

Heels Dance on Social Media: Stripping the Female Body of the Social Norms

Fitriani Marchellita Halim¹, Jenny Mochtar²

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University, Siwalankerto
121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
E-mail: fitriani.chellita@gmail.com¹, jennymd@petra.ac.id²

ABSTRACT

This study explores how heel dancers challenge social norms around the female body and examines audience reactions along with the dancers' responses. Using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, the analysis highlights how these dancers employ subversive strategies, framed by Foucault's counter-conduct, Butler's gender performativity, and Dolezal's body shame. Data includes Instagram posts and audience comments from @jessynirmalaa, @heelsnation.id, and @curvescollective.id from August 2021 to July 2024. The findings reveal that the dancers defy norms with brazen costumes, sensual movements, and subversive narratives, eliciting mixed audience reactions ranging from support to resistance. This dynamic interplay reveals the dancers' bodies as an arena of struggle, challenging and redefining dominant social meanings.

Keywords: body politics, female body, gender norms, heels dance, social media

INTRODUCTION

As a product of popular culture, dance functions as a communicative medium through which individuals convey ideas and generate collective meaning (O'Brien & Szeman, 2017). Dance embodies culturally constructed interpretations and reflects the ideological frameworks within a society. Pušnik (2010) notes that dance operates as a social ritual containing symbolic cultural elements, with meanings shaped by specific cultural contexts and value systems. Consequently, dance movements may be interpreted and stereotyped differently across cultures. Despite these variations, dance garners widespread popularity, especially in the digital age where social media amplifies its visibility. Bench (2020) argues that digital platforms enhance the accessibility of dance while fostering innovative movement practices by integrating physical expression with digital tools. The COVID-19 pandemic further increased the online presence of dance as quarantine measures led to the cancellation of live performances, prompting dancers to showcase their work on social media (Nana, 2023). This shift transformed social media into a virtual stage, turning dance into a global commodity and a cultural phenomenon.

In Indonesia, dance has similarly gained prominence on social media but remains shaped and constrained by local cultural and moral frameworks. The country's societal norms and the Law of Pornography regulate the dissemination of cultural products, particularly concerning moral standards. Violations of these norms often result in public criticism or official restrictions, as seen in cases like the ban on goyang pargoy and the suppression of the geol movement derived from traditional Jaipongan dance (Permana, 2022; detikNews, 2009). These examples highlight how normative regulations frequently target female bodies, perceived as inherently erotic in Indonesian society. Consequently, dances emphasizing bodily sensuality are often labeled as threats to moral standards and strictly prohibited. This underscores the intricate relationship between dance and the female body within Indonesia's cultural context.

Amidst these debates, heels dance has emerged as a controversial yet increasingly popular phenomenon on Indonesian social media. Combining elements of jazz, hip-hop, and contemporary movements performed in high heels, heels dance emphasizes the sensuality of the female body (Clement, 2023). Rooted in Western culture, it incorporates gestures influenced by exotic dance traditions (Easter, 2023). These elements, coupled with the patriarchal societal context, render heels

dance heavily sexualized. Despite this, heels dance has gained significant popularity worldwide, driven by global pop icons like Beyoncé. Inspired by international acclaim, Indonesian dancers trained abroad have introduced heels dance locally through social media. Key figures include Jessy Nirmala, who trained extensively in the United States, Russia, and Korea before founding Indonesia's first heels dance team, Heelsnation, in 2021. Similarly, Curves Collective, established by Sue Natanael in 2022, operates in Bali and Jakarta and promotes values like purposefulness, unity, and elegance through digital content.

Both Heelsnation and Curves Collective use heels dance as a medium for female empowerment. Jessy Nirmala challenges perceptions of vulgarity surrounding heels dance, advocating for its potential to inspire confidence and body positivity among women. Despite facing backlash and derogatory labels like “sinner” or “immoral,” Jessy persists in promoting heels dance as an artistic vision. Heelsnation's video “We Redefine Sexy” counters misconceptions, presenting heels dance as a symbol of strength and sophistication (HEELSNATION, 2024). Similarly, Curves Collective emphasizes empowerment and elegance in their choreographic work. These dancers' social media presence challenges societal expectations by celebrating the sensuality of the female body. Their posts often depict the body breaking free from traditional norms, symbolized by revealing costumes and bold movements. While some audiences appreciate this empowering narrative, others criticize the dancers for deviating from cultural values. This polarized reception reflects ongoing tensions between the dancers' defiance of restrictive norms and societal expectations. This study explores the strategies these dancers use to challenge societal norms, audience responses, and how they navigate public criticism.

In the digital era, social media plays a crucial role in shaping societal constructions, including gender and body norms. This research investigates how heel dancers leverage social media as a platform to challenge these norms, highlighting the potential of digital spaces as arenas for cultural resistance. By examining the intersection of dance, digital media, and societal expectations, this study demonstrates how social media expands the boundaries of dance, fostering global conversations around body politics, representation, and gender issues. Furthermore, it positions dance not merely as a creative form but as a powerful political act of self-expression and defiance. Through the lens of heel dance, this study underscores its function as a medium for empowerment, sparking critical discussions within the performing arts about the role of the body in protest and resistance.

This research examines the production and reception of meaningful discourse within heels dancers' social media posts using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, Michel Foucault's concept of counter-conduct, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Luna Dolezal's body shame framework. These theories collectively analyze the restrictions and resistance surrounding the female body in the context of Indonesian social norms.

Hall's (2005) encoding/decoding model provides a framework for understanding how media messages are created, distributed, and interpreted. Encoding involves the production of messages influenced by cultural contexts, while decoding involves audience interpretation, shaped by dominant cultural norms. Hall's model, originally developed for traditional media, has been adapted for social media's interactive nature, emphasizing the active role of audiences in meaning-making (Li et al., 2023).

Foucault's (2009) concept of counter-conduct describes resistance against dominant societal norms. In feminist contexts, this resistance often challenges power structures governing women's behavior. Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity complements Foucault's ideas, positing that gender is performative and constructed through repeated acts aligned with societal norms. Resistance to these norms occurs through subversive performances, mirroring Foucault's counter-conduct. Dolezal's (2015) concept of body shame explores how societal norms control behavior and appearance. Body shame disproportionately affects women, reinforcing feelings of inferiority and perpetuating societal control. In Indonesia, cultural and religious norms, such as the Islamic principle of *aurat*, emphasize body concealment, aligning with Dolezal's theory.

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This study adopts a qualitative approach, specifically online ethnography (Skågeby, 2011), to explore the cultural context of heels dancers' strategies and audience reactions on social media. Data were collected from the Instagram accounts of Jessy Nirmala, Heelsnation, and Curves Collective between August 2021 and July 2024. Using targeted document collection, posts and direct comments were manually recorded and coded based on strategies like costumes, body movements, and narratives. Comments were analyzed using Hall's (2005) reading positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. Data analysis involved qualitative content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016) to examine encoded meanings within posts and textual analysis to contextualize audience comments. This approach aligns with the theoretical framework, revealing how heel dancers navigate societal norms and resistance through their online presence.

ANALYSIS

Contravening the Concealment of the Body by Dancing in Brazen Costumes

The way people dress is one of the most prominent social conventions, as clothing is often the first visible indicator of one's conduct. According to Dolezal's (2015) body shame theory, clothing is used to conceal the female body, which society deems shameful. Reserved attire becomes a performative act normalized to align with societal expectations. However, heels dancers challenge these norms by wearing what can be termed *brazen costumes*—attire that is “shameless or impudent” (Dictionary.com, 2024). These revealing clothes convey a powerful message against societal constructs of body shame. Clothing, as Bohn (2012) suggests, serves as a communicative tool laden with codes and symbolism, aligning with Hall's (2005) encoding model. Heels dancers use these brazen costumes as counter-conduct, embedding their resistance into their attire. By defying norms, the dancers challenge the notion of the female body as inherently shameful, subverting societal restrictions that strip women of their autonomy to dress freely. Bernadika and Kavita (2021) argue that morality norms, enforced by laws like Indonesia's Pornography Law, over-criminalize women's personal choices, including their attire, thereby threatening fundamental rights. Through their bold costumes, heels dancers contest a history of body concealment, assert their right to dress as they choose, and reclaim visibility for women's bodies in public spaces.

Firstly, heels dancers use their performances to encode a desire for bodily liberation. Their costumes, often made of skin-tight, flexible materials, violate societal expectations by accentuating body contours. The dancers wear form-fitting tops and leggings that not only hug their bodies but also enable freedom of movement. Such attire allows technical maneuvers, like splits, to be executed comfortably, emphasizing the dancers' physical power. This choice of clothing symbolizes a rejection of the restrictive norms governing women's bodies and attire. It reflects a desire for self-expression and autonomy, opposing societal conventions that suppress and objectify the female body. By dressing in revealing outfits, the dancers enact a form of counter-conduct, reclaiming agency over their appearance and breaking free from the rigid expectations imposed by normative conduct.

Revealing costumes also serve to encourage body positivity. These outfits showcase the natural curves of dancers' bodies, such as the breasts and hips, which are often policed by societal beauty standards. Many dancers have body types that deviate from the conventional ideal of a slim, toned figure. Dolezal (2015) notes that women are expected to meet unrealistic beauty standards, with bodies that are “young, slim, toned, and smooth.” Women who fail to meet these criteria are often subjected to judgment, leading to feelings of inadequacy. Revealing costumes expose some dancers with rounder, fuller body types deviate from these ideals, challenging societal expectations. Through their performances, the dancers celebrate their bodies and redefine what is considered beautiful. A caption from one of their posts encapsulates this message:

We tend to take it for granted and hide our flaws like stretch marks, freckles, body parts that we think unappealing to look at, and forgot that those things are 'maps' of what we've been

through. To embrace our vulnerability is not a weakness, but a way to find courage and strength. (Alissa W & HEELSNATION, 2023)

By embracing imperfections such as stretch marks or wrinkles, the dancers transform these traits into symbols of strength and resilience. Their performances challenge the performative conduct of endlessly refining the female body to meet artificial standards, instead promoting a message of self-acceptance.

Moreover, the dancers also dance in lingerie to reframe sensuality as elegant rather than vulgar, representing another layer of counter-conduct. Islamic doctrine, as noted by Yuliani (2010), frames the female body as *keji* (vile) when exposed publicly. Undergarments like lingerie, traditionally hidden from view, challenge this imposed modesty. For example, a dancer performs in a red silk lingerie dress with lace detailing. While lingerie is often associated with seduction and vulgarity due to its historical ties to advertising and its connection to showgirls or prostitutes (Wilson-Kovacs, 2011), its presentation here is reimagined. By choosing a lingerie model resembling a mini dress, the dancers shift the perception of this attire from vulgarity to sophistication. When being viewed as a mini dress, the dancer's lingerie can be seen as an elegant dress which is "designed to be seen" (KOOKAI, 2024), and carries an elegance that challenges the negative connotations historically attached to lingerie. This reinterpretation sends a message that female sensuality is not shameful but rather a celebration of beauty and empowerment. Through their performances, the dancers reject the notion that the female body is inherently vulgar, using their costumes to reclaim dignity and respect.

The dancers' counter-conduct resonates with many of their fans, eliciting positive feedback. Supportive comments often highlight the empowering and comforting nature of their performances. For instance, a viewer's comment expressing how the message provides "comfort" (Alissa W & HEELSNATION, 2023), reflecting a deeper sense of relief from the pressures of societal norms. This term, as defined by Merriam-Webster (2024), implies a source of strength and hope, suggesting that the viewer has experienced distress from the societal constraints on women's bodies. Such comments reveal the pervasive impact of societal conventions, validating the dancers' efforts to subvert these oppressive norms.

However, some viewers offer negotiated readings, supporting the dancers' artistic expression while criticizing their choice of attire. For example, a commenter appreciated the performance but invoked the term *adab* (morality), a concept rooted in Islamic beliefs that emphasize modest dressing (Lestari et al., 2023), to criticize the dancers' costume (Jessy Nirmala Sari, 2023). In this context, the commenter's critique reflects the hegemonic influence of Islamic doctrine, which dictates that women's clothing should cover their *aurat* (private parts), be non-transparent, and avoid drawing attention. These responses highlight the cultural and ideological dominance that shapes perceptions of women's attire and artistic expression.

In contrast, other viewers interpret the dancers' performances in an oppositional manner, adhering strictly to normative conduct. Negative comments often accuse the dancers of ruining women's dignity by wearing revealing costumes (Jessy Nirmala Sari, 2021, 2023). These reactions are rooted in the historical idea that exposing the female body is shameful, as reinforced by religious doctrines like the Islamic concept of *aurat*. Yuliani (2010) notes that such doctrines link a woman's dignity to her level of bodily concealment, with violations resulting in social scorn and criticism. These responses reflect Butler's (1988) assertion that gender performativity is regulated by sanctions and punishments. Women who deviate from the prescribed norms face societal backlash, as their actions challenge the ideological values that underpin these conventions. The dancers' choice to wear brazen costumes thus provokes a clash between their counter-conduct and the hegemonic norms that seek to control women's bodies and behaviors.

Subverting the Taboo Through Performing Sensual Body Movements

Body movement is central to dance, serving as a primary medium for expression and communication. Every movement in a performance functions as a sign, purposefully encoded with meanings to convey the dancers' intentions. For heels dancers, these movements transcend artistry and become tools of resistance, directly challenging societal norms that regulate and suppress the female body. These norms operate through mechanisms such as shaming and surveillance, which enforce restraint over women's physical expressions. Dolezal (2015) likens this shaming strategy to a panopticon-like system of control, where women internalize societal judgment, shaping their behavior to conform to expectations of modesty and decency. For heels dancers, body movements become a potent form of counter-conduct. Through gestures traditionally deemed inappropriate or taboo, they deliberately oppose the normative rules governing how women should present their bodies. This study highlights two specific categories of movement that exemplify their resistance: the deliberate accentuation of private body parts and the mimicry of sexual activity. Both forms of movement challenge deeply ingrained cultural narratives that frame the female body as inherently shameful, emphasizing the dancers' efforts to reclaim autonomy and redefine societal expectations.

In Indonesia, legal frameworks like the Bill against Pornography and Pornographic Acts enforce strict rules prohibiting the display of sensual body parts, including breasts and buttocks, deeming them private and shameful (Yuliani, 2010). These restrictions reflect patriarchal values designed to control women's autonomy. Heels dancers, however, intentionally highlight these body parts in their choreography to defy such norms. They reject the oppressive historical ideas that denounce women's freedom of expression, transforming their performances into acts of rebellion. For instance, choreography often draws attention to the bosom, a body part that society heavily sexualizes and polices. As an example, a dancer unzips her bodysuit to expose her chest area, directly challenging the stigma surrounding this part of the female body. These gestures are not designed to seduce or appeal to the male gaze. Instead, paired with determined facial expressions and upright posture, they convey strength and self-assurance. This shift in context transforms the bosom from an object of desire to a source of pride and vulnerability, symbolizing emotional expression and defiance against societal constraints. By accentuating their bosoms, the dancers challenge the taboo surrounding private body parts, reclaiming their autonomy.

Another focal point of the dancers' movements is the buttocks, another body part subjected to judgment and sexualization. For instance, a dancer performs a floorwork move that prominently highlights her buttocks, lifting them upward in a bold, confident gesture. This choreography rejects the shame associated with women's lower bodies and challenges the idea that these parts must be hidden or restrained. Dolezal (2015) notes that shame is often used to make women uncomfortable with their own bodies, restricting their freedom of expression. By celebrating their bodies through movement, the dancers resist this narrative and assert their right to personal expression.

In addition to regulating private body parts, the Bill against Pornography and Pornographic Acts prohibits movements that mimic sexual activity (Yuliani, 2010). Such restrictions aim to uphold rigid moral standards by deeming such gestures inappropriate and offensive. Heels dancers, however, deliberately include sexually suggestive movements in their choreography to counteract these prohibitions. By mimicking positions associated with intercourse, they perform acts of resistance, challenging the immense power of social norms that attempt to control female bodies. For example, a dancer executes the movement of thrusting her hips into the floor, a gesture that evokes the male-dominated role during sexual activity. By adopting this traditionally dominant position, the dancer symbolically reclaims a space historically reserved for male authority. This act disrupts the patriarchal control of women's bodies and critiques the societal imbalance of power. The dancers' mimicry highlights their refusal to comply with oppressive norms, asserting their right to autonomy and expression through their bodies. These performances not only critique the historical restrictions placed on women but also reimagine these movements as symbols of liberation.

The dancers' counter-conduct in body movements elicits mixed reactions from audiences. Many viewers resonate positively with the dancers' performances, praising their strength and the empowering messages encoded in their movements (Jessy Nirmala Sari, 2024). Supportive comments often reflect the audience's shared frustrations with societal conventions, particularly those that strictly police women's bodies. Such reactions underscore the widespread impact of the restrictive norms, validating the dancers' efforts to subvert these oppressive systems.

Despite receiving much support, the dancers also received criticism that opposed their message. Critics of the dancers' movements often focus on their perceived vulgarity and immorality, labeling the performers as sinful (Jessy Nirmala Sari, 2021). These judgments stem from the historical association of sensual movements with seduction, a concept rooted in religious doctrine. In Indonesian culture, Islamic teachings explicitly prohibit acts that are believed to incite lust or seduction, framing such behaviors as sinful (Yuliani, 2010). Within this framework, the dancers' movements are seen as violations of moral and religious values, leading to condemnation and moral exclusion. The use of religious language in these critiques reflects how deeply ingrained these doctrines are in shaping societal expectations. Butler's (1988) concept of gender performativity emphasizes that societal norms are enforced through sanctions and punishments, a dynamic evident in the public judgment faced by the dancers. Religious ideology extends beyond personal belief, serving as a mechanism of social control that dictates women's behavior and enforces prescribed moral values. By labeling the dancers' movements as sinful, critics reinforce the narrative that women's bodies are inherently dangerous and must be strictly regulated. This opposition underscores the significant role of religion in governing female behavior and maintaining patriarchal power structures.

Overall, the audience's reactions are extremely polarized. While many express outright support or disapproval, there are no comments that exhibit negotiated reading. This revelation reflects that the audiences mostly have extreme perceptions, whether positive or negative, about body movements which persist in their minds and leave no room for doubts or negotiation.

Performing Defiance through Conceived Narration

While heels dancers use bold costumes and provocative movements to challenge restrictive norms, their resistance does not rely solely on these visual elements. They amplify their message by incorporating verbal narration on social media, creating a multi-dimensional approach to counter-conduct. This strategy ensures their encoded messages of defiance are not misinterpreted or dismissed by dominant ideologies. Using Hall's (2005) encoding/decoding model, the dancers combine performance with narration to guide audiences toward counter-hegemonic readings of their acts. This deliberate framing strengthens their efforts to reclaim agency over the female body and highlights the transformative nature of their resistance. Narration serves as a crucial link between the dancers' physical performances and their audience, contextualizing their defiance and mitigating potential backlash. In doing so, the dancers deepen the layers of meaning in their performances and ensure their movements are seen as intentional acts of empowerment rather than mere vulgarity. The dancers primarily adopt two narrative tones—satirical and forthright—to challenge societal norms, confront criticism, and reshape perceptions of female agency.

Firstly, satire is a key tool for the dancers, blending critique with entertainment to address societal prejudices. Tang and Bhattacharya (2011) define satire as art that critiques human and social flaws through parody, irony, and ridicule. By employing satire, the dancers transform criticisms into humorous yet biting rebuttals, making their resistance accessible and engaging. For example, a dancer parodied public criticisms by performing to a popular sound mocking accusations like "attention-seeker" and "too old to act young." The satirical narration laughs off these remarks while questioning whether the critics could match her beauty and agility (Jessy Nirmala Sari, 2023). At first glance, this may seem like a lighthearted parody, but the chosen sound highlights the unfair scrutiny heels dancers face for their sensuality and confidence. By embracing these criticisms and responding with humor, the dancer reframes insults as affirmations of pride in her appearance and sensuality. By

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addressing criticism in an entertaining way, the dancers disarm their audience and subvert body shame, transforming what is often a source of humiliation into a celebration of vitality and self-assurance.

Alongside humor, the dancers use forthright narratives to confront societal norms directly. These unapologetic responses strip away playfulness, offering bold rebuttals to criticisms and exposing the biases behind restrictive expectations. By addressing audiences plainly, the dancers provoke critical reflection on societal double standards. For instance, one dancer dismissed remarks that restrict women from wearing revealing clothes or pursuing their careers, encouraging women to live authentically and prioritize their own choices (Jessy Nirmala Sari, 2021). This statement reflects a rejection of societal views that subordinate women and deny their agency. By advocating for freedom of choice, the dancer challenges patriarchal systems that seek to control women's bodies and behaviors. Her defiant stance asserts women's autonomy and highlights the oppressive nature of norms that perpetuate subjugation. By openly confronting critics, the dancers advocate for a redefinition of norms and an acknowledgment of heels dance as a legitimate form of artistic expression. Forthright narration also amplifies their resistance by emphasizing that their performances are not acts of submission but deliberate assertions of autonomy and strength.

The audience's reactions to the dancers' narratives reveal diverse interpretations of their resistance. Many viewers adopt a dominant reading of the satirical content, resonating with its empowering message. Humor serves as a bridge, enabling audiences to engage with critical ideas without feeling attacked. For instance, one viewer described the satirical narration as entertaining, reflecting the effectiveness of humor in delivering powerful messages (Jessy Nirmala Sari, 2023). This positive response underscores the role of satire in making resistance relatable and accessible, allowing audiences to align with the dancers' counter-conduct.

Forthright narratives, on the other hand, elicit more mixed reactions. While some audiences support the dancers' advocacy for women's autonomy, others negotiate their understanding by partially agreeing while still adhering to traditional norms. For example, one commenter supported the message of self-determination but emphasized that women should still conform to societal expectations for their own safety (Jessy Nirmala Sari, 2021). This negotiated response reveals a tension between the desire for personal freedom and the recognition of societal constraints. It also reflects an acknowledgment of the persistent oppression posed by patriarchal systems, where women's autonomy is often curtailed by the threat of objectification or violence.

Oppositional reactions are more extreme, with critics condemning the dancers as shameless or sinful. One commenter, for instance, criticized a dancer for ignoring men's "inherent nature" tied to lust, suggesting that women have a responsibility to dress modestly to prevent objectification (Jessy Nirmala Sari, 2021). This perspective reflects deeply ingrained patriarchal and religious beliefs that naturalize male desire while placing the burden of regulation on women. According to Islamic teachings, human lust is inherent and plays a vital role in reproduction, but both genders are responsible for maintaining moral conduct (Afrizal et al., 2022). Critics use this belief to justify controlling women's clothing and behavior, perpetuating the idea that women's bodies are dangerous and require strict regulation. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps unpack these oppositional responses. Butler (1988) argues that gendered behaviors are constructed through repeated performances rooted in historical and cultural expectations. The criticism that women should dress modestly reflects this constructed norm, which positions men's lust as natural and women's modesty as obligatory. Such critiques expose the hegemonic power of religious ideology in governing women's behavior, framing dissent as a moral failure.

CONCLUSION

Heels dancers' use of social media to challenge societal norms around the female body reveals its role as a contested site of ideological struggle. Through bold attire, sensual movements, and

assertive narratives, these dancers reclaim agency, redefining how the female body is perceived and represented in public. Their provocative costumes and stylized movements defy restrictive norms, transforming taboos into expressions of elegance and empowerment. Purposeful narration further amplifies their message, fostering a sense of liberation and resistance. Audience reactions underscore the ongoing conflict over body representation. While many support the dancers' movement, others offer negotiated interpretations, influenced by entrenched values, or outright opposition, citing threats to cultural traditions. These varied responses highlight the persistent tension between progressive and conservative perspectives on femininity and morality. This study also emphasizes the growing role of social media in advancing global conversations on body politics and gender issues. Heels dancers use these platforms not just to showcase their artistry but to provoke dialogue that transcends cultural boundaries. In doing so, dance transcends its traditional role as mere entertainment, becoming a political act of defiance and self-expression. By challenging societal restrictions, these performances reposition the female body as a powerful tool of protest and redefinition. Ultimately, the dancers illustrate that the body remains a battleground where competing ideologies collide. Their work exemplifies how the female body can be reclaimed and redefined as a site of resistance, agency, and empowerment. By confronting restrictive gender norms, these dancers contribute to a broader movement advocating for bodily liberation and the reevaluation of entrenched ideas about femininity.

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