

The Influence of the Kardashian-Jenners on Fourth Wave Feminism Through Digital Media Platforms

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Abstract

Thanks to its decade-long TV show, profitable business ventures, and robust social media platforms, the Kardashian-Jenner family has an incredible digital media presence. The family, centered on strong, independent women, is “unapologetically sex- and body-positive” and more trans-aware than most other celebrities – three characteristics that are staples of fourth-wave feminism. This study examined if the Kardashian-Jenners encourage their target audience to adapt these traits. The study found that while they partially encourage body-positivity and sex-positivity, they have led the general population to be trans-aware. This research suggests the Kardashian-Jenners are serious media influencers who share a semi-positive, non-purposeful feminist message.

I. Introduction

The Kardashian-Jenners do not qualify themselves as feminists. *Feminism* is not a word that is often uttered on their hit reality television show or within their multitude of popular businesses. However, the family is unfailingly matriarchal and female-centric. The Kardashian-Jenners are accidental feminists.

Kris Jenner, the “momager,” runs the show—quite literally. In addition to serving as an executive producer for their decade-long running TV show, she manages herself and her six children: Kim, Kourtney, Khloe, Kendall, Kylie, and Rob. She is the matriarch and is responsible for the significant revenue this family has raked in over the past 10 years. The family is centered on strong, independent women.

Kim, Khloe, and Kourtney Kardashian—the eldest three sisters—have faced constant criticism from the start of their careers about their curvy bodies and comfort with their sexualities. These women are fiercely independent. Though the world has watched them date, get married, and have children, they make it clear that they do not depend on their significant others in any way, shape, or form. Kendall and Kylie Jenner, the youngest sisters, are young adult and have flourishing careers and businesses of their own. Rob, the single brother and son, has only recently come back into the spotlight following an exodus because of body-image issues. It took his girlfriend, Blac Chyna, to get him to return to the public eye. Lastly, there is Caitlyn Jenner, formerly Bruce Jenner. Her transition was incredibly public, and her family never failed to support her as a woman. None of her children or stepchildren disowned her, and they all shared trans-accepting messages to

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their followers.

The Kardashian-Jenners are dominant on social media. Their followers are in the millions, they can't go anywhere without a bodyguard, and their business products are in high demand. They have branded themselves as sexy women who do what they want, are not afraid of their sexualities, and practice self-love. Recently they are debatably trans-inclusive, since Caitlyn began her transition in 2015. Their trans-inclusivity is questionable for many in the LGBTQIA community, but they have advocated enough to be considered trans-aware and trans-accepting.

It is hard to put the feminist movement in a neat, tidy box—but the concept of different “waves” seems to help. The Kardashian-Jenner brand falls into the realm of fourth-wave feminism. Experts argue that 2017 is in the midst of the fourth wave. It is mostly online and digital, where artists, celebrities, and average social media users employ their bodies to make statements about race, class, gender, sexuality, and bodily autonomy. The digitally driven fourth-wave feminism is sex-positive, trans-accepting, and body-positive (Baumgardner, 250).

Sex-positivity, according to the Women and Gender Advocacy Center at Colorado State University, can be defined as the idea that all sex is a positive thing, as long as it is healthy and explicitly consensual. Trans-accepting feminism includes trans women, and does not prefer cis women over trans women. Trans-accepting feminism considers trans issues to be feminist issues. To be body-positive is to support and accept all shapes and sizes, to promote comfort in one's own skin, and to encourage women to make their own choices about their bodies.

As mentioned earlier, the Kardashian-Jenners have an incredible online presence, and their fans and followers get the vast majority of their information about this family through digital media. People have built serious parasocial relationships with this family through a strictly digital platform. And within this platform, the women in the Kardashian-Jenner clan have posted and talked constantly and openly about their sexualities, their bodies, and Caitlyn's transition.

This study explored the Kardashian-Jenners' impact on the confidence of their social media followers and TV audiences in the context of fourth-wave feminism. Are followers of the Kardashian-Jenners encouraged to be more sex-positive, body-positive, and trans-aware because of the family's prominent digital presence?

II. Literature Review

The Kardashian-Jenners are perhaps the greatest accidental feminists of all time. “The qualifier ‘accidental’ in this title is a crucial one, one meant to suggest that these women have stumbled upon a way to pioneer the movement into its next iteration, rather than having tirelessly dedicated their lives towards equality” (Kirkpatrick). Nonetheless, they are “unapologetically sex- and body-positive,” and are more trans-aware than most other celebrities, especially in reality television (Kirkpatrick). These three characteristics that the Kardashian-Jenners exhibit are staples of the new fourth-wave feminism, which is manifesting itself digitally. Understanding the social media and TV popularity of the Kardashian-Jenners is crucial to this study.

Members of the Kardashian-Jenners family have a robust social media presence. According to the Social Blade (2017), two of the 10 most-followed Instagram accounts of 2017 belong to members of the Kardashian-Jenner clan (Refer to *Figure 1*).

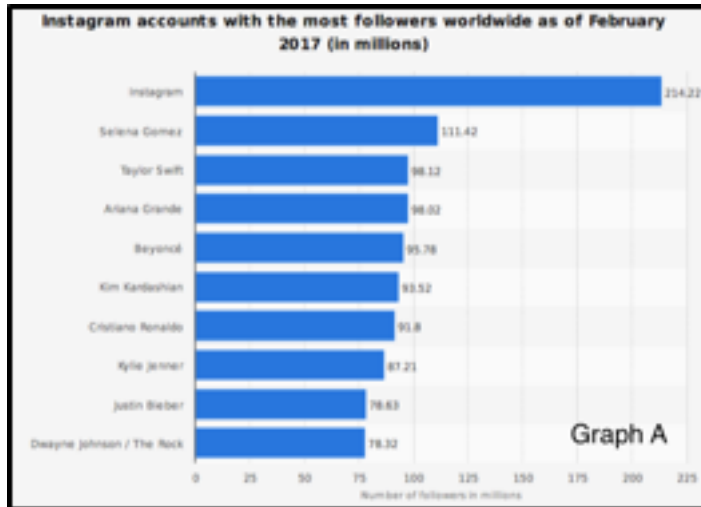


Figure 1. 10 most-followed Instagram accounts of 2017 includes Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner.

Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner are both huge influencers on Instagram, with 93.52 million and 87.21 million followers, respectively (“YouGov”). The family members not only have an online presence, but they also have a 10-year-old hold on cable television. *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* has been on E! Network since 2007, with four spin-off shows, and there are no plans of the series ending. Figure 2 shows that docu-series shows, like *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, are the second-most popular reality genre (after cooking shows) for young adults ages 18-34 years old. This is the millennial generation, which is the most proficient with social media. This generation “keeps up” both by watching the Kardashian-Jenners and following their social media accounts.

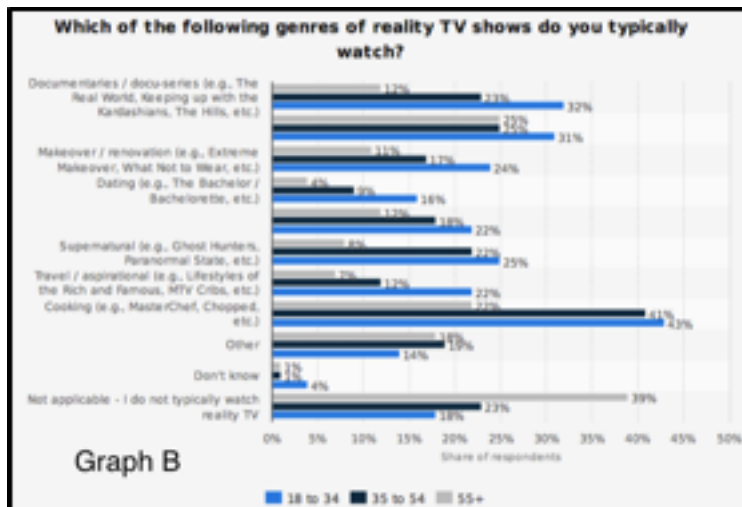


Figure 2. Genres of reality TV shows

Parasocial Relationship

Rubin and McHugh (1987) describe in depth the traditional nature of a parasocial relationship, as it was developed in the 1980s. “Parasocial interaction is a one-sided interpersonal relationship that television viewers establish with media characters” (280). Rubin and McHugh note that television networks purposefully seek physically and personally attractive characters in hopes that a bond of intimacy will form when audiences view these characters over time. The more viewing interaction that occurs, the stronger this bond will become. “Parasocial interaction results from both exposure and attraction. In interpersonal and mediated contexts, this process is thought to result in increased relationship importance” (281).

Rubin and McHugh also found that viewers still engage in the parasocial relationship when their television is off. A relationship can easily continue if the TV show is not playing, just like a friendship continues when the friends are not together (280). This is important to note because the Kardashian-Jenner family can continue the relationship with its viewers through social media.

In her comparison of different reality TV genres, Henry (2011) found that documentary soap operas, such as *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*, warrant a stronger parasocial relationship formed over other reality genres, such as reality game shows. Henry reasons that this could be that shows like *Keeping Up* frequently break the “fourth wall” with confessional scenes to the audiences. The illusion of conversation between media personalities and the audience creates a seemingly face-to-face relationship. In a study comparing Instagram to Twitter in strength of parasocial interaction, Williams (2016) found that “the platform primarily used by celebrities for interpersonal relationships with fans is Twitter, while Instagram is used to show interpersonal relationships with those the celebrity knows personally” (20).

The Kardashian-Jenners are masters at the parasocial relationship, especially on digital platforms. “Questions like ‘Is my hair too dark?’ lure audiences into thinking that the desire of and respect for opinions resemble an actual friend-like connection with the celebrity” (Lueck 99). Lueck explains that the Kardashian-Jenners post content containing personal information, but they do not know the same details about their audience; this one-sided information is an indicator for parasocial interaction (99). The Kardashian-Jenners are celebrities who “promote a lifestyle through reality television and social media that is socially accepted and admired. Audiences then, especially females, begin to engage in Parasocial Interaction by wanting to imitate their idol and to create closeness through communication” (Lueck, 103).

Fourth-Wave Feminism

Before delving into fourth-wave feminism, the first three waves of the movement must be examined. In her study of the rise of fourth-wave feminism, Wrye (2009) explains that first-wave feminism is all about the suffragettes and the women’s right to vote. It was essentially a political change movement. The suffragettes not only supported a woman’s right to votes, but they also championed the abolition of slavery, and supported women’s education on a broad scale (185). Second-wave feminism “critiqued rigid sex roles; claimed economic parity; validated women’s desire for sexual pleasure; and widened feminism’s scope to take in critical differences among women, from sexuality to class to race and ethnicity” (185). The Third Wave is described by Wrye as intersectional, meaning that multiple group identities intersect to create our identity. Third-wave feminists also use their bodies for personal expression. The wave is sex-positive and it includes queer sexuality, transgenderism and transsexuality, and disability activism (Wrye, 185).

The fourth wave of feminism is essentially an extension of the third wave, and it takes place online. “The Fourth Wave enacted the concepts that Third Wave feminists had put forth” (Baumgardner 2011, 250). In an interview by *New York Times Magazine* with Jessica Urlenti, Feministing.com founder and editor, the successful blogger mentioned why fourth-wave feminism is starting to replace third-wave. Feministing.com is one of the most widely read feminist publications online. Urlenti says that she knows people who are considered third-wave feminists who are 20 years older than her. She alludes to the fact that the fourth-wave is online, and that is where the modern woman is expressing her liberties. She says the Internet has freed women to do amazing things (Soloman 2009).

In her article about the rise of fourth-wave feminism, Munroe (2013) argues that older feminists are out of touch with inclusivity and intersectionality, and online spaces often call them out on these topics. These online spaces are where a younger generation of “third-wave feminists” express their views—thus creating the fourth wave. She argues that the key to fourth-wave feminism is intersectionality, which includes trans-rights. “Contemporary feminism is characterized by its diversity of purpose, and amid the cacophony of voices it is easy to overlook one of the main constants within the movement as it currently stands – its reliance on the internet” (22).

“In place of zines and songs, young feminists created blogs, Twitter campaigns, and online media with names like Racialicious and Feministing, or wrote for Jezebel and Salon’s Broadsheet. They commented on the news, posted their most stylish plus-size fashion photos with info about where to shop, and tweeted that they, too, had had an abortion. ‘Reproductive justice,’ coined by women of color in the 1990s, became the term of choice for young feminists. Transgenderism, male feminists, sex work, and complex relationships within the media characterized their feminism” (Baumgardner, 251).

Methods

Qualitative data was collected because feelings on the Kardashian-Jenners, body-positivity, sex-positivity, and trans-awareness cannot be expressed in numbers. Also numerical data was collected to see a difference among groups. This study relied on a survey and a focus group, whose participants were women or gender-nonconforming ages 34 and under, the target audience of *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*.

Although anybody could have participated in the survey, most answers came from women and gender-nonconforming participants ages 34 and under. The first section of the survey dealt with participants' demographics. The second section asked the respondents about their viewing habits of *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, which of the Kardashian-Jenners they follow on Instagram, and if they consider themselves fans. Questions were asked to determine the strength of a parasocial relationship respondents have with the family. Determining if a parasocial relationship exists in the participant's mind is important in this study. The words "parasocial relationship" were not used in these questions. The respondents may not have clearly understood what they were while answering if these words had been used. Other words like "parasocial relationships," "body-positivity," "sex-positivity," or "trans-awareness" were not used in the survey, either.

The third section asked three questions on body-positivity after showing participants four Instagram posts from various members of the Kardashian-Jenner family.

The fourth section included a quote taken from the app of Khloe Kardashian, a short clip from an old episode of *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, and a viral Instagram post from Kim Kardashian. Each of these elements was used to gauge the participant's views on sex-positivity.

The fifth section dealt with the participant's memory of the news-media. This section first seeks to measure if the Kardashian-Jenners have made their followers more trans-aware. The questions then go one step further and seek to see if the family inspired general trans-acceptance.

A focus group was conducted to ask questions about survey results that were unusual. Most of the questions were "why do you think people responded as they did in the survey?"

Results and Analysis

Among 160 survey respondents, 158 of them were ages 18-34, and two of them were under 18. Out of the respondents, 159 identified as female, and one identified as gender variant/non-conforming. Seven participated in a focus group, ages 19-22, were sophomores, juniors, and seniors at Elon University.

Kardashian-Jenner Media Habits and Parasocial Relationships

In response to Question 1 of "How often do you watch *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*?" 83.2% of the respondents have seen the show at some time; 16.9% had never seen the show; and 23.8% of respondents frequently or always watch the show.

Question 2 asked "On a scale of 1-10, how connected do you feel to the Kardashian-Jenners when you watch their show?" with "1" meaning they do not feel connected at all, and "10" meaning they feel very connected. Most respondents at least feel some level of connection to the family when they watch the show: 57 respondents feel connected at a medium level or higher. The dominant category was the lowest level. All 27 who have never seen the show answered "1" –they may have chosen "0" instead of "1" if the former had existed on the scale as the lowest level.

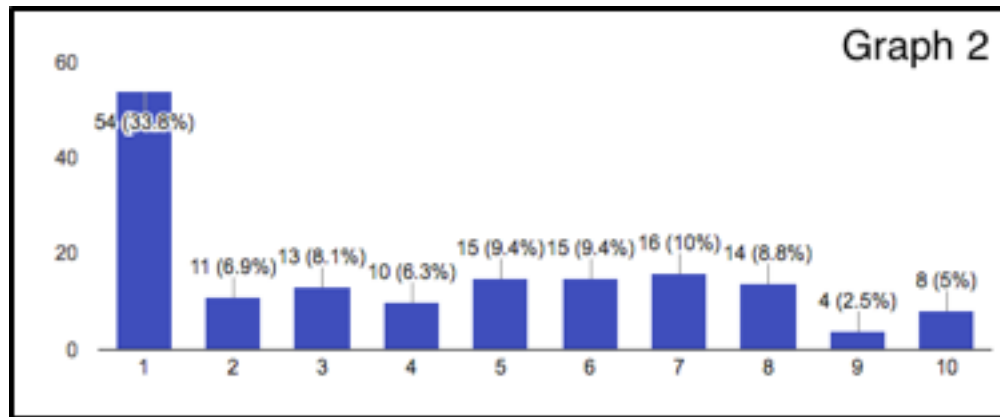


Figure 3. The level of connection people felt with the Kardashians-Jenners

Regarding question 3 asking which Kardashian-Jenner women the respondents follow on Instagram, Kim Kardashian was chosen by 30%. Kourtney Kardashian was indicated by 26.3%; Khloe Kardashian by 28.1%, Kylie Jenner by 33.1%, Kendall Jenner by 35%, Kris Jenner by 12.5%, and Caitlyn Jenner by 5.6%. 44.4% indicated following none, and 6.3% had no Instagram accounts.

Question 4 was “On a scale of 1-10, how well do you think you know the Kardashian-Jenners?” with “1” meaning not well at all, and “10” meaning very well. Figure 4 shows that the respondents’ perception of their knowing the Kardashian family is higher than their feeling of being very connected to them during their show. Many respondents replied that they do not follow any of the Kardashian-Jenners on Instagram and hardly ever watch the show, yet they feel they know the family at levels of a “6” or above out of “10.”

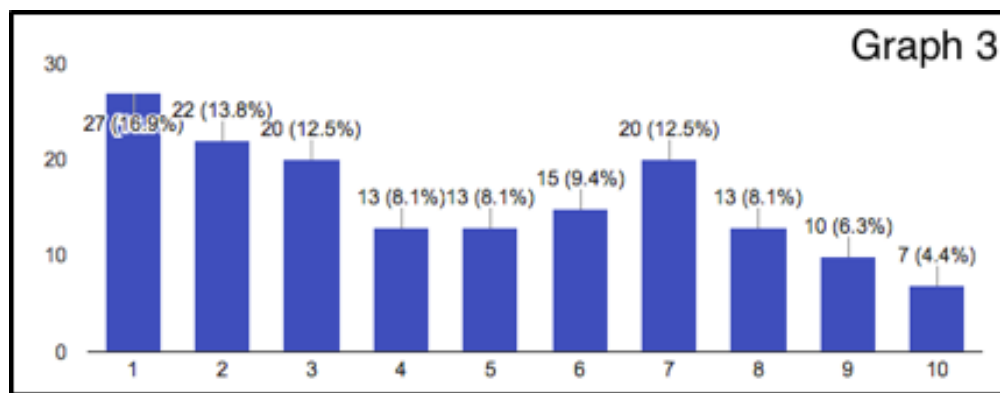


Figure 4. How well do you think you know the Kardashians-Jenners?

When asked about why they think this happened, focus group participants pointed out that the Kardashian-Jenners are frequently in the news. They are also always “popping up on social media feeds” and “their presence is always thrown in your face.” “If people are seeing that, even if they don’t follow them on social media, they are very much exposed to what they are doing.” Another explanation was that the Kardashian-Jenners have “a lot of reach” because of their relationships with other famous people. For example, if someone doesn’t like the Kardashian-Jenners, but they like Kanye West, then they may pay attention to the family more than they would if Kanye West was not married to Kim Kardashian. The Kardashian-Jenners have achieved a feat that very little other reality stars have. They have created a parasocial or semi-parasocial relationship with consumers who do not directly consume their media.

Contrary to that fact, individuals who were avid watchers and followers of the family feel like they know them less than they did. It was pointed out that people who watch and follow the family might keep coming back for more content because they feel like they don’t know them well and are in search of authentic moments.

When asked if the respondent considered herself a fan of the Kardashian-Jenners, the largest number of survey participants answered “No” (30%), followed by “Neutral” (26.2%), “Yes” (25.6%), and “Maybe” (18.1%). Many respondents replied that they are not fans of the Kardashian-Jenners, yet they feel they know the family at a “6” or above level out of “10.” This further backs up the theory that the Kardashian-Jenners have been able to establish a parasocial relationship with people who do not consider themselves fans.

Body Positivity

One question in the survey focused on body positivity using Image 1 in *Figure 5*. The question asked, “If you took a photo in a similar pose and outfit, would you want to post it on Instagram?” This question was asked to find out if Kylie Jenner’s body confidence inspires others around her age to be confident in showing off their bodies in a similar fashion, even if some consider her body “unattainable.”

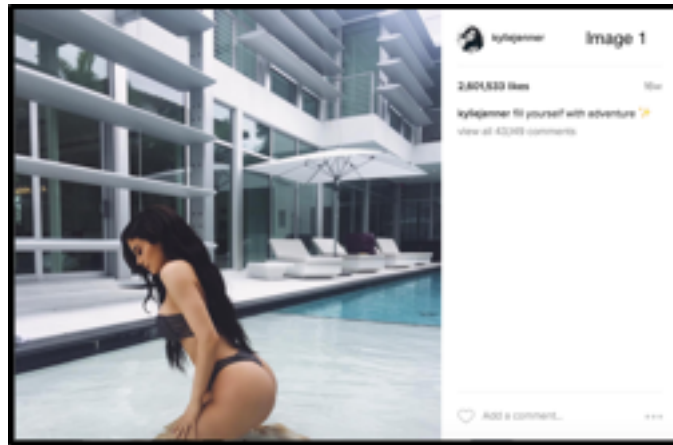


Figure 5. An image revealing buttocks

Overwhelmingly, respondents said “No” (76.1%), followed by “Maybe” (14.5%) and “Yes” (9.4%). After seeing image 2 in *Figure 6*, one of seven focus group participants said, “yes, they would post,” two said, “maybe,” and four said, “no.” One explanation given was that people don’t want their family to see this, or potential employers.

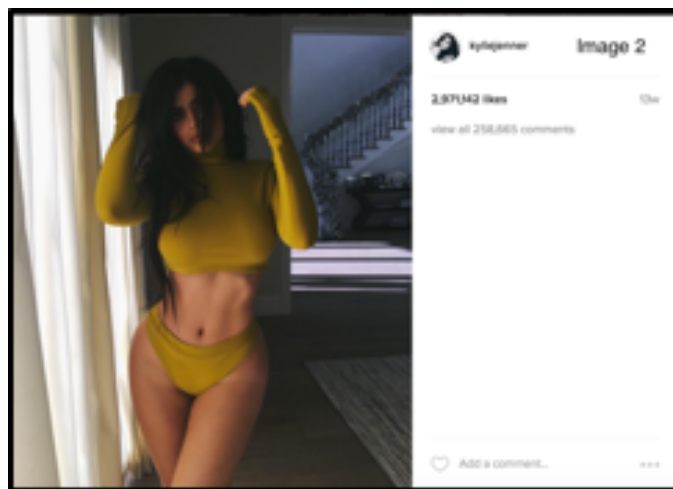


Figure 6. An image revealing a navel



Figure 7. An image in workout clothes

After seeing Image 3 in *Figure 7*, four focus group participants said “Yes” they would post, one said “Maybe,” and two said they would not post. More said “Yes” to this photo because they feel a workout outfit is more acceptable and less intimate than a bodysuit or bikini.

After seeing Image 4 in *Figure 8*, three focus group participants said “Yes” they would post, and four said “Maybe,” none said they would not post. The participants mostly concurred that women are more inclined to post a photo showing off their breasts rather than their butt.

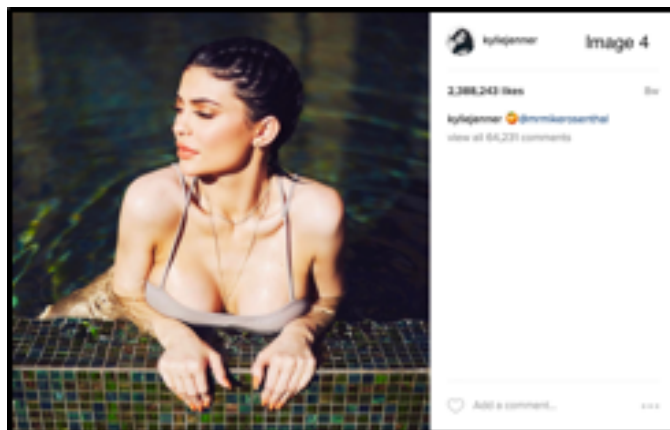


Figure 8. An image revealing breasts

The next question in this section showed a screenshot of an Instagram post from Kim Kardashian. After being shown Image 5 in *Figure 9*, including the caption written by Kim Kardashian, participants were asked, “Would you feel psychologically comfortable using a waist shaper/trainer because Kim Kardashian posts about using one?”



Figure 9. Kim Kardashian in a waist shaper/trainer

The answer was again overwhelmingly “No.” Of 160 participants, 71.9% said “No,” followed by “Maybe” (14.4%) and “Yes” (13.8%).

The modern body-positive movement does not shame women who change their bodies in unnatural ways because it makes them feel more confident, and because they want to do so. The Kardashian-Jenners change their bodies often. Kylie receiving lip injections, Kourtney has breast implants, the family is open about liposuction and Botox, and they all advertise products like waist trainers and “Fit Tea.” As a result, the author asked the focus group whether they would be okay with doing this to themselves.

The focus group participants pointed out that waist trainers are widely known to be unsafe for women’s health, especially related to internal organs. Some said they would have answered “No” to using a waist trainer, but perhaps “Yes” to getting lip injections or liposuction.

Regarding why they think society still has a stigma against getting cosmetic work done, costs aside, one participant said she sees getting work done in two different categories: adding to self vs. subtracting from self. She thinks adding to oneself (such as a breast enhancement or lip injections) is worse than subtracting from oneself (such as liposuction or a waist trainer). “Subtracting to me is more acceptable because you’re not putting fakeness into your body,” she said.

The last question in this body-positivity section of the survey was based upon two Instagram posts from Khloe Kardashian, talking about her jean line created to fit women of all different shapes and sizes, as shown in *Figure 10*. When asked to look at two images and their captions, written by Khloe Kardashian and respond to a question of “Does the way Khloe Kardashian talks about body positivity make you feel good about the way you look?” 45% felt good, followed by “Maybe” (35%) and “No” (20%).

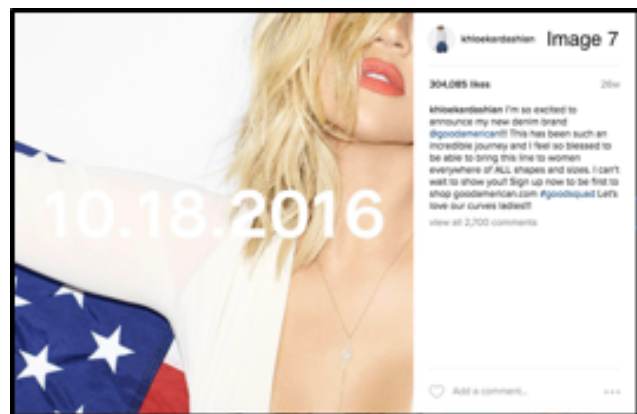


Figure 10. Two Instagram posts from Khloe Kardashian, talking about her jean line created to fit women of all different shapes and sizes

Sex Positivity

In the sex-positivity section of the survey, one question focused on sex education, which is important in the sex-positivity movement. Sex education does not necessarily refer to the basic sex education that children learn in school, but it refers to educating yourself on a wide range of sex-related topics. Survey participants were shown a clip from *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, where a pregnant Kourtney Kardashian and her partner Scott Disick go to a class about sex during pregnancy. In the clip, Kourtney is scared about having sex while pregnant, and this class helps her learn that sex during pregnancy is safe. After watching the video, survey participants asked, “Do you feel that you could benefit from a sex-education class of any kind?” Among the participants of 160, 23.1% said “Yes,” while 36.3% said “No” and 40.6% said “Maybe.”

When showing the focus group this result, one participant immediately said, “36.3% are lying,” while referring to those who said ‘No’ to this question. She said there are so many classes you can take that are beyond “this is how not to get pregnant,” and perhaps people don’t realize the extent of options out there. One participant said “we have such a weird stigma in this country about not talking about sex, and that’s why we have a lot of problems with unwanted pregnancies and STI’s (sexually transmitted infection), because people don’t know, but they *think* they do. They think they’ve got a handle on it when they really don’t.” Another participant said generally sex is taboo in this country, since many people are brought up in a religion that forbids it; people feel they cannot talk about it.

The last question in this section relates to comfort with nudity and the female body. After viewing Image 8 in *Figure 11*, participants were asked, “On a scale of 1-10, how comfortable are you with the image above, posted by Kim Kardashian?” with “1” meaning they do not feel comfortable at all, and “10” meaning they feel very comfortable. As *Figure 12* showed, the majority of respondents (21.3%) feel total comfort with the naked image. This is a positive outcome for sex-positivity, as it shows that respondents are comfortable with nudity and the female body.

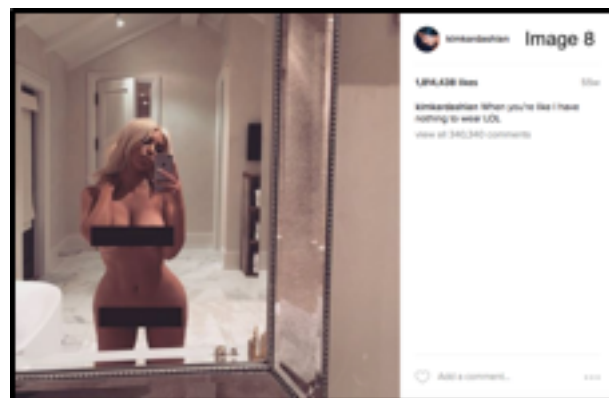


Figure 11. A nude image of a female body

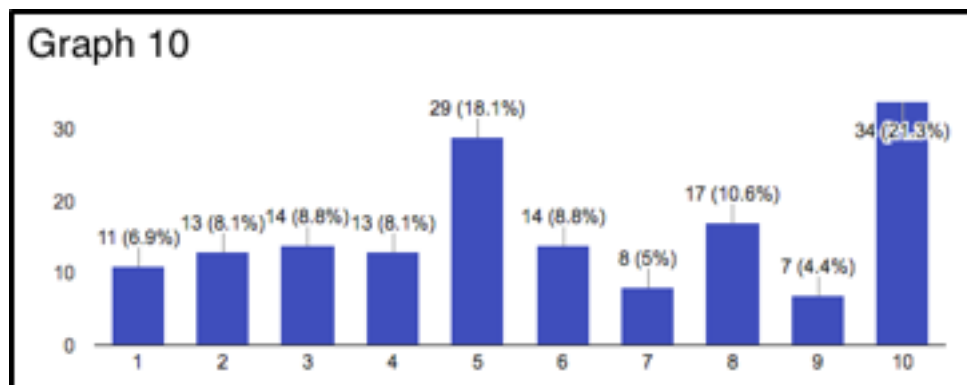


Figure 12. How comfortable are you with the nude image of a female body?

Trans-Awareness

One question about trans-awareness and trans-acceptance was based on prior knowledge. The question was “In April of 2015, Caitlyn Jenner revealed her identity as a trans woman. Before her very public transition, had you ever seen trans issues being widely discussed in the media?” The majority of respondents (50.6%) said “No,” they had never seen transgender issues being discussed in mainstream media before, followed by 26.3% of “Yes” and 22.5% of “Maybe.” Only 1 respondent did not know of Caitlyn Jenner’s transition until the survey.

The second question in this section, open-ended, asked, “Have you become more aware of specific struggles that the trans community faces because of what you have seen of Caitlyn Jenner? If so, what issues have been brought to your attention?” Caitlyn Jenner is generally understood to be a poor representation of the trans community, but a lot of people replied that they learned at least one thing from her transition. One respondent even responded that they learned what transitioning is. Many said that though Caitlyn doesn’t do a great job of bringing attention to trans struggles herself, just the fact that she transitioned and the media paid attention to it laid a path for others, like Laverne Cox, to step up and speak about trans rights.

The last question was about an Instagram post from Kim Kardashian, showing Caitlyn Jenner’s Vanity Fair cover and its caption, which reads “*Caitlyn Jenner for Vanity Fair (camera emoji) Annie Leibovitz! How beautiful! Be happy, be proud, live life YOUR way!*” When asked, “Do you feel more accepting of the trans community because the Kardashian-Jenners are accepting?” 79.4% answered “Not more accepting” and 11.9% answered “Yes,” while 9 (5.6%) said “No,” not accepting trans-gender, a very small portion of people out of 160.

Conclusion

The Kardashian-Jenners partially encourage the fourth-wave feminist notions of body-positivity and sex-positivity in their target audience, and they have made their target audience trans-aware, and trans-accepting. They have also created one of the strongest parasocial relationships in reality television history; not only among fans, but also among people who do not directly try to consume the media content the family produces. The majority of people who do not follow the Kardashian-Jenners actively still think they know the family.

As the results about body-positivity show, the family makes their target audience feel good about their own looks through their words. This is the surface level definition of body positivity: feeling good about the way you look. Delving deeper into the body-positivity movement, not many women feel inspired to show off their bodies like the Kardashian-Jenners do. A limitation, pointed out by the focus group, is that the author may have gotten more positive responses for this question if she had used a different post of Kylie Jenner’s. Most respondents did not feel psychologically comfortable changing their bodies unnaturally, but this does not mean they necessarily make judgments about other people who do. A limitation on this survey was that the author did not ask if participants judged the Kardashian-Jenners on the work they have had done.

The Kardashians encourage sex-positivity in the respondents more so than body-positivity. The majority of respondents felt comfortable with Kim Kardashian’s nude Instagram post. Among respondents, 63.7% definitely or maybe feel that they could benefit from a sex education class.

More than any other category, the Kardashian-Jenners have inspired trans-awareness. Over 50% of respondents had not seen trans issues being discussed in the mainstream media before Caitlyn Jenner transitioned. The family has also encouraged followers to be trans-accepting. A majority of respondents were not any more trans-accepting than they were before seeing Kim Kardashian’s Instagram post, but 11.9% of respondents felt more trans-accepting after seeing the post.

Much research has been done about parasocial interaction, but this research is very specific in determining the relationship formed. Future research may look at comments on Kardashian-Jenner Instagrams displaying fourth-wave feminist notions, coding them as positive or negative reactions, and comparing their size.

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