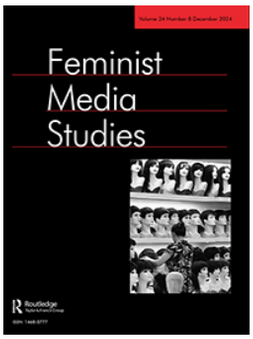

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Perfect: feeling judged on social media: a roundtable discussion

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Perfect: Feeling Judged on Social Media (Rosalind Gill, 2023a) is a book rooted in careful and attentive listening to a diverse range of young women talking about everyday life on their phones. In an earlier short piece for *Feminist Media Studies*, when I was part way through the research project, I wrote about some of the key themes and ideas that emerged from the interviews and the survey (Gill 2022). I discussed young women's experiences of the tyranny of perfection and of constantly being made to feel that they are not good enough. I explored their multiple senses of feeling watched and being subject to minute and forensic surveillance on and off their socials. And I discussed what became a key finding of the research—namely how feeling watched is connected to *feeling judged*, generating intense anxiety and a potent fear of "getting it wrong." The "fails" here could be posting too much so people feel like you are *constantly* "popping up" in their feed, or posting too little and prompting sarcastic comments about how boring you/your life must be, or impugning you for "mental breakdown;" it could be posting a picture that is not good enough or posting one that is "too perfect;" or posting a picture that looks "fake;" or seeming too vain; or looking like you have tried too hard; or coming across as "attention-seeking." As I discuss in *Perfect*, the list of ways in which young women fear getting it wrong is seemingly endless, extending to what they shared, how they caption their content, what they repost, or indeed *whether* they post—particularly at moments where they felt implicitly or explicitly called on to take a stand.

As I show in the book, young women do not inhabit these social relations passively, nor is this sense of being judged the only thing going on. There is also fun, pleasure, community, and the experience of being "in the know" about "what is happening," and "in the flow" of connections with others. Participants were expert and highly creative in how they managed their social media lives, how they navigated relentless and often contradictory demands. But, as I argue, their digital fluency did not somehow magically erase pain and difficulty. For example, it was perfectly possible to critique the operation of platform capitalism's racist, disablist, fat-hating, cisheteronormative appearance standards, yet at the same time still feel deeply invested in trying to live up to them. The

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book centres precisely these quotidian struggles and ambivalences in young women's lives on social media. It does not focus on the most dramatic, headline-grabbing accounts of alleged social media-fuelled eating disorders or suicides, nor does it endorse calls for "bans," but rather through attention to young women's own everyday concerns and experiences, it aims to give a vivid sense of the texture of their familiar, ordinary lives on their socials. In doing so it seeks to illuminate both the pleasures and the pains, and the way they are entangled.

Some of the questions the book raises relate to living in a culture dominated by visuality. In 2024 1.93 trillion photos were taken (61,400 per second), most of them on smartphones (Matic Broz 2024). Fourteen billion new images are shared every day on social media (Broz 2024), a large proportion of them on platforms owned *by just one company* (Meta). As I have argued elsewhere (Gill 2025) we are fast running out of hyperbole to capture the rapidity and intensity of the changes in our image-based society. It is difficult to wrap our heads around the sheer magnitude of this turn to the visual in contemporary culture. Research can document the number of images but has not kept up with *how we live and experience life* in such visually dominated societies.

I am fascinated by questions like: how do young people navigate mediated environments characterised by the unprecedented proliferation of images, many of them produced and shared by ordinary users? How do relations of power and inequality shape experiences of participation in visual culture? And how do young women negotiate the imperatives of the moment to "be visible," "put yourself out there," "broadcast yourself" and "post your best life"? (Gill 2025a)

In the book one direction I take is to look at the role that the beauty industrial complex is playing in this new hypervisual culture. From ubiquitous makeup, makeover and GetReadyWithMe videos, to try-on apps, to online skincare advisors, to constant push-notifications and adverts for treatments, cosmetic procedures and surgery which young women said they saw "All.The.Time," the beauty industry, I argue, is increasingly relocating onto our phones—a process that is only accelerating with AI in its many iterations (e.g., Bold Glamour Filter and beyond). Alongside this (and shaped by it), ways of seeing and looking are being transformed. The "new visual literacies"—particularly of the face—that Ana Elias and I (Ana Sofia Elias and Rosalind Gill 2018) discussed a few years ago in relation to smartphone appearance apps, are vividly materialising today in young women's ways of looking. I show that young women practise a "digital forensic gaze" (Christine Lavrence and Carolina Cambre 2020), and deploy what we might call a "magnification sensibility" on—but crucially also off—their phones, anticipating and imagining being subject to a scrutiny that is both magnified and 360 degree, and in which blemishes, pores, teeth, and eyebrow hairs loom large, literally but also emotionally.

Young women contrasted their own ways of looking at themselves and others with those of their mothers (and in some cases with me). For example, Bianca, a Black 18 year old from London, said that when posting on her Instagram "it has to be perfect" because others would be judging her posts for what is wrong or could be criticised. She told me: "you might not see it but they will." Eve, a white student from the north of England, in turn observed: "you're like my mum—she just sees a photo of me and says 'that's lovely, Eve is smiling'—*you don't really see*" (emphasis added). The work needed to understand the significance of these profound shifts in ways of seeing and looking is just beginning, raising questions about what kind of gaze(s) this intense scrutiny is shaped by and

configures—a male gaze? a colonial gaze? a platform gaze?—and about the distinctively visual intensity of contemporary capitalism.

Another of the key arguments of the book is about labour. I explore the sheer amount of time, energy and care that young women put into maintaining multiple social media accounts, carefully tuned to display different aspects of the self and to reflect and maintain different levels of intimacy. I document the work involved in creating a "typical" post: the careful selection of outfits and the styling of the self; the research and thought that goes into choosing a location for a selfie or a night out that will facilitate great pictures; the time and energy put into selecting and then editing the photos before posting (which for some was redolent of professional photographers); and the careful attention given to what, when and how to post (Stories, Reels, posts- how many, in what order, etc etc), as well as the work of "engagement" afterwards—replying to some comments, blocking and/or reporting others, and so on. Young women described themselves in terms that suggested a *constant need for hypervigilance*, particularly in a context where seemingly small actions—e.g., liking one friend's post but not another's—could be felt and experienced as painful acts of (micro)aggression.

Drawing on an important body of work on influencers/content creators which highlights the distinctive forms of labour they are required to practice including affective labour, intimacy labour, visibility labour (Crystal Abidin 2016; Nancy Baym 2018; Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund 2019; Zoe Glatt 2021), I highlight parallels with the young women in my research. I contend that *the professional content creator has become the model for young women's social media activity*; we are witnessing what Sophie Bishop (2023) has called "influencer creep." In some ways, I suggest, "we are all influencers now" (Gill 2023b), and subject to many of the same pressures, challenges and struggles as those who make a living from creating and sharing content(Sophie Bishop, Rosalind Gill and Zoe Glatt forthcoming; Gill 2023b).

Importantly, the research was conducted at a moment of converging crises in the UK (and elsewhere): pandemic, lockdowns, war, austerity, Brexit, institutionalised racism, sexism and disablism, a collapsing health and social care system, and dramatic loss of confidence in government and other institutions. Many aspects of this wider context were palpable in this research—as they should be—particularly experiences of debt, housing insecurity, poverty and unemployment, and the grief and rage provoked by police racism and brutality and sexual violence. Mental health struggles were also a visceral feature of the lives of the majority of my participants. It was noteworthy to me how extraordinarily *patterned* these "psychic lives" were—even as they were experienced as individual and unique. In a visual representation, some kind of mapping or "cartography of feelings," anxiety would be the largest and brightest affect by some way—whether as a diagnosed condition or simply as a vividly recounted experience. Alongside anxiety, dread and shame were common feelings, as were overwhelm and burnout, and experiences of fatigue and exhaustion, which in turn could tip into depression and despair. The use of the word "drained" came up again and again, alongside the concept of "spiralling down" and the sense of how *rapidly* one could go from feeling fine to feeling really low.

One of the most striking and upsetting findings was how alone young women feel with these experiences. I asked them if they spoke with others about their struggles on social media and hardly anyone did. This was understood by many to be related to the imperative to "have to be alright" and to be "coping" because "people don't like to

admit how hard it is" (Katie, 20). For all the contemporary buzz about the "destigmatisation of mental illness" or the "vulnerability turn," it seemed that the ability to present frailties, vulnerabilities or mental health challenges remains unevenly distributed; open only to a privileged few. For others, to post when you are feeling low, or to admit to an insecurity could all too easily be attacked as a form of "attention-seeking" or a "pity post."

My hope, then, is that the book contributes to debates about how we understand emotional distress, at a moment when rarely a week goes by without a new report about mental health crises affecting young people. I would like *Perfect*'s intervention to generate questions about the disjuncture between psychiatric diagnoses and ordinary experiences; to de-pathologise and de-individualise mental health crises, and instead to offer a wider picture of "structures of feeling," rooted in material conditions and cultural life; to challenge the notion that mental ill-health has been effectively and decisively destigmatised; and to highlight how lonely young people still feel with their distress, even in a culture saturated by wellbeing discourses. Above all I hope it contributes to young people's voices and experiences being heard and discussed.

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