



Women's Sexual Agency, Pleasure, and Orgasm in Popular Netflix Series: A Quantitative Content Analysis of Mixed-Gender Scenes

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Abstract

Media representations of sexuality can play a relevant role in the development of gender stereotypes and sexual learning processes. In the current pre-registered study, we examined the representation of sexuality in content on Netflix, a dominant force in global mass media consumption. We coded 271 mixed-gender sexual scenes across seven highly popular Netflix series for orgasm portrayal, depiction of sexual behaviors, including clitoral stimulation, and gendered sexual scripts (i.e., initiation, control, and expression of desires). Our results revealed a nuanced picture of women's sexual pleasure representation. Women's orgasms were depicted less frequently than men's, although orgasm portrayal was generally rare. Sexual behaviors were mostly limited to penile-vaginal intercourse, though cunnilingus was depicted more frequently than fellatio. Regarding gendered sexual scripts, women were portrayed as equally sexually agentic as men, initiating sexual encounters, taking control, and expressing their needs and desires. Our findings indicate that this content simultaneously reinforces and challenges gender stereotypes related to sexual experiences, highlighting the need for sexual educators to critically address the realism of mainstream media portrayals to foster a nuanced understanding of sexuality and pleasure.

Keywords Sexual pleasure · Orgasm · Gendered sexual scripts · Gender role stereotypes · Media analysis

In most contemporary societies, women's sexual pleasure is subordinated to men's sexual pleasure, particularly within heterosexual contexts – a phenomenon described as gender disparity in sexual pleasure (Laan et al., 2021). Research has shown that this gender disparity is reflected in television fictional (Devlin, 2022; Jozkowski et al., 2019), with women's sexual pleasure often portrayed in constrained ways. Even romantic movies often portray physical intimacy between women and men as hasty vaginal penetration, often erasing manual or oral stimulation of the vulva and clitoris. Those portrayals are deeply rooted in traditional gender stereotypes, which can be defined as “fixed, overly simplified concepts of the attitudes and behaviors considered normal and

appropriate for specific genders” (American Psychological Association, 2023). Traditional gender stereotypes ascribe women qualities such as being caring, emotional and passive, while ascribing men attributes like competitiveness and dominance (Eagly, 1987; Smiler & Epstein, 2010; Ward et al., 2022). Mainstream media plays a significant role in shaping and reinforcing these stereotypes, because their portrayals can perpetuate narrow and limiting views of both femininity and masculinity (Ward & Grower, 2020). Consequently, analyzing media content for its portrayal of gender has been a central focus in feminist and gender research for the past decades (Kim et al., 2007; Rudy et al., 2010; Ward, 2003; Ward & Grower, 2020).

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Gender Stereotypes and Sexual Scripts in the Media

In a recent review, Ward and Grower (2020) identified four key areas where gender stereotypes are highly prevalent in the media: (1) the portrayal of simplistic stereotypes, like reducing women's value to their physical appearance, (2) the personality traits ascribed to women

and men characters, for example, depicting men to be more aggressive than women, (3) gendered representations of roles and occupations, like showing women as primary homemakers, and (4) depictions of romantic and sexual relationships, such as illustrating women as prioritizing emotions over sex. Thus, sexuality is one of the key areas where gender stereotypes, commonly known as gendered sexual scripts, are enacted and portrayed in the media.

Traditional sexual scripts are characterized by a gendered power inequality which promotes male dominance and female submission (Sanchez et al., 2012). Those scripts accordingly tend to (a) prioritize men's sexual pleasure over women's sexual pleasure (Mahar et al., 2020), and (b) depict women in submissive or passive roles, which undermines their sexual agency (Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015; Klein et al., 2019; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010; Rubin et al., 2019; Sanchez et al., 2012). As a result, research consistently indicates a so-called *pleasure* or *orgasm gap* in heterosexual encounters, where women experience significantly fewer orgasms and less sexual pleasure compared to men (Frederick et al., 2018; Herbenick et al., 2023). Moreover, a lack of sexual agency among women has been strongly linked to lower levels of sexual pleasure (Dworkin et al., 2006; Reis et al., 2021; Schick et al., 2008; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2015). Given research shows that the pleasure gap is not biologically determined (e.g., Mahar et al., 2020), it is highly relevant to understand which social forces contribute to it.

Feminist media theory offers a lens through which to understand and critique the media's potential role in perpetuating the pleasure gap. This framework, rooted in feminist theory, underlines the social construction of gender, rejecting essentialist views and challenging conventional gender stereotypes and sexual relations (Eagly, 1987; Harvey, 2019; Steiner, 2014). In the realm of sexuality, feminist media theory critiques the portrayal of stereotypical images of heterosexual sex (e.g., depicting sexual behaviors aimed at men's satisfaction), which reflects and reinforces patriarchal gender relations (Döring & Miller, 2022; Harvey, 2019). The current study examined the portrayal of sexual pleasure in mainstream media with a focus on the potential gender disparity in whose orgasm is depicted, as well as the portrayal of sexual behaviors associated with orgasm. Furthermore, we examined further elements that potentially contribute to gendered pleasure disparity in mainstream media, particularly by focusing on gendered sexual scripts.

Sexual Portrayals in Mainstream Media

Sexuality is commonly depicted across various media formats, and it continually conveys conventional notions about how sexual behaviors are performed (Lemke & Tornow, 2018a). Content analyses showed that in comedy drama TV shows, television movies, and feature films, over 90% of material contained some form of sexual behavior (Fisher et al., 2004), and a more specific analysis of British soap operas revealed that shows contained an average of 6.5 sexual implicit or explicit sexual scenes per hour (Al-Sayed & Gunter, 2012). Similarly, recent research on teen content found an average of two explicit sexual scenes per episode (Masterson & Messina, 2023). Collectively, these findings highlight the pervasive presence of explicit sexuality in mainstream media.

Gender Disparities in Orgasm: Whose Pleasure is Shown?

Extant results have shown that kissing and intimate touching are the most commonly portrayed intimate behaviors on mainstream television (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017; Masterson & Messina, 2023; Timmermans & Van den Bulck, 2018). Regarding more explicit behaviors, in a study investigating 100 mainstream films, penile-vaginal-intercourse (PVI) was far more prevalent than manual or oral stimulation (Jozkowski et al., 2019). To our knowledge, no study has yet analyzed orgasm portrayal in mass media formats. Hence, our reference point is limited to studies within the realm of pornography. A review has found that men's orgasms are shown significantly more often than women's orgasms in pornographic content (Miller & McBain, 2022). In an analysis of the 50 most viewed Pornhub videos of all time, only 18% of the women compared to 78% of the men were shown reaching orgasm. Of the orgasms experienced by women, 45% were induced through PVI, 35% through anal intercourse, and only 5% through cunnilingus (Séguin et al., 2018).

These findings are consistent with a broader cultural tendency to overemphasize PVI as "real sex," deemphasize other forms of sexual intimacy, and make penetration the goal of heterosexual sex (Andrejek et al., 2022). Research indicates that in real life—as opposed to media representations—only a small percentage of women report experiencing orgasm from penetration alone (Conley & Klein, 2022; Laan et al., 2021). Most women require some form of external clitoral stimulation for orgasm (Herbenick et al., 2018; Mintz, 2017), which is commonly achieved through manual stimulation or cunnilingus, during, after or instead of penetration (Herbenick et al., 2023; Mintz, 2017; Rowland & Kolba, 2019). However, even regarding media

representations of oral sex, an analysis of pornographic content revealed a notable disparity, with fellatio depicted more frequently than cunnilingus (Vannier et al., 2014). This pattern in media representation reflects a broader cultural oversight of direct clitoral stimulation, thereby neglecting an essential aspect of women's sexual pleasure.

Gendered Sexual Scripts: Who Takes Control of Their Sexuality?

Sexual script theory (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 1986) posits that people develop ideas about how, when, where, and why sexual behaviors are performed. Those scripts are based on organized “blueprints” that exist on three levels: the cultural (e.g., normative ideas about sex in society), interpersonal (e.g., peer expectations), and intrapsychic (e.g., personal sexual fantasies; Markle, 2008; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). According to this theory, media are considered crucial agents in constructing the socio-cultural milieu in which people develop cultural scripts. Those cultural scripts might in turn influence their interpersonal as well as their intrapsychic scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 2003). As stated earlier, sexual scripts tend to be highly gendered in the heterosexual context, placing men at superior and women in subordinate positions (Sanchez et al., 2012; Ward et al., 2022).

Though studies show that pornographic media content frequently reflects these gendered sexual scripts (Döring & Miller, 2022; Fritz & Paul, 2017; Vannier et al., 2014), less is known about their portrayal in mainstream media. An impactful study by Kim et al. (2007) analyzed the presence of heterosexual gendered scripts in primetime network television, which have since been widely applied in content analytical research (e.g., Kirsch & Murnen, 2015; Terán et al., 2022). The analysis focused on broader categories for stereotypical gender roles in relationships and dating, rather than looking at specific scripts in sexual encounters. Therefore, the study drew on sexual script theory and the idea of compulsory heterosexuality, meaning the societal expectation and pressure for individuals to engage in heterosexual relationships and behaviors. The identified script categories matched behaviors representing social and stereotypical gender stereotypes in romantic and sexual relationships (e.g., masculine commitment avoidance versus feminine commitment orientation). Men were more likely to be depicted talking openly about their sexual desires, whereas women were more at risk for being judged for their sexual behaviors. In total, 16 references to heterosexual scripts were found per hour. Similarly, in an analysis of German reality TV, women compared to men were more frequently shown as having sexual regret, meaning experiencing negative emotions or

remorse after engaging in a sexual encounter (Lemke & Tornow, 2018b).

Studies that analyze more specific sexual scripts have indicated that media tend to follow a similarly gendered pattern in sexual situations. Men are commonly presented as initiating sexual encounters and experiencing high sexual desire, whereas women are ascribed passive roles and lower desire (Terán et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2022). Additionally, women are more likely to be objectified in these media portrayals (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007). Hence, initiation of a sexual act is often discussed as an indicator of the traditional male sexual script (Simms & Byers, 2013). In line with this, early research examining U.S. soaps has revealed that men are far more often depicted as initiators of sex (Greenberg & D'Alessio, 1985), a trend that is also evident in a recent analysis of teen programs (Terán et al., 2022). In contrast, an analysis of the famous and perhaps more women-focused show *Sex and the City* has revealed equal rates of sexual initiation for women and men (Markle, 2008).

A different aspect of gendered sexual scripts involves determining the power dynamics within the sexual interaction (e.g., controlling rhythm, pace, and position). Although this variable has not been analyzed in mainstream media, two studies of pornographic movies have shown that men were more likely than women to take control of the sexual act, with men being depicted more commonly in dominant and women in submissive positions (Gorman et al., 2010; Vannier et al., 2014). Further research has indicated that men are more likely to position their women sex-partners or verbally instruct them to move in specific ways (Gorman et al., 2010). In general, there is a dearth of studies that examine gendered scripts in sexual situations outside of pornographic content.

(Sexual) Media Effects Theories

But how can media representations influence people's sexual behavior? There are two commonly used general media effects theories, namely *cultivation theory* (Gerbner, 1988) and *social cognitive theory* (originally *social learning theory*; Bandura, 1971) well applicable to sexual media content. Taken together, these theories suggest that repeated exposure to sexual media messages shapes viewers' perceptions of reality. People then develop behavioral guidelines through observing media role models. Building upon these media effects theories and sexual script theory, the *acquisition, activation and application model of media sexual socialization* (3AM) by Wright (2011) focuses specifically on the effects of sexual media content (Miller & McBain, 2022). It posits that through media consumption (a) new scripts

can be created (acquisition), (b) existing scripts can be activated (activation), and (c) the use of certain scripts can be encouraged by portraying them as normative or rewarding (application). For example, frequently watching women on TV being sexually passive could influence women viewers to adopt or activate these scripts and consider such behaviors as desirable. The theory also suggests that scripts can be either formed on a specific (e.g., engaging in specific sexual behaviors after having watched them) or general level (e.g., developing a gendered way of having sex; Wright, 2011), highlighting the broad impact media can have on attitudes and behaviors. While media effect theories are mainly applied in the context of negative or harmful sexual media effects, recent developments have emphasized the importance of detecting the positive influences sexual media messages might have (Tillman & Wells, 2023; Ward et al., 2022). To illustrate, if women are exposed to sexually agentic women in the media, it is possible that they will become motivated to claim agency in their own sexuality.

Researchers argue that the more accessible gendered sexual scripts are in the media, the more likely it is that they will guide people's gendered perceptions and sexual behaviors (Ward & Grower, 2020). Looking at past research on media effects, meta-analyses indicate that media content exerts a small but significant influence on gendered stereotypical attitudes and behaviors (Herrett-Skjellum & Allen, 1996; Oppliger, 2007). More specifically, the exposure to narrow and gendered ideas about sexuality in the media can have negative consequences, such as increasing sexual double standards—where men are praised for sexual activity while women are criticized for similar behavior—or reducing feelings of sexual agency among women (Curtin et al., 2011; Klein et al., 2022; Seabrook et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2019; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006).

Representations of Sexuality on Netflix

In recent years, Netflix has emerged as the dominant digital streaming platform. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Netflix users rose exponentially (Gallagher, 2020), reaching approximately 240 million subscribers worldwide in 2023, across all age groups (Iqbal, 2024). Despite Netflix accounting for over 30% of daily video consumption in 2018, research of the portrayal of sexual content on subscription video-on-demand platforms remains limited (Masterson & Messina, 2023; Tauty et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2024). Netflix has been celebrated for portraying rather liberal and inclusive content, particularly in its in-house productions (Avery, 2023; Stoddart,

2017). For example, some of Netflix' self-produced teen series such as *Sex Education* have been praised for sex-positive approaches and accounting for sexual diversity (Díaz-Fernández, 2022; Dudek et al., 2022; Jensen, 2019). With this potential shifting social climate in mind, an analysis of (women's) sexual pleasure depiction and gendered sexual scripts portrayed in modern media, on platforms such as Netflix, is vital for understanding contemporary portrayed norms of sexual behavior (Lemke & Tornow, 2018a).

Current Study

The goal of our study was to examine the representation of sexual pleasure in contemporary Netflix series. We identified whose pleasure is depicted, the sexual behaviors presented and their implications for pleasure distribution, and how gendered sexual scripts are portrayed. Since the pleasure gap is most prominent in heterosexual practice (Mahar et al., 2020), we focused on these encounters. This study extended past media content analyses of sexuality representations in two main ways.

First, we analyzed orgasm portrayal and the depicted sexual practices that can elicit an orgasm (e.g., PVI, fellatio, and cunnilingus) in mass media, focusing on women's pleasure. In our analysis, we examined the portrayal of orgasms as an indicator for sexual pleasure while acknowledging that incentives for sex include factors other than orgasm (Dienberg, Oschatz, Kosman, & Klein, 2023; Opperman et al., 2014). Orgasm is, however, arguably an indicator for sexual pleasure and has traditionally been associated with women's sexual satisfaction (Dienberg, Oschatz, Piemonte, & Klein, 2023). Guided by the notion that activities involving clitoral stimulation may be crucial for women's pleasure (Mintz, 2017), we also investigated the frequency of depicted clitoral stimulation in relation to women's orgasm experiences.

Although numerous studies have examined the portrayal of orgasms and sexual practices in pornographic content (e.g., Miller & McBain, 2022; Vannier et al., 2014), extending this analysis to mainstream media is essential for several reasons. Pornography tends to be used more by men than women (Emmers-Sommer, 2018), suggesting a gender disparity in exposure to this form of sexual content. Additionally, everyday media is often viewed as more realistic by audiences compared to the artificiality of sexual scenes in pornography and may thus be more likely to influence actual behavior (Lemke & Tornow, 2018a). The study was pre-registered (<https://aspredicted.org/kf98g.pdf>). We made the following predictions:

Hypothesis 1a: PVI would be shown more frequently than other forms of sexual acts.

Hypothesis 1b: Fellatio would be shown more frequently than cunnilingus.

Hypothesis 1c: Men experiencing orgasms would be shown more frequently than women experiencing orgasms.

Hypothesis 1d: Women would be shown more frequently as experiencing orgasms without external clitoral stimulation than with clitoral stimulation.

Second, previous content analyses of sexual content in media often conflated the presence of sexual content, such as depictions of women being nude or partially dressed, with the conclusion that women were being sexualized (Collins, 2011). However, this approach does not adequately address *how* women are portrayed in the media (e.g., as agentic versus submissive) (Collins, 2011). Hence, we aimed to analyze the portrayal of stereotypically gendered sexual scripts and their appearance on these series (e.g., men versus women initiating sexual behavior and men versus women being assertive). In comparison to broader relationship-oriented heterosexual scripts that have been commonly analyzed in past research (Kim et al., 2007; Kirsch & Murnen, 2015; Terán et al., 2022), this is the first study to focus its analysis on a range of specific gendered sexual scripts in mainstream media, namely initiation, control, and expression of needs and desires. We made the following prediction:

Hypothesis 2 Men compared to women would be more frequently shown as agentic (i.e., the initiators of sexual behavior, having control of the sexual encounter, and more expressive of their sexual needs and desires).

Method

We conducted a quantitative media content analysis of $N=271$ mixed-gender sexual scenes from seven popular Netflix shows. In total approximately 133 h of material was viewed. The codebook, data set, and analysis script of the main analysis, as well as all documents for the reliability test, are available on the OSF: <https://osf.io/5s6hm>.

Sampling

In total, seven Netflix shows were included in our analysis. Four inclusion criteria for the Netflix series were applied: (1) their availability on Netflix in October of 2022, (2) a

launch date within the past five years (2017 or later), (3) ranking among the 30 most-watched series on Netflix, each with at least 200 million total hours viewed within the first 28 days after release (Solsman, 2023), and (4) being mentioned in at least three of six internet rankings determining shows with sexual content. An initial review of the top 30 most-viewed Netflix series indicated that a significant number of the series lacked explicit visual representations of sexuality. We aimed to select shows that, pragmatically speaking, had sufficient sexual content and were known to generate discussion about sexuality. This approach allowed us to include a diverse range of shows, including those targeting both primarily teen and adult audiences, to ensure a comprehensive analysis of sexual representation in contemporary media. Other studies have used Netflix's genre labels for content categorization (e.g., using the "teen television" label to pinpoint young adult content; Masterson & Messina, 2023); however, Netflix does not provide specific labels to directly identify series with substantial sexual content. Given we were interested in sexual content in the sense that people engaging in sexual behavior with each other are shown, we adopted an alternative approach for the selection of relevant Netflix shows using internet rankings (Tauty et al., 2021). We referred to six different internet rankings of Netflix series (Chakrabarty & Mitra, 2022; Colbert, 2022; Ellis & Zane, 2022; Foutch, 2022; Vincentry & Pasternak, 2021; Wallace et al., 2022). These lists were labeled either "sexiest" or "steamiest" series on Netflix and were sourced from a wide range of audiences, including Cosmopolitan and Men's Health, to provide a comprehensive overview.

The four inclusion criteria resulted in a sample of six different Netflix-produced series. However, during the preliminary review, we observed that one of the chosen series, *The Witcher*, only contained a few visual sexual scenes between two people. Nonetheless, considering the presence of implied sexual acts and acts involving more than two people, the series still fit the label of a "sexy show." To ensure a sufficiently large sample size, we decided to deviate slightly from our pre-registered criteria and include a seventh series. We additionally included the series *Sex/Life* because it was mentioned in four of the six above mentioned lists of series with sexual content. Although it did not rank among the top 30 most-watched series on Netflix, the show has gained substantial and comparable popularity and media attention (Andreeva, 2021; Television Stats, 2023).

For each of those seven series, we coded all seasons that were available in October 2022. A total of 167 episodes with 271 sexual scenes involving one woman and one man were coded. See Table 1 for an overview of the series characteristics.

An a priori power analysis using *G*power* (Faul et al., 2007) indicated that 145 sex scenes would be needed

Table 1 Characteristics of selected Netflix series

	Total	Bridgerton	Dark Desire	Élite	Sex Education	Sex/Life	The Witcher	You
Year of Launch		2020	2020	2018	2019	2021	2019	2018
Number of Seasons	18	2	2	5	3	1	2	3
Number of Episodes	167	16	33	40	24	8	16	30
Average Duration of an Episode		60 min	35 min	50 min	50 min	45 min	60 min	45 min
Target Population		General	General	Teen	Teen	General	General	General
Genre		Drama	Drama	Drama	Drama	Drama	Fantasy Action	Thriller
		Romance	Thriller	Thriller	Comedy			
Original Language		English	Spanish	Spanish	English	English	English	English
Total Number of Sexual Scenes	323	16	88	67	53	52	5	42
Number of Mixed-Gender Sexual Scenes	271	16	87	35	41	48	4	40

Note. The selected Netflix series are presented in alphabetical order

to achieve 95% power ($\alpha=0.05$), considering a medium effect size for a chi-square test ($w=0.3$) of a 2 (gender) x 2 (sexual variable such as orgasm presence) cross table (Cohen, 1977). We decided to code all available mixed-gender sexual scenes from the seven selected Netflix series, resulting in a total of 271 sexual scenes, as preliminary inspection showed that not all sexual scenes were shown until the end of the encounter, providing information about orgasms or sexual scripts. Please also note that our pre-registered a priori power analysis was quite conservative, using a threshold of a 0.95 power, which indicated a required sample size of 145 scenes. To balance statistical power with practical constraints, a power level of 0.80, is commonly recommended in contemporary psychological science (Cumming, 2011; Giner-Sorolla, 2024). Using a power level of 0.80 suggests a sample size of 88 completed scenes, which our current sample closely approximates (total of 85 completed scenes).

Units of Analysis

The unit of analysis was at the level of the individual sexual scene. For each sexual scene, we coded orgasm occurrence, sexual behaviors, and gendered sexual scripts. A scene was considered “a passage in a story when the time generally holds constant [...] ending when the primary setting shifts in time, place, or when there is an addition of a new character entering at the time or place” (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017, p. 6). Scenes in which characters only verbally referred to sexual acts (e.g., “Yesterday I had sex with Sarah.”) or in which sexual acts were only implied (e.g., two characters go to the bedroom and shut the door) were not included. We only coded scenes if at least one of the sexual behaviors (e.g., PVI, fellatio, cunnilingus) listed in our codebook was shown; kissing alone was insufficient for coding. If scenes were brief (≤ 5 s), we categorized them as short scenes. For these scenes, we refrained from applying gendered sexual script codes due to the limited information available.

Because gendered sexual scripts unfold mainly in heterosexual encounters, we only coded two-person scenes between one woman and one man (cis-gendered). However, sexual scenes occurring between more than two people, same-sex encounters, or scenes with at least one non-binary or gender-diverse character are reported for descriptive purposes. Scenes with non-binary or gender-diverse characters were only excluded if the series explicitly mentioned the gender identity of the character.

Content Categories

Sexual Behaviors and Orgasm Experience

A total of 13 different sexual behaviors which have been included in previous content analyses were coded (Jozkowski et al., 2019; Séguin et al., 2018; Vannier et al., 2014). The sexual behaviors were coded as either present or absent in each scene. For instance, if intimate kissing occurred multiple times within a single scene, it was counted only once. See Table 2 for a full list of coded sexual activities.

The coding of the orgasm experience included several steps. First, the general orgasm presence was coded separately for both characters in a scene as either *present*, *not present*, or *not shown*. To code the orgasm portrayal, we paid attention to auditory and visual indicators of orgasm, as suggested by past research (Lebedíková, 2022). Auditory cues included verbal cues (e.g., “I’m coming”), moaning, and hyperventilation. Visual cues included muscle and facial contortions, and squirting or ejaculation. If the entire sexual interaction was shown and the characters did not show any indicators of orgasm, we coded *not present*. If the scene was not shown to the end and it remained unclear whether the characters would have experienced orgasm, we coded *not shown*.

In the case of women’s orgasm, the orgasm-inducing behavior was coded for whether it provided some form of external clitoral stimulation (cunnilingus, manual stimulation, or PVI with external stimulation). In case of the orgasm

Table 2 Coding variables and intercoder reliability

Coding Variables	<i>n</i>	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha
Sexual Behaviors			
Kissing	64	0.96	0.96
Intimate Touching or Kissing of the Body	64	1	1
Body			
Women Self-Stimulation	64	1	1
Men Self-Stimulation	64	-	-
Manual Stimulation of Woman's Genitals by Man	64	0.88	0.88
Manual Stimulation of Men's Genitals by Woman	64	0.79	0.79
Orgasm Experience			
Cunnilingus	64	1	1
Fellatio	64	1	1
Anilingus (Woman)	64	-	-
Anilingus (Man)	64	-	-
Penile-Vaginal Intercourse	64	0.97	0.97
Anal Intercourse	64	-	-
Sex Toy Use	64	1	1
Orgasm Experience			
Women Orgasm	64	0.94	0.94
Orgasm Source	64	1	1
Men Orgasm	64	0.97	0.97
Fake Orgasm	64	1	1
Sexual Scripts			
Initiation	57	0.82	0.82
Control	57	0.82	0.82
Expression of Needs and Desires	57	0.97	0.97

Note. *n* = Number of analyzed scenes for this category. Coding variables are presented in the same order they are introduced in the methods section. The sample refers to 64 sexual scenes used to calculate intercoder reliability

occurring during PVI, external clitoral stimulation was only coded if there was additional visible manual stimulation of the self or by the partner (or using a sex toy) of the external female genitalia.

To illustrate, a scene example for an orgasm induced through external clitoral stimulation without PVI appears in season one, episode three of the series *Sex/Life*. The scene unfolds as a flashback, showcasing the intense and intimate connection between the young Billie Connelly and her attractive ex-boyfriend, Brad Simon. In this scene, Billie is grappled with stress about meeting Simon's mother in a hotel. When they both enter the hotel elevator Simon asks, "What can I do to make you relax?", looks at her intensely, lifts her dress and begins to manually stimulate her genitals. She begins to moan, her body tenses as he continues to intensely touch her. She reaches orgasm when they arrive at the top floor of the hotel. We additionally assessed whether the displayed orgasms were authentic or faked, drawing from previous studies (Klaassen & Peter, 2015). The primary

indication of a faked orgasm was when characters openly confessed to others that their orgasms were fake.

Portrayal of Gendered Sexual Scripts

Sexual scripts were coded using three variables: initiation, control, and expression of needs and desires, with the first two derived from past content analyses of pornography content (Vannier et al., 2014). The third variable, verbal "expression of needs and desires," was added to broaden the concept of agency. The ability to communicate sexual needs to a partner is a crucial aspect of sexual agency (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Koenig et al., 2020), therefore we added this variable to extend our analysis beyond non-verbal cues to include the verbal expression of needs, desires, and boundaries.

First, we determined the gender of the initiator of the portrayed sexual activity. Based on other studies, the initiator was identified as the person who first expressed interest in sexual activity, either verbally or through physical gestures (Klaassen & Peter, 2015; Terán et al., 2022; Vannier et al., 2014). Codes were either *woman*, *man*, *not shown* or, if both partners displayed reciprocal interest, *mutual initiation*. An example of women's initiation can be found in season one, episode two of *Sex Education*. In this scene, Maeve Wiley, an intelligent teenage girl from a difficult family background, grabs Jackson Marchetti, her casual sex partner, at a house party by the arm and drags him up the stairs. She then pushes him onto the bed, starts kissing him and pulls off his shirt. While at first he seems a little confused by her initiation, he quickly follows her lead.

Second, we coded who took the primary control of the sexual encounter (*woman*, *man*, and *both equally*; Vannier et al., 2014), defined as taking charge over sexual positions, behaviors, and the pace of the interaction. Indicators for control were non-verbal (e.g., spreading partner's legs, thrusting speed, or pushing partner on the bed). A scene illustrating an instance of shared control appears in season one, episode four of *You*. This scene shows one of the first sexual encounters between Guinevere Beck, an aspiring writer and Joe Goldberg, a bookstore manager who begins developing an obsession for her. As the scene unfolds, the dynamics of control are vividly illustrated. Initially, he exerts force, pulling her in for a kiss and pushing her onto the couch, yet she promptly seizes control, pushing him to the floor. The interplay continues with consistent noticeable shifts of control throughout the scene.

Third, we coded the expression of sexual needs and desires. This referred to a person actively verbally communicating what they wanted or did not want to gain sexual pleasure or to avoid pain (e.g., "Touch me there," "Harder," "Stop"). Our codes were *only woman*, *only man*, *both*, and

neither. A scene from *Élite* (season two, episode two) gives an example of the code *only woman*, showing the first sexual encounter between Carla Róson Caleruega and Samuel García Domínguez, a teenage couple who begin their romance with an intense physical relationship. In the scene, Carla and Samuel meet in a bar. While Samuel persistently asks Carla if she was involved in the death of a close friend, she initially avoids the question and begins to walk away, while he follows her. The sexual tension between them grows and they begin to kiss intensely. When she reveals that she was indeed involved in the murder, he says: “I want to know everything.” She replies: “And I just want you to fuck me,” expressing her sexual desires directly.

Deviating slightly from our pre-registration, we did not code for characters’ sexual experience. This decision was influenced by the absence of consistent background information on many characters’ sexual histories and the large variation of “high sexual experience” criteria across different series.

Data Collection and Coding

Prior to the final coding phase, the first author and three student research assistants conducted a pre-screening of all pertinent series and seasons. This pre-screening aimed to identify all sexual scenes depicted in the selected content. After scene collection, the first author and a fourth student research assistant underwent detailed coding training. This training, conducted weekly over six weeks, included practicing coding with other Netflix series containing sexual content (e.g., *Sexify*, *She’s Gotta Have it*, *Tiny Pretty Things*) to enhance coding proficiency and modify and improve the codebook.

After training, intercoder reliability was calculated using the first 10 scenes of each series. This approach was chosen because it allowed for the collection of background information. This study is part of a larger research project, covering additional codes on portrayed characters published elsewhere (Oschatz et al., 2024). Subsequently, we coded 24% (64 scenes) of the sample, which goes beyond common recommendations for content analysis of 10–20% of the total sample (Neuendorf, 2002). Both coders were familiar with the selected series, increasing the likelihood that their interpretation of the content aligned with that of viewers (Dillman Carpentier et al., 2017; Manganello et al., 2010).

We assessed intercoder reliability using Cohen’s Kappa and Krippendorff’s Alpha. Adhering to interpretation guidelines for both coefficients, values ≥ 0.80 indicated substantial or strong agreement (McHugh, 2012; Neuendorf, 2002). In our analysis, all variables except one (i.e., manual stimulation of men’s genitals by woman, 0.79) exceeded this threshold (Table 2). Considering Hayes and Krippendorff’s

(2007) assertion that Kappa coefficients of 0.70 are deemed acceptable and with a low risk of misinterpretation, we decided to include the variable “manual stimulation of men’s genitals by woman” in our study.

Statistical Data Analysis

For the descriptive analysis of the data, the percentages of each variable were computed. To test our hypotheses (H1c, H1d, and H2), chi-square tests were conducted using SPSS Version 27. We reported the effect size phi (w), which is recommended for small contingency tables (Kim, 2017). A phi (w) value of 0.10 indicated a small effect size, 0.30 a medium, and 0.50 a large (Kline, 2004).

Results

In total, 323 sexual scenes were coded. Among these, 40 scenes (12%) showed sexual interactions between either two men ($n=30$), two women ($n=9$), or included one non-binary character ($n=1$), and 12 scenes (4%) occurred between more than two people. For the current analysis, we focused exclusively on the 271 remaining scenes that depicted sexual interactions between one woman and one man. The duration of the heterosexual scenes in the final sample ranged from 1 to 330 s ($M=52.52$, $SD=56.32$). Of the final scenes, 40 (15%) were categorized as short scenes (≤ 5 s). Gendered sexual scripts were not coded for short scenes. Hence, the total numbers of analyzed scenes vary slightly across the categories of analysis.

Sexual Behaviors and Orgasm Experience

The most common intimate behaviors shown in the included Netflix series were intimate touching or kissing of the body ($n=181$, 67%), kissing ($n=178$, 66%), and PVI ($n=171$, 63%). PVI emerged as the predominant sexual behavior including genital stimulation, providing support for H1a. Cunnilingus was the second most common, appearing in 9% of the scenes. Contrary to H1b, cunnilingus was shown in more sexual scenes ($n=23$, 9%) than fellatio ($n=10$, 4%). This difference between the proportions of both behaviors was statistically significant, $z=2.35$, $p=.019$. For a full overview of the representation of all sexual behaviors see Table 3. Most of the sampled sexual scenes (68%) did not show the complete sexual encounter until the end; hence, neither the potential orgasm of the woman nor the man was shown. We identified two fake orgasms (one of a woman, one of a man), which were labeled as such by the protagonists themselves and excluded from further analyses.

Table 3 Portrayal of sexual behaviors across selected series

Sexual Behaviors	<i>n</i>	%
Intimate Touching or Kissing of the Body	181	66.8
Kissing	178	65.7
Penile-Vaginal Intercourse	171	63.1
Cunnilingus	23	8.5
Manual stimulation of Woman's Genitals by Man	22	8.1
Manual stimulation of Men's Genitals by Woman	12	4.4
Fellatio	10	3.7
Women Self-Stimulation	4	1.5
Sex Toy Use	2	0.7
Men Self-Stimulation	1	0.4
Anilingus	-	-
Anal Intercourse	-	-

Note. Sexual behaviors are presented in descending order of prevalence. Sample includes 271 mixed-gender sexual scenes

Looking at the resulting sample of completed sexual scenes, women were shown experiencing orgasm in fewer scenes ($n=16$, 6%) than men ($n=27$, 10%). Chi-square analysis indicated that this difference was statistically significant $\chi^2(1, n=170)=4.12, p=.042$, with a small effect size, $w=0.16$, confirming H1c. In ten scenes showing orgasms, both the women and the men characters experienced an orgasm during the sexual encounter (47% of all orgasms). However, in 63% of the scenes depicting men's orgasms, only the men character experienced an orgasm. In contrast, in only 38% of the scenes solely the women characters were shown to have an orgasm, while the men partners did not.

Examining H1d that women's orgasms are more likely to be shown without external clitoral stimulation, we found that most portrayed orgasms were induced by PVI alone ($n=11$, 69%). In contrast, 31% of portrayed orgasms were induced through some form of external clitoral stimulation (cunnilingus, manual stimulation, or PVI with external stimulation). This difference was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, n=16)=2.25, p=.134$, most likely due to low number of cases. For an overview of orgasm portrayal in the included Netflix series, see Table 4.

Portrayal of Gendered Sexual Scripts

Initiation

We frequently coded the initiation of sexual activity as *not shown* because many sexual scenes started with sexual

activity already in progress ($n=130$, 56%). Contrary to H2, women initiation was the most common among the scenes that portrayed the initiation of sexual activity ($n=40$, 17%), followed by men initiation ($n=34$, 15%) and shared initiation ($n=27$, 12%). These differences were not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, n=101)=2.51, p=.284$. Moreover, the difference between women and men initiations was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, n=74)=0.49, p=.485$.

Control

Across scenes, control over the pace and behaviors was primarily shared equally between the two characters involved ($n=167$, 72%), compared to men characters being in control ($n=35$, 15%) and women characters being in control ($n=29$, 13%), $\chi^2(2, n=231)=158.03, p<.001$. Comparing only the frequencies of women versus men control, the difference was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, n=64)=0.56, p=.453$.

Expression of Sexual Needs and Desires

In most scenes, neither character verbally expressed their sexual needs and desires ($n=168$, 73%). Contrary to H2, when communication of desires did occur, women were more likely to express their sexual desires ($n=37$, 16%), compared to men ($n=13$, 6%), or both women and men characters expressing their desires ($n=13$, 6%). Chi-square tests comparing all three categories, $\chi^2(2, n=63)=18.29, p<.001, w=0.54$, and comparing only women versus men characters, $\chi^2(1, n=50)=11.52, p<.001, w=0.48$, were statistically significant. In sum, results indicate that gender was neither associated with initiation nor sexual control. For the expression of sexual needs and desires, we found an association with gender in the opposite direction as expected: women characters were more likely to express their desires than men characters.

Discussion

Past research shows that sexuality is highly gendered and often shaped by stereotypes (Ward & Grower, 2020; Wetzel & Sanchez, 2024). The goal of the current research was to analyze the portrayal of sexual behaviors, orgasms, and gendered sexual scripts in highly popular Netflix series,

Table 4 Representation of orgasm and clitoral stimulation across selected Netflix series

	Yes		No		Not Shown		With CS		Without CS	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Men Orgasm	27	10.0	57	21.2	185	68.8	-	-	-	-
Women Orgasm	16	5.9	70	26.0	183	68.0	5	31.3	11	68.8

Note. CS=Clitoral stimulation. Sample includes all completed scenes with information about orgasm presence

specifically focusing on the representation of gender and pleasure. Our findings unveil a nuanced landscape of favorable and adverse trends in the portrayal of aspects related to women's pleasure. On one hand, sexual behaviors depicted were largely limited to PVI and women's orgasms were shown less frequently than men's orgasms. On the other hand, we observed a positive trend in the representation of gendered sexual scripts, portraying women as equally sexually agentic as men.

Sexual Practices and Orgasm Experience

Approximately two-thirds of the coded sexual scenes did not depict orgasms, often only showing the initiation of sexual interactions. This finding indicates that the explicit portrayal of sexual pleasure, particularly in terms of orgasm, is relatively rare in Netflix shows. Instead, sexual innuendos are more commonly portrayed. The relatively low number of scenes depicting completed sexual interactions, which included orgasms, might influence the robustness of our findings. Our results, however, tentatively suggest that Netflix series were not notably progressive in terms of gender equality, leaning more towards depicting men's rather than women's orgasms. This is interesting given that Netflix, being self-regulated with considerable content flexibility (Masterson & Messina, 2023), has previously been acknowledged for its progressive content in the realm of sexuality (Díaz-Fernández, 2022). We recorded portrayals of women's orgasm in only approximately 6% of the sexual scenes and men's orgasms in approximately 10% of the sexual scenes, indicating a ratio of approximately 1:2. Although this disparity was statistically significant, it is considerably smaller than for orgasm portrayal in pornographic films. In these films, the ratio lies at one orgasm shown by women for every four to five orgasms shown by men (Klaassen & Peter, 2015; Séguin et al., 2018). Additionally, in our analysis men's orgasms were more frequently shown as isolated events, whereas women's orgasms were more often depicted in conjunction with men's orgasms. This might reflect broader patterns in media portrayals of sexual experiences, potentially emphasizing men's orgasms as more noteworthy standalone events than women's orgasms. While women's orgasms were shown more in relational contexts, men's orgasms were often portrayed in a more individualistic manner, which might hint towards a gender disparity in how sexual pleasure is represented. To illustrate a pronounced example of gender disparity in orgasms in the analyzed content, we can look at the relationship between Daphne Bridgerton and Simon Basset (widely known as "the Duke") in *Bridgerton*. Daphne, characterized by her sexual naivety, is guided through her journey of sexual discovery by the more experienced Simon. Despite the 10 intimate scenes

they share over the course of the series, and a variety of sexual practices shown (i.e., cunnilingus, manual stimulation), Daphne is depicted experiencing orgasm only once, whereas Simon reaches climax five times. Furthermore, each instance of his orgasm signals the end of their sexual encounter.

One might argue that the less frequent depiction of women's orgasms compared to men's on-screen mirrors the real-world phenomenon of the gendered orgasm gap (Döring & Mohseni, 2022). For instance, a representative study of a US sample found that 91% of men reported having an orgasm during their most recent sexual encounter, whereas only 64% of women did (Herbenick et al., 2010, for a review see Mahar et al., 2020). In line with this, our study has revealed limitations in representing diverse sexual behaviors beyond PVI, which might perpetuate the orgasm gap. Matching a previous content analysis of mainstream films (Jozkowski et al., 2019), in our study, PVI emerged as the by far predominant sexual behavior, compared to activities such as genital touch or oral sex. The emphasis on PVI in both real-life encounters and media often marginalizes other forms of sexual stimulation, such as crucial clitoral stimulation required for many women to achieve orgasm (Mintz, 2017). The constrained portrayal in media may limit people's understanding of various sexual interactions, possibly causing unrealistic expectations about women's orgasms. Following theoretical implications of media effects theories, viewers may wrongly come to believe that most women reach climax through PVI alone. Such perspectives may curtail the exploration of diverse sexual activities.

While the gender differences in orgasm portrayal and the dominance of PVI in the analyzed Netflix series mirror real-life experiences, it is crucial to recognize the media's potential to challenge societal norms. Hinting towards a subtle shift away from exclusively male-centric sexual behaviors, we found that cunnilingus was portrayed more often than fellatio, promoting clitoral stimulation. This is a noteworthy finding and stands in contrast to pornographic films, where fellatio was shown at much higher frequencies than cunnilingus (Vannier et al., 2014). However, it must be acknowledged that cunnilingus, the most reliable route to women's orgasm, was still shown in less than 10% of the analyzed scenes and lies far behind the portrayal of PVI.

Agency and Gendered Sexual Scripts

Contrary to our predictions, the results of the present study do not affirm but transgress traditional, gendered sexual scripts. Women characters were just as likely as men characters to take on agentic roles by actively initiating and taking charge of their sexual encounters and voicing their sexual needs. In most sexual scenes, initiation and control were

mutual or equally shared. These results align with recent content analyses of popular (teen) series, which show gender parity in sexual initiation (Masterson & Messina, 2023; Terán et al., 2022) or even more frequent women's initiation (Timmermans & Van den Bulck, 2018), conveying to viewers that both women and men have the agency to initiate and shape their sexual encounters (Terán et al., 2022). Women in our analyzed shows were even more likely to express their sexual needs and desires than the men protagonists. However, our coding scheme did not differentiate between pleasure-seeking communication (e.g., 'lick me') and pain-avoidance communication or the communication of sexual boundaries (e.g., 'Stop'). Consequently, whereas these types of communication might all reflect sexual agency (Balint, 2024), it is possible that women were more often depicted in contexts where they needed to set boundaries. This might have contributed to the observed gender difference on the expression of sexual needs and desires script dimension.

Taken together these changes in gendered sexual scripts seem to be evolving alongside broader heterosexual scripts or gender representations in the media. For instance, in teen and young adult TV programs, Terán and colleagues (2022) have observed fewer instances of traditional heterosexual scripts such as masculinity being attained through sexuality. We welcome this trend, as assumptions of sexual media effects theories and results of past studies indicate that being exposed to stereotypical gendered sexual scripts in the media may have negative influences for women's sexual pleasure and agency. Therefore, the fact that in our study women showed similar amounts of sexual agency to men might mark a potential shift for women's pleasure. Following the ideas of the 3AM Theory, when women viewers witness characters initiating sex, leading sexual interactions, and expressing their desires, it could potentially empower them to assert agency in their own sexual lives (Wright, 2011). However, one question emerges: Why did the agency of women characters not lead to a more diverse range of sexual behaviors and greater equality in orgasmic pleasure? It's essential to recognize that pleasure equality is a complex issue with numerous barriers and women's agency might represent just one aspect of it (for a review see Mahar et al., 2020).

In feminist research the concept of sexual agency has been discussed in critical ways (for a review, see Fahs & McClelland, 2016). In her theoretical work, Bay-Cheng (2015) proposed that women may face new pressures to demonstrate sexual agency and control within a neoliberalist framework that emphasizes ambition and independence but does not necessarily guarantee greater self-determination. In this neoliberal context, women might face conflicting expectations: they are urged to 'perform' sexual agency and assert control over their sexuality, while simultaneously being constrained

by traditional gender stereotypes that promote submissive or gatekeeping behaviors (Balint, 2024; Bay-Cheng, 2015). This tension can be problematic as it may create a double bind where women are expected to embody empowerment in theory but in practice face structural and cultural barriers that limit their actual autonomy and reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. In contrast, other researchers argue that neoliberalism and agency are not inherently linked concepts viewing agency as a means of empowerment for women to address systemic inequalities and challenges related to neoliberalist notions of sexuality (Lerum & Dworkin, 2015). Future research could thus analyze the portrayal of agency, for example exploring different representations of performative agency as opposed to expression of empowerment.

Another issue is that while women may draw inspiration from sexually agentic women characters, translating this behavior to real life may come with challenges and societal judgments. In other words, sexually agentic women, both on screen and in real-life encounters, may face backlash (Klein et al., 2019) and negative evaluation (Endendijk et al., 2020). Previous research has shown that negative consequences, such as disappointment and guilt after sexual encounters, were more commonly depicted in mass media by women rather than by men characters (Aubrey, 2004).

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this is the first study to analyze orgasm portrayal and several comprehensive gendered sexual scripts in the context of mainstream media series, it is not without limitations. We focused on a limited sample of Netflix series, selected based on their high popularity, viewership, and sexual content. Findings should be interpreted within this scope and cannot be generalized to other contemporary media content. Future studies could focus on comparing sexual representations in mainstream television programs with those in other modern subscription video on demand platforms, such as Amazon Prime or Disney+.

In our study, we used orgasm as an indicator for women's pleasure and focused on particular pleasure-inducing behaviors such as cunnilingus. Sexual pleasure, however, extends beyond orgasms and is not always determined by it (Opperman et al., 2014). Further, we did exclude orgasms from analysis that were explicitly mentioned to have been faked. However, it is possible, that more orgasms were faked, but the characters did not label them as such. This is noteworthy considering the high prevalence of women reporting faking orgasm (Barnett et al., 2019; Harris et al., 2019; Herbenick et al., 2019). An interesting task for future research endeavors would be to explore more comprehensive pleasure categories. These could include women's evaluations of sexual encounters and verbal affirmations of pleasure.

One limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size of completed sexual scenes that include information on orgasm occurrence. Although we coded more scenes than our a priori power analysis suggested, many only showed the beginning of sexual interactions, leaving the presence of orgasm unclear. Because only a few of the sampled scenes depicted a ‘completed’ sexual interaction, our conclusions about women’s orgasm are less robust than they would be with a larger sample size. Our results, however, point to a general tendency towards gender disparities in sexual pleasure. The observed gendered orgasm gap aligns with our findings on depicted sexual behaviors, such as the low frequency of sexual practices involving external clitoral stimulation and the prominence of PVI, which tends to favor men’s pleasure over women’s pleasure. Therefore, although conclusions about orgasm representation are tentative, the observed trends in sexual practices provide valuable insight and support for understanding gendered pleasure disparities in Netflix content.

In our study, we coded characters assuming they were cisgender women or men. Transgender and non-binary individuals were only excluded from our analysis if their gender identity was explicitly stated within the series. This was done due to the fact that usually viewers assume a person’s gender based on observable cues like names, clothing or hairstyle. However, as a result, we cannot rule out if certain characters identified as cisgender during the coding procedure might in fact represent varied gender identities that are not explicitly defined in the narrative.

Our results are limited in that we only examined mixed-gender interactions due to our specific examination of heterosexual gendered sexual scripts. A limited representation of LGBTQIA+ scenes has been found both in mainstream television in general (Jozkowski et al., 2019) and in Netflix series (Masterson & Messina, 2023), a result that was mirrored in our sample. We found that only roughly every tenth sexual scene showed non-heterosexual interactions. And most of the queer sex scenes predominantly derived from the two teen series (*Sex Education* and *Élite*). Previous research has indicated significant differences in sexual behaviors, such as orgasm frequency and engagement in cunnilingus practice, between women engaging in same-sex relationships and those in heterosexual relationships (Frederick et al., 2018). Therefore, it would be insightful for future studies to analyze and compare dimensions such as agency, orgasm, and pleasure in hetero versus queer sex scenes.

An interesting venue for future research would be to investigate how viewers perceive the agency cues of characters depicted in the series analyzed. Thereby, the gender of the viewer may significantly influence their perception of agency. For example, a study by Alexopoulos et al. (2024) found that nonverbal consent cues lead boys and nonbinary individuals to perceive women as more agentic, while girls

viewed these same behaviors as indicative of lower agency. Building on this insight, it is plausible that nonverbal cues of control, such as managing the pace or initiating sexual behaviors, might have a diminished impact on how women perceive sexual agency compared to men and nonbinary individuals. Exploring these dynamics further could illuminate how different types of cues affect perceptions of sexual agency across genders and contribute to a deeper understanding of media’s role in shaping these perceptions.

Many past studies examining sexuality in mass media, especially subscription video on demand platforms, have focused exclusively on teen or tween content (e.g., Masterson & Messina, 2023; Tauty et al., 2021). A strength of this study is that the selected series target different demographics ranging from teens to adults. Although theories of media influence suggest young people might be most prone to learning effects, adult audiences can also be influenced in their behaviors by media portrayals (Bala et al., 2017; Bessenoff, 2006). Regarding sexual pleasure, it is known that disparities in orgasm frequency, for example, are apparent across age groups (Frederick et al., 2018). Given that the orgasm gap appears to be unrelated to age, it is possible that realistic portrayals of women’s sexual pleasure can shape both youths’ as well as adults’ perceptions of normative sexuality.

Practice Implications

Our results offer practical implications both for sexual educators, as well as for media producers. For sexual educators and those involved in developing sexuality education curricula, our study highlights the crucial need to expand discussions to critically analyze not only the realism of pornography but also the portrayal of sexuality in mainstream media. This would give educators the opportunity to challenge and debunk pervasive myths and stereotypes about sex that are often perpetuated by media in general. Expanding sexual education to include discussions on sexual pleasure might be also helpful. To date educational programs are often limited to teaching about reproductive functions, whereas information about women’s pleasure and the clitoris (Dienberg, Oschatz, Kosman, & Klein, 2023; Koepsel, 2016), as well as critical examinations of gendered sexual scripts are scarce (Izienicki, 2022). By gaining a better understanding of the mechanisms of women’s pleasure and their barriers (Laan et al., 2021), individuals can develop a critical lens through which to assess and interpret media portrayals of sexual encounters. Netflix, along with other content creation platforms, may be in a key position to shape the conversation about sexual health and pleasure. By consciously diversifying the portrayal of sexual activities and pleasure beyond the conventional focus on PVI, these platforms can support efforts in fostering a more inclusive and equitable understanding of sexual experiences.

Conclusion

The current study expands understanding of the portrayals of sexual pleasure and agency in contemporary media. Whereas sexual behaviors predominantly centered around PVI and women's orgasms were less common than men's, there was a clear challenge to traditional gendered sexual scripts. Notably, both women and men were depicted as sharing sexual initiation and control evenly, reflecting a departure from gendered sexual scripts. In sum, our findings indicate that this content simultaneously reinforces and challenges gender stereotypes related to sexual experiences. More research is needed to determine whether and how mainstream media portrayals of sexual pleasure actually influence viewers real-life sexual behavior. Although there are numerous studies that have suggested that entertainment media does influence viewers' sexual behaviors and beliefs (e.g., Seabrook et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2019), most of these studies are correlational. For causal implications, experimental and longitudinal studies are necessary to better understand the potential impact of media portrayals on individuals' sexual behaviors and attitudes that can, ultimately, reduce the gender disparities in sexual orgasms and pleasure.

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Data and Code Availability Data files, syntax and codebook are available at: <https://osf.io/5s6hm>.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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