

# The (Se)X factor



Does the overt sexualisation of women in films affect the way society views female empowerment and femininity?:

An exploration into the distorted female narrative through the lens of the waves of feminism

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# Introduction

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Why for a full week after ‘Oppenheimer’ came out, all anyone talked about on social media was Florence Pugh’s boobs?<sup>1</sup> Why did all Jo Koy seem to take away from Barbie were the “*doll's big boobies*”<sup>2</sup>?

Catalysed by the different waves of feminism, societies' perception of women has been shifting and adapting to accommodate for features of femininity that have previously been suppressed. Consequentially, this has forced mass media outlets such as the film and television industry to ultimately ‘move with the times’, injecting the modern perception of femininity and female empowerment into every aspect of the industry, off-screen and on. While this shift's impact on society is undeniable, the overt-sexualisation of women in films runs so deep through the veins of the industry that it has now created an entirely new distorted narrative that blurs the lines between liberation and oppression.

How does the overt sexualisation of women in films affect the way society views female empowerment and femininity? An investigation into the distorted female narrative reflected in the late 20th-21st century and the subliminal messages this sends to society. The focus of my PIP is the distorted narrative of female empowerment and femininity reflected within films. Thereby, the impacts of overt sexualisation of both males and females will be examined and

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<sup>1</sup> Z.Millman ‘Why Oppenheimer Needed Florence Pugh’s Controversial Sex Scene’ (*Polygon* 26 July 2023)  
<<https://www.polygon.com/23807420/oppenheimer-florence-pugh-sex-scene-cillian-murphy-controversy>> accessed 14 July 2023

<sup>2</sup> R.Leishman, ‘I Cannot Live through an Award Season of Sexist Jokes about “Barbie”’ (*The Mary Sue* 13 January 2024)  
<<https://www.themarysue.com/jo-koys-golden-globes-barbie-joke-needs-to-be-the-end-of-this-trend/>> accessed 14 July 2024

subsequently the impact this may have on an individual's perceptions of both gender's masculinity and femininity.

The oppression of females in society and their portrayal in film angered me and therefore I sought to investigate the true impacts of that narrative on society. I was specifically inspired by the two latest cult-classic films of 2023 Barbie and Saltburn, both feature characters who have been greatly sexualised within the film industry and by the media.

My PIP relates to multiple aspects of Society and Cultural concepts as I am examining how this cultural narrative affects the identity of people within society. Furthermore, it relates to how those in a position of authority or power specifically in Hollywood have abused the power they have been gifted over time to perpetuate society's view of female empowerment and femininity. I will specifically be focusing on how this sexualisation has fluxed over the past 50 years, engaging with the continuities and some of the changes.

My primary research consisted of a content analysis of films over the last 50 years, including Disney, female-directed films and those that appeal to the male gaze. In conducting my content analysis I watched various movies from the last 50 years. My focus group consisted of three separate groups, boys, girls and mixed that responded to visual stimulus as well as questions, building off the knowledge gained from the content analysis and questionnaire. My questionnaire focused primarily on comparing societal opinions on my cross-cultural component of gender.

From my conclusions, there are multiple different ways the film industry can sexualise a woman, projecting a “sex factor” to which a women are deemed by.

# Log

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The trajectory of my PIP was evident from the brainstorming period of the journey, driven by my passion surrounding the later waves of the feminist movement and its impact on my life as a 21st-century young woman. My interest in the intricacies of the film industry was alternatively a major inspiration for the topic of my PIP and ultimately what drove me to centre my ardour for feminist equality within a prominent systemic issue within society. Research into this particular topic allowed me to refine the broadband issues of ‘Female Sexulisation within Movies’ to an investigation into whether the overt sexualisation of women in films has any effect on the way society views female empowerment and femininity.

In conducting my research, I became captivated by Dr. Stacy L. Smith’s *‘The Future is Female? Examining the prevalence and portrayal of girls and teens in popular movies.’*<sup>3</sup> This led me to become intrigued by the effect exposition to such sexualisation from vulnerable ages can have on the identity and pressure of conformity within society, culminating in two of my chapters. It was during this time that I began to collect an extensive inventory of female characters regularly referred to as sexualised throughout my research as well as movies to execute a content analysis of. A prevalent article which prompted this decision was Giada Gavazzi’s commentary on “Male Gaze and Female Objectification in Contemporary Cinema: A Dive into How Some Recent Hollywood Films Have Reinforced the Objectification of Women’s Bodies and Attitudes”<sup>4</sup> which drove me to consider just how deep the male gaze was enshrined within popular culture, resulting in the formation of my second chapter.

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<sup>3</sup> A. Lovell, ‘The Future Is Female? Examining the Prevalence and Portrayal of Girls and Teens in Popular Movies’ (2017) <<https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/the-future-is-female.pdf>>

<sup>4</sup> G. Gavazzi ‘Male Gaze and Female Objectification in Contemporary Cinema’ (Themattthewrome.com 15 March 2022)

<<https://themattthewrome.com/2022/03/15/male-gaze-and-female-objectification-in-contemporar-y-cinema/>> accessed 14 July 2024

The cross-cultural component was initially challenging as I considered multiple fronts for comparison such as Western vs Eastern films or even films vs literature. For a significant amount of time, I considered drawing comparisons between the ‘waves of feminism’<sup>5</sup> and how the film industry’s sexualisation of women has developed with society's definition of femininity and female empowerment. Upon reflection, this strategy proved ineffective as the theory does not enforce explicit end and beginning dates for any of the waves, thus rendering a comparison too difficult. A cross-gendered investigation into sexualisation within rendered to be most effective as a means to depict the drastic difference between perceptions of female sexuality compared to their on-screen male counterparts.

This decision led me to decide on the structure of my focus groups, realising that to conduct ethical research effectively, I needed to canvas a variety of genders and ages to get a thorough scope of opinions. As a result of this realisation, I conducted three separate groups, one for female-identifying participants, one for male-identifying and one for a mixed group, allowing me to incorporate a cross-cultural perspective within my PIP effectively.

My PIP informed me of the deeply entrenched systemic issues of sexualisation within our society, reminding me of the necessity for consistent self-reflection. This process has progressed my social and cultural literacy through learning to question established paradigms, enhancing my understanding of femininity and female empowerment.

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<sup>5</sup> The “waves of feminism” first surfaced in the late 1960s as a way of differentiating the emerging women's movement at the time. It consists of four ‘waves’ to depict how societies depiction of female empowerment develops with the desire for equity and equality. S. Pruitt, ‘What Are the Four Waves of Feminism?’ (*HISTORY2* March 2022) <<https://www.history.com/news/feminism-four-waves>> accessed 14 July 2024

# Screen Sirens to Social Suicide

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How perceptions of women within film influence the social inclusion or exclusion of women in society

The overt sexualisation of women is a societally constructed affliction, permeating contemporary cinema since women were allowed a place in film. The film industry and thus, society at large has epitomised the female psyche into a profitable commodity, which is then translated to the malleable mind of young girls. The ripple effect filters back into society forcing an invariant cycle to permeate pop culture. Due to this cycle, it can be concluded that the effects of the sexualisation of women in the film create degradation within the micro, meso and macro levels of society, yet specifically, how these effects can result in the inclusion and exclusion of women within meso-level institutions.

Social exclusion involves a lack of mobility to participate in equality in all aspects of a society<sup>6</sup>. It occurs within a society when an individual's rights are denied to, resulting in overwhelming sensations of sequestration and inferiority. The term was first coined by René Lenoir<sup>7</sup> when describing minority groups which have been marginally secluded from society. If a subordinate group such as women, become excluded from social inclusion it can result in negative preconceptions and discriminatory behaviours by the majority group, such as males. As films function as mirrors of society, these displays of social exclusion and inclusion are also evident within the industry, and broader society.

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<sup>6</sup> N.Rawal, 'Social Inclusion and Exclusion: A Review' <<https://www.cmi.no/file/589.pdf>> accessed 11 May 2024

<sup>7</sup> N. Rawal, 'Social Inclusion and Exclusion: A Review' <<https://www.cmi.no/file/589.pdf>> accessed 11 May 2024

Society consistently pressure women to conform to the film industry and medias, view of a ‘perfect object’<sup>8</sup>, utilising women’s sexuality as commercial commodities to further their capitalist agendas. This was made evident by the commodification of Brooke shields, specifically how the film industry’s decided ‘femme fatalic’ portrayal of her thus was utilised as a vantage point by Calvin Klein™ at just 15.<sup>9</sup> Presented as a ‘series of cinematic commercials’<sup>10</sup> the phenomenon of the Brooke Shields ‘*Nothing comes between me and my calvin’s*’ ads featured Shields in a number of compromising or sexually suggestive poses in order to target off the stars budding image as Hollywood’s ‘sensuous, sexy, woman-child’<sup>11</sup>. These ads included Shield’s dressing herself, sucking her thumb, holding herself in awkward positions and caressing herself to demonstrate her flexibility as well as other *suggestive* movements all while the camera “lovingly caressed her body”<sup>12</sup>. The target demographic for these ads were for women, especially adolescents, feeding off their insecurity to be included within what the media deemed, societal norms. The ads were met with public outcry, with news publications stating that, at a time when “child molestation was on the increase, images are filtering into the mainstream and thereby legitimising”, deeming the ads as ‘soft porn’<sup>13</sup>. Despite this, the brands sales increased by more than 30% over the first month of the ads release, making many women feel that they “had to get the jeans to feel seen as potentially interesting”<sup>14</sup>, transforming the nature of what society deemed feminine.

When asked in a questionnaire, a participant stated “Movies like this have changed the way that teenage boys treat the females and how they act around them (eg words or actions) and it can create an uncomfortable environment sometimes. Sometimes these movies portray a hyper-sexual image of what a woman should stand for and look like which contributes to body

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<sup>8</sup> Primary research, Content analysis

<sup>9</sup> E.Kirkpatrick, ‘Brooke Shields Says She Was “Naive” Not to Think Her ’80s Calvin Klein Commercial “Was Sexual in Nature”’ (*Vanity Fair* 29 October 2021) <<https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2021/10/brooke-shields-80s-calvin-klein-commercial-naive-nothing-sexual-15-years-old>> accessed 24 July 2024

<sup>10</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>11</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>12</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>13</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>14</sup> Primary research, content analysis



dysmorphia.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in all three of the focus groups, when asked how old they were when they first saw something inappropriate on TV, all participants replied that they weren’t sure, some going as far as stating “It’s so normalised, we’re so conditioned to see it that we just ignore it”<sup>16</sup> In fact, when asked to watch these innuendos back as teenagers in movies such as *Hercules* (Disney, 1997)<sup>17</sup> and *Road to Eldorado* (Disney, 2000)<sup>18</sup> many were shocked to the realisation that this is what is being fed to the malleable minds of children as the expectation of what a woman should be. When asked to reflect on what they witnessed in the short clip from *Road to Eldorado*, “That was incredibly sexual, it’s just enough to fly over your kid’s heads”<sup>19</sup> while another stated, “It kinda normalises the (sexualisation of women) as well, oh well this is what is shown in the films you know.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, it essentially reinforces my hypothesis that the overt sexualisation of women in film can have detrimental impacts on the socialisation process of young girls and boys, promoting the discrimination of those who don’t fit into Hollywood’s designated stereotypes within society.

The film industry’s depiction of women and the harmful stereotypes created, reinforces the idea that a woman’s worth lies in her beauty, and she is only valuable if she can attract men. Once films promote the mistreatment of women it allows the media too believe they can mistreat celebrities which allows individuals to think they have the right to mistreat a peer. Jean Kilbourne, a senior scholar at the Wellesley Centers for Women<sup>21</sup> stated “it is very difficult to be violent to someone we consider an equal human being, but very easy to abuse a thing.” This distorted image of women leads to a ‘toxic climate’<sup>22</sup> which normalises the objectification of

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<sup>15</sup> Primary research, questionnaire

<sup>16</sup> Primary research, focus group

<sup>17</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>18</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>19</sup> Primary research, focus group

<sup>20</sup> Primary research, focus group

<sup>21</sup> S. Israelsen-Hartley, ‘Ignored or Sexualized: How Hollywood Is Failing Women’ (*Deseret News* 22 November 2017)

<<https://www.deseret.com/2017/11/22/20636387/ignored-or-sexualized-how-hollywood-is-failing-women/>> accessed 30 May 2024

<sup>22</sup> S. Israelsen-Hartley, ‘Ignored or Sexualized: How Hollywood Is Failing Women’ (*Deseret News* 22 November 2017)

<<https://www.deseret.com/2017/11/22/20636387/ignored-or-sexualized-how-hollywood-is-failing-women/>> accessed 30 May 2024

women at the macro, meso and micro levels of society. Within the macro, media outlets such as the paparazzi hold significant institutional power<sup>23</sup> over society and have been known to perpetuate the social ostracisation of women within society. The power these journalists hold has often been abused to sell a story, often at the expense of actresses, teaching the micro levels of society that women's bodies are commercialised commodities of their environment<sup>24</sup>. After a photographer took a photo up her skirt at the 2012 *Les Miserable* premiere, Anne Hathaway was asked about the 'lesson she learnt' from such an experience, evidently a vastly inappropriate and inconsequential response to such a traumatic display of female commodification.<sup>25</sup> Danielle Fisher, a child Disney star spoke out about these occurrences of media subjugation, further stating that she "had people tell (her) they had (her) 18th birthday on their calendar."<sup>26</sup> Mara Wilson, another child star said "Before I even turned 12, they were images of me on foot fetish websites and photoshopped into child photography. Every time I felt ashamed"

If the film industry are creating a culture that deems women and adolescent girls alike as 'public property' within the eyes of the media and greater society, this causes the same message to filter down to the meso and micro levels.

Consequently, it can be concluded that the overt sexualisation of women in film casts harsh stereotypes of women that commercialise women's bodies to further Hollywood's capitalist agenda. These patriarchal stereotypes paint a damning display of femininity back to society and perpetuate the inherent prejudice against women, manifesting in discriminatory acts which exclude women from the majority of society. The process of conducting primary research ultimately enforced my preconceived belief that the film industry is first and foremost a

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<sup>23</sup> K. Kanaya 'Cameras, Angles and Celebrities: The Blatant Objectification of Women for Views and How Celebrities Are Shutting Them down - Elle India' (*Elle India* 16 April 2024) <<https://elle.in/8-times-celebrities-slammed-paparazzi/>> accessed 24 July 2024

<sup>24</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>25</sup> T. Watson, '12 Times Famous Women Were Asked Wildly Inappropriate Questions in Interviews.' (*Mamamia* 2 October 2023) <<https://www.mamamia.com.au/celebrity-women-asked-inappropriate-questions/>> accessed 30 May 2024

<sup>26</sup> D. Gray, '16 Stars Who Spoke out about Being Sexualized at a Young Age' (*SheKnows* 22 June 2023) <<https://www.sheknows.com/entertainment/slideshow/2509093/celebrities-sexualized-young/>> accessed 30 May 2024

corporation that can establish and dismantle notions of femininity and female empowerment within society.

# (Female) Sex Sells

How the portrayal of women in film is affected by the male gaze

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Within greater society, a prevalent feminist theory, the male gaze, permeates modern cinema. Constituted by Laura Mulvey<sup>27</sup>, the theory<sup>28</sup> was developed on the basis that ‘in film, women are typically the objects rather than the possessors of the gaze because the control of the camera comes from factors such as the assumption of heterosexual men as the default target audience’. It presents female autonomy to the heterosexual male, and society, as an object to conquer which can influence the way society and women themselves view their bodies and sense of self. As the industry was traditionally a male-driven workforce, women were often portrayed as seductresses who existed to cater for the needs of their onscreen male lead. A 2016 study conducted by Dr Stacy L. Smith that examined the prevalence and portrayal of girls and teens in popular movies concluded that teenage females are more likely to be sexualised than their male counterparts, demonstrating how female sensuality dominates the silver screen.<sup>29</sup> The commodification process further encourages production companies to promote the 'male gaze' as sex sells and the profit-driven motive is further enhanced. However, Adriana Mucedola, a doctoral candidate in the Newhouse School of Public Communications states that “film-makers and production companies must consider not only their bottom line but also the eyes their story will reach and the implicit messages their depictions of female characters will perpetuate”<sup>30</sup> further skewing the way society views female empowerment and femininity. This consumerist-driven society has

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<sup>27</sup> L. Mulvey - “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (Laura Mulvey 1973)  
<https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1021/Laura%20Mulvey%2C%20Visual%20Pleasure.pdf> accessed June 1 2024

<sup>28</sup> L.Michele Jackson 2023, ‘The Invention of “the Male Gaze”’, *The New Yorker*, retrieved July 23, 2024, from  
 <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/the-invention-of-the-male-gaze>>.

<sup>29</sup> A.Lovell ‘The Future Is Female? Examining the Prevalence and Portrayal of Girls and Teens in Popular Movies’ (2017) <<https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/the-future-is-female.pdf>>

<sup>30</sup> S.Szydlik, ‘The Prevalent Dangers of Sexualizing Females in the Film Industry’ (*The Daily Orange* 24 March 2022)  
 <<https://dailyorange.com/2022/03/the-prevalent-dangers-sexualizing-females-film-industry/>>  
 accessed 1 June 2024

essentially transgressed the modest domestiques such as Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly<sup>31</sup>, instead captivated by the male gaze affecting how young women are presented within society.

This 'male gaze' in film is further perpetuated by all aspects of the filmmaking process.

Throughout the content analysis, there exists a comprehensive overview of elements of film production which have been infiltrated by the male gaze. Such aspects can include the way a scene is lit, such as using dim or backlighting to portray it as inherently sexual. The angles of the camera such as focusing on specific female body parts or panning up or down the body to sexualise it. Characterisation such as adhering to a specific stereotype that is steeped in sexuality such as the Femme Fatale. Costuming a female character with less clothing than her male counterparts or even clothing that holds sexual connotations. Any of these aspects of production can lead to a female character being portrayed as inherently sexual or inferior to the viewer which can implant beliefs within individuals that perpetuate socially constructed gender roles. In a focus group, one participant stated that “the whole thing is like, the desirable outcome or whatever is on the screen and then these kids grow up and they are sort of coded into thinking this is what I want. It’s got to have some effect”<sup>32</sup>. The affirmation effects culminate within the way society perceives the concepts of femininity and masculinity, concluding that to be feminine and empowered one must find that through sexuality. This concept enlarges the existing systems of dominance within society, normalising inappropriate social encounters such as catcalling, unrealistic body standards and an engrained subconscious that women are the objects of men’s desire.<sup>33</sup>

Costuming is, in theory, supposed to personify the character it’s inhabiting, yet with the multitudes of women on screens who are depicted in minimal clothing or even lack thereof, is teaching young girls that their sexuality is a primary aspect of their identity, rather than an extension of the self. Dr Stacy’s study also concluded that ‘female teens were almost four times

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Early 1900’S Actresses’ (*IMDb*2024) <<https://m.imdb.com/list/ls048085068/>> accessed 1 June 2024

<sup>32</sup> Primary research, Focus group

<sup>33</sup>S.Rieken ‘The Male Gaze and Its Effects on Women | the Women’s Network’ (*Thewomens.network*2022)

<<https://www.thewomens.network/blog/the-male-gaze-and-its-effects-on-women>> accessed 24 July 2024

as likely to be depicted wearing tight or alluring attire<sup>34</sup>. A content analysis<sup>35</sup> of popular films concluded that costuming characters in sexually suggestive clothing can date back to the 1950s (perhaps even further), as the presentation of Tinkerbell in Disney's animated adaption of Peter Pan shows her in a 'tight, revealing sleeveless dress which shows cleavage'.<sup>36</sup>

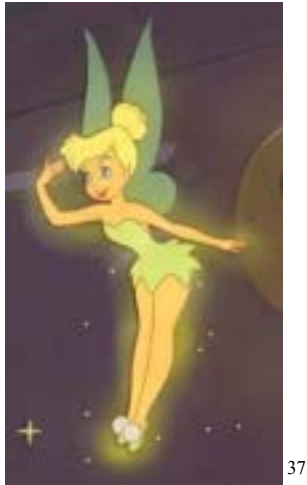


Figure 1. Tinkerbell costuming, *Pinterest*<sup>38</sup>

Figure 1 depicts the outfit worn by her for the entirety of the film. As the short, figure-hugging dress barely passes her lower back, the character ends up 'flashing' the audience 10 times throughout the film. Notably, as she is introduced, Tinkerbell looks at herself in the mirror from below and the audience gets a glance of her underwear. This establishes her character as

<sup>34</sup> A.Lovell 'The Future Is Female? Examining the Prevalence and Portrayal of Girls and Teens in Popular Movies' (2017) <<https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/the-future-is-female.pdf>>

<sup>35</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>36</sup> Primary research, Content analysis

<sup>37</sup> 'Tinkerbell Original Peter Pan - Google Search' (*Google.com*2018)

<[https://www.google.com/search?q=tinkerbell+original+peter+pan&sca\\_esv=f71d07ff22bda681&udm=2&biw=1440&bih=779&ei=ImFeZvLzMIjR2roP\\_Cs-Aw&ved=0ahUKEwjyjLXt2cCGAxWIqFYBHX84C88Q4dUDCBA&uact=5&oq=tinkerbell+original+peter+pan&gs\\_mosaic](https://www.google.com/search?q=tinkerbell+original+peter+pan&sca_esv=f71d07ff22bda681&udm=2&biw=1440&bih=779&ei=ImFeZvLzMIjR2roP_Cs-Aw&ved=0ahUKEwjyjLXt2cCGAxWIqFYBHX84C88Q4dUDCBA&uact=5&oq=tinkerbell+original+peter+pan&gs_mosaic)> accessed 4 June 2024

<sup>38</sup> 'Tinkerbell Original Peter Pan - Google Search' (*Google.com*2018)

<[https://www.google.com/search?q=tinkerbell+original+peter+pan&sca\\_esv=f71d07ff22bda681&udm=2&biw=1440&bih=779&ei=ImFeZvLzMIjR2roP\\_Cs-Aw&ved=0ahUKEwjyjLXt2cCGAxWIqFYBHX84C88Q4dUDCBA&uact=5&oq=tinkerbell+original+peter+pan&gs\\_mosaic](https://www.google.com/search?q=tinkerbell+original+peter+pan&sca_esv=f71d07ff22bda681&udm=2&biw=1440&bih=779&ei=ImFeZvLzMIjR2roP_Cs-Aw&ved=0ahUKEwjyjLXt2cCGAxWIqFYBHX84C88Q4dUDCBA&uact=5&oq=tinkerbell+original+peter+pan&gs_mosaic)> accessed 4 June 2024

‘clumsy’ and ‘innocently sexual’ teaching young girls that this is acceptable. Moreover, Peter Pan gets pixie dust from Tinkerbell by smacking her ass. As the majority of Peter Pan’s prevalence for Wendy and the boys is his endless supply of pixie dust, this presentation alludes to Tinkerbell’s presence in the film to serve Peter with her body..... Infact, the film’s animator Marc Davis noted that he based her on Margret Kelly, an “attractive, blonde blue-eyed young white female, with an exaggerated hourglass figure”<sup>39</sup> who was hired as a “live-action reference”<sup>40</sup> for the character.

The use of costuming to unnecessarily sexualise females has been noted by many actresses, specifically from Marvel Studios™ such as Scarlet Johansson whose impractical, leather zip-up suit has often been a notable presentation of sexualised clothing<sup>41</sup>. During a conversation on Dax Shepard’s *Armchair Expert* podcast, the Black Widow actress stated that she felt pushed “ into this weird hypersexualised thing. It was like, that’s the kind of career you have. These are the roles you’ve played.”<sup>42</sup> When reflected upon in focus groups, participants stated that she wasn’t represented as a ‘realistic superhero’ “She’s a superhero that just had a zip all the way down”<sup>43</sup> comparing her to her male counterparts saying “You know, Captain America’s super strong, superhuman ya da and she’s pretty and flexible.”<sup>44</sup> By failing to costume characters in realistic attire, the film industry is compliant with the systemic appraisal of the male gaze, inherently establishing females as nothing more than their looks which can cause debilitating impacts upon an individual's self-esteem and socialisation process. When young girls grow up susceptible to such drastically unrealistic expectations it sets a standard of self-objectification<sup>45</sup>. Within the last

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<sup>39</sup> Wikipedia Contributors, ‘Tinker Bell (Disney Character)’ (*Wikipedia* 25 May 2024) <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tinker\\_Bell\\_\(Disney\\_character\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tinker_Bell_(Disney_character))> accessed 4 June 2024

<sup>40</sup> ‘Tales of Tinker Bell with Margaret Kerry | the Walt Disney Family Museum’ (*WaltDisney.org* 2018)

<<https://www.waltdisney.org/education/talks/tales-tinker-bell-margaret-kerry#:~:text=Margaret%20Kerry%20is%20an%20American,in%20the%20Neverland%20lagoon%20scenes.>> accessed 4 June 2024

<sup>41</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>42</sup> S. Johansson, ‘Armchair Expert’ (*Armchair Expert* 10 October 2022) <<https://armchairexpertpod.com/pods/scarlett-johansson>> accessed 26 June 2024

<sup>43</sup> Primary research, Focus group

<sup>44</sup> Primary research, Focus group

<sup>45</sup> S. Rieken ‘The Male Gaze and Its Effects on Women | the Women’s Network’ (*Thewomens.network* 2022)

20 years, a correlation between women who self-objectify and those who have high levels of anxiety has been discovered<sup>46</sup>. The drastic epitomisation of women to be seen only through the male gaze has led to increased vulnerability, depressive moods, sexual dysfunction, eating disorders which is then internalised by the media and normalised by the film industry as seen through popular films such as *Mean Girls* (2011)<sup>47</sup>. The pop culture phenomenon depicts a scene in which three main characters of the film stand in front of the mirror listing off things they hate about their appearance such as “God my hips are huge”<sup>48</sup> “I hate my calves”<sup>49</sup> and “I’ve got man shoulders”<sup>50</sup>. All three women are of similar unrealistic ectomorphic<sup>51</sup> body types, characteristic of the early 2000s yet still vastly unobtainable by any healthy standards<sup>52</sup>. If women are fed to be so objective about themselves through the films produced ‘for their pleasure’ how is this creating a healthy standard for women to access themselves?

Film manipulates perspectives by design, this is enhanced by the angle and type of shots of the cameras. This can be from shooting a scene in a top-down shot, making the woman seem inherently inferior, by commencing a slow pan up (or down) of a female’s body or even zooming in on specific body parts paired with seductive music or sexual innuendos. The study, ‘rewrite her story’<sup>53</sup> looked at the top-grossing films in 2018 and concluded that 15 percent of women in power had the camera focused on their body parts in slow motion compared to just 4 per cent of

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<<https://www.thewomens.network/blog/the-male-gaze-and-its-effects-on-women>> accessed 24 July 2024

<sup>46</sup> Li A, ‘Male Gaze Creates Harmful Mindset’ (the Southerner Online 2021)

<<https://thesoutherneronline.com/84232/comment/male-gaze-creates-harmful-mindset/>> accessed 24 July 2024

<sup>47</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>48</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>49</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>50</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>51</sup> K. Kumar, ‘What’s Your Body Type: Ectomorph, Endomorph or Mesomorph?’ (MedicineNet 19 January 2021)

<[https://www.medicinenet.com/body\\_type\\_ectomorph\\_endomorph\\_or\\_mesomorph/article.htm](https://www.medicinenet.com/body_type_ectomorph_endomorph_or_mesomorph/article.htm)> accessed 24 July 2024

<sup>52</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>53</sup> J.Tu, ‘How the Top Grossing Films Are Warping Our Views of Women’ (*Women’s Agenda* October 2019)

<<https://womensagenda.com.au/life/how-the-top-grossing-films-are-warping-our-views-of-women/>> accessed 4 June 2024



men. Through content analysis<sup>54</sup> of The “Adrenaline-soaked fight sequences”<sup>55</sup> and “massively destructive gunplay”<sup>56</sup> of Micheal Bay’s 2007 hit Transformers, the movie was portrayed as a ‘macho-masculine’ cult classic<sup>57</sup>. The film promotes major gender discrepancy with only 13 female characters out of a cast of 51 as a result of the inherent masculine stereotypes associated with the Transformer brand.<sup>58</sup> Moreover the character of Mikaela Banes (Megan Fox) seemed to be created as a way to satisfy masculine scopophilia<sup>59</sup>. The content analysis highlighted a scene where cinematography was specifically used to sexualise Mikaela as she leans over the hood to fix Sam’s broken-down car. The camera slowly pans over her body in its entirety, framing multiple shots to feature her waist, stomach and lower back, focusing on small beads of sweat from her bare stomach. The camera is framed to personify Sam’s point of view at the moment, positioning the audience to ‘sympathise’ with the male character. This is paired with the character of Sam making awkward and uncomfortable sexual innuendos. There is no need for the camera to be framed in this sense but it functions to highlight her body in a sexual light.<sup>60</sup> When questioned about this scene in focus group, a participant replied “I feel like they pick sexy elements, and then they design an entire character around that but there's no actual nuance to anything that she’s saying she's not a developed character”<sup>61</sup>, while another stated, “It kept just

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<sup>54</sup> Primary research, Content Analysis

<sup>55</sup> The Massie Twins, ‘Transformers (2007) - Movie Review / Film Essay’ (*Gone With The Twins* 4 July 2007) <<https://gonewiththetwins.com/transformers-2007/>> accessed 4 June 2024

<sup>56</sup> The Massie Twins, ‘Transformers (2007) - Movie Review / Film Essay’ (*Gone With The Twins* 4 July 2007) <<https://gonewiththetwins.com/transformers-2007/>> accessed 4 June 2024

<sup>57</sup> Wikipedia Contributors, ‘The Transformers: The Movie’ (*Wikipedia* 1 June 2024) <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Transformers:\\_The\\_Movie#:~:text=Across%20the%20decades%2C%20The%20Transformers,releases%2C%20and%20more%20theatrical%20screenings.>](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Transformers:_The_Movie#:~:text=Across%20the%20decades%2C%20The%20Transformers,releases%2C%20and%20more%20theatrical%20screenings.>)> accessed 4 June 2024

<sup>58</sup> ‘Transformers Cast 2007 - Google Search’ (*Google.com* 2018)

<[https://www.google.com/search?q=transformers+cast+2007&sca\\_B9oK&scient=gws-wiz-serp&safe=active&ssui=on&clie=1](https://www.google.com/search?q=transformers+cast+2007&sca_B9oK&scient=gws-wiz-serp&safe=active&ssui=on&clie=1)> accessed 4 June 2024

<sup>59</sup> B.Fridley, ‘The Male Gaze in Transformers (2007)’ (*Feminist Film Studies Fall 2018* 15 November 2018)

<<https://femfilm18.wordpress.com/2018/11/15/the-male-gaze-in-transformers-2007/>> accessed 4 June 2024

<sup>60</sup> Primary research, Content analysis

<sup>61</sup> Primary research, Focus group

cutting the camera to her in a very provocative pose.<sup>62</sup>” The first Transformer movie went on to be considered a success, racking in \$709 million at the box office<sup>63</sup>.

The male gaze sets up a dangerous precedent within the film industry, allowing the sexualisation of women to infiltrate every aspect of the filmmaking process. This not only affects how female characters are portrayed but also dictates how stories are constructed and perceived by society. It is infiltrated within all aspects of production, forcing the audience into the perspective of the heterosexual male, skewing the lens through which they are regarded. Hollywood’s use of the male gaze reinforces male dominance over female bodies, reinforcing gender roles to force individuals to conform to societal norms<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>62</sup> Primary research, Focus group

<sup>63</sup> ‘Transformers Franchise Box Office History - the Numbers’ (The Numbers2024)  
<<https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Transformers#tab=summary>> accessed 26 June 2024

<sup>64</sup> Brady T, ‘Brainwashed: How the Male Gaze in Cinema Has Kept Women Boxed In’ (*The Irish Times* 13 May 2023)  
<<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/2023/05/13/brainwashed-how-the-male-gaze-in-cinema-has-kept-women-boxed-in/>> accessed 26 June 2024

# Mirror, Mirror on the wall who's the sexiest of them all

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## How does popular culture distort the female narrative and identity of young females

Third-wave feminism<sup>65</sup> prompted a reclaiming of the notion of female sexuality and femininity as a form of empowerment instead of its prior demeaning connotations. While this catalysed a new era of female agency, one of the responses to the dominant culture was the commodification of sexualisation<sup>66</sup>, as corporations began to feed off female empowerment as an advertisement tool. Popular culture's perpetual obsession with the female physique has led to the film industry setting unachievable standards for adolescent female viewers. The demoralising emphasis placed on the female body implements the subliminal message to teen girls as an 'expectation' that they should adhere to, meaning young girls are always under pressure to be perfect objects<sup>67</sup>. This skewed demographic ultimately distorts the image being presented back to young girls forcing them to believe a lie, that the Hollywood physique is obtainable<sup>68</sup>. Stacy L Smith, wrote "The picture young female viewers see of themselves in media is one of erasure and marginalisation and reinforces the idea that a girl's value is not only on her appearance but her romantic interests, rather than what she can do or be"<sup>69</sup>. The issue lies with what the next generation of young

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<sup>65</sup> L. Brunnell 'Feminism - Intersectionality, Inclusivity, Activism | Britannica', *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2024) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism/The-third-wave-of-feminism>> accessed 8 July 2024

<sup>66</sup> Primary research, Content Analysis

<sup>67</sup> Primary research, Content Analysis

<sup>68</sup> A.Lovell 'The Future Is Female? Examining the Prevalence and Portrayal of Girls and Teens in Popular Movies' (2017) <<https://assets.uscannenber.org/docs/the-future-is-female.pdf>>

<sup>69</sup> A.Lovell 'The Future Is Female? Examining the Prevalence and Portrayal of Girls and Teens in Popular Movies' (2017) <<https://assets.uscannenber.org/docs/the-future-is-female.pdf>>

females is seeing projected within films and what impact this will have on their respective identities.<sup>70</sup>

As a corporation, Disney feeds off young females forming a sense of identity through the distortion of their industrialised ‘Grand narratives’. Participants from the focus groups stated that the first time they witnessed a sexual innuendo was while watching a Disney film, well disguised as “you would have seen it whenever your parents put them on.”<sup>71</sup> Besides the odd sexual reference meant to fly over kids' heads, Disney’s portrayal of female characters particularly in their earlier films can be found to have a drastic impact on the identity of young females, a participant in a questionnaire stated “I think a lot of young women, especially from Gen Z suffered from body dysmorphia growing up because of the way the Disney princesses are portrayed. They have small waists but larger chests and are overall skinnier and smaller than the princes which creates a subconscious image to young girls that this is the ideal dynamic in a relationship. I have seen tiktoks about Jasmine in particular and how gorgeous she is but also seen criticism of her outfit that it is unnecessarily revealing.”<sup>72</sup> These earlier Disney princesses promoted the ‘idealised woman’<sup>73</sup> of their respective eras, teaching young girls as young as three to be a princess one must be trusting, domesticated, abled, and have an impossible physique with ‘skin as white as snow’<sup>74</sup>. This description was formulated to exclude any not applying to the set criteria as ‘other’, affecting the identity formation process of many young females as they internalise these limiting and often unrealistic standards. This shaping of identity through media consumption, particularly during formative years, has led to a generation grappling with body image issues and self-esteem challenges. Such dichotomies reinforce a simplistic view of gender dynamics, influencing young viewers' perceptions of their roles in society. Having access to such a distorted narrative projected onto them by popular culture can cause issues of self-esteem,

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<sup>70</sup> A. Lovell ‘The Future Is Female? Examining the Prevalence and Portrayal of Girls and Teens in Popular Movies’ (2017) <<https://assets.uscannenber.org/docs/the-future-is-female.pdf>>

<sup>71</sup> Primary research, Focus group

<sup>72</sup> Primary research, Questionnaire

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/entertainmentweekly>, ‘Disney Heroines through the Years’ (EW.com2017) <<https://ew.com/movies/disney-heroines-evolution/>> accessed 25 June 2024

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/entertainmentweekly>, ‘Disney Heroines through the Years’ (EW.com2017) <<https://ew.com/movies/disney-heroines-evolution/>> accessed 25 June 2024

depression, body dysmorphia and eating disorders among many of the upcoming generation<sup>75</sup>, demonstrated as 89% of respondents to a questionnaire stated that they have felt personally affected by the way females have been sexualised within films<sup>76</sup>.

An ongoing issue within the film industry is the distorted portrayal of adolescents. One of the responses of the dominant culture to the rise of feminism was the sexualisation of young girls<sup>77</sup>. As late as the '60s, Karina Longworth states, Hollywood was still working off of a sexual idea based on Marilyn Monroe, a bombshell, exaggerated sexuality but that was all adult sexuality<sup>78</sup>. Monroe redefined the ideal body type, her hourglass physique, while unobtainable for budding teens, was heavily pushed onto young females, especially by the film industry.

The challenge lies within Hollywood's sexualisation of adolescents while wanting to depict real ongoing epidemics of sexual morality, the director's use of children was often ethically questionable resulting in the infantilisation of young child stars. Actors such as Drew Barrymore and Brooke Shields<sup>79</sup> were devastatingly epitomised as 'American<sup>80</sup> sweethearts<sup>81</sup>' from a young age, building an image of them that would influence their careers and society's perception of them forever. Thanks to the recent 'Me Too' movement, issues of sexualisation within the film

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<sup>75</sup> S. Israelsen-Hartley, 'Ignored or Sexualized: How Hollywood Is Failing Women' (Deseret News 22 November 2017)

<<https://www.deseret.com/2017/11/22/20636387/ignored-or-sexualized-how-hollywood-is-failing-women/>> accessed 25 June 2024

<sup>76</sup> Primary Research, Questionnaire

<sup>77</sup> Primary Research, Content Analysis

<sup>78</sup> Primary Research, Content Analysis

<sup>79</sup> Primary Research, Content Analysis

<sup>80</sup> T. Teeman, 'Brooke Shields: The American Sweetheart Who Grew Up' (The Times.com 12 February 2011)

<<https://www.thetimes.com/article/brooke-shields-the-american-sweetheart-who-grew-up-rt6z3q5nwzn>> accessed 25 June 2024

<sup>81</sup> W. Inbal, 'How Drew Barrymore Went from Hollywood Wild Child to American...' (Traveler Master 20 May 2024)

<[https://travelermaster.com/how-drew-barrymore-went-from-4n/?utm\\_source=pinterest-4n&utm\\_campaign=4n-ww-a-trm-drewben-saq5](https://travelermaster.com/how-drew-barrymore-went-from-4n/?utm_source=pinterest-4n&utm_campaign=4n-ww-a-trm-drewben-saq5)> accessed 25 June 2024

industry have come to light with multiple child actors<sup>82</sup> speaking out on their experiences both on and off-screen.

As a commercially celebrated beauty of the 90's<sup>83</sup>, Brooke was forced into playing a living contradiction, playing into both a “doll-like innocence” and a “premature, sexualised knowingness.”<sup>84</sup> Director Randal Kleiser attempting to “sell” her “actual sexual awakening”<sup>85</sup> in an attempt to sensationalise the opening of his film *Blue Lagoon*. While, in reality, “the irony was, (She) wasn't in touch with any of (her) sexuality”<sup>86</sup> as a budding teen who had unfortunately been held captive to 90's popular culture's distortion of femininity and female empowerment. Within popular culture, girls are consistently valued for their “budding sexuality” when sexuality is a commodity you can sell the idea of losing virginity over and over again.<sup>87</sup> Not only did this Hollywood-spun narrative have demoralising impacts on the identity of Brooke herself, but can be further seen as Brooke's influence tainted the identity of young females internationally as “she was represent(ing) femininity at the time”<sup>88</sup>. Hollywood used Brooke as a ‘sex symbol’ to create a “voyeuristic image culture”<sup>89</sup> where young women are “told that they need to express themselves in very sexual ways but then they are blamed for anything that happens.”<sup>90</sup> This sets up the notion that young females' association with their femininity and empowerment should be tainted through the lens of a popular culture driven by men.

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<sup>82</sup> D.Gray, ‘16 Stars Who Spoke out about Being Sexualized at a Young Age’ (SheKnows22 June 2023)

<<https://www.sheknows.com/entertainment/slideshow/2509093/celebrities-sexualized-young/>> accessed 25 June 2024

<sup>83</sup> R. Garelick, ‘Brooke Shields and the Curse of Great Beauty’ *The New York Times* (3 April 2023) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/03/style/brooke-shields-pretty-baby.html>>

<sup>84</sup> R. Garelick, ‘Brooke Shields and the Curse of Great Beauty’ *The New York Times* (3 April 2023) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/03/style/brooke-shields-pretty-baby.html>>

<sup>85</sup> Primary research, Content analysis

<sup>86</sup> Primary research, Content analysis

<sup>87</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>88</sup> Primary research, content analysis

<sup>89</sup> O.Gleiberman, “‘Pretty Baby: Brooke Shields’’: Holds Our Image Culture up to the Light’ (Variety21 January 2023)

<<https://variety.com/2023/film/reviews/pretty-baby-brooke-shields-review-1235496742/>> accessed 12 July 2024

<sup>90</sup> Primary research, content analysis

The crass sexualisation of children’s TV truly came into bloom during the 2000s to the early 2010s as the rise of kid sitcoms skyrocketed thanks to American multinational mass media and entertainment conglomerates<sup>91</sup> such as Disney and Nickelodeon. Both companies, in competition with the other, created corporate divisions which worked solely on marketing more mature content under the guise of their ‘family-oriented brand’<sup>92</sup>. In recent years, both companies have been publically scrutinised, being “called out”<sup>93</sup> via social media platforms<sup>94</sup> such as TikTok<sup>95</sup>(see figures 1-5)

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<sup>91</sup> ‘Disney - National Center for Simulation’ (National Center For Simulation 13 May 2020) <<https://www.simulationinformation.com/members/disney/>> accessed 12 July 2024

<sup>92</sup> ‘Disney - National Center for Simulation’ (*National Center For Simulation* 13 May 2020) <<https://www.simulationinformation.com/members/disney/>> accessed 12 July 2024

<sup>93</sup> Internet slang to mean “When an inappropriate or embarrassing question is asked in front of a large group of people that can include friends or family.” The term grew in popularity with the enmass of cancel culture and is usually referring to Social Media.

<sup>94</sup> F.Ward, ‘Ariana Grande: Nickelodeon Clip Goes Viral as Fans Say She Was Sexualised as a Teen Star’ (Glamour UK 16 August 2022) <<https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/ariana-grande-sexualised-allegations-nickelodeon>> accessed 12 July 2024

<sup>95</sup> ‘TikTok - Make Your Day’ (Tiktok.com 2024) <<https://www.tiktok.com/>> accessed 12 July 2024



Figure 1<sup>96</sup>

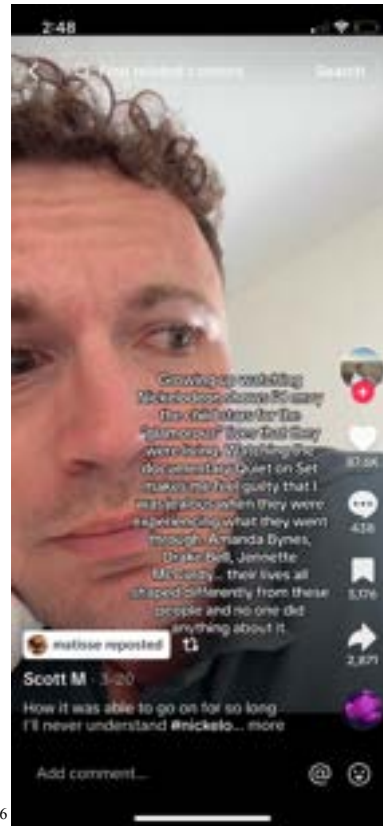


Figure 2<sup>97</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Shock at sexual innuendo within Nickelodeon show Zoey 101

<sup>97</sup> Shock at revelations in Quiet on set documentary





<sup>98</sup>Figure 3



Figure 4<sup>99</sup>



Figure 5<sup>100</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Scrutiny of the levels of extreme sexualisation that was deep into the production side of Nickelodean shows

<sup>99</sup> Shock at name of character on Nickelodean show The Amanda show that has sexual connotations

<sup>100</sup> Reveals another level of crass humour in Nickelodean show Victorious

Most were in scrutiny of former Nickelodeon producer Dan Schneider when controversial allegations of his inappropriate behaviour began to float around back in 2018<sup>101</sup>. Subsuming Jennete McCurdy’s description of him in her 2022 book, “I’m glad my Mom Died”, Maxine Productions, aired the four-part docuseries in early 2024 which included interviewed accounts of the real-life abuse happening on the sets as well as a deep dive into the sexual innuendos Schneider wrote. The shows repeatedly featured underage female actors in inappropriate clothing, having water, goo or ‘slime’ squirted in their faces, girl’s bare feet and recurring footage of then 16-year-old Ariana Grande enacting sexually suggestive activities<sup>102</sup> such as “milking a potato”<sup>103</sup>. By normalising the broadcasting of these sexual innuendos, popular culture distorted young females' sense of identity, ‘condition(ing) (them) to giggle’<sup>104</sup> when such jokes were made.

As a result of this outbreak, new child labour laws were put in place building on the basic laws that already existed such as The Coogan Act<sup>105</sup> and the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)<sup>106</sup>. These laws put restrictions on working with children to ensure their safety, limit the number of hours they could work, mandate appropriate working conditions, and require regular school

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<sup>101</sup> O.Singh, ‘SCMP’ (South China Morning Post 28 March 2024)  
<<https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/entertainment/article/3257031/what-are-allegations-against-dan-schneider-former-nickelodeon-producer-timeline-his-controversies-he>> accessed 12 July 2024

<sup>102</sup> J.Seale, ‘Quiet on Set: The Dark Side of Kids TV Review – How on Earth Was This Stuff Ever Broadcast?’ (*the Guardian* 25 March 2024)  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2024/mar/25/quiet-on-set-the-dark-side-of-kids-tv-review-how-on-earth-was-this-stuff-ever-broadcast>> accessed 12 July 2024

<sup>103</sup> Primary research, Content analysis

<sup>104</sup> D.Gray, ‘16 Stars Who Spoke out about Being Sexualized at a Young Age’ (SheKnows 22 June 2023)  
<<https://www.sheknows.com/entertainment/slideshow/2509093/celebrities-sexualized-young/>> accessed 12 July 2024

<sup>105</sup> ‘Coogan Law’ (SAG-AFTRA 2023)  
<<https://www.sagaftra.org/membership-benefits/young-performers/coogan-law>> accessed 25 June 2024

<sup>106</sup> ‘Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) | Office of Financial Management’ (Wa.gov 2020)  
<<https://ofm.wa.gov/state-human-resources/compensation-job-classes/compensation-administrative/fair-labor-standards-act-flsa-washington-minimum-wage-act-wmwa/fair-labor-standards-act-flsa#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20Fair%20Labor,%2C%20state%2C%20and%20local%20governments.>> accessed 25 June 2024

attendance, thereby prioritising the well-being and development of minors in the film industry. However, this subsequently means that it becomes more economically sustainable for directors to cast adults to play teenage roles as they can work longer and cheaper to ensure when shooting stunts<sup>107</sup>. The epidemic of adults playing teenagers has drastically affected how teenage characters, specifically females are portrayed in the film. 54%<sup>108</sup> of teenage female characters are played by adult actors – offering a ‘distorted image of teenage females to younger viewers, skewing the desirable body type and maturity levels to even more unobtainable than ever before. Now, more than ever, Pop culture demands young females act older than they are, deeming sexual inexperience as immaturity. This sets an unachievable standard for young female viewers, who developmentally are not adults, impacting both the formation of their identity as they feel pressure or dissatisfaction to mimic these on-screen peers.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Why Hollywood Keeps Casting Adults to Play High-School Students in Movies’ (LADbible22 September 2021)

<<https://www.ladbible.com/entertainment/tv-and-film-why-hollywood-keeps-casting-adults-to-play-teenagers-in-movies-20210922>> accessed 19 June 2024

<sup>108</sup> S. Israelsen-Hartley, ‘Ignored or Sexualized: How Hollywood Is Failing Women’ (Deseret News22 November 2017)

<<https://www.deseret.com/2017/11/22/20636387/ignored-or-sexualized-how-hollywood-is-failing-women/>> accessed 25 June 2024

<sup>109</sup>A. Lovell ‘The Future Is Female? Examining the Prevalence and Portrayal of Girls and Teens in Popular Movies’ (2017) <<https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/the-future-is-female.pdf>>

# Conclusion

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The women of today have been taught to 'give 'em the 'ol razzle dazzle', maintaining the notion that women are yet to be valued for more than their sexuality, but it doesn't have to be this way.

So why do we as a society feel the need to consistently measure a woman's worth with her looks? Because we always have. But it doesn't have to be this way. The journey of writing this PIP has not only proven that women can simultaneously feel feminine while empowered but also expanded my understanding of social and cultural literacy. Primarily, by validating my hypothesis that the overt sexualisation of women within the film does affect the way society interacts with the notion of female empowerment and femininity, my PIP has allowed me to realise that the two do not have to be symbiotically connected - a woman's sexual identity is not definitive of her worth.

The content analysis in particular challenged me to engage critically with the sexual nature of the portrayal of females within films and to think precariously before engaging with the subliminal messaging influenced by popular culture. The focus group invited me to consider conflicting notions of sexualisation, reinforcing that the content an individual is exposed to can have detrimental impacts on an individual's participation within a conforming society, ultimately affecting their perception of femininity and female empowerment. The questionnaire drove me to the understanding that once an individual consumes a piece of media, that content is retained and can culminate within their perspective of gender. The process of conducting primary research ultimately enforced my preconceived belief that the film industry is first and foremost a corporation that can use its power to and dismantle notions of femininity and female empowerment within society.

A major aspect of my PIP was understanding how society's perception of female sexuality changed over time. Through the lens of gender as a societal construct, my secondary research led me to become aware of how society's perception of gender norms affects what is reflected within

the media which notably has had some development since its formation, however, there is still a long way to go. The process of undertaking secondary research simultaneously allowed the development of my cross-cultural assessment, informing the necessity that I comprehend the discrepancies between the sexualisation of women and the sexualisation of men within films.

Through the complex process of my PIP, I have come to fundamentally understand the importance of being socially and culturally literate and allowing that understanding to inform my consumption of media. By challenging the societal norms presented to society, we can continue the dismantling of systemic injustice for women and move towards a more equitable and empowering portrayal of all individuals.

# Primary research annotations

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## Content Analysis

The content analysis of 20th-21st century films proved to be an invaluable primary research method, presenting a range of quantitative and qualitative details which informed multiple facets of my PIP, including chapter headings and focus group discussions. I analysed over 30 films in total, non-exclusive to genre nor period which presented me with an extensive list of sexualised characters, actors and subliminal messages which I was able to draw back on when culminating stimuli for my focus groups. I utilised a diverse mixture of films that were suggested to me or found via my secondary sources and divided them via three character categories Disney, 'Progressive' Feminism and Male gaze. I then watched each film, creating notes with timestamps whenever a female character used their bodies to put themselves in a position of power or authority, what their clothing entailed whether revealing or modest, their role within the film, the language used (e.g. said about, said by, sexual comments, their Body Type (realistic or not) and any aspect of production influenced by the male gaze. This did create a large amount of redundant information yet illuminated certain areas of concern within my PIP I had not concerned previously such as the notion of irony and the sardonic portrayal of archetypes. The process of collating became tendentiously time-consuming which impacted my sense of accuracy, especially within films that did not interest me personal biases may have affected the validity of my results as I am a strong feminist, thus the lens I saw these films may be different to someone who was watching for enjoyment. Nevertheless, the content analysis was useful in informing the fundamental elements of my PIP.

## Focus group

The content analysis of 20th-21st century films proved to be an invaluable primary research method, presenting a range of quantitative and qualitative details which informed multiple facets of my PIP, including chapter headings and focus group discussions. I analysed over 30 films in

total, non-exclusive to genre nor period which presented me with an extensive list of sexualised characters, actors and subliminal messages which I was able to draw back on when culminating stimuli for my focus groups. I utilised a diverse mixture of films, interviews and docuseries' that were suggested to me or found via my secondary sources and divided them into three character categories Disney, 'Progressive' Feminism and Male gaze. I then watched each film, creating notes with timestamps whenever a female character used their body to put themselves in a position of power or authority, what their clothing entailed whether revealing or modest, their role within the film, the language used (e.g said about, said by, sexual comments, their Body Type (realistic or not) and any aspect of production influenced by the male gaze. This did create a large amount of redundant information yet illuminated certain areas of concern within my PIP I had not concerned previously such as the notion of irony and the sardonic portrayal of archetypes. The process of collating became tendentiously time-consuming which impacted my sense of accuracy, especially within films that did not interest me personal biases may have affected the validity of my results as I am a strong feminist, thus the lens I saw these films may be different to someone who was watching for enjoyment. Nevertheless, the content analysis was useful in informing the fundamental elements of my PIP.

### Questionnaire

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yet illuminated certain areas of concern within my PIP I had not concerned previously such as the notion of irony and the sardonic portrayal of archetypes. The process of collating became tendentiously time-consuming which impacted my sense of accuracy, especially within films that did not interest me personal biases may have affected the validity of my results as I am a strong feminist, thus the lens I saw these films may be different to someone who was watching for enjoyment. Nevertheless, the content analysis was useful in informing the fundamental elements of my PIP.



# Secondary research annotations

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## Journal articles

Israelsen-Hartley S, 'Ignored or Sexualized: How Hollywood Is Failing Women' (Deseret News 22 November 2017)

<https://www.deseret.com/2017/11/22/20636387/ignored-or-sexualized-how-hollywood-is-failing-women/>

accessed 19 October 2023

Sara Israelsen-Hartley's dissertation 'Ignored or Sexualized: How Hollywood Is Failing Women' focuses on the statistical evidence that separates the sexualisation of women in film and men, examining all the aspects that cause this divide. The work examines that not only does the sexualisation of women in films affect the way women view themselves, but it also affects the way that men view women, creating a 'toxic culture' which accumulates to major issues such as domestic violence and sexual assault, which became useful when writing my first and second chapter. The article draws heavy reliance on the research report 'The Future is Female' adding to the validity and reliability of the source. This piece became a prevalent source in the writing of my PIP, proving to be useful for all three chapters of my PIP.

Szydlik. S, pulp\_new 2022, 'The prevalent dangers of sexualizing females in the film industry', *The Daily Orange*, retrieved October 23, 2024, from

<https://dailyorange.com/2022/03/the-prevalent-dangers-sexualizing-females-film-industry/>

Sophie Szydlik's journal article on 'The prevalent dangers of sexualizing females in the film industry', examined specifically how women become confined to stereotypical roles which are inherently created to appeal to the male gaze. The article made reference to conclusions made by Ann Lovell within her 'Future is female' academic report, addressing that these findings are not unique to the Annenberg study and explicitly relates the findings back to the authors own

conclusions about the topic, meaning that overall the piece was yes reliable and valid but holds an inherent bias as well. Nonetheless, this was an invaluable source, the findings of which appeared heavily within all three of my chapters.

Swift. J, Gould. H, ‘Not an Object: On Sexualization and Exploitation of Women and Girls’ (UNICEF USA2022)

<<https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/not-object-sexualization-and-exploitation-women-and-girls-0>>

accessed 19 October 2023

Jaimee Swift and Hannah Gould’s media article ‘Not an Object: On Sexualization and Exploitation of Women and Girls’ provided a statistical outlook regarding the notion that the objectification and sexualisation of women within the media are instinsictly linked to the violence of women and young girls globally. The piece was published as a call to action to support UNICEF’s program to offer support and protection to women’s rights in an attempt to alleviate the number of women subjected to gender-based violence annually. The article featured numerous informative statistics which were then included in the first chapter of my PIP as they proved the connection between discriminatory portrayals of women within films and the culture surrounding domestic violence within modern society. It continuously referred to its sources, culminating in a heavily reliable and valid source.

Kanaya. K, ‘Cameras, Angles And Celebrities: The Blatant Objectification Of Women For Views And How Celebrities Are Shutting Them Down - Elle India’ 2024, *Elle India*, retrieved July 28, 2024, from <<https://elle.in/8-times-celebrities-slammed-paparazzi/>>.

Kashish Kanaya’s interest article about the declining mystique surrounding celebrities produced evidence for the rise in blatant misogyny within the media, especially the paparazzi’s motives and attitudes towards Female celebrities. The piece was submitted to Elle magazine, an online newsletter back in April, 2024 and shows no specific attempt at referencing apart from several social media statements released by celebrities and does not acknowledge inhere biases, culminating in not the most credible, valid source with little reliability. The piece was helpful in establishing how the sexulisation of women in film has led to the social inclusion and exclusion of women in society and how the media perpetuates this within chapter 1.

Michele Jackson. L, 2023, ‘The Invention of “the Male Gaze”’, The New Yorker, retrieved July 28, 2024, from

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/the-invention-of-the-male-gaze>.

Lauren Michele Jackson’s article surrounding the history and subsequent evolution of the male gaze theory was a pivotal aspect of my chapter 2 research specifically on how the male gaze has influenced the film industry. It provided an indepth history of the theories origins, making heavy reference to Lauren Mulvey’s original paper on the subject as well as other theorists writings on how the concept has evolved and what that means for today’s society. As the article was published to The New Yorker, a prominent and well renowned newsletter and makes consistent references to sources, it can be deemed a valid and reliable source, pivotal within the formulation of my PIP.

Pruitt S, ‘What Are the Four Waves of Feminism?’ (*HISTORY*2 March 2022)

<https://www.history.com/news/feminism-four-waves>

accessed 14 July 2024

This source was not the most useful overall, but at the beginning when I was conducting my cross-cultural component around the waves of feminism. The source delves into a detailed explanation of what each wave of feminism entails, including what differentiates one from the other and criticisms of the theory. The piece is a research article submitted to A&E Television Networks’ ‘History’ page and includes no references at the bottom of the article, thus I am unsure about the validity and reliability of the article. Despite this, the article features some helpful pieces of information that are fed into my introduction and third chapter.

Leishman R, ‘I Cannot Live through an Award Season of Sexist Jokes about “Barbie”’ (The Mary Sue)13 January

2024)<<https://www.themarysue.com/jo-koy-golden-globes-barbie-joke-needs-to-be-the-end-of-trend/>>

accessed 14 July 2024

Rachel Leishman’s critic of the comedian Joe Koy’s inappropriate jokes made to diminish the success of Greta Gerwig’s sensation ‘Barbie’ helped inspire the direction of my PIP. The work was an interest piece published to ‘The Mary Sue’ online newsletter so portrays a biased opinion

on the event, however, this opinion was proved the opinions of the majority. As a result of the format of this source, there are no references listed within the article apart from images, threatening the validity and authenticity of the article. Overall, the piece was helpful in the beginning research period of my PIP.

Watson T, '12 Times Famous Women Were Asked Wildly Inappropriate Questions in Interviews.' (Mamamia 2 October 2023)

<<https://www.mamamia.com.au/celebrity-women-asked-inappropriate-questions/>> accessed 30 October 2023

Tara Watson's interesting article '12 Times Famous Women Were Asked Wildly Inappropriate Questions in Interviews' described several instances in which interviewees overstepped boundaries when interviewing celebrities. This piece was another early influential piece, proving that when the media allows women to be heavily sexualised within film it gives way to a popular culture in which women are objects within the eyes of society. The piece was published in the 'Mamma Mia' online newsletter and featured no references throughout the article having a large effect on the piece's reliability and validity.

Gray D, '16 Stars Who Spoke out about Being Sexualized at a Young Age' (SheKnows 22 June 2023)

<<https://www.sheknows.com/entertainment/slideshow/2509093/celebrities-sexualized-young/>> accessed 23 October 2023

Delilah Gray's interesting piece entitled '16 Stars Who Spoke Out About Being Sexualized at a Young Age' acknowledged the stories of former child actresses who spoke about the horrific sexualisation they were exposed to at young ages. It examined the way that even when not portrayed as inherently sexual, the media can create their own narrative that adheres to the one

pop culture creates. The piece does not include a reference list but does include intertextual referencing to interviews and other news articles, affecting the overall validity and reliability of the piece. Despite the questionable credibility of the article, Gray's writing provided evidence for the topics discussed in chapter 3, identifying pop culture's effect on the distortion of the female narrative and identity of young females.

'Early 1900's Actresses' 2024, IMDb, retrieved June 1, 2024, from <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls048085068/>.

This IMBD page was helpful in retrieving the names of some popular actresses and their impact on popular culture within the early 1900s, allowing me to assess how our society has shifted away from the conservative values of these actresses into what is displayed on television today. This was not the most credible source as there seems to be no effort to reference and was published under a pseudonym 'fabianberntsson' and does not seem to have been fact checked, implying a less valid and reliable source.

Johansson, S 2022, 'Armchair Expert', *Armchair Expert*, retrieved 26 June, 2024, from <https://armchairexpertpod.com/pods/scarlett-johansson>.

Dax Sheppard's podcast episode interviewing Scarlett Johansson offered valuable insight into the actresses take on the sexualisation of her and her characters, going into depth on what it truly means to be an actress in the 21st century. As the source was a recorded interview, there was no need for referencing. However, being personal, the interview contains high levels of bias meaning it is not necessarily an intellectually valid source, however, it does not claim to be, acknowledging inherent bias' and not attempting to speak generally on the industry, instead giving a personal rendition of her experience.

Tu, J 2019, 'How the top grossing films are warping our views of women', *Women's Agenda*, retrieved October 23, 2024, from

<<https://womensagenda.com.au/life/how-the-top-grossing-films-are-warping-our-views-of-women/#:~:text=Women%20are%20rarely%20portrayed%20as,be%20what%20you%20can%20see.%E2%80%9D>>

Jessie Tu's article on 'How the top grossing films are warping our views of women', specifically how the overt sexualisation of women is so deeply ingrained in the film industry to the point where camera angles are affected by it. The piece gave new insight into how even 'female-centric' films, demonstrating how conflicting "movies that seem to celebrate female empowerment when all they're really doing is adhering to outdated standards of what qualifies for a woman." This was a journal article published on the 'Women's agenda' online newsletter and featured frequent referencing to other academic publications, culminating in a valid and reliable source.

The Massie Twins 2007, 'Transformers (2007) - Movie Review / Film Essay', *Gone With The Twins*, retrieved June 4, 2024, from <<https://gonewiththetwins.com/transformers-2007/>>.

Mike Massie's personal review of Micheal Bay's 2007 hit 'Transformers' included a visceral critical retelling of the film from which I lifted a few quotes from. All in all it was not the most reliable source as it was a personal review from a self-titled 'film-buff' and did not contribute to the overall construction of my PIP

Garelick, R 2023, 'Brooke Shields and the Curse of Great Beauty', *The New York Times*, retrieved from <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/03/style/brooke-shields-pretty-baby.html>>

Rhonda Garelick's interest article on 'Brooke Shields and the Curse of Great Beauty' was a valuable source of information utilised in gaining insight into the life of the actress Brooke Shields. The article built off of the information disclosed in Brooke shield's 2023 docuseries 'Pretty Baby', making reference to the source ethically and efficiently deeming it a reliable and

valid source. I primarily utilised the source in the writing of my third chapter, incorporating quotes from the article numerous times.

<https://www.facebook.com/entertainmentweekly>, 'Disney Heroines through the Years' (EW.com2017) <<https://ew.com/movies/disney-heroines-evolution/>>

accessed 30 November 2023

This article provided interesting thoughts into the original ideals behind the creation of the original Disney Princesses, how they were created as a method of social propaganda to promote the 50's ideal woman. This source has now been removed from the internet, leading me to conclude it is not a valid or reliable source.

Gleiberman, O 2023, "'Pretty Baby: Brooke Shields': Holds Our Image Culture Up to the Light', *Variety*, <<https://variety.com/2023/film/reviews/pretty-baby-brooke-shields-review-1235496742/>>.

accessed July 12, 2024

Owen Gleiberman's piece "'Pretty Baby: Brooke Shields': Holds Our Image Culture Up to the Light' for Vanity fair summarises the information discussed in Brooke Sheild's docuseries "Pretty Baby", examining the life and social impact of Brooke Sheilds. The piece effectively references the docuseries as well as other sources mentioned as well, culminating in a valid and reliable source. The primarily of this information was utilised the information sourced within Chapter 3 and was an effective source in illustrating the life and career of Sheild's.

Ward, F 2022, 'Ariana Grande: Nickelodeon Clip Goes Viral As Fans Say She Was Sexualised As A Teen Star', Glamour UK, retrieved July 12, 2024, from <https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/ariana-grande-sexualised-allegations-nickelodeon>

Fiona Ward's interest piece for online newsletter Glamour UK, builds off of the rising tensions within social media that Dan Schiender purposefully 'sexulised and infantilised' the stars of his early 2000's teen sitcoms, especially Ariana Grande. The article used effective referencing, culminating in a valid and reliable source. While the information disclosed wasn't overallly permeant in the formulation of my PIP, it was still an effective source that provided insight into the broader cultural implications of how young female stars were portrayed on screen during this era.

Seale, J 2024, 'Quiet on Set: The Dark Side of Kids TV review – how on earth was this stuff ever broadcast?', *the Guardian*, retrieved July 12, 2024, from <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2024/mar/25/quiet-on-set-the-dark-side-of-kids-tv-r-view-how-on-earth-was-this-stuff-ever-broadcast>.

Jack Seale's review of the 'Quiet on Set: The Dark Side of Kids TV' providing interesting insight into the 2024 docuseries which delved into the darkest aspects of children television that reshaped how audiences pierced the world created by an alleged sexist and abuser. It functioned as a 'expose' of the film industry as an extension, serving as a reflection of the consumption of children TV. The article made effective reference to not only the docuseries but simultaneously alternate sources that provided additional depth and context to the issues at hand. Information gained was utilised primarily within my third chapter as I used my knowledge gained from the content analysis of the docuseries.



## Academic papers

Lovell. A 2017, retrieved from <<https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/the-future-is-female.pdf>>.

Accessed 20 May 2024

Ann Lovell's research paper 'The Future Is Female? Examining the Prevalence and Portrayal of Girls and Teens in Popular Movies' was possibly the most substantial secondary source I read, as its conclusions from Lovell's conducted content analysis became a principal stimulant for my PIP and the subsequent conducting of my content analysis. The article featured various culmination of statistics found from the women's secondary analysis of 100 of the most popular movies made from 2007 to 2016, in order to examine for the prevalence and portrayal of young women within the films. The piece featured consistent reference to their own findings throughout and acknowledged the inherent bias that the participants conducting the analysis were all women making this a valid and reliable secondary source. Lovell's conclusions was overwhelmingly a very valuable source, becoming integrating heavily within all chapters of my PIP.

Mulvey. L, - "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Laura Mulvey 1973)

<https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1021/Laura%20Mulvey%2C%20Visual%20Pleasure.pdf>

accessed June 1 2024

Laura Mulvey's paper on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was a noteworthy source for the writing of my third chapter. The piece devolves into the feminist theory known as the 'male gaze', utilising aspects of psychoanalysis to create a feminist 'polemic' exploring how the "male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure." The article was very informative in developing my understanding of the male gaze theory which was a primary point for my third chapter, specifically Mulvey's writings on how modern cinema has fed on an individual's ego libido, forcing women to become passive material for the active gaze of men which thus feeds back into the way society views femininity and female empowerment. It uses thorough research references throughout, making it a reliable and valid secondary source.

Eggen.Ø, Roland. K, *Social Inclusion and Exclusion: A Review*, retrieved from

<<https://www.cmi.no/file/589.pdf>> 11 May 2024.

The review of the social inclusion and exclusion theory by Øyvind Eggen and Kjell Roland presented a detailed explanation of the concept. The article utilises valid and reliable use of referencing but was only utilised to define the theory within Chapter 1, making it an effective source but not vastly essential to the overall formulation of my PIP.