

Rise and Grind:  
A Post-Feminist Analysis of the  
Complexity of Representation in Kim Kardashian's Instagram Posts

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is to examine Kim Kardashian's self-representation in her Instagram posts. The objective of the study is to find out what kind of a woman she represents, and how it can be seen in her posts. The analysis will focus on the pictures and the captions that accompany them. In order to conduct the analysis, the present study uses theories of post-feminism and multimodal discourse analysis as tools.

The data for the study comprises of Kim Kardashian's Instagram posts from the month of January in 2018. There are 40 posts in total, which have been divided into four categories. The categories are: motherhood, advertisements, unclear or possible advertisements and pornographication.

The findings of the study state that Kim Kardashian enforces the typical stereotypes that are imposed on women, but at the same time she breaks them.

## **Tiivistelmä**

Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, millaista naiskuvaa Kim Kardashian toteuttaa Instagram-kuvissaan. Analyysissa keskitytään tarkastelemaan kuvia, ja kuvatekstejä, jos sellainen on.

Tutkimusmateriaalina käytettiin Kardashianin Instagram-päivityksiä tammikuulta 2018. Ne kerättiin Instagramista, ja päivityksiä oli yhteensä 40. Analyysia varten ne on jaettu neljään kategoriaan: äitiys, mainokset, epäselvät tai mahdolliset mainokset sekä pornografisaatio.

Analyysissa on käytetty apuna post-feminististä teoriaa, sekä multimodaalista diskurssianalyysia. Multimodaalista diskurssianalyysia sovellettiin kuvien ja kuvatekstien suhteiden analysointiin. Post-feminististä teoriaa käytettiin kuvien analysointiin.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että Kim Kardashian vahvistaa naisiin kohdistuvia stereotyyppioita, mutta samalla hän rikkoo niitä.

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## 1. Introduction

In today's society, one's social media presence is increasingly important, and how one presents themselves online is becoming synonymous with what they are considered to be in their everyday life. Visual communication is a key factor in one's social media presence, and it is the pictures that the consumers of social media content focus on first. If the picture is eye-catching and interesting, the viewer will want to see more. By conducting research on social media, one can learn more about how humans operate and how they present themselves when they are aware of having an audience watching. It is especially applicable to celebrities, who may have thousands or millions of followers, and whose pictures are under heavy scrutiny.

Kim Kardashian West<sup>1</sup> rose to fame in 2007, when an erotic home video of hers leaked online, and a reality show, *Keeping up With the Kardashians*, which follows the life of the Kardashian family, started airing. Today, she is known for her appearance on the show, her line of cosmetics and social media presence, as well as events that have taken place in her personal life, such as weddings and pregnancies.

As of March 2018, Kardashian has 109 million followers on Instagram, and each of her posts gain millions of likes, which is an indication of how wide her audience is. In addition, her posts are shared and viewed by people who do not "follow" her with the Instagram function.

Previous research on the topic is sparse, however, Amanda Scheiner McClain has formerly studied the Kardashian family and their use of social media. Her study focused on their use of Twitter, but the findings are applicable in the present study as well. McClain notes that "Kim is by far the most prominent social media user" (70). Furthermore, she has the most followers on Instagram out of all the Kardashian siblings, which itself is an indicator of her popularity.

In addition to McClain's study, Benjamin Brabon and Stéphanie Genz have conducted a case study on Paris Hilton, who is, similarly to Kardashian, a notable figure in the history of popular culture in the United States. There are several similarities between the lives and careers of Hilton and Kardashian. Both women became known to the public by a leak of a personal video, built an empire around their image and can be considered to be icons of popular culture.

The present study aims to research how Kim Kardashian presents herself in her Instagram posts. The key objective is to find out what kind of a woman she represents, and how it can be seen in her

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<sup>1</sup> From this paragraph onwards, she will be referred to as Kim Kardashian, as that is what she is best known as professionally.

posts. Another objective is to study Kardashian's public image, and how she further enforces it via her Instagram posts, as well as to identify the type of reality, or unreality, she presents. This will be done by applying the post-feminist theory and methods of multimodal discourse analysis to the data.

## **2. Data**

This section introduces the research data that is used for the present study. The data is collected from Instagram, which is an online platform for publishing, commenting on and liking pictures. The data consists of a selection of Kim Kardashian's Instagram posts from the month of January in 2018. The data includes pictures, as well as the pictures' possible captions, which are written text, emojis or hashtags.

This time frame was chosen to ensure that the posts would be as recent as possible at the time of conducting the study. There are 59 posts in total, but the present study only includes posts where Kardashian herself is visibly present, on her own or accompanied by others. Therefore, the data consists of 40 posts. The posts selected for the study will be included in their respective sections in order to display the findings of the analysis more clearly.

Kim Kardashian's profile is not set to private, which means that her posts are publicly available for anyone to view. The present study focuses on the posts that are posted on Kardashian's main profile page; therefore, possible videos or Instagram stories are not included in the data. Comments from other users have been omitted in order to protect their privacy.

The posts have been divided into four sections by themes, which have been identified by the topic of the posts prior to the analysis. The themes are as follows: motherhood, advertisements, unclear or possible advertisements, and pornographication. The first category, motherhood, includes three (3) posts. The second category, advertisements, includes nine (9) posts. The category of unclear or possible advertisements includes eight (8) posts. The category of pornographication also includes eight (8) posts. The themes were established in order to find possible recurring patterns that lie in the Instagram account and the individual posts. These themes and individual posts will then be analysed later on in their respective sections.

### **3. Theoretical and methodological framework**

This section will introduce in more detail the theoretical and methodological framework that will be used in the analysis of the study. The present study adopts theories of post-feminism and multimodal discourse analysis for examining the data. The study also draws on a previous research on social media, conducted by Sofia Caldeira, as well as other works which will be referenced throughout the analysis.

#### **3.1. Post-feminist theory**

Post-feminism has, throughout years, gained different schools of representation. The present study adopts ideas from several scholars, which will be introduced in this section. Kim Kardashian does not explicitly state her own stance on feminism within the scope of the present study, thus her opinion on the topic has not been included in the thesis.

The post-feminist theory stems from the feminist theories of the 20th century. ‘Feminism’ as it is, is difficult to define, and, as Chris Beasley states, “the notion of ‘defining’ feminism is controversial”. At its roots, feminism comprises of “critique of misogyny, the assumption of male superiority and centrality” (Beasley). This type of criticism is considered to be the key factor that differentiates feminism from other social and political ideals (Beasley). It is also understood that feminism considers the mainstream political beliefs to see men and the male experience of the world as the norm, and the female experience as the exception to that norm (Beasley). Post-feminism, then, has its foundations on these views, and according to Benjamin Brabon and Stéphanie Genz, post-feminism “emerged in the late twentieth century in a number of cultural, academic and political contexts” (1).

Brabon and Genz use ‘post-feminism’ as a term to refer to “a shift in the understanding and construction of identity and gender categories (like ‘Woman’, ‘Man’ and ‘Feminist’)” (1). Angela McRobbie, on the other hand, proposes that post-feminism refers to “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s come to be undermined” (255). Meaning, that according to McRobbie, post-feminism weakens the position of women in society by working against what feminists from previous decades have achieved. Brabon and Genz suggest that post-feminism includes a “bond with feminism but also relations with other social, cultural, theoretical and political areas” (6). In the present study, post-feminism is applied in relation with popular culture and with what Brabon and Genz call “consumer culture and popular media” (6). These relations to other fields may also raise discordance with feminism (6).

McRobbie suggests that parts of popular culture are involved with the undermining of the earlier feminist roots, “while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and well-intended response to feminism” (255). Thus, it can be understood that post-feminism encompasses both feminist and anti-feminist ideals, and that one’s interpretation of the current topic based on the specific context may affect which type of post-feminism is applicable.

According to Adrienne Trier-Bieniek, post-feminist theory can be understood to “explore the ways that women are constructed and construct themselves in particular ways and make sense of those constructions” (106). This suggests that post-feminist interpretations examine the core beings of women, and how these beings come to be, or whether they derive from the women themselves. Additionally, Brabon and Genz also note that “post-feminism is context-specific and has to be assessed dynamically in the relationships and tensions between its various manifestations and contexts” (5).

McRobbie argues that the post-feminist theory suggests that “equality has been achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it [feminism] is no longer needed” (255). Today, feminism is often associated with negative connotations because of the movement’s past. It is also often thought that it is no longer necessary, as in the Western world the social conditions for women are seemingly good. However, people often fail to take notice of the social pressure that women still face in their everyday lives. This pressure may be enforced by non-women and women alike, and it may be directed at, for instance, the way women look or their choice between working and being a parent.

Brabon and Genz have identified different branches within post-feminism. They introduce two prominent branches, which they call “do-me feminism” and “raunch culture” (91). ‘Do-me feminism’ has its roots in the 1990s, and it “sees sexual freedom as the key to female independence and emancipation” (91). It also “-- addresses women as knowing, active and heterosexually desiring subjects” (91). ‘Do-me feminism’ is related to ‘raunch culture’, which according to Brabon and Genz, encompasses the “increasing sexualisation of late twentieth-century culture that finds its expression in the propagation of discourses about and representations of sex and sexuality” (qtd. in Gill 101). Elements from these two branches are evident in Kardashian’s Instagram posts, and they will be examined in more detail in the analysis.

Brabon and Genz also notice a phenomenon of ‘pornographication’, where “highly sexualised and pornographic styles and aesthetics have become common features of popular media culture in Western societies” (101). These features are notable in Kardashian’s Instagram posts. In several of



her pictures, she is scantily clad or completely naked. She also poses in a highly sexualised manner, which draws attention to her body. Yet, these posts also depict the image of a liberated and free person: she is not afraid to dress however she wants to, post whatever she likes or pose however she desires. This type of free self-expression is tied to feminist ideals, according to which women should be able to express themselves as they wish.

In summary, it can be said that post-feminist theories, as Adrienne Trier-Bieniek puts it, “index the complexities that women face as they navigate the current terrain” (112). While post-feminism can be understood to support the liberation of women, it can also be considered to reinforce and maintain female stereotypes. This is especially notable within ‘do-me feminism’ and ‘raunch culture’ (Brabon and Genz 91). The present study adopts the post-feminist theory to examine how Kim Kardashian’s Instagram posts, and if the way she presents herself reflect, or do not reflect these views. The analysis will look at the ways how Kardashian presents herself in her posts: her styling, what she wears, how she poses and how the posts’ captions reflect the picture itself.

### **3.2. Multimodal discourse analysis**

Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) is used to examine sources that combine multiple types of discourse (Kay O’Halloran 120), such as text and images. O’Halloran uses the term ‘semiotic resource’ to refer to the discourse that merges with “sensory modalities”, which can be, for instance, visual (121). These types of combinations are called “multimodal phenomena” (O’Halloran 121). According to O’Halloran, the objective of MDA is to examine “the semantic expansions that occur as semiotic choices combine in multimodal phenomena” (121). In the present study, MDA is used to analyse photos and the texts that accompany them. In addition, MDA is used to analyse the relations that the pictures and texts possibly have.

Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen suggest that “language and visual communication express meaning belonging to and structured by cultures in the one society” (17). They argue that “the meanings expressed by speakers -- are first and foremost social meanings” (18). Meaning, communication and the messages that it brings, mirror the values, diversity and conflicts that arise within that society (18). According to Kress and van Leeuwen, “writing may carry one set of meanings and the images another” (18), and as such it is not always clear what the actual intended meaning of the message is. In the context of Instagram, the connection between text and images can be very unclear at times, and it is often the case that they are not related at all. When the viewer is presented information in two types of discourse in the same context, it can be argued that they usually consider them to be related to each other. The present study explores the connection

between pictures posted on Instagram, and the captions that accompany them. The main objective is to assess whether the captions and pictures have a connection between them.

The term 'modality' is used to refer to "the truth value or credibility of (linguistically realized) statements about the world" (Kress and van Leeuwen 160). According to Kress and van Leeuwen, "-- modality judgements are social, dependent on what is considered real -- in the social group for which the representation is intended" (161). The present study examines the type of reality that Kim Kardashian presents in her Instagram pictures. These pictures are often accompanied by captions, and therefore the study also considers how the captions relate to the pictures, or if they relate to them at all. Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that in today's society the standard for "visual modality" (168) lies in the "culturally and historically determined standards of what is real and what is not" (168).

Kress and van Leeuwen argue that while critical discourse analysis is used for examining how "language is used to convey power and status in contemporary social interaction" (13), MDA can be used for this type of analysis in a way that seeks multiple and more diverse solutions than when conducting discourse analysis, by including more than just text in the data analysis (13).

The present study aims to examine how Kim Kardashian's Instagram posts convey the messages and meanings created by the different types of visual elements that are included in an Instagram post: the pictures and their captions. In addition, it seeks to find out what kind of reality Kardashian presents via the connection between the posts' captions and the images, as well as to study if the captions and images have a connection between them.

## 4. Analysis and findings

This section includes the analysis of the data and presenting of the findings of the study. It is divided into subsections by the aforementioned themes, in which the analysis and findings are presented in detail. Each section contains figures as examples of Kardashian's Instagram posts. Firstly, the analysis concentrates on the topic of motherhood, followed by two types of categories of advertisements. The analysis will conclude with the category of pornographication.

### 4.1. Motherhood

The category of motherhood contains the least amount of posts; there are three. The posts in this category are either pictures of Kardashian with her children, the children are mentioned in the caption of the posts, or the caption relates to her parenthood otherwise. Two of the pictures in this category include Kardashian's son, and one of them is of Kardashian on her own.

Figure 1 is a picture of Kardashian alone, with the caption “#momofthree” (figure 1). In the photo Kardashian is seen walking in a street, wearing a top, shorts and high heels. She also has makeup on. It can be argued that with the hashtag she is referring to her looks, and how ‘regular’ mothers are not seen looking so made up and are not necessarily in such a good physical shape like she is. From the point of view of the post-feminist theory, this defies the idea of how women are ‘supposed’ to, or expected to be, which can be interpreted as a feminist sign: Kardashian is presenting herself how she wishes to, despite what society may expect of mothers. However, it can also be viewed as Kardashian enforcing the typical stereotypes that are imposed on women, by constantly presenting herself looking perfect, and not showing anything that can be interpreted as a flaw.

Sofia Caldeira argues that “through the photographic portrait people explore, define, and confirm their idealized self-identities, seeing themselves in the eyes of the media and of others” (143). It can be argued that this is a reciprocatory phenomenon: Kardashian has been in the public eye for more than 10 years, and she has cultivated a certain image of herself which she has to uphold. On the other hand, her audience is expecting her to look and act a certain way, which, if she fails to do, may cause backlash and gain negative comments on her Instagram page and elsewhere. By posting pictures such as in figure 1, Kardashian is confirming the identity that her viewers expect her to uphold. Caldeira also notes that “-- most of the times the Instagram practice is marked by a great effort of idealization of the users lives” (142). It is also possible that Kardashian's followers are aware of this idealisation and would not even want to see the “real” version of her, which would

break the illusion of the “perfect” woman that she seems to represent. Caldeira goes on to state that “photographs act not only as a documental record of a person's identity, but more importantly as a “stage” were they can dramatically perform an idealized version of themselves” (143), which is very applicable to celebrities’ Instagram accounts, which can be considered to be more of a catalogue of what the celebrity does. In the case of Kim Kardashian, she is known for being Kim Kardashian, and her job is to be herself, therefore her Instagram account needs to reflect the aspects of her life that her audience finds interesting.



Figure 1. Kardashian walking. The post was uploaded on January the 17th, 2018. Date of access: February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018.



Figure 2. Kim Kardashian holding her son. The post was uploaded on January the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018. Date of access: February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Figure 2 depicts an image of Kardashian holding her son in her arms, and the caption recounts a story of how he had to visit the hospital. The caption shows motherly worrying on Kardashian's part, as one would expect. In the picture, however, she is heavily made up, and looking what can be considered 'perfect'. It is likely that the picture was taken on another occasion and is not related to the event that is mentioned in the caption. However, the viewer cannot know if that is indeed the case. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that "the question of the reliability of messages" is a key factor within communication (159). They go on to suggest that people are aware of the fact that "while the camera does not lie -- those who use it and its images can and do" (159). Despite being aware of Instagram pictures not being completely 'real' and candid, users of Instagram do not always pay close attention to what they are viewing. Viewers oftentimes scroll past posts quickly, and when doing so they only see the pictures. In this case the picture depicts the image of the 'perfect' woman, and mother, that Kardashian seems to be. This way her followers are left unaware of the hardship that Kardashian is talking about in the caption and are left with only the image of Kardashian's seemingly perfect life.

As Kress and van Leeuwen state, it is possible that the text intends to convey one message, while the image conveys another (18). When presenting different messages in the picture and the caption that accompanies it, the poster is sending mixed signals, which in turn may display a false reality to the viewer. Meaning, the signals may depict an unrealistic image of the poster's, in this case Kim Kardashian's, life. This unrealistic image may affect the viewers' way of thinking. For instance, in figure 2 Kardashian is seemingly 'perfect', even though her child has been in the hospital. This may

make the viewer think that they also have to be able to achieve being ‘perfect’, when they are going through a hard time in their life. In addition to physically looking ‘perfect’, Kardashian is also expressing that she is adequate as a mother. Celebrities, who are also mothers, are often criticised for their parenting skills by the general public. In the caption she is showing that she is capable of taking care of her son. With the combination of the picture and the caption she is showing that she has it all: she is a good mother, and also looks good while being a mother. This way she is setting an example for her followers, who may also have children.

In summary, the posts in the category of ‘motherhood’ aim to show the viewer that Kardashian is a parent, but at the same time she is able to keep up with her image of looking ‘perfect’. This can be seen in both figure 1 and 2: the picture in figure 1 exhibits Kardashian’s trained body, while the caption states that she is also a parent. The caption in figure 2 shows that she is a regular mother who is worried about her child’s well-being, but the picture shows her, again, looking ‘perfect’ despite experiencing hardships.

#### **4.2. Advertisements**

Celebrities often use their Instagram page for advertising products or services. In the world of social media, advertisements are not always obvious like in magazines or television. The present study classifies ‘advertisements’ as posts that either explicitly state that they are done in collaboration with a brand or are promoting Kim Kardashian’s own products, such as her line of cosmetics or perfume range. This category contains nine posts in total.

Each of these posts include captions, which tell the viewer more details about the product that is being advertised. Three of the posts contain the hashtag ‘ad’, which allows the viewer to know that the post is a paid promotion for the brand. The other posts include tags of the brands’ Instagram accounts, or they are promoting Kardashian’s own products, which are tagged and include a link to the web page where one can order them from.

According to Amanda McClain, “social media have the power to greatly raise awareness of a celebrity, perpetuating fame and fortune” (71). Kim Kardashian uses her Instagram page to promote her products, and she also frequently tags her makeup artists, stylists and photographers in the posts, making her followers aware of these people, and guiding them to view their profiles as well.



Figure 3. Kim Kardashian promoting a meal replacement shake. The post was uploaded on January the 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Date of access: February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Figure 3 is an example of a post that is clearly an advertisement: the caption is a detailed account of the benefits of the product that is being advertised, it includes the hashtag “#ad”, and the company, “flattummyco”, is tagged in the post. The advertised product is a “meal replacement shake” (figure 3), which is supposed to help one get a flat stomach. In the picture Kardashian is seen using the product, and she is wearing white clothing, which matches the product that she is advertising.

Because the post is an advertisement, the message that it brings to the viewer is that if one uses the product, they will get a flat stomach. It can also be argued that the combination of the caption and the picture creates the idea that by using the product, one’s body will look like Kim Kardashian’s body. The post also brings a sense of awareness to the viewer: if they did not need this product before, they may think that they need it after seeing Kardashian promote it. As Kress and van Leeuwen state, texts and their meanings often express the values that society upholds (18). In the case of figure 2, it can be argued that the post conveys the idea that having a flat stomach is ideal.

In the caption, Kardashian recounts a personal story of her Christmas and New Year’s holidays, and how she found it difficult to keep up with her workouts and eating habits. This is something that a lot of people can relate to, and it makes it seem like Kardashian is just like any other person. In the picture she is wearing underwear and is showing her flat stomach and trained body. Her pose is highlighting these features even more, and her stomach is at the centre of the picture. It is also the first thing that draws the viewers’ attention when they see the post.

In the post, Kardashian is seen standing in a kitchen, in just her underwear, drinking the shake. This follows the ideals of 'do-me feminism', as according to Brabon and Genz, "the do-me feminist consciously employs her physical appearance and sexuality in order to achieve personal and professional objectives and gain control over her life" (92). In this case, Kardashian is seeking to reach professional gains, and she is using her body to do so. It could, however, be argued that the case of figure 3 requires Kardashian to showcase her body, because she is promoting a product that is supposed to change one's body. If the possible buyer is shown a 'successful' experience of someone using the product, they may be more likely to purchase it.

The caption states, "-- they're [the shakes] all about getting women back on track" (figure 3), which determines the intended audience of the advertisement as women. It is also expressing the idea that women have a 'track' to get back on, of which they may have fallen off during the holidays. The message that the combination of the caption and the image conveys is that women should look a certain way: to have a flat stomach. The caption concludes with Kardashian stating, "-- if you want to start 2018 right... trust me, you're going to want to check them out!" (figure 3). With this comment, Kardashian is further setting the expectations of how women are 'supposed to' look like. She is also creating a sense of familiarity: she is directly addressing the viewer as if they were her friend. By doing this, she is blurring the lines between the celebrity and the fan, and this way making herself more approachable and credible. If the viewer considers her as someone they can relate to, they are more likely to buy the product.

The post is enforcing a strict image of something for women to aspire to, which, according to the post-feminist ideal proposed by McRobbie, undermines the original feminist idea. In the post this can be seen in the way how Kardashian is wearing only underwear, in an advertisement that is not about promoting underwear at all. Kardashian is presented in a sexual manner, which goes along with McRobbie's idea of commercial sexuality. Commercial sexuality includes the idea of women approving of and supporting the "normalisation of pornography" (259). Meaning, it is becoming increasingly common for women to present themselves in a sexual manner in their everyday lives and in contexts where it is not necessarily needed. In the case of figure 3, this is being done by presenting Kardashian sexually in a context where it is not necessary for the intended aim of the advertisement, which is to promote a meal replacement shake. McRobbie suggests that an important aspect of commercial sexuality is to dismiss the original feminist ideas, while supporting "a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality participation and pleasure --" (260).

In the case of figure 3, the caption and the picture are clearly connected. With the combination of the caption and the image, the viewer gets the idea that by using this product they can achieve the



same kind of body that Kardashian has. However, Kardashian already has a flat stomach in the picture, which would mean that she does not need the product at all. This creates unrealistic expectations for the viewers: the message that the photo and the caption convey is that one will achieve a flat stomach by using the product. It also evokes the idea that if one does not already look like Kardashian, they should buy the product in order to “get back on track” (figure 3) and achieve this type of a body.



Figure 4. Kim Kardashian’s perfume advertisement. The post was uploaded on January the 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018. Date of access: February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Figure 4 is an advertisement for Kardashian’s range of perfumes, which is called the Kimoji Hearts range. The post fulfils the criteria for an advertisement: the caption is a lengthy description of the product and the post contains tags to the product line’s own Instagram page, as well as a link to the website where one can order the perfumes from. It is, however, missing the signifying hashtag, ‘ad’. In the picture Kardashian is seen posing with a life-size version of the perfume bottle.

Similarly to figure 3, Kardashian’s clothes match the product in figure 4. However, in figure 4, Kardashian herself is not at the centre of the picture. The focus is on the product, and its name, “Ride or Die”, is at the very centre of the post. The caption of the post begins with the name of the product written in capital letters. The tag is also placed at the centre of the photo, which the viewer will see once they tap or click on the photo. It is evident that this post is meant to promote the product, and not Kardashian as a persona.

The caption is a very detailed description of what the perfume smells like, which is important as the fragrance is only sold online, and the customer is not able to smell or test it before purchasing. In this post, the caption is not personal at all, and in the picture Kardashian is just a model for the product: it does not have any other relation to her, except for the fact that it carries her name. It can be claimed that Kardashian herself is not in the main focus of the post, and that she is there as a prop to enhance the product's image, or to merely give a face to the product. Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that in advertising, it is possible that the "verbal text is studiously 'non-sexist', while the visual text encodes overtly sexist stereotypes" (18). Figure 4 embodies the idea of using one's body to achieve professional benefits, as noted by Brabon and Genz (92). While the caption is very professional and applicable, the promotional picture could be considered sexist, as Kardashian is styled in a way that accentuates her body. In addition, Kardashian is there to promote the perfume, and she is an object to look at, alongside of the perfume itself. Furthermore, Kardashian is using herself as a way to advertise and bring attention to the product that she is currently selling.

It can also be argued that, as the product is from Kardashian's own range, she is able to influence the marketing of the product. Therefore, it is possible that she is able to affect her styling. As Brabon and Genz argue, a key element within 'do-me feminism' is glamorous styling (98), which is evident in figure 4. In addition, this advertisement is posted on Kardashian's own Instagram page, which gives the impression that she has approved of the messages that the post conveys.

It is important to note that in the posts that are classified as 'advertisements', the captions and the pictures relate to each other, while in the other categories that is not always the case. A reason for this may be the fact that Kardashian has been given directions on what to write in the captions when she is posting about a certain product. In addition, the intention of an advertisement is to sell the product, and the section for captions is the only space where one can tell more details about the products. Therefore, it can be argued that it is necessary to include a descriptive caption with promotional pictures.

To summarise, the most notable difference between the category of advertisements and the other categories lies in the captions. The captions in this category are very descriptive; they give detailed explanations of what the products are for, and what their benefits are. Unlike in the other categories, all of the posts' captions relate to the picture. In addition, it is important to note that in order to make the decision on if they want to buy the product, the possible buyer can only rely on Kardashian's image, and the description that the post provides. Because of this, Kardashian and her team must be sure that the products will sell well. It can be assumed that Kardashian is aware of the

image that she has cultivated and is upholding, and of the status that she has as an ‘icon’ in popular culture.

### 4.3. Unclear or possible advertisements

The posts that are classified as ‘unclear or possible advertisements’ are posts from which the viewer is unable to clearly tell if they are, or are not, advertisements. The pictures are mostly of Kardashian herself, and most of them contain tags. It is the tags which make it hard for the viewer to tell if the post is a paid advert or not. The tags are mainly those of Instagram pages of the brands of clothing and cosmetics that she is wearing.

Amanda Scheiner McClain observes that celebrities, Kim Kardashian included, use social media to build a “version of themselves” for the public eye (74). This version is a combination of the public persona, and the private person (74). Adrienne Trier-Bieniek argues that “popular media plays a highly significant role in shaping women’s conceptions of what is possible” (106), which supports the notion of the fact that Kardashian’s widespread influence may in turn affect the views of her audience, women and non-women alike, for instance on the idea of what women are ‘supposed’ to be and what they ‘cannot’ be.



Figure 5. Kardashian posing in front of a mirror. The post was uploaded on January the 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Date of access: February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018.



Figure 6. Kardashian walking with ice-cream. The post was uploaded on January the 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Date of access: February the 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Figures 5 and 6 are very similar in nature. Figure 5 shows an image of Kardashian taking a picture of herself via a mirror. She is wearing only a piece of underwear, which is tagged with the tag "tomford". Tom Ford is a luxury clothing brand. The caption is only an emoji of a camera, and it does not give any kind of indication towards whether the post is a paid advertisement of the brand. The emoji does, however, seemingly relate to the photo. One can see a flash from Kardashian's phone camera, which allows the viewer to make a connection between the picture and the caption, although it does not give more context to the photo.

The setting of the photo is quite casual: Kardashian's hair is wet, as if she just got out of the shower. Pictures in casual settings allow the viewers to feel as though they know Kardashian personally, however, it is impossible for the viewer to know if the pictures from her 'private life' are actually that, or if they are staged, or, in this case, advertisements. Admittedly, McClain does also note that "social media have the potential to alter the illusion of intimacy, while also perpetuating it" (71). It is important for a celebrity to maintain a relationship with their fans and followers, in order to keep them coming back to view their posts and continuing to support them.

Figure 6 is a seemingly candid photo of Kardashian. She is walking in a street, holding an ice-cream cone. The caption states, "I'm craving Mc Donald's" (figure 6). She has also tagged the Instagram page of McDonald's in the picture. It is not evident if the post is an advertisement, because it is missing the indicating hashtag, 'ad'.

While the pictures in both posts are seemingly casual, Kardashian is still presenting something for her audience to aspire to: she is showing her body, a part of her house and the expensive piece of clothing she is wearing. At the same time, she is showing a glimpse of her as a 'regular' person: in figure 5, she has apparently just stepped out of a shower, and in figure 6 she is craving junk food, which is something that a lot of people can relate to. The contrast between Kardashian as a private person and her public persona is evident in this category. Sofia Caldeira notes that by posting pictures online, people seem to be "either representing Positive moments of their lives or by representing the desirable Objects they acquired through consumption" (142). This is evident throughout the category of 'unclear or possible advertisements'.

In short, the category of 'unclear or possible advertisements' differs from the obvious advertisement in their captions. In this category, the captions do not explicitly state if the posts are advertisements. Because of this, the viewer does not know if the pictures are candid or whether they are staged to promote the product. This, in turn, may cause the viewer of the posts to make a falsified modality judgement of the reality of the post, as proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (161).

#### **4.4. Pornographication**

The category of 'pornographication' contains eight posts. The posts selected for this category can all be considered to be of sexual nature, despite the context of the posts not being sexual at all. In most of the posts in this category, Kardashian is nearly nude, or the posts employ "pornographic styles and aesthetics" (Brabon and Genz 101), such as in her posing or styling.

The term 'pornographication' refers to the phenomenon of mainstream media increasingly incorporating sexual themes into discourse, and a "-- culture that finds its expression in the propagation of discourses about and representations of sex and sexuality across a range of media form" (Gill, qtd. in Brabon and Genz 101). Pornographication is closely tied into 'do-me feminism' and raunch culture. Brabon and Genz argue that "nowhere is the do-me feminist stance more contentious than in the mainstream of popular culture, where feminism has come to be associated with sexually aggressive behaviour, glamorous styling and provocative posturing" (98). Today, this is particularly salient in the world of social media, and Instagram especially.

Figure 7 shows Kardashian lying on a bed, wearing only underwear. The caption states, "rise and grind" (figure 7), which suggests that the picture was taken in the morning, which, in turn may suggest that the photo is casual. However, Kardashian has tagged a photographer in the post, which implies that the picture was planned in advance, and is not candid at all. Caldeira argues that

pictures act as a “stage’ were they [people] can dramatically perform an idealized version of themselves” (143). As previously mentioned, it is especially important for celebrities to maintain a certain image of themselves online, because that is what their audience expects of them. In addition, Claudia Nir notes that people “perform different roles in different settings and before different audiences” (13). While Kardashian presents a sexualised image of herself on Instagram, it may not reflect who she actually is in her personal life.



Figure 7. Kardashian lying on a bed. The post was uploaded on January the 5th, 2018. Date of access: February the 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

The picture in figure 7 encompasses some of the elements of pornographication, mentioned by Brabon and Genz (101), as well as aspects of ‘raunch culture’. Kardashian is nearly nude in the picture, and she is highlighting her curves with her pose. Her face is not clearly visible, and the focus of the photo is on her body. The caption of the post brings some context to the image; the combination of the caption and the picture implies that the photo was taken candidly, but it may not be the case in reality.

Kress and Van Leeuwen note that the viewers of photographs will likely never meet all, or any, of the people who are involved in creating them, and the viewers may have a “distorted and glamourized idea of the production processes behind the image” (119). It is often the case that viewers fail to realise how much thought and effort goes into producing one photo. In the context of social media, it is especially easy to forget, as social media are often used for instant posting. This

factor is important to take into account when studying celebrities' Instagram accounts, where they, essentially, create a product of themselves.



Figure 8. Kardashian posing with a coat. The post was uploaded on January the 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Date of access: February the 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

Figure 8 is perhaps the most notable case of pornographication within the scope of the data. Kardashian is wearing a fur coat and a piece of underwear, and she is posing with her breast completely bare. Figure 8 showcases provocative posturing and glamorous styling, which are key elements of 'do-me feminism', as proposed by Brabon and Genz (98). The post does not have a caption, and the viewer is not given any other context besides the photo.

The focus of the picture is, again, on Kardashian's body. She is presenting herself unashamedly how she wants to, which complies with feminist ideas of women expressing themselves freely. From the post-feminist point of view, however, this kind of expression undermines the feminist idea. McRobbie suggests that "by means of the tropes of freedom and choice -- feminism is decisively aged and made to seem redundant" (255). Considering this approach, Kardashian is choosing to show her body, but at the same time she is exposing herself to scrutiny and criticism. In addition, Nir notes that "people consciously and unconsciously define the way they are perceived through emphasizing certain characteristics, such as -- their hairstyle, through dress, behaviour, speech and so on --" (15). In the case of figure 8, Kardashian is enforcing the image that she has by posing nearly nude, in a sexual manner.

The pictures that Kim Kardashian posts are highly retouched and edited, and it is likely that she takes multiple shots before posting one. However, the viewers of the posts do not see what happens

'behind the scenes', and they may not think about the fact that each post is carefully planned and honed before it is actually posted. As noted by Caldeira, "through the photographic portrait people explore, define, and confirm their idealized self-identities" (143).

As was previously mentioned, Kardashian is a celebrity and she uses her Instagram page to promote herself and her products. It could be argued that she wants to gain more followers, as well as likes for her posts. In order to achieve this, she needs to keep giving the viewers reasons for them to come back to view her posts. According to Nir, "in an online environment people are able to select only information that present a desired image, therefore presenting a highly selective version of themselves" (16). Nudity is an effective way to gain attention, and to keep people talking about her. At the same time, by posting nude pictures, Kardashian is creating a standard that she continuously has to live up to. If her followers expect her to post similar pictures, she has to continue finding new ways to attract her viewers, which may result in posting even braver pictures for shock value.

In brief, the category of pornographication presents Kim Kardashian as a freely sexual woman. At the same time, it can be argued that she is following the post-feminist principle of undermining feminist roots by posing nearly nude and submitting herself to scrutiny, as well as creating a model for other women to follow. According to Brabon and Genz, "texts citing highly sexualised and pornographic styles and aesthetics have become common features of popular media culture in Western societies" (101). This is evident throughout the category, as Kardashian is seen posing nearly, or completely, nude in contexts that do not require nudity at all. Many of the posts lack captions which would give context to the pictures. In these cases, the only context is the picture itself, which further reinforces the post-feminist point of view.



## 5. Conclusion

The objectives of the present study were to examine Kim Kardashian's use of Instagram, how she presents herself in her posts, and what kind of a woman she seems to represent. This was done by analysing Kardashian's posts using the post-feminist theory and multimodal discourse analysis as references. The findings state that on her Instagram page, Kim Kardashian represents a woman who expresses her sexuality freely while still being a mother and a successful business woman. Oftentimes it is said that women cannot be all these things, but in the posts that were analysed, Kardashian breaks these stereotypes.

When examining Kim Kardashian's Instagram pictures, one could argue that the woman she represents follows feminist principles, as she presents herself how she wishes freely and without shame. However, it could also be interpreted as her defying these principles, as many of her pictures are very sexual in nature, which in turn may objectify her. This dichotomy is evident, and it is a key factor when it comes to Kardashian's posts: she expresses her womanhood according to her wishes, but at the same time she enforces the stereotypical expectations for women that the society harbours. By enforcing these stereotypes in her posts, she simultaneously creates an image of something that her followers should aspire to, whether it is by buying the products she endorses or by emulating the way she looks. Alternatively, when considering Angela McRobbie's theory of post-feminism dismantling the original ideas of feminism, it is evident that Kardashian is not the feminist icon that some of her followers seem to consider her to be.

Themes of pornographication and 'do-me feminism' are evident in each category that were presented in this thesis. These elements can be seen in the ways that Kardashian poses and how she is styled in her pictures. It can be argued that while Kardashian seems to implement and normalise overtly sexual behaviour online, she also breaks the stigma of women not being sexual beings. At the same time, however, she is setting expectations for how women are 'supposed' to be like. On Instagram, Kardashian is in a constant state of perfection. It is very unrealistic, but that is what her followers expect of her, and if she were to show herself looking less than 'perfect', it could gain negative attention and damage her career. It could, therefore, be argued that Kardashian is also creating expectations for herself to keep up with.

Kardashian has a lot of fans and followers, of all ages. It is important to note that while her younger fans may look up to her and copy her styling and the pictures that she posts, Kardashian does not state that she wants to be a role model for these young fans. Therefore, it is not Kardashian's responsibility to ensure that her young fans do not copy her styling or posing. In addition,

Kardashian herself is an adult, and she is free to present herself as she wishes on her Instagram page. This, however, does not change the fact that Kardashian has a notable influence on her audience, and her actions may affect the opinions and views of her audience. This is especially applicable when examining the posts that are advertising something. In those posts she is intentionally trying to make her audience purchase the products that she is promoting.

The findings state that Kardashian includes the most descriptive captions in posts where she is advertising something. This is due to the fact that the intention of the posts is to sell the products. Posts that are not advertisements either do not include captions at all, or they are very short and non-descriptive. In most posts outside of the category of advertisements, the caption and the picture are not related to each other, while in posts that are advertisements, they have a clear connection. In the posts with detailed captions, Kardashian is engaging her followers, and making them feel as though they are close to her, while in the posts without captions, she is distancing herself from them. This creates a barrier between Kardashian's public and private persona: she seems to include her followers in her life when she has something to gain from them.

It is difficult to predict whether Kardashian will continue to be popular in the future or not. Trends in popular culture are fickle, and they are constantly changing. In addition, the popularity of celebrities varies, and it is possible that Kardashian's fans will move on to follow someone else. This has already started happening, as Kardashian's half-sisters, Kendall and Kylie Jenner, have become immensely popular in the recent years. However, Kim Kardashian has been able to uphold her popularity for more than 10 years, and by changing and adapting to the current trends, it is possible that her success will continue, and she will gain even more fans and following.

The scope of data for the present study is quite small, which makes the findings limited. Future research might benefit from a larger scope, which would make the results more accurate and applicable on a larger scale. Also, future research could be expanded to other celebrities who are similar to Kardashian, in order to draw more accurate conclusions about the state of popular culture. Moreover, future research could focus on, for instance, how following celebrities, such as Kim Kardashian, affects people's self-image, and what kind of an impact these types of celebrities have on society, which this thesis did not examine. In addition, research could focus on comparing how different celebrities have different kinds of status in society, and how they differ from each other.

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