



Feminism Vs. Capitalism: The Paradox Of Female Body Monetisation On Social Media

Shrija Raj

Independent Researcher

Patna, Bihar, India

Abstract: This study investigates the scepticism of feminist movements in the Digital Age of social media where people, brands, influencers etc. are advocating for feminism, inclusivity and body positivity while endorsing products for their respective businesses that contradict the same ideology. This research explores the paradox in upholding the feminist ideology while justifying the marketing language of monetisation through set beauty standards for the sake of consumerism through thematic analysis of secondary data.

Keywords: *Social Media, Feminism, Capitalism, Paradox, Hypocrisy, Female Body, Monetisation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of feminist movements on social media has revolutionised the discourse, surrounding gender equality and inclusivity. Feminine ideals, body positivity, and breaking societal norms are promoted on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. They try to make the human mind accept its uniqueness, undermine rigid beauty standards, and advocate for diversity in race, body type, and color of skin. Among this empowering advocacy, paradox persists, like the continuation of female body commodification through their marketing practices.

Skincare fashion and cosmetics businesses continue to promote unrealistic beauty standards despite feminist efforts to create industry inclusivity. Companies advertise 'glass skin' methods as body positivity although these standards do not represent genuine confidence. Social media influencers keep spreading this contradiction by advertising products that target the insecurities of their followers.

The aim of this study is to examine the dual narrative of feminist advocacy and female body monetisation and the way social media fuels the practice of inclusion while being able to facilitate commercial practices that are different from feminist ideals. This study examines the challenges and contradictions in modern feminist advocacy by analysing existing research and performing a thematic analysis.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Elder, et al., (2021), feminist movements in the 21st century use and exploit social networks to make people listen to what they are declaring and drawing attention to themselves through awareness. Social media including Instagram, Facebook, and more importantly, Twitter continue to host discussions about inequality in terms of gender, highlighting body positivity and women's rights campaigns. As per Finkelstein, (2018), the campaigns of #MeToo, #BodyPositivity, and #WomenSupportingWomen have been successful in uniting millions worldwide in the fight against male-controlled structures. The accessibility of these platforms has allowed marginalised voices to resurface, giving rise to a new wave of intersectional feminism that takes race, class, and gender identity into account.

In contrast, Jackson, (2018), opposed that there are significant challenges which it has associated with it. The adoption of empowerment-related words by the brand and the influencer for carrying out the performative makes it appear to have been commercialistic rather than a revolutionary practice as it cannot use the conceptual potential. Issues of inclusion remain relevant to women in the feminist circles. Movements

including #BodyPositivity has gained ground, often excluding the voices of non-Western communities or the ones who don't fit the mainstream aesthetics. According to Elder, et al., (2021), Instagram provides a platform for visibility but simultaneously constrains the same through the algorithmic bias, which gives more preference to certain body types, skin tones, and beauty standards.

According to Martínez-López, et al., (2022), social media has been successfully used by feminist movements of the 21st century to raise their voices, criticise oppressive systems and get some of the most critical issues out of the darkness and into the light of positivity, gender inequality and women's rights. Movements like #MeToo, #BodyPositivity, and #WomenSupportingWomen are supported by the power of Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, and become a global concern (Siddiqui, et al., 2021). In the age of social media, it has now become easier to reach out to the downgraded voices silenced by mainstream media, creating room for inclusiveness. Thus, the impact of these movements is undeniable.

According to Kopf, (2020), the monetisation of beauty standards is important to recognise the complexity and contradictions involved in using social media as a means of feminist advocacy. Performative activism, the adoption of feminist language by brands and influencers to sell is one major challenge. The commercialisation of feminist ideals can undermine their transformative potential. Empowerment campaigns are used as advertising campaigns to further water down the authenticity of the message and substitute consumer engagement with real social change. In a similar context, Goanta, et al., (2019), the inclusion of feminist voices in social media remains a pertinent issue. Movements such as #BodyPositivity have gained momentum, but this movement tends to the standardising standards by Western-centric measures, pushing non-Western publics and those not fitting into mainstream aesthetics to the edge.

As opined by Siddiqui, et al., (2021), social media filters and editing tools, celebrated for their creative potential, contribute to the persistence of unrealistic beauty standards, even within feminist spaces. On the one hand, digital feminism celebrates body positivity and acceptance. However, in its existence, there are usually social pressures towards the unattainable ideals of the ideal woman. The more social media engages people in talks about self-acceptance and love, the more insecurities are cultivated as a result of the standardisation of photos and images filtered through editing tools.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the relationship between feminist movements on social media and the continued monetisation of the female body in marketing. The approach utilises secondary data collection and thematic analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

3.2. Data Collection

The research uses secondary data methods by reviewing published research including peer-reviewed journals and reports focused on feminist advocacy, social media use and marketing strategies (Ruggiano et al. 2019). Sources were selected based on the relevance to the topic, credibility and their contribution to understanding the dual narrative of empowerment and commercialisation. The research used key search terms including 'feminist movements on social media' and 'body positivity' to find relevant literature. The research combines social media analysis with influencer marketing data to provide insights into how feminist values relate to business habits.

3.3. Thematic Analysis

The research uses thematic analysis to find and interpret patterns that occur across many sources. Through this methodology researchers can easily analyse complex data by grouping information based on research objectives (Braun et al. 2024). The research established an understanding by examining existing literature before initiating the analysis. The study explores themes about inclusivity standards in beauty and impact of social media influencers. Additionally data sources includes analyses of social media campaigns and influencer practices, this offers a glimpse into the intersection between feminist ideals and consumerism.

Research using established literature records is suitable for this project because it ensures reliable results by accessing multiple published viewpoints without needing new data collection (Neuendorf, 2018). The thematic analysis strengthens the research by identifying and analysing the differences between feminist support and business attempts to profit. This research method combines previous knowledge to identify patterns that explain how social media feminist groups bridge with beauty product marketing.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Theme 1: Advocacy for Inclusivity

Feminism promotes and approaches equality, and aims to eliminate everything that was previously excluded from mainstream society. Over the past couple of years, social media platforms have become pivotal space for promoting and disseminating these ideals, driven not only by body image concerns, but also due to race and gender (Matacin and Melissa, 2019). Feminist campaigns that are inclusive represent the concept of diverse representation and units of all forms such as physical and ideological.

The #BodyPositivity movement is one of the most visible feminist campaigns for inclusivity. This movement emerged in response to the unfair beauty standards widely encouraged by the media and the fashion industry. This movement encourages people to accept their bodies, no matter how big, small curvy, or skinny they are (Griffin, et al., 2022). Social media, especially Instagram and TikTok, has been crucial in giving a platform to voices that challenge traditional beauty norms. Activists and Influencers share empowering messages, describing personal stories of body acceptance and reminding people to reject body shaming. These platforms grant users with a wide variety of role models, who show that there is no such thing as beauty and also that all types of bodies must be respected.

Apart from body positivity, racial inclusivity has become a cornerstone of the feminist movement on social media. Mainstream media has, historically and predominantly presented white, Western ideals of beauty which have negatively affected people of color. But feminist advocacy on Instagram has shifted representation. Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) activists and influencers have used these platforms to say that beauty is not limited to Eurocentric standards. #BlackAndBeautiful, #BrownGirlsDoItBetter and #SayNoToFairnessCreams have all been campaigned, they have encouraged people to love and accept their skin tone as beautiful and to challenge the notion that fair is beautiful and success is fair (Hussain, et al., 2023). These campaigns have gained significant attention, contributing to a broader understanding of beauty that includes a variety of skin tones, hair textures, and cultural backgrounds.

Social media also plays a pivotal role in challenging gender stereotypes by providing spaces for individuals to express their gender identities outside the binary. Inclusivity-focused feminist movements seek to recognise and validate non-binary, transgender, and gender non-conforming people (Pompa, 2021). The hashtag #TransRightsAreHumanRights has been widely used to bring awareness to transgender issues, as well as access to healthcare, legal recognition, and protection from discrimination. Non-binary and transgender influencers have become advocates, sharing their stories of self-discovery and the struggles they face to broaden the scope of feminist advocacy to all gender identities.

In addition, intersectionality is increasingly being used in feminist advocacy. Intersectionality is a term that is used to describe how different forms of discrimination such as racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia are represented, in such a way that they add upon one another to affect people in complicated ways. Activists bring different races, genders, sexual orientations, and abilities together as identities that construct a person's marginalisation, discuss it on social media, raising awareness for intersectional feminism (Wei, 2021). These discussions intend to ensure the feminist movement is all-encompassing by including the voices of women of colour, queer women and disabled women.

4.2. Theme 2: Persistence of Commercialised Beauty Standards

Despite the growing influence of feminist campaigns advocating for inclusivity and self-acceptance, the beauty industry continues to promote unattainable ideals of beauty, often under the guise of body positivity and empowerment. Mady, (2023), further suggests the heavy product marketing strategy of promoting flawless skin, slim bodies and defined facial features, which are commercially beautified by brands around the world. It is a paradox that speaks to a central tension within modern beauty culture such as between ideals about feminist beauty, versus commercial interests.

An example of the persistence of commercialising beauty standards is the continued success of skin-lightening products. Feminist movements are inclusive, but many beauty brands market products that show that fairness is the top standard. Widespread use of skin-lightening creams to lighten skin also represents the myth that lighter skin is more desirable, disregarding health and self-esteem (Vickery, et al., 2018). The empowerment and self-care language used in these campaigns is often to market products, pitching them as confidence and success tools. This commercialisation of fairness, in direct contradiction to the inclusive

messages promoted by feminist movements, underscores the ongoing tension between industry profit motives and social progress.

Similarly, the anti-aging market has long capitalised on the fear of aging, particularly among women. There are many advertisements for anti-aging creams and treatments that promote the message that youthfulness equals beauty, success, and desirability. While feminist campaigns promote aging to be accepted and the discontinuing of beauty standards that favor youth (Silvestrini, 2020). From this, the beauty industry is making profits, from aging being something to be feared and corrected. For instance, brands often sell products that promise 'eternal youth,' promoting the idea that aging is something to fix, which undermines feminist ideals of embracing natural beauty at every stage of life.

Body modification products marketed by the fitness and wellness industries contribute to the perpetuation of narrow beauty standards despite the body positivity movement's advocacy for inclusivity. Influencers within these industries, who advertise weight loss, muscle toning and body shape-enhancing products, are encouraged to project an image of the 'ideal' body. These campaigns promote these products as tools for self-improvement and empowerment, but in doing this they reinforce beauty ideals (Sari, et. al, 2022). Fitness influencers on platforms such as Instagram promote weight loss supplements, workout routines and diet plans that emphasise how to achieve a specific physique. While these influencers may promote self-love and confidence, they also promote the idea that your self-worth is dependent on your physical appearance. It is a paradox in which empowerment is associated with conformity to a certain standard of beauty, which goes against the inclusive, diverse messages the body positivity movement seeks to spread.

4.3. Theme 3: Influencers and the Empowerment-Consumerism Paradox

In the digital age, influencers play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of feminism and empowerment, particularly on social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Influencers are seen as feminists who present themselves as people who advocate for feminist values such as body positivity, gender equality and self-empowerment. This influence is frequently coupled with the propagation of commercial products, leading to a paradox, in which empowerment is related to consumerism (Gurrieri, et al., 2023). The dual role of these influencers which are empowering and selling creates ethical questions and questions the authenticity of messages that these influencers tend to present themselves as.

Influencers, especially those with large followings, have significant customer reach in shaping trends and influencing consumer behaviour. They are important to the marketing strategies of many companies, especially in the beauty, fashion and wellness industries, as they can help promote brands, products and lifestyles. They are very open about being body-positive, self-loving and gender inclusive but they do it while promoting body products, weight loss supplements and cosmetic treatments that continue the beauty standard norms (Sun and Ding, 2024). The empowerment consumerism paradox is the tension between promoting inclusivity and selling products that perpetuate conventional standards of beauty.

For example, some of the most popular beauty influencers who are promoting body confidence, also advertise skin-lightening creams, detox teas and fat-burning supplements. While these products are sold as tools for empowerment or self-care, they promote the opposite message of body positivity by suggesting the idea that some physical traits such as lighter skin, or a slimmer body are better than others (Nilsson, 2024). These make for a complicated system where influencers want people to appreciate themselves, while still following beauty standards that are sold and marketed for profit.

The nature of influencer-marketing itself makes the ethical dilemmas surrounding this paradox even more complicated. Influencers are paid to promote products and they make money based on brand partnerships and affiliated links. Influencers may also be under pressure to align with brands that don't entirely align with their values. An example is an influencer who promotes diversity and inclusivity will be incentivised to promote a brand that only offers products for a specific demographic, for instance, a skincare line claiming to be for 'flawless' skin (Shaikh, 2024). The contradiction that arises from this can make the influencer appear unauthentic, where the influencer's feminist ideals are surpassed by commercial interests.

This paradox is perceived differently by different types of audiences. Some followers appreciate the influencer's message of empowerment and accept the promotional content as a necessary part of their career. Influencer-marketing offers many people the opportunity to earn a living in this field, which is part of the broader narrative of women's empowerment such as to build a career, gain financial independence and get recognition for their brand (Erin Duffy, et al., 2024). However, others may feel betrayed when they realise that the influencer's message of self-acceptance is focused on the promotion of products that sell unrealistic beauty ideals. This tension can lead to a loss of trust, as followers question whether the influencer is genuinely

committed to the values they promote or whether they are simply capitalising on feminist discourse to sell products.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Summary of Findings

The thematic analysis reveals a paradox in social media driven feminist movements. As #BodyPositivity and intersectional feminism campaigns are for inclusivity, they are also being marketed by businesses that continue to uphold traditional beauty standards. While social media platforms give visibility to feminist advocacy, they are also biased by the algorithm, favouring Eurocentric aesthetics and mainstream ideals. Influencers, central to these movements, embody a dual role such as empowerment alongside the sales of products that strengthen societal insecurities. The tension works as a contradiction between the power of feminist ideals and the commercialization of advocacy.

5.2. Implications for Advocacy and Marketing

The findings underscore the necessity for brands and influencers to adopt practices that align with authentic feminist values. It includes promoting diversity in representation and avoiding products that promote discriminatory beauty standards. Marketing strategies should focus on real empowerment by consumers rather than exploiting consumer insecurities for profit. Furthermore, social media platforms must also recognise that algorithmic biases prevent diverse people from having visibility and representation. To achieve their transformative goals feminist advocacy must reject its performative activism and resist stereotypical commercial interests. Brands, influencers and platforms can foster authenticity, inclusivity and trust by proceeding with the advocacy of feminist ideals.

REFERENCES

- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Thematic analysis." *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2024. 7187-7193.
- Elder, Laurel, Steven Greene, and Mary-Kate Lizotte. "Feminist and anti-feminist identification in the 21st century United States." *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 42.3 (2021): 243-259.
- Erin Duffy, Brooke, Anuli Ononye, and Megan Sawey. "The politics of vulnerability in the influencer economy." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 27.3 (2024): 352-370.
- Finkelstein, Naomi. "Where Self-Love Fits in the #MeToo Movement - the Body Positive." *The Body Positive*, 19 Jan. 2018, thebodypositive.org/where-self-love-fits-in-the-metoo-movement/. [Accessed 20 Jan. 2025].
- Goanta, Catalina, and Isabelle Wildhaber. "In the Business of Influence: Contractual practices and Social Media content monetisation." *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Wirtschafts-und Finanzmarktrecht* 91.4 (2019): 346.
- Griffin, Meridith, K. Alysse Bailey, and Kimberly J. Lopez. "# BodyPositive? A critical exploration of the body's positive movement within physical cultures taking an intersectionality approach." *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* 4 (2022): 908580.
- Gurrieri, Lauren, Jenna Drenten, and Crystal Abidin. "Symbiosis or parasitism? A framework for advancing interdisciplinary and socio-cultural perspectives in influencer marketing." *Journal of Marketing Management* 39.11-12 (2023): 911-932.
- Hussain, Mobeen. "Black, beautiful and essentially British: African Caribbean women, belonging and the creation of Black British beauty spaces in Britain (c. 1948–1990)." *British culture after empire*. Manchester University Press, (2023) 207-229.
- Jackson, Sue. "Young feminists, feminism and digital media." *Feminism & Psychology* 28.1 (2018): 32-49.
- Kopf, Susanne. "'Rewarding good creators': corporate social media discourse on monetization schemes for content creators." *Social Media+ Society* 6.4 (2020): 2056305120969877.
- Mady, Sarah, et al. "'A Whiter Shade of Pale': Whiteness, Female Beauty Standards, and Ethical Engagement Across Three Cultures." *Journal of International Marketing* 31.1 (2023): 69-89.

- Martínez-López, Francisco J., Yangchun Li, and Susan M. Young. "Social Media Monetization." *Future of Business and Finance* (2022).
- Matacin, Mala L., and Melissa Simone. "Advocating for fat activism in a therapeutic context." *Women & therapy* 42.1-2 (2019): 200-215.
- Mei, Maggie Qiuzhu, and Corine Genet. "Social media entrepreneurship: A study on follower response to social media monetization." *European Management Journal* 42.1 (2024): 23-32.
- Neuendorf, Kimberly A. "Content analysis and thematic analysis." *Advanced research methods for applied psychology*. Routledge (2018): 211-223.
- Nilsson, Gabriella. "Set in motion. Paradoxical narratives of becoming Swedish digital media influencers." *Gender, Work & Organization* 31.2 (2024): 337-352.
- Pompa, Chiara. "The beauty of inclusivity: "Visual activism" from social media to fashion magazines." *jasiapacipopcult* 6.2 (2021): 313-333.
- Ruggiano, Nicole, and Tam E. Perry. "Conducting secondary analysis of qualitative data: Should we, can we, and how?." *Qualitative Social Work* 18.1 (2019): 81-97.
- Sari, Mila, et al. "BEAUTY OF WOMEN FROM IDEAL APPEARANCE AND UNDERSTANDING OF BEAUTY STANDARDS: A LITERATURE REVIEW." *INFOKUM* 10.5 (2022): 686-699.
- Shaikh, Zoya, et al. "The Evolution of Social Media: From Connecting People to Empowering Influencers." (2024) *International Conference on Multimedia Computing, Networking and Applications (MCNA)*. IEEE, 2024.
- Siddiqui, Adeeba. "Social media and its role in amplifying a certain idea of beauty." *Infotheca—Journal for Digital Humanities* 21.1 (2021): 73-85.
- Silvestrini, Molly. "'It's not something I can shake': The effect of racial stereotypes, beauty standards, and sexual racism on interracial attraction." *Sexuality & Culture* 24.1 (2020): 305-325.
- Sun, Qingyue, and Runze Ding. "Unveiling the Contested Digital Feminism: Advocacy, Self-Promotion, and State Oversight Among Chinese Beauty Influencers on Weibo." *Social Media+ Society* 10.3 (2024): 20563051241283301.
- Vickery, Jacqueline Ryan, and Tracy Everbach. "The persistence of misogyny: From the streets, to our screens, to the White House." *Mediating misogyny: Gender, technology, and harassment* (2018): 1-27.
- Wei, Runjia. "Fashion and Intersectionality." *2021 International Conference on Education, Language and Art (ICELA 2021)*. Atlantis Press, 2022.