

The Gendered Gaze on Social Media: the Female Gaze as Rebellion

Zeyi Long*

Department of Intellectual Property, East China University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai, China

*Corresponding author: 191016010017@ecupl.edu.com

Abstract. The male gaze, according to Laura Mulvey, means a way to objectify and sexualize women from heterosexual male perspectives. The male gaze can be found in every woman's daily life and has extended to social media. Thus, a specific type of female gaze emerges on social media in order to resist the male gaze. This type of female gaze aims at judging men's appearance, figure, education level or social position aggressively, differing from the female gaze in its usual context. Most studies of the gendered gaze lie in the field of film, literature and art, so in order to fill the gap, this study tries to analyse the gendered gaze in the field of social media. Two cases are raised in this study, 1saye bikini gate and Rayza airport gate, and the comments concerning the gendered gaze are gathered. Using textual analysis as a method, this study analyses the different characteristics of the male gaze and the aggressive female gaze on social media. According to the characteristics, this study focuses on whether the aggressive female gaze on social media can launch a rebellion against the male gaze on social media. Because of the nature and the purpose of the aggressive female gaze on social media, this study regards it as impossible for this type of female gaze to truly become a solution and a rebellion.

Keywords: Female gaze; male gaze; gender; social media.

1. Introduction

The concept of the male gaze was first introduced by Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. This female film theorist said that heterosexual male perspectives objectified and sexualized female characters in films because women were believed to be displayed as sexual objects. Thus, under the male gaze, female characters were created to be one-dimensional and served for men's visual pleasure [1]. The term "the female gaze" grows out of the male gaze theory [2], but it is a more complicated and multi-layered theory than a reversed version of the male gaze. The female gaze does not tend to depict men as sexual objects as the male gaze does to women. Instead, the female gaze is more likely to project romantic desires onto men [3]. In general, the female gaze emphasizes the subject position of women and tells how the world looks from women's perspectives.

Nowadays, it is common for people of all ages and races to share their lives and post photos on social media like Twitter, but some young women, it seems they cannot fully enjoy social media. Rosalind Gill's interviews with 200 young women aged 18 and 30 showed that young women felt "being watched" when posting images about their lives. For many young women, the experiences of being "stared at" by strangers were negative. They felt embarrassed, afraid, and other unpleasant emotions and the unwanted attention and comments even sometimes made them feel being harassment [4].

Social media, due to its multidirectional-dissemination pattern [5], enable users who may never meet in real life can interact with each other instantly. Therefore, chances are created for some men to watch and judge women on social media and leave impolite comments. The male gaze usually occurs in the form of comments under young women's posts. Most of these kinds of comments are to judge the women's appearance, dress or lifestyles and give opinions about what women should be like. The comments can be extremely offensive and are usually not welcomed by female posters, so online conflicts between men and women happen sometimes.

Women who are offended by the male gaze comments on social media may choose various ways to express their feelings. Some of them choose to stay silent, while others decide to fight back. Thus,

a specific type of female gaze, as a way to resist the male gaze, emerges on social media. This type of female gaze does not technically have the same meaning as the certain concept discussed in the media field or film field. In short, this type of female gaze does not aim at observing the world from women's perspectives but aims at judging men as a response to the offensive male gaze. The definition of the female gaze mentioned in this study will be stated more precisely in the following part.

1.1 Significance

Since Mulvey pointed out that the male gaze existed on the screens, women have tried hard to avoid being watched and judged both on the screens and in reality. However, the prosperity of social media carries the male gaze in a new way. Facing the male gaze on social media, women feel embarrassed and afraid, which may eventually cause gender opposition.

Current studies about the gendered gaze are mostly in the field of media and film, seldom of which are in the field of social media. Thus, the significance of this study lies in its potential to shed light on the gendered gaze on social media.

1.2 Research questions

This study aims to explore the female gaze used to resist the male gaze on social media. Moreover, there will be an attempt to discover whether the special counter-gaze from women is an effective and rational way to resist being watched and judged.

Therefore, three separate questions are raised to explain the main research objection:

1. What are the characteristics of the male gaze on social media?
2. What are the characteristics of the aggressive female gaze on social media?
3. According to the characteristics, can this type of female gaze become a rebellion against the male gaze on social media?

1.3 Methodology

This study will use textual analysis as a method. The study will first raise typical cases about the research object, and comments on this event will be gathered. The comments will be chosen from various social media and should clearly state the publishers' opinions and sentiments. Then, the words used in the comments and the sentiments behind the comments will be analysed to summarize the characteristics of two kinds of gaze and the differences between them. Based on the characteristics and differences, the study will focus on the resistance of the female gaze on social media.

2. Definition

The original concept of the female gaze was developed in the film field to create a new perspective of the camera lens differing from the traditional male gaze after the famous "male gaze" concept was put forward in 1975 by Laura Mulvey [1]. As Alicia Malone mentioned in her second book, *The female gaze: essential movies made by women* (2018) [6], casting the female gaze in films is to ask: What makes a film feminine? What can audiences gain by watching films through a female lens? Besides, in the film field, the female gaze is also used for the appreciation and creation of feminist literary works and paintings.

The concept of the female gaze also extends beyond the literature field and the art field to everyone's daily life [7]. The main reason is that the male gaze exists in every corner of the world. From the "white, young and slim" standard for women to the advertisements publicizing that only beautiful women will be loved, the male gaze does not intend to correct itself after Mulvey officially raised the concept. So automatically, the female gaze enters our daily lives, not only denying the male gaze but also offering another way to view our lives and the world. From this perspective, women with tall and slim figures can be appreciated, as well as women with short and full figures; women who wear dresses and grow long hair can be beautiful, as well as women who prefer trousers and

short hair. Usually, the female gaze does not mean to resist the male gaze passively but to create a feminist perspective actively.

However, the specific type of female gaze which will be discussed in this study does not have the same meaning. Actually, this study decides to pick out a special type of female gaze, which can be widely found under controversial topics concerning the male gaze on social media. This type of female gaze is always aggressive and aims at judging men's appearance, figure, education level or social position out of malice because it regards itself as a kind of rebellion against the offensive male gaze. Contrary to the female gaze mentioned above, this type of female gaze emphasizes resisting instead of creating.

Here is an example. A female blogger on Weibo (a social media platform) sent a post to talk about her boyfriend and share how she and her boyfriend ran their relationship well [8]. (This post received 569 comments and 7845 likes.) A male user—his account showed his gender—commented under the post: "You are not good-looking enough to make a man love you so much." (His comment received 534 likes and ranked second in the comment area.) This is a classic and impolite male-gaze comment, judging a woman's appearance and personal relationship carelessly. Under his comments, the female blogger replied: "No matter what I look like, I will never choose a tiny man like you. You'd better delete your selfies on your homepage before leaving comments." The female blogger was gazing at the male user from a woman's perspective—women always prefer tall and strong men! She judged him by his stature in an aggressive way to give a counterattack. This type of female gaze is exactly what the study will discuss later.

All "the female gaze" in this study refers to aggressive replies to the male gaze comments from women's perspective.

3. Cases

3.1 Isaye bikini gate

In August this year, a Chinese Internet celebrity named "Isaye" posted her photos on a yacht on social media. In the photos, she wore a white bikini top that exposed a large area of her breast. Her photos quickly caused disputes on social media about inappropriate dressing. By November, these photos had been reposted 15 thousand times, commented on more than 3 thousand times and gained 209 thousand likes on Weibo and on RED, another social media platform that is well-known by young people; these photos have gained 430 thousand like, 17 thousand comments and been collected for 50 thousand times. Lately, a heated discussion about the freedom to dress has happened on social media.

However, this study will pay more attention to the male-gaze comments and the female-gaze counterattack under the post. In this case, 3 pairs of comments are picked out from her posts' comment areas on Weibo and RED and are labelled in order as group A1, group B1 and group C1. These comments and replies are picked out because similar opinions are common in the comment area of the post.

Group A1:

A male user commented: "I cannot see your boob. Such flat chest." (2043 likes and 409 replies)

A female user replied: "Send me a photo and let me know what size your penis is. Or is it invisible?" (9324 likes)

Group B1:

A male user commented: "Wouldn't it be better if you do not wear anything?" He added an emoji with a mocking look at the end of his comment. Also, the male user made a typo in his comment. (109 likes and 48 replies)

A female user replies: "Wouldn't it be better if you accept some education before you comment here? You illiteracy person!" (1628 likes)

Group C1:

A male user commented: "Look at her! How embarrassing. Does her boyfriend know this?" He added a snigger emoji at the beginning of his comment. (824 likes and 132 replies)

A female user replied: "A man? Not surprised. Your words have implied your gender." She added a shrug emoji at the end of her reply. (674 likes)

3.2 Rayza airport gate

Rayza is a Chinese actress born in Xinjiang. She is known for her exquisite facial features, excellent acting in some famous TV episodes and controversy in 2019.

In the summer of 2019, Rayza was photographed at an airport wearing a low-cut halter top. She did not have a coat, so she only wore the yellow halter top on the upper part of her body. She was smiling in the photos and seemed confident. However, these photos were criticized by some people for Rayza's dress. They regarded her dressing as a corruption of public morals because the low-cut halter top exposed too much of her breast. Similarly, the event eventually brought a discussion on social media about dress codes in public places.

In this case, 3 pairs of comments are picked out from the comment areas and repost areas of Weibo and RED and are labelled in order as group A2, group B2 and group C2. These comments and replies are picked out because similar opinions are common in the comment areas.

Group A2:

A male user commented: "You guys think she is pretty? Look at her sagging boob. She is like a middle-aged woman." (263 likes and 468 replies)

A female user replied: "Show us your six-pack stomach or shut your mouth up." (1655 likes)

Group B2:

A male user commented: "I will never allow my wife to wear this. No man is going to marry an unscrupulous woman who wears this and go to public places." (106 likes and 86 replies)

A female user replied: "No woman is going to marry a chahuzui (In Chinese, the word refers to men with the little penis) from the bottom of society." (572 likes)

Group C2:

A male user commented: "Her boob is about to come out of her halter top! She must be seeking to be famous by exposing her boob to the camera. It is against public morals." (281 likes and 30 replies)

A female user replied: "Save your moral trial to the next time when you see men walking topless on the street." (441 likes)

4. Analysis

4.1 Characteristics of the male-gaze comments

Mulvey said that the male gaze is to objectify and sexualizes female characters in films and regards women as sexual objects. She has already revealed the two main characteristics of the male gaze: objectifying and sexualizing. The male gaze on social media also shows these two characteristics.

In Group C1 and B2, the male users' comments objectify women as things that belong to men. In Group C1, the male user asked whether the blogger's boyfriend knew what she wore, and in Group B2, the male user stated that no man would marry such a woman like Rayza because of her dress. These comments regard women as objects that are subject to men by implying that all decisions a woman makes, from what she wears today to what she would like to learn in the next ten years, aim at the ingratiating man, and women should not do anything that reduces their attraction to men even if they really want to do so. In Isaye's and Rayza's cases, the two male users doubted the women's choices of dressing because they did not prefer this kind of sexy style, and they believed women as objects must always satisfy their demands or women like Isaye and Rayza would be abandoned miserably and loved by no man. From these male users' perspectives, women are in the passive position. Women are bound to be watched and picked rather than watching and picking.

In Group A1 and A2, the male users' comments sexualize women's bodies. According to Cambridge Dictionary, the word "sexualize" means to see someone or something in sexual terms or

to make someone or something sexually exciting. In both Group A1 and Group A2, the two male users complained about Isaye's and Rayza's breasts' shape, although besides their breasts, there were many other points left worth discussing, such as freedom to dress and appropriate dress code in public places. The male users saw the two women in sexual terms by casting their sights on the secondary sexual sign of Isaye and Rayza. Furthermore, they felt free to judge the two women's breasts because heterosexual male perspectives believe women are sexual objects for men to look at, which demonstrates the connection between objectifying and sexualizing.

4.2 Characteristics of the female-gaze replies

The specific type of female gaze showing in the female users' replies has unique characteristics.

First, the female gaze in the replies is a kind of deliberately sexualized gaze. In Group A1, Group A2 and Group B2, the female users attacked the male users by doubting whether they had large penises or six-pack stomachs. Large penises and six-pack stomachs are symbols of masculinity, representing a man's sexual capacity, and judging a man by his sexual capacity is undoubtedly sexualizing. Moreover, different from the male gaze, the sexualizing of the female gaze is not natural but deliberate. In fact, the female gaze can be understood as the male gaze without biological implications [9]. So, sexualizing men represents more of a rebellion against the sexualizing of women rather than satisfying women's desire to watch. In other words, women do not naturally love to watch men's bodies, but female users on social media do so on purpose.

Second, besides deliberately sexualized gaze, the female users also cast sight on men's education level and social position. In Group B1 and Group B2, the two female users judged and mocked the male users' education level ("You illiteracy person!") and social position ("chahuzui from the bottom of the society"). The education level and social position, along with men's bodies, become the objects of the female gaze on social media.

Third, the female gaze on social media has little to do with logic. Instead, the female-gaze replies are speculative and sometimes point to the entire male group. In almost all groups, the female users' replies attacked the male users' bodies or education level based on their assumptions about the male users' little penises or low education level. The male-gaze comments judging Isaye's and Rayza's bodies were made according to the photos of Isaye and Rayza, but the female-gaze replies did not base on the male users' photos or CVs. Sometimes those undesirable characteristics like little penises and low education levels, which are based on assumptions of the female users, are generalized to the entire male group. In Group C1, the female user made the generalization by inferring that all impolite comments were left by men. She had no references, but she made the conclusion.

4.3 The female gaze as rebellion

The female gaze this study focuses on is expected to become a kind of resistance to the male gaze on social media. The original intention of the female users may be the wish to do unto men what they did to women. By watching, judging and belittling men, the female users of social media intend to find a way to dispel the ubiquitous male gaze on the Internet and protect their sisters from being watched.

However, is this type of aggressive female gaze a rebellion against the male gaze? Can it truly dispel the male gaze?

This type of female gaze has not reached the expected goal so far. Actually, the doubt is whether the female gaze on social media will ever have a positive effect on gender issues because the aggressive gaze seems to exacerbate the gender dichotomy. Conflicts between users of two genders are everywhere in the comment areas of Isaye's and Rayza's posts and even become worse, showing the failure of the female-gaze replies to end the conflicts or stop the male gaze as the female users wish. After witnessing its failure, maybe it is time to rethink the value of the aggressive female gaze on social media and why this type of female gaze cannot actually play a role in dispelling the male gaze on social media.

To answer the question, the analysis will be made from two aspects. By its nature, the aggressive female gaze on social media is a deliberate imitation of the male gaze. The female gaze, in its usual context, is about observing the world from a woman's perspective, but on social media, the aggressive female gaze, to some degree, aims at sexualizing men in the way men sexualize women. Although much more could have been seen from their perspective, the female users stare viciously at men's sexual organs in response to the offensive male gaze. Furthermore, besides their bodies, men's education levels and social positions also become objects for women to gaze at and mock on social media. However, no matter what is gazed at, women's bodies, men's bodies, someone's education level or social position, the structure of the "gaze" has never changed in this process. Back to Mulvey defined the structure of the male gaze as "active/male and passive/female". The position of male and female merely shifted in the aggressive female gaze on social media to active/female and passive/male, and the subordinate relationship of the structure still exists, with its objects changing from women's bodies to men's bodies, education levels and social positions. It is impossible to end a fight by starting another. The reason why the aggressive female gaze can never reach its expected goal is that it itself is the product and imitation of the male gaze.

By its purpose, the aggressive female gaze on social media deviates from the initial expectations of female users. Rather than to solve gender issues, protect females and dispel the male gaze, the aggressive female gaze seems to be mostly used to vent emotions. Some of the replies are illogical, aiming to arbitrarily deny the value of the whole male group. These aggressive replies are to express female users' anger and fear of being watched as objects on social media by men instead of overlooking the present situation with an objective attitude from a woman's perspective. Blindly venting emotions disables rational discussions to happen between different genders and reduces the possibility of solving real issues, especially on social media [10].

Thus, launching a rebellion against the male gaze on social media by casting the aggressive female gaze on men is bound to fail because of the aggressive female gaze's own nature and its deviation from the initial goal.

5. Suggestion

It is unwise to deal with the offensive male-gaze comments on social media by replying with the aggressive female gaze, or vituperative wrangles between two genders will occur, which have already appeared in Isaye's and Rayza's comment areas. What has happened implies that a less aggressive way may be a better way to dispel the male gaze on social media. So, it is worth discussing how social media users can deal with this issue in a comprehensive way.

In fact, the concept of "the female gaze" appeared not in order to defeat and eliminate the male gaze or fight against anything but because women wanted to describe and observe the world from a less mainstream perspective—their perspective. The female gaze itself is non-antagonistic but comprehensive in the first place. Thus, in the case of social media, maybe it will help if all users, no matter female or male, seek more guidance from the comprehensive female gaze.

6. Conclusion

By analyzing the male-gaze comments and the female-gaze replies on social media, the study first sums up the characteristics of the gendered gaze on social media. The male gaze on social media objectifies and sexualizes the bodies of women, while the aggressive female gaze on social media deliberately sexualizes men's bodies, judges men's education levels and social positions and has little to do with logic. The study also analyses the possibility of the female gaze on social media becoming a rebellion against the male gaze on social media. The nature (product and imitation of the male gaze) and the purpose (venting emotions rather than solving gender issues) of the female gaze on social media make it unable to resist the male gaze.

As for the limitations, this study gives a qualitative analysis of the research object, yet the result will be more precise if a quantitative analysis is made. Moreover, only two famous cases are analyzed in this study, and there is suspicion of under-sampling. Thus, the result may be more accurate if more samples are to be analyzed.

Further studies on this research topic can be done from the perspective of the psychology of social media users. Combining psychology with the gendered gaze on social media may help produce a deeper understanding of this research topic.

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