

# **Plastic Molds: An Exploration of the Paradox of Women's Empowerment Through Promiscuous Self-Presentation**

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## **Abstract**

This study looks into the phenomenon of empowerment through provocatively presenting oneself and how it may be harmful to the women practicing such. To explore this, I have conducted a qualitative study, interviewing a demographic of women about their experiences regarding the matter. The women who participated in the interview had differing self-expressions, body types, as well as environments. Despite this, their answers still revealed similar experiences regarding being exposed to beauty standards. These standards, according to most of the women, have caused insecurity in their physical appearance. I have also noticed a pattern of criticism of their clothing regardless of modesty. Going off their answers and my research, I have concluded that while dressing provocatively may encourage objectification, dressing conservatively does not hinder objectification either. This leads me to believe that the phenomenon goes beyond revealing clothes but is a deeper societal issue that calls for further research and analysis.

*Keywords:* male gaze, women empowerment, Objectification theory, female complicity

## **Introduction**

The feminist movement was initially started as an initiative to raise awareness and advocate for women's rights. In the years following the attainment of rights in areas such as employment, education, and politics, feminism has evolved to encourage women to further explore their newfound freedoms. This modern version of the movement promotes a departure from conservative values and encourages the embrace of a liberated world that transcends the traditional stereotypes that have historically constrained women.

In this modern world, a woman's identity is no longer defined by her purity, her potential as a wife, or her willingness and ability to be a mother. Instead, it envisions and pursues a society where women have equal opportunities as men, free from societal judgment. In this realm, women are empowered to express their opinions, exercise their sexual agency, and pursue ambitious careers without facing criticism or scrutiny.

However, as we learn to navigate towards this new world, it's worth pondering whether this transformation has genuinely liberated women or if it has imposed another set of expectations and constraints upon them. In this study, I will be exploring the implications of this shift in our society and how it may be affecting modern women.

The hypothesis of this study, that ideas being promoted by mainstream feminism may be harming women instead of helping them, stemmed from stumbling upon 'S.L.U.T.' by an artist named Ppcocaine. The official music video premiered on YouTube in 2020 and showcased confident women of various sizes and colors dancing like cheerleaders, scantily clad in short skirts and shiny pink bikini tops.

Throughout history, women in media, whether locally or on an international scale, have frequently embraced such sexualized portrayals. The only difference between the now and then is the transformation of this presentation into a symbol of liberation and an image of women's empowerment.

This observation prompted me to ponder a fundamental question: Can empowerment through provocative self-presentation truly exist in a patriarchal society shaped by the male gaze? Or does it inadvertently reinforce the objectification of women?

The Objectification theory, presented by Fredrickson and Roberts in 1997, suggests that individuals exposed to media that portrays people primarily as sexual objects tend to gradually internalize this perspective. According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), this internalization process particularly affects women, leading them to believe in the objectifying images they encounter, reinforcing these harmful perceptions.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) have identified several consequences of this internalization, including an increased inclination toward cosmetic procedures, the use of physical attractiveness to enhance social status, and negative outcomes for those who do not conform to society's established standards of attractiveness. This theory places the responsibility on patriarchal societal norms and the pervasive influence of the male gaze in our society, emphasizing that it is beyond the control of those affected by it.

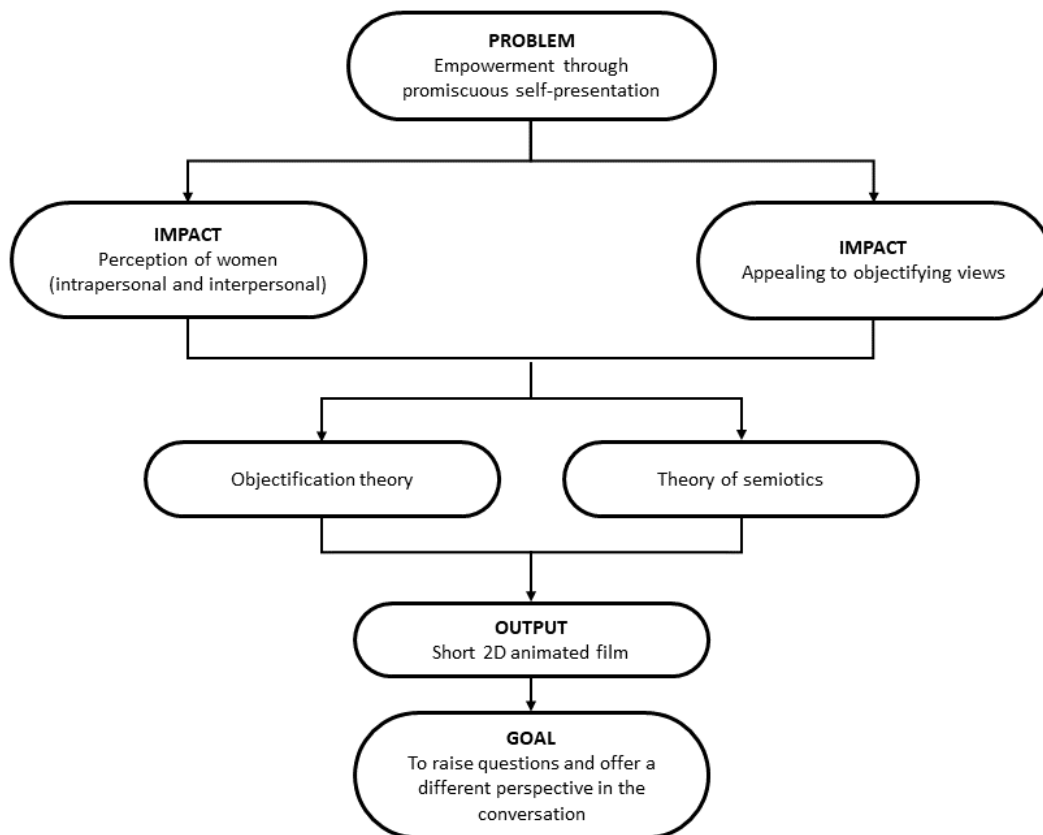
When cross-referenced with Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking work, "The Second Sex," published in 1949, it provides us with additional insights into the complexities of this phenomenon. In her book, Beauvoir explores the potential reasons why women, even in more accepting societies, continue to experience a sense of being "unfree." She highlights the role of female complicity in contributing to the view that women, in comparison to men, are the "other" and the subordinate sex. In addition, she adds that this complicity can manifest in various ways, with one of the simplest and most common manifestations, according to Beauvoir, being the acceptance and defense of women's roles as sexual objects.

This discussion prompts deep reflections on our understanding of women's empowerment. However, it's essential to clarify that while this study has the potential to connect to the topic, its primary aim is not to definitively answer the question of what true empowerment is (not that I think it can be definitively defined in the first place). Instead, this study is focused on exploring the paradoxical nature of contemporary definitions of women's empowerment, particularly concerning how individuals choose to present and express themselves. It's important to note that in this study, promiscuous self-presentation will be defined as wearing revealing clothing that either exposes a lot of skin or accentuates the figure.

To effectively illustrate the framework of the research, I have made a visual representation of the topic, the project, and its goal.

**Figure 1**

*Framework of the Topic and the Thesis Output*



The central theme of this paper revolves around the concept of empowerment through promiscuous self-presentation and its connection to the phenomenon of objectification. This

topic will be examined through the lens of the Objectification theory, supported by other research studies and literary works, including Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex." The ultimate creative output of this study will be a short animated film, which will apply the theory of semiotics, utilizing symbolism to convey a narrative that invites discussion and interpretation.

The Objectification Theory, first proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts in 1997, forms the cornerstone of this research. According to this theory, individuals exposed to objectifying imagery, or more simply, media that portrays people as primarily sexual objects, tend to internalize these perceptions over time. This theory will serve as the foundational framework for this research and form the basis for the paper's hypothesis. It will set the stage for a comprehensive exploration of the relationship between promiscuous self-presentation, empowerment, and the dynamics of objectification. Through the creative medium of a short animated film, this study aims to shed light on these intricate connections, inviting viewers to reflect upon the message.

## **Research Design**

Due to the paper's qualitative nature, the data gathering tool used was a recorded audio interview with a total of eight (8) respondents. The respondents were college women, around 18-23 years of age, all based in Metro Manila. To save time and to ensure safety, the interviews were conducted through Zoom meetings. All the respondents were asked for their permission to have the meeting recorded under the condition that the actual recorded clips would not be disseminated to the public. The answers provided by the respondents will thoroughly be assessed and analyzed using Thematic analysis to recognize patterns in the answers given.

## **Target Audience**

The target audience of the thesis output would be college women based in Metro Manila, within the age range of 18-23 years old. This demographic was also the respondents of the interview conducted and whose answers were analyzed for the findings of the research paper. I chose this demographic as I think they would be the ones to relate the most to the topic of the animation. As someone who is also part of the same demographic, I navigate in a similar world. I have similar experiences and similar struggles as them. So, while the film may be able to touch other demographics, I will only be considering the target demographic during the production process of the project.

## **Design Process**

Animation serves as a prevalent source of entertainment for children while also emerging as a powerful tool for conveying information, imparting messages, and delivering lessons across diverse subject matters. Notably, there has been a growing trend in the

production of animated content aimed at adults, delving into mature themes distinct from their child-oriented counterparts. I opted for animation as the medium for my thesis project due to its capacity to address mature subjects and its boundless storytelling potential. In addition, the utilization of semiotics expands the horizons of interpretation, fostering discussions on the film's meaning and message.

The narrative and characters of "Plastic Molds" will draw inspiration from the insights given in the interview answers given by the study's participants. The objective of this paper is to delve into the paradox of women's empowerment, specifically how it relates to encouraging a more liberated self-presentation, and to analyze its impact on the women involved.

### **Pre-production Stage**

In this section, I will be discussing the thought process that went into the steps that I took before moving to the production process of the animated film. I will be covering the thought process and the inspirations that have led me to conceptualize the film.

### ***The Concept***

The idea of hypersexuality and its potential repercussions has always intrigued me. I became initially conscious of this concept when I witnessed people I knew criticizing women who openly displayed their sexuality. These remarks often ridiculed these women, and for quite a bit of time, I internalized these views and projected them to other people. It wasn't until I became an adult that I began to distance myself from these beliefs and started my journey to explore my own sexuality.

I didn't realize how damaging and demeaning it can be until I had personally dealt with the outcomes and consequences of presenting myself in a more sexually liberated way. This personal revelation was the inspiration behind my choice for this topic—it's an issue that deeply connects with me. I wanted to develop an animated film which could metaphorically reflect the challenges that many women, including myself, go through. I have an overwhelming sense of empathy for the struggles that women often face and I will always be an advocate for equality and empowerment because of that.

Despite the fact that I value these principles, I do not always share their mainstream feminism viewpoints, especially the belief that being hypersexual is an indication of empowerment. Many of these concepts, in my opinion, may not truly benefit women as much as they claim to. Having said that, I want to be clear that I'm not claiming to understand everything that is to know about empowerment. I just felt compelled to look into and recognize an issue that I believed deserved attention, a fundamental problem that frequently goes unmentioned in conversations about women's experiences.

## ***The Writing***

The plot of "Plastic Mold" revolves around Megan and Rosa. Megan, a manufactured doll, was unhappy with her existence as a toy. Rosa, who had just emerged out of her flower, aided by an ant and her curiosity, found Megan being played with by her human. When Rosa observed how unhappy the doll was, she made the decision to assist Megan and rescue her. After the human was consumed by ants, they are able to get away from Megan's kidnapper. The two women went on to live their lives free.

Its conceptual and I am aware of that, but I wanted to create something that would spark conversation. Although the plot is conceptual, in my opinion it is still simple enough to be understood literally as well as examined to derive a deeper meaning. I chose this approach as I didn't want the narrative to be overly didactic.

## ***Storyboard***

I'll be planning the look and flow of the film through the use of a storyboard. This will give me something to refer back to during the animation process. This will help me determine compositions, camera transitions, and how long scenes will run. Using a storyboard will help in ensuring the animation stays on track and consistent with the vision. Additionally, this step lessens the workload done in planning the timing of the movements in the animation.

## ***Production Stage***

The production stage will mostly be comprised of animating and problem solving, in case there are issues regarding the animation. I have broken the process of animating in different steps for an organized workflow and to better gauge the progress made.

The animation process is broken into the following steps:

- A. Blocking
- B. Refining
- C. Outlining
- D. Coloring

## ***Post-production Stage***

The post-production stage is where the editing and compositing of the project will be done. During this part of the project, any necessary corrections and effects such as color corrections and lighting will be done. I will also be incorporating the sound into the animation by this stage.

## **Review of Related Literature**

This section contains studies, analyses, and research regarding the topic. This section will go deeper into depth on the definition of objectification theory and how it relates to the topic of women's empowerment through promiscuity.

### **The Defying and Submissive Nature of Promiscuous Self-Presentation**

In her Media and Culture Bachelor Thesis, Heta Puoskari explores women's empowerment through the Promiscuous Representation of women in Hip-hop. She analyzes the lyrics and music video of W.A.P. (Wet Ass Pussy) by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. She also analyzes how the use of promiscuous imagery and lyrics in the song pushes empowerment not only when viewed through the experiences of African-American women but also through the lens of intersectionality. The paper argues that while promiscuity, as represented by the music video and lyrics, may warrant the subjection to objectification, it does not take away the agency of the women in the video.

I have looked at the ways the artists have portrayed empowering and even dominant self-representation while simultaneously reproducing but also challenging stereotypical representations. Even though the music video has stereotypical ideas of Black female representation, I argue that all the performers have agency over how they are depicted, and they resist existing patriarchal structures within the culture through certain submission and self-sexualization. (Puoskari, H. E. 2021)

While Puoskari, H. E. (2021) made convincing arguments and a good analysis of the WAP, I argue that her analysis failed to consider several important elements such as how the agency expressed by the artists involved empowers women exposed to it, how the promiscuous imagery affect how women are viewed, and how it glosses over the paradoxical nature of having agency in how one is objectified. Does the active participation in how someone is valued as an object render the act of objectification powerless or does it only encourage it?

### **The Effects of Objectifying Imagery**

Objectification is defined as treating and evaluating a person like an object. Similarly, sexual objectification is the valuation of a person based on their ability to be a sexual object either to be looked at or to be used for sexual pleasure. As the basis for my definition, according to the Objectification theory, objectification is engrained in a person through objectifying media. The theory states that objectifying imagery in media causes an individual to internalize this imagery and start to objectify themselves (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, as cited by Soto, S., 2022). There have been numerous studies exploring the effects of objectification on women. Besides the questionable morals in treating a human being as an object, objectification has been proven to have long-lasting, negative effects on the mental health and life of women affected by it (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Objectification theory explores the effects of objectification on women and has even linked it to women utilizing physical attractiveness to raise their status and value. The Objectification theory also states that women who meet the beauty standard that is set tend to have better outcomes in their lives as opposed to those who don't. This idea parallels Simone de Beauvoir's idea of female complicity. In her book *The Second Sex* (1949), she emphasizes how female complicity is something that plays a big part in the woman's experience in such a manner that it prevents women from their freedom. It is defined as the act of defending the position where women are viewed as objects and sexual beings (Beauvoir, 1949).

The Objectification theory places the majority of the responsibility on society and the environment the woman is in. In this case, her actions are simply influenced and she is but a victim of her environment. While Beauvoir recognizes that the woman is disenfranchised and at a clear disadvantage compared to men, she places a bit of responsibility on the woman in her unfreedom. By saying women are complicit, Beauvoir implies that women can choose to comply or not comply with what is expected of them. It implies that women can be free if only they choose to as she believes that for complicity to exist and materialize, there is a reality that needs to be embraced. To quote Beauvoir, a woman "chooses to want her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her to be the expression of her freedom", which is to say women believe that her choice to submit is a sign of her having true power in the situation.

However, I don't think that Beauvoir is necessarily blaming women. She mentions that for complicity to happen, there is a degree of acceptance that needs to happen. Beauvoir recognizes that women are viewed as sexual objects and while that's not their fault, they have come to accept and embrace that expectation and reality. I think that Beauvoir realizes how hard it would be for women to fully detach themselves from those expectations and recognizes that it would be easier for women to embrace the situation they are put in.

## **The Aftermath**

The accessibility of social media has made creating and viewing sexual or suggestive content easier. This accessibility has warranted the rise of sexual content produced as well as sexual content containing harmful representations resulting in the dehumanization of those involved (Flores, Z. W. 2019). Exposure to this type of representation influences how individuals see themselves, producing a self-evaluating view that negatively impacts self-esteem (Magnus, J., 2022).

The rise of content where women are objectified has strengthened the illusion that this objectification is good and benefits women. It also reinforces the perception that women are objects and should be seen as such. As Andrea Dworkin, a feminist and anti-pornography advocate, said, "If we give up now, younger generations of women will be told porn is good for them and they will believe it." While I don't agree with all of Dworkin's ideas, I believe that her statement helps as a warning in how we approach the discussion of empowerment and liberation and how we influence the current and future generations.



## **Illusion of Empowerment**

According to Puoskari, H. E. (2021), Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion have turned the objectifying gaze into a form of empowerment for women that reinforces sexual and bodily autonomy, but numerous studies have proven the negative effects of objectification and its direct effect on women. However, this contradiction does not render Puoskari, H. E.'s (2021) conclusion invalid as autonomy is one of the key ideas of feminism. The choice of what to do with one's body is something women have been restricted from and women still have to fight for this today.

The perspective that choosing how one is objectified is empowering in the sense that it reclaims and exhibits bodily autonomy is valid, but that does not automatically mean that objectifying oneself is a positive thing to be encouraged. Furthermore, this research argues that striving for this type of empowerment, the empowerment through promiscuous self-presentation, is not freedom but is simply just submission to the objectifying gaze especially, in a patriarchal society.

## **Review of Related Works**

This section contains the related works that serve as inspiration and reference for the thesis output. The following related works have been categorized by which aspect of the related works element of the related work contributes to the output and its process. The categories are animation style, environment style, character style, and use of metaphors. Relation between the project and the related works chosen will be discussed, as well as why those works were chosen.

### ***Character Style***

Steven Universe (2013) is an animated series created by Rebecca Sugar. Since its airing in 2013, it has captivated audiences with its innovative approach to animation and character design. The series utilizes shapes, colors, and sizes to convey different character personalities. For Plastic Mold, I will be taking inspiration from the series' creative and unique character design to show the audience more about the characters in the film. The reason for choosing this style is due to the limitation of production and running time. There's not a lot of room to show every detail of the characters. To remedy this, I wanted to pick a style that uses big shapes and allows for exaggerated expressions and movements.

**Figure 2**

Steven Universe

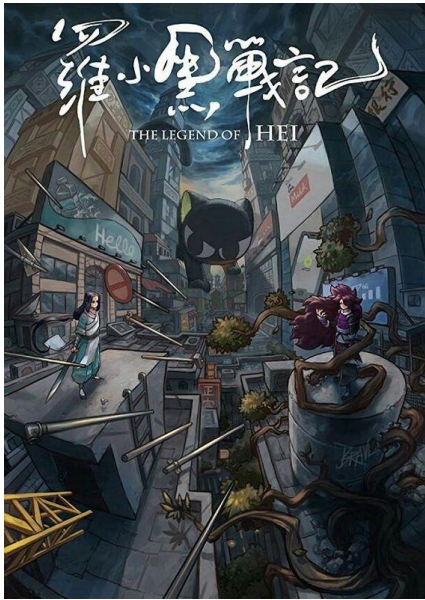


***Animation Style***

The animated film "The Legend of Hei" is directed by MTJJ (also known as MTJJY), a Chinese animator and director. The film, which was released in 2019, is an adaptation of MTJJ's earlier web series, "Scissor Seven," and it features a unique and visually distinct animation style. The film mostly uses hand-drawn 2D animation, which separates it from standard 3D or CGI animation methods. This approach lends the film a traditional, timeless feel reminiscent of earlier animated films. The film's animation is notable for its fluidity and attention to detail in character movement. Characters move fluidly and organically, adding to the lifelike and compelling impact of their actions and interactions. Qualities which I also want the animation in "Plastic Mold" to have.

**Figure 3**

The Legend of HEI (2019)

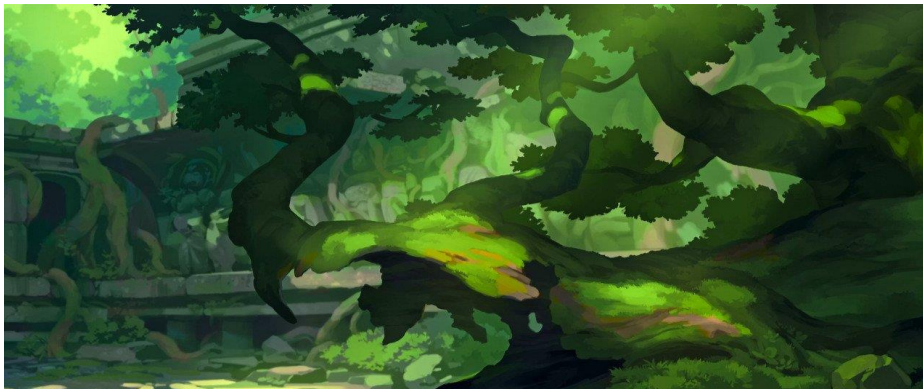


***Environment Style***

The film's backgrounds are incredibly detailed and impressionistic, adding depth and atmosphere to the scenes. The lush and vibrant settings add to the film's overall visual appeal. The use of color in "The Legend of Hei" is eye-catching and unique. Vibrant colors are employed to portray mood and emotion, and the color palette shifts throughout the story to match the various places and atmospheres. I will be using a similar approach to the backgrounds in "Plastic Mold". The soft painterly feel of the backgrounds will help the characters stand out, given the style chosen for the character design.

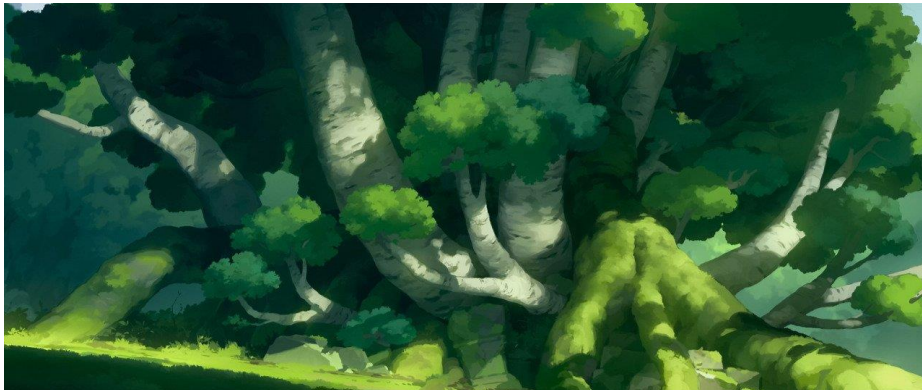
**Figure 4**

The Legend of HEI



**Figure 4.1**

The Legend of HEI



***Use of Symbols***

My Little Goat (2018) is a short-animated film directed and animated by Tomoki Misato. It is an animated film with an unsettling feel that tells an equally dark and disturbing story of predatory behavior towards a boy and his loss of innocence at the hands of his father. The film makes use of symbolism with excellent use of visual storytelling to show rather than tell the audience what the film means which will go well with the thesis output's intention.

**Figure 7**

My Little Goat



## **Results and Discussion**

In this section of the paper, I will be discussing the findings and results of the topic and the design process. I will be splitting this section into two with one section dedicated to the topic and the other to the design process.

### ***Research Topic***

I interviewed eight (8) women of different sizes, different backgrounds, and different self-expressions. All the respondents had in common was the general area they lived in and their age group. To gather the data that I needed for my research, I asked the respondents the following questions:

- Have you ever struggled with things like fitting in or meeting a beauty standard? How have you coped with it?
- Do you find that you get more positive/negative attention when you lean more conservative or revealing?

These questions served as a guideline and I asked additional questions based on the answers of the respondents for them to further elaborate and clarify their answers.

When asked the first question, the majority of them answered that they have struggled with insecurities although with varying degrees of impact in their everyday lives. They also had varying answers in how they coped with it with some even stating that they didn't need to cope as they felt that the insecurities didn't severely affect their lives.

An interesting detail to add, when I asked the respondents if they could give their idea of what the beauty standard is, their answers were similar to one another, with some of the answers being the same. The commonly given standards were:

- Petite
- light and clear skin
- a small nose and slender

For the next question, there were also mixed responses. Some answered that, generally, they got more compliments when wearing conservative clothes and others stated that they got more compliments while wearing more revealing clothes. Most have stated that it mainly depends on where they are and who they are with.

Based on the answers given by these women, I have concluded that there is indeed an imposed beauty standard that women are exposed to, regardless of whether they choose to be exposed to it or not. I have also concluded that contradictory to my first hypothesis, choosing to present yourself conservatively does not save a woman from criticism and being valued based on her appearance. While I still think that choosing to dress oneself provocatively opens an individual to being objectified, I have found that choosing to do otherwise does not stop the objectification. Regardless of how a woman wraps herself, she is seen as a gift to be opened

and enjoyed and it is through no fault of her own but the world that she moves in. No matter where she goes, she is subjected to standards and expectations, not in her control.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

As I have stated, my interest in the topic grew from my lived experience with promiscuous self-presentation as well as observations on the feminist movement and its attitude towards women empowerment. Initially, I saw a problem with how promiscuity is being encouraged and normalized as seen in modern media. While I do not advocate for enforcing conservatism, I still believe that the increasing promotion of promiscuity is badly affecting women. I looked to other theories and research to study and look into the phenomenon. I mainly reference the Objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) and *The Second Sex* by Simone Beauvoir in formulating my hypothesis, which was that empowerment through the valuation of outside appearance and sexuality does more harm than good for women. I believe that it not only opens women up to objectification but also makes women root their value in their appearance. Such is also stated by the Objectification theory which states that exposure to objectification leads the objectified to objectify themselves. *The Second Sex* also touches on the attitude of women towards being seen as sexual.

However, analyzing the interview responses, I have concluded that while dressing provocatively does encourage objectification, dressing conservatively does not stop it either. That is to say that women are born in a society that objectifies them regardless of how they dress and values them using trivial things. This is brought to light by the pattern recognized in the interviewee's responses such as imposed beauty standards and the attention and criticism they receive regardless of clothing. Many have also stated that because of the standards they grew up with, many have developed insecurities and have come to compensate by maintaining their appearance.

While this is also related to my lived experience, the research and data gathering has been a long process. It has not been as easy as I thought it would be. I came across several hurdles while researching the topic, as well as while working on the output. I would say that one of the major limitations I encountered was regarding the respondents that were interviewed. Originally, I had planned for the respondents to be sex workers or people who sell adult content online. Given the nature of the research topic which wishes to discuss and explore the paradoxical nature of promiscuity, I thought that they would be able to give valuable insight regarding the paradox of becoming empowered by something that, in hindsight, dehumanizes and objectifies.

Unfortunately, I could not get in contact with the desired demographic. They were very hard to get a hold of and most were not interested in participating in the research. I found that most of them were highly motivated by money and most of the sex workers I have talked to only became interested after the introduction of monetary incentives. While the original plan was to compensate those who participated, I got scammed and I decided that it would not be

wise to risk my thesis budget so I just switched to a more open respondent demographic. With that said, I still believe that I have gathered the information necessary to spark curiosity and encourage further research on the topic.

As for the work process, the majority of the blockage had something to do with time. The whole time, it had been heartbreaking for me because this was something I was passionate about. I had to make shortcuts and think of ways I could lessen the workload which also meant that I wasn't doing what I envisioned for this project. That was the main struggle. I didn't want my film to be a requirement for me to graduate. I wanted to make something. Unfortunately, I didn't have the luxury of money and time to spend on this project.

If anyone were to conduct more intensive research regarding this topic, I recommend finding sex workers or adult content creators as the respondents. Future researchers could also mix women who are not involved in sex work and women who are to be able to compare their answers. I theorize that this comparison will give us a more solid understanding of the effects of societal views and norms on women.

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