Examining the Discursive Landscape of Women's Sexual Desire and Implications for Sexual Subjectivity

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology at Massey University, New Zealand.

Jessica Tappin

2025

Abstract

Sexual desire and pleasure can be an "awkward" subject to bring up in conversation, many choosing to ignore it completely, or relegate it to the private realm. Yet, our media landscape is filled with various representation of sex that fundamentally shape the way we can think about, speak about, and enact expressions of sexual desire. A substantial corpus of feminist research suggests that discursive representations of sexual desire are highly gendered and heteronormative. These researchers have mapped cultural and social constructions of women's sexual desire, tracing its portrayal as, for example, absent, relational, and aligned with postfeminist discourses of sexual agency. Previous scholarship has considered how these discourses are circulated within talk, and through mainstream media. A research gap remains in considering alternative feminist media, and psychological literature as sites that circulate discourses of sexual desire.

The central aim of this thesis is to determine how women's sexual desire is constructed across three sites of discourse circulation: (a) mainstream media, (b) alternative media, and (c) psychological literature, how prevalent discourses are supported, transformed, and resisted, as well as the implications for women's sexual subjectivity and sexual agency. Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis was conducted with each set of textual data collected from those sites. Specifically, 75 advice columns or articles from mainstream media websites, 55 articles from alternative feminist publications, and 12 published articles from psychological and therapeutic journals.

Key findings from these analyses indicate that (i) an essentialist biological discourse of desire is prevalent, shaping women's sexual subjectivity in relation to men, (ii) many discourses

and sexual subjectivities on offer within the texts are highly heteronormative and restrict agency outside of a narrow prescription of appropriate desire, (iii) a neoliberal incitement for women to reflect on and work on themselves in various ways underscored much of the data, and (iiii) alternative media texts provided opportunities for resistance of heterosexual norms, along with a broadening understanding of what desire is and can be for women.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge and thank my supervisors, Professor Sarah Riley, and Associate Professor Tracy Morison for the impact they have both had on me as a researcher. I of course could not have done this without your support. Thank you for sharing your combined wealth of knowledge and expertise with me, your academic guidance, and for giving me the space to make my own decisions while pointing me in the right direction. You have helped to raise my confidence, and I have truly enjoyed the process of doing this research. On a practical note, learning to navigate the world of academia and academic publishing has been a whirlwind, and dipping my toe into that space was much easier with your support.

The other PhD students I have met in the School of Psychology have been so helpful and inspiring in navigating this journey. I didn't have much of a cohort or office friends to connect with, so occasionally getting a coffee and chatting over email and Zoom has given me lovely touches of community throughout that I immensely appreciate. Siobhán, I remember the first time we connected you were finishing off and I was just starting. It was incredibly helpful for me to have someone who had just finished what was seeming like an insurmountable hill to climb, and it helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel. It has been wonderful to stay in contact over these years, now as colleagues and friends.

The broader health psychology team, thank you for bringing me into the group. I really enjoy working with you all and am excited to continue doing so in future. Whilst it has been hard at times to do two things at once, the experience has been invaluable.

Thank you, Taylor, for being the epitome of steadfast encouragement and loving support. Thank you for listening to me chatter on about it excitedly, or cry about it being hard,

and everything in between. It's not an understatement when I say I couldn't have done this without you, and I will be forever grateful.

Mum and Dad. You have always been rocks of support in everything I do, and your enthusiastic encouragement throughout my life was instrumental in giving me the confidence to even start this endeavour in the first place. I love you both so much.

Elizabeth. It has been an absolute pleasure to be doing our PhDs at the same time. Having such a close friend who is "in-it" and gets it has been amazing. Moving down to Ōtautahi and being able to pop over for coffees, or work together at the library (probably less work more chat than we should have!) will stick with me forever. I will visit you in Canada soon to celebrate both of our achievements together.

My friends and support system outside of the PhD, thanks for reminding me to live a regular life and do fun stuff, rather than descend into a big PhD hole which was tempting at times. Kate, Beth, Mia, Renee, Lara, Savannah, Stephen, Charley, Tash, the Maida Vale Crew, Wellington friends, and many more. Thanks for having weddings and babies, and throwing parties and going to festivals, and visiting Christchurch, and going on hikes, and catching up for drinks and for *not* asking me when I am going to finish studying; for reminding me to do my PhD whilst living my life rather than instead of it. I can't express enough how lucky I am to have such good people around me.

Lastly to Misty and Chip thank you for your soft cuddles and moral support.

Tables of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

1. Chapter One: Introduction

This research examines the discursive construction of women's sexual desire in public representations, considering the implications for sexual subjectivity and agency. My project focuses on three prominent textual sites that circulate discourse on sexual desire; (a) popular online media with women as the target audience—hereafter, "mainstream media"; (b) online feminist media that forefront gender minorities and other non-dominant discourses on sexuality – hereafter "alternative media"; and (c) academic literature about sexual desire written for a professional psychological audience—hereafter, "psychological literature". These sites represent both popular and academic perspectives that influence public perceptions of women's sexual desire and ultimately impact how women are positioned as sexual subjects in society.

Sexual subjectivity is an internal sense of sexual selfhood. Tolman (2002, pp. 5-6) has defined it as:

> A person's experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being. Sexual desire is at the heart of sexual subjectivity.

The possibilities for sexual subjectivity are shaped by the discourses circulating in society. Powerful discourses create norms that are reinforced and reproduced (or potentially resisted and transformed) within public sites of circulation. These sites include texts produced in popular and academic spheres. Gavey (2005) asserts that these discourses and norms are often taken-for-granted, and employed without conscious awareness, further restricting choice and possibilities for sexual subjectivity. Therefore, paying close attention to the social and cultural

discourses of sexual desire is crucial for understanding the possibilities available to women to think, feel, and act as sexual beings. In this research, I explore how various social constructions of sexual desire in Western media aimed at women re/produce gendered power relations that enable and restrict sexual subjectivity and agency.

Drawing on a feminist poststructuralist lens, within an overarching feminist constructionist perspective, my research directs attention towards insidious power structures and the implicit ways that dominant discourses shape understanding. In 21st century Western cultural landscapes, scholars have highlighted how gender inequity is frequently publicly portrayed as no longer being a pertinent issue due to positive changes in gender norms in recent decades (Gill, 2007, 2017; McRobbie, 2009). Adding to these insights, my research findings show how trusted sources of information, namely the media and scholarly research, sustain traditional gender norms (albeit in modified forms) and play a role in perpetuating uneven gendered power relations in everyday life. By examining these discursive spaces, I highlight how dominant constructions of women's sexual desire continue to limit women's sexual agency in subtle but significant ways, bringing to light persistent inequalities that are often overlooked.

1.1. Situating the Research

Located within an overarching feminist social constructionist orientation, my research is premised on the view that contemporary and historical contextual norms, beliefs, and values shape constructions of women's sexual desire. From this perspective, these constructions are…

…tethered to a complex tapestry of societal norms and expectations surrounding sex. Women learn from a young age what it means to be desiring sexual subjects: there are

> consequences of desiring the wrong person or acts, or of having too much or too little desire (deemed dysfunctional), all of which are imbricated with social positioning (e.g. race, class, sexual orientation) (Thomas & Gurevich, 2021, p. 83).

This recognition of how social norms shape sexual subjectivity necessitates attention to contextual location in the analysis of contemporary norms, to consider the conditions of possibility that re/produce them. This attention to historical foundations follows Fahs and McClelland's (2016, p. 393) call for critical researchers of sexuality to "trace how concepts travel between and among disciplines" [and beyond], their relationship to power, and "the implications of the concepts they employ". I take this as a call for consideration of the socio-historical context that informs meanings about sex, both past and present as well as for critical awareness on the part of researchers.

I therefore begin with an overview of the socio-cultural backdrop against which my work is located. I do this through a brief historical discussion of the emergence of dominant Western understandings of women's sexual desire. Having established this broad socio-historical backdrop, I then turn to the issue of researcher positionality as part of the critical endeavor of feminist poststructuralism.

1.1.1. The Socio-Cultural Context of Sexual Desire over Time

In this section, I examine three temporal moments—Ancient Greek and Roman, Victorian, and twentieth-century Anglophone contexts—as historical "snapshots" to contextualise how changing gender roles, moral values and relational norms have shaped contemporary constructions of sexuality and sexual desire. These snapshots do not constitute a complete genealogy of sexual desire but rather illustrate key shifts in the social understanding of sexual

desire. These moments were chosen because they are all situated within the Western cultural tradition that informs contemporary understandings of sexuality and were selected in part because they are periods for which sufficient historical records exist, allowing discursive changes to be traced. In the Ancient Greek and Roman period, sexual desire was bound to civic and reproductive obligations; in the Victorian era, it was redefined through moral and religious restraint; and in the twentieth century, it was medicalised and psychologised, reflecting the emergence of scientific authority over sexuality. Taken together, they demonstrate how Western women's sexual desire has been repressed, problematised and tied to patriarchal control for two millennia.

1.1.1.1. Snapshot One – Ancient Greece and Rome.

The Ancient Greek and Roman period provide a useful starting point because it offers extensive documentation and insight into early Western conceptualisations of sexual pleasure and gendered norms. Historical scholars suggest that sexuality and sexual desire in ancient Greek and Roman societies were bound within the framework of familial and civic responsibilities, intertwining individual desires with broader societal expectations of purity and reproduction (Clark, 2019). Women were excluded from public life, and predominantly confined to domestic roles (Clark, 2019; Salisbury, 1996). Subsequently, the social discourse surrounding women's sexual desire was shaped by the prevailing ideals of purity, modesty, virtue, and fidelity within the context of marriage and motherhood.

Women's role in sex was often tied to their role in serving the state by reproducing and ensuring the continuity of the next generation of "legitimate Athenian citizens" (Clark, 2019, p. 18). Similar logics echoed into later sexual reproductive politics, such as early twentieth-century

Settler-colonial policy exhorting Settler women to reproduce in the name of White nationalism (Wanhalla, 2007).

However, in both Greek and Roman societies, women's pleasure occupied a more visible and, at times, legitimate place within sex. For example, Athenians believed that orgasm was required for fertility for both men and women, and the Romans viewed women's sexuality as insatiable (Salisbury, 1996). This indicates that pleasure and sexual agency were not always as heavily constrained as they later became. This provides an important point of contrast with the Victorian period which decoupled pleasure with sex and thus represents not linear "progress" but, in some ways, a regression — a tightening of moral and reproductive imperatives around sexuality.

1.1.1.2. Snapshot Two – The Victorian Era.

In contrast to the preceding time period, the British Victorian era is an example of a period characterised by a pervasive moral discourse that discouraged overt public discussion of sexuality and reproduction, even as Victorian society fixated on sex (Foucault, 1978). Within this moralistic cultural milieu, included the association of women's sexual desires with stringent moral codes and the glorification of women as paragons of virtue. Women's sexuality was certainly not associated with overt expressions of sexual desire (Foucault, 1978; Jackson, 1994; Poovey, 1990). In fact, Poovey (1990, p. 34) analysing an essay from 1850, highlighted that women's sexual morality was perceived to transcend social class differences. They explain that "if all women are innately moral, then their sex matters more than their class, and women's morality can be counted on to control the 'ready, strong, and spontaneous' drive of male

sexuality". These ideas underpin notions of passive female and active male sexuality (Hollway, 1984), as I discuss in more depth later.

Also relevant during this time was the growing status of science and the emergence of psycho-medical discourses of sexuality, which frequently served a regulatory function (Foucault, 1978). The social control of female sexuality was exemplified by the "diagnosis" of "hysteria" (McVean, 2017). Hysteria epitomised the pathologisation of women's sexuality and constraint on their sexual agency. The interweaving of moral and psycho-medical discourse construed respectable womanhood as free from sexual desire (Foucault, 1978).

1.1.1.3. Snapshot Three – The 20th Century Anglosphere.

Skipping forward, in the mid-20th century public discussion of sex and (heterosexual) relationships became more acceptable in the Anglosphere (i.e., English-speaking nations with shared cultural, historical, and political ties, primarily including the UK, US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) (Seidman, 1991). With the status and authority of Science firmly established by this time, the start of the century saw the rise of "sexologists" and other experts theorising about sexuality (e.g., Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud); theories that gained significant traction and contributed to a "modern sensibility regarding sex" (Neuhaus, 2000, p. 453). Firmly embedding sexuality as a legitimate avenue of scientific discussion worked to de-stigmatise ideas of sexual pleasure, and refute the morally laden Victorian ideas of sexual repression (Featherstone, 2005; Seidman, 1991).

For women, sex and desire became linked to their role as housewives and taking care of their husbands. Books and magazines, all tailored towards this goal, situated sex as fundamental to marriage, and encouraged women's sexual competency as a strategy for

keeping their marriage together (McLaughlin, 2023; Neuhaus, 2000). For example, Marie Stopes' book *Married Love*, published in 1918, sought to educate women about the mechanics of, and their right to pleasure within, sex. As described by Holtzman (1982, p. 42):

> By arguing that women were sexual beings who had a right to sexual satisfaction, Stopes was, in effect, providing women with a sexual role within marriage. Moreover, her descriptions of the heights of ecstasy that a women could reach during sex gave women a goal to strive for within the confines of their domestic life.

Thus, women could conceptualise their sexual desire and subsequent pleasure, as being valid, but inextricably tied to their role as a good housewife (Holtzman, 1982; Neuhaus, 2000).

These ideas continue to influence present-day expectations despite challenges to the norm of female sexual passivity in the context of domesticity and marriage during the sexual revolution of the mid-late 20th century and subsequent 21st century. In spite of these challenges, a discursive legacy remains linking women's sexuality to biology, childbirth, patriarchal control, and women's passivity (Fine, 1988; Hollway, 1984).

1.1.2. Summary

These three historical snapshots show a shift toward and a millennium of cultural valuing of women's sexual passivity, with women largely positioned as sexual objects in relation to desiring masculine sexual subjectivities. This binary gendered positioning constrains women's sexual agency, limiting women's thoughts, feelings, and capacity to act in regard to desire and sexuality, for even if women feel sexual desire, they may be limited in how they can account for those feelings or face meaningful repercussions if they transgress and enact themselves as sexually desiring subjects (Farvid et al., 2016; Tolman, 2002). As I will argue in

this thesis, and Chapter Three in particular, the foregrounding of women's sexual desire in relation to men is one that endures insidiously within our present moment.

1.1.3. Researcher Positionality: How I Came to this Research

A critical approach to psychological research requires consideration of the place of the researcher (Finlay, 2002, 2003; Gough, 2003; Wilkinson, 1988). The researcher is far from an objective, value-free, neutral observer, but someone who is embedded within the research, and shapes the design of the study, along with the collection, and interpretation of data (Finlay, 2003). This might be seen as a problem from a positivist perspective; obscuring or biasing an objective "truth" to be found within the data. However, Finlay (2002, 2003) argues that this subjective focus presents an opportunity for further insight, and crucially, transparent evaluation of the research process, method, and outcomes. Further, reflexivity is "an essential part of a feminist research paradigm, which emphasises the centrality of personal experience" [and] "the grounding of knowledge in particular social/cultural/historical contexts" (Wilkinson, 1988, p. 494).

Having attended briefly to why reflexivity is relevant in my research, I now turn to how I will employ a reflexive stance in this thesis. Gough (2002) argues for the plural term of *reflexivities*, acknowledging that there are multiple ways to do reflexivity. It is also important to avoid the trap of focussing on introspection so much so that the researchers voice is overly privileged, becoming too central within the discussion (i.e., naval gazing) (Finlay, 2003; Gough, 2003; Wilkinson, 1988). Thus, I follow Finlay's (2002, p.542) assertion that "with reflexive analysis, the self is exploited only while to do so remains purposeful". I use Wilkinson's (1988) two linked and overlapping aspects of "personal" and "functional" reflexivity to guide my

approach. That is, attention to my identity, interests, and attitudes that have influenced my involvement in the research, along with my effect on the research process (Gough, 2003; Wilkinson, 1988).

Therefore, by reflexively situating myself within this research process, I hope to give insight to the reader as to *who* I am, *why* I have conducted the research in this way, and *how* I have come to the conclusions I made. As I will outline in the remainder of this section, by the time my PhD thesis reached the stage in its conception that reflects the structure it takes now, my thinking had been shaped by personal experience that has clearly impacted my engagement with the topic. Additionally, the process of undertaking this thesis has shaped who I am and how I think about sexuality and desire; after immersing myself in this topic for the last five years, how could it not? My identity as a pākehā, cis-gendered, heterosexual, atheist, middle-class, politically liberal, feminist-orientated, tertiary-educated woman, has shaped the research in its entirety.

My interest in this topic began when I stepped into the world of qualitative, critical research as I started my honours thesis work in 2019. The Education Review Office (ERO) in New Zealand had recently published a report on the state of sexuality education within public schools, an audit that takes place once per decade (ERO, 2018). I found these findings disheartening. They showed that the quality of sexuality education was incredibly varied, thanks in part to a recommended curriculum, effectively making comprehensive sexuality education opt-in or opt-out for both schools, and individual pupils/parents. This resonated with and infuriated me, reflecting on my own almost non-existent sexuality education in school. As a teenager I gave little attention to the sexuality education I was (not) receiving. But, in the

intervening years, developing my own sense of sexual selfhood and hearing friends' experiences, I wondered whether it would have been a whole lot easier to have some guidance earlier on, not just on sexual health, but about pleasure, sexual empowerment, and positive sexual experience.

For my honours dissertation, I designed an interview study with seven women in their early 20s about their experiences of high school sexuality education. I conducted thematic analysis on the data and the findings highlighted how sexuality education for these participants was inconsistent at best, and at worst, reinforced harmful reductionist ideas about sex. My study findings largely matched up with previous research on sexuality education in a New Zealand context, including the ERO report (e.g., Allen, 2007; ERO, 2018; Garland-Levett, 2017; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010). The aspect that I found of particular interest, was the students' talk around sexual desire, where they indicated this was completely missing from their sexuality education (even for those who had relatively positive experiences).

These findings made me think about the question; if desire is absent from a discussion of sexuality in school, where do people learn about it? Home and family environments are likely to reinforce ideas about sex conveyed in school-based sexuality education; that sex is risky and taboo, often accompanied with overt moral stances (Coleman et al., 2010; Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2015). Young people turn to their peers to have more open conversations about sex and desire which can be affirming, yet still often reproduce harmful stereotypes about sex (Morison et al., 2022; Trinh, 2016). Most young people have had at least some encounters with internet pornography (Healy-Cullen et al., 2022), which despite their ability to engage critically

with (Atwood et al., 2021; Healy-Cullen et al., 2024) can perpetuate the (hetero)sexualisation and objectification of women's bodies (Coy et al., 2018).

My engagement with this literature prompted me to reflect on my own sexual history, the perspectives on sex that I had been exposed to within media and personal relationships, including when (and how) I started to consider sexual desire as an important part of sex; something that I was entitled to. As I mentioned, sexuality education, whilst theoretically included in our health curriculum, was effectively non-existent. My physical education (P.E.) teacher, tasked with taking us through the curriculum, was a man in his early to mid-20's, who seemed to find the topic just as awkward and uncomfortable as we did. I remember that our discussions of consent focused entirely on the dynamics of boys pressuring girls into sex; perpetuating the problematic discourse of pressure from boys and gatekeeping from girls (Carmody, 2005) and notions of sex being "risky" for girls and women (Chmielewski et al., 2017; Morison & Herbert, 2019). Pleasure and desire were certainly not a topic of conversation. Within my friend group as a teenager, sex was skirted around, but not really discussed. I did not grow up in a religious household, or attend a religious school, so I do not think there were any religious or moral hang-ups restricting these conversations. We just did not have the language to talk through these ideas, or perhaps the courage to bring our internal thoughts into the open. Generally, I think I had a relatively "smooth" pathway from learning about the mechanics of sex, to understanding desire and pleasure as a valid and integral part of my sexual identity. I also recognised this was not the case for everyone.

I started to bring this topic up casually with flatmates at home, with my friends over bottles of wine at the kitchen table, and slowly began to build up a picture (within my feminist,

liberal bubble) of how ideas about sexual desire shift or stagnate over time. Something that came up consistently, was the media landscape that promoted and perpetuated warped ideas about how our bodies should look and how we should act around people we were attracted to.

I recognised that sexual desire was produced within a mediated world. For my research I oriented towards a media-related approach due to a personal and academic drive to untangle the complexities inherent in the structures and institutions that govern our own lives. I grew-up in the 2000s and was a teenager in the early 2010s, a period characterised by a media landscape that often perpetuated problematic ideals around sexuality, feminism and body image, shaping cultural narratives and bodily expectations in ways that were both pervasive and profound (Gill, 2006). To this end, Calder-Dawe and Gavey (2017), describe the experience of being exposed to hegemonic discourses that construct how women should act, as wearing a "second skin" (p.218) This concept resonates deeply with me as I reflect on many incongruous moment where my logical, feminist, critical mind comes into contest with deeply problematic ideas around femininity that feel like they are there, hidden in the back of my mind. I attribute this to being relentlessly exposed during my formative years to scripts about "how to look good naked", and what actions I need to take to attract a boyfriend. Thus, my work in this area has brought my own experiences of wearing this "second skin" into focus and led to a subsequent intrigue in this topic.

I turn once more to Calder-Dawe and Gavey (2017, p. 218) in justifying my own personal interest, who note that "An understanding of the dynamic relationships between knowledge, knowledge production, agency, and action also has implications for scholarship: it positions research as an ethical and political undertaking as well as an intellectual activity". Indeed, this

thesis comprises both an academic interest, but also a personal endeavor of sitting with and thinking through my own ideas and experiences.

1.2. Overview of the Thesis

This thesis by publication includes three co-authored journal papers: two published (presented in Chapters Five and Six), and one in preparation for submission (presented in Chapter Seven). The theoretical framework that informed my research reported in these papers is set out in Chapter Two. As I will explain in more depth there, I approached this research from a feminist social constructionist perspective, specifically drawing on feminist poststructural theory in order to illuminate the gendered power relations alluded to above. I explain the theoretical foundations of feminist poststructuralism more broadly before pulling out key theoretical concepts such as power, discourse and normativity which are framed as guiding concepts throughout the research. At the end of Chapter Two, I explain the core objectives and research questions of this thesis.

Chapter Three provides a detailed review of relevant literature highlighting prevalent discourses that underscore public understanding of women's sexual desire in a Western context. This review attends to how desire is constructed within both talk, and mainstream media. I then highlight two key gaps in the literature, namely, discourses of desire within both alternative media texts, and psychological literature.

Next, in Chapter Four I detail the methodological approach I took in attending to the core research objectives. I discuss the methodological decisions I made when designing each study, collecting the data, and how I approached data analysis. This chapter also includes a reflexive discussion of my positioning in shaping the method.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven are three manuscripts that comprise the research findings of the thesis. Chapter Five addresses the discursive construction of women's sexual desire within mainstream media and has been published in *Feminism and Psychology*. Chapter Six addresses alternative media as a space of resistance to prevalent discourse of sexual desire. This article has been published in *Feminist Media Studie*s. Chapter Seven is a discourse analysis of women's sexual desire within professional psychological literature. This article is in preparation to submit for publication in *Culture, Health and Sexuality*.

Chapter Eight is the final discussion and conclusion chapter where I expand on the findings from the articles as they relate to each other and the overall objectives. I consider how the various discursive constructions of women's sexual desire present in each of the three textual sites interrelate in a wider representative practice, including where the discursive patterns are similar or divergent. I then discuss the implications of these constructions for women's sexual subjectivity and sexual agency. I finish by attending to the overall contributions, and reflexively evaluating the research.

2. Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

My research is theoretically located within a poststructuralist feminist framework, which falls under the broad umbrella of social constructionism. From this theoretical perspective, the particular sexual identities, desires, and practices that any society accepts as normal (or abnormal) are constructed via discourse and social practices (Gavey, 2005). Therefore, as Foucault's (1978) work on sexuality highlighted, the ways that sexuality is understood at a particular time and place are directly related to the interests of a society and subsequently associated with relations of power between social groups (e.g., between women and men, people of different social classes, or the able-bodied and the disabled). Indeed, according to Foucault, sexuality is a key area of political struggle. However, as I discuss further on in this chapter, while Foucault addressed sexuality in his work on power, he neglected a focus on gendered power; an aspect which has been both critiqued, and subsequently addressed, by feminist poststructuralist scholars (Butler, 1990; Gavey, 1997; Macleod, 2006; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 1993; Weedon, 1987).

Feminist poststructuralism turns attention to not only how power might be exercised over women, but also how power is deeply embedded within social structures that produce practices of marginalization and regulation. This examination of power is of relevance to my work on the gendered construction of sexual subjectivities. Taking a feminist poststructural approach allows consideration of how gendered power dynamics are embedded in dominant discourses of sexual desire, and the subsequent shaping of sexual subjectivity and possibilities for subjects' sexual agency.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will delve into the theorisation of key feminist poststructural scholars and explain how I use their concepts in my work. As I will explain, I draw on Foucault as a foundational poststructuralist theorist, particularly focusing on his work on power and knowledge. I then turn to the work of feminist scholars who have used gender and feminist theory to develop Foucault's work to emphasise gendered power relations. Together this work forms the basis of the feminist poststructuralist framework for my work. I then dig deeper into specific theoretical concepts that were of relevance in shaping my work. This includes discourse, representation, norms and subjectivity. I give overviews of each of these conceptual areas and attend to how and why they are relevant to my research on sexual desire.

2.1. Feminist Poststructuralism - Knowledge, Power, Foucault, and Feminism

Feminist poststructuralism merges feminist theoretical perspectives on gender and sexuality, with a poststructuralist philosophy (Weedon, 1987). Poststructuralism as a theoretical position, connects to the works of philosophers such as Foucault and Derrida, who rejected the notion of fixed, universal truths, instead emphasising the multiplicity of interpretations inherent in language, as well as the influence of power dynamics in shaping knowledge and social structures (Derrida, 1981; Foucault, 1978, 1980). These ideas were subsequently taken up by a range of feminists, including Judith Butler (1990) and Nicola Gavey (1997) to draw attention to the gendered nature of power, as discussed above. Following its overarching constructionist epistemology, from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, social reality is produced by the linguistic concepts available to people within a particular sociohistorical period, as these shape people's perceptions and interpretations of the world rather than there being an objectively observable world (Gavey, 1997). In this sense, language is not merely descriptive, but produces

meaning, actively creating social and cultural realities, including what is known to be true, or what is taken for granted as objective or truthful 'knowledge' at a particular time and place (Weedon & Hallak, 2021).

Moreover, as Gavey (1997, p. 52) explains: "knowledge is understood to be not neutral". Amid the diverse possible constructions of reality, certain "truths" are privileged as those in power perpetuate constructions advantageous to their interests. Therefore, the critical examination of gendered power dynamics is fundamental in understanding how knowledge production is shaped in relation to gendered subjectivity and the regulation of different bodies (Weedon & Hallak, 2021).

Within this consideration of knowledge production is the concept of discourse, described by Foucault (2002, p.54) as "practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak". Burr (2015) elaborates further, drawing on Foucault's conceptual foundations to define discourse as:

> … a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event, person or class of persons, a particular way of representing it in a certain light (p. 74-75).

Therefore, the discourses circulating in a particular historical time and cultural setting structure the way we can understand and think about different phenomena, including gender, and in turn enable or restrict what is sayable and doable (Riley et al., 2021).

For instance, the sexual double standard discourse (which I discuss further in Chapter Three) frames men's hyper-sexuality as commendable or celebrated while simultaneously

constructing women's similar sexual behaviour as inappropriate; subsequently prescribing a narrow norm of sexual behaviour for women and stigma should they behave "like men" (Farvid et al., 2016). This discourse was, and still is, prevalent in contemporary Western understandings of "appropriate" gendered expressions of sexual desire, which circulate in media and via social networks (Chmielewski et al., 2017; Conde Dias et al., 2012; Farvid et al.,2016; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Ringrose et al., 2013).

This uneven positioning in favour of men is, in part, enabled through binary opposition. According to Derrida (1981), Western societal thinking creates fixed binary pairs (e.g., masculine/feminine, mind/body and so forth) that are supported by language. He argues that these oppositions are inherently hierarchical, placing one in relation to its opposite, but are also socially constructed rather than natural or stable. Applying this reasoning to gender and sexuality, allows a reading of the male/female dichotomy as placing men in a privileged position over women.

Many feminist scholars have highlighted how the male/female dichotomy significantly shapes and constrains women's sexual subjectivity (e.g., Brown et al., 2020; Farvid & Braun, 2014; Jackson & Scott, 2001; Potts, 2000; Ringrose et al., 2013). For instance, in the context of sexual desire, Potts (2000) demonstrates that moving away from the hierarchised binary opposition of presence/absence of orgasm disrupts the orgasmic imperative (a cultural prescription that defines good sex as culminating in orgasm), thereby allowing multiple interpretations of "good" sex, and sexuality.

The above analysis aligns with Foucault's (1978) theorisation of power as diffuse and productive, operating through various institutions, practices, and knowledge systems rather

than being wielded by a person or group. Foucault emphasised that power operates through systems of knowledge, norms and institutions in ways that regulate behaviour and shape subjectivity (Foucault, 1978). In this sense, power is present in the ways we think about and categorise objects through discourse in our everyday interactions. Power and knowledge cannot be separated, because the ability to assert a particular understanding of reality as the taken-for-granted version is inherently a manifestation of power. Moreover, dominant or prevailing discourses uphold particular power structures that work to ensure society functions in favour of certain groups or ideologies (Burr, 2015; Foucault, 1978).

In this vein power can be considered as regulatory, rather than repressing or restricting, it is involved in creating and upholding values and ideas about the world and the way it works (Foucault, 1980). The prevailing discourses in a particular social context establish norms, which are the often unspoken and taken-for-granted "rules" that guide behaviour in that setting. (I speak further to the construction of norms in section 2.4.)

For instance, mainstream media (defined in Chapter One for the purposes of this thesis as: popular online media with women as the target audience) has been shown to exercise power by selectively promoting heterosexual relationship dynamics while marginalising queer relationships or portraying them in ways that reinforce homophobic narratives and stereotypes. Critical research has demonstrated how media narratives of same-sex marriage (Jowett, 2014), same-sex parenting (Morison & Reddy, 2013), or gay male sexuality (Crath & Rangel, 2017) for instance, are embedded within heteronormative discourse which functions to legitimise inequalities, constructing non-normative identities as deficient, abnormal, immoral, and so forth.

According to Foucault (1978) power permeates everyday practices through taken-for-granted knowledges and norms of sexuality that support dominant sexual practices and subjectivities, such as heterosexuality. Normative frameworks therefore constrain and define the available positions within the available discourses of sexuality, thus maintaining a particular (heteronormative) status quo (Foucault, 1978; Gavey 2005). Further, the way information is generated, controlled, and circulated is such that sexualities existing outside the boundaries of mainstream knowledge, can be marginalised, pathologised, or altogether excluded from dominant discourses. In particular, mainstream media (Chapter Five) and professional academic literature (Chapter Seven) serve as key authorities where discourses surrounding sexuality are circulated. Alternative media (Chapter Six) provide sites where marginalised discourses may circulate that resist, re-appropriate or otherwise negotiate dominant discourses.

The validation of certain discourses and dismissal of others, by authorities (such as experts reported, or writing, in the media) results in the domination of certain discourses that serve to suit a particular agenda or reinforce a status quo (such as heterosexuality). Expertise plays an important role in establishing what counts as "truth" or legitimate knowledge and is central to Foucault's thesis on power (1978). The presence (or presumed presence) of expertise within discourse lends authority to norms, legitimising and naturalising them. A clear historical example is the 20th Century pathologisation of homosexuality, which was once firmly positioned within the bounds of psychological abnormality through its inclusion in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). In this context, medical and psychological expertise reinforced biomedical discourses that framed homosexuality as a deviation from normative or "natural" heterosexuality (Spurlin, 2023). These discourses were not neutral but

deeply tied to social control and were legitimised by their inclusion in the diagnostic manual (Lafrance & McKenzie-Mohr, 2013) thus dictating what forms of sexual identity were acceptable and which were not. This example illustrates how the recognition and representation of diverse sexual identities become intricately tied to power dynamics within knowledge production.

Despite the usefulness of Foucault's thinking on power, feminists have critiqued Foucault's work for its gender blindness and androcentricity (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002). Foucault's work considered power as operating fairly universally with limited attention to gendered power (Ramazonoglu & Holland, 1992). Feminist scholars assert that Foucault's male-centredness contributed to the lack of consideration of how men have historically, and continue to, exercise power over women (Bordo, 1993; Fraser, 1989), including how powerful norms and institutions come to be dominated by men and function to subordinate women, as discussed by Ramazonoglu and Holland (1993).

> Men's grip on women may be fragile, shifting, rooted in vulnerability, easily fractured, but this grip has a temporal and geographical ubiquity and tenacity which constitutes men's power as sturdy and persistent relations of domination and subordination on which women's resistance has made little impact. This concentration of power is interwoven with other social divisions but reproduces discourses and institutional arrangements in favour of men. In feminism, conceiving men's power in terms of some system of patriarchy has proved extremely problematic, but it is this solidification of multiple power relations which has attracted feminist concern, and which was not of primary interest to Foucault (pp.223-224).

Despite these issues in regard to gender and feminist pursuits, feminist scholars have subsequently found Foucauldian theorising of power useful, to the extent that Macleod and Durrheim (2002) assert that feminist scholars should focus on "the implications of Foucauldian discourse for feminism" (p.42) which is the approach I take in this thesis.

To attend to the critiques above and approach Foucauldian concepts from a gendered perspective, a feminist poststructural approach acknowledges that knowledge and power are inseparable. This creates a knowledge/power matrix which, in regard to gender, means that taken-for-granted meanings about gender roles and sexuality, including those produced by patriarchal discourses, have historically contributed to (and continue to contribute to) women's oppression (Weedon, 1987). This approach scrutinises how social norms, language, and power structures intersect to produce and reinforce gendered hierarchies. Through an interrogation of discursive practices, feminist poststructuralism aims to elucidate the mechanisms through which gendered subjectivities are constructed, contested, and negotiated within various social, political, and institutional domains. Crucially, this approach allows for the consideration of women's experiences outside of patriarchal discursive constructs (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019) and of relevance to my thesis, an "investigation of women's sexual agency within the context of the societal constructions that often marginalise their experiences" (Balint, 2024, p.3)

I draw on feminist poststructuralist theory to consider women's sexual desire as multifaceted and shaped by language, power dynamics and sociocultural context, rather than as a fixed or innate attribute. This approach allows for exploration of how gendered subjectivities are produced, contested, and negotiated within different contexts. Weedon and Hallak (2021, p.437) define feminist poststructuralism in the following way.

> Feminist poststructuralism is not a theory or methodology in the conventional sense. It is a series of critical positions on language, subjectivity, the body, discourse, and power that provide the grounds for mapping and analysing how relations of gender and sexuality are socially constituted, lived, reproduced, and challenged.

Accordingly, I adopt these "critical positions" to guide my analytical perspective.

In the remainder of this chapter, I elaborate on the key concepts that I have touched on above, which I draw on in my research, namely: language and discourse, discursive representations, the construction of norms, sexual subjectivity, and agency.

2.2. Language and Discourse

Following the social constructionist view of language as constitutive of social reality, poststructural feminists are concerned with how language constitutes and reproduces gender inequality (Weedon, 1987; Gavey, 1989, 1997). Various versions and perspectives of reality are produced by language, which support the rules and conventions of specific socio-cultural settings, including those related to gender. Taking this perspective into consideration, language is structured into discourses that are contingent upon the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which they originate and are used (Willig, 2014).

There is some variation in how "discourse" is defined and understood. Parker (1994) draws on Foucauldian theory and applies it to psychological research to define discourses as "sets of statements that construct objects and an array of subject positions" (p. 245). I adopt this definition in my thesis to consider constellations of meaning that cohere around a common way of seeing/understanding an event, person, or object and so present a phenomenon in a certain way. For example, an essentialist discourse of sexual desire emphasises the biological

and includes ideas about "nature," natural and inherent predispositions or "drives" given by genetics or evolution (Farvid, 2015). These appeals to naturalness contribute to the medicalisation and pathologisation of female sexual desire in comparison to a male standard (Thomas & Gurevich, 2021; van Anders et al., 2021).

I also draw upon the idea that discourses are not mutually exclusive but may contradict or reinforce one another. Interdiscursivity means that discourses refer to one another; intersecting or interacting within a particular context (Parker, 2002). This theoretical concept recognises that discourses are not monolithic, but that social meaning-making involves multiple, and sometimes conflicting discourses that shape potentially divergent or corresponding meanings about a topic (Parker, 2002). I point to the conflicting nature of discourse in particular in Chapter Three, where I consider how various discourses of women's sexual desire often contrast with one another, creating contradictory subject positions that women have to negotiate (e.g., women's sexual desire is constructed through both discourses of virtue and competency, [Gill, 2007]). Recognising the importance of examining the multiple discourses of women's sexual desire, I now turn to the public sites where dominant discourses are circulated and contribute towards representations of women's sexual desire.

2.3. Discursive representations of sexual desire and public sites of circulation

As discussed in section 2.1, taking a Foucauldian perspective allows consideration of power as operating everywhere, dispersed through a wide network of social relationships, discourses, institutions, and everyday practices. In essence, as I alluded above, power is diffuse (Foucault, 1978). Foucault's understanding of power informed and aligns with Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which suggests that meaning is actively constructed through language and

images, particularly in public sites like the media (Hall, 1997). In combination, these ideas provide a framework for understanding how particular discourses are employed in practice; to create public representations of sexual desire. Hall explained in his work that representation is not simply a mirror of reality, but an active process through which meaning is produced. Meaning is generated through the interplay of various discourses, alongside the interpretations and understandings that individuals derive from these representations.

In the previous section (2.2), I used the example of essentialist discourses of sexual desire as contributing to the pathologisation of female sexual desire, to demonstrate how discourse creates meaning. Drawing on that same example in the context of representation, essentialist discourses may interplay with traditional relational discourses of sexuality (i.e., within the context of being a wife or mother [Hollway, 1984]) to create a discursive representation of women's sexual desire that is considered secondary to relational or reproductive goals. Such representations do more than simply depict sexual desire; they produce meanings that individuals internalise and navigate in their own lives. These representations thus do not merely reflect societal norms but help shape them, reinforcing the power relations embedded within dominant discourses. Accordingly, representations of sexuality produce subject positions that can be taken up, subsequently broadening, or restricting sexual agency (I will attend to and explain subject positioning and agency further in section 2.5).

Discourses and representations are, however, not produced in a vacuum. They are developed and circulated across various public sites; within various social communities, through institutions, in print and digital media, in academic literature and so forth (Gill, 2006). The latter

two sites are of course, of relevance to this thesis. From a poststructuralist perspective, the sites where discourses are circulated are also not just passive channels but are themselves imbued with power (Foucault, 1978). For example, in his work on the history of sexuality, Foucault discusses how key institutions held power in circulating discourses of sexuality, in order, in effect, to separate sex from pleasure (Foucault, 1978). He identified institutions such as the church, education, medicine, psychiatry, and the criminal justice system as holding significant power in shaping social discourse on sex; particularly in the context of the 18th and 19th centuries (and arguably still in our current moment).

Foucault also pointed towards the way in which different public sites might circulate ideas in different ways (particularly the church, medical institutions, and schools), stating that "…we are dealing less with *a* discourse on sex than with a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions" (Foucault, 1978, p.33). Similarly, in her work on gender, Rosalind Gill points towards the media as being "...involved in actively producing gender" (p. 12) rather than as reflective of reality. These ideas are key in shaping my approach in this thesis, as I consider multiplicity of discourse both within, and across, key sites of circulation. Namely, mainstream media, alternative media, and psychological literature.

Building on these theoretical foundations, I turn back to Gill (2006) as a prominent feminist poststructuralist researcher who highlighted the significance of public representations of gender and their impact on women's lives and agency. Gill (2006) succinctly stated that "representation matters" (p.7), emphasising the media's role in producing cultural understandings of gender. In the contemporary context, online media have become particularly

pervasive, functioning as a constant and influential site of discourse circulation (Cotter, 2015). As Roberti (2022) notes, the media remain a "repository of social models and depictions with which women, in particular, have to deal on a daily basis" (p.2).

The capacity that search-term algorithms have in producing powerful discursive representations, and reproducing problematic stereotypes is also significant (Graham, 2022). For example, in their work on algorithmic bias, Noble (2013, 2018) details how hegemonic narratives about gender and race are insidiously legitimised through *Google's* keyword search results. Similarly, Segev (2019) asserts that *Google's* "mechanisms of control" (p.245), regulate the production of knowledge online. The example used showed that 95 out of 100 images produced from the search term "beauty", were young, White, women (Segev, 2019). Other researchers have provided analysis on how *Google* search results shape discourse and information about "the news" (Schjott-Hanson & Hartley, 2021; Ørmen, 2016), health advice (Kitchens et al., 2014; Scullard et al., 2010), and political representation (Puschmann, 2019). Since power operates through various discourses and institutions, the media serve as a powerful site where cultural understandings are constructed, negotiated, and circulated, influencing individual subjectivity and agency.

To further explore how discourses intersect and are reinforced, I draw on the concept of intertextuality—the idea that texts refer to and reinforce each other, emphasising how discourses circulate within and across different sites (Kong, 2014). This focus is particularly relevant in our current digital age, where interconnectivity is central to online information and communication. Unlike previously, where analog texts were more isolated and less accessible, the digital environment creates a web of connections and an opportunity to examine how

discourse is shared, shaped and re-created across different textual locations (Vásquez, 2015). Intertextuality emphasises the interconnectedness of texts and the way they, through referencing each other, reinforce dominant ideologies and power structures (Kong, 2014). This dynamic is particularly evident in the relationship between lay and professional texts (which I will discuss further in Chapter Three and Chapter Seven). Here, I note how mainstream media articles often refer to academic publications to legitimise their content, while professional texts cite each other as part of scholarly convention to substantiate claims, thereby reinforcing dominant narratives. From this perspective, the relationship between popular (lay) discourse and professional discourse (including the interaction and exchange of ideas, language and meaning) contributes to the co-construction of knowledge (Gannon & Davies, 2012; Morison & Herbert, 2020), and in the case of my research, creating and perpetuating specific representations of sexual desire. The reasoning above forms the basis for my inclusion of mainstream online media, alternative online media, and professional psychological texts as central to my analysis (Chapters Five, Six, and Seven respectively).

In summary, public discourses on sexual desire are reinforced through intertextual connections between lay and professional texts. These representations shape, and sometimes challenge, normative frameworks. In the next section, I explore how such frameworks, particularly heteronormativity, define what is considered "normal" sexual desire.

2.4. The Discursive Construction of a Heteronormative Framework

Powerful discourses create normative frameworks about how we should think about particular objects, along with normative subjectivities. These established norms provide a framework for expected social behaviours, reflect cultural values, and create guidelines on how to navigate

and participate in a society. Norms also inform how individuals perceive and construct their identities within their sociocultural milieu. Riley et al., (2019) state that "Norms provide the lens through which we see ourselves. Since we understand ourselves through these norms, we do not 'exist' outside of them" (p.60). Therefore, if we understand norms as forming the framework through which individuals understand their identities, it follows that norms impact how women perceive and construct their sexual subjectivity.

Also of important consideration is how insidious norms lead individuals to act in a certain way to adhere to normative frameworks (Macleod and Durrheim, 2002; Riley et al., 2018). Foucault explains this compliance as follows:

> [T]here is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself (Foucault 1980, p.155).

To fit in with what is expected of them by society, individuals are, therefore, compelled to adhere to norms, as defined by dominant discourses. Thus, while norms may appear natural, they can be understood through this lens, as culturally produced (Gavey, 2005; Riley et al., 2019). As people internalise norms, they are not only led to act or think a certain way by social expectations, but expectations that they place upon themselves, as Macleod and Durrheim (2002, p.48) explain, drawing on their work on teenage pregnancy:

> As the individual invests in the tenets of a normalising judgement (e.g., normal behaviour and feelings during pregnancy), so s/he begins to exercise vigilance with regard to his/her own behaviour, monitoring whether what s/he does fits the norm.

> Regulation thus becomes self-regulation as the person subjects him/herself to an internalised surveillance.

Subsequently, as people work to view themselves and act in a certain way, the norm is reinforced on a societal level.

In relation to sexual desire, an important norm of relevance to my work is heteronormativity, theorised by Butler (1990) as operating within what she terms the "heterosexual matrix". Butler (1990) defines the heterosexual matrix as a "grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, gender, and desires are naturalized" (p. 151). It comprises an interconnected set of social and cultural norms that construct and reinforce heterosexuality as the default and privileged identity in Western society (Butler, 1990). The heterosexual matrix rests upon a binary construction of gender. Femininity and masculinity are regarded as diametrically opposed and complementary; each category is defined based on the absence of qualities found in the other (e.g., men are rational and stoic while women are irrational and emotional) (Butler, 1990, Folgerø, 2009; Morison & Lynch, 2019). Under this framework, femininity's "natural" opposite is masculinity, and vice versa, the naturalness of these is linked to the sexed body, which is viewed dimorphically as female and male (Morison & Macleod, 2015; Nentwich & Morison, 2019). In this way, the apparent naturalness of heterosexuality is maintained, upholding the heteronorm.

A binary logic is evident in Hollway's (1984) influential analysis of common Western sexual discourses. Men are positioned within a male sexual drive discourse as always ready for sex and women as lacking desire and needing to be primed, wooed, or persuaded by men to have sex. In contrast, a have/hold discourse positions women as striving for a relationship and

children and depicts them as interested in sex primarily for love and procreation. Once again, men are positioned in opposition as more interested in sexual pleasure than in romance, love, and commitment and as needing to be persuaded, pleased, or even tricked by women to get the latter (Morison et al., 2019). These discourses "work together, in highly gender-differentiated ways to prescribe cultural forms of heterosexual sex and relationships" (Gavey, 2005, p. 104), thus heterosexuality is privileged as it fits within socially sanctioned expectations of how gender should be expressed and enacted.

The heterosexual matrix "normalises and naturalises everything associated with heterosexuality" (Morison & Macleod, 2015, p. 23). Heteronorms are often based on essentialist discourses that refer to biology to justify constructions of women and men as innately distinct and attraction/sexual desire linked purely with procreation (Farvid, 2015; Morison & Macleod, 2015). Heterosexuality has also typically been a "privileged and invisible category" (Farvid, 2015, p.97), whereby heteronormativity is so embedded into our social and cultural world, that it is difficult to see and speak about it as a cultural concept, without positioning it in regard to an "other" (Farvid, 2015).

In terms of appropriate sexual desire, Butler posits that the heterosexual matrix "accounts for all desire for women by subjects of whatever sex or gender as originating in a masculine, heterosexual position" (Butler, 1990, p.72). This therefore brings to light the implications of viewing sex and desire through this lens, where appropriate sexual desire is regulated by heteronormativity. By highlighting the default attribution of desire to a masculine, heterosexual position, we can consider the limitations and biases inherent in societal norms that exclude or marginalise other forms of desire and diverse expressions of gender and

sexuality. It is the subsequent possibilities for subjectivity and agency that are constrained or enabled by these norms that I turn to next.

2.5. Sexual Subjectivity and Agency

As part of their constructive function, discourses make available various possibilities for fashioning subjectivity (Burr, 2015; Gavey, 2005). The specific role or identity that one assumes within a given discourse is referred to by the term "subject position," which captures how individuals are positioned or defined by language and power structures, shaping their identities, beliefs, and behaviours within the broader framework of societal norms and power relations (Davies & Harré, 1990). For instance, the discourses of sexuality that are available in a particular society provide a delimited range of options for the construction of sexual identity. Binary logic is often used to frame discourse in categories whereby one is better, or more privileged than the other (Derrida, 1981). In Westernised contexts, for example, "normal" sexuality, was historically linked with ideas of naturalness and moral correctness; while "perverted" or "abnormal" sexuality, encompassed anything outside of those norms. These discourses mapped onto heterosexuality and homosexuality in such a way that heterosexuality was commonly portrayed as conventional, innate, and morally correct, while homosexuality was seen as deviant, unnatural, and morally wrong (Foucault, 1978; Rich, 1980).

While dominant discourses and subjectivities are powerful and enduring, the subject positions given by discourse are not fixed and immutable. Since language and meaning constantly shift across time and place, one can contest and re/negotiate one's "sense of self in relation to the larger social world" (Norton, 2021, p. 401). For instance, in a modern, neoliberal context, "normal" and "abnormal" sexuality now map onto "healthy" and "unhealthy" sexuality

where inhabiting a “healthy” sexual subject position requires agentic and active engagement with sex including a demand for orgasm and a drive to work-on their sexual skills (Riley et al., 2019). There is, therefore, a dynamic interplay between language, power, and the construction of subjectivities in various discursive contexts (Nentwich & Morison, 2018).

If sexual subjectivity is framed as a fundamental part of people’s self-knowledge, and sexual desire is a key component of this, then it stands to reason that paying close attention to the social and cultural discourses surrounding sexual desire is crucial in understanding the cognitive and behavioural possibilities available to women. Sexual subjectivity is shaped by, and in turn shapes, broader societal norms, power dynamics, and dominant discourses surrounding sexual desire. Importantly, Gavey (2005) argues that these discourses and norms are often taken-for-granted, and taken up by women without conscious awareness, further restricting choice and consideration of available ways of being.

Importantly, considering the discursive representations of sexual desire and the subsequent subjectivity they offer up, means considering how sexual agency is constricted, or enabled. Sexual agency refers to the capacity to make autonomous choices about one's sexual experiences, desires, and actions. I turn to Weedon and Hallak (2021) who state:

> Drawing on the work of Foucault (1981) feminist poststructuralism sees discourses of gender and sexuality as produced within social structures, institutions, and practices, and in opposition to them. Discourses are structured by power relations and produce subject positions of both subjectification and agency. The meanings that they produce and reproduce need to be understood in relation to their specific historical and cultural location and the interests that they serve. (p.438)

Therefore, when norms and discursive representations are internalised, the ways that the subject can think, feel, speak, and act, are bound within those norms. In this way, the loss of sexual agency is at stake. When women's sexual subjectivity is shaped by narrow, normative discourses, their ability to make active, empowered sexual choices is compromised. Recognising and challenging these discourses is a key tenet of feminist research (and this thesis), in the aim to expand the possibilities for sexual subjectivity and agency.

2.6. Summary

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of key components of a feminist poststructuralist approach, focussing on how power and discourse intersect to shape knowledge, norms and subjectivity. Through this conceptual framework, women's sexual desire can be seen not as a fixed aspect of reality, but one constructed and shaped by prevalent societal discourse. Drawing on Foucault's conceptualisation of power as diffuse (Foucault, 1978), I considered how multiple discourses intersect to construct sexual desire in particular ways, and highlighted media as a powerful site where discourses are circulated. Drawing on Foucault's conceptualisation of power as productive (1978), I looked at how representations of sexual desire create normative frameworks through which people can see themselves. I turned to feminist poststructural scholars who have applied this idea to locate heterosexuality as a powerful normative framework through which women's sexual desire is understood. The dominance of heteronormativity as a social norm, shapes and significantly limits the available subjectivity for women to take up and restricts sexual agency. Having now established my broad theoretical foundation for making sense of women's sexual desire, I present my research rationale, aims, objectives and guiding questions below. Then, in the next chapter I examine existing literature

on the representations of women's sexual desire, paying particular attention to how these shape subjectivity and agency.

2.7. Research Rationale, Aims, Objectives and Guiding Questions

The overall aim of this thesis is to explore the public discursive landscape of women's sexual desire. In particular, the discursive *textual* landscape, which means examining media and psychological literature, rather than discourses drawn from within participant talk. This focus is theoretically justified; as outlined above, a feminist poststructuralist approach directs attention not only to how power is exercised over women, but also to how gendered power is embedded within social structures that maintain inequitable sexual relations. Discourse functions as a key mechanism through which these structures are sustained, challenged, or negotiated, shaping how we come to see and understand ourselves. My focus is on the dominant discourses and ideologies circulating in society; what ideas are available for people to take up, negotiate and position themselves within.

The mediascape is deeply gendered; women are told how to act, what to look like, and how to attract men on a daily basis. My focus on media texts aligns with Rosalind Gill's assertions that media are "...involved in actively producing gender" (p. 12) rather than reflecting reality. Media play a central role in shaping public understandings of gender, sexuality, and desire, while psychology, as an expert knowledge system, lends scientific legitimacy to those understandings. I also wanted to know whether we are stuck in this discursive web. Is there a possibility for fractures in the dominant discourse of sexual desire, are there alternative ways of knowing, being, understanding ourselves offered up in any of this? To

explore this, I focus on alternative media as a site of resistance and negotiation, where the web might unravel.

Taking an intertextual approach, this thesis explores how mainstream and alternative media, and psychological literature mutually support and reinforce dominant ideologies and power structures. Focusing on textual sites across multiple domains, rather than in isolation, provides a contained and coherent scope. Three different textual sites are considered in chapters 5, 6, and 7. Chapter 8 brings the intertextual and interdiscursive lens to consider how discourses are produced, circulated, reinforced, and sometimes contested across these sites. Together, analysis of these textual sites allow for a broader understanding of how discourses shape what it means to feel, express, and understand sexual desire as a woman, and highlights the continued need to critically examine institutional knowledges and public texts that define, enable and constrain women's sexual subjectivities and agentic potential

I draw on three sites that circulate discourse on sexual desire; (a) mainstream media, (b) alternative media; and (c) psychological literature. Across the three sites of discourse circulation I had four guiding research objectives, which each study attends to in slightly different ways. These broad objectives are:

1. *To identify the prevalent discourses used in constructing women's sexual desire.*
2. *To examine how those discourses cohere in creating public discursive representations of women's sexual desire.*
3. *To consider the implications of those representations for women's sexual subjectivity*
4. *To explore how the sexual subjectivities offered constricts or enables women's sexual agency.*

I address these broad objectives over my three studies. Each study has a slightly different approach, due to the nature of the sites of discourse circulation. The specific research objectives and research questions for each study and corresponding chapter are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1:

Study-Specific Research Objectives and Questions

	Study One / Chapter Five
Data Source	75 mainstream media articles
Research Objective	To investigate how women's sexual desire is constructed within mainstream online women's media and the implications of these constructions for women's sexual subjectivity.
Research Questions	How is women's desire constructed in online media aimed at women? What discourses support these constructions? What subject positions are made available within these texts? What possibilities for subjectivity and practice are enabled or restricted from the vantage point offered by these subject positions and discourses?
Publication Details	Tappin, J., Riley, S., & Morison, T. (2023). How to have great sex: Exploring sexual subjectivities and discourses of desire in mainstream online media aimed at women. *Feminism & Psychology, 34*(1). 172–192. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535231195957
	Study Two / Chapter Six
Data Source	55 alternative media articles
Research Objective	To explore the potential for alternative, feminist online media (written for women and gender-diverse readers) to resist and possibly transform prevailing discourses of sexuality that currently create a narrow, normative representation of female sexual desire.
Research Questions	How is women's desire constructed in online, alternative media?

	How do online alternative media texts reproduce, resist or otherwise negotiate normative constructions of women's sexual desire? What wider discourses support these constructions?
Publication Details	Tappin, J., Riley, S., & Morison, T. Resisting normative sexual subjectivities: A discourse analysis of how feminist alternative media re-shape constructions of women's sexual desire. [Manuscript accepted for publication in *Feminist Media Studies* as of October 2025. Located at https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2025.2580417]

Study Three / Chapter Seven	
Data Source	12 pieces of published psychological literature
Research Objective	To examine how women's sexual desire is constructed in psychological academic literature, with a focus on the construction of gendered norms related to sexuality.
Research Questions	How do academic psychological literature sources construct sexual desire? What common discourses are drawn on when constructing women's sexual desire? What are the discursive effects of these constructions in terms of women's sexual subjectivity?
Publication Details	Tappin, J., Morison, T., & Riley, S. Flipping the critical gaze: Discourses of sexual desire within psychological literature. [Manuscript in preparation for submission to *Culture, Health and Sexuality*.]

3. Chapter Three: Literature Review

As I have detailed, in this thesis I aim to examine public discursive representations of women's desire, and their implications for sexual subjectivity and sexual agency. In Chapter Two I discussed discourse as having power to shape various representations of women's sexual desire. I demonstrated how dominant discourses provide the language to guide what is shown, hidden, or emphasised in those representations, subsequently impacting the way women can see themselves in relation to their own desire. I also discussed the diffuse power of discourse, and how particular sites of circulation (e.g., media) play a role in circulating key ideas about sexuality and desire.

In this chapter I begin by focusing on how the dominant social and cultural discourses that have shaped understandings of women's sexual desire over time. I then turn my attention to mainstream media that has been produced within the Anglosphere, which includes English-speaking nations with shared cultural, historical, and political ties, primarily including the UK, US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. This aligns with both my own context and reflects the media that I will draw on in my own research. I consider how these ideas are taken up and rearticulated through a postfeminist media sensibility. I then turn to look at the relative dearth of research on sexual desire discourses within both alternative media, and psychological literature.

All three textual sites comprise slightly different aspects of a whole public discursive domain. Additionally, all three sites are interrelated, with mainstream media drawing on psychological literature as expert voices, psychological literature being impacted by dominant

discursive constructions, and alternative media providing a place of resistance to mainstream ideas. Together, these textual sites co-construct public representations of sexual desire.

3.1. Prevalent Discursive Constructions of Sexual Desire

In this section, I discuss key discourses in turn that feminist scholars have identified as underpinning common Western constructions of women's sexual desire. Namely the "biological" discourse, the "male sexual drive" discourse, the "have/hold" discourse, the "risk and responsibility" discourse, the "sexual double standard" discourse, and a missing discourse of sexual desire. I will give an overview of the relevant research that has explored these discourses, and how they have been instrumental in shaping collective understandings of women's sexual desire.

3.1.1. The Biological Discourse of Sexuality

This powerful discourse constructs a solely biological basis and imperative for desire that, as I discuss below, works to construct and evaluate women's desire according to men's standards. The biological discourse of sexual functioning focuses primarily on hormones, bodily functioning, evolutionary roles and so forth, with little to no consideration of the socio-cultural context in which physiological desire occurs (Tolman & Diamond, 2001; Wood et al., 2006). This discourse has been foundational in much social understanding of sexual desire as innate. It also appears that this understanding of sex and desire as primarily biological is an overarching discourse on which others all rely, to some extent. I will firstly focus on the foundations of biological discourse and then turn to other common discourses of sexual desire in the following sections, outlining where they to some extent draw on, or diverge from biological reasoning.

The biological discourse emerged in response to psychological understandings of sexual desire, in particular, Freudian theories of psychosexual development, which were influential in the early to mid-20th century and focused heavily on unconscious conflicts and the role of early childhood experiences in shaping adult personality and behaviour. These psychodynamic theories were critiqued for being phallocentric, locating the penis as the primary site of pleasure and the defining feature of sexual development. Women's sexual desire was pathologised and framed as inherently deficient or deviant compared to male desire. In response, Masters and Johnson, in 1966, attempted to normalise female desire. The researchers conducted empirical research involving direct observation and measurements of physiological responses during sexual activity. Their results contradicted Freudian theory by locating sexual desire in the biological realm and emphasised the importance of considering both physical and physiological aspects of sexual desire.

Masters and Johnson's (1966) model of human sexual responding largely conceptualised sexual desire as a physiological response that happens spontaneously and comprises standard linear phases, namely: excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution (Wood et al., 2003; Masters and Johnson, 1966). This model had a clear basis in empirical evidence, provided valuable insights into the physiological aspects of sexual response, and moved discussion of women's sexual desire into the mainstream. The scientific basis also gave it greater credibility than psychoanalytic psychological discourse and has thus made it very powerful and embedded. However, its emphasis on the physiological had three clear limitations, according to feminist critique (Tolman & Diamond, 2001; Ussher, 1993; Wood et al., 2006). Firstly, it primarily focussed on a heteronormative and genital-centric understanding of sexuality. Secondly, it

reduced the complexity of human sexuality to a linear sequence of stages, whereby there is a "correct" and normal way to experience desire. Lastly, the model posited that women's physiological sexual response is similar to men's. While this is a robust empirical finding, it reflects a decontextualised and reductionist approach that overlooks the sociocultural and psychological dimensions of sexual experience. By focusing narrowly on physiological stages, the model lack nuance around the differences in how desire and arousal are experienced and shaped by broader social and cultural influences.

Feminist scholars have argued that these and other physiologically focussed models of sexual desire, contribute to a construction of male's desire as the standard upon which women's desire is based (Usher, 1993; Tolman & Diamond, 2001; Wood et al., 2006). This tendency is particularly evident in studies where research predominantly focuses on male participants and subsequently extrapolates findings to apply to women, without considering the unique contexts and complexities of women's sexual experiences. Consequently, women's desire can be seen as "lacking" compared to assumed norms derived from male-centred research. Women who do not conform to these expectations—either by not exhibiting desire in the same manner as men or by displaying alternative patterns of sexual response—are often pathologised as dysfunctional (Tiefer, 1996, 2001). The comparison of women's sexual response to men perpetuates hierarchical and often stigmatising views of sexuality where women's sexual experiences are systematically marginalised or pathologised when they deviate from male-centric standards, reinforcing the notion that female sexuality is inherently deficient or abnormal.

3.1.2. Wendy Hollway's Discourses of (Hetero)Sexuality

A central text in scholarship on sexual desire was Hollway's (1984) work, in which she described three central discourses of sexual desire; the *male sexual drive discourse*, the *have/hold discourse*, and the *permissive discourse*. This work was foundational to contemporary feminist, critical scholarship, as it provided a framework for analysing how gendered power relations are reproduced through sexual practice and meaning making. Hollway demonstrated how these discourses constructed particular subject positions for men and women, shaping who can legitimately express sexual desire and under what conditions. Her work remains relevant to and has been taken-up in contemporary scholarship on the dynamics of relationships and sexual desire, as I will demonstrate below (e.g., Beres & Farvid, 2010; Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2014; Garland-Levett, 2017; Gavey, 2005). Whilst these discourses remain related, I will explore them distinctly in the following subsections.

3.1.2.1. The Male Sexual Drive Discourse

Building on the foundations of the biological discourse discussed above, the discourse of the male sexual drive, as identified by Hollway (1984), constructs men as having a naturally higher sex drive than women and, importantly, propelled or ruled by their sexual urges. The discourse entrenches notions of intrinsic biological differences, constructing men as inherently driven by high sex drives and women as lacking or even devoid of sexual urges. While Hollway identified the male sexual drive in the 1980s, contemporary research highlights its continuation in framing women as passive recipients of sex and men as active seekers (Garland-Levett, 2017). In Farvid and Braun's (2006) media analysis, for example, the sexualities of men and women were continuously constructed as opposite, with men's sex drives as high, and women's as negligible according to the male sex drive discourse.

The male sex drive discourse bolsters cultural expectations of men's virility and sexual prowess and traditional gender norms in which men are the pursuers (active) and women the pursued (passive). Consequently, the gendered subjectivities afforded within this discourse, is that men are positioned as agentic subjects while women are objects of male desire. Positioned thus, women's worth comes from being sexually desirable and able to attract men. These positions are naturalised when seen from a biological perspective: men have more testosterone and are evolutionarily destined to act this way, this is seen as normal and expected (Hollway, 1984).

The implication of the male sexual drive discourse is that men can be seen as unable to control their sexual thoughts and behaviours, are unchangeable, and thus not held responsible for their actions. In contrast, as ostensibly not similarly driven, women are considered (better) able to exercise sexual restraint and so bear the responsibility of gatekeeping or granting permission for sex, rather than an active participant who also desires sex. The grounding of this discourse in biology helps legitimise the male sex drive discourse, with such views of male virility and female passivity often upheld by experts as the objectively scientific position (Hollway, 1984).

3.1.2.2. The Have/Hold Discourse

The idea of biological gender differences forms the basis of what Hollway (1984) called the have/hold discourse. Within this discourse, women's sexual desire is firmly situated within the realm of (heterosexual) marriage, supported by essentialist gender notions of sex being "natural" between men and women. This discourse links clearly to broader heteronormative expectations that reinforce marriage and monogamy as the ultimate goals for women. This is

partly protective, as women are seen as vulnerable and in need of support from a husband, where they can express their sexuality within reasonable limits (Hollway, 1984). Ironically, the solution to being victimised by men, is to be protected by men.

The have/hold discourse restricts women's sexual agency by positioning desire as something that can only be appropriately expressed within marriage, and ideally for the purposes of reproduction. Subsequently, through this discourse, "women are seen as comparatively asexual creatures for whom sex is a means to an end" (Gavey, 2005, p.103). By positioning women's desire as something that can only be appropriately expressed within the confines of marriage, it places strict limitations on sexual agency. The have/hold discourse not only constrains how women experience and express desire but also frames their sexuality as something to be managed and controlled, reinforcing the notion that women's sexuality is dangerous unless contained within socially acceptable boundaries (Rich, 1980). Conversely, the Have/Hold discourse places a sexual imperative on women, to want sex, or adhere with requests for sex within the context of marriage as it is what is expected of them.

Whilst Hollway discussed this discourse in the early 1980s, and theoretically, social discourse has moved on since then, we still see glimmers of this discourse within contemporary feminist research. For example, the expectation for sex within a monogamous relationship is seen in Fahs et al., (2020)'s research on sexual desire discrepancy within relationships. Participants reported that they felt obligated to participate in sex with their (male) partners, and in their discussion, the authors connected these findings to pervasive ideas on coercion and sexual violence:

> women saying that they were "grossed out" by sex or that they let their husband "do your thing" when they were not interested suggests a portrait of sexuality where women may feel that they must endure it or that they have no real ability to say no. This interpretation extends the literature we already know about sexual violence and assault and implies that removing women's sense of sexual voice ("enthusiastic consent" in particular) is a normative part of their sexual lives (p. 235).

Similar notions of sex and desire being acceptable and expected within monogamous relationships are identified in other feminist research (e.g., Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Farvid & Braun, 2014). Such studies demonstrate that whilst adaped and modernised, discourses of heteronormativity and monogamy, supported by essentialist gender discourses are still present within our contemporary moment.

3.1.2.3. The Permissive Discourse

Hollway (1984) described the permissive discourse as "the offspring of the male sexual drive discourse", but "essentially genderblind" (p. 231) in that it encompasses the assumptions that both men *and* women possess natural, biological sex drives. In contrast to the have/hold discourse, the permissive discourse locates sexuality as an individual pursuit rather than a relational or social one. Women, within this discourse, are framed as autonomous agents capable of initiating and desiring sex for pleasure rather than reproduction or love.

In this way, the permissive discourse appeared liberatory, seemingly offering women the opportunity to "have sex like a man" (Markle, 2008) and participate in the sexual revolution (Gavey, 2005). However, this apparent liberation is complicated. As Campbell (1980) argued, "the very affirmation of sexuality was a celebration of masculine sexuality," (p. 2) meaning that

what was positioned as sexual freedom for women often relied on and reproduced androcentric standards of sexuality. Rather than dismantling gendered norms of desire, the permissive discourse rearticulates them within a new framework of individual freedom.

While the permissive discourse extends beyond the earlier have/hold and male sex drive discourses, it does not exist in isolation. Instead, it remains entangled within heterosexual and gendered norms that constrain women's sexual subjectivities. Beres and Farvid (2010) found that women negotiating casual sex encounters balanced the permissive discourse of sexual liberation with the persistent sexual double standard. While women were rewarded for being sexually available, they were simultaneously judged for being "too sexual." This double bind illustrates how the permissive discourse promises freedom but continues to position women within contradictory and gendered expectations of desire.

The logic of the permissive discourse also obscures the broader social and cultural conditions in which sex occurs and the power dynamics that shape heterosexual relations, with significant consequences. Gavey (2005) found that within a permissive discourse, some women felt that sexual "permission" was accompanied by an implicit *obligation* to engage in sex. As she explained, "while morally conservative prohibitions against sex before marriage would have been oppressive and unwelcome for many women in many situations, the erasure of these restrictions at the same time removed socially acceptable ways for women to avoid sex in situations where it was not desired" (p. 139). Thus, rather than facilitating genuine sexual agency, the permissive discourse can function to reobjectify women by limiting their ability to refuse sex or assert boundaries.

The permissive discourse provides an important bridge to postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of sexuality, which emphasise personal choice, empowerment, and responsibility (as I will discuss in section 3.2).

3.1.3. The Risk and Responsibility Discourse

The risk and responsibility discourse emphasises the risk and danger associated with sex for women, and frames women as victims (Allen, 2007). Its logic stems from the male sexual drive discourse's construction of men as having an insatiable sex drive that they are unable to control, which then impacts the safety of women (Tolman, 2002). Sex is framed as particularly dangerous for women and something to negotiate in terms of keeping themselves safe rather than something that is normal and can be done in a safe, healthy, and pleasurable way. This way of talking about young women's sexuality is commonly emphasised in the media and sexuality education classes (Chmielewski et al., 2017).

Although there are certainly dangers and risk for women to be aware of, an overemphasis on risk removes the notions of pleasure and desire from the conversation. Furthermore, when the dominant discourses construct sex in terms of consent and risk, talking about pleasure and desire often takes a back seat and could be viewed as irresponsible (Tolman, 2002). Youth voices in these conversations are often muted, re-emphasising the idea that young women's sexuality is a problem and constructing them, not as autonomous women with desires of their own, but as "objects of concern" (Morison & Herbert, 2019, p.3). This also creates a dilemma around their decision to engage in sexual activity with the choice to either abstain from sex to avoid a risk, or to ignore potential risk and have sex (Coleman et al., 2010).

In turn, those young people who do decide to take the risk are constructed as irresponsible or deviant, by ignoring the advice given to them (Allen, 2007).

For example, in a media analysis of US teen magazines, Joshi et al. (2011) found that sex was presented as being risky and dangerous, but significantly more so for young women, than young men. The double standard is also present in popular Anglo-American films, as indicated by Smith (2012). The findings from this research show that across many popular English language teen films between 2000 and 2009, two key messages consistently given were that only bad girls (whores) verbalise desire and those who do will suffer negative consequences.

3.1.4. The "Sexual Double Standard" Discourse

The sexual double standard discourse stems from the male sexual drive discourse and positions active male sexuality as positive and normal. In contrast, the sexuality of women is deemed to be minimal, and perceived as negative when expressed openly (Jackson & Cram, 2003). It is a pervasive discourse that exists in media, schools and in general society, constraining the way that we view men and women who express sexual desire and/or engage in sexual activity. In society, men are often praised for their sexual accomplishments in social settings, with language such as "stud" used to congratulate them. In contrast, women who engage in casual sex or advertise their sexuality in the way that they dress or their behaviour, are considered promiscuous and "slutty" (Farvid et al., 2016; Jackson & Cram, 2003). This double standard is clear, even within the language commonly used to describe someone who openly expresses desire and sexuality. Where "slut" refers to someone who has several casual sex partners, the term is feminised, with "man-slut" being the male equivalent, and in doing so is thus problematised (Farvid et al., 2016). Like many discourses, the roots of the sexual double

standard lie in moral principles that value purity and virtue in women (as discussed in Chapter One). As such, women are told that women do not, or should not, desire sex.

Tolman's (2002) work on dilemmas of desire illustrates the double standard at play, with the young North American women in her research expressing the ways that they must manage or suppress their sexual desires in public spaces. Tolman (2002) identifies young women who feel desire but have made concerted efforts to silence it within their embodied experiences and talk, because they recognise the risks associated with expressing desire both to their reputation, and safety. Similarly, Tolman discusses young women who do understand the social rules and discourses that govern women's expression of desire, but reject the idea that women are undesiring. These women, however, still adhere to these norms publicly, keeping their desires in underground safe spaces, because they recognise the benefit of living "within the system" (Tolman, 2002, p. 152).

Women, and young women especially, are denied the space in which to talk about their sexual desires, and those who do, receive a bad reputation or risk their personal safety. This creates a clear dichotomy where women can choose between being a "bad girl" or a "good girl" in terms of embracing their sexuality or conforming with the normative ideas that women should not express their sexuality (Chmielewski et al., 2017; Jackson & Cram, 2003). The sexual double standard can also impede safer sexual practices, as Farvid & Beres (2016) noted participants drawing on the use of alcohol to explain or justify their casual sex encounters; framing their experiences as a result of getting "really drunk" (p. 385), rather than as deliberate choices. This strategy allows women to protect themselves from this negative labelling as a "bad girl."

3.1.5. A Missing Discourse of Women's Desire

Stemming from work with female students and sexuality education policies, Fine (1988) identified that female sexuality was spoken about in the context of violence, victimisation, and morality, but overall, a discourse of desire was absent (Fine, 1988).

This has not changed significantly since 1988 when Michelle Fine identified the silence around women's desires. Two decades on, she asserted that the desire was still missing in mainstream discourse (Fine & McClelland, 2006), which is reflected in other sexualities research in which the absence of a discourse of desire has been noted (Brown et al., 2020; Costa et al., 2009; Jackson & Cram, 2003). For example, Tolman's (2002) interview study with North American young women indicated that women's own desire and pleasure was often left out of talk about sex or relationships. Participants did not have the language to talk about this aspect of sexuality because it was ignored by their sexuality education classes and general society. Tolman (2002) argued that this missing discourse has created a social standard of femininity that supports the silencing of women's expressions of desire.

Missing the language to describe and talk about sexual desire, results in young women lacking the subjectivity to view themselves as desiring people (Fine, 1988). Additionally, they may become disconnected from their own embodied experiences. For instance, some of the young women in Tolman's research stated that they did not feel desire, because it had not been an option presented to them by teachers, family, peers, sexuality education, or within the media. Consequently, as Fine (1988) argued, such young women were unable to understand what sexual desire feels and does not feel like. As such, young women were constructed, and could view themselves, only as passive sexual objects.

3.2. A Postfeminist Sensibility as a Central Feature in Western Media.

The foregoing discussion highlights how discourses of women's sexual subjectivities have changed over time, in part due to the women's movement and sexual liberation of the late 20th century. Popular women's magazines such as Cosmopolitan were key in moving women's sexual pleasure and expression of desire into the mainstream, whilst rejecting the more traditional discourses of women's sexuality discussed above. From the early 1990s onwards, these magazines began to circulate, and celebrate, a picture of a woman who is empowered, sexy, fun and openly sexual (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Lamb & Peterson, 2012).

In response to this change, Gill (2007) coined the term "postfeminist sensibility" to describe a particular way of looking at issues of gender, informed by postmodernist and constructionist perspectives. Viewing postfeminism as a "sensibility" rather than a fixed ideology allows for aspects to change and develop within the current social landscape (Gill, 2007). Thus, postfeminist researchers identify and critique a key set of ideas that cohere around contemporary notions of ideal femininity. Gill (2007) conceptualised various elements of a postfeminist sensibility, including an emphasis on sexualization in contemporary culture, a shift from sexual object to sexual subject for women, self-surveillance as a normative practice and one connected with an emphasis on choice and empowerment. Gill (2007) conceptualised postfeminism not just as a reflection of media culture, but a hegemonic form of sense making that has permeated everyday life.

Postfeminism itself has also developed and changed. Gill and Orgad (2018) argue that it is no longer just about the "sexualisation of culture", with emphasis on women's bodies, choice, empowerment, but a media landscape that has included more political and critical discourses of

power, inequity, and sexual violence. Yet, these discussions remain entangled with postfeminist sensibilities, often centring particular "kinds" of (White, cis, heterosexual, middle-class) femininity and reproducing neoliberal ideas of individual responsibility and self-management (Gavey, 2012; Gill & Orgad, 2018).

In the following subsections I will discuss some key tenets of postfeminism that have been identified in research on sexual desire.

3.2.1. Sexual Empowerment

In resistance to traditional discourses of desire that construct women as sexual objects, or deny them sexual agency, postfeminist discourses of desire offer up the opportunity for women to be and feel sexually empowered (Gill, 2007). Whilst this certainly conjures new possibilities for subjectivity and greater options for sexual expression to women, it also imposes a new set of expectations and standards. In this sense, sexual empowerment becomes compulsory, creating a narrow and stereotypical prescription for womanhood—one who is overtly sexy, confident, and in control of her desires.

A prototypical postfeminist sexual subject is one who has lots of sex with men and enjoys it. They are always up-for-it, willing and excited to adopt and maintain their sexual identities, while also being knowledgeable and experienced (Evans & Riley, 2014; Farvid & Braun, 2014). For example, Gill (2009) identifies the push for women to become "sexual adventurers" in her analysis of sex advice within women's magazines. Women are told to spice things up and increase their sexual knowledge so that they can transform their sexual practice and better please their male partners; becoming "pleasure pursuers" (Evans & Riley, 2014, p.63). However, postfeminist discourses also present a specific version of empowerment that

aligns with conventional standards of attractiveness and sexuality. This creates an expectation that women must conform to a particular image of sexiness to be considered empowered.

3.2.2. Individual Choice and Work

The compulsory empowerment discussed above is also most often framed as a personal journey, emphasising individual agency. Postfeminism is linked to neoliberalism which has become the predominant ideology that has saturated economic and public policy worldwide. This ideology prioritises economic freedom and removes interference from governments so that individuals can think independently and make choices for themselves about their welfare and prosperity (Evans & Riley, 2014).

While the intention is to provide a sense of autonomy, the consequence is a heightened burden placed on women to achieve and embody empowerment on an individual level, and one that involves a considerable investment of time and emotional labour, along with financial resources (Barker et al., 2018). The impetus has been placed on women to undertake work on themselves to adopt the subjectivity of sexually liberated women. For example, the female readership in Gill's (2009) research was instructed through discourses in Glamour magazine on how to manage their bodies and behaviour to occupy competent and sexy subject positions.

Because women are tasked with navigating and negotiating their sexual desires in a way that aligns with postfeminist ideals of empowerment, individual blame and responsibility is also placed on women if they fail to meet these cultural norms (Evans & Riley, 2014). This emphasis on choice also neglects socio-structural issues that constrain choice-making (Evans & Riley, 2014; Riley et al., 2019). The notion of choice is thus, paradoxically linked to a prescription to conform to normative expressions of sexual desire. An emphasis on personal choice and

individual responsibility, in conjunction with psy-disciplines and the focus on improving the self, results in a shift towards prioritising the work that people should do to align with particular social ideals. This work is, in turn, constructed as liberating because there is ostensibly choice involved (Evans & Riley, 2014).

3.2.3. Consumer Culture

In postfeminism, both the emphasis on individual agency and choice, and its connection with neoliberalism, intersects with consumer culture to construct narratives where empowerment is closely tied to the act of consumption. Empowerment thus comes intertwined with products and services that promise to enhance sex appeal or sexual pleasure. This commodification reinforces the idea that empowerment is attainable through consumption.

Despite these new discourses celebrating the empowerment of women through their sexual agency, postfeminist discourses of sexual empowerment operate within a patriarchal system and the beneficiaries of this kind of women's liberation is, once again, men (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2010). For example, women are told that they need to be great at sex, experts at achieving orgasm, and sexually adventurous if they are to be worthy of male attention (Frith, 2015a). In this sense, women are positioned as needing to rely on men in order to experience themselves as powerful and boost their own self-image (Farvid & Braun, 2006). Women and girls who read these magazines are instructed in 'men-ology' and learn how to express their desire and sexuality by imitating the sexualised media, conforming to what their peers do because boys like it (Gill, 2009; Lamb & Peterson, 2012). Their own desire and pleasure are still constructed as being given to them by men, and they should be knowledgeable about how to get them (Farvid & Braun, 2014). Despite mainstream magazines such as Cosmo and Cleo being

written for women, men's pleasure is the actual focus (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Frith, 2015a). Women are told that they need to work to learn how to please men better; and to act and appear in ways that provide men with sexual pleasure. Women are still, therefore, merely objects for men's pleasure (Kim & Ward, 2012), and their sexual performance is emphasised rather than their embodied experiences of desire.

3.2.4. Summary

The previous sections of this literature review have demonstrated the complex and often contradictory discourses that have constructed women's sexual desire within mainstream, online and print media over time. The corpus of literature I have drawn on all point towards changing representations of desire from limited and suppressed, to active, engaged and empowered. However, a key feature throughout this literature is that women are positioned in relation to men to various extents. Critical researchers have also drawn attention to the limited representations of desire outside of a thin, White, Western, able-bodied, cis-heterosexual woman (Atwood et al., 2015; Diamond, 2005; Chmielewski et al., 2017; Farhall, 2018; Jackson, 2005; Kim et al., 2007 Loeser et al., 2018; Pausé, 2015; Shakespeare & Richardson, 2018). Next, I turn to alternative media, and psychological professional literature as relevant areas of discourse circulation.

3.3. Alternative Media and Psychological Literature

As I noted in sections 2.2 and 2.3, discourses shape sexuality and desire in specific ways, depending on the context. These discourses are not static; they can contradict, interact, and reinforce one another (Parker, 2002). My previous discussion demonstrates how the dominant discourses framing women's desire have shifted over time; away from conservative ideals

(Hollway, 1987; Carpenter, 1998) and, more recently, to postfeminist discourses (Gill, 2007, 2017; Riley et al., 2019). This aligns with the idea that prevalent discourses reflect a complex interplay of multiple, sometimes conflicting narratives that create divergent or overlapping meanings about a subject (Parker, 2002). Additionally, the power to shape public understanding lies in the platforms where these discourses circulate. Some narratives gain more legitimacy than others through the effect of expert voices and/or intertextuality (Kong, 2014).

A focus on mainstream media discourses is important because these texts reflect dominant discursive constructions and are more likely to influence public understanding due to their reach and accessibility. Considering intertextuality, mainstream media not only shapes other texts, but interacts with them, as discourses intersect across different contexts. However, there is little scholarship on textual discourses of women's sexual desire, other than within mainstream media. Therefore, in this section, I will briefly introduce why my two areas of focus; alternative media, and psychological literature, are relevant authorities where discourses of sexual desire are circulated. I will briefly outline what is known about how sexual desire is constructed within these contexts, with further exploration and detail to follow in the literature sections of Chapters Six and Seven respectively.

3.3.1. Alternative Media

Alternative media serves as a vital space for counter-narratives and resistance to mainstream oppressive institutions. For the purposes of this thesis, I am drawing on the definition of alternative media as counter to mainstream media (Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Gunnarsson-Payne, 2012), and as feminist-focused publications that foreground discourses that are in resistance to mainstream discourses of desire.

Historically, alternative media publications have been influential in feminist spaces, in particular supporting the women's liberation movement of the mid-late 20th century. These publications have served as a space to share radical ideas, critique patriarchal structures, and provide a sense of community and solidarity among women, and in recent years, other marginalised genders (Gunnarson-Payne, 2021). By operating outside the constraints of corporate media, alternative media has had the remit to prioritise content often overlooked by mainstream outlets, such as gender inequality, reproductive rights, and concerns in the queer community. For example, in the 1970's and 1980's, publications such as *Spare Rib* (Hollows, 2013; Todd, 2017) and *Red Rag* (Bazin, 2021), or *Gay Community News* (Booth, 2019) broached topics that were, at the time, seen within public discourse as taboo or even morally wrong. Their persistence in sharing narratives on abortion, sexism, gender roles, sexual identity, and sex work, for example, was instrumental in not only amplifying diverse voices, but also challenging popular narratives and bringing these issues to the forefront of mainstream awareness (Bazin, 2021; Hollows, 2013).

As such, these publications are important places to look in considering how media may resist, transform, and directly challenge discourses that are circulated by mainstream outlets. This is particularly significant given the extensive literature highlighting how prevalent discourses within mainstream media constrain women's sexual agency, linked their desire to men's pleasure, and marginalise sexual desire for non-White and cis-heterosexual women (Atwood et al., 2015; Diamond, 2005; Chmielewski et al., 2017; Farhall, 2018; Jackson, 2005; Kim et al., 2007 Loeser et al., 2018; Pausé, 2015; Shakespeare & Richardson, 2018).

There is only a limited body of literature addressing women's sexual desire within an alternative media corpus, particularly in contemporary times. However, the small corpus of texts that have taken this focus demonstrate that alternative platforms generally challenge heteronormativity, overtly critique oppressive practices and patriarchal structures, and share narratives of agentic expressions of women's pleasure (Jenkins & Johnson, 2017; Muise, 2011; Todd, 2017). The literature also shows that a binary distinction between mainstream and alternative media narratives is oversimplified. While alternative feminist media can challenge mainstream constructions of sexuality, they may also reaffirm traditional tropes or pervasive discourse. For example, highlighting women's pleasure while simultaneously featuring gender stereotypes (Gil-Glazer, 2023; Todd, 2017), and promoting agentic sexuality whilst also reproducing neoliberal ideals of self-improvement (D'Enbeau, 2011; Jenkins & Johnson, 2017). This overlap demonstrates the complexity of alternative media, as they both resist and align with mainstream narratives, blurring the line between radical and normative discourses. I delve into specifics of the above studies, in the review of literature in Chapter Six, before further exploring this complexity through my own analysis to attend to the gap in the literature of women's sexual desire discourses within alternative feminist media.

3.3.2. Psychological Literature

In this section, I consider psychological literature as a third site of circulation whereby discourses of women's sexual desire might be examined. When compared to research on both mainstream and alternative media, there is a dearth of literature addressing discourses of women's sexual desire within psychological literature. Yet, this literature is an important site of

expert discourses that circulate across other media sites, as well as shaping psychological therapeutic practice.

In section 2.3, I briefly discussed how intertextuality in relation to lay and professional texts is especially relevant when considering how discourses are legitimised and subsequently taken-up. Mainstream media texts commonly directly refer to professional scientific texts and/or experts to justify their reasoning. Lay readers are more likely to view these ideas as credible due to the perceived expertise and authority of their authors, especially when relevant credentials are highlighted (Thon & Jucks, 2017; Takahashi & Tandoc, 2016). Mainstream media often reinforces this dynamic by using scientific language to validate their content, regardless of whether they are referring to relevant research or not (McGannon et al., 2016). As a result, media texts that directly engage with scientific literature or expert opinions are perceived as more legitimate. Yet rather than being understood as objective science, research shows that they reproduce social norms, constructing subjects in ways that align with dominant discourses embedded in scientific institutions or that serve the interests of these authorities (McGannon et al., 2016).

Scientific discourse is no longer confined to the professional community but can be accessed online in some cases and is often circulates within media aimed at women readership. Thus, a new level of accessibility to academic work highlights another way in which psychology can shape public discourse.

4. Chapter Four: Methodological Approach

As this is a thesis by publication, each of my three articles (Chapters Five, Six and Seven) include their own methodological sections. In this chapter, I go into significantly more detail than is possible with the context of a journal article, to explore the choices I made in designing and conducting these studies. There were a variety of choices to make in regard to designing a data collection method for the first and second studies (Chapters Five and Six). In this chapter, I articulate the design and data collection of each of the three studies in turn. Then, I discuss my method of data analysis as a cohesive whole across all three studies. Similarly, I discuss ethical implications of my research in its entirety, rather than as separate parts. I end with a reflexive account of my positioning within the data collection and analysis process.

4.1. Study One (Chapter Five): Mainstream Media Analysis

The first study addressed Objective One: To investigate how women's sexual desire is constructed within mainstream online women's media and the implications of these constructions for women's sexual subjectivity. This study was guided by two main research questions and sub-questions:

1. How is women's desire constructed in online media aimed at women?
    a. What discourses support these constructions?
    b. What subject positions are made available within these texts?
2. What possibilities for subjectivity and practice are enabled or restricted from the vantage point offered by these subject positions and discourses?

When designing the data collection method, I wanted to develop a data corpus that reflected the landscape of mainstream online women's media that diverse audiences might be

exposed to. This meant locating content that is “popular” online, that would be delivered to large audiences. However, as I explain below, ascertaining this media was not a simple task owing to algorithms that personalise content so that search results vary widely for different people when browsing/searching online. My method therefore recognised the influence of search algorithms and digital marketing strategy in shaping the information landscape online, reflecting how power operates in curating and prioritising content, and thus the dominance of discourses. I collected data via keyword searches of *Google*, which holds an uncontested monopoly in search-engine use, largely due to its search algorithm and exclusivity agreements with other companies (to be the default search engine on products such as mobile devices) (Graham, 2022). As I explain next, the difficulty was that this approach has not commonly been used by qualitative media researchers, and so there is a lack of existing data collection procedures in the published literature to draw from.

4.1.1. Design Choices

The internet media landscape has changed considerably since its inception, especially in the last ten years. Internet media data collection is a new method and constantly changing as new ways of interacting online become available (Morison et al., 2015). Media consumption can be purposeful, with users navigating purposefully to their choice of news sites or signing up to newsletters. However, with the growth of multiple social media platforms, and the sheer scale of content available through mobile technology, media consumption can also be relatively non-agentic with opinions, advice and information washing over readers as they scroll. In the algorithmic age, online media has become even more complicated to study, as data feeds, search results, and sponsored posts are personalised (Eg et al., 2023; see also Boeker & Urman,

2022; Schjøtt-Hansen & Hartley, 2021 for examples of research within TikTok and news media respectively). I sought to find some way of collecting media data that could reflect the eclectic or serendipitous nature of online consumption of media, and thus circulation of discourses about sexual desire.

In setting out to design a data collection method to meet the above-mentioned research objective, I found relatively few examples of existing studies to draw from in which online media had been collected for the purpose of qualitative analysis; ideally discourse analysis. Within the literature that was relevant, I broadly categorised three different types of methods and types of media data:

1. A selection of weblog posts (blogs) or online publications.
2. User-generated comments.
3. Keyword-based media content.

I considered each medium in relation to my research question before making a final choice of medium for which I then designed a specific data collection strategy, a keyword-based search design. Below, I briefly outline key considerations for each medium, and the rationale for why I decided against them.

4.1.1.1. Selecting Blog Posts or Online Publications

Personal blogs and online magazines regularly publish writing on a particular topic for example *cosmopolitan.com*. Both personal blogs and online magazines are similar in that the content is edited and curated purposefully to be read by a target demographic. Typically, researchers analyse personal blogs to gain insights into individuals' thoughts, opinions, and narratives (Hookway, 2008), and this method does allow for the exploration of diverse voices

and personal perspectives (Muise, 2011). Focussing attention to online magazines gives the potential for consideration of how media companies construct and present dominant narratives, and shape cultural discourses (e.g., Frith, 2015a; Brown et al., 2020). However making decisions about which blogs and magazines were best to include, would come into conflict with the goal of examining mainstream representations of desire (as my own selection choices would come more into play). Similarly, this method had the potential to result in a narrower understanding of mainstream media alongside a geographic skew if, for example, the magazines were more popular in certain countries.

4.1.1.2. User-Generated Comments.

This content includes comments from online communities, discussion forums, or social media. This type of analysis captures users' responses to specific topics or news articles and gives opportunities to explore how individuals engage in discourse (Giles, 2017). This method also highlights the dialogic nature of online discussions, whereby users re/negotiate and re/construct ideas within interactions with each other, or in response to the original prompt (e.g., Brooker et al., 2017; Colliver & Coyle, 2020; Evans & Riley, 2020; Sagredos, & Nikolova, 2022). However, comment sections generally have a relative absence of expert power relations and authority because the commenters are interacting between themselves, rather than being given advice from an expert voice. Additionally, online commenters often tend to be polarised in their opinions, indicating that those who choose to comment are more likely to reflect extreme positions (Lee & Kim, 2023). Researchers have also commented that this polarisation is likely due to a combination of factors including, an echo-chamber effect encouraging a shift to the majority opinion (Gupta et al., 2022); emotional intensity about topics resulting in

commenters immediately rejecting views in contrast to their own; and impulsivity associated with anonymity (Asker & Dinas, 2019). Thus, the limited opportunity to examine the role of expert authority and power within the discourse, and the consideration of a skewed selection, discouraged me from this option.

4.1.2. Design: Keyword-Based Media Analysis

Based on the above considerations, I chose to use a keyword-based search design. In this approach, researchers employ keyword searches to identify popular online articles on a particular topic, from various sources. Rather than intentionally seeking and choosing specific content, in this design, the content is located in a systematic way and selected based on explicit criteria. Researchers have utilised online keyword search to collect data about casual sex advice (Farvid & Braun, 2014), oral health (Holden, 2019), the HPV vaccine (Habel et al., 2009) and adolescent sexuality (Chmielewski et al., 2017; Morison & Herbert, 2020; Morison & Reddy, 2013) for example. Such studies were useful in gaining an understanding of how to choose relevant keywords, considerations to make about the choice of search engine, and how to identify resources that lay people may encounter.

However, in the age of the Internet, technology develops quickly. Thus, due to the age of these studies, some methodological choices were no longer relevant. For example, while *Yahoo! News* was a commonly used search engine previously, in 2023, *Google* holds the market share of search engine use in most countries (notable exclusions being China and Russia [Bianchi, 2023]), and a total worldwide share of 91.86 percent (Graham, 2022).

I also found it difficult to locate methodological exemplars that gave in-depth consideration to how the user's online metadata impacted the search results, and the potential

role search algorithms play in delivering results. While the impact of *Google's* search algorithm bias has been well documented, the algorithm is also commercially sensitive, and tightly controlled by the company (Ørmen, 2016). This means that while *Google's* results page might be considered as a relevant compilation of data directly related to the keywords entered, in reality, the factors that contribute to retrieving the search results are complex (see Graham, 2022 for a comprehensive overview of how *Google Search* works). The outcome is that researchers report difficulty in identifying and reproducing what other users might be seeing online (Ørmen, 2016). In the context of my research, I was cognizant that as a researcher, what I see online would not be reflective of what others' might see despite using the same search terms. Therefore, I needed to develop a search method that integrated consideration of search-engine algorithms and keyword popularity in shaping the landscape of information that people encounter online. This meant focusing on two issues: digital marketing, and personalisation.

4.1.2.1. Digital Marketing.

"Digital marketing" refers to all the decisions made by companies to ensure that their content appears most often to users online. Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), is a set of practices that increase a website's visibility within *Google's* search results (Graham, 2022). Despite the commercially protected nature of *Google's* search algorithm (Ørmen, 2016), *Google* does release (and regularly updates) in-depth user-guides[1] that indicate which aspect of a website are most important for boosting their visibility online. Large businesses have developed to analyse and predict *Google's* algorithm, educate marketers on how SEO works, and create

[1] Google Search Central https://developers.google.com/search is the go-to for official SEO information that marketers worldwide rely on to inform their digital strategy.

tools for marketers to monitor their search rankings; *Moz*, and *Ahrefs*[2] being two of the most profitable and well-known.

Digital marketing considerations also extend to strategic advertising decisions. Marketers need to choose what keyword terms they should link ads to, and how much money to spend. These decisions of course, impact how many clicks a webpage will receive, and ad placement can "make-or-break" a companies' SEO. For example, if you search for *Pizza Hut*, an advertisement for *Dominoes* might pop-up, demonstrating that companies compete and out-bid each other for lucrative ad placements. For context, while smaller companies might have an advertising budget of a few thousand dollars per year, large corporations can spend 40 – 50 million dollars per year on advertising with *Google* (McCormick, 2024).

What this discussion of SEO and advertising demonstrates, is that those organisations that have large budgets and resources, hold significant power in influencing what is seen online. Noble (2013) explains further below:

> It can be argued that *Google* functions in the interests of its most influential (i.e., moneyed) advertisers or through an intersection of popular and commercial interests. Yet *Google's* users think of it as a public resource, generally free from commercial interest—this fact likely bolstered by *Google's* own posturing as a company for whom the informal mantra, "Don't be evil," has functioned as its motivational core (p. 4).

[2] *See https://moz.com/ and https://ahrefs.com/ for more information about these companies.*

Thus, it was important to recognise that the top content is not the "best" content, but merely the content from those companies with the most influence, money, and resources, and therefore dominates the mainstream media landscape.

4.1.2.2. Personalisation.

The second consideration is the co-construction of personalised media that users themselves create. Much of *Google's* content delivery algorithm is based on page views, i.e., the number of times a certain website page is clicked on. Therefore, by accessing and engaging with content online, users determine what becomes popular, and therefore prioritised further by *Google's* algorithm for that user (Noble, 2013). Additionally, in the algorithmic age, *Google* holds swathes of personal information on its users and can direct personalised content to them as a result. These factors combined can result in echo chambers and filter bubbles, where users see the same type of content repetitively, and their engagement with said content reinforces the delivery of further similar content (Boeker & Urman, 2022; E.g. et al., 2023; Segev, 2019). Therefore, in my research, it was important to consider that what I saw in my search results might not reflect the search results of other users.

Consideration of the above factors demonstrates how this method of keyword-based research fits with my research aims and objectives. A Foucauldian understanding of power (as discussed in Chapter Two) considers knowledge and power to be inseparable, in part because power is enacted when ideas about the world are accepted as valid and truthful. My approach acknowledges the influence of search algorithms and digital marketing strategy in shaping the information landscape online, reflecting how power operates in curating and prioritising content and, thus, the strength and visibility of certain discourses. In the following section, I will

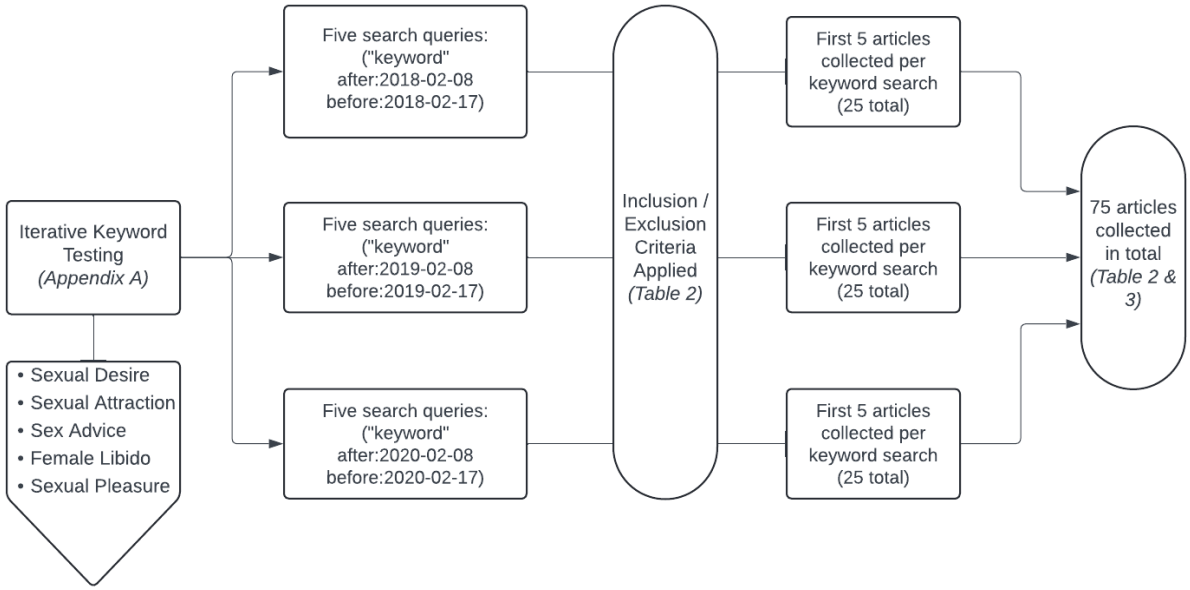
summarise the considerations and decisions made in developing the keyword-search method to attend to the above factors.

4.1.3. Data Collection

As discussed in the previous section, I chose to collect the data via keyword searches in *Google*, which holds an uncontested monopoly over search-engine use. This monopoly is mainly due to a comprehensive and intelligent (commercially protected) search algorithm, as well as exclusivity agreements with other large industry giants such as *Apple*, to keep their search engine the default on their products (Graham, 2022). This dominance supported my decision to focus on this search platform. Next, I will discuss the key considerations I made when developing my search and data collection method. Figure 1 shows an overview of the data collection method.

Figure 1:

Data Collection Method (Study One)



4.1.3.1. Developing a Keyword Strategy

The focus of this study was on discourses of sexuality and how they construct women's desire, and therefore it was important that the keywords chosen related to that concept. The concept of desire is understood somewhat "loosely" in the context of everyday sense-making, circulating in mainstream popular media texts aimed at lay people. For example, when I started initial scoping work on this project, I conducted many *Google* search variations and read different types of articles to get an idea of what information was available online about my chosen topic. I noticed that terms like "desire", "sexual attraction", "libido", and "pleasure" were often used interchangeably. Colloquial language, term conflation, and innuendo was also common, making it apparent that the precise search strategy used in academic literature search, would not be appropriate for keyword search on *Google*. This variation within lay text

can be attributed to an intersection between the strategic intent of online content, and more generally cultural ambiguity around these concepts. To cater to a wide readership, digital marketers need to align their work with principles of search engine optimisation (SEO); keyword diversity enhances search visibility and consequently reader engagement (Bradley, 2015; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Graham, 2022).

With the above in mind, I decided to conduct iterative testing whereby I started with a large list of possible topic keywords and phrase variations (see Appendix A) and ran them through *Google* to gain an overview of the types of articles that would appear. As I have noted above, I found that there were a relatively wide range of topics that ultimately discussed sexual desire, regardless of whether that was the specific wording used. Using a gendered clarifier (i.e., "woman") did not significantly impact the search results, other than for "libido". Using the singular search term "libido" tended to produce articles aimed at men, discussing erectile dysfunction. Adding "female" produced content more in line with what is colloquially understood as "desire", that is, active engagement and wanting for sexual activity. Many articles that ended up discussing sexual desire within text were general sex advice columns that covered a wider variety of topics, rather than being specifically about desire. Terms such as "lust", "passion", "intimacy", "arousal", mainly produced results to sex-toy shops, pornography, or literary erotica, and the relevant articles they produced were also present in the results from other keywords. Resultantly, five keyword phrases were chosen, which yielded a broad range of outcomes, while remaining related to the specific topic of women's sexual desire. These were: "Sexual Desire", "Sexual Attraction", "Sex Advice", "Female Libido", and "Sexual Pleasure".

4.1.3.2. Accounting for Personalisation

I was also concerned about algorithmic produced differences, and how to identify "neutral" content rather than results shaped by my personal information. As noted earlier, this is a significant consideration for Internet researchers' data collection, as search results vary widely between individuals, making it difficult to gain a perspective of what is "popular" online (Boeker & Urman, 2022; Eg et al., 2023; Ørmen, 2016).

I went to my Ad Centre in my *Google* account to see what the company has surmised about me, based on my previous browsing habits. According to *Google*: I live in New Zealand, I am Female, I am 25–34 years old, and I speak English. This is fairly broad demographic data, and it is all correct. *Google* also collects more specific demographic data based on search history and habits, online spending, social media use. *Google* has also guessed that I am: married, have a high-income household, have an advanced degree, work in the healthcare industry at a large organisation, rent a house, and do not have children. While some of these guesses are not quite right, overall, it paints a fairly accurate picture. This demographic data is used by *Google* to place users into various cohorts to shape search results and personalised ad-delivery for all users.

I wanted to try to limit the potential impact of my *Google* profile as best I could. To explore how to do this, I turned to Farvid and Braun's (2014) media analysis which conducted different searches from multiple country domains (google.co.nz, google.com.au, google.co.uk, and so forth) to produce location-specific content. In the intervening decade, *Google* has removed this option, developing automatic location-specific results from the google.com domain instead (Kao, 2017). Therefore, while in the keyword testing stage discussed above, I changed my search region in my *Google* account settings to Australia, United Kingdom, North

America, and Canada in turn. This had the same effect, meaning I was able to replicate the online experiences of people in different geographic locations, to gauge the potential influence of regional preferences on the search outcomes. I also conducted identical keyword searches using *Google's* "Incognito Mode" which removes the user's search history and does not store browsing data.

Aside from some slight regional differences, the results obtained from these tests were very similar, and I therefore elected to proceed with using Incognito Mode. While manually changing my location was useful to see regional differences, it carried the potential to skew the data even further towards Anglosphere countries, as I would need to manually choose some regions, thus excluding others. Opting to use Incognito Mode, therefore, resulted in a more neutral and standardised representation of the types of data that might be delivered for a wide range of people. In effect, I limited the influence of my own search history, and demographic data, as far as I could tell. However, due to my geographic location and the use of English-language searches, the range of content in this research is still most likely more representative of Anglosphere, particularly Australasian, countries (See Table 4 below).

4.1.3.3. Considering Timing

Given the vast volume of online content that is continuously generated, it was important to be purposeful about the timing of data collection. For instance, conducting the search on a random day had the potential for a large news story to dominate, and would only capture an arbitrary snapshot of data. After discussion with my supervisors, I decided to align the data collection with the days before and after Valentine's Day, a period of heightened discussion of sex and relationships in Western media. I also chose to include data over three

years, therefore giving a more substantial dataset and again avoiding potential for a specific year to carry any kind of extra bias (e.g., if there had been a celebrity wedding/divorce). To do so, I used a Boolean search string (e.g., “Sexual Desire” after:2020-02-08 before:2020-02-17) to generate results that aligned with each of the five keywords and were published between 9–16 February in 2018, 2019, and 2020. Overall, this choice gave me the ability to identify a substantial corpus of contemporary writing about women’s sexual desire.

4.1.3.4. Choosing the Data

When deciding how many results to include in the dataset, I attended to the principle of digital marketing, discussed above. As noted, companies invest a significant amount of both time and money to ensure that their content is seen by the largest audience. As such, doing a deep search through multiple pages of *Google* search results would mean moving further away from popular (and thus highly read) articles. It is also generally understood that the first 10 results on *Google* receive approximately 95 percent of web traffic as most users do not look at results past the first page (Bradley, 2015; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2009). Therefore, for each search, the first five relevant results were collected, resulting in 75 mainstream media texts. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented in Table Two.

Table 2*:*

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Data Collection

Category	Inclusion	Exclusion
Relevance to research question	Target audience was woman or gender-neutral Includes content about women	Target audience was men Content solely about men Scientific articles Dictionary or thesaurus results Media reviews Advertisements
Format	Advice columns Opinion pieces Online magazine articles Blog posts	Videos Comics Image galleries

Once all the texts were collected, they were arranged in a spreadsheet that ordered them by keyword result, and year. I also categorised the "type" of articles they were (i.e., Blog, Opinion piece, Online magazines, or Product blogs), and collected information on the geographic region of publication (shown in Table Three and Table Four respectively). Table Three and Four have also been reproduced in Chapter Five.

Table 3:

Article Characteristics ("Type")

	n *(N=75)*	%
Blog	14	18.7
Opinion Piece	24	32
Online Magazines	25	33.3
Product Blogs	12	16

Table 4:

Article Characteristics (Geographic Region)

	n *(N=75)*	%
USA	43	57.3
UK	13	17.3
Australia	6	8
Canada	3	4
New Zealand	1	1.3
India	1	1.3
China	1	1.3
Denmark	1	1.3
Ireland	1	1.3
Philippines	1	1.3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1	1.3
Unknown (Published on Medium.com)	3	4

4.1.4. Overview of Dataset (Study One)

At the end of the process that I have described above, I had a data corpus that comprised 75 mainstream media articles about women's sexual desire. These articles were published across a range of Western countries, with a few exceptions (three articles were published in Asia), from 2018 to 2020. These articles were for the most part, published by corporations, and were all advice columns or blog addressing women as their target audience.

4.2. Study Two (Chapter Six): Analysis of Alternative Media

My second study addressed objective two, namely, to explore the potential for alternative, feminist media to resist and possibly transform prevailing discourses of sexuality that currently create a narrow, normative representation of female sexual desire. This study was guided by three research questions:

1. How is women's desire constructed in online, alternative media?
2. How do online alternative media texts reproduce or otherwise negotiate normative constructions of women's sexual desire?
3. What wider discourses support these constructions?

4.2.1. Design Choices

When conducting data analysis and writing up study one, it became clear that there was a subgroup of online women's media that was not appearing in the first data corpus. Most of the websites included in the data corpus for study one were owned by large media companies or their subsidiaries. I had personally read and subscribed to smaller scale, feminist, and independent media outlets that spoke about agentic desire, and was therefore surprised that this content was largely missing from the data corpus.

This "missing" data drove the decision to implement study two, aiming to identify feminist, alternative media publications, and explore how women's desire is constructed within these publications. There is a substantial history of alternative feminist publications in print (and some online) media (Gunnarsson-Payne, 2012). Researchers have examined the resistant voices and social influence of alternative feminist magazines such as *Spare Rib* (Forster, 2022; Hollows, 2013), *Red Rag* (Bazin, 2021), *Oz* (Gil-Glazer, 2023), *Bust, Ms* and *Bitch* (D'Enbeau, 2011; Jenkins & Johnson, 2017), as well as the *Riot Grrrl* "zine"[3] movement (Harris, 2003; Radway, 2016). These types of publications were not surfaced in the keyword search method used in study one, and further justified my decision to distinguish between mainstream and alternative/feminist media in the overall thesis design.

The above researchers chose their publication focus mainly due to the magazine's self-description as resistant or alternative, and their popularity based on readership or perceived collective consciousness. I followed their approach in this regard when designing my second study, which also involved adapting the approach used for data collection in study one to orient to the context of alternative media in contrast to that of mainstream media. The design still called for in-depth consideration of the way that information is delivered to users online.

I set out to develop a way to collect data that would reflect the alternative media that consumers might come across if they were interested in, or looking for, texts in contrast to the mainstream. This brought up two key questions: What is alternative media? And how do I find it?

[3] Zines are small-scale, self-produced publications that have been typically associated with countercultural movements as well as amplifying marginalised voices (see: https://www.britannica.com/topic/zine).

4.2.1.1. What is Alternative Media?

In terms of the first question, at face value, alternative media can be understood as a counter-response to popular or mainstream media (Gunnarsson-Payne, 2012). Media scholars have debated the specifics of the definition (see Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Gunnarsson-Payne, 2012), but for the purposes of this research, I define alternative media as texts appearing in publications that: (a) could typically be described broadly as politically and socially progressive, (b) position themselves as feminist and/or providing a space of resistance, and (c) are usually produced by small-scale or independent publishers, or community driven. To gauge what a small-scale publisher would look like, I used a digital marketing platform (similarweb.com[4]) to measure the website traffic (i.e., the monthly visits of a website) of the mainstream media publications from the first study. Their websites had an average of 47 million views per month, giving me a benchmark to establish whether a publisher was "small-scale" or not.

4.2.1.2. How Do I Find Alternative Media?

Once I had a more comprehensive understanding of what might count as alternative media, I undertook some scoping work to determine the type of alternative media available online and how to develop a systematic search method to avoid selection bias. I initially conducted a search with the same keywords as those from my first study ("Sexual Desire", "Sexual Attraction", "Sex Advice", "Female Libido", "Sexual Pleasure") adding the qualifier "feminist", "resistant", or "liberal" to allocate the kind of media I was looking for. However, keyword searching in the same way as for study one, only surfaced highly read or promoted

[4] Similarweb (https://www.similarweb.com/website) is a digital marketing platform. It includes a free "website checker" which estimates website traffic using data from shared analytics, other apps, network partnerships, and public information. It's a broad estimate, not a precise measurement.

content, which did not align with my aim of searching for alternative media. This search strategy returned the same or similar articles that appeared in my searches for study one (articles from large media outlets where "feminism" is mainly a marketing buzzword) or critiques of feminism. These results can be attributed to *Google's* content delivery algorithms, which prioritise content receiving views and attention, and the well-funded, targeted marketing that large media companies are capable of (Graham, 2022; Noble, 2013). I therefore changed track to identifying highly read or popular online publishers *within* the alternative media space, as described further below.

4.2.2. Data Collection.

For this second study, data collection involved first identifying the most popular alternative online publications (Step One), and then identifying relevant articles within each publication (Step Two). I discuss each of these steps in turn.

4.2.2.1. Step One: Searching for Alternative Publications Online.

To find popular alternative publications, I utilised a keyword search strategy in a slightly different way to the first study. As I will discuss in section 4.6 of this chapter, I have previously worked as a digital marketer for a medium-sized New Zealand software company. I knew anecdotally and experientially that search terms like "top" and "best" are often searched by users to find content online (e.g., "best" skincare New Zealand). In response, many companies also use those terms to describe their product, or create review and referral lists also using those terms. This effectively results in a feedback loop of reinforcement where users receive the results they were expecting when they use those terms in their searches. I know that I do not carefully curate my search terms online, instead tending to use natural language phrases.

Google recognises this, integrating AI-based language models into their search algorithms to understand the intent behind a query and the relationship between words (Nayak, 2022).

Thus, I decided to approach my own search from this angle and found that it was successful. I decided to use combinations of the qualifier “best” along with a qualifier for the type of publication (e.g., “feminist") and a descriptor of the medium (e.g., “online magazines”), to more effectively mimic the type of natural language searches users might make. Table Five shows a list of the qualifiers and descriptors used to construct the keyword phrases.

Table 5:

Qualifier and Descriptor Keywords

Qualifier	Descriptor
“Best”	“Women’s Media”
“Feminist”	“Online Magazine”
“Liberal”	“Online Media”
“Sex Positive”	“Online Writing”
“Woman” or “Women’s”	“Digital media”
“Empowering”	“Online Commentary”
“Inclusive”	“Women’s Blogs”

I combined these qualifiers and descriptors into a range of different keyword phrases and chose seven phrases where unique results were produced. For each phrase, I noted the names of publications that were generated until no new publications were found. Table 6 shows each unique keyword search phrase used, and the number of publications that were produced.

Table 6:

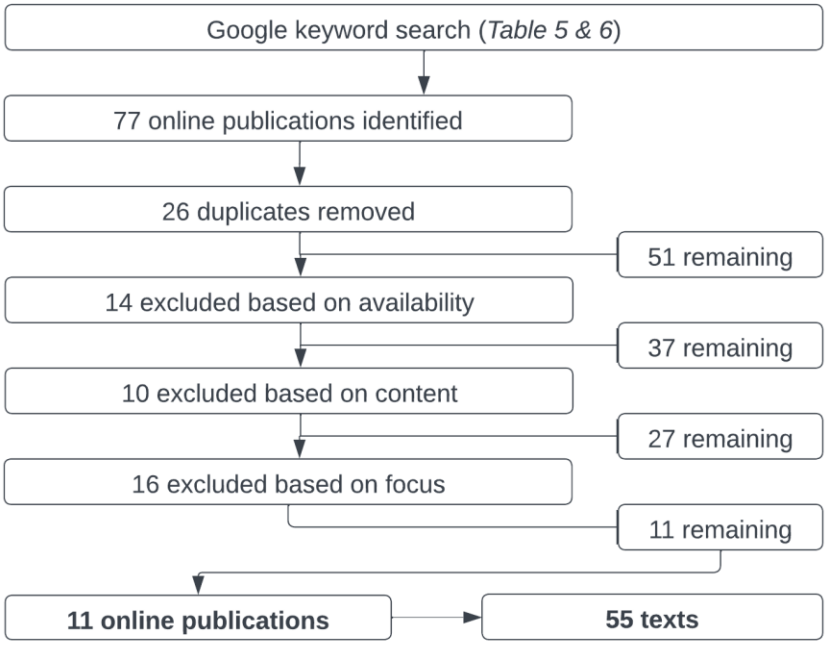
Keyword Search Results

Keyword Phrase	n (N=77)
Best feminist women's media	14
Inclusive feminist blogs	5
Best sex-positive magazine	11
Best women online magazines	22
Best women online writing feminist	16
Best liberal women's digital media	5
Best empowering feminist online commentary	4

After conducting the series of keyword searches to find relevant publications, I applied an exclusion criterion to screen the list of publications (shown in Figure 2 below and reproduced in Chapter Six). First, I screened for availability, to exclude those that turned out to be only available in print or had to be purchased. The rationale for excluding both is that publications behind a "paywall", and those that needed to be bought in print would not be as easily accessible and therefore have a smaller readership. Thus, these publications would hold less power in widely circulating discourse. Next, I screened the list based on the publication content, excluding publications without written articles (i.e., visual-art or poetry). Lastly, I screened based on publication focus and excluded publications that did not have writing about sex, relationships, or sexual desire. This left a final list of 11 publications.

Figure 2:

Screening Process for Data Collection (Study Two)



After narrowing the list, the final task was to decide whether these publications matched up with the definition of alternative provided above. To do so, I reviewed each publication's website to see how the publication described itself and/or the type of content that it published (e.g., feminist, counterculture) and whether it was independent or owned by a corporation. I then used *similarweb* to estimate each website's traffic through page views. While this metric gives a general idea of user activity, it is not completely accurate. It counts every page visit, regardless of whether they come from the same user or reflect actual engagement with specific content. With this caveat, I used the tool consistently to make a general comparison between mainstream and alternative publications.

As I indicated early, the websites included in Study One had an average of 47 million views per month. In comparison, the alternative publications had an average of 861,000 visits per month. Table 7 below, shows characteristics of the publications including their estimated site visits, a description of their target audience and content focus, and whether the publications were independently owned.

Table 7:

Dataset Characteristics

Name	Monthly site visits [a]	Target audience [b]	Description [b]	Ownership
Bitch Media	380,000	Women	A feminist response to pop culture	Indep. [c]
Bust	165,000	Women	For women with something to get off their chests	Indep.
gal-dem	590,000	Women and non-binary people of colour	Telling the stories of people of colour from marginalised genders.	Indep.
Autostraddle	1,100,000	Lesbians, queer and non-binary people.	The internet's oldest website for lesbian culture.	Indep.
Bustle	5,000,000	Young women	Relatable and impactful dialogue through content from a diverse set of voices	BDG
Archer	26,000	All individuals interested in sexuality, gender and identity.	A magazine about sexuality, gender and identity with a focus on lesser-heard voices and the uniqueness of our experiences	Indep.
Salty	100,000	Unapologetic women, trans and non-binary people	Fighting for digital visibility and to make sure our stories are not erased from the internet.	Indep.
The Whorticulturist	4,000	Women of all shapes, sizes,	Stories that offer a feminist take on sex and culture.	Indep.

		backgrounds, colo[u]rs, and sexual identities		
GoMag	170,000	Lesbians	The cultural roadmap for city girls everywhere.	Indep.
Diva	140,000	LGBTQI women and non-binary people	The world's leading magazine for LGBTQI women and non-binary people	Indep.
Jezebel	1,800,000	Women	Sex. Celebrity. Politics. With Teeth.	G/O Media

[a] Monthly site visits metrics were collected from *similarweb* (https://www.similarweb.com/website) in February 2022.

[b] As described by the publications themselves.

[c] Short for "independently owned".

4.2.2.2. Step Two: Article Selection.

Most of the publication websites had content categories, such as "sex and relationships". In these instances, I chose the first five articles from the relevant category. Two publications did not have this option, so I used the website search function to locate relevant content. I entered a series of keyword searches (e.g., "sex", "desire", "relationships", and "sexual pleasure") into the website search bar and selected the most recent five articles yielded by the search. Overall, this left me with 55 articles with which to conduct analysis. Table 8 and Table 9 comprise a descriptive summary of all articles.

Table 8

Article Characteristics (Geographic Region)

	n *(N=55)*	%
USA	40	72.7
UK	10	18.1
Australia	5	9.09

Table 9

Article Characteristics (Date Published)

	n *(N=55)*	%
2016	1	1.8
2017	1	1.8
2018	4	7.2
2019	7	12.7
2020	9	16.3
2021	18	32.7
No Date	15	27.2

4.2.3. Overview of Dataset (Study Two)

The data corpus for study two comprised 55 alternative media articles across 11 separate online publications. The publications were identified through an iterative search process, and all described themselves as counter to the mainstream in various ways. Most of the publications were based in the USA, with a small number in the UK, and Australia.

4.3. Study Three (Chapter Seven): Psychological Literature Analysis

The third study in this thesis looked at desire within the context of professional literature (as opposed to lay media), in this case, psychological research. This research objective was "To examine how women's sexual desire is constructed in psychological academic literature, with a focus on the construction of gendered norms related to sexuality". To do this, I developed three research questions which guided the design and subsequent data analysis.

1. How do academic psychological literature sources construct sexual desire?
2. What common discourses are drawn on when constructing women's sexual desire?
3. What are the discursive effects of these constructions in terms of women's sexual subjectivity?

4.3.1. Design

With the first two studies focussing on lay media, after discussion with my supervisors, I decided to focus the third study on psychological literature, since it is a powerful agent in circulating discourses of women's sexual desire. I did not need to create my own method for this third study as there are many validated methods for systematically searching academic literature. The purpose of a systematic literature review is to consolidate research findings that address a specific question, whereas a scoping review aims to create an overview of the available literature on a given topic. As a result, a scoping review method produces a comprehensive collection of diverse literature, while a systematic review compiles literature focussed on a specific and narrower research question. Therefore, a scoping review was more appropriate for my research aims, so I drew on and adapted Arskey and O'Malley's (2005) framework which offers a conceptually strong approach. This article has more than 32,000

citations[5] and has been subsequently reviewed and developed by other researchers since it was published.

Arksey and O'Malley (2005, p. 22) state that their method "is not linear but iterative", meaning that rather than starting with a strict, narrow research question, researchers might adapt their aims as they become more familiar with the literature on their set topic. Their framework sets out detailed stages for (a) shaping the research question, (b) searching for and selecting studies, (c) charting the data, and (d) reporting the results. As the purpose of my study was not to describe the research area, but conduct discourse analysis on the literature, I also turned to Möller et al. (2023) who drew on the scoping review method but focussed on critical examination of discourses within the texts, rather than the mapping and description of texts that the original method advises. Therefore, when collecting the data, I chose to only follow Arksey and O'Malley's guidelines for searching, selecting studies, and charting the data. Regardless, the framework was helpful in structuring a systematic search process and providing a data corpus from which I could then apply discourse analysis. In the next section, I will give an overview of how I utilised this framework for data collection.

4.3.2. Data Collection

4.3.2.1. Designing the Search Strategy.

My key area of focus for this search was articles that were written on negotiations of desire and pleasure, both individually and within relationships. Arksey and O'Malley advise that when deciding on search parameters, researchers should "maintain a wide approach in order to

[5] *32,147 citations according to Google Scholar on 25th November 2024*

generate breadth of coverage" (p.23), rather than search too narrowly and run the risk of missing a relevant area of literature. However, it was also important not to be too broad and run the risk of producing a list of references that is too large to realistically search through, or crucially missing relevant literature.

I first conducted a variety of scoping searches, testing different combinations of keywords to identify what was delivered (like both Study One and Two). I noticed that many of the results surfacing when using search terms like sexual desire, were medical or clinical psychology journals, where sexual desire was being discussed in regard to dysfunction. This did not align with my research objective which was, as above, to: explore psychological academic literature in constructing norms of women's sexual desire. Therefore, I decided to include the terms "relationships" and "psychology" to my search, to address this issue, and point the results towards more therapeutic articles that discuss desire in a social way. The search term chosen, resultantly, was: "(Sexua* Or Desire) AND (women OR female) AND relationships AND Psychology".

On advice from Massey's Library services, I conducted searches on the Massey University database (*Discover*) and *Scopus*. I restricted the results to the English language and set the date range from 2018 to 2022 to align with the date range from studies one and two. This search process initially returned 2069 articles.

Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) scoping review method has been highly cited in the intervening years since publication and is thus a robust method that has been used to shape many subsequent scoping reviews. However, its age means that some aspects are dated. For instance, they advise combining database searches with checking reference lists, hand-

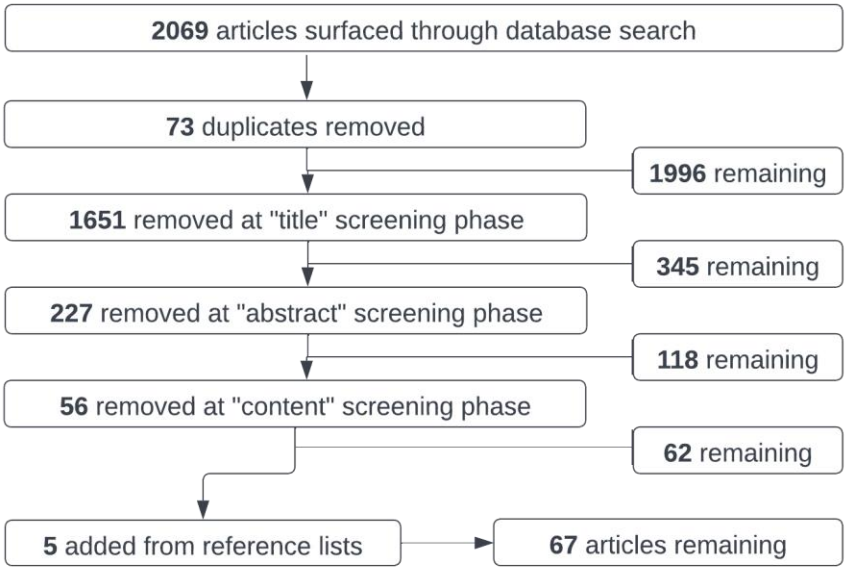
searching journals, and consulting organisations or conferences related to the topic. In 2005, online database searching was less comprehensive, offering limited content coverage and basic keyword-based search functionalities. Today, databases like Scopus provide broader multidisciplinary access to content, and utilise AI and Natural Language Processing (NLP) to produce more accurate and relevant search results. Therefore, in tandem with online database search, I decided to consult the reference lists of articles, however I omitted the other processes.

4.3.2.2. Applying the Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

The inclusion criteria were articles within the disciplinary areas of sexuality, sexual health, and relationship therapy. The focus was on how desire is understood in everyday contexts, rather than as a clinical "problem". This meant excluding articles that pathologised sexuality or discussed desire from a clinical and diagnostic lens, usually those from medical or clinical psychology perspectives. Applying the criteria was an interpretative process because desire can be talked about in many ways. It was thus difficult to define strict parameters around what to exclude. The screening process was done in multiple steps shown in Figure 3, which included screening by title, abstract, and content.

Figure 3

Screening Process for Data Collection (Study Three)



At the "title" screening phase, I removed articles that had nothing to do with sexual desire. Many such articles were returned in my search, despite the care that I took with crafting a keyword search phrase. At the "abstract" screening phase, I removed literature reviews, meta-analyses, or articles reporting on the validation of clinical scales. At the "content" screening phase, I removed articles in which sexual desire turned out to be only a minimal focus or where the content was clinically focussed. This left me with 62 articles. At this point, aligning with Arksey and O'Malley's recommendation, I reviewed the reference lists of each article to identify extra texts based on their titles, resulting in a list of 31. Of these, 12 were duplicates

and 14 did not meet the above inclusion criteria. I added five articles to my final list, resulting in 67 texts.

I then sought to narrow the list further to allow sufficient analytic depth for my Foucauldian discourse analysis. In line with studies One and Two, I wished to focus on the most highly regarded and widely read texts, which would be influential in re/producing discourses of sexuality. I therefore decided to include the most highly cited articles. I grouped the 67 articles by year and ranked them by their citation counts, excluding those published in 2022, which had not yet accrued many citations. I then selected the first three most highly cited articles from the years 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021, yielding 12 highly cited articles for analysis. These 12 articles spanned a broad range of countries, and relevant journals.

The dataset was determined to be sufficient for analysis, both in terms of size, and scope. I did not aim to achieve saturation in terms of amount of text but looked to Willig (2013) and Parker (1992) who both outline that sufficiency in discourse analysis is through identifying a range of similar and alternative ways of speaking about and constructing the object of study. The focus was therefore on analytic depth and theoretical adequacy rather than representativeness. During analysis, I mapped a range of discursive possibilities including how they differed and converged. I also considered whether and how the dataset would be appropriate when I was attending to my research aims and question.

Finally, the dataset was comparable in size and analytic manageability to those in the other two studies, supporting consistency across the project. A snapshot overview of the dataset is presented below and reproduced in Chapter Seven for clarity.

Table 10

Summary Table of Dataset

Authors & Year	Citations [a]	Geographic Location[b]	Journal Name	Study Description
Dewitte & Mayer (2018)	67	The Netherlands	*Archives of Sexual Behaviour*	Diary study with 66 heterosexual couples completing measures of sexual desire, sexual activity and relationship quality, for 21 days.
van Lankveld et al. (2018)	61	The Netherlands	*Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*	Experience sampling method with 134 heterosexual participants who were in a relationship. Participants completed measures of emotional intimacy, sexual desire, and sexual activity 10 times per day for a week.
Pascoal et al. (2018)	52	Portugal	*Journal of Sex Research*	Survey study with 124 heterosexual couples. Participants completed measures of sexual functioning and sexual satisfaction.
Impett et al. (2019)	39	Canada	*Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*	Survey study with 122 couples, completed daily for 21 days. Included measures of relationship satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect, and sexual desire.
Péloquin et al. (2019)	29	Canada	*Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*	Survey study of 298 heterosexual couples seeking relationship therapy. Participants completed three measures including dyadic adjustment, sexual satisfaction, and sexual experiences.
Rubin et al. (2019)	23	USA, Canada, Germany, Denmark	*Personality and Individual Differences*	Survey study with 1480 heterosexual women, across four countries. Participants completed Likert-type scale questions about sexual desire and anticipated

				sexual pleasure (sex defined as penile-vaginal intercourse).
Dobson et al. (2020)	15	Canada	*Social Psychological and Personality Science*	Diary study with 100 heterosexual couples over a 21-day period. Measures of sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction compared with whether the participant made a sexual advance, and whether it was accepted.
Vowels & Mark (2020)	13	USA	*Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*	Diary study with 90 heterosexual couples over a 30-day period. Participants completed Likert-type scale questions on sexual desire, love, engagement in sexual activity, and quality of sexual experience, along with a dichotomous question about daily occurrence of sexual activity.
Blumenstock et al. (2020)	12	Canada	*Archives of Sexual Behaviour*	Survey study with 2400 participants in midlife (defined as age 40-59). Study compared relationship characteristics, health, sexual communication and frequency of sexual activity, with measures of emotional and sexual satisfaction.
Kim et al. (2021)	20	USA, Canada	*Social Psychological and Personality Science*	Survey study of 366 heterosexual couples. Analysis compared whether couples who scored similarly on measures of sexual desire, scored higher on measures of sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction.
Frost & Donovan (2021)	15	Australia	*Sexual and Relationship Therapy*	Mixed-method study with 13 heterosexual couples. Participants completed measures of sexual desire, sexual distress, relationship satisfaction, and psychological functioning (Depression, Anxiety and Stress

				Scale). Semi-structured interviews were undertaken about low sexual desire and desire discrepancy.
Moor et al. (2021)	9	Israel	*Journal of Sex Research*	Semi-structured interview study with 15 heterosexual women about their experiences of declining sexual desire.

[a] At the time of data collection (March 2023)

[b] Based on the locations of participants. If not given, based on the first author's location.

4.3.3. Overview of Dataset (Study Three)

The data corpus for study three comprised 12 psychological literature texts from seven different psychology or therapy journals. The studies all focused on sexual desire within (mainly heterosexual) relationships. The articles were primarily quantitative studies, with one qualitative and one mixed-methods study. The articles were mainly published in, and with participants from, North America (USA and Canada), with four studies including participants from Europe, one from Australia, and one from Israel.

4.4. Data Analysis

The data across the three studies were analysed using a form of discourse analysis grounded in Foucault's ideas about discourse, power, and knowledge (Foucault, 1978, 2002). This approach was employed to explore how sexual desire was discursively constructed, and to examine the implications these constructions had for women's sexual subjectivity and agency. Across all three datasets, I drew on Riley and Wiggins (2019) practical method for doing Foucauldian-informed Discourse Analysis (FiDA), as well as broader reading on discourse analysis (e.g., Burr, 2003; Gill, 2000; Parker, 1994, 2002, 2015; Potter & Wetherall, 1994; Willig, 2013). Each of my

publication chapters that follow contain a section that goes into depth about the process of the analysis specific their study (chapters five, six and seven). In this following section, therefore, I outline the overall focus and general process that I engaged with in doing data analysis, including discussion of the progression from coding through interpretative analytic development.

I did not engage with any coding software such as *NVivo*, instead following a more manual analysis procedure set out in Riley and Wiggins (2019). I put the texts into a table in *Microsoft Word*, with five columns; the left-hand column was labelled "keywords", followed by "data", "what", "how" and "why" from left to right.

The analytic process began with familiarisation with each data corpus and the initial identification of my object of interest (i.e., sexual desire). This also involved identifying related terms such as *sexual pleasure, sexuality, libido,* and *sex drive*. I noted where these terms occurred and recorded early descriptive codes in the left-hand column. To move from descriptive coding to discursive analysis, I was guided by three central analytic questions adapted from Riley & Wiggins (2019), and represented within the three right-hand columns that ran to the right of the data column (see Figure 4 below):

1. What is being constructed? (i.e., the nature of reality or truth produced in the text)
2. How is it being constructed? (attending to rhetorical strategies such as extreme case formulations, truth claims, listing, exaggeration, and rhetorical questions)
3. Why is it being constructed in this way? (considering broader discourses and systems of meaning that render these ideas intelligible or "thinkable").

The process of coding was both inductive and theoretically informed, shaped by my ongoing engagement with Foucauldian theory. This included paying close attention to: (a) taken-for-granted assumptions and norms; (b) what was rendered problematic; (c) the formation of subject positions within the data drawing on Davies and Harre's (1990) conceptualisation of subject positions as culturally recognizable roles, identities or vantage points, that are produced within specific discourse; (d) power effects and how norms and truths were established; (e) what was missing from the data; (f) the wider discourses invoked in the sense-making.

Coding was also iterative. I moved back and forth reading and re-reading the data, refining my codes, and seeking feedback and discussion with my supervisors in order to move from surface meanings toward more conceptual understandings. I printed out multiple copies of my data and cut out the extracts that were coded under my series of more conceptual keywords. I read through each of them, attending again to those discursive questions (what, how, why) and collated piles of extracts, with each pile representing a discourse. From here, I discussed these findings with my supervisors and talked about how to present these in the articles. More analysis work went on at this stage as discourses were defined further, collapsed and developed during stages of writing. Figure 4 gives a small, adapted example of what the initial coding table looked like, using a small excerpt from an early analysis table in Study One to demonstrate.

Figure 4:

Adapted Example of Data Analysis Process from Study One

Keywords	Data	What	How	Why
Age Men strong sex drive M + W differences in sex drive Women=low libido	Most men over 50 can remember experiencing **libido** as a **strong drive** — akin, almost, to hunger: They felt horny and went after sex. (Indeed, some still do.) But recent research shows that women experience **libido** as an urge far less compelling than that.	M have a strong sex drive M seek sex - "went after" Sex drive isn't natural for W. W not compelled to have sex	Men sex drive innate, strong, can't control/resist Sex drive as hunger Desire as compelling W have to be convinced to have sex W can control their sexual desire in contrast to M	Biological differences, justifying men's 'high' libido Reinforcing norm of women low libido

4.5. Ethical Considerations

As this research did not involve interaction with human participants, details of each study were instead submitted to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) under a low-risk ethics notification. The two media analyses (Study One and Two) were approved together (application number: 4000025291) and the psychological literature analysis (Study Three) was approved separately (application number: 4000027988). In addition to

Massey University's code of ethical conduct (Massey University Human Ethics Committee, 2017), I consulted a variety of internet research ethics guidelines and discussions to gain an understanding of the types of ethical issues I should consider when using online content as qualitative data (Association of Internet Researchers [AoIR], 2019; Burles & Bally, 2018; Ess, 2012; Favaro et al., 2017; Tiindenberg, 2018).

The AoIR guidelines emphasise that online research ethics involve "ethically legitimate judgment calls" (AoIR, 2019, p.9) rather than rigid rules. Ethical decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis, considering the context and potential consequences of data use. Guided by this principle, I reflected carefully on the public/private nature of my data sources, potential harms or benefits to online authors, and how to appropriately manage, analyse, and present data. The three main areas of consideration most relevant to my research were informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and copyright, each of which is outlined below.

4.5.1. Informed Consent

One key consideration in internet-based research is distinguishing between what is "public" and what is "private" and how this informs expectations of informed consent. Ess (2012) argues that this line can quickly be blurred as access and content online changes, thus rather than seeing this as a binary distinction, it should be considered as a continuum. One element to consider is reasonable expectation of privacy. Even when content is visible online, it is important to consider whether the intent of the author was for the material to be private. All the data used in this project were located in the public domain. The online media texts analysed in Studies One and Two were published through openly accessible online magazines, blogs, and news platforms, and were created, edited and marketed for the express purpose of being read

by a wide audience. The psychological literature was also published in public journals, again for the express purpose of being read, but less accessible to a public audience (assuming that some journal articles lie behind paywalls). Therefore, I considered that my data could reasonably be considered public. Another consideration here is the context in which the information was put online. Informed consent would be required, for instance, if researchers were accessing information in *Facebook* groups or *Reddit* forums where users might reasonably expect a degree of privacy or limited audience.

In my research, I treated all media sources as *public* only insofar as they were authored and published with public readership in mind (e.g. open-access blogs, online magazines). Even though it was not necessary to seek consent from all authors, the principles behind informed consent still apply in terms of how the data was used and analysed. It is important that the information is not taken out of context, or the intentions of the authors misrepresented. To attend to this, when directly quoting work, or there was the potential for confusion, I made sure to include extra context or information. Additionally, in relation to study three, the articles included in the analysis did include personal narratives and information about participants. In this case, it can be assumed that these original participants did not consent to have the information they provided re-published somewhere else. Therefore, any data excerpts included in Study Three did not include any participant information.

4.5.2. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Although the materials were publicly available, I consider the possible risks associated with re-publishing online content, particularly where authors or participants shared personal or sensitive experiences. Following AoIR (2019) recommendations, I sought to minimise harm by

removing names and other highly identifiable details from excerpts where appropriate. Where possible, I cited the author as an organisation or publication rather than as an individual, unless the original work was already presented under the individual's public authorship.

I also considered the vulnerability of potential subjects, especially if online material involved personal disclosures or topics such as sexual trauma or health. None of the data used in this thesis involved private communications (such as comment sections or password-protected forums), nor did it include harmful content (e.g., expressions of self-harm or harm to others).

4.5.3. Copyright

In relation to Studies One and Two, all data was available to be re-published under a Creative Commons licence. If the original source specifically prohibited re-posting or sharing their work even with attribution, then it was not included in the final dataset. All studies were correctly attributed, by citing and referencing the authors clearly.

4.5.4. Data Storage

All data were stored securely in electronic form on Massey University's password-protected OneDrive system. This included both direct links to online sources and archived copies of textual data to ensure continued access if websites became unavailable. As recommended by AoIR (2019), I also considered the lifecycle of data storage and deletion. Data will be retained for the standard five-year post-publication period and subsequently deleted, in line with institutional requirements.

4.5.5. Reflexivity and Ethics

Throughout the research process, I engaged reflexively with the ethical dimensions of using online and published data. I recognised that ethical decision-making in internet research is not simply procedural but interpretive. A concept that made sense to me was to consider the "human behind the data", and this remained central to my reasoning, even when working with texts produced by organisations rather than individuals. This reflexive awareness helped me remain sensitive to how the texts were authored, the audiences they addressed, and the potential consequences of recontextualising them in academic research.

4.6. Reflexive Thinking about the Design and Data Collection

In Chapter One, I introduced my approach to reflexivity within this thesis. I discussed who I was, how I came to this research, and my positioning in approaching the topic. The Education Review Office (2018) report of sexuality education in New Zealand prompted an initial intrigue into how people develop sexual subjectivity and desire in a context of a lack of sexual education that focusses on pleasure. The findings reflected my own experiences where an affirmative sense of sexual selfhood was something I had to come to alone, not helped by the deluge of problematic media I was exposed to that positioned women firmly as men's sexual objects. In Chapter One, I also discussed why reflexivity is important in qualitative research, and how reflecting on my positioning allows for a more critical perspective when investigating this topic.

In this section, I turn to my positioning within the research design and data collection, attending to Wilkinson's (1988) concept of functional reflexivity. Throughout my PhD, and the data collection phase in particular, I kept a reflexive diary as recommended. At first, I did not have much to say in the diary regarding how I was shaping the research, given that I was collecting media data rather than interacting with participants. It is much easier to think of

yourself in situ when it is in comparison to another human rather than a pile of textual data. Making comparisons between collecting data and recruiting participants, for example, helped me to reflect on my place as actively shaping the design of the studies.

Putting the topic aside, one of the key experiences that influenced the decisions around the design of the studies, particularly the attention to the contextual influence of search engines, and marketing, is my previous career experience as a digital marketer. After I finished my undergraduate studies, I spent three years working for a software company, where I learned a lot about digital advertising, how information online is popularised and shared, and crucially, the influence that algorithms play in tailoring what we see on the internet, to the specific needs, expectations, and interests of the "consumer". Doing this job opened my eyes to the power that large corporations with big advertising budgets hold in dictating what information is shown to the masses, and what content is lost to the depths of the search engines. "Falling-off" the front page of Google was tantamount to a full-blown crisis in my daily routine. So, with this context, I approached the design of the study with some prior understanding, and a lot of anxiety around how to do it "right". I constantly grappled with the impossibility of ever being able to gain anything near a neutral data corpus of the media available online. After much back and forth with myself and my supervisors, I turned instead to controlling the areas I was able to control (search history, timing and so on) and contextualising the data within the areas I was not (algorithmic bias, geographical location, language).

Effectively, this meant doing a lot of testing and eventually landing on using *Incognito Mode* as the best approach. While this might seem inconsequential, I would argue that the extended thinking and testing around this, allowed for deep consideration of the power that

large organisations hold in shaping what we see, and this lines up with a poststructural approach. Alternatively, approaching the data collection as a straightforward input/output exercise would have meant I would have lost this context.

While my employment history played some part in shaping the data collection strategy, my personal context as a woman and as someone who has been drawn to seek out feminist writing and community online, was what prompted the inclusion of the alternative media analysis (Study Two). Initially, I only planned one media analysis. However, after conducting the mainstream media analysis, I was surprised and disappointed in the findings. In hindsight, I shouldn't have been; as I outlined in Chapter Three, decades of literature shows us that popular media perpetuate problematic discourse about women and support hegemonic patriarchal norms. However, I was interested that none of the types of articles I had seen coming across my feed on social media, or in newsletters I subscribed to, had been surfaced by my searches. Ultimately this led to design and develop the second study, if I was someone else, I may have not known to look for "more", and thus taken the mainstream media at face value of what exists online.

5. Chapter Five, Study One: *How to Have Great Sex: Exploring Sexual Subjectivities and Discourses of Desire in Mainstream Online Media Aimed at Women*

5.1. Foreword

This chapter presents the first study of my research, which explored how popular texts work to construct women's sexual desire. These articles were analysed using poststructuralist discourse analysis, specifically through the lens of what subject positions were offered-up for readers of these texts. The study was published in 2023 as follows:

> Tappin, J., Riley, S., & Morison, T. (2024). How to have great sex: Exploring sexual subjectivities and discourses of desire in mainstream online media aimed at women. *Feminism & Psychology*, *34*(1), 172-192. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535231195957

The article has not been altered from its published form, other than small formatting changes to align with the style of the thesis document.

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION
DOCTORATE WITH PUBLICATIONS/MANUSCRIPTS

We, the student and the student's main supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the student's contribution as indicated below in the Statement of Originality.

Student name:	Jessica Tappin
Name and title of main supervisor:	Professor Sarah Riley

In which chapter is the manuscript/published work?	Chapter Five

Describe the contribution that the student and members of the supervisory team have made to the manuscript/published work:[1]

The candidate (i) developed the research questions and study methods in collaboration with supervisors, (ii) collected all data, (iii) analysed the data with advice and input from supervisors, (iv) wrote the manuscript with advice and feedback from supervisors.

Please select one of the following three options:

- (●) **The manuscript/published work is published or in press**

  Please provide the full reference of the research output:

  Tappin, J., Riley, S., & Morison, T. (2024). How to have great sex: Exploring sexual subjectivities and discourses of desire in mainstream online media aimed at women. Feminism & Psychology, 34(1), 172-192. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535231195957

- ( ) **The manuscript is currently under review for publication**

  Please provide the name of the journal:

- ( ) **It is intended that the manuscript will be published, but it has not yet been submitted to a journal**

Student's signature:		Main supervisor's signature:	

This form should be placed at the beginning of each relevant thesis chapter.

[1] Refer to the Massey University Publishing and Authorship guidelines (OneMassey for staff, Stream for students) and/ or Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) guidelines for guidance.

5.2. Abstract

Affirmative sexual subjectivity and agency are fostered by positive understandings of sexual desire and pleasure. Yet, research shows that print media circulate problematic discourses, including constructing women's desire as passive, linked to objectification, or as a form of (postfeminist) empowerment enacted through pleasing men. Developing this work with a specific focus on digital media and the subject positions offered there, a Foucauldian-informed Discourse Analysis was performed on 75 online articles, identified through a systematic search intending to replicate the information young women are exposed to during everyday internet use. The analysis produced three subject positions: The "Made through the male gaze" woman whose experience of sexual desire was contingent on men's desire; the "Working on it woman" who employed self-help methods to improve her libido and match a socially acceptable male standard; and the "Sexual connoisseur", a postfeminist subject position who is sexually knowledgeable and confident yet still prioritises men's pleasure. The analysis demonstrates a hetero-gendered discursive framework operating within mainstream media accounts, wherein men's sexual agency and desire are prioritised over women's, even in apparently sex-positive and feminist-oriented articles.

5.3. Introduction

Sexual desire is typically considered a natural, pre-social essence that resides within the individual. Yet, feminist scholars have highlighted its inextricable connection to hetero-gendered discourses and hierarchical social relations (Fine & McClelland 2006; MacKinnon, 1987). Desire is disciplined by the politics of sexuality, including an array of norms underpinning determinations of degeneracy, pathology, immorality and so on (Foucault, 1984). These norms

are re/produced and circulated through mediated sex advice. For example, psychologists' and sexologists' advice feature ubiquitously in online publications' health and lifestyle sections and aims to help readers solve various problems in their sex lives (Barker et al., 2018). In Foucauldian terms, such psy-experts form part of a "dispositif"; a range of actors and institutions that support forms of sense-making (Foucault, 1980, p. 194).

Mediated sex advice, accordingly, has the power to shape sexual subjectivities (i.e., an experience of oneself and identity as a sexual being [Tolman, 2002]). In this way, desire, as "sexual and pleasurable feelings in and of the body … constitutes a form of knowledge about the self, one's relationships and one's cultural contexts or social worlds" (Tolman, 2012, p. 749). Tolman (2002) argues, therefore, that sexual desire is central to sexual subjectivity, shaping one's experiences with others, sense of self, and the ability to explore and seek pleasure. In this article, we examine the gendered constructions of sexual desire in online media aimed at women, which provide an important arena for exploring cultural concepts of ideal sexual subjectivities as they shape understandings of desire, including what and who is desirable.

Media discourses of female sexual desire have been structured by a postfeminist sensibility for over a decade, producing a range of sexual subjectivities. Women have been positioned primarily as empowered, agentic, sexually knowledgeable, heterosexual pleasure-pursuers (e.g., Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2007, 2017). Scholars of postfeminism have raised concerns regarding this empowerment rhetoric. Their critiques show how postfeminist sexual subjectivities are underpinned by essentialist hetero-gendered discourses that, paradoxically, result in the re-traditionalisation of gender and create new disciplinary and contradictory demands on women in heterosex (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gavey, 2012; Gill, 2007, 2009, 2017;

Riley et al., 2017; 2018). These critiques underscore the necessity for nuanced analyses of the idealised sexual subjectivities represented in media aimed at women.

Importantly, in technologically mediated cultures, where the digital is present in practically every aspect of daily life, digital media play an integral part in creating and circulating a pedagogy of sexual desire, authoritatively instructing readers to think and act in certain ways. As women's media engagement increasingly shifts from print-based to digital, women encounter an unprecedented, potentially limitless range of representations of feminine sexual desire (Attwood et al., 2015). This makes online media an important site for investigating the pedagogies of desire. Yet, compared to research analysing print media, this remains largely unexplored terrain (cf. Farvid & Braun, 2014).

To advance the body of work on media constructions of female sexual desire, we present a Foucauldian-informed analysis of the subject positions available in online texts offering sexual advice or commentary that are generated in Western contexts for heterosexual (cisgender) women[6] readers. To locate our study within the broader literature, and indicate our contribution, we begin with an overview of existing knowledge on print (and digital) media.

5.4. Media Constructions of Female Desire and Postfeminism

Feminist media analyses have identified postfeminism as a dominant Western discourse, circulating interconnected, although potentially contradictory, notions of ideal femininity (Gill, 2007, 2017; Riley et al., 2017; 2018). These newer ideals cohere around notions of empowerment, individualism, and choice regarding working on the self and the body. In

[6] This paper analyses mainstream media which tends to use binary terms such as women, men, boyfriend etc. Therefore, we have used these terms for reference throughout. However, we recognise that this is problematic and have included this critique in our analysis.

contrast, traditional ideals of femininity silenced female sexual desire (Fine, 1988), and sexual subjectivities were orientated towards heterosexuality, emotional intimacy and motherhood (Hollway, 1984). The media is a key place of circulation for these ideals.

Feminist analyses of print magazine sex and relationship advice across a range of Western contexts show these new ideals in a common positioning of women as liberated and striving for great sex (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2009; Gupta et al., 2008). For example, Menard and Kleinplatz's (2008) analysis of print magazines available in Canada highlighted that women who have great sex are presented as skillful, kinky, adventurous, and sometimes willing to engage in rough sexual experiences. As part of this incitement to sexual competence and adventurousness, magazine texts reproduce a broader pattern of working on the self and self-improvement within neoliberalism, underpinned by the postfeminist construction of women as flawed yet fixable (Riley et al., 2018, 2019).

From a Foucauldian perspective, magazines can be understood to "operate as pedagogical devices" (Frith, 2015a, p. 323), providing readers with the information and tools for self-improvement. For example, Gill's (2009) discourse analysis demonstrated that sex advice in Glamour (a best-selling UK women's magazine) constructed sexual competency as achieved through significant consumption and work on the self. For instance, to produce a desirable sexual subjectivity, readers were prescribed a range of consumption practices (e.g., buying lingerie and sex toys), and interpellated to retrain their psyche by making potentially fundamental shifts in how they thought about themselves and sex.

The language of choice and individualism, indicative of a postfeminist sensibility that frames contemporary magazine sex advice, has been shown to cohere with essentialist, binary

constructions of gender and heterosexuality. This allows the distinction between an active, desiring man and a passive woman to be maintained in more nuanced ways than in traditional hetero-gendered discourses, through recourse to the "reality" of biology (Tolman, 2002). In this vein, magazine sex advice has been shown to link testosterone to an insatiable male sex drive, reducing desire to biological functioning (Gill, 2007) and thereby rendering women's libidos as being "naturally" lower than men's (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gupta, et al., 2008; Ménard & Kleinplatz, 2008; Moran & Lee, 2008). This, in turn, ostensibly justifies women's prioritisation of men's sexual needs and gratification in heterosex.

While empowerment and choice rhetoric are prominent in mainstream magazine sex advice, feminist analyses have shown that male sexual desire remains prioritised (Gill, 2009). Women are often instructed to put men's needs before their own, as shown in Gupta et al.'s (2008) analysis of sex advice from Cosmopolitan magazine. This analysis highlights the positioning of women as responsible for competently pleasing their male partners while simultaneously giving guidance and encouraging compliments, thereby managing both sexual partners' experience. Magazine readers, presumed to be heterosexual women, are thus enjoined to become proficient in what Gill (2009) calls "men-ology", that is, "to learn to please men" (p. 345) and to expertly "read men's minds" (p. 356). No similar expectation is placed on men. Indeed, Ménard and Kleinplatz noted "an absence of sexual advice in men's magazines" (2008, p. 17), while Farvid and Braun (2014) demonstrate that advice in men's magazines mainly focuses on obtaining sex from women. Men's magazines, therefore, reflect hetero-gendered scripts of men having a high sex drive and women needing to be persuaded to have sex.

Together the analyses discussed show that magazine sex advice not only directs women to prioritise men's needs, but also links women's sexual subjectivities, and their sense of self-worth, to their effectiveness as sexual partners. Relatedly, feminist media research shows that for women being a competent (hetero)sexual subject has become imperative to relationship success, allowing them to "snap up" a male partner (Gill, 2009, p. 352) and "keep your man" (Farvid & Braun, 2006, p. 301). This scholarship also highlights how the emotional labour prescribed by magazine sex advice and the positioning of women vis-à-vis men, maps onto traditional hetero-gendered power relations, with women expected to be the ones working on maintaining relationships, including meeting their male partners' emotional and sexual needs (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2009; Gupta et al., 2008).

This positioning of women is reinforced by a discourse of healthism, which dovetails with neoliberal and postfeminist sensibilities (Riley et al., 2018), conflating health with normalcy, and in this case, linking optimal health with a desiring and functional libido. For example, Ménard and Kleinplatz (2008) note that to improve their sexual performance, readers of women's magazines are told to take up diets and increase exercise. Likewise, Frith (2015b) reports that women are advised to extend exercise workouts to "down-there" (p. 90) (i.e., their genitalia). These "simple" changes can be read as imperative for sexual health and success.

Another key finding in this scholarship concerns women's performance of desire. For instance, in their analysis of two popular Australian women's magazines Moran and Lee (2008) demonstrate that to boost a male sexual partner's ego, women were instructed to either visibly indicate pleasure or fake it. This is echoed by Frith's (2015a, p. 322) findings in an analysis of sex advice in Cosmopolitan. She notes that women are advised to engage in the spectacle of (real

or fake) orgasm as part of various "embodied performances" during sex. Thus, as these analyses indicate, women's performance of desire is ultimately constructed as less for themselves and more for the role they play in men's satisfaction (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2009, Moran & Lee, 2011).

As the preceding review of feminist media scholarship shows, print media aimed at women has consistently offered a limited pedagogy of desire. The constructions of female desire in the sex advice offered are underpinned by a hetero-gendered binary. Same-sex desire, if recognised at all, is either invalidated by being construed as a phase to grow out of (Jackson, 2005) or acceptable only as experimentation or to fulfil heterosexual men's fantasies (Diamond, 2005; Gill, 2008). The shift to online media consumption has the potential to radically expand what is available, yet the opposite is also possible given concerns about algorithmic reinforcement of racism and sexism (Noble, 2018). It is therefore timely and important to advance existing work by exploring subject positions produced in mainstream digital media aimed at women offering advice or commentary on sexual desire. Accordingly, the following research questions guide our analysis of such texts:

1. How is women's desire constructed and what wider discourses support these constructions?
2. What subject positions are made available within these texts?
3. What possibilities for subjectivity and practice are enabled (or diminished) from the vantage point offered by these subject positions?

5.5. Material and Method

Online texts about women's sexual desire were collected by the first author via a series of keyword searches in Google using five keyword search terms (viz., Sexual Desire, Sexual Attraction, Sex Advice, Female Libido, Sexual Pleasure). The search strategy was to locate the most prominent English-language articles available through searches from Western locations, namely, North America, UK and Australasia. We kept the search location relatively wide because we sought to locate popular articles delivered to large audiences and wanted to avoid local websites with limited readership. We used Google, which holds the market share of search engine use, and took into consideration its content delivery algorithm.

We selected articles appearing in the first 10 results, which receive approximately 95 percent of web traffic and are prioritised by the algorithm (Bradley, 2015; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). We sampled texts over three years (2018 - 2020), using a targeted specific timeframe search query falling on either side of Valentine's Day (9 - 16 February), which is a time of increased discussion of sex, desire, relationships, and dating. We retained the first five relevant results from each keyword per year and excluded texts that were unrelated or not relevant to the research questions (i.e., articles aimed at/about men, scientific articles, dictionary/thesaurus results, media reviews, advertisements) or non-textual formats (i.e., videos or images). The articles were associated with a broad range of over 30 media companies; Vice, Buzzfeed and Condé Nast are among the most well-known (see supplementary dataset for full details).

The dataset thus represents the default algorithmic choice, which aligns with dominant or normative content. This was achieved by using Google's Incognito Mode to mask search

history, thereby generating generic results not specific to Author 1's online profile. We tested this by conducting region-specific searches (as if the query were from the UK, North America, and Australasia) which yielded very similar outputs to our Google Incognito results. Therefore, although the search was conducted by a specific person in Aotearoa/New Zealand, we consider our dataset to represent similar results to those that would be obtained in comparable searches conducted from other Western Anglosphere countries. However, it is possibly more the case for those in Australasia, and without very specific search histories or demographic data.

5.5.1. Dataset

The dataset of 75 texts represents a focused snapshot of mainstream media aimed at women over a three-year period. These texts were categorised by a range of characteristics, including the type of text and the country of origin as summarised in Table 11 and Table 12. See also Appendix B for attribution of the extracts used in-text.

Table 11

Article Characteristics ("Type")

	n *(N=75)*	%
Blog	14	18.7
Opinion Piece	24	32
Online Magazines	25	33.3
Product Blogs	12	16

Table 12

Article Characteristics (Geographic Region)

	n *(N=75)*	%
USA	43	57.3
UK	13	17.3
Australia	6	8
Canada	3	4
New Zealand	1	1.3
India	1	1.3
China	1	1.3
Denmark	1	1.3
Ireland	1	1.3
Philippines	1	1.3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1	1.3
Unknown (Published on Medium.com)	3	4

5.5.2. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Foucauldian-informed Discourse Analysis which illuminates how talk or texts construct different versions of reality and how these delimit what people can say, think, feel, and do (Riley et al., 2021; Willig, 2013). Each text was coded for the ways that desire was constructed, adhering to the method set out by Riley et al. (2021). This included noting mentions of key words that referenced the topic of study or related topics, including desire, sexual pleasure and sexuality. As lay media often use the terms sexual desire, libido, pleasure,

and experience interchangeably, and so too sexual identity and sexuality, we sometimes use these terms in the analysis in corresponding ways, although our focus is on sexual desire.

To attend to our first research question we asked, regarding women's desire: "what is being constructed" (i.e., the nature of reality produced in the text), "how is it being constructed" (paying attention to rhetorical strategies such as use of extreme case formulations) and "why is it being constructed in this way" (which includes considering wider discourses that "enable these ideas to be thinkable")? (Riley et al., 2021, p. 293). In this study, for example, such discourses included postfeminism, neoliberalism and healthism. Once this work was done, we examined any conflicting constructions of desire to identify variation in the discourses within texts and across the dataset.

Regarding our second research question, we identified common subject positions, by reviewing the above codes and asking, "who is being talked about" (Riley et al., 2019, p. 297)? We drew on Davies and Harré's (1990) conceptualisation of subject positions as types of culturally recognisable persons or roles produced within a discourse and available for individuals to inhabit (e.g., the sexually confident woman). Subject positions have associated ways of speaking and acting, and come with a set of rights, obligations, and vantage points from which the subject can view themselves and the world (e.g., visibly enjoying sex).

Finally, to attend to research question three, we considered what was made possible for subjectivity construction (how the reader could view themselves, e.g., sexually confident) and practice (what the reader could do/imagine doing, e.g., appropriate frequency of sex). Foucault's (1980) concept of the "dispositif" (discussed earlier) helped us consider how expert positions were mobilised, giving us further analytic insight into the rhetorical power of the talk.

5.6. Analysis and Discussion

We identified three common subject positions, which we entitled: (a) “Made through the male gaze”, (b) the “Working on it woman”, and (c) the “Sexual connoisseur”. These subject positions were produced through material that reinforced both heteronormativity and gendered heterosexuality in ways that consistently foreground men’s sexual desires, needs and interests. The following analysis uses exemplary extracts from relevant texts to illustrate analytic points; each quote is labelled with the number of the article from which it originates.

5.6.1. Made Through the Male Gaze

In the “Made through the male gaze” subject position, sexual desire is predicated on being sexually alluring and desirable to men. For example, readers are told that “in women, sexual desire is often responsive, so allowing your partner to initiate sex is the only way to ensure that it happens” (Article 19-M). This quote starts with a normative statement about women’s sexual desire as “often” in response to another, but the claim is cemented with an extreme case formulation (“the only way”), which significantly limits what women’s desire might look like.

The construction of women’s sexual desire as responsive to an instigator who is opposite (i.e., male) reinforces the norm in media aimed at women, to assume a male partner, despite commonly using gender-neutral language. Accordingly, women must expect their male partners to initiate sex and their own feelings of desire will follow. Women are therefore not entirely without desire (given that they are reading advice on “How to have great sex”), but an agentic desiring female subject position is excluded from the data. Fine (1988) contemplated what it might look like to “release females from a position of receptivity” (p. 33), but we can

see in this article 31 years later, women are still rendered as "responsive" recipients of male desire.

The "Made through the male gaze" subject position conflates desire with being a "turn on for the man" (Article 18-C). For example: "Many women don't just want sex. They want to feel desired first. If a woman doesn't feel desired, then the sex itself may not seem so appealing" (Article 19-B). This subject position is sustained by a heterosexual script (Kim et al., 2007) that constructs women and men as complementary opposites, invoking a passive-female/active-male binary based on biology (Tolman, 2002). Gender difference is thus attributed to a one-way interactional dynamic in which male desire is directed toward female recipients. Accordingly, women must ensure they are sexually desirable to men, by being physically attractive and/or pleasing them sexually.

Thus, although men are positioned as both sex-needy and sex-ready, a contradiction is evoked whereby women must work hard to be sexually desiring to men. For example, making "sure your lipstick is blue-based, not yellow based" (Article 18-G) is recommended because research shows men's preference for these colours. Women are also instructed on how to covertly detect men's sexual attraction to them, such as: "If he is changing his body position to replicate one of yours (like crossing his legs), it's usually a sign of attraction" (Article 18-I)—echoing the "men-ology" identified by Gill (2009). Such advice can be understood as reinforcement of the "male in the head": internalisation of the male gaze and self-regulation to be appealing to men (Holland et al., 1998). Thus, over 20 years after ground-breaking feminist research identifying this tendency, we find that in the context of widespread postfeminism—

with its associated agentic sexual subjectivities—women are still being directed to understand that his desire is their own.

In a similar vein, women's desire was portrayed as reliant on penetrative sexual intercourse. Men were typically depicted as "preheated" (Article 20-A), whereas women were lacking sexual desire and needing to have their own embodied desire aroused. For instance:

> Extract 1: Portuguese sex researcher Ana Carvalheira found that women who said that sex preceded desire outnumbered those who reported desire first by a margin of 2 to 1. Today, sex therapists increasingly accept [a psychiatrist]'s view that for many (if not most) women, desire is not the cause of sex, but its result (Article 20-A).

These claims make sense in relation to an essentialist hetero-gender discourse that constructs men as biologically distinct from women, decontextualising sexuality and reducing it to physiological function (Frith, 2015b; Gill, 2007). This construction reflects the enduring construal of women and men as innately different, propagated by popular psychology in titles such as "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus", and critiqued by feminists over 20 years ago (Potts, 1998). Reference to experts and research statistics ("a margin of 2 to 1") are rhetorical strategies that in this case, rebrand these outdated ideas and grant validity to essentialist claims about women's desire.

As shown in extract 1 above, articles generally referred to sex in ways that were synonymous with coitus, based upon the taken-for-granted view of penile-vaginal penetration as the key element of "real" sex (McPhillips et al., 2001). Penetrative sexual practices were constantly referenced or implied within the data, constructing penetration as the normative route through which women can participate in and enjoy sex. For example, "Have you ever

noticed that your partner's penis seems to 'fit' better in your vagina once things get going?" (Article 20-S). Not only is the heteronormative coital imperative normalised, but it also constructs women's desire as being the result of penetrative sex, rather than preceding it. Thus, while previous research has indicated that penetrative sex is constructed the only kind of sex (Gupta et al., 2008; Jackson, 2005; McPhillips et al., 2001; Moran & Lee, 2011), here, we show it is also being constructed as the only kind of turn-on.

The construction renders sexual desire as something that happens to women rather than embodied and originating in or from themselves. Accordingly, the "Made through the male gaze" subject position works in the interests of heteropatriarchal practices, providing a vantage point from which women can understand themselves as sexual objects (rather than subjects), whose own desire is a product of being an object of men's desires, including engaging in penetrative sex even when not "warmed up". Such advice enjoins women to submit to heterosex regardless of their own feelings, and men to disregard their female partners' arousal, desire or even refusal. These constructions of sexual desire potentially support rape myths and groom female readers into accepting sexual coercion.

5.6.2. Working On It Woman

In contrast, the "Working on it woman" has sexual desire but needs to work on maintaining or increasing her sex drive. Women's sex drives were repeatedly depicted as not just distinct from men's but also not sufficiently high. The "Working on it woman" is thus interpellated to continually work to boost her libido.

Women are portrayed as able to "go for a long time without feeling desire" (Article 19-B), unlike men (their assumed sexual partners) who are positioned in the male sex-drive

discourse (Hollway, 1984) and are understood to "think about sex all the time" (Article 18-M). It is women's bodies, however, that are rendered problematic, and their fluctuating sex drive is routinely troubled as they are commanded to "find out what the problem is and do your best to address it" (Article 18-L). Thus, rather than problematising a needy male sex drive, the measure of "normal" and appropriate desire is modelled on men, with women being blamed when those standards are not met.

This construction of problematic low and fluctuating female desire was supported by drawing on science and expert authority. Psychologists or medical professionals were often authors or quoted as expert commentators, and readers were usually advised to seek their help, as shown in the example below:

> Extract 2: If your sex drive is lacking, it is likely that there is a medical reason for that. You should speak to your doctor about the problem. If they are able to identify the reason for your low sex drive, they will be able to work with you to find a solution (Article 20-N).

The above extract directs readers to seek help from a doctor, and other articles attributed low libido to hormonal imbalance (e.g., Article 20-D; 19-A). These explanations draw on bio-medical discourses that situate women's sexual desire in the realm of dysfunction and disorder (Tiefer, 2001). Stress and exhaustion from paid employment or balancing domestic responsibilities are also presented as the culprit. For example:

> Extract 3: Women are always on, but is this stopping us from getting turned on? If we're not actually doing something we're thinking about doing it (washing up or filing our tax return or any of those 3,000 things on our to-do list that aren't sex) (Article 20-M).

Locating women's low libido within the social, provides potential for critiques of gender inequality, but this potential is not met. Instead, the suggested solutions are for women to work on themselves, reframing a social issue as a personal one and aligning with the neoliberal trope of individualising social problems. In the data, women's fluctuating desire is rendered as both problematic and their responsibility to fix, usually through monitoring and disciplining their bodies. For example, readers are told that their "sexual desire flourishes" when they "eat well, exercise, control blood pressure, and don't eat sugar" (Article 18-B). Thus, the "Working on it woman" needs to maintain control over multiple aspects of her life.

Other examples of individualist solutions include meditation to manage stress. For example, in an article entitled "Ladies, meet the hidden force behind your sex drive" readers are instructed to "Rewire your brain's stress response through a daily meditation practice and try to become more conscious about how you handle your stress in general" (Article 20-Y). Relating women's lack of desire to a faulty body (a brain that needs "rewiring") renders women individually responsible for addressing the problem through stress management. Accordingly, a prevalent postfeminist trope of linking regular sexual activity with normative, desirable health is reproduced (Frith, 2015b; Riley et al., 2018). This becomes explicit as readers are told, for example, that "Most people are happier when they have a satisfactory sex life" (Article 20-N) and an active libido is "a positive force for health" (Article 18-A). This conflation of health, sex, and happiness is underpinned by wider postfeminist discourses of optimal living and expectations for happiness through self-reflexive work (Riley et al., 2019).

The incitement to self-regulate and engage in associated self-help practices also intersects with neoliberal discourses of good citizenship and healthism (Crawford, 1980; Gill,

2007; Riley et al., 2018). Within healthism, health is an expectation and outcome of lifestyle choices. Thus, a call to health intersects with normalcy and the discourses of individual responsibility evident in the "Working on it woman" subject position. This expectation was not similarly extended to men. The gendered asymmetry is consistent with other broader postfeminist analyses showing how contemporary self-help advice is focused largely on women's flaws, and often correcting feminine behaviours to be more like men (Riley et al., 2019).

Not only is the "Working on it woman" commonly positioned in the data as responsible for their own desire but, consistent with analyses of women's print media (e.g., Gill, 2009; Gupta et al., 2008), they are also tasked with maintaining their relationship by taking care of their (usually) male partner's sexual needs. Frequent sex, for example, is rendered a "pretty accurate barometer of the state of a relationship" (Article 18-L) and differences in sexual desire cause for therapy. The potential relationship repercussions for failing to match a male partner's desire are depicted in the extract below. This is also an example of how women's lower desire is constructed as a medical problem resolved by medical experts:

> Extract 4: This is what wrecked [name]'s relationship with her boyfriend. She was experiencing vaginal dryness and super low libido, which made sex painful and also lead to decline in the frequency to have sex. This took a direct hit on her relationship, ending her 2-year-old relationship with her partner. Finally, after a couple of visits to gynaecologists, she got her sex life back on track and rekindled her relationship with her boyfriend (Article 20-D).

Here, anecdotal evidence of a relationship being "wrecked" due to infrequent sex functions rhetorically as a warning. The ideal outcome, and main concern, in this extract is restoring the relationship. The protagonist is shown as taking the correct course of action to do so: seeking expert medical help (gynaecologists) to correct her dysfunctional desire, thereby restoring her sex-life and, in turn, her relationship. Notably, responsibility for the "wrecked" relationship is attributed solely to the dysfunctional woman, while the male partner's role in the deteriorating relationship is not considered.

Overall, the "Working on it woman" subject position constructs women as a sexually desiring agent, rather than a sexual object, but still lacking compared to men and thus required to remedy this. Consequently, the "Working on it" woman can view herself as flawed, yet fixable. All she needs to do is engage in self-health practices and seek expert medical advice, to "fix" her desire and be normal and happy.

5.6.3. The Sexual Connoisseur

The "sexual connoisseur" is also interpellated to work on their sex life, not in response to dysfunction but to optimise the quality of sex, as well as their experiences of both sexual desire and sexual pleasure in the context of heterosex. In contrast to the "Working on it woman", who is working primarily to match their level of desire to their male partner, the "Sexual connoisseur", a subject position initially described by Evans and Riley (2014), is a pleasure pursuer; they are sexually confident, knowledgeable, desiring, and want to develop new sexual skills to maximise their pleasure. In the extract below, for example, boring sex is construed as problematic (whereas a lack of sex is the "Working on it woman's" problem):

> Extract 5: Bored in the bedroom? That's no excuse for giving up on your sex life. If you find that you're too sexually complacent with your spouse, mix it up! Bring toys into your sexual activity, act out fantasies, roleplay, and tease and entice each other with dirty text messages throughout the day, or focus on different nights of pleasure (Article 18-H).

The "Sexual connoisseur" subject position describes a woman who desires sex and needs to work to further optimise potential pleasure. Women who do not work at having an exciting sex life are positioned as problematically "giving up". Solutions to sexual boredom are offered in a six-part list which works rhetorically to support the claim that there is "no excuse for giving up on your sex life" and encourage readers to "spice-it-up". Other suggestions include, "Open your mouth and let those dirty thoughts spill out", "Concoct a sexy to-do list for his eyes only", and "Pick a new place to give him oral sex like in the car or while he's in the shower" (Article 20-T).

In particular, the "Sexual connoisseur" is encouraged to work on increasing the quantity and quality of orgasms she experiences. Orgasms were consistently linked closely with desire and pleasure, and often described using esoteric language: "life-force", "mystical", "euphoric", "powerful" (Article 19-S), amid claims of health benefits (e.g., Article 18-U; 19-S; 20-K). This is similar to analyses of print media, which show how the female orgasm is represented as both the performance of desire and pinnacle of pleasure (Frith, 2015a; Riley, et al., 2018), constructing what Potts (2000, p. 56) calls the "orgasmic imperative". This imperative, to understand your own desire as linked inexorably with orgasms, is evident in the following extract from an article entitled "I Orgasm Every Single Time I Have Sex":

> Extract 6: I’m not some anomaly. I’m not some magical creature. I simply know what I like, know how to ask for it, and don’t settle for anything less. Life is too short not to have an orgasm. Here's how I get the job done during sex, every single time (Article 18-V).

Orgasming during sex is rendered normative through the extreme case formulation disclaimers that position her as ordinary (not an “anomaly” or “magical creature”) and describing the ability to orgasm regularly as “simple”. These statements are given authority and support with the use of an assertive and simple three-part list. Orgasming is also related to notions of productivity and performance (a “job”), with anything less than orgasming “every single time” rendered failure by the statement “I … don’t settle for anything less”. The onus of pleasure is thus on the woman to gain self-knowledge (“know what I like”), communication skills (“know how to ask for it”), and a sense of self-worth intersecting with assertiveness (“don't settle for anything less)”. Subsequently, those who do settle for less, can view themselves as failures since the individual is centred in this advice, rather than the relationship in which the sex is happening.

In a similar vein, orgasms, sexual desire, and good sex generally, are also related to psychological work, such as meditation and mindfulness to become “more attentive and aware of my own senses and desires” (Article 20-B). The implication is that women may be disconnected from their own sexual desire, but able to reconnect through increased self-knowledge, echoing the injunction to “know thyself”, central to the construction of modern subjectivity (Foucault, 1994). The call to increased self-knowledge invokes the ideal psychological, reflexive self, engaged in the project of self- improvement as it relates to sex

(Riley et al., 2018). Accordingly, the labour involved in having good sex, and by association, enhancing a sense of desire, is linked not just to regulating behaviours but effecting inner change such as "increasing the number of sexual thoughts that you have" (Article 18-A). This imperative for emotional transformation is common in the data and has also been noted in previous analyses of magazine articles (e.g., Barker et al., 2018; Gill, 2009).

Given the focus on psychological labour and personal development, many of the texts were instructional in which experts like sex therapists and sexologists identified areas of sexual selfhood and performance to be worked on to improve one's sex life and ultimately become "sexually enlightened" (Article 18-S). Such work has been called a "technology of sexiness" in which women work on themselves in order to produce themselves into the desired, and desirable, sexual subjectivity of an agentic, up-for-it, sexually savvy, pleasure pursuer (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2009; Radner, 2008). These technologies are often profoundly heteronormative and consumerist (Evans & Riley, 2014, Harvey & Gill, 2011), as evidenced in our data in instances where, as part of the labour of the sexual connoisseur, women are tasked with buying sex toys, lingerie, or novelty lubricants to enhance sex with male partners. Such products were constructed as widening one's sexual repertoire, and implicitly, in keeping male partners satisfied, as shown in the extract below:

> Extract 7: I was recently talking to a wife about how her husband is constantly trying to put her legs over his shoulders. For years, it wasn't her favourite position because, well, everybody ain't a gymnast, ya know? But once she invested into a sex pillow that supported her back while elevating her body, it became an instant go-to for her as well (Article 20-E).

There are some elements of the "Working on it woman" present here regarding the sexual labour required of women. But where the "Working on it woman" is focused on increasing her desire for sex to match her male partner's, here the change made (buying the sex pillow) is framed as her further development as an active sexual subject in pursuit of her own pleasure; since it becomes a "go-to for her as well". However, the narrative is also about fulfilling her husband's desires, who is described as "constantly" trying a position she did not like. Rather than problematise his behaviour, responsibility for resolving the problem is placed on the woman. The solution of buying a product, using the language of economy ("invest"), creates a highly individualised, consumerist solution. This extract also shows how the "Sexual connoisseur's" experiences of desire were often discussed in relation to men and men's pleasure, in similar ways to the previous subject positions. Thus, despite a focus on her own desire and the construction of an agentic, self-directed female sexuality—in sharp contrast to the "Made by the male gaze" subjectivity—the "Sexual connoisseur" was often (but not always) directed to prioritise male pleasure.

In sum, this subject position allows for female desire in and of itself as women are enjoined to learn how to increase the quality of their sex, maximise their pleasure, and connect with their inner selves to unlock their sexual expertise (Ménard & Kleinplatz, 2008; Moran & Lee, 2011). The "Sexual Connoisseur" subject position we identify in mainstream mediated sex advice, contrasts somewhat with Harvey & Gill's (2011) "Sexual Entrepreneur" in that the subject already views herself as desirable but requires skills and resources to maintain her desirability. As Evans and Riley (2014) argued, the sexual connoisseur is the quintessential neoliberal subject perpetually labouring to be, do and have more in the face of the threat that

one will never be good enough or able to obtain sexual contentment. Thus, the compulsory performance of sexual expertise reflects the requirement to constantly work on oneself that is central to the postfeminist sensibility pervading these texts (Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2007). The "Sexual connoisseur" subject position interpellates women to meet ever-increasing demands and expectations placed upon them and simultaneously creates the possibility for readers to understand themselves as failures if they do not successfully, continuously engage in this labour on the sexual self.

5.7. Concluding Discussion

Our Foucauldian-informed analysis of mediated sexual subjectivities focused on the largely unexplored area of online media (a notable exception being Farvid and Braun's 2014 analysis of online casual sex advice). Our focus on subject positions is relatively novel to this area of scholarship and allowed us to clearly see what kind of subject is constructed and interpellated in mediated sex advice circulating online. An analysis of this nature gives a unique perspective on how readers might see themselves reflected in and through these positions. We can understand not only how desire is constructed, but directions for how women might adopt particular subject positions to make sense of themselves and their sexual subjectivities and consider the potential implications for the readers of these texts.

Our analysis indicates that a discourse of women's desire may not be missing, as shown in earlier analyses of women's sexual subjectivities (Fine, 1988), but it is certainly stifled. All the subject positions we identified allow female sexual desire and agency, since each expects women to want to enjoy sex. This gives the advice we analysed a broadly sex-positive, feminist orientation. Yet, as we showed, even within such an orientation, women's pleasure is

consistently rendered secondary to that of men, with some accounts "grooming" women into accepting sexual coercion, and reinforcing rape myths. Sex and desire were bound tightly in binary logic, perpetuating a relentlessly hetero-gendered narrative that is supported by discourses appearing in media analyses for over 20 years (Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2014; Gill, 2009; Potts, 1998). Therefore, rather than the internet broadening possible sexual subjectivities for women, we show an intensification of a particular narrative of female desire as constructed through, and in inescapable reference to, male pleasure. This strictly limits possibilities for sexuality and desire.

Importantly, our findings add to the scholarship by highlighting how the re/production of this narrow framing of female desire in mainstream online media is enabled and achieved within an overarching postfeminist sensibility. The discursive reappropriation of feminist rhetoric of female empowerment, gender norms and sexual liberation in mainstream media, postfeminist scholars have argued, enables sexist constructions of women's desire, sexual subjectivity, and practice. It is the seemingly feminist framing that allows such advice to be given, and heard, in our contemporary moment (Gill, 2009; Riley et al 2018). Established discourses of sexuality (e.g., medicalisation, biological essentialism) are reproduced and made over as they interconnect with newer, contemporary discourses (e.g., postfeminism, neoliberalism, healthism). These accounts were further supported with reference to expert authorities, who often reproduce dated popular psychology such as Mars/Venus male and female sexuality.

The resultant subject positions bid female-identified readers to work on themselves in the pursuit of gendered normalcy. The embedding of men's pleasure as an innate priority

negates women's desire, limiting sexual agency, expression, and subjectivity. And just as McRobbie (2007) argued that the postfeminist sexual contract allows women public participation only if existing within non-threatening parameters, our work demonstrates that women can hold agentic sexual subjectivities if they still focus on pleasing men. In much the same way as heterosexuality was assumed in the articles, race or ethnicity were rarely mentioned. Our interpretation of this is that failing to mention ethnicity created a White norm, rendering racialised women as Other (Hines 2019, 2020). This highlights the need for future research on the racialised constructions of online sex advice.

The promise of online media to expand the range of available representations and choices for women has, therefore, not been delivered in mainstream digital media. The widely circulated content aimed at women, mostly generated in the United States, simply repackages many of the ideas evident in print media for decades, reproducing a limited set of Western (specifically North American) discourses and subject positions.

What is different in the new media landscape is content delivery algorithms and personalised advertising; clicks beget clicks and amplify these limited cis-centric, hetero-gendered accounts of female desire. Given that what ultimately drives the circulation of ideas and discourse online is the popularity of content, as clicks are tied to advertising revenue and product sales, we must infer that this well-worn narrative is commercially beneficial for media companies (Bradley, 2015; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

The question then, is how the largely unchanging narrative, with its relentlessly heteronormative focus on male desire, might be disrupted and resisted. To address this question, it would be fruitful to explore alternative online media that often resist dominant

discourses and incorporate diverse representations of sexuality, as well as gender, race, and other social locations that rarely feature in our data. This would be a significant next step in this under-researched area of online media, potentially identifying new and more empowering ways for women (broadly understood) to construct agentic sexual subjectivities. Such content is largely produced by independent or smaller-scale online writers and is therefore pushed outside the default algorithmic choice, hence its absence from our data corpus. Analysis of non-mainstream or alternative media could identify possible resistant discourses with more liberatory sexual subjectivities and determine how to amplify these. It might be here, for example, where discussions of how power intersects with hetero-sex in response to the #metoo movement would be circulated, which was absent in our corpus.

It would also be useful to expand research beyond text-based analysis and consider other online platforms where sex advice circulates through image, video and text (e.g., TikTok, Instagram and YouTube). Doing so is important for the under-researched area of online media given rapidly changing online engagement trends, especially in relation to young people. At the same time, we must also find ways to challenge and persuade mainstream media outlets to move away from the limiting, relentlessly normative discourses of heterosex.

6. Chapter 6, Study Two: *Resisting Normative Sexual Subjectivities: A Discourse Analysis of How Feminist Alternative Media can Re-Shape Constructions of Women's Sexual Desire.*

6.1. Foreword

This chapter presents the second study of my research, which explored how alternative media texts worked to discursively construct women's sexual desire. This article pays close attention to the ways that normative discourses of desire were resisted or otherwise transformed within the texts. These articles were analysed using poststructuralist discourse analysis.

The study has been accepted for publication in *Feminist Media Studies* as of October 2025. At the time of submission of the thesis, the article has not yet been published online, but will be found at https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2025.2580417

The article has not been altered from its published form, other than small formatting changes to align with the style of the thesis document.

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION
DOCTORATE WITH PUBLICATIONS/MANUSCRIPTS

We, the student and the student's main supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the student's contribution as indicated below in the Statement of Originality.

Student name:	Jessica Tappin
Name and title of main supervisor:	Professor Sarah Riley

In which chapter is the manuscript/published work?	Chapter Six

Describe the contribution that the student and members of the supervisory team have made to the manuscript/published work:[1]

The candidate (i) developed the research questions and study methods in collaboration with supervisors, (ii) collected all data, (iii) analysed the data with advice and input from supervisors, (iv) wrote the manuscript with advice and feedback from supervisors.

Please select one of the following three options:

○ **The manuscript/published work is published or in press**

Please provide the full reference of the research output:

◉ **The manuscript is currently under review for publication**

Please provide the name of the journal:
Feminist Media Studies

○ **It is intended that the manuscript will be published, but it has not yet been submitted to a journal**

Student's signature:	Tappin	Main supervisor's signature:	S Riley.

This form should be placed at the beginning of each relevant thesis chapter.

[1] Refer to the Massey University Publishing and Authorship guidelines (OneMassey for staff, Stream for students) and/ or Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) guidelines for guidance.

6.2. Abstract

Mainstream media representations of women's sexual desire typically limit the full range of possibilities for sexual agency and embodied pleasure. This occurs when they foreground the importance of men's sexual gratification, prioritise heteronormativity, exclude diverse identities and bodies, and frame women's desire as an individualised project of the self. It remains unclear whether feminist alternative digital media disrupt and resist these normative constructions of women's sexual desire, how they might do so, and with what possibilities for readers' agentic sexual subjectivity construction. Addressing these questions, we conducted a discourse analysis of 55 articles from self-identified feminist online publications examining constructions of women's sexual desire. Our analysis highlights two dominant constructions of desire: (1) "desire as diverse", relating to an expanded representation of who can be sexually desiring and how, and (2) "desire as political", locating desire within wider social critique and as a tool for social change. These indicate a potential broadening of women's sexual agency but ultimately are undercut by neoliberal discourses of individual self-work and improvement.

6.3. Introduction

Online media are a key site for the circulation of representations of sexuality and desire, shaping expectations of acceptable or healthy sexual subjectivity and practice through their ubiquitous presence in everyday life (Barker et al., 2018; McRobbie, 2004). Media representations are also embedded in, and reflective of, broader systems of power and inequity (e.g., heteronormativity, sexism, racism). Thus, media representations and intimate experiences can be seen as co-existing within a shared cultural terrain that can sustain, or resist, inequitable sexual norms (Fahs et al., 2018).

In the early days of the Internet, feminists were optimistic that online media could provide space for heterogenous representations of women's sexual desire (Tsatsou, 2012). The relatively small emergent body of work on this topic suggests, however, that this promise remains largely unfulfilled (Attwood et al., 2015; Tappin et al., 2024; Wood, 2017), aligning with findings from print media analyses (Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2014; Gill, 2009; Potts, 1998). This work shows that digital media do depict women as sexually agentic and desirous within a broadly sex-positive, feminist orientation. However, their sexual desire remains tethered to male pleasure, reinforcing hetero-gendered, androcentric norms, and a neoliberal incentive for self-work (Tappin et al., 2024).

Despite the early recognition of the Internet as a potential space for resistance, there have been almost no investigations of so-called alternative and/or feminist online media representation of women's sexual desire. We, therefore, have little knowledge of the nature and range of representations of women's sexual desire in online media sources. Pursuing this under-explored avenue in feminist media studies, we examined how women's sexual desire is portrayed in "alternative media." Taking a feminist poststructuralist perspective, we discursively analysed a digital corpus of contemporary Anglo-Western feminist and politically progressive independent online publications. These publications are typically small-scale, community-driven, or independent, and present themselves as feminist, politically and/or socially progressive, critiquing prevailing sexual and gender norms. We focus primarily on adult women's media; however, analyses of adolescent girls' magazines demonstrate similar and interrelated discourses. For example, Farvid and Braun (2006) note that publications for girls

provide models of heterosexual femininity, while "women's magazines advise on how femininity should be moulded, sexualised, and practiced as one gets older" (p.296).

In this article, we explore the discourses of desire re/produced in texts, the extent to which they resist normative constructions of women's sexual desire, and the implications for women's sexual practices and subjectivity construction. We define desire broadly, as the ways in which people can "imagine themselves as sexual beings capable of pleasure" (Fine & McClelland, 2006, p. 301), including concepts like sexual drive, expressions of sexuality, and embodied sexual feeling (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2012). We begin by locating our study within the broader literature on mediated discourses of desire, before discussing the small body of work on alternative feminist media as an important space for resistance to dominant sexual norms.

6.4. Representations of Sexual Desire in Mainstream Media

There is an established body of feminist research examining the construction of desire in popular Western media, including print magazines, films, television, and, to a lesser extent, online platforms (e.g., Barker et al., 2018; Frith, 2015a; Gill, 2009; Gupta et al., 2008; Jackson, 2005; Potts, 1998; Tappin et al., 2024). The findings demonstrate how media shape possibilities for sexual subjectivity and practice by linking representations to broader systems of power. They show how media construct norms around desirability, pleasure, and legitimacy in sexual relationships, sustaining inequities that shape everyday intimate experiences.

Feminist analyses of Western mainstream media over time, highlight a shift in depictions of women's sexuality—from a "missing discourse" of women's desire (Fine, 1988) to increasing expectations for women to express sexual desire in particular ways. For example, Carpenter's (1998) analysis of two decades of teen magazines (1974 to 1994) showed how in

earlier publications women and girls were constructed as lacking sexual agency and desire, and as objects of male sexual gratification. However, in later publications desire was constructed as conditional; women were *allowed* to want (hetero)sex but *not allowed* to act on those wants. Embodied pleasure and enjoyment were consequently largely absent. This shift reflects growing neoliberalism and a postfeminist sensibility that emerged in the West in the 1990s.

At this time, new media representations of agentic female sexuality arose, including in women's magazines and popular makeover television programs (Farvid & Braun, 2014; Gill, 2007, 2009; Markle, 2008). At the same time, Anglo-American second-wave feminist arguments advocating for women's sexual agency became entangled with neoliberal individualism and its emphasis on self-improvement. Women's autonomy and empowerment therefore became tied to their active pursuit, expression, and enjoyment of (hetero)sexual pleasure, constructing a pleasure imperative (Allen, 2012; Frith, 2015b; Gill, 2007; Wood et al., 2019).

Accordingly, ideal feminine sexual subjectivities came to be defined by sexual readiness, hypersexual appearance, and sexual knowledge gained through self-improvement and relationship work with men (Gill, 2007, 2009; Harvey & Gill, 2011). These constructions continue to uphold heteronormative expectations, positioning women as responsible for enhancing men's sexual pleasure, evidenced, for example, in media advice instructing women to be exciting lovers for men (Gill, 2009; Tappin et al., 2024). In these portrayals, women and men are positioned as inherently different to one another via and discourse of gender essentialism, which is central to a postfeminist sensibility (García-Favaro, 2016; Gill, 2007). In this way, heteronormative gender constructions and compulsory heterosexuality are reinforced (Moran, 2017).

These postfeminist portrayals thus leave little room for diverse expressions of gender and sexuality. Instead, queer desire is often rendered invisible, stereotyped, or framed as titillation for the heterosexual male gaze in women's and teenage magazines, as well as in primetime television (Attwood et al., 2015; Diamond, 2005; Farhall, 2018; Gill, 2009; Jackson, 2005; Kim et al., 2007). Similarly, discussions of desire and sexuality in relation to ethnicity, cultural practice (Chmielewski et al., 2017), or non-normative bodies (e.g., fat, disabled) are largely absent (Loeser et al., 2018; Pausé, 2015; Shakespeare & Richardson, 2018).

These patterns reflect the dominance of a postfeminist sensibility that positions women as desiring, while simultaneously maintaining uneven hetero-gendered power relations. However, this structural dimension is obscured by its underlying neoliberal individualism, which reframes any sexual difficulties as personal deficiencies women must overcome (Riley, Evans & Robson, 2019; Tappin et al., 2024). Individualist framing deflects attention from how structural and systemic factors—such as stress and fatigue from unequal parenting and domestic labour—may impact women's sexual desire (Gill, 2007; Harris et al., 2022).

In the current media landscape, contemporary mainstream representations have since emerged that give greater attention to gendered power relations and sexual politics (Gill, 2016; Gill & Orgad, 2019). Yet, pervasive heteronormativity, the privileging of male pleasure, and gendered self-surveillance remain prominent (Gilchrist, 2024; Tappin et al., 2024). Existing studies suggest that mainstream digital media reproduce the coupling of women's empowerment and sexual desire with expectations to satisfy men (Farvid & Braun, 2014; Tappin et al., 2024). Search algorithms further amplify this pattern by prioritising and reinforcing dominant sexual norms. Therefore, the question remains whether alternative,

feminist media might offer different representations of sexual expression to those identified in the mainstream.

6.5. "Alternative" Representations of Sexual Desire?

Alternative media are socially resistant media forms, often linked to political movements such as feminism (Gunnarsson-Payne, 2012). Feminist publications have been instrumental in mainstream (White) feminist history, notably during the suffragette movement and 20th-century second-wave feminism in Europe and North America (Gunnarsson-Payne, 2012). For instance, in the 1970s and 80s, the publications *Spare Rib*, and *Red Rag* challenged social norms by discussing issues such as domestic labour, sexism, orgasms, and abortion; breaking taboos and pushing these ideas into public discussions (Bazin, 2021; Hollows, 2013).

However, there is little feminist analysis of how these resistant texts constructed sexual pleasure, desire, and agency. Notably, Todd (1999) showed how women's pleasure was tied to oppression and objectification in *Spare Rib* magazine. Later, Jenkins and Johnson (2017) showed that feminist magazines and online media, actively challenged heteronormative depictions of sexuality, and Muise (2011) found that women's sex blogs provided safe spaces for discussion of sexuality. More recently, Sciberras and Tanner (2022, 2023) showed how *Instagram* posts promoting feminist sex education and sex-positive art can challenge heteronormative constructions of sex-as-performance, centring female pleasure and enjoyment instead.

These above findings align with changes in women's talk about sexual desire and pleasure (Farvid, 2014), and popular cultural texts that reproduce and rework normative gender relations around sexual desire (Gilchrist, 2024). They also point to the complexity and multiplicity of discourses underpinning constructions of sexual desire in these media.

Alternative media representations of sexuality are (like all media depictions) varied, fluid, and open to interpretation. It is therefore overly simplistic to consider alternative media simply as countering mainstream depictions (Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Gunnarsson-Payne, 2012).

Feminist alternative media may both contrast with and support problematic mainstream constructions of sexual desire. Even as publications counter the mainstream, they may simultaneously reinforce the status quo. For example, some feminist magazines have featured articles about women's sexual pleasure alongside advertisements perpetuating gender stereotypes or objectified depictions of women (Gil-Glazer, 2023; Todd, 1999) and draw on neoliberal discourses of self-improvement and individual responsibility in discussions of health issues (Jenkins & Johnson, 2017). In this way, the boundaries between radical discourses of sexuality and desire, and the dominant, normative discourses abounding in the mainstream are blurred.

Nevertheless, the overall lack of research on alternative feminist media means we have little knowledge regarding how contemporary alternative feminist media construct women's sexual desire. Therefore, in this article we ask: (1) What discourses of women's desire are evident in alternative digital media? and (2) How do they reproduce or resist normative constructions of women's sexual desire?

6.6. Methodology

6.6.1. The Data Corpus

We analysed 55 online texts obtained from 11 self-identified alternative online publications, acknowledging the subjective nature of the term "alternative" (Gunnarson-Payne, 2012). These were predominantly independent and small-scale publications that receive an average of

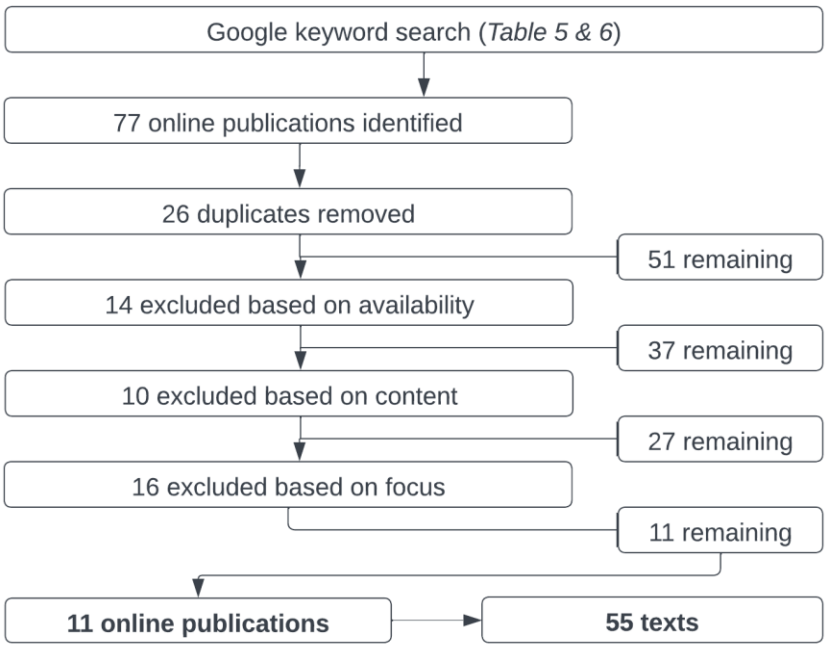
approximately five million monthly visits —about nine times less than mainstream outlets[7]. Most target women or non-binary audiences, describing themselves using slogans such as: “A feminist response to pop culture” (*Bitch Media*), “Telling the stories of people of colour from marginalised genders” (*Gal-Dem*), promoting “lesser-heard voices” (*Archer*), and “Fighting for digital visibility” (*Salty*). (Supplementary File 1 provides detailed characteristics of the data).

Figure 5 provides a detailed graphic overview of the search and selection process. We searched for feminist, sex-positive, or difference-centred perspectives on sexual desire, adapting search strategies from previous relevant studies (Chmielewski et al., 2017; Farvid & Braun, 2014; Tappin et al., 2024). Since these publications are less likely to be highly ranked by search engines (due to smaller readerships and budgets) we did not start by searching for individual articles, as we would with mainstream media. Instead, we first located alternative online publications from which to select relevant articles.

[7] To contextualise, the outlets that published the 75 mainstream media texts about desire in our recent analysis (Tappin et al., 2024) averaged 37 million monthly visits.

Figure 5

Screening Process for Data Collection



Author1 used a broad keyword search designed to identify highly read or popular publications. The keyword "best" was also used in combination with other relevant qualifiers ("liberal," "feminist" "women's" and "sex positive") and descriptors ("online magazines," "online media," and "online writing"). For example, the search string "*best* women's online media" frequently yielded lists of trusted publications (e.g., *feminist.org* compiled a list of recommended "feminist magazines"). For each search query, Author1 reviewed the first ten results pages to identify an initial list, and then progressively screened the identified publications. She then screened the publications according to: (1) availability (freely accessible

with actively published content within the 12 months prior, i.e., 2021-2022), (2) content (written texts, columns, editorials), and (3) focus (substantive attention to sexual desire).

This process yielded 11 suitable online publications from which Author1 selected the five most recent articles about sexual desire, thus yielding a corpus of 55 texts for analysis. The articles were located within each publication's website either via the content category or "menu" (e.g., "Love & Relationships") or using keyword searches (e.g., "sex," "desire," "relationships," and "sexual pleasure"). See Appendix C for attribution of the extracts used in-text.

6.6.2. Analytic approach.

Taking a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis approach (Willig, 2013), we conceptualised discourses as distinctive "sets of statements that construct objects and an array of subject positions" (Parker, 1994, p. 245). From this perspective, each discourse delineates the possibilities of what is sayable and doable at a specific time and place (Burr, 2015). Individuals are positioned differently within various discourses, enabling certain ways of being and precluding others (Davies & Harré, 1990). Although some discourses may dominate and become taken for granted as common sense, understandings are never singular. Multiple discourses exist, each offering distinct perspectives and potential courses of action, thus allowing room for contestation and resistance to prevailing norms (Foucault, 1984).

Author1 first conducted keyword coding for the primary object of analysis—desire—alongside related terms (e.g., pleasure, sexuality) due to their interchangeable use in media texts. We then analysed the data through a post-structuralist lens, engaging in multiple rounds of coding and discussion to refine and conceptualise themes.

Next, we coded and analysed the data through a discursive lens. This included multiple conversations and iterations between the author group where codes were refined and conceptualised. For each section of data, we examined the realities being constructed and the discourses and subject positions made available, asking: "What is being constructed?" and "How is it being constructed?" (Riley & Wiggins, 2019). We also attended to rhetorical strategies, patterns of meaning-making, and the broader discourses that shaped these constructions, asking, "Why is this being constructed this way?" to determine the discursive functions and implications for what can be said, thought, felt, or done from particular subject positions, and which norms were supported or challenged. Finally, we identified the discursive constructions of desire, as relevant to our research questions, and selected extracts that best illustrated each, based on clarity, representativeness, and analytical richness.

6.7. Analysis and Discussion

The texts we analysed commonly dominant norms, including conservative constructions of gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity. Within this broad discursive pattern, we identified two prominent constructions of desire, namely: (1) "desire as diverse" and (2) "desire as political". Though we discuss them separately these constructions were not discrete, given the intertextual nature of discourse (Parker, 1994), and this can be seen in the data extracts which sometimes reflect both the discursive constructions we identified.

6.7.1. Desire as Diverse

Desire was constructed as diverse through naming and celebrating a range of sexualities, including those related to homosexuality, disability, and asexuality. Sexual diversity was frequently contrasted with normalcy vis-à-vis conservative cultural or religious norms that

either absent or prohibit it. Accordingly, constructing desire as diverse supports an affirmative approach to difference that resists normative restrictions on sexuality and centres and normalises differences in desire.

A diverse construction of desire sits in contrast with heteronormative discourses of sexuality found in mainstream media research. These dominant discourses offer limited constructions of female sexual desire and prescribe a narrow set of accepted practices and identities (Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2014; Gill, 2009; Potts, 1998; Tappin et al., 2024). Such resistance to hetero-gendered norms and the construction of heteronormative sexual desire as insidious and "suffocating," was a notable feature of our data, as illustrated in extract 1.

> Extract 1: When I went away to college, I had a real "Come to Gay Jesus" moment. College — or for many people, growing the hell up — serves as a time when you meet new people, branch out, and get out of the place that has suffocated you without you even knowing. In college, I met gay people. I saw my girl friends thoroughly enjoy having sex with men — dating men. And I thought to myself, "People really do enjoy this. Why don't I? I did enjoy having sex with women. Should I be exploring that more?" Or in other words, "Holy shit, am I a lesbian?" (Article 45).

Here sexual desire is constructed as shaped by exposure to spaces that make visible the taken-for-granted status of heterosexuality ("without you even realising it") prompting personal growth. Moving from a repressive ("suffocating") environment to a more sexually open one at college prompts the author's questioning of her sexuality: "am I a lesbian?" The account follows the quintessential coming-out narrative, which follows developmental stages culminating in the "realisation" of one's sexuality as who one has always been (Gibson & Macleod, 2014). Hence,

the epiphany is described as a result of "growing …up" and sexual desire is rendered part of her inherent identity, who she truly is. This essentialist construction of sexual identity features in the well-established "born this way" narrative that counters constructions of homosexuality as a problematic or sinful lifestyle choice (Morison et al., 2016; Sullivan-Blum, 2006). However, it also potentially closes possibilities for fluidity and change as sexuality is construed as binary and innate (Pond, 2020).

Yet, at the same time, describing the heteronormative environment where she grew up as "suffocating" problematises the constricting power of heteronormativity. Centring and celebrating difference, heterosexuality is framed as one of multiple ways to experience sexual desire and pleasure, thereby detaching pleasure from singularly heterosexual experiences. In this way, what counts as pleasurable sex is expanded.

Extract 1 shows how the possibilities for pleasure were expanded outside of a heteronormative framework. This was also achieved through gender-inclusive and queering language, as part of a broader queer discourse that challenges heteronormative and binary constructions of gender and sexuality, enabling alternative ways of imagining bodies, pleasure, and relationality, as in the following extract.

> Extract 2: If you're a queer woman or person with a vulva who sleeps with other vagina-having people, these are some game-changing products you can use together. Whether you like penetration, clit stimulation, vibrator or oral sex, there's a sex toy for you (Article 44).

Here the use of gender queering language ("person with a vulva," "vagina having people") resists binary constructions of gender, allowing for diversity and multiplicity. Hence, penile-

vaginal penetration is presented as just one option for pleasure available to people of a range of genders and sexualities—not just heterosexual cisgender women and men—resisting the coital imperative (McPhillips et al., 2001). The tactical use of queering language ("person with a vulva") also opens possibilities for recognising shared interests or common injustices not only among those with marginalised sexual identities, but also across the lines of sexuality and gender, potentially allowing for the development of a shared oppositional consciousness (Taylor & Rupp, 2005).

As part of the emphasis on diversity, there were also challenges to assumptions that the absence of sexual desire and pleasure represent abnormality, as demonstrated in the following discussion of asexuality.

> Extract 3: I've had to learn about asexuality mostly on my own. There was no mention of it in my sex-education classes in high school or college, so I combed through various websites and books to find stories that matched my own and helped validate that I was not strange, weird, or "broken," as so many people in my asexual community grow up believing about themselves. I'm now at a point where I'm in community with other asexuals and can even claim pride over this part of myself (Article 1).

This account problematises the narrowness of the writer's sexuality education. It highlights that without information on diverse sexualities, including asexuality, people are vulnerable to interpreting their desires (or lack thereof) as abnormal ("strange, weird, or broken"). This interpretation is based on the assumption that expressing sexual desire is indicative of full human functioning (as implied by the word "broken") and that failing to do so is unhealthy (Frith, 2015b). Instead, the writer self-positions as proudly asexual, challenging the postfeminist

imperative to pursue sexual pleasure as a sign of women's empowerment or good health. This extract shows how claiming and affirming asexuality disrupts its historical erasure from media representation and resists the norm of compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2016; Gupta & Cerankowski, 2017).

Another example of resistance to normative restrictions of sexuality is evident in critiques of sexual ableism, which allows for the regulation of sexual and reproductive practices of diverse bodies (Rohleder & Swartz, 2012). Several articles scrutinise normative expectations of sexual relations vis-à-vis people's intellectual or physical capacities for example:

> Extract 4: There are asexual people with disabilities, of course, but it's incorrect to place that label on all disabled people. Disabled people can have fulfilling sexual lives – despite what you may have been conditioned to believe (Article 21).

This text challenges misconceptions that constrain norms of sexual desire through a three-part argument: it (i) recognises and validates asexuality, (ii) opens the possibility of disabled sexuality, and (iii) problematises taken-for-granted assumptions about disability and desire. Critical disability research shows that media representations have long reinforced stereotypes portraying disabled people as sexually unattractive (Richardson, 2017) or as lacking sexual desire (Hall, 2018). These constructions stem from a sexual ableist discourse that shapes how disabled people come to understand their sexuality.

Extract 4, in contrast, constructs "fulfilling" sexuality as a legitimate possibility for disabled people, aligning with critical disability perspectives (Hall, 2018; Loeser et al., 2018; Rice et al., 2021) that reject binary understandings of "disabled" versus "desiring" bodies. This lens broadens sexual norms by recognising that "no one universal ideology can hear and see the

complexities and diversities of disabled sexualities and desiring subjectivities, and the multiple modes through which they are both represented and lived" (Loeser et al., 2018, p. 266). Positioning readers as shaped by social conditioning, the extract invites them to question what else they may have been "conditioned to believe" about sexual desire.

Finally, many texts explored love, sex, and relationships at the intersections of gender, sexuality, culture, and religion. This focus contrasts with mainstream media, which rarely engage religion or culture in discussions of sexual desire (Authors, 2024) yet aligns with prior analyses of alternative media that challenge normative constructions of desire (e.g., Jenkins & Johnson, 2017; Sciberras & Tanner, 2022, 2023). Several texts critiqued conservative cultural and religious discourses that regulate whose desire is recognised or valued. For example, the following extract speaks to "women of Middle Eastern heritage who might be struggling with their sexuality, relationship to sex, or gender identities."

> Extract 5: Know that you're not defined by your family, your culture, traditions, nation, faith, or anything other than what you want to be. Nor do you need to abandon them either when exploring what gender, sex, and sexuality works for you (Article 11).

This extract constructs multiple possibilities for sexual expression, positioning women from sexually restrictive contexts as active agents capable of negotiating cultural expectations. In contrast to the didactic tone of mainstream sex advice, which often prescribes how women "should" express desire (Authors, 2024), diverse sexual subjectivities beyond Western, heteronormative frameworks are legitimised. Desire is framed as fluid and contextually situated, resisting universal definitions of what constitutes "good" or pleasurable sex.

Through this discursive framing, sexual agency becomes a matter of negotiation rather than compliance, foregrounding the complexity of desire as socially and culturally mediated. Advice on enhancing desire thus acknowledges that what "works" varies across individuals and contexts, reflecting a more pluralistic understanding of sexuality. Such constructions expand the boundaries of the "normal," potentially normalising different ways of desiring and widening the subject positions available to readers (Barker et al., 2018; Diamond, 2005; Farhall, 2018; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Markle, 2008; Tappin et al., 2024). At the same time, however, transformation is located within the individual, reproducing a neoliberal logic of self-responsibilisation rather than collective or structural change.

These examples illustrate the complex and often contradictory nature of discursive resistance (Foucault, 1980), where the very discourses that appear to resist dominant norms may simultaneously reproduce them. Likewise, while possibilities for sexual practice and diversity were opened up, at times normative understandings of sexuality and desire were simultaneously reproduced. For example, in an article discussing kink, the disclaimer "If that's not how you're wired, that's cool!" (Article 7) constructs openness to sexual experimentation as an innate trait. The use of essentialist rhetoric to suggest that people are either "wired" for adventurous sex or not legitimises sexual difference by grounding it in biological difference and thereby beyond social or political reproach (Pond, 2020; Sullivan-Blum, 2006; Tolman & Diamond, 2001). Similarly, invoking sexual fluidity to signal inclusivity, in the same article, paradoxically constructs fluidity as part of a fixed identity rather than a dynamic, socially shaped process. Hence, despite the celebratory tone and avoidance of overt prescriptiveness (Authors, 2024), the article ultimately reinforces fixed sexual subjectivities and reflects a

broader tendency to privilege biological over contextual accounts of sexuality (Tolman & Diamond, 2001).

Other texts, however, positioned readers as active agents in the pursuit of pleasure, encouraging self-exploration and self-work as routes to sexual fulfilment. Readers were incited to seek what is pleasurable for them—to become one's "own kinky and compassionate lover" (Article 4). This sometimes involved engaging in technologies of sexiness (Evans & Riley, 2014; Radner, 1999), promoting consumerist solutions (e.g., buying sex toys as in Extract 4), and self-work to produce a desirable sexual subjectivity. However, these texts also reclaimed the celebration of women's pleasure that has been appropriated by permissive postfeminist discourse. While postfeminist media often constructs a singular heteronormative subject position for women—prescribing mastery of adventurous sex for men's gratification (Authors, 2024)—these alternative texts commonly resisted such norms by validating women's active desire and pursuit of pleasure for their own sake (Authors, 2024; Evans & Riley, 2014; Harvey & Gill, 2011).

6.7.2. Desire as Political

Texts constructing desire as political echoed the preceding critiques of normalcy, but connected these to racism, sexism, patriarchy, homophobia, and/or other inequitable ideologies. Within this discursive logic, the enjoyment of passion and pleasure represented resistance of dominant discursive constructions. The extract below, for example, locates pleasure within the experience of recognising, and starting to heal from, oppressive systems:

> Extract 6: Never underestimate the power of a queer person who has finally figured out how to present themselves once they shed the shackles of the patriarchy– I think the

> kids are calling it “leveling up.” I was comfortable and happy pursuing, dating, and sleeping with women (Article 40).

Here, norms of desire were problematised and located beyond the personal sphere, connected to wider socio-political ideological systems such as “patriarchy.” The subtext was that experiences, such as “pursuing, dating, and sleeping with women,” were contingent on political liberation from “the shackles of patriarchy,” thus orienting to the feminist aphorism, the personal as political. First-person language invited the reader to take control of their sexual subjectivity as a political act. Sexual liberation was constructed as an awakening—recognising and resisting the oppressive social forces impinging on one’s sexual freedom. This aligns with feminist arguments that conceptualise women’s and girl’s bodies simultaneously as sites of injustice and opportunities for resistance (Piran, 2017). These ideas are not new, resonating with Lorde’s (1978) critique of the patriarchal suppression of women’s erotic power by framing their desire and erotic expressions as perverse. Much like Lorde’s (1978) calls for women to reclaim their erotic power, the texts in our dataset render pleasure and desire as revolutionary forces.

In texts articulating desire as political, sexual liberation takes many forms, such as engaging with erotic representations of men as a means of reclaiming sexual agency (e.g., Article 33), embracing one’s sexual identity (e.g., Article 40), or relinquishing cultural shame and “taboo” around sex (e.g., Article 14). Community and connection were constructed as both the means and the outcome of political enlightenment and liberation. The processes of liberation were attributed to community engagement, and being liberated was rendered both

personally beneficial and connected to a shared purpose more important than the individual. For example:

> Extract 7: No one in my family speaks about sex openly but when they do, it's with revulsion and hushed tones. I've even been shouted at for using the word "vagina" in a conversation about sexual health. This is the attitude to sex that I grew up with and trying to unlearn it has – quite literally – been painful. I'm really proud of our generation's commitment to unlearning all the toxic and damaging attitudes we've inherited. It's a comfort to know that for many, there are generational traumas that will stop with us." (Article 11).

The phrase "our generation's commitment" points to a larger collective struggle to generate long-term social change concerning sex. The generational emphasis invokes a shared responsibility for younger people to recognise and discard "toxic and damaging attitudes [they have] inherited" about sexuality. Similarly, in another article, joint commitment and collective action are related to racial and cultural identity: "as women of colour, we endeavour to rid ourselves of the shame that our various cultures often replicate when it comes to sexuality" (Article 14). Such constructions of desire and pleasure that explicitly highlight oppressive systems and norms are inherently political, aligning with Black feminist thought, which seeks to dismantle systems of oppression (Thomas et al., 2023).

Politicised constructions of collective responsibility for social change also contrast with mainstream media constructions of desire, in which sexual issues are most often attributed to internal psychological deficiencies (Authors, 2024; Riley, Evans & Robson, 2019). Instead, sexual

issues were located outside the person, directing the focus to the social world. Nevertheless, aspects of neoliberal rationality were still discernible when individuals were given personal responsibility for recognising political barriers and self-transformation. For instance, in extract 6, power is attributed to having "figured out" one's sexual or gender identity and "leveling up" implies coming to a higher state of understanding and knowledge. Sexual liberation was consequently constructed within a hierarchy, with readers enjoined to move up a level as it were, to adopt a liberated subjectivity in which they could experience authentic pleasure and desire.

Such descriptions point to the Foucauldian technology of self-knowledge in which self-mastery comes from submitting to the decree to know yourself (Foucault, 1988) and one comes to experience oneself as a therapeutic or psychologised subject (Parker, 2015). Drawing on psychological discourses of self-help and self-actualisation, a comparison was created, whereby it is only in post-enlightenment liberation that people can be "comfortable and happy" in their dating and sex life. The tradition of liberation through feminist conscientisation has a longstanding history; however, when situated within a neoliberal framework, it places a substantial psychological burden on individuals (Budgeon, 2015). The self-help through individual enlightenment implied in the text functions paradoxically by promoting liberation but also encouraging self-discipline and control (Parker, 2015). Similarly, feminists critique expectations for women to be more resilient in response to social inequalities (Riley, Evans, Anderson & Robson, 2019).

6.8. Conclusion

Our analysis of online feminist texts shows how desire was constructed as diverse, and political. Constructing desire as diverse celebrates diverse sexualities, challenges hetero-and mono-normativity, inviting exploration of sexual desires. and potentially allowing multiple, dynamic articulations of active feminine desire that can change over time. Desire was also constructed as political and — impacted by oppressive societal institutions like patriarchy and racism but also offering the potential for collective action, awareness, and new forms of resistance.

Our analysis highlights a broader range of constructions of women's desire and pleasure than those typically found in mainstream texts, including representations that move beyond heteronormativity. We therefore note a shift from early feminist media's linkage of sexual desire with gendered oppression (Todd, 1999). The texts we analysed show more explicit recognition of structural oppression and actively advocating for resistance and reimagining desire outside those constraints. They also construct women's desire as agentic and self-determined, in contrast with mainstream media portrayals of women's sexual desire and agency as contingent on men's pleasure, despite the postfeminist celebration of women's sexual desire (Barker et al., 2018; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2014; Frith, 2015a; Gill, 2009).

Another difference from the mainstream media is the implied value of experience over expert knowledge. Mainstream media draw on professional expertise in ways that legitimise dominant discourses of women's sexual desire. For example, psychologists emphasising the role of biology in expressions of desire or sexologists supporting "appropriate" gendered practices (Authors, 2024). In contrast, in our data, expertise was linked to personal experience, challenging expert and institutional power in circulating norms of desire (Foucault, 1980). The "real people" depicted within and authoring the texts also held identities and experiences

significantly more diverse and representative than the typically affluent, white, thin, able-bodied women are usually represented in mainstream media. Shifting away from "top-down" institutional knowledge to valuing experiential expertise from diverse voices held significant power in resisting normative discourses and producing alternative knowledge about sexual desire. As our analysis demonstrated, intersections of desire with disability, religion, and ethnicity were explored in-depth through personal experience.

However, our analysis also shows that how an individualistic focus constrains resistance and deterministic, neoliberal frameworks that limit possibilities for action to individual solutions, ultimately limiting deeper shifts in dominant cultural narratives and broader social change. The shift from "top-down" expertise to valuing personal experience empowers individuals but limits collective action. Similarly, the alternative constructions of desire we highlighted simultaneously resist and reproduce the disciplinary power of neoliberalism and postfeminism.

Even while offering more progressive discourses and making available a wider range of subject positions, these constructions are also constrained by essentialist and individualised framings. The construction of desire as diverse draws on an individualist discourse as neoliberal imperatives of self-improvement and self-work in relation to sexuality are reiterated—for example, in the endorsement working on the self to enhance knowledge and mastery of sexual desire and pleasure. Likewise, the construction of desire as political offers only sexual personal liberation as a route for understanding positive sexualities. Individual moments of resistance—such as recognising and challenging societal barriers to pleasure and embracing personal desires as political action—may offer a sense of freedom but are also restricted by the focus on

personal empowerment and broader structures of inequity. These findings highlight how, from a post-structural feminist perspective, resistance is a complex and incremental process (Morison & Macleod, 2013).

There is substantial potential for alternative media to resist the mainstream media's restrictive framings of sexual desire, but the continuing emphasis on individual transformation requires attention. We therefore call for feminist media and feminist media scholars to actively attend to and explore the tensions between individual-level self-empowerment and social-level solutions, including identifying material ways of addressing these. We also point towards the examination of positions of expertise and authority within these types of texts, particularly regarding how experiential authority shapes individual empowerment and collective action.

7. Chapter 7, Study Three: *Flipping the Critical Gaze: Discourses of Sexual Desire Within Psychological Literature.*

7.1. Foreword

This chapter presents the third study of my research, which explored how psychological literature texts worked to discursively construct women's sexual desire. This article focusses on pays close attention to the ways that normative discourses of desire were resisted or otherwise transformed within the texts.

This study is currently in preparation to submit to *Culture, Health, and Sexuality.*

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION
DOCTORATE WITH PUBLICATIONS/MANUSCRIPTS

We, the student and the student's main supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the student's contribution as indicated below in the Statement of Originality.

Student name:	Jessica Tappin
Name and title of main supervisor:	Professor Sarah Riley

In which chapter is the manuscript/published work?	Chapter Seven

Describe the contribution that the student and members of the supervisory team have made to the manuscript/published work:[1]

The candidate (i) developed the research questions and study methods in collaboration with supervisors, (ii) collected all data, (iii) analysed the data with advice and input from supervisors, (iv) wrote the manuscript with advice and feedback from supervisors.

Please select one of the following three options:

○	**The manuscript/published work is published or in press** Please provide the full reference of the research output:
○	**The manuscript is currently under review for publication** Please provide the name of the journal:
◉	**It is intended that the manuscript will be published, but it has not yet been submitted to a journal**

Student's signature:	Tappin	Main supervisor's signature:	S Riley.

This form should be placed at the beginning of each relevant thesis chapter.

[1] Refer to the Massey University Publishing and Authorship guidelines (OneMassey for staff, Stream for students) and/ or Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) guidelines for guidance.

7.2. Abstract

This article explores the discursive construction of women's sexual desire and sexual subjectivity, within academic, psychological literature texts. Psychological literature is part of a psy-industry that has discursive power to shape understanding, not only of those performing therapeutic practice, but in mainstream media which often draws on published literature as expert voice. Previous research demonstrates that these voices of expertise and authority support ideas around healthy or ideal sexual desire, subjectivity, and practice offered up within mainstream media articles. Media have significant power to circulate ideas, as well as give legitimacy to them, by presenting scientific knowledge as valued knowledge. However, from a Foucauldian perspective, scientific knowledge is likely to be shaped by the social norms within which researchers operate. This means that psychological literature should be an object of critical study. However, little research has analysed what discourses of sexual desire are employed within psychological literature and how they relate to normalisation and maintaining or challenging status quo power relations. In this Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis of 12 psychological literature texts, we identify three common discursive constructions, all underpinned by heteronormativity, and binary notions of gender which position women in relation to a valued, male norm. These were (a) sex drive differences, (b) contextual differences, and (c) motivational differences in relation to sexual desire. We assert that these constructions reinforce heteronormative norms and create a narrow range of subjectivities for women to adopt, where their pleasure is always positioned in relation to men.

7.3. Introduction

The relationship between lay and professional knowledge is dynamic and complex. Academic articles are often framed as objective, universal conveyors of truth—but this assumption overlooks the context in which they are produced. Rather, like all bodies of knowledge, academic texts exist within specific social, cultural, economic and political contexts (Huntington & Gilmour, 2000; Roberts, 2005). Additionally, academics, scholars, researchers, and authors, bring with them particular values and interests, whilst cultural norms, social movements, and public discourse shape the questions researchers ask and the interpretations they give to data (Read & Leathwood, 2021).

Research, therefore, has the power to shape normative understandings of particular phenomena. However, this is not a unidirectional relationship, since cultural norms also shape professional knowledge and research direction (Gannon & Davies, 2012; Morison & Herbert, 2020). In relation to psychological research this article, we focus on psychological research as integral in shaping discourses of women's sexual desire. The psy-professions demarcate sexual ab/normality in contemporary Western societies, as Foucault (1991) highlighted, scrutinising practices and pronouncing upon what is normal, desirable, and therefore permissible. The prevailing and dominant discourses about sexuality, such as those deployed in psychology articles, therefore have implications for what individuals may say, think, and do in relation to sex in each time and place.

In this article, we take a poststructuralist approach, aiming to explore discourse and power within the psy-disciplines. We conceptualise academic texts as discursive practices embedded in broader socio-historical contexts that both shape and are shaped by power and cultural norms. While a corpus of research has explored the media's role in constructing sexual

subjectivity (e.g., Barker et al., 2018; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2007, 2009; Joshi et al., 2011: Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Smith, 2012; Tappin et al., 2023), few have focused on how professional psychological texts contribute to these norms. We turn the analytical gaze back onto psychology to reflect on its powerful role in producing and potentially challenging norms related to sexuality. First, we present a review of the relevant literature on psychology's role in constructing norms around sexuality. We then outline our poststructuralist theoretical and methodological approach, followed by the results of our discourse analysis, and conclude by considering the implications for women's sexual subjectivity.

7.3.1. Academic research, expert discourse, and the power-knowledge nexus

Academic research is an important part of what Foucault termed the knowledge-power nexus (Foucault, 1980), in which texts have productive power to produce discourses that construct objects (in the case of our research, sexuality), which in turn, shape the norms about sexuality, sexual subjectivity, and sexual practice. According to Foucault, certain discourses come to be seen as more valid or true, thus carrying more authority in a particular time and place, creating widely accepted and normalised taken-for-granted understandings in everyday sense making (Foucault, 1978, 1980).

Psy-institutions, such as those related to medicine, psychiatry and psychology, have power to shape what discourses are more or less likely to be taken for granted through their claims to expertise and the expert subject positions of those connected to these institutions (Foucault, 1978). Therefore, psychological research is important to consider because of its productive power.

The powerful role played by the knowledges and techniques constituting psychological expertise has come to be termed as the "psy-complex" (Rose, 1985). The psy-complex comprises "the material and ideological meshwork of psychological ideas and institutions that structure academic departments, professional interventions, and popular-cultural representations of mind and behaviour" (Parker 2015, p. 6). In essence, the psy-complex refers to the web of psychological ideas and practices that together influence how people think about themselves, and at a social level, what behaviours are normalised. The psy-complex links psychological theory and academic research, with the work of psychologists in professional practice, and popular psychology in media and self-help books (Parker, 2020). Together, these elements combine to "provide[s] an image of normal healthy well-adjusted individuals against which those who fail to fit can be assessed" (Parker, 2020, p.29). For instance, Barker (2007) found that across 22 popular undergraduate psychology textbooks, sexuality was primarily framed through a biological lens; prioritising reproduction, framing gender as dichotomous, and norming heterosexuality. Additionally, over half excluded mention of bisexuality as a relevant sexual orientation, illustrating how the psy-complex both reflects and reproduces sexual hierarchies. From this perspective, the professional constructions in scholarly texts can be "considered as a discursive practice" (Breheny & Stephens, 2010, p. 308), significant in shaping norms and the subsequent ways people can think about and view themselves.

As such, research plays a key role in the production of regimes of truth concerning sexuality and associated cultural norms that govern sexual desires and practices (Macleod, 2011). Foucault (1978, p. 53) argued that, in contrast to its purported neutral and objective status, scientific knowledge about sex was "a science subordinated in the main to the

imperatives of a morality whose divisions it reiterated under the guise of the medical norm". As feminist psychologists have shown, these regimes of truth are not value-free; psychodiagnostic systems such as the DSM embed gendered and moral assumptions that reproduce dominant cultural norms (Lafrance & McKenzie Mohr, 2013; Marecek & Gavey, 2013; Ussher, 2013).

However, the influence of scientific discourse on social understanding is not unidirectional. Existing social and historical norms shape the subjectivity of researchers themselves, including psychologists and other academics. Discourses—systems of knowledge, language, and power—construct normative frameworks through which people, including scientists, think and understand the world (Foucault, 1978, 1980, Riley et al., 2019). Since discourse is inextricably linked to social context (Willig, 2014), it is impossible for researchers to objectively detach themselves from this. Thus, research questions, method of analysis, interpretation of data, and the prioritisation of topic and type of research, are also shaped by the discursive social context and norms within which they are located. Importantly, researchers themselves are situated within social and institutional systems that are shaped by intersecting forms of inequity. Shields (2016, p.399) for instance argues that "the discipline [of psychological science] itself is founded on and flourishes because of values that structurally support the persistence of long-lived inequitable systems of professional training, advancement, and reward". This highlights that the discipline's very foundations, and those conducting research within it, are embedded in gendered power relations that shape what kinds of knowledge are legitimised and whose experiences are centered.

Conversely, as new research is published and circulated within the lay public via mainstream media, it may challenge or reinforce existing social norms; resulting in an

interaction between psychological research and social norms that is co-constructed and mutually reinforcing. Professional judgements, in turn, drive public descriptions and subsequent evaluations of sexual relations, which are taken up and reinforced in various social spaces, among them the media (Brickell, 2006). Academic research can be considered therefore, to play a significant role in producing knowledge about, and thereby regulating, sexuality

Given the substantial power that psychological research has in influencing social norms, attention also needs to be given to the effects of norms on subjectivity. Breheny and Stephens (2010, p. 308) argued, in their analysis of scientific literature on teenage motherhood, that "particular ways of constructing the world provide advantages for some and disadvantages for others and investigating these constructions demonstrates how they function to produce … a certain type of subject". Expert knowledge thus not only plays an important role in forming subjects, but also in disciplining and naturalising these subjects through the creation and maintenance of categories and criteria for determining what is "normal" or "healthy" (Breheny & Stephens, 2010). In this vein, critical sexuality scholarship has demonstrated how pervasive distinctions between "good" and "bad" sex generate a "hierarchical system of sexual value" (Rubin, 1984, p. 280) as experts exercise the power of delineation and judgment over sexual relations. Turning our attention to sexuality and sexual desire, feminist scholars have argued that sexual subjectivity—how individuals experience and understand their sexuality—has critical implications for sexual agency, influencing how people navigate sexual relationships, desires and boundaries (Gavey, 2005; Tolman, 2002).

7.3.2. Prevalent Discursive Representations of Desire

There is a dearth of research on the construction of women's sexual desire specifically within academic texts. However, a substantial body of work addresses the discursive framing of desire within scientific and diagnostic frameworks, media, and more generally, people's talk. Previous research suggests that (hetero)sexual and gendered normality in relation to sexual desire are discursively represented in ways that remain restrictive despite significant social change (e.g., Gill, 2017, 2017; Riley et al., 2019; Tappin et al., 2023).

One such discursive framing of desire stems from binary, biological fundamentalism which constructs women and men as essential, yet complementary opposites. Derrida (1981) asserts that Western thought relies on rigid pairs (e.g., masculine/feminine, mind/body) that are reinforced through language. These pairs are not neutral but hierarchical, with one term valued over the other. Butler (1990) extends this concept, arguing that the dominant Western construction of gender as binary is underpinned by an essentialist gender discourse in which femininity and masculinity are each ascribed an opposing set of familiar gendered connotations rooted in biology.

These essentialist ideas are evident within scientific and psychological traditions, where femininity and sexuality have been defined through biologically determinist frameworks. Historically, sexology and scientific research established a gendered foundation for understanding sexual desire, positioning male patterns of desire as the norm and women's as deficient (Boyle, 1994; Spurgas, 2013, 2020). Such biologically driven models underpin the medicalisation of women's desire, where difference is interpreted as dysfunction (Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 1994, 2006; Spurgas, 2013). Biomedical and biologically determinist approaches to research also reduce desire to physiology and hormones, treating low desire as an inherently

female problem, while overlooking the social construction of sex (Irvine, 2005). This pathologisation of women's sexual desire, produces particular sexual subjectivities through which women can understand themselves (e.g., in need of pharmaceutical intervention [Tiefer, 2006]). In Spurgas's (2020) research, participants articulated that the pathologisation of sexual desire socialised them to see low desire as expected and they felt excluded from experiences of desire, seeing sex as "a realm for men" (p. 130). Angel (2013) argues this disordered framing with diagnostic settings also risks normalising a resignation to women's comparatively lower sexual desire. Ultimately, further research conducted from a biomedical perspective, seeking to understand women's low-desire therefore, "sets up a perpetual biological basis to maintain the medicalization" (Tiefer, 1994; p. 371), which in turn further entrenches essentialist and gendered assumptions about female sexuality.

Another way in which the articulation of these essential differences operates is by constructing female sexuality as complementing male sexuality (Farvid & Braun, 2006). For instance, within the binary, men are constructed as sexually active, desirous, and dominant. This construction creates a natural role for women to fill, as sexually passive, submissive, and lacking an intrinsic drive for sexual desire. Moreover, because femininity and masculinity are constructed as inherently complementary opposites, a woman is understood to naturally desire a man, and vice versa (Butler, 1990). In this way, Butler (1990) argues, gender complementarity is fundamentally heteronormative in that it supports "compulsory heterosexuality" (as Rich (1980) originally termed it).

Anglo-American second-wave feminism challenged these gendered norms of sexuality (Hollway, 1989), and the rise of postfeminism reframed female sexual desire in terms of agency

rather than passive participation (Gill, 2007). However, critics argue that postfeminist discourses construct women as empowered only if they are sexually adventurous and active in ways that align with conventional heterosexual attractiveness, thus centering male sexuality, reinforcing heteronormativity, and privileging the male gaze (Evans & Riley, 2014; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2014; Gill, 2007, 2017; Lamb & Peterson, 2012). Overall, therefore, despite significant social change in relation to discourses that normalise women's agentic sexuality, a persistent discourse of heterosexual complementarity circulates norms that are heteronormative, binary, and in which men and women are understood as distinctly different.

Although psychological research can align with dominant values and thus reproduce norms, psychology is also a site where there is opportunity to resist conservative and traditional norms, with a view to creating alternative frameworks. For instance, Barker and Iantaffi (2019) argue that de-constructing binary thinking (they attend to this broadly, however in the context of this research, relating to sexualities and gender) allows for consideration of sexuality as a "landscape rather than a continuum" (p. 37). Thus, a new realm of possibility is opened for psychologists or other professionals, and the people they work with. Therefore, it is important to critically examine how psychological research shapes norms around sexuality, considering not only the norms it reinforces but also the extent to which it expands discursive possibilities or perpetuates restrictive frameworks.

As prefaced, there is limited discursive examinations of expert psychological texts, and a distinct gap regarding sexual desire. Thus, our focus on this discursive area speaks to the importance of reflecting on psychology's role in maintaining or challenging problematic power relations vis-à-vis sexuality, in line with a broader critical psychology agenda (Bharj & Hubbard,

2023; Capdevila & Zurbriggen, 2023). Therefore, in this research, we turn the gaze back onto expert knowledges, seeking to shine a light on our own powerful discipline of psychology. As such, our research objective is to examine how women's sexual desire is constructed in psychological academic literature, with a focus on the construction of gendered norms related to sexuality. We attend to this objective in the following research questions.

1. How do academic psychological literature sources construct sexual desire?
2. What common discourses are drawn on when constructing women's sexual desire?
3. What are the discursive effects of these constructions in terms of shaping the potential for women's sexual subjectivity?

7.4. Methodology

7.4.1. Data Collection

Our data corpus comprises 12 articles of original research, published in journals in the sexual health and relationship-therapy disciplinary area between 2018 and 2021. This disciplinary area was chosen for its likelihood to include articles focusing on negotiations of desire and pleasure, both regarding individuals and within relationships, and including the orientation of the psy-complex. We wished to understand how desire is conceptualised in everyday life, rather than only when it specifically presents as a clinical problem, and so we excluded articles taking a clinical perspective or pathologising sexuality (i.e., medical or clinical psychology journals).

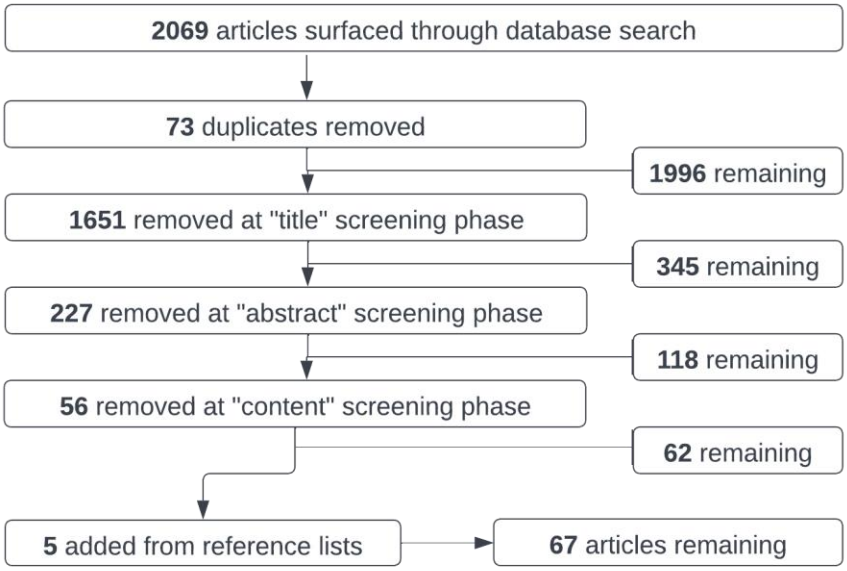
We turned to Möller et al. (2023), and Arksey and O'Malley to shape our method of data collection. Arksey and O'Malley (2005) developed a robust method for a scoping review, suitable for mapping literature terrain. Möller et al. (2023) expanded this method in a critical way to "go beyond detailed mapping and description of studies in the later stages of the review

by critically examining the underlying discourses, theoretical assumptions, and subjectifying effects" (p.804). It is this hybrid approach that we took, seeking to source relevant articles in a systematic way, but instead of providing an in-depth overview of findings, turning to discursive analytic work to examine the prevalent discourses of sexual desire circulated in the texts.

Author1 sourced relevant articles using search keywords in two online journal databases, viz: an institutional database ([University] Discover) that searches across a range of databases and Scopus. After initial keyword scoping to identify search terms that delivered relevant articles aligned with our aims, the following search query was used: ("sexual desire") AND ("woman" OR "female") AND ("relationships" OR "intimate relationships") AND "psychology". Peer-reviewed, English-language articles published from 2018–2021 were included, resulting in 2888 articles that were then screened according to the process shown in Figure 5 below. Articles that had a focus on women's sexual desire or broadly sexual health, and were original empirical research were included. Articles that had a considerable focus on dysfunction or disorder, medical journals that focused on physiological functioning, and validation of clinical scales were excluded, leaving a total of 67 articles.

Figure 6

Screening Process for Data Collection



To refine this data corpus, the articles were grouped by year and ordered according to citation count. We took citation count to indicate a larger number of readers and, therefore, greater reach and impact, and subsequently, are more powerful in shaping normative discourse around sexual desire. We then selected the three most highly cited articles for the years 2018 to 2021, resulting in a total of 12 articles for analysis. Aligning with our aim of in-depth examining the underlying discourses that the articles draw on, moving beyond a broad descriptive overview of the findings, 12 articles served as a sufficient dataset. Table 13 shows details of the dataset. Appendix D gives full details of the theoretical frameworks and analytical methods of the articles, including how desire was conceptualised. Within the dataset, 10 articles were quantitative and took a positivist approach to the topic. One of the articles was a

mixed methods study, and one was a qualitative study that approached the research from an interpretivist approach and thematically analysed the data.

Table 13

Summary Table of Dataset

Authors & Year	Citations[a]	Geographic Location[b]	Journal Name	Data
Dewitte & Mayer (2018)	67	The Netherlands	*Archives of Sexual Behaviour*	Quantitative
van Lankveld et al. (2018)	61	The Netherlands	*Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*	Quantitative
Pascoal et al. (2018)	52	Portugal	*Journal of Sex Research*	Quantitative
Impett et al. (2019)	39	Canada	*Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*	Quantitative
Péloquin et al. (2019)	29	Canada	*Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*	Quantitative
Rubin et al. (2019)	23	USA, Canada, Germany, Denmark	*Personality and Individual Differences*	Quantitative
Dobson et al. (2020)	15	Canada	*Social Psychological and Personality Science*	Quantitative
Vowels & Mark (2020)	13	USA	*Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*	Quantitative
Blumenstock et al. (2020)	12	Canada	*Archives of Sexual Behaviour*	Quantitative
Kim et al. (2021)	20	USA, Canada	*Social Psychological and Personality Science*	Quantitative

Frost & Donovan (2021)	15	Australia	*Sexual and Relationship Therapy*	Mixed-Methods
Moor et al. (2021)	9	Israel	*Journal of Sex Research*	Qualitative

[a] At the time of data collection (March 2023)

[b] Based on the locations of participants. If not given, based on the first author's location.

7.4.2. Data Analysis

To explore how academic psychological literature sources construct sexual desire, we used a poststructuralist lens to attend to the productive power of discourse, exploring how prevailing discourses (defined further below) uphold a particular power structure that favours certain groups (Burr, 2015; Foucault, 1978). We analysed the data via Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis (Riley, Evans & Robson, 2019), conceptualising discourses as organised systems of coherent statements and ideas that "form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 2002, p.54)). Put simply, discourses are shared sets of culturally specific meanings, metaphors, representations, stories and so on, which jointly "produce a particular version of … an event, person or class of persons" (Burr, 2015, pp. 74-57). Whether spoken, written, or otherwise represented, discourses shape people's understanding of the world and, importantly, provide "socially understood ways, or rules almost, for talking about something and acting in relation to it" (Gavey, 2005, pp. 84-85). With that in mind, we focussed on identifying the various ways that sexual desire was commonly constructed, and the discourses drawn on to do so.

To conduct the analysis, we followed an iterative analysis process, firstly seeking to identify the broader discourses at work in the texts by attending to recurrent patterns, such as recurring imagery, concepts, words/phrases, metaphors and so forth (Burr, 2015). We then

worked to identify key discursive constructions or ways of thinking about women's sexual desire, supported by these common discourses. Through which we identified an overriding framework of heterosexual gender complementarity, which provided the conceptual framework for three different discussive constructions of sexual desire. Our analysis demonstrates how these common discursive constructions were normalised, allowing us to show how these texts function to maintain the heteronormative status quo in the context of sexuality.

Although we did not specify the type of relationship (i.e., heterosexual, lesbian etc.) in our keyword search, the search delivered articles with heterosexual, monogamous relationships as their default focus. Some mentioned different relationship types in passing, but this was not the focus. The representation of heterosexual monogamy as the default norm constructs heterosexuality as the standard relationship model, underpinned by heterosexual gender complementarity (Butler, 1990).

7.5. Analysis and Discussion

In our analysis, we show how heterosexual gender complementarity is supported by biological and/or social discourses in three common discursive constructions of sexual desire where women's desire and men's desire is compared in various ways; (a) sex-drive differences, (b) contextual differences and (c) motivational differences. Our analysis includes small quotes and extracts from our data corpus that are attributed with formal in-text citation. To distinguish between references that form part of our data, and external references that support our analysis, we have placed a "D" in front of the former (e.g., [D: Dewitte & Mayer, 2018]).

7.5.1. Sex-Drive Differences

In the dataset, women were commonly portrayed as having a nominal sex drive, comparatively lower than men's. For example, the extract below explicitly describes women's sexual desire as "lower" in contrast to men's.

> **Extract 1:** Given that women are generally characterised by lower sexual desire and thereby determine the frequency and pacing of sexual activity [two citations] it makes sense that female desire is most influential in gaining satisfaction from sexual responding. (D: Dewitte & Mayer, 2018)

Women's low sexual desire was constructed as an accepted truth (a "given"), and then used to support further reasoning about women's sexual responses. This comparison was common in our dataset and established men's sex drive as the normative referent against which women's sex drive can be judged. In this way masculine sexuality (constructed in terms of high levels of desire) is implicitly positioned as a normative ideal that women must strive towards. This was particularly apparent in the construction of women's lack of desire as a problem for themselves and their partners as, opposed, say, to describing men's high levels of sexual desire as problematic and needing to be brought in line with women's.

The problematisation of women's desire is evident in assertions such as: "low sexual desire was the most common problem, experienced by more than half of the women and more than a quarter of the men" (D: Péloquin et al., 2019); and "[w]omen report feeling frustrated with their low sexual desire, and males report feeling frustrated due to the lack of sexual release or hopelessness of the situation." (D: Frost & Donovan, 2021). In both quotes, women are positioned as most likely to be responsible for this problem (i.e., as per the second quote

they are frustrated with themselves), and men most likely to suffer because of the problem (i.e., they are frustrated with their female partners).

The discursive construction of women's desire as problematically lower than men's, was consistently normalised within the journal articles through reference to supporting research and statistics that rendered these differences factual and irrefutable. For example, in Extract 1 above, primary findings and previous research were referenced in support of their claim, thereby discouraging dissent and solidifying the construction of gendered desire discrepancy as an unquestionable truth. Similarly, in the following quote, the authors draw on the idea of common knowledge, to preface their findings: "However, as women are traditionally the sexual gatekeepers in heterosexual relationships, this proposition is inconsistent with previous findings […]" (D: Dobson et al., 2020). This quote therefore supports a gendered discrepancy in who gets to initiate sex, and problematises women's desire, indicating that women's lower sexual desire comes into conflict with men's sexual urges. As part of this authorising practice, citing of statistics, as in (D: Péloquin et al., 2019) above, operates rhetorically by quantifying and giving authority to the ideas. Whilst these practices are to be expected, given that we are examining psychological literature and they are in line with scholarly convention, together they function to frame women's low desire as a universally consistent problem.

The normalisation of a gendered desire discrepancy occurred through both biological and sociocultural discourses, in different ways but to the same effect. In terms of the biological discourse, men's sexual appetite was, for example, constructed as "more biologically driven" (D: van Lankveld et al., 2018) than women's, thereby naturalising gender differences. A similar normalising effect was achieved when a discourse of socialisation was drawn on to explain the

discrepancy between women's and men's sexual desire. For example, the psychological notion of gender socialisation, illustrated in extract 2 below, draws on the assumption that children learn appropriate gendered behaviour from gender role models as part of the normal developmental trajectory (Morison & Macleod, 2015).

> **Extract 2:** Endorsement of gendered cultural scripts may inhibit sexual desire because gender roles inform and reinforce each other— just as men learn to desire sex, women learn to prioritize others' needs above their own (D: Rubin et al., 2019).

Here, drawing on a social discourse to explain a gendered desire discrepancy, women's and men's sex drives are constructed as shaped by social learning of normalised "gender roles", in which women prioritise relationship maintenance over sexual gratification and men the reverse. Women are considered to have lower sex drive than men because of these gender norms. Rather than the result of innate biological differences, the explanation is socially located, as gender norms are construed as learned and encouraging women to value men's sexual needs over their own.

While this explanation considers the social, it is inherently 'psychologistic' in that it assumes innate psychological processes implicated in the reproduction of gender that cannot account for the origin of dominant gender norms or variance from these (Stanley & Wise, 2000). It therefore does not necessarily challenge the fundamental understanding of gender as emanating from a stable core (Butler 1990) and, thus, inherent. This notion can therefore still support an essentialist, dualistic construction of gender (Morison & Macleod 2015).

The implicit description of women's desire as a "need" (D: Rubin et al., 2019) supports the contemporary construction of women as active sexual subjects, in contrast to historic

constructions of women as exclusively sexual objects, lacking sexual agency and desire (Hollway, 1984; Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002). This reflects recent paradigm shifts characterised by a fundamental re-evaluation of societal gender norms and perceptions, acknowledging and legitimising women's inherent sexual agency and desire. Such changes have been outlined in a significant corpus of research on postfeminist sexual subjectivities (e.g., Authors, 2023; Gill, 2007; 2009; 2017; Harvey & Gill, 2011). Nevertheless, the sexual agency granted to women in the psychological literature, we analyse, is conditioned by heterosexual gender complementarity as women's sexual arousal is construed as reliant on men and, as we elaborate further in the coming discussion, on the context of a secure heterosexual relationship.

7.5.2. Contextual Differences

Women's sexual desire is constructed as susceptible to various contexts and influences, resulting in a more fluctuating and inconsistent nature. This is contrasted with men's desire, which is discursively constructed as consistent and stable. The following extracts (extracts 3, 4, and 5) illustrate this comparison:

> **Extract 3:** In general, we found that contextual variables (i.e., relationship duration, satisfaction and children) moderated the link between sex and relationship variables in women, but not in men. This fits with the idea that female sexuality is more responsive to person-by-situation interactions and thus more variable than men's sexual experiences […] (D: Dewitte & Mayer, 2018)

> **Extract 4:** Women's desire typically declines more steeply than men's [reference] and is more strongly impacted by life transitions such as having children (D: Kim et al., 2021).

Extract 5: The latter [female sexuality] is generally described as more context-dependent than male sexuality which is grounded more in physical aspects and guided by internal sensory cues. […] (D: Dewitte & Mayer, 2018)

In these quotes, heterosexual gender complementarity is again present, as evident in the oppositional portrayal of feminine and masculine sexual desire: the former is depicted as variable and "context-dependent" (extract 4) and the latter, contrastingly, implied to be stable since it is not similarly influenced by "contextual variables" (extract 3). Female desire is impacted by external "variables" (Extract 3), rather than being inherent like masculine sexual desire. Extract 4 illustrates how the construction of men's stable desire was predominantly situated in biological reasoning, evident in the reference to "internal sensory cues". This construction draws on biological and scientific discourses that together naturalise and normalise stable sexual desire as a fundamental aspect of men's psychological and physiological nature.

Such naturalisation reinforces the idea that desire should be stable throughout the lifespan and supports a male sexual drive discourse in which the normatively acceptable version of masculinity involves being constantly ready for sex. Once again, an implicit value judgement is present, with variability seen as problematic and stability as desirable, thereby reinforcing masculine sexuality as the normative standard against which feminine sexuality is measured and found wanting (Mattos, 2015).

Little explication is given for the gendered truisms presented in these articles. In extract 3 the inconsistent feminine sex drive is attributed to "relationship variables" and described as "fit[ting] with the idea that female sexuality is more responsive to person-by-situation

interactions", intimating the conventional understanding of women as relationally oriented (Hollway, 1984). From a gender complementarity perspective, femininity is associated with the relational and emotional, while masculinity is associated with the physical and the sexual, as we discuss further below.

Alongside the relational woman/physical man binary, women's desire is attributed to sex-to-life events, such as marriage and parenthood, as shown in extract 3, which highlights "children" as a significant factor in women's fluctuating desire patterns. Although this pattern might reflect societal expectations for women to prioritise familial and social roles over their individual sexual agency, this is not accounted for in the articles. Instead, these are, as described in Extract 3, "variables" to which women or men may be "responsive" or not, evoking the stimulus/response language and a biological underpinning to such talk, cohering with the biological rendition of male sexual desire. Therefore, the social environment is minimally recognised with gendered patterns of behaviour aligning with the common essentialist understanding of gender as emanating from a stable core (Butler 1990).

Constructing women as contextually or relationally "responsive" implies that women's (inherent) orientation toward home and family responsibilities causes their changeable sexual desire. In the data corpus, explanations of women's inconstant sexual desire most often cite life events such as marriage and parenthood, which potentially reinforces a traditional life-course discourse and heteropatriarchal family/child-raising norms and the associated traditional gender roles. This can contribute to the perception that women's sexuality is secondary to their roles as caregivers, reinforcing heteronormativity (Hollway, 1984).

7.5.3. Motivational Differences

The third discursive construction of sexual desire, linked women with emotional expressions of desire, and men with physical expression. We conceptualise this as supported by the intertwining of heterosexual gender complementarity with dominant mainstream discourses of heterosexuality, such as the "have/hold" discourse and the "male sex drive" discourse (Hollway 1984) that together reinforce the widespread Western cultural understanding that "men want sex, while women want love" (Hayfield and Clarke 2012, p.67). The longstanding have/hold discourse positions women as linking sexual desire with feelings of love, affection, and relationship closeness, more strongly than men. The entrenched male sexual drive discourse positions men as sexually "always on" as their sexual desire is construed as constant and unyielding, detached from external factors such as emotional closeness (Hollway 1984).

We noted that while the emotional component of sexual desire was deemed important to men in the articles, gender difference was again presented as influencing the strength of this connection. For example, in the extracts below, women's sexual desire is directly related to emotional closeness in the context of relationship, whereas men's is attributed to biological processes.

> **Extract 6:** According to these models [name], women's sexual desire is more likely to emerge once they feel emotionally intimate with their partner, whereas among men, intimacy and sexual desire have a weaker connection and sexual desire is more biologically driven (D: van Lankveld et al., 2018).

> **Extract 7:** Research has also shown that women and men have different reasons for engaging in sex. Women, for example, report engaging in sex to please their partner and

express love within the context of an ongoing committed relationship (D: Rubin et al., 2019).

These extracts show how women's sexual desire is constructed as intertwined with and, importantly, dependent on emotional intimacy, specifically with a (likely monogamous) male partner. Women's desire is implicitly construed as originating not from themselves, but from their emotional closeness with their male partner. The use of the word "emerge" in extract 6 aligns with the common Western construction of women's sexual desire as aroused by interaction with male partners rather than a spontaneous physiological impulse like masculine sexual desire (Fine, 1988; Hollway, 1989; Tolman, 2002). This construction renders women's sexuality simply as responsive to men's rather than existing in its own right.

In tandem with this construction of female desire as aroused by the emotional and relational, Extract 6 naturalises male sexual desire by drawing on a biological discourse of sexuality. Men's "biologically driven" desire for sex is invoked to explain their "weak" link to love and emotional connection in contrast to women. In this way, men's desire for sex over relational intimacy is construed as natural and men's desire is rendered as self-originating and internally driven, inherent, and spontaneous, in contrast to the relational and context-dependent nature ascribed to women's motivation for sex. Discussing this discourse in the context of rape, Gavey (2011) asserts, "The male sexual drive discourse, in the absence of a corresponding discourse of active female desire, sets up a heterosexual dynamic where sex is something that is done to women by men" (p. 122). Furthering this, framing women's desire as relational, positions their drive to "please their partner" (Extract 7) as seemingly neutral or even "romantic", rather than recognising it as potentially reinforcing gendered inequities, or even

contribution to the perpetuation of sexual violence. Indeed, as Fahs et al., (2020) note, gendered socialisation towards pleasing others whilst feeling less entitled to pleasure contributes to a social context in which sexual coercion is framed as a normative and expected experience rather than gendered violence. Additionally, men are excluded from discourses of love, closeness, and intimacy within sex and in these texts, instead only provided with the subjective positioning of cavemen ruled by their sexual urges. Men are thus not given permission to, or offered the subjectivity of, exploring the loving side of themselves.

Extract 7 highlights a significant gendered dynamic by asserting that the occurrence of sexual activity primarily hinges on how women feel about the relationship. This positions women as key agents in dictating the terms of sexual activity within the relationship and, as highlighted within our data (e.g., D: Frost & Donovan, 2021), carrying the blame when the occurrence of sexual activity does not meet the expectations of their male partner. The subsequent emotional labour and responsibility that is placed upon women in this relational context is also reflected in Extract 7, which constructs women's desire as linked with both expressing love, but also pleasing their partner. Sexual activity for women is thus constructed as an expression of love and an act of service to their partners.

It is possible to see the logic of heterosexual gendered complementarity within the relational woman/physical man binary, as "within the terms of the male sex drive discourse, men are sexually needy creatures and, within the terms of the have–hold discourse, women know that they need to give men sex in order to retain the relationship that they desire" (Gavey, 2005, p. 139). Critical feminist scholarship has examined traditional gendered power relations where women are responsible for fulfilling their male partners' sexual needs (Authors,

2023; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gavey, 2005; Gill, 2009; Gupta et al., 2008). In Extract 7, this obligation is intertwined with an expression of love, further embedding the responsibility for this work to show affection and emotional connection. Consequently, the possibilities for women's desire are reduced, confining it primarily within the boundaries of heterosexual relationality, while also creating additional pressures of emotional connection required for sexual satisfaction.

7.6. Conclusion

In our analysis, we identified three discursive constructions of desire, all of which framed men and women's sexual desire as distinctly different in relation to sex drive, context, and motivation. These discursive constructions were underpinned by heterosexual gender complementarity, positioning men and women as distinct and opposite (Butler, 1990). These constructions therefore reinforced traditional gender binaries whereby women and men are depicted as naturally different from one another, thus ascribed different subjectivities; ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving, to inhabit (García-Favaro, 2015). These binaries are not neutral but hierarchical, with one side typically privileged over the other (Derrida, 1981). In the context of our data, men are associated with stability, higher sexual drive, and physical instincts—qualities that are socially valued—while women are positioned as emotionally driven, fluctuating, and lower in desire. This reinforces power dynamics in which men's sexual subjectivities are privileged as normative, while women's desires are constructed as different and problematic.

Our analysis shows how heterosexual gender complementarity is maintained in the texts' analysed, ultimately reinforcing traditional gender binaries, and promoting

heteronormativity by linking gender identity with heterosexual desire. Indeed, there was a lack of sexual and gender diversity within the texts in our dataset, and most articles spoke about either women's or men's sexual desire, most often in contrast to one another. Women's and men's sexual desires were constructed as distinct, with each comprising what the other lacks. As we have shown, assumed gender differences were often attributed to biological (natural) factors, such as hormones, for example. However, we also identified a social discourse used to construct differences as connected to societal functioning such as typical gendered relational dynamics and roles. Neither of these ways of speaking about desire is particularly surprising; both discourses draw on long-standing and entrenched notions about sex, relationships, and desire (e.g., Gill, 2007; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Tolman, 2002). However, it is noteworthy that both biological and social discourses of desire, despite their apparent differences, were used in tandem, with the combined effect that whatever framework the researchers used, their psychological studies worked to reinforce heterosexual gender complementarity and make absent similarities across men and women, nor variation within them.

Accordingly, men's desire was most often discussed in contrast to women's, and vice-versa. Using biological discourses thereby legitimises and justifies what are effectively moral judgements regarding (heterosexual) relationship ideals. The discursive effect of these discourses in both instances, is that a heterosexual norm is perpetuated. The sexual desire of both men and women, is positioned in contrast to an opposite. In doing so, this literature supports a discourse of sexual essentialism that feminist and poststructuralist scholars have been attempting to dismantle for decades (McRobbie, 2007; Riley et al., 2019).

The norm of men's desire is rooted in entrenched discourses that privilege male sexuality, reinforcing traditional gender roles and power structures. The discourse surrounding men's consistent desire becomes a mechanism through which normative expectations are established and maintained. This construction of norms has implications for both individual autonomy and gender equality. By framing men's sexual desire as consistent and women's as contextual, a range of acceptable expressions of sexuality are restricted. Previous scholarship also attests that these norms create a sexual double standard of social judgement for women operating outside these norms and holds potential for perpetuation of sexual harm where women "submit" to sexual pressure from men (Brown et al., 2018). The norms described also contribute to a social environment where women may feel compelled to conform to a prescribed role, potentially limiting their ability to assert their desires independently of external influences. Concurrently, men's ability to connect intimacy and love to sexual desire is similarly constricted within these discursive frameworks.

In the beginning of this article, we stated that the psychological research discipline has the power to reinforce norms or open possibilities. Our analysis and discussion of this data corpus has indicated that the possibility for broader constructions of women's sexual desire outside of a heteronormative, biological framework, is not met. The limiting of women's sexual desire within strict parameters aligns with Fine's assertion that a discourse of desire is missing within sexuality education (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2011); our research demonstrates that a non-heterosexual discourse of sexual desire is missing within professional psychological literature.

There is a wide range of constructions of women's sexual desire that have been articulated in other research. For example, women's desire has been constructed in regard to social morality (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Jackson & Cram, 2003), or as passive and linked to men's sexual advances (Authors, 2023; Fine, 1988; Gavey, 2005). Contemporary critical research has also identified postfeminist discourses of sexual empowerment (Authors, 2023; Gill, 2007; 2017; Riley et al., 2019), agentic pleasure (Barker et al, 2019; Fahs, 2014), as well as feminist discourse challenging heteronormative and patriarchal constructions (Farvid & Braun, 2014; Jenkins and Johnson, 2017; Muise, 2011; Todd, 2017). Despite this wide variety of discourse, none of these were engaged with by the mainstream psychological research included in our data corpus. Of course, this needs to be considered within the parameters of our search terms, as such perhaps the critical literature was not being surfaced. However, this indicates to us that psychological literature that does sit outside of the narrow scope we have presented, needs to be searched for specifically and consequently does not have a wide reach.

Therefore, we return to the productive power of psychology as a discipline. Given that psychology plays a pivotal role in producing and legitimising certain truths about sexuality, it's relevant that we turn the gaze back on our own discipline. The authority of psychological knowledge not only reinforces heteronormative frameworks but also regulates what becomes accepted as "normal" or "healthy" desire. As a result, psychological discourse can perpetuate narrow constructions of sexuality, influencing both academic understanding and public discourse in ways that discipline individual subjectivity and limit diverse expressions of desire. Consequently, we issue a call to mainstream psychological literature to broaden the constructions of women's sexual desire outside of heteronormative, and biological foundations.

8. Chapter 8: Concluding Discussion

The questions guiding this research centered around the discursive construction of sexual desire, how discourses created public representations of women's sexual desire, and the subsequent implications for sexual subjectivity and agency. In this discussion chapter, I bring together the findings from the preceding three chapters, with particular focus on the implications of these findings for sexual subjectivity and agency. I first provide a summary of findings from each study, then discuss three prevalent discursive representations of sexual desire across the datasets, and lastly comment on how, together, these discursive representations enable and restrict possibilities for sexual subjectivity and agency.

8.1. Summary of Findings

8.1.1. Study One: Analysis of Mainstream Media

My aim for the first analysis was to investigate how women's sexual desire is constructed in mainstream online women's media, and what these constructions might mean for women's sexual agency. In my analysis, I identified a clear motif across the relatively varied constructions of sexual desire, namely, the androcentric construction of women's desire as intrinsically linked to men and men's desire. The multiple discourses I identified that were present within the dataset constructed women's sexual desire in seemingly different ways, but all ultimately connected to their relationships with men. I presented this data with focus on the subject positions produced within discourse. When taking on these three subject positions, women could consider their own desire as: (a) merely "responsive" to men's desire; (b) inadequate in comparison to men's and requiring substantial ongoing work to fix; and (c) a skill requiring constant effort to master the "sexpertise" necessary to please men and attain ideal

femininity. These varied representations of women's sexual desire worked together to re/produce an overall heteronormative, androcentric narrative. Subsequently, women's sexual agency was curtailed; either (a) removed entirely as women are relegated to sexual objects or reliant on being aroused by men, or (b) permitted to some extent, but only in the direction of a postfeminist form of "sexpertise" that focused on the performative elements of sex.

The analysis did identify an element of progressiveness, whereby women's sexual agency was foregrounded. This was in relation to some aspects of postfeminist discourse that encouraged women to seek their own pleasure. In this sense, women's sexual agency was broadened, as pleasure and desire were constructed as intrinsic aspects of self, and women were encouraged and given "permission" to seek their own pleasure. However, I argued that this was simply a veneer of progressiveness, as my analysis demonstrated that their own experiences of desire was oriented towards their relationships with, and ability to please, men. Essentially, traditional norms were merely repackaged in the mainstream media via postfeminist logics, giving lip-service to agency where in practice, agency is limited.

8.1.2. Study Two: Analysis of Alternative Media

In my analysis of alternative online media, I sought to determine the extent to which prevailing normative discourses of sexuality are resisted and potentially transformed, and the implications of alternative constructions for women's sexual subjectivity and agency. I identified two common alternative discursive constructions of sexual desire: (a) as "diverse", whereby the validation of desire for a range of sexualities and identities is celebrated, and (b) as political, that is, as intertwined with broader systems of oppressions such as misogyny and racism. Both

discursive constructions broaden and extended the parameters of what counts as "normal" desire.

My analysis demonstrated the alternative media texts promoted an understanding of sexual desire and pleasure as independent of singularly heterosexual experiences, thus creating additional avenues of representation of desire online. I posited that these alternative frameworks potentially afford women agency to examine and affirm their sexual desire beyond the normative frameworks prevalent in the mainstream media representations of desire identified in study one (Chapter Five) and in previous research (e.g., Barker et al., 2018; Carpenter, 1998; Frith, 2015a; Gill, 2009; Gupta et al., 2008; Jackson, 2005).

Alongside this opening up of possible sexual subjectivities, the discursive constructions of desire within alternative media reject the individualistic interpretation of sexual desire which was evident in study one. As I noted, postfeminist constructions of femininity within mainstream media, interpellated women to work on themselves to inhabit a sexy, adventurous subject position, in which their desire was intrinsically tied to their sexual performance with male partners. In effect, this created a very limited representation of what desire *could* look like for someone, along with notions of individual inadequacy or personal failure if/when the subject failed to meet normative expectations. Instead, in these alternative media texts, sexual desire was contextualised within the broader social sphere (e.g., societal norms and oppressive structures) which worked to legitimate subjectivities that did not align with a narrow, heterosexual norm.

Despite drawing on social and community discourses to construct desire as part of a bigger picture, neoliberal discourses were also present, for example, when producing an

incitement to labour on the self for individual empowerment and liberation. Therefore, readers were still potentially enjoined to understand themselves through discourses of regulatory neoliberalism where they must work on themselves. The incitement towards self-improvement, however, was different to that present in mainstream media due to an emphasis on self-improvement for the good of a feminist community, rather than to sexually please their male partners. In this case, sexual agency was enabled but still constrained within dominant constructs of neoliberal subjectivity.

8.1.3. Study Three: Analysis of Psychological Literature

In Chapter Seven, my focus turned away from public media, back towards the "experts" themselves. This study considered psychological literature as another important place of discourse circulation, looking at highly cited articles in psychological journals focused on sex and relationship therapy. My analysis in Chapter Five demonstrated that psychological research as an "expert" voice, is consistently drawn on by the mainstream media, often to justify a biological or "scientific" discourse of sexual desire. Chapter Seven provides an analysis of that "expert" voice to consider whether these texts are also supporting this discursive framing.

I presented three discursive constructions of desire present within the literature. These constructions were all heteronormative, bound within binary gendered comparisons, and all underpinned by biological reasoning that framed men and women as naturally different. The first discursive construction I identified was that the texts supported a normalised framing of women's desire as lower than men's. I argued that both biological and social discourses were drawn on to situate this difference as "natural", but simultaneously in conflict with men's "natural" sexual urges. The second discursive construction depicted men's desire as stable and

consistent, whilst women's desire would fluctuate in relation to other life events or personal context. The final discursive construction positioned women's sexual desire as emotionally driven and dependent on relational closeness, contrasting with men's valuing of physical pleasure and sexual urges.

I argued that for all three discursive constructions, the differences were constructed to be both biologically, and socially, natural. However, at the same time, women were problematised and held to the male standard. I drew on the concept of heterosexual gender complementarity as central to this comparison. This theory positions men and women as distinct, opposite, and inherently complementary, with women's emotionality offsetting men's physicality for example (Butler, 1990). This framing in the psychological literature reinforced normative gender roles and further limited the scope for understanding desire outside of binary, heteronormative frameworks. Here, sexual subjectivity was again constrained by a gendered framework that positions women's desire as lesser, inferior, or fundamentally different from men's.

Notably, critical and feminist approaches to sexual desire such as those that challenge binary logics or consider power dynamics, were largely absent from this literature. This absence underscores the dominance of biological and normative social frameworks in shaping how desire is understood in psychological research. Thus, contemporary psychological literature acts as a normative force, reinforcing the status quo, while presenting these constructs of desire as natural and desirable.

8.2. Representational Practices and Implications for Sexual Subjectivity and Agency.

Looking across the findings from the three datasets, I identify consistent patterns regarding the representation of women's sexual desire suggesting common representational practices. From this poststructuralist perspective, my interest goes beyond how women's desire has been broadly represented, to consider the *effects* of these representational practices in relation to possibility for women's sexual subjectivity. As I discussed earlier in this thesis, representations of sexual desire shape norms, perceptions, and meanings surrounding sexuality that individuals actively negotiate in constructing their sexual selves, either adhering to and internalising dominant norms, or resisting or subverting them.

Sexual subjectivity has been conceptualised as the way that people can understand and think about their bodies and sexual selfhood, and their capacity to act in certain ways, that is, their sexual agency. Tolman (2012) in fact suggests that "desire is a part of the self, a knowing, feeling, experiencing self" (p. 749). Developing an empowering and stable sexual subjectivity is essential for understanding preferences, and boundaries within a sexual context; making informed choices, advocating for one's needs and navigating intimate relationships confidently and safely (Chmielewski et al., 2020;).

Given how representations of desire shape constructions of sexual subjectivity, below I develop the analysis of the thesis further by considering prevalent representations of desire, and that circulated across all three sites, and their discursive effects in relation to possibilities for sexual subjectivity. I consider similarities between the representations, how they interact and influence each other, and how this aligns with broader social and institutional understandings of sexual desire. I detail how various discourses and discursive constructions of

desire contribute to these representations, along with considering the intertextual implications; demonstrating how these representations interact within the broader context of my thesis.

8.2.1. Women's Desire is Linked to Men.

My findings show that an emphasis on essential biological differences, alongside gender binaries, work together to construct a representation of women's desire bound in androcentric norms and existing in relation to men. These norms are reinforced in both the psychological literature and mainstream media texts yet resisted in the alternative media texts. Both the mainstream media data, as well as the psychological literature data drew on reductionist biological discourses and constructed desire as an inherent, pre-social drive stemming from a stable biological foundation (Butler, 1990). Biology was central within much of discussion of sexual desire, particularly in relation to (heterosexual) relationships. Links were made between sexual desire, physiology, hormones and evolution, positioning sexuality and sexual functioning as innate.

Feminist scholars have outlined how a physiological framing of human sexual response (e.g., Masters and Johnson's, 1966 Human Sexual Response Model) reduces the complexity of sexual desire down to a simplistic response that is generally heteronormative and genital-centric (Frith, 2015b; Gill, 2007; Tolman & Diamond, 2001; Ussher, 1993; Wood et al., 2006). My findings in this thesis contribute to a large body of work that suggests a heteronormative and male-centric discursive framing of women's sexual desire is insidious and socially embedded (e.g., Farvid, 2015; Gavey, 2005; Gill, 2009; Rich, 1980). Crucially, this impacts women's ability to think about their own desire as valid and autonomous, independent of men

(Holland et al., 1998). Consequently, women's sexual agency is diminished and restricted outside of heteronormative and reductionist gendered frameworks.

It is important to recognise that the comparative framing of women's and men's desire seen across the dataset does not just construct women's desire as different, but as different *and* inferior to men's. This is evident in the "working-on-it woman" subject position, where women are encouraged to address their perceived shortcomings in having a lower sexual drive than their partners. Similarly, in the psychological literature women's desire is positioned in direct contrast and comparison to men's across all three discursive constructions.

I argue here (as in Chapters Five and Seven) that a consistent recourse to biological function creates a physiological construction of "normal" sex, vis-à-vis the coital imperative (McPhillips et al., 2001). Thus "good" sex and "good" desire are measured against androcentric standards. By centering men's sexual functioning as the default, women's sexual desire is positioned as secondary, inadequate, or inherently less powerful (Mattos, 2015). This creates an impossible standard for women, while also situating their desire in the context of dysfunction and disorder when they inevitably do not meet those impossible standards of what normal desire "should" look like (Tiefer, 1996, 2001). Gill (2007) in fact notes that an assertion of gendered differences is one element of a postfeminist sensibility, stating "discourses of natural gender difference can be used to freeze in place existing inequalities by representing them as inevitable…" (p.159). Thus, even though biological discourses and postfeminist discourses work to frame women's desire in very different, contradictory ways (i.e., as an inherently limited, fixed aspect of the self, rather than something to actively "work" on), biological essentialism is still part of postfeminist sense-making. As such, a recourse to

biological essentialism is effectively inescapable within the dominant contemporary discursive landscape.

Similarly, social and psychological discourses are also used in a way that constructs women's desire as lesser in relation to men's. For example, the mainstream media texts drew on gender norms, like child raising or housekeeping, as justification for women's low desire, whilst the psychological literature pointed towards normative gender roles such as women being gatekeepers for sex. The attention to gendered difference supports the emphasis on women's self-improvement and the turn to self-help books (Gill, 2007), such as John Gray's classic: *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (Gray, 1992), which reflects and reinforces essentialist gender differences (Gill, 2007; Potts, 1998).

Mapping onto Derrida's (1981) theorising on binary logic, together, both biological and social discourse support a gendered binary that valorises men's desire and supports an unequal values system. This comparison between men and women, subordinates' women to their male partners, reinforcing hetero-gendered power relations within heterosex, and highly restricting women's sexual agency. Subsequently, across the datasets women's desire is represented as different from, but inextricably linked to men's, seen as worse than men's, and positioned as existing primarily within heteronormative relationships.

An intertextual approach allowed me to examine how discourse is resisted, supported and reinforced across textual sites. Within mainstream media, expert voices; doctors, "sexologists", researchers and so forth, were used to support the positioning of sexual desire within biological discourse. These are positions that hold authority and power, and a lay audience will likely perceive expert ideas as more truthful or authoritative, especially when

drawing on scientific language and accompanied by relevant credentials (McGannon et al., 2016; Thon & Jucks, 2017; Takahashi, & Tandoc, 2016). As I argued in Chapter Two, expertise plays a part in validating certain narratives, whilst dismissing others, and is pivotal in legitimising "truth" and what counts as knowledge, according to a Foucauldian understanding of power (Foucault, 1978). Therefore, instead of offering-up alternative representations of desire in regard to the social, the mainstream media and psychological literature reinforced traditional ideas surrounding sexuality and desire that have been seen in the media for decades.

The alternative literature demonstrates how biological discourse can be resisted, portraying sexual desire, instead, as socially constructed and evolving. The alternative media normalised difference and opened-up possibilities for imagining desire outside of male-centric or biologically deterministic frameworks. Normative discourses of desire were resisted in the alternative corpus, by prioritising experiential expertise over institutional knowledge, and thus almost solely positioned desire within the socio-cultural context instead of the biological.

8.2.2. Pervasive Heteronormativity

In accordance with wider feminist literature, the analysis of all three datasets reflected the pervasiveness and prominence of norms surrounding cis-heterosex (Gill, 2008; Kim et al., 2007; Rich, 1980). There was a clear heterosexual norm that was reinforced within the mainstream media, and psychological literature to a lesser extent. The representation of women's desire within a heterosexual context serves to exclude broader and diverse sexual subjectivities.

In Chapter Two, I discussed how heterosexuality has been discursively embedded into contemporary Western culture, such that it is difficult to "see", or call attention to without

positioning it in contrast to homosexuality or queerness (Farvid, 2015). Western cultural and social beliefs, as well as institutional structures, assume heterosexuality as the "standard", and resultantly, the language that is available to speak about many related concepts (but sexuality and desire in particular) is wrapped up tightly in a heterosexual context (Morison & Macleod, 2015). Biological reasoning, and a focus on reproduction gives heterosexuality this power, positioning it as the normal, taken-for-granted, natural state, whilst difference is pathologised (Farvid, 2015). In my research, I found that heterosexuality was insidiously normalised within the mainstream media and psychological literature data corpus'.

At the outset of the data collection process for both studies, I purposefully used search terms that were neutral in terms of the relationship construction (i.e., neither heterosexual nor queer). Despite this, most of the psychological research found (not just those 12 that were included, but the articles surfaced before the exclusion process) only attended to heterosexual couples. Some articles stated that their focus was heterosexual, while some discussed men and women in tandem to each other, assuming a heterosexual dynamic. Similarly, in the mainstream media data corpus, most of the data discussed heterosexual couples more overtly, or mentioned men and women but did not specifically attend to desire for queer women or queer relationships. This prevalence of heterosexual framing in both studies, underscores how deeply the heterosexual matrix permeates discursive practices, shaping not only what is studied or reported but also how desire is constructed and understood, often to the exclusion of queer experiences.

This finding also resonates with van Anders et al. (2022) study argues that heteronormativity itself can *produce* diminished sexual desire in women. Rather than framing

"low desire" as a problem within individual women, Van Anders et al. (2022) theorise it as an outcome of gendered power relations that structure heterosexual relationships. The inequitable division of household labour, the expectation that women nurture and manage their partners (i.e., "having to be a partner's mother"), sexual objectification, and gendered sexual scripts positioning women as sexually responsive rather than agentic, collectively constrain women's sexual subjectivity. These dynamics were visible in my data, in Study One for example, where diminished desire was described as being linked to the mental load of "washing up" and "a million other things on our to do list" taking precedence. The texts located the obligation of attending to this "low desire" as a personal responsibility to work on, rather than attending to the structural inequities shaping heterosexual intimacy.

In both the mainstream media and psychological literature data corpuses, it was clear that some efforts were made to incorporate diverse sexual identities, thereby avoiding overt heteronormativity. Some articles did attempt to broaden their scope by using gender-neutral terms like "partner". However, such gestures manifested as performative, as the articles consistently "slipped" back into discussing sexuality and desire from a heteronormative lens. Similarly, in the psychological literature (discussed in Chapter Seven), sometimes gender-neutral terms were used, and in discussions of relationship and sexual dynamics, the language was carefully neutral and vague.

While these actions could be seen as seemingly progressive and inclusive, these articles failed to meaningly engage with the complexities of non-heteronormative desire, simply adding an "extra" term to account for difference without changing the content of the discussion. Rich

(1980, p. 649) argues in an analysis of compulsory heterosexuality, that the lesbian experience is erased, when they are framed as equivalent to gay men, stating:

> Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through "inclusion" as female versions of male homosexuality. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to deny and erase female reality once again. To separate those women stigmatized as "homosexual" or "gay" from the complex continuum of female resistance to enslavement, and attach them to a male pattern, is to falsify our history.

Within my research, I would argue that a similar effect occurs when queer experiences are relegated as an optional “extra” within discussions of heterosexual desire and relationships. Therefore, paradoxically, even when mainstream media articles or psychological literature attempted to diversify their focus, it in fact reinforced heterosexuality as normative, and relegated queer and gender-diverse expressions of desire to being different or abnormal. In terms of sexual subjectivity or agency, queer women are prevented from seeing themselves reflected in the data, their experiences othered or completely excluded. In this sense, a cis-heterosexual norm of sexual desire was established and upheld within these texts, even when outwardly attempting to be “neutral”.

The data presented in Chapter Six demonstrates an alternative way of “doing” media when talking about sexuality and sexual desire. Across the dataset, but in the first discursive construction (“desire is diverse”) in particular, it was evident that meaningful inclusion of queer women’s desire did not just include performative labels, but attention to the diverse experience of being queer. That is, difference in contrast to heterosexuality, and difference

within queerness (Linné, 2003), which resulted in a much broader range of subjectivities for readers to adopt and avoided tokenising queer desire or framing it through a heterosexual lens. The alternative media corpus, therefore, worked to resist dominant discursive constructions of heterosexuality insidiously present within our contemporary media landscape.

Previous literature on representations of desire also indicates that abled and slim bodies (Loeser et al., 2018; Pausé, 2015; Shakespeare & Richardson, 2018), and Whiteness (Settles et al., 2008; Ward et al., 2020) is prioritised within discussions of sexual desire. In the mainstream media dataset, and psychological literature dataset, my analysis and discussion were focused mainly on what was included, rather than what was missing. However, when considered in tandem with the alternative literature, it is clear that meaningful representation of anyone other than White, slim, abled, cis-heterosexual women was missing. The alternative media specifically centered queer, gender-diverse, and non-normative bodies, identities, and practices. Consequently, pervasive norms were resisted and the ways in which desire could be understood was broadened rather than narrowed, offering readers further agency within which to explore their desires.

8.2.3. Sexual Desire and Self-Improvement

Across the datasets, neoliberal discourses were present in shaping representations of women's sexual desire. Within the mainstream media, women's sexual desire was constructed through postfeminist discourses of individual empowerment, choice and agency, which intertwine with a neoliberal agenda of self-improvement to "achieve" said empowerment and agency (Gill, 2007). However, as the analysis made clear, women were still interpellated to pay attention to men's pleasure first. Thus, rather than an empowerment for individual sexual agency, women

were empowered to please their male partners and view themselves in relation to men. Women's sexual empowerment, therefore, remained confined within heteronormative frameworks, aligning with a robust tradition of postfeminist analysis that suggests women's sexual practices and subjectivities are produced in relation to men (Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2014; Gill, 2007, 2009, Harvey & Gill, 2011; Riley et al., 2019).

Notions of postfeminism were not present in the alternative media or psychological literature, however aspects of neoliberal discourse created a representation of women's desire as never "good" enough, and the drive to work on oneself frames women's sexual desire as a site of self-improvement. In the mainstream media, the drive for self-improvement was particularly evident through the postfeminist rhetoric of empowerment, which suggests that women should take control of their sexual desires. Women were urged to optimise their sexual selves through practices such as taking supplements, attending therapy, or refining sexual skills. This focus on self-work places the responsibility on women to constantly improve themselves, linking sexual subjectivity with ideals of self-optimisation. Harvey and Gill (2011, p.64) capture the contradictions of this rhetoric, noting that:

> Although sexual entrepreneurship allows for a desiring, knowing female sexuality, it must be at once 'up for it' yet sensitive to male needs and fears, and 'spiced up' but maintaining the boundaries of heterosexual monogamy. Such a contradictory mode of femininity intimately entangles the struggles and gains of feminism and sexual liberation with the neoliberal incitement to constant self-improvement through hyper-consumption.

Crucially, the entanglement of sexual liberation and neoliberal self-improvement shifts the focus away from women's embodied desire and instead centred their sexual performance as a means to provide pleasure for men.

Although the psychological literature did not explicitly engage with postfeminist discourses, it similarly reflects neoliberal ideals of self-improvement through its biological framing of sexual desire. By medicalising issues like low libido, the psychological literature places women's sexual desire within a framework that demands intervention and correction, once again implying that women's desires are never sufficient. Paradoxically, neoliberal discourses of individual blame and responsibility worked in tandem with biological discourses to create a never-ending incitement for women to work on themselves to reach an impossible standard. The expectation is that women must manage and fix their desires, framing this work as a medical or psychological responsibility. Yet, despite the lack of postfeminist rhetoric, the same neoliberal logic underpins the discourse, compelling women to optimise their biology to fit societal standards of health and normalcy.

Interestingly, even within the alternative media where there is an explicit rejection of mainstream norms of desire and a push for inclusivity, the neoliberal imperative to improve oneself remains. Despite drawing on social and community discourses to construct desire as part of a bigger picture, neoliberal discourses were also present producing an incitement to labour on the self for individual empowerment and liberation. Therefore, readers were still potentially enjoined to understand themselves through discourses of regulatory neoliberalism where they must work on themselves. The incitement towards self-improvement, however, was different to that present in mainstream media due to an emphasis on self-improvement for

the good of a feminist community, rather than to sexually please their male partners. In this case, sexual agency is enabled but still slightly hamstrung, suggesting that, even in spaces of resistance, women's desires require labor and echoes a neoliberal discourse of never being fully "good enough".

Ultimately, across all three sites, women's sexual subjectivity is tied to a relentless pressure to work on themselves. Whether framed as empowerment, medical responsibility, or community contribution, the underlying message remains consistent: women's desires are never inherently complete or adequate. The postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that pervade these texts contribute to a representation of women's sexual desire that is always in need of improvement, reinforcing the notion that women must continuously work on themselves to meet external standards, whether those are rooted in femininity, health, or social progress. This ongoing pressure reflects broader gendered expectations of individual responsibility, positioning women's sexual desire as another arena in which they are expected to self-optimise and improve.

8.3. Research Reflections and Possibilities for Future Research.

My research was informed by a social constructionist epistemology, and my research aims and objectives, theoretical underpinnings and methodological approach reflect this epistemological standpoint accordingly. In line with critical feminist principles around quality in qualitative research (Clarke & Braun, 2019), and in coherence with my research paradigm, it is important that I do not finish this thesis by making statements about the broad generalisability of my findings, and positivist notions of reliability of the data. As I have reiterated throughout the thesis, knowledge is "not neutral" (Gavey, 1997, 57); the context surrounding us, the discourses

available for us to draw on, and the inherent power in the systems we operate within, shapes the framing of issues and thus our understanding. The same principle applies to this thesis, my place as the researcher cannot be erased with claims of objectivity. The subjective context of my life and experience is relevant and is "essential for clarifying what the data represent, and what knowledge claims you can make on the basis of them" (Clarke & Braun, 2019, p.22).

Finlay (2003) sets out five clear principles for evaluating qualitative research, these are: clarity, credibility, contribution, communicative resonance, and caring. I have used these principles to reflect on the research presented in this thesis, and I hope I have been successful in doing justice to them. I paid close attention to ensuring the logic of my writing, and data analysis, was clear and accessible. I analysed the data in a way that aligned with the social constructionist and feminist poststructuralist lens of my research (i.e., attending to dimensions of gendered power and language), in a reflexive and critical manner. I have outlined where my findings support, add to, or deviate from a substantial body of feminist poststructural research, and have made efforts to communicate how I as a researcher have shaped this research, including the assumptions I have made (I will continue this work in the remainder of this section). In relation to the last principle (caring), whilst I did not interact with participants, I have attempted to show consideration and respect to the data and the way I have discussed and shared key pieces. In relation to the topic, this is one that I care deeply about and is has been deeply relevant to my life. I hope that this comes through clearly in my work.

With these principles of good quality, epistemologically congruent research in mind, I will reflect on the research process, contextualise the research and data more clearly, and outline subsequent avenues for future research endeavours.

8.3.1. The Geographic Context of the Data

As I outlined in my methodology (Chapter Four), my data collection took place in New Zealand and was conducted in the English language. Internet research widens the possibility for accessing data outside of a narrow geographic area, however due to the nature of *Google's* search engine providing the most "relevant" content to the user, the data was still located in the Anglosphere for the most part. In fact, conducing data collection online, focussing on widely read publications, meant that most of the articles included across all three datasets were from North America (USA and Canada), rather than New Zealand. Aside from North America, Australasia, and the United Kingdom, the mainstream media data included articles from India, The Philippines and China. This leads me to wonder whether if I conducted the search from the UK, or USA, would these articles have still been surfaced, or might more European articles (for example) have been more highly ranked. Conducting a comparative analysis (e.g., Joshi et al., 2011), or simply broadening the search scope might allow for more effective tracing of popular discourse across different cultural settings.

However, I do think that the reach of the articles included in my dataset, and therefore the relevance of my findings, covers a broad context, given that the articles that sat outside of Australasia, North America, the UK, also drew on postfeminist discourses of sexual empowerment, work on the self, and normative gender roles. This maps onto other research that suggests postfeminism is evident on a global scale yet suggests further consideration of differences in cultural context is required. For example, examination of Chinese media demonstrates that aspects of a postfeminist sensibility are intensified and adapted due to Chinese state ideology (Zhang & Riley, 2024; Yang, 2020). My work in this thesis indicates that

examination of the discursive landscape, across multiple sites of circulation, with further consideration to "how elements of postfeminism intersect with a country's values, politics, histories and gender relations, and the recognition of the multiple flows of meaning making" (Zhang & Riley, 2024, p.227), would be useful.

8.3.2. Implications of the Fast-Moving Nature of Online Media

I started this research in 2020, before the "explosion" of *TikTok* into a Western context, and certainly before I personally realised the dominance of it, given I was on the very edge of its target demographic. As I *did* the research, over the last five years, I was seeing this app, and the subsequent ways that people engage with media online, evolve in front of me. This highlighted to me how quickly online media landscapes can shift, and I deemed it important to reflect on it as an avenue for further research and as a way of situating my findings within the rapidly changing online landscape.

Research into social discourses and interaction on social media is complex. Due to personalised algorithms (similar to my discussions of search engine algorithms in Chapter Four) it is difficult to get a grasp of what users are seeing. My own experiences of interacting with media online, reflected what Jackson (2018) found in their research on "young feminists" and their interactions online. The participants in that research stated that they used Facebook pages (in my case, Instagram) as hubs through which to link to, or discover, articles published by sites such as Buzzfeed, Huffington Post and so forth. Therefore, access to mediated discourses could be conceptualised as occurring through, rather than on, social media. Thus, my research reflected this pipeline of accessing media content.

TikTok has had an unprecedented influence on the way people engage and interact online, as well as influencing other social media platforms, contributing to the creation of an "extensive ecosystem" of media content (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022, p.10). *TikTok* videos are now shared across other platforms like *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube*, as "reels" or "shorts". The platform actively makes it difficult to place links in *TikTok*, meaning that navigating away from the app (as the participants in Jackson's study described in relation to Facebook) is discouraged, thus popular discourse is circulated *through TikTok* videos and their comments.

TikTok has also intensified the influence of algorithms in content delivery, as well as the publics' awareness of how those algorithms shape what they see. Some users appreciate *TikTok because* of how personalised the algorithms were (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022), whilst others are put-off by it not quite capturing their interests, or being *too good* (Siles et al,. 2024). Regardless, the personification of the algorithms results in an echo-chamber effect whereby users are fed and increasingly narrow scope of information and opinions, particularly when the ideas are controversial or polarising (Bleakley, 2023). Some studies have looked at *TikTok* in the context of alt-right discourse and political influence (Bleakley, 2023), or #anti-feminism and "trad-wives" in relation to religious conservatism (Bauer, 2023; Sykes & Hopner, 2024). Recent research done by Radio New Zealand highlighted concerning data around how quickly the *TikTok* algorithms tapped into a mutually reinforcing loop where users were shown content about the "manosphere" for instance (Radio New Zealand, 2025). This example underscores how quickly algorithmically driven content can reinforce particular discourses, highlighting the challenge of keeping research current in fast-moving online contexts.

TikTok provides another avenue for circulating alternative discourses and providing resistance to the mainstream, as well as platforming community spaces such has been seen with young feminists on *Facebook* (Jackson, 2018) or NSFW (Not Safe For Work) communities on *Tumblr* (Tiindenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). While this thesis focused on discourses in textual media spaces, its findings remain relevant for understanding how dominant and resistant ideas about women's sexual desire are constructed and contested across mediated spaces. Building on this, future research might examine how feminist, alternative, or countercultural discourses circulate through video-based platforms such as *TikTok*. Such work would align with Tiidenberg and van der Nagel's (2020, p. 161) argument that "accepting that sexual social media communities may have profound value and significance for their members invites discussing the intersection of sex and social media as a space of potential social change."

8.3.3. My Positioning in the Data Analysis

So far, I have given attention the context of my research, what it attends to (or does not attend to), my role in shaping the research, and possibilities for future research inquiry along those lines. In this section, I attend to "personal reflexivity" (Wilkinson, 1988) in considering my subjectivity in shaping the data analysis. While being appropriate for general qualitative research (Clarke & Braun, 2019; Finlay, 2003, Gough, 2003), it is particularly important for poststructuralist research. Gavey (2005, p.84) asserts that to do research from a poststructuralist approach requires "an ongoing critical reflexivity about the way we formulate our ideas and construct our arguments, so that we can be more aware of the assumptions we are making and the priorities and exclusions that these maintain" (Gavey, 2005, p. 84).

My context as a Pakehā New Zealander, who is financially stable, politically left-wing, heterosexual and non-religious, impacted how I approached, read, analysed and discussed my data. Particularly as this was textual data, I could not ask participants to elaborate or contextualise the statements they made. I was particularly cognizant of my identity as a liberal feminist with a history of interest in issues of sexuality, gendered power, privilege, oppression and so forth, and how that might shape the way I approached the data. In essence, I shared a similar worry to McClelland (2018, p.284) who wrote (in speaking on behalf of herself and Michelle Fine) that they "... worried, our ears might be clogged with our own dominant feminist discourses for their desires" (McClelland, 2018, p. 284).

In conducting data analysis across all three studies, I was guided by Riley et al., (2019) approach to Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis, which prompts the researcher to ask, "what is being constructed", "how is it being constructed" and "why is it being constructed in this way" when looking at pieces of data (Riley et al., 2021, p. 293). Similarly, Ballinger (2003, p.68) encourages researchers to ask themselves "difficult questions" when conducting data analysis, prompting them to think about the assumptions they are making and the implications of looking at the data in a different way. I found these approaches very useful in prompting me to stop, take a breath, and think carefully about the data when I came up against a confronting text. For example, the mainstream media articles often included egregious statements about sex or made claims that I knew to be untrue or biased. Attending back to the above questions helped me to pull-back and engage with analysis of what the data said, rather than just my opinion of it.

As McClelland (2018) noted, “critical methods press us to understand the process and politics of knowledge production, while also continuing to be knowledge producers” (p. 284). One such influence that I have had on the production of knowledge within this thesis, is that religion has not been a significant focus of my analysis, despite a well-documented, prickly, complex, and enduring entanglement between sex and religion (Foucault, 1978). I did not grow up in a religious household and attended a very secular school. I grew up in a small town where none of my immediate peers or friends were religious, or if they were, we did not talk about it. In fact, when pondering my (lack of a) religious upbringing, I realised that I have never attended a church service (or any religious meeting) other than a small handful of weddings, christenings, and funerals.

I do assert that the data did not prompt me to consider religious discourses of in depth, meaning these ideas were not prominent in online discursive representations of sexual desire. However, had I grown up with more religious influence, I may have noticed a subtle thread in my reading, and may have considered the data with that lens. In this way, religion has an “absent-presence”, in that religion wasn’t mentioned much in the data, yet it’s historical influence provides the conditions of possibility for our continued associations with sex, morality, and gender differences (Jackson, 1994). Thus, my research demonstrates that in a Western, Anglosphere context, mainstream popular discursive constructions of desire are largely missing the overt religious influence that has been present historically (Jackson, 1994).

Within my alternative media data corpus, religion did come up in a small handful of articles, where authors wrote about how they grappled with the incongruence of religion and their sexual identities, some coming to move away from religion, and some figuring out a way

to sit with both "selves" comfortably. I talked about this briefly in Chapter Six, in terms of how desire was constructed as "diverse"; fitting with multiple expressions of self and identities. Further research agendas might look towards the dilemmas of desire for contemporary "feminists" and how alternative community media spaces allow for recognition of these multiple identities.

8.4. Conclusion

Discursive constructions of women's sexual desire in mainstream media have been well explored by feminist research over time (for example see Carpenter, 1998; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2014; Frith, 2015a; Gilchrist, 2024; Gill, 2009, for key temporal snapshots). In contrast, both alternative media, and psychological literature as sites of discourse circulation (in regard to women's sexual desire) have remained relatively under-explored. This thesis, therefore, contributes to widening understanding of the range of discourses available for the construction of sexual desire, and the places where they circulate in society.

Taking Study One and Three together, looking across mainstream media and psychological literature as sites of discourse circulation, my research shows that a biological framework structures how desire is conceptualised. Entrenched, scientific discourses of sexual desire, referring to physiological functioning, reproduction, and evolution were present, echoing essentialist ideas that feminist researchers gave critique to years ago (McRobbie, 2007; Riley et al., 2019; Tolman & Diamond, 2001; Usher, 1993; Wood et al., 2006). The reciprocal relationship between these two sites, where one draws on and reinforces the other, only worked to further embed a link between sexual desire and physiology. Thus, my research shows that this discourse holds power and legitimacy, likely due to the perception of science as value-

free and objective [8]; shaping what we know, and what is knowable (Davies & Gannon, 2004, Foucault, 1977).

Embedding sexual desire within biological foundations of physiology and reproduction means that female desire can only be understood in relation to male desire. Gender norms about how women and men should act, worked with these essentialist biological discourses to reinforce the gender binary. Accordingly, the use of binary gendered norms worked to compare women's sexual desire to men's across multiple domains and hierarchised men's desire as a standard norm that women needed to meet, in line with previous theorising (Derrida, 1981; Gavey, 2005). Overall, this meant that my research showed a that in a Western/Anglosphere cultural context, healthy, normal, appropriate sexual desire is produced within and regulated by heteronormativity. The enduring matrix of heterosexuality (Butler,1990; Farvid, 2015; Morison & Macleod, 2015) limits women's sexual subjectivity in such a way that for heterosexual women, their own desire is firmly linked to their sexual experiences with men, and anyone else is excluded from representations of desire.

Postfeminist discourses of women's sexual desire were present within the mainstream media, broadening opportunities for subjectivity and agency in some ways, and limiting them in others. My analysis of this mainstream media data tied in with a quintessential postfeminist sexual subject who is afforded the agency to seek sexual pleasure and engage with their own desires, spurred on by messages of empowerment and self-love (Gill, 2007; Evans & Riley, 2014). My analysis also demonstrated that these ideas were still deeply tied to women's role in

[8]As an aside, I am finalising this thesis in the wake of the defunding of the Marsen Fund grants for humanities and social sciences, by New Zealand's current government. This demonstrates quite clearly, what knowledge systems are valued, or not. (Source: https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/marsden-fund-refocused-science-purpose)

pleasing men, once again restricting the ability to understand sexual desire outside of a heteronormative framework.

Entangled with both discourses of postfeminism, and more overt essentialist biological framing of sexual desire, is the incitement to do work on the self. Across all three sites of discourse circulation women were positioned as inadequate in comparison to men, therefore compelled to do self-work in order to achieve, or maintain, these various idealised sexual subjectivities.

Turning towards the alternative media dataset, my analysis demonstrated that what could be considered diverse, feminist (rather than postfeminist), agentic, inclusive discourses of sexual desire do exist online. However, they are not circulated into the mainstream, instead remaining somewhat siloed in online feminist community spaces. Within these data, sexual subjectivity was broadened such that "difference" was itself normalised, giving women the sexual agency to think about engage with their own desire in relatively limitless ways. The lack of an essentialist biological discourse of desire (and subsequent heteronormative framework) opened-up possibilities for "liberated", agentic sexual subjectivities that were not seen within the mainstream or psychological literature.

As I iterated in the conclusion of Chapter Six, the exciting possibility of alternative media to broaden discourses of sexual desire is somewhat hampered by the dominance of the discursive status quo and realities of the spread of discourse and information online. Large media corporations have the resource and budget to out-compete smaller, independent publications; an effect that has always existed, but is exacerbated by the increasing "intelligence" of algorithms curating personalised information online. In fact, in the time since I

conducted data collection for Study Two, two of the independent publications that formed part of my data corpus have closed due to a lack of funding, and another has ceased posting content[9]. From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, "discursive practices, have the power to hold the normative order in place, and the power to open up the not-yet-known" (Davies & Gannon, 2004, p. 313). Thus, in the context of heteronormative, restrictive discourses of desire that dominate much of the contemporary discursive landscape, my research demonstrates how alternative media can provide spaces of resistance. It is my hope that this thesis lays some groundwork for future research exploring how alternative and resistant voices can be amplified to open-up further sexual subjectivities and agentic frameworks for women's sexual desire.

[9]*Bitch Media* closed in April 2022 (Smith, 2022), *gal-dem* closed in March 2023 (gal-dem, 2023), and *The Whorticulturalist* has not posted any content online since January 2023.

References

Allen, L. (2007). Denying the sexual subject: Schools' regulation of student sexuality. *British Educational Research Journal, 33*(2), 221-234. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701208282

Allen, L. (2012). Pleasure's perils? Critically reflecting on pleasure's inclusion in sexuality education. *Sexualities, 15*(3–4). 455–471. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460712439654

Angel, K. (2013). Commentary on Spurgas's "Interest, arousal, and shifting diagnoses of female sexual dysfunction." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality, 14*(3), 206–216. https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2013.818862

Arksey, H., & O'Malley, L. (2005). Scoping studies: towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *8*(1), 19–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616

Asker, D., & Dinas, E. (2019). Thinking fast and furious: emotional intensity and opinion polarization in online media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *83*(3), 487–509. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz042

Association of Internet Researchers. (2019). Internet research: Ethical guidelines 3.0. *Association of Internet Researchers*. https://members.aoir.org/resources/Documents/IRE%203.0%20-%20final%20distribution%20copy%20for%20AoIR%20members.pdf

Attwood, F., Barker, M. J., Boynton, P., & Hancock, J. (2015). Sense about sex: media, sex advice, education and learning. *Sex Education, 15*(5), 528-539. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2015.1057635

Attwood, F., Smith, C., & Barker, M. (2021). Engaging with pornography: an examination of women aged 18–26 as porn consumers, *Feminist Media Studies, 21*(2), 173-188. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1681490

Balint, S. (2024). Women's experiences of sexual agency under constrained choice: A systematic review. *Psychology of Women Quarterly 48*(4), 491–512. https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843241245713

Ballinger, C. (2003). Navigating multiple research identities: Reflexivity in Discourse Analytic Research. In L. Finlay & B. Gough (Eds.), *Reflexivity: A practical guide for researchers in health and social sciences* (pp. 66–77). Blackwell Science.

Barker, M. J. (2007). Heteronormativity and the exclusion of bisexuality in psychology. In V. Clarke & E. Peel (Eds.), *Out in Psychology: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer Perspectives* (pp.86-118). Wiley.

Barker, M. J., & Iantaffi, A. (2019). *Life isn't binary: On being both, beyond, and in-between.* Jessica Kingsley

Barker, M. J., Gill, R., & Harvey, L. (2018). Mediated intimacy: Sex advice in media culture. *Sexualities, 21*(8), 1337–1345. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460718781342

Bauer, M. F. (2023). Beauty, baby and backlash? Anti-feminist influencers on TikTok. *Feminist Media Studies*, *24*(5), 1023–1041. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2263820

Bazin, V. (2021). Red Rag magazine, feminist economics and the domestic labour pains of liberation. *Women a Cultural Review*, *32*(3–4), 295–317. https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2021.1972651

Beres, M. A., & Farvid, P. (2010). Sexual ethics and young women's accounts of heterosexual casual sex. *Sexualities, 13*(3), 377-393. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460709363136

Bhandari, A., & Bimo, S. (2022). Why's everyone on TikTok now? The algorithmized self and the future of self-making on social media. *Social Media + Society*, *8*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221086241

Bharj, N. & Hubbard, K. (2023). Power/history/psychology: A feminist excavation. In E. L. Zurbriggen., & R. Capdevila (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Power, Gender, and Psychology* (pp. 13–28). Springer International

Bianchi, T. (2024, May 22). *Share of desktop search traffic originating from Google in selected countries as of January 2024.* https://www.statista.com/statistics/220534/googles-share-of-search-market-in-selected-countries

Blumenstock, S. M., Quinn-Nilas, C., Milhausen, R. R., & McKay, A. (2020). High emotional and sexual satisfaction among partnered midlife Canadians: Associations with relationship characteristics, sexual activity and communication, and health. *Archives of Sexual*

Behavior: The Official Publication of the International Academy of Sex Research, *49*(3), 953–967. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-01498-9

Boeker, M., & Urman, A. (2022). An empirical investigation of personalization factors on TikTok. *Proceedings of the ACM Web Conference 2022,* 2298–2309. https://doi.org/10.1145/3485447.3512102

Booth, K. M. (2019). "All the same thing": liberating reproductive politics for a mediated "gay community." *Feminist Media Studies, 19*(1), 70–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1377275

Bordo, S (1993). Feminism, Foucault, and the politics of the body. In C. Ramazanoglu (Ed.), *Up against Foucault: Explorations of some tensions between Foucault and feminism* (pp.179–202). Routledge.

Bradley, S. V. (2015). *Win the game of Googleopoly: unlocking the secret strategy of search engines*. Wiley.

Breheny, M., & Stephens, C. (2010). Youth or disadvantage? The construction of teenage mothers in medical journals. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 12*(3), 307-322. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050903513234

Brickell, C. (2006). The sociological construction of gender and sexuality. *The Sociological Review*, *54*(1), 87-113. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954x.2006.00603.x

Brooker, P., Barnett, J., Vines, J., Lawson, S., Feltwell, T., & Long, K. (2017). Doing stigma: Online commenting around weight-related news media. *New Media & Society*, *20*(9), 3201–3222. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817744790

Brown, J., Schmidt, J., & Robertson, N. (2017). "We're like the sex CPR dummies": Young women's understandings of (hetero)sexual pleasure in university accommodation. *Feminism & Psychology*, *28*(2), 253–271. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353517742500

Brown, N., Campbell, C., Owen, C., & Omrani, A. (2020). How do girls' magazines talk about breasts? *Feminism & Psychology, 30*(2), 206-226. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353519900203

Brown-Bowers, A., Gurevich, M., Vasilovsky, A. T., Cosma, S., & Matti, S. (2015). Managed not missing. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *39*(3), 320–336. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684314567303

Budgeon, S. (2015). Individualized femininity and feminist politics of choice. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 22*(3), 303–318. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506815576602

Burles, M. C., & Bally, J. M. (2018). Ethical, practical, and methodological considerations for unobtrusive qualitative research about personal narratives shared on the internet. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *17*(1), https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918788203

Burr V. (2015). *Social constructionism*. Routledge

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Calder-Dawe, O., & Gavey, N. (2017). Feminism, Foucault, and Freire: A dynamic approach to sociocultural research. *Qualitative Psychology*, *6*(3), 216–231. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000106

Campbell, B. (1980). A feminist sexual politics: Now you see it, now you don't. *Feminist Review, 5*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1980.9

Capdevila, R., & Zurbriggen, E. L. (2023). Introduction: Feminist theorizing on power, gender, and psychology. In E. L. Zurbriggen., & R. Capdevila (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Power, Gender, and Psychology* (pp. 1–12). Springer International

Carmody, M. (2005). "Ethical erotics: Reconceptualizing anti-rape education." *Sexualities 8* (4): 465– 480. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460705056621

Carpenter, L. M. (1998). From girls into women: Scripts for sexuality and romance in Seventeen magazine, 1974-1994. *The Journal of Sex Research, 35*(2), 158–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499809551929

Chaffey, D., & Ellis-Chadwick, F. (2019). *Digital marketing: strategy, implementation and practice* (7th ed.). Pearson.

Chmielewski, J. F., Tolman, D., & Kincaid, H. (2017). Constructing risk and responsibility: A gender, race, and class analysis of news representations of adolescent sexuality.

Feminist Media Studies, 17(3), 412–425. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1283348

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2019). Feminist qualitative methods and methodologies in psychology: A review and reflection. *Psychology of Women and Equalities Section Review*, 2(1), 13-28. https://doi.org/10.53841/bpspowe.2019.2.1.13

Clark, A. (2019). *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Coleman, T. M., Kearns, R. A., & Collins, D. C. A. (2010). 'Anywhere you can talk about how you feel is better': Young people's experiences of sexual health messages. *New Zealand Geographer*, *66*(1), 61–73. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-7939.2010.01171.x

Colliver, B., & Coyle, A. (2020). 'Risk of sexual violence against women and girls' in the construction of 'gender-neutral toilets': a discourse analysis of comments on YouTube videos. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, *4*(3), 359–376. https://doi.org/10.1332/239868020x15894511554617

Conde Dias, A. R., Machado, C., & Gonçalves, M. (2012). From "chastity as a gift" to "doing it as a sign of love." *SAGE Open*, *2*(4), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244012467341

Cotter, C. (2015). Discourse and media. In D. Tannen., H. E. Hamilton., & D. Schiffren (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (2nd ed, pp 795–821). Wiley

Coy, M., Horvath, M. A. H. (2018). Young People, Pornography, and Gendered Sexual Practices. In S. Lamb, & J. Gilbert (Eds.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Sexual Development:*

Childhood and Adolescence (pp. 462-482). Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology. Cambridge University Press.

Crath, R., & Rangel, C. (2017). Paradoxes of an assimilation politics: media production of gay male belonging in the Canadian 'vital public' from the tainted blood scandal to the present. *Culture Health & Sexuality*, *19*(7), 796–810. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2016.1263873

Crawford, R. (1980). Healthism and the medicalization of everyday life. *International Journal of Health Services, 10*(3), 365-388. https://doi.org/10.2190/3H2H-3XJN-3KAY-G9NY

D'Enbeau, S. (2011). Sex, feminism, and advertising: The politics of advertising feminism in a competitive marketplace. *Journal of Communication Inquiry, 35*(1), 53–69. https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859910385457

Davies, B., & Gannon, S. (2004). Feminism/Post-structuralism. In C. Lewin., & B. Somekh (Eds), *Research methods in the social sciences*. SAGE.

Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal of Theory of Social Behaviour, 20*(1), 43-63. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5914.1990.tb00174.x

Derrida, J. (1982). *Positions*. University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1972)

Dewitte, M., Mayer, A. (2018). Exploring the link between daily relationship quality, sexual desire, and sexual activity in couples. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 47, 1675–1686. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1175-x

Diamond, L. M. (2005). “I’m straight, but I kissed a girl”: The trouble with American media representations of female-female sexuality. *Feminism and Psychology, 15*(1), 104–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353505049712

Dobson, K., Zhu, J., Balzarini, R. N., & Campbell, L. (2020). Responses to sexual advances and satisfaction in romantic relationships: Is yes good and no bad? *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 11*(6), 801-811. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619888884

Drüeke, R., & Zobl, E. (2016). Forming publics: Alternative media and activist cultural perspectives. In G. Meikle (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to media and activism* (pp. 134–141). Routledge

Eg, R., Tønnesen, Ö. D., & Tennfjord, M. K. (2023). A scoping review of personalized user experiences on social media: The interplay between algorithms and human factors. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, *9*, 100253. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2022.100253

Ess, C. (2012). Internet research ethics. In A. Joinson., K. McKenna., T. Postmes. & U. Reips (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Internet Psychology* (pp.487-505). Oxford Academic

Evans, A., & Riley, S. (2014). *Technologies of sexiness: sex, identity, and consumer culture.* Oxford University Press.

Evans, A., & Riley, S. (2020). The righteous outrage of post-truth anti-feminism: An analysis of TubeCrush and feminist research in and of public space. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *25*(1), 25–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420951574

Fahs, B., & McClelland, S. I. (2016). When sex and power collide: An argument for critical sexuality studies. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *53*(4–5), 392–416. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1152454

Fahs, B., Swank, E., & McClelland, S. I. (2018). Sexuality, pleasure, power, and danger: Points of tension, contradiction, and conflict. In C. B. Travis., J. W. White., A. Rutherford., W. S. Williams., S. L. Cook., & K. F. Wyche (Eds.). *APA handbook of the psychology of women: History, theory, and battlegrounds., Vol. 1.* (pp. 229–247). American Psychological Association.

Fahs, B., Swank, E., & Shambe, A. (2020). "I just go with It": Negotiating sexual desire discrepancies for women in partnered relationships. *Sex Roles*, *83*(3–4), 226–239. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-01098-w

Farhall, K. (2018). 'Girl-on-girl confessions!'Changing representations of female–female sexuality in two Australian women's magazines. *Sexualities, 21*(1–2), 212–232. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716679388

Farvid, P. (2014). "Oh, it Was Good Sex!" Heterosexual women's (counter)narratives of desire and pleasure in casual sex. In S. McKenzie-Mohr., & M. N. Lafrance (Eds), *Women voicing resistance: Discursive and narrative explorations* (pp. 121–140). Routledge.

Farvid, P. (2015). Heterosexuality. In C. Richards., & M. J Barker (Eds.). *The Palgrave Handbook of the Psychology of Sexuality and Gender* (pp.92–108. Springer

Farvid, P., & Braun, V. (2006). “Most of us guys are raring to go anytime, anyplace, anywhere”: Male and female sexuality in Cleo and Cosmo. *Sex Roles, 55*, 295–310. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9084-1

Farvid, P., & Braun, V. (2014). The “Sassy Woman” and the “Performing Man”: Heterosexual casual sex advice and the (re)constitution of gendered subjectivities. *Feminist Media Studies*, *14*(1), 118–134. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.724027

Farvid, P., Braun, V., & Rowney, C. (2016). ‘No girl wants to be called a slut!’: women, heterosexual casual sex and the sexual double standard. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *26*(5), 544–560. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1150818

Favaro, L., Gill, R., & Harvey, L. (2017). Making media data: An introduction to qualitative media research. In V. Braun., V. Clarke., & D. Gray (Eds.*), Collecting qualitative data: A practical guide to textual, media and virtual techniques* (pp. 117-118). Cambridge

Featherstone, L. (2005). Sexy mamas? Women, sexuality and reproduction in Australia in the1940s. *Australian Historical Studies, 36*(126), 234-252. https://doi.org/10.1080/10314610508682922

Fine, M. (1988). Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Educational Review, 58*(1), 29-53. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.58.1.u0468k1v2n2n8242

Fine, M., & McClelland, S. I. (2006). Sexuality education and desire: Still missing after all these years. *Harvard Educational Review, 76*(3), 297-338. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.76.3.w5042g23122n6703

Finlay, L. (2002). "Outing" the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research*, *12*(4), 531–545. https://doi.org/10.1177/104973202129120052

Finlay, L. (2003). The reflexive journey: Mapping multiple routes. In L. Finlay & B. Gough (Eds.), *Reflexivity: A practical guide for researchers in health and social sciences* (pp. 3–20). Blackwell Science.

Finlay, L. (2006). 'Rigour', 'ethical integrity' or 'artistry'? Reflexively reviewing criteria for evaluating qualitative research. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *69*(7), 319–326. https://doi.org/10.1177/030802260606900704

Folgerø, T. (2009). Queer nuclear families? Reproducing and transgressing heteronormativity. In P. Bjorby., & A. Ryall (Eds.), *Queering Norway* (1st ed., pp.124–149). Routledge.

Forster, L. (2022, August 6). Spare Rib: 50 years since the groundbreaking feminist magazine first hit the streets – its legacy still inspires women. *The Conversation.* https://theconversation.com/spare-rib-50-years-since-the-groundbreaking-feminist-magazine-first-hit-the-streets-its-legacy-still-inspires-women-186876

Foucault, 1991. Governmentality. In G. Burchell., C. Gordon., & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 87-104). University of Chicago Press

Foucault, M (1980). *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. The Harvester Press.

Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: An introduction (Vol. 1).* Random House.

Foucault, M. (1984). Polemics, politics, and problematizations. In P. Rabinow (Ed.) *The Foucault reader: An introduction to Foucault's thought* (pp.381-390). Penguin Books.

Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16-49). University of Massachusetts Press.

Foucault, M. (1994). *Ethics: subjectivity and truth*. The New Press.

Foucault, M. (2002). *Archaeology of knowledge*. Routledge.

Fraser, N. (1989). *Unruly practices: Power, discourse and gender in contemporary social theory*. Polity.

Frith, H. (2015a). Sexercising to orgasm: Embodied pedagogy and sexual labour in women's magazines. *Sexualities, 18*(3), 310–328. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460714550912

Frith, H. (2015b). *Orgasmic bodies: The orgasm in contemporary western culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Frost, R., & Donovan, C.L. (2021). A qualitative exploration of the distress experienced by long-term heterosexual couples when women have low sexual desire. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 36 (1)*, 22 - 45. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2018.1549360

gal-dem (2023, March 31). *Goodbye from gal-dem*. https://web.archive.org/web/20240228161226/https://gal-dem.com/gal-dem-goodbye-letter/

Gannon, S., & Davies, B. (2012). Postmodern, post-structural, and critical theories. In S. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2 ed., pp. 65-91). Sage

García-Favaro, L. 2016. 'Porn trouble:' On the sexual regime and travels of postfeminist biologism. *Australian Feminist Studies, 30*(86), 366–376. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2016.1150937

Garland-Levett, S. (2017). Exploring discursive barriers to sexual health and social justice in the New Zealand sexuality education curriculum. *Sex Education, 17*(2), 121-134. http://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2016.1233396

Gavey, N. (1989). Feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis: Contributions to feminist psychology. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 13*(4), 459–475. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1989.tb01014.x

Gavey, N. (1997). Feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis. In M. M. Gergen., & S. N. Davis (Eds.), *Towards a new psychology of gender: A reader* (pp. 49–54). Routledge

Gavey, N. (2005). Just sex? The cultural scaffolding of rape. Routledge.

Gavey, N. (2011). Feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis revisited. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *35*(1), 183–188. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684310395916

Gavey, N. (2012). Beyond “empowerment”? Sexuality in a sexist world. *Sex Roles, 66,* 718–724. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-0069-3

Gibson, A., & Macleod, C., (2014). Beyond ‘coming out': Lesbians' (alternative) stories of sexual identity told in post-apartheid South Africa. In S. McKenzie-Mohr & M. N. Lafrance (Eds.), *Women voicing resistance: Discursive and narrative explorations* (pp. 29-43). Routledge.

Gilchrist, K. R. (2024). Self-knowledge, self-regulation and ambivalence: the production of female desire in the US-UK popular cultural imaginary. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2299989

Giles, D. (2017). Online Discussion Forums. In V. Braun., & V. Clarke (Eds.), *Collecting qualitative data: a practical guide to textual, media and virtual techniques* (pp. 166–188). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107295094.010

Gil-Glazer, Y. (2023). Between sexism and sexual liberation: Oz magazine as sex education agent in Britain in the 1960s–1970s. *Sexuality & Culture 27(1)*, 211–241. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-022-10010-w

Gill, R. (2000). Discourse Analysis. In M. W. Bauer & G. Gaskell (Eds.), Qualitative researching with text, image and sound: a practical handbook (pp. 172-190). Sage.

Gill, R. (2006). *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 10*(2), 147–166. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898

Gill, R. (2008). Empowerment/sexism: Figuring female sexual agency in contemporary advertising. *Feminism and Psychology, 18*(1), 35-60. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353507084950

Gill, R. (2009). Mediated intimacy and postfeminism: A discourse analytic examination of sex and relationships advice in a women's magazine. *Discourse & Communication, 3*(4), 345–369. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481309343870

Gill, R. (2017). The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 20*(6), 606–626. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417733003

Gill, R., Kelan, E. K., & Scharff, C. M. (2016). A postfeminist sensibility at work. *Gender Work and Organization*, *24*(3), 226–244. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12132

Gill, R., & Orgad, S. (2018). The shifting terrain of sex and power: From the 'sexualization of culture' to #MeToo. *Sexualities, 21*(8), 1313-1324. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460718794647

Gough, B. (2003). Deconstructing reflexivity. In L. Finlay & B. Gough (Eds.), *Reflexivity: A practical guide for researchers in health and social sciences* (pp. 21–35). Blackwell Science.

Graham, R. (2022). *Investigating Google's search engine: Ethics, algorithms, and the machines built to read us*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Gray, J. (1992). *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. Thorsons.

Gunnarsson Payne, J. (2012). Feminist media as alternative media? Theorising feminist media from the perspective of alternative media studies. In E. Zobl & R. Drüeke (Eds.), Feminist media: Participatory spaces, networks, and cultural citizenship (pp. 55-72). Transcript

Gupta, A. E., Zimmerman, T. S., & Fruhauf, C. A. (2008). Relationship advice in the top selling women's magazine, Cosmopolitan: A content analysis. *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy, 7*(3), 248–266. https://doi.org/10.1080/15332690802237987

Gupta, K. (2016). "And now I'm just different, but there's nothing actually wrong with me": asexual marginalization and resistance. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *64*(8), 991–1013. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1236590

Gupta, K., & K. J. Cerankowski. (2017). Asexualities and Media. In C. Smith., & F. Attwood (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality (1st ed.)* (pp. 19–26). Routledge

Gupta, S., Jain, G., & Tiwari, A. A. (2022). Polarised social media discourse during COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from YouTube. *Behaviour and Information Technology*, *42*(2), 227–248. https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929x.2022.2059397

Habel, M. A., Lidden, N., & Stryker, J. E. (2009). The HPV vaccine: A content analysis of online news stories. *Journal of Women's Health 18*(3), 401–407. https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2008.0920

Hall, M. (2018). Disability, discourse and desire: Analyzing online talk by people with disabilities. *Sexualities*, *21*(3), 379-392. https://doi-org.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/10.1177/1363460716688675

Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage, in association with The Open University

Hansen, A. S., & Hartley, J. M. (2021). Designing what's news: An ethnography of a personalization algorithm and the data-driven (re)assembling of the news. *Digital Journalism*, *11*(6), 924–942. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1988861

Harris, A. (2003). GURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines: The Regulation and Resistance of Girls in Late Modernity. *Feminist Review*, *75*(1), 38–56. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400116

Harris, E. A., Gormezano, A. M., & van Anders, S. M. (2022). Gender inequities in household labour predict lower sexual desire in women partnered with men. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour, 51*, 3847–3870. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-022-02397-2

Harvey, L., & Gill, R. (2011). Spicing it up: Sexual entrepreneurs and the sex inspectors. In R. Gill, R., & C. Scharff (Eds.), *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity* (pp. 52-67). Palgrave Macmillian.

Hayfield, N., & Clarke, V. (2012). "I'd be just as happy with a cup of tea": Women's accounts of sex and affection in long-term heterosexual relationships. *Womens Studies International Forum*, *35*(2), 67–74. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2012.01.003

Healy-Cullen, S., Morison, T., Taylor, J. E., & Taylor, K. (2024). Performing smart sexual selves: A sexual scripting analysis of youth talk about internet pornography. *Sexualities*, *27*(8), 1656–1672. https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607231152596

Healy-Cullen, S., Taylor, J.E., Ross, K., Morison, T. (2022). Youth encounters with internet pornography: A survey of youth, caregiver, and educator perspectives. *Sexuality & Culture, 26*(2), 491–513 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-021-09904-y

Henriques, J., Hollway, W., Urwin, C., Venn, C., & Walkerdine, V. (1984). Changing the subject: Psychology, social regulation and subjectivity. Methuen & Co.

Hines, S. (2017). The feminist frontier: on trans and feminism. *Journal of Gender Studies, 28*(2), 145-157. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1411791

Hines, S. (2020). Sex wars and (trans) gender panics: Identity and body politics in contemporary UK feminism. *Sociological Review, 68*(4), 699-717. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120934684

Holden, A. C. L. (2019). Dentistry and Oral Health in Online Media Sources: A Discourse Analysis. *Community Dental Health*, *36*(3), 221-228. https://doi.org/10.1922/cdh_4623holden08

Holland, J., Ramazanoglu, C., Sharpe, S., & Thomson, R. (1998). *The male in the head: Young people, heterosexuality and power.* The Tufnell Press.

Hollows, J. (2013). Spare rib, second-wave feminism and the politics of consumption. *Feminist Media Studies, 13*(2), 268–287. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.708508

Hollway, W. (1984). Gender Difference and the Production of Subjectivity. In, J. Henriques, W. Hollway, C. Urwin, C. Venn and V. Walkerdine (eds) *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity*, pp. 227–63. Routledge.

Hollway, W. (1989). *Subjectivity and method in psychology: Gender, meaning and science*. Sage Publications.

Holtzman, E. M. (1982). The Pursuit of Married Love: Women's Attitudes toward Sexuality and Marriage in Great Britain, 1918-1939. *Journal of Social History*, *16*(2), 39–51. https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh/16.2.39

Hookway, N. (2008). `Entering the blogosphere': some strategies for using blogs in social research. *Qualitative Research*, *8*(1), 91–113. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794107085298

Huntington, A. D., & Gilmour, J. A. (2001). Re-thinking representations, re-writing nursing texts: possibilities through feminist and Foucauldian thought. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *35*(6), 902–908. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2001.01927.x

Impett, E. A., Muise, A., & Harasymchuk, C. (2019). Giving in the bedroom: The costs and benefits of responding to a partner's sexual needs in daily life. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *36*(8), 2455–2473. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407518787349

Irvine, J. M. (2005). *Disorders of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Modern American Sexology*. Temple University Press.

Jackson, M. (1984). Sex research and the construction of sexuality: A tool of male supremacy? *Women's Studies International Forum, 7*(1), 43–51. https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(84)90083-9

Jackson, M. (1994). *The real facts of life: Feminism and the politics of sexuality, c1850-1940*. Taylor & Francis.

Jackson, S, M., & Cram, F. (2003). Disrupting the sexual double standard: Young women's talk about heterosexuality. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 42*, 113–127. https://doi.org/10.1348/014466603763276153

Jackson, S. (2005). "I'm 15 and desperate for sex": "Doing" and "undoing" desire in letters to a teenage magazine. *Feminism and Psychology, 15*(3), 295–313. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959-353505054717

Jackson, S., & Scott, S. (2002). Embodying orgasm. *Women & Therapy*, *24*(1–2), 99–110. https://doi.org/10.1300/j015v24n01_13

Jackson, S., & Weatherall, A. (2010). The (im)possibilities of feminist school based sexuality education. *Feminism and Psychology, 20*(2), 166-185. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353509349603

Jearey-Graham, N. & Macleod, C. (2015). A discourse of disconnect: young people from the Eastern Cape talk about the failure of adult communications to provide habitable sexual subject positions. *Perspectives in Education*, *33*(2),11-29. http://www.perspectives-in-education.com

Jenkins, J. M., & Johnson, E. K. (2017). Body politics: Coverage of health topics and policy in U.S. feminist magazines. *Mass Communication and Society, 20*(2), 260–280. https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2016.1227994

Joshi, S. P., Peter, J., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2011). Scripts of sexual desire and danger in US and Dutch teen girl magazines: A cross-national content analysis. *Sex Roles*, *64*(7–8), 463–474. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-9941-4

Jowett, A. (2014). 'But if you legalise same-sex marriage ': Arguments against marriage equality in the British press. *Feminism & Psychology*, *24*(1), 37–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353513510655

Kao, E. (2017, October 27). Making search results more local and relevant. https://blog.google/products/search/making-search-results-more-local-and-relevant/

Kim, J. J., Muise, A., Barranti, M., Mark, K. P., Rosen, N. O., Harasymchuk, C., & Impett, E. (2021). Are couples more satisfied when they match in sexual desire? new insights from response surface analyses. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 12*(4), 487-496. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550620926770

Kim, J. L., & Ward, L. M. (2012). Striving for pleasure without fear. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *36*(3), 326–336. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684312442856

Kim, J. L., Sorsoli, C. L., Collins, K., Zylbergold, B. A., Schooler, D., & Tolman, D. (2007). From sex to sexuality: Exposing the heterosexual script on primetime network television. *Journal of Sex Research, 44*(2), 145-157. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490701263660

Kitchens, B., Harle, C. A., & Li, S. (2014). Quality of health-related online search results. *Decision Support Systems*, *57*, 454–462. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2012.10.050

Kong K. (2014). *Professional Discourse*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi:10.1017/CBO9781139177962.001

Lafrance, M. N., & McKenzie-Mohr, S. (2013). The DSM and its lure of legitimacy. *Feminism & Psychology*, *23*(1), 119–140. https://doi-org.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/10.1177/0959353512467974

Lafrance, M. N., & Wigginton, B. (2019). Doing critical feminist research: A Feminism & Psychology reader. *Feminism & Psychology*, *29*(4), 534–552. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353519863075

Lamb, S., & Peterson, Z. D. (2012). Adolescent girls' sexual empowerment: Two feminists explore the concept. *Sex Roles*, *66*, 703–712. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-9995-3

Lee, S. Y., & Kim, J-H. (2023). What makes people more polarized? The effects of anonymity, being with like-minded others, and the moderating role of need for approval. *Telematics and Informatics*, 76, Article 101922. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2022.101922

Linné, R. (2003). Alternative textualities: media culture and the proto-queer. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *16*(5), 669–689. https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839032000142940

Loeser, C., Pini, B., & Crowley, V. (2018). Disability and sexuality: Desires and pleasures. *Sexualities, 21*(3), 255–270. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716688682

Lorde, A. (1978). *Uses of the erotic: The erotic as power*. Out & Out Books.

MacKinnon, C. A. (1987). *Feminism unmodified: Discourses on life and law*. Harvard University Press.

MacLeod, C, & Durrheim, K. (2002). Foucauldian Feminism: the Implications of Governmentality. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 32*(1), 41-60. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5914.00175

Macleod, C. (2006). Radical plural feminisms and emancipatory practice in post-apartheid South Africa. *Theory & Psychology, 16*(3), 367-389. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354306064284

Macleod, C., & Morison, T. (2015). *Men's pathways to parenthood: silences and heterosexual gender norms*. HSRC Press

Marecek, J., & Gavey, N. (2013). DSM-5 and beyond: A critical feminist engagement with psychodiagnosis. *Feminism & Psychology, 23*(1), 3-9. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353512467962

Markham, A. N., & Gammelby, A. K. (2018). Moving through digital flows: An epistemological and practical approach. In U. Flick (Ed.) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection (*pp.451-453). SAGE

Markle, G. (2008). "Can women have sex like a man?": Sexual scripts in Sex and the City. *Sexuality & Culture 12*, 45–57. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-007-9019-1

Massey University Human Ethics Committee (2017). *Code of ethical conduct for research, teaching and evaluation involving human participants.* https://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/fms/PolicyGuide/Documents/c/code-of-ethical-conduct-for-research,-teaching-and-evaluations-involving-human-participants.pdf

Masters, W. H., & Johnson, V. E. (1966). *Human sexual response*. Ishi Press.

Mattos, A. (2015). Feminist psychology: Researches, interventions, challenges. In Parker(Ed.), *Handbook of critical psychology* (pp.329–338). Routledge.

McClelland, S. I. (2010). Intimate justice: A critical analysis of sexual satisfaction. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *4*(9), 663–680. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00293.x

McClelland, S. I. (2018). Critical methods for studying adolescent sexuality. In J. Gilbert & S. Lamb (Eds.), *The ambridge handbook of sexual development: Childhood and adolescence* (pp. 281–299). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108116121.015

McCormick, K. (2024, February 26). *How much does Google Ads cost in 2024?* https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2015/05/21/how-much-does-adwords-cost

McGannon, K. R., Berry, T. R., Rodgers, W. M., & Spence, J. C. (2016). Breast cancer representations in Canadian news media: A critical discourse analysis of meanings and the implications for identity. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *13*(2), 188-207. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2016.1145774

McLaughlin, M. J. (2023). Remedies for the housewife's nervousness: Life advice in Abraham Myerson's popular self-help texts, 1920–1930. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 59, 380–398. https://doi.org/10.1002/jhbs.22250

McPhillips, K., Braun, V., & Gavey, N. (2001). Defining (hetero)sex: How imperative is the "coital imperative?" *Women's Studies International Forum, 24*(2), 229–240. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(01)00160-1

McRobbie, A. (2004). Post-feminism and popular culture. *Feminist Media Studies, 4*(3), 255–264. https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000309937

McRobbie, A. (2007). Top Girls? Young women and the post-feminist sexual contract. *Cultural Studies, 21*(4-5), 718-737. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380701279044

McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. SAGE Publications.

McVean, A. (2017, July 31). The history of hysteria. Office for Science and Society; McGill University. https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-quackery/history-hysteria

Ménard, A. D., & Kleinplatz, P. J. (2008). Twenty-one moves guaranteed to make his thighs go up in flames: Depictions of “great sex” in popular magazines. *Sexuality & Culture, 12*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-007-9013-7

Möller, C., Passam, S., Riley, S., & Robson, M. (2023). All inside our heads? A critical discursive review of unconscious bias training in the sciences. *Gender Work and Organization*, *31*(3), 797–820. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13028

Moor, A., Haimov, Y., & Shreiber, S. (2021). When desire fades: Women talk about their subjective experience of declining sexual desire in loving long-term

relationships. *Journal of Sex Research*, *58*(2), 160–169. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2020.1743225

Moran, C., & Lee, C. (2011). On his terms: Representations of sexuality in women's magazines and the implications for negotiating safe sex. *Psychology and Sexuality, 2*(2), 159–180. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2010.534489

Morison, T., & Herbert, S. (2019). Muted resistance: The deployment of youth voice in news coverage of young women's sexuality in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Feminism & Psychology*, *30*(1), 80–99. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353519864376

Morison, T., & Lynch, I. (2019). 'Living two lives' and 'blending in': Reproductive citizenship and belonging in the parenthood narratives of gay men. In T. Morison., I. Lynch., & V. Reddy (Eds.), *Queer Kinship: South African perspectives on the sexual politics of family-making and belonging* (pp. 167–189). Routledge.

Morison, T., & Macleod, C. (2013). A performative-performance analytical approach: Infusing Butlerian theory into the narrative-discursive method. *Qualitative Inquiry, 19*, 566–577. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413494344

Morison, T., & Reddy, V. (2013). Familiar claims: Representations of same-gendered families in South African mainstream news media. In C. Lubbe & J. Marnell (Eds.), *Home affairs: Rethinking lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender families in contemporary South Africa* (pp. 21-49). Johannesburg: Fanele Press.

Morison, T., Gibson, A. F., Wiggington, B. & Crabb, S. (2015). Online research methods in psychology: Methodological opportunities for critical qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 12* (3), 223-232. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2015.1008899

Morison, T., Macleod, C. I., & Lynch, I. (2022). "My Friends Would Laugh at Me": Embedding the Dominant Heterosexual Script in the Talk of Primary School Students. *Gender and Education*, *34*(3), 329–345. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1929856

Morison, T., Macleod, C., Lynch, I., Mijas, M., & Shivakumar, S. T. (2016). Stigma resistance in online childfree communities: The limitations of choice rhetoric. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 40*(2), 184–198. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684315603657

Muise, A. (2011). Women's sex blogs: Challenging dominant discourses of heterosexual desire. Feminism & Psychology, 21(3), 411-419. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353511411691

Nayak, P. (2022, February 3). How AI powers great search results. *Google.com.* https://blog.google/products/search/how-ai-powers-great-search-results/

Nentwich, J. C., & Morison, T. (2018). Performing the self: Performativity and discursive psychology. In C. B. Travis, J. W. White, A. Rutherford, W. S. Williams, S. L. Cook, & K. F. Wyche (Eds.), *APA handbook of the psychology of women: History, theory, and battlegrounds* (pp. 209–228). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/0000059-011

Neuhaus, J. (2000). The importance of being orgasmic: Sexuality, gender, and marital sex manuals in the United States, 1920-1963. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, *9*(4), 447–473. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16856308

Noble, S. U. (2013, October 29). Google Search: Hyper-visibility as a means of rendering Black women and girls invisible. *InVisible Culture*. https://doi.org/10.47761/494a02f6.50883fff

Noble, S. U. (2018). Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism. NYU Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pwt9w5

Norton, (2021). Poststructuralist research on language, gender, and sexuality. In J. Angouri., & J. Baxter (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language, gender, and sexuality* (1st ed., pp. 399–407). Routledge

Ørmen, J. (2015). Googling the news. *Digital Journalism*, *4*(1), 107–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2015.1093272

Ørmen, J. (2016). Are you paying attention? Keeping up with news in daily life. In Jensen J., Mortensen, M., Ørmen, J. (Eds), *News across Media: Production, Distribution and Consumption (pp.162-180)*. Routledge.

Parker, I. (1994). *Discourse dynamics: Critical analysis for social and individual psychology.* Routledge.

Parker, I. (2002). Discourse: Definitions and contradictions. In *Critical discursive psychology* (pp. 142-159). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Parker, I. (2015). *Critical discursive psychology (Second edition)*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Pascoal, P. M., Byers, E. S., Alvarez, M. J., Santos-Iglesias, P., Nobre, P. J., Pereira, C. R., & Laan, E. (2018). A dyadic approach to understanding the link between sexual functioning and sexual satisfaction in heterosexual couples. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *55*(9), 1155–1166. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2017.1373267

Pausé (2015). Human nature: On fat sexual identity and agency. In H. Hester & C. Walters (Eds.), *Fat sex: New directions in theory and activism* (pp.37–48). Routledge.

Péloquin, K., Byers, E. S., Callaci, M., & Tremblay, N. (2019). Sexual portrait of couples seeking relationship therapy. *Journal Of Marital And Family Therapy*, *45*(1), 120–133. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12328

Piran, N. (2017). *Journeys of embodiment at the intersection of body and culture: The developmental theory of embodiment.* Academic Press, an imprint of Elsevier.

Pond, T. (2020). "It's almost like an ownership of my body": Negotiating identity and marginalisation in the lives of bisexual and other plurisexual women [Doctoral dissertation, Auckland University of Technology]. Auckland University of Technology Repository. https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/items/e0fa7a9f-26da-4b07-83bc-c45bd9ba9a09

Poovey, M. (1990). Speaking of the body: Mid-victorian constructions of female desire. In M. Jacobus, E. F. Keller, & S. Shuttleworth (Eds.), *Body/politics: women and the discourses of science (pp. 29-46)*. Routledge.

Potter, J. & Wetherall, M. (1994). Analysing Discourse. In A. Bryman & B. Burgess (Eds.), *Analyzing Qualitative Data (1st ed.*) (pp. 47-66). Routledge

Potts, A. (1998). The science/fiction of sex: John Gray's Mars and Venus in the bedroom. *Sexualities, 1*(2), 153-173. https://doi.org/10.1177/136346098001002002

Potts, A. (2000). Coming, coming, gone: A feminist deconstruction of heterosexual orgasm. *Sexualities, 3*(1), 55-76. https://doi.org/10.1177/136346000003001003

Puschmann, C. (2018). Beyond the bubble: Assessing the diversity of political search results. *Digital Journalism*, *7*(6), 824–843. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1539626

Radner, H. (1999) 'Introduction: Queering the Girl'. In, H. Radner and M. Luckett (Eds.), *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s.* University of Minnesota Press.

Radner, H. (2008). Compulsory sexuality and the desiring woman. *Sexualities, 11*(1-2), 94-100. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460708011001030 4

Radway, J. (2016). Girl Zine networks, underground itineraries, and riot GrrRl history: making sense of the struggle for new social forms in the 1990s and beyond. *Journal of American Studies*, *50*(1), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021875815002625

Ramazanoglu, C., & Holland, J. (1993). Women's sexuality and men's appropriation of desire. In C. Ramazanoğlu (Ed.), *Up against Foucault: Explorations of some tensions between Foucault and Feminism* (pp. 239-264). Routledge.

Read, B., & Leathwood, C. (2021). Gender and the politics of knowledge in the academy. In A. Ross (Ed), *Educational Research for Social Justice: Evidence and Practice from the UK* (pp. 205-222). Springer

Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. *Signs*, *5*(4), 631–660. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173834

Richardson, N. (2017). The invisibles: Disability, sexuality and new strategies of enfreakment. In C. Smith., & F. Attwood (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality (1st ed.)* (pp. 328–339). Routledge

Riley, S. & Wiggins, S. (2019). Discourse analysis. In C. Sullivan & M. Forrester (Eds.), *Doing qualitative research in psychology* (2nd edition., pp 233–256). Sage.

Riley, S., Evans, A., & Robson, M. (2019). *Postfeminism and health: Critical psychology and media perspectives*. Routledge.

Riley, S., Evans, A., Anderson, E., & Robson, M. (2019). The gendered nature of self-help. *Feminism and Psychology, 29*(1), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353519826162

Riley, S., Evans, A., Elliott, S., Rice, C., & Marecek, J. (2017). A critical review of postfeminist sensibility. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 11*(12), e12367. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12367

Riley, S., Robson, M., & Evans, A. (2021). Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis. In, Bamberg, M., Demuth, C., & Watzlawik, M. (Eds.), *Cambridge handbook on identity* (pp. 285-303). Cambridge University Press.

Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R., & Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory*, *14*(3), 305–323. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700113499853

Roberti, G. (2022). Female influencers: Analyzing the social media representation of female subjectivity in Italy. *Frontiers in Sociology,* 7(1024043). https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2022.1024043

Roberts, M. (2005). The production of the psychiatric subject: power, knowledge and Michel Foucault. *Nursing Philosophy*, *6*(1), 33–42. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1466-769x.2004.00196.x

Rodríguez-López, R. (2023). Technologies of the self in culture: critical reflections on the self-managed subject. *Subjectivity*, *30*(2), 152–166. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41286-023-00162-x

Rohleder, P., & Swartz, L. (2012). Disability, sexuality and sexual health. In P. Aggleton., P. Boyce., H. L. Moore., R. Parker (Eds.), *Understanding Global Sexualities: New Frontiers*, (pp. 138–152). Routledge

Rose, N. (1985). *The psychological complex: Psychology, politics and society in England 1869–1939*. Routledge & Kegan Paul

Rubin, Gayle (1984). Thinking Sex. In C. Vance (Ed.), *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality*. Routledge & Kegan Paul

Rubin, J. D., Conley, T. D., Klein, V., Liu, J., Lehane, C. M., & Dammeyer, J. (2019). A cross-national examination of sexual desire: The roles of 'gendered cultural scripts' and 'sexual pleasure' in predicting heterosexual women's desire for sex. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *151*, 109502. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.07.012

Sagredos, C., & Nikolova, E. (2021). 'Slut I hate you' A critical discourse analysis of gendered conflict on YouTube. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, *10*(1), 169–196. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00065.sag

Salisbury, J. E. (1996). Gendered Sexuality. In Bullough, V. L., & Brundage, J. (Eds.), *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality (1st ed.)* (pp. 81-102). Routledge. https://doi-org.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/10.4324/9780203054284

Sciberras, R., & Tanner, C. (2022). Feminist sex-positive art on Instagram: reorienting the sexualizing gaze. *Feminist Media Studies*, *23*(6), 2696–2711. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2080752

Sciberras, R., & Tanner, C. (2023). 'Sex is so much more than penis in vagina': sex education, pleasure and ethical erotics on Instagram. *Sex Education*, *24*(3), 344–357. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2023.2199976

Scullard, P., Peacock, C., & Davies, P. (2010). Googling children's health: reliability of medical advice on the internet. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, *95*(8), 580–582. https://doi.org/10.1136/adc.2009.168856

Segev, E. (2019). Volume and control: the transition from information to power. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, *14*(3), 240–257. https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2019.1662028

Seidman, S. (1991). *Romantic longings: Love in America, 1830-1980*. Routledge.

Settles, I. H., Pratt-Hyatt, J. S., & Buchanan, N. T. (2008). Through the lens of race: Black and white women's perceptions of womanhood. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 32*(4), 454-468. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.2008.00458.x

Shakespeare, T., & Richardson, S. (2018). The sexual politics of disability, twenty years on. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 20*(1), 82–91. http://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.25

Shields, S. A. (2016). Functionalism, Darwinism, and advances in the psychology of women and gender: From the 19th century to the 21st. *Feminism & Psychology, 26*(4), 397-404. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353516663567

Siles, I., Valerio-Alfaro, L., & Meléndez-Moran, A. (2024). Learning to like TikTok . . . and not: Algorithm awareness as process. *New Media & Society*, *26*(10), 5702-5718. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221138973

Smith, E. (2022, April 13). After 26 years, Bitch Media is coming to a close. *Lit Hub.* https://lithub.com/after-26-years-bitch-media-is-coming-to-a-close/

Smith, S. H. (2012). Scripting Sexual desire: Cultural scenarios of teen girls' sexual desire in popular films, 2000–2009. *Sexuality & Culture*, *16*(3), 321–341. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-012-9126-5

Spurgas, A. K. (2013). Interest, arousal, and shifting diagnoses of female sexual dysfunction, or: how women learn about desire. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality, 14*(3), 187–205. https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2013.818854

Spurgas, A. K. (2020). *Diagnosing desire: Biopolitics and Femininity Into the Twenty-first Century.* Abnormalities: Queer/Gender/Em.

Spurlin, W. J. (2023). Queer theory and biomedical practice: The biomedicalization of sexuality/the cultural politics of biomedicine. In R. Garden., & W. J., Spurlin (Eds.),*Queer interventions in biomedicine and public health* (pp. 7–20). Springer International

Stanley, L., & Wise, S. (2000). But the empress has no clothes! Some awkward questions about the 'missing revolution'in feminist theory. *Feminist Theory*, *1*(3), 261–288.

Sykes, S., & Hopner, V. (2024). Tradwives: Right-wing social media influencers. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 53*(4), 453-487. https://doi.org/10.1177/08912416241246273

Sullivan-Blum, C. R. (2006). ‘‘The natural order of creation’’: Naturalizing discourses in the Christian same-sex marriage debate. *Anthropologica, 48*, 203–215. https://doi.org/10.2307/25605311

Takahashi, B., & Tandoc Jr, E. C. (2016). Media sources, credibility, and perceptions of science: Learning about how people learn about science. *Public Understanding of Science*, *25*(6), 674-690. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662515574986

Tappin, J., Riley, S., & Morison, T. (2023). How to have great sex: Exploring sexual subjectivities and discourses of desire in mainstream online media aimed at women. *Feminism & Psychology, 34*(1). 172–192. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535231195957

Taylor, V., & Rupp, L. J. (2005). Crossing boundaries in participatory action research: Performing protest with drag queens. In D. Croteau, W. Hoynes, & C. Ryan. (Eds.), *Rhyming hope and history: Activism and social movement scholarship*, (pp. 239-264). University of Minnesota Press

Thomas, E. E., Griffin, A. A., & Toliver, S. R. (2023). Intersectionality and discourse analysis. In M. Handford & J. P. Gee (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis* (2nd ed., pp. 217–230). Routledge.

Thomas, E. J., & Gurevich, M. (2021). Difference or dysfunction?: Deconstructing desire in the DSM-5 diagnosis of Female Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder. *Feminism & Psychology, 31*(1), 81-98. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353521989536

Thon, F. M., & Jucks, R. (2017). Believing in expertise: How authors' credentials and language use influence the credibility of online health information. *Health Communication*, *32*(7), 828-836. https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2016.1172296

Tiefer, L. (1996) The medicalization of sexuality: Conceptual, normative, and professional issues. *Annual Review of Sex Research, 7*(1), 252-282. https://doi.org/10.1080/10532528.1996.10559915

Tiefer, L. (2001). The selling of "Female sexual dysfunction." *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, *27*(5), 625–628. https://doi.org/10.1080/713846822

Tiefer, L. (2006). Female sexual dysfunction: A case study of disease mongering and activist resistance. *PLoS Medicine, 3*(4), e178. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.0030178

Tiidenberg, K. (2018). Ethics in digital research. In U. Flick (Ed.) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection* (pp. 466-479). SAGE

Tiidenberg, K., & van der Nagel, E. (2020). *Sex and Social Media*. Emerald Publishing Limited.

Todd, S. (2017). Models and menstruation: Spare Rib magazine, feminism, femininity and pleasure. *Studies in Social and Political Thought*. https://doi.org/10.20919/sspt.26.2016.54

Tolman, D. (2002). *Dilemmas of desire*. Harvard University Press.

Tolman, D. (2012). Female adolescents, sexual empowerment and desire: A missing discourse of gender inequity. *Sex Roles, 66*(11-12), 746-757. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-012-0122-x

Tolman, D., & Diamond, L. (2001). Desegregating sexuality research: Cultural and biological perspectives on gender and desire. *Annual Review of Sex Research, 12*, 33-74. https://doi.org/10.1080/10532528.2001.10559793

Trinh, S. L. (2016). "Enjoy Your Sexuality, but Do it in Secret": Exploring Undergraduate Women's Reports of Friends' Sexual Communications. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *40*(1), 96-107. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684315596914

Tsatsou, P. (2012). Gender and Sexuality in the Internet Era. In Ross. K (Ed), *The handbook of gender, sex, and media.* Wiley-Blackwell.

Ussher, J. M. (1993). The construction of female sexual problems: Regulating sex, regulating women. In J. Ussher & C. Baker (Eds.), *Psychological perspectives on sexual problems*. Routledge

Ussher, J. M. (2013). Diagnosing difficult women and pathologising femininity: Gender bias in psychiatric nosology. Feminism & Psychology, 23(1), 63-69. https://doi-org.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/10.1177/0959353512467968

Van Anders, S. M., Herbenick, D., Brotto, L. A., Harris, E. A., & Chadwick, S. B. (2021). The heteronormativity theory of low sexual desire in women partnered with men. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *51*(1), 391–415. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-02100-x

Van Deursen, A. J. a. M., & Van Dijk, J. a. G. M. (2009). Using the Internet: Skill related problems in users' online behavior. *Interacting With Computers*, *21*(5–6), 393–402. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intcom.2009.06.005

van Lankveld, J., Jacobs, N., Thewissen, V., Dewitte, M., & Verboon, P. (2018). The associations of intimacy and sexuality in daily life: Temporal dynamics and gender effects within romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *35*(4), 557–576. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407517743076

Vásquez, C. (2015). Intertextuality and interdiscursivity in online consumer reviews. In R. H. Jones., A. Chik., & C. A. Hafner (Eds.) *Discourse and digital practices: Doing discourse analysis in the digital age* (pp. 66-80). Routledge.

Vowels, L. M., & Mark, K. P. (2020). Partners' daily love and desire as predictors of engagement in and enjoyment of sexual activity. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, *46*(4), 330–342. https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2019.1711274

Wanhalla, A. (2007). To 'Better the Breed of Men': women and eugenics in New Zealand, 1900–1935. *Women's History Review, 16*(2), 163–182. https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020601048779

Ward, L. M., Jerald, M., Avery, L., & Cole, E. R. (2020). Following their lead? Connecting mainstream media use to black women's gender beliefs and sexual agency. *Journal of Sex Research*, *57*(2), 200–212. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2018.1554741

Weedon C. (1987). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory*. Blackwell.

Weedon, C., & Hallak, A. (2021). Feminist poststructuralism: discourse, subjectivity, the body, and power. In J. Angouri., & J. Baxter (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language, gender, and sexuality* (1st ed., pp. 437–449). Routledge

Wilkinson, S. (1988). The role of reflexivity in feminist psychology. *Women's Studies International Forum, 11*(5), 493– 502. https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(88)90024-6

Willig, C. (2013). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology* (3rd ed.). Open University Press

Willig, C. (2014). Discourses and discourse analysis. In U. Flick. (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis* (pp. 341-353). SAGE Publications Ltd, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243

Wood, J. M., Koch, P. B., & Mansfield, P. K. (2006). Women's sexual desire: A feminist critique. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *43*(3), 236–244. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490609552322

Wood, R., Hirst, J., Wilson, L., & Burns-O'Connell, G. (2019). The pleasure imperative? Reflecting on sexual pleasure's inclusion in sex education and sexual health. *Sex Education, 19*(1). 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2018.1468318

Yang, F. (2020). Post-feminism and chick flicks in China: subjects, discursive origin and new gender norms. *Feminist Media Studies*, *23*(3), 1059–1074. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1791928

Zhang, X., & Riley, S. (2024). Empowering middle-aged women? A discourse analysis of gendered ageing in the Chinese television reality show *sisters who make waves*. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2297170

Appendix A

Search Terms Used in Keyword Testing Phase (Study One)

Broad Search Term	Term Variations	Results
Lust	Women's lust Sexual arousal Women sexual arousal Sexual passion	Some relevant articles, mostly pornography or erotica. Medical and scientific journal articles about the physiology of arousal.
Sex Drive	Female sex drive Women sex drive Sex drive differences Sex life Women sex life Libido Sexual libido Female libido Women libido Libido differences	"Sex drive" produces mostly health pages or health care services (i.e., Mayo Clinic). "Sex life" produced the same results as sex drive. "Libido" was mostly about men, adding "woman" & "female" was in line with search aims.
Desire	Sexual Desire Female sexual desire Women sexual desire Sexual Pleasure Female Sexual Pleasure Women Sexual Pleasure	Mostly in-line with search aims. Some health/clinical articles "Pleasure" was similar to sexual desire, but more focused on advice columns and magazine articles.
Sexuality	Women sexuality Women sexuality and desire Female sexuality Female sexuality and desire Sensuality	More focused on sexual identity than what could be considered "desire". The content that was in-line with "desire" was clinical journals etc. "Sensuality" included mainly dictionary definitions.

Sexual Attraction	Women sexual attraction Female sexual attraction Romantic attraction	"Sexual attraction" produced advice columns, opinion pieces, magazine articles in-line with search aims. Adding "woman" and/or "female" didn't change the results significantly "Romantic attraction" produced dictionary definitions and clinical articles.
Sex Advice	Women sex advice Female sex advice Sex tips	"Sex advice" produced advice columns, opinion pieces, magazine articles in-line with search aims. Similar results produced by "sex tips" as well as the addition of "woman" and/or "female".
Intimacy	Sexual intimacy Women sexual intimacy	Some relevant articles, mostly medical and scientific journal articles. Some videos, pornography or erotica.

Appendix B

Reference Details for Article Extracts Included in Study One

Code	Title	Domain	Country	Type
19-M	How to have great sex: sex advice for grown ups	womanandhome.com	USA	Online Magazine
18-C	How To Initiate A Conversation About Sexual Desires, According To A World-Famous Relationship Expert	mindbodygreen.com	USA	Blog
19-B	Women's Sexual Desire Is Different	sexualityresource.com	USA	Produce Blog
18-G	Here's What A Man Perceives When A Woman Wears Red	huffpost.com	USA	News Media
18-I	5 Signs You're More Than Just a Friend (But He's Afraid to Take It to the Next Level)	womenworking.com	USA	Blog
20-A	Why men are hot for sex but women warm to it	huffpost.com	USA	News Media
20-S	Why Sex and Masturbating Feel So...Different	instyle.com	USA	Online Magazine
18-M	15 Ways To Prep Your Man From Morning To Sex	metro.style	The Philippines	Online Magazine
18-L	Sex advice with Suzi Godson: Pressure of a romantic weekend puts me off	irishexaminer.com	Ireland	News Media
20-N	Sex Tips For Women Health And Happiness	womenfitness.net	USA	Online Magazine

20-M	This Is The Key To Female Orgasm, Say Sex Experts	huffingtonpost.co.uk	UK	News Media
18-B	Most People Have Unsatisfying Sex. Here's What to Do About It	insidehook.com	USA	News Media
20-Y	Live better: Ladies, meet the hidden force behind your sex drive	beekeepersnaturals.com	Canada	Product Blog
18-A	Low libido? The 8 reasons why you're not in the mood for sex	dailymail.co.uk	UK	News Media
20-D	Your Dry Vagina Could Be…. The Culprit For Your Murdered Sex Life	https://bleucares.com	India	Product Blog
18-H	How to Fix Sexual Problems in a Relationship	thefix.com	USA	News Media
20-T	20 Best Foreplay Tips For Women To Please Him In Bed	promescent.com	USA	Product Blog
18-V	I Orgasm Every Single Time I Have Sex'	womenshealthmag.com	USA	Online Magazine
20-B	'Sex Meditation' Is a Thing—and It Totally Changed My Sex Life	glamour.com	UK	Online Magazine
18-S	Can being more mindful make sex better?	thelily.com	USA	News Media
20-E	So, Who Wants To Have Some Really Good Valentine's Day Sex	xonecole.com	USA	Blog

Appendix C

Reference Details for Article Extracts Included in Study Two

Article Number	Title	Domain	Country
45	I Never Had A Partnered Orgasm Until I Slept With A Woman, & Now I Can't Stop	Gomag.com	USA
1	It's 2021. Why Are Doctors Still Trying to "Cure" Asexuality?	Bitchmedia.org	USA
7	How To Stay Connected (And Get Pleasure) Even In Quarantine	Bust.com	USA
49	GOOD VIBES: The latest sex toys for *ultimate* pleasure	Divamag.co.uk	UK
4	Love No Limit: The Messiness of Pandemic Sex	Bitchmedia.org	USA
21	The reality of sex and disability: Defying ableist assumptions	Archermagazine.com.au	Australia
11	How Middle Eastern women and non-binary people are redefining their sexuality	Gal-dem.com	UK
14	The sex positivity movement shouldn't just be for white women	Gal-dem.com	UK

Appendix D

Theoretical and Analytic Frameworks of the Articles Included in Study Three.

Authors & Year	Empirical/theoretical orientation and/or framework	Study Description	Analytic Framework	How desire is conceptualised and/or defined.
Dewitte & Mayer (2018)	Biopsychosocial; cognitive-behavioural. Positivist Quantitative	Diary study with 66 heterosexual couples completing measures of sexual desire, sexual activity and relationship quality, for 21 days.	Structural equation modelling (SEM) Testing relationships between sexual desire, relationship quality, and sexual activity over time and in relation to variables.	"...thinking and fantasizing about sex as well as wanting to engage in sexual activity with their partner"
van Lankveld et al. (2018)	Positivist Quantitative	Experience sampling method with 134 heterosexual participants who were in a relationship. Participants completed measures of emotional intimacy, sexual desire, and sexual activity 10 times per day for a week.	SEM Testing temporal associations between partners' intimacy, desire, and sexual activity across days.	An affective-motivational state; comprising both proactive ("I feel sexually excited") and receptive ("I am open to sexual initiative") elements.
Pascoal et al. (2018)	Positivist Quantitative	Survey study with 124 heterosexual couples.	SEM	psychophysiological and subjective.

	Causal model of sexual processes	Participants completed measures of sexual functioning and sexual satisfaction.	Measurable, directional cause and effects between variables (e.g., desire → sex → relationship quality) Testing the change and comparing gender differences	Linked to partner Linked to sexual functioning and sexual satisfaction.
Impett et al. (2019)	Positivist Quantitative Communal Motivation Theory	Survey study with 122 couples, completed daily for 21 days. Included measures of relationship satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect, and sexual desire.	Multi-level modelling measuring within-person and within-couple fluctuations in desire (including variable testing)	Framed relationally and motivationally. Contextual and fluctuates Self-report.
Péloquin et al. (2019)	Positivist Quantitative Dyadic systems approach Social exchange theory	Survey study of 298 heterosexual couples seeking relationship therapy. Participants completed three measures including dyadic adjustment, sexual satisfaction, and sexual experiences.	explored gender differences and discrepancies between partners' reports of satisfaction, adjustment, and sexual functioning.	Part of "sexual wellbeing," influenced by sexual functioning, equity, and relationship quality
Rubin et al. (2019)	Positivist Quantitative	Survey study with 1480 heterosexual women, across four countries. Participants	Multi-level modelling to test predictors of sexual desire within and across national	"an interest in sexual objects or activities, or a wish, longing, or craving to

	Draws on sexual scripting theory and pleasure theory to critique biological essentialism and emphasises sociocultural influences such as gender norms and sexual inequality. Also uses measurable variables statistically predict desire.	completed Likert-type scale questions about sexual desire and anticipated sexual pleasure	samples. (USA, Canada, Germany, Denmark)	engage in sexual activities" (sex defined as penile-vaginal intercourse)
Dobson et al. (2020)	Positivist Quantitative	Diary study with 100 heterosexual couples over a 21-day period. Measures of sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction compared with whether the participant made a sexual advance, and whether it was accepted.	Multi-level modelling examined within-person and between-person effects, capturing how daily fluctuations in sexual acceptance/rejection predicted satisfaction across time.	desire is treated as behavioural initiation of sexual activity, observable through the act of making an advance rather than as an internal state or subjective experience.
Vowels & Mark (2020)	Positivist Quantitative integrates clinical, evolutionary, and attachment perspectives	Diary study with 90 heterosexual couples over a 30-day period. Participants completed Likert-type scale questions on sexual desire,	Desire is examined in interaction with love to explore whether combined states predict engagement in sexual	"wish, need, or drive to engage in sexual activity with partner." fluctuating variable

		love, engagement in sexual activity, and quality of sexual experience, along with a dichotomous question about daily occurrence of sexual activity.	activity and quality of sexual experience.	
Blumenstock et al. (2020)	Positivist Quantitative considering psychosocial, demographic, and health-related factors that influence satisfaction.	Survey study with 2400 participants in midlife (defined as age 40-59). Study compared relationship characteristics, health, sexual communication and frequency of sexual activity, with measures of emotional and sexual satisfaction.	Analysis separated by gender identify which factors (relationship characteristics, sexual activity and communication, and health factors) predict high emotional or sexual satisfaction while controlling for the other type of satisfaction.	Not conceptually defined by implied through frequence of sexual activity with a partner, engagement in specific sexual behaviours and frequence of sexual communication
Kim et al. (2021)	Positivist Quantitative Dyadic framework	Survey study of 366 heterosexual couples. Analysis compared whether couples who scored similarly on measures of sexual desire, scored higher on measures of sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction.	Testing whether matching versus mismatching in desire predicts satisfaction, controlling for overall levels of desire	A relationally meaningful, partner-directed, continuous psychological construct that can vary between and within couples
Frost & Donovan (2021)	Mixed method Interpretivist	Mixed-method study with 13 heterosexual couples. Participants completed	Exploratory qualitative design Thematic analysis	Not treated as a fixed trait but as something experienced and

		measures of sexual desire, sexual distress, relationship satisfaction, and psychological functioning (Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale). Semi-structured interviews were undertaken about low sexual desire and desire discrepancy.	Quantitative component was summary statistics on a variety of scales designed to measure sexual desire**.**	interpreted by individuals. It is defined by how participants feel, think, and behave in relation to sexual activity, both alone and with a partner.
Moor et al. (2021)	Qualitative Interpretivist Feminist Critiques of traditional sex research that often measure women's desire against male norms or biomedical frameworks.	Semi-structured interview study with 15 heterosexual women about their experiences of declining sexual desire.	Thematic analysis	Subjective, self-defined. relational, context-dependent, and dynamic. Explored through women's narratives about personal and relational meaning, changes over time, and responses to partner dynamics.