

The Illusion of Free Choice: How Our Lives Are Constantly Shaped by Gender, Media, and Communication

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Abstract

Human dynamics are inevitable. The perspectives and values we hold today may differ drastically from those we believed in just a few years ago. The author's personal journey serves as concrete evidence of this transformation. Through in-depth discussions on the concepts of gender, the power of media, and the dynamics of communication, the author came to realize that social change within oneself is not a coincidence but rather the outcome of complex interactions between individuals and their environment. This essay aims to revisit the key materials studied in the course, with a focus on media and communication in particular contexts, and how these aspects influence the sociological factors that shape human perceptions of gender in everyday life. The article will also include discussions on the history of feminism, post-feminism, masculinity, and consumerism within media representation.

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Introduction

At first, the author engaged with the basic concept of gender and the longstanding tendency to conflate it with sex. For centuries, gender was often treated as synonymous with biological difference. However, contemporary scholarship has distinguished the two: while sex refers to biological characteristics, gender is understood as a social construct shaped by culture, history, and discourse (Butler, 1990; Scott, 1986). The concept of *social bodies* is highly relevant in this regard, as it emphasizes that gender identities are produced and reproduced through shifting social arrangements rather than fixed biological categories.

A compelling illustration of this construction can be found in the history of gender discrimination in sports. Historically, sports have been framed as a masculine domain, where women have had to struggle relentlessly to gain recognition and legitimacy (Connell, 2002). This phenomenon demonstrates how gender as a social construct can restrict individual opportunities and shape life trajectories.

At the same time, beneath these complex *gender wars* lies a layer of commercial interest that capitalizes on gender differences for economic gain. The media, as a central institution in the formation of public opinion, frequently amplifies and commodifies gender stereotypes for profit (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). This reveals the intricate interplay between gender, media, and broader structures of power, highlighting how cultural representations not only reflect but also reinforce social hierarchies.

Feminism in The Past

When discussing gender, the conversation inevitably turns to women. This is unsurprising, given that humanity has long operated within a patriarchal social order in which women have historically been placed at a disadvantage. For centuries, women have struggled for equality and the right to live with the same opportunities as men. These struggles are recorded throughout history, and many have led to tangible gains. Practices that are now considered “normal” for women—such as access to education, participation in politics, or engagement in professional life—were once unimaginable.

The media has played a dual role in this process. On one hand, it has served as a crucial archive, documenting women’s struggles and achievements. On the other, it has also reflected—and reinforced—the ways in which societies have treated women across different eras. Susan Bordo’s work offers valuable insights into how women have been represented in Western culture. In her analysis, representations of women are not neutral but operate as mechanisms to sustain or challenge structures of power (Bordo, 1993). Women’s bodies, she argues, have frequently been objectified, surveilled, and regulated through social norms of femininity. Drawing on earlier feminist thought such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Bordo highlights how women have historically been encouraged to prioritize physical appearance and docility over intellectual or political participation. Early feminist movements, such as the mass meetings of the early 20th century, resisted these pressures by rejecting fashion dictates and beauty standards, thereby asserting women’s agency against patriarchal expectations. In this sense, representations of women not only reflect social realities but also actively shape and sustain them.

The Western gaze, however, has also profoundly influenced perceptions of women beyond the West. In works such as *Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation*, scholars argue that post-9/11 media representations of Muslim women have reinforced harmful stereotypes. Symbols such as the hijab are often misinterpreted or politicized, stripped of their cultural and personal significance (Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2013). Similarly, elements of Islamic culture—such as *mehndi*—are appropriated for commercial purposes, divorced from their original contexts. As a result, Muslim women are frequently portrayed either as victims in need of saving or as threats to Western values, narratives that contribute to real-world discrimination and stigma. This underscores the need to critique biased media representations and to amplify the diverse voices and lived experiences of Muslim women.

The impact of such representations is visible in everyday life. Many women continue to experience pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards and traditional gender expectations, leading to issues such as low self-esteem and eating disorders. Bordo’s analysis calls attention to these harmful dynamics while also encouraging women to resist and redefine cultural norms (Bordo, 1993). In this sense, media representations function not only as reflections of reality but also as catalysts for broader social change.

Nevertheless, despite the recognition of how damaging such portrayals can be, the media continues to circulate and monetize harmful stereotypes. In her essay *Hunger as Ideology*, Bordo demonstrates how advertising directed at women often embeds patriarchal ideologies within consumer culture. These advertisements construct the “ideal woman” as one who eats little, remains slim, and embodies conventional beauty. Women are often depicted in commercials primarily as sexualized icons rather than as individuals, further reinforcing their status as objects rather than subjects. This process illustrates how media representations not only sell products but also perpetuate stigmas rooted in patriarchal ideology, ensuring that women remain bound to restrictive expectations.

What About Men?

Patriarchal culture does not solely disadvantage women; it also produces harmful consequences for men. Although these representations and stigmas are problematic, the media continues to exploit them as long as they generate profit. For example, in *The Male Consumer as Loser: Beer and Liquor Ads in Mega Sports Media Events*, research highlights how patriarchal and misogynistic values construct stigmas around men, shaping their social identities in real life. Beer advertisements frequently depict men as embodiments of rugged masculinity—adventurous, strong, and closely tied to sports culture. Particularly in the context of the Super Bowl, such commercials not only market products but also construct and reflect collective identities, values, and aspirations, especially those associated with men. These representations function as more than entertainment; they serve as mirrors of popular culture while reinforcing normative expectations of masculinity.

The image of masculinity has undergone significant transformation across the 20th and early 21st centuries. During early industrialization, dominant ideals emphasized men as strong, authoritative, and distanced from traits coded as feminine. By the 1980s, however, the notion of the “new man” emerged—characterized as caring, sensitive, and engaged in domestic and family life (Segal, 1990). This shift proved temporary, as the 1990s saw a resurgence of traditional, hegemonic masculinities emphasizing strength, bravery, and aggression (Connell, 1995). The 2000s then introduced the “metrosexual” figure, signaling a marked shift in how men viewed themselves—more open to self-expression, consumption practices, and fluid forms of identity (Edwards, 2003). These transformations reveal that masculinity is not static but historically contingent, shaped by evolving media and consumer cultures.

The concept of masculinity—often associated with traits such as courage, dominance, and decisiveness—has therefore undergone a complex evolution under the influence of media. Advertising, in particular, plays a central role in shaping and circulating public understandings of masculinity. Traditional stereotypes of men as stoic and emotionally restrained are repeatedly reinforced in media campaigns, yet over time, advertising has also introduced more diverse and hybridized masculinities. Commercials thus function not only as marketing tools but also as sites where social and cultural values surrounding manhood are produced, negotiated, and contested.

Through the analysis of advertisements and other media representations, it becomes clear that the construction of masculinity is deeply intertwined with consumer culture. Media industries exploit these gendered narratives for commercial gain, while simultaneously reflecting and reshaping what it means to “be a man” in contemporary society.

Post-Feminism

Following historical accounts of how media have shaped gendered social structures, contemporary discussions on gender, media, and communication inevitably turn toward *post-feminism*—a discourse associated with the most recent wave of feminist thought currently unfolding. Post-feminism is often characterized by a paradoxical relationship with feminism: while it embraces feminist language of empowerment and choice, it simultaneously re-inscribes traditional gender norms through consumerism and self-surveillance (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009).

Several studies illustrate how post-feminism manifests in popular culture. For instance, the article *Cupcakes, Pinterest and Ladyporn + Join the Knitting Revolution* highlights the cultural shifts underpinning this era. Using the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series as a case study, the authors demonstrate how contemporary women’s empowerment is negotiated within the dynamics of gender and power. In this context, sexuality becomes a site where women are encouraged to assert autonomy, yet still within the boundaries of heteronormative expectations.

Digital platforms further complicate this landscape. Pregnancy-support applications, for example, no longer exclusively target expectant mothers but also provide content for fathers-to-be, emphasizing their supportive roles during pregnancy. This reflects how digital media can simultaneously challenge and reinforce traditional gender roles, offering spaces for negotiation of contemporary identities.

Other cultural texts examined in this discourse include the *chick-lit* genre, which represents the everyday struggles of young women in navigating economic, emotional, familial, and entrepreneurial pressures. Similarly, *Join the Knitting Revolution* reclaims domestic practices such as knitting, reframing them as acts of creative empowerment that bridge generations and communities. Such examples demonstrate the fluidity of post-feminist sensibilities, where traditional symbols are re-appropriated within modern feminist expression.

Rosalind Gill (2007) identifies two defining features of post-feminist discourse: its contradictory nature and its double entanglement. On one hand, post-feminism proclaims women’s independence, choice, and empowerment; on the other, it simultaneously reinforces patriarchal ideals by tying femininity to the disciplined, sexually attractive body. Media culture plays a central role in this process, positioning the female body as a project requiring constant maintenance, surveillance, and self-regulation. In this sense, post-feminism cannot be understood merely as the “next wave” of feminism but rather as a complex cultural sensibility shaped by neoliberal consumer culture, media industries, and ongoing struggles over gendered identity.

Consumerism in Postfeminist Media

Individualism and personal choice have become central themes in postfeminism, often celebrated as tools of women's empowerment. However, neoliberalism appropriates these principles to promote consumerism through self-improvement products such as cosmetics and skills training. Self-transformation is framed as both a moral necessity and a standard of success, thereby blurring the boundaries between empowerment and social control. Television programs such as *The Swan* illustrate this dynamic by legitimizing cosmetic surgery as a pathway to both physical and emotional transformation in the name of self-empowerment. In postfeminist media culture, irony and self-awareness are often employed to subvert gender stereotypes through humor or casual narratives, yet paradoxically, they continue to reinforce traditional gender norms. While women are seemingly offered greater choices, these options are frequently constrained within the neoliberal framework. This article demonstrates how media contribute to shaping body culture and promoting an idealized femininity—defined as a combination of aesthetic transformation and individual success—while simultaneously raising debates about women's empowerment and structural control.

With the advancement of modern society, where individualism increasingly dominates, media continue to influence public perceptions of gender while capitalizing on these perceptions for profit. In today's digital era, the media's role in shaping social views extends beyond mass media such as television, film, or novels, encompassing personal social media platforms as well. Under the theme "*Women and Social Media – Self-Branding Online*", the phenomenon of female self-branding in postfeminist contexts is examined. Following the third wave of feminism, emphasis shifted toward self-expression and individual identity, a trajectory that aligns with the rise of social media. Self-branding—the construction of a unique personal identity—has become a form of self-actualization for women on digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Branding, once linked primarily to commercial trademarks, has evolved into "brand culture," where individuals utilize brands to craft personal narratives. In this context, self-branding reflects a shift in authority from collective to individual forms of media production, with women positioned as the "authors" of their own identity narratives.

Nevertheless, self-branding is deeply entangled with capitalism and consumer culture. Personal identity is frequently commodified, with narratives of self-empowerment repurposed as marketing tools, particularly in the beauty and lifestyle industries. This phenomenon, often termed *commodity feminism*, describes the appropriation of feminist values to encourage consumption. A notable example is Tila Tequila, a celebrity who successfully marketed herself as a brand. Here, women are not only narrating their identities but also designing and selling them as products. Consequently, feminist values are often reduced to instruments of corporate branding. This article highlights how self-branding obscures the boundaries between consumer and producer, creating an illusion of female empowerment that ultimately sustains capitalism. Although women appear to exercise control over their narratives, individual authority remains overshadowed by the forces of the market.

At the same time, as inherently social beings, individuals—even in a world that celebrates individualism—tend to form communities. In the modern era, these communities increasingly coalesce around shared interests, giving rise to the phenomenon of fandom. Since the early 20th century, fandom has evolved, initially through theater practices dominated by women. Activities such as fanfiction (fanfic) and cosplay (fancos) have provided women, particularly queer communities, with spaces to express identities and desires often marginalized in mainstream culture. Fanfic and fancos originally served as safe spaces for the exploration of gender and sexual orientation, with terms such as *gong* and *su* (from Korean) used to identify roles within queer relationships. However, over time, fancos activities have declined, partly due to idols' growing openness toward fans and the negative stereotypes attached to these practices.

Fandom itself is typically divided into two categories: *affirmational* fandom, which supports mainstream media narratives without critique, and *transformational* fandom, which critically challenges those narratives. The media industry frequently exploits fandom for profit, imposing strict rules that restrict community expression. The second generation of K-pop illustrates this shift, as fans increasingly position themselves as “customers” who demand satisfaction from their idols. This dynamic has led to a decline in fancos activities, now often regarded as deviant—even among younger queer women. Such developments signal a cultural transformation in fandom toward explicit commercialization, prompting queer women to retreat further into invisibility within society.

Conclusion

This study underscores the complex and dialectical relationship between gender, media, and communication, revealing that these three dimensions cannot be separated from one another. Gender identities and roles are not fixed realities but social constructions, continually mediated through cultural narratives and reinforced by media representations. Following Stuart Hall's theory of representation, media do not merely reflect social reality; they actively construct and reproduce meanings that shape public consciousness. In this sense, the portrayal of gender in media aligns with Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, where dominant ideologies are normalized through everyday cultural practices, including advertising, popular culture, and digital platforms. At the same time, audience reception theory reminds us that individuals are not passive consumers. As John Fiske suggests, audiences engage in polysemic readings—negotiating, resisting, or appropriating media messages in ways that align with their lived realities. This dual process highlights the tension between media's structural power and the agency of its audiences.

The phenomenon of post-feminism further illustrates this interplay: while media narratives commodify empowerment and individuality under neoliberal logic, they simultaneously open spaces for new forms of identity expression and resistance. Thus, the influence of media on gender cannot be seen as unilateral. Instead, it operates within a continuous feedback loop, where media shape social norms, and society, in turn, challenges and reshapes media discourse.

This dialectical interaction reflects what can be described as the “illusion of free choice.” Individuals often perceive themselves as autonomous agents making independent

decisions, yet their choices are profoundly mediated by cultural discourses and market logics embedded in media systems. Recognizing this paradox is essential for understanding how gender, media, and communication intersect in shaping contemporary social life.

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