

# Gender Rhetoric for Sale: Ferragni and the Platformization of the Female Body That Crushes Ideologies

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## Abstract

This article aims to make a contribution to the study of liberal feminism, social media, and influencer culture, especially in the Italian context. The feminism of Chiara Ferragni, Italian fashion influencer with over 29 million followers, is an interesting case study that questions the relations, as well as the interaction, between activism, gender, and influencer culture. Ferragni’s body simulacrum, exhibited through numerous social media advertising images, was displayed at Sanremo, a renowned Italian song festival, watched by 12 million people in 2023. At Sanremo, that body carried on the feminist battle through the wearing of manifesto luxury designer dresses together with the reading of a letter addressed to herself, a vector of a rhetorically powerful message that was, however, directed to the single woman rather than to women as a collectivity. This neoliberal discourse is emblematic of the instrumental use of gender issues for self-promotion, which often leads to the dilution of feminist meanings and the trivialization of social movements.

## Keywords

digital platforms; female bodies; feminism; gender; influencers; rhetoric; social media influencer

## 1. Introduction

This article discusses the case study of the Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni and in particular her commitment to supporting feminism—through the contradictions it manifests itself with and which we are going to discuss—unmasking the neoliberal ideology that pervades it, and thus emptying it of strength.

The rationale of our study is to explore the implications and potential challenges arising from the instrumental use of gender issues for self-promotion, which often leads to the dilution of feminist meanings and the trivialization of social movements. The superficial treatment of relevant gender equality issues

warrants a critical examination. The analysis aims to investigate the entanglement between body image, platform capitalism, and the various strands of feminism.

In contemporary discourse, feminism exists through various forms (see Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Postfeminism is characterized by its unique sensibility, consisting of a number of interconnected themes that include the notion that femininity is a bodily property, with an emphasis on self-surveillance, individualism, choice, and empowerment within a media-saturated society (Gill, 2007). Neoliberal feminism, on the other hand, intertwines with neoliberal ideals, placing a strong emphasis on professional and economic success while simultaneously upholding traditional familial roles (Rottenberg, 2018). Popular feminism suggests that postfeminist sensibility has facilitated feminism's rise in popularity, linking it to media visibility and an affective embrace by the public (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This form of feminism is characterized by its commodification, especially through digital platforms (van Dijck et al., 2018) and the ways in which feminist ideas are repackaged for mass consumption.

In our society, there is a noticeable conflation between body and identity, particularly among women. As Rosalind Gill (2003) points out, since the 1980s, the process of the re-erotization of female bodies in media content has involved a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, i.e., the representation of women who freely choose to become sexual objects. Alongside the male gaze on objectified and judged women (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975), there is the female gaze of women on men and above all on themselves: In the postfeminist representation, feminism would be supplanted by narcissism, by the pleasure of pleasing oneself (Gill, 2007). Gill notes how words such as choice, empowerment, and body positivity, a trend defined as cooling feminism, are circulating to make girls feel fashionable, cool, and stylish. Thus, there is a psychologization of the feminist discourse, which becomes flat and hollow through its focus on increasing self-esteem and self-confidence: A confidence culture that proposes girls to work on themselves as a solution to gender inequality, distancing them from the political goals of the feminist movement (Gill & Orgad, 2017). Having self-esteem and self-confidence become the new dominant imperatives, thanks to the self-esteem industry, but do not motivate them to become “feminists” by fighting to change power structures in depth. The proliferation of beauty products, practices, and services on social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok further complicates this landscape. The digital makeup tutorial format exemplifies a form of democratized beauty, suggesting that with effort, learned skills, and the right products, individuals can transform their appearance regardless of their “natural beauty.” However, this trend simultaneously sets unprecedentedly high expectations for appearance, perpetuating the ideal of a perfect body: a *simulacrum* of perfection.

The image of Chiara Ferragni coincides with her body through which the entire influencer narrative is conveyed on Instagram. A body that also becomes a medium for neoliberal feminism or postfeminism, as we shall see in our analysis. The influencer's success began in 2009 with a blog “The Blonde Salad” (that is metaphorically a salad-like mix of Ferragni's passions and interests): A diary started with her passion for fashion that permeates Ferragni's “mediatized” everyday life. Since 2010, she has been producing a clothing and accessories line branded with her own name. There is therefore a gradual reconfiguration of the blog, which is transformed into a lifestyle magazine (transversally touching on topics such as fashion, trends, celebrity looks, and beauty) and a global retail business. Chiara Ferragni perceives the value of Instagram (introduced in 2010), an image-based social media platform particularly suited to enhancing fashion outfits due to its primarily visual nature.

Social media platforms like Instagram have been domesticated as stages where the physical body becomes a central element of everyday posts. With approximately 26.8 million active users in Italy, representing about 45% of the population (Socialbakers, 2022), Instagram serves as a significant site for the construction and dissemination of body images. Instagram's digital affordances, as features of socio-technical systems that enable and constrain interactive behaviors (Bucher & Helmond, 2017), drive users to post engaging photos and videos by leveraging visual creativity, algorithm-driven visibility, and interactive features like stories and reels. These affordances not only influence user behavior but also extend to third parties such as developers, who enhance the platform's capabilities, and advertisers, who capitalize on user engagement for monetization (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). Instagram favors content that generates high levels of engagement, such as "likes" and comments: Images of bodies tend to receive more interaction, thereby increasing the post's visibility through the platform's algorithm (Leaver et al., 2020).

Capturing the body in countless photos shared on these platforms appears to be a means of preserving and controlling it. This control, however, is not solely individual but is deeply influenced by media narratives that promote ideal and perfect bodies, transforming them into simulacra that reflect the power of capital: Bodies are expected to be beautiful, young, slender, and sensual. The phenomenon of "Instagrammability" underscores this issue, as the value of women is often reduced to their surface appearance in social media images. Gender is thus situated within these communicative circuits, shaped by shared processes of social construction where the body serves as one of the primary "evidence" of gender, understood as the visible and objectified aspect of representation (Poggio, 2018).

The construction and representation of self-identity have long been influenced by cultural products, establishing expressive trends and cultural models. These representations are the result of a sedimentation process of shared images, significantly circulated within social media platforms (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020).

Gender, conceptualized as a dynamic performative practice, is produced and reproduced through a series of acts (Butler, 1988). It is not a static trait but one that is historically constructed and both socially and culturally determined (Butler & Trouble, 1990). From the discovery of photography to the present day, the proliferation of images shared in the media has continually disseminated the ideal of female beauty as a social value, conferring upon it a normative power (Wolf, 2002). These media-driven standards of beauty have profound implications on how femininity is perceived and enacted.

This pervasive media influence can foster processes of sexual objectification and self-objectification among women, reducing their identities to mere sexual objects and ignoring the complexity of their individuality (Fredrickson et al., 2011). As technology evolves and social media platforms become more integrated into daily life through mobile access, the line between "online" and "offline" increasingly fades (Carstensen, 2015).

Our case study is contextualized within the broader Italian patriarchal society, in which the digital influencer Chiara Ferragni operates. The traditional/patriarchal model is deeply rooted in Italian history and culture, with the influence of Catholicism, which has long reinforced traditional gender roles. Men are typically seen as "heads" of households, while women are expected to focus on caregiving and domestic duties (Saraceno, 1994). These roles contribute to significant gender inequalities in the labor market, where women face higher unemployment, lower wages, and limited career opportunities (Righetto, 2023). Nationalist forces are

strategically co-opting gender equality to further their agendas, posing a serious threat to feminist politics and gender justice. This involves the intersection of gender and sexuality with the selective appropriation of feminist ideals by right-wing parties, particularly through *femonationalist* actors who actively contribute to ongoing attacks on women's and LGBTQI+ rights (Peroni & Rapetti, 2023). Furthermore, the alliance between right-wing governments and pro-life groups has intensified a transnational "anti-gender war" and this backlash threatens the progress made in reproductive and sexual rights (Colella, 2021).

## 2. Methodology

This article focuses on and discusses a case study of the Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni, a mega influencer and digital entrepreneur internationally known, followed by over 28 million followers on Instagram and 6,5 million followers on TikTok. The study aims to uncover how her use of gender rhetoric in media and social media storytelling influences public perceptions of gender and feminism, and the broader implications for social and cultural norms. The research is based on a qualitative analysis of the storytelling online and a critical analysis of a particular speech.

A qualitative analysis of the influencer's storytelling was carried out over time (Polesana, 2017, 2023). In particular, the observation focused on the contents (posts and reels) published in Ferragni's Instagram feed (<https://www.instagram.com/chiaraferragni>) and not as Instagram stories (given the ephemeral nature of these contents). The specific study timeframe was 2023 and the first three months of 2024 (with the so-called "Pandoro Gate" episode). In this article, we will use the feminist criticism posture as an interpretative key to the content posted by the influencer (images, videos, and captions). Additionally, a critical analysis of Ferragni's speech at the Sanremo Festival 2023, an esteemed Italian song festival held annually in Italy was conducted. This is one of the most significant musical events broadcast on television, with its first edition dating back to 1951. The observation focused in particular on the episode of reading a letter that the influencer wrote to herself, the dress worn, and the words used are considered emblematic of how some feminist instances are selected and treated.

## 3. Ferragni's Body as Simulacra and Symbol of Popular Feminism

On social media, Chiara Ferragni builds a storytelling that is mostly visual, therefore photos and videos (sometimes accompanied by descriptions or captions). From the analysis of this content, it clearly emerges that the image of Chiara Ferragni coincides with her body through which the entire narrative of the influencer is conveyed, in particular on Instagram. So much so that the logo identifying the brand consists of the so-called "winking eye": a stylized blue eye (just like the influencer's eyes) with long black eyelashes, accompanied by the name Chiara Ferragni. A synecdoche that stands for the whole person of the influencer and conveys her friendly and playful attitude. The logo thus speaks to us of a living brand and is emblematic of how the brand humanizes itself and, vice versa, how individuals brand themselves, making the logics of branding their own in order to impose themselves in the communicative space and in the imagination of contemporary society. However, it is not simply a matter of the individual's self-commodification, but of something deeper, namely how the individual expresses their creativity, sociality, and humanity within brand culture.

In order to strengthen her visual/brand identity, and foster follower engagement, she begins to turn her private life into a sort of reality show. Her marketing strategies underpin narratives that mark “highly emotional” stages of life: from rapper Fedez’s declaration and marriage proposal to the birth of their children. The wedding, celebrated in 2018, witnesses both the triumph of a large number of brands sponsoring the event, and marks the birth not only of a couple, namely Fedez and Ferragni, but of a real brand: The Ferragnez. “The Ferragnez” is also the name of a docuseries (2021 and 2023 on Amazon Prime) on the life of her family which, like the many pictures posted on Instagram, shows Chiara Ferragni’s ability to be both mother of two children (they enter the screens as newborns and from the start are perfectly integrated into the Ferragnez’s consumerist world) and entrepreneur. It’s a transmedia narrative permeated by typically neo-liberal gender rhetoric that requires women to reconcile career and family in order to be truly complete (Rottenberg, 2018). To make this point, Chiara Ferragni herself on more than one occasion (even reading the letter addressed to herself at the Sanremo festival) has claimed to feel the pressure of society that expects women to be efficient at work and at the same time good mothers and wives, whereas it is different for men, on whom such expectations don’t apply but at the same time she herself, through her words and her body, supports the inequalities she criticizes.

Specifically, Chiara Ferragni’s life, her passion for fashion, and her activist activity take place against the backdrop of the latter and are manifested through a corporeity that is continuously displayed on her Instagram page. Chiara Ferragni is indeed a *showcased* body (Codeluppi, 2021), which reveals the contradictions of the neoliberal ideology that rules it, in which freedom of choice is disguised as emancipation. In other words, female empowerment, which Ferragni represents, coincides with the feminist imagery that has been asserting itself since the 1990s, circulating in popular culture (McRobbie, 2004) that enhances/supports female individualism. In line with the empowerment promoted by the mainstream media and much advertising, it seems to be reduced to the choice of one consumer good rather than another, to a private, individual action, to a complacent narcissism in the name of a kind of marketplace feminism (Zeisler, 2016), i.e., a decontextualized, depoliticized, mediatized feminism, focused on individual experience and personal fulfillment. A feminism emptied of its subversive charge, a commodity feminism or postfeminism: The consumer society has transformed bodies into inexhaustible repertoires of proposals and solicitations (Priulla, 2016).

Chiara Ferragni’s body seems to become a compendium of neoliberal and postfeminism issues: She engages herself in constant self-monitoring, in continuous self-surveillance to identify the areas on which to act in order to transform one’s appearance. The imperative to transformation meets very high expectations and requires high financial resources and a large investment of time (McRobbie, 2020; Riley et al., 2018). Actually, women, even before the advent of digital screens and the profiling that characterizes them, have always thought of themselves on the basis of a second-order observation. Indeed, as Berger (1972) argues, women have to look at themselves all the time, they are almost constantly accompanied by the image they have of themselves. From a very early age, a woman is taught and persuaded to observe herself continuously. And so, she comes to regard the overseer and the overseen within herself as the two constituent elements of her identity as a woman. For the woman, feeling her own existence is replaced by feeling recognized by the other. In this regard, we can take up Berger’s reflection on painting. The scholar, considering a series of paintings from different eras depicting nude women in the act of looking at themselves in the mirror, notes how the mirror was often used as a symbol of female vanity, even though in reality it is a hypocritical form of moralism. In particular, regarding the *Vanity* portrait by the German painter Hans Memling (1435–1494), Berger states:

You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight. (Berger, 1972, p. 53)

In photos and videos posted on Instagram, Ferragni's body is an expression of this reduction to "sight," it is a simulacrum body (Polesana, 2017), since despite being part of an identitarian narrative this does not make it earth-human, as this biography is narrated through advertising images. And advertising, by its very nature, is the realm of the happy ending, of happiness, of perfect bodies, especially if female. It is this syntax constructed by capital (Foucault, 1975) and acted out by Ferragni's simulacrum body that guarantees her success even beyond national borders because she expresses her value within a "deterritorialised aesthetic space" (Lull, 2000) affected by consumer culture and the visual logic of communication.

In the many photos shared on social media platforms, this influencer seems to play, like a child, at dressing up. Her laughter, a sort of uncontainable joy, and her exaggerated gestures express a playfulness in line with the celebration of youth and happiness. We can consider this in line with the contemporary discourse on "happycracy," another new narrative that focuses on the development of character traits associated with happiness, such as inner strength, autonomy, self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience, aimed at increasing the likelihood of individuals completing challenging tasks (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). This discourse reflects a shift towards emphasizing psychological attributes as key to personal and professional success, intertwining with neoliberal ideologies of self-optimization

As Baudrillard states, the body has an "ideological function"; it is "the guiding myth of an ethic of consumption" (2016, p. 136) and as such loses any "demythifying" character to become, in its pornography, "advertising," an obsessive show-casing of which the proliferation of digital images is a disturbing and hypertrophic manifestation, a simulacrum, an empty packaging that refers to nothing but itself. It is visible without any "originality" in its reference to a capitalist "model" (Baudrillard, 2016) of body image that is not the result of a "representation," but is a simulacrum invested by pornography that, in the name of the truest of the true, annihilates any claim to uniqueness. The very nudity of the body, which claims to be progressivist and rational, far from finding the "truth of the body"—its "natural" reason beyond clothes, taboos, and fashion—passes by the body used as the universal equivalent of the spectacle of commodities (Galimberti, 2013).

In this regard, we recall the criticism of sexual objectification expressed by an Italian teenager follower, as a comment to a photo on Ferragni's Instagram profile in May 2023: That image portrays the influencer naked in front of the mirror, covered only by her hands that hide her breasts. The young user commented: "What is the message for us girls? That to get noticed we have to get naked? I don't find that a good message to send." Ferragni's counter-response seems to confirm the cannibalization of the feminist message by the neo-liberal culture that turns the structural problem of gender inequality into an individual issue by focusing on the individual empowered woman. In fact, the influencer wrote:

The message for all of us, young girls or not, from me is very simple: no one can judge us or make us feel wrong. Posting a photo like this should not embarrass anyone and on the contrary, show that everyone is free to be themselves and celebrate themselves when they feel like it. Why should a woman in her

underwear be ashamed of her body? Why should she be afraid of giving the wrong idea instead of feeling good inside her skin? We have been taught that women cannot dare, and this is one of the many ways that I use to take the freedom that we ALL should have.

Actually, it is a strange freedom, a freedom subject to the less visible and more insidious control of money: “Knowing how to sell yourself is the mercantile motto shown as a conquest of modernity. Make an authentic brand of yourself” (Priulla, 2016 p. 245). As Priulla argues:

It is not nudity itself that is right or wrong, but the meaning we give to that naked body at that moment. If it is a subject of freedom or if it is an object of exchange, if it is erotic or if it is eroticised for commercial purposes. (Priulla, p. 246)

The body, in tune with the post-feminist sensibility (Gill, 2007), becomes also the place of feminine value and identity: in the next paragraphs, the Dior dress worn by Chiara Ferragni at the Sanremo Festival can be an emblematic example. A flesh-colored tulle dress that simulates, in a sort of *trompe l'oeil*, the influencer's nude body, a body that symbolically represents, in her intentions, liberation from the shame that has befallen it since Eve, the first woman in history to feel this sentiment (recalling the words used by Ferragni).

The emphasis on her “perfect” body translates into so many forms of control since “to the extent that she becomes ‘free,’ a woman becomes increasingly confused with her own sex” (Baudrillard, 2016, p. 160). We are in the presence of that social control that Foucault (1975) denounces as an emanation of power in a kind of anatomo-politics of the human body. The power that Foucault speaks of is now located in capital and consumption, instruments that induce adaptation with respect to precise models of femininity that in fact lead towards homogenization of bodies and their forms, rather than towards their free expression.

#### 4. The Intersections Between Body Image, Platform Capitalism, and Neoliberal Feminist Issues

Ferragni's body expresses itself in all its simulacra nature (Polesana, 2017) and it becomes a symbol of popular feminism, a feminism mediatized as much through broadcast media (television and the press that quote her) as through social media.

The influencer fights “to free the nipple” through images posted on Instagram, in which she wears transparent garments that defy social censorship with respect to the nipple, claiming the need for women to regain possession of their bodies: a liberating gesture, according to her intentions, but which can also be read as an example of sexual subjectification (Gill, 2003). In short, once again feminism becomes an expression of one's individuality, of being what one wants without any attempt to question the structural aspects that undermine its strength in a still patriarchal society. Chiara Ferragni seems to use a precise (social media) marketing strategy to tune in to the feeling of the contemporary consumer who, in her specific case, is a woman. Modern marketing no longer sells a product or service, but it leverages the storytelling of the product, makes it emotionally impactful, and convinces the consumer to buy the product not (only) because of its intrinsic qualities but because the consumer is in line with the values of the brand selling it.

This type of (influ-)activism, however, as Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, does not go beyond the politics of individual visibility: Being the bearer of an instance means being important/relevant/famous in oneself, without having a real objective of social and structural change. This sort of feminism is an expression of an economy of attention in which its accessibility (through shared images, “likes,” clicks, followers, retweets, etc.) is a key component of its popularity. This popularity is linked in a kind of perverse spiral to its visibility, which is not static but dynamic: meaning that popular feminism is constantly striving to maintain and increase its visibility. As Rottenberg (2018) argues, the values and assumptions of neoliberalism (ever-expanding markets, entrepreneurship, a focus on the individual) are embraced and not contested/challenged by feminism.

In digital platforms, the popularity is conditioned by algorithmic and economic components and is measured mainly in quantitative terms by rewarding with greater visibility users with more followers, comments, or likes, and content that is able to generate immediate reactions from users. But such visibility circuits are driven by profit, competition, and capitalist logic (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016): Influencers are incorporated within the world of advertising and marketing, and their dependence on the platforms where they carry out their activities shapes their content and their relationship with followers (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021).

Chiara Ferragni embodies the tenets of neoliberal feminism which, unlike traditional feminism that focuses on social justice, equality, emancipation, and liberation, enhances self-esteem, resilience, and the ability to manage both professional and domestic spheres effectively (Rottenberg, 2018). Ferragni’s public persona and Instagram storytelling promote a vision of happiness achieved through balancing career and family life, framing this balance as a managerial challenge.

The intersections between body image, platform capitalism, and post- and neoliberal feminist issues manifest prominently across various and increasingly social media platforms. These intersections are set against a historical backdrop where associations between women and beauty concerns have been problematized by feminist discourses as oppressive and objectifying (Riley et al., 2018). In contemporary contexts, such as the discourse propagated by influencer Chiara Ferragni, we observe a convergence of body image with neoliberal feminist activism, where gender terminologies and visual representations of bodies serve the purposes of self-promotion, visibility, and commercial gain. This is evident in the commodification of personal data, content, and beauty products. Ferragni’s rhetoric exemplifies what can be termed a “re-traditionalisation” of femininity, where pursuits related to beauty and the domestic sphere, once critiqued by feminists like Rosalind Gill (2007) as tools of oppression, are now rebranded as sites of pleasure and empowerment (Riley et al., 2018). This shift, from viewing these activities as oppressive duties to recognizing them as sources of pleasure and empowerment, illustrates the complex and often contradictory nature of contemporary feminist discourse, particularly within the framework of platform capitalism. This dynamic underscores how neoliberal feminism reinterprets traditional feminine roles, aligning them with modern ideals of personal success and fulfillment, while simultaneously engaging in the commercial exploitation of these identities.

Digital activism and influence culture, increasingly central themes in social sciences within the platformization framework (Poell et al., 2019), have traditionally been treated separately. Recently, however, two processes have blurred this distinction. In our analysis, an influencer like Chiara Ferragni takes explicit stances on controversial issues, as well as an increasing number of creators that focus on public issues to



promote social change in areas such as intersectional feminism and social justice. This phenomenon, termed influ-activism, has sparked a debate on digital activism's ability to promote non-hegemonic narratives while also being influenced by the neoliberal and commodifying logics of social media platforms.

Chiara Ferragni's activity in favor of solidarity campaigns and her frequent social media exposure on civil rights issues were helping to also generate expectations regarding her substantial ability to frame current political issues (Mitchell, 2020). For example, Ferragni and her husband Fedez played a significant role during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic by raising awareness among young audiences about the importance of wearing masks, following a request for help from Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in October 2020. While Ferragni's influence in the world of marketing and commercial branding has been extensively analyzed, it is also crucial to explore how she leverages her substantial social media following to become a socio-political influencer, effectively "selling" political content to her audience (Duffy & Pierce, 2007).

Chiara Ferragni's activism is an expression of the intertwining of neo-liberal feminism and platform affordances that encourage self-branding whose success rests on the emotional involvement of the audience through her own autobiographical narration (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

## 5. From "Think Yourself Free" to "Think Yourself Liberal": Feministic Rhetoric for Sale

Starting from her social media image, Ferragni participated as co-presenter of the Italian Festival of Sanremo in the 2023 edition, broadcast on RAI1, the main public television channel in Italy (part of the Radiotelevisione Italiana group), which is the public broadcasting service in Italy. This event was viewed by an average of 12 million viewers.

Our case study focused, more specifically, on her speech and clothing. Among the dresses worn by Ferragni at the festival, one notable piece was a long, black, strapless, bustier dress with a white stole manifesto bearing the embroidered inscription "*Pensati Libera*" (think yourself free), designed by the high fashion company Dior. According to Ferragni and Dior, this dress represents an invitation to women to step out of societal roles and feel free. Ferragni explained that "Think Yourself Free is dedicated to all women who want to feel simply themselves without being judged," highlighting the concept of self-management and the empowerment of women as sole architects of their destinies, consistent with neo-liberal ideology.

However, the paradox of the message was caught by the web with a meme replacing "*libera*" (free) with "liberal," thus exposing what some people perceived as the hollowing out of feminism by Ferragni. Her invitation was ironically transformed into "pensati liberal" (think of yourself as liberal). Additionally, Maria Grazia Chiuri, Dior's creative director, claimed on Instagram that she was inspired by a photo taken of this manifesto on a wall in Genoa by the artistic duo Claire Fontaine. However, the phrase had long appeared on the walls of Bologna, attributed to the street artist Cicatrici Nere (Black Scars), who clarified that his intent was not feminist advocacy but rather a critique of the commodification and spectacle that consume all aspects of human life.

During one of the evenings at the festival, Chiara Ferragni delivered a "letter addressed to herself." Her discourse begins with this incipit: "Hello baby girl, I decided to write you a letter." The speech included some reflections such as: "At any stage of my life there was one thought stuck in my head: I didn't feel

enough” and “you will feel guilty for having other dreams than family, because our society has taught us that when you become a mother you are just a mother.” She urged herself (as a single woman) to “celebrate your successes, the big ones and the small ones” and to “challenge prejudices” surrounding body image, noting, “If you hide it you’re a nun, if you show it you’re a slut.”

Ferragni’s speech effectively engaged the audience’s identification mechanisms, presenting a rhetorically powerful message that addressed the individual woman rather than women as a collective:

I always tried to make you proud. Everything I do, I do it for you, it is for the little girl that I used to be. All those times you haven’t felt good enough, pretty enough, smart enough, anything enough...you were. And do you know during how many moments you’ll feel like this? So many.

The struggle for women’s emancipation is treated in an ambivalent and individualistic manner:

Yes, you’ll become a mother too...But you will be the same person, with the same doubts and insecurities as always...Will it be easy to be a parent? Never. It will be the hardest job of them all...You’ll often feel guilty of being far from your kids, even to go to work. Our society has taught us that when you become a mother you are only a mother...But I’ll tell you something: If you’ll always do your best for your children, and if they’re the main thought of your days, set aside any doubts: probably you are a good mother. Not perfect, but good enough.

In these quotes from Ferragni’s speech, it emerges how gender inequalities are considered issues to be solved with individual work on herself as a woman: a common feeling that leads to a collective movement of social change is not solicited. More specifically, we can notice a discrepancy between Chiara Ferragni’s words and the pictures portraying her on social media. The images posted by Ferragni represent the images of her own body and of the traditional family: the goal is commercial and stimulates mechanisms of projection (“I would like to be like her”) and identification (“I see myself in her”). The words instead tell of a potential empowerment useful to fuel an individualistic feminist rhetoric (with the same purpose, which is to attract followers/consumers).

In this sense, we view Ferragni’s speech as an example of rhetoric for sale that fuels the phenomenon of influ-activism (Sobrero, 2024). On one hand, the blend of celebrity and politics has the potential to rejuvenate political culture, encouraging public engagement through alternative forms of participation (Campus, 2020). On the other hand, celebrity activism is often perceived as either a meaningful contribution or a superficial manifestation of a consumer-driven culture. It embodies “heroic individualism” (Wheeler, 2013), promoting the pursuit of economic growth while perpetuating consumerist culture and reinforcing social inequalities. Ferragni’s discourse appears to generate not dissent, but rather adherence to an “idolatry of consensus” (Nicolas, 2016).

Influ-activism often struggles to promote non-hegemonic narratives because it is deeply embedded within the neoliberal and commodifying logics of social media platforms. These platforms prioritize visibility, engagement, and marketability, which tends to favor content that aligns with dominant cultural norms and consumer interests. As a result, influencers, even those engaged in activism, reduce complex social issues to individual branding opportunities, where the focus shifts from collective action to personal gain and visibility. This can dilute the radical potential of activism by framing it within a commodified, easily digestible format

that is more about maintaining a positive image and less about challenging the status quo. Consequently, non-hegemonic narratives, which often require deeper, more critical engagement, may be sidelined in favor of content that is more palatable to a wider audience, more easily monetized, and less likely to disrupt the platform's commercial ecosystem.

Ferragni's gender storytelling and feminist rhetoric aim to capture the attention (Lipovetsky, 2017) of consumer-followers. Her commitment, along with that of millions of other bodies displayed on digital platforms, manifests the capitalization of values promoted by advertising narratives into habitus. By exploiting gender rhetoric, the image of women is reduced to their ability to spectacularize their bodies, thus emptying ideologies of substance. According to Immanuel Wallerstein (2007) in *The Rhetoric of Power: Critique of European Universalism*, there is nothing more particularistic than universalist claims. Ferragni's speech separates the collective, hierarchical, and material dimensions of gender relations, individualizing them and relegating them to the private sphere. This is an example of the fragmentation of a *spot-politik* made of slogans and the pulverization of consensus (Capaci & Licheri, 2014), leading to the construction of "fragile public opinions, incapable of independently formulating critical thought" (Banti, 2020, p. 96). The relationship between influencers and followers is based on the emotional involvement of social media audiences, often ignoring the topic of the speech and wherein "the global image we have of the person prevails as a persuasive factor over the details of their words" (Landowski, 2018, p. 5).

Paraphrasing Nancy Fraser (1989), it is evident that a woman like Chiara Ferragni, who attains top positions by conforming to capitalist norms, changes things for herself without subverting the system. This corporate-friendly feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018) equates female empowerment with the mere inclusion of more women in corporate settings. This approach suggests that merely having more women in top positions resolves all issues, overlooking the need to challenge dominant cultural models of sexuality and the underlying ideology.

Chiara Ferragni's presence at the Sanremo Festival 2023, her promotion of a "feminist manifesto" (all dressed in Dior), her promotion of Di.Re. (a network of organizations dedicated to ending violence against women) can be considered a marketing operation. Chiara Ferragni introduces herself to the public, shares an open letter with her baby self, talks about her experience of motherhood, and gets in touch with her audience, which is women. She talks about women, selling products for women with the aim of monetizing by leveraging emotions. It is not necessarily pinkwashing: her fee for Sanremo 2023 amounted to around 100,000 euros and was donated to associations dealing with gender violence. Many of her collaborators are women. These are very practical actions that go from a simple brand purpose to strong brand activism (Sakar & Kotler, 2021).

## 6. The Capitalist Spectacle of Ferragni's Branded World

Chiara Ferragni's narrative is imbued with neo-liberal arguments that are translated into the narcissistic competition that she sustains with herself, and with respect to her own limits, according to a dictatorship of therapeutic well-being functional to the demands of capitalism: that is, a model of a woman that is engaged in a process of constant, perpetual self-monitoring and self-improvement, to be realized through psychological tools in order to achieve happiness (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). To the point that, as the influencer herself states several times in the documentary *Chiara Ferragni-Unposted* (2019), what inspires her is the "Chiara I would like." In other words: a model of the ideal individual ("I have always been obsessed with

becoming the best version of myself,” states Ferragni). And the whole transmedia narrative of the influencer is centered precisely around the commitment to self-improvement, working on unwanted emotions and thoughts in a positive way. Thus, she embodies, through her affective and entrepreneurial life, a sort of therapeutic model for finding happiness.

It is interesting in this regard to consider the particularly troubled period, both professionally and from a personal point of view, that the influencer is going through in the current year (2024). Indeed, we can see how the reaction to the scandal that engulfed her in December 2023 unmasks the ambiguities of popular or postfeminist feminism deeply steeped in neoliberal ideology. Specifically, Chiara Ferragni was fined one million euros in December 2023 by the Competition and Market Authority (the Antitrust Authority) for misleading advertising. Let us briefly recall that the influencer was the protagonist, in 2022, of the promotional campaign “Pandoro Pink Christmas” for a line of pandoro cakes (traditional Italian Christmas sponge cake) produced by Balocco. She received a cachet of one million euros and consumers were led to believe that the sale of each product (which had tripled in price due to the packaging with Chiara Ferragni’s brand logos) would contribute to a charity donation to the pediatric oncology ward of the Regina Margherita hospital in Turin. However, it was revealed that the donation, amounting to 50 thousand euros, had previously been made by Balocco alone, regardless of sales. It is clear, therefore, that the amount of this donation was completely unrelated to the number of sales of the Ferragni-branded Pandoro cakes.

As we know, the lives of digital influencers are subject to intense scrutiny and public fascination. When Chiara Ferragni experienced a fallout, whether due to scandal, controversy, or public disagreement, the event reverberated through media channels and societal discourse. The role of social media platforms in managing fandom bashing on her Instagram account can be interpreted in the context of what Guy Debord (1966) defines as a spectacle. To apologize to her followers, Ferragni shared an exculpatory video on social media in which she presented herself in a very sober manner, wearing a grey tracksuit, admitting her mistake (albeit partially, since she claimed and maintains that it was a communication error that led consumers to misunderstand the real nature of the collaboration between her brand and that of Balocco), with her voice broken by tears. In order to remedy this, she pledged to donate an amount equal to the fine imposed by the Antitrust Authority, that is, one million euros, to the hospital. Without delving too deeply into the content of the video and the many communication errors that characterize it, we can’t help but note the somewhat too openly contrived character of the video itself through a stereotypical communication/presentation of suffering (dull make-up, resigned outfit, rehearsed facial expression, voice broken by weeping, as already noted, etc.). The spectacle, typically seen as a theory of sign and image dissemination, gains depth when viewed as a comprehensive organization of signs. This perspective helps us understand figures like Ferragni across various levels of the spectacle, including digital platforms and their impact in Italy. It also allows us to move beyond the notion of celebrity agency in self-presentation (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) as a result of the sedimentation of shared images previously circulated (not only) inside social media platforms (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020).

What we would like to draw attention to, however, is the most macroscopic among the errors committed, namely the influencer’s belief that she could make amends by buying the betrayed trust of her followers with a large sum of money—as if everything had a price, including values and ethics. This gesture violently brings to light the capitalist nature of Ferragni’s branded world, insinuating in those who follow her the doubt that the social commitment she has professed over the years, on several fronts—including the one taken into

consideration here, namely feminist commitment—was not in fact disinterested, but rather aimed at soliciting “likes” and maintaining her visibility on the platforms.

In this sense, we argue that the fallout involving Chiara Ferragni represents a rupture in the structure of the spectacle, disrupting established codes of behavior, morality, and identity. This disruption extends beyond the individual to encompass broader social and cultural dynamics of the spectacle. Social media platforms serve as both channels for the proliferation of the spectacle and platforms where the micro ruptures of fallout are amplified, providing space for negotiation. By analyzing the fallout, it becomes evident that underlying power structures, ideological tensions, and cultural norms are at play within the spectacle, influencing the reception and interpretation of the event. Through a precise rhetorical and content organization strategy (rather than mere dissemination) consisting of images, narratives, and discourses, social media platforms play a pivotal role in constructing and deconstructing the meanings associated with influencers.

## 7. Some Conclusions

In this article, we discuss the case study of the Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni as an example of gender rhetoric for sale and of platformization of the woman body that crushes gender ideologies. We considered both the visual storytelling on her Instagram channel (during 2023 and the first two months of 2024), and letters addressed to herself as a baby girl, together with the dresses worn at the 2023 edition of the Italian Sanremo Festival.

The analysis conducted revealed a powerful narrative in favor of female empowerment, which actually seems inspired by neoliberal rhetoric. As much on social media as on television, Chiara Ferragni is her body, an advertised body, anything but free. It’s a body that expresses the contradictions of postfeminism in which the struggle for women’s freedom is reduced to self-management, through the “free” objectification of one’s body, and the possibility of making one’s own consumer choices independently. Therefore, it does not have a collective dimension but is an expression of an individual act.

Other celebrities, such as Beyoncé and Emma Watson, have become spokespersons for feminist issues. We can consider Ferragni’s speech as the contemporary evolution of the “girl power” rhetoric, which gained popularity in North America and Europe, from the Spice Girls to the Women’s World Cup, promoting confident, assertive, and intelligent girls. “Girl power” practices and goods quickly became normative, embedding themselves in a postfeminist culture.

The digital landscape has influenced gender representation, offering both opportunities and challenges. As we discussed in the article, the relationship between feminism and (social) media remains open, because, in a complex and mixed way, it concerns aspects such as sexism, empowerment, visibility, resistance, activism, or even the irrelevance of gender.

On one hand, social media and online platforms have democratized content creation, giving marginalized genders a platform to share diverse and authentic narratives that challenge traditional stereotypes. Research shows that these platforms can empower individuals to redefine gender norms and identities in more inclusive ways, even if social media platforms are complex and contradictory spaces for feminism (Locke et al., 2018). Digital platforms can offer the potential for widely disseminating feminist ideas “shaping new

forms of discourse on gender and sexism, connecting with diverse audiences, and fostering creative modes of protest” (Baer, 2016, p. 18).

On the other hand, the context of feminism via social media captures “a distinctive contradictory yet patterned sensibility closely tied to neoliberalism” (Gill, 2016, p. 610), emphasizing “individualism, choice, and agency” (Gill, 2016, p. 613). In this sense, many of the new feminist activities on social media are rooted in postfeminist ideas. Whether we remain in a postfeminist era or are transitioning away from it toward a potential fourth wave of social media-based activism (Turley & Fisher, 2018), remains an open question.

On a more macro level, we cannot fail to consider the connection between (social) media and platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017): Neoliberal and popular feminism depend on and validate the interests of social media platforms and digital corporations, as well as neoliberal capitalism. Contemporary iterations of feminism do not challenge the hegemony of neoliberal or platform capitalism but rather contribute to its normalization and presumption of inevitability. On social media, different feminist practices coexist, embedded in an attention economy shaped by the logic of popularity (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Digital activism initiatives navigate algorithmic logics to attract and sustain visibility for feminist messages, with social movements competing by using the same communication strategies and algorithmic management as social media influencers.

While we critically discuss contemporary feminisms, our critique also represents an attempt to envision alternatives beyond instrumental rhetoric. We explore the ambivalence of Ferragni’s speech and reflect on how gender rhetoric can potentially generate movements within post-, neoliberal, and popular feminisms. We consider how this ambivalence might be mobilized to construct a renewed vision of economic and gender justice. The relationship between gender, influencer culture, and digital activism, as well as their interaction, are promising but under-researched areas deserving further exploration.

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### Conflict of Interests

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