



The Male Gaze: Sexual Objectification in Women's Body *In The Substance*, A Movie Script by Coralie Fargeat

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Keyword 1; Sexual objectification
Keyword 2; male gaze
Keyword 3; media pressure
Keyword 4; beauty standard
Keyword 5; women's insecurity

Article History:

Received : 19/06/2026
Revised : 25/06/2026
Accepted : 28/06/2026
Available Online:
30/06/2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines how *The Substance* portrays the sexual objectification of women's bodies through the framework of the male gaze, with the aim of understanding how media representations contribute to the psychological of women. The research is grounded in concerns that women are often reduced to visual objects, valued more for appearance than identity or capability. A qualitative method is employed, drawing on Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997). This qualitative study adopts Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) Sexual Objectification Theory as its theoretical framework. Within this framework, the concepts of male gaze, body shame, and anxiety are used as analytical lenses to examine how sexual objectification is represented in the film. The analysis is conducted through close reading of dialogues, visual scenes, and character behavior, allowing for the identification of how the masculine perspective in media narratives fosters internalized objectification. Findings reveal that the female protagonist, Elisabeth Sparkle, is consistently depicted through a fragmented and sexualized lens that reinforces patriarchal ideologies. This portrayal leads her to internalize objectification, resulting in psychological consequences including anxiety, shame, and a fractured sense of self. The study concludes that *The Substance* illustrates how women who fail to conform to imposed ideals are systematically marginalized or replaced, underscoring the need for critical scrutiny of gendered visual narratives in contemporary media.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the entertainment industry, female public figures are frequently subjected to sexual objectification, wherein their physical appearance is valued above their talent, achievements, or personal identity. This phenomenon is rooted in the concept of the *male gaze*, as described by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), a masculine framework that positions women as visual objects designed to fulfill male pleasure. Within this framework, women are compelled to view themselves from a male perspective rather than asserting their individuality. Consequently, actresses and other female performers are expected to maintain a youthful and flawless appearance to remain visible and desirable within the industry. Beauty standards shaped by the *male gaze* serve as benchmarks, pressuring female public figures to continuously monitor, alter, and perform their physical image as a condition for sustaining their careers. This persistent scrutiny often leads to self-objectification, whereby women begin to perceive themselves through the same narrow and sexualized lens imposed by others

This issue is clearly represented in the script of the film *The Substance*, through the main character, Elisabeth Sparkle. As Elisabeth begins to age, her boss considers replacing her with someone younger and more attractive. The fear of losing her position and the anxiety of no longer being accepted in the entertainment industry create intense psychological stress. In an effort to preserve her career, she resorts to an extreme measure by using a mysterious substance that enables her to create a new version of herself. The substance generates a young and beautiful body emerging from her back, causing her original body to split into two. However, the substance imposes strict rules: body swaps can only occur every seven days. Consequently, Elisabeth must alternate between her original body and the new body named Sue.

Related to the issue of male objectification, only one study was found that analyzed *The Substance*, while other studies applied the same theoretical framework to different movies or novels. Rozan et al., n.d. (2024) analyzed Kritik Standar Kecantikan Dalam Film "The Substance". This study examines how the horror film *The Substance*, directed by Coralie Fargeat, represents the identity crisis experienced by women through the use of body horror. The analysis highlights how body horror in the film illustrates the fragmentation between an idealized self-image and the unstable, ever-changing body, leading to self-alienation and the character's inability to recognize herself. Other studies focused their analysis on the use of sexual objectification in movies and novels. Ahmed (2016)'s study discusses the sexual objectification of women in cinematic films and its impact on the issue of sexual violence against women in India. The findings of the study reveal that in the selected films, women are often portrayed stereotypically as sex objects or items for male gaze. In line with it, Kim et al., n.d. (2022) discusses the portrayal of gender stereotypes and sexual objectification of women in the popular Netflix series *ELITE*. The researchers highlight how, despite technological and cultural advancements, modern media still perpetuates traditional gender roles, especially regarding women. The last, Galdi et al., (2014) discusses two studies that tested the hypothesis that exposure to objectifying television, in which women are depicted as sexual objects, increases the likelihood of harassing behavior. Unlike this study, which explores the psychological effects of sexual objectification in media on women, those studies are more concerned with social and behavioral consequences within society. As a result, this research offers a distinct perspective by combining an analysis of the mechanisms of sexual objectification in media with its psychological impacts on women.

With this new identity, Elisabeth as Sue, intends to present herself before her former boss without anyone discovering her secret. Through this strategy, she aims to maintain her career, even if it requires living a double life. Because Elisabeth and Sue share the same consciousness, they are fundamentally a single entity trapped in an endless cycle, forced to inhabit two physical forms alternately. Applying Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) Sexual Objectification Theory, particularly the concepts of the *male gaze*, body shame, and anxiety, this study examines how *The Substance* portrays both the internal and external impacts of objectification on female public figures. Using a qualitative approach and close reading methodology, the analysis focuses on the visual emphasis on body parts, the dismissal of personal identity, and the pressure to maintain attractiveness as instruments of patriarchal control.

The analysis reveals that Elisabeth Sparkle experiences continuous sexual objectification that fragments her identity and reduces her worth to her appearance alone. This leads her to internalize the *male gaze*, resulting in persistent anxiety and body shame. Even after achieving the idealized physical form through transformation, she remains trapped in a cycle of objectification and invisibility. The study finds that *The Substance* not only critiques the media's perpetuation of unrealistic and gendered standards of beauty but also exposes the profound psychological toll such pressures impose on women, particularly those in the public eye.

Ultimately, the film underscores that no matter how much women conform to these ideals, the *male gaze* remains insatiable constantly redefining, replacing, and eroding their existence.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The present study employs a qualitative research design, aimed at providing in-depth understanding of narratives and textual data rather than numerical analysis. Analysis of literary works, including films or movie script, can be understood by examining the intrinsic elements that build the story internally, such as plot structure, characters, setting, and point of view (Oktaviano et al., 2024). The research setting involves the examination of the film script *The Substance* by Coralie Fargeat. The population of interest consists of the characters and narrative elements within the script, while the sample focuses on key dialogues, interactions, and pivotal scenes relevant to the study objectives.

The primary research instrument is the script of *The Substance*, which contains textual data including dialogues, character descriptions, and narrative structures. Secondary instruments include theoretical frameworks, particularly Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) Sexual Objectification Theory, which guides the analysis of objectification and its psychological impact.

Data were collected through close reading of the script. The researcher initially read the script in its entirety to observe and understand narrative progression, character development, and visual storytelling. Key themes and emotional nuances were identified during this process. Subsequently, the researcher conducted a detailed examination of dialogues, character interactions, and significant scenes to extract data aligned with the research objectives. Both visual and textual elements were considered to ensure comprehensive coverage of the film's representation of female characters.

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively through comprehensive interpretation of how women are represented within entertainment media standards. Particular attention was given to the sexual objectification of women's bodies, highlighting how media reduces women to visual objects of desire while neglecting intellectual, emotional, and personal dimensions. The psychological impacts of such representations were examined, including internalization of media standards and effects on mental health. Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) Sexual Objectification Theory served as the guiding framework to analyze how external gaze influences women's psychological states over time. All findings were systematically presented using qualitative analysis to ensure an in-depth exploration of the narrative texts.

3. RESULTS

This study identified a total of several scenes and dialogues in *The Substance* that represent the sexual objectification of women's bodies through the perspective of the male gaze. These findings were classified into two major categories: (1) the ways media objectifies women through male gaze, and (2) the psychological impact of masculine perspective, which consists of body shame and anxiety. The results are presented under the following subheadings:

3.1. The Ways Media Objectifies Women through Male Gaze

In the entertainment industry, the *male gaze* positions women as visual objects, with beauty standards defined by male perceptions. A woman's worth is often reduced to how well her body fits the physical ideal, either in the upper or lower part of the body. Media frequently emphasizes sexually appealing parts while neglecting the rest, reinforcing the idea that a woman's value is measured by her physical attractiveness. This situation can be seen in the following quotation:

The director says he saw something bizarre on the monitor... Sue turns and sees that it's the camera... that is just behind her ass. (145. int. TV studio / Pump It Up show – day p.90)

This scene illustrates how the camera deliberately focuses on Sue's buttocks during a dance performance, ignoring the context of the activity. Instead of documenting the movement, the camera selectively highlights body parts that align with male desires. Such framing confirms that the *male gaze* reduces women's bodies to objects of visual pleasure.

The male gaze not only focuses on a woman's lower body but also places significant attention on her upper body. This means that this gaze does not merely set standards for body shapes, but also has specific criteria regarding which parts of a woman's upper body and face are considered most attractive according to male gaze. This can be seen in the following quotation:

The handcam image rewinds and plays again in a tighter shot on her magnetic face that pierces the screen. Sue I'm Sue. ... The image rewinds and plays even closer on her luscious, curved lips. which repeat, without any sound this time Sue (mute) (cont'd) Sue, Sue, Sue (36. int. back to the dv image that freezes paused on Sue's face p.35).

This quote shows how the male gaze focuses on specific parts of a woman's face. In this scene, the camera rewinds and zooms in on Sue's lips, suggesting that they hold greater visual and sexual value than the rest of her face. The description "*luscious, curved lips*" further emphasizes this feature as an object of male desire. Rather than presenting Sue as a whole person, the camera isolates one facial feature associated with female attractiveness. This fragmentation reflects how the male gaze turns women's bodies into visual objects designed to satisfy male pleasure.

Moreover, the male gaze often focuses solely on the physical appearance of women, without acknowledging their abilities, talents, or achievements. This concept position makes women's value and existence more frequently measured based on physical appearance alone. According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), in this context, women are viewed solely from their physical aspects, especially their bodies, without considering their abilities, talents, or achievements. This point shows that when a woman has talent, her talents tend to be ignored or sidelined and prioritize physical appearance even though she has extraordinary qualities. As if a woman's value is only measured by her appearance, not by her character, intelligence, or creativity. This can be seen in the following quotation:

Casting director: too bad her boobs aren't in the middle of her face instead of that nose. ... Assistant casting director: next! Still focused on them, we hear the door that opens and closes, footsteps... the two men look up: a beat where their faces are frozen, as if something took their breath away... and the camera slowly pulls back to reveal... an ass, frozen in the same sexy sway, hand on her hip and wearing the same flashy pink leotard as the mannequin in the store window... except this time it's a human ass. New Elisabeth's perfectly formed ass. Casting director: looks like everything sure is in the right place this time... (35. int. dance studio / casting room - day. p.34).

This situation shows that women who already have perfect appearance also often become a target of male gaze. While women who do not have perfect appearance are often immediately

ignored or judged negatively, without considering their talents, experiences, or achievements. Objectification still happens to women in various physical conditions, only differing in the form of responses shown by the male gaze's perspective.

This portrayal leads to a condition in which the value and the existence of women in media are measured by how closely their appearance aligns with male-defined physical ideals. As a result, women who do not conform to these standards are often marginalized or judged less eligible to the visual standard of such perspective.

3.2. The Psychological Impact of Masculine Perspective

The pressure of the male gaze, which judges women's bodies according to masculine ideals, makes women feel uncomfortable with themselves. As a result, they constantly try to fit these standards to gain acceptance, leading to body shame and anxiety.

3.2.1. The Emergence of Body Shame

Body shame is an emotional state where women feel embarrassed and dissatisfied with their appearance when they believe they do not meet socially constructed beauty standards. In the context of the *male gaze*, women often internalize these standards, leading to negative self-perceptions when they fail to achieve them. This situation is reflected in the following quotation:

Before leaving she goes to close the secret room's door... Elisabeth turns to the mirror, her expression a little gloomy... She adds a bit of lipstick, another stroke of blush to make her cheekbones rosier. A beat. More blush. She forces a smile as she looks at herself. (133 int. bathroom – end of the day p.82)

This scene shows Elisabeth comparing herself to Sue's youthful and flawless body. Confronted with Sue's ideal appearance, Elisabeth suddenly feels dissatisfied with her own aging face, which no longer fits masculine beauty standards. Her gloomy expression and excessive use of makeup highlight her attempt to cover up feelings of shame and inferiority. The *male gaze* here does not only come from the external environment but is also internalized, shaping the way Elisabeth perceives her own body and self-worth.

Besides feeling ashamed of her face, which she believes is no longer attractive, Elisabeth also begins to realize that her body does not match the masculine perspective standards. At first, her feelings of shame focus on her face. This can be seen in the scene where Elisabeth looks at herself in the mirror and tries to improve her appearance by adding makeup to look younger and fresher. However, after feeling somewhat satisfied with how her face looks, the shame within Elisabeth does not simply go away. Instead of gaining confidence, she starts to pay attention to other parts of her upper body. This can be seen from the following quotation:

She walks down the hallway, grabs her coat and handbag... searches for her keys... sees them on the table in the living room. Walking over to the table she looks up and her eyes fall upon... the huge billboard outside. PUMP IT UP A suspended moment standing face to face with Sue's gigantic overly-sexualized body: Her perfectly round, perky breasts. Her luscious lips... Her gorgeous shiny hair.. Elisabeth is back in front of the mirror. A harsh expression as she contemplates her face: this won't do at all. She pulls up the fabric on her dress to hide her cleavage which all of a sudden can't even compare. She throws a wrap over her shoulders to cover it. And the lipstick is all wrong. She takes it off and puts on another. She adds more blush. Brush strokes to her cheekbones, in an increasingly

aggressive fashion. She lets her hair down. No, she puts her hair back up.
Ok (134 int. hallway / living room – evening, 135 int. bathroom – evening
p.82-83)

In this scene, Elisabeth is reminded of beauty standards after seeing a large billboard of Sue, who represents the male gaze through her idealized and sexualized appearance. The description, “*Her perfectly round, perky breasts. Her luscious lips. Her gorgeous shiny hair,*” presents Sue as the image of ideal femininity. This causes Elisabeth to feel ashamed of her own body, especially when she “*pulls up the fabric on her dress to hide her cleavage.*” Her reaction shows that she now sees her body as inadequate compared to Sue’s. She then repeatedly changes her makeup and hairstyle, revealing her growing dissatisfaction with her appearance. Rather than accepting herself, Elisabeth becomes trapped in a cycle of self-criticism shaped by the male gaze. This scene demonstrates how body shame expands from concern about facial appearance to dissatisfaction with her upper body.

After feeling ashamed of her face and upper body, Elisabeth begins to worry about how others will see her. Her shame shifts from personal dissatisfaction to fear of being judged by others. This supports Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997, p. 180) view that body shame is not only based on self-evaluation but also on concern about how one's body is viewed by others. As a result, Elisabeth becomes increasingly self-conscious, leading to greater emotional discomfort. This is reflected in the following quotation:

Elisabeth in front of the bathroom mirror; a dour, accusatory look in her eyes as she looks at her reflection: Disgusting. She uses a cotton pad to wipe the lipstick off her face with a slow and harsh gesture, smearing it onto her cheek like a bloody gash. Elisabeth is sitting in her bathrobe on the bed, her make-up removed and her hair down, her skin reddened from repeatedly putting her make-up on and taking it off. (137 int. bathroom – evening p.84)

In this scene, Elisabeth tries to ignore her appearance and go on her date. However, when she sees herself in the bathroom mirror, her body shame returns. Looking at her reflection, she calls herself “*disgusting,*” showing that she has fully internalized negative judgments about her appearance. She begins to imagine that her date will see her the same way, making her feel unworthy of social interaction. This feeling is reinforced when she harshly wipes off her lipstick, an action that symbolizes self-rejection rather than simply removing makeup. Overwhelmed by shame and fear of being judged, Elisabeth cancels the date. This scene shows how the male gaze and social beauty standards can make women feel unworthy and prevent them from participating confidently in social life.

The analysis shows that the male gaze, through the beauty standards it promotes, encourages women to evaluate themselves from an external perspective. Elisabeth’s body shame develops gradually, beginning with dissatisfaction with her face, extending to other parts of her body, and eventually leading to fear of social judgment. This progression reflects how the internalization of objectification shapes women's self-perception and emotional well-being.

3.2.2. The Emergence of Anxiety

Anxiety refers to excessive concern about physical appearance, often triggered by negative comments and the pressure to meet unrealistic beauty standards. In *The Substance*, this anxiety is experienced by Elisabeth when she becomes increasingly aware of her aging body and its declining value in the eyes of others. This situation, can be seen in this quotation:

At 50, it stops. and that's not me saying so. that's biology ... Elisabeth what stops? Harvey? The... you know the... the... suddenly really uncomfortable, he makes a circular gesture with his hand... then he brushes it all aside with a sweeping gesture. (6 int. restaurant day p.8–9)

This quotation shows how Elisabeth's boss subtly implies that women lose their attractiveness at the age of 50. Elisabeth's reaction, "What stops?" reveals her unease and immediate anxiety about aging. The remark signals that her social and professional value is tied to her youthful appearance, pushing her to fear replacement by younger women who meet the masculine standard of beauty. This growing anxiety ultimately drives Elisabeth to use *The Substance* in an attempt to transform into an idealized version of herself, represented by Sue.

Elisabeth believes that by becoming Sue, she can escape the negative judgments she experienced as Elisabeth. This belief is shaped by painful experiences that continue to affect her. One of the strongest memories is her boss's remark that she would be replaced, reinforcing her fear of no longer meeting society's beauty standards. This traumatic experience is reflected in the following quotation:

I don't give a fuck what we promised her! This is tv, not a charity! So find me somebody new. now. ... His laughter trailing off in the distance until the room is completely silent again. ... Then, the sound of a toilet flushing. The door to one of the stalls finally opens slowly and Elisabeth walks out. (5 tv studio – men's room p.7).

In this scene, Elisabeth overhears a conversation in which her boss says, "*find me somebody NEW. NOW.*" These words trigger anxiety as she realizes that she is about to be replaced. The statement reflects the entertainment industry's demand for youth and physical attractiveness, leaving little space for women who no longer fit the ideals shaped by the male gaze. This painful experience remains with Elisabeth and later drives her to create a new identity as Sue. Through Sue, she hopes to escape these judgments and regain a sense of worth and acceptance.

However, even after transforming into Sue and feeling more attractive, Elisabeth's anxiety does not disappear. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997, p. 181) explain that anxiety arises when individuals become overly concerned with how others perceive and evaluate their appearance. As a result, confidence in one's looks does not necessarily eliminate the fear of being judged. This is also reflected in Sue's experience, as shown in the following quotation:

How sweet... So everyone is aware that you replaced Elisabeth Sparkle and no doubt about it you stepped in, turned up the volume and ROCKED THEIR WORLD! (the audience cheers) Were you a fan of her show? ... SUE Well, I can't really say I actually watched her show because... well you do know that we're not exactly the same generation... (everybody laughs). ... And you have to admit that it was a bit old fashioned - Jurassic Fitness really - it needed a change... (164 int. living room / talk show studio – night p.108)

In this scene, Sue is interviewed after being introduced as Elisabeth's replacement. Although she appears confident, her responses reveal underlying anxiety. When she says, "*well you do know that we're not exactly the same generation...*" followed by laughter from the audience, she seems to test how people react to her former identity. Fearing that others might associate her with Elisabeth, Sue quickly distances herself by criticizing Elisabeth's old show, calling it "*a bit old fashioned—Jurassic Fitness really.*" By rejecting her former identity, Sue tries to convince others that she is someone entirely different. Her reaction reflects anxiety about how people would judge her if they discovered that Sue and Elisabeth are the same person.

The analysis shows that the anxiety experienced by Elisabeth and Sue is shaped by beauty standards promoted through the male gaze, where a woman's value is closely tied to her appearance and age. Negative experiences, such as her boss's degrading comments, leave a lasting impact that drives Elisabeth to create a new identity as Sue. However, even after becoming the ideal woman according to these standards, her anxiety remains because she fears being judged if her former identity is exposed. This suggests that conforming to beauty ideals does not remove anxiety but instead reinforces fear of social evaluation and the need for continuous self-monitoring.

4. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the representation of women in *The Substance* reflects how the male gaze continues to shape media portrayals of the female body. Women are positioned primarily as visual objects, with their value measured through physical appearance rather than their personal qualities. The analysis shows that sexual objectification is expressed not only through male characters' dialogue but also through visual elements such as camera framing that highlight specific body parts to satisfy male desire.

Furthermore, the study reveals that such objectification has psychological consequences. The main character, Elisabeth Sparkle, internalizes these unrealistic standards, leading to body shame and anxiety. These findings highlight that sexual objectification in media is not trivial but instead reinforces harmful norms that negatively affect women's mental well-being.

By applying Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) Sexual Objectification Theory, this study contributes to understanding how media representations perpetuate the male gaze and emphasizes the need for critical awareness of its impact on women's self-perception. The findings also suggest that filmmakers and media creators should be more aware of how women are represented on screen, as repeated portrayals of women as visual objects may reinforce unrealistic beauty standards and their psychological effects. In addition, this study provides a basis for future research to examine sexual objectification in different media or cultural contexts using similar theoretical perspectives.

Acknowledgment

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Authors' Contribution

Bernice Jovetta Suryadi conceived the study, developed the theoretical framework, conducted the textual analysis, interpreted the findings, and drafted the manuscript. *Melania Priska Mendrofa* contributed to the research design and assisted in the analysis and interpretation of the data.

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