The Feminine Gaze: The Re-imagination of Cinematic Female Sexual Experiences in a Post #MeToo World

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ABSTRACT

The cinematic female sexual experience has historically been criticized for its use of one dimensional, purely aesthetic, and representational practices. Scholars have argued that this is largely due to the patriarchal ideological framework, and male gaze, that has long defined the Hollywood film industry (Smith, 2018). However, in an era influenced by the #MeToo movement, female filmmakers, screenwriters, and media executives are working to eradicate the stigma surrounding the female sexual experience (Bennet, 2018). Prior research has looked specifically at the portrayals of female characters in popular film with a feminist lens, using aspects such as gender norms and the patriarchy to explain the ways in which female characters are portrayed (Stewart, 2015; Marcus, 2018; Steinberg & Weisel-Barth, 2019). Similar to previous feminist film scholarship, this study aimed to understand how the feminine gaze, when used as a lens for perception in a post #MeToo world, has the potential to reveal a more nuanced understanding of cinematic female sexual experiences. Using two gender-segregated focus groups, participants were exposed to intimate content from six post #MeToo films and subsequently engaged in a conversation about gender stereotypes, feminism, and consent as these topics relate to sexual experiences. The results of this study showed that while the male gaze can offer up a perception of the female sexual experience in a way that does not align with hegemonic values, the feminine gaze far surpasses the male gaze's attempt at understanding the female sexual experience by providing an in-depth, intersectional analysis of female sexuality in a post #MeToo world, all from a decidedly female perspective.

Keywords: cinematic female sexual experience, #MeToo, the feminine gaze, the male gaze

INTRODUCTION

In our current social climate, conversations regarding the relationship between gender and sexuality are becoming more prevalent in part due to the digital activism cultivated by fourth-wave feminist ideals. Different from its predecessors such as post-feminism, fourth-wave feminism relies upon digital technology to cultivate a worldwide community of activists (Looft, 2017). Sparked by the shift to fourth-wave feminism, advocacy efforts such as #MeToo and #Time'sUp are rooted largely in the resistance of hegemonic ideologies about gender and sexuality in order to combat the patriarchal structures that disproportionately marginalize non-male identities. When #MeToo gained popularity as an online advocacy effort in 2017, its mission was to illuminate the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and misconduct in everyday society (Bennet, 2018). #Time'sUp was born as a result of #MeToo, the activists behind it focusing specifically on disbanding the "Boys Club" that many have coined the culture within the Hollywood Film Industry to be (Bennet, 2018).

#MeToo and #Time'sUp were aided by their roots in digital advocacy because the reach of social media allowed for female voices to be heard worldwide. Pervasive ideologies that had become entrenched within society pertaining to gender, consent, and sexuality were discussed and contested using an oppositional, feminist driven lens with low barriers to access. For example, more and more women began to share their personal experiences with sexual assault and harassment, creating a sense of community and giving them agency to eradicate the stigma surrounding their experience. This cultural shift permeated into the entertainment industry as well, marked by a period of time where an abundance of women began to sit in the director's chair for the first time (Smith et al., 2018). This shift allowed female filmmakers to reclaim the feminine gaze in order to portray aspects of social life in a more nuanced, realistic manner.

Before the feminine gaze became a legitimized perception in the realm of media, conversations occurred that concerned the damaging social ramifications that the male gaze presents when used as a lens for perception.

These ramifications include a continued use of the male gaze which naturalizes misogyny. Evidence of these conversations can be seen in the abundance of research that currently exists pertaining to audience attitudes on gender and sexuality in popular media (Coyne et al., 2014; Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015; among others). Other studies specifically looked at film for its ability to either challenge or perpetuate dominant social ideologies in the depictions of their narratives (Stewart, 2015; Marcus, 2018; Steinberg & Weisel-Barth, 2019).

This study adds to this existing body of work by furthering the discussion in asking how #MeToo has allowed space for the feminine gaze to be used as a lens for perception that pushes back against hegemonic norms pertaining to gender and sexuality. Furthermore, this research aims to speak to how feminist attitudes could affect how intimacy is understood and communicated on screen. Within this argument of a shift in perception, explications of consent and female sexual empowerment will be discussed for their relevance to the understanding of how the feminine gaze has altered the way intimate moments in film are perceived by audiences. This study utilized a series of focus groups in which both male and female-identifying participants viewed sexually intimate material and were asked to share their reactions. The reactions of the participants in this study demonstrate that women have a more nuanced understanding of how a male gaze affects the way the female sexual experience is depicted in film by relying on aspects such as feminism, intersectional identities, and gender roles to relay their thoughts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To conduct this research, the utilization of theories that discuss the different aspects of society that individuals can rely upon when cultivating and communicating their perceptions is imperative. Both standpoint and queer theory foreground the processes associated with interpreting media texts by focusing on identity as having an impact on one's perceptions.

Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory asserts that a person's standpoint or perspective of the world affects the way we as individuals are able to craft, understand, and communicate messages (Harding & Wood, 2012). Previous studies on standpoint theory have found that by looking at the experiences of women specifically, one is able to gain more insight into the way in which female-identified individuals experience a social world historically dominated by hegemonic masculine ideologies (Walker & Melton, 2015; Woodman, 2018). For example, Walker and Melton (2015) analyzed the experiences of female college athletes from different racial backgrounds, finding that by engaging with standpoint theory it "allowed women who may not fit the institutionalized norms of intercollegiate sports to freely express how their marginalized identities influenced their experiences in sport" (p. 259). In a similar context, Woodman (2018) rhetorically unpacked artist Meghan Trainor's song "Dear Future Husband" and found that because she, the researcher, adhered to feminist ideologies, she was able to analyze and make sense of Trainor's lyrics with a different perspective than a researcher who may not self-identify as a feminist. Standpoint theory provides a robust framework for understanding how identity and social structures affect how humans perceive and communicate messages.

Queer Theory

While the term queer has many different meanings depending on the context, when used theoretically queerness aims to examine how the everyday facets of social life are oriented towards heterosexual ways of being and strives to push back against the pervasive patriarchal ideologies often used to depict gender and sexuality in the media (Doty, 1997). An example of how queer theory can be applied to media texts can be seen in the research of Dr. Evan Brody. Brody (2011) looked at two separate portrayals of coming out narratives and evaluated them using a queer lens. Brody's main takeaway from the research was that the fascination with coming out narratives for LGBT characters "enable(s) society to recognize the essentializing of a culturally produced ritual, and subsequently necessitates the expanding of possibilities of queer identity production" (p. 43). Essentially what this means is that the premise of requiring LGBT folk to "come out" necessitates identification, something that queer theory tries to resist. Brody also points out through this research that the ritual of "coming out" is only expected and required of non-straight or non-normative individuals. Queerness, in the context of media texts, allows audiences to evaluate artifacts by both recognizing and then critiquing hegemonic, binary ways of thinking. This study utilizes the implications made by queer theory to recognize, and then push back against the social norms that are perpetuated by the male gaze.

The Feminine Gaze

Inspired by the feminist movement of the mid-1970s, author Laura Mulvey (1989) published an essay entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that introduced the concept of the female gaze and its relationship to the realm of film. Mulvey writes that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly" (p. 62). The feminine gaze is thus a rebellion in perception to the hegemonic male gaze, a perception that is able to show the intimate most parts of a female character without a trace of hypersexuality. While revolutionary in the context of feminist critical analysis, this theory has garnered criticism for its reliance on the existence of the male gaze's toxic permeability (Stewart, 2015). For example, both of the studies referenced in this subheading delve into how the male gaze directly impacted the way their studies were able to use the feminine gaze as a lens for perception. This provides relevance to this study by demonstrating the way the male gaze affects perception even in a non-normative context such as feminist film scholarship.

The Pervasiveness of the Male Gaze. Because of the power the male gaze holds in determining perceptions, especially those related to gender and sexuality, it is often difficult for individuals to distinguish what facets of their everyday lives are actually social constructs perpetuated by hundreds of years of male ideological dominance. Stewart (2015) attempted to make these distinctions through their critique of the male gaze via a textual analysis of the films *La Niña Santa* and *La Ciénaga* by female director Lucrecia Martel. Stewart's study found that Martel managed to confront the male gaze directly by placing women at the forefront of her films, using haptics in both platonic and romantic contexts, close-ups that uncomfortably linger on the faces of women, and transgressive sexual relationships that overwhelm the audience with the female image (Stewart, 2015). Stewart concluded that Martel formulated a more nuanced, multidimensional perspective in her films by confronting the male gaze directly and using a feminine gaze to redirect audience perceptions.

Scanlon and Lewis (2017) utilized the feminine gaze in their research of the female sexual experience while viewing lesbian oriented media and discussed how aspects of the male gaze were a leading factor in how their participants analyzed the media texts. Through a series of focus groups with women who had viewed lesbians on screen, they found that because lesbian sexuality is appropriated by hegemonic masculine notions of heterosexuality, it complicated the way their participants were able to resist the pervasive patriarchal perspective that the male gaze offers audiences. However, in noting this barrier to perception, the women in the focus group were able to have a constructive discussion about how women can reclaim the performance of lesbian sexuality on-screen by relying on aspects of feminism to convey meaning. The implications made by these two studies demonstrate how the feminine gaze aims to eradicate the harmful ways the male gaze misrepresents women in film. This idea foregrounds the purpose of this study, as it shows us how we as audience members can form a more nuanced and inclusive view of sexuality when using a feminine gaze as a lens for perception.

Fourth-Wave Feminism

Feminism as a social movement has existed for decades, yet the reverberations of fourth-wave feminist efforts are particularly strong because of their ability to syndicate messages all around the world with the help of digital platforms (Philips & Cree, 2014). This is what sets the fourth wave of feminism apart from its predecessors, as is its reliance on social media as a ground for feminist debate has produced increased visibility for the feminist movement (Phillips & Cree, 2014). The fourth wave of feminism was thus born with the creation of social media platforms, as this kind of digital technology has allowed a new kind of advocacy effort to take place, one that enables messages of solidarity to be syndicated on a more wide-reaching platform.

In a study that examined the gendered artform of photography, Looft (2017) utilized the hashtag #girlgaze as a way for women on social media to connect with other female photographers looking to see their experience as women represented through a lens other than a male point of view. Looft (2017) found that in relying on fourth-wave feminist ideals to create the hashtag #girlgaze, the advocacy effort "flipped the male-centered narrative embedded within photography as an artform to instead privilege a female perspective (p. 897). #Girlgaze was able to increase the visibility of art created by women and cultivate a new way to interact with photography without the guise of a male-dominated lens.

Similarly, researchers Phillips and Cree (2014) conducted a rhetorical analysis of a sample of educators' written experiences that deal with teaching in the era of fourth-wave feminism. They found that educators must "find ways of drawing on broader, more nuanced approaches to feminism than they did in the past, and in doing so, must reject the rigid ideological parameters that characterized second-wave feminism" (p. 940). This research demonstrates how the fourth wave of feminism has altered perceptions of social life.

#MeToo

With the rise of fourth-wave feminism, #MeToo was born as a digital advocacy effort that aimed to spread awareness of the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment, particularly as they are perpetuated by powerful men. The hashtag #Time'sUp was created in solidarity with the #MeToo movement, however, it focused on the experiences of women in the entertainment industry who had been victims of acts of sexual violence and gender discrimination. With the immense social following that #MeToo and #Time'sUp garnered in 2017, more and more women became self-identified feminists (Bennet, 2018). Fourth wave feminism's ability to cause more women to self-identify as feminists demonstrates how individuals tend to latch on to advocacy efforts when they see facets of their identities represented. By adhering to digital advocacy efforts within the realm of fourth-wave feminism, standpoint theorist Harding and Wood (2012) would argue that one's perception of the world will be altered. This concept of advocacy efforts affecting the perception of media is evident in the research conducted by both Steinberg and Wiesel-Barth (2019) and Marcus (2018) respectively.

Steinberg and Weisel-Barth (2019) analyzed the films *The Wife* (2017) and *Colette* (2018) for their inclusion of the implications made by #MeToo while Marcus (2018) chose to analyze the film *Wonder Woman* (2017) and examined how the costume design worked as a site for feminist debate. Both studies found that the reverberations from the #MeToo movement and feminist advocacy efforts respectively affected the way they were able to interpret the films' narrative structures. These studies add validity to this research as they provide a precedent for how to critically analyze media using implications made by social movements.

Boys Will Be Boys, But Girls Should Know Better: Gender as a Means of Perception

Prior research has utilized gender to construct attitudes about aspects of media and social life. Often when examining the differences between male and female behavior, the phrase "boys will be boys" is used to justify damaging and often harmful behaviors perpetrated by men. This rhetoric creates a perception that the behavior of men can always be justified on the basis that they are adhering to normative masculine ideologies. However, if a woman is perceived as exhibiting the same harmful behaviors, they are always at fault. The pervasiveness of the patriarchy and the normalization of maleness are the driving forces behind this kind of rhetoric. Each study referenced under this subheading utilized the male gaze as the foundation of their research to describe why gender-based distinctions exist in social life and in the context of media.

Both Lobo et.al (2017), as well as Hiramoto et.al (2019), looked at how hegemonic masculine ways of thinking affect perceptions. Lobo et. al (2017) utilized interviews with 18 male and female-identifying Portuguese journalists, asking them to describe the inner workings of their day to day professional lives. The results were then analyzed using a feminist lens. The researchers found that their participants relied on aspects of personal image, innate abilities, and family constraints to explicate the occurrences of their daily working schedules (2017). This ultimately cultivated the argument that a male gaze, one that only sees masculine notions of gender, was a key factor in determining the functionality of the profession (2017). Similarly, Hiramoto et. al (2019) investigated how hegemonic masculine ways of thinking affected the way race and sexuality were depicted in James Bond films. Their in-depth textual analysis of the films found that in the depictions of East Asian characters, hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality, as well as the inherent male gaze, were major factors in how the characters were sexualized (2019).

Furthermore, both Coyne et. al (2014), as well as Pennel and Behm-Morawitz (2015), exposed audiences to depictions of superheroes that adhered to gender stereotypes cultivated by a male gaze and then analyzed audience reactions. Coyne et. al (2014) did this with children, asking the parents of the children to report on different behaviors they saw their children exhibiting post superhero screenings. The researchers found that the exposure to said superhero programs with traditional gender stereotypes caused the male-identifying participants to exhibit behaviors that more closely aligned with stereotypical masculine ideologies, while the female-identifying participants exhibited more submissive, subdued behaviors (Coyne et al., 2014). Similarly, Pennel and Behm-Morawitz (2015) found in their surveys administered post-screening that the exposure to sexualized female superheroes cultivated a decrease in the rates of self-esteem for female-identifying participants (Pennel & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). Each of these research studies adds validity to the argument that depictions of gender with a stereotypical or sexualized lens, often created via the male gaze, creates harmful perceptions of acceptable behavior as they relate to gender categories.

Don't Fetishize Me! Sexual Orientation as a Lens for Perception

Using the premise that lesbian sex is historically appropriated to represent a fetishized fantasy in regards to patriarchal perspectives cultivated by the male gaze, countless studies have been conducted on audience reactions to lesbian sex and how those reactions are inherently tied to gender. Soto-Sanifel and Ibiti's (2016) study of lesbian

sexual instances and audience enjoyment argues that lesbian sex scenes will cultivate sensations of pleasure for both homosexual and heterosexual audience members of either gender. However, it is the way these pleasurable sensations are cultivated that sets the precedent for how gender is inextricable from sexual orientation as a lens for perception. Through a questionnaire administered after viewing of the film *La vie d'Ade`le*, the researchers quantitatively analyzed their results and found that while lesbian audience members enjoyed the sensations of seeing lesbian sex outside of the context of fetishized pornography, heterosexual men claimed that the depictions of lesbian sex on screen only reinforced their fantasies of having sex with two women (Soto-Sanifel & Ibiti, 2016). This tendency for heterosexual men to view lesbian sex as a fantasy they wish to fulfill and not as a genuine depiction of desire adds more validity to the argument that gender is a key contributor to the way that one is able to make sense of the world. It also provides a useful implication in that the male gaze seeks to achieve pleasure for the male audience member, even if there are two female-identifying individuals seen on screen.

Standpoint Formation as a Result of Media Exposure
    Currently, there is a plethora of research that explores the different facets of social life individuals rely upon when forming opinions pertaining to the media they engage with (Bond & Drogos, 2014; Galloway et al., 2015; among others). Bond and Drogos (2014) exposed undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university to the hit tv show *Jersey Shore* and then gave them an online survey to complete after watching. After quantitatively analyzing their results, the researchers found factors such as wishful identification and parasocial relationships as mediators to the exposure to sexually intimate scenes. Similarly, Galloway et. al (2015) used cultivation processes as a starting point when they researched if movie viewing caused young people to create unrealistic expectations about romantic relationships. Through the analysis of a survey given to young adults who frequently engage with both romantic comedies and dramas, they found that the more frequent viewings of films with romantic narratives, the more audiences had idealized notions of love as well as higher expectations for intimate contexts (Galloway et al., 2015).
    Studies by Miller et. al (2016) and Miller, Kinnally, Maleche, and Booker (2017) looked at media use as it relates to sexual attitudes in Ugandan and Nairobi adolescents respectively. Miller et. al (2016) utilized focus groups of Ugandan adolescents to gather information about how much of their knowledge pertaining to sexuality came from the media they engaged with. They looked at how that content was interpreted and how much of it they attributed to their current understanding of sexuality. The most robust finding from the study conducted by Miller et. al (2016) was that many participants claimed they were "more likely to be to influenced by media messages about sex than what they said were more trustworthy sources such as family, school, and church" (p. 717). Similarly, Miller, Kinnally, Maleche, and Booker's (2017) study looked at Nairobi adolescents in a similar context, this time gathering data about their media usage with quantitative questionnaires. Overall, they found that exposure to sexual material caused students to overestimate the rate at which sexual behaviors were prevalent amongst their peers, ultimately causing them to adopt more casual, gender-typical attitudes about sex (Miller et al., 2017). All of the studies referenced under this subheading provide a useful framework to understand how audiences form perceptions of media with sexual themes that directly relate to their understanding and performance of their sexuality.

Yes Means Yes: Using Media to Rewrite the script on Consent in a post #MeToo World
    One key component of the #MeToo movement was the need to highlight the importance of enthusiastic verbal consent (Bennet, 2018). Operating under the veil of the male gaze, it has been assumed historically that men are the only ones allowed to instigate sexual encounters; if a woman were to instigate, she would be perceived as promiscuous and thus, undesirable (Bennet, 2018). This ideology has thus created a harmful practice of behavior that has just now re-emerged amidst the #MeToo movement, causing more research on the subject to be conducted.
    Jozkowski et. al (2019) conducted a content analysis on how consent and refusal communication were depicted in mainstream film. One of their main findings was that nonverbal cues were largely the mode of communication used to represent consent in sexually intimate contexts. They relied largely on the premise discussed in prior research (Bond & Drogos, 2014; Galloway et al., 2015; among others) that the media has the power to influence sexual behaviors and attitudes. Relying on this same premise, research such as the study conducted by Kelly Oliver (2016) proves the need for more accurate representations of consent in the media. Oliver (2016) asserts this is needed in order to push back against the recent uptick in the glorification of rape and sexual assault through the use of social media platforms such as Snapchat. Through her research, Oliver (2016) found that non-consensual sex with unconscious girls, as documented by photo-sharing apps like Snapchat, has become a competition for some young men, the photos representing a trophy of sorts. Research on consent, especially in our current society, is imperative in order to change the pervasive and patriarchal culture created by the male gaze that has long plagued the nature of engaging in sexual acts for men and women alike.

METHODS

This study was conducted through a series of focus groups. Participants were asked a series of demographic questions before they were exposed to six sexually intimate scenes from films made after 2017 when the #MeToo movement initially gained popularity. Their reactions were documented via a series of questions related to gender norms, feminist influences, and the aftermath of #MeToo. Previous research has shown that focus groups are useful in addressing cultural attitudes around a specific subject and allow for information to be gathered that reflects the values, perceptions, and beliefs of a particular group of people (Calderon et al., 2000). Because the main purpose of this research was to examine how #MeToo has afforded the feminine gaze legitimacy in the context of sexual intimacy, it was important that focus groups were utilized to foster a more collaborative, socially conscious, and culturally relevant way of thinking about the cinematic female sexual experience.

This research utilized an interpretive approach coupled with critical theory to both recognize and call attention to the implications made by the male gaze when it is used as a lens for perception. An interpretive approach allows researchers to use people's subjective experiences of the world to formulate arguments concerning aspects of social life (Pelz, 2020). When coupled together with critical theory, researchers can understand how reality is socially constructed through the lived experiences of those within society that have been faced with oppression and inequality (Potter et al. 1993).

Participants

The population used to conduct this research consisted of 10 participants, five male-identifying individuals and five female-identifying individuals. All participants were between the ages of 19-22 and were current students attending a midsized midwestern university. They were recruited through an Instagram advertisement that asked all college-aged students who were interested in film to participate in a brief one-hour focus group that would entail screenings of scenes with intimate content from several popular films. Participants who replied to the advertisement were directed to fill out a demographic survey that asked them to disclose their age as well as their gender, racial, and sexual identity. The two optional questions participants could choose whether or not to disclose were their religious and political identities. After each participant filled out the demographic survey, they were then separated into a focus group based on the disclosure of their gender identity. This was done in order to allow participants to speak openly and freely about the experiences they associate with their gender identity. This approach was modeled after Scanlon & Lewis (2016) who found that conversations that took place in a gender-segregated environment allowed for "a unique cinema space that felt free of conventional constraints of heteronormativity and patriarchy" (p. 2).

Focus Group A consisted of five female-identifying individuals with ages ranging from 19-22. Of those five, four identified as Caucasian and one individual identified as mixed-race. Further, one of the participants identified as heterosexual, one identified as questioning, two identified as bisexual, and one participant identified as pansexual. For the remaining two optional questions, all five participants in Focus Group A said they identified as Democrats and four of the five participants said they identified as agnostic in terms of their religious identity. One participant preferred not to answer.

Focus Group B consisted of five male-identifying individuals with ages ranging from 19-22. Of those five, four identified as Caucasian and one individual identified as Latinx. In addition, four of the participants in Focus Group B identified as heterosexual while one participant identified as homosexual. For the remaining two optional questions, four of the five participants in Focus Group B identified as democrats and agnostic while one participant identified as Republican and Christian.

Sample

As noted earlier, participants were exposed to sexually intimate scenes from the #MeToo era. These films were: *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017), *Booksmart* (Olivia Wilde, 2019), *Dude* (Olivia Milch, 2018), *Atomic Blonde* (David Leitch, 2017), *Hot Summer Nights* (Elijah Bynum, 2017), and *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2018).

Procedure

On the day the focus groups were conducted, each participant was given ample time to read over and sign both an informed consent form in addition to a non-disclosure agreement. Each focus group lasted between 1-2 hours, was videotaped, and had the audio transcribed verbatim. All audio transcripts and videos were saved in a password protected folder and deleted after the data were analyzed. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants were accounted for by the non-disclosure agreements each participant signed at the beginning of the focus group in addition to the utilization of pseudonyms for each participant included in the transcription of the audiotapes. The two focus groups were conducted on the same day in a private classroom within a university lecture hall. The focus

group protocol consisted of each group screening six scenes with sexually intimate content from films that were made post #MeToo. Half of the scenes were directed by male-identified directors and half by female-identified directors. After each set of two scenes, the focus groups were asked to relay their initial reactions and then were asked a set of discussion questions created by the researcher. Once each focus group was completed, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes and subthemes within the discussions that took place in each focus group. A thematic analysis allows researchers to sort their findings into categories based upon reoccurring ideas, these categories thus serving as themes that outline the research's main implications (Braun and Clarke, 2014).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While previous research has broadly explored audience reactions to sexually intimate material (e.g. Bond & Drogos, 2014; Galloway et al., 2015; among others), this study takes a more in-depth approach to answering how social movements such as #MeToo and feminism, as well as gender identity, affect perceptions of sexually intimate material. Thus, the first research question inquires:

RQ1: How does an audience member's gender identity influence the way they perceive intimate moments in film?

Standpoint theorists Harding and Wood (2012) support the notion that identity and membership to social circles can affect one's perception of the world and ultimately their ability to communicate that perception. Because #MeToo relied largely on the disclosure of intimate details of one's sexual history, its implications are imperative not only to this research but to the field of Communication at large. While there has been research conducted on consent communication since #MeToo's rise to prominence (Oliver, 2016) there has not been an abundance of research that has studied how having membership in the #MeToo community may affect the way intimacy is perceived when seen on screen. This lack of information thus gives reason to ask the question:

RQ2: How has #MeToo affected the perceptions audiences have in regard to intimacy in popular film?

While research has used a feminist lens to examine media texts concerning gender disparities (Steinberg & Weisel-Barth, 2019; Stewart, 2015; Marcus, 2018; among others) engagement with feminism and the effect it has on an individual's ability to interpret and communicate messages about sex has not been extensively studied. This research thus inquires:

RQ3: How does the adoption of feminist attitudes pertaining to gender and sexuality affect an individual's ability to interpret female sexual experiences film?

RESULTS

The focus groups revealed six overarching themes with five sub-themes embedded within the discussions. RQ1's themes were associations and dissociations. The sub-themes under associations were smashing the patriarchy, the female sexual experience, and the price of vulnerability. RQ2's themes were communicating consent, the survivor perception, and the idea of seeing women no longer just as virgins and whores with a sub-theme that dealt with the concept of queering the power. RQ3's theme was female sexual empowerment and the sub-theme under it was not just a pretty face.

The purpose of RQ1 was to uncover how gender identity affects how individuals are able to perceive sexual intimacy in film. Two themes and three sub-themes emerged from this line of inquiry.

Associations

The ability to identify or relate to an aspect of sex when depicted in film was a key theme that emerged through the discussion of how one's gender identity affects perception. Many of the female participants related to the female characters in the scenes, whereas the male participants related to the male characters. In addition to answering the question as to how gender identity affects perception, focus group members intertwined discussions of patriarchy and relatable sexual experiences as affecting the way they were able to perceive the scenes screened during the focus group.

Smashing the Patriarchy. Many female participants stated patriarchy as a reason they resonated with different aspects of the scenes that were shown. Participant A1, a white, heterosexual, woman, related to the aspect of women always feeling the need to please in sexual encounters.

> I think that as a society, there is this notion surrounding female sexuality that women need to satisfy and take care of men. Having that notion reflected in some of the female characters in these scenes just goes to show how pervasive the patriarchy is. I think the more female characters being depicted as not there just to satisfy the male character, the more that we will see women in society adopting more progressive attitudes concerning their value as a sexual being.

Participant A2, a white, bisexual, woman, talked about her experience in watching the scene from *Dude* (2018) in a way that directly connected her perception of the scene to her identity as a sexually active woman.

> I've never seen female pleasure being depicted in a way that was so similar to my own experiences before this scene *(Dude, 2018)*. I think this is because female sexuality has been taken over by the male point of view, so we only see this very pretty, aesthetic, sexualized version of it when in reality, that is, at least not for me, the experience that most women have. I think the lack of accurate female pleasure depictions in the media just goes to show just how much sexuality is connected to the patriarchy and the misogyny that is so prevalent in our society.

The Female Sexual Experience. Members of Focus Group A, which consisted entirely of female-identified individuals, associated with the scenes where they felt like the female sexual experience was shown in a more nuanced or relatable way. Participant A3, a white, bisexual, woman, said that a particular moment within the film *Lady Bird* (2017) was especially relatable to her as a sexually active woman.

> I related to the scene from *Lady Bird* in the way that she said "I'm ready" to him as a way to sort of signal her feeling of obligation to have sex. As a woman, I related to that, because I often feel it's a female experience to always feel like you are giving and never receiving, and in that moment, it almost felt like her having sex with him was an obligation, it was something she knew she had to do to keep that relationship alive, and I feel like that notion of women feeling like they always need to be giving is something… that really resonated with me and something I think you wouldn't pick up on if you were a man watching this.

Participant A1, a white, heterosexual, woman echoed this sentiment:

> When she was sitting over his shoulder and waiting for him to put on a condom, I really related to that, because how many times as a girl have you been hooking up with a guy and you and have to stop, fully stop, and wait for the guy to put on a condom, and you assume this cute little over the shoulder position to give them their privacy in a sense… like that is such a female experience moment… that feeling of having to wait but not wanting it to be awkward or for things to stall. As a woman, I really related to that moment and I felt like I was living through that with the character.

The Price of Vulnerability. Participants within Focus Group B, a group composed totally of male-identified individuals similarly answered the questions related to how their gender identity affected their viewing experience by discussing their own sexual experiences. They mentioned the concept of vulnerability as being a large facet of how their gender identity affected their past sexual experiences, which then caused them to be able to form associations with the media screened. Participant B5, a white, heterosexual, man, expanded on this notion in his reaction to a scene from the film *Lady Bird* (2017).

> It seemed like the girl in this situation was more eager and more invested in their relationship beyond a physical level and I think the guy in this situation was obviously just there for the physical aspect. I think that as a man, I can understand that feeling, the feeling of not wanting to open up. I think that also has to do with male insecurity and this pressure we put on men in society to be purely sexual beings and to not show vulnerability.

Participant B2, a white, heterosexual man, said he could relate to the concept of losing your virginity and the vulnerability associated with that experience. In reacting to a scene from *Hot Summer Nights* (2017) he said:

> I feel like because of the stigma there is with male sexuality, we don't see a lot of men in film being so vulnerable to admit that they are a virgin, especially in the presence of a female they want to have sex with. I could really understand his apprehension in this scene and his nervous energy because for me as a guy, it was really hard for me to have that conversation when I did lose my virginity because I thought that by saying it out loud it would make me lesser somehow.

Dissociations

While the ability to associate or relate to an aspect of intimacy was a key theme that emerged through the discussion of how one's gender identity affects perception of intimacy, the aspect of not being able to relate, or dissociating, was also a key theme within the responses to RQ1. Many individuals vocalized that they were not able to give accurate perceptions of the scenes screened during the focus groups due to not seeing their identities and experiences being represented.

Some participants took a more intersectional approach to dissociating, stating that while gender is an important aspect to focus upon when analyzing intimacy, factors such as sexual orientation, race, and class are also crucial for one's ability to relate to a particular media artifact. Participant B1, a Latino, gay, man, described his experiences by stating:

> I guess I can't really give you an accurate perception of these scenes just because I didn't ever really see myself being represented on screen because I'm gay and mix raced, and most of the scenes that we saw, they had straight couples who were white.

Participant A5, a white, pansexual, woman, similarly described how her marginalized identity affected the way she could perceive the intimate material that was screened when she explained:

> I know that you're focusing on gender but I think it's really hard to just narrow down to gender because you need to take an intersectional analysis of a person's class and how they were raised and their ability and really understanding everything that feeds into that person which can be so difficult to research.

Viewing lesbian sex scenes caused some of the male focus group participants to dissociate with the scenes screened. Participant B2, a white, heterosexual, man gave his perception of those scenes when he stated:

> I mean with those scenes, because they contain all women, I just can't give a male perspective. In that same sense, I wasn't sexualizing these women or using my maleness as a way to perceive this sexual situation just because I couldn't relate to it. I had equal pleasure watching those scenes then I did with the heterosexual scenes.

One participant also included a discussion of how they couldn't relate to the scenes that were screened because they were a virgin. Participant A4, a mixed-race, questioning, woman shared her perception of the scenes when she explained:

> I think that while yes, my identity as a woman affected my perception of these scenes just because I can relate to the emotions that the female characters might have been going through, but when it came to the actual intimacy stuff, I couldn't relate to that at all because I have never had an intimate experience so, for me, all of that stuff, I was coming at it from a completely objective perspective.

The purpose of RQ2 was to evaluate whether support of the social circle that is the #MeToo movement had an effect on the way individuals were able to perceive the intimate moments within this research's media archive. Three themes and one sub-theme emerged from this line of inquiry.

Communicating Consent

The aspect of consent was a large topic of discussion in terms of how #MeToo has changed audience perceptions when intimacy is displayed on screen. All of the members of the focus groups discussed consent, in some form, and additionally mentioned how #MeToo has forced them to reevaluate sexual moments within scenes

differently than they might have before. Participant A3, a white, bisexual, woman claimed that before #MeToo, they probably wouldn't have thought twice about how consent was being talked about in sex scenes within the media that was screened in the focus group; however, now that she is more aware of the conversation, she sees how important healthy and consensual displays of sex are in our media.

> I think that while I didn't think about consent consciously in the media I watched before #MeToo, knowing what I do now, I do see #MeToo as having an impact on how I was able to perceive the media that we have screened here because we can look at these scenes with a different lens now, we can see things happening in them that represent dominant, damaging ideologies and with #MeToo, we can push back and say, "No, that's not okay anymore." I think consent especially is the big thing for me that I always look for now in media because that was a big thing that came out of #MeToo and it's important that our media reflects those changing attitudes.

Another interesting anecdote from when RQ2 was initially posed came from participant B3, a white, heterosexual man, who said that he had "little to no knowledge" of what the #MeToo movement did for the voices of women; however, he recognized enthusiastic, verbal consent and an increase in communication within sexual encounters as being outcomes of the movement.

> To be honest, I know what #MeToo is but I don't really know what #MeToo is... like I know that it caused us as a society to kind of, revaluate what consent is and it caused us to have more healthy communication in sexual encounters so from just that knowledge that I have, I see the second scene *(Dude, 2018)* being more representative of what a healthy sexual encounter looks like because of the consent that was explicated and how they talked more than in the first scene you showed *(Eighth Grade, 2018)*.

The Survivor Perception

In addition to enthusiastic, verbal consent as a main takeaway from #MeToo and something that individuals looked for when analyzing media in a post #MeToo world, the aspect of being a survivor of sexual assault was also brought up as something that #MeToo destigmatized and additionally, could affect an individual's perception of intimacy. Participant B5, a white, heterosexual, man, stated that his perception of some of the scenes may have been different than others due to his status as a survivor of sexual abuse.

> I looked at some of these scenes differently because when I was in middle school, a bunch of upperclassmen high school girls did to me what happened in the scene from *Eighth Grade* (2018). I guess for me, that has caused me to be more aware of power dynamics and consent communication when I'm watching sexual scenes unfold, but it has also made me not be able to relate to a lot of sex scenes that I see in movies because my experiences were tainted by a negative encounter.

Participant A2, a white, bisexual, woman, stated that while she had no prior negative experiences with sex, she had friends who were survivors of sexual assault and had shared with her how their perceptions of sexual content in the media are affected by those negative experiences.

> I always think about the fact that I might not feel anything from this, this is just fiction to me, but like, for some of my friends who I know have had negative sexual experiences, they have said that little things for them can be triggering and that they can't always separate a fictional depiction of sex from their own experiences, so it's important for media that has sexual content to always have a trigger warning, just because everyone's experiences with sex are different and you never know what little thing could really affect someone emotionally.

No Longer just Virgins and Whores

In addition to their awareness of discussions of consent within media, some participants also pointed out the effect that #MeToo has had on eliminating the hegemonic binary of either being labeled a slut or whore. The female focus group was largely the one that led this conversation and made several points concerning how #MeToo has changed their outlook on female sexual expression in film but also in their own lives as women. Participant A1, a white, heterosexual, woman stated that:

> I think that #MeToo has really lent a hand in opening up the ways that women can be portrayed as sexual beings in film and in society. Women are no longer just seen as virgins or whores; they can be silly, and serious… nervous, and confident… assertive and submissive. It's not a matter of this or that anymore. Finally stories are being told from a female perspective and were getting these nuanced little details about that existence, especially concerning sex and the ways women can perform their sexuality that I just don't think you would get if not for #MeToo and if not for women being at the helm of said films.

Queering the Power. Within the discussion of female sexual performativity, the relationship between gender and power was something that many participants brought up in terms of #MeToo and their perceptions of the scenes that were screened. In some of the scenes that were shown in the focus groups, the power that is traditionally afforded to men was displayed by female characters. All of the members of the focus groups picked up on this dynamic change and their discussions were especially relevant to the way #MeToo has caused individuals to look at sexual encounters with a different lens than they may have before. Participant B1, a Latino, gay, man stated his response to seeing a woman in a position of power when he explained:

> I think that when I initially watched this scene, it was a little weird to see the female acting in such a sexually assertive and dominant way because we usually see male characters fulfilling that role, umm… and so I think that changed my perception a little bit because I thought that she was being a little bit aggressive, but now thinking about it more in the context of #MeToo and how that movement has caused society to re-evaluate, you know, norms in society, I'm only thinking that because it's a woman, if a man did the same things she did, I wouldn't think he was being aggressive.

Participant A4, a mixed-race, questioning, woman, shared a similar response to the scene when she said:

> I think it's important to note that in the second scene, she was in control. Like she took off her clothes right away, she initiated the sexual encounter, and I think that by doing that the director wanted us to see you know, a woman assuming a position of power that is usually afforded to men and how that impacted the encounter. I also think like, with #MeToo, we are seeing this shift in how women perform sexuality, you know, they are being given more affordances to voice their needs and wants and to also say no when something goes too far and I think that was really evident here.

The purpose of RQ3 was to unpack how feminist attitudes affect an individual's ability to perceive moments of female sexuality in film. One theme and one sub-theme emerged from this line of inquiry.

Female Sexual Empowerment

The concept of sexual empowerment in terms of modern feminist attitudes was a prevalent theme in the discussions surrounding RQ3. While the male-identified individuals briefly talked about how feminist attitudes such as sexual empowerment influenced their perception of these scenes, the female-identified individuals had a longer, more nuanced discussion as to feminism, the male gaze, and its impact on their perceptions of the scenes. Participant B5, a white, heterosexual, man, gave his perception on a specific moment within the scene from *Hot Summer Nights* (2017) that he thought was fairly progressive in terms of the feminist movement and female sexual empowerment. His statement is explained here:

> Something that I noticed was after she said she was a virgin, he said "No, really" and she became offended, but then he came back and said the same thing but in a more caring and attentive tone and that really stood out to me because that communicated to us as audiences that in her experience, people have slut-shamed her, and he wanted to make it a point like, "No I don't want to be like that, I'm not like that" and by reiterating his response that went to show that he really cared about getting to know her. I think that the director added that in because it shows like, what her life is like beyond just this interaction, that she is seen as this sex symbol when really, she's not and I think that has a lot to do with feminism and women being empowered about their sexual

history. I think that someone watching this without that knowledge of feminism might not have been able to catch that little tiny detail.

Not just a pretty face. In their discussion of sexual empowerment, the women in the focus groups also touched on the aspect of aesthetics and how women are traditionally depicted as objects of desire. They added that feminism aims to flip that narrative, giving women power and agency in sexual situations beyond their physical appearance. Participant A3, a white, bisexual, woman, discussed her reactions to the scene from *Dude* (2018) from a feminist standpoint here:

> I like that she communicated in the beginning about the expectations of the sexual encounter, and I think that was something that without feminism we wouldn't have ever seen because, with feminism, women have been given the agency to express their sexual desires and behaviors like men have always been able to do. It's not about shutting up and being pretty, it's about being vocal and communicating desires.

Participant A1, a white, heterosexual, woman similarly commented on the scene from *Dude* (2018) for having feminist influences when she stated:

> You know it's funny, I feel like I've never really seen a woman orgasm like that on-screen before… it's always like a close up of her face where she's super sexualized and you see just her head and her boobs and the moment is really about the guy being satisfied, whereas here, we saw both of them together, she communicated her desires very clearly… it just felt very true to modern feminist attitudes as they pertain to sex and it made me realize that in this new kind of world that we are living in, we as women can be seen as the looked from, not just as the looked at. We can learn things from seeing sex as it is seen from a woman's perspective.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to uncover if in the process of using a feminine gaze to analyze sexual intimacy specifically in post #MeToo films, would the perceptions brought about from that analysis reveal a more nuanced, socially conscious, and progressive way of thinking about sexual intimacy than one would find in using a traditional male gaze. This section will make sense of the themes that were gathered as well as describe the limitations within this study and provide a useful framework for the possibility of future research on this subject to be conducted.

The responses to RQ1 uncovered that while gender was a leading factor in terms of a participant's ability to perceive sexual intimacy in media, there were other facets of identity that affected their perceptions as well. Those with dominant identities (white, cisgender, and heterosexual) saw themselves in the media more, which allowed them to relate to the media more, creating the theme of associations. Those who didn't see their identities represented shared their perceptions largely through the theme of dissociations, or through aspects they could not relate to. By using gender as a lens for this question, the responses revealed how individuals of different gender identities perceive sexual intimacy when depicted in the media differently.

In the process of forming associations, the sub-theme of patriarchy and the effect it has on the performance of female sexuality was something many female focus group participants related to. They identified how patriarchal views of female sexuality in media have caused audiences to have a narrow understanding of how one can perform sexuality as a woman. This finding adds validity to the claim that individuals are "more likely to be influenced by media messages about sex than what they said were more trustworthy sources such as family, school, and church" (Miller, 2016, p. 717). In addition, it reinforces the concept found within both Coyne et. al (2014) and Pennel and Behm-Morawitz's (2015) studies that hegemonic ideologies pertaining to gender and sexuality when represented in our media have the ability to affect audience behaviors in future contexts.

In addition to discussing the implications of a patriarchal view of female sexuality in film, participants also mentioned the possibilities for more inclusive and diverse representations of female sexuality as having a positive impact on female viewing practices. This finding confirms the implications made by Scanlon and Lewis (2017) by recognizing the inherent issues the male gaze presents when used to examine sexualized material. This finding also supports the claims made by Stewart (2015) by reinforcing the possibility for a resistance of patriarchal viewpoints as having a positive impact on audiences when exposed to sexualized material.

The action of relying on past sexual experiences to identify was something widely utilized amongst the focus group participants. When answering questions related to RQ1, participants intertwined discussions of how their

gender identity influenced the outcomes of their past sexual experiences. This notion thus affected the way they were able to identify with the scenes within this research's media archive. Many of the male-identifying individuals connected how hegemonic ideologies related to the performance of their gender identity and significantly affected the way their past sexual experiences transpired. Many of them discussed how vulnerability, as a concept, was hard for them to grasp when it came to their individual sexual interactions due to hegemonic ideologies of maleness that discourage displays of emotional vulnerability. They recognized when the male characters exhibited toxic masculine traits and pushed back against them in relating to their own experiences, revealing a more nuanced look at male sexuality as well as perceptions relating to how men can become more aware of the female sexual experience. This affirms queer theoretical scholarship such as work by Doty (1997) and Brody (2011) by revealing how implementing an oppositional approach to the performance of hegemonic masculinity allows for new performances and understandings of masculinity to emerge. This relates to the concept of inclusive masculinities, or the ways in which men can resist hegemonic masculinity in order to cultivate a more nuanced performance of their gender. In his book entitled *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities*, author Eric Anderson (2009) explains that men who adopt inclusive masculinities are more likely to embrace behaviors that could be deemed as feminine. This idea validates the reactions of the male participants in this study as it demonstrates how inclusive masculinities possess the power to collapse the misogynistic undertones within a hegemonic masculine view of the world.

When making associations using a feminine gaze, most of the female-identifying individuals pointed out moments within the scenes that were screened that they thought were especially relatable or reflective of their own experiences. One participant connected depictions of the female experience to society's reliance on hegemonic ideologies pertaining to female sexuality as a determining factor in negotiating a woman's value. These findings support the work of Lobo et. al (2017) as well as Hiramoto et. al (2019) in the sense that they illustrate the ways we often rely upon notions of gender and sexuality that are innate and familiar to us in order to form perception, even if those perceptions rely upon hegemonic ideologies in order to come to fruition.

While many participants claimed that gender was a factor that influenced their ability to associate with the scenes screened, there were other facets of their identities that were more salient to them in terms of their perception of intimacy. These facets include a lack of representation of their ascribed sexual orientation, racial identity, and the absence of diverse representations of social-economic status. In addition, some participants claimed that their status as a virgin affected their perception of the scenes more so than did their gender identity, thus causing them to dissociate from some moments within the scenes. The implications made by the theme of dissociations in response to RQ1 further validate the claims made by Walker and Melton (2015) in their research that utilized standpoint theory to assert how those with marginalized identities will have differing perceptions of social life.

In the context of dissociations, one male focus group participant said that while they were not able to relate to the lesbian sex scenes due to not seeing their gender identity represented, they didn't use their maleness or heterosexual desire as a lens to perceive the sexual moments. He claimed that he found equal pleasure in the heterosexual scenes as he did the lesbian sex scenes. While this finding validates the existence of a male gaze in this participants inability to relate to the scene due to his straightness and maleness, this finding also contradicts the research done by Soto-Sanifel & Ibiti (2016) in the sense that it provides space for the male gaze to be utilized in a way that doesn't fetishize lesbian sexuality for the sexual pleasure of a male viewer.

The themes that emerged from the inquiry of RQ2 were communicating consent, the survivor perception, no longer just virgins and whores, as well as the concept of queering the power. The existence of these themes shows the different ways in which the implications made by the #MeToo movement affected individual perceptions.

The first theme of communicating consent was a widely discussed aspect within the focus groups. All of the members of the focus groups pointed out when verbal consent was explicated, when protection was used, and when both parties were enthusiastic and communicative while engaging in the sexual encounter. Furthermore, members of the focus groups also noted when interactions seemed non-consensual, pointing out aspects such as emotional detachment, not verbalizing consent, and the use of coercion tactics to engage in intimate acts. Participants also discussed the power media has in shaping our perceptions of social life, stating that more diverse, communicative, and consensual sex scenes need to be represented in order to progress society's understanding of what a healthy sexual encounter looks like. These findings support the work of Jozkowski et. al (2019) and Oliver (2016) as they confirm the claims that more accurate depictions of consent in the media will help to eradicate the damaging ideologies relating to consent and gender that were largely ignored until the #MeToo movement gained worldwide attention.

In their discussions relating to RQ2, participants also brought up several points relating to how #MeToo destigmatized the label of being a survivor of sexual assault. Participants within the focus groups stated that through possessing the identity of a survivor of sexual assault, your perception of intimacy is going to be different than

someone who has only had positive sexual experiences. This idea of identity affecting perception again confirms that claims made by standpoint theorists Harding and Wood (2012) in their research that asserts a person's adherence to identity categories affects their ability to cultivate perceptions of social life.

In addition to their discussions of consent and survivor perception as outcomes from #MeToo that affect perception, female participants also noted how #MeToo has aimed to eliminate the hegemonic binary of being labeled a virgin or a whore in regards to female sexual expression. The women within the focus groups connected how #MeToo gave women agency to share their experiences with sexual assault, thus giving them the confidence to reclaim their sexuality. They claimed that this outcome of #MeToo was something that influenced their perceptions, mentioning that in some of the scenes that were screened they saw women occupying spaces not normally afforded to them in a pre #MeToo world.

The last theme that was discovered was queering the power. Individuals mentioned that they were more aware when women had power in sexual situations because they had become accustomed to seeing men in these roles. The participants stated that while seeing women in positions of power in sexual situations felt unfamiliar, they were able to ease that unfamiliarity by noting that those depictions were meant to collapse the harmful structures relating to female sexuality that existed in a pre #MeToo world. Now living in a post #MeToo world, women have begun to reclaim their sexuality which has thus given them a sense of power in asserting their wants and desires in a sexual context.

The themes of collapsing the binary label virgin or whore and queering the power confirm the work of queer theorists such as Doty (1997) and Brody (2011) by calling attention to hegemonic binary ways of thinking that are evident in our media, as well as how individuals can critique said binaries by using an oppositional lens.

The main theme that emerged from the inquiry of RQ3 was female sexual empowerment with a sub-theme of not just a pretty face. Within the theme of female sexual empowerment, participants relied upon the implications made by feminism as factors that affected their perception. One participant claimed that his perception of the rhetoric that was used in the scenes with sexual content was affected by his status as a feminist. He also claimed that the rhetoric that was used in the scene could have been easily missed by someone who had no knowledge of how feminism has contributed to female sexual empowerment. This finding validates the claims made by standpoint theorists Harding and Wood (2012) and is further supported by the research of Woodman (2018) in that it showcases how the adherence to a feminist identity affects one's ability to perceive aspects of social life.

The sub-theme within female sexual empowerment was how women are no longer just seen as a pretty face. By seeing past the aestheticism of the female sexual experience, women were afforded the ability to be seen as active and authoritative in sexual situations. This kind of rhetoric gives validity to the claim that a feminine gaze offers up a new kind of experience for analyzing media, one that sees women as intricate beings rather than just objects of lustful affection. In a post #MeToo world, the feminine gaze can be applied freely to the media we engage with, revealing a more nuanced, socially conscious, and culturally relevant way of perceiving female sexuality in film. This finding affirms the work of Laura Mulvey (1989) and Looft (2017) in that it supports the notion that the feminine gaze offers up a view of the world that works to combat the embedded patriarchal perspectives lingering within society's understanding of gender and sexuality.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One limitation of this study was the data collection method. While focus groups foster discussion in a more communicative fashion than a traditional one on one interview, they can also stifle disclosures of valuable information relating to the research questions because of the group environment.

Another limitation of this study was the convenience sampling used to gather participants. In using this method of enlistment, many of the focus group participants were members of the same social circles, thus their relationships with one another were more friendly than they would be if they were strangers. This aspect could have caused other focus group participants who were not members of the social circle to feel alienated, thus stifling their desire to communicate within the focus group. This aspect was not a limitation in the male focus group, as all participants were also members of the same social circle. However, this social circle that they all belonged to was defined by fairly progressive attitudes towards gender and sexuality.

A further limitation was this research's use of gender as a distinguishing characteristic. This alienated non-binary folk from the conversation as well as those who don't fit into the labels of male and female. Furthermore, only conducting two focus groups was a limitation. This study was conducted in March of 2020 and so the restrictions COVID-19 placed on group gatherings hindered the ability to conduct more than two focus groups. Having the ability to run more focus groups could have yielded a more diverse pool of responses that could have

given more insight as to how a feminine gaze cultivates differing perceptions of female sexuality than through the use of a traditional male gaze.

Future research could go more in-depth on how non-binary folk perceive aspects of the social world and if there is room for another lens to be cultivated in terms of their perception of intimate material. The aspect of identifying as a virgin could also be an interesting research subject in terms of how those individuals might perceive media depictions of sex differently than a more sexually experienced individual. Replicating this study using semi-structured interviews as a method for gathering data could also be interesting to see if the change in data collection method would yield similar or different results to this study. Further, more research that explores how the implications of #MeToo possess the potential to allow tenets of the feminine gaze to be more widely used in media analyses could be exceptionally useful in the realm of feminist media scholarship.

This study proves the need for more research that looks at how the #MeToo movement has allowed the feminine gaze to be legitimized. In doing so, we will have more critical analyses of media that helps to understand, and draw attention to, the hegemonic ideologies that influence female sexuality. This study demonstrates that a feminine gaze when used in a post #MeToo world recognizes when media is representing female sexuality with depth, nuance, and authenticity, thus encouraging more stories of this kind to be created. The female sexual experience is messy; it's confusing, it's empowering, it's multidimensional, and it has yet to be completely understood. In using a feminine gaze to perceive intimacy not just in media we engage with, but in our lives as well, we can all become more inclusive and well-informed members of society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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