Post-feminist luminosities: Negotiating covering the female body in the contemporary media environment

By

Elsa Pearson

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Supervisor: Erzsébet Barát

Second Reader: Eszter Timár

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Abstract

Billie Eilish is an American female pop star who, since her rise to fame as a teenager, has challenged the conventions of dress in the pop industry through the way she covers and uncovers her body. My thesis uses Eilish as a case study to consider this negotiation of covering and uncovering the body as a feminist issue. Through the use of visual and discourse analysis to examine Eilish's visual self-presentation, her reasons behind it, and the online media response to it, I argue that Eilish's example is revelatory of the oppressive post-feminist constraints that exist in Western society today, and are particularly visible in the popular culture media context. Throughout my analysis, the concept of luminosities is used to shed light on the struggles that Eilish faces as a young woman negotiating her hypervisibility in the music industry, as well as her privilege in being able to assert her agency through her dress and be praised for it. Exploring the intricacies and contradictions within both Eilish's experiences (such as her simultaneous struggle and privilege), and the media response to her dress practices, I facilitate an understanding of the complex ways that women's bodies are policed in the contemporary culture environment, as well as the importance of an intersectional perspective in understanding this policing: Eilish's experience of covering her body is very different from how Muslim female coverings have been received in the west. Understanding this regulatory context, I argue that, unavoidably, covering and uncovering the female body remains an issue charged with meaning in the contemporary Western world and considering and critiquing the politics of these processes remains an essential task for feminists today.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 23,206 words

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Signed: Elsa Pearson

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Introduction

I am going to begin by describing two events. Firstly, on August 23, 2016, a woman named Siam was relaxing on the beach in Nice, France (Fig. 1). That was, until the police approached her and, in the name of secularism, forced her to remove some of her clothes (Quinn, 2016). She was wearing leggings, a tunic and a headscarf, a combination of dress deemed inappropriate in the wake of France's then-recent ban of the 'burkini'. Secondly, on February 1, 2004, pop stars Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake were performing together at the Superbowl in Houston, Texas (Fig. 2). During their performance, Timberlake ripped off a layer of Jackson's top. This move was meant to reveal Jackson's red lace bra, but due to a costume malfunction, accidentally revealed her breast. Timberlake describes the quick reaction like this: "They brought a towel up on stage. They covered her up" (Hall, 2004). The event provoked widespread controversy, became known as #nipplegate and required Jackson (sic!) to release a public apology (Gomes, 2021).

These two events are vastly different for obvious reasons. However, they have crucial similarities. They both demonstrate that women's bodies are regulated in diverse but intersecting ways across borders, locations, and time. They show the disciplining regimes female bodies are subjected to as society's values are projected onto their bodies, yet, in each case, it is the individual that bears the burden of these stories. Both women were policed for their actions. While Siam was policed by literal police, Jackson was policed through widespread media critique; Siam was policed for her modesty, Jackson was hounded for not being modest enough (Quinn 2016; Gomes 2021).

Figure 1: Muslim Woman being forced to remove clothes on French beach (The Guardian, 2016)

Figure 2: Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake performing the Superbowl (Wikipedia, 2004)

Responding to these two events, I cannot help but see the complex layers of meaning around the way these women's bodies are covered and uncovered as reflective of a wider issue. It makes me think of a statement about slut-shaming on my social media timeline (Fig. 3). It makes me think of the image shown to me by an Egyptian friend (Fig. 4). It makes me think of the problematic discourses of racist responses to religious female bodily coverings in the west. It makes me think of #freethenipple campaigns (Fig. 5). It makes me think of Slutwalk protests (Fig. 6).

Figure 3: Writing on a woman's legs critiquing slut-shaming (R.L.Stoller, 2014)
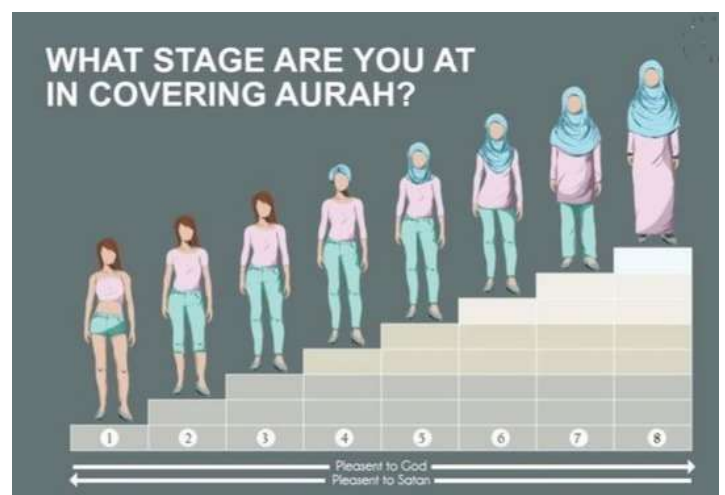
Figure 4: Scale connecting female coverings with religiousness (femresrowan, 2021)

Figure 5: Topless women posing for #FreeTheNipple campaign (Campaigns of the World, 2015)

Figure 6: Women protesting in their bras at a Slutwalk protest (The New Statesman, 2017)

It also makes me think of the way female celebrities have negotiated this terrain of covering and uncovering the female body in the Western popular cultural sphere. In just the last 20 years, in addition to the Jackson 'scandal', we have seen Britney Spears uncover her scalp (Fig. 7), Sia conceal her face (Fig. 8), SZA choose not to wear a hijab (Fig. 9), Rihanna go sheer for the red carpet (Fig. 10), and Kim Kardashian cover every inch of her body (Fig. 11). Considering all of these examples, the need for a study of the way women cover and uncover their bodies and the cultural conditions of this act can be understood.

Figure 7: Britney Spears shaving her head (Tone Deaf, 2020)

Figure 8: Sia wearing oversized wig that covers her face (E News, 2022)

Figure 9: SZA holding a head scarf over her head (The Grape Juice, 2021)

Figure 10: Rihanna wearing sheer dress at CDFA awards (Glamour, 2016)

Figure 11: Kim Kardashian wearing all black at the Met Gala (Glamour, 2021)

It is for this reason that my thesis explores this topic. I have chosen the case study of Billie Eilish (Fig. 12), an American female pop star who rose to fame in her teens in 2015, and who, across her career, has negotiated the covering and uncovering of her body under the

media's gaze (Matthias, 2022). As a pop star whose body, dress choices, and the audience's response to them, are all highly visible, through Eilish, it is possible for me to explore the intricacies of negotiating the covering and uncovering of the female body in the contemporary Western popular cultural sphere.

Figure 12: Billie Eilish performing in oversized green top (BBC, 2019)

Through this research, I situate myself at the intersection of multiple different academic fields. Existing scholarship has extensively explored the hijab as a gendered act of covering the body and the way it has been associated with an intensified negotiation around shame, agency, and the emancipation of Muslim women diasporas in the west (Scott 2007; Badiou 2015; Reina 2013; Rosenburg 2019). More broadly, dressing as a societal practice imbued with cultural meaning has also been the subject of ample academic research (Arthur 1993; Roach-Higgins et al 1995; Brumberg 1997; Braizaz 2019). Additionally, much work has focused on the celebrity experience and discourses around celebrities in popular culture, including the specific focus on women's body politics in this environment (Kearney 2015; Projansky 2014; Williamson 2010; Karakus 2018). This has included work which connects the experiences of females in the media to a cultural environment of post-feminism (Gill 2016; McRobbie 2009; Kearney 2015; Butler 2013).

Informed by all of these fields, my thesis connects studies of celebrity visibility with the visibility of the female body in a way that hasn't been done before. While scholarship on dress politics has widely explored the various meanings behind different modes of dressing, the specific implications of covering and uncovering the female body have not been widely researched. When female bodily coverings have been considered, scholarship has largely remained rooted in a religious context and not considered how this issue can be connected to other, non-religious modes of covering. Hence, my project provides a new layer of understanding of female body politics in the Western popular culture sphere.

To facilitate this understanding, I have chosen to focus on how discourses around Eilish's practices of covering and uncovering her body reveal underlying political value systems within a post-feminist cultural space. I focus on two areas of analysis to accomplish my objective: considering Eilish's own perspective on her self-presentation and the way the media has responded to it. I use discourse analysis and visual analysis to explore these data sets through the concept of 'luminosities', helping me to shed light on the links between these data sets and the wider cultural world (Bille and Sørensen 2007; McRobbie 2009; Kearney 2015). My study is built around these key questions: *What does Eilish's negotiation of covering and uncovering her body tell us about the contemporary cultural environment? How do the discourses around Eilish's covering interact with the idea that we are allegedly living in a post-feminist society? How do Eilish's experiences inform our understanding of the way women's bodies are policed in the Western world today? How does Eilish's cultural position inform our understanding of what it means for women to cover up?*

In Chapter 1, I establish the importance of covering and uncovering the female body as a topic of feminist concern. I consider the historic regulation of women's bodies and the dress politics intertwined with this, as well as the specific connotations of covering and uncovering the female body and its particular relevance to post-feminist ideas. In Chapter 2, I explore the

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specific significance of this topic to the hypervisible female pop star, for whom self-branding practices are essential areas of attention. Chapter 3 sets out my methodology for my analytical chapters, Chapters 4 & 5. In Chapter 4, I explore both how Eilish covers and uncovers her body (through studying her visual self-presentations) and what she says about these practices (through analysing her public statements on this topic) to see how these statements make luminous the post-feminist cultural environment in which Eilish resides. Finally, Chapter 5 considers how the media has responded to key moments on Eilish's dress timeline and, again, explores how these responses illuminate the post-feminist cultural environment.

As a public figure with 103 million Instagram followers, Eilish's influence cannot be denied (Eilish, n.d.). With 22.5 million monthly readers globally, the influence of *Vogue* (just one of the media outlets I consider in my study), among other online Western media outlets, must also be recognised (Condé Nast, n.d.). Therefore, exploring how Eilish and these outlets negotiate the female body becomes essential if we are going to understand how these negotiations inform our own understanding of the female body today. I hope to show that, while frequently apoliticised, the issue of covering and uncovering the female body remains a process charged with political meaning in contemporary consumer society and that exploring the intricacies of these meanings remains an important task for feminist thinking.

Chapter 1: Covering/Uncovering the Female Body as a Feminist Issue

In order to understand the significance of Eilish's dress practices, I first consider why covering/uncovering the woman's body is a topic of feminist research interest. In this chapter, I begin by considering broadly the historic regulation of women's bodies and then, more specifically, the political importance of women's dress practices. From there, I consider the specific connotations associated with covering and uncovering the female form, the intersectional nuances of these processes, their regulation, and their subversive potential. Finally, by framing this discussion within the contemporary post-feminist environment, I establish the particular relevance of covering and uncovering the female body to today's society.

1.1 Body and Dress Politics

Firstly, since the inception of feminist theory, the female body, and the way society views it, has been a fundamental topic of concern (Beauvoir 1989; Lorber 1993; Bordo 1993). While there are many layers to this issue, a key element of this topic is the way women's bodies (like the bodies of other marginalised people) are surveyed and regulated. Central to these scholarly discussions is the theory of the 'male gaze', introduced by John Berger (1972) and popularised in visual studies by Laura Mulvey (1975), which exposes the widespread sexualisation of the female body in Western society. In the 1970s, Berger and Mulvey argued that, in (then) contemporary Western society, the female body is constructed as a passive object through the ongoing attention placed on it. These discussions remain a key topic for feminist scholars today. Mary Angela Bock et al. (2019) argue "everyone has a body, but those of marginalized people, whether female, queer, or non-white, are subjected to shaming, problematizing, and regulation" (ibid, p. 54). Linda Duits and Liesbet Van Zoonen (2006) emphasise the way female bodies (in contrast to men's bodies) are raised as subjects of public debate. Rosalind Gill (2019) emphasises both the expectation of women to pursue beauty through their bodies

and the way women are surveyed as a means of enforcing this. All of these feminist scholars establish the female body, and the way it is seen and regulated, as a key topic of feminist concern that demands our attention today.

The particular importance of dressing in relation to the regulation of women's bodies must also be considered. In 'The Body Project', Joan Brumberg (1997) emphasises how part of the regulation of female bodies involves the expectation of girls and women to dress a certain way. Brumberg argues that the specificities of these expectations depend on the particular historic context. For example, the 1920s constituted a 'mass unveiling' of women's bodies in fashion and film (Brumberg, 1997, p. 98). This was a new phenomenon and brought with it new beauty standards for women, whereby female bodies "were bared and displayed in ways they had never been before" and shorter skirts and revealed flesh became an expectation (ibid). However, Brumberg argues that, although at the time this trend was seen as liberating, it actually demonstrated a move to control the female body in different ways. Brumberg goes on to show how the way women dressed became a subject of anxiety, as the female body became a "message board" (1997, p. 137) and picking the right clothes (or messages) became a matter of success or failure in the social realm (1997, p. 128). Therefore, it is possible to understand women's bodies as regulated through dress expectations.

Marion Braizaz (2019) reiterates this idea in relation to the contemporary context. She argues that, in Western societies, female bodies are regulated through dress and "from a very young age, women are encouraged to think about the image they express of themselves through their clothes, jewelleries, adornments, etc." (ibid, p. 5). Braizaz emphasises the existence of a clear "code of conduct" for women's dress practices, with the expectation for women to dress in certain ways linking to the wider historic regulation of their bodies (2019, p. 10). As Braizaz quotes Berger, "women see themselves as observed", and they must dress accordingly (2019, p. 10). Jennifer Craik (1993) reiterates this, arguing "a fashion system" is made up of

"acceptable codes and conventions" and "prescribes acceptable- and proscribes unacceptable-modes of clothing the [female] body" (ibid, p. 5). Therefore, the politics of women's dress practices embodies an important aspect of body politics today, and remains an essential topic of feminist concern in the contemporary social world.

1.2 Covering and Uncovering the Female Body

Having understood the political relevance of dress practices for female bodies, it is now possible to consider how covering and uncovering the female body becomes an important issue in this regulatory context. To reiterate, from the 1920s onwards, Brumberg (1997) tracks a 'mass unveiling' of women's flesh, whereby uncovering the female body became the norm. Brumberg argues that this unveiling of the body was seen as "the ultimate expression of the self", that is, women were expected to express themselves through revealing their skin according to a particular logic (1997, p. 2). Alain Badiou (2015) reiterates this expectation in the contemporary context. He argues that, in today's Western society driven by capitalism, the "obligation is tendentially toward nudity" as "a girl must show what she has to sell" (Badiou, 2015). In this context, he argues that the mini skirt is still valued as a signal of "the spring of human rights" and, this favouring of bared flesh has led to an "imperative" for women to "hint to undressing at all times" (ibid). As Badiou quips, "All women in the nude! And make it snappy!" (ibid). Through Badiou's statements, a clear expectation (if not, obligation) on women to bare their flesh in Western society can be identified. Hence, if there is a dress 'code of conduct' (as argued by Braizaz), uncovering the female body can be seen as one way of playing by the rules in this environment.

Understanding the connotations of bared skin helps us to further appreciate the significance of this uncovering as a feminist issue. In their discussion of the disciplining of women's bodies, Duits and Van Zoonen (2006) argue that, across contemporary 21st century

discourses, there is an "unchallenged", although unfounded, "articulation of nudity with sexuality" (2006, p. 107). This collapsing of all possible social associations of nudity with sexuality guides our understanding of why the societal expectation to uncover is a topic of feminist concern: this expectation of women to reveal themselves as sexual(ized) subjects speaks to key feminist debates about the sexualisation of women. This includes the question posed by feminist theorists of whether or not it is empowering for women to sexualise themselves as (if) active agents, or whether, when seen as sexual beings, women are inevitably being oppressed (Butler, 2013). On the topic of uncovering, Badiou (2015) hints to the latter, by exposing the patriarchal, capitalist intentions behind the discourses of sexual liberation associated with uncovering the body which construct an expectation of women to be sexual (if not sexualised).

The significance of this association of the uncovered female body with sexuality becomes yet more problematic when we consider the impact it has on real women's lives. For example, Roach-Higgins et al. (1995) expose how, because of the association of nude female flesh with sexuality, dressing in ways which reveal the body can be deemed sexually suggestive and has been interpreted as indicative of consent in law cases of sexual violence (1995, p. 209). They expose how an unquestioned association of uncovered female flesh with sexuality is problematic and far from an unconditioned idea of liberation. Hence, the expectation for women to uncover in Western societies becomes further cause for feminist concern.

So, if perceptions of uncovering the female body centre around the issue of sexualisation, how does covering the female body fit into these interpretations? Badiou (2015) argues that, in comparison with the liberating ideals associated with uncovering the female body, "all excessive covering up of the body is suspicious". In particular, Badiou refers to what is arguably the most prominent discourse around the covering of the female body in Western feminist scholarship and public debate: the topic of Muslim religious or cultural coverings of

women's bodies in the Western diaspora. These discourses mostly fall into two key perspectives. Firstly, the view that the expectation of women to cover their body is a sign of oppression, and secondly, that women should be free to wear whatever they want (Scott 2007; Akou 2018; Lewis 2015; Farris, 2017). Badiou suggests that the former interpretation is most present in dominant media discourses. Speaking about the French context in 2015, Badiou states "everywhere you hear it said that the 'veil' is the intolerable symbol of control of feminine sexuality" and he explicitly contrasts this association of othered religious coverings with oppression with the liberated sexuality associated with uncovering the female secularised body (2015). This point is also made by Joan Scott (2007), who argues that, in the Western context, "equality became synonymous with sexual emancipation, which in turn was equated with the visibility of the female body" (ibid, p. 156). The oppressiveness of this system is also articulated by Scott, as she contrasts a "covered" approach to gender equality, which regulates the female body in terms of modesty, to an "open" approach, which views a failure to expose the female body as "detrimental" (2007, p.155). While these examples explore just one of the diverse ways women's bodies are covered in the Western world, from them it is possible to infer an expectation not just for women to uncover their bodies, but also to not cover them. Both of these processes entail the regulation of women to dress a certain way, enforcing a certain 'code of conduct' and, again, reinforcing the legitimacy of analysing this topic as one of feminist concern.

However, while it is possible to discuss the general trends and expectations of covering and uncovering the female body in binary terms, the complexities of these expectations – like that of dressing and undressing in contemporary France – must be situated in a historically and spatially contingent context. As Roach-Higgins et al. (1995) argue, the meaning of veiling "changes depending on locality" (ibid, p. 288) and, as Craik (1993) states, the way clothes generate meaning is specific to "habitus or milieu" (ibid, p. 9). As has been mentioned, the

veiling of Muslim women living in Western diasporas is received in these locations with very particular connotations, in ways that differ to its reception in Muslim countries (Scott 2007). Similarly, bodily covering is received differently within Western countries depending on who is doing the covering for what expected reasons. This contradictory hypocrisy is pointed out by Heather Akou (2018), who compares the reception of the burqa in France to that of the facekini, a Chinese mask used by swimmers which has a similar form to the burqa. As Akou argues, while the facekini is in no way linked to oppressive connotations, the burqa is so associated with these connotations that it is banned in certain public spaces.

Understanding the expectation to uncover the female body demands similar nuances. Duits and van Zoonen argue that the way the female body is uncovered dictates whether or not it is acceptable. To demonstrate this, they compare the media reception of the G-string to that of the mini skirt. Their conclusion argues that "there is a 'good', political way to reveal your body [mini skirt], and a 'bad', consumerist way [G-string]" (2006, p. 108). The works I have cited also observe that age constitutes an important factor changing the connotations of uncovering and covering (Roach-Higgins et al., 1995). This is of particular interest to me as Eilish emerges in the popular cultural scene at the age of thirteen. Duits and van Zoonen, for instance, emphasise the arbitrary nature of turning 12 as a signal that "a girl is mature enough to dress explicitly" in Western societies (1995, p. 108). In this regard, I can also consider the expectations of 'older' women to re-cover as a limit to uncovering: they are no longer perceived as sexually desirable subjects. These are just a few elements of the highly complex nuances of covering and uncovering the body, however, together they demonstrate the necessity of an intersectional analysis to understand uncovering/covering as a feminist issue which operates within localised and institutional power dynamics, where intersectionality is understood as the "the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference" and "the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power" (Davis, 2008, p. 68).

So, if there is a localized 'code of conduct' for women's dress practices, how can we understand this to be enforced? Duits and Van Zoonen's argument is based on the linking of discourses on G-strings, miniskirts, and headscarves as all attempts to discipline female bodies. They argue that a "nice girl" in these discourses would be "a girl who manages to balance her sexuality on the decency continuum; neither showing too much of it (G-string) nor denying it (headscarf)" (2006, p. 110). The mini skirt therefore signifies an appropriate level of covering in this continuum (Duits and Zoonen, 2006, p. 108). This imperative of striking a balance between decency and promiscuity is reiterated by Bock et al. (2019), who emphasise that "women are expected to manage the scrutiny of their breasts by maintaining an appropriate balance between attractiveness and respectability" (ibid, p.55). Both of these texts reveal how women are expected to negotiate public femininity standards across contradictory expectations through their choices to cover and uncover their bodies in certain ways.

This expectation is made clearer still when considering the vilification of women who do not meet the perceived standards of covering/uncovering. This can be noted in the vilification of Muslim coverings in the West (Badiou 2015; Scott 2007), and in discourses about girls who uncover in the 'wrong' ways (Skeggs, 2004). Beverly Skeggs (2004) argues that girls and women who are seen "revealing too much of the wrong type of cleavage" are coded with 'low-class' morality, and marked out as "tasteless and sexually shameless" (ibid, p. 169). This example demonstrates again the importance of the localised nature of the specificities concerning covering/uncovering the body as well as how dressing the right way is linked with values of worth and morality, which may be what is at stake if women do not follow the 'code of conduct' for their specific social location. Again, these nuances all underline the relevance of a critical feminist analysis to this topic.

1.3 Dress Practices and Subversion

Having established the disciplining of the female body through the 'code of conduct' for female self-covering and -uncovering, it is now possible to question if dress practices are so policed, is there any room left to subvert these oppressive expectations through dress? The subversive potential of dress can be located in its opportunity to communicate meaning. Both Roach-Higgins et al. (1995) and Craik (1993) locate in dress a potential for symbolic meaning making. Both argue that, as clothing is a means of 'boundary making' or 'restraint', it can also work to push these very boundaries and send subversive messages (Roach-Higgins et al., 1995, p. 220; Craik, 1993, p.4). In this sense, "clothing can simultaneously symbolise [both] agency and constraint" (Arthur, 1993, p. 66), as it represents a regulatory mechanism at the same time as a subversive one. This constitutive understanding of dress practices allows us to see uncovering and covering the female body, as a potential site of both oppression and subversive meaning making simultaneously; a duality which is useful in guiding our interpretation of Eilish's dress code.

However, we must also understand the limits to this. Colin Campbell (1996) argues that there is human tendency to associate meanings with objects, for example clothes, and wrongly attribute the same meanings to the people who use these objects, i.e., the wearers of the clothes. Campbell argues that not only is it "a mistake…to imagine that the meaning of a consumer's action can be simply 'read off' from an understanding of the meaning of the good or commodity to which it apparently relates" (1996, p. 104), but he also emphasises how ambiguous actions are, as individuals are constantly in an evolution of meaning (ibid, p. 94). Craik (1993) reiterates this, affirming that clothing can neither be understood as "simply functional nor [simply] symbolic" (ibid, p. 4). Hence, when considering the acts of covering and uncovering the body, while recognising their subversive potential, the ways these acts resist simplistic interpretation must also be understood.

1.4 Dress Practices and Post-Feminism

Finally, I want to address the significance of covering and uncovering the female body in the contemporary environment of post-feminism. Post-feminism is a term initially coined outside of academia to describe how feminism is negotiated in the contemporary world (Kearney, 2015). Post-feminism denotes "a contradictory perspective on contemporary gender relations that takes feminist achievements for granted while repudiating feminism as a critical lens and social movement" (Kearney, 2015, p. 265). Post-feminism is largely characterised by the idea that feminism is no longer needed and, therefore, is critiqued by feminist scholars for overlooking structural issues of power (Gill, 2007). In this sense, post-feminism has also been closely tied with neo-liberalism, defined as a "global hegemonic doctrine" that encourages individuals to become 'self-reliant' and 'self-governing', ironically, in order to best fulfil the expectations of capitalist society (Butler, 2013, p. 40).

These key post-feminist characteristics speak to the topic of female dress politics. Understood from a post-feminist perspective, dressing would be an apolitical issue, as the way women cover and uncover their bodies is no longer subject to oppression. Through this apoliticisation, the key patriarchal and capitalist structures that still affect gendered dress politics are overlooked. In this sense, the way women cover and uncover their bodies becomes an even more important topic of concern in an environment which seeks to apoliticise it.

Additionally, the way post-feminism frames the female body further increases the importance of a study in this context. Post-feminism asserts the potential for women to use their sexuality for empowerment (Gill, 2007). Gill (2007) argues that, following this understanding, the body in post-feminist society becomes a woman's "source of power" (ibid, p. 149). However, while this perspective may seem to assert the potential for female dress practices to be subversive, understanding how women are expected to use this 'power' disrupts

the alleged liberation. Gill argues that women's bodies in post-feminist society require constant "re-modelling, ruling, self-surveillance, [and] monitoring" to fit neo-liberal expectations of them (2007, p. 149). In this sense, the so-called empowerment of the female body in post-feminism actually plays into retrenching patriarchal standards of femininity and sexuality, critiqued earlier in this chapter. As Mary Kearney (2015) argues: "I am concerned whenever female agency gets linked to the body and marketplace given the history of women's and girls' construction as merely objects available for male pleasure" (ibid, p. 270). Therefore, when considering the significance of covering/uncovering the female body in the contemporary environment, it is important to frame our understanding within the prevalent post-feminist context. In a so-called post-feminist society that expects women to empower themselves physically, through certain commodified modes of dress(ing) still connected to their sexuality, the way women cover and uncover their bodies becomes an even more important topic of feminist concern.

1.5 Conclusion

The female body has been the subject of feminist discussion since the inception of feminist theory. And, because of their connection with the female body, dress practices have, by extension, sparked similar debates among feminists and non-feminists alike. The particular associations of revealing and covering the female body result in new forms of objectification, oppression, and control, which underscores these processes as areas for feminist concern, particularly because of the way discourses link these subjects with the value and morality of individuals. Hence, it is possible to see that covering/uncovering the female body becomes both a feminist issue (warranting an intersectional feminist analysis), and, to a certain extent, an opportunity for feminist subversion, particularly in a post-feminist society precisely because it places greater expectations on women's bodies to be used in a certain way.

Chapter 2: Covering/Uncovering the Female Pop Star Body

After establishing the significance of covering/uncovering the female body as a topic of feminist concern in Chapter 1, I now consider the relevance of this issue to the contemporary popular cultural media environment. Visibility is an essential characteristic of the experience of the celebrity popstar in the Western world. I begin by studying the conditions of this visibility to expose the particular attention placed on young female popstars' bodies in today's Western media environment. Understanding this mode of surveillance then allows me to explore the importance of self-branding for female popstars and the relevance of covering/uncovering the body to this self-branding, a relevance that is heightened by the function of popstars as figures that may help their audiences negotiate social issues. To conclude, I will argue that practices of covering/uncovering the female body play a significant role in the construction of the female pop star's public image.

2.1 Hypervisibility of Female Pop Stars

In the last 50 years of commodity culture, key works of cultural theory have centred around what has been termed the 'spectacularisation of society' (Debord 1967; Lury 2011; Projansky 2014). In his seminal text, Guy Debord (1967) argues that modern modes of production have created a social life defined by an "immense accumulation of spectacles" (ibid, p. 12). Triggered by the "mass dissemination of images" (ibid, p. 13), Debord defines the spectacle as "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (ibid, p. 12). Celia Lury (2011) reiterates this sentiment, arguing that under the conditions of consumer culture, the individual, or rather one's sense of Self, is "theatricalised" and made into a "spectacle" in late modern society (ibid, p. 203). Sarah Projansky (2014) adds to this understanding by specifically emphasising the role of the media in spectacularising the individual.

This 'spectacularisation of society' is instrumental in helping us to understand visibility as an essential characteristic of the celebrity experience today. In a society in which individual lives are spectacularised, the celebrity is the ultimate example of this spectacularisation. As Debord states "media stars are spectacular representations of living human beings" (1967, p. 38). The connection of this spectacularisation of stars with their visibility is explored by Karina Eileraas Karakus (2018). Karakus argues that we live within an "attention economy" that demands total transparency from celebrities (2018, p. 367). She defines this economy as the work of "communicative capitalism" which "incentivises constant self-exposure to attract popularity, fame, and profit" (2018, p. 371). In this context, "transparency and virality" are seen as "the pinnacles of success" (Karakus, 2018, p.372). Karakus also emphasises how technological advancements, specifically "the sharing economy of instant messages, viral memes, and news feeds", have broadened and diversified the ways that celebrities are expected to make themselves visible, making it more and more difficult for the celebrity to achieve an "unrecorded moment" (2018, p.368). Gill (2019) reiterates this point, emphasising the increasing level of surveillance on every aspect of people's lives, "by the state, by corporations, by media", and pointing out the surveillance of celebrities through the regimes of visibilities as a key example (2019, p. 148). Therefore, visibility can be identified as a central characteristic feature of the celebrity figure in the 21st century Western world.

The heightened visibility of young female celebrity figures (including pop stars) must also be considered. Projansky (2014) argues that in today's society "the volume of attention [on girls specifically] has reached […] an unprecedented level" (ibid, p. 57). Projansky attributes this to both the expansion of the media and the expansion of the audience of female consumers (2014, p. 57). This argument is echoed elsewhere by Gill (2019), who underlines that young women are surveyed more than other group and Karakus (2018), who emphasis that in today's cultural economy "images of women", particularly youthful female figures, are

"ubiquitous" (ibid, p. 377). As Gill (2019) states, surveillance (or visibility) does not fall across distinct binary gendered lines. Instead, it is crosscut by abled, classed and racialised relations of power. However, as Gill argues, attention must be paid to the fact that "whilst we are all implicated in the surveillant imaginary, the 'work of being watched' remains disproportionately women's work" (2019, p. 26).

This hypervisibility of the young female celebrity can also be situated in the post-feminist environment set out in Chapter 1. Gill (2019) argues that the heightened level of female surveillance can be explained by the post-feminist logic that drives it (ibid, p.7). Post-feminism puts a heightened emphasis on young women, disciplining them to use their bodies in certain ways, making surveillance of the female body to enforce this regime ubiquitous (Gill, 2019). Post-feminism also requires women to be visible in order for them to access it's alleged advantages (Butler, 2013). Therefore, in addition to consumer culture and the rise of digital technologies, the ideological understanding of femininity in post-feminism also contributes to the hypervisibility of the young female celebrity in the media.

The specificities of this hypervisibility must also be considered. What is distinct about the visibilities of female celebrities in the media is not just their ubiquity, but the way these visibilities are coded. Gill (2019) argues that, through their surveillance, women's bodies are analysed and regulated in a way that is "entangled with hostility towards women in general" (2019, p. 17). She states that "contemporary culture teaches practices of micro scrutiny and assessment" of women's bodies to the point of painful anxiety (Gill, 2019, p. 20). Karakus (2018) reinforces this, stating that "women's appearances are publicly scrutinized and privately linked to self-worth" (ibid, p. 377). Both Gill (2019) and Karakus (2018) emphasise female celebrity bodies as the targets of the most scrutiny in this environment through the various platforms of the media. As Gill states, "gossip and celebrity magazines and websites" are key sites which perform the "forensic dissection of the cellulite, fat, blocked pores,

undepilated hairs, wrinkles, blotches, contouring, and hairstyle/sartorial/cosmetic surgery (mis)adventures of women in the public eye" (2019, p. 15). Hence, female celebrity bodies (including pop star bodies) are not just hypervisible in the media but put under microscope to be scrutinised, evaluated and regulated through this mode of post-feminist surveillance.

So, how does this hypervisibility and surveillance impact the experiences of young female pop stars specifically? Kearney (2015) argues that the "spectacular body displays" of female celebrities and pop stars have positioned them as setting a benchmark for "female attractiveness" (ibid, p. 264). Arguably, this focus on beauty overpowers other aspects of their celebrity persona. This point is convincingly argued by Karakus (2018) who states that, while men in the music industry are judged as artists, a female pop star is judged in terms of her image (ibid, p. 377). Thus, as fans "we consider it our right to consume not just her music, but her entire physical being", and, in fact, her appearance is valued more than her "substantive talent" (Karakus, 2018, p. 378). In addition to, or perhaps because of this, there are more constraints placed on how women self-present. As Kai Arne Hansen argues "female pop stars are constrained in their image construction by the structures of gender norms to a greater extent than their male counterparts" (2017, p. 93). Therefore, not only are female pop stars hyper visible and surveyed, but emphasis on their appearance is a constraint that can overshadow their musical contribution in their reception.

2.2 Self-Branding

The effects of hypervisibility lead us to understand the importance of self-branding in contemporary society for the female pop star. Lury (2011) emphasises how consumer culture and neoliberalism have led to "the emergence of a self-fashioning individual" (ibid, p. 192). She argues that the priority of the individual in this environment has become the reflexive "negotiation of self-identity" (mediated through the commodities at the market) in which

questions like 'what to wear' have received new levels of importance (2011, p.198). Lury argues that a significant characteristic of this aspect of consumer culture is not merely having to make choices, "but having to choose in ways that enhance your identity as a source of value", positioning the self as a potential cultural capital through constructing it as a sellable brand (2011, p. 206). This reflexive self-construction requires "the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of mainstream culture industries" – including the popular music scene that I have chosen for my case study (Lury, 2011, p. 206).

In this sense, self-branding practices are linked with the conditions of both neoliberalism and post-feminism through this emphasis of the body as a 'source of value' (Gill, 2007). Sarah Banet-Weiser (2011) emphasises these links. She argues that not only is self-branding "validated by the cultural context of post-feminism which […] connects gender empowerment with consumer activity", but self-branding plays into the post-feminist ideal of 'girl power' where female empowerment is rooted in the body (2011, p. 2). Therefore, self-branding becomes a means to construct the self as valuable and, particularly for women, achieve post-feminist 'empowerment'.

So, what does self-branding mean for the female celebrity pop star figure? To reiterate, for female pop stars, image is just as important, if not more important than their musical talent (Karakus, 2018). Therefore, as argued by Linda Lister (2001), self-branding correctly becomes a central aspect of pop stardom, and a matter of success or failure in this industry. Discussing the 'divafication' of female popstars ('divafication' denoting the "diva adoration" fans have for female pop stars over any other artist), Lister emphasises that a key aspect of this 'divafication' is the obsession with a pop star's looks (2001, p. 1). Achieving the right look is essential to achieve divafication and, in turn, a female pop star's success. For Simon Firth (2007), this need for pop stars to control their image also has strong links with identity. He argues the "experience of pop music is an experience of identity" (2007, p. 294), and fans seek

to relate themselves to pop stars and thereby construct their sense of Self. This can be linked to Kai Arne Hansen's (2017) argument that fans seek to locate individual agency in female pop star figures (ibid, p. 94). This becomes another aspect that is expected to be communicated through their self-branding which also aligns with post-feminist expectations. Hence, self-branding correctly becomes an essential practice to female popstars, for whom carving an agentic image that is sellable and can be 'divafied' is a key part of their star stardom, as well as a means for them to achieve success and "empowerment" within this system.

2.3 Uncovering Popstars

It is now possible to consider how covering/uncovering the female body interacts with these issues of visibility and self-branding. In Chapter 1, I outlined the expectation to uncover the female body in contemporary society. Due to the demands of hypervisibility of the female popstar, this expectation of uncovering in particular ways becomes even greater. Because of the obsession with the visibility of celebrities, their self-covering and -uncovering becomes symbolic of the urge for celebrities to reveal as much as possible about themselves – this time physically as well. This sentiment is presented by Caitlin Lawson (2018) in her discussion of celebrity nude photo hacks. Lawson draws links between celebrity nudity and the perception of authenticity, arguing that part of the voyeuristic enjoyment of celebrity nude photos comes from the public feeling that this represents a newfound authenticity. Lawson's point reiterates Brumberg's (1997) earlier emphasis on the body as "the ultimate expression of the self", whereby revealing flesh entails revealing this self (ibid, p. 2). Hence, both covering and uncovering become symbolic acts of revealing the self for individuals in this industry and these processes of concealing and revealing become significant self-branding decisions to be made by the contemporary female pop star.

Karakus' (2018) argument deepens our understanding of this. To reiterate, in the pop star environment, she describes "female exposure" as an ideal of the music industry in which "transparency and virality are seen as 'the pinnacles of success' and 'empowerment'" (2018, p. 372). Hence, uncovering the female pop star's body in the popular culture sphere not only satisfies the spectator's search for authenticity, but also is seen as a normative step to success and empowerment within this industry.

Additionally, understanding the role of celebrity figures in negotiating social issues increases the relevance of considering how they cover and uncover their bodies. Lawson (2017) argues that "celebrity culture provides an important discursive arena in which the media and audiences negotiate meanings around a variety of social and ideological issues" (ibid, p. 825). In particular, we can argue that the pop star, above any other celebrity, is a figure that has a distinct relationship with social issues through their relationship with their fans. In her discussion of divafication, Lister (2001) emphasises how fans project "their own dreams" onto their pop idols and seek personal connections with them based on shared experiences (ibid, p. 8). In this sense, we can imagine how pop stars also become figures through which fans negotiate their own personal experiences of social issues. This sentiment is articulated by Firth (2007), who argues "pop music has been an important way in which we have learned to understand ourselves as historical, ethnic, class bound, gendered subjects" (ibid, p. 273). Informed by Projansky (2014), who argues that girls are used in the media to address cultural anxieties about social issues, we can also consider how young female popstars have a uniquely heightened experience of this. As a meeting point of all of these specificities, young female popstars can be seen as key figures that negotiate social issues in today's Western society, and, therefore, the way they negotiate covering/uncovering their bodies (which I have established as a feminist issue) becomes even more significant.

2.4 Conclusion

To conclude, the female pop star can be seen as a celebrity figure whose body is not only made highly visible through the media and the heightened public attention placed on them but is also highly scrutinised as part of this process. Because of this, self-branding correctly is an essential practice for the female pop star and reflexive, identity-constructing choices, in other words, how they make themselves visible in line with post-feminist expectations, is an essential part of building their stardom. Hence, bodily covering/uncovering becomes a charged decision for the female pop star, who bears the burden of expectations to uncover and must negotiate this social issue exposed to their audience's gaze.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In Chapters 1 and 2, I set the contextual scene for our understanding of covering up/uncovering the female body as an issue of feminist significance in today's society more generally, and, as particularly relevant to the hypervisible Western female pop star. It is now possible for me to set out my methodology for the specific analysis of Eilish's bodily coverings. I first address and explain my choice to analyse Eilish, and then define my use of key terms. Following this, I outline my methods for Chapters 4 and 5, respectively. Finally, I establish how the concept of luminosities will be used as an analytical tool across both chapters, guiding my interpretations.

3.1 Billie Eilish

Billie Eilish is an American pop singer who, since her rise to fame in 2015 at the age of 13 (Matthias, 2022), has become recognisable for more than just her music. From 2015, in all of her music videos and public appearances, Eilish wore large baggy oversized outfits which covered her skin. In a popular music context where female stars are known for baring their bodies (Karakus 2018; Lieb 2021), Eilish's self-presentation became distinct. Then, at the age of 18, Eilish altered her look to reveal her body for the first time in a *Vogue* cover shoot and, following that event, at numerous other public appearances. Therefore, it can be suggested that Eilish has made distinct and calculated choices concerning the way she has covered and uncovered her body across her career.

Eilish embodies a subject who is both culturally interesting and practically useful. As a popular culture star, her dress choices interact with the expectations of hypervisibility placed on the female celebrity in the 21st century (Karakus, 2018). This hypervisibility also means that both Eilish's dress practices, and discourses responding to Eilish's dress practices, are widely visible. Hence, a study of Eilish not only facilitates an interesting exploration of a unique

example of covering and uncovering the female body, but also a wider understanding of a cultural response to these dress practices (which can be tracked down through media documentation of Eilish over the years).

Admittedly, a study of Eilish does not come without complications. I have chosen to consider Eilish as an individual agent. However, as Michel Foucault (1979) argues, an author must be considered as more than just an individual. Specifically, Eilish's choices are likely to be entangled with other music industry power dynamics, including the input of her label, her management team, and her family (particularly as she began her career as a teenager). Notably, from what can be seen from Eilish's public output, she appears to be largely in charge of her own decision making; she writes her own songs, directs many of her own music videos, and constantly asserts her autonomy in her public appearances (Cutler 2021). However, the underlying power dynamics of the music industry which underscore this 'autonomy' must be understood. Within this industry, Eilish's stardom becomes a means of generating profit, a profit which Eilish's managers, lawyers and label all have a stake in (Market Research Reports n.d.; Whitely 2006). It is through constructing Eilish as a sellable product that she has accumulated a net worth of 53 Million dollars (Forbes, n.d.). Hence, informed by Sheila Whitely (2006), understanding the disconnect between Eilish the 'iconic' persona and Eilish the 'real' person is necessary (ibid, p. 339). While the hypervisibility of today's media stars allows us extreme insight into their personal lives, and as fans we search for authenticity in these stars, that does not mean that we receive it. Therefore, within my study, I am considering Eilish's 'agentic' public persona, which is not necessarily the same as her personal identity.

3.2 Terminology

In my research, I understand 'covering' to mean any attempt to conceal both skin and body shape. In contrast, I define 'uncovering' as the revealing of these aspects, particularly areas of

the female body which are frequently sexualised, such as the cleavage (Pappas 2012; Gill 2007; Lieb 2021). Largely, I have focused on the use of clothes and dress to cover (and uncover) the body, however, I also understand other methods of body covering to be included in this term, including the way accessories, bodily modifications, and even light, can contribute to the concealing or revealing of flesh and form. My use of the term 'dress practices' intends to incorporate all of these elements.

3.3 Eilish's Visual and Verbal Self-Presentation

In Chapter 4 my analysis addresses two topics. Firstly, how Eilish has covered/uncovered her body across her career. Secondly, her perspective on, and reasoning behind this covering/uncovering. I will use a combination of visual analysis and discourse analysis to consider these topics.

Firstly, in order to establish how Eilish has covered/uncovered her body, I will use visual analysis track her visual self-presentation across her career chronologically, exploring not just the ways Eilish covers her body, but also how significant this is to her visual branding. Key feminist scholars who have explored the visual representations of girls in the media (McRobbie 2009; Kearney 2015; Karakus 2018) provide the inspiration for my general approach to this analysis. In order to track Eilish's dress practices chronologically, I have chosen to use Eilish's music videos as my main sources of data. These music videos have been supplemented with additional visual sources in order to avoid leaving out key visual material. For example, images of Eilish at celebrity events, such as the 2022 Oscars, are essential in discussing her look after her most recent album release. Additionally, a video commercial featuring Eilish (Calvin Klein, 2019), a short film made by Eilish (Billie Eilish, 2020), and a *Vogue* cover shoot starring Eilish (Snapes, 2021), are all essential additions to my collection of sources, as they directly address the topic of her dress. I will be considering only the visual

aspects of all of these sources (not the music or the lyrics), as the focus of this section of analysis is on understanding how Eilish presents herself visually through covering and uncovering her body.

My second section of analysis will focus on Eilish's public statements about her dress. Discourse analysis – as developed by Norman Fairclough (2003) – is essential for this analysis. Influenced by Fairclough's approach to discourse, I will borrow his key concepts of 'intertextuality' (meaning the way a text incorporates other voices into it) and 'assumptions' (meaning the claims a texts makes which are presented as truths) to complete my analysis (2003, p. 40). Additionally, inspired by Penelope Eckart (2002), I will explore how language use 'indexes', or implies other topics which are not named, as well as considering how the writer orients themselves within the discourse (ibid, p. 100). A combination of these techniques will allow me to critically analyse Eilish's linguistic statements about her dress. My data for this section includes Eilish's Calvin Klein advert, her short film, and 6 interviews with her. These sources have all been chosen as representative examples in which Eilish has made explicit comments about her dress practices throughout her stardom. The different levels of authenticity in these public statements can be questioned. For example, it is likely that in the Calvin Klein advert Eilish's perspective is entangled with the commercial intent of the Calvin Klein brand. Similarly, the interviews with Eilish must have been both guided and edited by external writers and the editorial board. However, while I recognise these potential interventions, using a larger number of diverse sources can enable me to track down general trends and themes in Eilish's statements which are still useful to my research by illuminating the wider institutional, structural environment in which Eilish is situated.

3.4 Media Response to Eilish's Dress

In Chapter 5, I will consider how Eilish's covering and uncovering of her body has been received in popular media through an analysis of online articles responding to her dress practices. There are two reasons for choosing this perspective. Firstly, considering the celebrity media as a space which simultaneously reflects and shapes the historical moment (Butler, 2013, p. 45), allows us to understand its relevance for the discussion of dress practices in connection with the cultural moment. Secondly, understanding online media articles as significant means of surveilling women's bodies (Gill, 2019, p. 15), allows us to see why a study of these articles is significant in understanding how women's dress is policed today.

Again, as in Chapter 4, I will use discourse analysis, using the same concepts borrowed from Fairclough (2003) and Eckart (2002) to identify key trends in online media articles responding to Eilish's dress and connect them to wider frameworks of power. My data selection for this chapter is designed to facilitate an understanding of how each mode of Eilish's dress has been responded to, and how this reception has changed over time. Because of this, I have identified three key events in Eilish's dress timeline: her 2019 Calvin Klein Advert describing why she wears baggy clothes; her 2020 short film critiquing public opinions of her body; and her 2021 *Vogue* Cover shoot revealing her body in a traditionally sexy way for the first time. All of these releases sparked a media response, from which I have selected 14 articles, separated into 3 chronological groups, that explicitly take Eilish's dress practices as the main focus. Conducting this analysis will then allow me to understand how Eilish's bodily covering/uncovering has been policed by these media outlets, and how this is reflective of the cultural environment in which these outlets are situated.

3.5 Luminosities

In both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, I will use luminosities as an analytical tool to shed light on the nuances of both Eilish's self-presentation, and the media response to it. 'Luminosities' is a

concept used in media studies to explain social events of commodification in terms of light, by exploring what light is made to shine on in the media (McRobbie 2009; Kearney 2015).

Mikkel Bille and Tim Flohr Sørensen (2007) provide an in-depth account of the importance of understanding light as an interdisciplinary historically specific concept. Their analysis of how light has been conceptualised across academic fields reveals light's historic connection with 'truth', 'revelation', and meaning creation. Bille and Sørensen understand light as "a powerful social agent" (2007, p. 263) and, therefore, argue that 'luminosities' should be analysed as agentic forces revelatory of social power relations (Bille and Sørensen, 2007, p. 280). For my research, Bille and Sørensen's study provides important theoretical background into the diverse functions of light in producing and maintaining gender relations of power in contemporary popular culture.

While Bille and Sørensen's study provides a useful historical overview of luminosities, the work of Angela McRobbie (2009) demonstrates the specific usefulness of luminosities to an analysis of gender relations in contemporary media culture. McRobbie uses the concept of luminosities to explore the reconfiguration of particular types of femininity visible in the media. Inspired by Deleuze, McRobbie understands luminosities to emerge as areas of visibility which are created by light itself. McRobbie conceptualises these luminosities as 'spaces of attention' to demonstrate how certain types of femininity become desirable in today's media and connects this to the wider post-feminist environment in neoliberal societies. According to McRobbie's explanation of the concept, luminosity works like a stage spotlight which shines on something in order to make it "visible in a certain kind of way" (2009, p. 54) while disguising the regulative technologies of this very light in neoliberal society (2009, p. 54). Therefore, luminosities can be understood as a useful tool for my analysis to help me identify where attention is being focused, what is (and isn't) being put under the spotlight, and how this spotlight is connected with wider systems of power (like post-feminism).

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The concept of luminosities has particular relevance for the analysis of Eilish as a pop star. As already mentioned in Chapter 2, Lury (2011), Debord (1995) and Projansky (2014) all emphasise how the individual is spectacularised in today's consumer culture. Considering the particular hypervisibility of the young female celebrity pop star in the media, the way her body is scrutinised by the media, and the meticulous self-fashioning that this engenders, luminosity becomes extremely useful in helping us to understand these factors. The usefulness of this concept is twofold. Firstly, where the individual body is self-fashioned, luminous spaces of attention are created by the individual who presents themself in a certain way. Secondly, as this body is received as a spectacle (for example in media reception), luminous relations are created between this spectacle, its audience and its environment. It is therefore possible to see how these elements of luminosity can be applied to Eilish, who exhibits a luminous self-fashioning through her dress choices (clothes which have been chosen to both conceal and reveal), but also invites the luminosities created through her relationship with her spectators – including the media critique – and the wider social world.

Finally, the work of Kearney (2015) provides a framework for understanding how we can interpret the luminosities associated with young women in nuanced ways. Kearney argues that girlhood, as a post-feminist identity, literally shimmers through its association with sparkly magic, glimmering environments, and glittery makeup. For Kearney, this glittery luminosity problematises a binary perception of agency vs. constraint as, while, in some ways, girls' glittery self-fashioning plays into the post-feminist self-objectification of the female body, girls also use glitter and sparkle to negotiate the bounds of post-feminist society and reclaim femininity (2015, p. 270). This nuanced interpretation of a luminosity of girlhood is useful in guiding my interpretation of Eilish's self-fashioning. While Eilish's self-fashioning involves less glitter and sparkle (at least initially), arguably, through using the concept of luminosities

to explore how she covers/uncovers her body I will be able to understand how Eilish may use clothes to negotiate the post-feminist environment she is situated within.

3.6 Conclusion

To conclude, in my analysis of the formation of the Eilish persona, I will use a combination of discourse analysis and visual analysis to consider how she dresses, what she says about how she dresses, and what the media has said about how she dresses. Inspired by the work of McRobbie (2009) and Kearney (2015), I will apply luminosities as an analytical tool throughout my analysis to consider the spaces of attention of both Eilish's dress code and its reception. This analytical tool can be applied not just to visibilities of the body (how Eilish makes herself visible), but also visibilities in the media (how Eilish is made visible). Using all of these methods will allow me to connect the case study of Eilish with wider power dynamics, in order to facilitate an understanding of how culture negotiates the covering of the female body in today's Western society.

Chapter 4: Eilish's Visual and Verbal Self-Presentation

It is now possible for me to move to the case study of Eilish. In this chapter I begin by considering the way Eilish covers and uncovers her body through tracking her clothing choices across her career in her music videos. After having considered Eilish's self-branding in these videos, I will draw on first-person accounts from Eilish (sourced from an ad campaign, Eilish's own work, and interviews) to track Eilish's own commentary of her reasons behind her dress choices. An analysis of these luminosities will then allow me to understand how the complexities of Eilish's subjecthood are reflective of the complicated post-feminist terrain which Eilish must negotiate.

4.1 Eilish's Visual Self-Presentation

In the official music video for Eilish's first ever release, 'Ocean Eyes' (2016), Eilish's style is not a noticeable aspect. A close-up camera records Eilish singing, with just her face in frame. Neither Eilish's body nor her clothes are a focal point of the video; instead, all attention is placed on her vocal performance of the lyrics. However, after the release of her 9-track EP 'Don't Smile at Me' in 2017, these sites of luminosities began to evolve. The visuals for this EP feature Eilish in what later became recognisable as her trademark look. In the album cover, Eilish appears central to the frame, in an oversized, all-red hooded outfit which shrouds her body (Billie Eilish, 2017). In the 'idontwannabeyouanymore' music video Eilish wears a large white hazmat suit (Fig. 13) (Billie Eilish, 2018). In 'Bellyache' Eilish wears a large yellow trawlerman's outfit (Billie Eilish, 2017). In 'Watch' Eilish sports an oversized red tracksuit (Billie Eilish, 2017). In 'Hostage', while Eilish wears shorts and a t-shirt, their oversized nature means they still manage to obscure her body (Billie Eilish, 2018). In all of these visuals, Eilish's whole body is in shot and central to the frame are her colourful, oversized outfits which reveal little of her body. Through this positioning, Eilish's outfits become essential aspects of the

videos' aesthetics, and, in the process, luminous attention is drawn to the way Eilish covers her body.

Figure 13: Screenshot from Eilish's 'idontwannabeyouanymore' music video (Billie Eilish, 2019)

Similar luminosities are present in the visuals of Eilish's first album 'WHEN WE FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?' (2019). In the videos for the tracks in this album, 'Bad Guy', 'Xanny', 'when the party's over', 'all the good girls go to hell' and 'bury a friend', Eilish is consistently positioned as the central figure and her various, brightly coloured oversized outfits which cover her body are central aspects of the frame. In addition to oversized clothes, Eilish uses other artistic devises to attract viewers' attention to her bodily self-covering in these videos. While most of Eilish's skin is covered throughout these videos, the moments when it is not become conspicuous through Eilish's use of devices which interrupt, or at least distract, the viewer's gaze away from her bared flesh. In 'Xanny', the exposed skin on Eilish's face is quickly stubbed with cigarettes leaving blackened marks on it (Billie Eilish, 2019). In 'when the party's over' black liquid streams out of Eilish's eyes to cover her face (Billie Eilish, 2018).

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In 'all the good girls go to hell' Eilish climbs out of a dark pool completely covered in thick black slime (Billie Eilish, 2019). In 'Bad Guy' close-ups of Eilish's bare knees reveal them covered in dark bruises (Billie Eilish, 2019). In 'bury a friend', Eilish's bare back is partially revealed, only to be quickly covered with dozens of needles injecting black liquid into it (Fig. 14) (Billie Eilish, 2019). In all of these videos, black liquid, needles, bruises and cigarettes all function to interact with her body artistically. However, interestingly, they also function as additional 'coverings' that conceal and attract attention away from her flesh, again drawing luminous attention to the way Eilish covers her flesh, rather than reveals it.

Figure 14: Screenshot from Eilish's 'bury a friend' music video (Billie Eilish, 2019)

Alongside her album release, in May 2019 Eilish appeared in a Calvin Klein underwear commercial, an appearance which also functioned to draw attention to Eilish's dress practices (Calvin Klein, 2019). Despite participating in an underwear commercial, there is no underwear shown throughout the advert. Instead, Eilish appears in an oversized green hoody and is shown removing her jewellery and laying down (fully clothed) in a bathtub. In this video, it is the contrast between the location of the video (an intimate bathroom setting associated with undressing), the context of the video (an advert for underwear) and Eilish's highly covered

dress, that draws attention to her covered body. Through this contrast, the viewer's awareness of Eilish's self-covering is forced and, in the process, her dress practices demand our attention.

This space of attention became more luminous still a year later, when Eilish released her short film 'Not My Responsibility' (Billie Eilish, 2020). In this film, Eilish is gradually illuminated in a dark room, wearing a large black oversized hoody, with the hood up. Light slowly moves around Eilish, revealing different parts of her body at a time. Gradually, throughout the video Eilish unzips and removes her hoody, her shirt, and her tank top. Wearing nothing but a black bra, Eilish then submerges herself in black liquid (Fig. 15), only to reappear completely coated in black slime. In this video, lighting is used to explicitly explore the luminosities of covering and uncovering Eilish's body. Through this artistic exploration of light and shade in connection with covering and uncovering, the video spectacularises Eilish's undressing. The visual effects bring luminous attention to her bodily coverings, however, this time (as opposed to her previous self-presentations) light is shed on the act of revealing Eilish's flesh, rather than concealing it. Although, it still must be noted that through submerging herself in black liquid just at the very moment she removes her top, the video is still using artistic means to reveal as little of her body as possible.
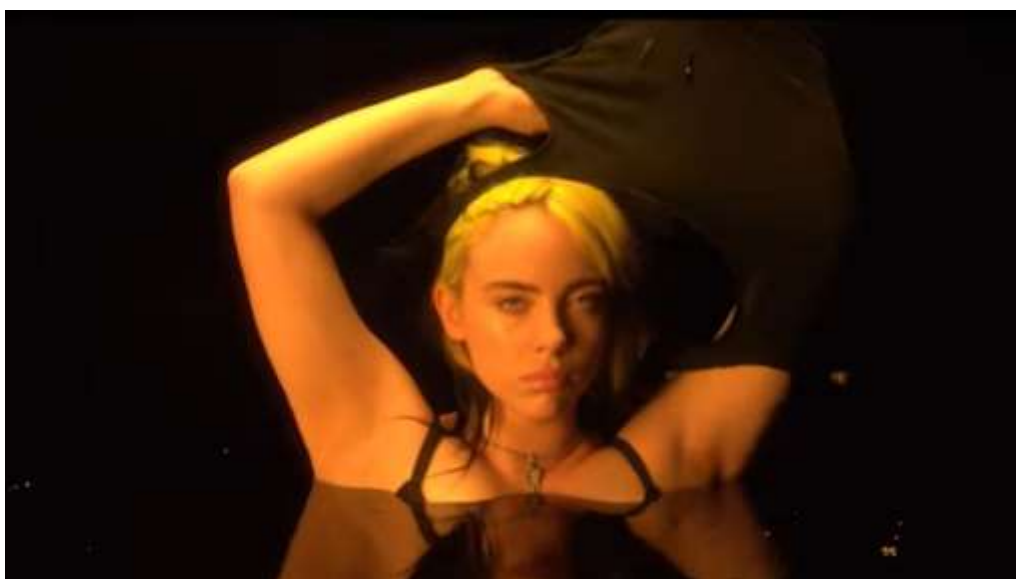

Figure 15: Screenshot from Eilish's 'Not My Responsibility' music video (Billie Eilish, 2020)

This video paved the way for a shift in Eilish's dress practices coinciding with the release of her subsequent album 'Happier Than Ever' (2021). While the first three singles released for Eilish's second album featured Eilish's signature baggy style (Eilish, 2021), in the June 2021 issue of *British Vogue*, a cover shoot of Eilish was released which showed her sporting an alternate dress code (Fig. 16) (Snapes, 2021). Instead of baggy, oversized clothes, Eilish is photographed in a corset, a look described in the accompanying article as "classic, old-timey pin up" (Snapes, 2021). Compared to large, oversized outfits, this fitted, traditionally sexy and revealing outfit indicates a significant exposure shift, a shift which demands attention through its front-page position on a popular transnational women's fashion magazine. This uncovering continued with the release of Eilish's next single, 'Lost Cause' in 2021, which filmed Eilish and a group of girlfriends wearing different variations of revealing loungewear (Billie Eilish, 2021). Through these visuals, for the first time, Eilish not only uncovered her body, but presented herself intimately in hyper-feminine underwear and lingerie with visible

Figure 16: Eilish's Vogue Cover Shoot (Snapes, 2021)

sexual appeal. This shift in Eilish's dress practices in this *Vogue* photoshoot, and subsequent single release, constitutes a spectacularised unveiling of her body in a luminous way.

However, although these images suggested a binary transition from covered to uncovered, Eilish's subsequent looks instead suggest that she chooses to negotiate between the two. Her latest album releases include videos which are more reminiscent of Eilish's initial aesthetic, of large baggy t-shirts (Billie Eilish, 2021). Since then, Eilish's public appearances have often played with different amalgamations of her initial baggy silhouettes and more recent uncovered looks. At the 2022 Oscars, while Eilish's choice of a ruffled black dress (Fig. 17) has a traditionally feminine Bardot neckline, revealing her shoulders and collarbone, the rest of her dress is made up of such large ruffles that the rest of her body is completely obscured (Bitsky, 2022). Similarly, Eilish's 2022 Grammy look featured a large, oversized suit jacket-style cape which obscured her body, but underneath she wore a fitted tailored dress (Truffaut Wong, 2022). Through these looks, Eilish is, again, drawing attention to the way she is dressing, however, this time it is through her negotiation of both covering and uncovering her body that she does this.

Figure 17: Eilish at the Oscars 2022 (Bitsky, 2022)

Therefore, through tracking Eilish's dress practices, it is possible to see how throughout her stardom luminous attention has been drawn to what Eilish is wearing. While, initially, attention was drawn to her covering of her body, since her 'Not My Responsibility' video and *Vogue* cover shoot reveal, her self-uncovering has become luminous too. Since then, Eilish's luminous self-fashioning has danced a line between these two ways of dressing. Having established an understanding of Eilish's dress practices, I now consider her public statements about these dress practices, in order to then interpret these statements, and her dress code, within the contemporary environment they are situated in.

4.2 Eilish's Verbal Self-Presentation

From the beginning of her career, Eilish has made statements about her dress practices in her lyrics, interviews, adverts, and other media appearances. Most prominently, Eilish appears in two videos, the Calvin Klein advert and 'Not My Responsibility' short film, in which she explicitly addresses the topic. Considering these first, and then relating them to statements made in interviews, it will be possible to identify the key specificities of Eilish's reasonings behind her dress practices, and, in particular, the complex and contradictory elements of these reasonings.

Firstly, in the voiceover for her Calvin Klein advert, Eilish states:

> *I never want the world to know everything about me. I mean that's why I wear big baggy clothes; nobody can have an opinion because they haven't seen what's underneath, you know. Nobody can be like 'she's slim thick, she's not slim thick, she's got a flat ass, she's got a fat ass. No one can say any of that because they don't know. I speak my truth in my Calvin's.*

(Calvin Klein, 2019)

In this voiceover Eilish draws attention to her dress practices as a means of producing and maintaining privacy. She doesn't want the world to know everything about her body, so she conceals it. In particular, she does not want people to have 'opinions' about the size and shape

of her body (whether she is 'slim thick' or has a 'fat ass'). Eilish ends the video stating "I speak my truth in my Calvin's". Understanding this phrase as the tag line for a wider Calvin Klein campaign (LeDonne, 2019), it is possible to see how it signposts the intervention of the Calvin Klein brand in this content (which was ultimately created to sell products). However, additionally, this phrase also creates a relationship between revealing the body with the 'truth', speaking to Bille and Sørensen's understanding of luminosities (2007). The message that is being made luminous through this advert is that Eilish is concealing her 'truth' through concealing her body with baggy clothes.

Similar workings of luminosities reappear in Eilish's own short film 'Not My Responsibility' which, this time, was written by Eilish rather than being part of an external ad campaign. In the script to this video, Eilish states the following:

Do you know me?
Really know me?

You have opinions
About my opinions

About my music
About my clothes

About my body

Some people hate what I wear
Some people praise it
Some people use it to shame others
Some people use it to shame me

But I feel you watching

Always
And nothing I do goes unseen
So while I feel your stares
Your disapproval
Or your sigh of relief
If I lived by them
I'd never be able to move

Would you like me to be smaller, weaker, softer, taller?
Would you like me to be quiet?
Do my shoulders provoke you?
Does my chest?

Am I my stomach? My hips?
The body I was born with
Is it not what you wanted?

If I wear what is comfortable
I am not a woman
If I shed the layers
I'm a slut
Though you've never seen my body
You still judge it
And judge me for it
Why?

We make assumptions about people
Based on their size
We decide who they are
We decide what they're worth
If I wear more
If I wear less
Who decides what that makes me?
What that means?
Is my value based only on your perception?
Or is your opinion of me
Not my responsibility?

(Billie Eilish, 2020)

Through beginning this short film with the question 'Do you know me?' Eilish begins by challenging the viewer. As the text goes on, it becomes clear that what Eilish is challenging is the opinions that have been formed about her based on the way that she dresses. This speaks to the dominant confinement of femininity to a regulated bodily appearance widely critiqued by feminist scholars (Thornham, 2007). Like in the Calvin Klein advert, here it is clear that this confinement bothers Eilish. However, while in the Calvin Klein advert clothes are presented as a tool to avoid external judgement, this video suggests this tactic has not worked. She states "you have opinions… About my body", "nothing I do goes unseen", "I feel you watching" and "I feel your stares, your disapproval". She presents these opinions and judgements as both directed at her body ("though you've never seen my body, you still judge it"), and how she covers it ("some people hate what I wear, some people praise it"). What becomes luminous is Eilish's awareness of the inescapability of others' opinions about the way she dresses, which

is intrinsically linked as a 'second skin' to her body (Craik, 1993). The solution Eilish offers here is shifting the burden of these judgements. Through stating "If I wear more, If I wear less, Who decides what that makes me?... Is my value based only on your perception? Or is your opinion of me Not my responsibility?", she externalises the 'responsibility' of these judgements and removes the value from them. Therefore, what becomes luminous is her resolution to disassociate herself from opinions about her dress, rather than provide an explanation for it.

However, despite this resolve, Eilish's awareness of external opinions about her body remains a luminous space of attention in her interviews both before and after the 'Not My Responsibility' release. Repeatedly, when questioned about her dress code, Eilish uses intertextuality to reference other points of view in her response (Fairclough, 2003). For *Dazed*, Eilish states "I saw comments like, 'How dare she talk about not wanting to be sexualised and wear this?!" and "There were comments like, 'I don't like her anymore because as soon as she turns 18, she's a whore' (Allwood, 2020). Similarly, in *V Magazine* Eilish states "everyone sees it as 'She's saying no to being sexualised'" (Rosenzweig, 2019) and in *Vogue* Eilish mentions "people were like 'Good for her feeling comfortable in her bigger skin'" (Snapes, 2021). On top of referencing comments that have been said about her, Eilish also repeatedly predicts potential reactions to her style. In the same *Vogue* article, Eilish predicts potential reactions to her shoot, including: "If you're about body positivity why would you wear a corset?" and "You're going to complain about being taken advantage of as a minor, but then you're going to show your boobs?" (Snapes, 2021). Similarly, in *Dazed*, Eilish predicts: "if I wore a dress to something, I would be hated for it", people would be like, 'You've changed, how dare you do what you've always rebelled against?' (Allwood, 2020). Across these publications, Eilish's constant referencing of other people's opinions of her (even after her 'Not My Responsibility' film dismissed them as not her 'responsibility') becomes overwhelming.

Noticing this trend, Eilish's choice of dress practices must be understood to be entangled within this hyper-awareness of the scrutiny of her body and clothes.

It is also possible to consider how, through exposing constant judgements made about her, Eilish's public statements about her dress are used to critique this scrutiny of women's bodies and identify it as a structural issue. In 'Not My Responsibility' Eilish makes the assumptions that "If I wear what is comfortable, I am not a woman If I shed the layers, I'm a slut". In *Vogue* Eilish voices this again: "suddenly you're a hypocrite if you want to show your skin, and you're easy and you're a slut and you're a whore" (Snapes, 2021). In *Dazed*, Eilish reiterates this double standard created by external judgements of her, and concludes "I can't win, I can-not win" (Allwood, 2020). The phrase "I can't win" is repeated in her interview for *Elle* after making a similar reference to people's judgements of her (Barlow, 2019). By explicitly presenting herself as in a situation in which she "can't win", Eilish uses a discussion of her dress practices to index a wider feminist issue (Eckart, 2002). Therefore, it is possible to argue that Eilish's constant referencing of external perspectives functions to illuminate and critique this structural issue of the disciplining scrutiny of female bodies.

This structural critique is also achieved through Eilish's use of pronouns which generalise the issue and assert Eilish's positionality (Eckart, 2003). In her 'Not My Responsibility' video, through using the pronoun "you" throughout the majority of her script, Eilish manages to be both general and specific. By connecting this "you" with negative behaviours ("Though you've never seen my body You still judge it") Eilish manages to address a mass audience, while simultaneously directly calling out the spectator. By switching to the pronoun "we" in the final verse (in her statement "we make assumptions about people based on their size…we decide what they're worth") Eilish positions herself as complicit in this behaviour, and, in doing so, suggests it is a universal structural issue. Combining these pronouns with rhetorical questions such as, simply, "why?", Eilish provokes the spectator to

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question the status quo and sets the scene for a need for change. These generalised pronouns are also present in Eilish's interviews in which she uses phrases such as "people were like" and "everyone sees it as" to emphasise judgements of her as widespread (Snapes, 2021; Rosenzweig, 2019). Considering how these statements illuminate a structural issue, and how Eilish uses them to call out the spectator, it is possible to infer that there is some element of protest in Eilish's choices to cover/uncover her body.

However, in spite of these references, across Eilish's interviews, she also asserts an apolitical stance on her dress practices. In her *V Magazine* interview Eilish states "I wear baggy shit and I wear what I want; I don't say 'Oh, I'm going to wear baggy clothes because it's baggy clothes'… It's more, just, I wear what I want to wear" (Rosenzweig, 2019). For *Dazed*, Eilish states "I'm like, 'I'm not rebelling against anything really.' I can't stress it enough. I'm just wearing what I wanna wear" (Allwood, 2020). For *Elle*, Eilish recounts "the other day I decided to wear a tank top. It wasn't even a provocative shirt. But I know people are going to say, 'Holy fuck, she's dressing sexy and trying to make a statement…' No, I'm not. It's 500 degrees and I just want to wear a tank top" (Lambert, 2021). Through these comments, Eilish sidesteps complex structural issues and instead asserts that she is just wearing whatever she wants. These statements not only contradict the explicit motive behind her baggy clothes that Eilish formulated in her Calvin Klein advert, but also the way Eilish has historically invested in the significance of her dress practices through her visual illumination of them in music videos. This contradiction adds complexity to her perspective, as she appears to simultaneously use her platform to call out a structural issue related to how her body is judged while positioning her dress code as accidental and so apolitical.

Further complexity is added when we consider comments Eilish has made about her own personal insecurities. While in her Calvin Klein advert, Eilish argues she wore baggy clothes to avoid public judgement of her body, in an interview for *Dazed* Eilish again appears

to contradict this by stating that "the only reason I did it was 'cos I hated my body" (Allwood, 2020). For *The Guardian* Eilish reiterates this: "I'm obviously not happy with my body…but who is?" (Sawyer, 2021). Similarly, for *Vogue* photoshoot, Eilish explains her choice of corset like this: "if I'm honest with you, I hate my stomach, and that's why" (Snapes, 2021). Through these statements, Eilish establishes a direct relationship between covering/uncovering and what is not liked about her bodily looks. These links are affirmed as she states (again for *Dazed)* "if there's a day when I'm like, 'You know what, I feel comfortable with my belly right now, and I wanna show my belly,' I should be allowed to do that" (Allwood, 2020). Through these statements, uncovering becomes charged as an act of self-love and self-acceptance, aligned with a dominant logic that defines the meaning of femininity as 'sexually appealing appearance' (Thornham, 2007). Again, these messages from Eilish bring complexity and contradiction to our understanding of her dress practices, which don't seem as simple as her earlier statement suggests: "I'm just wearing what I wanna wear" (Allwood, 2020).

Finally, Eilish's age contributes an additional factor that must be understood as influential in her dress decision making. As established above, Eilish's 'Not My Responsibility' video is used to critique the public's obsession with, opinions of, and judgements about how she as a female performer dresses. She understands the double bind: "If I wear what is comfortable, I am not a woman" (Billie Eilish, 2019). It can be assumed that in this context 'what is comfortable' means her baggy oversized clothes. Through negatively underlining this association, Eilish appears to critique the connection of womanhood or femininity with a particular style of dress. However, elsewhere, in interviews, Eilish appears to affirm this very connection. For *Elle*, talking about her 18th birthday, Eilish states "I'm gunna be a woman. I wanna show my body. What if I wanna make a video where I look desirable?" (Barlow, 2019). Through this statement, Eilish associates womanhood with revealing her body in order to be desirable and, in the process, vocalises the same rhetoric she critiques in her

video. These links are repeated when, describing her *Vogue* photoshoot, Eilish contends "I feel more like a woman somehow" (Snapes, 2021). Again, 'womanhood' is equated with revealing skin and wearing sexy clothes, and therefore uncovering her body is vocalised as a means of achieving womanhood for Eilish. Again, these statements shed light on further complexities to Eilish's reasonings for covering/uncovering her body which are also seen as a symbol of 'coming of age' for Eilish.

In summary, it is evident that Eilish's statements about her dress practices are not homogenous. Instead, the luminosities Eilish creates when talking about way she covers and uncovers her body are complex and, at times, contradictory. Hypervisibility, personal insecurities, a want to feel desired, age and apoliticality are all themes indexed by Eilish in connection with her dress. Through considering these complex luminosities in connection with the structural post-feminist media environment established in Chapters 1 and 2, it will now be possible to understand how Eilish's luminosities are reflective of the wider cultural environment she is situated in, which makes covering and uncovering the body a complex terrain for women to negotiate.

4.3 Post-Feminist Luminosities

Firstly, it is possible to relate Eilish's critiques of her own hypervisibility, with the hypervisible pop star environment we established in Chapter 2. As mentioned, throughout her videos and interviews, Eilish emphasises her awareness of how she is scrutinised by the public. A similar experience of contemporary female pop stardom has been explored by Karina Karakus (2018), analysing the work of Australian female pop singer Sia Furler. Furler, like Eilish, has become recognisable for a particular mode of covering. Through the use of oversized wigs, paper bags, glasses, and other methods of subterfuge, Furler "withholds visibility from her audience by refusing to show her face" (Karakus, 2018, p. 370). In her analysis of Furler's self-covering, Karakus interprets this visual statement as a means of challenging the "sexual politics of

visuality within the music industry" (2018, p.370). Karakus commends Furler's covering up as a subversive act and suggests that her bodily covering is part of a wider pattern of contemporary artists who "deploy "ugly" performance practices to subvert hegemonic codes of beauty, appearance, and identity [and] expectations of transparency, virality, and publicity" (2018, p. 361). Karakus identifies "hiddenness and revelation" as key tools used by contemporary feminist artists in response to "a cultural context in which women's simultaneous erasure and hypervisibility constitute substantive threats to the project of being seen" (2018, p. 371).

There are some clear overlaps between Eilish's luminosities and Furler's strategies of covering her face. Both of them choose to cover their bodies to withhold visibility and do so alongside making critiquing statements which expose the same structural issue. In this sense, understanding hypervisibility of the female pop star in today's media environment may allow us to interpret Eilish's dress practices in the same way as Furler's: as a means of protesting this mass surveillance.

However, while Karakus provides this clear-cut interpretation of Furler's luminous covering, Eilish's luminosities are not so homogeneous. Eilish's honest discussion of her own self-esteem issues is a key example. In her discussion of Furler, Karakus argues that the value in Furler's covering is that she "prioritizes privacy and mystery over self-exposure, but not because she believes she is unworthy of the gaze" (2018, p. 382). However, in Eilish's case, she has openly stated that her insecurities are a reason she chose this mode of covering (Allwood, 2020). In fact, through covering body parts deemed unattractive by herself, Eilish may be seen to reify a patriarchal understanding that the function of female flesh is to be looked at and seen as attractive. This is reinforced when Eilish does uncover her body and opts for a traditionally sexy 'pin-up' look. Considering the work of Gill (2019) can inform our understanding of this act. In her text on surveillance as a feminist issue, Gill emphasises the effects that female-focused surveillance and scrutiny has on girls' self-esteem, creating an

increase in negative self-image (2019, p. 12). She describes this trend as an example of 'post-feminist melancholia' (Gill, 2019, p. 12). Understanding Eilish as part of this system of scrutiny allows us to see why negative body image discourses may play an equal role in her decisions to cover and uncover her body, even if in some ways Eilish's dress practices may be subversive.

Eilish's switch to a traditionally sexy uncovered look in order to be desired must also be considered as an additional complexity present in Eilish's subjecthood that is reflective of the cultural terrain she resides in. Understanding the post-feminist environment in which Eilish is situated (introduced in Chapter 1) can help us understand this. To reiterate, post-feminism can be understood as how "young women are being put under a spotlight so that they become visible in a certain kind of way" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 54). In particular, Gill (2007) describes a key element of post-feminism is the way that, instead of being sexual objects, women are emphasised as sexual subjects, who empower themselves through self-sexualisation (ibid, p. 152). Gill argues that this expectation engenders the post-feminist idea that femininity is a bodily property that can be communicated in terms of sexiness (2007, p. 149). This perspective can be located in Eilish's public statements. When Eilish describes changing her visual look, she states "I'm gunna be a woman. I wanna show my body. What if I wanna make a video where I look desirable?" (Barlow, 2019). Through this statement, Eilish links both femininity and desirability with womanhood, all of which are communicated via showing her body. Her subsequent decision to not only reveal skin, but also opt for a hyper feminine, seductive look in her *Vogue* cover demonstrates her movement to self-sexualise as a means of empowerment. This movement is affirmed as, after uncovering her body, Eilish states "I feel more like a woman, somehow" (Snapes, 2021). Therefore, again Eilish's statements about her dress practices can be seen to reflect the cultural environment, this time through her regurgitation of a post-feminist logic of desirability.

Additionally, understanding post-feminism may help us to explain Eilish's repeated insistence that she is wearing (and doing) whatever she wants, despite this contradicting her other messages about her dress (Snapes, 2021). As described by Gill (2007), another important aspect of the post-feminist framework, is how the female body is envisaged as a means of individual empowerment for women, a woman's "source of power" (ibid, p. 149). Elements of this post-feminist tendency can be located in Eilish's dress code (as well as what she says about it). Whether the intention has been to withhold information or assert femininity, Eilish has used her body and dress as a source of power. Through her repeated statements that affirm her freedom to do what she likes with her body ("My thing is that I can do whatever I want"), Eilish emphasises this post-feminist logic that she is using the way she dresses to empower herself, individually, and for no other reason (Snapes, 2021). Therefore, again, Eilish's luminosities are revealing of the post-feminist environment she is a part of and understanding this environment can help us grasp the complexities of femininity articulated in her contradictions.

Eilish's negotiation of her age through her dress can also be seen to play into this post-feminist use of the body as a source of power. Craik (1993) demonstrates that "gender – especially femininity – is worn through clothes" as well as other 'body techniques' which are intrinsically linked with sexuality (ibid, p. 55). As we have seen, Eilish is clearly implicated in this logic that femininity is communicated through the body. Eilish states before revealing herself in a traditionally sexy way for *Vogue*: "I'm gunna be a woman. I wanna be desired", and after it: "I feel more like a woman" (Snapes, 2021). Importantly, it is on turning 18 that Eilish visually signals her 'womanhood'. Hence, it can be argued that Eilish's post-feminist use of the body as a source of power, extends to constructing her own maturity through a spectacular body display.

However, considering the work of Projansky (2014) complicates our understanding of Eilish's dress shift as a female pop star's 'agentic' manipulation of her persona. Projansky

argues that girls in the media embody a tension between innocent and sexual as a "child signifies sexual innocence but (female) star signifies erotic to-be-looked-at-ness" (2014, p.44). Therefore, anxiety is produced "about the prospective erotic threat posed by the male gaze at the child girl" (Projansky, 2014, p. 44). Understanding this anxiety, and particularly the threat of the gaze, can help inform our understanding of Eilish's dress choices. Whether intentional or not, Eilish's decision to cover up before turning 18 acted as a means to avoid a sexualised gaze. Then, through altering her luminosities to a revealing, classically sexual look only at the age of 18, Eilish overtly attracts a sexualised gaze. Considering this, Eilish's dress choice can be seen as attempts to avoid this "anxiety" by, pre-18, diverting the gaze and, post-18, signposting her 'womanhood'. Understanding that Eilish cannot avoid the gaze, only alter her self-image to negotiate it, it is possible to argue that she is less of an agentic manipulator in this scenario, than an individual caught in complexities of a pop star system.

Eilish's struggle in negotiating her age in this pop star system is reinforced when considering the gothic-nature of Eilish's pre-18 self-presentation. As argued by Kearney (2015) the luminosity most associated with girlhood in the media is glitter and sparkle. Clearly, Eilish's use of needles, black slime, bruises and cigarettes alongside her baggy clothes in her self-representation subverts this glittery norm. Understanding these devices as all methods of inflicting pain on the body, it is possible to wonder how they may illuminate the painful realities of being a girl in the music industry which, as Whitely (2006) argues, has dark undertones. Additionally, Eilish's switch to a traditionally feminine dress at the age of 18 to assert her womanhood may show these constraints in a different way. As Roach-Higgins et al. (1995) argue, children and teenagers have more leeway to push the boundaries of dress than adults (ibid, p. 102). In light of this, we can speculate if Eilish's dress change at 18 may be a response to pressures to conform to normative expectations of femininity and womanhood. Hence, age

appears as another factor Eilish must negotiate through her dress as a hypervisible pop star in a post-feminist environment and, therefore, adds further complexity to Eilish's perspective.

Considering post-feminism can also help guide our interpretation of this complexity and the wider contradictions in Eilish's public statements. As mentioned earlier, while in 'Not My Responsibility' Eilish critiques the idea that baggy clothes make her less of a woman, she then uses revealing clothes to assert her womanhood. Similar contradictions have been noted elsewhere, for example in Eilish's simultaneous assertion of her apoliticality alongside her critiques of structural issues. Considering Gill's description of post-feminism as a complex "entanglement" of feminist ideas amongst anti-feminist ones helps us to understand these contradictions (2007, p. 162). When considering the example of Nicki Minaj, a Trinidadian-born American rapper operating in the same popular music sphere as Eilish, Jess Butler (2013) notices that while Minaj performs what are considered to be feminist acts, she refuses to call herself a feminist (ibid, p. 36). For Butler, Minaj's refusal to fit in a box shows how she plays into this "complex terrain of Postfeminism", which entangles contradictory ideologies (2013, p. 52). Eilish's contradictory stance can be interpreted in the same way. It is because of this entanglement that it is possible for us to locate subversive messages in Eilish's luminosities (like her critique of the hypervisibility of the female pop star) and less subversive ones (like her conflation of revealing clothes with what it means to be a woman).

Finally, considering the conditions of contemporary society allows us to understand what puts Eilish in a position to luminously cover and uncover her body. In Karakus' analysis of Furler's facial covering, she asks the question: "who has the privilege to deploy this strategy?" (2018, p. 380). To answer this for Eilish, we can turn to Banet-Weiser's (2011) argument that "individuals who are culturally marginalized… because of race or class, for instance, do not have the same access to the practice of self-branding as white, middle-class girls and women" (ibid, p. 17). Campbell (1996) makes a similar point specific to the use of

clothes, arguing that if dressing is considered like a language, not everyone is able to speak that language freely (ibid, p. 96). In the case of Eilish (and Furler), as white, middle-class girls/women, it is possible to argue that it is because of this status that they have the space to luminously question the status quo through her dress practices. This is affirmed by considering the experiences of pop music star SZA, who operates in the same scene as Eilish, but who has publicly spoken out about her decision to not to wear a hijab for fear of the reaction it would provoke (Elan, 2021). Both Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2009) assert that postfeminism centres white, heterosexual subjects as individuals who can access empowerment. Eilish's repeated assertion of her bodily freedom (although this is admittedly, at times, contradicted) demonstrates her achievement of some level of empowerment in this post-feminist system. Therefore, Eilish's dress practices are, again, indexical of a wider cultural framework as her very presence as a female singer on the pop culture scene who can be empowered by dressing differently, is, again, inherently situated in the post-feminist society she operates in.

4.4 Conclusion

Therefore, to conclude, it is possible to see that while Eilish's dress practices across her career have been consistently luminous, her reasonings behind this self-covering and -uncovering have been complex, and, at times contradictory. While covering and uncovering her skin may signify an important (and potentially subversive) means of negotiating Eilish's hypervisibility as a female pop star, her statements about these processes reveal how Eilish's dress code is also entangled with her personal insecurities, her age, her political motives, and her apolitical ones (factors which often undermine Eilish's subversive messaging). Considering Eilish's implication in the contemporary post-feminist media environment allows us to understand these contradictions. What Eilish's covering and uncovering of her body illuminates is the complex post-feminist terrain in which she operates, which makes negotiating dress practices

for the white female media star difficult (and, perhaps, for the non-white female star, even more

so).

Chapter 5: Media Response to Eilish's Dress

Having established Eilish's own perspective on her dress code in Chapter 4, I now turn to the media's response to Eilish's covering/uncovering of her body. My analysis considers the media reaction to three key eras in Eilish's dress timeline: her Calvin Klein advert, her 'Not My Responsibility' short film, and her *Vogue* cover shoot. I begin by considering the key aspects of each of these groups of articles chronologically. This then allows me to identify some important trends which permeate all of these groups. These general trends are then explored for the ways in which they illuminate the persistence of a post-feminist logic in the media today, and how exploring this post-feminist logic sheds light on the flaws in the 'feminist' rhetoric that reappears across these texts.

5.1 Approaches to Eilish's Dress

5.1.1 Group 1

To reiterate, in May 2019, Eilish appeared in a Calvin Klein advert in which she revealed the reasoning behind her decision to wear large oversized clothes which covered her body (Calvin Klein, 2019). In this advert, Eilish positioned her baggy clothes as a strategy to withhold information about herself and her body. Having gathered 4 articles which respond to this advert, I now explore the key characteristics of them.

Firstly, the headlines of these articles can be studied to identify the focus that connects them. While *Teen Vogue*'s headline reads 'Billie Eilish Reveals the Reason for Her Baggy Clothes' (Elizabeth, 2019), *Buzzfeed*'s repeats this wording describing 'The Reason [Eilish] Wears Baggy Clothes' (Dahir, 2019). *Seventeen*'s headline continues this focus '…why [Eilish] Covers Her Chest' (Gomez, 2019), as does *Elite Daily's* 'Billie Eilish Revealed She Wears Baggy Clothes to…' (Walsh, 2019). In all of these headlines, emphasis is placed not

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just on Eilish's dress (baggy clothes), but on figuring out 'the reason' behind it, an objective that also characterises the content of all of these articles.

A common interpretation of this 'reason' for Eilish's covering of her skin also unites these texts. *Elite Daily* argues that Eilish has "made no secret of the fact that she tends to favor loose-fitting attire to prevent people from sexualising her body" (Walsh, 2019). Similarly, in *Seventeen*, Eilish's "choice to wear baggy clothes" is labelled as "a way to prevent people from over-sexualising her" (Gomez, 2019). Both *Teen Vogue* and *Buzzfeed* reiterate this by using the intertextual voices of fans tweets to affirm that "Eilish wears baggy clothes so she won't get sexualised" (Elizabeth 2019; Dahir 2019). Hence, interestingly, while in her Calvin Klein advert Eilish never explicitly cites sexualisation as 'the reason' behind her decision, these articles unanimously interpret Eilish's dress as such.

This positioning of sexualisation as 'the reason' behind Eilish's dress code also paves the way for a structural critique that runs through these articles. In *Buzzfeed*, Dahir argues that Eilish's dress has "started a conversation" about "an important issue" (2019). She questions "why teenage girls are made to feel this way" and labels Eilish's dress as "empowering & incredibly sad all at once" (Dahir, 2019). Similarly, *Teen Vogue* emphasises how Eilish has "sparked an ongoing dialogue…about the objectification of women's bodies", and, again, uses fans voices to describe the issue as heart-breaking and state that it "really says something about our society" (Elizabeth, 2019). These ideas are reinforced in *Seventeen* and *Elite Daily* as Eilish's clothes are again positioned as a "point of conversation" and her decision to cover up is deemed "actually pretty upsetting", especially because it still "hasn't prevented her from being sexually objectified" (Gomez 2019; Walsh 2019). In all of these perspectives, Eilish appears as a victim of a larger issue and a structural critique is implicit.

The conclusions of the articles can also be seen to connect them. For *Buzzfeed*, Dahir concludes, "when it comes to how others dress, it's best to drink water and mind your business" (Dahir, 2019). In a similar way, *Teen Vogue* finishes their article by affirming "the decision to cover – or bare – a body part" as a "personal choice" that "no one deserves to be shamed or judged for" (Elizabeth, 2019). This sentiment is reiterated in *Elite Daily* ("it's Eilish's choice whether she chooses to wear baggier clothing [or] chooses to show off her body") and put simply by *Seventeen* ("Do you, Billie!") (Walsh 2019, Gomez 2019). While these conclusions engage with a political critique to varying degrees, they all emphasise the importance of Eilish dressing how she wants without public scrutiny. More importantly, while the interest in attributing a reason implicates a structural problem (the sexualisation of young women's bodies), these conclusions all articulate the resolution on an individual level.

Hence, the crux of these articles is their attempt to uncover 'the Reason' behind Eilish's self-covering, a reason that has been interpreted as her critique of sexualisation. Eilish is depicted as the young celebrity caught in a structural issue across these articles, and appreciated for doing/wearing whatever she wants to overcome this social problem as a successful young woman, indirectly reassuring their readers if they are to do the same.

5.1.2 Group 2

In March 2020 Eilish released the short film 'Not My Responsibility' which revealed her body for the first time (Billie Eilish, 2020). In this short film Eilish's voiceover emphasises the way her body and dress are scrutinised, and her resolve to disassociate herself from these opinions. Again, this video sparked a media response from which I have selected 5 articles that can be representative of the key trends in the media at the time.

Following this shift in Eilish's dress practices, a shift in the media framing of Eilish's dress can be noticed too. While our first group of articles emphasised 'revealing' the reason

behind Eilish's choice to cover her body, this group of articles now sees the change as Eilish's use of her body 'to send an *important* message', managing the apparent contradiction between the earlier and current dress practices. Again, this can be noted through the choice of headlines. *Buzzfeed* states Eilish 'Showed Off Her Body On Tour Alongside A Powerful Message' (Henry, 2020). Both *Pop Crush* and *Glamour* opt for a similar phrasing, stating Eilish 'takes off her shirt in powerful statement' (Reda, 2020) and 'showed off her body on tour for an important reason' (Rosa, 2020). Again, language is used in these headlines to emphasise not just that Eilish is now shedding layers but also that she has done so "for an important reason", to send a "powerful message", a focus which continues throughout the articles' content. The headlines for *The Guardian* and *The New York Post* reiterate this, as well as demonstrating a shift in the interpretation of Eilish's choice to cover her body from a reaction to sexualisation to a protest against body shaming, describing Eilish as "addressing" and "protesting" body shaming with her more revealing dress code (Snapes 2020; Bailey-Millado 2020).

This shift in framing of Eilish's self-presentation to a public means of 'protest' rather than an individual 'upsetting' response to sexualisation is also reflected in the way Eilish is given agency in these texts. *Buzzfeed* emphasises how Eilish "used" her tour "to address constant speculation about her body" and is "using her platform to speak up and speak out" (Henry, 2020). Similarly, *Glamour* states that Eilish is "using her tour" to make a "statement", *The Guardian* praises Eilish for "hit[ting] out" against body image pressures, and *The New York Post* describes Eilish as "regaining control" (Rosa 2020; Snapes 2020; Bailey-Millado 2020). Combined with *Pop Crush's* repeated labelling of Eilish as "powerful" we can see how, in all of these framings, Eilish is positioned as an agentic actor who is empowering herself by speaking out against an issue, rather than being implicated as the victim of it like in our previous group of articles (Reda, 2020). Notably, it is when Eilish (unconventionally) covers her body

that she is interpreted as a victim of an oppressive system and when she (conventionally) reveals her skin that agency is located in her 'choice' to do so.

The intertextual inclusion of fans' voices across our articles also works to positively affirm Eilish's 'agency' (Fairclough, 2003). While in the previous group, emphasis was placed on Eilish's dress practices as a 'conversation' starter, across this group of texts there is a unanimous response of praise documented from Eilish's fans. *Buzzfeed* emphasises how, in response to Eilish's short film, "fans could be heard screaming their support", she was "met with praise online" and "fans rallied behind Eilish's message" (Henry, 2020). Similarly, *The New York Post* asserts that "the crowd roared in response" to Eilish's video and *Glamour* documents how "fans flooded to Twitter to praise Eilish for taking a stand" (Bailey-Millado 2020; Rosa 2020). Hence, fans' perspectives are integrated across our texts to rally behind each writer's construction of Eilish as an agentic young female performer.

Therefore, it is possible to see how, in this group of texts, rather than framing Eilish as someone who is caught in a structural issue, she is instead presented as a powerful agent sending a message. The message that is received from Eilish's film is one of body positivity and these articles use this message to both assert and praise Eilish's agency – without implicating the conditions that make such a shift possible.

5.1.3 Group 3

In 2021, for a *British Vogue* cover shoot, Eilish appeared in a lace pink corset and suspenders, revealing her body in a traditionally feminine way for the first time (Snapes, 2021). Accompanying this photoshoot was an interview with Eilish about her new look. Again, this shift in Eilish's bodily covering triggered another bout of media responses, from which I have selected 5 articles to establish their strategies of argumentation.

In comparison to our first two sets of media responses, the emphasises of this third group of articles is more diverse. This can be noted already from their headlines. Similar to earlier articles, *Seventeen*'s headline focuses on the reasoning behind Eilish's clothing choices ("to claim her power") (Stiegman, 2021). In contrast, *Buzzfeed*'s headline focuses on the physicality of Eilish's new look, stating Eilish is 'Rocking A *Very* Different Style, And Holy Moly' (Jokic, 2021). Differing again, *Teen Vogue*'s headline simply registers the fact of the appearance, 'Billie Eilish Is British Vogue's June 2021 Cover Star' (Elizabeth, 2021) and *Vogue* and *Fashinza*'s articles set the focus on Eilish's new look as an 'Internet Breaking Transformation' (Snapes 2021; "On her Internet Breaking Transformation" 2021).

However, despite the diverse emphases in these headlines, in their content these articles all construct a similar narrative of a 'shocking transformation'. Stiegman's article for *Seventeen* begins:

> *If you heard me shrieking from the backseat of an Uber around 1:26 pm on Sunday afternoon, no you didn't. That was the exact moment that I opened my phone and was smacked directly in the face with a blonde-haired, lingerie-clad Billie Eilish–a sight I never thought I would see.*

This article goes on to describe the *Vogue* cover shoot as a "new era of Billie style", and how her "jaw-dropping cover" is a "drastic change" from her previous attire (Stiegman, 2021). Similarly, *Teen Vogue* documents that "we are in a totally new Billie Eilish era", "Billie as you've never seen her before" (Elizabeth, 2021), and *Fashinza* emphasises "the transformation which broke the internet" as Eilish's "mystery silhouette was revealed" ("On her Internet Breaking Transformation", 2021). Again, *Buzzfeed* reiterates this emphasis by describing a "new Billie look" showcasing "a *very* different style" (Jokic, 2021). Hence, in all of these

articles, Eilish's uncovering of her body is spectacularised into a transformation which signifies an unexpected new "era" of Billie Eilish.

These articles also share commonalities in their interpretations of Eilish's uncovering: as a sign that Eilish can (and should) do whatever she wants. *Seventeen* argues that through her dress, Eilish is showing that "similar to her choice to hide her body from the public…it's also her right to *reveal* it in any way, shape, or form she chooses" (italics on the original; Stiegman, 2021). Similarly, *Teen Vogue* interprets Eilish's cover shoot as "all about pride and confidence" as "people should do whatever they want, whenever they want, if…it's what makes them comfortable and confident" (Elizabeth, 2021). A similar perspective is repeated in *Fashinza*, as the article states "everyone should be allowed to redefine themselves" as being a feminist means "freedom of choice" ("On her Internet Breaking Transformation", 2021). This sentiment is foregrounded in *Vogue*, as the quote by Eilish, "It's all about what makes you feel good" is given headline position (Snapes, 2021). Hence, all of these articles choose to interpret Eilish's dress change in favourable terms, as an act demonstrative of her ability to do whatever she wants, which they simultaneously set as a recognised social standard.

Therefore, while the focus of each article in this group differs slightly, they all function to spectacularise Eilish's underdressing into a 'transformation'. As interpreted across these articles, this transformation signifies Eilish's ability to do whatever she wants, an alleged freedom of the successful celebrity, which is still positioned as a universally available choice in contemporary society.

5.2 General Trends

The luminosities of these groups of media articles have transitioned over time and this transition can be tracked. While after Eilish's Calvin Klein advert (Group 1), the media largely positioned her as a victim of the sexualisation of women's bodies in society, after her 'Not My

Responsibility' short film (Group 2), the media began to depict Eilish as an agentic individual actor, praised for protesting against oppressive norms. In response to her *Vogue* cover shoot (Group 3), emphasis was then placed on Eilish's physical transformation as a symbol of what it means to 'do whatever you want' as a matter of individual sovereignty. Having established this, it is now possible for me to identify the key general trends that cross the chronology of these articles, which can then be used to illuminate their relation to the wider cultural context.

Firstly, it must be noted that, throughout the articles, Eilish's practices of covering and uncovering her body are established as a central aspect of her stardom. In 2019, Eilish's "baggy clothes" and "loose attire" are consistently defined as Eilish's "signature" (Dahir, 2019; Elizabeth 2019; Walsh 2019; Gomez 2019). In 2020, this trend continues as Eilish's covered body is labelled as her "staple", "trademark" (Snapes 2020, Rosa 2020), and a reason for which she is "known" (Bailey-Millado, 2020). *Buzzfeed* even establishes Eilish as "just as known for her clothes…as her incredible singing talent" (Henry, 2020). Even when Eilish's bodily covering shifted in 2021, *Vogue* still affirms her "instantly identifiable silhouette" of "capacious" clothes, *Teen Vogue* still references Eilish's "previous look" of "baggy pants, tees and sweatshirts" and *Seventeen* still emphasises that Eilish has worn "oversized clothing for most of her career" (Snapes 2021; Elizabeth 2021; Stiegman 2021). Additionally, in response to her dress code shift, Eilish's uncovered body became a central aspect of her persona too, demonstrated by the obsession with Eilish's 'new look' in the third group of articles (Elizabeth 2021; Stiegman 2021). Hence, across the media response to Eilish, her dress practices are constructed as aspects of central importance to her pop star persona.

Additionally, not only is Eilish's dress code centred, but it is emphasised throughout these articles as the bearer of some 'deeper' meaning. As we have seen, the first set of articles are constructed around the process of uncovering 'the Reason' behind her dress practices, interpreted as an attempt to avoid sexualisation. In the second set of articles, Eilish's dress

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practices are discussed in connection with a 'powerful message', interpreted as Eilish bravely 'hitting out' against body shaming. In the third set of articles, Eilish's sexually appealing dress is labelled a 'transformation', a transformation that proves Eilish can do whatever she wants. Across all of these periods, Eilish's dress is framed as an individual 'choice', a 'decision' the artist has made for a premeditated reason. Therefore, while the interpretations of Eilish's bodily covering and uncovering may evolve, what is consistent is the media urge to imbue her dress practices with meaning; her clothes are not just clothes, but signifiers of something deeper.

This urge to reveal and connect Eilish's dress choices with meaning is also linked to another commonality that threads these texts together: their indexing of a feminist ideology (Eckart, 2002). As discussed, in the first group of articles, a critique of the sexualisation of women's bodies as a structural issue is implicit. Similarly, in the second group of articles Eilish's 'message' of protest (about the scrutiny placed on women's bodies) is praised as both 'powerful' and 'important' (Henry 2020; Reda 2020; Rosa 2020). In the third group of articles, feminism is explicitly named, as *Fashinza* connects Eilish's dress with the very "label of being a feminist" ("On her Internet Breaking Transformation", 2021). Hence, it is possible to track a common practice of appropriating a 'feminist' stance that becomes a luminous space of attention across all of these groups of articles.

A key visibility of this luminous 'feminist' standpoint is the message that Eilish can (and should) do whatever she wants. This assertion can be noted from the conclusions of the first group of articles. As we established, the emphasis is that "at the end of the day, it's Eilish's choice whether she chooses to wear baggier clothing, chooses to show off her body in more form-fitting attire, or a combination of both" (Walsh, 2019). Very similar messages are present in the third group of articles. To reiterate *Seventeen*'s message, "similar to her choice to hide her body from the public, Billie wants to emphasize that it's also her right to *reveal* it in any way, shape, or form she chooses" and this "should not impact your opinions of her" (Stiegman,

2021). Similarly, to complete *Fashinza*'s phrase, "the label of being a feminist" entails "having the freedom of choice" and "everyone should be allowed to redefine themselves" ("On her Internet Breaking Transformation", 2021). While the second group of articles does not explicitly come to the same conclusion, their prolific assertion and praise of Eilish's agency plays into a similar appraisal of women's 'freedom of choice'. Hence, it can be seen that our articles not only share a common referencing of a certain feminist ideology, but more importantly, they share a similar message that constructs 'feminism' to mean that Eilish *has the right to choose* and should be praised for showing agency.

The way that Eilish is illuminated as the embodiment of this feminist message must also be considered. In the first group of texts, Eilish is repeatedly positioned as a catalyst for starting 'conversations' (Dahir 2019; Elizabeth 2019; Gomez 2019). In the second group of texts, it is not the political message that is said to be praised as "iconic" by fans, but Eilish herself, for having been the one that sent such a message (Bailey-Millado, 2020). In the third group of texts, this logic runs a full circle when Eilish is labelled as the "voice of a generation", an "icon of body positivity", and connected with the very definition of feminism through her determination to do whatever she wants (Snapes 2021; "On her Internet Breaking Transformation" 2021). It can be argued that not only do these texts use Eilish to index a particular 'feminist' ideology, but through their indexing, Eilish as an individual becomes the very embodiment of the media's 'feminist' understanding.

However, while a common construction of a feminist ideology (embodied by Eilish) can be noted across these articles, the political contradictions within this messaging must be understood. In the quotes cited above, the articles emphasise freedom of choice as a 'right' that 'should' be available to everyone. In contrast, elsewhere, emphasis is placed on Eilish already doing what she wants, apparently without the availability of those 'rights', as if structural constraints no longer exist, and feminism has already achieved an unacknowledged success.

Seventeen emphasises "people's comments have never stopped Billie from doing what she wants before. Do you, Billie!" and *Buzzfeed* concludes their article "it doesn't look like other people's opinions are going to stop Billie from using her platform" (Gomez 2019; Dahir 2019). Politically, the idea that Eilish should (be able to) do what she wants is different from the message that she can (already) do what she wants. Hence, it is possible to identify a grey area in the understanding of Eilish's freedom, which Eilish appears to already have, at the same time as still having the right too. Inevitably, this complicates and undermines the feminism the media texts attribute to Eilish.

This grey area also speaks to a wider contradictory stance which exists across these articles and complicates their feminist messaging. There are moments across these texts that work to disperse the very feminist ideology that unites them. In *Vogue*, Snapes repudiates the association of Eilish as an "icon of body positivity" as "simplistic", and something Eilish "never claimed to stand for", despite having labelled her that herself (2021). Additionally, we must also note that the consistent message that Eilish should do whatever she wants and her dress choices don't matter, comes in contradiction to the fact that Eilish's bodily covering is consistently put under the microscope across all these articles. This irony can be clearly noted in *Buzzfeed,* as Dahir concludes their article "when it comes to how others dress, it's best to drink water and mind your business", after having dedicated her whole article to exploring fans opinions on Eilish's dress practices (2019).

The depiction of Eilish's age across these articles can also be seen as another element which adds complexity to their political messaging. Across our articles, references to TikTok, memes, Gen Z (a term used to classify Eilish's age group), and to Eilish's veganism all function to assert Eilish's youth (Snapes 2021; Dahir 2019; Rosenzweig 2019). The repeated specification of her age has the same effect. In 2019, *Buzzfeed* labels Eilish "the 17-year-old" and "teenage girl" and *Elite Daily* describes Eilish as "a young woman who is still a minor"

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(Dahir 2019; Walsh 2019). In 2020, *The Guardian, Popcrush, The New York Post,* and *Buzzfeed* all label Eilish "the 18-year-old" (Snapes 2020; Reda 2020; Bailey-Millado 2020; Henry 2020). In 2021, *Fashinza* labels Eilish as "the girl", "the teenager", and "the youngest person to win a Grammy" and *Vogue* describes Eilish as a "gothy teenager" who has "teenage aspiration(s)" and a "teenage-girl heart" (Snapes, 2021). Interestingly, this assertion of Eilish's 'teenageness' comes in contradiction to how Eilish assertively describes herself (as a "young woman") (Snapes, 2021). It can be argued that this consistent effort made to infantilise Eilish across these articles undermines both the construction of Eilish as agentic, and, in the process the feminist messaging about the importance of agency that reappears across these texts. It also puts limits on their structural critique by suggesting that Eilish's struggles may be limited to her position as a teenage star, rather than being widespread and structural. Hence, it is possible to see how the feminist messaging that threads these articles together, must also be understood alongside moments of contradiction which also unravel it.

Therefore, across our articles, the way that Eilish dresses is not only given luminous attention, but is also consistently connected with deeper meanings. The interpretations of these meanings can be seen to be guided by the common 'feminist' ideology that unites all the texts. However, this shared feminist ideology must be understood as ripe with contradictions that may compromise their feminist messaging.

5.3 Post-feminist Luminosities

Having established the complex representational strategies that reappear across the articles, it is now possible to interpret these trends as both reflective of, and explained by, the contemporary popular cultural environment they are embedded in. Through relating these articles to the contemporary media context, it is possible to see how they illuminate the post-

feminist environment set out in Chapters 1 & 2, and, in particular, understand the flaws in their 'feminist' messaging as reflective of this.

Firstly, in Chapter 2, I established that for the female pop star appearance is often prioritised over musical talent by their audiences (Karakus, 2018, p. 378). In the articles studied in this Chapter, this can be seen to be the case. Across these articles, Eilish's covering and uncovering of her body is not just mentioned but centred as a fundamental aspect of her celebrity persona, and often discussed with no mention of her musical output. Reconsidering the post-feminist understanding of the female body sheds light on this focus. As argued by Gill, post-feminist media surveillance places hyper-attention on the female body (2019). The hyper-attention focused on Eilish's dress across the three groups of articles (that eclipses any focus on her musical talent) may therefore be interpreted as a clear example of this tendency.

Reconsidering the post-feminist conception of the female body as a site of empowerment deepens this understanding. In Chapter 4 I established that the way Eilish views her body and dress can be seen to play into the post-feminist logic that a woman's body is her "source of power" and female empowerment is achieved through the correct 're-modelling' and 'self-surveillance' of this body (Gill, 2007, p. 149). The framing of Eilish's dress practices across the articles reiterates this logic. Eilish's dress choices are constructed as means through which she can fulfil her various motives, including diverting the gaze, protesting body-shaming, or showing she can do what she wants. In many of the texts, Eilish is explicitly praised for 'using' her body to 'regain control' and 'speak up and speak out' (Henry 2020; Bailey-Millado 2020; Rosa 2020). Each time Eilish alters her look, the media response is one of support and agency is located in Eilish's 'choice' to do so. As established in Chapter 2, agency is a characteristic audiences seek to find in pop stars (Hansen, 2017, p. 94). Implicating the post-feminist logic of empowerment allows us to see that, in a post-feminist environment, audiences may specifically seek to find 'agency' in the way female pop stars use their body

(rather than just their artwork) as a source of power, a trend that we can consistently identify across the articles.

The tendency across the articles to imbue Eilish's dress code with some 'deeper' meaning can also be connected to this post-feminist logic. As established by Campbell (1996), viewers often urge to imbue clothes with meaning, a meaning which the viewer, by extension, attributes to the wearer of these clothes. It is possible to see how this urge in the articles to attribute meaning to Eilish's clothes may illuminate this post-feminist logic of empowerment: finding meaning in Eilish's dress strengthens the understanding of her body as the major 'source of power' (Gill, 2007). However, as argued by Campbell, the inevitable ambiguity of human action means this attribution of meaning is often misplaced, a trend we can see from the way these articles repeatedly shift their interpretations to suit Eilish's next outfit change.

The fact that the articles constantly seek deeper meanings or reasonings behind Eilish's dress practices is also revelatory of the specific expectations of pop stars in contemporary society. Kristin Lieb (2021) argues that Eilish's stardom is reflective of a "cultural rebranding" for women in the pop industry. Lieb argues that "being a pop star once meant baring skin" but now "it's all about emotional stripping". She states that "skin-deep revelations have become so common they no longer stand out", which is why stars are now "keeping their clothes on" and instead, "expos[ing] their insides" (Lieb, 2021). As a result, media outlets are now less focused on "objectifying the stars actual bodies" and, instead, "they greedily consume trauma stories rather than thinking more deeply about how to stop the production of them" (Lieb, 2021). While this sought-after emotional exposure is unlikely to be authentic (Firth, 2007, p. 261), it plays into the long-established association of 'revealing' with the quest for 'truth' (Bille and Sørensen, 2007, p. 272). This process can be located in the media response to Eilish, in which her body is not objectified, but instead used as a means to reveal the 'truth' about the negative

experiences Eilish has had as a female performer in the pop industry (without thinking about how create change in this industry).

The position of pop stars as figures that audiences draw on to negotiate social issues also helps to further illuminate this urge to interpret deeper meanings behind Eilish's dress. As established in Chapter 2, female pop stars must be understood as historically and spatially situated subjects through which audiences negotiate the contemporary environment (Lawson 2017; Lister 2001; Firth 2007; Projansky 2014). This process can be located in my selected media texts which repeatedly locate deeper meaning in Eilish's dress as a means to discuss the current social world – even if this means misinterpreting Eilish's actions. For example, in *Teen Vogue*, by identifying a deeper meaning behind Eilish's dress, Elizabeth uses it to ignite a "conversation" about the sexualisation of women's bodies in society (despite Eilish never calling out sexualisation herself), which she implies is a structural issue. Elizabeth concludes by asserting her own standpoint on the issue: "the decision to cover – or bare – a body part is an individual, and often personal, choice, and no one deserves to be shamed or judged for their clothing decisions, period" (Elizabeth, 2019). This structure of imitating a conversation (which ultimately asserts the standpoint of the writer) reappears across our articles and turns Eilish's dress code into a matter of disciplining the reader on the topic of women's dress as a social issue. In this structure, the 'deeper' meaning becomes a starting point for the articles to negotiate and assert their own understanding of the female body in the contemporary cultural environment.

The construction of the figure of Eilish as the embodiment of a feminist message also sheds light on this negotiation. In her discussion of 'divafication', Lister (2001) argues that fans are "eager to identify role models" in female pop stars (ibid, p. 8). Specific to the current context, Lieb (2021) argues that, since the #MeToo movement, audiences seek popstars who are "esteemed warriors seeking to hold abusive systems and individual abusers accountable".

Hence, the type of 'role models' fans seek to find in popstars is culturally specific and the construction of Eilish as a 'feminist' role model exemplifies this. *Vogue* constructs Eilish as a figure fighting against "exploitative men", using her self-fashioning to "confront abusers" and make statements "about the systematic nature of abuse" (Snapes, 2021). In a post-#MeToo environment in which feminist issues are of central concern, the construction of Eilish as an abuse-fighting, choice-making, feminist female figure works as a means to negotiate this environment. Hence, the construction of the Eilish persona as a feminist role model across our articles must be understood as fulfilling the audience's desire for this kind of ideological role model while negotiating their own lives.

Both the tendency to view Eilish as a feminist figure and to use her to discuss structural issues can again be understood as illuminating a post-feminist logic across the texts. Gill argues that in media discourses and among young women today, there has been "a resurgence of interest in feminism" (2016, p. 610). Gill argues that this constitutes a "new visibility" of post-feminism today, in which 'feminist' has become a "desirable and stylish" identity (2016, p. 618). Gill contends that individual female celebrities as well as women's magazines have become instrumental in this "cool-ing" of feminism, which is intrinsically linked with "youthfulness", "fashion" (2016, p. 611), and "brand culture" – all in line with a consumerist logic (2016, p. 618). Through understanding feminism as 'newly fashionable', it is possible to see the chosen articles as clear examples of the commodification of feminist ideas moving into mainstream media discourses for profit-driven purposes. This understanding also explains Eilish's positioning as a feminist role model: as a young, fashionable female celebrity figure, it is clear to see why 'feminism' has been intertwined with her branded image (as well as role model status) in the contemporary media discourse.

The particular relevance of this brand of fashionable feminism for producing the Eilish persona as a trend-setting figure must also be understood. Across the articles, as Eilish covers

and uncovers her body, her clothes become physical objects luminously charged with feminist meaning. In this process, Eilish's embodiment of a feminist message becomes literal. Following the logic of commodification, it is possible to see that, as Eilish's unconventional style has, ironically, become a fashion trend (La Ferla, 2020), her 'brand' (sic!) of feminism has become further implicated as a fashionable entity too. The chosen articles must be understood as instrumental in creating these luminous links between Eilish, fashion, and feminism, as they reproduce a wider trend of the 'cool-ing' of feminism under post-feminist logic.

However, while on the surface an alleged rise of feminist media discourses may appear to be positive, as argued by Gill (2016), this feminist resurgence must be approached with caution. She contends that, unfortunately, these feminist visibilities follow a largely neoliberal logic (2016, p. 617). Gill tracks the prominence of the "promotion of female "confidence," self-love, and self-esteem" as a "one-size-fits-all solution to gender injustice" that champions "heterosexuality, fashion-love, and consumerism" and encourages self-work on one's appearance as a moral obligation rather than social transformation (2016, p. 617). In this sense, Gill identifies a feminist "weightlessness" in the sense that a feminist identity is claimed in the absence of a defining feminist politics or desire to instigate real change, maintaining post-feminism as a logic that still requires feminist critique (2016, p. 619). Similar visibilities around 'feminism' exist in the three groups of articles. Eilish is depicted as a woman who is empowering herself (individually) through controlling the way she covers and uncovers her body as if an act of transformative freedom. While structural issues are at times pointed to, the only solution presented to counter them is the young popstar's ability to find confidence in doing whatever she wants *with her dress*, which, as Gill points out, is by no means a "one-size-fits-all solution to gender injustice" (2016, p. 617). Hence, it is possible to see how the

feminism indexed in these articles aligns with neoliberal, post-feminist values of individual empowerment, rather than setting out the need for structural change.

This implication in a post-feminist logic also sheds light on the consistent undermining of the 'feminist' messaging that occurs across these articles. This is evident from the construction of Eilish's age. To reiterate, Eilish's youth is prolifically mentioned throughout the three groups of articles in a way that serves to undermine Eilish's agency. Projansky (2014) argues that, in the post-feminist media environment, female child stars inevitably remain associated with girlhood even when they become adults (ibid, p. 19). This infantilization of Eilish can clearly be seen to be reflective of this process. In this sense, the articles entanglement in a post-feminist logic undermines their ability to follow their own feminist messaging (of empowering female subjects). This contradiction is reflected by the wider ideological contradictions that I have located across these articles, including the assertion that Eilish should be able to do whatever she wants alongside the assertion she already is, the way that feminism is indexed at the same time as being repudiated, and the manner in which Eilish's dress is put under the spotlight only to be judged as 'none of our business'. Together, what all of these points of tension reveal is the 'weightlessness' of the 'feminist' visibility across these texts, again, further illuminating their implication in a post-feminist logic (Gill, 2016).

Finally, considering the statements that aren't included in the articles can also be understood as moments of telling silence that are reflective of post-feminism, and particularly its promotion of a flawed 'feminist' ideology. Gill argues that post-feminism "re-centres both heterosexuality and whiteness" while "fetishizing" the young, able-bodied woman (2007, p. 163). This process can be clearly seen in the chosen texts. While Eilish's age and femininity is repeatedly made luminous within our articles, both her class and race membership are areas that are consistently put in the shadow. While the issue of class is never indexed, a mention of race occurs just once (Dahir, 2019). At the end of her 2019 *Buzzfeed* article, when reflecting

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on Eilish's covered body, Dahir (who is incidentally one of the only non-white writers in the media sample) points out that "while many Muslim women choose to dress modestly for similar reasons, they aren't celebrated in the way Billie has been" (Dahir, 2019). Dahir's comparison is valid, however the absence of a similar perspective from every other article over the years discussing Eilish's bodily covering is revelatory. As Projansky argues, in the public eye, it is the young white (usually blond) girl figure who is deemed as meriting the most adoration and protection (2014, p. 60). This adoration and protection are clear throughout our sets of articles in which Eilish's covering and uncovering is lit with luminous attention and praise. However, as Dahir's point reveals, while light is shone on Eilish, other voices, identities and perspectives are left in the shadow and, in this shadow, the 'weightlessness' of the 'feminism' indexed in these articles, again, reveals itself.

5.4 Conclusion

To conclude, undoubtedly, Eilish's covering and uncovering of her body has sparked a conversation, a conversation that exploring these media responses has allowed me to unpick. As Eilish's self-presentation changed, her media depiction did too. Her figure is presented as one that has transitioned from the victim of sexualisation to an agent protesting against body-shaming, to eventually the example of a confident young woman 'doing whatever she wants'. Across these representations, Eilish's dress practices have remained a central concern and Eilish has been praised for agentically using her body as a source of power and embodying a feminist role model in this regard. Through relating these elements to the consumerist cultural context, what these trends illuminate is a wider post-feminist logic that exclusively celebrates Eilish for using her body to empower herself as an individual, however, in the process, sidesteps any attempt to instigate structural change. Hence, while 'feminist' ideals form the backbone of our articles, the 'weightless' reality of this post-feminist visibility cracks their foundations, as they fail to resist putting Eilish's dress practices under the microscope,

undermine the agency in Eilish they are so keen to affirm, and reproduce racial bias by re-centering a white middle-class young woman celebrity's experience.

Conclusion

For the contemporary feminist analyst, the current moment—by which I mean

variously, this year, this month, and right now—must rank as one of the most

bewildering in the history of sexual politics. The more one looks, listens, and learns,

the more complicated it seems.

(Gill, 2016, p. 613)

Undeniably, the complications that Gill asserts in this quote have largely characterised the case study of Eilish. Across the way Eilish presents herself visually, the way she talks about how she dresses, and the way the media has responded to these stimuli, what has remained consistent is the complex contradictions which have characterised all of these data sets. Not only has Eilish drastically changed her self-branding practices across her time in the spotlight, but her reasoning behind these changes has darted around in ways that are impossible to pin down. Similarly, the media responses to Eilish's covering and uncovering of her body at various points on her dress timeline have shown complex strategies of reporting.

However, these contradictions are revelatory in their own right. Drawing on feminist engagements with post-feminism, it has been possible to see how these contradictions illuminate the popular cultural environment they are embedded in. This is a cultural environment which simultaneously expects Eilish to conform to female dress expectations and to assert her body as a source of power and, hence, her self-branding decisions have negotiated both. This is a cultural environment which simultaneously seeks political and apolitical messages from Eilish, and, hence, her public statements about her dress entangle both. This is a cultural environment in which particular forms of feminism are 'fashionable', however, structural critiques are sidestepped and, hence, the media response to Eilish's dress exhibits both. In this sense, not only does focusing on Eilish as a case study of covering and uncovering

the female body demonstrate the continuation of a post-feminist logic today, but it is also revelatory of the difficulties young women, and particularly young female popstars, face in negotiating this environment in which oppressive systems and practices remain in place. Eilish repeatedly contends in her public statements "I can't win" (Allwood 2020; Barlow 2020). My analysis has proved that to be the case. As Whitely (2006) argues "celebrity status…has a sting in its tail" and, as we have seen, it is female celebrity figures who are most likely to get stung (ibid, p. 333).

This exploration of Eilish's covering and uncovering of her body has also shed light on the diverse ways in which women's bodies are policed today. As established in Chapter 5, the media narratives with respect to Eilish's dress practices largely respond with praise, while distancing themselves from anyone that should scrutinise women's bodies. However, what we see in these articles is scrutiny, just in a different form. Eilish's body and how she presents it is still put under the microscope (a process about which she has actively expressed her discomfort), it is just the way it is responded to that has changed as Eilish is praised, but still probed, for dressing differently. While the media has rallied behind Eilish's dress changes, it is possible to assume that not every woman would get the same response, as even though Eilish is supported this time, the policing system of female scrutiny remains in place.

This also brings me to point out that Eilish's experience of is dependent on her cultural position. While an analysis of Eilish's covering and uncovering of her body has revealed the struggles that she faces when negotiating this environment, it has also exposed her privilege. As I established in Chapter 1, dress holds subversive power. Undeniably, through her negotiation of the celebrity dress code in a way that questions the status quo, to a certain extent, Eilish has been able to exercise this power. However, as I have argued, it is because of her cultural position as a wealthy young American white celebrity woman that Eilish is able to push the boundaries of dress in the way that she does and be praised for it. As written by Dahir

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(2019) in *Buzzfeed*, "while many Muslim women choose to dress modestly for similar reasons, they aren't celebrated in the way Billie has been" and considering the experiences of the pop star SZA proves the realities of this (Elan, 2021).

Hence, although in a feminist utopia, covering and uncovering the female body would be a truly non-sexist and, in that sense, meaningless decision, my analysis has shown this not yet the case. Covering and uncovering the female body is an act charged with political meaning in today's Western society which polices young women's dress practices in ways that meet post-feminist and consumerist expectations. Therefore, while the topic is repeatedly met with attempts to apoliticise it, understanding and critiquing the politics of these processes in an intersectional manner is an essential task for feminist analysts today, particularly considering the vast influence celebrity figures and global media outlets have on the way we think about women's bodies.

There are of course limitations to my study. The scope of my thesis has only been able to consider the case study of Eilish and I have only briefly touched on the experiences of other women in the popular culture sphere (Sia and SZA). Hence, my understanding of the extremely diverse ways and reasons for which women cover and uncover their bodies in the Western world today has been limited. More work must be done to understand how Eilish's distinct example relates to, or even affects, the experiences of women more generally and considering a broader range of diverse case studies is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of how women's bodies are currently being regulated, inside the popular cultural sphere and outside of it. Only through doing this study would it be possible to begin responding to the questions: *where is the space for feminist subversion when it comes to dress practices and what will it take to get to a point where covering and uncovering the female body truly does not matter?*

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