

## Self-knowledge, self-regulation and ambivalence: the production of female desire in the US-UK popular cultural imaginary

Kate R. Gilchrist

**To cite this article:** Kate R. Gilchrist (08 Jan 2024): Self-knowledge, self-regulation and ambivalence: the production of female desire in the US-UK popular cultural imaginary, *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2023.2299989](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2299989)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2299989>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 08 Jan 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 109



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Self-knowledge, self-regulation and ambivalence: the production of female desire in the US-UK popular cultural imaginary

Kate R. Gilchrist 

Department of Culture, Communication and Media, University College London, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

This article examines how media texts are curbing and conditioning female desire in the contemporary US-UK cultural moment. It analyses eight popular cultural texts: fictional TV shows *Sex/Life* (2021-), *Wanderlust* (2018), *Gypsy* (2017), film *Hello, My Name is Doris* (2015); factual TV shows *Sex, Love & Goop* (2021) and *The Principles of Pleasure* (2022); short story *Cat Person* (2017); and non-fiction book *Three Women* (2019). These media call on women to identify and regulate their desires in ways that sustain patriarchal ideals of femininity. Celebrations of female sexuality as a vehicle for self-knowledge are tied up in psychological, physiological and medicalised discourses which pathologise female desire in a binary of low/excessive, or confused and complex. Such discourses mask sexual trauma and present female sexual liberation as a reparative solution to violence. However, transformative understandings of desire as unknowable, contextual and culturally conditioned, which allow for a reworking of gendered relations, also emerge. Bringing together philosophical, psychological and popular debates on female desire with cultural representation, the article concludes that representations largely ignore the relationality of desire as always located within the violence of gender, race and class power structures.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 April 2023

Revised 13 December 2023

Accepted 19 December 2023

## KEYWORDS

Feminine subjectivity; representation; popular culture; Lauren Berlant; desire

The study of discourses addressed specifically to women can contribute to the determination of what desiring motives are instilled in women themselves in order to maintain a given social symbiotic. Women's desires have crucial implications for the order of the social field. (Mary Ann Doane 1987, 10)

## Introduction

Scholarship on gender, sexuality, and intimacy in recent years has seen a shift from concerns over sexualisation in the 1990s to a more politicised interest in the ways sex and power intersect with sexual violence and harassment (Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad 2018; Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins 2021). This has been propelled by

**CONTACT** Kate R. Gilchrist  [k.gilchrist@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:k.gilchrist@ucl.ac.uk)  Department of Culture, Communication and Media University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

the resurgence of the #Metoo<sup>1</sup> movement in 2017 and popular debates on so-called “femcels:” women who are involuntarily celibate or choosing to sublimate their desires by not having sex with men.<sup>2</sup> Discussions in academic literature of female subjectification as agentic, desiring subjects have been fuelled and shaped by this shift (Rosalind Gill 2007). This counters what Srinivasan has highlighted was a turn in feminism *away* from how gendered politics shapes desire in the 1960s and 1970s, towards a pro-sex or “sex-positive” feminism since the 1980s, which embraces consent and choice (Amia Srinivasan 2021). The #Metoo movement has seen a proliferation of accounts of sexual violence in the workplace on social media, alongside a rejection of “sex positivity” (Nona Willis Aronowitz 2022; Heather Berg 2020). Yet, as this article will demonstrate, there has been a rise in mass media popular cultural depictions of the sexually desiring woman. This research considers connections between the current cultural moment and political context, where sexual harassment is being foregrounded and sex positivity is critiqued for hiding misogyny, racism and ableism under the cloak of individual preference (Srinivasan 2021). It asks why depictions of female desire are proliferating against a backdrop of activism against sexual violence.

The centring of female desire can be seen in a wealth of mainstream depictions on US and UK streaming services. The long cultural shadow of the popular 1990s TV show, *Sex and The City* (SATC) (1998–2004), which focused on the sex lives of four female friends, continues to be replicated transnationally, but also partially reworked. The sequel, *And Just Like That* (AJLT) (2021–), has drawn significant audiences, and reframed themes of female sexual empowerment in older femininity, with the characters now in their 50s. The SATC format has travelled and appears in Spanish drama, *Valeria* (2020–2023), which focuses on the sexual exploits of four late-twenties women (Ariana Romero 2020); and Swedish show *Lust* (2022), which features four mid-life female friends reigniting their sex drives. TV mini-series *What/If* (2019) has similarly nostalgic overtones, gender-flipping 1990s film, *Indecent Proposal* (1993) by starring Renee Zellweger as a millionaire who pays for a night with a woman’s husband. Polish TV series *Sexify* (2021), US dramas *Easy* (2016–2019), and *I Love Dick*<sup>3</sup> (2016–2017), and UK film *Good Luck to You Leo Grande* (2022), all centre female desire. The spotlighting of female desire continues in non-fictional formats with *Sex Education* (2019–2023) actress Gillian Anderson’s anthology of female desire inspired by Nancy Friday’s *My Secret Garden* (1973); model Cara Delevingne’s documentary *Planet Sex with Cara Delevingne* (2022) which investigates gender inequalities shaping women’s desire; and educational website *OMGYes*.

Feminist media scholarship has argued that contemporary culture over the past three decades has *itself* become sexualised (Gill 2007; Angela McRobbie 2009). In 2007, Gill highlighted that postfeminist women’s culture discursively constructed sex as “something requiring [women’s] constant attention, discipline and emotional labour,” with younger women required to present as desiring, sexualised, sexually desirable subjects (Gill 2007, 152). Angela McRobbie concurred that the modern “girl” was free *only* if she consented to sexualisation and endorsed a “new regime of sexual meanings based on consent equality, participation and pleasure” (McRobbie 2009, 17). This construction of female sexuality as individualised labour, I claim here, is deepened—going beyond embodiment, knowledge and practice—to shape and condition *what* women desire. Rather than women being required to be desirable—and desiring—subjects, the very nature of *how* women desire is under scrutiny. Women are called on to perpetuate a postfeminist “technology of sexiness,” and to (re)work their desires to

conform to patriarchal norms (Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley 2014). No longer are these discourses only directed towards younger women, surveillance of femininity is expanded to older women too, exemplified by the success of *AJLT*. Depictions of younger female sexuality are still present (*Euphoria* (2019), *Broad City* (2014-2019), *Shrill* (2019-2021)), but these are joined by representations of older female sexuality. Similarly, Gill's claim that lesbian desire is inculcated in the same hypersexualised, postfeminist, neoliberal logics of being "up for it," continues under a new guise of "empowered" female desire (Rosalind Gill 2017).

Three kinds of mainstream texts are examined here that exemplify the shaping of female desire: fictional TV shows *Sex/Life* (2021-2023), *Wanderlust* (2018) and *Gypsy* (2017) and film *Hello, My Name is Doris* (2015) (MNID); factual self-help shows *Sex, Love & Goop* (2021) (SLG) and *The Principles of Pleasure* (2022) (TPOP); and narrative accounts *Cat Person* (Kristen Roupenian 2017) and *Three Women* (Lisa Taddeo 2019) (fictional and non-fictional). Bringing together philosophical, psychological, and popular debates on female desire with cultural representation, I explore how women's desires are being contoured by power-laden, gendered logics. This article asks: how are women's desires being constructed, conditioned, and curbed in popular cultural texts, and why is this occurring in this political, social, and cultural moment? How do these representations sustain or challenge patriarchal structures surrounding feminine subjectivity? How are representations of women's desire contoured by structures of gender, race, age, sexuality, and class?

## Female desire: visualisation, valuation, and contextualisation

As decades of feminist and media scholarship has shown, a key mechanism through which the construction, surveillance, and devaluation of female sexuality occurs is symbolically at the cultural level (Linda Williams 2018; Doane 1987). In visual representations, the female character is deprived of subjectivity, reducing her to a visual spectacle or object of masculinised heteronormative desire (John Berger 1972; Doane 1987; Laura Mulvey 1975; Teresa de Lauretis 1988). Mary Ann Doane claims filmic representations of women are "forcibly linked to the iconic and spectacle, or in Mulvey's terms the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' foregoes the feminine subject's ability to be actively desiring, which is assigned to the masculine" (Doane 1987, 12). The female character's only access to desire is through the *desire* to desire (Doane 1987). While the representations I analyse here perpetuate a close linking of femininity with desire, I question whether they continue an a-subjective form of passive femininity. I also consider if there is a complexification of representation of female desire as active, coherent, and nuanced.

Cultural scholar Eva Illouz suggests one reason the #MeToo movement gained traction in 2017 was its spotlighting of the disjuncture between meaningful gains made by women in the political and economic sphere and continued domination of men over women in the sexual sphere—particularly through sexual violence, but also "diffuse, elusive, and vague processes of devaluation" (Eva Illouz 2019, 99). Illouz argues current culture features heightened visual evaluation which favours the evaluator and is dictated by patriarchal logics that reinforce privileges of gender, race, age, class and embodiment (Illouz 2019). I am inspired by Illouz's call to investigate culture as a primary discursive site in which contemporary female sexuality is being produced, circulated and (de)valued.

In her analysis of cultural, psychological, and medical discourses of female desire, Alyson Spurgas also challenges this abstraction, using a sociological perspective to show the social

relations in which female desire is formed and shaped (Alyson K Spurgas 2020). Spurgas highlights how the medical establishment has historically constructed female desire as problematically low, and how this discourse emerges in both cultural texts and women's own accounts of desire (Spurgas 2020; Katherine Angel 2022). Female desire is also constructed passively as *responsive* to the male, who incites her arousal (Spurgas 2020). If it is not low, Katherine Angel suggests, it is excessive or out of control, requiring containment (Angel 2022). Angel argues if female desire actually *is* low, we must question the social conditions that produce this: "[It is] the result of a world which demands the impossible of women, asking them to display desire while simultaneously telling them that their pleasures and safety are not prioritised or valued" (Angel 2022, 66). In conversation with these arguments, this article explores how women's desire is conditioned by the contemporary cultural context in ways which may delimit or threaten women's desire. It examines how the gendered power dynamics in which these depictions are imbricated, shape what women desire, how women's desires may be limited by fear of sexual violence, and how women's desires may be required to conform to patriarchal norms.

Women's desire has frequently been related to debates over consent (Srinivasan 2021; Angel 2022; Berg 2020; Spurgas 2020). Angel suggests these contentious discussions are based on requiring women to be self-knowing subjects who identify their desires to subvert sexual assault and avoid vulnerability (Angel 2022). This is rarely, if ever, possible as desires are often intangible, or fleeting, and always relational and contextual (Angel 2022). Desire is also shaped by ambivalent forces of pain, vulnerability *and* pleasure (Angel 2022). This has consequences for how we understand and negotiate sexual relations and desires between gendered subjects. Illouz argues consent is an agreement which heterosexual parties do not enter as equals; as men are more socially powerful, women are subject to pressure when deciding whether to consent (Illouz 2019). Yet Srinivasan reminds us that while it would be problematic to suggest women lack agency, "under patriarchy our choices are rarely free" (Srinivasan 2021, 84). At the very least, agency in negotiating these choices is unevenly distributed and I explore how female desire is being shaped by unequal gendered pressures.

Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman also incorporate vulnerability within desire (Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman 2014). They argue sex brings to the fore our limits as sovereign subjects; and is an uncomfortable encounter with the estrangement of being in relation (Berlant and Edelman 2014). Yet such discomfort unleashes the energy for transformation; sex is a site where we experience relationality which is paradoxically overwhelming and anchoring to our sense of self (Berlant and Edelman 2014). Desire is conceptualised as painful yet also productive of pleasure and potentially transformative (Angel 2022). Building on Butler's assertion that we can desire our own subjugation, we can also consent to and even desire that which results in our *displeasure* (Judith J Butler 1997). This analysis thus sees desire as complex and contradictory, shaped relationally as a response not only to each other, but to the structural and social conditions where sexual encounters occur.

## **A desiring, psychosocial subjectivity**

It is important not only to consider how female desire is represented, but how cultural meanings condition and structure intimate relationships and feminine subjectivities.

I build on Doane's assertion that it is by examining how discourses of female desire are shaped at the cultural level that we can also consider how feminine subjectivity is *lived* at the societal level (Doane 1987). I use a Butlerian, psychosocial understanding of feminine subjectivity as discursively constructed at both the social and individual level. Butler argues the subject is forged through an: "interiorisation of the regulatory force of the social norm" (Butler 1997, 66). While the subject is seen to "capitulate to the regulatory force of the social category through which it is formed, it is equally constitutive by and of the social" (Butler 1997, 66). Butler sees desire as implicated in the performativity of gendered subjectivity (Butler 1997). "According to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy ... acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance" (J Butler 1990, 185). Gender is not only performative, it is an affective and emotional logic operating through unconscious structures—such as culturally-shared, agreed meanings (Linda Åhäll 2018). I apply this to examine how feminine subjectivities are constructed discursively at the cultural level, as a relational, historical process in conjunction with the social, rather than as a *solely* individual process. My approach takes a Foucauldian conceptualisation of desire as discursively deployed as a form of regulation (Michel Foucault 1978). Female desire is understood in three ways, 1) as discursively circulating within cultural understandings of feminine subjectivity, 2) as formative of the feminine subject at the psychic level, 3) as relationally constructed through gendered relationships. I use this to examine how femininity is being constructed through representations of desire, and is intersected along categories of class, sexuality, and age (Audre Lorde 1984).

## Methodology

Starting from these theoretical building blocks, this article asks: how are women's desires being constructed, conditioned, and curbed, in popular cultural texts, and why is this occurring in this political, social, and cultural moment? How do such representations sustain or challenge patriarchal structures surrounding feminine subjectivity? How are representations of women's desire contoured by structures of gender, race, sexuality, and class? To explore this, I analyse three kinds of mass-media mainstream cultural texts on female desire: three fictional TV shows *Sex/Life* (2021–2023), *Wanderlust* (2018), *Gypsy* (2017), and one film *MNID* (2015); two factual shows *SLG* (2021) and *TPOP* (2022); and two fictional and non-fictional narratives: *Cat Person* (Roupenian 2017) and *Three Women* (Taddeo 2019).. While the texts span different genres, and fictional and non-fictional formats, they repeat themes of female desire identified in the literature as passive, as responsive, as low or excessive, as knowable, and as intimate labour. My cross-genre choice of texts is inspired by Chouliaraki's claim that repetition of different but interrelated discursive regimes of representation across sites within global networks indicates significance and underscores the pervasiveness of such themes (Lilie Chouliaraki 2006). Despite being from different genres, the texts contribute to the same discursive regime of representation of female sexuality. The selection is also informed by the claim postfeminist discourses are widely disseminated and require investigation across a range of settings and media genres (Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra 2007; Patricia Lewis, Yvonne Benschop and Ruth Simpson 2017). As postfeminist discourses are transnational, defined as circulating across nation-state

boundaries (Simidele Dosekun 2015; Suman Mishra and Rebecca Kern-Stone 2019), the selection includes texts streamed or circulated on global media platforms. This methodology blurs boundaries of genre to explore how female desire is constructed across a range of media and argues that discursive formations of female desire travel across different genres, sites and locations.

The texts were thematically coded and deductively analysed according to the theoretical framing, but I remained open to where themes were reconfigured or contested, or new themes appeared. I then conducted a feminist critical discursive analysis on thematically-rich sections of text. Led by the research questions, the analytical questions considered how these representations of female desire sustain, or challenge, patriarchal structures surrounding feminine subjectivity and how discursive formations of femininity are intersected with race, class, age and sexuality (Rosalind Gill 2009; Rosalind Gill, 1996). The analysis also looked for patterns, contradictions and inconsistencies between the texts. Critical discourse analysis, rather than visual or semiotic analysis, was chosen as appropriate for the sample, which includes visual and non-visual texts. Discursive analysis provides a bridge to analyse discursive links across both visual and non-visual texts, fictional and non-fictional, while remaining attentive to their differences. Such an approach is also consistent with my interest in how discursive repertoires travel across the cultural imaginary, within and across different media forms.

### **The texts**

*Wanderlust* (2018) is a six-episode British series co-produced by the BBC and Netflix. It tells the tale of London-based, white, middle-class, mid-life mother and therapist, Joy (Toni Collette), who has become sexually bored of her husband and persuades him to open the marriage. Netflix show *Sex/Life* Season 1 (2021)<sup>4</sup> was written and directed by Stacey Rukeyser, who said it depicts empowering female sexuality (Dana Feldman 2021). Again Billie (Sarah Shahi) is a white, middle-class, married mother who is consumed by sexual fantasies about a former partner from her twenties. Netflix series, *Gypsy* (2017), stars Jean (Naomi Watts), a white, married, New York mother and therapist, who becomes obsessed with her patients' private lives. The film *MNID* (2015), by contrast, features an almost asexual older woman, Doris (Sally Field). A single, childless, white, working-class woman in her 60s, Doris is deeply unfulfilled by her administrative job at a New York agency.

Factual shows *SLG* (2021) and *TPOP* (2022) examine desire from a self-help perspective, aimed at enhancing sexual wellbeing, relationships and health. *SLG* (part of Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop brand), sees couples undergo therapy with "cutting-edge sex practitioners" to reignite sexual desire.<sup>5</sup> *TPOP* is an educational show, where "experts" instruct viewers on embracing sexual pleasure. Kristen Roupenian's fictional story *Cat Person* recounts an affair between 20-year-old, Margot, and an older man, Robert<sup>6</sup> and was the *New Yorker's* most-read piece of online fiction in 2017 (Olga Khazan 2017). Finally, non-fiction book, *Three Women*,<sup>7</sup> is based on interviews with three US women, written in a third-person narrative. My analysis focuses on Sloane, due to her story's resonance with themes I am interested in. Sloane is a white, upper-middle-class, heterosexual 40-something woman, who has an open marriage. Next, I present three key understandings of female desire that emerged: female desire as



a vehicle of self-knowledge; female desire as a form of self-regulation; and female desire as ambivalent, relational, and vulnerable.

### Desire as a vehicle for self-knowledge

The sexual scripts repeated across most of these texts conform to pathologizing models of female desire as a problem to be fixed through medicalised “technologies of the self” (Spurgas 2020). Low desire is not acceptable; women are compelled to move from lacking desire to identifying and expressing what they want. Alternatively, female desire is excessive and must be harnessed, limited and managed through self-awareness. Often self-knowledge is cultivated through confession, where subjects “speak their truth”: techniques such as individualised narratives or accounts to the camera are used in most of the texts.<sup>8</sup> In the words of Foucault, this is a means of “producing a knowledge of pleasure, as a pleasure that comes from knowing pleasure” (Foucault 1978, 48).

### Female desire as low

The narrative that low female desire must be fixed as “project of the self,” is central in factual shows *SLG* (2021) and *TPOP* (2022), and repeated in *Wanderlust* (2018), and *MNID* (2015).<sup>9</sup> In *SLG*’s opening episode, Paltrow says: “Your intimate relationship is a meditation on everything that is wrong with you.” While low desire is a “problem” all the couples must overcome; it is only the women who have this “issue.” This builds on a long tradition of representations which reduce female sexuality in binaries of asexual/low desire or hypersexual/excessive desire, tropes which feminist scholarship has shown are deepened through racial intersections (Williams 2018; Carolyn M West 2008; Cheryl R Jorgensen-Earp 1990; Jennifer Fuller 2011; Sheila Jeffreys 1997). Low desire is linked to self-knowledge: the show states low desire can be overcome if women “discover” their own relationship to desire (Rachel Wood 2017). Thus, desire becomes a vehicle for self-optimisation; discovering desire is a fix which covers over cultural stigmatisation of female sexuality.

While *TPOP* (2022) attempts to consider how women’s desire is curbed by gendered power structures, this is individualised and depoliticised. One transgender woman says that the gendered pressure to express a machismo, masculine, sexuality in her culture led her to suppress her desire, and identity. She presents the solution as “understanding my pleasure is my pleasure,” rendering it a solo task decoupled from patriarchal power structures. An expert notes that, “it is ultra-hard for non-binary people to feel pleasure,” yet the show compels them not only to achieve this, but with joy, imposing a double affective burden.

Women’s disconnection from—and reclaiming of—desire as a process of self-discovery, is extended to older femininity in *Wanderlust* (2018), *Sex/Life* (2021), and *MNID* (2015).<sup>10</sup> In *MNID*, Doris replicates asexual, spinster tropes by dressing older than her age in dowdy, dated outfits. Doris’s “incorrectly” suppressed desires, are awakened by the arrival of 20-something colleague John (Max Greenfield). Once unleashed, her desire becomes fantastical and overwhelming. After intensively watching self-help videos, Doris transforms from someone who lacks sexual agency, into someone who confidently asserts her desire (Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad 2015). When Doris finally declares her feelings to John in the closing scene, he responds with an ambiguous smile. The ending suggests it doesn’t matter if Doris fulfils her desire, liberation is achieved through awakening and



expressing her desire. Sexual confidence is cemented as a form of empowerment for the older woman (Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad 2021; Wood 2017). Yet, as Angel argues, women's lack of desire may be the result of cultural conditions in which women are implicated (Angel 2022). *MNID* overlooks the fact Doris cannot be seen by herself, or others, as a sexual subject because ageing female sexuality is devalued in contemporary Western society. Doris must overcome the fetishization of youthful femininity which renders her undesirable and undesiring (Dobson Amy, Karalyn McDonald, Maggie Kirkman, Kay Souter and Fisher Jane 2017; Amy Dobson 2011; Michelle Lazar 2017). The film confines ageing female sexuality to historical, misogynistic and pathologizing dualisms of frigidity/asexuality versus promiscuity/hypersexuality (Beth Montemurro and Jenna Marie Siefken 2014; Spurgas 2020).

As in *MNID*, *Wanderlust's* (2018) Joy also suffers from problematic low desire (Jorgensen-Earp 1990). But Joy realises the issue is more complex: she no longer desires her husband, Alan (Steven Mackintosh). Once her desire is triggered by a chance encounter, Joy doesn't struggle with a lack of confidence; her desire is freely expressed. Following intensive affective regulation and negotiations with her husband, Joy persuades Alan to open the marriage. Joy at first enjoys her sexual emancipation, perhaps because she has privileges Doris does not. Slightly younger than Doris, she conforms to postfeminist normative modes of feminine attractiveness, with long shiny hair (Rosalind Gill Elias and Christina Scharff 2017). Desire is only acceptable in an older femininity that still meets youthful beauty ideals.

### ***Female desire as excessive***

Angel identifies a concurrent narrative that women have *voracious* sexual desires that are stronger than men's; once triggered, female desire becomes over the top, dangerous and uncontrollable (Angel 2022). Such a script is repeated across several texts. One husband in *SLG* (2021) says his wife just needs a little motivation to "get going." A sexologist tells another that if he "gives [his female partner] the *permission* to be sexual" he will have a "hard time" catching up, and should "hold on for the ride." This perpetuates a troubling narrative that instead of asking why women do not want sex, and listening to this, they must be coaxed to desire (Angel 2022).

Female desire is an overwhelming, destructive character flaw which threatens marriages in *Gypsy*, *Sex/Life*, and *Wanderlust*.<sup>11</sup> In *Wanderlust*, Joy has several uncontrolled sexual encounters which threaten her personal and professional life, including one in her therapy room. A temporary separation is caused by Alan's relationship with a younger, black colleague Claire, which becomes romantic. One of the few characters of colour, Claire signifies black femininity through the white male heterosexual gaze, a form of fantasised, fetishised "white gazing" which reaffirms the superiority of white, middle class, heterosexual coupledness (George Yancy 2016). The final scene shows Joy and Alan reunite: yet while Alan sleeps soundly, Joy looks pensive. Rather than critiquing monogamous marriage, *Wanderlust* suggests non-monogamy is acceptable in the confines of middle class, white, heterosexual coupledness; it is performed to preserve not question, marriage. Joy goes outside marriage *only* to rediscover her desire for Alan. It is Joy's duty to desire others to fulfil her role as a sexually desiring wife (Suzanne Leonard 2019). While Joy subverts

historical racialised narratives that white female sexuality needs protected, unlike with Clare, Joy's sexuality is celebrated not hypersexualised (Patricia Hill Collins 2004).

Female desire is even more threatening in *Sex/Life* and *Gypsy*, breaking up both main characters' marriages.<sup>12</sup> In *Sex/Life*, Billie, who has a "big appetite", becomes pathologically obsessed with her former boyfriend, tracking him down and reigniting an affair. Unlike in *Sex/Life*, Jean's husband in *Gypsy* is not lacking passion, yet she is *still* dissatisfied. Like Joy, Jean's urges lead her to cross professional boundaries, lying, spying, drug-taking and seducing her client's former girlfriend. Billie and Jean signal the dangers of unchecked female desire, which is linked to mental dysfunction, and confine female desire in a binary of low or excessive desire (Spurgas 2020).

While less extreme, in *Wanderlust*, a whole episode explores Joy's psychological issues over past relationships, which are untangled in a therapy session.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the expression of women's desire becomes a way of resolving sexual violence or psychological trauma, rather than highlighting how male violence towards women perhaps limits female desire.

All of the texts extend postfeminist discourses of hypersexualisation from young to mid-life women, who must maintain a youthful appearance and be sexually active, sexualised subjects (Jessica Ringrose 2009; Tasker and Negra 2007; Elias and Scharff 2017; Gill 2017). They pathologise female desire, linking it to psychological disorder. Black female desire appears via the white male heteronormative gaze; expelled from the viable monogamous coupled femininity. The relationality through which desire is produced is never interrogated and relationships dynamics are shown as unproblematic—the men in *Wanderlust*, *Sex/Life*, *MNID* and *Gypsy* are dutiful and doting, at worst, disinterested. The centering of white women's desire also obscures racialised structures that might cause low desire, such as violence, instead emphasising female self-knowledge of pleasure and self-control.

### **Desire as self-regulation: pleasure as labour**

Female desire is constructed through medicalised, psychological, biological, and physiological discourses. Therapeutic discourses are centred in the fictional texts, while *SLG* and *TPOP*, instruct women on how to "fix" sexual behaviours using self-regulatory techniques to "produce" their desires (Foucault 1978). Desire emerges as gendered biopolitical labour, where "women are compelled to labour for their partner's *and* their own pleasure" (Spurgas 2020, 151; Eva Illouz 2012).

### **Female desire as confused and complex**

Female desire is complex and confused; a complexity which must be untangled by women as a form of intimate labour (Spurgas 2020). While complexity and confusion is prevalent in *Cat Person* and *Three Women*, this is not something which women must change; instead it is used to trouble gendered hierarchies (see below). *TPOP* states the connection between genital response and arousal is straightforward for men but complicated for women who have "wildly different" understandings of pleasure. Women are guided on using self-monitoring techniques to unlock the "secrets" of their desire, including looking at their body in mirror and "mindfulness". The relationship to desire is particularly mysterious and "unknowable" for queer women. In *SLG*, a lesbian couple are

shown as confused about how to have sex; the experts tell them that this is something they need to resolve through self-education, which will transform into confident sexual beings (Gill and Orgad 2015; Laura Favaro 2017). Tools such as sex toys are presented as a simple solve, through which the expert says they are “shaping their very identities as lesbians”. Rather than diversifying sexual scripts, or acknowledging stigma surrounding queer female sexuality, lack of confidence is reduced to a personal issue of identity (Gill and Orgad 2015).

*TPOP* attempts to consider vulnerability arising from stigma. One lesbian woman says she feels vulnerable during sex as she grew up being told same-sex desires must be suppressed. But the solution in *TPOP* is simply for her to learn techniques of sexual pleasure. Rosalind Gill has argued that lesbians are increasingly visible in mainstream culture, but their representation is organised around postfeminist logics of sexualised self-presentation (Gill 2017). This is extended here to desire, requiring lesbians to *always* be sexually desiring and sexually active subjects, ignoring structural histories of stigma that surround queer female sexuality. The show features several black women, one of whom remarks that black women’s bodies have a violent history of colonialism, therefore white women can express sexual pleasure more easily. Yet the discussion ends there, obscuring racialised and queer inequalities in formations of female desire (Spurgas 2020).

### ***Female desire as responsive and passive***

Female desire is constructed as passive through discourses of vulnerability in *TPOP*, *SLG*, *MNID*, *Cat Person* and *Three Women*. While *TPOP* includes trans and non-binary people, “women” and “men” are still placed in respectively in binaries of “responsive/spontaneous.” Yet passivity is empowering when it is chosen. In *SLG*, Paltrow asks women to embrace surrender; making themselves “completely soft and vulnerable” and says she enjoys surrendering during sex. An *SLG* expert agrees: “[It] is the same for queer couples, lesbians, gays, it doesn’t really matter.” This ignores the fact we make sexual choices from uneven positions of power (Illouz 2019, 151). The historical stigmatisation of black female vulnerability, or stigma surrounding queer female sexuality, may lead to a vulnerability which is *disempowering* (Patricia Hill Collins 2002); such a choice may come from shame not liberation. While it may be agentic for a cisgender, heterosexual woman to show vulnerability or passivity, depoliticising this “choice” reinforces gendered forms of control, which are deepened for women who are queer, black, trans and more at risk of violence. Rather than offering a complex understanding of vulnerability as shaped by inequalities, vulnerability is always positive.

## **Transformations: desire as ambivalent, relational, and vulnerable**

### ***Desire as ambivalent***

*Wanderlust* and *Sex/Life* briefly show Joy and Billie as complex, ambivalently desiring subjects caught between their sexual desire and an urge to preserve their marriages. While Joy in *Wanderlust* at first revels in her unleashed passion, ambivalence creeps in when it conflicts with a reignited desire for her husband, which she prioritises. Still, *Wanderlust* opens-up traditional heterosexual scripts by making Joy the instigator,

softening the rigid categorisation of female sexuality as passive, showing female desire as similar to, not distinct from, men's (Angel 2022; Spurgas 2020). Yet visual culture is central to the construction of female sexuality, where it is often transformed into the object of masculine scopophilic desire (Doane 1987; Williams 2018). While all the texts contain the themes examined so far, *Cat Person* and *Three Women* more prominently centre ambivalent forms of female desire which make space for greater nuance, emphasising desire as always shifting and entangled. It is in the text-based examples that female subjectivity is able to escape the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of femininity.

From the moment we meet *Cat Person's* Margot, she feels ambivalently towards a customer at work called Robert. Margot finds Robert both attractive *and* unattractive—cute but not that cute, tall but too heavy, tattooed but too bearded, older but with bad posture. Margot is constantly confused by her actions towards him. She "surprises herself" by giving him her number and we are left unsure if she does so because she wants to, or because *he* wants her to. Her desire and consent are often known after the fact; after sleeping with him, "she marvelled at herself" for making this "inexplicable decision." Margot's discordant desire for Robert—where physical arousal does not match with expressed desire—is typical of psychological, medical and cultural discourses of female desire (Spurgas 2020). There are times when this is troublingly stark. When they have sex, Margot recoils from Robert's body, unable to breathe, but she keeps going. Her pleasure is conjured up only through remembering a previous kiss. But this pleasure sits alongside feelings of disgust, awfulness, humour, and humiliation; "a perverse cousin to arousal." During sex she suppresses laughter as he mimics pornographic conventions, throwing her around like a doll. Margot makes feelings of humiliation bearable by fantasising about a *future* self who recounts the story to a new boyfriend and they laugh at Robert instead. This briefly "disorganises accustomed ways of being" by reconfiguring Margot's inferior positioning (Berlant and Edelman 2014).

Margot's desire is also curbed by threat of sexual assault. The first time she goes to his house she imagines that there are dead bodies of previous lovers in his bedroom. While this is never a realistic threat, she feels relief when she enters and finds it empty. Like the previous texts above, Roupenian's story presents Margot's desire as confused. Margot's passivity in bed is feminised, while Robert's dominance in bed is deeply masculinised (Spurgas 2020). Margot's sense of responsibility to follow through on sex when she no longer wants to, reaffirms the masculinised idea Robert's desire is linear and cannot be stopped once engaged (Spurgas 2020). Yet *Cat Person* is disruptive in that it highlights consent is shaped by gendered power dynamics (Angel 2022): Margot's desire fluctuates in response to pressures to pleasure and be desirable to Robert, and the ever-present shadow of sexual violence.

### ***Desire as relational***

Female desire is at times constructed as relational in ways which challenge individualised constructions of desire. In *Sex/Life*, a major part of Billie's desire comes from being desired by her former lover, who knew her before she became a middle-aged wife and mother. However relational desire is most central in *Cat Person* and *Three Women*. Margot's desire stems, not from herself, but *through* Robert. She experiences flushes of attraction only

when he sees her as desirable. Age shapes their desire, with Robert described as attractive (and more powerful) because of his older age. Margot is conferred gendered sexual capital through her youthful, and less powerful, positioning. In one scene, she cries as she is too young to enter a bar, he kisses her on the forehead, and she feels a rush of attraction. Margot's desire for Robert peaks when she imagines him seeing her as youthful, perfect and beautiful—which reinforces patriarchal forms of feminine attractiveness (Elias and Scharff 2017). She describes his reaction when she takes off her clothes as what she likes most about sex: “stunned and stupid with pleasure—like a milk-drunk baby.” This infantilises *him*, but also self-objectifies her. Once sex is done, her desire for him disappears because she thinks he no longer finds her attractive.

In *Three Women*, Sloane's desire also centres around being desirable to her husband. As with Margot, Sloane suggests that she sleeps with others not because she alone desires them, but to fulfil her husband's desire. She sleeps with men chosen by her husband. “Richard picked the men. She rarely said no . . . . It is his predilection she was serving, though she enjoyed it as well . . . . It wasn't her desire, it was mostly theirs that she was serving” (Taddeo 2019, 267). Thus Sloane's pleasure is contoured by patriarchal models of female desire as a form of sexual caregiving (Spurgas 2020). There is a flipping of this in *Wanderlust*, when Joy's husband says he is engaging in non-monogamy only because it is what Joy wants. Yet patriarchal structures are affirmed by their eventual abandonment of non-monogamy.

### ***Desire as vulnerability***

Both *Three Women* and *Cat Person* acknowledge the permeable line between vulnerability and trauma, and how these lines are raced, classed and gendered. As discussed above, while *TPOP* acknowledges such intersections, they are depoliticised. Sloane's desire in *Three Women* is painful and vulnerable in transformative ways which both partly repeat and complexify the idea of female sexual desire as responsive and passive (Angel 2022). This ambivalence opens up room to disorganise gendered hierarchies. Sloane embraces the label of submissive, which paradoxically offers her control over her own desire: “If previously she had been simply accommodating her husband's desire without being true to her own, now she was a submissive, a submissive acquiesced to . . . the dominant” (Taddeo 2019, 270). When she does choose a man to join them, she does so as Richard “occasionally” liked her to control. This results in: “the most comfortable and blissful sex of her life . . . . She had two heterosexual men wanting her. . . . She felt mighty. (Taddeo 2019, 278)” Sloane partially transforms tropes of feminine passivity; while her pleasure still originates from male desire for her, she works within such strictures to reclaim her desire as her own (Spurgas 2020).

Sloane also experiences confusion and instability in her arrangement. This is summed up when she describes it as “something that feels unsavoury, alien” yet where she finds both “hedonism and care” (Taddeo 2019, 57). Sloane describes the first time she and her husband have sex with another. At first, she finds it pleasurable, but quickly experiences a fracturing of her sense of self:

Something inside Sloane stopped . . . . She could feel it, her actual soul melt out and skitter from the room . . . . . In the near future, she would fantasise again about [it], but for now she

felt she was leaking out from the inside . . . Somehow . . . Sloane decided she could keep going. After all, it had already happened. (Taddeo 2019, 61)

Sloane thus experiences sex as “unbearable;” as an encounter with the non-sovereignty of the self which evaporates (Berlant and Edelman 2014). Following the script of responsive desire which “turns sexual desire into something towards women must strive even when they don’t want to” (Angel 2022, 52), Sloane can’t stop what has been started. What makes it bearable is fantasising about the future: like Margot the *future* Sloane has regained her power. The fracturing of Sloane’s self is destructive while simultaneously raising potential for a remaking of the self and how we relate as gendered subjects (Angel 2022).

Both texts construct desire as unpredictable and unknowable, at least in the moment. Margot and Sloane repair their discordance, and make encounters “bearable” through fantasies of a future more coherent, desiring self. As Berlant and Edelman argue: “Fantasy is not what glosses over this craziness but that which makes it possible to move within it” (Berlant and Edelman 2014, 13). The texts work against the idea female desire is fixed, but remind us that neither is it fully fluid; it is always caught in social structures. Both acknowledge consent cannot be reduced to dichotomies which place women in safety or risk, but is a contextualised process which is continually shifting and reworked (Angel 2022).

### Conclusion: re-visioning desire

These findings show how discourses of female desire are circulating across multiple genres of contemporary women’s culture. Returning to Doane’s critique of feminist film theory as conceptualising the female spectator in dangerously asocial ways; an “effect of signifying structures” (Doane 1987, 8), this article resituates cultural discourses of female desire within the contemporary political, social, and cultural moment. Using a Butlerian conceptualisation of subjectivity, I have explored how discourses of female desire are being shaped and curbed by intersecting gendered structures of power. This research therefore contributes to a psychosocial conceptualisation of desire as discursively circulating, consciously and subconsciously, at the cultural and individual psychic level to shape feminine subjectivities (Butler 1997).

In a political climate where sexual harassment in the workplace is being challenged, and sex positivity is being critiqued for obscuring discrimination (Srinivasan 2021), female desire is still being centred and depicted in the cultural realm in troubling ways. Women are incited to identify, then control, their sexual pleasure using techniques that are presented as liberatory but repeat sexual scripts of female desire as lacking. Alternatively, female desire is constructed as out of control and linked to historical tropes of mental instability. Persistent themes of female sexual behaviour as responsive, seen across all these texts, reproduce dominant gendered norms of female passivity. Continuous with postfeminist critiques of contemporary culture, discourses of asexuality and non-desire are foreclosed; women are *compelled* to be desiring subjects rather than address the climate of violence in which sexual relations are located (Gill 2017). The representations were found to largely obscure the relationality of desire. When sexual trauma, inequality and vulnerability are addressed, it is individualised via psychologised, medicalised discourses which compel women towards self-labouring as a reparative

solution. Such discourses hide the fact that sexual safety is not always secure for women in the same ways; female desire is embedded in histories of transphobic, racialised or homophobic violence which may compromise its expression. These representations direct attention away from violent behaviour, particularly in *Wanderlust*, *TPOP* and *Cat Person*.

However, while the texts share an overlapping terrain, with *Sex/Life* and *Wanderlust* depicting a conflicted, ambivalent desire to move outside, yet ultimately preserve a monogamous arrangement, the non-visual texts, were more likely to offer a more transformative depiction with the potential for a remaking of the self. *Cat Person* and *Three Women* demonstrate how sexual encounters disorganise gendered ways of being by acknowledging the instability inherent in intimate encounters. Both offer a reworking of female desire as passive, agentically constructing moments of alienation and erasure as pleasurable. They trouble ideas of what consent is, and whether it can be given, at the time or retrospectively (Angel 2022). Non-visual formats perhaps allow an escape from the fixity of the implicit narrative pattern and intense scopic surveillance of the female body typical of visual representations (Williams 2018; Richard Dyer 2002)

While many feminist media scholars have begun this important work, more research needs to consider what this turn to greater representation of female desire does. Are proliferating discourses of female desire recloaking what the #metoo movement sought to expose, and is this extending sexualisation to other groups? Further inquiry needs to ask if such representations compel women to rework their desires to conform to patriarchal logics of visual culture. The lack of diversity within these mainstream texts is reflective of the wider US-UK popular cultural sphere; future work could focus on how such themes emerge in texts depicting more marginalised categories of gender, race, class and sexuality.

Feminist media studies more broadly should focus on how intimate life is being contoured by persistent and pervasive gender, race, and class inequalities (Illouz 2019; Spurgas 2020; Angel 2022). We need deeper understanding of how sexual trauma, violence and harm, affect women's ability to understand, imagine and articulate desire within relationships (Angel 2022). Gendered violence against women in intimate relationships continues to be discredited, delegitimised or dismissed in the media (Banet-Weiser and Claire Higgins 2021). Feminist scholarship must return to considering how heterosexual intimate relations are collectively bound by gendered inequalities (Boyce Kay Jilly 2021); and contribute to shifting responsibility for assault away from women, towards partners. Feminism must re-politicise intimate life and investigate how individual sexual encounters are regulated by gendered norms formed at the social and cultural, not just the individual, level and consider what the implications are for our social field.

## Notes

1. The MeToo movement was founded by black US feminist activist Tarana Burke in 2006 to raise awareness of sexual violence against women. It went viral as a hashtag in 2017.
2. <https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/tech/meet-the-women-of-the-incel-movement/>  
<https://www.elle.com/life-love/sex-relationships/a37288143/0168-0169-the-femcel-revolution-september-2021/>.
3. Based on Chris Kraus's 1997 novel.



4. At the time of analysis Season 2 had not been released.
5. An erotic wholeness coach, an intimacy coach, a somatic sexologist, a relationship expert and a family therapist.
6. Many women said they recognised the unpredictability of sex, the grey area between consent, acquiescence and assault. Many men said they saw it as bad sexual performance rather than—potentially or ambivalently—assault. This reflects the differing political, social, historical and psychic investments gendered subjects bring to sexual encounters.
7. *Three Women* is being adapted into a TV drama.
8. Except *Gypsy* and *MNID*.
9. This theme also emerges in *Cat Person*, where Margot works to overcome wavering desire.
10. Several older and mid-life women “struggle” with low desire in *SLG*.
11. In *Three Women*, it instead fuels Sloane’s marriage.
12. Billie briefly reconciles with her husband at the end of Season 1.
13. *Sex/Life* and *Gypsy* attribute excessive female desire to past psychological trauma.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Professor Shani Orgad for early discussions on this article and insightful feedback on drafts.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Kate R. Gilchrist**, Lecturer in Digital Media, Department of Culture, Communication and Media, University College London.

## ORCID

Kate R. Gilchrist  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1316-3493>

## References

- Åhäll, Linda. 2018. “Affect as Methodology: Feminism and the Politics of Emotion.” *International Political Sociology* 12 (1): 36–52. doi:10.1093/ips/olx024.
- And Just Like That. 2021-. Television Series. Seasons 1-3. USA: HBO.
- Angel, Katherine. 2022. *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent*. London: Verso.
- Aronowitz, Nona Willis. 2022. “I Still Believe in the Power of Sexual Freedom.” *The New York Times*. 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/16/opinion/sex-women-feminism-rules.html> .
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah, and Kathryn Claire Higgins. 2021. “Television and the ‘Honest’ Woman: Mediating the Labor of Believability.” *Television & New Media* 23 (2): 127–147. doi:10.1177/15274764211045742.
- Berg, Heather. 2020. “Left of #metoo.” *Feminist Studies* 46 (2): 259–286. doi:10.1353/fem.2020.0036 .
- Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing: A Book*. London: Penguin.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Lee Edelman. 2014. *Sex, or the Unbearable*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

- Boyce Kay, Jilly. 2021. "Abject Desires in the Age of Anger: Incels, Femcels and the Gender Politics of Unfuckability." In *Imagining "We" in the Age of "I" Romance and Social Bonding in Contemporary Culture*, edited by D. Harrod, M. Leonard, and S. Negra, 29–46. Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis.
- Broad City. 2014-2019. *Television Series. Seasons 1-5*. USA: Comedy Central.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, California: Stanford University.
- Chouliaraki, Lilie. 2006. *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. New York City: SAGE Publications.
- Doane, Mary Ann. 1987. *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Dobson, Amy. 2011. "Hetero-Sexy Representation by Young Women on MySpace: The Politics of Performing an 'Objectified' Self." *Outskirts* 25. Accessed December 15, 2023. <https://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-25/amy-shields-dobson>.
- Dobson Amy, Karalyn McDonald, Maggie Kirkman, Kay Souter, and Jane Fisher. 2017. "Invisible Labour? Tensions and Ambiguities of Modifying the 'Private' Body: The Case of Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery." In *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, edited by Rosalind Gill, Christina Sharff, and Ana Sofia Elias, 351–368. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dosekun, Simidele. 2015. "For Western Girls Only?" *Feminist Media Studies* 15 (6): 960–975. doi:10.1080/14680777.2015.1062991.
- Dyer, Richard. 2002. *The Matter of Images*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Easy. 2016-2019. *Television Series. Seasons 1-3*. USA: Netflix.
- Elias, Ana Sofia, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff. 2017. *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*. Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff, Edited by. London: Palgrave.
- Euphoria. 2019. *Television Series. Seasons 1-3*. USA: HBO.
- Evans, Adrienne, and Sarah Riley. 2014. *Technologies of Sexiness: Sex, Identity, and Consumer Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Favaro, Laura. 2017. "'Just Be Confident Girls!': Confidence Chic as Neoliberal Governmentality." In *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, edited by Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff, 283–299. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Feldman, Dana. 2021. "New Netflix Series 'Sex/Life' is All About Female Empowerment." *Forbes Com* 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danafeldman/2021/06/14/new-netflix-series-sexlife-is-all-about-female-empowerment/>.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*. London: Penguin.
- Friday, Nancy. 1973. *My Secret Garden*. New York: Trident Press.
- Fuller, Jennifer. 2011. "The "Black Sex Goddess" in the Living Room." *Feminist Media Studies* 11 (3): 265–281. doi:10.1080/14680777.2010.535306.
- Gill, Rosalind. 1996. "Discourse Analysis: Practical Implementation." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences*, edited by John T. E. Richardson, 141–158, London: British Psychological Society.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2007. "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10 (2): 147–166. doi:10.1177/1367549407075898.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2009. "Beyond the Sexualization of Culture Thesis: An Intersectional Analysis of Sixpacks, Midriffs and Hot Lesbians in Advertising." *Sexualities* 12 (2): 137–160. doi:10.1177/1363460708100916.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2017. "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years on." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20 (6): 606–626. doi:10.1177/1367549417733003.
- Gill, Rosalind, and Shani Orgad. 2015. "The Confidence Cult(ure)." *Australian Feminist Studies* 30 (86): 324–344. doi:10.1080/08164649.2016.1148001.
- Gill, Rosalind, and Shani Orgad. 2018. "The Shifting Terrain of Sex and Power: From the 'Sexualization of Culture' to #metoo." *Sexualities* 21 (8): 1313–1324. doi:10.1177/1363460718794647.
- Gill, Rosalind, and Shani Orgad. 2021. *The Confidence Cult(ure)*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

- Good Luck to You, Leo Grande. 2022. Directed by Sophie Hyde. UK/USA: Align and Genesis Pictures.
- Gypsy. 2017. Television Series. Season 1. USA: Netflix.
- Hello, My Name is Doris. 2015. Film. Directed by Michael Showalter. USA: Haven.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 2002. *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 2004. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Illouz, Eva. 2012. *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Illouz, Eva. 2019. *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- I Love Dick. 2016-2017. Television Series. Season 1. USA: Amazon Studios.
- Indecent Proposal. 1993. Directed by Adrian Lyne. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Jeffreys, Sheila. 1997. *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930*. Melbourne: Spinifex.
- Jorgensen-Earp, Cheryl R. 1990. "The Lady, the Whore, and the Spinster: The Rhetorical Use of Victorian Images of Women." *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1): 82-98. doi:10.1080/10570319009374326.
- Khazan, Olga. 2017. "A Viral Short Story for the #metoo Moment." *The Atlantic* 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/12/a-viral-short-story-for-the-metoo-moment/548009/>.
- Lauretis, Teresa de. 1988. "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation." *Theatre Journal* 40 (2): 155-177. doi:10.2307/3207654.
- Lazar, Michelle. 2017. "Seriously Girly Fun!: Recontextualising Aesthetic Labour as Fun and Play in Cosmetics Advertising." In *Aesthetic Labour*, edited by Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff, 51-66, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Leonard, Suzanne. 2019. *Wife, Inc. The Business of Marriage in the 21st Century*. New York: NYU Press.
- Lewis, Patricia, Yvonne Benschop, and Ruth Simpson. 2017. "Postfeminism, Gender and Organization." *Gender, Work & Organization* 24 (3): 213-225. doi:10.1111/gwao.12175.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.
- Lust. 2022. Television Series. Season 1. Sweden: Miso Film.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: Sage.
- Mishra, Suman, and Rebecca Kern-Stone. 2019. *Transnational Media: Concepts and Cases*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Montemurro, Beth, and Jenna Marie Siefken. 2014. "Cougars on the Prowl? New Perceptions of Older Women's Sexuality." *Journal of Aging Studies* 28: 35-43. doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2013.11.004.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1975. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16 (3): 6-18. doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6.
- Planet Sex with Cara Delevingne. 2022. Television Series. UK/USA: Naked Television. Season 1
- The Principles of Pleasure. 2022. Television Series. Season 1. USA: Netflix.
- Ringrose, Jessica. 2009. "Sluts, Whores, Fat Slags and Playboy Bunnies: Teen Girls' Negotiations of 'Sexy' on Social Networking Sites and at School." In *Girls and Education* edited by Carolyn Jackson, Carrie Paechter, and Emma Renold, 170-182. Open University Press: Berkshire.
- Romero, Ariana. 2020. "If You're Hornier Than Ever Right Now, Watch This Netflix Show." *Refinery 29*. Accessed 15 December 2023. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2020/05/9814818/valeria-netflix-season-1-review-victor-sex-scene>.
- Roupenian, Kristen. 2017. "Cat Person The New Yorker December 4, 2017". The New Yorker December 4. Accessed December 4. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person>.
- Sex and the City. 1998-2004. Television Series. Seasons 1-6. USA: HBO.
- Sex Education. 2019-2023. Television Series. Seasons 1-4. UK: Netflix.
- Sexify. 2021. Television Series. Seasons 1-2. Poland: Netflix.
- Sex/Life. 2021-2023. Television Series. Season 1. USA: Netflix.
- Sex, Love & Goop. 2021. Television Series. Season 1. USA: Netflix.
- Shrill. 2019-2021. Television Series. Seasons 1-3. USA: Hulu.

- Spurgas, Alyson K. 2020. *Diagnosing Desire: Biopolitics and Femininity into the Twenty First Century*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Srinivasan, Amia. 2021. *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the 21st Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Taddeo, Lisa. 2019. *Three Women*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Tasker, Yvonne, and Diane Negra. 2007. *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Valeria. 2020-2023. *Television Series. Seasons 1-3*. Spain: Netflix.
- Wanderlust. 2018. "Television Series." *Season 1*. UK: Bbc/netflix.
- West, Carolyn M. 2008. "Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Their Homegirls: Developing an 'Oppositional Gaze' Toward the Images of Black Women." In *Lectures on the Psychology of Women*, edited by P. Rozee, J. Chrisler, and C. Golden, 286–299. New York: McGraw Hill.
- What/If. 2019. *Television Series. Season 1*. USA: Netflix.
- Williams, Linda. 2018. *Hard Core : Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Wood, Rachel. 2017. "Look Good, Feel Good: Sexiness and Sexual Pleasure in Neoliberalism." In *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, edited by Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff, 317–332. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yancy, George. 2016. "White Embodied Gazing, the Black Body as Disgust, and the Aesthetics of Un-Suturing." In *Body Aesthetics*, edited by Sherri Irvin. Oxford: Oxford University Press.