Decoding Marilyn Monroe's Iconic Sex Symbolism: Exploring the Driving Forces

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Abstract: Marilyn Monroe, a famous Hollywood star known as her own "sex symbol", epitomized the ideal feminine image, especially in postwar America. Discussions about Marilyn Monroe commonly revolve around the male gaze, but frequently ignore the analysis of women's impressions and opinions of Marilyn Monroe. This research acknowledges the impression of Marilyn Monroe under the male gaze and explores the underlying reasons. Additionally, it analyzes the phenomenon of Marilyn Monroe being recognized and admired by women. The primary focus is on the factors that formed Marilyn Monroe's sex symbol and the driving forces behind it. This article incorporates a wide range of sources, including but not limited to publications, videos, artwork, and peer-review articles. The findings of this research demonstrate that Marilyn Monroe is not exclusively an object of the male gaze; she is also regarded as an ideal image by female spectators. This phenomenon can be attributed to postwar consumerism ideology and prevailing gender stereotypes. This article offers a relatively new perspective that challenges conventional stereotypes of Marilyn Monroe's image.

Keywords: Marilyn Monroe, postwar, sex symbol, spectatorship, male gaze

1. Introduction

During the postwar era in the United States, spanning from the mid-1940s to the late 1960s, women underwent significant changes in their lives. A huge number of the population moved to suburban areas after the war because it was more affordable compared to central cities, therefore ending up having a life that is family-oriented. "Domestic containment" was a prevalent phenomenon in the family in the postwar period. At that time, women were expected to be housewife and take care of their children, husbands, and the whole family. In contrast, men were expected to have stable jobs and earn money to provide financial support [1]. Due to this circumstance, many women gave up their jobs to "sacrifice" in their housewife life, thus leading to a decline in the rate of women's higher education.

During the postwar period, Marilyn Monroe was a famous movie star and almost everyone knew that she was portrayed as a "sex symbol". Marilyn Monroe was the mainstream star because she was one of the most famous actresses of that time period. However, she was a representative of the emerging counterculture because the message she transmitted was not limited to the classic Hollywood star system. Marilyn Monroe is a creation shaped by the culture and era, molded by the beliefs and desires of her audience and onlookers. There was a common belief that Marilyn's

spectators were all male because of her sexiness. However, many documents show that female audiences gazed at her too. Monroe, a figure influenced by both established mainstream culture and emerging countercultural movements, embodies the ambitions and the ideals of women in the postwar United States.

2. Consumerism and Female Expectation in the Postwar United States

During the postwar period, there was a sudden appearance of conservative ideology that limited women's thoughts and prevented their freedom of action with traditional spheres. In order to have a sense of security, middle-class Americans developed an ideal family concept that subordinated women [2]. After the war, the population declined dramatically which made Americans focus on their families. Therefore, earlier marriage and an increased emphasis on procreation happened. Women who played an important role in procreation had more societal pressure. For example, a woman named Coya Knutson, a Minnesota representative, was an advocate for a food stamp program in Minnesota. She wanted to fund school lunches for young children and provide student loans. However, Knutson's husband embarrassed her in public which made Knutson's career stop [3]. In this context, being a career woman was not viewed as an ideal way of living, and it was not a pride of female independence. Similarly, in Marilyn Monroe's film, she presents several female independent characters with sex liberation, yet Marilyn has been viewed as the "dumb blonde" with stereotypes. This also implies that women could be alluring and sexy, but intelligence and independence were less acceptable, revealing a contradiction.

3. Marilyn Monroe's Dual Identity and the Male Gaze

3.1. Dual Identity in Films

Monroe assumes a dual identity, representing both mainstream culture and the emerging counterculture. During the postwar period, Marilyn Monroe was not only limited to the presentation of sexiness or Hollywood stars, but her films and her messages hinted at a desire for women's independence as well as sex freedom, though within certain confines. Among her renowned films, *Some Like It Hot* had a profound impact, brimming with comedy and fantasy. In this film, Marilyn acts as Sugar, a young choir member trying to escape from the band's management while pursuing love. Sugar's thoughts and behaviors exposed women's desires for freedom and self-determination. For instance, the band girls drink alcohol at midnight when their boss is asleep, or secretly meet men after performances. Monroe's character defied conventions, as earlier Hollywood primarily emphasized the "female gaze." She showed the physical allure of female characters. In the movie, *Some Like It Hot*, Sugar is not only charming but also courageous in pursuing her own aspirations despite societal norms.

Meanwhile, Sugar does not seem completely independent because she is always seeking a wealthy man to marry. In order to achieve that goal, Sugar can even hive up her career. Throughout the whole film, Sugar falls victim to deception, remaining oblivious to being cheated even as the truth becomes apparent. Her pursuit of love adheres to a male-centered paradigm. Even when she uncovers the lie, she disregards it and forms a relationship with the person who deceives her. The movie portrayed the ideology of women in society during the time in a humorous way. In the ideology, it is acceptable for women not to be intelligent or capable, but it is more important for them to have external beauty and inner simplicity. Although women might have their careers or specialties, they were expected to be housewives and support their husbands.

According to Jolanta, roles like Sugar revealed on screen comforted male spectators because it made the least attractive men feel like a hero and valued or desired under the comparison of males' power and females' chasing [4]. Despite the social impression of gender in her works, women still

embraced her. This highlights that the prevailing ideology among women of that era was to attract men through femininity and lead lives that conformed to societal norms.

3.2. Male Gaze

Marilyn Monroe, as a mainstream cultural figure, was viewed as "own property" by several famous men. This phenomenon implies women being objectified. Andy Warhol, a famous artist in the same time period, created a series of artworks featuring Marilyn Monroe's face. In Andy Warhol's 1971 art exhibition, artworks showcased the sexy symbol by emphasizing Marilyn's lips and her emotions. Andy Warhol used Marilyn's iconic look, instantly evoking thoughts of the alluring Monroe whenever the group of artworks is seen. Meanwhile, former President John F. Kennedy also had a story with Marilyn Monroe. At his own birthday party, he invited Monroe to be his guest singer in a sexy dress. The recorded audio of Marilyn singing shows her sexy voice full of expression. Her speed of singing is very slow and deep, leading the listeners to close their eyes and enjoy her child-like voice. These two examples suggest that even male celebrities viewed Marilyn as their own object. Marilyn Monroe represented an iconic feminine figure constructed within the framework of the male perspective, and she satisfied all the ideal images under the imagination of gazing, including controlling the female body [5]. In Monroe's film, her body itself has sexual features that can trigger the male spectators' desire and the movie camera acts like a man's eyes, capturing her beauty and sexy parts. Thus, collecting Monroe's image such as posters or pictures was an easy way for "gazers" to consume her and satisfy their own desire.

However, Marilyn Monroe's sensuality was in conflict, as people accepted her sensuality and attractive feminine features while also criticizing her for violating traditional rules. Marilyn Monroe once attempted a liberating pose for *Playboy* magazine, but Hollywood was ashamed of her nude pin-ups [6]. Paradoxically, Hollywood tended to portray Monroe as a sex symbol in the beginning. Marilyn Monroe's image of sexual freedom largely supported women's independence and freedom. However, when Marilyn Monroe served as a servicewoman in a U.S. army parade, she was forbidden to take photos with soldiers because she had been known for her sex appeal. People thought her image was not "pure", and taking photos with her would damage the image of soldiers. *The Los Angeles News* in 1952 mentioned that the image of Marilyn Monroe gave women the wrong idea [7]. Men, especially, found pleasure in the visual allure and emotional resonance that Marilyn Monroe provided during that time. Yet, even as they enjoyed her, they often disparaged her image, believing that the sensuality she exuded did not align with the conventional image of a "good girl." Consequently, Marilyn Monroe's image embodies a contradiction. She encapsulates a dual persona – simultaneously representing both the mainstream and non-mainstream cultures.

4. Marilyn Monroe and Female Spectatorship

4.1. Female Gaze: Attraction to Men

Marilyn Monroe was highly admired by her female audiences as her sex symbol. Women of the postwar period desired to have sexual freedom and glamour, and Marilyn Monroe inspired them. Female sexuality should be one's own, but mostly taken away from them [8]. This indicated that internalized their role as sexual objects due to societal perceptions, making them accept this as their attractiveness. Marilyn Monroe became a famous movie star, and many women at the same time period started to consume and follow her fashion. Patricia Ogden, a female audience of Hollywood movies bought the same style of clothes worn by Monroe and kitten heels shoes to look like Marilyn Monroe [9]. Female spectators were motivated to chase the style because they admired the image of Monroe and viewed it as a beauty. This imitation did not easily happen to other actresses because Monroe's female spectators wanted to gain visual and psychological fascination from men, alongside

seeking some degree of freedom in behavior and sexual expression instead of just being limited to buying the same clothes.

Women's admiration for Marilyn Monroe primarily stems from her embodiment of both mainstream culture and counterculture. This duality resonated with women who aspired to pursue independence, yet were expected to conform to the prevailing societal ideology that prioritized being homemakers. In Jackie Stacey's words, "Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at" [9]. During the postwar era, as many women were predominantly expected to fulfill the role of housewives, their expression of charm could not solely revolve around their careers. Displaying their femininity became a means for them to experience a sense of liberation and embrace their inherent allure. Marilyn Monroe's portrayal resonated with audiences by shedding light on the societal expectations placed on women during that period. When female viewers aspired to match Monroe's attractiveness, they were also reflecting their own self-expectations within the prevailing historical context. As Szymkowska argues, for women, Monroe represented a certain kind of apprehension that was equally fundamental to the hope she inspired in men: the fear of a sexual rival who could potentially divert the attention of men, upon whom women's identities and even livelihoods might rely [4]. Marilyn Monroe's movie images portrayed the "dumb blonde", beautiful but not smart enough, depending on men to live and showing a man-centered mind.

4.2. Mutual Recognition in Celebrity Consumption

Marilyn Monroe's childlike image made female viewers feel safe, comfortable, and reliable. Women acting like children have a powerful and different effect on both men and women. In men's eyes, child-like women make them look more masculine and heroic, which gives them a lot of confidence and satisfaction. From a woman's perspective, such a woman can arouse female goodwill and reduce female hatred [4]. Monroe films present a beautiful woman whose kindness requires no reciprocation. In Monroe's movie, *Some Like It Hot*, Sugar is the most beautiful girl in the band, and she stands in the middle during the performance. However, other women did not envy her, they paid more attention to her beauty and interesting personality. The image of Marilyn Monroe is compared to the image of the vampire beauty in the early movies. Such a beauty is dangerous because it is all about the blood contract. However, Marilyn Monroe's sex was lovely and defenseless [10]. Monroe's image does not evoke fear of love or sex for women. Her face and voice possess a natural childlike quality, juxtaposed against her mature sensuality. This contrast contributed to her appeal to the 1950s American audience.

During the postwar time period, female spectators established their self-ideal by consuming Hollywood stars. According to Jackie's book, the reason why movie stars can be consumed and recognized by female audiences is because they are related to female passions and ideals [9]. Some viewers like the look of the stars, and spend hours staring at the window to pick out the clothes worn by the stars [9]. When female viewers watch the stars they recognize, they are often different from men, and they are more willing to imitate the appearance of stars. However, this behavior can be traced back to consumerism [11]. In the patriarchal society of that time, women seemed to be more subordinate. Hence, during that era, Hollywood films prominently featured the female body as the primary object of sexual objectification in both media and movies. Concurrently, the status of women in society at that time also encapsulated and exemplified the role of viewers and consumers, as they sought to align their own lives with the narratives unfolding on the screen. This phenomenon includes but is not limited to, a star's dress, image, and character. This desire is especially compelling for women, underscoring their inclination to be active consumers. For women, images in movies are not just shopping windows for them to consume and imitate, but also methods they use to approach others [12]. The way and the cause of Monroe's death is still a hot topic, and people always have different opinions about it. It was reported that Marilyn Monroe was found dead with a bottle of pills next to her bed, suggesting that her death was a suicide. However, others believe that Marilyn Monroe's

death was an accident or murder [7]. The takeaway from this is that even today, long after Marilyn Monroe's death, people continue to associate with Marilyn Monroe, but that association itself represents a kind of celebrity consumerism.

5.   Conclusion

There is no doubt that Marilyn Monroe was a famous Hollywood actress symbolizing sex appeal in postwar America. She embodies both mainstream and counterculture. In the postwar period in the United States, Monroe's female audience was deeply influenced by men and social ideology and thus began to idolize Marilyn Monroe. The female audience expressed their admiration for Monroe through imitative behavior, as the presence of Monroe not only gratified the female audience's inner longing for sexual freedom and the pursuit of behavioral liberation but also mirrored the internal ideological coherence of the society they lived in. Against the backdrop of consumerism, Marilyn Monroe, as a figure coexisting with both mainstream culture and counterculture, represents a unique, contradictory, and contentious subject. This contradiction continues to be a subject of consumption even after her death.

The research underscores the significant cultural impact of figures like Marilyn Monroe. Future research can further conduct in-depth studies, surveys, and analyses of both historical and contemporary celebrity figures. Additionally, exploring the intersections of gender, media, consumerism, and popular culture in the context of celebrity idolization would offer valuable insights into the dynamics of celebrity influence on society.

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