

In this work, I examine femininity in our culture—its representation in the media and how women are treated on a daily basis. When I started my research journey, it quickly became clear that the sexualization of women is more prominent than I originally believed. I created a piece to promote conversation about that sexualization.

I decorated 144 tiles; each tile represents a specific person I know personally or am inspired by in the media. To create an abstract effect, the tiles were painted with Sharpie ink, which was then dissolved with isopropyl alcohol. The individual tiles work together to form an image that depicts a sexualized image of a woman.

The woman is in a state of undress, unaware that she is being watched from her window. This is the clearest way to indicate that she does not give consent to the viewer watching her. Even though the individual tiles (or people represented by them) are not sexualized, the larger concept is.

Rachel

How Beauty Affects Feminism

Rachel



I believe we ignore, on a regular basis, the limitations our society places upon gender expression. Although we have made great strides in the last 50 years, in relation to women and their rights, it is clear that expectations such as beauty and sexuality have replaced the “house wife” ideals that once contained them. Is it possible that these new expectations of appearance are continuing to limit women in our modern day society?

I have regularly found myself drawn to friendships with young men over young women. It hasn't been a consistent desire for me to come across as more masculine, but I have always been attracted to activities that are not commonly associated with femininity. When I was young, I wanted to be a spy or a wizard, I wanted to be a powerful person. It was easy to look at my body and see weakness, as the women in movies I loved, and video games I played were often portrayed as “damsels in distress”. When female characters were more than a girl in trouble, they tended to start drama and have wild emotions, constantly creating seemingly uncontrollable situations. I didn't want to be affiliated with a lack of personal ability or control, and I never associated the commonly “girly” aspects of dress up with strength or an ability to succeed. So I continued to fantasize about being Mario, instead of Princess Peach. As I got older, I began to feel the effect of the expectations placed upon me as a woman. I went from playing until my clothes were ruined, to dressing in my nicest pieces in an attempt to impress those around me. This often meant I would wear the same three outfits in a cycle.

By third grade, I started to believe that my voice was too loud, I was drawing too much attention to myself, and my thoughts didn't need to be heard. I struggled with feeling as if I needed to be quieter and smaller. My mother had raised me in a way that allowed me to be as valuable as everyone in the room, without a question of age or gender. I was taught to develop my own relationships with people outside of my parent, which led me to feel as if I was capable of many forms of social interaction. I thought sharing my thoughts, values, and opinions would benefit the community as a whole, but in school I was treated as an “attention seeker”, while. In my mind, discussing how we have been raised and how that has led to our opinions about the world around us would lead to the visibility of new points of view. When I would speak up, hoping to look further into topics being discussed in class, I would often be shut down by my peers and encouraged to accept the material as it was given, without question of what it meant. My male counterparts on the other hand were praised for speaking up and expressing their views, further instilling the idea that my thoughts were less valuable than the thoughts of my more masculine peers.

Starting at the age of 11, when my body began developing, I was often approached by much older men. They would follow me, asking for a smoke, hit on me in bars (It was legal to be with a parent in bars where I lived, in Arizona. They often had board games and offered food), or yell across the street and from their cars about my still premature body. As these interactions increased, I began to feel unsafe alone and at night. This happened so gradually that I hardly noticed before my mother taught me how to hold the car keys like a weapon. While learning how to drive, my mom encouraged me to take us on the freeway for my first time as we went shopping for new school clothes. We spent the entire day driving and looking for stores. By the time we decided to head home, we were forced to walk through a deserted parking lot at night. Two potentially threatening men stood in the way of our path to the car. Quickly, my mom told me to hold the car keys between my fingers and stand up straight as we passed them. She hopped in the car and told me to lock the door before we drove back to the house.

This fear was present again when a friend and I found ourselves verbally assaulted by a man standing next to us on our way home. Riding skateboards back from the rock climbing gym,

forced to listen to a man we didn't know whisper dirty comments about our bodies and make kissing noises to our face. And again when someone screamed "TWERK FOR ME" from his car before revving his engine to a small group of girls talking about school. I watched my friend cry out of fear that a man, who we later found was completely harmless, would follow us home as we ran to campus in the dark.

On top of this, I felt a serious desire to look a particular way. Since the age of 8, I felt the need to be smaller, skinnier, or curvier. I vividly remember being in first grade, gripping the skin on my stomach between my hands and telling my mom how I felt I needed to start dieting. During eighth and ninth grade, I would often skip breakfast and lunch, never with anorexic intentions in mind, but hoping that if I only ate as much as I had to, I would stay skinny and "healthy". I wore pounds of makeup, not because I thought it was fun or creative, but because I believed it was the only way I would appear pretty to my peers.

This behavior is not uncommon in young girls, and I have spoken with many people who have shared similar experiences. It seems that this can be related back to how women are regularly objectified through the mass media, which is filled with sexual imagery and unrealistic expectations of the female form. "It's not just peer pressure. Children do have a problem with food that is different than problems they had before," said Dr Colin Michie, the chairman of the nutrition committee at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, when asked about how eating disorders can be related to the rise in advertisements children are exposed to through technology and media. Since such images have increased, the weight of fashion models dropped to 23% percent less than that of the average woman. The women who represent today's average have become the faces of "plus-size" modeling lines. Still, within the last several years, plus-size models have been shrinking, while the average remains the same. "A decade ago, plus-size models averaged between size 12 and size 18. Today, the majority of plus-size models an(d) agency boards are between size 6 and size 14"(ABC News). Half of women today wear a 14 or larger, but the majority of clothing companies produce 14 and smaller. This is clearly problematic and has led to serious issues among young women. Between 1999-2009, the hospitalization caused by eating disorders rose by 24%, showing that this ideal is affecting people on an extreme level. "The ideology of beauty is the last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies that still has the power to control these women who second wave feminism would have made relatively uncontrollable," says Naomi Wolf, who studied the concept of beauty in her book, The Beauty Myth. We are continuously pushing imagery that directly creates a perception of self worth based off of physical attributes that are already unrealistic expectations to achieve. This creates new ideologies to further instill an idea of how women need to conform to fit this culture.

Women have consistently been confined by standards that often make them appear less than or weaker than men. It has only been since the 70's that women have begun to be treated as equals. Women were unable to get birth control if unmarried before a law passed in 1972 known as Baird vs. Eisenstadt. Before this law was in place the concept of being unable to receive birth control was creating a stigma around sex, and creating a situation where the woman could not choose what she wanted to do with her body. There were not safe spaces to get an abortion, and it was illegal before 1973 (Roe vs. Wade). Again, not giving women the opportunity to take control of their bodies. These limitations based off gender continued past reproductive decisions.

Credit Cards could not be made in women's names before 1974 (Equal Credit Opportunity Act), which is now considered a basic necessity. And suing for sexual harassment was improbable until Paulette Barnes and Anita Hill took action in 1977. Being unable to speak

up about unwanted sexual interactions further promotes the belief that women are sexual objects and are therefore unable to choose when to be sexually active and with whom. This was perpetuated further because marital rape wasn't criminalized until 1993 (Criminalization of Marital Rape). These basic rights that moved women closer to being considered equal have only been given within the past 50 years, but there continues to be an extreme idea of beauty women often believe they must conform to. Even though so much has been done to bring women to the forefront of our society, next to the men commonly considered powerful, we continue to inhibit feminine value and expression.

These confinements can also be seen within the porn industry, which remains one of the largest mass media categories to date. "The sexual revolution promoted the discovery of female sexuality; 'beauty pornography' - which for the first time in women's history artificially links a commodified 'beauty' directly and explicitly to sexuality - invaded the mainstream to undermine women's new and vulnerable sense of sexual self worth" (Wolf, 11). Suddenly, the limiting views on female sexuality converted from a fear of shame, which had been deeply rooted in our culture, to fear of not appearing desirable. Not only does pornography continue to perpetuate the often unachievable standards women are consistently seeing in the media, it places women in situations that constantly objectify them. Close-up images of women's bodies are shown regularly while men's bodies are not. "And even though violent acts and manipulation into sex were rare, when either of these things did happen, the researchers found that they generally happened to women. Not to mention, women were more likely to be dominated by men" (The Huffington Post). Pornography capitalizes on the ideology of beauty, the objectification of women and the belief that men possess power over them. Treating the female form simply as a physical object promotes criticism of physical features that are not simply changed. Viewing women in such manner is clearly consistent across multiple media platforms.

With thin body types becoming the norm among the fashion industry and within everyday media such as magazines, movies, and pornography, it becomes increasingly easy to forget the reality of the female form. Pushing the image of women that meet the criteria of an anorexic body, and who are even still Photoshopped to be thinner, creates a sense of self dislike and disappointment among everyday women. It is easy to forget that those women are not the average, and that very few people look like that. It is no surprise that as women in the media have decreased in size, we have started to treat that body type as the ideal or as a goal to accomplish. This leaves the unhealthy expectation for women to match this ideal. It diminishes the possibilities of other forms of feminism and further objectifies women's bodies. This "Beauty Myth", as Naomi Wolf calls it, is today's version of controlling women and their ability to choose how to take care of their bodies. Conforming to the standard often leads to cat calling and continued sexualization, while disrupting the status quo and acting masculine or versions of feminine that are not widely or culturally accepted can lead to discrimination, harassment and fear.

It is vital to recognize when judgments of ourselves and of those around us are based off of a perception of femininity, which we have been encouraged to believe is desirable. Only accessing the concept of femininity through a pinhole, as the media does, prevents the possibility for alternate forms of feminine expression. It also limits our ability to see women as sexual beings and not sexual objects. Small actions such as researching gender expression, talking to kids about the use of Photoshop and what it can mean, and taking steps to ensure peers are safe on their way home can make a serious difference. Changing the portrayal of women in the media will not happen overnight. But we can choose to consistently educate ourselves and find those

who are willing to discuss their experiences. Starting a conversation can change the way a few people think about femininity, and hopefully lead to open minded and loving responses to those who express their feminine characteristics in alternative ways. Examining femininity from a new light may be the perfect opportunity to discover where our personally developed opinions stand, and how they have been altered by what the media has told us. Choosing to detach from these idealized version of beauty, that are continuously perpetuated, is the next step in breaking the barriers that continue to control women today.

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