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The Search for Agency: Female Sexual Desire in U.S. Sex Education and Coming-of-Age Cinema

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THE SEARCH FOR AGENCY:
FEMALE SEXUAL DESIRE IN U.S. SEX EDUCATION AND COMING-OF-AGE CINEMA

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship of film and society is one of the most central arguments within film studies, discussed endlessly by film theorists and film viewers alike: is film merely a reflection of society? Or does cinema create new ideologies in society? The film theorist Christian Metz suggests “film is too obviously a message for one not to assume that it is coded,” as the message is both indicative of its surrounding culture and the creator of new meaning (1974, 137). Cinema is arguably one of the most impactful media texts, as film narratives create a cross-cultural unifying language. Two viewers are aligned when absorbing the same visual narrative, regardless of their societal differences. While the power of cinematic narratives can be use for positive transformation, film can also continuously recycle damaging societal ideologies. The film theorist Marc Furstenuau discusses the potential negative power of film, as “[f]ilm seem[s] to pose very real threats to social order, confusing traditional cultural and aesthetic categories, and radically altering received conceptions of public decorum and conduct” (2010, 3). The discussion of ideologies within this thesis is directly correlated to the pervasive nature of cinema and the film narratives’ reflection of societal expectations.

The following essay provides an analysis of the gendered ideologies present in coming-of-age cinema, as well as a critique of heteronormative, patriarchal concepts that hinder female sexual agency and adolescent empowerment. More specifically, this essay will critique the harmful portrayal of female puberty as romantic, passive, and emotional in comedic coming-of-age cinema. This essay will be split into three primary segments. The first segment will consist of a literature review discussing the correlation between sexual desire and autonomy, as well as the importance of portraying female sexual agency rather than passivity in media and sex education curricula, in order to challenge female objectification and lack of autonomy. The

second segment will analyze the concept of female as passive and male as active with an explicit connection to film narratives. This segment will feature both a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of twenty coming-of-age comedic films between 1980 and 2015. The third segment will offer an autoethnographic account of pubescent sexual expression, showing how the existence and expression of female sexual desire is impacted by societal ideologies throughout the “coming of age” years. Ultimately, this essay provides a definitive correlation between the portrayal of adolescent sexual desire in film and the overall view of female sexuality in society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I. The Missing Desire – An Introduction

Sexual desire is one of the most common plot devices throughout the history of film. Sexual desire can be experienced through multiple facets of cinematic narratives, such as the enviable, tangible sexual tension between two characters, the titillating attraction to an idealized body on screen, or the collective arousal of a subversive, secretive, and erotic scene. The desire of the fictional characters drives the audience to identify with the characters and strive to embody their sexualized attributes and fantasize a fictitious sexual relationship between themselves and the idealized cinematic persona. The characters’ portrayal of sexual desire within film narratives is perceived as the ideal of sexual fulfillment and satisfaction. Through repetitious narratives, the ideological impact of these sexualized narratives permeates societal discourse and ultimately influences the consumer’s outlook on sexual desire. Through the use and allure of Hollywood star power, specific portrayals of sexual desire are associated with certain actors and actresses, thus perpetuating consistent narratives correlated to popular film stars. For instance,

the fans of Molly Ringwald (*Pretty in Pink*, *Sixteen Candles*, *Breakfast Club*) would be exposed to one consistent version of sexual expression, which would be much different than Jonah Hill's (*Superbad*, *Knocked Up*) version of sexual desire. When identifying with certain actors or actresses, the viewer is positioned to desire this heightened, idealized version of sexual desire that the cinematic characters and narrative provides. From the patriarchal perspective, film narratives supply limitless freedom of sexual expression - but which variations of sexual desire are truly celebrated?

While a limitless expression of raw, carnal sexual desire does occur in cinema, only half of the audience receives unlimited expression through patriarchal film narratives. The positive portrayal of female sexual desire and sexual autonomy is underrepresented in comparison to male sexual desire in film. The lack of prominent female directors, the male gaze theory, the profit motives: all can explain why female sexual desire is overlooked in cinema. Yet this disparity is unquestioned by the general audience. Heteronormative, patriarchal films, which cater to the male gaze and masculine sexual satisfaction, have thus far been the predominant narrative of media text, so there is no clear motivation to change this framework of sexuality in film. Viewers of these ideological narratives justify the disproportionate depiction of sexual desire as only occurring within the fictional narrative of film, and therefore not having true implications in modern culture. The trivialization of the impact of cinema perpetuates the harmful narrative of female sexuality as inferior to male sexuality, and subsequently reinforces these ideologies into society beyond the scope of the film industry.

The mainstream cinematic representation of female sexual desire sends a distinct message to all film consumers that male sexual desire overpowers female sexuality. The widespread integration of the male, heteronormative gaze into mainstream film texts fulfills the

male sexual desire while ignoring the female sexual expression. This framework of representation forces female viewers to watch film through the lens of the male gaze, internalizing the oppressive ideologies of passivity and systematically participating in the objectification of their own gender. The ideological film narratives suggest that women must conform to the normative roles of the “active male” and “passive female,” and the only means of expressing female sexual desire is through love, emotion, and romance. In a current system of limited sex education and widespread media access, these ideologies implement normative gender inequality for impressionable adolescents, and thereby reduce the sexual agency and self-efficacy of young women. In the following discussion, the literature will explore the meaning of sexual desire and female sexual agency, the ideological narrative of female as emotional/romantic/passive and male as physical/sexual/active in coming-of-age cinema, and the implications of media as a sexual education resource for female adolescents.

II. Let’s Talk About Sex, Baby.

In a public-opinion survey by Amy Bleakley, Michael Hennessy, and Martin Fishbein, the general population agrees that sexual education needs some semblance of change or a different outlook upon adolescent sexuality (2010, 51). In the United States, the present system of sex education is focused primarily on abstinence-based curriculum. With the lack of positive non-abstinence based sexual education, teens look elsewhere for knowledge and information, turning to peers or media outlets, risking the chance of misinformation, and reinforcing biases surrounding sexuality. According to scholars Jane Arthurs and Usha Zacharias, “Media texts are far more successful in addressing sexuality as a potential source of pleasure and fulfillment, rather than the more scientific approaches taken in formal education, which focus on the

biological facts or faith based approaches, that are designed to promote abstinence only” (2006, 539). Peers face shame, embarrassment, and sexual taboos within sexual education, so media texts become the easiest method of education. The answer to a sexual question, left unanswered or invalidated by the school education system, may be quite literally a click away. In this way, the media may serve as a “super peer” for adolescents entering puberty (Brown 2005, 420). The media as a “super peer” can be understood as an apparatus available to questioning teens, in which media texts are presented as relatable, nonjudgmental, and informative.

The average American adolescent (age eight to 18) spends from six to nine hours a day with some form of mass media, such as recorded music, television, movies, magazines, and Internet sites (Brown 2005, 421). In a study completed in 2000, teenage media consumers viewed an average 143 incidents of sexual behavior on primetime television networks each week, while as much as 80% of all movies shown on network or cable television stations had some sexual content (421). In the subsequent fifteen years, these statistics have only increased. As previously mentioned, the common argument views the media as only reflecting current and predominant philosophies of a given culture, but the media can also introduce new ideologies, and through wide dissemination and repetition these new societal beliefs can become normalized and accepted. The act of film watching is inherently passive, rendering the audience as only passive consumers without active involvement or critique, existing only to further media ideologies. The passivity and influence of media exposure undoubtedly impacts uninformed, vulnerable adolescents, as the younger demographic has relatively little training in questioning the ideological narratives of film and other media. Subsequently, the American adolescent’s societal discourse and personal philosophies reflect and replicate the values to which they are exposed within media texts.

The emotional coming-of-age years possess an “inner war experienced by teens as they struggle with pubertal changes and concerns about personal and sexual identity” (Bay-Cheng 2003, 62). Female adolescents’ low self-confidence and personal crises can be correlated to an ineffective sex education system, as their sexuality and sexual desire is less validated than that of their male peers. The naming of desire, pleasure, or sexual entitlement, particularly for females, barely exists in formal public education (Fine 1988, 33). These curriculums discourage young women from sexual self-interest and instead unconsciously suggest passivity and victimization (42). The media also propagates narrow and unrealistic versions of “normal” adolescent sexuality, failing to truly inform and empower teens to make healthy and responsible sexual choices (Bay-Cheng 2003, 71). Both the sex education curriculum and the media continuously reiterate that females are passive, romantic, non-desiring beings, and males are active, sexual, desiring beings. These normative constructions regulate the sexual lives, experiences, and identities of adolescents often to their detriment (62). In the case of female adolescents, the virtual absence of female sexual desire shown in media undermines the expression of female sexual desire and the development of sexual agency.

III. Sexual Desire & Culturally Enforced Passivity

An exact period of adolescence is difficult to define, as most interpretations use vague social constructions of age and maturity. In 1905, the psychologist G.S. Hall substantiated the social construct of adolescence and recognized sexual exploration as one of the inherent, essential features of being an adolescent (Bay-Cheng 2003, 62). In many ways, both biologically and through societal discourse, the term “adolescent puberty” is synonymous with burgeoning sexuality. Currently, the visibility of male sexuality greatly surpasses the representation of

female sexuality in the portrayal of adolescent sexual desire within film and sex education. This invisibility of female sexual expression insinuates a connection between female adolescence and sexual innocence, implying that male adolescents inherently possess more sexual desire than female adolescents. The linguist and critical theorist Pierre Macherey suggests that “within a language system or body of text, that which is *not* said—or included—is just as important, if not more so, than that which is” (Macherey 1978, 18). Using Macherey’s theory of subtext, the filmic portrayal of male sexual desire as more frequent, visible, and normative suggests that male sexual desire is more valued and legitimate than female sexual desire. Male desire is constructed as natural and individualistic, while female sexuality depends entirely on an active male presence, to maintain the culturally embedded values of reproduction and passivity (Bay-Cheng 2003, 68). Adolescent males have scripts of agency, initiation, and subjectivity at their disposal, while narratives of female adolescence only offer scripts of passivity, responsiveness, and objectification (69). Due to the widespread, unconscious societal acceptance of these gender-specific values, any non-normative variance in expressing sexual desire faces marginalization, punishment, or complete disregard.

Through the subtext of these narratives, the attributes of activeness and assertiveness are associated with the expression of desire, which subsequently suggests that sexual desire cannot also be expressed through passivity. When film and sex education curriculum portray female sexuality as innately passive, female adolescents lose the autonomy to claim active sexual desire for fear of challenging the masculinisation of active sexual expression. Due to the normalization of female passivity, society often rejects and shames the expressive, active female desire, most noticeably appearing in the practice of “slut-shaming.” Slut-shaming reinforces the dichotomous gender construction of sexual desire, as female adolescents are more harshly judged for their

sexual activity than their male peers, both through cultural and film narratives. This model of disempowerment also uses the Virgin/Whore binary to further punish any form of active female sexual expression. According to this dichotomy, female adolescents are divided in two groups on the basis of their perceived sexual behavior: either the female is abstinent and pure (i.e. virgins) or they are sexually active and therefore contemptible (i.e. whores) (Bay-Cheng 2015, 281).

Regardless of the female adolescent's actual sexual activity or autonomous behavior, both forms of female representation are subjected to sexualization and objectification. The active sexuality of the whore motif can be objectified and appropriated by male sexual desire, while the sexualization of the virgin motif occurs because "she epitomizes the feminine ideal, in that the virgin is sexy, but not sexual – having the appearance of sexiness, but not [expressing] sexual pleasure" (Bachechi and Hall 2013, 551). These two forms of female sexuality are consistently represented, not because they symbolize the feminine ability to abstain from or partake in sexual activity, but because their sexual expression can be co-opted in order to serve the dominant male sexual desire.

Gendered sexual norms create a double bind for girls: to be desirable, but not desiring, and to be a sexually responsive girlfriend while also being a sexually responsible gatekeeper (Bay-Cheng 2015, 281). The concept of the "sexual gatekeeper" implies that the responsibility in heteronormative sexual activity depends entirely on the female, and the only activeness of female sexuality occurs in her ability to say "no." In other words, the expression of female sexual agency only occurs in the refusal or the consent to men's sexual overtures (281). In this patriarchal system, females are not seen as independent sexual beings, their sexuality exists only for the satisfaction of men. In the traditional sense of female sexuality, women who wish to initiate sex are encouraged to do so through indirect means, allowing the male to take the more

active role (Losek and Terrell 2014, 2). This indirect form of sexual initiation, or in the more colloquial terms of “playing hard to get,” can lead to dangerous misinterpretations of intention and ultimately result in victimization. This discourse of female sexuality invites adolescents to conform to a patriarchal mode of sexual expression, in which male sexuality exhibits the freedom of choice and female adolescents are taught to ignore their own sexual needs (Bachechi and Hall 2013, 551). This discourse also perpetuates an institution that is inherently hetero- and cis-normative. Despite the potential lack of a physical cis-male presence (i.e. lesbian relationships), the patriarchal hierarchy of sexual desire still controls and manipulates the portrayal of non-heteronormative relationships. In fact, non-cis/heteronormative displays of sexual desire in film are often equally appropriated to suit the male gaze and cater to male desire and sexual fantasy (Wolfe and Roripaugh 2006, 4). Regardless of sexual orientation and gender expression, the manipulation of sexuality to serve the male sexual desire is inescapable in a patriarchal culture.

Romance as Pseudo-Desire

In a survey by Pamela Regan and Ellen Berscheid, both men and women expressed the belief that male and female sexual desire have different causes: “intra-individual and erotic environmental factors” elicit male sexual desire, while “interpersonal and romantic environmental factors” cause female sexual desire (1995, 345). These results are echoed in the dichotomous portrayal of female and male puberty in film narratives, as male puberty is represented as erotic, active, and constant, while female puberty is shown as emotional, romantic, and non-sexual. The use of biological language in media texts and sex education curriculum, such as “wet dreams” (as the onset of puberty for males), erection (as the preface to

intercourse), and ejaculation (as the act of inseminating), substantiates male sexuality as inherently, naturally active (Fine 1988, 36). This use of biological language fundamentally excludes the discussion of adolescent female sexual expression, as no corresponding language exists to equally validate active female sexuality. Ideological narratives suggest that emotional and relational connections satisfy female sexual desire, rather than physical pleasure, often seen in the reliance upon heteronormative romantic stimulation within film. While the value of romance does not harm self-efficacy, the engrained passivity in this limited version of romance perpetuates the antiquated notion that women should not actively pursue their own sexual fulfillment—rather, they must wait for their metaphorical knight in shining armor.

Film continuously bombards adolescent girls with this narrative of romance, as if the only legitimate expression of feminine desire must come from an emotional connection and monogamous relationship. While romantic relationships offer a safe place for adolescent females to express themselves, their self-expression is often solely articulated in emotional terms as opposed to physical ones (Hogarth and Ingham 2009, 565). The theme of romantic love socializes pubescent girls into societal norms in which romance is presented as the “master gender relations narrative” (565). Ideological film narratives show female adolescents what they should aspire to do or become, contingent on the potential of wedding bells. By defining romance as the single facet of female sexuality, “society continues to privilege this ideology and imbue it with a sort of correctness,” inhibiting and discrediting female sexual expression (Bay-Cheng 2003, 67). The establishment of romance as limited to female expression can be equally damaging to men. This ideological narrative discredits the masculine range of emotions, and obstructs male expression of emotion and romance, limiting male desire to only sexual and physical expression.

In a quote by the French feminist scholar, Luce Irigaray implies that in a patriarchal system, “female desire and pleasure can gain expression only in the terrain already charted by men” (Irigaray 1980, 69). In the discourse of heteronormative masculinity, the expression of emotions and romance is often associated with effeminate qualities and considered inherently feminine. In this patriarchal institution masculine characteristics are valued as culturally superior, devaluing the converse heteronormative version of the romantic, emotional female sexual desire. Furthermore, the idealization of romantic patriarchal relationships insinuates that the only motivation of female sexual desire is to find a single, monogamous partner, particularly seen through film narratives portraying female characters as reluctant to partake in sexual activity independent of monogamous relationships. A double standard emerges, as males are encouraged to seek and initiate sexual activity, while females are expected to establish limits upon sexual intimacy and to confine sexual activity to socially sanctioned, romantically committed relationships (Bachechi and Hall 2013, 551). The gendered media narratives suggest that female sexuality is controllable, while masculine sexuality is uncommitted and uncontrollable, perhaps the most damaging consequence of this ideological double standard.

IV. Agency as the Product of Sexual Desire

Female adolescents cannot gain a full sense of self-efficacy without the acknowledgement of sexual desire, as the invisibility of female sexual desire inhibits female sexual agency. Female sexual agency is “the ability to advocate for one’s interests in the sexual arena,” and without agency, “teen girls will be unable to assert and protect their sexual desires” (Bay-Cheng 2003, 65). The ideological lack of discussion surrounding female sexuality impedes the acknowledgment of sexual desire as well as the celebration of sexual agency. The silence

surrounding female desire and pleasure implicitly shames teens' private experiences and sexual desires. This shame furthers the lack of agency among adolescent females, as young women feel as if they have no societal claim to pleasure (66). A vicious circle exists: without visibility and encouragement of female sexual desire, female adolescents cannot attain full self-agency, and without agency, these adolescents are unlikely to feel confident and assertive towards their sexual desire, particularly non-normative experiences. The acknowledgment and ownership of one's embodied sexual desire is the first step in achieving a sense of sexual entitlement, which in turn provides the necessary foundation for sexual agency (65). Females with higher levels of sexual agency are *less* likely to engage in unprotected vaginal sex or experience sexual coercion and unwanted sexual contact, and they are *more* likely to experience consensual sexual activity, a greater frequency of orgasms, higher levels of sexual desire, and greater personal sexual satisfaction (Losek and Terrell 2014, 1). In order to promote female sexual agency, female desire must be acknowledged and valued as equal to male sexual desire. Finding an egalitarian view of sexual desire would liberate women from societal expectations of passivity, challenge the heteronormative male gaze and female objectification, and pose female adolescents as autonomous initiators *and* negotiators of their sexual preferences (Fine 1988, 33). In a society that continuously objectifies women through popular film narratives, the portrayal of the feminine must shift from objectivity to subjectivity in order to encourage sexual autonomy in female adolescents.

Masturbation as Practice of Agency

The specific act of masturbation can epitomize both the disparity between male and female sexual desire and the potential benefits of increased sexual agency for women. The two

most common societal assumptions about masturbation suggest that “males masturbate exponentially more than females,” and “masturbation is far more acceptable for males than for females” (Kaestle and Allen 2011, 989). Specifically within narratives of U.S. coming-of-age cinema, male masturbation is neither shamed nor considered taboo. In film, “jacking off” is a common punch line, gag, or symbol within a male-oriented narrative. Comparatively however, there is rare mention of female masturbation within similar film narratives or everyday societal discourse. To openly discuss female self-pleasure firmly locates sexuality in the body, which challenges the conventional emphasis placed on “interpersonal, emotional components of sexuality for women, i.e. romantic intimacy” (Bay-Cheng 2003, 66). In other words, the emotional and romantic connotations of female sexual desire are non-physical – they do not exist within the body, only the mind – and masturbation represents the physical acknowledgement of desire. The physical and bodily acknowledgement of sexual needs in the act of masturbation directly contests the perceived feminine inclination toward emotions and romance and openly challenges the societal ideology of female passivity.

The antiquated notion that only males masturbate is false. While females do *report* masturbating less than males, Kaestle and Allen raise the possibility that women and men masturbate equally often, but women are socialized to downplay their sexual activity (Kaestle and Allen 2011, 985). Recent findings from the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior indicate that, among 20 to 24 year olds, 92% of men and 77% of women masturbate (984). While a disparity can be seen, the point remains: a majority of U.S. women masturbate. In a study by Yasaman Madanikia, Kim Bartholomew, and Joshua Benjamin Cytrynbaum, the first of two surveys revealed that women vastly under-reported their masturbation habits, due to the pressure felt to conform to restrictive female sexual norms (2013, 107). Film narratives magnify the

restrictions surrounding female sexual expression through the heavily regulated portrayal of female masturbation in coming-of-age cinema. The stigma surrounding female masturbation often produces “intense feelings of shame or guilt, feelings of alienation from the community, conflicts in relationships, and problems with self-esteem and sexual identity,” which leads to hindered self-expression, self-exploration, and sexual agency (Kaestle and Allen 2011, 984). The shame associated with female masturbation creates an environment of internalized oppression and propagates the patriarchal ideology of male sexual desire as more acceptable and natural.

Sexual exploration apart from sexual intercourse can contribute to higher perceptions of sexual well-being (Hogarth and Ingham 2009, 559). In terms of agency, if a woman has a positive perception of healthy sexual exploration, she may be able to more effectively voice her sexual desires and pleasure. According to a study by Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck,

Women with a history of masturbation and non-coital orgasmic responsiveness had higher levels of sexual subjectivity and felt more entitled to sexual pleasure through masturbation, more efficacious in achieving pleasure, and reflected more on the sexual aspects of their lives than those who had never experienced a non-coital orgasm. (2006, 130)

The definition of sex as exclusively penetrative, heterosexual, and partnered reinforces a hierarchy of male pleasure and limits the ability for female orgasm specifically through intercourse. In fact, 50-75% of women who experience orgasms are unable to have an orgasm through intercourse alone and need clitoral stimulation (Powers 2012, 37). Women who have higher levels of sexual subjectivity and agency are able to advocate for their own pleasure during sex. With increased normalization, awareness, and practice of female masturbation, females can value their own sexual pleasure to a higher degree, whether achieved individually or with a partner. Perhaps if female masturbation were normalized through film narratives, via celebration

rather than objectification, female adolescents may be more willing to voice their sexual pleasures and break from the restrictive ideologies constraining female sexual desire.

V. Patriarchal Appropriation

In a patriarchal institution, which systematically co-opts female empowerment, ideological changes in film narratives are hard to regulate in order to consistently portray positive depictions of female sexual desire and agency. Particularly within film, there is a strong difference between sexual empowerment and sexualization (Bay-Cheng 2015, 282). In finding sexual empowerment and agency through female sexual desire, there is a precarious balance between celebration and objectification. The suggestion that female desire is “both in the body as a personal experience and socially constructed within society” embodies the conflict between ownership of sexual desire and appropriation of sexuality (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, and Tomson 1994, 29). In celebrating female agency, the social construction of female desire can be reappropriated to satisfy patriarchal desire, undermining advancements in female empowerment. In confronting male dominance, females must reclaim their bodies and claim their own individualized experience of sexual desire (35). In order to challenge the male appropriation of female sexual agency, female empowerment must be critically judged as both “an internal subjective state and a measurable objective, external phenomenon, based off of perceived social agency and fictitious cinematic portrayals of empowerment” (Peterson 2010, 307). The ability to facilitate a positive sense of female empowerment begins with the destruction of patriarchal narrative structures within film and society.

Female sexual agency must somehow be created outside the realm of the male gaze and reach of patriarchal appropriation. Otherwise, the male dominant structure will continue to

sexualize and objectify women within society. Primarily within film narratives, female sexual desire enhances the masculinity of the male subject and supports the male ego, either by feminine, emasculate comparison or by objectification and the commoditization of female physical attractiveness. For example, the argument of a “female gaze” may appear as an alternative to the objectification of the male gaze, but this female gaze only reaffirms the patriarchal system by emphasizing the power and desirability of the idealized male (Dirse 2013, 14). This also exemplifies the pervasiveness of the male gaze, as media texts and culture cannot extract themselves from this ideology. The male gaze can just as easily circumvent female empowerment and female agency as well as take over a passive female subject. This consequentially demonstrates why female sexual agency must involve autonomy apart from the male gaze, as any feminine subject can be co-opted to serve male sexual desire. The scholar Zoe Peterson discusses the conflict between externalized and internalized sexual agency, as feminist scholars are torn between protecting female adolescents from “objectifying and misogynistic versions of female sexual expression,” while also allowing “girls the freedom to experience and express feelings of sexual desire, pleasure and agency” (Peterson 2010, 307). Women seek to disassociate from sexualization and objectification through expression of autonomy, yet in the attempt to reject the male gaze, the assertiveness of female sexual agency can be sexualized and appropriated as a form of patriarchal disempowerment.

In order to achieve egalitarian gender norms within film narratives, female sexual agency must also be framed through a discourse of equality rather than superiority. If the dialogue surrounding female sexual desire becomes superior to male sexual desire, the cycle of inequality will continue. Additionally, the promotion of female sexual empowerment cannot be at the expense of male sexual desire, as women can be punished for their active sexual expression. For

example, in many horror films in which women possess sexual agency or challenge male sexual desire or power, the cinematic narrative will include violence towards the sexually active women. Any discourse that legitimizes a woman's pleasure, recognizes her sexual awareness, and values her performance of sexual agency by placing it firmly under her control, is potentially threatening to dominant masculinity (Holland et al. 1994, 30). In some ways, this threat echoes the concepts of film theorist Barbara Creed, who expands on the Freudian concept of the passive "castrated woman," and suggests the existence of an active "castrating woman" specifically within horror cinema (1993, 13). Essentially, the activeness of female sexuality and desire in horror is given a negative and threatening connotation to which men can "fall victim" and be metaphorically or literally castrated, emasculated, and stripped of their privilege. The fear of emasculation and the castrating female suggests anxieties on a larger patriarchal, cultural context. The growth of female sexual agency can result in a similar metaphorical castration to the ideological customs that maintain current patriarchal ideologies.

VI. The Potential Visibility of Desire

While mass media can be an insidious source of dominant ideologies, they can also be vehicles for social change. If films promoted the inclusion of female sexual desire and pleasure as distinct from romantic, emotional intimacy, film narratives could help perpetuate the positive aspects of female sexual agency (Bay-Cheng 2003, 66). The critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno suggest that "to be entertained means to be in agreement" (2004, 64). If adolescents are being entertained by film texts that portray females as sexualized objects with less sexual agency than males, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, these adolescents are therefore in agreement – even at such a young age. Conversely, if adolescents were taught the

discourse of equal sexual desire between males and females, perhaps these constrictive ideologies would be eliminated. In a critical essay, Sharon Lamb argues that feelings of sexual desire, pleasure, and agency are not necessarily signs that females are sexually empowered:

The question is whether feeling empowered and being empowered are the same thing and whether empowerment is merely a feeling or should be connected to power and autonomy in other spheres. Feeling emboldened sexually is not the same as empowered. Self-empowerment is not enough to constitute real empowerment. Certainly feeling self-efficacious is not always the same as having social or political power. Yet, if we conceptualize empowerment as something beyond a subjective sense of self-efficacy then who is granted the authority to decide whether someone else is empowered? (2010, 299)

Within Lamb's analysis, agency is criticized as not being enough – an individual's personal agency is not the sole solution in achieving true equality. Film narratives have the power to disseminate and influence consumers in celebrating female sexual desire, rather than continuing narrative content that only caters to the male gaze. To use film as an egalitarian tool, rather than a misogynistic weapon, would increase and normalize female sexual desire, and consequently empower females to assert their sexual agency within society. Film can be a momentous catalyst for female agency, if the film narratives are used to portray a wide, inclusive spectrum of female sexual desire, rather than merely emotional or romantic.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

I. Introduction

As discussed in the literature review portion of this thesis, female desire in film is often portrayed as emotional, romantic, and passive, while male desire is shown as physical, sexual, and active. These contrasting gendered ideologies are particularly harmful to adolescents who utilize media texts for more informative and relatable narratives in contrast to ineffective and unrelatable sex education curricula. As coming-of-age films are consistently synonymous with

themes of sexuality and burgeoning sexual expression, puberty-related narratives are often the most susceptible to negative portrayals of sexual desire. Using the International Movie Database (IMDb), I conducted two forms of analyses on coming-of-age cinema to investigate the existence and perpetuation of gendered ideologies. First, I completed a quantitative analysis of twenty feature films, using the act of masturbation as an indication of active sexual desire and themes of romance as a potential indicator of passive, emotional desire. Secondly, I performed a qualitative content analysis of *Clueless* (1995) and *American Pie* (1999) – the two most popular films featuring either coming-of-age romance or masturbation. The following analysis will offer an in-depth discussion of both quantitative and qualitative results from the selected coming-of-age films.

II. Methodologies

The International Movie Database (IMDb) contains a breadth of information for all feature length films, short films, and animated films, as well as television shows and commercials. For each, the information includes box-office records, film budgets, audience and critics ratings, production information, lists of cast and crew, nominated and won awards, and so forth. Films can be searched through IMDb's "Most Popular" category, which organizes films by combining three forms of data: most-searched-for, highest-rated, and top box-office ratings. Through my research, I used "Most Popular" to identify the most relevant and recognizable films. For the quantitative element of my research, I divided my content analysis into two top-ten subsets: the top ten films featuring masturbation and the top ten films containing romance narratives. First, I examined the top ten romantic coming-of-age films to measure the frequency of female protagonists compared to male protagonists, as well as to see if a correlation existed

between women-led narratives and themes of romance and passivity. Then, I analyzed the top ten comedic coming-of age films featuring masturbation to measure the frequency of predominantly-male-cast narratives relative to predominantly female-cast narratives and to note gender-related patterns in portrayals of sexual desire.

Using IMDb I researched the following keywords in order to analyze the gendered ideologies surrounding the romantic coming-of-age film: Most Popular: “Coming of Age” Comedy-Romance Feature Films between 1980-2015. The subsequent films appear in the order in which they appeared on the “Most Popular” list: *Clueless* (1995), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), *The Spectacular Now* (2013), *American Pie* (1999), *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* (2005), *13 Going on 30* (2004), *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *Love, Rosie* (2014), *Big* (1988), and *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012). The comedic genre was chosen both for coming-of-age romance and masturbation films. The date range was chosen to include a variety of coming-of-age films, while also maintaining a modern representation of adolescent sexuality. In order to analyze the gendered ideologies present in coming-of-age films involving the sexually active male, I used IMDb to research the following keywords: Most Popular: “Coming of Age/Masturbation” Comedy Feature Films between 1980-2015. In order of IMDb’s “Most Popular,” those films are: *American Pie* (1999), *Superbad* (2007), *Kick-Ass 2* (2013), *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *Van Wilder: Party Liaison* (2002), *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001), *Adventureland* (2009), *The Kings of Summer* (2013), *Teeth* (2007), and *Youth in Revolt* (2009). The keyword masturbation was included because, according to the literature review portion of my thesis, the sexual act serves as an indicator of both active sexual desire and personal expression of sexuality and agency. Following the above quantitative analysis, I will offer an in-depth qualitative analysis of *Clueless*, the “Most Popular” romantic-comedy coming-of-age film of the past thirty-

five years, and *American Pie*, the “Most Popular” coming-of-age comedy film featuring masturbation.

III. Quantitative Analysis

Findings

Of the first ten results in coming-of-age romantic comedies, the majority aligned with the gendered ideologies suggested in the literature I reviewed. Of the top ten, six feature a single-lead female protagonist (*Clueless*, *Pretty in Pink*, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, *13 Going on 30*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, and *Love, Rosie*). In these films, the narrative is focused on the coming-of-age of a female adolescent; male characters primarily exist as foils and secondary characters. Of the additional four films, *Big* features a single-lead male protagonist, and *American Pie*, *The Spectacular Now*, and *Moonrise Kingdom* either feature both a male and a female protagonist (one is not secondary to the other), or an ensemble cast without a single discernable protagonist. *American Pie* has an ensemble cast, but the majority of the narrative focuses on four male characters. Nine of the ten films do not express explicit female sexual desire independent of romance or emotional attachment. *American Pie* serves as the single exception; however, the female character’s sexual expression serves primarily as a comedic conduit for male sexual desire. Across the ten films, the primary depiction of explicit sexual content is intended for the satisfaction of the male characters, and the sexual satisfaction of the female characters is rarely, if ever, addressed.

All ten comedic coming-of-age films with the keyword “masturbation” demonstrated the trope of male sexuality as active and physical. Of the top ten, eight feature a single-lead male protagonist (*American Pie*, *Superbad*, *Kick-Ass 2*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Van Wilder*:

Party Liaison, Y Tu Mamá También, Adventureland, The Kings of Summer, and Youth in Revolt). In these, the narrative focuses on the coming-of-age of a male adolescent; females primarily exist as secondary characters or sexual objects/conquests. Of the ten films, *Teeth* is the only film that features a female protagonist. Nine of the ten express explicit male sexual desire independent of romance or emotional attachment, and each of the ten shows at least one instance of male self-pleasure. All masturbation scenes include highly humorous narratives – male masturbation is normalized by the flippant and casual way these comedic moments are portrayed within the narrative. These comedic narratives still use shock value to elicit humor, but male masturbation is excused as natural, carnal, and not punishable, unlike the portrayal of female sexual expression, which is often subjected to higher film-ratings and limited to dramatic narratives (Gibson and Wolske 2011, 92). *Teeth*, while featuring a scene of female masturbation, can hardly be considered an empowering narrative. The film genre is more aptly classified as horror than comedy; *Teeth* explicitly incites castration anxieties through *vagina dentata* imagery. *Teeth* reiterates the gendered ideologies of sexual agency, as the active female sexual experience cannot occur without posing a direct threat to male, patriarchal order.

Discussion

The gendered attributes of male as sexual, physical, and active and female as passive, emotional, and romantic were consistently found within my quantitative findings. The first ten films in the romantic-comedy genre were governed by the gendered concept of female as emotional and not sexual. Any sexual expression of the female characters within these films was located within heterosexual romantic relationships. The female characters within these otherwise female-centric films define themselves via a male presence in their lives. The top ten comedic

coming-of-age films featuring scenes of masturbation reflect and reinforce the trope of male sexuality as natural, biological, carnal, and uncontrollable. The sexuality of the male protagonists was expressed via lewd jokes, masturbation, and active pursuit of sexual activity and satisfaction. The majority of the film narratives consisted of loose plot structures formed around a string of vulgar sexual innuendoes and jokes, while the female characters existed primarily as foils for the male characters' egos and sexual desires. The scenes of male masturbation were entirely based in humor and hilarity, while any masturbation of the female characters was either facilitating the male sexual desire (voyeurism in *American Pie*) or exemplifying female reluctance towards masturbation due to societal ideologies of female desire (*vagina dentata* in *Teeth*). Rarely is a self-pleasure scene for a woman couched in humor – in fact, in order to find a larger sample of film with female masturbation, the genre specifications must specify, “drama” rather than “comedy,” as the occurrence of female masturbation in comedy, at least as catalogued by IMDb, is scarce.

The occurrence of female masturbation in film is infrequent in comparison to male masturbation, and often, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) assigns a more restrictive rating to films featuring female masturbation (Podhoretz 2006, 39). In a secondary search of “female-masturbation” in feature films, the first 20 films are rated R or higher (five of the features being either NC-17 or Not Rated). Additionally, 13 of the 20 films were classified as either “romance” or “drama.” When searching for “male-masturbation” in feature films, only one of the top 20 films is rated NC-17; one is even rated PG-13. Only seven of the 20 films involving male masturbation were classified in a genre other than “comedy.” The quantitative research of MPAA-ratings revealed the implicit shame of active female sexual expression and the comedic naturalization of male sexual expression through genre-specific narratives and restrictive ratings.

The gendered discrepancy in the MPAA ratings system implies that female masturbation is more problematic than male self-pleasure.

IV. Qualitative Analysis

Findings – American Pie

American Pie was rated the “Most Popular” comedic film featuring a scene of masturbation. In some ways, *American Pie* is the quintessential raunchy male coming-of-age film: sex, bodily function humor, the pursuable hot girls, sexual innuendoes, and male camaraderie all have prominent places within the film narrative. *American Pie* attaches sex to manhood: four high schoolers “must” lose their virginites before going to college so that they can become “real men.” In the opening scene, and first impression of the film, high-school aged Jim Levenstein masturbates while watching pornography on the television in his room. This scene invites the viewer to take the entire sequence as a joke. Jim’s mother walks in, and he cannot get his television to turn off. Given the history of MPAA ratings, an identical scene in a female-centric film likely would be considered more controversial. The audience would not be invited to participate in the humor of female desire; somehow female masturbation is not seen as comedic. *American Pie*’s slapstick scene may ridicule the act of male masturbation, but the expression of male self-pleasure is still normalized through visibility.

The male masturbation within the film is discussed and shown explicitly. Mr. Levenstein discusses masturbation with Jim with no qualms or hesitation; he even offers his son pornography while they have a “talk” about his self-pleasure habits. In comparison, the female characters, Vicky and Jessica, discuss female masturbation entirely in code (“you’ve never double-clicked the mouse?”), hidden in the shame or embarrassment of the action. Vicky states

that she would never participate in self-pleasure or exploration, as she wants to wait until the right time to have sex for the first time. Vicky resists and denies pleasuring herself, as to not express sexual desire independent of a male partner. Vicky's embarrassment and shame in discussing her personal sexual desire reiterates the idealized passivity of female sexuality, as Vicky relies upon the dominance and activeness of a male partner in order to partake in any sexual activity.

The only instance of explicit female sexual desire that takes place within *American Pie* occurs when Nadia, a Slovakian exchange student, masturbates in Jim's bedroom. Unknowingly, the whole school watches her via a hidden webcam. The scene is a projection of heterosexual male fantasy. While changing out of her dance clothes, Nadia finds Jim's pornography and becomes aroused enough to remove all of her clothing and begin to masturbate on Jim's bed. While some elements of *American Pie* seem ridiculous and over-the-top, the concept that a girl would participate in this behavior in a near-stranger's room is ludicrous. The absurdity of the scene does not empower female expression of sexual desire. In fact, the portrayal of a scene so unbelievable only reiterates the concept that "normal" women (not eroticized foreign women) would never partake in such active sexual behavior. In addition, the female expression of desire is overpowered and appropriated by the male spectators' desire. The scene does not focus on the pleasure of Nadia, but rather the pleasure and awe of all of the teenage boys viewing her sexual self-expression. The voyeuristic element of this scene perpetuates the ideology of active male sexuality. Despite Nadia's sexual assertiveness, her to-be-looked-at-ness within the film is not within her control. The male gaze, both from the male characters and the audience, controls her sexuality; Nadia's sexuality only exists as an object of male sexual desire.

The violation of Nadia's privacy is only one of many instances of the hidden misogyny within *American Pie*, as women are seen as disposable sexualized objects without personal interest or autonomy. The concept of "boys will be boys" often excuses this misogyny, particularly for the sake of humor, along with the notion that male sexual desire is a carnal urge that cannot be controlled. The primary personification of carnal male sexuality is the character Steve Stifler. Stifler throws a large party at which he roams about with sexual aggressiveness, slapping the bottoms of female strangers and using sexually suggestive pick-up lines: "I'll be back for *you* later." All of his assertive sexual behavior is unsolicited and disrespectful; he treats women like objects or trophies. Stifler even suggests that the whole point of the party is to partake in sexual activity. While this concept is not particularly far from my experience of high school parties, the "I need to get laid" mentality implies that the female characters only exist as conquests. Conversely, any female character who displays sexual desire becomes exaggerated to the point of ridiculousness and ultimately serves the satisfaction of the male character's ego; such as Nadia's self-pleasure scene, the nerdy band-girl turned kinky dominatrix, and the cougar mother sleeping with the high school student. The portrayal of male desire within *American Pie* is equally outrageous, yet somehow the male character development remains dynamic and three-dimensional, while the female characters within the film are entirely defined based on their sexual availability.

One of the four male friends offers advice to another protagonist: "If you wanna get her in the sack, you have to tell her you love her." The hidden philosophy behind this advice suggests that the only way to satisfy women, or overcome their "gate-keeping" and passivity, is to appeal to their emotional, romantic side. The division of romance and sex is clear within the film. The core female characters romanticize sex, while sex for the male characters is strictly

connected to carnal desire and sexual pleasure. The character Vicky laments about her relationship with her boyfriend; she's thinking about love and all he's thinking about is sex. Vicky says, "All he does is think about sex – but that's normal for a guy, right?" The societal ideology of girls as romantic and boys as sexual is blatant within *American Pie*. The female characters assume (and rightly so) that all the male characters do is think about sex, and the male characters assume that the motivation of the female characters is primarily focused on love and romance. The women who do not fit the archetype are hypersexualized to the point of preposterousness, as discussed with Nadia, and the men who defy this binary of sexual desire are emasculated for not being sexually active, such as when the school geek wets his pants after being discovered to be a virgin. *American Pie* provides an exact parallel to the gendered ideologies discussed in the literature of this thesis, as the entire narrative of the classic, coming-of-age film is contingent on the portrayal of male puberty as sexual, active, and physical and female puberty as romantic, passive, and emotional for the sake of comedy.

Findings – Clueless

Rated the "Most Popular" romantic-comedy coming-of-age film, *Clueless* is a beloved '90s cult classic, a bubbly, girly tale of identity, desirability, female competitiveness, and the wait for the "knight in shining armor." The gendered ideologies present in *Clueless* are more subtle than those in *American Pie*; however, the concept of female as emotional/romantic and male as sexual still occurs and is prevalent within the narrative. My analysis of *Clueless* will serve as a comparison to the male-driven, raunchy comedy *American Pie* and will identify the film's female-centric gender ideologies. *Clueless* provides a narrative where female puberty is

shown as passive, emotional, and romantic, and female characters choose to be the object of desire rather than autonomous subjects of desire.

The most consistent and prevalent theme within *Clueless* is the female characters' aspiration to be desirable to male characters. The majority of female characters are focused primarily on their appearance and are dependent on their possessions, socioeconomic standing, and popularity. The opening scene of the film focuses on the lead character, Cher, meticulously getting ready for school, choosing an outfit, making sure every aspect of grooming is covered, all while a voiceover discusses her appearance, possessions, and popularity/success due in no small part to her father and his wealth. Cher's passion for making women more desirable by giving them makeovers is one of the most prominent plotlines of the film. Cher fixates on a new transfer student, Tai, and the transformation is thorough. Throughout the film, the female characters incessantly look for ways to "better" themselves to be more desirable via diets, working out, shopping, etc. A recurring joke centers on the number of female extras with bandages on their noses from getting rhinoplasty. Aside from the focus on physical appearance and desirability, the female characters also define themselves by the presence or absence of a male partner.

Compared to *American Pie*, the passivity of female sexual desire is portrayed slightly differently, as the female characters choose to remain in their passive roles of gatekeepers and receivers of male attention. Through the need to be desirable to their male counterparts, the female characters in *Clueless* internalize the concept of to-be-looked-at-ness. Despite their ability to actively pursue their romantic interests, the female characters wait until the male characters "make the move" or pursue them. The clichés of a "knight in shining armor" and a "damsel in distress" are prevalent within *Clueless*. The only true control the female characters have is self-modification, to be desirable enough for the male characters to pursue. This hegemonic seeking-

of-male-attention undermines autonomy and agency, as the choice is left to the male characters and whether they actively choose to pursue the female characters. In one scene, Cher hopes to lose her virginity to the new male transfer, Christian. Rather than acting on her own sexual desire, she waits until Christian “makes a move” on her, and when Christian ultimately does not, Cher blames the failed experience on her appearance and desirability. Despite the primarily female cast in *Clueless*, the female characters’ sexual desire and autonomy are still contingent on their physical desirability and the presence of assertive male characters to initiate romantic or sexual relationships.

Romance and emotional expression are consistent tropes heavily engrained into the narrative of *Clueless*. In the final scene, which occurs at a wedding, the three lead females discuss their emotional desire for a perfect wedding, full of romance and tradition. All three women conclude the film uniting with their male “match.” Thus, a happy ending is achieved via the women’s ability to find a romantic relationship with a male character. Despite the occasional sexual undertones and brief moments of sexual innuendo, the culmination of sexual activity is a long, romantic kiss between Cher and her boyfriend in the last seconds of the film. Rarely is sexual activity mentioned or discussed within the film. The only moment in which the female characters blatantly talk about sexual activity is so brief that the sentiment barely registers; Tai emotionally interrupts the short discussion to lament over the song playing on the radio, which reminds her of her ex. This short scene summarizes the sexual expressiveness within the entire film, as the gendered ideologies within *Clueless* link women to romance, passivity, and emotionality. Ultimately the film relies heavily on antiquated gender stereotypes for the sake of comedy, such as love of shopping, failure to effectively drive a car, association with domesticity,

and obsession with appearance. *Clueless* provides a complementary narrative to *American Pie*, as the majority of the film is based on the concept of romantic female passivity.

Discussion

After an in-depth analysis of *Clueless* and *American Pie*, I conclude that the films provide substantive support of my argument that in adolescent coming-of-age films, male puberty is portrayed as sexual, active, and physical, while female puberty is portrayed as emotional, passive, and romantic. In some ways, *Clueless* could be considered as the quintessential female coming-of-age film and *American Pie* as the quintessential male coming-of-age film. Both films offer archetypal examples of stereotypical gender expression for adolescents via active sexual expression or “damsel in distress” narratives couched in romance and passivity. By comparing the “feminine” *Clueless* with the “masculine” *American Pie*, qualitative differences become evident. The overall sexual content disparity between the two films is the most significant difference. *American Pie* received an R-rating from the MPAA, while *Clueless* was rated PG-13. While the correlation between female sexual activity and higher MPAA ratings was previously established, in the instance of *Clueless*, the primary form of female desire shown is passive and romantic without any explicit sexual activity – hence the lesser rating in comparison to *American Pie*. The R-rating of *American Pie* is based on “strong sexuality, crude sexual dialogue, language and drinking, all involving teens,” while the PG-13 rating of *Clueless* is based upon “some sex related dialogue and some teen use of alcohol and drugs” (IMDB). The difference speaks to the larger difference between a male-based comedy and a female-centric comedy. The overall sexual content within *American Pie* is vastly more prevalent and reoccurring than *Clueless*, and the type of sexual content is more graphic and

explicit. The sexual activity, the sexual dialogue, the language, and the sexual ideologies are all more rampant and crude within *American Pie*. While both films follow adolescents in their senior year of high school, the gendered differences are visibly apparent.

V. Implications

The overall implications from both the quantitative analysis of twenty “Most Popular” coming-of-age films and the qualitative analysis of *Clueless* and *American Pie* confirm the gender ideologies the literature review led me to expect. Both through qualitative and quantitative analyses, men were consistently shown as active, sexual, and physical, while women were shown as passive, emotional, and romantic. These dominant ideologies insinuate that female sexual desire is less important than male sexual desire and active expression of female sexual desire rarely exists. Furthermore, the majority of the “Most Popular” films used for this analysis featured white, heteronormative couples. This homogeneous representation within coming-of-age films limits the dialogue surrounding female sexual expression. There should not be one definition of sexual desire to which all persons should relate – each individual’s character and personal taste impacts their sexual desire and expression. Perhaps if there were more diverse portrayals within the “Most Popular” coming-of-age comedies, the portrayal of sexual desire could be more explorative of non-heteronormative, non-white, non-masculine forms of sexual expression. The dominant ideologies within these films suggest that popular Hollywood film values male pleasure and satisfaction more than female desire. By portraying female puberty as only passive, emotional, and romantic, these coming-of-age films are denying female characters, and ultimately impressionable adolescent viewers, the agency and autonomy needed to express active sexual desire.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

I. Eight Years Old

As a tenacious young child, I was always encouraged me to speak my mind, ask questions, and be confident in myself. As the eldest of three children by five years, I was the first to receive the “sex talk.” At eight years old, my father sat me down and told me that storks do not deliver babies. Despite my open and communicative relationship with my mother, she shied away from discussing sex openly with me. From what I can recall, I left the conversation with my dad without much emotional turmoil. My father told me the basics of sexual activity and reproduction, including biological and scientific anecdotes.

“When you get older, McKenzi, you will start to have certain feelings towards boys, and you may want to become physically close with them. It is normal to have these feelings, but you have to be responsible and respectful of yourself.”

His overview of sexual intercourse mimics the literature reviewed on the experience of most adolescent sex education. However, unlike traditional school curricula, my father also disclosed the emotional aspect of sexual activity, as well as how to be responsible and respectful of my body. It was not until later in my life that I realized how important the second half of this conversation was, because my father gave me the unconscious permission and right to my own sexuality and responsibility. Granted, at eight years old, I still exclaimed “Yuck! Gross!” every time the word “penis” was mentioned, but this lesson remained: sex includes emotions and a sense of respect, independent of hormones and the mechanics of reproduction.

In a culture torn between describing sex as a forbidden, sinful yet biological necessity and as a patriarchal, carnal desire, I was lucky to have a “sex talk” that was not limited to one of these inadequate and restrictive tropes.

II. Nine Years Old

At nine years old, I was taught the status quo regarding gendered expression of desire. It was my first day at my new elementary school classroom, and I had to go to the bathroom. Attending a Montessori school, I was free to leave the classroom at any point to use the facilities. However, when I left to go to the bathroom, I didn’t realize that I was being followed. As I was finishing in the stall and about to redress to leave, I heard the voice of a boy taunting me:

“McKenzi! Are you peeing? Are your pants off? Your pants are off! Are you naked? McKenzie! I’m gonna see you! I’m gonna peek through the door crack and I’m gonna see you! McKenzie! Are your pants off?”

He was a year younger than I and not well liked by the class, and he had followed me from the classroom into the girls’ bathroom. At only eight years old, he was harassing me about being indisposed and threatening to spy on me. Thinking he was kidding, and being the tenacious child I was, I taunted him back and quickly got redressed. “You won’t look at me! Leave me alone! Don’t look at me! I know you won’t look. I’ll hit you if you do! Don’t look at me!”

Then, that boy peered his head underneath my stall. In that moment, I was so shocked, confused, and upset that I cried out and ran immediately back into the classroom.

As I came back into the classroom, I told the teacher what the boy had done, and with only a mild scolding, he was dismissed. Additionally, I was told to be careful going into the bathroom and to not taunt boys. From this experience, I was introduced to the notions of sexual,

active, “boys who will be boys” and the passive, nonsexual girls as careful, responsible “gatekeepers.” My friends reiterated the sentiments of the teacher, suggesting I may have been complicit in letting the boy follow me into the bathroom. This invited doubt into my mind; perhaps I should have been more careful. I was taught that boys have an uncontrollable sexual desire, and their urges are independent of their character and excusable. Girls need to be responsible for boys’ desires, and we have no sexual desire or “biological urges” of our own. The ideology that the male being has biologically more sexual desire than the female stuck with me, even at nine years old.

“That’s not fair! He should get in trouble. I didn’t do anything wrong!” I could see the inherent injustice, and in that moment when negative, aggressive male sexuality was accepted as normal, I decided that I must lead by example and advocate for my female peers, even in an environment serving the male hierarchy.

III. Eleven Years Old

I had spent all day getting sweaty – pulling weeds, dragging bags of mulch, picking up trash – all in the dead heat of a July summer in Florida. I was eleven years old at Girl Scout Camp, and my fellow Cadettes and I were volunteering at Camp Wildwood along with many other Girl Scout troops. These weeks spent at Camp Wildwood were always great fun – twelve preteen girls stomping around in the forest, free of any peer pressure from boys, able to take charge, show initiative and leadership, and act silly together. This particular week at camp was different however: Boy Scouts were attending camp this week too. As incentive for doing a camp-wide clean up, the Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops were promised a “mixer” or dance together on the last night. Attempting to play it cool, most of my peers and I pretended not to

think the dance was a big deal. However, under our sheets in our bunk beds, whispering late at night when our Girl Scout leaders were asleep, we giggled, squealed, and connived plans on how to dance with the boys.

“I only like tall boys! I don’t want to dance with anyone shorter than me.”

“How are you going to ask him?”

“I’m just going to walk up and grab him!”

“I bet I could dance with more boys than you!”

One of the girls, Sarah^{*}, suggested that we all try to dance with the most boys as a competition, the winner receiving a prize or award. As I have previously established, I was a tenacious child, and with that came a strong sense of competitiveness. As a preteen going through the pangs of puberty, cute boys and a promise of competition were all I needed.

The night came and my troop and I were very excited. We put on our best Converse shoes, black chokers, and backwards studded belts (without going through the belt loops), and we were ready to have a great night at the dance. The night started off in a blur of giddiness and energy: our troops mainly stayed together, girls with girls and boys with boys. We danced to “Laffy Taffy” by D4L and “Run It” by Chris Brown, shimmying, bouncing, and pretending to be sophisticated club dancers. Then, a slow song came on (most likely “You’re Beautiful” by James Blunt), and immediately the mood shifted. Girls who had been so excited all day to ask boys to dance, and who actively pursued boys they liked, walked off to the sidelines and pouted until boys would ask them to dance. The majority of my troop followed suit. Our meticulously planned technique of asking boys to dance was foiled. Maybe it was because when it came down to it, pubescent insecurities reinforced the hegemonic passive female and active male.

*Names changed for privacy.

“I just want the cute boy in the red shirt to ask me to dance,” I heard a girl whine.

Perhaps because the rest of the girl scouts were complying with this gender code, our troop followed suit. My friends collectively voiced their concerns:

“I don’t want to be the only girl to ask a guy! What if he says no? Everyone will laugh at me, and all the boys will think I’m weird! I just want him to come ask me!”

I looked around and saw 40 pre-teen girls, all standing on the outskirts of the dance floor, all with the same look of disappointment, all waiting for their “knight in shining armor.” Perhaps we learned it from the movies we watched, maybe from how we saw our peers act around each other, perhaps from what we learned in school – none of the girls was willing to make the first move.

Not distracted or discouraged by these gendered expectations, my friend Sarah and I chose to be assertive with our pubescent-hormone-driven sexual desire. We went to ask the boys to dance. With false bravado, I walked up to the cutest boy in the room and began to dance with him in the awkward way that only preteens at a dance can do.

*“I know what girls want
I know what they like
They want to stay up
And party all night”¹*

Rather than approaching the boy with respect and starting a conversation that led to dancing together, I imitated how I saw boys ask girls to dance and immediately jumped into dancing with him without asking. The boy appeared confused and awkward. He stood almost

¹ Chris Brown. 2005. *Run It*. Audio LP. Jive and Somba Records.

perfectly still while I was unsuccessfully attempting to mimic the dance moves I saw in a music video on MTV's *TRL*. I continued to shimmy and shake until suddenly the song changed, and my boldness disappeared. I didn't know how to continue my sexual assertiveness, especially when the boy seemed so uncomfortable.

"So um, I like your baseball hat," I said. "Are you, I mean, did you work on trash pick up today? I saw you there. I mean, I didn't see... I thought you... You looked familiar."

The boy's complete surprise at my bold move had left me flustered. Why should a boy be this surprised and uncomfortable by a girl taking initiative?

The night at the dance reaffirmed to me that there was a tangible difference in perception of female and male desire. The girls knew the difference and, for the most part, they didn't challenge it. The boys knew there was a difference, and they didn't try and change it either. The boys were "allowed" and encouraged to be active and to voice their desires, while the girls were "supposed to" stand back and let the boys come to them to initiate any sort of sexual or romantic connection. I chose to challenge the societal norms by asking the boy in the baseball hat to dance, but that night I also learned that, when challenging gender ideologies, there would be resistance and uncomfortable moments.

IV. Fifteen Years Old

Another summer, another camp. I was fifteen years old at Camp Wekiva, and we were on an away-trip to Crystal River, west of Central Florida. The environmentalist camp sends the 9th grade campers to a separate site to learn about water conservation and to experience the beauty of Florida's water sources. We spent the week snorkeling through the crystal-clear fresh water springs, boating through mosquito-infested salt water canals looking for manatees, and taking in

inspiring, but long-winded lectures about protecting Florida's aquifer. During the day we attentively listened and participated, but at night in our sixteen-person dorm room, we were as wild and raucous as fifteen-year-old girls could be. Every night we would shove and squeeze together into two of the bottom bunks (the ones farthest from the counselors), and we would wiggle and giggle, braiding each other's hair and telling scary stories about The Hermit down at Lake Privatt.

On one particularly memorable evening, our nightly conversation turned to sex.

"Has anyone ever done... it?"

At fifteen, only a handful of girls had experienced any form of sexual activity. The majority of the girls, including myself, had not yet been sexually active beyond a sloppy, wet first kiss. For a while we continued giggling and whispering, as we "oohed" and "ahhed" over our celebrity crushes. Then, the conversation took an interesting turn: one of my peers asked if anyone had ever touched herself. The entire group immediately burst out into uproarious giggles and shrieks.

"Ew!"

"Shhh! The counselors will hear you!"

"Oh my Gawd! You can't just ask someone about masturbating!!" one girl furiously whispered through her giggling.

But then, strangely, after the laughter died down, our group of nine close girl friends began to actually consider the conversation. One brave soul spoke up, sheepishly admitting to having "personal time," and then the floodgates opened. Every fifteen-year-old girl wanted to weigh in on the topic of female masturbation.

"I did it when I was little and I thought there was something wrong with me!"

“I do it with a showerhead!”

“I’ve never done it, and I’m scared to try!”

Even the introverted, quiet girls had some comment about having “alone time.” I was shocked. None of the girls was ashamed, at least after the cue that the topic was safe to talk about, and most of the girls had, at least once, experienced sexual self-exploration.

I thought back to the night of the Scout dance and how the girls were too afraid to show their attraction and take action in asking boys to dance. Granted, my friend Sarah and I tried to change the environment, but with the reluctance of the boys, we were not successful. In this moment, with nine girls crammed into two bunk beds, we all were having a frank, open conversation about our sexuality and our sexual preferences. This was the first moment when I witnessed a group of girls uniting over their similar sexual desires and needs. Some girls even stated that they didn’t mind waiting longer to engage in sexual activity with a significant other because they were satisfying themselves. In a period when hormones are at an unprecedented high, and self-confidence in short supply, the importance of valuing personal pleasure cannot be overlooked. These girls were confident in their sexuality, which translated to having ownership and respect of their bodies independent of a male figure in their lives. We laughed at our conversation, but there was evident appreciation and respect for our talk as well. We were proud of our shared secret, and our confessions felt empowering. Our group of girls united in our shared sexual urges and claimed ownership over our active sexual desires.

V. Seventeen Years Old

At seventeen years old, I went into the pediatrician for a routine appointment around the beginning of the school year. She checked my eyes, my ears, and my throat – all fine. Then my doctor asked me when my last menstruation cycle was.

“I actually haven’t started my period yet. That’s normal right? I’m a dancer and I read somewhere that periods start later for dancers. Right?”

Curious, but not alarmed, the doctor recommended that I get an ultrasound and some blood work, just to make sure everything was working properly. In October of 2010, I was diagnosed with Mayer-Rokitansky-Kuster-Hauser syndrome (MRKH), a birth anomaly associated with a malformed or missing uterus.

“I’m sorry Miss Vanderberg, but that means you cannot carry your own biological children. When you feel you are ready, we can discuss surrogacy or adoption, but unfortunately you will never be able to conceive.”

In the same doctor’s visit, I discovered that I did not have a uterus, I could not have biological children, and I could never become pregnant from sexual intercourse. While a traumatic experience, one thought lingered: I could never get pregnant. A lot of my peers were starting to engage in sexual activity just as I was given an immunity card. I would never have to experience the terror of a missed period or an awkward Dollar General check out over a pregnancy test. I was excused from one of the scary aspects of sexual activity; I would only need to worry about STDs. In a way, I was free to express my sexuality and sexual desire similar to a man.

As it may have already come across, I value my independence, free from societal norms or expectations. I don’t define my sexual desire based off the hegemonic status quo or my peers’ input or influence. When I was diagnosed with MRKH, I was given the opportunity to explore my sexual desire separate from the risk of procreation. I felt that my purpose in life was not to settle down to be a wife and a mother. I was defying the gendered stereotype of the passive, nonsexual woman. I had all of the capacity and freedom to be sexual and to express my

sexuality, and I avoided the ideology that equated women with motherhood, because that simply was not in the cards for me. Through my difficult diagnosis, I was able to gain more independence and sexual autonomy, because I was unique. I didn't need to adhere to societal norms because I was already not *normal*.

VI. Nineteen Years Old

I came out as bisexual at nineteen. My sexual independence as an adolescent helped me realize and understand my sexual orientation, while the collegiate environment, full of promise and reinvention, helped me make the decision to come out. I told three or four friends privately, and once I had their support and approval, I exploded. I wanted to shout my sexual orientation from the rooftops.

“I like boys! I like girls! And there's nothing wrong with me! I am proud!”

So long I had sat in silence, even in my sexual independence, wondering if I was wrong or different. I had lesbian friends, I had straight friends. But the visibility of bisexuality among my peers and in the media was practically nonexistent. I had no guidance, and the only bisexual girls I had ever encountered in high school were regarded with shame and disgust for being too sexual or “wanting it all.” I was scared to be publically shamed or ridiculed for my sexuality, as my orientation did not fit neatly in a binary box of “straight” or “gay.” My sexual desire, sexual orientation, and MRKH diagnosis all took me outside the binary way of thinking. I was female, but I was not passive, straight/lesbian, or motherly/maternal. I had always considered myself unique, but by college, I had created a laundry list worth of ways I strayed from societal expectations.

Freshman year I came out by nervously stumbling out a quasi-coherent sentence.

“I-I like girls. You know – I’m a les-uh-bisexual.”

I sat cross-legged in my extra long twin bed, squirming in the awkwardness of the moment, making the decades-old bed frame squeak. My friend bashfully stared down at her hands.

“We all figured. We were just waiting for you to tell us.”

I had gained a space where I was free to express my true feelings. Not my most eloquent moment, but perhaps one of my more powerful moments. I admitted, and consequently took ownership of, my sexual orientation and my sexual desires. I finally felt in charge of my sexuality, beyond what independence I believed I had in high school. All of my peers were supportive of my journey, but I felt a need for an understanding community beyond a polite, well meaning, “So, are you uh, interested in any girls at school?” So, I found a community that understood precisely my uniqueness and non-heteronormative sexual expression. The LGBT community at my college was small, but nevertheless gave me the space and support I needed to grow.

The pinnacle of my freshmen year of self-acceptance was my first ever journey to a gay bar, just outside of downtown Orlando. I put on my combat boots, eyeliner, and trusty black choker, and went to the bar, with feelings not unlike how I felt at the Scout mixer, eight years prior. I paid my cover (“That’ll be eight dollars, honey”), and walked through the doors of the establishment. Immediately I felt a sense of peace. As someone who considers herself an introvert, typically the club atmosphere does not provide/invite relaxation. However, the moment I walked into the dance room, I recognized that I was among men and women who equally appreciated straying from the hegemonic norm. No longer was I the only girl on the dance floor actively asking people to dance; the whole environment was alive with the celebration of sexual

energy and desire. The atmosphere of the club was most poignant in the patrons' respect for one another. At no point did I feel that I was treated differently for being a minority or not possessing all hegemonic characteristics of a white woman. I was celebrated for my differences, and above all else, I was joined in celebrating the expression of female desire. How impactful that expression can be.

VII. Twenty-One Years Old

At twenty-one years old, I revisited the sex talk I experienced at Camp Wekiva half a decade prior. Again, coincidentally occurring in a bunk bed, the topic of female masturbation was brought up in discussion. Three friends, including myself, huddled in bed watching a raunchy movie – something along the lines of *Super Bad*, *40-Year-Old Virgin*, or *Bridesmaids*. Within the movie, a joke was made regarding boys going through puberty and the masturbation jokes that accompany pubescent boys.

“I wonder why no one tells jokes about female puberty? No one talks about girls masturbating. All girls do it too – why don't movies joke about girls too?”

One of my friends, Jane*, pondered this thought out loud, musing this inequality.

“Actually, I've never masturbated before,” said Savannah. I've never done it, and I never want to. I think it's gross.”

Jane and I sat dumbfounded in our college bunk bed. Was it possible that many of our female peers had never masturbated? Was female masturbation truly so taboo that girls refused to partake in self-exploration? Jane and I began texting, messaging, and talking to our other friends – an unofficial, curiosity-based survey, if you will. Jane and I were so mystified by

Savannah's claim that we made it our mission to prove her wrong and convince her that all girls masturbate.

Instead of smugly correcting Savannah and informing her that she was in the minority, Jane and I hit wall after wall of refusal or shame when trying to talk with peers about female masturbation. Some girl friends refused to answer, either giggling or getting flustered by the subject, while other girls stated that they would only touch themselves if with their partner. This was a common sentiment among our peer group, and Jane and I were flummoxed. Not only were our female peers saying that they did not engage in masturbation, but our female peers were also suggesting that when they do exercise this autonomous, personal, independent sexual act, they primarily use masturbation to fulfill their significant other's sexual fantasy. The most independent act of female sexual desire was co-opted through shame and guilt to fulfill the desires of the opposite sex. Jane and I were shocked. I wondered what had occurred since that 9th grade discussion. Was my college peer group merely raised in a different environment, or had women internalized hegemonic expectations and norms? In the ten years between eleven and twenty-one years old, my female peers had subsumed their sexual desires beneath the satisfaction of their partner. This discussion helped inspire my thesis, as I saw a way to call out attention to this unjust treatment of female desire.

VIII. Twenty-Two Years Old

At twenty-two years old, I learned a hard lesson. Up until my senior year of college, I had been discussing the effects of lower degrees of female agency only in the hypothetical. I could string together statistics of how decreased sexual desire leads to decreased sexual agency, and how these together could lead to unsafe and unprotected sex, unwanted sexual activity or

coercion, or sexual dissatisfaction. While each of these effects is harmful, perhaps the most difficult result of lowered agency occurred during my senior year. Throughout my four years at college, I lived primarily in my sorority house on campus. There I would often hear the laments of sisters about how much “boys suck” and how they will be “single forever.” This consistent dialogue of defining happiness based off of the success of a relationship with a boy always bothered me. I was crushed to see amazing, successful sisters belittling their accomplishments and driving themselves into depressive states merely because they did not have a boyfriend or were not getting adequate attention from the opposite sex. On one occasion, I held a sister in my arms while she cried about not feeling sexually wanted by boys. I got frustrated with her because when this kind of sentiment reiterates the ideological discourse of women as passive receivers of love, sexual activity, and affection.

At twenty-two years old, a close friend disclosed to me two previous accounts of sexual assault and rape, and in that moment I started to take the ideological correlation between male as assertive and female as passive very seriously. This ideology was not merely separating the boys and the girls at a middle school dance; this ideology was perpetuating violence. Following the assault, my friend was publically shamed for her sexuality. Rather than her community asking for responsibility from the attacker, instead my friend was a victim of slut-shaming and being blamed for her own attack.

“She slept with a lot of guys before *that* happened. I don’t want to say she deserved it, but it was bound to happen.”

“Maybe if she handled her alcohol better, that wouldn’t have happened.”

Her role as an agent of sexual desire was misconstrued and manipulated to the point that somehow she was the one at fault for her own sexual assault. The male attacker was merely

expressing his biological, carnal urges, and she “should have been the responsible one.” Standing by her during these difficult times, I’m not entirely sure that the societal backlash wasn’t just as emotionally damaging as the actual sexual assault. This story is not uncommon – a girl gets written up in school for wearing a spaghetti strap shirt and “distracting” the boys. A girl gets sexually assaulted and we ask, “What was she wearing? Was she drunk? Did she say yes and then change her mind?” We, as a society, continuously place the responsibility upon the girls and women to be “gatekeepers” against the active male sexual desire, yet we do not provide narratives or examples of autonomy or agency for women to actively protect themselves. More importantly, we are not educating boys properly by instilling respect for women and valuing women as sexual beings equal to men.

IX. Now

As I sit writing this extensive essay on female sexual desire and agency, as well as the public and private shaming of female masturbation, I wonder what exactly is the primary influence in reiterating these ideologies within our society. An easy answer would be to shrug and yell to the sky: “Patriarchal structures! That’s what’s wrong with our society!”

And perhaps, that is the right answer. While patriarchy may be the bigger, ultimate answer, my exposure to media and film texts largely influenced my perception of my sexual identity. Gender codes are imbedded within all discourses of media: One need only look at my middle school and high school obsession, *Gossip Girl*, to realize that the cat and mouse, assertive/sexual male concept is a widely used trope. Women are also continuously reminded that their sexual desire and expression is subordinate to men’s and male sexual desire is biologically stronger than female sexual desire. Through media texts, female sexual desire

overwhelmingly is embedded in romance and emotionality, while male sexual desire is allowed to be sexual and physical. Female masturbation is seen as taboo, only allowed in independent films with NC-17 ratings, whereas male masturbation is the butt of a joke in most raucous R-rated mainstream comedies. I sought after relatable portrayals of female sexual expression within my favorite television shows and movies. I searched for positive portrayals of bisexuality, female sexual desire, and assertive female characters. Instead the majority of the media texts provided me with heteronormative Cinderella stories, which made me question whether my sexual identity was abnormal or somehow shameful.

Girls have been taught that their “prince will come someday” from their first exposure to media texts. Girls are told that when boys are mean on the playground, or act sexually in a child’s bathroom, for instance: “Don’t worry, they just like you!” “Boys will be boys!”

Girls are socialized to believe that, if they act in an assertive way, boys will be emasculated. Girls are told that they should fend off any unwanted sexual activity, yet they are also told that they may have been asking for it. So what are boys being told?

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, in both the literature and original analyses, ideologies of female passivity and active male desire were consistently demonstrated and validated. The literature comments on the ineffectiveness of the U.S. sex education system specific to the missing discourse of female sexual desire, as well as the substantiates the correlation between the expression of sexual desire and increased sexual agency and autonomy. Furthermore, the literature suggests the act of masturbation exemplifies an individualistic expression of sexual desire, and through the inherent societal shame of active female sexuality, women are considered

less sexually active and desiring than their male counterparts. The first form of original research analyzes the ideological correlation between female as passive and male as active present within popular coming-of-age films. This analysis substantiates the consistent themes of romance and passivity connected to the female character and female-driven narratives, as well as the contrasting attributes of activeness, physicality, and sexual desire associated with male-driven narratives and male characters. The second form of original research examines a first-hand account of adolescent sexual desire, particularly relating to self-confidence, sexual assertiveness, and sense of personal agency. Through these three forms of analysis, this thesis demonstrates an inherent societal bias against female sexual expression, perpetuated through the ideological narratives of film and a weak sex education system.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this thesis is the correlation between active sexual desire and agency. While we can see female passivity and active male desire in social discourse and media texts, the actual impact of these narratives on adolescent sexuality is often more hidden and ultimately more damaging. A decreased sense of adolescent agency can later lead to sexual dissatisfaction, objectification, victimization, and sexual abuse, as female adolescents are not given a voice to express their sexual needs and autonomy. As seen in the autoethnographic experience of sexual assault, currently one in four female college students are victims of sexual assault or misconduct (Mangan 2015, A4). Female adolescents are consistently taught that they do not express sexual desire in the same way that their male peers do. Through sex education curriculum, female adolescents are taught to be virginal and responsible and to act as “gatekeepers” against the active, carnal male sexual desire. These gendered ideologies of passivity and responsibility are echoed within coming-of-age cinema, through themes of romance and emotionality. Rather than discovering a spectrum of female sexuality in film and media

narratives, female adolescents are only shown one version of acceptable female desire: emotional desire for romance and companionship. These narratives teach female adolescents that they do not *desire*, but rather they are only seen as *desirable* to males.

Female adolescents are incessantly taught through film narratives and sex education curricula that their sexual desire is nonexistent or inferior to their male peers. This inherent patriarchal form of misogyny shames and punishes female adolescents into subscribing to a specific form of sexual expression. Active female sexual desire is thus manipulated and restricted to not challenge or pose threat to the patriarchal institution. When the depiction of girls' sexuality is devalued within narratives of film and sex education, female adolescents are told that they cannot claim the right to sexual autonomy and assertiveness. If the ideological narratives of men as sexual aggressors and women as non-desiring, sexual "gatekeepers" were changed within coming-of-age cinema and media texts, perhaps sex education curriculum would also reflect more relatable, positive portrayals of sexual desire showcasing a spectrum of adolescent sexuality.

Limited to the feminine attributes of romance and passivity, the restrictive discourse and portrayal of female sexual desire must ultimately be changed in order to facilitate increased female sexual agency and self-efficacy. The narratives in sex education curricula and film texts must provide more egalitarian variations in portrayals of sexual desire – both for female expression of sexual desire and non-hetero/cis-normative forms of sexual expression. The current focus of biologically based sex education programs limits and ignores the discussion of female sexual desire; if a reformed sex education curriculum included more discourse surrounding emotionality and expression of sexual desire, both male and female adolescents would be empowered to express and voice their needs, rather than feeling forced to subscribe to a specific

form of sexual expression and desire. Increased female sexual agency would lead to decreased objectification and victimization of females within both film narratives and society. By changing the discourse of female passivity in film and sex education narratives, female adolescents can be socialized to reject the societal shame surrounding female sexual desire and instead celebrate healthy variations of sexual expression independent of gender ideologies.

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