

"A Girl Resembles a Bunny"

A Feminist Re-Analysis of Representations of
Women in Playboy

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Abstract

This thesis explores the complicated representations of women in Playboy magazine and its related media, re-evaluating these portrayals through the lenses of the gaze, objectification, and agency. Spanning the magazine's inception in 1953, to its post-Hefner digital transformation, this study investigates how Playboy has both reflected and shaped cultural constructions of femininity over time. By employing an interdisciplinary and multi-method approach, including feminist critical discourse analysis, visual methodologies, semi-structured interviews with Playboy staff, and auto-ethnographic practice-based research centred on self-portraiture, this work delves into the complexities of Playboy's depictions of feminine sexuality. Focusing on the contributions of women who have produced, consumed, and posed for Playboy, the thesis shifts attention away from Hugh Hefner's to foreground the women involved in shaping the brand. Drawing on Ann Cahill's concept of derivatization (2010) and Susanna Paasonen et al.'s work on objectification (2021), the thesis introduces the concept of complicated empowerment to frame the interplay between agency, objectification, and commodification within Playboy's patriarchal "Entertainment for Men" framework. This analysis reveals how women working within or represented by Playboy navigate, perform, and at times subvert its constructed ideals of desirable hyper-femininity, challenging simplistic binaries of empowerment and sexual objectification. By situating Playboy within evolving feminist discourses this thesis demonstrates how Playboy's portrayals of women negotiate cultural tensions surrounding femininity, empowerment, and sexualisation. It further interrogates the brand's contemporary alignment with feminist ideals amid movements such as #MeToo, exploring how these shifts complicate its legacy while reshaping narratives of feminine sexualities from within. This study contributes to feminist media scholarship by offering a nuanced, historically situated analysis of Playboy as a site of both constraint and possibility.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
List of Figures.....	6
Acknowledgments.....	8
Author’s Declaration.....	10
Chapter One: Introduction.....	11
Prologue: “If You Introduce a 'Men’s Lifestyle’ Publisher to the Clitoris, You Get a Mansion, Right?” (Wells, 2017).....	11
“A Girl Resembles a Bunny”	17
Thesis Aims, Research Questions, and Methodologies.....	19
Structure of the thesis.....	22
Chapter Two: “These Chicks are Our Natural Enemy”: Playboy’s Fraught Relationship with Feminism.....	26
Early Feminist Critiques and The Playboy Bunny Image.....	28
Those Girls with the Playboy Bunny Tramp Stamps: Postfeminism's Embrace of Playboy.....	39
Post-Hefner Playboy’s New (Pop) Feminist Positioning.....	51
Conclusion.....	58
Chapter Three: Framing Complicated Empowerment.....	60
Performing Cunt.....	62
Disrupting Binaries.....	68
Notions of the Gaze.....	75
Playful Reinterpretation.....	80
Conclusion.....	83

Chapter Four: Patchworking Interdisciplinary Methodologies.....	85
Research Design and Overview of Data Collected: Unfurling the Quilt.....	89
Artmaking as an Auto-Ethnographic and Embodied Research Method.....	92
Data Collection and Analysis: Fibre Art and Rhinestoning as a Feminist Art Practice.....	100
Data Collection and Analysis: Self-Portraiture.....	105
Analysing Playboy’s Media: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Visual Methodologies.....	110
Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA).....	110
Approaching Analysing Reality Television.....	115
Visual Methodologies.....	119
Data Collection and Analysis of Playboy Media.....	122
<i>The Girls Next Door</i>	122
Bunny Yeager in Playboy.....	126
Playboy’s Digital Platforms.....	129
Semi-Structured Interviews with Playboy Staff.....	130
Recruitment and Sampling.....	131
Ethical Considerations.....	133
Data Collection.....	135
Data Analysis.....	136
From Outsider to Observer: Reflexivity and Positionality.....	137
Conclusion: Piecing the Methodological Quilt.....	142
Chapter Five: The Female Lens on the Female Form: Women as Producers of Playboy Content.....	144
The Playboy Gaze and The Two Marilyns.....	147
Bunny Yeager’s Disruption of the Gaze in Playboy.....	159

Double Exposure.....	163
Crafting Her Own Gaze.....	168
“Express Who I Really Am, but with Make Up on and Nude, You Know?” Agency, The Gaze and Complicated Empowerment within <i>The Girls Next Door</i>	178
Just Shoot Me.....	182
Mutiny on the Booty.....	193
Third Time’s the Charming.....	206
Reflections on GND.....	215
10 Inch Pleasers and a Camera Trigger: Reimagining the Playboy Gaze through Self-Portraiture.....	219
10 Inch Pleasers and a Bed of Swarovski Crystals.....	219
Analogue Mirror Selfie.....	223
Glitched Exposures.....	227
Conclusion.....	231
Chapter Six: Constructing and Complicating the Girl Next Door: Representations of (Hyper-)Femininities in Playboy	233
Complicating Playboy’s Construction of the Idealised Feminine: The Unruly Body of Anna Nicole Smith.....	235
Rectifying and Reworking Playboy’s Legacy: A Short Series of Interviews with Playboy Staff.....	253
“Everybody Wants a Makeover from a Playboy girl”: <i>The Girls Next Door</i> , Postfeminism and Hyper-femininity.....	263
Trashy Lingerie & Situating Hyper-femininity.....	264
Consuming <i>The Girls Next Door</i>	268
Becoming a Playboy Woman: A Midsummer Night’s Dream.....	273
Reflections on GND.....	285

“A Girl Resembles a Bunny” Queering the Playboy Woman Through Embodied Art	
Making.....	285
“l’ve Got a Wand and a Rabbit!” Framing Queer Approaches to Playboy Branded	
Femininity.....	286
Hyperbolic Femininity and Rhinestone Bunnies.....	291
Conclusion.....	299
Chapter Seven: “Be Fun and Flirty, Not Raunchy”: Post-Hefner Playboy’s Digital	
Rebranding	302
“Let’s Commit to Losing me”: The Lena Image.....	305
Situating Post-Hefner Playboy in a Changing World.....	310
Capitalising on Nostalgia.....	316
Feminist Interpretations of Playboy’s Legacy.....	321
<i>The Playboy Club: Agency, Sex Work and Whorephobia</i>	325
<i>PlayboyPlus: Consent, Control and Re-Purposing of Archival Media</i>	342
Conclusion.....	357
Chapter Eight: Conclusion.....	359
Finding Complicated Empowerment in Playboy’s Representation of Femininities.....	361
Summary of Findings and Main Contributions.....	363
Methodological Approach.....	368
Limitations of This Study and Directions for Future Research.....	370
Epilogue: Reclaiming a Piece of Playboy’s Archives.....	372
Appendix One: Information Sheet.....	376
Appendix Two: Consent Form.....	379
Reference List.....	381

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 <i>The Red Wine and Roses Suite</i>	16
Figure 4.1 <i>Data Table</i>	92
Figure 4.2 <i>At the Playboy Offices</i>	141
Figure 5.1 <i>'Golden Dreams' as seen in Chicago History Museum's Reading Room</i>	149
Figure 5.2 <i>Double Exposure</i>	167
Figure 5.3 <i>Lisa Winters Pictorial</i>	170
Figure 5.4 <i>Lisa Winters Centrefold</i>	171
Figure 5.5 <i>Cindy Fuller Pictorial and Partial Centrefold</i>	174
Figure 5.6 <i>House Party Pictorial</i>	175
Figure 5.7 <i>GND Cover 1</i>	191
Figure 5.8 <i>GND Pictorial 1</i>	192
Figure 5.9 <i>GND Cover 2</i>	203
Figure 5.10 <i>GND Back Cover</i>	204
Figure 5.11 <i>GND Pictorial 2 (Kendra Wilkinson)</i>	205
Figure 5.12 <i>GND Cover 3 (Kendra Wilkinson)</i>	213
Figure 5.13 <i>GND Pictorial 3 (Bridget Marquardt)</i>	214
Figure 5.14 <i>Pamela Anderson Cover</i>	221
Figure 5.15 <i>10 Inch Pleasers and a Bed of Swarovski Crystals</i>	222
Figure 5.16 <i>Analogue Selfie</i>	226
Figure 5.17 <i>Suze Randall Self-portrait Pictorial</i>	229
Figure 5.18 <i>Glitched Exposures</i>	230
Figure 6.1 <i>Anna Nicole Smith Cover 1</i>	237

Figure 6.2 <i>Anna Nicole Smith Cover 2</i>	244
Figure 6.3 <i>Anna Nicole Smith Cover 3</i>	249
Figure 6.4 <i>My Trashy Lingerie Membership Card</i>	266
Figure 6.5 <i>A Fantasy in Pink</i>	292
Figure 6.6 <i>Bunny of the Year 1971</i>	295
Figure 6.7 <i>A Girl Resembles a Bunny</i>	296
Figure 6.8 <i>Playful Pastures</i>	297
Figure 7.1 <i>Lena Forsén Pictorial and Partial Centrefold</i>	307
Figure 8.1 <i>Bunny Yeager</i>	375

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Chapter One: Introduction

Prologue: “If You Introduce a ‘Men’s Lifestyle’ Publisher to the Clitoris, You Get a Mansion, Right?” (Wells, 2017)

At 1340 N. State Parkway in Chicago’s Gold Coast neighbourhood stands a red brick mansion that blends quietly into its surroundings. Its unassuming exterior seems no different from the other historic buildings along the tree-lined street. But as I glanced down at my phone, I was told something different. Apparently, I was standing in front of a landmark, one with a legacy far more infamous than its quiet façade suggested.

In the summer of 2016, I had just moved to Chicago to pursue an MFA. It wasn’t just my first time in Chicago, it was my first time in America. I was eager to explore my new city, to see everything it had to offer. Among the usual tourist sites, one unexpected destination just a couple of blocks from my Airbnb caught my attention: “The Playboy Mansion? I thought that was in LA, right?”.

Upon further research I came to find that my new city was the birthplace of Playboy¹. Having been born in Chicago in 1926 Hugh Hefner founded Playboy magazine in 1953 at his kitchen table, armed with a number of loans and a nude image of Marilyn Monroe which he had purchased from a calendar company. In 1959 as Playboy’s circulation grew to one million copies a month (Watts, 2008) Hefner divorced his first wife and moved into 1340 N. State Parkway, which he had crafted into the physical embodiment of the Playboy fantasy lifestyle. Behind its unassuming exterior, the original Playboy

¹ I have made a stylistic choice within this thesis to not italicise the word Playboy

mansion was a dreamscape of post-war American bachelorhood. It boasted lavish features such as a rotating bed, dormitories for Playboy bunnies of the newly opened Chicago Playboy Club, and a hidden door which revealed a fireman's pole (Watts, 2008). The pole descended to a basement pool which contained underwater windows for the viewing pleasure of patrons of the mansion's bar. In the words of Paul Preciado:

From the outside, the Playboy Mansion was indistinguishable from the other stately homes on Chicago's Gold Coast. But behind the conventional nineteenth-century facade hid a revolution- or at least this was what Playboy magazine maintained. Playboy was turning male domesticity into a pharmacopornographic spectacle (2014, p.108).

The proximity of an unexpected icon of Americana to my Airbnb was a serendipitous coincidence. Growing up in Yorkshire in the 1990s and 2000s I learned about Playboy primarily through pop-culture: a Playboy mansion cameo in *The Simpsons* in which a gaggle of Playboy bunnies in lab coats run an "alternative energy research center" (1993); Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* deciding to dedicate her time to academia, as opposed to romance whilst dressed in a pink Playboy bunny costume; Cady Heron in *Mean Girls* declaring "In girl world, Halloween is the one time a year when a girl can dress like a total slut, and no other girls can say anything about it" (2004). As the scene cuts to queen of the plastics, Regina George, dressed as a Playboy Bunny, embodying the very idea that Cady is talking about. During this period Playboy was more a pop-culture reference, an idea, not a physical, tangible magazine.

That changed when the television channel E4 introduced *The Girls of the Playboy Mansion* (titled *The Girls Next Door* in the US), a reality series documenting the lives of Hefner's three girlfriends. Nestled in E4's programming schedule between reruns of *The*

Simple Life and *Gilmore Girls*, it quickly became a fascination of mine. I watched the show with the volume low, trying to catch glimpses of the girls getting ready for the next big Playboy party or posing for their pictorials, until my mum would quickly change the channel, dismissing it as "American trash".

Unfortunately for my mum it was my obsession with "American trash" that eventually led me to Chicago. Where, once immersed in grad school life and settled in a new apartment miles away from the Playboy mansion, I found myself once again in its gravitational pull. While browsing Tumblr posts from my new university, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), I found myself faced with images of a familiar façade, the caption reading: "Time for a dose of SAIC history, remember when we lived in the Playboy mansion?" (SAIC, 2013). I soon came to learn that SAIC had been gifted the original Playboy mansion by Hugh Hefner in 1984. Renamed 'Hefner Hall', SAIC utilised the mansion primarily as student accommodation, with some rooms hosting seminars. However, not all aspects of the Playboy mansion were deemed appropriate for its new academic life. According to an article in SAIC's student-run journal, the mansion's elaborate basement pool was drained and repurposed for storage (Wells, 2017).

SAIC's occupancy of Hefner Hall was short lived, however. Just five years later, the school sold the property to establish a scholarship fund. The Chicago Playboy mansion was eventually developed into condominium apartments. Like many SAIC students, such as Grace Wells (2017), my reaction to finding out this unique piece of trivia about my new school was a simple one: "why?". Why would Hugh Hefner, who had no apparent ties to SAIC bequeath them with such a lucrative piece of real estate? Why would a school that prides itself on being a progressive institution, accept - and even name a building after- a man who had such a complicated and often contentious

relationship with feminism? And perhaps the question that filled me with the most frustration: why would SAIC sell the mansion at all? Why let go of such a provocative and historically charged location, one that could have continued to spark conversation and inspire generations of artists? “You’re telling me I could have studied at the Playboy Mansion?” I exclaimed to my advisor, still grappling with my discovery.

Throughout my two years at SAIC I was unfortunately unable to answer many of those questions. According to Hefner’s biographer, Steven Watts (2008), Hefner took life drawing classes at SAIC whilst he was studying at the University of Illinois in 1946. Meanwhile *Inside the Playboy Mansion* and former Playboy staff writer Gretchen Edgren claims that these classes played a key role in Hefner’s decision to donate the mansion stating that it was through taking them that “he had caught his very first glimpse of a nude female-in the flesh” (1998, p.278). This frankly absurd rationale that Hefner donated such a valuable piece of real estate because he first saw a naked woman at SAIC only raised more questions and prompted Wells (2017) to quip the header of this section.

Living in the U.S during Donald Trump’s presidency and the dawn of the #MeToo movement only deepened both my perplexity over my discovery of SAIC’s connection to Hefner, and my fascination with Playboy. The, at times seemingly overt, sexism of Playboy disgusted me, yet I couldn’t deny that there was something alluring about it. I poured over vintage Playboy magazines I would find on eBay, studying every photograph of women I could find. I tore them from their bindings and plastered them across the walls of my studio, letting their glossy surfaces surround me. My fascination soon found its way into my artwork: a heart-shaped bed in a love motel on the outskirts of Chicago (figure 1.1) became my personal stand-in for the Playboy Mansion, a physical space where desire, fantasy, and critique could collide.

Critiques from Professors in my art school pushed me to decide as to whether my work stood as a critique, or celebration of Playboy. Feminist writers ranging from Gloria Steinem (1963, 1970) to the plethora of articles in response to Hefner's passing in 2017 (Ahmed 2017, Bindel 2017, Heuchan 2017, Kang 2017, Moore 2017) have argued that Playboy objectified the women in its magazine pages, clubs and other media. Yet, I felt like the reality of Playboy's representation of women was more complicated than these critiques often suggest.

At the same time, Playboy held a certain allure, a sense of class that distinguished it from the Lads Mags and *The Sun's* Page 3 culture I had been exposed to growing up. Yet, as I delved deeper into Playboy's history and its portrayal of women, I found that this allure, like cheap gold-plated jewellery, gradually eroded. The idea of classiness began to chip away, revealing something more complex, an entity built on both attraction and performance, objectification and agency.

This thesis emerges from both a personal fascination and a desire to better understand the images of women that have long captivated me, and to explore how this captivation can be reconciled with my feminism. A cultural shorthand for playful sexuality and sexualised imagery of women, Playboy has forever changed how we view and represent feminine sexualities in western media. With the company in a transitional period, with Hefner dead, the LA Playboy Mansion in the hands of a developer, the Playboy clubs

closed and at the time of writing the magazine no longer in circulation, I believe that now is an opportune time to reflect on Playboy's legacy and look towards its future.



Figure 1.1 *The Red Wine and Roses Suite*

“A Girl Resembles a Bunny”

This thesis title is taken from an excerpt from a 1967 interview of Hugh Hefner by Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci:

The rabbit, the bunny, in America has a sexual meaning, and I chose it because it's a fresh animal, shy, vivacious, jumping - sexy. First it smells you, then it escapes, then it comes back, and you feel like caressing it, playing with it. A girl resembles a bunny. Joyful, joking. Consider the kind of girl that we made popular: the Playmate of the Month. She is never sophisticated, a girl you cannot really have. She is a young, healthy, single girl - the girl next door...we are not interested in the mysterious, difficult woman, the femme fatale, who wears elegant underwear, with lace, and she is sad, and somehow mentally filthy. The Playboy girl has no lace, no underwear, she is naked, well-washed with soap and water, and she is happy. (p.116)

This quote has been a source of both frustration and fixation for me. It encapsulates the contradictory and restrictive vision of desirable femininity that Hefner and Playboy promoted. Within it lies a clear binary: the “good” girl next door; playful, uncomplicated, accessible, and the “bad” or “difficult” woman, who is mysterious, sad, and tainted by sophistication. Hefner's words expose not only the boundaries Playboy imposed on its representations of femininity, but also his dismissal of women who defy these boundaries, rejecting them as mentally or morally impure.

The zoomorphic notion of women resembling bunnies further exposes the contradictions in Hefner's statement. Rabbits carry complex cultural associations, symbolising both sexuality and innocence. This duality arises from their reputation for frequent reproduction and their characterisation as timid prey animals. Hefner projects this paradoxical blend of sexuality and innocence onto his idealised woman: she is young, uncomplicated, and sexually desirable.

Notably, however, the first anthropomorphised representation of Playboy's rabbit mascot was male. Introduced in the magazine's second issue, "Mr. Playboy" appeared as a rabbit dressed in a tuxedo, flanked by women on either side (Watts, 2008).

Throughout Playboy's first decade Mr. Playboy became a recurring visual motif, often featured in collages on magazine covers. He embodied the ideal bachelor as imagined by Playboy, cultivated, witty, and always surrounded by art, women, and alcohol. This contrast illustrates Playboy's gendered ideology: women are bunnies, innocent, accessible, and uncomplicated. Men, in contrast, are rabbits, cultured, playful, and inherently in control.

I would argue, however, that within this frankly sexist and absurd notion there is some playful room for reclamation and re-imagination of Hefner's quote. A woman resembles a bunny: she is vulnerable, yet resilient, nurturing yet assertive. A woman resembles a bunny: they both know the power to be found in their warren and their community. A woman resembles a bunny: both symbolically tied to the moon, they find strength in renewal and the cycles of waxing and waning.

It is in this both acknowledgement of the harm of Playboy, yet playful reimagining of Playboy that this thesis derives its title, but also its aims and approach. This thesis is a feminist re-evaluation of Playboy, analysing aspects of its representations of femininities

and seeking for moments of what I've come to refer to as complicated empowerment. I utilise the term complicated empowerment as an acknowledgement of both the complications and contradictions of Playboy, but also in reference to the feminist scholars (for example: Nagle, 1997; Paasonen et al, 2021) whose ideas of theorising representations of women in media outside of the binaries of objectification/empowerment, subject/object, bad girl/good girl have informed my work. My approach allows for multiple meanings to co-exist, untethering Playboy from these limiting binaries.

It is through the lens of complicated empowerment that this thesis develops its aims, research questions, and methodological framework. In the following section, I outline the core aims of this study, the key questions driving the research, and the multi-method approach I employ to critically engage with Playboy's representations of women and femininity.

Thesis Aims, Research Questions and Methodologies

This thesis has four key aims:

1. First, it seeks to re-evaluate Playboy from a feminist perspective, aiming to challenge simplistic readings of the magazine and its related media as purely misogynistic. While acknowledging the magazine's complicated history, it offers a nuanced analysis that explores the complexities within its portrayals of women and femininity.
2. Second, through the framework of complicated empowerment, this research explores the contradictions within Playboy's representations of femininity. It also highlights opportunities for feminist reclamation and repurposing of Playboy's

imagery, demonstrating how women have negotiated agency within spaces often framed as sites of male desire.

3. Third, this research seeks to shift the focus away from Hugh Hefner, who has frequently been central to existing literature on Playboy, and instead highlight the women who have produced, featured in, and consumed Playboy content. Photographers such as Bunny Yeager, Playboy media such as *The Girls Next Door* (GND), and contemporary creators on Playboy's digital platforms, such as *The Playboy Club*, demonstrate that women have not merely been subjects of male desire, but active producers of their own representations. Here, I explore ways in which women have subverted the male gaze by taking control of how they are depicted and participating in the creation of Playboy content, complicating the narrative of Playboy as solely male-driven and crafted for the entertainment of the male gaze.
4. Fourth, in response to changes in Playboy both before I began this research, as well as those that occurred during the course of this research (e.g. the magazine ceasing publication, distancing themselves from Hefner, and investing in digital platforms) this thesis seeks to analyse what I have come to term post-Hefner Playboy. Through interviews with Playboy staff and analysis of its digital content, this research reflects on how the company is repurposing its legacy in the context of movements like #MeToo. This aim positions the thesis at a critical moment in Playboy's history, exploring how the brand navigates both its past and present, balancing legacy with contemporary cultural pressures

To achieve these aims, the following research questions guide the analysis of Playboy's representations of women, exploring the contradictions of empowerment and objectification, and the role of women in shaping the brand's legacy and future:

1. What ideals of femininity does *Playboy* construct and promote, and how do these representations define what is considered desirable within the magazine's (and its related media's) framework?
2. How do Playboy's representations of femininity complicate the binaries of sexualisation and empowerment, and how can these representations be understood through the lens of complicated empowerment?
3. How can feminist methods such as auto-ethnography and self-portraiture offer new insights into the reclamation and reinterpretation of Playboy's depictions of femininity?

Given the complexities inherent in Playboy's portrayal of desirable femininities, this thesis employs a multi-method approach to capture these contradictions. Combining artmaking, feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), visual methodologies, as well as a small number of semi structured interviews with Playboy staff, these methodologies are patched together to craft an approach that allows for both critical reflection and embodied engagement.

Inspired by the work of Graeme Sullivan (2010), Ellen Sampson (2020), and Gloria Wilson (2020) and their approach to art practice-based research, I set out to craft my own queer feminist self-representations in response to Playboy's legacy. Through my own arts-based practice, I explore how women might reclaim sexualised representations on their own terms and how Playboy's representations of femininity may be reimagined and repurposed.

I employ FCDA and visual methodologies to explore how ideas of gender and power operate within Playboy's media. These methods are particularly effective for analysing the reality television series, *GND*, and are also applied to qualitative data gathered from

a series of four interviews I conducted with Playboy staff members in 2022, examining how the company's post-Hefner era is framed through their perspectives. Additionally, I analyse Bunny Yeager's self-portraits and photographs, which challenge the male gaze through her dual roles as photographer and subject. The combination of methods enables a layered analysis: FCDA provides insight into the socio-cultural context of Playboy, while visual methodologies traces shifts (or stagnations) in representations of femininity in Playboy's magazine and media over time. These analytical approaches are complemented by practice-based research, which offers an embodied feminist response and ensures that both theoretical frameworks and personal experience inform the analysis.

Together, these methods offer a comprehensive framework for engaging with Playboy's representations of femininity. They align with the concept of complicated empowerment by allowing for both critical reflection and personal reclamation, ensuring that this thesis captures the contradictions and possibilities within Playboy's legacy

Structure of the thesis

This thesis is comprised of eight chapters. Following the introduction, chapters two and three form my review of relevant substantive and theoretical literature. Chapter two examines existing literature on Playboy, exploring its relationship with feminism and the feminist discourse surrounding it throughout its history. Chapter three focuses on how I frame my concept of complicated empowerment and the feminist literature that informs my theoretical positioning in relation to themes such as objectification and the gaze.

Chapter two begins with a review of feminist critiques and analyses of Playboy across its extensive history, spanning from its founding in 1953 to the present. Given the breadth of Playboy's legacy, this review is organised into thematic eras of feminist scholarship. It begins with early second-wave critiques (e.g., Steinem, 1963, 1970; Lehrman, 1972; MacKinnon, 1987) that identify Playboy as emblematic of patriarchal objectification. The discussion then moves to third-wave feminism and postfeminism (e.g., Levy 2006, Snyder-Hall 2010, Ringrose 2011), examining how these frameworks complicate earlier critiques. Finally, the review addresses more recent feminist objections and re-evaluations of Playboy's cultural significance (e.g., McKinney 2014), which reflect an evolving understanding of its legacy.

Chapter three outlines the conceptual framework that informs this thesis, which is rooted in the idea of complicated empowerment. Drawing on Ann Cahill's concept of derivatization (2010), and Susanna Paasonen et al.'s work on subject/object fluidity (2021), this framework provides a lens for understanding how empowerment and objectification coexist within representations of feminine sexuality. This chapter also integrates concepts of the gaze, agency, and playful reimagination, bridging feminist theory with Playboy's representations to move beyond binary categorisations of empowerment versus objectification. Together, these chapters establish the foundation for this thesis, positioning Playboy as a site of cultural negotiation where traditional and evolving understandings of feminine sexuality, representation, and agency intersect.

In chapter four I outline the multi-method approach employed in this thesis. I discuss the use of FCDA, visual methodologies and autoethnographic practice-based research. This section explains how these methods interact and allows for an approach which

both critically engages with Playboy's representations of femininity and allows space for playful creative exploration and feminist self-representation in relation to Playboy.

Chapter five, the first of three data analysis chapters, investigates themes of the gaze, self-representation, and agency, focusing on the extent to which women throughout Playboy's history have exercised agency in producing their own images. The chapter comprises of four sections, the first presents further literature which will guide discussions that follow, through the case study of one of the many women of Playboy (this is motif which every analysis chapter begins with). The second examines the contributions of Playboy's first female photographer, exploring her impact on the magazine. The third analyses three photoshoot-focused episodes of the reality series GND, evaluating whether its three female protagonists gain greater creative control and agency as the series progresses. Finally, the fourth section reflects on object/subject dynamics and the gaze through a series of three self-portraits.

Chapter six examines how representations of femininity in Playboy are constructed and how they have evolved over time, focusing on the deployment of hyper-femininity. It includes interviews with Playboy staff to explore whether the company's ideal vision of women has shifted in the post-Hefner era. The chapter also analyses GND, assessing how the show both caricatured feminine identities for a female audience and celebrated hyper-femininity. Finally, through artmaking and autoethnographic reflections, it queers Playboy's iconic imagery, such as the Bunny costume, to uncover subversive possibilities within the hyper-feminine framework

Chapter seven investigates how Playboy has sought to reposition itself in the post-Hefner era amidst the cultural shifts of the #MeToo movement and the rise of digital platforms. Drawing on interviews with Playboy staff and feminist content analysis of

digital offerings such as *PlayboyPlus* and *The Playboy Club*, the chapter explores tensions between commodification and empowerment. It highlights how Playboy's reliance on nostalgia both reflects and constrains its efforts to align with contemporary feminist ideals, raising questions about whether the brand can genuinely evolve or remains tethered to its patriarchal legacy.

Chapter Two: “These Chicks are Our Natural Enemy”: Playboy’s

Fraught Relationship with Feminism

Playboy has occupied a contentious and often controversial position within western feminist discourse since its inception in 1953. Spanning over seventy years, Playboy has evolved alongside second, third, and now fourth-wave feminist theory². Throughout its history, Playboy has been described as both anti-feminist and, at times, feminist, with founder Hugh Hefner even proclaiming: “I was a feminist before there was such a thing as feminism” (Hylton, 2007). While this self-assessment is arguably hyperbolic, Playboy has at various points, taken vocal and financial stances on issues central to feminist concerns, such as its support for Roe v. Wade. Scholar Carrie Pitzulo (2011) acknowledges this complexity, arguing that although Playboy cannot be classified as feminist, its engagement with women’s rights contributed to the cultural negotiation of emerging femininities.

This chapter examines Playboy’s fraught relationship with feminism, analysing key feminist debates and theoretical perspectives related to the magazine throughout its history. The discussion is organised into three subsections. The first explores early second-wave feminist critiques of Playboy, focusing on how feminists like Gloria Steinem (1963) and Germaine Greer (1972) framed the magazine as emblematic of patriarchal objectification. The second subsection addresses third-wave feminist discussions and postfeminist interpretations, examining how shifting feminist

² Although the notion of waves of feminism has been critiqued as being western-centric and too simplifying (e.g Evans & Chamberlain, 2014) I employ the waves model here to contextualise key critiques of Playboy throughout different eras and generations of feminist debate

frameworks complicated earlier critiques and allowed for more nuanced perspectives. The final subsection considers more recent feminist re-evaluations of Playboy, including its post-Hefner iterations, exploring how its representations of women have continued to intersect with debates on gender, sexuality, and agency. By tracing these shifting feminist perspectives, this section situates Playboy within broader cultural and theoretical debates on gender, sexuality, objectification, and representation, providing essential context for the analysis that follows in subsequent chapters.

Carrie Pitzulo's *Bachelors and Bunnies: The Sexual Politics of Playboy* (2011) provides a foundational framework for understanding Playboy's contradictory relationship with feminism. Pitzulo positions the magazine as occupying an ambivalent space, neither fully feminist nor explicitly anti-feminist. Her analysis highlights Playboy's vocal support for causes like reproductive rights while also acknowledging its reinforcement of the male gaze and traditional gender roles. Pitzulo's work emphasises the magazine's role in shaping cultural dialogues on femininity, even as its representations often conformed to patriarchal norms.

While Pitzulo's insights are invaluable, her analysis focuses primarily on Playboy's early to mid-history, particularly the 1950s–1970s, leaving the magazine's later years less examined. My research builds upon her work by taking a broader historical perspective, and one more focused on the women of Playboy (rather than Hefner), analysing Playboy from its origins through to its post-Hefner era. My approach expands the discussion to include the magazine's evolving representations of women, tracing how these shifted over time and intersected with emerging feminist frameworks.

Through this analysis, I argue that Playboy serves as a site where empowerment and objectification coexist, reflecting the complexities of feminist engagement with sexualised representation. By considering these tensions across Playboy's extensive history, the following discussion deepens and extends feminist scholarship, positioning the magazine as a significant yet ambivalent influence on evolving debates about gender, sexuality, and agency

Early Feminist Critiques and The Playboy Bunny Image

From its first issue in December 1953, Playboy explicitly framed itself as a magazine for men, with the tagline 'Entertainment for Men' and a pointed message in its first editorial:

IF YOU'RE A MAN between the ages of 18 and 80 Playboy is meant for you...
We want to make clear from the start we aren't a family magazine. If you're somebody's sister, wife or mother-in-law and picked us up by mistake, please pass us along to the nearest man in your life and get back to your nearest Ladies Home Companion (Hefner, 1953, p.3).

This exclusionary framing, alongside its sexualised depictions of women in pictorials and the Playboy Clubs, where Playboy Bunnies worked in corseted bodysuits, made the magazine a focal point for feminist critique. One of the most well-known early feminist critiques is Gloria Steinem's exposé 'A Bunny's Tale', published in two parts in *Show* magazine in 1963 (Steinem, 1963). Steinem documented her experience working undercover as a bunny in the New York Playboy Club highlighting exploitative working

conditions including a strict demerit system, uncomfortable uniforms, and a policy requiring all Bunnies to undergo mandatory gynaecological exams.

Steinem expanded her criticism in her 1970 *McCall's* magazine article, 'What Playboy Doesn't Know About Women Could Fill a Book.' accusing Hugh Hefner of commodifying women and equating them with consumer goods like cars and liquor. These critiques reflected broader feminist disdain for Playboy, which reached its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s through protests at Playboy Clubs, college campuses, and even the 1968 Miss America Pageant (Pitzulo, 2011). During the latter protest, copies of Playboy were symbolically thrown into the 'Freedom Trashcan' alongside bras, critiquing Western beauty standards that demanded women be "sexy and wholesome, delicate but able to cope, demure yet titillatingly bitchy" (as cited in: Pitzulo, 2011, p. 36).

Appearing on television talk show, *The Dick Cavett Show* in 1970 alongside Sally Kempton to discuss the Women's Liberation Movement, Susan Brownmiller described Hugh Hefner (who was also a guest on the show) as her "enemy" who had "built an empire on oppressing women" (*The Dick Cavett Show*, Hugh Hefner, Rollo May, Grace Slick and Jefferson Airplane, Sally Kempton, Susan Brownmiller, 1970). Brownmiller specifically criticised the Playboy Bunny uniform, calling it dehumanising and degrading, arguing that it stripped women of their femininity by likening them to animals. She challenged Hefner's views on human rights, stating that she will believe him "...on the day comes that you're willing to come out here with a cotton tail attached to your rear end" (*The Dick Cavett Show*: Hugh Hefner, Rollo May, Grace Slick and Jefferson Airplane, Sally Kempton, Susan Brownmiller, 1970).

In response to mounting feminist critique, Playboy attempted to engage with the Women's Liberation Movement (Watts 2008, Pitzulo 2011). However, its efforts often reinforced the tensions between objectification and feminism. For example, while the magazine initially commissioned feminist writer Susan Braudy to write about women's liberation, her piece was replaced by Morton Hunt's 'Up Against the Wall, Chauvinist Pig!' (1970). Hunt's article focused on the radical feminist movement, highlighting fringe groups such as Female Liberation Cell 19 and WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell). He accused these groups of being "militant man-haters" (p. 95) who undermined the work of second-wave feminists, including figures like Betty Friedan and organisations such as NOW (National Organisation for Women), claiming these fringe groups "discredit the legitimate grievances of American women" (p.95).

Hunt's article did not address any feminist critiques of Playboy, nor did it provide a balanced view of feminist aims and theories at the time. Instead, it chose to focus on the more militant aspects of radical feminism, implying that feminist readings of Playboy's representations of women were radical and "man-hating" rather than legitimate concerns. This inability to adequately respond to the growing feminist critique led to a public criticism from one of Playboy's secretaries, Shelly Schlicker, who leaked an internal memo written by Hugh Hefner regarding the decision to replace Braudy's piece with Hunt's article. In this leaked memo Hefner stated: "What we have is a well-balanced, objective article, but what I want is a devastating piece that takes the militant feminists apart... these chicks are our natural enemy. It is time to do battle with them" (as cited in: Watts, 2008, p. 242).

However, while prominent feminists such as Gloria Steinem argued that Playboy objectified the women featured in its magazine, actions taken by Playboy and its charitable arm, The Playboy Foundation, during this period complicate any

straightforward reading of the magazine as inherently or solely anti-feminist. According to Pitzulo (2011), the Playboy Foundations' actions reflected the aims of much of the women's movement, seeing Hefner and Playboy editors "literally put money where their mouth is" (p.149). The magazine publicly advocated for abortion rights and published a significant volume of articles on the subject. Between 1963 and 1973, Playboy published 350 readers' letters pertaining to abortion rights, with roughly one-third of those letters written by women (Tishgart, 2017). In 1970, The Playboy Foundation made a grant to the Center for Constitutional Rights to aid in the defence of Shirley Wheeler, the first woman in U.S. history to be convicted of manslaughter for having an abortion. Wheeler's conviction was eventually overturned, and the Foundation later helped fund the Texas court case of Jane Roe, which ultimately led to the landmark Roe v. Wade decision (Yuko, 2019).

Further examples of The Playboy Foundation's charitable causes include a donation of \$10,000 in the mid-1970's to Marty Goddard to create the first standardised rape kit (Kennedy, 2020). Furthermore, during an archival visit to the Chicago History Museum in 2022 I discovered a directory of Chicago-area women's organisations published by the Playboy Foundation in 1976 to be distributed among local philanthropists. This list comprised of 137 organisations, organised under headings such as "Employment," "Lesbian," "Minority," "Pregnancy/Family Planning," "Rape," "Women in Prison," and "University/College Organisations". The foreword to the directory states: "In the process of educating ourselves about women's issues, we realised a need for an up-to-date survey of organisations working in the area" (The Playboy Foundation, 1976, p.2).

The philanthropic actions of The Playboy Foundation did not go without feminist critique, however. Catherine MacKinnon (1982) took a strong stance against Playboy's

philanthropic activities, arguing that feminists should reject any financial support from the Playboy Foundation due to what she termed as "dirty money" derived from the objectification of women (1987 p. 135). She suggested that the Foundation's funding, no matter how progressive its application, was tainted by its origins in a sexist industry. MacKinnon contended that accepting this money perpetuates the commodification of women, as it turns women's sexual objectification into a means of funding social justice:

We have found projects in which people said that no one other than Playboy would pay for the work, like rape victim assistance kits, for instance. So you take the money and you use it in good ways, in ways that support your opposition to sexism, knowing Playboy is sexist and that other women paid for that money. (1987, p.141)

While MacKinnon's argument is compelling, especially in light of second-wave feminism's critique of pornography and sexual objectification, it risks oversimplifying Playboy's impact. The fact that the Playboy Foundation funded critical feminist causes, such as reproductive rights, and rape prevention, challenges a blanket dismissal of its contributions to women's sexual and reproductive health. MacKinnon's rejection of Playboy's involvement, while rooted in feminist moral principles, might overlook the fact that Playboy supported important feminist initiatives at a time when few other organisations would.

Thus, while Playboy's portrayal of women in its magazine was widely critiqued by many prominent feminists of the 1970s, its philanthropic work complicates a purely one-dimensional reading. Playboy and its foundation's philanthropic work illustrates tensions between objectification, and empowerment, and signals that Playboy's role in feminist

history cannot be viewed as wholly anti-feminist, or feminist. Playboy's legacy is far more nuanced and contradictory than either position suggests.

Returning to Hunt's article and the backlash it received; we see in response Playboy beginning to introduce feminist thinkers into its magazine. One of the earliest and most notable examples of this is Nat Lehrman's interview with Germaine Greer, published in the January 1972 issue (notably, the first issue to feature a full-frontal nude Playmate with pubic hair, Marilyn Cole). According to Carrie Pitzulo, Greer's interview is "...an important example of the ways in which the magazine engaged certain elements of the women's movement and brought feminism to its readers" (2011, p.151). Introduced as a "ballsy author" and "feminist who loves men," Greer states that she granted Playboy the interview despite knowing that she would be criticised by her feminist peers for doing so, as she wanted to address its predominantly male audience and felt that the magazine was "trying to go in a decent direction" (Lehrman, 1972, p.64).

In her interview, Greer accused Playboy of objectifying women and promoting harmful beauty standards. She expressed concern over the magazine's focus on "excessively young" (p. 63) women, warning that this youthful image of female sexuality could shape how men view their wives. Like Steinem's critiques in *McCall's*, Greer argued that Playboy commodified women:

And you display your girls as if they were a commodity...I'm simply against showing girls as if they were pork chops. Why should women's bodies be this sort of physical fetish? Why can't their bodies just be an extension of their personalities, the way a man supposes his body is? (p.63).

With Greer's 1972 interview we see an example of Playboy platforming feminist critique of their representations of women and feminine sexualities within their own pages.

Whilst by engaging directly with Playboy Greer takes a provocative stance, one which she indicates would draw criticism from her peers, her position on the magazine's imagery aligns with other feminist critiques of the time such as Brownmiller, MacKinnon and Steinem. Beyond her critique of Playboy's commodification of women, Greer used the interview to draw attention to abortion rights and sexual assault, reflecting a shift in the magazine towards publishing feminist debates that aligned more closely with the advocacy work of the Playboy Foundation.

These second-wave feminist critiques of Playboy reflect broader anti-pornography feminist debates around pornography during this era. As both a men's lifestyle magazine and a cornerstone of the burgeoning pornography industry, Playboy became a focal point for feminist opposition. Eric Schlosser describes its pivotal role in the sex industry's evolution, noting: "The modern American sex industry began on the kitchen table of a small Chicago apartment, where Hugh Hefner pasted together the first issue of Playboy in 1953" (2003, p.116).

Anti-pornography feminists frequently critiqued pornography as a mechanism of patriarchal oppression, arguing that it reduces women to objects for male pleasure. Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon were among the most prominent voices in this movement, with MacKinnon (1987) asserting that pornography positioned women as a class defined by their sexual availability to men. Within this framework, Playboy was a central target for its glamorised depictions of women, who Dworkin (1981) described as "captive, bound" (p.143). By presenting idealised images of women crafted for the male gaze, Playboy was seen as perpetuating systemic gender inequality and reinforcing harmful stereotypes about women's roles in society.

Twenty years after Greer's Playboy interview, Betty Friedan also granted an interview to the magazine in 1992. Like Greer, she explained that she wanted to address Playboy's predominantly male audience, many of whom might oppose the idea of feminism. Like Brownmiller, Greer, and Steinem, Friedan criticised the objectification of women in Playboy, particularly the Playboy Bunny uniform, which she believed "dehumanised" (p.62) women stating: "The Playboy Bunny image of women's sexuality was an extreme Rorschach for a culture that completely denied the personhood of women" (Sheff, 1992, p.52). However, Friedan expressed a more open stance on Playboy's presentation of women than some of her feminist peers in the decades prior. When asked if she objected to the "celebration of sexuality" in Playboy pictorials, Friedan responded:

A celebration of women's bodies is all right with me as long as there is no denial of the personhood of women. I suppose sometimes women are sex objects — and men are too, by the way. It's the definition of women just as sex objects that bothers me. Women can celebrate themselves as sex objects, they can celebrate their own sexuality and can enjoy the sexuality of men as far as I'm concerned. Let's have men centerfolds (p.52).

Friedan's argument that women can enjoy being sex objects while still retaining autonomy rejects previous feminist debates that women in Playboy should and can only be seen as merely commodified and objectified. She suggests that Playboy pictorials could serve as a celebration of sexuality, if they allow women's personhood to remain visible. However, her interview raises an important question: where is the line between women celebrating their sexuality and losing their personhood? Friedan connects the

loss of personhood to the Playboy Bunny uniform, yet sees more potential for Playboy's pictorials to function as sites of sexual celebration

In contrast, accounts from former bunnies offer more complex perspectives on what it meant to be a Playboy Bunny and their experiences working with Playboy. Kathryn Leigh Scott's book *The Bunny Years* (1998), features former Playboy bunnies accounts of their time at Playboy, with many describing both the job and the uniform as sources of enjoyment. For example, Chicago based Bunny Sue Ling Gin, recalls reading Gloria Steinem's 'A Bunny's Tale' and being invited to debate Steinem on television, although the interview never took place. Ling Gin credits her time at Playboy with providing the perfect background to launch her own business:

She [Steinem] had taken such a negative approach, and I was ready to defend the job because I truly believed I was reaping the benefits; the job was financially rewarding, and I learned a lot about business. I later started a food service company [Flying Food Fare] so I don't think that I spent four years at Playboy not learning anything. But there is no question that I was also having a lot of fun. (Leigh Scott, 1998, p.79)

While *The Bunny Years* offers a unique perspective on the Playboy Bunny experience, it is not without bias. With a foreword by Hugh Hefner and personal acknowledgments to Playboy staff by author Kathryn Leigh Scott, the collection reflects a sympathetic stance toward the magazine. Nevertheless, it complicates feminist critiques that position the Bunny role as inherently dehumanising. For women like Sue Ling Gin, working as a Bunny was a positive and productive experience. Gin credited her time at Playboy with teaching her valuable business skills, which later enabled her to launch a successful food service company. Her account challenges Betty Friedan's argument that women

working as Playboy bunnies were denied their personhood by reducing them to objects of male fantasy. Instead, Gin's experience highlights how, for some women, the role offered professional opportunities that extended beyond the objectification Friedan described.

Similarly, some former Bunnies interviewed in the 2022 documentary series *Secrets of Playboy* expressed how the role boosted their self-confidence and allowed them to explore their sexualities. Jaki Nett, a Los Angeles Bunny and Bunny trainer who became the third African American Playboy Bunny at the LA Playboy Club, reflected, "When I was a Bunny, I was able to have my sexuality and be okay with it" (*Secrets of Playboy: The Bunnies and the Clean Up Crew*, 2022). Nett's account aligns with narratives from *The Bunny Years*, suggesting that, for some, the role enabled agency and self-expression.

However, *Secrets of Playboy* also exposes troubling aspects of the Bunny experience that complicate these narratives of empowerment. Former Bunny and Bunny Mother P.J. Masten revealed the physical toll of wearing the heavily corseted costume and heels for long shifts:

A lot of girls had kidney infections 'cause you were cinched in. We used to go into the ladies room and take our shoes off, which were encrusted with blood, and stick them in the toilet bowl and keep flushing it with, like, a whirlpool to get the swelling down and hope that your shoes could fit back in. Once a month we got weighed in, and there was a chart in the Bunny room next to the scale, and it was humiliating (*Secrets of Playboy: The Bunnies and the Clean Up Crew*, 2022)

The Bunny image, which reinforced the rigid standards outlined in the official Playboy Bunny employee manual (*The Playboy Club*, 1960), left little room for deviation. The manual imposed strict rules on appearance, including bright lipstick to prevent a “washed out” look, and prohibited chewing gum, eating, drinking in front of guests, or wearing jewellery. This policing of the Bunny image aligns with Friedan’s critique, suggesting that the costume and its accompanying rules denied individuality and reinforced a narrow and rigid standard of femininity.

More alarmingly, *Secrets of Playboy* includes allegations of sexual abuse by VIP members at the Playboy Clubs. Although the Bunny manual explicitly forbade guests from dating or touching Bunnies, former employees alleged that such rules were routinely violated, with Playboy actively covering up instances of abuse. Masten stated: “In the 10 years that I worked for Playboy, I would venture to say that there were probably 40 to 50 young women that were silenced by Playboy because of abuse, sexual abuse” (*Secrets of Playboy: The Bunnies and the Clean Up Crew*, 2022)

Despite these troubling revelations, the Bunny costume continues to hold cultural significance beyond the now-closed Playboy Clubs. Today, the uniform remains a highly recognisable symbol, frequently worn as a popular fancy dress or Halloween costume. As I will explore further in chapter six, wearing the Playboy Bunny costume can also serve as a conduit for playful re-imagination of feminine sexualities. The continued popularity and re-interpretation of the costume suggest that engagement with it is far more varied and complex than Friedan’s critique allows. Whether worn to embody empowerment, irony, or fantasy, the Bunny costume illustrates the enduring tension between objectification and agency that defines much of Playboy’s legacy.

Those Girls with the Playboy Bunny Tramp Stamps: Postfeminism's

Embrace of Playboy

Perhaps one of the more humbling experiences of my PhD research came after describing my research topic to my partner's twenty-year-old cousin. She responded with a disdainful look on her face: "I don't really know what Playboy is, other than that bunny logo those girls get as tramp stamp tattoos". Her response took me aback, not because she meant anything personal by it, but because it unintentionally echoed a familiar cultural tendency to mock or dismiss women's choices around self-expression. By reducing a woman engaging with Playboy to the stereotype of a Playboy bunny 'tramp stamp,' it reflected how hyper-feminine aesthetics are often trivialised, reinforcing the idea that these forms of self-presentation lack value or seriousness. As a woman with both a Playboy bunny tattoo and a lower back tattoo, I took pause, have I perhaps been duped? Am I a bad feminist? Is my blue fluffy Playboy bunny tattoo an act of playful reclamation, or a sigil of patriarchal control?

Growing up surrounded by postfeminist media and the rise of choice feminism I internalised the idea that Playboy represented an embodied feminine sexuality. Carrie Bradshaw's bunny necklace in *Sex and The City* (2000), Elle Woods' Playboy Bunny fancy dress costume *Legally Blonde* (2001), and the plethora of Playboy-branded stationery in WHSmith, each served as a taboo calling card, symbols of a form of adult femininity I longed for.

In many ways this thesis is in defence of the women - and individuals of all genders - with Playboy bunny tramp stamps, who dress up as Playboy Bunnies on Halloween, or proudly clutch their pink fluffy Playboy handbag. But it also serves as an interrogation,

what is it about Playboy that is so alluring, and how can we negotiate our desire for Playboy Bunny sexuality as feminists? Analysing feminist discourse on Playboy from the 1990s onward reveals a similar tension, a dichotomy between empowerment and constraint, between choice and co-option.

From the 1990s onward, the Playboy brand saw increasing co-option by female consumers, as evidenced by the rise in popularity of the Playboy Bunny costume as a fancy dress and Halloween costume. Feminist discourse around Playboy during this era broadly falls into two camps: critiques of its portrayal of feminine sexuality - particularly its marketing to younger audiences - and postfeminist reappraisals of its cultural significance. For feminist theorists such as Ariel Levy (2006), the growing female consumption of Playboy reflects the rise of postfeminist "raunch culture," characterised by the commodification of hypersexualised femininity under the guise of empowerment. Conversely, R. Claire Snyder-Hall (2010) views the choice to pose in Playboy as emblematic of choice feminism, emphasising individual autonomy and personal empowerment.

Both choice feminism, and postfeminism, as Snyder-Hall (2010) and Rosalind Gill (2007) suggest, overlap in their focus on personal choice, empowerment, and individual autonomy, with each heavily informed by neoliberal ideologies. These notions have also been regularly tethered to third wave feminism. This section is not concerned with engaging in debates differentiating between choice feminism/postfeminism/third wave feminism, rather this discussion is interested in engaging in feminist debate and engagement with Playboy around ideas of choice, agency, empowerment and sexualisation.

In her article, 'Third-Wave Feminism and The Defence of Choice' (2010), Snyder-Hall explores the shift within third-wave feminism toward a pluralistic understanding of feminism, which embraces women's sexual empowerment and supports choices that earlier feminist movements might have criticised for reinforcing patriarchal norms. Snyder-Hall cites posing for Playboy as an example of this shift:

Lacking a common definition of feminism makes it difficult to judge another woman's claim to be a feminist because a wide variety of choices-including contradictory ones-could be justified as feminist. In addition, it is hard to make judgments about a choice that appears to be anti feminist at first might look very different when properly contextualised... What does it mean that a gorgeous blonde posing in Playboy chooses to call herself a 'feminist', when most readers of that magazine probably view feminists as anti-sex and anti-male? Perhaps by eroticising feminism, she helps build support for political goals, such as reproductive freedom, policies to create work/life balance, and safe, affordable childcare. (p.259)

By embracing aspects of choice feminism and aligning it with third wave feminist ideals, Snyder Hall, argues that women's decisions to wear high heels, engage in sex-work, or pose for Playboy (acts which many second wave feminists criticised as giving into patriarchal demands) should be viewed beyond earlier feminist assumptions of compliance and submission. Snyder-Hall suggests that, by embracing their sexuality through Playboy, women might challenge the stereotypes of feminists as anti-sex and anti-male and open new avenues for feminist discourse. Snyder-Hall's definition of choice feminism echoes Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richard's (2000, 2004) notion of third wave feminism's embrace of girlie-ness, arguing that enjoying aspects of

feminine enculturation (for example, Barbie, high heels, makeup) does not inherently mean that women have been duped by patriarchal ideals.

However, feminist critiques of choice feminism reveal limitations in Snyder Hall's argument. Linda Hirshman (2006) first coined the phrase choice feminism to criticise the lack of political engagement that she perceived went into making these choices. Critics such as Michael L. Ferguson (2010) also argued that choice feminism risks depoliticising feminism, and privileges individual autonomy over collective responsibility. Ferguson argued that framing all individual choices as inherently feminist ignores that these individual choices are made within broader systems of power and removes feminism's abilities to challenge systematic inequalities and analyse, debate, and form dialogue around these choices.

Rachel Thwaites (2016) suggests that feminists can bridge the gap between academic critique, and popular feminism's embrace of choice by examining the socio-political contexts that shape individual decisions. She states that feminists must be "prepared to discuss and critique the context within which they make their life decisions" (p. 58).

While Snyder-Hall argues that choices such as posing for Playboy can be empowering within the pluralism of third wave feminism, critiques from scholars like Ferguson (2010) and Thwaites (2016) highlight that these choices cannot be viewed in isolation from the socio-political structures that shape and constrain them.

Susan Bordo's work on cosmetic surgery offers a useful lens for understanding this dynamic between structure and agency. Bordo (1993) argues that choices, such as dieting or undergoing cosmetic surgery, are often perceived as personal or empowering, but are deeply embedded within cultural norms and societal pressures that prioritise certain beauty standards. Bordo states that these choices are "logical (if

extreme) manifestations of anxieties and fantasies fostered by our culture” (p.15)

Similarly, the decision to pose for Playboy may be framed as an exercise of individual autonomy but is nonetheless shaped by cultural structures that prioritise the male gaze and narrowly defined ideals of feminine beauty. By acknowledging this interplay between agency and structure, we can better analyse the socio-political contexts that both enable and constrain women’s choices within the Playboy brand and its representations of feminine sexuality.

This interplay between Playboy, consumer culture, individual empowerment and feminist dialogue brings us to the rise of postfeminist media’s adoption of Playboy’s iconography. Media texts like *Sex and the City* and *The Girls Next Door* offer insights into how Playboy’s aesthetics have been repackaged as playful markers of autonomy, aligning with postfeminist ideals of self-expression and consumer-driven empowerment. These representations embody the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in postfeminist culture, where notions of agency and empowerment are entangled with structures of commodification and consumption.

Rosalind Gill (2007) describes postfeminism as a sensibility that is perpetuated through media. It presumes that the aims of earlier feminist movements have been achieved, allowing women the freedom to enjoy their sexualities, present themselves as they wish, and consume what they choose. Angela McRobbie (2009) refers to postfeminism as the “undoing of feminism” (p.11) which simultaneously appears to be a well-informed and even well-intentioned response to feminism but disavows feminisms’ politics. Similarly, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker characterise postfeminism as the presumed “pastness of feminism” (2007, p.1). They argue that while postfeminism should be distinguished

from the third wave feminist movement, it constructs feminism as “the other, as extreme” (p.19).

Negra and Tasker further contend that postfeminist culture complicates distinctions between progressive and regressive representations of women, necessitating new reading strategies. They state:

Postfeminist culture does not allow us to make straightforward distinctions between progressive and regressive texts. Nevertheless, it urgently requires us to develop new reading strategies to counteract the popularised feminism, figurations of female agency, and canny neutralisation of traditional feminist critiques in its texts. Feminism challenges us to critique relations of power, to imagine the world as other than it is, to conceive of different patterns of work, life, and leisure. Postfeminist culture enacts fantasies of regeneration and transformation that also speak to a desire for change. (p.22)

Negra and Tasker’s observations about the difficulty of distinguishing between progressive and regressive texts within postfeminist culture echo McRobbie’s readings of postfeminism as both dismantling feminism in often problematic ways and engaging in a well-informed response to it. It is these contradictory grey areas that particularly excite me as a researcher. Despite its complexities, there are moments of complicatedly empowering and nuanced representations of women embedded within postfeminist media.

These contradictory, complicated grey areas of postfeminism (and feminist discourse in general) which are a source of fascination in my research are reflected in Ann

Braithwaite's article 'The personal, the political, the third wave and postfeminisms' (2002). She states:

... intersections and overlaps between postfeminism and the third wave point to the centrality of multiplicity, plurality, contradiction and conflict in all current feminist thinking. Neither of these two terms is a fixed concept, but rather they both open up the possibility -indeed they demand the necessity- of engaging in debates about those apparent paradoxes that mark much of what characterises contemporary feminisms. (p.342).

This analytical framework grounded in the complexities and contradictions of postfeminist theory, highlights the interplay between agency and structural constraints in representations of feminine empowerment. By engaging with these nuanced debates, my approach not only situates Playboy's media depictions within larger feminist discourses but also contributes to ongoing conversations about the shifting boundaries of feminist critique and cultural analysis. In chapters five and six, I will analyse the 2005–2009 television series *The Girls Next Door* (GND), which presents a complex portrayal of Playboy-branded femininity. Through the lens of postfeminist media theory, I will explore how the series reflects instances of complicated empowerment within the patriarchal structures surrounding it.

Playboy's resurgence in the 2000s can be partially attributed to Hugh Hefner's personal life and the commodification of the women he surrounded himself with during this period. After his divorce at the turn of the millennium, Hefner began dating multiple young, white, thin, blonde women. At one point, he was reported to have had as many as seven girlfriends simultaneously (Sales, 2001). This relationship dynamic, alongside

his frequent appearances at Los Angeles nightlife events, helped boost Playboy's visibility. For example, Hefner, his girlfriends, and the Playboy mansion featured prominently in music videos (e.g., Nelly's *Work It*, 2002, and Weezer's *Beverly Hills*, 2005), television series (e.g., *MTV Cribs: The Playboy Mansion*, 2002 and *Sex and the City: Sex and Another City*, 2000), and magazine interviews (e.g., Hylton, 2000; Sales, 2001).

As discussed previously, the Playboy bunny costume emerged as a symbol of American feminine sexuality in postfeminist films like *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001), *Legally Blonde* (2001), and *Mean Girls* (2004), representing a postfeminist "up for it" sexuality (Gill, 2007). This theme is further explored in the film, *The House Bunny* (2008), co-produced by Playboy's Alta Loma Entertainment. The film uses Playboy aesthetics as a vehicle for female empowerment, following Shelley, a former Playboy Mansion resident inspired by *The Girls Next Door's* star Bridget Marquardt. Initially portrayed as the antithesis of the Zeta Alpha Zeta sorority's feminist identity, Shelley's hyper-feminine aesthetic undergoes transformation as she gains intellectual knowledge, while the sorority girls explore sexual and feminine expression through makeovers. Joel Gwynne (2013) argues that the film aligns youth culture and sexualisation with anxieties surrounding female aging, offering a framework to examine how new femininities engage with sexualised imagery.

The third act of *The House Bunny* shifts the focus from individual transformation to themes of sisterhood, solidarity, and self-acceptance. By the end, the Zeta girls reconcile their feminist politics with the enjoyment they find in their newfound femininity, reflecting third wave ideals of choice. Shelley also rejects a return to the Playboy Mansion, choosing sisterhood over a Playmate photoshoot, highlighting female fellowship as a source of agency. However, the characters' decision to retain elements

of the Playboy aesthetic complicates second-wave critiques of Playboy as inherently anti-feminist. As Gwynne (2013) notes, the Playboy bunny has been reclaimed as a symbol of postfeminist agency: "... it is hardly surprising that the Playboy bunny figure has been reclaimed from the territory of second-wave derision and reinscribed as a symbol of postfeminist agency" (p.65).

The rise of Playboy's popularity among women during this period is reflected in the increasing presence of Playboy bunny imagery in female-focused postfeminist media. This includes the widespread popularity of Playboy bunny-logo merchandise (Cartner-Morley, 2000; Williams, 2024) and the large female fan following cultivated by *The Girls Next Door* (Kaplan, 2007; Goddard, 2008). These developments complicate the notion that Playboy's audience is exclusively male, challenging its original ethos of "entertainment for men."

During this era Playboy also became popular with teenage girls, which prompted further feminist critique (Ringrose, 2011; Jackson et al, 2012). In 2009 British retailer WHSmith announced they would no longer sell Playboy branded stationary following criticism and protests from the group 'Object', who claimed that the brand was pornographic and sexualising girls (Bell, 2005, Daily Mail, 2009). An article by Rachel Bell for the *Guardian* newspaper (2005) interviewed both critics of WHSmith's selling of Playboy stationary, and teenage consumers who articulate how they view the Playboy primarily as a "posh" lifestyle brand, and associate it less with the concept of porn:

'I like the brand because it's posh,' explains 14-year-old Tatiana. 'It makes you feel like you're worth something.' When I ask her if she knows what the bunny

logo means, she giggles and says, 'It's porn innit? But people don't think it's porn. They think it looks nice.' (Bell, 2005)

Another critic interviewed in Bell's *The Guardian* article is Natasha Walter, who argues that the widespread use of the Playboy logo is symptomatic of a mainstreaming of pornography. Walter is not the only feminist to find that the mainstreaming of the Playboy logo reflects a cultural shift towards the embracing and normalising of pornography. Jessica Ringrose (2011) observed how the Playboy bunny logo gained popularity among teenagers on social media platforms like Bebo, reflecting a shift towards 'porno-chic' aesthetics among teen and tween girls. She notes that her participants used the Playboy logo as a stand-in for sexual expression, even when they didn't post suggestive photos of themselves. As Ringrose puts it, this practice creates a 'digital bunny subjectivity,' where adopting the logo signals sexiness without explicit sexual content (p.108).

Similarly, a participant in Sue Jackson et al's (2012) research into postfeminist culture impacts girl's self-fashioning coined the term "Playboy Mansion image" (p.153) to disdainfully describe her hyper-feminine and hyper-sexually styled peers. Jackson et al theorise that their participants' contempt for this idea of "Playboy Mansion image" femininity could be understood as a "heterosexualised competition between girls" (p. 153). This could also be understood as a form of femmephobia, described by Rhea Ashley Hoskin and Karen L. Blair (2022) as the devaluation and regulation of femininities.

We can see through these examples how within postfeminist culture Playboy was mainstreamed and normalised, with the Playboy bunny logo and other symbols of the brand utilised as a conduit for showcasing feminine sexualities. The adoption of the

Playboy bunny logo by teenagers and girls raised significant concerns around perceived sexualisation and normalisation of pornography with minors (Bell 2005, Ringrose 2011). This co-option of Playboy by women and girls, was often seen as a signifier of “raunch culture” (Levy, 2005).

In her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005) Ariel Levy critiques postfeminist “raunch culture,” arguing that women engaging in sexualised behaviours (like consuming Playboy, waxing pubic hair, or pole dancing) are complicit in objectifying both themselves and others: “If male chauvinist pigs saw women as meat, we would outdo them... and become female chauvinist pigs” (p.4). Levy interviews Christie Hefner, former CEO of Playboy, who offers a contrasting view. Hefner frames women’s adoption of Playboy as empowering, suggesting that consuming Playboy products allows women to reclaim their image: “A lot of women read the magazine. We know they read it because we get letters from them... the rabbit head symbolises sexy fun, a little bit of rebelliousness” (p.39)

While Levy frames Playboy consumption and raunch culture as self-objectification, feminist dialogues around the mainstreaming of sexualised imagery, often referred to as porno-chic or pornification, offer alternative perspectives on these cultural shifts (McNair, 2002, 2013; Paasonen et al., 2007; Attwood, 2009). The normalisation of sexualised aesthetics in fashion, advertising, and entertainment, once relegated to pornography, has become a defining feature of contemporary media culture. This transformation, described by some scholars as the emergence of the “pornosphere,” (McNair, 2013) marks the transition of explicit content from an underground, niche phenomenon to a pervasive cultural force.

As Brian McNair (2013) notes, the launch of Playboy in 1953 was pivotal to this shift, with its now-iconic image of a nude Marilyn Monroe. He writes:

The emergence of the pornosphere as a space accessible to mass audiences—as a mass medium—goes back only a few decades, to the launch of Playboy magazine, perhaps, in 1953 with its now iconic images of a nude Marilyn. From that point on, pornography was not under- but overground, not elite but popular culture, not artisanal but industrial (p.22).

By mainstreaming heteronormative pornographic aesthetics, Playboy not only popularised what McNair describes as industrialised sexuality but, by the 1990s, also became a sigil of postfeminist "raunch culture." This phenomenon blends feminist ideals of sexual self-expression with the commodification of sexuality, encapsulating the tensions that define contemporary sexualised media. Scholars such as Paasonen et al. (2007) caution against viewing pornified culture solely as a space for sexual self-expression or the democratisation of desire. They argue that this perspective often obscures the underlying heteronormative codes and norms shaping these expressions. Scholarship on pornification reflects - and simultaneously contributed to - the growth of the field of porn studies from the 1990s onward (e.g., Vance, 1984; Kipnis 1996; Kirham and Skeggs, 1996; Attwood 2002, 2004, 2009; McNair 2002, 2013; Williams, 2004). As Jennifer Wicke (2004) observes, the "orgy of publication and commentary" during this period parallels the "equally unstoppable flood of pornographic materials into all cultural interstices" (p.176). This convergence of academic and cultural discourse highlights the pervasive influence of pornography on media and society, demanding nuanced feminist engagement.

My analysis of Playboy is informed by both porn studies and pornification scholarship, particularly in their shared focus on the interplay between personal pleasure, consumer culture, and systemic power. Much like my own conflicted feelings about my Playboy Bunny tattoo, these debates illuminate the complexities of navigating the grey areas where agency and commodification intersect, challenging simplistic binaries and underscoring the need for critical feminist dialogue.

Post-Hefner Playboy's New (Pop) Feminist Positioning

In the 2010s, Playboy renewed its efforts to engage with feminist discourse, commissioning an increased number of articles addressing feminist topics. This period marked a transitional phase for the brand as it entered its post-Hefner years following Hugh Hefner's death in 2017. During this time, Playboy also began expanding its representations of desirable femininities. Throughout much of Playboy's history, its depictions of desirable femininities reflected and affirmed Western beauty standards by prioritising whiteness, thinness, heteronormative beauty ideals, and the good 'girl next door' image, as detailed in Hefner's 1967 interview with Oriana Fallaci. However, in response to the rise in popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), the body positivity movement (Sastre, 2014), and the #MeToo movement (Boyle, 2019), Playboy began making changes to these traditional representations, challenging and diversifying its portrayal of femininity.

However, not all of Playboy's feminist efforts during this period were celebrated as meaningful change. Some critics argued that many of its initiatives appeared superficial, leveraging feminist ideals for commercial gain without addressing the magazine's entrenched legacy of objectification (McKinney, 2014, June, 2017). For example, a 2014

flow chart feature published on Playboy's website titled 'Should You Catcall Her?' discouraged catcalling unless explicit consent was given. While the chart was framed as a feminist gesture, Kelsey McKinney, in a *Vox* article, critiqued such efforts as undermined by the magazine's simultaneous publication of sexually suggestive pictorials. McKinney further noted that Playboy's feminist engagement coincided with the rise of popular feminism in mainstream culture, exemplified by moments such as Beyoncé's VMAs performance (2014) sampling Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDx talk *We Should All Be Feminists* (2013) and Emma Watson's *HeForShe* UN speech (2014). This suggested a calculated response to capitalise on feminism's growing cultural visibility rather than a deep-seated commitment to feminist principles.

Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) describes popular feminism as a corporate-friendly phenomenon shaped by celebrity culture and neoliberal feminism. This form of feminism is characterised by the commodification of feminist ideals, aligning them with consumer culture. Popular feminism presents a palatable "fun-house mirror" (p.41) reflection of feminist discourse which largely privileges white, cis-gendered, thin, heterosexual and able-bodied women. According to Banet-Weiser, this corporate co-option has made feminism profitable, evidenced by the proliferation of products bearing slogans such as 'We Should All Be Feminists' and 'Smash the Patriarchy'. Media expressions of popular feminism, including hashtag activism and feminist messaging, circulate widely through social media platforms like *Instagram* and *Twitter*, reinforcing its marketability while simultaneously shaping public understandings of feminist ideals.

Banet-Weiser argues that popular feminism emerges within and in relation to postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2018), and whilst on the surface they may seem different in that popular feminism co-opts feminist discourse, and post-feminism rejects the need for feminist discourse, they are entangled together within

media visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p.20). To quote Rosalind Gill: "New cultural trends do not simply displace older or existing ones. A momentarily visible resurgence of interest in feminism should not lead us to the false conclusion that antifeminist or postfeminist ideals no longer exist." (Gill, 2016)

Viewing Playboy's new embrace of feminism from the 2010s onwards, we can see how this reflects a rise in popular feminism, characterised by what could be seen as a performative and media-driven nature. This trend of superficial engagement is further illustrated by Playboy's use of popular feminist slogans in its March/April 2017 issue, which prominently featured the phrase 'Free the Nipple'. The issue included a nude pictorial of actress Scarlett Byrne, the partner of Cooper Hefner, Hugh Hefner's youngest son and at the time the magazine's chief creative officer. In the accompanying article, Byrne references Betty Friedan (1963) and justifies her decision to pose for Playboy as a feminist act, aligning herself with the Free the Nipple movement. She argues that while magazines like *Men's Health* freely feature shirtless men on their covers, Playboy's depictions of women in similar poses are often hidden behind blinders on newsstands (p.119). However, the disproportionate emphasis on Byrne's nude imagery, spanning seven pages compared to her half-page article, undermines the feminist message she aims to convey, framing her alignment with feminist ideals as secondary to her visual appeal.

This issue followed Playboy's controversial 2015 decision to remove nude imagery entirely, with then-CEO Scott Flanders declaring such depictions "passé" in the age of internet pornography (New York Times, 2015). The move, which aimed to attract a younger and broader audience, was described as an effort to modernise the brand and make it more accessible in the digital era. However, it failed to generate the desired

results, with declining sales leading Playboy to reverse the policy just over a year later (New York Times, 2015). Rather than acknowledging this reversal as a failed commercial experiment, Playboy framed its return to nudity as a feminist act, declaring it a celebration of women's bodies and a reclamation of sexual empowerment.

This interplay of feminist slogans with a postfeminist sensibility (where Playboy branded sexuality and women's choice to pose for Playboy is centered as key to empowerment) underscores Banet-Weiser's argument that popular feminism operates within the constraints of media visibility, often transforming critical feminist challenges into marketable aesthetics. In this context, Playboy's rebranding demonstrates how popular feminism and postfeminism remain intertwined, perpetuating both feminist and postfeminist ideals through commodification and cultural visibility.

However, following Hefner's death in 2017, Playboy's engagement with feminism began to broaden. Most issues of Playboy post-Hefner included several articles dedicated to feminist topics or interviews with feminist writers. Notable examples include interviews with sex positivity writer Karley Sciortino (Porch, 2018, p.35), *Bad Feminist* author Roxane Gay (Ogilvie, 2019, p.113), and body positivity activist Chidera Eggerue (Shuti, 2019, p.15). Articles such as Katie Hagan's 'The Playboy Symposium: On Sex, Cinema, and The Female Gaze' (2020, p.179) and Elizabeth Yuko's 'We Won't Go Back' (2019, p.210) further illustrate this trend. Whilst in many ways we can see this as a corporate decision to brand Playboy as more feminist friendly, however it could simultaneously be argued that these choices made visible feminist writing in a space which historically had a contentious relationship with feminism.

Whilst, as Banet-Weiser points out, popular feminism prioritises white, cis-gender, middle class, heterosexual, and thin bodies, this standard remained ingrained in

Playboy throughout its history from 1953 to its final years of publication. However, within Playboy magazine's last two years before ceasing operations in 2020, the magazine began to diversify its Playmates. In November 2017, Playboy published its first centrefold featuring a transgender Playmate, Ines Rao. Additionally, in August 2019, Gender Proud founder and Playmate Geena Rocero, a transgender woman, wrote an editorial accompanying her pictorial, stating: "For so long, we trans people have not been in charge of our own stories... This is our lived experience. It's not up for debate" (2019, p.129). In April 2020, singer-songwriter Marsha Elle showcased her prosthetic leg in her pictorial and discussed how modelling had allowed her to represent disabled women, emphasising self-love and acceptance (Elle, 2020, p.74). Through these efforts, Playboy began to move towards a more inclusive representation of femininity.

Celebrity pictorials from the post-Hefner era also challenge traditional notions of beauty and disrupt second-wave feminist readings of Playboy pictorials as merely objectifying. Lizzo, a plus-size African-American musician, and Dorian Electra, a non-binary musician, serve as prime examples. In Lizzo's Spring 2019 pictorial, she is depicted in various lingerie and jewels within an opulent, Barbie-esque mansion. In a double page spread, Lizzo reclines on a pink velvet sofa, wearing a black lace bodysuit and an abundance of jewellery, exuding confidence. Her direct gaze commands control, transforming the viewer's experience into a reciprocal visual interaction rather than an implied male gaze. Lizzo invites viewers to appreciate her beauty on her own terms.

Dorian Electra's Spring 2020 Playboy pictorial challenges traditional beauty norms and dominant gender expectations. Set on a beach, Electra wears a sailor hat, a drawn-on moustache, and visible binding tape across their chest. In their accompanying interview (Volpe, 2020), Electra discusses their playful exploration of masculinity, inspired by the

comedic character of Austin Powers, and critiques hegemonic masculinity by highlighting its absurdity. This performance aligns with R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity as the dominant gender configuration that sustains patriarchy (1995, p.77). By openly displaying their binding tape, Electra subverts masculine ideals, reflecting the principles of Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism*, where "hacking the code of gender" challenges societal order (2020, p.25)

While Playboy began to incorporate new feminist voices and broaden its notions of desirability in its final years, particularly during 2019–2020, there remains a substantial lack of feminist scholarship or academic engagement with the magazine's evolving approach during this period. However, the conversation around Playboy and its legacy was reinvigorated in 2022 with the release of the documentary series *Secrets of Playboy* which critically examined the history of the magazine and its founder. The documentary prompted renewed feminist debates on Hefner's role in shaping media culture, objectification, and power dynamics within Playboy. (for example: Morgan, 2022; Kaufman, 2022; Puente, 2022) In response, the magazine distanced itself from Hefner's legacy (Playboy, 2022), signalling an attempt to reconcile its history with contemporary feminist ideals.

This discourse was further amplified by Crystal Hefner's 2024 memoir *Only Say Good Things*, in which she reflects on her marriage to Hefner and time within the Playboy empire, offering a post-#MeToo perspective on Hefner's legacy. These developments sparked a re-evaluation of Hefner's influence, leading to a public reckoning with Playboy's past. Karen Boyle's (2019) discussion on #MeToo, gendered violence and continuum thinking is useful for understanding this cultural shift, as it situates seemingly disparate actions, such as harassment and exploitation, along a spectrum of systemic gendered power dynamics. Boyle argues that behaviours by famous men, such as

Weinstein once dismissed as playful or harmless, must be re-examined as part of a broader patriarchal logic that perpetuates inequality.

What Weinstein and feminist theorists arguably share is an understanding that this behaviour was not inappropriate according to patriarchal logic, but rather an expression of what men are promised, what they are continually told about their position in the sexual order (p.70).

Through this lens, we can see how the behaviours of Hefner and other men in Playboy's orbit (such as Bill Cosby) were conducted in plain sight, shielded by the patriarchal norms of the time. The media's co-option of #MeToo has since shifted public perceptions of these behaviours, triggering a reappraisal of the legacy of Hefner. These shifts in public perception, largely triggered by *Secrets of Playboy*, are ongoing and have evolved during the course of my doctoral research. This prompted me to consider further how post-Hefner Playboy is renegotiating its legacy, a topic I will explore in greater depth in chapter seven.

Boyle (2019) also critiques how the #MeToo movement has seen media co-opt causes of gendered violence, often detaching these from their roots in feminist discourse and collective action. She argues that such detachment risks depoliticising the movement, transforming systemic critiques into individualised narratives that prioritise visibility over structural change. This co-optation aligns with Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2018) conceptualisation of popular feminism, in which feminist ideals are commodified and absorbed into neoliberal consumer culture. By reframing the #MeToo movement as a marketable phenomenon, media surrounding the movement risks emphasising

performative gestures over meaningful feminist activism, ultimately undermining the movement's transformative potential.

The re-evaluation of Playboy's legacy reflects these tensions between media-driven narratives and feminist critique. While the magazine's attempts to modernise its image and distance itself from Hefner signal an awareness of its problematic past, its efforts remain entangled with broader structures of power that the #MeToo movement continues to challenge. This cultural moment underscores the importance of situating such reckonings within a lineage of feminist discourse and activism, resisting the dilution of feminist causes into depoliticised spectacles.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter situates Playboy within a complex web of feminist critique and cultural negotiation, tracing its historical evolution from emblematic of patriarchal objectification to a contested site of agency, empowerment, and reclamation. By examining how second wave, third wave, postfeminist, and fourth wave frameworks have critiqued, re-evaluated, and reinterpreted Playboy, this review underscores the magazine's role not merely as a passive reflection of societal norms but as an active participant in their construction and evolution. These shifting feminist perspectives illuminate the contradictions at the heart of Playboy's legacy, where empowerment and objectification coexist in a dynamic and often fraught relationship.

This chapter charts how Playboy moved from privately declaring feminists their "natural enemy" to publicly engaging with feminist ideals, a transformation underscored by the magazine's corporate adoption of feminist rhetoric in the post-#MeToo era. However,

this shift is not without its own contradictions. While Playboy's recent feminist framing may signal progress, it also raises critical questions about the co-optation and commodification of feminist ideals within media and consumer culture. These tensions provide a foundation for the subsequent analysis, demonstrating that Playboy's representations of femininity and agency are shaped by the broader socio-political forces that define each historical moment.

Ultimately, this chapter situates Playboy as a site of cultural negotiation, where feminist critique, and evolving ideas of empowerment and objectification intersect. These complexities highlight the necessity of frameworks like complicated empowerment (which will be unpacked in the subsequent chapter) which allow for an analysis that transcends binary readings of feminist media. This perspective will be central to the analyses that follow, offering a nuanced lens to interrogate the ways in which Playboy continues to mediate and challenge cultural understandings of femininity and power.

Chapter Three: Framing Complicated Empowerment

Following on from the discussion in the previous chapter, in this chapter, I introduce and frame the concept of complicated empowerment, a term I have coined to describe the nuanced and often contradictory representations of women in Playboy. While feminist scholars such as Rosalind Gill (2012) have argued for complicating the concept of empowerment, this framework distinguishes itself by focusing specifically on how empowerment and objectification coexist within Playboy's cultural representations of women. Developed from my research, complicated empowerment emerges as a tool for understanding how women in Playboy navigate the tensions between agency, systemic constraints, and self-expression.

Drawing from personal experience, I grapple with the complex emotions surrounding my relationship with Playboy. How can I take joy Playboy branded hyper-femininity; in my pink fluffy vintage Playboy handbag and Playboy bunny cowboy boots while fully acknowledging Hugh Hefner's role in perpetuating a broader patriarchal rape culture and the allegations against him brought to light in the post-#MeToo era? How can I find inspiration in Playboy's imagery of women for my own embodied explorations of feminine sexuality, while also recognising how this same imagery reinforces narrow beauty standards and promotes ideals of self-surveillance? I put forward complicated empowerment as a term to navigate this tension, one that seeks to reconcile objectification with empowerment, revulsion with attraction, and joy with constraint.

Building upon feminist critiques of objectification, complicated empowerment challenges binary distinctions between empowerment and objectification, proposing that these concepts are not oppositional but are frequently intertwined. This chapter

draws on key feminist scholars, including Ann Cahill (2010) and Paasonen et al. (2021), to examine how women's representations in Playboy reflect broader debates about agency, identity, and sexuality. By grounding this framework in both theoretical and cultural analyses, I aim to show how complicated empowerment offers a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics.

As discussed above, critiques of Playboy often centre on its objectification of women, reducing them to passive, commodified objects for male consumption (e.g., Lehrman, 1970; Steinem, 1970; Levy, 2005; Bindel, 2017; Everett, 2024). Feminist writers such as Gloria Steinem and Germaine Greer have argued that Playboy presents women as consumer products - objects to be bought, sold, and consumed. While these critiques are crucial, complicated empowerment encourages us to move beyond such readings to explore how Playboy's portrayals also leave room for performances of femininity that can be seen as empowering.

This chapter is divided into four sub-sections, each of which explores key aspects of how women in Playboy navigate objectification and empowerment. The first section expands on last chapter's discussion of feminist theories of objectification in Playboy using frameworks such as those put forward by Nussbaum (1995), before discussing how Playboy models perform a heightened form of femininity and sexuality (Or 'performing cunt'). The second section explores the interplay between objectification and agency, complicating binary notions of objectification and empowerment, drawing on feminist frameworks such as those of Paasonen et al. (2021) and Cahill (2010). The third engages with literature around the notion of the gaze including Berger, Mulvey and hooks. Finally, the last section engages with ideas around playful re-imagination and

reclamation, focusing on the role of selfies and self-portraits as tools of resistance and self-expression

Through these sections, I will unpack the contradictory forces at play in Playboy's representations of women, exploring how these portrayals both reinforce and subvert traditional ideas of femininity, sexuality, and agency. By examining the intersections of objectification, empowerment, and performativity, I aim to offer a more nuanced understanding of Playboy as a site where empowerment and objectification are not mutually exclusive but can be seen as existing together in complex and dynamic ways.

Performing Cunt

To be objectified is to be thing-like. The notion of objectification has been central to feminist theory, often used to critique pornography and media representations that are seen as dehumanising women and perpetuating violence against them (Dworkin 1979, MacKinnon, 1987). However, within feminist discussions of objectification, there is space for complications and contradictions, suggesting that the notions of sexual object and sexual subject can co-exist. This complexity is captured in Simone de Beauvoir's argument of objectification and sex work in *The Second Sex* (1949) when she states: "Paradoxically those women who exploit their femininity to the extreme create a situation for themselves nearly equal to that of a man; moving from this sex that delivers them to men as objects, they become subjects" (p. 627).

Whilst Beauvoir does argue ultimately that sex workers are dehumanised and reduced to objects of male desire, we can see within this quote a paradox which reflects the idea that women, while placed in what Beauvoir believes to be objectified positions, can

simultaneously manipulate this same position to assert subjectivity. Utilising their femininity to manipulate male desire, these women, according to Beauvoir, can become subjects, although this power is limited and exists within a framework that still objectifies them.

To what extent are the women of Playboy sex objects? Anthony Bogaert, Deborah Turkovich and Carolyn Hafer's content analysis of Playboy centrefolds from 1953-1990 (1993) argue that they are, to some degree, but there is not a constant level of objectification. Objectification was measured by the degree to which a model's individual characteristics were de-emphasised, such as the visibility of a model's eyes and face, and their body posture. Their quantitative content analysis into how Playboy centrefolds change in relation to their explicitness, objectification, and the age of models found that whilst explicitness increased over time, it however stayed within the realm of soft-core pornography (e.g rarely showing model's vulvas), whilst objectification, according to their criteria, remained low overall. This study raises the question as to whether objectification is a phenomenon that can be quantifiably measured, or if it is a more nuanced qualitative experience.

A further example of a useful framework for negotiating the idea of objectification, which has been applied to Playboy is Martha Nussbaum's definition of objectification (1995), which explores the philosophical implications of how women are often portrayed in society, drawing on Kantian theory. She identifies seven ways in which a person can be treated as an object:

1. Instrumentality: Treating a person as a tool for one's own purposes

2. Denial of Autonomy: Treating a person as lacking in autonomy and self-determination
3. Inertness: Treating a person as lacking in agency and as passive
4. Fungibility: Treating a person as replaceable, or interchangeable with others
5. Violability: Treating a person as lacking boundaries, and as something you have the permission to violate
6. Ownership: Treating a person as something that can be owned or as a possession
7. Denial of Subjectivity: Treating a person's experiences and feelings as unimportant or irrelevant (Nussbaum, 1995, p.257)

Applying Nussbaum's categories to Playboy, it could be argued that the magazine exemplifies several forms of objectification. For instance, Playboy often treats women as instruments for male pleasure (instrumentality) and presents them as interchangeable objects (fungibility) through its narrow beauty standards, particularly its emphasis on young, thin, white, blonde women. Furthermore, the denial of subjectivity is evident in the magazine's focus on women's bodies rather than their personal stories, goals, or experiences, reducing their presence to sexual allure rather than full personhood.

One of Nussbaum's key examples of objectification in media is Playboy. She argues that the magazine teaches men that they possess subjectivity while portraying women as mere tools for their desires, available for consumption: "For what Playboy repeatedly says to its reader is, whoever this woman is and whatever she has achieved, for you she is cunt" (p. 285). To Nussbaum, these depictions are ethically problematic, as they contribute to a culture that devalues women and promotes unhealthy relationships.

While I agree with Nussbaum's claim that the women of Playboy embody "cunt", my interpretation diverges. While Nussbaum uses the word to signify women's objectification and exploitation, an alternative interpretation of the term 'cunt,' through the lens of drag culture and queer internet vernacular, reclaims it as a celebration of heightened femininity. This new interpretation and reclamation of 'cunt' implies that women (and others) have ownership over their bodies and sexualities, performing an empowered and subversive version of femininity that challenges traditional beauty standards and gender norms. As RuPaul Charles famously stated on *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009), to be "cunt" is to embody "Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent.". Terms like "serving cunt" and "cunty" have since entered mainstream culture and online vernacular (Ilbury, 2023). For instance, American singer Chappell Roan's viral *TikTok* video, which presents an excerpt from her performance at the music festival *Coachella* in an elaborate butterfly garment inspired by Lady Miss Kier, she declares: "My name is Chappell Roan, I'm your favourite artist's favourite artist, I'm your dream girl's dream girl, and I'm gonna serve exactly what you are: Cunt!" (Roan, 2024). By October 2024 the video had amassed over 11.2 million views and has become a popular sound for users to lip-sync.

However, this reclamation of the word "cunt" stems from ballroom culture (an LGBTQ+ subculture created by African American and Latino individuals) and African American Vernacular English (Bailey, G et al, 1998; Bailey 2011; Ilbury, 2023). Marlon Bailey (2011) defines the use of the term in ballroom culture as referring to the performance and achievement of femininity: "'you look cunt' means 'give me femininity in your performance and self-presentation.'" These terms are about the desire to achieve femininity, not to demean it" (pp. 382-383). In other words, to quote American musician

Kevin JZ Prodigy: “Do you speak the language? Do you vogue in the language? Do you understand the language of cunt?” (2021).

Removed from its essentialist connotations, instead a queer reading of the term cunt suggests an embodied hyper-femininity. This interpretation does not suggest that one must physically possess a cunt, nor does it invoke the term in a derogatory sense.

Rather, to be cunt is to embody the idea of cunt; performing cuntiness as an aesthetic and lived expression. It signifies an attitude, a performance, and an energy that encapsulates all that hyper-femininity can represent.

While Nussbaum's interpretation of 'cunt' aligns with some wider feminist critiques of Playboy (e.g Steinem, 1963, 1970; Brownmiller –in The Dick Cavett Show, 1970; Dworkin ,1979; MacKinnon, 1987) which argue that women in Playboy are objectified, dehumanised and reduced to their body parts, this overlooks the possibility that these women are not merely passive objects, but instead active participants in a complex performance of heightened femininity. In this sense, the women of Playboy have long spoken and performed the language of cunt. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is helpful here (1990). According to Butler, gender is not something one is but something one does, it is an act, or more specifically a series of acts, a repeated, stylised performance. Similarly, to be 'cunt' in this context is not a noun, but a verb, it involves performing a certain type of femininity that is socially constructed and can be both exaggerated and subverted.

In contrast to Nussbaum's argument that Playboy perpetuates objectification, I explore in this thesis the ways in which the women featured in Playboy are performing femininity that complicates the binary of objectification versus empowerment. Their gendered performance for the camera present exaggerated notions of feminine sexuality; they are

not reduced to being 'cunt' in a derogatory sense, but rather, there is space for them to be seen as embodying the idea of 'cunt'; a performative enactment of sexual allure, charisma, and power, reflecting Butler's notion that gender is a performance enacted through repeated behaviour', not an intrinsic identity. In the case of Playboy, a model's performance of femininity through repeated gestures for the camera can be seen as an act of embodied and performative hyper-femininity.

However, Playboy operates within a heteronormative framework, designed primarily for a male, heterosexual audience. As Pitzulo (2011) notes, while Playboy occasionally positioned itself as supportive of LGBTQ+ issues (such as publishing Charles Beaumont's 1955 short fiction 'The Crooked Man', which imagined a dystopian reversal of heteronormative oppression) "Hefner's primary allegiance was to heterosexual masculinity" (Pitzulo, 2011, p. 109). This privileging of heterosexuality limits the extent to which a queer reading of its representations can apply. Unlike the subversive reclamation of 'cunt' in queer and drag cultures, which celebrates hyper-femininity detached from biological essentialism, Playboy reinforces conventional ideals of femininity shaped by male consumption.

While moments in Playboy's history complicate this framework (such as instances of female gaze within its pages, explored in later chapters) the magazine's representations are largely constrained by the expectations of the male gaze and heteronormative desire. This raises questions about the concept of complicated empowerment and its application to Playboy's representations. Can the women within Playboy's pages be seen as performing a heightened version of femininity that is playful, agentic and potentially subversive of gendered norms? Or, does their positioning within a heteronormative and commodified framework limit the subversive potential of their

performances? Do the women of Playboy embody an objectified cunt for the pleasure of the male gaze, or perform 'cunt' in a sense that evokes the queer reclamation of the term? By posing these questions, the analysis in the following chapters invites a deeper examination of how empowerment and objectification coexist in Playboy's representations. To what extent might these performances of femininity reflect moments of agency, and how are they shaped, or constrained by patriarchal structures?

Disrupting Binaries

In their co-authored book *Objectification on the Difference between Sex and Sexism*, Susanna Paasonen, Feona Attwood, Alan McKee, John Mercer and Clarissa Smith, argue for a more nuanced approach to analysing the binary of sexualised/sexually empowered representations of women, stating:

Drawing analytical distinctions between being looked at (as an object of the male gaze) and exercising agency (as a sexual subject) is convoluted at best. This book argues for a more complex understanding where people are understood simultaneously as sexual subjects and as sexual objects: that is, we both act and are acted upon, and it is through such engagements and interactions that we enact sociability, build relationships and bond with one another (2021, p102)

Paasonen et al. challenge the rigid separation between objectification and agency, arguing that representations of female sexuality cannot easily be categorised as either empowering or dehumanising. This perspective disrupts the binary of object versus subject by acknowledging the contradictions, complexities, and the interplay of agency and objectification in sexual representation. Their argument is further developed in

subsequent work, led by Feona Attwood, which through the example of Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's music video *WAP* argue for a rethinking of objectification that allows for ambiguities and contextual nuances, recognizing the complexities of contemporary gender and sexual politics (Attwood et al., 2021). This expanded framework underscores how women in sexualised representations simultaneously act and are acted upon, navigating roles that are shaped by but not reducible to systems of power and commodification

This approach opens a space for understanding depictions of women's and feminine sexualities as multidimensional. Paasonen et al. suggest that rather than viewing these depictions as falling strictly on one side of the binary, feminist scholars should recognise that women can be positioned both as subjects who exercise agency and as objects of desire. Representations of sexuality, therefore, are full of multiplicities and contradictions, capable of embodying both objectification and empowerment simultaneously. This nuanced reading disrupts the traditional dichotomies and allows for a more flexible understanding of women's experiences and identities in sexual contexts.

Similarly, Ann Cahill's concept of derivatization (2010) offers an alternative framework to traditional understandings of objectification. According to Cahill, derivatization occurs when an individual is treated as being derivative to another person's desires or purposes. Derivatization treats a person as an extension of another's subjectivity, whilst their own subjectivity, agency and desires aren't recognised, ignored, or undervalued (Cahill, 2010, p32).

Cahill argues that her theory of derivatization differs from objectification in that it does not reduce an individual to a thing, or an object. The derivatized individual retains a level of stunted subjectivity, meaning that they are not entirely denied their agency, but that agency is limited, overlooked, or undervalued. In this sense, the subject's potential for action and autonomy is still present but constrained. Cahill argues that this potential for subjectivity is actually what derivatization takes advantage of. Rather than targeting someone as a passive object, derivatization exploits the person's body as a subject, a site of sentience and potential for agency. As Cahill explains:

In fact, what is often exploited or used in a case of derivatization is not the derivarized woman's body as body, as thing: it is her body as subject, as the site of sentience and her potential for agency, that is targeted. (p.35)

This insight shifts the focus away from reducing women purely as objects (as in traditional theories of objectification) and instead considers how women can be positioned as subjects whose capacity for agency is strategically manipulated. The distinction between objectification and derivatization is essential in understanding how women can simultaneously inhabit roles of subject and object.

Cahill's broader framework, which includes the theory of embodied intersubjectivity, provides further depth to this analysis. Embodied intersubjectivity is the "...theoretical approach that positions both the body and other subjects as central to the being of the human subject" (p.21). In other words, core to the development of our sense of self is our embodied interactions with others. Rather than positioning interactions between people as strictly one-sided or passive, embodied intersubjectivity views these exchanges as dynamic, where both parties are implicated in the recognition and

assertion of subjectivity. This relates back to Paasonen et al's notion that it is through sociability that we navigate our dual positions as both sex object and subject.

In the context of derivatization, this concept of embodied intersubjectivity allows us to see how women remain as subjects even when they are being treated as extensions of another's desires. They are not passive objects but active, embodied subjects, caught in the tension between being acted upon and exerting their own agency.

Cahill's concept of derivatization provides a useful framework for understanding how women in Playboy might simultaneously be objectified and empowered, which aligns with my idea of complicated empowerment. In Playboy, women are often positioned as fulfilling male desires, they are, in Cahill's terms, "derivatized" by being treated as extensions of male subjectivity and fantasies. However, they are not reduced to mere objects; instead, their subjectivity, agency, and autonomy remain present, albeit in a form constrained by the heteronormative ideals and demands of Playboy.

Cahill argues that derivatized individuals are not entirely denied their potential for agency; rather, it is this very potential that is exploited. This is crucial for understanding the paradox at play in Playboy's depictions of women. Whilst images of women in Playboy have in the past been produced to satisfy the male gaze, their heightened performance of femininity and knowingness can also be read as an assertion of their subjectivity and control over how they are viewed. In this way, Playboy's models embody what Cahill describes as the "targeted" agency of the derivatized subject.

Furthermore, Playboy also derivatives its female subjects through ownership of their images. Playmate Miki Garcia stated at the Nation Commission on Pornography in 1985:

They are able to distort the pictures or do anything they want to with them...for example, I was a puzzle. I was a deck of playing cards. This is what they call Playboy products...By the way a Playmate is a product. (as cited in MacKinnon, 1987, p.134).

Playboy's treatment of its models reveals the tension between objectification and agency that lies at the heart of complicated empowerment. Whilst models of Playboy can assert a kind of subjectivity when posing for their images, as Cahill's concept of derivatization highlights, once the camera shutter has closed, their agency over their own image is taken away. Miki Garcia's testimony illustrates Playboy assumes ownership of these women's images, transforming them into commodities - puzzles, playing cards, and other forms of merchandise - effectively extending their derivatized status beyond the initial photoshoot. This distortion of the original images reflects how the models' subjectivity is overridden by Playboy's commercial interests, further complicating the notion of empowerment. This repurposing of archival images becomes more morally questionable as Playboy shifted in the 2010s to meet the rise of internet pornography, which will be explored in further depth in chapter seven

In my analysis, I draw on Ann Cahill's concept of derivatization to explore how representations of women in Playboy reflect the coexistence of agency and objectification. Cahill's framework provides a valuable lens for understanding how women, while positioned as extensions of male fantasies, retain a degree of subjectivity that is strategically manipulated. This idea is particularly relevant in examining how

Playboy's imagery simultaneously portrays women as objects of desire and as agentic individuals performing heightened femininity. By incorporating derivatization into my framework of complicated empowerment, I analyse how these women's agency is constrained yet present, exploited yet not entirely erased. However, my scope extends beyond derivatization to consider broader dynamics, such as the interplay between postfeminist discourse, the gaze, and the possibilities for reinterpreting sexualised imagery. This perspective allows for a nuanced reading of Playboy's representations, recognising the interplay of subjectivity, objectification, agency and reimagining in shaping how empowerment and constraint coexist within these images.

Paasonen et al.'s argument about the complexity of objectification adds further nuance to this discussion. Their argument that sexualised subjects can both act and be acted upon is useful in exploring the ways in which the women of Playboy embody contradictions. This duality illustrates how it is difficult to draw clear distinctions in Playboy's representations of women, they are both object and subject, empowered and objectified, neither wholly feminist nor wholly anti-feminist. These women are both active subjects shaping their sexual representations and passive objects whose images are commodified and exploited. This ambiguity mirrors Paasonen et al.'s notion of the fluidity between object and subject, where women navigate overlapping roles in a space fraught with contradictions. Complicated empowerment gives another name for this complexity and ambiguity, embracing multiple meanings, whilst rejecting binary thinking.

Also central to this discussion of disrupting binaries is Rosalind Gill's (2012) response to Sharon Lamb and Zoe Peterson's (2011) exploration of sexual empowerment in adolescent girls. Gill critiques how empowerment has been commodified within

consumer culture, co-opted by capitalist systems, and stripped of its political significance. She calls for a move away from individualised notions of empowerment toward broader cultural and structural changes that promote safe, consensual, pleasurable, and diverse expressions of sexuality. In her analysis, Gill argues that “heterosexy, young female subjectivity” (p.743) has replaced virginity and virtue as the dominant currency of feminine desirability, raising questions about the utility of empowerment as a concept within feminist scholarship, given its many contradictory meanings.

With this in mind, the concept of "empowerment" itself warrants scrutiny. Whilst my frameworks of complicated empowerment attempts to embrace the ambiguities inherent in representations of women's sexuality, Gill's critique highlights how empowerment has become entangled with consumerist logics, often stripping it of its radical, political roots. Similarly, Paasonen et al.'s emphasis on the interplay of agency and objectification urges us to move beyond binary distinctions to engage with the complexities of power, pleasure, and subjectivity. Yet, these contributions collectively raise the question: is empowerment, as a term, still useful for feminist analysis, or has its contradictions rendered it insufficient for capturing the nuances of contemporary sexual politics? By employing the term in complicated empowerment, I hope to retain its aspirational and critical potential while acknowledging its limitations. However, the search for new or alternative concepts beyond empowerment may be necessary to continue interrogating how agency, representation, and power intersect in an increasingly commodified and digitalised culture.

Notions of The Gaze

Academic discussions of the gaze have long been anchored by the foundational theories of the male gaze developed by John Berger (1972) and Laura Mulvey (1975). These works remain central to feminist visual culture and film theory, critiquing the objectification of women and their positioning as passive subjects for male desire. However, it is important to situate these theories within their original contexts. As Attwood et al. (2021) point out, Mulvey's concept of the male gaze was formulated specifically within the framework of classical Hollywood cinema and psychoanalysis, addressing the specific visual and narrative structures of that medium. Over time, however, this theory has been applied widely across diverse media contexts, often without fully accounting for the nuances or differences between these contexts.

This section seeks to critically engage with these foundational ideas while addressing the limitations and critiques of the male gaze framework. Building on the work of Attwood et al. and other scholars, I explore how Playboy's visual culture complicates the binary positioning of active male gaze and passive female object. Through its nuanced interplay of gazes (including the male gaze, the female gaze, and potential queer gazes) Playboy provides an intriguing site for interrogating how agency and desire operate within visual representations. These considerations aim to expand the discourse beyond a rigid application of Mulvey's theory, opening space for a more multidimensional understanding of gaze and agency in media like Playboy.

In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger theorises the notion of the gaze in relation to art history and gender, stating:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object-and out particularly an object of vision: a sight. (p.47)

Berger suggests that women internalise the male gaze, performing for it and, in doing so, objectifying themselves. While this theory of "women watching themselves being looked at" has been highly influential in the study of the gaze, it also presents troubling and heteronormative assumptions. By implying that women can only perceive themselves through the male gaze, Berger's theory negates not only women's sexual subjectivity and independence but also the possibility of a female gaze.

After Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, feminist filmmaker and theorist Laura Mulvey published her formative essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), which is credited with originating the term "the male gaze." In this work, Mulvey examines traditional Hollywood cinema through the lens of psychoanalysis and scopophilia, the "pleasure of looking" (p.16), to highlight how female characters are objectified by the camera's lingering gaze. She argues that "pleasure in looking has been split between active male and passive female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure..." (p.19). However, like Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, Mulvey's theory of the male gaze has limitations, particularly in its failure to accommodate queer readings or interpretations beyond the binary of sexualised/empowered. As Paasonen et al. (2021) argue:

since scopophilia connected to the male gaze is understood as controlling, even sadistic drive, female viewers are left with the option of masochistic pleasure in

the fact of their own objectification. There is no room for the active desire of female viewers, no room for identifications that cross the gender binary (p.25).

Playboy was originally created for a male audience, as evidenced by its tagline 'Entertainment for Men,' which was used throughout much of its publication history. The male gaze is reinforced in many Playboy centrefolds, where subtle cues often suggest the presence of a man in the scenario. These details can range from men's clothing in the background to a second glass of wine on the table. For example, in the January 1959 centrefold of Virginia Gordon, she is posed as though her male partner has just entered the bathroom. Dressed in only red satin mules and lipstick, Gordon smiles at the camera, her leg bent to cover her pubic area, while drying her hair with a towel labelled 'HIS'. The presence of a matching 'HERS' towel reinforces the heterosexual framing of the image and aligns with the male gaze, signalling that Gordon's nudity and sexuality are intended for a male lover.

This use of implied masculine presence in Playboy allows the male viewer to easily project himself onto the scenario, mirroring Mulvey's theory that male protagonists in cinema act as "screen surrogates" for male viewers to identify with (p.21). In Playboy, women are similarly positioned as objects for male fantasy, their sexuality tethered to a faceless masculine presence. This presentation implies that the women perform their sexuality for men, not for self-pleasure or autoeroticism. However, whilst many aspects of Playboy were crafted for the male gaze, my analysis of Playboy's representations of women in subsequent chapters does not rely on a simplistic reading of Playboy being solely for and crafted by the male gaze, instead it considers the other gazes of Playboy.

When analysing photographs of women in Playboy in relation to the gaze, it is important to consider how the medium of photography itself contributes to the theoretical formulations of the gaze. In *Camera Lucida* (1993), Roland Barthes distinguishes three categories of looking: the Operator (the photographer), the Spectator (the viewer of the image), and the Spectrum, which is the aura emitted by the subject of the image.

Barthes reflects on his own experience as the spectrum of a photograph, explaining that when being photographed, “everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of posing, I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image” (p.10). According to Barthes, the subject of a photograph performs for the camera, transforming themselves into the image they wish to project, aware that they are being seen. Photography, then, becomes a tool for self-transformation, where the subject can reconfigure how they are perceived.

This dynamic shifts in self-portraiture, where the operator is also the spectrum. In self-portraiture, the photographer has control over the gaze, documenting themselves as they wish to be seen without the mediation of an external photographer. The camera lens, now in their hands, becomes a tool of empowerment, allowing the subject to curate their image and define their identity. Self-portraiture thus becomes a conduit for self-expression, where the subject has complete agency over their representation, reshaping their body and identity according to their own desires.

Photography as a medium has long been considered male-dominated. Susan Sontag, in *On Photography* (1977), observes that even the language surrounding the medium is overwhelmingly phallogocentric, with terms like "loading," "aiming," and "shooting" the camera. She describes this as an “...inescapable metaphor that everyone unselfconsciously employs” (pp. 13-14). Historically, Playboy has also reflected this gender imbalance, with the majority of its photographers being male. This aligns with

Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, where the male photographer captures the female nude for the assumed pleasure of a male viewer. However, there were also notable female photographers who worked for Playboy, and their contributions - such as Bunny Yeager and Suze Randall - complicate the traditional dichotomy of the man as the gazer and the woman as the object of the gaze. With an increasing number of female photographers in the later years of Playboy's publication, this shift raises important questions about how male gaze theory is challenged and redefined within Playboy, especially through mediums like self-portraiture.

Several theorists have disrupted Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. Griselda Pollock's (1988) work on feminist visual culture challenges traditional formulations of the male gaze by emphasising the complexities of subjectivity and identity in visual representations. Pollock critiques the gaze as a simplistic power dynamic, arguing that gendered subjectivities are shaped by history, culture, and social context.

A further notable example of this critique is bell hooks' *The Oppositional Gaze* (1992). hooks asserts, "There is power in looking" (p. 319) as she explores the critical black female gaze in relation to film. She emphasises the necessity of the black oppositional gaze, not only in response to a history of oppression and racism, but also against the backdrop of a lack of black representation in cinema. hooks advocates for black women filmmakers and media that view the world from the perspective of the black female spectator, further disrupting the white male gaze, which has dominated Western cinema and visual media. As hooks states, "Identifying with neither the phallogocentric gaze nor the construction of white-womanhood as lack, critical black female spectators construct a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation" (p. 316).

The female gaze has become an increasingly important topic in academic discourse. In her introduction to *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (1989), Lorraine Gamman argues that while most popular culture has been created with the male gaze in mind, feminists should not succumb to pessimism about this. Instead, she suggests that we should engage with mainstream culture and reinterpret it to create our own feminist meanings. Similarly, Jessica Kiang, in her essay 'The Kiss, Or What the Movies Never Taught Me About Desire' states, "Cinema might be a powerful, masculine-coded master, but women viewers can be disobedient to its demands; we can subvert and co-opt" (p.93). This view offers a potential answer to the question of how to carve out a female gaze within a framework traditionally dominated by the male gaze: by acknowledging the male gaze but going beyond it, reclaiming our own feminist pleasures. In my research, I aim to move beyond the binary of the active male gaze and the passive female objectified subject-often employed in feminist discussions of Playboy. Female producers of Playboy content, female consumers of Playboy, and female subjects within its pages all challenge this binary, offering new possibilities for feminist readings.

Playful Reinterpretation

While navigating representations of women in Playboy through the lens of complicated empowerment, I wanted to create space for playful re-imagination, reclamation, and reinterpretation. This has become a central aspect of my framework of complicated empowerment, acknowledging that agency and self-expression can exist within and in

relation to spaces that might traditionally be seen as sexist or objectifying. By incorporating playful imagination into the discussion, we can push beyond binary interpretations of empowerment versus objectification and instead explore how we might creatively reclaim and reimagine our bodies and identities in relation to sexualised imagery.

In this context, self-portraits and selfies (distinguished as self-portraits typically taken with mobile phones) become vital tools for resistance and reinvention. The playful possibilities inherent in digital media, from filters to interactive editing tools, open new avenues for creative self-imaging. This aligns with Valerie Frissen et al.'s (2015) theory of 'ludification,' which asserts that playful technologies encourage experimental engagement with identity and self-expression. As performative acts, selfies allow individuals to experiment with their identities, express sexualities, and challenge traditional power structures in media by reimagining how the gaze functions.

The selfie, named Oxford Dictionaries' 2013 Word of the Year, has inspired a growing body of academic work examining its intersections with gender, bodies, and objectification (For Example: Tiidenberg, and Gómez Cruz, 2015; Bollmer & Guinness, 2017; Tiidenberg, 2018; Murray, 2021). Bollmer and Guinness (2017) argue that the performative nature of selfies enables individuals to construct idealised versions of themselves, echoing Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which frames identity as enacted through repeated acts. In this sense, selfies are sites of everyday gender performance and curation of self-representation.

Derek Conrad Murray (2021) challenges the assumption that selfies cater exclusively to the male gaze, suggesting instead that they can celebrate femininity and promote body

positivity. Social media platforms have enabled greater representation of diverse bodies and sexualities, yet this progress is often undermined by disproportionate censorship of women's bodies, particularly those of sex workers or creators of sexualised content. Instagram, for example, has been criticised for shadowbanning and removing posts deemed sexually suggestive, disproportionately targeting marginalised bodies (Byström and Soda, 2016; Are, 2023). This reflects a broader societal tendency to equate female nudity with obscenity, as Paasonen et al. (2021) highlight, which reinforces harmful binaries between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' self-representations.

Projects such as *Pics or It Didn't Happen* by Arvida Byström and Molly Soda document images banned by Instagram, illustrating how certain bodies are deemed 'unsafe' by algorithms. Byström and Soda (2016) note that these patterns of censorship reflect societal biases that privilege narrow ideals of beauty and erase diversity in sexual expression. For example, images of unshaved bikini lines are more likely to be removed than their hair-free counterparts, revealing cultural preferences that prioritise sanitised, normative representations of bodies.

Despite these challenges, the selfie remains a powerful medium for reclaiming sexualised imagery traditionally controlled by the male gaze. Katrin Tiidenberg (2018) emphasises how 'sexy' selfies allow women to shape their sexual identities, contrasting with mainstream media's objectification. However, as Zahra Stardust (2024) argues in her analysis of independent porn platforms, the potential for self-representation is often stifled by commercial interests and regulatory paranoia, which disproportionately affect queer sexual practices and marginal bodies.

The paradox of the selfie lies in its dual function: while it offers a space for self-expression and empowerment, it also exists within digital environments that perpetuate

patriarchal beauty standards and constrain diversity. Drawing from these tensions, my own creative practice seeks to reimagine and reinterpret the imagery of Playboy, using embodied art-making methods to subvert traditional representations of gender and sexuality. Through this, I aim to challenge the power dynamics of visual culture and create new possibilities for representing identity and agency.

Conclusion

This chapter frames the concept of complicated empowerment, providing a lens to navigate the contradictory narratives surrounding Playboy. By integrating feminist theories of objectification, agency, the gaze it situates the magazine's representations of femininity within a dynamic interplay of enforcing patriarchal norms and enabling subversion, reinterpretation, and agency. Drawing on key thinkers like Cahill (2010) and Paasonen et al. (2021), this chapter demonstrates how the fluidity between subject and object, empowerment, and commodification, is central to understanding these representations.

By establishing this conceptual framework, the chapter directly links these feminist debates to the notion of complicated empowerment, underscoring how Playboy serves as a critical site where empowerment is neither straightforward nor wholly subversive. Instead, it is mediated by cultural forces and historical contexts that complicate binaries. This approach not only sets the stage for the subsequent analysis but also positions complicated empowerment as an essential tool for interrogating the intersections of feminist discourse, media representations, and embodied practices.

Moving forward, this analytical tool will be applied to critically examine Playboy's legacy and its potential for queer and feminist reinterpretation through art and practice.

Chapter Four: Patchworking Interdisciplinary Methodologies

To patch or piece together suggests collecting information or things, an act of investigation. Patch can be a scrap or a remnant: a piece of material, a computer key, a torn item of clothing. Patching can also mean to mend, join together, or collect.

- Kirsty Robertson, 2016, p.197

Drawing inspiration from Robertson's evocative description of patchworking, this chapter outlines the multi-method approach underpinning my research. This approach encompasses art making as an embodied auto-ethnographic practice, analysis of selected pieces of Playboy's media, as well as a small series of semi-structured interviews with Playboy staff. These methodologies interconnect through a central guiding concept: patchworking. Inspired by textile processes, patchworking describes the act of combining fragments of history, experience, or material into something new.

There are many ways to create cloth. Natural and synthetic fibres can be matted and compressed to form something new. Multiple strands of fibre can be spun together into yarn, which may be woven into a grid - warp and weft - or knotted and interlinked to create soft, flexible textiles. Through intervention, cloth takes on countless forms and utilities: it can envelop our bodies, serve as a site of protest, or document histories. Patchworking, stitching together fragments of cloth, offers yet another transformation, where disparate pieces are reworked and remade to form new knowledges and purposes.

This ethos of transformation resonates with the methodological framework of this research, which draws on the metaphor of patchworking to assemble and reinterpret fragments of Playboy's history. Much like Dolly Parton's autobiographical song 'Coat of Many Colors' (1971), which recounts her mother sewing rags into a beloved coat, this research stitches together elements of the past to create something rich with new meaning:

I recall a box of rags that someone gave us
And how my momma put the rags to use
There were rags of many colors
But every piece was small
And I didn't have a coat
And it was way down in the fall
Momma sewed the rags together
Sewin' every piece with love
She made my coat of many colours
That I was so proud of (Parton, 1971).

This thesis takes something familiar - Playboy, a magazine that, for much of its history, presented female bodies primarily for male consumption - and seeks to uncover new feminist meanings and interpretations. By critically re-examining fragments of Playboy's history and reinterpreting them through a multi-method approach, this research investigates the fibres of Playboy to create new cloth woven from its fragments

Kristina Lindström and Åsa Ståhl explore practice-based methods of knowledge generation in relation to their own collaborative project, *Threads*. Described as a mobile sewing circle (Lindström and Ståhl, 2016), *Threads* invited members of the public to

embroider text messages from their phones, through both hand and digital embroidery. From this project Lindström and Ståhl developed the concept of “patchworking ways of knowing,” which they describe as:

Patchworking, in this context, is thereby not only the making of a textile object, but the collective making of a patchwork of different kinds of knowledges, experiences, histories, and anticipations in relation to ways of living with technologies. Staying with and knowing over time and through multiple presents is a particularly important aspect of patchworking ways of knowing and we consider it neglected in practice-based research. (p.65)

Whilst my research differs in that it does not solely interact with technologies (for example, my usage of digital photography and exploration into Playboy’s digital platforms) but also with interviews, visual analysis and art making, Lindström and Ståhl’s concept resonates deeply with my multi-method approach. Patchworking as a methodological strategy reflects the process of collecting, questioning, and reworking histories, ideas, and experiences from diverse contexts. Echoing the time and labour that goes into traditional patchwork quilts, Lindström and Ståhl describe a key aspect of patchworking ways of knowing as “staying with”; taking time to sit with and study the complexities and mess (p.71).

This ethos informs how I combine autoethnographic practice-based research through artmaking, with feminist critical discourse analysis and visual methodologies. My aim is to engage with selected pieces of Playboy’s media through an intersectional feminist lens, uncovering new meanings and subverting traditional interpretations of its representations of women. Central to my approach is the willingness to sit with the

contradictions and complications inherent in Playboy's legacy, investigating the loose threads and knots rather than cutting them off or rushing to tidy them away. As in Lindstöm's and Ståhl's project, the emphasis on labour, time, and layered meaning is central also to my own practice.

This chapter outlines the methods that underpin this thesis, emphasising their interconnectedness through the concept of patchworking. The chapter delves into the four primary methods:

1. Artmaking as an autoethnographic and reflexive research practice (primarily focusing on self-portraiture and creating a rhinestone Playboy Bunny costume)
2. Feminist critical discourse analysis of the 2005-2009 reality series, *The Girls Next Door* (GND), Playboy's digital platforms (*PlayboyPlus* and *The Playboy Club*) and the photographer Bunny Yeager's work in Playboy.
3. Visual methodologies applied to the same above list of content
4. Interviews with Playboy staff (In August 2022, four interviews were undertaken with Playboy employees at Playboy's offices in Los Angeles, USA)

This chapter examines how these approaches collectively engage with the complexities and contradictions inherent in Playboy's representations of women. By doing so, it opens pathways for new feminist interpretations that challenge traditional readings of Playboy's legacy

In summary this chapter is divided into five sections:

1. The first provides a more detailed overview of the methods this thesis employs, and the breadth of data collected

2. The second discusses embodied art making as an autoethnographic practice, this is divided into two subsequent sub-sections which look at my use of fibre art and self-portraiture respectively
3. The third is divided into three subsections which looks at literature related to FCDA, analysing reality television, and visual methodologies
4. The fourth is divided into three subsections looking at my data collection and analysis strategies for Playboy's media: GND, Bunny Yeager, and Playboy's Digital Platforms
5. The fifth reviews my approach to collecting and analysing data from my semi-structured interviews with Playboy staff.

Research Design and Overview of Data Collected: Unfurling the Quilt

Continuing the metaphor of my multi-method practice as a patchwork quilt, this section steps back to unfurl the entire quilt before examining each patch in detail. Here, I provide an overview of the scope of data collected, summarising the diverse materials and methods that underpin this thesis.

A qualitative study was the most suitable approach for this research because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the nuanced and multifaceted representations of women in Playboy. Qualitative methods excel at capturing the cultural, historical, and social complexities embedded in visual and textual materials, making them ideal for interrogating themes like femininities, empowerment, and objectification. This approach aligns with feminist ethnographies, which emphasise multi-method, reflexive, and context-sensitive inquiry to challenge traditional power structures and foreground marginalised voices. Methods such as critical discourse analysis (CDA), visual analysis,

and auto-ethnography not only reflect this multi-method tradition but also enable the examination of how power and gender intersect within Playboy's media. By embracing the interpretative and creative potential of qualitative research, this study addresses the complexities and contradictions of Playboy's legacy, offering new feminist interpretations grounded in both subjective and cultural contexts. To quote Kathy Ferguson (2017):

Feminist theory flourishes best through scholarly practices that cast a capacious net across fields, think interrelationally about power and resistance, and seek alliances with others who are both critical of prevailing conditions and imaginative about collective possibilities for freedom, justice, and joy. (p.270)

One of the potential criticisms of this thesis is its wide scope. This thesis brings together pieces of media from throughout Playboy's history (photography, reality television, and digital media), my own interviews with Playboy staff, and art-led auto-ethnographic enquiry to form a feminist re-evaluation of a company with an over seventy-year history and wide range of media produced. In order to best analyse and form a dialogue with such varied media this thesis employs a multi-method strategy. While each of my subject matter (Bunny Yeager's work in Playboy, GND, Playboy's online platforms) could be the focus of a PhD project in their own right, this multifaceted approach (in terms of focus and method) is deliberate. By investigating each element in-depth and bringing them together, this thesis constructs a cohesive investigation where multiple focuses and methods inform and enrich one another. Together, they contribute to a feminist re-evaluation of Playboy, offering nuanced perspectives on its representations of women and their intersections with femininities, the gaze and complicated empowerment.

Below (Fig. 4.1) is a table summarising the key components of the data collected for this research. The following sections delve into the processes, ethical considerations, and literature that informed my approach in greater detail. However, it is important to acknowledge that certain aspects of this project resist quantification and neatly packaging into a table. This includes my longstanding engagement with Playboy, the extensive number of pictorials and issues I have reviewed, the informal notes made during this process, and the reflective writing that has shaped my auto-ethnographic response. While the table does not capture the full breadth of data and media informing this thesis, it provides an overview of the primary components. These diverse sources collectively underpin a feminist re-evaluation of Playboy, interweaving content analysis, interviews, and artmaking to generate new insights into its representations of women

Whilst developing my research design, it became evident that it was beyond the scope of this thesis to study Playboy in its entirety. Early in my fieldwork, one of my initial research focuses was a quantitative analysis of diversity among Playboy Playmates. However, I quickly realised there was insufficient data available, which would have required me to estimate key information, such as the ethnicities of Playmates. Relying on estimates not only risked compromising the accuracy of my findings but also raised ethical concerns, as assigning identities or categories without sufficient evidence could perpetuate misrepresentation or reinforce reductive assumptions. Moreover, with thousands of women having posed for Playboy and countless others working in its clubs or being featured on its online platforms, the sheer scale of the task made it impossible to provide an in-depth analysis of all these women. While I would love to give each of these women their due recognition, this thesis is necessarily selective, focusing instead on a range of representations and narratives that best encapsulate Playboy's broader legacy.

Overview of Data		
Type of data	Quantity of data compiled	Quantity selected for analysis
Objects	1 object made (Rhinestone Playboy bunny suit compiling of ears, cuffs, name tag rosette, tail & corseted body suit)	1
Self-portraits	1031 photographs taken	6
The Girls Next Door	91 episodes, with episodes on average 22 minutes in length	4
Girls Next Level Podcast	113 episodes with episodes ranging in length from 51 to 158 minutes	N/A supplementary information, not major site of analysis
Bunny Yeager Pictorials	16 (13 shot by Yeager, and 3 where Yeager and her work are the subject)	5
The Playboy Club Profiles	100 creator profiles	N/A
Playboy Plus Content	100 content pages	N/A
Interviews	4 varying in length from 14:23 to 27:03 minutes	4

Figure 4.1 Data Table

Artmaking as an Auto-Ethnographic and Embodied Research Method

The first method - or patch- I will describe in further depth is artmaking as an auto-ethnographic and embodied research method. Having pursued both my undergraduate and MFA degrees in practice-based fine arts programs, interdisciplinary artmaking is integral to my thinking and research processes. This section explores how art-making functions as an embodied research tool, drawing on relevant texts that position it as a methodological approach within academia. I will also discuss how the specific mediums

of photography and fibre art are utilised within my practice and their role in this project as well as the ethical considerations inherent in using my body as a research site.

The inspirations and connections that inform my art practice span feminist art histories, photography, fibre art, representations of women in media (especially sexualised media), neo-burlesque and drag performance, and notions of hyper-femininity. I envision this network of influences as a web encrusted with pink rhinestones; sparkling and multifaceted yet interconnected. Just as my methodologies interact like a patchwork quilt, the seemingly fragmented inspirations and processes in my art practice are stitched together to form new feminist knowledges.

A key element of my practice is in alignment with auto-ethnography, where the self becomes both the subject and the site of inquiry. Autoethnography, a form of ethnography, diverges by positioning the researcher's own experiences as the primary site of inquiry, intertwining personal narrative with cultural critique, whereas ethnography traditionally focuses outward on observing and interpreting the practices of others. (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Alsop, 2005). Unlike autobiography, auto-ethnography situates personal experiences firmly within cultural and socio-political contexts (Ettorre, 2017), using reflections on the self to interrogate and form discussions around broader societal issues. Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe auto-ethnographic practices as involving multiple layers of consciousness:

Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations. (p.739)

Elizabeth Ettore (2017) further articulates the potential for auto-ethnography to operate as a feminist method, identifying four key aspects of feminist auto-ethnography: creating and inhabiting transitional spaces, demonstrating that the personal is political, performative feminist critical writing, and raising oppositional consciousness through exposing precarity. Each of these dimensions is reflected in my research practice, where auto-ethnographic practices allow me to navigate the complexities of Playboy while interrogating my own positionality as both researcher and subject.

Auto-ethnography extends beyond my art practice, encompassing my immersive engagement with Playboy's cultural landscape. This immersion includes examining visual media, testing their digital platforms onboarding process, and critically reflecting on my interactions with the brand's representations. By embedding myself within this field, I connect the personal to the cultural, drawing parallels between my subjective experiences and broader social critiques of gender and representation. For example, my prolonged engagement with Playboy's media allows me to engage with its contradictions, navigating its complex legacy through an embodied feminist lens.

My artmaking further enriches this process, transforming auto-ethnographic principles into visual and material forms. The embodied act of creating art allows me to critically explore my positionality and emotional responses, offering an alternative mode of inquiry that complements textual analysis. Through self-portraiture and other visual methods, I inhabit a liminal space where personal experience and cultural critique intersect, reflecting the feminist potential of auto-ethnography to challenge dominant narratives.

This approach is uniquely suited to my research aims, as auto-ethnography provides the tools to interrogate the layered and subjective nature of Playboy's representations

of women. By combining introspection with cultural critique, I can both reflect on my own positionality and engage with the experiences of others, creating a methodology that aligns with feminist principles while addressing the complexities of this field.

This interplay between personal narrative and cultural critique forms the foundation of my broader methodological approach, particularly in the context of my art-making practices, where the embodied processes of creation serve as both a mode of inquiry and a site for critical reflection. Despite its presence in academic discourse for around forty years (Candy & Edmonds, 2018), art/practice-based research often remains ambiguous and, at times, under-acknowledged. This ambiguity can be attributed to its mutable and evolving nature, as new researchers and disciplines continue to redefine its boundaries. Examples of practice-based methods span diverse activities, including activism, archiving, artmaking, artist collaborations, curating, experimental archaeology, performance, re-creation of historical objects, sound, and video. This plurality underscores its flexibility but also contributes to its contested definition within academia. Jenna Ward and Harriet Shortt (2020) argue that art based research methods have the potential to elicit more reflexive, layered and provocative accounts than traditional approaches to qualitative research: “In this way, art has the capacity to engage with tensions and ambiguities whilst holding open possibilities for critical reflection, reconstruction, sense-making and change” (p.2) Whilst Barone and Eisner (2012) position artistic practices as valid methodologies in scholarly inquiry, emphasising their ability to generate and communicate knowledge through aesthetic, emotional, and interpretive means, challenging traditional research paradigms.

Graeme Sullivan (2010) characterises art practices as transformative research. Rather than focusing solely on generating entirely new information, transformative research re-

analyses and reworks existing knowledge, inviting fresh perspectives. Sullivan emphasises the unique role of the artist as both researcher and object of study, employing arts-based self-study and auto-ethnographic approaches to explore and communicate insights. He writes that these approaches “...investigate and subsequently communicate the outcomes of an inquiry into the self or others to a wider audience” (pp. 70-71). This dual role of the researcher as both creator and subject resonates with my approach to art-making, particularly through self-portraiture and the manipulation of fibre art.

Ellen Sampson (2020) further develops the potential of practice-based research by highlighting its tactile, embodied nature. In her work, she documents the process of making and wearing garments, foregrounding the unique perspective of the maker as researcher. Sampson writes:

It is the nature of practice-based research that the researcher is also often the creator of the object of enquiry...Making gives the researcher the ability to alter or enhance their experience of the research subject in a manner that would not be possible through observation alone. Maker-researchers come to know their subject through touch and often the material manipulation of its form. (p.28)

According to both Sullivan (2010) and Sampson (2020) artists have a unique perspective and positionality as researchers in their proximity to their subject matter. Artist-researchers who make their research subjects have an enhanced understanding of the tactility of their object of inquiry, that perhaps a researcher studying objects in archives may not. They know exactly how the object was constructed, have lived and sat with it for longer than a research appointment would have allowed. Furthermore, with objects that function as garments, artist-researchers may understand how an object feels on

their body, facilitating a further new understanding of the object of inquiry. For artist-researchers who centre their own bodies, such as through auto-ethnography or self-portraiture, their work becomes not only an investigation but also a lived experience of their subject.

This insight resonates with my art-making practice, where I have both produced objects of inquiry - such as a rhinestoned Playboy bunny costume - and positioned myself as the subject through self-portraiture and reflective auto-ethnographic documentation. These practices allow me to interrogate the aesthetics, labour, and meanings tied to Playboy's imagery, while embodying and reflecting on my relationship with themes of femininity, sexuality, and the gaze

Art-based methodologies have gained increasing recognition within women and gender studies, where embodied and creative practices intersect with feminist and intersectional theory. Gloria Wilson's 'Embodying Critical Arts-Based Research: Complicating Thought/that Leaders Through Transdisciplinary Discourse' (2020) offers a compelling example of this integration. In her research, Wilson employs textiles and fibre art to critically reflect on her own racialised and gendered identity, stating:

At one level. I am responding to identity-boundaries and power differentials. At a deeper level, my own image making serves as a critical arts-based autoethnographic reflection of my own racialized/gendered status within academic feminist discourse and power differentials. (p.202).

Wilson situates her art-based research practice within feminist discourse, more specifically within hip-hop feminism and critical race feminism, utilising her work as

activism to identify and challenge power differentials particularly in relation to race and gender. Her approach, which she describes as transdisciplinary, highlights the ability of art-based methodologies to challenge traditional academic boundaries and create knowledge rooted in embodied experiences.

Similarly, I utilise my art practice as an act of embodied research to engage with and respond to the imagery I consume and analyse. While, as a white woman, I will never experience racial inequalities, my work explores inequalities tied to gender and sexuality, critically examining how hyper-feminine representations intersect with cultural narratives of agency and empowerment. Like Wilson, my artmaking is both a method of inquiry and a form of critique, allowing me to reimagine visual tropes tied to femininity and challenge hegemonic interpretations of the imagery I study.

Women's studies inherently lend itself to more interdisciplinary and creative ways of thinking. Lebbie Hopkins (2007) identifies three defining aspects of research in women's studies: "Its interdisciplinary, its highly political nature, and, at times its occupation of the margins of academia" (p.566). These qualities encourage the adoption of innovative methodologies, including arts-based and arts-informed research. Feminist scholarship, with its emphasis on challenging dominant power structures and generating new ways of seeing, naturally aligns with the exploratory and reflexive nature of arts-based methods.

Whilst art making is steadily becoming recognised more broadly within academia as a research method, outside of the academy art making as a site of exploration and activism has long been a tool within feminism. However, the intersection of art and feminism remains fraught, as Hilary Robinson and Maria Elena Buszek discuss in their introduction to the anthology *A Companion to Feminist Art*. When the art canon has

been long dominated by westernised, colonial and patriarchal ideals, “feminist art” can be a slippery concept to grasp that Robinson and Buszek claim has been often misused. They critique how the term “feminist art” has been misapplied to female artists regardless of whether their work engages feminist themes. Yet, Robinson and Buszek state that despite the fraught nature of creating feminist art against a patriarchal backdrop, there is a need to work at this intersection: “To us, and to a determined, angry, joyous, powerfully creative, and increasing number of artists, critics, scholars, and curators, working at this intersection is an urgent activity.” (2019, p.1)

This urgency to challenge patriarchal structures and redefine artistic spaces for women has historical roots in the feminist art movement of the 1970s. In her landmark essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971) Linda Nochlin called out art institutions for creating environments that prohibited female artists from succeeding in the arts and encouraged female artists to create their own spaces and push for visibility.

...women can reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses in general, and, at the same time that they destroy false consciousness, take part in the creation of institutions in which clear thought—and true greatness—are challenges open to anyone, man or woman, courageous enough to take the necessary risk, the leap into the unknown. (Nochlin, 1971)

Nochlin’s notion of artmaking as a “leap into the unknown” resonates deeply with my own practice, which is often exploratory and intuitive. Artmaking allows me to think through ideas in tactile, embodied ways, generating new forms of knowledge that are not always easily translatable into academic language. The sensations, half-formed thoughts, and messiness inherent in my process often resist being neatly encapsulated

in writing. Returning to Lindström and Ståhl's concept of 'patchworking ways of knowing', I aim to embrace this complexity and allow space for the intuitiveness of my practice. My notes on the making process - captured in iPhone memos, post its, or scribbles written while wearing long rhinestoned press-on nails - may seem fragmented, but they collectively form an auto-ethnographic account of my experiences. These notes serve as a raw archive of how it feels to create and photograph myself, and I intend to sit with them, threading their insights into a more cohesive analysis

Data Collection and Analysis: Fibre Art and Rhinestoning as a Feminist Art Practice

The following two sub-sections will discuss two distinct mediums of my embodied art making process. This section focuses on fibre art and rhinestoning, examining how these methods and materials intersect with feminist theory, craft histories, and my personal practice.

Fibre art (often also referred to as Textile art) is often intrinsically linked with notions of women's labour, femininity and domesticity, making it an evocative medium for feminist exploration (Wilson, 2020). Historically, patriarchal Western art institutions have marginalised fibre art, categorising it as 'craft' rather than 'fine art' (Butchart, 2018). Rozsika Parker, in *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), examines this divide, highlighting how embroidery became associated with femininity and amateurism: "When women paint, their work is categorised as homogeneously feminine-but it is acknowledged to be art. When women embroider it is seen not as art, but entirely as the expression of femininity. And, crucially, it is categorised as craft." (p. 5)

Fibre art lends itself well to exploring themes of gender and sexuality. Much like how Lekkie Hopkins (2007) describes women's studies as occupying "the margins of academia" (p.566), similarly, fibre art has historically been relegated to the margins of fine art, with Western art institutions often classifying textile-based works as "craft" rather than "art." This marginalisation reflects not only its historical associations with feminine domestic labour but also the colonial histories tied to cloth production. These layered histories imbue fibre art with an inherent political potential, making it a powerful medium for feminist critique and subversion.

In my practice, I align myself with the traditions and politics of fibre art by engaging with its materiality and situating my work within its historical and contemporary theoretical contexts. By acknowledging both the domestic and global histories embedded in textiles, I use my materials intentionally, viewing them as conduits for exploring and challenging the cultural constructs of femininity

Despite its marginalisation, fibre art has become a powerful medium for feminist artists to interrogate themes of gender, sexuality, and domesticity. Julia Bryan Wilson (2017) argues that fibre and textiles are both historically and currently used by makers as a social practice, with its malleable nature leading to it being activated for a broad range of political and social means. Similarly, Jesse Harrod describes textiles as symbolic tools, stating: "The politics of cloth seem inescapable, and material and technical histories are fundamental to my choices as a maker... the materials are stand-ins for political ideas, for people, for moments, for gender expressions." (2017, p.vii).

Having graduated with an MFA in Fibre and Material Studies, I approach material choices with intention, understanding them as conduits for exploring and subverting

gender. Harrod's observation about the "histories and politics" of materials resonates with my practice, where every fabric, garment, and embellishment carry symbolic weight.

My embodied art making centred on the creation of a rhinestone Playboy bunny suit and photographic self-portraiture. Often associated with "tackiness" and excess (Skelly 2017) rhinestones have the radical potential to transform bodies and ordinary objects into spectacles. Rhinestoning offers a tactile, meditative process of labour that echoes feminist craft traditions while celebrating hyper-femininity. As Dita Von Teese (2006) writes rhinestones represent a "parade of hyperbole," where exaggeration and excess become aesthetic tools:

Now, hold up a Swarovski Crystal. That's right. It shines with an intensity you prefer to the suns. Perhaps I exaggerate a little, but it is the nature of my business. What is costume and makeup - what's burlesque - but a delicious parade of hyperbole? (p.42)

While drafting this methodology chapter in 2023, I identified a notable gap in the literature: there were no dedicated texts on rhinestones despite their widespread use in contexts that evoke themes of gender, class, patriotism, and sexuality. To address this gap, I submitted a proposal for a short publication to the independent craft publisher Common Threads Press' *open call in December 2023. The proposal was accepted, and I began working on *Crafting Spectacles: A Short Cultural History of Rhinestones* alongside the write-up of this thesis in 2024, with publication expected in 2025.*

In *Crafting Spectacles*, I explore rhinestones through an wide array of cultural practices, from vagazzles and drag king performances, to Olympic gymnasts, burlesque acts, and

Taylor Swift fandoms. My research highlighted rhinestones' ability to mask, transform and subvert. These sparkling objects blur boundaries between the artificial and the real, high and low culture, and the glamorous and the gaudy, serving as conduits for gendered self-expression and joy.

One particularly illuminating interview I conducted for *Crafting Spectacles* was with Rebecca Seaver, head of archival services for, and niece of, Dolly Parton. Seaver recounted a childhood memory of sitting next to their aunt on a plane and becoming mesmerised by the rainbow prisms that danced across the cabin as sunlight hit Parton's rhinestone-encrusted jacket. Seaver likened the experience to sitting next to a real-life fairy, suggesting that Parton's love for rhinestones is tied to a simple yet profound desire: "Dolly wants to shine" (Seaver, 2024).

This reflection reinforced my understanding of rhinestones' radical potential to create magic. Beyond their surface glamour, rhinestones invite us to fulfil our desire to shine, granting permission to embrace hyperbole and self-expression. In my own practice, rhinestones embody this duality, allowing me to explore themes of performance, identity, and labour while aligning with feminist craft traditions that celebrate excess and subversion.

By rhinestoning a costume so deeply embedded in the cultural imaginary and branding of Playboy, as well as broader Western constructs of feminine sexuality, I both celebrate the countless women who wore a Playboy costume and infuse the Playboy bunny with ideas of queerness and hyper-femininity. The process of crafting my rhinestoned Playboy Bunny suit spanned over a year, from October 2021, to November 2022, and involved the application of more than 10,000 Preciosa Crystal AB rhinestones. These

rhinestones ranged in size from SS 9 to SS 30 (2.6 mm to 6.4 mm) and were individually affixed using E6000 glue, a highly toxic craft adhesive commonly used in rhinestone application. To mitigate the risks associated with the glue's toxicity, I worked in a well-ventilated space with windows open or wore a respirator mask throughout the process.

Rhinestoning is an inherently slow and meticulous process. I chose not to document the number of active hours spent crafting this costume as I felt this data would not significantly contribute to my analysis (additionally, I personally would prefer not to know how many hours the process took). However, the time-intensive nature of the work reflects broader themes in my research: the labour inherent in feminine performance, and the embodied experience of crafting femininity. Furthermore, reflecting Ellen Sampson's (2020) findings on practice-based research and the unique positionality of maker/researchers, alongside Kristina Lindström and Åsa Ståhl's (2016) concept of staying with and knowing over time, the slow, deliberate labour of crafting the rhinestoned Playboy Bunny suit allowed me to develop a deeper, embodied understanding of the costume.

In their chapter for the edited collection, *Crafting Autoethnography* Rommy Anabalón Schaaf and Javiera Sandoval Limarí explore how the repetitive and slow process of textile based methods created space and time for them to reflect on their own lives and analyse their research findings: "The crocheting hands, the thinking hands, opened a space in which I could reflect on my own story and the fieldwork stories in creative ways, making new connections that were not visible when analysing in a more conventional way." (2023, p.85).

Similarly, I found that the slow, meticulous process of rhinestoning my Bunny suit offered a dual function in my research. It allowed me to gain an embodied

understanding of the object, its textures, shapes, and materiality, while simultaneously creating a vital space for reflection. The repetitive act of applying over 10,000 rhinestones, one by one, became a meditative practice, during which I could process not only my relationship to the Bunny suit itself but also the broader themes of my research. This included interrogating how feminine labour, performance, and adornment intersect with power, sexuality, and identity within Playboy's legacy.

Much like Schaaf and Limari's crocheting hands, my rhinestoning hands provided a creative and embodied lens through which I could analyse my findings. The tactile nature of this process unlocked connections and insights that were less accessible through conventional academic analysis alone. It was through this embodied labour that I could both critically engage with the cultural meanings of the bunny suit and immerse myself in the affective and material dimensions of crafting a hyper-feminine spectacle.

This rhinestoned Bunny suit functions not only as an art object and a site of analysis but also as a tool for embodying my interpretation of Playboy Bunny-inspired hyper-feminine sexuality. By wearing the suit in self-portraits, I engage with its cultural and symbolic weight through an embodied lens. The next sub-section delves into how I utilise self-portraiture as an embodied and auto-ethnographic research method.

Data Collection and Analysis: Self-Portraiture

Photography has long been established as a valuable method in ethnographic and participatory research, with scholars such as Sarah Pink (2007) emphasising its potential to capture and interrogate the social relations, subjective agendas, and

discourses through which visual materials are produced and made meaningful (p.95). Participatory practices, including auto-photography (Ziller and Lewis 1981, Tsao, 2015) and photo-elicitation (Radley & Taylor 2003, Rose, 2023), have explored the power of inviting participants to photograph themselves or their environments in response to research questions.

However, the use of self-portraiture by researchers as a methodological tool remains less discussed. This approach, where the researcher turns the lens on themselves, offers a distinctive means of exploring identity, reflexivity, and subjectivity, while expanding the potential for creative, embodied, and introspective research practices.

Building on texts on autoethnographic arts-based practices (Sullivan, 2010; Barone and Eisner, 2012; Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Sampson, 2020; Ward & Short, 2020) I utilise art making as an embodied research method, as well as a conduit for reclaiming and subverting representations of femininities found in Playboy. By creating images that respond directly to Playboy's visual media, I engage with its representations on a deeply personal and critical level. Focusing on self-portraiture, I transform myself through rhinestoned costumes, wigs, and makeup into heightened versions of feminine sexualities. This practice functions both as a reclamation of Playboy's imagery and as a tool to explore firsthand how it feels to pose and produce photographs that interrogate feminine sexualities.

For over a decade, art making and self-portraiture have been central to my exploration of identity and sexuality. When I take self-portraits, I feel at my most powerful, I control everything, the camera shutter in my hand like a loaded gun. I choose what is seen, what I wear, or choose not to. It is a self-directed fantasy. Art making for me is escapism: like playing with Barbies, except I get to be Barbie.

Most of the images were captured using a DSLR camera, which I often connected to my phone via an app. This setup allowed me to see through the DSLR lens on my phone screen, control the camera settings, and take photographs using my phone. Operating in this way mimicked the immediacy of a selfie, bridging the gap between traditional photographic techniques and the technologies of the selfie.

In addition to digital photography, a small number of shoots were conducted using analogue techniques. These images were taken with a twin-lens reflex camera on medium-format film, a process that demanded greater deliberation and precision. While my digital shoots often produced between thirty and over one-hundred images, analogue photography imposed a stricter limitation of twelve frames per roll of 120mm film. This constraint necessitated careful planning and an intentional approach to composition and pose.

The development of the film took place in my bathroom, transformed into a makeshift darkroom, where I processed and then digitally scanned the negatives myself. This blending of analogue and digital processes created a dialogue between traditional photographic methods and contemporary visual practices. The use of expired film and the less-than-ideal technical conditions of my DIY darkroom setup introduced natural glitches into many of the images. Instead of viewing these imperfections as flaws, I embraced them, allowing the unpredictability of the medium to disrupt the rigid beauty standards typically associated with Playboy. These glitches became symbolic of a broader aim: to subvert and complicate the polished aesthetics of Playboy's visual culture by foregrounding the raw, embodied reality of my own body.

All photographs were taken at home in a self-made studio setting, which allowed for complete control over the environment and offered a safe, familiar space for exploration. I experimented with materiality to create unique backdrops, incorporating fabrics, textured surfaces, and other props to construct visual narratives. This studio setting became a site of transformation, where I could fully embody the aesthetic and performative qualities I sought to explore in my work.

Over the course of these seventeen shoots, my practice evolved as I experimented with different materials, poses, and aesthetics. Early shoots focused on recreating specific visual tropes from Playboy media, while later sessions became more exploratory, combining homage with subversion. The inclusion of analogue photography added an additional dimension, contrasting the immediacy of digital methods with the tactile, process-driven nature of film.

My self-portraits form not only a series of intuitive, embodied responses to the Playboy media I consume and analyse as part of this thesis but also a form of a visual diary that indirectly reflects shifts in my personal life. Over the four years of this PhD, I have gone on holidays, picked up new hobbies and obsessions, experienced failed situationships, mourned, fallen in love, got a dog, lost weight, gained weight, spent a year pursuing a breast augmentation, spent a year convincing myself not to get a breast augmentation. While these life events may not be directly represented in these images, they inform my creative process and the emotions I bring to each shoot. Self-portraiture becomes a way of grappling with these changes, allowing the boundaries between academic inquiry and personal reflection to blur.

My art-making process is inherently reflexive. At every stage from costume creation, preparation, shooting, editing, and final selection, I pause to document my emotions

and positionality. Questions such as: How am I feeling in this moment? How do I want to be seen? What is the fantasy I am creating? Do I feel sexy, empowered, or insecure? guide this reflection. These insights are recorded, forming an auto-ethnographic body of research that investigates my relationship with Playboy and explores its potential to empower or constrain.

However, engaging with Playboy's imagery has presented challenges, particularly in relation to the perfection of its aesthetic ideals. Consuming images of women who embody "desirable" Western femininity, often in unattainable ways, has at times distorted how I view my own body. While reviewing dozens of photographs from a shoot, I catch myself having intrusive, self-deprecating thoughts: I'm not sucking in my stomach enough; my breasts look uneven; my face looks terrible. In these moments, I approach my feelings with compassion and honesty, recognising the impact of continuous exposure to perfected bodies on self-perception. My aim is not to shy away from these negative emotions but to document them as part of my auto-ethnographic practice, where possible keeping these thoughts documented in a self-reflexive journal. These comments become vital data which showcase a reflective grappling with a complicated legacy. Through this process, I explore whether Playboy's imagery can simultaneously empower and constrain, contributing to the broader discussion of complicated empowerment.

It is also worth noting that, upon reflection, I can identify how self-deprecating thoughts have influenced the selection process for my final self-portraits. I often gravitate toward images where I appear thinner or where my expression aligns more closely with the idealised standards I observe in Playboy pictorials. While the goal of this practice has been to use self-portraiture as a means of feminist reclamation and subversion of

Playboy's imagery of women, I remain mindful of how these standards continue to shape my own biases. This tension underscores the complexity of engaging with Playboy's aesthetic legacy, where attempts to critique and subvert its ideals can coexist with an internalisation of the same visual norms. Recognising this duality is integral to my autoethnographic practice, as it allows me to critically interrogate not only the media I analyse but also how my own practice may embody this paradox.

Analysing Playboy's Media: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Visual

Methodologies

This section outlines my methodological approach to analysing Playboy media. To examine the complex interplay between representations of women, gendered power dynamics, and feminist critique, I draw on Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), Visual methodologies, and scholarship on reality television. While FCDA will guide my analysis of Playboy media (in particular, GND, the works of Bunny Yeager, and Playboy's digital platforms), I will engage specifically with reality television scholarship when discussing GND

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)

This research is grounded in FCDA, which emerges from and is informed by the broader framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA provides a robust methodology for analysing discourse within its broader socio-political context. As Fairclough (2018) outlines, CDA operates through a dialectical reasoning process that connects critique, explanation, and advocacy for change. This involves several key steps:

1. Normative critique of discourse.
2. Explanation of normatively critiqued discourse in terms of features of the existing state of affairs (existing social reality).
3. Explanatory critique of the existing state of affairs.
4. Advocacy for action to change the existing state of affairs "for the better"
(Fairclough, 2018, p.16).

In my analysis, CDA provides a foundational approach to interrogating the gendered representations in Playboy media, examining how these depictions reflect and reinforce broader ideologies, power dynamics, and institutional structures. By situating these representations within their socio-political contexts, my critique extends beyond the media itself to engage with the realities that shape and sustain its discourse.

Building upon this foundation, FCDA centres gender as a critical category of analysis, allowing me to explore how representations in Playboy media intersect with other axes of identity, such as race, class, and sexuality. Lazar (2018) characterises FCDA as an extension of CDA that brings a feminist lens to the analysis of discourse, emphasizing the ways in which power and ideology operate to sustain gendered inequalities.

The six principles of FCDA outlined by Lazar (2018) guide my analysis in the following ways:

1. Gender, or as Lazar states "...the ideological character of 'gender'" (p.373).
 - 1.1. Whilst Lazar states that modern FCDA scholarship acknowledges that gender is "fluid and plural", the fixed binary of male and female still is present in society and re-enforced institutionally. Gender is understood

as intertwined with other social identities and structures. Lazar states:
“gender remains one of the important ideological structures in the intertwining and overlaying of these other identities” (p.373)

1.2. In my analysis, I examine how Playboy media and GND construct specific brands of femininity, whether through visual representation, text, narrative framing, or linguistic discourse.

1.3. For instance, Playboy pictorials and visual media often perpetuate a narrow definition of desirable “girl next door” femininity. Using FCDA I explore how these portrayals reinforce, or challenge traditional gender norms and intersect with other identities such as class, sexuality, and race.

2. Power.

2.1. Lazar identifies two conceptions of power that have been of importance in FCDA scholarship. Firstly, the concept of patriarchy, which Lazar describes as a pointing towards “hegemonic masculine dominance and systematic inequalities based on gender” (p.374) and secondly, Foucault’s theories on pervasive power: “power is everywhere” (Foucault 1998, p.63)

2.2. I investigate how Playboy media reflects patriarchal structures, such as Hugh Hefner’s control over Playboy’s representations of women, and the perpetuation that women’s bodies must be regulated to fit within narrow ideals of femininity.

2.3. In GND I analyse moments where the women assert agency, subvert expectations, or navigate power dynamics with Hefner, production teams, and Playboy as a whole

3. Discourse.

3.1. FCDA, CDA and wider feminist approaches share a “constitutive view of discourse” (Lazar, 2018, p.374.) Adding to Fairclough’s theories on CDA’s approaches to the relationship between discourse and the social, Lazar states how gender and identities are performed through discourse and social situations: “Rather than assume that gender categories are immanent, through their linguistic (and non-linguistic) practices, people ‘do’ or ‘perform’ identities as ‘women’ and ‘men’ within particular social and historical constraints” (p.374). Similarly to CDA, FCDA defines discourse as multimodal in nature across -for example- the visual, the verbal, the linguistic and across various mediums such as text, images, and films.

3.2. In my analysis, I examine how gendered performances in Playboy media and GND are constructed through language, television editing, imagery, performativity and behaviour. For example, in GND I will explore how visual cues and mediated editing choices, such as costumes and set designs, contribute to the performance of specific feminine identities.

4. Reflexivity.

4.1. Lazar states that “Feminists are not exempt from turning a critical self-reflexive gaze upon ourselves either” (p.374). FCDA scholarship seeks to turn its critical lens inward as well, asking researchers to question their own relationship with their subject and how their own privilege may impact their research.

4.2. Throughout my research, I remain reflexive about my own relationship with Playboy, acknowledging how my positionality as a feminist researcher shapes my interpretations. For instance, my auto-ethnographic reflections interrogate my own consumption of Playboy media and its impact on my views of femininity and empowerment.

5. Activism.

5.1. Lazar considers FCDA scholarship as “analytical activism”, which strives for a “socially just society in which gender does not predetermine one’s sense of self and relationship with others” (p.374). This links to Fairclough’s theory that CDA advocates for “...action to change the existing state of affairs ‘for the better’” (Fairclough, 2018, p.16)

5.2. My analysis aims to disrupt traditional readings of Playboy as purely exploitative or empowering, instead presenting a nuanced exploration of its representations. By focusing on women’s agency and moments of resistance, I aim to contribute to feminist discussions on the complexities of empowerment, sexuality, and the male gaze.

6. Transnationalism.

6.1. FCDA scholarship considers gender struggles globally, even when researching more local and contextual subjects, FCDA scholars should make themselves aware of wider global social processes even when examining localised contexts.

6.2. I contextualise Playboy’s representations of women within broader feminist debates on globalised beauty standards. For example, I examine how Playboy media’s idealised beauty standards reflect and

perpetuate Western ideals while marginalising non-Western and non-white identities

In summary in my analysis of Playboy's media outputs, including pictorials, editorials, digital platforms and reality television series (i.e GND) I use FCDA to:

- **Deconstruct Gender Ideologies:** Investigate how Playboy constructs gender through discourse, such as the linguistic and visual framing of women's bodies and the ideologies of "good girl next door" desirability and sexuality these reinforce.
- **Interrogate Power Dynamics:** Examine the patriarchal structures embedded in Playboy's media production, including the roles of editors, and Hefner's branding of the magazine. I also analyse how female producers of Playboy content, such as Bunny Yeager, both subvert and perpetuate these patriarchal structures.

Approaching Analysing Reality Television

Reality television offers a fruitful and unique site for FCDA due to its performative and constructed nature, which often reflects broader cultural ideologies about gender and power. FCDA's focus on gender as ideological and performative (Lazar, 2018) aligns with the genre's reliance on archetypes and scripted narratives to shape participants' identities. In GND the constructed personas of Holly Madison, Bridget Marquardt, and Kendra Wilkinson exemplify this process, presenting the women as marketable

embodiments of hyper-feminine archetypes. FCDA's attention to the pervasive nature of power (Foucault, 1978) allows for an analysis of how production elements - such as editing, music, and visual framing - reinforce patriarchal norms while also creating spaces for agency and subversion. By combining FCDA with reality television theory, I explore how GND uses discourse to construct femininity and how these constructions intersect with cultural narratives of empowerment and resistance.

Since the rise in its popularity from the late 1990s there has been much academic output dedicated to reality television (Wood and Skeggs, 2011; Lorenzo-Dus and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013). Despite its name, reality television often sits within the paradoxical space between reality and fiction, with audiences aware of its constructed nature. Ouellette and Murray (2009) describe this as the "entertaining real," where the genre blends authenticity with fabrication: "Although reality TV whets our desire for the authentic, much of our engagement with such texts paradoxically hinges on our awareness that what we are watching is constructed and contains fictional elements" (2009, p.7).

Wood and Skeggs (2011) similarly highlight this interplay between reality and fiction, coining the term "representational play" to describe the genre's reliance on constructed personas and narratives:

...a contradictory cultural environment where viewers, participants and producers are less invested in the absolute truth and representational ethics and more interested in the space that exists between reality and fiction, in which new levels of representational play and reflexivity are visualised. (p.6)

In GND representational play is evident in the distinct personas constructed for the show's protagonists. For example, Holly Madison, Bridget Marquardt, and Kendra Wilkinson are framed as marketable archetypes, with Madison as "the devoted girlfriend," Marquardt as "beauty and brains," and Wilkinson as "the wild one." These personas are reinforced through narrative framing, editing, and visual presentation, as well as tie-in merchandise such as bobblehead dolls.

Furthermore, my analysis of GND draws on Eriksson's (2018) approach to critically engaging with reality television, which is itself informed by critical discourse analysis. Eriksson describes his approach to analysing reality television as "semiotic resources," with an awareness of how elements of production, for example music, camera angles, cuts, and graphics change the media. This also includes how reality television recontextualises its subjects, like Woods and Skeggs suggestion of "representational play," Eriksson proposed that reality television "...can be seen as a form of social actor analysis, implying a focus on the representational strategies used to depict participants and their actions" (2018, p.602). According to Eriksson, these recontextualisation choices can be described as the "doing of discourses" that constitute a form of knowledge. Eriksson further describes how recontextualisation transforms the media:

A particular programme represents what can be identified as specific social practices, but like all forms of recontextualization, the production process necessarily entails making choices about how to represent the practice in question. In such processes fundamental transformations take place. (2018, p.602).

Drawing on Eriksson's (2018) concept of "semiotic resources," I analyse how production choices - such as music, camera angles, and editing - recontextualise the women's identities, transforming their actions into forms of discourse. This concept also informs my understanding of the constructed and fictionalised aspects of the "reality" depicted in GND. The DVD commentary serves as a key site for identifying these production transformations. In the commentary, Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson discuss various episodes, highlighting instances where scenes were edited out of chronological order, scenarios were fabricated for the show, or music was strategically employed to guide audience perceptions. These reflections reveal how recontextualisation processes were shaped by specific gendered social practices.

Similarly, Madison and Marquardt's Girls Next Level podcast offers valuable insights into the production process. Created thirteen years after the original GND DVD commentary, the podcast reflects their evolved perspectives, shaped by time and distance from the Playboy Mansion and the production companies involved in the show. This temporal separation allows for greater candour, as Madison and Marquardt critically revisit the show's construction and their roles within it.

By examining these elements, I aim to unpack how GND blends fiction with reality, offering insights into the ways gendered roles are constructed and mediated through production choices. This awareness enables a more nuanced understanding of how the show reinforces or complicates traditional portrayals of femininity and agency.

Visual Methodologies

Another key methodological approach that I employ in my analysis of Playboy media alongside FCDA is visual methodologies. Gillian Rose's framework of visual methodologies (2001) has informed my critical approach to analysing Playboy's visual media.

Rose identifies three interconnected sites where visual meaning is constructed: the site of production, the site of the image, and the site of audiencing:

1. The Site of Production^{za}

1.1. This refers to the context in which an image or media product is created: "the circumstances of their production may contribute towards the effect they have." (Rose, p14). This includes the technology or processes involved, the genre of the image, the cultural norms shaping its creation, and the intentions of the image's author.

1.2. Spanning various mediums, technologies and decades; the visual media of Playboy examined in this thesis vary significantly in the circumstances of their production.

1.3. For example, Bunny Yeager's position as a rare female pin-up photographer in the 1950s and 60s offers a distinct lens on the production of Playboy imagery. My analysis of Yeager's work in Playboy in chapter five engages with Rose's notion of the site of production by considering Yeager's position within a male-dominated industry, her intent in producing work for men's magazines, the techniques she employed (such as natural lighting and usage of mirrors) and her

collaborative relationship with her models. These factors inform how Yeager's images challenge or conform to the patriarchal norms of her time.

1.4. Similarly, the production of GND reflects a distinct set of circumstances. As a reality television series produced in the 2000s, it was shaped by the conventions of the reality TV genre, including narrative editing, constructed personas, and marketability.

2. The Site of the Image

2.1. The site of the image refers to the compositional elements of the visual material itself, encompassing features such as composition, colour, framing, and subject matter. These choices shape how an image conveys meaning, evokes emotion, and interacts with broader cultural narratives.

2.2. Through an analysis of the aesthetic and compositional choices in Playboy's visual media, this thesis uncovers new meanings, revealing how these visual elements construct, reinforce, or challenge cultural narratives of femininity, sexuality, and empowerment.

2.3. For example, GND's aesthetic presentation (e.g., costumes, set designs, lighting) contributes to constructing the personas of its protagonists, intersecting with postfeminist visual tropes and their role in conveying neoliberal ideas of feminine sexual empowerment

3. The Site of Audiencing

3.1. Rose uses the term audiencing to refer to "...the process by which a visual image has its meanings renegotiated, or even rejected, by particular audiences watching in specific circumstances" (p.22) Audience

interpretations vary based on factors such as social identity, cultural context, and viewing conditions, shaping the reception and legacy of visual media.

3.2. In line with Rose's emphasis on the variability of audience interpretations, reflexivity plays a critical role in understanding how one's positionality as a researcher and viewer shapes the analysis. Reflexivity involves recognising and interrogating how subjective experiences, biases, and cultural influences inform the interpretation of media. In this thesis my auto-ethnographic creative methods not only inform my reflexive analysis but also position myself as both creator and audience. These methods allow me to embody and critically engage with the visual language of Playboy, providing a unique perspective on how media constructs femininity and sexuality.

3.3. While Playboy assumed a predominantly male audience throughout its history, this analysis investigates moments that challenge this narrative. Bunny Yeager's female gaze, the largely female audience of GND, and the post-Hefner era's shift toward gender inclusivity complicate Playboy's male-centric framing, opening space for alternative interpretations.

3.4. Inspired by Rose's discussion on how the context in which spectators view images change the meaning, where possible I have sourced original Playboy magazines through either Ebay, or archival visit, in order to view these images in the way they were originally intended to be viewed (rather than the digital reproductions). Photographs of these magazines in my collection form the illustrations of this thesis.

Data Collection and Analysis of Playboy Media

The Girls Next Door (GND)

I began my analysis of GND in spring 2021, watching all six seasons and making extensive notes. Following this, I read memoirs by Holly Madison (2015) and Kendra Wilkinson (2010), which offered insider perspectives on their experiences, and began exploratory writings analysing key moments in the series through the lens of feminist theory, focusing on themes such as empowerment, masculinity, and ironic sexism. In January 2023, I rewatched the entire series of GND, this time incorporating the DVD commentary provided by Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson (later Harris and Shannon in season six), as well as deleted scenes and additional interview content. Again, I took detailed notes to document my observations and reflections. In parallel, I have been engaging with Madison and Marquardt's Girls Next Level podcast, listening to new episodes weekly since the podcast first launched in August 2022 and taking notes to contextualise their retrospective insights. From January-May of 2024 I also subscribed to their fan subscription page on the platform Patreon, listening to their bonus episodes and engaging in their fan Q&A which will be explored in chapter five.

When engaging with GND media, I approach the material with several guiding questions: How do the depictions of women in the series relate to ideas of complicated empowerment? Are there moments where the women assert agency over patriarchal forces, such as Hugh Hefner or the production team? Where can production interference be identified, and how does it shape the show's narrative and tone? How do the accounts in memoirs, DVD commentary and the Girls Next Level podcast differ

from the representations seen in the series? What specific brands of feminine sexuality are constructed for the protagonists, and how do these align with or diverge from postfeminist theory? Finally, does the show subvert, or lean into the male gaze, and how?

To explore these questions, I identified several episodes of particular interest for transcription and detailed analysis. These episodes connect to themes explored in chapters five and six: The gaze and women as producers in *Playboy*, and the complexities of femininity in its media. When transcribing, I captured not only dialogue but also non-verbal elements such as visual composition, music, and editing choices. My analysis focuses on how discourse is disseminated through four key avenues: dialogue, by identifying patterns and themes in the women's interviews and interactions; editing, by examining how music, sequencing, and pacing influence meaning; visuals, by considering how the women and their environments are framed and presented; and lastly, narrative, by analysing how the women's storylines are presented in terms of wider narratives throughout the series.

A recurring plot line in *GND* revolves around the women's participation in *Playboy* pictorials, which offer a unique lens into the dynamics of agency and power. I have chosen to analyse three episodes centred on these photoshoots in chapter five, as they demonstrate a progression in the women's influence over their portrayals and reflect themes of the gaze and women as producers. Early episodes depict the women as having minimal input and being photographed collectively, while later episodes highlight their growing ability to direct their individual shoots. These episodes also illustrate how the constructed femininities of the women are reflected in *Playboy*'s visual branding and whether these depictions evolve over time. The selected episodes are:

1. *Just Shoot Me* (Season 1, Episode 7): The women pose for their first Playboy shoot. Marquardt balances the pressures of an exam with the demands of the pictorial.
2. *Mutiny on the Bounty* (Season 2, Episode 4): Hefner initially insists on a collective photoshoot, but the women advocate for individual portraits, demonstrating their growing confidence.
3. *Third Time's the Charming* (Season 5, Episode 20): The women pose for their final Playboy pictorial. Madison, now working as a photo editor, assists her friends during the shoot.

Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six key steps of thematic analysis - familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report (p.87) through analysing these episodes in spring 2024 I identified eight common patterns that occurred in varying frequencies throughout the episodes:

1. Girls explaining their concepts and ideas behind the shoots/ expressing agency in how the shoots are put together
2. Girls expressing their lack of agency and creative control over the shoots
3. Girls expressing how they want to please Hefner/ centre Hefner as the decision maker
4. Girls expressing anxiety about performing well/their appearance
5. Girls expressing confidence in themselves/their appearance
6. Girls complimenting/ helping each other out
7. Girls appear to be in conflict with one another
8. Girls reflecting on their journeys/storylines

As I watched these episodes and analysed the transcripts, I wrote down timestamps of where in the episode I perceived each pattern as occurring. These occurrences were then charted in a graph to observe how these patterns evolved across episodes. While this process introduced a quantitative element to my research, I decided not to include the data in the body of my analysis chapters. This decision was informed by the subjective nature of identifying these patterns, which cannot be easily quantified. However, this exercise was invaluable in shaping my qualitative analysis, helping me understand how the protagonists are depicted as gaining agency and control, and how their experiences reflect the show's evolving power dynamics.

The last episode I selected for analysis is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Season 1, Episode 8), which exemplifies the series' use of traditional high-feminine identities and activities; and the construction of Playboy branded femininity; thus a key piece site of analysis for chapter six. This episode showcases Marquardt's younger sister undergoing a glamorous makeover for the Mansion's annual *Midsummer Night's Dream Party*, a hyper-feminine activity imbued with joy and performativity. However, I also look for moments where these portrayals are complicated through discourse, including verbal interactions, visual cues, or editing choices. Such complexities offer insight into how hyper-femininity operates as both a source of empowerment and a site of negotiation within the series.

By analysing GND, I aim to disrupt traditional critiques of Playboy by shifting the focus toward the women at its centre, as well as to focus on to them as subjects with some agency rather than just objects drawing on Cahill's concept of derivatization discussed in chapter three. My analysis identifies themes of empowerment, agency, and

patriarchy, highlighting how GND offers a nuanced exploration of feminine identities that complicates binary readings of Playboy as either wholly oppressive or wholly empowering.

Bunny Yeager in Playboy

As the first female photographer to have her work in Playboy, Bunny Yeager's photographs in Playboy are integral to this thesis, serving both as subjects of critical analysis and as a source of inspiration for my art-based methods. I have chosen Yeager's work in Playboy as a key site of analysis because her dual role as photographer and subject uniquely challenges traditional notions of the male gaze and aligns with this thesis' aim of highlighting women's contributions to Playboy. Yeager's extensive contributions to Playboy, as identified through the *iPlayboy* archive (Playboy's digital archive of its magazines), provide a unique lens through which to explore her role in shaping, and at times subverting, the Playboy gaze. My analysis draws upon both the digital archive and physical copies of the magazines, with the latter offering a tactile engagement that enriched my understanding of Yeager's work by revealing nuances in layout, materiality, and audience interaction.

Using *iPlayboy*, I identified 42 Playboy issues featuring Bunny Yeager's work, including:

- 22 issues featuring her photographs.
- 6 centerfolds shot by Yeager.
- 13 pictorials shot by Yeager.

- 3 pictorials specifically dedicated to Yeager and her work.
- 2 covers photographed by Yeager.
- 3 letters written by Yeager featured in the 'Dear Playboy' section.
- 1 eulogy dedicated to Yeager.
- Selected Images for Analysis

From this extensive archive, I selected five key photographs (or spreads) by Yeager that highlight her construction and subversion of the gaze:

- Bettie Page's Playmate of the Month photograph (January 1955): A pivotal image that exemplifies Yeager's playful yet commanding approach to pin-up photography.
- Mike Shea's documentation of Yeager at work from the "Double Exposure" pictorial (May 1955): With a focus on her self-portraits, this spread captures Yeager's dual role as subject and creator, challenging traditional notions of the male gaze.
- Lisa Winter's centrefold and pictorial (December 1956): This work emphasises Yeager's ability to blend sensuality with a natural, candid aesthetic.
- Cindy Fuller's pictorial (May 1959): A set that explores themes of innocence and allure within the conventions of mid-century pin-up photography.
- Playboy's "House Party" pictorial (May 1959): Specifically pages 52–53, where Yeager's composition transforms domestic spaces into vibrant, performative stages.

My methodological approach integrates both digital and tactile engagement with Yeager's work. *iPlayboy* provided an invaluable tool for locating her contributions,

enabling comprehensive searches by keyword and issue. However, I also sought out physical copies of the magazines, when possible, as the materiality of these editions often shifted my readings. Holding the physical magazines emphasised the embodied experience of interacting with Yeager's photographs in their intended format, revealing how layout, paper quality, and the interplay of text and imagery shaped the audience's reception. This dual engagement, spanning digital and physical archives, allows for a richer, multi-dimensional analysis of Yeager's contributions to Playboy.

In addition to critical analysis, Yeager's photographs serve as a source of inspiration for my own art-making practice. Key areas of influence include:

- **Self-Portraiture:** Inspired by Yeager's use of self-representation in "Double Exposure," I explore how positioning oneself as both subject and creator can challenge the male gaze.
- **Staging and Composition:** Yeager's playful yet intentional use of space and props (such as mirrors and photographic apparatus) informs my photographic work, which interrogates constructs of femininity and performance.
- **Feminist Frameworks:** Yeager's dual position as photographer and subject aligns with feminist methodologies, offering a framework for engaging with themes of power, representation, and agency in my practice.

Through this combined critical and creative engagement, Yeager's work provides a unique site for examining the layered dynamics of power, representation, and femininity within Playboy. Her photographs exemplify the ways in which women within Playboy's ecosystem could simultaneously uphold and challenge its ideological frameworks, a tension that underpins my broader methodological approach.

Playboy's Digital Platforms

My research into Playboy's digital platforms (*PlayboyPlus* and *The Playboy Club*) employs a feminist lens to critically engage with the ways these platforms navigate themes of agency, empowerment, and commodification in a digital, post-Hefner era. I have selected Playboy's *PlayboyPlus* and *The Playboy Club*, as they represent a contemporary evolution of the brand, offering a crucial opportunity to analyse post-Hefner Playboy's attempts to reconcile its legacy with modern discourses on empowerment, agency, and digital commodification. Through a detailed content analysis, I explore how these platforms' representations of women reflect both continuities and departures from Playboy's traditional portrayal of femininity.

PlayboyPlus serves as a digital repository of Playboy's legacy, offering both archival images from its print history and new NSFW content created for the platform. In my analysis, I explore how these materials are curated and framed, paying particular attention to the tension between nostalgic commodification and contemporary ethical concerns. My analysis of *PlayboyPlus* interrogates how archival content, including previously unpublished images and casting videos, is recontextualised for digital consumption. I question whether these materials, often created decades ago under different societal norms, adequately reflect the principles of consent and agency that Playboy now claims to champion.

The Playboy Club, a creator-led subscription platform, positions itself as a space for agency and empowerment while drawing from the aesthetics and iconography of Playboy's history. I examine the ways the platform navigates and reimagines the brand's legacy within a commercial framework, critiquing the limits imposed by the platform's

governance and branding. I explore the contradictions inherent in *The Playboy Club's* corporate language. This includes its emphasis on “flirty, not explicit” content, which perpetuates binaries of respectability and stigmatisation in representations of sexual self-expression.

Through a combination of qualitative approaches, FCDA, and visual methodologies, I categorise and analyse visual and textual materials from *PlayboyPlus* and *The Playboy Club*. As part of this I reviewed 100 pages or profiles on each platform, focusing on the presentation of archival images, creator-generated content, and marketing language to identify recurring themes and tensions. To conduct this analysis I signed up for a one-day membership to *PlayboyPlus* (costing \$1) and created a profile as a creator on *The Playboy Club*. However, I refrained from linking bank information or posting work on *The Playboy Club* due to ethical concerns about directly participating in the platform's commercial ecosystem. Additionally, full access to creator content on *The Playboy Club* required payment to subscribe to individual creators, which was beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I analysed creators' “landing pages” and the limited images and information visible there.

Semi-Structured Interviews with Playboy Staff

In addition to employing practice based autoethnography, FCDA, and visual methodologies, this research integrates semi-structured interviews with Playboy staff as a means of enriching the analysis of the site of production and contextualising the broader socio-cultural implications of Playboy's media. These interviews provide firsthand insights into the creative processes, institutional goals, and ideological

frameworks that has shaped Playboy's post-Hefner years. By incorporating the voices of those involved in working from within Playboy's corporate structure, this study gains a deeper understanding of the intentions and guiding ethos influencing the production of post-Hefner Playboy media.

By positioning interviews as a complement to other methodological approaches, this study foregrounds the experiences and perspectives of staff as vital components in understanding how Playboy constructs its representations of desirable femininities. This approach addresses significant gaps in existing literature: not only is there no existing academic inquiry into Playboy's post-Hefner operations, but much of the existing scholarship focuses on external critiques of Playboy without engaging with the perspectives of those within the institution.

Through these interviews, this thesis illuminates how staff navigate Playboy's complex legacy and reconcile its historical framing as 'Entertainment for Men' with its contemporary ethos of 'Pleasure for All'. These perspectives not only enrich the analysis of Playboy's media but also contribute to a nuanced understanding of the company's attempts to reimagine itself within a post-Hefner, #MeToo-informed cultural landscape while negotiating the tension between nostalgia and progress.

Recruitment and Sampling

Recruitment of participants for my study differs from many other semi-structured interviews in that it was not only handled internally by Playboy staff themselves, but also the notion of interviewing was in-part initiated by Playboy staff.

This process began in March 2022 when I sent an email to Playboy's parent company PLBY's press inquiries email address. Within this email I described my project and requested an archival visit. I received a response from a member of staff at the company two weeks later stating that I would be "happy" to help me and could book time not only with their archivist, but with other members of staff to discuss their work. Their email underscored the apparent transformation within Playboy's corporate structure and audience to being more female driven and engaging with an increasing female audience:

PLBY Group, the parent company, is now more than 80% female so a lot of us are all fascinated by your research! Our customer base is also now 50% female. And our mission is no longer "Entertainment for Men" as it said on the magazine cover, but rather, "Pleasure for All". We look forward to meeting you in September (PLBY, 2022)

In response, I inquired whether it would be possible to interview staff members during my visit, attaching an information sheet outlining my research aims and the study in further detail (see Appendix 1 and 2).

The sole sampling criterion for my study was that participants must be current employees of Playboy. This criterion was intentionally broad, reflecting my interest in understanding how staff across various roles and levels of the organisation conceptualise and engage with the company's evolving ethos in its post-Hefner years.

I left the process of recruiting participants and determining the number of interviews entirely up to Playboy, a deliberate decision that allowed the company to self-organise

and respond to my prompt in a way that reflected its priorities. This approach aligns with my ethical framework, discussed in detail in the ethics sub-section below, and was intended to minimise risks to staff.

Whilst the number of participants is small at only four, the participants included individuals across various departments and roles, offering diverse perspectives on Playboy's corporate culture and creative processes. By focusing on current staff, I aimed to capture the ethos of the company as it continues to navigate its rebranding and attempts to engage with post-#MeToo feminist narratives and shifts to digital platforms. While I intentionally avoided stipulating specific roles or departments for participants, the range of individuals offered by Playboy provided a cross-section of perspectives that enriched my analysis, from senior management to more junior positions in three separate departments. Reflecting the email I received which highlighted the increasingly female driven corporate nature of Playboy, three out of four of my participants identified as female, with one participant identifying as male.

Ethical Considerations

The decision to allow Playboy to self-organise and recruit participants for interviews was made from an ethical standpoint, prioritising the protection of staff members and fostering a safe environment for open dialogue. By conducting the interviews in-person at Playboy's offices and ensuring they were officially sanctioned and approved by Playboy's legal department, I aimed to mitigate any perceived risks for participants.

This approach acknowledges the potential power dynamics and vulnerabilities inherent in interviewing staff connected to a corporation, particularly one with a significant public image. By having interviews organised through official channels, I sought to:

- **Protect Staff from Repercussions:** Avoid the possibility of staff feeling pressured or at risk of jeopardising their employment by participating in unsanctioned interviews.
- **Ensure Institutional Approval:** Allow for greater transparency and official acknowledgment of the research process, providing staff with a clear understanding of the scope and purpose of the interviews.
- **Foster a Comfortable Environment:** Create a setting where participants felt supported by the institution they represent, reducing anxiety about their responses being viewed as unauthorised or inappropriate.

While this method limits the potential for unsolicited, candid responses, or more critical engagement from staff on Playboy's legacy that could arise in independently recruited interviews, it aligns with my commitment to ethical research practices that prioritise participant well-being and trust.

Another ethical decision in conducting interviews with Playboy staff was choosing not to ask specific questions about Hugh Hefner. This decision was informed by both ethical and methodological considerations. From an ethical standpoint, I was aware that Playboy is actively working to distance itself from Hefner's legacy considering contemporary cultural critiques (Madison, 2015; *Secrets of Playboy*, 2022; Hefner, 2024). Asking staff to comment on Hefner could have placed them in a difficult position, particularly given his complex role within the company's history and ongoing rebranding efforts. Avoiding this topic helped to ensure that participants did not feel pressured to

navigate potentially sensitive or contentious discussions that might compromise their comfort or professional standing.

Methodologically, this decision aligns with one of the central aims of my research: to shift the focus of analysis away from Hefner and instead explore the women who produced, featured in, and consumed Playboy content. Including Hefner in my interview questions would have detracted from this focus and could have reinforced the very patriarchal lens my work seeks to complicate

Data Collection

The interviews took place over the course of a single morning in August 2022 at Playboy's Los Angeles offices. Three interviews were conducted in participants' private offices, while a fourth was conducted remotely due to the participant working from home that day. For the remote interview, I was seated in a Playboy conference room, notable for its art collection, including a Matisse painting that bears the burn marks of a cigarette stubbed out by John Lennon during a visit to the Playboy Mansion.

Interviews were scheduled around participants' work commitments, with three lasting approximately thirty minutes each and the fourth lasting fifteen minutes. While some of these interviews were shorter than anticipated, they still provided sufficient data to address my research questions and informed subsequent stages of my analysis.

The interviews were semi-structured, balancing consistency and adaptability. I designed a core set of vital questions to ensure key topics were addressed across all participants. However, the semi-structured format also allowed flexibility for follow-up questions to

emerge naturally in response to participants' answers. This approach was chosen to foster richer, more conversational data while maintaining alignment with the study's research aims.

Despite time constraints and limitations in access to archival materials, the interviews offered valuable insights into the post-Hefner rebranding of Playboy, participants' roles within the organisation, and the company's evolving cultural ethos. These discussions provided a nuanced perspective on the site of production, particularly the interplay between institutional goals, individual creativity, and corporate feminist re-imaginings of Playboy's media and identity.

Data Analysis

To analyse the semi-structured interviews conducted with Playboy staff, I employed a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), complemented by insights from FCDA. This dual approach enabled me to critically examine participants' reflections on Playboy's evolving ethos, creative processes, and ideas around desirable femininity while remaining grounded in the broader socio-political contexts shaping these discussions and maintaining criticality around how Playboy's corporate dynamics may influence staff's perspectives and responses.

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' exact wording and phrasing. Identifying information- such as anything directly relating to their job role- were then removed from transcripts to maintain participants anonymity.

Participants were assigned pseudonyms I had chosen from a list of popular fictional rabbit names. These names do not reflect any physical or personal characteristics of the

participant other than their gender. This initial stage allowed me to become deeply familiar with the data. This familiarisation process laid the foundation for identifying initial patterns and key ideas.

Using Braun and Clarke's six-step process, I systematically coded the data to identify recurring themes. Codes were grouped into broader categories, such as Playboy's ethos, and corporate feminism, before being refined to ensure coherence and relevance to the research questions. This iterative process ensured that the themes accurately reflected participants' perspectives and highlighted tensions, contradictions, and shared understandings.

FCDA informed my interpretation of the themes, enabling me to interrogate the language used by participants in describing Playboy's rebranding from 'Entertainment for Men' to 'Pleasure for All.' CDA allowed me to situate their narratives within broader discourses of power, inclusion, and cultural transformation, while FCDA emphasised how gender and intersectional identities intersect with these dynamics.

The interview data was triangulated with findings from my visual analysis of Playboy's media and the discursive patterns in FCDA. This integration offered a multidimensional perspective, linking staff insights to the visual and discursive strategies underpinning Playboy's evolving identity.

From Outsider to Observer: Reflexivity and Positionality

Roni Berger (2015) highlights reflexivity as essential in qualitative research, particularly regarding the researcher's insider/outsider status. An "insider" perspective can offer

benefits like familiarity with the subject and greater rapport with participants, who may feel more comfortable with someone from their community. However, this also risks blurred boundaries, bias projection, and imposing values on the research. Conversely, an “outsider” perspective can provide fresh insights and frame participants as “experts,” but lacks embodied experience, potentially missing nuanced understanding (p.224).

My evolving relationship with Playboy reflects both intimate familiarity with its media and an outsider’s distance from its corporate structure. Reflexivity has shaped how I approach my research questions and situate myself in relation to Playboy as a brand and subject. Throughout this research, I have reflected on whether I occupy an insider or outsider status. Playboy, as a corporation distinct from its cultural symbolism and media output, has often felt like an abstract entity, one I assumed I would never engage with directly. I believed that Playboy would remain unaware of my research.

In 2017, during my MFA, I covertly critiqued Playboy by applying to be a playmate and attending an open casting call for Playboy bunnies, not as formal research, but to interrogate beauty standards. My goal was to gain insight into these processes and desirability would measure up to my own body. Paradoxically, I hoped for rejection, an official confirmation that I did not meet the criteria of Playmate standard. Although this may seem self-punitive, the motivation stemmed from a desire to confront and demystify the cultural authority Playboy holds over feminine beauty. Instead of an official response from Playboy my attempts were instead met with silence.

By 2022, my perspective on engaging with Playboy had shifted, influenced by the company’s public denouncement of Hugh Hefner in response to the Secrets of Playboy documentary series (Secrets of Playboy, 2022, Playboy, 2022). Motivated by this

apparent alignment with more progressive values and step away from Hefner, I approached Playboy with a formal request to access their archives, followed by a request to interview staff after conversing with a member of staff through email. My intent had shifted from a personal critique of Playboy's standards to a more structured inquiry into its post-Hefner evolution, with a focus on de-centering Hefner and examining broader cultural narratives of femininity, sexuality, and inclusion in post-Hefner Playboy.

Visiting the Playboy offices in Los Angeles in August 2022 fundamentally shifted my perception of Playboy. The experience made Playboy tangible: a real office, with real workers, whose business cards now sit on my desk, whilst a Playboy branded water bottle label is stuck to my fridge a surreal and physical reminder of this encounter.

Upon my arrival, I was greeted with a personalised coffee featuring Playboy bunny latte art, a gesture accompanied by the comment, "This is something we do for everyone on their first day..". My guide, a member of Playboy's staff, gave me a private tour of the office spaces, where the hallways were adorned with original artefacts from the Playboy Mansion and artwork commissioned for the magazine from artists such as Keith Haring, LeRoy Neiman and Andy Warhol. Among these, a Frank Gallo sculpture of a nude woman as a chair (originally from Hugh Hefner's bedroom) stood out. My guide, with a mix of humour and unease, referred to it as "a little creepy."

This curated, corporate, environment blended nostalgia with corporate polish, highlighting the tension between Playboy's history and its contemporary ethos. The experience left me with the impression of an institution attempting to balance its legacy with a forward-looking identity. How could a company that publicly states they have

distanced themselves from their problematic founder simultaneously display an objectified hybrid of a nude woman/chair which once stood sentinel in his bedroom in the hallways of their corporate headquarters?

While I can never truly consider myself an “insider” at Playboy (I’ve neither worked for the company nor modelled for them) this visit offered a glimpse into what it might feel like to be part of their world, or at least a projection of how Playboy want to portray that world as. The office’s mix of nostalgic artefacts and modern corporate polish made Playboy’s cultural legacy feel both inescapable and carefully managed. As a researcher engaging with Playboy through a feminist lens, I was acutely aware of how my positionality aligned with their post-Hefner rebranding efforts, making me both a guest and an ideal audience for their narrative. This experience underscored the importance of reflexivity, prompting me to critically examine how the curated nature of the visit may shape my interpretations while maintaining the necessary distance to analyse the company’s complexities and contradictions.



Figure 4.2 At the Playboy Offices

Conclusion: Piecing the Methodological Quilt

My interest in patchworking and quilting does not just come from a handy metaphor for a multi-methodological research practice; I have had a long-held fascination with these textile-based objects. At age 16, seeking to learn more about archives and quilts (suffice to say I was not a popular teenager), I volunteered at York Quilters' Guild Museum, spending many weekends enamoured by their collections of meticulously patchworked textiles. From the eclectic and vibrant crazy quilts with their contrasting patterns and controlled spontaneity, to more structured and precise log cabin designs, these pieces captivated me. Quilts, with their soft layered textures and intricate compositions, have documented histories, covered sleeping bodies, forged communities, and acted as sites of protest (Bailey, 2021). As Jess Bailey (2021) so aptly states, "Quilts mend our heartbreak and bind us to action" (p. 57).

Patching together methodologies brings together diverse perspectives and approaches, enabling a richer and more nuanced analysis. Each method employed in this thesis offers its own insights, but it is through their integration that a more comprehensive understanding emerges. By re-examining fragments of Playboy's visual and textual media across its history through the lenses of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, and visual methodologies, this research seeks to uncover the gendered power dynamics, recurring motifs, and patterns embedded in Playboy's representations. It interrogates how these visual and textual materials reflect, reaffirm, and at times disrupt broader socio-political contexts, revealing the complexities and contradictions inherent in Playboy's cultural legacy.

Just as quilts carry the marks of their makers - the stitches, fragments and decisions that bind them together - this research is equally shaped by my own positionality and reflexive practice. By critically engaging with my relationship to Playboy as both an outsider with a vested interest in Playboy media and a researcher afforded glimpses into its corporate world, I hope to bring a perspective that is both embodied and critically distant.

Chapter Five: The Female Lens on the Female Form: Women as Producers of Playboy Content

I want to do the imagining. I don't wanna be the idea.

- Barbie, 2023

The final guest on July 14th 1957's episode of *What's My Line?* (an American game show series where panellists guess the occupations of its guests) appears onstage dressed in a ballgown and blonde hair and introduces herself as Bunny Yeager. The panellists struggle to guess her occupation with one announcing that she is a "...beautiful blonde, she's obviously a typical American school teacher". Another panellist queries Yeager as to whether the services she provides can be enjoyed by both men and women, to which Yeager responds, "that's right". The panel fails to deduce that Bunny Yeager is in fact a "cheesecake photographer", whose self-portraits and photographs of models such as Bettie Page continue to be analysed and exhibited well over sixty years later. During her most prolific years in the 1950s and 1960s, Yeager's gender was often written about as a novelty, framing her with patronising labels like "the world's prettiest photographer" (Perrone, 2014). Recent scholarship (Mason, 2012; Wright, 2016) has re-evaluated Yeager's contributions through a feminist lens, but her legacy in a male-dominated industry remains complex.

Bunny Yeager was the first female photographer to have her work published in *Playboy* and is among the very few women whose work appeared in *Playboy* during its formative years. Over the magazine's sixty-seven-year history, female photographers transitioned from being seen as novelty "lensladies" (*Playboy*, 1960) to outnumbering their male counterparts by the "post-Hefner" era of 2017-2020. By 2019 most Playmates were photographed by female photographers (Bennett, 2019). As former *Playboy* Chief

Marketing Officer Rachel Webber noted, “We talk a lot about what’s the Playboy gaze and how we need to diversify that. It’s who is behind the camera as much as in front of it” (Bennett, 2019).

This “Playboy gaze” has typically been viewed as an extension of the male gaze, given that Playboy’s content was historically produced by men, for a male audience. While Playboy’s post-Hefner era has generated woman-led content that disrupts longstanding ideas of the male gaze, this chapter argues that there are key moments throughout the magazine’s history that reveal more female agency than previous feminist critiques have acknowledged. Through a focused analysis of early Playboy issues featuring Bunny Yeager’s pioneering photography, as well as more contemporary media portrayals in *The Girls Next Door* (GND), this chapter will explore how women in Playboy exercised creative control and self-representation, challenging reductive views of the magazine as exclusively male-centred and objectifying women. Post-Hefner Playboy and its female-led initiatives will be examined further in chapter seven, while this chapter demonstrates how female producers and subjects negotiated their agency even within Playboy’s formative, male-driven years. By combining archival research, visual and feminist critical discourse analysis with creative art-making practices, this chapter aims to unpack the complex dynamics between female agency and the so-called “Playboy gaze.”

This chapter presents my original research, which integrates critical analysis, creative production, and interdisciplinary methodologies. Through a review of Playboy issues featuring Bunny Yeager, sourced via the *iPlayboy* archive and physical magazines, I examine Yeager’s dual role as photographer and subject, highlighting how she navigated and subverted the male gaze. This includes analysis of selected photographs and pictorials, such as Bettie Page’s Playmate of the Month centrefold and

documentation of Yeager's self-portraits in "Double Exposure," contextualised within feminist discourses on agency and the gaze. Despite Yeager's significant contributions to Playboy, there is little scholarly analysis of her role, making this a critical gap that my research addresses. Similarly, I analyse GND using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to interrogate how gender, power, and identity are mediated through the lens of reality television. Examining episodes for narrative framing, visual cues, and agency, I connect GND's representations to Playboy's broader cultural legacy. Given that no major academic analysis exists on GND, my research offers an original contribution by situating the series within feminist critiques of media and representation. Additionally, my art-making practice contributes through the creation of self-portraiture and autoethnography, I reimagine Playboy's visual codes, merging feminist reinterpretation with material engagement to critique constructs of femininity and performance.

In summary this chapter is divided into 4 main sections:

- The first presents further integral literature to this chapter through a discussion of Playboy's first ever 'Sweetheart of the Month': Marilyn Monroe
- The second analyses the work of photographer Bunny Yeager and her contributions to Playboy
- The third focuses on *The Girls Next Door* (GND) reality television series, analysing three photoshoot focused episodes.
- The fourth section, explores issues of self-representation and production through my own self-portraiture

The Playboy Gaze and The Two Marilyns

Before analysing the work of female producers in Playboy, it is essential to consider: what is the “Playboy gaze”? A useful starting point is the magazine’s very first centrefold. This section will review further literature relating to the gaze and the notorious subject of Playboy’s first centrefold to argue that the Playboy gaze might be more nuanced and subversive than its ‘Entertainment for Men’ tagline suggests. This reconsideration of the gaze in Playboy forms a theoretical foundation from which I will build my analysis of my findings in subsequent sections.

During my 2022 research visit to the Chicago History Museum archives, I was offered a rare opportunity to view Playboy’s inaugural issue from their vault. While I was excited to see this iconic piece of history, I also felt a sense of hesitation and guilt. The reason? Marilyn Monroe.

Playboy’s first issue featured Monroe as the magazine’s inaugural Sweetheart of the Month (later renamed Playmate of the Month in the second issue). However, Monroe’s appearance in Playboy was without her consent: Hugh Hefner had purchased a nude image of Monroe taken by Tom Kelley, entitled *Golden Dreams*, from a Chicago-based calendar company. This photograph was shot before Monroe achieved mainstream success. Despite Hefner crediting Monroe with catalysing Playboy’s early popularity (Izadi, 2017) and eventually purchasing the burial plot next to her declaring: “Spending eternity next to Marilyn is too sweet to pass up” (Gottlieb, 2009), Monroe was never compensated for her appearance, nor did she ever meet Hefner.

Viewing Monroe's non-consensual centrefold stirred feelings of unease that were compounded by an incident that occurred en route to my appointment, when I was sexually harassed on Chicago's "L" train. Years of studying Playboy have made me conscious of the need to be mentally prepared to confront some of its more misogynistic language, particularly in the early issues, which reflect wider sexist cultural attitudes of the time. Already unsettled, Playboy's description of Monroe as "Marilyn 'blonde all over' Monroe is the juiciest morsel to come out of the California hills since the discovery of the naval orange" (Playboy, 1953, p.17) left a particularly bitter taste.

Turning the page onto *Golden Dreams*, I felt even more conflicted. Monroe's lack of consent in being published in Playboy is incredibly significant and deserves to be recognised. At the same time however, looking at the image there is no denying the absolute magic of Monroe's performance of sexuality. In the predominantly black and white inaugural issue of Playboy, she is radiant. Seated amongst a sea of bright red draped fabric, red glossed lips parted, she gazes straight into the camera; the embodiment of feminine allure.

Monroe has been the subject of extensive analysis in books, articles, and other media (for example: Schiller, 2021; *Blonde*, 2022; Cooper 2022.) As an American icon, her impact on popular culture and representations of women in media is immeasurable. Initially, I planned to leave Monroe out of this thesis, wondering what more could be added to existing discourse. However, Monroe, and the evolving discourse surrounding her, contribute profoundly to an understanding of Playboy's relationship with the gaze and female sexuality.

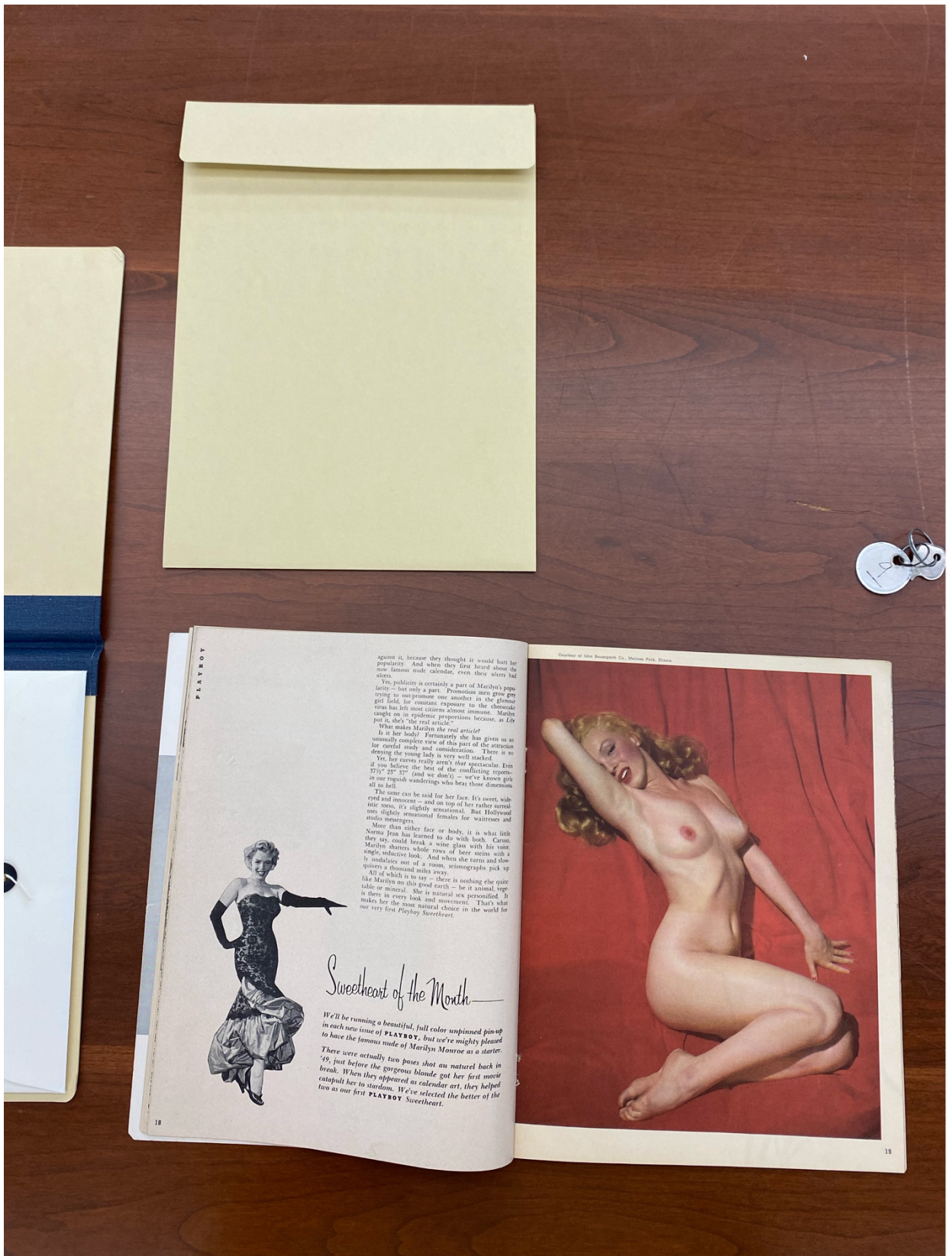


Figure 5.1 'Golden Dreams' as seen in Chicago History Museum's Reading Room

Monroe was foundational to Playboy's construction of femininity. As Playboy's inaugural -albeit non-consenting - centrefold, she set the standard for its idealised femininity. After her appearance in Playboy's first issue, Monroe's image featured on multiple covers, and later shoots with Anna Nicole Smith and Lindsay Lohan explicitly referenced her iconic look. It could be argued that Monroe, perhaps more than any other figure, is emblematic of Playboy. The magazine frequently emphasised Monroe's role in its brand identity, using her image as a symbol of the Playboy ideal: predominantly white, thin, hyper-feminine, and blonde. An example of this appears in recruitment materials for models and Playmates from 2017 which describes the lineage of a Playmate (quoted below). Here we see Playboy refer to Monroe as their inaugural Playmate, tethering her to their legacy. In doing so, Playboy continued to profit from her image and enduring cultural status.

Playmates have heritage.

As the first Playmate (at the time she was called a 'sweetheart'), Marilyn Monroe set what has become one of the most incredibly legacy's [sic]. Come and follow in the footsteps of Pamela Anderson, Jenny McCarthy, Jayne Mansfield, Amanda Cerny, Betty [sic] Page & Victoria Silvestedt [sic] (to name a few).
(Playboy.com, 2017)

Monroe has often been analysed in relation to the male gaze, her first appearance in *The River of No Return* (1954) is one of Laura Mulvey's examples of "to-be-looked-at-ness" in her pivotal 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Mulvey argued that Monroe's depiction in *The River of No Return* is an example of women in cinema being utilised as an "erotic spectacle" to fulfil the fantasy of the male gaze. Her characters role as a showgirl allows for her to function as a dual object of desire both

for the male characters within the film, as well as the intended male audience watching the film:

A woman performs within the narrative; the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude. For a moment the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the film into a no man's land outside its own time and space. (p.12)

In *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996), Mulvey returns to Monroe, arguing that Monroe's public image can be viewed through what Mulvey terms "commodity fetishism," where her carefully curated persona symbolises post-war consumer culture's sexual ideals. Mulvey argues that Monroe's public image and the launch of Playboy in 1953 exemplifies an era where female sexuality was repackaged for male consumption. As Mulvey notes, Playboy marketed a sanitised image of femininity for mainstream acceptance. This cinematic influence - exemplified by Hefner's love of Hollywood - can be seen in Playboy's imagery, arguably setting a standard for the Playboy gaze as highly stylised and male-oriented.

Joanna Pitman similarly argues that Monroe was "a carefully moulded vehicle for male voyeurism, whose job was to light up the 1950s and make herself available to the world" (p.223). Monroe's constructed persona embodies a heightened femininity, almost a fantasy. However, whilst it could also be argued that whilst Monroe's appearances in cinema and still photographs are primarily constructed by and for the male gaze, that is not the whole picture. Somewhat similar to Playboy, the large female fanbase surrounding Monroe, and the moments of a female gaze on Monroe disrupt the narrative that Monroe is solely constructed for male consumption.

Hefner's aspiration to channel cinematic fantasies into his magazine, combined with the shared visual nature of photography and film, makes it relevant to analyse Playboy's imagery through theories on the male gaze within film. Yet photography, and particularly the pin-up genre, also has nuances worth exploring. Kathryn Benzel (1991) argues that the pin-up photography's role as an instrument of male desire influences its meaning:

Pin-ups, often referred to as artistic stills, have a subtext for meaning in these conventions that encourage voyeuristic viewing. The seemingly private subject- a scantily clad model- is made a spectacle for public consumption. This subtext creates and reaffirms the stereotype of woman as object- she seems not to know that she is viewed; she's naked, needing protection; she is vulnerable and innocent; she becomes the male idealisation of the female body, the perfect body. All of this "meaning" is made to appear truthful by photography's pretensions to reality and thus the female body becomes a way to meaning, but the meaning of these pin-ups is skewed by its exclusive code for male pleasure rather than aesthetic or artistic representation (p.3).

Kathryn Benzel's description of the pin-up as an "instrument of male desire" aligns closely with Mulvey's concept of the "erotic spectacle." Both Benzel and Mulvey highlight how the female subject, displayed in a voyeuristic context, is reduced to an object primarily intended for male pleasure. Benzel's observation that the pin-up "seems not to know that she is viewed" reinforces Mulvey's idea of "to-be-looked-at-ness," where the woman exists in a kind of suspended awareness, as if entirely unconscious of the viewer's gaze

Moreover, Benzel argues that the meaning within these images “appear truthful by photography’s pretensions to reality” (p.3). This sense of authenticity allows the male gaze to transform the woman into a “perfect body,” giving the illusion of authenticity while still catering exclusively to male pleasure. By invoking photography’s connection to reality, the pin-up further enforces this idealised constructed image of femininity as natural, conflating fantasy with reality.

We see this stylised representation of the pin-up within much of Playboy’s photography, especially within their formative years. Furthermore, Benzel’s concept of the pin-up as a “private subject” displayed for “public consumption” parallels Playboy’s ‘girl next door’ ideal, which presents women as approachable and unassuming, yet implicitly inviting male desire. This construct reinforces a familiar yet sexualised image of femininity that appears natural and accessible, embodying Mulvey’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” by positioning the model as innocently unaware of her erotic appeal, an ideal crafted entirely around male pleasure.

In contrast, Maria Elena Buszek (2006) offers an alternate reading of the pin-up genre, acknowledging its historical roots in male pleasure but also recognising how its hyper-feminine aesthetic allows for a re-appropriation by feminists. Buszek points to contemporary feminist artists who have reclaimed pin-up imagery as expressions of assertive femininity. This approach repositions the pin-up as a space where women can assert agency over sexualised images, thus disrupting the binary of subject and object imposed by the male gaze.

While many pin-ups are indeed silly caricatures of women that mean to construct their humiliation and passivity as turn-ons, the genre has also

represented the sexualised woman as self-aware, assertive, strong, and independent...Many contemporary feminist artists have looked to this genre as a mode of self-expression (p.8).

Buszek's notion of feminist artists reclaiming the pin-up genre aligns with the concept of the female gaze and the co-option of media traditionally crafted for the male gaze, as discussed in my literature review. Jessica Kiang captures this potential for subversion: "Cinema might be a powerful, masculine-coded master, but women viewers can be disobedient to its demands; we can subvert and co-opt" (2020, p.93). Applying this perspective, Monroe's non-consensual appearance in *Playboy* has become a subject of feminist reinterpretation that challenges the traditional male gaze imposed on her image.

Barbara Bloom's *Playboy in Braille* (1995), displayed in the *Feminism and Art* exhibition at the *US National Museum of Women* in 2002, exemplifies such an intervention. Through my analysis of Bloom's work, I interpret her use of Eve Arnold's 1954 photograph of a fully clothed Marilyn Monroe reading *Ulysses* as a deliberate subversion of *Playboy*'s pin-up imagery and its male gaze. This choice reframes Monroe within an intellectual and non-sexualised context, challenging the *Playboy* gaze.

In the 1970s, the US Library of Congress began publishing braille editions of popular magazines, including *Playboy*, to make them accessible to blind and visually impaired readers. While these editions contained only text and no images, they still sparked controversy over whether taxpayer funds should support an accessible *Playboy*. In 1985, the US House of Representatives voted to cut funding for braille *Playboy*, arguing that it still conveyed an inappropriate gaze, even without imagery. This ruling suggests that in the eyes of the US government even when reduced to just its text, the sexualised

gaze on Playboy remains. That even when the sighted gaze is removed from Playboy, it still is viewed as pornographic in nature.

Bloom's choice of Monroe's image is significant. Rather than selecting a pin-up shot by a male photographer, she uses Arnold's image of Monroe fully clothed, reading *Ulysses*. Bloom's intervention recalls historical censorship, comparing the ban on braille Playboy to the obscenity charges once levelled against *Ulysses*. Though Bloom also inserts Monroe into Playboy without her consent, this image of Monroe subverts the gaze, challenging assumptions about sexualisation, censorship, and intended audiences.

Kim Q. Hall (2002) examines *Playboy in Braille* through the lens of feminist disability studies, arguing that Bloom's piece critiques both sexism and ableism by questioning who the intended readers of Playboy and *Ulysses* "should be." Hall writes:

Bloom's Playboy in Braille problematises the gaze in ways that reveal connections between sighted female readers and male and female blind readers. Far from the Marilyn Monroe character who describes herself as "not very bright" in *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder 1959) Bloom's centrefold presents Marilyn Monroe who defies the "dumb blonde" sexist stereotype by engaging in serious reading. Rather than inviting the gaze, Marilyn Monroe's eyes in this photograph are fixed on Joyce's *Ulysses*. (p.viii)

In juxtaposing Playboy with *Ulysses*, Bloom disrupts Playboy's assumed male readership and challenges the reductive "dumb blonde" trope often associated with Monroe. By positioning her artwork in a feminist exhibition, Bloom defies Playboy's early editorial note, which once directed non-male readers to pass the magazine "along

to the nearest man in your life” (Playboy, 1953, p.3), subverting both the intended gaze and audience of Playboy itself.

Griselda Pollock’s analysis of Eve Arnold’s photograph used in Bloom’s disrupted copy of Playboy goes beyond the conclusion that the image simply subverts the dumb blonde trope frequently attributed to Monroe. Pollock (2016) argues that the photograph is potentially not as candid as it suggests and has a layer of staging. Pollock stipulates that Monroe is purposely posed reading a specific section of the novel, the only moment where a female character - Molly Bloom - expresses her point of view, albeit through the lens of Joyce. Pollock suggests that Monroe chose to be photographed reading *Ulysses* - a notoriously hard to read novel - to transcend sexist stereotypes often culturally placed on herself and thus to pass amongst patriarchal cultural and academic circles:

When we return to Eve Arnold’s photograph, we see both Marilyn Monroe and Norma Jean Baker ventriloquizing the words from a novel-high art- that breached its own censors to speak the body and to create within it a space that gave words that had to be voiced to become intelligible to a woman speaking her experiences as a body and a soul in a world of men. Could any photograph ‘say’ all this? No. By virtue of the seemingly paradox of sex goddess reading Joyce, it could, would and has provoked a reading that tries to say some of this.
(p. 229)

Pollock’s analysis of *Marilyn Monroe Reading Ulysses* reveals Monroe’s use of her public persona to engage with high art, subverting the “dumb blonde” stereotype. By choosing to be photographed with a challenging novel like *Ulysses*, Monroe created a complex image that challenged reductive stereotypes and subtly asserted her agency

within a patriarchal cultural framework. I argue this sense of intentionality offers a lens through which to view other images of Monroe, including *Golden Dreams*, as part of her nuanced performance of femininity and sexuality.

Whilst feminist artistic interventions of Playboy, such as with Bloom's work, complicate and critique the gaze, I argue that additionally Playboy itself when reanalysed can serve as a site for feminist engagement with the concept of the gaze. We see this potential not only in the female photographers of Playboy, whose work crafts a female gaze within Playboy, but also in the performance of the subjects of Playboy's images.

Returning to Monroe's *Golden Dreams* Playboy photograph, I find myself grappling with the tension between objectification and empowerment. While I acknowledge the ethical complexities of her non-consensual involvement in Playboy, this image also reflects Monroe's mastery in performing feminine sexuality.

As Benzel (2004) states Monroe often remarked that photographers "...never pose her for shots, rather let her create the portrait" (p.5), implying that Monroe exercised control over her image, functioning as a co-creator rather than a passive subject. Benzel adds, "When Monroe displays herself as object and plays herself as subject in still photographs, Monroe becomes the artistic subject in a text without words, a text that invites the viewer's participation" (p.1). If we are able to view Arnold's *Marilyn Monroe Reading Ulysses* as an agentic statement from Monroe, I would argue the same approach could be applied to *Golden Dreams*.

When discussing the male gaze on female subjects, especially cultural icons like Monroe, it's easy to overlook the subject's own agency. Although Monroe's lack of consent in Playboy complicates the meaning of *Golden Dreams*, the image also

captures her skilled performance of feminine sexuality, actively playing up to the male gaze. Within *Golden Dreams* Monroe embodies a particular form of sexuality that is self-directed, suggesting that Monroe both inhabited and directed the male gaze cast upon her. In a *Life* magazine interview conducted shortly before her death, Monroe reflected on her status as a sex symbol: “That’s the trouble, a sex symbol becomes a thing, and I just hate to be a thing. But if I’m going to be a symbol of something, I would rather have it sex.”(Merryman,1962, n.p) Here, Monroe voices her desire to be seen as an agentic human rather than a solely an object, embracing her role as a sexual subject on her own terms. As Joanna Frueh writes, “As long as I am an erotic subject, I am not averse to being an erotic object.” (1996 p.4)

As a pivotal figure in Playboy’s construction of feminine sexuality, Monroe’s relationship with the gaze and the complex binary of sexual object/subject provides a crucial lens for analysing the diverse portrayals of women in Playboy. Her *Golden Dreams* centrefold encapsulates these complexities: while it reflects limiting beauty standards and ethical concerns tied to the male gaze, it also creates space to challenge this gaze by viewing women as active participants in the performance of feminine sexuality. Through the lens of complicated empowerment, these portrayals resist reductive binaries of objectification and empowerment, instead revealing Playboy’s gaze as a site where women’s agency and societal norms intersect and collide.

In the following sections of this chapter, I apply and test these notions and ideas against Playboy’s representations of women, focusing first on the works of Bunny Yeager, Playboy’s first female photographer. I then analyse three photo-shoot-focused episodes of GND, examining how the show portrays women navigating agency, constraint, and the gaze. Finally, I present my own embodied responses to this

research, using practice-based methods to critically engage with and reinterpret Playboy's visual and cultural legacy.

Bunny Yeager's Disruption of the Gaze in Playboy

Eleanor Linnea "Bunny" Yeager's pin-up photography, particularly her work in Playboy, offers an example of how female photographers within the patriarchal space of Playboy can navigate, subvert, and even complicate the gaze. This section examines Yeager's contributions to Playboy to explore how her images challenge and expand the concept of the gaze within Playboy and demonstrate complicated empowerment. While Yeager's self-portraiture and photographs have seen a resurgence of critical interest³ (Soloman, 2012; Mason, 2012; Ollman, 2015; Wright, 2016; Frank, 2015; Knelman, 2018), interpretations of Yeager's relationship to feminism remain divided. Some hail her as "a feminist before the term was part of the cultural conversation" (Frank, 2015), while others (Wright, 2016; Knelman, 2018) argue that her position vis-à-vis feminism is more nuanced.

Although Yeager's work adhered to conventional Western ideals of feminine beauty, often favouring young, white, thin, able-bodied models, it also reveals her unique positioning within the male gaze. Working within patriarchal spaces like Playboy while advocating for women to become producers of their own self-portraits through her book *How I Photograph Myself* (1965), Yeager complicates traditional feminist readings of her work. As Ellen Wright (2016) observes, while Yeager's images aligned with beauty

³ i As mentioned, whilst there has been critical interest in Yeager's work, her work within Playboy has not been the focus of any academic output

standards, her playful engagement with the male gaze allows moments of female agency within an otherwise constraining framework:

While Yeager was an active part of an industry that reinforced normative notions of heterosexual female sexuality, her approach to self-portraiture, particularly her use of eyeline matching, mise-en-scène, and performance demonstrates that not all pinups are created equal. Indeed it may be possible to find agency in what may seem initially to be the most unlikely of photographic genres; to have one's cheesecake and eat it, too. (p.17)

Building on these perspectives, this section focuses specifically on Yeager's Playboy contributions, examining how her work both reinforces and subtly critiques the magazine's patriarchal framing of female sexuality. Whilst Yeager's work appeared in multiple men's magazines, she highlighted her relationship with Playboy in interview (Solomon, 2012), suggesting its significance in her career. Playboy played a formative role in Yeager's career, first acting as a catalyst for her early success and later as a return platform toward the end of her career. Yeager's rare position as a female photographer within Playboy's early years both conforms and problematises Playboy's construction of the gaze, with Yeager utilising her knowledge of the gaze to question and sabotage it from within.

This section analyses five images/ photo spreads which are as follows:

1. Bettie Page Playmate of the Month photograph: January 1955
2. Mike Shea's documentation of Yeager at work from the pictorial *Double Exposure* (with a focus on the photo spread that documents her self-portraits):
May 1955

3. Yeager's pictorial and centrefold of Lisa Winter: December 1956
4. Yeager's pictorial of Cindy Fuller: May 1959
5. Yeager's pictorial *Playboy's House Party* (specifically pages 52-53): May 1959

This analysis draws directly on my primary research, which involves sourcing and examining physical copies of Playboy magazines to engage with the materiality and context of Bunny Yeager's photographs. Where possible, I have acquired these issues to support my analysis and to provide material for illustrations. Any figures featuring Playboy images within this thesis (unless otherwise stated) are photographs of magazines from my personal collection. However, this approach was not feasible for every issue, such as the January 1955 edition, which features Yeager's iconic image of Bettie Page and is considered a valuable collector's item.

My analysis begins with Yeager's first published work in Playboy, her 1955 Playmate of the Month photograph of Bettie Page, one of her most iconic contributions to the magazine. This work exemplifies Playboy's visual culture during its formative years, when the publication explicitly distanced itself from women readers. As part of my primary research, I critically examine how this image complicates Playboy's construction of the gaze, due to Yeager's unique position as a female photographer, a rarity in Playboy's ecosystem. While later issues would foreground her gender in commentary, her debut appearance included only her name in the credits, without emphasising her identity as a woman.

Yeager's 1955 Playmate of the Month photograph of Page is Christmas themed, with Page seen in-front of an emerald green background kneeling beside a Christmas tree in nothing but a Santa hat. Page's face appears playful and joyful as she winks at the camera and holds up two glass baubles teasingly, reflected in which we can see studio

lighting equipment that reveal the artifice of the setup. Yeager's photograph of Page is undeniably cheesecake pin-up and indicative of Yeager's mastery of the pin-up genre, with saturated colour and Page's animated pose and expression, it is pure, playful, camp fantasy.

In a 2012 interview (Solomon, 2012) Yeager described how Hefner's enthusiastic response to her Bettie Page Christmas photo led to her ongoing collaboration with the magazine. In the same interview Yeager discusses her creative direction of page, coaching her to perform different "characters" which showcased different ideals of feminine sexuality that played to and subtly critiqued the male gaze: "I made her into different characters because I wanted to show how women are viewed by men, who of course have different ideas of women. They don't see the real girl -- they see her as something else" (Solomon, 2012). Here we can see how Yeager's and Page's collaborative depictions of characterised femininities function as both compliance with and subtle subversion of the male gaze, simultaneously appealing to and playing with Playboy's male audience. This approach suggests that Yeager not only catered to the male gaze but also critiqued it by exposing its reliance on constructed ideals, allowing Page to embody a form of performance that reveals and disrupts the expectations placed on female identity.

Page's cheesecake pin-up images by Yeager, as seen in her Christmas photograph, reflect Playboy's 'girl next door' ideal (playful, familiar, and non-threatening) while simultaneously emphasising Page's self-awareness and performative control. Buszek (2006) argues that Page's work with photographers Irving and Paula Klaw in which she posed in fetish and bondage scenarios, presents a more overtly powerful and subversive image of femininity that contrasts with Playboy's wholesome aesthetic. In a sense, Page's body of work spans a spectrum of feminine sexual expressions,

encompassing both the approachable 'girl next door', and the 'difficult' woman Hefner deemed undesirable (Fallaci, 1968). Yet, Yeager's images of Page, though softer in tone, also convey strength and self-possession within this 'girl next door' aesthetic. Viewing these images through a lens which resists a simplistic good girl/bad girl binary, Yeager's portrayal reveals a more layered vision of femininity that speaks to women's agency even within Playboy's constraints, suggesting that Page's accessible femininity holds its own form of complicated empowerment

Double Exposure

While Yeager's gender was frequently discussed in relation to her work, particularly as a rare female pin-up photographer in the 1950s, her relationship to feminism is complex. Ellen Wright (2016) explores this nuance, noting that, while modern writers like Priscilla Frank (2015) have labelled Yeager a "...feminist before the term was part of the cultural conversation" (P.116), Yeager's relationship to feminism is less straightforward. Wright observes that, although Yeager's work in male-dominated industries was a "bold move," it's likely she did not have complete "creative and authorial control" (P.125) over her published work, with editorial decisions often influenced by male editors. Yeager never explicitly identified as a feminist, but she frequently commented on her gender, noting, "I wanted to do what I wanted to do, not what men had done" (p.129). Wright suggests that these reflections were less overtly feminist statements than expressions of Yeager's desire to prove herself in a male-driven field, striving to be seen as equal or superior to her male counterparts. As Yeager wrote in *How I Photograph Nudes*:

I have often been asked 'Who do you think takes better pictures of women... a man or a woman?' This seems to me a ridiculous question because there is no

answer. With equal knowledge of the fundamentals of photography, either sex can make excellent pictures...This battle of the sexes eludes me (1963, p. 20).

While Yeager downplays the role of gender in artistic ability, she overlooks that the photography and men's magazine industries at that time were heavily male dominated, making it especially challenging for women to succeed. The gender binary might not impact one's ability as a photographer but certainly impacted one's ability to make a career as one. Her success within Playboy can therefore be seen as revolutionary. This raises the question of whether Yeager needed to explicitly identify as a feminist for her work to be viewed as such. Even if her brand of empowerment is complicated, her persistence as a female photographer in a male-dominated space can itself be read as a feminist act.

Whilst Yeager's position of operating from within patriarchal spaces, such as Playboy, leads to complicated feminist readings of her work, Wright (2016) argues that Yeager's self-portraits in particular stand out as examples of Yeager subverting the gaze and challenging the binary of sexual object/subject:

Yeager's work may not have been explicitly political, but a small cache of her self-portraits problematise the established dichotomies of male and female, active and passive, subject and object, demonstrating Yeager's awareness of the mechanisms in operation and stakes involved in the observer-observed dynamic, and of her anticipated position as a woman within that dynamic (p.41)

Yeager's self-portrait set up was featured within Playboy, in her second feature in the magazine. In Playboy's May 1955 issue, the pictorial *Double Exposure* focused on the duality of Yeager's position as a model and photographer, showing Yeager at work

photographing other models, and herself. Yeager's position as a photographer did not however, stop her from being treated like many other models in Playboy, as I found that the corresponding text to the pictorial both published Yeager's measurements and repeatedly discussed her appearance, for example: "Roughly two years ago, a cute and curvaceous Florida model took a long gander at her bank account, compared it with those of the photographers who hired her, and decided she was in the wrong end of the business" (Playboy, 1955, p.43). Remarks such as these undercut Yeager's professional standing, presenting her success as a novelty and linking her achievements to her looks. Playboy even claimed she "is by no means an expert photographer" (p.47). Whilst Yeager positioned her approach to photography as accessible through her how-to-books on photography (1963, 1964), her skill at crafting self-portraits and pin-ups are undeniable. Through gendered remarks, and a focus on Yeager's looks and the downplaying of Yeager's skills, this text creates a tension between Yeager's role as a creator and Playboy's undermining of her professional identity.

In this pictorial, we see Yeager in a sheer black negligee setting up her camera, positioning her tripod, and using a mirror to fine-tune her pose. Although these images were taken by Playboy photographer Mike Shea, the setup and styling suggest Yeager's input and control over her presentation; that Shea was documenting Yeager at work in a set-up and configuration that she has self-produced. This behind-the-scenes look at Yeager's process, utilising a self-timer and mirrors to frame herself, illustrates a woman creating her own image, a stark contrast to typical Playboy pictorials where male photographers directed for male audiences. While not self-photographed, these images likely reflect Yeager's own decisions regarding her setup and attire, enabling her to assert a degree of agency within the framework of Playboy's gaze.

As illustrated in figure 5.2, this spread captures Bunny Yeager as a professional, actively setting up her equipment, taking light meter readings, and positioning herself for the camera. My analysis highlights how this imagery reinforces her dual identity as both creator and subject, showcasing her agency in constructing these moments. Notably, we see Yeager using a mirror to assist in posing during the brief interval between pressing the camera's shutter and the timer's release, offering insight into her deliberate, performative construction of femininity. Through my research, I argue that mirrors were not only practical tools for Yeager in creating her self-portraits but also recurring motifs in her work, used strategically to play with the gaze and expose artifice. This is particularly evident in her photograph of Bettie Page with a mirrored Christmas bauble, where the reflective surface doubles as both a prop and a commentary on the constructed nature of pin-up imagery

By claiming space as both photographer and subject, Yeager challenges traditional gender roles in photography, a field and career path largely dominated by men. To revisit Benzel's insight on Monroe's self-representation, "When Monroe displays herself as object and plays herself as subject in still photographs, Monroe becomes the artistic subject in a text without words, a text that invites the viewer's participation" (2004, p.1). Similarly, Yeager's self-portraits and the pictorial of her process assert her dual role as both subject and object, demonstrating her expertise and complicating the typical male gaze by blending feminine sexuality with creative authority within Playboy's pages.



With an automatic timer attached to her camera, Bunny is able to play both photographer and model at the same time. Here, in one end of her living room, she adjusts light and camera, after checking exposures (the camera's and her own), she sets the timer and steps in front of the lens. A mirror beside the camera helps her to find the proper pose and expression. This shooting arrangement saved a model's fee and produced some very saleable checks. Models are no problem for Bunny, however. Because of many friendships made during her own modelling career, she has some of the country's choicest charmers to choose from.

Shooting in her own studio and posing together. As a woman, Bunny has a unique advantage over her male colleagues. Some girls have no objection to posing in costumes or lingerie, but they get shy (or so we're told) when a male photographer asks them to pose in the slingshots. Naturally, they can have no such objections when the photographer's personal appearance is not different than their own. This state of affairs has led one painting woman to lament that beautiful models will double for only one of two reasons - for love or Bunny. However, since most of Bunny's work is done out of doors, nude modelling does pose a few problems. There was the time, for instance, when Bunny and her undraped subject were surprised to find their labors being gleefully observed by a group of fishermen whose boat had drifted silently into view. Or the time Bunny thought she'd foil such prying eyes by working in the privacy of a walled garden, not reckoning with a loitering helicopter and its interested pilot. Usually, though, Bunny avoids these problems by shooting her pictures in the early morning, before more conventional citizens are up and going. Bunny is by no means an expert photographer, and she's the first person to admit it. Her shooting techniques are almost as simple and basic as the tips in those free pamphlets you get with packages of flash bulbs. And her equipment is anything but fancy. One of her cameras has a broken shutter and her tripod is corroded from salt water. But this doesn't worry her. She knows that the elements of pin-up photography are little more than a well-stocked model, a camera, and someone behind it to snap the shutter. By simply moving from the front to the back of the camera, ex-model Bunny Yeager is making a lot more bread and butter out of cheese-cake.

Y

Figure 5.2 Double Exposure

Crafting Her Own Gaze

Page was not the only model Yeager brought into the pages of Playboy. One of Yeager's favourite subjects was Lisa Winters, whom she discovered herself. Writing to the 'Dear Playboy' section after a 1997 feature revisited Winters' photographs, Yeager remarked: "I was so pleased to see Lisa Winters featured in January (especially since you used my photos). She was probably the most beautiful girl I ever photographed" (Yeager, 1997, p.12).

Yeager's 1957 pictorial and centrefold of Winters features two main hallmarks of Yeager's work: outdoor locations and the notion of mirrors. In her centrefold of Winters she is seen out in the Miami sun in a pool (figure 5.4), the expanse of bright blue water catching the sunlight and contrasting with Winters' tan skin and red lips. Winters tilts her head back and opens her red glossed lips into a smile. Yeager's centrefold of Winters captures less of her body - with just her chest upwards visible and her arm blocking her nipple - instead the focus is on her joyful expression.

It is in the adjoining pictorial however that we see a prime example of Yeager's skill in crafting a layered gaze. In figure 5.3 Winters poses in a domestic setting wearing a sheer blue peignoir and matching mule heels. On the right side of the image, Winters reaches towards a curtain, her hand resting playfully on her thigh as she smiles and looks off to the side, as though acknowledging a lover's entrance. The left side of the image, at first glance, seems like a reflection of Winters in a mirror, when I first found this image on *iPlayboy* this was my initial reading at least. However, a closer inspection, in particular when I sourced the original magazine and saw the image in the flesh (so to speak), reveals subtle differences. In right side of the image Winters' arm is raised

across her chest rather than on her thigh, her smile has faded, and most strikingly, her gaze is now directed outwards, meeting the camera and engaging directly with the viewer. Studying this image, I found that it is a photographic collage of two images.

This analysis highlights how Yeager's composition introduces a nuanced reading of Lisa Winters' depiction in this image. On the right side, Winters is presented in a classic Playboy pin-up pose, embodying the playful 'girl next door' ideal as she greets her presumed male lover with a smile and a pose that accentuates her curves. However, through my analysis, I argue that the left side of the image complicates this reading: Winters looks over her shoulder directly at the Playboy viewer, her expression now serious. Yeager's deliberate use of this dual image, positioning Winters both turning toward and away from the viewer, subtly subverts the male gaze as theorised by Mulvey (1975) in her analysis of Monroe in *The River of No Return*. Mulvey describes Monroe's showgirl character as an "erotic spectacle," positioned to satisfy both the male characters in the film and the presumed male audience. I contend that Yeager disrupts this dynamic: the gaze of the fictional, in-image "audience" and the gaze of the Playboy reader are intentionally separated. Winters greets her imagined lover on the right, yet confronts the Playboy viewer head-on in the left image, challenging their passive consumption of her image.

In her interview with Solomon, Yeager reflects on her awareness of the fantasy-like ideals of femininity men project onto women, and she captures these stylised versions of womanhood in her work. It is as though Yeager's second image of Winters, with its direct engagement, exposes this fantasy's artifice, confronting the viewer and rendering Winters not only an erotic spectacle but also an erotic subject.

lside



Figure 5.3 *Lisa Winters Pictorial*



Figure 5.4 Lisa Winters Centrefold

During my research, one issue of Playboy particularly stood out as a strong example of Yeager playing with the concept of the gaze. Despite housing the largest number of Yeager's works in a single issue (Yeager photographed the cover, two pictorials, and the playmate centrefold) May 1959's issue evaded my initial data collection of Yeager's involvement with Playboy, as it did not appear in any *iPlayboy* search results for 'Bunny Yeager'. It wasn't until later into my research in autumn 2023 when conducting a manual search through each issue that I discovered Yeager's work in this particular issue.

The first pictorial in this issue features Yeager's work with playmate Cindy Fuller. This pictorial is predominantly shot in black and white, except for the centerfold, where we see Fuller leaning back against a wall, holding a bright yellow towel in her teeth, which barely covers her. In the accompanying photo spread (figure 5.5), we see candid photographs of Fuller walking down the beach in Miami, a common location for Yeager. However, what is particularly interesting and unusual about these images is the inclusion of members of the public. In the images, we see the predominantly male public looking at and interacting with Fuller. In one image we see Fuller walking into a crowd, as several men look towards her. In another we see Fuller turn back at two men sat in the sand gazing up at her, as though they have just made a comment at her. The accompanying text from Playboy comments on this: "Floridian water sports of the masculine variety are fascinated by the fullness of the Fuller fuselage as a becomingly bikinied Cindy promenades past." (Playboy, 1959, p45). By capturing the male public's gaze on Fuller, I argue that Yeager holds a mirror up to the male reader of Playboy.

Upon analysing the physical copy of this issue I found that this is further emphasised by the positioning of these images within the pictorial layout; they are published on a fold-

out page adjacent to Fuller's centrefold. In order for the Playboy reader to reveal the full centrefold image of Fuller, they must actively engage with the page, physically opening it to view her. This interaction transforms the act of viewing from a passive consumption to a more deliberate engagement, compelling the reader to confront the layered representations of femininity that Yeager presents.

Fuller appears again in a second Yeager pictorial just three pages later. Entitled *Playboy's House Party*, Yeager documents models as they go about their day as guests at a Miami bachelor pad. One particular spread (figure 5.6) caught my eye, contrasting with Yeager's male gaze spread just a few pages earlier. It depicts the girls enjoying some time away from their male dates, sunbathing in the pastel-coloured solarium. In one photograph, we see Fuller sitting in front of a window displaying a mural of pastel blue female nudes. She playfully covers herself with a towel and sticks the temple of her sunglasses in her mouth as she gazes at Bonnie Harrington, who lounges in front of her. In the adjoining photograph, we see Fuller, Harrington, and Dottie Sykes lounging in front of a large mirror. Sykes is positioned with her back to the camera, looking down as if she is about to apply makeup in the mirror. Meanwhile, Harrington and Fuller are in the foreground, seemingly engaged in conversation. Harrington sits with her back to the mirror, her towel covering her front; the mirror reveals her back and offers a glimpse of her breast, while Fuller lies down, gazing up at Harrington.



MISS MAY PLAYBOY'S PLAYMATE OF THE MONTH

PHOTOGRAPH BY G. S. ...

Floridian water sports of the masculine variety are fascinated by the fullness of the Fuller fuselage as a becomingly bikined Cindy promenades past.



Figure 5.5 Cindy Fuller Pictorial and Partial Centrefold



Off for a spin around the bay in Chaskin's runabout, the baby chimp Candy back-seat driving—have left the other passengers too excited and rough up the other passengers baby Candy is better behaved and has been made an honorary commodore of a Miami yacht club.

Gen Tilt Corporation. They use a lot of tile in the hotels and homes down Florida way and today Chaskin is one of the nation's half dozen largest tile contractors.

When Chaskin first arrived in Miami, and was living out of a small hotel room, his exploration of the area brought him to Palm Island, a man-made inlet off one of the causeways which link Miami Beach and the City of Miami, and he fell in love with it, vowing that someday he would build himself a luxurious house there.

Two years ago the prospering Chaskin bought his self-promised land on Palm Island and went about making his dream a magnificent reality. Situated at the water's edge on Biscayne Bay, in a breezeswept setting of swaying palms, Chaskin's house is more like a precious bachelor apartment than like the usual Florida family house. It actually has many features in common with Playboy's *Heek and Heloise*, a kind of tribute which Chaskin, a member of the Lifetime Playboy Club, appreciates, especially since he designed and decorated his haven virtually unaided.

Harold Chaskin not only knows how to design a dream house, he also knows how to warm it. For his housewarming party, he invited five beautiful Miami misses and, being a considerate fellow and consummate host, he invited a few male friends to join the jollification later in the day. The girls—a lovely, lively, carefree threesome who were eagerly looking forward to this fun occasion—arrived early. There was Dottie Sikes, an ash-blond sophisticate and business girl who runs her own hairprint firm; there was baby-faced Bonnie Harrington who is, coincidentally enough, receptionist for a baby doctor. There was raven-haired Fran Stacy, who looks like a young Gina Lollobrigida and works in a hotel gift shop and as a part-time photographer's model; Mary Jane Ralston, a fresh-faced, titan-tressed office girl on vacation from Grand Rapids, Michigan; and chestnut-haired Cindy Fuller, featured in this issue as Playmate of the Month.

Chaskin wasn't home when the girls got there, but his houseboy welcomed



The house has a private solarium for those who like to keep their all-over tans golden, as Cindy and Bonnie are doing at left. They find the tiles of tile-man Chaskin cooler than the sands of any beach, and know a freshening bath is just a step away through the sliding glass panels. Above: Bonnie, Cindy and Dottie sunbathe and chat about the evening festivities to come, enjoying the lazy ease of the sunny afternoon, the intimate seclusion of the walled and roofless room.

Figure 5.6 House Party Pictorial

It could be said that Yeager's photographs of Fuller, Harrington, and Sykes in the solarium evoke a sapphic quality, with the models lounging nude and gazing at each other rather than outward at an imagined male viewer. This dynamic is heightened by the fact that a female photographer captured these moments, which offers an alternate lens through which viewers experience the image. Although these images were ultimately intended for Playboy's male readership, Yeager's composition subtly disrupts this expectation. By focusing on the models' intimate interactions and mutual gazes, I argue that Yeager introduces a female gaze into the space of Playboy, a context typically dominated by a singular, heteronormative male gaze.

Yeager's composition draws attention to the women's self-contained world, where they interact freely without performing directly for the viewer. The recurring motif of mirrors in Yeager's work again plays a critical role here: it reflects not just the models' physical forms but their private exchanges and shared moments. This interplay of gazes, the women looking at each other and themselves, offers a layered portrayal of femininity that challenges Playboy's typical framing of women as passive subjects for male pleasure. Instead, I argue that Yeager's framing allows for a reading where the models are active participants in their own representation, reflecting an complicatedly empowering complexity within the image.

In this sense, Yeager's solarium photos exist in a liminal space between commodification and agency. By incorporating the models' shared gaze and nuanced expressions, she captures a complicated empowerment where the women's beauty and sensuality are not merely consumable objects but expressions of solidarity and connection. This unique perspective complicates the male viewer's expected role, inviting them to witness an interaction not intended solely for their consumption.

This section demonstrates how my primary research, including the examination of physical Playboy magazines alongside digital resources like *iPlayboy*, provides a nuanced understanding of Bunny Yeager's contributions to Playboy. By critically analysing five selected images and photo spreads, I explore how Yeager's dual role as both creator and subject complicates traditional readings of the male gaze. My findings reveal that Yeager's work operates within patriarchal spaces like Playboy while challenging the simplistic binaries of objectification and empowerment. Through her deliberate use of mirrors, layered gazes, and interactions between models, Yeager redefines femininity as an active performance rather than a passive display.

Drawing on secondary research, including Mulvey, Wright, and Buszek, I situate Yeager's images within a framework of complicated empowerment, where women navigate and subvert the confines of the male gaze. Yeager's work, such as her depictions of Bettie Page, Lisa Winters, and Cindy Fuller, highlights how female photographers can reclaim agency within patriarchal institutions, presenting women as active participants in their own representations. By blending playful adherence to Playboy's aesthetic norms with subtle critiques of their artifice, Yeager's photographs challenge the assumption that female sexuality within Playboy is solely objectifying. Instead, her compositions destabilise the gaze, asserting a female perspective that complicates the magazine's traditionally male-driven visual narratives.

“Express Who I Really Am, but with Make Up on and Nude, You Know?”

Agency, The Gaze and Complicated Empowerment within *The Girls Next*

Door

Holly Madison, “number one” girlfriend of Hugh Hefner and star of *The Girls Next Door* (GND) is sat at a desk at the Playboy Mansion. Sat in a Playboy Bunny shaped chair in front of a laptop, Madison is dressed in an oversized pink shirt with her hair tied back, a small dog is sat in her lap. The camera pans down to reveal another dog which she’s petting with her feet. Audio and short clips of Madison in a confessional interview are cut into this scene, where she states: “I’m really excited because today we’re shooting our pictorial, most of the pictures we’re gonna shoot together, but today we’re shooting a few individuals that we shoot in our own rooms”. (*Girls Next Door: Just Shoot Me*, 2005)

The scene shifts to Bridget Marquardt, friend of Madison and fellow girlfriend of Hefner, in her pink Playboy mansion bedroom, preparing her morning coffee as her teenage sister, Anastasia, visiting for the summer, eats breakfast in bed. Dressed in a hot pink robe, Bridget moves through her hyper-feminine space, filled with a Persian cat named Gizmo, a *Hello Kitty* alarm clock, and an assortment of teddy bears and Playboy Bunny cushions. In her confessional⁴, she expresses her long-held desire to be in Playboy stating: “I’ve always wanted to do Playboy; it’s kind of like making all of my dreams come true.” (*Girls Next Door: Just Shoot Me*, 2005)

⁴ An interview format in which participants speak directly to the camera, which is commonly interspersed with other scenes.

These scenes form the opening of GND's first pictorial-focused episode, *Just Shoot Me* (Season 1, Episode 4), one of three episodes that depict the women's three pictorial shoots they posed for in *Playboy: Just Shoot Me* (S1, E7), *Mutiny on the Booty* (S2, E4), and *Third Time's the Charming* (S5, E20). Whilst, *Under the Covers* (S1, E9) depicts the girls shooting the cover for their first *Playboy* pictorial, and *Calendar Girls* (S3, E5) depicts the girls shooting their own calendar, the analysis will be focused on the three main *Playboy* pictorial focused episodes examining them in relation to themes of power, agency and the gaze. Using FCDA, I reflect on how portrayals of Madison, Marquardt, and Kendra Wilkinson (the third girlfriend of the group) evolve across these episodes while acknowledging the "entertaining real" (Ouellette & Murray, 2009, p.7) nature of reality television. I argue that, as the series progresses, each episode suggests the girlfriends gain more authority over their images, enjoying the shoots as a means of expressing their unique interests and sexual identities. However, the production's choices also complicate a straightforward reading of empowerment, as these episodes also reinforce gendered stereotypes or reveal tensions in the portrayal of female agency.

To contextualise GND's portrayal of Hefner's girlfriends, it is important to consider *Playboy's* history of using these relationships to craft Hefner's public image. Hefner's girlfriends frequently appeared in *Playboy* pictorials, as *Playmates*, or on magazine covers, embodying the *Playboy* lifestyle ideal. Prominent examples include Barbie Benton, Sondra Theodore, Kimberly Conrad, and twins Sandy and Mandy Bentley. Hefner himself acknowledged this dynamic, stating, "It wasn't difficult to figure out that the most successful sex object I'd created was me. I have built here what could be viewed as a perpetual women machine" (Zehme, 2012, p.144).

By casting himself as the ultimate “sex object” with agency over his image, Hefner used Playboy’s women as tools to amplify his desirability. The interchangeable and carefully curated representations of his girlfriends positioned him as the central figure in the Playboy brand. This strategy both sustained his image and defined the roles of his girlfriends within the Playboy narrative. Leading up to GND, Hefner maintained a rotating group of young, blonde, white girlfriends, described by Vanity Fair’s Nancy Jo Sales as a “wriggling, giggling mass of matching pink-pajama-clad girlfriends” (2001). During this time, Hefner ceased featuring his girlfriends in Playboy pictorials, a decision Madison (2015) suggests was intended to prevent them from leaving him after achieving Playmate status. By withholding this prize and dangling it as an incentive, Hefner prolonged their submission to his control, using them as status symbols to project his continued embodiment of the Playboy lifestyle. Crystal Hefner later reflected on her role, stating:

My job was to look a certain way and to act a certain way... tangible proof to the world that [Hefner] was ‘the man.’ So my job was to embody the ideal girlfriend... Hef’s interests were my interests. My interests were irrelevant (Hefner, 2024, p.93).

By the time GND began filming, Hefner had reduced his entourage to Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson, all of whom had yet to achieve the coveted Playboy appearance (Madison, 2015). A major season one storyline revolves around Hefner finally offering this opportunity in a staged bedroom announcement: “We’re going to shoot a cover, and I’m going to put you in the magazine, ok?” (*Girls Next Door*, Meet the Girls, 2005) While the girlfriends are visibly excited, their gratitude is tinged with obligation. Wilkinson vows to give her “all for the shoot,” even if it means “starving”

herself, while Madison reflects that appearing in Playboy would “legitimise” her status as Hefner’s girlfriend, proving she is someone he is “proud of.”

These moments underscore the power imbalance and how the opportunity to appear in Playboy was deeply linked to Hefner’s control and the validation of the girlfriends’ roles. The extent of the power imbalance between Hefner and his girlfriends during the GND era became public knowledge with the publication of Madison’s memoir in 2015. Hefner, a white man in his mid-seventies, wielded extensive control as Playboy editor-in-chief, GND producer, and a public figure. The girlfriends lived in his mansion, received allowances from him, followed schedules he dictated, and adhered to strict curfews. Hefner also retained final say over the GND episodes and Playboy pictorial layouts (Madison, 2015; Madison and Marquardt, 2022). At this time, the girlfriends were unpaid for their appearances in GND (although were paid for their appearances in later seasons); they were neither consulted about the show’s creation, nor were they informed that their uncensored nude scenes would be included in the DVD releases (Madison, 2015). Although Madison, Marquardt and Wilkinson were the stars of the show with Hefner making few appearances, the girlfriends received no credit in the series until season four, while Hefner featured prominently in the credits. Madison reflects in her memoir:

We were constantly reminded that the show was Hef’s show our contributions were irrelevant. We were the decorative icing, not the cake. According to our boyfriend, he could have splashed any three blondes on screen and found instant success (2015, p.165).

Returning to the opening scenes of *Just Shoot Me*, as Madison and Marquardt prepare for their first ever Playboy shoots, a childhood dream for Marquardt and an allure which drew each of them to the orbit of the Playboy mansion, we see these women embark on a journey to be seen as more than an interchangeable wriggling, giggling, pink pyjama-d mass of blondes. Through these episodes, they navigate a complex route to self-expression and complicated empowerment within the constraints of Playboy and GND. Examining these episodes as mediated entertainment, what insights might they offer about Playboy's complex relationship to power, agency, and empowerment?

Just Shoot Me

As the seventh episode of the first season, *Just Shoot Me* was initially planned as the season's penultimate episode. However, after filming, E! ordered additional episodes. The main focus of this episode is the girls' highly anticipated Playboy pictorial shoot, beginning with individual shoots in their rooms and culminating in group sessions. The episode ends with the suspenseful reveal of which images will be selected for publication.

In *Just Shoot Me*, the girlfriends express recurring anxiety about their appearance and performance during the shoot, with Marquardt's concerns receiving the most emphasis. A key storyline for her in the season is the pursuit of two goals: becoming a Playmate and completing a PhD. Having previously failed to be selected as a Playmate, Marquardt often discusses her desire to appear in the magazine. Her anxiety is heightened by the clash between these ambitions, with her final exam for a Master's degree in Broadcast Journalism coinciding with the Playboy shoot.

Through confessional interviews, Marquardt shares her nervousness about meeting both her own expectations and Playboy's standards. She dreams of making a lasting impression, stating, "I'm most nervous about my own body and how it's going to look...I just want it to be perfect.". This vulnerability is amplified by her backstory of aspiring to Playboy since childhood and her fear of failing again, setting her apart from Madison and Wilkinson. Additionally, she expresses a strong desire for Hefner's approval, worrying she might "blow it."

Marquardt's concerns resurface during the individual and group shoots. Although pleased with her solo photos, she compares herself to the others during the group shoot, saying, "I see that Kendra's got a totally flat stomach and I'm like, 'ahh, I wish I had that.'" As the oldest girlfriend (early thirties compared to Wilkinson at twenty and Madison in her mid-twenties) and the only one without plastic surgery, her body is often scrutinised. Marquardt reflects on this portrayal in the *Girls Next Level* podcast (a GND themed podcast launched by Madison and Marquardt in 2022), suggesting production exaggerated her insecurities, leading to comparisons with Wilkinson:

BM: And then they do another...Ok this one is really, we're starting to get really like, bad here I feel like. They do another on the fly interview with me, having me compare my body to Kendra's

HM: Urgh!

BM: Having me say stuff like 'Why is Kendra's body better than yours?' type of thing

HM: That's fucked up!

BM: Yeah! So I'm like 'well 'cos she has a flat stomach, and she has a good butt', and erm, but I say in there 'But mine's bigger!'. I'm still trying to be positive

and stuff, and not, I'm not trying to hate on myself, and I feel like they were trying to make me hate on myself. (Madison and Marquardt, 2023)

This exchange suggests that the volume of anxious comments from Marquardt was heightened by editing and production choices, likely to add entertainment value. With her previous playmate rejection and the contrast of her natural body type and being the eldest girlfriend, Marquardt seems an ideal candidate for this storyline. However, it is essential to recognise that *Girls Next Level* - a podcast launched 18 years after the original airing of GND - is also a mediated production, designed for a post-#MeToo audience. The podcast serves as a self-produced outlet for Madison and Marquardt to reflect on their experiences, reinterpreting them through a contemporary lens. While *Girls Next Level* is subject to less external control (with Madison and Marquardt self-producing and self-editing the podcast) than GND, it remains a media product created for entertainment and monetisation.

Marquardt's comments about comparing her body to her peers resonate with me, as I've often scrutinised my own body when reviewing images from my shoots, especially against Playboy's seemingly perfected bodies. Given GND's largely female audience (discussed in chapter six), many viewers likely empathised with Marquardt's vulnerabilities. Despite fitting within Playboy's narrow beauty standard (thin, blonde, white, cis-gendered), her slight differences - like her age and natural curves - are framed as a plot point. The editing validates her anxiety, reinforcing the idea that even women who meet these standards face intense self-scrutiny. This perpetuates the notion that succeeding in Playboy requires constant self-monitoring, embodying what Berger (1972) describes as a self-scrutinising, internalised male gaze. Reflecting on my notes while watching, I wrote: "If it's difficult for Bridget to feel that her body is good enough for Playboy, then there's no hope for the rest of us."

I argue that these editorial choices, which disproportionately feature Marquardt's anxious and self-deprecating remarks, both expose and reinforce the "postfeminist masquerade" conceptualised by Angela McRobbie (2009, p.59). McRobbie describes how postfeminist culture presents the appearance of female empowerment while ultimately upholding traditional gender roles and norms. On the surface, the protagonists of GND are portrayed as empowered individuals, confidently expressing their sexuality through Playboy. Yet, Marquardt's remarks highlight the anxieties women face in adhering to Playboy's beauty standard, which prioritises whiteness, youthfulness, thinness, and blonde-ness. By showcasing these vulnerabilities, the show exposes the pressures of conforming to narrow ideals, even as it continues to promote them as markers of female success and desirability.

Just Shoot Me also underscores the power imbalance between the girls and Hefner. While the women are preoccupied with their bodies, appearances, and performances, fearful of their precarious positions, Hefner is portrayed differently. As both their boyfriend and Playboy's editor-in-chief, he becomes the figure they perform for and the arbiter of which images are selected for publication.

This power imbalance is further emphasised when Hefner resolves one of the central conflicts of the episode: Marquardt's struggle to balance her academic ambitions with her desire to be a Playboy model. When a shoot runs overtime, Marquardt must leave for a final exam in her Master's program, while Madison and Wilkinson stay behind to shoot a shower scene together. Marquardt, upset by the situation is seen in confessional interviews as expresses her frustration. Hefner then enters the scene and reassures Marquardt, offering to reshoot the scene with her involved. The scene, however, is heavily edited. In the *Girls Next Level* Marquardt and Madison reveal that,

contrary to the show's portrayal, they had actually shot multiple scenes with just two girls. Marquardt admits she wasn't initially upset about missing the shower scene. However, her feelings changed after seeing the layout draft, where the shower picture of Madison and Wilkinson was the only one selected for publication that didn't feature all three girls.

Marquardt also explains that she had requested this conversation with Hefner be kept private, but the show used audio from their discussion, which had been recorded while Marquardt was still mic'd up. The production then paired this audio with a completely different scene. Upon rewatching with this knowledge, it is clear that the audio does not match the movements of either Hefner's or Marquardt's lips. This manipulation of audio and the girls' private conversations exemplifies the lack of agency and control they had in the editing decisions behind GND

After reshooting the shower scene to include all three girls, we see Hefner enter Marquardt's bedroom to show the girls the completed "brown book" (the mock-up of the magazine's layout). Hefner is centred as being in control, as well as a figure in which the girls should owe their gratitude for, as all the girls sit around him as he shows them the completed pictorial. As he flicks through the mock-up, the girls express their gratitude, shrieking, kissing, and thanking him when he announces it will be published in the November issue. As the scene ends, the girls eagerly ask to see it again, but Hefner gets the final word, addressing the audience: "Well... I think I know how we're gonna spend the rest of the evening." (*Girls Next Door: Just Shoot Me*, 2005)

While *Just Shoot Me* spends significant time on the girls' individual photo shoots, which were intended to showcase their personalities such as Madison's love of Old Hollywood glamour, Wilkinson's sporty style, and Marquardt's hyper-feminine aesthetic, none of

these shots make it into the final Playboy pictorial. Instead, looking at the published pictorial I found that it instead presents them as a collective, focusing on them as Hefner's blonde girlfriends, with little insight into their personalities. The first full-page image features Hefner with the girls outside a limousine, his hand placed on Madison's waist. The shoot continues with the girls posing in various sensual settings, often in ways that reinforce their status as Hefner's companions, not individuals with distinct identities. We then see the girls posing nude inside the limousine, with Madison pretending to film Marquardt and Wilkinson on a handheld video camera. They pose in a replica of Hefner's bed dressed in his satin smoking jackets. They sensually scrub each other with sponges in an outdoor shower and then pour champagne over each other in the mansion's grotto. Finally, the shoot ends on a double spread of the girls piled on top of each other on a replica of Hefner's bed, with Marquardt lying down and Madison and Wilkinson leaning over her and each other, all whilst making eye contact at the camera.

By omitting their individual photos, the pictorial constructs the women as a single, homogeneous fantasy, less as individuals and more as an emblem of Hefner's brand and vision. As Brian McNair (2013) argues, Playboy at its inception in 1953 was emblematic of the idea of porno chic before the term entered academic and cultural discussion. GND and its corresponding Playboy pictorials carry this legacy forward, utilising the medium of reality television to disseminate a pornified Playboy branded ideal of feminine sexuality to mass-market popular culture, this time however, to a largely female audience.

This version of "porno chic" is complex: it presents empowerment through sexuality, yet it often reinforces patriarchal norms about women's self-representation and attractiveness. The Playboy pictorial exemplifies this tension by erasing the girls'

individuality. Rather than highlighting their distinct personalities, it presents them as a collective of Hefner's idealised blonde girlfriends, crafted for the male gaze. In *Girls Next Level*, Madison and Marquardt express disappointment over the exclusion of their individual shots from the issue and reflect on the pride they felt in curating these images to reflect their personalities:

HM: But it was a bummer, I didn't think those photos were gonna be the main attraction of the pictorial by any means, but I thought maybe on one page there were gonna be three little photos that kinda... cos we picked our sets, and we picked... not our sets I mean it's our room, but we wanted it to express our personalities..

HM: And we were proud of that because this is what makes us individuals, but of course that wasn't ever used.

BM: Actually that's funny I have that in my notes next! I said all these individual shoots reflected our personalities, our characters! (Madison and Marquardt, 2023)

Posing for Playboy was a personal goal of all three girls, and something that Madison and Marquardt have eighteen years later in *Girls Next Level* reflected on as a positive experience in their lives, with Marquardt stating: "I one hundred percent am grateful for that opportunity and still am...It was just a dream come true" (Madison and Marquardt, 2023). Whilst Marquardt and Madison still reflect positively on their experiences shooting with Playboy, it is clear that editing decisions spun a narrative that reinforced the idea that women must self-scrutinise to align with rigid beauty standards and the Playboy ideal. Moreover, GND presents the idea that being Hefner's girlfriends was the defining feature of the women's personas, perpetuating heteronormative ideas that

position women's sexuality as existing for male pleasure rather than for any auto-erotic fulfilment.

Though the girls have limited say over the final pictorial, there are glimpses of their own ideas for the shoot. Wilkinson, for example, expresses excitement about making her shoot unique to her personality: "Today is kinda like my day. I'm gonna look like me. Express who I really am, but with make-up on and nude. You know?" (*Girls Next Door: Just Shoot Me*, 2005). Madison, too, shows her creative input by requesting Playboy photographer Arny Freitag, who she admired for his style.

One notable moment of complicated agency comes when Freitag invites pose ideas, Wilkinson exclaims, "I've got one! It's kind of more porn-ish though!" (*Girls Next Door: Just Shoot Me*, 2005). She then proposes that Marquardt pour champagne down Madison's body while she playfully pretends to lick it off. This image (figure 5.8) captures a more animated and joyful side of the girls' sexuality that stands out from the more staged, formulaic shots typical of Playboy. Rather than serving only a male fantasy, this particular pose reflects Wilkinson's own sense of humour and her idea of sexuality (albeit one arguably that is informed by wishing to appeal to men's desires), presenting a hint of agency and playfulness that challenges the otherwise homogenised depiction of them as 'Hefner's blonde girlfriends'.

These moments of joy and personal expression, while subtle here, grow into larger patterns as GND progresses, with later episodes focusing less on the girls' anxieties over pleasing Hefner and more on their own creative input and unique expressions of sexuality. These glimpses suggest the potential for empowerment within a structure that is largely directed and edited by male decision-makers, showcasing how the girls'

contributions add layers to the otherwise pornified narrative created by Playboy and GND.



Figure 5.7 *GND Cover 1*



Figure 5.8 *GND Pictorial 1*

Mutiny on the Booty

In GND Season 2, Episode 4, *Mutiny on the Booty*, the girls shoot their second Playboy pictorial. Although Hefner is still depicted as the authority figure they aim to please, a central plot line in this episode focuses on the girls 'convincing' him to let the pictorial highlight their individual personalities. Unlike in *Just Shoot Me*, where the girls' limited agency is implied but there is a lack of dialogue which openly calls attention to it, here they voice their frustration over creative restrictions while simultaneously gaining some control over the shoot's direction.

At the episode's start, the girls are summoned to Hefner's bedroom, where he announces they will be shooting another Playboy pictorial. Their initial excitement fades, however, when they learn he wants them to pose on his old "round, rotating, vibrating bed" from the original Chicago Playboy mansion, now housed at the nearby "bunny house" (a property for Playmates' temporary stays). This sets up the central conflict: the girls push back against Hefner's concept of posing collectively on his iconic bed, expressing their distaste for this idea in confessional interviews:

HM: The round bed at the Playmate house is Hef's bed from when he lived in Chicago. It moves around in a circle and it's a famous bed. But we did it for our last pictorial so I'm like why are we doing this again?

KW: I just knew there were other ideas out there that could have been more fun

BM I think that Hef thinks that people don't wanna see our individual pictures, that we're not as sexy individually as we are as a group, sometimes you want your own individual picture. It would be nice to just have our own page (*Girls Next Door: Mutiny on the Booty*, 2006)

In their first pictorial, the girls had limited creative input and were shown as compliant with Hefner's vision. Here, however, they repeatedly voice their desire for greater creative control and highlight their lack of say the creative direction of the shoot. Through the *Girls Next Level* podcast we learn that this narrative shift to focus on the girls dissent from Hefner's vision was a production driven decision:

“Kevin [Burns, GND's executive producer] had explained to us the plot line of how like Hef really wants you guys to shoot on the round rotating bed, but we know you guys aren't gonna wanna do that. So you're gonna have to convince him to do something else” (Madison and Marquardt 2023)

This increase in self-advocacy, even if partly orchestrated as a plot device, suggests a subtle shift in power. It also reflects the success of GND's first season, which established Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson as distinct public figures rather than interchangeable blondes. The girls begin to use Playboy and the show as a platform to express their individual sexualities, instead of being presented solely as vessels for Hefner's ideals of femininity and sexuality.

After shooting on Hefner's old bed, where the girls are shown as bored and disinterested through close-ups of yawning and frowning set to dull, bumbling music, there's a scene in which Hefner and Madison sit in bed, wearing matching pink and blue pyjamas, Madison is reading a copy of *OK Magazine* while Hefner pets her thigh:

HH: So, how'd the shoot go today?

HM: It was fun

HH: Yeah. I like the notion of the fact that you were shooting in my rotating, vibrating, round bed from the Chicago mansion

-Close up of his hand on her thigh-

HM: *-with a smile on her face-* I feel like they were kind of like the same as our last pictorial

-plodding music, cut to him frowning and HM smiling and looking down at her OK Magazine-

HH: You got some other notions?

HM: *-voice goes higher-* I don't know, I just thought it would be fun if we got to do like, direct our own things. Like, do themes that kind of go with our personalities?

-HH still petting HM's thigh-

HH: Like...what do you have in mind?

HM: Like Kendra wanted to do like a sports thing, and Bridget wanted to do like a horror thing and I wanted to do a Hollywood kind of glamour. Just 'cos it's kinda like different from last time.

HH: Well I don't know if that'll work for the whole theme of the feature, but it might add something to it. That's interesting

HM: I think it could be fun to try

HH: Mmhmm

HM: Maybe you'll like it

HH: Ok well, alright

HM: Cool!

HH: I'm gonna order something to eat (*Girls Next Door: Mutiny on the Booty*, 2006)

Whilst it is likely that this scene was staged by production, the narrative that it depicts, where Madison advocates for herself, Marquardt and Wilkinson to have more input as producers of the shoot, is a departure from the narrative spun in *Just Shoot Me*.

Hefner's power remains clear, signalled visually by his hand on Madison's thigh and emphasised through his dialogue as he asserts his final say on what makes publication, and his abrupt shift of the conversation at the end, when he moves on to say he is going to order food, thereby taking the power to end the discussion.

This episode, like *Just Shoot Me* still centres Hefner's approval through dialogue and visual cues as seen in the above seen. The girls frequently express concern about pleasing him, reinforcing his control, as demonstrated by these pieces of dialogue:

HM: I'm really excited to get the opportunity to shoot our own themes, but I don't think they'll be what Hef likes, and I don't think they'll be the ones that he picks for the magazine. It would be exciting to see if he accepts it in the end or not

BM: I hope Hef likes the King Kong thing, I think he will because it's one of his favourite movies

HM: It's really important for me not to disappoint Hef. It's not just a personal thing for me that Hef like the pictures, its a professional thing too. I want him to approve the pictures and hopefully one of them will get used (*Girls Next Door: Mutiny on the Booty*, 2006)

Whilst the spotlighting of Hefner as having final say most probably was utilised as a plot device to generate tension, it still echoes the reality of the situation and the real power imbalance between Hefner and his girlfriends. This episode, however, I found further contrasts with *Just Shoot Me* by showing fewer moments of anxiety from the girls about

their appearance. Madison and Wilkinson briefly comment on feeling more pressure in this shoot, but don't dwell on it. Marquardt, however, becomes visibly upset after Playboy photo editor Marilyn Grabowski makes remarks about her body during the group cover shoot. Although Marquardt's screen time devoted to expressing anxiety is limited compared to the earlier episode, her reactions reinforce her desire to perform well and the significance of these shoots to her.

These moments echo the same issues of self-scrutiny and compliance with an impossible beauty standard that *Just Shoot Me* exemplifies, revealing that even with more creative input, the pressure to meet Playboy's strict ideals remains a pervasive source of tension.

Another shift from *Just Shoot Me* to *Mutiny on the Bounty*, however is an increase in the girls expressing a level of creative control over their shoots. Not only do we see this in the dialogue of Madison in bed with Hefner as she convinced him to let them try individual shoots, but we also see this through dialogue and actions throughout the episode. As Madison explains to Hefner, instead of shooting group images, the girls produce three different staged shoots that focus on their individual interests and characters set out in the show, with the girls who aren't the focus of the shoot playing supporting roles (for example Madison and Marquardt are posed as cheerleaders in the background of Wilkinson's American football themed shoot).

Each girl is seen explaining the concept behind her individual shoot and why it resonates with her persona. Marquardt's shoot focuses on her love of horror films, which is often highlighted in the series through her enthusiasm for Halloween decorations and spooky activities. Describing her shoot, she says: "The theme for my pictorial is King Kong. King Kong lives on Skull Island, so we were all dressed as sexy

native girls for the first part of the shoot". (*Girls Next Door: Mutiny on the Booty*, 2006). With generic jungle-themed music playing during this scene and Wilkinson making comments about enjoying looking like a "jungle woman," this scene can be interpreted as culturally appropriative. Although the shoot was intended to parody the classic movie *King Kong*, it draws heavily on racialised symbols to support a white, sexualised fantasy. The cultural shorthands used in the costumes, the set design, and the editing choices in GND production serve to mock and appropriate Indigenous cultures and women of colour.

Viewing this in relation to Anne McClintock's (2004) concept of "commodity racism" reveals how GND reflects a broader pattern McClintock identifies, where Western media frequently commodifies racialised bodies and aesthetics as spectacles, repurposing cultural symbols of otherness for consumable, white-centred fantasies. Marquardt's "native girl" costume and the jungle set reduce Indigenous symbols to mere props, erasing their cultural meanings in favour of spectacle. Given that everyone seen in the episode is white and considering the lack of representation of women of colour not only in GND but within *Playboy* as a whole, this scene reflects larger systemic inequalities within *Playboy* and the wider cultural landscape.

The second shoot is American football themed (figure 5.11). A devoted sports fan and the tomboy of the group, Wilkinson is seen in a jersey of her favourite team, the LA Chargers, cropped so that it sits above her breasts. Wilkinson expresses her love for the shoot and her desire to pose like the Heisman football trophy, an award given to the most outstanding college football player:

I want the Heisman trophy pose in. It. Bad. I wanna be known as the girl who did the Heisman trophy pose naked in *Playboy*, because who has done the Heisman

trophy pose naked before?! Nobody! Not that I can recall! (*Girls Next Door: Mutiny on the Booty*, 2006)

Lastly, Madison's shoot is inspired by Marilyn Monroe's 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend' scene from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). This old-Hollywood theme aligns with Madison's character as a vintage film enthusiast while playfully hinting at the gold-digger trope often associated with the girls' relationships with Hefner. Madison demonstrates notable agency in the planning and styling of her shoot, stating that she was "in charge of the costumes involved in my part of the shoot and my own set.". She explains how she sourced a wig (which she ultimately chose not to wear), developed the concept of her set, and even selected costumes for the other girls: "a sexy Marlene Dietrich kind of top hat, cuffs and collar kind of thing... I just think that's a really sexy look on a woman." (*Girls Next Door: Mutiny on the Booty*, 2006)

Madison expresses numerous times that Hefner had in private expressed to her that he was concerned about different aspects of her shoot, in particular the more masculine leaning costuming for Marquardt and Wilkinson believing it wasn't "very feminine or very glamorous". However, the shoot is published just as Madison envisioned, indicating that at this point the girls were beginning to enjoy a level of creative control not present in their first shoot.

While I found that this episode continues to centre on tension over whether the girls are 'good enough' to be featured individually and whether Hefner will approve their images, unlike the previous pictorials the girls' individual shoots do make it into the issue. Like *Just Shoot Me*, *Mutiny on the Booty* ends with Hefner revealing the images to the girls, who thank him for the opportunity:

-dramatic music-

HH on phone, presumably to Playboy staff: As you know to begin with I really thought that the things shot at the playmate house would be the primary theme and that the portion of the pictorial that was really related to their special interests would become kinda secondary, but...I'm undecided

-Cuts to the girls lounging on Hefner's bed waiting for him and looking bored-

BM confessional interview: Holly, Kendra and I were dying wondering what he was gonna pick

-We see Hefner walk down the hallway and enter the bedroom as Cy Coleman's

Playboy Theme (1960) plays-

HM: Puffin!

KW: Yay!

HH: Ok! I got something nice, something nice!

KW: Do you?!

BM: I can see the cover already!

KW: Oh my god!

HH: My original notion before the fact was that uh, uh. Your own themes would be kinda secondary, but they worked out so well – *drumroll sound plays-* that they've become the primary.

Girls: Ooooo!

-Fanfare music plays-

HM confessional interview: When Hef chose our individual pictures instead of the round bed pictures I was shocked! I thought for sure he had his mind made up before the fact, and it just felt really good to throw something creative out there and have him embrace that

HH: I love the costumes! This pictorial really was produced by you girls, and you came up with the individual concepts, up to and including the cover and all the themes and I think it's gonna make them doubly popular.

HM confessional interview: I think I'd be a really good art director for the Playmate shoots because I'd get it right every time! (*Girls Next Door: Mutiny on the Booty*, 2006)

With its pink cover and matching back cover (figures 5.9 and 5.10) which plays on the concept of the girl next door, showing the girls peeking out behind a window (We learn in *Girls Next Level* that this cover was conceptualised by Madison) and campy themed pictorials, the shoots depicted in *Mutiny on the Booty* suggests a shift toward appealing to GND's growing female audience and perhaps even a nod to the female gaze. While the episode continues to emphasise Hefner's authority, positioning him as the final decision maker to whom the girls express gratitude, Hefner's acknowledgment that the girls produced the images and had creative control marks a radical departure from *Just Shoot Me*. This shift is further underscored by text in the corresponding Playboy pictorial:

Another surprise: More than half the show's audience is female. 'We knew it would be appealing to men,' says Hef, 'but it has also established a cultlike following among women.' One female fan from Florida went so far as to fly to Los Angeles to have her hair done at the José Eber salon in Beverly Hills simply because that's where the girls go. (Playboy 2006 p.149)

With *Just Shoot Me* produced before GND's premiere, it seems that producers (and likely Hefner himself) initially expected the series to attract Playboy's traditional male

demographic. However, as the series garnered a significant female fan base, this pictorial appears to have been shaped with this female co-option audience in mind. Rather than merely depicting the girls as Hefner's girlfriends, it focuses on them as individual characters, allowing each to convey her own style and personality. Though the characters they portray are limited by Playboy's narrow standards of femininity, the fact that the girls can co-produce their own shoots suggests a departure from Playboy's traditional male gaze. By the third pictorial in 2009, Playboy would go even further, describing GND's fans as "largely female". Madison's comment about her belief that she would make a good art director at Playboy foreshadows a larger shift in power dynamics in her relationship with Hefner, a shift that would influence their third Playboy shoot.

THE RETURN OF THE GIRLS NEXT DOOR

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EXPLOSIVE INTERVIEW: EX-FEMA BOSS **MICHAEL BROWN** •
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OF A COAL MINE • **PARIS HILTON'S LOOK-ALIKE NUDE** •
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Figure 5.9 *GND Cover 2*

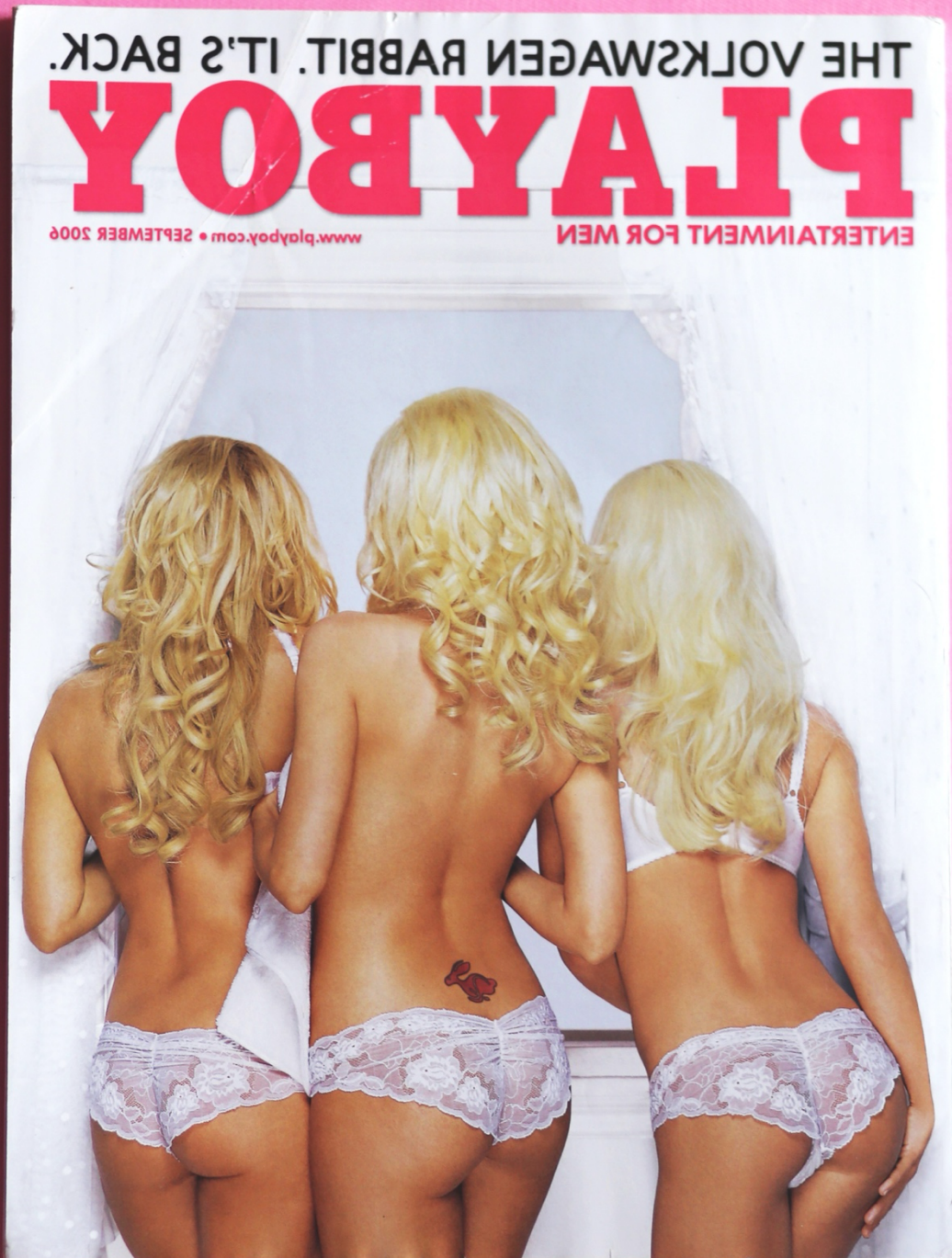


Figure 5.10 *GND Back Cover*



Kendra Wilkinson, 21, Hef's youngest and most recent girlfriend, is sports crazy, so she decided to stage her own Super Bowl party in the colors of her hometown team, San Diego. "This is my dream photo shoot," she says. "I'm doing a Heisman pose, naked except for a Chargers jersey." Score!

a rabid following and made stars of its three leading ladies, and when it's shown upstairs at the Mansion, those stars are apt to view their on-screen exploits with occasional cringing—but mostly with love and laughter.

Then again, if you've been watching, you have a good idea of what those private viewing parties are like. You've been inside the Mansion, up the stairs, in Hef's bedroom. You've gotten to know Holly, the number one girlfriend, who has been with Hef for five years. And Bridget, the northern California broadcast journalism graduate student who has wanted to be in *FLAVOR* since

Figure 5.11 GND Pictorial 2 (Kendra Wilkinson)

Third Time's the Charming

By 2009, when *Third Time's the Charming* aired (three years after *Mutiny on the Bounty* and four years after *Just Shoot Me*) significant changes had shifted the power dynamics in GND, giving the girls more agency in their representation. In 2007, Madison began working at Playboy Studios West, first as an intern under Marilyn Grabowski and later as a full-time photo editor, overseeing Playmate shoots. The girls also produced three Playboy calendars, (directed and edited by Madison), posed for a March 2008 Playboy cover, and released a tie-in book (Ruditis, 2008) aimed at their primarily female audience. The book included episode guides, quizzes, recipes, behind-the-scenes photos, and interviews with the girls. By this time, the series' success elevated the girls to celebrity status, granting them greater autonomy. Wilkinson pursued DJ gigs, whilst Marquardt hosted a Playboy radio show

By the time this episode aired, further shifts had taken place. *Third Time's the Charming* is the season 5 finale on DVD, but was followed by a one-hour special, *Transitions*, which documented the girls' breakups with Hefner and their departures from the Mansion. Wilkinson left to marry football star Hank Baskett (their wedding special aired the same year), Marquardt moved on to host the series *Bridget's Sexiest Beaches*, and Madison's departure, less clearly depicted, was linked to her desire for marriage and children. According to Madison (2015), production and Hefner were unprepared for her decision, with her departure influenced by her realisation she didn't want to stay with Hefner once the others left. Madison also began a relationship with magician Criss Angel. The girls' exits, which took place in late 2008, were widely covered in tabloids (e.g., Oh, 2008; Adams, 2008), meaning many viewers were already aware of their pursuits beyond Playboy by the time *Third Time's the Charming* aired.

Instead of the previous pattern where Hefner is shown ordering a Playboy pictorial for the girls, as seen in earlier shoot-focused episodes, this episode opens with Madison pitching the idea to an excited Marquardt. The two then propose the idea to Hefner and his male friends. While Hefner is still portrayed as being in charge, I argue that Madison and the girls are shown as notably more assured of themselves and their positions within the Playboy world. They are shown exercising greater creative control over their shoots than in previous episodes, producing images that align with their personal concepts of sexuality, albeit still within the framework of Playboy. This shift is evident not only in the final outcome of the pictorials but also in the dialogue and how the girls reflect on the experience:

HM: Since we did Playboy's first front and back cover I wanted to top this by doing another *Girls Next Door* pictorial, but this time really have each of our pictures be separate, really represent our personalities and our visions of sexuality

KW: We have come so far since the first pictorial, in our previous pictorials we were always with each other and always in each others pictures, so I think in this pictorial, it's very important for us to express our individuality and personalities

BM: It was my lifelong dream to be a part of Playboy and now I feel like finally I might not be a "playmate", I might not be "a month", but I finally have my own pictorial in Playboy, and a cover! Which not that many girls can say! (*Girls Next Door: Third Time's a Charming*, 2009)

I found that this episode marks a significant departure from earlier shoots, where the focus was often on Hefner's authority and the girls' anxieties over pleasing Hefner and

living up to expectations. Here, the girls express their concepts more confidently, focusing on their personal journeys rather than their relationships with Hefner. As the series nears its conclusion and prepares for the girls' departures from the Mansion, the narrative shifts to emphasise the girls' growing autonomy, with less emphasis on anxiety or centering Hefner's involvement.

Furthermore, this episode focuses even further on the girls shooting individually, no longer having to play supporting roles in each other's shoots so that all three still feature together, they can not only shoot individual pictorials focused on their own interests and ideas of sexuality, but they even shoot individual covers (figure 5.12). These three covers feature Madison, Marquardt and Wilkinson posing separately in bikinis in front of a varying sections of the exterior of the Playboy Mansion. Whilst we learn in *Girls Next Level* that Madison developed the concept of their previous cover seen in *Mutiny in the Booty*, her role in conceptualising this is not directly highlighted in the episode, with the only mention being Hefner quickly attributing the cover concept to the girls. However, in this shoot Madison's leadership and creative direction is given significantly more attention.

Not only did Madison conceive of the idea for each girl to have her own cover, which aligns with her vision of giving fans the opportunity to choose their favourite girl or collect all three covers, but she is also shown actively guiding and advocating for her co-stars during their photoshoots. Madison is seen coaching Wilkinson through her beach themed pictorial shoot, suggesting specific poses and encouraging her to feel confident about her body. In the below quote, Madison is shown reviewing images of Wilkinson and offering suggestions on how to pose, emphasising the trust and comfort between them:

HM: She'll like it if she sticks out her butt more!

Playboy staff: How are those? Those are gonna have to be good

-HM gives thumbs up-

KW confessional interview: It felt really good having Holly at my shoot because she knows what I like. She knows me, and I trust her and I trust her thoughts and her opinions so it made things a lot easier! I finally got to do the shoot I always wanted to do, I don't want any props in my photoshoot, I don't want surfboards and that sporty crap, all I want to show is me and my beauty with the sunlight. It was really sexy, and I feel like I'm growing up and I feel like I've found my inner woman. (*Girls Next Door: Third Time's a Charming*, 2009)

For Wilkinson, this beach shoot marks a departure from her earlier, more heavily themed pictorials. Inspired by *Sports Illustrated* and her San Diego roots, Wilkinson's concept is an unembellished beach setting, where her natural physicality can be showcased without props. Although she is still working within Playboy's stylised and polished aesthetic, in her confessional interview Wilkinson is depicted as feeling that she has a greater degree of control over her portrayal, allowing her to capture the image of herself she desires.

This episode represents a change in the dynamics of the girls' portrayals within the Playboy brand. Madison's leadership, paired with the unique shoots tailored to each girl's vision, emphasises their increasing contributions to their own self-presentation. Much like their second pictorial, these shoots reflect each woman's personal journey, interests, and evolving sense of self. Marquardt, who has taken up trapeze, creates a circus-themed shoot to showcase her skills, in keeping with her love for theatricality

(figure 5.13) . Meanwhile, Madison's water-themed shoot continues her series arc of learning to swim and scuba dive, although the final, *Wizard of Oz*-themed images printed in the magazine diverge from this theme. Madison later explains (2015) that production limitations on location fees led her to propose the alternate underwater shoot for the series to film, aligning with her storyline while still adhering to Playboy's aesthetic expectations.

Although the shoots still conform to Playboy's glossy, carefully curated aesthetic, Madison's influence and the girls' increased autonomy reflect a notable change, they now have greater input in shaping their images, becoming architects and producers of their own self-representations even as these images still align with Playboy's overarching branding.

During confessional interviews heard whilst the girls shoot their individual pictorials, the series places emphasis on the girls discussing their ideas of sexuality, empowerment and the role Playboy plays in this:

HM: I think Playboy's definitely empowering for women, I think any woman that's ever been a centrefold it's been a positive experience in her life and it's been a stepping stone for bigger and better things.

BM: My vision of sexuality is to be really comfortable, and confident in who you are. And with Playboy I get to be who I want to be in the magazine, and who I am right now, and to show my true self 100% (*Girls Next Door: Third Time's a Charming*, 2009)

The centering of Playboy as a conduit for empowerment reflects a distinctly postfeminist sentiment, where empowerment is framed through the lens of sexual self-

expression and consumer culture. In this context, the girls' discussions of Playboy as a "positive" and "empowering" space where they can express their authentic sexual selves align with neoliberal postfeminist ideals, placing the brand of Playboy as key to their empowerment.

As Gill (2007) writes, a key theme of postfeminist sensibility is the preoccupation with possessing a "sexy body" (p.149) and the positioning of this as central to empowerment: "The body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling" (p.149). This concept is echoed in GND, where the women's pursuit of self-realisation through Playboy remains inseparable from the brand's demands for hyper-feminine, heteronormative ideals. Here, Playboy becomes a means for self-expression, yet its continued influence over "empowered" sexuality blurs the line between self-directed empowerment and adherence to an external standard.

Marquardt's recurring body anxieties highlight this tension, illustrating how the standard of a "sexy body" is never fully attainable, demanding ongoing self-surveillance. In this way, Playboy provides a framework for empowerment, yet it simultaneously binds the girls' agency within Playboy's own definitions of femininity.

Third Time's a Charming further diverges from the previous shoot focused episodes by omitting formal approval of the pictorial. However, Hefner's power is still asserted with dialogue towards the end of the episode. With *Third Time's a Charming* being the prelude to the girls' eventual exit from the mansion, it ends with confessional interviews with all three girls reflecting on their time with Playboy. Whilst their friendship with each other, travel, Playboy shoots and work opportunities and all mentioned, their relationship with Hefner is notably central in all three reflections:

BM: The whole experience of being part of Playboy, Hef's life, it's hard to fathom how much of an effect it's had on me personally, and the whole world. We've become so synonymous with Playboy, and representing it now, and it's such an honour for me to have come this far,

KW: I came here when I was 18, fresh out of high school, bleach blonde hair y'know, I would just party. All I wanted to do was go crazy and have a bunch of fun, but now, y'know I've grown up, and Hef has definitely helped me grow up. And I see myself, and look in the mirror and say 'wow' I'm changing into a woman now.

HM: Being Hef's girlfriend has impacted me as a person in a million different ways, but I think he gave me the opportunity to grow and become a better person. I can't even explain it, it's like trying to explain why you were born. (*Girls Next Door: Third Time's a Charming*, 2009)

Wilkinson's comments about arriving at the mansion at 18 and "growing up" under Hefner's influence illustrate that, while the girls have gained a degree of autonomy, they still credit him for their personal transformations, positioning Hefner as an enduring figure in their personal evolution. This framing upholds Hefner as central to their identities, even as they assert newfound independence and creative input. Their reflections thus highlight the duality of Playboy-branded empowerment within a postfeminist framework: the girls express a sense of autonomy and self-actualisation, yet their empowerment is still tethered to Playboy's ideals and Hefner's legacy.

As in previous episodes, Hefner claims the last word. While watching a Fourth of July fireworks display with the girls, he concludes, "The best time of my life is right now," reaffirming his continued role as the overarching figure in their journey.



**Figure 5.12 GND Cover 3
(Kendra Wilkinson)**



Figure 5.13 GND Pictorial 3 (Bridget Marquardt)

Reflections on GND

Rewatching GND almost two decades after its original airing, in a post-#MeToo, post-Hefner era, elicited both a sense of morbid curiosity and genuine engagement. Hefner's unsettling moments, such as fondling the girls' legs and directing their appearances, are particularly challenging to watch, especially considering subsequent accounts of emotional abuse within the mansion (Madison, 2015; *Secrets of Playboy*, 2022; Hefner, 2024). However, beyond these uncomfortable scenes, my research highlights a nuanced narrative of three women navigating, and at times resisting, the patriarchal forces and production interference that shaped their experiences. These three protagonists confront their roles as interchangeable figures used to maintain Hefner's power, while gradually finding ways to reclaim agency. Through focused episodes, my analysis tracks their journey from being commodified for Hefner's vision of femininity to shaping their own expressions of sexuality within the confines of Playboy's broader framework. Their evolving dynamics reflect a complex interplay of autonomy, resistance, and collaboration.

The "entertaining real" (Ouelette, L & Murray S, 2009, p.7) nature of reality television often leaves viewers questioning the authenticity of what they see. Throughout my research into GND I have been left wondering how accurate this reading is to the girl's authentic experiences? Is this narrative of them gaining agency and creative control something the girls actively fought for or was it a storyline conceived by production (particularly considering the show's female fan base). Madison, Marquardt and Wilkinson can now be viewed as celebrities, and as such are hard to contact to request an interview, especially when you are a PhD researcher and not a major media outlet. However, I decided instead to utilise the fan Q&A feature on *Girls Next Levels* fan-

subscription platform on *Patreon* to attempt to gain further insight into this. To my surprise my question was selected to be answered in a Q&A video:

BM: This one is from Bimbo Scholar.⁵ Hi Holly and Bridget I hope you're both...

HM: Bimbo Scholar?! I love that name!

BM: ... I hope you're both doing well. I am a Women's Studies PhD student in the UK and in my final year of writing up my thesis on re-analysing representations of women in *Playboy* and shifting the lens from Hefner and onto the women of *Playboy*. I've been writing a lot about *The Girls Next Door* through a feminist lens. As a viewer in *The Girls Next Door* it seems that you guys gain more control over your pictorials as the show goes on, and they become more about showcasing your individual ideas of feminine sexuality, as opposed to them being about pleasing Hef and his idea of how his girlfriends should be portrayed. How accurate was that to your experiences and how much creative control did you have/gain over time? It's been so wonderful to see the progression of your podcast and see you both reclaim your narratives through it. Also Bridget, thank you for showing that you can be hyper feminine and pursue academia, I can't wait to frame my PhD diploma in an ornate pink frame like you did with your degrees.

BM: We definitely got more control over our pictorials

HM: Yeah! And we definitely pushed for that too and I feel like that was part of just me pushing to be part of the studio too, and even with the calendar too I really took charge of that and we all got to like pick our individual themes and stuff. And I feel like that was so important to us, and y'know if we hadn't pushed for it it would never have happened. And as far as pushing for stuff that would

⁵ This is my pseudonym/ username

never have happened, like our last pictorial would never, like Hef did not want to give us that last pictorial. The only reason that happened was because Kevin [Burns] offered to allocate some of *The Girls Next Door* budget towards the pictorial so we can cover it for the show, and Hef was like ‘Ok, well free pictorial, cool. We don’t have to pay for the cost’. So it was definitely something we pushed for, it wasn’t like Hef sat back and thought ‘Y’know what..’

BM: Right! And even though we pushed for it, and he would let us shoot it, we didn’t know that we were gonna get them until like it was reviewed and everybody in Chicago and everywhere else had to review it. It’s never like something we knew that we were gonna be given.

HM: And we didn’t get to pick the final photos either.

BM: Noooo

HM: The only ones that I did were from my last pictorial and that’s ‘cos we did this weird like flip-flop thing where I wanted to shoot at the Los Angeles theatre but that was more money than Kevin was willing to allocate for each of our photos. So, I thought y’know I’m just gonna pay for that myself so I own the rights and I’ll give Playboy the rights to the photos that they can use. So, I gave them like 8 photos and I’m like ‘You guys can use this one’. (Madison and Marquardt, 2024)

Their response here sheds light on a broader truth within GND; rather than a story of empowerment bestowed upon the girls by Hefner, their increasing agency was something they had to actively advocate for, navigating not just Hefner’s desires but a labyrinth of corporate interests, production budgets, and editorial approval processes. An important aspect of their answer is in its decentralisation of Hefner, revealing that the Playboy empire, despite Hefner placing himself as the figurehead, involved other

decision-makers and gatekeepers, from executives in Chicago, to editorial staff who reviewed and approved pictorials.

The evolution of Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson's portrayals in GND serves as an illustrative case of complicated empowerment wherein agency and objectification coexist. Initially the series emphasises Hefner's authority and the girl's conformity to his vision; the resulting pictorial centres their relationship to Hefner and blonde sexy bodies as the most important part of their personalities. However, as the series rose in popularity and became co-opted by a female fan base, with more than 70% of its audience being female (Kaplan, 2007), and its third season premiere generating 2.16 million viewers, at the time the second highest premier ever on E! (De Leon, 2007), I argue that the series and the resulting pictorials pivot its representations to cater towards their new growing female gaze. Yet, this shift towards presenting the girls as having further agency and creative control is complex; their empowerment is still constrained within the Playboy empire's carefully curated, heteronormative lens.

The women's experiences reveal the dual nature of complicated empowerment. On the one hand, they achieve a form of self-realisation, tentatively moving away from what Cahill (2010) terms a derivatized state - where their bodies are extensions of male fantasies - to semi-autonomous figures who increasingly define their sexuality and representations of femininity. However, their choices remain intertwined with the brand's expectations, and undermined by production choices, which perpetuate the need for self-surveillance and an adherence to a male-defined gaze, aligning more closely with Cahill's notion of derivatization.

10 Inch Pleasers and a Camera Trigger: Reimagining the Playboy Gaze through Self Portraiture

This section presents three photographs created as part of my embodied, autoethnographic art-making process. At first glance, these images may appear disparate, but they are unified by a common thread: the deliberate revelation of what is typically concealed in photographic images - the photographic equipment itself. Just as Bunny Yeager revealed the artifice in her photographs and asserted herself as the photographer of her self-portraits, by revealing these pieces of equipment, I assert myself as both subject and producer of my own image.

These self-portraits are included in this chapter to navigate and experiment with themes of the gaze, objectification, and agency through embodiment. Informed by representations of women in Playboy, I reimagine the Playboy gaze through my own lens, challenging traditional notions of objectification while reclaiming space for personal expression and autonomy.

10 Inch Pleasers and a Bed of Swarovski Crystals

10 Inch Pleasers and a Bed of Swarovski Crystals (figure 5.15) is one of the first photographs I created for this project, drawing direct inspiration from one of my favourite Playboy covers: Pamela Anderson's July 2001 cover, shot by David LaChapelle (figure 5.14). Anderson graced 14 US Playboy covers and countless international editions, but I was drawn to this particular image, where she crouches on a beach in a pink micro bikini and matching pink pleasers (a brand of platform heels

typically worn by strippers and pole dancers), holding a bright pink handgun. I chose this image to reimagine as a self-portrait because of its vibrant colours, unabashed artifice, and the evocative way it depicts Anderson in a powerful, commanding stance. The photograph speaks to themes of agency and objectification, and I sought to explore and challenge these ideas by embodying a similar pose, but with my own twist on the narrative.

I wanted to subvert elements of the original image, particularly by swapping out the gun in Anderson's pose. I asked myself: What object of power feels most personal and poignant for me? The answer was my remote shutter release, a tool I often conceal in my self-portraits. By revealing it here, I assert my dual role as both the photographer and the model, asserting my own agency in the creation of my image.

Due to COVID restrictions, I was unable to shoot on a beach like the original image, so I turned instead to crafting a backdrop in my own home, a setting that became a common thread throughout all the images I proceeded to create for this project. Using leftover Swarovski crystal beads from an MFA project, I added depth to the image, transforming the pink backdrop into something more evocative of glamour and fantasy. However, this approach also made the image more challenging to create. Not only did I struggle to walk in the 10-inch heels I had chosen (evoking Anderson's sky-high Pleaser heels), but crouching and holding my body in a set position on an uneven surface of beads while attempting to take an effective self-portrait proved to be more difficult than I had initially anticipated.

At the time of reviewing and editing images from this shoot, I hesitated to use this photograph due to how my stomach appeared in the image. While Anderson's flat stomach and enhanced breasts seem effortless, embodying the idealised image of desirable



Figure 5.14 *Pamela Anderson Cover*



Figure 5.15 10 Inch Pleasers and a Bed of Swarovski Crystals

femininity, my own stomach curves outward, with white flashes of stretch marks streak up my hips.

Reflecting on this now, over two years after taking this photograph, I see how misplaced those concerns were, after all, I was balancing on a bed of beads in 10-inch heels while taking my own photograph! Still, I choose to honour those moments of self-doubt and vulnerability, as they reflect the complications and contradictions that arise when creating images in response to near-impossible standards of desirable femininity. They highlight how these standards can make us feel as though we must constrain and censor ourselves and our bodies when we do not embody this ideal

Analogue Mirror Selfie

I began taking nude photographs of myself at the age of 18 while studying Photography at the Glasgow School of Art, where I learnt both analogue photographic processing alongside digital photographic techniques, and I initially approached both mediums with enthusiasm. However, my confidence in analogue processes quickly eroded as I encountered a culture within my male-dominated department that made me feel scrutinised, both as an artist and as a subject. Working in shared darkrooms and studios, I was frequently subjected to unsolicited comments about my body and my work. Male technicians loudly critiqued any perceived technical flaws in my prints with exclamations of “Too exposed!” as I quietly put them away to dry,

Beyond the critiques, I was repeatedly reminded of the fragility and expense of the analogue equipment. Warnings like “If you break this, it’s irreplaceable. it’s from a small company in Kansas” were issued with a tone that made it clear I was expected to fail. This weight of inherited anxiety, coupled with the male gaze lingering over my process

and prints became overwhelming. Analogue photography, with all its fragility, precarity, and expense, began to feel like a medium that did not belong to me. My hands were too clumsy, my presence too disruptive.

This notion changed for me on a summer's day spent at Scotland's National Library in 2022, where in the vast reading room I found myself sat in front of Bunny Yeager's 1964 how-to guide to sexy selfie taking: *How I Photograph Myself*. Yeager frames self-portraiture as a tool for self-improvement, suggesting that it allows individuals to see themselves through another's gaze, aligning her ideas with the feminine disciplining of the body and the theories of the male gaze articulated by Berger and Mulvey. However, Yeager simultaneously positions self-portraiture as an accessible medium for creating empowered, self-produced images, where subjects/producers can experiment with and redefine their representations of femininity. Presented as a DIY guide, Yeager demystifies the analogue photographic process, offering technical advice alongside tips on posing, costumes, and backdrops.

This contrast between Yeager's accessible approach to analogue 1960s sexy selfies and the rigid, exclusionary teachings I encountered during my undergraduate studies inspired me to revisit analogue techniques. Her perspective encouraged me to reframe the process not as fragile or intimidating, but as a playful and creative act of self-expression.

Analogue Mirror Selfie (figure 5.16) was the first analogue photograph I had made in nine years. This image became a symbolic act of reclaiming a method I had once abandoned and re-learning a skill that had been overshadowed by the constraints and criticisms I experienced during my undergraduate studies. It also serves as an exploration of tropes traditionally associated with gendered selfie-taking and feminine vanity, reflecting the interplay between performance and subjectivity within the image.

In March 2022, I resolved to revisit analogue photographic practices, using my twin-lens reflex (TLR) Rolleicord camera - a treasured Christmas gift from my dad when I was 18 - and a box of expired film purchased during my early analogue experiments. Determined to work autonomously, I gathered the materials needed to develop the film myself in my bathroom and turned to YouTube tutorials to guide me through re-learning these processes. The act of re-teaching myself analogue photography became an exercise in reclaiming a practice I had once loved but had felt compelled to abandon due to the male-dominated and often judgmental environment of my undergraduate department

The resulting image, *Analogue Mirror Selfie* features visible imperfections caused by small errors in the film processing, including green curves speckled across the image. Rather than treating these as flaws to be edited out, I chose to leave them intact, embracing them as natural glitches that disrupt the image and add texture to its narrative. These imperfections reflect the process of relearning, a metaphor for the uneven, sometimes messy journey of reclaiming artistic agency within a medium previously clouded by external criticism and self-doubt.

This image was also created as a response to Bunny Yeager's use of mirrors in her self-portraits, echoing Claire Raymond's analysis of the interplay between mirrors, the gaze, and cameras: "The mirror becomes a stand-in for the camera, highlighting the camera's role as ideology, the way that the camera, between gaze and object, interprets" (2016, p.84). In



Figure 5.16 *Analogue Selfie*

drawing on Yeager's techniques, I sought to explore how the act of photographing oneself in a mirror engages with and disrupts traditional notions of the gaze and subjectivity.

One of the most recognisable tropes of the selfie is the mirror selfie, described by Derek Conrad Murray as "a lone subject facing directly into a mirror or a reflection while holding up a cell phone or more traditional analogue or digital camera" (2022, p.1). With *Analogue Mirror Selfie*, I wanted to subvert this trope by blending the aesthetics of the contemporary selfie with those of traditional self-portraiture. Instead of using a smartphone, I employed a twin-lens reflex (TLR) analogue camera. Additionally, I replaced the typical domestic settings of modern mirror selfies with curtains and fabric as backdrops, thereby isolating and asserting the focus on the mirror, my reflection, and the act of photographing myself.

Glitched Exposures

Glitched Exposures was created as part of my continued exploration into re-learning analogue photographic processes and embracing the natural glitches that expired film can introduce. This work also reflects my desire to craft images that reveal the mechanics of photography itself, asserting my dual role as both subject and producer of the image. Inspired by Playboy's first female staff photographer, Suze Randall's self-portrait pictorial for Playboy (figure 5.17) where she photographed herself wrapped in the trigger cord of her camera this image draws on a lineage of female photographers reclaiming the tools of their medium to challenge traditional dynamics of the gaze and authorship.

When creating these images, I sought to explore and experiment with analogue photography's materiality, intentionally taking double and multiple exposures to craft layered compositions. After processing the film, I discovered a slight error in how I had loaded it onto the reel in the developing tank, with the film accidentally pressed together allowing for the film chemicals to pool and drip down the film. This, combined with the fact that these images were also shot from the same box of expired film I used for *Analogue Mirror Selfie* meant that the negatives were distorted in places, at times with images bleeding into one another

After digitally scanning and reviewing the negatives, I chose to lean into this natural glitch, selecting two images where a wavy band of cloud-like distortion cut through both frames, creating an organic disruption. What was once a technical flaw that symbolised my lack of ability, now I chose to celebrate for its ability to disrupt

One of the selected photographs was a double exposure, while the other was a single exposure. To further explore this layering effect, I introduced a third layer by digitally blending another image from the same shoot through Photoshop. This process combined analogue and digital techniques, embracing their interplay to disrupt conventional photographic hierarchies. By merging the unpredictability of analogue film with the control and precision of digital editing, I sought to create images that celebrate imperfection and transformation, blurring the boundaries between process, materiality, and representation.

Through my self-portraiture, I engage in a playful reimagination of Playboy's iconic imagery, using performance and artistic experimentation to explore hyper-femininity on my own terms. By intentionally revealing the tools of production, such as glitches, layered



Figure 5.17 Suze Randall Self-Portrait Pictorial

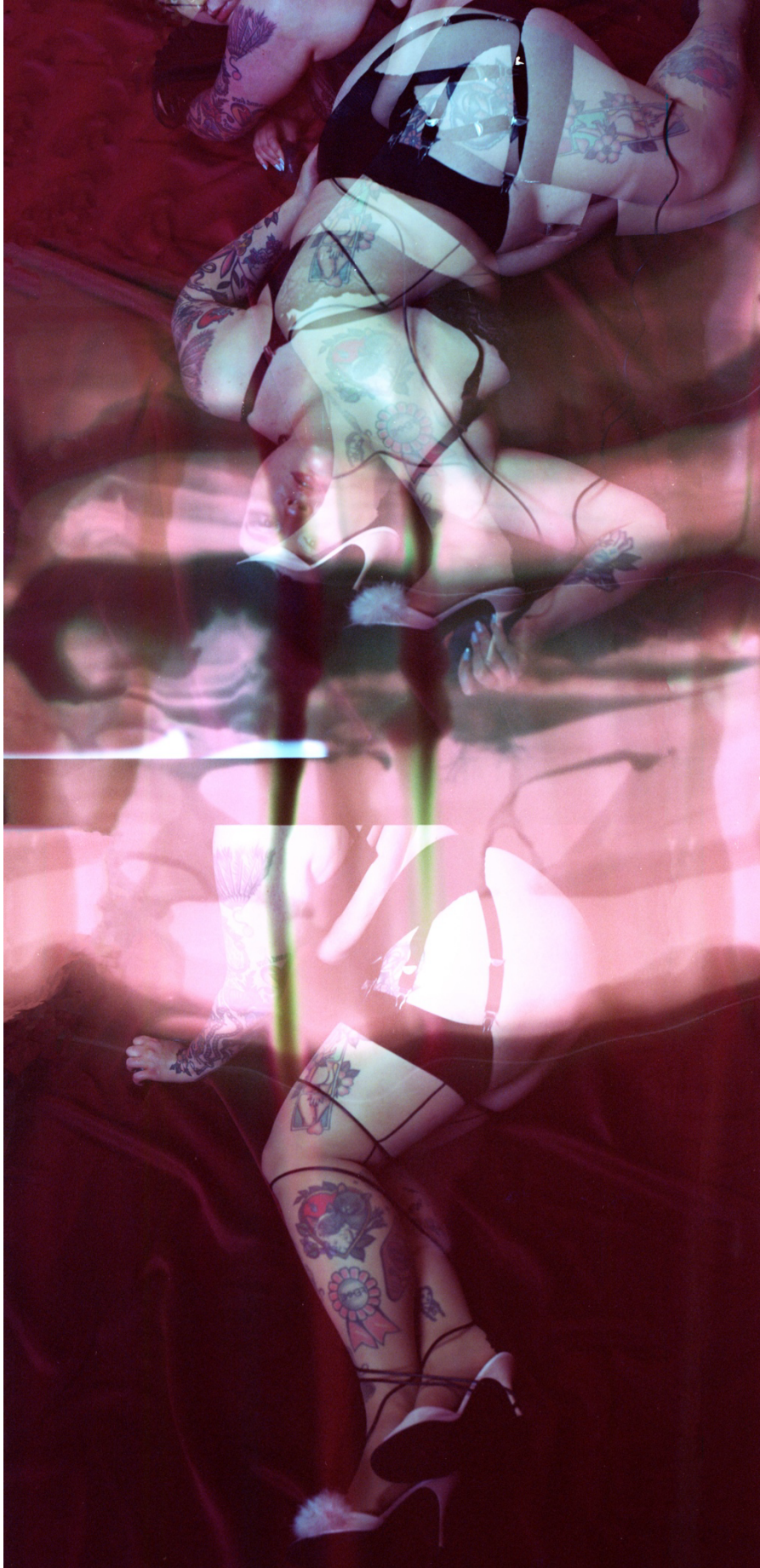


Figure 5.18 *Glitched Exposures*

exposures, and visible photographic equipment, I assert agency in the creation of my own image, subverting traditional portrayals of women as passive objects of the gaze. This act of self-representation complicates the subject/object binary, inhabit the roles of subject and producer and blurring the lines between being looked at and creating the gaze. This tension aligns with the concept of complicated empowerment, disrupting reductive dualisms and highlighting how femininity can be both performed and reclaimed. My self-portraits illustrate how hyper-femininity, often viewed as a tool of patriarchal control, can instead become a site for subversion, self-expression, and agency. In this way, my work demonstrates how creative practices can serve as a feminist method for reinterpreting and reclaiming Playboy's legacy.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the interplay between the gaze, agency, and self-representation within the context of Playboy, using feminist theory, visual methodologies, feminist critical discourse analysis, and embodied creative practice. The exploration of these themes has been done in relation to three subject areas: Bunny Yeager, GND, and my own analogue and digital self-portraits.

Key to this discussion is the act of revealing photographic processes, whether through Yeager's self-portraits entwined with her camera equipment and mirrors, GND's behind-the-scenes glimpses into their photoshoots, or my use of glitches, layered exposures, and visible tools of production. These strategies actively challenge the traditional invisibility of the photographer in Playboy's imagery, asserting subject-producer agency in spaces historically dominated by the male gaze.

My analysis of Playboy's visual media, spanning from its first 'Sweetheart of the Month' in 1953 to GND in the 2000s, demonstrates how these representations align with Cahill's (2010) notion of derivatization, wherein women's agency and creativity are expressed and constrained within and shaped by structures that sexualise them. For example, Yeager's self-portraits reclaim creative control but remain bound to Playboy's aesthetic and cultural norms, reflecting a negotiation between empowerment and constraint. Similarly, GND's protagonists reveal how femininities are performed and mediated within patriarchal frameworks, illustrating how agency can exist even within derivatized states.

These performances underscore the tensions of complicated empowerment, wherein derivatization is not entirely resisted but is instead navigated and reimagined. Through the interplay of subject and object positions, the women in these representations, and my own creative practice engage with hyper-femininity as a site of negotiation, blending critique with playful reinterpretation. This chapter thus demonstrates how Playboy's legacy serves as a space for both reinforcement and subversion of patriarchal norms, aligning with the complexities inherent in Cahill's framework of derivatization.

Second, these performances disrupt dualisms such as active/passive, object/subject, and empowerment/objectification. By reimagining the gaze, Yeager, GND's protagonists, and my autoethnographic work offer more fluid and nuanced representations that resist binary categorisations. This chapter positions these creative methods as vital tools for challenging and reinterpreting Playboy's legacy, showing how complicated empowerment operates as a dynamic interplay between critique, agency, and playful subversion.

Chapter Six: Constructing and Complicating the Girl Next Door:

Representations of (Hyper-)Femininities in Playboy

I'm just a backwoods Barbie in a push-up bra and heels.

I might look artificial, but where it counts I'm real.

And I'm all dolled up and hopin' for a chance to prove my worth

- Dolly Parton, "Backwoods Barbie"

Who is the Playboy woman? Throughout the magazine's sixty-seven-year history thousands of women graced its pages. Their smiling faces, glistening bodies and smouldering gazes look out through the magazine's pages, each one a piece in the legacy of Playboy's portrayal of feminine sexuality. To understand who the Playboy woman is, it's essential to briefly revisit how Hugh Hefner's own ideals shaped this image. Hefner's vision of the Playboy woman was that of a "girl next door" type, one who conveyed an approachable, non-threatening sensuality; what Pitzulo (2011) describes as safe female availability. She represented an accessible fantasy, an all-American girl who embodied a version of femininity that reassured rather than intimidated, showing readers that good girls like sex too. She must enjoy sex, but not be a harlot. She must be educated, but not too educated to intimidate men. She must also fulfil a specific and narrow beauty standard, which has throughout Playboy's decades of publication been overwhelmingly white, skinny, blonde, able-bodied, and cis-gendered. After all, to quote Crystal Hefner: "...this was Hugh Hefner's America, this meant being the blondest and the skinniest" (Hefner, 2024, p.13)

However, despite what is seemingly a narrow and harmful representation of feminine sexuality, on further analysis the women of Playboy demonstrate more nuance than

some feminist accounts (e.g Greer quoted in: Lehrman, 1972; Friedan quoted in: Sheff, 1992; Nussbaum, 1995; Levy, 2006.) indicate. This chapter examines how femininity, particularly forms of hyper femininity are portrayed in Playboy, identifying moments that both conform to and deviate from Hefner's ideals. It also explores whether and how forms of complicated empowerment can emerge even within representations that align with Playboy's restrictive standards of beauty and femininity.

This chapter focuses on how representations of femininities in Playboy are constructed and how they have evolved over time, with particular attention to the deployment of hyper-femininity. Through interviews with Playboy staff, I investigate whether and how Playboy's vision of the ideal woman has shifted, and whether this ideal is currently undergoing transformation. The chapter also revisits *The Girls Next Door* (GND), analysing how the series caricatured feminine identities for a predominantly female audience, presenting hyper-femininity as both a spectacle and a defining feature. By emphasising exaggerated performances of femininity, the series not only celebrated these identities but also created space for playfulness and critique.

Finally, my artmaking and autoethnographic reflections serve to queer one of Playboy's most iconic representations of feminine sexuality: the Playboy Bunny. Through this creative practice, I explore how hyper-femininity can transcend traditional boundaries, offering subversive possibilities that challenge conventional notions of desirability and representation while engaging with themes of agency, resistance, and self-determination.

In summary the chapter is divided into four main sections:

1. The first section presents further literature which has informed the analysis that follows, through the example of Anna Nicole Smith
2. The second analyses interviews with four Playboy staff members on topics surrounding representations in Playboy
3. The third forms a discussion on female fans and constructions of hyper-femininity of GND and analyses the make-over focused episode: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
4. The Fourth presents three self-portraits and a rhinestone bunny suit exploring autoethnography and queering Playboy's iconic imagery.

Complicating Playboy's Construction of the Idealised Feminine: The Unruly Body of Anna Nicole Smith

Similar to chapter five's analysis of Marilyn Monroe's appearance in Playboy, this opening section looks at Anna Nicole Smith's appearances in Playboy as a case study to review and revisit key themes and literature pertinent to this chapter.

Anna Nicole Smith's life, from her ascent to fame to her often-turbulent years in the spotlight, has been subjected to relentless media scrutiny. Born Vickie Lynn Hogan, Smith's journey from a working-class Texan background to international celebrity exemplifies the power and pitfalls of Playboy's portrayal of idealised femininity, and the potential consequences for women who deviate from it. At age 19, Smith moved to Houston in search of a better life for herself and her young son, Daniel, and began working as a stripper. This work eventually funded a breast augmentation that not only secured her rise to stardom, but ultimately helped seal her fate, as severe back pain

from her breasts contributed towards a pattern of abuse of prescription drugs of which she died from aged 39.

Anna Nicole Smith was one of Playboy's most prolific models, appearing on 5 US and 42 international Playboy covers, across 19 countries. She made her Playboy debut on the cover of its March 1992 issue (figure 6.1), credited under the name of Vickie Smith. The issue's cover story revolved around debutantes, claiming to reveal the "sexy daughters of the rich and famous" (Playboy, 1992, p.5). Smith appears dressed like a debutante, masquerading as an upper-class white woman in a blue satin gown, a pair of gold satin opera gloves, holding opera glasses and wearing a diamond necklace. What is particularly striking about Smith's first Playboy appearance is the guise of wealth and class Playboy projects onto Smith, and how this depiction of Smith wildly differs from how she came to commonly be portrayed in the media following her Playboy debut. In contrast, only two years after her first Playboy cover Smith would grace the cover of *New York Magazine* in a pair of white cowboy boots, denim hot pants and a pink vest top with a packet of *Cheez-Doodles* between her legs, under the caption "White Trash Nation" (1994). How did Smith's public image shift so dramatically and so fast, and what does this tell us about ideas around femininity and how it relates to themes of beauty standards, acceptability, thinness, and class? The unravelling of Smith's public image from faux-debutante, to Playmate, Guess model, gold-digger, white trash, "bovine sized beauty" (cited in: Brown, 2005, p. 83), reality television star, and ultimately, to an American tragedy; is one that speaks of the ways in which the patriarchy punishes women, particularly women when they no longer fit within the restraints of traditional feminine desirability and acceptability.



Figure 6.1 Anna Nicole Smith Cover 1

Playboy was central in shaping Smith's public image, launching her into fame. Following her cover debut, Smith quickly became a Playmate in May 1992. Her centrefold photograph depicts Smith in a pink frilled corset, matching ruffled pink cropped bolero jacket, and mint lace stockings. Her breasts are exposed, and she has visible bikini top tan lines, just above her exposed pubic region is a small tan outline of the Playboy bunny logo (a nod to popular tanning practice). With a soft smile, her hands playfully in her hair, and the delicate styling of her clothing and setting, Smith's look is both approachable and non-threatening. Behind her, a bottle of perfume and a single pink rose subtly suggests the presence of a masculine protagonist off-camera, a recurring motif in Playboy centrefolds that serves to reassure male viewers that the Playmate's allure is for the male gaze.

Smith's centrefold reflects Hefner's vision of the ideal Playmate as "a young, healthy girl, simple girl—the girl next door" (Fallaci, 1967, p.116). The pink rose and feminine styling reinforce a familiar, romanticised view of feminine sexuality, one intended to appeal to a male audience's fantasies without presenting any challenge to their gaze. Through these visual cues, Smith's image embodies a type of femininity that is simultaneously inviting and controlled, an image carefully crafted for male pleasure

This interpretation of Smith is carried further by the corresponding article published alongside her centrefold, entitled *Lone Star Stunner*. Here, Smith's story shifts from debutante to small-town girl finding success, a narrative that glosses over her work as a stripper and her relationship with 87-year-old billionaire J. Howard Marshall. Instead, Playboy frames her as a hard-working young woman waiting tables at *Red Lobster* to make ends meet, whose life is magically elevated by Playboy:

It's common for small-town girls to deploy a flotilla of feminine wiles and guises designed to get themselves out of Nowheresville to Anywhere, but Vickie Smith has always played it straight. As earthy and wide open as the North Texas spaces she hails from. (Playboy, 1992, p.91)

It's somewhat ironic that it was stripping, in which Smith utilised her sexuality (or as Playboy would put it her "feminine wiles") that enabled Smith to provide for herself and her son and thrive away from her small hometown of Mexia. Sex work is what carried Smith from "Nowheresville to Anywhere" (p.91) and propelled her towards Playboy and stardom. Yet, Playboy wished to portray her journey as far more wholesome, perhaps again to craft her into their ideal of non-threatening femininity

This representation of Smith as a simple, natural girl who overcame humble beginnings, while omitting her work as a stripper, reveals the gendered power dynamics embedded in Playboy's portrayal of women. Consistently, Playboy constructs narratives of women as coming from "nothing" and being given opportunities by Hefner and Playboy. This framing positions Hefner - and by extension the Playboy ideal of masculinity - as cultured, worldly benefactors who bestow social and cultural capital upon the women of Playboy, presenting them with a path to success. This dynamic perpetuates an imbalance in which women are implicitly beholden to Hefner and Playboy's audience, reinforcing a sense of entitlement and ownership over their bodies and images. Through this lens, the Playboy woman is positioned less as an empowered individual and more as a figure who owes her status to Playboy's influence.

Playboy's sense of entitlement over Smith's success and story extended to commodifying her life narrative. In 2001, Playboy promoted and sold VHS tapes of

Smith's "Rags to Riches Story," promising to chart her rise to fame with "full nudity." This product fetishised Smith's working-class background and reinforced Playboy's ownership over her body, image, and story, a product built on her personal life, yet it is unclear as to whether she profited from its sales.

By emphasising Smith's small-town origins and portraying her as unworldly (pointing out that she'd "never left the state of Texas" before Playboy) Playboy subtly belittled her, crafting her as innocent and accessible. Playboy's portrayal of Smith as an idealised, non-threatening feminine figure is not just a curated public image, it serves as an example of what Foucault (1977) describes as a panoptical gaze, where social institutions exercise control by fostering self-surveillance. Foucault's concept, inspired by Bentham's panopticon prison model, explores how societal institutions instil a sense of being constantly watched, leading individuals to monitor and discipline themselves to conform to social norms:

There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end up internalising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself. (Foucault, 1977, p.155)

Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) expands on this concept in the context of patriarchal power, suggesting that women internalise a "panoptical male connoisseur," a form of constant self-monitoring that reflects societal expectations of femininity. Under this "tyranny of slenderness," women feel pressured to discipline their bodies to meet institutionalised ideals of beauty. Bartky argues that:

In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal other. (p.72)

Playboy's depiction of Smith exemplifies this internalised surveillance, encouraging readers to accept a feminine ideal defined by non-threatening beauty and sexual availability. By representing Smith as an innocent "girl-next-door" and omitting her past experiences with sex work, Playboy shapes not just her image but also a broader standard of acceptable femininity. This version of Smith exemplifies how Playboy enforces patriarchal norms by encouraging women to internalise the male gaze, transforming Smith's body into a site of surveillance and self-discipline, conforming to an ideal that is docile and subservient to male desire.

This panoptical effect of Playboy's standards extends to its depictions of other women, reinforcing a narrow ideal where women's bodies must be disciplined, slender, and perpetually desirable. In this way, Playboy functions as an institutional panopticon for femininity, both shaping public perceptions and encouraging women to self-police their own bodies in alignment with Playboy's regulated ideals. Gendered power imbalances in Playboy's depictions of femininity are not just perpetuated through text, but also through the imagery itself, and Playboy's selection of which visual representations of femininity it published. What bodies are perceived as acceptable in Playboy's eyes, and which are not? Playboy's insistence on almost only publishing bodies that conform to its idea of idealised femininity: blonde, thin, white, skinny, cis-gendered upholds a narrative that women's bodies must be disciplined and regulated.

Playboy did not invent the feminine beauty ideal of white, slender and blonde; rather, it shaped and amplified it. Hefner's vision of the Playboy woman, as described in his interview with Fallaci (1967), was a product of and in alignment with wider societal expectations. Hefner often stated that his conception of feminine beauty was influenced by the classic Hollywood actresses he grew up admiring (Watts, 2008), and Playboy's pages ultimately reflected and perpetuated this cinematic, idealised version of femininity. Yet by popularising this ideal, Playboy contributed to a broader culture of patriarchal control over women's bodies, reinforcing a panopticon-like effect where women are encouraged to constantly monitor and remodel themselves to fit narrowly defined standards. The women of Playboy became tools to develop and showcase these visions of femininity.

In the case of Anna Nicole Smith, we can see throughout her multiple Playboy shoots the different roles they cast her in as they attempted to mould and compress her into easily digestible and accessible representations of feminine sexuality. Initially presented as Vickie Smith, the approachable, non-threatening 'small-town girl next door,' Smith's next Playboy appearance a year later in June 1993 recasts her entirely. Now we meet the "Playmate of the Year": Anna Nicole Smith, an Amazonian, hyper-sexualised figure, glamorous and bold (figure 6.2). This shift from innocence to iconic sensuality redefines her as an ideal rooted in power and allure.

Styled in black-and-white imagery that recalls her successful *Guess* campaign (a modelling job she booked due to her Playboy appearances), the June 1993 cover features Smith with coiffed hair and cat-eye makeup reminiscent of old Hollywood stars, such as Marilyn Monroe, a figure often evoked in discussions of Smith's own appeal. The soft-focus image, with visible grain that emulates the glamour photography of the 1940s and '50s, She glances back over her shoulder, not quite meeting the viewer's

gaze but hinting at an assumed lover just outside the frame, her glossed parted lips conveying a seductive, dream-like allure.

In her Playmate of the Year feature, Smith's stature is no longer portrayed as simple and non-threatening. Instead, Playboy emphasises her physical attributes to construct a more powerful, goddess-like image:

By four in the afternoon I was knocking on room 444, counting the plates piled outside on a room-service tray. Seven, all empty. This was a hungry woman. And there she was, on the threshold of a darkened room, blinds drawn, one shaded lamp on the table... She was maybe an inch under six feet. (Potterson, 1993, pp. 131-132)

At the start of her career, Smith's curves were widely praised, with many viewing her figure as a refreshing departure from the waif-like models of the time, such as Kate Moss. This sentiment is reflected in letters from Playboy readers. For instance, Sean Foster wrote, "In this age of the skeletal model, Anna Nicole is the happy exception" (Playboy, 1993, p. 12), while Elizabeth Juergens expressed her gratitude: "Thanks, Playboy, for giving the world a look at a real woman—not some small, thin beauty that women feel pressured to look like, but a full-figured woman" (p. 12).



Figure 6.2 Anna Nicole Smith Cover 2

While Smith's figure was indeed curvier than that of most Playboy models, a difference that clearly prompted Juergens' letter, her body still adhered to the narrow societal standards of feminine beauty, characterised by a relatively flat stomach, large breasts, and platinum blonde hair. This points to a deeper contradiction: while Smith's curvier figure was seen as a departure from the dominant aesthetic of the time, it still fit neatly within the highly specific and commercialised ideal of female beauty that Playboy promoted.

It is also important to note that Smith's relatively thin figure at the beginning of her career was one she struggled to maintain in the years following her debut. This underscores the pressures she faced not only to embody a specific type of femininity but also to sustain it under the intense public scrutiny of her appearance.

Jeffrey Brown (2005) analyses how Smith's 1993 appearances in Playboy and *Guess* exemplify the ideal of white, upper-class beauty, positioning her as a symbol of the cultural standards of femininity in the early 1990s:

The combination of *Guess* and *Playboy* helped Anna Nicole Smith become the preeminent sex symbol of the early 1990's. The similar visual style of the *Playboy* layouts and the *Guess* advertisements also clearly constructed Smith as a bourgeois sexual ideal, as the living embodiment of the classical body: sleek, symmetrical and self-contained. The photography used for both emphasises glamour and romanticism. Smith is clearly a fantasy figure on offer as an image of perfection. The heavy, stylised make-up and hair, the jewellery, the flirtatious

poses, even the use of black and white photography all work to act Smith as the cultural ideal of white, upper-class womanliness. (P.79)

Smith had now graduated from the Playboy mansion, starring in a major fashion campaign and set to become one of the most prominent sex symbols of her generation. Therefore, it makes sense that Playboy would cast her in a new role. No longer just a small-town girl, Smith has benefitted from gaining some of Playboy's social and cultural capital and now returned to the magazine more experienced and worldly. However, as Brown states, Playboy's styling of Smith as a classical and bourgeois beauty, even having her pose and tower over a classic statue, still upholds Playboy's idealised femininity.

As Brown argues, Playboy used its portrayal of women, like Smith, to maintain and regulate its image as a bastion of middle-class, white, and heterosexual masculinity. As Barbara Ehrenreich observes: "The breasts and bottoms were necessary not just to sell the magazine, but also to protect it" (1983, p.45). Hefner specifically targeted the post-war middle-class male during an era marked by the rise of commercial capitalism, crafting his version of "the good life" (Fraterrigo, 2011), a vision that prioritised the consumption of goods and women. Hefner strove to protect and perpetuate this ideal of the good life throughout his life, even until his death.

In many ways, Smith embodies Playboy's ideal woman; however, she also deviates from this ideal in significant ways. It is through these deviations, and how Playboy negotiated them, that we can discern cracks in the construction of their idealised femininity. As seen in Smith's early Playboy appearances, her working-class background and prior experience as a stripper posed a challenge for the magazine, which sought to re-contextualise her as non-threatening for their middle-class, white

male audience. However, as Smith's personal life came under increasing media scrutiny, and as she committed what could be considered the cardinal sin for any Playboy woman, gaining weight, Playboy's control over the polished ideal of her image began to unravel.

As Brown (2005) suggests beneath the veneer of Smith's seemingly "classic bourgeois body" as seen in *Guess* and her Playboy appearances there also existed "a hint of another body lurking just below the surface, a body threatening to transcend the boundaries of slender self-containment, of becoming more corporeal than ethereal" (p.80). At the height of Smith's early success Smith embodied a curvier version of the feminine ideal, with her Playmate data sheet claiming that she measured 39-27-39. Her almost cartoonish body was applauded by the media, as reflected in letters from Playboy readers. However, like many others, Smith's weight fluctuated over the course of her life, and when she dared appear heavier than she was when she first found fame, to tip towards unacceptability, she faced intense mockery and punishment from the media. The National Enquirer notably described her as a "play-buoyant pin-up" and a "bovine-sized beauty" (as cited in: Brown, 2005). Another notable example occurred during Smith's 2002 appearance on *The Howard Stern Show*, where Stern repeatedly tried to coax her into stepping onto a set of scales for the entertainment of his viewers. Despite being offered thousands of dollars, an Xbox, and a chance to view Stern's penis, Smith refused stating: "Why do you want me to get on the scales so that you can humiliate me?" (Sirius Internet Radio, 2002)

Playboy did not overtly take part in the public mockery of Anna Nicole Smith's weight but did poke fun at her on two occasions. In the January 2003 issue, a write-up compared her to Ozzy Osbourne, describing one as heavy metal and the other as

heavy. Similarly, the November 2003 issue's 'Raw Data' section humorously noted the average weight and square footage of a person's skin, adding that numbers for Smith might vary. While less overt than the outright humiliation Smith endured on *The Howard Stern Show*, these instances reflect Playboy's valorisation of certain body shapes over others. Given the magazine's pivotal role in her career, such jokes seem incongruous and reveal how Playboy contributed to a culture that punished women for defying traditional feminine beauty standards.

Furthermore, a closer look at Smith's Playboy features reveals a clear pattern: when she deviated from traditional feminine beauty standards, she was notably absent from the magazine. After a cover shoot and Valentine-themed pictorial in February 1994, Smith did not appear again in Playboy until another cover shoot and pictorial in February 2001, aside from occasional updates in the Playmate news section and archival photographs.

This February 2001 Marilyn Monroe 'Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend' themed cover (figure 6.3) sees Smith covered in jewels smiling open mouthed at the camera, the tagline reads: Anna Nicole Smith: \$450,000 Playmate. The pictorial featured predominantly archival images from her Playboy pictorials nearly a decade earlier, as well as new images of Smith wrapped in jewels and fur and covering most of her body. This pictorial focuses on how Smith has now hit it big with her poised to potentially inherit her share of her late husband's fortune. Still curvier than she was when she originally featured in Playboy, although lighter than she had been in recent years, it is clear that Playboy made attempts to cover Smith's curvier figure using archival images and costuming.

PLAYBOY

ENTERTAINMENT FOR MEN

FEBRUARY 2001 • www.playboy.com

**ANNA
NICOLE
SMITH**

**\$450,000,000
PLAYMATE**

**19 Ways
To Take Off
Her Panties**

**All The Little
Lies Behind
SURVIVOR**

**Playmates
Pick Cars
That Drive
Girls Wild**

**Xtreme
Interview
VINCE
MCMAHON**



Australia Sub 113
Belgium Flak 53
France Fr 48
Germany DM 28.50
Italy Lit 18000
Norway NOK 88
Spain Ptas 1300
Sweden SEK 78 000
Switzerland Sfr 13.90
U.S. \$4.95

Figure 6.3 Anna Nicole Smith Cover 3

No longer depicted as a demure, small-town girl, Playboy now positions Smith in relation to themes of excess and greed. The accompanying text exaggerates her potential wealth, while visuals of jewels and fur reflect cultural assumptions that fat bodies are lazy and indulgent. At the same time, Smith's sexualised image also became intertwined with whore stigma (Pheterson, 1996). Her career as a stripper before becoming Playmate of the Year, her arguably transactional relationship with J. Howard Marshall, and her role as a highly visible sex symbol tied her to stereotypes of promiscuity, excess, and moral failings, labels that are disproportionately applied to women who embrace their sexualities in ways that deviate from more 'acceptable' forms of femininity. In other words, Smith crossed over from the good girl (which Playboy's girl next door archetype of femininity sits within) to the bad girl; and as such must be punished.

Susan Bordo (1993) argued that cultural ideals of femininity, particularly those related to thinness, dress, and beauty, are a product of patriarchal control. Women are fed the idea that thinness is a sign of wilfulness and desirability. To not conform to thinness, therefore, signifies the opposite. Similarly, Naomi Wolf (1991) described the tyranny of thinness as a tool to control women's bodies and ensure obedience. However, Smith's disobedience to these standards was not only physical. Her embodiment of overt sexuality, which Playboy both celebrated and controlled, came to symbolise the tension between desirability and stigmatisation.

For Playboy, Anna Nicole Smith and her "disobedient" body became too unruly to fit into their narrow ideal of the perfect Playmate. Her career marked by her overt sexualisation and public sexuality, made her an easy target for whore stigma. Playboy positioned her as a quintessential fantasy figure, but her personal history as a stripper and her later publicised relationships (particularly with elderly billionaire J. Howard

Marshall) marked her as an object of moral judgment. In this sense, Smith was both the ideal and the pariah, an embodiment of the whore who could be consumed for male pleasure but also punished for daring to live outside the bounds of socially acceptable feminine behaviour.

In a 2007 tribute feature on Smith, *Playboy* centralises her weight as an obstacle to be overcome to portray her as the ideal *Playboy* woman. Makeup artist Alexis Vogel described the challenges, stating:

The photographers didn't want to deal with her. They had beautiful girls going through there every day for *Playmate* tests, and this one was heavy. It would be hard work to drape her just right, hide the weight, and get the perfect angle (*Playboy*, 2007, p56).

These comments suggest that Smith's image, like the women who came before her, was something to be manipulated into a mould that would be acceptable to their readers. Yet, the very fact that her image could be so heavily edited to fit a narrow beauty ideal reflects the tension between her public persona as a *Playboy* model and the stigmatisation of her more complex, messy sexuality

Anna Nicole Smith's and her body, whilst one of *Playboy's* most notable and famous women, was also a challenge to them. Throughout Smith's multiple *Playboy* pictorials we can see *Playboy* slowly lose their ability to re-contextualise her unruly curves into a neatly packaged body that masqueraded as thin and remained in line with their idealised, uncomplicated version of femininity. Smith's complications and disobedience from this idealised standard of femininity serves as an example of *Playboy's*

construction of feminine desirability being challenged, but also simultaneously of the danger posed by these beauty standards themselves to women. To quote Bordo: “At the farthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead them to utter demoralization, debilitation, and death” (1993, p.166). Smith’s crash dieting (with her becoming a spokeswoman for the diet meal supplement brand, *TrimSpa* in 2004) and addiction to prescription drugs which was partly caused by her ongoing pain she endured from her breast augmentations, contributed to her passing. Forever in pursuit of her idol, Marilyn Monroe's levels of fame and beauty, Smith’s own corporeality eventually became too much for her.

While Anna Nicole Smith’s story reflects the tragic consequences of a life shaped by external scrutiny and commodification, where her hyper-feminine persona was publicly sexualised, mocked, and wrested from her control; other women within Playboy’s orbit have been able to navigate these dynamics with greater agency. Pamela Anderson, another Playboy icon whose hyper-feminine and hyper-sexual image often positioned her within stereotypical readings of desirability, has recently reclaimed her narrative in profound ways. However, Anderson’s journey has not been without its own struggles. Her agency was infamously stripped away through the non-consensual leaking of her private sex tape in the 1990s, a violation that reduced her to an object of public consumption and ridicule with her position as a Playboy model used against her as a reason why she has no right to her privacy (Anderson, 2023). Unlike the deliberate cultivation of her Playboy persona, this breach of privacy exemplified how women’s bodies can be commodified against their will, with devastating consequences.

More recently, Anderson has reclaimed further control over her image through her autobiography *Love, Pamela* (2023) and subsequent Netflix documentary *Pamela, A Love Story* (2023), where she reflects on her life with honesty and vulnerability,

reframing the Playboy vision of femininity as part of a broader narrative of empowerment, resilience, and self-definition. Furthermore, in 2023 and 2024 Anderson challenged beauty ideals around aging by making public appearances without makeup (Chan, 2023), subverting the cultural expectation that women, particularly those who have been Playboy symbols, must remain eternally youthful and glamorous. Unlike Smith, whose image was frequently consumed and shaped by external forces, Anderson demonstrates how embracing and redefining a hyper-feminine persona, on her own terms, can become a powerful act of self-ownership and resistance against reductive stereotypes.

The analysis of Anna Nicole Smith serves as a useful lead in to the following discussion of constructions of femininity in Playboy through analysis of my interviews conducted with Playboy staff in 2022; an evaluation of the GND episode *Midsummer Night's Dream*; and consideration of my own art-making practice. Through these different research lenses, I re-evaluate how to consider constructions of femininity within Playboy, to move beyond analyses that see Playboy as merely objectifying of women, to a more nuanced appraisal which explores instances of complicated empowerment.

Rectifying and Reworking Playboy's Legacy: A Short Series of Interviews with Playboy Staff

In the years following Hugh Hefner's death in 2017, Playboy has radically shifted its operations. With the magazine no longer in print, the Playboy mansion in the hands of a new owner, and the Playboy clubs closed, the company refocused its efforts into digital media. While chapter seven will analyse Playboy's new digital platforms, this section examines recent Playboy staff members' views on femininity within the company. Using

interview responses from four Playboy employees, this section explores how staff perceptions of femininity may differ from the company's historical representations and identify the extent to which contemporary Playboy's constructions of femininity constitute a break or continuity with the past (this discussion continues in the following chapter).

Women are what made Jessica choose to work at Playboy. Sitting in her office at Playboy's headquarters in Westwood, Los Angeles, she describes how both the large female workforce at Playboy (at the time 80% of its staff identified as women) and her daughter's enthusiasm for the company is what drove her to choose a job at Playboy:

I have four daughters, between the ages of 17 and 21. And I was considering a number of other job opportunities at the same time. And I sat down with my kids, and my husband and said: 'Here are the various opportunities, here's the pros and cons with each one, you know, a lot of them I'd have to travel internationally or whatnot. What do you guys think?' And one of the opportunities was with an entertainment company, and I thought they'd want that because they get access to tickets and events and things like that. They all unanimously, my husband, like, didn't even get a word in edgewise, my four kids unanimously, my four daughters were like 'You have to go to Playboy.' and I said, 'Why?'. Because I didn't really know about the new Playboy. And they said, 'Because they stand for freedom of expression. Did you know they put, you know, Bretman Rock on the cover? Did you know they did an interview with Lizzo? They're all about body positivity, inclusion, and just really embracing, like your authentic self.'. And I'm like, tell me more! And so, my kids started explaining more, and more, and more. So then when I was going through the interview process, I met with so many women. And [name redacted] is our Chief Brand Officer, and when I spoke with her, you know,

she was such a big part of that brand transformation...And women lead a lot of that thinking. And it's really looking closely at those aspects of the legacy, like what do we want to embrace? Who do we want to be? What do we want to pull forward with it with us? And so that ability to be your authentic self and to feel safe and empowered and value that's what really comes through in everything that we do. And so I think just having women leading a lot of that work is so important, and it was part of why I wanted to be involved. (Jessica, 2022)

Jessica's statement captures a shift in Playboy's self-representation in the post-Hefner years, as the company increasingly aligns with messages of body positivity, inclusion, and empowerment while distancing itself from Hefner's legacy, especially in the wake of #MeToo. Jessica sees this transformation as driven by women, with female employees actively choosing which aspects of the brand's legacy to keep and which to change. Jessica views the female leadership and workforce at Playboy as essential decision-makers, and this inclusive environment attracted her to the company. She cites musician Lizzo's feature in Playboy's Spring 2019 issue, where Lizzo discussed feminism and the importance of making body positivity "mainstream", as well as social media star Bretman Rock's digital feature and October 2021 "cover" as examples that influenced her choice to join. Both features signify a departure from Playboy's traditional idealised portrayals of femininity and desirability, with Lizzo being a fuller-figured African American woman, and Rock, a gay Filipino man.

Rock's groundbreaking cover was celebrated by both Playboy and several media outlets (Balagtas, 2021; Clark, 2021; Palumbo, 2021), marking him as the first openly gay male cover star in Playboy's history. However, his cover and pictorial only appeared online, as the magazine ceased print publication in Spring 2020. By May 2024, I found

that Rock's feature was no longer available on Playboy's website, or its subscription-based platforms. While Jessica points to Rock's pictorial as a sign of Playboy's progressive shift, its quiet removal reflects the company's shifting digital priorities, now focused heavily on subscription-based creator platforms that primarily spotlight female bodies for a male audience (which will be explored further in chapter seven).

Interestingly, at the time of writing Rock has kept his Playboy shoot announcement as a pinned post on his Instagram feed, highlighting its enduring significance for him and his followers, even as it fades from Playboy's own archive.

LGBTQ+ representations and identities were a common thread of discussion amongst all four interview participants. With Peter discussing how he felt welcome working at Playboy, despite not belonging in Playboy's traditional target demographic:

...We have a very strong queer representation in the office amongst both men and women, and I'm gay. And I've honestly never felt more comfortable about my sexuality than I have working here. And actually, later today, we have our LGBTQ Resource Group, which is awesome. And it's something I haven't been a part of before. So, I think we offer a very welcoming environment for everyone. And when we say pleasure for all, we really do mean it. And if you look at our consumer products, and our marketing and our advertising of those new products, you'll see a lot more diversity. We really emphasise body positivity. (Peter, 2022)

Jessica also highlighted the LGBTQ+ friendly work environment at Playboy, mentioning how they host events for their LGBTQ resource group, with a drag bingo event scheduled later the day of my interview. This supportive office culture reflects Playboy's evolution from its previous tagline, 'Entertainment for Men', to the more inclusive

'Pleasure for All', along with a predominantly female workforce and LGBTQ+ resource groups that foster an inclusive workplace.

As discussed in chapter two this shift in Playboy's tagline is reflected in recent content, with celebrities like Orville Peck, Dorian Electra, and Lizzo appearing in features that challenge Playboy's heteronormative and traditional beauty standards. The last Playmates the company featured before they stopped producing Playmate shoots in spring 2021 also reflect this inclusivity.

Whilst as mentioned in chapter four, there is no comprehensive data tracking Playboy's diversity over its history. Looking through imagery of women in Playboy over the decades, its last couple of years of publication stand out as representing a more diverse spectrum of bodies and ideas of femininity. Yet, as Playboy company employee, Miffy, notes, Playboy has at various points over its history occasionally challenged its conventional beauty standards. She describes the inclusion of Caroline Cossey (also known as Tula) a transgender model who posed for Playboy twice, first in 1981 and again in 1991:

She was the first openly transgender model in Playboy, and this was like, my point is that it was long before it was trendy to feature members of LGBTQ+ community in a celebratory way. And the reason I like that example is, not to toot our own horn, but because it's a good example of how if you're a brand who has a big platform it would be a lot easier to go with the status quo. We have a reputation, y'know the 'read it for the articles' is kind of a joke, we have a reputation for featuring beautiful women in the pages of the magazine, that sells magazines, we know that, full stop. To continue to challenge the cultural zeitgeist and the

discourse, it's an example of one of the reasons why I work here, is not settling for the status quo and always challenging things to move conversations forward. But doing it in a way that's, it wasn't like "oh my god we're going to make a big statement!" It was, "this person's beautiful, let's give them a voice and do a stunning pictorial the same way that we would with anyone who is in the magazine. So, I would say that's a good example. (Miffy, 2022)

Miffy sees Tula's features in Playboy as examples of the magazine's occasional willingness to challenge societal norms by representing a broader scope of femininity. She suggests that Playboy prioritised Tula's ability to conform to their vision of feminine desirability, positioning her beauty as more crucial than her identity. According to Miffy, Tula's identity as a trans woman was secondary to her capacity to embody the magazine's idealised femininity, a standard still largely rooted in cisnormative and heteronormative aesthetics. In Miffy's view, Playboy's decision to feature Tula again in 1991 was less about her identity as an out trans woman and more about her ability to perform femininity in a way that resonated with the magazine's established expectations of beauty. This suggests that Playboy has, at times, selectively embraced diversity while still adhering to a restrictive and conformist vision of feminine appeal.

Drawing from Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism* (2020), in which Russell states, "The glitch challenges us to consider how we can penetrate...break...puncture...tear the material of the institution, and, by extension, the institution of the body" (p.25), we can view individuals like Tula as embodying glitches within Playboy's framework. These figures momentarily disrupt expectations by making visible identities that exist outside of Playboy's traditional beauty norms. However, while these deviations challenge interpretations of Playboy's representations of femininity as exclusively white, blonde,

thin, cisgendered, and able-bodied, the infrequency in which they appear in Playboy limits any reading of Playboy as fully revolutionary or subversive.

Both Jessica and Peter also briefly refer to Playboy as being the first major publication to feature a Black woman on its cover whilst listing other examples of diversity in Playboy's representations. At the time of the interview, I did not think to ask for further information on this fact; however, on reviewing the transcripts, I thought to fact-check this statement. Darine Stern was Playboy's first solo Black cover model, appearing on the cover in October 1971 (although Jean Bell's 1969 centrefold did appear on January 1970's cover amongst four other centrefolds). Stern's appearance on Playboy's cover is predated by numerous Black women appearing on the covers of African-American magazines, such as *Ebony* magazine (National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2020), Donyale Luna appearing on the cover of British *Vogue* magazine in 1966, and Katiti Kironde appearing on the cover of *Glamour College* magazine in August 1968. Whilst Stern's cover undeniably marked an important moment for Playboy, it is clear that the magazine was not the pioneer that its staff claim it to be. This selective framing of Playboy's history suggests a narrative crafted to bolster its reputation as a revolutionary force in diversity, overlooking the broader and earlier contributions of other publications.

This critique aligns with Playboy employee Lola's reflections on Playboy's representations, which she views as echoing rather than shaping societal beauty standards of each era. Lola, believes that representations of women in Playboy have long echoed wider societal beauty standards of each era, at times to the detriment of diversity in the magazine:

I think the women in Playboy and I'm gonna say early on they were definitely reflective of the era. Absolutely what you saw in the pinups was what was considered beautiful at the time. And you saw, you know, full figured women, you saw women of all shapes and sizes. And I think that obviously, as beauty standards changed, there was a shift away from that there was a period of, you know, the 90s, 2000s, where you stopped getting the diversity and body type, you stop getting, I would say, and this is just my personal view is that people start all looking the same. There's a formula for what we think works. And it's been really wonderful to see the shift move away from that again, and to see the inclusiveness and to see different body types different, you know, gender identities, it's, I think that's just been phenomenal. For me as a woman, absolutely, being on the other side of it and seeing, I mean, I'm you know a normal sized woman, but I would say even for me seeing the women in Playboy, I was like 'Oh, that's not everybody.'

(Lola, 2022)

Lola's acknowledgment that even she felt excluded by Playboy's past depictions of women resonates with broader critiques of the magazine's narrow beauty ideals and their impact on women's self-esteem. Significantly, she sees Playboy as reflective rather than constitutive of societal body standards, minimising the role which the magazine played in shaping ideas of ideal hetero-femininity. Yet, she is optimistic about recent changes, which she views as moving toward a more inclusive vision that embraces diverse bodies and definitions of femininity. When asked about her hopes for Playboy's future representation of women, Lola continued:

I think we've already sort of broken our own mould. And I think everybody was excited for it. I mean, internally, I can speak to that, but we're all ready for it. And I think we've gotten nothing but positive responses. I mean, obviously, you'll lose

some readers, not everybody's gonna like what you do, but I think we would rather stay true to the idea of inclusion and of representing everybody, representing the people who are reading, representing, you know, rather than representing like a teeny tiny percentage of what exists like let's represent everyone and so I would love to, I've always said I would love to see male playmates absolutely (Lola, 2022)

Lola's vision of a possible future for Playboy prioritises representing all bodies, as opposed to privileging a narrow and formulaic representation of desirable femininities, and recognises the part that Playboy can play in shaping this future (rather than just reflect it). We see her sense of optimism for Playboy's future reflected in all four participants, with Peter discussing how Playboy could be utilised as a conduit for female empowerment:

...we definitely want to be inclusive not only in what we offer but who we're putting out there to represent the brand which is important for us, and I think that goes for the talent we work with. There's a lot of diversity there. ... And you know, it's all about female empowerment. And so I think the whole idea that we've taken Playboy and now it's women who are figuring out how do we leverage this amazing brand to empower women? It's a really fascinating sort of case study. (Peter, 2022)

Despite this sense of optimism, it is important to note that, as of 2024, Playboy's parent company, PLBY Group, still has a predominately male executive leadership despite the large number of female employees. Yet, staff like Jessica, Peter, Miffy, and Lola articulate a commitment to fostering diversity and inclusion as central to Playboy's

post-Hefner identity. Whilst it remains unclear as to whether Playboy will be able to truly leverage their legacy to empower women, it is apparent that in their post-Hefner years the company has made efforts to take what was once small and infrequent glitches in their construction of idealised femininity and shift to expanding this to include more varied bodies. However, is this enough? Can expanding Playboy to represent a wider range of feminine bodies undo decades of women's bodies being utilised by Playboy to enforce limiting and stereotypical ideals of femininity? To quote Emma Dabiri:

I don't want to fight to be appreciated as an object. I want to transform the world in which objectification of women is the default. I don't believe the solution to making beauty- as it's currently understood, as an abstracted, singularly visual, physical quality- less oppressive is merely to diversify those standards, to expand them to include fat, black, brown, short and disabled bodies. (2023, p110)

Dabiri argues that to truly subvert patriarchal and colonial standards of beauty, we must foster communities where beauty "...is not simply something to behold, but rather something we can do together" (p.135). This vision challenges the notion of beauty as a static, visual ideal shaped for consumption, instead promoting a collective experience of beauty that embraces diverse senses and perspectives

In post-Hefner Playboy, statements from Jessica, Peter, Miffy, and Lola suggest that the company is working to foster a workplace where women and LGBTQ+ individuals feel represented and capable of influencing its direction. However, the persistent profit-driven nature of Playboy, and its reliance on women's bodies as central to its revenue model, raises a deeper question: can a corporation like Playboy genuinely serve as a platform for empowerment and a challenge to patriarchal norms when the primary motive is to make the company money?

Playboy's evolving inclusivity efforts may indicate a step toward diversification, but as Dabiri's critique implies, redefining beauty in a truly transformative way requires more than broadening representation. It necessitates a fundamental shift away from frameworks that commodify femininity to create spaces where beauty is not only visual but shared and co-created. We see a tension created between the optimism of its staff, and the reality of the company's history and operational priorities (such as Jessica's enthusiasm for Bretman Rock's digital cover, and the quiet erasure of it from Playboy's website), necessitating the question: is inclusivity within a traditional, commodified beauty standard enough to disrupt the male gaze, or does it risk reinforcing it under a more inclusive guise? As I dive into Playboy's digital platforms in the next chapter, I explore this question further.

“Everybody Wants a Makeover From a Playboy Girl”: *The Girls Next Door*, Postfeminism and Hyper-femininity

It is established early on in *The Girls Next Door* (GND) that its protagonists Holly Madison, Bridget Marquardt and Kendra Wilkinson are acutely aware of how they are perceived by the public and media, with Marquardt in the pilot episode remarking: “There's two main adjectives people think when they see us: bimbo, and slut” (*Girls Next Door: Meet the Girls*, 2005). This captures the double-bind many women faced in the 2000s, a decade Sarah Ditum (2023) dubs “the up-skirt decade”: a time when women were simultaneously sexualised, slut-shamed, and punished if they dare to fail to conform to rigid beauty standards. Meanwhile a growing amount of feminist discourse (for example: Levy 2006, Walter 2010) targeted what they perceived as sexualised and pornified representations of women.

Amidst these conflicting discourses, questions persist: Can women express their sexuality and hyper-feminine identities while maintaining agency? Can this be achieved within patriarchal spaces, such as Playboy? This section will look at the ways in which GND portrays its female protagonists as variations of feminine stereotypes which collectively form a postfeminist, hyper-feminine ideal of modern womanhood in the 00s. Reviews of the series from its original airing will inform a discussion on how the series repackaged Playboy to a female audience and the complicated feelings this incited for female viewers. Finally, analysis of the GND episode *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will explore how the idealised hyper-feminine Playboy aesthetic is constructed and how GND situates this as a site of feminist/postfeminist empowerment and joy.

Trashy Lingerie & Situating Hyper-femininity

In 2022 when visiting Los Angeles to interview staff at the Playboy offices, I made a pilgrimage to an iconic setting of GND. Standing on the corner of Oakwood and La Cienega with her bright pink facade contrasting against the endless blue sky stands Trashy Lingerie. Trashy has sold sexy Halloween costumes and lingerie to celebrities from Paris Hilton to Madonna for decades (Allaire, 2022), but for many they know it as the go-to stop for Madison, Marquardt and Wilkinson to shop for outfits for Playboy parties. Walking past the windows lined with Playboy bunny costumes I dutifully paid my \$2 membership fee at the front desk and entered (figure 6.4). Amongst racks of sexy mini Marie-Antoinette costumes, frilly suspender belts and beaded bodysuits I felt like I was participating in one of the hyper-feminine rituals of GND.

Trashy Lingerie serves as a recurring setting in GND, showcasing the protagonists' embrace of hyper-femininity through lingerie shopping and custom costume fittings. With its provocative name, sexually suggestive products and hyper-feminine branding, Trashy Lingerie is emblematic of how femininity is constructed in GND. Whilst Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson are individually branded as variations of femininity in the series and its tie in merchandise, femininity in general in the series is depicted as being an identity in which one can find joy and empowerment, albeit always in relation to the heterosexual male gaze. The girls, and particularly Marquardt, embody exaggerated hyper-femininity, with their blonde hair, pink Juicy Couture tracksuits, and love for "girly" activities like planning themed dog parties or eating cupcakes. This depiction positions femininity as both a shared identity and an aesthetic to celebrate.

Femininity as depicted in popular culture has long been a subject of feminist discourse and debate (for example: Baumgardner, and Richards, 2004; McCann 2018; Hoskin, and Blair, 2023) however, the concept of hyper-femininity and what it signifies has shifted in recent years. Murnen and Byrne (1991) define hyper-femininity as an "exaggerated adherence to a stereotypic feminine gender role" (p.480). Exploring the relationship between hyper-femininity and violence against women, Murnen and Byrne emphasised the centrality of heterosexuality in relation to hyper-femininity. Similarly, Allan (2009) related the construction of hyper-femininity in private primary school students as intertwined with heterosexuality. However, more recent discussions of hyper-femininity suggest that it can be explored as an exaggerated subversion and queering of traditional hegemonic femininities and a reclamation of feminine tropes and identities often belittled in the '90s and '00s, such as that of the bimbo. Once a derogatory word used to mock women who were viewed as unintelligent due to their hyper-feminine presentation, the bimbo became subject of a renaissance through social



Figure 6.4 My Trashy Lingerie Membership Card

media platforms, most notably *TikTok*, in 2020. Pierce (2022) describes this resurgence of bimboism as a “resistive political community” (p.205) inclusive of, and in solidarity with marginalised groups which utilises hyper-feminine gender expression to explore, reclaim and subvert cultural ideas of femininity: “TikTok bimbos draw upon normative embodied and discursive neoliberal femininity and perform it in ways that reveal its instability and create alternative meanings.” (p.208). Bimbo content creator Chrissy Chlapecka described bimboism’s relationship to femininity in an interview on hyperfemininity with Nylon as: “I think there is a lot of beauty in femininity in itself, but also so much beauty in how queer people express their own femininity and aesthetic. It’s almost an art form of itself, coming from authenticity and self-acceptance.” (Reilly, 2024)

As discussed in chapter three this thesis explores the subversive possibilities within hyper-feminine expressions and performances while recognising that interpreting GND’s presentation of hyper-femininity as solely subversive overlooks its heteronormative and patriarchal foundations. GND emphasises the heterosexuality underpinning its protagonists’ hyper-feminine identities, notably through Hefner’s constant presence and the repeated affirmation of his relationships with the women. For instance, in episodes where the girls spend a night away from the mansion (e.g., *Half-Baked Alaska*, S4, E3, *Jamaican Me Crazy*, S4, E9), Madison frequently phones Hefner to express her love and longing.

In many ways representations of femininity in GND align with normative, neoliberal, postfeminist ideals, featuring disciplined bodies, self-surveillance, and the framing of Playboy and Hefner as central to empowerment. Instead of arguing that representations of femininity in GND falls definitively either side of the binaries of

empowered/sexualised, good/bad, normative/subversive this section is instead interested in finding a more nuanced reading. By acknowledging the patriarchal background of GND and where representations of femininity within the series perpetuates normative and at times harmful ideals, we can also make room for readings of complicated empowerment to be found within the series' construction of femininities and the girls' joyful embracing of their hyper-femininity.

Consuming *The Girls Next Door*

Reviews of GND reflect the double bind and conflicting appeal the series posed for female audiences. Early coverage, such as Entertainment Weekly's pre-launch review, echoes the misogynistic media landscape surrounding the show, with reviewer Charles Curtis dismissively belittling the girlfriends as mere "blonde bimbos":

Girls focuses on three of his [Hefner's] lady friends, who attempt to prove they're more than arm candy—a noble endeavour, though one that struggles to hold our attention. Like, where are those bunny fights over Hef? (Curtis, 2005, p. 63)

In contrast, reviews in *Jezebel* and *Elle* highlight the series' unique appeal for women, acknowledging its retro-sexism while praising its depiction of the girlfriends as relatable and complex. Jennifer's *Jezebel* review celebrates the girlfriends' resistance to hegemonic, docile femininity, citing the episode *Mutiny on the Booty*, where the women successfully push to design their own Playboy photo shoots:

I selected one of my favourite episodes, where lead girlfriend Holly convinces Hef that the girls should design and execute their own individual photo shoots

for their second appearance in Playboy, rather than be photographed together in straight-forward settings. Within three minutes flat, my male friend had lost interest. He might've even been nodding off, if I'm not mistaken. Who knows, I was glued to the TV... these are the girls we all could be. They are the anti-fantasy. Behind the fake boobs and the fake tans and the fake hair and, in Holly's case, the fake nose, these are girls that are (sorry Us Weekly) just like us. They're feisty. And have something to say. (Jennifer, 2007)

Similarly, Daphne Merkin's *Elle* review reflects her internal conflict as a feminist enjoying GND. Interviewing Hefner, the girlfriends, and producer Kevin Burns, Merkin probes the show's appeal. Burns attributes its draw to three factors:

(1) to laugh at and feel superior to it; (2) because it's genuinely funny and sweet; or (3) because they find the show strangely empowering, in that it's the women who are ultimately in charge. (Merkin, 2007)

While Burns' claim that the women are "ultimately in charge" is debatable, given Hefner's and the production team's control, GND does craft a narrative of the women gradually gaining agency, particularly over their Playboy shoots. Merkin describes the protagonists as "antediluvian in their embrace of unliberated femininity" but finds their performances refreshing, contrasting them with traditional feminist figures like Hillary Clinton. She hypothesises this contrast as a key to the show's success:

In the end, I guess you could rationalise the grip the show has on its audience by noting that it's good fun and that we all need time off from Hillary Clinton models of femaleness. (Merkin, 2007)

This analysis of GND highlights the dualities and contradictions inherent in its portrayal of femininity. As Merkin suggests GND presents a neoliberal postfeminist fantasy where women can revel in unbridled femininities and express their sexualities while ostensibly existing in a world where feminism is no longer necessary. In the constructed utopia of GND, feminism is no longer needed, it has achieved its goals and thus the girls are free to embody their own idealised forms of feminine sexualities... that is as long as they don't wear red lipstick and they're back at their octogenarian boyfriend's mansion before their 9pm curfew (Madison, 2015). However, this constructed fantasy is fraught with contradictions. Reviewers like Jennifer and Merkin identify the odd duality and a sense of what I would argue is a form of complicated empowerment within the series, capturing the series as simultaneously troubling and beguiling, particularly for female viewers.

Part of the conflicting enjoyment women like Merkin found in GND may lie in its reclamation of Playboy, a brand historically created exclusively for men. For decades, Playboy catered explicitly to a male audience, yet GND reimagines it through a pink, rhinestoned lens, creating a space where women could engage with and consume the brand. This pink-ification of Playboy is evident in the series' aesthetics, from the cartoonish opening credits showing bobblehead-style versions of the girls in their individual rooms to the pink-themed graphics and lower-third descriptions. The merchandise tie-ins further allowed female fans to participate in GND's brand of hyper-femininity, buying into a carefully curated version of Playboy.

This reclamation aligns with a postfeminist sensibility, where mass media and consumer culture co-opt feminism's rhetoric of empowerment, choice, and agency while downplaying or outright dismissing the need for feminist critique (Attwood 2006; Tasker & Negra 2007; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008; Jackson, Vares & Gill, 2012). In GND,

Playboy is framed as the central conduit for women's empowerment and agency, yet the concept of feminism itself is conspicuously absent

In GND, Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson are not just central characters but also integral to Playboy's branding and merchandising efforts. The series capitalises on heightened, cartoonish personas of the women, branding them as "The Wild One," "The Sweet One," and "Beauty & Brains.". These archetypes, paired with corresponding merchandise, from calendars to lingerie, reduce the women to simplified and marketable stereotypes, limiting their individuality.

Whilst Madison, Marquardt and Wilkinson were individually branded as variations on feminine stereotypes, overall, the series constructs an overarching image of desirable femininity in which the Playboy woman as depicted in GND embodies a cohesive and highly stylised ideal of hyper-femininity. Reviewing the series my findings indicate that the Playboy woman as presented in GND is as follows: she is enveloped in pink, frothy, and rhinestoned aesthetics, reflected in her bedroom, clothing, pets, accessories, and even her Hello Kitty alarm clock. She is hyper-sexual, she dresses in short necklines and even shorter hemlines, she has augmented breasts, which she regularly flashes in public for a laugh, she takes no issue with posing nude. She has a disciplined body and will regularly shame herself and her peers for indulging in food. The Playboy woman is above all blonde, the maintenance of which is often unseen; it appears effortless, but her hairdresser, Laurent, knows different.

While the hyper-feminine performances depicted in GND reinforce narrow beauty standards and centralised Playboy as the source of their agency, GND also offers glimpses of joy and power in the women's embrace of their femininity. Through the lens

of critical femininities, this duality can be understood as reflective of femininity's potential for both complicity and subversion, both "a resource *and* a source of subordination" (Dahl 2012 p.59) emphasis in original). The heightened feminine personas of the girls, mixed with the hyper-feminine branding of the series, undoubtedly led to the femme-phobic reviews as seen in Curtis' (2005). These reviews reflect cultural assumptions that link femininity with frivolity, mindlessness, respectability (or a lack thereof), and a distinct unseriousness (Brownmiller, 1984; Skeggs, 2002; Dahl, 2012; Hoskin and Blair, 2023,)

The women of GND embody a hyper-feminine aesthetic tied to Playboy's sexualised branding, which aligns with Beverley Skeggs' (2002) analysis of how femininity is policed and classed. Performances of overt sexuality and exaggerated femininity, often associated with working-class aesthetics, are devalued as "trashy," with the women of GND dismissed as "bimbos" or "arm candy." This moral judgment reflects broader societal anxieties about class and sexuality, where femininity linked to visible sexual expression is critiqued as excessive and vulgar. However, while their agency is often overlooked, the women of GND's joyful embrace of their hyper-femininity suggests a reclamation of these stigmatised identities, complicating reductive readings and offering a more nuanced understanding of empowerment within constrained frameworks.

Whilst this ideal of the Playboy brand of femininity as seen in GND perpetuates harmful beauty standards and is embedded with postfeminist sentiment, there exists within GND a disarmingly and strangely liberating idea of joyful hyper-femininity. As we see the girls rhinestone their costumes for the latest Playboy parties, shop at Trashy Lingerie and host pyjama parties to celebrate the newest Playmate of the Year, a hyper-feminine fantasy is constructed, one in which women have the agency and choice to express their genderful aesthetics and desires. GND exemplifies the complexities of modern

femininity, crafting a utopia that is both compelling and fraught with contradictions. If we're to remove ourselves briefly from the problematics of this representation of idealised femininity seen in GND, we can also see the feminine utopia that the series attempts to craft.

Becoming a Playboy Woman: A Midsummer Night's Dream

For the many women buying GND merchandise or, like myself, visiting icons of the series such as Trashy Lingerie, these actions were a way to participate in the hyper-feminine rituals depicted in GND. They offered a chance to own part of the fantasy presented on screen, a world where the girls were aspirational figures, crafted into almost untouchable idols of femininity. Watching the series myself I longed to be as feminine as them, as skinny, as blonde. I want their Juicy Couture outfits and Louis Vuitton bags, their tiny dogs and bright pink bedrooms. For many, this fantasy is unattainable.

In season one, episode eight viewers are offered a taste of this fantasy fulfilled through a makeover storyline featuring Marquardt's teenage sister Anastasia, as she is transformed for the Midsummer Night's Dream party. The episode positions hyper-feminine transformation as a conduit for self-realisation and agency, framing Playboy's idealised femininity as indicative of successful modern womanhood. It simultaneously reveals the deliberate construction of this ideal within GND's hyper-feminine aesthetic.

Playboy's annual Midsummer Night's Dream party, a central cultural event in Hefner's empire, provides the perfect backdrop for Anastasia's introduction to this world. The party's lingerie dress code and exclusive guest list highlight Playboy's signature blend

of glamour, sexuality, and unattainable luxury. At this point in the series we have been introduced to Anastasia, Marquardt's younger eighteen-year-old half-sister who spent her summer living at the mansion, however until this point there had been no major storylines including Anastasia.

The Midsummers Night's Dream party is not the only staple of GND introduced in this episode, in the cold opening of the episode we see Marquardt shopping for a costume for the party in what will become a familiar location: Trashy Lingerie. As we see Marquardt deliberating over skirt length and bra padding, we are reminded of the carefully curated nature of this world, where even the smallest details are designed to evoke fantasy.

We are then introduced to the main storyline of the episode; a surprise Playboy girl makeover for Anastasia. We see Madison and Wilkinson enter Marquardt's hyper-pink bedroom where Anastasia is sitting at a desk. This scene introduces Anastasia as a natural foil to the carefully styled personas of Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson. While the girls embody the hyper-femininity of Playboy through their rhinestoned and logo-embazoned outfits, Anastasia's minimal makeup and casual attire mark her as distinctly untransformed. This juxtaposition sets the stage for the makeover, which not only highlights the construction of femininity but also frames it as a pathway to acceptance and empowerment within the Playboy world. Confessional interview clips are interspersed as we see the girls explain their plans to Anastasia:

BM (confessional interview) My younger sister Anastasia has stayed with me the whole summer, and sometimes I feel kinda bad for her 'cos I can't include her in everything we go and do. So hopefully that'll all change.

BM: We have a surprise for you Anastasia

A: Ok....

-dramatic music starts playing-

BM: For Midsummer's you're gonna get a total makeover

BM: We're gonna get your hair done, your makeup done...

KW: I'm gonna teach you how to get laid!

A: Oh Shiitt

A (confessional interview): I was so like, 'oh my god. For me? Are you kidding?

I'm so excited!'

HM (confessional interview): I think everybody wants a makeover from a Playboy girl

-Anastasia starts hugging each girl individually-

BM: Now you can impress all the guys

A: Yeah really I look forward to it!

BM (confessional interview): I'm dying to see her in the full package, at the best that she can be. Awesome make up, awesome hair. I think she's gonna look worlds different.

A: Oh my god! Ok after hair extensions I am NOT gonna look like the same person at all

BM: Oh and we got a waxing place for erm... bikini

A: Uh oh!

BM: And whatever else you need done

BM (confessional interview): She was feeling really frumpy. When we were doing our pictorial **cuts to footage from Just Shoot Me where Anastasia looks sad as Marquardt shoots her pictorial** ...and she felt fat, and ugly, and everyday we were made up and looked so beautiful and running around naked. And now she's really excited and she can't wait! (*Girls Next Door, Midsummer Night's Dream, 2006*)

In this scene, Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson introduce Anastasia to the aesthetic and behavioural requirements of being a Playboy woman: waxing, hair extensions, makeup, and an overtly sexual confidence. Wilkinson's joking promises to teach Anastasia "how to get laid" reflects her ladette persona while aligning with Rosalind Gill's (2007) analysis of postfeminist media's sexually autonomous, "up for it" young woman. Here, Playboy femininity is positioned as a complete package, encompassing both aesthetic perfection and sexual agency.

Marquardt frames the Playboy branded transformation as achieving the best version of oneself, recounting how Anastasia felt inadequate watching the girls shoot their pictorials in *Just Shoot Me*. In DVD commentary of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Marquardt elaborates on this, saying that Anastasia called their mother after watching the girls shoot their Playboy pictorial and complained that it made her feel fat and ugly. The implication is clear: the hyper-feminine Playboy ideal is not just desirable but necessary for self-worth and social acceptance. As Madison asserts, "everybody wants a makeover from a Playboy girl," suggesting that the Playboy aesthetic represents a universal aspiration. Madison and Marquardt elaborated on this idea, as well as briefly discussing fans reaction to the episode and the implication of the Playboy girl style of femininity in terms of beauty standards in their GND rewatch podcast, *Girls Next Level*, stating:

HM: And do you know what else? I feel like this episode, at least just from feedback I've seen it's a fan favourite. Because I feel like so many young women watching at home were like, 'I wanna have that makeover too'.

BM: That is so interesting that you said that because that leads right into the next thing I was gonna say. When I was leaving the mansion, there were so

many people, including Kevin [Burns] who wanted me to do a show that was giving girls like the Playboy makeover

HM: Ok that's hilarious because Kevin tried to get me to do that show too. I think that's fucked up! He was trying to get us both to do it? At different times?

BM: Yes!

HM: Fuck him!

BM: Yeah. He just thought it would be the best show to go around and give the Playboy makeover to girls. I don't deny that it's not like kind of a fairytale, like would have been a fun show. But I also feel like it sends the wrong message that this is what you need to look like. Now for people who want to look like that, I feel like it would be an amazing show! But I also think that shouldn't be the only beauty standard that's out there (Madison and Marquardt, 2023)

This excerpt from *Girls Next Level* highlights the importance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, not only does Madison point out that from her experience she believes it to be a fan favourite, with her speculating that this may be due to fans wanting to replicate Anastasia's makeover, but we also learn that this episode was a catalyst for a prospective spin-off series on Playboy makeovers. To Marquardt, the concept of basing an entire series around a Playboy style makeover, as opposed to a standalone episode within GND, would be problematic in its message that the Playboy standard of idealised femininity is what should be held as the beauty standard for women. Marquardt presents an interesting duality, that Playboy branded hyper-femininity can be a joyous and empowering aesthetic for those who "want to look like that", however it's dangerous when the media positions this as something women *should* look like.

Makeovers are a pop-culture trope, especially within postfeminist media. During the same eras as GND's release there was an abundance of media which depicted women transform to reflect desirable new femininities such as *Miss Congeniality* (2000), *The Princess Diaries* (2001), *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *The Swan* (2004), & *What Not to Wear* (2001-2007). This phenomenon has been investigated by a number of feminist scholars (Wood & Skeggs, 2004; McRobbie, 2004, 2009; Gill, 2007; Weber, 2009; Gilligan 2011, Sherman, 2011; Gwynne 2013). Within media that utilises the makeover paradigm we often see a reflection of postfeminist sentiments including the importance of self-surveillance and a disciplined body, a focus on hyper-feminine aesthetics, sexualisation of its subjects, as well as centering the subject's choice to pursue a makeover as an act of empowerment.

Gill (2007) refers to the influx of makeover centric postfeminist media as the makeover paradigm. According to Gill the makeover paradigm emphasises the need for self-surveillance and self-improvement and transformation. Gill states that these ideals are disproportionately targeted towards women:

Women are called on to self-manage and self-discipline. To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, regulate every aspect of their conduct, and present their actions as freely chosen (p.164)

These makeover narratives are often rooted in neoliberal postfeminist ideas that they promote choice, agency and empowerment however, they often perpetuate narrow and restrictive beauty standards, as well as reinforcing heteronormative and patriarchal constructs

The episode *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reflects feminist discussions on the makeover paradigm within postfeminist media but also complicates them. While Marquardt

mentions Anastasia's insecurities, at no point do the girls shame Anastasia or comment negatively on her appearance. This avoids a common trope in makeover media, where participants are criticised for their perceived shortcomings and inadequacies (Peck, 1995; Gill, 2007). Instead, Anastasia's makeover is framed as a voluntary, fun activity designed to boost her confidence and strengthen her bond with the girls. Notably, the transformation does not include weight loss or dieting, as is often central to makeover narratives. While Marquardt mentions Anastasia feeling "fat" after witnessing the girls' Playboy pictorials, neither the editing nor the characters suggest that weight loss is necessary for her transformation.

However, the episode does not entirely escape promoting harmful body ideals. In a separate scene Wilkinson and Playmate Destiny Davis discuss the "sleep diet," promoting unhealthy ideas about weight loss. Wilkinson in a confessional interview describes the sleep diet as: "When you sleep for so long you miss breakfast, you miss lunch. Y'know and there you go! You miss all the eating! And then you're skinny!" (*Girls Next Door*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2006)

This moment starkly contrasts with the episode's lighter tone, undermining its message of Anastasia finding joy and agency in her transformation. The conversation reinforces unhealthy diet culture, reflecting the broader pressures women face to conform to narrow beauty standards. It suggests that even within the playful hyper-feminine world of GND, the disciplining of the body remains a requirement for achieving desirability.

I found that Anastasia's makeover, in contrast, centres on adornment rather than body discipline. Through hair extensions, makeup, and lingerie, she is transformed into a hyper-feminine version of herself. This reflects GND's broader portrayal of idealised

Playboy femininity; an aesthetic rooted in hyper-sexuality, disciplined appearances, and self-styling as a form of empowerment. As Gill (2007) notes, the makeover paradigm often masks societal pressures, scrutiny, and surveillance with a veneer of choice and agency. Anastasia's makeover fits this mould, even as it avoids some of the more overtly shaming elements of some traditional makeover narratives.

The majority of the episode's runtime is dedicated to Anastasia's makeover journey, presenting it as a transformative experience. After being "surprised" with the announcement, Anastasia is taken to a spa with Marquardt, where they enjoy facials and massages. Later, they go lingerie shopping, with Marquardt expressing her desire for Anastasia to feel "like a princess." In another scene, Madison takes Anastasia out for lunch and gifts her an illustration depicting her "before" and imagined "after" the makeover. The illustration emphasises longer hair and a curvier figure, reinforcing the physical changes expected of her transformation. To help her achieve this, Madison also gifts Anastasia bra inserts to enhance her bust, a gesture presented as lighthearted as the girls laugh over the absurdity of the objects

In one of the episode's more striking sequences, Anastasia undergoes a waxing session. These scenes are deliberately interspersed with clips of Marquardt's Persian cat, Gizmo, at the groomers with dramatic music and exaggerated cat growls adding comedic effect. This juxtaposition frames the creation of desired femininity as something silly and light-hearted, but also at the same time as something that must be fought for with pain, time and access to merchandise and beauty treatments. As we see Gizmo howl whilst being submitted to her fur being shaved whilst being asked to be a "good kitty cat", we too see Anastasia's body being submitted to painful beauty treatments. As her face winces in pain her beauty technician announces that she's

“cleaning up, so, so nicely”, positioning a hairless body with feminine beauty and cleanliness.

Through these moments hyper-femininity is depicted as performative aesthetic labour requiring time, access to resources, and physical discomfort. The playful tone of these scenes obscures to some extent the society pressures they reflect. The emphasis on grooming and adornment underscores the commodification of femininity, where treatments and products are positioned as essential tools for reaching idealised versions of femininities. Simultaneously however the jovial tone also gestures toward the performative and constructed nature of these feminine ideals.

The artificial plastic chicken cutlet-like bra inserts, the elaborate rituals, pain, and adornments which can go into these feminine selfhoods may reflect rigid beauty standards and notions of self-surveillance, but also suggests a meticulously crafted gendered performance. This draws attention to the drag-like qualities of hyper-femininity, where the creation of the Playboy woman mirrors the theatricality and exaggerated gender performance often associated with drag. Much like drag queens deliberately highlight the artificiality of gender through heightened wigs, makeup, and costumes, the exaggerated femininities presented in GND, complete bleach blonde extensions, waxing, and rhinestoned custom lingerie, reveal the artifice underlying the notion of the Playboy woman.

By making these constructions visible this episode offers an almost self-aware commentary on the artifice of heightened femininity, inviting viewers to consider the effort required to embody such ideals. This drag-like performance of femininity, while still rooted in postfeminist ideologies of self-surveillance and commodification, hints at

the potential for agency in reclaiming and reinterpreting hyper-feminine aesthetics as a space of play, theatricality, and even resistance. As we see the girls get ready for the party in Marquardt's vivid pink bedroom, giggle over wobbly plastic bra inserts and walk into "pink cheeks" salon we see the potential for femininity to be framed as a communal, transformative act. This reflects Emma Dabiri's (2023) notion of radical beauty, where shared acts of adornment and transformation hold the potential for subverting normative ideals and creating new spaces of joy and solidarity.

It is interesting to note that despite Marquardt stating that it takes "a lot of work" to get ready for parties such as *Midsummers*, and Wilkinson emphasising the importance of being in shape and tan for such events (even remarking: "It means a lot to me to get my butt tan") other than glimpses of the girls in the salon and in tanning beds we rarely see the girls undergo beauty treatments. Their hyper feminine beauty is seen as something effortless, the aesthetic labour of which we don't fully see the extent of. By contrast, Anastasia's transformation into a Playboy woman is fully revealed, making her journey to "become beautiful" central to the narrative.

After undergoing her most "dramatic part of her makeover" - getting blonde hair extensions, seemingly a staple for any true Playboy girl - we then move on to another overarching trope of makeover paradigm media: the reveal. GND heightens the drama by including multiple reveals of Anastasia's new Playboy woman identity, the first of which is to Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson in Marquardt's bedroom.

In confessional to camera interviews, the girls express their anticipation and excitement. When Anastasia finally enters, dressed in a sheer white mini-skirt and bra with her newly blonde hair and heavier makeup, the other women scream in delight. The scene is bathed in golden, high-exposure tones, and slow-motion close-ups emphasise

Anastasia's glow-up. A side-by-side comparison of Anastasia's "before" and "after" underscores the stark transformation, reinforcing the makeover's effectiveness in aligning Anastasia with the hyper-feminine Playboy ideal.

In classic GND fashion Hefner's approval is positioned as being significant and something the girls must work to meet. After revealing her makeover to the girls, Hefner then enters the room announcing, "There's a lot of semi naked girls in here!". He is then seen as appearing visually surprised at seeing Anastasia and then inserting himself into a photograph Anastasia and Marquardt are taking together. Madison in a confessional interview elaborates on Hefner's surprise at the effectiveness of the makeover stating: "Even Hef commented that he thought 'oh you know she's gonna look like the same person with a little more make up.' But he had to do a triple take, he didn't know who she was when he walked in the room". (*Girls Next Door*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2006)

Until this point Anastasia's makeover is presented as an act of self-improvement and bonding with her sister and the other women of the Playboy mansion, not to impress Hefner. However, the inclusion of Hefner and the weight given to his approval, reframes the transformation within the broader context of the series' patriarchal dynamics. The insertion of Hefner in this way reaffirms both his power and the heterosexuality of this series. In other words Anastasia cannot do something purely for any auto-erotic, or self-empowerment function, or as a bonding experience with other women, she must also seek the approval of a man and the male-gaze, and since this is Playboy, that man must be Hefner.

The final and most theatrical reveal of Anastasia's makeover occurs when she descends the Mansion's grand staircase into the main hall, where a crowd awaits her transformation. The audience includes her mother, Marquardt, Madison, Wilkinson, Hefner, and other guests. As camera flashes illuminate the room and her mother cries, Anastasia's voiceover confessional declares the makeover "the best gift I've ever gotten in my life." The episode concludes with vignettes of the Midsummer Night's Dream party, showing Anastasia, her mother, the girls, Hefner, and lingerie-clad celebrities such as Paris Hilton dancing and celebrating together.

In many ways, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* positions Anastasia as a proxy for GND's primary demographic: teenage girls. The episode offers them a vicarious taste of wish fulfillment as Anastasia undergoes a transformation that takes her from an awkward onlooker often seen standing shyly in the background of earlier scenes, into a fully-fledged Playboy woman. Her new identity, complete with expensive lingerie, blonde hair extensions, and access to one of Playboy's most exclusive parties, is framed as a rite of passage from awkward teenagehood to modern womanhood.

Notably, after this episode Anastasia disappears from the show for the remainder of the season, though she makes sporadic appearances in later episodes. While her absence is explained by the end of her summer break, the narrative arc of GND suggests a symbolic graduation. Anastasia, having absorbed the lessons of hyper-femininity and cultural and social capital from the girls and embraced the Playboy aesthetic, makes her public debut at the Midsummer Night's Dream party, completing her transformation into a modern, "empowered" woman. The makeover serves not only as a personal journey for Anastasia but also as a narrative vehicle that embodies the series' ethos: the construction of femininity as a commodified and aspirational identity.

Reflections on GND

My analysis of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and by extension GND, indicates that the series often leans into the more harmful tropes associated with postfeminist media, including the promotion of diet culture, self-surveillance, heteronormativity, self-sexualisation, and the positioning of Playboy-branded consumption as a pathway to empowerment and self-expression. However, this analysis also shows that interwoven within GND's construction of Playboy-branded hyper-femininity, and the ways in which the girls engage with it, is an undeniable sense of joy and liberation. The series offers a pink-tinted lens through which hyper-femininity is not only celebrated but framed as transformative, a space where blonde hair extensions and a mini skirt can radically alter one's self-perception for the better. Here, again the idea of complicated empowerment is a useful way to frame this duality and to capture both the empowering and harming aspects of Playboy's construction of femininity.

"A Girl Resembles a Bunny" Queering the Playboy Woman Through

Embodied Art Making

The final section of this chapter will utilise auto-ethnographic art making and writing to seek to queer Playboy branded femininity. This section reflects on the Playboy bunny suit, drag culture, femme and critical femininities theory, and other queer femme performers and artists usages of the Playboy branded femininity. I consider my own relationship to Playboy's idealised femininity, particularly its construction of hyper-femininity, utilising art making with a focus on self-portraiture and rhinestone work to both celebrate and subvert one of the most significant cultural icons of the Playboy world: The Playboy Bunny.

“I’ve Got a Wand and a Rabbit!” Framing Queer Approaches to Playboy Branded
Femininity

Chappell Roan (stage name of American singer Kayleigh Rose Amstutz) opened her final song of her NPR Tiny Desk concert with the rallying call: “Be bimbos ladies, be bimbos” (NPR Music, 2024). Surrounded by her all-female band dressed in pink outfits and matching blue eyeshadow and red lipstick, Roan appears in a bright pink 1980s style prom dress with matching fingerless gloves. A tiara, multiple stubbed out cigarettes and butterfly clips sit in her towering red beehive, which she declares is stuffed with multiple trash bags to achieve its height. Her face is painted white, with bright blue sparkly eyeshadow embellished with rhinestones, and red lipstick which has marked her teeth.

Roan then launches into her final song of her set: ‘Red Wine Supernova’, a single from her debut album *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*. The first verse opening with:

She was a Playboy, Brigitte Bardot
She showed me things I didn't know
She did it right there, out on the deck
Put her canine teeth in the side of my neck
I’m in the hallway waiting for you
Mini skirt and my go-go boots
I just want you to make a move
So, slow down, sit down, it’s new (NPR Music, 2024)

‘Red Wine Supernova’ fantasises about having a passionate, cosmic affair with a bombshell Brigitte Bardot, Playboy type of woman. Roan joyfully crafts a narrative

which is predominately absent from within Playboy media: the idea of sapphic longing for the Playboy woman. Whilst GND establishes that women too can enjoy Playboy, the series enforced heteronormativity removes the possibility of women pursuing Playboy branded pleasure with other women, unless, of course, they are doing so for the enjoyment of men. It is no surprise that, in conceptualising her fantasy woman, Roan utilises the notion of a Playboy girl, with Playboy being synonymous with idealised feminine sexuality (at least within the US). However, with the representations of women in Playboy being for the most part explicitly for the male gaze (with the exception of a few outliers as detailed throughout this thesis, such as through the lens of female producers of Playboy content like Bunny Yeager, through GND which opened Playboy up to the hetero-female gaze, and post-Hefner Playboy which co-opted queer culture into the magazine) Roan's selection of a Playboy girl to have her imaginary affair reads as an illicit, forbidden love. The woman you can never have.

Having described Chappell Roan as her drag persona, Roan has embraced drag culture within her performances, not only through her heightened hyper-feminine aesthetic, but also by inviting local drag performers to be opening acts for her shows. Roan also invites her audiences to participate in performative dress up for her concerts by announcing aesthetic dress themes ahead of each performance to serve as inspiration for her fan's outfits.

Roan's position as an AFAB drag performer subverts western cultural ideas around performing femininity and drag performance. Queer and feminist scholars (e.g Surkan, 2008; Stokoe 2019) have reflected on drag performances' ability to subvert and celebrate aspects of gender construction. However, femininity within drag is often discussed in relation to masculinity. Drag as often discussed in academia, as well as

portrayed in media is regularly seen as performing as the opposite gender, most often men performing femininity. Hannah McCann (2018) argues that this has led to conversations on exaggerated hyper-femininity being tethered to masculinity. McCann described how hyper-feminine icons such as Dolly Parton, Mae West and Madonna are often discussed in reference to terms such as camp and drag, associating their construction of heightened femininity with masculinity: “All of these accounts focus on stars who are ostensibly demonstrating extremes of female femininity, yet what is seen as interesting, or “queer” about them is understood in terms of masculinity.” (p.82). Femme theory and critical femininities scholars (McCann, 2018; Hoskin & Blair, 2020) have argued that femininity is often linked to notions of oppression, infantilisation, frivolity and anti-intellectualism. Femme-phobia has led to representations of femininity arguably being seen as subversive only when framed around ideas of challenging normative femininity, or in relation to masculinity. Expressions of femininity, whether that be in their most hyper and exaggerated forms, such as in the case of Roan, or in more normative and everyday gestures, should be equally seen as having radical potential to incite joy and empowerment.

Whilst scholars (such as Stokoe, 2019) have argued for discussions on drag to advance away from the idea that performers must perform as the opposite sex, AFAB drag performers, such as Roan, are often viewed as not being as legitimate as their AMAB counterparts, with cisgender female drag queen performers often being dubbed faux-queens (see: Coull, 2015).

Roan’s drag persona both celebrates aspects of femininity through her hyper-feminine aesthetics, whilst also destabilising heteronormativity through her overtly queer lyrics. Roan’s use of excess and camp; so much lipstick it bleeds into her teeth, hair teased to impossible heights, garments embellished with sparkling clusters of rhinestones and

sequins, plays with and celebrates ideas around femininity. Roan's usage of drag plays into cis-female drag performer (and first major AFAB performer to win a major drag pageant) Fauxnique's description of drag as: "...a sort of self-awareness, a self-consciousness about playing with around playing with femininity" (Nagy, 2008, p.29).

Roan's usage of drag culture and how she embraces her queer femme identity has been hugely influential in framing my own approach to art making in relation to Playboy's representation of femininities. However, it is also worth noting that Roan is not the only performer or artist to queer the Playboy woman in their work. In 2024 Drag performer Ramona Slick utilised early Playboy covers and Playboy bunny costumes as a site of inspiration for a series of photographs of both themselves and their drag family shot by Matt Dickson. Each performer appears on a mocked up magazine cover imitating the graphics of early Playboy covers in bunny costumes, drag makeup and tall wigs, with the covers reading "Slickgirl: Entertainment for Sluts" (Slick, 2024).

Furthermore, textile artist and researcher Dr Sarah Joy Ford, whose work explores queer communities and employs femme aesthetics, exhibited quilts depicting characters dressed in Playboy bunny suits in films such as *Legally Blonde* amongst embellished hearts and Playboy bunny logos in her 2024 exhibition *Bunny* at Bury Art Museum. Ford's exhibition featured textile works responding to cultural representations of rabbits, from childhood soft toys, to Beatrix Potter, to Playboy bunnies: "Prioritising the politics of softness in harsh times: and uplifting that which has been denigrated; the femme, the threadbare creature, and our childish dreams." (Creative Lancashire, 2024). Queer explorations and reclamation of Playboy, such as seen in the work of Roan, Slick, and Ford challenge the hetero-patriarchal construction of Playboy, subverting Hefner's proclamation of what a Playboy woman is.

As an artist, and a queer, femme woman Playboy's construction of femininities is a complex and often conflicting source to create work in response to. Some days, I love Playboy. I want to be the women in the pages of Playboy. I want to fuck the women in the pages of Playboy. I want the Playboy bunny logo inked into my skin. I love its early pin-ups: Colleen Farrington, 1957 in a mirrored pistachio green bathtub, soap clinging to all the right places. I love how camp some of its images are: Gwen Wong, 1967 in her matching Argyle cardigan and knee-high socks, her tall beehived hair playfully styled in two pigtails. How subversive its images can be: Suze Randall, 1976 photographing herself wrapped in the trigger cable of her own camera. How beautiful its images can be: Hiromi Oshima, 2004, stood in front of a hyper-saturated blue sea and framed by a pink and purple butterfly kite, the pink ribbon strings of which wrap around her body, her rhinestoned navel piercing sparkling.

Other days, however, are more complicated. It is difficult at best, and perhaps unproductive, to separate representations of women in Playboy media from the patriarchal and arguably at times misogynistic context surrounding them. Flipping through a Playboy magazine and turning the page away from a beautiful centrefold I'd regularly be confronted with the Playboy Party Jokes section, with such misogynistic bangers like: "Q: What constitutes a woman for a handicapped parking spot in Los Angeles? A: An A cup" (Playboy, 2001). Or watching GND I could be swept away in the hyper feminine fantasy of it all, as the girls discuss what they'll be wearing to the next big party in Bridget Marquardt's all pink bedroom, and then that quickly gets disrupted by Hefner making an appearance, or the girls being shamed for simply enjoying food. As much as I desire to free the women of Playboy from this patriarchal framework: tear them out from the magazines and rebound them into something new, create a fan edit of GND removing any trace of Hefner, it is, however, important to acknowledge the complications of Playboy and the tension this creates. At times when researching

Playboy and creating art in relation to that research, that tension can be a lot, it can be heavy, it can feel disgusting, it changes the way I view my own body in the mirror. But within that tension and within the complications of Playboy there can also exist a dialogue between empowerment and objectification, feminism and misogyny, queerness and heteronormativity. I approach creating art in relation to Playboy as both a celebration of the women of Playboy and their performance of heightened feminine sexualities, but also as a method of seeking to subvert and reclaim the aspects of Playboy which have undoubtedly caused harm.

Hyperbolic Femininity and Rhinestone Bunnies

Taking inspiration from hyper-femininity and drag culture, I aimed to create a self-portrait that embodies femininity at its most extreme. By playing with the performative and artificial nature of gendered expressions, I saturated both myself and my surroundings in the colour pink. *A Fantasy in Pink* (figure 6.5) is the result of this playful exploration of hyper-femininity, where I painted my body in pink to emphasise the theatricality of gender performance and challenge traditional ideals of femininity.

When I began thinking about what to create for my PhD, I knew I wanted to make a Playboy bunny suit. Having long been fascinated with these garments I wanted to understand how they felt on my body, to mould and transform my body into a hyper-feminine fantasy. I collaborated with my friend Amber Sylvia to craft my dream bunny suit, inspired by the suits worn in the Playboy Bunny of the year pageants (figure 6.6). These competitions, held at Playboy clubs worldwide, awarded bunnies with trophies, tiaras, and other prizes, including portraits by LeRoy Neiman and cars. Winners of these prizes also were allowed to wear metallic bunny suits, often in silver and gold,



Figure 6.5 *A Fantasy in Pink*

symbolising the highest achievement for a Playboy Bunny. But I wanted something even grander; what would the Bunny of the Century, or the Miss Supreme Bunny Queen wear? I quickly decided that my Playboy bunny suit must be adorned entirely with rhinestones. Amber created the bodice of the suit, adapting patterns from original Playboy Bunny designs, and I spent months embellishing it with over 10,000 rhinestones. Rhinestoning is an act of celebration, transforming an object into something sacred, gilding it with crystals. While rhinestones are often associated with excess and kitsch, they are integral to performances in burlesque, drag, and country music. The rhinestones' close cultural association with hyper-femininity, drag and spectacles of all kind made it the perfect material to reinterpret my bunny suit as a site of embodied hyper-femininity, celebrating the countless women who have worn the garment over the decades.

I chose to utilise larger crystals at the seams of the garment to emphasise the pattern pieces, further revealing how the suit's design exaggerates the feminine form. As I embellished the suit, I intentionally left very few gaps in the fabric, covering it almost entirely in rhinestones. This process made the garment significantly stiffer, which I began to interpret as a form of armour, a tangible weight of femininity. The weight of the suit transformed as it took shape, becoming an imposing presence both to wear and to behold. When I displayed the suit at the *Sisterhood in Action Conference* in February 2023, I invited attendees to handle it. Many remarked on how much heavier it was than anticipated, challenging their expectations of the traditionally lightweight and sexualised Playboy Bunny costume. These interactions deepened my understanding of the bunny suit not just as a costume for self-portraits, but as an art object that embodies tensions between the playful and the laborious, the beautiful and the burdensome.

Wearing and embodying the bunny suit revealed further insights. Its heightened design with heels, exaggerated ears, rhinestoned press-on stiletto nails, and a towering wig crafted by Sarah Necia elevated my physical stature to over six feet tall, transforming my sense of self. Its corseted structure and rhinestone armour pulled in my waist and accentuated my breasts, amplifying hyper-feminine proportions. Yet, the garment also restricted my movements, making it difficult to bend or move freely, a physical manifestation of the tension between femininity as empowerment and confinement.

I produced two self-portraits embodying my rhinestoned Playboy Bunny, whose nametag reads 'Femlin.' This serves as a dual reference: first, to LeRoy Neiman's female gremlin cartoon created for Playboy, and second, to the stage name I adopted as an OnlyFans creator, 'Femlin Power'. The first image, *A Girl Resembles a Bunny* (figure 6.7), presents a minimalist backdrop, intentionally devoid of props or distractions. This simplicity shifts the focus entirely onto the rhinestoned suit and its intricate embellishments, crafting a drag-inspired celebration of hyper-femininity. The pose, styling, and exaggerated elements of the costume reflect an embrace of artifice and performativity, highlighting how the Bunny suit serves both as a marker of Playboy's legacy and a vehicle for self-expression.

In *Playful Pastures* (figure 6.8), I explore the interplay between artifice and the natural symbolism of the rabbit. Embracing the history of Playboy Bunnies as waitresses, I photograph myself serving drinks in an artificial yet playful interpretation of nature, amongst plastic grass and swaths of sky-blue satin. This contrast plays with the artifice and performance of hyper-femininities, and the girl next door Playboy archetype of good girl femininity as dictated by Hefner.



Figure 6.6 *Bunny of the Year 1971*



Figure 6.7 A Girl Resembles a Bunny



Figure 6.8 Playful Pastures

Constructing the bunny suit was a crucial part of the research process, enabling an embodied engagement with Playboy's imagery in two distinct ways: first, through the making and wearing of the costume, and second, through creating self-portraits while wearing it. This process allowed me to explore and challenge the notion of the gaze, which often marginalises the embodied experiences of women. Within such frameworks, women are reduced to objects to be looked at, their own bodies, senses, and feelings rendered absent, a static, surface-level image.

Drawing on Cahill's (2010) concept of inter-subjectivity, which emphasises the relational nature of embodiment and derivatization, as well as the potential for shared experiences of subjecthood, my art-making practice allowed me to navigate these ideas. By wearing and photographing myself in the bunny suit, I was able to position myself simultaneously as subject and object. inhabiting both roles within the act of creation. This dual positioning highlights the tension between objectification and agency, demonstrating how embodiment can resist the totalising effect of the gaze.

By embracing both roles, I was able to reclaim the act of representation and highlight the embodied complexities of femininity. My art-making practice functioned as a method of inquiry, reimagining Playboy's iconic imagery on my own terms and using embodiment to complicate the dynamics of the gaze. This approach not only critiques Playboy's reductive framing of femininity but also demonstrates how embracing the dual roles of subject and object can reveal new possibilities for agency within representational frameworks.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how Playboy has constructed representations of femininity over its decades of publication, particularly through the case study of Anna Nicole Smith and the mediated portrayals of hyper-femininity in GND. In my analysis I have shown both continuity and change in this construction, with contemporary depictions of 'Playboy femininity' showing a greater self-awareness of the narrowness of its historical constructions (although acknowledging also previous glitches disrupting the uniformity of representation, such as Tula). I have also demonstrated that there are multiple readings of the hyper-femininity central to Playboy, that can show agency and empowerment alongside objectification and misogyny. Here, Cahill's (2010) work on derivatization is useful in resisting falling back into dualisms and instead demonstrates that, although many representations of femininity in Playboy can be seen as conforming to the hetero-patriarchal framework of desirability, there is space to simultaneously view the women of Playboy through a lens of agency. This nuanced approach acknowledges that femininity within these contexts can be both performative and intentional, allowing for a deeper exploration of how identity and expression coexist within such frameworks.

Central to this analysis is the foregrounding of the tension between Playboy's idealised vision of femininity and the ways these representations can be repurposed for creative and queer reinterpretation, a tension that reflects and illustrates the usefulness of the concept of complicated empowerment in interpreting and reimagining the relationship between Playboy and femininity

Smith's story illustrates how Playboy's idealised femininity operates as both a site of opportunity and constraint. Through her early appearances, Smith embodied the

quintessential Playboy woman: hyper-feminine, non-threatening, and sculpted for male desire. Yet, as her public image evolved, and ultimately deviated from the narrowly defined standards of beauty, Playboy's framing struggled to contain her. This dynamic exposed cracks in the magazine's construction of femininity, revealing both the power of its gaze and its limitations in controlling the complexities of real women's lives. The tragedy of Smith's trajectory underscores the dangerous intersection of societal beauty standards, commodification, and patriarchal pressures, reinforcing that the empowerment Playboy offered can come at a significant cost.

In contrast, *GND* provided a mediated version of hyper-femininity that resonated differently with audiences. Through its playful lens, the series reimagined the Playboy aesthetic as a site of communal joy and identity, particularly for its female viewers. Yet, the series remained steeped in patriarchal structures, evident in Hefner's omnipresence and the framing of empowerment as contingent upon conformity to Playboy's aesthetic ideals. This duality speaks to the central theme of this thesis: empowerment and objectification are not mutually exclusive but often coexist in ways that complicate simple feminist critiques. In *GND*, hyper-femininity is simultaneously a source of agency and a tool for perpetuating patriarchal ideals, embodying the tension between liberation and discipline.

This chapter has demonstrated how Playboy's representations of femininity serve as both a reflection of and a challenge to broader societal ideals. While moments of subversion and nuance exist within its depictions, these moments often remain constrained by the magazine's adherence to a commodified and male-centered vision of beauty. However, by engaging with these representations through a queer lens and within the context of hyper-femininity, new possibilities for reinterpretation and resistance emerge. My own embodied art practice seeks to explore these possibilities,

reclaiming and reframing the Playboy aesthetic to challenge its historical constraints and open spaces for queer expression.

Chapter Seven: “Be Fun and Flirty, Not Raunchy”: Post-Hefner

Playboy’s Digital Rebranding

Introduction

I'll bring thunder, I'll bring rain

When I'm finished, they won't even know your name

You brought the flames and you put me through hell

I had to learn how to fight for myself

And we both know all the truth I could tell

I'll just say this is I wish you farewell

- Kesha, “Praying”

On July 6 2017 American recording artist Kesha Sebert released the lead single from her upcoming album, *Rainbow*. Serbert’s career had been halted for several years following the release of her sophomore album *Warrior* in 2012 due to a lengthy legal dispute between herself and her music producer Lukasz Gottwald (Sebert v. Gottwald, 2014) whom she accused of sexual and emotional abuse. Having signed a five-album recording deal with Gottwarld’s record label, *Kemosabe Records* at the age of 18, Sebert was contractually obligated to continue to release her music under Gottwald’s label despite her accusations of abuse and her legal battle to release herself from this contract. Her single *Praying* addresses Gottwarld, channelling her feelings of hopelessness, depression and anger into strength whilst simultaneously “...hoping everyone, even someone who hurt you, can heal” (Bradick, 2017). The release of Sebert’s *Praying* came at an interesting crossroads in the recent American socio-political landscape. The single released a few months following the inauguration of

accused sexual abuser (and one of the few male Playboy cover models) Donald Trump as President of the United States of America, but also three months before allegations of sexual abuse levelled against film producer Harvey Weinstein would ignite the #MeToo movement.

The #MeToo movement is a now global feminist social movement which shines a light on pervasive sexual harassment and abuse against women perpetrated by men (uncovering, for example, men's abuses of power against women in the workplace in Hollywood), which has been subject to a high amount of coverage and discussion both online and within traditional media formats. Karen Boyle (2019) describes the #MeToo movement as "...a spectacularly high-profile example which brings many of the central concerns of feminist thinking on men's violence against women into focus." (p121). Serbert's anthem of resilience and strength in the face of abuse captured the sentiment of the rising #MeToo movement, serving to many as a #MeToo anthem. Singer Janelle Monae introduced Serbert's performance of the song at the 2018 Grammys by urging the audience to "undo the culture that does not serve us well" (Grammy Awards, 2018).

Amidst the backdrop of radical change in the American socio-political landscape in which Serbert released *Praying*, and one week prior to news of allegations against Weinstein broke in a *New York Times* article penned by Jody Kantor and Megan Twohey on 5 October 2017, a new era of Playboy began. On September 27, 2017 Hugh Hefner passed away in his bedroom at the Playboy Mansion. The Mansion had been sold for \$100,000,000 to real estate developer Daren Metropoulos the year prior on the stipulation that Hefner could continue to reside there until his death. Following Metropoulos' acquisition of the mansion its gates have remained closed; no more parties on its lawns, no more tv camera crews, no more girls frolicking in the pool and

the grotto on “fun in the sun” Sundays. At the time of writing drone footage of the Mansion grounds under renovation are all the snippets we’ve had in recent years from 10236 Charing Cross Road.

As Playboy navigates a changing socio-political and cultural landscape, this chapter examines how the post-Hefner era of Playboy responds to the shifting dynamics of feminist discourse in the wake of the #MeToo movement. Following Playboy shifting its focus to digital content, this chapter aims to explore the tension between empowerment and commodification in two of Playboy’s digital platforms: *The Playboy Club* and *PlayboyPlus*. Do these digital ventures manifest complicated empowerment in new or similar ways to Playboy’s magazine and other media? This chapter draws data from:

1. Interviews with a small number of Playboy staff which will situate Playboy’s post-Hefner politics and how they approach Playboy’s legacy and future and navigate nostalgia.
2. Feminist content analysis of Playboy’s digital subscription websites *PlayboyPlus* and *The Playboy Club* which offer differing perspectives and examples on how Playboy digitally repurposes, reimagines, and recycles its legacy in relation to themes such as consent, agency and authorship.

The analysis is, in summary, divided into the following main sections:

1. The first reviews further literature related to themes pertinent to this chapter, through the case study of Playmate Lena Forsén.
2. The second analyses responses from interviews with Playboy staff in relation to ideas such as recontextualising and imagining Playboy’s legacy, nostalgia, Hefner, and agency.

3. The third reviews my findings from a feminist content analysis of one of two Playboy digital platforms: *The Playboy Club*
4. The Fourth reviews my findings on the second digital platform: *PlayboyPlus*

“Let’s Commit to Losing me”: The Lena Image

Just as chapters five and six open by utilising a Playboy woman as a catalyst to explore themes and literature related to each chapter, this chapter starts with another woman of Playboy

In November 1972 Swedish model Lena Forsén’s (credited as Lenna Sjööblom in Playboy) Playmate of the Month centrefold was published in Playboy (figure 7.1). Unbeknownst to Forsén, Playboy, or photographer Dwight Hooker, the image would later become a ubiquitous standard test image for digital image processing, and one of the most cited images in academia. Known as the Lena (or Lenna) image, the photograph has been utilised in thousands of journal articles, books and educational materials, sparking debate around sexism in digital engineering and STEM fields and the use of sources perceived as sexualised images of women in academia.

The Lena image was first taken out of the pages of Playboy and digitally processed in the summer of 1973, when Alexander Sawchuk, an assistant professor of electrical engineering at the University of Southern California Signal and Image Processing Institute and a graduate student were “hurriedly searching the lab for a good image to scan for a colleague’s conference paper” (Hutchinson, 2001, p1). Drawn by the glossy quality of the image, the detailing of the purple feather in Forsén’s hat, and the mixture

of flat regions, shading and texture, the engineers tore the top third of Forsén's centrefold from Playboy, cropping the image to above her shoulders.

Lena and Playboy were unaware of the new utility of their image, until July 1991 when the journal *Optical Engineering* placed the image on their cover. Playboy initially requested authorisation for any usage of the Lena image, however swiftly changed their minds with Brian J. Thompson, editor of *Optical Engineering*, addressing the issue in an editorial stating that they have "reached an understanding with Playboy" (1992, p.1). Eileen Kent, former Vice President of new media at Playboy later stated in 1997 "We decided we should exploit this, because it is a phenomenon" (Brown, 1997). Playboy even assisted in tracking down Forsén (who following her retirement from modelling moved back to her native Sweden) in order for her to attend the 50th Annual Conference of the Society for Imaging Science in Technology, where the now dubbed "First Lady of the Internet" was invited to sign autographs, pose for pictures and give a presentation about herself (Brown, 1997).

Researchers and engineers Jennifer Ding, Jan Diehm and Michelle McGhee (2021) tracked usages of the Lena image through Google scholar, Google search and reverse image searches and found that usage of the image reached its peak in 1995 with 280 found instances of the Lena image. Further usages of the Lena image within analogue journals and sources which were not available digitally are not included in this data, meaning that the exact known usages of the image are unknown and should be expected to be larger than Ding, Diehm and McGhee's findings. We can, however, see from these findings that whilst the Lena images popularity has fluctuated over the years, it has consistently been utilised, with over 240 found usages in 2004 and over 200 in 2014. (Ding, Diehm, and McGhee 2021)



Figure 7.1 Lena Forsén Pictorial and Partial Centrefold

Over the decades of its usage however, the Lena image was subject to significant debate. Not only has it been argued (Hutchinson, 2001) that the image is no longer suited for modern image processing technology and that improvements in technology since 1973 has produced more suitable test images, but also the nature of the Lena image as an image sourced from Playboy cultivated discussion on the appropriateness of utilising images that some argue are derogatory towards women. Over the decades multiple women (Ding, Diehm, and McGhee 2021) within the digital engineering field have expressed their frustration with the continued usage of the image, with some explaining that it emphasises the gender gap in their field. To many, the Lena image has become a symbol of gendered hierarchies within academia and digital engineering, despite women, such as Ada Lovelace being instrumental in early developments in computer science. Deanna Needell, professor of Mathematics at UCLA states:

For me the Lena image just symbolises the role that women have played stereotypically in STEM fields, they have been the beautiful young woman that's in the photograph, not the woman doing the coding or writing the algorithm (*Losing Lena*, 2019)

In 2019 the organisation *Code Like a Girl* released the short documentary film *Losing Lena* which explored the usages of the Lena Image and the implication it has for women in STEM fields. The documentary argues that for STEM fields to become more inclusive, the Lena image must be retired as a standard test image. Several women in the documentary discuss that whilst the cropped Lena image itself does not depict nudity, it has become a long running in-joke within classrooms, lecture halls and offices that people will discuss how they've googled the whole image. Interviewed in the documentary herself Forsén states that: "I retired from modelling a long time ago. It's time I retired from tech, too... Let's commit to losing me." (*Losing Lena*, 2019). Whilst

Forsén at first was happy with her image being utilised as a test image, with her agreeing to appear at conferences, over the years she has changed her positioning on this.

Ding, Diehm, McGhee state however that despite Forsén's wishes, her image is still being utilised, finding over 240 usages of the image in 2021:

When one of the only women this well referenced, respected, and remembered in your field is known for a nude photo that was taken of her and is now used without her consent, it inevitably shapes the perception of the position of women in tech and the value of our contributions (2021)

Several journals however have responded to the ongoing criticism of the Lena image by banning the usage of it, the most recent example of this being The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) who in March 2024 released the following statement:

IEEE's diversity statement and supporting policies such as the IEEE code of ethics speak to IEEE's commitment to promoting an inclusive and equitable culture that welcomes all. In alignment with this culture and with respect to the wishes of the subject of the image, Lena Forsén, IEEE will no longer accept submitted papers which include the 'Lena image'. (Hern, 2024)

The ubiquity of the Lena image within digital engineering and STEM fields and the continued usage of the image without Forsén's consent (and for several years, without her knowledge) speaks to issues surrounding consent and the repurposing of archival images in the digital age. When Forsén posed for Playboy in 1972 we can assume she

would not have envisioned the digital legacy of her image. Nor would the concept of the internet have been something her, or the countless other women who posed for Playboy pre-internet, would have foreseen when they signed their model release forms. However, Forsén is not the only woman to have posed for Playboy whose images have found a new life online. Not only is every Playboy pictorial and centrefold now available digitised through their online archival magazine subscription website *iPlayboy*, but thousands of photoshoot out-takes, casting videos and on-set videos of women throughout Playboy's history are available on another of their subscription websites, *PlayboyPlus*.

Situating Post-Hefner Playboy in a Changing World

“Wait Playboy is still around?” (Mike_9_P, 2023) reads a comment posted under *CNN*'s tweet linking to an article which I had originally written for *The Conversation* titled ‘How Playboy cut ties with Hugh Hefner to create a post-MeToo brand’ (McManaman, 2023). This comment mirrors a common reaction I've encountered both personally and academically when discussing my research on Playboy. To many, the idea of Playboy seems incompatible with a modern, digital, post-#MeToo society. Yet, interviews I conducted with Playboy staff members in 2022 suggest a different narrative, that the company is actively adapting to meet new audiences, adopting new media and digital outputs, and shifting cultural expectations.

This section explores how Post Hefner-Playboy has attempted to reposition itself in a rapidly changing world. Using interviews with Playboy staff, in this chapter I will examine how the company has adapted to both the rise in digital media, and the

#MeToo movement, and asks to what extent does the company's operations and ethics reflect feminist politics?

The Playboy empire has shifted its operations considerably in the years following Hefner's death. One such example is the closure of the last remaining Playboy club, which never reopened following Covid-19 lockdown restrictions in London. Instead, the location quietly dropped its Playboy branding and changed its name to *Metropolitan Mayfair* in 2022. The closing of the London Playboy Club only a couple of years after the company failed to relaunch the New York Playboy club in 2018 (with the club closing only a year after it opened) could indicate that there is decreased public interest in Playboy.

Furthermore, on the 18th March 2020 during the Covid 19 Pandemic, Playboy announced via an open letter published on the online platform *Medium* that they would immediately cease publication of their US magazine: "Over the past 66 years, we've become far more than a magazine. And sometimes you have to let go of the past to make room for the future" (Playboy, 2020). In its last few years of publication Playboy successfully began to disrupt its *Entertainment for Men* ethos bringing in a rise of female and queer audiences, as well as challenging their own narrow beauty standards of desirable femininity through featuring disabled, transgender, non-binary and fat bodies in pictorials. However, considering a general decline in magazine readership across the publishing industry (Thurman and Fletcher, 2019) and the rise of internet pornography, it is clear why Playboy chose to cease publication of its magazine and focus on its digital content to survive in an increasing digital culture.

In addition to ceasing the operation of more of the legacy aspects of Playboy's operation (the magazine and the Playboy clubs) the attempted erasure of Hefner from the brand is another indication of the company shifting to keep up with changing cultural perceptions. Whilst as discussed in chapter two, feminist criticism of Playboy has existed throughout the company's history, however, public perception of Playboy and particularly Hugh Hefner has shifted in response to both Hefner's death and the #MeToo movement. The weeks following Hefner's death saw several neutral eulogies (BBC News, 2017; Berg, 2017; Liebenson, 2017) as well as articles reflecting both positively (Dalton 2017, Desta 2017) and negatively (Ahmed, 2017; Bindel, 2017; Heuchan, 2017; Kang, 2017; Moore, 2017) on Hefner and his legacy. Arguably however, online articles were more critical of Hefner with a number reflecting on feminist critiques of Hefner (Ahmed, 2017; Heuchan, 2017; Moore, 2017) as well as many calling out Hefner being buried next to Marilyn Monroe as "creepy" (Hills, 2017; Kang, 2017).

Hefner's death sparked a renewed critical interest, however public perception of Hefner shifted significantly following the release of the documentary series *The Secrets of Playboy*, which originally began airing on American television network A&E aired on the 24th January 2022 (later airing in November 2022 on Channel 4 in the UK). The series saw multiple women throughout Playboy's history such as Playmate and Hefner's ex-girlfriend Sondra Theodore, Playmate and former head of Playmate promotions Miki Garcia and *The Girls Next Door* stars Holly Madison and Karissa and Kristina Shannon come forward with allegations of sexual and emotional abuse at the hands of men of the Playboy empire, most notably Hugh Hefner. Allegations against Hefner are not a new phenomenon, over the years several allegations have been brought forward by women, with one of the most prevalent examples being Holly Madison's 2015 memoir *Down the Rabbit Hole*. However, potentially in part due to the influence the #MeToo movement has generated in the public's receptiveness to listening to victims of sexual abuse, *The*

Secrets of Playboy has made a significant impact on how Playboy is discussed and viewed in western media, permanently casting a shadow on the man who was once emblematic of Playboy.

We can see evidence of the impact of the series on Playboy in their decision to publish an open letter through the online platform *Medium* in which they state that they are listening and “trust and validate” (Playboy 2022) the women who came forward, declaring that “the Hefner family is no longer associated with Playboy, and today’s Playboy is not Hugh Hefner’s Playboy”. (Playboy 2022). This contrasts with the company’s initial approach to Hefner following his death in 2017, in which the company had continued to refer to Hefner, for example until its last issue in spring 2020 the magazine kept Hefner as the first name in their masthead, referring to him as their “founding editor-in-chief” following his death. Hefner’s name appeared multiple times in issues up to the last publication, most often in articles which reflected on aspects of the company’s legacy. However, since the release of this statement Playboy has removed named references to Hefner from their website platforms, this indicates that the release of *Secrets of Playboy* is key in this shift in public perception of Hefner which led to Playboy making their decision to step away from him.

Walking through the corridors of Playboy’s offices in 2022 the walls were filled with archival photographs and artwork, however, I spotted no photograph or depiction of Hefner. His personal items on the other hand, from his sofas to his collection of leather-bound issues of Playboy were everywhere, each a haunting reminder of the complicated figure who was once inseparable from the idea of Playboy. In 2024 Playboy’s collection of Hefner’s belongings were sold at auction, including all the Hefner adjacent items I had seen at Playboy's offices in 2022 (Juliens Auctions, 2024).

However, whilst Playboy claims to no longer be associated with Hefner and have made much effort to remove him, there still exists traces of Hefner within Playboy. At the time of writing in September 2024 I found that Playboy stock Hefner themed clothing and costume items on their official online store. These items include red velvet smoking jackets, red satin robes, black satin two-piece pyjamas, a captain's hat, loafers and a pipe; all of which were clothing items Hefner wore frequently and is heavily associated with. In the item descriptions Playboy makes no mention of Hefner, instead describing them as worn by celebrities, and pieces of Playboy's history. In part due to the Playboy bunny costume being an enduringly popular choice as a Halloween and fancy dress costume, Hefner is also a popular Halloween costume. Playboy bunnies and Hefner costumes are most frequently seen in heterosexual couples' costumes, at times with couples gender swapping the costumes. This has meant that a number of costume stores sell both Hefner costumes as well as more revealing "sexy" Hefner costumes. Seemingly aiming to profit from this trend Playboy sells Hefner related costume items for all genders, including smoking jacket themed Playboy bunny suits.

It is clear that except for the nostalgic visual metaphors for Hefner on which Playboy continues to capitalise, Hefner has largely dropped out of direct sight and language for Playboy. At the time of writing, his name does not appear anywhere on Playboy's main website (not counting their subscription platforms), his name came up very little in my interviews with Playboy staff, nor did his face grace the hallways of the offices of his once empire. This creates a contradictory duality. On the one hand the company has sought to erase their controversial founder to adapt to a modern culture which has become more receptive to victims of sexual assault. On the other hand, Playboy also knows that nostalgia generates capital. They're aware that many look back nostalgically on Playboy's grand, lavish parties in which Hefner would be photographed in his

smoking jacket and pyjamas amongst Playboy bunnies and girls in lingerie, and so, they continue to sell this fantasy to us. It is my conclusion that leaning into Hefner too heavily would generate controversy and negative publicity for Playboy, but looking carefully at Playboy shows us that the brand continues to see parts of the aesthetics of Hefner as a part of their legacy of which they can capitalise and sell to consumers.

When interviewing Playboy staff, I chose not to specifically ask them any questions pertaining to Hefner, predominantly because I was more interested in their viewpoints on the women of Playboy, their personal experiences working with Playboy, and the company and its values. As such Hefner's name only appeared in conversation once, with Peter reflecting on how he believes that Playboy will never completely remove themselves from their notorious founder:

And you know, we're never going to be completely detached from Hugh Hefner, because he, for better for worse, wasn't brilliant. But he advocated for a lot of social causes that people just don't know about (Peter, 2022)

As Peter states Hefner is a complicated figure, who simultaneously advocated for a number of socio-political causes, whilst also allegedly denying the personhood and agency of many of the women around him. Hefner had embedded himself into Playboy's very core. As Peter indicates it is impossible for Playboy to truly detach themselves from their creator, especially when he is so culturally interlinked with the concept of Playboy. The company's strategic rebrand away from Hefner indicates a level of adaptation in response to the #MeToo movement. However, their continued usage of nostalgic visual motifs of Hefner in the form of their costumes suggests that

this change may be more cosmetic and does not indicate deeper shifts in the company's operations.

Capitalising on Nostalgia

It is evident that Playboy has made some major shifts in recent years to survive in an ever-changing world (i.e. ceasing the publication of the magazine, shutting Playboy clubs and stepping back from the legacy of Hugh Hefner). Despite these efforts, Playboy's rebranding continues to draw on its legacy, raising questions about how much the company has truly transformed, versus how much it leans on nostalgic elements. According to Playboy staff there are many elements of Playboy's legacy of which the company continues to embrace. In my interviews with Playboy staff, participants often reflected on Playboy's legacy and which of its ethos they feel are still relevant to the brand. Freedom of expression, inclusion, diversity and anti-censorship were brought up as examples of Playboy's core ethos by interview participants. These values reflect those which are listed in Playboy's mission statement: "...the core values of equality, freedom of expression and the idea that pleasure is a fundamental human right" (PLBY Group, 2024).

Some of these modern core Playboy values can be seen reflected throughout Playboy's history. From December 1962-May 1965 Hefner published a series of self-admittedly "...rambling, disorganised" (Hefner, 1963 p.81) essays in Playboy which made up "The Playboy Philosophy". The Playboy Philosophy was intended as a "...living statement of our beliefs, our insights, and our prejudices" (P.81) and covered topics such as the first amendment rights (with a focus on freedom of speech and freedom of the press), the separation of church and state, and U.S foreign affairs (such as The Cold War). Whilst

as feminist historian Carrie Pitzulo writes “the [Playboy] Philosophy, like much homespun unsystematic American wisdom, was a study in contradictions”. (Pitzulo, 2005, n.p), we can see within Hefner’s disorganised and often contradictory philosophy some of the same ethos which the brand continues to champion.

The interview participants described how they believe that the Playboy of 2022 has not radically shifted and still reflects the values and ethos it has represented throughout its decade's long legacy. At the time of interview Playboy was just over a year away from celebrating their 70th anniversary. For staff member Jessica, she states how this anniversary had her feeling reflective on Playboy’s history and had been looking back through its previous content:

It's going to be our 70th anniversary. And the values and that core DNA is driving the future, you know, and pulling from 70 years of history through to the future and seeing so much of it still relevant, it's pretty amazing...And so I'm looking back at our rich 70 year history, and the content is incredible. Oh, there's so much to pull from. And so when you look at the content, where we are today isn't as different from where we used to be. I mean, it's more, like, the thought and leadership aspects of it are still so in line. And I think it's more that the aesthetics that's changing, mediums that are changing, the channels that we're using to reach our communities are changing. (Jessica, 2022)

It is interesting that Jessica claims that the leadership and thought behind Playboy are still “in line” with the brand's legacy, despite the brand putting heavy focus on the fact that 80 percent of Playboy staff now identify as female in both email correspondence with myself and on their website. This comment by Jessica could suggest that at its

core post-Hefner Playboy is not radically different, it has just adapted to speak to new audiences, and to present itself as palatable in the post-#MeToo climate. This calls into question whether Playboy announcing that “today’s Playboy is not Hugh Hefner’s Playboy” (Playboy, 2022) was purely performative, or whether it does indeed represent a deeper transformation in the company’s ethics and practices.

The idea of staying true to aspects of Playboy's legacy whilst finding new methods and outputs to speak to new generations is a clear focus of post-Hefner Playboy. Since closing down their print magazine in 2020 the company has invested heavily in new media such as, for example, launching a range of NFT artworks utilising both new and archival imagery, and their own subscription-based creator-led app, *The Playboy Club*. Whilst these new media outputs have become platforms for creators to produce and publish new work which draws inspiration from Playboy’s history, these platforms also at times frequently repurpose archival imagery, at times in contexts which bring into question the consensual nature of Playboy’s usage of these images, which will be discussed in the next section.

Playboy’s recycling of archival images in new media formats, as well as utilising their legacy as a source of inspiration is evidence of Playboy centring nostalgia as a key element of their brand. Playboy have over seventy years of archival content to recycle, re-contextualise and sell. We can see examples of Playboy employing nostalgia for capitalistic gain within their merchandise which frequently utilises vintage Playboy covers and pictorials on items such as t-shirts and posters, as well as within their adult content subscription websites (which I will discuss later in this chapter).

Nostalgia is frequently employed as a corporate strategy, perhaps one of the greatest modern American examples of this is Disney, who have capitalised off their audience’s

collective nostalgia for decades, such as by re-making previously animated films and projects in new “live action” films. (Kennedy-Karpat, 2020).

Svetlana Boym (2001) differentiated between two forms of nostalgia, “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia seeks to return to an idealised past, without an awareness of the futility of seeking to do so. Boym points out that restorative nostalgia is often mistaken as a truth, or a tradition. Whilst reflective nostalgia looks back on the past and considers other scenarios, it is a self-aware longing for what else might have been. Elisabeth Wesseling (2017) builds on Boym’s theories, stating:

“Contrary to restorative nostalgia, reflective nostalgia has a critical potential, in that it prevents us from taking the status quo for granted as the natural outcome of an inexorable, law-like historical process” (p.3). Applying this, post-Hefner Playboy, for the most part employs a reflective nostalgic lens to its history, especially in its identification that it must step back from Hefner to continue in the current socio-political climate.

However, there are aspects in how Playboy reflects on its legacy and ethos, both within my interview participants’ answers, as well as how the company describes itself online, which shows a more restorative nostalgic outlook. We often see the company romantically reflect on its value and ethos, and how the brand is not radically different from its past, without directly acknowledging the problems in this thinking. As discussed throughout this thesis, Playboy has both moments where we see it challenging patriarchal norms, cultivate a female gaze, and advocate for various socio-political causes (see for example discussion of the imagery of Bunny Yeager, or Playboy’s support of Roe v Wade.); however we also see Playboy reflect and reaffirm harmful western feminine beauty standards, contribute to rape culture, and assert racist, homophobic, and sexist stereotypes. Without leaning into the complications and contradictions of Playboy’s legacy we risk seeing the company through a limiting binary

viewpoint, or worse take a restorative nostalgic viewpoint on Playboy and fail to learn from the harm the brand has caused.

In a similar sense to how many re-contextualise and reimagine the romanticised aesthetics of pin-ups (Buszek, 2006), Playboy's decades of representations of desirable femininity have become a source not just for the company, but the public imaginary at large, to nostalgically reflect on and repurpose. We can see examples of this through, for example, the continued popularisation of the Playboy bunny suit as a Halloween and fancy-dress costume (which Playboy sell their own official versions of).

As Jessica states in my interview, the aesthetics of Playboy has changed over time, we can see the company has adapted its visual language over the decades to continue to speak to new audiences, however Post-Hefner Playboy's aesthetic very much leans on nostalgia. We can see this in their repurposing of archival imagery alongside new imagery from creators on both their social media accounts as well as in their subscription-based websites. This is also evident in the brands continued usage of the Playboy bunny uniforms (which have not seen any radical change to their design since their inception in 1960) despite there no longer being any Playboy clubs.

While Playboy has taken steps to adapt in a changing world, its ongoing reliance on nostalgic imagery and legacy values complicates its attempts to modernise. Playboys at times romanticised notion of its own legacy risks leaning into Boym's concept of restorative nostalgia; placing the idea of Playboy's on a pedestal without truly reflecting on the complications of their past. As Playboy continues to navigate its post-Hefner identity, the question remains whether it can meaningfully align its legacy with the evolving demands of modern intersectional feminism.

Feminist Interpretations of Playboy's Legacy

While nostalgia remains a key component of Playboy's brand identity, its response to feminist movements like #MeToo demonstrates another facet of its ongoing reinvention. Jessica elaborated on how she feels that Playboy simultaneously has adapted to modern cultural shifts, whilst continuing to be informed by its own legacy stating: "We're staying at that intersection of culture and society, but then being very sex forward. We're still true to who Playboy is, but meeting culture where culture is today" (Jessica, 2022). We can see Playboy adapt to meet "culture where culture is today" in its continued investment in online content, such as its adoption of creating content for social media platforms, such as *TikTok*, to its subscription-based platforms to compete with the rise of porn 2.0 (which will be discussed later in this chapter). Whilst as discussed, we can see Playboy adapt to the #MeToo movement through attempting to erase Hefner, however has the company made any further changes to adapt to recent feminist politics?

Playboy's adaptation to feminist politics, as discussed in my literature review, has been ongoing for a number of years with the company commissioning a rising number of feminist themed articles and interviews with feminist figures in the last few years of the magazine's publication. Whilst the term #MeToo did not come up in any answers from participants in my interviews conducted, and the notion of feminism was rarely brought up, I would argue that aspects of these movements are implicitly reflected in the answers given, especially in the focus on diversity (as discussed in chapter six) and in positioning platforms such as *The Playboy Club* as sites which leverage Playboy's legacy as a tool for creator's empowerment. Whether this promise of Playboy branded empowerment through participation in *The Playboy Club* reflects a more neoliberal,

postfeminist and popular feminist sentiment will be discussed further in the next section.

Miffy, one of the Playboy employees interviewed, is the only participant who specifically references feminism. She provided an example of a recent project she had done for the company which she instilled with a feminist ethos, as well as approaching the project with a focus on artist's and model's agency. To protect Miffy's identity and job title parts of this statement has been redacted:

This is half a feminist point of view, but it's also an artist's agency and autonomy point of view, which is that I insisted that we, whenever we could, for all of those [*makes reference to something specific to project*], all the material we used was cleared from a rights standpoint. We were legally allowed to use it, we had the commercial right to do what we did, but whenever we could we tracked down the original photographers and model. Which took so long, but it was so worth it, and we ended up finding all these Playmates from the past. In some cases, the photographer or the model had passed away, so obviously in cases like that we weren't able to, but we did our best due diligence wise to try and find every person, and gave them a percentage of the sales, even though we weren't contractually obligated to. And so that part was really important to me, the reality is we live in a capitalist world where y'know I think we should have respect that making a deal that they know what they're doing and that they are protecting their self-interests, that being said I also think that it's cool to have this opportunity where, you know at the time that those contracts were signed they obviously didn't know what an **makes reference to project** was, there wasn't even the internet yet. So it just felt right to use it as an opportunity to

compensate the people that made it possible to do what we're doing. So that part of it was really exciting. (Miffy, 2022)

As Miffy points out, many models who posed for Playboy and signed their model release forms did so pre-internet and may have never envisioned the online legacy the images they shot for Playboy could have. Consent and agency were evidently critical issues to Miffy whilst approaching this project, and she was successfully able to adapt her work to allow -when possible - for the models and photographers to give informed consent for their images to be repurposed. As she states, this is not something Playboy need to do from a legal standpoint, as they have the rights to these images, but it is evident that from an ethical standpoint Miffy felt it was beneficial to seek out consent where possible. This extra step Miffy went not only ethically benefited her project but also facilitated new dialogues between models and photographers from across Playboy's history with its current staff. This provides a notable example of Playboy staff actively changing their working practices to adapt to feminist ways of working, one which centres the agency and consent of the women of Playboy. However, as I turn towards Playboy's digital subscription platforms in the following two sections it becomes evident that not all levels and aspects of Playboy's operations have been conducted with the same ethical diligence.

Outside of the corporate structure of Playboy, however we have seen an example of a feminist reappraisal and reclamation of Playboy which has been informed by both *The Secrets of Playboy* series and #MeToo movement. The *Girls Next Level* podcast by Holly Madison and Bridget Marquardt provides an example of a feminist reflective (Boym, 2001) nostalgic approach to Playboy. The podcast, which is self-produced and edited by Madison and Marquardt, began in 2022 and sees the two hosts recap

episodes of GND, where they will discuss the events of the episodes, share a behind the scenes glimpse into filming the episodes and express their feelings on how they feel they were presented through the episodes editing. Alternative episode structures focus on interviews with guests from the Playboy world as opposed to discussing episodes, guests have included Hugh Hefner's son Marston Hefner, and sister-in-law Caya Hefner, Playboy Playmates Carmella DeCesare Garcia, Qiana Chase, and Audra Lynn, former Playboy staff photographer Arny Frietag and GND producer Becca Gullion. Whilst Madison and Marquardt lean into nostalgia, such as introducing podcast episodes that analyse GND episodes by inviting listeners to "step into the grotto time machine" as they re-cap popular media at the time each GND episode aired, their approach to analysing GND and Playboy takes a highly reflective approach. The hosts lean heavily into the contradictions and complications of Playboy, often acknowledging both the darker side of Playboy and their different experiences with the company, whilst also finding space to highlight aspects of Playboy they continue to find joy in.

Marquardt and Madison also offer a more nuanced approach to Hefner than Playboy has in the wake of *Secrets of Playboy*, as opposed to not acknowledging his presence in GND and their lives, the hosts do make reference to Hefner, taking the same balanced approach they do with the rest of the series. At times they point out what they perceive to be manipulative and abusive behaviour from Hefner that went on behind the scenes of the episodes, whilst on the other hand they can also dwell on more positive memories. In their interview with Marston Hefner, Marston states that whilst he disagrees with elements of Madison's narrative on Hefner as she writes in her memoir (Madison, 2015) he appreciates her subjective opinion of her experience and is interested in new viewpoints on Playboy and his father given that much of the narrative was dominated by Hefner for so much of his life.

By centering women's narratives on Playboy, leaning into the complication of their subject matter and seeking alternative meanings and outcomes through analysing the editing of GND, *Girls Next Level* offers a feminist reclamation of Playboy that utilises a reflective nostalgic lens. Within the corporate structure of Playboy, interviews I conducted with Playboy staff, in particular in Miffy's response, showcases that there are projects in the company that have meaningfully adopted feminist ethos and have adapted to centre agency and consent as key aspects of repurposing archival Playboy material. *Girls Next Level* and Miffy's response demonstrate that both internal and external to Playboy's corporate structure there exists modern feminist interpretations of Playboy's legacy. These projects shift the lens onto the women of Playboy as important and agentic subjects in Playboy's legacy. However, as I move on to analysing Playboy's digital platforms in the next two sections, the feminism of Post-Hefner Playboy is called into further question.

The Playboy Club: Agency, Sex Work and Whorephobia

In recent years, Playboy has sought to rebrand itself for a post-#MeToo era, leveraging digital platforms to claim feminist ideals of sexual agency and empowerment. One of the most prominent initiatives in this rebranding effort is *The Playboy Club*, a creator-led platform that offers a space for women to produce and monetise their own content. However, this platform, while promising creative freedom, raises critical questions about the limits of empowerment within a commercial framework that continues to commodify women's bodies.

During the interviews with Playboy staff in 2022 *The Playboy Club* was mentioned by three out of four participants (although none directly worked with the platform). It was

clear that at the time of interview staff were excited by the platform and saw it as an example of Playboy adapting to meet new audiences, as well a shift towards the women of Playboy gaining further agency through being able to utilise the platform to monetise their own versions of desirable femininity.

The Playboy Club is a content creator platform which enables users to pay monthly subscription fees to access exclusive content from creators (with higher ranking creators dubbed *Bunnies*). Creators receive 80 per cent of income generated from their profiles, with the platform taking a 20 per cent fee. The platform operates on a similar basis to other adult and NSFW content creator platforms, the most notable example being *OnlyFans* which was founded in 2016 and gained significant notoriety and popularity during the Covid-19 pandemic as a popular platform for NSFW content. Whilst there exists a wide variety of scholarship on *OnlyFans* in relation to themes such as the public imaginary of the platform (van der Nagel, 2021), masculinity and male content creators (Longstaff, 2023), and precarity and the platform's relation to gig-economy work (Easterbrook-Smith, 2023) there is a gap in literature on *The Playboy Club*

Since 2021 the platform has changed its name three times, first launching as *Centerfold* in December 2021, with the press release stating:

CENTERFOLD, the new home for the world's top creators to interact directly with their fans, expand their communities and build their own personal content and commerce businesses. CENTERFOLD is dedicated to creative freedom, artistic expression, and sex positivity, as the next evolution of Playboy's long history at the intersection of culture and sex. (PLBY, 2021)

In 2023 Playboy announced that it was dropping the name *Centerfold* instead the platform would simply go by *Playboy*, thus integrating the platform fully into the brand. Press surrounding this rebranding (e.g Chadwick, 2023; Kessler, 2023; Spangler, 2023) asserted that the renamed platform would serve as a type of digital magazine, with the platform hosting “essays from creators and content about what it’s like to be a part of Playboy.” (Kessler, 2023).

In 2024 the platform rebranded once more to *The Playboy Club*, adopting its name from the former chain of clubs the company once owned. This re-branding introduced the concept of higher performing and popular creators being dubbed ‘Bunnies’, named after the workers of the original Playboy clubs. This shift also saw a further focus on creators posting short, flirty posts alongside visuals, as opposed to the promised essays on what it is like to be a part of Playboy.

This considerable amount of rebranding the platform has undergone in its first three years could be indicative of Playboy struggling to find success with the platform and establish its place in the market amongst competing platforms such as *OnlyFans*, or this rebranding may be a reflection of the company simply trying to figure out what they want from the platform in its infancy.

At the time of my interviews with Playboy staff the platform was still titled *Centerfold*. The ways in which participants referred to the platform used language associated with feminism, such as frequently referring to ideas such as empowerment, autonomy, and agency. However, it could be argued that participants' employment of concepts such as empowerment when describing *The Playboy Club* is reflecting of post-feminist, or popular feminist sentiment.

Peter for example, stated in relation to the digital platform:

This autonomy and agency that you're giving to the creator and turning the lens...I think is definitely a part of the future of Playboy's vision. Creating a world where creators who are expressing themselves with work that align with the Playboy ethos, and their own ethos, and their own self representation and expression. They have an opportunity to create, produce and monetise their own work, and have agency, and have control (Peter, 2022)

Peter's thoughts on *The Playboy Club* reflects his colleague Jessica's discussion on how the major difference in modern Playboy is how they have adapted to use new mediums and channels to meet new communities, with Playboy's core ethos staying relatively the same. For Peter, *The Playboy Club* is leveraging the way Playboy operates to put more creative freedom and control in the hands of the women who pose for Playboy. Peter views this as Playboy providing a platform for creators to use Playboy branded sexuality as a conduit for empowerment, as well as to view the Playboy brand through their own lens and bodies. Jessica, another Playboy employee, describes the platform in a similar light, emphasising the control creators have over the content they produce and crafting their own visions of sexuality:

It's really kind of turning the magazine on its head. The magazine was all its own content. But this way, the models aren't just in front of the camera, they're controlling the camera. So, they're basically their own set designer, they're selecting what they're wearing, they're selecting the photographers, and it's just putting all the control into the creator's hands. And I love that, like, we're trying to basically empower the creator. So, they get to set their prices, they pick what

content they want, it's just very much in their control. But what's in our control is who the creators are that we onboard. And so making sure that it's, you know, diverse and that we're really being thoughtful about it. (Jessica, 2022)

We can see Peter and Jessica describe *The Playboy Club* in ways which reflect Playboy's shift towards embracing popular feminism, which is enmeshed with postfeminist sentiment (Banet-Wesier, 2018). Jessica focuses on the sense of control creators have over the images they produce, with creators able to exercise a level of agency over their images than traditional shoots in Playboy often would often allow. *The Playboy Club* could be viewed as a continuation of the legacy of the small handful of women who were able to have their own self-portraits and self-produced imagery in the magazine, such as Bunny Yeager. In this sense *The Playboy Club* is giving women and the people who pose for Playboy more creative freedom and control than the company has ever allowed them in the past. However, to what extent does the platform provide a space for empowerment, agency and creative control?

As Jessica mentions, one of *The Playboy Club*'s unique selling points which the company has prominently mentioned in press statements (Chadwick, 2023; Kesslen, 2023; Spangler, 2023) as evidence that it is different from their major competitor, *OnlyFans* is the editorial aspect to how its creators are selected. Whilst anyone over the age of 18 can sign up to *OnlyFans* and create content, as Jessica and Playboy's press statements state prospective creators for Playboy must apply to be on Playboy's platform and have their account approved by a member of staff. The criteria for selection are not public, and I found that the platform's terms and conditions give no mention to anything pertaining to what physical attributes or identities warrant a successful selection.

Looking through the public profiles of one hundred creators the platform has discoverable under their *explore*, *online now*, and *new* pages in August 2024 in my opinion it appears that Jessica's statement that the platform is thoughtful in their casting of "diverse" creators is somewhat accurate. In my opinion creators discoverable on the platform, or at least on the day that I reviewed public profiles portray more diverse body types than what was traditionally presented in the magazine. As I scrolled through the creators, my snapshot of the platform is that more curvy and fat women, as well as more women of colour were visible amongst the creators.

However, what was lacking from the discoverable creators on the platform at the time of my research, were creators who overtly challenged the heteronormative sexuality of Playboy. Despite Playboy staff expressing a personal desire to see male playmates in interviews I conducted, as well as utilising Playboy's online pictorial with Bretman Rock as an example of the company's shift towards embracing diversity, I saw no male-presenting creators on the Platform. Within the terms and conditions and language utilised in the onboarding process for creators there is nothing which overtly specifies that a creator must identify as female to appear on the platform. Therefore, it is unknown as to whether I did not see any male presenting creators due to a lack of such creators choosing to join the platform, whether they are on the platform but not publicly visible on the pages I viewed on the specific day I reviewed profiles, or whether they are screened out of the platform and their discoverable pages as part of this editorial selection process. Further research into *The Playboy Club* as the platform develops would allow for a more accurate and in-depth analysis of how representations of creators may challenge or reflect Playboy's beauty standards.

In September 2023 I signed up to be a creator on the platform to assess their onboarding process. It is worth noting that at no point in this process did I connect my bank account information nor allow paid subscriptions to be active on my page, thus ensuring that I did not profit in any way from my interaction with the platform. My intention in creating a profile on *The Playboy Club* (at the time simply named, *Playboy*) was to study the language utilised in the terms and conditions and prompts it gives its creators, as opposed to experiencing first-hand how it felt to interact with the platform as creator, as I felt that profiting from Playboy would ethically compromise this research. However, having previously worked as a creator on *OnlyFans* I am familiar with navigating similar subscription-based platforms as a creator.

Signing up to the platform in September 2023 required verifying my identity, creating a username and linking to a social media account, my account was then made live.

During the onboarding process it was unclear as to whether my profile was screened as part of the editorial process that Jessica and Playboy's press statements (Chadwick, 2023; Kesslen 2023; Spangler, 2023) alluded to. Whilst these statements suggest that creators are screened before their accounts are made live, I was able to sign up to the platform and have my account made live instantly, suggesting the absence of an editorial screening process. It is unclear as to whether my account would have been reviewed by staff in this sense if I were to utilise my account and attempt to make 'Bunny status'.

After my account was made live the platform informed me that to gain 'Bunny status' I should begin gaining points by recruiting other creators, create posts and gain subscribers. The more points a creator earns the higher up the ranks they climb, unlocking silver, gold, platinum, and diamond bunny status. These status tiers unlock

more exposure on the app with a higher chance of being on the discoverable pages, invitations to Playboy events and official photoshoots, and at the highest level (which can be attained by earning 1,000,000 points) the opportunity to become a Playmate. It is worth noting that due to me not interacting with the platform, other than signing up and navigating its pages I did not experience gaining points and moving up tiers.

Email correspondence I received from Playboy after signing up as a creator included tips to gain points and get my account started, as well as open calls for themed content submissions. In an email I received on September 7th 2023 announcing that my profile was live, the company provided three next steps. The first was to begin cross-promotion amongst other social media channels. The second prompted me to write an automated welcome message stating: “to encourage new followers to start getting to know you better 😊” (Playboy, 2023). Lastly, I was asked to begin posting content, “Fun & flirty content works best (not explicit or raunchy). Remember to use enticing captions that are fun & flirty as well!” (Playboy, 2023). We can see from this email that Playboy were encouraging its creators to toe the line between sexually suggestive, and sexually explicit, meaning they must appear flirtatious and suggestive enough to entice subscribers, without being too seen as too much. Interestingly Playboy did not provide any examples of what they deem as too raunchy. Upon receiving this email, I was a little confused as to why a platform which supposedly prides itself on its sex positivity from a brand which historically has positioned itself as anti-censorship, would want to regulate how their creators express themselves.

The platform has run several themed open call outs, in which they encourage creators to submit images and in turn if selected those images are featured on the discovery page of the platform (Playboy, 2023). Previous themed call outs have been in relation to

Playboy's legacy (with specific examples being Playboy Bunnies, and Pamela Anderson), related to wider cultural events (such as a sports themed call out to tie with the 2024 Paris Olympics), or seasonal. For an autumn 2024 themed call out, a mood board sent to creators featured images of women intended for users to utilise as creative inspiration for poses, lighting and location. These thirty-two images give us an insight into the type of images and models that *The Playboy Club* wants to feature. Whilst these images showcased significantly more racially diverse models than previously presented in Playboy, the models *The Playboy Club* featured on their autumn 2024 mood board were all thin, able bodied and feminine in appearance. Once again, we see that the platform does not radically challenge the standard of feminine beauty and desirability that Playboy has reflected and upheld for decades. We can also see the way in which *The Playboy Club* defines being sexually suggestive, as opposed to explicit. The models featured in this mood board are predominately dressed in revealing clothing and lingerie and are obscuring any explicit nudity through their poses.

From my research it is evident that *The Playboy Club* is publicly positioned as a platform where creators post suggestive content, rather than explicit, as corroborated in a statement a Playboy spokesperson gave *Variety* in 2023:

While we allow nudity, we do not allow explicit content/pornography... We are not positioning this as an 'adult' platform — it's for everyone, including mainstream creators sharing behind the scenes of their lives. (Spangler, 2023)

My findings suggest that this statement of not allowing explicit and pornographic content is not actually representative of the content on *The Playboy Club*. Whilst creators are encouraged to be sexually suggestive, as opposed to explicit in email

communication, as per the platform's terms and conditions they are able to upload explicit and NSFW content such as solo nude and NSFW photos and videos. However, the terms and conditions do state creators are prohibited from uploading any content which features other individuals. Whilst it is impossible to get a full picture of all the content on *The Playboy Club* without paying for a significant number of subscriptions to individual pages - which is beyond the scope of this research - we can get an idea of the type of content creators post through their chosen profile picture and caption.

Looking through the public facing pages of creators featured in the platforms discoverable pages it was evident that a significant amount of creators were utilising the platform to post NSFW and adult content, with the platform even allowing creators to start live video streaming to interact live with fans in a similar manner to adult cam-girl websites (Bleakley, 2014). Under the tab of “live now” creators, one creator had a profile picture of her lying back with legs behind her head (with the image cropped to not show her vulva) with the profile caption “tip for request daddy 🍑” (The Playboy Club, 2024), whilst another posed in lingerie with the caption “🍒Let's have fun together, completing the Tip Goal👉👉”. (The Playboy Club, 2024). In my opinion these images and captions suggest more of a sexually explicit nature, than suggestive.

As previously noted, it is not possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of creators on *The Playboy Club* and their use of the platform without further research, which falls outside the scope of this thesis. However, analysis of the limited data available suggests that a considerable number of creators produce NSFW content, raising questions about Playboy’s public positioning of the platform as “flirty, not raunchy”. Differentiating between sexually suggestive and sexually explicit profiles on *The Playboy Club* is not intended to assign value or cast judgment on how creators use

the platform. Instead, this distinction underscores the discrepancy between Playboy's public claims and the reality of its content. The company's erasure of sex workers and explicit material from its narrative suggests that Playboy may be less sex-positive and open to embracing sexual representation than its corporate messaging implies.

Sex workers are an important part of Playboy's legacy and have existed within the magazine's pages and various Playboy media for decades. By downplaying the existence of explicit and NSFW content Playboy are reinforcing Hefner's idea of desirable femininity, that the Playboy woman is a "healthy girl, simple girl - the girl next door" (Fallaci, 1967, p.116), as opposed to the "mysterious difficult woman, the femme fatale who wears elegant underwear with lace, and she is sad and somehow mentally filthy" (p.116). Sex workers complicate this virtuous notion of safe, desirable Playboy femininity, they threaten to push the Playboy woman into the latter half of the good girl/bad girl binary.

Despite the company's claims of centering empowerment, Playboy's treatment of sex workers reveals deeper contradictions within its platform governance and ethos.

Playboy's attempts to regulate the ways in which its creators express themselves and public downplaying of the existence of NSFW and explicit content can be seen as a reflection of whore stigma (sometimes referred to as whorephobia). Gail Pheterson, who first coined the term whore stigma, describes it as the dehumanisation of women based on certain attributes or behaviours deemed to signify "illegitimate or illicit femaleness" (1996, p.70).

Whilst one of Playboy's core ethos, as identified on their website and by their staff in my interviews, is that of freedom of expression, there appears to be a level of censorship in

how they wish their models and creators to perform female desirability, and which of their creators they will publicly embrace. They are not interested in “illicit femaleness” as Pheterson puts it, instead they cast on the women of Playboy what Jill Nagle refers to as “compulsory virtue” (1997, p.5). Jill Nagle (1997) writes how the enforcement of the plethora of binaries pushed on female identities mandates many “to not only *be* virtuous, but also to *appear* virtuous, to again demonstrate our affiliation with the privileged half of the good girl/bad girl binary.” (p.5). When Playboy continues to privilege a narrow ideal of desirable “good girl next door” femininity, they perpetuate whore stigma. Whilst in my research I found a large number of profiles which framed themselves as offering explicit and NSFW content on the platform’s discoverable pages, I question just how many other NSFW/ explicit creators go unseen because they do not meet Playboy’s framework of respectability and desirability to gain further promotional opportunities and thus be more visible on the platforms discoverable pages.

However, Playboy is not the only platform purposely downplaying the existence of sex workers whilst quietly profiting from them, in fact it is symptomatic of wider issues of platform regulations and governances online driven by longstanding whorephobic attitudes and laws. An example of the latter being The Fight Online Sex Traffickers Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (FOSTA/SESTA). FOSTA/SESTA holds online platforms responsible for hosting content which could be considered as facilitating sex trafficking. Whilst FOSTA/SESTA is a U.S law it has global ramifications, as social media platforms have adjusted their terms and conditions to meet the law’s demands not just in the U.S, but globally. Since the twin laws were passed by the U.S Senate and House in 2018 there has been a significant amount of sex workers, feminists and academics (Blunt and Wolf, 2020; Mia, 2020; Tichenor, 2020; Bronstein, 2021) call attention to how

FOSTA/SESTA significantly impacts sex workers rights and abilities to form communities, and safely work and express themselves online.

Carolina Are and Susan Paasonen (2021) argue that FOSTA/SESTA has also contributed to a culture in which online platforms, such as *Instagram*, *Tumblr* and *Reddit* have heavily reduced the availability of sexually suggestive and explicit content on their platforms. However, as Are and Paasonen point out this shadow banning and removal of content is not always equal, with celebrities such as Kim Kardashian, Cardi B, or Miley Cyrus who draw a significant amount of traffic, data and brand deals onto platforms such as *Instagram*, being able to freely post sexually suggestive imagery. Meanwhile, strippers, pole dancers, and content creators who are perceived as posting sexually suggestive and nude content are more frequently subject to having their content and accounts shadow banned and removed (Are, 2022). A report by Carolina Are at The Centre for Digital Citizens found that deplatforming “disproportionately affected marginalised users like sex workers, LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC users, nude and body-positive content creators, pole dancers, but also journalists and activists” (Are, 2023). This platform governance has led to many creators feeling that they must self-censor to continue utilising platforms, therefore there is a need for more inclusive platforms where creators can freely express themselves.

Whilst *The Playboy Club* is publicly presented as a platform that empowers its creators and offers them greater creative freedom over their self-representations compared to the women traditionally featured in *Playboy*, its “flirty not raunchy” approach to censoring creators reflects broader issues prevalent across online platforms. Zahra Stardust (2024) calls attention to how platform governances constrain independent

sexual media permitting narrow representations of sex and sexuality whilst disproportionately impacting queer sexual expressions and women's body fluids:

The sexist, queerphobic, ableist, and racist legal frameworks that govern pornography are based on simplistic narratives about the value and effects of sexual representations and so little to protect the well-being of performers. They are based on regulatory *fantasies* of what porn is and does (Stardust, 2024, p.10. emphasis in original)

The ripples of these regulatory fantasies and laws such as FOSTA/SESTA has even impacted platforms which are publicly known for the high proportion of sex workers utilising them. Emily van der Nagel (2021) argues that whilst culturally *OnlyFans* is seen as a NSFW platform, much like *The Playboy Club* it does not position itself as one. Van der Nagel expands on van Es and Poell (2020) and Litt and Harigattai 's (2016) work on the platform imaginary: "how people understand and organise themselves in relation to platforms" (p.395). Van der Nagel argues that the platform imaginary of *OnlyFans* is "grounded in a misogynistic, patriarchal framework" in that the platform is commonly viewed in both memes and news articles as an online space in which women degrade themselves for easy money (2021). Despite *OnlyFans* public imaginary positioning it as a NSFW platform, as van der Nagel states, the corporate language of *OnlyFans* centres its SFW creators whilst attempting to erase the presence of NSFW creators.

It is evident that *The Playboy Club*'s corporate language operates on a similar level to *OnlyFans* by purposely downplaying the existence of NSFW content on the platform. However, whilst *OnlyFans*' corporate language contradicts the platform's public imaginary, in the case of *The Playboy Club* they appear to be more aligned. Whilst news articles on *The Playboy Club* are significantly fewer than on *OnlyFans*, we can see that

the platform imaginary of *The Playboy Club* does differ slightly from van Der Nagel's findings on *OnlyFans* in that it is positioned as a "classier" version of *OnlyFans* (Peterson, 2023; Nolasco, 2023). Reasons given as to why the platform is "classier" is the non-existence of pornographic video content featuring another individual (these articles fail to point out that solo pornographic video content is permissible on the platform), and that creators can post bikini and lingerie images. This positioning of *The Playboy Club* as more respectable and classier than *OnlyFans* (which as van Der Nagel points out is publicly associated with sex work and often viewed in a negative and whorephobic light) further stigmatises sex work. It privileges one form of sexual self-expression as more deserving of respect and further upholds the binary of good girl/bad girl.

News articles focusing on *The Playboy Club* features creators who are influencers and reality series stars who already have large followings, which is not representative of the true breadth of creators on the platform. An example of this is an interview with *Fox News* former *Nickelodeon* actress and *The Playboy Club* creator Madisyn Shipman centres working with Playboy as a tool for empowerment, highlighting how she has been able to attend Playboy branded photoshoots in the Bahamas and financially support herself: "I think it's so empowering to be able to pose like that and feel great in my skin" (Nolasco, 2023). However, one aspect of working on the platform that Shipman briefly mentions and for the most part glosses over is the "weird requests" that she receives from fans: "I mean, no shame to anyone involved, but I was never exposed to the fetish world, so that was a shock to my system". (Nolasco, 2023). Despite Shipman claiming that she does not intend to shame fans who send fetish requests, framing these requests as "weird" undermines this statement and contributes to the othering of NSFW content and sex workers on *The Playboy Club*.

The attempted coercion by *The Playboy Club* to entice its creators to perform a narrow ideal of desirable good-girl next door femininity, as well as the corporate public erasure of the presence of NSFW and adult content leading to a public imaginary of the platform as one which is a “classier” iteration of *OnlyFans* perpetuates whore stigma. Whore stigma punishes not just sex workers (Pheterson, 1996; Nagle, 1997) but women who are deemed as illicit in their femininity, who are seen too much, too loud, who fall out of the perimeters of respectability. To quote Melissa Gira Grant:

Whore stigma makes central the racial and class hierarchy reinforced in the dividing of women into the pure and the impure, the clean and the unclean, the white and virgin and all the others. If woman is other, whore is the other’s other. (2014 p77)

However, as Shipman and the staff at Playboy point towards for some creators, *The Playboy Club* serves as a platform for them to publish their own images which reclaim Playboy’s legacy as a site of self-expression and empowerment. Katrin Tiidenberg’s and Edgar Gómez Cruz (2015) empirical research into Tumblr bloggers prior to the platform’s 2018 ban on adult content found that creators who were posting their own “sexy selfies” on the platform were utilising this practice as a tool for self-expression and to explore their sexualities:

Sexy selfie practices thus have the power to become a tool that produces a body that looks and feels good. A tool that is controlled by ordinary women, unlike the pens, printing presses and cameras that wrote the history, systematically erasing or caricaturing some groups and experiences. (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz, 2015, p.85)

Expressing oneself on platforms through sexy selfies can challenge notions of desirability dictated by traditional media and be a powerful tool for expressing and playing with gender and sexuality. Platforms can be used to reimagine and create our own interpretations of sexuality. However, whorephobic and misogynistic platforms governance, such as seen in *The Playboy Club*, impede this notion. If Playboy truly wishes to repurpose their legacy as a source of empowerment and agency for a new generation of Playboy women and creators, then they need to embrace the multitudes of feminist sexual self-expressions of their creators. *The Playboy Club* needs to be a platform that serves whores, virgins, and everybody in between, of all bodies and all genders. In doing this *The Playboy Club* could become a site of not just complicated empowerment, but true empowerment, one that was continuing the legacy of the female producers of Playboy content such as Bunny Yeager.

In examining *The Playboy Club*, it becomes evident that Playboy's digital rebranding effort reflects a deeper cultural tension between its desire to modernise and adapt to post-#MeToo culture and its historical reliance on the commodification of women's bodies. The platform, marketed as a space for creative autonomy and sexual agency, appears to embrace feminist ideals of empowerment. Yet, beneath these promises lie contradictions that echo the popular feminist critique of media encouraging women to simply "be empowered" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. IX) without engaging with the structural politics necessary to support meaningful feminist change.

Playboy's emphasis on "fun and flirty" content while discouraging "explicit" or "raunchy" material reveals the limits of the platform's commitment to freedom of expression. Rather than providing creators with true autonomy, the platform enforces a

narrow vision of acceptable femininity and heterosexuality that aligns with long-standing respectability politics and whorephobic cultural attitudes. Furthermore, Playboy's attempts to distance itself from NSFW content while still profiting from sexual labour, suggests a superficial rebranding rather than a substantive break from its patriarchal legacy. By continuing to draw on nostalgia for its past and commodifying women's bodies under the guise of empowerment, Playboy maintains its relevance in a digital age, but at the cost of reinforcing traditional hierarchies of gender, race, and sexuality

The contradictions within The Playboy Club raise important questions about the future of sex work and agency in digital spaces. As platforms like Playboy continue to navigate the demands of both capitalist markets and feminist politics, it remains to be seen whether true sexual empowerment can be achieved within structures that still commodify and regulate women's bodies.

PlayboyPlus: Consent, Control and Re-Purposing of Archival Media

In the final episode of *Secrets of Playboy*, host Lisa Guerrero asks Playmates Sondra Theodore and Susie Krabacher whether they knew where unpublished images from their Playboy shoots ended up. Krabacher responds with uncertainty, but Theodore interjects, claiming, "You don't know? We are on dirty porn sites." (*Secrets of Playboy: The Aftermath*, 2022). Theodore's statement refers to Playboy's business partnership with *Manwin* (renamed *MindGeek* in 2013, and *Aylo* in 2023), a company that owns major adult sites like *PornHub*, *Brazzers*, and *YouPorn*.

Aylo has faced multiple controversies, including lawsuits and allegations of hosting non-consensual pornography and content involving underage individuals (Lati, 2021; Lakhani, 2022). Playboy entered a 15-year licensing agreement with *Manwin/Aylo* in 2011, granting the company control over *Playboy.com* and other adult-content assets. However, in 2014, Playboy CEO Scott Flanders described the partnership as “the biggest mistake I’ve made at the company” (Shandrow, 2014), and Playboy bought back *Playboy.com* “at significant expense.” (Shandrow, 2014) (however their other platforms remained under the control of *Aylo*). At the time of writing the extent of Playboy’s current relationship with *Aylo* remains unclear. However, with their original agreement set to expire in 2026, it is plausible that *Aylo* continues to operate some of Playboy’s adult content platforms.

Playboy TV is the video pornography subsidiary of Playboy which operates both through a premium television network channel, as well as a subscription-based website. Its offerings vary from reality shows, scripted series, video Playmate centerfolds (which include soft-core set-ups of Playmates posing dispersed with them discussing their life, interests and experience posing for Playboy), omnibus style clip shows and sex shorts (Alilunas, 2018) Peter Alilunas describes the latter, which consists of lightly edited content produced by *Manwin/Aylo* and is otherwise available on other *Manwin/Aylo* owned websites, as being contradictory to *Playboy TV*’s aims of producing raunchy softcore content which appeals to female audiences as well as male. Alilunas describes *Manwin/Aylo*’s hardcore sex shorts as creating a tension and disparity compared to Playboy’s more soft-core branding.

More pertinent to this research is Playboy’s predominantly still-image adult subscription website, *PlayboyPlus*. Originating as *Playboy’s Cyber Club* in 1997, this platform

featured online pictorials of “Cyber Girls”, models showcased in Playmate-style photoshoots, with new content uploaded weekly. Members could vote for their favourite Cyber Girl of the Month, who would return for additional shoots. Some Cyber Girls transitioned into the magazine, becoming Playmates, including notable figures like Stephanie Heinrich, Carmella DeCesare, and Monica Leigh. Following Playboy’s partnership with *Manwin/Aylo*, *Cyber Club* was rebranded to *PlayboyPlus*, continuing the Cyber Girl format until 2019. The site also offered archival images from the magazine, as well as previously unpublished photos. Playboy’s intent to digitise and monetise its vast archival collection dates back to its first iteration of *Playboy.com*:

Q: How many Playmate photos does Playboy own?

A: Millions. A Playboy photographer typically takes more than 1000 photographs during a shoot, but only a dozen or so are published in the magazine. The images, both published and unpublished, are then stored on 35mm slides in a climate-controlled photo archive. At last count, the archive contained just under nine million photographs. Many of these unpublished images are being digitized and will be posted on the Playboy pay site. (Playboy, 1996)

I have divided *PlayboyPlus*’ content offerings as of 2024 into four categories: new model-driven content, archival images, archival videos, and celebrity images.

New model-driven content constitutes the majority of new material on *PlayboyPlus*, primarily consisting of photo sets and soft-core video shorts featuring female-identifying models and. One of the most prolific contributors to this category is Holly Randall, a seasoned photographer and pornographer and the daughter of Suze Randall (Playboy’s first female staff photographer). Holly Randall has long collaborated with Playboy’s digital platforms and has produced a number of photo and video sets of models for

PlayboyPlus, as well producing pornographic content for other sites such as *Digital Playground* and *Hustler*, alongside her own independent ventures.

Returning to Sondra Theodore's claim that unpublished Playboy images of models ended up on porn sites, she may have been referring to *PlayboyPlus*' second content category: archival images. *PlayboyPlus* not only offers subscribers access to previously published Playmate pictorials and other images from the magazine's history but also provides access to previously unpublished photos. These galleries span Playboy's early years to the present, featuring models such as Lisa Winters (photographed by Bunny Yeager), Lena Forsèn, and Crystal Hefner. Subscribers can view, download, and share these images, including outtakes that were never originally intended for public consumption.

The third category, archival videos, consists of short-form videos drawn from Playboy's extensive media history. These include Playmate video centerfolds, soft-core content originally produced for *Playboy's Cyber Club*, and footage from Playboy model casting sessions. The latter videos often depict women posing nude or semi-nude during auditions, responding to instructions from photographers like "bend over please" or "take your bra off." Many of these women were not cast, yet their casting videos remain available on *PlayboyPlus*, where users can consume, comment on, and download the footage.

Finally, celebrity images form the fourth category, showcasing galleries of well-known women. These include both published and unpublished outtakes from Playboy shoots, as well as images of online celebrities previously featured in Playboy's *Cyber Club*. High-profile names such as Iman, Lindsay Lohan, Bo Derek, Kim Kardashian, and

Marilyn Monroe appear in these collections. As discussed in chapter five, Monroe is regularly credited by Playboy as their first ever Playmate in their debut issue (at the time named Sweetheart of the Month), however the *Golden Dreams* image of Monroe was published without her knowledge, or consent. In 2012 Playboy continued this practice, with the December 2012 issue promising 'The Nude Marilyn'. The corresponding pictorial not only reprinted *Golden Dreams* image but also several archival Monroe images, including photographs by Lawrence Schiller of Monroe partially nude and poolside on set of her final, incomplete and unreleased film *Something's Gotta Give*. These images also feature in their own gallery on *PlayboyPlus*, however, due to an error in *PlayboyPlus*' corresponding text description (which usually gives a brief bio of the subject and background of the content) Playboy claims authorship over these images:

Playboy.com is on set with Marilyn Monroe to shoot her exclusive pictorial. Get to know more about Marilyn Monroe by watching our behind the scenes footage and the complete nude version available exclusively on Playboy Plus. Watch the video as Marilyn Monroe reveals all her little secrets, adventures [sic], fantasies, along with her fun & wild experiences. (Playboy Plus, 2024)

This description provides a bizarrely erroneous and impersonal account of images of the woman whose non-consensually published nudes provided the initial catalyst for Playboy's success. Perhaps it is unsurprising that, more than seventy years after launching with Monroe's *Golden Dreams* image, Playboy continues to profit from images of women that, while legally permissible to publish, raise significant ethical questions.

Like *The Playboy Club*, *PlayboyPlus* does not feature graphic pornographic content involving more than one individual. However, it is explicitly positioned as a more adult

and NSFW platform. For instance, one of the categories prominently advertised on the platform's landing page is 'adult stars', showcasing content featuring well-known adult actresses such as Riley Reid and Lacy Lennon. Unlike *The Playboy Club*, where content creators independently sign up and manage their presence, *PlayboyPlus* operates more like a curated subscription-based premium adult website. The positioning of *PlayboyPlus* as an NSFW platform does contradict much of Playboy's focus on being seen as more sexually suggestive, than explicit, and perhaps indicates further that *PlayboyPlus* is not being fully operated by Playboy. Whilst this shift in embracing its NSFW nature leads to less implications of whore stigma, it does call into question the ethics of repurposing archival material into digital NSFW contexts.

Similar to Alilunas' findings on *PlayboyTV*, *PlayboyPlus*' content appears to be in contention with itself. We see a disparity between model-driven content which was produced specifically for *PlayboyPlus* of models who have consented to their images being utilised on the platform (I also found that many of the images were taken by female photographers) and archival content which often repurposes content produced for Playboy magazine into digital adult content settings often without the consent or knowledge of the models. I question whether the hundreds of women who signed waivers for the rights to the filming of their casting in the hopes that they would make it as a Playmate would have envisioned that this footage would years later remain online on Playboy's adult content websites, and how they would feel about this. Or the feelings of the thousands of women who did succeed in being cast as Playboy models over the decades of the magazine's operation whose images are now reconstructed into new media forms.

PlayboyPlus' usage of archival content capitalises on Playboy fans' desire for the previously unseen. It gives its users license to view the women of Playboy through a porn 2.0 lens, fulfilling their desire for more and more content. This can be seen as an attempt to keep up with what Fiona Vera-Gray refers to as the "infinite supermarket of unregulated content" (2024, p14) that is the porn 2.0 landscape. As Vera-Gray explains, earlier iterations of pornographic media, like Playboy, marketed an aspirational escape: a curated fantasy of exclusivity, where men were invited into a world of luxury filled with whiskey, cigars, and women dressed as Bunnies (2024, p.14). In contrast, porn 2.0 has transformed porn into something omnipresent and ubiquitous. Now available on digital platforms, it permeates our everyday lives, accessible anytime, anywhere, on any device. *PlayboyPlus* represents Playboy's attempt to adapt to this cultural shift, positioning itself to cater to the expectations of modern porn consumers.

The cacophony of often unregulated content available on porn sites such as Aylo owned *Pornhub*, as well as *PlayboyPlus*' attempts to appeal to new demographics through its regularly updated creator-led content and repurposed archival content can be seen as symptomatic of late-stage capitalism. In Margot Weiss' analysis of mainstream culture's co-option of BDSM she argues that "late-capitalism works by inciting and capitalising on these desires, yet it can never control the emotional effect of this excess" (2006 p128). Playboy's desire to further capitalise and commodify their archival content to meet new digital audiences may have enabled them to stay relevant in a Porn 2.0 landscape, however it disregards the agency and consent of the women of Playboy. With this in mind, is Playboy complicit in fostering a culture that prioritises endless content over the ethical treatment of women's images? Evidently the emotional effect of the excess of content available on *PlayboyPlus* is heavy for some of the women, like Theodore, who have found their images and their bodies utilised in contexts they never previously envisioned them to be.

In *Secrets of Playboy* Theodore describes her experience of signing a model release form for Playboy, stating that she was not given enough time to read the full terms and conditions:

A man [is] taking the pictures. All of a sudden, one of the makeup girls comes up and hands you [a piece of paper]: 'Can you just sign this for us? Because we're taking your picture, you know, we have to have your permission.' You don't know what you're signing, really (*Secrets of Playboy, The Aftermath*, 2021)

Whilst this is only Theodore's experience and does not speak to the experiences of every woman to have posed for Playboy, we can stipulate that others may have shared a similar experience to Theodore. If it is indeed correct that other Playboy models felt that they were not able to fully understand the model releases Playboy had them sign, then this further calls into question the ethics of Playboy repurposing archival images of women on their adult content subscription website

Furthermore, Sondra Theodore highlights an additional factor that raises questions about the consent surrounding Playboy's repurposing of archival content: the use of uncensored video footage. While Theodore acknowledges consenting to being filmed nude for her video Playmate centrefold, she claims she was assured that fully nude footage would not be made public. However, once Playboy launched their *PlayboyTV* adult cable channel, Theodore alleges that the company "pieced [outtake footage] together, released it in cable without telling me that it was going to be happening, not paying me for it, and that was soft porn. They had made me a porn star against my will" (*Secrets of Playboy, The Aftermath*, 2021). Theodore's account aligns with similar claims

made by Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson, who have stated in various outlets (e.g., Madison, 2015; Madison and Marquardt, 2022) that they were unaware that uncensored nude footage of themselves would be included in DVD releases and foreign broadcasts of *The Girls Next Door*.

These accounts raise critical ethical questions: Is it justifiable for Playboy to reconstruct sexually explicit and suggestive images of women into new media forms, often presented in more explicitly pornographic contexts than the original magazine, without the explicit consent of the women involved? Even when such reconstructions fall within the legal framework of the original agreements, they bring into focus significant concerns about the boundaries of consent, commodification, and the evolving definitions of what constitutes ethical media practice.

Whilst I find Theodore's characterisation of the digital pornographic contexts her archival Playboy images have now found themselves in as "dirty" problematic and reflective of whorephobic cultural ideas that portray pornography as inherently degrading to women, her concerns about nude images of herself, which she states she viewed as erotic art, now being marketed by Playboy as porn are valid. While Theodore argued that she did not see Playboy as a pornographic magazine, it is important to acknowledge that Playboy can be viewed as such, given its centrality to the mainstreaming of heteronormative pornographic aesthetics (McNair, 2013). However, there are significant contextual differences between the analogue magazine and digital pornographies, which raises ethical questions about repurposing archival images intended for the former. In the magazine, these images were often accompanied by articles penned by well-known authors discussing a variety of subjects, including lifestyle, political issues, and philosophy. In contrast, *PlayboyPlus* presents its images and videos of women without such accompanying content, instead positioning itself

firmly within the realm of internet pornography. This shift is evident in its cross-promotion of other pornographic subscription sites such as *Brazzers* and *MetArt*.

Seemingly in response to Theodore's comments on *Secrets of Playboy*, as well as Madison and Marquardt's *Girls Next Level* podcast, Playboy did remove the searchable model tag for some of the women of Playboy who had been more outspoken against them in recent years. Some of these women's pictorials and galleries dedicated to their images seemingly are deleted from the *PlayboyPlus* website. However, in searching through curated themed galleries of archival images available on *PlayboyPlus* (including one compiled of Hefner's girlfriends over the years, as well as GND themed galleries) I found that a number of nude images of Theodore, Madison and Marquardt appeared. Furthermore, some of the women from *Secrets of Playboy* still appear on *PlayboyPlus* with searches of their names bringing up galleries of previously unpublished images. This includes Susie Krabacher, who appeared shocked and upset by Theodore's revelation of their Playmate outtakes appearing on pornographic websites.

The key difference between model-driven content, and archival content on *PlayboyPlus* is consent and agency. Many of the creators modelling for *PlayboyPlus*' content are sex workers, who are not averse to aligning themselves with pornographic content, and whose appearance on *PlayboyPlus* comes from a place of informed consent. Playboy selling images under the guise of pornographic content when models in archival content may not have viewed the images as such raises important questions of control over one's own image and consent. To re-quote Theodore no one should be made to be a porn star against their will.

The term revenge pornography has been frequently used to refer to the nonconsensual creation and/or distribution of intimate images especially since the mid-2010s following its inclusion in both the Oxford and Merriam Webster dictionaries. However, usage of the term revenge pornography has been critiqued (Maddocks, 2018) for victim blaming and limiting the scope of the distribution of non-consensual intimate images as being that by a scorned ex-partner seeking revenge. Terms such as non-consensual pornography, image-based sexual abuse and technology facilitated sexual violence have been utilised and offered as alternatives. Non-consensual pornography has been described by Carolyn Uhl, Katlin Rhyner and Noël Lugo (2018) as the “the distribution of sexually explicit photographs or videos without the consent of the individual in the image” (p.1). Through this definition I would argue that the repurposing of archival images on *PlayboyPlus* accounts as an example of non-consensual pornography. It is worth noting that I do not argue that Playboy’s repurposing of archival materials on digital pornographic platforms is illegal, however I would argue that it is ethically questionable.

Interestingly as Maddocks (2018) points out in articles discussing the phenomenon of revenge pornography the non-consensual usage of Monroe’s *Golden Dreams* image in Playboy’s inaugural issue was utilised as an early example (Hills 2017) as Megan Hills argues in *Marie Claire*:

Yes, she may have consented to a photoshoot with a photographer, but she didn’t consent to have her images circulated to hundreds of thousands of people. It’s a nightmare that many women continue to be subjected to today, with reports of leaks and revenge porn (which has officially been listed a crime in the UK) on the rise. (2017)

However, Monroe's *Golden Dreams* image and the usage of archival images on *PlayboyPlus* are not the only times where issues of consent have been raised against Playboy. Mirroring the story of Monroe's un-consensual feature in Playboy, *Wheel of Fortune* host Vanna White appeared on the cover of Playboy's May 1987 issue which promised its readers a glimpse of "Vanna before Wheel of Fortune". A corresponding pictorial showed White posing in a variety of lingerie, she is seen reclining on a pink bed petting a cat, and posing sheer negligées playfully holding her hair. However, like Monroe, White never consented to the publication of these images which were taken years prior to their publication. In an interview (Nolasco, 2017) White claims that Hefner purchased the images once she had achieved fame and used (and profited from) them without her consent.

Furthermore, in 1976 *Playboy Press* (Playboy's publishing company) released the book *Sugar and Spice*, which featured photographs of women which they claimed focused on "the sugar and spice, naughty but nice duality that is frequently an element in the creation of sexual attraction between men and women." (Anon, 1976, n.p). Included in the publication were images of the then ten-year-old actress Brooke Shields posing nude in a bathtub photographed by Garry Gross. The corresponding text description of the photographs claimed that Gross' images were focused on contrasting adult feminine sexuality with girlhood; "Inside that little girl there's a sexy woman hiding" (Anon, 1976, n.p). Kristen Hatch (2022) argues that Gross "conflates female sexuality with the girl's availability to the male gaze." (p.194) The sexualisation of underage Brooke Shields and her mother's coercion of Shields has been well documented (Turner, 2009; Saner, 2021; Hatch, 2022; *Pretty Baby: Brooke Shields*, 2023). It is worth questioning that whilst Shields' mother consented to the sexualised depictions of Shields in the images by Gross and Louis Malle's film *Pretty Baby*, whether these

depictions should be classed as child pornography. It is worth noting that Playboy does not have these images available under any of their websites.

Meanwhile the fear of revenge pornography/ the leaking of non-consensual pornography has been brought up before by Holly Madison, with her stating in the podcast series *Power: Hugh Hefner*: “When girls would go out with [Hefner] and come back to his room after, he was constantly taking photos of these women on his disposable camera. And these women were almost always intoxicated. I know I was heavily intoxicated” (Spiegel, 2021). Hefner had kept a number of personal and at times graphic images such as the ones Madison describes of his ex-girlfriends and women of Playboy in his personal scrapbooks (having held the Guinness World Record for the largest scrapbook collection). Hefner had reportedly wanted to make his collection of over 3,000 scrapbooks publicly available and kept in a museum archive or public library. However, the collection currently sits in storage in the possession of *The Hugh Hefner Foundation*, Hefner’s free speech foundation which is unaffiliated with Playboy. A number of ex-girlfriends, such as Madison, have raised concerns about the possibility of the collection being made publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the imagery included in the collection.

These instances are symptomatic of wider issues surrounding media perpetuating a sense of ownership over women’s bodies, which is not isolated to Playboy. Rival publications of Playboy have committed similar offences, with *Penthouse* notably publishing nude photographs of the first African-American Miss America winner, Vanessa Williams in 1984. The images were taken before her involvement in the pageant whilst she was working as an assistant for the photographer Tom Chiapel. *Penthouse*’s publication of the images years later led to Williams being forced to resign as Miss America. Interestingly, and perhaps somewhat ironically, Hefner had allegedly

been given the opportunity to publish the images and turned them down with him stating “The single victim in all of this was the young woman herself, whose right to make this decision was taken away from her.” (Robinson, 2015). It is uncertain where this empathy for women’s bodily autonomy and agency over their image was when Hefner chose to include Monroe’s *Golden Dreams*, or the images of Vanna White in Playboy. Perhaps however, a key reason that Hefner is leaving out is that a key reason why Williams’ images were not included in Playboy may have been due to the nature of some of the images, with them depicting simulated oral sex between Williams and another female model. Not only did Playboy not publish photographs depicting simulated sex acts in their magazine (unlike *Penthouse*) but according to a Playboy spokesperson Dave Salyers they also did not publish “lesbian material” (Anolik, 2020)

On the other hand it could be argued that the digitisation of archival images of the women of Playboy also happens outside of Playboy’s own digital spaces. Whilst writing this chapter actress and television host Drew Barrymore released a statement on her social media accounts reflecting on parenting in the digital age, in it she reflects on the unexpected digital legacy of her Playboy shoot:

I thought of it as art, and I still do not judge it. But when I did a chaste artistic moment in Playboy in my early 20s, I thought it would be a magazine that was unlikely to resurface because it was paper. I never knew there would be an internet. I didn’t know so many things (Barrymore, 2024)

Barrymore’s positioning of her decision to pose for Playboy as “chaste” reflects “good girl” corporate language and public imaginary of Playboy, which to Barrymore and many other women of Playboy contradicts with the porn 2.0 digital landscape they are seeing

their images repurposed and commodified. However, at the time of writing Barrymore's Playboy pictorials are nowhere to be seen in *PlayboyPlus*, her digitised pictorial instead has been uploaded onto a plethora of blogs and pornographic websites. This is the case for much of Playboy's imagery, with many celebrity and playmate pictorials uploaded by various internet users online and accessible through simple *Google* searches. Playboy is certainly complicit in participating in this digital culture of commodifying women's bodies by making available not only archival material which they've previously published in their analogue magazine, but as well as making available previously unseen imagery and video content. However, they are not the sole conspirators and instigators of this culture.

PlayboyPlus exemplifies the company's ongoing tension between empowerment and commodification. While the platform reflects post-Hefner efforts to modernise the brand, its reliance on archival material highlights how Playboy capitalises on nostalgia while perpetuating patriarchal control. The repurposing of images without ongoing consent underscores a broader pattern in capitalist digital platforms, where feminist values are marketed but fail to deliver true autonomy and empowerment for the women whose images fuel profits. Whether Playboy will align *PlayboyPlus* with the commitment to consent and agency expressed by staff like Miffy remains to be seen.

Amidst this tension we also see potential for women to reclaim agency outside of Playboy's corporate structures. Through podcasts, memoirs, and social media, former Playboy women are subverting the narratives historically controlled by the brand, offering new forms of empowerment that challenge the limitations of corporate feminism (Madison and Marquardt; 2022; Anderson, 2023, Hefner 2024). These developments raise critical questions about whether Playboy's digital platforms can genuinely embody

feminist values or if authentic empowerment can only emerge beyond its corporate reach.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to investigate how Playboy has attempted to rebrand itself in the post-Hefner era, responding to socio-political shifts such as the #MeToo movement, the rise of digital platforms, and the evolution of Porn 2.0. By examining Playboy's digital offerings (*PlayboyPlus* and *The Playboy Club*) and incorporating insights from employee interviews, the analysis illustrates how the brand seeks to navigate tensions between nostalgia and modernity, agency and control, and empowerment and exploitation.

My findings reveal that while post-Hefner Playboy positions itself as a space for sexual agency and feminist reclamation, this rebranding is marked by contradictions. On one hand, platforms like *The Playboy Club* provide creators with opportunities to expand and subvert Playboy's legacy of western beauty standards. On the other hand, corporate oversight enforces normative representations of femininity, limiting the range of expression to "fun and flirty" while excluding more explicit or non-conventional depictions.

Playboy's reliance on nostalgic branding further complicates its rebranding efforts. The use of archival imagery highlights tensions between restorative nostalgia (capitalising on an idealised version of its past) and reflective nostalgia (engaging critically with its history). While some staff members approach archival projects with a focus on consent and agency, inconsistencies in these practices, particularly in the more adult-oriented *PlayboyPlus* trouble claims of alignment with modern feminist politics.

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that post-Hefner Playboy continues to reflect the complexities of complicated empowerment. The brand simultaneously presents the appearance of sexual autonomy and empowerment while perpetuating exploitative structures through its commodification of nostalgia and inconsistent ethical practices. These tensions underscore the challenges of fully detaching from its patriarchal roots, raising the question of whether Playboy can ever truly reinvent itself or if its legacy will continue to tether it to its contradictions

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

I did what I thought all models would do, but a heightened version. I was wild and uninhibited, rolling, laughing, playing to the camera, pulling the cold, wet silk across my skin...goose bumps, biting my lip. I had unleashed a wild woman inside me, but the shyness crept in. I was the girl next door, pushing boundaries, naturally coming into her sexual existence. For Playboy, that's exactly what they wanted. It was authentic, all happening on camera in real time. Hef called me the DNA of Playboy - Pamela Anderson, 2023, p.92

As Pamela Anderson reflects on her experience when she first posed for Playboy, her words highlight how Playboy's constructions of femininity rely on heightened performances that challenge traditional notions of passivity. Her description of embodying both a "wild woman" and a shy, "girl next door" figure captures the complicated and contradictory ideals of Playboy's feminine allure. Hefner referring to Anderson as the "DNA of Playboy" further reveals how Playboy's success relied on women who could embody a heightened, yet accessible sexuality, positioning them as both icons and producers of the brand's allure. Recognising these women as intrinsic to Playboy's identity and lasting cultural impact allows us to see how the magazine's representations of femininity are more than passive visuals for the male gaze, they are active, complex engagements that both shape and reflect cultural ideals.

This final chapter will explore the main findings and contributions of the thesis, unpacking how my analysis demonstrates how Playboy constructs and promotes femininities that resist binary readings of subject/object, sexualised/sexually empowered. A major aim of this thesis was to shift the lens from Hugh Hefner (who until

recent cultural shifts in light of the #MeToo movement has often been the focus of media and literature on Playboy) and onto the women who produce, feature in, and consume Playboy content. As demonstrated not only by the above Anderson quote, but also by numerous examples throughout this thesis - such as the works of Bunny Yeager, and the shoot focused episodes of *The Girls Next Door* - the women featured in Playboy's images across the decades exhibit a performance of feminine sexuality that subverts the notion that they are merely objects of the male gaze, instead positioning them as active producers of their own representations. These findings lean into what I have termed complicated empowerment, a conceptual framework that recognises the coexistence of agency and objectification in these portrayals.

As well as drawing attention to some gaps in the findings and directions for future research, this chapter will also unpack how this thesis answers its three main research questions:

1. What ideals of femininity does *Playboy* construct and promote, and how do these representations define what is considered desirable within the magazine and its related media framework?
2. How do Playboy's representations of femininity complicate the binaries of sexualisation and empowerment, and how can these representations be understood through the lens of complicated empowerment?
3. How can feminist methods such as auto-ethnography and self-portraiture offer new insights into the reclamation and reinterpretation of Playboy's depictions of femininity?

Finding Complicated Empowerment in Playboy's Representation of Femininities

One of the key contributions of this thesis lies in its reframing of Playboy as a site of intersection between feminist empowerment and patriarchal control. Drawing from Paasonen et al's (2021) writings on objectification, and Ann Cahill's (2010) concept of derivatization, this thesis offers a reading of Playboy through a lens of complicated empowerment. Complicated empowerment rejects the binaries of subject/object and sexualised/empowered, instead it leans into the complications and multiplicities of Playboy's representations of women. Drawing on Cahill's work it also complicates the idea of objectification and sees derivatization as a way of thinking through sexualisation as an intersubjective negotiation. The core aspects of complicated empowerment are as follows:

1. Empowerment and Objectification as Co-Existing Forces

By viewing representations of women through the lens of complicated empowerment this thesis argues that empowerment can occur within constraints that may limit, but do not entirely negate agency. Within the patriarchal space of Playboy, I argue that women are not simply objects of desire for the male gaze, but instead active participants whose performances of femininity blend agency with objectification. Through the lens of complicated empowerment, we can view representations of women in Playboy as a layered dynamic that challenges binary readings.

2. Commodification of Feminine Sexuality

This framework acknowledges that women's performances of sexuality within Playboy are deeply embedded within a capitalist framework that commodifies their bodies and personas. The concept of finding empowerment and agency through Playboy branded sexuality has been marketed both as a postfeminist ideal in *The Girls Next Door*, as well as a popular feminist notion in recent digital post-Hefner Playboy initiatives. This commodification of women's bodies, along with the corporate co-option of empowerment reflects how the idea of empowerment is often bound up with commercial interests that capitalise on women's sexual identities.

3. Hyper-Femininity as Both Subversion and Compliance

Models in Playboy engage in heightened, performative hyper femininity. These performances of feminine sexuality as seen in Playboy can be seen as reflecting notions of queer hyper-femininity, or in other words they can be seen as "performing cunt": an embodied construction of exaggerated femininity. However, within the heteronormative context of Playboy, this performance is not purely subversive. Instead, it intertwines subversion with compliance, as Playboy models also conform to Western beauty standards and Hefner's "girl next door" philosophy of femininity.

4. Tension Between Pleasure and Critique

Complicated empowerment addresses the emotional tensions of engaging with media like Playboy, where pleasure, nostalgia, and critique can coexist. For example, enjoying Playboy's aesthetics or branding while being aware of its complicity in patriarchal narratives creates a space for critical yet personal engagement. This framework encourages playful and experimental approaches to reinterpreting and engaging media, allowing space for ambivalence and joy alongside critique.

5. Feminist Reinterpretation and Reclamation

Feminist creative methodologies such as auto-ethnography and self-portraiture enable re-examinations of Playboy's imagery, allowing for a reclamation of these representations. As feminist re-makers we can craft new knowledges, and develop responses that reframe, subvert, and play with the legacy of media entities such as Playboy. These creative interventions and re-evaluations have the power to find new feminist meanings within Playboy, seeking our own empowerment within the complications and contradictions of its representations of women and feminine sexualities.

Summary of Findings and Main Contributions

By focusing on the complexities and contradictions within Playboy's history, this research demonstrates that the magazine's depictions of women are more nuanced than much of the existing early feminist scholarship on Playboy argues (Steinem, 1963, 1970; Greer, 1973; MacKinnon, 1987; Levy, 2006). Playboy is not simply a tool of patriarchal oppression but a cultural site where agency, objectification, and feminist reinterpretation coexist. This re-conceptualisation offers a more layered understanding of Playboy's cultural significance and its potential for feminist reclamation. In answering my second research question - how Playboy's representations complicate binaries of objectification and empowerment - it became clear that these images and pieces of Playboy media are sites of contradiction. Through the lens of complicated empowerment, this thesis demonstrates that while Playboy frequently reinforces patriarchal beauty standards, it also provides space for moments of feminist

reinterpretation and agency. Women are positioned not merely as passive objects, but as active participants in the creation of images and media that portray hyper-feminine sexualities, allowing for nuanced exploration and expression of identity.

Drawing on Cahill's concept of derivativization, this thesis interrogates how Playboy's media situates women as derivative subjects constrained by patriarchal norms, while simultaneously exploring how women resist these constraints by embracing dual roles of subject and object. One of the predominant subjects of analysis within this thesis is the photographer Bunny Yeager, whose work challenges the traditional portrayal of Playboy as a male-dominated enterprise. In chapter five, I analysed Yeager's groundbreaking contributions to Playboy. I argue that her "double exposure" pictorial - where she posed for the camera and took on the role of photographer - showcased her own female gaze by turning the lens on herself and other women. This act of self-representation disrupts the male gaze and challenges patriarchal structures in Playboy, positioning Yeager's images as female-authored works within a magazine historically constructed by and for men. By highlighting her unique perspective, this thesis argues that Playboy's visual culture is far more female-driven than existing literature suggests. Yeager's pioneering role is mirrored in contemporary creators on platforms like *The Playboy Club*. Modern creators, models, and producers continue to assert their agency, reshaping Playboy through a feminist lens. However, these platforms present new challenges, imposing constraints and raising ethical dilemmas about image use, while perpetuating heteronormative ideals. Despite these limitations, many women on these platforms assert control over their sexual representations, reflecting the enduring relevance of Yeager's work. Through this analysis, this thesis shifts the focus away from Hefner, centering instead on the women who have shaped Playboy's content and redefined its cultural significance.

Primary research, including interviews with Playboy staff and analysis of *The Girls Next Door* (GND), further highlights the dynamic interplay of agency and objectification. On one hand, GND could be critiqued for reflecting a patriarchal view of femininity by reaffirming Western beauty standards, centering the hetero-male gaze of Hefner, and perpetuating a postfeminist sentiment that equates Playboy-branded femininity with individual empowerment. However, through the lens of complicated empowerment we see that the hyper-femininity depicted in GND is more complex. This portrayal allows the protagonists (Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson) to assert varying degrees of agency within the constraints of Playboy's ideals of desirable femininities. My findings show that as the series progresses, the women gain greater creative control over their photoshoots, reflecting a shift from passive objects of the male gaze to more active participants in shaping their own representation. The depiction of these women as complex, multi-dimensional figures discovering joy and self-expression through their Playboy-branded femininity challenges the conventional binary of empowerment vs. objectification. While the portrayal is undeniably influenced by the mediated nature of reality television it attracted a significant female fanbase, further complicating traditional notions of the gaze and suggesting that these women's agency is not only rooted in their sexuality but also in their ability to connect with a largely female audience.

Chapter seven of this thesis responds to significant changes at Playboy during the course of my research, which I argue are influenced by the #MeToo movement, evolving media representations, such as *Secrets of Playboy* (2022), and the changing digital landscape of media content production. When I began this PhD project with the aim of shifting focus onto the women of Playboy, I noticed that Playboy itself was repositioning away from Hefner, increasingly centering the women involved, particularly through its digital creator-led platform, *The Playboy Club*. This shift marks a clear attempt to align

with contemporary feminist movements and reflect a more inclusive, woman-centered brand.

This research was conducted during a particularly interesting interim period for Playboy. When I first conceptualised this project in the spring of 2020, Playboy announced the end of its print magazine. Then, in August 2024, as I was concluding my analysis, Playboy revealed plans to revive the print magazine with a new annual edition set to launch in February 2025. Examining Playboy in its post-Hefner era, which has largely focused on digital content, led me to investigate how these new digital platforms have adapted to feminist movements. More importantly, I explored how they relate to or diverge from Playboy's previous model of desirable femininity, and how these platforms reflect the ongoing complexities of complicated empowerment.

Despite Playboy's feminist-leaning repositioning, my findings suggest that its post-Hefner era continues to echo the same complexities and dualities that have marked much of its legacy. These digital platforms offer significant opportunities for feminist reclamation, where creators can shape and present their sexual identities on their own terms, often reimagining the iconography that Playboy has historically commodified. Interviews with Playboy staff, as well as an analysis of the creators featured on *The Playboy Club*, reveal an expanded definition of femininity within the brand; one that is more diverse and inclusive than previous representations. However, much of this progress is undercut by the persistent heteronormative sensibilities that still govern these platforms. Upon critical analysis of the platform's terms and conditions, as well as its marketing language, Playboy's policing of creators' self-representations perpetuates the same good girl/bad girl binary that has long been a hallmark of the brand, complicating any readings of *The Playboy Club* as fully empowering. Furthermore, ongoing issues with consent, particularly the repurposing of archival images on

PlayboyPlus, reflect longstanding concerns that have persisted throughout Playboy's history, raising questions of the ethical engagement with women's labour and their images, which question whether these digital spaces can truly offer a feminist reimagining of the brand. It is in this space that we see the continuing exploitative, profit driven, and patriarchal underpinnings of Playboy that highlight that any discussion of female empowerment and agency must be considered within the broader structural inequalities of capitalist production that inform the work of Playboy.

Through the analysis of how Playboy constructs femininity, examining examples such as GND, Anna Nicole Smith, and the brand's current digital subscription platforms, this thesis demonstrates that Playboy's portrayal of women is a complex negotiation between traditional beauty standards and moments of self-expression. These portrayals reflect the tension between objectification and agency, where women are both framed by patriarchal ideals of femininity and given opportunities to assert their own identities within those confines. This finding directly addresses my first research question, revealing how Playboy's representations of femininity are far from one-dimensional, blending objectification with moments of self-expression and, at times, reclamation. The tension between these elements complicates traditional feminist readings of Playboy, challenging the idea that the brand is solely a site of exploitation and offering instead a more nuanced view of its cultural significance.

This thesis contributes to feminist scholarship by offering a nuanced re-examination of Playboy's cultural role and the complex constructions of femininity within its media. It challenges the binary readings of Playboy as either a purely misogynistic enterprise or a site of total empowerment, introducing the concept of complicated empowerment to reveal the concurrent and often conflicting forces of objectification and agency at play.

By focusing on the female creators, models, and photographers who have shaped Playboy's imagery; from Bunny Yeager's pioneering self-representations and crafting of her own gaze to the contemporary creators on platforms like *The Playboy Club*, this thesis shifts the focus away from Hefner and towards the women who have not only produced but also reclaimed Playboy's brand of femininity. It shows that the cultural imagery of Playboy is not produced solely within and by Playboy, but its wider consumption holds the possibility for multiple, creative and queer engagements that extend and subvert its broader cultural meaning. Furthermore, through the integration of feminist methodologies like auto-ethnography and practice-based research, this thesis offers new pathways for feminist engagement with sexualised imagery, demonstrating how creative practices can serve as powerful tools for feminist reinterpretation and cultural critique. In doing so, it provides a more layered understanding of Playboy's legacy, showing how it continues to both reinforce and subvert dominant norms around femininity, sexuality, and power.

Methodological Approach

“A quilter knows their patchwork is a protest. Quilting *against* the structures of white supremacy, imperialism, mass incarnation, capitalism, ableism and patriarchy remains an act of deliberate revolt. A quilt offers both a way to stay warm and a way to tell the truth.” (Bailey, 2021, p56, emphasis in original)

I introduced my multi-method approach to Playboy in chapter four with an analogy. Drawing on Kristina Lindström and Åsa Ståhl's theory of patchworking ways of knowing (2016), I compared how my methodologies interact to a patchwork quilt. This thesis is a collection of stories, histories, experiences, media and self-portraits, stitched together

by words. Through critical reanalysis of aspects of Playboy's history and present-day operations, I have sought to find new feminist meanings and interpretations. By pulling at the threads of Playboy, sitting with and investigating the complications and contradictions of its construction, and cutting and reassembling fragments of its legacy, this thesis offers new feminist cloth. Much like how quilting has the radical potential to act as a form of protest (as described in the quote above from Jess Bailey) patchworking methodologies can challenge ways of knowing and call attention to inequalities.

My approach brings together art-making and auto-ethnographic approaches, feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), visual methodologies, and a short series of interviews. These methods allow me to craft a multifaceted analysis of Playboy's representations of women and femininities, offering a nuanced understanding that combines personal narrative, visual critique, and media analysis. The integration of these methods allows for a comprehensive and multi-dimensional perspective of Playboy, where the visual, textual, and personal dimensions intersect.

My third research question - how women can reclaim Playboy's imagery within a feminist framework - was answered through my use of an auto-ethnographic methodology and practice-based research. My methods provide an embodied perspective on feminist engagement with sexualised imagery. Through self-portraiture and artistic production, I both celebrate and critique Playboy's depictions of femininity, actively reclaiming and reinterpreting these representations. My creative practice serves as a tool for redefining the aesthetics of femininity, allowing me to engage with the magazine's history from a personal and transformative standpoint.

This thesis also contributes to feminist scholarship by providing new feminist pathways for engaging with sexualised representations in media. By combining critical analysis with creative reimagining, my approach offers a unique contribution to feminist discourse on media reclamation, showing how autoethnographic driven art-making can serve as a methodology to respond to the imagery we analyse and create alternative representations of empowerment.

As a feminist researcher and artist, my positionality shapes my methodologies. I approach the analysis of Playboy not just as a scholar but as someone who actively engages with visual and narrative content. My embodied experience of reworking sexualised imagery through art forms like self-portraiture allows me to critically engage with Playboy's representations of women, reflecting on their complexities and contradictions from an inside perspective. This approach challenges objectification while also acknowledging the complications within these portrayals, offering a more nuanced feminist perspective.

Limitations of This Study and Directions for Future Research

Like all research, this study of Playboy has its limitations, and several areas warrant further exploration. While this thesis has made significant strides in reevaluating Playboy's place within feminist discourse, there are key areas that remain underexplored. First, while the thesis addresses the role of marginalised groups, including women of colour and transgender individuals, these discussions could be expanded. Playboy's history with race and diversity calls for deeper investigation to fully unpack the intersections of race and gender in its representations. Furthermore, this research has remained primarily focused on the U.S. edition of Playboy and its related

media, but the global impact of Playboy is significant. Furthermore, future research could benefit from a larger study that includes international editions, examining how Playboy's beauty standards and representations of femininity have been adapted or contested across cultural contexts.

Another limitation is the scope of this research as it focuses primarily on Playboy as a visual and cultural text. While this approach has provided critical insights into its representations of femininity, future studies could deepen this analysis by engaging more directly with audience reception and the personal narratives of women who have appeared in, produced for, or consumed Playboy content. The limited interviews conducted with Playboy staff have provided valuable insights into the post-Hefner era of the magazine, but direct engagement with platform creators, especially those working on *The Playboy Club* would offer a more nuanced understanding of how these individuals navigate the complexities of empowerment and derivatization in practice.

Additionally, this thesis does not address the upcoming relaunch of Playboy's print magazine, set for 2025, which falls outside the scope of this research. As Playboy returns to print, further studies will be necessary to assess how this shift impacts the brand's depictions of desirable femininity. Will the new generation of Playmates embody more diverse expressions of sexuality and femininity, or will the same tensions and contradictions persist, as they have throughout much of the brand's history?

The post-Hefner era of Playboy presents significant opportunities for future research. As the brand continues to evolve, especially through its digital initiatives, examining the tension between patriarchal objectification and feminist empowerment remains critical. Playboy's shift to creator-led platforms allows for a deeper analysis of how the brand is

navigating feminist discourse in the digital age, and whether it opens new spaces for feminist reclamation. Moreover, as more former producers, models, and subjects of Playboy content use new media platforms (such as podcasts, social media, and personal memoirs) to reclaim their narratives, these spaces provide rich sites for analysis. Through these personal reclamations, individuals can challenge the traditional narratives that have framed their roles, revealing a more complex understanding of their experiences with Playboy. Future research could explore how these platforms serve as vehicles for feminist reinterpretation, shedding light on the broader cultural and personal impacts of Playboy on those involved in its production.

Epilogue: Reclaiming a Piece of Playboy's Archives

“Wait... but who is she?”

My friend asks as she looks at the new photograph hanging in the hallway of my flat. Framed in pink, the woman is knelt on the ground in black lace lingerie and a sheer negligée contemplating a light meter which she holds in her hand. Her lips are slightly open and her curled hair falls forward as she carefully adjusts the equipment. Behind her we see the edge of a photo backdrop, providing us a glimpse into what often goes unseen in a photographic image: the set up and equipment which goes into making a photograph. As we look, we see that this image isn't a subject posing for the photographer, but instead documentation of the labour behind a self-portrait. With age the whites of the photograph have faded and slightly yellowed, and small creases and marks around the edges denotes signs of handling. On the back of the image, now encased behind glass, are remnants of yellowed glue marks indicating perhaps this was once stuck in a layout mock-up. A credit stamped on the back reads “Photo by Mike

Shea,” handwritten above in blue ink reads “Double Exposure. Bunny Yeager. Used 5/55”.

For almost seven decades this photograph of Bunny Yeager setting up a self-portrait shoot has been property of Playboy’s archives, now she stands guard in my hallway above my sleeping dog. Playboy is particularly protective of their archives, in 2022 when I enquired about accessing their archives, I was told that access is limited only to Playboy employees. In March 2024 however, a small number of photographs from Playboy’s archives were put up for auction amongst several of Hefner’s furniture and paintings, many of which I had seen lining the hallways of the Playboy offices during my visit in 2022. (Julien’s auctions, 2022) I had originally looked through this auction catalogue out of curiosity, looking to see which of Hefner’s belongings Playboy were selling. I most certainly had no intention to bid. That is until I found that amongst Hefner’s belongings and art collection, happened to be prints from my favourite Playboy pictorial.

Out of the ten photographs taken from Playboy’s archives and placed for auction in March 2024, five were images of Jayne Mansfield taken by William Read Woodfield in 1956, two were photographs taken by Bunny Yeager of Bettie Page on a beach, and three were Mike Shea photographs of Bunny Yeager at work from 1955 and published in Playboy’s ‘Double Exposure’ pictorial as discussed in chapter five. Over the years Playboy have very rarely placed their photographs from their vast archival collection for sale at auction, from the small handful of auction catalogues we see that the images they usually sell are of celebrities, such as Marilyn Monroe, or by well-known photographers, such as Helmut Newton. These small number of images which Playboy

make available at auction tells us which images Playboy wants to make public, and what they feel represents the public imaginary of Playboy.

In the last two auctions where Playboy sold archival photographs (2002 and 2010) we can see that one Bunny Yeager photograph was included (her 1963 centrefold photograph of Sandra Settani). The shift to now feature five images either taken by, or where the subject is Yeager indicates that in the post-Hefner era of Playboy where self-portraiture, selfies, and digital content creation are central to the brands reinvention, Yeager's images are as pertinent as ever.

Self-portraits have long been a valuable tool in crafting self-representations. In acquiring Shea's photograph of Yeager, with its remnants and marks charting decades of being in the hands of Playboy, I am reminded of the power of reclamation. Through this thesis, I have sought to pull at the threads of Playboy's history and reassemble them into new feminist cloth. As I reflect on my own engagement with Playboy's archives and its images, I am reminded that the work of feminist reinterpretation is never complete, it is ongoing, stitched together by each individual who challenges the ways they are seen and represented. In its post-Hefner era, as Playboy moves forward, so too does the potential for feminist reclamation and critique, ensuring that the story of Playboy will always be told through multiple, complicated, and nuanced voices.



Figure 8.1 *Bunny Yeager*

Appendix One

Participant Information Sheet

Background

I am Daisy McManaman, a PhD student at the University of York, UK and would like to invite you to take part in the following doctoral research project,

“A Girl Resembles A Bunny” A Feminist Re Analysis of Representations of Women in Playboy

Before agreeing to take part, please read this information sheet carefully and let me know if anything is unclear or you would like further information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The study is designed to explore themes of the gaze, subjectivity, empowerment and feminine beauty standards in relation to women who have posed for Playboy Magazine, and re-analyse the women of Playboy through an intersectional feminist lens. Whilst there has been a small number of academic publications on Playboy (Fraterrigo, 2012, Pitzulo, 2011), there has been very little academic research published that focuses on the women of Playboy, whose aesthetic labour and performance of feminine sexuality not only made Playboy famous, but also influenced western beauty standards and the way in which women are represented, sexualised and consumed in media. This project aims to draw attention away from Hugh Hefner, who up until now has been the focal point of texts on Playboy, and onto the women who both consume, produce and feature in Playboy content.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part because as a staff member at Playboy you have unique insight into how women have been represented in, and have consumed, Playboy, and how this has shifted over time, which would provide an invaluable resource for this project.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation is optional. If you do decide to take part, you will be given a copy of this information sheet for your records and will be asked to complete a participant consent form. If you change your mind, you will be able to withdraw your participation without having to provide a reason up to 4 weeks after the date of the interview.

On what basis will you process my data?

Under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the University has to identify a legal basis for processing personal data and, where appropriate, an additional condition for processing special category data.

In line with our charter which states that we advance learning and knowledge by teaching and research, the University processes personal data for research purposes under Article 6 (1) (e) of the GDPR:

Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest

Special category data is processed under Article 9 (2) (j):

Processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes

Research will only be undertaken where ethical approval has been obtained, where there is a clear public interest and where appropriate safeguards have been put in place to protect data.

In line with ethical expectations and in order to comply with common law duty of confidentiality, I seek your consent to participate where appropriate. This consent will not, however, be our legal basis for processing your data under the GDPR.

How will you use my data?

Data will be processed for the purposes of the PhD and related publications

Will you share my data with 3rd parties?

No. Data will only be accessible to the researcher.

How will you keep my data secure?

The University will put in place appropriate technical and organisational measures to protect your personal data and/or special category data. For the purposes of this project I will store data in password encrypted file storage on the University Google drive.

The University is committed to the principle of data protection by design and default and will collect the minimum amount of data necessary for the project. In addition, I will anonymise the data, use a pseudonym.

Will you transfer my data internationally?

Yes, as this doctoral research project is being conducted in the UK, with these interviews being conducted in the US, your data will be transferred internationally. All data will be stored on the university's google drive. The University's cloud storage solution is provided by Google which means that data can be located at any of Google's globally spread data centres. The University has data protection compliant arrangements in place with this provider. For further information see, <https://www.york.ac.uk/it-services/google/policy/privacy/>.

Will I be identified in any research outputs?

No, you will be anonymous in all research outputs. Your job title, any information relating to your job title, or any information that could lead to re-identification will not be published

How long will you keep my data?

Data will be kept for 5 years after the completion of the doctoral project, after which it will be destroyed.

What rights do I have in relation to my data?

Under the GDPR, you have a general right of access to your data, a right to rectification, erasure, restriction, objection or portability. You also have a right to withdrawal. Please note, not all rights apply where data is processed purely for research purposes. For further information see, <https://www.york.ac.uk/records-management/general-dataprotection-regulation/individuals-rights/>.

Questions or concerns

If you have any questions about this participant information sheet or concerns about how your data is being processed, please contact Daisy McManaman (dem526@york.ac.uk) in the first instance, or this doctoral projects supervisor Dr Rachel Alsop (rachel.alsop@york.ac.uk), or chair of University of York's Economic, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee (ELMPS), Professor Tony Royle (tony.royle@york.ac.uk)

Right to complain

If you are unhappy with the way in which the University has handled your personal data, you have a right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office. For information on reporting a concern to the Information Commissioner's Office, see www.ico.org.uk/concerns.

Appendix Two

Daisy McManaman, Centre For Women's Studies, University of York

"A Girl Resembles a Bunny" A Feminist Re Analysis of Representations of Women in Playboy

Consent Form for Participants

Have you read the Information Sheet about the project?

Yes No

Do you understand what the project is about and what taking part involves?

Yes No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the project?

Yes No

Do you understand that if you take part in the research that your words will be used, however your name, job title and any other identifiable information will not be published? And that in any published materials a pseudonym will be used?

Yes No

Do you know that if you decide to take part and later change your mind, you can leave the project up to four weeks after your interview without giving a reason?

Yes No

Would you like to take part in the project “A Girl Resembles a Bunny” A Feminist Re Analysis of Representations of Women in Playboy?

Yes No

If yes, is it okay to record your interviews?

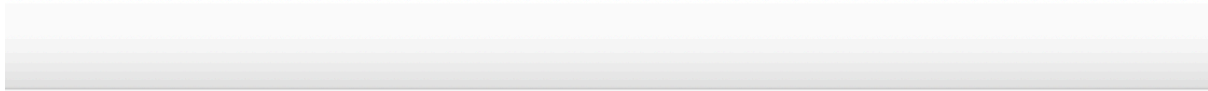
Yes No

Participants Name : _____

Participants Signature: _____

Interviewer's name:

Date: _____



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