Women’s Desire: A Journey from Pleasing to Sexual Fulfillment

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Women’s Desire: A Journey from Pleasing to Sexual Fulfillment

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in Psychology

Bridgewater State University

May 3, 2023

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Abstract

Women’s sexual desire, while being a common experience, is subjective and elusive in nature (Meana, 2010). Desire has typically been researched from a heteronormative standpoint which may inaccurately represent the nuanced ways in which women experience desire. Since women are socialized as selfless and nurturing (Conley et al., 2011; Keifer & Sanchez, 2007), understanding their own desires and communicating those desires to partners may be complicated. This qualitative study used a feminist perspective to examine the ways in which women fulfill, communicate, and experience sexual desire. A research team recruited 21 self-identified women to participate in semi-structured interviews, using a purposive sampling strategy to achieve greater demographic diversity. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used to analyze the coded transcripts and resulted in three overarching themes: (1) Let’s (Not) Talk About Sex, (2) (Un)Fulfilled, and (3) Journey to Liberation. The results suggest that women are often hesitant in communicating their desires to partners. Women expressed fulfilling their partners’ desires absent of their own. When women do fulfill their desires, it is often without an end goal of orgasm. Participants’ experiences with desire change throughout their lifetimes, often becoming more empowered in understanding and communicating their desires as they experience different relationships and gain deeper understanding of their own bodies and preferences.

Keywords: Women’s sexuality, sexual desire, sexual satisfaction, feminist theory, sexual wellness
Women’s Desire: A Journey from Pleasing to Sexual Fulfillment

Desire is a common sexual experience, but its true nature remains elusive, especially for women. Much of the research on desire and sexuality is from a narrow lens which rarely highlights the positive aspects of sexual pleasure and desire (Jones, 2018). Additionally, much of the past research has assumed that women experience and fulfill desire in the same ways as men (Brotto et al., 2009). Therefore, most of the research on sexual desire is through a heteronormative, male-centric lens. In this research study, the ways in which women communicate, fulfill, and experience sexual desires is examined through a feminist lens.

Despite an increase in research on sexual desire, there are some areas that remain unclear or that have not been extensively researched. There is no consensus on how to properly conceptualize and operationalize women’s sexual desire (Brotto et al., 2009; Meana, 2010). In conjunction with this, researchers have also debated the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) change, which combined both desire and arousal disorders into one diagnosis. Additionally, there is limited research on the gendered differences in the ways in which men and women are expected to communicate and experience desire, especially for individuals in the LGBTQ+ community. There is scant research on how women communicate desire to partners, which may be important in understanding how and if desires are fulfilled. While there is some research on the factors that influence women’s desire (i.e., sociocultural factors) as well what satisfies women’s desire (i.e., wanting to be wanted), it is important to examine these topics further to gain a deeper understanding of women’s individual experiences with desire.

It is important to acknowledge the previous research on desire while also highlighting why the current study is a significant contribution to the existing literature. There is limited
qualitative research on women’s sexual desire and even less research using a feminist, intersectional lens. Through conducting qualitative interviews with women of various social identities, we hope to fill a gap in the literature where women’s individual and complex experiences with desire may be overlooked or dismissed (Chivers & Brotto, 2017; Meana, 2010). The present study aims to understand how women interpret, communicate, and fulfill their sexual desires.

**Defining Sexual Desire**

While the research on women’s sexual desire has progressed in the past three decades (Chivers & Brotto, 2017), there is still ongoing debate on how exactly to define the term, as well as how to accurately diagnose and assess desire and arousal disorders. Due to the subjective and multifaceted nature of desire, there have been multiple definitions provided by previous researchers. Regan and Berscheid (1999) described sexual desire as a subjective psychological state characterized by an awareness of wanting to attain a sexual goal. This definition places less emphasis on behavior and more weight on the subjectivity of desire. Later, more behavioral definitions of the term were adapted. Basson (2000) defined sexual desire as the experiences of sexual fantasies, thoughts, and urges to engage in sexual activity. Similarly, Levine (2003) said that desire is “the sum of all forces that lean us toward and push us away from sexual behavior.” The previous definitions were created based on the traditional and biological male model of desire, which emphasizes spontaneity and physically driven responses (Meana, 2010). While all of these definitions lead to some sort of sexual goal, Meana (2010) argues that it may be harmful to define desire in terms of behavior. While it is true that many women do desire sexual activity (Meana, 2010), there are numerous ways in which desire may be fulfilled or influenced. Defining desire in terms of pleasure and sexual activity can be problematic for women, who may engage
in sexual activity with or without desire (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Mark, 2014) and may fulfill desire without sexual activity (Meana, 2010).

It may be difficult for researchers to define desire, since it is often used in conjunction with or in place of terms such as arousal and pleasure, leading to uncertainty for both researchers and the general population. While sexual desire has traditionally been conceptualized as a motivational state, sexual arousal has been defined as an emotional state, with varying degrees of overlap between the two (Janssen, 2011). Additionally, research has shown that desire often precedes arousal (Kaplan, 1979), or that desire is one of the preliminary stages of arousal (Laan & Janssen, 2008). Nonetheless, distinctions between desire and arousal have not yet been clearly agreed upon, which is reflected in previous research. In a qualitative study where men and women were asked to define desire, they had trouble differentiating between desire and arousal, but could do so after reflecting on their own subjective experiences (Mitchell et al., 2013). Brotto and colleagues (2009) found that women with female sexual arousal disorder (FSAD) were easily able to distinguish between desire and arousal, while women without FSAD had trouble with the distinction. This research demonstrates the possible importance of the distinction between desire and arousal for women. It is not that women have a lack of sexual desire, but that women experience and fulfill their desire in different ways than men, and that physical response, sex, or orgasm may not necessarily be the only goals of sexual desire (Brotto et al., 2009).

The debates on defining desire extend to the clinical setting, where psychologists and psychiatrists are still trying to understand how to assess and diagnose women with desire and arousal disorders. In 2013, the DSM-5 categorized both lack of desire and arousal into one diagnosis, leading to controversies between experts in the field. Prior to the DSM-5, the DSM considered sexual interest and arousal as two separate but related entities, until evidence
suggested that desire and arousal could not be distinguished in women (Brotto et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2004). Currently, the DSM-5 defines Female Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder (FSIAD) as a lack of or a reduction of sexual interest and arousal. To be diagnosed with FSIAD, women must exhibit three of the six symptoms: “(1) Absent or reduced interest in sexual activity; (2) absent or reduced sexual thoughts or fantasies; (3) no or reduced initiation of sexual activity, and typically unreceptive to a partner’s attempts to initiate; (4) absent or reduced sexual excitement or pleasure in almost all or all sexual encounters; (5) absent or reduced sexual interest/arousal in response to any internal or external sexual cues; and (6) absent or reduced genital or non-genital sensations during sexual activity in all or almost all sexual encounters”.

The symptoms listed for FSAID are some of the most common sexual complaints for women (Mccarthy et al., 2018) and exhibiting any of the symptoms can have negative effects on relationship satisfaction. Treatment options for FSAID are limited, and research is still needed to have a comprehensive understanding of the disorder and how to treat it (Mccarthy et al., 2018). Some researchers disagree with the change in diagnosis and feel that this conceptualization does not accurately represent all women's experiences with a lack of desire and or arousal (Clayton et al., 2012).

The ongoing disputes on how to interpret and define desire and arousal show how convoluted and subjective the topic is, demonstrating the need for further investigation. In the current study, we hope to contribute to the literature by asking women directly what desire means to them without mention of previous definitions of desire. In addition, we anticipate that using open-ended questions allows participants to thoughtfully reflect upon their personal ideas surrounding desire.
Gendered Differences in Desire Expectations and Communication

There are many gendered differences in the expectations and communication of sexual desire, which are driven by cultural beliefs and can negatively affect women’s desire. Traditional gender roles reinforce ideas that men should be the ones to initiate and directly ask for sex, giving them an empowered and dominant role in sexual encounters (Kiefer & Sanchez 2007). In contrast, women are often taught to be more submissive and to put their partners’ needs before their own (Conley et al., 2011; Keifer & Sanchez, 2007). This double standard plays a powerful role in dictating acceptable sexual behaviors for men and women, which stigmatizes women for communicating sexual desires (Conley et al., 2011). Since these gender roles have become so ingrained in society, there are many false beliefs about gender differences in sexuality (Conley et al., 2011). An example of one of these beliefs would be that women think about sex and orgasm less frequently than men (Conley et al., 2011). Instead, men generally think about their physical needs more than women, and women’s frequency of orgasm is significantly correlated to the type of sexual relationship they are in, whether it be casual or committed (Conley et al., 2011).

Traditional gender roles heavily influence relationships, and therefore can have negative effects for women. When women endorse traditional gender roles, it increases their sexual passivity and decreases their sexual resourcefulness, which can be defined as the cognitive and behavioral skills used to deal with unwanted sexual encounters and to communicate effectively with a sexual partner (Kennett et al., 2013; Keifer & Sanchez, 2007). Kats & Tirone (2019) found that the more women believed in the notation of “ideal womanhood,” the more sexually compliant and less sexually satisfied they were when compared with women who did not have strong beliefs in traditional womanhood. Additionally, women who had fewer liberal attitudes towards women were more likely to have stereotypically feminine sexual fantasies and more
likely to believe victim-blaming rape myths (Zurbriggen & Yost, 2004). Women may also experience a pressure to engage in sex due to traditional gendered sexual scripts since they emphasize the importance of pleasing a male partner (Conley et al, 2011; Keifer & Sanchez, 2007). Alternatively, women who had fewer beliefs in traditional gender roles were more sexually resourceful, reported higher satisfaction, and engaged in less unwanted sexual activity (Kennett et al., 2013).

While it is known that traditional gender roles influence sexual scripts in heterosexual relationships, little is known about the effects of traditional gender roles in lesbian relationships, or for women who identify as bisexual or polyamorous. There are stereotypes about lesbian women, assuming they should take on hyper-masculine or feminine roles in relationships in ways that would follow heteronormative gender roles (Nimbi, 2020). The extent to which these ideas influence the endorsement of gender roles has not been extensively researched.

Although it is important for both men and women to experience sexual agency to have fulfilling sexual encounters, traditional gender roles and values significantly hinder women’s ability to have autonomy in heterosexual relationships. While the current study does not specifically ask participants about their endorsement of traditional gender roles, we hope that through the questions participants will draw on experiences communicating desires to partners. Specifically, we focus on whether participants initiate conversations about sexual desires with a partner and why they would or would not be transparent about them. Since there is scant research on how women communicate and discuss their desire with partners, we aim to explore this area to find if gender roles play a factor in women’s communication of their desires.
Desire in Heterosexual Relationships

A substantial portion of the research on desire focuses specifically on desire within heterosexual relationships. Within relationships, it is not uncommon for there to be desire discrepancies between partners, in which one partner experiences desire more or less frequently compared to their partner (Fahs et al., 2019). These discrepancies tend to occur the longer a relationship progresses and can have negative effects on overall relationship satisfaction (Mark, 2014). For women, desire has been shown to decline in long-term relationships (Basson 2002; Fahs et al., 2019; Levine 2002; Mark, 2014; Moor et al., 2021), and these declines are thought to be normative (Basson, 2002). As a relationship progresses, overfamiliarity and lack of novelty may also lead to decreased desire, especially for married women (Sims & Meana, 2010). Women in long-term relationships engage in more sex with their partners without feeling desire, possibly due to avoidance motives such as reducing conflict or enhancing the relationship (Katz & Tirone, 2019). While women’s sexual desire is negatively predicted by relationship duration, men’s desire is not shown to be as affected by the length of a relationship (Murray & Milhausen, 2012). Instead, men tend to over-perceive women's desire in initial encounters and under-perceive women's desire in long-term relationships, which may worsen the desire discrepancies in long-term relationships (Muise et al., 2016).

In a qualitative study examining how women negotiate desire discrepancies, Fahs and colleagues (2019) found five themes: declining sex, having unwanted sex, experiencing pressure for sex, feeling disappointed, and discussion discrepancies. The most common themes were experiencing pressure and engaging in unwanted sex, which has also been found in previous research (Brotto et al., 2009; Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2010). The negotiations of desire
discrepancies in relationships can lead to larger examinations of gender, power imbalances, and inequality.

In the current study, how women deal with desire discrepancies is explored, as well as how transparent they are when discussing desire discrepancies. While there is research on how the levels of desire differ between partners, there is little research on if the content of what partners desire differs. In the current study, we hope to gain a better understanding of how partners negotiate differences in the objects of their desire, and how this influences their relationship.

**Desire in LGBTQ+ Relationships**

It is essential that research continues to become more diverse and to include women who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, especially when examining topics such as sex and relationships. Much of the literature on women’s sexual desire focuses on heterosexual women, and nearly all the research on intimacy in relationships is in terms of heterosexual couples and conventional ideas about gender (Umberson et al., 2015). This makes it difficult to understand and interpret queer women’s desire, since it is often viewed through a heteronormative lens (Nimbi et al., 2020). While the current research on desire has found insignificant differences in sexual frequency, Nimibi and colleagues (2020) found that lesbian women experienced more sexual desire, more sexual partners, fewer issues with achieving orgasm, and longer sexual encounters when compared to heterosexual couples and gay men. Some research has found that people in same-sex relationships report higher levels of desire and satisfaction than those in heterosexual relationships (Holmberg & Blair; 2009). In addition, women in same-sex relationships were found to endorse a greater need for emotional intimacy when compared with men in same-sex relationships (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). To create intimacy, both straight and
lesbian women felt that minimizing boundaries (the ability to discuss intimate details about desires and emotions with a partner) was important (Umberson et al., 2015). However, women in lesbian relationships felt their partners agreed with this notion more so than straight women (Umberson et al., 2015). This may indicate that women in lesbian relationships are better at managing discrepancies in emotional closeness, intimacy, and boundary setting.

It is important to continue research on desire within LGBTQ+ relationships to have a deeper understanding of how sexual orientation impacts individual desire and desire within relationships. We aim to explore desire with women of varying sexual orientations to add to the literature which currently lacks research on LGBTQ+ women.

**Factors that Influence Desire**

There are many different factors that can shape and influence women’s desire in a variety of ways. Throughout history, women’s sexuality has been shaped by social and political changes, to a much more significant degree than men’s (Baumeister, 2000). This phenomenon is known as erotic plasticity, or “The extent to which sex drive is influenced by social, cultural, or situational factors” (Baumeister, 2004). Erotic plasticity may make women more likely to have sexual attitudes, desires, and behaviors based upon the culture and society in which they reside (McElwain et al., 2009). Women living in a culture where sex is often shamed may feel guilt for experiencing desire, which may lead to lower levels of sexual desire and satisfaction (Woo et al., 2012). For lesbian women, cultural factors such as minority stress and internalized homophobia may reduce sexual desire (Henderson et al., 2009). Compared to men’s sexuality, which is thought to be stable and consistent (Basson 2000), women’s sexuality is thought to be flexible and highly influenced through erotic plasticity. Given this, women may be less likely to label themselves with one specific sexual orientation. Women’s sexual identity may not be
dichotomous, and some women may feel restricted by labels of sexual orientation (McElwain et al., 2009). Understanding erotic plasticity is essential to examining the individualities present in women’s sexual desire and uncoupling the heteronormative assumptions of desire from women’s lived experiences.

In addition to erotic plasticity, there are many intrapersonal factors which can affect desire. In a study with straight, lesbian, and bisexual women, many women found their desire either increased or decreased as they got older or ebbed and flowed throughout their lifespan (Vowels, 2020). Life transitions such as menopause, childbirth, or being diagnosed with a medical illness can all attribute to the varying levels of desire women experience throughout their lifetimes (Carvalho & Nobre, 2010). Hormonal influences were also found to be a common theme associated with desire and desire discrepancies, with some women feeling increased or decreased desire due to oral contraceptives or their menstrual cycle (Vowels, 2020). Mental and physical health also influences women’s desire, with stress being the most common factor to impact desire. Multiple studies have found correlations between depression and desire, suggesting that desire may decrease with depression or perhaps low desire leads to depression or vice versa (Murray & Millhausen, 2012).

The ways in which women perceive themselves physically can have different impacts on their desires. In research on women’s fantasies, their focus tended to be on their own pleasure rather than their partners’ pleasure, indicating an intrapersonal influence on desire (Zurbriggen & Yost, 2004). Masters and Johnson (1970) conceptualized this idea of erotic self-focus as focusing on oneself during sexual activity and evaluating their appearance and performance during sexual activity. Compared to men, women are found to engage in more self-focus and cognitive distraction associated with body image (Meana & Nunnink, 2006). This may be due to how
women are objectified in society and media (Bogaret & Brotto, 2014). Women may be subconsciously more aware of themselves as objects of desire, which influences how they express their desires. Women who had lower self-worth and expressed negative attitudes toward their body image were found to have low sexual desire (Dosch et al., 2016). The implications body image has on women’s confidence and levels of desire demonstrate how important it is that we continue research on this topic so that women can feel more empowered and have increased desire during sexual encounters.

In the current study, we hope to achieve a better understanding of some of the factors that influence women’s desire, and if these factors influence the ways in which women communicate and fulfill desires. Additionally, we hope to learn more about how levels of desire change over time or with different partners and how desire is shaped through sexual experiences.

**Satisfying Women’s Sexual Desire**

While women’s sexual desire has been conceptualized in several ways, exactly what women desire (i.e., the objects of women’s desire) has not been extensively researched. In a qualitative research study where women discussed positive sexual encounters, Jones (2019) found four overarching themes: physical pleasure, emotional connection, comfort, and control over sexual scripts. Although physical pleasure is an important aspect of a satisfying sexual encounter, women prioritized the relational components of sexuality, such as intimacy, bonding, and reciprocity. From this research, it could be inferred that women may find relational aspects of desire to be more or equally as important as physical aspects. Mark (2014) and Brotto (2009) had similar findings, where women overall did not endorse physical objects of desire as much as men, and women’s desire was driven by more interpersonal and romantic factors, with emotional connection being a significant factor that predicted desire. Women endorsed desire for intimacy
and the desire to feel sexually desirable as well as emotional closeness and love (Mark, 2014). In her important piece on women’s desire, Meana (2010) highlights the idea that desire may not be fulfilled solely by sexual activity, and that simply feeling desired may be enough to feel fulfilled for some women. This desire to feel sexually desirable is a common theme among research and many women’s sexual fantasies (Brotto et al., 2009; Goldhammer and McCabe, 2011; Meana, 2010).

In the present study, we explore the various objects of women’s desire and fantasies, focusing on the extent to which interpersonal factors may play a critical role in women’s feelings of desire. Additionally, we explore the possible correlation between desire and fantasies, and if women’s fantasies relate to what they desire in real life.

**The Present Study**

This study examines the individual and subjective experiences women have with desire and the ways in which women communicate and fulfill their desires. While there is some research on women’s experiences with desire, there is scant qualitative research on the topic. This study's purpose is to contribute a more in-depth understanding of women’s desire, highlighting the multifaceted and unique ways in which women experience desire. By conducting qualitative research through a feminist and intersectional framework, we can bring more awareness to how women experience, communicate, and fulfill their desires. Women’s sexual desire is a complex topic that is often influenced by many heteronormative standards and gendered scripts. Therefore, by gaining a better understanding of women’s sexual desire, we can contribute to the literature and dispel the ways in which women’s desire is traditionally viewed through a male-centric lens.
Method

Participants

Twenty-one participants were recruited to participate in this qualitative study. Participants were recruited by members of the Psychology of Women Collaborative (a research lab at a university in the northeastern United States comprised of two faculty mentors and six undergraduate students) using social media advertisements and subsequent snowball sampling. Eligible participants were self-identified women, 18 years and older, with the sample deliberately selected to achieve greater demographic diversity.

All twenty-one participants were designated female at birth, self-identified as female, and their ages ranged from 20 to 63 years ($M=28.8\ SD=11.34$). The sample included 60% (13) White women (one specified Greek and one Jewish) and 40% (8) women of Color, including four Black women (one specified Cape Verdean), three Asian women (one specified South Asian), and one Hispanic woman. Six of the participants identified as not religious, four said they were raised with a religion but do not currently practice (one grew up practicing Hinduism, one Jewish, one Catholic, and one Christian), three identified as “spiritual, not religious,” three identified as Christian, two as Catholic, one as culturally Jewish, and one as Wiccan/Pagan. Twelve of the participants identified as heterosexual, two identified as bicurious, two identified as lesbian, two identified as fluid, two identified as bisexual, and one as pansexual. Eleven of the participants were in committed relationships but not married, five were married, three were single, and two were engaged.
Table 1

Participants Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sexual Identity</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oak</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willow</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Fluid(^1)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beech</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cedar</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sycamore</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redbud</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poplar</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elm</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cypress</td>
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<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurel</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alder</td>
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<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birch</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>Pansexual</td>
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<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>Married/2 relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) The term fluid was chosen for participants that did not identify themselves with a specific sexual identity, and did not fit into any of the other identities listed.
Procedure

Members of the Psychology of Women Research Collaborative posted information about the study to social networking apps (Instagram and Facebook). The virtual poster included the email of one of the members of the group. Participants who expressed interest in the study via email were sent a Google form to fill out their interview availability and were then assigned a participant number and pseudonym. Once participants scheduled a date with an interviewer, they were sent a consent form and a Zoom link. Zoom settings were adjusted so that only audio would be recorded and a transcript would be generated. The audio and transcripts were then saved in a protected cloud account. Thus, no video was recorded regardless of whether the participants or interviewers had their cameras on during the interviews.

Prior to starting the interview, participants were read a brief paragraph that reiterated the information from the consent form. They were reminded the audio of the interview would be recorded, and they were given the option to leave their camera on or off. The participants were told that participating in the interview was voluntary and that they did not have to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with. If the participant decided to terminate their interview at any point, they were told they would still be compensated for their time. Once participants were aware of what participating in the interview entailed, they were asked to give verbal consent. Upon obtaining verbal consent, interviewers asked participants for their preferred method of payment (Venmo, PayPal, Apple Cash, or personal check) for their $25 compensation. Participants received compensation within 48 hours.

Utilizing a semi-structured interview format, participants answered 14 questions related to their desire, and the interviews lasted anywhere from 25 to 95 minutes ($M = 40.19$ $SD = 19.19$). The interviews began with basic demographic questions, followed by three sections of interview
questions. The sections were designated as follows: “Desire” (5 questions), “Sexual Fantasies” (3 questions), and “Desire with Sexual Partners” (6 questions) (Refer to Appendix A for interview guide). The first set of questions were aimed at understanding how women view and experience desire. The second set of questions asked about sexual fantasies and how they may relate to feelings of desire. The final set of questions explored women’s experiences with sexual partners and how women communicate desire in relationships or during sexual encounters. The questions were open-ended to allow for follow-up questions and probes, promoting a free-flowing, conversational style interview. To end the interview, participants were asked if they had anything more to share regarding their experiences with desire, how they felt throughout the interview, and if they had any feedback for the interviewer.

Participants were read a short debriefing paragraph at the conclusion of the interview, which reiterated that their information would be stored on a protected cloud account and no identifying information would be kept. They were told they would receive a debriefing email with helpful information and resources (Refer to Appendix B for the list of resources). The debriefing email also included contact information for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the two faculty mentors’ emails. The participants were thanked for their contributions to the study and were told that the research team would be looking for common themes within the interviews.

**Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were completed, the first step of data analysis required editing the transcripts generated by Zoom. The process of transcribing required listening to the audio recording of the interview and matching the written transcripts as close to the audio recordings as possible. Each transcript was then checked by another team member. Next, thematic analysis
drawing from feminist theory (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used to code and interpret the data. Members of the research team utilized an open-coding method, which consisted of listening to interviews and highlighting parts that were relevant to the research question or potential themes. Through this coding process, the research team was able to work together to find important passages and quotes from the interviews to develop themes.

After discussing and compiling all the pertinent data, the team then worked on initial theme development. This consisted of discussing the different themes we found most relevant to the research question. After reviewing our findings from the open-coding, I began sorting the codes into similar groups, and then pulled out quotes from the interviews that were related to each of the different codes. The quotes were then cleaned up, with repeated words and filler words removed for clarity (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Through this process I was able to identify three overarching themes, each with two subthemes.

**Positionality**

It is important to express my positionality as a 22-year-old, White, cisgender, heterosexual woman. In addition, there were six members of the research team and two faculty members who assisted in all aspects of the research. All six students identify as White and cisgender, with four women and two men. Of the six students, three identify as heterosexual, one as lesbian, one as bisexual, and one as queer. Both faculty members identify as White, cisgender, heterosexual women.

Qualitative research is innately subjective, which enables intersections of mine and the research members identities to affect the analysis. Thus, it is imperative to recognize our positionalities and privileges as qualitative researchers analyzing a diverse sample of women's experiences with desire.
Results

This qualitative study examined how women communicate, fulfill, and experience desire. The ways in which participants have communicated, fulfilled, and experienced desire manifested in various ways, with women at different places on their journey of sexual fulfillment. With greater experience and/or the passage of time, nearly every participant discussed a change in their sexual behavior such as communicating their desires to a partner, fulfilling their desires, or developing a deeper understanding of their own desires through experience. Three overarching themes emerged that describe the different ways participants communicate, fulfill, and experience desire. The first overarching theme, *Let’s (Not) Talk about Sex*, encompasses how participants discussed not being open about their desires and the reasons why, with some participants moving from being less open to more open about communicating what they want. The second overarching theme, *(Un)Fulfilled*, explores the dichotomy between fulfilling a partner's desire versus fulfilling one’s own desires, with many participants discussing putting their partner’s needs before their own and how their desires may be fulfilled without achieving orgasm. *Journey to Liberation*, the final overarching theme, includes how participants’ experience of desire changes throughout life due to experiences, hormonal changes, and mental health awareness. See Figure 1 for a visual organization of the themes.

Through interpreting and analyzing the results, we found that prevailing gender norms, societal standards, and intersectionality influenced participants’ experiences with desire and affected all three aspects of the research question. For some participants, traditional gender roles heavily impacted how they experience and communicate desire. For others, they either are in the process of shedding or have shed societal influences as much as possible which also affects the
ways they experience desire. Additionally, aspects of participants’ identities, notably age and sexual orientation, influenced how they experience desire.

**Figure 1**

*Overarching Themes and Themes*

<table>
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<th>Let’s (Not) Talk about Sex</th>
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**Let’s (Not) Talk about Sex**

This overarching theme organizes the varying levels of honesty women have when communicating and expressing their desires, with some women being more open about what they want with partners than other participants. Many women described the reasons why they may not be as open, and the effort it takes to have more control over sexual scripts. This overarching theme consists of two themes separating the ways in which women communicate desire: *Good Girls Don’t Talk Dirty* and *Yes Means Yes*.

**Good Girls Don’t Talk Dirty**

Many of the participants discussed how they felt uncomfortable expressing their desires to a partner or potential partner, with a variety of reasons as to why expressing their desires can be difficult. Also, women talked about the diverse ways they may communicate with a partner, such as using media or technology to initiate conversations.
Redbud, a 21-year-old lesbian woman, described her reasoning for not being as open with her partner due to her concerns about how her sexual desires might make her partner feel and how she will be perceived.

I think if it's something that I know that they wouldn't be interested in I feel kind of awkward admitting that maybe I would be, just because it then puts them in a position of knowing this information of something that their partner might want to do, but they don't and I don't ever want to make someone feel like they have to do something because I wanna do it. I also feel like I sometimes just worry about what someone might think that says about me if I have a certain interest or something. Because there's a lot of stigma, I think, associated with, what you're interested in sexually.

Redbud, despite being in a long-term relationship, illustrated how she still feels that her partner may judge her desires. Due to this, she does not want her partner to feel she needs to fulfill those desires. Redbud narrows her communication of desires to what she believes her partner will be comfortable with, as a means of avoiding pressure or coercion. Redbud also brings up the idea of stigma surrounding desires as another reason to not be as open. It may be societal standards, rather than discomfort with her partner, that is causing her to not share her desires. When women are living in a culture where sex is shamed, they may feel guilt surrounding their desires (Conley et al., 2011; Woo et al., 2012) which, in Redbud’s case, is leading to a lack of openness and honesty with her partner.

In relation to feelings of guilt surrounding communication Elm, a 22-year-old heterosexual woman, describes not wanting to make her husband work to fulfill her desires.

Just sometimes I feel guilty for wanting more than I would normally ask for but sometimes it's just like you know. I definitely want more. But I don't want to make
you work harder. So sometimes I shy away from saying everything that I want…like I don't ask partners to go down on me, but sometimes there is a desire for it, and so sometimes I don't voice it, even if it is desired, only because I feel guilty making them work harder.

While Elm has a desire for her partner to perform cunnilingus, she refrains from asking for it due to feelings of guilt about making her partner put in effort to satisfy her needs. Elm frames the idea of her partner performing cunnilingus on her as if it is a chore to fulfill her desires, and that it is a task he may not want to perform. Societal standards may also be at play here, since it is deemed less acceptable for women to express their desires than it is for men, and more acceptable for women to attend to a man's needs rather than their own (Conley et al., 2011). It is possible that her partner may enjoy fulfilling her desires through oral sex, but since she feels it is a difficult task for him, she refrains from asking for it despite having that desire.

Due to the double standards for acceptable behaviors for men and women, a new insight found in our research shows that women sometimes need a buffer to initiate conversations about their desires. Take for example Ash, a 29-year-old heterosexual woman, and her response when asked if she initiates conversations about desire: “I guess. Like if it comes up on the TV or something, I will um say like, what do you think about that that kind of situation. Um, just in the moment.”

Rather than stating directly what she likes on the TV, Ash asks her partner more neutrally what he thinks about whatever they are watching together. Although she is initiating a conversation, she is allowing her partners desires to still drive the conversation. Using media or technology as a means of starting a conversation about desire with a partner was an experience several women referenced. While it is important to note that any sort of initiation is beneficial for
women’s sexual agency, it is interesting that in some cases it appeared to be used to alleviate discomfort about being more direct. Additionally, starting conversations based on scenarios presented in media limits women’s communication to the traditional sexual scripts portrayed in media (Ward et al., 2022). Thus, it is even more important for increased representation of empowered female sexuality in media.

Laurel, a 24-year-old heterosexual woman, brought up the idea of messaging about desires with a partner.

Yeah, like texting. I'm better than just like in face to face. I will never, I will never say what my desire is, like in front of his face. Like never. But in a text, yeah.

Laurel discussed how she will only have conversations about her desire over text with a partner, and how it is difficult to have conversations about desire in person. Thus, technology may be a beneficial tool for women to start initiating conversations with their partners, but the overall discomfort with direct, verbal communication may still be present for many women.

The findings may indicate that many women have underlying feelings of shame in expressing desires. Women may not communicate their desires to partners possibly due to “slut shaming,” which is deliberately associating individuals, primarily women, with sexual deviancy or promiscuity (Sweeney, 20107). Participants also brought up stigmas and lack of comfortability with a partner as reasons to not communicate desires. These ideas relate to the endorsement of traditional gender roles and societal standards for women, which ultimately hinders their sexual agency and satisfaction (Keifer & Sanchez, 2007; Kennett et al., 2013; Zurbriggen & Yost., 2004). An interesting finding to emerge from these data was the use of media in communicating desires, which there is scant research on. Despite these findings, several
women did discuss how they are growing into sexual agency and express their needs clearly, which is covered under the second theme, *Yes means yes*.

**Yes Means Yes**

A number of women described the difficulty and effort it takes to move from being submissive in communicating their desires, to taking more control over sexual scripts, which are gender-specific, heterosexual expectations for how men and women behave in a sexual encounter (O’Sullivan & Byers, 1992). When discussing this transition, several women mentioned that having a more supportive partner helped them to become more empowered in expressing their desires. There was one participant who said she always tries to be open with partners and explained her reason why. Most participants recognized some discomfort or effort when working towards being more direct.

Birch, a 25-year-old bicurious woman, described how having a partner that makes consent a priority allows her to be more open about communicating what she wants.

I try to be, even though it's hard, communicative about what I like and what I don't like. I feel like I've been better at that in the context of this most recent relationship, because my partner is really open and very into consent along the way and asking what feels good and pushing me to say it out loud instead of just show it, cause I think sometimes women have been conditioned not to voice what they desire and what feels pleasurable.

Birch also highlights how women are often socialized to be passive during sex, which makes trying to be communicative even more challenging. Zurbriggen and Yost (2004) found that men who do not conform to traditional gender roles and who place more importance on consent may help increase their female partner’s sexual agency. Thus, it may be as important for
men to shed societal standards as it is for women. If men worked towards promoting active and equal communication and made it a point to receive consent from their partners, it could help women to feel more empowered.

Some participants also discussed how they may pretend to be satisfied to avoid challenging or awkward conversations. Beech, a 21-year-old heterosexual woman, describes how she personally used to fake orgasms in the past, and in the context of her current relationship she is beginning to be more honest about being satisfied. Beech also discusses how she tried indirect communication which proved ineffective with her current boyfriend.

This is definitely something that I've had to work throughout, every partner I've had, I've definitely noticed that it's gotten easier, because of the kind of former boyfriends that I've had, I had a really hard time even telling them like that time we had sex like I didn't come, I didn't finish. That was really hard for me, and it's definitely gotten easier with my current boyfriend. I really made a point early in the relationship cause I was noticing every time he wanted to have sex I was kind of bitter about it, cause I was like well last time we had sex I didn't come, and I kind of tried to switch my mindset around that to be more like well, I didn't tell him that it wasn't working for me. I was just kind of, you know, I guess, hoping he'd notice which isn’t how effective communication works.

Opperman et al (2014) found that many women faked orgasms, the main reason being for their partner. Beech discussed how she would fake orgasms because she was nervous to speak up and say that she was not being satisfied. Both Birch and Beech expressed that conversations about their desires can be difficult to initiate, but both are working on being more expressive in their current relationships. While Birch said that she is starting to communicate more because her
partner wants her to be, Beech realized that she was not using effective communication in previous relationships which left her feeling dissatisfied.

While we discussed media and technology being used as a buffer in the *Good Girls Don’t Talk Dirty* theme, some participants found media enhanced their expression of desire and increased arousal outside the bedroom. Magnolia, a 33-year-old fluid woman, described how texting about fantasies has been beneficial for her and her partner.

So I never, like, sexually texted anybody before about fantasies. So, it's so awkward and really hard to even try to do that. I felt really uncomfortable. It was actually really funny. And we were actually just talking about it the other day from before, feeling really uncomfortable to now, and literally creating like a whole movie or a scenario like um you know, very detailed. And into it so it has drastically changed. you know, more with like being comfortable and being, you know, able to talk about that has created more of an opening to be able to talk more about the fantasies in depth.

For Magnolia, it appears that technology is being used as a supplemental tool to enhance communication with a partner rather than a way to avoid direct, in-person conversation. Magnolia discussed how she went from feeling uncomfortable creating fantasies with her partner, to now creating in depth scenarios. Magnolia went on to explain how these sexual messages allow for arousal to build up between her and her partner, which improved their sex life.

Birch, Beech, and Magnolia described in different ways how difficult it is to be direct with partners, and how it takes both effort from themselves and their partner to increase their communication skills. Contrastingly, Alder, a 25-year-old heterosexual woman, described how
she has always tried to be as open and direct with her sexual partners as possible, but still may not be as expressive with her desires until she is more comfortable.

I will just tell them, you know kind of in the moment, like if we're having sex like, you know. Choke me. Slap me whatever it is. You know, if it's before I'll be like, you know I have these sex toys that I'm bringing, if it was like a first time hook up, I wouldn't bring toys, but I'd be like, you know, choke me, or whatever spank me things like that. So, I'm just upfront about it. I find that confidence is more of a turn on for people just knowing what you want is a turn on versus being someone shy and scared.

Alder described how this form of direct, verbal communication with her partners is effective and went on to discuss how she enjoys taking control over sexual scripts. She also said that she is sexually satisfied the majority of the time with her partner. While Kennett et al., (2013) found that women who were more sexually resourceful had higher relationship satisfaction, it may also be that women who are more verbally direct about their desires are also more satisfied.

As we saw through various participants experiences with communication, many women need to actively work to become initiators in conversations about desires and will refrain from bringing up certain interests until they are more comfortable. The data suggests that being more direct and honest about desires almost always leads to greater satisfaction and increases women's control of sexual scripts and sexual agency.

(Un)Fulfilled

During the interviews, we asked participants what factors make an experience fulfilling versus unfulfilling. Many participants discussed how fulfilling a partner's needs is not always
satisfying and found themselves putting their partner's needs or desires before their own. This overarching theme highlights the contrasts between fulfilling a partner’s needs versus fulfilling your own needs. The first theme, *Aiming to Please*, consists of participants’ accounts of how they have been socialized to put their male partners needs before their own. The second theme, *I Don’t Have to Orgasm*, looks at the various ways women fulfill their desires, with orgasm often not being the top priority.

**Aiming to Please**

When asked about the ways in which women fulfill their desires, several of the participants brought up experiences where they felt unfulfilled or put their partner before themselves. We again see how prevailing gender roles and societal expectations impact women’s experiences with desire.

Willow, a 21-year-old fluid woman, discussed her past issues with playing a role during sex with her ex-boyfriend:

*I was not sexually satisfied until the last six months of our relationship…we started dating when I was seventeen...but I felt like I was faking a lot like I was playing a role, I wasn't being really honest when it came to sexual desire, and I think I was just like doing what I thought I was supposed to be doing. So, I was not satisfied at all the first year and a half.*

Willow recounts her experience as a teenage girl, being completely unsatisfied sexually and simply doing what she thought she was supposed to be doing to please her boyfriend. These ideas relate to Baumeister's (2000) finding that women are often willing to have sex devoid of desire to either develop or maintain relationships, which inherently lowers their desire. Additionally, qualitative research conducted by Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) found that
some women felt that to be a good girlfriend, they must fulfill the obligation to have sex despite it not being satisfying. While it may have been that she was playing a role to please her boyfriend, Willow at a young age may have lacked the interpersonal skills or education to help her navigate those situations.

Several other participants discussed feeling the need to please a partner as a teenager but becoming more satisfied during sex as they got older. However, there were some women who still felt they needed to satisfy their partner devoid of their own desires.

Maple, a 26-year-old bicurious woman, explained how she will perform oral sex on her boyfriend, despite having no personal desire or satisfaction from it.

I mean like, I don't, I personally don't like oral, which is pretty much entirely what he wants. So, even if I don't like it, I still try to do my best. Even if I'm very much not enjoying it, and not turned on at all.

Several participants had similar experiences, which relates to previous findings on women practicing sexual compliance in the absence of desire (Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2010). Additionally, it has been found that having sex to earn a partner’s approval is associated with dissatisfaction (Tirone & Katz, 2019). An interesting finding is that women who discussed not wanting to give their partner oral also said that they do not ask their partner to give them oral. This may be because women empathize with their partner and do not want to put their partner in a position they willingly put themselves in.

While it is evident that women in heterosexual relationships may be male-partner oriented, there is a lack of research on if bisexual women do the same when in relationships with men and women. Sycamore, a 21-year-old bisexual woman, described how her experiences with women and men are different.
I also think it would depend on which gender, like, if I was with a female, I think it's a lot easier to communicate your desires because you are talking to another woman so they kind of have an idea what desires that you would want ‘cuz, you are a female as well, so you know it feels good and you know what doesn't. But for the male gender, I feel like it's really hard because...I'm only 21, so I'm still pretty young so when I did, when I was with guys, I felt like I didn't want to hurt their egos or that would make them not talk to me anymore. So, I felt like because they were a male, I couldn’t voice my opinion what felt good because I felt like it was more about them than me.

When in a relationship with another woman, Sycamore explained how it is much easier to be satisfied because women’s desires are often similar. However, with men there is still a need to please out of fear of rejection or bruising a man’s pride. Holmberg and Blair (2009) found that women in same sex relationships reported higher levels of desire than those in mixed sex relationships, which may be related to experiences similar to that of Sycamore’s. It appears that when bisexual women are in relationships with other women, they conform less to traditional gender roles and are able to have their desires satisfied easier than with men.

Within this theme, many participants had experiences where they put their male partner’s needs before their own, which speaks to how prominently traditional sexual scripts and stereotypes can hinder women's desire. Several participants had experiences similar to Willow, where they were not sexually satisfied until later in life. Additionally, there were multiple participants who recounted experiences like Maple, where they performed a sexual act solely to please their partner. An interesting idea to emerge from this data is that bisexual women may conform to traditional gender roles when with male partners, yet with women they feel more
equal. Future research could examine this topic further and see how gender roles influence bisexual and lesbian women.

**I Don’t Have to Orgasm**

Participants described many ways in which their desires can be fulfilled. We found that women did not always emphasize the need for a sexual encounter to end in orgasm, and that other relational and physical components were important in creating a satisfying experience. Additionally, many participants were brought up not needing to satisfy desire when they feel it, with some participants more open about discussing self-pleasure than others.

When Alder, a 25-year-old heterosexual woman, was asked how she fulfills her desires, she explained how she always likes to fulfill her desires with a partner: “Anything but doing something to myself, so like usually with a partner? Um, you know whether, if it's oral sex, or intercourse, or just like as simple as like making out, I mean, or kissing, or whatever it is, or stroking each other things like that.”

Alder described how fulfilling desire can be done through traditional heterosexual intercourse, but sometimes her desires can be fulfilled through physical contact with her partner that may or may not lead to intercourse. Mark et al. (2014) found that men's desire almost always leads to orgasm, while women prioritize interpersonal and romantic factors more than orgasm. This may relate to Alder's response, as she finds non-genital physical touch that typically does not lead to orgasm fulfilling. Alder went on to explain later in the interview that she does not masturbate because she finds it unfulfilling.

Interestingly, participants were split on whether they discussed masturbation or not. About half of the participants shared that they masturbate, and half either said they rarely masturbate or did not bring up masturbation at all. It may be because women endorse emotional
and interpersonal factors more than men that they do not satisfy themselves through masturbation as much as men. Alternatively, it may be that women did not discuss self-pleasure because it is not as normalized for women to talk about masturbating as it is for men (Conley et al., 2011).

Birch, a 25-year-old bicurious woman, discussed how she fulfills her desires through masturbation, and also through various, non-sexual ways.

I'm into masturbation, too, of not always relying on another person to fulfill that desire for you, and finding ways whether it be yeah, like masturbating or doing something like art, or going for a walk or hiking, you know, just doing other things, that if you're feeling desire and you're feeling pleasure, and you want to have, a peak experience of some kind, being able to make that yourself, and not always rely on someone else to do it for you.

Birch, in comparison to Alder, highlights the idea that it is important to fulfill desires without needing a partner. Aside from masturbation, Birch may also engage in other non-sexual activities she enjoys to fulfill her sexual desire. It appears that Birch sometimes channels or sublimates her sexual desires into creating “peak” experiences for herself that are completely non-sexual, which is something there is limited research on. Again, we see that participants describe different ways to fulfill desire that do not necessarily result in orgasm.

Mesquite, a 63-year-old bisexual woman, described how she prefers not to orgasm each time she has sex.

So, there are times where I actually like to be sexually aroused, and I'm differentiating, I think, desire and sexual arousal, which is the physical part.
Right? So, it's hard to find a need as well. Would life be better if I satisfied it?

And it doesn't necessarily mean orgasm. There are times where I crave touch, and I crave. I call it like slight arousal. But sometimes it's nice just to let it sit there and satisfy it another day, because then it's like an explosion, which is lots of fun. So I guess half the time, not all the time maybe, less than half the time [I feel the need to satisfy my desire].

Rather than reaching an orgasm whenever she has sex with a partner, Mesquite enjoys letting her desires linger until the next time she has sex. She explained that in doing so, she achieves much greater orgasm and sexual satisfaction, Mesquite, similarly to Alder, also discussed that she sometimes will only crave non-genital physical touch. In Fahs and Plantes (2017) research on what constitutes good sex, they found that many women placed less emphasis on orgasm, despite media portrayals of orgasm being the pinnacle of sexual satisfaction. Within our study, we see how orgasm may not play as significant of a role in creating a pleasurable experience, and that there are many other factors that contribute to fulfilling desires.

Hemlock, a 33-year-old pansexual woman, described a different reason than Mesquite as to why she does not feel she needs to orgasm when she has sex with a partner:

I don't necessarily feel like I need to have an orgasm to feel satisfied in sex with a partner. If it's with myself, then yeah, I would say, I probably do. But yeah, with a partner, because there are so many different things that I find sexually that I like, and I've never really had that. I've never really believed that that is necessary or that's the end. I'll be all basically like that for having sex. So, I mean which is
partly, I've just had to adopt that because it is tough for me to orgasm with a partner. So, it doesn't happen that often, when it does, it's great, but I definitely don't feel like I need that to enjoy it and to feel satisfied. I really, I definitely enjoy cuddling after and talking and that kind of thing a lot, too. So... and there's definitely, there's plenty of times when I've gotten really intense pleasure... that still didn't result in an orgasm, but I really enjoyed it.

Hemlock brought up an important idea of sex not being goal-oriented, and that she does not go into a sexual encounter expecting an orgasm to happen. Since it can be difficult to orgasm with a partner, which is something many women struggle with for a variety of reasons (Meana, 2010), Hemlock has adapted to sex where she has pleasure, but may not have an orgasm. Meana (2010) discussed how looking at sexual desire as goal driven, specifically for women, can be limiting. This may be due to all the different ways women can fulfill desire, or the trouble women sometimes have reaching orgasm during partnered intercourse.

Our participants discussed the different ways they fulfill desires without orgasm necessarily being an end goal, several participants also expressed that when they feel desire, they do not necessarily feel they need to act on it. This idea of not acting on feelings of desire has been covered in literature (Meana, 2010), but the reasons for not acting upon desires remain primarily unknown.

Aspen, a 35-year-old heterosexual woman, described why she may not act on her desires: “well the person might not be around at that time, I might be alone, it might be like just the timing isn’t right, like it could be like a song that I'm listening to on my way to work and then it just the feeling doesn’t always last. It comes and goes.”
Aspen said that she does not feel a need to fulfill desires if she is by herself or if she randomly feels desire at an inopportune time. The idea that feelings of desire come and go is something several other participants brought up. It seems that it is fairly easy for women to “shut off” feelings of desire or push those feelings away if the timing is not right or they do not want to masturbate. These ideas may add to the argument that desire for women is more mental than physical.

**Journey to Liberation**

This overarching theme explores how women's desire changes over time, and the intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that affect desire. This theme includes how many evolve in their response to societal expectations that influence body image and sexuality. Furthermore, hormonal changes and mental health were found to have an impact on desire. Within this overarching theme there are two themes, *Shedding Heteronormative Expectations* and *Waves of Desire*. *Shedding Heteronormative Expectations* examines societal norms concerning feminine appearance and sexuality that influence a woman’s body image and sexual orientation, that women have either shed or are in the process of shedding. *Waves of Desire* outlines how desires may fluctuate within a woman’s lifetime and includes how hormonal changes and mental health play a role in the ebbs and flows of desire.

**Shedding Heteronormative Expectations**

When women discussed their desires changing over time, some key factors that influenced this were certain societal standards, specifically regarding sexuality. Growing into understanding one’s own sexuality can impact how one experiences desire. Within this subtheme, ideas about sexual education, coming out, and understanding oneself are explored.
For many women, a first relationship can be difficult to navigate. Poplar, a 21-year-old lesbian woman, discussed how she felt in her first relationship with a woman in high school. She talked about how uncomfortable it was to figure out who she was, and how being gay was not considered normal.

I think it's like so awkward and just figuring out who you are and that's even like another topic of I don't know it was, I think she was more comfortable talking about those things, and I wasn't and being young is like you didn't have like the best sex ed in high school and stuff like that. [Interviewer: So especially for women who love other women like you're not getting any education on it at all] Yeah. So, I had to figure that out on my own...It's like, not it wasn't considered like normal.

Since Poplar was not educated on anything regarding her sexuality, it made it much more difficult to learn about her own desires. Overcoming the awkwardness of learning about being in a relationship can be difficult for all women, but especially queer women. In a comprehensive review of the current literature on sexual education in schools, the sexual education was primarily heteronormative, which leaves LGBTQ+ youth with a lack of information needed to understand themselves and make informed decisions on their sexual health (Rabbitee, 2020).

In a similar way, Willow, a 20-year-old fluid woman, discussed how the stigma surrounding sexuality while she was growing up made it challenging to feel comfortable with her sexuality.

Growing up my biggest thought was always about my sexuality, and literally in the midst of high school hallway I would always have these thoughts of if you don't step on this color square, then you're gonna be gay, and it's going to be the
end of the world. And it was just this horrible thing, and that was so hard for me.

But the second I realized it was like oh, my brain is one tricking me and two if I did have those thoughts, it's not bad. It's not a big deal. It took so much value away from it.

Meyer (2003) found that within a society where heterosexuality is considered normal or preferred, individuals who identified as LGBTQ+ experienced more stressors due to stigma. Even though it is becoming increasingly more prevalent for people to openly identify as LGBTQ+ (Phillips et al., 2019), for Willow those societal expectations still made it difficult to accept her sexuality. Willow also discussed being diagnosed with OCD, which contributed to her intrusive thoughts surrounding her sexuality. When she did accept her sexuality, she was able to be more honest with her partner, saying “when I accepted that part of myself [sexuality] and we started dating again like it was like I was way more comfortable.” When individuals become comfortable with their sexuality and embrace their identity, they develop a greater acceptance of themselves (Rostosky et al., 2018). For Willow, it was important to overcome the negative/intrusive thoughts about her sexuality in order to become more comfortable with herself and with partners.

For both Willow and Poplar, they were able to shed societal standards surrounding sexuality at a young age, possibly due to the increased acceptance of non-heterosexual orientations within the past decade (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019). Developing an understanding of one's sexuality does not happen at the same pace for each individual and can be dependent on maturational factors and societal changes (Floyd & Bakman, 2006). Coming out, for some, may be a lifelong process, or experienced later in life. Mesquite, a 63-year-old bisexual woman, for
example, described how she only discovered her sexuality later in life once she was out of an unhealthy relationship.

Knowing I'm bi has only come about in the past 4 years. So it was only, you know. I had thought about it. I had been in trios with, but they were enforced situations, with my ex. So, I had no idea whether I really enjoyed it, or was just trying to please him and not get yelled at or worse. And I didn't know, and it wasn't until about 4 years ago, with my girlfriend, I told her I had a crush on her, but I didn't even know if I was bi or not. And we let, we went slowly and from there.

Once Mesquite was out of the unhealthy relationship and not held back by pressure to please her partner, she realized that she was bisexual on her own terms. While there is limited research on sexual desire for LGBTQ+ women, our data indicates that lesbian and bisexual women often need to shed societal standards to understand and be confident in their sexuality.

Through Poplar, Willow, and Mesquito's responses, it is evident that there is a process of shedding heteronormative expectations to understand ones sexuality. Another participant, Birch, discussed how she felt pressured by heteronormative expectations to shave her body hair, which in turn caused her to question her sexuality. Birch discussed her journey with healing her relationship with her body hair, and how she went from feeling insecure to more desirable.

I've been trying to heal my relationship with body hair too because for my whole life I believed that I was only desirable if my legs were shaven, my armpits were shaven, I didn't have any hair on my face except for my eyebrows. It just made me really uncomfortable in my own skin, and I feel like that one of the reasons that I was interested in dating women was because I hadn't found any male
partners that were comfortable with my body as is, and I wasn't super comfortable
with them saying, hey this is something that matters to me so either get with it or
see you later. So, it was just this kind of thing that I internally was uncomfortable
with shaving and managing my body hair to serve another person's interests.

In Birch's response, it is evident that societal beauty standards affected how desirable she
felt. Research has found a correlation between negative body image and decreased sexual desire
in women (Dosch et al., 2016). Furthermore, Birch cites her body hair as a reason she thought
about dating women. This may imply that Birch feels a woman would be more understanding of
her body hair, or that having body hair would not matter to a woman as much as a man. For
Birch, being in a relationship with another woman would potentially decrease the influence of
societal beauty standards.

Waves of Desire

Nearly every participant mentioned their desire changing over their life. This subtheme
captures the different ways women discussed their desires changing over time, and how their
desires may ebb and flow. Additionally, this theme includes the hormonal and mental health
factors that can influence the ebbs and flows of sexual desire.

Cypress, a 24-year-old heterosexual woman, talked about how her desire has changed
with age.

I feel like sexual desire definitely evolves through our time. If you were to ask me
all these questions, maybe ten years ago, when I was a teen, I would not...it's so
young, but it would not have the same answers that I would have now. So it's
pretty cool. How that's ever changing, depending on who you're around or your
environment.
Cypress said how her answers to the interview questions would have been significantly different when she was a teenager. She also mentioned how desire not only changes as you grow older, but also changes depending on the people you surround yourself with. In a study with straight, lesbian, and bisexual women, many women found their desire either increased or decreased as they got older or ebbed and flowed throughout their lifespan (Vowels, 2020).

While desires may ebb and flow simply due to one’s environment and sexual partners, they can also be impacted by hormonal changes. Mesquite brought up how as she has aged, her desire for sex has remained constant, but the actual physical arousal has decreased.

I can feel hormonally for the first time in my life, at 63, I need lube. And that’s why I was different. That in my head. Yeah, I really want sex. I really want touch. I really want the closeness. I really want the fun. It's all of those things. And then, when we get down to it, or the situation arises where the flirting has increased, and I kept wanting all these experiments and stuff I suddenly don't want to. And that's really bothering me that it's been decreasing. Bothers me because it’s given so much to my life. It gives so much to my life and connecting with people. And it's only that in the past 20 years I threw off the shackles of good girl, bad girl type shit. You know. And it's bothering me. It's bothering me a lot. And I know I, for medical reasons I can't do hormone therapy. And I'm beginning to think I should. Yeah, it's really bothering me.

Mesquite discusses how she has only later on in life became empowered in her desire, and how beneficial sexual interactions have been for her in recent years. Mesquite’s experience with a lack of physical arousal relates to past research which indicates that sexual arousal is lower with older, postmenopausal women (McCabe & Goldhammer, 2012). Mesquite also
discusses this division between her mental and physical desire, where she wants desire mentally but physically finds it difficult to become aroused. The division between mental and physical desire has been heavily contested, with some researchers believing that desire is separate from physical arousal, and some combining both into one definition. Mesquite’s experience may add to the literature indicating that desire and arousal are two distinct factors, and one can be present without the other (Zurbriggen & Yost, 2004).

Similar to Mesquite, Jacaranda, a 55-year-old heterosexual woman, talked about the stigmas surrounding conversations about menopause, and how she was unaware of how much menopause would affect her desire.

I think the people don't explain menopause until you're in it and so its this taboo, and especially...my American friends don't really talk about those things anymore, or if they do its ever only when they're in it sort of it may come up as a commentary after they went through it. But nobody really coaches you like, hey you're going to experience this and that, but they may just talk about hot flashes, and I don't know your hair starts standing down, and but I'm like nobody ever talked about how I was going to feel sexually, just nobody prepared you nobody...

I'm not really sure what you would read in order to get a gradual sense of it as you go.

Studies have found a correlation between lower sexual desire and menopause, and one study found that women who experience other menopause related symptoms (e.g., hot flashes, fatigue, difficulty sleeping) reported significantly lower sexual desire than women who did not exhibit those symptoms (Woods et al., 2010). Despite this understanding, many women report having limited information or support in understanding menopause (Edwards et al., 2021). In a
recent study, women who were exposed to podcasts explaining menopause were better able to understand the importance of discussing the topic with other women (Edwards et al., 2021). It is evident through Jacaranda’s experience and recent research that it is important for society to work to destigmatize menopause by providing women with more support and resources.

While Mesquite and Jacaranda discussed age-related hormones impacting their desires, hormones connected to menstruation also were found to either increase or decrease desire. Hemlock, a 33-year-old pansexual woman, discussed the different ways she feels at the various stages of her menstrual cycle.

I don't feel great around my period, but I didn't realize how much it affected my mental health as well… I've struggled with various issues over the years, and they can be triggered by other stuff, too, for sure, but... I definitely have noticed that I would get PMS. And I would get really, irritable and kind of, like, low, level, depressed, and that kind of thing for a few days before, and around when I start my period... I guess I didn't realize how much... the other aspects like when I'm ovulating, I tend to get much more... manic...like, way more high energy, and just yeah, I mean basically hypomanic I guess you could say…I do I track my cycle, I have been doing that for a few years now, so, which is very helpful but I didn't really until, yeah, probably 3, 4 years ago. Yeah, learning stuff it’s hard. Life is definitely much more stable in my thirties. I like it.

Hemlock also discussed feeling more desire when she is ovulating, and a decrease in desire when she is menstruating. The idea that menstruation and desire is connected was brought up by several participants. In contrast with Hemlock, Cedar, a 21-year-old heterosexual woman, simply stated “I'm more horny when I'm on my period. I don’t know if that’s like a thing.”
Hemlock’s and Cedar’s varying experiences with desire and menstruation relate to previous research conducted by Vowels (2020) who found that hormonal influences were a common theme associated with desire and desire discrepancies, with some women feeling increased or decreased desire due to oral contraceptives or their menstrual cycle. Hemlock also brought up feeling depressed during certain parts of her menstrual cycle. It may be that hormonal changes influence mental health and vice versa, and both have the ability to affect sexual functioning and desire.

Several participants cited how their mental health has impacted their desires. Participants discussed issues ranging from stressful events in their lives, to different medications that impacted their desire levels. Throughout this subtheme, we see how much sexual desire can be influenced by outside forces, and the importance of taking care of one’s mental health.

Beech, a 21-year-old heterosexual woman, described how taking certain medications for her anxiety has dramatically lowered her desire to have sex.

I have kind of always been the one who's less into sex than my partner and I'm on a medication Venlafaxine or Effexor and it's an anti-anxiety med. And when I first got on an anti-anxiety med I got on Lexapro and I really noticed, I was not interested in sex at all after that, doing things that would normally feel good didn't really feel good so if I was having sex at that point, it was purely for my partner, and I've definitely like Venlafaxine it's not as extreme. But I do really wonder, I've been trying to cut my dose and I've been trying to get off of it, and I wonder if when I'm off of it, if I'll notice that I have more desire than I did previously.

In Beech's case, both mental desire and physical arousal were affected by her anti-anxiety medication. While Caravalho and Nobre (2010) found that life changes such as diagnosis of a
medical illness can attribute to the varying levels of desire throughout women's lifetimes, the medications used to treat those illnesses have an impact on desire as well. For example, Basson (2018) found that the current literature shows a correlation between sexual dysfunction and the treatments for psychiatric disorders. Additionally, common side effects of SSRIs may include reduced interest in sex and difficulty to become or maintain arousal (Corliss, 2022).

Of all the factors women discussed that lower their desire, stress was the most prevalent. Participants described stress manifesting in different ways from traumatic life events to stress caused by work related issues.

Alder, a 25-year-old heterosexual woman, discussed how a few major life events happened in a short time span, which had a significant impact on her desire. Yeah, I'll be totally open. I had a miscarriage a couple of months ago, and I put sex on pause for two months because...what my body went through, what my mind went through, and just kind of freaked me out, you know I've had a few losses this year, both my grandmothers had passed away so, of course, during that time, I'm not gonna be super aroused so kind of more depressing events like that will interfere with my sexual desire, and just anything surrounding that.

For Alder, several traumatic life experiences occurring within the last year had greatly affected both her mental desire to have sex, and her body physically. In a study with women who had recurrent pregnancy loss and depression, their sexual function was decreased (Fertil Res Pract, 2020). Additionally, studies have shown that experiencing a miscarriage can have negative effects on a couple’s sexual functioning (Swanson et al., 2003).

While Alder discussed specific life events that lead to grief and lower desire, other participants described how their general mindset can play a role in decreasing their desire.
Magnolia, a 33-year-old fluid woman, for example, discussed how it is important for her to have emotional stability in order to have sexual desire: “So if I'm emotionally, not feeling stable or secure, then the desire to play or to try new things is close to none. So, it's really determined on where you are in your relationship or with yourself. Yeah. Helps you to like either want you or not.”

For Magnolia, a lack of emotional stability may limit how much she wants to experiment in the bedroom. Khavari and colleagues (2020) found a positive correlation between high emotional intelligence and increased sexual functioning. Additionally, she brought up the importance of feeling secure in yourself and in your relationship with others. For Magnolia, we see how important mental health and specifically emotional stability is for her to experience sexual desire.

**Conclusion**

This qualitative study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of women’s sexual desire. Specifically, how women communicate their sexual desires to partners, how women fulfill their desires, and the experiences women have with desire were explored. The data suggests that women may not communicate their desires for reasons such as slut shaming, stigma, and lack of comfort with a partner. Becoming more direct about communication is something women may struggle with but doing so appears to lead to greater satisfaction and increased reciprocity. Additionally, women may use media and technology as a way to initiate conversations about their desires. Women fulfill their desires in numerous ways, with orgasm not always the main priority or end goal of a sexual encounter. However, participants also discussed ways in which they fulfilled their partners’ desires rather than their own. Women’s experiences with desire
change throughout life, and some factors that cause a change in desire and desirability include shedding societal standards, hormones, and mental health.

Woven throughout this study are ideas about heteronormative standards and societal expectations that women may have shed or are in the process of shedding. While women have become more empowered in taking more control over sexual scripts and fulfilling their desires, the need to please partners over themselves and an inhibition to share desire with partners were still present. It is important to note that more research highlighting sexual pleasure, and more media portrayal of women’s pleasure needs to be conducted in order to normalize women’s experiences with sexuality (Jones, 2019).

**Limitations**

A limitation of this study is self-selection bias, as only women who felt comfortable discussing their sexual desire participated. Additionally, participants could have been influenced by financial incentive to participate in the study.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Many participants discussed a change overtime in their desires or how they communicate desires. Due to the cross-sectional design of this study, we only interviewed women at one point in time. Future research should investigate how women’s desire changes overtime by using a longitudinal study design. The data from bisexual and lesbian women were incredibly valuable, and it would be interesting to conduct a study on the difference in communication patterns for bisexual women when their partners are men versus women.
References


Appendix A

Interview Questions

Demographic
1. How old are you?
2. What is your sexual orientation?
3. What is your race/ethnicity?
4. Do you identify with or practice any religion?
5. How would you describe your current relationship status?
   a. If you are in a relationship, how long have you been together?

Desire
6. What does sexual desire mean to you?
7. How do you know when you are feeling desire?
   a. Is your desire spontaneous, or responsive to specific cues?
   b. Are there specific things that increase your desire?
      i. What are your turn-ons?
   c. Are there specific things that decrease your desire?
8. How frequently do you experience desire?
9. When you experience desire, do you feel the need to satisfy it?
   a. Why or why not?
   b. In what ways do you satisfy your desire?
10. Are you ever concerned about your desire being too high or too low?

Sexual Fantasies
11. Do you have sexual fantasies?
    i. From what point of view are your fantasies? (Are you the actor or do you see things happening to you? 1st person, 3rd person, etc.)
    ii. Who are the people involved in your fantasy? (Partner, stranger, celebrity, multiple people, etc.)
    iii. When fantasizing, do you fantasize more about giving or receiving pleasure?
    iv. Do your sexual fantasies relate to your desire?
    v. Have you ever acted out a fantasy in real life?
12. Do you find yourself desirable?
    i. Why or why not?
13. Do you have the desire to be desired?

Desire with Sexual Partners
14. How do you communicate your desire to a partner? (Verbal or non-verbal behaviors)
   a. Do you feel your communication is effective?
15. Do you initiate conversations about sexual desire with sexual partners?
   a. If no, why not?
   b. If yes, what does that look like?
16. When discussing your sexual desire with a sexual partner, are you honest about your personal desires?
   a. Are there reasons why you would be more or less honest with sexual partners about your sexual desires?
   b. What about sexual fantasies?
17. How often is your desire satisfied with a partner?
   a. What makes a sexual experience satisfying?
   b. What makes a sexual experience unfulfilling?
18. What happens if your sexual desires differ from your partners?
19. What factors contribute to pursuing a sexual partner or encounter?
   a. What might make you hesitate in pursuing a sexual encounter?
      i. Do you see any downsides to fulfilling desire with a partner?

Closing Question
20. Is there anything else you would like to share?
Appendix B

Resources for Participants

The following links were provided to participants upon completion of their interviews in a follow up email. All of the resources were obtained from Google and were reviewed by the BSU IRB.

Resources:

https://shcs.ucdavis.edu/health-topic/sexual-communication
https://wellness.sfsu.edu/sexual-communication-consent
https://time.com/5775442/sexual-relationships-inequality/