

# [***Sydney Sweeney Embraces the Male Gaze***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BGH-Y221-JBR6-9037-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Length:** 923 words

**Byline:** Shannon Power

**Highlight:** There was plenty of discussion about Sydney Sweeney's "SNL" debut, but it was not strictly about her performance.

**Body**

Sydney Sweeney [*hosted*](https://www.newsweek.com/sydney-sweeny-donald-trump-party-saturday-night-live-mom-1875341?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)[*Saturday Night Live*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/snl?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)for the first time, and her appearance has sparked many conversations, but not for the reasons you may think.

In her opening monologue, the actor [*poked fun at the controversy*](https://www.newsweek.com/sydney-sweeny-donald-trump-party-saturday-night-live-mom-1875341?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) around her mom's birthday party. In another sketch, she made out with gay cast member Bowen Yang. But her debut hosting gig has mostly been remembered for the way she looked.

Much of the online chatter and post-show reviews said the gags relied heavily on Sweeney's cleavage and appearance, rather than digging deeper to find something more original.

In its review, *Vulture* described the episode as "this season's most dismal," and *Cracked* criticized the sketch-comedy show, saying, "When *Saturday Night Live* features a well-endowed woman host, the show will, inevitably, turn a low-cut top into an entire four-minute sketch."

One sketch saw Sweeney play a ditzy but successful Hooters waitress who makes $30,000 in tips. In another, she played a ditzy high school cheerleader who falls in love with the school's new basketball star, Air Bud, the golden retriever. The [*Euphoria star*](https://www.newsweek.com/sydney-sweeneys-double-emmy-noms-have-fans-rejoicing-euphoria-star-1724077?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) also joked in her monologue that if her strategy to get into acting had failed, her backup plan was to "show boobs."

"*SNL* has never known what to do with 'hot' guests, and Sydney Sweeney is the latest example," Eammon Jacobs wrote for Business Insider.

Inez Feltscher Stepman, a senior policy analyst at the Independent Women's Forum and senior contributor at the Federalist, suggested the actor leans into her attractiveness and even welcomes the "male gaze."

"Men don't ONLY like Sydney Sweeney for her boobs, they like her bc she's the first starlet in a long time to unrepentantly and cheerfully chase the male gaze. She is clearly giving permission to ogle and enjoying that feminine power. An oasis for men in a nut vice culture lol," Stepman [*wrote on X*](https://twitter.com/InezFeltscher/status/1764673491826024589?s=20), formerly [*Twitter*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/twitter?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships).

*Newsweek* contacted Sweeney's and *SNL's* representatives by email for comment.

The concept of the "male gaze" was first introduced by academic and filmmaker Laura Mulvey in the 1970s. She described it as the phenomenon in multimedia that put women on screen to satisfy male protagonists and, ultimately, male viewers.

More specifically, she argued women were sexualized to satisfy men's desires, which she described as "voyeuristic," in her 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

According to Nathalie Weidhase, a program director in media and communication at the University of Surrey in the U.K., Sweeney seems to be following in the footsteps of other stars who "leaned into an ironic, 'knowing' performance of sexiness."

"*SNL*, like many other comedy programs, is a show where women are allowed to be funny but still need to be sexy," Weidhase told *Newsweek*, adding, "She will also have been aware that this is what is expected of her as 'a good sport' in on the joke."

"At this stage of her career, Sweeney and her management will have made calculated decisions based on the publicity this appearance would get, and how this features into the construction of her marketable persona going forward," Weidhase said.

Whether Sweeney courts the "male gaze" is beside the point, as the concept is more importantly "about the communication of a power dynamic through well-established visual conventions," said Hannah Yelin, a media and culture academic at Oxford Brookes University.

Yelin quotes theorist John Berger, who once said, "Men act and women appear"—meaning men have agency, while women appear simply to be "passively decorative."

"For hundreds of years, Western art and the majority of contemporary visual culture has repeated this pattern of representation to the point that it's deeply entrenched and self-reinforcing," she told *Newsweek.*

"Now, if we take the case of Sydney Sweeney hosting *SNL*, she is in the agentic role. She has agency. She acts, not just appears," Yelin continued.

The academic describes Sweeney's role on *SNL* as "the ring mistress at this particular circus," who "is conducting a particular performance of femininity as visual spectacle."

She added: "And that spectacle of femininity has its own long-standing conventions of visual signs and codes: long blond hair, mega-cleavage, visible skin, warm, friendly, smiling, nonthreatening delivery. These conventions of specular femininity overlap with those of the male gaze."

Yelin said a focus on Sweeney's aesthetic could detract from her "perfectly competent professional skill at hosting live television" and perpetuate "femmephobia"—the devaluation of the feminine.

"All gender is performative. Sweeney's turn as *SNL* host is undertaken as a performance of a particular convention of femininity," Yelin said.

"But the ***politics*** of the gaze are more complicated and femmephobia so prevalent that even when we think we're giving a feminist hot take, we risk failing to engage with the way women are acting and reducing them to their appearance," she continued.

Weidhase said women in Hollywood often do not have much say in how they are portrayed because they "work in an industry that is largely built on their objectification."

She continued: "So in order to be successful, the young women in particular need to play the game. Ideally, this wouldn't be the case. There are many successful male actors who don't need to rely on their appearance for success and critical acclaim.

"In order for women to have a 'choice' about whether they want to cater to the male gaze or not, celebrity culture and Hollywood would first have to divest from objectifying women as a business strategy."

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2357557/sydney-sweeney-red-carpet.jpg)

**Graphic**

sydney sweeney on red carpet

Frazer Harrison/Getty Images

Sydney Sweeney at the world premiere of "Madame Web" on February 12, 2024 in Los Angeles, California. There has been much discussion about her 'Saturday Night Live' hosting gig.

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