

Pleasure and Patriarchy

Tracing Changes in Women's Sexual and Romantic Relationships during the Sexual Liberation Movement

Anya Russell

Abstract

The sexual liberation movement revealed that women were being controlled and subordinated within their intimate relationships. The movement exposed this mechanism of social control by attaching women's deep sexual dissatisfaction to their subordinate social and political statuses. With an influx of information during the second wave about women's health, anatomy and sexual pleasure, this study aims to address how the movement impacted women's sexual relationships and, therefore, answers this research question: "How have women's sexual displays of love changed according to the sexual liberation movement of the second wave of feminism?" Through a content analysis of twelve articles from six different magazines written during the second wave of feminism, this research paper finds two main conclusions. First, the sexual liberation movement changed older women's romantic relationships and sexual displays of love as these new social norms revolutionarily encouraged women to advocate for themselves within sexual relationships. Second, for younger women, the movement triggered profound ideological struggles and moral discomfort while normalizing premarital casual sex. Paying attention to the humanistic dynamics of a political movement, this study elucidates where women felt a positive and negative change at the height of the sexual liberation movement.

Keywords

Feminism, content analysis, sexual liberation movement, social movement

RESEARCH STATEMENT

In the quest for gender equality, second-wave feminists unveiled another layer of gender oppression that permeated beyond the public sphere and into their private lives. Women realized they were not only being controlled politically and economically but also within their intimate relationships. Thus began the sexual liberation movement. Women's sexuality, specifically their anatomical knowledge and understanding of the act of sex, was constructed by chauvinist men whose political and social goals hinged on women's subordination and internalized inferiority. Most fascinatingly, the movement exposed this mechanism of social control by attaching women's deep sexual dissatisfaction to their subordinate social and political statuses. This made women's romantic sexual and relationships a social issue. The sense of constraint was brought to the forefront of women's consciousness when feminists realized how deep-seated patriarchal control and ideologies were as they controlled acts of intimacy within the most private of spaces.

Historically, sex was never framed as being for the woman or decided by the woman. Instead, women's sexuality and reproductive systems were controlled by husbands, doctors, and politicians. Literature in the early 20th century told women that healthy and proper sex depended on their passivity, innocence and dependence on their husbands (Gerhard, 2000). As such, women did not hold any power in deciding when to have sex or how they were going to have sex. By framing women's roles this way, women overwhelmingly saw sex as something they did for their husbands rather than for themselves or the health of their romantic relationship (Lieberman, 2016).

The sexual liberation movement was a response to these constraints on women's sexuality and a broader, indistinct dissatisfaction with life (Lieberman, 2016). Feminists encouraged women to take responsibility for their pleasure and learn about their bodies as entities independent of men. Despite the clear impact this movement would have on women's intimate relationships, literature on the sexual liberation movement primarily focuses its energy on explaining the link between sexual oppression and political oppression. Meanwhile, many feminists writing in the 1960s to 1970s sought to share, legitimize

and validate women's experiences after centuries of being told they were physically and/or mentally inadequate.

Women's sexuality and intimate relationships continue to be laced with undertones of masculine-centred patriarchal ideals. Most women still struggle to speak up in the bedroom, and its implications are gravely deserving of attention. Some consequences this study finds include unclear consent leading to rape allegations or feelings of being taken advantage of and lack of experiencing sexual pleasure leading to cheating, feelings of guilt and self-blame. Uncovering how social movements can provoke change within the private sphere is a compelling way of understanding social and political change. Moreover, analyzing what went right and what went wrong offers a path forward in revising and reviving the movement, as these struggles are far from over.

With an influx of information during the second wave about women's health, anatomy and sexual pleasure, this study aims to address how the movement impacted women's sexual relationships. After all, this sexual revolution prompted many women's first orgasms and divorces. Therefore, my study aims to answer this research question: How did the sexual liberation movement as reflected in women's magazines change women's sexual and romantic relationships?

To explore this question, this study first situates itself within the historical and theoretical discussions that have defined the sexual liberation movement's legacy. It then details the methodological approach, a qualitative analysis of women's own words, collected from popular magazines of the era, to understand the movement's impact on a personal level. The analysis reveals often contradictory set of experiences, which I explore through the three emergent themes of societal pressure, incongruity, and self-liberation. Ultimately, this paper argues that the reception of the sexual liberation movement was split along generational lines, a finding that complicates and enriches our understanding of the second-wave feminism's impact.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most academic articles written about the sexual liberation movement were primarily published at the beginning of the 21st century, a few decades after the second wave of feminism reached its peak. This literature review has two primary objectives: to explore the historical context and debate its political significance. Providing historical context explains why and how sex is a politically charged issue. Debating its political significance critically evaluates the utility of centring female sexuality and sexual pleasure in the feminist movement.

Historical Context

In discussing historical context, scholars tend to provide a historiography of this period, including the writings of famous feminists as cultural artifacts that provide valuable insights into the leading voices of the sexual liberation movement. Gerhard's (2000) study "Revisiting 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm': The Female Orgasm in American Sexual Thought and Second Wave Feminism" uses Anne Koedt's 1970 *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm* as a "window into one moment of feminist sexual thought" (Gerhard, 2000, p. 450). Gerhard (2000) explains how Koedt outlined the political significance of female pleasure and sexuality by revisioning the clitoris as the center of female pleasure rather than the vagina. This was a response to Freud's 1905 *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* which explained that upon maturity, women undergo an "erotic transfer" which shifts their source of pleasure from their clitoris to their vagina (Gerhard, 2000, p. 453). Second-wave feminists spent a lot of time undoing Freud's psychoanalytic understanding of female sexuality since it placed women as inherently subordinate to men while also spreading false theories of sexuality (Freud, 2016). Essentially, sexual liberationists identified patriarchal constructions of sexuality that damaged and suppressed women physically, mentally and emotionally for decades. As such, historical context is an essential component of the literature as it explains how and why the sexual liberation movement found female sexuality politically significant.

The Political Significance Debate

Those who examined the movement's political significance commonly debated the importance of women's sexual pleasure in obtaining gender equality. Lieberman (2016) also begins her study, "Intimate Transactions: Sex Toys and the Sexual Discourse of Second-Wave Feminism," with a detailed historiography. However, Lieberman's historical context focuses on the movement's divisive nature. The idea that women's sexual pleasure was significant in obtaining gender equality was radical, and many feminists debated this idea. Betty Friedan, famously known for *The Feminine Mystique*, said she did not think a "thousand vibrators would make much difference...if unequal power positions in real life weren't changed" (Lieberman, 2016 p. 99). In "Slave of a Slave No More: Black women in Struggle," Frances M. Beal (1981) complements Friedan's message. Beal (1981) critiques the women's liberation movement for failing to address the real, material causes of harm by instead focusing on superficial or symbolic issues. She uses a metaphor of a thief entering one's home: "you can either shoot the shadow of the thief or you can shoot the body" (Beal, 1981, p. 22). In this case, sex could be understood as a mere shadow distracting mainstream feminism from the root causes of sexism (Beal, 1981). Moreover, some feminist groups rejected the notion of reclaiming women's sexuality altogether (Lieberman, 2016). They perceived sexual desires as masculine, designed to enslave women to men as women "don't have orgasms" and argued women's sexual liberation should mean "liberation from sexuality" (Lieberman, 2016, p. 100). Arguing against these claims, other feminists viewed personal-level change as tackling the root issue—hence the catchphrase "the personal is political" (Lieberman, 2016, p. 90). They contested that "a revolution in every bedroom cannot fail to shake up the status quo" (Lieberman, 2016, p. 100). Hence, there was a heavy dialogue between feminists on the importance of women's sexual pleasure. Even within radical "pro-sex" feminists, there was disagreement on exactly how the liberated woman should have sex (Lieberman, 2016). This debate shaped much of the literature published on the sexual liberation movement, as many feminists are still attempting to argue the political significance of sex and whether it is productive for achieving gender equality. Noting this discussion is important as women's respective positions on this debate influence the manner and degree to which the movement affected their sexual relationships. My study's research will build upon this discussion as qualitatively examining changes in

women's sexual and romantic relationships may produce results that adhere to one, both or neither side of the debate. Despite this division, it is clear that women, no matter their position on the matter, were affected by the rising idea that sexual pleasure has political importance.

The Role of Media in the Movement

Outside of the political and academic space where this debate was taking place, many feminist magazines promoting sexual liberation were circulating. These magazines are an important part of studying the movement's influence, as their provocativeness serves as a reflection and reaction to the sexual liberation movement. They have been crucial in studying public sentiments during this time, as these accessible magazines also served as socializing agents. Gil-Glazer's (2020) article examines the magazine *Oz*, a controversial counterculture magazine published in Britain and Australia and its relationship to the sexual liberation movement. *Oz*'s contents reflected an anti-establishment utopia where freedom of expression was celebrated. Its readers were primarily teenagers, and Gil-Glazer (2020) argues the magazine was a sex education agent that encouraged sexual expression. Similarly, Riviere et al. (2013) article analyses sexual messages within the magazines *Cosmo* and *Essence*. The article examines the extent to which depictions of sex within the magazines mirrored the principles of the second wave (Riviere et al. 2013). These studies are extremely significant to the field of research as they analyze content from the sexual liberation movement.

Continuing the debate, Gil-Glazer (2020) and Riviere et al. (2013) seek to decipher whether these magazines had positive or negative impacts on women and the women's movement. Gil-Glazer (2020) suggests *Oz* contradictorily includes sexist messages alongside its feminist ones. Meanwhile, Rivere and Byerly (2013) ponder whether these magazines were truly feminist since *Cosmo* and *Essence* often frame their sexual advice as instructions on how to keep a man interested. Thus, within these articles, the debate on whether the sexual liberation movement advances feminist agendas continues.

While Gil-Glazer (2020) and Riviere et al. (2013) examine the magazines' messages, little attention is given to the reader's discourse. Contrarily, Lieberman's (2016) study examines customer letters sent to Dell Williams, founder of Eve's Garden, the first sex shop owned and run by women.

Lieberman (2016) coded the letters to understand women's attitudes toward sex toys. This provides an important contribution to the literature as its research design provides insights into the attitudes of ordinary women living through and directly affected by the second wave. Moreover, Lieberman's (2016) study demonstrates a change in women's sexual habits—such as the use of vibrators, first orgasms and open discussions about sex—in response to the sexual liberation movement of the second wave. With that being said, this provides space for expansion as my research seeks to qualitatively analyze media and the community of communications that magazines have created to understand how the sexual liberation movement has changed women's sexual and romantic relationships.

To complement the literature's predominantly historical and theoretical approach to the topic, my study seeks to qualitatively analyze media content from the sexual liberation movement. Veering away from critiquing the movement or attempting to label its messages as “good” or “bad,” this study fills a gap in the literature by objectively observing how the movement specifically influenced women's intimate and sexual relationships.

METHODS

To better understand how women's sexual and romantic relationships changed according to the sexual liberation movement, I collected content women wrote about love, relationships and sex from the 1970s to the 1980s. The second wave of feminism produced an influx of women's magazines that gave relationship advice in line with the principles of the sexual revolution such as how to have better sex, advocate for yourself, be more independent, find fulfillment and so on. These publications created a space and an opportunity for women to share their thoughts, concerns, and vulnerabilities around sex that have been historically suppressed and/or stigmatized. This community of communications thus fought the silence that bell hooks describes as “woman's submission into patriarchal authority (hooks, 2014). Thus, magazines are simultaneously objects of analysis and physical manifestations of liberation.

In these magazines, many women submitted questions, letters to the editor, submissions of personal experiences and gave interviews to columnists for publication. The accounts were provided by North American women aged 14 to 82, with the majority from those between 18 and 40. The vast majority of these women were white middle to upper-class individuals. However, many women anonymized their identities, so this is an approximation and assumption based on the magazines' and the second-wave's targeted demographic. As a white upper-middle-class woman, my social position produced an ingroup bias. Thus, I had assumptions coming into the research process based on personal experiences as a woman with the same social position as the subjects. For instance, informed by personal experience, I could have applied subtext to their claims rather than solely relying on the data. However, because my content was written 50 years ago and 30 years before my lifetime, generational differences removed me from the subjects, allowing for a more objective perspective.

I found my documents through the Women's Magazine Archives database. Over three weeks (February 9th to March 1st, 2024), I collected twelve articles published in six different magazines: *New York Times* (November 1972), *Lady's Home Journal* (March 1975 and July 1979), *Redbook* (June, July 1975 and July 1978), *Women's Day* (October 1977), *Branching Out* (July 1974), and *Cosmopolitan* (July and September 1980). I chose these magazines based on four characteristics: year of publication, the magazines' targeted audience, explicit references to the sexual revolution (women writing "the sexual revolution" or "the new morality" in their comments), relationships, love and/or sex, and if they contained quotes/questions from female readers.

First, I looked at dozens of magazine articles from 1970 to 1980, as I wanted them to be published during the height of the sexual liberation movement. Because my study population is North American women and my research objective is understanding how the sexual revolution impacted their relationships and sex lives, I focused mainly on American and Canadian magazines that had feminist objectives targeted at women. Magazines are agents of socialization, and the women's magazines I chose reverberated messages from the sexual liberation movement. So, those who read and write to these magazines are to some degree impacted by the movement.

Then, I looked for issues and segments relevant to my research question that mentioned romantic relationships and sex. Because I'm looking to uncover women's inner thoughts about their relationships and sexual behaviours, I was not interested in content written by journalists, columnists or editors. They represent a smaller demographic and publish opinions geared toward the magazine's objectives and image. Instead, I sought firsthand narratives from women who consume this media, as my research question examines the impact the movement had on women. This represents a more general population of women with different careers, family structures, and ages, which allows for a more representative sample size. However, because the sexual liberation movement largely excluded women of colour and simplistically focused on the needs of wealthier housewives, the sample population is not representative of all North American women; however, it is representative of the sexual liberation's targeted audience, one that racialized women were indubitably excluded from.

Although my original objective was to analyze Q&A sections solely, I found that many of these sections contained one-liner questions, which did not provide rich data. To address this problem, I expanded my search to any section containing quotes directly from women. Thus, in addition to the Q&A sections, I included three interviews conducted and published in the *New York Times* by Thomas J. Cottle, a professor, sociologist, psychologist and columnist. I also included columns in *Branching Out* that published readers' accounts of their experiences as women. Additionally, I used letters sent to *Women's Day* that included personal experiences of single women, and I collected questions sent to sex counsellors that were answered in *Redbook*. Moreover, I selected articles from *Cosmopolitan* that supported the author's claims through quotes from women as well as polls and questionnaires given to women.

All content was analyzed in chronological order to observe any significant changes over ten years. Overall, the earlier magazines contained more accounts of insecurity, confusion, and fear of the revolution. However, as the revolution progressed into the late 70s and early 80s, there was an increase in positive experiences from the revolution (i.e., independence, agency, confidence). I first read through my articles to become familiar with their contents and gain a general sense of common themes across all twelve articles.

Then, I began the coding process with line-by-line open coding and generated twenty-five open codes, which I organized and colour-coded into an Excel sheet.

The initial coding process revealed two unexpected findings. First, there was a fairly equal divide between negative and positive feelings towards the sexual revolution. The negative accounts expressed having incompatible morals, confusion, and a desire for clear social rules (i.e., “Who’s to say what’s good or bad?” “How can I just let go and forget everything that was so meaningful to me before?” and “They need a cop down here to direct traffic”). The positive accounts expressed renewed agency in independence (i.e., “Society told me that being single would mean being lonely and unhappy—nothing is farther from the truth” and “I now realize I have tolerated such behaviour just to maintain the security of marriage”). They also conveyed a liberation from traditional ideals of sex, including destigmatizing female pleasure (i.e., “no longer does she view sex as an imposition and burden, the way her grandmother’s generation did, nor does she see it as a means to catch a mate, as her mother might have” and “you mean it’s alright for me to have an orgasm while I rub against my lover’s thigh? I always thought I was some sort of pervert!”). Second, I found that the sexual liberation movement impacted women differently depending on their age group. There was a distinct difference in attitudes between young, typically unmarried women aged 14-25 and women who were typically married with children aged 25-60. Generally, they understood and were affected by the movement differently since they were at different stages of life when the movement occurred.

I continued the process with line-by-line focus coding which I organized and colour-coded into an Excel sheet. Then, I narrowed down the twenty-five open codes to six focused codes: Societal Forces, Conflictual Feelings, Aversion to Existing Relationship Structures, Agency, Liberation from Traditional Ideals of Sex and Intergenerational Influences. Finally, this led to the development of three themes: Societal Pressure, Incongruity and Self-Liberation.

DATA ANALYSIS

Societal Pressure

The power of the sexual liberation movement, or “the new morality,” was not felt subtly nor gradually; instead, its social pressure held a strong presence. Due to the movement, women often felt social pressure to engage in sexual relationships. Accounts in magazines show that the new norms advanced by the revolution were not felt as a gradual socializing process, but something that was forcibly imposed on people. Women said things like, “I have no choice,” “I had to feel like in some way I was a part of it all,” and “Society’s got a hold on your leg.” For youths in particular, the perceived ideals of sexual liberation were seen as mandatory ways of behaving that, if not adhered to, would exclude them from their peers. The mass distribution and popularity of magazines encouraging the sexual revolution amplified the testaments of “liberated” women; this created an enviable ingroup. One college woman said, “I had to feel that in some way I was a part of it all. A part of *them*, the generation.” She wanted to know if she *could* have sex even though she wasn’t sure she wanted to. To fit in, she went so far as thinking of ways she “could arrange to get raped” but settled on getting a diaphragm instead. The dispersal of the revolution’s misconstrued messaging created immense societal pressure, leading some women to extreme and unhealthy thoughts.

Confused by messages from peers and society at large, younger generations predominantly interpreted the movement as encouraging them to be more promiscuous, regardless of their personal preference. One person wrote, “The sexual revolution has made women talk themselves into sexual behaviour they don’t really desire, under the pressure of being labelled uncool or possessive.” Magazines directly contributed to this pressure, acting as a socializing force. For instance, *Cosmopolitan* created an ingroup of “Cosmo girls” with a socially desirable identity defined by sexuality. In 1980, the article titled “The Sexual Profile of That Cosmopolitan Girl” analyzed the sex habits of 106,000 readers and described her through first sexual experiences, turn-ons, sex positions, number of partners. They found she is, “sexy and wild,” often experimenting in bed, but also “romantic and conservative,” with “reservations about living

in a sexually permissive society.” By publicizing readers’ sexual activities and labeling them as “extraordinarily sexually free,” the media glorifies such behavior and pressures women to conform. As such, young women’s sexual habits may not have changed of their own volition, but because they felt forced to change. The movement was mainly intended to free women from constricting marriages and cycles of patriarchal-induced sexual dissatisfaction, and not to force teenagers to have sex. Young women had yet to encounter patriarchal structures of sex and marriage and thus lacked an understanding of the movement’s purpose and objectives. Therefore, youths felt just as socially pressured to have sex as their mothers’ generation felt pressured not to have sex.

For older women, circulating messages promising remedies for their bland marriages and unsatisfactory sex lives were encouraging. Many sought out sex therapists and explored new ways to receive pleasure from sex. One woman hesitantly tried masturbating in front of her husband, and another fantasized about an X-rated movie to improve their sex life with their husband. However, many women in older generations still bought into the societal myth that their husbands should be able to sexually “awaken” them. When they couldn’t orgasm as society dictated, these societal pressures instigated feelings of self-blame and criticism of their husbands. Sexually dissatisfied women often had affairs or decided to divorce as a result of these misleading societal narratives and pressures.

Incongruity

Many women felt the sexual liberation movement’s rhetoric was incongruent with their social codes and previously held belief systems. The “new morality” undermined these moral codes. This created an internal moral struggle, which confused their understanding of sex and relationships. Magazines became the battleground on which conflicting values clashed before readers. They transparently laid out these new confessions, writing that “freedom brings problems, and along with the pleasures of liberation, many women reported new stresses and problems.” Young women battled with deciphering the “right way” to sexually display love. Before the sexual liberation movement, society had strongly entrenched ideas and

morals for women that valued modesty and passivity. These social norms instructed women on how to express sexuality; the expectation was to wait until marriage to have sex. For adolescents in the midst of uncovering and practicing social norms and acceptable behaviours to prepare for adulthood, this adjustment was particularly difficult. One young woman spent her formative years learning to value chastity, but at the height of the sexual liberation movement, she was engaged and strongly desired to have sex. She eventually succumbed and attempted intercourse with her fiancé but started crying hysterically and did not go through with it. Battling between the ideas she grew up with and the idea that sexual desires are permissible for unmarried women, she wrote, "How can I just let go and forget everything that was so meaningful to me before?" Years of being told one must wait until marriage created a conflict between previously held values and those advanced by the sexual revolution.

Others sought to reconcile these incongruent values and expressed a need for more rules, they felt were missing from society amid the sexual revolution. A young woman wrote, "One person says aloneness is right, somebody else says I should find someone to sleep with. I don't know, I don't know." Another person expressed concern over marriages falling apart, increased sexual behaviour and fear of being labelled uptight and said, "They need a cop down here to direct traffic." Although the revolution's 'new morality' encouraged freedom from constricting gender roles in the form of female pleasure, the adjustment was extremely difficult. In terms of young women's sexual relationships, incongruent value systems only added another layer of confusion and insecurity to novel sexual encounters.

Meanwhile, older women and those in marriages displayed behaviours incongruous with their desires. Many women said they wanted to experience sexual pleasure but were unable to take action. The sexual revolution inspired many women to attempt to orgasm, but as one woman said, "I cannot admit that I haven't had an orgasm. I have let the relationship progress too far to be able to say I have been implying (next to lying) otherwise all along." Because of these fears, she has avoided sex altogether. Another woman, "scared to tell [her] husband to change his love-making technique," resorted to masturbating. However, this made her feel "terribly wrong" and "so guilty." Many women experienced this type of internal conflict. Although they wanted to begin enjoying sex, many suffered from conflictual feelings and an

inability to properly communicate their needs. Often, what they desired sexually was either incongruent with what they told their partners or incongruent with their conscience. This led women to avoid sex altogether or continue to have unsatisfactory sex lives. However, some of these accounts came from Q&A sections, so women wanted a change since they were seeking advice. One could thus infer women began to take accountability and advocate for their sexual pleasure.

Self-Liberation

The sexual liberation movement pushed many women to advocate for themselves, discover their bodies and communicate their needs. Together, women experienced self-liberation. This affected their relationships and sex lives in a few ways. First, the revolution freed young and older women from sexual shame by normalizing previously taboo behaviours such as increased promiscuity, masturbation, casual sex and divorce. Women were open about having multiple sex partners, as one said, “I have had twenty-eight lovers, one for each of my years,” and another said she “kept a sex journal since 1962” to keep track of all eighty of her lovers. Furthermore, a woman determined yet unable to have an orgasm with her boyfriend, asked her partner to try another technique she may enjoy more, but said he “refused to believe me.” So, she wrote, “I’m planning to move on, find another man.” Inspired by the movement, she displays a wider trend of women leaving marriages to feel heard, respected and sexually satisfied. For these women, being married and adhering to societal expectations is the opposite of independence and freedom.

In the article “*Can a Woman Stay Single and Be Happy?*” the answer was an overwhelming yes. None of them expressed regret; instead, they believed they would not have had so many accomplishments if they had married. While this article expresses data proving the self-liberating effects of the movement, these magazines are also responsible for encouraging other women to follow suit. Responses addressed the main concerns of women unsure to leave their marriages by describing their accomplishments: “I’m forty-one and still single.... I adopted a baby girl” and “[I] received my bachelor’s at fifty” and “I slowly

began to see what I was capable of being totally independent.” Magazines served as a platform for affirmation, fostering a community that validated and encouraged women’s choices. Furthermore, magazines spread the message of self-liberation to subsequent generations. Many women expressed a warning-like desire for their children’s experiences to be better. Those who felt unable to obtain such independence wrote things like, “I am what you call a passive, dependent wife...Too late for me. But I’m going to ask my eighteen-year-old daughter to read the article.” Thus, women experienced a liberation, if not for themselves, then for their children.

Overall, the movement encouraged women to see themselves as capable individuals as well as compel society to recognize them as human beings, rather than passive objects. Eloquently put, one woman wrote, “We no longer have to be the Mothers of civilization – it’s a grown child. Let’s stop being Mothers and Wives and start being Women.” As a result of the movement, many women took control over their relationships and sex lives.

DISCUSSION

The sexual liberation movement’s impact on women’s sexual and romantic relationships was not monolithic. Its popular rhetoric of freeing captive women from the intimate constraints of their marriage and unsatisfactory sex lives proves to be much more nuanced. To understand the root of these nuances, my research reveals there are two different, yet interrelated narratives. One from young unmarried women (roughly 14-25 years old) and another from older women, typically married with children (roughly 25-60 years old).

This difference is grounded in the semantics of the sexual liberation movement. At its core, it is a rallying call for women to be *liberated from* patterns of sexual dissatisfaction and gender-biased relationship structures. Concepts of relationships and sexuality are socially constructed patriarchal systems designed to oppress women; therefore, they are the very structures women seek liberation from.

However, most young women have not encountered these structures. Yet to experience the patriarchal institution of marriage and the unequal power dynamics of sex, this younger generation still buys into the ideals and promises of love. As such, the thing that women are trying to be liberated from differs depending on their stage in life. For older women, it is mainly their unsatisfying marriages and sex lives, but for younger women, it is simply the moral codes society has sold them as ideal (i.e., the white picket fence). Generally, these traditional values and morals provide youths with comfort, stability and regulation in the face of daunting adulthood. For many older women, these empty promises provide constraint, dissatisfaction, and unfulfillment. Summarized by a twenty-five-year-old woman, "The sexual revolution has been very enlightening to many women older than me... My mother has profited from it. But I grew up in the midst of it, and sometimes I wish the pendulum would sit where it is for a while." As such, the movement's intended impacts were most positively assumed by older generations attempting to escape patriarchal constructions of love, whereas youths got caught in the crosshairs of a complex rebellion against unrecognized structures of gender oppression.

Although changes in women's sexual and romantic relationships differed depending on age, changes in social norms were uniformly felt. These changes were described by both generations based on three consistent factors: societal influence, incongruity, and self-liberation. For younger women, shifting social norms felt abrupt, and their social prescriptions were understood as dictating and controlling, despite their intention of being liberating. Most of their discomfort and aversion to the movement stemmed from the incongruity of previously held belief systems and the new morality. Conversely, older women found these narratives exciting, inspiring and promising. However, desires to adopt sexually liberating behaviours were often incongruous with their actions as they suffered from internalized misogyny, shaming them for sexual pleasure.

Those who overcame these mental blockades exhibited newfound confidence, independence, and ultimately, self-liberation. This took the form of sexual exploration, first orgasms, cheating and divorce. Meanwhile, for younger women who adopted their understanding of the new morality, self-liberation took the form of polyamory, casual sex, and waiting until marriage. However, increased promiscuity may not

have directly resulted from the movement. Instead, my data found patterns of mothers urging their daughters to approach love and sex differently than they did. Furthermore, increases in divorce and affairs among older women could have provoked sexual deviance in their children. In this light, increased promiscuity among youth should not be understood as a direct result of the sexual liberation movement, but as a result of the effects the movement had on older women.

Extracted from popular women's magazines, these findings suggest two broad conclusions. First, for older women, the sexual liberation movement changed women's sexual and romantic relationships as there was an increase in divorce, extramarital affairs and experiences of sexual pleasure. Second, for younger women, the sexual liberation movement contradicted previous conceptions of sex and romantic relationships, thus provoking insecurity and a lack of a moral compass. My findings suggest that youths' increase in casual sex and delaying marriage did not arise out of a positive and willing place like their mothers. Rather, it was a result of social pressure and familial instability.

Situating within the Literature

While literature published in the 21st century on the sexual liberation movement's impact remains limited, existing studies are embedded with debates about the political significance of sex and whether it is productive for achieving gender equality. Gerhard (2000) argues why the sexual liberation movement found female sexuality politically significant, whereas Betty Friedan (1963) disagreed; meanwhile, Lieberman (2016), Gil-Glazer (2020) and Riviere et al. (2013) discussed both sides without taking a firm position. Consistent with the dichotomous nature of the debate, my findings show it was both positive and negative for accomplishing feminist objectives. However, my study contributes to this debate by suggesting the divisive reception of the movement is generational.

The literature holds significant theoretical utility in academic and political contexts, but it falls short of studying the public's reception of the movement. In other words, studies have not sought to explore

whether or not the very targets of the movement felt as though the movement had political implications for feminist agendas. Highlighting the importance of sociological qualitative methods and media studies to the study of the sexual liberation movement, my study fills this gap by analyzing what women thought, said and wrote about the movement as it unfolded through published media.

My findings suggest women did not explicitly link sexual liberation to political rights. Although scholars may have been having this debate, the average woman did not link the sexual liberation movement to their political rights as an oppressed minority. However, what can be substantiated is that it changed social norms and encouraged women to take control of their personal lives, gradually dismantling gendered power dynamics within the private sphere. Before, social norms around relationships and sex placed the woman as sexually passive, needless and undeserving of equal enjoyment of sex. The movement, and the magazines themselves, encouraged advocacy and turned women into active agents. Regardless of whether or not women acknowledged the political implications of sex, the sexual revolution advanced feminist agendas as it encouraged women to advocate for themselves and rebel against patriarchal constructions of sex.

Considering the movement produced profound ideological struggles and moral discomfort for younger generations (aged 14-25), directions for future studies may examine its long-term effects concerning present-day feminist issues. *Roe v. Wade*, a Supreme Court decision made in 1973 as a result of the sexual revolution, was overturned in 2022 by the generation I found most opposed to the sexual liberation movement. Once grappling with a profound loss of morality, the majority of 60–70-year-olds oppose access to abortion (Gallup, 2024). With political power, these lost teens overturned what their mothers worked so hard for. Future studies may explore this speculation.

CONCLUSION

Reflected through popular feminist magazines in the 70s–80s, the sexual liberation movement changed older women's sexual and romantic relationships as these new social norms revolutionarily encouraged women to advocate for themselves within sexual relationships. For younger women, the movement triggered moral ambiguity and normalized premarital casual sex. These changes broke down some of the longstanding sexual norms constructed by misogynist men whose social position hinged on women's subordination across public and private spheres. The implications of these findings underscore the importance of sociological qualitative research in studying the sexual revolution. Paying attention to the humanistic dynamics of a political movement, this study elucidates where women felt positive and negative change. Changes in women's sexual relationships should be conceptualized as changes in women's social position. Despite these shifts, the fight is far from over. Many women continue to subjugate their voice and pleasure to that of a man. The revolution requires careful revision and a rigorous revival.

References

Beal, F. M. (1981). Slave of a Slave No More: Black Women in Struggle. *The Black Scholar*, 12(6), 16–24.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1981.11414215>

Freud, S. (2016). Three essays on the theory of sexuality: the 1905 edition (P. van Haute & H. Westerink, Eds.). Verso.

Friedan, B. (2010). *The Feminine Mystique*. Penguin Classics.

Gallup. (2024). "Abortion Trends by Age." *Gallup*. Retrieved April 14, 2024

(<https://news.gallup.com/poll/246206/abortion-trends-age.aspx>).

Gerhard, J. (2000). Revisiting "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm": The Female Orgasm in American Sexual Thought and Second Wave Feminism. *Feminist Studies*, 26(2), 449–476.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/3178545>

Gil-Glazer, Y. (2023). Between Sexism and Sexual Liberation: Oz Magazine as Sex Education Agent in Britain in the 1960s–1970s. *Sexuality & Culture*, 27(1), 211–241.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-022-10010-w>

hooks, bell. (2014). *Talking back: thinking feminist, thinking black* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743134>

hooks, bell. (2015). *Feminist theory: from margin to center* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743172>

Koedt, A. (1970). *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm*. New England Free Press.

Lieberman, H. (2017). Intimate Transactions: Sex Toys and the Sexual Discourse of Second-Wave Feminism. *Sexuality & Culture*, 21(1), 96–120. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-016-9383-9>

Reviere, R., & Byerly, C. M. (2013). Sexual Messages in Black and White: A Discourse Analysis of Essence and Cosmo. *Feminist Media Studies*, 13(4), 676–692.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.680195>