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Sex Sells: A Critical Examination of Sexualisation Within the Male Gaze Marketing Gimmick Through Kim Kardashian, Barbie, and Bonnie Blue. Three Major Influences of the 21st Century.

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Fine Art

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Abstract

This dissertation interrogates the widely accepted cultural belief that “sex sells” by examining how sexualisation functions across contemporary media, consumer culture, and identity formation. It explores the extent to which sexualised imagery and performances are perceived as empowering, commercially advantageous while arguing that such practices remain deeply rooted in patriarchal and capitalist systems. Through three case studies, Kim Kardashian, the Barbie franchise with emphasis on the 2023 film adaptation, and adult content creator Bonnie Blue, the research critically analyses how femininity and sexuality are produced, commodified, and circulated within our culture.

The analysis of Kim Kardashian exposes contradictions in the post-feminist celebrity culture, where self-branding appears empowering but remains shaped by the “male gaze” driving the ideals of femininity. Gerwig’s film critiques the patriarchy while using the nostalgic ideals to fight against the idealised femininity with a lot of satire. Bonnie Blue’s online persona demonstrates the commodification of sexuality becoming the norm as society becomes more desensitized, monetising harmful gendered narratives.

Collectively these case studies demonstrate that although women may use sexualisation as a means of agency and visibility, these actions occur within systems that continually reproduce patriarchal, values. The research concludes that the enduring influence of “sex sells” is less a reflection of inherent human desire and more a result of culturally reinforced structures that benefit from the objectification and idealisation of women’s bodies. Ultimately, meaningful progression towards gender equality requires structural change to challenge the logic of sexualised commodification rather than repackage it.

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Introduction

In the world we live in today saturated with images, advertising does not only just sell products. It sells identity, ideals, and a fantasy. From alcohol to perfume, even fast-food chains draped in sensuality sexualizing the mundane. The mantra that ‘sex sells’ has dominated the modern marketing world for decades with its persistent use of sexualised bodies reflecting more than just a profit driven strategy. As what started out as the bold marketing strategy has become normalised in our everyday. Beneath the glossy veneer of desirability lies a deeper cultural message, one told by the “male gaze” (Mulvey, 1975), dictating who is seen, how they’re seen, as well as for whose pleasure to be seen. What was first meant to provoke has evolved into seemingly the only pathway for success and attention. Laura Mulvey created the “male gaze” theory profoundly shaping feminist critiques of visual culture as she revealed how women are always framed for the desirability of the heterosexual man (Mulvey, 1975). Unfortunately, this framework extends far and wide beyond not only cinema into every aspect of media and day to day life. It has embedded itself into the fabric of life where it is continually used time and time again only allowing for it to reproduce and grow these patriarchal ideologies. In this dissertation through the use of many peer reviewed journals, articles, and books an in-depth analysis and examination of the term ‘sex sells’ will be explored along with exploring why the phrase has become a truism in marketing discourse, often overlooking the gendered implications.

In recent years, between the 20th to 21st century the use of sex appeals has soared. In the 1900s with the early days of advertising suggestive themes rather than explicit ones were used, showing women to be elegant or flirtatious. Sexuality was packaged in domesticity to be the perfect pretty wife then around the 60s and 70s became a cultural shift towards more overtly sexual imagery. There was a sexual revolution that sparked change in the national conversation around sex, appearing progressive as it broke down the stigma of natural exploration although a step closer to the objectification (Levine, 2007). Eroticism has become a pervasive cultural force in our modern society due to the intentional creation and management of desire. Not just for sex but also wealth and identity. Sexuality is no longer just about pleasure but is entangled with social control and domination (Rutherford, 2007). The commercialisation of sex has taken away from the liberation and freedom shifting a narrative that tells us what we should desire instead of reflecting one’s own personal wants and needs. The western society has commodified the body to become the most powerful tool in marketing. This dissertation explores three very relevant pop culture icons today that have worked in fuelling the “male gaze” for their very own benefit. Kim Kardashain, along with the family, the Barbie doll, and finally Bonnie Blue all of whom have used sexuality not as a private or natural force but instead as a socially organised field for power at some point to inevitably create their careers and stance in society. The “male gaze” has constructed what is sexy and what is to be desired, and these women only used this to their own advantage. Given their role in helping build this massive visibility, through their extensive media presences, of the commodity of desire, they also raise critical questions about power and the exploitation they are inevitably glamourizing. Together they all show an example of how contemporary

culture is entangled with consumption, image, identity, and power just like it is suggested in the book *A World Made Sexy: Freud to Madonna* (Rutherford, 2007). However, the concern of who they inspire is a troubling thought as it seems like society is trapped in a very vicious circle that will be extremely difficult to escape and break free from. Are they truly expressing themselves, or are they performing a script shaped by the media and social expectations? Are they the post-feminist belief of taking control in their own agency or instead glorifying the hyper sexualised consumer spectacle? If the system is to be challenged could authenticity and creativity be desired in the place of branded perfection? To stop the objectification wouldn't be to stop people doing what they wish because who can draw the line between self-branding and self-objectification but these deep structural questions do need to be answered and challenged in order to deconstruct these patriarchal ideals.

Chapter One – Kim Kardashian

The Kardashians, a family that are far more than just their reality television show. They have become a defining cultural phenomenon of our time. The family are everywhere shaping our world of media today, both printed physically as well as online. The family of businesswomen have expertly utilized social media to build their empire, documenting every minute detail of their day-to-day life. Whether that is from either of their reality shows *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* (2007) or *The Kardashians* (2022), the regular content they post to their social media accounts, or events and celebrity appearances they make. Coming from a wealthy background the family have always lived a glamorous lifestyle comfortably and you would be quick to assume this is what allowed them to get themselves to the position they sit at currently with all of the success however you would be wrong. The release of Kim Kardashian's sex tape was what catapulted the family, especially Kim, into the attention of everyone in mainstream media (Mcclain, 2013). The pornographic video, which featured Kim and Ray J in an intimate moment was originally intended for private use, it was never meant for public release. The scandal produced a dilemma that could have ruined the family, but instead they seized it as an opportunity that could further push them into fame.

“I'm Kim Kardashian West. I'm a mother, millionaire, law student, and billionaire” (‘Kim Kardashian West Monologue - SNL’, 2021)

All stemming from Kim leveraging this sex tape for attention. It allowed them to solidify their celebrity status and live a lavish lifestyle. Only a few months after the incident of the leaked video, the pilot of their reality TV show was released, the premise being them choosing how they would tackle the situation at hand. According to an article, written by Blake Karsten Beaver, the urgency of the leaking is questioned due to the family choosing to profit off it by turning it into the start of a new career for them all (Blake Karsten Beaver, 2024). Fabricating a celebrity status out of an everyday life, all that was needed was something to grab attention. A key text underpinning and structuring this chapter in the dissertation is the book, *Keeping up the Kardashian Brand: celebrity, materialism, and sexuality* (Mcclain, 2013) however several other sources are being drawn from to challenge as well as support these points.

Why in today's society does success of a woman's work rely on something sexual to be involved to capture the attention of the male gaze?

“Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.” (Guerrilla Girls, 1989).

The simple answer? Because “sex sells”. This is a little well-known phrase in the marketing world that acts as a double-edged sword, causing controversy but inevitably results in brands profiting off sexual imagery. Although it does not only relate to the imagery itself that is

jumping out towards the audience but could also refer to provocative sayings and actions. Nudity is only one part in this marketing gimmick according to *Sex in Advertising: Perspectives on the Erotic Appeal* (Reichert, 2011). It is clear that when the opportunity was presented, Kim could use this to her advantage. It is critiqued how effective these sex appeals are as they do create negative connotations yet have the ability to captivate such a large-scale audience. Rarely the product that is being sold is the focus in these adverts but instead the suggestive imagery that is being presented on a platter. Whether that be the hourglass female or the ripped man. It has happened and continues to happen to both sexes throughout the years, which commands the attention whilst subliminally getting the brand into the viewers heads. Marketing using the “sex sells” gimmick comes down to Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze” theory (Mulvey, 1975) which implies all women in visual media are presented as passive objects that are used for sex. This is due to the assumption that the heterosexual; masculine man is the priority viewer. It’s a man’s world, the directors are male and present their narrative, reinforcing the patriarchal ideology contributing to the objectification of women. Although according to *Gender, design, and marketing : how gender drives our perception of design and marketing* (Moss, 2016) gender has a massive impact on aesthetics and is suggested women do not have enough say in the marketing industry resulting on the large amount of sex appeals that have been used. The irony of this is, Kim is female and used her own sex tape for fame but from a strategic marketing point of view. Instead of fuelling the shame, the fame allured Kim in as she used it to hook the viewers into the television series ultimately meaning more income stream for her.

Without a doubt all members of the Kardashian family show traits of narcissism, they reify beauty stereotypes. Every member has undergone some form of plastic surgery including botox, breast augmentations, face lifts in order to stay relevant to the “male gaze.”

“reality TV is particularly strong in reinforcing traditional views of women and what makes women desirable” (Wood, 2011, p. 265). Shows like *America’s Next Top Model...* highlight traditional beauty valuations” (Mcclain, 2013).

The Kardashian’s show presents a paradox of family values and explicit sexualization. Shockingly when Kim was offered to pose for *Playboy* in 2007, she originally was going to turn down the offer. Later she agreed to do the shoot but not be fully nude, but *Playboy* was not happy with the results and insisted she done a second shoot almost fully nude. Considering the entirety of her celebrity career was a result of the pornographic video being leaked Kim’s hesitance to go along with that was opportunity almost feels superficial. The ‘sex sells’ marketing gimmick brought this family into their lifestyle and continues to do so as they pose practically nude for merchandise such as magazine and calendars.

“Kim has created an image that is both the Madonna and whore” (Amanda Scheiner McClain, 2013).

Kim subverts and exploits this binary: she presents herself as glamorous, elegant, and aspirational “the Madonna”, while also openly embracing sexualised self-presentation and scandal “the whore”. As much as Kim is highly sexualized, she has got a law degree from completing Californias Law Office Study Program and runs many of her own businesses, an

inspiration to many women. Unfortunately, due to fame deriving from the sex tape this will always be present outweighing anything she does, creating connotations around her and her family. This is an issue for when it comes to the “sex sells” marketing gimmick, it results in women needing to be objectified to gain attention but then it will get held against them afterwards. They can no longer be taken seriously. This creates the idea the gimmick “sex sells” is counterproductive as it produces negative emotions as well as being a fleeting opportunity as it only works with the ‘ideal’ younger models. With the medias obsession with objectification of the human body, especially the females, creates a very harmful standard for society to keep up with. It leads to unrealistic standards which get normalised creating a toxic world for people to be living in. Women are constantly told to appear or act a certain way by two contradictory imperatives if they want to make it far in life.

“women are expected to be both highly sexualized and virginal. Kim Kardashians represents this paradox” (Mcclain, 2013).

This is a very true statement which highlights the damaging exploitation which comes with the objectification from profiting from sex. Kim represents Angela McRobbie’s conception of post-feminism (McRobbie, 2004) suggesting women have, in many ways, set aside or even relinquished explicitly feminist commitments to collective struggle for equality, and instead embraced a new cultural framework centred on individualism. In this view, the feminist project is treated as something that has already succeeded, with equality presumed to have been achieved, meaning that continued political activism or solidarity is dismissed and deemed unnecessary. What replaces it is a focus on the self, often people are seen undoing the process leaving women vulnerable to many of the same inequalities that feminism originally challenged. Kim has moved on to build a business empire but continues to maintain sexual standards to stay relevant, exemplifying a contortion on feminism benefiting from her own exploitation.

Evidently the entire Kardashians family are engaged in the capitalistic system, showing off both their notions of materialism and consumerism. Their lifestyle could be viewed as the American dream; the idea anyone can achieve success and wealth to then go and buy everything they could dream of to improve their self-worth. However, when young women look up to them as inspiration what hard work brought them here? Today they may appear to be driven with hard working work ethics. The origin point of their fame comes from the sex tape going on to start their reality show which is full of sexuality and materialism. They normalize body ideals conforming to beauty norms then change their minds and will undergo another surgery to alter their appearances drastically. The entire family are clear examples that “sex sells” and create harmful expectations of what femininity and celebrity is which seemingly the Kardashians themselves can’t even keep up with. This is problematic as they are the ones leading the pack hence others will follow.

“Men aren’t exploiting the Kardashians; instead, the Kardashians are exploiting what audiences have been socialized to like” (Mcclain, 2013).

Reinforcing female stereotypes as they are exploiting themselves for profit, which they have succeeded massively in so far. Although Kim Kardashian is often dismissed as being “famous for nothing”, her fame is strategically built on commodifying her image and transforming

notoriety into a profitable brand. This approach reflects a broader cultural trend where celebrity and consumerism blur. Where controversy is no longer a liability but a valuable commodity. The Kardashians thrive by transforming hyper-visibility, self-sexualisation, and scandal into marketable assets, presenting these strategies as empowerment while ultimately reinforcing systems that profit from female objectification. Their business empire highlights how fame itself has become a product, raising questions about whether their success represents innovation and agency, or a regressive step that normalises exploitation and reduces women's empowerment to consumption and branding. Another prime example is when Kourtney Kardashian's old explicit photos resurface 'The Price of Fame' (2007) *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, series 1, episode 8 another sex related scandal which is related with Kris Jenner's now famous quote "You're doing amazing sweetie". This family are prime examples of how credited the objectification of women can be, even their own mother thinks it is "amazing" to have this opportunity of fame as a result from their nude bodies. They fully encapsulate the idea "sex sells" demonstrating how sexualised visibility can transform into becoming highly profitable. Their fame carefully curated and amplified through social media for millions of followers to engage emphasises glamour, desirability and sexual appeal. It is no wonder brands demonstrate similar strategies when these marketing models work impressively well, industrialising on the controversy.

The worrying part is the expectations that have come as a result, to a young impressionable female the Kardashian's success highlights a cultural phenomenon that sexualisation is not only accepted but what is expected for a path of consumer loyalty and commercial growth. As the media is so over saturated in objectification it shapes how we as a society value individuals and credit their worth. Reinforcing it is tied primarily to their appearance, sexuality, or marketable traits rather than their skills, intelligence or character. With big names such as the Kardashians being a brand built off of objectification illuminates how normalised it is now. When our inspirations are what erode both personal wellbeing and social equity, it embeds inequality into our everyday culture.

Chapter Two – The Barbie Doll

Greta Gerwig's recent Barbie movie (*Barbie*, 2023) was the film of the season, so eagerly anticipated for its release. The film is the highest grossing feature film by a single female director. A very impressive and crucial achievement for when it comes to tackling Mulvey's "male gaze" theory (Mulvey, 1975). According to Gerwig herself

"It's feminist in a way that includes everyone." (Gerwig and Robbie, 2023)

Which is an important step to help fight misogynistic views and beliefs, one step further to irradicate the need for objectification in our modern world society. When Margot Robbie was asked to talk about her motivations to produce the film her response was:

"The word "Barbie" is just already globally recognised. And people feel really strongly about Barbie. Some people love Barbie, some people have a lot of problems with Barbie, but everyone has an associated memory with Barbie; whether they felt ambivalent or indifferent about her, they still remember her. She was kind of omnipresent, I think, in nearly everyone's childhood" (Gerwig and Robbie, 2023).

Barbie dolls were first produced in 1959, invented by Ruth Handler. According to *Barbie Imagining and Interrogating a Popular Culture Icon* (Coghlan et al., 2024) the idea was to allow children to play with a doll that looked like a woman not a baby almost as a toy to inspire to be somewhat like.

"Her arched eyebrows were matched with a coy sideways glance reflecting her sexual origins" (Coghlan et al., 2024)

The doll was designed to look like the 'ideal stereotypical' young female, with blonde hair, big boobs, and a small waist promoting unrealistic body standards. However, it was never Handler's intention for the doll to be sexualised, from early prototypes the nipples were removed, and underpants were always on the doll. Barbie's body was produced to appear like what was seen at the time but for a while she stayed this shape until criticism. Due to concerns of body dysmorphia, Mattel was pushed to start making more diverse body types. As long as Barbie has been around, she has created an uproar around her meaning and influence. Barbie creates the paradox, is she the feminist icon the movie creates her out to become or is she simply a doll that is a reinforcement of the patriarchal ideals?

Barbie, similarly, to Kim has been a major social influencer, but for a much longer period of time. As there was change of societal norms barbie too changed to reflect these with modernisations of her body. However, it is without a doubt the Barbie doll was an idealization of being thin, the peak of prettiness for young girls to aspire to look like. When in actual fact according to Barbie's proportions if she were to be a real live woman there would not be enough space for all her bones, organs and tissues resulting in the need for her to most likely walk on all fours. In line with this an Australian study compared Barbie's

proportions with a variety of women concluding the odds of a woman coming close to Barbie's measurements was 1 in 100,000 (Norton *et al.*, 1996). These unrealistic beauty standards the doll has set inevitably has caused lots of young girls to be left with body dysmorphia and low self-esteem, especially seen as they are exposed to the standards from a very early age. Leaving impressionable females feeling the need to conform to the "male gaze" as even their toys have. An American study featuring 84 girls between the ages of 3 and 10 were given four dolls with identical facial features but different height and weights (original, petite, tall and curvy). They were asked to rank the dolls considering what they would want to play with. 53.6% of the girls described the curvy doll to be "not pretty" and 39% said they would not play with that doll as she was described as "fat" and "chubby". 42.4% believed the tall doll to be the happiest (Harriger *et al.*, 2019). Mattel does not publish any data regarding sales of these other shaped and sized dolls from the fashionista line. The harmful attitudes towards body ideals especially in young girls in extremely worrying as it emphasises how much sex does in fact sell, even children would rather play the doll that is thought to be more conventionally 'attractive'. Whilst the diversification of Barbie dolls is an admirable step taken; there needs to be more representation to sell these dolls so they can be accepted and reduce stigma around weight. Perhaps if toys children that are given from a young age don't conform to the toxic standards society sets, the children playing with them wouldn't either.

Gerwig's movie *Barbie* (*Barbie*, 2023) has a variety of opinions and creates an interesting topic for debate. The film features a mix of fantasy and social satire exploring a feminist narrative that is open to including everyone. The Narrator, Dame Helen Mirren, states

"Because Barbie can be anything, women can be anything..." (*Barbie*, 2023)

As it begins we meet a wide variety of Barbies such as President Barbie, Diplomat Barbie, Lawyer Barbie, and even Weird Barbie. Margot Robbie plays the 'stereotypical' Barbie and therefore is the leading role. The casting choice of Margot Robbie was heavily criticised by many feminists as Robbie is the conventional 'pretty' woman already. However, it is important to remember the context of the Barbie doll to analyse the movie on a deeper level. The doll is meant to be plastic perfection and essentially Robbie almost is too (Byrnes *et al.*, 2024). Inspired by the German Lilli doll, a novelty toy sold to adult men, it makes sense for the film to work with the "male gaze" for this casting when it is essentially what created the dolls origins. Looking at the movie through Roland Barthes theory *Death of the Author* (1978) if the film chose to focus on another Barbie instead of 'stereotypical' Barbie then yes casting could have removed the need for working towards the "male gaze" however the movie would look very different as it would tell a very different story (Champagne *et al.*, 1978). The story told would be an empowering feminist tale looking at challenges and expanding beauty of the doll although it was not the story Gerwig wanted to tell. The point of this film was to homme in on what standards Barbie has unintentionally set for women and how hard these are in the real world. Unfortunately, life is not in plastic therefore neither is it fantastic. Whilst it has been criticised and viewed as problematic due to it not using its ability of capturing a large scale audience to tackle the male gaze in the casting choice for the leads, a wide variety of women, of all beauty standards, were cast even just as extra Barbies they do

highlight the importance of acceptance to all standards. The film has fed into the idea of ‘sex sells’ but only because the original ‘stereotypical’ Barbie did too when first released.

The film when looked at from a post-feminist lens, critiques hyper and toxic masculinity. Perhaps Barbie is not the feminist icon of the movie and instead it is Ken (Yakalı, 2024). The film uses lots of humour and satire as its weapon allowing it to frame the patriarchal system as the prime antagonist. The entire film features mockery of stereotypical masculinity when along with Barbie becoming more aware it creates emphasise on the independence of women (Macaluso, 2018). It allows viewers to subvert and ridicule societal norms, ultimately to then make them more aware of a need to challenge them.

“Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him.”
(*Barbie*, 2023)

Ken is reliant on validation, a flip on the way women would usually be presented towards men through the “male gaze” which expresses the postfeminist views in media (McRobbie, 2009). It is when Ken ventures to the real world when his existential crisis starts as he becomes obsessed with the idea that men rule. The film uses traditional symbols of power and masculinity to transform Barbie land into Kendom reinforcing male dominance over women. The hyperbolic masculine stereotypes are critical for when it comes to igniting a conversation and questioning upon the underlying gender inequality issues. The “male gaze” is then challenged as if men watching feel uncomfortable with the power they lack, surely consideration of the issue superiority over women may cause, would then occur. The satire of the male competitive nature is exploited to inevitably destroy this patriarchal land that has been created, this film is a crucial part of shaping the post-feminist landscape. It emphasizes that the problem stems not from the gender of those in power, but from the patriarchal system itself, calling for deep systemic reform rather than surface level solutions. Reimagining masculinity and inviting in space for change. Toxic masculinity along with ‘sex sells’ uphold a system that profits from imbalance, one that exploits both men and women by limiting authentic expression and perpetuating patriarchal norms (Yakalı, 2024). The film exposes all of this portraying how harmful expectations like this are for everyone, satirizing hyper masculinity and the hyper femininity calling for empathy and inevitably equality.

The film can still undoubtedly be viewed as a feminist film as the entirety of the plot is around the realisation of the harmful stigmas Barbie may have caused and the importance of fighting back against them.

“By giving voice to the cognitive dissonance required to be a woman under the patriarchy, you robbed it of its power.” (*Barbie*, 2023)

This is a quote for ‘stereotypical’ Barbie’s realisation and consciousness, the article “*She’s everything*”: *feminism and the Barbie movie* responds to this with:

“Even without the benefit of Gerwig’s framing of Barbie as “certainly feminist,” the film’s address is to an audience already steeped in popular feminism; its story of Barbie versus the

patriarchy becomes conceivable and its jokes intelligible in this context” (Byrnes et al., 2024)

Barbie has always sparked feminist debate. Gerwig and Robbie’s film bring that debate back into focus, communicating feminist ideas through mainstream entertainment. It ignites people to consider how we view people, especially women, commercializing and profiting off the harmful ideals. Whilst it may not seem apparent always to be tackling the ‘sex sells’ marketing gimmick it does help to critique the logic behind them. The doll, and women in general, have been marketed as desirable, ideals that are purchasable Gerwig exaggerates these and humanises Barbie to flip the script turning a formal symbol of sexualised perfection into a story about self-knowledge and imperfection. Presenting a world where femininity and identity thrive without sexualization, Barbie challenges the ‘sex sells’ ideology.

Encapsulating empowerment, creativity and self-fulfilment captivating an audience with more than a sexual appeal. The rejection of Barbies conformant to the heteronormative romance with Ken thus becomes a critique of how mainstream culture commodifies female sexuality.

Chapter Three – Bonnie Blue

The term ‘sex sells’ is quite literal for prostitution, one of the oldest trades in the world being relevant throughout all of history. Today with the digitalization of everything, pornography has also evolved and in recent years there has been a soar in the use of platforms such as *Onlyfans*. Discussions about sex work have remained deeply divided, framed either as empowerment of one owns agency or exploitation of innocent people. However, before the technological advancements moving everything online, it was thought to be an “invisible issue” (Matthews, 2008). Whilst *Onlyfans* was originally to be a subscription site for a variety of industries such as cooking or fitness, it has become one of the largest and most mainstream platforms for erotic content (Litamet al., 2022).

Onlyfans creators can be anyone who has a phone and cares to start uploading. Majority of creators present a glamorized portrayal of sex work as they profit from the recognition from social media and essentially gain something close to a celebrity lifestyle. Bonnie Blue is currently one of them most relevant and talked about creators in our present time due to her controversial marketing strategies. Blue, the creator in her mid-twenties, has been criticised for her exploitive strategies, in her own words targeting “barely legal” males to sleep with her (Poynor, 2025). Blue utilises her sexuality and controversial ideas as commodities to push her successful business model, in the exact same manner big named companies use the sex appeals. Stirring the water for the ripples to carry their names and allow them to stay afloat and relevant in our society. It is Bonnie Blue’s engagement with people, both those who are fans as well as people who dislike her, that creates political and cultural complications with today’s society. Everything Blue does is criticised due to the impact it has on feminism, almost setting all the progress back towards the struggles of equality.

It was the extreme explicit stunts that Blue pulled that launched her to the fame she currently holds. Her “Uk Dogging Tour”, sleeping with 1000 men in one day, the “Freshers Bang Bus Tour”, to name a few. In her first month of creating content on *Onlyfans* Blue made just under £8,000 (Cox, 2024) and since has claimed on the podcast *Saving Grace* on *Onlyfans* she has made more than £3 million (GK Barry, 2024). In that same interview she states it was “necessary” to find a unique niche which was “fresh 18 year olds” and whilst it seems controversial looking from a business perspective it shows entrepreneurial traits. This is her business model which she pushes across all social media platforms allowing her to use her own sexuality as a consumable product.

“I am a businesswoman so I am going to capitalise on wherever the most money is” (Wells, 2024).

Post feminism has the ideal being self-empowerment, there are many emphasises on choice, individualism and empowerment (McRobbie, 2004). Blue has stated she “loves” what she does as it has “made her rich” therefore why should there be so much hatred and shame towards her work? What may have previously been critiqued by feminists should surely, if considering these post-feminist views, should be enthusiastically encouraged and supported (Hemmings *et al.*, 2013, pp. 240–258). Blue recognised the society we live in; she has the ability to use her sexuality as a tool for advancement and found a fast track to fame and fortune no different to the way Kim Kardashian did. The one major difference, however, is for Kim it was one tape Blue has made it her full career producing hundreds. Sex work has been known to be thought as being “degrading and oppressive to women” (Overall, 1992) in Blue’s instance it could be argued as the same or instead self-empowering as she finally gains from a hypersexualised society. The worry is though as Blue goes more and more extreme the question she will face is where does it stop?

As pornography on the internet is so easily accessible, the consumption of it has flourished over the last decade (Shor and Seida, 2018). With creators like Bonnie Blue sleeping with over 1000 different men in one day people who can gain access from very early age will soon become desensitized, expecting this as norm craving more extreme. One of the biggest examples of this is violence and aggression towards submissive partners, particularly women, in mainstream pornography becoming more normalized. 50 popular pornographic videos were examined resulting with 88.2% of them containing some form of violence (Bridges *et al.*, 2010). The violence in the videos was considered to no longer be a niche kink rather a pervasive theme. Unfortunately, pornography is changing for the worse as viewers quickly become bored and search for something more extreme, the shock factor works well to bring them in. On the contrary a more recent study sampling 269 pornographic videos, it was discovered videos featuring aggression were less likely to be favoured and receive positive reviews. A promising result suggesting pornography may not be the biggest cause of nonconsensual aggression (Shor and Seida, 2018). Perhaps the industry may have mistaken or got confused the supply, what a large section of pornography looks like, and the demand, what viewers are actually looking to watch. Obviously, some people will be wanting this genre, but the majority do not, it suggests the industry pushes this narrative enforcing the “male gaze” yet again. In the study mentioned prior males noted they much prefer a woman to be actively involved rather than there to merely serve the man. This proves that the world we live in with the objectification and heavy use of sex appeals is forced onto us from the high up corporate world. Similar to how barbies were presented to young girls as perfection, the porn industry presents to young impressionable boys they are superior to women holding dominance over them. Through this logic Bonnie Blues work whether it is loved or loathed it sends the message to men; women should be so willing to go to these extremes.

Not only her work but every little controversial thing she says in interviews continues to further this issue as she is reinforcing misogynistic ideals. Bonnie Blue promotes lad culture

and toxic masculinity, like mentioned prior she actively wants younger boys as her ‘niche’, men who will be most easily influenced as their not fully developed and feel a pressure to lose their virginity. The toxic masculine concept that virginity is a weakness and until you have slept with someone you are not a ‘real’ man, contrasted with the importance of women keeping theirs (Selo, 2024). Granted Bonnie Blue has only recently become such a public figure and is not the cause of misogyny, we already know that it is the “male gaze’s” doing that is spread so widely across everything in today’s society but without a doubt it is inevitable Blue fuels the fire, contributing to the problems.

Blue casually admits that she enjoys sleeping with cheating husbands and she does the wives a favour calling them “lazy”, and of course if these married men are willing to cheat Blue isn’t the only one in the wrong however her message comes as a serious threat. Promoting women are purely sexual objects for their husbands needs, if they won’t fulfil this duty men will resort to finding someone else who will (Selo, 2024). Women like Bonnie Blue today creating content on *Onlyfans* are pushing boundaries further and further in order to get some sort of attention, they have no fear of coming across controversial as no press is bad press which is unfortunately encouraging the lack of morals in everyone. The controversy many creators stir up to stay relevant raises the cause for concern. It almost seems like nowadays cancel culture is a strong marketing technique as it merely lasts until the next thing gets cancelled, there is no fear around saying the wrong thing, people like Bonnie Blue are prime examples of it only working in their favour. Society as a whole is becoming numb to the objectification happening all around us, content to seem interesting is going to have to become much more shocking. A dangerous thought as how far is extreme and how long before we live in a dystopian world?

The use of sex appeals are of course going to be used for relating to sex work and the pornography industry, which is inevitable. In no way is this to discredit or critique the sex work its actual self rather to bring focus on how harmful they can be when so easily accessible being pushed onto every social media platform it goes without saying inspiration will be taken for other products and companies etc. There is so much glamourization of creators such as Bonnie Blue living lavish celebrity like lifestyles, as they gain what seems like an easy route to fame. With these examples becoming more and more mainstream it is worrying the standards it will set for young girls as they potentially believe this is how they too should be acting for their very own partners or even inspire to take the similar path and create their own content to gain a similar life. Sex work should not be alienated to be a career deemed unrespectable if that is the work someone wishes to pursue (Overall, 1992). Unfortunately, not everyone will be as lucky enough to be the *Pretty Woman* like Julia Roberts was (1990) and find the work they do to give them a happily ever after ending and as there is already such an oversaturation in pornography to become as famous as a creator like Blue you would need to be bigger and better.

In order to overcome the misogyny and sexism women will need to work together and support a change, which primarily most do however when you have those like Blue in the public eye actively advocating to serve male needs it is counterproductive. Perhaps if the women particularly working in this industry were to take more control over producing content for the “male gaze” then they could educate those about valuing people for more than just a body. Boys will be boys, yes but only if we let them. The men are not the only cause of these sex appeals; the women too are just as responsible (James, 2024). Especially those that are justifying these toxic behaviours. Men and women are different, but all humans are meant to be civilised that can control their actions.

Blue has manipulated a capitalist society to support her business grow; it is undeniable that clearly sex did sell for her. The marketing point of view would be to see her as a genius. None the less she does contradict a lot of feminist values whilst also only partaking in the post-feminist beliefs of self-agency and doing as one wishes to (McRobbie, 2004).

“She has turned herself into a patriarchal fantasy and plays into the Madonna-whore complex, all for the sake of turning a profit” (James, 2024)

Critics believe there seems to be double standards going on, people would be “outraged” if she was man doing this to women but believes equally society would be disgusted by the women sleeping with him but due to the reinforcement in toxic masculinity this gives men something to boast about. Considering the accusations of exploitation and Blues beliefs reinforcing misogynistic ideals can her career genuinely be framed as an act of the post-feminist self-empowerment and individualism when it appears to operate at the expense of her audience, and more broadly, weakens the feminist progression? Can a model of empowerment built on the ‘sex sells’ mantra and the use of the “male gaze” marketing gimmick ever subvert these ideals like they claim to when they are reinforcement of the very structures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation has thoroughly examined the ‘sex sells’ marketing gimmick that is a result of the “male gaze” exploring three major influential female figures in our present day. Regardless of if they purposely seek for these gimmicks or have no intention of them it appears that it is inevitable it will catch them at some point as a price of their fame and publicity.

In chapter one the focus was on Kim Kardashian and how the family transformed the leaking of her sex tape into a commodity to launch themselves into the public eye, ultimately leading to one of the most successful television empires in Hollywood. Kim recognised that in a culture driven by the “male gaze” the only way forward was to use this dynamic to her advantage, yet this sexual origin always overshadows any current work. The Kardashians were also critiqued for promoting materialistic and unattainable beauty norms, ultimately exemplifying how female objectification is normalised as well as monetized within capitalist culture. This raises significant concerns around how society values women, prioritising a hypersexualised appearance over any genuine substance. Therefore, Kim Kardashians being such as aspirational figure to young women emphasises the need for a harmful curated self-presentation that relies on sex and consumerism to have the post-feminist ideal, where one’s own individual empowerment replaces the collective of large feminist goals.

Chapter two delved into the Barbie doll but more specifically the major cultural phenomenon being Gerwig’s film. The film drew on Barbie’s long and controversial history being associated with unrealistic beauty standards, thinness, and sexualised ideals that were never Ruth Handler’s intention when creating the toy. Blending fantasy and satire as Gerwig explored how Barbie both embodies and critiques the standards placed upon women. The film was heavily criticised for casting Margot Robbie as stereotypical Barbie, essentially this romanticised ideal already, although this choice aligns with the doll’s origins. Using traditional image to highlight how impossible such standards are in real life. Another major part of the film was critiquing toxic masculinity just as much if not more than hyper femininity. Flipping the usual gender dynamic of the gaze exposed the absurdity of patriarchal structures and encourages audiences to question gender inequality and rethink masculinity itself. Combining this with confrontation of the pressure the doll has historically reinforced is a promising challenge to the “male gaze” and the ‘sex sells’ ideology. Offering a vision of identity and femininity that is not defined by consumerist ideals and sex.

Finally in chapter three, the dissertation examines Bonnie Blue and the growth of platforms such as *Onlyfans* allowing for pornography to be so easily accessible online. Obviously in sex work the concept ‘sex sells’ is quite literal, but the danger is the glamourisation of the creators presenting the possibility of a celebrity like lifestyle. Blue markets herself through extreme sexual stunts and provocative statements, in doing so she is earning millions built all on controversy. Whilst this aligns with the post-feminist ideas of choice it is argued as undermining feminist progression, essentially reinforcing misogyny and toxic masculinity. The mainstream pornography industry already contributes to the desensitisation and unrealistic standards to young audiences. Blue’s work promotes women should go to even further extreme lengths to satisfy the male desire, her influence signals hypersexualised performances lead to success. Blue’s business success demonstrates how the capitalist society today rewards sexualisation and clearly the “male gaze” does control everything. When this behaviour is encouraged rather than challenged the expectations and objectification are only going to continue to get more extreme.

Taken together, these chapters illustrate how pervasive and adaptable the “male gaze” remains, manifesting in different forms across all media and entertainment. Whether it is being masked as empowerment, satirised, or amplified the objectification of women continues to function as cultural currency. Demonstrating ‘sex sells’ is not merely a marketing gimmick rather a cultural force. Sex does sell but so does other things. Until society challenges these structures of rewarding and reproducing this logic, objectification will always be required for success. Ultimately, this dissertation underscores the need for cultural narratives and feminist frameworks that value women further than their marketability using sex and resist the commodification of the female body. Overwhelmingly it is clear with the capitalist landscape despite shifts in media platforms the underlying marketing mechanism remains the same. Female bodies generate attention which generates profit and therefore sex still does well and truly sell.

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