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Social media stars

Is it empowering to show your body online and does it
have to be?

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Introduction

The female body, pornography, feminism, nudity and what can or cannot be posted online are very controversial topics. It seems like everybody has an opinion on what other people do. Patriarchal society, the Male Gaze and feminists all seem to have different opinions on these topics and subsequently want to control what women do with their own bodies. Most people would agree that in today's society there are some unwritten rules about how women are allowed to express their sexuality and how they should behave online. These unwritten rules change very quickly and it has been a debated topic how women want to "take back their bodies" from the Patriarchy and the Male Gaze (Oliver, 2017). Women are getting tired of being objectified and sexualized. Therefore, many women want to control when they are portrayed as sexy. For instance, sexy pictures of women in bikinis and lingerie have been normalized over the years. Some women feel that they are in control of their bodies when they post these pictures online themselves and they may even feel empowered. However, it is debated whether sexualised photos posted online are a positive or negative influence overall in women's fight for feminism (Higgins, 2021). Posting photos online and getting paid without ever having to meet the men that are paying you can also be very powerful (Stringer, 2020). Since opinions about women's bodies on social media are both varied and abundant in today's society, it raised my question about how these women feel about it themselves. I wanted to find out why they post these kinds of photos. Is it because doing so makes them feel empowered, or because they want to raise awareness and take a stand? Or is it perhaps because they feel pressured by society or because they simply want likes on social media? When starting to write this essay the challenge was to find a group of women from different backgrounds, doing very different things in life, to see if their reasons for posting pictures of their bodies online would be similar. The goal was to hopefully find a pattern among these women. When going through the data, one of the biggest questions of all emerged: "Do they need to have a reason?"

Methodology

The methodology that I used in writing this essay is a qualitative research method. I conducted one-on-one interviews with influencers, social media stars, all active on Instagram. I interviewed six women all living in Iceland and due to *Covid-19* all of the interviews were conducted over *Zoom*. All women I interviewed had a minimum of a couple of thousand followers and all of them post pictures of their bodies on Instagram in one way or the other. For example bikini, lingerie or half-naked pictures, including pictures of stretch marks and other body positivity photos. The goal of these interviews was to figure out how these women feel when they post the pictures mentioned above and their reasons for posting them. Women who post pictures of their bodies online are often highly judged by other people and society as a whole. Therefore, the main reason for my observations was to learn how these women felt about such pictures and their subsequent view of themselves.

What is pornography and how does it affect men

Many people believe that risqué photos which include some kind of nudity are pornographic or “soft-core porn”. It is a controversial topic to define exactly what pornography actually is and the line where it begins. According to dictionary.com porn or pornography is “sexually explicit videos, photographs, writings, or the like, produced to elicit sexual arousal (often used attributively).” (Dictionary.com) However, porn has definitely managed to seep its way into our lives and has become very normalized in today’s society. Paul Fishbein, publisher of Adult Video News said:

Porn has entered the mature years....It’s no longer naughty, underground. It’s an up-front, in-your-face business, as much a part of the pop culture as anything else. We are in a different phase of our culture. (Dines, 2012)

Not only that but also with the rise of the Internet, pornography has become very easy to find and extremely accessible. Now in 2021 you do not even need to download a video to watch it, you are only one click away from viewing explicit content. (Dwulit & Rzymiski, 2019). Some would even go so far to say that some content on Instagram is a form of soft-core porn. Defining whether a sexy picture is considered pornographic or not is a difficult task seeing as people do not really share the same ideas on exactly what is considered porn.

Setting the definition of pornography aside, it is clear that porn affects us more than we realize, particularly the majority of male consumers of pornographic content. Porn is a big part of pop culture and things we do not consider are that one commercial might not affect us but a significantly large percentage of the population thinks it is normal for men to watch porn. Many people do not realize how porn can affect these men, and how porn builds up expectations that will probably never be met. Not only that but it can affect relationships, men's sexuality and even their communication with and attitudes towards women. It can also highly affect how we view femininity and the objectification of women's bodies (Dines, 2012). Porn is a very controversial topic "some argue that porn has no effect in the real world, while others, especially anti-porn feminists, view pornography as material that encourages and justifies the oppression of women." (Dines, 2012). This feeling you can never measure up is a feeling many women feel about porn which has led to a huge rise in plastic surgery or a 465 percent increase (Dines, 2012). As porn is such a big part of our pop culture what people do not take into consideration of is that all the relentless bombardment of sexualised images of women that men are exposed to can lead to men thinking of women as nothing more than sex objects and something they can own or whose sole purpose is to give the male sex pleasure (Dines, 2012).

Playboy in the 50s and Instagram in 2020s

Pornography has evolved from being the realm of dirty magazines for men that would be hidden under their beds and not talked about publicly to being a part of our pop culture. How did porn become such a big part of our pop culture? It indubitably did not happen overnight. How did we go from Playboy centerfolds posing in a coy way to half naked women on Instagram.

The Playboy bunny is something everyone recognizes and knows. Not only that, it is everywhere, on everything, it is on clothing and bags, pencils and so many different objects. In the Western world the Playboy bunny logo is undoubtedly one of the most known (Dines, 2012). The Playboy magazine was founded in 1953 by Hugh Hefner. Even though pornographic magazines existed before Playboy was founded they were more discreet to the public eye. Hefner thrived to have a good public image for his magazine that is why everything needed to be tasteful as well did he not want

the typical pornographic magazine but a quality lifestyle magazine (Dines, 2012). Marilyn Manroe was the first to appear on the front of the magazine. Hefner wanted “the girl next door” to be the inspiration of girls he chose for the magazine (The New York Times, 2017). After Playboy emerged, the industry of porn magazines changed immensely, the access became more accessible compared to how it used to be. With Hefner’s “classy” approach and “tasteful” attitude Playboy the women and the pictures had to convey that. Also, women in the magazine “were designed to be “teasers,” demonstrating to the reader what he could have if he adopted the Playboy lifestyle of high-level consumption.” (Dines, 2012) Playboy began with the soft-core porn approach where breasts were allowed but no pubic hair was allowed to show to maintain that “girl next door” approach. It was not until the 70s where a full nude centerfold was introduced due to competition from Penthouse and other pornographic magazines. Advertisers were not too happy about Playboy's transformation into showcasing hard core material and Hefner decided to “return to the magazine’s previous standards” (Dines, 2012). In today’s society people have been numb to nudity, however Instagram still has a very hard no nipples policy. Besides that, if we were to compare Playboy’s 50s centerfolds to numerous half-naked sexy pictures found on Instagram it would not be too dissimilar. The most obvious difference would be that in Playboy the nipples are exposed. As mentioned before, pubic hair was not shown in Playboy and therefore genitals were hidden just as genitals are not shown on Instagram. Even though a no nipples policy lives on Instagram, some influencers choose to post very bold pictures, including see-through lingerie and topless pictures hiding the nipples which is not far from the “classy” and “tasteful” lure of Playboy's 50s centerfolds. On the other hand something that is getting very common in today’s society are breast implants among women, something that centerfolds in the 50s did not possess since the first breast implant was not done until the 60s (Bowes & Hebblethwaite, 2012).

Sexy pictures and how do we define them

Defining what is considered a sexy picture is not easy. There is not a list we can check off to know if a picture is considered sexy. For instance, is the amount of clothes you have on or the pose you are in something that determines whether or not the picture is

sexy? In fact most people would agree that nudity can be an artistic expression and does not need to be sexual, and on the other hand a woman can be incredibly sexy without showing any skin. Thus, it makes you wonder what exactly makes a picture sexy. Like the famous quote by Plato says “Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder” which stems from the belief that each person decides what they think is beautiful. Therefore, we can conclude that sexual attraction is the same, something that can be portrayed as sexy to one person might not be sexy to the next. In addition, we can not overlook the person's intention when posing for that photo. Did they intend to be sexy or to entice the audience? All of these speculations do not really have one specific answer.

Sex sells

As a result of porn being normalized it has become a part of our daily lives with pop culture being no exception. It can be found everywhere and often we do not even realize it, we can see it on television, on social media, on the internet and in advertisements. We went from thinking of porn as Playboy and Penthouse magazines to Girls Gone Wild, very popular videos in the 2000s of college girls flashing the camera, to now in 2021 Netflix shows like Bridgerton where the main characters are having sex on the screen. Sex is all around us and most of the time we do not even give it a thought (Dines, 2012). Even looking back a hundred years, sex was commercialized (Hockel, 2019). It has always been believed that “sex sells” which is why companies have made it a mission to objectify and over sexualize every part of the female body. Advertisement campaigns over the years have included half-naked women, women’s mouths, and liquids or food items being poured over women's bodies as a way to better sell these products. Not only that, but some advertisers like perfume companies even use men's bodies to sell. However, recent studies show that sex does not actually sell. In the last three decades, 78 peer-reviewed studies have been conducted and published at the University of Illinois on advertising and sex appeal (Hockel, 2019). Professor John Wirtz explains in a university press release that they “found literally zero effect on participants’ intention to buy products in ads with a sexual appeal”. “This assumption that sex sells – well, no, according to our study, it doesn’t. There’s no indication that there’s a positive effect” he further states (Hockel,

2019). Scientists wondered how sexual appeal affects explicit memory if it affected the buyer intention. Their main finding was “that sexual appeals only adversely affected implicit brand logo memory; and there was no significant difference between sexual and non-sexual advertisements with respect to explicit brand name recall” (Lawrence et al., n.d.).

The influencers and social media stars

I interviewed six influencers and social media stars, all that have at least 2000 followers on Instagram and that post pictures of their bodies in one way or the other. I wanted the women to be very diverse to show that everyone can post pictures of themselves online, you do not need to be a certain type of woman. That is why I chose two body positivity influencers and two bikini models, and two that show a little more skin. Bryndís Líf is a model and an influencer. Kara Kristel is an influencer that wants to normalize stretch marks and having a belly as well as non tabooing that moms can be sexy and they are allowed to show their sexuality online. Íris Svava is a body positivity influencer that wants to inspire others to love their body as it is like other influencers have taught her. Nína Dagbjört is a model for Wagtail and she is also a singer that competed in the Icelandic Eurovision contest. Neyta is pole dancer that is a advocate for sex workers rights and wants to make it untaboo for women to express their sexuality online. Hulda is a doctoral student and pageant queen.

Bryndís Líf

Bryndís Líf is a recent graduate of psychology in Iceland. She is also an influencer and a model that started her Instagram page as a modeling portfolio where she would post photos from ads and photoshoots she had done so that foreign photographers were able to find her work when traveling to Iceland. She says that she has mostly worked with foreign photographers, not as many Icelandic. As she posted more content, her follower count grew with it. A lot of her content was and is lingerie photoshoots for numerous brands. In 2021 she has accumulated almost 26 thousand followers as well as having a successful modeling career where she appears on billboards and ads around Iceland.

Bryndís believes Instagram is a lot of work. She says to reach a lot of people you need to use various methods, she says there is a reason some people have a lot of engagement compared to others. She says since she has not been as active as before everything gets kinda stale, just like if you would just stop working at your job you would just get fired, you have to work hard if you want to succeed. She says the algorithm and knowing how Instagram works is a very important thing, reading what works best is something people trying to engage should do, and know your niche and how to reach them. You can't be afraid to put yourself out there.

When asked if she thought it was weird that so many people view her content she replied by saying she thought it was very normal and she enjoys that so many people watch her everyday life. She says she is a very open and social individual. Bryndís described her content as her everyday life and photos from photo shoots. She also mentions that she is kind of known for posting sexy pictures of herself online. She continues and says “flaunt it if you got it”. She says that there is no pressure from her followers to post a lot, however she says Instagram wants you to post a lot and rewards you when you do, the more time you spend on the app and the more you post the more rewards you get. She does not feel any pressure from followers or society to post naked pictures but she just thinks those pictures are more fun and she likes the pictures and she thinks it is empowering to be comfortable with her body or as she. She never receives negative feedback on Instagram but somehow old people in Iceland seem to talk negatively about her on comment threads on Icelandic sites.

Kara Kristel

Kara first appeared in media when she launched her sex blog a couple of years ago. A blog that became highly discussed at that time, she ended up closing it a couple of months later. Kara was also a regular guest in Brennslan, a morning radio show on FM957 an Icelandic radio station. Kara appeared on the show at the same time her blog was in full swing, on Brennslan she would talk about sex and give advice along with the hosts of Brennslan. She says she was getting around 100 followers a day at that time. Nevertheless, being famous on social media was not something she planned, it just happened.

For Kara, Instagram is not a job in the normal sense of the word, it is just for fun and a great way to get more opportunities from various avenues. Kara described her “brand” as a little bit of everything and nothing very specific; it has also changed a lot over the years and it changes depending on her mood. However, she claims that she is a self-appointed big sister for her followers as she helps them with hair and skin routines as well as their problems. In addition, she launched a podcast last winter where she answers questions she receives from Instagram.

Kara is not affected by how many people follow her as it is just numbers on a screen and she expresses how immune you get to those numbers. However, before the rise of the Covid-19 pandemic she explains how a lot of girls would approach her, especially during gatherings in Iceland and how they would talk about things she had posted on her story or feed a while back. Mostly, things she had even forgotten herself, she said it is in those moments that she realizes that these numbers or followers are real people that look up to her. Kara has a very healthy approach to her Instagram. She asserts that there is no pressure for her to post often. She sometimes posts nothing and then 10 things in a day. She adds that people can just unfollow her account if they do not care for it, and she also says that she does not care about likes, follows, or unfollows. Kara does what she wants when she wants. Kara has been actively posting body positivity photos for the past years, which she says the reason behind is very peculiar. Kara's reason is that for the past one to two years numerous women and influencers have been posting pictures of their bodies on Instagram and she explains how those photos always follow a long lecture about how they hated their body and their journey to self love. These are mostly women that had extra weight or maybe a little belly but learned to love themselves despite it. She says many women related to that material but she wanted to show people that you do not have to have a big transformative story to be allowed to post pictures of your body. She continues to explain that she has never hated her body because she always had 20 other problems to deal with, and worrying about the size of her stomach or her weight was not as important. She explains how she has always had a bit of a belly and has also given birth to a baby which gave her a lot of stretch marks and it never bothered her. She says there are many things about her body that other women hate about their own bodies and she thinks it is so sad.

Kara does not think there is any difference posting a picture of her stretch marks, belly or her face. Additionally, she says that it is very important not to let either the negative comments or the positive ones affect you. Kara decides how she feels about herself. On the other hand, she says it does affect her when girls look up to her and send her messages to thank her for sharing her stories and that they ask her to help them with their problems, she holds that very close to her heart. Those strong women follow her and trust her with their difficult problems. That is something she thinks is very empowering. She also thinks it is very important to use her platform to consolidate important causes. In fact, Kara has twice designed a product to raise money for various charity causes.

Nína Dagbjört

Nína Dagbjört is a law student at Reykjavík University and she is also a model. She became famous on social media when she started regularly modeling swimwear for Wagtail, an Icelandic clothing brand. Not only that but she also competed in the preliminary Eurovision song contest in Iceland in 2020.

Nína does not consider Instagram to be a job but only for her enjoyment. When asked how she described her content she laughed and said it was mostly just pictures of herself and things she does. Nína explains how she does not experience any pressure to post bikini pictures on Instagram but says that obviously there are more likes involved in those pictures. She expresses how she feels there are unwritten rules about what you can post on social media. Nevertheless, she does not think it is uncomfortable to post bikini pictures and people around her do not seem to have a problem with it either. She simply posts them because she thinks she looks good and she is not shy about it. Besides, negative comments have less effect on her after she started modeling and she feels like she is taking her body back into her own hands. She thinks social media can have both good and bad effects on body image for women. She thinks Icelandic women that post pictures of their bodies online do not have a bad effect on teenagers today. In her opinion they are showing teenagers that not everyone is perfect and it also shows that you can have confidence and can be secure in your own body even if you are not perfect. However, in her opinion Kim Kardashian and more famous people do have a bad effect on people because most of

their bodies are not real. She says even though she is not a big girl and that she is in the smaller range she is still not perfect, she says she does not have big boobs, perfect skin, perfect face or a big butt. She also believes it would send a different message if she had had plastic surgery done. On the other hand, she does not have a problem with people paying for their body but she believes it does not have a good effect on young girls. She wants everyone to be comfortable in their own skin.

Nina says there is no pressure for her to post anything more explicit than bikini pictures and if she would do it, it would be for herself.

Íris Svava

Íris is a graduate student in gender studies and recently gained fame on social media. Her recent gain in followers only started about one year ago when she doubled her follower count in a very short time. Her followers began to grow when she started sharing content that other women related to as well as her journey to self love and a positive body image. Íris explains how she always focuses on being genuine when she posts on *Instagram*. Íris described her content as empowerment, she thinks it is very important to have diverse role models online. Similarly, she enjoys seeing women in the same shape or body type as her and to connect with them. Therefore, she often shares pictures of her stretch marks, her stomach, and her cellulite, because she knows that many women are insecure because of these things. All of the content she posts is aimed at women that do not feel secure about themselves. She aspires for other women to see her pictures and think “If she can be confident in her body so can I”. She also mentions that her page is a safe space for other women to share their opinions with her and get encouragement and advice from her.

Everything that she shares is 100% genuine and she never needs any engagement because she is so confident of who she is. Not only that but she also expresses how empowering it is to know that she helped another woman on the path to self love and all the other things she does that helps others. It drives her forward knowing that she is helping women see themselves in a different light. Íris’s journey was exactly like that, she saw women loving themselves in their own skin online and it is a dream come true to do that for other women. Íris likes to post photos that go against “the norm” and are a bit provocative, pictures that show skin or are sexy. She

wants to show that you can be sexy no matter your size. She believes social media can have a negative effect on women's body image but also mentions that we decide what we want to see on social media by following content we want to see, if people are conscious about what they consume online and if we choose constructive, positive content then it can have a positive effect. She does not experience any pressure to post any specific content on social media because she is very determined that everything she posts is 100% her. She does not care if her follower count goes down because she considers those that unfollow her not to have been real followers in the first place. She wants her niche to follow her and she wants to post what she wants. In her opinion there are rules and pressure from society on what to post, she sometimes thinks that a particular photo will give her more likes but then she thinks “is that empowering for me?” and if the answer is no then she finds something else to post. She also says that these are not pictures of women that are objectified and porographically altered and it's empowering for her to control when she is sexy. Íris believes it is a woman's choice when she wants people to look at her in a sexual manner.

Neyta

Neyta is a pole dancer that posts erotic content on Instagram. She started pole dancing about 9-10 years ago. Her follower count started to increase about two years ago. It happened slowly and steadily over the years around the time when she began to post videos of her pole dancing and posting other erotic expressive videos. Neyta does not spend much time on social media, therefore she does not consider Instagram to be a job, and she uses it purely for entertainment purposes. Neyta expressed that she does not have any long term goals for her Instagram page, she just likes to share dance videos and her other content with her followers. She also disclosed how much she enjoys getting acquainted with people with similar interests that also practice pole dance and she explains how Instagram is a great tool to find other people that also enjoy pole dancing. When Neyta moved to Iceland three years ago she got to know so many Icelandic pole dancers just by following each other on Instagram. She described her content that for the past one to two years, she has mostly focused on posting her pole dance and other dance videos. She said her account is basically an exhibit of her as a dancer, she shows very limited from her personal life.

Neyta sometimes feels pressure from her followers about posting everyday but she does not want Instagram to have a negative effect on her as well as she does not want to have the pressure of having to post. She mostly wants Instagram to be fun and have a positive effect on her, and if she does not want to post she does not want to force it or stress herself over it. When Neyta started pole dancing she was very aware not to post anything because she did not feel there was any representation of "normal people" doing pole dancing. In the beginning she could only find one woman on Youtube pole dancing. Neyta used those videos to teach herself to pole dance. She did not even think about posting anything herself at that time. She began to feel comfortable posting when she saw others on Instagram posting videos of themselves pole dancing as well as people in closed pole dancing groups on Facebook. She then began posting on these closed groups, videos of herself. Neyta described the art of pole dance as a "world of pole dance" and she explained that the more she fell into the "world of pole dance" the more support and positivity she received from people that belong there. Neyta explained to me how liberating it was for her when she started to post videos of her pole dancing and expressing her body. Nevertheless, she explains how for the longest time she was too scared of negative reactions but when she finally began to post she received a very positive reaction. Additionally in the process she started to meet people that shared her values and outlook on things. As she believes there is nothing wrong with showing and expressing your body, and she does not want to associate with people that think it is offensive anyway.

Neyta luckily has not experienced a lot of negative feedback however she explains how there was someone from her family that was a little bit sceptical that she was posting sexually expressive videos and that this person thought that she should not. There was also another incident. The incident was very strange, she explains. Someone was commenting anonymously on her posts and being hateful and every time she would block the person, a new account popped up commenting.

Neyta's content has been evolving over the years, when she first started posting she was fully clothed dancing on the pole and after that she immediately wanted to post more because she has always been more fond of sexy pole dance that is why the next thing she posted was a sexy video of her doing a pole dance routine. She thought it was extremely liberating to be able to show this side of her, completely

exposed. Neyta does think it is empowering to show her body online. She says it varies and there is no rule for her what is empowering and what is not. It is not mainly because she is showing her body but for her it is empowering to be able to post what she wants. Neyta talked about how there is a lot of shame around female sexuality especially when displayed publicly. She believes she is taking a stand when she displays her sexuality online and it shows that it should not be something shameful or something you feel ashamed about and that makes her feel empowered. Neyta believes there is a lot of pressure on women to feel empowered when posting sexual pictures. “Why does it need to be empowering to be valid if she is just doing it for the likes or because she likes to, then it is not enough reason for people,” explains Neyta.

Neyta is an advocate for sexworkers rights, and she is a member of the Rauða Regnhlífín organization in Iceland that fights for increased rights and improved safety for sex workers. In Iceland it is illegal to buy sex but you can sell it, which is the laws way of exterminating this kind of work. In her eyes the shame over showing your body and the negative way in which many people look at women selling sex are connected ; this is all so taboo. It also stems from women not having that much power over their sexuality. Neyta thinks women should be able to act on their sexuality in any way they please. That is why every negative comment for her is just a good thing, because every time a woman posts something that agitates people it further encourages visibility of the subject. However, she says it is arguable whether it is always done in the best way, she believes this is a big debate and her coming from the perspective of someone who advocates for sex worker rights she just wants to change people perspectives. She adds that it is because of sex workers that we have come to a place where it is okay to show our bodies. “Who do you think started showing their bodies?” Neyta expresses. The first people that dared to show their ankles were sex workers, and now it has become normalized.

In addition she believes the “world of pole dance” is in a way body positive, in pole dance you can see so many different bodies which are very rare in other sports, especially in other types of dance. Even though she believes it is better than in other sports it could always be even better. She says pole attire is often not made for bigger bodies. Because of her explicit content she receives creepy messages everyday. And once she got a message that read “I want to impregnate you”.

Hulda

Hulda Vigdísardóttir is a doctoral student in Icelandic linguistics as well as being an published author. Hulda won the title of Queen Beauty Iceland 2020 in the Miss Universe Iceland pageant in 2019. Not only that but in December 2021 she won the title Miss Power Woman at the Miss Multiverse pageant in the Dominican Republic. Additionally, she has been a model for many years, however she explains how her increased followers did not come with that but she started gaining more followers a couple of years ago when she worked with Ghostland, a social media marketing company. An opportunity she gained while working at an advertising agency. Hulda says social media can be a lot of work if you want to do it well. Nonetheless, Hulda believes the most important thing is to be doing something that people find interesting and that people want to see and when you achieve that it does not matter if you post one photo a day or ten. Hulda does not really think about how many people follow her and keep up with her on social media.

On the other hand, she has experienced people approaching her and knowing a lot about her life. Even her dad was stopped once and asked by a woman whether he was Hulda's dad; she followed Hulda on social media and had recognized him through Hulda's Instagram page. Hulda explains that you do not always realize there are real people behind these numbers. When describing her own content she says she hopes some of it is real but a lot of it is just like most of Instagram: plenty of superficial glossy images that do not really represent real life . She says Instagram is indeed a world made of superficial glossy images but she does not want it to just be like that, she aspires to have something real. Right now her feed has been a lot of pageant pictures because she just arrived in Iceland after competing in Miss Multiverse. She purposefully posts a lot of pageant material right before a pageant and something else if she is doing something else. She also tries to make her Instagram aesthetically pleasing with the colors matching. Right now it is very colorful but in the past she has had everything in black and white. Hulda has experienced a pressure to post everyday but she does not feel that anymore. She says maybe it is not pressure but an addiction to be always putting something on the feed. You feel like you always have to post to be up to date, she said.

While competing in the sunny Dominican Republic, Hulda naturally posted a lot of bikini pictures to her Instagram profile. Hulda personally never wants to post anything that shows too much, but she said because of the pageant she posted a lot of bikini pictures. What is good about social media, according to Hulda, is that there are real photos within all the superficial glossy images. She says it is good that there are girls that post stretch marks and things that are real so you do not feel alone. Back in the day all you could see were airbrushed models. However, she feels like there needs to be some kind of line that you do not go over. Her line is, she only posts bikini photos, she says she would never post photos in her underwear or lingerie. In her opinion, there is a lot of difference between being in her bikini compared to lingerie. She just modeled in a music video recently and one scene was supposed to be a sexy lingerie scene and none of the other girls in the video wanted that, they all agreed that a bikini would be a whole different thing. Being sexy is not something she wants everyone to see and she does not want something like that to live on the internet forever. She says for her it is different to have a bikini picture of her on tenerife even though she is posing sexy compared to her in sexy lingerie on her bed. Also, does she not want her pictures online to affect her possibilities of getting a respectable job in the future. She does not want her future employer to google her and the first thing they see is a picture of her in her underwear. Nonetheless, she does not think posting a bikini picture online is empowering. When she posts a photo of her in a bikini she feels like she is content with herself just as she is, because she has, like many other women, been insecure at some point in her life. She also thinks it is normal to be in a bikini when it is sunny. She joked about not being in her bikini in the snow like some girls on Instagram sometimes do. She has also had to take pictures of bikinis she has been sponsored with.

Hulda does not receive negative feedback but only the occasional inappropriate message or comment which she says she just deletes. She does not have any specific goals for her Instagram page. Hulda social media is however a great way to get opportunities from various avenues, and she says she has had companies contact her through Instagram for all kinds of projects.

The interviews results

I intentionally chose women for my interviews that are notably diverse. I did that to discover and then illustrate that there is no “one type” of woman that likes to express her body online. Whether she chooses to express it in a bikini, lingerie, or half-naked, or whether it is for body positivity purposes or to express her sexuality or simply because she wants to, I can conclude that all of the women I interviewed had their own individual reasons for wanting to express their body online. Nevertheless, not all of them agreed that posting bikini, lingerie or naked pictures online was empowering per se, however, most of them thought it was empowering to one degree or another.

Even though all of the women are very diverse there was a pattern in the empowerment level that they felt depending on what kind of photos they were used to posting. The two influencers that post body positivity images, Kara Kristel and Íris Svava, felt that the empowerment came from the women they inspire and both of them loved getting personal stories from their followers; they both also shared the outlook that they do not care if people unfollow if they do not like their content. The two women that regularly post bikini pictures, Nína Dagbjört and Hulda, mostly posted because they thought they looked good and were happy with themselves in the photos. The two that post lingerie and more revealing content, Bryndís and Neyta, both agreed that showing your body was not only empowering but liberating. Neyta even pointed out, why do women need to have a reason to express their sexuality and does it need to be empowering to be valid. However, most of them talked about not getting any negative feedback or at least not a lot which could be explained by Dines (2012) research on how porn has seeped into our lives and has become a part of our pop culture. If people are seeing half naked people in music videos and on television why would it be any less weird when seen on Instagram?

Three of them said Instagram is a great way to get other opportunities elsewhere and only one of them talked about receiving more likes when posting these photos. Although, receiving more likes on bikini pictures does not align with the studies that have been conducted over the last three decades on how sex does not sell. Furthermore, there were very different opinions on whether Instagram was a lot of work. However, there seems to be a pattern in the amount of followers and how much work each woman felt their Instagram account was. The ones that said it was hard work tended to have more followers than those you said it was not hard work.

Pornography has been extremely normalized over the past couple of decades and most pornographic content is centered towards the Male Gaze due to the fact that men are the biggest consumers of porn. Women have been objectified and sexualized for centuries and women and/or feminists have been trying to change that image for years. This is in perfect alignment with Dines' research back in 2012 of how she believes men view women as objects and for their own pleasure. Therefore, some people believe that when women post images of their body online they have taken the power back from the Patriarchy and the Male gaze. They are taking back ownership of their bodies and they feel comfortable in their own skin just as Neyta explained when she said that she feels like she is taking a stand when she posts her body online. This is in alignment with Oliver's speculations from 2017. Although no actual research has been done on this subject it has been made obvious that further research on this topic in the near future would be very interesting.

In 2021, Higgins speculated whether women are choosing to feel sexy when they posts pictures of themselves online and whether those pictures have a positive effect on feminism, a topic that also needs further research. In fact, Íris talked about being able to choose when she was sexy as being very empowering to her. Another interesting point raised by Stringer in 2020 was that when women post naked pictures online they are in control, you get paid for the photos and you never have to meet the men paying for it.

All of the information that emerged from my data is very interesting and it is intriguing to see how some of the women's experiences and beliefs align and how others do not. This topic of whether it is empowering to post naked or sexy pictures online and if it needs to be empowering, is undoubtedly something that needs further investigation and a larger and wider candidate list of influencers from different demographic groups to enhance this research and provide more finite conclusions.

Conclusion

Even though we live in a world where pornography has become a huge part of our daily lives and sex roams free over the internet, in advertisements, television and on social media, somehow it is still taboo in many ways for women to express their sexuality and show skin on Instagram or other social media platforms online.

Therefore, many female influencers and social media stars have made it their mission to express themselves, take a stand or to shock conservative public opinion through the internet. Empowerment is a word we often hear associated with female nudity or sexual expression. The internet is filled with other people's opinions on how women choose to express their bodies and their sexuality online. Rarely do we hear the point of view of the women actually expressing themselves. Even if we do, their voice is often shut down by someone who has no knowledge on the topic because they do not post expressive pictures online themselves. I interviewed six wonderful and diverse women, all of which had their own feelings and opinions regarding why they do what they do. Each reason as valid as the next. I started this qualitative research with the goal in mind to figure out if influencers and social media stars truly thought it was empowering to post pictures of their bodies online or if it was just something the internet is selling us to shut these critics down.

My most important finding was when one of the social media stars said “why does it have to be empowering for women to express themselves online”. This statement was important because it offers a new perspective and pinpoints a potentially positive development in the way expressive pictures of women online are seen. It might even be the a step forward in the fight for feminism considering that men are not judged for showing their bodies on social media and they do not need a validation like empowerment to do so. Many of my interviewees did agree that it was empowering in some way to post an expressive picture of themselves online. But why do women need to feel empowered to be allowed to post these kinds of photos? Why is it not valid for them to express themselves because they want to or because it is liberating or they want to take a stand, or for no reason at all. Women should be allowed to express themselves in any way they want, whether they want to be empowered through their body image or not. In the process of interviewing these women I found out there is not a “type” of woman that shows her body on social media. I found that all types of women like to express themselves in numerous ways on social media and all of them have their own reasons, however, and most importantly, no reason is needed.

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