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POWER, IMAGE, AND CAPITAL: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF EMILY RATAJKOWSKI'S MY BODY MEMOIR (2021)

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Abstract

This study examines Emily Ratajkowski's *My Body* Memoir (*2021*) through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital and a feminist literary criticism approach. It explores how the female body is depicted and commodified, where beauty and desirability become forms of capital. This study investigates how Ratajkowski's experiences reflect the dynamics of capital in contemporary media culture, Using Bourdieu's four types of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Preliminary analysis reveals that symbolic capital plays a dominant role in shaping the portrayal of Ratajkowski's body, where her visibility, desirability, and recognition are central to her narrative of both empowerment and exploitation. Through a feminist lens, the study highlights how Ratajkowski navigates these power structures, using her body to negotiate her place within a media-driven capitalist system. The study contributes to feminist discourse by exploring the intersection of gender, power, and capital in the commodification of female bodies in modern society.

Keywords: Emily Ratajkowski, *My Body*, Capital Bourdieu, Feminist Literary Criticism, Female Agency.

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Introduction

The female body have historically been embedded within cultural, economic, and ideological systems. In contemporary media culture, women's bodies are not only represented but also consumed, circulated and valued as commodities. Beauty, visibility, and desirability increasingly operate as a source of power while also reinforcing patriarchal traditions. female body becomes a site where empowerment and exploitation coexist, shaped by both agency and structural constraint.

Emily Ratajkowski's memoir *My Body* (2021) offers a reflective critique through a personal narrative shaped by her career in the media and fashion industries. As a model and actress, Ratajkowski illustrates how her physical appearance operates as a primary source of income in her career. granting her access to wealth, visibility, and symbolic recognition. At the same time, her body remains subject to objectification and normative gender expectations. Rather than positioning herself solely as a victim, Ratajkowski highlights the ambivalent nature of embodiment, where the body functions both as a strategic resource and a site of vulnerability within capitalist and media systems.

Previous studies on *My Body* have largely emphasized feminist resistance and bodily objectification, often employing patriarchy and male gaze as primarily analytical frameworks. While these approaches provide important critical perspective, they tend to frame the female body primarily as a site of oppression. This article advances the discourse by applying Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital to examine how the female body operates as multiple forms of capital operating within specific social structures.

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Theoretical Review

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital conceptualizes capital as resources that produce and maintain power within social structures. In this framework, capital is not limited to economic or material assets, but operates in multiple forms that shape social relations. These forms of capital include: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital.

According to Bourdieu (1986) these forms of capital interact to shape one's position within social hierarchies. In the context of gender, women often accumulate capital through embodied and cultural forms, which are often constrained or exploited by patriarchal norms. As a result, the female body becomes a strategic yet vulnerable site where capital is produced and contested.

Bourdieu identifies four primary forms of capital, Economic capital encompasses material or financial assets that can be directly converted into money, making it the most visible and measurable form of capital. Cultural capital refers to embodied dispositions of assets that encompasses through education, knowledge, skills, and culture. Social capital derives from social networks of relationship and group affiliation, the quality and power of those connections that able provide access to resources and opportunities. Symbolic capital operates through recognition, legitimacy, and prestige that grant value to other forms of capital. These forms of capital are connected and may be converted into one another depending on social context. (Bourdieu, 1986).

Method

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach using close textual analysis as the primary method to examine Emily Ratajkowski's memoir *My Body* (2021). The study grounded in feminist literary criticism and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital as the main analytical frameworks.

The data consist of narrative passages, personal perspective and reflections, and selected quotations from the memoir that represent the body's function as economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Data collection was conducted through careful and repeated reading, followed by the identification of relevant text to bodily representation, commodification, and agency. The analytical procedure involved three stages. First, the selected data were categorized according to the four forms of capital by Bourdieu. Second, the data were interpreted using feminist literary criticism to examine how the female body is positioned within patriarchal and capitalist structures. Third, the findings were synthesized to explain the negotiation between commodification and agency as reflected in the text.

Result

The main findings of the research based on the analysis of Emily Ratajkowski's memoir *My Body* demonstrates that the female body in the text operates as a significant form of capital within the media. Specifically, the analysis reveals four dominant forms of capital, economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. These findings illustrated how bodily representation is not only a matter of appearance but a strategic resource that is continuously negotiated within media and contemporary culture.

1. Economic Capital

Data 1

" In many ways, I have been Undeniably rewarded by capitalizing on my sexuality, I became internationally recognizable, amassed an audience of millions, and have made more money through endorsement and fashion campaigns than my parents (an English

professor and a painting teacher) ever dreamed of earning in their lifetimes." (My Body, Ratajkowski, 2021, p.5)

This passage from My Body memoir shows how Emily's sexuality has been commodified that allows her to accumulate wealth by becoming famous and amassing millions of audiences, made money through lots of brand deals and endorsement that made this passage relates to economic capital in Bourdieu's framework.

2. Social Capital

"We'd been instructed to meet at the Plaza, where we were directed immediately onto a bus. Evan had been right about the other guests: there were two famous models whom I'd never met before, one known for her recent appearance on the cover of Sports Illustrated's swimsuit edition and the other for her stint as a Victoria's Secret angel. There were a few male actors, accompanied by their posses." (My Body, Ratajkowski, 2021, p. 138).

Written on Emily's memoir, her experience on an exclusive event and social setting among well-known models and actors where she could connect and get new opportunities. This passage relates to Bourdieu's capital in social aspects, that Ratajkowski's presence and influence in such circles grants her access to do networking that can enhance her visibility and new opportunities. The act of being included among these figures demonstrates how social ties functions as valuable resources in modeling and media industries.

3. Cultural Capital

"Over the course of our dinner, Natalie didn't bring up anything about my body and I, despite being underage and driving, drank three glasses of the driest, most delicious white wine I'd ever tasted. We talked about Los Angeles and the clients we didn't like and the clients we loved. I'd never experienced a "getting to know you" dinner with people I worked with."

This passage illustrates cultural capital as it demonstrates how Emily's experience of her first professional dinner setting that acquires the knowledge, behavior, and social norms and habit that are valued in the professional modeling and entertainment industries. The setting shows how professionals talk, interact, topics that are appropriate in a work setting. According to Bourdieu, this form of learning is part of embodied cultural capital where individuals gained legitimacy through behavior and communication style. Therefore, the dinner functions as a space of cultural transmission, enabling Emily to adapt herself to the standards of industry and strengthen her position within it.

4. Symbolic Capital

"I built a platform by sharing images of myself and my body online, making my body and subsequently my name recognizable, which at least in part gave me the ability to publish this book." (My Body, Ratajkowski, 2021, p.5)

In this passage, Emily talks about her images and her online presence and influence which shows how the visibility of her image became widely recognizable, which enabled her to publish her memoir. This passage illustrates symbolic capital in Bourdieu's framework, as recognition and legitimacy gained through public visibility and function as valuable resources that can be converted into further reputation and recognition, and operates as a form of power that opens access to other fields.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate how Ratajkowski actively mobilizes her body and her public presence into various forms of capital within the media industry. However, Ratajkowski acknowledges the exploitation of her body within the entertainment industry, yet through her memoir she attempts to reclaim her own agency and authorship. By publishing My Body, Ratajkowski asserts authority in a space typically controlled by media. She reconfigures her body from a visual commodity into a narrative text under her own authorship. In line with Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which

suggests that although gender is structured by norms, it can also be reshaped as a form of resistance.

Conclusion

This research finds that the data found from Ratajkowski's my body memoir, can be concluded that the research presents 4 types of capital based on Bourdieu's framework, economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. The result shows that all forms of capital appear throughout the memoir as Ratajkowski navigates her career and personal life within the media and entertainment industries. Ratajkowski depends heavily on visibility, professional networks, and public acknowledgement. In media driven environments, reputation and social connection often holds more powerful than material wealth. These data findings confirm that Ratajkowski's body becomes a site through value, authority, and access is negotiated but at the same time, the memoir also became Ratajkowski's space to reclaim her agency by narrating her life journey in her own words and terms, she challenges the structure that commodify her body as a woman. Although Ratajkowski participates in practices that contribute to the commodification of her body, she retains her agency by consciously choose to operate within the system while maintaining a clear sense of self and personal boundaries. Moreover, through her own narrative in My Body memoir, Ratajkowski articulates a form of subtle resistance, revealing that even within restrictive cultural structures, female agency continues to negotiate, challenge, and redefine itself.

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