

From Instagram to Society: The Impact of Social Media on Female Self-Sexualization

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Abstract: The proliferation of social media has facilitated extensive discussions on various social issues, with feminism being a particularly prominent topic of interest. Social platforms have not only provided individuals with the means to share their opinions on gender equality, but they have also, to some degree, fostered a greater comprehension and consciousness of feminism among the general population. Facilitated by internet communication, the evolution of societal perspectives has led to a transformation in our perception of gender roles, resulting in the increasing integration of feminism into mainstream discourse. This article examines the increasingly prevalent phenomenon of female self-sexualization in the context of social media in the United States. This study utilizes an extensive examination of existing literature to investigate the relationship between internalized gender discrimination, which is experienced through platforms like Instagram, and the male gaze. The investigation reveals that social media serves as a platform that mirrors and intensifies preexisting gender stereotypes, promoting women to conform to limited ideals of attractiveness and conduct.

Keywords: Social Media, Self-Sexualization, Gender Discrimination, Male Gaze

1. Introduction

Social media has become an essential tool for expressing and shaping gender identity in the digital era. Platforms such as Instagram have a substantial impact on shaping individual's view of societal standards and personal identity, particularly for women. This essay explores the occurrence of female self-sexualization, specifically examining how the internalization of gender discrimination and the male gaze impact female self actualization on social media. Prior research, conducted by Fisher, Cross, and Sales, has highlighted the role of social media platforms in perpetuating gender stereotypes, impacting self-perception and mental well-being of women. There is a pressing need to further explore the complex connections between these elements [1].

Researchers have produced substantial advancements in comprehending the psychological and sociological factors that contribute to the achievement of self actualization by women on social media. For instance, the study conducted by Sales&Jo and Tsaliki revealed how the combination of visual and verbal material on social platforms strengthens limited aesthetic norms and gender expectations [2-3]. Nevertheless, the precise influence of internalized societal expectations placed on males and how they affect the way females portray themselves has yet to be thoroughly investigated. This study aims to address such differences by conducting an extensive evaluation of existing literature,

examining the impact of internalized beliefs on women's actions and perception of self on online social platforms.

This study seeks to utilize the theoretical framework of post feminism and male gaze theory to examine the ways in which social media influences the self-sexualization of women. The objective is to augment comprehension of the interplay between these aspects and offer insights for more efficacious social and educational tactics to counter gender discrimination and boost media literacy. This study makes valuable contributions to scholarly discourse and has practical implications for policy-making and educational practices about gender equality and the influence of media.

2. Literature Review

Researchers have extensively studied the phenomenon of women's sexualization on social media, concentrating on how these platforms shape gender cognition and behavior. This literature review critically examines existing research, focusing on the interactions between social media, internalized gender discrimination, and the male gaze.

Research has consistently shown that social media platforms play an important role in strengthening traditional gender stereotypes. Fisher and Cross emphasized in their study how social media platforms like Instagram impose feminizing pressures on adolescents, indicating that these platforms encourage women to value themselves based on continuous observation and evaluation of their appearance [1]. This scrutiny can lead to psychological issues, such as body image disorders and reduced self-esteem. Similarly, Sales and Jo explored how social media not only serves as a mirror reflecting social norms but also actively constructs these norms by encouraging young girls to adopt highly sexualized personas from an early age through mechanisms such as child beauty pageants and seeking social recognition through likes [2].

The sexualization of young girls and women has always been a focus of media criticism, and Tsaliki discussed how media descriptions further influence the social environment [3]. In the social environment, women are more regarded as sexual partners than individuals with agency power. This environment encourages self objectification, where women internalize the observer's perspective as their primary view of their own body. These studies explore how media driven cognition is transformed into self presentation strategies on social media, where women often feel compelled to depict themselves in ways that gain social recognition and validation through likes and comments.

Although extensive research has explored the various factors that influence gender stereotypes on social media, as well as the psychological impact of these stereotypes on women, there is still a clear gap in research that combines internalized gender discrimination and male gaze with women's daily use of social media. This review underscores the necessity for a comprehensive approach that considers the open and subtle ways in which social media interactions internalize and express gender norms.

Internalized gender discrimination refers to the way in which gender-based stereotypes and expectations are absorbed by individuals and become part of their own self-image and behavior. This phenomenon is closely related to the male gaze, a concept theorized by Laura Mulvey and further explored in various feminist discourses [4]. The male gaze describes a way of portraying and looking at women that objectifies them and reduces their existence primarily to the pleasure of the male viewer. In the context of social media, these concepts manifest as pressures on women to conform to certain beauty standards and behaviors that are deemed desirable from a male-centrism perspective. These internalized norms not only dictate how women should appear but also how they perceive their own worth and identity, often valuing physical appearance over other attributes.

Self-sexualization occurs when individuals adopt and reproduce sexualized behaviors and presentations of themselves that align with societal standards. This can include dressing in revealing clothing, using suggestive poses in photographs, and emphasizing sexual attributes through various

digital enhancements like filters and editing applications. The process of self-sexualization is not merely about choosing to present oneself in a certain way; it reflects deeper psychological and cultural dynamics where such choices are seen as pathways to social acceptance, personal value, and even success. In essence, self-sexualization on social media can be viewed as a performative act where women, often subconsciously, negotiate their identity and self-worth through the lens of culturally endorsed sexual desirability.

Social media's unique interactive and highly visual nature significantly amplifies the effects of internalized gender discrimination and the male gaze through its unique interactive and highly visual nature. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok facilitate an environment where appearance-based feedback (likes, comments, and shares) is immediate and quantifiable. This environment encourages users to conform to popular standards of beauty and presentation to gain approval and visibility. Furthermore, the algorithms underlying these platforms often promote content that conforms to these popularized beauty standards, thus creating a feedback loop that reinforces and normalizes self-sexualization. Studies have shown that prolonged exposure to such environments leads to increased body dissatisfaction among women, heightened anxiety about physical appearance, and more profound feelings of inadequacy [5]. Additionally, the blurring lines between public and private spheres on social media mean that the personal becomes publicly consumable, further complicating how women negotiate their self-presentation and privacy.

3. Cases of famous influencers

This section applies the theoretical frameworks of Post-Feminism and Male Gaze to analyze three distinct social media influencers, including Kim Kardashian, Emily Ratajkowski, and Nikita Dragun. Each case provides unique insights into how social media environments affect female self-sexualization under the lens of internalized gender norms and male gaze dynamics.

3.1. The case of Kim Kardashian

Utilizing the Male Gaze theory, Kim Kardashian's social media presence can be analyzed in terms of how it caters to and reinforces male-centric views of femininity and sexuality. Kardashian's posts, which often highlight sexual elements of her persona, encouraged a performance that aligns with traditional expectations of female sexuality as defined by male audiences [6].

Kim Kardashian's Instagram showcases a highly curated image that blends glamour, luxury, and sexuality. Her content strategy involves frequent posting of fashion and beauty-focused images that emphasize her body in a way that typically resonates with the male gaze. This perpetuates a form of self-sexualization that is rewarded with high engagement on social media, suggesting that such representations are not only accepted but even encouraged. It solidifies the stereotype of ideal femininity as highly sexualized while also influencing her followers to emulate similar aesthetics and behaviors.

3.2. The case of Emily Ratajkowski

Post-Feminism provides a useful lens for understanding Emily Ratajkowski's approach to social media, which often involves a narrative of empowerment alongside sexualization. Ratajkowski uses her platform to challenge traditional narratives by portraying sexualization as a form of empowerment, although it may still comply with the underlying principles of the male gaze.

Ratajkowski is vocal about women's rights and body positivity, frequently discussing themes of female empowerment and ownership of sexuality. Her posts, which often include revealing attire or poses, can be seen as reclaiming the female body from traditional male narratives. However, despite

this empowered stance, the content still often aligns with socially accepted norms of beauty and femininity, suggesting that even empowerment narratives can inadvertently reinforce the same

3.3. The case of Nikita Dragun

Examining Nikita Dragun's content through the Male Gaze theory helps highlight how transgender identity intersects with the pressures of conforming to female beauty standards. As a transgender woman, Nikita Dragun's social media portrayal emphasizes both conformity to and defiance of traditional female sexualization, aiming to validate her femininity in the public eye.

Dragun's Instagram is a vibrant mix of beauty tips, glamorous fashion, and candid discussions about her journey as a transgender woman. Her posts frequently explore themes of feminization, often showcasing her makeup skills and glamorous lifestyle. This not only reaffirms her femininity but also challenges traditional boundaries of gender norms. However, the emphasis on beauty and sexuality can be seen as a response to societal validation, reflecting a nuanced interaction with the male gaze where acceptance is intertwined with conventional attractiveness and sexual appeal [7].

4. Conclusion

This research has thoroughly examined the complex dynamics of women engaging in self-sexualization on social media, within the framework of internalized gender bias and the perspective of male observation. This study has utilized an extensive examination of literature and a qualitative analysis of influential individuals on social media to establish how these platforms strengthen conventional gender stereotypes and promote women to adhere to a limited, frequently sexualized notion of femininity. The results emphasize the crucial influence of social media in creating and perpetuating gender norms, affecting women's self-perception and psychological well-being.

Nevertheless, this research has significant limits. Limiting the attention to only a small group of chosen social media influencers implies that the results may fail to encompass the complete range of experiences and viewpoints that are present across various cultures and demographic backgrounds. Subsequent studies could broaden the investigation by encompassing a wider array of influencers from various geographical and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, incorporating quantitative methodologies with qualitative insights would enhance the examination of trends and patterns, resulting in a more comprehensive evaluation.

In the future, there will be a distinct requirement for ongoing investigation into the impact of social media on gender norms and identities. Additional investigation should focus on comprehending these alterations, specifically the function of emerging technologies and platforms. Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly important to create tactics that can utilize these insights to promote online environments that are more inclusive and empowering. This may entail a combination of policy-driven and community-led efforts focused on diminishing gender stereotyping and fostering a more inclusive attitude towards varied gender expressions on social media platforms.

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