

“Reframing Desire”: A content analysis of *Bridgerton*

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INTRODUCTION

The Netflix series *Bridgerton* has gained worldwide popularity for its lavish visuals, romantic drama and modern storytelling, amassing over 313 billion views across its three seasons as of November, 2024 (Netflix). A key part of its success is its use of the female gaze to rethink gender roles. This study aims to analyze how the female gaze is depicted in the Netflix series, *Bridgerton*.

Currently, mainstream media often reflect patriarchal values. Male characters are dominant in their narratives, holding power and driving the plot. Men control the perspective but women, in contrast, are often reduced to objects and passive roles. This dynamic highlights systemic gender biases deeply embedded within the industry.

The “female gaze” has become a key concept in feminism and media analysis. It challenges traditional portrayals of women and redefines how gender is depicted in art and television. In contrast to the “male gaze”, which objectifies women for male audiences, the female gaze offers a fresh perspective on gender roles and dynamics. Women's experiences are highlighted for their depth and authenticity, portraying them as individuals who play an active role in shaping their own stories and emotions. Embracing the female gaze is important as it opens up opportunities for a variety of voices to be heard and reshapes the way we perceive femininity and individuality.

This paper will explore how *Bridgerton* uses the female gaze to redefine power dynamics and shift gender norms, highlighting how the series creates a new narrative style for regency-era dramas. *Bridgerton* challenges patriarchal norms in media through its intimate portrayal of romance and focus on female empowerment. By focusing on key characters and scenes, the female gaze explores *Bridgerton's* impact on modern views of femininity, desire, and agency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea of the “female gaze” has challenged conventional portrayals of women and reshaped how gender is depicted and understood in art and television. In contrast to the “male gaze” which has often objectified female figures for male audiences, over time, the female gaze provides a different lens through which society views and understands gender roles and dynamics. This literature review examined eight articles on the female gaze in media, aiming to understand how it highlights women’s experiences for their depth and authenticity.

Literature on the female gaze primarily focuses on how grasping the female perspective is important as it opens up opportunities for a variety of voices to be heard and reshapes the way we perceive femininity and individuality in stories. The following section explores how the female gaze is perceived through various forms of media.

“Boys Will Be Boys”

Before the feminine gaze was recognized as a valid perspective in the media, discussions emerged about the harmful social effects of the male gaze as a dominant viewpoint. The effects include the reinforcement of misogyny, a type of sexism that can confine women to a lower social standing than men, reinforcing the traditional roles of a patriarchal society. Riebe (2020) discusses how when growing up, boys and girls are held to a different standard compared to one another. The expression “boys will be boys” is frequently used to justify harmful actions by men, reinforcing the idea that such behaviors align with “masculine” norms. In contrast, if women exhibit similar harmful behaviors, they are often labeled as mean or aggressive and are consistently held accountable. This double standard reinforces patriarchal influence and the dominance of male-centered norms, which are rooted in gender-based differences within society and media. In addition, Santoniccolo et. al (2023) discusses male-centered norms contributing to

gender stereotypes and promotes traditional gender roles, while also fueling sexism, harassment, and violence among men, and suppressing career aspirations in women.

Superhero Films and Gender-Based Differences

Furthermore, studies conducted by Coyne et. al (2014), as well as Pennel and Behm-Morawitz (2015) suggest that gender-based differences within society are embedded in mundane aspects of daily life, such as superhero stories. In superhero stories, Coyne et. al (2014) found that superheroes often reinforce male gender stereotypes. They are shown as strong, assertive, aggressive, fast, powerful, and muscular leaders. On the contrary, Pennel and Behm-Morawitz (2015) found that in these same superhero films, women are portrayed as the hero's love interest and serve primarily as visual attractions, usually cast as victims in need of rescue, which limits their role in a more complex and meaningful storyline.

In addition, the male gaze is even depicted in films like *Wonder Woman*, often viewed as feminist. Her character attracts viewers with a hypersexualized appearance, featuring an exaggeratedly small waist, large chests, and an unrealistic hourglass figure (Herbozo et al., 2004). Pennel and Behm-Morawitz (2015) also examined the impact of the sexualization of women in superhero films on body satisfaction and self-objectification. Their findings indicate that watching sexualized female superheroes may slightly decrease women's body esteem and hold them to an unrealistic standard of beauty. This reinforces that the male gaze frequently serves as the foundation for gender-based differences in both society and media and "creates harmful perceptions of acceptable behavior as they relate to gender categories" (Riebe, 2020:4).

Me Too Movement and Sexuality

In addition to gender norms being established early on in childhood, Riebe (2020) also explores how the #MeToo movement has influenced the portrayal of female sexuality in cinema

through the feminine gaze. A study was conducted using the female gaze in a post #MeToo movement world as lens when viewing “cinematic female sexual experiences”. After viewing these experiences, participants in the study were then separated by gender and had discussions concerning feminism, gender roles and stereotypes and consent. The results of this study found that the male gaze *can* shape how female experiences are perceived. In today's world shaped by the #MeToo movement, gender equality discussions are essential to understanding the complex experiences of women through a lens that values their perspectives and voices.

Traditionally, the male gaze dominated Hollywood, portraying female sexuality through patriarchal ideals. However, the feminine gaze challenges this, focusing on more authentic, nuanced representations. Riebe (2020) found that audience perceptions of female sexuality in film are heavily influenced by gender identity. Women in focus groups identified more with the female characters' experiences, while men often viewed these depictions through a lens shaped by traditional masculinity.

Pornography and Women's Experience

Further, the “female sexual experience” is examined by Stewart (2019) who notes that feminist pornography's clear focus on women's desire and passion prompts an exploration of what constitutes “women's desire” and how it should be depicted. Those in the pornography industry now have to consider the shift in thinking regarding feminist porn as being “women-friendly.” Their findings indicated that to align with feminist political aims, these films should emphasize types of sexual experiences that “women might enjoy” (Labinski 2019). The types of sexual experiences women might enjoy are those that convey a sense of emotion and feeling, where women are appreciated for not only what their bodies have to offer, but themselves as a complex being. Daskalopoulou and Zanette (2020) elaborate further that since

pornography is typically seen as a genre made by men for men, numerous studies suggest that women often prefer erotica, as it is thought to place a greater emphasis on women's pleasure.

The exploration of the "female sexual experience" within feminist pornography highlights a shift in how women's desire is represented and prioritized. It is important to create content that not only resonates with women's pleasures but also acknowledges them as whole, complex individuals. As feminist pornography evolves, it challenges the male gaze by incorporating emotional depth and genuine appreciation for women beyond what they have to offer physically.

In conclusion, the female gaze offers a transformative lens that challenges traditional portrayals and objectification often associated with the male gaze, promoting instead a more inclusive and empathetic perspective. By focusing on the inner lives, experiences, and agency of women, the female gaze redefines representation and highlights women's complexity and depth. This shift not only broadens our understanding of femininity but also encourages a more diverse and impartial storytelling approach. Ultimately, the female gaze empowers audiences to see women beyond stereotypical roles, fostering greater gender equality in media and society.

METHODS, DATA AND SAMPLE

This study utilizes content analysis to examine how the female gaze is depicted in the Netflix series *Bridgerton*. I conducted a content analysis of six episodes from *Bridgerton's* three seasons, two episodes per season. Content analysis is considered an unobtrusive method because the researcher works with non living and non-interactive data. Content analysis is most preferable in answering my research question because it allows for identifying patterns, themes and underlying meanings. Because I was particularly interested in how feminine desires are portrayed in media, content analysis is favorable for analyzing a television series, like

Bridgerton, as it allows for an in depth exploration of narratives, character dynamics and visual storytelling.

Bridgerton was chosen as the media to analyze for its depiction of the female gaze due to its wild popularity. Within weeks of its initial release, *Bridgerton* sparked massive social media discussions and media coverage. A recurring topic in these reviews was the idea of the female gaze and how no other television series portrayed the female perspective in the way that *Bridgerton* does. Because of this, my study aims to explore the female gaze in the show as it is a neglected topic.

As mentioned above, I will focus on six episodes from *Bridgerton* as streamed on its original platform, Netflix. Specifically, I will analyze two episodes from each season: the first episode and another selected from the middle or end of the season. This approach will help identify patterns and consistencies related to the female gaze throughout the series. To access these episodes, a monthly Netflix subscription is required.

While watching the six episodes for my analysis, I carefully observed specific words, behaviors and scenes. These were then coded for recurring themes, with a particular focus on romantic relationships, physical and emotional intimacy and a female perspective of the male characters. After collecting this initial analysis, I separated my data into examples (descriptive codes) in hopes of finding common patterns throughout. Afterwards, I categorized those examples into three specific themes. By linking these themes together in a meaningful way, (in a process known as open coding) I aimed to answer my research question on how the female gaze is depicted in *Bridgerton*.

While content analysis was most preferable in being able to answer my research question, it is important to understand its limitations in this study. Because content analysis relies heavily

on what is explicitly presented, it cannot explore the intentions of *Bridgerton's* creators. Without any other methodologies used such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, additional insight and data may have been missed. Needless to say, content analysis sufficed in answering my research question.

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to explore how the female gaze is depicted in the Netflix series, *Bridgerton*. For this study, I analyzed six episodes across *Bridgerton's* three seasons. For season one, I analyzed the first and fifth episodes of that season. For the second season, I analyzed episodes five and seven. Lastly, for *Bridgerton's* third season, I chose to analyze episodes three and seven. An analysis of these episodes helps inform our understanding of how the female gaze is portrayed in mainstream media. The findings help answer my question of how the female gaze is depicted in *Bridgerton*.

Upon completion of data collection and analysis, three themes emerged. (1) Women are portrayed to be constricted by gender norms and etiquette; (2) Intimacy is based on women's desire; (3) Women create their own stories based on their wants and needs. In the sections below, I explore each theme, aiming to give readers a chance to view *Bridgerton* from a critical perspective.

Women are NOT equal

Theme 1: Women are portrayed to be constricted by gender norms and etiquette

The female characters in *Bridgerton* are heavily bound by societal expectations. They are judged by their beauty, manners, and ability to secure a husband, as marriage is seen as their ultimate goal. Their choices are limited, and their independence is restricted.

Daphne, for example, must maintain her reputation while seeking a match. This is seen in season one, episode one. Daphne must carefully protect her reputation while navigating the marriage market, as her social standing depends entirely on how she is perceived by others. Her actions are scrutinized, and even small mistakes can ruin her chances. For example, she fakes a courtship with Simon to seem more desirable, but she has to stay within society's rules. In contrast Anthony, her older brother, enjoys far more freedom. He openly has an affair with Sienna, an opera singer outside of their class, and suffers no real consequences. Daphne's value is tied to her virtue, while Anthony's actions are overlooked. This double standard highlights how women in *Bridgerton* are held to stricter societal expectations than men.

In addition, the female characters in *Bridgerton* have one goal: secure a match and get married. This is seen in season one, episode five. Lady Featherington's daughters are pressured to marry well to save their family's status. Their financial problems and bad reputation leave marriage as their only option to stay in society's good graces. Lady Featherington pushes her daughters to attract wealthy suitors, often at the expense of their happiness or desires. She even manipulates situations to help Prudence, her eldest daughter, stand out. Despite this, they struggle to compete with wealthier and more attractive debutantes. The family's future depends on the daughters marrying into money or power. This shows how marriage is used as a tool to secure financial and social stability in *Bridgerton*.

The female characters in *Bridgerton* are deeply confined by the rigid social norms of their time. Their lives revolve around marriage, reputation, and societal approval, leaving them little room for independence or personal desires. Ultimately, the series highlights the unequal expectations placed on women and the sacrifices they must make to fit into a society that values their virtue over their individuality.

What a woman wants

Theme 2: Intimacy is based on women's desire

Bridgerton focuses on women's desires moving away from traditional romance stories.

The show examines the emotional, romantic, and physical needs of its female characters, giving them control in their relationships. The series also flips traditional gender roles by showcasing male characters, like Simon and Anthony, as objects of female desire.

For example, in season one, episode five, Daphne and Simon's wedding night is a key example of the female gaze in play. The scene focuses on Daphne's feelings and experiences as she explores physical intimacy. Unlike traditional portrayals, the moment isn't about Simon's dominance or control but about their mutual vulnerability and connection. Simon's body is also framed in a way that makes him an object of *her* desire, reversing typical portrayals of gender. The lighting and setting create a safe, intimate atmosphere centered on her. Through these choices, the scene reflects the female gaze by prioritizing emotional depth, mutuality, and Daphne's perspective rather than objectifying her.

Another way that *Bridgerton* focuses on women's desires is through the emotional depth of the male characters. Traditionally, men in romance narratives are often portrayed as distant, stoic, or emotionally detached. However, in *Bridgerton*, the male characters, like Simon and Anthony, are shown as complex individuals with emotional struggles, vulnerabilities, and personal growth. The female gaze lets us explore these emotional layers by focusing on the male characters' feelings and desires from a female point of view.

For example in season two, episode five, Anthony becomes jealous when Kate goes on a boat ride with another man. His jealousy shows his vulnerability and strong feelings for Kate, which contrasts with his usual calm and controlled behavior. Rather than just anger, the scene

reveals his inner conflict and growing attachment to her. His jealousy is not about possession, but a fear of losing someone he cares about. This moment highlights his emotional complexity as he struggles between duty and the desire for love. The female gaze in this scene highlights Anthony's emotions, making his vulnerability clear and relatable. His jealousy marks a key moment of emotional growth, showing he's not just a strong, protective figure but also someone who can love deeply and feel fear.

Bridgerton highlights women's desires by focusing on their emotional, romantic, and physical needs. The series challenges traditional gender roles by giving female characters control in their relationships and centering on their perspectives. From Daphne's search for love to Anthony and Simon's vulnerability and emotional depth, the show portrays women's desires as complex and key to the story. It changes how women's experiences in romance are typically shown.

It's my world and you're just living in it

Theme 3: Women create their own stories based on their wants and goals.

In *Bridgerton*, women shape their own stories by pursuing their desires and goals, often defying societal expectations. Kate, Eloise, and Penelope each follow their own paths, making choices based on their desires, not society's expectations. Kate wants respect and independence, Eloise seeks intellectual freedom, and Penelope takes charge of the narrative despite the obstacles she faces. The show shows how these women challenge societal roles and define their own journeys. Through their actions, they create stories based on their personal goals and ambitions.

For example, throughout season two, in her interactions with Anthony, Kate Sharma consistently stands her ground, showing strength and independence. She challenges him both

intellectually and emotionally, refusing to let him control their relationship. Specifically in season two, episode seven, Anthony initially pushes her away, insisting that she isn't the right match for him, Kate refuses to accept his decisions without question. Kate shares her thoughts honestly and isn't afraid to disagree with him. Instead of letting him lead, she asserts her own desires creating a more equal dynamic between them, where both characters are active participants in their relationship. It becomes clear to the audience that Kate is not there to be controlled, but to engage in a partnership built on mutual respect and understanding.

Another example of women creating their own stories and desires throughout the series is Eloise Bridgerton. The female gaze and Eloise's character are deeply connected through her challenges of traditional gender roles and societal expectations, especially regarding love and marriage. While most women in the series are focused on securing a marriage, Eloise actively rejects these norms, seeking intellectual freedom and independence. Specifically in season three, episode seven. Her curiosity and thirst for knowledge are highlighted through the female gaze, focusing on her agency and inner world.

Kate and Eloise both create their own stories through the female gaze, which highlights their independence and personal agency. Kate challenges traditional gender roles in her relationship with Anthony, standing firm in her desires and asserting control over her own narrative. Similarly, Eloise rejects societal expectations, prioritizing intellectual freedom and self-discovery over marriage. The female gaze allows their characters to be seen as more than just romantic figures; it emphasizes their complex inner lives and personal goals, giving them the space to shape their own stories in ways that break from tradition.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze how the female gaze is depicted in the Netflix series, *Bridgerton*. The analysis of six episodes throughout *Bridgerton*'s three seasons revealed three themes. These themes are supported by scenes from the episodes.

The first theme is that women in the show are not considered equal and are bound to society's rules. This finding is repeated throughout the series by depicting the female characters as lacking economic independence, pressure to marry and limited education and opportunities. This highlights the unequal expectations placed on women where society values women for their conformity rather than their individuality.

The second theme is that intimacy is based on women's desires. *Bridgerton* focuses on women's desires by highlighting their emotional, romantic, and sexual wants within the constraints of society.

The final theme is that women create their own stories based on their wants and goals. Daphne, Kate, Penelope and Eloise actively create their own stories, driven by their personal wants and goals, rather than simply conforming to the roles prescribed for them. By focusing on women's agency, *Bridgerton* redefines the way female characters can shape their own narratives, offering a more nuanced and empowered portrayal of women in historical romance.

Analyzing *Bridgerton* to understand how it depicts the female gaze has some limitations. These can stem from how interpretations can be subjective, the "female gaze" is hard to clearly define, and the way the show is made also plays a role.

Nonetheless, by examining these depictions, we can better understand how storytelling shapes cultural views on gender roles and relationships. This makes *Bridgerton* not just a piece of entertainment, but a valuable tool for understanding social dynamics.

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