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Citation: Gill, R. (2021). Being watched and feeling judged on social media. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(8), pp. 1387-1392. doi: 10.1080/14680777.2021.1996427

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Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/27620/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1996427>

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Being watched and feeling judged on social media

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ABSTRACT

This short paper reports on research I conducted in 2020/21 with a diverse group of young people living in the UK. The research is interested in multiple aspects of “life on my phone” and is centred on listening to young people’s accounts of their lives on and off social media. Here, I draw out several key experiences that young women in particular told me about again and again. First, the impossibility of being perfect but also real. Second, the experience of feeling watched and surveilled. Thirdly, the sense of feeling and being judged all the time. Fourthly, the palpable fear—particularly when posting—of “getting it wrong” in one or more ways. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the current conjuncture and field of study as Feminist Media Studies celebrates its 20th anniversary.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 September 2021
Accepted 13 October 2021

KEYWORDS

Social media; affect;
surveillance; subjectivity;
neoliberalism

In 2020–21, I spent a year listening to young people talk about their lives on and off social media. More than 200 people took part in the research. The criteria for participation were simple: to be aged between 18 and 30 and living in the UK. I heard mainly from young women but also from some young men and people who identified outside or beyond the gender binary. Participants came from diverse heritages and ethnicities, a variety of sexual orientations, included people living with physical and mental health challenges, and people from a range of classes and religious backgrounds. Interviewees included a junior doctor, a nail technician, a fashion assistant, a research scientist, a fitness instructor, a media worker, a primary school teacher, a trainee vet, retail and hospitality workers, and several students.

The interviews were conversations that took place at an extraordinary time. The context included the global COVID-19 pandemic that, at the time of my final interviews in March/April 2021, had killed more than 120,000 people in the UK; repeated lockdowns; the resurgence of Black Lives Matter activism in the wake of the brutal murder of George Floyd; and, in the UK context, the murder of Sarah Everard, also by a serving police officer. All of these became topics for passionate discussion in the interviews—alongside seemingly lighter issues about other aspects of “life on my phone”—which ranged from participants’ love of cooking videos and of *Drag Race*, the new popularity of TikTok among a twenty-something demographic, body positivity trends, “Instagram versus Reality,” and the “codes of honour” among friends of the “night out photo”.

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As they discussed their lives, I was impressed by how skilfully my participants navigated multiple demands, platforms and relationships. They were expert and adept. Yet despite this fluency and sophistication, their experiences were far from straightforward, but instead full of ambivalence and struggle. Some of this originated in the material conditions of their lives—frightening amounts of student debt, precarious housing, worries about getting or keeping jobs—all of which had been exacerbated by the pandemic with its egregious intersectional inequalities relating to race and ethnicity, gender, age, class, disability and health status. Yet there were also a huge array of dilemmas that related to other issues—not least how to be, how to live and how to present oneself in contemporary mediated culture, in which they felt both under ubiquitous surveillance and subject to constant judgment—but from which they could not readily escape without also losing the chance to feel part of the pleasurable flow of life, knowing what is happening, seeing and being seen.

The need to be perfect but real

A growing body of research points to the pressure to be “perfect” (Angela McRobbie 2015; Heather Widdows 2018) including research from Facebook-Instagram itself, which, at the time of writing, is garnering extensive discussion, after being leaked to the press (e.g. Siva Vaidhyanathan 2021). The phrase “it’s all too perfect” is one I heard repeatedly from participants in this research. Media of all kinds, but particularly social media platforms, were seen as trafficking in images of youthful, slim, upper class, white, non-disabled cisheteronormative femininity that are exclusionary, unrealistic, unattainable, and that contribute to a pervasive sense of never being good enough. “I don’t look like that, I’ll never look like that” 27 year old Keisha told me, capturing a widely held view: “I see all these perfect bodies in bikinis and it makes me feel really low”. Others said they feel “ashamed”, “overwhelmed” and “like a failure”.

Young women of diverse ethnicities, sexual orientations, class backgrounds and disabilities were eloquent in their critiques of “perfect” images, and their rage is palpable, as Whitney Cull and I (Rosalind Gill and Whitney Cull 2022) discuss in our chapter “Media do not represent me” in which we distinguish between critiques of “perfection” and critiques of exclusion—while noting how they may coalesce. As one woman wrote in the survey: “we are constantly being told we are not thin enough, not pretty enough, too many spots, not enough boob, not enough bum, too bigger thighs . . . it goes on and on.” Participants were skilful at deconstructing photographs, whether that is to question the authenticity of the picture (e.g. filtered, edited, botoxed) or to challenge the norms it represents (e.g. whiteness, slimness, upper-class aesthetics). But they still feel “caught” by the pressure to somehow live up to these images: that is, *their anger at the injustice of this pressure does not nullify its impact.*

Instead, in their posts, they strive to present their *own* version of the perfect—which many described simply as a “nice photo”- one that is characterised by a beautiful yet natural and apparently effortless appearance, with pictures that should look “amazing” but spontaneous, and not appear to have been (unduly) filtered or edited. An ideal post is not only “picture perfect” but also displays coolness, fun, and popularity. It must be carefully curated but not look as if it is the result of any particular care or design. It means being in the right locations with the right people, with good-looking

“instagrammable” food and drinks, and an always “positive” disposition—no matter how they actually feel. Living up to the ideals of the perfect, then, is not just about appearance but also about displaying the “right” kinds of feelings and attitudes, through pictures but also through humorous, self-deprecating and relatable captions and stories (Akane Kanai 2018). Time and again, young women told me that they struggle with what they experience as the “impossible” demand to be “perfect” and yet also to be “real” (Maria José Camacho-Miñano, Sarah Maclsaac and Emma Rich 2019; Meaghan Toll and Moss Norman 2021)

Being watched and feeling judged

Paralleling the pressures to post images of a perfect life was the experience of “being watched” which I heard about repeatedly from young women. First, there is the sense of being watched and evaluated in public space, both on and offline as well as in venues such as bars and clubs. This could occasionally be enjoyable, but for many young women it was decidedly negative—they talked about being “stared at” and described feelings that ranged from embarrassment to fear. For those whose social media settings were public, this also meant being subject to unwanted attention and comments that some experienced as harassment. Indeed, the *routineness* of this—and the extent to which it was regularly dismissed as “just creeps,” “weirdos” or “some random guy” -was shocking to me as a researcher, precisely because so many women took it to be such a mundane feature of their lives that it apparently hardly merited discussion.

A different form of being watched was that experienced among friends and peers. Young women repeatedly expressed a sense of being under scrutiny in a way that was both evaluative and forensic. Most young people *expected* their photos to be subject to a critical scrutiny that bordered on hostility—possibly to be screenshotted and shared for cruel dissection. In fact, one of the experiences discussed most frequently in the interviews was that of “feeling judged” by others—even by close friends who might reasonably be expected to have warm and affectionate feelings towards them. This experience generated a multitude of anticipatory labours (Melissa Gregg 2008), and also a common anticipatory *dread*. As 21 year old India put it “Honestly, it’s awful. Every single thing anyone does is judged . . . Even if you’re just being yourself -and people are all for being yourself—they’re still going to judge you anyway.”

The forensic scrutiny of others is facilitated by the affordances of smartphones—particularly their magnification features—as well as the platforms themselves, which could “reveal” if photos had been filtered. More generally these critical forms of looking have been inculcated and tutored by a rapidly expanding beauty industry, which has trained young women to “see,” that is to practice forms of looking, which are quite new and historically unprecedented in their attention to micro surveillance of the face and body (Ana Sofia Elias and Rosalind Gill 2018; Rosalind Gill 2019; Christine Lavrence and Carolina Cambre 2020; Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans and Alison Mackiewicz 2016). Many young women were aware of having been schooled by make-up videos, transformation challenges, and adverts for myriad cosmetic procedures from tooth whitening to lip fillers—as well as by the aesthetics of the platforms themselves—in precisely the forms of critical and evaluative looking that they themselves experienced as painful and

judgmental. Thus, being watched and feeling judged are not simply done by others to the self, but equally are applied to one's own appearance, requiring a distinctive critical gaze on the self.

Fear of getting it wrong (FGW)

The fear of posting a “bad photo” pulsed through young women's talk. But more than this, there were *so many* ways of getting it wrong—young women told me about the multiplicity of other ways they could “fail” in front of their friends and peers—such as by seeming to be “trying too hard,” being “fake,” posting something that does not get enough likes, or showing distress and thus being deemed “attention-seeking.” A sense of coruscating anxiety animated many young women's accounts of posting to their socials. Posting was an intensely anxious endeavour. Once an image was posted, many described how fear and doubt would eat away at them, how they would refresh the app multiple times to “make sure it was ok” and to see if it was getting likes and comments. They offered embodied and visceral accounts of this experience—particularly at night—with stories of hearts pounding, adrenaline pumping, and the restless anxiety that made falling asleep impossible after having posted something.

Conclusions

What does this research tell us about the current conjuncture as the vital and cherished journal *Feminist Media Studies* celebrates its 20th anniversary? On the one hand, the study—and others like it (e.g. Josie Reade 2021; Kim Toffoletti and Holly Thorpe 2021)—illustrate some of the exciting trends and developments in our field, which include decisive shifts away from the tripartite producers-texts-audiences model that held sway for so long, towards greater methodological pluralism and an attempt to think together different moments in the media/digital circuit—from platform capitalism, dataism, algorithmic injustice to the felt, lived experiences of teens creating Instagram posts or TikToks. This study is influenced by vibrant contemporary feminist scholarship about the complex relations between digital culture, affect, embodiment, representations, intimacy and relationality (e.g. Julia Coffey 2021; Amy Shields Dobson 2016; Sarah Handyside and Jessica Ringrose 2017; Brooke Erin Duffy and Ngai Keung Chan 2019) which offers rich and multiple ways to think about media.

On the other hand, the empirical findings of this research yield complicated results. The study illustrates the forceful and articulate anger that so many participants felt about gender, racial and sexual injustice; it highlights their critical sophistication, their uptake of “popular” feminism (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018) and antiracism, and, as such, the wide cynicism of trends such as the uptake of BLM sentiments and imagery by corporate marketing organisations (Francesca Sobande 2021). Moreover, it shows some of their attempts to *resist* e.g. by producing, following or liking different kinds of content e.g. queer or body positive. Yet, at the same time, the research also reveals numerous features of a neoliberal sensibility: a pervasive focus on the body and face as a key source of value, an emphasis upon the experience of being forensically surveilled, a focus on perfection and simultaneously authenticity, and the policing of affects—with the need to be “positive,” “fun” and “cool” however one is actually feeling. This shows the complex

entanglement—at the levels of subjectivity and affect—of investments in popular movements for social transformation and simultaneously in a quotidian neoliberal sensibility (Jo Littler 2017)

The research also speaks back to entrenched debates about social media and especially what I see as the false polarities of “pain” vs “literacy”- which loosely map onto psychologically dominated traditions, and those shaped by youth and cultural studies. It shows that it is possible to be sophisticated, literate and critical but nevertheless *still* to be caught in a mesh of social relations that are difficult to resist let alone to exit. It demonstrates that young people are phenomenally media literate and finds the standard calls for more “media literacy training” both patronising and evasive: obfuscating the huge power of private platforms, digital capitalism and algorithmic injustice (Safiya Umoja Noble 2018). Finally, I was painfully struck by the paradoxical loneliness of this sociality: my participants said they did not discuss its difficulty with their friends. In this sense, some said, the interviews felt “like a detox” and one of the very few spaces in which they could talk relatively freely and openly about the struggles and ambivalences behind their perfect posts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the City Impact Funds [not known].

Notes on contributor

Rosalind Gill is Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at City, University of London. She is the author of several books including *Gender and the Media* (Polity, 2007) *Mediated Intimacy* (Polity, 2018, with Meg-John Barker and Laura Harvey), and *Confidence Culture* (Duke, 2022, with Shani Orgad). Her book about this research is due out in Spring 2022 and is called *Perfect: Feeling Judged on Social Media* (Polity, 2022). E-mail: Rosalind.Gill.2@city.ac.uk

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