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Introduction

Women's bodies have long been sites of cultural attention, regulation, and debate within Hollywood and popular media. Although recent conversations about body positivity and representation have challenged narrow beauty standards, thinness still holds cultural significance in contemporary celebrity and entertainment culture. Discussions of women's bodies increasingly circulate celebrity weight loss, changing physical appearances, diet culture, and expectations surrounding femininity. This project examines the perceived return of thinness as a feminine beauty ideal in Hollywood, focusing on how contemporary media discourse constructs this perception. Rather than assuming that thinness has objectively returned as a dominant beauty standard, my project examines how media discourse produces and negotiates the perception that it has.

Ariana Grande serves as the central case study for my project because her appearance especially has become a recurring subject of public and media discussion, especially within the last year. Throughout her career, entertainment journalism, social media, interviews, photographs, and public commentary have represented and interpreted Grande's body and physical appearance. Recent discussions of her appearance have frequently extended beyond descriptions of her body to questions and assumptions about weight, health, beauty, and femininity. Grande has also publicly addressed commentary about her body, emphasizing that

appearance does not provide enough information to determine another person's health or circumstances. Her case therefore provides an opportunity to examine how a celebrity woman's body becomes a site through which broader cultural assumptions about women's bodies are produced and circulated.

My project examines how discourse constructs these meanings. Existing scholarship has demonstrated that beauty standards are culturally and historically produced rather than universal or fixed. Feminist scholarship has also examined the female body as a site of social regulation and has questioned the cultural systems through which certain bodies become more desirable or acceptable than others (Shefer; Kyrölä and Harjunen). Research on media and body image has further established the importance of thin-ideal representations within fashion and social media, while more recent scholarship has examined the coexistence of thinspiration, fitspiration, body positivity, and body neutrality within digital media environments (McLean et al.; Schönhals et al.). These conversations provide an important foundation for understanding the cultural significance of thinness. Still, they do not fully explain how contemporary media discourse constructs the meaning of thinness itself, particularly through representations of celebrity women.

My project addresses that gap through Critical Discourse Analysis, informed by feminist and intersectional theories of the body. CDA provides a way to examine how language and representation produce social meanings rather than treating media descriptions as neutral accounts of reality. Applied to discourse surrounding Grande, the analysis will examine recurring language, assumptions, binaries, and patterns through which thinness, beauty, femininity, health, desirability, and bodily discipline are constructed. A feminist and intersectional framework will further allow my analysis to consider how these representations participate in broader

expectations surrounding women's bodies and femininity. My project therefore shifts attention away from simply asking whether thin-ideal media affects audiences and instead asks how contemporary media discourse constructs and negotiates the cultural meaning of the thin female body. The following research questions will guide my project: How does contemporary media discourse construct the perceived return of thinness as a feminine beauty ideal through representations of Ariana Grande? What discourses surrounding femininity, beauty, health, and the female body emerge in media representations of Ariana Grande's appearance? How do these discourses reproduce, negotiate, or challenge dominant cultural understandings of thinness and femininity?

Literature Review

I. The Cultural Construction of the Female Body

Scholarship on the female body shows that cultural expectations shape understandings of women's bodies rather than biology alone. Feminist theories of the body, position women's physical appearance as a site where gendered power, social regulation, and cultural expectations intersect. Shefer argues that feminist approaches to the body must account for the ways women's bodies become implicated in systems of oppression, demonstrating that one cannot understand the body separately from the social structures that assign it meaning. This perspective is important for examining contemporary media discourse because it shifts attention away from viewing appearance as an individual or purely aesthetic concern and toward the cultural systems that determine which bodies are valued.

Kyrölä and Harjunen similarly demonstrate that body size carries cultural meanings through their examination of fatness, thinness, and feminist theories of the body. Their discussion of the “phantom” and “liminal” fat body illustrates how bodies can become simultaneously visible and

marginalized when they do not conform to dominant expectations. Their work therefore complicates the assumption that thinness has an objective or universal meaning. Instead, body size becomes meaningful through cultural norms that distinguish between desirable, acceptable, excessive, and otherwise regulated bodies. This perspective allows thinness to be examined not simply as a physical characteristic but as a culturally valued position within broader systems of bodily regulation.

Beauty standards are also historically and culturally variable. Boucherie et al.'s research on the cultural evolution of beauty standards shows that representations of physical attractiveness change over time, while certain body characteristics can continue to receive disproportionate cultural visibility. This complicates the idea that contemporary beauty culture moves straightforwardly from restrictive ideals toward greater inclusivity. Instead, multiple and sometimes contradictory standards can coexist. One can therefore understand the perceived renewed visibility of thinness within a media environment that promotes greater diversity while still privileging particular forms of femininity.

Race and intersectionality also shape these standards. Avery et al. demonstrate the importance of examining hegemonic beauty ideals through the experiences of Black women, particularly because dominant standards can reflect racialized and Eurocentric understandings of femininity. Kanai similarly examines how women negotiate dominant expectations of femininity within contemporary popular feminist discourse, emphasizing that individuals may simultaneously reproduce, negotiate, and challenge those expectations. Together, this scholarship establishes the female body as a culturally constructed site where gender, race, beauty, and power intersect. This foundation is necessary for examining how thinness acquires meaning within contemporary

Hollywood discourse and how representations of a celebrity woman's body can participate in broader constructions of femininity.

II. Thinness, Media, and Celebrity Culture

Building on scholarship that understands the female body as culturally constructed, researchers have examined how media circulates thinness as a feminine ideal. Thinness has historically been associated with attractiveness, femininity, discipline, and desirability, particularly within fashion and popular media. Tiggemann, Polivy, and Hargreaves demonstrate the significance of thin-ideal representations in fashion media, while McLean et al. examine the relationship between exposure to thin-ideal media and body satisfaction. Booms and Lynch extend this conversation to social media imagery, demonstrating the continued significance of thin-ideal representations within contemporary digital environments. Together, this research establishes the media as an important site where expectations about women's bodies circulate and are reinforced.

The movement from traditional fashion media to social media has expanded the visibility and circulation of these ideals. Brown and Tiggemann's research on celebrity Instagram images demonstrates how celebrity representations can contribute to body comparison and appearance evaluation. Unlike traditional media, social media allows celebrity bodies to circulate alongside captions, comments, and audience responses, creating an environment in which representations of women's bodies can be continually interpreted and negotiated. Slater, Cole, and Fardouly further complicate this relationship by examining responses to parody versions of thin-ideal images, showing that audiences can also challenge these representations when encouraged to recognize their constructed nature. Schönhals et al. similarly identify the coexistence of thinspiration, fitspiration, body positivity, and body neutrality content within image-based social

media. Together, these studies demonstrate that contemporary media does not communicate a single, uncontested message about the ideal female body.

Contemporary discussions of weight and body image also exist within a changing landscape of weight-loss culture. Markey et al. examine body image and interest in GLP-1 weight-loss medications, illustrating how contemporary understandings of weight management intersect with women's relationships to their bodies. This scholarship provides additional context for my project because the perceived return of thinness occurs alongside new cultural conversations about weight loss and the technologies and practices associated with achieving particular body types. Rather than treating contemporary thinness as an isolated aesthetic trend, these developments suggest that ideas about the desirable female body remain connected to broader cultural conversations about weight, transformation, and bodily control.

Celebrity culture is particularly significant within this media environment because celebrities' bodies receive sustained public visibility and interpretation. Ferris's analysis of media representations of celebrity women shows how discourse around individual celebrities can shape broader ideas about what constitutes an appropriate female body. Rogers similarly examines women's bodies within fashion media through the concept of surveillance, illustrating how female appearances can become objects of continuous observation and evaluation. Celebrity bodies therefore function as highly visible cultural sites where expectations surrounding femininity and appearance are produced and negotiated.

These findings provide a foundation for my examination of Ariana Grande as a case study. Grande's body and appearance have received extensive attention across entertainment media and social platforms, with discussion frequently extending beyond physical description into assumptions about beauty, health, femininity, and personal behavior. Her case offers an

opportunity to examine how broader cultural ideas about thinness attach to an individual celebrity woman's body. It also highlights a tension within contemporary media: discourse may reject judging women's bodies while continuing to describe, evaluate, and interpret them. My study builds on existing scholarship by shifting attention from the effects of thin-ideal representations toward the discourse through which thinness itself is constructed and negotiated in contemporary celebrity culture.

III. Critical Discourse Analysis, Feminist Theory, and the Research Gap

While existing scholarship establishes that women's bodies and thinness are culturally constructed and widely circulated through media, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a way to examine how language and representation produce these meanings. Rather than treating media discourse as a neutral reflection of reality, CDA examines how recurring linguistic patterns, assumptions, categories, and oppositions shape social meanings. Pienaar and Bekker's analysis of the female body demonstrates how discourse can construct competing meanings around women's bodies through ideas about discipline, health, attractiveness, and bodily control. Their work provides a methodological foundation for examining how discourse can reproduce conflicting expectations while presenting particular bodily ideals as natural or desirable.

CDA has also been applied to media representations of women's bodies and celebrity culture. Ferris's examination of media constructions of celebrity women's bodies demonstrates how discourse can establish culturally appropriate understandings of female appearance. Similarly, research on celebrity discourse on Instagram considers how digital media participates in constructing femininity and gendered expectations. These studies provide a methodological precedent for examining not simply what a celebrity's body looks like, but how media discourse gives that body cultural meaning. Feminist approaches further strengthen this method by

recognizing that representations of women's bodies operate within broader systems of gendered power. At the same time, an intersectional perspective keeps the analysis attentive to how beauty standards can be racialized and differently experienced across social identities.

Despite extensive scholarship on thin-ideal media, body image, beauty standards, and celebrity representation, less attention has been given to how contemporary media discourse itself constructs the perceived return of thinness. Much existing research emphasizes audience effects, body satisfaction, or exposure to idealized imagery. At the same time, less attention has been paid to the language through which contemporary media describes, explains, and evaluates celebrity women's bodies. This distinction matters in a media environment where discourses of body positivity and bodily autonomy coexist with continued public scrutiny of women's appearances. By examining discourse surrounding Ariana Grande, my project brings together scholarship on the cultural construction of women's bodies, thin-ideal media, celebrity culture, and feminist approaches to bodily regulation. Through CDA, the study will examine how thinness is constructed in relation to femininity, beauty, health, desirability, and bodily discipline, while also identifying moments when these meanings are challenged or negotiated.

Methodology

My project will employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) informed by feminist and intersectional theories of the body. CDA is appropriate because the research questions focus on how contemporary media discourse constructs and negotiates meanings surrounding thinness, femininity, beauty, health, and the female body. Rather than treating representations of Ariana Grande's appearance as neutral descriptions, the analysis will examine how language and representation establish particular understandings of what women's bodies should look like and what those bodies are assumed to communicate about health, beauty, femininity, and desirability.

The research object (RO) will consist of a bounded sample of contemporary media discourse surrounding Ariana Grande's body and physical appearance. The sample will include approximately 10-12 publicly circulated texts, including entertainment-news articles, social-media discourse, and selected statements from Grande herself. I will be selecting texts based on their explicit discussion of Grande's appearance, weight, thinness, health, beauty, or femininity. Examining both media representations of Ariana Grande and her own responses to commentary about her body will allow my project to consider how authority over the meaning of a celebrity woman's body is constructed and negotiated. The sample will be limited to a defined contemporary time period to remain manageable while capturing current discourse surrounding the perceived return of thinness in Hollywood.

My analysis will examine recurring language, assumptions, binaries, and patterns through which thinness, beauty, femininity, health, desirability, and bodily discipline are constructed. I will pay particular attention to how texts describe Grande's body, what explanations or assumptions accompany those descriptions, and who is positioned as having authority to interpret her appearance. I will also examine tensions such as healthy/unhealthy, attractive/unattractive, thin/normal, disciplined/undisciplined, and empowerment/objectification. Additionally, the analysis will consider moments when media discourse appears to reject judging women's bodies while still observing and evaluating Grande's appearance.

A feminist framework will guide the interpretation by treating the female body as a site of cultural regulation and gendered expectations. An intersectional perspective will further account for how beauty standards operate within broader systems of identity and power, rather than treating femininity as a universal experience. Together, these frameworks will allow my analysis to consider not only what media discourse says about Grande's body, but what broader cultural

assumptions make those statements possible and meaningful. The goal is not to determine whether Ariana Grande is objectively representative of a returning thin ideal, but to analyze how contemporary discourse constructs the perception that thinness is returning as a valued feminine ideal.

Through this methodology, my project will connect Ariana Grande's case to broader scholarly conversations about beauty standards, celebrity culture, bodily surveillance, and feminist theories of the body. My analysis will ultimately use Grande's case to examine how contemporary media discourse reproduces, negotiates, or challenges cultural expectations surrounding women's bodies.

“I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work, and am unaware of anyone who has not”. -*Trinity Bothur*

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