

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Femininity in Contemporary Popular Culture

Femininity is a trait or characteristics that are conventionally associated with women and feminine identity. Traditionally, feminine characteristics are commonly associated with empathy and emotional expressiveness, in society femininity is accompanied with normative expectations such as selflessness, obedience, and passivity (Gonzales and Spencer, 2015; Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Adegoke and Muhammed, 2025). Beauty standards further shape how femininity is expected in the society, often pushing women to be thin, well-groomed, and desirable to be accepted within the society (Caldeira et al., 2021). These expectations demonstrate how femininity goes beyond biological sex to serve as a socially accepted framework for how women are expected to behave, express themselves, and interact with others.

The association of femininity and women is usually perceived as natural. However, contemporary gender scholars argue that femininity is not an inherent character, rather it is a socially constructed trait (Butler, 1999; Smith, 2015; Gonzales and Spencer, 2015). Butler argues in the book *Gender Trouble* (1999) that the distinction between sex and gender was initially developed to challenge the biology-is-destiny formulation, which suggests that biological sex naturally determines social roles and behaviors.

With this distinction, gender is seen as a cultural and social construct shaped by social norms, not as a natural consequence of biological sex. Furthermore, Butler adds that gender is performative, meaning that it is not a fixed inherent identity but an identity formed through a stylized repetition of acts. This notion suggests that femininity may differ across different social contexts, as individuals experience gender understanding differently according to factors such as culture, ethnicity, and religion (Gonzales and Spencer, 2015). This means that there is no singular or universal form of femininity, rather multiple expressions of femininity that are continuously negotiated within society. Nevertheless, associations of femininity with beauty, compassion, softness, and nurturing are the most accepted traits in society (Smith, 2015). This tells that femininity is not an inherent trait, rather a concept that is constantly shaped by social expectations and cultural values.

In the context of contemporary popular culture, social expectations and cultural values of femininity become increasingly complex. Rosalind Gill (2007) calls this as postfeminist media culture, arguing that contemporary popular culture shifts the definition of femininity from a social or psychological trait into a bodily property. Within this framework, a woman's identity and power are closely tied to her physical appearance, where the ability to maintain an attractive body is associated with success. One of the profound impacts of this shift is the transition from depicting women as passive sexual objects to portraying them as active, desiring

sexual subjects who choose to express their sexuality for their own interest. Furthermore, this postfeminist perspective emphasizes individualism, choice, and empowerment by framing beauty, self-care, and body management as personal choices made for self-satisfaction rather than a response to social expectation (Gill, 2007). As a result, women are represented as autonomous agents freely pursuing their own desire.

This theoretical framing has been applied in recent research on media representations. Hotidou (2024) demonstrates how *Vogue* magazine covers have rephrased feminist values into ideals of self-improvement, using the language of independence as a way to reinforce beauty and gender norms. Similarly, on digital platforms Caldeira and Bauwel (2021) argue that women often unconsciously reinforce norms that support narrow beauty standards and align with commercial interest in their self-presentations online. This highlights how socially accepted images of femininity are utilized as drivers for commercial activities (Smith, 2015). These findings suggest that contemporary media representations of empowerment may not necessarily challenge gender expectations, but rather show a shift in power where judgment gaze of the female body is now internalized and not coming from external power (Gill, 2007). Therefore, this supports Gill's (2007) notes that these seemingly liberated choices are still deeply shaped and constrained by broader social, cultural, and commercial factors.



Figure 6 Illustrating the postfeminist shift in media portrayal

Source: <https://www.vogue.com/slideshow/charlize-theron-in-vogue-photos>;
<https://www.vogue.com/article/gal-gadot-cover-may-2020>

This pattern can be seen in the Vogue covers in Figure 5. Where the cover in 2000 featuring Charlize Theron (left) emphasizes feminine ideals through the phrase “Glamour Girl”, and the later cover in 2020 featuring Gal Gadot (right) shows themes of empowerment and independence with the headlines such as “Gal Power” and “Superhero”. Even with the shift in language into promoting female empowerment, both covers still maintain the portrayal of commercially driven beauty standards of thinness, youth, and desirability. This shows that although contemporary media increasingly embrace feminist ideas, empowerment is often communicated through conventional ideals of physical appearance.

In conclusion femininity cannot be understood as a fixed or universal concept, as cultural, social, and historical context may shape different meanings. As Butler (1999) argues, femininity is a social construct shaped by a repeated performance of gender norms and behaviors. Through this repetition particular traits such as beauty, softness, and desirability becomes

a dominant ideal and perceived as a natural trait. However, popular culture shows a transition in how these ideals are represented. Gill (2007) calls this a postfeminist media culture, where popular media puts a focus on women's bodies. Even with the modernization of feminist values being communicated, a high emphasis on women's bodies are still maintained. As Smith (2015) notes that correct images of femininity are utilized as commercial drivers, this shows that images of empowered women are still entangled with commodification.

2.2 Hyper-Feminine Aesthetics in Popular Media

Hyperfeminine can be understood as an exaggeration of feminine stereotypes. It is commonly characterized by highly visible feminine aesthetics such as makeup, glamorous fashion, and an overall emphasis on beauty and attractiveness (Smith, 2015). Historically, women who present themselves this way are devalued in society, deemed as incompetent or only focusing on how they look. This is supported by research by Matschiner and Murnen (1999), which tells that while hyperfeminine women are perceived as less competent, they are able to persuade men. Popular media reinforce these negative representations by portraying hyperfeminine characters as mean girls, dumb blonde, and bimbo (Pantoja, 2025). One of the prominent examples of this is the character Karen Smith in the movie Mean Girls, who is depicted as clueless and defined only by her appearance and sexuality (Chand, 2024). Such portrayals reinforce the traditional belief that intelligence and competence are incompatible with highly feminine self-

presentation. As a consequence women and girls tend to avoid feminine presentation to be taken seriously (Timmer, 2025).

However, contemporary popular culture has begun to reinterpret hyper-femininity as a performative, parodic, and potentially empowering tool. Drawing from Butler's (1999) gender performativity, that states gender is a stylized repetition of acts, an exaggerated performance of gender may unveil the socially constructed concept of gender. It can be understood that as hyperfeminine is an exaggeration of femininity, it may reveal that femininity is not an inherent nature but a set of cultural expectations. Digital movements such as #BimboTok have actively reclaimed the used to be derogatory label of "bimbo", reframing it with independence and bodily autonomy in mind (Sandall, 2024). Another movement, #Girlhood has become a resistance towards misogyny and capitalism acting as a subversion of hyper-femininity that once was considered degrading female, into something worth celebrating (Weins and McWebb, 2025).

In the broadcasting media movies and music have also begun reframing these pictorials of femininity. In movies titled *Legally Blonde* (2001) challenges societal expectations that equate femininity with lack of intelligence, showing the transformation of the main character Elle Woods from perceived as a "dumb blonde" into a competent lawyer (Lee et al., 2024). The movie *Barbie* (2023) also shows the reclamation of the word "bimbo" and embracing femininity instead of abandoning it (Fletcher, 2023; Byrnes et al., 2024). In music, singers and songwriters also embraced

femininity in their works. A song titled *Most Girls* by Hailee Steinfeld celebrates women however they choose to be, regardless how they present themselves (*Hailee Steinfeld – Most Girls Lyrics*, 2017). Similarly, Fifth Harmony with their song *That's My Girl* has become one of the most renowned songs for female empowerment as its multiple appearances on multiple clips on female Olympians (Elizabeth, 2016). These examples show how contemporary media has actively made an effort in reframing the meaning of femininity.

However, this shift comes with its criticism. While contemporary representations often emphasize choice and self-expression, critics argue that these narratives may maintain the continuation of social expectations. This reflects Gill's (2007) argument that postfeminist media culture has shifted external patriarchal judgements into internalized self-monitoring. In this context, this rejection of traditional femininity does not mean rejecting the beauty standards attached to it, instead it only reappropriates these standards to be presented as empowering choices. As representations of femininity increasingly frame traditionally feminine aesthetics as something to be reclaimed, this reclamation can also create new opportunities for commodification. What may appear as an individual choice to embrace femininity can become a marketable aesthetic that is packaged, promoted, and consumed within popular culture. On social media particularly, this shift remains ambivalent due to the risk of one-dimensionality, as empowerment movement can be reduced to a purely aesthetic trend,

detaching from its original intended intention (Timmer, 2025). In this case, hyper-femininity can shift from a form of self-expression into a marketable form of empowerment. In this context, appearing feminine, attractive, confident, and sexually expressive can become part of how empowerment is defined and presented. Scholars also mention the possibility for neoliberal trap, arguing that the acts off “rebellious hyper-femininity” may unintentionally reinforce consumerism where empowerment is achieved through product consumption and maintaining a marketable body (Sandall, 2024; Timer, 2025). Therefore, the issue is not women's choice to perform hyper-femininity itself, but how these choices can be incorporated into a commercial system that commodifies femininity by turning certain forms of empowerment into desirable and consumable ideals (Smith, 2015). As certain feminine aesthetics are packaged, promoted, and consumed with popular culture, what may appear as individual reclamation of femininity may also become a commodity. Thus, even when femininity is presented as a personal and empowering choice rather than an imposed expectation, it can still serve as a commercial purpose, where empowerment itself becomes the thing that can be marketed.

However, these forms of empowerment do not necessarily benefit all women equally. Contemporary hyper-feminine aesthetics may continue to privilege particular bodies and appearances, particularly those aligned with white and Eurocentric beauty ideals (Caldeira et al., 2021; Borah et al., 2023; Sandall, 2024; Wiens & McWeb, 2025). Some scholars note that

these trends remain limited in their inclusivity, as they primarily center white cisgender women while overlooking the historical and cultural experiences of women of color (Caldeira et al., 2021; Borah et al., 2023; Sandall, 2024; Wiens & McWeb, 2025). As a result, the empowerment promoted through hyper-femininity can reproduce the same beauty standards that determine which forms of femininity are considered desirable, visible, and marketable (Gill, 2007). When a particular appearance becomes the dominant visual representation of empowered femininity, empowerment itself can become tied to the ability to embody these conventionally attractive and commercially desirable ideals. Thus, the reclamation of hyper-femininity contains an inherent ambivalence, while it can challenge the idea that femininity is inherently passive or oppressive, it may also reproduce unequal standards of who gets to be seen as empowered.

2.3 The male gaze and women portrayal in the media

Laura Mulvey (1975) introduced the concept of the Male Gaze in her essay titled *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Mulvey argues that visual media have historically been constructed through a patriarchal point of view. In this case women are primarily positioned as objects of visual pleasure rather than active subjects (Mulvey, 1975). According to Mulvey, visual pleasure is divided into male/active and female/passive, where male are the bearers of the look, while females are presented as the passive “to-be-looked-at” figure. This visual logic is reinforced through several

techniques such as: voyeurism, positioning women as subjects to be observed and controlled within the narrative; fetishistic scopophilia, positioning women as the object of visual and erotic enjoyment; and fragmentation, isolating and emphasizing specific parts of the female body (Mulvey, 1975).

The representational logic established by the male gaze has contributed in explaining the recurring reproduction of female stereotypes and tropes across visual media. While stereotypes refer to generalized cultural assumptions (Santoniccolo et al., 2023), and tropes are the recurring themes that used to describe people or things in a form of overused imagery and words (Hart, 2025). One of the most common stereotypes is that women are inherently passive, emotionally compliant, and dependent on male authority (Gonzales and Spencer, 2015). This stereotype is frequently manifested through tropes such as damsel in distress, where female characters need rescue or protection from male characters (Rodríguez and Lopez-Figueroa, 2024). Similarly, the emphasis on women's physical attractiveness often appears through objectification, fragmentation, and hyper-sexualization of the female body, reducing female characters to decorative object whose value lies on their physical appearance (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). Although these representational patterns have historically dominated visual media, scholars believe that these ideas are increasingly being challenged through role reversals, female agency, parody and satire particularly within music video (Osborn, 2021).

2.4 Satire, Irony, and Feminist Critique

Satire is a form of public discourse that involves four elements: aggression, judgement, laughter, and play (Greene and Day, 2020; Peifer and Lee, 2019). Called an “artful political critique” its objective is to reveal hidden inequalities within society, it uses irony as a rhetorical tool to deliver criticism without being literal (Peifer and Lee, 2019). Irony itself is a contradiction between the literal meaning of a text and its intended meaning (Kitsch, 1987). This way criticism is able to be delivered in a playful yet effective way, allowing a ridiculing of an unusual reality while creating a safe distance (Gill, 2007).

In the context of feminist discourse, humor, satire, and irony have long been used as a critic towards patriarchal norms and gender inequalities. As Peg Brand (2006) mentions that feminist satire is a form of artistic expression that challenges the traditional male-dominated artistic and social standards, while valuing females’ perspective. Historically, feminist art has two main functions: first, to challenge stereotypical depictions of women which are primarily sexual, passive, and dependent; and second to promote positive feminine attributes, accomplishment, and autonomy (Brand, 2006). Though satire is often associated with ridicule and criticism, its intended purpose is not negative, rather it aims for positive societal change (Peifer and Lee, 2019). This means, satire does not only serve as a critique of patriarchal structures but also as a way in advocating alternative understandings of women and femininity.

However, irony often operates differently in contemporary media culture. As Gill (2007) argues, postfeminist media culture adopts irony through the sense of “knowingness”, where media sees the audience to be aware of the attempted manipulation and recognizes them as ironic. Rather than delivering the critics directly, postfeminist media culture creates a “safe distance” acting as a defensive shield, to allow the presentation of problematic ideals while denying them at the same time (Gill, 2007). This way, it allows representations of women to seem empowering while still relying on conventional gender stereotypes. Resulting in an ambivalence where traditional stereotypes of women and critics of those representations can coexist at the same time (Gill, 2007).

In popular culture, performers utilize different ironic modes to deconstruct conventional gender stereotypes from the inside out. In an analysis of Amy Schumer’s stand-up performance, Greene and Day (2020) describes a strategy they call “sneaky feminism”, where performers purposefully portray a clueless, submissive, or “dumb” stereotype of women to subtly expose and critique patriarchal assumptions. This way, it allows the performer to deliver sharp criticisms that are easily accepted by mainstream audiences (Greene and Day, 2020). On the other hand, an analysis of a digital creator *Man Who Has It All*, achieves a defamiliarization of patriarchal ideologies through four primary satirical strategies: reversal, allusion, distillation, and collaboration (Cui, 2025). This framework also is evident within music and music videos. In the analysis of

a performance on Saturday Night Live (SNL) called “*Welcome to Hell*” the media uses a pastel “bubblegum-pop” aesthetic in delivering harsh criticism on women’s daily experience (Greene and Day, 2020). It exhibits a contrast of an infantilized “male fantasy” with a dark reality of systemic sexual harassment (Greene and Day, 2020). This tells that music video may serve as a platform where playful visual elements conceal sharp text-based subversions.

Regardless of its potential, postfeminist irony in music has its limitations towards intersectionality and inclusivity. Critics highlight that mainstream feminist satire often centers on the experience of white women (Greene and Day, 2020). This creates the possibility of “hipster racism” where the dominant group uses humor to deliver racism, reinforcing racial stereotypes rather than deconstructing them (Greene and Day, 2020). Despite the limitations, feminist satire becomes a place of refuge and a therapeutic relief for audiences (Declercq, 2017; Cui, 2025). As humor is recognized to be a “savior of sanity”, this creates an emotional buffer from systemic injustice, allowing individuals to navigate the gap between societal ideals and actual reality (Declercq, 2017).

2.5 Sabrina Carpenter and Contemporary Postfeminist Culture

Sabrina Carpenter is an American singer, songwriter, and actress, who has emerged as one of the most commercially successful female pop artists in this era. Beginning her career as a Disney Channel actress, Carpenter gradually established herself in the mainstream music industry (Comstock,

2026). Her breakthrough came with the release of *Short n' Sweet* (2024), which debuted at number one on the Billboard 200, with the renowned songs “*Espresso*” and “*Please, Please, Please*” (Zellner, 2024). Her following album *Man’s Best Friend* (2025) further strengthened her recognition, earning multiple Grammy nominations and six alone on her single *Manchild* (Sabrina Carpenter Grammy Awards and Nominations, Song & Bio, 2026).

Beyond her musical success, Carpenter has become recognized through carefully curated public persona combining modern trends with highly feminine aesthetics. Frequently incorporating pastel color palettes, babydoll dresses, glamorous blonde hairstyles, makeup, and high heels (Borgogno, 2025; Almendral, 2026). This carefully curated visual identity has also become part of her marketability as a celebrity, reflected in her various brand partnerships, including Victoria’s Secret and Redken (Almendral, 2026). While these styles have traditionally been associated with conventional femininity, Carpenter combines them with confident performance, playful humor, and expressions of female sexuality (Borgogno, 2025). This performance of femininity is reinforced with the recurring themes of female desires and sexual agency in “Juno”, “Bed Chem”, and “Please, Please, Please” (Hurt, 2024). Tropes of frustrations towards incompetent men appear in “Manchild”, “Tears” and “Slim Pickins” (McMenemy, 2026). Overall, Carpenter presents herself with

hyperfeminine aesthetics while simultaneously promoting themes of female agency and playful critiques towards gender expectations.

However, public response to Carpenter's image remains polarized. One side interprets her work as a reclamation of femininity and female sexuality, portraying females as active, desiring subjects rather than passive objects of the male gaze, using humor as the tool for social critique (Jeffrey, 2025; *'Make Me Juno': What Sabrina Carpenter's Pop Music Can Tell Us About 21st Century Feminism*, 2025). The other side views her performance as a branding catering directly towards the male gaze and possibly a regression towards feminism (Horton, 2025; Jeffrey, 2025). Beyond the debate over whether her femininity is empowering or reinforces the male gaze, however, her highly feminine image can also be understood as a strategic branding resource that contributes to her marketability. The consistent packaging of femininity through recognizable aesthetics allows it to function not only as a form of self-expression, but also as a commercially valuable aspect of her celebrity persona, through which femininity itself becomes increasingly commodified (Putri & Febriansyah, 2025). This division illustrates the core ambivalence of contemporary postfeminist media culture, where empowerment and objectification coexist. By framing her hyperfeminine presentation as an individual choice, Carpenter exemplifies the postfeminist paradox where personal autonomy remains deeply entangled with traditional commercial expectations, as

femininity can simultaneously be performed as empowerment, circulated as a recognizable brand identity, and converted into economic value.