SLUT! THE NEW FEMININE MYSTIQUE:

THE INFLUENCE OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION ON WOMEN’S PERCEPTIONS OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

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by

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Abstract

Sexual agency, or the active assertion of one’s feelings and desires, is generally absent from socially acceptable standards of female sexuality. Categories such as “slut” implicate the sexual attitudes or practices that deviate from social standards. Women who assert their sexual agency are often dismissed as promiscuous. I propose that women who do not identify as heterosexual are more likely to attribute sexual attitudes and behaviors to agency rather than promiscuity because their lives already deviate from heterosexual norms. I analyze the reactions of fourteen female college students who participated in focus groups for heterosexual and non-heterosexual women centered on an episode of Sex and the City entitled “Are We Sluts?” during Fall 2005. All participants recognized the overarching significance of the sexual double standard between men and women, the implications of others’ opinions, and the importance of relationships as anchoring themes in the episode and in real life. However, participants discussed these themes differently: non-heterosexual participants consistently delved deeper into deconstructing the themes whereas heterosexual participants generally stated and explored the themes on a superficial level. Non-heterosexual participants also recognized the invisibility of non-heterosexual women on the show whereas heterosexual participants failed to notice the extensive heterosexuality of the show. While use of personal anecdotes suggests that sexual orientation plays a role in shaping individual experiences, which in turn shape their opinions, variables such as their age, race, and education background inhibit the claim that sexual orientation explains the differences between participant reactions.
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INTRODUCTION

Over forty years ago, Betty Friedan’s revolutionary text, the *Feminine Mystique* ([1963] 1997), brought public attention to a large social issue that was previously treated as an individual problem. Friedan referred to the feminine mystique as the mysterious camouflage that disguised widespread female discontentment as individual failures. What was originally dismissed as a mother or wife’s failure to find fulfillment from being a housewife slowly turned into a larger social struggle for women’s rights. Friedan wrote about a time when “women were defined only in sexual relation to men—man’s wife, sex object, mother, housewife—and never as persons defining themselves by their own actions in society” (xv). Friedan empowered women to assert themselves by validating their desire for more than a life of housework; she also introduced women to the concept of voicing their desire. This desire embodied a life of one’s own. While the majority of women are no longer forced to rely on husbands and children for their sole source of fulfillment, I argue that the feminine mystique has moved from the living room into the bedroom. In many instances women still lack the agency and the social acceptance to freely express their sexual desire.

Women are not free to express their sexual desires, however they are still depicted as sexual creatures in contemporary society. Sexual visibility differs from being sexually independent. Sexual visibility infers passivity where women are sexualized objects for the whims and wants of a male privileged society; sexual independence, in contrast, refers to a sense of ownership where women are comfortable expressing their sexuality. This agency is the ability to assert oneself or one’s desire without fear of negative repercussions. These repercussions stem from a system of power that Gayle Rubin
exposes in her text, *Thinking Sex* (2003). She states that “sexuality is political. It is organized into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others” (34). The sexual system of power admires female sexuality while restraining it at the same time.

Sexual promiscuity offers a unique perspective through which we can see and understand the sexual systems of power. Negative categories such as slut, whore, and prude all refer to women. Men do not experience the same sexual repercussions for their actions. That different guidelines exist for female sexual behavior than for male behavior suggests that the systems of power Rubin (2003) referred to involve a component of gender inequality, or sexism. This political analysis of sexuality implies that “the personal is political,” which suggests that personal problems on a large-scale expose a public issue. While categories such as slut, whore, and prude implicate an individual’s actions, I purport that underneath the guise of these labels exists a social problem involving sexist standards that devalue a woman and her body.

I explore how women interact with these sexual standards. Because women are not a homogenous group, I have focused on how sexual orientation molds women’s understandings of female sexuality. I propose that women who do not identify as heterosexual are more likely to attribute sexual attitudes and behaviors to agency rather than promiscuity.

In the following section I will first review the literature surrounding concepts of female sexuality. Then, I will outline my research design and methods that I used to explore my research. After, I will elaborate on my data findings while exploring the limitations of this research as well as re-evaluate my hypothesis.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Radical Research: exploring sex negativity

The paradox of sex is that while we live in a sex-obsessed culture, we are not comfortable talking about sex. As Gayle Rubin warns: “sexuality is impervious to political analysis as long as it is primarily conceived as a biological phenomenon or an aspect of individual psychology” (10). Reducing sex to a purely biological entity inhibits our ability to deconstruct our social beliefs about sex. For example, scientific research on sex, referring to general acts, and sexuality, referring to individual behaviors, has seen countless amounts of red tape that suggests that sex is a taboo topic to challenge and explore. Brumberg (1998), Erikson and Steffen (1998), and Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) describe the increasing acceptance of sex research within the social sciences. However, this acceptance is slow-paced. As Laumann et al. demonstrated, past research on sexuality was simply avoided or redirected through a focus on abnormal and dysfunctional aspects of sexuality, thus for a long time, “‘normal sex’ … [was] somehow off limits” (Laumann et al 1994, 37). I attribute this hesitancy to the framework that Gayle Rubin calls “sex negativity,” which she defines as the notion that sex is naturally bad and dangerous (2003). Rubin concludes her explanation by saying “virtually all erotic behavior is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established. The most acceptable excuses are marriage, reproduction, and love” (11). Sex is only socially acceptable when it perpetuates biological functions such as reproduction. Moral standards then link healthy reproduction to stable, committed, loving relationships. Sex that deviates from these standards is not socially acceptable because of essentialism, or “the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social
life and shapes institutions” (Rubin 9). The combination of this sex negativity and essentialism is undoubtedly responsible for the challenges that face individual members of society who talk about, participate in, or choose to research sex. Any research on sexuality is radical because it implies that there is more to sexuality than biology. While this framework may not be very radical according to sociological thought, Laumann, Michael, and Gagnon (1994) explain how the radical nature of their research endangered their ability to secure and rely on government funding. In a letter to the researchers, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services explained that “the basic problem is… the more general subject of sexual mores, preferences, and behavior patterns in American society” (35). The lack of institutional support, most often through denying financial means, explains why there is little research on sexuality, making the topic even more significant to explore.

**Perfect Patriarchy: exploring femininity**

Patriarchy, as defined by A.G. Johnson (1999), is a system, built upon notions “about defining men and women as opposites, about the “naturalness’ of male aggression, competition, and dominance and of female caring, cooperation, and subordination. It’s about the valuing of masculinity and maleness and the devaluing of femininity and femaleness” (84-5). The United States, like most Western societies, is a patriarchal society (Chilman 1974; MacKinnon 1989; Bordo 1993; Debold, Wilson and Malave 1993; Johnson 1999, Rose 2000). While today’s patriarchal system may seem less lethal than generations past, it is still present. In a patriarchal society women are seen as the other. Bosmajian (1995) explains how language demonstrates sexism, which creates this gender imbalance: “The invisible woman remains linguistically invisible as long as the
‘assumption is that unless otherwise identified, people in general…are men. It’s a semantic mechanism that operates to keep women invisible” (391). The valued standard of masculinity connotes that femininity is secondary to masculinity. Additionally, the devaluation of the female translates to the devaluation and repression of female sexuality—that is, unless female sexuality is in some way expressed in relation to or in benefit of male sexuality. In establishing this superior value for masculinity over femininity, patriarchal standards perpetuate gendered differences of sexuality.

**Gendered Sexuality:** In relation to sex, Evelyn Blackwood (2000) explains that sex is gendered. This notion states that sex is thought of differently in relation to men versus in relation to women and that this “ideology of what is ‘natural’ … [has] to do with concepts of gender” (236). This means that there are certain acceptable behaviors for men and certain acceptable behaviors for women. These acceptable actions are called gender roles. Gender roles are outlined in a gender, or more broadly cultural, script. Cultural scripts provide models for behavior as well as consequences for not following the script (Simon and Gagnon 1986). As Rubin explains, “part of the modern ideology of sex is that lust is the province of men, purity that of women” (33). Romance is tied to femininity in the sense that a pure woman saves herself for a partner and is supposed to nurture the relationship while depending on her male partner. These scripts feed off of the many concepts and dimensions of femininity.

Deborah Tolman (2002) explains how the “narrative of romance” acts as an overarching script that combines heterosexual relationships with romance and patriarchal views of femininity where the female is the object of desire. The narrative of romance serves to keep women as submissive participants within the framework of acceptable
behaviors. Romance allows a woman to be sexual without the repercussions of a bad reputation; because the context of a long term, loving relationship justifies certain actions for women that would not otherwise be socially acceptable (Martin 2006, Orenstein 1994, Rubin 2003, Thompson 2004). Thus, there is a social script not only for what actions are acceptable, but also with whom and when they are allowed to occur.

As a result of this gender construction, females are backed in a corner where the only options are being labeled a prudish “goody-goody” or being labeled a “slutty, bad girl” (Kaplan and Cole 2003). Women remain passive throughout their sexual experiences, resulting in less independence. Previous studies support the idea that women are more reactive and dependent in the sense that the focus is on the other person (Rose and Hanson Frieze 1989; Bordo 1993; Kaplan and Cole 2003; Henningsen 2004). For example, Deborah Cameron’s (1992) study on terms for male genitalia noticed that the women in her study interacted on a more “intimate” level and from a “personal/relational perspective” while the men were more “distant” and “impersonal” (368). While distance and impersonal mannerisms are not optimal, these behaviors require an independence that women need not establish with a group relationship. Additionally, in an exploration of the relationship between femininity and capitalism, Susan Douglas (1994) says “women are supposed to be dependent, passive, nurturing types uninterested in competition, achievement or success” (18). The only trait that femininity actively supports is passivity and with women socialized to be nurturers, focused more on others than themselves, females are trained to be passive in the sexual aspects of their lives. However, as Bordo (1993) and Irvine (1993) explore, a negative consequence of a woman’s outward control as a nurturer is the conflict of growing up in a capitalist driven society. The
confrontation between feminine principles of self-denial and capitalist principles of consumption result in insatiable cravings like shopping, eating, or sex (Bordo 1993; Irvine 1993). These outlets show a lack of self-control and purity.

**Social Discourse:** Barrie Thorne (1993) notes that the progression from child to teen is where “girls start negotiating the forces of adult femininity, a set of structures and meanings that more fully inscribe their subordination on the basis of gender” (170). Women, essentially, learn to put themselves last. This is celebrated as altruism and pure-hearted selflessness but when women are unable to separate themselves from others and put their needs first it also suggests a dependency on others. A woman’s passive nature is reinforced throughout adulthood. I use passivity to refer to the uncertainty and lack of active ownership over one’s life or body. This lack of ownership over one’s body is best indicated at the onset of menarche, where hesitancy and insecurity surround adolescent females and their bodies. Girls grow into women ashamed and embarrassed of their body’s natural cycle; they learn that their bodies are not accepted by society and that their biological processes should be hidden. Through menstruation girls recognize “the relationship of women to their bodies in a misogynist society – fear, shame, embarrassment, humiliation, preoccupation, mess, hassle, and so on” (Lee 1994: 354; Brumberg 1998). While menstruation is a biological function, the implication that menarche is dirty and shameful is a social construction. Gloria Steinem deconstructs the social taboo of menarche from exclusively biological roots. In her satire, “If Men Could Menstruate,” she postulates that if men could menstruate, “menstruation would become an enviable, boast-worthy, masculine event” ([1977] 1995: 367). Steinem acknowledges that the current restraints placed upon the female body exist because of “power
justifications” or excuses that supposedly explain why social constructs exist as they do (369). These “power justifications” relate to the institution of patriarchy and as a result, females learn to not discuss their body or bodily functions the way males do. This silence results in body shame, or “negative evaluations of one’s body and … a desire to hide oneself and one’s body” (Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, Caruthers 2005: 325).

Related to how women learn to hide their bodies and their bodily functions, Michel Foucault argues that the body is a site for social control (1980).

Foucault examines the discourse of sexuality, with discourse referring to the context in which humans live, operate, think, and interact (1980). More specifically, discourse regards the significance in the types of conversations that we have, the context in which we have the conversations, what words we choose to express our ideas, and how we react to the spoken word and the suggested idea. Foucault claims that the “central issue” of the discourse on sexuality is “to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said” (Foucault 1980: 11).

Language is an important component of understanding the discourse of sexuality. For example, Cameron (1992) demonstrates the male dominance and command over language in talking about their bodies by asking a group of females and a group of males to list all of the names for male genitalia they could think of in a given time period. The men had over three times as many terms than did the women (368). This study is significant because there was no study exploring the various names women use to name their vulva, suggesting a higher comfort and interest with discussing the male body versus the female body. Additionally, Carpenter (1998) discusses how romance is used to
strengthen female dependency. In her study of a popular female teen magazine, young girls are taught to focus on the men in their lives and not themselves. She suggests that sexual scripts reinforce romance, which then reinforces patriarchy. The lack of female agency then results in women’s “subordination” or “dependence” on men. Lastly, Thomas Laqueur (2003) explains how scientific and medical discourse of sexuality dismissed female sexuality through degrading clitoral pleasure. Laqueur explored Freud’s claim that “the elimination of cliteroidal sexuality is a necessary precondition to the development of femininity” (Freud in Laqueur 2003: 201). This particular discourse has been challenged, reiterating the fact that sexuality is fluid, changing, and not simply biological. As Thomas Laqueur (2003) outlines the history of masturbation, he explains how a feminist discourse of sexuality has connected female masturbation to female empowerment. The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective published Our Bodies, Ourselves, a revolutionary book that acknowledged and rejected the guilt surrounding masturbation (Laqueur 76). First published in 1971, Our Bodies, Ourselves actually instructed women on how to experience the “unencumbered autonomy” of masturbation (Boston Women’s Health Book Collective in Laqueur 2003: 76). While female masturbation is lauded as empowering, the social discourse surrounding female sexuality instituted a lack of knowledge surrounding females and their bodies, which asserts female sexuality as in a lower relation to male sexuality.

**Charmed Circle:** If male sexuality is socially accepted—or expected—more so than female sexuality, a hierarchy exists of acceptable sexualities and unacceptable sexualities. Rubin (2003) explains the groupings of acceptable behaviors as a “charmed circle.” Actions that exist outside of this circle are labeled as dangerous, immoral, and
unhealthy. Rubin attributes these labels to what she calls, the “domino theory of sexual peril [which is] the fear that if anything is permitted to cross [line], the barrier against scary sex will crumble and something unspeakable will skitter across” (14). The domino theory of sexual peril affects women of all ages. While society expects that “boys will be boys,” the responsibility to keep boys in control falls upon girls’ shoulders. Our language, thus, enables a culture to exist where boys are sexual aggressors and girls must try to remain safe and pure (Chilman 1974; Fine 1988; Hyde and Jaffee 2000; Tolman 2002). This phrase gives boys permission to do as they please while asserting pressure over girls to save the world with their purity. When girls do not successfully dodge advances from boys, or intentionally make advances directed to other men or women, they step outside of the charmed circle because girls are not expected to be sexual (Rubin 2003). Therefore, “girls who are sexual are either (1) bad girls, if they have been active, desiring sexual agents or (2) good girls who have been passively victimized by boys’ raging hormones” (Tolman and Higgins 1996: 206). Women who do not exhibit this fear are labeled as “bad girls” because they have sex and are active independently of men (ibid, Martin 1996). As the gatekeepers to the charmed circle, female sexuality exists on the border of a sexual world perceived as uncontrollably dangerous due to the domino theory of peril. In addition to negative reputations for sexual females, popular discourses on sexuality view sex as violent and victimizing to females (Fine 1988; Debold, Wilson and Malave 1993; Tolman 2002). In addition to sexual violence and victimization, sexual risks include pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Therefore, women are taught to experience fear, shame and passivity throughout their life as a means to control and maintain patriarchy.
Existing beyond the charmed circle serves a significant threat to keep women in stride with the forces that oppress them. Peggy Orenstein (1994) exposes one of the more powerful tools for perpetuating the fear that exploits female independence and denies agency. Her study of middle school girls exposed that notes “a ‘slut’ is not merely a girl who ‘does it,’ but any girl who—through her clothes, her makeup, her hairstyle, or her speech—seems as if she *might*” (51). Thus the conversations surrounding female sexuality are as much, if not more important than the actual sexual behaviors of females. Through this discourse, women fail to learn how to have an independent relationship with their bodies because the overwhelming peril of being labeled a slut instigates women to turn to romance and male dependency to retain their purity and merits as a woman. As Rose (2000) explains, these cultural scripts of femininity “maintain that heterosexual romantic love will fulfill one’s deepest needs” (317). This sheds light on why women most often lose their virginity safely within the charmed circle of a heterosexual romantic relationship because their male partner ensures their feminine role while romance protects them from a “bad girl” label. Laumann et al (1994) discovered that women’s first intercourse was motivated by showing affection for their partner. That Laumann et al found men’s first intercourse was motivated by curiosity only further proves male agency. Additionally, Martin (1996) discovered that whereas “first sexual experiences further solidify agency and sexual subjectivity in boys, girls, however, feel less agentic and less sexually subjective after first sexual experiences” (60). This lack of independence then results in women’s confusion or ignorance surrounding their bodies and runs so deep that dependency extends into seemingly independent sexual settings. For example, females are less likely to experience sexual pleasure independently because
they are less likely to masturbate (Laumann et al 1994). Women therefore do not learn about arousal or pleasure unless in relation to their boyfriends (Hyde and Jaffee 2000), which of course, assumes that the women are heterosexual. Additionally for women who do masturbate, the starting age for masturbation is much later for women than for men (Laumann et al 1994). Patriarchal sexual norms thus prevent women from gaining full independence, or agency, over their bodies.

However, women who break from the mold and challenge these roles are labeled as deviant, rather than independent. Heterosexuality combines with patriarchy to form an overarching institution that shapes female sexuality, regardless of a woman’s sexual orientation. For example, Rebecca Kaplan (1994) explores how the labels “slut” and “dyke” are more similar insults than at first glance. While “slut” refers to a woman having or wanting too much sex with a man, “dyke” refers to a woman who has or wants too little sex with a man. As Kaplan explains:

A woman is called a dyke for challenging male authority, refusing to have sex with a man, being strong and assertive, or otherwise rejecting compulsory femininity. The sexual orientation of the woman is almost irrelevant; the point is that the broader heterosexism is powerful enough to keep women afraid of being called dykes, so that they will give up feminist behavior to avoid this threat. (1994: 3)

This connection between patriarchy and heterosexuality is often forgotten, which enables these systems to perpetuate sexist and heterosexist standards that reduce female sexuality to an objectified, passive role.

**Healthy Heterosexuality: exploring compulsory heterosexuality**

In *The Heterosexual Imaginary*, Chrys Ingraham states that “evident in most conceptualizations of gender is an assumption of heteronormativity. In other words, to
become gendered is to learn the proper way to be a woman in relation to a man, or feminine in relation to masculine” (186). Thus, there exists a cycle in which sex is gendered and gender is heterogendered, making sex heteronormative. To explore gendered sexuality we must examine the system in which sexuality exists: a heterosexist patriarchy. Ingraham defines heteronormativity as “the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements” (169). Heteronormativity assumes that the normal standard for a relationship is a heterosexual relationship. This presumed heterosexual standard ties into patriarchy in the sense that the view is male-centered and forces women and non-heterosexual relationships into a sub-category.

Heteronormativity is a monitoring device that helps ensure the survival of the system of patriarchy. Adrienne Rich (1980) uses the term compulsory heterosexuality to refer to the institutionalized system that works to prevent individuals from questioning their heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is not simply the norm in our society, but it is so naturalized that we fail to even recognize its existence. This lack of recognition makes exploring female sexuality more challenging because compulsory heterosexuality works in favor of patriarchal standards that continue to keep women in secondary positions. For example, Rachel Maines (1995) explains how society’s definition of sex is androcentric, or male focused. She explains that sexual intercourse is defined by male orgasm because though: “the female is expected to reach orgasm during coitus … if she does not, the legitimacy of the act as ‘real sex’ is not thereby diminished” (5). This male focus clearly devalues any desire women might experience or expect, which makes women second-class partners in the sexual realm. The devaluation of female desire results in what
researchers call the “missing discourse of desire,” which refers to the social standards that prevent women from being seen or discussed as a desiring body without social stigmas (Fine 1988; Tolman 2002), such as being labeled a “slut.” The absence is neither coincidental nor is it natural. While women are desiring bodies, gender roles prevent women and society from recognizing female desire as natural – that is, of course, unless female desire is nestled in the arms of accepted heterosexual gender norms. According to Rubin (2003), non-heterosexual relationships exist outside of the charmed circle. Cheryl Clarke supports this marginality by explaining that being “lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture, such as that of North America, is an act of resistance” (155). Identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer means that a woman independently chooses to express her desire outside of andocentric, male-centered relationships. Inherently, non-heterosexual relationships assert female desire in ways that patriarchy would never allow.

Steven Epstein (1994) explains the theory called the “centrality of marginality” as the significant necessity of exposing the marginalized, ostracized groups of society so that we can better see what our society strives to accomplish. Through this framework, we cannot explore sexuality without exploring sexism and we cannot explore female sexuality without exploring heterosexism. Past research has effectively shown how female gender roles restrict women and their development as sexual agents. However, the research has failed to explore the marginalized population of non-heterosexual women in relation to their heterosexual counterparts. I intentionally use the category of “non-heterosexual” to de-emphasize the significance of the label with which individuals choose to identify. An important aspect of Queer Theory, de-centering identities means
not focusing on labels and what they might mean (Epstein 1994). Instead, I choose to focus on the shared experiences faced by women who deviate from society’s norms, both as a challenge to patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality as a desiring woman. My research focuses on how women navigate societal expectations and how their sexual orientation shapes how they understand gender roles. I explore this topic by attempting to gauge how heterosexual and non-heterosexual women perceive the category of the slut to better understand if and how women recognize sexual agency and promiscuity.

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS

When first discussing my interest to explore female sexual agency, I witnessed a prevailing attitude that because women are depicted on television and in the movies as sexually empowered, women in real life are equally empowered. *Sex and the City*, the popular HBO series, was commonly referenced by every individual I spoke to regarding my thesis topic as an important marker of the acceptance of female sexuality. Because there seemed to be a common consensus or at least familiarity with the series, I chose to use *Sex and the City* as the medium through which I would explore how sexual orientation contributes to how women perceive sexuality. Because of the complex interaction between personal problems and social issues, I wanted to emphasis the participants’ social group membership and thus decided against conducting a series of individual interviews. In addition to being much more time-effective, focus groups were intended to mimic real world dynamics among women in order to explore if and how female sexuality is socially constructed. Interviews could not capture the intra-group dynamics associated with defining and describing socially acceptable sexual norms,
which would easily occur in the participants’ dialogues before, during and after the episode screening. Additionally, focus groups provided a more casual and comfortable environment for the participants to share their opinions, feelings, and personal experiences in comparison to independent interviews.

Conducting a focus group surrounding *Sex and the City* meant finding one episode that targeted the topic of social acceptance of expressions of female sexuality. I watched the entire series of *Sex and the City* and took detailed notes on all ninety-four episodes. Using these notes, I narrowed down the selection pool to approximately a dozen episodes. I then reviewed the dozen episodes and ultimately selected the sixth episode from the third season, entitled “Are We Sluts?” I chose this episode because unlike other episodes, every plotline related to the social acceptance of female sexuality (see Appendix A). This episode was shown during each of the three focus groups and was followed by a semi-structured group interview in response to the episode. My goal for the focus groups was to direct the conversation away from details about the episode to broad discussions on gender roles and norms present in the episode. Once gender roles and norms were identified as being present in the episode, I then inquired as to whether and how these gender roles present themselves in real life. In the process of comparing and relating the show to real life, I predicted that each participant would comment on social standards of female sexuality and their perceptions of these standards.

**Recruitment & Data Collection**

I posted flyers around central campus advertising a focus group on perceptions of female sexuality (see Appendix B). To motivate interested individuals to participate, these flyers advertised a free dinner during each focus group. I posted flyers in women’s
restroom throughout buildings on campus and in the public posting space of every residence hall except for the building in which I work and live. I chose to avoid the residence hall in which I work because I wanted to avoid having participants with whom I have a rapport. Within a few days, I realized that I had a sufficiently large response rate and would not need to post additional flyers in other buildings on campus.

Flyers instructed prospective participants to contact me. Once prospective participants emailed me, I responded with a more detailed explanation of the project and of the expectations of participants (see Appendix C). I also gave them potential dates and times for the focus groups. A total of 31 women contacted me to learn more details about the project. In general I over-recruited for each focus group. Between 6-7 women were signed up for each focus group. Of these women generally 5-6 women confirmed their attendance while only 4-5 women showed up for the actual focus group. The number of participants was intentionally kept low to maximize participant input during the focus groups.

While the original round of flyers did not specify sexual orientation, the first women to contact me identified as heterosexual. The dominance of heterosexual participants posed a significant problem for my research that related to sexual orientation. In part, this lack of response from non-heterosexual individuals can be attributed to the self-selection aspect of participant recruitment. The flyers mentioned “Sex & the City” and invited women to react to perceptions of female sexuality. In a heterosexist society, non-heterosexuals may feel isolated and alienated from popular culture (Gamson 2002). Women who did not identify as heterosexual could have intentionally disregarded the
original flyer, presuming that the focus group would echo the heteronormativity present in *Sex and the City*.

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval to actively recruit women who identified as other than heterosexual, I drafted a new version of a flyer that said, “lesbian and bisexual women are strongly encouraged to participate.” Additionally, this flyer advertised a slight monetary gift for participation (see Appendix D). Unfortunately, even with the $5 bonus, posting these flyers was not successful. While this posed a serious problem for recruiting non-heterosexual participants, a discovery that many of the heterosexual participants had heard about the study from someone who had seen the flyers, led me to engineer a solution by attempting to establish a word-of-mouth connection for women who identified as non-heterosexual. I spoke with professors, friends, residence staff within residence halls, as well as staff from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Ally Office in the Michigan Union. I asked them to speak to women who identified as non-heterosexual to let them know about the project. If women were interested, they were given my email address and the same procedure described above was followed. From this strategy, I was able to successfully recruit non-heterosexual participants.

**Focus Group Sessions**

I collected data from a total of three focus groups of female college students. The first focus group consisted of five heterosexual women. The second focus group also consisted of four heterosexual women. The third focus group consisted of five non-heterosexual women. The small number of non-heterosexual participants is not overall a
significant discrepancy, considering the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities make up a small percentage of the general American population\(^1\).

As participants walked in, they signed the consent form (see Appendix E). If they felt comfortable, they identified their racial identity and sexual orientation on the back of the consent form. After brief introductions of myself and the research, I showed the episode of *Sex and the City*. Afterwards, I used a series of questions formulated to gauge the participants’ reactions to the episode as well as to help them make connections and observations about real life (see Appendix F).

All of the participants in the three focus groups had a variety of explanations for their motivation to participate. I had expected that all women who self-selected to participate would be fans of the show. However, while some women had prior exposure to the show and knew a lot about the series, other women had never seen the show before and were curious to watch a free screening. No one admitted to disliking the show. This dynamic is important to note because individuals who dislike the show for various reasons, such as finding the show sexist and anti-liberationist, may have avoided participating, potentially creating a less desirable, more homogeneous sample.

My predictions stated that women who do not identify as heterosexual are more likely to attribute sexual attitudes and behaviors to agency rather than promiscuity because their lives already deviate from heterosexual norms. I expected to find that women who identified as non-heterosexual would be more accepting of the characters’ sexual behaviors on *Sex & the City* than their heterosexual counterparts. I expected this to be the case because as women who did not identify as heterosexual, their own sexual

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\(^1\) According to Laumann and Michael (2001) 3.9% of men and 2.8% of women over the age of eighteen in America reported having “any same-gender partner over the lifetime” (445).
orientation and identity had already put them in confrontation with traditional gender scripts; thus they would recognize and accept a wider range of sexual behaviors for women.

**DATA FINDINGS**

The episode of *Sex and the City* was aptly titled “Are We Sluts?” and while no one from the focus groups gave an answer, the question was thoroughly explored in the group interviews that followed the viewing of *Sex and the City*. Both heterosexual and non-heterosexual women found sluttiness incredibly difficult to define. The women could, however, give detailed descriptions of sluttish behaviors. These behaviors were always looked down upon and were always associated with excessive sexual expression. While sluttiness was described in terms of behavior, participants of each focus group talked about sluttiness as much more than having too much sex. Everyone noted specific standards and restrictions for appropriate and acceptable sex.

Participant discussions revolved around three main points. First, both of the heterosexual and non-heterosexual groups discussed the existence of a double standard between men and women’s sexual behaviors. Additionally, both groups explored the significance of opinions and perceptions of others. Lastly, the group interviews emphasized the importance of long-term, stable relationships as a way to avoid sluttiness. I conceptualize the relationship between these concepts to operate within a circular framework, supported and established through the combination of concepts. The circle, as diagrammed below:
embodies acceptable female sexuality, suggesting that any behavior abandoning these factors is unacceptable and, as perceived by society, slutty. I use the circle for two reasons: first, to demonstrate that each concept flows into the others. The existence of one aspect requires the presence of other two. Second, I allude to Rubin’s “charmed circle” (2003). To exist within the charmed circle, a woman must operate under the double standard, must focus on other people first, and must idealize and emphasize romance.

In the following sections I will explore the similarities and differences between the heterosexual and non-heterosexual participants as they discuss each section of the triangle. I will use their language to refer to the concepts described above.

**The Double Standard:**

“I want sex too much if I want it more than a man does.”

- Heterosexual Participant

While Goldilocks successfully found porridge that was just right, women must choose between too much and too little. There is nothing just right: women who want too much sex are labeled “hypersexual” or “slut” while women who want too little sex are labeled “prude.” There is no middle ground.
Within the focus groups, the negative connotation of the label slut correlated to wanting a lot of sex. One non-heterosexual participant explained sluts as “people who are actively, always looking for sex and lots of different people.” While the gender-neutral noun, “people,” suggested that slut is used for both men and women, both the heterosexual and non-heterosexual groups used the specific terms “man-slut” or “man-whore” to identify the masculine counterpart. The masculine qualifier exposed that slut, while potentially gender neutral, refers to women. While Bosmajian (1995) indicates that most words use the masculine form to refer everyone, ironically, the word slut is one of the few words that presume the subjects’ femininity.² The label “slut” is tied to gender roles and norms for women. Another non-heterosexual participant explained that, “women are expected to be subservient. They are expected to be passive. And that’s what, in a cultural sense, is the antithesis of a slut.” Acting independently or being assertive contradicts the socially accepted standards for femininity, and are thus grounds for being called a slut.

Participants from both groups noted that while the concept of having “too much sex” exists in a very real way for women, men rarely demonstrate concern for the subject. Men are not held to the same standards. The groups identified this double standard and commented on the unfair standards thrust upon women. As one heterosexual participant expressed, “men are allowed to have a lot of amorous affairs and nobody really seems to mind. But, women do and they are sluts.” Positive adjectives like “pimp” and “player” were used in both groups to explain that men are expected to be sexual. Guys who have a lot of sex were described as “players or bachelors or [positive] things like that.”

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² The Oxford English Dictionary defines slut as “a woman of low or loose character.” (http://www.oed.com)
word pimp, in particular, was used as masculine counterparts to the female “slut.” One heterosexual participant discussed how guys can parade their status as a pimp whereas women cannot pride themselves as a slut. The same heterosexual participant explained that a guy that she knows owns a “robe that says “pimp” on the back. And he wears it around and everyone thinks it’s hilarious. But if a girl wore, like a “slut” shirt, I mean, that would not be socially acceptable. And it’s just annoying.” The double standard depicts an atmosphere in which male sexual activity is applauded while female sexual activity is stigmatized.

As a result of this double standard, women are forced to choose between the extremes of being a slut or a prude. Since few desire to fit into these categories, many women become insecure about themselves, their bodies, and or expressing their sexuality. As one heterosexual participant explained:

I think that a man can be portrayed as, like, very confident and unwavering and not having anything that makes him uncomfortable. And a woman has to be portrayed as having some insecurity, some fault about her that she’s not sure about. And, I think making it their sexuality is easy because it is the whole double standard.

While this participant recognizes the existence of the double standard she fails to challenge it. Rather, she seems to accept the imbalance as she concludes her thought with “it is the whole double standard.” There is no afterthought that suggests that the double standard is bad in any way other than giving women an easy insecurity. None of the other heterosexual participants challenged the notion either. While these groups noticed the existence of the double standard, the way in which they deconstructed and explored the double standard differed because the non-heterosexual participants recognized that
the double standard implies a male-centered power dynamic between men and women, relating to heterosexuality.

While the heterosexual and non-heterosexual groups recognized that gender roles mold the lens through which society views female sexuality, none of the heterosexual participants recognized heterosexist norms, which establish male desire as natural, normal, and healthy. The term hyper-sexuality is a term that rarely describes a man simply because masculinity assumes high sexual desire as a norm. Once again, here is another example of negatively connoted term that primarily infers a female subject. Heterosexual participants noted that a key standard for monitoring female sexuality is through comparisons to men. For example, one heterosexual participant commented that Carrie must have felt that she was going beyond appropriate standards for a woman. The heterosexual participant explained, from Carries point of view, that: “I am being too sexual: I want sex too much if I want it more than a man does.” According to this thought process female desire is not expressed; rather, female desire is dependent on and measured against man’s desire. Heterosexist norms assert that female sexuality exists always in relation to male sexuality, which is supported by the fact that sluttiness is defined in relation to a woman’s experience with men. However, if these standards for female sexuality relate to men, what happens to female sexual standards that involve two women? Only the non-heterosexual participants critiqued the show for being “very heterosexual.” They contrasted heterosexual female sexuality with non-heterosexual female sexuality and stressed that heterosexuals “would never label [a girl hooking up with many, many, many women] a slut.” Thus, the notion of “too much” revolves around

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3 Contrary to popular knowledge the term nymphomania is actually gender-specific. Men with a hypersexual sex-drive are called satyriasis (http://www.oed.com).
the double standard that reinforces female sexuality as passive and secondary to male sexuality. Complete deviation from heterosexual standards of female sexuality free women from being labeled a slut for expressing their desire; only when the women are not heterosexual will the same behavior escape being labeled slutty.

Additionally, the non-heterosexual women were much more likely to distinguish between being sexual and acting as an agent of one’s sexuality. The non-heterosexual participants agreed that Samantha “uses her body … to her own benefit to increase her agency.” They also saw Samantha as reversing the double standard: “it never crosses her mind because she’s doing it simply for her own pleasure, for her own self. She’s kind of ignoring the double standard like as if it’s not existing even though we know it is.” Furthermore, the non-heterosexual women emphasized the irony of the double standard since “the guy’s got to be having sex with someone.” Unlike the non-heterosexual group, which even applauded Samantha’s behavior for challenging the double standard, the heterosexual group called Samantha’s behavior slutty. The heterosexual participants failed to thoroughly deconstruct the double standard and were instead content to recognize simply that the double standard existed and was unfair.

The Importance of Others’ Opinions:

“No one would call themselves a slut!”
– Non-Heterosexual Participant

Because female sexuality is not accepted independently of male sexuality, women have a ceiling under which their sexual desire is restrained. The ceiling is men’s sexuality. Although the participants could not define concrete standards for judging sluttiness, they still used this label to demean other women. At the same time, ironically,
these women feared that the label was or would, in the future, be used against them.

Sluttiness, as an indefinable trait, translates into an irrational concern that anyone and everyone can be a slut. If anyone and everyone can be called a slut then anyone and everyone should be concerned about what others might think about them. The participants’ discomfort with expressing sexual desire stems from their fear of outside critiques of their desire. This begs the question: who holds the gavel that decrees what behavior is acceptable and what behavior is slutty for women? As sexual agents the women would hold their own gavel, however the overwhelming concern for other’s opinions suggests that this is clearly not the case.

As all of the women explained, women who are not passive are independent. However, regardless of one’s level of independence, the fear of being labeled a slut never dissipates. As seen in the episode of *Sex and the City*, women may have the professional and economic power to do what they want but when it comes to sex, that type of power is slutty, dirty, and bad. The fear of being labeled a slut does not dissipate, as demonstrated through the participants’ struggle to reassure themselves that they were not sluts.

Participants personally evaluated their sluttiness by gauging if their numbers were too high. Numbers as a system to define sluttiness infers that others will know the number—otherwise, who would care about the actual number? Counting one’s partners and the amount of time spent together before getting physical was criteria that both heterosexual and non-heterosexual women used for their game of numbers. One heterosexual participant explained “it’s hard knowing, I guess, what your own definition of being a slut is and what is ok for you personally and what is not, when you cross the line.” Both groups related to the number system similarly. As one heterosexual participant put it,
“they’re all fearful that their numbers are too high!” A non-heterosexual participant commented along a similar line by saying “I just see promiscuity as someone who sleeps with a lot of people.” When probed to explain what “a lot” meant and who defined the standard for “a lot” of sexual partners, the non-heterosexual participant continued by saying “obviously not the individual because no one would call themselves a slut!”

These standards, set externally, operate internally and shape our actions and comfort level with expressing our sexuality. Furthermore, both groups acknowledged that the show never answered the question “Are We Sluts?” The participants concluded that it is left up to the audience to decide, thus mimicking the external judgments.

Both the heterosexual and non-heterosexual groups viewed social stigmas as an important force to be respected. They commented on the alarm that the *Sex and the City* characters faced when their sexuality was scrutinized. As a non-heterosexual participant remarked: “I think … they are starting to view their sexuality through the eyes of social norms instead of through their own viewpoint.” Regardless of the individual’s confidence and personal beliefs, these social norms are recognized as more powerful. One heterosexual participant explained, “While all the characters are comfortable with their sexuality, in the face of other people’s scrutiny, especially in this episode, they seem less confident and secure in their sexuality.” Thus, we see that sexual confidence, independence, and agency are easily dismantled by the hint of disproval from another person.

The significance of others is so great that both groups credited the show for normalizing their feelings. One non-heterosexual participant exclaimed that *Sex and the City* “was a sigh of relief…for the first time we saw a woman owning her sexuality. …
[Whereas] all the time in the media women are, like, sleeping with men and it’s like ‘you dirty girl, you dirty slut, you dirty whore.” Additionally, a heterosexual participant explained that watching the show reminded her that she was “not the only one to have these insecurities, because while I’m very comfortable with my sexuality, I do, like these characters worry [if my sexuality] is affecting the way other people perceive me.” She concluded her explanation by suggesting that the show helped her to not “feel so bad about myself.”

While both groups noticed that Samantha moved out of her complex building after becoming the topic of gossip, they attributed the move to different reasons. The heterosexual groups found that Samantha’s move proved her insecurities and self-doubt: “I initially thought [Charlotte was] the one that’s sort of the most concerned with how she’s perceived, but it ended up being Samantha who made the most dramatic change! Like, she actually ended up moving because of the way people thought of her.” Conversely, the non-heterosexual group viewed Samantha’s decision to move as a sign that “she wasn’t gonna apologize because she knows what she’s doing and she does it…she lives life. Period.” The non-heterosexual group was more willing to see Samantha’s actions as making her life easier to live as she saw fit, rather than conforming to other’s standards, as the heterosexual group had understood. The non-heterosexual participants were more willing to attribute Samantha’s move to her agency or independent decision to lead her lifestyle free of friction. The heterosexual participants saw Samantha’s move as proof that she was ultimately not comfortable with her sexuality and was, thus, a slut who used sex to feel better about herself.
All participants mentioned that Samantha was the character most notably “open” with her sexuality. As heterosexual participants talked about Samantha, they described her as “powerful,” “strong,” and “in control” but they also commented on how “she wants to have sex freely and not feel like she’s a slut.” The heterosexual group, in contrast to the non-heterosexual group, sometimes referred to Samantha as “too open” and even called her slutty. The non-heterosexual group was careful to not call any of the characters slutty. As one of the non-heterosexual participants explained: “I refuse to use the word slut. I don’t think [Samantha] is a slut. Really, I can’t say she’s a whore; [I can’t say] she’s a slut. I just think she has fun and everything.” On several occasions the non-heterosexual women started to say “sl…” but then stopped and corrected themselves. The non-heterosexual women preferred using promiscuous because it was less offensive and emphasized that like many other curses, slut was a four-letter word. The non-heterosexual participants discussed how “Samantha’s the most promiscuous one, but the time where the slut issue is brought up is with the least promiscuous one – who is Charlotte.” They were careful to not describe Charlotte as slutty and instead said that the “slut issue” was brought up. While small in gesture, attention to language was only present in the non-heterosexual group. The non-heterosexual participants also suggested that the show purposefully intended for viewers to dismiss Samantha as a slut, although they did not personally agree with the show’s verdict. The heterosexual participants were confused as to the message of the show. They were unsure if the show meant to say that the characters were sluts or if the show meant to challenge the social taboos against female sexuality. These participants concluded that the ambiguity and confusion implied that these women were not supposed to be seen as sluts. They recognized the ambiguity
as intentionally emphasizing the role that other people play in defining a woman as a slut. In this manner, the non-heterosexual participants were more analytical in recognizing the interplay between person and society and actively broke down the show’s themes and messages, unlike the heterosexual participants. Ultimately, both groups recognized the important factor that other people’s opinions play in shaping individual actions, but the heterosexual participants were much too afraid of behaviors and attitudes that the non-heterosexual participants were willing to embrace. Especially after admitting that other’s opinions matter, the non-heterosexual women were much more cautious of the language they used to describe other women.

**The Significance of Relationships:**

"*Meaningless sex many, many times may be bad.*"

*Heterosexual Participant*

One of the ways in which society seeks to control sexual behavior is through emphasizing monogamous, committed, long-term relationships. As the narrator of the show, Carrie is the character audiences are set up to identify with most of all. As heterosexual participants described her: “Carrie seems like more of the relationship type;” “She had the most…sort of normal and most fully portrayed relationship;” “I tend to like Carrie the most because she has all these nice men that seems to be interacting with in all these different episodes.” Non-heterosexual participants repeatedly saw Carrie as “independent” and wanting to be in “an actual, caring relationship.” Being in a relationship was championed as more than finding a partner to love. Being in a committed relationship was considered optimal and healthy. Sexual behavior outside of a
relationship translated sluttiness into a fear of the consequences of sex outside of a monogamous relationship. With this emphasis on relationships, sex outside of a relationship was seen as emotionally and physically dangerous. The heterosexual and non-heterosexual participants described meaningless sex as sex not in a relationship. The danger of meaningless sex went beyond the physical and included the emotional. As one participant put it, “meaningless sex is not necessarily a bad thing, but meaningless sex many, many times, may be bad.” Thus, if sex is to be repeated in more than just a one-time celebration, society dictates it should take place in the safety of a relationship. Participants’ comments from both groups supported this notion. One heterosexual participant mentioned that: “I know somebody who is very sexually active, very open about it, and probably has many STDs.” This comment shows that an active sex life outside of a relationship is perceived and judged by others as neither safe nor healthy. As a non-heterosexual participant explained:

    We also saw a lot of ramifications of a lot of their decisions. Like Chlamydia…or getting kicked out, well not getting kicked out but ostracized by a little community…ummm…not, with Carrie, not being in an actual caring relationship. Just risking you know the one night thing. So they all suffered something for being slu…and they like learned from it and realized why it’s better to not be sexually promiscuous.

The participants clearly denounced sex outside of a relationship as dirty and, potentially, slutty. In this sense, dirty meant more than just a scarred reputation but physically “dirty” and tainted with sexually transmitted infections. The focus on relationships dismissed sexual behavior outside of a relationship. Both groups dismissed sexual agency and sexual freedom as an excuse to be promiscuous and disregard consequences. This form of sex-negativity was a prevalent attitude in both groups and was demonstrated in the notion that sex is only healthy when safeguarded in a relationship. As one non-
heterosexual participant explained, “if you have tons and tons and tons of sex, bad tings
will happen.” When asked to elaborate what she meant by “bad things” the non-
heterosexual participant explained: “disease, emotional shit, um, being labeled a slut,
how you’re viewed by others. I mean there are sexual practices that are considered
healthy for a reason.” Both groups’ discussions failed to acknowledge safe sexual habits
that would protect individuals against sexually transmitted diseases, whether in a
committed relationship or one-night stand. Being in a relationship seemed to make sex
safer, not only emotionally but also physically.

Promiscuity was defined by both groups as having a lot of sex outside of a
relationship, suggesting that there is no space for a woman to be sexual without being
slutty unless if in a committed relationship. This establishes a dependence on others for
women to be sexual, which does not empower or promote agency. The heterosexual
participants strongly explained that the show “normalizes more casual sex.” We lack any
knowledge about these characters that is not directly related to their sexual and or
romantic lifestyles. The lack of character development and multidimensionality is
another shared critique of the show. While all participants acknowledged that only the
sexual sides of the characters were developed, only the heterosexual group expressed that
sex, which took place outside of a relationship, was seen as “de-sanctifying”
relationships. As one heterosexual participant explained: “although [the show is] positive
that it enforces sexuality and that it is ok to be comfortable with [sex/sexuality] … [the
show is] so extreme in a way that it makes casual sex so ok in that you don’t really need a
relationship.” The non-heterosexual participants recognized the one dimensionality of
the characters, but did not see it as a problem as much as the heterosexual participants
did. Instead, the non-heterosexual participants searched to find the various dimensions – Carrie as independent, Miranda as the career-woman, Samantha as the sex goddess, and Charlotte as the wife/mother – which each character portrayed and then asked: “Why can’t women be all of these things?” Here the non-heterosexual women challenged the notion that sex should be discarded so women could value the other roles in their lives.

Considering that the heterosexual women saw the show as de-sanctifying relationships, it is ironic that the heterosexual women viewed the relationships each character concluded the series with as being stereotypical. A heterosexual participant explained: “all of them end up in some sort of monogamous relationship…and that is termed to be the ultimate climax of the show? Well, that’s very stereotypical in itself that women would just want to be fulfilled and have some ultimate man in their lives to complete them.” In contrast, the non-heterosexual women viewed these relationships as something that retained the independence of each character:

The show ended on that note where Samantha ended up with a guy, but he was a guy who supported her…and she was very much in that same position of power. Miranda had that baby and ended up with a man who really loved her but at the same time she didn’t have to compromise her career. So, I didn’t think there were any contradictions at the end.

Once again, while both groups recognized the significance of romance in women’s lives, the non-heterosexual participants more thoroughly deconstructed the episode rather than taking it at face value. The non-heterosexual group was able to identify how the women prioritized their goals in life. To them, the conclusion of the series was not a shallow relationship with a man, but a relationship that enabled them to stay who they were while alone. The non-heterosexual interpretation enables the show to be empowering while at

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4 The participants referenced the end of the entire series of *Sex and the City*, not just the particular episode screened during the focus group. They use their personal exposure to the show to discuss the series finale.
the same time conforming to the social norms, depending on one’s frame of reference. Again, the non-heterosexual participants focus on the agency of these characters rather than their passivity.

**Group Dynamics:**

“No one turned me gay!”

- Non-Heterosexual Participant

By simply *not* being heterosexual, the non-heterosexual participants deviate from society’s standards for women. Deviance asserts that one is different from the norm, which then defines what the norm is and what it is not. Not identifying as heterosexual forces these women to see norms that they break and that heterosexual woman do not have to face. Identifying as something other than heterosexual provides non-heterosexual participants with a lens as an outsider, through which they interpreted the social norms portrayed in *Sex and the City.* As discussed, American society is deeply heteronormative. By stepping outside of society’s standards and challenging the system of “compulsory heterosexuality” these women challenged the system of heterosexuality they expressed an independence to act on their own desire. By breaking the gender norms, society ostracizes them and marginalizes their experiences to protect the charmed circle and leave patriarchy and heteronormativity intact. This oppositional relationship enables the non-heterosexual women to regard others who challenge the system not necessarily as deviants, but as agents of their own will.

This outsider’s lens does not exist within the heterosexual participants. At most, one heterosexual participant questioned the heteronormativity of the series. In discussing the role of the characters, she stated that all of the characters are looking for:
“relationships or some sort of satisfying encounter between a man…or maybe a woman – I don’t know if they’ve ever done any of that on the show.” As quickly as this thought entered the conversation, it left; no one else commented or explored the heteronormativity of the show. Heterosexual relationships were not questioned, thus asserting the system of “compulsory heterosexuality” at work. While non-heterosexual relationships were explored in the series, the non-heterosexual participants explained that these plotlines only succeeded in further emphasizing an aversion to a non-heterosexual lifestyle. This framework as “other” is apparent in one non-heterosexual participant’s critique of Sex and the City’s representation of the bisexual community. This non-heterosexual participant explained how the camera direction differed from any other episode: “the camera was moving everywhere and there was smoke clouds and they sat down to play spin the bottle. Carrie was like ‘this is weird and gross and it isn’t me.’ They just made bisexual people and lesbians seem like their worlds are just really fucked up and crazy and just promiscuous.” While these comments refer to another episode that was not screened, the non-heterosexual participants prove themselves to be very aware of sexual deviance. Being bisexual was not accepted as an appropriate norm for Sex and the City. The lack of representation that these women could relate to further emphasized their “otherness” and forced them to find their own way. Another non-heterosexual participant explained how disappointed she was with the lesbian plotline involving Samantha and a woman named Maria. She explains: “I totally didn’t identify with it… I was a little frustrated, well not frustrated…and of course the woman is too emotional and so settled in her life.” While the series portrayed a non-heterosexual relationship, the plotline only dismissed lesbian relationships as “needy and emotional.” As this non-
heterosexual participant elaborated “Ok, yea, obviously you give that plotline to Samantha because she the one that is so hypersexual that she will even go through the bounds of the hetero-norm and try women for a minute.” This lesbian-encounter even managed to fail to challenge the “hetero-norm” by emphasizing Samantha’s experimentation and lustful attraction to Maria. That this participant even used the term hetero-norm further suggests that being an outsider to heteronormativity allows one to recognize the standards that operate from within. Thus, we see that identifying as non-heterosexual left these women feeling isolated and marginalized from popular representations of female sexuality.

Additional comments also recognized that marginalization and invisibility of non-heterosexuals on television (Gamson 2002). In the middle of the non-heterosexual group interview, one participant interrupted me with the following questions: “so, are you gonna get to gay stuff?” When I responded to what sort of “gay stuff” she wanted to talk about, she explained, I wasn’t sure if you were gonna get to those questions related to like lesbians.” I offered her free range to take the conversation wherever she wanted and she started to talk about Showtime’s series, *The L-word*, which follows the friendships and relationships of a group of lesbian women. There was shared excitement in talking about *The L-word*; all but one of the participants had seen the show and everyone strongly expressed that she watch an episode because they said it was “the best show ever!” Clearly the excitement proves that the women related to the show and the plotlines. One participant even shared that one of her personal sexual experiences paralleled a plotline from the episode. However, when a question asked about how participants related to *Sex and the City*, the fact that the show was “very heterosexual” seemed to get in the way.
Even though the women related to *The L-word*, one participant explained that the viewer ratings were paltry in comparison to *Sex and the City*, further supporting their awareness of the marginality of non-heterosexuals.

Throughout the non-heterosexual group interview, participants made comments about their personal lives that supported the notion of having an outsider’s lens. For example, when discussing how much easier life and relationships could be if she were heterosexual, one participant explained: “yeah, that’s so easy you know, everyone knows the rules because there’s representation everywhere and you learn it from when you are small.” There is no such representation or dating scripts for non-heterosexual women. This simple comment explains that the non-heterosexual women are consciously aware of how heterosexuality operates whereas dating scripts and sexual expectations are less obvious in relation to lesbian, bisexual, and queer communities.

For these participants, identifying as non-heterosexual was not simple and they freely discussed pressures they have felt, at various times in their life to conform to heterosexual standards. For example, one participant explained that she “was trying to have sex [with an ex-boyfriend] to cure my homosexuality.” Immediately after saying this, the participant’s laughter muffled the rest of her statement, which reiterated the myth—which she had internalized—that lesbians just “need a good dick,” as she explained. Another participant said that while she knew she was gay, she was “trying not to be, but I know I think I am, I mean, I know I am. I’m just having issues.” In a later conversation about “desires” the same participant clarified her response, “oh, my desire is very gay. My desires are gay!” If her desires are gay, then there is something external to her feelings that pressure her to not admit she is gay. Another participant elaborated on
the notion that non-heterosexual women simply need a man: “guys think that it’s their responsibility to keep the woman straight. And they’re not doing their job if you go gay. [Laughs] No one turned me gay!” The very foundation of this statement, turning someone gay, suggests that one is naturally straight. The normalization of heterosexuality perpetuates the notion of gay as the “other.”

All of these comments demonstrate the pressures non-heterosexual women face for living outside of the charmed circle. Characters like Samantha and the non-heterosexual participants live outside of the charmed circle. While this commonality does not assume that these women will relate to one another and bond over their shared deviant status, it does provide a strong foundation for recognizing that a woman’s sexual agency is deviant in a patriarchal and heterosexual society. While the heterosexual participants shared personal anecdotes, they seemed more like stories than explorations into their social identity. These comments also demonstrate that the non-heterosexual participants are very aware of the norms that they break while the heterosexual participants are largely unaware of the norms that they follow. I believe that this lens contributes to the varying ability to deconstruct the episode as well as themes from the focus group discussion.

**HYPOTHESIS REVISITED & DISCUSSION**

Ultimately, the heterosexual and non-heterosexual groups were very similar. However, the differences noted among the heterosexual and non-heterosexual participants focused on level of deconstructing the same themes that everyone had
recognized. These differences cannot be directly linked to participants’ sexual orientation. While I do assert that sexual orientation has underlying influences on the participants’ reaction, I cannot accurately claim causality because there are many other factors that could explain why the non-heterosexual participants deconstructed the overarching themes more thoroughly than their heterosexual counterparts. Age, race, major, prior exposure to the show, and personal experiences could have influenced each woman’s reactions to the group interview.

In a perfect world, all extraneous variables would have been controlled. Race, socio-economic class, age, major, exposure to Sex and the City, sexual orientation, sexual experiences, and familiarity with other focus group members would have been standard across the groups. However, this was not the case and could never be the case. Identities intersect, making it incredibly difficult to explore sexual orientation without understanding how race plays a factor (Clarke 155). Race variance, exposure to concepts in other classes, level of activism on the subject of gender or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer rights all played a role in this study on some level.

Other research limitations revolved around how I structured the group interviews. Having a paper survey instrument available for participants to reflect on individually before and or after the focus group could have been very useful. It might have been helpful for participants to express themselves without worrying about the group’s reactions and could have helped me to better understand why the focus groups existed as they did. Another useful modification would have been having the participants take notes during the screening of anything interesting they noticed about female sexuality in the
episode. However, this activity might have distracted the participants from the realistic viewing setting that I wanted to establish.

One of the most surprising elements of the research findings was the nearly non-existent discussion of sexual pleasure as a form of agency. The women in the focus groups linked sexual agency with sexual freedom, which they understood as having sex whenever and with whomever. Yet, this notion of sexual agency was feared and regarded as unhealthy. Rather than recognizing sexual agency as the ability to experience pleasure, the focus group participants saw numbers, more specifically unrestrained numbers that would increase without restrain. One heterosexual participant reviewed *Sex and the City*:

> It’s both positive and negative in the fact that it normalizes this more casual sex. … It’s very positive for women because it says: ‘YES! Women have a sexuality. YES! Women are comfortable with their sexuality. YES! Women will satisfy their sexual needs.’ But perhaps it’s negative that it’s so normal. Perhaps it makes people think that this type of casual sex is generally accepted and generally a good idea when sex is something that is very personal and needs to be decided within the context of a person’s life and their feelings…so to generalize and say that casual sex is good for everyone, all the time, might be damaging.

This participant contradicts herself because while female sexual agency is embraced as a positive entity, she only sees the agency existing in a negative way. Her fear of female sexuality and casual sex not only relates to Rubin’s concept of sex-negativity. Sex is something to be feared and controlled, to not enjoy without feeling guilty or dirty. Combined with sex-negativity, the theory of sexual peril suggests that if any liberal changes to sexuality occur to widen the lens of what is socially accepted, then all walls of society will come crashing down (Rubin 2003: 14). The notion that female sexual agency will lead to excessive promiscuity and complete abandonment of relationships, represents sexual agency as a perilous addiction. Rather than move from embracing
women’s sexuality to women’s search for pleasure, the notion is that women will simply run around wild.

Linking agency to sexual pleasure would be a very liberal change that would challenge the establishment of the charmed circle. Limited conversations about desire focused only on the stigma of expressing desire, not on its fulfillment. One heterosexual participant explained the following about being labeled a slut: “It’s not how much sex they’re having exactly, but just how they, um, express that, I guess.” Expressing desire is slutty, which explains why even after probing for discussions on pleasure, participants skipped over the topic. If expressing desire is slutty, asserting on one’s right to pleasure must make one inconceivably slutty.

CONCLUSION

“I think that’s part of women’s liberation – changing the sexual expectations of women.”
– A non-heterosexual participant

Unfortunately my research has not demonstrated that there is a correlation between sexual orientation and a woman’s perceptions of sexuality. However, while the heterosexual participants recognized sexist gender norms, non-heterosexual participants were more successful in recognizing and respecting a wider range of sexual behaviors that deviated from the norm. Most noticeably, the heterosexual participants interpreted talking about sex as a demonstrator of sluttiness whereas the non-heterosexual participants did not.

With a preoccupation on promiscuity, casual sex, and numbers, the conversation regarding female sexual agency focused on having a lot of sex and avoiding dangerous
sex. Yet there was nothing on a women’s ability or desire to have healthy, good sex. In addition to the missing discourse of desire, I pose that there exists a missing discourse of pleasure that is essential to uncover. Female sexual agency was described as empowering, yet the participants’ language connoted something dangerous, scary, and necessary to control. While sexual desire regards wanting to be sexual, sexual pleasure regards enjoying or asserting one’s right to enjoy being sexual. Future research on the missing discourse of pleasure is necessary to understand the social construction of female sexuality in a sexist and heterosexist society.

Women are unable to be independent sexual agents without facing negative stigmas because female sexual expression is only accepted in relation to males. Women who stand out or are in opposition to sexist and heterosexist social norms are faced with demeaning labels that insult their independence. The “slut” represents a problem that has no name because, like the housewife Friedan sought to empower over forty years ago, the “slut” is seen as an individual problem rather than as a social issue. While the housewife used to be a category for women that restricted their agency, the slut has become the contemporary category that restricts women’s sexual agency. The “slut” embodies today’s feminine mystique.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Background on Sex and the City

Sex and the City, the successful HBO hit which ran for six years starting in 1998, chronicles the lives of four wealthy, successful, urbanites living in New York City in the late 1990s. The show was a large success and won three consecutive Golden Globes for “Best Television Series – Musical or Comedy” from 2001-2003. Countless other awards proved that the series was just as popular with everyday viewers as with the critics (http://www.hbo.com/city/news/index.shtml). The series followed the lives of Carrie Bradshaw, Samantha Jones, Miranda Hobbes, and Charlotte York, four friends with very distinct personalities. By the conclusion of the sixth season, each character is equally developed, however through her voice-overs, Carrie emerges as the narrator and thus main character as viewers relate to her inner thoughts.

Each woman is portrayed as a successful, independent professional. Carrie is a relationship columnist, Charlotte is an art dealer, Miranda is a partner in a law firm, and Samantha is a powerful public relations executive. However, they are all in search for a partner of some sorts, though each has her own definition of what a partner actually entails. Charlotte most noticeably wants a husband. She searches for the perfect mate and compliment to her posh New York City lifestyle is evident in every episode. Carrie wants to find the love of her life. She wants to remain independent but is recognizably clingy in her relationships. Miranda wants a partner to invalidate her insecurities. Her desires for a partner stem from a concern that something might be wrong with her if no one wants to be in a relationship with her. Samantha was a partner in bed. While Samantha has serious relationships throughout the series her sexual escapades make the most waves and have the most screen time. Ultimately, every character finds herself in a committed, serious relationship by the conclusion of the sixth and final season.

The storylines that fill ninety four episodes come from the experiences each woman shares in their weekly bonding rituals where the four women unite at a restaurant, dance club, yoga studio or coffee to tell stories about their love and sex lives – which do not necessarily overlap. These stories ground the episode with humorous, sentimental, sad, and usually realistic plotlines all the while bringing life to the characters.

5 The series was nominated again in 2004 and 2005 but lost to The Office and Curb Your Enthusiasm, respectively in 2004 and 2005 (http://www.hfpa.org/nominations/).
In episode six of *Sex and the City’s* third season, each of the characters struggle with personally identifying with the label “slutty.” The title of the episode stems from Carrie’s plotline with her new romantic interest, a man named Aidan. Aidan wants to take the physical aspects of their relationship slowly but Carrie finds herself concerned when he does not want to sleep with her. She takes this as a sign of disinterest and spends much of the episode trying to seduce him. When Aidan explains that he wants to take things slowly because he wants to get to know her first so that he can sleep with someone he “cares about.” This inspires Carrie’s column, which asks the question whether we are “simply romantically challenged, or are we sluts?” Meanwhile, Miranda must make a list of all the men she slept with after discovering that she has Chlamydia. Her list includes forty-two men ranging from boyfriends to nameless men, such as “guy from deli.” Miranda discloses this information to her boyfriend, Steve, while calling herself a “big, dirty, diseased whore.” Steve disagrees and then discloses that his number is much higher. This imbalance seems to comfort Miranda and as she leans in to kiss Steve, Carrie’s voice over explains that “men who have had a lot of sexual partners are not called sluts, they are called very good kissers and some are called romantics.” Samantha’s plotline also implies that such is not true for women. After letting a man in for a late-night rendezvous, Samantha discovered that a mugger followed her sexual fling inside the building and proceeded to rob and attack an elderly woman in the apartment complex. Samantha’s neighbors call her tart and explain that they know she was at fault. As Samantha endures criticism from her elderly neighbors she has a series of flashbacks of her physical adventures in the elevator. Ultimately, Samantha decides to give up her rent-controlled apartment and move into the meatpacking district, a place where she does not have to worry about being chased around like she is “Fuckenstein.” Lastly, Charlotte finds herself horrified at her partner’s manner of climaxing. While she enjoys her date outside of the bedroom and finds him charming and a perfect gentleman, in the bedroom he calls her a “fucking bitch, you fucking whore” during his orgasm.

As these women meet to share their stories, Samantha teases Charlotte for sleeping with her date too soon. Samantha asks if Charlotte slept with him after the first
date, to which Charlotte defensively says “it was the third date!” Samantha faces scrutiny when she jokingly says that if Charlotte is a slut “what does that make me?” Everyone lowers their heads at the table and omits their response. Miranda explains how she felt a “little judged” by her gynecologist when she said that she could have gotten Chlamydia from “any number of guys.” Lastly, Carrie judges herself for being so forward with Aidan and focuses on her behavior as romantically challenged and slutty, rather than driven by lust. These omissions have the effect of equating lust with sluttiness.

I selected this episode because every character faces judgment for being slutty regardless of her behavior. Charlotte does nothing other than lay in bed and she is called a whore meanwhile Samantha gets active with many different men while riding the elevator. Miranda is in a stable relationship with a man who does not care but still feels bad about her past just as Carrie feels bad for being so forward and sexually expressive. This episode shows the range of sluttiness and explores the subconscious level to which women hold themselves, their friends, and strangers to standards for proper non-slutty behavior.
Appendix B: Initial Flyer

Sex & the City

Want to participate in a research project on perceptions of female sexuality?

I am looking for female participants, aged 18 and over, to take part in a 2-hour long focus group where you will watch a show and then have a discussion. Food will be provided in appreciation of your participation.

If you are interested in being an anonymous participant, or if you would like more information, please e-mail rleder@umich.edu

For more information or to sign up for a group e-mail: rleder@umich.edu
Appendix C: E-Mail Sent to Prospective Participants

Thanks for your interest in the focus groups! I am conducting a research project (approved by the Institutional Review Board) for my thesis within the Department of Sociology on perceptions of female sexuality.

The focus group will involve watching an episode of Sex and the City and then discussing your reactions to the episode in a semi-structured conversation (the episode viewing is included in the 2 hour time frame). Each focus group has 6 participants, each will use a pseudonym throughout the duration of the focus group to ensure their anonymity - either I can assign the pseudonym or participants can choose their name ahead of time. At the very most, the focus group will take 2 hours.

The dates are very dependent on your schedule as well as the other participants. It is my expectation that most students will find sometime during the weekend more convenient. But, I will cater to whatever works best for you and the other participants. I plan on holding focus groups throughout the month of October:

I would like to start holding focus groups during the weekend of October 7th. Since I will be providing food (most likely pizza, soda, and some snacks), I am aiming for a timeframe of late afternoon / dinner.

Here is a list of other potential dates: (any time during these dates will work):
Sunday, October 9
Friday, October 14
Saturday, October 15
Sunday, October 16
Monday, October 17 (Fall Break)
Tuesday, October 18 (Fall Break)
Friday, October 21

If you are willing to participate, please let me know what dates and times work for you as well as your preferences for the dates / times so that I can coordinate a group time with the other participants.

Please let me know if you are still interested so that I can keep in touch with updates (there is a potential that I may have. If you have any more questions, feel free to contact me at (609) 947-8277 or (734) 565-7891.

Thanks again,
Rachel Lederman
Appendix D: Non-heterosexual Recruitment Flyer

Sex & the City

Want to participate in a research project on perceptions of female sexuality?

Lesbian & Bisexual Women Strongly Encouraged to Participate!

I am looking for female participants, aged 18 and over, to take part in a 2-hour long focus group where you will watch a show and then have a discussion. Food and a small ($5) monetary compensation will be provided in appreciation of your participation.

If you are interested in being an anonymous participant, or if you would like more information,

For more information or to sign up for a group e-mail: rleder@umich.edu

Sex & the City Focus Group
Email: rleder@umich.edu
Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

Perceptions of Sex and the City

Student Primary Investigator: Faculty Advisor:
Rachel Lederman Genevieve Zubrzycki
Sociology Honors Thesis Assistant Professor, Sociology
(609) 947-8277 (734) 764-7501

My research explores how college-aged students understand representations of female sexuality in the television show Sex and the City. The significance of this research lies in the pervasiveness of Sex and the City throughout popular culture. Furthermore, the show is commonly referenced as sexually empowering for females. This research seeks to explore how women understand representations of female sexuality in the show. While you may not directly benefit from this study, the benefit of this research lies in developing a greater understanding of how people interact with the show in relation to their gender.

Participants are expected to take part in a 2-hour long focus group. Each focus group will consist of 6 college students, aged 18 and over. Each group is expected to watch the same episode of Sex and the City and actively participate in a discussion led by the primary investigator regarding their impressions of the episode. Participants may skip any question they wish. Participants may be re-contacted if the principal investigator has any questions about their responses. There is no financial payment; participants will be thanked for their time and willingness to participate through light snacks such as popcorn, pizza, and soda, provided during the episode screening.

While Sex and the City contains sexually explicit material you will not be required to watch or discuss anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. While episodes often contain sexually explicit language and nudity this episode is not “over the top” or excessive. Prior to watching this episode you will be notified if there is any nudity or strong language. If you are uncomfortable with something in the screening you are able to leave the room or the study immediately. Also, if you are uncomfortable with the group discussion you do not have to respond and are free to leave immediately. The group discussion will focus on participants’ feelings, interpretations, and understandings of the episode. You will NOT be asked any questions about your sexuality.

Participants’ privacy will be respected. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, each participant will use a pseudonym assigned to them by the primary investigator throughout the focus group. Participants will be introduced to one another through their pseudonym thus ensuring that participants cannot be identified in any way. The primary investigator will keep a record of the real names and the pseudonyms in case a participant needs to be contacted to clarify her response. The record book will be destroyed after the primary investigator completes the study. This will ensure the confidentiality and privacy of participant responses. Your participation in this project is voluntary. Even after you sign the informed consent document, you may decide to leave the study at any time without
penalty. Participants are asked to respect the privacy of the other subjects by keeping the focus group conversation confidential.

If significant new knowledge is obtained during the course of this research, which may relate to your willingness to continue participation, you will be informed of this knowledge. Should you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board, Kate Keever, 540 E. Liberty Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48104, (734) 936-0933, email: irbhsbs@umich.edu

One copy of this document will be kept together with the research records of this study. You will receive a copy to keep for your own records.

I have read the information given above and Rachel Lederman has offered to answer any questions I may have concerning the study. I hereby consent to participate in the study.

________________________________________________________________________
Printed Name

Consenting signature

An audio recorder will be used during the discussion component of the focus group. However, you will not be identified in any reports on this study. During transcription, a pseudonym will be used in place of your real name to prevent exposing your identity. The tape will be kept on file in the Sociology department in case participants need to be contacted to clarify their responses. After the final report is handed into the Sociology department the audio recording will be destroyed.

Please sign below if you are willing to have this interview audio recorded. You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

________________________________________________________________________
Signature

Date
Appendix F: Group Interview Question Guide

Did you like the episode? Why?
Which characters are represented positively/negatively? Why and How.

In your opinion, what is the moral of the story or main idea of this episode? Why?

Who is your favorite character? Why?
How are Carrie, Samantha, Miranda, and Charlotte portrayed?
   What are some of their differences and similarities?
How do these characterizations affect what the show says about female sexuality?
In your opinion, are these characters realistic? Why?

What are your thoughts/reactions to how the romantic/sexual relationships are portrayed?
How are each of the characters are shown as sexually active?
   How does this relate to the title of the episode: “Are We Sluts?” and each character’s concern?
What is gained/lost by the focus on Carrie?
Are these romantic/sexual relationships portrayed realistically?

What are your reactions to the following quotes from the episode?
Charlotte: “Nobody wants to marry a whore!”
Miranda: “Now that you’re married you don’t have to worry about things like this!”
Samantha: “Date? Don’t tell me you’re not having sex!?”

What do you think about how sexuality is portrayed on the show?
Is anything missing from how the show explores sexuality?
   (If needed, probe with pregnancy / STDs)

How does the show present male sexuality?
   (If needed, probe with romantic man as deviant & quote from the episode: “men who sleep with a lot of women aren’t called sluts, they are called very good kissers”)

How does the show present female sexuality?
(If needed, probe with whore/virgin complex, orgasms as discussed in the show, definitions of romance, and Samantha as “Fuckenstein” – a sexual monster)

In your opinion, why do you think Sex and the City is so popular?
What are your final thoughts on the show?