

GIRL CULTURE
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SELF/OBJECT

A collection of stories and analysis of how and why girls learn to self-objectify

BY DYLAN RUPERT

THE QUESTION:

Whether it's called "objectification" or the "male gaze", girls around the beginning of adolescence begin to learn that they are everyone's visual object and will be judged and scrutinized as such. To survive the pressure of this reality, girls learn to shift their personal views of themselves from internal to external, always considering how appearances will translate through someone else's eyes. Girls go through a psychological process of becoming their own constant mirror, judging how one outfit will read, or what someone will categorize them depending on the quantity of make-up a girl chooses to apply.

What were your first encounters with having to look at yourself from the outside? When did you begin wondering, "will I get catcalled if I wear these tights; will I be dismissed if I don't wear eyeliner?" and was there a specific event that brought these questions to your attention?



TERRA WILLIAMS, 23

Online Vintage Shop Owner

San Francisco, CA

The first time I was aware of needing to look at myself from the outside: I was standing on a corner not far from my middle school, waiting for the bus. I was standing close to the street, looking down at traffic, waiting for it to come. I was wearing just this kind of fun little pink, ruffley miniskirt, fishnets, and big boots, because I was a silly little 14 year old punk girl...it was just like what I would wear to a show. All of a sudden this guy in this big truck pulls over to the bus stop, and I'm looking at him funny because cars can't pull into bus stops. He's looking back at me in this weird way and I realize, "Oh my god, he thinks I'm a prostitute." And I'm only 14.

I just don't even know how to react because it wouldn't have even occurred to me to think about how other people looked at my appearance or my outfit choice, other than worried about what my mom would think, or what school would think. It didn't occur to me that strangers out in the world would look at me and make assumptions about what kind of person I was. It was kind of a scary experience, which could have gone so badly. After that it was just kind of realizing how men look at things and jump to conclusions, and making sure that what I wore wasn't too suggestive, but still wanting to wear whatever I wanted to, its this balance that sucks. It sucks to this day – it's not something that ends. I can't feel 100% comfortable wearing exactly what I want to wear because I know if I go to a certain neighborhood, or have to walk down a certain street, I'm going to get unwanted and unwarranted attention.



ESME BLEGVAD, 22

University Student & Illustrator

London, UK

My earliest, earliest memory of anything like this is when I was really really young – I'd say seven or eight, which is probably why I remember it so clearly, because at that point this kind of stuff hadn't remotely entered my consciousness. Anyway, I used to have these super-ugly, very 90's leggings with huge sunflowers patterned all over them that my dad hated, and I remember him saying to me once, *"Ugh, I hate when you wear those – they look like hooker pants, they make you look like a little prostitute!"*

Now, my dad's a great guy and all, but I remember thinking even at the time that this was an extremely fucked up thing to say, and I told him as much (in kid language, ha) and carried on wearing the damn pants! I remember thinking and saying that luckily I was a KID so nobody in their right mind would look at my sunflower leggings and think "prostitute", but it was the first time I remember being consciously aware of the way in which people paid attention to the way I dressed, as well as I guess it being my first experience of slut-shaming, in a roundabout way. Most importantly, even at the time, I remember thinking: *"A) My dad's a jerk and B) I couldn't give a good golly gosh who thinks I look like a hooker because I LOVE these sunflower pants."* So it was a weird little experience but I guess it formed the way I react to people judging me, which is to say, *SEE YA, BOO!*



BRITNEY FRANCO, 13

Activist Blogger at SPARK Summit,
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Brooklyn, NY

I think that my first encounters with having to look at myself from the outside were in 7th/8th grade, but more in the 8th grade. This year, a lot of the people around me began paying more attention to appearances and whether or not someone in our class was wearing makeup, and silly things like that. I started wearing things like eyeliner and lip gloss more, but sort of stopped because people would comment on it and say things like, “*You sort of looking like you’re trying too hard.*” I stopped wearing it as much because people assumed that I was trying to attract someone whenever I wore even the slightest dash of makeup.

I also started looking at myself from the outside because of the outfits that I wore, which were more expressive than what people in my grade are used to. I’d wear, say, a long white tulle skirt or a bindi, and people would dismiss me as a weirdo or, contradictory to what was said before, a lesbian because they thought I was trying to push guys away. The fact that it was mostly boys making these comments made it really weird for me, because I felt like that meant that the majority of my classmates was judging me for either trying to attract guys or hating them entirely because I was “pushing them away intentionally.” Whenever I get dressed, I feel like I’m trapped or have to think about whether or not someone will comment on my outfit, which leads to me being more repressed.



CAITLIN DONOHUE, 29

SF Bay Guardian Culture Editor

San Francisco, CA

#1:

Lugging my trumpet case through the halls of middle school after band class, a popular boy shouted from 50 meters:

"You don't shave your legs right."

He was right. In San Francisco none of my friends had, and I was only just learning the social mores of Portland, Oregon.

#2:

"Take that off your face, you look like a whore."

My mom! My hippie progressive activist mother! It was just black eyeliner anyway, and as a HS sophomore it was kind of my job to wear makeup shittily.

She must have had a rough day. Granted, I'm still telling the story a decade later. Sorry mom! I guess we should talk about it.

#3:

My best friend Anna and I simultaneously bought sleeveless tank tops from Nordstrom's junior section that had the bottom portion of the back panel missing. Hers was pink, mine was blue.

Straight A students, we were surprised to be called over to our journalism teacher's desk in the middle of class work time.

"What are you wearing?" The teacher said, or something like it. *"All the boys are *talking* about you."*

Hooray! But she didn't see our popularity through the same eyes and sent us to the vice principal's office for dress code violation, where we didn't get in trouble because what would we be getting in trouble for? Plus, the VP was my friend Caitlin's dad and my basketball coach.

Don't worry though, I have learned my lesson. Always ignore unhappy people when it comes to fashion.



IFRAH AHMED, 21

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Seattle, WA

My experience with the “male gaze” is two-fold. I don’t remember when I first encountered it, but I recall several times where it’s had an impact on me. My first encounters with the ‘male gaze’ had to do with the hijab. I wore a Hijab from ages 7-19. I am 21 now. My family did not force me, but it was expected of me in the way that graduating high school is an expected and accepted social norm by most people. I was told that I needed to wear a hijab to be modest and so that men wouldn’t be tempted to look at me. I wanted to make my family happy so I wore the hijab. My family’s lack of academic Quran-ic study and reliance on post civil war Somali cultural norms made me from a young age think that I needed to wear a hijab just in order to lift the burden of potential sin off of men. I went through a phase where I believed this. I would ask myself if my ankle length skirt was too short, if my hijab revealed a wisp of hair, or if the outline of my cleavage could be seen through my hijab. I was paranoid that I would do something wrong. I policed myself and other hijabis, and they did the same for me.

I remember once, when I was in 8th grade, my father had just come to live with us. One day, I was getting ready to leave the house and my father looked at my near ankle length skirt and told me that it was too short and that I needed to wear a longer skirt. I protested and he explained to me that it was my responsibility to not tempt men. Being in 8th grade, I had no concept of what patriarchy or misogyny meant but I knew that in my heart I disagreed with my father and felt that placing responsibility on women to not ‘tempt’ men was an injustice and demeaned men because it made them seem like animals who could not control themselves.

This was the first time I felt the stirrings of disagreement and it was my introduction to how the patriarchy is harmful to everyone. Before this, I had complained and pouted about having to wear a hijab but this was the first time I felt in my heart that I didn't agree with what my family was saying to me about why I needed to wear a hijab. My family did not really learn the Quran. They memorized it in Arabic without really knowing what they were reading and they relied on hearsay from other people about what was in the Quran. My family followed the Somali cultural norms of women wearing a hijab first and then a jilbaab/burqa; which was a norm that was not native to Somalia but only began occurring after the 1991 civil war. Frustrated with my family's interpretation that a hijab needed to be worn in order to be modest so as to not burden men, I bloomed into a young Muslim Feminist looking for answers to my many gender equality related questions.

I began doing my own research and stumbled across this story of the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh): *"When Prophet Muhammad was travelling on the road with his cousin, Al-Fadi ibn Abbas, a woman stopped him to ask him a question. The woman was very beautiful, and Al-Fadl couldn't help but stare at her. Seeing this, Prophet Muhammad reached out his hand and turned his cousin's face away. He didn't tell the woman to cover her face. He didn't tell the woman to change her clothing. He didn't tell her that her appearance was too tempting or indecent. He averted his cousin's impolite stare."*

Reading this cemented many things that I had been thinking: that it was misogyny to think of my existence as a burden to men, and that it was the patri-

archy at work to believe that I needed to dress a certain way for men. It also confirmed my suspicions that this unquestioned misogyny and patriarchy was a cultural rather than religious standard.

I've known some radical burqa wearing feminists who wear a burqa not because they believe themselves to be a burden to men, but because they don't want to be objectified. I think that's rad and I support any woman doing anything that she believes is right without having to please men. With those ideas in mind, I stopped wearing my hijab. I no longer wanted to wear it because I felt that the reasoning for wearing it, to me, was steeped in cultural misogyny and patriarchy and until I studied the Quran academically, I did not feel that it was right of me to wear a hijab just because Somali society or my parents expected me to, as an extension of their misogyny. From then on, I questioned the patriarchy and how it has shaped my life and the lives of all women. I was disgusted with the idea that the male gaze policed women to dress a certain way whether it was wearing a hijab specifically for the idea of not tempting men or getting catcalled while you're walking down the street as a non-hijabi.

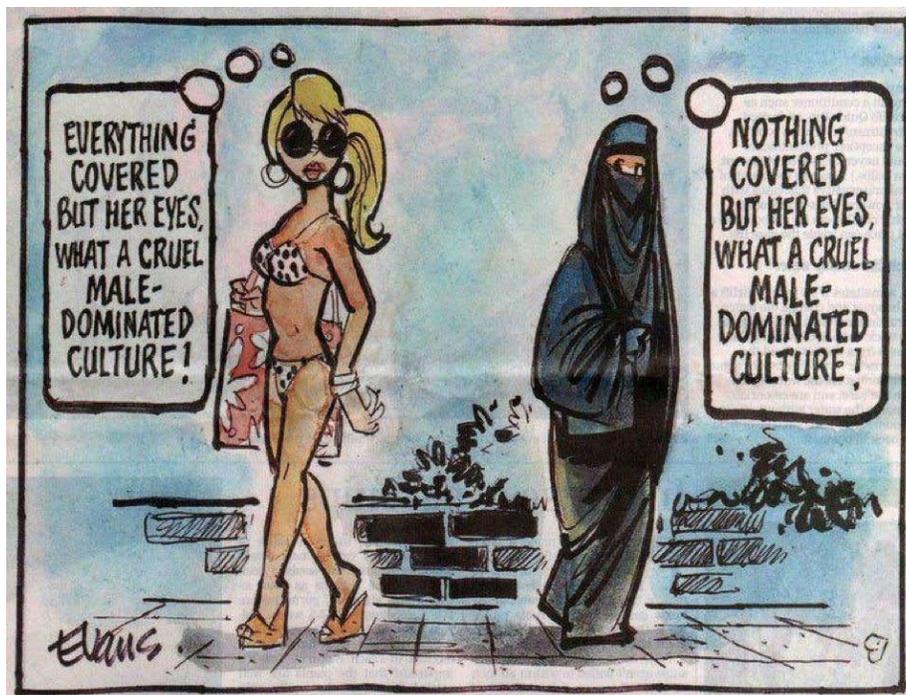
My second set of experiences with the male gaze came in the two years after I stopped wearing a hijab. The summer of my 20th year, I was taking public transportation multiple times a day in order to get to work. By this point, I was sporting an afro, no hijab, and mid-calf length high waisted skirts. I was harassed daily and had to deal with sexual comments from men simply because I was a woman in public, on her own, and dressed in a way that appealed to them. I also nearly escaped rape.

The irony of everything was not lost on me. I realized that patriarchy is a global issue and so is misogyny. Whether one wears a burqa or a bikini, the male gaze continues to be harmful to the development and well being of women and girls. We have been taught to simultaneously please the male gaze and that it is our responsibility to keep from tempting men. If men do anything to harm us, then we are taught that it is our fault. That we did something to provoke it. Women are raped everywhere. Women in Burqas and women in bikinis. Women in Paris and women in Mogadishu. The logic behind rape culture, misogyny, and the male gaze is the same in the United States as it is in Saudi Arabia.

I recall stumbling across this cartoon of a woman in a burqa and a woman in a bikini looking at one another and both thinking that the other was so oppressed. The bikini clad woman thinking that the woman in the burqa was oppressed because she was ap-

parently forced to wear a burqa by men but is not 'free' to wear a bikini because that would tempt the male gaze. The woman in the burqa believing that the bikini clad woman is oppressed because she is sexually objectified daily based off of how much men can see and that if she wore a burqa she would be 'free' from objectification and the male gaze.

That cartoon taught me that we women will only have total freedom and will only be able to smash the patriarchy and destroy misogyny when we see that Patriarchy and Misogyny are global issues and that the male gaze is harmful for ALL women and girls. We will be able to live in a world that celebrates womanhood and girlhood when we realize that all women suffer as long as the patriarchy is in place. Woman will be free when she realizes that her sister in a bikini is no freer than her sister in a burqa because the male gaze polices us all.





LENA SINGER, 31

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#1

When I was probably four, my grandparents, who had more money than anyone I'd ever met and lived about 10 miles from my family in working-class rural Illinois, spent the winter in a semi-posh gated community near Sarasota, Florida. (In retrospect, its name, "The Plantation," was completely fucked up.) My parents, sister, and I took the two-day drive to visit them during the week before Easter. My mom, who was in her mid 20s at the time—young and as much a defiant butthead as she was obedient—had been raised in a strict Catholic family. That Sunday morning, instead of hanging out in the rented fancy house with my grandparents, whom my sister and I worshipped, and swimming in the in-ground pool, my sister and I were required to go with my parents to Palm Sunday services. I remember that my mom dressed me in a seersucker sailor-style dress and a white wide-brimmed hat. During communion, I followed her through the line, and stopped to receive a blessing from the priest as she walked away. But instead of blessing me, he told me I looked like Marilyn Monroe. I had no idea who that person was, but I guessed that she was famous, so I was excited to tell my parents about what I believed had been a compliment. When we were back in our pew, I told my mom what had happened. "He said you looked like Marilyn Monroe?!" When I nodded yes, she said in a tone that made me believe that I was in trouble: "Maybe it was the hat."

#2

Every year, my strapped-for-cash parents took snapshots of my sister, Katie, and I at home in front of the Christmas tree and had them made into inexpensive holiday cards at the local Walgreen's. The November I was nine, I had only recently discovered undershirts in my dresser,

which my mom told me I needed to start layering beneath my other clothes without really explaining why. To wear for that year's Christmas card, she bought Katie a turtleneck patterned with tiny Christmas tree illustrations. Mine had tiny Santas. One Saturday afternoon, my parents told Katie and I that we were going to take the picture for the card. We changed into our turtle-necks, and then sat on our knees in front of the tree and smiled. My dad snapped a few pictures—enough that I was seeing the tiny black rectangle that appears when a flash goes off a few times in quick succession. We stood up to go back to playing like we had been before, but my mom wasn't happy with how things turned out. I hadn't smiled as hard as Katie. I wasn't sitting up as straight. We sat back down, and she readjusted my shoulders. My dad took a couple more pictures. She told me to smile. I thought I was. Two or three more pictures. Finally, she told me to come with her to my parents' room, which was just a few feet away from the living room where the tree was. She said, "I know you're embarrassed about your breasts, but there's nothing to be embarrassed about." My cheeks got hot, and I felt sick. I'd never even thought about having breasts, period. No one I knew in real life—including her—even called them "breasts" (they were "boobs.") That breasts were something I had, and that I'd want to hide them, was an idea that had never even crossed my mind. I was sure my dad and Katie heard her, and I was completely ashamed.

#3

By the time I was in sixth grade, I was my adult size: 5' 5", about 140 pounds, and a size B bra. I felt freakish. I was a giant, and I wasn't "pretty" like girls in my class, who shopped in the pre-teen section of J.C. Penney

and could still fit two-to-a-seat in the swings on the playground. No boys (that I knew of) liked me, which I deeply believed was a permanent condition. My family lived in the country, outside a tiny town, so my mom took my sister and I to a larger town—Mattoon—to get our hair cut (so, I assume, none of us would look like "white trash.") Vicki, our hairdresser, had her sink and chair in a tiny salon that she'd made on her front porch. One afternoon, all three of us—my mom, sister, and I—had all gone to get trims, and I was last. Katie was playing outside; my mom and Vicki were gossiping. A very tall woman with short hair opened the glass door to the salon, lifted her sunglasses to the top of her head, and made eye contact with me through the salon mirror. Before saying hi to Vicki, or acknowledging my mom, who I think was a stranger to her, she said right to me, "You're beautiful." It felt like a punch in the gut. After Vicki swept the hair off my shoulders, I asked to use the bathroom, and sat down and cried. What should have made me feel better made me feel worse: The only person who thought I was beautiful was a woman. There were no other implications because I couldn't even deal with it or understand it as anything other than an underline to what I knew to be fact: I was not attractive to boys.



JO MARIE RIEDL, 23

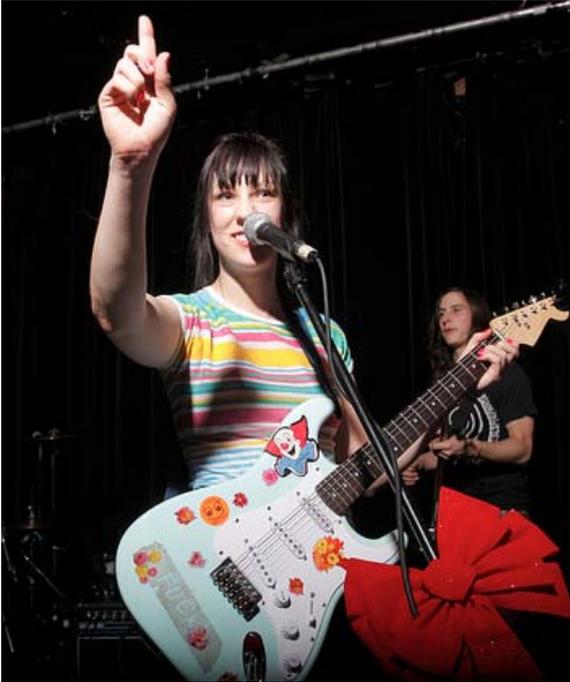
Hair Stylist

Seattle, WA

Like everyone in middle school, I started developing...but not in a cute way. I basically got really pudgy with no boobs and I dressed in whatever I found at Value Village. However, this didn't stop a handful of encounters with creepy older men following me around stores or touching my ass. This taught me early on that it really doesn't matter what I look like, be it well-dressed, or feminine, or traditionally pretty. Men can and will still creep on you. This kept me uncomfortable in my own skin through most of my youth; I would make myself up enough just enough so that I looked acceptable, but not too much because I didn't want to be noticed.

I was and have always been boy-crazy, but back then I was scared shitless of them, so I preferred to keep my distance. This kept up until high school when I started adopting punk rock ideals and the idea of wearable art. I wore a lot of makeup, and colorful makeup too. I'd obsess over teen magazines to learn how to apply makeup and dye my hair crazy colors. I was doing this with more of the idea of my body being a canvas than the intent of impressing and winning a boyfriend; fellow arty weird boys just came naturally at this point (sometimes fellas who also dyed and flat ironed their hair, fussing over the mirror every morning).

Now as an adult, my experiments with hair and makeup have translated into a career in cosmetology. I come across a lot of people with insecurities, mostly women, and it's my job to delicately balance beauty enhancing services while making them feel comfortable in their own skin. I definitely do not want people to feel ugly without professional help, and if I ever come off that way I've failed. It's a rewarding experience finding the beauty in my clients on the daily.



ALLIE HANLON, 28

Musician, Peach Kelli Pop

Sacramento, CA

My consciousness and awareness of how much I am constantly being watched and judged in public has built gradually over the years. As a teenage I was blissfully ignorant to it, but this has become less and less the case. I am so aware now that I am constantly waiting for unwanted comments from strangers. I am constantly feeling defensive, thinking about how I will respond to these comments, prolonged staring, etc. This is a learned behavior.

In terms of when I started realizing that I was being inappropriately watched and judged by men in public almost all of the time, there was no one event that occurred, only instances happening over and over. I became increasingly angry the more it happened. If I had to pick an instance that had quite an effect on me, it would be when I was riding my bike home alone at night on an empty street, and a man drove up behind me in his car and started talking to me derogatorily about my butt. He was not driving next to me, but very closely behind my bike, where I couldn't really see him or make eye contact or respond to him. I was startled most of all, but felt angry and humiliated because of how powerless I was in the situation. I am very comfortable responding (quite ferociously) to this kind of attention - but usually I am unable to because the harassers are conveniently in a vehicle. Of course men will harass women less when they know they have the power to respond. I see these exchanges as men desperately trying to assert their power and sexuality onto unwilling female participants.

Sadly, when I am going out with friends or if I am being accompanied by a male, I know that I can wear whatever I want and not deal with the same kind of unwanted attention I would receive if I were alone. I

have learned from experience that it is when I am alone that I receive the vast majority of street harassment.

When I am walking around with a man, I can say very honestly that I feel a distinct sense of relief knowing I won't be harassed, yet can still dress in a way I enjoy and makes me feel attractive. I experience too much anger and disappointment to dress in a way where I know I will be subjected to street harassment, so unfortunately I still consider these horrible people as I get dressed to go out in public.

RESPONSE

These stories, from a range of self-confident and accomplished young women, all reveal a common experience of a contemporary girlhood: objectification. No matter the girl or the circumstance, it's part of our coming-of-age story in a patriarchy. Girls experience moments of their own objectification by others, and thus learn how to self-objectify to adapt to the highly coded lens through which society views girls by their appearances. From Terra's ruffled skirt and fishnets to Ifrah's hijab, the cues of girls' appearances exist in a social context that defaults all their choices of appearance as made for the "male gaze". Whatever intention of self-expression or personal comfort is behind the way a girl chooses to appear is rendered invalid through this defaulted way of looking at girls. It's what gives us stories like Lena's, where the priest eerily suggested she looked like Marilyn Monroe – her mother's solution was not to be upset at the priest comparing her young daughter to a classic sex symbol, but was to adjust to this observation: "maybe it was the hat." Girls are forced to adapt and adjust in these ways, and in order to do so, they learn to self-objectify.

A study from 2010 by the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls defines the process by which girls adapt to seeing themselves from the outside. The objectification theory states "girls internalize and reproduce within their own self-schemas this objectified perspective, an effect referred to as 'self-objectification.' Self-objectification involves adopting a third-person perspective on the physical self and constantly assessing one's own body in an effort to conform to the culture's standards of attractiveness." (APA 20). A girl must look from the outside at her appearance, straining to see herself as she would appear through other lenses, in order to avoid any public discomfort, shame, or mistreatment. This is presented as the solution to a society that treats girls as highly coded, visual objects. The study goes further into explaining this process: "Psychological researchers have identified self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996) as a key process whereby girls learn to think of and treat their own bodies as objects of others' desires. In self-objectification, girls internalize an observer's perspective on their physical selves and learn to treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated for their appearance." (APA 17). Before girls are even prepared to deal with the reception of the unknowingly sexual cues of the length of their skirt or the height of their socks, other eyes are already coding them through these cues. These "other eyes" are the eyes of the male gaze; whether they come from an actual male, or are just a product of the dominant societal way girls are viewed, this gaze is embedded in how girls are viewed, and thusly, how they learn to view themselves. Ifrah's point plays right into this realization that no matter what instructions we're given to understand how we come across through the eyes of a

patriarchy, we're placed in a position to have to play to that, whether its to cover up or expose – the problem remains the same.

All interviewees are intelligent, self-determined people – they acknowledge objectification as part of their experience as females, and use this awareness to push back. The study acknowledges girls' power to resist this condition – and conditioning – of objectification: "Girls' choices are not fully independent of cultural or past interpersonal influences. In addition, it is important to remember that girls are fully capable of agency and resistance in this area." (APA 18). At the end of the day, we do realize that this is a part of girlhood in a patriarchy – girls are made to learn to navigate the nuances and unfortunate expectations of the male gaze alongside all of the other shared lessons of growing up, such as how to drive or how to write checks. Understanding and acknowledging this process of self-objectification that girls go through is the only way to reclaim freedom of appearances. As Ifrah mentioned, once patriarchy and misogyny are recognized as global issues, we have this system of the male gaze imposed on everyone. The way society polices the attention given to women based on their appearance can be ignored, subverted, and just cast away as irrelevant and ridiculous. Girls should never have the expectation put upon them to adopt these codes of appearances that compromise expression and independence, but disrupting these expectations of what appearances girls "should" be concerned about takes more than a little courage and confidence. Although girls' choices in responding to this policing of appearances are discouragingly limited, girls still can respond by purposefully ignoring it all. They can say "no" to these expectations and subvert the system of codes generated by the male gaze (which is everyone's frame of reference for judging girls) by looking however they want and shutting out the oppressive reactions from their psyche. It's not easy, and it's not fair, but as long as one detaches from her own self-objectification, all external objectification becomes more and more meaningless, and at the least, there can be justice in the safety of a girl's sense of freedom to look however she wants.

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