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**The Flavors of Sexual Liberation:  
Exploring the Normalization and Dangers of  
Non-Vanilla Sex and Relationship Portrayals on TikTok**

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores how the theories of postfeminism, neoliberalism, social learning, and sexual scripting contribute to the normalization of toxic, abusive, non-vanilla sex and relationships, especially as it is seen on TikTok. Though it delves into the roles that erotic novels and pornography play in the perpetuation of this phenomenon, this thesis mainly focuses on how women on TikTok exemplify the postfeminist, neoliberal ideals of sexual empowerment and freedom of choice. It also highlights how TikTok's popularization of a modified traditional sexual script results in the shaming of conventional sex practices and the acceptance of sexual violence against women.

**Keywords:** *toxic relationships, rough sex, BDSM, vanilla, non-vanilla, kink, postfeminism, neoliberalism, social learning, sexual scripting, TikTok, pornography, #BookTok, sexual liberation, sexual violence, consent, rape culture, normalization, romanticization*

**Type of Project:** Theoretical Dissertation

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Dissertation Introduction

*“I want you to run a knife all over my body and press it into me if I make a noise.”*

Toxic relationships, rough sex, and BDSM. These things are not considered uncharted territories, nor is there a lack of academic research covering them. What is new, however, is how these types of sex and relationships are being portrayed in the media, and particularly on TikTok, as the everyday woman’s preference. Agentic, empowered, and sexually liberated, women now are the ones romanticizing abusive relationships and vocally expressing desire for violent sexual acts like strangulation, spitting, slapping, and knife play. In contrast, women who do not have the same desires – women who prefer “vanilla” sex – are portrayed as prudish, boring, and sexually inhibited. Whether they are forced to succumb to peer pressure or their partner nonconsensually performs these more violent sexual acts, women are dealing with the repercussions of the normalization of non-vanilla sex and relationships, which brings about the question: Why is this phenomenon occurring in this historical moment, and what kind of consequences does it bring?

Postfeminism and neoliberalism are theories that provide potential explanations for the occurrence of this phenomenon, in addition to social learning and sexual scripting theories. As defined by Rosalind Gill, postfeminism can be described as a “distinctive sensibility, made up of a number of interrelated themes,” and these themes include the idea that “femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference” (Gill 2007, 147). These notions are heavily tied to the theory of neoliberalism, in which individuals are seen as “entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating, and self regulating” and who “must bear full responsibility for their life biography, no matter how severe the constraints upon their action” (Gill 2007, 147). Both of these theories focus on the agentic, self-reinvented individual and are defined by the idea of choice. This thesis will explore why postfeminism and neoliberalism are critical in understanding the romanticization and normalization of toxic, non-vanilla sex and relationships.

In addition, social learning and sexual scripting are two theories that are relevant to this thesis topic and that go hand-in-hand. Developed by Albert Bandura, social learning theory purports that people learn through observing others, modeling others' behaviors, and imitating what they see (Bandura 1986). Bandura also argued that this kind of observational learning can occur not only through real-life interactions but also through various forms of media, which is significant in understanding how TikTok users accept certain behaviors as norms or ideals (Bandura 1986). Social scripting theory, introduced by Gagnon and Simon in 1975 and first applied to sexual behavior, points to the idea that "much of sexual behavior seems to follow a script" which is "similar to scripts that stage actors use to guide their behavior" (Wiederman 2005, 496; Gagnon & Simon 1975). These social, or sexual, scripts instruct people how to perform their sexualities and sexual activities, and they have three levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts. The first two levels of scripting theory are most relevant to this thesis. Learning these scripts through forms of media falls into the cultural scenario level, while acquiring these scripts from conversations with friends or peers (whether that be online or in person) falls into the interpersonal script level. Wiederman writes, "These social scripts are communicated through the examples displayed by members of the culture who have already adopted the scripts as well as through mass media depiction of how people act and react in particular situations" (Wiederman 2005, 496).

Through various forms of media, including books, pornography, and social media, the traditional sexual script, in which the man is dominant sexual aggressor and the woman is the submissive sexual gatekeeper, has been modified to reflect postfeminist and neoliberal ideals. These ideals maintain the woman's submission but focus on repositioning the woman as an agentic, empowered, hypersexual being, and this modified traditional sexual script is being normalized and romanticized on popular platforms like TikTok. With TikTok growing in popularity over recent years, its influence in the lives of its users has become extensive. As of 2023, TikTok has over 1.60 billion users worldwide, 1.05 billion of which use the application monthly (Ruby 2023). Not just another form of social media, TikTok is a "site for meaning-making practices that begin on the app but quickly migrate into other digital and analog spaces in our day-to-day lives" (Boffone 2022, 13).

The normalization and romanticization of toxic, abusive, non-vanilla sex and relationships, particularly on platforms like TikTok, raise important questions about the origins

and consequences of this phenomenon. For this thesis, postfeminism and neoliberalism provide critical frameworks for understanding the shift in the traditional sexual script and the emphasis on women's individual choice and sexual empowerment. Moreover, social learning theory and sexual scripting theory provide insight into how observational learning through media like TikTok influences the acceptance of certain sexual behaviors as ideals or norms. This thesis explores the origins of the romanticization of toxic, abusive, non-vanilla sex and relationships through erotic novels and #BookTok, pornography, the idealization of non-vanilla sex on TikTok, and the concept of vanilla shaming. It also utilizes related empirical research and TikTok examples to illustrate the blurring of boundaries between consensual acts and sexual violence in which this phenomenon has assisted.

## **1.2 Defining “Non-Vanilla”**

To provide clarity and coherence, I must first define what I mean by “non-vanilla” sex and relationships. In related empirical research, and in most everyday conversations, the terms “rough sex,” “BDSM,” and/or “kink” are used instead of “non-vanilla sex.” I find these terms to not be inclusive enough of all the types of sex and relationships that are being romanticized and normalized at the moment, through platforms like TikTok. To explain, rough sex is typically seen as “sexual acts involving physical aggression, such as biting, scratching, fisting, and spanking” (Vogels and O’Sullivan 2019, 654). While BDSM and kink can involve some of these things, and rough sex can include some BDSM or kink practices like bondage, the two are not synonymous. One of the biggest differences between rough sex and BDSM/kink is the idea of consent. Within BDSM/kink communities, consent and clear, open communication are of utmost importance, with the foundation being “structured on open communication regarding the enactment of mutually consensual practices” (Vogels and O’Sullivan 2019, 654). Rough sex, on the other hand, “might not incorporate explicit consent between partners and is desired by at least one partner (not necessarily both or all partners)” (Vogels and O’Sullivan 2019, 654). Additionally, BDSM/kink do not necessitate sexual activity; they involve a variety of things that can range from bondage (without sex) to mental or emotional manipulation.

Moreover, the types of people who use the term “vanilla” to describe conventional sexual behavior have expanded. Previously, “vanilla” was “used by BDSM participants to refer to

non-BDSM sex, often with strong pejorative connotations (e.g. boring, unfulfilling, stereotypical, conforming, mindless, self-gratifying)” (Simula 2019a, 211). Now, people on social media have adopted the term to refer to any type of sexual or romantic relationship they deem to have those same connotations. According to TikTok user standards, someone can be considered “vanilla” if they don’t engage in rough sex practices, *or* if they don’t engage in things that belong to the world of kink and BDSM that are not inherently rough, like orgasm control, degradation, humiliation, and Daddy/girl roleplay. Therefore, I will be using the term “non-vanilla” as an umbrella term that encompasses rough sex practices as well as BDSM/kink practices.

### **1.3 Trigger Warning and Limitations**

Before continuing, I want to provide both a trigger warning and a disclaimer of limitations for this thesis. The topic involves discussion of extremely sensitive topics, including rape, sexual assault, and violence towards women. Please be aware that reading this material might be distressing or triggering for some, and I encourage readers to prioritize their mental and emotional health while consuming this content.

Second, I want to make it abundantly clear that this thesis is by no means an attempt to slut shame, villainize the BDSM/kink communities, or judge individuals’ sexualities and/or sexual preferences. The TikToks that are utilized as examples in this thesis often are tagged with hashtags associated with BDSM or kink, but it is important to note that many of these TikToks and the people who make them do not display the communication and consent upon which the BDSM/kink communities are founded and practiced, hereby misrepresenting said communities. Moreover, BDSM/kink communities have historically provided spaces for marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ folks in addition to subverting traditional gender roles, and the phenomenon this thesis explores mainly prioritizes the cis-heterosexual relationship, which leads to the recognition of the limitations of this dissertation (Sibula 2019b).

It is important to consider that the display of this phenomenon on social media is quite heteronormative, though some exceptions do exist. Therefore, this dissertation is limited in that it is mainly focused on sex and relationships between cis-men and cis-women.

Every person should be allowed to explore their sexuality in healthy, safe, and consensual ways, and this thesis is an attempt to uncover the reasons behind a phenomenon which idealizes and promotes sex that is undesired by and nonconsensual for certain individuals.

#### **1.4 Importance of This Dissertation**

The topic of this dissertation is significant for several reasons. The normalization and idealization of toxic, abusive, and/or non-vanilla sex and sexual relationships can be extremely dangerous. Blurred lines of consent and the idea that most women desire this type of sex contributes to rape myths, rape culture, and domestic/sexual violence, a concept which will later be explored. Moreover, lack of knowledge of how to properly perform certain more aggressive sexual acts can lead to injury and sometimes even death. In addition, this idealization can reinforce traditional gender roles, which make the woman more submissive and the man more aggressive, hereby reasserting the ideals of toxic masculinity. Finally, related topics have been empirically analyzed, as will be later explored. However, according to my extensive research, even though this particular topic has raised social concern on blog posts, editorials, and social media, it has yet to be explored in Academia. Therefore, this dissertation raises awareness about an under-studied phenomenon which has serious consequences.



## 2. ARGUMENT BASED ON RELEVANT THEORIES AND LITERATURE

### 2.1 Erotic Novels and Women's Fantasies

It is difficult to pinpoint where exactly this type of sex and relationships was initially romanticized and idealized, but novels have long been playing into fantasies of the non-vanilla nature. Whether they are classified as Young Adult, Romance, or Erotic novels, this literature frequently promotes toxic, abusive, non-vanilla sex and relationships, which can have a significant impact on its readers, especially the younger ones. Seifert claims that “YA literature often functions, implicitly or explicitly, as a model for what constitutes romance and what doesn't,” and Špiranec argues that this can have a negative impact on easily-influenced teenagers who are still developing (Seifert 2015, 15; Špiranec 2018, 4). Moreover, Younger posits that the portrayal of healthy romantic relationships instead of toxic ones is important because Young Adult romance novels “help young women understand the experiences that can come with adolescence and romantic relationships” (Younger 2009, 75). New Adult literature follows a similar pattern as Young Adult literature in its portrayals of romance, but it “features slightly older characters who engage in more explicit sex than what a reader would find in a traditional young adult novel” (Seifert 2015, 94). However, NA is “much more focused on romance than YA is” and authors often employ “toxic” literary tropes (Špiranec 2018, 5).

Illustrating the depth of and lack of novelty in toxic, abusive, non-vanilla relationship idealization, Critelli and Bivona's 2008 article entitled “Women's Erotic Rape Fantasies: An Evaluation of Theory and Research” analyzes the reasons behind women's rape fantasies and where they can find them in the media. They note several potential reasons for women's rape fantasies including masochism, sexual blame avoidance (not wanting to be labeled a “slut” but desiring being sexual), openness to sexual experience, desirability (being so beautiful that men cannot help but rape), male rape culture, biological predisposition to surrender, sympathetic activation (anxiety as an enhancement of sexual arousal), and adversary transformation (from enemies to lovers) (Critelli & Bivona 2008).

Adversary transformation is accredited as the theme of many romance novels, which, at the time in the United States, accounted for 40% of mass paperback sales. These novels were and are written mostly by and for women (Salmon & Symons 2003). One might question which women choose to read these kinds of novels, and Kraxenberger, Knoop, and Menninghaus's

research shows that most erotic novel readers are “heterosexual women in committed relationships” who are “highly educated, from a broad age span, and like to share their reading experiences with others” (Kraxenberger, Knoop, & Menninghaus 2021, 1). These women also believe erotic novels to be, to a certain extent, “emancipated, feminist, and progressive” (Kraxenberger, Knoop, and Menninghaus 2021, 10). Citing Hazen (1983), Gorry (1999) and Salmon and Symons (2003), Critelli and Bivona argue that the heroes in romance novels are handsome and strong, but also cruel and dangerous with the “temperamental qualities of warriors” (Critelli & Bivona 2008, 66). As paraphrased by Critelli and Bivona, Hazen (1983) also further purports that romance novels often include “a violent confrontation with a dominant, sexually aggressive adversary who appears to be evil” and the heroine’s challenge is to “conquer his heart, seduce him into falling in love with her, have him voluntarily make a lifetime commitment to her, and transform his apparent evil and cruelty into something more socially acceptable without diminishing his masculinity” (Critelli and Bivona 2008, 67). Therefore, Hazen (1983), as reworded by Critelli and Bivona, argues that “in the female imagination, shattered purity through violent sex is a primordial danger whose tension creates a powerful story” (Critelli and Bivona 2008, 67).

These novels reflect what Simon and Gagnon (1975) call the “traditional” sexual script, in which the man is the sexual aggressor and the woman is the sexual gatekeeper. The man is supposed to make sexual advances and be more dominant while the woman is supposed to simultaneously make the man wait to have sex and be submissive to him. The traditional sexual script reinforces traditional gender roles and the gender binary. When performing this script in an actual sexual situation, the man is focused on leading and “is liable to ‘take it from there’” while the woman’s role is to be “visually attractive and sexually responsive to his behavioral performance” (Wiederman 2005, 499). Rittenhour and Sauder suggest that the traditional sexual script “encourages men to use aggression or manipulation in order to acquire sex, and their pleasure is considered primary during the sexual interactions” (Rittenhour & Sauder 2023, 3). Moreover, Rittenhour and Sauder argue that “endorsement of these unwritten rules has a negative impact on sexual behavior and limits sexual agency,” with the scripts potentially offering a “partial explanation for the frequency of sexual violence against women” since the “conflicting scripts” legitimize “men’s usage of violence to accomplish sex with women” (Rittenhour & Sauder 2023, 3).

In this traditional sexual script, especially in media depictions, the man often displays characteristics of toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity refers to a “loosely interrelated collection of norms, beliefs, and behaviors associated with masculinity, which are harmful to women, men, children, and society more broadly” (Sculos 2017, 3). Some of these norms, beliefs, and behaviors include, but are not limited to, hyper-competitiveness, violent tendencies, glorification of violence, “entitlement to (sexual) attention from women,” and the objectification and infantilization of women (Sculos 2017, 3). The toxically masculine man has typically been the love interest in romance novels, movies, and other forms of media, and he continues to be such even in today’s more progressive social climate. However, in recent years, there seems to be a modification to the traditional script, in which the woman is much more sexually assertive yet “desires” to remain submissive during sexual performances.

A good example of this modification to the traditional sexual script is the bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which also emphasizes postfeminist and neoliberal ideals. In her book *Hard-Core Romance: “Fifty Shades of Grey,” Best-Sellers, and Society*, Eva Illouz explores the reasons for the popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and she states that “best-sellers are likely to be texts that encode problematic social conditions” (Illouz 2014, 22). The problematic social condition facing the modern, postfeminist woman, is how to characterize and perform her sexuality when it is “caught in the tensions between freedom and the traditional social structure of the family” and when that sexual freedom is “completely entangled with the longing for intimacy” (Illouz 2014, 29). In the novel, Anastasia Steele engages in a BDSM relationship with a wealthy, possessive man named Christian Grey. Anastasia is seen as a “parodic model of assertiveness,” proving herself to be a “highly competent and liberated sexual partner” and choosing to be submissive to her dominant, violent partner (Illouz 2014, 45). This idea of competence, liberation, and choice is reflective of postfeminism and neoliberalism, and it showcases the modified traditional sexual script. The modern, sexually-liberated woman *chooses* her submission and *desires* violent, non-vanilla sex from her dominant male partner.

Illouz also provides a more complex argument as to why this inequality is romanticized and desired. Translating inequality into the idea of “protectiveness,” she says that pleasure can be found in inequality for three reasons (Illouz 2014, 46). First, inequality provides “clarity” as far as gender roles go. Arguing that “equality is intrinsically more muddled because it cannot fix roles or values to roles,” she states that it is “less pleasurable” than inequality because “it

generates uncertainty and ambivalence” (Illouz 2014, 46). Second, inequality creates strong emotional bonds and mutual dependency, while equality requires “an awareness of each one’s own needs and rights, which can potentially conflict with the rights and needs of the other” (Illouz 2014, 47). In this sense, equality does not emotionally bind people the way that inequality does. Finally, Illouz claims that inequality can be pleasurable because “well-scripted social roles do not require negotiation or even reflexiveness,” and this allows for more immediate, spontaneous emotions (Illouz 2014, 47). These clearly defined roles are what Simon and Gagnon would call sexual scripts, and they require no negotiation, which can allow for ease and comfortability in knowing exactly how one is supposed to act and react.

## 2.2 #BookTok

Illouz argues that the BDSM fantasy depicted in *Fifty Shades of Grey* encodes and overcomes the aporias of heterosexual relationships, which are heightened by recent developments in feminism and gender equality, and her argument can be applied to other books that have gained popularity through #BookTok (Illouz 2014). #BookTok is a subset of the TikTok community that focuses on promoting, reviewing, summarizing, or re-enacting certain books. This community is highly connected to the kink, BDSM, and non-vanilla subsets of TikTok, with many of the most popular and viral TikToks featuring and idealizing dark romance or toxic relationships.

The books which frequently go viral on #BookTok often reflect the modified traditional sexual script, in which the postfeminist, neoliberal woman is agentic and empowered in her relationship with an aggressive, dominant, possessive, and frequently violent man. Some of these TikToks romanticize and idealize extremely abusive or violent relationships in novels, and the comment sections usually echo the same sentiments. One TikTok with 60.4K likes, for example, describes a book in which a woman finds out the man she has been sleeping with is actually a hitman who was hired to kill her. Captioning the video, “Sending some mixed signals there buddy,” the TikTok text reads, “She finds out the man she’s been sleeping with is a hitman sent to end her life. So she runs away. The next morning she wakes up to a note on the hotel pillow. ‘Stop messing around and find a better place to hide,’ And another stabbed into the door with a knife. ‘You’re beautiful when you sleep.’” Some of the comments include things like, “Why

would I literally let him find me,” “Now this is romance,” and “If he doesn’t do this then I don’t want him” (arliareads 2023). Another TikTok quotes the book *Haunted Adeline* by H.D. Carlton, and the text reads, “‘Run,’ he growls. ‘If I catch you, I f\*ck you.’” With 281.7K likes, the comment section expresses desire in having this kind of relationship, with comments such as, “Run towards him” and “I’m on my 🧎 [knees]” (mrswarnerr 2023).

Other viral TikToks on #BookTok romanticize the jealous, aggressive, possessive man who simultaneously “protects” and objectifies the main character. For instance, a TikTok with a whopping 1.8 million likes summarizes a book called *The Marriage Debt* by Clarissa Wild. The video’s text reads, “When the guy who’s been bullying you since forever... would kill anyone who dares to touch you. And says you’re his toy and no one else’s” (darkanddeliciousbooks 2022). With 224.3K likes, another TikTok describes a scene from *Nikolai* by Shandi Boyes, in which a woman wakes up with the Russian mafia boss in her bed. When she inquires about whether or not they slept together, the mafia boss only replies, “Are you sore?”, to which she says, “No.” He then tells her, “You’ll have no doubt when I make you mine because you’ll feel me for days.” One comment on this TikTok says, “Where do you find these men in real life? These books have ruined me for any other kind of man 😂😭” (obsessive book boyfriend 2023).

According to Natasha Walter in *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, this idea of women being sex toys or dolls for men has worsened with the hypersexualization of society. She claims that while the women’s liberation movement in the 1970s afforded women the ability to explore their sexualities without being “confined to idealized chastity” or “contemptible promiscuity,” current hypersexual culture encourages women to “see their sexual allure as their primary passport to success” (Walter 2008, 20). She says, “Although opportunities for women are still far wider than they were a generation ago, we are now seeing a resurgence of old sexism in new guises. Far from giving full scope to women’s freedom and potential, the new hypersexual culture redefines female success through a narrow framework of sexual allure” (Walter 2008, 24-25). Moreover, this hypersexual culture has brought about a revival of the concept of biologically-constructed traditional femininity rather than socially-constructed traditional femininity (Walter 2008, 25). These concepts of self-objectification (or subjectification) and “natural differences” reflect how heavily intertwined hypersexual culture and postfeminism are, and the concept of “choice” also demonstrates their linkage with neoliberalism.

### 2.3 Pornography and Rough Sex

Rosalind Gill argues that postfeminist media culture invites girls and women “to become a particular kind of self” and endows them “with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual fantasy found in pornography” (Gill 2007, 152). The heterosexual fantasy in pornography is frequently one that is characterized by violence towards women, and sexual violence can also be considered part of the sexual script promoted in mainstream online pornography (Vera-Grey et al. 2021). Vera-Grey et al.’s study finds that “mainstream online pornography is a key social institution” for the development of sexual understanding, and pornography websites produce and reproduce the “cultural scaffolding of rape,” as coined by Nicola Gavey (Vera-Grey et al. 2021, Gavey 2018). The cultural scaffolding of rape refers to the cultural and social factors that contribute to the perpetuation and acceptance of sexual violence as well as the creation of environments conducive to rape. Vera-Grey et al. found that the labels and framing of pornographic videos situate serious sexual offenses as ordinary or humorous, which is exemplary of “the positioning of sexual violence as a normative sexual script” (Vera-Grey et al. 2021, 1256). Because pornographic websites actually forbid videos that depict sexual violence to be labeled as such since they legally cannot condone such activities, Vera-Grey et al. argues that there is a disconnect that “actively warps the boundary between what counts as sex and what counts as sexual violence” (Vera-Grey et al. 2021, 1257).

Kingston and his colleagues propose that pornography might increase sexual aggression in two ways (Kingston et al. 2009). First, it could teach, through social learning, models of behavior that others observe and imitate. Second, it could inform negative attitudes towards women by depicting them as “whores” or “loose” in addition to perpetuating rape myths such as victim blaming (Kingston et al. 2009). To provide an example for the first point, some women say that pornography has played a part in their partner choking them during sex. Herbenick et al.’s study found that “women often talked about the first person who choked them being someone who watched pornography and who the women felt did sexual things to them that the partner had seen in pornography” (Herbenick et al. 2021, 1119). However, their findings indicated that pornography is not the main way that people learn about choking during sex. Though their results were limited in that they could potentially exclude people who more

organically learned about choking, they found that most participants “described noticing references to choking within a large and diverse body of media, include magazines, social media, mainstream television and movies, and popular erotica,” which were all cited as sites of learning about choking as teenagers and young adults (Herbenick et al. 2021, 1119).

## **2.4 TikTok and Sex Education**

As one of the most popular social media platforms in the world, TikTok is a powerful site for transmitting postfeminist and neoliberal approaches to sexuality that are posed as empowerment and agency and framed as widespread female desire. In conjunction with the transmission of romantic and sexual norms, social media like TikTok are also places for sexual cultures to take place, with Nic Cloyd citing “Tumblr, Twitter, Reddit, and TikTok” as spaces for modern BDSM culture (Cloyd 2022, 3). According to Cloyd, these social media platforms host “various subcommunities” and offer “uncensored and unmonitored space to discuss kinks and sexual interests with people across the globe” (Cloyd 2022, 3). Because of these online spaces, Cloyd argues that BDSM has become much more accessible and mainstream, but without verified and cited sources, these spaces can often lead to people unsafely practicing BDSM. Out of those platforms, TikTok is the place with the most Kink/BDSM content. Cloyd states, “Typically referred to as KinkTok, this side of the app focused on Kink education as well as fostering a community of like minded individuals” (Cloyd 2022, 22). They go on to say that although KinkTok has a significant focus on safety, “a portion of this information has come from uninformed and outdated sources, including individuals who are using this information as a bait to lure and groom others into unsafe relationships and activities” (Cloyd 2022, 23). Moreover, this content can be harmful as TikTok does not have any way to completely hide certain content from underage users since the app has no way of verifying age (Cloyd 2022, 23).

With many children and teenagers having access to unfiltered and uncensored social media, much of what they learn about sex and relationships is through these platforms. Nicole Döring points out that sexual education online and on social media is popular because “it allows easy, anonymous, shame- and guilt-free access to a broad variety of sexual information as well as sexual role models,” which can have both positive and negative effects (Döring 2021, 10). Fowler et al.’s content analysis of sex education on TikTok shows how TikTok serves as a sex

education source, with mostly user-generated content rather than content created by healthcare providers or educators (Fowler et al. 2021). For this reason, some of the videos provide nonfactual information, which is not regulated by the app. They state, “While teens benefit from a private space to explore these themes, passive video consumption does not provide avenues to ask questions or seek additional information from a trusted source” (Fowler et al. 2021, 741).

## 2.5 Idealization of Non-Vanilla Sex on TikTok

In today’s hypersexual culture, the sexually-liberated woman *chooses* to take part in her subjectification or to play the role of the sex toy or doll. As subsets of hypersexual culture and postfeminism, raunch culture and do-me feminism also assist in understanding the foundations of the normalization of toxic, non-vanilla sex and relationships. Raunch culture can be defined as “a heavily sexualized, hierarchical, and heteronormative paradigm of gendered behavior, shaped by the norms of the sex entertainment industry” in which raunch itself is seen to be “empowering,” “liberating,” and worthy of celebration (Lopes 2019, 2522). Similarly, do-me feminism is a “highly sexualized version of power feminism” that posits “sexual freedom as the key to female independence and emancipation” (Genz and Brabon 2017). Genz and Brabon argue that “raunch culture and do-me feminism blend the sometimes-conflicting ideologies of women’s liberation and the sexual revolution by heralding sexually provocative appearance and behavior...as acts of female empowerment” (Genz and Brabon 2017).

This particular brand of empowerment is picked up through social learning and the adoption of sexual scripts, and this is influenced by the idea of the “siren.” A siren, according to Robert Greene, represents a “powerful male fantasy of a highly sexual, supremely confident, alluring female offering endless pleasure and a bit of danger” (Greene 2001). In their 2017 journal article, Albright and Carter delve into the “myth of the siren’s song” and how popular culture impacts who young women consider their role models. Claiming that “popular culture has become an important vehicle for the transmission of these role models,” they declare, “Social learning theory suggests that young women look to media models to learn their ‘proper’ gender scripts and are most likely to model behavior which leads to desired or valued outcomes” (Alright & Carter 2017, 11). Since the siren is considered highly attractive to men, and since she is conveyed this way in popular culture, modeling siren behavior is something that could reap



desired male attention or validation for women. They state, “Configured simultaneously as seductive and threatening the siren in popular culture is dangerous precisely because she eschews traditional gendered sexual scripts that dictate she ‘play the girl’ by taking on a passive role; her apparent freedom to choose by ‘calling the shots’ in her own life is presented as a seductive siren’s song for modern women” (Albright & Carter 2017, 12). While the siren does subvert traditional sexual scripts by being more vocal and active in expressing sexual desire and pursuing sexual gratification, the end goal in the adoption of siren characteristics is still to seduce or please men.

All of these concepts come together to inform the modification of the traditional sexual script that can be seen on TikTok. Women are portraying themselves as hypersexualized, empowered, and emancipated, but they are doing so in a way that has them almost competing to be the *most* sexually empowered and emancipated woman. Expressing interest in or desire for different forms of non-vanilla sex insinuates sexual empowerment and liberation, even if this sex still conforms to the heteronormative, traditional sexual script in which the man is more physically aggressive and the woman is more physically submissive.

The competitive nature to be the most hypersexual, kinky, liberated woman can be seen in a number of TikToks in which women share their sexual preferences. One TikTok user, employing the sound, “Me’s a freaky girl. Me’s a very freaky girl,” writes, “Normal girls: ‘I like being choked’...Me with my forced breeding kink” (Jessie Nicole 2021). With 503.5K likes to date, the creator indicates that she is much “freakier” than other women because being choked is not freaky enough for her. Instead, she desires forced breeding, which is the fetishization of being impregnated against one’s will (WebMd Editorial Contributors 2020). Other TikToks romanticize knife play in the bedroom, which is a BDSM activity that uses knives as a way to wield power over the submissive, often producing an adrenaline response that occurs because of the inherent danger of knives (“Knife Play” 2022). For example, a TikTok with 91.2K likes describes a scenario in which the creator and a man are discussing their mutual interest in rough sex. The man then asks her if she can handle choking, to which she responds, “Haha no i want you to run a knife all over my body and press it into me if I make a noise” (madison jordan 2021). This message suggests that “regular” rough sex and strangulation are too conventional for the TikTok creator and that she wants to partake in something more dangerous.

Another TikTok with 156.2K likes uses the sound, “Is this turning into a near death experience? Possibly. Does this add to the adventure? Absolutely!” The TikTok text reads, “When ur biggest k!nk is to be forced into submission.” The captions were overwhelmingly in agreement, saying things like, “I wanna see all the force he COULD be using,” “CNC GANG WHERE YOU AT,” and “I wanna be forced but not like FORCED” (Heather 2022). In CNC, or consensual nonconsent, “both partners agree to act out their forced sexual fantasies and fetishes” (Yogeshkumar 2023). These acts might include “having one person’s consent to engage in a forced yet intense sexual activity” and/or “extreme sexual violence from the dominant partner” (Yogeshkumar 2023). Furthermore, during CNC, all participants preemptively consent to partake in sexual behaviors for which they might not have been prepared prior to the act, and CNC has been frequently voiced as a sexual preference in these TikToks (Yogeshkumar 2023). A different TikTok’s text reads, “My kinks but they get progressively worse...Edging. Breeding. Knife/gun play. CNC.” With 29.7K likes, the comment section includes statements like, “CNC is and always be my favorite,” and “I just learned about forced breeding and I felt the achievement for a new kink unlock 🥹” (Sophia the first 2022).

With TikTok users showing that they are more sexually adventurous or less vanilla than “normal” girls, these TikToks exemplify the escalatory nature of idealizing non-vanilla sex practices. The women are making the *choice* to desire and to partake in knife play, “forced” submission and breeding, and CNC. Moreover, their online peers reiterate and bolster the attraction of partaking in violent, “coerced” sex. Normalizing these behaviors as a universal desire amongst women has powerful and dangerous repercussions that will be expounded upon in a subsequent section.

## **2.6 The Vanilla Wife and Vanilla Shaming**

Expanding upon this idea of women competing to be the *most* sexually empowered and liberated, hypersexual, postfeminist, neoliberal culture has wedged a divide between the women who prefer vanilla sex and women who prefer non-vanilla sex. As a result, the modification of the traditional sexual script, which is framed as sexually liberated, agentic female desire, has led to what is being called “vanilla shaming.” Vanilla sex, or conventional sex, is considered boring, prudish, and unprogressive, as are those who have vanilla preferences. The hypersexual culture

of the postfeminist and neoliberal realm has created a narrative of “choice” that is actually limiting the choices that are deemed acceptable (i.e. non-vanilla sex). Natasha Walter also discusses this in *Living Dolls*, saying that this hypersexual culture “is taking up and reinforcing certain behavior in a way that can make it hard for many young women to find the space where other views of female sexuality and other ways for women to feel powerful are celebrated” (Walter 2008, 44). In this case, women are only sexually liberated if they adhere to a specific type of sexual liberation. Walter argues, “By co-opting the language of choice and empowerment, this culture creates smoke and mirrors that prevent many people from seeing just how limiting such so-called choices can be” (Walter 2008, 44).

There was a recent, popular TikTok trend disparaging the “vanilla wife,” or a woman who prefers to have conventional sex, which reflects the illusion of choice in this phenomenon. One TikTok with 277.2K likes, for example, has the following text: “May not be the girl you end up with but you’ll probably think of me when you f@ck your vanilla wife” (cosmic3londe 2022). Another TikTok text reads, “I may not be the woman you marry, but I’ll be the one you still think about in 10 years when you’re sat next to your vanilla wife wondering if I ever found a man to tame me” (clare\_heavyhand 2023). A separate TikTok has a similar text, stating, “I might not be the girl you chose but I’ll definitely be the girl who you regret losing when you’re having vanilla sex with your downgrade of a wife in 10 years” (Ellie 2022). These TikToks illustrate the postfeminist idea of women being pitted against one another to compete for a man’s attention. Moreover, the sexually empowered and “untamed” woman is still focused on the man’s pleasure, hereby reinforcing the traditional sexual script.

As can be seen throughout this thesis, there exists a plethora of academic research surrounding the ideas of erotic novels, rough sex, pornography, and the influence of social media. However, academic research covering the phenomenon of the recent idealization of non-vanilla sex and relationships (and the consequential vanilla shaming) particularly as it is seen on TikTok, is lacking. Though there is a dearth of this topic in Academia, there have been many blog posts and online articles discussing the phenomenon and illustrating societal concern.

One of these articles, by Mara Leighton (2022) at *Insider*, is entitled “TikTokers denigrating ‘vanilla wives’ as women doomed to silent dinners and boring sex have spurred conversations about kink and misogyny on TikTok,” and it discusses the anti-“vanilla wife” TikToks that were going viral on the application. The author writes, “The women making these

TikToks frame themselves as more adventurous and memorable sexual partners. They're the momentary escape from a man's boring marriage" (Leighton 2022). The article covers a number of TikTok comments and counter-videos which express concern regarding the "competition"-like behavior, with one TikToker telling viewers that "framing 'vanilla sex' as boring can set a 'dangerous precedent'" (Leighton 2022).

Other TikTok trends in the community of #KinkTok focus on the woman's desire and need to have non-vanilla sex, shaming not only women who do not prefer it but also the men. Some of the videos insinuate that the women in them would not date or sleep with a man who does not want to have non-vanilla sex and/or who is unwilling to specifically be violent during sex. One TikTok expresses complete disgust at the idea of having vanilla sex by using an Enimen song with the lyrics, "You don't know how sick you make me. You make me fucking sick to my stomach. Every time I think of you, I puke..." as the sound to a video with the text, "When he only wants vanilla seggs!" (Tattooed Mo 2022). Another TikTok with the text, "I actually enjoy vanilla seggz," is accompanied by the sound "Alright. Take care now. Bye bye then. Loser!" (Shweetie 2022). A different TikTok has the following text: "Me: 'I think we should get more rough during s3x...' Him: 'No, I don't want to hurt you...' The sound of that TikTok is "Aw baby naw, that ain't gonna work," and the caption reads, "I'm out" followed by hashtags including "#rough," "#hurtme," "vanilla," and "#notforme" (Melissa 2020). Another woman in her TikTok claimed that if she had to choose between having vanilla sex for the rest of her life and going to jail, she would rather go to jail (Maggie Ann 2022).

This kind of romanticization and idealization of being hurt during sex or maintaining sexual injuries is overwhelmingly supported in the comment sections and by the number of likes the videos receive. One TikTok with 31.6K likes illustrates the preference for non-vanilla sex by combining the text "vanilla s3x" with the sound of an unenthusiastic "hey" and then the text "cnc, biting, degrading, ropes>" with the sound of a very enthusiastic "hey." One of the top comments of the TikTok says, "If I don't feel like crying by the end of it I don't want it" (n0tf0und 2022). A different woman recounted a story that started off as an attempt to have vanilla sex but ended much differently. Using the TikTok text to tell her story, the text says, "'Yeah, we can have vanilla seggs.' ... Amber did not have vanilla ✨seggs✨ that night. She is now covered in visible cons3nsual scratches and bruises. She had lunch with her dad and she told him she got into a fight with the neighborhood raccoon." With 19.7K likes, the comment section

has replies like, “If there’s no scratching or biting I don’t want it lol 😄” and “I just went to the chiropractor today and he was shook at how thrown out my back was 😊 😬” (Amber Blake 2021). Another woman’s TikTok with 341.8K likes says, “Having extreme rough seggs & getting absolutely railed...\*bl33ds for 2 days straight\*...No more rough seggs...” The creator also liked one of the comments in the comment section which says, “\*Gets railed the next week after ive healed\* 😊” (Kaila 2021). Videos and comments like these normalize and idealize extreme injuries during sex, and yet, women who do not desire to have these same experiences are shamed for being boring or closed-minded.

Vanilla shaming is part of what Natasha Walter identifies as sexual bullying, and she expresses her concern about how this sexual bullying especially affects teenage girls. She says that this type of culture “may be contributing to a reality in which many young women still feel that they are not in control of their first sexual experiences” (Walter 2008, 76). In her interviews with young women, Walter also found that the young women felt that if they do not adhere to the tenants of hypersexual culture, they will be seen as prudes, because “overtly sexualized behavior” is the only way to achieve sexual liberation in this social environment (Walter 2008, 80).

Nia Tipton of *YourTango* wrote an article in 2021 entitled, “Why TikTok’s ‘Vanilla Shaming’ Trend Perpetuates Dangerous Non-Consensual Relationships.” Condemning TikTok videos that mock girls for not being into choking, hitting, and spitting during sex, Tipton argues that preteens and teenagers, especially young girls, are at risk of believing that the only “good sex” is sex that is aggressive and violent. She says, “It’s disgusting to think about young girls watching these videos and then pushing themselves into situations where they aren’t comfortable just to fit in, and not be made fun of” (Tipton 2021). Moreover, Tipton claims that these videos, which “romanticize domestic abuse, the ‘abusive boyfriend,’ and even ‘things girls want but won’t ask for,’” have become normalized, and “social pressure is making young women feel as if their decision not to be choked or slapped is deemed abnormal” (Tipton 2021). This is resulting in a even blurrier line between consensual sex and sexual violence. She also clarifies that the majority of these videos should not be labeled as BDSM, fetish, or kink, even though many of them use the hashtag #KinkTok, because the BDSM/kink community prioritizes consent, respect, and safety, while these sex and relationships depicted in these videos do not (Tipton 2021).

A blog post for *Global Digital Cultures* by Veronica Fanzio, a research master's student in Media Studies, New Media, and Digital Culture at the University of Amsterdam, explores the pros and cons of #KinkTok. On the negative side, she explains how some users worry that “vanilla-shaming incites people, and especially young girls, to engage in sexual practices that may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar to avoid being labeled as ‘prude’” (Fanzio 2021). She continues on to say, “Kinky sex, in this scenario, can quickly result from peer pressure and fear of social judgment and exclusion, rather than a search for pleasure” (Fanzio 2021). Fanzio also discusses the normalization of kink on TikTok, which can lead to the blurring of consensual lines as well as sexual violence, and she claims that this can further contribute to harmful misrepresentation of sexuality on social media. On the positive side, however, Fanzio argues that KinkTok can be a “liberatory community” where people can engage in conversations about sex “with no shame” (Fanzio 2021). In addition, she clarifies that some of the content on KinkTok is stigma-breaking and educational, “explaining how to perform safe kinky practices” and “underlining the importance of being physically and emotionally protected” (Fanzio 2021).

Within the complexities of modern sexuality, hypersexual, postfeminist, neoliberal culture has created a divide between women who prefer vanilla sex and those who prefer non-vanilla sex. This divide has resulted in vanilla shaming, as the sexually liberated and progressive woman is supposed to be one who prefers non-vanilla practices. Capitalizing on the narrative of choice and empowerment, the postfeminist, neoliberal movement ironically limits the acceptable sexual preferences and reinforces traditional gender roles through the modification of the traditional sexual script. Considering the glorification of non-vanilla sex and the phenomenon of vanilla shaming, it becomes crucial to examine the potential dangers associated with the modified traditional script that can be seen in TikTok trends. By stigmatizing conventional sexual preferences, harmful rape myths are perpetuated and enthusiastic, informed consent is undermined. Without a strong emphasis on communication, boundaries, and respect, the normalization of non-vanilla sex can blur the lines between consensual acts and sexual violence.

## 2.7 “She Asked For It:” Pain, Consent, and Rape Culture

The blurring of the lines between consensual acts and sexual violence is already evident, as can be seen in related empirical research, in TikToks of young women sharing their personal experiences, and in the courtroom. Even though young women on TikTok are claiming to be more sexually liberated and are expressing their non-vanilla desire more openly, there is a great deal of evidence that points to negative consequences of the idealization of non-vanilla sex and the shaming of vanilla sex. Women are still adhering to their role in the traditional sexual script that prioritizes male pleasure, and because of the normalization of women’s desire for non-vanilla sex, they are experiencing unwanted or nonconsensual sexual acts on top of that.

Carter et al. 's 2019 study found that a major theme for why women do not talk about painful sex and generally lack pleasure in their sexual interactions is prioritization of the partner’s enjoyment. When asked why they continued to have sex in spite of experiencing pain, some acknowledged “playing the part of a ‘pleasing woman’” who was fulfilling her partner’s needs instead of her own (Carter et al. 2019, 8). They also noted a theme of complying with gender norms, “not wanting to be difficult, demanding, or negative” in an effort to “keep their partner’s masculinity intact” (Carter et al. 2019, 8).

Women experiencing pain or unwanted sexual acts is a concerning trend that can be seen in various studies and is corroborated with personal accounts on TikTok. In 2019, a BBC study found that among UK women aged 18-39, 59% had experienced slapping, 38% choking, 34% gagging, 20% spitting, and 59% biting. More than half of these women reported that the acts were “unwanted,” 46% expressed feelings of pressure or coercion, and 20% stated that “the experiences left them feeling upset or frightened at least once” (Beres, Pearman-Beres, & Johns 2020, 26). Beres, Pearman-Beres, and Johns looked at TikTok to see if the users were discussing these aggressive sexual behaviors. They found that “one man talked about how he wanted to ‘choke’ women until he could ‘see the fear in their eyes’ and there were posts from women talking about experiencing these behaviors during sex” (Beres, Pearman-Beres, & Johns 2020, 26).

Several TikTok users have made videos discussing the negative consequences of normalizing non-vanilla sexual behaviors, and the comment sections provide insight into women’s personal experiences with these acts. One woman on TikTok made a video condemning

the normalization of hitting women during sex, and the comment section includes things like, “THIS. Thank you! And men do this without asking consent sometimes 🙄” and “Or men that want to go so far to make you throw up by head pushing...” A different comment reads, “My ex bf never wanted to hit me in bed bc he didn’t want to hurt me. Then he started to do it in bed. We broke up and he punched me in the face 🧠 😭” (Talia Lichtstein 2023). Another TikTok user made a video with the text, “I’ll never forgive y’all for villainizing vanilla s\*x. You’re 19. You don’t have to like being spit on or choked especially from people who don’t care about you.” One comment, with 7,572 likes, reads, “I’ve been hit and choked without permission simply because it’s so normalized. It’s scary.” Other comments include things such as the following: “This guy choked me the first time we did it I was shook 🧠 like at least discuss it first”; “I was kissing this guy and he asked if I liked being choked. I said no, and a few seconds later he started lightly doing it...”; “I will never let anyone spit on me again, it happened the first time and i was so shocked it felt so degrading”; and “This guy literally slapped my face out of nowhere multiple times ://” (Samantha 2023).

Normalizing a behavior can result in people taking for granted that everyone has the same desires and preferences without openly and effectively communicating those desires and preferences. Enthusiastic consent was not sought in some of the situations previously described because some of the men assumed that the women wanted it. In other cases, there also exists the possibility that they knew the woman did not desire to partake in non-vanilla sexual behaviors, but they did so anyway. Through conversations with mostly university students, Beres, Pearman-Beres, and Johns reported seeing “increasing levels of violence (slapping, spitting, and strangulation) being accepted as ‘usual’ during sex,” which raises concern regarding the “consensual rough sex” defense in domestic violence, sexual assault, rape, and murder cases (Beres, Pearman-Beres, and Johns 2020, 25-26).

In their piece, “Resurrecting ‘She Asked for It:’ The Rough Sex Defence in Canadian Courts,” Sheehy, Grant, and Gotell analyze how men are now using “rough sex gone wrong” as a defense for sexual assault, and in some cases, murder. These men who go to the courts claiming that the women “consented to rough sex” are also usually acquitted on the “basis of consent or the complainants’ eroded credibility (Sheehy, Grant, & Gotell 2022, 3) One of the biggest cases related to this defense is that of Grace Millane, who, after consensually agreeing to being choked during sex with a man she met on a dating application, was strangled to death. Although Jesse



Shane Kempson, her murderer, was eventually found guilty, his lawyers used the “fifty shades defense,” which claims that her murder was accidental and occurred during consensual rough sex. As described in Bow and Herring’s research, the campaign group We Can’t Consent To This (WCCTT) has been “collecting data on national and international cases where rough sex or SM is a feature” (Bow & Herring 2020, 526). They have found that since 2010, there has been a “90% increase in [murder] cases where rough sex or ‘sex game gone wrong’ has featured in the defense’s account,” and in these cases, 66% of deaths were caused by strangulation (Bow & Herring 2020, 526).

Normalizing non-vanilla sexual practices has a slew of consequences, which range from discomfort during sex to homicide. These consequences are evidenced by empirical research, personal accounts shared by young women on TikTok, and courtroom cases. While women who adhere to postfeminist and neoliberal ideals on TikTok might claim sexual liberation and express their non-vanilla desires openly, there is significant evidence that points to dangerous repercussions resulting from the idealization of non-vanilla sex and the shaming of vanilla sex. Though the traditional sexual script has been modified, the non-vanilla sex that is romanticized on social media contributes to the prioritization of male pleasure and violence against women during sex. Normalization of non-vanilla sex can lead to lack of communication due to men’s assumption of all women’s shared desires and disregard of explicit wishes from partners. Moreover, this normalization provides men with an excuse to commit violent acts against women, or even murder, for which they sometimes escape accountability and/or punishment.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

#### **3.1 Dissertation Conclusion**

In conclusion, the normalization of toxic, abusive, non-vanilla sex and relationships in addition to vanilla shaming, particularly on platforms like TikTok, has raised significant questions about its origins and consequences. Postfeminist and neoliberal theories provide critical frameworks for understanding the shift in the traditional sexual script and the emphasis on women's agency and sexual empowerment. Both of these theories highlight the autonomous, self-reinvented individual and the focus on choice in contemporary society. Furthermore, social learning and sexual scripting theories illustrate how observational learning through media platforms such as TikTok influences the acceptance of certain sexual behaviors and acts as ideals or norms. With TikTok's extensive reach and over 1.60 billion users worldwide, the application is an undeniable site for meaning-making practices that extend beyond the platform itself.

This thesis has explored the origins of the romanticization of non-vanilla sex and relationships through various media sources, including erotic novels, pornography, and the idealization of non-vanilla sex on TikTok. It has also examined the concept of "vanilla shaming" in addition to the blurring of boundaries between consensual acts and sexual violence. By drawing upon empirical research and providing examples from TikTok, this thesis has highlighted the disturbing consequences of normalizing non-vanilla sex. It is crucial to critically analyze and understand this phenomenon to ensure the promotion of healthy, consensual relationships while dismantling traditional gender roles, ideals of toxic masculinity, and the postfeminist, neoliberal illusion of choice.

#### **3.2 Future Research**

As previously mentioned, this thesis is limited in that it focuses on heterosexual relationships between cis-men and cis-women. For this reason, it is important that future research about the normalization of non-vanilla sex in the LGBTQ+ community be explored. Moreover, this thesis approached this phenomenon from a woman's perspective, and it would be enlightening to understand how this phenomenon is affecting men and their attitudes towards sex. Men might also feel pressured to be violent or perform toxic masculinity, especially if that is

what many women are claiming they desire, whether that be on social media or in person, and it is critical to understand their perspective as well. Other future research might include longitudinal studies which analyze the long-term effects of partaking in non-vanilla sex, investigations into the influence of intersectionality and cultural contexts on the romanticization of non-vanilla sex and relationships, and the evaluation of media literacy and sexual education programs.

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