Resisting The Neoliberal Postfeminist Sexual Objectification Matrix: A Critical Autoethnography Exploring Sexual Objectification, Mental Health, Relationship to Self, and Reclaiming Subjectivity

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, women's subjectivity and sexual experience have been dramatically reshaped by the rise of dating apps, the normalization of hookup culture, the popularization of BDSM, and the dominance of neoliberal postfeminist sexual discourses. In the South, this all unfolds in the lingering residues of purity culture, creating a perfect storm of sexual objectification. This autoethnographic dissertation examines a defining period of my life shaped by the mental health consequences of sexual objectification and self-objectification. During this time, I experienced two brief marriages, many sexual relationships, posed on social media, dating apps, sexted, and performed sexual 'agency,' all while becoming deeply entangled in these cultural forces. I was fueled by hollow notions of empowerment and social status, yet beneath were significant psychological and spiritual costs. I experienced internalized shame and misogyny, an unstable and shifting sense of identity, a deep psychic disconnection from my body and erotic self, and psychological and emotional struggles of body dysmorphia, depression, anxiety, ongoing safety concerns, and substance abuse. This autoethnography argues that, within a neoliberal postfeminist era, my lived experience reflects broader structures of gendered oppression rather than merely idiosyncrasies, individual choices, or happenstance (Beauvoir, 1949; R. Morgan, 1970). Contemporary feminists argue that neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies blur the boundaries between empowerment and conformity and that these ideologies mask objectification under the rhetoric of agency and self-expression (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2004; Rottenberg, 2018). I investigate how migration, race, and class interact with these ideologies to shape my experiences of gender, sexuality, and self-worth. To address these dynamics, I introduce the theoretical framework of the *neoliberal postfeminist sexual objectification matrix*,

grounded in radical feminism, but also thread intersectional, poststructural, sex positive, and liberal feminist theory, as well as feminist media and recovery scholarship. I contend that reclaiming subjectivity requires conscious resistance through feminist theoretical analysis and embodied practices such as art-making, sobriety, therapeutic recovery, and feminist awareness. Grounded in the radical feminist principle that "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1969), my goal is to contribute to contemporary feminist discourse on sexual objectification describing that private struggles are not just individual failures but manifestations of gendered oppression to which we can, collectively, and individually, free ourselves from should we choose.

DEDICATION

I believe that changing the direction of one's life through therapy, deep self-awareness, and radical accountability is one of the highest forms of love, and I hold that conviction close as I dedicate this dissertation to my son. My hope is that becoming sober, returning to school, writing autoethnography, and committing countless hours, weeks, and months to therapy, will one day be understood as a gift. First it was a gift to myself, but then I think about how that impacts those after me. This work represents my effort to become healthier, to grow, and to change the trajectory of my life, and therefore, his.

I also dedicate this work to my mother, who listened to my stories with unconditional love and quiet bravery. You always listened with objectivity, yet I often wondered whether, on your long drives home, if you cried after hearing about parts of my life you could not change, moments you could only witness many years later, during my recovery. Your presence, even if only as a witness, mattered more than you know.

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ACCOMPANYING DOCUMENTARY AND MEDIA

At the beginning of this journey, I created a documentary illustrating the subjectivity I was attempting to understand. This video was created before the findings in this autoethnography were discovered. After which, further emotional and psychological excavation took place, when I interpreted feminist theory to my lived experience. In my dissertation defense, I initially hesitated to show the video because the woman on that video does not depict the woman I am today. But I resisted the urge to dismiss that stage of the process, because I think it does depict where I started and every phase of critical consciousness is relevant and important.

In this video, I adopt the victim role. It is problematic to only see feminists as either victims or empowered. This limits us. It collapses the complexity of life into narrow, opposing roles. It individualizes structural issues. Victims are seen as passive and powerless and the empowered are seen as fully responsible for their choices. For example, you will read in the findings of this work, I was often complicit in objectifying men and adopting a victim role would be disingenuous- it is never that straightforward.

Finally, I see this video as still being shrouded in shame. At the time of making the video, even though knew shame to be a power construct of the patriarchy and purity culture, I was not in a position to relieve myself of that shame- this is still very evident in the video. Today, I do not use language like “I slept with a lot of men,” I just say, “I had sex.”

Nevertheless, I offer this work as part of this research because it shows what it looked like when I was coming to the *realization of what I was experiencing*- and maybe women might identify with that stage of the process. Further, it is even more important

that such a realization does not stop in a state of shame, but pursues another way of living, articulated in this work.

https://youtu.be/Dg4sdqFZuF4?si=5h8I32KbHIsOowci

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Feminist Andrea Dworkin (1974) claimed that feminist revolution demands more than political reform; it requires a deep restructuring of consciousness, identity, and culture. The spirit of my work focuses on the deep restructuring of consciousness, identity, and how I relate to my culture. It began with an inner conflict, recognizing there was something happening to me, but it was happening from forces outside of me - forces I did not understand but was very much shaped by. I got sober from substance abuse 18 months into my doctoral program and came to the realization that what I knew about myself as a woman was largely characterized by the patriarchy. In this new awareness, at 41 years old, then 2021, I realized I lived an objectified life. I set out to learn feminism as a means of liberating myself and contextualizing my lived experience, and I knew somehow that my sexuality was the core of this work. So much was unclear in the beginning.

By immersing myself in feminism, my work became a project of opening my eyes to what now I contextualize as the *neoliberal-postfeminist sexual objectification matrix* and un-objectifying my mind. Through needed self-reflection, an excavation of emotional and psychic self and critical analysis, I came back to some sort of inner authority and cohesiveness through this journey. A new consciousness emerged through sobriety, feminist thought, and the transcendent act of scholarship. I had to learn how to live in the world, and simultaneously, not completely of the world, or at the very least, redefine, undefine, or eradicate social constructs that kept me unconsciously, self-objectifying.

Today, my academic purpose is to expose the neoliberal-postfeminist sexual objectification matrix and contribute to the cultivation of women's collective consciousness. This consciousness recognizes, resists, and heals the psychic dissonance in women's sexual subjectivity. I speak only as one woman, but like many feminists before me who have shared their personal stories, I have come to understand that lived experience is not merely about individual choices or circumstance - it is a form of knowledge that reveals the cultural, political, and relational forces shaping women's lives. As such, personal narrative becomes of pathway to a feminist collective consciousness, shining a light on shared conditions and possible structures that sustain unconscious gendered oppression.

Autoethnographic research utilizes personal experience to make sense of cultural phenomena (Ellis, 2013). Central to autoethnography, and feminism at large, is subjectivity, where personal experience is framed as a legitimate, situated knowledge (Ellis, 2004; Spry, 2001). Women's subjectivities have been historically silenced or devalued and reclaiming them is both an epistemological and political project (Bartky, 1990; Collins, 2004). For me, individual freedom could be marked by the measure of self-awareness, capacity for agency, and the ability to act and interpret my world.

Building on the idea that subjectivity is a site of knowledge and resistance, Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *mestiza consciousness* offers a framework for understanding how women negotiate fragmented identities and resist the dualisms that sustain oppression. She wrote 'The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner… a massive uprooting of dualistic thinking… in the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hope, bring us to the end of

rape, violence, and war'(Anzaldúa, 1997, p. 102). To me, the 'rape, violence, and war' is not just literal, but metaphorical as it applies to women's love affair and then consequential psychological warfare with sexual objectification. Mestiza consciousness embraces hybrid identity, border thinking, and is characterized by tolerance for ambiguity, resistance and transformation. My hybrid identity and border thinking is expressed through being a woman researcher-participant; an Australian immigrant to America; someone recovered from substance abuse; the guardian to my inner child, a survivor of sexual abuse, and finally; someone who lives in and out of the neoliberal-postfeminist sexual objectification matrix. Each one of these identities embodies the experience of seeing from multiple perspectives, forged in some struggle and overcoming, seeking insight from the lived experience, and undergoing inner ongoing transformation.

My Experience

When I immigrated to the United States, I encountered a culture shock rooted in powerful, socially enforced ideas about what kind of woman I was expected to be. I do not believe these pressures were uniquely American. Rather, I was particularly susceptible to these pressures given who I was and the stage of life I was in. At the same time, the environment and culture mattered. Just as addiction can reflect broader social conditions, the scale and intensity of American culture, particularly in the South, shaped my experience of womanhood. In the neoliberal postfeminist era, my worth was measured through success, beauty, and doing-it-all. I internalized scripts, performed, and lived out the ideals of femininity.

My identity was shaped by the contradictory sexual scripts of purity culture and hook-up culture; my subjectivity shaped by neoliberal postfeminist discourses that framed sexual visibility and desirability as empowerment. I wanted to be respectable so I went to church, looked for a husband, and started working as a teacher. Being unsatisfied with teaching, I became a financial advisor which appealed to my growing entrepreneurial drive.

After two short-lived marriages, I faced an unwanted divorce with a newborn, isolated in a state where I knew no one. I carried deep resentment toward my son's father for relocating me to Alabama, and marrying me only to establish permanent residency, despite having no intention of remaining married. I returned to teaching because the schedule was more compatible with motherhood, but this also meant earning half as much income. The combination of overwhelming attorney's fees and a custody battle that lasted nearly two years left me feeling trapped and powerless.

Unconsciously and misguided, I regained a sense of power and control over my life by getting on Tinder and Bumble, platforms with a reputation for hooking up. Before this, my only online dating experience was when I used Christian Mingle to meet my ex-husband, while searching for a good Christian partner, a choice I later came to question. While these platforms initially felt exhilarating and empowering with the choices and visibility they offered, this newfound power was largely an illusion. What appeared to be agentic was really performance, and left me feeling fragile, out of control, and dependent on external validation.

I had always tended to drink wine and had a drug experimental phase in my early 20s, but until that point in my life, my drinking felt relatively moderate. During this

period, however, my dating life was fueled by weed and wine. I drank to feel more comfortable in my body and to manage social anxiety on dates. Looking back, had substances not been involved, I do not think I would have had the same path sexually. Sex and substance use became inseparable, leading me into what I now recognize as the darkest period of my life. During that time, I had sex and it left me increasingly depleted and ashamed. In the language of the *Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous (1939), I had become "spiritually bankrupt." In sobriety, I came to realize that my sexuality was deeply intertwined with my spirituality. Each time I had sex, it came with a psychological and emotional cost I did not recognize at the time.

…

The question I ask myself is, what if I had been another person, from a different point in history, in another country, in a culture that did not objectify women? Would my modus operandi have been the same? I do not think so. I think I was shaped by societal pressures and environmental factors that led to my demise of self-objectification. These external forces eroded my subjectivity. Without really being conscious of it, I was compelled to manage my sex appeal, perform sexual confidence, and embody femininity as a measure of worth. Discourses circulated through popular culture, dating apps, and social media, reproducing patriarchal norms under the guise of choice and sexual agency. What at times felt like empowerment often masked psychological warfare.

My life and identity have been marked by constant transitions in migration, career shifts, divorces, academia, and even sobriety. Each change required me to become someone new, to adapt and perform versions of myself that specific roles seemed to reward. Assimilation and role playing became ways to survive. My life became a series

of scripts. My identity morphed and my selfhood was unstable. Early on, assimilation and conditional affection taught me that approval depended on performance. Later, in adulthood, popular culture and digital platforms offered templates for empowerment that were as confining as they were seductive.

What began as self-presentation became self-objectification, and what felt like agency often masked deeper insecurity. Across romantic relationships, I oscillated between being subject and object, visible yet unseen, confident yet fragmented. The mental health consequences of this existence included body dysmorphia, dissociation, shame, addiction, and unstable selfhood. My experience was not simply a matter of personal struggles. Rather it was a response to systemic forces that link worth to compliance with gendered norms. My experience shows how gendered oppression is internalized through self-objectification.

Subjectivity of the Sexual Self

To analyze these experiences, it is important that I describe how subjectivity is formed and how subjectivity has been contextualized from a theoretical perspective. Subjectivity reflects how I feel about my body, how I see myself through social expectations, and how I have been influenced by my background. External factors shape my subjectivity including interpersonal relationships, institutions, history, culture, and discourse. My subjectivity includes my emotions, beliefs, behaviors, and the way I navigate sex norms.

My subjectivity was not simply shaped by personal choices. I inherited discourses that construct femininity and sexuality through deeply gendered power relations. My experiences reflect a cultural legacy in which women's bodies are persistently sexualized,

rendered visible, regulated, and commodified. My subjectivity has been deeply influenced by cultural institutions, social norms, media, and politics, situated within a particular moment in history. Significantly, my subjectivity is not fixed; it is influenced by external and environmental factors (Bordo, 1993). My subjectivity is how I understand and experience myself, especially as a woman shaped by sexual scripts dictated by culture and power (Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978a).

Problem With No Name

Understanding the historical development of feminist thought around sexual objectification begins with the radical feminist critiques of the body, sexuality, and gender. This foundation helps me illuminate how current neoliberalism and postfeminism continue to obscure, repackage, and perpetuate gendered oppression, all under the guise of empowerment. Over sixty years ago Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in which she grappled to explain 'the problem that had no name' and realize it 'was shared by countless women in America' (Friedan, 1963, p. 15). Friedan's book has been recognized as the book that ignited the second wave of feminism (hooks, 1984) and largely focuses on how wives are objectified by femininity directives to cook, clean, care for children, and satisfy her husband's sexual desires. She writes "…. the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in women" (Friedan, p. 425, 1963). Today, the problem with no name is the objectifying constructs embedded in neoliberal-postfeminist sexuality discourses. Friedan's seminal work sets the stage for how objectification has morphed over the decades, and how objectification leads to alienation and psychological consequences that society largely

ignores. Objectification has become synonymous with sexual expression under the neoliberal-postfeminist era.

Radical Feminists on Gender Oppression

The radical feminist revolutionized the way we viewed women's oppression through examining how power operated through objectification of the female body, sexuality, femininity and the construction of gender. Feminists like Andrea Dworkin (1987), Catherine MacKinnon (1989), and Shulamith Firestone (1970) argued that the patriarchy was not only maintained through systematic, institutionalized and legalized means, but significantly, oppressive ideologies were deeply embedded in cultural norms, interpersonal relationships, and embodied experience. The first wave of the women's liberation movement fought for equality in legal representation, education, and employment, then the feminist struggle evolved to the second wave's fight for the woman's body and intimate lives, encapsulated in the influential slogan *"the personal is political"* (Hanisch, 1969). Issues like reproduction, beauty, and sexual expression were regulated to maintain male dominance and female subordination. The second wave framed sexuality as a site of male domination, institutional power, and violence. Radical feminists, who saw pornography as a catalyst to violence against women, lost their clutch on mainstream feminism, losing ground to the libertarian feminists who framed pornography as self-deterministic, agentic, and even beneficial to women. The third wave emerged in the 1990s carrying forth this liberal view of pornography which was seen to be sex-positive. This was a significant shift which I discuss in considerable detail in chapter 2 titled *The Historical Context of The Sex Wars: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminist and the Legalization of Pornography*. This was a significant

shift because the critical nature of feminist thought around objectification was largely lost to the popularization of sex positivity.

The 1990s Girl Power

The early 1990s brought about much progress in the women's empowerment movement, including public figures like Oprah Winfrey, Madonna, Courtney Love, Princess Diana, and Riot Grrrl. Significantly, sexual harassment cases were being brought to public scrutiny, most notably Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas in 1991 and high numbers of female legislators were being appointed in the pro-feminist Clinton administrations, and internationally the world saw its first female Canadian prime minister, and Paul Keating election in Australia was a socialist party that embraced the feminist movement (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006). The early 1990s brought about a new era of female power, as feminist critiques of sexual harassment, gender inequality, and political exclusion were being taken seriously by the public and policymakers. At the same time, these advances sparked criticism about whose voices were being heard, that women were being 'essentialized,' without the important factor of intersectionality (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1992; A. Walker, 1992). Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality critiqued the universalizing white feminism, arguing feminists failed to account for the multiple and overlapping forms of oppression experienced by women of color, particularly at the intersections of race, gender, and class.

As a result of this new female power in the 1990s and the emergence of sex-positive ideas, postfeminist neoliberal sexuality emerged (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2008a; McRobbie, 2009). Scholars argue that the third wave marked a historical and

ideological shift from collective feminist politics to individualized, market-driven, and aesthetically oriented sexual subjectivities (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2008a; McRobbie, 2009). This shift is critical to understanding objectification because sexual visibility and self-display are reframed as freely chosen empowerment, obscuring how women's bodies continue to be disciplined, evaluated, and commodified through the gaze.

Defining The Neoliberal-Postfeminist Era

Neoliberalism is an economic and cultural philosophy that promotes free-market capitalism, individual responsibility, reduced state intervention, favoring privatization, deregulation, and the ideal of individual choice (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal rhetoric frames social and structural inequalities as matters of personal failure or success, shifting the burden of well-being onto the individual. W. Brown (2015) writes "Neoliberalism transmutes the political into the economic, displacing democratic values with market metrics and rationalities in every sphere of life" (p. 17). Brown argues that neoliberalism reshapes how people think, feel, and relate to one another. Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie write about how the neoliberal logic extends into gender and sexuality, in which sexual agency is reframed as a project of entrepreneurial self-making which is managed, optimized, and made visible through aesthetics, bodily discipline, and digital performance. Sexual liberation and the so-called 'sexual agency' become synonymous with hypersexuality and sexual objectification, hiding patriarchal, racialized, and heteronormative power structures (Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009).

In feminist theory, scholars like Gill (2007b), Gill and Scharff (2011) and Banet-Weiser (2018) critique how neoliberalism uses feminist values such as empowerment, choice, and agency to promote individualized and marketable forms of femininity that

align with capitalist and patriarchal interests. The neoliberal framing of sexuality works in tandem with postfeminist discourse, which similarly emphasizes personal choice and self-determination while obscuring the ongoing influence of systemic inequalities. Postfeminism is a historical period, ideology or a cultural 'sensibility' (Gill, 2007b) that counters and reacts to second-wave radical feminism, suggesting that feminism has achieved its goals and can now concentrate on individual choice. Women are free to make so-called 'choices' about their bodies, identities, and sexualities. Postfeminism recodes feminist values into neoliberal, individualistic, and often depoliticized forms. Postfeminism ideology perpetuates oppressive gendered power dynamics, cloaked in the words of 'freedom,' 'confidence,' or 'autonomy.'

Defining The Neoliberal-Postfeminist Sexual Objectification Matrix

I define the *neoliberal-postfeminist sexual objectification matrix* in greater detail in chapter 3 in the theoretical framework, but to introduce the idea here, I will briefly describe my proposed matrix. Neoliberal postfeminist sexuality refers to a cultural discourse in which women's sexual expression is framed as personal empowerment, individual choice, and entrepreneurial self-making, even though it is shaped by structural power relations (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2008b; McRobbie, 2009). In this paradigm, sexuality becomes less about erotic desire, intimacy, or embodied sensual experience and more about visibility, performance, and self-branding. The key distinction is that sexuality is organized through objectification rather than mutuality. In this dissertation I propose the neoliberal-postfeminist sexual objectification matrix to be the interlocking system of discourses, practices, and norms that regulate contemporary femininity through the appearance of empowerment, choice, and sexual agency, while reinforcing

objectifying patriarchal, capitalist, and heteronormative power structures. In this context, a *matrix* refers to an interconnected framework of discourses, practices, and norms operating together to shape subjectivity. Significantly, this power appears diffused and natural (Collins, 1990). The matrix is something I identify to resist, to become conscious of, so I am no longer subject to it unknowingly.

From a Foucauldian perspective, "choice" becomes a disciplinary mechanism: women may appear to be freely choosing to perform a certain kind of sexuality (e.g., hyperfeminine, heterosexual, confident), but in fact, these choices are shaped by cultural scripts, economic incentives, and media representations of what is desirable, valuable, and acceptable. Gill (2008a) writes “The shift from objectification to subjectification does not mean the end of sexualization. Rather, it involves the reworking of sexual objectification into practices of self-policing, self-surveillance and self-discipline that are presented as freely chosen” (Gill, 2008b, p. 43).

Gill argues that neoliberalism generates a “compulsory sexual agency” (Gill, 2008b, p. 55) where women are expected to be sexually confident and performative. Yet this expectation is market-driven whereby sexuality must be curated to the male gaze or broader cultural ideals of desirability. The popular rhetoric of “sexual empowerment” often equates agency with participation in heteronormative, objectifying, and consumerist sexual practices such as pole fitness, lingerie selfies, OnlyFans, or sex-positive branding, while ignoring how these are shaped by capitalism and patriarchy. Chen (2013) writes “The terms ‘choice,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘agency’ are appropriated to reinforce women confidently embracing patriarchal heterosexuality and commodity culture” (p. 440).

Feminist scholars critique this kind of choice as a "faux-feminist" discourse that masks continued gender inequality (Chen, 2013).

Society Symptoms

The idea of individual choice masking disciplinary norms was articulated in Susan Bordo's influential book, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993). She argued that what women did with their bodies is influenced by cultural symptoms of broader social anxieties, rather than idiosyncratic choices. In her analysis of anorexia, she posits that the illness is a manifestation of a culture obsessed with perfection which created an anxious collective social consciousness. Anorexia is not just a personal or medical issue; it reflects deep cultural pressures and fears that many people, especially women, experience in modern society. Bordo suggested that anorexia reflects a society obsessed with controlling the female body. Anorexia acts as a mirror of cultural values, especially gender, discipline, and appearance. Similarly, sexual objectification of women is much more than an issue of beauty standards or women's self-worth. While objectification can harm a woman's mental health, the issue's root is structural and cultural. Objectification is built into the ways culture treat women, often shaping their life outcomes. When a woman internalizes societal objectification, she then 'self-objectifies,' absorbing the femininity and sexuality ideals into her own identity.

Literature Growth on Objectification and Sexualization of Girls

I discovered I was not alone in my distress on the current state of objectification in the world, as there has been rapid growth in literature on concerns of worsening sexualization and objectification of girls and women (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018; American Psychological Association, Task Force on the

Sexualization of Girls, 2008; De Wilde et al., 2020; Koval, Holland et al., 2019; Orenstein, 2016). Research using objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) has exploded over the past 20 years with hundreds of articles being published (for review, see Kahalon et al., 2018; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Due to rising public worry, America, UK, and Australia have committed extensive resources to examine the scope and worsening effects of sexual objectification in girls (American Psychological Association, 2007, 2018; Bailey, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010; Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts, 2008).

To summarize the combined findings of these reports (American Psychological Association, 2007, 2018; Bailey, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010; Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts, 2008) sexualization is systemic and cultural, widespread across media, advertising, and cultural products (TV, magazines, music videos, etc.) and is getting worse, leading to serious developmental and psychological problems. Sexualization is defined as valuing a person primarily for their sexual appeal or behavior or equating physical attractiveness with being sexy. A society that sexualizes girls encourages girls to self-objectify, viewing themselves as objects to be looked at, rather than as whole individuals. Media portrays women in overtly sexualized ways and tends to present women as objects of desire who are passive or submissive, reinforcing objectification and rigid gender roles. Repetitive exposure can normalize sexist attitudes about gender, identity, and relationships from a young age. Sexualizing girls leads to lower self-esteem, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, risky behavior, and inhibits cognitive performance and academic achievement. Children's products frequently present girls as miniature adults in sexualized ways, blurring

childhood boundaries. Together, these reports show that sexualization functions as a form of objectification by teaching girls to see themselves primarily through appearance and sexual appeal, encouraging self-objectification and reinforcing gender roles that harm psychological development, well-being, and learning. As a 45-year-old woman, these cultural patterns help explain how early and ongoing sexualization shaped my adult relationships, self-concept, and mental health, contributing to cycles of self-objectification and performance.

Sexual Culture Today: My Lived Experience and the Accumulation of Objectifying Forces

To my knowledge, research lacks an autoethnographic account of self-objectification that considers the compounding effect of purity culture, the normalization of hookup culture and BDSM (bondage, domination, sadism and masochism), dating profiles, and sexting. Each area may be considered in isolation to one another, but do not adequately depict today's sexual climate girls and women navigate. Some scholars, sociologists, and journalists have endeavored to examine the current affairs of women's sexuality and objectification such as Peggy Orenstein's *Girls & Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* (2016), Paasonen et al. (2021) *Objectification: On the Difference between Sex and Sexism,* and Rachel Krantz's (2022) *Open: An Uncensored Memoir of Love, Liberation, and Non-Monogamy.* Taken together, these authors offer good reasoning as to why more research needs to examine the totality and compounding effects of sexualization and objectification in 2026, specifically under the neoliberal-postfeminist sexuality discourses

Statement of the Problem

Although extensive research examines sexualization and objectification, it rarely captures the nuanced, embodied experiences of individuals who navigate these dynamics from within. In a neoliberal postfeminist era, sexual objectification is getting worse, although existing studies do not showcase the combined social context of self-objectification, firsthand subjectivity, or mental health consequences of the lived experience. Few accounts reflect the voice of the researcher's lived experience of self-objectification. To address this problem, I offer embodied knowledge with cultural critique and write from a standpoint that is both critical and personal.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is fourfold. First, it seeks to contribute to feminist discourse on the contemporary conditions of sexualization and objectification facing women today. Second, it uses autoethnography to expose the social conditions that shape intimate and private aspects of life, including sexuality, subjectivity, and mental health. Third, it aims to contribute to feminist class consciousness on broader structures of gendered power. Finally, it aims to move beyond the victim-empowered binary, recognizing the limitations of both positions.

Personal is Political

Characterized by the radical feminist of the 1960-1970s 'personal is political' (Hanisch, 1969), the purpose of this study is to contribute to feminist discourse about sexualization and objectification in the 21st Century. It aims to articulate and dismantle oppressive social constructs that harm women. This intimate study describes how I became aware of the harmful objectifying constructs effecting my quality of life, identity

as a woman, and life out comes. Radical feminist members wrote in the *Redstockings Manifesto* (1969)[1]:

> Women are an oppressed class. Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as *sex objects*, breeders, domestic servants, and cheap labor…. Because we have lived so intimately with our oppressors, in isolation from each other, we have been kept from seeing our personal suffering as a political condition (p.1).

By utilizing the early foundational work of radical feminists and contextualizing today's contemporary sexual culture, my study offers new insight into an ongoing problem facing women today.

Use Autoethnography to Expose Social Conditions

As Simone de Beauvoir observed in *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir, 1949), "…there is not public good other than one that assures the citizens' private good" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 6). Another purpose of this autoethnography is to use critical reflexivity to examine the lived experience of self-objectification through my perspective, as contemporary feminist, who is committed to the deep restructuring of consciousness, identity, and culture (Dworkin, 1974). I use personal narrative and feminist thought to explore how objectifying norms have shaped my subjectivity, my identity, and my quality of life.

[1]Radical feminist members wrote collectively *Redstockings Manifesto* (1969). Writers included Ellen Willis, Shulamit Firestone, Kathie Sarachild, Patricia Mainardi, Barbara Leon, Corrine Grad Coleman, Lucinda Cisler, Irene Peslikis, and Alix Kates Shulman. Ellen Willis and Shulamith Firestone are considered to be the main drafters.

Class Consciousness, Not Therapy

Although mental health is a central theme in this dissertation, this work was not intended to be a therapeutic undertaking. I have undergone extensive therapy to address the psychological impacts of objectification and related traumas. Instead, this autoethnographic project functions as a complementary academic undertaking, one that seeks to situate lived experience within its broader sociopolitical context. While engaging in this research has contributed to my personal growth and improved my quality of life, the primary aim was scholarly: to critically examine how systems of power shape women's internal worlds and to contribute meaningfully to feminist discourse. Written collectively by Ellen Willis and Shulamith Firestone in *The Redstockings Manifesto* (1969):

> Our chief task at present is to develop female class consciousness through sharing experiences and publicly exposing the sexist foundation of all our institutions. Consciousness-raising is not 'therapy,' which implies the existence of individual solutions and falsely assumes that the male–female relationship is purely personal, but the only method by which we can ensure that our program for liberation is based on the concrete realities of our lives. The first requirement for raising class consciousness is honesty, in private and in public, with ourselves and other women (p. 2).

As such, the purpose of the work was using my story to contribute to developing female class consciousness. Raising class consciousness will assist with understanding sexual objectification as gendered oppression across many areas of society. Mental health professionals, educators, family, medical, and social institutions have can utilize this

research to enable deep social change to curb capitalistic sexual objectification of women.

Accounting For Complexity, Not "Victim Feminism" Vs. "Power Feminism"

In *Fire with Fire* (Wolf, 1993), Naomi Wolf distinguishes between what she terms "victim feminism" and "power feminism," arguing that feminism has become polarized between two limiting frameworks. She argues that victim feminism positions women as powerless subjects of men's harm, reinforcing a moralized binary in which women are cast as virtuous and men as inherently culpable. In contrast, power feminism emphasizes women's entitlement to equality and agency, but risks transforming suffering into moral capital. Wolf cautions that this tendency can turn "suffering into a virtue, anonymity into a status symbol, and marginalization into a mark of highest faith" (Wolf, 1993, p. 147-148). These distinctions are significant for my study, as Wolfe highlights the importance of resisting reductive narratives. Instead I want to account for complex, often contradictory, and even complicit ways women live, negotiate, and make meaning of their experiences.

Research Questions

Therefor my research questions ask: *What is my gendered perspective of my experience of sexual objectification and its mental health consequences*? Within this question I aimed to explore the following sub-questions: 1) *What is the socio-cultural context of sexual objectification within a neoliberal-postfeminist era?* 2) *How does my individual experience reflect broader social conditions of gender oppression?*

These questions are crucial because objectification does not operate in a vacuum. They expose how power operates invisibly. They analyze how broader cultural logics

shape objectification and contribute to the meaning attached to women's suffering. I want to help women see the hidden power dynamics behind the matrix.

These questions are significant because they resist the neoliberal tendency to treat harm as a personal failing. They produce counter-narratives for neoliberal success stories. Feminism's central tenant is to expose how power dynamics operate in the personal realm. I want to articulate the distress these social conditions caused.

These questions are important because they foreground subjectivity as a legitimate site of knowledge production. Feminist scholars have argued that women lived experiences have been marginalized or psychologized in traditional research (Collins, 1990; Harding, 1991; D. E. Smith, 1987). I want to contribute to establishing autoethnography as an important and necessary means of research.

These questions challenge dominant mental-health framings. Dominant clinical and recovery discourses often interpret women's sexual behaviors through individualized, moralized, or diagnostic lenses, often obscuring socio-cultural conditions of sexual objectification and neoliberal norms of self-regulation. As a result, women's distress can be misunderstood to only be a matter of personal dysfunction, rather than a response to gendered regulation and harm. I want to help address a critical gap in the literature surrounding stigma faced by women whose sexual histories are pathologized within recovery contexts.

These questions restore the political stakes of feminism. Neoliberal and postfeminism discourses both call feminism fourth, only to dismiss it. These questions matter because they reclaim feminism as a critical project concerned with material, psychological, and relational consequences of gendered power, countering neoliberal-

postfeminist claims that feminism is no longer necessary or relevant. I want to contribute to exposing such faux feminism and contend the urgent need for feminist critique and resistance.

Finally, these questions are meaningful to me, to women who have followed similar paths, to women in recovery, to insider–outsider international transplants, and to feminist scholarship more broadly. My story speaks to women navigating mental health challenges that are often shaped by patriarchal systems of oppression. Understanding sexual discourse and the power structures of patriarchy can be deeply liberating, particularly when it helps distinguish between personal responsibility and social conditioning. Making this distinction is a critical step in resisting self-objectification and preventing patterns of thought and behavior that contribute to unconscious self-objectification.

Borderland Theoretical Framework

I created my own theoretical framework titled the "Neoliberal-Postfeminist Sexual Objectification Matrix." I use the word 'matrix' because I see sexuality under this neoliberal-postfeminist era as a power construct in which women can become critically conscious of, rather than victim to. I write in considerable detail on the theoretical structure of my framework in Chapter 3, however I will introduce the idea here. I use a feminist constructionist epistemology, which is the basis of much feminist and qualitative research, and Gloria Anzaldúa's idea of borderland theoretical design and her concept of 'mestiza consciousness' to shape the framework.

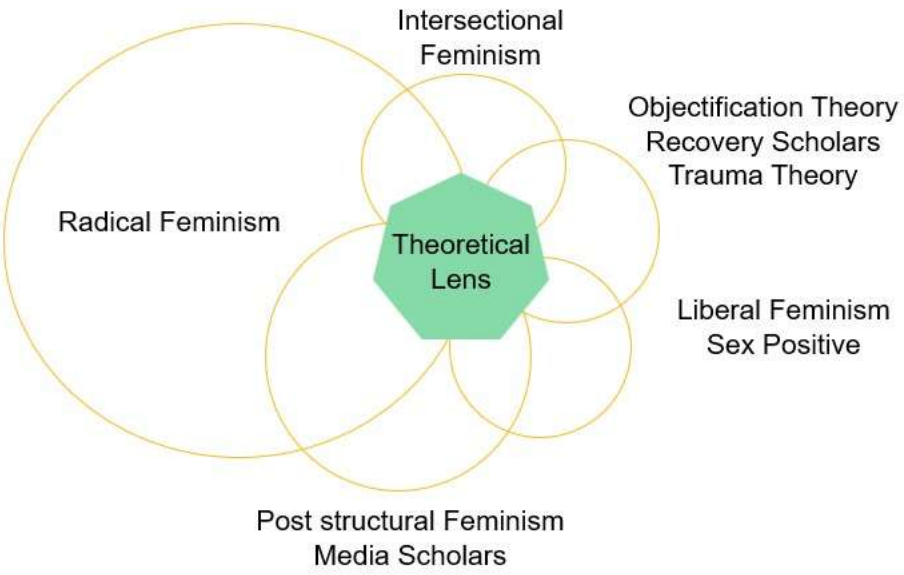
Ontologically, I use constructionism which says reality is socially constructed, created through social interaction (Harding, 1991).Epistemologically, I draw from

standpoint epistemology and Black feminist epistemology which say knowledge is shaped by lived experience. This epistemology values the lived subjectivity and reflexivity (used in autoethnography) as legitimate and necessary sources of knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2014; D. E. Smith, 1987). Using Sandra Harding's 'standpoint epistemology' (1986) and Patricia Hill Collins' 'Black feminist epistemology' (1990), proposed knowledge is shaped by lived experience, especially when that experience is informed by intersecting systems of oppression. Black feminist thought challenges dominant (white, male, Western) epistemologies by centering community-based knowledge, oral traditions, and resistance practices as sources that have historically been devalued in mainstream academia. Anzaldúa's concept of mestiza consciousness says that knowledge emerges from liminal and intersectional spaces and that meaning is produced through embodied struggle, cultural friction, and spiritual insight. That said, my theoretical framework uses feminist traditions compiled of radical, intersectional, post structural (including feminist media scholars), sex positive, and liberal feminism to examine the neoliberal- postfeminist sexual discourses experiences of the 21st century.

"Neoliberal-Postfeminist Sexual Objectification Matrix" Theoretical Model"

Figure 1

Theories Used in the Borderland Theoretical Framework



Using feminist constructionist epistemology and Anzaldúa's idea of borderland theoretical design, I designed my own theoretical framework that embraces feminist traditions that are often complimentary, but sometimes even in conflict with one another. I do this because this strategy offers deeper analysis by showing multiple interpretations and achieving 'mestiza consciousness' understanding.

Using a variety of key concepts relating to the phenomenon of sexual objectification, I created a lens that offers multiple perspectives and insights into gendered power dynamics. Key concepts include gendered oppression, the social construction of the body and subjectivity, the normalization of sexuality discourses and neoliberal-postfeminist discourses, femininity norms of self-surveillance and self-optimization, the capitalist commodification of women's sexuality, and the positive and liberal aspects of sexual objectification.

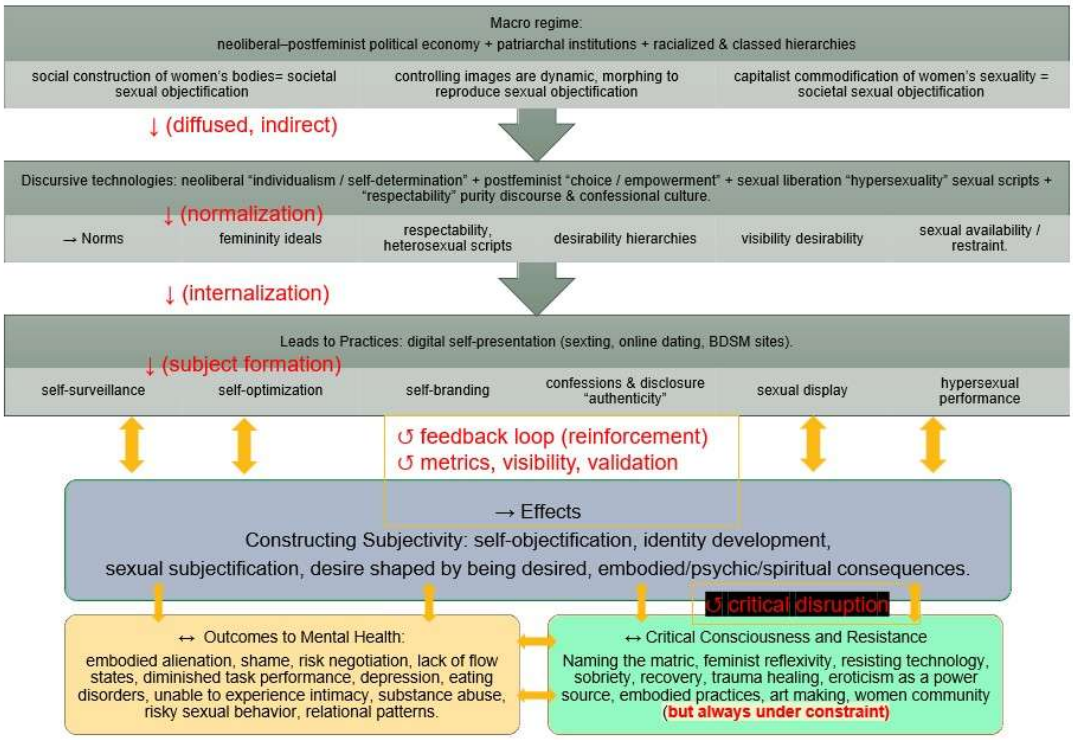
Neoliberal-postfeminist sexuality refers to a cultural discourse and paradigm in which female sexual expression is framed as a site of personal choice, empowerment, and entrepreneurial self-making, rather than as a domain shaped by structural power relations (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2008b; McRobbie, 2009). Sexual objectification refers to the gendered power dynamics that are embedded in this social construction of sexuality. Therefore, in this dissertation I propose the 'neoliberal-postfeminist sexual objectification matrix' to be the theoretical framework that examines the interlocking system of discourses, practices, and norms that regulate contemporary femininity through the appearance of empowerment, choice, and sexual agency, while reinforcing patriarchal, capitalist, and heteronormative power structures. In this context, a *matrix* refers to multiple discourses, practices, and norms operating together to shape subjectivity, making power appear diffused, natural, and individually chosen rather than structurally imposed. The matrix is something I identify to resist, to become conscious of, so I am no longer subject to it unknowingly.

Therefore, the *neoliberal postfeminism sexual objectification matrix theoretical model* (fig. 2) stipulates, in a neoliberal and postfeminist political economic culture, societal sexual objectification is worsening, and sexuality discourses and sexual scripts cause women to self-objectify. Women direct material and psychic resources to achieving femininity norms and desirability hierarchies, which effects the formation of subjectivity through practices self-optimizing, discipline, and sexualizing mechanisms. This leads to mental health consequences, risk negotiation, alienation, disembodiment, and deep spiritual costs. However, the negative mental health outcomes can be negated through

critical consciousness such as feminist reflexivity, sobriety, therapy and reclaiming subjectivity practices such as art making, pleasure and embodied practices.

Figure 2

Neoliberal-Postfeminist Sexual Objectification Matrix Theoretical Model



It is necessary to add that my work does not want to paint all objectification as inherently negative or associated with oppressive power constructs. Media scholars warn that not all media portrayals of women are inherently synonymous with sexism (Paasonen et al., 2020). They challenged the tendency to conflate all sexual depiction with objectification, as they recognize the complexity of objectification in contemporary society. Sexism and sexual expression can exist simultaneously. They advocate for a more nuanced understanding that considers individual agency and the diversity of experiences.

Heeding this warning, my work resists binary opposition between victimization and empowerment. Instead, it opens space to interrogate how sexual subjectivity is constructed and experienced, highlighting harms, benefits, and complicity. How it is experienced under neoliberal- postfeminist conditions, where sexual freedom is often framed through market-driven agency.

Summary of Methodology

This dissertation employs autoethnography as its primary methodological approach. Ellingson and Ellis (2008) frame autoethnography within a constructionist epistemology, emphasizing that knowledge is socially constructed, contextual, and co-created through interaction. Autoethnography is particularly well suited for this study, because it seeks to explore the internal and external impacts of the neoliberal-postfeminist sexuality from the standpoint of a feminist, insider-outsider, white Gen X woman academic in recovery from substance abuse. Ellingson and Ellis argue that autoethnographic research does not seek objective truth, but rather aims to explore and represent the complex, situated meanings individuals give to their lived experiences**.** Autoethnography emerged as researchers realized that observing participants, while omitting the researcher's voice, missed a vital part of the story (Poulos, 2021). Autoethnography was a response to the problem of 'othering' participants and the fallacy of objectivity. Instead, using narrative inquiry, pioneering researchers set out to convey the lived experience in more humanistic ways.

Key methodological features include reflexivity, storytelling/narrative, relational ethics, dialogic engagement, and blurring boundaries (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). Reflexivity refers to how researchers use their own experiences as data, interrogating

how their identities, emotions, and social locations shape the research. Personal narratives and storytelling are used as a methodological tool to convey meaning, theory, and cultural critique through lived experience. Relational ethics emphasizes ongoing ethical responsibility to others represented in the research, as represent self and others thoughtfully, acknowledging the subjectivity of experience. Readers are invited into a dialogue with the text, where meaning is co-produced through interpretation. This method challenges distinctions and boundaries between researcher/researched, personal/scholarly, and art/science (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). Ellingson and Ellis posit autoethnography is a creative, critical, and politically conscious methodology, that can disrupt traditional notions of scientific inquiry by highlighting the constructed and context-dependent nature of knowledge.

Limitations

Writing autoethnography as a dissertation offers unique strengths of deep reflexivity and cultural insight, but its weakness is inherent biases that should be acknowledged to maintain scholarly rigor and transparency. As such, the autoethnographic methodology faces some valid scrutiny over the legitimacy of the role of the self as a source of data. Despite its roots in post-modern qualitative traditions of research, autoethnography has been criticized to be narcissistic, self-indulgent, and too individualized (Sparkes, 2000). Significantly, and despite its limitations, the central contribution of autoethnographic research is its capacity to contextualize personal experience by connecting individual events to larger conversations about culture, power, and social change (Holman Jones, 2005). As mentioned in the section about positionality, I hope to avoid presenting myself as a hero or a victim. Instead, I aim for the exercise to

reveal complicity, privilege, and power, and the process will be a "intellectual interrogation of the self" (Spry, 2001, p. 710). Ellis et al. (2011) suggested that autoethnography's strength of being personal is also its weakness. Some more limitations of autoethnography include the selective and reconstructive nature of memories, the presence of confirmation bias, ethical restrictions, and possible weakness in methodological rigor.

First, because the researcher is the 'subject' who is using one perspective, memory, and values, there is an inherent lack of objectivity in interpreting events. Personal memory and retrospection are selective and reconstructive, not objective records (Ellis, 2004). I hope to corroborate recollections with artifacts (journals, photos, emails), where possible, and I reviewed the work with people like my mother who asked questions like "Are you sure you wrote enough about the marriage and divorces?"; "Are you sure you would consider yourself a type of sexual hunter? Because you certainly weren't as a teenager?" This works as a type of mirror and a way to manage potential exaggeration.

Second, autoethnography, in essence, presents as a form of confirmation bias. I present what supports the theoretical framework or narratives that reinforce pre-existing beliefs. It would also be easy to summarize my personal experience only in terms of personal choice, individual responsibility, and mental health issues. That said, I hope to discuss my analytical process openly, challenge my own assumptions, seek alternative data, and allow for contradictory highlights. There are strong emotional biases attached to lived experience, which can influence tone, interpretation, or focus, potentially overshadowing critical distance, or alternative perspectives (Chang, 2008). Emotion can

act as an important source of data and analytic tool, but I aim to balance emotional investment with scholarly analysis (Ellis, 2004).

Third, there are ethical concerns that need to be managed. Writing about my experience will involve writing about other people. I have considered the extent of necessary disclosure because I shared sensitive experiences, but it is necessary to disclose I write without full consent (Tolich, 2010). To protect the people in these stories, all names of characters in this story have been changed for anonymity, even those who were perpetrators of revenge porn violence and childhood sexual abuse. For those who can be identified and the content could be conceived as damaging, it content was excluded.

Finally, autoethnography has been criticized for lacking methodological rigor and academic acceptance. Wall (2008) posits that limited recognition is particularly prevalent in academic fields that question autobiography's legitimacy, writing "autoethnography still struggles to gain acceptance in disciplines where positivist and empirical paradigms dominate" (Wall, 2008, p. 38). Wall recommends finding a balance between personal narrative and critical analysis, grounding experience in theory, ensuring the reflection is ethical, and presenting methodological reflexivity.

To address the limitations and criticism of autoethnography, I intentionally situate my personal narrative within established objectification research and feminist theory and cultural critique. This study follows Wall's (2008) recommendation to balance autobiographical narrative with critical analysis. This demonstrates that autoethnography can meet scholarly standards while offering insights unavailable through positivist methods. Therefore, I aim to maintain analytical rigor by grounding my interpretations in existing scholarship and linking lived experience to broader structural conditions. My

goal is for personal experience to function as data, not confession. I treat reflexivity as a methodological practice rather than personal indulgence.

Positionality

Consistent with feminist and qualitative traditions, I reject the notion that knowledge production can be neutral or detached. I write as a white, Western, middle-class, Generation X, feminist woman who immigrated to the United States at age twenty-nine after extensive international work and travel. I acknowledge that I occupy a position of relative social privilege and that this location shapes and limits my analysis.

My interpretation of sexual objectification is informed by personal history, including struggles with body image and sexual trauma, and recovery from substance abuse. As such, I am predisposed to read certain encounters as harmful or oppressive. My intellectual commitments draw from radical, intersectional, post structural, and gender-critical feminist traditions. I approach sex-positive feminism and neoliberal discourses of empowerment with skepticism. As such, this may limit my ability to fully represent those perspectives. I am attentive to material realities and structural power. This dissertation is explicitly interpretive and critical and does not claim objectivity or universal truth.

As I critically examine objectification, I also participate in beauty rituals and heteronormative standards of attractiveness. I approach these tensions as analytically productive rather than contradictory. A more extensive account of my positionality, including its emotional, spiritual, and theoretical dimensions, is outlined in the writing section of Chapter 5.

My positionality inevitably produces bias, particularly in how I interpret experiences of sexual objectification. Twelve- step recovery and therapeutic interventions

have shaped my interpretation and this impacts how I conceptualize accountability and how I convey transformation and meaning making. My transformation is one that involves character and moral growth which may not resonate with some readers or some theoretical and religious traditions, and the measure of morality or character may not meet the readers' standards or expectations.

Reflexivity is the ongoing practice of critically examining how my social location, values, experiences, assumptions, and power shape every stage of the research process, including how questions are formed, data are interpreted, and meanings are produced. While I strive for reflexivity, I recognize that my interpretations are emotionally bound and influenced by personal experiences. Rather than attempting to eliminate biases, I aim to not obscure bias but be transparent. By doing so, bias becomes an analytic resource rather than a methodological flaw. I hope that readers can critically engage with my interpretations and situate context.

Glossary

To understand the definition of these concepts from a critical feminist point of view, I will also provide the feminist definition from a sex-positive standpoint. Interestingly, reviewing the definitions highlights the tension of neoliberal sexuality.

Sexualization

Sexualization refers to the process of a person is framed in sexual ways, often reflecting hegemonic, patriarchal, and commercial interests (Tolman, 2002). Sexualization is a process that can reinforce rigid gender roles and commodify women's bodies (Bordo, 1993). Sexualization is produced when a person's value is reduced to their

sexual appeal. Sexualization imposes impose narrow and objectifying standards, particularly targeting women and marginalized groups (Bordo, 1993; Gill, 2007b).

The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2008) emphasized the occurrence of when sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon someone, or when a person is treated as a sex object rather than as a whole person. Sexualization is a form of gendered power that limits autonomy and enforces conformity to heteronormative ideals (Tolman, 2002). Feminist theorist Ariel Levy argues that media and consumer culture reduces women and girls to their sexual appeal, reinforcing gendered hierarchies and disciplining female bodies into normative beauty and sexiness ideals (Levy, 2005).

From a sex-positive perspective, sexualization is not inherently oppressive. Instead, sexualization can enhance a spectrum of sexual identities, desires, and cultural expressions, which can resist homogenizing or moralistic narratives about sexuality (Rubin, 1984). Sexualization can be reframed as an expression of sexual agency. Individuals can reclaim their sexuality as a source of empowerment and pleasure, challenging shame-based norms, and embracing diverse sexual identities and desires (Attwood, 2006). Embracing sexualization in a consensual, informed way challenges dominant discourses that pathologize or victim-blame sexually expressive individuals. Instead, sexualization can be framed as sexual agency as a legitimate form of empowerment and resistance (Attwood, 2006).

Objectification

Objectification is the process by which a person is treated as a thing, a tool, or a body without autonomy, subjectivity, or voice. Martha Nussbaum (1995) identifies features such as instrumentality (using a person as a tool), denial of autonomy, and

fungibility (interchangeability) in objectification. Objectification disproportionately affects women under patriarchal systems, rendering them spectacles rather than subjects, especially in visual culture, advertising, and pornography (Bartky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Langton, 2009).

In a sex-positive framework, objectification can be consensual and erotic. If subjectivity and agency are intact, individuals can voluntarily participate in being seen as objects of desire, empowerment, and sexual expression (G. Rubin, 1984; Taormino, 2008). This reframes the male gaze into something that can be reclaimed as a source of pleasure, confidence, and self-expression (McNay, 1992). Objectification may intersect with performance and play, which is when individuals use their bodies to negotiate social and sexual power dynamics on their own terms, challenging restrictive norms about modesty or passivity (Butler, 1990).

Sexual Objectification

Sexual objectification specifically is where a person is reduced, specifically, to their sexual body parts or sexual function, often for the pleasure or gaze of another. To compare the difference, objectification can refer to using the body as a tool or for a function (Bordo, 1993). Sexual objectification contributes to the internalization of the 'male gaze" (J. Berger, 1972; L. Mulvey, 1975) and leads to self-objectification, which negatively impacts women's self-esteem, agency, and mental health. Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) explore how sexual objectification leads to self-surveillance, body shame, and diminished mental health in women and girls.

Sexual objectification is a central concern in both radical and contemporary intersectional feminist critique. Radical feminist Andrea Dworkin and Catharine

MacKinnon analyzed sexual objectification as part of the broader system of patriarchy and sexual violence (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1987). Feminist theories, especially those critiquing media and pornography (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1987), see sexual objectification as foundational to women's oppression under patriarchy, linked to male gaze, control, and commodification. Feminist Rae Langton theorized sexual objectification in context to speech acts and autonomy (Langton, 2009). Intersectional theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw was interested in how sexual objectification is understood across race, class, and other identities (Crenshaw, 1991) and bell hooks examined sexual objectification within systems of race and gender oppression (hooks, 1981).

From a sex positive standpoint, sexual objectification can be embraced as part of consensual erotic practices where individuals actively engage and reclaim their sexuality, in being desired sexually, and disrupting restrictive norms about sexual expression and identity (Taormino, 2008). Additionally, instead of a rigid divide, sex-positive perspectives recognize a fluid interplay where the 'object' can also be a 'subject' who derives pleasure and agency from being viewed or sexualized, breaking down binary thinking about power and agency in sexuality (Butler, 1990; Taormino, 2008).

Self-Objectification

When women internalize societal constructs of beauty ideals and body standards, they may begin to identify with these ideas and begin to embody them willingly- which is called 'self-objectification.' Women see themselves in third person, as an object, as though they are looking at themselves from another person's perspective. Women can self-objectify by habitually monitoring their bodies' appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). When women self-objectify, they monitor their bodies and police their appearance

which takes up a significant amount of attention, time, and resources (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Kozee et al., 2007).

Subjectivity

The theoretical roots of subjectivity lay in post structural theory (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978a; Gill, 2007a). Subjectivity refers to one's capacity for agency, self-awareness, lived experience, and the ability to act and interpret one's world. Judith Butler (1990) argues that subjectivity is not fixed but constructed through discourse, embodiment, and social power. Social forces that limit or suppress women's subjectivity do it by controlling their bodies and sexuality (Butler, 1990) Women's subjectivities have been historically silenced or devalued and reclaiming them is both an epistemological and political project (Bartky, 1990; Collins, 2004). Subjectivity is also central to autoethnographic research, where personal experience is framed as legitimate, situated knowledge (Ellis, 2004; Spry, 2001).

Subjectivity is central to sex-positive feminism, emphasizing that all people are active sexual agents who construct their own sexual identities and experiences through self-awareness, consent, and pleasure (Butler, 1990; Tolman, 2002). Andrea Lorde (1984) values embodied knowledge and emotional truth, recognizing that the body and sexuality are core parts of subjective experience and sources of knowledge. Subjective fluidity is seen as a strength rather than a sign of inconsistency or pathology (Butler, 1990; Tolman, 2002).

Femininity

Femininity is a sociocultural construction that directs women to particular traits, behaviors, and aesthetics associated with being a woman. This is not an inherent or

biological characteristic (Butler, 1990). Bartky (1990) describes femininity as a disciplinary regime that molds women's behaviors to conform to narrow standards of attractiveness, docility, and emotional labor. Practicing femininity benefits men and patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist systems. Butler (1990) further conceptualizes femininity as a performative identity. She argues that gender is a performance of repeated actions that produces the illusion of a stable gender identity. Butler pointed to how femininity is both punished (as weak, superficial, or frivolous) and demanded (as the norm for womanhood), revealing its contradictory and oppressive function. Femininity is also racialized, classed, and sexualized; what counts as "appropriate" or desirable femininity often reflects white, Western ideals (Butler, 1990; Collins, 2004; Serano, 2007).

From a sex-positive lens, femininity is a diverse and dynamic set of gender expressions that can be embraced or rejected (Rubin, 1984). Rather than viewing femininity as inherently oppressive, sex-positive feminists recognize it as a potential source of erotic power and aesthetic creativity (Queen, 1997). Feminine expression can be a deliberate performance of empowerment and self-love when chosen freely (Gill, 2007b).

Purity Culture

Purity culture is a socio-religious system, particularly prominent in evangelical Christian communities, that idealizes sexual abstinence, modesty, and regulation of women's bodies and behavior. Purity culture reinforced patriarchal control over female body and uses shame as a means of psychological control. Purity culture constructs women's worth around their sexual status. Purity culture can be framed as the

commodification of female "virtue" and gendered double standards, often disproportionately targeting girls and women of color (Collins, 2004; Valenti, 2009). Purity culture includes rituals such as purity pledges, rings, or abstinence-only education. Sex-positive feminism rejects purity culture's shame-based approach, instead advocating for sexual autonomy, celebrating sexual diversity, and emphasizing pleasure as a vital part of human health and freedom (Valenti, 2009).

Hook-Up Culture

Hook-up culture refers to social and sexual culture characterized by casual, non-committed sexual encounters (England et al., 2008) and often critiqued for reproducing gendered power imbalances, commodifying sex, and privileging male sexual freedom while stigmatizing women's sexual agency (England et al., 2008; A. Harris, 2011). While often described as liberating, hook-up culture can reproduce gendered power imbalances, particularly when heterosexual norms, emotional detachment, conquest narratives are valorized, reinforces male dominance, prioritizes male pleasure, and marginalizes women's emotional and sexual experiences (Valenti, 2009; Wade, 2017). Wade's research (2017) explores how hook-up culture in U.S. college settings often reproduces traditional gender scripts and sexual double standards, emphasizing male sexual conquest and emotional detachment, which can disadvantage women. Hook up culture is embedded in neoliberal ideals of individualism and consumerism, which often mask persistent gender and heteronormative inequalities (Albury & Byron, 2016). In Albrury and Bryon's work on digital hookup cultures, they discuss how hookup culture is shaped by neoliberal values (e.g., self-optimization, choice), encouraging users to view dating and hookups as personal responsibility projects, focused on self-presentation,

performance, optimization of profile images, and strategic selections which resembles broader market logic. Rhetoric of 'choice' and 'freedom' on hookup apps still reproduce traditional gender norms and heteronormative relationship models, often marginalizing non-normative sexualities (Albury & Byron, 2016).

Sex-positive standpoints view hookup culture a way subvert heteronormative expectations. Hookup culture allows consensual, pleasure-focused interactions, sexual empowerment and exploration, where communication and consent are central and where people can experience sex without compulsory commitment (J. R. Garcia et al., 2012; Wade, 2017). Hookup culture offers an alternative to the 'relationship escalator' (Solo, 2016) referring to social script that dictates romantic relationships should progress linearly through socially sanctioned stages—such as dating, sexual exclusivity, cohabitation, marriage, and monogamy.

Fetish, Kink, BDSM

Fetish, Kink, BDSM (are terms used to describe consensual sexual practices that fall outside mainstream norms. Fetish typically refers to a strong sexual fixation on a non-genital body part or object; kink is a broader term for unconventional practices; BDSM encompasses Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, Sadism, and Masochism. Fetish, kink, and BDSM refer to consensual sexual practices that deviate from normative sexual scripts, including power exchange, role-play, and sensation play. Feminists have debated whether BDSM reinforces patriarchal hierarchies or can subvert them. Radical feminists like Dworkin (1987) and MacKinnon (1989) critique BDSM to enact male dominance and sexual scripts of violence.

A sex-positive take would be that fetish, kink, and BDSM are complex, consensual forms of sexual expression that can subvert dominant norms and foster empowerment (Easton & Hardy, 2001; Rubin, 1984). Carol Queen (1997) critiques radical feminist perspectives (like Dworkin and MacKinnon) that broadly condemn BDSM as inherently oppressive or violent, arguing that such critiques erase the agency and voices of people who find pleasure and liberation in kink.

Sexting

Sexting is the dissemination of sexually explicit messages, images, or videos. Sexting 'panic' culture emphasizes gendered risks. The risk is higher for girls and women who are judged more harshly and punished with greater severity for participation in sexting (Hasinoff, 2013). Sexting complicates notions of privacy, agency, and digital embodiment (Albury, 2015). Sexting is often unequally policed by gender, with young women experiencing the majority of legal, social and reputational consequences of sexting (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; Hasinoff, 2013). Sexting is often critiqued and problematized for risks related to coercion, privacy violations, and reinforcing gendered power imbalances, especially among youth (Henry & Powell, 2018; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). When consent is violated (e.g., through image-based abuse or 'revenge porn'), it becomes a tool of digital gender violence. Sexting also illustrates the neoliberal emphasis on self-branding and sexual capital, where women are expected to perform a desirable, commodified version of sexuality (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016). In this sense, sexting can become a form of self-objectification, influenced by market logics of visibility and self-surveillance (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016).

Sexting can be an empowering, consensual form of sexual communication, extending erotic expression beyond physical presence (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). Sexting can facilitate exploration and enhance communication in both long-distance and in-person relationships (Albury & Crawford, 2015). Sexting can foster body positivity and reduce shame around sexual pleasure (Henry & Powell, 2018).

Dating Profiles

Dating profiles are online self-presentations designed to attract romantic or sexual partners (e.g., Tinder, Bumble, Match, OkCupid). From a critical perspective, dating profiles replicate gendered and racialized hierarchies (Noble, 2018). Women are often compelled to conform to culturally sanctioned ideals of beauty (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Gill (2007b) argues women's profiles operate in what she calls a 'postfeminist sensibility' where self-sexualization is framed as empowerment and men emphasize status or dominance, reinforcing normative expectations of femininity (Gill, 2007b). Profiles are designed to function like consumer advertisements, highlighting characteristics that will 'sell' the individual in a competitive digital marketplace (Illouz, 2012).

From a sex-positive perspective, dating profiles are tools for sexual self-expression and identity exploration. Instead of merely reproducing social scripts of desirability, they can offer individuals the ability to curate and perform authentic or aspirational versions of themselves (Albury, 2017). When dating profiles are used with awareness and consent, they can challenge heteronormative, monogamous, and body-normative ideals (Attwood et al., 2018; J. R. Garcia et al., 2012).

Postfeminism

Postfeminism is a concept that can refer to a historical period, a cultural sensibility, or an ideology that counters and reacts to second-wave feminism. Postfeminism suggests feminism has achieved its goals and can now concentrate on individual choice. Postfeminism recodes feminist values into neoliberal, individualistic, and often depoliticized forms. Postfeminism ideology perpetuates oppressive gendered power dynamics, cloaked in the words of freedom, confidence, autonomy. Women are free to make choices about their bodies, identities, and sexualities.

Gill (2007b) defines postfeminism not as a backlash against feminism, but as a "sensibility" of a set of contradictory ideas, including the combination of feminist and anti-feminist themes, the emphasis on individualism and personal choice, the sexualization of culture, and the reassertion of traditional femininity. Sexual objectification is sold as self-expression, and subjection is most frequently read as empowerment (Gill, 2007b). Gill's sensibility positions empowerment and sexual objectification as compatible, rather than in conflict with one another. Women are active agents who choose to engage in practices, which was previously critiqued by feminists.

According to McRobbie (2004), postfeminist culture is characterized by a "double entanglement" which simultaneously incorporates feminist ideas while also undermining them, suggesting that feminism is no longer necessary. McRobbie writes "Post-feminism is best understood as a double entanglement: the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life (values that are often perceived as 'retro') with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations" (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255). Double entanglement often manifests

through media portrayals that celebrate women's empowerment through consumerism, beauty labor, and sexuality, while masking ongoing gender inequalities.

From a Foucauldian perspective, postfeminism exemplifies how power is internalized and enacted through the self. Foucault demonstrates how power is inscribed, performed and practiced in/through/in the body. Gill writes “One of the most striking aspects of postfeminist media culture is the emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline. A new disciplinary regime has emerged in which women are invited to become a particular kind of self — and that self is sexualized, but always in a carefully controlled way” (Gill, 2007b, p. 149). The postfeminist sensibilities frame liberation through the internalization of norms that compel self-objectification as a form of self-actualization (Bartky, 1990; Foucault, 1978b).

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a political, economic, and cultural ideology that promotes free-market capitalism, individual responsibility, and the reduction of state intervention in favor of privatization, deregulation, and personal choice (Harvey, 2005). Market logic extends to all aspects of life including education, health, identity, and subjectivity. Harvey (2005) writes “Neoliberalism is... a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 2). W. Brown (2015) writes “Neoliberalism transmutes the political into the economic, displacing democratic values with market metrics and rationalities in every sphere of life” (p. 17). Brown argues that neoliberalism reshapes how people think, feel, and relate to one another.

Neoliberal-Postfeminist Sexuality

Neoliberal postfeminist sexuality refers to a cultural discourses/paradigm in which female sexual expression is framed as a site of personal choice, empowerment, and entrepreneurial self-making, rather than as a domain shaped by structural power relations. The neoliberal-postfeminist sexuality matrix refers to the interlocking system of discourses, practices, and norms that regulate contemporary femininity through the appearance of empowerment, choice, and sexual agency, while reinforcing patriarchal, capitalist, and heteronormative power structures.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW COMPLETE

Overview of Literature Review

This literature review consists of three parts. Before I describe the process of the literature review, I need to reiterate that an autoethnography is based on the researchers' personal experience which steers the literature surveyed. I provide both interpretive and empirical evidence to support my gendered experience of self-objectification. Where possible, I used cohesive literature review search guidelines (such as the research using Objectification Theory) and where this was not possible, I used seminal authors and citation chasing to guide my strategy. I used experts in feminist literature to oversee this process, including Dr. Lisa Sharlach, director of the Women's Studies minor at UAB who is on my advisory committee, and meetings and classes with UK feminist and scholar, Dr. Jane Clair Jones.

Part 1 defines sexual objectification from the perspective of influential feminist from the second through fifth waves. I discuss the historical tipping point when feminism was fractured in the 'sex wars' over the legalization and proliferation of pornography during the 1980s. Additionally, I situate objectification in terms of the sex and body positivity movement. I include a summary of how objectification became a matter of increasing public concern and topic of academic research at the beginning of the 21st century. I examined 3 course outlines of upper-level feminist studies classes to discover the eminent feminist scholars who specialized in objectification. I cited foundational authors until I reached saturation. For example I included texts that Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) used Objectification Theory article, they write: 'Theorists in a variety of disciplines have begun to explore the multiple ways that the body conveys social

meaning and how these meanings shape gendered experience [e.g., Bordo (1993) and Foucault (1979) in philosophy, E. Martin (1987) in cultural anthropology, K. A. Martin (1996) and Shilling (1993) in sociology, Kaschak (1992) and Ussher (1989) in psychology]' (p. 174). I used these authors to ensure saturation.

Part 2 describes 'today's sexual climate' in relationship to my direct personal experience, not already described in part 1. This climate includes my experience of prevailing purity culture, the normalization of hook up culture and BSDM, and the technological implications of online dating and sexting. Sources were selected through a systematic search of the PsycINFO database covering the period 2015–2025. Searches targeted peer-reviewed journal articles that included the terms *self-objectification*, *sexual objectification*, *purity culture*, *hook-up culture*, *BDSM culture*, *sexting*, or *online dating* in the title or abstract. This ensured that these concepts were central rather than peripheral to the study. Priority was given to feminist or sociocultural critiques that examine subjectivity and sexual norms Sources were included if they referenced contemporary Western sexual culture and engaged in feminist theoretical frameworks. Scholarship included the fields of psychology, gender studies, sociology, and media studies. Sources were excluded if they (a) treated sexuality solely as individual behavior without sociocultural analysis, (b) lacked engagement with gendered power relations, (c) focused exclusively on clinical or risk-based outcomes without contextualizing cultural meaning, or (d) centered transwomen or male experiences without relevance to women's subjectivity. Popular media, opinion pieces, and non–peer-reviewed sources were excluded unless used for contextual illustration rather than analytic evidence.

Part 3 examines research on the mental health consequences I experienced associated with sexual objectification, drawing on Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) scholarship on developmental, psychological, and emotional outcomes, including eating disorders, sexuality-related distress, and substance use. I have engaged with Objectification Theory literature since its inception and reviewed research spanning the past 27 years. Over the last two decades, scholarship using Objectification Theory has expanded substantially, with hundreds of studies published across psychology and related disciplines (Kahalon et al., 2018; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Much of the Objectification Theory literature uses experimental and quasi-experimental designs, operationalizing different components of the original framework.

This section synthesizes draws uses Moradi and Huang's (2008) comprehensive review of the first decade of Objectification Theory research (1997–2007) and Szymanski et al.'s (2011) review. After this, I created an updated literature search using the same parameters as Moradi and Huang. Using the PsycINFO database, I included peer-reviewed articles published between 2008 and 2025. The terms searched included *self-objectification*, *sexual objectification*, *Fredrickson and Roberts*, or *objectification theory* in the title or abstract. This search equaled 29 peer-reviewed journal articles. Dissertations, theses, and books were excluded. This approach allowed continuity with prior reviews while providing an updated synthesis of contemporary research on objectification and mental health outcomes relevant to the aims of this autoethnographic study.

Part 1 Overview of Objectification

Human Condition

I aim to convey an expansive understanding of objectification as a human condition that reaches far beyond the appropriation of women's bodies. In my understanding, objectification could be considered a universal condition of Western life, synonymous with, or on a scale with, human alienation and cultural dissociation, and to self-objectify is a denial of humanity (Bartky, 1990; Gervais et al., 2013). In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins (1990) describes how objectification has become a "prerequisite for the despiritualization of the universe… and through it the Western cosmos was made ready for ever increasing materialization" (p. 72). Thus, objectification can be understood as a social mechanism that dehumanizes everyone. This effects predominantly women and is a part of a broader Western worldview that fragments the human.

Socialization and Disciplining the Body

To understand objectification deeply, I will explain the relevance of socialization, identity construction, and the role of disciplining the body. In *The Social Construction of Reality* (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1966), social constructionist theorists P. L. Berger and Luckmann (1966) write "Society, identity and reality are subjectively crystallized in the same process of internalization" (p. 133). This means that individuals potentially internalize societal roles and norms, incorporating them into their own sense of identity. As such, socialization is complete when these norms are fully adopted, shaping both behavior and self-conception. This is how objectification is imposed externally but lived out through one's own self-perception and behavior.

Michelle Foucault (1977) further emphasizes that power operates through surveillance, noting that, “there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze…each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself” (p. 155). Thus, external structures of power are most effective when internalized, compelling individuals to self-discipline and reproduce the social norms they are expected to follow. Objectification operates through this same mechanism, as individuals learn to monitor and discipline their own bodies according to cultural standards of attractiveness and worth. The gaze becomes internalized, so people participate in their own objectification by treating themselves as objects to be scrutinized and controlled.

Sexual Parts

Building on this wider frame, feminist theorists such as Sandra Lee Bartky and others have traced how objectification becomes particularly acute in the sexual realm, where women’s bodies are fragmented, instrumentalized, and reduced to their value for others. According to Bartky ‘sexual objectification occurs when a woman’s sexual parts or functions are separated out from her person, reduced to status of mere instruments, or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her….To be dealt with in this way is to have one’s entire being identified with the body...’ (1990, p. 35). Martha Nussbaum’s (1995) definition of objectification consisted of instrumentality, denial of subjectivity, denial of autonomy, inertness, violability, fungibility, and ownership. Later, R. Langton (2009) extended Nussbaum's definition to include reduction to the body, reduction to appearance, and the act of silencing. Contemporary feminist Clair Jane Jones conceptualizes objectification as ‘de-subjectification,’ meaning the process strips a

woman of her subjectivity (C. J. Jones, 2022). Taken together, these accounts demonstrate how objectification functions as a pervasive form of dehumanization, fragmenting women's bodies and identities into instruments of patriarchal use.

Male Gaze

The term 'male gaze' (J. Berger, 1972) comes from art analysis of European oil paintings from the Renaissance period. Male painters depicted beautiful, sexualized women. The audience views art from a masculine position. The male gaze has been normalized in broader society and extends to social and interpersonal interactions and media representations (J. Berger, 1972; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The male gaze operates with sexual objectification as mechanisms that enforces patriarchal ideals that treats women's bodies as objects to control.

Romantic and Heteronormative Scripts

Sexual objectification is deeply embedded in romantic and heteronormative scripts. Bartky (1990) posits women are socialized with beauty standards that improves value and social approval. Empirical research supports this, showing women self-objectify more when single and dating (Sanchez & Broccoli, 2008a, 2008b). Calogero and Pina (2021) found that romantic relationship priming increases self-objectification among single women. This suggests that anticipation of being evaluated by a potential partner intensifies self-surveillance and appearance-focused concerns. Tan et al. (2023) demonstrated that if were women exposed to the sexually objectifying gazes during simulated dating scenarios, they were more likely to internalize appearance-based standards. The researchers suggested this supports the argument that dating contexts activate objectifying norms.

Tan et al.'s (2023) findings are important because the study demonstrates that sexual objectification is not just an individual attitude or a media effect. Significantly, sexual objectification is normalized through interpersonal interactions. When objectification is embedded in romantic and heteronormative scripts, women are incentivized to view being sexually objectified as a prerequisite for connection. This helps explain why objectification can feel both harmful and rewarding at the same time.

Performing Gender Roles

Understanding objectification requires the examination of gender roles and the acting out those roles. Influenced by de Beauvoir (1949) and Foucault (1977), Butler (1990) developed the concept of gender performativity. In Butler's (1990) "*Gender Trouble*" and Butler's (1993) "*Bodies That Matter*," Butler argues that gender is produced through "regulatory norms." These norms include cultural stereotypes of "woman," "man," "mother," "butch," "femme," and so on. They do not just describe people; they *create* identities that seem natural and others people.

She wrote that gender ideals are "phantasmatic" images that act as "regulatory fictions." Gender ideals tell us what a proper man or woman should look like. They discipline us to conform. While Butler (1990) does not frame gender theory as a study of sexual objectification but the theory works is a useful analytical tool She shows how femininity and masculinity stereotypes reduce people to a set of signs (appearance, gestures, clothing) that must be performed to stay socially "real." That pressure is what Bartky (1990) describes as objectification becoming a process of turning a person into a body who's worth depends on fitting an ideal.

To dive deeper into the foundation of Butler's (1990) work, I will explain the basic premise of existentialist feminist Simone de Beauvoir. She famously wrote in *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir, 1949) "the body is not a thing, it is a situation" (p. 46) and "one is not born, but rather becomes, [a] woman" (p. 283). Beauvoir writes that from a young age, girls are socialized to become a particular kind of woman through exposure to female stereotyped images which directs girls to suitable feminine thinking, behavior and feelings. She argues that a woman is socialized to be the person a man needs her to be, who he wants, and is the object of his desires and fears. Stereotypes include the 'fertile Earth Mother, the chaste Madonna, the lustful Whore, the beguiling Nymph and the terrifying Crone' (C. Stock, 2021, p. 13).

In contemporary debate around trans gender stereotyping, gender critical Kathleen Stock quotes Beauvoir: 'She wrote: 'There is…no feminine figure – virgin, mother, wife, sister, servant, lover, fierce virtue, smiling odalisque- capable of encapsulating the inconstant yearnings of men.' Stock goes on 'In other words, the expectations around femininity are inconsistent. Women are expected to be kind, domesticated submissive, modest, selfless, and responsible but also sexually available 'frivolous, infantile, irresponsible' and other contradictory things too' (C. Stock, 2021, p. 13).

The Oppression of Stereotypes and Objectification

The Madonna–Whore dichotomy originates in Freud's early psychoanalytic theory, where he argued that patriarchal culture splits women into virtuous maternal figures and sexually desiring figures, a division he termed the "Madonna–whore complex" (Freud, 1912, 1957). Feminist scholars later expanded on the dichotomy, sometimes referring to the respectability-hypersexuality binary, showing how it continues

to regulate women's sexuality and moral worth (Collins, 2004; Dworkin, 1981; Higginbotham, 1993; Tolman, 2002). Gill (2007b) and McRobbie (2009) further illustrate how postfeminist media rework this dichotomy through discourses of choice, empowerment, and sexual self-presentation, reinforcing older hierarchies of respectability and desirability.

The Madonna–Whore dichotomy illustrates how respectability operates as a technology of objectification. This technology translates moral norms into visible standards. These standards are used to surveil women's bodies and behaviors. Respectability and purity offer redemption scripts, where marriage represents moral rescue and social legitimacy. Bridal and evangelical cultures teach that a woman's identity can be restored through performances of virtue and respectability (Higginbotham, 1993; Ingraham, 1999; Moslener, 2015; Valenti, 2009). Scholarship on weddings shows that the bride functions as a spectacle that legitimizes the self through ritualized display (Dyer, 1998; Ingraham, 1999).

Respectability is historically, a racialized force that has been used against Black women (Collins, 2004; Hakim, 2010; Higginbotham, 1993). Collins (2004) argue that Black women are pitched against white, middle-class norms of behavior, morality, and femininity. Coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993), the concept of the "politics of respectability "describes how black women, particularly within black church and reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, adopted "proper" behavior. As such, chastity, modesty, hard work, and domestic virtue, becomes a strategy to combat racist stereotypes of immorality and inferiority. These performances were not

simply about assimilation but about survival and dignity within a white supremacist society that dehumanized blackness.

Haslam and Loughnan (2014) demonstrate that the Madonna–Whore split positions women as either pure subjects or sexualized objects, thereby reproducing the same gendered power dynamics Freud described. “Animalistic dehumanization” can map onto stereotypes like “Madonna-whore” (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). They explain that dehumanization is not a single phenomenon, but a *family of related processes* that reduce others to a lesser, inferior, or fundamentally different form of being. The authors identify two broad forms: animalistic dehumanization, in which people are likened to animals and denied traits associated with culture, civility, or refinement; and mechanistic dehumanization, in which people are likened to machines and denied warmth, emotion, and individuality.

Objectification is one of the primary mechanisms through which these forms of dehumanization are enacted and normalized in everyday life. Enforcing such stereotypes is inherent to objectification. In the media, African American women, Asian women, and European women are often characterized and graded in dehumanizing, racist, sexist ways. African American women are hypersexualized, have animalistic natures, or are typed as the Jezabel; Asian women are often considered sexually desirable, exotic, and passive; European women are often positioned to be the white virgins, demure, and submissive (Abrams, 2019; Bond et al., 2021). Media stereotypes can be seen in expressions of sexual preference, such as lesbians being typed as ‘butch’ or ‘fem’ and trans being typed to reinforce hyperfeminine and hypersexualized stereotypes (Stock, 2021).

Such stereotypes can affect how people are treated and influence group disparities (Bodenhausen et al., 1998). Some studies how found participants seeing sexually objectifying images of women increases participants support for gender stereotypes and sexist statements (Guizzo & Cadinu, 2020), and increased tolerance for sexual harassment and sexual violence (Aubrey et al., 2011; Galdi et al., 2014), and increased victim blaming and rape acceptance (Romero-Sánchez et al., 2017). Taken together, this body of research demonstrates that sexual objectification operates as a powerful cultural mechanism that normalizes dehumanizing stereotypes, legitimizes sexist beliefs, and reshapes social judgments in ways that sustain gendered power constructs.

Collins's idea of 'controlling images' argues that unlike stereotypes, which are constant, simplified, descriptive, controlling images morph and evolve into anything they need to be to reinforce existing power dynamics. Controlling images might include "hot girl," "the bride," "femme," "single mother," "good woman," "have-it-all woman," they might get more sophisticated like "intellectual porn star." Controlling images work in synchrony with one another, like a cast of characters to contrast and reinforce existing power dynamics. You see these images morph to meet the market dynamic and is often scripted through media. Controlling images are ideological tools. They justify and maintain systems of power (race, gender, class). They are historically produced, widely circulated, and politically useful.

These are pervasive, socially sanctioned stereotypes that define Black women in narrow and degrading ways, helping to sustain intersecting systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Collins (1990) explains that "controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear natural, normal, and

inevitable" (p. 69). Among the most enduring examples are the mammy, the loyal and asexual servant; the Jezebel, who portrays Black women as sexually promiscuous and immoral; and the welfare mother or queen, who is framed as lazy and dependent on the state. These images provide ideological justifications for oppression by casting Black women as either hypersexual, irresponsible, or self-sacrificing, rather than as complex human beings (Collins, 2004). By presenting these caricatures as if they were facts of nature, controlling images work to objectify Black women and confine them to social positions where exploitation seems legitimate.

Collins (1990) argues that binary thinking is a part of stereotyping, which is key to the objectifying process. Binary thinking like "white/black, male/female, reason/emotion, culture/nature, fact/opinion, mind/body, and subject/object gains meaning only in *relation* to its counterpart" (p.70) and in opposition to one another. Collins writes, "In binary thinking, one element is objectified as Other, and is view as an object to be manipulated and controlled" (p. 70). Put another way, Collins argues that binary thinking underpins stereotyping and objectification by defining identities in oppositional pairs, in which one term is positioned as dominant and the other is reduced to an object that can be controlled and manipulated (Collins, 1990).

Similarly, Anne McClintock argues that because women are associated with the natural (vs. culture), it is justifiable that women are objectified and conquered by men (1995). In *Imperial Leather*, McClintock examines how British imperialism operated not only through political and economic domination, but also through cultural, sexual, and gendered discourses. She argues that race, gender, and class are interlinked ("intimate interdependence") and that those categories shape one another rather than being separate

in hierarchy. McClintock traces these dynamics from Victorian Britain through colonial rule and toward anti-colonial struggles (especially in South Africa) to show how imperial power depends on imagined binaries—civilized/primitive, white/black, masculine/feminine. She explores how domestic life, advertisements, literature, photography, maps, and notions of sexual purity or fetishism all play roles in reinforcing these binaries. McClintock demonstrates that objectification is central to imperial power, as women and colonized peoples are rendered "natural," primitive, and conquerable through gendered and racialized binaries that legitimize domination and control (1995).

In *The Person as a Problem: The Crisis of Objectification Imposed on Human Existence* (A. M. Smith, 2024), Avery Merriel Smith considers how Black persons in America are often treated as '*problems,'* socially, politically, culturally, rather than being recognized as fully human, subjects with intrinsic value. Smith situates this within existential philosophy, invoking the concept of *Dasein* (being-in-the-world) to argue that Black people are aware of their own being and of others, but are positioned in a world that denies them recognition. The "crisis of objectification" refers to the way Black existence is imposed upon by others: by being seen, judged, regulated, and defined by white society. Objectification here does not just mean reduction to body or stereotype, but the structural and existential imposition of being *other*, being a problem, which shapes lived experience.

Enforcing stereotypes is central to objectification because media depictions of African American, Asian, and European women present them as graded, racialized bodies rather than full subjects, reducing their worth to how well they fit dehumanizing ideals (Abrams, 2019; Bond et al., 2021; Stock, 2021). Research demonstrates that exposure to

sexualized imagery increases support for sexist beliefs, tolerance for harassment, and propensity to blame the victim (Aubrey et al., 2011; Galdi et al., 2014; Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015; Romero-Sánchez et al., 2017).

Her discussion of binary thinking explains how hierarchical opposites (i.e. white/Black, male/female, subject/object) create a framework where one category is cast as Other, thus prepared for objectification (Collins, 2004, p. 70). McClintock (1995) reveals how colonial culture relied on gendered and racialized binaries to justify domination, making women and colonized peoples objects of conquest rather than autonomous subjects. Finally, A. M. Smith (2024) extended the critique by showing how objectification is an existential crisis for Black Americans, where being treated as a "problem" denies recognition and constrains authentic existence.

While objectification through othering reduces people to abstract categories or social problems, sexual objectification is distinct in that it narrows a person's value to their physical body and its appeal, treating them as an instrument for another's pleasure rather than a whole subject. Furthermore, I would add to Smith's argument that women who self-objectify, especially to extreme lengths such as those who spend excessive time on objectifying themselves, are also othered because of the social norms that judge women who are vain or seen to be supporting patriarchal norms of sexually objectifying women. The othering process could also be seen in the way I other myself in that we begin to see myself in third person, dissociating my subjective self from my physical self.

Sexualization of Girls

Sexualization of girls starts at a young age (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2008; Zurbriggen, 2018). We now have entire

generations growing up exposed to a 24-hour stream of sexually objectifying content on social media (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2008; Karsay et al., 2018; Koval, Butler et al., 2019; Santoniccolo et al., 2019; L. M. Ward, 2016). Daniels et al. (2020) argued that literature on the prevalence of objectification mostly focuses on adolescents, despite concerns that objectification starts with young girls (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2008; Hatch, 2011). Objectification appears to be present from 5th grade onwards, and spikes in 9th grade as bodies mature into puberty (Tiggemann & Slater, 2015).

Self-objectifying behaviors can be modeled by mothers (Perez et al., 2018). Perez et al. (2018) found that a mother's dissatisfaction with their body is correlated with a daughter's body dissatisfaction, often passed down through mother's body talk. Self-objectification is also shaped by peer influence as children grow into adolescents. In one study (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011), peers exchanged positive and negative comments about their bodies, measuring self-objectification and self-surveillance. Interestingly, both positive and negative comments led to self-objectification.

Objectification is a daily experience that accumulates over a lifetime and an objectifying experience reinforces oppressive social constructs about femininity (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Young Australian women experience an objectifying event, such as the male gaze, at least every other day, and witness objectifying experiences of other women at least 1.35 times per day (Holland et al., 2017). Quinn et al.'s (2006) study highlighted that an objectifying situation or event has a psychologically lingering effect on body shame and salient thoughts about the body, suggesting that brief

experiences of self-objectification can have enduring impacts on women's attention and self-perception.

The effects of sexually objectifying media will be covered further at the end of Part 2, but here I want to illustrate the effect that objectification has on development from children into adulthood. Sexually objectifying media seen in childhood is considered to have a significant impact on self-objectification in adulthood (Slater & Tiggemann, 2006). Longitudinal data indicates that exposure to sexually objectifying media as children can both lead to self-objectification as adult women and lead children to avoid sexually objectifying media as adult women (Aubrey, 2006a, 2006b, 2007). Mori et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis demonstrates that children and adolescents exposed to both violent and non-violent sexual content are more likely to develop problematic sexual behaviors, underscoring the need for prevention and intervention programs that address media and online sexual exposure. Similarly, Lin et al.'s (2020) longitudinal study shows that early adolescent exposure to sexually explicit media predicts risky sexual behaviors in emerging adulthood, such as earlier sexual debut, unsafe sex, and multiple sexual partners. Taken together, these findings suggest that early encounters with sexualized media not only influence behavioral outcomes but also cultivate objectifying practices and self-objectification, reinforcing cultural patterns where bodies are viewed as instruments for sexual gratification rather than as whole persons.

Self-Objectification

As established so far, objectification morphs in many directions and manifests in many ways, including interpersonal (i.e. the gaze) and intrapersonal (i.e. self-objectification) experiences. Interpersonal forms of objectification might include ogling,

catcalls, whistling, name calling, stereotyping, discrimination, unwanted sexual advances, sexual harassment, and even employment discrimination (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Specifically, objectifying experiences may also include comments that reduce a woman to be measured or evaluated by her body or sexuality (Bartky, 1990). Extreme forms of interpersonal objectification that victimize women and children include domestic abuse, murder, sex trafficking, rape, assault, incest and molestation (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

When women internalize societal constructs of beauty ideals and body standards, they may begin to identify with these ideas and begin to embody them willingly- which is called 'self-objectification.' Women see themselves in third person, as an object, as though they are looking at themselves from another person's perspective, habitually monitoring their bodies' appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). When women self-objectify, they monitor their bodies and police their appearance which takes up a significant amount of attention, time, and resources (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Kozee et al., 2007).

When women do not meet the societal ideals of beauty and body standards, they can also internalize shame. Instead of this problem being isolated to just a standard of beauty, shame perpetuates to the global sense of self (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Fredricks and Roberts argue that shame causes women to want to hide, escape the gaze, leaving us in a state of powerlessness and worthlessness. 'Intense shame can also compound an already fragmented state of consciousness. Shame disrupts ongoing activity as the self focuses completely on itself, and the result is a state of confusion: inability to think clearly: inability to talk, inability to act' (Lewis, 1971, p. 34).

Important Distinctions in Objectification

The Erotic

It is important to distinguish between sexual objectification and erotic. In the case of Audre Lorde's (1978) *Uses of the Erotic* (p. 54), she describes beautifully what we lose in objectifying:

> The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against woman. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.
>
> The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need, the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment.
>
> The very work erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects born of Chaos and personifying creative power and harmony. When we speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of the creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives."

Audre Lorde explores the idea that embracing one's erotic instincts can lead to a deeper and more fulfilling sense of self. She explains that in a society dominated by patriarchal norms, eroticism is often misunderstood and reduced to something shallow or purely sexual. Such as pornography which lacks emotional depth and true power. This misrepresentation robs women of the richness found in genuine erotic experience. For Lorde, when women reconnect with the erotic from their own perspective, it becomes a powerful tool for self-expression and a form of resistance against systems that encourage emotional and creative suppression. By honoring this internal force, women can reclaim joy, purpose, and strength in their lives.

Objectification in Relationships

Objectification could be considered necessary for romantic relationships and attracting partners. The following research suggests that objectification plays a normative role in heterosexual dating, as women are socialized to be attractive to secure romantic relationships, yet evidence indicates that self-objectification may once in a relationship, underscoring how beauty and desirability are most intensely emphasized in the pursuit rather than the maintenance of intimacy. Bartky (1990) writes that women are socialized to put strong emphasis on gaining a relationship and risk the stigmatization of not meeting the standards of institutionalized heterosexuality. When women prepare for the date, they often make sure they have 'kissable lips,' 'dewy complexions,' 'mysterious eyes,' and 'soft supple skin' (Bartky, 1990, p. 72-73). Sanchez and Broccoli (2008a) examined self-objectification in a dating scenario and women preparing to meet romantic partners. The results indicated that women who are in relationships self-objectify less

than women who were single, highlighting the significance of attractiveness and beauty in pursuit of romantic relationships.

Sexual objectification in romantic relationships presents complexity in understanding its benefits and harms. This tension also appears in sexual subcultures, where even explicit objectification, such as in BDSM, can be consensual and experienced as intimate rather than harmful. Although some consider kink and fetish as 'abnormal' or even see BDSM as 'pathology' (i.e. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), objectification 'play' in BDSM subcultures is considered consensual and legitimate exploration and sexual expression, often leading to intimacy (M. Melavc et al., 2024).

Historical Context of the Sex Wars: Radical and Libertarian Feminist Debates on Pornography

The roots of the contemporary sex-positivity movement can be traced to the legalization, commercialization, and normalization of pornography in the 1980s. The legalization of pornography combined with the rapid expansion of the home video market marked a turning point in which pornography moved from the cultural fringes to a widely available consumer commodity (C. Smith & Attwood, 2014). This transformation was the single most influential turning point in the history of sexual objectification. While these developments expanded sexual expression for some, they also intensified concerns about sex inequality and the commodification of intimacy.

The expansion of the legal and commercial pornography industry provoked intense debate within feminism, producing what became known as the "sex wars." This debate divided feminists into two broad camps: radical-cultural feminists and radical-libertarian (sex-positive) feminists. Radical-cultural feminists argued that sexuality is a

primary site of patriarchal domination and viewed pornography as a civil rights infringement (Tong & Botts, 2017). They argued pornography normalizes violence against women and encourages women to disregard their own sexual pleasure. Feminist legal scholars Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin argued that pornography institutionalizes women's subordination by depicting women as inherently inferior and deserving of domination and violation (MacKinnon, 1987).

In *Pornography and Male Supremacy* (Dworkin, 1989), Dworkin argued that pornography could only exist in a society structured by male dominance, where practices such as rape and prostitution are already normalized. While she acknowledged that it was difficult to prove that pornography directly causes rape or prostitution, she argued that these systems of sexual exploitation create the conditions that allow pornography to flourish, normalize women's sexual subordination, and encourage victim-blaming in cases of sexual assault.

In contrast, radical-libertarian feminists[2], often described as sex-positive feminists, argued that anti-pornography politics risked policing women's sexuality and reinforcing sexual conservatism or sexual hierarchies. Scholars such as Gayle Rubin contended that many forms of sexual expression had historically been stigmatized as immoral or pathological. Rubin argued that societies construct hierarchical systems of "good" and "bad" sexual behavior, privileging heterosexual, marital, reproductive sexuality while stigmatizing sexual minorities and non-normative practices (Rubin, 1984).

[2] 'Radical-libertarian' feminist might not be a term liberal feminist would not claim today because this was a split from radical principals of women being protected as a class, with emphasis on individual rights. Tong and Botts (2017) makes these distinctions.

In the 1984 essay *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality* Rubin advocated for the destigmatization of sexual practices such as BDSM, non-monogamy, and homosexuality, admonishing conservatives and the potential for radical feminist to present a hierarchical ranking of sexual practices, which she calls the "charmed circle" versus the "outer limits." Ruben wrote "Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of the hierarchy… As one moves away from this charmed circle, sexual practices are increasingly treated with suspicion, condemnation, and legal punishment" (Rubin, 1984, p. 288). Rubin argued that understanding and improving sexual freedoms is a distinct political issue, that was not then fully embraced by feminism, gay rights, or traditional leftist politics. She wrote "It is precisely at moments when sexuality is being criminalized and moralized that it becomes especially urgent to develop a radical theory of sex" (Rubin, 1984, p. 284). Rubin's critique of radical feminist theory reveals how moral hierarchies of sexuality function as a mechanism of objectification, reducing complex sexual subjects to ranked categories of value and deviance.

From this perspective, pornography could function as a space for sexual exploration, fantasy, and education. Radical-libertarian feminists argued that consensual sexual practices, even those involving power dynamics or fantasy, should not automatically be interpreted as reinforcing real-world violence. As Tong and Botts (2017) explain, exploring sexual fantasies involving power does not endorse male domination or violence in everyday life.

Since the Sex Wars, the pornography industry become an "economic juggernaut" (Dworkin, 1981). With the rise of digital technology, online access has transformed pornography into a global industry. One in ten websites contain pornographic content (Buchholz, 2019). Early claims that legalization would improve working conditions for performers failed to materialize (Comerford, 2022; Strossen, 1993). Instead, the industry has been reorganized along neoliberal capitalist lines (Cameron, 2019; Comerford, 2022). Investors and platform owners make the big money.

The internet is now flooded with amateur and self-produced pornography with websites like OnlyFans.com and FetLife.com. These sites allow for participation in pornography and sexual content production more accessible. As such, users are able to explore their sexuality, connect with like-minded members, and receive financial gain. As a result, pornography has become deeply embedded in contemporary digital culture.

Historical Context of Third Wavers and The Sex and Body Positivity Movement

Third-wave feminist emphasized sexual pleasure and self-determination (Segal & McIntosh, 1993). As Lynne Segal argued, "women's rights to sexual pleasure and fulfillment, on her own terms, symbolized their rights to autonomy and selfhood" (Segal & McIntosh, 1993, p. 93). Rifts within feminism continue. In *Sexual Correctness: The Gender-Feminist Attack on Women* (McElroy, 1996), Wendy McElroy critiques what she calls "gender feminism." In her view, gender feminism has moved away from sexual liberation and toward the enforcement prescriptive norms around sexuality. She argues that gender feminism represents feminist political correctness. As such, this marginalizes practices of pornography, sex work, BDSM, or casual sex. According to McElroy, this political correctness paternalistically moralized women's sexuality. Gender feminism

dictates which types of sexual expression are acceptable and which are deviant. Elroy argues that this undermines feminist core principles of individual autonomy and her ability to define her own desires. McElroy aligns with Rubin (1984) who cautions that regulating women's sexuality, even in the name of protection, can reinforce patriarchal structures.

This idea is central to the body positive and sex positive movement. The body positivity movement advocates for inclusion of varying types of bodies and resistance to beauty norms (M. Leboeuf, 2019). However, with the focus on the body, the movement has been criticized for continuing objectification and for being appropriated for commercial interests (A. Kisner, 2010; Vendemia, DeAndrea & Brathwaite, 2021).

Feminist analyses of fashion and beauty further complicate this picture. Scholars have found that fashion and beauty practices may appear to reinforce dominant norms but they can also be expressions of individualism and resistance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Kwan et al., 2020). Fashion scholars challenge binary readings of empowerment versus objectification, suggesting that dressing rituals be agentic and healthy in identity formation (Tseëlon, 1995).

In this vein, feminist hip-hop researchers argue that female rapper Megan Pete created the alter ego *Megan Thee Stallion* as a teenager, intentionally crafting a persona that was hypersexual and unapologetically objectified (Lindsey, 2015; Rajah, 2022). Megan Thee Stallion's performance draws on and subverts dominant cultural scripts of female sexuality. Megan's tall, curvy body (hence *Thee Stallion*) is central to her persona. Scholars argue that Megan openly celebrated her masculine sexuality and size, height, and curves. She disrupts narrow Eurocentric beauty standards that often exclude Black

women's bodies. Black feminist scholars (Collins, 2004; Lindsey, 2015) argue that Black women's bodies have historically been hypersexualized, commodified, and policed. This history of controlling and regulating the Black body is what the sex positive and body positive movements aim to transform and subvert.

The body positivity movement, including the fat acceptance movement, attempted to promote for the acceptance and appreciation of all body types, challenges societal beauty standards, and advocated for marginalized identities based on body size, shapes, skin tone, gender and physical abilities (M. Leboeuf, 2019). Feminist have embraced the movement to combat body shaming and promote self-love; however, some have criticized the movement for inadvertently undermining feminist goals to dismantle oppressive beauty norms. Vendemia, DeAndrea, and Ilakkuvan's (2021) findings suggest that while body positivity aims to promote acceptance, the sexualization of its imagery may have counterproductive effects. Feminist A. Kisner (2010) scrutinized the movement being used for commercial interests, that the movement promotes obesity, and does little to challenge social norms.

There are positive sides to objectification, such as the feeling of empowerment and the rituals associated with preparing aesthetic attire, adornment, and makeup. Furthermore, women might gain men's attention or improve her social mobility with work promotions or career success. Research by D. Kellie et al. (2021) and Robertson and Kingsley (2021) examined the motivations for using make-up, finding women often wear makeup to express empowerment, rather than a response to societal pressures.

In the Salah et al. (2024) article 'Fashion and Feminism: A Theoretical and Historical Background,' the authors explore how fashion has been contextualized as a

tool of oppression and offer a new interpretation of self-expression and empowerment. The study discusses how choosing aesthetics and fashion can serve as acts of autonomy and resistance against traditional gender norms. Similarly, Moffitt et al.'s (2024) systematic review examines the impact of empowerment messaging in beauty advertisements, finding exposure to these advertisements can enhance women's feelings of empowerment and reduce self-objectification.

Historical Context of Fourth Wave Feminism

Fourth-wave feminism (emerging in the early 2010s) is characterized by its digital activism, intersectional politics, and renewed focus on gendered power, sexual violence, representation, and sex-based rights. Fourth wave feminist responded to contemporary conditions shaped by neoliberalism, platform capitalism, and online culture. Public storytelling and survivor-led movements challenge rape culture, workplace harassment, and institutional silence.

While the waves of feminism often overlap, and it can be difficult to type cast authors to either wave, it is important to describe the influence of certain texts and authors that influence current critiques of sexualization and objectification. Scholars such as Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad are often read as theoretical interlocutors of fourth-wave feminism, because their work critiques postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that fourth-wave movements actively resist. They are not sex-positive feminists nor are they radical or anti-sex feminists; instead, they examine how claims of empowerment can coexist with self-surveillance, objectification, and inequality.

In Gill and Orgad's (2018) "*The Shifting Terrain of Sex and Power: From the 'Sexualization of Culture' to #MeToo*," they traced a cultural shift in how feminism,

sexuality, and power are discussed in the media and popular culture. Earlier debates (2000s–early 2010s) focused heavily on the "sexualization of culture," where women were represented as increasingly sexualized objects in media, advertising, and celebrity culture. By the late 2010s, however, when the politics of the #MeToo movement captivated the public's attention. This shifted focus on sexual harassment, abuse, and structural inequalities of power. Gill and Orgad argue that this shift represents both a disruption and a continuity in feminist and cultural concerns. While discourses on the sexualization of women's bodies remained the same, the #MeToo emphasized women's lived experiences of harm and silencing. Gill and Orgad highlight how feminist scholarship must navigate this shifting terrain, by holding both perspectives in account, critiques of objectification and recognizing women's strategies of agency and resistance. They caution against overly celebratory readings of empowerment (as in postfeminist body positivity) while insisting on the importance of structural analysis of gendered power.

Significantly, the fourth wave revamped critiques of objectification, beauty norms, and neoliberalism. Third waver Noami Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf, 1991) was an earlier text but heavily re-mobilized in fourth-wave critiques of beauty labor and self-surveillance. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Banet-Weiser, 2018) by Sarah Banet-Weiser examined how media, pornification, influencer culture, and algorithmic visibility intensified self-surveillance and commodification. Banet-Wiser also debated the limits of "choice" and empowerment. Unlike third-wave feminism, which often emphasizes individual choice and sexual expression, fourth-wave feminism is more critical of how "choice" operates under unequal conditions.

To further illustrate influential works of the fourth wave, I briefly describe some of the texts that characterize the scope of critique on objectification and sexualization. A key text was *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl®, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* (Zeisler, 2016) by Andi Zeisler critiques how feminism is co-opted by consumer culture and branding. *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women White Feminists Forgot* (Kendall, 2020) by Mikki Kendall argues that sexualization and objectification are unevenly distributed harms: women who are poor, racialized, or otherwise marginalized are more likely to experience hypersexualization, surveillance, and vulnerability to sexual violence, highlighting the intersectional component of fourth wave. Investigative journalist Jon Krakauer wrote *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town* (Krakauer, 2015) that fueled public feminist reckoning with rape culture and institutions. *Know My Name* (C. Miller, 2019) was an influential memoir by Chanel Miller telling a survivor narrative that reshaped discourse around victimhood, voice, and credibility in the #MeToo era. Taken together, these works suggest that fourth-wave feminism seeks to 're-fang' feminist critique by confronting sexual violence, objectification, and structural inequality, responding to what has been described as the "de-fanging" of feminism (C. J. Jones, 2022), most evident in the third wave's emphasis on sex-positive and body-positive discourses.

Historical Context of Neoliberalism, Neoliberal Feminism, and Post-Feminism

Neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy characterized by globalization, privatization, deregulation, and cuts to social welfare, and is thought to have the effect of constructing subjects as self-managing, autonomous, and enterprising (Gill & Scharff, 2011). This logic was advanced through postwar political leadership

under the Thatcher, Reagan, and Bush administrations (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism promoted imperial, economic, and social policies that normalized consumer culture and encouraged individuals to view entrepreneurialism and the accumulation of possessions as markers of success. Neoliberal discourse further equates the private and privatized with *freedom* and *choice*, while casting the public, collective, and communal as forms of constraint and imposition (Segal, 2013). These shifts are particularly consequential for women, as neoliberal governance intensifies expectations of self-regulation and self-surveillance, positioning women as the "ideal subjects of neoliberalism" (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 7).

Christina Scharff writes "public media and policy discourses have positioned young women as subjects of capacity who can lead responsibilized and self-managed lives through self-application" (Scharff, 2016, p. 271). Alexandra Rutherford (2018) critiques feminist psychology to inadvertently reinforced neoliberal subjectivity. Drawing on Foucauldian governmentality, Rutherford argues that neoliberalism extends beyond the economy and informs psychological norms. As such, women are shaped to be entrepreneurial, self-regulating, empowered agents, focused on self-help, consumption, appearance, and personal transformation.

In a speech at a women's conference in Wellington, New Zealand, titled *Transgenderism, Neoliberalism and Rape Culture* Renne Gerlich's (2019) neoliberal analysis of the effect of globalization offers a convincing perspective of how capitalism benefits from the sexualization of girls and women (Gerlich, 2019). She, and others observe significant trends towards the colonization of the body (Draz, 2022). To illustrate in global context, when the World Bank began to give loans to countries, governments

had to commit to "structural adjustments" to benefit multinational corporations (Gerlich, 2019; Harvey, 2005). This led to government cutbacks on social services that bolster women's prospects, such as education, health, and welfare services (Harvey, 2005). In doing so, women's financial opportunities became more limited and male financial assistance more appealing (Gerlich, 2019). In this process, laws and regulations that offered protections of workers were stripped leading to worker exploitation (Gerlich, 2019). N. Klein (2007) argues that neoliberalism is characterized as "disaster capitalism." Multinational companies profit from disasters, such as natural disasters, economic collapse, or social crisis, when populations are disoriented and resistance is weakened (N. Klein, 2007). With a heavy dose of propaganda, they swoop in to save the day and profit (N. Klein, 2007). Gerlich goes on to say this "fuels a climate of male entitlement, rape, violation, objectification, body hatred, dissociation, dysphoria, and anorexia- these are the disaster conditions."

To elaborate, consider the sex industry. The strength of the pornography industry and the popularization of *50 Shades of Gray* depicts the global subversion of individualism trumping the collective rights of women (Roche, 2023). One in ten websites are pornography websites (Worldmetrics.org, 2024). The porn industry is one of the largest economies in the world, and approximately 30% of all data transferred over the internet is adult content United States porn site activity accounts for nearly 25% global visits (ibid). The porn industry is growing 12% annually, which will double a billion-dollar industry in 11 years (TechSci Research, 2024). In line with the idea of disaster capitalism, during the Covid pandemic, online porn viewing increased between 11% in the first week of the COVID-19 pandemic, spiked to 24%, and averaged out at

20% overall growth (Mestre-Bach et al., 2020). Neoliberalism contends we call prostitution – "sex work" - because sex work is more humanizing and empowering and the women in the industry choose to be there out of "self-determination" (Gerlich, 2019).

Neoliberal Feminism. In *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Rottenberg, 2018), Catherine Rottenberg (2018) coined the term "neoliberal feminism," being a 2010s movement that utilizes the language of empowerment and gender equality, but redefines feminism in ways that depoliticize it, removing its structural, collective, and anti-capitalist roots. This depoliticization and de-collectivization process happens through individualism and self- responsibilization that aligns with market rationality. For example, neoliberal feminism produces female subjects who are self-managing, responsible for their own success and wellbeing; who are entrepreneurial, who constantly optimizes their productivity and emotional health; and who are encouraged to solve gendered inequality through individual effort, not collective action (Rottenberg, 2018). Rottenburg writes "Neoliberal feminism interpolates a specific kind of subject—one who is individualist, self-reliant, and entrepreneurial" (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 14).

Depoliticization and de-collectivization are a way of 'defanging' feminism (C. J. Jones, 2022), which is a phrase used to summarize notions articulated by writers like hooks (2000a), McRobbie (2009) and Banet-Weiser (2018), by "commodifying," "neutralizing," or "disarticulating" feminist discourse. In this way, feminism does not demand systemic change. Instead, depoliticization and de-collectivization strips feminism of its radical and structural critiques, reduces empowerment to personal success stories and avoids difficult discussions about patriarchy, capitalism, racism, or colonialism

(Rottenberg, 2018). As such, feminism is transformed from a political movement into a "set of individualized practices and self-care routines" (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 20).

Instead of antagonizing consumer culture, neoliberal feminism becomes compatible with it. Rottenberg posits neoliberal feminism aligned with market rationality by supporting women's advancement within existing institutions (e.g., corporations, politics) rather than challenging their exclusionary or exploitative structures. For example, the *Lean In* culture of Sheryl Sandberg encourages women to *lean into their careers,* advocated for equal participation in neoliberal capitalism, not liberation from the oppressive system that puts them in competition with men to engage in the rat race. Rottenberg (2018) writes "It is not that feminism has triumphed, but rather that it has been re-signified and repurposed for neoliberal ends" (p. 3).

Naomi Wolf (1993) wrote in *Fire to Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* that this historic surge in women's power will not necessarily be sustained without addressing self-defeating beliefs and discourses within feminism. In part two of the book, titled '*What Went Wrong? How many Women and Their Movement Parted Ways,'* described the then present (and still today) issue of the word "feminism." To many, women harbored negative connotations to the idea of feminism because of stereotypes of "man-hating," "women-issues," "intellectual-rigidity," and "exclusivity of trickled down feminism" that has alienated many women from embracing the feminist identity (e.g. McRobbie, hooks). McRobbie wrote in *The Aftermath of Feminism* "Feminism is routinely invoked only to be dismissed" (2009, p. 24).

Additionally, the dilution of feminism to the mainstream culture now reinforces traditional gender norms under the guise of modernity and female empowerment (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Dow (1996) criticized these postfeminist shifts in popular culture, arguing that women's agency is a serious concern that has been reduced to slogans in primetime media outlets. Chen's analysis of neoliberalist consumerism argues that the terms "choice," "freedom," and "agency" are appropriated to reinforce "women confidently embracing patriarchal heterosexuality and commodity culture" (Chen, 2013, p. 440). Chen suggests that although these ideas usually evoke feminist ideas of womanhood, capitalism has used these ideas to promote women's "success" via consumerism.

Postfeminism. Gill (2007b) argues that postfeminism is both a continuation and repudiation of feminism. Gill writes:

> Feminism is acknowledged, its terms adopted, but only to be pressed into service in the continued objectification … Here, then, feminism is indexed with the paradoxical purpose of repudiating it (Gill, 2007b, p. 15).

For example, postfeminists might promote gender equality in the workplace while also celebrating hypersexualized femininity and consumerism. Gill's definition:

> ...postfeminist(m) is best understood as a distinctive sensibility, made up of a number of interrelated themes. These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance; monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of the makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about the natural sexual difference (p. 149).

Note Gill frames postfeminism as a 'sensibility' characterized by notions of choice, empowerment, and self-policing femininity.

To illustrate further, I liken this power dynamic to something like the phenomena of pop music icons, such as girl groups like Destiny's Child, Pussycat Dolls, and my personal influence, the Spice Girls. The Spice Girls were empowered, iconic singers, touting girl power, friendship, and sisterhood, who appeared to express free will and individuality through each being their own character. Each girl seemed to fulfill sex fantasy stereo types, Posh Spicy wore mini dresses, Baby Spice wore pigtails sucking Lollie pops, Sporty Spice represented the female athlete, Crazy Spice imbued the slightly aggressive black jezebel, and Ginger Spice was the firey redhead. These groups marketed themselves using "girl power" language and presenting empowerment accessible through consumerism, heteronormativity, and conventional beauty ideals (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009).

Bordo's (1993) analysis of bodily discipline reveals how practices framed as personal choice and self-mastery are deeply shaped by cultural power, a logic that later becomes central to neoliberal discourses that recast self-surveillance and bodily control as forms of empowerment. Bordo explores thin idealization and eating and exercising habits of women who suffer from anorexia. She explains that these behaviors are not necessarily acts of liberation but forms of self-discipline shaped by cultural pressures.

> Within the Foucauldian framework, power and pleasure do not cancel each other. Thus, the heady experience of feeling powerful or "in control," far from being a necessarily accurate reflection of one's social position, is always suspect itself the product of power relations whose shape may be very different (p. 27-28).

The point I believe Bordo is attempting to make here is that reclaiming one's body in response to being oppressed, may at first feel liberating and an expression of feminist self-determination, however, these gestures are only superficial and embody the same oppressive means by which they are oppressed. Bordo continues:

> What emerges clearly from such analysis is that the docile bodies of women are produced through the regulation of feminine comportment, posture, and bodily habits. The rules for body shaping and display are internalized and enforced not by an external oppressor, but by women themselves (Bordo, 1993, p. 166).

Bordo argues the woman who achieves social approval through being disciplined may simultaneously experience a sense of control and a loss of self. This contradiction is central to the lived reality of self-objectification.

Rise of Academic Interest of Objectification

Many feminist theorists investigated how western culture objectified the female body including De Beauvoir (1949), J. Berger (1972), A. Dworkin (1974), S. Orbach (1978), J. B. Miller (1986), J. Ussher (1989), N. Wolf (1991), S. Bordo (1993), and M. Nussbaum (1995). These will be covered in the conceptual framework in Chapter 3. More recently, concerted efforts to examine sexual objectification have continued into the 21st century, as mentioned in the introduction. In 2008, the American Psychological Association (APA) commissioned a landmark study *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. The purpose of the taskforce was to summarize the best research, theory, and clinical experience, concerning the sexualization of girls via cultural messaging and media with particular emphasis on the intersectional outcomes to girls with varying socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity. The scope of the report

articulated, like objectification theory, that sexualization of girls happens at the societal level, the interpersonal level, and intra-personal level (self-sexualization). Societal messaging conveys the notion that sexualization of girls is good and normal. Parents, peers, and teachers can treat girls like they are sexual objects. The girls treat themselves as sexual objects, adhering to societal norms and receiving rewards if they are perceived to be attractive or 'sexy.' Media communicates that a woman's worth is in her appearance and that their bodies and overall physical appearance should meet social norms of sexual appeal and attractiveness. This report was followed up *The Sexualization of Girls: Update* report by Lamb et al. in 2019.

APA's initiative spawned similar studies and initiatives across the world. In the United Kingdom, *Joining up the Dots* was produced by grassroots organization Object.org, to influence parliament to act on the growing sexualization of girls, the media, and popular culture. Their findings concluded that sexualization of girls was a result of the growing 'pornification of culture' and the recent mainstreaming of pornography, lap dancing, and prostitution. The report demonstrates that the sexualization of girls and women is linked to reinforcing the sexist attitudes towards women which was one of the determining factors of discrimination and violence against women. Minor sexualization leads to major objectification. The campaign argued that the UK Government is negligent in protecting human rights and gender rights.

The APA's continued commitment to this worsening condition extended their study to the Task Force on the Sexualization of Popular Music (2018) and argued that due to the advancement of technology, sexualization of women is becoming more widespread and an increasing number of songs are objectifying women. Girls and women

are hypersexualized in music videos. Music videos are highly stimulating and elicit sexual exploitation and degradation, sexualization of girls at a young age, in which they are primarily positioned as sex objects and substance use is normalized. Apuke and Jigem (2019), agree that music videos that sexually objectify women are becoming more acceptable, frequent, and intense. These songs suggest that sex is the top priority for men, propose sexual violence against women, degrade and exploit women, and defining women to only be valuable if they have a man (Flynn et al., 2016). Sexually objectifying music videos impact self-objectification, body satisfaction and affect consequences (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2012); gendered stereotypes and attitudes (Carpentier, 2014); dating and sexual behaviors (Wright & Qureshi, 2015); misogynistic beliefs (van Oosten et al., 2015); sexual beliefs (Aubrey et al., 2011); sexual scripts (Stephens & Few, 2007); violence against women (Johnson et al., 1995).

Part 2 Sources of Objectification

This section examines the intersecting cultural forces that have shaped my experiences of sexual objectification. The intension here is to present a broad overview of these intersecting forces of sexualizing mechanisms and sources of objectification. Here I will only convey areas of research that support the notion that sexualizing and objectifying forces are creating the perfect storm of heightening sexual objectification.

Specifically, I identify and explore the influence of purity culture, neoliberal sexual discourses, hookup and BDSM culture, and the digital environments of social media, dating profiles, sexting, and the proliferation of distribution of non-consensual intimate images (common only known as ‘revenge porn’). By analyzing these sources

together, I highlight how multiple, overlapping contexts operate to normalize objectification.

Purity Culture

When I came to The South, I found myself being influenced by what I discovered to be the lingering effects of purity culture. Placing value on a girl's virginity and sexual purity is an overt form of sexual objectification. Sexuality has been a long-standing power construct, but the 1990s saw a resurgence of "purity culture" within the evangelical church (a term originally coined by Freitas, 2008). Purity culture emphasizes traditional gender roles and specifically places the onus of sexual purity on women because men cannot control themselves (Gardner, 2011; A. Rivera & H. Scholar, 2020). Although purity culture was supposedly aimed at both men and women, women were expected to bare the weight of the burden. Women are not to tempt men's lustful ways and are expected to "shoulder the task" (Cieslik, 2022, p.1) of the community's purity. Effectively, women are in constant fear of being slut shammed. Deviance meant dire repercussions for women's reputation and value (Alea, 2022). Purity culture brought about serious consequences in women's physical and mental health. As girls grew up to adults, they learned nothing about their sexual anatomy or basic sexual health. Once married, women endured untreated vaginal infections, painful sex, and had no idea what sexual consent was, facing sexual abuse and rape (Valenti, 2009).

The cultural apparatus of purity culture includes abstinence-only education, purity pledges, rings, and father–daughter balls (Valenti, 2009). Girls were to remain sexually abstinent outside of marriage, received strict views on modest dress, and were not allowed to date or experienced stringent dating rules (Fahs, 2010). Purity culture can be

read as a continuation of the Christian tradition of equating women's bodies with danger and sin, while simultaneously operating as a modern mechanism of self-surveillance, where women were taught to view their sexuality through the lens of male control and divine judgment (Foucault, 1977; Freitas, 2008). Furthermore, critical writers like Natarajan et al. (2022) frame purity culture as a form of gendered racism and white idealization.

For men, 'toxic masculinity' can be traced to purity culture. Purity culture caused a lack accountability, deregulating impulse control, normalizing abusive behavior, and perpetuating rape culture (A. Rivera & J. Scholar, 2020). Although this research is not directly related to the effects of purity culture, toxic masculinity may cause mental health issues such as depression, aggression, high levels of stress, dysfunction and poor social relations, self-image problems, and may lead to violent socialization and violent radicalizations (Watson et al., 2022).

The shame instilled by purity culture has caused a trauma that has deeply affected women's relationship to themselves and intimate relationships and extends much further than extreme evangelical groups. The shame associated with purity culture has been so severe; L. K. Klein (2018) considers it a type of post-traumatic stress disorder. Shame is the negative evaluation of one's core self; verses guilt which is the negative evaluation of one's behavior (Dearing et al., 2005; Gilbert, 2003; Lewis, 1971). Research has highlighted how the teachings of purity culture has instilled shame with pleasure, restricted women's sexual agency, and normalized women's oppression (Fahs, 2010; Klement & Sagarin, 2017).

Neoliberal Sexuality Culture

Purity culture is a stark contrast to contemporary neoliberal sexual culture. Neoliberal sexual culture is often defined in consumerist terms, emphasizing visibility and marketability (Gill, 2008a;

b; Gill & Scharff, 2011). Individuals present and perform their sexuality through curated self-portraits (selfies) and signal desirability and empowerment (ibid). Hookup apps (i.e. Tinder, Bumble, Grindr) condition users to make sexual statements through crafting bios photos that receive instant appeal (Hobbs et al., 2017). These platforms reward marketable sexual identity (Chan, 2018; Duguay, 2017). Similarly, popularization of BDSM markets sexual identity. The normalization of BDSM in popular discourse and dating platforms turns kink into a marketable trait, to have a unique, edgy identity that can enhance one's desirability (McInnes, 2021; Simula, 2019). BDSM aesthetics, roles, and tropes are now detectable in dating profiles (McInnes, 2021; Simula, 2019).

The concept of consumer choice underscores both dating profiles and sexting as acts of self-surveillance under the guise of empowerment (Dobson, 2015; Duguay, 2017; Gill, 2008a). On platforms like Tinder, users engage in "subjective capture," curating their bodies and desires as purchasable goods, transforming identity and intimacy into marketable commodities (Miskolci, 2021). Creating a dating profile becomes a form of self-branding by presenting "the best possible self" in a competitive market (Duguay, 2017). Users craft sellable identities by selecting messages and images, and disclose strategically (Duguay, 2017; Hobbs et al., 2017).

When women engage in hookups, they often report feeling emotional confusion and stigma, and researchers argue that neoliberal norms of choice can obscure harm (Bogle, 2016; Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2008a). In Kathleen Bogle's book, *Hooking up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (Bogle, 2016) through multi-year interviews on two U.S. campuses, the author shows that "hooking up" (from kissing to intercourse) has largely displaced traditional dating as the dominant script for beginning relationships in

college. The hookup script is sustained by peer networks, parties/alcohol, and gendered double standards and it can offer flexibility and exploration but also produces ambiguity, miscommunication, and unequal outcomes (especially for women) around desire, status, and power.

In Amy Dobson's book *Postfeminist digital cultures: Femininity, social media, and self-representation* (2015) through interviews and cultural analysis, she shows how platforms encourage women to present themselves as empowered subjects, yet this "empowerment" often reproduces narrow norms of beauty, desirability, and heteronormativity. The book highlights the paradox of digital postfeminism: it creates spaces for visibility and expression while intensifying pressures of self-objectification and market-driven identity performance. Sexting is often portrayed as digital sexual liberation Sexting's visibility compels girls into performative roles, where authenticity is mimicked and surveilled, trapping the girls between empowerment discourse and objectifying gaze (Dobson, 2015).

Hook Up & BDSM Culture

To contextualize my work further, I must convey how my experience was shaped by the hook-up culture, non-traditional relationship structures (such as polyamory, non-monogamous, friends with benefits), the rise of fetish, kink, BDSM, sexting and online dating. Paradoxically, what was once on the fringe of society, we find moving towards mainstream culture. Importantly, with such a fluid and moving sexual climate, it was incredibly difficult to navigate.

Hook-Up Culture

Research suggests that since the 1960s, dating and courtship culture has shifted towards a more spontaneous, non-committal form of sexual encounter (Bogle, 2016). While committed relationships are common, 'hookups' and 'friends-with-benefits' is phenomenon more prevalent in this era. Hookups are sexual encounters that usually involve two people who are not in a committed relationship, are often strangers, and usually involve alcohol (Bogle, 2016; T. A. Garcia et al., 2019).

Bogle researched hook up culture and college student sexual scripts and found college was a time to 'party' and 'get loose' (Bogle, 2016, p. 51). Hookup scripts are multifaceted and sometimes unpredictable, in that some sex can be determined as relationship sex or recreational sex (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). Hookup sexual scripts can also be misunderstood if one partner's script differs from the other, and cause pressure or coercion (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). Hookups are described by college students to be spontaneous, alcohol fueled encounters, that usually exclude communication about consent, protection, or sexual status (T. A. Garcia et al., 2019).

Research has captured alcohol being used specifically to facilitate hookups at social gatherings and parties and being intoxicated is sometimes used to explain the spontaneous sex (Orenstein, 2016). Working as a social lubricant, alcohol is often a catalyst for sexual behavior (Fielder et al., 2014; Orenstein, 2016) It is not surprising that up to 64% of college students indicated they were drinking during a hookup (Fielder & Carey, 2010). Many young people develop schemas regarding alcohol-related hook ups (T. A. Garcia et al., 2019). In some cases, young women use alcohol to 'excuse unsanctioned sexual behavior' and that alcohol related sex was more likely to increase regret and coercion (Livingston et al., 2012). Hookups could be an area of concern for

people with addictive tendencies as the experience of being ‘swept away’ (Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009) is much like a high experience of substances.

On objectification, Prior et al. (2025) qualitative study explores the benefits, drawbacks, and emotional impacts of hook up culture. Benefits included experiencing feelings of belonging, social connection, and affirmation. Drawbacks included negative emotions such as emptiness, disgust, and shame. The study highlighted how broader cultural narratives shape sexual scripts and perception of hookup culture. Women reported feeling dehumanized, objectified, used, objects of male gratification, and subject to peer-driven sexual conquest dynamics. Prior et al.’s (2025) study is a significant work in highlighting how hookup culture perpetuates gendered power imbalances.

Rodrigue and Fernet’s (2016) qualitative study examines objectification of women in hookup culture through the lens of individualism. The researchers reveal that women self-objectify while seeking sexual validation. Rodrigue and Fernet found that women often engage in hookups to assert sexual autonomy and challenge traditional norms around female sexuality. The participants describe men prioritizing their own pleasure and treat women as sex objects. Women described their hook up experiences created conflicting feelings, including regret, insecurity, or emotional detachment, which complicate the narrative of empowerment. The cultural scripts of hookup culture emphasize individual responsibility, hiding structural gender inequalities and the ways women’s experiences are shaped by male-dominant norms.

BDSM, Kink, & Fetish

Fifty Shades of Grey by E.L. James was the bestselling book between 2011-2019, selling over 35 million copies and e-books. The book received controversial reviews due

to the portrayal of normalizing sexual practices that elevated misogyny, male dominance, and female submission. Some argue that the 50 Shades of Grey 'phenomenon' caused exponential growth in BDSM interest, causing kink and fetish become mainstream, and inspiring an enormous growth in BDSM research literature (De Neef et al., 2019; Green, 2015).

In Deborah Cameron's book *Feminism* (2019), in a chapter about sex, she questions the implications of the 50 Shades of Grey cultural phenomena from a feminist lens,

> Did it say, for instance, that feminism has not changed the eternal truth that girls just wanna be dominated by older, richer, and more powerful men? Or do today's women get pleasure from fantasies of female powerlessness precisely because they are now, in reality, so powerful? Was the popularity of these books (which spawned a whole genre, dubbed "mommy porn" by the media) a sign that women have been liberated to explore their own desires without shame, or was it worrisome evidence of their continued susceptibility to representations that make violence against women sexy? (p. 75)

Here we see this neoliberal tension claiming to be a tool or sign of women's empowerment. When in actuality, gendered oppression may have been compounded by the decoy of false liberation. Alternatively, we could consider this from a liberal perspective and place the woman on equal footing with men as far as being able to express sexual desire, even if the power dynamic require the submission of women. Advocates of BDSM argue that the dynamic between a submissive and a dominate (S/M) is an equal relationship (Califia, 1980; Cameron, 2019). Radicals might argue that the

seeming paradox between these two tensions are two sides of the same patriarchal coin, and that the feminist objective would be abandon both in search a new definition of sexual experience not defined by power, but by desire (C. J. Jones, 2022).

In the 1980s, when porn was under scrutiny from radical cultural feminist (Dworkin, & McKinnon, 1981), libertarian feminists posited that S/M should be embraced as the full sexual experience Pat Califia (1980) writes in *Feminism and Sadomasochism*:

> Sadism is not a form of sexual assault. It is a consensual activity that involved polarized roles and intense sensations. An S/M scene is always preceded by s negotiation in which the top and bottom decided whether or not they will play, what activities are likely to occur, what activities will not occur and how long the scene will last. The bottom is usually given a "safe word" or "code action" she can use to stop the scene. This safe word allows the bottom to enjoy fantasy that the scene is not consensual, and to protest verbally or resist physically without halting stimulation…. The key word to understanding S/M is *fantasy*. The roles, dialogue, fetish costumes, and sexual activity are parts of a drama or ritual. The participants are enhancing their sexual pleasure, not damaging or imprisoning one another. A sadomasochist is well aware that a role adopted during a scene is not appropriated during other interactions and that a fantasy role is not the sum total of her being (emphasis in original text, p. 167-168).

People involved in kink tend to have levels of education and socioeconomic classes (De Neef et al., 2019). Nordling et al. (2000) found that childhood sexual abuse is high in BDSM practitioners (8% men, 23% women), men practicing sadism and women

practicing masochism. Frías et al. (2017) found that women who participated in sexual masochism were more likely to have borderline personality disorder.

In De Neef et al.'s (2019) systematic review of current BDSM literature, the authors summarize existing literature prevalence rates, describe the BDSM spectrum, stigma surrounding BDSM, pathologizing BDSM, psychological aspects of BDSM interests (i.e. personality, personality disorder, adverse childhood experiences, education levels, orientation) and hormonal changes associated with BDSM. Prevalence rates are not conclusive. Schuerwegen et al.'s (2023) study captured a large-scale participation across America, Europe and the Pacific, estimating that 73.8% showed interest in BDSM.

BDSM has been stigmatized for some time, but recently, there has been some attempt to undo the assumed pathology associated with the practice De Neef et al.'s (2019). The DSM (DSM-IV and DSM-5) made a distinction between non-pathologic atypical sexual interest and paraphilic disorders, in which to be considered a disorder, the patient must experience distress or at risk of harming others. Social stigma associated with participating in BDSM has been found to be linked with higher rates of suicidality (S. L. Brown et al., 2017).

One of the reasons people are drawn to these sexual practices is because they are seeking intense experiences. Impulsivity and sensation seeking are two characteristics of people who suffer from SUD, contributes to the likelihood of participating in BDSM activities. Like addiction, BDSM can offer new experiences that increases intensity of pleasure or pain, just as users may seek to increase intensity substances once the body has developed tolerance.

Digital Environment and Mechanism

Social Media

Sexual objectification has morphed with social trends and advances in digital technology. With the advent of social media, new avenues of objectification have emerged. Today's media is a primary delivery source of sexual objectification (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2008; Zurbriggen, 2018). People are primed by media to affect their behavior, thoughts, and judgements and what we see on screen, often manifests in our day-to-day lives (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002). In many cases, this type of socialization can appear innocuous, but in other cases, such as extreme forms of objectification can be harmful. One of the most cited examples of harmful media found online is music videos. Music videos have long been source of much academic interest and research indicates to be getting worse over the past 30 years (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2008; Aubrey et al., 2011; Santoniccolo et al., 2019; L. M. Ward, 2016).

Monica Ward's extensive body of empirical work positions sexualized media as a central mechanism of sexual socialization, showing how repeated exposure shapes girls' and women's sexual self-schemas in ways that prioritize aesthetic desirability and external validation, supporting similar tenants in outlined in objectification theory. Across reviews and longitudinal studies, Ward demonstrates that media does not merely reflect sexual norms but actively teach them, normalizing the evaluation of women's bodies (L. M. Ward, 2016). Her synthesis of two decades of research shows that sexualized portrayals of women are consistently associated with more permissive sexual attitudes, internalization of beauty ideals, and acceptance of gendered sexual scripts (L. M. Ward, 2016).

Similarly, S. E. Davis (2018) examined how online sexuality discourses shape women's technology experience, women's self-image, and life goals like education and career paths, and found that Instagram's social media objectifies, denigrates women to submissives, and highlights whiteness. One study found that the number of Facebook friends' girls (aged 13-15) predicted the internalization of beauty ideals and motivation towards thinness (Tiggemann & Slater, 2017). Other studies found that when young women are exposed to various forms of media (such as social media, video games, television content), in which images of girls and women are idealized or sexualized, those viewing the images experience increased self-objectification, weight dissatisfaction, and drive for thinness (Daniels, 2009; Harrison & Hefner, 2014; Meier & Gray, 2014).

Dating Profiles

In Europe and North America, studies have shown that most people meet their dates online (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2022). Online dating provides accessibility to romantic partners and allows people to develop identities and explore desires. While online dating has been revolutionary in the way we connect to one another, heightened objectification may be leading to mental health concerns, as they often encourage users to evaluate others primarily on appearance and sexualized cues (Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2021; Bowman et al., 2025; Konings et al., 2024; A. M. Smith et al., 2025). While there are many benefits to online dating, problematic use occurs when users receive using the app excessively, abuses anonymity, and begin to act impulsively. I will outline how frequent use of dating apps has been linked to increased sexual objectification of others.

The Tinder app and apps like it were designed on the same basis as B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017) in that the swiping left and right

feature creates anticipation of a match which keeps the user engaged and leads to the immediate reward of a potential match. The immediate reward feature, as well as receiving external validation, can lead to users developing addiction in users. Using Orosz et al. (2018) definition, problematic use is considered addictive use, although not in the DSM5. Characteristics of addicted users are correlated with sociability, neuroticism, sexual permissiveness, and sensation seeking. Searching for sexual encounters and self-esteem enhancement is a predictor of problematic use (Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2021). One of the reasons women use dating apps is to boost their self-esteem (Orosz et al., 2018).

Online dating has fundamentally changed the way we meet and experience romantic or sexual relationships, and is facilitated largely by objectifying mechanisms, "Like showrooms that display commodities on shelves" (Bhattacharya, 2025, p. 1). There are complex dynamics when presenting the self in online dating environments. In a recent study exploring objectification and projection, Bhattacharya (2025) argues that dating apps are characterized by easy accesses, excessive choices, low attention spans, and frivolous interactions, in which users depict themselves as sexual products to be consumed. Users use language like "human shopping" and "I'm on the market," while over sexualizing themselves. A. M. Smith et al. (2025) point to the issue of consent when users may incorrectly interpret matches or messages as consent for sexual activity. They warn us of issues in miscommunication and challenges of establishing clear consent boundaries.

On platforms like Tinder and Bumble, a significant amount of dating profiles features sexualized images (Konings et al., 2024). One study found that 56.8% of profile

pictures displayed sexualized facial expressions (Konings et al., 2024). This trend was more pronounced among women, non-heterosexual users, and individuals with negative body image perceptions. Chen (2013) found that women with higher levels of self-objectification are more likely to curate their profiles according to beauty normativity. They found that this behavior is driven by a heightened need for social approval (Chen, 2013).

In Bonilla-Zorita et al.'s (2021) systematic review examines the psychological and behavioral impacts of online dating, including how the platforms can contribute to problematic use patterns. The use of swipe-right interfaces, emphasis on profile images, rapid judgment mechanisms, and algorithms, can foster objectifying tendencies. Psychosocial risks include self-objectification, body dissatisfaction, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, and compulsive app use. Swiping culture encourages seeing people as disposable or interchangeable. Users are reduced to physical traits- which is objectification. The gamified interface rewards superficial judgments and reinforces appearance over personality.

Sexting

While some research frames sexting as an other, scholarship emphasize its potential to function as an objectifying practice, shaped by media portrayals, peer pressure, and the risk of non-consensual sharing. Research conveys the complexity of sexting being both a form of sexual expression and sexually objectifying. Gassó et al. (2019) distinguish between consensual sexting (often framed as sexual communication or intimacy) and coerced/non-consensual sexting (pressure to send; redistribution without consent. They point to the issue of harm and meaning differing across these contexts.

Dobson and Ringrose (2016) describe how digital sexual practices are shaped by broader cultural scripts rather than "choice" alone (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016).

Early research of sexting focused on adolescent populations, prevalence, and mental health consequence, but more recently attention has been growing in areas of adult women, specifically in relation dating practice, online personal branding, neoliberal sexual norms, and post-feminist discourse of empowerment (Döring, 2014; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020). This section includes empirical research using objectification theory, qualitative feminist research, and critical theory from psychology, sociology and media studies. Here I synthesize interdisciplinary research on sexting with particular attention to adult women, mental health outcomes, and feminist analyses of power, agency, and harm.

Empirical studies capture that sexting is most prevalent to adolescents and women aged up to 45, when sexting has become normalized in dating and relationship maintenance (Döring, 2014; Gassó et al., 2019). Dobson and Ringrose (2016) report important differences between adolescent and adult women sexting experiences. Adult women frame sexting as their 'choice' or an expression of their 'sexual confidence' but this occurs with them feeling they must portray sexual availability; they feel relational pressure, and; they fear rejection and abandonment (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016). Whereas adolescent sexting is influenced by peer status, experimentation, and developmental risk. Considering women have been socialized for longer periods, the difference is significant. When images are distributed without consent, women face worse consequences than adolescents, including workplace repercussions, custody concerns, intimate partner control, and long-term digital permanence.

Bianchi et al. (2017) investigated how the internalization of media models and body-esteem influence sexting motivations among adolescents. Adolescents who internalized images of idealized bodies were more likely to engage in sexting. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Mori et al. (2019) examined the association between sexting and mental health among adolescents. Findings suggest participants who sext were more likely to experience anxiety and depression symptoms.

Mori et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis to determine the prevalence of sexting behaviors among emerging adults. The study found that approximately 38% had sent sexts, 41.5% had received them, and 15% had experienced non-consensual forwarding of their sexts. The prevalence of non-consensual sexting highlights the risk of sexual objectification. Similarly, Crapolicchio et al. (2022) research explored self-objectification in women who are at risk of non-consensual dissemination. Their findings indicate that women who score higher on self-objectification are more likely to engage in sexting and less likely to practice protective boundaries around their images. Below, I examine the implications of non-consensual dissemination in more depth.

Revenge Porn Domestic Violence: Proliferation of Distribution of Non-Consensual Intimate Images. "Revenge porn," more accurately described as non-consensual intimate image sharing (NCII) or image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), refers to the distribution or threat to distribute sexually explicit images or videos of a person without their consent (McGlynn et al., 2017, 2021). Although, my experience was specifically a revenge motive from the perpetrator, the term "revenge porn" is increasingly critiqued for implying motive (revenge) and consent to the creation of the image, because the term obscures the broader spectrum of image-based harms such as

hacking, voyeurism, up-skirting, and synthetic or AI-generated deepfake pornography (Henry & Flynn, 2020). While men can be victims, women and girls are disproportionately targeted, highlighting broader structures of gendered power (Henry & Powell, 2018).

Empirical studies suggest that non-consensual image sharing is widespread and increasing with the expansion of digital media. In a national U.S. study, approximately 10 million Americans (about 4%) reported being victims of image-based abuse (Lenhart et al., 2016). In 2014 Survey data from the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative indicates that roughly 90% of victims are women. In 2017, Pew Research Center reports 4% of the US adult population have had intimate images shared without consent, reporting that women experience more severe and sexualized forms of abuse. Young adults aged 18–29 are at greatest risk, with higher victimization rates among women, LGBTQ+ people, and ethnic minorities (Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020). Alarmingly prevalence is getting worse- in a 2025 multinational survey, 22.6% respondents reported an experience of IBSA (Umbach et al., 2025).

Research and feminist theory reveal that revenge porn is a form of sexual violence rooted in patriarchal and neoliberal logics (Eikren & Ingram-Waters, 2016; Gabriel, 2020; Henry & Powell, 2018; Sheikh & Rogers, 2024). Eikren and Ingram-Waters (2016) posit revenge porn is a form of gendered cybersexual assault that functions to discipline and punish women. Henry and Powell (2018) argue that IBSA is a continuum of sexual violence, that goes beyond privacy violation or interpersonal conflict. Gabriel (2020) argues that legal systems fail victims of because they do not adequately recognize NCII as sexualized, gendered harm. Sheikh and Rogers (2024) synthesizes international

research showing NCII as part of broader gender-based violence ecosystems, functioning as a form of technology-facilitated sexual violence. Sheikh and Rogers (2024) points to NCII becoming a growing public-health and gender-justice concern. NCII produces profound mental-health consequences and are compounded by victim-blaming (Citron & Frank, 2014). Gill (2007b) and McRobbie (2009) argue this reflects double standards where women are encouraged to be sexy yet punished for being sexually expressive. Scholars call for survivor-centered, intersectional approaches that move beyond criminalization toward cultural transformation, collective accountability, and reclamation of digital subjectivity (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; Eikren & Ingram-Waters, 2016; Gabriel, 2020; Henry & Powell, 2018; Sheikh & Rogers, 2024).

Part 3 Objectification Theory and Predicting The Mental Health Consequences of Objectification

This section examines the seminal work of feminist psychologists Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory, which provides a framework for understanding how societal objectification leads to mental health consequences. The authors argue that societal objectification leads women to internalize social constructs of beauty and body ideals, causing them to self-objectify, treating themselves as objects. Women internalize an external, objectifying gaze and begin to habitually monitor their physical appearance. This self-surveillance fosters fixation on the body, reduces opportunities for optimal flow states, diminishes bodily awareness (such as sensitivity to hunger, satiety, emotions, and physical sensations), and increases vulnerability to depression, anxiety, shame, and eating disorders. Fredrickson and Roberts argue that intense self-consciousness and habitual body monitoring disrupt psychological consciousness, emphasizing the significant cognitive costs of this preoccupation,

including the time spent ruminating, preparing, and acquiring resources to meet beauty standards. The time consumed by this preoccupation comes at the expense of pursuits that could enhance other life outcomes, such as personal development, skill acquisition, social and community participation, and athletic or academic achievement. The personal and societal cost is great.

Building on this theoretical framework, a substantial body of empirical research has documented the wide-ranging psychological, cognitive, sexual, and developmental consequences of societal objectification. To date, research grounded in objectification theory has documented the mental health consequences of societal objectification across emotional domains (e.g. depression, anxiety, shame, and safety concerns), cognitive domains (e.g. reduced bodily awareness, diminished flow experiences, and impaired task performance), and sexual health outcomes (e.g. sexual dysfunction and risky sexual behavior). Related studies have illustrated how objectification can lead to developmental issues (e.g. cognitive development, identity formation, age-related self-esteem, and sexual development).

Like other socialization theories, Fredrickson and Roberts point out that self-objectification is a strategy for improving life outcomes. Because women's life outcomes can be determined by their attractiveness, women become the first surveyors of themselves (J. Berger, 1972). In a beauty-obsessed society, having a favorable appearance can benefit women, can determine life outcomes and social mobility, and acts like a social currency, as one's beauty and body becomes a commodity. When a woman has internalized self-objectification because of socialization, it becomes a part of her

identity, and in turn appears to be a matter of personal agency and seemingly natural (Costanzo, 1992).

Fredrickson and Roberts propose that societal objectification is produced and reinforced through both media representations and interpersonal interactions. Media images in advertising, film, television, and digital platforms circulate narrow and idealized beauty standards that frame women's bodies as objects for visual evaluation. These interactions may involve romantic partners, family members, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, or strangers. Fredrickson and Roberts argue that both intrapersonal and environmental factors shape the frequency and intensity of self-objectification: some conditions promote a more constant, chronic internalization of self-objectification, while others trigger it situationally, such as during moments of being stared at or subjected to catcalling. Several studies have made the distinction between state and trait of objectification (see Moradi and Huang for review). State refers to a temporary, situational experience of self-objectification at the moment, such as during specific activities or exposure to objectifying environments. This is a transient mental condition where women might momentarily focus excessively on their appearance, feel shame, or engage in self-monitoring, but these feelings are not permanent traits. Conversely, a trait describes an enduring characteristic that reflects a person's long-standing pattern of behavior or perception regarding their body, and self-objectification becomes a part of their everyday being.

At the time the theory was written, pre-existing research existed on overarching themes of sexual objectification such as the sexualization of girls, body obsession, sexual violence, and employment discrimination. Identified forms of objectification were the

pressure to become thinner, sexual abuse and sexual harassment from others, 'subtle and covert sexual objectification' (Field et al., 1999; Groesz et al., 2002; Jacobi et al., 2004; Larkin et al., 1996; Murnen & Smolak, 2000; O'Connor-Greene et al., 1994; Stice, 2002; Weiner & Thompson, 1997). Many of these studies grounded their theory on research established before or concurrent to objectification theory. Fredrickson and Roberts wanted to address the gap of documenting the subtle, more insidious, micro-level occurrences of sexual objectification in women's everyday lives.

Depression and Body Shame

Consistent across racial and ethnic groups, women experience significantly higher rates of depression (Kessler, 2003; Kuehner, 2017; Salk et al., 2017). Biopsychosocial research suggests that this gender disparity is multifactorial. First, biological research points to fluctuations in estrogen and related neuroendocrine processes, which may increase women's vulnerability to prolonged depressive episodes, particularly during reproductive transitions (Altemus et al., 2014). Second, sociocultural theories emphasize that women's structural oppression, chronic stress exposure, and relative lack of social and economic power are significantly linked to depressive outcomes (Kessler, 2003; Russo & Green, 1993). Finally, psychological research suggests that gendered personality and relational orientations—such as heightened interpersonal sensitivity, emotional attunement, and self-sacrificing tendencies—may further contribute to women's increased risk for depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001, 2012).

In objectification theory studies, depressive symptoms have been correlated with lower self-esteem, body shame, and disordered eating symptoms (Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003; Miner-Rubino et al., 2002; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002;

Tolman et al., 2006). Inversely, depression may lead to body shame, body surveillance, and high-risk behaviors (Ertl et al., 2022). The role of body shame mediated the link between body surveillance and depressive symptoms in multiple studies (Grabe et al., 2007; Muehlenkamp et al., 2005; Szymanski & Henning, 2007; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004). These authors argue that when women do not meet the societal ideals of beauty and body standards, they internalize shame. Internalized shame manifests in body-image problems, body surveillance, and body shame.

Eating Disorders

Calogero and Thompson (2009) examined objectification theory measuring sexual objectification, sexual well-being, and disordered eating in American women and British women. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to examine sexual objectification on the understudied sexual consequences and its relationship to disordered eating in two highly developed western societies. They discovered that in American women, the higher the self-objectification resulted in lower sexual esteem, which mediated the relationship between disordered eating and self-objectification. In British women, higher self-objectification led to body shame and lower self-esteem, which in turn, led to eating disorder symptomology. This study suggests that the measure of how much a woman likes and accepts her sexual self is a direct consequence of self-objectification.

Sexuality

I discuss sexuality further as I dive a little deeper into intimacy problems and sexual dissociation associated with self-objectification, and then I examine objectification in relation to out of control sexual behavior in relationship to alcohol use. Sexuality represents a key domain through which self-objectification shapes lived experience,

influencing sexual self-esteem, embodied arousal, and the use of substances as a means of regulating anxiety, performance pressures, and bodily discomfort. While objectification theory has not yet been directly applied to the study of intimacy, I will review existing research suggests that disruptions in self-awareness, shame, and fragmented self-concept may undermine women's capacity to experience emotional and sexual intimacy. Although sexual dissociation has not been empirically examined within objectification theory, the theory's emphasis on adopting a third-person perspective toward the body offers a compelling framework for understanding dissociative sexual experiences, particularly among women with trauma histories or heightened self-objectification.

Carretta and Szymanski (2022) suggested that a possible motivation for drinking before engaging in sexual activity is to relieve somatic tension and anxiety related to vaginal lubrication. This study found that self-objectification was correlated with alcohol use and alcohol use prior to hooking up, and self-objectification was indirectly related to alcohol consumption via sexual self-esteem, alcohol sexual enhancement expectancies, and hooking up. Another study demonstrated that substance use is associated sexual dysfunction, including lack of desire and sexual satisfaction, and anorgasmia (inability or difficulty having an orgasm; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011).

Unable to Experience Intimacy

Intimacy is widely understood as a necessary component of healthy sexual relationships and requires a capacity for self-awareness, emotional vulnerability, and connection to internal states. To date, no empirical studies have directly applied constructs from objectification theory to examine the ability to experience intimacy,

either intrapersonally or interpersonally. However, related research on the sexual experiences of women with serious mental illness offers useful insight. Women with severe mental illness often struggle to form and maintain intimate relationships due to difficulties expressing vulnerability and sustaining a stable sense of self (Mizock & Carr, 2021). Additionally, women who perceive themselves as unattractive or inadequate partners may avoid initiating or sustaining intimate relationships altogether (Cook, 2000; Frieh, 2020; McCann et al., 2019).

Substance Abuse

Women use substances for a range of reasons, including recreational, social, medicinal, and maladaptive or addictive purposes. Research grounded in objectification theory suggests that chronic exposure to sexual objectification may contribute to substance use as a coping strategy. For example, Szymanski et al. (2011) proposed that the psychological distress associated with both every day and extreme forms of objectification may lead some women to self-medicate with alcohol. Similarly, Le et al. (2021) found that self-objectification is indirectly associated with alcohol use through its role in emotion regulation and coping.

Carr and Szymanski (2011) hypothesized serial mediation with objectification. Serial mediation is a research model where the influence of an independent variable flows through multiple mediators before affecting the dependent variable. They found that everyday forms of objectification and extreme forms of objectification are correlated with nicotine, alcohol, and other drug abuse. To explain further, first, sexual objectification causes women to internalize social constructs about beauty and body ideals. This then causes women to experience body shame because they may not match

such ideals. Body shame then causes negative effects and depression, finally resulting in substance use as a means of self-medication.

In contrast to Carr and Szymanski's (2011) intrapersonal focus on self-objectification, Haikalis et al. (2017) adopted an interpersonal perspective and tested a reverse mediational sequence. Specifically, their study examined whether women's alcohol consumption increased the likelihood of being sexually objectified by men. Drawing on objectification theory, Haikalis et al. (2017) assessed sexual objectification in the form of body evaluation and unwanted sexual advances, alongside women's alcohol use (frequency and quantity) and sexual victimization. Results indicated that body evaluation mediated the association between frequency of alcohol consumption and unwanted sexual advances. Furthermore, both body evaluation and unwanted sexual advances jointly mediated the relationship between alcohol use and sexual victimization.

Ertl et al. (2022) used objectification theory to examine the relationship to body surveillance, body shame, depressive symptoms and high- risk sex and substance-use behavior (number of partners and condom use). The aim was to identify if body surveillance, body shame, and depressive symptoms mediate pathways to substance use and high-risk sex. The study found that objectification was linked to an increased number of partners but not condom use.

Out of Control Sexual Behavior & Substance Use Comorbidity

Efforts have been made to refer to what was called 'sex addiction' as 'hypersexual disorder' or 'out-of-control sexual behavior.' Some debate has occurred over the term 'sex addiction' because some claim there is no such thing as too much sex (Ley, 2012), and that sex should not be included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual

of Mental Disorders (Kafka, 2010). While sex addiction is not the focus of this research, it is necessary to point out the risk of developing sex addiction because of societal objectification. Currently there are no objectification theory studies that examine sex addiction, unless one considers high-risk behaviors in this category. Out of control sexual behavior is often developed by those who are addicted to substances, before treatment and after treatment, acting as a 'replacement' addiction (Bőthe et al., 2018; P. Carnes, 1983; P. J. Carnes et al., 2005).

Out-of-control sexual behavior is characterized by hypersexuality, compulsivity, engagement in risky sexual practices, boundary violations, difficulty experiencing intimacy, and persistent relationship problems (P. Carnes, 1983; Goodman, 2001; Kafka, 2010). Neurobiological and clinical research suggests that sexual behavior can activate dopaminergic reward pathways, temporarily alleviate symptoms of depression or anxiety, and provide short-term improvements in self-esteem (Goodman, 2001; Kafka, 2010). Sexual behavior may also offer opportunities to exert control or relinquish control within interpersonal dynamics—patterns that mirror affect-regulation and reinforcement processes commonly observed among individuals with substance use disorders (P. J. Carnes et al., 2005; Reid et al., 2011).

Importantly, women entering recovery may be especially vulnerable to interpreting their sexual desire as "sex addiction," which reflects the tendency to pathologize women's sexuality (Ley, 2012; Moser, 2011). Research on addiction and attachment suggests that individuals are looking for connection and intimacy (Flores, 2004; Khantzian, 1997). From this perspective, women maybe looking for relief from shame, objectification, and moral scrutiny (Calogero & Thompson, 2009; Tolman, 2002).

Risky Sexual Behavior

There is extensive literature on the influence of substance use on risky sexual behavior. Between 18-29 years, young women who experiment with heavy alcohol use and sex have higher levels of alcohol use disorder (Grant et al., 2017). Alcohol related sex often involves poor communication between partners, no protections against sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy, and multiple, high-risk sexual partners (Grant et al., 2015). The spread of STDs continues to be a 'hidden epidemic among young people (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 1997), although recent data indicates slower rates of infection (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). In objectification theory studies, heightened self-objectification was found to negatively correlate with sexual self-efficacy, sexual experience, and condom use (Impett et al., 2006). Parent and Moradi (2015) found that body shame and body surveillance lead to decreased confidence in obtaining condoms, condom-use self-efficacy, and less assertiveness to insist on condoms during sex.

Gap

My literature review demonstrates that scholarship on sexual objectification is deeply rooted in feminist theory across second- to fourth-wave feminism (Beauvoir, 1949; Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1990; Collins, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991; Dworkin, 1981; Firestone, 1970; Friedan, 1963; Frye, 1983; Gill, 2007a, 2007b; Hanisch, 1969; hooks, 1981; MacKinnon, 1989; McRobbie, 2009; Millett, 1970). This body of work situates objectification as a key mechanism of gender oppression, with recent scholarship arguing that sexual objectification is intensifying within the neoliberal, postfeminist era (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009). The issue has gained attention not only in academic circles (Lamb et al., 2019; Moradi & Huang, 2008) but also at national levels (APA,

2007, 2018; OBJECT, 2009). While ample scholarly and popular literature exists on sources of objectification, such as purity culture (Cieslik, 2022; Freitas, 2008; Natarajan et al., 2022; Valenti, 2009), hookup culture (Bogle, 2016; Fielder & Carey, 2010; J. R. J. R. Garcia et al., 2012; Prior et al., 2025), BDSM normalization (Califia, 1980; Cameron, 2019; De Neef et al., 2019; Green, 2015; McInnes, 2021; Simula, 2019), pornography (Dworkin, 1981; Keller, 2018; MacKinnon, 1989; C. Smith & Attwood, 2014), social media (APA, 2007, 2018; Aubrey, 2006a, 2006b; Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002; Santoniccolo et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Slater, 2015; L. M. Ward, 2016; Zurbriggen et al., 2018), dating profiles (Bhattacharya, 2025; Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2021; Konings et al., 2024; A. M. Smith et al., 2025), sexting (e.g. Bianchi et al., 2017; Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; Liong & Cheng, 2019; Mori et al., 2019; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020), and revenge porn (Henry & Powell, 2018; Lenhart et al., 2016; McGlynn et al., 2021; Umbach et al., 2025), rarely, does this research consider how these sources and mechanisms of objectification compound on individual subjectivity from first-hand experience.

Research from the APA and objectification theory illustrates the pervasive and worsening influence of media on adolescent girls' and young women's mental health. In their review of objectification theory, Moradi and Huang (2008) recommend examining specific subpopulations particularly those vulnerable to multiple forms of prejudice- such as women in recovery. They posit that sexually objectifying experiences may be compounded by factors like mental health status, like substance abuse.

Given that self-objectification is intrinsically subjective and shaped personal history, socio-cultural norms, and internalized ideals, understanding its impacts requires a methodology that specifically captures the nuance of the lived experience. Most

objectification theory research are empirical designs, which is valuable, but does not account for the layered complexities of cultural forces on subjectivity. This gap points to the need for autoethnography.

My research responds to this need by using scholarly autoethnography to examine my own experience of sexual objectification. I do this as a participant and a researcher. I aim to capture my gendered perspective of my experience of sexual objectification and its mental health consequences; to explore the socio-cultural context of sexual objectification within a neoliberal-postfeminist era; and examine how my individual experience reflects and critique broader social conditions of gender oppression. By situating my personal narrative within feminist theoretical frameworks and broader cultural analysis, this study aims not only to document an individual trajectory but also to interrogate how structural forces shape, sustain, and complicate women's self-perceptions, relationships, and mental health.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

This research is guided by the following research questions: *What is my perspective of my experience of sexual objectification and its mental health consequences*? Within this question I aimed to explore the following sub-questions: 1) *What is the socio-cultural context of sexual objectification within a neoliberal-postfeminist era?* 2) *How does my individual experience reflect a critique broader social conditions of gender oppression?*

In Chapter One, I provide an overview of the research purpose, background, significance, and methodological orientation. In Chapter Two, I review sexual objectification from multiple feminist perspectives; explore sources of objectification and review the mental health consequences of sexual objectification in contemporary culture. In this chapter, I outline the theoretical foundations that support this research, drawing on a borderlands approach to constructing the conceptual framework. This method embraces the intersection of multiple theoretical frameworks, reflecting the complex and overlapping dimensions of subjectivity, power, and lived experience explored in this study. To explore my lived experience of becoming aware of the neoliberal-postfeminist sexual objectification matrix, a qualitative approach is the most appropriate. Here, I will outline my epistemological stance, the borderline approach to theoretical design, and the qualitative paradigms used for inquiry.

Constructionist & Feminist Epistemology

Epistemology addresses the question of how we know what we know. Identifying my epistemological stance is essential to clarifying the foundations of this research. Feminist scholars argue that epistemology, the theory of knowledge, shapes what is considered valid and meaningful within an inquiry and is always influenced by relations of power (Collins, 2004; Harding, 1991). Constructivism, which underpins much of feminist and qualitative research, assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is created through interaction (Harding, 1991). Researchers, therefore, explore how individuals make sense of their world through their positionality, social location, and lived experience. This study is grounded in both constructionist and feminist epistemology that values lived experience, subjectivity, and reflexivity as legitimate and necessary sources of knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2014; D. E. Smith, 1987).

Sandra Harding (1986) is known for standpoint epistemology, which argues that women, and other marginalized group, have a unique perspective on the world due to their social position. Similarly, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) emphasized the importance of intersectionality in accounting for the ways that race, gender, class, and other axes of identity interact to produce unique experiences of marginalization. Building on Harding's standpoint epistemology, Collins (1990) introduced Black feminist epistemology, emphasizing that knowledge is formed by lived experience, especially when that experience is informed by intersecting systems of oppression. Collins (1990) argues that Black women have a unique standpoint that offer critical insights into how power operates across institutions, cultural norms, and everyday life.

Black feminist thought challenges dominant (white, male, Western) epistemologies by centering community-based knowledge, oral traditions, and resistance

practices (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984). Historically these epistemologies have been devalued in mainstream academia. This methodological stance acknowledges the situated and relational nature of knowledge production (Haraway, 1988). The autoethnographic method challenges dominant patriarchal and positivist traditions that privilege objectivity (Collins, 2004; Sprague, 2005). Thus, my epistemological approach informs my methodology and theoretical framework. This aligns with feminists' commitments to critique, resist, and transform.

Borderlands Approach

Monolithic approaches that use a single theoretical lens risk producing limited and reductive understanding of complex phenomena. Monolithic refers to a theoretical framework that might be singular, uniform, or unchanging. This is particularly limiting when analyzing sexuality which is influenced by discourse, power constructs, and layers of cultural and historical factors. To offer more contextual understanding, feminist scholars have advanced more inclusive and dynamic approaches to knowledge production.

Significantly, Anzaldúa (1987) and Anzaldúa et al. (2012) introduce a borderlands theoretical approach rooted in her concept of mestiza consciousness. Anzaldúa's (1987) borderlands approach recognizes that knowledge and the subjective experience is not fixed, but negotiated across cultural, psychic, and structural boundaries. Anzaldúa writes "From racial, ideological, cultural, biological cross pollicization, an "alien" consciousness is presently in the making—a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer.* It's a consciousness of the borderland" (Anzaldúa et al., 2012, p. 99). 'Mestiza'

translates to ‘a person with mixed blood’ and *una conciencia de mujer* translates to ‘a woman’s conscience,’ or ‘awareness.’

Anzaldúa et al.’s (2012) approach not only exemplifies critical feminist practice, but the borderlands approach is significantly apt because I am a researcher presenting my lived experience of someone who has migrated to the United States mid-life, after living in differing geographic and cultural climates. Anzaldúa et al. (2012) describes the internal struggle of someone who straddles three cultures simultaneously:

> Cradles in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, struggling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza*, undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war….A struggle at the borders. Because I, a mestiza, continually walk out of one culture and into another, because I am in all cultures at the same time. The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza’s dual or multiple personalities is plagued by psychic restlessness…. (p. 100).

Anzaldúa et al. (2012) suggest that differing perspectives can often clash and cause a duel inside us, but we must resist viewing the world from the oppressed and oppressor standpoint. She argues for a perspective that avoids rigidity while tolerating ambiguity:

> From convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode) to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and towards a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (p. 100)

The goal of the *mestiza* consciousness is to perceive beyond the restrictions of dualist thinking:

> The work of the *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in the healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective massive consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war. (p.102)

The concept of dualism is central to the idea of objectification. Looking at a woman's body as an object, desubjectifying her (C. J. Jones, 2022). It illustrates the process of 'othering' her to humanity. A woman who self-objectifies thinks about herself as an object that needs to meet standards, that can be improved, shaped, and styled to increase value, to attract male attention. This process separates her from her soul, from the collective consciousness; she lives in a space of objectifying imagery and sound bites of her audience's impressions. The separation of body and selfhood needs to be healed and integrated again.

Therefore, a borderlands theoretical framework [3]as established by Anzaldúa will be utilized as the lens for this study which incorporates critical feminist theory that

[3] The Borderlands Theoretical Framework by S. R. Jones and Abes (2013) conceptualizes identity as fluid, intersecting, and continuously negotiated within shifting social, cultural, and structural contexts. Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *borderlands*, the framework emphasizes the in-between spaces where identities are shaped through tensions, contradictions, and power relations rather than fixed categories. While identity is a significant aspect of the self, it does not incorporate subjectivity or the unconsciousness self as specifically as I require, nor does it leave room for the mental health implication of sexual objectification, so I opted to develop a framework only using Anzaldúa's writings.

includes existential feminism and radical feminism, post-structural feminism (including feminist media scholars), and sex positive and liberal feminism.

Qualitative Paradigms

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research is a contextualizing and interpretive practice that seeks to understand the world through lived experiences, social contexts, and meaning-making processes. It is a naturalistic approach that studies people and phenomena in their everyday settings, using methods such as interviews, field notes, and observations to make the world visible. These practices interpret meaning individuals assign to their experiences, transforming them into rich, layered phenomena. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) highlight that qualitative research is transformative, writing:

> Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (p. 44).

To begin, I must establish the key assumptions and theoretical frameworks that guide how I assign meaning. This research is shaped by interpretive paradigms such as critical

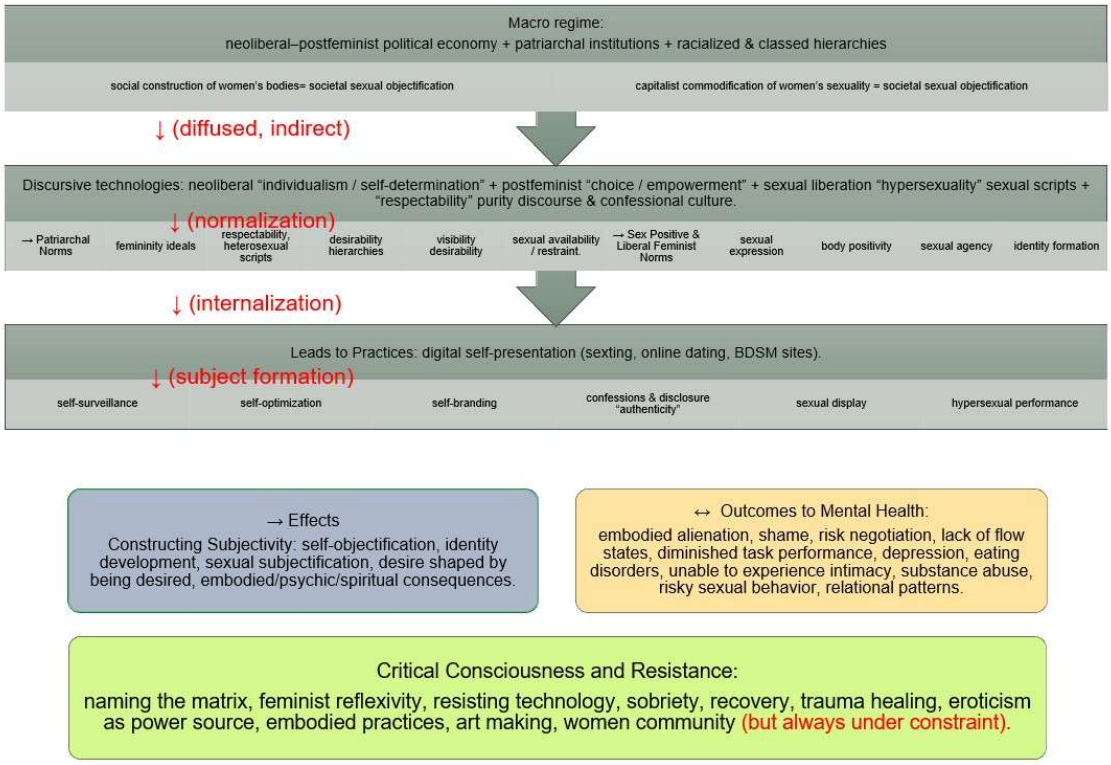
feminism, sex positive and liberal feminism, and poststructuralism. These frameworks collectively support an approach that values subjectivity, questions power, and explores how meaning is socially constructed through discourse, culture, and embodied experience.

Borderland Theoretical Framework Overview

Below, I briefly describe how my borderland theoretical framework explains the key concepts and theories that guide this study and clarifies how I interpret the phenomenon under analysis. I begin with a broad overview of each theoretical tradition, outlining the overarching concerns and questions they seek to address. I then move into a deeper engagement with the specific concepts and ideas that shape my analysis. My theoretical framework includes critical feminist theory that includes existential feminism, radical feminism, intersectional feminism, post-structural feminism (including feminist media scholars), and sex positive and liberal feminism. In this section, I articulate an analytic framework for examining how sexual objectification operates within a neoliberal postfeminist matrix. Below is a concept map which illustrates the integrated dynamics of the matrix.

Figure 2

Neoliberal-Postfeminist Sexual Objectification Matrix Theoretical Model



In this matrix, gendered power is diffused through interlocking processes of normalization, femininity norms (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Dworkin, 1981; Millett, 1970; R. Morgan, 1970) and practices of hypersexuality, self-surveillance and self-optimization that socially construct the female body and subjectivity (Gill, 2007a, 2007b; A. McRobbie, 2009). The power dynamic here serves men's sexual appetites and commodifies the female body to be consumed, used, and sold (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Federici, 2004; Firestone, 1970). I describe subjectivity as constituted through culture, discourse, and historical conditions rather than arising from an autonomous self (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978a).

I frame how women's objectification has morphed from self-objectification to 'subjectification' in which women are conditioned to actively construct themselves as sexually desirable and socially valuable subjects (Foucault, 1978b, 1988; Gill, 2007a, 2007b). I articulate how social norms of femininity, sexuality, morality, and value, socially construct women's bodies as objects to be seen and how women's subjective experiences governed by that objectifying mechanism (Bartky, 1990; Beauvoir, 1949; Butler, 1990; Collins, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Frye, 1983; hooks, 1992; C. J. Jones, 2022; MacKinnon, 1989; Millett, 1970; R. Morgan, 1970; Nussbaum, 1995; Paasonen et al., 2020). I examined the adoption of sexual scripts and directives under neoliberal and post-feminism influence (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009; Rottenberg, 2018; Zeisler, 2016) reframing hypersexuality as an individualized choice and a form of personal branding, upheld by the rhetoric of individualism, choice, and empowerment. This includes sex positive and liberal feminism view romantic, heteronormative, and erotic scripts, and the purported benefits of sexualization, sexual objectification, femininity, hook-up culture, fetish, kink, BDSM, sexting and online dating (Barnard, 2014; Califia, 1980; Easton & Hardy, 2001; Entwistle, 2000; J. R. Garcia et al., 2012; D. Kellie et al., 2021; A. Kisner, 2010; C. Leboeuf, 2019a; M. Melavc et al., 2024; Moffitt et al., 2024; Queen, 1997; Vendemia, DeAndrea & Johnson, 2021). Positive dimensions include self-expression, increased sexual agency, confidence, and the ability to reclaim desire on one's own terms (McElroy, 1996; Paglia, 1992). Proponents of sexual objectification argue that it can foster sexual confidence, bodily autonomy, and expressive freedom (Attwood et al., 2018; Paglia, 1992; Rubin, 1984; Taormino, 2008; Valenti, 2009); however, these purported benefits are typically

articulated within market-driven and appearance-based frameworks that warrant critical scrutiny (Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2009). Individual freedom and empowerment is co-opted into marketing strategies that are tied to buying and consuming products, not meaningful feminist political or structural change (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2009; Rottenberg, 2018; Zeisler, 2016) Finally, I describe how these operations occur within capitalist systems of value and market metrics, impacting subjectivity, mental health, and life outcomes (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Whitaker, 2019).

Significantly, because there is good argument for the critical and sex positive theory, and I am resisting binary or oppositional dichotomies. It is important to bring in resistance strategies, an erotic framework, and theory that describes the importance of reclaiming subjectivity (Collins, 1990; Harding, 1991; hooks, 1992; Lorde, 1984; Whitaker, 2019). This theoretical framework describes how embodied love and the erotic as power centers the reclamation of subjectivity as a political and transformative act.

….

Contemporary claims of empowerment stand in tension with Simone de Beauvoir's existential critique, which reveals how women's apparent choices are formed within social conditions that have long positioned the female body as an object of regulation, meaning-making, and patriarchal control. In *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir, 1949), de Beauvoir, famously wrote "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 13), and is often cited to be the beginning critical thought gender being a social construction, not just a biological reality. Here we see fierce critique of the body and the body politic, and the ways women's bodies have been historically and

socially constructed as a site of patriarchal dominance and regulation and cultural meaning. Women's reproductive labor, sexuality, and domestic roles are central to their oppression, and positioning them as tools of both reproduction and subjugation.

Critical theory focuses on issues of power, inequality, and social justice, and aims to challenge and change oppressive structures, often finding roots in Marxist analysis. Radical feminists[4] like K. Millett (1970), S. Firestone (1970), C. MacKinnon (1989), A. Dworkin (1981), M. Frye (1983), M. Daly (1978), S. Bartky (1990) S. Walby (1990), S. Jeffreys (2009), S. Federici (2012, 2018), B. Skeggs (2011) and E. Parry (2015), all examined how power shapes sexual discourse and sexual practices that benefit the patriarchy. They scrutinize ideology that naturalizes the patriarchy; they see gender oppression as systemic institutional power, not just interpersonal conflict; they emphasize emancipation and consciousness-raising, and; they challenge science, law, and culture. These theorists defended reproductive freedom (while advocating birth control and abortion) and criticized the conditions under which children are reared in patriarchy, challenged heterosexual norms, and debated the politics of prostitution and pornography (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1993).

Radical and intersectional feminists see sexual objectification as a central mechanism of women's oppression (Collins, 2004; Dworkin, 1987). As such, gender oppression is a structural, institutionalized, patriarchal force that controls women's bodies, sexuality, and subjectivity (Frye, 1983) and that sexual objectification normalizes gender-based violence (R. Morgan, 1977). Radicals frame objectification as the denial of

[4] Not all of these feminists would categorize themselves explicitly as radical feminists, like many of the waves, these topics ebb and flow across timelines, might be more evident in the 1970-1980s however, are reemerging in contemporary feminist discussion and literature. Significantly, these authors all contributed to the interrogation of how power shapes sexual discourse and sexual practices that benefit the patriarchy.

humanity (Millett, 1970) and the annihilation of the 'self' in the woman (Dworkin, 1987). When objectification is internalized to become self-objectification, women can experience mental health consequences (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Controlling images, often in the form of stereotypes, objectify women part of systems of racialized, classed, heteronormative power (Collins, 2004).

Post-structural feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler (1993, 1990), building on Michel Foucault's (1977, 1978a) writings, emphasizes how knowledge, identity, and reality are shaped by language, discourse, and culture, and importantly, describe how subjectivity is influenced by cultural norms and discourses that effect subjectivity. Butler's feminism challenges essentialist ideas of 'woman' by arguing that gender is socially constructed and performative. Building on post-structural ideas, feminist media scholars Rosland Gill (2007b, 2008a), and Angela McRobbie (2004, 2009), contend that sexual objectification is no longer imposed solely from the outside, but internalized and reproduced by individuals who are compelled to self-monitor, self-present, and self-objectify in alignment with culturally sanctioned norms.

The *Neoliberal-Postfeminist Sexual Objectification Matrix* theoretical model proposes that within a neoliberal and postfeminist political-economic culture, societal sexual objectification intensifies rather than diminishes. Dominant discourses of culturally sanctioned sexual scripts encourage women to self-objectify and claim this is empowering. Women invest both material and psychic resources into achieving femininity norms and navigating desirability hierarchies. These dynamics shape women's subjectivity through self-optimization, bodily discipline, surveillance, and sexualization. Over time, women experience consequences of mental health struggles and are constantly

negotiating intimate relationships. Women may experience alienation from the body, disembodiment, and profound spiritual costs. However, the model also asserts that these effects are not inevitable. This matrix can be disrupted when women develop critical consciousness, feminist reflexivity, sobriety and recovery practices, therapeutic engagement, and reclaim subjectivity through art-making, embodied practices, and pleasure grounded in agency rather than performance.

Macro Power Structures

Figure 3

Macro Power Structures



The Patriarchy & Gender Oppression

The radical feminists of the 1960s and 70s became the greatest advocates for the class consciousness of gender oppression, particularly on patriarchal control of women's sexuality (Walby, 1990). In *Sexual Politics: A Manifesto for Revolution* radical feminist Millett wrote gender oppression is the denial of "*image* of dignity and self-respect, equality of status, and recognition as human beings" (emphasis added, Millett, 1970, p. 365). By this standard, sexual objectification and self-objectification are gender oppression. She continues that women "are confined to the condition of economic dependence based on the scale of their sexuality in marriage or a variety of prostitutions" (ibid). I argue that, although Millett wrote to an audience on the brink of a sexual revolution, the self-objectification exhibited today could be considered in that variety of prostitution because neoliberalism profits from the sexual exploitation of women.

In *Oppression* in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Frye, 1983), radical feminist Marilyn Frye wrote:

> "The root of the word "oppression" is the element "press" … Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly restrain, restrict, or prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce" (Frye, 1983, p. 11).

Frye goes on to write oppression reduces choices to "penalty, censure, or deprivation"; we must maintain face and not complain to "smile and be cheerful" and we "participate on our own eraser;" that our fortitude might be seen as "difficult" or unpleasant to work with, which is enough to cost one's livelihood (Frye, 1983, p. 11). Frye gives us another example of oppression in which women in the United States are pressed when they are sexually active and when they are not, slut shamed or fridged. Sexual violence is met with the attitude that 'she liked it' and 'had it coming,' "You are caught in a bind, caught between systematically related pressures" (Frye, 1983, p. 11).

Bordo (1993) further elaborates on this view, explaining how modern power functions by 'regulating the intimate and minute elements of the construction of space, time, desire, and embodiment' (Bordo, 1993, p. 27). She continues to describe power as not simply oppressive; it is productive, constantly generating new subjectivities, norms, and forms of resistance (Bordo, 1993). Forms of power are constantly morphing and 'spawning new forms of culture and subjectivity' (Bordo, 1993, p. 27). Bordo describes a case in point:

> The woman who goes into rigorous weight-training program to achieve the current stylish look may discover that her muscles give her a new self-confidence

> that enables her to assert herself more forcefully at work. Modern power-relations are thus unstable; resistance is perpetual and hegemony precarious. (Bordo, 1993, p. 28)

Here, I see the agency is ambiguous. Bordo questions whether these acts are truly liberatory or if they are shaped by internalized norms, and how both agency and constraint might be true at once. Throughout this theoretical framework I will illustrate how gender oppression is disguised and transformed to appear as it is not.

Social Construction of The Body

Most feminists, across phenomenological, radical, intersectional, post structural, sex positive, and liberal thinkers, would agree that the female body and subjectivity is a socially constructed, cultural and existential condition (Bartky, 1990; Beauvoir, 1949; Butler, 1990; Collins, 2004; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Frye, 1983; hooks, 2000a; C. J. Jones, 2022; MacKinnon, 1989; Millett, 1970; R. Morgan, 1977; Nussbaum, 1995; Paasonen et al., 2020). The woman's body is not only a biological phenomenon but has been the subject of an inordinate amount of social commentary and is under constant regulation and meaning making. History and culture demonstrate how women's bodies are interpreted and evaluated through dominating social discourses in religion, medicine, media, and consumer culture.

Objectification is not limited to visual sexualization; it is also produced and maintained through institutional practices that embed culturally constructed meanings of women's bodies within patriarchal and capitalist systems that organize control over women's labor, sexuality, and reproductive capacities. Walby (1990) highlights that patriarchy manifests in multiple domains including violence, sexuality, cultural

institutions, and the state. She insists that femininity norms play a crucial role in maintaining control over women's bodies. From this perspective, the female body is socially constructed not only as an object of visual evaluation but as a site of control shaped by institutional power. Second-wave Marxist feminists further extend this analysis by emphasizing how women's bodies have been constructed in relation to labor and reproduction under capitalist systems, suggesting women's reproductive and caregiving capacities as socially regulated resources rather than autonomous bodily functions (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Federici, 2004). Although the 'means of production' idea is not the scope of this paper, labor and reproductive capabilities are another way to conceptualize objectification and demonstrate how women's bodies are instrumental resources.

From a post-structuralist perspective, the body is a discursive construction and a site where power is inscribed. Famously, Foucault argued that power should not only be thought of as a top-down repressive model, by that power manifests in production of knowledge and norms that govern bodies and identities. Power "inscribes" itself on the body, establishing "regimes" of what the body should do, look like, what is desirable and what is unacceptable (Foucault, 1977, p. 137). Instead of discipline being a form of external regulation, self-monitoring subjects come to govern themselves in accordance with dominant regimes of desirability, propriety, and normality.

Butler (1990) extends Foucault's theory to gender, arguing that gender is not an innate or natural essence but is performative. Butler argues that gender is not something that one *is,* but rather gender is something that one *does.* Thus, gender is a performance of a script that directs stylized acts that produce the appearance of a stable gender

identity. As such, self-objectification emerges as a key mechanism through which those performances are sustained. By adopting the gaze, individuals perform their gender successfully by monitoring their appearance (thinness, beauty, sexual availability), and comportment (posture, movement, spatial restriction), and even the ways they display their sexuality, aligning themselves according to dominate scripts of acceptability and desirability.

The Capitalist Commodification of Women's Sexuality

Founded in radical feminist traditions, scholars argue that capitalism depends on women's sexual, reproductive and emotional labor, rather than being exposed for being exploitative or coercive, this type of labor is disguised this labor as 'natural,' 'private,' and 'chosen.' In *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Firestone (1970) argued that women's biological reproduction capacity is used as a method of political and economic subordination. She described that reproduction is regulated to the private sphere for the purposed of controlling (similar to Foucault argument), making women economically dependent on the man for provisions, and society treats women's sexual availability as a social expectation (Firestone, 1970).

Significantly, Federici described the monetary value of this commodification of women's bodies and reproductive labor in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Federici, 2012) and *Wages for housework* (Federici, 2018). Federici is scathing of the patriarchal capitalist efforts to extract, regulate, and profit from women's sexuality. This is all done to stabilize population growth, secure the reproduction of labor power, and secure the family unit. Significantly, sexuality becomes a site of discipline, which is required to ensure a compliant labor

force. As I will describe in the post structural theoretical section, neoliberalism has not liberated women's sexuality from the constraints of capitalism, but rather, intensification and reconfiguration have occurred. Early capitalism relied on external forms of sexual discipline, like through morality, reproductive laws, domestic labor, and regulating sex to the confines of marriage, neoliberalism has shifted the discipline to internalized subjectivity. Instead, women self-regulate to individualized responsibility, we brand along hypersexuality-respectability lines, marketing ourselves online shrouded in language of choice and empowerment.

Like most forms of oppression, women's oppression is disguised as being "innate, right, justified, and that those suffering that oppression either choose it (so it is okay) or deserves it" (Parry, 2015, p.1). In a speech at Feminism in London, Parry (2015) states:

> Feminism veered away from the original aim of the liberation of women from the patriarchy into a diluted, distracted fixation with striving for equality….*But then neoliberalism came along.* Achieving equality without getting rid of the system that enforces and normalizes inequality is pointless and impossible. But feminism took on more of a '*if you can't beat them, join them'* (emphasis added, p. 1).

Throughout this work I call to heed radical feminism of the 60's-70's, because under the guise of neoliberalism, women believe they are in a state of 'freedom' and 'choice,' yet by the radical measures of gender oppression, we are still treated like sex objects, experience shame associated with our sexuality, lack the dignity and respect, and through objectification, are seen as less than human beings.

Dworkin (1981) argued that objectification is an economic process, and that it not a symbol or abstraction, but rather it is material in that women are reduced to sexualized

body parts and sexual availability is normalized. Significantly, capitalism turns objectification into a profitable system of pornography, prostitution, advertising, dating economies, influencer culture, self-branding, plastic surgery, and beauty products- and now sex trafficking and gender reconstructive surgery. Dworkin calls for the complete cessation of these types of objectification- it is not something the radicals wanted to negotiate or reform.

As discussed in the section on *Historical Context of The Sex Wars: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminist and the Legalization of Pornography* in Part 2 Literature Review, MacKinnon 's main argument was that sexuality is not necessarily a mutual exchange when a hierarchy is enforcing male dominance and female submission. Capitalism implies this inequality by monetizing sexuality in pornographic spaces and treats consent as a market transaction. Mackinnon was one of the first feminists to articulate that "choice" functions ideologically to conceal power.

To further extend this argument, consumerism is deeply linked to objectification insofar as women are positioned as self-optimizing subjects who are expected to continually invest in products and services that enhance beauty, desirability, and bodily compliance with normative standards (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2008a, 2008b; McRobbie, 2009; Rottenberg, 2018). Individual freedom and empowerment are appropriated by neoliberal consumer culture and transformed into marketing strategies that equate liberation with purchasing and self-optimization, diverting feminist politics away from structural change and toward individualized consumption (Zeisler, 2016). This process is sustained by an extensive network of interrelated industries, including the beauty and cosmetics industry, fashion and apparel industry, skin care and dermatology

industry, hair care, hair growth, and hair removal industry, plastic surgery and cosmetic medical industry, anti-aging and longevity industry, diet, weight-loss, and appetite-suppression industry, fitness, wellness, and body-sculpting industry, pharmaceutical and hormone-modulation industry, aesthetic medicine and injectables industry, grooming and personal care products industry, and makeover and image-consulting industry. These industries intersect with the modeling, advertising, and branding industry; media, entertainment, and influencer economy; pornography and sexualized media industry; dating app and digital self-presentation industry; wellness, self-optimization, and lifestyle coaching industry; surveillance technologies related to appearance such as apps, filters, and trackers; and retail consumer goods markets targeting feminine appearance norms. Collectively, they normalize self-surveillance and commodify the female body, reinforcing objectification by framing bodily modification and constant self-management as both personal responsibility and social value.

Controlling Images

Building on the work of *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins, 1990), Patricia Hill Collins argues that all forms of oppression use objectification as a means of submission. She writes that objectification also occurs whenever a group is defined and othered. Her concept of controlling images is significant. Controlling images are different from stereotypes, in that stereotypes are constant, simplified, and descriptive. Controlling images morph and evolve into anything they need to be to reinforce existing power dynamics. Controlling images might include “The Bride,” “Hot Girl,” “Good Girl” / “Good Woman,” “Superwoman” / “Have-It-All Woman.” They work in synchrony with one another, like a cast of characters to contrast and reinforce existing power dynamics.

Controlling images are ideological tools. They justify and maintain systems of power (race, gender, class). They are historically produced, widely circulated, and politically useful.

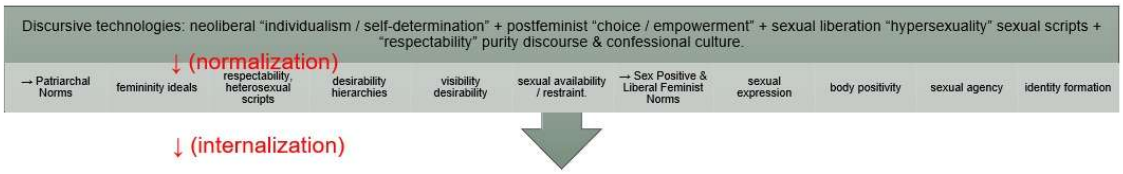
In a neoliberal, postfeminist context, overtly degrading representations may be repackaged as empowerment, where sexual objectification is reframed as choice, agency, or self-expression. For example, the hypersexualized figure, once used to justify exploitation like the Jezebel stereotype, can be rebranded as a symbol of confidence and autonomy, obscuring the structural conditions that shape and constrain that "choice." Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B figures are good examples.

In this way, controlling images continue to discipline women's bodies and subjectivities, but through subtle forms of regulation aligned with neoliberalism. Crucially, empowerment and the language of liberation become central to marketing schemes mobilized to sell products and lifestyles (Zeisler, 2016). This sustains consumer capitalism and neutralizes feminist critique.

Dominant Discourses

Figure 4

Dominant Discourses



The discourses that influence this system shape how women understand sexuality and identity (Foucault, 1978a; Gill, 2008b). First, neoliberal individualism presents life as a personal project. Neoliberalism asserts success and happiness are matters of self-

discipline and personal responsibility rather than structural conditions (W. Brown, 2015; Rottenberg, 2018). Problems are individualized, and solutions are framed as self-improvement. Second, postfeminist discourse suggests that gender equality has already been achieved, so any action a woman takes, especially sexual display, can be interpreted as empowered choice (Gill, 2008a; McRobbie, 2009). Structural power fades into the background, even when women's options are shaped by inequality, hierarchies, and metrics. Third, sexual liberation and hypersexuality scripts perpetuate overt sexual expression as confidence and freedom. Sexual availability and visibility become markers of being modern and self-deterministic (Attwood, 2006; Gill, 2008a; Levy, 2005). At the same time, and depending on location, purity discourses continue to operate. Women are judged according to norms of modesty, particularly along racialized and classed lines (Collins, 1990). This creates a double bind: be sexually confident but not too sexual; visible but not excessive. Finally, confessional culture encourages constant self-disclosure. Sharing personal stories, trauma, desire, and identity become a way to signal realness and social value, especially in digital spaces (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Foucault, 1978b). Together, these discourses influence how women evaluate themselves, how they perform gender and sexuality, and how subjectivity is formed within contemporary culture.

Normalization Through Discourse

Foucault's (1977) model of power relations is useful when understanding the power dynamics of sexual objectification from a post-structural perspective. Foucault's work on power operations revealed how systems of knowledge such as medicine, psychiatry, and sexuality, construct "truths" that serve political and institutional interests.

Power, in this view, is not merely repressive but productive: it shapes subjectivities by defining what is normal, desirable, or deviant. Foucault argues that power is delineated through what was considered 'normal' or 'natural,' versus what is considered deviant or abnormal. He described normalization as a process of social control over the body. Foucault's analysis (1977) of military discipline as a form of bodily normalization reveals how social control operates subtly, through ideals, repetition, and internalized standards rather than force. His example described the cost efficient, normalizing process of how soldiers stand, march, and move their bodies. If the soldiers fall out of step, they are punished to conform until they meet the ideals of bodily comportment and nuances of marching operation.

If we consider how normalizing processes can create social structures, examining how normalization of sexual practices offers insight to patriarchal forces that might be oppressing women. As covered extensively in chapter 2 on the normalization of pornography, I portray the change pornography being considered taboo to becoming socially sanctioned and even endorsed by feminist proport sex positive ideals. To contextualize the power of normalization further, my experience was shaped by the normalization of hook-up culture, non-traditional relationship structures, and the rise of fetish, kink, BDSM. Paradoxically, what was once on the fringe of society, we now find moving towards mainstream culture. Foucault's concept of normalization helps contextualize how these practices have shifted from the margins to the mainstream, and how their normalization often masquerades liberation while reinforcing patriarchal norms.

One way normalization is facilitated is through social discourses that perpetuate expectations and practices. For Foucault (1979), discourse is not simply language, but a system of knowledge and power that produces what can be said, known, and experienced as truth. Discourses define categories, norms, and possibilities for bodies and subjects by establishing regimes of truth that shape how individuals understand themselves and are governed. Butler (1990) extends Foucauldian discourse theory to gender and embodiment, arguing that discourse does not merely describe bodies but brings them into being as socially intelligible subjects.

Sexuality Discourses

In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (Foucault, 1978a), Foucault examined ways in which power is administered through the production, regulation, and circulation of sexual discourses. Rather than using repression as a means of control, modern power regimes proliferated sexuality discourses. He argued sexuality became a central "discursive object" through which individuals are classified, monitored, and normalized. Sexuality, he argued, became a 'discursive object' that works as a power dynamic in society. Sexuality discourses spread through families and institutions like The Church and medicine. Foucault's framework helps us understand how both neoliberal sexuality discourses and purity culture discourses function as disciplinary systems that promote self-surveillance and normative behavior, despite their contrasting moral narratives.

Neoliberal sexuality discourses frame sexual agency and identity through individual choice, self-entrepreneurship, and market logic (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2008a). Neoliberal sexuality discourses promote the idea that empowered sexuality is expressed through personal responsibility, visibility, and consumption, often detaching sex from

patriarchal inequality. Rather than challenging power systems, neoliberal sexuality discourses repackage traditional sexual norms under the guise of empowerment, suggesting that freedom is achieved through "choosing" to conform to idealized, commodified forms of femininity or desirability (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2008b; McRobbie, 2009).

By contrast, purity culture is a conservative, religiously grounded discourse that links a woman's worth to her sexual 'purity,' defined as abstaining from sex until heterosexual marriage (Gardner, 2011; Valenti, 2009). Rooted in evangelical Christianity, purity discourse constructs sexuality as dangerous, shameful, and needing containment. For example, Gardner (2011) analyzes how purity culture repackages abstinence using the language of desire and empowerment, while still upholding patriarchal control. Similarly, Valenti (2009) critiques how virginity is culturally constructed and used to policewomen's bodies and values.

Despite their ideological differences, both discourses discipline the body through internalized surveillance and normativity, producing subjects who either confess their sexual 'empowerment' through digital performances or regulate their desire in service of moral purity. As Foucault (1978b) notes, modern power "produces" rather than merely prohibits working through subtle and dispersed mechanisms encourages self-regulating dominant social scripts. Thus, whether framed as sexually empowered or pure, the female subject is still regulated through discursive constructions of what is 'normal,' 'valuable,' or 'appropriate' sexuality (Foucault, 1978b).

Confession of Sexuality. Foucault (1978b) described a power construct embedded in sexuality discourses manifested in the form of confession, and confession becomes

internalized and a mechanism of subjectification. Foucault (1978b) writes ‘The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us” (Foucault, 1978b, p. 60). Foucault (1978b) suggested there may be a tendency to view all sexuality through the lens of being a sin that needs to be confessed, even if these sexualities are within normative confines. Born from the Church, the ‘confessional imperative’ expanded into secular institutions such as medicine, schools, and now therapy, requiring people to verbalize their desires as a form of self-knowledge and ‘subject formation’ (Foucault, 1978b).

In neoliberal and postfeminist contexts, women are encouraged to disclose their sexual selves as acts of agency (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2008b). Confessional culture reinforces femininity norms of rewarding emotional openness (e.g. "vulnerability" in online dating or social media) **(**Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2007b). Even sexting or sharing desires becomes a kind of digital confession by being voluntarily ‘offerings’ (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2007b). Such acts do not dismantle the patriarchy but repackage it in individualist, neoliberal terms.

Neoliberal and Postfeminist Discourses

Post structuralist feminists concentrate on the socialization of sexual discourses and how subjectivity is shaped by what is considered normal, desirable, or deviant (Foucault, 1978a, 1979). As such, gender is performative in that individuals become sexualized subjects, not through inner essence, but through societal scripts, norms, and expectations (Butler, 1990). Women's bodies are produced through disciplinary practices, such as posture, makeup, and grooming (Bartky, 1990), beauty, thinness, and control

(Bordo, 1993). From a Foucauldian perspective, "choice" becomes a disciplinary mechanism: women may appear to be freely choosing to perform a certain kind of sexuality (e.g., hyperfeminine, heterosexual, confident), but in fact, these choices are deeply shaped by cultural scripts, economic incentives, and media representations of what is desirable, valuable, and acceptable.

Post structuralist feminists argue that the shift from objectification to subjectification doe does not dismantle patriarchal power. Gill (2003) writes “The shift from objectification to subjectification does not mean the end of sexualization. Rather, it involves the reworking of sexual objectification into practices of self-policing, self-surveillance and self-discipline that are presented as freely chosen” (p. 43). This means, in a postfeminist culture, women are no longer merely objects of the male gaze but are now expected to become knowing and active sexual subjects (Gill, 2007b).

Gill (2007b) coined two important post-structural ideas. First, ‘postfeminist sensibility’ operates through a sexual subjectification of women, wherein empowerment is often framed through hypersexualized self-presentation, choice, and visibility (Gill, 2007a, 2008b). Second, ‘compulsory sexual agency’ describes a key feature of postfeminist and neoliberal femininity. It refers to the cultural expectation that women must actively and visibly perform sexual confidence, desire, and pleasure, not because they freely choose to, but because this performance is now socially required (Gill, 2007b, p. 55). Yet this expectation is market-driven whereby sexuality must be visible, curated, and palatable to the male gaze or broader cultural ideals of success and desirability. The popular rhetoric of “sexual empowerment” often equates agency with participation in heteronormative, objectifying, and consumerist sexual practices such as pole fitness,

lingerie selfies, OnlyFans, or sex-positive branding, while ignoring how these are shaped by capitalism and patriarchy. Chen (2013) writes “The terms ‘choice,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘agency’ are appropriated to reinforce women confidently embracing patriarchal heterosexuality and commodity culture” (p. 440).

Commodified Versions of Empowerment. McRobbie (2009) defines ‘post feminism’ as a term that has been adopted in neoliberal discourses, suggesting that feminist goals have already been achieved. Postfeminism appears to embody feminist principles, and women appear empowered but are subtly re-subjugated through self-surveillance and consumerism. Similarly, the rise of popular feminism merges postfeminist and neoliberalism to produce commodified versions of empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2018). She posits feminism itself has been commercialized, becoming type "popular feminism" in a postfeminist era. This type of feminism is highly visible but an individualized and commodified version of empowerment. Building on Gill, Banet Weiser is critical of this diluted, trickle-down feminism. Although it might promote inclusion and visibility, popular feminism fails to challenge structural inequalities and reinforces hegemonic standards of femininity and capitalist values.

Feminism as a Lifestyle Brand. Post structural scholar McRobbie frames postfeminism as a “double entanglement”- an idea that simultaneously invokes and rejects feminism (McRobbie, 2004). As such, there is an undoing of feminism in that the postfeminist ‘masquerade’ relies on women choosing freely to conform to hyper-feminine ideals, but within a narrow range of culturally acceptable (McRobbie, 2004). Furthermore, critics argue that feminism has become commercialized, where

'empowerment' is reduced to materialistic consumption or sexual visibility, which depoliticize feminist goals (Gill, 2008b; hooks, 2000a; McRobbie, 2004).

For example, instead of challenging oppressive systems (capitalism, racism, patriarchy), empowerment becomes a matter of buying products, following influencers, and wearing clothing with slogans like "The Future is Female" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 23). Banet-Weiser (2018) argues simplistic slogans like "The Future is Female*"* conflates and dilutes politics into personal identification, and in doing so, feminism becomes a lifestyle brand. If we do not push past the cool factor of feminism, we miss the power of critique, and it is absorbed into the very systems (capitalism, racism, patriarchy) it originally sought to disrupt (Banet-Weiser, 2018). It encourages a focus on the self, not the collective, which echoes Roche's point about the collective rights of women being subverted by global individualism. Women are encouraged perform strength, confidence, and assertiveness, while ignoring the social conditions of the collective like economic inequality, white supremacy, and sexual violence (Banet-Weiser, 2018). It is like we are caught in our own gaze, admiring our strength and beauty in the mirror, while the world burns around us.

In *Emerging Voices* (Keller & Ryan, 2018) Jessalynn Keller and Maureen Ryan edited multidisciplinary volume that examines how postfeminism circulates in digital and social media, demonstrating how platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, YouTube, and blogs both enable and constrain feminist expression especially as it concerns intersectionality, affect, and identity. Using Gill's notion of postfeminism sensibility, the authors analyze how post-feminist expression plays out online. In particular, the authors aim to interrogate how capitalism commodifies feminism by encouraging users to curate

feminist identities as content, rewarding certain types of content (e.g., positive, branded, palatable feminism). Women are often encouraged to perform empowerment, confidence, and authenticity while being subject to self-surveillance, branding, and visibility pressures. Postfeminism becomes an aestheticized activism, where feminist messages are packaged for viral appeal and algorithmic visibility. Interestingly, and somewhat ironic to this entire dissertation, is how emotions like rage, pride, vulnerability, or shame are commodified and politicized. Personal feelings are used for political activism, and that emotional authenticity becomes a form of capital. Platforms reward emotional expression that is relatable, clickable, and shareable. Posts about trauma, empowerment, or identity become performative content, which is encouraged by likes, followers, or influencer culture.

Significantly, the authors point out that postfeminist and digital cultures reproduce whiteness and privilege, even within feminist movements. For example, in Cheryl Thompson's (2018) chapter, "The New Afro in a Postfeminist Media Culture," she analyzes an Allure magazine tutorial that taught a white actress how to style a loose Afro. Thompson notes "Unlike the old Afro… the new Afro in contemporary media culture appears as a race neutral choice for white women" (Thompson, p. 161). Thompson criticizes that cultural appropriation masquerading as choice strips the Afro hairstyle of its deep-rooted historical and political significance in Black liberation. Presenting aesthetic choices as 'race-neutral' highlights how postfeminist and digital media normalize whiteness and erase structural histories, even within spaces calling themselves feminist.

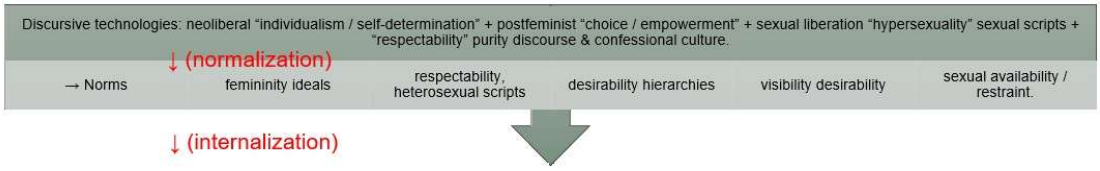
'Individualism,' 'Choice,' 'Empowerment.' Gill and Scharff (2011) argue that post-feminist popular culture is linked to contemporary neoliberalism. The authors posit that chick lit, chick-flicks, makeover programs and advertisements depicting an empowered woman, and is a form backlash or break with feminism. The "entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas" (p. 4) is indicative of neoliberalist sentiments. The intent is to contrast a liberated woman who actively makes choices about her sexuality compared to older versions of femininity that characterized woman as submissive and weak.

Lazar (2009) asserts that the discourses in beauty advertisements represent a consumer-based female identity that is emancipated and feminized despite feminist's attempts to critique femininity norms. The "emancipated feminine identity not only rides on the notion of emancipation which originates within feminism but, at the same time, is also premised upon emancipation from (second-wave) feminism, as mis guided and curtailing of women's realization of their true feminine selves" (Lazar, 2009, p. 49).

Femininity Norms and Sexual Scripts

Figure 5

Femininity Norms and Sexual Scripts



Radical feminists argue that femininity is not a natural expression of womanhood, but a patriarchal construction that enforces a set of behaviors, appearances, and emotional dispositions designed to maintain male dominance (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1987; Walby, 1990). Bartky (1990) links femininity norms directly to objectification, arguing that women learn to experience their bodies to be looked by others and be to under constant negotiation and correction. This produces what she calls a *"fragmented consciousness,"* where women are simultaneously subjects living in their bodies and objects surveilling them. For Bartky (1990), femininity norms are invisible and avoid scrutiny because they are naturalized to feel like personal choice and even self-care. In Walby's (1990) structural analysis, femininity norms are the primary pillar of patriarchal control. Femininity is maintained through the media, family, and heterosexual relationships. She argues that femininity is not only a private issue of performance or identity, but a public issue tied to systemic structures that perpetuate inequality.

Diving a little deeper into the makeup of femininity as a structural inequality, Skeggs (2011) argues working-class women are judged by middle-class standards of femininity and respectability which leads to self-monitoring around dress, demeanor, and behavior. Skeggs connects femininity to neoliberalism by suggesting that femininity is part of a moral economy that dictates women perform their worth through self-surveillance. She writes "The femininity produced had an affinity with the habitus of the

upper class, of ease, restraint, calm … it was produced as a sign of difference from other women" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 99). Thus, femininity operates as a classed, moralizing form of power, not a neutral or universally accessible ideal.

MacKinnon (1987) contends that femininity is defined in relation to male desire and women's social subordination is organized erotically. Femininity is a product of the patriarchy and sexual objectification is the central mechanism of control. Not only is femininity oppressive, but it also orders women's social position. What counts as feminine, including desirability, passivity, compliance, and availability, is defined through men's sexual interests and then institutionalized across law, culture, and everyday relations.

In an earlier work, Dworkin (1981) argued that femininity is a cultural lie that eroticizes women's submission. She contends that objectification is not just about being looked at or sexualized; it is the *social process* through which women are taught to experience themselves as things for men's use. She argues that femininity trains women to fragment themselves, prioritize male desire, and internalize an external gaze. Crucially, Dworkin (1981) rejected the idea that femininity could be beneficial but demanded we examine the harm of cultural practices that appeared to be pleasurable, such as fashion, pornography, and sexualized media, contending that these objectifying practices normalize women being reduced to bodies and making inequality feel intimate and inevitable.

In the realm of contemporary feminist media and cultural studies, Gill used poststructuralist tools to critique postfeminist and neoliberal representations of femininity. Gill (2008b) argues that postfeminism operates through a sexual

subjectification of women, wherein empowerment is often framed through hypersexualized self-presentation, choice, and visibility, what she terms "compulsory sexual agency" (Gill, 2007a, p. 147). Therefore, femininity as a power construct, continues to benefit men, diffuse its oppressive nature, and is often a practice of agency, making it impervious to scrutiny.

Self-Surveillance and Self-Optimization Practices

One of the ways femininity norms are enforced is through self-surveillance. Using Foucault's (1979) framework, Bartky (1990) describes how women's bodies are subjected to a "micropolitics of power" through beauty routines, posture, and dress. Influenced by Foucault's concept of the discipline enforced by the panopticon, self-surveillance becomes an internalized self-disciplining mechanism. Gill (2008b) writes "Surveillance is internalized, and power is exercised not through coercion but through the production of a subject who is active, freely choosing, and self-monitoring" (Gill, 2008a, p. 163). In the neoliberal postfeminist context, surveillance and the labor of maintaining beauty standards includes counting calories and obsessively managing body weight or shape; using apps to track workouts, meals, and menstrual cycles for "optimization"; investing time and money in hair removal, skin care, tanning, and makeup as routine "maintenance" rather than personal expression (Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009).

Gill (2008a) describes "the commodified self" under neoliberal postfeminism. The self becomes a product to market. Women are often expected to act as entrepreneurs of the self by curating a "desirable" online presence. Women curating Instagram feeds to reflect a balance of beauty, health, career success, and 'authenticity.' Women police how they present sexuality.

Women track their metrics (likes, comments, shares) as feedback on social worth. McRobbie (2009) argues that emotional discipline is part of the postfeminist masquerade. Women are often expected to regulate not only their appearance, but their emotional expression by smiling even when uncomfortable or unhappy (emotional labor); avoid "negativity" or anger in public or professional spaces, for fear of being labeled "hysterical" or "difficult."

Women are expected to make strategic, future-oriented decisions about their fertility, family planning, and career in ways that align with neoliberal norms of control and optimization. Gill (2008a) and McRobbie (2009) argue the neoliberal subject are always rational**,** responsible and optimizing by freezing eggs in their 20s or 30s "just in case," and using birth control not just to avoid pregnancy, but to regulate hormones or plan ideal timing for motherhood. Women in neoliberalism pursue degrees and career advancement with the pressure of "having it all" success, beauty, motherhood, love.

Gill (2007b) critiques as the "rhetoric of choice" where empowerment is defined by consumption, because postfeminist media culture women are taught to express autonomy through consumer choices. These choices might include buying "feminist" merchandise like mommy-time wine, girl boss mugs, or pole dancing classes framed as sexual empowerment. Self-care is equated with consumer activities like spa treatments, boutique fitness classes, or curated fashion subscription boxes. Cosmetic procedures and plastic surgery are seen as a personal choice or "investment in self."

Founded in radical feminist traditions, scholars argue that capitalism depends on women's sexual, reproductive and emotional labor. Rather than being exposed for being exploitative, this type of labor is naturalized to being "private" or "chosen." In *The*

Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution, Firestone (1970) argued that women's biological reproduction capacity is used as a method of political and economic subordination. She described that reproduction is regulated to the private sphere for the purposed of controlling (similar to Foucault argument), making women economically dependent on the man for provisions, and society treats women's sexual availability as a social expectation (Firestone, 1970).

Significantly, Federici wrote described the monetary value of this commodification of women's bodies and reproductive labor in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Federici, 2012) and *Wages for Housework* (Federici, 2018). Federici is scathing of the patriarchal capitalist efforts to extract, regulate, and profit from women's sexuality. This is all done in an effort to stabilize population growth, secure the reproduction of labor power, and secure the family unit. Significantly, sexuality becomes a site of discipline, which is required to ensure a compliant labor force. As I will describe in the post structural theoretical section, neoliberalism has not liberated women's sexuality from the constraints of capitalism, but rather, an intensification and reconfiguration have occurred. Early capitalism relied on external forms of sexual discipline, like through morality, reproductive laws, domestic labor, and regulating sex. Now, neoliberalism has shifted the discipline to internalized subjectivity. Instead, women self-regulate to individualized responsibility, we brand along hypersexuality-respectability lines, marketing ourselves online shrouded in language of choice and empowerment.

Like most forms of oppression, women's oppression is disguised as being 'innate, right, justified, and that those suffering that oppression either choose it (so it's okay) or

deserves it' (Parry, 2015, p. 1). In a speech at Feminism in London in 2015, Esther Parry states:

> "Feminism veered away from the original aim of the liberation of women from the patriarchy into a diluted, distracted fixation with striving for equality….*But then neoliberalism came along.* Achieving equality without getting rid of the system that enforces and normalizes inequality is pointless and impossible. But feminism took on more of a '*if you can't beat them, join them'* (emphasis added, p. 1).

Throughout this work I call to heed radical feminism of the 60's-70's. Under the guise of neoliberalism, women believe they are in a state of 'freedom' and 'choice.' However, when we use the radical measures we are still treated like sex objects, experience shame associated with our sexuality, lack the dignity and respect, and through objectification, are seen as less than human beings.

Dworkin argued that objectification is an economic process, and that it not a symbol or abstraction, but rather it is material in that women are reduced to sexualized body parts and sexual availability is normalized. Significantly, capitalism turns objectification into a profitable system of pornography, prostitution, advertising, dating economies, influencer culture, self-branding, plastic surgery, and beauty products- and now sex trafficking and gender reconstructive surgery.

As discussed in the section on *Historical Context of The Sex Wars: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminist and the Legalization of Pornography* in Part 2 of the Literature Review, MacKinnon 's main argument was that sexuality is not necessarily a mutual exchange when a hierarchy is enforcing male dominance and female

submission. Capitalism implies this inequality by monetizing sexuality in pornographic spaces and treats consent as a market transaction. Mackinnon was one of the first feminists to articulate that “choice” functions ideologically to conceal power.

To further extend this argument, consumerism is deeply linked to objectification insofar as women are positioned as self-optimizing subjects who are expected to continually invest in products and services that enhance beauty, desirability, and bodily compliance with normative standards. This process is sustained by an extensive network of interrelated industries, including the beauty and cosmetics industry, fashion and apparel industry, skin care and dermatology industry, hair care, hair growth, and hair removal industry, plastic surgery and cosmetic medical industry, anti-aging and longevity industry, diet, weight-loss, and appetite-suppression industry, fitness, wellness, and body-sculpting industry, pharmaceutical and hormone-modulation industry, aesthetic medicine and injectables industry, grooming and personal care products industry, and makeover and image-consulting industry. These industries intersect with the modeling, advertising, and branding industry; media, entertainment, and influencer economy; pornography and sexualized media industry; dating app and digital self-presentation industry; wellness, self-optimization, and lifestyle coaching industry; surveillance technologies related to appearance such as apps, filters, and trackers; and retail consumer goods markets targeting feminine appearance norms. Collectively, these products and services normalize self-surveillance and commodification of the women’s body. By framing bodily modification and self-management as personal responsibility, these industries increase social value and sexual appeal.

Sex Positivity and Liberalism

Significantly, it is important that the theoretical framework include sexual expression, body positivity, gender diversity, and the reclamation of sexuality, pleasure, and appearance as potential sites of agency. Sex positive feminists reject the automatic submission to patriarchal control and argue that women should be able to choose and claim sexuality of their own definition. Camille Paglia (1992) argues that erotic display is not inherently degrading or oppressive but can function as a form of female power and aesthetic self-expression. She wanted to challenge feminist frameworks that only interpret sexual objectification to victimize women.

Practices such as makeup and fashion were increasingly framed as forms of self-definition and resistance when chosen on one's own terms (D. Kellie et al., 2021; A. Kisner, 2010; Moffitt et al., 2024; Vendemia, DeAndrea, & Ilakkuvan, 2021). Some media and fashion scholars reject binary opposition between empowerment and objectification, arguing that dressing practices and aesthetic rituals can function as sites of self-expression and identity formation rather than evidence of patriarchal compliance (Barnard, 2014; Entwistle, 2000; Gill, 2007a).

During the third wave, the body positivity movement celebrated diverse body sizes, shapes, and appearances (C. Leboeuf, 2019a, 2019b). The body positivity movement was a response to narrow and exclusionary beauty standards. While initially grounded in fat acceptance activism, body positivity increasingly intersected with consumer culture and social media, creating tensions between its emancipatory aims and its later commodification (Banet-Weiser, 2018; C. Leboeuf, 2019a, 2019b; Rottenberg, 2018). This development is central to this study because we see how discourse of choice

and empowerment can simultaneously function as resistance to the patriarchy and also reinforcing mechanisms of normative femininity and self-surveillance.

In response to feminist critiques of objectification within romantic and heteronormative scripts (Bartky, 1990), some feminist theorists have sought to reclaim desire and embodiment as sources of women's power rather than solely sites of domination. Significantly, Lorde (1978) reframes the erotic to be an important resource of power and joy and sharply distinguishes it from the problems of pornography. Lorde argues that engaging in the erotic is important part of the emotional and creative vitality for women. Her vision calls to move beyond reductive frameworks and embrace embodied knowledge, emotional depth, and transformative joy as sources of power.

McNay (1992) and Gill (2008a) suggest that sexualization is not always inherently oppressive, in it can enhance sexual identities and desires, and resist homogenizing or moralistic narratives. Sexualization can challenge shame-based norms that pathologize or victim-blame sexually expressive individuals (Attwood, 2006). Rubin (1984) and Taormino (2008) argued against binary evaluations, insisting that when subjectivity and agency are present, objectification can be consensual and erotic, where there is a fluid interplay where the 'object' can also be a 'subject.' Subjectivity is central to sex-positive feminism in that sexual agency allows for individuals to construct their own sexual identities and sexual expression through self-awareness, consent, and pleasure (Butler, 1990; Tolman, 2002).

From a sex-positive lens, femininity is a diverse and dynamic set of gender expressions that can be embraced, redefined, or rejected by individuals of any gender (Rubin, 1984). Rather than viewing femininity as inherently oppressive, sex-positive

feminists recognize it as a potential source of erotic power, aesthetic creativity, and identity (Queen, 1997). Queer and trans feminist thought celebrates femme identity as resistant and subversive within both heteronormative and gay male cultures (Serano, 2007).

Sex-positive standpoints view hook-up culture as integral to disrupting heteronormative expectations. When communication and consent are present, hook-up culture allows for pleasure-focused interactions, where people can experience intimacy without commitment (J. R. Garcia et al., 2012; Wade, 2017). Importantly, hook-up culture offers an alternative to the 'relationship escalator' (Solo, 2016), which is the social script that dictates romantic relationships should progress from dating to sexual exclusivity, cohabitation, marriage, and monogamy. As such, ethical nonmonogamy too offers an alternative relationship dynamic.

Fetish, kink, and BDSM embrace objectification and sexualization as a practice of intimacy and freedom (Califia, 1980; Queen, 1997). Scholars agree that these arenas are complex, but can be resistant to patriarchal dominance (Califia, 1980; Easton & Hardy, 2001; M. Melavc et al., 2024; Queen, 1997). These scholars argue that in theory, fetish, kink, and BDSM allows for consensual forms of sexual expression can subvert dominant norms, foster empowerment, and enable embodied pleasure.

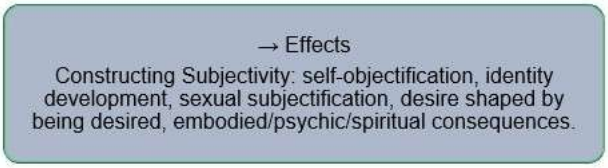
Sexually objectifying mechanisms such as sexting and online dating, seen through the sex-positive framework, can be sexually expressive and add to intimate connection (Albury, 2017; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). Sexting can allow for sexual communication beyond physical presence, facilitate desire and playfulness, and enhance long-distance relationships (Albury & Crawford, 2015; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). Sexting can foster

body positivity, queer and trans sexual visibility, and reduce shame around sexual pleasure (Henry & Powell, 2018). Similar, dating profiles foster identity exploration, allow for individuals to curate, perform aspirational versions of and engage in consensual pleasure-seeking (Albury, 2017), and can challenge heteronormative, monogamous, and body-normative ideals, especially when users articulate desires and boundaries (Attwood et al., 2018; J. R. Garcia et al., 2012).

Effects on Subject Formation and Constructing Subjectivity

Figure 6

Effects on Subject Formation and Constructing Subjectivity



Subjectivity, the way one experiences oneself, is shaped by culture, discourse, and history. Foucault's view of subjectivity (as explained by Oksala, 2007) challenges the idea of a unified, autonomous self. Instead, Foucault argues that subjectivity is a product of social forces, ideologies, and unconscious drives. Oksala (2007) explained Foucault's interpretation of subjectivity was that "he sought to reveal the non-subjective conditions that made the subjective experiences of order and knowledge possible." Oksala continues to explain the nature of the subjective experience "He is autonomous and rational, and at the same time he is the product of unconscious forces and cultural practices beyond his control" (2007, p. 2). This is crucial for my theoretical framework because it explains *how* women come to internalize objectifying norms: if subjectivity itself is shaped by

power, then self-objectification is not a personal choice or psychological flaw but a predictable outcome of cultural and institutional regulation.

Drawing on Beauvoir's (1949) engagement with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel via Alexandre Kojève, the authors describe that subjectivity does not emerge in isolation but through encounters with others in which recognition is always uncertain and unequal[5]. This concept resonates with my experience of objectification, where identity is often formed in relation to how others see me, rather than from within, revealing an existential vulnerability of being a subject that needs to be recognized. Kojève asserted that for a person to become self-conscious, they need to meet another person with consciousness to formulate a comparison. In doing so, each person will confront the possibility of not being recognized in the manner they wish to be perceived. Each person psychologically projects a narcissistic assertion of their own sovereignty of their conscious identity and this situation can cause friction between the two people. In the case between the master and slave, each asserts they are who they say they are. The slave eventually submits to his master, but the master then recognizes that the admission is not an authentic recognition, and the master feels unvalidated and alone (C. J. Jones, 2022). This is crucial for my study because sexual objectification exploits this vulnerability by positioning women as objects of recognition rather than mutual subjects, shaping identity through being seen, evaluated, and validated by others. This dialectical model explains why objectification has such profound psychic consequences: when recognition is asymmetrical, as in objectifying relations, women's subjectivity is formed through

[5] Almost 100 years ago, Simone de Beauvoir attended a talk by Russian philosopher Alexandre Kojeve talk on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* describing the Master-Slave dialectic (C. J. Jones, 2022).

submission to external definitions of worth, mirroring the logic of the master–slave dynamic.

Contemporary feminist Jane Clair Jones takes this consciousness-in-relation-to-another-consciousness idea further by examining French philosophers and psychologist Jacques Lacan's mirror stage idea. The mirror stage suggests that early childhood development consists of an archetypal moment when babies encounter themselves in the mirror and recognize themselves and have the ability consider themselves third person by imagining themselves as another object (C. J. Jones, 2022). Lacan's mirror stage adds another dimension, suggesting that the psyche is fractured by the process of seeing oneself as an object—setting the stage for lifelong alienation.

C. J. Jones (2022) described that objectification causes women to experience a sort of 'annihilation' to the psyche and a type of dissociation that occurs when the mind-body experiences objectification. Interestingly, objectification theory also posits that a mental health consequence of societal objectification is the inability to achieve peak optimal flow states. Jones describes the answer to objectification is achieving unfolding desire, a kind of flow state. For women to achieve this, we must undo the trauma that has accumulated from a lifetime of objectification, and reintegrate the mind-body (C. J. Jones, 2022).

Shift from Objectification to Subjectification

Gill posits women of contemporary post-feminism and neoliberal cultures, are less objectified by external forces and more 'subjectified' by themselves. Gill calls 'subjectification' the process by which women are conditioned to actively construct themselves as sexually desirable and socially valuable subjects. Gill writes "Women are

not straightforwardly objectified, but are constructed as active, freely choosing subjects who submit their bodies to regimes of self-surveillance, self-discipline, and self-improvement" (Gill, 2008b, p. 442). This is a similar concept used by researchers examining self-objectification, using objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The difference lies in the process of self-objectification. Women see themselves as an object, whereas in the process of subjectification women construct themselves as a subject. Another difference lies in agency. Self-objectification is the passive internalization of the gaze, and subjectification is an active performance under the illusion of choice. With self-objectification, the power appears to come from the external gaze whereas subjectification power operates from internalized norms. Finally, self-objectification appears to lack empowerment due to oppressive forces, yet subjectification appears empowering, despite being structured by norms. The main issue with this shift of power is appearances. Women appear and even feel empowered by subjective choices to better themselves, regardless of the heteronormative standards they are constrained by.

Women's Sexual Desires and Subjectivity

An important element of subjectivity is women's sexual desires. Gagnon and Simon (1973) proposed the idea that cultural sexual scripts influence intrapsychic scripts. Internal scripts are a person's internal sense of self, desire, and agency, could be seen as a part of subjectivity. Gagnon and Simon wrote "What appears as an individual impulse is actually the result of internalized cultural patterns" (1973, p. 19). Similarly. Bordo (1993) argues that disciplinary power uses femininity norms to construct women's desires, how they should live and feel, and how they understand themselves. Therefor desire is not

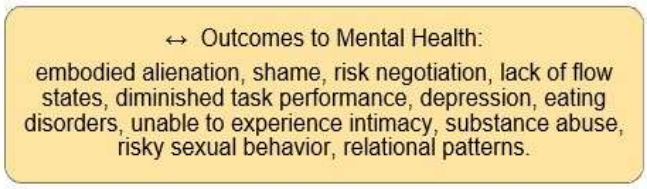
innate but actually shaped by cultural scripts that teach women teach women to seek approval, to desire being desired, and to internalize standards of beauty and restraint.

Neoliberal sexuality scripts and purity culture scripts are two distinct yet sometimes overlapping frameworks that shape how sexuality is constructed, regulated, and lived. For example, purity culture may influence a woman's internal experience of desire to be shaped by cultural scripts direct femininity to be passive, modest, and self-restraining, while a neoliberal script might direct femininity to be sexually liberated, hypersexual, and empowerment might be expressed through consumption (e.g., through lingerie or cosmetic surgery). Both scripts sexualize women and enforce heteronormativity and narrow beauty ideals.

Mental Health Consequences

Figure 7

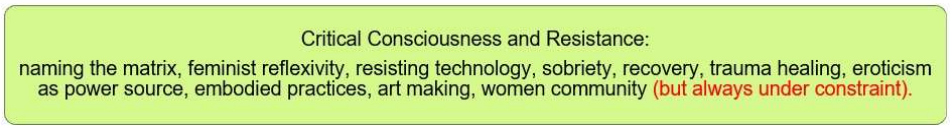
Outcomes of Mental Health



As discussed extensively in Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) research, scholars argue that societal objectification leads women to internalize external beauty standards, resulting in self-objectification and habitual self-surveillance. Women adopt an internalized gaze toward their own bodies, which disrupts bodily awareness, reduces opportunities for flow, and contributes to depression, anxiety, shame, and eating disorders. This constant monitoring carries is costly to cognitive processes, diverting time and energy away from personal growth, achievement, and social participation.

Figure 8

Critical Consciousness and Resistance



This theoretical model offers describes a 'critical interruption,' an internal counterweight that prevents the framework from collapsing into a one-directional oppression story. This part allows for critical consciousness to include contradiction, complicity, and ambivalence in a woman's experience. First, recognizing and naming the matrix is the first step to critical consciousness. Harding (1991) and Collins (1990) posit critical consciousness emerges when women reinterpret their lived experiences to be conditioned and shaped by culture and power, rather than individually deficient. Consciousness transforms shame into political analysis; naming objectification destabilizes its psychological hold, and reflexivity becomes epistemic resistance.

Feminist therapy and recovery practices can offer resistance models by reframing mental health struggles a response to oppression rather than pathology. In Judith Herman's (1992) framework, *Trauma and Recovery*, conceptualizes trauma to fundamentally disrupt agency, self-power, and connection to self and others. She writes trauma should be understood within systems of power, including violence, sexual exploitation, war, and patriarchal domination. She explicitly argues that trauma recovery requires recognition of the social and political forces shaping the subjective experience.

In *Quit Like a Woman*, Holly Whitaker (2019) reframes sobriety to be a feminist act of refusing to participate in patriarchal and capitalist culture, not just individual moral

reform. Mainstream drinking culture socializes women into self-silencing, normalizes self-abandonment, rewards performative femininity, and markets "empowerment" through alcohol consumption. Alcohol is embedded in a system that profits from women's insecurity, sexualizes women to dull their boundaries, and rewards self-objectification. Whitaker critiques traditional 12-step frameworks for centering male experiences. Further, 12-step programs emphasize powerlessness in ways that can feel disempowering for women. She argues that the 12-step path ignores gender trauma and socialization. Instead, recovery should be about reclaiming intuition and embodied awareness. Recovery should be about deconditioning patriarchal scripts and even reclaiming anger if necessary. She emphasizes that in recovery, self-trust becomes a political act. Women are socialized to doubt their perceptions, override bodily cues, and prioritize likeability over safety. In recovery, women can restore internal authority. Finally, Whitaker is critical of 'wine mom culture' that brands empowerment with narratives of neoliberal feminism, disguising self-care as consumption. She argues that true recovery requires stepping outside market-driven identity formation.

Lorde's (1978) concept of the erotic as power is integral to becoming whole and reclaiming subjectivity. By honoring this internal force, women can reclaim joy, purpose, and strength in their lives. The erotic self can become a powerful tool for self-expression and a form of resistance against systems that encourage emotional and creative suppression. Anzaldúa et al.'s (2012) borderlands theory conceptualizes creative practice as a method of transforming fragmentation into new subjectivity. Art-making becomes a site of meaning reconstruction and the refusal of imposed scripts. As such, art making can rebuild psychic coherence and emotional sovereignty.

Embodied practices are activities that restore attention to lived, internal bodily experience rather than the body as an object to be evaluated. Embodied practices might include somatic therapy, yoga or trauma-informed movement, breathwork and mediation, working out and exercise, dance and even sexual experiences that are not performative. Lorde (1978) argues that an embodied sexual experience is deeply internal and self-anchored rather than a display. This may include paying attention to breath, warmth, tension, relaxation, without monitoring appearance. This supports my distinction between pleasure grounded in agency versus pleasure grounded in performance or desirability hierarchies. hooks (1992) similarly frames love and self-recovery as political acts that resist domination.

Summarizing the Neoliberal Postfeminist Sexual Objectification Matrix Borderland Theoretical Model

Neoliberal postfeminist sexuality refers to a cultural discourse in which women's sexual expression is framed as personal empowerment, individual choice, and entrepreneurial self-making, even though it is shaped by structural power relations (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2008a; McRobbie, 2009). In this paradigm, sexuality becomes less about erotic desire, intimacy, or embodied sensual experience and more about visibility, performance, and self-branding. The key distinction is that sexuality is organized through objectification rather than mutuality. In this dissertation I propose the 'neoliberal-postfeminist *sexual objectification* matrix' to be the interlocking system of discourses, practices, and norms that regulate contemporary femininity through the appearance of empowerment, choice, and sexual agency, while reinforcing objectifying patriarchal, capitalist, and heteronormative power structures. In this context, a *matrix* refers to an interconnected framework in which multiple discourses, practices, and norms

operate together to shape subjectivity, making power appear diffuse, natural, and individually chosen rather than structurally imposed. The matrix is something I identify to resist, to become conscious of, so I am no longer subject to it unknowingly.

Therefore, the neoliberal postfeminism sexual objectification matrix theoretical model stipulates, in a neoliberal and postfeminist political economic culture, societal sexual objectification is worsening. Sexuality discourses and sexual scripts cause women to self-objectify. Women direct material and psychic resources to achieving femininity norms and desirability hierarchies. This effects the formation of subjectivity through practices self-optimizing, discipline, and sexualizing mechanisms. Then this leads to mental health consequences, risk negotiation, alienation, disembodiment and deep spiritual costs. However, women can interrupt and even negate this process through critical consciousness such as feminist reflexivity, sobriety, therapy and reclaiming subjectivity practices such as art making, pleasure and embodied practices.

→Macro regime: neoliberal–postfeminist political economy + patriarchal institutions + racialized & classed hierarchies = social construction of women's bodies+ capitalist commodification of women's sexuality = societal sexual objectification.

↓ (diffuse, indirect)

→ Discursive technologies: neoliberal "individualism / self-determination" + postfeminist "choice / empowerment" + sexual liberation "hypersexuality" sexual scripts + "respectability" purity discourse & confessional culture.

↓ (normalization)

→ Norms: femininity ideals, desirability hierarchies, respectability, heterosexual scripts, visibility, sexual availability / restraint.

↓ (internalization)

→ Leads to Practices: self-surveillance, self-optimization, self-branding, confessions & disclosure "authenticity," sexual display, hypersexual performance, digital self-presentation (sexting, online dating, BDSM sites).

↓ (subject formation)

→ Causes Constructing Subjectivity: self-objectification, identity development, sexual subjectification, desire shaped by being desired, embodied/psychic/spiritual consequences.

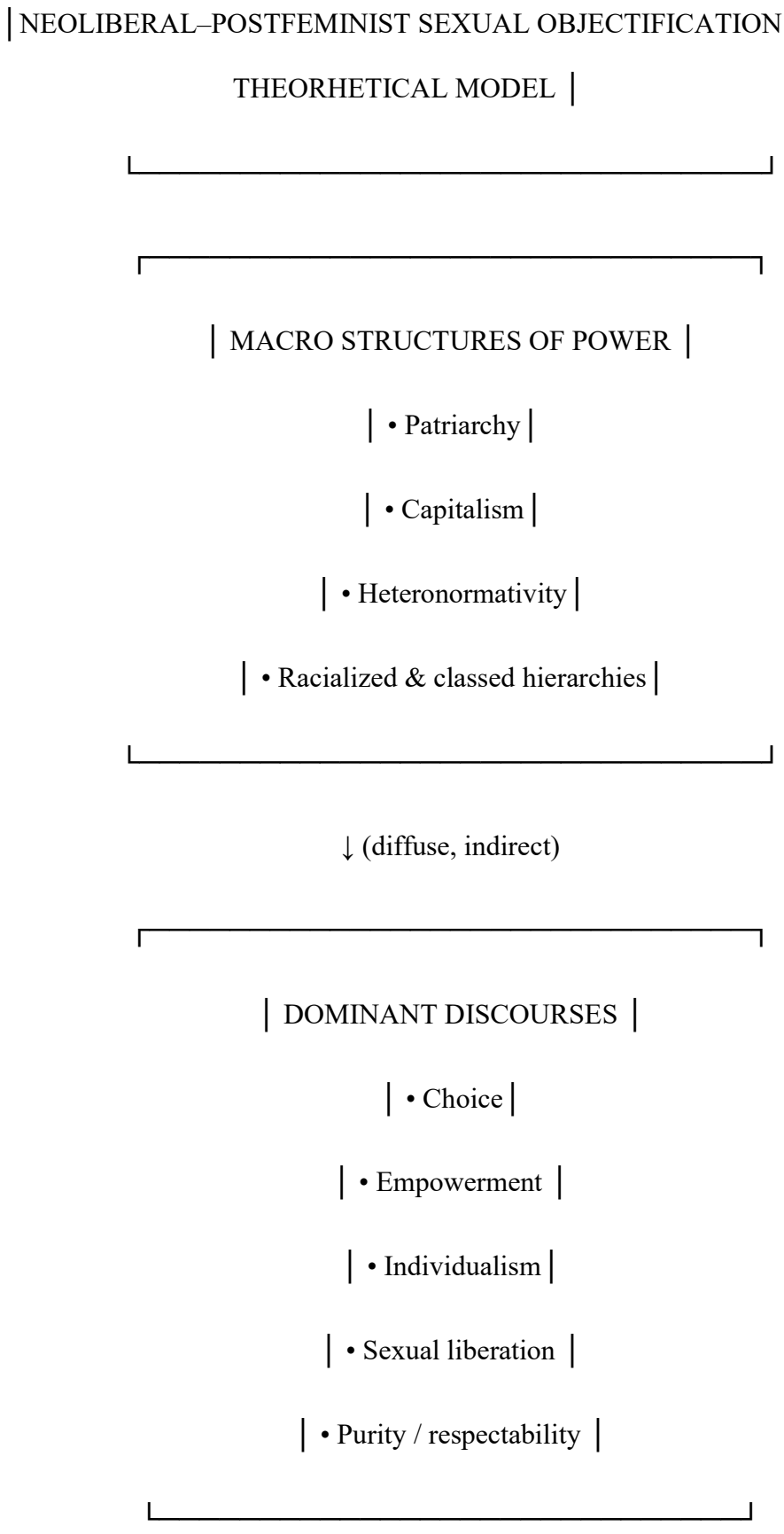
↺ feedback loop (reinforcement)

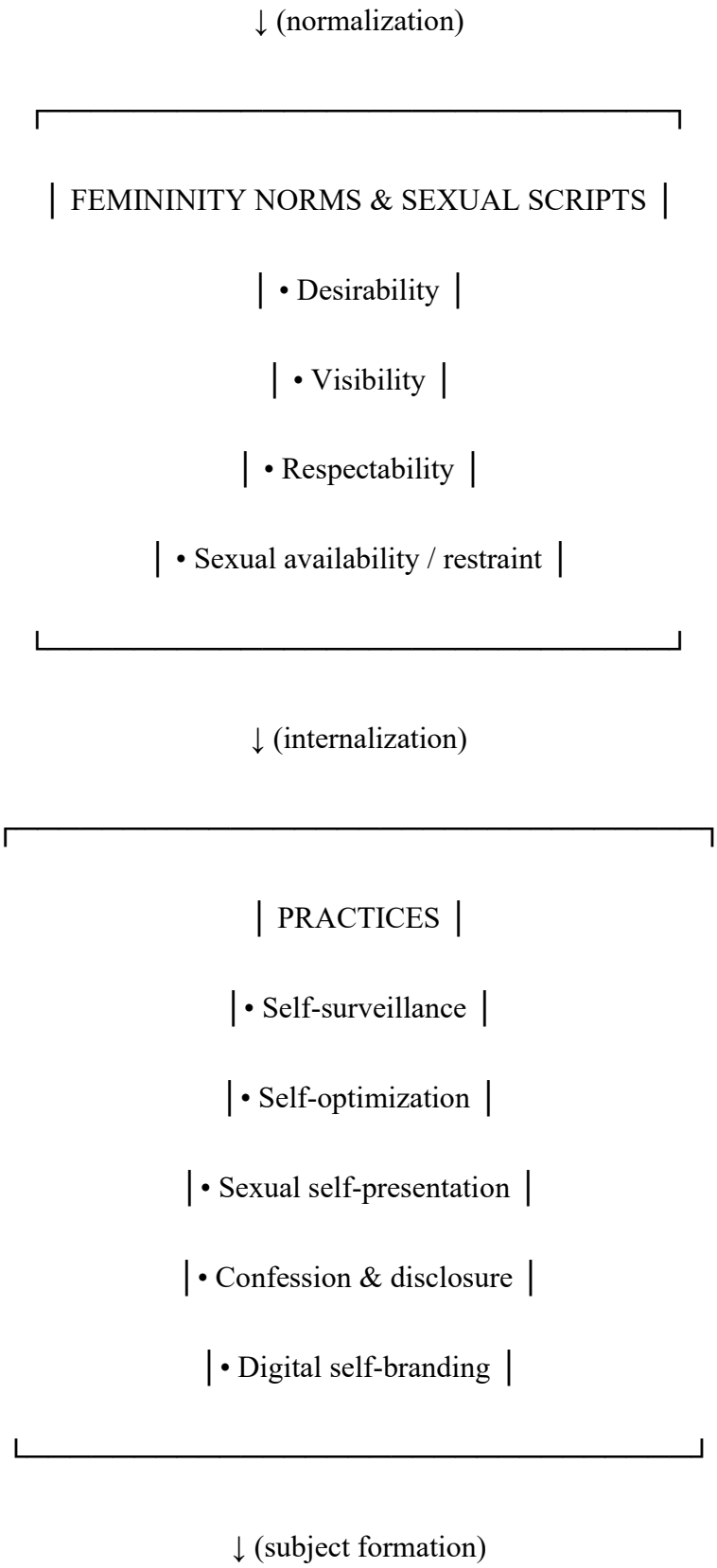
↺ metrics, visibility, validation

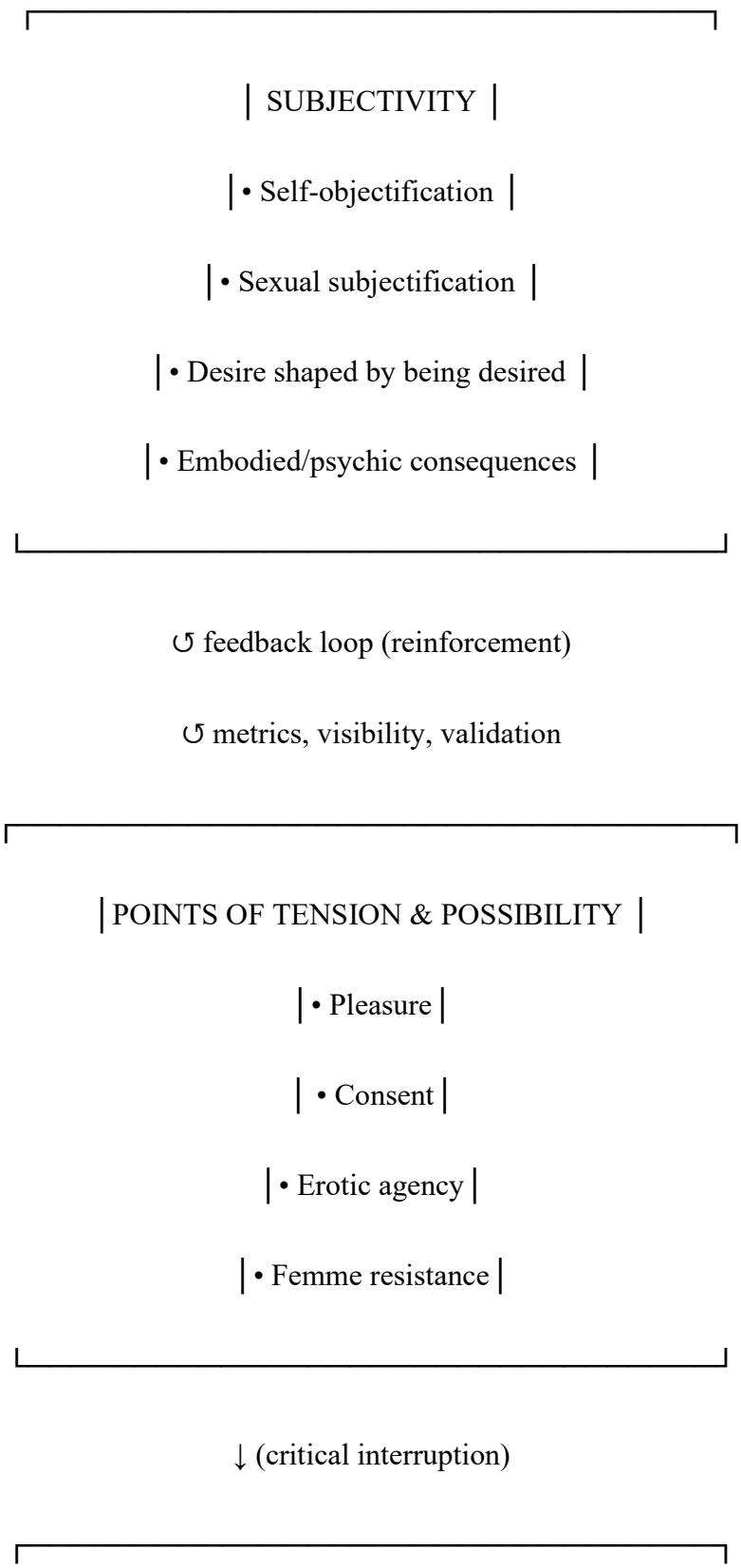
↔ Outcomes to Mental Health: embodied alienation, shame, risk negotiation, lack of flow states, diminished task performance, depression, eating disorders, unable to experience intimacy, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, relational patterns.

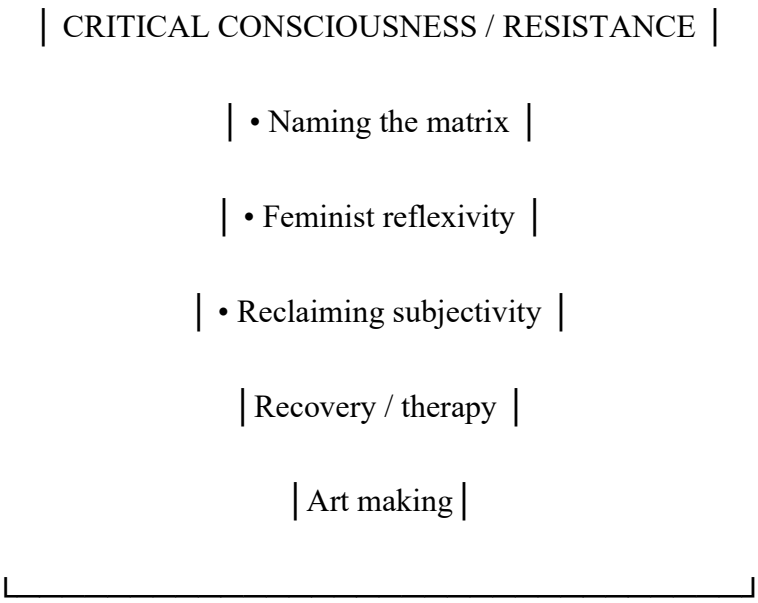
↓ (critical interruption)

↔ Critical Consciousness and Resistance/agency: naming the matrix, feminist reflexivity, resisting technology, sobriety, recovery, trauma healing, eroticism as power source, embodied practices, art making, women community (but always under constraint).


NEOLIBERAL–POSTFEMINIST SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION MATRIX
THEORHETICAL MODEL
MACRO STRUCTURES OF POWER
• Patriarchy
• Capitalism
• Heteronormativity
• Racialized & classed hierarchies
↓ (diffuse, indirect)
DOMINANT DISCOURSES
• Choice
• Empowerment
• Individualism
• Sexual liberation
• Purity / respectability


↓ (normalization)
FEMININITY NORMS & SEXUAL SCRIPTS
• Desirability
• Visibility
• Respectability
• Sexual availability / restraint
↓ (internalization)
PRACTICES
• Self-surveillance
• Self-optimization
• Sexual self-presentation
• Confession & disclosure
• Digital self-branding
↓ (subject formation)


SUBJECTIVITY
• Self-objectification
• Sexual subjectification
• Desire shaped by being desired
• Embodied/psychic consequences
↺ feedback loop (reinforcement)
↺ metrics, visibility, validation
POINTS OF TENSION & POSSIBILITY
• Pleasure
• Consent
• Erotic agency
• Femme resistance
↓ (critical interruption)


CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS / RESISTANCE
• Naming the matrix
• Feminist reflexivity
• Reclaiming subjectivity
Recovery / therapy
Art making

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Chapter 1 presents the broad overview of this work, including setting the stage of the neoliberal-post feminist era that shaped my subjectivity and sexuality. Chapter 2 presented an in-depth review of the literature regarding the present study. Chapter 3 outlines the rationale for autoethnography and my borderland theoretical framework utilizing existential feminism and radical feminism, post-structural feminism (including feminist media scholars), and sex positive and liberal feminism.

This dissertation explores my embodied experience of developing a critical consciousness of the neoliberal–postfeminist matrix of sexual objectification and its mental health consequences. Guided by a constructionist and feminist epistemology, I frame lived experience, reflexivity, and subjectivity as legitimate and necessary forms of knowledge production. My research questions ask: *What is my perspective of my experience of sexual objectification and its mental health consequences?* and, more specifically: (1) *What is the socio-cultural context of sexual objectification within a neoliberal–postfeminist era?* and (2) *How does my individual experience critique broader social conditions of gender oppression?*

To address these questions, I use autoethnography which is methodology that situates individual narrative within cultural and structural contexts. Ontologically, I use constructionism which posits reality is socially constructed, created through social interaction (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1966). I ground this work in feminist epistemology of standpoint theory (Harding, 1986) and Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990, 2004). I use the borderlands theoretical design approach (Anzaldúa, 1987; Anzaldúa et al., 2012) to frame my conceptual framework. Within this framework,

qualitative paradigms serve as the methodological foundation. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize that qualitative inquiry seeks to understand meaning through lived experience. Qualitive paradigms privileges reflexivity, context, and interpretation.

Anzaldúa's concept of "mestiza consciousness" has applied to transformative research that uses multiple theories to examine social phenomena. Mestiza consciousness emphasizes the need to transcend dualism (i.e. oppressor/oppressed, subject/object, self/other). She writes:

> The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner…a massive uprooting of dualistic thinking… in the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hope, bring us to the end of rape, violence, and war (Anzaldúa et al., 2012, p. 100–101).

I extend that to psychological war produced by objectification. This idea is about finding yourself in the struggle. It is about coming to an understanding or consciousness while living to two worlds. It is about finding yourself in the liminal spaces, in between where you are today and where you want to be. It is about finding the truth where two conflicting ideas or theories meet, and that I might find the truth in that *space of that fiction.* This applies to being inside the matrix, while also naming its harms. I say it as an insider-outsider to the United States as an immigrant, and: I say this as a researcher-participant; practicing reflexive analysis.

Scholarly Autoethnography

Using the research methodology of autoethnography, I situate personal experience to reveal previously ignored perspectives within sexual objectification research. One of

the intentions of autoethnography is to make social connections with personal experiences, revealing the state of human consciousness (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). Autoethnography is a "study of culture of which one is a part, integrated with one's relational and inward experience" (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 448). Autoethnography is mostly depicted through story telling or personal narratives, in which meaning can be depicted through characterization, scenes, dialogue, and plots (Ellis, 2004). These writings should:

> …Feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and introspection, which appear as relational and institutional stories influenced by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are revealed dialectically through action, feeling, thought, and language (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 448-449).

Carolyn Ellis (2004) argues that autoethnography rejects the myth of detached neutrality. Instead, the researcher's lived experience is legitimate data; the emotional, embodied self is part of the analytic process, and knowledge is relational and situated. The "I" is not contamination of data — it *is* the site of inquiry.

Through discussions, reflective writing, journals entries, photographs, and artworks as the primary source of data collection, I draw upon theoretical concepts to examine key themes discovered in this process. I have come to understand that my story is not an isolated experience. My story is part of a broader political and cultural system. This project documents the process of awakening to the realization. The feminist insight that the personal is political (Hanisch, 1969) has helped me reinterpret my relationship to self. These are not merely individual experiences; they are positions within a socially constructed matrix. Although I was initially reluctant to center myself in this work, I was

encouraged to recognize the epistemic value of lived experience. Autoethnography is therefore methodologically appropriate, as it aligns with my social constructionist and feminist commitments, allowing me to examine how subjectivity is formed through discourse, power, and culture while situating my own experience as a legitimate site of knowledge production.

There are two types of autoethnography, analytic and evocative. Analytic autoethnography was developed by Leon Anderson (2006) set out to capture validity and credibility, without getting too deep into the emotional element of the lived experience and aimed to develop theoretical analysis that explains social phenomena. Bochner and Ellis (2016) formulated evocative autoethnography to capture the raw human emotion with particular emphasis on the inner workings of the narrator. Wall writes:

> There is a debate about the extent to which autoethnography approaches would be narrative, emotional, therapeutic, and self-focused as opposed to theoretical, analytical, and scholarly with a more traditional understanding of self as connected to a particular ethnographic context rather than the focus of it (Wall, 2008, p. 2).

This is particularly relevant in my dissertation because I did not write a purely evocative narrative, I used my lived experience to theorize sexual objectification within a neoliberal-postfeminist matrix. Thus, these two types are not exclusive to one another. Analytically, I have developed the theoretical framework to apply my thematic analysis, connecting theorists, and theory to the data. It is evocative in that my narrative is immersive, has therapeutic depth, and describes interiority and vulnerability. That said,

although my work has evocative elements, I believe that my work leans more heavily on being theoretical, analytical, and socially contextualized.

One of the strengths of autoethnography is its ability to convey complexity and depth, while avoiding dichotomous understanding such as interpretations as either art or science, hard or soft, and qualitative or quantitative. Ellingson and Ellis state that autoethnography should challenge dichotomous thinking, not only in society, but also in academia, such as the dichotomous pairings of "Self-other, subject-object, humanities-social-science, process-product, personal-political, emotional-rational, passionately involved-neutral, evocative-analytic" (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 448). Dichotomous thinking is limited because such pairs of opposites are interdependent rather than a duo restricted to its opposite, and this duo limits possibility and infinite variety to only two options.

Data

In keeping with a feminist constructionist epistemology, data collection for this study emphasized the centrality of lived experience, reflexivity, and the acknowledgment of subjectivity as a legitimate form of knowledge production. Autoethnography utilizes memory and personal narratives with cultural encounters on sexual objectification and its mental health consequences. Unlike positivist research that seeks to separate the researcher from the data, this project positions me as both the subject and the analyst, highlighting the entanglement of the personal with the political (Ellis et al., 2011).

Sources of Data

Multiple forms of qualitative material were drawn upon constructing the narrative basis of this study. First I write in response to writing prompts that account for formative

experiences in which sexual objectification shaped my subjectivity. I draw memories of different stages in my life, from adolescence to adulthood, and across diverse cultural contexts. I do not treat memories as memory as neutral recall, rather I am active in reconstruction of meaning (J. Crawford et al., 1992). Second, I incorporated cultural artifacts including screenshots of dating profiles, selfie photographs, social media posts and notes from my journals. Third, I write with emotional and affective interpretations at the forefront of my descriptions. I recall bodily sensations, such as shame, dissociation, or heightened self-consciousness. Autoethnography recognizes that knowledge is not only textual but also sensory and embodied (Spry, 2001).

Process of Collection

The data collection process was iterative and reflexive. As a researcher I am always conversation with my past, present, and cultural context (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Data collection was not a linear endeavor. I revisited stories with new insights, especially considering theory. I set aside regular writing sessions over the course of four weeks to respond to prompts or write spontaneously. I drafted questions that included the following prompts in which I wrote responses:

Week 1: Early Socialization & Cultural Foundations Theme: How purity culture, media, and early life experiences shaped my gendered subjectivity. Session 1: Prompt: What were the earliest lessons I received about sex, my body, and being a "good girl"?

Theory tie: de Beauvoir (1949) on "becoming woman"; Marilyn Frye (1983) on oppression.

Key Life Experience: shamed for masturbation when I lived with my grandmother (purity culture)

Key Life Experience: dad telling me he slept with 136 women as a young girl

Key Life Experience: watching In Bed with Madonna as 11-year-old

Key Life Experience: Seducing a 50 something year old man when I was 15

Session 2:

Prompt: How did 90s media, or celebrity culture shape how I saw femininity and beauty?

Theory tie: Susan Bordo (1993) on body image; Bartky (1990) on disciplinary beauty practice

Key Life Experience: Spice Girls/Sex in the City/ Anorexia

Session 3:

Prompt: When do I first remember being objectified (catcall, unwanted attention, body scrutiny)?

Theory tie: Andrea Dworkin (1987) on objectification as denial of humanity.

Key Life Experience: childhood sexual abuse.

Key Life Experience: Revenge porn sent to 96 teachers, school principals, and board of education

Week 2: Neoliberal/Postfeminist Sexual Subjectivity

Theme: How empowerment discourses, dating apps, hookup culture, and sex-positivity shaped you.

Session 1:

Prompt: How did dating apps, hookup culture, or sexting shape how I performed sexuality?

Theory tie: Rosalind Gill (2008b) on compulsory sexual agency.

Key Life Experience: Post divorce- had sex with many men to get my power back

Key Life Experience: Marketing self-online dating- becoming a pro to get the highest likes

Session 2:

Prompt: How did sex-positive/BDSM discourses influence how I understood sexual "freedom"?

Theory tie: Gayle Rubin (1984) on sex hierarchy; Angela McRobbie (2004) on postfeminist "double entanglement."

Key Life Experience: Non-monogamy, BDSM- did not benefit me

Session 3:

Prompt: How did I manage my body (dieting, fitness, beauty) as part of performing femininity?

Theory tie: Foucault (1979) on self-surveillance; Bordo (1993) on body discipline.

Key Life Experience: Getting sober I became more of a neoliberal subject, became more attractive, more disciplined,

Key Life Experience: Weight, diet, masturbation, drinking, 4th step inventory- 'confessing'

Key Life Experience: moving to America I had to get married, become superwoman, achieve success and be ‘empowered.’ I knew nothing about feminism.

Week 3: Consequences & Mental Health

Theme: The personal toll of self-objectification and its intersections with addiction, shame, and mental health.

Session 1:

Prompt: How did constant self-monitoring (appearance, desirability) affect my confidence and relationships?

Theory tie: Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) on objectification theory.

Session 2:

Prompt: How did substance use intersect with my experiences of objectification and sexuality?

Theory tie: Bartky (1990) on alienation from the body; feminist critiques of consent/rape culture.

Key Life Experience: Substance abuse and sex went hand in hand- are women really giving consent in an environment of ‘compulsory sexual agency’?

Session 3:

Prompt: How did objectification contribute to anxiety, depression, or dissociation in my life?

Theory tie: Dworkin (1987) on erasure of self; bell hooks (1981) on invisibility of women (denial of femininity) white women benefit while women of color don’t

Week 4: Resistance, Recovery & Reclaiming Power

Theme: How you resisted, reframed, and reclaimed your subjectivity.

Session 1:

Prompt: What feminist texts or ideas helped me reinterpret my lived experiences of objectification?

Theory tie: Radical and intersectional feminists (Crenshaw, hooks, Collins).

Session 2:

Prompt: How has recovery (sobriety, spirituality, therapy) reshaped my relationship to my body and sexuality? Made me more of a neoliberal subject – I've become more feminine, lost weight, become more 'attractive.'

From dissociated sexual power- to consciousness / awareness /intimacy /connection

Theory tie: Audre Lorde (1984) on erotic power. Experiencing intimacy in recovery for the first time

Session 3:

Prompt: How do I now understand my subjectivity as a woman shaped by culture, power, and sexuality?

Theory tie: Patricia Hill Collins (1990) on controlling images.

Gloria Anzaldúa – mestiza consciousness - Academic and scholarly exercise is a liberatory practice

How did immigrating to the U.S. change my experience of femininity, sexuality, and objectification?

How did my class position, work in the arts, or cultural background shape how you were seen as a woman?

How did my international experiences complicate or deepen your awareness of gendered oppression? Key Life Experience: I went to The American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists (AASECT) convention where I presented a poster and I was scrutinized for saying that 'sex workers' were objectified, and that gender ideology and obsession with gender identity was an objectifying practice. I felt for the first time the authoritarian left regulating academic discourse.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2022), *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide, developed the* reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) in which the researcher is an active interpreter, and themes are *developed* (not discovered) through reflexive engagement. Themes are patterns of shared meaning organized by a central organizing concept (not just topic summaries). There are six flexible phases (familiarization → coding → initial themes → develop/review → refine/define → write-up). Iteration and reflexivity are expected in this process. Braun and Clarke emphasize quality through transparency and reflexivity (not inter-coder reliability, codebooks, or "saturation" in the positivist sense).

Using RTA for Autoethnography- Step-by-Step

RTA works well when in my dataset of writing (journals, fieldnotes, artifacts, emails, spoken-word pieces) and offers a practical path of analysis. These are steps taken to analysis the data.

1. Define the dataset (what texts are "in"?), and state your epistemology (e.g., constructionist, feminist).

2. Familiarize: read/re-read my narratives. Here I reviewed the data document with my mother sitting at the kitchen table. She offers objective triangulation and can check for accuracy and emphasis. I reviewed my narratives with my committee members via zoom calls in which I read the journal entries out loud to them and identified any missing journal entries. For example, I had written about the "darkest point in my life" in my chapter 1 introduction but had not written about it in the data collection.
3. Code reflexively which is mostly an inductive process but informed by theory I chose (constructionist-feminist) and I code meanings, not just topics.
4. Build themes that capture *shared meanings across moments in your story*—each with a clear central organizing concept (e.g., 'Hierarchy, Class Mobility, Privilege, and Objectification,' 'Mythologized Male Power & Male Sexual Scripts,' 'Madonna (Respectability)- 'Whore (Hypersexuality) Dichotomy,' 'Morphing Identity and Unstable Self-Hood,' and 'Reclaiming Subjectivity as an Act of Feminist Resistance and Healing.'
5. Review and refine to ensure themes answer your research questions (e.g., how neoliberal-postfeminist scripts shape self-objectification).
6. Write-up with thick data extracts and analytic commentary, and a reflexivity section (how your standpoint shaped the analysis).

Using NVivo to Code

NVivo was used as an organizational and reflexive aid to support thematic analysis. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, coding was

understood as a flexible, interpretive process shaped by the researcher's feminist and constructionist positionality.

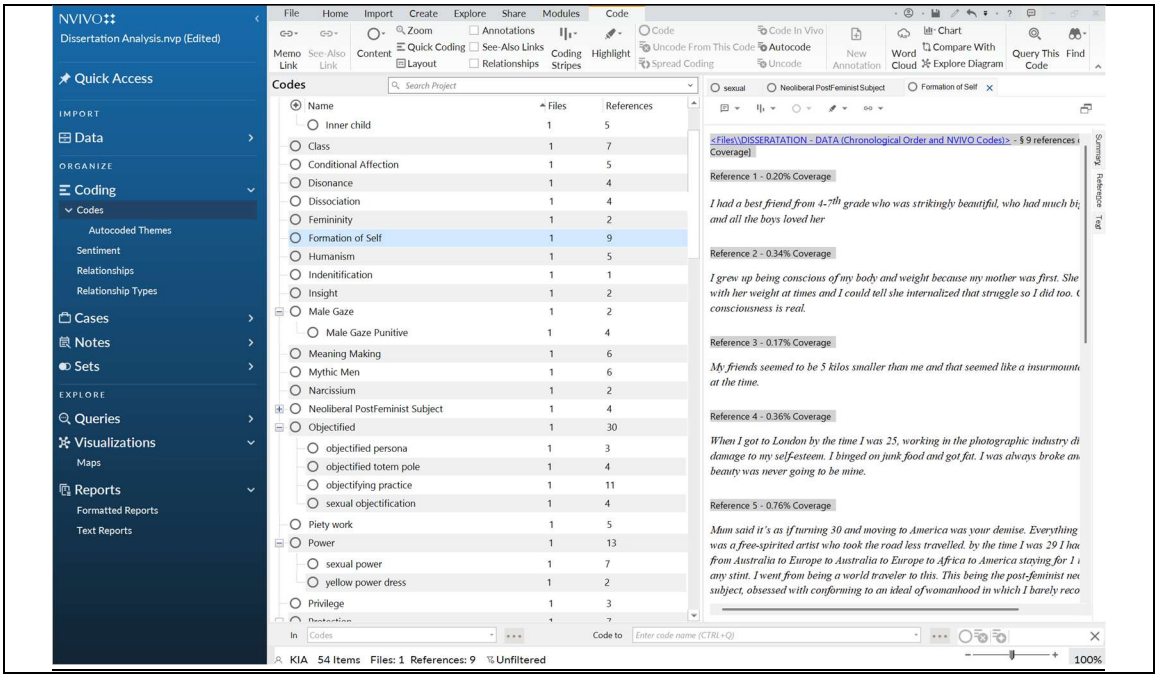
The following codes were identified:

- Belonging
- Betrayal
- Child
    - Inner Child
- Class
- Conditional Affection
- Dissonance
- Dissociation
- Femininity
- Formation of Self
- Humanism
- Identification
- Insight
- Male Gaze
    - Male Gaze Punitive
- Meaning Making
- Mythic Men
- Narcissism
- Neoliberal Postfeminist
- Objectified
    - Objectified Persona
    - Objectified Totem Pole
    - Objectifying Practice
- Peity Work
- Power
    - Sexual Power
    - Yellow Power Dress
- Privilege
- Protection
    - Gender Policing
- Recovery Work
- Safety
- Self-Soothing
- Sexual

    - Female Sexuality
    - Sexual Agency
    - Sexual Conquest
    - Sexual Content
    - Sexual Empowerment
    - Sexual Motivation
    - Sexual Narrative
    - Sexual Objectification
    - Sexual Power
    - Sexual Relationships
    - Sexual Sadism
    - Sexuality Educators
    - Sexualized Control
    - Stigmatizing Sexuality
- Sexual Scripts
- Shame
- Subjectivity
- Survival Strategy

Figure 9

Coding Output in Nvivo Software Example



Data Organization

Narratives were grouped into six thematic clusters:

- Childhood and Adolescence – Reflections on childhood sexual abuse, familial gaze, gendered policing, purity culture, adolescence of self–consciousness, paternal influence and modeling, and early sexual experiences.
- Moving to America – Young adulthood experiences prior to migration, strategies for assimilation, constructions of femininity and womanhood, neoliberal-postfeminist norms, failed marriages, substance abuse, dysfunctional online dating encounters, and revenge porn violence.
- In Sobriety – Writings on embodiment, spirituality, 4th step sex inventory from recovery work, changing body image, evolving sexual identity, experiences of sexual violence through revenge porn, and institutional betrayal.
- Objectification Violence - Experiences and analysis of sexual objectification as material and psychological harm, including image-based abuse, revenge porn, coercion, digital surveillance, and institutional betrayal.
- Refining the Neoliberal Post Feminist Subject - Exploration of self-surveillance, self-optimization, desirability hierarchies, and identity management shaped by neoliberal and postfeminist norms.
- Reclaiming Subjectivity – Strategies of resistance, reframing and reclaiming selfhood, expansion of eroticism beyond sexuality, analysis of self-objectification as identity armor, and how mentorship and feminist autoethnography contributed to acceptance and activism.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive and personal nature of the data, ethical considerations was used, especially when other people were involved. Pseudonyms were used for any identifiable people and identifying details were altered to protect privacy. I received written permission from one participant who can be identified (see appendix). I also grappled with the ethical responsibility of narrating stories that intersect with the lives of others. I recognized that my truth is partial and situated. Further, I engaged in reflexivity to navigate the dual role of researcher and participant, acknowledging the risks of retraumatization while also recognizing the transformative potential of narrating my story (Adams et al., 2015).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Autoethnography maintains trustworthiness and rigor through transparency, reflexivity, and thick description. My narrative includes theoretical interpretation and cultural artifacts of photographs and screenshots. I provide a multifaceted account, considering multiple perspectives and I resist simplification. This approach aligns with feminist methodological commitments to accountability, honesty, and the recognition of voice (Richardson, 2000). Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation using artifacts, multiple theories, and third-party input.

Triangulation

In the positivist tradition, triangulation refers to the use of multiple data sources, researchers, methods, or theoretical lenses to enhance credibility and neutrality. In contrast to positivists traditions, autoethnography does not triangulate to prove neutrality, but is used to deepen interpretation (Denzin, 2012; Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnographic

triangulation uses journals, memory, text messages, photographs, cultural artifacts (like screenshots from dating apps), and of course, theoretical texts. Theoretical triangulation includes using multiple theories to examine the phenomena (Denzin, 2012). Reflective triangulation deepens this notion by attempting to expose bias through articulating positionality (Anderson, 2006). Finally, I scrutinized the data by I asking my mother to check for exaggeration and accuracy and made suggestions on parts I may have missed.

Positionality Explained

I begin this chapter by outlining my positionality summarized in chapter one in greater detail. Feminist and qualitative scholars such as Haraway (1988), Harding (1986), Collins (1990), D. E. Smith (1987), hooks (2000b), and Ellis (2013), emphasize that acknowledging the researcher's positionality is significant in dismantling the notion that knowledge is produced in neutral, universal, or detached ways. Instead, these scholars argue that research and knowledge is shaped by the researcher's social position, lived experience, and epistemological commitments. By explicitly disclosing oneself, the researcher acknowledges that interpretation and analysis are partial, situated, and relational rather than objective or value-free. Accordingly, I situate myself in this research as a white, Western, middle-class woman who identifies as a feminist. I immigrated to the United States at the age of 29 following extensive international travel and professional work across multiple continents. At the time of writing, I am a 45-year-old Generation X woman who came of age in the 1980s and 90s.

As someone who has benefited from privilege, I recognize that my experiences of objectification are shaped by identity and social location. For example, I am more likely to be hyper visible in certain spaces while invisible in others, based on cultural ideals of

desirability. I do discuss the impact of intersectionality on stereotyping, but I am not considered a marginalized person, but someone that might benefit from said marginalization. I write from a position of relative social privilege, and I acknowledge that this shapes both the scope and limits of my analysis.

My recollection of these experiences is emotionally charged, and my analysis is therefore explicitly critical rather than neutral. My longstanding struggles with body image likely heighten my sensitivity to cultural messages surrounding femininity, sexuality, desirability, and womanhood more broadly. Additionally, my history of childhood sexual abuse profoundly shaped how I understood the relationship between power and vulnerability. Finally, my tendency to reference a high number of sexual partners reflects the enduring influence of purity culture as a power construct. I both internalized shame and consciously attempted to resist it. Today, I am a different person from when I started this project- today I do not say "I slept with a lot of men," instead I say, "I had sex." The former is shrouded with shame; the latter is factual.

My interest in self-objectification became clear when I got sober from substance abuse, when I was in a deep state of self-reflection, character development, and spiritual practice, all while I was sinking my teeth into rich feminist theory. These coalesced into a magnificent opportunity to examine how my sexuality, identity, and self-worth shaped over time and changing landscapes. My worldview has been significantly shaped by the 12-step recovery program that encourages self-examination, accountability, humility, and ongoing personal growth. The program emphasizes the need to develop a spiritual practice, and although AA is historically rooted in Protestant traditions, my spiritual practice is pluralistic and expansive, including mystical eastern traditions and stoicism.

As such, my spirituality informs my interpretation and subjectivity to be fluid, fallible, and subject to revision. In that same vein, this dissertation is an interpretive project rather than a claim to truth.

My philosophical alignment lives somewhere between second-wave radical socialist, third wave intersectional and post structural feminism, and fourth wave gender critical feminist in that: I acknowledge that oppression has a compounding effect on human positions or locations (i.e. identity or geography). I acknowledge oppression is built into cultural norms, language and structural institutions. I was largely influenced by African American professor Dr. Tonya Perry who directed me to African American writers and Black Feminism (Collins, 1990; hooks, 2000a; Morris, 2016); I acknowledge that subjective meaning and our interpretation of reality is shaped in *relation* to environmental, cultural, and historical factors, and is discursive in nature (i.e. Foucault, 1979), and; I think material reality is important in deconstructing the patriarchy forces and class oppression of the sexes (C. J. Jones, 2022; K. Stock, 2021). I think pragmatism is central to meaningful research, and that truth and solutions lie somewhere in collective consciousness and conscience. I am also in constant review and apply critical thinking to my 'theoretical darlings;' for example, towards the end of editing this dissertation I started disentangling my love affair with feminism and am becoming increasingly critical of problematic abstractions in postmodern intellectualism and identity politics more broadly.

A noteworthy part of my positionality is that this work is largely not sex positive due to the goal of identifying harmful elements of objectification that may be acted out unconsciously. I do discuss the significance of sex positivity, but this dissertation is

predominately critical. With the exception of being conscious of objectifying constructs, I offer no solutions or answers as to how to live outside of an objectifying culture. I still like to objectify myself; I love the ritual of putting on make-up, stepping into my sexual power, and strutting the metaphorical sexualized catwalk. I continue to maintain my body within heteronormative ideals of beauty and attractiveness, and I do not intend to change this. I have undergone plastic surgery, used Botox, and invested significant time and money in maintaining a youthful appearance, and I am fully aware of how these practices align with dominant beauty norms.

Finally, my interpretation and analysis are shaped by my positionality as an educated feminist scholar with access to theoretical language that allows me to connect personal experience to broader political and social structures. My academic knowledge is shaped by particular, situated sources of knowledge. My analytical training has shaped how I understand contradiction and complicity. I see these fictions as the point of interest where the most truth can be found; I do not see this as an analytic flaw. This positionality informs the questions I ask and the meanings I prioritize.

CHAPTER 5

THE WRITING & THEMEATIC ANYALSIS

In this chapter, I practice reflexivity while interpreting themes from the data collected. I include data which is presented in italicized text. I drafted six themes through reflexive thematic analysis of my narrative data, guided by the central research question: *What is my gendered perspective of my experience of sexual objectification and its mental health consequences?* In examining my own story, I also considered the broader conditions that shape this experience, asking: *What is the socio-cultural context of sexual objectification within a neoliberal postfeminist era?* and *How does my individual experience reflect or challenge wider patterns of gender oppression?*

My early orientation to men was shaped by mythologized male power and the sexual scripts (theme 1) that centered male gaze. As I grew up I moved through different cultures and experienced different class, and I learned how objectification and privilege shaped hierarchies (theme 2). Beauty, whiteness, and desirability operate as social capital and social currency. Within these dynamics I appealed to the respectability-hypersexuality dichotomy (theme 3). I cycled between assimilating, seeking belonging and social legitimacy to seeking attention and performing sexual empowerment. As I internalized postfeminist and neoliberal ideals of choice, empowerment, and self-optimization, I participated in the sexual objectification matrix. I began to self-brand and self-surveil to signal confidence and success. These experiences contributed to morphing identity and unstable selfhood (theme 4). Over time, this affected my relationship with myself and others. At a breaking point and in finding sobriety I begin to reclaim subjectivity (theme 5) through art-making, sobriety, feminist awareness, and embodiment practices.

Theme 1: Mythologized Male Power, Male Sexual Scripts, and Sexual Dominance

Mythologized Male Power & Male Sexual Scripts Formed in Childhood

[DATA] 136 women

8/26/25

I was in love with my father, not in a sexual way by any means, but infatuated and in awe of. He was my Daddy Kings. He was an adventurer and had many stories. He got his teeth kicked out by the communist soldiers when he was 16 and they escaped war torn Hungary and smuggled their first daughter through professional smugglers. He landed on the Australian shores as a refugee and learned English as a mechanic even though he was an engineer by Budapest standards. He was not afraid of hard work. He eventually became a photographer when photography was a glamourous profession in the era of film, large format cameras and Time magazine and the National Geographic glory days.

He made himself out to be a Don Juan or Julio Iglesias type, telling me as a young girl, maybe 10 years old, that he had slept with 136 women. How he knew that number perplexes me as an adult. Did he keep count as a source of accomplishment? I know he never did a fourth step inventory, in which I discovered somewhat of a similar number but instead of pride, I felt shame. He made sure to say that after he met my mother that body count stopped. He said women were like eating popcorn, he was always thirsty for more and he was never satisfied. Until he met my mother, that is. I think he thought it was somehow justified telling his daughter that because he revered my mother so much. Like that was what I was supposed to aspire to. To not be popcorn, but to be the top of the objectified totem pole where he placed my mother.

I wonder what knowing that did to me as an adult. I wonder if I somehow internalized the masculine ideals of sexual conquest, as if my sexual power were exercised in the same way. I consider some of the men I dated later in life, much older, much more sexually experienced, and wonder if I thought I was absorbing some of their sexual prowess through seducing them.

My father disclosing that he has sex with 136 women reveals masculine scripts of sexual conquest. It also informs my understanding of sexuality and power. Sexual conquest are markers of masculinity and status in patriarchal cultures (Connell, 1995; Flood, 2019). My father describes women as objects of male accumulation rather than subjects of desire. I consider how this affected my adult sexual behavior and question if conquest was an ideal I had adopted. Gill (2007a) and McRobbie (2009) posit that

women sometimes adopt masculine-coded sexual scripts as a form of agency or empowerment. They contend that within systems that limit women's power, women adopt existing norms and tendencies. Further, my father's describing women as popcorn reflects the commodification of women's bodies and the interchangeable characteristic of objectification (Nussbaum, 1995). Feminist critiques of sexual objectification highlight how such metaphors normalize the treatment of women as consumable bodies (Bartky, 1990; Nussbaum, 1995).

From childhood onward, I learned to interpret masculinity through exaggerated stories of power and conquest. I mythologized my father and subsequently mythologized male relationships. I saw them not as people but as embodiments of power and desire. In doing so, I objectified him and them. I cast my father as a heroic survivor and a charming seducer, which sets a template for male power and sexual prestige. It taught me what to admire and what to fear, and it set the standard for how I related to men.

While radical feminists would contend that I merely adopted disciplinary femininity (Bartky, 1990) and heterosexuality dominance and submission (Dworkin, 1981), sex-positive and liberal feminists argue women's desires are not simply imposed by patriarchy but can be agentic, exploratory, and context-specific (Cornell, 1995; McElroy, 1996; Paasonen et al., 2020; Rubin, 1984). Seen through this lens, it is possible I was being agentic, but it is hard to imagine I adopted the pursuer and dominate role without that hierarchy being modeled to me first.

The men I later categorized as not ambitious enough, not dominant enough, or bland or vanilla, did not meet myth status and were eventually discarded, retired, or minimized. Ambition became a measure of attractiveness. Calling a stable partner boring

because of low ambition shows how classed and neoliberal values shape desire and partner selection, and self-optimization become attractive traits (Bourdieu, 1984; W. Brown, 2015).

In this excerpt, power is gained through desirability, and seduction is framed as a craft. Years of practice made me an expert user of scripts, images, and timing. Landgraf and von Treskow (2017) explain that seductions scripts tend to follow predictable patterns and sequenced events. These scripts tend to be shaped by traditional gender roles and sexist expectations. Chisholm (2019) contends that seduction is a type of skilled labor, especially in context of marketized intimacy. Whereas Rubin (1984), McElroy (1996), Cornell (1995), and Paasonen et al. (2020) suggest that seduction can facilitate self-definition and erotic expression.

[DATA] *Online Dating Pro*

(Date unknown).

I know how to play the game. I have well over 7 years' experience of alluring men. I wasn't as attractive as I am right now when I started but I knew how to sell my 'Australian' brand. Aggressive and unapologetically sexual. They lapped it up and I loved the power.

My profile is more toned down today, whereas there were times when I was explicit about my interest and experience in BDSM.

My complicity in the scripts is obvious. Because I was objectified and self-objectify, I too objectified men. To illustrate further, Megan Thee Stallion persona is overtly objectifying to men and women abound. When I think about this reversal, I see both power and tension in it. Flipping the gaze onto men and openly naming desire can reclaim voice and agency, yet it also risks repeating the same form of objectification. hooks' notion of oppositional gaze and hip-hop feminist argue that flipping the gaze can

be a resistant practice for black women inside male centered culture, even as critics warn that reversal can mirror the same objectifying structure (hooks, 1992; J. Morgan, 1999).

Power Asymmetry, Grooming, and Reframing Sexual Experience

[DATA] Limp Dick and Thin Skin

8/26/25

Mackenzie was my father's friend. He was old enough to be my grandfather. He was fantasy figure to me; I wonder if it was like sleeping with my father. Oh, that's so fucked up to think about it like that. I seduced him. I just went into his bedroom and sat by his bed. I remember not saying anything on the side of his bed. He wasn't totally sure I was saying what I was saying without saying anything. I think I grabbed his arm or something. I remember feeling his limp dick and thin skin. I never felt skin like that before- it was loose like fabric. I don't think we got very far, I can't remember any penetration, maybe just kissing. Maybe his body thought it was too weird.

For a long time, I carried shame around, I thought what teenager does that?

I told my therapist I was writing about this, and she pointed out that the man abused his power by sexually engaging with a minor. I said, "it was in the eighties" (it was actually the 90s,) and she said it didn't matter. That was the first time I had considered it a type of sexual abuse. It's dumbfounding to me now, that as an adult, I remember never thinking that it was an abuse of power, I was always so confused and filled with shame and kept it a secret for decades after.

This vignette illustrates how early sexual experiences involving large age differences can be reinterpreted retrospectively through the lens of power. At the time, I interpreted the encounter as something I initiated. The later reflection with my therapist reframes the event as an abuse of power. She insists it is a form of sexual abuse, highlighting the central issue is the asymmetry of power. Adolescents are developmentally and relationally vulnerable. My participation does not negate the unequal power conditions that structure the interaction. Feminist scholars argue that girls often interpret sexual encounters with older men through narratives of agency or curiosity (Herman, 1992; Tolman, 2002). They contend that this happened because patriarchal

sexual culture frames male desire as normal and female participation as voluntary, even when significant power differences exist. Sexual consent cannot be understood solely as an individual act of choice because sexual interactions occur within broader social hierarchies of age, gender, and authority (Kukla, 2024; Srinivasan, 2021). Sexual encounters involving significant power asymmetries cannot be evaluated purely through the language of individual agency (Perry, 2022). Feminist analyses of sexual violence emphasize that responsibility lies with the adult who fails to maintain appropriate boundaries (Brownmiller, 1975). For the girls, however, their early sexual experiences are often interpreted through cultural discourses of female morality and responsibility, often ignoring cultural context (Gill, 2007a; Tolman, 2002).

In this instance and later in my story, I treat proximity to a powerful man as a form of personal capital. According to Gill (2007b) and McRobbie (2009), that blend of empowerment and dependency is a signature of postfeminist sensibility. Desire is not the problem, by agency depends on contextual power dynamics. Real consent requires space that is free from pressure, influence, or old family patterns of authority (Rubin, 1984; Segal & McIntosh, 1993).

Sexual Violation, Objectification, and the Reconstruction of Meaning

[DATA] His Perfect Little Body

8/29/2025

There's always a level of detachment when I think, talk, and write about this. I can tell you what happened, but what happened doesn't represent what happened for the rest of my life because of what happened. I minimized it for a long time. There were times throughout my life when I did therapy around it. Even intensive therapy at times. It wasn't until I got sober was I really in a place to excavate my truth around what it means when an adult man sexually violates the body of a six-year-old girl.

My son was 5 years old when I got sober. His perfect little body was so beautiful with his little button bottom and round belly. So delicate and sacred. A child's body represents beginnings, potential, and humanity's renewal. I was looking at him running around the house naked one day and it started to dawn on me… what it meant in my life and what that man took from me. To take that energy from me. To reach inside me for his needs. My higher power put my son in my life at that particular moment in my sobriety for me to be able to love my son like that, to witness his stunning beauty and to understand that perfect innocence on a spiritual level. Because I was able to see my son at that age, to see his body, I was able to truly connect with what happened to me as a little girl.

I was turned into an object. I was handled like a thing to push and pull, to poke. He stole from me. He stole what was only mine, and only Gods to hold. I was left empty. I was left scared.

As if I was in a dark forest, that loomed over me, I heard the monster coming. I was standing in an opening, exposed where anything could grab me from the bushes. My pretty dress was tattered and I was crying for someone to save me. It was getting louder and more terrifying. And no one was coming to rescue me. No one came. My mother didn't come. My father didn't come. The monster came.

Then I became the monster. The fear turned into rage. Then I consumed them. I devoured them.

This vignette depicts the long-term consequences of childhood sexual abuse and the process of reinterpreting traumatic events later in life. I describe minimization and detachment which is a response to trauma, which is a coping mechanism that distances myself from overwhelming emotions (Herman, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014). A critical turning point occurs when I see my young son's body and recognize the vulnerability and innocence of my childhood. Trauma researchers describe this moment as retrospective meaning-making, when I interpret the event with more empathy and understanding towards my younger self and inner child (Herman, 2015). Seeing my son at approximately the same age as my trauma occurred allowed me to recognize the magnitude of what was taken from me as a child.

This experience was sexual objectification in the form of body violation. “Being handled like a thing” describes a child being reduced to an object to satisfy a sexual desire. Objectification theory explains that sexual violence represents an extreme form of bodily objectification in which a person’s body is treated as an instrument for another’s use rather than as an autonomous subject (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Nussbaum, 1995). Importantly, bodily violence penetrated my developing sense of self and changed my relationship with myself and others indefinitely, highlighting the existential and spiritual dimensions of trauma.

Innocence is framed as sacred, in which the violation is a theft of the soul. van der Kolk (2014) posits survivors of sexual abuse are both victims of child abuse and experience a disruption to identity, safety, and the meaning in the world. The metaphor of the “monster” conveys the overwhelming fear and helplessness experienced by me as a child. Trauma is often encoded through vivid imagery and symbolic representations rather than linear narrative (Herman, 2015). The final paragraph depicts a transformation from vulnerability to rage as a monster consuming ‘them.’ Trauma researchers frame anger as a form of protection, in an attempt to regain control and agency, following prolonged experiences of fear and powerlessness (Herman, 2015). In this sense, I am shifting from victim to resistance and survival.

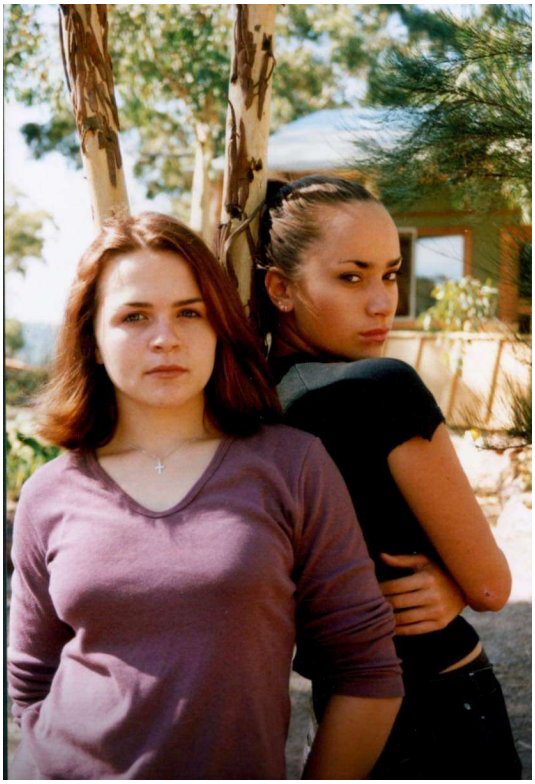
Theme 2: Hierarchy, Class Mobility, Privilege, and Neoliberal Self-Objectification

Beauty Metrics and Hierarchies

[DATA] Big Breasted Bestie
8/27/25

Figure 10

Two Girls Photo



I had a best friend from 4-10th grade who was strikingly beautiful, who had much bigger breasts, and all the boys loved her. Her white mum had her when she was 16 years old to a Māori man, they were from New Zealand. She was the oldest of 4 other siblings and often had to look after them.

I loved her, I was in love with her. Not sexually, but I do remember how attractive she was. I felt eclipsed by her when boys were around. They ogled her massive tits and she didn't seem to mind the attention. She got called a slut before she ever had sex. Other girls were envious, but I knew who she really was, and that felt special.

She and I snuck out at nighttime and met boys down on the school's playground at midnight. I was 'frigid' and didn't know about boys like she did. I'm sure she didn't know much more than me, but 'pashing,' 'making out,' and 1st base was way more than I knew at the time. She told the first boy I ever kissed that I had never kissed anyone before so he would have to make the first move. All I remember is I was sitting in a movie theatre when the boy basically attacked my face and stuck his tongue far down my throat and it was awkward and gross and generally an unpleasant experience. But I was proud to have finally reached first base, meanwhile, Tammy was getting her tits felt up and that seemed like it warranted being called a 'slut' to some.

She ended up getting pregnant at 16 years old to Joel and they are still together- over 30 years later. Sometimes I wonder if she ever shook the 'slut' stereotype because she had big boobs, it wouldn't matter that she stayed with the same guy for decades.

As a young girl, I learned my place in a hierarchy, and I internalized that scale and began to see myself through it. I was taught my place by watching boys watch my best friend; their attention raised her value and lowered mine. I internalized their gaze to become my self-worth which was tied to visibility and being desired (Bartky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Wolf, 1991). Here, I subconsciously learned that that heterosexual attention is an unevenly distributed cultural currency (L. Mulvey, 1975).

This vignette illustrates how female adolescence is characterized by sexual hierarchies and peer surveillance. My friends body became the subject of conversation, admired by hormonal boys and labeled derogatory names by envious girls. Scholars point to the double standard where girls are judged negatively for sexual attention and also encouraged to be sexual (Ringrose & Renold, 2012; Tolman, 2002). Girls learn to evaluate themselves by comparing attractiveness and male approval. Scholars of adolescent sexuality note that such experiences are common during identity development and often occur before sexual orientation categories are socially understood or available (Diamond, 2008).

[DATA] Feeling Poor

(Date Uknown)

When I was 12, my parents went bankrupt. We had money and lost it. I grew up feeling poor.

The struggles around my worth were intensified by the instability of my family's class position, where social status felt fragile. As such, seeking class mobility and

privilege seemed to exacerbate my tendency to self-objectify. I grew up in a family that had a contradictory class position. We had money and then lost it. My family lost our social status, and both my parents had to work jobs that were beneath them. My mother 'just got on with it,' but my father felt shame and embarrassment being a qualified engineer and inventor reduced to working as a maintenance man. We held certain markers of privilege like education, international travel, aesthetic taste, literacy, and artistic sensibility. Despite the cultural capital I came to appreciate later in life, I was acutely aware of our lack of money, I grew up feeling poor, and the lack of money was a driving force in my identity and life choices.

This contradiction shaped how I understood myself in relation to others. I learned to navigate spaces where I appeared to 'fit in' while simultaneously feeling like I was pretending, potentially another factor contributing to the tendency to dissociate. The resulting tension blurred my sense of security and identity. I learned that class is not only about material resources, but also about performance, belonging, and how others saw me. The strain between privilege and loss became the backdrop for my early encounters with sexual objectification, where appearance, desirability, and femininity possibly functioned as alternative currencies to reclaim the status and validation my family had lost. This manifested most in my teenaged years into my 20s and 30s, when I had a heightened sense of self surveillance, sought romantic partners as validation, all while using substances to regulate my discomfort. Later, I considered class mobility through partner selection, and being driven by need to be the most desired woman in the room.

[DATA] Get Skinny
8/27/25

I grew up being conscious of my body and weight because my mother was first. She struggled with her weight at times. I could tell she internalized that struggle, so I did too. Collective consciousness is real.

Then I grew up flicking through Vogue magazines where glamour was stick thin Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell. There were a couple of girls who were thin in school, but I knew I wasn't. My friends seemed to be 5 kilos smaller than me and that seemed like an insurmountable problem at the time. My high school quote was "99% fat free." How embarrassing and how telling could it be.

I remember my second boyfriend who wasn't really a boyfriend but would come over to my house and eat my cereal after school and flirt with me. I started to accept that boy's dictated what happened to me in relationships at a young age. I wonder where my mum's guidance was here- I don't think there was any- her parenting was very hands-off. Sometimes I wonder if my life would have gone differently if my mother was more hands-on. I don't wonder that with my Dad because in my adolescent years I became very combative towards him and he always had a lot to say.

I'm pretty sure that boy lost his virginity to me on my living room floor. He was so skinny his bones stuck into mine. He told me I needed to "get skinny" to be with the beautiful people. He actually said it, and I still remember, 28 years later.

I remember when we did a school play production and my group did an expressive dance piece were we sang and wore tight black clothes moving in a moody fashion. He told me I "actually had a good voice and a good body" and I felt like I had arrived for a moment. I put my self-worth in a boy's adolescent's idea of what beauty was. A boy who was dead set on becoming famous. That sounded adolescent because it was, but some ten years later in his mid-20s he was still fixated on being famous, unabashedly, unapologetically.

There was a bulimia phase in my teens. It didn't last for long and I told my mum almost immediately. I don't know when it occurred in relationship to the Skinny boy's disproval-approval-rejection experiences, but it was all about that same time.

This narrative illustrates the adolescent body's surveillance and appearance-based self-worth. My mother's subjectivity was partially transferred. I internalize beauty ideals from fashion magazines. Bordo (1993) and Gill (2007b) posit that media imagery promotes narrow femininity ideals, equating thinness with beauty and social value. The statement from a teenage boy "to get skinny to be with the beautiful people" describes how social hierarchies are defined. Both Bordo (1993) and Fredrickson and Roberts

(1997) point out that self-objectification is a means of improving social standing and class mobility. The brief episode of bulimia illustrates the psychological consequences of internalized beauty ideals. Eating disorders have been widely linked to cultural pressures surrounding female appearance and thinness (Bordo, 1993).

Cultural Scripts – Adult Imitation and Digital Performance

[DATA] I Chose Samantha

8/27/25

There were five of us tight in college- that's 11th and 12th grade in Australia. Nellie, Allison, Olivia, Verity, and me. We were the arty group. Our dress ranged from pixie, to grunge, to art-house combinations. Three of us had sex by the time we got to 11th grade.

It was kind of childish at that age, but we didn't care, we all adopted a Spice Girl each. I'm not sure how much The Spice girls informed my sexuality, but what they did do was prime me to do it again. Later, I chose Samantha when I identified with her character on Sex on the City. By the time I watched it, I had made it to the United States and was 30 years old.

I chose Samantha - Sam was my girl. She was unapologetically masculine in her sexual prowess. She was about my age, and I took my cues from her in a way. I don't think I ever actually acted like her in real life, but I adopted a psyche that later showed up as justification of objectifying men. Post divorce I hunted men to get my power back and treated them quite despicably in some cases. If they weren't good lovers, their dicks weren't the right kind, or if they didn't speak right, I wouldn't call them back. Which was really just a reflection of my own self-objectification and self-hatred at the height of my drinking and smoking days. Samantha's objectification was delivered like a man would deliver it- justified, a matter of class, and glamour.

This excerpt illustrates how media influenced my subjectivity during adolescence, and how we might claim feminine architypes identities. In adulthood, I adopt the same type of claim, only Samantha was scripted to perform masculine sexual scripts of conquest in neoliberal postfeminist culture (Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009). However, in retrospect, I reflect that this performed confidence was masking a deeper experience of self-objectification and emotional distress. Evaluating men based on sexual performance,

physical traits, and speech shows how intimate relationships can reproduce status hierarchies. This demonstrates neoliberal scripts that identify suitable partners through markers of attractiveness, sophistication, and lifestyle (Hakim, 2010; Illouz, 2007).

This passage also highlights the role that my privilege had in enabling participation in these scripts. Access to media, global mobility, and exposure to certain lifestyle cultures shaped my ability to adopt these identities. These forms of social and cultural privilege placed me in environments where sexual experimentation and identity performance were possible and socially accepted. However, today I see the instability of this identity, as what appeared to be sexual empowerment existed alongside self-hatred, substance use, and self-objectification.

Coming to America- Assimilating to the Neoliberal Post Feminist Subject

[DATA] Privilege, Whiteness, Coolness

(Date unknown).

When I travelled to Europe via my London bout, I experienced far more exposure to people from other classes, races, ethnicities. I didn't realize how many black people there were in the world, life in Canberra was mostly White and Asian and we celebrated multiculturalism, but Black people were an anomaly- there was Salem of Ethiopian dissent and Boa of Papa New Guinean dissent. That was it.

After my parent's divorce, we moved to a modest home, in a mixed-income neighborhood, on a street where there were lots of single mums, working-class, and artist-types. We lost our home on a desirable street when my parents declared bankruptcy.

While bodies and beauties were central to my teenage existence, sex and my sexuality was not something I really focused on. I just had crushes and maybe three boyfriends in my teens. It wasn't until my early 20s did I start being seduced by the nightclub life, ecstasy and alcohol, and the lack of self-consciousness I experienced when I was under the influence. I became one of the beautiful people when I took drugs and drank fancy cocktails.

When I got to London by the time I was 25, working in the photographic industry did a lot of damage to my self-esteem. I binged on junk food and got fat. I was always broke and the world of beauty was never going to be mine.

When I got to Kenya, I first learned what white privilege was, not that I knew what that really meant. I discovered that they liked bigger girls, so my thickness was considered attractive, my whiteness basically opened any door I wanted to enter, and I was surrounded by wealthy people almost immediately. That was a wild time for me because I finally felt the power of being in what many people might consider upper class, white woman privilege, all eyes were on me, and I loved it. With alcohol, I started to learn what it felt like to develop sexual confidence.

I started going to the gym and changed my body from thick fat to thick muscle.

Figure 11

Me in Kenya Photo



The adolescent lessons of performing classed identity was repeated when I sought belonging in the nightlife culture. I wanted to be cool when I first started taking drugs and drinking. Cool is social status; beautiful people are social capital. When objectification was packaged as elegant and upscale, it felt justified and even acted as a reward. Ecstasy, cocktails, and clubs produced entry to that life. Drugs and alcohol can manufacture confidence and temporary inclusion within scenes.

The same desire for status and belonging later resurfaced in the global contexts, where race and nationality offered new forms of visibility and advantage. Whiteness was an advantage everywhere I went, but I became conscious of it when I moved to Nairobi, and in doing so, revealed racialized desirability markets. Color dictated value and I was at the top of the scale. What felt insignificant in Canberra became significant- it became a field where race, class, and nationality granted access and attention (Collins, 2004; Frankenberg, 1993; McIntosh, 1988). Preference for 'thickness' and whiteness maps how body size norms and race intersect to produce advantage. This contrasted with the 'thinness' preference of Anglo European countries. Erotic capital converts sexual appeal into status. Black feminist theory cautions that such markets reproduce racial hierarchies (Collins, 2004; Hakim, 2010; hooks, 1992). I was intoxicated with this new privilege and social capital. I signaled this privilege through my accent, talk of international travel, invoking the mysteriousness and exoticism I put on living in Kenya, and Americans put on Australians. These experiences evidence how sexual objectification operates through racialized beauty hierarchies, where whiteness became forms of erotic capital that reproduce global systems of power and value.

[DATA] Moving to America was Your Demise

9/27/25

Mum said, "it's as if turning 30 and moving to America was your demise." Everything changed. I was a bohemian, free-spirited artist who took the road less travelled. By the time I was 29 I had bounced from Australia to Europe to Australia to Europe to Africa to America staying for 1 to 3 years in any stint. I went from being a world traveler to this. This being the post-feminist neoliberal subject, obsessed with conforming to an ideal of womanhood in which I barely recognized. Up until I arrived in America, I had pretty much written my own script, albeit following in my father's footsteps at the time, it wasn't so socially prescribed. I don't think I ever thought about respectability, social status, femininity or what it meant to be a woman. But when I came to America everything

changed. I changed careers to being a financial advisor and bought and sold houses after living in renovation, constantly bettering my situation. I became obsessed with getting married, being married, being respectable. I thought marriage would save me from myself, the self that wasn't whole, that didn't know who she really was.

I was jealous of the white women driving SUVs, with that Jesus glow, with the fat rocks on their fingers, with their perfection, and slimness. In the white glowing beach photos in which everyone wore white which seemed to beam off the photo's edges. She was woman who was successful, had an education, yet still aspired to the woman that stayed home to look after the children because her husband was wealthy enough to provide for her.

My first marriage was to a thug who I met door knocking for Edward Jones, who was the love bombing - abusive - Christian evangelizing type. He solid me on his oil fracking dreams in Texas, we were going to build an empire. After becoming aware of the cycle of abuse and entering an emotional affair, I chose to annul the marriage. The decision came after he became belligerently drunk at an Edward Jones annual dinner where I received multiple awards and was publicly recognized. He liked the attention on not being on him.

Then two years later I met my son's father on Christian Mingle.com. That was my first experience of online dating. I think I was on Match.com too. He lived in Alabama; I was in Arkansas at the time. We only dated for a couple of weeks. And several months later I found out I was pregnant. I moved to Alabama to try to make it work.

Initially, I believed he was marrying because it was the right thing to do. Now, I believe he married me to establish permanent residency in Alabama and not risk me moving back home.

I was blindsided by the divorce papers delivered to me 5 months into our marriage. My back-to-back marriages were an epic blow to my identity as a woman. I felt like my power had been stripped from me in the second divorce- I didn't want a divorce, but he had other plans. The divorce was incredibly acrimonious, and I was seething with pain and anger and powerlessness.

For some reason, I thought Tinder was a good idea during those ugly days of the divorce proceedings. I had rarely experienced one-night stands or brief encounters, but then hooking up became a part of my lifestyle. I started to really drink, and smoke weed and fuck my way through the pain.

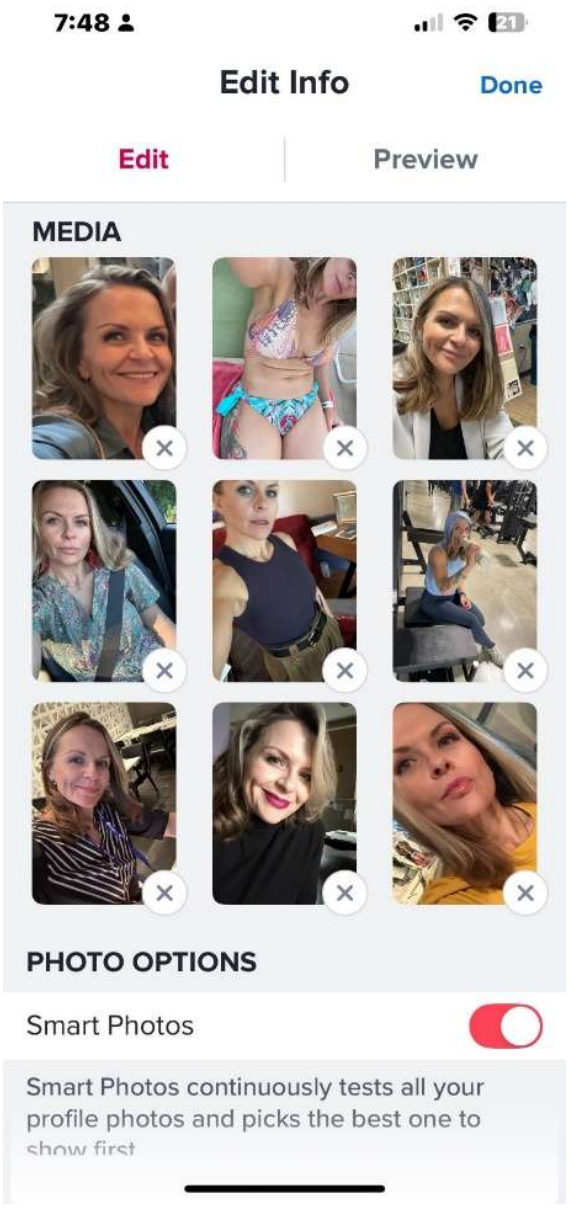
Refining the Neoliberal Post Feminist Subject in Sobriety

[DATA] More Attractive, More Disciplined

9/4/25

Figure 12

Screenshot of Dating Profile



I only realize this now, but I think the choice to become sober has made me more of a neoliberal subject – I have become more productive, more disciplined, more of a 'doing' the work. I am a busy bee worker of sorts. I've become more feminine, lost weight, and became more attractive.

I started to look better when I stopped poisoning my body on a regular basis. Then I learned to love myself and began to like the person I saw in the mirror, whereas before I

couldn't look at myself without a glass of wine in my hand. Seeing myself as beautiful was a new experience. On that deep level, anyway.

In recovery we get disciplined, and we learn to keep a schedule of exercise, sleep, and I was always trying to manage my weight. I lost about 10 pounds straight away and then I lost another 20 pounds 3 years by training daily and the new weight loss drugs available on the market. I got a personal trainer who I worked with 2-3 times every week, and when I started to see results, I worked out 5-6 days a week. I transformed my body. I have never looked like this good.

Now, I love going to the gym. I tell everyone who asks and even those who don't ask, when you go to the gym, ALWAYS look cute. That's half the challenge. If we feel like we look good we are more likely to enjoy the experience of standing in front on the mirror, with an audience of men watching you. I usually wear makeup when I work out. I usually make sure I smell good and I get my sexy tight clothes on and I love it. I love working out. I love people watching me. I love being there with my trainer, she's become my best friend. Two 45-year-old women have the room captivated.

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Figure 13

Selfie in Yellow Dress Photo



The photo of me wearing the yellow power dress with red sneaker pumps, pouting my lips, jawline in check, smoky eye shadow like I know I'm sexy, because now, at 45, in shape, sober, surer of myself, and actually, sexually empowered without having sex with anyone.

The image of me in the yellow dress depicts what scholars describe as the postfeminist ideal of the confident, self-managing woman (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007b). Recovery practices of discipline, self-management, and bodily transformation converge with expectations of feminine self-optimization. While recovery was a vital component in my feminist awareness, I also recognized sobriety intensified the neoliberal forms of self-management. Neoliberalism encourages individuals to see themselves as a project, which is objectifying, as improvement requires constant productivity and self-optimization (Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009). I became more productive, disciplined, and increasingly committed to exercise, weight regulation, aesthetic presentation, aligning with neoliberal ideals of self. Scholars have argued that neoliberal subjectivity encourages individuals to interpret personal transformation through narratives of individual self-improvement rather than through structural or relational contexts (W. Brown, 2015; Gill & Orgad, 2018).

At the same time, the narrative highlights the influence of postfeminist sensibilities, in which femininity, beauty, and sexual attractiveness are framed as forms of empowerment and self-expression (Gill, 2007b). I paint a clear picture of enjoying the gaze, putting on make-up, and dressing attractively for the gym. Postfeminism frames these practices as freely chosen expressions of confidence, despite these norms being tied to feminine desirability (Banet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2009). Equally, sex positive theory would suggest that the ritual of self-care and make-up is an expression of erotic power and agency. (Lorde, 1984; Paglia, 1992). Significantly, I interpret these changes

with some ambivalence in that I see self-love as a needed transformation, but I also see its limits in being a superficial marker of what needs to be meaningful change.

[DATA] More and More a Neoliberal Subject

(Date unknown).

Yesterday I met with Dr. Bas and Dr. Forbes to discuss chapter 4- data collection- or the content of the research- my story. I told them both how I had reached a point where I found myself more and more a neoliberal-postfeminist subject- becoming more obsessed with the way I look, as I age and work out and lose weight… In sobriety I have become more attractive on the inside and outside, but it has caused more narcissism in my self-reflection. I thought I would be liberated by feminism, I thought feminism would be the answer. Dr. Bas said I don't have to stay inside the box and I said maybe that's what I feared. My first thought was the redundancy of trying to describe my identity superficially and then I just got scared that I was supposed to be something else, something other than what society had created of me. Was there any free will there? Did I arrive at any of this alone? Or did the neoliberal-postfeminist ra-ra hype bring me to become a women seeking liberation from objectification while being intoxicated with finally arriving at some level of physical attraction? Can I be liberated while benefiting from being a quintessential neoliberal-postfeminist subject?

Am I liberated if I am attractive?

Am I liberated if I am educated?

Am I liberated if I am productive?

Am I liberated if I am a proud woman?

How do I eradicate the binary here?

I describe more ambivalence towards my neoliberal postfeminist identity, through questioning free will, my fear of my identity being socially constructed, and my awareness of benefiting from attractiveness. This excerpt reveals the central tension of being aware of neoliberal ideals of productivity, beauty, and self-management, and practicing them anyway. Rather than representing a clear binary between empowerment and oppression, the data illustrates how these forces operate simultaneously, producing a

subject who both resists and reproduces dominant norms of femininity. Instead of eradicating the binary, I expose the instability of the binary itself.

Figure 14

Bride Photo



Theme 3: Respectability-Hypersexuality Dichotomy

[DATA] Bride- I arrived!

Then when I got to America, with the pressure of purity culture, I needed redemption for my promiscuous ways, and getting married became the answer. When I look at the picture of me in my sequined hourglass wedding dress I think about how I was the picture of femininity and privilege. I am toned, tanned, my colors are light and bright, and my

hair is long and blonde. I didn't realize I could be so pretty. My Australian accent added to my privilege, American's love Australians. My point is the more privileged I became, the more I feel prey to the post-feminist neoliberal self-objectification. Privilege sucked me in.

Respectability became a strategy of assimilation and my personal redemption script, where marriage functioned as both moral rescue and social legitimacy (Higginbotham, 1993; Ingraham, 1999; Moslener, 2015; Valenti, 2009). Scholarship on weddings show the bride's image functioning as a spectacle that legitimizes the self through ritualized display, evidenced in my sequined hourglass portrait (Bourdieu, 1984; Collins, 2004; Dyer, 1998; Ingraham, 1999). Though I did not realize it at the time, I was aspiring to whiteness, believing that respectability would ensure success and acceptance into the middle class. Femininity operated in a similar way, functioning as a performance that symbolized belonging and moral worth. I remember feeling jealous of the church women who had that "Jesus glow"—driving shiny SUVs, posing for beach portraits in white clothing, tanned and slim, with large diamond rings. These images symbolized whiteness and domestic success, revealing how gender, race, and class work together to define what is considered a desirable life (Bourdieu, 1984; Collins, 2004).

Initially, I sought respectability markers to attain belonging and then it manifested to secure safety and credibility in the wider world. Respectability became a pathway to social legitimacy and a way to access forms of safety, employment, and credibility. Seeing respectability within bigger power structures helps explain why I chased it. Collins (2004) shows that racialized controlling images define stereotypes of sexual and moral deviance, making respectability both a protective strategy and reinforce hierarchy.

The more privilege I gained, the deeper I sank into neoliberal postfeminist self-objectification; the seduction of becoming the 'ideal woman' drew me in completely.

Marriage to entrepreneurial, respectable men, along with the spectacle of my sequined bridal gown and gleaming diamond ring, became symbols of success and aesthetic proof of my neoliberal education in femininity. This illustrates how power and objectification intertwine, as I internalized and performed ideals that embodied empowerment, I also bind my worth to visibility, desirability, and compliance with patriarchal and neoliberal norms.

Even adopting a feminist identity can act as a form of social mobility, heightening an objectified persona of virtue. Dabrowski (2021) examines how feminism in the UK has been intertwined with austerity politics, showing how many middle-class women adopt neoliberal feminism, a version of feminism focused on individual resilience, self-improvement, and lifestyle choice rather than structural change. She argues this type of feminism works as a moral project: it distances "worthy" women from "unworthy" others (often classed or racialized), and in doing so helps legitimize existing hierarchies rather than challenge them.

[DATA] Megan Thee Stallion

9/16/25

I was watching the documentary about Megan Thee Stallion, aka Megan Pete. She is a rapper known for her in your face – fuck-off sexuality. She is quintessentially objectified, self-objectifying, and objectifies others.

Academically, she made sure she finished her degree even though she was exploding. Her lyrics are about fucking and treating men like objects. There are an irony and power to her work- like back people reclaim the work 'n' word, she reclaims her sexuality and flips the script.

WAP Wet Ass Pussy is like an anthem of sexual empowerment, unapologetically. It's so bouncy and good to work out to. I could also see how critics thought it went too far, that it was vulgar, immoral, or obscene, and even harmful to women.

My heart was warmed by the portrayal of Megan Pete. She said Megan Thee Stallion protects Megan Pete, her real self. I never considered objectified persona as a form of protection. She talked about how sensitive she was as a child and how people use to pick on her. The documentary featured animation that clearly depicts Megan's inner child, hurt and in need of protection and nurturing.

It's so easy to further demonize objectified women, when there is a little girl inside there. Her humanity, juxtaposed with her objectified self, was truly a beautiful sight.

I have a lot of respect for women who, in the face of feminist or ideological criticism, just be themselves. There's freedom to it. There's a 'fuck you' in it. There's resistance in it.

But her documentary also depicts a woman tortured by this life. Tortured by the fame, constant performance, the public scrutiny- all levels of objectification.

I love her because I relate to her. The difference between us is that it seems like I'm still apologetic and she isn't.

The documentary *Megan Thee Stallion: In Her Words (*Rothman, 2024) reveals the complex interplay between sexual objectification, agency, and resistance. Megan's public persona celebrates explicit sexuality and reverses traditional rap narratives by centering female desire and objectifying men. Critical interpretations might view her work as vulgar, degrading, and even harmful to women, but a others view it as a form of sexual reclamation and empowerment. Hobson (2020) argues that the controversy surrounding the song "WAP" reflects the long-standing history of policing Black women's sexuality. Explicit expressions of female pleasure challenges race and sex double standards.

The documentary highlights the distinction between Megan Pete, the private individual, and Megan Thee Stallion, the hypersexualized public persona. Megan describes her objectified persona as a form of protection for her more vulnerable self. Drawing on performativity theory, gender identities can be performed in ways that both express who someone is and protect them within systems of power (Butler, 1990).

[DATA] Revenge Porn

8/28/25

Vice Principal H. let me finish up with a student on a drawing project before she showed me her phone. My jaw dropped. I was disgusted and mortified, then I felt indignant rage.

Then I felt the panic that he would do it again, with more pictures.

Then I felt humiliated. Publicly diminished, to such a low level, to be sucking the cock of an ex-boyfriend- to show a picture to the world of my fat body, a picture I would only take to spur on weight loss. He's attempting to control of my identity – taking that from me.

...

The defendant disguised himself as a concerned parent and on three separate occasions, contacted the school board, my principals, and 92 teachers, attaching a screen shot of a page of sexualized pictures claiming it was me, potentially exposing pornographic pictures to classes of 14-18-year-old students. According to his son, his son tried to deter him for months. He planned to do it for six months to a year.

Revenge porn is illegal in Alabama but it's only a misdemeanor for the first offense, which basically means the damage is done and little justices will be paid unless my detective can get it to a felony.

One of the pictures was a picture that I took of myself monitoring my weight. It was not sexualized at all. It was like he was trying to fat shame me, since I've lost 30 pounds since we split nearly 4 years ago.

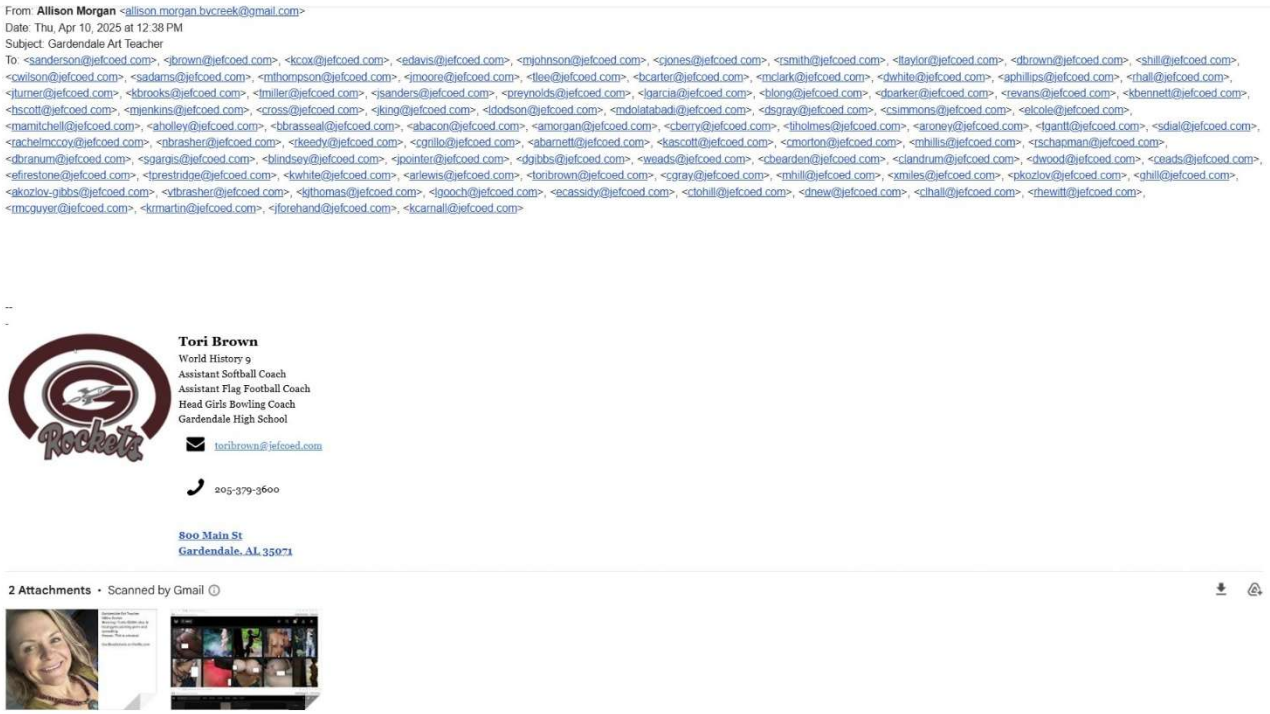
The guy has a restraining order on him already and it's like he has nothing to lose which is unnerving.

Two days after the incident I posted on Facebook.

"Two days ago, I had an ex send explicit photographs to a group of colleagues in some sort of attack against my character. I will not be silenced in violence against women. As woman I know he wants me to cower in shame. But today I stand tall. The sickness spread is not a reflection of me, but a reflection of his dying patriarchy and the shame is his as he hides behind proxy servers and fake emails."

Figure 15

Revenge Porn Screenshot


From: **Allison Morgan** <allison.morgan.bvcreek@gmail.com>
Date: Thu, Apr 10, 2025 at 12:38 PM
Subject: Gardendale Art Teacher
To: <sanderson@jefcoed.com>, <jbrown@jefcoed.com>, <kcox@jefcoed.com>, <edavis@jefcoed.com>, <mjohnson@jefcoed.com>, <cjones@jefcoed.com>, <rsmith@jefcoed.com>, <ltaylor@jefcoed.com>, <dbrown@jefcoed.com>, <shill@jefcoed.com>, <cwilson@jefcoed.com>, <sadams@jefcoed.com>, <mthompson@jefcoed.com>, <jmoore@jefcoed.com>, <tlee@jefcoed.com>, <bcarter@jefcoed.com>, <mclark@jefcoed.com>, <dwhite@jefcoed.com>, <aphillips@jefcoed.com>, <rhall@jefcoed.com>, <jturner@jefcoed.com>, <kbrooks@jefcoed.com>, <tmiller@jefcoed.com>, <jsanders@jefcoed.com>, <preynolds@jefcoed.com>, <lgarcia@jefcoed.com>, <blong@jefcoed.com>, <dparker@jefcoed.com>, <revans@jefcoed.com>, <kbennett@jefcoed.com>, <hscott@jefcoed.com>, <mjenkins@jefcoed.com>, <cross@jefcoed.com>, <jking@jefcoed.com>, <ldodson@jefcoed.com>, <mdolatabadi@jefcoed.com>, <dsgray@jefcoed.com>, <csimmons@jefcoed.com>, <elcole@jefcoed.com>, <mamitchell@jefcoed.com>, <aholley@jefcoed.com>, <bbrasseal@jefcoed.com>, <abacon@jefcoed.com>, <amorgan@jefcoed.com>, <cberry@jefcoed.com>, <tiholmes@jefcoed.com>, <aroney@jefcoed.com>, <tgantt@jefcoed.com>, <sdial@jefcoed.com>, <rachelmccoy@jefcoed.com>, <nbrasher@jefcoed.com>, <rkeedy@jefcoed.com>, <cgrillo@jefcoed.com>, <abarnett@jefcoed.com>, <kascott@jefcoed.com>, <cmorton@jefcoed.com>, <mhillis@jefcoed.com>, <rschapman@jefcoed.com>, <dbranum@jefcoed.com>, <sgargis@jefcoed.com>, <blindsey@jefcoed.com>, <jpointer@jefcoed.com>, <dgibbs@jefcoed.com>, <weads@jefcoed.com>, <cbearden@jefcoed.com>, <clandrum@jefcoed.com>, <dwood@jefcoed.com>, <ceads@jefcoed.com>, <efirestone@jefcoed.com>, <tprestridge@jefcoed.com>, <kwhite@jefcoed.com>, <arlewis@jefcoed.com>, <toribrown@jefcoed.com>, <cgray@jefcoed.com>, <mhill@jefcoed.com>, <xmiles@jefcoed.com>, <pkozlov@jefcoed.com>, <ghill@jefcoed.com>, <akozlov-gibbs@jefcoed.com>, <ytbrasher@jefcoed.com>, <kjthomas@jefcoed.com>, <lgooch@jefcoed.com>, <ecassidy@jefcoed.com>, <ctohill@jefcoed.com>, <dnew@jefcoed.com>, <clhall@jefcoed.com>, <rhewitt@jefcoed.com>, <rmcguyer@jefcoed.com>, <krmartin@jefcoed.com>, <jforehand@jefcoed.com>, <kcarnall@jefcoed.com>

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2 Attachments • Scanned by Gmail

The revenge porn sent to my workplace by a bitter ex, disguised as a concerned parent, aimed precisely at the respectability-hypersexuality or Madonna-whore dichotomy[6]. This event illustrates how sexualized imagery can be weaponized to damage women's reputations, careers, and sense of safety. He used his fantasy of my sexualized body and then weaponized my sexualized body against me at the schoolhouse to contrast my apparent lack of respectability. His male gaze acts as the morality police, while also exhibiting his own sexual dominance and prowess, when in fact he is the perpetrator of sexualized violence against the women, the women he parades and pretends to protect. Research shows how love bombing, control, and public humiliation track the cycle of abuse and coercive control often comes wrapped in Christian language and pious veneer (Stark, 2007; L. Walker, 1979).

[6] A concept Freud originally wrote about, and then feminists adapted.

Image-based abuse relies heavily on norms that shame women for sexual expression while absolving men of responsibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Eikren & Ingram-Waters, 2016). Publicly rejecting shame and refusing silence acted as feminist resistance against sexual harassment and reputational attacks. Women can resist the disciplinary power of sexual stigma and reclaim narrative authority over their own identities (Gill, 2008b).

Theme 4: Morphing Identity and Unstable Selfhood

The morphing identity and unstable selfhood theme is the most extensive, in-depth analysis in this study. My identity and subjectivity have been marked by many transitions in migrations, locations, career shifts, and divorces. Each shift demanded someone new, someone I adapted to, someone I performed. A version of myself that met specific cultures or milieus. I assumed whatever necessary role that was rewarded with belonging. I reshaped myself to fit in the spaces I entered, where role playing became ways for me to assimilate and survive. My life became a series of scripts rather than a grounded sense of being. Instability became a constant condition, pushed and pulled by the gaze and the demand to belong. This theme depicts the emotional turmoil and psychic cost self-objectification caused me. I experienced feelings of uncertainty, shame, instability, dissociation, narcissistic self-focus, loss of connection, and even a drug-like altered state of consciousness. I was completely disembodied and dissociated from my erotic self and true agency.

In adolescents, assimilation and conditional affection taught me that approval depended on performance. In adulthood, the performance was guided by womanhood templates, mostly depicted on social media or in popular culture. What began as self-

preservation became self-objectification. What looked like empowerment often masked a deeper insecurity. Across romantic relationships, addiction, and recovery, I oscillated between being subject and object, appearing confident yet fragmented, visible yet unseen. Through these transformations, my identity morphed and my selfhood felt unstable. I eventually found the ground and began to root and reclaim my subjectivity intentionally, defining myself beyond performance.

Assimilation & Conditional Affection – Early Roots of Performance

[DATA] Becoming Woman

8/22/25

The year I lived with my grandparents was like moving to a twilight zone of what it meant to live a sheltered life. I embraced the country life and adopted the accent like a good little assimilated girl. That was the year I started wearing bras. I accepted 'Jesus into my heart' so I would be accepted into their little country tribe- so they would be proud of me, so I could garner adoration like a puppy role on their belly in ecstatic submission.

...

I think my grandmother didn't know what to do but felt like she had to do something because good girls don't touch themselves, not on her watch at least. I would to lay on the couch on my belly with my arms tucked under my body naively thinking no one would know what I was doing. I'm sure it was embarrassing for them.

I remember my dad looking at me in disgust and anger and my mum standing at the kitchen sink in a non-confrontational way and telling me I needed to do 'that' in 'privacy.' I'm not sure I knew what privacy meant until that moment.

This excerpt describes my shifting identity attempting to find belonging in the country tribe. My identity was shaped by conditional affection and assimilation. In childhood, assimilation took the form of baptism and learning to act like a "good girl." In the United States, femininity was overtly practiced, while in Australia these expectations were far less visible. When I returned to America in my adulthood, I subconsciously saw that feminine respectability was a social currency and a way to gain approval and

belonging. What appeared to be virtue functioned as a survival strategy. I learned that appearing proper and feminine earned proximity to affection.

This vignette illustrates childhood sexual curiosity being moralized and disciplined within the religious and family context. Being told that "good girls don't touch themselves" conveys sexual regulation over women's bodies. Historically, women's sexuality has governed by moral discourse and something that should be kept in the private realms of society (Foucault, 1978a; Tolman, 2002). Privacy becomes a mechanism of self-regulation and feminine propriety.

Narcissistic Self-Love

[DATA]: Some Narcissism

8/22/25

I'm at the gym for the second time to train late with Lauren. Cute guy isn't here. I put heavier eyeliner on in the hope that he would be. I look good. Would I be into working out if I didn't enjoy my reflection? I didn't enjoy it like I do now. Now I do it to make sure I can keep this reflection. I've made it to my personal trainer's promotional videos. I've arrived. "We're filming today."

...

I've been feeling myself... Sexier than ever… and today I feel less grounded since breaking up with the doctor. Too many "transitional" red flags and his ongoing serious skin condition is just something I don't want to be confronted with. It looked too much like meth lesions and even though he convinced me he didn't do meth, I still trusted my instinct more.

I wasn't heartless enough to say it was his skin, because that wasn't just it, it was just as much my push-pull tendencies in full swing- I didn't feel safe with him, he was very hyper and intense. He called it his "genius," but I sensed it was a diagnosis he wasn't telling me about. I wonder if the "transitional" red flags would suffice as an excuse to split, or would he succinctly diagnosis some narcissism? That's what it feels like right now. "I'm too pretty for your skin problems." Am I that disgusting? Is an ending marriage, lost fortune, transitioning jobs, transitioning cities, transitioning wives not enough? The carload of stuff he manage to leave at my place within a month of us dating was a huge fucking red flag. Apparently, I encouraged it. I made him get his shit almost immediately.

I am supposed to see through it, see through to his beautiful humanity. Which is so beautiful. But he repels me. As it would any mating animal, "this one is sick, stay away."

Writing about objectification hasn't made me anymore human. I've always held aesthetics and appearances high, but now I have something to be proud of…. I became more attractive in sobriety, and I guess I won't play in the gutter anymore.

This passage illustrates the ongoing negotiation between self-objectification, desirability hierarchies, and neoliberal self-optimization: I am aware of it and I do it anyway. Seeing my reflection in the mirror becomes motivation and reward, and the gym becomes a place of performance and evaluation (Gill, 2008b). Pride in appearing in the trainer's promotional videos also reflects neoliberal cultural messages that reward discipline, visibility, and bodily optimization as signs of success and empowerment (Gill, 2008b; McRobbie, 2009).

Rejecting a partner partly due to his skin condition reveals how desirability hierarchies influence intimate decisions (Bordo, 1993). Additionally, the instinctive thought that "this one is sick, stay away" shows how attraction can be influenced by the appearance of health. While biology and evolutionary analysis are beyond the scope of this research, it is necessary to point out that the base instincts of survival and reproductive success can be a powerful source of intuition. Nevertheless, I then turn the lens inward, raising questions about pride and possible narcissism.

Questioning the tension between self-confidence and self-absorption is warranted because pride in one's appearance can gradually shift toward heightened sense of personal superiority. Twenge and Campbell (2009) argue that contemporary Western culture pays an inordinate amount of attention to self-branding and individual success. They warn that this hyper focus can foster narcissistic tendencies in obsessive self-assessment and comparison with others. Social media intensifies this dynamic through

metrics such as likes, views, and comments. Further, self-surveillance can sustain narcissistic loops of self-objectification (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Chua & Chang, 2016).

I consider the myth of Narcissus who falls in love with his reflection. He learns to love himself, yet that is something that can never love him back. This tension reflects how my sense of self remained unstable because it is mediated by the gaze. The myth cautions against vanity and self-absorption, but it also speaks to the human struggle with unattainable longing and alienation, that is especially prevalent in digital spaces.

Interrupted Interoception

[DATA]: Objectification as Altered State of Consciousness

9/8/2025

Substance abuse and sex went hand in hand. I often wonder if I would have preceded with half of the sexual encounters if I wasn't drunk or high or objectified. Is being objectified like being in an altered state of consciousness? I'm sure I get dopamine hits from it.

Was I really giving consent in an environment of 'compulsory sexual agency'? If we aren't conscious of it, like a child can't give consent, did I really have a choice in the matter. I don't want to continue to look at it in the victor-victim binary.

This excerpt succinctly describes the inseparable relationship with substance use and sexual objectification. Self-objectification interferes with the ability to sense and interpret what is happening inside one's body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). A lack of interoceptive awareness occurs when attention shifts outward, toward regulating appearance and proving value (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Extensive research documents alcohol impairs judgment, increases arousal, and reduces inhibitions, leading to impaired sexual decisions and risky sexy behavior (Cho & Yang, 2023; K. C. Davis et al., 2007).

I think about the high I get from being watched and putting on make-up. Being desired and receiving attention can create strong psychological rewards linked to dopamine and social approval. Enhancing my appearance, seeing myself as attractive, and receiving attention can activate the brain's reward system, releasing dopamine associated with social approval, attraction, and pleasurable reinforcement (Cloutier et al., 2008; Kampe et al., 2001; Krach et al., 2010).

Shame and Sexual Stigma

[DATA] Body Count- Darkest Point in My Life

9/29/2025

When my ex-husband filed for divorce, I felt completely powerless. In response, I unconsciously tried to get my power back by seducing men. My body-count was high. I call it a body count because the experience was lifeless and life taking. I don't know why I did it because it hurt me every time. Each time I slept with them in the hope that they might validate my worth or that it might lead to something more. I felt something inside me slowly draining away.

I emailed my attorneys during that time and told them I was struggling and considering going to rehab and they advised me not to do it because they would take my son away and it wasn't worth it. So, I didn't. I didn't, but I should have.

I remember it being so bad one time, that I was scrolling through Tinder, and I had the thought that I was going to get HIV if I didn't stop and started to cry. That anxiety and pain was not enough to stop me, I was addicted. I kept scrolling. That's what I mark a key point in my rock-bottom- to know this path was leading to great destruction and feeling powerless to stop.

This excerpt illustrates how shame, sexual stigma, and emotional distress contributed to an unstable sense of identity post-divorce. When self-worth is dependent on external validation, my identity became unstable. My pursuit of validation through my sexuality intensified feelings of shame and disconnections. Although addiction neurobiology is beyond the scope of this work too, it is worth mentioning that people

who suffer from addiction often recognize the negative outcomes but feel unable to change as the reward system in the brain has hijacked their reason and agency (Steele & Josephs, 1990; Volkow et al., 2016).

[DATA] Sexuality in Recovery

(Date unknown)

When I first got into recovery I harbored a lot of shame around my so-called promiscuity, which was immediately pathologized to be sex addiction. I internalized the shame from the beginning and then people around me seemed to agree in the same shame.

I think the culture around 'the one-year rule' contributes to stigmatizing sexuality and I think this is particularly problematic for women in recovery in The South because of the residues of purity culture.

The one-year rule is an unwritten law of recovery culture that discourages relationships within the first year of sobriety. It is actually grounded in good evidence that relapses are associated with romantic and sexual relationships, but it comes across shrouded in shame. Not getting into a relationship was a tall order for me at the time- it seemed more challenging than not drinking.

I heard of people fucking their way through recovery and using the rooms as a pick-up joint. One guy told me how sick he felt when he walked into a meeting one day and he had slept with four women in the room. When he told me that story I said to myself 'that would be something I would do' and I didn't want to get a reputation. I also heard horror stories of people hooking up with each other in the room and 'going back out' and only one of them survived the relapse.

I was nine months before I got into relationship with someone in the room. It didn't last long. I honestly wasn't ready then. I couldn't experience intimacy, I didn't feel connected to the guy or myself, for that matter.

The passage illustrates how I negotiate my identity around sexual stigma and shame associated with pathologizing my sexuality. This passage also illustrates becoming aware of the gendered power constructs inherent in the pathologizing process and becoming critical of how this manifest in recovery cultures. Feminist scholars note that women's sexuality is often scrutinized through moral frameworks that can produce

shame and self-surveillance (Bartky, 1990; Tolman, 2002). In this context, my self-concept morphs in response to the dominant discourse.

The "one-year rule" further contributes to this unstable identity formation. The guideline is toned with regulation and discipline which restricts sexual expressiveness, which was particularly restrictive as I sought connection and validation through intimate connections. Matesa (2016) explores sex in recovery in a healthy way and instead of repressing sexuality, she suggests that people can learn new ways to experience intimacy and desire, without it becoming compulsive or problematic. She argues that in addiction, sexuality often becomes distorted because sex can be another means of regulating emotions and a means of curing loneliness. She posits that in recovery, people need to develop emotional awareness, self-respect, and intimacy. Integral to this process is slowing down and recognizing motivation, and most importantly, developing a healthy sexuality is integral to our identity.

[DATA] Confessing in the 4th Step Inventory

9/17/25

Twelve step programs are about looking at your actions, behaviors, and perspectives and correcting, or becoming accountable to those you have hurt, and then adjusting your lifestyle to spiritual principles. Everyone would benefit from this sort of self-reflection, but I do believe it's based on the Christian dogma of confession (like Foucault described). I felt as is all my behavior came under scrutiny, especially my sex life. At the time I thought my sexuality was more of a threat to my recovery than drinking. But today, almost four years sober, I don't think that anymore. I don't think that my sexuality is a threat to my current sobriety, nor do I think my sexuality was as much of a problem as I made it out to be when I first got sober. The problem was I had internalized so much shame around my so-called promiscuity. I confessed to everything, even things I didn't have any business confessing to, like childhood sexual experiences. I persecuted myself simply because I was a sexual being, because I had sex outside of marriage, because I liked to seduce men.

Shame destabilizes subjectivity by displacing embodied experience with the internalized gaze, resulting in a subjectivity that is performative, reactive, and constantly under moral and social scrutiny (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Foucault, 1977). Foucault explains how social power creates internalized surveillance, where people regulate themselves because they feel constantly watched. The shame associated with self-objectification destabilized my identity because it interrupted my ability to experience myself as a subject who desires, chooses, and feels. Like interrupted interoception, shame works as a kind of internal censor, redirecting attention away from my own sensations and embodied knowledge and toward an imagined external gaze. I narrated my sexuality through a shame-based perspective too, in a setting where promiscuity was treated as a problem, and where confession-based recovery culture heightened my self-surveillance. While 12 Step confession culture can function as harm reduction to addiction, the tone is often moralizing, teaching me that my sexuality required discipline, apology, and containment (Matesa, 2016; Whitaker, 2019).

At first, I believed my sexuality was the main threat to recovery, but with time I learned to separate genuine risk from the 'moral panic.' Through therapy and feminist reflection, I began to reclaim my sexual subjectivity and understand that desire can coexist with sobriety when grounded in deep self-love and mutual respect and care. As Fine (1988) explained, the absence of language for women's desire often reinforces silence and shame. Naming my desire allowed me to recover a sense of agency and to see pleasure as a part of healing rather than a return for harm.

[DATA] Feeling Unbelievably Desirable

9/4/25

Recently I dated this guy who made me feel unbelievably desirable. He made me feel like the sexiest woman in the figurative room. In bed he would drive me wild, it was very hot. But I found myself objectifying myself more. Feeling more dissociated and out of my body, fixed on maintaining and increasing that desirability like a drug rush. There was a shallowness in me.

With another partner, I faced the opposite issue where he was sexually inexperienced. When I asked him why he did not perform particulars, he told me I "smelled," which I immediately internalized, and it left a traumatic scar on my psyche. It stopped me from feeling comfortable, I internalized self-disgust, ultimately fractured my sense of self. When my behavior became unpredictable, he quickly suggested I had borderline personality disorder, and I gave him authority over my own mind by accepting his uninformed, armchair diagnosis. Remember Women and Madness. Again, my identity was shaken due to someone else's perspective, and this instilled even more hypervigilance. I would oscillate from knowing my truth and then accepting someone else's perception.

Paradoxically, when I feel desired, I slip into the objectified self, and when I am not desired, I feel invisible. My sense of self became unstable and contingent on others. This passage shows how my identity shifted in romantic relationships, shifting in response to validation and criticism. The first relationship described how intense sexual attention elevated my self-worth temporarily, only to be left feeling unstable. The second relationship has the opposite dynamic when I internalize criticism causing a deeply traumatic shift in my identity and trusting myself. When a sense of self if tied to being seen or desired, women may experience feelings of alienation and disconnection (Bartky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

My identity became unstable when my self-understanding was ceded to another. When the man suggested I had a mental illness, I accepted his interpretation despite

recognizing it was uninformed. Relational power dynamics can shape self-concept, especially during periods of emotional vulnerability. Receiving and internalizing stigmatizing labels can reshape how individuals understand ourselves and our social identity (Corrigan & Watson, 2012).

[DATA] On Tinder for 48 Hours Max

(Date Unknown)

I only spent two days on the dating sites this time. Sometimes I wonder if it's about male attention anymore. I am often disgusted by the caliber of most men on the site and there are so many fake profiles scamming desperate women. Rather than exhilarating, often I find it a numbing experience.

Two weeks later. I deleted Tinder again. I lasted 48 hours. I was talking to two guys who vaguely had my attention. Sent a last message with my cell number and Facebook ID but deleted it before they saw the message, no doubt. I selfishly didn't really care about their feelings. I wasn't really into it. Maybe it's just a narcissistic endeavor- the excessive preoccupation with self-centeredness at the expense of others. How gross.

In the Narcissus myth, Narcissus rejects the nymph Echo who is cursed to only repeat the words of others which seemed poignant, considering our image is an echo of societal expectations. As punishment, the gods curse Narcissus to fall in love with his own reflection, something that can never love him back, and he wastes away and dies.

This excerpt reflects how digital dating environments can intensify a shifting and unstable sense of self by placing identity within systems of evaluation. My brief return and quick departure from Tinder reflect my ambivalence to male attention and attempt protecting my subjectivity. It also reflects the narcissistic superiority mentioned earlier and a growing disconnection from both me and others. Scholars argue that dating cultures increasingly frame intimacy according to market metrics of desirability, dating choices are shaped my rapid choice selection, only basing judgements on appearance, status, and desirability (Hobbs et al., 2017; Illouz, 2012).

[DATA] Revenge Porn continued

9/12/25

Since, I have bought more security cameras for my home. I bought a gun which I'm terrified of. I listen to a book called 'The Gift of Fear' which talks about how to deal with these kinds of situations and to learn to trust your intuition. I have talked to real estate agents and mortgage lenders because I no longer feel safe in my house because he knows it. He knows how to access I, and he knows the area. I can't move at this stage because I couldn't afford to buy a new house with my recently accumulated student debt. Nor do I want to move because my son has the luxury of riding his bicycle in what I thought was a safe neighborhood. I fear getting in and out of my car when I go to the gym. I felt like I should tell my son about what happened because I want him to keep an eye out for strangers, but I am also worried that will scare him.

I break down on my AA meetings with uncontrollable emotions sometimes.

As discussed in the previous section, when I feel desired, I begin to experience myself as an object, but when that attention disappears, I feel invisible, leaving my sense of self dependent on others' validation and therefore unstable. Thinking about this dilemma in relation to the revenge porn attack takes us deeper into the paradox. In that moment the email was sent I became hyper visible while simultaneously erased as a person. The act attempted to strip my agency and momentarily my sense of self felt destabilized because I became frightened. Research on image-based abuse illustrates that because women are positioned as objects of visual consumption, women can experience cycles of hypervisibility, shame, and psychological distress that destabilize identity and diminish agency (Henry & Flynn, 2020; Henry & Powell, 2021; McGlynn et al., 2021).

My professional and public identity was violated when I had to contend with the confused and embarrassed looks from my colleagues. The photos were curated to degrade me and construct me as an object of ridicule. Feminist criminology shows that revenge porn is rarely about sex; it is about power, humiliation, and control (McGlynn et al.,

2021). My ex was attempting to subvert my personhood and exert his sexual power against my will. He does this by contrasting my apparent hypersexuality with my lack of respectability.

Radical feminist MacKinnon (1984) and Dworkin (1981) warned that pornographic imagery led to the normalization of violence towards women and unsafe intimate environments. If the images were not monetized, they were only online for a short time. Nevertheless, the effects have been enduring, leaving me with ongoing safety fears, constant hypervigilance, and a heavy sense of precaution that now shapes both my personal and professional worlds. Cameras, route scanning, and fear at the car door exemplify the ongoing labor women perform to manage risk. Feminist scholars describe this as everyday safety work and as the ongoing psychic labor of living under patriarchal surveillance, where the threat of exposure continually reorganizes daily life (Vera-Gray, 2018). In this way, gendered violence destabilizes identity by interrupting one's sense of being a subject with agency and coherence. It forces the self into fragmentation, into retreat, into redefinition. Reclaiming subjectivity after such violation is not simply about healing; it is about adapting to a new identity that includes hyper vigilance and safety.

Psychic Toll, Dissociation, Addiction – Coping and Consequence

The revenge porn except also describes the labor required switching between subject and object, and how it takes a toll on my psyche. Here, I wanted to call attention to how objectification, self-objectification, dissociation, and addiction are all a part of the same psychological dynamic. Although the revenge porn attack happened in my third year of sobriety, it is worth pointing out how these dynamics are interconnected.

Self-surveillance and evaluation reduce embodiment and increase fatigue, explaining the taxing negotiation I describe (Bartky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Not only do the consequences of such a psychic toll increase the likelihood of dissociation; it also sets me up to seek relief through substance use. Detachment and minimization function as dissociative coping strategies that preserve psychological functioning until safety is restored (van der Kolk, 2014). Dissociation became a survival strategy in childhood and then the dissociation manifested in my adult sexual experiences. The self-medication model and addiction neuroscience frame this as learned relief that becomes costly over time (Koob & Volkow, 2016).

Although I would never negate personal responsibility for my choices that led to addiction, self-objectification inextricably exacerbated my substance misuse and abuse and vice versa. As I self-objectified, intoxication and transactional sex became a coping mechanism. Substances and rapid hookups functioned as short term emotional regulation with long term costs, echoing self-medication and the objectification loop (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Khantzian, 1997).

Theme 5: Reclaiming Subjectivity as an Act of Feminist Resistance and Healing

The neoliberal postfeminist sexual objectification matrix requires conscious resistance through reclaiming subjectivity. I describe how sobriety, therapy, embodiment, understanding the formation of self, and developing safety and protection lead to reclaiming subjectivity. I illustrate how flow states in art and writing nurtured self-awareness by removing performance and self-consciousness, enabling creativity and autoethnography to serve as reparative practices that convert shame into self-compassion and trauma into insight. In this theme, I write about resisting oppressive gendered scripts,

resisting the technology that reinforces neoliberal ideas, and resisting postfeminist sensibility and sexual objectification. By resisting these forces, I instead reimagine embodied eroticism and begin to rewrite another way to live. I illustrate how developing feminist consciousness enabled a return to embodied selfhood after experiences of sexual objectification and self-objectification. I recall how feminist writings, academic mentorship, and surrounding myself with embodied and emotionally mature women have developed a heavy anchor to a community of women.

Sobriety and Embodiment

[DATA] Back Into My Body

(Date unknown).

Sobriety

Sobriety got me back into my body. I started feeling emotions in a way that surprised me. I thought I smoked weed and drank wine to feel good, not feel better. I didn't realize how much I used substances to mask anxiety or sadness. When I got sober, I was very tearful for the first year. I had to feel and process the flood of emotions I was experiencing. I had to feel the stress and anxiety and recognizing its manifestation in my body.

Spirituality

In 12 step programs, the idea is to find a higher power of their own understanding. Some people call their higher power God. God came to me through the voices and stories of other people in the rooms, in the faces sitting across from me, and also in a physical way. I feel a safeness in my chest when I talk about it. A connection and healing. I think God comes to people in different ways, in ways the person needs it, and I needed God in my body.

Sobriety became a process of returning to my body after years of disconnection and numbness. Sobriety from substance misuse was integral to that embodiment, then I was able to engage in the important work of finding sobriety from self-objectification. Being able to recognize that self-objectification was a part of my addictive thinking was integral. Once I could see and name its harms, I was better equipped to explore

subjectivity, interoception, and the trauma related to that addiction and self-objectification.

Trauma theorists describe the re-embodiment phase as the reemergence of sensations, emotions, and bodily cues that had long been suppressed as survival mechanisms. Herman (1992) notes that trauma fragments self-awareness, leading to dissociation from the body as a form of protection. van der Kolk (2014) and Skeggs (2011) explain that recovery involves widening the *window of tolerance* as the body's capacity to feel without becoming overwhelmed. This allows for signals of safety and presence to return. Craig (2002) adds that interoception becomes a vital channel for reconnection and self-trust. In this way, sobriety became a practice of reinhabiting the body as a type of 'sensing' home.

Flow States

[DATA] Reclaimed Subjectivity

9/5/25

I was talking to one of my committee members yesterday. It felt like I could call her by her first name though. I was sharing about how it's hard not to fall in prey to the empowerment-victimhood binary. I want to be liberated from objectification, but I also love it. I didn't just mean the visibility or performative thread, I meant the objectification of all the social constructs that push and mold us to be something particular, be it identities, professions, or life courses. She said something to the effect that she hopes that I can find a space where I can both be in-the-world and do-the-things-of-the-world but also create a space where I am not of-the-world, "where no eyes are on you." Immediately my art came to mind, and I explained painting has been important to my sanity and mental health in that it's other worldly, it's my flow-state exercise.

After art school, I stopped painting for almost 10 years. I didn't pick it up again until I got pregnant and started back to teaching art. I yearned for it. It took several years to get back to any sort of confidence with it. I produced a lot of shit before I got anywhere. About a year before I got sober I started to develop some style and gained some

momentum and really stick with works, allowing the painting to have a life of its own, allowing for magic in the mistakes, letting works cook.

Figure 16

Pre-Recovery Abstract Painting



Figure 17

Post-Recovery Abstract Painting



Something special happened to my work after getting sober and a lot of therapy around my childhood sexual abuse and what I then categorized as 'sex addiction.' My work expressed the transition beautifully. The first painting (fig. 16) shows my first major work before I got sober and the second painting (fig. 17) shows the first major work I completed in the first year of recovery. I think this work describes my sexuality in a spiritual way; it evokes an energy and connection I developed in my subjectivity. Not surprisingly, I fell in love with my therapist during this painting. He showed me what intimacy was. He showed me that I can show someone that can love my most vulnerable shadow selves.

The image of the hand is about a romantic relationship in which I experienced deep intimacy for the first time with another person.

Figure 18

Two Hands Drawing Intimacy



This passage illustrates reclaiming subjectivity as an act of feminist resistance by creating spaces where the self is no longer defined by external evaluation, objectification, or social expectations. One of the most significant consequences of self-objectification is the psychological strain it places on women's cognitive and attentional resources, which can inhibit flow states, creativity, and higher-order thinking (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Winn & Cornelius, 2020). Experimental studies show that when women are placed in self-objectifying conditions, their performance on cognitive tasks declines, supporting

the claim that self-surveillance creates cognitive interference (Quinn et al., 2006; Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008; Winn & Cornelius, 2020; Zola & Engeln, 2023).

Avoiding self-objectification and protecting my subjectivity was rendered through creative endeavors where I could experience flow states, and a lack of self-consciousness and performance, such as painting in my art studio. Painting is an automatic flow state for me. Here I suspend self-consciousness, where hyper focus and experiment: here play can heal (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). After a decade away from painting, I returned when I got pregnant and started working as an art teacher. I slowly built my confidence through failed canvases and rediscovered flow states. My work evolved with my healing- pre-sobriety, my work was very busy and intense (fig. 16) and as I started to heal in sobriety, my work became more sensual and erotic (fig. 17). Lorde's (1984) concept of the erotic as a deep, unconscious source of power, can be seen in my work. She argued that reclaiming the body and engaging in creative expression can serve as forms of resistance against societal objectification and systems that silence women.

In the conversation with my committee members, I discussed the tension between wanting to be free of objectification while also enjoying its participation and rewards. In this moment I realize I must be intentional about making a space outside of performance and the gaze. Here, I might find intimacy with myself and with others, as I described recognizing intimacy emerge in therapeutic relationships and romantic relationships, also evident in my art (fig. 18). Instead of seeking validation through objectifying myself, I experience connection grounded in vulnerability and mutual recognition. The two-color paintings evoke this transformation, illustrating how subjectivity can be experienced in creativity and healing.

[DATA] Resisting Technology

9/8/2025

I have tried to get back onto Tinder since things didn't work out with the doctor. I lasted 48 hours in the first round, and 18 hours in the second round. I can't do it for long. I trip out. I start feeling dissociated- and I am resolved to delete my profile in passionate resolve that the app is not good for me. Like I'm in third person, not quite existent.

...

I remember once seeing myself in the reflection, just walking down the street one day, and being assured I was there. I thought, with some surprise, "O, there you are!"- as if to say without my reflection I didn't know where I was. That's how online dating feels to me. I do it to feel connected to myself or attempt to connect with others, but it has the reverse effect.

This is one way I resisted and reclaimed my subjectivity. I use the tools and technology until it no longer serves me. I am getting better at listening to myself. I am hearing and acknowledging the energies that work for me and work against me. The dating apps are designed to work for you- at least be a tool to bring the men towards you. But you are just a cog in the machine – a machine designed to create an industry that reduces people down to a shopping list, a machine that trains us to see people as to how much they can offer us, and algorithms to keep us swiping.

This passage illustrates how resisting digital dating platforms became an act of reclaiming my subjectivity. The impulsive cycle of engaging in and deleting dating apps reflects the moment of realizing the apps are harmful and becoming aware that participation leads to an intensified sense of disembodiment. Research indicates that dating apps encourage users to market themselves according to the gaze, heightening self-objectification (Hobbs et al., 2017; Illouz, 2007).

Online, rather than being a whole person, I become a flattened list of images of body parts and personality traits. Dating apps cause a type of self-alienation. Feminist media scholars demonstrate that dating apps shape identity and self-perception in ways that can be alienating, particularly for women who are pressured into normative beauty

ideals and self-surveillance (Du, 2025; Evans & Riley, 2023; Paasonen, 2002; Rahman, 2025). Leaving the platforms becomes a way to return back to myself, listening to my intuition.

The moment I describe seeing myself in the reflection, I was reassured that I existed. This reveals how strongly my identity had become tied to my external visibility and a high level of self-objectification. Another view might be that my reflection validated my experience.

Developing Safety and Protection

DATA] Excerpt from Indignant Rage

9/12/25

Since, I have bought more security cameras for my home. I bought a gun which I'm terrified of. I listen to a book called the Gift of Fear which talks about how to deal with these kinds of situations and to learn to trust your intuition……I fear getting in and out of my car when I go to the gym. I felt like I should tell my son about what happened because I want him to keep an eye out for strangers by I am also worried that will scare him.

Throughout the process of this research, I have come to recognize that safety and protection have become an important part of my re-embodiment, subjective exploration, and emotional sobriety. Objectification theory reminds us that internalizing the third-person gaze leads to anxiety and safety concerns (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Winn & Cornelius, 2020). Safety began to return through embodied practices like working out and making art, which helped me come back into my body and regain a sense of trust in the world around me. While working out building physical strength, painting became a refuge, a space free from the constant gaze of others and from self-monitoring. Research confirms that creative activities offer survivors of image-based violation a form of safe zone where self-surveillance and shame are suspended (Karsay et al., 2018). Returning to

the studio helped rebuild patience, confidence, and a steadier self. These creative routines became disciplined practices of self-care and self-governance, echoing Foucault's practices of the self where freedom is realized through chosen limits (Foucault, 1977). In therapeutic settings, I learned to be seen without fear - the idea of witnessing and being witnessed helped me rebuild intimacy. The concept of "transference" in therapy, when ethically managed, models recognition and secure attachment which I then translated into life and art (Mitchell, 1988). Safety became both an internal state and relational condition, created through creativity and connection and the courage to be visible on my own terms.

Naming the harm of societal objectification and self-objectification and reclaiming my voice acted as an important form of protection. Keeping objectification in view helps resist sliding into explanations that individualize the harm (hooks, 1993). Specifically, regarding the revenge porn attack, after I went public and received support from friends and colleagues, the private shame started to transform into a type of collective resistance. By framing the attack as a symptom of the patriarchy, rather than my personal failure, I reclaimed ownership of my story. I shifted the shame to the perpetrator, which counters potential victim blaming. Feminist scholars argues that when victims reframe shame publicly, they can reduce stigma, promote resilience, and communal meaning making (hooks, 1989; Perro, 2022).

[DATA] Rejected Stalker (with elements of Resentful Stalker)

(Date unknown)

My therapist wrote a Stalking Risk Profile (SRP) Formulation. Her assessment reads: Stalker Type: Rejected Stalker (with elements of Resentful Stalker). This individual pursued a long-term intimate relationship that ended against his wishes, and his

behaviors reflect grievance-fueled attempts to punish, degrade, and humiliate the victim post-separation. Behavior is consistent with sexual sadism and retaliation narrative

A. Motivation

- Retaliation and reassertion of control following perceived rejection

- Obsession with portraying himself as the "true victim"

- Entitlement to vindication via humiliation and destruction of the victim's reputation and career

- Sexualized control and humiliation (e.g., revenge porn and misuse of legal system for abuse purposes with a sexual narrative around STI status and kink)

-Potential Sexual motivation of exhibitionism demonstrated in revenge porn

- Grievance fueled entitlement through legal, online, and workplace exposure

This passage reflects how naming abuse and taking protective measures can guard against coercive control. When I discussed the revenge porn incident with my therapist she insisted I understand the gravity of the situation and wrote a perpetrator profile so that I might understand the seriousness of the threat. Taking proper precautions is a part of practicing resistance. By identifying the perpetrators' attempt to reassert control, I shifted from self-blame to understanding the behavior within broader patterns of gendered violence. Scholars argue that harassment, stalking, and image-based sexual abuse are used to punish and humiliate women (Kelly, 1988; Powell & Henry, 2017). The revenge porn was used as a tool of power and weapon of control rather than isolated personal conflict. Understanding that sexual violence was a choice of the perpetrator and not a reflection of my shame was integral to feminist resistance praxis.

Understanding Self Objectification as Self Protection

[DATA] Excerpt from Megan Thee Stallion
9/16/25

My heart was warmed by the portrayal of Megan Pete. She said Megan Thee Stallion protects Megan Pete, her authentic self. I never considered objectified persona as a form of protection. She talked about how sensitive she was as a child and how people use to pick on her. The documentary featured animation that clearly depicts Megan's inner child, hurt and in need of protection and nurturing.

Framing objectification a protective mechanism can help highlight that self-objectification can be a survival strategy. As such, adopting an objectified persona can serve as armor. Figures like Megan Thee Stallion demonstrate how a crafted, visible stage identity can buffer a private self from direct scrutiny (Perro, 2022). Banet-Weiser's (2018) work on brand culture explains that media operates as identity performance that can feel simultaneously empowering and constraining. By transforming the self into a marketable brand, women can craft and control their image. However, this same visibility demands constant maintenance, exposing them to constant forms of scrutiny and commodification (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Butler's (1990) notion of performativity further clarifies how repeated performance can make a persona feel real and function as a form of protection.

Resisting Scripts by Embracing the Erotic

[DATA] Understanding Eroticism Audre Lorde

9/10/25

My interpretation of Audre Lourde's Use of the Erotic Power: The Erotic as Power

I will paraphrase and add my experience.

The erotic is a resource.

The erotic is deeply spiritual.

The erotic is deeply female. In so, feminine energy and accessible to men.

The erotic is connected to our unconscious. It is deeply connected to our unconscious selves, our unexpressed selves, the unrecognized feelings.

For patriarchal oppression to work, it must corrupt our erotic selves. For women, denying the erotic is like denying a source of power. I add, God's power.

We have been conditioned to see all elements of sexuality as bad. Women have been taught to feel inferior and suspect. This is how I felt when in those room with those two men- Principal D. and Dr. T. from the school board when they were questioning me about having nude pictures online.

The patriarchy tells women that we must suppress the erotic to be strong.

We have learned to distrust that which is non-rational knowledge. I am told I am pathological, that I am mentally ill, that "you have borderline," a condition mostly "assigned" to women, just like hysteria. Yet the person who's saying that is merely taking someone else's inventory, not his own. My body resists and then my rational mind agrees- "I am crazy." When he was the selfish lover, when he was repulsed by his own sexuality, and therefore mine, when he was the uptight one, repressed, and "clean."

We have been warned against that knowledge. My body knowledge says we are here to benefit serving men.

The depth of feeling women experience, especially in their sexual selves, is 'psychically milked' as a 'life-giving' substance for their masters.'

But the erotic is a well of ever giving life for those who don't fear it.

But the erotic has been twisted into the 'confused, psychotic, plasticized sensation.'

The opposite to erotic is pornographic, the plasticized sensation. Soulless, dissociated. But pornography denies the power of erotic, true feelings, true connections.

The erotic lives in a liminal space of self and emotion- once we experience it we will want to honor it.

Lorde demands we work beyond mediocrity, beyond objectification. We must work past our capacity to guide our destinies. The work is about feeling the erotic to its fullest extent and discovering what in our lives brings us closest to that erotic- my paintings, music, prayer, receiving God. That the erotic should be integrated into all areas of our lives, not sent to the bedroom.

This passage reflects reclaiming my subjectivity through resisting the cultural scripts that frame women's sexuality as shameful, pathological, or dangerous. Resisting the internalized scripts of objectification also involves reclaiming the erotic as a sacred, life-affirming power. Lorde (1981) described the erotic as a deep source of knowledge

and connection that extends beyond sexuality into art, prayer, music, and love. The patriarchy distorts this power by teaching women to distrust their bodies and label desire as shameful, but when honored, the erotic can become a guiding source towards my authenticity. This passage also puts the erotic in contrast of sexuality being scrutinized in my workplace and being pathologized in the bedroom. My experiences of being questioned about nude images and on another occasion, being indirectly labeled as pathological, illustrates how institutions and interpersonal relationships can discipline women's sexuality through shame and medicalized labels (Foucault, 1977). Bartky and Bordo both wrote that women's emotional experiences and embodied knowledge are frequently dismissed as irrational or pathological, and this happens within a patriarchal system that regulates women's voices and women's bodies. Being defined, labeled, or categorized as a type of objectifying process and is a form of denial of humanity (Collins, 1990).

In these moments, I internalized shame from the revenge porn incident and began to distrust myself accepting the armchair diagnosis from a deflecting lover. Yet, through this process of reflexivity, I came to recognize that these experiences manifest out of male violence and a lack of male accountability, and not my sovereign self. While I still attend therapy for both accounts, I can heal from both offenses, and I take responsibility for that healing. I also take responsibility for my part in relationships by setting boundaries, leaving situations that undermine my well-being, and avoiding similar dynamics in the future. In doing so, I stop internalizing shame and begin to reclaim authority over my body, emotions, and story. Embracing the erotic becomes an act of feminist resistance, allowing me to reject the labels placed on me and reconnect with my

embodied knowledge. Lorde (1984) argues that when women reconnect with the erotic as a source of knowledge and strength, they resist the cultural pressures that reduce sexuality to pornography, objectification, or shame. I do this through artistic and spiritual reflection, and emotional awareness. Painting, music, prayer, and creative expression became ways of accessing the erotic as a life-giving energy rather than something to be hidden or suppressed.

Sisterhood, Community, and Women Mentors

[DATA] Women Mentors

(Date unknown).

I don't have any mentors or communities that support resistance to objectification. Only books. Many books. Thank God, because they saved me. To hear women voice their experience is life giving- my whole world is validated when I hear women's stories about their lived experiences. I told Dr. B. yesterday that without her, I would never have seen the value of putting my own story down in the annals of academic writing. I thought it would be perceived as an exercise of narcissism and self-indulgence, which, I guess, potentially it could have been. But what I realized was 'what's more important than the data collection of the lived experience?'

To voice the secrets, most private parts of ourselves- our vanities, our sexuality, the state of our souls.

...

After I meditated this morning (something I adopted between recovery, the Morning Mircale, and fru-fru esoteric practices so vogue these days), I realized that those women, Dr. B. and Dr. F., have been such an important influence on my life. They pushed me to be braver. They helped me see what my lived experience belonged to in the annals of scholarly literature. Their connection to me and my connection to them is what is the most meaningful part of this journey. That gives me purpose.

This passage reflects the reoccurring theme of women's mentorship, be it through sponsorship, academic mentoring, or feminist writers. Such mentorship becomes a catalyst for voice, validation, and intellectual courage. Feminist scholars posit that knowledge is developed through relationships, dialogue, guidance, and shared experience

(Collins, 2004; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991). I describe how hearing other women's stories is a life-giving experience for me. Women voicing their experiences can become a form of epistemic validation. Standpoint theory suggests that marginalized groups develop knowledge through articulating the lived experience and collective reflection (Collins, 2004; D. E. Smith, 1987). As such, women's narratives go beyond personal testimony and act as important element of critical consciousness.

This passage demonstrates that senior academic mentors can facilitate mentees seeing that their lived experience can become sources of legitimate academic data. My mentors helped me see that my insight warranted academic pursuit. Initially, I was concerned that my work would be received as a narcissistic or self-indulgent project. This demonstrates how feminist research and autoethnography has been dismissed as a legitimate method within positivist traditions. Autoethnography has been criticized for being too subjective and personal (Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2008). However, my mentors helped me understand that the personal experience is a valuable site of knowledge and exemplifies the idea that "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1969).

Finally, "…the secrets, most private parts of ourselves—our vanities, our sexuality, the state of our souls…" illustrates the collapse of public and private space. Sexuality is very much an intimate experience, but it is most definitely shaped by my public discourse. Furthermore, it demonstrates that in feminist autoethnography, the personal experience can be transformative in breaking the silence and challenging social norms. By sharing these private experiences, I am breaking norms that tell women to feel shame and hide- especially when it pertains to their bodies, sexuality, or emotions. By

voicing these experiences, women can create knowledge, build solidarity, and reclaim their subjectivity (hooks, 1989).

Feminist Awareness

As I studied the waves of feminism, I have come to recognize the salience of feminist contribution to illuminating and exposing the layered complexities of social life. Standpoint epistemologies are central to this endeavor. I started to see how generations of patriarchal and racial systems have shaped the home, workplaces, and schools; how colonization *still* colonizes the body; and how women's sexuality has been an effective tool of oppression.

In the absence of local feminist allies, texts by sister thinkers such as Anzaldúa et al. (2012), Bartky (1990), Lorde (1984), hooks (1984, 2000a), Gill (2007a, 2007b), and McRobbie (2009) act as mentors and counter publics. Therefore, feminist awareness becomes both a process of accountability and a collective practice of seeing and being seen differently. Feminist awareness begins with recognizing complicity as part of consciousness. Acknowledging that one can objectify others while also being objectified creates room for ethical self-awareness rather than denial or moralism. Feminist awareness shows that I can both benefit from and be harmed by the gaze and suggesting that becoming aware of my own participation in this gaze can shift shame into empathy and accountability.

Writing has become part of my healing. When I tell my story, shame no longer owns me. Dr. F. use to say, "turn your pain into purpose." Developing narratives can transform violation into survival. It can transform me out of the victim-empowered

binary, into a consciousness that is grounded and global in understanding. I move from being seen to being the one who sees.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION & SUMMARY

Building on the thematic analysis presented in the preceding chapters, Chapter 6 concludes this dissertation by synthesizing the study's findings to address the research questions. I articulate the theoretical and methodological contributions of the work and examine the broader implications for feminist theory, education, mental health, and feminist praxis. I drafted the six themes through reflexive thematic analysis of my narrative data, guided by the central research question: w*hat is my gendered perspective of my experience of sexual objectification and its mental health consequences?* In examining my own story, I considered the broader conditions that shape this experience, asking: *what is the socio-cultural context of sexual objectification within a neoliberal postfeminist era?* And *how does my individual experience reflect or challenge wider patterns of gender oppression?*

The analysis does not separate the person from the culture. Instead, it treats my lived experience as evidence of how subjectivity and embodiment is shaped through power relations and discourses. The five themes represent the layered ways sexual objectification and resistance appeared across my life. Each theme shows how my experience is both deeply personal and part of a larger social story about gender and power in contemporary culture.

Returning to the Research Problem

This dissertation argued that sexual objectification is a cultural condition that shapes subjectivity, relationships, and life outcomes. Until this work, autoethnography research has not captured the nuanced, embodied experiences of individuals who

navigated sexually objectifying dynamics from within, from the insider-outsider-researcher-participant perspective. My study supports existing research that a sexually objectifying culture leads to both subtle and overt mental health consequences, such as internalized shame and misogyny, an unstable and morphing sense of identity, a deep psychic disconnection and alienation from the body and erotic self, and more pronounced psychological and emotional challenges like body dysmorphia, depression, anxiety, safety concerns, and substance abuse.

Interrogating the socio-cultural context of sexual objectification within a neoliberal-postfeminist era is urgent. Women's subjectivity and embodied autonomy face ever changing forces of power and manipulation. This is particularly significant in contemporary culture where digital platforms transform public discourse and gender norms rapidly. The past two decades have radically transformed subjectivity and sexual experiences. With the ubiquitous use of dating apps and social media, the normalization and popularization of hookup and BDSM culture, ongoing proliferation of personal and sexual identity branding, and the narcissism that comes from such self-absorption and self-optimization, have created the perfect storm of increasingly objectifying arenas of contemporary society.

The neoliberal-postfeminist sexual objectification matrix is something, in the very least, I need to become conscious of, and at most, can resist. Neoliberalism replaces collective and political values, like public responsibility and social justice, with market logic like competition, productivity, and profitability. Neoliberalism reshapes how people think, feel, and relate to one another, including their practices of gender and sexuality. Neoliberalism uses feminist values such as empowerment, choice, and agency to promote

individualized and marketable forms of femininity that align with capitalist and patriarchal interests (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007b; Gill & Scharff, 2011). Sexual identity, behavior, and presentation are recast as consumer-style decisions, in which I choose according to market metrics. Sexual agency is reframed as a project of entrepreneurial self-making which is managed, optimized, and made visible through aesthetics, bodily discipline, and digital performance. Sexual agency becomes synonymous with hypersexuality and sexual objectification, hiding patriarchal, racialized, and heteronormative power structures (Gill, 2008b; McRobbie, 2009). Fortunately, we have strong voices re-fanging feminist criticism, calling out the faux feminism postfeminism. Postfeminism recodes feminist values into neoliberal, individualistic, and often depoliticized forms, perpetuating oppressive gendered power dynamics, cloaked in the words of 'freedom,' 'confidence,' or 'autonomy.'

Theoretical Contributions

Expanding Existing Theory and New Theoretical Contributions

My theoretical model The Neoliberal-Postfeminist Sexuality Matrix allows for analysis of contemporary sexual culture to be analyzed using multiple sources of feminist theory to observe and identify gendered oppression. Drawing on Gill (2008b), McRobbie (2009) and Banet-Weiser (2018), we understand that gendered oppression in today's sexual climate as an interlocking system of discourses, practices, and norms that regulate contemporary femininity through the appearance of empowerment, choice, and sexual agency, while reinforcing patriarchal, capitalist, and heteronormative power structures.

The *matrix* refers to an interconnected framework in which multiple discourses, practices, and norms operate together to shape subjectivity, making power appear

diffused, natural, and individually chosen rather than structurally imposed. As such, self-objectification happened not because I "didn't get feminism" or "haven't done enough internal work." It happened because I live inside systems that trained me to see myself through external, evaluative eyes, even when I *know better*. By foregrounding my lived contradiction, this study contributes to existing feminist knowledge that self-objection is structurally induced. The matrix is something I identify to resist, to become conscious of, so I am no longer subject to it unknowingly.

Methodological Contributions: Autoethnography as Feminist Accountability

I write with great enthusiasm in my advocacy of autoethnography as a feminist practice and research methodology, as autoethnography as epistemologically necessary for studying self-objectification due to its impact on subjectivity and the embodied experience of being a woman. While existing research methodologies have contributed valuable insights into sexual objectification, many remain limited to accessing the interior and relational dimensions of the lived experience. Positivist and empirical methodologies, including experimental designs, surveys, and psychometric measures, have produced a substantial body of knowledge documenting the prevalence, correlations, and outcomes of self-objectification, especially in the expansive body of objectification theory research. Positivist knowledge assumes that reality is objective, measurable, and knowable through observation and data, relying on an object–subject dualism that can be inherently objectifying.

While objectification theory research has done a remarkable job of understanding emotional consequences and mental health aspects of self-objectification, existing research does not adequately depict the embodied and lived experience of self-

objectification, in particular, how meaning shifts across contexts or how the phenomena might unfold over time. Autoethnography addresses these limitations by positioning the researcher's experience as a legitimate and necessary site of knowledge production. Autoethnography finds a deep understanding of how self-objectification develops over time, often shaped by contradictory feelings, and experiences across relationships, institutions, and culture.

Because of the reflexive nature of autoethnography, this study contributes the following new insights into the self-objectification literature:

1) Insider-outsider perspective.
2) Insight into midlife objectification.
3) How self-objectification was shaped by class position and my process of assimilation into the U.S. South.
4) An intimate account of how self-objectification functioned as a response to diminished power in my interpersonal life, operating as a survival strategy rather than an individual failing.
5) How self-objectification was identified, interpreted, and negotiated in therapeutic contexts, particularly through the de-pathologizing of my sexuality during recovery from substance abuse.
6) How a combination of recovery practices, therapeutic techniques, feminist theory, and the academic practice of research enabled my emancipation from the neoliberal–postfeminist sexual objectification matrix.

What My Analysis Does Not Prove

I argue that neoliberal-postfeminist culture produces self-objectification and mental health consequences. While I offer a compelling firsthand experience that is consistent with existing research, my work does not prove that neoliberalism or postfeminism causes self-objectification in a generalizable or predictive way. It does not prove that the matrix operates uniformly across all women, nor that objectification inevitably leads to the specific outcomes I describe. My work is interpretive, not causal.

This research has led me to question whether women may be particularly vulnerable to becoming neoliberal subjects, and whether certain demographics are more susceptible than others. I am especially curious whether women who identify as attractive, high achieving, and performance oriented, as well as women who describe themselves as people pleasing or codependent—traits often discussed in recovery communities—may be more susceptible. While I do not think my work establishes significant substance behind this possibility, my work shows that vulnerability might be greater for these subgroups. Additionally, an important question might be how race, disability, queer identity, migration status, or economic precarity alters the pattern.

Another opening this research offers, but does not answer, is on the matter of the social construction of gender and femininity more broadly. If we socially construct women's bodies and subjectivities, then we can influence this construction in a healthier manner- yet little alternatives exist. The most significant gap, or strength, in my research is that I do not fully map a coherent, widely transferable alternative sexual script. It is a gap because readers might be left wondering, if not the matrix, then what? But I do not think that offering another script would be anything be anything other than another

potential matrix. We must go off script and find ourselves again, in the wilderness, in to the creative spaces humanity resides.

I critique empowerment discourse, sexual branding, and performative hypersexuality, but I do not offer an opposite or counter narrative, nor do I articulate social norms to aspire to. I do not know what a post-neoliberal, post-postfeminist erotic culture would concretely look like or how embodied sovereignty could be taught, replicated, or institutionalized.

One important idea that could be further explored is that some women may be especially vulnerable to becoming neoliberal subjects. This may be particularly true for women who identify as attractive, high achieving, performance oriented, people pleasing, or codependent, traits often discussed in recovery communities. While my research does not prove this pattern, it suggests a meaningful direction for future study.

Discussion on Repair, Resistance, and Reclaiming Subjectivity

Reclaiming subjectivity did not occur through confidence or sexual freedom alone, but through practices that reduced self-surveillance and re-centered interior experience. This directly aligns with my art practice, recovery, and feminist ethics. One of the significant factors Fredrickson and Roberts were concerned with was the amount of psychic energy, time, and resources women spent in a self-objectifying life. While I might still engage in objectifying process- some harmful potentially, and some quite fun and somewhat empowering momentarily- such as adhering to beauty norms, obsessing about men, or still desiring marriage, I have dramatically tipped the scale from a high level of self-objectifying rumination and a life that pursues worth measured only by my ability to seduce men, my appearance, or my social status. Understanding and resisting

the matrix takes self-awareness of my motives, attention to social scripts of sexualization and the subtle use of empowerment rhetoric and checking my performative nature. I orient my life towards being anchored in my body, checking my nervous system, and instead of self-surveillance, I am checking for an audience and scripts that might be steering my direction.

Tipping the Scale

This is what a tipped scale looks like to me. Today my energy is spent on healing psychic wounds and dedicating a life to the spiritual practice of sobriety; to negotiating what serves me and what keeps me safe; to fostering flow states of painting, writing, and exercise; to developing a routine and habits that serve spiritual development and physical training; to sponsoring other women with similar experiences; to building a sisterhood in my immediate circle and getting connected to feminists across the nation and globe; to attaining a PhD and presenting research at conferences; to taking social and intellectual risks by putting my story out there as a product of valuable knowledge; to advocating for revenge porn laws, speaking out against sexual violence against women, sex-based rights and protections; to reshaping intellectual and social discourses about women's liberation; to the soul-searching work of academia and feminist literature production.

Sovereignty

Feminist resistance to sexual objectification is about collective and individual sovereignty over our bodies, subjectivities, and spirituality. Sovereignty becomes an organizing principle and personal manifesto. Not as in a coercive sovereignty of the state, but rather like the indigenousness decolonial sovereignty of the land, body and spirit, in which refusal becomes a sovereign act and is a lived practice rather than recognition by

the state (or man, or audience, in my case; Simpson, 2014); sovereignty as relational, emerging through mutual recognition rather than domination or submission (Benjamin, 1988); an epistemic sovereignty in my right to define one's own reality (Collins, 1990), and; the bodily and psychic sovereignty of the erotic (Lorde, 1978; C. Ward, 2023).

Implications: Why This Work Matters

My dissertation can contribute to feminist theory and feminist praxis. By describing my intensely personal lived experience of self-objectification, across changing contexts, over a long period of time, this work challenges dominant discourses that shaped my subjectivity and life outcomes. It helped me understand the problems of postfeminist empowerment narratives and how neoliberalism is adopted into women's subjectivities to self-regulate, self-surveil, and self-optimize. Hypersexualization is encouraged, if not required, yet it operates alongside contradictory demands for respectability and class conformity, all governed by an ongoing psychological struggle. My work de-pathologizes sexuality and offers a cultural analysis in contemporary society, geographically located in the American South. This is where marriage is socially supported and institutionally reinforced, unlike many other forms of intimate relationships; where kink, fetish, and BDSM cultures have become mainstream, adopted, and even become a mark of social status, where a lack of sex education leaves young people referencing pornography as a source of direction. This is at a time hyper femininity and hyper masculinity are increasingly being rebranded and marketed online. Politically, I believe this to be both resistance to leftist gender ideology, while simultaneously reinforced by gender ideology itself, creating an ironic convergence that appears to revive and normalize traditional gender roles associated with right wing

conservative politics. My work calls for the recognition of such forces and how these power constructs oppress women's subjective and lived experiences. My work calls for slower, relational frameworks that center feminist collective epistemology, emotional recovery, and bodily sovereignty.

My work holds significant implications for sex education, recovery culture, and women's mental health practices. Educational and therapeutic models that emphasize individual choice, confidence, or resilience without addressing the structural conditions that shape self-objectification are limited. When self-objectification is framed solely as a mental illness or personal coping issue, the broader cultural forces that sustain it remain unchallenged. To avoid the risks of moralizing sexual discourse, trauma-informed and non-performative approaches are needed. The post-feminist neoliberal matrix could be adopted into curriculum and therapeutic models for the dissemination to students and clients to understand in relation to their own practice and mental health paths.

Feminist praxis means putting feminist theory into action by linking feminist ideas, values, and analysis to lived practice and social change. My work encourages collective witnessing rather than individual resilience. By situating self-objectification within shared cultural and structural conditions, my work resists narratives that place the burden of repair solely on individual women. It affirms the importance of setting boundaries and reclaiming one's sense of self and treats care as a political act. These practices disrupt the neoliberal postfeminist sexual objectification matrix that centers self-optimization and visibility and replaces that performance with self-protection and ethical care. Paying attention to women's lived bodily experiences, emotional labor, and safety is not secondary to feminism; it is at the heart of feminist change. Taken together,

these implications suggest that addressing self-objectification requires not only critical awareness but also collective and care-centered feminist responses that move beyond individual solutions toward structural and ethical transformation.

An Opening, Not a Closure

In conclusion, my dissertation examined the sexual objectification matrix in the neoliberal postfeminist era as a cultural condition, shaping subjectivity and mental health. By situating my personal narrative within broader socio-cultural forces, I illuminate gendered power dynamics. These power dynamics are internalized and sustained through controlling images at the macro level, then instilled through sexuality and empowerment discourses, and then sustained through femininity and class practices. These forces produce mental health consequences that are indicative of structural effects, not personal failure. These forces are characterized by rhetoric that subverts feminist empowerment to self-optimization and reduces women to branding projects of respectability-hypersexuality sexual norms. Fortunately, this research demonstrates that subjectivity is malleable and can also be shaped through critical consciousness and deliberate embodiment. For me, this happened by interrupting self-objectification through practices like artmaking, sobriety, therapy, exercise, and feminist reflection.

Methodologically, this work affirms autoethnography to reveal dimensions of the sexual objectification phenomenon that is inaccessible to positivist approaches. Theoretically, I contribute a framework that can explore contemporary sexuality culture as an interlocking neoliberal–postfeminist matrix. Rather than offering resolution, this dissertation insists on staying with contradiction, arguing that feminist responses to

sexual objectification must prioritize care, embodiment, and collective accountability, and that reclaiming subjectivity is an ongoing, ethical practice rather than a final state.

…

As I chased rabbit holes and discovered lost worlds of feminist discourse, the process of researching these fields has been life changing for me. I studied second to fourth wave feminism with fervent intensity and excitement; it gripped every part of my purpose. Feminism is needed now, more than ever, in a world of increasing sexual objectification, skewed ideas of sexual liberation, and all its related mental health consequences.

I advocate for new literature and research to reframe and return to critical ideas of the radical feminists, as I believe the fourth wave is doing. The work of the radical and critical feminists of the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s was some of the most significant literature the world has seen. I would argue the passionate writing of these radical feminists was the most important work ever written for half of the human population. Despite radical feminism's vital contribution, I believe the progress of curbing the sexual objectification of women has been largely lost to the neoliberal postfeminist influence on women's identity and sexuality. Instead, work like mine remembers and reignites the profound work done by these revolutionaries, impacting the most secret and intimate parts of our lives.

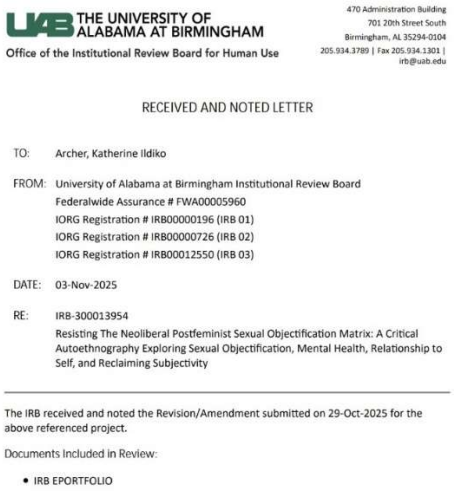
I have come to know the creative and transcendent potential of academic scholarship, the critical importance of autoethnographic research, and most significantly, how much feminism has the potential to be an emancipatory practice. While I think research and theory are a very exciting world of exquisitely crafted abstraction and

conceptualization, it cannot live in the air alone. It must return to the ground and mirror life. Mirror the dirty, lived experience of human reality and human potential.

APPENDIX

Figure 19

IRB Letter



THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM
Office of the Institutional Review Board for Human Use

470 Administration Building
701 20th Street South
Birmingham, AL 35294-0104
205.934.3789 | Fax 205.934.1301 |
irb@uab.edu

RECEIVED AND NOTED LETTER

TO: Archer, Katherine Ildiko

FROM: University of Alabama at Birmingham Institutional Review Board
Federalwide Assurance # FWA00005960
IORG Registration # IRB00000196 (IRB 01)
IORG Registration # IRB00000726 (IRB 02)
IORG Registration # IRB00012550 (IRB 03)

DATE: 03-Nov-2025

RE: IRB-300013954
Resisting The Neoliberal Postfeminist Sexual Objectification Matrix: A Critical Autoethnography Exploring Sexual Objectification, Mental Health, Relationship to Self, and Reclaiming Subjectivity

The IRB received and noted the Revision/Amendment submitted on 29-Oct-2025 for the above referenced project.

Documents Included in Review:

- IRB EPORTFOLIO

Figure 20

Consent and Permission to Publish Letter



Publish approval Inbox ×

Ildiko Archer
Hi Tammy, Please find attached my dissertation draft Resisting The Neoliberal Postfeminist Sexual Objectification Matrix:A Critical Autoethnography Exploring Se

Holly Gaylard
to me

Hi there,

I consent to the use of photographs and the discussion of myself in Ildiko Archers publication of her dissertation,
Resisting The Neoliberal Postfeminist Sexual Objectification Matrix:A Critical Auto ethnography Exploring Sexual Objectification, Mental Health, Relationship to Self and Reclaiming Subjectivity.

Tammy de Joanelli

1

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