

BEAUTY STANDARDS AND BODY IMAGE ON INSTAGRAM: A CULTURAL STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This research aims to examine beauty standards and body image across several influential Instagram accounts that significantly shaped narratives of women's empowerment within a cultural studies framework. Using a qualitative approach, it analysed visible narratives expressed through visual and textual content, while also incorporating netizen comments related to feminist discourse. Drawing on postfeminist perspectives from Stuart Hall and Rosalind Gill, as well as theoretical insights from scholars such as Naomi Wolf and others, this study provided a critical lens for understanding the construction of women's bodies in digital media. The findings indicated that many influencer accounts ultimately share similar objectives in reproducing and representing particular standards of beauty and body image. These representations did not emerge entirely from organic ideologies, despite their strong emphasis on women's bodily independence. Instead, digital media spaces often function as industries that commodify the body to generate profit and public attention. As a result, the freedom promoted by these platforms did not entirely align with the original goals of bodily liberation, as it remains bounded by digital capitalism.

Keywords: *Postfeminism, Beauty Standard, Body Image, Instagram, Cultural Studies.*

1. Introduction

The current discourse on feminism will always be a never-ending debate alongside the advancement of technology, which has made the female body no longer seen as a singular identity and numerous figures have emerged from the critiques built upon the repositioning of women in life. Nawal El Saddawi herself has developed a critique of anti-patriarchy, where women are not only about beauty standards, the objectification of the female body, and male control in exploiting the female image. Apart from Nawal, a famous philosopher was also present to criticize feminism itself, namely Simone de Beauvoir, who has a strong view of how women are shaped by society, so that social construction does not only give birth to organic culture but is the result of complex influences. The construction itself is born from digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and others. The role of algorithms is inextricably linked to the coercion of these images. Digital spaces often serve to indoctrinate, provide specific rules, and ensure women remain captive within the cultural constructs of the myth of beauty (Wolf, 2002). Furthermore, research conducted by Konings et al. (2024) on body image demonstrates a positive shift through empowerment frameworks that are closely associated with the representation of diverse body models. This raises a critical question regarding whether women genuinely possess autonomy over the social constructions imposed upon them.

Therefore, this study seeks to analyze contemporary beauty standards and examine the role of the body within the digital culture of Instagram. The detrimental impact of social media content on body image has attracted significant scholarly attention and has also become a broader social concern recognized by various groups within society. In response to the performative culture perpetuated through social media platforms, many individuals and communities have actively promoted more positive perspectives on body image by encouraging self-acceptance, embracing personal identity, and fostering greater body satisfaction (Glaser et al., 2024).

One study conducted by Suren (2024) emphasizes that understanding Dengey's body-positive Instagram content requires recognizing the influence of contemporary popular feminist trends within digital culture by Dasol (2019) have become part of consumer culture. On Instagram, these trends often turn feminism and body positivity into commodities. We should examine how followers react to and interact with ideas about body image and authenticity on the platform. Digital spaces often serve to indoctrinate, provide specific rules, and ensure women remain captive within the cultural constructs of the myth of beauty (Wolf, 2002). Furthermore, research conducted by Konings et al. (2024) on body image demonstrates a positive shift through empowerment frameworks that are closely associated with the representation of diverse body models. Nevertheless, these studies also reveal an inherent contradiction, as empowering messages continue to coexist with negative narratives due to the persistent dominance of sexualization frameworks within media representations.

2. Literature Review

Etymologically, the concept of beauty originates from the word *bellus*, which means beautiful, lovely, or attractive. Historically, this term has been closely associated with the female body as part of the social construction of femininity and physical appearance. Meanwhile, Naomi Wolf interprets beauty within the framework of women's freedom, arguing that women possess the agency and potential to redefine and transform broader possibilities of liberation. However, contemporary reality demonstrates that many women remain trapped within superficial social expectations, including appearance-based judgments and insecurities regarding their physical image. As a result, dominant constructions of beauty continue to function as mechanisms of control that reinforce psychological pressure, social cruelty, and the ongoing oppression of women (Madania & Arviani, 2025).

According to Naomi Wolf, the beauty myth has become a new political instrument used to counter the achievements of feminism. Although feminist movements have enabled women to participate in public and professional spaces with greater legal protection, new forms of inequality have emerged, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States, where many institutions continue to discriminate against women based on physical appearance and socially constructed standards of beauty (Triani et al., 2023). Consequently, anxiety surrounding beauty standards often leads women to develop self-hatred, excessive obsession with physical appearance, fear of aging, and feelings of losing control over their own identities and bodies

2.1. Cultural Studies and Beauty Standards.

Contemporary beauty brands frequently promote products that claim to whiten and brighten facial and body skin within a short period of time. Such marketing strategies are intensively disseminated through social media and television, aiming to attract consumers who aspire to socially constructed and normalized standards of beauty. This phenomenon reflects

a broader cultural tendency in which society increasingly prioritizes achieving lighter skin tones, despite potential health risks, rather than valuing healthy and natural skin conditions (Ardia et al., 2023). Beauty itself emerges from a long historical and cultural process that not only gives rise to movements resisting the objectification of women's bodies, but can also paradoxically become a mechanism that turns against women themselves.

One perspective underlying this transformation is Naomi Wolf's argument that women should demonstrate their potential, exercise freedom, and resist male domination. Her feminist theory of power emphasizes the importance of critically examining the structures that govern women's lives in order to strengthen women's agency and autonomy. Wolf further argues that women's choices possess the capacity to influence social environments and contribute to broader social change (Nurjihan Indasari, 2025).

Cultural constructions surrounding masculinity and femininity are deeply embedded within society and continuously shape social attitudes and behaviors. Stereotypes attached to gender identities often create hierarchical relations in which dominant groups are privileged while others are (Nurjihan Indasari, 2025) subordinated. Although such constructions affect both men and women, women continue to be positioned within inferior social roles under patriarchal structures (Nurjihan Indasari, 2025). Body positivity can be understood as a visual and textual discourse that challenges conventional perspectives on the physical body shaped by dominant beauty standards. This concept advocates for the reclamation of bodily autonomy and self-representation by encouraging individuals to redefine their relationship with their own bodies beyond socially imposed ideals. Furthermore, body positivity promotes self-acceptance and celebrates bodily diversity, embracing individuals of different shapes, sizes, and physical appearances without discrimination (Suren, 2024).

The commodification of women's beauty has historically functioned as a form of symbolic currency circulated within patriarchal social structures. Alongside the development of capitalist economies following the Industrial Revolution, the concept of beauty evolved in parallel with economic values, positioning female attractiveness as a form of social and cultural capital within consumer society. Expressions such as "she looks like a million dollars" or "her face is her fortune" illustrate how women's physical appearance became economically and socially valued. Within the bourgeois marriage markets of the nineteenth century, women were increasingly conditioned to perceive their beauty not merely as a personal attribute, but as an asset embedded within systems of exchange, status, and power relations (Wolf, 2002).

2.2 Postfeminist Representation Theory

Feminism emerged as both a conceptual framework and a critical paradigm aimed at challenging dominant social structures and systems of inequality. Within the critical paradigm, feminism functions as an intellectual and emancipatory approach that seeks to deconstruct forms of socialization which reproduce false consciousness, irrational norms, and oppressive power relations. Through this perspective, feminism not only critiques patriarchal ideologies but also encourages social awareness and liberation from structures that marginalize and subordinate individuals, particularly women. Within a critical perspective, social reality is understood not as a harmonious system, as viewed in functionalist paradigms, but as a space shaped by inequality and power imbalances, particularly in relations between men and women. Feminism therefore continues to evolve through critical interpretations of patriarchal culture, which often reproduces injustice in different forms across societies. Nevertheless, feminism remains an ongoing project, as unresolved interpretations and shifting cultural contexts continue to open possibilities for redefining and reconstructing feminist perspectives.

Post feminism has a perspective that is almost the same as post-structuralism, while postmodernism sees truth as not singular. Everyone has the freedom to bring out new truths. Foucault said every self has the power to give an interpretation of something true. The discourse opposes and even undermines the concept of feminism and directs women to change power relations (Sofyan & Arenggoasih, 2022a).

In post feminism, every woman has independence and freedom. Digital reality has moved social dynamics into a space that knows no boundaries. In this context, the community no longer recognizes territorial boundaries. Deterritorialization has undermined the geographical area that has been limiting interaction. All the dynamics in this digital reality are not always balanced and fair to women. Many sentences in the form (status, twitt, story, snapgram, upload, post, etc.) directly or indirectly marginalizing women. With social media, people easily have access to information, create self-profiles, and form networks (Sofyan & Arenggoasih, 2022b)

According to Stuart Hall, representation consists of two interconnected dimensions. First, mental representation refers to the conceptual understanding of objects or phenomena within the human mind, which remains abstract in nature. Second, language functions as a central system through which meaning is constructed, communicated, and interpreted within society (Garcia & Winduwati, 2023). Reception theory, first introduced by Stuart Hall, emphasizes the active role of audiences in interpreting media meanings. This theory argues that media texts contain multiple potential meanings, which audiences interpret differently based on factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and cultural affiliation, including fan culture and shared social identity. (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

Audience-centered analysis, such as the study conducted by (Ardia et al., 2023), demonstrates that although informants originate from different cultural backgrounds, cultural differences do not significantly determine the acceptance of beauty meanings. This suggests that visual representations naturally produce subjective and open interpretations, as texts and images never operate within a single fixed meaning. Meanwhile, in the book chapter Noam, Wolf (2002) mentions "Women are mere "beauties" in men's culture so that culture can be kept male. When women in culture show character, they are not desirable, as opposed to the desirable, artless ingenue (Wolf, 2002). Wolf shows how second-wave feminism demolished the beauty myth, which had succeeded the idea of domesticity. Women who distanced themselves from traditional domestic roles in pursuit of employment and personal autonomy were increasingly influenced by the beauty myth, which offered new forms of identity and recognition through media representations (Mehta, 2022). This indicates that the transformation of women's bodies in their attempts to move beyond traditional feminine spaces often generates new forms of social expectations, preventing women from ever being fully detached from associations and judgments tied to their bodies.

3. Research Method

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach method. The data analyzed in this study consist of various Instagram caption statements from influencers' accounts that promote ideas of bodily freedom and self-expression. Using a descriptive approach, this research does not rely solely on fixed indicators or measurements in interpreting subjective narratives. Instead, multiple perspectives are employed to examine and construct broader representations of meaning within the discourse of body freedom.

The object of this research is social media as a site of observation for exploring digital realities related to feminism through the perspective of critical postfeminism. The study also

incorporates public responses, such as comments and interactions, as part of the research data. These data are utilized to examine beauty standards and body image within the context of patriarchal power relations. In this regard, the data analysis is directed toward understanding postfeminist concepts within the algorithmic realities of digital media.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Body Empowerment as a Reconstructed Beauty Standard

From a postfeminist perspective, this theoretical framework critiques social discourses that appear to challenge feminism while simultaneously reproducing new forms of control within contemporary culture. In this context, the body becomes a platform through which ideological messages are circulated, encouraging the public to believe that beauty and physical appearance are forms of empowerment. Several Instagram accounts representing body positivity discourse, such as Lizzo, Jameela Jamil, Ashley Graham, The Birds Papaya, and Kim Kardashian demonstrate efforts to encourage public acceptance of marginalized bodies and identities. However, behind these representations also exist commercial and ideological interests tied to the visibility and commodification of the body itself. The following captions are cited as data in this article:

Table 1. Results of data observations on several influencer Instagram accounts

Account	Caption	Body Interest
@Lizzobeating	<i>"I am the beauty standard."</i>	seems empowering, but still makes the body the center of identity validation, beauty remains a "primary social value".
	<i>"Confidence is beautiful."</i>	
	<i>"My body is nobody's business."</i>	
@JameelaJamil	<i>"You are more than your body."</i>	Anti- diet culture, anti- unrealistic beauty standards, self-worth beyond appearance
	<i>"Your worth is not measured by your weight."</i>	
@AshleyGraham	<i>"Love the skin you're in."</i>	stretch marks, postpartum body, body acceptance, sexy plus-size representation.
	<i>"Beauty beyond size."</i>	
@thebirdspapaya	<i>"This body tells my story."</i>	body positivity, motherhood body, real skin, cellulite normalization.
	<i>"Perfectly imperfect."</i>	
@Kim Kardashian	<i>"Confidence."</i>	body shaping curated beauty, cosmetic enhancement aesthetics, performative femininity.
	<i>"Self-made."</i>	
	<i>"Own your body."</i>	

According to Wolf, the beauty myth operates through the assumption that standards of beauty are natural and universal, even though they are socially constructed and subjective in nature. Within patriarchal culture, women are pressured to conform to ideals shaped by male desire, reinforcing the belief that women must be beautiful to gain acceptance and value. Such pressures have encouraged feminist movements to challenge dominant beauty norms, as reflected in the body-positive narratives promoted by figures such as Lizzo and other influencers.

The traditional notion that beauty is exclusively associated with white skin, slim bodies, straight hair, and tall physiques has increasingly been challenged by emerging body-positive discourses. Through media representation, influencers promote the idea that every woman deserves to be recognized as beautiful, emphasizing that beauty extends beyond physical standards and encompasses the body in its entirety. In Indonesia, beauty standards are heavily influenced by cultural perceptions regarding ideal physical traits. A survey conducted to review how Indonesian women view the beauty industry provides significant insights into this phenomenon. According to the survey results from the ZAP Beauty Index, 73.1% of women in

Indonesia stated that the concept of "beauty" is commonly associated with clean, smooth, and bright skin.

According to the survey results from the ZAP Beauty Index, 73.1% of women in Indonesia stated the concept of "*beauty*" is commonly associated with women who possess clean, smooth, and bright skin, while 24.6% of respondents considered white skin to be more important than maintaining healthy and naturally happy skin conditions. Furthermore, survey data involving 17,889 women in Indonesia indicate a growing tendency among women to use artificial beauty products in pursuit of these dominant beauty standards (Nurul Malahayati, 2022). This cultural condition simultaneously creates broad opportunities for industries and investors to expand beauty-related markets and programs. In contrast to commercial beauty industries, influencers within the body positivity movement often reinforce their resistance to dominant beauty myths through visual representations and empowering Instagram captions such as "*I am the beauty standard*," "*You are more than your body*," and "*My body is nobody's business*." However, these visuals also represent capitalist interests behind bodily representation and digital content production. Although Instagram influencers promote self-love and body positivity through empowering captions, these representations may still reproduce postfeminist beauty culture where femininity remains centered on appearance, confidence performance, and visual desirability.

Captions are not merely expressions of empowerment or self-confidence, but also part of digital performance in which the body functions as a visual commodity to generate engagement. In this context, bodily representation becomes a strategy for personal branding and the expansion of commercial opportunities through new products and market interests.



Image 1. The production of visuals to simulate empowerment against social realities.
(@lizzobeating , @thebirdspapaya)

The communication and engagement strategies employed by these accounts adopt systematic narrative structures designed to maximize the reach and visibility of empowerment messages. The following section deconstructs several narrative elements embedded within these digital representations.

1. Provocative captions such as "*You are more than your body*" construct emotional authority by promoting equal rights in defining beauty, while encouraging resistance to diet culture, unrealistic beauty standards, and appearance-based self-worth.
2. The visuality and iconography of resistance are reflected through influencers' efforts to normalize fat bodies, stretch marks, and postpartum bodies as forms of body acceptance and sexy plus-size representation, reinforced through audio-visual elements such as background music and subtitles.

3. From a visual communication perspective, the integration of text within video content such as Reels enhances the retention of empowerment messages, making complex issues like gender inequality more accessible and easier for younger audiences to internalize.

In addition to strategies for enhancing feminine values through visual distraction, captions also influence how others perceive them, ensuring that their validity is valid and justified. Here are some comments on the influence of the feminine body above:



Image 2: @sierraiouslyy's comment (as the follower) on influencer's account

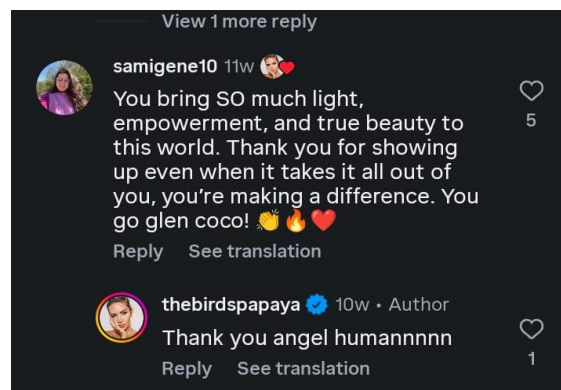


Image 3: @samigene10 comment (as the follower) on influencer's account

In the interactive comments section of the influencer accounts, followers also express appreciation for the shift in body image definitions. They increasingly perceive body image not through the lens of traditional, rigid doctrines, but as a state of being happy, healthy, and confident in one's own skin. For instance, the data from the comment section show how @sierraiouslyy as follower shared a personal struggle regarding how they previously pursued an idealized body image through strict weight loss, despite already being perceived positively by others. This personal narrative from a follower was further reinforced by comments from other community members like @samigene10 who viewed the influencer's overall message as an important form of enlightenment regarding women's empowerment. This pattern suggests that the influencer has successfully generated a positive social influence and fostered a supportive digital space. Within this gendered influencer economy, women experience greater pressure to continuously display and market themselves in ways that differ significantly from men (by Dasol, 2019). In addition, all the narratives that are present are not only market strategies but the body is represented as a narrative that builds false hegemony in the name of women and the perception of beauty so that the media is a space of femininity that is constructed through visual authenticity.

4.2 The lens of Postfeminism of Body Positivity in The Social Media Age

Postfeminism does not merely examine visual representations of women's empowerment and bodily freedom from dominant social doctrines, but also critiques the meanings and ideologies embedded behind those visuals. From this perspective, the body should exist organically, free from labels, classifications, and symbolic ornaments imposed upon it by society. Engagement with social media inevitably exposes users to the curated content of others, where individuals may present authentic identities, idealized selves, desired lifestyles, or even constructed false personas. Critics argue that contemporary social media platforms increasingly encourage performative self-representation, prioritizing visibility and personal branding over meaningful and deeper social interactions (Glaser et al., 2024). Pay attention to the following table where space also influences the body to gain legitimacy of power and influence on the body.

Table 4.2. *Instagram data came from influencer*

Influencer	Purpose	Caption
"Clean Girl" Influencers	"clean girl aesthetic"	"Be the best version of yourself."
	"that girl routine"	"Discipline is self-love."
	"hot girl walk"	"Soft life."
	"glow-up journey"	"Healing era."
Influencer Gym/Beauty Lifestyle	discipline,	"No excuses."
	bodily regulation	"Summer body loading."
	internalized beauty ideology	"Work for your dream body."
Influencer "Baddie Aesthetic"	heavy makeup	"Know your worth."
	luxury fashion,	"Bad b*tch energy."
	seductive posing,	"Too glam to care."
	hyper-feminine confidence.	

The data above demonstrate that beauty standards are shaped not only by idealized body images as forms of social validation and self-confidence, but also by visual environments and healthy lifestyle routines that influence how beauty is constructed and perceived. Gym and beauty lifestyle influencers often emphasize discipline and bodily control as part of internalized beauty ideologies. Captions such as "No excuses" and "Bad btch energy" construct narratives of resistance, asserting that bodies considered "unideal" by dominant beauty standards still deserve visibility and acceptance within public spaces.

Through Gill's perspective, this phenomenon suggests that digital postfeminism in Indonesia extends beyond the commodification of identity, functioning instead as a critical framework for renegotiating gendered power relations. These shifts range from heightened awareness of discrimination to concrete actions that challenge social norms which disadvantage women in the digital era (Maulidiyah & Listyani, 2026).

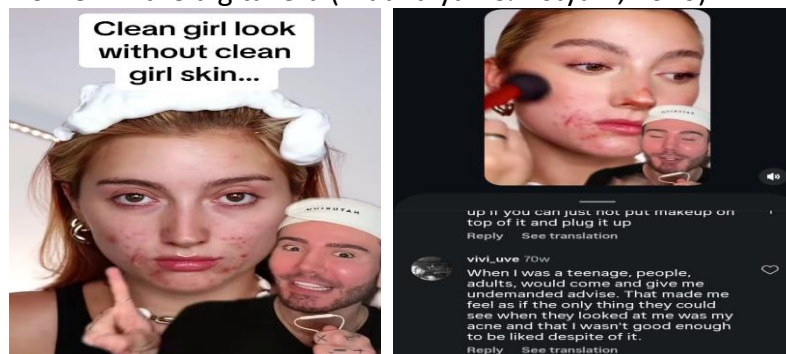


Image 4. *The "Clean Girl" aesthetic as a form of bodily defense advocating for self-acceptance.*

The data above indicate that influencers associated with the “Clean Girl” personal branding attempt to frame body image as something that should be accepted and appreciated. However, this representation also functions as a strategy to attract public attention, endorsements, and audience engagement by promoting the idea that confidence does not depend on having smooth or white skin. This claim is further reinforced by responses in the comment sections, where many users express the view that society should accept bodies as they are, regardless of whether they conform to dominant standards of attractiveness. For example, body positivity content on Instagram often reflects feelings of insecurity, frustration, and the emotional struggle involved in maintaining a consistently positive perception of one’s body. These experiences demonstrate that negative emotions and psychological tensions remain central to many individuals’ engagement with body positivity discourse. (Hill, 2024). Fundamentally, the feminist resistance performed by influencers on Instagram can be seen as operating within the logic of the fashion industry, where the body is aestheticized and monetized through forms of glamorous visual culture.

Furthermore, beauty will not only be an asset for capitalism but the attributes inherent in an individual are also able to influence support networks as shown in the following data:



Image 5: @indahnadapuspita as empowerment Islamic fashion designer

In the context of Gill's postfeminism, @Indah represents postfeminist sensibility through the aesthetics of "clean," "modest fashion," and self-discipline packaged as empowerment. Although the attributes she wears are in accordance with the culture of Indonesia, which is predominantly Muslim, this style has succeeded in influencing netizens that Islamic fashion can appear from the best perspective. However, critically (Gill), this is still part of neoliberal feminism. In contrast to @indah, on the other hand, @putrimarino shows more empowerment through the attributes of "clean girl" and is in stark contrast to @lululahfah. Consider the following data:



Image 6: @putrimarino as natural beauty and @lululahfah as engagement economy

The data above shows that @putrimarino is often represented as a symbol of “*natural beauty*” and “*real woman*.” The narrative of no *makeup/natural/effortless beauty* presents itself as an anti-standard of artificial beauty. However, in McRobbie's postfeminism, authenticity becomes a new style of capitalism. Natural beauty is not purely anti-standard, but a new, more subtle standard. This is called the “*postfeminist masquerade of authenticity*” that looks natural, but remains visually controlled. Furthermore, @lululahfah is more hyper-visibility and sexual capital to gain engagement economy. Empowerment in digital media is never free from neoliberalism because women's bodies are always projects that must be managed, displayed, and monetized.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored how the body is positioned as a form of capital used to generate attention and engagement through narratives of empowerment. Many influencer accounts ultimately share similar objectives in reproducing and representing particular standards of beauty and body image. These representations do not emerge from entirely organic ideologies, despite their strong emphasis on women's bodily independence. Instead, digital media spaces often function as industries that commodify the body to generate profit and public attention. As a result, the freedom they promote does not always align with the original goal of constructing more authentic and liberating perceptions of the body.

Participants' experiences reflected in the comments reveal that individuals remain engaged with body positivity content on Instagram despite the negative emotions it may evoke. One major reason is that body positivity communities help individuals move beyond feelings of isolation and self-hatred by connecting them with supportive communities of people who share similar bodily experiences and encourage one another emotionally (Hill, 2024).

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