



Social Media Opinion Leaders Who Cater to the Male Gaze and Their Influence on Beauty Standards: A Case Study on Kim Kardashian's Posts on Instagram

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Abstract. As the product of the long-lasting patriarchal social system, the male gaze is not only directing the gender performances on social media but also affecting females' behaviors in the display of beauty in real life. Social media and opinion leaders are shaping active online users' perceptions of the current beauty standard due to the audience's repeated exposure to those media content that shows feminine beauty ideals. The paper did a case study on Kim Kardashian's photos posted on Instagram using categorical sampling and data analysis as the research methods in the two surveys. This research proved the cater to the male gaze in photos posted by celebrities on social media and discusses the influence of social media opinion leaders on the audience's ideology and behavior regarding beauty standards. As a result, over-engaging with social networking platforms and images published by social media opinion leaders can lead to severe consequences on the audience, such as appearance anxiety and low self-esteem.

Keywords: Male Gaze · Social Media · Opinion Leader · Beauty Standard · Cultivation Theory

1 Introduction

The data shows that there were 4.48 billion active social media users worldwide in 2021, which was an increase of 13.13% year on year from 3.69 billion in 2020 [1]. Social media platforms opened a new age of online communication with the ability to expand individuals' social networks in a more time-saving way. Actions and information shared by opinion leaders can often influence large numbers of followers. Due to individuals' increasing engagement with social media, people are tended to believe in the information they receive from the online social network rather than other media channels [2]. Gender

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roles portrayed and narrated in media productions always go stereotypically. For instance, in traditional media, the content of *Jakie* magazine created an ideal and attractive world for girls and promoted the “standard” of perfect appearances of teenage girls [3]. Besides, in new media, due to the repeated exposure to those media stereotypes, media consumers accept the stereotypes as a social reality [4]. Images containing a sexualized performance are attractive for males and females in the patriarchal society. Photos posted on social media platforms, especially selfies, mainly include content or ideologies related to the male gaze. The existence of the male gaze in social media also frames and affects the current female beauty standard. Sexy and beautiful girls are more likely to be loved and noticed.

There is a gap in previous research on gender representation within social media. Prior research on the existence of the male gaze in the media industry is more concentrated in traditional media than social media. Meanwhile, while social media has been shown to change the beauty standards of the general public, the male gaze is not an influential factor in this change. Based on previous research, this article puts forward two hypotheses that can be checked by conducting surveys: First, the male gaze perspective on social platforms affects the social content published by celebrities; Second, the audience will be affected by the content published by celebrities on social platforms, even change their personal aesthetic views and daily behaviors after watching the images published by celebrities. Since Kim Kardashian represents a phenomenal beauty trend that has reached the feminine beauty ideal, the content and the sharing of pictures posted by netizens on social media are influenced by Kim Kardashian and the beauty trend she created [5]. Thus, Kim Kardashian was chosen to be the example of this study.

This paper did two separate surveys on Kim Kardashian’s Instagram posts and her imitators to support the existence of the male gaze on social media and social media opinion leaders’ influence on contemporary beauty standards and to discuss the negative impact on society elicited by the toxic social media scene. Survey 1 divides Kim’s posts into six groups based on the author’s own observations: swimsuits, kids, daily life, OOTD (Outfit of the Day), and landscape. By sorting and sampling, photos of Survey 2 were classified into 6 groups by identifying whether they have these 5 elements according to the main types of fashion trends led by the Kardashians summarized by Dosekun: Makeup, dressing style, body, hairstyle, and lash style [6]. This study will finally compare and synthesize each group’s photo number and draw a conclusion through typological analysis. The result of this study will be helpful to make online users obtain a basic understanding of the negative impact of social media on their ideologies and behaviors in order to avoid facing appearance anxiety created by social media opinion leaders.

2 Data and Method

The author used categorical sampling and data analysis as the research methods in both surveys: Survey 1 is to prove the existence of the male gaze in social media, while Survey 2 is to show its impact on the beauty standard.

In Survey 1, the authors studied the content Kim Kardashian posted on Instagram and found that the content Kim posted could be broadly grouped into the following categories: swimsuits, kids, daily life, OOTD (Outfit of the Day), and landscape. For

Table 1 The average number of likes of Kim's Photos on Instagram

	Swimsuits	Kids	Daily life	OOTD	Fashion	Landscape
Photo 1	3048273	2314716	3382597	2578847	3182455	912826
Photo 2	4569079	3827317	3429558	6601737	1813237	1420366
Photo 3	4415729	5147394	3820200	1575548	4105355	1160902
Photo 4	8583121	3645137	3311026	1956625	1641707	2655313
Photo 5	4792317	1780072	3822152	1900029	1715380	1749649
Photo 6	5479108	5961664	3847517	3147542	1726530	1100719
Photo 7	4198147	4591319	5881463	2889231	2785741	2093334
Photo 8	5616138	3027802	2771071	3118963	2268175	815330
Photo 9	4441168	3643422	4621556	1735350	1411271	4009545
Photo 10	3413170	4026465	2228508	2831182	1726160	2660691
The average number of likes	4855625	3796530.8	3711564.8	2833505.4	2237601.1	1857867.5

the selection of photos, 10 recent photos for each category (60 photos in total) were selected from Kim Kardashian's Instagram (@kimkardashian) posts until the date of March 20th, 2022, which is the end date of the survey. The average number of likes under each category can be figured out by using this formula: Average = Sum of all likes under one category /10, and its result can be shown in Table 1.

In Survey 2, 50 posts of imitators of Kim Kardashian were selected from two trendy hashtags on Instagram: #kimkardashianvibes and #kimkardashianstyle. For the selection of photos, the last 50 photos posted under these tags would be chosen within one single month in the year 2022. Since not all of the photos under these two tags were posted by Kim's imitators, the following types of photos will be excluded: advertising photos released by the brand, photos of the Kardashians themselves posted by fans, and press photos. Then these photos were classified into 5 groups by identifying whether they have these 5 elements according to the main types of fashion trends led by the Kardashians summarized by Dosekun: Makeup, dressing style, body, hairstyle, and lash style [6]. The percentage of each element can be figured out by using this formula: Percentage = Photo number/50, and the result can be shown in Table 2.

3 Results

As shown in Table 1, photos of Kim in swimsuits showed off her perfect body to the maximum and came in first place with an absolute advantage. The number of photos of Kim in swimsuits reached 4855625 likes, far ahead of the average number of likes for photos of Kim's kids (3796530.8), which is in second place. Although Kim herself is not shown in this type of photo, there is no small amount of likes based on the public's curiosity about her personal private life [7] and the advantage of her children's appearance. The third most popular type of photo is about Kim's daily life (3711564.8).

Table 2 Percentage of the elements imitated

Elements	Numbers of photos	Percentage (%)
Body	5	10
Makeup	32	42
OOTD	11	22
Hairstyle	7	14
Lash style	6	12

Kim likes to share her workouts, time spent socializing with her friends, and healthy eating style on social media. She wants to express that she has an active lifestyle that the public admires [8]. The fourth-ranking photo type is about Kim's OOTD (Outfit of the Day), these have a certain reference for ordinary girls' dressing, and the average number of likes reached 2833505.4; while the number of likes for fashion shots is not high (2237601.1), ranking second to last, and the reason is that these shots have a certain distance from themselves in the eyes of ordinary people, and have almost no relationship with their own lives [9]. The landscape photos came in last place with 1857867.5 likes, which is expected because they are everywhere on the social media platform and don't attract much attention, and Kim is not a professional photographer, so there is nothing special about these landscape photos.

According to Table 2, the selected photos of Kim Kardashian's imitators can all be classified into these five categories listed in the table. From the calculated data, the main types of fashion trends led by the Kardashians, as summarized by Dosekun are in line with reality. The percentage of imitators who imitated Kim's makeup was the highest at 42%, nearly half of the total counted photos, which clearly shows that Kim's delicate makeup is highly admired by imitators. In the second place are the posts that imitate Kim's OOTD. This type of dressing can show off the shape of a woman's body very well. The next three categories of imitation objects: hairstyle, lash style, and body, accounted for a similar proportion, 14%, 12%, and 10%, respectively.

4 Discussions

4.1 The Male Gaze Behind Sexy Photos Posted by Celebrities on Social Media

Kim Kardashian is one of the most famous people on online social media platforms, and she is followed and admired by many people, especially young teenage girls and male groups. She is very good at using her graphics to capture the attention of her audience, with much of the content being sex-related images. It is highly likely that this is the result of the male gaze view. These photos have not only brought her much attention but have even helped her create and build one kind of redefined entertainment of a democratic nature through social media platforms. The result in Table 1 shows that Kim Kardashian's swimsuit photo is the category that strongly received and boasted a whopping 4,855,625 likes, much higher than the likes of any other type of photo. Compared with another

type of photo, the swimsuit category is the sexiest one, fulfilling the expectations of the male gaze and meeting the standard criteria of a sexy woman. The sexy behaviors she shows in the pictures can make her look even more desirable to men. Her images in sexy swimsuits satisfy the male gaze on social media and gain many male likes.

Moreover, male viewers tend to respond more favorably to the sexual appeal appearing in the image [10]. In shorter words, Kim Kardashian fulfilled the fantasies that males have on feminine beauty, and the highest numerical favorite rate confirms this view as well. So far, Kim has managed to standardize the stimulation of the body and sexuality on social media platforms, making this normalized and highly popular in viewers' eyes [11].

It is undeniable that Kim Kardashian has control over her body, and she often appears in sexy clothes, which makes her look sexually attractive. At the same time, this bold and free expression has made her a sexually relevant icon in the eyes of her audience. Her sexualized performances are highly visible and followed by many viewers on social media and received a large number of likes. The results also suggest that celebrities continue to send out similar images to get more attention. With the cultivation theory on social media platforms and the fact that more sexy images have been posted, Kim Kardashian is increasingly seen as a sex symbol of sexuality, which also greatly satisfies the psychological expectations of the male gaze viewers.

4.2 Social Media and Opinion Leaders' Influence on Active Online Users

As real-life events become more visible on social media, people's thoughts and opinions are more likely to be influenced by popular contemporary ideologies. In the age of social media, social media opinion leaders play a huge role in virtual communities, online groups, and information dissemination and can quickly spread and amplify their influence [12]. Social media has the power to bring people together digitally, which enables opinion leaders to maximize their influence within social networks by reaching a larger number of audiences [13]. The results shown in previous research show that the power of online social influence can direct and determine what people will learn on social media [14].

Viewers who are influenced by the content posted by celebrities in the media become imitators of the celebrities usually, which is a result of the cultivation theory in the media. Social media opinion leaders like Kim Kardashian are highly influential in social networks since they are playing both the roles of media producers and consumers, owning too many fans who pay attention to them. Opinion leaders' highly active engagement in the online environment has dominated the overall cultural environment in which they are participating. Thus a certain kind of cultural phenomenon became visible to the public. From the strong influence of social media prosumers on social media platforms on the Internet, it is clear that active online users are more likely to be persuaded by these opinion leaders and develop a sense of shared values, attitudes, and behaviors that are in line with social media opinion leaders [15]. For instance, with Kim Kardashian's 322 million followers on Instagram and her posted photos about fashion, Kim herself represented a phenomenal beauty trend and became the standard of beauty that fits the feminine beauty ideal, which was then followed by others. In this case, Kim Kardashian as the social media opinion leader, affected people's perception of feminine beauty and

reinforced the ideology of the male gaze by showing a sexualized performance of women in media productions. Such behavior virtually deepened the influence of online opinion leaders and further made the male gaze recognized by the public. Through celebrities like Kim Kardashian publishing more pictures of male gaze-related topics, the beauty standards on social media platforms will be closer to what opinion leaders recognize. Under such a trend, the aesthetics in the social environment will tend to be a deformed unity, and the audience will lose their choice in this toxic social network environment. It may fall into the behavior of imitating celebrities.

4.3 Opinion Leaders Set Beauty Standards for the Audiences at the Ideological Level

As Table 2 shows, the imitators' imitation of Kim Kardashian has been involved in varying degrees, from the simulation of appearance to the similar daily lifestyle. The five areas where imitators imitate Kim the most are body, makeup, OOTD, hairstyle, and lash style, which proves that the public's aesthetics and expectations for life have been affected by celebrities from many angles. As a representative of sexy women, Kim Kardashian's appearance even has a profound and significant impact on female audiences. Previously, white women tended to idealize a slim body shape, but Kim Kardashian preferred to create a curvaceous body shape. As an opinion leader with countless fans on social media, her popularity makes her views supported and imitated by the audience. As a result, female viewers would activate their self-improvement goals towards Kim Kardashian's seductive portrayals, and they are eager to pursue similar seductive, sexually appealing looks like Kim Kardashian as well. In this case, Kim Kardashian's position can be defined as a trendsetter in society [16]. The combination of the power from social media platforms and the popularity of Kim Kardashian herself have led to a new era of beauty standards, which has not only made her followers want to emulate her aesthetic but has also created appearance anxiety in the psychological state in some of her imitators.

In addition, experiments have shown that idealized images portrayed in the media can increase body shame and appearance anxiety in young women and have a negative impact on their body image [17], which proves the hypothesis previously proposed. In the research experiment, 39 female university students were invited as participants and shown 24 magazine advertisements, including 12 body-related products and 12 non-body-related products, half of which were idealized images and the other half were not. The experiment compared the psychological impact of the different categories of images on the participating subjects by recording pre-exposure and post-exposure measures of body shame and appearance anxiety. The results showed that appearance anxiety increased after the female undergraduates viewed the advertisements with idealized images. Appearance anxiety increased as the duration of viewing increased. Therefore, the idealized image depicted by the media may greatly strengthen women's anxiety on their looks. Kim Kardashian, an influential online opinion leader, often publishes sexy and perfect photos, which is more likely to constantly affect the public's aesthetics and create women's appearance anxiety. Under the influence of media cultivation theory, women had deepened their approval of the way females were portrayed in the media through the imitation process, which reinforces the appearance anxiety created by

celebrities such as Kim Kardashian, and increased the authority and influence of beauty standards set by celebrities.

4.4 Social Media Opinion Leaders Influence the Audiences at the Behavioral Level

According to Table 2, what imitators most often imitate is Kim Kardashian's makeup style, which accounts for 42% of the total data, According to Table 2, what imitators most often imitate is Kim Kardashian's makeup style, which accounts for 42% of the total data, and counts for nearly half of the total sample. Compared with other types of imitation, the imitation of OOTD only accounts for 11%, the imitation of hairstyle is only 7%, and the imitation of lash style is just 6%. Despite Kim Kardashian's striking figure, imitators that choose to imitate her body are the fewest, accounting for only 5%. Thus, in practice, appearance anxiety pushes viewers to become new imitators and to continue changing their appearance and bodies to suit the male gaze and current beauty trends. Nevertheless, imitators are tend to imitate the beauty style they like in simpler and safer ways to finally reach the goal.

The new ideal body image trend led by Kim Kardashian has not only created a toxic environment on the Internet but has also had a very bad impact on the real world. Twenty years ago, when Kim Kardashian was not famous, a well-proportioned and natural body like Marilyn Monroe's was considered the sexiest [18]. If the girls want the same sexy body, they just need to control their diet properly or exercise. Girls at the time didn't have to be too hard on themselves for a good figure. When Kim Kardashian first came into the public, she didn't have the same overly exaggerated huge buttocks she has right now. Slim waist and exaggerated large hips, this ant-like, eye-catching body that Kim has right now has made her social media explosion. [19]. With this trend led by Kim, the hottest procedure on the market today is the Brazilian Butt Lift (BBL) [20], which can help achieve a fuller, higher buttock. However, BBL has one of the highest mortality rates of any plastic surgery procedure. In 2017, a study found that the mortality rate for this procedure was 1 in 3,448 when it was performed, which caused serious concern among those in the medical industry [21]. On a more serious level, Kim indirectly caused the death of many women who were her followers, thus causing a danger to society.

While the aspect of Kim that brings the most buzz is her body, the percentage of girls who mimic Kim Kardashian's body ranks at the bottom of Table 2. The reasons for this result are obvious because the cost of plastic surgery is huge, and there is also the need to go through a series of risks associated with plastic surgery failures, such as not achieving the desired results, causing sequelae, or even death [22]. Compared to the most costly plastic surgery, makeup is the least expensive form of impersonation, and it is also a one-time event: after removing the Makeup, the imitators get their original look back. On the contrary, after having plastic surgery, if one day the girls who imitated Kim to get plastic surgery find that they prefer their original looks, they are unlikely to change back to their former appearance since plastic surgery is irreversible [23]. For OOTD, which has the second-highest percentage of imitators, it is as cost-effective as makeup. Once Kim's followers take off their clothes, they will regain their original look. Moreover, since Kim Kardashian has been a fashion pioneer for two decades [24], girls can become fashion trendsetters and receive attentions from the public by simply

copying Kim's dressing style. Therefore, from the data shown in Table 2, we can see that although most of Kim's imitators are blind admirers who believe that they can become fashionable themselves if they imitate the trend, they still have the sanity to not spend high prices and take irreversible risks to have plastic surgery that is not necessary.

5 Conclusion

Although the form of media has shifted from traditional to paperless and in a more digitized way, the concept of the male gaze is still deeply rooted in media productions with the continuation of patriarchy. New media perpetuates the male gaze that appears in traditional media and has the ability to disseminate this ideology to broader audiences with the help of technological development in communication. Social media is the most successful product of the progress in communication technology in the digital era. It not only frames the cultural environment of society but also reinforces some dominant ideologies by taking advantage of social media opinion leaders' immense influence on the public. The long-term daily exposure and over-engagement to content posted by opinion leaders on social media are making active online users believe in certain things as the "fact" and treat dominant ideologies as the "truth" that need to be followed. With the influence of the male gaze aesthetic, some social media opinion leaders started to post images that contained sexualized performances of women to gain more love and attention. The behavior of these celebrities shown online has increased the male gaze on social media and created a toxic online environment. Kim Kardashian is one of the most influential social media opinion leaders, the images she posted on Instagram are closely tied to the idea of the male gaze, which consolidated her reputable status as the feminine beauty ideal. Since online users are constantly bombarded by notifications, posts, and photos about the perfect looks of others, they will have unattainable ideas of beauty standards, resulting in low self-esteem and appearance anxiety. Therefore, in order to avoid these consequences, the study of this topic aims to notice individuals, especially females, that beauty ought to be diversified, and it is unnecessary for individuals to fit into a standard beauty template since the standard of beauty is constantly changing with what is shown by opinion leaders on social media. Meanwhile, the unclear answer of how social media viewers specifically avoid falling into this trap of appearance anxiety remain to be answered in future study.

Authors' Contributions. Shihyun Yang contributed to the Method, Results, Introduction, and third part of the Discussion of this study.

Yiran Dang contributed to the conception of the study and wrote the Abstract, Introduction, the second part of the Discussion, and the Conclusion.

Yuhan Ma contributed to the logical conception and organization of the entire contents, conducted the data analysis, wrote the first and the fourth part of Discussion through constructive Discussion with the literature.

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