



CHALLENGING OBJECTIFICATION THROUGH ALTERNATIVE BEAUTY CONCEPTS IN THE FILM *I FEEL PRETTY* (2018)

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E-ISSN: 2621-9158
P-ISSN: 2356-0401

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Submitted: 10 June 2023
Approved: 29 June 2023
Published: 30 June 2023

Citation:

Zahara, D., M., & Farlina, N. (2023). Challenging Objectification through alternative beauty concepts in the film *I Feel Pretty* (2018). *Celtic: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching, Literature and Linguistics*, 10(1), 63-80. Doi: 10.22219/celtic.v10i1.27028

ABSTRACT

Beauty ideals that primarily focus on physical attributes play the role of a cultural milieu in which women are vulnerable to objectification. Such a cultural force gives rise to the importance of investigations on literature, such as films, as a cultural product as well as a cultural shaper in which women are portrayed and represented through their narrative, characters, and more. This study is a qualitative descriptive study on the film *I Feel Pretty* that applies the feminist theory of objectification. It aims to explore the portrayal of Renee Bennett, the main character, in dealing with objectifying beauty ideals and how such phenomena are challenged in the film. The results found that Renee Bennett experiences objectification by others, self-objectification, and objectifying others under the context of appearance-focused beauty concepts. However, the film challenges such objectifying beauty concepts by introducing alternatives that focus on internal qualities or non-physical attributes, such as self-confidence, intelligence, and health. Thus, the film is a critique towards the existing beauty ideals that glamorize the physique, and it encourages a shift of focus from external to internal qualities that support women's mobility and well-being.

Keywords: *Beauty; character; feminism; objectification; women*

ABSTRAK

Standar kecantikan yang menekankan atribut fisik merupakan salah satu faktor yang berperan dalam menciptakan lingkungan budaya di mana wanita rentan akan objektifikasi. Hal tersebut menunjukkan pentingnya investigasi terhadap karya sastra, seperti halnya film, sebagai sebuah produk budaya sekaligus pembentuk budaya tersebut dimana wanita digambarkan dan direpresentasikan melalui narasi, karakter, dan lainnya. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian deskriptif kualitatif terhadap film *I Feel Pretty* dengan menggunakan teori feminis objektifikasi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi penggambaran Renee Bennett, sang karakter utama, dalam menghadapi konsep kecantikan yang mengobjektifikasi wanita dan bagaimana fenomena itu ditantang oleh film tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Renee Bennett mengalami objektifikasi oleh orang lain, objektifikasi oleh diri sendiri, dan objektifikasi terhadap orang lain dalam konteks standar kecantikan yang berfokus pada penampilan. Akan tetapi, film ini menantang konsep kecantikan yang mengobjektifikasi tersebut dengan memperkenalkan konsep alternatif yang berfokus pada kualitas internal atau atribut non-fisik, seperti kepercayaan diri, kecerdasan, dan kesehatan. Dengan demikian, film ini merupakan kritik terhadap konsep kecantikan ideal yang mengagungkan fisik, dan mendorong pergeseran fokus dari kualitas eksternal ke kualitas internal yang mendukung mobilitas dan kesejahteraan wanita.

Kata Kunci: *Feminisme; karakter; kecantikan; objektifikasi; wanita*

INTRODUCTION

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is a well-known saying that suggests beauty as a subjective concept that appeals to personal assessment. However, the socialized Western beauty ideals prompt the contrasting idea through its prevalent physical qualifications as if beauty is an objective construct. For instance, the disseminated ideals of the embodiment of youth, thinness, leanness, facial attractiveness, model-like figure, as well as voluptuous breast and hip which are commonly encountered through media in modern Western society (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Monks et al., 2020; Wolf, 2013), suggesting the effort to side with the idea of objective measurements of attractiveness. Such naturally unattainable expectations illuminate the understanding of women’s daily rituals with body hairs, blemishes, bulges, and other supposed flaws that they try to have control over in order to resemble acceptable femininity. Nevertheless, the drawback of such exclusive ideals that pay particular attention to appearance is the ignorance of the internal values of women as human beings which has been a concern from a feminist perspective. It is especially since women should have been free and autonomous ever since the achievement of the right to vote, political access, and other legal rights. Instead, women seem to be trapped in their bodies that are caged by the beauty ideals the patriarchal society generates.

This issue of beauty ideals that is immensely physical reflects a pervasive gender issue called objectification. Objectification theory, a feminist psychological theory, attempts to explain how cultural objectifying treatment of women influences women’s well-being. Women first encounter sexual objectification, internalize such objectifying views, and turn to self-objectification and self-surveillance practices. It is further explained to cause negative subjective experiences (body shame, anxiety, disrupted peak motivational states, and diminished awareness of internal bodily states) and mental health risks (depression, sexual dysfunctions, and eating disorders) (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

However, objectification does not only occur through sexualization (sexual objectification) as practiced through objectifying gaze at women’s bodies, sexual comments, whistles, sexual harassment, exposure to sexualized images of women, etc. (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Women are also objectified through a focus on beauty or physical appearance. Both of these treatments dehumanize women and strip off their uniqueness or personality where sexual objectification is associated with lacking uniquely a human dimension (animalistic dehumanization), and the latter reflects the lack of human nature (mechanistic dehumanization) (Morris et al., 2018).

Given the sociocultural significance, it becomes crucial to examine society’s literary works and sites, as well as how they portray women as discussed in previous studies (Chaerani & Junaidi, 2019; Farlina, 2016; Novitasari & Hia, 2021; Setyaningrum, 2020). Indeed, films as a form of art or motion pictures that utilize the interaction of image, sound, and movement, and communicate them simultaneously (Petrie & Boggs, 2018) are the reflection of a society which also create awareness about social issues (Thangavelu, 2020). Thus, such a unique form of artistic media, when approached from the lens of literature study, becomes important in understanding how the film portrays the objectification of women through its characters and other film elements. In this light, the film *I Feel Pretty*

(Kohn & Silverstein, 2018) comes to the attention given its story regarding the main character's preoccupation with Western beauty ideals. In the film, the main character named Renee Bennett is highly insecure about her appearance. However, after experiencing a falling accident that tricks her mind into believing that she has physically changed into a culturally pretty woman or a supermodel, she lives her life differently and does things she previously detained herself from although she never physically changes in the first place. Throughout her experiences, Renee values physical beauty as the highest value or merit for women in any domain of their lives.

Previous studies that analyze the film *I Feel Pretty* have touched on the issue of the film's educational values, moral messages, analysis of flouted maxims, symbolical violence, the audience's perception of the film's body positivity message, the media's role in disciplining women's body, and plus-size women portrayal's impact to society (Baby et al., 2021; Ervina, 2019; Fortuna, 2022; Lusianti, 2021; Maharani, 2020; May, 2020; Munawar, 2021). However, a more relevant study is the one that finds how the film tries to change viewers' perception of women's body standardization through human interaction in the film (Mae, 2020). Similarly, an interaction study found that the film represents the denial of beauty standards by improving one's self-quality (Ginting et al., 2022).

Despite the similar discussed issue of women's beauty and body, the mentioned previous research is mostly communication and media studies, not literature or film studies. Thus, by utilizing film theory and detailed analysis of the film elements in examining the issue, this research may enrich the study of the film from a different perspective. Moreover, because none of the previous research made use of the objectification theory despite its comprehensiveness in providing an understanding of beauty issues in the film, the importance of this study is raised. Furthermore, considering there is an apparent tendency in body discourse among the discussions of women's beauty, this study approaches beauty in its bigger sense of physical appearance, including the overlooked aspects of faces, clothing, and more to treat objectification beyond its hostile form.

In terms of existing previous studies regarding women objectification in fiction and literature works, the fact that they are saturated with discussions on women sexual objectification (Deshmukh & Mane, 2016; Kaur, 2019; Permatasari, 2015) for the most part, and significantly little in including general physical appearance (Gayathri et al., 2018) that are more subtle and easier to be overlooked emphasizes the research gap this research may lessen. Thus, considering these gaps and the problems of research, this paper aims to examine how the film *I Feel Pretty* portrays the main female character's experiences with objectifying Western beauty ideals and how the film tries to propose alternative beauty concepts.

METHOD

As the objective of the research is to understand in deep about how a phenomenon is experienced, especially the objectification phenomena experienced by the main character named Renee Bennett in the film, this study applies a qualitative approach. Indeed, this research does not aim to measure or quantify the objectification state in individuals, but rather to understand in deep about the objectification portrayed in the film *I Feel Pretty* (2018). Thus, qualitative method is

the most suitable way of conducting this research where words are collected and analyzed as data in sort of ways instead of numbers and statistics. It also seeks to explore and understand the meaning of social problems (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Therefore, it allows for the examination of the film as a text from which data are collected and analyzed to understand objectifying beauty ideals as social problems.

Considering the social problem this study explores is the gender oppression issue of women objectification through beauty ideals, this qualitative research of a film analysis works within a particular theoretical framework of feminist film theory, a framework that discusses how cinema works on patriarchal and mythical women representation and issues (Smelik, 2016). The study utilizes the framework specifically by applying the feminist theory of objectification proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). Thus, this paper is a film analysis of *I Feel Pretty* where the researcher plays the part as the instrument of research because they are the ones who gather the information and make sense of it (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

As for the unit of analysis, the film *I Feel Pretty* is chosen for its story which brings about women's issue of beauty. The film is directed and written by Abby Kohn and Marc Silverstein. Meanwhile, it is starring Amy Schumer, Michelle Williams, Emily Ratajkowski, Rory Scovel, Naomi Campbell, Lauren Hutton, Busy Philipps, Aidy Bryant, and Tom Hopper. The 110 minutes film is released and distributed in the United States by STX Films in the year 2018.

In conducting the research, firstly, data collection is done. The researcher watched the film repeatedly and recorded the data by taking notes. The data collection was focused on identifying the main character's portrayal in relation to beauty in her daily life by paying attention to various film elements, especially dialogue, visual design, cinematography, sound effects and dialogue, and musical score (Petrie & Boggs, 2018). Specifically for dialogue, it was transcribed by the researcher for the better use of data analysis and presented as verbatim in this paper. The diverse film elements not only enrich the discussion but also triangulate the findings in this study. Moreover, data from secondary sources were also collected, such as from reading critics and reviews of the film, books, research papers, and journal articles. Afterward, the data were analyzed by finding emerging themes from the collected data of the main character's preoccupation with beauty. In this stage, the objectification theory plays role in understanding these portrayals. Thus, in presenting the findings, this paper first discusses how Renee Bennett is found to be portrayed as objectified, followed by how the film tries to challenge objectification.

It is important to state positionality not only in terms of methods taken but also to state that the researcher is a Muslim Indonesian woman who has been focusing on gender and women issues. This is especially important to address considering the film and the study are specifically in regard to the context of a heterosexual white American female character who lives in the United States. Meanwhile, objectification, despite being a shared experience of women, has different manifestations based on an individual's culture, race, sexuality, and other contexts.

FINDINGS

Women under the Cultural Beauty Ideals: The Portrayal of Renee Bennet

The film *I Feel Pretty* revolves around the character of Renee Bennett, who grapples with societal pressures to conform to prevailing beauty standards. Physically, Renee is portrayed as having long, blonde hair, an average height, a larger physique, and facial features that do not conform to the idealized concept of attractiveness. Therefore, she becomes consumed by her perceived inadequacies in numerous facets of her life, including her social interactions, romantic relationships, and professional endeavors. By applying objectification theory, Renee is found to be portrayed as objectified by others, objectified by her own self (self-objectifying), and objectifying others.

Firstly, Renee is objectified by others through gazes and comments where she is discriminated against after a first glance. During Renee's application process for a receptionist position at Lily Le Claire company, she experiences instances of being subjected to lingering gazes and unfavorable facial expressions from employees. This unsettling behavior is particularly evident when one employee, accompanied by a disapproving facial expression, directs their gaze towards Renee. Similarly, in the interview room, one of the boards named Helen Grey repeatedly gazes at Renee's face and body, reinforcing her determination that Renee is not qualified for the job solely based on appearance. These portrayals suggest the denial of Renee's competence due to the primary value of appearance. The setting of the interview room further supports this as Renee sits behind a long and wide table which gives a sense of distance from the two model-like examiners, Helen Grey and Avery Le Claire. Moreover, the displayed images of female models and makeup in the office assert the highly valued physical beauty.

Renee: Good morning!
Customer: Hi... you know what, I think I pressed the wrong button. I am looking for Lily Le Claire, and this is not-
Renee: Nope, that's us. Welcome to Lily Le Claire.
(00:38:58 – 00:39:08)

Accordingly, Renee is also objectified while working as a receptionist at Lily Le Claire. Not only does the customer deny Renee's professionalism, but the words selection of "this is not" instead of "you are not" while pointing at Renee's appearance reflects how she is treated as an object of sight that lacks subjectivity or viewed as lesser of a human. An establishing shot before the scene gives visual information of how other employees are physically model-like, giving insight into the basis of objectifying treatment towards Renee.

Besides beauty-based objectification, Renee is also sexually objectified. This aspect becomes evident when Renee dresses in more revealing clothing. Indeed, a study showed that despite sizes, women are equally objectified when they dress in revealing clothes (Holland & Haslam, 2013). It is essential to note, however, that this does not imply that objectification is the sole responsibility of women, as social phenomena demonstrate that modestly-dressed women are not completely immune to such experiences (Al-Mutawa et al., 2019; Zahara, 2023a, 2023b).

Renee's experience of sexual objectification becomes apparent when she participates in a bikini contest during a date with Ethan. Such setting facilitates the phenomena as the contestants, along with Renee, display their bodies in swimwear.

In accordance, Renee's choice of apparel exposes her legs, arms, and midsection, highlighting her physical attributes. The discourse delivered by the master of ceremonies echoes the reality that Renee's body will be the focus of attention.

MC: I hope her buns are tighter than this penmanship because uh... this is really hard to read, but uh.

(00:48:44 – 00:48:48)

Such attention to certain body parts, like the hip, reflects the sexualization of women based on fetishized body parts in Western culture (Wolf, 2013). This becomes especially clear when the master of ceremonies implies that Renee's physical attributes, specifically her behind, compensate for her writing abilities, highlighting the explicit sexualization. This behavior is exhibited not only by the master of ceremonies, but also by the audience, who objectifies Renee and the other contestants by staring at their bodies, enthusiastically cheering, clapping, whistling, and evaluating their sexualized dance performances.

Renee is subjected to additional instances of sexual objectification in a Chinese restaurant, where she encounters a male security officer while wearing a sleeveless red dress that reveals her cleavage. As Renee walks past him, he looks at her breasts, which is emphasized by the deliberate panning of the camera, which captures the guard's fixated gaze on Renee's chest. This depiction represents yet another instance of sexual objectification, highlighting the pervasiveness of such occurrences in social contexts.

The second form of objectification is self-objectification found in Renee's makeup practices, exercises, and engagements with mirrors. Renee owns various makeup, skincare, body care, and hair treatment displayed on three huge shelves and one big makeup box. Instead of showing them through a short establishing shot, the film utilizes panning and tilting for a longer time, emphasizing its importance in the characterization of Renee. Nevertheless, Renee's involvement with beauty products, particularly makeup, demonstrates a form of self-objectification whereby she diminishes herself to a mere physical facade. This is evidenced by her consistent application of full-face cosmetics, even while engaging in exercise activities in *Soul Cycle*. This behavior exemplifies Renee's keen awareness of her appearance and her desire to conform to societal norms.

Renee: Right? Yeah, you look really beautiful.

Vivian: Wow! I mean, I feel like pretty, just... I don't know if I look like me.

Renee: No, you don't look like yourself, but you do look like Selena Gomez in that video when she says 'It ain't me'. It is you. Like, I recreated it.

(00:09:25 – 00:09:41)

The dialogue reveals Renee's view on makeup practices. Instead to express or connect with internal creative quality, Renee believes makeup is used to look other than what one looks or to imitate the appearance of Selena Gomez. The emphasis on the word "do" delivers the belief that looking like the pop star is something to be proud of.

Renee's exercise regimen further exemplifies her engagement in self-objectification, as she endeavors it solely to obtain the thin ideal. She places sole importance on her body's appearance and size, disregarding its inherent functionality and the holistic advantages of physical activity. Indeed, Renee never

returns to Soul Cycle after mistaking her changing appearance, and when she does, she tries to recreate the accident to re-live the magic. In support, the visual framing of Renee at the center of the class surrounded by other participants depicts how she only focuses on looks by concentrating on her reflection in the mirror while others focus on breathing and enjoying the workout. Additionally, Renee's willingness to wear smaller-sized shoes due to shame about her actual size demonstrates another facet of self-objectification as Renee mutes her internal feeling of pain like an object that lacks emotion.

Self-objectification is also found in Renee's appearance monitoring through mirrors. Based on the setting of Renee's apartment itself, there is no single room without a mirror which asserts the need for constant appearance checking. In engagements with mirrors, Renee evaluates every part of her face and body by gazing, touching, rubbing, and expressing what she feels.

Renee: I mean, look at me. Look at my jawline! No, no, I-I always, I always wanted this to happen! Y-you dream that this would happen! But, I never thought it would really happen! I mean, look at me! Look at my boobs! Look at my ass! I'm... beautiful!

(00:25:13 – 00:25:33)

This dialogue shows that self-objectification is not limited to one's appearance dissatisfaction since the main essence is how one values themselves primarily for visual quality. Similarly, this monologue is uttered when Renee mistakes her appearance for the first time, and such a fragmented self-view is particularly found in people who self-objectify (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). However, one of the most appalling manifestations of Renee's mirror engagement is during sexual intercourse because she is supposed to attend to internal sensations. It reflects what the theory proposed as disrupted peak motivational states due to objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Lastly, the portrayal of Renee also includes instances where she objectifies others. One such example occurs when a model named Mallory is objectified by Renee who secretly gazes at Mallory's face and body in Soul Cycle's locker room. The contrast between Renee's choice of clothing, a long-sleeved sweater, and Mallory's attire, a sports bra and shorts, serves to accentuate visual cues that facilitate objectification. In this scene, the camera captures Renee's face and Mallory's hip in one frame, providing the gazing perspectives.

Renee: Someone said to you, 'I don't wanna see you anymore, ever again. I don't wanna have sex with you again'. Somebody-somebody told you- you got dumped?! ... Your body, your whole head! Do you have every rib that I have? Everything really worked out for you. Where even are your organs?

Mallory: Well, it's the thought with being really insecure. So, it's nice to hear it.

Renee: Shut up forever! What? ... I wanna punch you right in your dumb face right now.

(01:34:11 – 01:34:56)

After being acquainted with Mallory and knowing her breakup story, it is apparent that Renee interprets breaking up as the loss of a guy's sexual desire with

Mallory, showing how Renee views Mallory as a sexual object in her relationship. The word “see” instead of “meet” to some extent also delivers the idea of Mallory as an eye candy which personality, insecurity, and internal feelings are ignored by Renee. She furthermore labels Mallory as “dumb”, which is evidence of how objectified individuals are perceived as less capable, skilled, or effective in their abilities (Loughnan et al., 2017). Renee even silences Mallory’s feelings by telling her to shut up, and such reduction of someone to appearance and silencing are also indicators of objectification (Papadaki, 2019).

Another others-objectification is done by Renee on female models in magazines. On the covers of Renee’s magazines, there are female models in off-shoulders dress and bikinis, heavy makeup, and beauty topics that encourage women to alter their appearance, and these representations in media are internalized by Renee.

Renee: Well Grant, I noticed on page six that you are often photographed drinking this pressed juicer green 1.5, correct? I saw that and I brought it here in case you were ever to come in... I’ve also seen you holding a lot of Brazilian models, but I didn’t think they’d fit in the fridge.

(00:41:02 – 00:41:27)

It is apparent that Renee reads magazines and internalizes how women are portrayed. The significance of Renee’s remarks about the female models, particularly in relation to the juice, should not be discounted, as these models are portrayed as submissive, Grant-dependent figures to whom they adhere. Moreover, Grant’s unreturning gaze at one of the models on the cover exemplifies an objectifying representation of women (Fardouly et al., 2015). Renee participates in the objectification of other women as a result of her internalization and application of these perspectives to others. Thus, by adapting the view and applying it to others, Renee objectifies other women.

In conclusion, Renee is portrayed as someone who experiences objectification; objectification by others, self-objectification, and objectifying other people. Such portrayals reflect the circle of objectification where attention brought to women’s appearances can lead them to self-objectify and objectify others. From this analysis, the objectification in Renee’s portrayals reveals that the underlying key to objectification is the value placed on appearance-focused beauty ideals. Therefore, in challenging this pervasive gender issue, alternative concepts of beauty are required.

The Alternative Beauty Concepts: Confidence, Intelligence, and Health

Based on the discussed portrayal of Renee, it can be discerned that in a culture that holds appearance-based beauty ideals, women are vulnerable to objectification that disturbs their internal state and interfere with their social mobility. Indeed, Renee previously holds herself back from her dream job, social engagement, love relationship, etc. due to her lack of physical beauty conformation. Therefore, the way the film presents Renee as achieving those goals when she mistakenly believes that her appearance changes imply the idea that what makes her succeed are non-physical qualities, especially since her physique never actually changes. In other words, the film proposes alternative concepts of beauty that are

no longer universal or 'one size fits all', but concepts that allow women to connect or attend to their bodies, reflecting the attempt to challenge objectification.

Self-Confidence as Beauty

The film presents self-confidence as a form of beauty through various means, including Renee's communication style, her willingness to take on new challenges, the inclusion of diverse-looking women as models, and her transformation in the way she dresses and walks. Firstly, the depiction of Renee as more active and confident in talking shows how this film challenges the objectification of women. As dehumanized women are characteristically denied from meaningful conversations or dialogue (Pražmo, 2022), thus behaving in a more object-like manner and become more passive, Renee's transformation in this aspect is apparent in how she becomes brave to initiate conversation and approach Ethan, her love interest. This stands in stark contrast to her previous passive approach to finding love, wherein she waited for men to approach her on an online dating platform. Moreover, the way she talks to Ethan with no stutter and accompanied by genuine eye-contact show how she is confident, making Ethan attracted to her as he later gives credit to her self-confidence which makes Renee "perfect" and "beautiful".

Self-confidence is also observed in how Renee speaks out when a customer judges her as unattractive. This poignant moment highlights her ability to reclaim her body through verbal assertion. Notably, Grant Le Claire, who happens to be standing behind the customer, is drawn to the customer's display of confidence. The fact that Grant, whose daily interactions revolve around models, signifies how self-confidence outweighs physical qualities.

Self-confidence is also found in the way Renee challenges herself to explore new things, especially since one of the characteristics of objectified women is passive and restraining themselves (Zahara, 2023b). This trait defies objectification as Renee actively explores various activities in life. For instance, Renee's final act of applying as Lily Le Claire's receptionist job is the manifestation of confidence itself after she previously denies it, especially considering one of the job requirements to be "full of confidence". During her application, a song played as the back sound with the lyrics "If I was you, I'd wanna be me too", asserting self-confidence as beauty.

Certainly, self-confidence leads Renee to impress the Avery the CEO and further accepted as the office's receptionist. This is a peculiar decision for Avery as all of Lily Le Claire's employees are physically model-like and Renee is the first to break that standard. By accepting Renee as the first face or the image people see when they step into the office, this film challenges that beauty in physical appearance can be alternated with beauty in self-confidence. Simultaneously, self-confidence opens up life opportunities Renee previously believes as achievable only if she embodies the physical beauty ideals.

The film also portrays self-confidence as a form of beauty through the inclusion of diverse-looking women as the representatives of Lily Le Claire's new diffusion line, deviating from the initial plan of featuring a single model, Mallory. There are pictures of black, white, Asian, Caucasian, old, young, overweight, skinny, straight-haired, curly-haired, glasses-wearing women, and more. Each woman exudes a sense of contentment, radiating confidence in their distinctive appearances.

Renee: When we're little girls, we have all the confidence in the world... Somebody says something mean to you on the playground, and then we grow up, and you doubt yourself over and over again until you lose all that confidence, all that self-esteem, all the faith you started with is gone... What if we never lost that little-girl confidence? What if when someone tells us that we aren't good or thin or pretty enough, we have the strength and the wisdom to say what I am is better than all of that?

(01:40:57 – 01:42:04)

Renee's monologue at the launch of her diffusion line is a pivotal moment in the film in which she realizes that her physical appearance has not altered. This realization is a potent demonstration of the film's central message: beauty transcends conformity to a single, rigid physical standard. It emphasizes the significance of embracing and exuding confidence in one's distinct qualities and genuine individuality. By focusing on women's competence or internal qualities, it is evident that they are challenging the idea of individuals lacking in warmth, competence, morality, and humanity, which are some of the negative implications of objectification (Loughnan et al., 2017). Furthermore, the setting of this event titled "Celebrating 50 Years of Beauty" contextualizes self-confidence as what truly makes women beautiful.

Besides working for a beauty company, self-confidence also brings Renee to join a bikini contest. This film tries to show how Renee's confidence at the contest makes her liked by the audience compared to other contestants who are skinny, toned, and model-like. Through the utilization of elaborate lighting techniques, close-up shots, panning movements, and slow-motion effects, the film effectively captures and conveys Renee's exhilaration and enjoyment during her performance. It delivers the idea that to have an imperfect body according to ideals is overpowered by confidence in terms of attractiveness. Nonetheless, from a critical standpoint, this scene may be regarded as presenting a paradoxical strategy for challenging objectification. While a bikini contest celebrates the concept of self-confidence, it is essential to recognize that, by its very nature, it involves the sexual objectification of women. Consequently, although the scene's primary objective is to challenge the prevalent beauty standards, it operates within a framework that views women as objects of sexual satisfaction.

Following the discussion, self-confidence is also proposed through the way Renee dresses. The film portrays Renee's evolving sense of fashion, which becomes more varied in terms of style and color selection, as a manifestation of her growing self-confidence. Whereas her previous outfits may have been relatively uniform, Renee is depicted wearing a wider range of clothing styles, including one-piece dresses, sleeveless garments, and outfits with lower necklines and patterns. While this shift in her wardrobe might initially give the impression that confidence is equated with dressing more provocatively, the underlying message is actually centered around confident individuals being at ease with their bodies. As a result, their fashion choices are no longer constrained by societal norms, and they are no longer burdened by concerns regarding how others perceive them.

Lastly, the manner in which Renee walks also demonstrates her self-assurance. Renee begins to walk with a newfound confidence, characterized by

larger, lighter, and more buoyant steps, after the incident in which she mistakenly believes her appearance has altered. This is in striking contrast to her previous hurried commutes to work, which were accompanied by a tired expression on her face. Renee is depicted smiling and listening to a song with the lyrics, "This girl is on fire," as she strides confidently, effectively conveying her internal state of empowerment.

The film employs various visual techniques in this scene to emphasize the significance of Renee's confident walks. Slow-motion cinematography, a full-body shot, and a prolonged take are utilized to provide intricate visual details of her assertive strides on her way to work. Notably, this scene functions as the film's poster, emphasizing its narrative significance and highlighting the inherent connection between physical beauty and one's inner emotions, as expressed through actions such as walking. Moreover, because an objectified woman tends to restrain their movements or take less space (Zahara, 2023b), by showing Renee's confident walks that take more space and wider movements, the challenge against objectification is apparent.

Intelligence as Beauty

Besides self-confidence, the film introduces intelligence as another beauty alternative. In objectification study, intelligence is indeed one of the qualities considered as human attributes which differentiate humans from non-humans (Morris et al., 2018). Accordingly, how the film presents Renee as achieving her dream career, getting promoted at work, starting a relationship, and being liked by other people is found to be facilitated by her intelligence. These accomplishments are especially crucial since they are socialized in Western culture to be achievable if women embody attractive appearances.

First of all, Renee's intelligence can be seen in how passionate and knowledgeable she is about the beauty industry as her career field. Her aptitude becomes evident in various instances throughout the film. She effortlessly articulates the names of lipstick shades with precision, possesses the ability to identify lipstick shades at a single glance, exhibits a comprehensive understanding of the design and layout of Lily Le Claire's products, and contributes numerous ideas for the launching of the diffusion line. These competencies not only demonstrate Renee's intelligence within the sphere of the beauty industry, but also garner recognition and appreciation from Lily Le Claire's decision-making boards. Renee distinguishes out from other employees due to her extensive knowledge, demonstrating that intelligence can serve as a viable alternative to physical beauty.

Renee's intelligence becomes even more significant when juxtaposed with the other employees at Lily Le Claire, especially those who possess the conventional model-like appearance but lack expertise in the beauty market. This striking contrast emphasizes Renee's intellectual abilities. Unlike her colleagues, Renee demonstrates a deep understanding of the industry and showcases her ability to make informed decisions. Renee's suggestion to include a blush application brush in the new product is a notable illustration of this disparity. Her understanding of customer preferences and market trends surpasses that of her colleagues, including the company's CEO, Avery Le Claire. In fact, Avery seeks Renee's assistance while in a physically vulnerable position, squatting down, which gives a sense of power to

Renee as someone who knows more, especially since it depicts Avery's eye level that looks up at Renee while Renee looks down at her.

Avery: No, if you think it's a shitty idea, please tell me cause I'm really freaking out about this whole thing.

Renee: From what I can gather just, you know, from my friends. Those professionals at the makeup counter are actually a deterrent... That's why these regular girls flock to the anonymous aisles of a big superstore...

Avery: I'm just a stupid idiot, dumb bitch.

(00:54:37 – 00:54:15)

For a CEO to approach her receptionist who is not a part of the production team and lowers herself shows how Renee is competent. Avery's reaction to the insight while thinking she is stupid and later expressing gratitude for having Renee even though she already employs many attractive employees further emphasizes the idea that a beautiful physique is not as valuable as intelligence. Indeed, Renee's knowledge leads her to succeed in her career through various opportunities other employees do not have, such as being invited to a private dinner with the boards, invited to a work trip, and even promoted as the vice president of the diffusion line despite working for shorter periods. It proves how intelligence opens up life opportunities and pleasure, something believed by Renee to be significantly dependent on the way women look.

The concept of intelligence as beauty is further exemplified by its effect on Renee's likability. Unlike some of the previous receptionists at Lily Le Claire, Renee possesses a friendly demeanor, always wears a warm smile, and enthusiastically greets office visitors. In addition, she goes above and beyond by offering genuine compliments to those she interacts with. Individuals who interact with Renee frequently respond with smiles and a general sense of contentment, demonstrating the effect of her interpersonal intelligence. Resisting the idea of popularity as associated with being physically good-looking, this film shows that Renee's likability is not because of her physique, but rather her interpersonal intelligence.

Health as Beauty

Besides self-confidence and intelligence, the film further proposes health as an alternative concept of beauty. This concept is seen through the emphasis on the importance of bodily function, such as health and fitness, instead of bodily appearance as the motive for exercise. Through such an emphasis on the non-observable qualities of the body, health is shown as a beauty concept that challenges women's objectification.

As previously discussed, Renee's initial motivation for exercise revolves around the mere pursuit of the thin ideal, which is indicative of self-objectification. However, the film's ending scene defies such self-treatment where Renee returns to Soul Cycle where she engages in exercise for the purpose of her health. The deliberate choice of this scene as the film's ending, rather than the previous scene of Renee and Ethan kissing does not only reflect the importance of health, but also the idea that being beautiful is not about attracting men as the end results, but how women can connect, feel, and truly live in their body. serves to emphasize the significance of prioritizing one's well-being.

Renee's health motive for exercise is apparent in her action that does not focus on looking at the mirror anymore. Instead, Renee smiles and pays attention to her breathing. These actions reflect the shifting of priority from bodily appearance to bodily function. Cinematically, the camera only focuses on Renee, zooms into her face, and does not capture mirrors and other objectifying cues in the class anymore. This visual representation illustrates the importance of focusing on oneself and how one feels or connects with the body instead of comparing one looks to another.

Luna: I don't know what you came in here for today, but the miracle is already here. You just have to open up your heart and receive it. I want you to look into the mirror... [sound fades out]

(01:45:50 – 01:45:57)

In the previous Soul Cycle class, this kind of monologue of Luna is what motivates Renee to exercise fully until she falls off and experiences the accident. However, this time, the sound utilized supports the idea of health as beauty by how Luna's voice fades out and changes into a song with the lyrics "Baby, how you feeling? Feeling good as hell". Furthermore, as it is also followed by the film title, *I Feel Pretty*, the positivity Renee feels while exercising is communicated. Indeed, physical activity like exercise is beneficial in improving someone's mood, and general physical health as well as mental health. Thus, the film proposes health as something that makes someone beautiful by showing how a healthy activity like exercise can improve women's mood and make them feel good about themselves because it is an act of self-care and self-love. Furthermore, by showing how Renee finally exercises without the primary intention to alter her body, the objectification of women as objects to be seen and evaluated is challenged.

DISCUSSION

I Feel Pretty vs. I Look Pretty: Challenging Women Objectification

The previous discussions have touched upon the portrayals of Renee as a character who experiences objectification and how the film attempts to challenge it. The discussion has shown that the cultural beauty ideals are disadvantageous for women's mobility and psychological well-being, thus alternative concepts of beauty are needed. In this light, the characteristics of objectification itself should be interfered. Since objectification occurs when one's physical appearance (observable physical attributes) is merely or primarily valued in comparison to their competence or internal qualities (non-physical attributes) (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), shifting the focus toward women's competence or internal qualities helps to challenge the objectification. This shifting to internal qualities is indeed found in analyzing the film *I Feel Pretty* as the film introduces alternative concepts of beauty, namely self-confidence, intelligence, and health.

These concepts are in line with previous studies as they are contributive in the attitudes of resisting objectification. Self-confidence is found to moderate the relationship between objectified body consciousness and social interaction anxiety (Appu & Lukose, 2022). Intelligence is also considered as one of the human attributes which is perceived as lacking in women who are objectified (Morris et al., 2018). Similarly, another study found that objectified women are indeed perceived as lacking in mental capacity (Kellie et al., 2019). Finally, health, as manifested in

focus on bodily function instead of appearance, prevents and reduces the state of objectification (Alleva et al., 2015; O'Hara et al., 2014). Not only do these three concepts found in this research strengthen the previous studies, but it also contributes to literature studies on objectification that are saturated with sexual objectification of women characters, overlooking the beauty or appearance-based objectification.

What needs to be discerned is that these alternatives are not observable solely through outward appearance promoted as rigid concepts. Given how confidence, intelligence, and health are abstract constructs instead of physical, they can be manifested differently and not only limited to Renee's experiences in the film. For instance, women's confidence in public speaking, women's intrapersonal intelligence, or their recovery from eating disorders are some of the different manifestations. It also shows how these non-physical concepts are subjective and contextual or treat women as humans with different backgrounds and conditions. Thus, the conception and manifestation of beauty itself are encouraged to come or grow from the women themselves as autonomous beings, not from external ideas, people, or the culture that impose them and contaminating their sense of value, showing the rejection of beauty ideals as a form of social control over women. Especially, since what is wanted from such objectifying ideas is not female beauty, but female obedience (Wolf, 2013). Therefore, the film attempts to shift the idea of beauty from something physical and universal to non-physical and contextual. Such non-competitive, non-hierarchical, and non-violent nature is indeed the characteristics sought in the embodiment of beauty (Wolf, 2013).

Accordingly, these alternatives are also what bring Renee to achieve love relationship, dream job, or life pleasure in general. It supports the idea of Wolf (2013), a feminist scholar, that beauty is supposed to bring pleasure into women's life instead of taking it away through discrimination based on physical qualities women do not completely have control over. Thus, these proposed alternatives are not only treating women as humans but also as humans of pleasure or happiness.

In conclusion, the alternative beauty concepts proposed view beauty as no longer restricted to universal ideas of physical conformation. This encourages women to not only pay more attention to the three alternative concepts found in the film, but also to further look critically or explore before holding onto any idea of beauty. Such exploration that foregoes a committed idea of beauty results in women without a foreclosed identity of beauty, but they rather are active agents or subjects of what determine themselves as valuable.

CONCLUSION

The appearance-based beauty ideals socialize women as objects to be seen and evaluated which is further internalized by women in perceiving their values. This shows that the existing ideals do not only threaten women's right to be free from dehumanization but also shows that women have been actively performing the gendered ideals and maintaining the dehumanizing treatment by internalizing and acting according to the imposed ways of valuing themselves. This indicates the need for women to break free from the uncritical submission towards the imposed external ideals, and take an active role in finding beauty concepts from within themselves, such as beauty that is beyond the physical and involves women's

internal qualities. These values are found in the film as qualities that actually improve Renee's life. It is as reflected in the title of the film, *I Feel Pretty*, since what makes women beautiful is not merely their looks, but also how their qualities make them feel beautiful inside. Therefore, this film is found to be constructing meaning and proposing ideas of alternative concepts of beauty. It calls for positive images of women in cinema by rejecting the oppressing beauty ideals and encouraging autonomous ones.

This study has its limitation as it focuses on the objectification experience of heterosexual white American women in Western culture. Future research on the diverse context of other cultures or the women of minority groups, especially in literature and film studies which has been lacking in contrast to social studies, is encouraged. Furthermore, suggestions on studying women's characters and the issue of objectification need to include the overlooked form of objectification, such as the normalized practices of women's makeup application, fashion montage, exercise, mirror-gazing, relationships, etc. In other words, discussing women objectification in literature and films need to be more critical or not only focus on the hostile forms of objectification.

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