

To See and Be Seen

Self-(Re)Presentation and the Construction of Female Empowerment on Instagram



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Abstract

This thesis explores how ideas of female empowerment are portrayed on social media by specifically examining the self-representation on the Instagram accounts of Kylie Jenner and Ashley Graham. The thesis takes into consideration the development and the agenda of feminism in the United States from the second wave to the third wave of feminism and their perspective on the depiction of female bodies. The thesis pays specific attention to the emergence of post-feminism and its correlation to the sexualization and commodification of female bodies. My research examines the depiction of female bodies in the media using the example of public self-representation on Jenner's and Graham's Instagram accounts. By using feminist theories that discuss gender identity and the objectification of female bodies by the male gaze, this thesis argues that the sexualized self-representation of women's bodies is not an act of self-empowerment, but a result of an internalized male gaze that ultimately supports the sexualization and commodification of female bodies.

Keywords

Self-representation, social media, male gaze, objectification, feminism, post-feminism, gender performance

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Introduction

Indeed, glorying in one's appearance is an ancient warrior's pleasure, an expression of power, an instrument of dominance. Anxiety about personal attractiveness could never be thought defining of a man: a man can always be seen. Women are looked at.

—Susan Sontag in Annie Leibovitz, *Women*¹

Kylie Jenner sits at her pool, her gaze provocatively directed at the camera, her eyes slightly closed, and her lips lightly parted. Her bikini barely covers her breasts, and her body is covered in oil. This is just one out of many pictures that celebrity and influencer Kylie Jenner presents to her millions of followers on her public Instagram account. Every aspect about her pictures, from her posing, to her clothes, to her sexualized demeanor seems to address a male fantasy. In contrast to Jenner's form of self-representation is plus size model and influencer Ashley Graham, who presents the presumable imperfections of her body, such as her weight and stretchmarks in a less stylized way than Jenner. Graham uses the representation of her own body to promote body positivity and self-empowerment for women of all body types on Instagram. Even though Jenner and Graham apparently promote quite different approaches on the depiction of female bodies, both have in common that they focus on the staging and representation of their own bodies on social media.

This thesis focuses on the photo and video sharing platform Instagram as an example of today's self-representation of women on social media. The thesis takes a closer look at the internalization of the male gaze in relation to the postfeminist claim of gaining self-empowerment through sexualized self-representation. Unlike many common movies and television shows that have been studied extensively in regard to a postfeminist agenda, such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, or *Sex and the City*, this thesis puts the focus on the contemporary and very popular research field of social media. As Caldeira, De Ridder and Van Bauwel state, there is a growing demand for a critical evaluation of the way gender and bodies are

¹ Annie Leibovitz and Susan Sontag, *Women* (New York: Random House, 2000), 23.

depicted on Instagram, as the platform is becoming more and more popular.² For this reason, this thesis concentrates on two case studies of very popular Instagram profiles that compose self-representation of the media personality and influencer Kylie Jenner and the influencer and plus-size model Ashley Graham.

The representation of women, and especially the focus on the female body plays an important role on Instagram. By looking specifically at the accounts of influencer Kylie Jenner and plus-size model Ashley Graham it becomes noticeable that the focus of the uploaded images is on a form of self-representation that is based on the staging of their bodies in an often sexualized and objectifying way. Jenner's account, on the one hand, indicates a rather commercialized and consistent form of sexualized self-representation. Graham's account, on the other hand, differs in several ways. Not only is she a plus size model with a body image that does not conform with the ideal for Western women today, but she also presents pictures of herself with the intention of providing a body positive image for all women and thereby seeks to improve women's self-confidence. Body positivity is defined here as a movement that promotes self-care, self-acceptance and anti-perfectionism for women with different body types. Graham performs body-positivity through the active presentation of her presumably flawed body. Instead of hiding her weight or feeling ashamed for it she actively presents it, while she encourages other women to do the same in order to increase their self-esteem and make them accept and even be proud of their bodies, rather than to achieve a perfectionist goal.

One aspect that dominates the depiction of women's bodies over time is the male gaze that displays the female body as desirable object of male desire. In response to the objectifying and sexualized images of female bodies in the media, it has been the aim of the feminist movements to oppose the objectification of women's bodies. While the second wave of feminism demanded equality for women and men beginning in the early 1960s, and the third wave questioned the foundation of gender identity in itself in the 90s, it was post-feminism that established a shift in the perception of feminism and women's depiction in the media. Instead of seeing the sexualized depiction of women as an act of objectification, post-feminism promoted it as an act of choice and self-empowerment for women. As Susan Sontag implies, however, while showing off one's appearance is deeply rooted in humanity as an

² Sofia P. Caldeira, Sander De Ridder, and Sofie Van Bauwel, "Exploring the Politics of Gender Representation on Instagram: Self-Representations of Femininity," *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): pp. 23-42, 24.

“expression of power, an instrument of dominance,”³ this is hardly possible for women, who eventually are stuck in the role of observed objects.

The obsession with the female body can be seen as one of the most important aspects of media culture. The main aspect of post-feminism this thesis uses for the analysis of self-presentation on Instagram, claims that the identification of femaleness through aspects such as motherhood has been replaced by a correlation of femaleness with the possession of a certain body image as a key aspect in the gender identity building process of young women. The focus lies in the post-feminist notion of a deliberately sexualized self-presentation as a tool of self-empowerment. The female empowerment proclaimed on the selected Instagram accounts can thus be seen as a construct in which an internalized self-objectifying gaze has replaced the former male gaze from a solely outside observing perspective. However, Jenner’s and Graham’s self-representation shows that an adequate analysis of the profiles requires a more nuanced view that takes both the anti-objectification aspect of feminism as well as the self-empowering aspect of post-feminism into account.

From a postfeminist perspective, both Jenner’s and Graham’s form of self-representation can be interpreted as deliberate and feminist acts of self-empowerment, in which the women claim power over their own bodies and choose the way they want to present it to the public. Taking into account former approaches towards the female body by feminists over time, this thesis argues that the sexualized self-representation of women on a popular social media platform such as Instagram is not merely an act of self-empowerment, but essentially an expression of women’s internalization of the male gaze. Consequently, the self-representation ultimately does not support the self-empowerment of women, but it assists the sexualization of the female body image and the commodification of female bodies in general.

Due to restricted time and space, this thesis has several limitations. While Laura Mulvey’s theory on the male gaze lead the way for many studies on the perception and the display of female bodies, it needs to be pointed out that she got criticized for her concentration on the depiction of white women only. As bell hooks remarked in her essay “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators” from 1992, Mulvey neglects aspects of racist repression and white supremacy that gives the portrayal of women of color in film a whole other dimension. Due to the length of this thesis and the focus on only two case studies of white, heterosexual, cisgender women on Instagram, there will be no analysis of the experience and the impacts of self-sexualization and self-objectification for women of color, queer, trans or disabled women or many others. Furthermore, a closer analysis of the

³ Leibovitz and Sontag, *Women*, 23.

consequences of self-objectification for young women would require a more psychological and sociological viewpoint, which is not provided in this thesis.

The internal part of the thesis is divided into two main chapters. The first chapter provides a theoretical framework with a feminist approach and mainly addresses questions of female identity in relation to the depiction of the female body and femininity. The first part of the chapter discusses theories of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, while also taking account of the demands of the feminist waves, with a focus on the second and the third waves of feminism. Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of the history of women's treatment and the consolidation of their submissive role in society provides a substantial contribution to the analysis of the objectification of women. The analysis of de Beauvoir's theory concentrates on women's assigned role as "The Other," the second sex next to men, which reinforced and maintained their oppression by men throughout history.⁴ Equally important for the argumentation of this thesis is Judith Butler's take on gender, which she discussed in both of her books *Gender Trouble* (1990), and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Butler's philosophical approach to the concept of gender and sex depicts gender as a performative act, which creates the comprehension of gender in society. This approach helps to understand how the concept of femininity is related to the representation of the female body image in media. Ultimately, de Beauvoir's and Butler's theoretical concepts are essential for the analysis of the seemingly voluntary self-objectification of Jenner and Graham on Instagram.

The second part of chapter one examines three significant theories, which specifically address the male gaze on female bodies. Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which established the term of the male gaze, John Berger's *Ways of Looking*, and Fredrickson's and Roberts' "Objectification Theory." Although these theoretical approaches are interconnected and originate in different fields of research, they all address possible reasons for the sexual objectification of female body images and its consequences, which make them a valuable foundation for the further analysis of the presentation of female bodies on Instagram. The male gaze addresses the sexualized, objectifying gaze of men looking at women in film. Nevertheless, the concept soon became a valuable resource for other academic fields, which analyzed the depiction of women in general. Another important approach on the topic comes from John Berger, who originally explored perspectives on viewing female nudes in art and advertisement, and then specifically pointed out the connection between viewing as an act and the social and political influences behind that. The objectification theory by Fredrickson and Roberts emphasizes the psychological

⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 83.

consequences which the objectifying male gaze has on the self-perception of women. Based on the sociocultural approach of observing bodies as social constructions, Frederickson and Roberts highlight the consequences that sexual objectification has for the health and self-perception of girls and women.

The last part of the first chapter focuses on the emergence of post-feminism, and the way it changed the perspective on the female body. Whereas the female body was seen as something that needed to be freed from an objectifying gaze of men during the second and third wave of feminism, it was actively presented to the public in a sexualized way when post-feminism emerged. As Susan Faludi's approach in *The Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) shows, post-feminism can be interpreted as a direct backlash to the agenda of third wave feminism. At the same time, post-feminism was also understood as a fresh reinterpretation of feminist ideas. Overall, the image of the female body and questions about female identity remained an issue for the feminist movement, while at the same time experiencing a revision through media culture. As sociologist and cultural theorist Rosalind Gill indicates, the body did not become less important within the postfeminist approach. It just went through a change in the way it was looked at. As Gill discusses in her various works on the media's approach to post-feminism, the female body was no longer seen as a passively watched sexual object, but rather an active, desiring sexual subject, which women could use as they pleased.⁵

The aim of the second chapter is to use the theoretical framework discussed in chapter one to analyze the two case studies of female self-representation on Instagram. The analysis of the Instagram profiles focuses on the presentation of clothing, the staging of the body, posing, specific facial expressions and the background of the pictures. In addition, a closer examination of the pictures' captions provides a more detailed analysis of Jenner's and Graham's possible intentions. Applying the feminist cultural theories discussed in chapter one, the second chapter analyzes the images on the Instagram accounts based on the representation and construction of the self and the depiction of femaleness and femininity. The self-representation of the influencer Kylie Jenner focuses on the depiction of sex positivity, expressed through repeated images of sexualized posing and lascivious facial expressions. Although Jenner's followers are mostly women, her pictures seem to address the male gaze directly and the way she presents her body supports the notion of intentional self-objectification and submissiveness for the satisfaction of the male gaze. The Instagram

⁵ Robert Goldman, *Reading Ads Socially* (London: Routledge, 1992), quoted in Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): pp. 147-166, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898>, 151.

account of model and influencer Ashley Graham also focuses on self-representation and the display of her body in an often-sexualized way. Yet, she puts a focus on body positivity and ways to encourage women to embrace their bodies. The recurring motives of self-objectification and the focus on the sexualized depiction of female bodies on both Instagram accounts raises the question, if the images are an expression of an established internalized male gaze which further support the objectification of women's bodies instead of expressing and promoting acts of self-empowerment.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework

The body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project.

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*⁶

The aim of the first chapter is to provide a theoretical framework for the discussion of the female body image within the academic field. Before I analyze how body image is represented in the Instagram accounts of Kylie Jenner and Ashley Graham in specific, I explain the theoretical approaches which I use to examine the connection of feminism and the representation of women's bodies and femininity. Furthermore, I provide a short historical overview of the main goals of the second and the third feminist wave, and their individual viewpoints on the social positioning and the representation of women's bodies, to show how Jenner's and Graham's self-representation can be interpreted. When addressing and analyzing the representation of female bodies, it is necessary to define reasons for the persistent discussion around matters of the female body. For this reason, I look at theories, which explore the origins of sexual objectification and submissiveness of women.

1.1. Feminism, Femininity and the Body

Before I move on to theories addressing the objectification of female images in specific, I explore the development of the feminist waves, their demands, but specifically the significant role of the female body within the movements and the thereby ignited debate in feminist scholarship.

The issue of female suppression and the fight for women's rights has been the foundation of women's movements over time. But despite women's increasing demands for more equality, their role in society had still been shaped by a century-old value system that

⁶ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

saw “true women” as mothers and moral protectors of society. Women were seen as naturally caring, and individuality and personal fulfillment were not destined for them. In the 19th and the early 20th century the ideology of “true womanhood” was mostly used to keep women in their place and out of workspaces dominated by men. In the 1920s the term “new women” appeared, which described women who attempted equality for women on the labor market, in politics and in their social lives. Most men rejected the idea of more equality and also many women dismissed the feminist idea of the new woman who should enter the male domains of society, as they feared to lose their female identities.⁷

Simone de Beauvoir

Although women achieved some essential political rights during the suffragette movement, questions of femininity and female identity remained essential for future feminist agendas. Issues concerning the development of female identity were particularly interesting for feminist scholarship, as exploring causes for female oppression within history, and finding ways to oppose it, were central issues within the feminist discourse.⁸ Prior to the second wave of feminism, Simone de Beauvoir became a key figure in feminist scholarship by publishing her thoughts about the origins of female oppression in her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex* in 1949.

One of de Beauvoir’s most famous quotes claims that “one is not born but rather becomes a woman.”⁹ This sentence reveals one of the main points of her book, in which she argues that gender is not determined by biology or psychology, but rather is a social construct that imposes society’s construct of femininity on young girls and women and thus shapes their female identities. This aspect is one of the most distinctive in de Beauvoir’s thinking, as she sees the social aspect of gender prevailing over the biological aspect. This means that biology does not determine a woman’s, nor a man’s destiny, since it neglects important cultural and societal influences and circumstances in a person’s life.¹⁰ Yet, it is also not only culture that shapes gender identity. As Judith Butler suggests, by choosing the words “becoming a woman” de Beauvoir emphasizes that gender is not just a concept enforced on a person

⁷ Estelle B. Freedman, *Feminism, Sexuality, and Politics* (Chapel Hill (C.): University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 23-26.

⁸ Freedman, *Feminism, Sexuality, and Politics*, 21.

⁹ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 273.

¹⁰ Alex Hughes and Anne Witz, “Feminism and the Matter of Bodies: From De Beauvoir to Butler,” *Body & Society* 3, no. 1 (1997): pp. 47-60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034x97003001004>, 49.

culturally, a “construct.” Gender is also a process that provides possibilities for women to construct themselves, which emphasizes the understanding of gender as a “project.” According to Butler, de Beauvoir’s work in essence describes the development of “becoming a woman” as an ambiguous process of decision making and adjustment to cultural influences. Yet, the choices provided for gender are limited by the established cultural norms of society.¹¹

De Beauvoir emphasizes that women’s assigned role of the Other manifested their subordinate social, economic and political status over time. As a consequence of this submissive status, de Beauvoir argues that women internalized the man-made role of the Other to such an extent that it controls not only their own self-perception but also their very existence. By this de Beauvoir means that women’s behavior, their thinking and their self-perception is formed and determined by conditions regulated by men. In this way, they lose their own awareness of self and fully adopt the role of the Other.¹²

The female body plays an essential part in the establishment of this thinking, as the role of the Other is largely defined by her reproductive function. Among other factors, de Beauvoir sees men as dominators of nature at the foundation of female suppression. In a historical sense, she argues that men began to perceive of themselves as individual beings when they were able to dominate nature and thus began to comprehend themselves as active creators. De Beauvoir refers to this status as “transcendence.” The accomplishment of defeating the restrictions of nature gave them the notion to be entitled to rule over women who, in opposition to the active role of men as creators, hold a passive and submissive role, which de Beauvoir refers to as the state of “immanence.” De Beauvoir further remarks that by finding “transcendence,” men “found self-realization as an existent.” In other words, as creators, men can develop and maintain their self and their existence in society. Women who also desire the state of transcendence, are caught in the passive state of immanence, which prevents them from further personal development as they are stuck in their role as the reproductive source of society. At the bottom of this de Beauvoir sees the “imperialism of human consciousness,” the natural desire of humans to dominate others which caused the establishment of the category of the Other and ultimately resulted in the oppression of women.¹³

Another aspect of de Beauvoir’s work that is of interest regarding body image and objectification, is the function of women as sexual partners and erotic objects to men.

¹¹ Judith Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 72 (1986): pp. 35-49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930225>, 36-37.

¹² Hughes and Witz, “Feminism and the Matter of Bodies,” 49.

¹³ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 62-64, 82-84.

According to de Beauvoir this can be an element of self-empowerment for women, as sexuality itself can never fully be regulated and thus contains in itself an aspect of individuality. Consequently, the expression of sexuality in the form of eroticized appearance can be seen as a rebellion of “the individual against the universal.”¹⁴ In other words, the eroticized image of women could be perceived as an individual act of self-empowerment. However, de Beauvoir further indicates that individuality stands in contradiction with the concept of true womanhood. As discussed earlier, true womanhood was associated with caring for others instead of focusing on one’s own individual wishes. This left no choice for women but to willingly put themselves in the role of an object, the Other, in order to be perceived as true woman by society. In their role as the Other, women learned to perform the roles they were assigned to by men.¹⁵

Second Wave Feminism and Body Image

It was during the second wave of feminism beginning in the early 1960s, when a focus on the representation of female bodies in the media, popular culture and advertising was established. De Beauvoir established the theory that gender means more than just the sex assigned at birth, and her argument about gender as a social construct became the main theoretical foundation for the second wave.¹⁶

With this newly gained theoretical approach to women’s problems in American society, several feminist scholars examined the situation of white middle-class women in America. In 1963, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* described the unhappiness of many women in American post-war society, who were trained to be perfect housewives, wives and mothers and tried to maintain the perfect image that was sold to them in magazines, while secretly wishing to have a more self-determined life. Friedan states that young women did not think about the achievements of the previous feminist movement any longer, as they were focused on their appearance and praised for it by society. True womanhood was solely connected with a woman’s look and her capability of being a mother, which was seen as the ultimate achievement for a woman during that time. When de Beauvoir’s book got published in America, her theories were called into question and even rejected by many. It was assumed that matters of equality for American women were more advanced than for French women at

¹⁴ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 84.

¹⁵ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 84-85, 265-267.

¹⁶ Hughes and Witz, “Feminism and the Matters of Bodies,” 52.

the time, due to the development of technology and the introduction of household appliances. Since inequality was not considered a problem for American women anymore, it was believed they had no reason to complain about their situation. Thus, the so-called “woman problem”, meaning women complaining about inequality, was no longer seen as an issue in America.¹⁷

The second wave of feminism, however, very much still observed that women’s oppression had not just vanished. While the majority of people assumed white American middle-class women lived in domestic bliss and had a good future ahead, feminists drew attention to the inequality and the lack of opportunity women were exposed to because of their predetermined roles in society.¹⁸ At this point in time however, the term feminism was associated with the first wave, which many women of the new left movement condemned as “bourgeois and reformist.” For this reason, many feminists rather used the term “women’s liberation movement” or “radical feminism” instead in the late 1960s, to separate themselves from the first wave of feminism and to emphasize their demands of the destruction of a societal system that categorially disadvantaged women.¹⁹

Among other issues, there was a strong focus on identity politics and how women’s bodies were presented in the media. The body as a “medium of culture,” as Debra Gimlin puts it, makes the body a valuable study object, since its presentation can be an expression of the dominant cultural rules of a society. For example, the way female bodies are represented in the media, can be an indicator for the perception of femininity, femaleness and womanhood in general in a society. Consequently, if the cultural norms of a society have power over the appearance of an individual, these norms can also shape the identity of an individual who is bound to those norms.²⁰ In *History of Sexuality, Volume I* Michel Foucault discusses this close relationship of societal power structures and disciplinary aspects of sexuality. For centuries women have been oppressed with strict guidelines about their appearance. This oppression preserved existing patriarchal social structures, as women internalized the oppressive structures in order to correspond to the given norms.

Accordingly, women were regarded “not only as *objects* of disciplines but also as self-scrutinizing and self-forming *subjects*.”²¹ In other words, women internalize the dictating

¹⁷ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), 16-19.

¹⁸ Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement of the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books (Random), 1980), 3.

¹⁹ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975, Thirtieth Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 53-54.

²⁰ Debra L. Gimlin, *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Univ. of California Press, 2002), 3.

²¹ Gary Gutting and Johanna Oksala, “Michel Foucault,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Stanford University, May 22, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/>.

rules of how they should look and thereby discipline themselves according to the given expectations.

Judith Butler

The issue of the presentation of the female image was still relevant when the third wave of feminism emerged in the 1990s. When Naomi Wolf published *The Beauty Myth* in 1990, she argued that the domesticity of the 50s had simply been replaced by a new obsession for physical beauty. According to Wolf, this obsession for physical attractiveness can be seen as a means to control women beyond their newly acquired power and influence on the labor market. While the second wave of feminism achieved more self-determination for women in the Western world, the obsession with beauty still kept them under control. Thus, the beauty myth sabotaged former feminist achievements and established self-control and self-hatred among women.²²

The fixation on physical beauty initiated a rethinking about the representation of femininity and diversity. Movements such as *Riot Grrrl* propagated girl power, the right for women to display their own form of self-representation, and a destabilization of traditional gender categories.²³ Questions about gender identity became central at this time, and one of the most influential scholars who discussed this topic was philosophy and gender theorist Judith Butler. In her books *Gender Trouble* (1990), and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler attempted to rethink the categories of sex and gender and introduced the concept that gender is a performative act. What Butler means by this is that the perception of gender is created by the performance of repeated and ritualized acts. This means, women and men repeatedly act in specific ways, which then define how femininity and masculinity are perceived. They perform their gender through their demeanor and their appearance to an audience that functions as the outside observer of the body that gives the performance.²⁴

Thus, when women repeatedly perform submissiveness, it becomes a defining feature of femininity. As a result, disobedient or demanding character traits are considered to be unfeminine. This was a phenomenon that, for example, could be well observed in the case of first and second wave feminists, who were frequently characterized as hysterical and

²² Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (HarperCollins e-books, 2009), 29-30.

²³ Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford, *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 144-145.

²⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York, London: Routledge, 2006), 191-192.

unfeminine women, who acted against their female nature.²⁵ Butler argues that gender itself is never constant, instead it is a “*stylized repetition of acts.*” These acts are performed by bodies that are presented in specific stylized ways, and thereby create the illusion of an unchanging concept of gender. Butler does not identify gender as a fixed identity. Instead, she perceives it as “*social temporality,*” something that is influenced and created by social and historical circumstances.²⁶ Butler further analyzes the effect of gender performativity on gender identity, assuming that gender can only be understood as a canvas for political regulations and social norms. She argues that gender can be assumed as fixed if it becomes controlled by cultural and social norms, thus “not biology, but culture, becomes destiny.” The performative acts of gender are not continually maintained and determined within a person but performed for the outside gaze and ultimately believed and internalized by the performers as well. Thus, the performance becomes the only comprehension of gender for both the audience and the performer themselves.²⁷ Consequently, a woman is believed to be feminine if she fulfills the right performance of a feminine woman, even if this does not reflect her actual identity as a woman. Thus, the performative act of gender establishes how gender itself is perceived.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler later extended the topic of the materiality of the body itself, arguing that society provides an exclusionary ground in which not all bodies matter as bodies in the same way. Society, which is influenced by heterosexual norms, differentiates between bodies that do conform to the norm and bodies that do not conform. Thus, any other form of identification except an identification with the given norm is excluded.²⁸ The social concept of what femininity or masculinity means is so deeply rooted in our society that any deviation from those predefined norms would lead to a state of “radical dislocation.” She exemplifies the great discomfort experienced by people who in any way differ from the established concepts of femininity or masculinity. She even goes a step further and argues that if one can only fully exist in our society as a gendered being and existing itself can only be understood in a gendered way, questioning this gendered existence means questioning one’s existence in its entirety. Arguably, women perform their femininity based on the given norms, in order to avoid an existential identity crisis.²⁹

²⁵ Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 54.

²⁶ Original quotes are italicized.

²⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 11, 189-192.

²⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London: Routledge Classics, 2011), xiii.

²⁹ Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” 41-42.

1.2. The Male Gaze: Matters of Appearance and Female Body Image

John Berger and Laura Mulvey

The strong focus on the female body image and the reasons for women's pressure to conform to the established beauty norm was also the focus of research in John Berger's and Laura Mulvey's work. Before Mulvey's work was published, it was John Berger who addressed the subject of female representation in relation to power dynamics and objectification in 1972. In his BBC television series *Ways of Seeing*, which was followed by a book with the same name, he initiated a closer look at the representation of the nude female visual image in oil paintings and advertisements. The main idea behind Berger's work was to show how women were looked at by men, and in this context internalized the male view in their observation of themselves. Moreover, Berger emphasizes that women are not just subject to male sight but are raised with the notion that they constantly have to watch their appearance. It is because of this constant process of being observed both by the outside and by themselves that women in a way lose their sense of their inner selves. In the process they begin to seek appreciation from others, ultimately from men, for the version of themselves that they internalized, and that they think they should present to the outside.³⁰

Berger goes on to point out the identity forming process this initiates for a woman, as she has both "the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her." Berger's simplified claim that "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at," does not emphasize women's vanity, but rather highlights the internalized concept of the male observer within a woman, which makes her adopt an objectified view of herself, and thereby turns her into "an object of vision: a sight."³¹ While Berger acknowledges the gender relations that are embedded in a patriarchal system, he has also been criticized for a lack of detail and further analysis on the consequences this image of women has on the representation of gender itself.³² His analysis of the internalization of the male view were highly relevant for Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and for further research in the field overall.

It is this concept of the male gaze, which is the centerpiece of Laura Mulvey's theory addressing the way women and their bodies are looked at. In 1975, film scholar Mulvey

³⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 67-68.

³¹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 68-69.

³² Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism* (New York, London: New York University Press, 1995), 174-175.

caught the attention of a broad academic audience with her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Although Mulvey’s theory was initially meant to analyze classic Hollywood narrative cinema, her concept has been used in many other areas, such as sociology and cultural studies, to explain the representation of the female image. The reason why Mulvey’s essay was read with so much interest and was influential in the field of film studies and beyond, was the psychoanalytical approach she chose. She used psychoanalytical theory to display how the patriarchal structure of Western society has influenced the image of women in film, and thereby broke with purely sociological viewpoints.³³ To be more precise, Mulvey indicated that it is not society alone that establishes an objectifying view on female bodies. Rather, it is a much deeper psychological process of internalizing specific viewpoints for both men and women, which is the underlying cause of female objectification. Through this new psychoanalytical approach, Mulvey initiated further research on the matters of viewing and objectifying female bodies in various areas of study.³⁴

Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze made a lasting impression on research on the connection between the social role of women and the undeniable importance of their appearance and bodies. Her essay focuses on problematic issues that can occur in relation to pleasure arising from looking at the images of women in film. Based on the American movie industry with a patriarchal mindset, film addresses an active male audience that looks at women as passive figures, accompanied by a sexualized image of women. To put it more simply, women’s image is constructed in a way to please the objectifying look of men. Thus, the female body occupies the role of a performing object, or to use Simone de Beauvoir’s term it embodies “the Other.” Mulvey explains this idea with the psychoanalytical approach toward male castration anxiety, which as a consequence, leads men to take control over the female body in the form of an object.

Mulvey further points out how important visual representation is particularly for women, as it plays a crucial part in the development of their gender identity and has a lasting influence on their self-perception.³⁵ In particular, she examines how women are influenced by the images they see of other women on screen, and the way this reflects their own performance of femininity. This is also an aspect that made Mulvey’s research so relevant for feminists of the time, since the second wave feminist movement considered the objectification of female bodies as a crucial indicator of the oppression of women by men, which they

³³ Gamman and Makinen, *Female Fetishism*, 175.

³⁴ Sarah Gamble, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 121.

³⁵ Roberta Sassatelli, “Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 5 (2011): 123-143, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411398278>, 124.

opposed. Her focus on the male view on female bodies supported already existing objectification theories by feminist scholars of the time, by providing them with a solid theoretical foundation for a correlation between female objectification and imbalanced power relations between men and women established in a patriarchal system.³⁶ In this regard, Mulvey's theory actively helped the feminists' approach of finding ways to challenge the objectifying look at women, and to analyze women's view of themselves.³⁷

Although Mulvey's concept builds upon Berger's thoughts, it differs in its theoretical foundation. Mulvey emphasizes the function of psychoanalytical theory as "political weapon" with which she seeks to illustrate how patriarchal structures have formed the film industry. An essential aspect within the concept of the male gaze is the idea of a paradoxical "phallogentrism," which is preserved through the "image of the castrated woman."³⁸ This is a concept Mulvey based directly on Freud's psychoanalytical theory of men's castration anxiety and women's issues with never being able to possess a penis themselves. From Freud's point of view, women create "unpleasure" for men because women's absence of a penis, which symbolizes a man's masculinity, signifies a possible threat of losing masculinity for men. Women, however, want to make up for the absence that is created. Mulvey therefore argues that as a consequence of men's castration anxiety they turn women into fetishized objects of desire in order to make them less threatening.³⁹

Mulvey then applies the theory of the desired female object, which is created by the castration anxiety of men, to explain the way visual images of women in cinema are perceived and constructed. Her focus lies in the pleasure the male spectator gets from looking at the female body, and the reasons behind that. She specifically names two different aspects of pleasure provided by looking at an image: scopophilia, and the narcissistic aspect of scopophilia. Scopophilia describes the pleasure the spectator gets by the act of looking itself. In Freud's regard, it is specifically the act of looking at another person as an object that provides pleasure, which also contains an erotic component. Mulvey took this approach to explain the objectified portrayal of women in film as a means of fulfilling men's sexual desire. With the example of selected movies by Alfred Hitchcock and Josef von Sternberg, she highlights aspects of fetishism and voyeurism behind the display of female bodies in film. This is supported by the camera's focus on female body parts, as well as on a woman's

³⁶ Gamman and Makinen, *Female Fetishism*, 172-175.

³⁷ Gamble, *The Routledge Companion*, 121.

³⁸ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 57.

³⁹ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 64.

appearance, through clothes and make-up, which implies her “*to-be-looked-at-ness*,” reducing her to just her visual appearance.⁴⁰

The second important aspect of scopophilia that Mulvey points out is the element of narcissism, which emerges when a person identifies with the visual image they see on screen. Mulvey specifically emphasizes the consequences the gaze has for the development of the self. While the scopophilic aspect provides pleasure by observing a person as a sexual object, the narcissistic aspect brings pleasure by identification with the viewed image.⁴¹ Mulvey argues further that cinema offers ideals of human images which the spectator identifies with. This can result in a misrecognition of the spectator’s actual identity, as they glorify the viewed image that does not match their actual identity.⁴² This aspect of Mulvey’s theory is especially relevant when it comes to the analysis of the female gaze towards other women. Just as Berger, Mulvey focuses mainly on a heterosexual perspective of the gaze, assuming the man to be the main spectator of the woman. In an interview with Roberta Sassatelli from 2007, Mulvey emphasized that this perspective is absolutely essential for the understanding of her essay, as she wanted to argue that the male gaze and the female gaze are the same, since women internalized the male gaze to look at themselves.⁴³

Sylvia Blood elaborates on this concept in the context of body image research in psychology. In 2005, Blood criticized the majority of research on female body image for mainly containing the notion of viewing the female body from the outside, an aesthetic shell that is object of a male gaze for men and women alike.⁴⁴ According to Blood, it is not possible to look at the human form in a neutral manner as “seeing and being seen are never neutral activities.”⁴⁵ This correlates not only with Mulvey, but also with Judith Butler’s theories as they both state that gazing at another person is always influenced by people’s internalized gaze and concepts of gender. Since Mulvey concentrates on a heterosexual, masculine perspective of looking at women, her entire theory highlights the impacts of a sexualized way of gazing at women as object. Mulvey’s theoretical approach finally reveals that the act of looking itself puts women in a subordinate position, as it symbolizes the manifestation of male dominance over women on the foundation of an overall patriarchal social structure that relies on the representation of active males and passive females.

⁴⁰ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 57-65.

⁴¹ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 67.

⁴² Gamman and Makinen, *Female Fetishism*, 177.

⁴³ Sassatelli, “Interview with Laura Mulvey,” 127.

⁴⁴ Sylvia K. Blood, *Body Work: The Social Construction of Women's Body Image* (London: Routledge, 2005), 37.

⁴⁵ Blood, *Body Work*, 39.

Objectification Theory

The objectification of women and the male gaze that maintains women's subordinate position also alters women's self-perception psychologically. A theory that discusses the psychological consequences of the objectification process is Fredrickson's and Roberts' "Objectification Theory." Based on the sociocultural approach of observing bodies as social constructions, Frederickson and Roberts highlight the consequences that sexual objectification has for the health and self-perception of girls and women.

First, it is important to emphasize that objectification theory is based on the premise of women's objectification being mainly manifested in the sexualized male observation of female bodies. The reason why Fredrickson and Roberts focus on this approach is because it is the most commonly used form of sexualizing female bodies on an everyday basis. This does not mean that sexualized gazing is necessarily bound to sexual objectification of female bodies, yet it always contains the possibility for it. Fredrickson and Roberts imply that sexual objectification takes place whenever women are only observed and treated in regard to their physical appearance, and their bodies are reduced to a pleasurable tool for others.⁴⁶

Another aspect that objectification theory emphasizes is the frequency of the sexualized male gaze in American media culture. According to Fredrickson and Roberts, the establishment of sexualized images in American culture and mass media makes it impossible for women to escape those images, which then leads to the internalized male view women have of themselves. In addition to this, objectification theory indicates that women can obtain power with their physical appearance by using their attractiveness as a form of currency for success on a social and economic level. However, this requires a specific form of attractiveness, which has to conform with the preferences of dominant male Western culture. Thus, not every female body meets the requirements of what is seen as attractive enough within those dominant standards for women to take advantage of their looks. In this context, white, slim women are more likely to be seen as attractive while women of color, overweight women, and women with disabilities are often deemed unattractive.⁴⁷

Arguably, it then can be assumed that especially white, slim women who meet the standards of physical attractiveness in the Western culture might benefit from this by using their appearance for their advantage in social or work situations. By analyzing empirical

⁴⁶ Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1997): pp. 173-206, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>, 175.

⁴⁷ Rhoda K. Unger, *Female and Male: Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), quoted in Fredrickson and Roberts, "Objectification Theory," 176-180.

research, Fredrickson and Roberts show that the way female bodies are perceived from the outside can determine a woman's whole life, from educational to job perspectives to private life.⁴⁸ Objectification theory reveals that the awareness of the advantages that a specific physical appearance can have for women causes them to pressure themselves to conform to the provided beauty standards of Western society. At the same time, women who conform to these beauty standards also face disadvantages such as harassment or the assumption that their success is only built upon their looks. Corresponding with the thoughts of Berger, objectification theory indicates that the internalized visual image of the perfect female body leads to a constant observation of the body. As a consequence, this means that eventually all women, no matter how their bodies look, are forced both by the outer and the inner male gaze to try to acquire the given beauty standards and to put their bodies in the center of attention of their whole existence.

Accordingly, objectification theory proposes feelings of shame and anxiety as possible results of this societal pressure. As it is impossible for most women to obtain the requirements of what is seen as the ideal female body, they are chasing after an unattainable goal. This results in an ongoing comparison of their own presumably imperfect body with an imagined perfect ideal, which causes dissatisfaction and ultimately a feeling of shame toward their own bodies. This emotion of shame results in a desire to either change their body into the desired form, or to escape the gaze entirely by hiding it. Ultimately, this can cause the development of anxiety about a woman's own physical appearance, as her body is under constant surveillance of the male gaze both from the outside and the inside.⁴⁹

1.3. Post-feminism

Questions about female identity were one of the most important topics on the feminist agenda in the 80s and 90s that eventually found a way into popular culture, advertisements and the mainstream media. While the feminist movement of the second wave always looked with a critical eye on popular culture and the media's representation of women in general, visual culture itself had its own approach in the depiction of femininity. Although the phenomenon itself existed before, it was in the early 1980s when media first came up with the term post-feminism. Even though the prefix *post* implies post-feminism to be an era that comes after

⁴⁸ Fredrickson and Roberts, "Objectification Theory," 178.

⁴⁹ Fredrickson and Roberts, "Objectification Theory," 181-182.

feminism, it was mainly understood as a rejection of the agenda of feminist demands of the second wave. On the one hand, this rejection gave the term post-feminism the notion of being anti-feminist. On the other hand, as Genz and Brabon argue, post-feminism could be understood as an indicator for the continuous rethinking of feminist ideas and changes within the feminist movement. Yet, it cannot be understood as a movement itself, as no specific group ever claimed the term for itself, nor can it be assigned to an exact time frame as it existed simultaneously with the second and the third wave of feminism. This makes it quite difficult to differentiate between third wave feminism and post-feminism and to find an ultimate definition for the term.⁵⁰

This thesis does not consider third-wave feminism as equivalent to post-feminism. As Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake remark, media in the late 90s and early 2000s has labeled third wave feminism as post-feminism, causing confusion for the comprehension of both terms. Heywood and Drake who consider themselves as third wave feminists, reject the postfeminist approach that considers all former feminist demands as achieved. For them it is clear that post-feminism represents young women who directly oppose second wave feminism.⁵¹ Yet, as Shelley Budgeon indicates, third wave feminism itself, just as post-feminism, is a very disputed subject within academia. According to Budgeon, one of the most important features of third wave feminism was its different perception of the role of women within society. While the second wave put an emphasis on gender equality between men and women, the third wave had a more profound perspective on gender. They focused on challenging and altering the concept of gender identity and the system in which gender is embedded. Moreover, they attempted a more diverse apprehension of the concept of gender and the division between only two distinct genders. Regarding men and women, they did not want to solely focus on the dissimilarities between the two genders anymore. Rather they attempted to establish the idea of acceptance towards women's difference to men instead of aiming at "equality or sameness" of the sexes.⁵²

⁵⁰ Genz Stéphanie and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 10-11.

⁵¹ Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds., *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1.

⁵² Shelley Budgeon, *Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3-5.

Susan Faludi: Post-feminism as Backlash

Similar to third wave feminism, post-feminism was a phenomenon that offered a basis for discussion about the current status of feminism within society and challenged the established perspective on feminism. One of the scholars who came up with one of the most influential definitions of post-feminism was Susan Faludi, who defined post-feminism as direct backlash against second wave feminism.

In the introduction of her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* from 1991, Faludi states that the 20th century ended under the premise of a big victory for women in America, as equality had supposedly finally been achieved. Yet, at the same time there was the contradictive impression that women had never been as unhappy before. As Faludi indicates, it was an easy solution for the media to blame feminism for women's misery, and to designate women's liberation as the cause of their self-inflicted unhappiness.⁵³ Since the media had an immense influence on society's perception of the ideal female image, it was not difficult to convince many women through various media formats that feminist ideas of equality were now outdated, not worth pursuing, and in fact even the foundation for their own misery.

Uncertainty about gender identity became a hot topic again, and women asked themselves what it meant to be a woman. The political agenda and the media propagated the image of the liberated woman as stressed, depressed and confused, because of her focus on autonomy and career. For this reason, she was seen as responsible for her own unhappiness. But as Faludi emphasizes, women were far from being liberated, as inequality in sectors such as the work force, education and reproductive rights were still determining women's lives. Faludi argues that it was not feminism itself that was to blame for women's misery but the myths about feminism's deficiency and the "false images of womanhood" constantly presented to women in the media, popular culture and advertisements.⁵⁴

The power of the media and the advertising industry was substantial in shaping the public opinion about what feminism meant. As a solution to women's misery, advertisements in the early 80s proposed that women just needed new lifestyle choices to embrace their womanhood and to feel fulfilled. The media did not just stop writing about the feminist movement, they actively tried to diminish it by claiming that "feminism is 'dead'." Sexualized images of women were now promoted in advertisements as a "return to femininity." In this way, femininity was equated with women embracing and reclaiming their

⁵³ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991), ix-x.

⁵⁴ Faludi, *Backlash*, ix-xv.

most natural self, while the images being advertised were actually promoting a highly stylized and sexualized female image which meant to attract men.⁵⁵ Thus, popular culture and the media supported and even actively promoted an image of femininity and womanhood that had been opposed by second wave feminism. By advertising this new image of feminism, the media managed to successfully re-brand the term feminism. This gave young women, who otherwise rejected the agenda of the second wave, a reason to connect to feminism again and to perceive of themselves as feminists.⁵⁶

The Postfeminist Woman

As Stéphanie Genz illustrates, the media advertised that it was time for women to move on from former feminist ideas about womanhood. Second wave feminism was often associated with an image of women as frustrated, unfulfilled and without any style or physical attractiveness. The term “new woman,” which was introduced in the late 19th century during the first wave of feminism, was reinterpreted by media in the late 20th and early 21st century to present an image of a new, strong and superwoman-like woman who embraces her femaleness while at the same time being strong and independent. Genz describes what she calls the “new postfeminist women” as someone who wants to “have it all.” By this Genz means that women aimed to achieve a combination of femininity and feminist identity. They wanted to have a career, a fulfilled social and personal life and sexual freedom, but at the same time they did not want to be linked to the career-obsessed or unfulfilled image of the second wave feminists.⁵⁷

Post-feminism was based on the notion that second wave feminists opposed stereotypical symbols of femininity such as make-up or a specific interest in fashion and, as a result, refused some women a connection to their female feminine identity.⁵⁸ Advertisements and popular culture skillfully promoted the impression that feminism was outdated and prudish for rejecting the presentation of naked and sexualized female bodies in public. To further support this negative impression of the old feminism, the media openly and provocatively illustrated women in eroticized ways, always under the premise that the young

⁵⁵ Faludi, *Backlash*, 76-77, 201.

⁵⁶ Melanie Waters, *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1-3.

⁵⁷ Stéphanie Genz, “Singed Out: Postfeminism’s ‘New Woman’ and the Dilemma of Having It All,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43, no. 1 (2010): pp. 97-119, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2010.00732.x>, 97-98.

⁵⁸ Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism*, 76.

audience would understand it as playful form of irony. It was the artist Madonna, who was one of the first people in the music industry who played with her image and sexualized her performances, followed by other artists. Irony was an essential tool of post-feminism in the media, since it could be used to display sexism while at the same time claiming that it was only meant as some sort of ironic joke, which only the modern women would get.⁵⁹ The media broke with any political correctness and claimed that in contrast to the prudish attitude of second wave feminism, post-feminism did not see any shame in looking at beautiful bodies of women on screen and in magazines. On the contrary, the sexualized images were even advertised as encouragement of women's self-empowerment, as they choose to deliberately present their beauty and sexuality in public.⁶⁰

Female identity and empowerment were directly equated with openly displaying femininity, and female sexuality. This new interpretation of feminism was often described as “do-me” or “Girlie feminism,” which meant to give women agency through sexual freedom. Especially younger generations of women wanted to have the choice to define their own womanhood through an open display of their femininity. They claimed that gaining power from womanhood is only possible by “making choices” and “being in control.” Yet, the wish to make decisions and to be in control was not related to empowerment for women in a political sense anymore. Instead, the demand of choice and control for women, formerly directed at political issues, shifted to consumerism and lifestyle choices. The focus was put on choices about the aesthetics of being a woman, which in post-feminism was promoted as the reclamation of feminine identity.⁶¹

Michelle M. Lazar, whose research focus is on consumption and advertising in the cosmetic industry emphasizes a close correlation between consumption, beauty and emancipation in post-feminism. One of the main points within the postfeminist discourse was that young women demanded the right to actively present their bodies and to use beauty practices in order to claim self-empowerment. As Lazar puts it, “‘doing’ beauty” becomes an essential prerequisite for “‘doing’ femininity.” According to Lazar, the assumption that emancipation can be achieved through beauty advertisement bases on two essential factors. First, it supposedly offers women increased independence and freedom, which in the case of

⁵⁹ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): pp. 147-166, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898>, 159.

⁶⁰ Angela McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (February 17, 2007): pp. 255-264, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203168332>, 258-259.

⁶¹ Imelda Whelehan, *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (London: Women's Press, 2002), quoted in Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2010), 117.

beauty advertising, is women's freedom to be beautiful and to show it. Second, the use of beauty products fulfilled one of the most important demands for young postfeminist women, namely being able to make their own choices. By supposedly meeting the emancipatory demands of young women, the advertising industry thus achieves women's identification with feminism by consuming beauty products, without stopping the sexualization of the female body.⁶²

Rosalind Gill also emphasizes the focus on the female body within the postfeminist discourse. Unlike Faludi, however, Gill does not classify post-feminism solely as a backlash against feminism. Rather, she perceives it as a "sensibility," which influenced and shaped media productions. For Gill, whose focus is mainly on the advertising industry, one of the most relevant aspects of post-feminism is its compulsive fixation on the body. She argues that the perception of openly displayed femininity as a liberating act for the female identity crisis did not have any liberating effect on women, but rather put back the focus on "femininity ... as a bodily property." While motherhood was central to the definition of femininity in earlier times, it is the "possession of a 'sexy body'" which defines a woman's identity in post-feminism.⁶³

Gill sees this shift in the comprehension of feminism as essential for understanding the aspect of postfeminist sensibility. Women are not represented as passive, sexualized objects anymore, but they are willingly objectifying themselves. According to Gill this also represents a shift in the way power is conducted. Instead of having a controlling gaze from the outside, there is a shift to a self-controlling, self-centered gaze. Gill's argument is closely related to Foucault's theory of power structures and sexuality. Foucault's argument that women become self-forming subjects who discipline themselves, manifests in the strong focus on self-care and individualism that is central to post-feminism. Gill argues that the internalization of the objectifying gaze indicates an even stronger form of female exploitation, as it affects more than just their appearance, it shapes women's subjectivity, their construction of self.⁶⁴

⁶² Michelle M. Lazar, "The Right to Be Beautiful: Postfeminist Identity and Consumer Beauty Advertising," in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 37-51, 37-38.

⁶³ Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 149.

⁶⁴ Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 151-152.

The Postfeminist Paradox

The voluntary self-objectification of women, as well as “ambiguous portrayals of femaleness, femininity, and feminism” are recurring issues within the postfeminist context. Although the image of the new postfeminist woman widely promoted in the media was willingly adopted by many young women, it also revealed a paradox within post-feminism. In order to combine feminine identity with feminist values, women needed to take the role of the superwoman who is unwilling to neglect or sacrifice any aspect of her life for another, which Genz describes as a state of “postfeminist in-betweenness.” In order to achieve the goal of having it all, the postfeminist woman needs find a balance between her career and her private life. As a consequence, she tries to bend the contrast “between feminism and femininity, between professionalism and domesticity,” as sacrificing any condition is not an option.⁶⁵ She cannot be too demanding, nor can she be too weak, or how Ruth Shalit described it, she needs to be “savvy yet vulnerable, fallible yet likeable, feminist yet not.”⁶⁶ In the process of trying to live a perfectly balanced life, she loses her “harmonious inner wholeness,” as she is trying to reach the perfect “hybridity” between feminist identity, self-fulfillment and career.⁶⁷ Eventually, she has to meet a specific standard that can never be entirely fulfilled, which leads to an excessive demand of characteristics and tasks and a disconnection with her inner self.

As Angela McRobbie argues, the postfeminist discourse is paradoxical and ambivalent. McRobbie deems Faludi’s response to post-feminism as too conservative and indicates that post-feminism can be seen as an expression of a desired renewal of feminist ideas, which requires the assumption that former feminist approaches are outdated. While women have more choices, these choices become restrictive within the postfeminist lifestyle culture, as each individual has to make the right choices. McRobbie sees individualization, which is such an important feature of post-feminism, as a necessity since society does not provide predefined paths for women to follow anymore. As a consequence, they must make a plan for their own lives. However, McRobbie also discusses the negative aspects of individualism, which become particularly visible in the figure of the single woman who appears in many media productions with a postfeminist approach, such as the movie *Bridget Jones’s Diary* or the popular TV series *Sex and the City*. While individualism has an elevated position within post-feminism, it is still loneliness and the fear of not finding the right partner

⁶⁵ Genz, “Singled Out,” 98-99.

⁶⁶ Ruth Shalit, “Canny and Lacy: Ally, Dharma, Ronnie, and the Betrayal of Postfeminism,” *The New Republic*, 1998, pp. 27-32, quoted in Genz “Singled Out,” 99.

⁶⁷ Genz, “Singled Out,” 98-99.

that dominates women's lives in postfeminist media. This creates a contradiction, as it implies that women who are independent are unable to find happiness unless they find it in a romantic partnership. But because there is such a strong focus on self-improvement and self-control, the women cannot blame anyone but themselves for any form of inadequacy in their lives, which eventually gives their individuality a bad connotation.⁶⁸

What Genz calls postfeminist "in-betweenness," McRobbie describes as "double entanglement," the attempt to find a balance between neo-conservatist norms regarding gender and sexuality, and liberalizing ideas in regard to women making their own decisions. The postfeminist woman is aware of the achievements of feminism, and fundamentally opposes the sexual objectification of women. At the same time, she is aware of the power of femininity that can grant her the ability to make choices and liberate herself. This makes postfeminist womanhood a versatile and ambiguous subject, as it "renegotiates feminist, antifeminist, feminine, and patriarchal descriptions of womanhood."⁶⁹ The focus on the self and individual improvement underlines the factor of in-betweenness within post-feminism, as the ability to make choices comes with the burden to make the right choices in order to embrace one's femininity while being a feminist.

Feelings such as shame and anxiety which can result from the pressure to create the perfect female self as proposed by objectification theory, ultimately challenge the postfeminist approach to present female bodies. The postfeminist approach suggests that the feminist movement is no longer needed. Women can choose to show their bodies openly, and to present them in a sexualized way in order to reflect their full liberation. But even when bodies are presented in what is believed to be a deliberately erotized manner, they still need to conform with the beauty standards of the dominant Western culture, and women still try to adjust their bodies to those beauty norms. The postfeminist approach further proposes that hiding the body is not an option, and so bodies are not hidden but actively presented to the public. This does not change the issue that is at the bottom of this presentation of female bodies, however. The presented images might suggest liberation, but they are still meeting the male gaze and thereby unravel the women's presumed liberation.

⁶⁸ McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," 255-262.

⁶⁹ Genz, "Singled Out," 108-109.

Chapter 2

The Self-(Re)Presentation of Body Image and Styling on Instagram

Our bodies, ourselves; bodies are maps of power and identity.

—Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*⁷⁰

2.1. Kylie Jenner

The public presentation of sexualized female bodies can be well observed on social media. With now over one billion daily active users worldwide, Instagram has grown exponentially in users since its release in 2010.⁷¹ Among the most influential public accounts on Instagram is that of Kylie Jenner. At this point, Jenner has 216 million subscribers to her official Instagram account *@kyliejenner*, making her one of the most influential American celebrities on social media.⁷² Her large family, consisting of the Kardashians and the Jenners has been well known in the entertainment industry for their extravagant lifestyle and their reality show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, which was first aired in 2007 and follows the lives of the Kardashian/Jenner family. Kylie Jenner, who was born in 1997, was part of the show and thereby appeared in the public eye since she was a young child. While she, at first, was in the shadow of her big sister Kim Kardashian, she made a name for herself when she entered several social media platforms, such as Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram. Despite her young age of only 23, she is now a self-made millionaire who uses her massive influence on social media to merchandize, among other things, her own cosmetic and skin care brands. Yet, a closer analysis of Jenner's Instagram account shows that the main selling point is not her product line, but rather herself.

⁷⁰ Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Manifestly Haraway*, 2016, pp. 3-90, <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816650477.003.0001>.

⁷¹ Instagram, "About the Instagram Company," About Instagram | Explore Features, News, Resources & More, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://about.instagram.com/about-us>. The pictures of both Jenner and Graham are available on public Instagram accounts that are open to access for everyone.

⁷² Data retrieved from Instagram on February 18, 2021.

Look, Style and Fashion

Jenner developed a well-elaborated media image of herself and made her body and the representation of her lifestyle the focal point of her social media representation. While there are occasional postings about her travel destinations, her products, her home, and her family, the vast majority of her pictures show herself in different settings. The four images I have chosen, are representative of her entire collection, and show a pattern of specific poses, various and often changing clothing and hair styles, seductive facial expressions and generally a highly sexualized form of body presentation. For example, Jenner often presents herself in swimwear or underwear that reveals a lot of bare skin (see Images 1 and 2). As it can be observed in Images 1 and 2, her clothing emphasizes specific body parts, such as her butt, her hip and her breasts, which are highlighted by scanty undergarments and low necklines.



Image 1: all good.⁷³

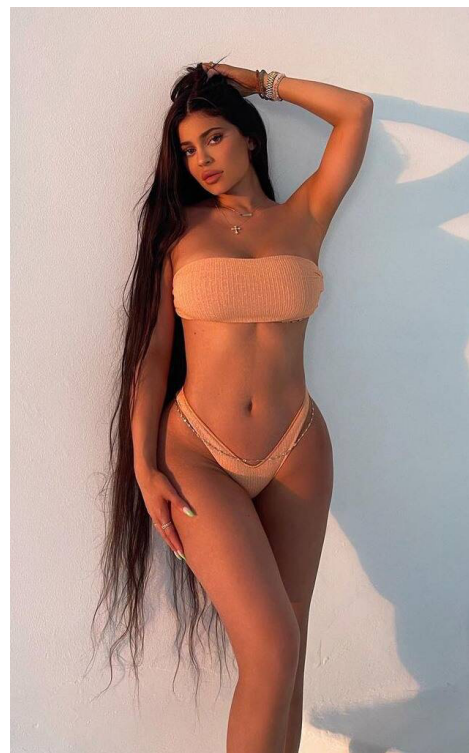


Image 2: sol solecito calientame un poquito.⁷⁴

⁷³ Kylie Jenner (@kyliejenner), “all good.” *Instagram*, November 23, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CH82CJong28/>.

⁷⁴ Jenner, “sol solecito calientame un poquito.” *Instagram*, January 20, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKPxXMvniOw/>.



*Image 3: found out red heads have a lot of fun.*⁷⁵



*Image 4: December in LA.*⁷⁶

The majority of her pictures show her in tight, form-fitting clothes that highlight her curvy figure, and often have bright colors or animal prints that underline the shape of her body even more (see Images 3 and 4). As can be seen in Images 3 and 4, the extremely tight dress she is wearing resembles the color of her skin and reveals her buttocks, which presents the allusion of nakedness. The features that are particularly prominent in these images are her butt and her breasts. These body parts, which can be seen as the most significant attributes of the female body and thus represent femaleness, are emphasized to an even bigger extent as they have been surgically enlarged. The recurring use of reflections and shadows in the pictures further enhance the focus on the shape of her body. As can be observed in Images 3 and 4, the silhouette of her body casts a shadow at the wall behind her. The shadows, which are projections of her body's shape, highlight her body's dimension and make it seem more three-dimensional, and thus more approachable for the gaze of the spectator. In Image 1 her body, in specific the backside of her body, reflects in the window behind her. Although her butt is not clearly visible, the spectator still gets a glimpse of it in the reflection. This creates the allusion of a sexual allure, almost like Jenner is teasing the spectator's gaze.

⁷⁵ Jenner, "found out red heads have a lot of fun." *Instagram*, December 12, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIq7Oeuncys/>.

⁷⁶ Jenner, "December in LA." *Instagram*, December 11, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIqwALvnMa4/>.

The increased emphasis on these parts of the body suggests that Jenner propagates a view of the female body that equates the display of femaleness with desirability created by a sexualized representation of the female body. It is important to note that these kinds of plastic surgeries can be seen on various members of the Kardashian/Jenner family. Even though they partially deny it, Kylie Jenner's sisters Kim and Khloé Kardashian visibly have the same body features that imply plastic surgery. The overall focus on sexy poses, with an emphasis on the exposure of breasts and butt, indicates that Jenner's self-representation is based on a sexualized female body image. With this form of self-representation, Jenner embodies what Amy Shields Dobson describes as "digital dreamgirl," a young woman who publicly presents her body in a sexualized way online. Digital dreamgirls represent the perfect heterosexual image of a woman by showing off "slim but curvaceous body types ... sinuous body poses" and "scant apparel," and thereby commodify their self through "signifiers of sexual arousal."⁷⁷ These signifiers can be found in various ways on Jenner's profile. In almost all of Jenner's images there is at least one part of her body that is highlighted by being uncovered. In many images in which her upper body is covered, her legs are exposed and vice versa. Her face is usually presented with full-face makeup and shows lascivious facial expressions such as a partly opened mouth, and slightly closed eyes. Her lips are another part of her body that has been surgically altered, in order to make them look fuller. Her hair, although changing in styles and colors, is generally very long and straight or wavy and hangs down to her hips. Another recurring feature is her long artificial nails (see Images 2,3 and 4).

Another significant detail in her pictures is her gaze, which is always addressing the camera. Her face is mostly directly pointed at the camera, with her eyes being completely or slightly closed, while her head is slightly tilted. Thus, her facial expression suggests a seductive gaze that, at a closer look, resembles an orgasmic facial expression and increases the impression of a sexual signifier discussed by Dobson. The staging of her body further suggests that it is somebody else who takes pictures of her. Her head is tilted to the side or over her shoulder, implying a performance for the person behind the camera, or her followers who will look at the pictures later. While Jenner's pictures imply a heterosexual perspective and a performance as desirable object for men, it is essential to note that Jenner's followers are mostly women. More precisely, 60.61% of her followers are female, while only 39.39% are male. Additionally, out of her total followers, the majority are rather young, aged between

⁷⁷ Amy Shields Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation*, 1 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 55-56.

18 and 24 (48%).⁷⁸ Based on her popularity on Instagram, it can be assumed that the image she presents of herself is well received among her male and female audience alike.

On the one hand, her self-representation can be seen as an expression of sex-positivity in a postfeminist sense, where self-empowerment is established through the open display of female sexuality. On the other hand, the repetitiveness of her performance suggests an internalization of the male gaze and the performativity of gender stereotypes. The frequency of sexual poses in Jenner's pictures suggest a positive connotation with female sexuality, as she pairs the pictures with positive captions and expressions of self-confidence, such as "found out red heads have a lot of fun" in Image 3. In a postfeminist sense, Jenner establishes herself as feminist figure because she is not denying but embracing the attributes of her femaleness, such as her curvy body, and attributes of femininity, such as make-up and sexy or scanty clothes. The notion of gaining power and control through the open display of one's sexuality are aspects that play an important role in postfeminist thinking. Considering Faludi's negative perception of post-feminism as backlash to second wave feminism and as expression of consumer culture, Jenner's form of self-representation can be seen as problematic. Jenner's appearance and demeanor correspond with the sexualized image of women that the advertising industry established as the new post-feminist ideal in the early 80s under the pretext of empowering women.⁷⁹

However, Jenner herself does not see her self-presentation as any form of directly intended feminist performance. Jenner's focus on the positive display of sexuality has no political background or specific feminist agenda. An interview from 2015 rather implies that Jenner's sexualized performance is based on an internalized and commercialized view of a form of desirable and eroticized femaleness. When Jenner was asked about her rather extravagant and often eroticized image on social media, she answered: "I'm way flashier on Instagram and Snapchat because I feel like that's what people want to see and that's what I've always done ..."⁸⁰ This statement reveals an essential problematic aspect behind Jenner's self-representation. By claiming that her self-representation is something that "people want to see," Jenner admits that the image of the cool, sexy and desirable woman that she is cultivating online is merely a performance for her audience. Thus, her sexualized performance is based on the perception that the outside observer demands a performance of femaleness in a sexualized way in order to receive confirmation, as well as benefit financially from it. While

⁷⁸ "Kylie Jenner Instagram Stats and Analytics (@kyliejenner)," SocialTracker, accessed January 25, 2021, <https://www.socialtracker.io/instagram/kyliejenner/>.

⁷⁹ Faludi, *Backlash*, 76-77, 201.

⁸⁰ Chris Wallace, "Kylie Jenner," Interview Magazine, November 30, 2015, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/kylie-jenner>.

her performance is not intentionally postfeminist, the aspect of the commodification of the female body through a sexualized performance, is. The fact that Jenner was only 18 years old at the time of the interview and still says that she always did what people wanted to see does not imply a reflective view on her own performance. Rather it indicates that she was brought up with the perception that the representation of femaleness is closely related to an open display of physical attractiveness in a sexualized and objectifying way. This notion is further supported by a very similar performance of femaleness by Jenner's sisters.

Although Jenner benefits financially from the sexualization of her own body, it is visible that her internalized sexualized view on the representation of women influences her self-representation. By spreading this image, she thus supports a system that further promotes this sexualized image and the objectification of female bodies as a sales strategy. As discussed by Unger in Fredrickson's and Roberts' "Objectification Theory," the firmly established sexualized images in American media culture can lead to an internalization of these images by women themselves.⁸¹ While women can make use of the display of their physical appearance, they can only do so by conforming to a certain ideal. As discussed by Fredrickson and Roberts, the internalized image of an ideal female body that corresponds with established societal views on female gender performance described by Butler leads to the constant observation of the female body from the outside and from the women themselves.⁸² For Jenner who was brought up with a sexualized view of female bodies that she internalized and thus continues to perform, a discontinuance of this performance would mean a loss of her status. The fact that she is aware that she is only performing for an audience and is very successful with this performance means that there is little room for change in the way she presents herself. Even when age changes her body over time, it will not change her perception of the performance of femaleness and femininity.

The repetitive performance of sexualized poses further supports this notion of Jenner's internalized self-objectifying view of women. As discussed in Butler's theory, Jenner reproduces images that are representing a very specific form of femaleness through the continuous performance of the same patterns. Her posing and her facial expressions are so repetitive, that it sometimes seems like the pictures show exactly the same image only with a slight variation of clothes and settings. The same characteristics can be found on almost all pictures on Jenner's Instagram account. Among the most prominent features are the extreme focus on her curvy figure, in specific her breasts, her butt, and her waist. In all four images I

⁸¹ Unger, *Female and Male*, quoted in Fredrickson and Roberts, "Objectification Theory," 176-180.

⁸² Fredrickson and Roberts, "Objectification Theory," 181-182.

have chosen, Jenner presents a similar posture. Among her signature poses is the tilted hip and the stuck-out butt, which in turn makes her waist seem smaller and her breasts bigger. Additionally, one of her hands is usually placed either on her thighs or her hips close to her genital region, while the other hand plays with her hair, which not only puts more focus on these body parts, but it also gives the impression of sexual willingness, seduction and submissiveness.

Jenner's statement from 2015 that she only performs for what people want to see and not what explicitly men want to see, reflects a strong heterosexual notion that suggests a performance for a male gaze. Even though the fact that the majority of her followers are women might suggest a possible homo-erotic component in her pictures, her look and her demeanor fulfill aspects of Mulvey's visual pleasure theory, of a female body staged for the male gaze. According to Mulvey's theory, aspects of fetishism, voyeurism and objectification of female bodies in film are an expression of deeply established patriarchal structures. Women's *to-be-looked-at-ness* is specifically highlighted by the camera's focus on women's intimate body parts, clothes and make-up. This fetishism of women's bodies was meant to address and please the male gaze based on patriarchal structures of the movie industry. The staging of Jenner's body with its strong focus on her intimate body parts, her clothes and her make-up shows the same components of fetishism and voyeurism described in Mulvey's analysis of women in film.

The sentiment of submissiveness in Jenner's pictures further supports the notion of her performing as a passive object for the male gaze. The performance of submissiveness expresses mostly through Jenner signaling that she is sexually approachable through her demeanor and her appearance. Neither her body nor her gaze are suggesting any form of resistance. Her arms are never folded in front of her body which could make her seem demanding or signify rejection. Instead, her arms frame her body in a way that reveals her body and thus invites a direct gaze. Her own gaze, even if directly looking at the camera, is never confronting. Her slightly closed eyes rather suggest passivity and approachability than protentional confrontation or dominance. Her tilted hips, and head are other signs of submissiveness, because these postures take any confrontational directness away from her body. While her body is overly present in all four images, it does not take the full space since she never stands straight, which does not make her seem dominant but rather passive and obedient. These features are not only visible in all four images provided here, but also in her entire collection of pictures on her Instagram profile. In this way, she gives the observer of her images a feeling of dominance in the way she presents passivity. At the same time, her

repetitive performance of submissiveness suggests a correlation to the performance of femininity. As Butler's theory of gender performativity explains, the constant repetition of ritualized acts creates and manifests a specific perception of how gender should be performed. In this way, the performance of submissiveness through a certain demeanor and body language becomes an element of the common perception of the performance of femininity. In Jenner's case, the repeated act of submissive behavior becomes defining of feminine behavior, which consequently signals male dominance over women.

This performance can have far reaching consequences for the perception and establishment of gender in society. Influencers such as Jenner who show a specific form of self-representation on social media can function as role models for those who follow these accounts. If sexualized posing and scant clothing for women is the norm in most of Western popular culture, it influences the self-presentation on Instagram and thus eventually shapes the perception of young women on how to present themselves online and in person.⁸³ Jenner's large numbers of followers and her status as well-known celebrity can give her influence a political aspect as she influences her follower's perception of gender roles. Even if the "self-representation on Instagram" is not intentionally political in itself, it "becomes political" when individuals are given the opportunity to present themselves to a broad public, and thus influence the way bodies are perceived on a larger societal scale.⁸⁴ As Butler's theory of gender performativity discusses, the constant repetition of certain performances creates the illusion that the concept of gender is not changing. However, for Butler gender is something that is largely influenced by heterosexual societal norms and conditions, a *social temporality*. Thus, Jenner's performance of femininity can be seen as an internalization of existing gender norms that she carries on through her performance.

Gill and Macdonald point out that the potential of social media to give individuals the opportunity to present themselves in any way they choose, conceivably also provides the possibility for a more diverse representation of female body types, which differ from the "young, white, able-bodied, middle-class, apparently heterosexual and conventionally attractive" women.⁸⁵ While Jenner's self-representation is certainly not conventional or representing of the middle-class, it symbolizes an artificial image of femaleness that is not

⁸³ Sander de Ridder and Sofie van Bauwel, "Youth and Intimate Media Cultures: Gender, Sexuality, Relationships, and Desire as Storytelling Practices in Social Networking Sites," *Communications* 40, no. 3 (2015): pp. 319-40, 334-335.

⁸⁴ Rachel Syme, "SELFIE: The revolutionary potential of your own face, in seven chapters," *Matter* (blog), November 19, 2015, <https://medium.com/matter/selfie-fe945dcba6b0>, quoted in Caldeira, De Ridder, and Van Bauwel, "Exploring the Politics of Gender," 25.

⁸⁵ Myra Macdonald, *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in Popular Media* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), quoted in Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 12.

representing more gender diversity but rather an intensified version of female stereotypes. De Ridder and Van Bauwel argue that “[s]elf-representations are embedded within popular culture.” The self, which is presented on social media can be understood as an “intertextual self” that uses strategies from common pop culture, such as specific body poses, to create an image and tell a story. The intertextual self that Jenner represent is based on a media culture that sexualizes the female body. If the women with the biggest influence and reach on social media platforms are not representing diversity but mainly stick to a mainstream representation of heterosexual normativity, the chances of actual change for the acceptance and normalization of diverse body images are limited. As Gill states, media in general is not so much “reflecting reality” as it is “constructing reality.”⁸⁶ This statement matches with Butler’s argument about the establishment of gender perceptions through performativity. Arguably, if self-representations on Instagram mainly feature stereotypical and highly sexualized versions of female bodies, this influences people’s understanding of femininity and the ideal female body.

The construction of self plays an essential role in the self-representation of young women online and it has a strong connection to the performance of stereotypical gender roles, sexual objectification of female bodies and the male gaze. The common understanding and the construct of femininity in Western society clearly reflects in Kylie Jenner’s self-representation on Instagram. Referring to de Beauvoir’s understanding of the body as culturally influenced construct and as personal project, Instagram functions as a platform that presumably provides the opportunity for young women to construct their own gender identity, by letting them choose what image of themselves they want to present online. However, the most popular images displayed on Instagram show stereotypical versions of female bodies, as the example of Kylie Jenner shows. Her sexualized posing and overall appearance suggest a performance of femininity that is meant to attract men, and thus display society’s heterosexual view of femininity. Moreover, by exclusively presenting herself in scanty clothes, posing in sexualized ways and often showing off expensive brands in high-class locations, Jenner sells an image of herself that directly connects sexual desirability with success, fame and wealth, making her self-objectification seem to be a worthwhile goal for women.

⁸⁶ Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 12.

The Qualified Self and the Male Gaze

As Dobson states, the perception of young girls' social media representation is divided in academia. She claims that "the Internet" and social media in particular, are often seen as "'safe space' for girls and young women to experiment with self-expression, including styles of gender performativity that deviate from traditional feminine modes of expression."⁸⁷

However, the social media accounts with the highest numbers of followers and influence do not spread diversity, but reinforce a stereotypical perception of femininity. Jenner's self-representation on Instagram focuses solely on the display of her body features. By solely presenting images that satisfy the male gaze, Jenner becomes an "erotic object for the spectator."⁸⁸ This notion increases through the constant repetition of the same poses. To speak in Mulvey's terms, by focusing on the display of specific body parts, her clothes and her make-up, Jenner puts her *to-be-looked-at-ness* on display, and thus satisfies the scopophilia of her audience. The sexualized poses in her images, such as the stuck-out butt, the barely covered breasts and the bedroom eyes, make her seem sexually approachable and she embodies an accessible object that is displayed for the pleasure of the spectator alone.

The significant signs of eroticism implied by Jenner's self-representation can be perceived as triggers for the male gaze. The camera symbolizes the gaze of an outside observer that focuses on the same body parts over and over again. Since the camera's perspective is focusing on the same body parts and an overall sexualized depiction of Jenner's body, it can be assumed that the camera's gaze conforms with the male gaze. The camera's strong focus on specific body parts, and the woman's overall outer appearance suggests a male viewpoint. Just like the camera focuses on the *to-be-looked-at-ness* of women from an outside view in the movies studied by Mulvey, the self-representation of Jenner focuses on make-up, clothes, and the presentation of a sexy body.

While the images seem to be addressing the male gaze, it needs to be considered that the majority of Jenner's followers are young women. The constant repetition of sexualized performative acts for the male gaze can be seen as influential to her female audience. Her performance of femininity represents the normative understanding of femininity in society. Additionally, her performance supports the notion that women's desirability for men is an essential feature for the representation of femininity. Here, John Berger's theory of the internalized male gaze can be applied. The constant observation from the outside male gaze leads women to internalize the male gaze and makes them observe themselves through a

⁸⁷ Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures*, 43.

⁸⁸ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 62.

sexualized male view. While Jenner's images provide pleasure for the male gaze of the camera, they at the same time support the internalization of the male gaze for women through the constant repetition of performative self-sexualization and submissiveness for the male gaze.

Through the constant display of the same images, a certain understanding of how female desirability should be ideally performed gets established in her audience's minds. As argued by Butler, the repeated performance of specific gender attributes defines the perception of the gender ideals in a society. Jenner's role as a popular influencer with a large number of followers puts her into the position of a role model and her performance of gender establishes how femaleness is perceived by her followers. While Jenner's posing and her sexually challenging look can be read as expression of self-confidence, it also contains a strong sense of submissiveness. She portrays a woman that conveys sexual availability and openness. The repetitiveness of her performance reinforces the image of women as submissive and passive figures. To the outside she expresses female empowerment by claiming her own sexuality, but at a closer look she performs submissiveness as a positive attribute in order to increase materialistic needs.

This indicates a sex-sells strategy that proposes to convey sex positivity as means to create immense wealth and financial independence for women. As a *Forbes Magazine* list of America's self-made women from 2020 states, Jenner has an estimated net worth of about 700 million dollars as of October 13, 2020.⁸⁹ Creating an image of herself for social media that both attracts the male gaze and gets the attention of women who admire Jenner for her self-marketing certainly was a decisive factor in building this wealth. At first, it seems natural to assume that the form of self-representation that Jenner promotes is something that she chose voluntarily. As Nancy Thumim implies the term self-representation itself suggests that people are "*doing it for themselves*."⁹⁰ From this point of view, the sexualized self-representation of Kylie Jenner can be seen as a voluntary act of self-empowerment. However, the very specific and repetitive presentation of Jenner rather indicates a calculated and commodified self-presentation.

When Lee Humphreys discusses the construction of self on social media platforms, such as Instagram, she refers to the version of self that has been specifically created for a representation on social media as the "qualified self." Humphreys argues that the use of social media and the creation of a new version of the self in an online context shapes the perception

⁸⁹ "Kylie Jenner," *Forbes* (Forbes Magazine), accessed January 28, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/kylie-jenner/>.

⁹⁰ Nancy Thumim, *Self-Representation and Digital Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 8.

of the self in general and can be divided into three main features: “quality, qualify, and qualification.” When the qualified self is created, there is an emphasis on specific character traits or “qualities,” which decide about how a person is perceived by others. The “quality” of a person online “often conveys something desirable,” a “positivity bias” that only promotes the best sides of this person. In order to be “qualifying,” the self-representation needs to convey a consistent image. This means that the qualified self has to be a more “qualified version” of the personality that the person has in real life. In other words, the character traits and personality that somebody has in real life have to be altered and improved in order to create a convincing and improved version of the self on an online platform. To convey an ultimately coherent image of a qualified self, certain “qualifications” need to be fulfilled, which are meant to highlight a person’s achievements. These highlighted qualifications are necessary to confirm their capability to perform for their assorted “social roles,” and mark their specific standing in the online community.⁹¹

When looking at Kylie Jenner’s self-representation it appears that her image shows all features of the qualified self that are meant to satisfy the male gaze. The qualified self that Jenner created presents her sexiness and the expression of desirability for men as her main quality. Her images never show any specific aspect of her personality. Instead, they focus on her style and her body as the main component of her whole being. In all of her images it can be observed that the presentation of her body shows a consistent pattern, which fulfills the qualifying aspect of the qualified self. There is always a focus on her breasts and her butt, which are surgically enlarged. Moreover, her hip is unnaturally large, which makes her waist seem very small in contrast. Her lips are also increased in size and she wears long, artificial nails. All these body features give her an artificial, almost comic like look and make her an almost larger-than-life figure that contrasts strongly with the image of an average female body.

This selective version of herself that she presents online matches with the focus on desirability and the positivity bias described by Thumim. Her image is qualifying in a way that it conveys a consistent focus on the staging of her body, which at the same time promotes her attractiveness and her openly expressed sexuality as her main qualification. Together with the depiction of her incredible material wealth she conveys an image of a desirable object for men, who benefits from her own objectification. The focus of her account is clearly on the pictures, yet the captions of the pictures further amplify the sexualized gaze on her body, as

⁹¹ Lee Humphreys, *The Qualified Self: Social Media and the Accounting of Everyday Life* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 17-20.

well as the positivity bias. The captions are kept short, and often just consist of emojis or short phrases that are not directly connected to what the picture actually shows. Short captions such as: “all good” (see Image 1), or “December in L.A.” (see Image 4) are used for pictures that focus solely on Jenner’s body, instead of giving any actual information. The background is usually kept quite plain. Any objects are removed from the scene, which emphasizes the focus on her body even more. In fact, if the caption does not state where the picture was taken, it could be anywhere, which emphasizes the importance of self-representation on her profile.

Arguably, the captions are kept short, to ensure that there is absolutely no distraction for the gaze. Instead, the captions are used to further highlight the focus on her body. With captions such as “found out red heads have a lot of fun,” combined with the eroticized posing in the pictures, she magnifies the sexualized connotation of her images. Since she is not actually doing anything on this image but tilting her head, closing her eyes, and sticking out her butt, the viewer of the picture can assume themselves what kind of kind of “fun” is suggested here. The sexualized posing in this photo set (Images 3 and 4 were posted within two days as a series), together with the caption strongly suggests a sexualized reading. The factor of hotness also plays a recurring role in the captions. “December in L.A.,” and “sol solecito calientame un poquito,” which in translation means “the sunny sun warms me a little,” both allude to Jenner being the *hot thing* in the picture. The caption of Image 1 saying “all good” then implies that she is at ease with her body and herself, which further advertises a positive connotation about women’s self-objectification and self-sexualization for her female followers.

Jenner’s pictures suggest a self-centered, self-controlled and internalized male gaze that is entirely based on the sexualization and commodification of the female body. Her self-centeredness shows in the extreme focus of the presentation and staging of her own body. The four images I chose for this analysis are representative of the entire collection of pictures on her Instagram profile that almost entirely show Jenner’s body in the same poses. Her self-control reflects in the precision with which Jenner controls every detail in her pictures in order to present a consistent image. Jenner made her body her project that builds the center of her career and needs constant surveillance and improvement to represent an ideal of female attractiveness that is based on the internalization of a normative, heterosexual perception of femaleness. The aspect of self-control which could be seen as an element of female self-determination and self-empowerment, loses its validity since her image is built as a series of performative acts that are meant to maintain this carefully constructed image. Thus, Jenner is

not in control of herself in an autonomous sense. She is only controlling her performance of an idealized image, influenced by patriarchal structures and an internalized male gaze on women.

2.2. Ashley Graham

The second Instagram profile that this thesis will examine, is the one of Ashley Graham. Graham who currently has 11.9 million followers on her Instagram account *@ashleygraham*, is a successful American social media influencer and a plus-size model, which means that her body type and her clothing size are above the norm within the fashion industry.⁹² Due to Graham's profession as a model, a lot of the pictures she posts on her private Instagram account show her at professional fashion photo shootings. One of the main differences between Jenner's and Graham's Instagram profiles is that Graham distinguishes between pictures that are related to her work as a model, and pictures show her private life. Both types of photos appear on the same account. On Jenner's account, the transition between pictures of her private life and pictures of her work is fluid or non-existent at all. One of the most important aspects of Graham's account is the focus on body positivity, self-love and female empowerment. The account is clearly targeted at a female audience, with a strong focus on issues around the female body and messages of self-empowerment for women. Although not as extreme as on Jenner's account, Graham's pictures also mostly feature herself and have a focus on the depiction of her body.



Image 5: *I keep it juicy juicy I eat that lunch.*⁹³

⁹² Data retrieved from Instagram on December 28, 2020.

⁹³ Ashley Graham (*@ashleygraham*), "I keep it juicy juicy, I eat that lunch." *Instagram*, December 8, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIhH9cNrsih/>.

Look, Style and Fashion



Image 6: Just so you know this is my audition to be a Bond girl.⁹⁴

The images on Graham's account are mostly focused on the presentation of fashion, lifestyle and her private family life. One thing that becomes apparent immediately, is a perceptible difference between commercial fashion photos and private, less stylized pictures on her profile. The pictures featuring fashion brands often show Graham in formfitting clothes that highlight her figure. Similar to Jenner's pictures, the fashion photos often present Graham in swimwear and underwear, exposing naked skin (see Images 5 and 6). While Graham's posing is not as repetitive as Jenner's, there is still a focus on eroticized poses and seductive facial expressions.

As can be seen in Images 5 and 6, there is a strong focus on her breasts. Image 5 shows Graham's naked body wrapped in a furry coat, which only reveals her pink panties. The picture has a strong notion of a sexual teasing of the male gaze, as it only hints at Graham's naked body underneath the coat, while not revealing too much skin. Just as in Jenner's pictures the professional model pictures, are taken by an outside perspective, making

⁹⁴ Graham, "Just so you know this is my audition to be a Bond girl wearing @marina.rinaldi @benritterphoto." *Instagram*, November 11, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHdb6iZLYfq/>.

the camera the representative of an outside gaze on Graham's body. Similar to Jenner's pictures, Graham's head is tilted, and her mouth is slightly opened, giving the impression of sexual approachability. This notion is increased by the setting of the picture, which looks like a bed on which Graham is lying. Apart from the furry coat and the panties, the only other thing she is wearing in this picture is a choker around her neck. This tight-fitting necklace gives the picture a notion of female submissiveness, as it can be read as a sign of domination over a woman.

The name of the brand that Graham is advertising in Image 5, *Juicy Couture*, which is printed on the underpants further enhances the sexual notion of the picture, as juicy can be used in the sense of something being succulent, but also in a sense of something being scandalous and tempting. In reference to a woman's body, and together with the caption of the picture: "I keep it juicy juicy I eat that lunch," the picture conveys an image of Graham as a highly approachable woman, who does not say no, neither to food nor to men. Yet, it is interesting to note that the underwear Graham is advertising is pink, a color that is commonly associated with being very feminine. While Graham is promoting underwear for women, her styling and posing in the picture overall express a certain seductiveness and eroticism that implies the staging of the female body for a pleasurable gaze of a male audience that perceives the female body as an object of desire.

Image 6 conveys a similar notion. The picture shows Graham wearing a black, plain top with a very low neckline, which puts an emphasis on her breasts. On top of that she is wearing a coat with animal print that is slightly taken off her left shoulder. Her head is tilted, and her lips are again slightly opened. Her gaze is addressing the camera directly and her hands are holding on to her panties or the end of her shirt. The animal print coat and her cleavage are the most prominent aspects of the picture, while the industrial seeming background is kept empty. As in Image 5, the staging of Graham's body in this picture has a sexual connotation. The emphasis on her cleavage highlights her femaleness, while the animal print and her seductive gaze make her seem tempting, which creates a contrast for the spectator. On the one hand there is the open display of her body, which suggests approachability. On the other hand, the animal print and her challenging gaze at the camera imply sexual teasing. The leopard print of her coat gives the association of Graham being a huntress, who does not hesitate and is in charge of her own sexuality. The entire staging of the picture seems to provoke the male gaze. Graham herself captioned the picture with: "Just so you know this is my audition to be a Bond girl," referring to a figure in popular movie culture that is known to be highly sexualized in order to seduce and manipulate men.

While these photos focus on Graham's role as a professional model and suggest that it is the influence of the fashion industry that supports a sexualized depiction of their models, Graham presents herself in a more diverse manner in the pictures she posts of her private life. These pictures mainly focus on the depiction of her lifestyle and her family life. Motherhood and messages of a positive perception of the female body are recurring themes. In contrast to the modelling pictures, Graham's private photos are less stylized, and often give the viewer a very intimate look into her private life (see Image 8). Unlike Jenner whose excessive presentation of wealth and bodily flawlessness often provides a notion of aloofness, Graham presents herself in a way that creates intimacy and relatability for her female audience, because she is emphasizing her alleged bodily flaws.



Image 7: Pardon my sincerity, you know I'm a rarity.⁹⁶

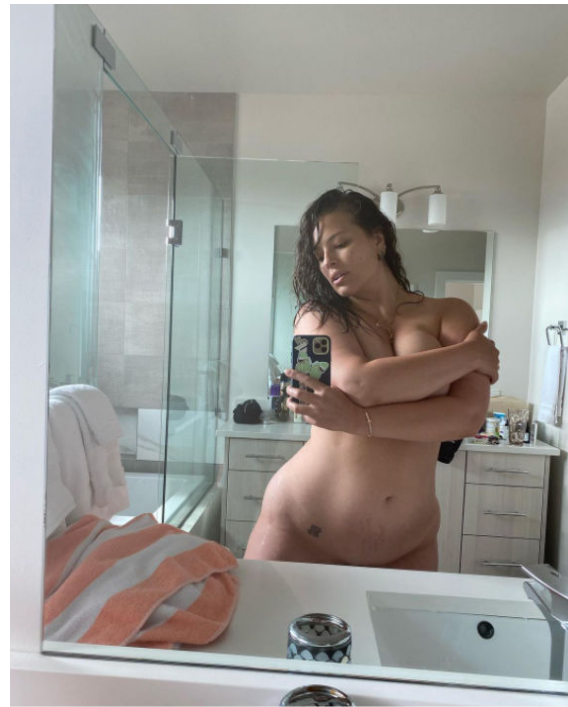


Image 8: nakie big girl.⁹⁵

In Images 7 and 8 Graham gives an insight into her private life. The pictures are kept in creamy colors and have a soft, natural lighting. The contrast to Jenner's pictures becomes particularly visible in these images, as Jenner uses sharp contrast to emphasize her body, while Graham uses soft contours. Unlike in Image 5 and 6, Graham's hair is not professionally styled in most of her private pictures, which emphasizes the naturalness of the

⁹⁵ Graham, "nakie big girl." *Instagram*, October 18, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGfQ89Yjbc5/>.

⁹⁶ Graham, "Pardon my sincerity, you know I'm a rarity (@KellyRowland CAN'T STOP listening)" *Instagram*, November 20, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CH09k9drNgR/>.

pictures. In contrast to Jenner, Graham conveys a notion of effortlessness by giving the impression that the pictures were taken spontaneously in an everyday situation. The fact that the background of the pictures is not specifically arranged, and things are lying around gives the viewer the illusion of intimacy and makes Graham seem more approachable to her female followers. Her private pictures seem to express the message of her being a normal woman and mother like many of her followers.

In both Images 7 and 8, Graham poses in front of a mirror and takes a picture of her reflection with her phone. Unlike in the modeling pictures, it is not an outside gaze that captures her, but her own view of herself in the mirror. Again, this contributes to the mediation of intimacy for her followers who get to observe Graham in her own private bedroom and through her own eyes. In Image 8, she presents her naked body in a mirror with the caption “nakie big girl.” By calling herself “big girl,” she actively points out that her body size is not perceived as the ideal for Western women. At the same time, the openly displayed nakedness, her posing, and her facial expression in the pictures suggest that she is confident and at ease with her body not conforming to this ideal. The captions of both Images 7 and 8 promote this notion of self-approval and certainty about her own body. In Image 7 she calls herself a “rarity,” thus pointing out her uniqueness and self-confidence. According to Dobson captions like these function as a method to promote “confidence and self-acceptance” for young women, “two highly valued traits of postfeminist femininity.”⁹⁷ This reading of Graham’s captions and the focus on encouraging women to embrace their own bodies thus suggests a postfeminist interpretation of her content. Just like in Jenner’s profile, there is no political agenda behind Graham’s pictures that would actively suggest a feminist reading. Yet, she conveys a message of choice and self-determination in the way she presents herself, which communicates a feminist notion. At the same time, it is still Graham’s body that defines her social media identity, and in particular a body that is stylized as sexy and desirable.

In her private pictures, Graham often presents her body in a very intimate way, as the example of Image 8 shows. With this picture, in which she physically embraces her own naked body, Graham emphasizes the main message of her profile, which is that women should embrace and love their bodies no matter which size it is. Especially in Image 7 Graham presents a more casual look. The squatted position emphasizes her thighs instead of hiding them or showing her long legs. Moreover, she is wearing a sweat suit, which implies that she feels comfortable and did not intend to dress up for her audience. The focus on body

⁹⁷ Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures*, 14.

positivity also reflects in the short profile description of her account, which states “#BeautyBeyondSize.”⁹⁸ However, it is also noticeable that the way Graham poses in her private pictures is quite similar to her posing in the professional modelling pictures. Graham tilts her head and slightly opens her mouth in both pictures. Further, her posing highlights her curves, specifically her butt, by her tilting her hip to the side (Image 8). The focus on both pictures clearly stays on her body. By putting the focus of her self-representation on her body, Graham automatically gives room for further discussions about the depiction of female bodies, female sexuality and desirability, which suggests a feminist agenda. On the one hand, there is the aspect of desirability for men and the outside gaze of the camera, as can be seen in Images 5 and 6. On the other hand, there is the aspect of desirability and sexiness as form of self-empowerment, as visible in Images 7 and 8. However, all pictures have a strong focus on specific body parts that seem to highlight the aspects of desirability and sexiness of the female body. This contrast between her pictures can be seen as an indication for the postfeminist shift from an outside objectifying male gaze, to an inside, self-centered but still objectifying internalized gaze of women on themselves described by Gill.⁹⁹

As De Ridder and Van Bauwel state, this form of self-representation on online platforms can be described as “intimate storytelling.” “Intimate storytelling” describes any form of “self-representation that gives meaning to gender, sexuality, relationships, and desire.”¹⁰⁰ The display of images is essential for any form of intimate storytelling as they convey authenticity to the audience.¹⁰¹ The way Graham communicates authenticity is by presenting a body image that is relatable to her female audience, because it presumably does not conform to the stereotypical ideal of a slim female body. The openly displayed nakedness, the direct gaze into the camera, and the eroticized poses suggest an image of a woman who is confident in herself and who does not want to hide her own body, but instead proudly presents it to the public. Thus, her self-representation suggests that in order to strengthen their self-esteem women have to embrace their bodies and convey desirability and sexiness as essential features of femaleness and womanhood regardless of size. As Graham herself said in an interview in 2015, “sexy is a state of mind.”¹⁰² While this self-presentation seems to convey a

⁹⁸ Information retrieved from Instagram in January 2021.

⁹⁹ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149-152.

¹⁰⁰ De Ridder and Van Bauwel, “Youth and Intimate Media Cultures,” 320.

¹⁰¹ Andrew L. Mendelson and Zizi Papacharissi, “Look at Us: Collective Narcissism in College Student Facebook Photo Galleries,” in *A Networked Self: Identity, Community and Culture on Social Network Sites*, ed. Zizi Papacharissi (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), pp. 251-273, quoted in De Ridder, and Van Bauwel, “Youth and Intimate Media Cultures,” 332.

¹⁰² Leah Melby Clinton, “Model Ashley Graham: ‘I’m Here to Remind Women That Our Bodies Are Beautiful at Any Size,’” *Glamour* (Glamour, January 13, 2016), <https://www.glamour.com/story/model-ashley-graham-body-activist>.

message of female self-empowerment for women, it still focuses on a sexy body as main tool of expression for women's femininity, which again emphasizes a male gaze on the female body.

The Construction of Female Empowerment

While looking at the aspects of the qualified self in Graham's self-representation on Instagram, it becomes evident that the qualities she depicts seem more complex in comparison to Jenner. The main qualities of her qualified self that Graham displays through her pictures are seemingly connected to the confidence she has in her body. The pictures that display desirability and sexiness convey a connection to self-love, happiness and body-positivity, in contrast to Jenner's notion of sex-positivity. Thus, the main quality that is communicated by Graham's qualified self is her ability to embrace her body. This gives her confidence, which in return makes her seem sexy and desirable. Graham's image is consistent in its depiction of self-empowerment, sexiness and desirability. As she repeatedly displays the appreciation of her own body and her self-confidence, her qualified self successfully conveys that she fulfills the qualification of a mediator for women's self-empowerment.

Therefore, Graham's self-representation has an influence on the perception of female bodies for her followers and consequently for their perception of female gender identity. Graham's images represent performative acts of femininity, such as performing sexiness and desirability to men, which is achieved by revealing specific body parts and posing in sexualized ways. Those depictions of femininity influence how the concept of gender is perceived by society, and thus support the stereotypical and normative perception of how women should perform femininity. Even if Graham's images are meant to address women's attitude towards themselves, and support their self-empowerment, the representation of a sexy female body is still based on the objectifying view of the male gaze. This perception supports a postfeminist view on female gender identity, in which a *sexy* self-representation is seen as an act of control and choice by women that supports their self-empowerment. Gill refers to the performance of feminist acts by public figures who have a wide reach of influence as "celebrity and style feminism." This form of feminism has a strong postfeminist notion that according to Gill, stands out due to its determined advocacy for "heterosexuality, fashion-love, and consumerism." Despite the notion of Graham supporting women's autonomy, her images still convey heterosexual desirability, and the consumption of fashion as means for women to empower themselves. Ultimately, this does not support the women's self-

empowerment, but rather gives the notion of women's bodies as sexualized and commercialized goods.¹⁰³

As discussed by Gill, "notions of choice" are essential to a postfeminist approach. Notions of individualism such as "being oneself" and "pleasing oneself," replaced the former assumption of women only dressing up to impress men and satisfy the male gaze. As Gill indicates, however, the explanation that women always just dressed up for men is not accurate either, as it depicts women as completely "docile subjects," who were controlled by men. Yet, the sexualized self-representation can also not be simply explained by women doing this for themselves, since the way they style and present their bodies is strikingly uniform.¹⁰⁴ Despite the apparent non-conformity of Graham's body with the ideal expectations of a slim female body image, her pictures still present a look that conforms with the beauty standards of the Western world, styled in a way that emphasizes on the same features of female bodies as in an exclusive presentation for a male gaze. The pictures and her self-representation still emphasize the display of her body, and the way Graham poses as a private person are quite similar to the way she poses as professional model. Her body might be bigger than the norm in the modelling business, yet the proportions of her body and her face still conform with normative beauty standards, which might not be the case for the average women who follow her account.

It can be argued that the version of feminism, which is displayed on Graham's account stands against the character of the "feminist killjoy" as described by Sara Ahmed.¹⁰⁵ This perception of feminism is associated with the feminists of the second wave who were perceived as angry and demanding women. As Gill describes the feminism of magazines and the postfeminist media puts an emphasis on not being angry, not being a *killjoy*, but accepting any form of how feminism can be expressed. Graham's account distributes a message of unity and self-acceptance for all women, which features this inclusive form of feminism that does not want to be perceived as demanding or aggressive. Accordingly, Graham does not communicate feminism in a political sense, but as a framework for her message of a positive self-perception for women in relation to body and mind. According to Scharff, this version of feminism has become popular, because it differs from the angry, demanding feminism of the

¹⁰³ Rosalind Gill, "Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): pp. 610-630, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1193293>, 618.

¹⁰⁴ Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 153-154.

¹⁰⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), quoted in Gill, "Post-Postfeminism," 618.

second wave.¹⁰⁶ It illustrates the shift to a “desirable and stylish” form of feminism that passionately cheers for “all things female,” yet in a broader political and societal spectrum lacks any deeper meaning.¹⁰⁷

Graham’s self-presentation illustrates this form of stylish and commodified feminism, which praises womanhood. However, it never becomes entirely clear if Graham considers her self-representation and the messages of body positivity as an explicitly feminist act. In an interview from 2015 about body positivity and feminism, Graham stated: “I’m not a fan of labels, so I’ve never labeled myself a feminist.”¹⁰⁸ While Graham’s approach to promote women’s self-empowerment through the open display of their bodies can be described as feminist, she distances herself from labeling her approach as feminism. As indicated by Gill, this expresses a postfeminist notion towards feminism, which tends to generate a definition of feminism that is simply equalized with womanhood. According to Gill, stating that anyone can “claim a feminist identity” without any political background means that feminism simply becomes a “cheer word” with a “positive value” that sells a positive image. It does not, however, actually support any specific political or social change, but the commodification of feminism. It is this commodified version of feminism that lacks any deeper meaning but uses the sexualized images of female bodies to sell the body as a product under the disguise of self-empowerment. This is visible both in Graham’s case, who communicates a body positive, self-loving attitude towards female bodies, as well as in Jenner’s case who focuses on sex positivity. Although the self-representation and the form of feminism that is communicated is nuanced and ambivalent, it is eventually relying on the display of women’s bodies, which get reduced to commodified products instead of being intentional role models for female self-empowerment.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Christina Scharff, *Repudiating Feminism Young Women in a Neoliberal World* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), quoted in Gill, “Post-Postfeminism?” 618.

¹⁰⁷ Gill, “Post-Postfeminism,” 618, 623.

¹⁰⁸ Clinton, “Model Ashley Graham”.

¹⁰⁹ Gill, “Post-Postfeminism,” 618-619, 626.

Conclusion

This thesis examined the self-representation of women on Instagram by using two selected examples of influencer and media personality Kylie Jenner, and influencer and plus size model Ashley Graham. By analyzing feminist cultural theory, as well as discussing the historical development of feminist movements and the take on the female body image, the thesis gave insight into the well-established foundation of objectification and sexualization of the female body over time and the reasons of women's internalization of this body image. By using feminist theories that discuss gender identity and the objectification of female bodies by the male gaze, this thesis argued that the sexualized self-representation of women's bodies is not an act of self-empowerment, but a result of an internalized male gaze that ultimately supports the sexualization and commodification of female bodies. The thesis explored the impacts of the internalized male gaze on the self-representation of female bodies and expressions of femininity and femaleness by Jenner and Graham.

There are both differences and similarities between Jenner's and Graham's forms of self-representation. As could be observed in the four images of Jenner that are provided in this thesis, her pictures have a strongly repetitive character and present her body in very distinctive and similar sexualized poses. Jenner relies on this sexualized representation of her body as her main selling point, which highlights the notion of commodification of the female body on her Instagram profile. The way she displays her body in the same repetitive poses that have a strong emphasis on her breasts and her butt, conveys a consistent image to her followers that seemingly expresses a message of sex-positivity. However, Jenner's pictures are all taken from an outside perspective, as she is posing for the view of the camera. Her postures, as well as her gaze resonate with submissiveness and passivity, and give the spectator a sense of dominance over her body.

The main focus of Graham's account is clearly to convey self-acceptance and body positivity to her female followers. While Graham's professional fashion photos have a similarly sexualized approach as Jenner's pictures, her private pictures are often taken by herself and do not address the male gaze from the outside perspective in the same way. In the two pictures provided in this thesis, which show Graham in a private setting, she takes pictures of herself in a mirror and promotes aspects of female self-empowerment by openly presenting the presumable flaws of her own body, such as her weight. This creates relatability and an intimate relationship with her followers, which further enables Graham to convey her

message of self-acceptance for women. Her openly presented nakedness and the fact that she does not hide her body in any way or tries to make it look flawless like Jenner does, makes her seem confident and proud of her appearance. Her main message seems to be that a body like hers that is not conforming to Western ideals can also express sexiness and desirability. The captions of her pictures further increase the body positive message, because they always in some way address the significance and beauty of her body image.

Both Jenner's and Graham's self-representation contains elements of feminism. On Jenner's side there is the aspect of empowerment through choice, which could be seen as a deliberately feminist performance in a postfeminist sense. On Graham's side, there is the promotion of body-positivity, self-acceptance and anti-perfectionism for women. One of the most important aspects I have found in the comparison of Jenner's and Graham's self-representation, however, is that neither of them claim to actively support a feminist agenda by the way they present themselves on Instagram. With the background knowledge of former feminist approaches to the representation of the female body image, it is surprising how Jenner and Graham seemingly do not claim to be feminist, while their self-representation contains feminist elements. Jenner's account presents a consistent representation of self-sexualized images, which nevertheless is the focal point of her online presentation and thus gives her attention and more possible followers. While Jenner is selling this sexualized image of herself, it is the source of her income and thus provides her with agency. Graham uses her self-representation to encourage other women to embrace their own bodies and therefore she also promotes female agency. The main difference is that Graham uses the display of desirability and sexiness in her private pictures to convey self-acceptance for other women, while Jenner uses it mainly as form of self-staging.

Although Jenner's and Graham's images differ in their form of self-representation, there are certain similarities that suggest the internalization of the same objectifying features and even some anti-feminist aspects. While both Jenner's and Graham's performance contains feminist elements, the analysis showed that their self-representation corresponds with the outside male gaze on female bodies described by Mulvey. This shows through the overly emphasized focus on the representation of the same body parts. The focus on the representation of these specific body parts as well as the use of scanty clothes, sexy poses and facial expressions correspond with the fetishized and voyeuristic depiction of women's bodies in film analyzed by Mulvey. The analysis of both Jenner's and Graham's images shows that the representation and exposure of their bodies is still the focus on both of their Instagram accounts. The focus on the presentation of their *to-be-looked-at-ness* suggests an

internalization of the voyeuristic, fetishized and objectifying gaze. This implies the replacement of an outside objectifying gaze with a self-objectifying gaze that correlates with the commodification of the female body.

The analysis of the different forms of feminism in comparison to the Instagram accounts showed that both Jenner and Graham's self-representation contains different feminist elements. Jenner's intentional form of self-sexualization that is closely linked to the performance of desirability for a male gaze and the commodification of the female body can be assigned to post-feminism. The analysis of Mulvey's theory showed that Jenner's performance of desirability and submissiveness is geared to satisfy a male gaze at the female body. Considering Faludi's interpretation of post-feminism, Jenner's performance of active self-sexualization and objectification can also be seen as anti-feminist. In comparison with Jenner, Graham's account contains a clearer feminist message. In her private pictures, which stand in contrast to her modeling pictures, Graham attempts to support the self-esteem of her female followers by spreading a message of body positivity and self-acceptance. In this regard, Graham can be allocated to a form of feminism that is part of the third wave agenda. However, her styling and posing, even in her private pictures, indicates that the presentation of her body does not break with the standardized and sexualized patterns of a performance for the male gaze. While Graham's self-representation embraces the uniqueness of the female body, it lacks any nuanced discourse about gender identity. For this reason, Graham's performance can be seen as another representation of post-feminism.

The analysis of the concept of the *qualified self*, an image that is specifically created for online representation, further indicated that Jenner's and Graham's self-representation is a performance based on a stereotypical gender perception. In the course of the analysis, I did not expect to see such a repetitive and monotonous representation of female bodies that is solely based on the outside appearance of Jenner and Graham. The analysis showed that their images created for their online performances contain elements of the digital dreamgirl image described by Dobson. This image further conveys the notion of an internalized stereotypical performance of femaleness and femininity, because it focuses on the presentation of stereotypical feminine features such as a desirable curvy body. The repetitiveness of the pictures, especially in Jenner's case, suggest a performance of femaleness and features of femininity based on an internalized view of the representation of gender described by Butler. The repetitive presentation of a specific appearance, demeanor and body language can be seen as performed ritualized acts that are repeated continuously and thus define the concept of

femaleness itself. The repetitive presentation of a submissive body language and sexualized posing are thus perceived as distinctive elements of the expression of femininity.

Considering that Jenner and Graham reach a lot of people, their influence is omnipresent on the mostly young people who consume their content. As Nancy Thumim remarks in her latest publication about self-representation, the way “individuals, groups and communities” present and represent themselves is a very important and relevant contemporary matter, especially related to digital media. To analyze self-representation means to engage in political issues.¹¹⁰ Thus, research on self-representation and the construction of new identities online is essential when it comes to the understanding of female sexualization, objectification and overall suppression of women. The way women present themselves can contain important political aspects and reveal power structures in our society that are worth studying, especially when it comes to aspects of feminism and recent feminist movements online.

In a time when the growing number of social media platforms provide women with the opportunity to choose if and how they want to represent their bodies, their self-representation can provide information, not only about the female body image in society, but also how women perceive themselves. It is not just the advertising industry anymore that influences women on how they should dress and represent their bodies, it is the women themselves who display their body images on public social media accounts and function as role models for others. It is all the more interesting that these images, which are meant to promote women’s self-empowerment and choice, seem to illustrate body features and styling that do not differ much from images that actively address the male gaze. It seems that while the perception of the meaning and expression of feminism shifted over time, the focus on the female body as sexualized object of male desire remained the same. The second wave of feminism fought against the sexualization of the female body, while in post-feminism the open display of the same eroticized body was seen as an act of liberation. Both the rejection and the celebration of the sexualized female body image have been perceived as an act of feminism, yet the presentation of the female body image remained the same. Sexualized poses, clothes that are focusing on the exposure of women’s bodies, as well as seductive facial expressions still illustrate very specific visual features of performed femaleness and femininity.

Both Jenner’s and Graham’s self-representation emphasizes the aspect of commercialization. While they do not actually sell their bodies physically, they use them to

¹¹⁰ Nancy Thumim, *Self-(Re)Presentation Now* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 1.

sell and promote their products and agendas. For their female followers, this can leave the impression that they must use those products or act in a similar way to be equally successful women. It is interesting that Jenner and Graham are such popular influencers, while they are just focusing on the representation of their bodies and not any form of professional skills. It seems like a necessity for most successful women on social media to meet specific beauty standards in order to obtain value, because it is not enough for them to convince just through their achievements. While a man can wear a suit and immediately radiates success and integrity, there seems to be no similarly standardized dress code for successful women. Instead, make-up and a specific feminine appearance seems to be a requirement for being taken seriously for women in many positions, which again reduces them to their outer appearance.

For future research, it would be interesting to address certain aspects that this thesis did not consider. The inclusion of a greater diversity of bodies could further contribute to the research of self-representation of women. Women with disabilities, trans, queer, old, athletic or pregnant women would therefore be a valuable asset for further research about female body representation. In regard to the transgender topic, Kylie Jenner's own family could be an interesting study object, since her father Bruce Jenner (now Caitlyn Jenner) came out as a trans woman in 2015. Her transformation and perception of womanhood and femaleness aroused great public interest and was also discussed in the Kardashian's reality TV show. Furthermore, it could be of interest to examine women with different body sizes. While Ashley Graham's body does not conform to the ideal of a woman's body in the West, she is far from being obese and due to her height and her facial structures she still conforms to Western beauty standards. Another research perspective could focus on the self-representation of influential women of color such as Beyoncé, or Tyra Banks, which would add aspects of racism and possible exoticification to the elements of sexualization and objectification of the female body. Additionally, an international comparison between the self-representation of American and European influencers could examine cultural differences about the perception of self-sexualization and objectification.

The objectification of female bodies and the immense emphasis on women's appearance that has been firmly established in our society has hindered women to use their bodies in the same way as men over generations. For a long time, outer appearance and general attractiveness did not play as an important role for men as it did for women, since men usually had access to better education and could thus build a career based on experience and skills instead of looks. Women on the other hand, were often forced to work in domains

that were focusing much more on their looks than on their work competence or their education, if they worked at all. Today, however, men face more pressure about their appearance, as women are now able to make their own living and have access to positions of power themselves. Therefore, women can make their own demands about the appearance of men. Compared to earlier times, when power and status were much more relevant than appearance, men now have to pay much more attention to their looks, which is often connected to a performance of masculinity that requires a muscular and athletic figure. Thus, the analysis of the self-representation of male influencers would be a promising research topic.

While Laura Mulvey's theory on the male gaze and spectatorship is certainly important and influential in various fields, it also neglects certain aspects about female spectatorship that would be necessary for a more nuanced research on the objectification and the commodification of female bodies today, such as women of all sizes, women with disabilities, queer or trans women and others. The role of influencers has become immensely important for the self-perception of young women. On the one hand, this can foster a more reflective way of thinking about the representation and awareness of female body representation. On the other hand, the constant display of female bodies on social media, together with the dependence on social media that many young women experiences, can put an immense pressure on them to perform femaleness and femininity in a specific way.

Certainly, the self-representation of Kylie Jenner is an extreme example of self-sexualization. Still, it is not an uncommon representation for women on social media. The representation of women such as Ashley Graham can convey a more diverse image of the female body in the context of self-representation on social media. Yet, the majority of images of female bodies in the media and specifically in the advertising industry, if intentional or not, are still presented in a sexualized and objectified manner that support the commodification of the female body. The internalization of an objectified view on the female body as well as stereotypical perceptions of gender could be the reason why many images of self-representation have the subliminal notion of submissiveness and passivity, even if they try to convey empowerment and agency for women. For this reason, further research should examine how women use their appearance as a way of expressing themselves and discuss possible indications for an objectified self-representation in comparison with an expression of self-empowerment. To come back to Susan Sontag, bodies are powerful tools to express one's identity, which is why women should be able to express themselves through their bodies in order to be seen and not just to be looked at.

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