Emily Ratajkowski confronts her power — and yours

Emily Ratajkowski knows how to play the game. Walking out of a bathroom nude before she'd hit it big, she marvels at how a powerful fashion photographer has fallen right into her trap: dismissing her as dumb, wanting to see her naked, then being shocked and impressed at the sight of her body.

"When I came out of the bathroom topless, I stood up straight, not covering my breasts," she writes in her memoir *My Body*. "I believed that by taking off my clothes proudly, by not letting myself be embarrassed by my nakedness, I might somehow intimidate you, shifting the dynamic."

She does not. While Ratajkowski lands the job, she's still reliant on sleazy men to get a paycheck. Now, as she reflects on the ways she's capitalized on her own sex appeal, she's wrestling with the central question: "What is the power of my body? Is it even *my* power?"

It's a question hinted at in Jia Tolentino's essay "The Age of Instagram Face," where she compares women who get plastic surgery to McKinsey consultants assessing a corporation, identifying underperforming assets and optimizing them for profit. The metaphor points to how broken the system is, but it also speaks to the natural inclination we all have to use the gifts we were born with to our advantage.

Perhaps this is why Ratajkowski is hesitant to dismiss other women for their choices. Like Tolentino, she's looking at the whole system, seeing the still-limited ways women can try to gain power. "That's what I feel about any woman deciding to modify her image and body," she tells *The Verge* in an

interview. “It’s like, ‘Of course she wants to do that. That’s the world we live in, and it’s a commodifiable asset.’”

Now, as the owner of a thriving direct-to-consumer swimwear line Inamorata, Ratajkowski is able to control her image and the end-product — a kind of vertical integration for the modeling industry. Is this real power? She’s not sure. “It’s still capitalism and it’s still selling clothes,” she says. “So I have problems around the girl boss politics of like, ‘There you go. That’s feminism. We did it.’ It’s just more complicated than that.”

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

The book started with an article in *New York Mag* about who owns your image. What inspired you to write that?

So, actually, *New York Magazine* chose that essay out of the book proposal. It wasn’t the first essay I wrote. The book had been written and they were cool enough to choose one of the longer pieces, which I wasn’t expecting. That one came from having many, many experiences in my lifetime about both capitalizing off of my image and also feeling like others were capitalizing off of it without my control. And I was interested in that idea of all these Emilys in the world that were floating around. And while it was my livelihood, it also seemed not to belong to me.

I’m curious if the experience of writing that, and processing the fact that your image is yours and not yours at the same time, has changed how you go about signing modeling contracts. Do you think you could be in a position again where a photographer was able to exploit a photoshoot and essentially create subsequent projects that you don’t really have control over?

I would say, never say never. Because I’ve had that experience

and other experiences that I didn't write about, I'm forever worried about that. And I've done so many photoshoots in my life, starting at a very young age. My modeling agency was in control of tons and tons of girls and was supposed to be protecting us, but also they're not planning on our long-term careers. They're not thinking about that. So I don't know how many photographers have a hard drive of images of me that I have no ownership over. That's just the reality of it.

But definitely because of that experience and knowing what it can be like, I now am very crazy about language in contracts and am always trying to tie up every loose end and make sure I'm protected. But that being said, there are still loopholes. Nothing's ever completely airtight.

There's a case that's going on right now with a paparazzo who is suing you for posting an Instagram image of yourself — and you're fighting back in court. It seems like this is an instance where you are trying to regain some power by making an argument about fair use, but the system is kind of working against you. The judge recently ruled that you violated the paparazzo's copyright. What's on your mind with the latest development?

I wasn't sure that I was going to win. And just to be clear, settling out of court and paying this paparazzi whatever x amount of dollars would've been the more financially smart decision for me. So I knew what I was getting myself into by deciding to go down this road, that it was going to be a battle. In some ways, it was more of a long-term versus short-term decision because I just felt more and more paparazzi could continue to sue me. And I wanted to send a message that I was going to fight back and also push these ideas more into the public eye so that people aren't just like, "Oh yeah, whatever, copyright law."

In the book, there's a chapter called Blurred Lines where you write, "In my early twenties, it never occurred to me that the

women who gained their power from beauty were indebted to the men whose desire granted them that power in the first place." You echo it in a later chapter when you say, "What is the power of my body? Is it even my power?" It's the underlying theme, in some ways, of the whole book.

It got me thinking that this is a lot of how internet celebrity works for women. It seems like with women who get famous on the internet, there's this way in which you're famous because people want to be you or they want to be with you. But ultimately, it's the companies cutting your sponsorship deals that have the real money and power.

I'm curious if you agree and if you've answered that question for yourself: is the power of your body your power?

No, I haven't answered that question for myself. I wish I had an answer for it, honestly. I think that you hit the nail on the head. It's like when I think about OnlyFans and everything that's going on with OnlyFans. It's such a perfect example of that. It's like women were trying to have an answer to the internet's huge revenge porn issue and say like, "No, we're going to be in control. We're going to be the ones capitalizing off of our images." But then you have a server that ultimately is profiting off of them and has the power to shut down the way that they make money at any point because their investors have decided that they've had enough of the sexy stuff or whatever. So I think that there are ways for women to have success and to have control by using and commodifying their image and their body. But ultimately it's within the confines of larger power structures that mean that their position is limited.

Has having your own business, Inamorata, changed that at all for you? It seems like now, at least in that context, you are the model *and* the product creator. But it also seems like, and you write about this in the book, there's a direct line between the sales of the direct-to-consumer swimsuits and

whether or not you are actually in the pictures.

Yeah. It definitely feels better to be the one in control and the one making decisions about how I'm going to profit off of my image and my body. And it's fun to work with other women that I like and make clothes that I like, but it's… I don't know if I would say that it's true empowerment because it's still capitalism and it's still selling clothes. So I have problems around the girl boss politics of like, "There you go. That's feminism. We did it." It's just more complicated than that.

It's also true that this project is self-funded – it's all your own investment. But if we look at the wider world of girl bosses, they're still having to go to men to ask for more money, to ask for support and investment. It's hard to get total control.

Yeah and we have not done that yet. I don't have any outside investors, partly because I just can't stand the thought of having to convince some guy in a suit to give us money, which is weird because that's the next step.

Do you think that you'll keep modeling for other people if you don't have to, from a financial perspective?

It's really hard because the money's good and I have a kid now and I have a lot of responsibilities and, honestly, writing isn't exactly an amazing way to make money. So one of the things that I love about modeling and working for other people is that it buys me time – I write about that in the book. Even initially, that was the appeal. My friends had to work really hard at cafes or service industry jobs, and I could go shoot a job one day a week or a month and make what they were making by working many, many hours. And even just being able to write this book was because I had time. So I like the opportunities that modeling allows me. But I think if I could, if I felt financially secure enough, I would absolutely probably stop.

You figured out early on in your career that there was a real benefit to be had in keeping your weight down and conforming to current standard beauty standards. It reminded me of this line, from Jia Tolentino's book —

Trick Mirror.

Yeah, exactly. She writes about women looking at their bodies like a McKinsey consultant looks at a corporation, in terms of what can be modified and improved.

It's a phenomenon I've seen with a lot of the young TikTok stars. They get famous in part because they're very approachable. But then to stay famous, like when they get the Hulu deal, you start to see them conform more and more to beauty standards. I'm curious if that's something you've seen and something you think about with today's social media stars.

Yeah, I'm so interested in that phenomenon because I see it all the time. Like now, I've been famous for eight-something years and I watch women come in and they have this charm about them and then slowly their boobs get a little bigger or they lose a little bit of weight or their nose gets a little smaller, whatever. And of course they do. They become very hyper aware of how they're perceived and they know that their value increases the more they fit the mold. So they're just being smart, which is the sad truth.

You touch on this, too, in the book. When you're in a capitalist system, you take the assets you have and you optimize them.

Yeah, that's a huge theme of the book. That's what I feel about any woman deciding to modify her image and body. It's like, "Of course she wants to do that. That's the world we live in and it's a commodifiable asset."

There's a section of the book and in the essay where you talk about some of the comments you've received on Instagram,

people feeling very entitled to say cruel or very sexual things about your body and your image. I know that there's an IRL version of this in the modeling industry, but I'm curious if you think about the internet making women particularly vulnerable to that type of harassment or critique and if there's any real way around that?

I don't think there's any real way around it. I definitely think that the IRL version is just so different. The things that people say online, no one, even the nastiest person in fashion, would say in real life. It's what everyone talks about, you're hiding behind your screen, you think you're anonymous. Sometimes I'm really shocked. I try not to look at comments, but of course I do sometimes. And I'll click on someone's profile because I'm just so curious who this person is that will say this incredibly hurtful and very specific thing. And it's just a person who's walking around and I think about what it does for them? I've definitely been a fan, but I've also always been a public persona as that kind of culture has risen. So I've never been able to relate or empathize with people who do that. And it must be satisfying in some way because so many people partake in it – it's really sad. It says something bad about people's mental health and where we are as a culture.

What's your way of dealing with that? You mentioned you try not to look at the comments. Do you ever try to engage or report them?

No, I don't. I've found, unfortunately, that sometimes the high road is the best road, which doesn't feel satisfying in the same way that writing a nasty retort would be. This is something I write about in the book. With moments that I've protested the use of my image, for example, it ends up just bringing more attention. And so I don't want to bring attention to that person and their comment, so I try to ignore it.

I’m curious what speaking up about the way that you’ve been treated by powerful men has cost you, if anything?

So it’s interesting because one of the first interviews I did around the book was with a man, and he asked me if I was concerned about the consequences for Robin Thicke. I was like, “Wait, for me or for Robin Thicke?” And he was like, “For Robin Thicke.”

Then, out of my control, some media outlet broke an embargo and leaked two sentences from what I hope was a pretty nuanced essay and just put those tag lines out into the world. And it’s been pretty brutal for me online. I would say 99 percent of Twitter is either saying that I’m low on money and therefore that’s why I’m talking about this now, or something about how I was dancing around naked, what did I expect? So the idea that our culture is shifted and that men need to be scared now, I haven’t experienced that.

Was it important for you to wait to speak out about what you’ve experienced until you had a bigger platform?

I didn’t think about it as speaking out. I felt like, “Okay, this is a perfect example of the full truth of my experience and therefore I want to include it in the book because I want people to understand what I’ve learned about myself and how I’ve evolved as a person.” But it didn’t feel like, “Oh, I’m speaking out.” Blurred Lines my editor basically had to force me to write. Initially, that experience was hidden in another essay — it was like two paragraphs. And it was one of the things that when we first started to dive into the book proposal, she was like, “This needs to be its own essay, it’s such a telling experience.” And I was really afraid that it was going to become what it has in this exact moment before the book’s release.

In the galley, in the version you read, it was the first essay. I ended up making it the second essay because I just

felt like it wasn’t the right thing. I think for me, it just feels like I have had so many people question my reality and question my experience. And I felt so frustrated with it that it wasn’t a choice of like, “I’m going to speak out.” It was just like, “I have to put this thing out into the world to validate my reality.” That was it. I knew there were going to be all these really hard parts about it, but that yearning drove me all the way to where I am now, which is publishing this book.

How has your thinking about the nuances of putting your image on the internet changed since becoming a mom? You tend to block out your baby’s face a lot in Instagram photos. How are you thinking about Sly’s image?

So I actually posted a picture of his face last weekend for the first time. And it was because we live in New York City and paparazzi had shot him, and you could Google his face anyway. And again, taking back control, I don’t like the idea of exploiting my beautiful baby’s image through Instagram. I’ve signed up for this life, but he hasn’t. But he is a part of my life and I also am proud of him and I don’t want other pictures of him that I don’t have control over out there instead. So that was the decision my husband and I made.

It might change, I don’t know. I’m learning. I might go to being like, “No, I love sharing pictures of him,” or I might go back to just not showing his face at all. I’m not sure. But that’s where I am in this moment.

Do you have anything next on the docket writing-wise?

I have actually been thinking about writing about putting this book out into the world and cancel culture and media and clickbait culture, and my experience with that. I’ve started to write it and then I just feel pretty exhausted because I’ve been talking about this book so much. Writing it and editing it was such an amazing experience, but publishing it is… I’m

not sure what it’s going to be like yet, and I’m nervous about it and I think that’s keeping me from writing. But I definitely plan on writing other books. At this moment in time, I would say that I’d be interested in trying my hand at fiction, just out of self-protection. But I also just really like writing from life, so we’ll see.

What do you want people to take away from the book? It feels like, with the leaks, people will have their own interpretations. But I would imagine that anyone who really engages with the text will have a really different takeaway. What are you hoping that the message will be for people?

That’s nice of you to say. When I’m in a good mood in the last couple days, I’ve been like, “Well, maybe more people will read the book because there’s all this chatter.” I don’t know. That’s the only positive I can take away from that. I really want to start conversations, and I say this in the book, I don’t have answers. I don’t know exactly what feminism or empowerment is. But I do think that women’s experiences, the female experience, what it means to be in a body as a woman, our reality is so frequently dismissed and ignored even by other women. And I do find through my close female friendships, that there is a baseline truth to what we know about our lives and our position in the world. And I want that to become something that is an understood thing between women.

So I guess my hope is that by putting these really personal vulnerable experiences out in the world, that other women will feel like it gives them permission to talk about their experiences. And instead of feeling like it’s something wrong with them or that they’re so specific, they’ll realize that there’s context for this and there’s a reason that we have so many shared experiences. That’s it, I think. That’s my biggest hope.

https://www.theverge.com/2021/11/9/22765720/emily-ratajkowski-interview-book-my-body