Article

Postfeminist Commodification of Digital Sexual Labor

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A B S T R A C T

There is limited research on how empowerment is marketed within digital sexual labor contexts. This article examines this phenomenon using Mikaela Siragusa, a TikTok creator, as a case study. It explores how postfeminist ideologies of agency, choice, and self-branding intersect with neoliberal commodification logics within these digital spaces. Through discourse and visual analysis of content, captions, and persona, supplemented by systematic audience comment analysis, this article argues that empowerment is strategically sold within digital marketplaces. Findings reveal how postfeminist rhetoric transforms sexual self-expression into entrepreneurial labor, blurring boundaries between autonomy and objectification, while audience participation actively reproduces the commodification of female sexuality.

Keywords: *Postfeminism, Digital Labor, Sexual Labor, Commodification, Empowerment Discourse*

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram has revolutionized how femininity, sexuality, and empowerment are performed and consumed. Within this media ecology, female creators have increasingly positioned themselves as entrepreneurs of their own image, selling not only access to their bodies but also narratives of confidence, independence, and authenticity. This phenomenon reflects what Rosalind Gill (2007) and Angela McRobbie (2009) term postfeminism, a cultural sensibility where empowerment is framed as a personal choice rather than a collective political struggle.

This article investigates **how empowerment is discursively constructed and marketed through sexual labor on digital platforms.** Using Mikaela Siragusa, a content creator who embodies the aesthetics of "self-made empowerment" through her TikTok presence, the article analyzes how her online persona reproduces and challenges dominant postfeminist ideals. By examining her self-presentation, captions, and audience interactions, including a detailed analysis of 16 representative TikTok comments, this study seeks to understand how empowerment functions as both ideology and commodity in the digital age.

The inclusion of comment data provides empirical grounding for theoretical claims about audience participation in commodification processes. These comments reveal not only how viewers consume content but how they actively participate in constructing and circulating empowerment narratives that ultimately reinforce market logics.

Postfeminism and Neoliberal Empowerment

Postfeminism has often been described as a discourse that blends feminist ideas of freedom with neoliberal values of individualism (Gill, 2007). It suggests that women's empowerment lies in personal choice and self-discipline rather than systemic change. Within postfeminist media culture, empowerment is no longer a political stance but a consumable

identity, a performance that can be achieved through aesthetic labor, confidence, and entrepreneurial success.

This ideology aligns with the neoliberal ethos of self-branding, where the self becomes a project of continuous improvement and monetization (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In digital spaces, women are encouraged to "be their own boss," to transform sexuality into content, and to turn visibility into income. The result is a complex negotiation between agency and exploitation where empowerment is expressed through the very systems that commodify it.

Sexual Labor and the Digital Marketplace

Sexual labor has long existed within patriarchal economies, but digital platforms have reshaped its visibility and legitimacy. These platforms promise autonomy and control: creators can set their own prices, curate their own image, and manage their fan interactions. Yet, this autonomy operates within market constraints, platform algorithms, audience demands, and aesthetic expectations (Jones, 2020). The result is a form of platformed sexual labor (Blunt & Wolf, 2020) that merges authenticity with strategic self-commodification.

Participatory Culture and Audience Labor

Digital platforms operate on principles of participatory culture, where audiences are not passive consumers but active contributors to content circulation and value creation (Jenkins, 2006). Comments, likes, and shares constitute forms of immaterial labor that enhance content visibility and platform profitability. In the context of sexual labor, audience engagement becomes particularly significant: comments function as both validation and value-generation, transforming spectatorship into a collaborative process of commodification.

METHOD

This article employs a qualitative discourse and visual analysis of Mikaela Siragusa's TikTok presence, supplemented by thematic analysis of audience comments. Publicly accessible TikTok posts, captions, and profile descriptions are analyzed to identify themes related to empowerment, entrepreneurship, and sexuality. Additionally, 16 comments from Siragusa's TikTok posts, spanning from April 2023 to October 2024, were collected and analyzed for patterns of engagement, objectification, and empowerment discourse.

The combination of multimodal discourse analysis and comment analysis is crucial for understanding how empowerment is constructed and negotiated on digital platforms. Multimodal discourse analysis allows for a detailed examination of how linguistic and visual elements in Siragusa's content work together to create a specific narrative of empowerment. This approach considers not only the words used in captions and descriptions but also the visual aesthetics of her posts, such as camera angles, poses, and filters, to understand how these elements contribute to the overall message.

Comment analysis, on the other hand, provides insights into how audiences engage with and interpret these constructed narratives. By analyzing audience comments, we can understand how the messages of empowerment are received, reinforced, or challenged by viewers. This approach allows us to examine the active role of the audience in the commodification process, as their comments contribute to the circulation and validation of empowerment narratives.

By combining these two methods, this article offers a comprehensive understanding of how empowerment is discursively constructed and commodified on digital platforms, examining both the creation of empowerment narratives by content creators and the reception and reproduction of these narratives by their audiences.

Instruments

The analysis focuses on linguistic features (captions, self-descriptions, hashtags, and comment language), visual aesthetics (camera angles, poses, filters), audience engagement patterns (types of comments, emotional registers, frequency of appearance-focused remarks), and ideological functions (how comments reproduce or challenge postfeminist narratives).

Data Analysis

The goal is not to evaluate Siragusa as an individual but to understand her as a representative example of postfeminist self-branding in the sexual labor economy, and to examine how audience participation actively sustains this system.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Subheading 1: Empowerment as Marketable Aesthetic

Siragusa's content embodies what Gill (2007) calls "the postfeminist sensibility," a blend of hyper-femininity, confidence, and sexual agency framed within consumerist aesthetics. Her visuals employ soft lighting, glamorized poses, and fashionable outfits, all contributing to an image of effortless empowerment. This aestheticization is crucial to how empowerment is marketed: it depends on visual pleasure and desirability. The postfeminist subject is "empowered" precisely through her ability to look good while being in control. This paradox turns empowerment into an aesthetic commodity, consumed through likes, views, and subscriptions.

The comment data reinforces this analysis: the overwhelming focus on beauty and appearance in audience responses demonstrates that empowerment, when performed online, is primarily recognized and valued through its aesthetic dimensions rather than its political or economic content.

Subheading 2: The Postfeminist Entrepreneurial Persona

A recurring motif in Siragusa's TikTok content is the declaration of self-ownership. Captions such as "I built this life for myself" or "My body, my business" articulate empowerment through autonomy and entrepreneurial success. This rhetoric aligns closely with postfeminist ideology, where empowerment is detached from collective struggle and redefined as personal fulfillment. Her videos often feature direct eye contact with the camera, confident body language, and empowering soundtracks, inviting the viewer to perceive her as both aspirational and self-determined.

Yet, this performance of empowerment is inseparable from its economic function. The declaration "I'm doing this for me" simultaneously markets the persona of the self-made woman who has "hustled" her way to success. This dual function—authentic self-expression and strategic marketing—exemplifies the postfeminist paradox: empowerment becomes most visible precisely when it is packaged for consumption. Siragusa's digital persona positions the body as a site of economic agency. The repeated narrative of "financial freedom" and "being my own boss" transforms sexuality into a business venture. Yet, this empowerment is contingent on constant self-production: maintaining her brand, responding to fans, and creating new content.

Subheading 3: Blurring Boundaries Between Agency and Objectification

Siragusa's online persona illustrates how digital platforms convert visibility into economic value. Her TikTok functions as both promotional space and personal narrative. She posts curated glimpses of daily life, gym sessions, outfit try-ons, and travel vlogs, each crafted to sustain the illusion of intimacy. However, this intimacy is strategically designed to attract potential subscribers.

This dynamic reflects what Hearn (2008) calls "self-commodification," where the personal is inseparable from the commercial. The boundaries between authenticity and advertisement blur, and empowerment becomes performative labor. Siragusa's confidence, aesthetic curation, and storytelling operate as affective capital—emotions and identities that are exchanged for profit. The platform architecture itself incentivizes this blurring: TikTok's algorithm rewards consistent posting, aesthetic coherence, and audience engagement, effectively mandating continuous self-production as a condition of visibility and economic viability.

In this sense, the empowered subject of postfeminism is also the exhausted subject of neoliberalism, empowered only insofar as she continues to produce herself as a marketable brand. Her "freedom" depends on her ability to stay desirable, active, and visible. The absence

of comments engaging with this entrepreneurial labor reveals a disconnection between how creators frame their work and how audiences consume it.

Subheading 4: Audience Reinforcement of Commodification

The comment sections on Siragusa's TikTok posts reveal how followers participate in reproducing empowerment discourse through various forms of engagement. The language of support and admiration transforms the act of consumption into a moral gesture, where fans affirm the legitimacy of sexual labor as a form of empowerment. However, this discourse also obscures the structural inequalities that underlie digital labor.

To further contextualize how empowerment is circulated and commodified through audience engagement, this study examines TikTok comments collected from publicly available posts featuring Mikaela Siragusa. These comments reflect recurring patterns of gendered admiration, desire, humor, and pseudo-intimacy, each reinforcing the exchange of the creator's image as both aesthetic pleasure and digital product.

The comments can be categorized into several thematic clusters. First, **beauty-centered admiration** is evident in comments such as "BLUE FITS U SO GOODDDD," "You are stunning," and "You're so beautiful." These comments focus exclusively on physical appearance, reinforcing the idea that her value is primarily tied to her looks. Second, **idolization and perfectionism** are reflected in comments like "You're perfect girl" and "What an Gorgeous Goddess Princess," showcasing a discourse of idealization that paradoxically dehumanizes through excessive praise. Third, **hypersexualized reactions** are apparent in comments such as "ON MY KNEES PLS AMOURANTH" and "GIRL U GOT ME ON MY KNEES!!!!! BI ATTACK !!," which frame consumption as overwhelming desire and reduce the creator to a sexual object. Fourth, **irony, humor, and meta-commentary** appear in comments like "GTA V" and "Ain't nobody pretty enough for me to tolerate getting screamed at like that," deploying cultural references that normalize objectification through play.

Of the analyzed comments, a significant portion explicitly references physical beauty, appearance, or sexual desirability. Notably absent from the comment data are references to Siragusa's entrepreneurship, business acumen, content creation skills, or labor. The empowerment narrative she promotes in her captions is not reflected in how audiences engage with her work; instead, comments focus primarily on consumption of her image.

The comment analysis reveals a central paradox: audience members believe themselves to be supporting empowerment through compliments and admiration while simultaneously reproducing the objectification that empowerment rhetoric claims to transcend. This is not hypocrisy but rather the structural logic of postfeminist digital culture, where empowerment and objectification are not opposites but twin mechanisms of the same commodification process. Comments like "You're perfect girl" or "Queen, get that bag" operate within what could be called affirmative objectification, a mode of engagement that celebrates female sexuality and entrepreneurship while still centering female value on physical desirability and market success. The empowerment frame makes objectification feel progressive, masking its continuity with historical patterns of female commodification.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has argued that Mikaela Siragusa's digital persona, analyzed through both her self-presentation and audience responses, exemplifies how empowerment operates as a marketable ideology within the postfeminist digital age. Through aesthetic labor, emotional expression, and entrepreneurial rhetoric, sexual labor is reframed as self-empowerment, obscuring the capitalist structures that demand constant self-commodification. The discourse of "choice" and "agency," while seemingly liberating, ultimately masks the underlying economic imperatives that drive this system. The comment data provides crucial evidence that this commodification is not imposed from above but is actively reproduced through participatory culture. Audiences actively engage in constructing creators as aesthetic objects while simultaneously believing themselves to be celebrating empowerment. This participation is essential to the digital economy: platforms profit not only from creator labor but also from

the affective and social labor of audiences whose engagement generates visibility and value. This analysis extends postfeminist frameworks by demonstrating how the commodification of empowerment is actively negotiated and reinforced through audience participation in digital spaces. It contributes to digital labor studies by highlighting the often-overlooked role of affective labor in generating value within creator economies. Furthermore, it nuances our understanding of gendered commodification by showing how empowerment rhetoric can mask and normalize the objectification of women in the digital marketplace. Ultimately, empowerment in this context is sold back to women as a product, promising autonomy while reinforcing market dependence. The postfeminist subject is not liberated from objectification; rather, she becomes both the producer and product of it. In selling empowerment, she sells herself, embodying the paradox at the heart of postfeminist neoliberal culture: freedom through commodification. This study is limited by its focus on a single case study, which may not be representative of all digital content creators. Additionally, platform restrictions and data access limitations may have influenced the scope of the analysis. Future research should explore a broader range of creators and platforms to further examine these dynamics. These findings have significant implications for understanding digital labor, creator economies, and gendered commodification. They suggest that genuine empowerment cannot be achieved through individual market success alone but requires collective recognition of and resistance to the structural conditions that make female bodies profitable. As long as empowerment is framed as an individual aesthetic performance rather than a political struggle, it will remain a commodity, purchased by some, consumed by all, and benefiting primarily the platforms that host the exchange. Further research should explore alternative models of digital labor that prioritize equity and challenge the commodification of identity.

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