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Interrogating Playboy: Has the Discourse Changed?

A Qualitative Inquiry of Intimate Citizenship

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3-7-2024

NRF National Research Foundation

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Declaration by Students

I, Danét Govender (Student number: 1665242), am a student registered for a Masters in Linguistics by Dissertation in the years 2022-2024. I hereby declare the following:

- I am aware that plagiarism (the use of someone else's work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong.
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- I have followed the required conventions in referencing the thoughts and ideas of others.
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Signature:  **Date: 7 March 2024**

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I now know that I have never been alone, even during this undertaking, thank you God, with You all is possible: 'And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.' – Matthew 21:22.

List of Abbreviations

BBL – Brazilian Butt Lift

CDA – Critical Discourse Analysis

HAES – Health at Every Size

IG – Instagram

LGBTQIA+ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and Other

MCDA – Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

MILF – Mom I'd Like to Fuck

POV – Point of View

SNS – Social Network Site

WTF – What the Fuck?!

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1. Introduction



"For Playboy *to have a male on the cover is a huge deal for the LGBT community, for my brown people community and it's all so surreal. A total "is this even fucking happening right now?" type of vibe. And I'm so pretty."* (Ziff, 2021)

When Bretman Rock, Filipino-American beauty influencer and social media personality, posted the above image on his Instagram page, looking fiercely confident and stating that he was a *Playboy* bunny, I was in utter shock and adoration because he conquered a space that has historically perpetuated white privilege, misogyny, sexism, fatism, anti-queer sentiment, homophobia, and the fetishising of brown-skinned people and Asian women.

I have been following Bretman Rock on social media since my days as a high schooler. During breaks my friends and I would turn on our phones and tune into Bretman Rock's latest beauty content. He was our makeup guru and idol on all things 'bad bitch' – a slang term for a woman who is attractive, confident, and independent – empowering us through his shared content.

Yet, it was only until a few years ago that he came to mean so much more to me due to his advocacy for LGBTQIA+ rights and representation, being openly gay and proud of his Filipino background, and identifying as non-binary (using all pronouns). I relate to Bretman Rock as a brown-skinned bisexual woman and feel represented by him in some ways through a shared community.

The above image of Bretman Rock is what inspired this entire research project and its objectives. I was curious to explore what the Playboy brand has been engaging with recently: who they are representing, and how they are communicating about previously marginalised groups. Most importantly, I wanted to investigate how *Playboy* has responded and rebranded in the light of prior scandals and backlash related to fatism, sexism, queerphobia, and the male gaze.

As a result, my dissertation examines the concept of intimate citizenship within the Playboy brand. Inspired by Sargent's (2010) evocative words that 'all utopias ask questions' and are characterised by 'social dreaming', a desire for something better, for personal or societal transformation, I seek to answer the following research questions, as listed below.

Main Research Question:

What shifts have occurred in *Playboy*'s discourse following past criticisms and its recent rebranding on Instagram (as discussed by Bennet, 2019)?

Sub-questions:

(A) What semiotic resources are employed in *Playboy*'s Instagram content, and how do they construct representations of gender, queerness, and fatness?

(B) What messages and ideologies about gender, queerness, and fatness are conveyed through *Playboy*'s online textual and visual content on Instagram?

I approach these questions with an express focus to not only to qualitatively dissect the representations but also to observe the Instagram public's reception and interpretation of the brand's latest content (between the years 2021 and 2023) in order to better paint a picture of the mediascape and broader discourses on gender, queer and fatness in *Playboy*.

The layout of this dissertation begins with the Aim and Rationale chapter, following the Introduction and outline of research questions. Here, I clarify the dissertation's overarching goal, direction, and significance. Next, the Literature Review chapter is divided into two parts: the first part provides background on magazines and *Playboy*, covering significant criticisms, and its various social issues; and the second part addresses themes of gender, queerness, and fatness, contextualising these themes within scholarly work, case studies, and discourses.

The Theoretical Framework chapter then discusses social constructionism alongside the concepts of discourse, social semiotics, representation, multimodality, and intimate citizenship

which inform the perspective taken for this dissertation, and its design, conduct, and later data interpretations. The Methodology chapter provides the philosophical paradigm utilised in the research's design, also covering the data collection and coding processes, tool for analysis, and considerations of reflexivity.

The Empirical chapter follows by presenting the data, data analysis, and findings of the themes of gender, queerness, and fatness, each structured into two parts: (1) detailed MCDA analyses of the visual samples, with both presentations and interpretations of the data; and (2) summarised patterns of each theme, presented in the Findings.

The Discussion chapter offers an argument and final interpretation of the overall findings, relating them to the literature and theoretical framework. Finally, the Conclusion addresses the research questions, reflects on my journey throughout this dissertation and the limitations I faced, and presents closing remarks.

2. Aim and Rationale

Until recently *Playboy* was plagued with an image crisis after founder Hugh Hefner's editorial line of 'sexual liberation for all' was critiqued by academics and journalists for containing the promotion of sexual violence, toxic masculinity, and misogyny, and heavily contributed to the visual and discursive objectification of women.

The New York Times article 'Will the Millennials Save *Playboy*?' highlighted these multiple critiques (Bennet, 2019), and also included a look at an autobiography by a former playmate *Down the Rabbit Hole* by Holly Madison (Madison, 2015), and the documentary *Secrets of Playboy* (Dean, 2022). All criticisms against *Playboy* are on issues of toxic masculinity, the exclusion of marginalised identities and the problematic male gaze that pertains to sexual objectification. The brand was in dire need of a reinvented identity to engage in a sexual liberation for all, one that was no longer restricted to catering only to white heterosexual men.

Since *Playboy*'s transition to digital-only content in 2020, the brand appears to have extended beyond its traditionally known heterosexual male-dominated presence (Bellinger, 2021). According to Bennet (2019), *Playboy*'s latest agenda appears to entail transitioning to a socio-politically conscious brand of consensual objectification and artistic quality content, aimed at representing a diversified group of persons, across gender, sexuality, and fatness, for the viewing pleasure of all.

Playboy, founded by American (editor-in-chief and publisher) Hugh Hefner, published its first issue in December of 1953 and went on to set the basis of an American male heterosexual masculine type of 'lad mag' (Conekin, 2000). With *Playbo*y, Hefner seemingly attempted to create a space for sexual liberation; something that was scandalous and provocative for its time (see details in the Literature Review).

Hefner's – and at this point, inseparably *Playboy'*s – goal of 'sexual liberation for all' is a complex tale, that reveals his following an inclusive and progressive ethos (Bennet, 2019): the 1955 publication of 'The Crooked Man', a short story about an alternate reality whereby the protagonist of the story the titular "crooked man" is a heterosexual man struggling to hide his true orientation in an oppressive society, the story places homosexuality as the norm and heterosexuality on the margins. In addition, the famed headline of 'Gay is Good' printed in 1969, is symbolic of his philanthropic contributions and support toward Equal Rights Amendment campaigns, abortion rights, and various other free speech organisations.

However, a more oppressive and harmful side to *Playboy* under Hefner's directorship has also been documented: unauthorised use of celebrity photographs (Bellinger, 2021), sexual violence, the objectification and oppression of women, and toxic masculinity (Bennet 2019; Dean, 2022; Madison, 2015).

Hugh Hefner stepped down from being editor-in-chief in 2016 and gave *Playboy* to his son Cooper Hefner, who then created a millennial-centred platform known as *StagDaily*. Soon after acquiring the company, Cooper Hefner handed it over to Ben Kohn, thus removing the Hefner name from all affiliation with the Playboy brand. Under Ben Kohn the brand has been controlled by a private-equity firm, Rizvi Traverse, and run by a younger team of editors and writers who have been hired to shift the magazine's editorial line to a more progressive brand identity (Bennet, 2019).

Such changes across ownership and staff led to changes in *Playboy'*s content, such as the adoption of 'consensual objectification', and more inclusive artistic quality of content representative of people across multiple marginalised intersections, i.e. those with disabilities, plus size models, queer identities, and gender fluid representations.

In wanting to appeal to a wider range of consumers, the team that runs *Playboy*'s content (editors, writers, photographers, and advertisers) engages in a transformative project, tackling key Western sociopolitical issues, while aiming to create content that is representative and supportive of a diverse range of people and identities across marginalised intersections. This is aimed at fostering intimate citizenship (see Theoretical Framework for a discussion on intimate citizenship) and provide 'sexual liberation' in terms of sexual wellness, education, and a business culture that appeals to the younger and modern consumer – progressive and neoliberal (Bennet, 2019).

Lad mags (newer men's lifestyle magazines) are imbued with an adaptability that allows them to persevere particularly when it comes to their cultural ideology. This is shown in their flexibility throughout time, and their appeal to the changing generational man. The forefather of the lad mag was *Esquire*. This was a magazine dedicated to soft pornography and 'special interest' publications (Conekin, 2000) and inspired many of the other existing lad mags which centred on women's nudes, locker room talk, and gross-outs. Unlike *FHM, Maxim,* and *Front* (Benwell, 2003), *Playboy* has completely transformed, having lost its paperback form, and magazine confines, evolving into a brand recognised by the symbolic Playboy icon alone.

Despite these many evolutions in the media landscape and brand ideology, and what is still seen in contemporary lad mag brands, a cultural ideology has been maintained, pertaining to the heterosexual matrix, objectification of women, and their role as a key site of hypermasculinity, sexuality and desire socialisation. This then informs many studies on the discourses of sexuality, gender, and desire, and their interrogations of these magazines – and turned brands, such as *Playboy* – which are both representative sites and mobilising forces of crucial socio-cultural shifts in society (see Straus & Baron, 1983; Matacin & Burger, 1987; Scott & Cuvelier, 1987; Bogaert et al., 1993; Benwell, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005; Coy & Horvath, 2011; Horvath et al., 2012; Roberts & Muta, 2016; Itzmeizeh, 2017; Romero-Sánchez et al., 2017; Sculos, 2017; Kimmel, 2018).

This dissertation aims to investigate how representations of gender, queerness, and fatness have evolved in *Playboy*'s online platform (see Methodology for more on the chosen themes), and to explore the ideological messages embedded in these shifts through a constructionist paradigm.

The objectives include:

1. To analyse patterns of representation related to gender, queerness, and fatness in selected *Playboy* online content (i.e., on Instagram, between the years 2021 and 2023).
2. To identify dominant patterns and messages conveyed through these representations.
3. To assess shifts in these representations, considering past criticisms and social and cultural changes.
4. To contextualise the findings within broader theoretical frameworks of gender studies, queer theory, and fat studies.

3. Literature Review

The title *Playboy* is written across the top of the cover page in bright deep red, in stark contrast against the black and white cover. Its slogan 'Entertainment for men' is directly below the brand name, making clear who the target consumer is (*HuffPost*, 2017). On the right-hand side are coverlines telling readers wat can be expected of the magazine. It is 50 cents and includes a first colour nude of Marilyn Monroe. One of these coverlines shouts, 'Vip on sex', along with indication that this is *Playboy's* first issue (*HuffPost*, 2017).

Conekin (2000) describes the historical moment when *Playboy* published its first issue in December of 1953 by founder Hugh Hefner, saying it set the basis of the ideal Western man and consumer, a lad mag mirrored from Hefner's own favourite magazine known as *Esquire* (Conekin, 2000). However, with *Playboy*, Hefner aimed to create a space for sexual liberation; even if liberation was solely granted to some – the white heterosexual American man – but not others.

The Playboy brand we know today has undergone significant transformations, moving away from explicit nudity and the traditional magazine format to embracing a new form of social awareness. It has evolved into an online brand that aims to represent and empower diverse bodies and identities (Bennet, 2019). No longer does the brand just sell women's nude photographs – that are supposedly artistic and consensually objectifying – and host interviews with notable politicians and activists, but *Playboy* also sells homeware merchandise and clothing, in conjunction with occasionally showcasing support for queer, gender fluid and plus-size bodies.

To understand the possible changes, transgressions, and reinventions that the brand has made, it is important to start at the beginning of *Playboy*'s history. It was once a popular lad mag, a magazine that in some ways functioned as any other magazine, shaping and reflecting the culture and social fabric of society, but unlike other magazines it evolved with technological advances into being more, into being a lifestyle brand with its own fashion label, jewellery, household items and aspired 'way of living'.

The literature review is divided into two parts, the first part contextualises *Playboy* by tracing the history of magazines, with a focus on the emergence of lad mags. It then provides a background on *Playboy* itself, detailing its origins as a magazine and centrefold, and reviews scholarly works that explore themes of socialisation, gendered representations, and violence

within its content. What follows is a consideration of *Playboy*'s claims of promoting sexual liberation and examines its recent rebranding efforts, framed through the editorial team's own statements. The second part shifts to the themes of gender, queerness, and fatness, offering an overview of the relevant literature and theoretical frameworks. These themes are then examined within the context of social network sites, situating them in the broader landscape of digital representation and discourse.

3.1. History of Magazines and the Emergence of Lad Mags

Gerhard (n.d.) tells us that it was not until 1731 that the term 'magazine' was coined: it was named figuratively from the earlier use of the word for printed lists of military stores and information, to mean the publication being a 'storage' of information, later it was termed a 'periodical journal containing miscellaneous writings' that dates from the publication of the first one which was *Gentleman's Magazine.*

Although the term 'magazine' was only coined in 1731, publications were being produced in Great Britain, Europe, and the American colonies earlier than this, with the first publication coming out of the American colonies in 1741 (Gerhard, (n.d.).

Aronson (2010) explains that the American magazine was a direct result of the emergent democratic culture that permitted the production and consumption of magazines. In the beginning publishers frequently presented anonymous contributions of prose, poetry, letters, queries, and fragments – whatever material they could gather (Aronson, 2010). These presented a more diverse array of content than their British or European counterparts.

It was only in the nineteenth century, with the increase in population in America and advancements in printing technology, which allowed faster, better quality printing and mass distribution, that magazine publishing saw a dramatic growth (Gerhard, (n.d.).

Even though one of the earliest men's magazines, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, began in 1731 during the period outlined by Aronson (2010, pp. 32-33) as "the rise and formulation" of the popular magazine, it did not gain widespread influence until the nineteenth century. It was only from the period of the mass-market magazine, which arose during the first half of the twentieth century, that the form and type of content seen in the contemporary men's magazine of today started to take shape (Aronson, 2010; Pendergast, 2000).

Men's magazines over time became more than simple texts. They mirrored shifts in masculine identities, and perceptions of the ideal masculine type, showing how these changes have been constructed, contested, and propagated. Moreover, these mirrors played a key role in positioning women within Western society and formulating traditional gender norms (Swiencicki, 2001).

Early men's magazines, like the first general magazines, were characterised by a diverse mix of voices and competing topics (Aronson, 2010). For example, *The Gentleman's Magazine* (published from 1731 to 1907), one of the earliest and most popular magazines, featured reviews, essays, songs, and columns on births, deaths, and marriages (Cave et al., n.d).

Lad mags were a revamp of the 'New Man' era that took place during the twentieth century, an era in which men's magazines covered fashion, music, and culture, that took place during the second wave of the feminist movement (Benwell, 2002). This shift culminated in the 'New Lad' era of the 21st century, described as "a withdrawal by masculinity from centre stage and a diffidence and ambivalence about excessive displays of vanity or physicality" (Benwell, 2003, p. 156).

'New Man' era magazines, directed at men, existed in the form of 'soft' pornography (e.g., *Playboy* and *Penthouse*) and 'special interest' publications on the likes of sport, DIY, fishing, and cars (Benwell, 2002), as seen in *Esquire* (Conekin, 2000). *Esquire* is considered the men's magazine that paved the road to modern men's magazines, by being the first to explicitly and exclusively centre on men's personal and leisurely lives (Swiencicki, 2001).

Benwell (2001) and Bødker and Osgerby (2017), however, state that the era and its magazines were found unfavourable due to notions of being 'tainted' by femininity, homosexuality, and consumer culture. Consequently, springing forth during the 1990s were the 'New Lad' era magazines (lad mags), which centred on readdressing men's anxieties and fears through redirection; reclaiming masculinity as the bachelor running through town, diverting the subject gaze onto women – objectifying and sexualising women's bodies – locker room talk, and 'Gross Outs' (Benwell, 2011).

Thus, lad mags were provided with an avenue into selling new content for advertising, in selling women and the modern masculinity – increasing consumerism – whilst reclaiming the power of masculinity and simultaneously preserving an intelligent post-feminist political identity (Benwell, 2003).

Since the era of New Lad began, starting with *Loaded* and followed by its popular imitators *FHM, Maxim*, and *Front* (Benwell, 2003), men's lifestyle magazines have become the focus of many studies on the discourses of masculinity, sexuality, gender, and desire. These magazines serve both as platforms that reflect key socio-cultural shifts and as agents that actively drive change in these areas (Benwell, 2003).

Hegarty et al.(2016) highlight the cultural event that was *Loaded* magazine and how it was part of the founding the lad mag era. Since the launch of *Loaded*, a British magazine, in 1994, it became the first of multiple lads' mags to follow that defined themselves against existing men's magazines of the New Man era. They were loaded began the readdressing and reclaiming of 'authentic' masculinity characterised by being hard and tough, drinking excessively, and sexualising women (Hegarty et al., 2016).

However, after the 'Lose the Lads Mags' campaign, that targeted lad mags as perpetuators of sexism and sexual violence, lad mags saw a drastic decline in sales. Even as lad mags attempted to shift to an online presence, many like *FHM, Loaded, Nuts* and *Zoo* failed; only *Maxim* and *Playboy* have been able to keep existing because of their adaptability to the changing socio-cultural and political contexts (Hegarty et al., 2016).

Similar to women's magazines, "Men's magazines have not simply been texts that reflected wider shifts in the articulation of masculine identities but have been significant sites within which these shifts have been constructed, negotiated and circulated" (Swiencicki, 2001, p.1).

In men's magazines, irony, humour, and metaphor were used to foster homosociality, shape specific aspects of masculinity, and validate masculine identities (Benwell, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007; Kimmel, 2018; Sculos, 2017). In contrast, women's magazines employed these same discursive strategies – irony, humour, and metaphor – to create excess, engage in socio-political and cultural negotiations, and subtly incorporate progressive feminist ideologies (Fiske, 1986; Blix, 1992).

3.1.1 *Playboy*

Bødker and Osgerby (2017) state that when *Playboy* published its first issue in December of 1953 it was an instant hit and its circulation skyrocketed to more than four million by the end of the 1960s. The authors attribute such success to the way in which the brand presented itself, as a "visionary bible for a new breed of hedonistic male consumers" (Bødker & Osgerby, 2017, p. 2).

From the beginning, *Playboy* promoted itself as a non-conformist, heterosexual masculine-type lad mag, aimed at the white American man, mirrored from Hefner's favourite magazine, *Esquire* (Conekin, 2000).

With *Playboy*, the founder aimed to create a space for sexual liberation; something that was quite scandalous and provocative for its time (Conekin, 2000). Bødker and Osgerby (2017) identify this as unsurprising given *Playboy's* non-conformist nature and history of partaking in key socio-political debates.

The inclusion of *Playboy's* many interviews with American politicians, party members, and civic organisation representatives, including academics, regional politics and international affairs have always played an integral feature of the magazine, especially throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Bødker & Osgerby, 2017).

In engaging with such socio-political changes of the time, *Playboy's* coverage of politics assisted in carving out a particular kind of masculine identity – alongside the magazine's nude pin-ups of women and product features – the political material helped outline the archetypal *Playboy* reader as not only a "…sybaritic hedonist, but also as an informed and intelligent man of the world" (Bødker & Osgerby, 2017, p.2).

Hefner's – and inseparably up until 2019 – *Playboy's* goal of 'sexual liberation for all', is a complex tale that reveals his following of an inclusive and progressive ethos (Bennet, 2019).

This is seen in the 1955 publication of 'The Crooked Man', a short story about an alternate reality, where homosexuality is the norm and heterosexuals are on the margins. What is seen is a subversion of the traditional societal structure, where the roles and expectations of sexuality are flipped. The narrative presents a world in which heterosexuality is the minority and treated as abnormal, rather than homosexuality, highlighting the contrast in how society might treat marginalised groups if those groups were in the majority (Beaumont, 1955).

This shift in perspective is seen through the lens of a world in which heterosexuals face discrimination and exclusion. The story likely uses this reversed scenario to provoke thought about the social and psychological effects of prejudice, marginalisation, and normality, encouraging readers to reflect on their own societal structures and biases (Beaumont, 1955).

Included in this change is the famed headline, 'Gay is Good' (*Playboy,* 1969), whereby *Playboy* signalled its shift from being a symbol of traditional masculinity and sexual liberation to becoming a platform for progressive social causes. The headline 'Gay is Good' itself represents

a clear endorsement of LGBTQIA+ rights, signalling a break from mainstream views that were often hostile toward queer identities at the time.

Even more so, Hefner's philanthropic contributions and support toward abortion rights, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) campaigns and various other free speech organisations mark a significant transformation in *Playboy*'s image, moving from a magazine associated with sexual indulgence to a brand that stands behind social justice issues. The magazine's philanthropic contributions and involvement in these causes are ways in which it not only reflects but also mobilises public opinion on these critical social issues (Bennet, 2019).

Playboy's history is deeply entwined with both progressive and problematic elements, revealing contradictions in its legacy. While the magazine gained a reputation for supporting personal freedoms, including civil rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, and feminist ideas in certain contexts, it also perpetuated harmful stereotypes and reinforced misogyny (Michallon, 2019). Over time its portrayal of women, particularly through the Playmate centrefolds, contributed to the objectification of women by emphasising sexualised images of them and reducing them to mere objects of male desire.

Pitzulo (2017) expresses how the magazine has also faced significant criticism for endorsing fatphobia, racial fetishisation, and homophobic content. *Playboy's* historical focus on idealised body types often excluded or marginalised fat individuals, reinforcing societal beauty standards. Additionally, the fetishisation of non-white bodies – particularly Asian and black women – was a recurring theme in its pages, reflecting broader societal racial dynamics of the time.

3.1.2 *Playboy* in Focus: Socialisation, Gendered Representations, and Violence

Beggan and Allison (2003) undertook a study on *Playboy* as an influence in socialising boys into men. By focusing on men's phenomenological experiences with sexually explicit material, the development of the sexual self-concept, and their conceptualisation of and interactions with women, and lack of misogyny is examined by these researchers.

The authors find that most participants describing their first *Playboy* moment seemed to involve three interconnected elements (Beggan & Allison, 2003): (1) discovering *Playboy* in the company of a same-sexed friend, i.e. the experience of the fraternal bond; (2) recognising the transgressive nature of *Playboy,* i.e. (3) the secretive nature of viewing *Playboy*; and experiencing sexual interest and arousal.

Of this, Beggan and Allison (2003) find that *Playboy*'s influence on masculine identity and attitudes about women indicate that despite *Playboy* informing masculine identity in the sense of sexual self-schemas, and due to the lack of misogyny found in its participants, *Playboy* is not found to influence men's attitudes towards women in a harmful manner (Beggan & Allison, 2003). Therefore, *Playboy*'s influence over these issues has waned (Beggan & Allison, 2003).

Roberts and Muta (2016) investigate the trend of weight loss and weight gain in *Playboy* magazines through examinations of changes in the Body Mass Index (BMI) of the *Playboy* models from 2000 to 2014.

Accompanying the pictorial of the naked models is a brief biographical statement, body measurements, interests, and other miscellaneous information. The centrefolds, published once a month, resulting in a total of 180 models from January 2000 to December 2014, were collected (Roberts & Muta, 2016). To examine weight trends, Roberts and Muta (2016) calculated the BMI for each centrefold.

Roberts and Muta's (2016) findings show that despite the trend toward increased thinness reported in earlier studies of *Playboy* centrefolds, there has shown to be a reverse – between 2000 and 2014, the average model BMI increased during most of this period, with 95% of models now possessing BMIs that are either normal weight or only slightly underweight (Roberts & Muta, 2016).

Another study that covers Playmate's bodies by Bogaert et al. (1993) looks at the changes in explicitness (nudity), objectification (the face of the model not being visible), and the model's age. Using content analysis, the data which consisted of 430 centrefolds were examined; this is similar to Roberts and Muta's (2016) study which also utilized centrefolds as a means of investigating the BMI indexes of Playmates.

Bogaert et al. (1993) observed that both explicitness and objectification in men's magazines increased over time, from 1953 to 1990. This pattern parallels the way male publishers historically controlled the narrative in women's magazines (Aronson, 2010; Blix, 1992; Moskowitz, 1996). Notably, men have maintained dominance over women not only socially but also through the portrayal of women in patriarchal contexts like men's magazines. In these settings, men have traditionally dictated what and who is considered desirable, pressuring women to conform to these expectations.

A study by Scott and Cuvelier (1987) analysed *Playboy* within the frame of sexual violence, and gender-based violence (GBV). The authors attempt to draw correlations between the increase in sexually violent content – rape, sadomasochism, and exploitative/ coercive sexual relations in its pictorials and cartoons – in *Playboy*'s magazines, to the increase in statistics of sexual violence occurring.

Through analysis of *Playboy*'s pictorials and cartoons, Scott and Cuvelier (1987) find the number of sexually violent cartoons and/or pictorials in *Playboy* is extremely small, with a ratio of sexually violent cartoons to all cartoons at 8.7%. Correlating this to the statistics of sexual violence is seen by Scott & Cuvelier (1987) to be a far stretch, especially since sexually violent material in *Playboy*'s content is discovered to be decreasing with time, over the 30 years examined by the authors.

Another investigation framed within the theme of sexual violence by Matacin and Burger (1987), looked at the gender norms reinforced through *Playboy*'s cartoons. The authors study explored the women figures posing as victims of sexual coercion, sexually naïve, and childlike, with a more exaggerated attractive body, than their men counterparts, i.e. being objects of the male gaze.

Utilising content analysis Matacin and Burger (1987) examined cartoons in 12 issues of the 1985 *Playboy* magazine: similar to Scott and Cuvelier's (1987) study. The authors discover that, "negative images of women identified by critics of pornography are the result of societal attitudes and values rather than their shapers" (Matacin & Burger, 1987, p.185).

Generally put, just like Scott and Cuvelier's (1987) study, Matacin and Burger's 1987 study indicates that the content in the magazines is a rather far stretch as a variable of influence in real-world sexual violence. Although gender stereotypes are subtly represented in the magazine material, all sexual accounts are rather a reflection of real-world views.

Masculinity, sexuality, and gender discourse are central themes in magazines, especially men's magazines. These publications can serve various purposes: fostering homosocial bonds, providing a space for identity formation, and exposing harmful gender stereotypes that reinforce the patriarchal dividend. Or, conversely, they perpetuate traditional masculinities in such a way that toxic ideologies and practices are not held accountable, through the ambiguous, hegemonic, and invisible synthetic masculinity presented in these magazines.

As *Playboy*, like any other lad mag brand, forms a piece in the larger puzzle of the discourse on masculinity and 'progression', it is vital to dissect and track its role as a perpetuator and reflector of ideologies and status quos in the arenas of gender representation, queerness, and fatness.

3.1.3 *Playboy*'s Sexual Liberation for All

Agha et al.'s *The Principles of Pleasure* (2022), a TV docuseries, explores sexual liberation, what it means, what it entails, who does and does not have access to it, and how it feeds into other socio-cultural structures of our lives, like our relationships with others, and our relationship with ourselves, and how we experience social power.

Chaves (2011) explains how, from a medical aspect, the 1960s became a pivotal era for women's sexual liberation because of the major medical advancements achieved in creating the contraceptive pill, thus allowing women to fully explore and enjoy their sexual activity without fear of falling pregnant, "The idea that sex was not purely for procreation became a dominant factor that tied sexual expression to women's choices, and studies showed a dramatic increase in sexual intercourse" (Chaves, 2011, p. 20). With these changes, *Playboy* played a role in advocating for the contraceptive pill as a valuable medical advancement.

The 1960s was a time of changing sexual mores, closely tying consumerism to mass cultural acceptance of sexuality, promoting feminist liberation – which sexual liberation was synonymous with at this time – and women's advancement (Chaves, 2011).

Understanding what sexual liberation means is vital in exploring *Playboy'*s messages of sexual liberation over time; what sexual liberation means to *Playboy* and if it is as inclusive as Agha et al. (2022) docuseries on sexual liberation entails.

Playboy has presented complex and somewhat contradictory (discursive) content, on one hand. But there are signs of liberation and inclusivity present in *Playboy*'s non-conformist nature: socio-political engagements with Western politicians, party members, members of key movements, and academics, as well as tackling issues of abortion rights and campaigning for the ERA (Bødker & Osgerby, 2017).

The brand is also one of the first to ever include black women in its magazine, alongside white women and speak to black women's sexual liberation, even though the lack of Black women is fetishised in their representation (Bennet, 2019; Conekin, 2000). Today it continues with its

inclusivity and need for progression by staging gender fluid and queer representations into its content.

Chaves (2011) specifies cases of *Playboy*'s sexually permissive ideology, when the brand did not reinforce men's domination over women, e.g. women being allowed to say 'no' to men with whom they did not want to participate with in a sexual relationship, and offered their male consumers a perspective into women's experiences and choices. Additionally, in using particular discursive strategies, *Playboy*'s advice column (in the magazine) positioned women not as objects or commodities for personal gain (Chaves, 2011).

The brand set a standard for how men should behave towards women, interdicting sexist ideas of women as strictly for pleasure, use, or control, and rather honouring mutual respect. Additionally, addressing sexuality in an unbiased and informative manner, *Playboy* stated that individuals held agency over their self-advancement, regardless of their gender (Chaves, 2011).

Chaves (2011) highlights the *Playboy* article 'What is Normal?' by Wardell Pomeroy, noting its presentation of sexuality as a personal experience, which contributed to the development of sexual liberation. Pomeroy framed feminine sexuality as a natural human experience, asserting an ungendered view on acceptable sexual behaviour and stating that our main concern should preferably be with individual wellbeing rather than with damaging labelling of sexual behaviour as normal or abnormal. Again, *Playboy* promoted individual agency over well-being regardless of gender.

This mass acceptance of various sexual norms permitted women to engage in sexual experimentation and self-discovery, which they were not allowed to do in the past due to strict sexual codes (Chaves, 2011). Such a permissive attitude towards sexuality grew an even bigger space for feminism and women's advancement, reducing stigmas associated with immoral behaviour and sexuality. In turn, these newfound freedoms translated over into consumerism, as an opportunity to make personal choices based on individual desires (Chaves, 2011); it appears that individual agency is at the core of (*Playboy*'s) sexual liberation.

On the other hand, amidst these sexual liberation developments, there are serious accusations, and graphic retellings by its former playmates, recurringly raising issues of women's oppression and control – particularly of their bodies (Bogaert et al., 1993; Roberts & Muta, 2016), toxic masculinity (Beggan & Allison, 2003), and GBV (Hegarty et al., 2016; Scott & Cuvelier, 1987).

The brand traditionally catered solely to the sexual liberation of white heterosexual men, despite voicing otherwise, and the power asymmetry existing between its consumer and playmate/participants was oppressive. Moreover, there exists a history of misogyny, fatism, Asian and black fetishisation, anti-queer and homophobic content, and continued gender stereotypes in the magazine.

The brand appears to lay within a constant ocean of ideological warfare, altogether (de)legitimising certain Western norms, expectations and attitudes, assuming a space of authority in allowing these shifts to occur, and ultimately reflecting on the tug-of-war present in Western society on gender expectations and representations, queerness and fatness within the frame of sexual desire, sexuality, and individual/personal empowerment.

3.1.4 *Playboy's* Rebranding

The New York Times article titled 'Will the Millennials Save *Playboy*?' foregrounded multiple critiques (Bennet, 2019), including an autobiography by a former playmate, *Down the Rabbit Hole* (Madison, 2015), and the documentary *Secrets of Playboy* (Dean, 2022). Issues of toxic masculinity, the exclusion and oppression of marginalised bodies – queer, gender fluid and people with disabilities – women's oppression, GBV, and the problematic gaze (pertaining to sexual objectification) were examined in the article.

However, *Playboy* today has diverse team of younger, and socially conscious individuals (Bennet, 2019), and so brand content is said to have adopted a consensual objectification (wanting to be looked at) and artistic quality, that is representative of all kinds of people, across multiple intersections, i.e. those with disabilities, plus size models, queer figures, and the breaking of gender norms.

This is all aimed at increasing inclusivity, providing sexual liberation in a direction of sexual wellness, education and business culture that appeals to the modern – young and progressive – consumer (Bennet, 2019).

Quoting *Playboy* staff (Bennet, 2019) said that these issues of intimate citizenship appear to form the company's agenda, '…in the office, members of the staff use terms like 'intersectionality," "sex positivity," "privileging" and "lived experience" to describe their editorial vision … *Playboy*'s new "brand vibe," that means being "intimate" but not "explicit", and "cheeky" but not "cheesy."… 'We talk a lot about when something is objectification versus

when it is consensual objectification versus when it is art,' … 'I think objectification removes the agency of the subject. Consensual objectification is the idea of someone feeling good about themselves and *wanting* someone to look at them. Art means, OK, we can hang this on a wall. And if it's both, for us, that's the major win.'

In the second part of the literature review that follows, the focus is on examining the shifts in *Playboy*'s discourse are gender, queerness and fatness (see Methodology, Data Collection and Procedure for how these themes were selected).

3.2 Gender

Historically, gender was continuously thought of along essentialist lines as dichotomous with biological sex – male (man, vir, masculine) and female (woman, Femina, feminine) (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.) – mutually opposite of one another, thus making it easy to assign gendered behavioural norms as naturally occurring and common-sense; this is then applied to whole groups and becomes stereotypes (Talbot, 2005).

Rather Goffman (1979) clarifies gender in relation to sex as, "If gender [can] be defined as the culturally established correlates of sex (whether in consequence of biology or learning), then gender display refers to conventionalized portrayals of these correlates" (Goffman, 1979, p. 69). Gender display informs and is informed by gender identity, which establishes and is established by gender roles – the context, and culture constantly feeds into and is fed by the individual, their agency, choices, and behaviour (performances).

Gender is dependent on cultural values and practices, informed by given cultures' understanding of femininity and masculinity, this shapes expectations of how individuals should ideally behave and communicate. Moreover how individuals behave and communicate forms gender and ultimately influences cultural views (Wood, 2009).

Since the meanings of one's sex are thus not inherent but constructed through interactions with people in a given society, i.e. through socialisation processes (Rose et al., 2012), as societies change, so do communities and contexts, therefore these meanings of gender are dynamic (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015).

Plurality and fluidity are terms often used to delineate gender. Talbot (2010) affirms that gender is not pre-fixed and stable, people's gender identities are performed constantly. Talbot is critical

of this and cautions that gender polarisation (gender binary) is to be avoided, because gender identity must be perceived as fluid and dynamic. Thus, context-dependent but agency-driven, gender is an ongoing negotiation and navigation along a continuum, occurring in multiplicity.

Comprehending the dynamic and complex nature of gender, Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2015) mention intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), a notion stressing the nuances of implicating other converging factors – like race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality – impacting the individual experience through a complexity of added meanings and contextualisation of gender.

3.2.1 Gender, Media and Discourse

One of the earliest forms of media was the radio, followed by television and today with newer technological affordances we have Social Network Sites and the emergence of social media (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015).

Krijnen (2020) expresses that traditional understandings of gender and media are becoming complicated with the developments in technology and globalisation. Due to both intersectional conceptions of gender and because of developments in technology allowing consumers to participate and become active in media content production and contribution; blurring the boundaries in production, content, and consumption and giving rise to the contemporary prosumer (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015).

Krijnen (2020, p. 5) says that "media technology also caused the blurring…between producers and consumers of media", and although this has allowed for a democratisation of media, giving voice to marginalised experiences, there still exists the digital divide, not everyone with the socio-economic means has access to digital content.

With mass media production, content and consumption, there are issues of underrepresentation and misrepresentation, wherein women are either constrained by stereotypical depictions or removed entirely (Krijnen, 2020). This is said to be caused by underrepresentation of women in positions of editorial power, i.e. in the decision-making positions of media production (Krijnen, 2020).

Krijnen (2020) asserts that in the 1970s research into media content and gender representation flourished, causing quantitative analyses on the presence of women in the media content, and gender social roles: women were mostly in domestic spheres, concerned with family, love and friendship, while men were in in the workplace and interested in technology, sports, and

politics. Krijnen (2020) finds that although there have been some positive changes that do not reinforce this binary of gender roles, it is still maintained across media, indicating a lack of change in societal structures and expectations.

With globalising media and gender, Krijnen (2020) asserts that de-Westernisation has become central to looking for experiences and realities of a specific context beyond the American European context – such as with Judith Butler's Western conceptualisations of gender performativity – including phenomena that move beyond geographical boundaries but that hold effects, like the gender pay gap that affects all women globally, but in specifically different manners (Krijnen, 2020).

As most media (mass and social media producers) are situated in Western contexts, there exists an amplification of neoliberal discourses on the gendered subject (Krijnen, 2020). Ultimately the relationship between gender and media is complex with vital nuances when intersectionality is involved, and when the individual as a media producer is considered: "…multiple aspects construct a field of power configurations in which and through which this relationship is articulated" (Krijnen, 2020, p. 7).

Collins (2011) provides a commentary on gender roles in (traditional) media. The author showcases the gaps in literature on gender in the media, namely that women have been underrepresented, and misrepresented when it comes to hypersexualising, and confining social actors in the media to stereotypes.

Most interesting is Collins' (2011) differentiation between posted sexual content and sexualisation: sexual content and partial nudity do not foster harmful attitudes or displace women in oppressed positions, apart from celibacy or virginity praising, rather it is the manner in which sexual content and nudity is portrayed, via facial expressions, body positions and various other factors, this is supported by Machin and Mayr (2012) in their systematic detailing of investigating visual semiotic choices, and by Goffman's (1979) theorisation that highlights the continuous subordination of women in media spaces.

Additionally, Collins (2011) expresses a need to examine the effects – at the level of socialisation and its consequences – of gender role representations (or lack thereof) in the media on social relations in the 'everyday', alongside these analyses of the media itself. And looking further into emerging media and how gender is being constructed in these newer spaces, Collins (2011) mentions that the media user's ability to interact with gender

constructions and representations in emerging media allows for more information into why and how certain ideologies on gender are being (re)produced.

In awareness of these effects of gender representations, Popa and Gavriliu (2015) mention that media is a volatile space, and because audiences can come into direct contact with content, it is vital that media producers are cognisant of biases, discrimination, and exclusion. Digital media offers an avenue for reshaping gender conceptions in an inclusive manner.

Goffman (1979) is a relevant theorist because he grounds gender as an act of 'doing', a performance, this understanding forms the ability to analyse gender through conduct and appearance display and link this to the broader gender discourse and ideology. Goffman's (1979) theory stemmed from impression management and is used by many scholars to date, including Butler (1990), who emphasised the performative nature of identity, whereby gender identity is successful via the constant and repeated acts in clothing choices, body gestures, movements, and the like, that function as the appropriate signifiers of gender.

Butler (1990) also supposed a counterhegemony, in competing discourses that are meant to dismantle the status quo, by engaging in subversions of the norm (subversive politics), resisting certain categorisations, challenging the 'truth' of dominant discourses, and "exposing the falsehood of the idea that an original gender (or heterosexuality) exists" (Watson, 2005, p. 72).

In Bell and Milic (2002), the authors provide a hybrid approach for discourse and multimodal analysis, based on uncovering gender representations and stereotypes in the media, combining a system of analysis developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) and utilising a theoretical framework from Goffman (1976). This has inspired my own data analyses.

The results show that women, more often than men, are engaged in scenes of subordination, even though there are a few contradictory exemptions: the number of women engaged in scenes of subordination outnumbers the few contradictory cases. Subordination occurs in social, spatial, and relational terms, reenacted upon the space and structuring of advertisements, often symbolically and metaphorically.

Turning to gender and discourse, Talbot (2010) states that discourses are historically placed social constructions, involved in the organisation and dissemination of knowledge (Talbot, 2010). Concurrently on gender and discourse Sunderland (2004) endorses seeing gender as a *process*, one that as Goffman (1979) states, people orient to and do in social interactions, and are limited by constraints of transgression, i.e. countering the expected gender norms of a

society, showing that specific contexts are significant in gender construction and performances towards what people can and cannot do without impunity.

3.2.2 Language and Gender Studies (LGS)

Sunderland (2004) declares language – whether written or spoken – as fundamental to discourse functioning, it is "the fabric in which discourse is manifested" (Talbot, 1995, p. 24). With this in mind, this section briefly overlooks the area of Language and Gender Studies.

Discussions about the relationship between language and gender has existed in human society for a long time – take the early prescriptive women's magazines (Aronson, 2010; Blix, 1992; Gerhard, n.d; Moskowitz, 1996), including the book, *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963) which has led to the creation of Language and Gender Studies, which only took up space in the world of academia in the 1970s, during the wake of the Second Wave Feminist movement (Wang, 2021).

Such a correlation between the validation of, and demand for Language and Gender Studies and feminist movements, is no coincidence. For years studies on women's speech looked at both how women's speech is thought of and how language use is 'genderised' in a patriarchal society (Wang, 2021). Language use has historically meant that there is a prescriptive nature to different genders in how men and women should speak, and on what topics are appropriate for discussion.

A common theme occurring in this 'genderising' of language is how women's language use is viewed as talkativeness or verbosity, which is usually disparagingly depicted as unwanted; essentially, supplanting women's talk as inferior to men's talk, and nonsensical (Wang, 2021).

Early studies of language and gender were quite different from those that emerged during the Second Wave Feminist movement, which raised public awareness of gender inequality and helped the field of language and gender gain significance (Wang, 2021). In response, Lakoff (1973, 1975) published two influential papers advocating for women's liberation. She theorised that women's language was perceived as powerless due to social oppression under patriarchal control (Wang, 2021). As a result, Lakoff is regarded as one of the first scholars to pave the way for the scientific study of language and gender.

Given that literature on lad mags and *Playboy* often raises the subjects of language and gender, specifically language and masculinity theorisations, it is important to consider the functioning

of masculinity and how it is culturally constructed in various societies, through whatever site – like the mediascape – may allow for the circulation, negotiation, and reproduction of masculinity constructions.

The study of language and masculinities can be traced back to the theorisations of Sigmund Freud on the Oedipus Complex. It is from trying to pull away from essentialised notions of sex and gender, that sex role theory developed (Lawson 2020): that particular character traits as differentially associated with men and women (and by extension, with masculinity and femininity). Thus how well an individual assimilated with these man-masculine, woman-feminine expectations was a marker of their normative integration into society (Lawson, 2020).

However essentialism and sex role theory were found to be problematic, "…cultural dissatisfaction with established gender relations, institutional sexism, and social inequalities, both inside and outside academia, led to huge strides in theoretical and applied work on power relations, patriarchy, and the social dominance of men" (Lawson, 2020, p. 412).

Consequently, theorists began debating whether there are multiple versions of masculinity and femininity, not necessarily linked to the respective man and woman, but rather that men and women can encompass both femininity and masculinity in diverse ways (Lawson, 2020). Since then ongoing studies on men have continued, and the arena of language and gender (and masculinity) has taken to uncovering notions of covert prestige, masculinity and performance, homosociality, and male solidarity (Milani, 2011; Lawson, 2020).

Lawson (2020) draws emphasis to the merits of Bethan Benwell's work in language and masculinity. Benwell (2001; 2002; 2004; 2005; 2007) investigated discourse in lad mags – via content analysis and critical discourse analysis – and the discourse derived from ethnomethodological interviews, finding that gender, masculinity, and sexuality is interlaced within language; after all, it is through language that gender, and masculinity is constructed, performed, and realised.

Considering masculinity in relation to sexuality, focusing on arenas of socialisation, like the home, school, media, and peers, which place these notions as inseparable and essentialist; coupled with contemporary settings of gender, masculinity, and sexuality formulation, in the online space, lead to misogynistic, and toxic performances of masculinity, and propagate such traditional essentialist notions.

However, queer masculinities increasingly challenge essentialist binaries, creating connections between women and masculinity. Lawson (2020) argues that this is the direction in which language and masculinity studies are moving, where the concepts of men and masculinity are deconstructed. This shift is particularly important in contemporary spaces where these identities are enacted, such as the online mediascape.

3.2.3 Gender Studies in SNS

As new media continues to grow, currently sitting at a 4.5 billion user rate globally with an increase of 7.81% in 2023 compared to the previous year (Dixon, 2023), SNSs are becoming a new avenue into (re)formulations of gender portrayals and social structures albeit in the virtual domain. Various studies have looked at gender from a representational, production and consumption standpoint (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015).

De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013) highlight the mediated nature of SNSs which both strengthens representations of coherence – the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990) and essentialism – and undermines representations of coherence with counter-hegemony in dislocations of passive femininity and hegemonic masculinity.

Studying one of the SNSs, Tortajada et al. (2013) look at Spanish adolescents' use of Fotolog (a photo-blogging service) in their self-representation and identity exploration. The authors question the kinds of self-presentation that Spanish adolescents engage in through the pictures they take (hinting at one of the earliest prosumers), and how types of hyper-ritualisation such as Goffman's (1979) markers of gendering that are used in advertising, are involved.

Tortajada et al. (2013) draw from Goffman (1979) because of the way in which gender displays were understood by the scholar, namely, the ways that gender conventions – of femininity and masculinity – were expressed in advertising as common sense, "…advertisers conventionalize our conventions, stylize what is already a stylization, make frivolous use of what is already something considerably cut off from contextual controls. Their hype is hyper-ritualization" (Goffman, 1979, p. 84).

Aside from drawing on Goffman's (1979) conventions like the ritual of subordination, feminine touch and licensed withdrawal, the authors used other found conventions like gaze and nudity (To-be-looked-at-ness), and the lesbian pose (Tortajada et al., 2013). These involve newer representational strategies in advertising such as eroticised men's bodies (increasing

objectification of men), heterosexual women's explicit showing of sexual desire, and sexually attractive (sexy) lesbians (appearing to appease the male gaze).

Their results indicate no clear-cut subversion of gender norms and stereotypes against the patriarchal order, but rather representations that fit traditional patterns of ideal gender characteristics, that socialise practices of adolescents, and influence how they express their gender – readapting (relocating) traditional gender expressions of femininity and masculinity – ultimately mirroring gender displays found in advertisements into SNSs (Tortajada et al., 2013).

De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013) also look at adolescents (Flemish ones), and their negotiations of gender and sexuality when commenting on profile pictures on these SNSs; unlike Tortajada et al. (2013) who tackle both production and reception of content, De Ridder and Van Bauwel's (2013) concerns are with reception and interaction. De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013) question how discourses are established within heteronormativity, and how the mediated nature of the SNS (Netlog) contributes to resistance. They use a qualitative textual analysis for the comments and showcase how commenting is a gendered practice.

The aims of De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013) are to identify 'intimate citizenship' present within the SNS, i.e. the eradication of social exclusion and assurance of social inclusion, to do this they draw on Butler (1990) and the idea of subversive politics. Subversive politics involves the locating (adhering) and dislocating (countering) of subjects (the social self which operates across the intersecting social groups of a society) within the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990), that is the structuring of norms that produce subjects whose sex, gender, desires, and practices align, along essentialist views.

Looking at the comment section in addition to the contextualising visual content and captions, De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013) find that dislocations of heterosexuality exist on Netlog: in the hyper-femininity of women's engagement, the excessive commenting on women's posts by women and their commenting more than men, including free expressions of sexual desire towards men. Men comment on other men's posts, something typically viewed as a feminine or homosexual practice. But there are still recuperations of heteronomy (relocations), that cause tensions and contradictions reaffirming power differences.

The mediated and networked nature of Netlog – seen across other SNSs – entails some specific practices and dynamics, in relation to social change and 'intimate citizenship', and the medium allows for cultural resistance, making the counterhegemony public and ultimately affording a

space for negotiations of gender and sexuality practices (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013). On Instagram, the mediated nature of the platform both supports the Playboy brand and represses their social change initiative, e.g. women's nipples versus men's, women's nipples are made inappropriate (through blurring) but not men's despite *Playboy*'s equal showcasing of both; thus, reaffirming the objectification of women and their subordination, but not of men.

Mediating the gendered act of commenting is reciprocal in nature as it not only regulates the types of comments to follow on the post but also actively polices and interpolates others' reception and interaction with the post (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013).

Coming to the focal point of this dissertation, the SNS Instagram (IG) – a private company based in the United States – and inspections of gender, Caldeira, De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2018) examine the gender politics functioning in *Playboy*, they draw on the case of Marisa Papen, a popular Instagram model who not only trod the line of Instagram's Terms of Use but countered hegemonic gender norms with a postfeminist stance to body expression.

Caldeira, De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2018) provide a perfect example of the socio-political tensions which exist in SNSs, that are enacted through user engagement, the platform's content, and the platform's own ideology, which mediates what is permissible. Looking at Instagram, the authors observe the political potential of self-representation on Instagram and its ability to enable more diverse forms of gender representation.

They find that despite the platform's reproducing and reinforcing of traditional gender norms – in mannerisms, styles, and poses – there are dislocations present, such as challenges to women's self-representation of appropriateness, like the showing of nipples and voicing sexual desire, including the public sharing of more inclusive gender identities ('everyday activism'). But even these are policed by technological parameters that shape such representations, i.e. Instagram's Terms of Use and the power exerted by Instagram users' feedback (flagging and reporting) (Caldeira, De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2018).

Kendall (1999, p. 58) insightfully argues: "On-line interaction cannot be divorced from the off-line social and political contexts within which participants live their daily lives"; imparting that the observed online complexities and negotiations are augmentations of the everyday within societies.

Often, gender in the media has been discussed in genres of television, film, magazines, and the radio (see Chapter 4 of Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015), new media is still an upcoming genre of

investigation. The data that follows forms part of this newly growing area, drawing from the popular SNS Instagram (Caldeira, De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2018; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015; Li, 2022), the forthcoming data analyses provide a window into gender representations by new media; how gender is utilised to promote consumer culture, and what role the Playboy brand plays in this new global culture of online consumerism.

3.3 Queer

3.3.1 Queer Theory

At its core, queer theory is characterised by a range of intellectual engagements for interrogating desire, and its relationship to identity, therefore, queer theory naturally poses some important questions about the status of gender/sexuality categories and, in particular, throws into focus the relational constitution of identities (Watson, 2005; Spargo, 1999). Queer theory emerges from critical theory and a poststructuralist backdrop in deconstructing the historical and cultural nature of the sexual subject (unified self), whereby categories such as 'heterosexual', 'gay' and 'lesbian' come to be constructed as stable identities (Watson, 2005).

Yet, through the deconstruction process, these fragility of these categories arises, as they continuously rely on the successful performance of gender. Thus, 'queer' breaks away from this fragility, cementing itself in the myriad ways of being, oppression and group dynamics, asserting that sexed and gendered identities are produced 'in relation' to one another, rather than as prefixed (Watson, 2005).

Talbot's (2010) notion of 'subject positioning', whereby an individual is placed in a broad range of positions as a social subject relates to this 'myriad ways of being', because an individual's subject positioning like their identity is not fixed, it changes, in different communities and cultures, producing tensions/conflict of values, assumptions and objectives within the individual, shaping us. Talbot (2010) asks us to think of ourselves as processes, as defined and delimited by discourse, but active in the construction of our (sex, gender, desire) identity – either conforming or not conforming to institutional norms through our performances.

The term 'queer' was first introduced and popularised by theorist Teresa de Lauretis (1991). It emerged from debates about why certain differences – such as race, sexuality, and class – are seen as more significant than others, and how power is distributed among these differences (Watson, 2005). It also addresses the pathologisation of homosexuality, viewed as a deviance from the heterosexual norm (Spargo, 1999). 'Queer' functions as a noun, adjective, or verb that

ultimately speaks directly to the suspicions formed during the Western 1940/50s, that undermined normality, and questioned identity's naturalised link to biological determinism (Spargo, 1999).

'Queer' is thus built upon liberal aims of equality and feminist liberatory political movements seeking to challenge inequitable identity categories and their power relations (Watson, 2005). Watson (2005) says that during the 1980/90s, queer activism – on gay and lesbian rights – drew upon these feminist ideas and reshaped them to fit contemporary liberal political strategies.

'Queer' affords a destabilising of power, so as to disturb the disciplining, marginalising and subordinating effects of social control enacted upon those who do not fit the heterosexual matrix norm (Spargo, 1999). Such ideology aligns with authors De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013) who promote 'intimate citizenship' and draw on Butler's (1990) subversive politics – queering – that involves the locating (adhering) and dislocating (disrupting) of subjects (the social self which operates across the intersecting social groups of a society) within the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990), that is the structuring of norms that produce subjects whose sex, gender, desires, and practices align along essentialist views.

Queer theory has also been influenced by psychoanalysis, in conjunction with post-structuralism, bringing forth identity, sexuality and the role of the symbolic (Watson, 2005). Significant theorists of post-structuralism include Jacques Lacan, who asserted identity and the self as being accultured through engagement with the symbolic, Jacques Derrida who is recognised for his work on binary constructions – male/female, proper/improper, etc. – and finally, the most influential Michel Foucault (1978, 1989), who assists in our understanding of 'queer' from a historical discourse approach.

Foucault (1978, 1989) outlined how certain identities (like homosexual) were fixed to individuals rather than their performances/behaviours, causing these individuals to be construed as objects of knowledge and thus subject to marginalisation; a social device of disciplinary power (Watson, 2005). Watson (2005) states that through Foucault's (1978, 1989) work, experiences (sexuality) were linked to particular institutional knowledge (sexological, psychiatric). Foucault (1978, 1989) theorises identity as a historical and cultural construction, between this link of discourse to identity, queer theory cements itself (Watson, 2005).

Turner (2000, p. 51) outlines (queer) discourse as "a set of rules for the constitution of conceptual objects and the production of statements about those objects"; the discourse of the object (sexuality) speaks the subject (the homosexual) into being (Watson, 2005). These

discourses set the constraints and re-assignments of sex/sexuality, and affirm the fluidity of such an identity.

Foucault (1978) who was primarily concerned with how sexuality functions in society (Spargo, 1999), drew out the power attached to such discourses and explained how societies operate on disciplinary power of ourselves and the policing of others. Like De Ridder and Van Bauwel's (2013) intimate citizenship project, and Butler's (1990) subversive politics, Foucault (1978) provides a reverse discourse, a demand towards Western society to acknowledge the legitimacy and *naturality* of queer (LGBTQIA+) existence and experiences (Spargo, 1999).

From a feminist vantage, 'queer', popularised by Teresa de Lauretis (1991) allows for a gender-neutral approach, i.e. the term homosexual backgrounds lesbian and queer women's experiences through acting as a substitution for gay, reinforcing the forefronting of men's experiences and representation. Feminist and scholar Eve Sedgwick (1990) proclaimed people's experiences as endless possibilities, the opposite of monolithic, each person's experiences of desire, sex, and sexuality are complexly different, thus identifying as queer to Sedgwick (1990) means "undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation" (Spargo, 1999, p. 64).

The consequences of queer theory involve 'queer' becoming characterised by transgression – assigned and adopted – as a means of resistance (Watson, 2005), wherein taboo-breaking, anti-normal sentiments and making the unnatural natural are defined as transformative. With this Watson (2005) says that various socio-political groups tackled ignorance and prejudice in their HIV/Aids awareness campaigns, and kiss-ins, serving to normalise same-sex relationships in public spaces. Queer activity was shown in the arts and culture sectors of society, like drag, and supported these emerging representations, shedding a positive light on queerness (Watson, 2005).

Through reconstructions, sexuality came to be theorised as a set of meanings attached to bodies and desires (not gender) (Watson, 2005). Watson (2005, p. 74) proffers that being queer means to continuously be in flux, shifting, contesting boundaries, eliding definition and "exhibiting the constructedness of categorization".

Queer is the problematising of categories, arising from the falsehood of binary distinctions of experience and identification, i.e. Watson (2005) finds that sexual identity is allowed to be defined by more than sexual acts and culture, and is interpretive and political. Spargo (1999) writes from a Foucauldian perspective that sexuality – like gender – is a constructed category

of experience which has historical, social, and cultural origin rather than biological; therefore 'queer' is a mesh of endless possibilities of being. In this chapter, the term 'queer' will be used as an umbrella term for all LGBTQIA+ representations because it speaks to myriad ways of being.

3.3.2 Queer Studies in SNS

Beginning with a sociolinguistic and discursive study, De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2015) focus on experiences of intimate storytelling by queer youth in mediatised spaces, i.e. immersion in digital and interactive media technologies and media cultures, such as social media sites. They explore the discursive constructions of gay peers' reviews of intimate storytelling practices in mainstream social network sites, all the while exposing culturally constructed inequalities which take place, related to sexual identities in mainstream social media (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015).

De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2015) argue that growing up gay during times of mediatisation facilitates opportunities for intimate citizenship formation, learning about gay identities and fostering support to 'come out', but also forms complexities requiring navigation by queer youth. These are technological and pertain to selective visibility options, and cultural, whereby discursive constructions become meaningful – for gender, sexuality and (romantic) relationships – through the intimate storytelling that is afforded by media (videos, pictures, and text) on SNSs (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015).

Another complexity that De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2015) consider are the constructs of *queer shame* and *realness*, that quell the political project of intimate citizenship by queer (youth). Intimate storytelling is a means to achieving intimate citizenship by queer youth, the storytelling refers to a communicative act that fosters sexual identity development, as an interactionist practice; intimate storytelling gives meaning to gender, sexuality, desire, and relationships.

Reflecting on their personal histories, narrators take agency in their reflexivity and counter dominant societal narratives that force coherence between desire, sexuality and gender, systems of heteronormativity that are suffused with cultural processes of power and structural systems of difference, which hinder intimate citizenship aims (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015). SNSs are increasingly becoming the primary means of achieving such counter-hegemonic discourses,

and self-expressions, because of their versatile media applications (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015).

In tackling how essential SNSs are to queer identities Cavalcante (2019) looks at the supportive (utopic) and limiting (vortex) side to Tumblr over the years in creating a space for queer individuals. The author also overviews the history of 'queer' in the public – more specifically geographical – domain, and how through its diminishment over the years, led queer (youth) individuals to seek out a space and community within the digital realm. Tumblr (a microblogging site) was ideal because of its permissibility (blocking and user control), anonymity (unlike Facebook) and promoting of posts over comments (comments can be tracked).

Because of this, Cavalcante (2019) finds that Tumblr was a popular SNS among young queer individuals, the site provides youth with a sense of political agency, possibility, hope, and community; the utopic aspect. However, simultaneously, the site is a vortex, due to the short periods of intense social interactions that wanes and involves information bubbles that hardly engage alternative perspectives, muting dissenting viewpoints. Moreover, this permits dark and possibly harmful niche communities (Cavalcante, 2019).

Affirming the vortex nature of SNSs towards queer identities, Fox and Ralston (2016) state that gay men are featured much more frequently than other queer identities, ultimately making them visible not just online, but in the offline domain, which is influenced by the online world. Further, queer identities represented are often stereotyped or bowdlerised and provide limited learning opportunities and validation to queer individuals (Fox & Ralston, 2016).

Fox and Ralston (2016) outline that the online harmful effects held by SNSs on LGBTQIA+ individuals' identity formation is in unsuspecting hate speech, and ignorant/insensitive voicing by heterosexual individuals; we can understand this as a force of normalisation.

SNSs (like IG) play a role every step of the way in a queer identity's emergence of their acceptance and homosociality, they also assist in normalising queer identities, expression, and role in heteronormative society, aiding in intimate citizenship goals (De Ridder & Van Bauwel (2013; Fox & Ralston, 2016). Overall, Fox and Ralston (2016) affirm the findings of Hillier and Harrison (2007), who noted that online environments were naturally augmented for LGBTQIA+ individuals to practice various aspects of identity, testing the waters.

Cavalcante (2019) defines ‘queer’ as an umbrella term which refers to nonnormative forms (identities, spaces, expressions, and interactions, etc.) of gender and sexuality, as I do in this dissertation. Like Butler (1990), Cavalcante (2019) positions ‘queer’ against the norm, outside of or in opposition to the heteronormative framework, i.e., a competing discourse. Queer identities consist of bisexual, lesbian, gay, pansexual, demisexual, nonbinary and asexual identities, among others.

As queer discourses only arose in the West during the late twentieth century as radical sexuality politics, and with public opinion being more favourable in respecting homosexuality and queer identities, media organisations began dual casting in order to reach a wider audience and appeal across demographics (Cavalcante, 2019). Cavalcante (2019) says that with the rise of technological advances, in internet and mobile communications, new spaces emerged for LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities to congregate and communicate; mobile dating apps proffered sex and companionship, some within heterosexual and queer-tailored spaces.

Cavalcante (2019) assert that Tumblr – like other social media sites – is limited by its corporate structure which prioritises profitability, thus no interests are rooted in advocacy and inclusion in social media sites, and there are no historical ties to political activism and queer advocacy communities. LGBTQIA+ communities, identities and representations are progressively, “imbricated in consumer culture’ and ‘are equally functions of a liberal discourse of individual rights, on the one hand, and a capitalistic economic arrangement, on the other” (Chasin, 2000, p. 23), this is important to note for this section, and could explain the ambiguity that we find when looking at this topic. I.e., the content showcases mixed messages/ideologies.

Cavalcante (2019) notes that even though Tumblr’s spokespeople appear to advocate for an inclusive platform, the queer community is still vulnerable to corporate policies and paradigms that may stand against them. This is similarly the case with *Playboy* on Instagram, the data shows mixed results of representation: although created by a more inclusive editorial team (Bennet, 2019), the content seen is both progressive (of the intimate citizenship agenda (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013) and traditional/stereotypical, a corporate paradigm of reaching a wider audience/consumer for profitability is evident.

3.4 Fatness

Jonathan Zenti’s podcast episode titled *Meat* speaks to the formative, mundane, stigmatised, and significant lived experiences of a fat person in a profoundly descriptive, poetic,

pedagogical, and impactful way: '…its flesh that gives a materiality to being alive…the cage of flesh that we call "body" that keeps us alive and sometimes keeps us from living in the way we like'.

Zenti challenges fatness as abnormal and undesirable: 'I wanted to be fat and this is what I became…I've had long-term relationships, short-term relationships, overlapped relationships, one-night stands, one-month stands, and I've always dated the nice girls…' He addresses the obesity epidemic misinformation of fatness as illness, saying: '…my heart is strong and my blood is normal…being in good shape has nothing to do with health…it's about not dying alone…fat people remind us of the lonely possibility' (Zenti, 2017). He relocates dialogue and authority back to fat people on the subject of fatness, ultimately offering teachings and awareness on fatness (experience) and fat discourse.

Rather than approaching body weight, size, and aesthetics from a medical and prescriptive lens, Simpson (2020) seeks to understand the embodied experiences of fatness through forefronting fat subjectivities, i.e. the narratives of fat people.

Simpson (2020) highlights the broad assumption that a person's weight is a direct connection to their overall health and well-being. Such beliefs are pervasive in Western cultures and justify themselves by linking 'obesity' – and the 'problematic large waist area' – to potentially increasing the chances of other severe illnesses: diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and hypertension (Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021; Simpson, 2020). As such, various industries, governments, and non-governmental organisations spend huge amounts in researching, controlling, and attempting to avert the global obesity epidemic (Kirkland, 2003). Such a framing of fatness as a disease and threat makes it difficult to have 'health' as a fat person (Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021; Simpson, 2020).

Although fat people's lives are multidimensional and fluid, Simpson (2020) explains how dominant discourses of fatness do not portray fat people in this light. Rather 'fatness' consumes their identity and is conceived as inherently problematic, as a disease and thus an epidemic, a byproduct of poor choices and behaviour; with the fat stomach/tummy area representing the epitome of 'obesity' and illness, justifying disgust and shame. Within such a monolithic paradigm it becomes a challenge for fat people to navigate and negotiate their understanding of their own body, health, and identity (Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021; Simpson, 2020).

However, as in the former sections which focused on gender and queer, it is important to address and challenge dominant understandings of the fat body too, because of the significant

consequences in the way systems, beliefs and institutions can exploit, police, and respond to fat people; hence the importance of positive and accurate representation.

In Simpson's (2020, p. 3) study such address and challenge occur via the fat epistemology and fat narratives, "…like other marginalised identities, the situated knowledge that fat people have is often overlooked or devalued in favour of other epistemic positions that are positioned as "value-free" or unbiased". Ellis (2019) further mentions the significant role that media plays in swaying dominant understandings of the fat body by presenting fat people in a multidimensional way, i.e. presenting the formative, significant and mundane lived experiences of fat people, as in the television series *Hulu*, which simultaneously serves educational and activist purposes.

As a reclamation, the term 'fat', which is often used to shame and ridicule individuals, is used in preference to the limiting terms 'overweight' and 'obese', these latter terms signal not meeting a normative ideal and pathologising the body (Simpson, 2020). Whilst 'fat' describes a rounded physique of rolls and curves made up of soft pillowy flesh, referring to bodies, people, and identities, 'obesity' – and 'overweight' trailing behind – signifies a disease label attached to those who embody fatness, a label that simultaneously carries medical, political, and public discourses of threat, disease, risk, and poor health.

Of the obesity epidemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2000, p. 6) defines obesity as a "condition of abnormal or excessive fat accumulation in adipose tissue, to the extent that health may be impaired". If there is excessive accumulation of fat around the tummy and/or waist (i.e. apron belly), the health implications are said to be even riskier (Simpson, 2020). This is worth keeping in mind when it comes to the data samples of this theme.

As Simpson (2020) explains there is a deliberate use of 'crisis language' embedded in the 'obesity epidemic' that conveys a threat and is comparable to the seriousness of an infectious outbreak. This is because 'health' is conceived as capital and fat bodies are deemed to threaten said capital via the inability to work, which in turn affects one's ability to successfully contribute to the economy and productivity (Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021; Simpson, 2020).

Choosing to speak about fatness in this way intentionally instils a sense of fear about, and desperation to eradicate, fatness and fat people – an ableist discourse emerges that excludes those who do not look and function as the norm in Western society (Simpson, 2020; Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021).

Overall, such approaches to fatness showcase an official acceptance and normalisation that there is a close relationship between individualised behaviour, choices and 'obesity', and that the accumulation of fat poses a problem to private and public health and wellbeing (Simpson, 2020). Simpson (2020) states that scholars have referred to this conceptualisation as a weight-based approach to health.

Furthermore, this highlights the role that discourse, as a system of knowledge, narrative and action, plays in (re)producing 'disease', aided by knowledge producers like WHO, Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), pharmaceutical companies and researchers, including medical systems, who act as authorities on the issue of 'obesity' (Saguy, 2021; Simpson, 2020). These authorities in return shape what is known about the fat body and continue to sustain existing power relations (the status quo).

Sobal (1995) concurs that the issue of body size becomes problematised under these authorities and turns into a medicalised and moralised risk to be policed at a global, national, and individual level. Such 'obesity discourses' harm fat people in the way that they understand and experience their bodies, identities and 'fatness'. Further, fat people who are the subjects of these dialogues are disregarded as viable sources of knowledge, becoming disempowered and marginalised in public and medical discourse, silencing their fat experiences which are valuable and thus strengthening the status quo.

3.4.1 Obesity Discourses

The hegemonic belief of 'obesity', as an epidemic, disease, health risk and threat, is questionable, yet still very much deep-rooted within contemporary Western societies. Governments, non-governmental and private organisations all funnel capital into eradicating 'obesity' and fat people – through the sugar tax, research, and interventions (Kirkland, 2003; Simpson, 2020; Saguy, 2021).

Moreover, there exists explicit discrimination in various areas of society: airlines impose two-seat policies and citizens are encouraged to judge, shame and comment on the bodies of others, men especially are given a free pass on their cruel behaviour towards fat women, overlooking and justifying their misogyny (Walker, 2017; Simpson, 2020) as a means to police fat bodies and destroy their deviance from the norm.

In addition to such discrimination, there are purposeful under-discussed issues that fat women experience, such as contraception and abortion (reproductive injustice), resulting in further

exclusion and oppression of fat bodies, this furthermore provides an indication of the poor quality of healthcare provided for fat people, because of the dominant aesthetics of health ideal (Ellis, 2019).

Given the unreliable and contestable nature of the knowledge produced on fat bodies, Simpson (2020) finds that authorities of knowledge production on fat bodies maintain their position as a legitimate source based on what counts as rational and moral thought. Therefore, the author posits it is more applicable to think of 'obesity' in discursive terms than as a disease (Simpson, 2020).

Obesity discourses offer a framing into dominant belief systems in which weight is considered to be an external reflection of overall health and well-being, wherein 'obesity' is positioned as a disease with serious medical implications, that can be resolved by simply adjusting lifestyle, namely, diet, exercise, and weight (Simpson, 2020).

Naturally, obesity discourses can be concluded as fatphobic, with hatred and fear of the fat body instilled, carrying with it encouraged discrimination and an *-ism* on its own: sizeism/fatism (Limatius, 2018; Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021). Simpson (2020) patterns these obesity discourses into four key themes which illustrate this phobia: badness (moral failure), sickness (medical disease), choice (poor choices), and (individual) responsibility.

Moral Failing according to Simpson (2020, p. 30) is "…a lack of moral fortitude…fatness as a form of social deviance…fatness symbolises an active refusal to accept and adhere to social norms and expectations". By the medical creation of 'obesity' in the twentieth century, 'fatness' became a signal of abnormality, deviance, and pathology, thus enabling medical systems, the state and other institutions to police and sanction fat bodies. Eating 'healthy', 'good' foods and maintaining a slender physique indicates health and virtuous character, that is, an acceptance and adherence to social norms and expectations, and enacting proper citizenship (synonymous with personhood) (Kirkland, 2003); whereas fatness showcases a refusal to accept, adhere and fit the socio-political norm (Simpson, 2020).

Simpson (2020) notes how fat bodies are associated with characteristics of lazy, ugly, smelly, and immoral, characteristics that have historically also been associated with other marginalised groups like racial minorities and the poor. The author further asserts that like other forms of oppression, performed on racial, gender, and class minorities, there are intersections with fat bodies of ridicule, isolation, and persecution.

Sickness in ‘fatness’ is medicalisation and involves the transformation of forms of social deviance into definable, treatable medical diseases (Simpson, 2020). Collins (2021, p. 255) adds that socio-historically the medical system has played a central role in perpetuating alleged “…scientific and common-sense beliefs about bodies, fitness, evolution, reproduction, science and the state, as well as about ability, race, ethnicity, gender sexuality, age and nation” stemming from Eurocentrism (Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021).

Given the surge of healthism discourse during the latter twentieth century, i.e. choosing ‘health’, and conversely also choosing ‘ill health’ (fat bodies), it became strongly believed that health could be cultivated through correct choices and actions, e.g. ‘lifestyle’ adjustments, ‘good’ foods, exercise, and not smoking (Simpson, 2020). Such good health was assumed to be reflected in body size – an aesthetics of health (Simpson, 2020) – and thus the undesirable fat body was believed to be the outcome of poor choices, which ultimately refreshes the moralistic basis about personhood and body size.

Simpson (2020) explains how, in contemporary Western societies, there is an expectation placed upon citizens to invest in themselves just as they would in an economic market so that investment choices are reflected in the accumulation of capital. So, when citizens are purchasing ‘healthy’ foods, weight loss products, gym memberships, plastic surgeries (e.g. Brazilian Butt Lifts and exercise equipment, they are actualising this ideal.

Lastly, a discourse of responsibility aligns with neoliberalism and sets forth a sense of agency concerning one’s health, in that health is achievable through individualised choice and action (Simpson, 2020). In Western societies, there is a social climate and common-sense functioning of neoliberal ideology, whereby a virtuous person and ‘good’ citizen of Western society is someone who self-governs and self-sustains, maintaining the correct body size – at a cost to themselves – but a ‘bad’ citizen and immoral person relies on the public system, and assistance from the state; fat bodies are presumed to rely on the public system and state, and weigh on countries’ resources, because of their pathology: ‘obesity’(Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021; Simpson, 2020).

Therefore, in this framing, ‘health’ is not a matter of well-being but rather a minimisation of the impact of illness, so that people can continue to contribute to society healthily and successfully, through economic growth. Again, health and able bodies are made equivalent to capital (Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021; Simpson, 2020).

Circulating these discourses and reading between the lines of fatphobia are the notions of deviance, othering, and weaponised respectability politics (Simpson, 2020). Factors of 'choice', choosing ill-health and 'obesity', and 'temporality', that thinness is achievable through self-management which fat people lack, are essential in understanding fatness as a deviant identity. Simpson (2020) contends that fat people are stigmatised as choosing to be that way and thus choosing to be deviant, so in addition to being policed by the public and shamed for their physical size, fat people are also blamed for their marginalisation.

Simpson (2020, p. 93) states, "…fat stigma as a product and consequence of the labelling process, rather than a standalone phenomenon in and of itself", a labelling of moral deficit. Here we witness a *force of normalisation*, through shame, ridicule, and stigma, fat people are socio-politically and culturally made abnormal, rather than their fat bodies discovered to factually (incorrect) be a medical problem (Limatius, 2018; Simpson, 2020; Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021); this is similar to the case of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990), and evident of the oppression experienced by other marginalised groups, across intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

3.4.2 Othering and Respectability Politics

According to Simpson (2020) fatness is perceived along a continuum, on one end is the 'good fatty' who engages in self-management practices (e.g. weight loss choices and actions) and tries to fit the social norm to prove their 'goodness', whilst either explicitly tearing down (othering) other fat people that are fatter, in order to improve their own moral standing, or covertly idealising and extolling thinness, and thus engaging in weaponised respectability politics (Simpson, 2020).

To the other end is the 'bad fatty' who is the 'worst' (fattest) and an exemplar of fatness and deviance, who proudly engages in fat advocacy, resists 'bad fatty' stereotypes of laziness, ugliness, immorality and smelliness, and who encourages holistic well-being – mental, emotional, and physical (with the intention of enjoyment in physical activity) – over thinness and an aesthetics of health (Simpson, 2020). Walker (2017) posits that there is a need to remedy the lack of female fat representation in Western culture so that being fat can be perceived as a place of strength and to subvert fat stereotypes.

Simpson (2020) finds that such othering and weaponised respectability politics coincide with the labelling processes, that is, fatphobia – which is entwined with misogyny (Walker, 2017) –

and is presented in the terms ‘overweight’, and ‘obesity’; resisting stereotypes, false representations of fatness and fat advocacy is often found in the term ‘fat’.

As for ‘plus-size’, which is commonly unitised in mainstream body-positivity movements that aim to broaden what is deemed ‘acceptable’ in terms of body standards. The term ‘plus-size’ is both positive as it portrays a sense of desirability despite one’s size, moreover, is significant in breaking the normalisation of fat bodies as asexual and undesirable (Simpson, 2020). Yet the term is also harmful, as instead of being progressive and liberating like the body-positivity movement, it does not remove the deviant label and rather like the ‘overweight’ term, covertly perpetuates abnormality (Simpson, 2020).

Simpson (2020) uses a popular linguistic approach for analysis of their embodied fatness narratives, namely Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and considers the obesity discourses of moralism, medicalisation, healthism, and neoliberalism (responsibility), alongside semantic considerations of the terms ‘obese’, ‘fat’, ‘overweight’ and ‘plus-size’. Other linguistic scholarly work on fatness includes that by Limatius (2018) who further focuses on the semantic framing of ‘fat’, ‘plus-size’, and ‘curvy’ for fashionista or activist aims: body positivity or fat advocacy. Limatius (2020) extends on Limatius (2018) by studying intersections of celebrity role models, gender and body positivity in fashion blogs authored by plus-size women.

Both corpus-linguistic studies (Limatius 2018; 2020) support Simpson’s (2020) findings in relating the semantics of body-related terms to particular discourses, ‘good fatty’ and ‘bad fatty’ conceptualisations and socio-political power relations.

Both Limatius (2018) and Limatius (2020) are clear in their distinguishing between the fat advocacy movement and the body positivity movement, as fat advocacy strives for bodily acceptance, of all bodies (body diversity) and opposes prejudice toward fat people (fatism), specifically tackling the discrimination of fat people, and mainstream discourse on fatness underscored by the obesity epidemic narrative (Limatius, 2018; Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021).

Body positivity is founded on media technology aims to enhance the visibility of body diversity: fat bodies, disabled bodies, as well as the bodies of LGBTQIA+ people and brown-skinned people (Limatius, 2018; 2020). However, this has unfortunately led to issues of commercialisation and the removal the radical aspect, shifting the focus back onto beauty – even if who is considered beautiful becomes broadened – and thus forces marginalised bodies to become part of the mainstream (Limatius, 2020). As Simpson (2020) states on the term plus-

size, which goes hand in hand with the body positivity movement, abnormality and deviance are perpetuated.

Ashdown-Franks and Joseph (2021) highlight Health At Every Size (HAES) as an alternative to body positivity and fat acceptance movements. HAES aims to de-link weight from health and vice versa, and through doing so actively dismantles obesity discourses justified by medicalisation and epidemic narratives, permitting fatness to no longer be made abnormal.

The next part briefly looks at fat studies within the online space, outside of the blogosphere, where we see body positivity and deviance in other contexts and intersections.

3.4.3 Plus-Size Studies in SNS

Aside from the online SNS studies by Limatius (2018) and Limatius (2020), there are two other notable works, by Saguy (2021) and Ashdown-Franks and Joseph (2021) in the field of fat studies, i.e. critical examination of dominant social understandings of body weight (Saguy, 2021). Both studies like Limatius (2018; 2020) support the fat epistemology and fat study's findings made by Simpson (2020).

Saguy (2021) engages in a sub-field of fat studies known as 'fat frames' that draws on Goffman's (1974) conceptual *framing*, i.e. just as people create definitions of situations to organise their experiences and guide their actions, social movements (fat advocacy) strategically define socio-political issues in order to garner support and immobilise their opposition (anti-obesity). Therefore, through such framing, Saguy (2021) studies the way in which various media portray different fat framing – anti-obesity versus fat acceptance – and how this influences people's attitudes about health, health policy, and anti-fat stigma (Saguy, 2021).

Saguy (2021) discovers that obesity-crisis narratives are informed by biased researchers and media (journalists) – financially incentivised by weight loss pharmaceutical companies and companies (Saguy (2021); Simpson (2020) – who are overly critical of counterviews that advocate for body diversity and fat acceptance, but uncritical of their shaky evidence for obesity as an epidemic threatening society.

According to Saguy (2021) 'negative portrayals' of fatness as an epidemic by media fuels fat stigma and discrimination and an understanding of being fat as unhealthy, deviant, and wrong. 'Positive portrayals' are educational – e.g. an aesthetics of health does not necessarily mean

health – and create awareness, leading to fat acceptance and openness to body diversity in societies (Saguy, 2021).

Saguy (2021) concurs with Simpson's (2020) explanations of the 'obesity epidemic' and crisis language, further uncovering that those who promote claims about the threat of obesity have greater economic power and symbolic authority (medical research and doctors) than those countering those claims (fat acceptance organisations), thus indicating why obesity as a danger is so popular and representative of dominant public discourse, as a major public health crisis.

Lastly, although Simpson (2020) describes fat studies as mainly a Western, middle-class, and racially white concern, Ashdown-Franks and Joseph (2021) concur with Simpson (2020) on the Western, whiteness and middle/upper-class preoccupation with body size, tying thin idealism to moralism, personhood, self-control, and rationality as a means to distinguish the Westerner from the Other. Highlighting the deeply colonial provocation, Ashdown-Franks & Joseph (2021) draw out the intersections between race, gender, and body size of fat black women, pointing out black people's covert historical embeddedness in fatness studies that continues today.

Supporting Simpson's (2020) identification of obesity discourses as deeply misogynist and sexist, Ashdown-Franks and Joseph (2021) detail how anti-fat attitudes have always contained gendered and racialised elements, stemming from colonialism and its system of Othering, i.e. objectifying and forming Western definitions of non-Western being and experiences. Socio-historically, from the time of slavery, black women in Western society have been positioned as hyper-sexual and with an oral insatiability (obesity), altogether stressing black women's deviance via their body; made abnormal by race, body size and as women (Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021).

Western classifications towards black bodies – women especially – drew fascination and disgust, exemplified by the case of Saartjie Baartman, and a need to distinguish oneself from and be made superior to bodies of colour, i.e. white supremacy (Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021). Within the functioning of colonialism, the need to civilise and progress translated to white supremacy and whiteness as an ideal that posited blackness as requiring erasure. Such anti-black attitudes have continued into today as anti-fat attitudes, with colonialism evolving into neo-liberalism, privileging thinness, economic progression (classism), and personal responsibility (leaving the marginalised on the margins).

The temporality of fatness – also mentioned by Simpson (2020) as investing in oneself – aligns with progress and bettering one's body for increased productivity, this ideology of personal reasonability and progress ties colonial temporality to its evolved system 'of neoliberalism', a modern-day 'civilizing the savages for the sake of progress'.

Thus, the thin white body ideal signifies progress whereas black bodies are stereotyped as obese and are limited by this bias (Simpson, 2020). Moreover, Western state apparatus participates in this and systematically permits and denies – makes deviant – some bodies over others based on their correctness, and socio-economic futures (progress).

In the following section, I outline the theoretical framework, adopting a social constructionist approach. This framework aligns well with the concepts of social semiotics, discourse, representation, and multimodality, which are essential in framing this dissertation.

4. Theoretical Framework

Recognising that knowledge, identity, and social reality are dynamic products of social interaction, representation, and interpretation, this dissertation adopts a social constructionist lens to interrogate the shifts that have occurred in *Playboy*'s discourse of gender, queerness, and fatness, following its rebranding on the online platform Instagram (Bennet, 2019). By addressing the social processes that shape what we consider 'reality' and social 'truths', social constructionism aligns well with the concepts of social semiotics, representation, discourse, multimodality, and intimate citizenship. Together, these concepts are integral in guiding the research design, and conduct (see the methodology section), and informing the interpretation of the dissertation's findings.

4.1 Social Constructionism

Burr (2015, p. 11) emphasises the 'social ongoings' at the heart of social constructionism which fabricate our world and 'realities', stating that: "When people talk to each other, the world gets constructed", thus creating knowledge as knowledge is not something one does or does not have but something enacted and created together in people's communication.

Social constructionism argues that aspects of reality often deemed as inherent or natural – such as the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) – are typically the hegemonic products of social practices and language, shaped by people's perceptions and communication. This feeds into the first key assumption that characterises the theory, namely its critical stance towards conventional knowledge, i.e. common sense, taken-for-granted, so-called 'truths'. Social constructionism challenges the view that conventional knowledge is objective truth based on unbiased observations of the world and thus takes up an anti-essentialist perspective (Burr, 2015).

The second assumption is that our understanding of the world is historically and culturally bound, no nearer to the truth or better than any other knowledge, but rather the resulting knowledge is an artefact of its culture and time. Thirdly, by emphasising the social process of interaction and communication the theory asserts that our knowledge of the world is not inherent or pre-existing but the result of daily interactions and our engagement with one another that weaves together our versions of knowledge; again this highlights the historical and cultural specificity, e.g. gender and its norms that differ across time and cultures (Burr, 2015).

The fourth assumption raises the practical consequences which coincide with people's constructions of the world, stating that social on-goings can produce a range of possible social constructions of events (Burr, 2015). Ultimately, each variety of construction brings with it a different kind of action from people, sustaining some patterns of social action, excluding others and thus tying in the power relations bound in particular constructions of the world – the permissible (social norms), and legitimate treatment of others. Burr (2015) reaffirms that all knowledge is derived from looking at the world from one perspective or another and tends to serve some interests over others creating a hegemony.

Social constructionism roots out language as the basis for these constructions, specifying that our ways of understanding the world do not come from objective reality, but from other people via our social engagements (Burr, 2015). There already exists conceptual frameworks that are used by people in a culture, and congruent with Lawson's (2020) explanations, we see that over time we are socialised into these conceptual frameworks by institutions – like the family, school, etc – using language. The way a person thinks and perceives the world, the very concepts and categories that provide a framework of meaning for them, are facilitated by the language that they use. Burr (2015) stresses that language is a necessary pre-condition for thought.

This includes the construction of the self, which is a product of language and social interactions, which are fluid and constantly in flux, and as such is congruent with Talbot's (2010) argument about people being processes that are continuously shaped by discourse and active in the construction of our identity, and Foucault (1978, 1989) who theorises identity as a historical and cultural construction. This signals the alignment of the post-structuralist nature present in social constructionism and our construction of the world and ourselves: that social meaning carried by language is never fixed, always open to resistance and contestation and always temporary.

This dissertation deals with *Playboy*'s presence in the online space of Instagram, which entails by its very nature a form of shared 'reality' because of the social media's interface, whereby collective beliefs, identities, and norms are constructed, portrayed, and reinforced, showcasing a prime example of social constructionism at work.

There are shared meanings and symbols employed by users in the Instagram community, like photos, videos, and emojis, or certain types of prevailing aesthetics and posts (travel, food, and lifestyle photos) that are symbolic of specific identities and values, which ultimately shape

collective expectations of what is conventional, the norm, or aspirational (Baker & Walsh, 2018). The norms and social expectations around beauty, success, and lifestyle set a standard for what's 'popular' and 'trending'.

In addition, we observe collective identity construction where Instagram users curate posts that others may emulate, creating a further sense of shared construction towards what certain identities should look like or involve. And there is interaction and reinforcement with every 'like', comment, and share that feeds into a social feedback loop causing the algorithm to give prominence to desirable and popular representations within the community (Baker & Walsh, 2018).

Therefore, it feels necessary to employ social constructionism, rather than a social constructivism approach, the latter of which is more individual-focused, looking at how we acquire personal knowledge (Burr, 2015). Utilising macro social constructionism is necessary as it "acknowledges the constructive power of language and how it is inseparable from material or social structures, social relations and institutionalised practices" (Burr, 2015, p. 25), and assists in making sense of the material constructions (visual content) of *Playboy*'s content on gender, queerness, and fatness. Burr (2015) explains how macro social constructionism focalises the concept of power and is influenced by the work of Foucault (1972), tackling issues of social inequality by challenging dominant discourses via research and practice; this aligns with the aims of this research to uncover the shifts in *Playboy*'s constructions, representations, and discourse.

4.2 Discourse

Bucholtz (2003) states: '…those that emphasize discourse as a social, cultural, or political phenomenon have in common a theory of discourse not merely as the reflection of society, culture, and power but as their constantly replenished source'. Simply put, the social world is produced and reproduced through discourse; discourse is always found at the centre underpinning the workings of a society's social structures, systems and institutional practices.

A social constructionism understanding of 'discourse' is influenced by Michel Foucault and extends beyond the immediate context with which language is being used by a writer or speaker, it is not just 'talk' or 'language' but social practice too (Burr, 2015). Agreeing with this, Machin and Mayr (2012) concur that discourse is not simply a way of describing reality, but constructs and perpetuates social norms, ideologies, and power structures.

A discourse is defined by a set of meanings, ideologies, metaphors, representations, images, symbols, stories, statements, and so on, that together produce a particular version of events about the object (topic) in question (Machin & Mayr, 2012). It refers to the particular manner in which an event, person, or class of persons are portrayed, i.e. a particular way of representing in a certain light. This means many versions of one event, person, or class of persons, and various ways of representing and understanding can exist, so that there may be a multitude of different discourses each with a different story to tell about the topic in question (Burr, 2015); each foregrounding and backgrounding of certain aspects of a topic raises particular issues for consideration over others, holding different social actions and practical consequences.

A discourse about an object manifests itself in texts (visual texts too), anything that can be 'read' for meaning, like hairstyles, clothing, colour, and so forth can be thought of as a manifestation of one or more discourses and be referred to as a 'text' (Burr, 2015; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Referring to Bucholtz's (2003) assertion of discourse as not merely a reflection of society, culture, and power, but also its source, Burr (2015) concurs that discourses, whether written, spoken, or otherwise represented – visually, and so forth – serve to construct the phenomena of our world for us. With the variety of discourses available, we can construe our world in many ways, each representing the object in question as having a very different nature from the next; each discourse claiming to reveal the 'truth' about what the object really is (Burr, 2015).

In simple terms, a discourse can be considered a frame of reference or conceptual blueprint against which our utterances can be interpreted. Burr (2015) highlights the relationship between discourses and the actual things that people say or write as one of mutual influence, wherein discourses preside in the things people say or write, and, in turn, the things people say or write are also dependent on their meaning upon the discursive context in which they surface.

Burr (2015) explains that there is an intimate relationship between discourse, knowledge and power. This is because discourses construct our world, regulating our knowledge of it and our common understanding of events, people, and things; there is a connection between discourse informing social and institutional practices via constructed knowledge. Burr (2015, p. 80) states: "We can exercise power by drawing upon discourses, which allow our actions to be represented in an acceptable light." When we define or represent something in a particular manner, we are constructing a particular form of knowledge, which brings with it power and social consequences, benefiting some and marginalising others (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

However, given that there are multiple discourses surrounding an event at any given moment, each offering an alternative view and with it and a different possibility for social action, the dominant discourse that is said to be common sense is continually subject to resistance and contestation by competing (marginalised) discourses (Burr, 2015; Butler, 1990).

Disciplinary power is when knowledge is powerful and becomes ingrained within the individual so that they are self-policing to maintain the dominant discourse and status quo (Burr, 2015; Foucault, 1978; Watson, 2005). This is where we see a lack of contestation but rather a reinforcing of the prevailing discourse.

4.3 Social Semiotics

The social semiotics theory developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2021) is apt in approaching this dissertation's research questions and research design, particularly for exploring the construction and interpretation of meaning within an online social context such as Instagram. Social semiotics expands upon Halliday's (1985) systemic functional linguistics work to encompass images, design, and other modes of meaning-making, arguing that visual communication is governed by social and cultural conventions similar to language (speech and writing) (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Aligning with social constructionism, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) explain how social semiotics contends that meanings are constructed in social action and interaction, using existing, socially made, semiotic resources that continuously change in their use; with social, cultural, and historical changes.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021, p. xiv) retain the notion of 'mode': "…the central resources for making meanings materially evident", taken together with the principles of modal use in compositions, as multimodal complexes. The authors state that 'the visual' is one among many other modes, each mode having its own affordances – 'reach' and capacity – wherein the same or similar meanings expressed are realised differently in each mode (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

In Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2021) approach, social semiotics seeks to encompass all instances and types (modes) of meaning-making at all levels in every community, integrating it into one theoretically unified, overall study of meaning-making. This is substantiated by the visual mode's constant interaction with other modes because modes never function in isolation but

always co-occur and interact with other modes. Modes are affected by each other, thus shaping and reshaping each other in social and semiotic interaction (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021).

Halliday's (1985) metafunctions assess the functioning of a semiotic resource, whereby a potential semiotic resource must meet and fulfil the criteria of (1) the ideational function, to be able to account for the 'goings on' in the social world of its users; (2) the interpersonal function, which entails dealing with and documenting the social actions, interactions, and relations of the members of a community; and (3) the textual function, where the complexes of signs must cohere both internally with each other and externally with the context in and for which they were constructed (Halliday, 1985).

A modes 'reach' calls to the need for 'complementation', Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) explain that due to the distinct material affordances of each mode, in a modal complex where multiple modes are functioning together, each function is materialised and produces the same or similar meaning differently. Therefore, multimodality is not a matter of better choice, but of capacity and 'fullness' of the meaning potentials, overcoming the 'reach' and limitations of each mode functioning in isolation; a conjunction of modes in use (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021, p. xv) describe the social semiotic concept of mode as including, "…all resources used in making signs within a specific mode… All material aspects…form part of the semiotic resource of the mode". The authors state that in various societies, although certain modes have been highly valued over other modes, in recent years there has been a drastic shift to visualisation, that the visual modes dominate (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021; Machin & Mayr (2012).

With the increasing prevalence of screens, digital technologies, and globalisation, modern communication relies more on visual representation (images, graphics, layout) rather than traditional text-based modes (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021). This shift reflects changes in how information is conveyed and interpreted in the context of multimodal communication, where the visual mode often holds a primary role in the meaning-making process across various media. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) emphasise how the visual mode is not merely supplementary to the other modes (like text) but serves as a central mode of communication, often preferred for its accessibility and immediacy. It is with this visualisation that I found it necessary to use Instagram in my investigation of shifts in *Playboy's* discourse of gender, queerness, and fatness (see Methodology).

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) point out that a 'community' or a 'social group' uses the resources of speech, image, and other modes available, based on the issue(s) at hand in that specific group in a specific place. They further explain that in a 'community', or 'social group' the resources are continuously (re)shaped by users in dealing with the specific issues. Thus, a social semiotics approach centres around the resources present in a 'community' or a 'social group', describing how they are used, and how they are located in value systems and ideology, and so on.

At the core of semiotics is the notion of 'sign', however, specifically in Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2021) case, social semiotics focuses on the process in which the sign comes into being, so the sign-making process. A sign is made up of the signifier (form) which is the material manifestation (such as colour, layout, line, perspective), and the signified (realised meaning) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021).

In social semiotics, the sign is not seen as arbitrary or intrinsically occurring, but as motivated by the sign-maker's interest (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Thus, a sign is a motivated conjunction of the form (signifier) that better represents that which is to be expressed (signified). "Sign-makers thus "have" a meaning, the signified, which they wish to express, and then express it through the semiotic mode(s) that make(s) available the subjectively felt, most plausible, most apt form, as the signifier" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 9).

Stressing its motivated nature, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) argue that sign-making is produced in relation to the sign-maker and the context in which the sign is constructed, and not in isolation from the act of producing analogies and classifications. Signs are often recycled in the process of previous signs becoming the signifier material to construct new signs. Resting on the interest of sign-makers, sign-makers are thus seen as creating their own representational and interpretational resources. During sign-making, adult sign-makers are guided by interest, and a combination of cultural and social histories, an awareness of current contingencies, and convention (a pressure of conformity) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021).

Representation forms part of the sign-making process, in which sign-makers seek to create a representation of some object or entity, material or non-material, founded upon their interest in the object at the point of making the representation (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021; Machin & Mayr (2012). Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) inform us that this representational process arises out of the sign-maker's cultural, social, and psychological history, and is framed by the

particular environment in which the sign-maker constructs the sign. The sign-makers' interest is the source of the selection, what they see as the criterial aspects of an object – making salient certain aspects and shadowing others (Machin & Mayr, 2012) – which is then considered as sufficiently representative of the object in a given context.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) discuss two types of representation: narrative and conceptual. As the names suggest, *narrative representations* depict the 'doing' and 'happenings' in the world, while *conceptual representations* focus on the participants in a composition (structure), highlighting their generalised, somewhat timeless essences.

Narratively arranged structures tell stories, showing the actions, unfolding events, and change, and have transitory spatial arrangements and vectors (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021). 'Vectors' refer to the lines, directions, gaze, or gestures in a composition that create a sense of movement, cause-and-effect, or connection between elements in an image. Vectors help to construct a narrative or 'action' within the visual, allowing viewers to interpret the relationships and interactions between various components (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021); a limb making a gesture, gaze, or object can be pointed in the direction of another element, thus implying a relation or action and guiding the viewer's eye to follow that direction.

In a narrative structure, participants (such as people, animals, or objects) are often connected by vectors, indicating a process ('happening'). There are six processes outlined by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021), namely action, reactional, speech and mental, transformative, relational, and circumstantial processes.

Action processes entail a physical activity taking place, whilst reactional processes focus on emotions and expressions (like facial expressions and gaze), and speech and mental processes represent communication, thoughts, or inner experiences (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Transformative processes occur when a participant undergoes a change and transforms, relational processes depict the relationship between elements – the power dynamics, identity, and part-to-whole connection – and lastly, circumstantial processes provide the situational information, i.e. context, background or setting.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) point out that a sense of realism is accomplished in narrative structures, due to the vectors, making it appear more 'real' and engaging to the viewer, it creates a sense of depth and interaction that causes the viewer to actively engage with the storyline being conveyed.

Unlike narrative structures, conceptual structures do not focus on actions or events, but on what things are rather than what happens to them (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021). Conceptual structures relate participants in terms of 'part-whole' structures or symbolic attribution and do not have vectors but realise the relation between participants by spatial configuration.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) provide an overview of three major conceptual structures: classification, analytical, and symbolic. Classification structures showcase hierarchical or taxonomic relationships between elements, often having participants grouped or arranged in a way that implies that they belong to the same category or class (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021). Analytical structures describe the part-whole relationships between elements, whereby the whole is termed 'the carrier' and the parts as its 'possessive attributes' The final structure, the symbolic, relays what an element represents, and its identity or meaning(s) attributed to it, it has two subtypes: the symbolic attributive and symbolic suggestive (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021).

The symbolic attributive shows a person or object with an attribute that signifies their identity, they may pose in a meaningful manner rather than appear involved in some action, or appear out of place and unnatural, and be made salient through various means (foregrounding, exaggerated size, well illuminated, in a conspicuous colour/tone, and sharp focus) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021; Machin & Mayr, 2012). On the other hand, the symbolic suggestive relies on context or setting to imply meaning or identity, contrary to the symbolic attributive, in the symbolic suggestive the participant is de-emphasised to let values associated with the setting be imbued into the participant (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Goffman's (1979) framework for investigating gender representations and stereotypes in the media, i.e., hyper-ritualisation, speaks to some of these narrative processes and conceptual structures, expanding on what such processes and structures construct in their underlying meaning. Commercial advertisements and the media portray everyday social rituals in scenes, most often women's subordination and men's superiority. Like this, the participants in media content are seen to reenact everyday realities and social structures (and social order) of a particular culture – in this dissertation that of Western culture.

Goffman (1979) ties this subordination to the 'infantilisation' of women (Bell & Milic, 2002). Connotations are classified through 'relative size', with men depicted as larger and taller than women, there is also the 'feminine touch', which outlines the way women (more than men) gracefully touch objects or themselves in advertisements. 'Function ranking' is when women

and men participate in an activity. The man executes the activity whilst the woman supports him, or if it is a feminine role, the woman executes the activity and the man does nothing. However, if a man executes a feminine role, he is portrayed as silly or childlike (Goffman, 1979).

'The family' refers to the mother-daughter relationship, and conversely father-son relationship, with the latter being more spatially apart and thus emotionally distant. The 'ritualisation of subordination' involves women often portrayed in inferior positions and poses, via spatially lower positions and performing submissive or appeasement gestures. Additionally, women can be depicted as being under the physical care and protection of a man (Goffman, 1979). There is also 'licensed withdrawal', in which women are given the chance to symbolically withdraw from a scene in the advertisement due to protection or care from a man.

Aside from the relations between the elements depicted in the images, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) highlight a relationship between the producer of the image and the viewer. They tell us that there are two kinds of participants, namely the represented participants (people, places and things depicted in the image) and interactive participants (real people who communicate with each other through images, i.e. the producers and viewers of images) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021).

In addition, there are three kinds of relations: (1) relations between represented participants; (2) relations between interactive and represented participants; and (3) relations between interactive participants (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021). With relations between interactive participants, we look at the things interactive participants do for or to each other via images, this can be 'directly' when interactive participants know each other, or 'indirectly' when interactive participants do not know each other and the producer is absent from the viewer (and vice versa). Instagram, where I collect the data samples representations of gender, queer, and fatness in *Playboy*, is an instance of the latter.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021, p. 115) state that "…the articulation and understanding of visual interactive meaning is based on our embodied knowledge of everyday non-verbal communication…The interactive dimension of images is therefore a semiotic resource whose regularities of meaning are shared, within a given community, by all interactive participants".

Bell and Milic (2002) outline this interactive dimension in visual structures: (1) the relation between conceptual representation and represented participant, the authors note how women are represented in abstract forms, but men in concrete forms; (2) the relation between the

narrative role and represented participant, i.e. the actions presented under certain contexts: men have been seen as 'doing' (active agents), and women just 'being' (passive); (3) the relation between vertical angle and represented participant – the height of the point of view in relation to the participant – indicating a power play of dominance, submission, or equal standing (same level). Bell and Milic (2002) find that women are often shot from high vertical angles, to be seen as submissive to the viewer.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) and Bell and Milic (2002) recognise that an image makes demands on the viewer. They look at (4) the relation between the gaze and the represented participant. A 'demand gaze' establishes an imaginary or direct interaction between the represented participant and the interactive participant(s), i.e. the represented participant looks at the interactive participant (viewer). On the other hand, when a represented participant looks at another element in the image, they provide an 'offer gaze' that invites the interactive participant to observe the scene in the image.

Bell and Milic (2002) continue with (5) the relationship between the distance and represented participant, which mediates the interaction between represented participant and interactive participant; the authors tell us that women are typically portrayed at a closer shot to invite viewers in. Additionally, there is (6) the relationship between the horizontal angle and the represented participant, with a 'frontal angle' inviting the interactive participant in, and the 'oblique angle' signifying a degree of detachment or distancing (Bell & Milic, 2002; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021).

Bell and Milic (2002) also cover (7) the relationship between the vertical axis and represented participant, believing that the area left of the vertical axis on an image shows the semantically 'given' and 'known', whereas the area on the right is what's 'new' and 'unknown'; the authors point out how women are commonly shown more on the left than men. Finally looking at (8) the relationship between the horizontal axis and the represented participant, whereby the area above shows the ideal and fantasy, compared to below the axis, which shows the 'reality' and 'given', Bell and Milic (2002) observe how women are often depicted in the top part of the axis.

4.4 Intimate Citizenship

Plummer (2003, p. 14) states that intimate citizenship involves "…the decisions people have to make over the control (or not) over one's body, feelings, relationships; access (or not) to

representations, relationships, public spaces, etc.; and socially grounded choices (or not) about identities, gender experiences, erotic experiences...".

Given that this dissertation explores how individuals' personal and intimate lives – such as relationships, sexual identities, and bodies – are intertwined with social, political, and cultural processes concerning gender, queer, and fatness representations in *Playboy* (see the methodology section for how these themes emerged), the concept of intimate citizenship can provide a lens for understanding how these themes are constructed, negotiated and represented in media (Disability Studies Leeds, 2019; Reynolds (2010). By analysing shifts in *Playboy*'s discourse (see Main Research Question), this dissertation closely engages with intimate citizenship, particularly in terms of the brand's inclusionary and exclusionary practices.

Intimate citizenship aligns well with social constructionism as both perspectives focus on how social, cultural, and political contexts shape individuals' identities, rights, and experiences. Social constructionism emphasises identities as socially and culturally constructed through language, media, and societal norms, and intimate citizenship addresses the social construction of what is deemed 'acceptable', and 'legitimate'. Moreover, both social constructionism and intimate citizenship focus on the role of power in shaping reality and representation, viewing media, legal systems, and social institutions as key forces that construct and reinforce certain norms while excluding others (Reynolds, 2010).

At the core of social constructionism is the belief that meanings and norms are never fixed, always contested and evolving (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021). Intimate citizenship acknowledges that the rights and recognition of individuals' intimate lives are dynamic and shift based on changing cultural, political and social conditions (Disability Studies Leeds, 2019). Finally, both perspectives highlight the importance of the socio-cultural context in shaping individuals' experiences. For intimate citizenship, this means examining how cultural views on intimacy and personal rights differ across societies and how this affects individuals' inclusion or exclusion.

The methodology follows in the next section, providing the philosophical paradigm of this dissertation, the data collection methods and procedures, the tool for data analysis, and reflexivity.

5. Methodology

The philosophical paradigm underpinning this dissertation is qualitative, engaging with key concepts of ontology: 'What is reality?' and epistemology: 'How can we make sense of reality?' (Moon & Blackman, 2017). My role as the researcher has been to explore and interpret this reality, identifying and highlighting patterns through observation. Consequently, this dissertation adopts a constructionist paradigm as its primary aim is to examine and understand shifts in representation within *Playboy'*s online content, specifically regarding gender, queerness, and fatness. By using this paradigm, this dissertation engages in an inductive approach, since it aims to identify recurring themes and build a theory about representations in a particular space (Moon & Blackman, 2017).

Given the nature of this research, which aims to explore and understand contemporary shifts in *Playboy* by identifying constructions of representation and uncovering hegemonic ideologies within a constructivist framework, a qualitative research design is most appropriate. Burr (2015) discusses qualitative research from a social constructionist perspective, highlighting it as context-specific and focused on understanding societal choices, behaviours, and experiences. This dissertation seeks to uncover the semiotic choices behind these representations, analyse the representational patterns, and examine their constructed discourse.

5.1 Data Collection Methods and Procedure

For this dissertation, data collection involved multiple phases, akin to a 'gold panning' process, to sift out predominant patterns that reveal contemporary shifts in *Playboy* compared to its former criticisms. Since *Playboy* transitioned to an online-only platform in April 2020, the potential dataset was naturally confined to the digital domain. Historically, *Playboy* has established a strong visual presence through its centrefolds and editorial layouts. To examine the current iteration of *Playboy*, which has discontinued its centrefolds and now exists solely online (Bennet, 2019), it seemed essential to retain this focus on visual dominance for continuity. Consequently, Instagram emerged as the logical platform, further narrowing the dataset.

Instagram, launched in October 2010, has rapidly become the fastest-growing social networking site, with over 1 billion monthly active users as of October 2021 (Smith, 2024). Baker and Walsh (2018) note that 'Instagram is configured around the contemporary',

facilitating posts to be created, shared, and consumed in real-time while privileging visual content.

Instagram highlights visual moments (posts) – photos or videos – allowing users to edit, apply filters, and adjust brightness and colour, shaping the look and feel of their posts. This visual focus provides users control over their self-presentation and representation, a factor that also applies to *Playboy*'s approach on the platform (Baker & Walsh, 2018). While other social media platforms, like X, prioritise text-based communication, Instagram's primary medium is visual imagery, with text mainly confined to hashtags, captions, and the comment section.

My sampling method of choice was simple random sampling, whereby I randomly selected Instagram posts on *Playboy'*s page between the years 2021 to 2023. I chose simple random sampling because it reduces selection bias and provides a sample collection that is statistically representative of the whole population. The chosen years were determined to provide the most recent dataset since *Playboy*'s shift to solely being online; and to allow myself enough time to analyse the data and meet deadlines.

Of all the *Playboy* posts on Instagram between the years 2021 to 2023, 80 were randomly and initially selected for coding to get a general sense of themes without focusing on specific types of accounts. An inductive coding framework was then applied to these 80 posts, I printed screenshots of the 80 posts – the visual of the post and the caption of the post – and spent one month familiarising myself with the data, noticing recurring ideas, phrases, and patterns without imposing any specific framework of interpretation.

I highlighted the meaningful ideas, phrases and patterns that seemed relevant to my research question (the 'shifts') in my journal, keeping in mind the past criticisms as a criterion to intentionally highlight what appeared relevant to those past criticisms (see Literature Review, Part 1 for criticisms). These highlighted ideas, phrases and patterns became my codes by identifying and labelling anything of interest in the data related to the past criticisms. The codes were kept descriptive, i.e.: 'What is present and what is happening?, and close to the data (avoiding initial interpretations), using tags and keywords.

Specifically, 'verbal language codes' for the captions, and 'bodily codes' for the represented participants in terms of bodily contact, proximity between represented participants and the interactive participant(s), physical orientation, appearance, facial expression, gaze, head nods, gestures, and posture. These included 'commodity codes', for fashions and clothing, and

‘behavioural codes’ for the rituals, protocols and role-playing. Codes were allowed to overlap and coexist, which they often did.

Once a portion of the data was coded, I began grouping similar codes into broader categories of ‘representation of bodies’, ‘gendered imagery’, and ‘queer visual elements’. As more data became coded, themes were refined to reflect the meaningful patterns emerging in the data (thematic analysis) leaving the finalised coding framework which formed the empirical chapter sections: ‘empowerment versus objectification’ how bodies are framed (see ‘*Playboy:* Locations, Dislocations & Relocations of Gender’), ‘heteronormativity versus queer inclusion’ evidence of shifting sexual norms (see ‘Queering *Playboy*: Inclusivity, Disruptions & Sin’), and ‘commercialisation of body positivity’ fatness in marketing contexts (see ‘Plus-Size *Playboy*: The Hourglass Fatty’).

With the refining process of the themes came a final data sample selection, which most effectively addressed the research questions, composed of 24 visual images and 24 captions. Captions were included as they act as ‘anchorages’, i.e. a precise verbal restatement of the image which comes first (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021).

The initial aim of this research was to explore shifts in representational strategies within *Playboy* based on their past criticisms (see Main Research Question). Early coding and thematic analysis highlighted recurrent themes of gender, queerness, and fatness, which became focal points for the research questions as the study progressed (see Sub-questions A and B). This iterative and adaptive approach allowed the research to remain grounded in the data and responsive to the complexity of the subject matter.

5.2 Data Analysis

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) is the tool used for analysis. Alongside the MCDA descriptions are interpretations that link the found elements in the data to past case studies and understandings of emerging patterns to make sense of what is happening; this is modelled off the analysis work done by Machin and Mayr (2012), and Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) who do not just describe what is happening, but interpret as well.

MCDA emerged from linguistics during the late 1990s through the pioneering work of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (Machin, 2015; Ledin & Machin, 2017) and is also indebted to the work of Halliday (1985). It is a theorisation that stems from Critical Discourse Analysis

(CDA) a tool for analysis that solely focuses on language and text as the primary means of communication, identifying power relations, and ideological and discourse formation.

Critical discourse analysis considers language a primary force for the production and reproduction of ideology, i.e., of belief systems that come to be accepted and normalised as common sense (Bucholtz, 2003). Bucholtz (2003) explains that critical discourse analysis unveils the beliefs which are ingrained in texts that encourage the acceptance of unequal arrangements of power as natural and inevitable.

Out of CDA grew MCDA, a tool furthering that communication also takes place in various other communicative mediums, such as aural, visual, and corporeal. MCDA is not altogether separate from semiotics, as it investigates semiotic resources embedded in various multimodal communications that make up a social context (Ledin & Machin, 2017).

Ma and Stahl (2017) highlight that as a qualitative analytical tool, MCDA operates on the notions that: (a) discourses can be identified through the analysis of visual and textual choices in a given context; (b) language is never neutral, this is because choice is always at play in the construction of meanings attached to the social world, influencing how we perceive and behave in it; (c) meaning is shaped by and can affect power relations; and (d) these limitations that shape the construction of social meaning can be studied.

MCDA looks at how individual elements in images, such as objects and settings can signify discourses in ways that are made to appear natural or commonplace; this is accomplished by what is made salient versus what is not.

In summarising MCDA, Machin et al. (2016) identify it as a tool to reveal buried ideologies in multimodal communications, to show how those in power seek to re-contextualise social practice and thought in their interests to maintain control over ideology. In essence, MCDA focuses on how language functions in interactive and sociocultural contexts, and how this, in turn, reproduces and reflects upon particular societies as a whole (Ma & Stahl, 2017; Wang, 2014).

5.3 Reflexivity

As a researcher, I am aware that my background and personal experiences influence how I approach and interpret this study. I identify as a queer woman of colour, with a strong academic interest in media representation and its role in shaping societal perceptions of gender and body

politics. These interests stem partly from my own experiences navigating representations of queer and non-normative bodies in mainstream media.

My positionality inevitably shapes my choice of research topic, focusing on *Playboy*'s evolving representation of gender, queer identities, and fatness. Growing up with media that largely excluded or stereotyped these identities, I was drawn to exploring shifts in portrayals that may challenge or reinforce dominant ideologies.

Using a constructionist paradigm, I recognise that the data I analyse – visual and textual content from *Playboy* – is not neutral but embedded with ideologies constructed by cultural, historical, and commercial contexts. My interpretations of these representations are also influenced by my theoretical framework and personal worldview, which emphasise the importance of inclusivity and diversity.

During data collection and analysis, I was conscious of my role as both an observer and an interpreter. I acknowledge that my focus on themes of gender, queer identity, and fatness may have led me to prioritise certain patterns over others. To minimise potential bias, I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process, documenting my assumptions, decisions, and thought processes. Additionally, I sought feedback from my supervisor and peers to ensure my analyses remained grounded in the data rather than my preconceptions.

Finally, I recognise that my interpretation of representational shifts in *Playboy* is shaped by my theoretical lens and positionality. While I aim to present the data as objectively as possible, I understand that complete neutrality is unattainable. My role, therefore, is to transparently and critically engage with the data, linking my findings to broader cultural and social discourses while remaining mindful of my influence on the research process.

Moving forward, the next three sections that follow form part of the empirical chapter, namely gender, queerness and fatness, which provide examinations of the data using MCDA, and summarisations of the emerging patterns.

6. Empirical Chapter

6.1 *Playboy*: Locations, Dislocations and Relocations of Gender

In response to criticisms of misogyny, objectification of women, and prioritisation of the white heterosexual male perspective (Bennet, 2019), *Playboy* has implemented measurable changes in gender representation. Their editorial team now includes two women and an openly gay man, a team that the brand promotes as more inclusive and representative of diverse authority. Furthermore, *Playboy* claims to prioritise consensual objectification and intimacy over explicit nudity and overtly sexual insinuations.

With these changes as a foundation, this chapter initiates an empirical analysis of gender in *Playboy*, examining whether this self-proclaimed 'woke-er' (Bennet, 2019) version of the brand addresses its history of subordination and marginalisation.

As a foretoken, Goffman (1979) observed that men and women were often portrayed in advertisements as participants in 'hyper-ritualisations' of social scenes. These scenes distilled everyday social rituals into imagery that consistently portrayed 'female subordination', femininity, and effeminacy (Bell & Milic, 2002).

This chapter offers a detailed analysis of 'gender' representations, exploring both visual and text-based content to assess how *Playboy* constructs gender through participant representations and subject positioning. The findings in this chapter summarise recurring patterns – elements – found in the data samples.

6.1.1 Data Analyses



Figure 1 *'Playboy Jewelry is a girl's best friend. Shop our Women's Jewelry Gift Guide up to 40% off sitewide!'.* Copyright 2022 by I.L Shiver.

In Figure 1 the Playboy brand directs this content of selling *Playboy* jewellery at women, shifting the target consumer from mainly the heterosexual man equally to women too – concurrent with Chaves's (2011) claim that in the time of women's advancement in the 1960s, sexual freedom of women led to freedom of women's consumerism and selling of women's products, that was then exploited by *Playboy.*

This is noted in the caption, 'A girl's best friend', which is also a commonly associated play on the iconic Marilyn Monroe performance of 'Diamonds are a girl's best friend' (Hawks, 1953) to enhance the perceived quality of the jewellery; in this instance intertextuality is seen acting as a commonly used device of advertising discourse to boost the persuasive effect of advertising the jewellery (Xing & Feng, 2023).

Starting in the background we see a plain bronze-golden-like colour, the subdued tone towards the top creates a private and sultry feel, with the brighter lighting focusing on the objects at the centre of the image – up close and consuming the foreground and middle ground; this indicates that the objects are the centre of the image's message. There are soapy-looking bubbles floating all over, supplemented by the dishwasher rack which indicates that an activity is taking place: metaphorically the action of cleaning, being in a kitchen environment.

The dishwasher rack is metallic, and aside from this complimenting the warmer metallic tones of the background, the choice of metal dishwasher rack gives a sense of durability, long-lasting and reliability, that perhaps is aiming to be attached to the objects in the dishwasher rack: the jewellery being advertised.

In the dishwasher rack, there is a single drinking glass towards the back, a common cleaning object. There are also Christmas tree ornaments that imply gift giving, these ornaments are also a bronze-gold-like colour and blend in with the dishwasher rack and background. Some ornaments have jewellery wrapped around them, 'Gifting jewellery to women', whereas some are in a square container furthering this message of gifting in these packages. Some jewellery is strewn all over the dishwasher rack, appearing to be washed too, further connoting cleanliness and high quality.

The jewellery ranges from necklaces with a diamante Playboy logo, to cream pearl bracelets and includes hoop earrings, along with thin chain necklaces and a delicate chain necklace with a lock. The Playboy logo is present within each jewellery item. Characteristics of delicate (thin style), wealth, and luxury are portrayed. This however also serves to distract from how the content is directed both at women – via the caption, and possibly the feminine quality of the jewellery, through their delicate nature (Van Leeuwen, 2006) – and reinforces traditional gender roles of expecting women to belong in the kitchen and needing to be neat and tidy (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979), thus contradicting and diminishing the newer progressive agenda of the brand that is supposedly striving to empower all.



Figure 2 *'Trick or treat yo'self 🔥 🐰 This weekend only, take an additional 15% off our Halloween sale with code EXTRA15'.* Copyright 2022, by GDSHOOTS.

In Figure 2, the content of the composition is promoting Halloween consumerism, as seen by the caption '…Halloween sale…', and the play on words, 'Trick or treat yo'self'. The slang 'yo'self' functions to appeal to the viewer by speaking like the average person (viewer), in order to connote equality and obstruct the influence of this linguistic strategy, concealing power relations and making the viewer more likely to want the product as they identify with it, via the subliminal meaning potentials embedded in the caption and content (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Starting from the background of the composition: there is a long gold draped curtain against a white wall and beige archway, this indicates a room, a private and intimate space. Additionally, the soft lighting and glow create a mysterious and sultry feel, qualities that are reflected on the participants present in the composition. The archway itself connotes wealth, power, and luxury because of the intertextual ties to Roman architecture and mansions.

The composition is cropped causing the space to appear smaller, furthering the intimacy and closeness of the area in this room, with the camera angle shot from a low vertical angle tilted upwards towards the archway at the two participants in the scene of the composition; a feeling of being cramped into the scene is evident.

This camera angle and distance from the participants also affect our perception of the image, we see the full bodies of the participants and the surrounding setting of the room, contextualising the scene. Moreover, the viewer from this angle is asked to idealise – look up

to and aspire towards – the scene before them, the participants, and the activities of the participants (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979).

The two participants are a young black woman on the left, shown wearing the Playboy bunny costume, traditionally worn by women. And a young man (of colour) on the right, who is wearing silk black pyjamas and Playboy slippers (logo on the front) which depicts iconic Hugh Hefner who is known to dress this way. Together they recreate the renowned the look of Hugh Hefner with his *Playboy* bunnies. Since the room already signifies wealth and luxury, these qualities are carried onto the costumes too, communicated as being high quality.

In interaction with one another, the poses are revealing of the gender roles and power relations at play (of subordination): the woman's pose places her backside at the centre of the composition, the focal point, sexualising her body by reducing her to a part of her body; her face is hidden, whilst the man's pose shows off his muscular chest and midriff (Tortajada et al., 2013); also, at the centre of the composition, is the man, with a focus on sexualising his body.

The man casually leans on the archway with one arm, his gaze coolly directed onto the viewer, inviting the viewer to come and observe. The woman is turned away from the viewer and stands in front of the man, the back of her body is seen, along with her legs – which appear longer and draw more attention because of the camera angle – she has an Afro, on her back is a prominent butterfly tattoo (this possibly connotes edginess or rebelliousness), and her backside is on display. The hierarchy of this interaction, the woman in front of the man, calls the viewer to place emphasis on viewing her, this is supplemented by the man's gaze inviting the viewer to come to observe her, and how they act together (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

The ritualisation of subordination and licenced withdrawal is saliently shown in how the woman is turned towards the man, her hand on his stomach, looking to him and appearing preoccupied with him, she is also close up against him connoting intimacy, her desiring him by gazing at him – ultimately performing submissive or likewise appeasement gestures (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979). He is attentive to the viewer and unfazed by her, altogether reinforcing a gender stereotype and displaying a power relation between the two, with the man in a superior position.



Figure 3*: 'You start to create magic when you are confident, when you love every part of your body and your essence. You surround yourself with the right people and you are where you should be'.* Copyright 2022, by Playboy.

Figure 3 gives conflicting messages. The caption: 'You start to create magic when you are confident, when you love every part of your body and your essence. You surround yourself with the right people and you are where you should be' humanises the participant in the composition, by giving voice to her thoughts and showing that she is body confident, thus making her a subject rather than an object, the visual codes themselves insinuate submissiveness and sexualisation of the participant.

The caption shows her body confidence and self-love, i.e.: 'You start to create magic when you are confident, when you love every part of your body and your essence', empowering the participant. However analysing the meaning potential embedded in the visual cues tells of the potential disempowerment present in the image.

Tortajada et al. (2013) and Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2015) explain this tension, i.e. the discourse attached to such images that emphasise choice, empowerment, and sexual freedom are truly sexualised representations of women; accomplished via self-representational resources used by woman participants who want to portray themselves as sex objects – always ready for sex and trying to use their sexual powers, not to seek men's approval or be desired by others, but for their own pleasure.

Starting with the background: it is dark, and there is clear water, there are dark blue tiles along the sides of the white walls, steps leading into the water, this is a private swimming pool. The dark background connotes a private, mysterious, and sultry feel, this is consistent throughout *Playboy*'s advertisements with the darker compositional settings.

The only light source present appears to be spotlighted onto the participant, who is the focus of this composition, the unnatural lighting creates a blueish-purple tone on the pool and the participant adding a fantasy-like quality. Creating fantasy is a common strategy in advertising when sexuality is a mode of consumption (Talbot, 2010), and thus is a primary tool in *Playboy*'s marketing kit, especially when displaying women. Moreover, women are displayed in this fashion more than men who are mostly portrayed in realistic settings (Bell & Milic, 2002; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015).

The participant is completely nude and perched half in and out of the pool, like a mermaid, relaxing in a casual manner with her arm holding her head so that she may look up at the viewer. The participant's pose is a clear indication of submissiveness and a performance of appeasing the viewer (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979): head canting, gaze and close camera shot that invites the viewer in, being shot from a high vertical angle so as to be seen as beneath viewer (denoting an inferior position to the viewer) and engaging in the feminine touch by holding her head in a gentle manner.

The participant's body is in the centre of the composition, her backside appears intentionally raised out of the water, the necklaces that she wears draw attention to her neck and chest which are hidden, and to her face, which has been accentuated by the makeup worn – an unrealistic expectation of wearing makeup when swimming (fantasy-like quality) – and the long-slicked back hair that flows down her back to her backside.

The pose, aesthetic and lighting are all intentional and direct the viewers' gaze up and down the participant's body. Therefore, although the caption reads as one connoting empowerment, confidence, and self-love, the visual cues declare the opposite.



Figure 4: *'Don't miss out on these best-sellers for spring 🌸 Shop styles for men & women at the link in bio'.* Copyright 2022, by Playboy.

Figure 4 is an advertisement for Playboy clothing seen in the composition since Playboy has transitioned from a porn magazine for men to more of a brand that is invested in selling a wide variety of products to all people (Bennet, 2019) – no longer predominantly selling women – it is important to view the gendering of all their products (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015). In this analysis, we look at the 'everyday' clothing promoted by the brand.

In the composition, an unknown participant takes up the entire space so that the viewer's gaze is zoomed in on blue-washed jeans, with a large rip revealing brown smooth skin beneath the backside area; a pink Playboy logo on the jeans' back pocket further draws attention to this area (backside). Additionally, enhancing the salience, the small plain blue background juxtaposes the participant's body, strengthening the viewer's focus on the participant.

Again, the backside take centre stage in the frame of the composition, positioned at exactly the middle centre of the composition, and inclining a sexualisation of this participant's body, this is accentuated by the lack of identification of the participant, reducing them to their body parts for the viewer's consumption: subsidized by the rip in the jeans (connoting rebelliousness, sexual freedom, confidence), logo on the back pocket and body canting that enhances the fullness of the backside. Tortajada et al. (2013) support how fragmenting body parts (breasts, backside, hair, lips, and eyes) is a mechanism used to sexualise bodies.

Looking at the pattern of advertisements doing this in Playboy's Instagram content – the backside is the centre of attention for women's poses, similarly to this one – we can deduce that this is a black woman. Moreover, the snippet of long hair braids to the right of the composition, with the pink Playboy bunny logo (Western traditions consider pink a feminine colour), and smooth thighs with no body hair, affirms this.

Aside from advertising the clothing, noted by the caption, 'Don't miss out on these best-sellers for spring 🌸 Shop styles for men & women at the link in bio', which seems to be targeting both men and women with this content, the use of a woman participant, or a participant with feminine qualities, hints at expectations of what femininity is, or of being the ideal woman. That is the wearing of pink, showcasing of the body in a way that enhances the backside area (or curves), having no body hair, body canting and having long hair on your head (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979).

The 'everyday' clothing of jeans in this style, promotes body confidence, and by bringing this type of casual wear into the public sphere, being able to confidently wear something that reveals the body, suggests sexual freedom or body confidence is no longer reserved for private spaces.



Figure 5: '*Pla*yboy *and Culture Kings partnered for an exclusive collection of quality garments, encapsulating* Playboy's *"Pleasure for All" ethos. High quality fleece & heavyweight T-shirting paired with Puff Prints / Screenprints & Embroidery, designed through the Culture Kings Lens.'.* Copyright 2022, by Playboy.

The composition in Figure 5 has bright lighting, so that there is clarity, detail, and openness in the image. From the background we see a plain white wall, with a semi-circle mirror that reflects a spiral staircase behind the camera placement. In the foreground there is a plush white carpet, brown leather stool, and bamboo chairs in which the two participants in the composition are sitting.

The participants are centred in the middle ground of the composition and appear to be sitting inside a luxurious room – affording privacy and comfort as the connotations imply – comfortably relaxed on the bamboo chairs. Between them is a glass table held by a metallic shell frame, with various gold and sparkly ornaments. The gold, white, and silver colours are scattered throughout the composition, including many shiny items, these all connote qualities of luxury, wealth, high-end materials, and comfort; qualities that are further seen and emulated by the participants and the clothing that is being advertised.

The caption, 'Playboy and Culture Kings partnered for an exclusive collection of quality garments, encapsulating *Playboy*'s "Pleasure for All" ethos' supports that this is an advertisement for high-quality clothing. The high end qualities of the setting are meant to be to be attached to the clothing items (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Moreover, the name 'Culture Kings" shares that the clothing items and scene before showcase a particular culture – perhaps hip-hop street culture as seen by the hoodies and sneakers – that is up-market.

The viewer is on the same level as the participants, so the viewer is to see them on equal terms and possibly relate to them – resonating with the pleasure for all ethos. The participants are a brown-skinned woman on the left and a brown-skinned man on the right who are both gazing at the viewer, inviting the viewer to come and observe them, the setting, and the clothing advertised.

Even though the woman and man both wear the bluish-green hoodie and sweatpants – the *Playboy* collaboration indicated by the word 'Playboy' with the bunny logo across the front of the hoodie – with grey and white sneakers, thus covering their entire bodies and they sit on equal levels reinforcing the pleasure for all ethos yet again (no overlapping or hierarchy of any sort shown (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979) the poses of the two participants differ.

The woman – indicated by the long hair and pose characteristics, which is consistent with other women portrayed in *Playboy'*s online content on Instagram, shows body and head canting and her gaze is warmer due to her expressing a slight smile, connoting playfulness, and appearing

more inviting than the man (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979). She holds her hands between her legs on the base of the chair, with her legs apart, this draws attention to her private area and causes her to seem more open to the spectator in both a sexual and desirable way.

On the opposite end, the man – indicated by the short blonde hair, facial hair (permitted with men), and pose – is portrayed as relaxed and composed as he leans back in the chair with a cool, serious, and neutral expression, also gazing at the viewer but in a more controlled laid-back manner.

Dyer (1982) explains these poses by men as, "their physiques may look relaxed, but the model(s) posing tense their bodies and muscles, thus drawing attention to the body's action potential. The normalcy with which we assume such a display of brawn legitimates male power and domination" (Tortajada et al., 2013, p. 181).

There are many positive portrayals present here, in how the woman and man are dressed and sitting on equal terms, performing the same activity in the same setting, but the poses differ and illustrate Goffman's (1979) ritualisation of subordination for the woman as she aims to appease the viewer through her gestures, compared to the man who passively and cooly addresses the viewer with a show of hegemonic masculinity (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015).



Figure 6: *'*Playboy *x Peaches. Clubhouse! For this holiday season, we have partnered with automotive culture brand @peachesoneuniverse to present* Playboy *x Peaches. Clubhouse.'.* Copyright 2022, by Playboy.

Figure 6 has a dark background with neon blue lighting connoting a moody mysteriousness, perhaps even sultriness, as we have noted in other the darker compositions of *Playboy's* content. Combined with the setting of cement flooring, and a metal structure making this out to be a parking lot, there also exists a sense of toughness and rebelliousness. The lighting spotlights the participant and car (cropped) in the foreground and the middle ground of the composition, and as the participant is in front of the car (overlapping), compositional hierarchy dictates that the participant is the main focus, followed by the participant's relation to the car as she is in direct contact with it (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

The participant's relation to the car is mirrored in the caption, '*Playboy* x Peaches. Clubhouse! For this holiday season, we have partnered with automotive culture brand @peachesoneuniverse to present *Playboy* x Peaches…' This represents this collaboration with the participant and car in contact, and as this is still *Playboy*'s content, their use of a *Playboy* model dominates the other brand (the car) spatially in the composition.

The car supports this collaboration visually, as it has a white Playboy bunny in the left headlight and the word 'Peaches' with the Playboy bunny logo replacing the letter 'a' in the word on the windscreen. The car is a peach colour, symbolically linking the brand 'Peaches' to its identity as an automotive culture brand; furthermore, the car is like a Box BMW, which connotes masculine traits through being wide, broad, big, and taking up space (dominating) (Van Leeuwen, 2006).

The participant is an Asian woman, her gender is portrayed by long hair, high heels, makeup, and head canting: typical of women's poses in advertisements to attract the viewer (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979). Unlike most women's portrayals in advertising, the participant is shot from a low vertical angle to be seen above the viewer, denoting a superior position to the viewer, the viewer looks up to – is inspired and aspires to – the woman who is the ideal. This camera angle also enhances the length of her legs, making her appear taller and thus bigger than she is. Bell and Milic (2002) explain how this is typically a tactic for men to emphasise their masculinity, through their dominance in a composition.

Moreover, the woman is dressed in clothing that only reveals her head and shoulders; this appears to be common for the Playboy brand when the focus of their content is on the sales of the clothing or objects (like jewellery and mugs), i.e. there is less objectification and sexualisation of the body if it is going to distract from the selling of the product other than the participant. Affirming this we see on the leg of the pants the word 'Peaches' with the Playboy

bunny logo replacing the letter ‘a’ in the word. Again we note that this is a sale of the clothing collaboration by the two brands and not of the participant or the car.

Lastly, although the woman employs head canting, the remainder of her pose resembles that of most male models in *Playboy*’s content: that is, the relaxed and composed manner of leaning against objects in the setting. She also caves in her chest and stands legs apart gazing at the viewer with a neutral and serious expression. She is not emulating most women’s poses that draw attention to the body (namely the backside), but rather the opposite, emphasising masculine qualities whilst downplaying the feminine qualities (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979).

The analysis reveals clear challenges to traditional representations of women in *Playboy*’s content. In this case, the participant displays masculine qualities and poses that defy typical gender stereotypes. Although the head canting still follows a common trope, the overall image contrasts with expected gender norms. However, this shift in representation is likely driven by the magazine's commercial goals. In such exceptional cases, the focus is not solely on the participant, but on selling a product. To appeal to a broader audience, diversity in representation is often necessary.



Figure 7: *‘Introducing @klwhick: Industrial engineer, fitness instructor and @playboycenterfold Founding Creator. Head to the link in bio to subscribe to his content* 🔥 *’*. Copyright 2022, by Playboy.

Figure 7 offers an objectification of a man. Tortajada et al. (2013) term it as 'the erotic male': something that subverts *Playboy'*s typical and traditionally known content.

The composition contains a plain off-white background, its blandness draws focus to the participant whose image consumes the foreground and middle ground, taking up most of the composition. In addition, the composition is light and airy, suggesting openness, transparency, and optimism, perhaps to encourage the consumer to buy. The participant is a white man, who gazes directly at the viewer with a cool expression, unsmiling, he is completely naked aside from the white underwear that he wears (smaller than typical men's underwear). His pose is relaxed as he holds a clothing piece (shirt or blazer) over his shoulder, implying the act of dressing/undressing.

The participant's head is cut off from the frame, along with his legs, which centres his face, six-pack, shoulders, and private area up close to the viewer, enhancing the sexualising of the body. Moreover, this participant appears to represent the ideal man's body, with a sharp jawline, six-pack, broad shoulders, and chest, with some, but not excessive body hair.

Furthermore, the caption gives voice to this participant, despite the objectification, it reads: 'Introducing @klwhick: industrial engineer, fitness instructor and @playboycentrefold Founding Creator. Head to the link in bio to subscribe to his content'. This is unlike women's content that gives voice to their content whilst disempowering them through the visual passive feminine conventions. This participant is labelled as the Founding Creator, adding to his control and empowerment of his sexual freedom – via the display of his body – and aided by the visual cues, makes him less than an object and adds to his subjectivity (Caldeira et al., 2018).

The caption speaks to his profession (rough and manly engineering, a male-dominated field), career, independence, and success; this is a traditional association with men in advertising and the media (Machin & Mayr, 2012). By portraying the ideal man's body, he also signifies the ideal man.

His gaze and pose are repeated amongst other participants who are men in *Playboy*'s online content (see prior analyses). Thus a pattern surfaces describing a recuperation of hegemonic masculinity that becomes entwined in the man's objectification.

Tortajada et al. (2013) along with De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013) explain that the erotic male (objectification and sexualising of men) is increasing in standard advertising representations and on SNSs, mirroring advertising conventions of masculinity.

Yet, these presentations of men as sex objects – like the newfound convention 'six-pack advertising' – pose no true subversion to male dominance, Tortajada et al. (2013) explain that the female gaze does not counter society's pre-existing (male) gaze. Consequently, heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity are upheld, especially by the resources like gaze, pose, and expression by men, which scrutinises and rectifies any potential dislocation.

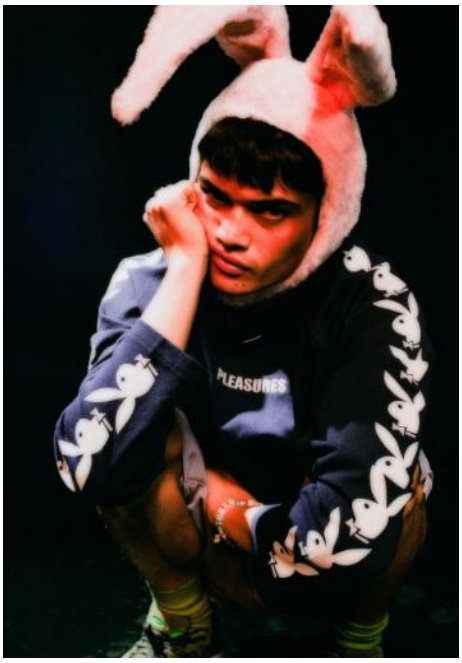

Figure 8: *'Shop the new drop from the Playboy X @pleasures collab 🐰 Link in bio'.* Copyright 2022, by E. Hernández.

Finally, Figure 8 has a dark background, but most of the composition is taken up by the participant, who is in the foreground and the middle ground. The participant is the focus of the composition, this is supplemented by the lighting centred on him. The caption reads: 'Shop the new drop from the Playboy X @pleasures collab…', and in conjunction with the visual content tells the viewer that products (clothing) are for sale that hold meaning potentials relating to pleasure – hence the collaboration with a brand called Pleasure – and a particular lifestyle, hinted at through the visual resources embedded in the composition, linked to the product.

The dark background suggests concealment, mystery, and possibly provocativeness. It may symbolise how secretive or taboo behaviours often occur in the dark to avoid social or cultural repercussions. In relation to the participant, this darkness seems to symbolise the concealment of non-hegemonic masculinity. This is due to the feminine qualities associated with the

participant – such as the pink bunny hat, crouching position, and small stature – which contrast with traditional masculine norms.

The participant is a young man – as seen in the short hair, hairy legs, gaze, expression and pose. He is fully clothed in casual dress wear, with a Playboy sweater, shorts neon yellow socks and sneakers, thus he is not revealing his body to be consumed (objectified) by the viewer. The conservative dress and absence of the 'erotic male' in this case may reflect the balancing act discussed by Tortajada et al. (2013). While there are subtle disruptions of hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality, these are countered by the use of resources such as gaze, pose, and expression to restore traditional norms.

The participant's gaze is directly on the viewer at the same eye level, addressing the viewer, and his gaze is neutral, cool, and serious. His pose is relaxed, he leans on his arm with a fisted hand (lack of feminine touch) (Goffman, 1979) and he takes up space in the composition – all typical of men's advertising conventions and they are affirmations of hegemonic masculinity. However, the pink fluffy bunny hat (typically worn by women) along with the crouched position and bent back relates to relative size, making him appear small and weak, dislocating his sexuality and gender representation.

Goffman's (1979) ritual of subordination underscores his childlike position, crouching to appear smaller, which challenges conventional ideas of size and creates femininity – typically associated with female poses. However, his expression and gaze restore the balance. In this way, the participant attempts to subvert traditional notions of masculinity (the power shift is unsuccessful) while also reinforcing certain masculine attributes and poses.

Despite the attempts at subversion of the norm – the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990) – to make way for a plurality of gender representations there appears to exist more tension, policing and recuperation (of the norm), with which passive femininity and women's subordination is maintained for the most part, alongside the attempts at empowerment and giving voice to the women participants. Although other masculinities are given a space for expression, they are made childlike and overshadowed by aspects of hegemonic masculinity (Goffman, 1979; Caldeira et al., 2018). There is a constant flux between the dislocations, locations, and relocations of subjects.

6.1.2 Findings

The patterns which emerge across the above dataset in terms of visual resources include lighting, in which the lighting is often focused on the represented participant making them central in the composition. Bright, soft lighting in some cases (e.g. Figures 5, 6) gives a sense of openness and luxury, whilst darker lighting in others (e.g. Figures 6, 8) connotes mystery, provocativeness, or taboo. Such a juxtaposition shows the contrasting moods depending on the context, i.e., luxury vs. rebelliousness.

Looking at the backgrounds, neutral or simple backgrounds (e.g. Figures 5, 7) are used to keep the focus on the represented participants, whereas the dark or abstract backgrounds (Figures 6, 8) evoke a sense of concealment, mystery or rebellion, enhancing the idea of forbidden or hidden pleasures. Additionally, with spatial hierarchy, the represented participants are often placed in the foreground and middle ground of the composition, reinforcing the focus on them. Overlapping elements, such as the participants in front of objects (e.g. Figure 6) assist in establishing their dominance in the composition.

With the gender representations, male participants (e.g. Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8) are consistently portrayed with a strong, dominant presence, often displayed through their gaze (serious, cool, or intense) and posture (relaxed, composed). The ‘erotic male’ is apparent in Figure 7, where a man is depicted as an object of desire. Regardless, men are shown as empowered figures, except for a few subtle signs of vulnerability (e.g. crouched position in Figure 8).

Female participants are often depicted as sexual objects (e.g. Figures 5, 6) through poses that invite the viewer's gaze (body canting, sitting in open postures), emphasising vulnerability and subordination. However, some images (e.g. Figure 6) show attempts to empower female subjects by giving them control over the scene, via posing confidently in front of the car and asserting a sense of independence and strength.

There are also instances of gender subversion, such as Figure 8, where a male participant wears a feminine accessory and adopts a crouching position, which challenges traditional masculinity but is ultimately controlled by the gaze and posture, returning the participant to a more masculine stance.

Sexualised poses are frequent, particularly for women through poses that emphasise certain body parts (e.g., legs apart, head canting, leaning forward) drawing attention to their sexual desirability. Men are increasingly objectified, especially in Figure 7, where the erotic male

body is displayed but with an empowered narrative (the participant is introduced as the founding creator), distinguishing his portrayal from that of women.

This brings me to the next emerging pattern of empowerment and control, whereby empowerment for women comes in the form of 'giving voice' to the represented participants (e.g. Figure 7). In this pattern, women and men are portrayed as confident and active agents rather than passive subjects, while male participants are typically portrayed as more independent and dominant (Figure 7).

There are 'direct gazes' from both male and female represented participants addressing the viewer, creating a sense of connection and intimacy. However, coupled with facial expressions, the male gaze often dominates the power dynamic between the represented participant and the viewers. In several figures, particularly those of women, their expressions and gazes are inviting or playful, reflecting their positions as objects of desire, while the male gaze is cooler and more composed.

Finally, there is the recurring presence of brand logos (e.g. the Playboy bunny logo on clothing) reinforces the promotional intent of the compositions. Clothing often reflects luxury, comfort, or rebellion, depending on the mood of the image. The focus on 'quality garments' in the caption links to the status and lifestyle that *Playboy* and its collaborators seek to portray, aligning with the luxury aesthetic seen in Figures 5 and 6. Moreover, the clothing anchors the collaboration with other brands (e.g., Culture Kings, Peaches), further emphasising the cultural association and status of the garments being advertised.

6.2 Queering Playboy: Inclusivity, Disruptions, and Sin

Over time, the term 'queer' has evolved from a derogatory slang within homophobic discourse – originally intended to enforce socio-political norms by aligning identities and bodies with the heterosexual matrix and coherent gender expectations (Butler, 1990) – to a term of resistance against these norms. It now allows for identities beyond rigid 'gay' and 'lesbian' labels, embracing a fluid and non-coherent relationship between sex, gender, and desire (Spargo, 1999). By nature 'queer' is disruptive (anti-assimilationist and resistant), and the process of 'queering' subverts established norms of sex, gender, and desire, challenging the essentialist heterosexual matrix (Spargo, 1999).

Historically, *Playboy* has positioned itself as an ally to queer discourse, claiming support for sexual diversity beyond restrictive labels (Chaves, 2011). Notable examples include 'The

Crooked Man' story by Charles Beaumont, the 'Gay is Good' headline, and the magazine's Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) campaigns (Bennet, 2019). With recent staff changes and pledges of 'reinvention' (Bennet, 2019), it is timely to examine how *Playboy* currently constructs queerness.

This section presents a detailed analysis of 'queer' representations within *Playboy*, exploring both visual and text-based content, to understand how the brand constructs queerness through participant representation and subject positioning. Similar to the prior section on gender, the findings in this section summarise the recurring patterns found in the data samples.

6.2.1 Data Analyses

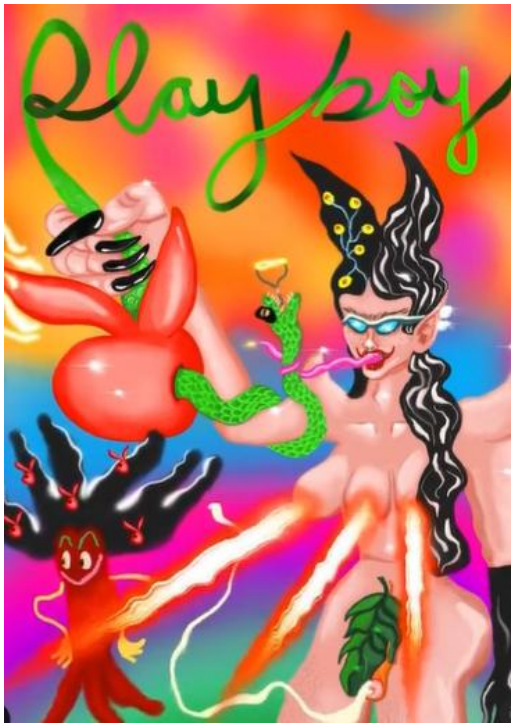

Figure 9: *'Presenting The New Surrealists' NFT collection 🌀 💭 Inspired by Playboy's history in contemporary art and surrealist photography, this @playboynfts collection includes digital artworks by our featured artists from Miami Art Week 2021: @filipcustic @imvirgenmaria @mirandamakaroff @ninamcneely & @bloomandplume '*. Copyright 2022, by M. Makaroff.

Figure 9 is of a digital artwork titled *AE 3.0: re-Genesis* by surrealist artist Miranda Makaroff. The artwork formed part of a collection of works that were inspired by *Playboy*'s history in contemporary art and surrealist photography, and was set for auction at a *Playboy* event. The

artwork is reflective of *Playboy*'s ideology and queer discourse, given that *Playboy* posted this piece on their Instagram page, it messages their queer representation.

The digital artwork shows movement and bright striking colours that add to the meaning-making of the composition as a whole and carry the viewers' attention throughout, truly disrupting both traditional arts in a technological sense – with what's new and contemporary and queer understandings – with the reimagining of gender, sexuality, and desire against Christian biblical (and dominant Western society) norms; hence the title *AE 3.0: re-Genesis*, which refers to the book of Genesis, and the 3.0, that implies a newer and updated version (*Holy Bible New Living Translation*, 2015, Genesis. 3:1-24).

The composition is colourful, abstract and holds multiple symbolic and metaphorical meaning potentials that altogether convey conventional ideologies toward queer identity – incoherences of gender, sexuality, and desire – representing disempowering, deviant, and unnatural notions.

A blurring occurs from the background, a vibrant array of orange, yellow, pink, blue, purple, and green, that connotatively functions to also blur the traditional lines of the heterosexual matrix and potentially signifies the very colourful LGBTQIA+ flag (potent cultural symbols are incorporated in covert and interpretative ways (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013).

There is a human-like figure on the right side that takes up most of the composition (foreground and middle ground) and a tree figure on the left side, smaller in comparison to the former figure and appearing further back into the composition which hierarchically forwards the importance of the human-like figure (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013). Looking at the figure on the right, the form is neither man nor woman but both, the figure signifies sex and gender fluidity. Moreover intensified feminine=female=woman and manly=man=male traits are found throughout. This is mainly accomplished through the three breasts, large round buttocks, long hair with flowers and nails, and a small waist, alongside a partially covered penis, broad shoulders, and a large frame.

As in the section on gender, the backside was central to women's poses and representation, Tortajada et al. (2013) refer to fragmenting body parts (breasts, backside, hair, lips, and eyes) as a mechanism used to sexualise bodies. For the feminine=female=woman aspects in this figure there is a fragmentation and exaggeration of the backside, breasts, hair, and nails that sexualises the woman and feminine parts of this figure; achieved through large sizing and highlights on the body.

The manly=man=male parts are shown by the relative size (Goffman, 1976) of the broad shoulders and large frame, which takes up space, appearing large, and domineering. Additionally, the penis with white fluid oozing out (ejaculation) is covered by the large green leaf, suggesting the protection of the virtue of the manly aspect of the figure, hiding indecency. Thus, while the womanly parts are placed for display and objectified, the manly parts are protected and made superior (Tortajada et al., 2013; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013).

Although the figure signifies gender fluidity, it does so in a conventional manner, with the sexualising of the body, causing the figure to appear alien, fantasy-like, and unrealistic. this ultimately incurring a disjoint in gender fluidity that is not human or normal. The holding of a green snake embedded in a red (Playboy logo) apple (*Holy Bible New Living Translation*, 2015, Genesis. 3:1-24) – that symbolises the devil and sin – continues the notions of unacceptance and not normal, linking this gender-fluid representation to something wrong.

This is further affirmed by the figure having a snake-like tongue that wraps around the snake's neck, claw-like nails that appear haggard and wicked, curved red lips, and blue glowing eyes that conceal a unibrow. The figure is something ugly and menacing, something to be curious about but also repulsed by, and unacceptable through its lack of humanness. The long hair curls upwards to make *Playboy* bunny ears, but also appears as devil horns (intertextuality and culturally potent symbols (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013). This cements the deviant and sinful character proposed in gender and sexuality that trespasses and disrupts (dislocates) the Western hegemonic norm.

The tree figure on the left reinforces the biblical and Christian presence in this composition and thus aids an understanding of gender fluidity and sexuality. The tree figure is the tree of knowledge of good and evil (*Holy Bible New Living Translation*, 2015, Genesis. 3:1-24), it has a brown bark and black foliage that appears like hair, the tree has a face, eyes, eyebrows, and a wide smile, with long arms and hands resting on its hips, its foliage/hair holds five smaller *Playboy*-shaped red apples, similar to the large one in the middle of the composition held up by the human-like figure. This tree figure insinuates deviance, fostered by its smug and mischievous look, that *Playboy* itself offers knowledge through the apples, of gender and sexuality and possibly personhood (made alien), of what is acceptable and what is not.

Movement can be found in the background, a pulsating blur of colours that makes the composition appear alive and causes the white lines of ejaculation to flow and ebb towards the tree of knowledge of good and evil (*Holy Bible New Living Translation*, 2015, Genesis. 3:1 -

24). The tree also floats up and down in the bottom left section of the composition, while its eyes survey its surroundings and change colour (red, green, blue, and yellow) in a hypnotising effect, and its eyebrows shift up and down, this assists in giving the tree personality and feeling, a quality of mischief, appearing smug and judgemental.

Langill and Muller (2016) describe such movement of digital arts as the 'living effect', whereby from the viewer's peripheral view the composition can be seen as a living thing, behaving, and extending the composition and its meaning beyond the online domain and into the real world, all the while instilling a materiality that is uncanny, enchanting, and unsettling.

Above the tree, white flames fire out from the Playboy apple's left ear, as if filled with energy, this feature of energy is carried by the snake too, which is embedded in the apple, and writhes against the figure's arm, as it continuously grows and decreases in size, mouth opening wide to reveal long sharp fangs and a tongue that acts as a conductor of electricity. The snake's body appears to charge the Playboy word across the top of the composition which is formed by the snake itself; this possibly symbolises the brand being charged or informed by the Devil – all that is wrong, evil, and sinful; when it comes to queer representations, displaying a subversion against Christian biblical (and Western) teachings of gender, sexuality, and desire.

Bell and Milic (2002) point out the configuration of composition along a vertical axis, explaining that often the area left of the vertical axis on an image shows the semantically 'given' and 'known', whereas the area on the right is what's 'new' and 'unknown'. Relating this to the figures, the tree figure on the left suggests what is traditionally known about gender and sexuality along biblical (and Western) ideology, namely the heterosexual matrix, that becomes subverted (queering) via the tree's appearance and apples, to become the human-like figure on the right. This then offers a metaphorically queer representation, depicting what is new and unknown in a negative light. All this is made abstract and fantasy-like, alien through the colours, features, and configurations, that altogether demolish queer legitimacy, denaturalising queer identity.

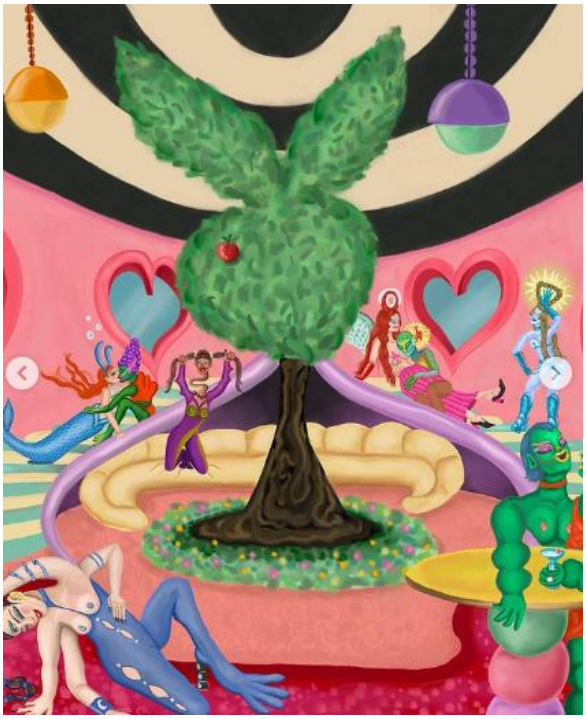

Figure 10: 'Presenting The New Surrealists NFT collection 🔄 💭 Inspired by Playboy's history in contemporary art and surrealist photography, this @playboynfts collection includes digital artworks by our featured artists from Miami Art Week 2021: @filipcustic @imvirgenmaria @mirandamakaroff @ninamcneely & @bloomandplume '. Copyright 2022, by M. Makaroff.

Figure 10 is also part of the collection of works that were inspired by *Playboy's* history in contemporary art and surrealist photography that was set for auction at a Playboy event, it is titled *The Garden of* Playboy's *d'lights* and is by surrealist artist Miranda Makaroff. This artwork extends off Figure 9, reinforcing *Playboy's* ideology and queer discourse found in the prior analysis. The Garden of *Playboy's* d'lights refers both to the Garden of Eden and the tree of knowledge of good and evil (*Holy Bible New Living Translation*, 2015, Genesis. 3:1-24), linking *Playboy* to a subversion of the Garden of Eden by the 'd'lights' of sexual pleasure and desire, including homosexuality and queer identity.

The composition is made up of bright vivid colours, abstract presentations and multiple symbolic and metaphorical configurations, this is in contrast to Figure 9 which portrays a mischievous and evil tone, a warning of the consequences of deviance from the heterosexual matrix. In contrast this composition appears sweet, playful, and fun.

This is supported by the use of warmer colours, soft curves throughout (Van Leeuwen, 2006) and the whimsical nature of the figures and their activities, e.g. the pink heart-shaped windows, hanging lollipop lights, hypnotising black and white ceiling, and the soft, plump, and bulbous bodies of the figures. The figures all appear quite happy, with smiles on their faces, completely engaged in each other and looking away from the viewer, inviting the viewer to observe the scene and warm up to it.

Starting from the middle ground which grabs the viewers' attention first, is a large tree with brown flowing bark, and foliage in the shape of a Playboy bunny logo, fruiting a single apple as its eye, the tree is also surrounded by a flower bed beneath.

In keeping with the series by Miranda Makaroff and relating to the caption, 'The Garden of Playboy's d'lights', this tree makes direct biblical reference to the tree of knowledge of good and evil (*Holy Bible New Living Translation*, 2015, Genesis. 3:1-4). This tree signifies *Playboy's* participation in the 'd'lights' of sin and the subversion of the Christian teachings which is extended by and shown by the figures and their actions surrounding the tree.

Drawing on hierarchical laws of compositional layout, the massive size and centring of this tree make it the most salient (significant) part of the image (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013), followed by the figures and their actions surrounding the tree, which indicates that the figures and their actions are possibly influenced by this tree.

The setting appears to be a room containing a couch and windows showing a clear blue day outside, with stairs, a table, and ceiling and variations of pink and red flooring, making the scene private; the once out-in-the-open Garden of Eden becomes a private affair, enclosing the supposed sinful acts portrayed (*Holy Bible New Living Translation*, 2015, Genesis. 3:1-24).

In the foreground, there are three figures: on the left corner is an inhuman figure, with four arms, three eyes, and frog-like feet, posing on the floor and displaying its body and breasts to the viewer, it wears heels and makeup, and its nails are painted. On the right there are two green figures – one is cut off from the composition – they appear engaged in conversation and are having a drink from a margarita glass; this allows the viewer to observe them. They are also inhuman with their lumpy bodies and pointed ears. And are similarly wearing makeup and revealing their breasts to the viewer like the other figures.

Moving up the stairs and towards the background, sitting on an off-yellow croissant couch is a womanly figure facing the viewer, and pulling their head up off their shoulders by their pigtails,

to reveal a long winding neck, she is fully clothed (bra visible) and appears to be part of the fray in the background, whereby five inhuman figures engage in various activities. On the left are two figures kissing, one is a mermaid, which is seen by the mermaid tail, bubbles floating above her head, which has wavy orange hair, and the other is green, orange, and yellow, with grape purple hair.

Towards the right are two figures, one angel-like with blue wings and blue glowing eyes leaning back on the floor, they are wearing heels and a long pink skirt with a matching bra, and her hair is orange and wavy forming a glowing halo above her head that glows. The other figure is inhuman and spooning the angel figure, hiding their body, and wearing brown pants, their mouth is on the angel figure's breast appearing to suckle. Lastly on the far right, standing on the stairs is a figure posing, body canting with one hand on a leg, the other hand on their head, their skin is light blue, and they are wearing dark blue lingerie and heels. Their brown hair is long and forms a triangular halo above their head that glows.

There are Christian biblical messages throughout, pertaining to the tree of knowledge of good and evil, that have subverted something considered pure (e.g., angels, those with halos, engaging in sexual desire and indulgence) to a theme of desire and gluttony throughout (*Holy Bible New Living Translation*, 2015, Genesis. 3:1-24). That is, consumption of bodies through desire and indulgence: lollipop-shaped lighting and a croissant-shaped couch, the room appearing like candy, kissing, suckling, drinking alcohol, and vanity presented in the posing.

Altogether this artwork undermines fluid expressions of gender and sexuality (as in Figure 9) in fantastical and unrealistic manner, implying that queer existence is not normal and thus sinful, i.e. the kissing, suckling, and engaging with same-sex bodies, or with bodies that are not clearly defined (gender fluid), claiming gender fluidity as deviant and inhuman. Spargo (1999, p. 25) unpacks Figures 9 and 10 via a Foucauldian perspective of Christianity that affirms the findings in the data analyses: "Christianity, according to Foucault, developed universal moral codes and interdictions increasingly centred on the truth of sex. While Romans might have seen desire as potentially harmful, Christians viewed it as intrinsically evil."



Figure 11: *'...he did it, joe 🤣 #happypresidentsday'.* Copyright 2022, by M. Hailes.

Figure 11 is captioned '…he did it joe 😊 #happypresidentsday', because it is a post that makes direct reference to the American presidency, and the then current President Joe Biden, undermining, through soft ridiculing, the celebration of this presidency. The participant consumes the foreground and middle ground of this composition, making them the most salient aspect (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013), the participant – the pronoun 'he' is stated in the caption – is a black man dressed formally, seen by the brown skin tone, short hair, and trimmed beard, and wearing a suit, namely a white shirt, blue tie, and navy-blue trousers with a silver watch.

The participant is the well-known American comedian Eric Andre (Hailes, 2022) who specialises in comedy genres of surreal comedy, shock horror, anti-humour, and cringe comedy; this is why such a post is not surprising and can be seen to fall under these categories for its abstract, symbolic, radical, and shocking effect.

Eric Andre is representing the president – more specifically a mockery of the president created by Eric Andre's actions – aside from the formal clothing, there is a logo seen on the left breast of the white shirt, which is not clear enough, but it is a logo that stands for the American president.

Eric Andre is performing an explicit sexual act he is bent over slightly and facing downwards, with his left hand in a fist and his mouth open, he appears to be symbolically performing oral sex on a long object in the distance; meant to appear as an erect penis. Because the viewer gets

a side view of the participant and is at the same level as them, we can clearly observe and contemplate this act.

In the background, there is a bright blue and clear day with clouds in the sky, and the setting appears to be outside in a public space – the trees and lake before the Washington Monument –invoking qualities of openness and transparency, a claim of truth (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013).

Thus, this composition and its message are directed at the public, while also engaging in a sociopolitical debate that questions (and delegitimises) President Biden's capability as president. This is done by undermining his masculinity and strength through homosexual implications, which ultimately harms queer identities (Benwell, 2003). In this context, queer representation is ridiculed and portrayed as inferior – contrasted with strength, legitimacy, and traditional masculinity.

The post is meant to be funny and demeaning towards President Biden, this is accomplished through the satire that questions the president's strength and masculinity, via the homosexual act portrayed of a man giving oral sex to the phallic-shaped Washington Monument building in the background (homoeroticism) (Benwell, 2003). The building is a potent cultural symbol of American presidency that also denaturalises queer symbols, such as same-sex sexuality/desire in this case, at a Western socio-political level of offence. i.e. queer is not the norm or acceptable in Western society, it is seen being used here as a tool of delegitimisation and mockery, to question the personhood of both the represented president and queer people (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013).

Benwell (2003) points out that humour (like the homoeroticism seen above), satire, and irony are discursive strategies employed in performances of ambiguous masculinity (contemporary masculinity), which is also a reflection of New Lad (lad mags) ideologies – such as the historical *Playboy* magazine – oscillating between the lines of conservative, traditional, pre-feminist masculinity, and post-feminist, progressive yet traditional masculinity, in the sense of non-effeminate and anti-queer sentiment, thus enabling the evasion of gender, queer, and feminist offences.

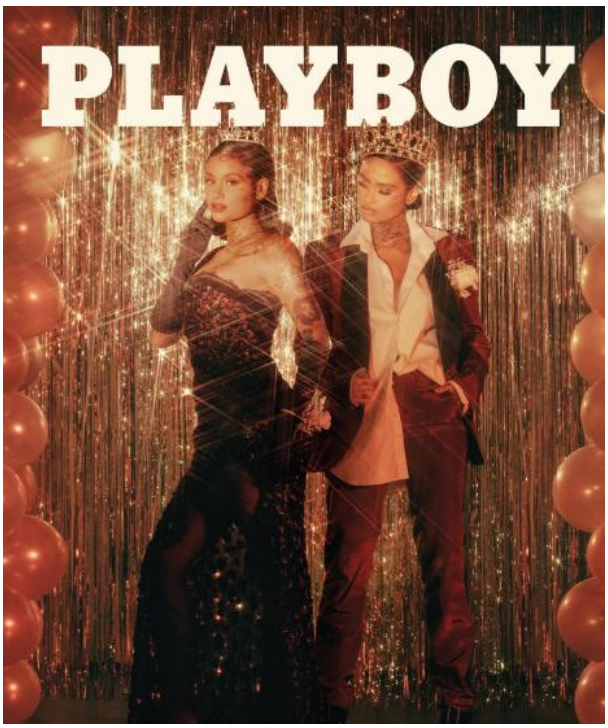

Figure 12: *'A look back one year ago at our digital cover with @kehlani 👑 The singer-songwriter talks to* Playboy *about playing with gender, finding joy in her craft and the ebbs and flows of motherhood. Read her 20Q interview at the link in bio'.* Copyright 2022, by B. Alysse.

Figure 12 holds qualities of elegance, wealth and royalty, this is portrayed by the gold and bronze sparkling colours throughout. The caption for this composition reads 'A look back one year ago at our digital cover with @kehlani 👑 The singer-songwriter talks to *Playboy* about playing with gender, finding joy in her craft and the ebbs and flows of motherhood. Read her 20Q interview at the link in bio'. This refers to the participant in the composition, the renowned singer-songwriter Kehlani, who is known to be queer, e.g. caption states that *Playboy* talks to Kehlani about their gender fluidity 'playing with gender'.

The qualities of elegance, wealth and royalty paint the queer representation enacted by Kehlani in a positive light, naturalising the gender fluidity expressed by Kehlani's double presentation of masculinity and femininity, thus legitimising such a queer representation, especially because a famous celebrity is supportive and a part of the queer community.

The setting appears to be a party, dance, or celebration (of gender fluidity): gold balloons all along the left and right sides of the composition frame, with Kehlani (the participant) in the

centre as the most significant part of the composition. Silver bronze tinsel makes up a sparkling wall behind Kehlani who is dressed in the finest clothes, a graduation dress for the feminine=female=woman presentation and a red velvet suit for the manly=man=masculine.

Moreover, Kehlani adorns a tiara when she is enacting the feminine performance and a crown when enacting the masculine performance. Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996) outline feminine qualities as small, soft, delicate with curves (like in a tiara), and masculine as broad, taking up of space and angular (like the crown).

'My femininity makes me feel soft and gentle and tender and careful. I feel more masculine when I am in my stillness and I'm grounded...But I am very fluid in both of those settings.' – Kehlani, (Alysse, 2022).

Although Kehlani is depicting a gender fluidity of the manly=man=masculine and feminine=female=woman parts of themselves that is a positive contribution to queer understandings, they also reinforce gender stereotypes by showcasing the feminine=female=woman as somewhat subordinate to the manly=man=masculine, and ultimately relocate a gender binary. This is patterned in their explanation of how they experience gender fluidity – that may be confining for other queer people – their poses utilised for this composition, as well as the clothing they wear.

Looking at their feminine=female=woman depiction on the left side, Kehlani looks straight at the viewer addressing us – specifically inviting us to admire their body – and stands with their side to the viewer (profile shot), allowing them to appear thinner and taking up less space (relative size component) (Goffman, 1979). Moreover, the viewer is able to clearly see Kehlani's curves in this pose, their backside and breasts are emphasised by the pose, thus forming a sexualisation of Kehlani's body (Tortajada et al, 2013).

Kehlani engages in two notable actions in their pose here, the feminine touch to their cheek, and the canting of their head and body (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979), these all link to Kehlani's explanation of their femininity as '…soft and gentle and tender and careful', and consistent with the results in the section on gender, there are cues to subordination in Kehlani's hyper-ritualisation of femininity.

On the other hand, the manly=man=masculine depiction on the right side is congruent with the findings in the first findings too, except for the wearing of makeup and head canting which are typically feminine/womanly representations. The head canting seen here causes Kehlani to

look down at their feminine=female=woman self; this further allows the viewer to observe Kehlani's manly=man=masculine presentation and be led by Kehlani's masculine presentation's gaze to their feminine self, drawing attention to the sexualisation of their feminine depiction yet again – a male gaze on themselves.

Talbot (2010) uncovers Kehlani's experience of the male gaze as sexualisation, highlighting the process of learning to view oneself from a man's perspective (the male gaze) and perceiving one's sexuality as an expression of femininity. Thus, gendered identity forces women to perceive themselves through the male gaze (as natural) and cultivate feminine characteristics in this light that will appeal to men. As a consequence women are caught up in their desirability and appearance to men (Talbot, 2010).

Dissecting Kehlani's manly=man=masculine depiction we see a taking up of more space through standing in a way that faces the viewer and makes Kehlani appear broader (relative size (Goffman, 1979) – heightened by the angular shoulders of the suit jacket. They are standing legs apart, one hand in the pants, and altogether notions of stability, and being grounded are connoted through the stance (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). Compared to the feminine=female=woman portrayal, the manly=man=masculine is convened as superior, this is supported by Kehlani's explanation of their masculinity as 'stillness', and 'grounded' and the lack of sexualisation found here.

Strikingly, the left side holds the feminine=female=woman depiction whereas the right side holds the manly=man=masculine. Bell & Milic (2002) note the significant relationship between the vertical axis and gender of represented participant; believing that the area left of the vertical axis on an image shows the semantically 'given' and 'known', whereas the area on the right is what's 'new' and 'unknown' – women slightly more than men are shown on the left. In this case, Kehlani both challenges and enforces a gender binary in another way here, with the left side showing a given of feminine stereotypical expectations, but the right is a reformulation of masculinity on a woman's body.



Figure 13: *'Jordan Firstman and the Art of the Asshole ✨ Read @jtfirstman's full interview by @beatricehazlehurst at the link in bio!'*. Copyright 2021, by N. Rasmussen.

Figure 13 resembles a lot of traditional art paintings created in the Naturalism genre. Munro (1960, p. 133) states how the Naturalism genre "implies an emphasis on accurate representation of nature" tying in with essentialist beliefs. Moreover, the author asserts that Naturalism is the opposite of fantasy, expressionism, and abstract displays, it aspires for factual truth, this contradicts the fantasy and expressionism (subjective contextualisation) present in Figure 13, which provides a reimagining for the factual truth of queer identity.

In this composition a reconfiguration takes place via photography, a contemporary medium, and thus new meaning potentials emerge which signify a contemporary recapturing of gender, body and beauty ideals or norms. The caption ties in the theme of art and reveals both the artist and the participant in the composition: 'Jordan Firstman and the Art of the Asshole ✨', the 'Art of the Asshole' is direct and confronting, and possibly refers to how to be bad-mannered (an asshole), or how to pose showing the backside, which is more likely in this case with the centring of attention on the backside in the composition.

The compositional background is a tarp depicting a typical Naturalism oil painting of nature during a bright, clear, and still day, that is carelessly hung low and bends at the top of the composition (Munro, 1960); this is done on purpose and possibly functions as a disruption, a disruption of Naturalism (essentialism) and what is considered beautiful and the ideal.

In front of the tarp background, is a sole participant who takes up the foreground and middle ground at the very centre of the composition. The participant's gender does not fit a category, they display a gender fluidity that completely overturns the gender binary, gender expectations and stereotypes; making gender a process, a literally portrayed performance, and a true disruption, that is the essence of queer understanding (Sunderland, 2004; Watson, 2005).

The participant has pale alabaster skin (maybe racially white), and they have dark brown hair, that is short hair on their head, a thick beard, thinly shaped eyebrows, full chest and stomach hair, and hairy arms. They portray Western hegemonic expectations of women's body hair with shaped eyebrows, and men, with thick body hair, a short haircut, and a beard. They wear long droopy silver earrings paired with a diamond/diamante necklace, that connote wealth, legitimacy, and a high social status. In addition, their long false eyelashes are traditionally associated with women's ideal beauty standards.

The participant is completely naked, aside from the black and beige fabric that the participant has slipped off and down their body, to reveal their curvaceous backside. Tortajada et al. (2013) support how fragmenting body parts (breasts, backside, hair, lips, and eyes) is a tool used to sexualise (women's) bodies, this composition breaks the pattern, with the sexualisation of a non-binary person.

The participant offers us a profile shot, so as to enhance the curves of their body and look over their shoulder at the viewer in a typically feminine manner (Goffman, 1979). The participant addresses and invites the viewer to observe their body, whilst engaging in a feminine touch of the fabric.

Overall, this artwork appears to be a disruption to Naturalism – and essentialism – and breaks the norm of body and beauty ideals. Spargo (1999) unpacks such a representational performance by the participant in Figure 13 as a disturbance of conventional knowledge. Because of the combination of conventional signs of the opposing gender, they do not fit neatly into the heterosexual matrix. There is disruption at every corner, from the settings to the participant who is challenging Western gender expectations. Disruption (dislocation) is vital to the queer and intimate citizenship agenda, as it brings about change through creating a new normal (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013).



Figure 14: *'@the_globbers wear the Aviation Wings High Neck Sweatshirt from @bigbunny 🚗 Shop at the link in bio'.* Copyright 2022, by Playboy.

In Figure 14 the setting is bright and clear, connoting openness – being out and in the open – and transparent, so that the viewer can see every detail in the composition. The background shows stone pillars and a stone building, the pillars are symbolic and connote an institution, law, justice, and legitimacy. There are qualities that seek to support and normalise gay (queer) identities and relationships, as is linked to and represented by the participants of the composition.

The caption of this post is, '@the_globbers wear the Aviation Wings High Neck Sweatshirt from @bigbunny 🚗 Shop at the link in bio', indicating that this composition is an advertisement for clothing by a brand known as '@bigbunny' (an Instagram handle), and that the participants in the composition are known as '@the_globbers' (their Instagram handle). Luca Pezzolo and Alessandro Zorzin are the globbers, an upper-class European couple that are digital creators who are influential for their travel and lifestyle posts, and are also representative of the queer community.

In the composition there are two participants (Luca Pezzolo and Alessandro Zorzin), and they are the most salient part too (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013), as they take up the foreground and middle ground and contrast brightly against the beige stone background. The participants appear to be two white men, this is seen by their tan, white skin, short haircuts, and thick full beards.

The participants are dressed casually (a quality matching their relaxed pose), the man on the left is wearing beige pants and a black sweater with a logo on the centre which appears to be wings, hence the aviation wings in the caption. Meanwhile the man on the right is wearing blue jeans and a white sweater with the same logo.

The participants are holding hands and standing very close together, and the man on the left is resting his head on the man on the right's shoulder, signifying an intimate relationship (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013); they are a gay couple. Both participants look straight at the viewer, potentially addressing the viewer on gay rights and acceptance (given the background and setting).

The participant on the left smiles as he leans his head on his partner's shoulder, they appear slightly tucked behind their partner in a *licensed withdrawal*. Bell & Milic (2002) explain *licensed withdrawal* in which women are given the chance to symbolically withdraw from a scene in the advertisement due to protection or care from a man. This is accomplished through gaze (looking into the distance), appearing preoccupied, and retreating behind objects or the man. In this case, a man is engaging in licensed withdrawal, thus disrupting (dislocating) such a gender stereotype for women. The participant on the right also smiles at the viewer but stands straight and faces the viewer head-on.

In addition to the covert contextualisation of gay rights and acceptance in the public eye – linking the gay men to an outside space and in front of a symbolic institution – the legitimisation via the symbolic institution (pillars) and the bright clear setting that indicates *being out and in the open*, the participants engage a normalisation, i.e. normalising same-sex relationships in public spaces (Watson, 2005). There is no stereotype enacted of gay men, these participants appear as any couple, in a most natural, casual, and relaxed way.



Figure 15: *'"I'm masculine and feminine, I'm both, I'm neither, I don't give a fuck." Pop genius @dorianelectra discusses fluidity, authenticity and Austin Powers in their Winter 2020 interview. Read more at the link in bio #pride'.* Copyright 2022, by R. Talboy.

Figure 15 is a most abstract and symbolic representation of queer identity that is captioned, '"I'm masculine and feminine, I'm both, I'm neither, I don't give a fuck." Pop genius @dorianelectra discusses fluidity, authenticity and Austin Powers in their Winter 2020 interview. Read more at the link in bio #pride', and the subject matter in the composition reflects the caption in every way, metaphorically, as being in a fantasy world.

This composition has extreme bright lighting that connotes openness, transparency, and vibrancy, and functions to legitimise the subject matter – that is queer representation – as nothing is hidden, everything is up close and in detail for the viewer's observation (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013). The background appears absent, a white space of nothingness, thus the setting and context is removed and attention rests on the participants that emerge out of and float in this white space on either end of the composition.

The two participants are shown up close to the viewer appearing engaged in each other, thus the viewer is invited in for close observation (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013). The participant on the left is slightly above the participant on the right, both have their eyes closed and appear to be pouting in front of each other's face, as if to kiss. Both participants seem to be racially white by their alabaster skin and have on a latex head covers; this conceals any gender expectations, especially since the rest of their bodies are absent.

The left participant has bright red lipstick, a thin line on their upper lip that appears as a moustache, and two black dots drawn near their nose and eyebrow. Their eyebrows are thinly shaped, and there is a blush of colour in red, white, blue, orange, and yellow that moves from

their eyes to below their cheek bone. This participant almost appears to look like a colourful fish, making a playful kissing fish face, that brings a quality of fluidity and queer identity (colourful, like the queer flag).

The participant on the right also wears bright red lipstick, and so again the viewer's attention is drawn to their lips which appear to be almost kissing, i.e., insinuating an intimacy, possibly touching on fluid sexuality more than just gender fluidity. This participant also has a black line drawn on their upper lip resembling a moustache, thinly shaped eyebrows, and flowing lines of blue, red, and white move from their eyelid down the left of their face to their chin, again qualities of flow, movement and fluidity emerge.

There is no clear gender portrayed by these participants, they embody both feminine (makeup, lipstick, thinly shaped eyebrows) and masculine qualities (moustache) and conceal the boundaries (like the head cover) that could match traditional Western gender norms. There is movement in the makeup that connotes fluidity, and a constant shift between gender binary performance. Altogether, the composition reflects on the caption – and vice versa – being masculine and feminine at the same time, and also being neither, blurring the boundaries and achieving personhood either way.

The only probable shortfall of this composition, like many of the data analysed before in this section, is the abstract and symbolic nature of most of these queer portrayals, as Machin and Mayr (2012) find that mostly heterosexual men are represented in concrete realistic terms, normalising their existence in society. But heterosexual women, and in this case queer people, are shown in fantasy-like, unrealistic, and often idealistic manners, that lessens the legitimacy of their identities and invalidates queer existence.



Figure 16: *"' For so long we trans people have not been in charge of our own stories, and our representation has been predicated on the idea that we're not the people we are. Obviously, this is who we are. This is our lived experience. It's not up for debate.' August 2019 Playmate @geenarocero 💟".* Copyright 2021, by Wiissa0.

Finally, in Figure 16 we see a blurred green background that resembles leaves of a tree with white spots of highlights, portraying daytime in nature and connoting an open and transparent quality. The background is blurred so as to focus attention onto the sole participant in the composition (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013). They consume the foreground and middle ground and appear close up to the viewer, allowing the viewer to see every detail of them and to connote a spatial closeness to them.

The participant appears to be a brown-skinned person and a woman, this is conveyed by their visible breasts, long hair and head canting; a pattern seen typical to women in their poses in the media, or otherwise associated with femininity (Goffman, 1976).

The participant is looking directly at the viewer, unsmiling, addressing them, and by their actions of revealing part of their breasts – which are at the centre of the composition and thus centre of viewer's line of sight – contextualises a sultry action of inviting the viewer in to observe them. The participant seems to be hanging an orange spaghetti strap T-shirt onto the line to dry, this is affirmed by the purple and blue clothing pegs held in the participant's hand on either side of the composition.

The caption is vital to this composition and disrupts it, this participant is not just a woman, but a successful performance of a woman, as the participant is a transwoman, 'For so long we transpeople have not been in charge of our own stories, and our representation has been predicated on the idea that we're not the people we are. Obviously, this is who we are. This is our lived experience. It's not up for debate.' Such a caption is aided by the participant's unsmiling expression which contributes a serious tone to the image, that the discussion and positive representation of trans people (and queer community) is a serious matter: 'This is our lived experience. It's not up for debate.'

The 'lived experience' is accentuated in the common daily chore of hanging up wet clothes on the line; this removes the stereotype of what being a transperson is and portrays them as normal people, naturalising their existence and reinforcing their acceptance as a member of society. In addition, this adds to the represented complexity of their identity so as to not be primarily defined by their categories of sex, gender, and desire.

Spargo (1999, p. 75) highlights the positive queering process surfacing in Figure 16, stating that transgendered people "… are those who refuse or disrupt the cultural norms of masculine or feminine appearance or behaviour and their assumed correspondence to pre-existing biological maleness or femaleness".

The only critique that can be taken away from this is that *Playboy*'s major use of transwomen to represent the queer community, while excluding other queer identities and lived experiences, shows that there is an overly feminine quality of transwomen that lends to a stereotype. Of course Figure 18 avoids this in a more naturalised manner. Furthermore, the continued use of abstract and fantasy-like settings seen here and in the other figures of this section communicates an ideal and unreal queer discourse, that somewhat invalidates queer existence and identities, deeming them unnatural and not the norm.

6.2.2 Findings

The emerging patterns from the above dataset, of the visual resources involve a consistent portrayal of fluid gender expressions that challenge binary notions of male and female. In Figures 13 and 15, gender fluidity is central, with represented participants embodying both masculine and feminine traits or neither. These representations highlight the dissolution of the gender binary and showcase a fluidity of identity. Figure 13 specifically features a participant whose gender identity defies typical expectations, with both masculine and feminine traits

combined (e.g. short hair and a beard alongside feminine adornments like earrings and false eyelashes). The disruption of gender norms is also evident in Figures 9 and 14, where queer identities, particularly same-sex relationships, are normalised in public spaces.

Many figures (e.g., Figures 14 and 16) display overt markers of queer identity – whether through clothing, body language, or explicit captioning. In Figure 14, the couple's physical closeness and their direct gaze at the viewer assert their queer identity, while in Figure 16 the caption anchors the participant's lived experience as a transwoman. These compositions invite the viewer to engage with the queer identity of the represented participant(s), making their identity visible and undeniable.

Figure 13 emphasises the fragmentation of the body (e.g. focusing on the backside), which breaks away from the conventional objectification of women's bodies and extends this to a non-binary individual. This representation destabilises the gendered expectations tied to body parts, suggesting a more expansive and inclusive vision of queer identity. By contrast, Figure 16 shows a transwoman engaging in a mundane task, counteracting the hyper-feminine stereotypes often associated with trans women.

There is a normalising of same-sex relationships, seen in Figures 14 and 16, which depict intimate relationships between same-sex couples in public settings (e.g. standing in front of an institutional backdrop or engaging in everyday tasks). This challenges the historical invisibility of queer relationships in public life. Figure 14, in particular, uses the institutional setting (stone pillars) to symbolise legitimacy and acceptance, while the casual, relaxed pose of the represented participants conveys a sense of normalcy and comfort in their relationship.

In Figure 13, the represented participant's direct gaze and the sensual pose invite the viewer to observe their body, creating an intimate connection. Similarly, Figures 9 and 16 employ the viewer's gaze to assert queer identity, with the participants looking directly at the viewer to invite recognition and engagement with their queer existence.

A notable visual resource across the dataset is the use of abstract, idealised, or surreal backdrops that suggest a form of escapism. Figures 15 and 16 in specific rely on a stylised or conceptual aesthetic (e.g., the white space in Figure 15, and the ethereal quality of the settings in Figure 16). These fantasy-like environments create an otherworldly atmosphere that highlights the subjective, non-conventional nature of queer identities.

In addition, symbolic elements, such as the 'Art of the Asshole' in Figure 13, evoke a reimagined narrative of beauty and queerness. In Figure 15, the colourful makeup and facial markings resemble abstract art, symbolising the fluidity of gender and sexuality. These metaphorical elements suggest that queerness can exist outside traditional representations and defy conventional meaning.

Despite the use of abstract or symbolic visuals in many cases, Figures 9, 14, and 16 focus on everyday realism. In Figure 16, the transwoman is shown performing an ordinary domestic chore, symbolising the normalisation of queer people and their lived experiences. The caption in this figure underscores the importance of reclaiming the narrative of transpeople and presenting them as ordinary individuals rather than exoticised or sensationalised figures.

While many images include fantasy elements, there is a clear attempt to portray queer identities in ways that counter stereotypical portrayals of queer people in the media, which often rely on idealised or unrealistic depictions. The mundane actions (like drying clothes in Figure 16) work to ground these queer identities in the everyday, suggesting that queerness, just like heterosexuality, exists within normal societal frameworks.

Figures 13 and 16 also highlight the intersections of race, body, and gender. In Figure 13, the participant's body is marked by hegemonic masculine and feminine ideals, while Figure 16 foregrounds a brown-skinned trans woman, emphasising the visibility of people of colour within queer representations. These intersectional elements challenge the whiteness and cisnormativity that often dominate queer media representation, offering a more diverse and inclusive portrayal of queer identities.

Lastly, several figures (specifically 13 and 14) actively work to legitimise queer bodies and identities, moving away from the stereotypical, marginalised representation often found in mainstream media. The use of institutions, the clear and open settings, and the focused attention on the represented participants' identities contribute to the visibility and normalisation of queer experiences.

6.3 Plus-Size *Playboy*: The Hourglass Fatty

Historically, bodies in *Playboy* have been shaped to fit 'an aesthetics of health' (Ellis, 2019; Simpson, 2020). Women often compare themselves to the Western ideal of thinness or an hourglass figure, altering their bodies through cosmetic surgery, dieting, and exercise to achieve a sense of youthfulness and perceived sexuality. In contrast, men have traditionally

strived to present bodies that appear strong, youthful, physically active, and dominant (Rose et al., 2012; Simpson, 2020).

The term *fat* is employed here as a reclamation concept, following Anu and Huovinen (2015), which allows fat individuals – participants in this study – to 'distinguish themselves and reject demands for bodily changes', thus constituting themselves as active, empowered subjects. Conversely, *plus-size* is used to draw attention to commercial intentions, where marginalised bodies are integrated into the mainstream Western beauty ideal, often shifting focus away from authenticity and towards beauty as defined by these norms (Limatius, 2020).

This section examines shifts in *Playboy*'s portrayal of body norms, specifically body size, offering a detailed analysis of 'fat' and 'plus-size' representations. It explores both visual and text-based content to assess how *Playboy* constructs fatness through participant representation and subject positioning. As in the last section on queerness, the findings in this section summarise the recurring patterns found in the data samples.

6.3.1 Data Analyses



Figure 17*: "'I could talk about 17th century baroque paintings – specifically the differences between Dutch, French and Italian baroque paintings – for hours!" 💝 January 2020 Playmate @rileyticotin'.* Copyright 2022, by H. Hazzan.

Figure 17's compositional layout and the participant's pose resemble a painting typical of the Naturalism genre depicting and appreciating the female form. Similarly, to Figure 15, and by Munro's (1960) explanation of Naturalism, Figure 19 aspires for a reimagining of the *factual truth* of fat body representation as beautiful, desirable, and multi-dimensional (art). Such a reference to classical art is supported by the caption which voices the participant's thoughts on

the composition, ‘I could talk about 17th century baroque paintings – specifically the differences between Dutch, French and Italian baroque paintings – for hours!’. This gives agency to the participant in the creation of such *Playboy* content, and shows *Playboy’s* new agenda of consensual objectification (Bennet, 2019).

In the composition, the setting appears to be outside, this is denoted by the concrete grey flooring which holds scattered fallen leaves, the white-washed wall that is bluish-grey and appears weathered, and the branch in the top right corner with green leaves and small white flowers, the setting connotes a natural quality, by showing the outdoors – hinted at by the branch – and nature (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013).

Due to the camera angle, the viewer is placed up close and in the personal space of the participant, a plus-size woman, who is centred in the foreground/middle ground and is the focus of the composition; this is further assisted by the contrasting tones of her warm tan body against a cold dull surrounding. The close-up camera shot of the participant allows the viewer to be in the participant’s personal space and is aided by the bright and clear quality of the imagery, which allows for clarity and transparency, but also detailed observation of her body (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013).

The participant engages in the feminine touch, which is seen by her hand resting on the thigh, and the head canting to the left of the composition that reveals a portion of her face which holds a smile, the participant's gaze is to the left, not on the viewer, further inviting the viewer to observe unabashedly; such factors are consistent with how women are presented in *Playboy* (see prior sections) and the media in subordinate subject positions (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979). There is also the centring of her backside, which is further emphasised by the angling of her hips closer to the viewer, this is also consistent with the prior section’s findings and is explained by Tortajada et al. (2013) as fragmenting body parts into breasts, backside, hair, lips, and eyes, a mechanism used to sexualise bodies.

The participant is completely in the nude, aside from her blue pointy heels that match the blue-ish grey background and the scrunchie in her hair. All items on the participant (scrunchie and heels) function to enhance her body (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013), the scrunchie takes her hair off her whole back, revealing more of it, and the heels elongate her legs so that the viewer's gaze is caught by the pops of colour on her body and travels up and down her frame.

The participant poses with ease, causally and comfortably, connoting confidence in her body and highlighting her femininity (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979). Her pose and nudity

allow us to observe her soft flesh and rolls, the thick thighs, calves, and arms, and rolls in her back, however, it also causes an angling of her body that results in an hourglass shape, with a small waist/tummy area (lack of apron belly). So, although this is a plus-size, bigger body representation, there appear to be parameters in place not exceed the 'good fatty' on the fat continuum (Simpson, 2020); in plain terms, a person can be fat, so long as it's in the proper and permitted areas.

The setting contextualises the participant's body representation, the natural quality being carried onto the participant, and is a comment on her body as being natural, the norm, and the ideal body standard (for fatness), thus legitimating and naturalising plus-size bodies in Western societies.

In addition, as Simpson (2020) and Limatius (2018; 2020) explain, mainstream media puts fat bodies into a box, permitting some – acceptable fat – portrayals over others, and making that the dominant representation; this participant is evidence of this, as she belongs to a modelling agency called Natural Models, and identifies herself as a plus-size model (on Instagram bio), yet she reifies the focus on beauty (hourglass shape) and less on body diversity and fat acceptance.



Figure 18: *"'Being able to openly embrace my sexual side without it determining my value or worth as a 'good woman' is sexual freedom." – @evie_spice 🦋 Get to know Yvette Mari on @PlayboyCenterfold and get access to her exclusive content."*. Copyright 2023, by J. Alphonso.

In figure 18, the entire composition appears to be blue, the background is a solid light blue, and in the foreground, the floor is dark blue with ripples denoting water. The participant seems to have blue lighting on them, as the white sheet that drapes them has blue tones, including the participant that appears tinted in blue, altogether creating an artistic quality (Bennet, 2019). Through the consistent use of blue tones, a darker composition forms, connoting a mysterious, and sultry feel, this is consistent throughout *Playboy*'s advertisements with the darker advertisements (e.g. Figure 4) (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013).

The only bright lighting in the composition lies directly on the participant, who is the focus, as she is already in the centre of the layout. The camera shot is level with the participant, placing the viewer on equal terms with the participant who is gazing directly at the viewer and addressing them (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979). The participant appears to be a nude plus-size woman, this is shown by the covering of the breasts – women's nipples are commonly deemed offensive – the long hair, nails, and make-up.

Other common factors in the image are of head canting to further reveal her neck and chest area, the feminine touch of the participant's hand to her breast, and her pose which juts out her

hips and backside to create the hourglass figure (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979). Such a pose stresses her backside, tiny waist, and breast area – increasing the sexualisation of the participant (Tortajada et al., 2013) – and is enhanced by the white sheet which covers and wetly clings to parts of her body, drawing focus to the desirable areas (backside, waist, breasts), and concealing other areas (the left side of their body, and most of her tummy area), altogether showing her sexualisation and providing a sugar-coated version of plus-size representation that does not represent the body diversity reality of fat bodies (Limatius, 2020).

Like the prior figure 17, figure 18's participant voices her thoughts via the caption stating, 'Being able to openly embrace my sexual side without it determining my value or worth as a 'good woman is sexual freedom." This is a linguistic practice that offers authentic representation as a plus-size woman (Limatius, 2020), because being a 'good woman' has socio-historically been tied to women's self-management of their bodies, i.e. being thin, and not being sexually active until marriage (Simpson, 2020), this caption defies that belief system as the participant asserts that she is a good woman, even with her being sexually active and plus-size.

This is positive in many respects: the scene in figure 18 positively reflects on the multi-dimensional nature of fat lives, sexually empowering fat people, and also allowing them to feel confident in themselves. Moreover, this participant has vitiligo and is a brown-skinned person, further adding to the inter-sectional considerations, and renegotiating beauty standards, challenging both body size and skin beauty conventions (Ashdown-Franks & Joseph, 2021; Simpson, 2020).

Ultimately figure 18, is highly unrealistic, idealistic, and objectifying, aside from the blue tones, and the participant standing in the middle of a body of water making herself wet which shows a fantasy quality (as in Figure 3). There is the concealing of the ('undesirable') parts of her body which compromises the radical nature of fatness representation (Simpson, 2020). Again, beauty as the focus triumphs, fitting fat bodies into the mainstream, and policing idealised behaviour and presentation (hourglass standard), while appealing to the male gaze (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979).



Figure 19: *'Blue skies ahead ⛅ Head to Venezia's @playboycenterfold page and see how she is breaking industry standards. Send her a DM and get to know her.'*. Copyright 2022, by Playboy.

Figure 19, is a simplistic composition from a low vertical angle, placing the participant, who takes up the entire composition, directly above the viewer and in a dominant position, but also close up and in the participant's personal space (Bell & Milic, 2002). Aside from the participant, there is only a background of a blue sky with scattered white clouds indicating daytime and connoting openness, clarity, and transparency – supported by the optimistic and spatial (participant is above) caption: 'Blue skies ahead ⛅' – but also allowing the viewer to observe the participant clearly (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013).

The participant is a plus-size woman, given her long hair, make-up, and the feminine touch of their hands on her chest that is consistent with *Playboy* and the media's stereotypical presentations of women (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979); her hands also draw the viewers' attention to the breast area, inviting observation of her body. The participant is wearing a green bikini – this is in the daytime, standing in the sun and being outside, and in possibly hot weather – that shows off her body, the soft flesh of her thighs, hips, large breasts, and tummy area. In addition, she is gazing directly at the viewer and addressing them (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013).

Although the participant is a plus-size representation, showcasing her soft flesh and slightly hanging tummy, again a certain idealised representation of fatness that is deemed acceptable is

shown (Limatius, 2020; Simpson, 2020), that of the hourglass shape, i.e., a thin waist is created by this pose, and the way the bikini bottom is worn above the hips enhances the hourglass shape. The caption reads, 'Head to Venezia's @playboycenterfold page and see how she is breaking industry standards. Send her a DM and get to know her.' Of particular interest is the 'she is breaking industry standards' that covertly draws attention to her 'deviant' body as a plus-size woman in an industry, e.g. fashion, modelling, social media, that socio-historically privilege thinness (Limatius, 2018; 2020). As Simpson (2020) states, this is the problem with plus-size mainstream representation, like the body-positive movement, is that it is making bodies deviant whilst claiming to increase body diversity.



Figure 20: *"'Having people around you who support and accept you makes all the difference." ♒ August 2020* Playmate *@alichanel'*. Copyright 2022, by A. Mitton.

In figure 20 the camera shot positions the viewer in a rather sly, stalker-like position, invading her private space and looking into a bathroom through the small rectangle window, indicated by the blurry white framing on the sides of the composition. The focus of this composition is the participant, made salient by the clarity of the camera shot on her (compared to the blurry sides of the composition) and placing her in the centre of the composition (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013).

The participant is a nude plus-size woman who is showering, we can see white soap bubbles on her lower body and a shiny shoulder that appears slick with water, moreover, the small blue square tiles in the background below a white wall at the top of the composition all denotes a bathroom (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013). The soap bubbles placement on her lower back, backside, and thigh, with her shiny wet shoulder, are purposeful, drawing the viewer's gaze to certain parts of her body (backside and breasts) and subtly fragmenting her body (Tortajada et al., 2013).

This with the participant's gaze turned behind her and not on the viewer, connotes a sense of concern from her – an awareness of being watched – while the viewer observes her in an almost predatory manner; causing both a sexualisation and objectification of the participant that places her in a subordinate position to the viewer via the male gaze (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979).

In terms of plus-size representation, the participant confidently – connoted by standing upright and shoulders back (Bell & Milic, 2002; Machin & Mayr, 2012) – reveals her nude body and soft flesh, her hair is pinned up to provide a full view of her thick thighs, backside, arms, and breasts. But because of her angling pose, with her arms limiting the view to her tummy area and creating a small waist, we perceive an hourglass figure that showcases the desirable parts of her body while concealing the undesirable parts (Limatius, 2020).

The caption states in the participant's own words, giving her voice, '"Having people around you who support and accept you makes all the difference." 💝 August 2020 Playmate @alichanel.' Because it is so vague, the caption makes no direct reference to this post and its composition, aside from the '...support and accept...' part which could relate to her struggles as a plus-size woman and mom.



Figure 21: *"'Sexual freedom is being able to openly embrace my sexual side without it determining my value or worth as a good woman." – @evie_spice 🐰 Head to Evie's @playboycenterfold page to get access to content she won't post anywhere else.'.*
Copyright 2023, by J. Alphonso.

Returning to @evie_spice from Figure 18, Figure 21 is less of an artistic quality and more of a showgirl depiction – a portrayal historically done to appease the male gaze and objectify the participant (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979). We see the participant more clearly here compared to Figure 20, due to the bright lighting and empty composition that connotes a sense of transparency, openness, and optimism (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013). Against the plain white background, the participant stands out in stark contrast, this is especially enhanced by the shiny emerald Playboy bunny suit – with cuffs, hidden bowtie, and emerald bunny ears – and the black pointy heels that she wears, and being positioned in the middle, making her the centre of attention.

Her expression is cheery and smiling, matching the optimism created by the setting, she gazes directly at the viewer inviting them to look at her (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013). Her pose is one typically seen by *Playboy* bunnies, performing a playful and coy nature that is accomplished by standing on one leg, the other leg bashfully lifted backwards, and one hand

on the hip with the other hand near the mouth pretending to cover her smile/laugh. Such a pose resembles the actions of the feminine touch (hand on hip), licensed withdrawal (hand covering smile/laugh) and the ritualisation of subordination (bashful knee bend) identified by Bell & Milic (2002), that places the participant in a subordinate position to the viewer and enacts a stereotypical expectation of women.

Although confidently flaunting her plus-size body with her chest upright and shoulders back, displaying her thick legs, arms, backside and chest area, the participant's pose emphasises an hourglass figure. By jutting out her hips and backside, her hand curling inside her small waist, she is drawing attention to the 'desirable' areas of her breasts, and backside and showing a tiny waist, altogether reinforcing the hourglass ideal for fat bodies, and the idealised standard (Limatius, 2020; Simpson (2020). Positively though, we can see her vitiligo more clearly in this setting, this challenges the dominant Western beauty standard, even if realistic fat acceptance is lost to the mainstream ideal of body size/shape.



***Figure 22**: 'Seeing purple with @alicia_olivasl in THE ICON COLLECTION 💜'.*

Copyright 2022, by G. Scuitto.

In Figure 22 the participant is a well-known plus-size woman on social media known as an influencer and model for Natural Model Management, The MiLK Collective, and Natural Models NY, modelling agencies for plus-size representation and to promote body diversity.

The background is a plain dark purple with shadows around the edges of the composition that connote a mysterious and sultry feel that ties to the portrayal by the participant (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013). The participant is at the centre of the composition and is its focus,

this is seen by the spotlighting that focuses the viewers' attention on her and the details of her body. She extends beyond the top and bottom of the composition, causing her to appear larger and closer to the viewer. I refer to Goffman's (1979) relative size which places women as appearing small and dainty. She is also on the same level with the viewer in camera shot placing her on equal footing with the viewer.

Her pose is similar to the prior participants in this section, and that of how women stereotypically appear to pose (see the first empirical section on gender), with their hips jutted to one side to emphasise certain parts of the body and to form an hourglass shape, as this participant does here (Bell & Milic, 2002; Goffman, 1979), moreover with her arms raised above her head to tauten her tummy area, she slims her waist further (Limatius, 2020; Simpson, 2020).

She is wearing a two-piece purple lingerie ensemble that is nearly transparent, with matching elbow-length gloves, it matches and blends into the background somewhat and contrasts against her tan skin, causing her body to stand out more. She appears to have a platinum blonde wig on, silver necklaces and makeup that sharpens her features, this together with the setting connoting an edgy and sensual feel. Her expression is poised, which adds to the edgy undertones, and her gaze is off to the right of the composition, not on the viewer, inviting the viewer to observe her up close; this could be why she appears so big and close to the viewer, to afford a better view of her body and the lingerie (the product being promoted).

The caption: 'Seeing purple with @alicia_olivasl in THE ICON COLLECTION 🩶' seems to be more advertising orientated, the icon collection being the line of lingerie that the participant is wearing. This is unsurprising given her career as a model, making this composition a commercialisation piece and thus without a plus-size awareness/acceptance focus. However, as Limatius (2018; 2020) mentions the fashion industry privileges thin bodies, therefore, this participant and this advertisement is radical, as it is challenging the norm in the industry, even if she conforms to mainstream Western beauty ideals (Limatius, 2020; Simpson, 2020).

Still it is problematic that fatness is limited to the hourglass shape ideal, a visual presentation of the idealised standard as the pattern is showing, because of the dominant beliefs around having a fat (apron) belly and being seen as unhealthy, lazy, ugly, and improper. Figure 22 is a clear example of such constrained body diversity and fat acceptance.



***Figure 23**: '🔥 50% OFF SITE WIDE! 🔥 Our Memorial Day Sale is still heating up. Find your fits at link in bio.'.* Copyright 2023, by Playboy.

Figure 23 is a simple composition, with a plain white and bright background that connotes openness, transparency, and optimism (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013). These qualities are mirrored in the participant who is smiling and appears to be at ease showing off this nude upper body. The participant is perched on a white stool that blends into the background so that only his brown body and patterned grey and maroon pants are the salient parts of the composition (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2013).

The participant is a brown-skinned man, we can deduce his gender display from the showcasing of his nipples – which is not taboo for men as it is for women – and his flexed abs ('six-pack advertising'), arms and shoulders that cause him to appear bigger, broader, and more muscular (Rose et al., 2012) connoting strength and ultimately supporting Goffman's (1979) relative size explanation.

Like prior samples of men in this paper, he appears at ease, posing casually with his one hand resting atop his head; even though flexing muscles is not a casual and relaxed action. Unlike prior samples of men, he is smiling and looking off to the right of the composition and away from the viewer, warmly inviting the viewer to observe him unabashedly, this contrasts Bell & Milic's (2002) and Goffman's (1979) findings of men's presentations in the media. The caption makes no mention of the participant or his thoughts like *Playboy* does for most of the women in their content, rather the caption refers to the pants that the participant is wearing, the Playboy product being promoted: '🔥 50% OFF SITE WIDE! 🔥 Our Memorial Day Sale is still heating up. Find your fits at link in bio.'

Such captioning objectifies the participant, moreover, the nude upper body with his friendly and inviting expression and gaze sexualises him as per Tortajada et al.'s (2013) erotic male commonality in male advertising. The camera shot places the viewer on the same level as the participant, as equals, yet such repeated 'six-pack advertising' promotes a particular masculinity and conventionalised body ideal for men, that excludes men who do not fit this body type. There is no plus-size for men in *Playboy*, perhaps because of the potential emasculating nature of having soft flesh that is becoming associated with femininity and women's body norms.



***Figure 24**: 'Mansion Robe: Looks great on, off and wet 😏 Head to the link in bio before it sells out.'.* Copyright 2022, by Playboy.

Lastly, in Figure 24, the participant is a man: showing his nipples, facial hair, short haircut, hair on his chest and white boxer shorts. Like the prior participant in Figure 26 participant, the six-pack is at the centre of the composition and thus the focus of the viewer's gaze; for men, this is how male sexualisation dominantly emerges in the media. This a strong example of the erotic male phenomena mentioned by Tortajada et al. (2013), for presentations of men as sex objects; aside from running his hand through his hair in a 'sexy' manner, there is a clear 'six-pack advertising' displayed. Furthermore, the camera shot is at a high vertical angle that places the participant beneath the viewer, i.e. the viewer is dominant to the participant, this is uncommon for men's presentations in the media and sexualises this participant (Bell & Milic, 2002).

The setting is a bathroom, which is denoted by the white tiling on the bottom right, the white walls and the bathtub that the participant appears to be lying in (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin,

2013), with the subdued lighting, connotations of mystery, sultriness, and private qualities arise that altogether heightens the participant's sexualisation. The participant is all wet and wearing a red shirt and white shorts that also appear to be wet from being in the bathtub, this causes the clothing to cling to his body and make his body glisten. He has 'Playboy' written across his chest in a red that matches the red lipstick kiss marks on his face, indicating his desirability as an ideal man, with an ideal body for romantic partners, again sexualising and objectifying the participant.

Just as Walker (2017) and Simpson (2020) articulate body size affects intimate relationships for women, specifically women requiring a certain body not only for health, to fit the Western norm and mainstream beauty standard but also to be seen as proper and worthy of a romantic relationship, the same is being conveyed by Figure 23 and 24 for men, the latter most especially by the hinted romantic actions (kisses on his cheek), through covert portrayals of the ideal man, what he looks like (muscular, broad) and thus should be like (strong); such is confirmed by the participant looking directly at the viewer with a seriousness/brooding expression, addressing the viewer as if to seduce.

6.3.2 Findings

The patterns which emerge in this dataset pertain firstly to the camera angles and shot composition. Figures 18, 19, and 21 consistently use camera angles that place the represented participant in dominant positions or central focus. This enhances their visibility and aligns with dominance in visual representation. For example, in Figure 19, the represented participant is shot from a low vertical angle making her appear dominant, but also within a close-up that brings the viewer into her personal space.

Conversely, Figures 20 and 24 use high vertical angles, placing the participant in a subordinate position, which is often used in sexualised representations (Bell & Milic, 2002). These angles create a sense of objectification by positioning the participant beneath the viewer, such as in Figure 25, where the man's muscular physique is sexualised.

With the framing and background, several figures (e.g., Figures 17, 21, and 22) feature simple, often white, or subtly darkened backgrounds that act to highlight the represented participant's body and convey openness and clarity. These backdrops help foreground the body as the focal point. Figure 22 demonstrates the use of spotlighting, creating a contrast between the represented participant and the dark purple background, which adds a sense of mystery and

intimacy. Similarly, Figures 17 and 20 use softer more ambient lighting that also enhances certain body parts and focuses attention on the body (i.e. backside, chest, and waist).

Many figures, such as Figures 18, 19, 21, and 22, showcase the hourglass shape of the represented participant, often emphasised through posing (e.g. jutting hips, hands placed on their waist, or folds of skin being highlighted). This alludes to an emerging ideal, where larger bodies are normalised as long as they adhere to certain beauty standards.

In many images (e.g., Figures 20 and 24), there is a fragmentation of the body, where certain body parts (breasts, thighs, waist, backside) are highlighted or objectified. The posture and gaze in these figures also reflect sexualised portrayals, emphasising traditionally desirable body parts, such as the chest or hips.

With gaze and interaction, in Figures 17, 19, and 21, the direct gaze of the represented participants engages the viewer, often making the viewer feel invited and welcomed. This plays into the sexualised objectification of the represented participants. The eye contact in these images, within the contexts, often links to a sense of empowerment or invitation, while also reinforcing the objectification. Yet there are cases of non-engagement, in Figures 20, 22, and 23 specifically, participants either look away or do not engage with the viewer, which often is used to convey a sense of vulnerability under observation. This subtly contributes to the objectification of the represented participants, as their bodies become something for the viewer to scrutinise without the subject's direct interaction.

7. Discussion

The main research question of this dissertation is: what shifts have occurred in *Playboy'*s discourse following past criticisms and its recent rebranding on Instagram (as discussed by Bennet, 2019)? The sub-questions ask: (A) what semiotic resources are employed in *Playboy*'s Instagram content, and how do they construct representations of gender, queerness, and fatness? (B) What messages and ideologies about gender, queerness, and fatness are conveyed through Playboy's online textual and visual content on Instagram? This discussion shall unpack the questions based on the findings around the themes of gender, queer, and fatness.

Starting with gender, a complexity emerges with which to look at *Playboy'*s content under its new agenda, one that is seen before on other media sites with content claiming 'progressiveness', a greying between empowerment and sexualisation, between location and dislocation of the heterosexual matrix and hegemonic gender stereotypes. De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013) sustain that the oscillation in media culture between empowerment and sexual subjectivity is commonplace – sometimes a deceptive act of capitalistic interests (Caldeira et al., 2018) – and something that we see occurring in *Playboy*'s content on Instagram despite their goal for 'intimate citizenship'.

Talbot (2010, p. 138) relevantly states that "In modern industrial societies, gender identities are determined by capitalist social conditions and constructed in capitalist social relations", with *Playboy* being well integrated into the SNS Instagram as a Social Network Advertiser (Taylor et al., 2011), the platform allows access into current Western performances of gender; more so the idealised gender performances, that become realised through certain semiotic choices (i.e. clothing, products, behaviours and aesthetics).

Gender is always at the centre of inquiry, even though it is not the only factor informing people's identities, behaviours, and thoughts – class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, along with other factors intersect when shaping experiences and existences (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015). In *Playboy*'s online platform on Instagram gender roles play out, gender representations are complex, either reproducing traditional ideologies or countering with new and inclusive portrayals, and prosumers engage with this content also reinforcing (aligning) or challenging (rebelling against) these constructions.

Across Figures 1-8, recurring visual resources (lighting, background, spatial hierarchy) and gendered representations (empowered males vs. sexualised females) reflect Playboy's brand identity of luxury and rebellion. There are also instances of gender subversion and objectification, particularly with male models in Figures 7 and 8, suggesting an evolving, though limited, space for diverse gender portrayals within the brand. Despite these attempts at dislocation, hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender norms persist, with female participants more frequently objectified and male participants depicted as more empowered and autonomous.

There exists no pleasure, or entertainment, for all, but still for heteronormative men, via the gender-sex role dichotomy, which is maintained, along with the continued use of long-standing classical gender stereotype advertisements, Goffman observes this as (1979) '…an internalization of socially constructed representations of masculinity and femininity in Western society, very similar to those easily available in advertising, where they become hyper-ritualized'. Playboy regarding gender transmits a failed socially progressive agenda of 'intimate citizenship' with all its ambiguity and oscillation, despite an updated editorial team and claims of reinvention.

With the queer theme, we observe conventional queer representations portrayed as sinful, abnormal, deviant, and sometimes a joke, not to be taken seriously. Or used for heterosexual men's entertainment and to reinforce their superiority, thus undermining and subordinating queer identities, experiences, and existences. This is backed by the major usage of art for queer representations, which are abstract, fantasy-like, and highly symbolic, not concrete, Machin & Mayr (2012) tell us that such extensive use of unrealistic attributes can be undermining and invalidating, making queer an unnatural, and possibly unachievable ideal, that is not present or existing in society but in a drawn-up fantasy. Moreover, there is an over-feminising of queer depictions seen that place queer individuals in a subordinate position, to the superior absent heterosexual man in the figures; aside from Figure 11, which shows subtle homophobia in the form of satire.

On the other hand, there is an awareness created that disrupts Western hegemonic gender conventions seen throughout, through shows of gender fluidity and combining gender conventions. There is also a legal connotation to support gay (and queer) rights, naturalising and thus legitimating elements of queer experiences, devoid of stereotypes.

The recurring patterns of visual resources across figures 9 to 16 suggest that queer identities are increasingly being represented in diverse, nuanced, and defiant ways. These representations, while sometimes set in fantasy-like or abstract contexts, largely serve to disrupt traditional gender norms, normalise queer identities, and challenge the limitations of stereotypical portrayals in mainstream media. The themes identified – fluidity, intimacy, intersectionality, and visibility – work together to offer a multifaceted and authentic representation of queerness.

Finally, the theme of fatness is similar to the section on queerness, which states the centrality of unconventional portrayals in queer people's self-development, acceptance, and the finding of community. Walker (2017) highlights the importance of seeing 'positive' (unconventional) images of fat bodies as important to fat people's transformation, enabling them to evolve from thinking of their fat bodies as something terrible and shameful to discovering them as a gift and a place of strength.

Outside of personal growth, unconventional portrayals are essential to sway public discourse and attitudes to increase intimate citizenship, Saguy's (2021) conceptual framing of anti-obese versus fat acceptance sentiment is vital to this section, as the data samples share limited fat acceptance and renegotiated aesthetics of health for fatness in the form of the idealised hourglass body.

Dominating the plus-size content of *Playboy* is a lack of showing their 'real' selves on social media, instead, participants highlight only the best aspects of their bodies through their poses and camera shots hoping to achieve authenticity through their captions (Limatius, 2020). As long as there is a tiny waist and curves in the 'right' areas – policing of women's bodies – an ideal is created for being plus size, what is acceptable (hourglass fatness) and is not ('bad fatty' with an apron belly).

Furthermore, only women appear to be permitted to be on the softer side, with visible fatness. Men are required to be muscular and have a six-pack, whilst making it look effortless, perhaps this is due to the associated masculine qualities of strength, activeness, health, and virility, whereas a soft body is deemed feminine, subordinate, and weak.

Tortajada et al. (2013, p. 181) support that such reasoning, "…fit[s] an older, classical pattern of attractiveness (extolling young, pretty and heterosexual women) and historically, men's and women's kinds of attractiveness have been valued differently… a man's social presence stands on the solidity of the promise of power it embodies (an outwardly projected power that is, as it

is to be exerted on others), whereas a woman's presence expresses an external attitude towards herself – it defines what can and cannot be".

In response to past criticisms of *Playboy* and claims of reinvention, we see that the brand has evolved in some ways to be more inclusive and enhance intimate citizenship, but there are limits. Playboy's representations indicate that inclusivity of body size is regulated, commercialising off fatness and promoting the good fatty (hourglass) which speaks to the brand's underlying capitalistic interests.

Altogether, the data analyses show a complex tale in representations of gender, engaging with the 'heterosexual matrix', the subjects appear to locate such coherences of traditional gender ideals and stereotypes, amidst the dislocations that are counterhegemonic and plural gender expressions. Consequently this sustains passive femininity, the objectification of women, and hegemonic masculinity, and ultimately subordinates women, feminine displays, and men who display other forms of masculinity (effeminacy).

Playboy surveillances oscillation between coherence and disruption of gender, and allows ambiguous and complex representations to emerge. The Instagram platform allows such plural gender displays to become public – an activism in its own right (Caldeira et al., 2018) – but also limits particular gender portrayals to report content that does not abide by the platform's Terms of Use. Caldeira et al. (2018) affirm that no SNS is neutral, there are ideologies entrenched in every fabric of society, even the digital space.

Furthermore, there exists a complex tale in queer representations, from engaging queer stereotypes, reinforcing gender binaries, and servicing the male gaze in compensation for meeting representational needs, to blurring gender and sexuality boundaries, causing a disruption (dislocation) of Western status quos, and reimagining body and beauty ideals to naturalise the complexities that is queerness.

Consequently, a strategic ambiguity arises from the Playboy brand in their intimate citizenship project, sustaining an invalidation and alienation of queer people. Moreover the objectification of queer people and reproducing forms of Western 'New Lad' masculinity, ultimately subordinating some queer representations of (e.g., lesbians and gender fluid participants) (Benwell, 2003), as Sunderland (2004, p. 20) proclaims it is "…possible to see men and boys constructing their masculinities to correspond to what they see femininities as not being".

Despite *Playboy*'s historical support of queer people – see 'The Crooked Man' short story, the famed headline of 'Gay is Good', and Hugh Hefner's philanthropic contributions and support toward abortion rights, Equal Rights Amendment campaigns and various other free speech organisations – such presented ambiguity, invalidation, objectification, sexualisation and further painting of queer people as deviant contradicts their supposed new inclusivity agenda and can be frankly deemed hypocritical. Yet, there are unconventional portrayals and normalising non-binary representations present, including gay rights advocacy, and awareness of the fluidity of gender and sexuality that strive to legitimate identification beyond the heterosexual matrix. Continuously throughout the queer analyses, subversive parodic performativity arises, strongly contesting what is considered natural and commonsense.

Finally, with fatness, as the data analyses show, there exists a complex portrayal of fat body representations, from advocating for body diversity and fat acceptance across body size, gender, and skin disorders, and positioning these presentations on the fat continuum of the 'good fatty', to further limiting appropriate and accepted fatness to the hourglass form. Including causing disruptions (dislocations) of the Western status quo and the aesthetics of health that privileges thinness, thus reimagining body, and beauty ideals to naturalise the multi-dimensional lives of fat people.

Consequently, a strategic ambiguity arises here as well, from the Playboy brand in their intimate citizenship project, reinforcing the oppression of fat people and the objectification and hyper-sexualisation of fat people. Yet, there are positive and normalising plus-size representations that employ HAES aims and challenge dominant misunderstandings and perceptions of fatness as ugly, undesirable, unhealthy, and abnormal. Additionally, the captions aid in these counter-narratives, and give voice to and humanise the participants, contributing to authentic representations of fatness and liberating them through sexual empowerment (Limatius, 2020).

Men have strived to portray their bodies as strong, young, and physically active and dominant (Rose et al., 2012; Simpson, 2020). Below we see this emerging, like in the section on gender, where participants appear to represent the ideal man's body, with a sharp jawline, six-pack, broad shoulders, and chest, and some, but not excessive body hair. This is supported by Tortajada et al. (2013) in the detected conventions of masculinity in men, and Goffman (1979) in the relative size component.

Moreover, on the objectification and sexualising of men, Tortajada et al. (2013) along with De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013) explain that the erotic male is increasing in standard advertising representations and on SNSs, mirroring advertising conventions of masculinity, hence why we see such occurrences in *Playboy*'s Instagram content too, where various products are now being promoted by the brand as Playboy merchandise.

These presentations of men as sex objects – accomplished through one such convention like 'six-pack advertising' – pose no true subversion to male dominance, as Tortajada et al. (2013) explain that the female gaze does not counter society's preexisting (male) gaze. Consequently, heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity are upheld, especially by the resources like gaze, pose, and expression by men, which police and recuperate any potential dislocation.

Limatius (2018, p. 15) asserts that "the concept of "plus-size" remains strongly connected to women…the marginalization of the fat body is a gendered phenomenon" and a central determiner of social status and acceptability, primarily among women, however, as this patterning of men's portrayals on *Playboy* Instagram shows, there are determiners defined by the body for men's social status and acceptability too: an avoidance of fat, that is an avoidance of weakness, laziness and softness (femininity) (see Simpson, 2020 on the meanings attached to the fat body).

Continuously throughout the fatness analyses, the link between fatphobia and the obesity epidemic mirrors that of racism and justifying racism, theming the suffering of deviant bodies, and being made abnormal and less than others. This adds to the complex performance made by *Playboy,* showing that the brand has evolved in some ways to be more inclusive and enhance intimate citizenship, though as a lot of the representations show, inclusivity of body size is policed too, commercialising off fatness and promoting the good hourglass fatty; hence the term 'Plus-Size *Playboy*' because of their economic interests that are apparent in their fat bodies' representation.

8. Conclusion

With globalisation accelerated by new technologies like Instagram, which facilitate dialogue across societies and cultures, Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2015) rightly observe that 'images produced in the US travel around the globe, meaning that a certain type of aesthetic is becoming the standard in representations'. This is the importance of my research on *Playboy,* inquiring into their intimate citizenship, and by the same token investigating their gender, queer, and fatness discourse, because the ideologies shared by such a world-renowned brand as Playboy influence and affect us in some way, no matter what part of the world we belong to, and despite our varying schemas.

In terms of what messages and broader discourses are being communicated via *Playboy*'s online textual and visual content, we note that with gender that there are locations, dislocations and relocations of gender stereotypes, expectations and norms, that either ascribe to the heterosexual matrix or counter it, this was evident in the gender diversity and fluidity present, but also in the rituals of subordination via women's location of traditional gender roles (seen in Figure 1), subordination, objectification and sexualisation.

In the queer section calls of deviance, transgression, and abnormality were frequent, this was escalated by the fantasy-like, abstract and repeated metaphors found throughout that altogether served to invalidate the queer experience, denaturalise being queer, and further alienate queer people. We witnessed forces of normalisation at every turn, so much as to even draw on Christian biblical ideology. Yet, in many cases, we also saw unconventional portrayals – challenges to harmful labelling, subordination of queer, and marginalisation – that sought to create awareness and acceptance of queer people and their lived experiences and promote accepting public attitudes towards queer people.

On fatness, visual representations were policed for both women and men, of the former women are praised and deemed acceptable if they conform to the hourglass shape, hence the enhancement of the hourglass form in many of the visual portrayals, but for the men, they are confined to the muscular ideal, as it seems that shows of strength and power are valued over softness and thus weakness, which is only allowed for women.

Throughout all three themes, semiotic resources being utilised and how are they being applied share in the rituals of subordination, objectification, and sexualisation. In many cases, speaking to the shifts in *Playboy* amid their criticisms, the answer is grey – they have and have not made

changes – the brand appears to be doing something they have always done. Historically and with their current rebranding, they engage in ambiguity and perpetuate the heterosexual matrix, and subsequent matrix of domination, while promoting feminism, progress, socio-political awareness, and inclusivity. Women continue in positions of subordination, objectification, and sexualisation, while men are positioned as having more power, even if they are objectified in some cases.

Queer people's lived experiences and normalisation is assisted somewhat, but they prominently are portrayed and understood by the public to be deviant, abnormal, out of place in Western society, and just a fantasy. Such is, unfortunately, the case for most bodies and identities that do not meet the Western societal norm, as we also see with fatness, and forces of normalisation to sugarcoat fatness into the hourglass standard for women, and the lean and muscular standard for men. This altogether in the end subverts Playboy's intimate citizenship project, undermining and hypercriticising their recent claims of/for equality, inclusivity, and acceptance and to sway public attitudes.

Obstacles faced by this project were in reviewing the production and editorial process of the visual imagery samples, which was not possible due to access, and in the deducing of most relevant samples because there is so much available for consideration and analysis, more so since most of the data overlaps in their themes of gender, queer, plus-size, and fatness. It is on this mantle that I put forward future research considerations, to explore black fetishisation, black stereotypes, and exoticisation in *Playboy*, which I observed recurringly, but for the sake of space cannot investigate further.

This research however is valuable, if I may say so humbly, as it adds to the surplus of literature present on *Playboy*, and that of media, gender, queer, and fatness studies. This research looks at *Playboy* in the online mediascape and at their supposed 'contemporary reinvention with their new and liberal staff that is supposed to enhance inclusivity', the 'artistic quality' of their content, and the brand's progress in 'empowering all'. We see that this tale is complex, and yet the scales are somewhat tilted more to one side than the other, sustaining the matrix of domination and capitalistic interests.

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