

“We Are Like Feminist Heroes Right Now”: A Study of Female Sexual Empowerment Communication for Female-Identifying Viewers of *Broad City*

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ABSTRACT

Viewers being passive or active is often contested in media. For female-identifying viewers, media that interacts with sexual elements is often limiting and counter-productive, only permitting female viewers to exist in realms of hyper-sexualization or puritan innocence. This study explored how female-identifying viewers interpret the communication of female sexual empowerment within the Comedy Central Show *Broad City* (2014-2019). I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews to further uncover the role that issues such as sex positivity, masturbation, feminism, orgasms, and more, are communicated and understood by the audience members. Results showed that media representations of sexual communication are craved by viewers, as well as seeking safe and consensual spaces to hold these conversations. Participants appreciated accurate representation such as normalization of sexual conversations or female friendship. The study also revealed that messaging about sexual empowerment left impressionable marks on participants that altered the space the subject takes up in their lives.

Keywords: Broad City, sexual empowerment, feminism

“I MEAN, THE FEMALE FORM; GOD’S HOTTEST CREATION.” - ILANA GLAZER, *BROAD CITY*, 2019

Broad City aired on Comedy Central from 2014 to 2019. The show started as a web series created by Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer in 2009 and later came to television with executive producer Amy Poehler. Shows such as, *Broad City*, are deemed feminist because they openly discuss issues such as sex, orgasms, masturbation, sexuality, and female sexual empowerment add another layer to deciphering media representation because, “Given the ambiguity surrounding feminism’s place in popular culture, viewer’s interpretations of comedic (potentially) feminist shows are important to examine since humor often straddles incongruities and embraces ambiguities” (Swink, 2017, p. 16). An examination of the feminist media culture aides to further understand feminism’s role in the media landscape and lessen the ambiguity of feminism in media.

Much post-feminist humor “emphasizes women as sexually empowered and proactive,” arguing that we live in a world that no longer needs feminism because equality reigns free (Swink, 2017, p. 17). This belief is met with a new era of sexual empowerment, so their existence is vital to analyze, as well as their possible impact on female-identifying viewers. Regardless of the fact that recent studies have shown that 85% of women masturbate, female sexuality and sex drive are often framed within reproduction and male sexual pleasure (Bowman, 2014). In this same mindset, most research on masturbation and sexual empowerment has focused on straight white perspectives (Meiller & Hargons, 2019). Sexual empowerment can stem from masturbation and increased rates of masturbation can lead women to feel more confident and more sexually stimulated in their experiences. “Simply feeling entitled to and able to experience sexual pleasure (with or without a partner) is an expression of sexual empowerment” (Bowman, 2014, p. 364). The feeling of autonomy over one’s sexual empowerment heightens the reality of their sexual pleasure. Bowman concluded that more research needs to be done surrounding motivations of sexual empowerment with masturbation. Solo focused sexual pleasure expands the definition of sexual pleasure for all of those who decide to engage. The chance to see your sexual identity reflected in media shifts the narrative of

female sexual empowerment in your own life, with sexual empowerment being closely tied to confidence one may feel not only with a partner, but as a sexual being themselves. Current research does not address the differences with sexual empowerment that viewers may feel post-viewing, and the levels of sexual empowerment that either increase or decrease based on stereotypes or accurate representation. The spectrum of sexual empowerment is one that is not just determined by confidence, but experience, partners, masturbation, or media.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how female-identified viewers of *Broad City* understand the show's depiction of female sexual empowerment. The findings from the semi-structured interviews were examined within the frameworks of female sexual empowerment, female comedic spaces, and Halberstam's concept of female masculinity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The goal of this study is to identify how female-identifying viewers of *Broad City* understand the show's mediation of sexual empowerment. The literature review will examine current literature consisting of the show itself, *Broad City*, the history and current state of female sexual empowerment and female sexual empowerment in the media, more specifically, in comedy, and Halberstam's (1998) concept female masculinity.

Broad City and Feminism in the Realm of Media

As stated, *Broad City* ran on Comedy Central from 2014-2019. The show was co-created by Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer and also stars them as the two main characters. The show follows the daily life of Abbi Abrahams and Ilana Wexler as they navigate New York City with little money, sex, and a lot of female friendship. Both characters identify as Jewish, and Ilana defines herself as pansexual and polyamorous, while the show never identified Abbi as anything but straight, in the final season she is shown dating women and being bisexual. The various identities held by Abbi and Ilana allow for a more fluid and inclusive conversation about feminism and representation because of the normalization of their identities – nothing is ever questioned. In Stefania Margitu's work in *Feminist Media Studies*, they found that "*Broad City* aimed to show representations of genuine female friendship, bisexuality and queer identity, interracial dating, non-monogamous relationships, intersectional feminism, and their Jewish identity," (2019, p. 1). These representations changed how the show was perceived to audiences and what identities were showcased and allowed to hold their own successful and entertaining storylines that go beyond straight white women existing in the male gaze. Margitu concluded that independently funded media, such as *Broad City* can provide on and off-screen inclusivity easier than privately funded media. This conclusion provides that there are industry changes that must be accounted for in order to create media that goes against the norm, instead of using previous storylines for success (2019). Past research has argued that when shows engage with multiple identities rather than focusing on the past narratives that have proven to be successful, (such as ones from white and straight viewpoints), there is increased room for collective storytelling.

In the past, many Comedy Central shows have focused on one demographic: young, white men (Marx, 2016). Shows like *Broad City* have worked to change this ideal and expand the identities of their viewers by targeting a wider range of audience members, which has been seen as a characteristic of networks such as Comedy Central. Marx argued that Comedy Central is engaging with post-politics, which he described as satire in television representations that do not favor one identity as the dominant. "These networks [Comedy Central] are broadening beyond demographically driven comedies to target more diverse audiences without alienating a core viewership of straight young white men" (Marx, 2016, p. 273). The audience of young white men is still prevalent even in shows like *Broad City* because this type of viewer is central to the comedic themes of Comedy Central.

Because of Comedy Central's main focus on young white men, shows like *Broad City* are still masculinized, whether this is purposeful or not. The concept of masculinity in female spaces is introduced to audiences as well as the meshing of feminine and masculine traits outside of the sexual sphere.

In the case of *Broad City*, idiosyncratic pattern between co-creators and series stars Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer underscores the blurry boundary between homosocial friendship and homosexual romance between the two. The duo often refers to one another with masculine slang like "dude" but just as often deconstruct the sexual or professional shortcomings of male characters, reasserting their homosocial relationship as the series' driving narrative force (Marx, 2016, p. 280).

Broad City has been able to re-shape the narrative for female comedic spaces by working within the system.

The comedy of *Broad City* is often referred to as “gross-out” humor and blurs masculinity with femininity, which in turn, encourages women to possess more masculine traits and desires (Branfman, 2019). This can be seen in scenes where characters penetrate men with strap-ons, catcall one another, and smoke recreational cannabis. Existing in the dichotomy of all-or-nothing comedy, *Broad City* found its niche within the boundaries in order to succeed and speak to their true audience and their authenticity towards women’s affection for one another (Marx, 2016). With the structure that *Broad City* has had to function within as well the traditional tropes of comedy, the humor used positions the show as a new fragment on the media landscape. The representation of the show and the audiences that engage with the medium can alter how the show is absorbed and what messages are memorable or not. My research aimed to prove that the representation explained by Marx and featured in *Broad City* was memorable for participants and that this representation altered how sexual empowerment existed in their lives post-viewing.

Explaining the State of Female Sexual Empowerment

There is not a single definition of empowered sexuality for women, any definition of the term would be multi-tiered for all individuals involved, including examples of sexual desire, pleasure, agency, and self-efficacy (Peterson, 2009). Traditionally, female sexuality, and more so female heterosexuality, is only seen for two purposes: reproduction or male sexual pleasure (Rich, 1980; Vance 1992) and between two polar opposites: the slut or the prude (Bowman, 2014). “The line between ‘just the right amount of sexuality and excess is fuzzy and unstable. Women are taught, for example, to solicit and appreciate male sexual attention, while simultaneously playing gate-keeper roles to protect themselves against it” (Bowman, 2014, p. 364). Walking the line between sexual empowerment can leave many women confused if they are performing their sexuality correctly, and more so, appropriately. If a woman is performing her sexuality through the lens of male interest it leaves little to no growth on her part for her sexual empowerment and her own interests.

Feeling sexual empowerment as a female individual can be seen through sexual efficacy and female masturbation. It is estimated that 85% of female-identifying individuals engage in masturbation (Bowman, 2014). When women perform masturbation, they are experiencing a selfless act that is rooted in regaining power.

When a woman masturbates, she experiences her sexuality in a way that does not conform to dominant expectations of femininity or female sexuality. She is not concerned with producing offspring, nor is she concerned with preventing pregnancy. She feels sexual sensations that are not provided by a partner, and, because no partner needs to be present, she need not concern herself with anyone’s pleasure but her own. In this way, the “excessive” nature of masturbation may be related to feelings of sexual empowerment for some women (Bowman, 2014, p. 364).

By expressing sexual empowerment through sexual pleasure, women can discover self-efficacy and empowerment within themselves. In the realm of sexual empowerment, the sense of empowerment comes from the recognition of wants and needs, “Therefore, a sex-positive woman who feels able to name her needs and then take care of them herself (demonstrating sexual efficacy) is more likely to feel sexually empowered by the fact she masturbates” (Bowman, 2014, p. 374). The reflection of sexual interests stems from the identifying of sexual wants and needs. When women demonstrate sexual efficacy through sexual empowerment there is a greater sense of representation and validity in their sexual interests.

Although, it should be noted that this same sexual empowerment tends to only be reserved to some women, while others are left out of the conversation. Erchull and Liss said that self-perceived attractiveness is an issue, and women will often compare how they meet these norms and then feel disempowered if they do not possess these Eurocentric beauty ideals that conform to the greater concept of mainstream beauty. “A manifestation of sexuality is largely in the domain of women who have bodies that conform to hegemonic social norms of beauty and sexiness,” (Erchull & Liss, 2014, p. 778). The conforming of hegemonic social norms of what is beautiful and what is sexy alters sexual empowerment and reserves expression for only certain women. For the women who are not acknowledged, there is a lack of visibility and erasure that they experience with their sexual empowerment.

Safe spaces can be created to promote room or all women to discuss female sexual empowerment and the role that it has played in their development as sexual beings. Instituting a sense of vulnerability when it comes to understanding sexuality can create visibility and comfortability that can benefit younger women who are only beginning their sexual exploration. Bay-Cheng argued that a factor that must be considered is “messiness and ambiguity,” further defining that there are no right answers in these shared sexual spaces. “In order to be successful and trusted allies, adult women must learn how to use their life experiences in ways that do not trivialize those of girls. An important step in this direction would be for adult women to admit their own periodic confusion and areas of ambivalence regarding sexuality,” (Bay-Cheng, 2011, p. 715). By admitting personal confusion and creating safe spaces, women can find allyship among other trusted women that does not rely on hierarchal standards. It may be comforting for younger audiences to see adult women confused about issues of sexuality, sexual empowerment, and

sex because it humanizes them, it encourages younger audiences to admire the awkward experiences rather than fear them.

For those who identify as feminists, defining this sense of empowerment can mean different things. Peterson explained how female sexuality is often “a battleground” for feminist scholars. “Feminists experience equally valid but sometimes competing desires to, on one hand, protect girls from objectifying and misogynistic versions of female sexual expression and, on the other hand, allow girls the freedom to experience and express feelings of sexual desire, pleasure, and agency” (Peterson, 2009, p. 307). Peterson also asked if we move empowerment past self-efficacy how do we decide who is granted the power to say what is an empowered action and what is not. This dichotomy of female sexuality evolves itself into the depths of female spaces, including feminism, where debates are often had about empowerment and disempowerment, and run the risk of creating further ‘hate speak’ against women (Attwood, 2007).

Because defining female sexual empowerment is a multidimensional task, the definition is often left to those developing their current state of female sexual empowerment to define what it means. And because there is so much room for defining female sexual empowerment, it can look different for every woman.

Empowered sexuality, like all sexuality, is a social construction. Empowered sexuality may look slightly different for different adolescent girls, but for all girls, their vision of empowered sexuality inevitably will be influenced by cultural messages and media depictions. It is important to note that girls are not merely passive recipients of these cultural messages. Girls actively interact with constructions of empowered female sexuality (Peterson, 2009, p. 309).

With women as active consumers of empowered female sexuality in the media, ideas can be formed of how and what female sexuality can exist as and who it exists for. Their ideas are influenced by media messages, and often have pre-convinced notions because of past representation, whether it be regressive or progressive. Because sexuality is a social construction, it is left to the consumer to define how it will fit into their lives and what role it will play with their sexual empowerment.

Montemurro, Bartasavich, and Wintermute argued that sex is still a difficult conversation for American women to talk about, regardless of what media may portray, and that women have a difficult time seeing their sexuality as a topic of discussion. The stigma around women discussing sex and female sexual empowerment is a result of the sexual discourse being a gendered discourse (Montemurro, et al., 2014). Women will more often than not limit their conversations around sexual interests due to not wanting to fit a stereotype and be categorized. “Although girls and women sometimes reveal their desire for sex in private conversations or to researchers, they generally keep quiet about it publicly because they know the stigma reserved for girls who have casual sex or are purported to be sexually active, particularly outside of monogamous, heterosexual relationships” (Montemurro et al., 2014, p. 142). The more that we break down this policing and work to understand why women choose not to discuss sex or choose to do so, “we understand gendered power dynamics and barriers in the development of sexual subjectivity or sexual agency” (Montemurro et al., 2014, p. 143). Understanding the dynamics at play to develop female sexual empowerment influence how we teach it and how we explain the policing of sexuality in general.

The changing narratives of female sexual empowerment and media representation of this do not change the stigma that is still present in society. “Girls and women are well aware that their sexual behavior is constantly under surveillance. To remain free from negative consequences, girls who do not talk about sex become women with private sex lives, complicit with emphasized femininity” (Montemurro et al., 2014, p. 154). Discussion around female sexual empowerment and the current stigma emphasizes that the conversation is open for the consumer to make up their mind about where they fit within the discourse, stigma prevalent or irrelevant. For viewers of *Broad City*, finding where one fits within the discourse is done by actively engaging within this type of media that is not complicit with emphasizes femininity or a lack of sexual agency.

Female Sexual Empowerment in Media and Comedy

Media representation teaches viewers how they exist and take up space in the world. Brooks and Herbert explained that gender is a component of power in regard to relations in society. The role of media, “is crucial in the construction and dissemination of gender ideologies and, thus, in gender socialization” (Brooks & Hebert, 2006, p. 298). For women, stereotypes further internalize society’s biased opinion of femininity and its existence in our culture, since “young women continue to be negatively affected by sexualized portrayals... in particular leading them not to feelings of sexual empowerment but to more constrained and stereotypical notions about gender roles and sexual roles,” (Tolman, 2012, p. 751). Tolman concluded that “confusing and contradictory” messages about sexual empowerment will force young consumers to adapt and decide which pieces they will consider in their own sexual lives, which can leave them ill-equipped for the sexual sphere. As Tolman explained, media representation that purely performs hyper-sexualization and stereotypical gender roles leave female consumers with mixed

messages about how they fit into the sexual discourse. If their female sexual representation exists as an “either/or” argument there is no room for self-definition.

Gendered beliefs that are presented in these scripts can produce emphasized messages that viewers absorb. Seabrook, Ward, Cortina, Giaccardi, and Lippman agreed that further research is needed in order to discover if the representation of nontraditional feminine characters has a positive impact on women’s sexual agency. “Further, studies conducted over the past 20 years indicate links between regular media exposure and young women’s acceptance of traditional gender beliefs (Signorielli, 2001) and traditional sexual scripts” (Seabrook, et al., 2017, p. 241). This acceptance can lead to self-manifested disempowerment. Women as audience members receive messages in different ways due to media visibility and even if they identify as being empowered, this does not mean that harmful messaging that portrays stereotypes will not affect them or their sexual empowerment status. Banet-Weiser questioned this idea of visibility by connecting social power with consumption activity.

First, to assume that media visibility leads to empowerment is to consider adolescent television audiences as active agents who position themselves in a variety of relationships with the ideological structures and messages of the media. Second, the acknowledgement that adolescent girls comprise an active, empowered audience does not necessarily free them from the commercial power of the mass media (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 125).

To consider television as an active agent of empowerment stresses that the message that are stated can also then be ignored. Television can have the ability to change these messages and improve the experience for female viewers by engaging with the subject of women’s rights (Yuwei, 2018). Even if space exists that is working to change messaging it must also be deconstructing how “feminist” deemed characters are controlled and exploited through media.

But even if television provides a place for feminine interests, a space for the expression of frustrations, and a site for negotiating oppositional values, television (at least U.S. network television) ultimately contains or repackages feminist discourses into feminine ones. Having and seeing a strong woman character on television is not necessarily feminist in that, in line with the ideological work of cinema, such strong women are, if not punished, carefully managed (Kim, 2001, p. 323).

The management of the female voice and character on television, when portrayed as empowered, does not always have to be “feminist.” Sexual empowerment at first, has been allowed space because of the feminism movements, but does not solely exist only within one single state of feminism. More so, the voice can be nuanced and complicated while also constantly evolving.

Female representation in media and female sexual empowerment dialogue remains a controlled subject by the media industry. Kim argued when women are represented and if that representation includes sexual interests, it is often done so to benefit the male gaze, which asks a larger question of who pleasure exists for. “The question is, is the pleasure that such a display elicits exclusively for the male gaze, is it an example of the masochistic female viewer, or is it something else” (Kim, 2001, p. 324)? Female characters have proved to be multiple faceted, but when existing through a masculine view, there can be limitations. “Female characters have long been negotiating, and thus marking, the boundaries between private and public spheres” (Kim, 2001, p. 322). The boundaries between the private and public sphere are the forefront for female characters but through only negotiation, not defined behavior.

When current television shows engage with feminism as a notion of the past, it also can create a minimization of the feminist movement. “The conflict with definitively calling the shows feminist, yet still seeing elements of feminism in the shows is emblematic of this post-feminist landscape that simultaneously entangles elements of feminism with an aversion towards feminism” (Swink, 2017, p. 22). This type of post-feminist humor positions feminism as an issue of the past but a comedic trope of the current.

Even with the existence of female sexual empowerment in television shows, the comedy that is used may not be confidently produced because of comedic stereotypes. “This pattern of identifying with women but favoring men for their humor is notable given the persistent stereotype that women are not as funny as men” (Swink, 2017, p. 21). Swink concluded that their research may speak to the limitations of using feminist humor in comedic settings. If viewers are identifying with women and their sexual empowerment storylines, but still favoring men because of their humor, then women will be continuously be left out of comedy. Viewing women as less than in the industry has been persistent even with the evolution of female-driven comedy, and the idea that women are not funny has existed as a cultural myth in the U.S. which in return has further masculinized comedy (Patterson, 2012). Relating to this current study, the role of comedy and female friendship will be analyzed as well as how receptive viewers are to messaging.

Female Masculinity

Branfman (2019) discussed *Broad City's* blurring of masculinity and femininity and focused on the adoption of more mainstream masculine traits and desires. In this sense, a form of female masculinity emerged in the show that is rooted in reclaiming male dominated spaces and mixing gender roles because sex itself is viewed as a masculine act. Halberstam discusses the essence of this concept in their book, *Female Masculinity* (1998). Halberstam wrote, "In other words, female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing" (1998, p. 1). When women exhibit any form of masculinity, it is not ever seen as masculine enough because it is regarded as the submissive and less rigid version of traditional hegemonic masculinity. If women are adopting the "rejected scraps" of the dominant culture, then there is room for further expansion and redefinition of how masculinity fits into the feminine domain.

Halberstam focused on how female masculinity exists in women and how the definition is more malleable than it is for men, when speaking in the gender binary. For more masculine women, they re-define what masculinity means to them and what role it will play in their life, while cisgender masculine men often do not consider the depth of the role and how to limit or increase it based on preference and social awareness. "The boxing strategy of 'taking it like a man' is not a favored strategy for the masculine woman; she is much more likely to transform the mechanisms of masculinity and produce new constellations of embodiment, power, and desire. She is more likely, furthermore, to give than to take" (p. 276). Even within feminine masculinity, women are still conditioned to be more empathetic and compassionate by giving more than they take. Although, there is room for transformation of these mechanisms to produce a new sense of masculinity in the feminine realm.

Women engaging in masculinity still do not receive the unsaid rights that are associated with possessing masculine traits. Because of this, they have to defend their right to be masculine and break from the norm:

Cut off from the most obvious rewards of masculinity – political power and representation – many masculine women have had to create elaborate rationales for their ways of loving, their desire to provide and protect a loved one, their decisions to live explicitly masculine lives. They have had to imaginably recreate masculinity through writing and other forms of cultural production (p. 276).

When rationalizing their sense of masculinity, women are forced to pick and choose what parts of their masculinity are visible and recognized in society by the dominant culture of mainstream masculinity. They cannot be seen as too masculine, or too feminine. The feminine and masculine traits of women are highly policed by society in order to keep gender norms in balance, but for female masculinity, there is often a sense of confusion. These women are "not playing by the rules," they cannot be neatly defined and organized therefore leaving onlookers hesitant to accept. Halberstam embraces this confusion and encourages those who engage in female masculinity to define it on their own terms, regardless of society's preconceived categorization. Tropes of classic masculinity are often intertwined with female sexuality presentations in *Broad City* which leaves viewers to also menace this confusion and further develop how their personal female sexuality will show up.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Montemurro, Bartasavich, and Wintermute (2014) studied how sex is discussed among women and the social implications of these conversations. They claimed, "There are taboos about women openly discussing their own sexual behavior, sexual desire, or sexual problems in large because sex talk is masculinized" (p. 139). These conversations appear in *Broad City* and the narrative is reflected in a gendered lens of how the characters discuss their personal sexual experiences as well as their female sexual empowerment. To understand, the first research question was posed:

RQ1: How do viewers of Broad City understand the shows discussion of female sexual empowerment through its storytelling and characters?

The existence of female sexual empowerment in society can be challenged through expectations and current representation. Kim (2001) stated, "One way to gauge how far society has come in terms of the status of women is to examine the ways in which female desire and female pleasure are regulated and controlled (as much through legal and economic mechanisms as through cultural mechanisms such as popular representation)" (p. 320). The evolution of society in accordance with female sexual empowerment is often reflected in the current media sphere and what impact this has had on its audience members, if any. Based on this, the second research question was developed:

*RQ2: How have female-identifying viewers of *Broad City* changed how they talk about sexual empowerment after viewing the show?*

METHODS

The focus of the study is if there are any identifiable influences on viewers of *Broad City* that has shifted their behaviors of sexual empowerment post-viewing. To conduct this study, a qualitative research method through an interpretivist paradigm was proposed. An explanation of qualitative research and the interpretivist paradigm is included along with the justification for these methods. Then, a description of the participants, the methods used to gather them, and the outline for the research procedure, and lastly a conclusion and description of my analysis technique and justification.

Method Description

The study was conducted using a qualitative method through an interpretivist paradigm that utilized semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research seeks to “contribute a better understanding of social realities and to draw attention to process, meaning patterns and structure features” (Flick, Kardoff, & Steinke, 2004, p. 3). It focused on using data and understanding the identities and collective human experience of participants that change the outcome of the research. This study worked well with semi-structured interviews because of the personal experience attached to the subject matter that alters how society discuss female sexual empowerment.

Interpretive approaches pay attention to how personal experiences and backgrounds of participants and how this will influence their assumptions and contributions. Interpretivists understand that because human’s contribution can be considered subject, “social reality may change and can have multiple perspectives” (Jamar, 2012, p. 71). This paradigm was chosen because it can aid the research and provide space for viewers to discuss their predisposed feelings of female sexual empowerment as well as their newly found influence, if applicable.

Participants

15 female-identifying viewers of *Broad City* were interviewed. The participants ranged in age from 19-23 years old. The participants that were interviewed were all female-identifying, and this was done purposefully to look at the role of femininity in sexual empowerment through media storytelling. Each participant watched Season 4, Episode 6 of *Broad City* prior to the interview as well as viewed the equivalent of a full season to participate. A \$25 Amazon gift card was used as incentive for participation and the cards were funded by an undergraduate research grant. Convenience sampling was used by posting on personal social media accounts as well as using the CST 110 pool.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Topics that were covered in my interview included female sexual empowerment storytelling in *Broad City* and its characters, discussion of sexual empowerment post-viewing, and personal identity and sexual empowerment. 15 interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes and the audio was recorded. Notes were taken during the interview and the audio recordings were transcribed. The anonymity of participants was ensured by removing any identifiable information and using pseudonyms.

Analysis

The data was coded by using thematic analysis based on themes from the literature review and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2014). First, all of the interviews were transcribed and then the transcription sections were divided based on the central themes of female sexual empowerment storytelling in *Broad City* and its characters, discussion of sexual empowerment post-viewing, and personal identity and sexual empowerment. Then, the transcriptions were color-coded to reflect further sub-themes. Separate documents were created where quotes were pulled and re-analyzed them to see how they fit into the study.

RESULTS

The interviews contained a total of four overarching themes, two themes per research questions, and nine sub-themes. RQ1's themes were accurate representation and female friendship. Sub-themes under accurate representation include normalization, orgasms and masturbation, and engaging with sexual empowerment. Sub-themes under female friendship include viewing Abbi and Ilana's friendship and filling the gap. RQ2's themes were the current role of sexual empowerment and continuing the conversation. Sub-themes under the current role of sexual empowerment include defining sexual empowerment and feeling empowered post-viewing. Sub-themes under continuing the conversation include the current conversation, recommending the show, and changing the conversation.

RQ1: How do viewers of Broad City understand the shows discussion of female sexual empowerment through its storytelling and characters?

The purpose of RQ1 was to explore if *Broad City* shares storylines that focus on sexual empowerment to viewers. Two themes and five sub-themes emerged.

Accurate Representation: Its [Broad City] made me feel like my most natural self was being represented, and that it was fully okay, however that may show up (Molly). Feeling accurately represented in media was important for participants. 13 out of 15 participants said that they saw their identity reflected in *Broad City*. Participants used phrases such as "realistic views," "normalization," and "lack of shame" to describe how they felt when the show engaged with topics such as sex, masturbation, orgasms, sex/gender politics, and sex communication.

Normalization: "I feel like when I watch [Broad City] I think things are more normal – maybe they aren't, the characters are really fucking weird, in the best way, but so am I, so it makes me feel more normal (Kim). Participants said that seeing the "awkwardness" and "raw" forms of characters displayed in the show made them feel like actions or conversations they engage with are more normalized in conversation than they once thought. This normalization occurred for most participants in the very first episode. Eight participants discussed the first scene from "What a Wonderful World." One participant, Molly, explained how she felt after watching this scene:

The first scene of the first episode when Abbi's planning out when she's going to masturbate, I think that fully just breaks down the wall. They're completely allowing it to be realistic views of women. And I think that first scene in particular said to me, so this is realistic, and I can relate to these people. Not that I schedule my masturbation.

Along with normalization, participants also discussed the acceptance of one's self. In the episode, "Witches," Jess saw acceptance in the scene where Abbi decides to get Botox injections:

I was watching it [Broad City] with my friends and in the episode where Abbi goes to get Botox and then she decides against finishing it, we all said we did not know if we would ever try something like that. At the end of the episode, Ilana said that if she ever wanted to do something like that later she would do it, and Abbi was supportive and accepting of her choice. They didn't completely say absolutely no to it or that you're beautiful just the way you are. They were saying that it is your choice to do what you want, I'm glad I have the decision to choose what I want.

This display of acceptance and freedom of choice displayed in this scene resonated with viewers and made them feel seen in their sexual confusion.

Orgasms and Masturbation: "Orgasming during sex or alone is kind of like taking something back that they [men] took. Does that sound bad? (Jess). In the realm of representation, participants discussed how seeing female masturbation and orgasms on television depicted in a relatable sense, versus in a hypersexual pornographic scene, helped them feel more empowered. Specifically, in "Witches," Ilana goes to a "Cum Coach" because she hasn't since the 2016 election. The coach helps her see a mental blocker she was experiencing and gives her coping mechanisms to be more successful. Marie explained how she felt when she saw this scene:

In any show I watch where an orgasm is actually shown, it's either always a male orgasm, or it's right after sex and you can tell because the man just rolls off of the woman. Even in porn, I think that female orgasms are so fake and inauthentic. I think showing realistic female orgasms prove that women can orgasm because people still don't know that, and just normalizes it too. I like that it depicted strong women as being a turn on because that's also not usually the case.

Seeing female masturbation displayed in an authentic light made participants realize that the conversation around orgasms and masturbation is often gendered. Emily explained how she felt after seeing Ilana masturbate in the "Witches" episode¹:

In film, you don't necessarily ever talk about female masturbation, which I didn't necessarily realize like growing up. You always saw male masturbation, and it was just kind of a norm. But there was never any talk about female pleasure or female masturbation. *Broad City* was the first show that I watched where that was actually, a theme that was important and talked about and it wasn't seen as a taboo.

Eight participants discussed Ilana calling herself a "Cum Kween" and how they felt like she was empowering herself by using an often-masculine word such as "cum" instead of orgasm. 11 participants said Ilana orgasming was their favorite scene from the "Witches" episode because of the montage of women that is shown. Nicole talked about this montage and how it made her feel as a viewer:

I think the empowerment of seeing a bunch of people that I look at in my life I respect and honor a lot and having that represented and reiterated from multiple other people's point of view, like whoever wrote the scene and then produced it, and to know those people agreed, is nice. I think it showed me that these are good people to idolize and to look up to me. It is amazing that the montage is what goes through Ilana's head when she is orgasming, instead of it just being one-person centered.

Engaging with Sexual Empowerment: "Just generally, I don't think any other show on television has ever made me feel more sexually empowered than *Broad City* has" (Molly). Participants said that sexual empowerment in the show is not shown purely through sexual actions. In reference to "Witches," Nicole discussed how she saw Ilana and Abbi both as sexually empowered:

I think Ilana is very obviously sexually empowered. But in the end with Abbi just being happy and accepting of her life the way it is, even after seeing Jeremy, and she's like, you know what, I'm not necessarily having regular sex right now, but I'm still happy with the way I am and my life. I think that for sure is still sexual empowerment. The part where Abbi says, "I think I am hot," that is also sexual empowerment. I need to remember that.

Seeing sexual empowerment through multiple lenses provided participants with an easier recognition of empowerment and the role it plays in their personal lives. Participants also discussed the differences between the characters and how they engage with sexual empowerment in their lives. Greta discussed this by mentioning how Abbi and Ilana's friendship is built on their open conversations and comfort in one another:

Abbi and Ilana both have their own experiences, like Abbi with pegging her neighbor, and they do their own things, but they discuss them with each other too. They have this incredible dialogue and they share that with each other as friends. Ilana is usually the one seen as the sexually empowered figure of the show, but I can see both of them lifting each other up and being sexually empowered.

Similar to Greta, Maggie felt like both Abbi and Ilana are sexually empowered, but how Ilana displays her sexual empowerment creates further representation for the show. Maggie explained this by saying: "In every

¹ In the Season 4, Episode 6, "Witches" Ilana has not been able to orgasm since the 2016 presidential election. She goes to see a "cum coach," and masturbates in attempt to orgasm. There is an inner battle in her between Trump and feminism, but at the end, feminism wins, and a montage plays during her orgasm that shows feminist icons such as Stacey Abrams, Gloria Steinem, Hillary Clinton, and more.

episode, Ilana is sexually empowered, she really encompasses it. She calls herself a Cum Kween. And she's very in charge of her sexuality, it's very much a reoccurring theme."

Female Friendship: "From the very opening episode we see two women who are so open about their sexual lives and I think that narrative just continues from there and is never something they shy away from or something they make a spectacle about" (Emma). Four participants said that the conversation between Abbi and Ilana about sexual empowerment feels the same as the conversations they have in their own lives. One participant said that the conversations feel different, and 10 participants said that it depends on who they are talking to, and the breadth and depth of that relationship.

Viewing Abbi and Ilana's Friendship: "When you have a close friendship like that, you can confide in one another and you can feed off each other's sexual empowerment" (Natalie). Marie said that the show opens "a door" to how sex can be a topic in female friendships:

These are two main characters who talk about their sex lives a lot and I think that's important and it empowers people, because just talking about it [sex] and being aware of it as empowering and knowing what you want out of it is needed. I think it [*Broad City*] depicts that in a way that a lot of shows don't, which is important.

Emma added how people often characterize themselves as either "an Abbi" or "an Ilana." She said that she feels like most people are Abbi, and Ilana is who they aspire to be. She said that the role of feminism in Abbi and Ilana's friendship has also kept her watching:

The way that I perform my feminism in my life is also like Abbi and Ilana because I feel like they're both very open about their views and also open about their friendship. I see a lot of that reflected in my friendships with the women in my life, and how they're very close to each other.

Molly continued this theme, by discussing how the portrayal of an open and honest friendship between Abbi and Ilana made her want to model her friendships off of them. "They can literally talk about anything and I think that's really great. They support each other so well. So that made me want to strive for those types of friendships honestly and it just led to be able to talk more openly in every aspect of my life now."

Many participants compared the two characters and discussed how their friendship feeds off of one another. Specifically, Liz talked about the contrast of the two characters, "I think Abbi is more representative of every woman, I find myself a lot more in her because of the way she falls into these standards and norms, but then is able to redeem herself through Ilana who is a lot more free."

Filling the Gap: "Shows like *Broad City* just give a chance for dialogue about sexual empowerment to even be present" (Greta). Out of the entire series, seven episodes were referenced by participants. From the most discussed to the least: "Witches," "What a Wonderful World," "Knockoffs," "Abbi's Mom," "House-Sitting," "Mushrooms," "Kirk Steele," and "B&B-NYC." The above episodes stood out to participants as episodes that possessed sexual empowerment as a central conversation. Participants agreed that *Broad City* introduces conversations not usually found in other basic television shows. Natalie described this:

I feel like *Broad City* has characters, plot lines and values that aren't being filled by other forms of like media. I really have to hunt to find queer representation. I think that *Broad City* is a show where they talk about sex and relationships in a way that's never judgmental or if it is judged, then that judgment is challenged. I think that really keeps my mind open.

Challenging judgment was a theme that other participants referenced. "Knockoffs," where Abbi pegs² her neighbor Jeremy, was mentioned by five participants. Greta said that after she watched that episode, she thought about what pegging would look like for her, as well as other aspects discussed in the show.

² Pegging is the sexual practice of an individual wearing a strap-on dildo used for penetration of their partner.

It just kind of made me think, hey, what would that look like for me. It wasn't something I had ever seen myself doing before. It has just really made me think about those types of experiences, such as Ilana being polyamorous and Lincoln wanting to be monogamous, that is a really specific thing that I did not think about until I watched the show.

Another participant, Avery, shared that she bought her first vibrator after watching *Broad City*. She discussed this by saying:

It was a huge step for me because before I felt like I still had this stigma around female masturbation. After I watched *Broad City*, I thought oh this is so cool, it is actually something people do. I always felt like when I was having sex, I needed to be feeling certain things or having him feel a certain way, rather than focusing on how I feel. *Broad City* taught me that this isn't true.

Overall, for RQ1, it is clearly shown that participants view sexual empowerment in *Broad City*, intended or not. Post-viewing this knowledge was often applied to their personal lives.

RQ2: How have female-identifying viewers of Broad City changed how they discuss female sexual empowerment post-viewing?

The purpose of the second research question was to explore if participants have changed how they discuss sexual empowerment post-viewing. RQ2 had two main themes emerge with five subthemes.

The Current Role of Sexual Empowerment: "It's about being confident in understanding your relationship with sex and being able to talk about if you want, but also being able to choose that too" (Marie). The current role of sexual empowerment was described by participants through two sub-themes. Sexual empowerment played an important role in each participant's life and every participant shared moments when they felt more or less sexually empowered as a woman.

Defining Sexual Empowerment: "It is the agency to be able to decide what I want, when I want, and where I want it" (Julie). Participants said that coming to an institution of higher learning helped them explore their personal sexual empowerment because there were more people willing to talk about sexual empowerment. Julie explained this feeling: "Sexual empowerment is not taught to women; we are taught to repress our sexuality. Coming to college and being on my own and being able to do what I wanted was a very sexually free time for me." Kim echoed this, saying that not only getting older, but also having good and bad experiences with sex helped her define how sexual empowerment would fit into her life. "From bad experiences I have been able to develop more respect for sexual empowerment and how I act sexually." Having difficult experiences or conversations led Kim to understand that sexual empowerment mattered to her. Greta shared that her sexual empowerment journey was challenging because of external focuses that she felt like not only influenced her but other women:

Sexual empowerment is when you are free in your own right to express your own individual form of sexual expression. I think it's really hard because there are so many external focuses that tell us [women] how we should be presenting ourselves sexually. It is so difficult because you have to navigate what that means for you. You have to fight with the things that are external and push back against what shames you. For me, it has been trial and error and it's just trying out different things through experience, but also it is giving fuck you's to the powers that be.

For Greta, sexual empowerment has been an ongoing process, rather than a destination point. Marie shared a similar testimony, explaining that normalizing the discussion of sex is important because of how many people have sex and do not know how to ask for what they want:

In the culture of history, sex is not something women are supposed to talk about, it is just something that we "do." I think talking about it more helps me understand that it is an important part of people's lives and

it can be a big part if they want it to be, and that is okay. Especially for people our age, most people around us are having sex and nobody talks about it. It is important to talk about so you understand it can be fun and a good thing and it is not just something you do or have done to you.

Feeling Empowered Post-Viewing: "It makes me prouder to be who I am, and it makes me feel like I am enough. It's like, if they can think about stuff like that, so can I, if they can talk about it, so can, I can do this" (Jess). 14 participants said that watching *Broad City* has made them feel more sexually empowered.

Liz discussed how Abbi and Ilana, the stars of the show, are also the co-creators and writers. "It makes me feel so good and more confident in myself, especially seeing that they are writers of the show too. Just to see that people can write this kind of stuff and feel confident and then others like it too, it empowers me more."

Natalie focused on new elements that the show provided her, referencing the scene from "Kirk Steele," where Ilana masturbates in a mirror, "I never knew you were allowed to be turned on by yourself and the way you look and I was like 'oh my god, yes, this is what I need to be seeing. It's just new things you didn't even know were things being named and shown for you."

Beginning a new sexual conversation, whether that be individually or collectively, was mentioned by many participants. Anna described *Broad City* as a starting point and the conversation that follows as the real change. "Before I started watching, I was still pretty comfortable with discussing stuff like this but then you watch it with your friends, and you all get more comfortable and talk more about the weird sexual situations that have happened." The feeling of post-viewing empowerment has led participants to feel more comfortable and create an open dialogue with those around them. Marie mentioned that being an active viewer of the show made her feel like she was engaging in these conversations too and experiencing these moments, even if she was just watching it on television:

When they [Abbi and Ilana] talk about sex I feel more open talking about it with other people and myself, it feels like people are talking about it with me even though it is a show. I feel like I am actively engaging in conversations about it, so if they talk about sex or something else after the episode, I feel like I have just been a part of that conversation, so then it is easier to do it in the future in real life.

Feeling empowered post-viewing allowed participants to continue the conversation after the show was over and introduced new ideas to their sexual lives.

Continuing the Conversation: "I was like, why don't we talk about all of this more?" (Avery).

The last theme of the research focused on continuing the conversation around sexual empowerment post-viewing with three sub-themes; the current conversation, changing the conversation and recommending the show. All 15 participants mentioned that there is a stigma around discussing sexual topics as a woman, and regardless of their current empowerment as an individual, this stigma is still impending on them in public spaces but less so in private intimate circles.

The Current Conversation: "Like we couldn't pretend anymore, I just didn't want to pretend anymore" (Natalie). 10 participants said they felt comfortable talking about female sexual empowerment topics that are discussed in *Broad City*, such as masturbation, sex, pornography, etc. Natalie explained how if there are not spaces for sexual communication amongst friends, people will continue to feel left out. She said, "I think that is how the patriarchy wins, because if we don't communicate together about these experiences, we are just going to continue feeling alone and isolated and think it is not a community issue." The conversations that had, as participants mentioned, usually depend on who the conversation is with.

Greta mentioned that she does not talk about sex or sexual empowerment with the men in her life, but more so women and non-binary individuals. "I share my experiences with my fellow women and nonbinary folks. It usually centers around the cis men we are having relations with and we talk in-depth about analyzing sexual exchanges and talk about what was okay and what was not okay with our sexual experiences with our partners."

Taylor discussed not feeling as comfortable and used an example of when her friend brought her vibrator into the shower with her:

I feel like I am just kind of a judgmental person. My friend did that, and I was like 'oh, I didn't know people did that. And I thought it was super weird. I don't know if I am close-minded or I don't think about other

people's habits, but I think I get uncomfortable because I only know about my habits and what I do. I never really watch porn and me and my friends talk about sex so little that when it comes up, I don't really know. Maybe talking about it over time would make me feel less uncomfortable.

This lack of comfort has made Taylor feel like she could not contribute to conversational topics about sexual empowerment.

Changing the Conversation: "Even if we are not close, it is just the commonality that we both watch the show and now we have this new thing to talk about" (Liz). 14 participants said that *Broad City* has changed how they discuss sexual empowerment in their lives. For many, this is rooted in asking more questions, displaying vulnerability, and being transparent about their sexual life. Liz compared this to how *Broad City* has changed how she is talking about sexual empowerment:

I am pretty open with my friends, but it has changed the conversation more in a way of talking about myself and my needs versus getting a partner or what your partner wants. We are always so concerned with getting boyfriends or talking to boys but now I think the question is, what do we need first? *Broad City* does a good job of balancing that and talking about a want versus a need.

Jess shared a similar sentiment, saying that *Broad City* has initiated conversations for her. "If we watch an episode, we discuss it after, and it changes our views things quite a bit. I know some of my roommates learn stuff while they watch too and then they feel free to ask other people about it." Beyond initiating conversations, participants said that it made them want to ask more, to know more, and feel like these things were allowed too. Julie commented on this, explaining that she comes from a small town where sex was never talked about:

I feel like watching the show broadened my horizons and it taught me a lot of things, not just about sexuality, but phrases, openness, acceptance, and all of these new things. I feel like before I watched it, I had the small-town view of like okay we talk about sex, but we don't go into detail. After watching the show, I wanted to talk more about stuff in depth. I asked my friends if they squirt, if it's hard for them, how it happens, etc. I feel like it [*Broad City*] opens up the dialogue for sexual conversations.

This change of discussion course impacted how participants felt about the role sexual empowerment plays in their lives and their relationships.

Remembering and Sustaining the Messaging: "I'll be watching again and there are some moments where I will be really happy that I got to hear this message again and remind me why these discussions matter" (Nicole). 13 participants said that they have re-watched episodes or seasons of *Broad City*, and two participants have not because they just finished the series but said they will begin re-watching shortly. All participants said that they recommended the show to someone in their life to watch as well. Taylor said that for her, it is a show you can watch an infinite amount of times. "It is one of the shows you can watch over and over again and it doesn't really get old. As soon as I finished the series, I went back and watched season one again just to see how much they [Abbi and Ilana] have changed."

Re-watching was also calming for some participants and a reminder of sexual empowerment. Julie said that she started watching *Broad City* as a freshman in college and has gone back throughout her undergraduate career and re-watched. "It is a great little thing to look at and view as something that is empowering. If I ever feel bad, I can watch an episode because there are episodes on all topics. After the episodes, I feel more empowered and like I can do whatever I want to."

Maggie highlighted this as well, saying that the characters are going through a similar struggle as her. "It has a lot of similar views to what I have. They talk about topics that are not discussed such as depression, anxiety, female health and reproduction sexuality, and more."

Jess discussed that she recommends the show to her friends and provides them episode she thinks are funny, and she also has shown her mom episodes in the past. "They cover so many topics that are relevant, I enjoy them, and I think specific people should see them." Molly said that she re-watches because she feels represented. "It is one of the most realistic representations of women and funny women on television. They are complex characters, and they are not necessarily all good or all bad."

To conclude, RQ2's results provided insight into the changing landscape of female sexual empowerment conversations for viewers of *Broad City*, both before and after viewing, as well as defining what sexual empowerment means for them in the modern age.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand if *Broad City* engaged with female sexual empowerment, as well as to identify how female-identifying viewers have changed their discussion of female sexual empowerment post-viewing. This section will interpret the meanings of the themes that were found and will conclude with the study's limitations as well as suggestions for future research.

RQ1: How do viewers of Broad City understand the shows discussion of female sexual empowerment through its storytelling and characters?

The two themes that emerged for RQ1 were accurate representation and female friendship. These themes illustrated that female-identifying viewers are active viewers of *Broad City*, meaning they are impressionable, and can see the ways the show discusses female sexual empowerment. The sexual empowerment that participants describe in the show has etched the importance of this topic into their minds. These themes support Margitu's (2019) work on the importance of millennial shows and the influences they can have on millennial or generation Z individuals. The presentation of multiple identities, as well as intricate representation, in *Broad City* changed how the audience understands the show. It is clear that when media presents relatable and personal storytelling that viewers display feelings of visibility.

Providing a space for equitable media representation was mentioned by many participants. Others echoed similar statements, saying that the idea of working masturbation into your schedule, such as Abbi does in "What a Wonderful World," (Season 1, Episode 1), was never something they thought of prior, and that including this reference in the very first scene made them keep watching. This confirms Brooks & Hebert's (2006) study on the role of media and gender socialization. Viewers look for personal representation in media, and when they find that representation, they often latch onto it, whether it be positive or negative. Put another way, negative representations can often be restricting and one-sided, leading viewers to not feel like their personal self is represented.

Likewise, this search for representation reflects Tolman's (2012) work, that young women are negatively affected by static portrayals of sexual representation, causing them to feel constrained to a single stereotype – that women have sex "done to them." For participants in this study, as mentioned, feelings of empowerment increased after viewing the show and allowed for a wider range of acceptance. Participant's ideas of affirming representation that allows room for growth were important, and this permitted them to define sexual empowerment on their own terms. The results contradict Signorielli (2001), of young women's further acceptance of traditional gender beliefs because participants described a breaking away from gender norms and introducing a new era of sexual exploration and acceptance.

However, it is vital to note that shows such as *Broad City* still exist for a specific demographic, and similar to the findings of Kim (2001), *Broad City* is not necessarily feminist in itself, as much as the ideological work displays the characters intertwined with the ins and outs of feminist issues. They are "feminists in training" if you will. The characters are still carefully managed within a cinematic sphere and arranged to affirm certain beliefs of more feminist liberal ideologies and disregard those of traditional conservative values. They aren't the perfect feminists, but rather a work in progress which leaves room for growth and mistakes.

Kim (2001) expands on this notion of female sexual representation and how it is policed in and out of media. *Broad City* countered this finding that female sexual representation is for the male gaze. It centers around the average sexually literate female viewer and highlights raw feminine sexual energy that is not in the male gaze because it lacks performativity. Male sexual energy is not a theme of the show, and when male sexual interests are seen, such as that of sexual partners of Abbi and Ilana, the dominance and empowerment are embedded within the female character, a trope often never displayed in mainstream media.

The blurring of masculinity and femininity in *Broad City* curated a space for female masculinity to exist in the show (Branfman, 2019). The themes from RQ1 overall supported that the sexual empowerment showcased by the characters has been influential to viewers. Participants described much of the sexual empowerment acts of "where they wish they were at," something attainable and within reach, but not necessarily current. These findings

further emulated Halberstam's (1998) concept of female masculinity, as participants cannot fully resonate with the sexual empowerment displayed in the show but hope to in time. It also confirmed agreed with the findings that women have to redefine what their masculinity will look like – as it has never been a conversation prior.

Masculine traits must be recreated, and through *Broad City*, characters work to enhance the essence of masculinity in female sexual empowerment and also introduce viewers to characteristics of sex that are often seen as male-dominated such as: orgasms, masturbation, penetration, control, and power. Viewers are left to understand how these former masculine traits fit into their definition of sexual empowerment post-viewing, which is what Halberstam described; embracing the confusion and re-defining your sexual interests within personal vocabulary (1998). Peterson argued that we must not ignore that girls are not passive viewers of cultural messages of female sexuality, but rather, that they are engaging with how sexuality is defined for them and then adopting these own measures into their lives, which is clearly explained by participants in RQ1 (2009). Responses to RQ1 further explained how female sexual empowerment is created and performed in *Broad City*; however, RQ2 provides more insight into participant's current feelings of sexual empowerment in their lives as well as the influence of media engagement with this artifact.

RQ2: How have female-identifying viewers of Broad City changed how they talk about sexual empowerment after viewing the show?

The two themes discussed in RQ2 were the current role of sexual empowerment and continuing the conversation. These themes furthered the argument that participants are actively interacting with mediated displays of female sexuality and female sexual empowerment, therefore, altering conversations post-viewing. (Peterson, 2009). Most personal sexual empowerment for participants came in the form of masturbation. All participants had engaged in masturbation, but not without feeling shame, supporting Bowman's research that female masturbation does not come without a feeling of discomfort, but this is only because female-identifying individuals have been conditioned to feel this way. Masturbating as a female-identifying individual is reclaiming power bit by bit that has been stripped away. To be a female, and experience solo sexual satisfaction goes against everything we have been taught about female sexuality (Bowman, 2014).

The current role of sexual empowerment for participants was often described as "a work in progress." This study affirmed Bay-Cheng's work about visibility and comfortability in sexual empowerment that can be insightful for all involved in conversations. Bay-Cheng argued that women must admit their confusion about sexuality and be vulnerable in order to build community. By creating these spaces for an enhanced conversation that does not rely on the utmost confidence or knowledge, all women can be invited to the conversation and feel safe to ask questions and share their worries free of judgment and therefore only increase the current conversation surrounding sexual empowerment and reaffirm community.

Participants discussed prior images and conversations from either sexual health education, past or current sexual partners, and friendships that have dismayed them from either asking questions or sharing experiences. Often times, media deemed "feminist," such as *Broad City*, hopes to challenge these past misconceptions and provide the freedom to express all emotions and actions surrounding sexual desire (Peterson, 2009). This work is important because it can create better representations that facilitate conversations between viewers that work against the prescribed norms.

Despite similar ideas such as Montemurro, et.al., this study rejected the idea that women will limit their conversations around sexual interests. All participants said that they have engaged in conversations about sex, but that the topics and vulnerability depend on the individual they are conversing with, but regardless, they all identified as sex-positive and many self-defined themselves as feminists, which should be noted. If this was a more sex-negative sample of female-identifying viewers, the results might have been different. Although, this study extended Montemurro, et.al., research of power dynamics and barriers of conversations, as participants mentioned that with some people, such as parents, conservative and/or religious friends, or childhood friends, there may be a difficult element of initiating the conversation or feeling like it is being reciprocated. Participants expressed wanting to have more conversations about sexual topics and only needing a judgment-free zone to continue to do so. They felt like *Broad City* provided them with buzzwords and sexual questions that they could explore with friends, similar to a starting point of a sexual revolution. Participants described these spaces as required judgement free zones that are instrumental in developing their sexual empowerment rhetoric and minimizing the shame factors they had previously experienced.

Sub-themes under the current role of sexual empowerment and continuing the conversation confirmed that the biggest issues for participants is being concerned about what others may think of them while discussing sexual topics. Participants also mentioned balancing this concern by questioning those in their lives who push back on their

sexual ideologies. The current conversation about sexual empowerment is determined by the individual and those that they engage with. Many participants brought past experiences or identities that influence their dialogue and the reactions of others. This confirmed Montemurro, et.al, that even though the narrative around female sexual empowerment is changing, women are well aware of the scrutiny they may face for engaging in sexual conversations as well as sexual behavior (2014). To be complicit with this constant policing of sexuality is to only further emphasize traditional femininity and reject any possession of masculinity in female sexuality. This is consistent with Halberstam's findings of female masculinity. Female masculinity reflects those who breach femininity by being sexually empowered or exhibiting more masculine sexual traits with little to no room to truly adopt masculinity in their sexual performance and be accepted by partners and/or society with the 'rejected scraps of mainstream masculinity' (1998).

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One limitation of the study was that all participants identified as cisgender. The study would have been more representative of female-identifying experiences if the sample included participants who identify as transgender women. Another limitation was the homogeneity in sexuality of the participants. Although half of the participants did not identify as heterosexual, the sexuality of participants was not a central discussion because all but one non-heterosexual participant explained that they have not engaged in same-sex sexual or romantic relationships. Because of this, participants who were non-heterosexual did not focus so much on their sexuality, as they did on their current state of sexual empowerment. Lastly, a final limitation was the racial make-up of participants. 13 participants identified as white, and the role that race played in *Broad City* was not mentioned, but the character's Jewish ethnicity was discussed. No participants identified as Jewish.

Further, using convenience sampling was a limitation because having the ability to interview more participants could have provided a deeper conversation about the role of sexual empowerment as well as expand on more scenes or episodes that either confirmed or denied current perceptions of sexual empowerment in *Broad City*.

Future research could go more in-depth with a larger amount of sexual, gender, racial, and ethnic differences with participants. All participants were between the ages of 19 and 23, so older viewers of *Broad City* could also be consulted to see if these findings find similar themes or contradict them. For example, all participants were members Gen Z where the Internet was a central part of identity development and coalition building. Future research might also engage in a comparative study to see if other pieces of media contain or don't contain the same feminist and sexual empowerment potential.

CONCLUSION

This study provides support for the claim that female-identifying audiences want media to engage with accurate representations of the female sexual experience that include powerful, unpolished, and vulnerable moments. Viewers crave to be represented, and this is often done so through their popular public identity, but this lacks to validate the hidden parts of one that may not be at the forefront, such as sexual experiences. Media that engages in validation heightens the sexual empowerment response of viewers. They are able to see themselves in ways they never could before and expand on a narrative that was once seen as prescribed. They want to see their full selves; exposed, natural, confused, and making mistakes.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

- 1) Briefly describe yourself.
 - a. What is your gender identity?
 - b. What is your sexuality?
 - c. What is your ethnicity?
 - d. What is your race?
- 2) When is the last time you watched *Broad City*?
 - a. Do you re-watch episodes?
 - b. If so, why?
- 3) While watching the episode “Witches,” what are some main themes you saw?
- 4) From the episode “Witches,” what was your favorite scene?
 - a. Why was that your favorite scene?
- 5) Do you feel like you see parts of your identity reflected in *Broad City*?
 - a. If so, how?
 - b. If not, why do you think that is?
- 6) How do you define sexual empowerment?
 - a. How did you develop this definition?
- 7) How do you discuss sexual empowerment in your life?
 - a. If you do, how do you feel when you discuss this topic?
 - b. If you do not discuss it, why?
- 8) Do you feel like *Broad City* discusses and expresses sexual empowerment?
 - a. Are there specific episodes or scenes that come to mind?
- 9) Has viewing *Broad City* changes how you discuss sexual empowerment?
 - a. If so, how?
 - b. If not, why?
- 10) How do you feel after scenes where the characters talk about sex, sexuality, orgasms, or sexual empowerment?
 - a. Does this feel similar or different to how you and your friends discuss these topics? (probe about sexuality)
 - b. Can you give me some examples?
- 11) In this episode orgasms are discussed; do you feel like orgasms are a part of female sexual empowerment?
 - a. If so, why?
 - b. If not, why?
- 12) Do you feel like Ilana and Abbi are sexually empowered through this episode?
 - a. If yes, how do you see this?
 - b. If no, why?
- 13) Is there anything else you want to share with me?