
The Digital Gaze: Social Media, Self-Surveillance, and the Repackaging of Feminine Identity

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Abstract

This paper looks into the complexities of the digital gaze and how it affects feminine identity in social media environments. Even though platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube offer ways for people to express themselves, they also create a sense of self-monitoring and algorithm-driven visibility, putting pressure on women to shape their online images to fit dominant beauty ideals. This study looks at how gendered surveillance shows up in social media by using ideas from feminist theory, surveillance studies, and digital media research. It focuses on self-presentation, platform algorithms, and how peers regulate each other. This paper explores the paradox of digital empowerment, where the perceived freedom of online visibility is in fact subject to neoliberal and commercial influences. The study also looks into feminist digital activism and how it challenges the politics of the digital gaze, examining movements like #BodyPositivity and #MeToo as places of both resistance and commodification. The research shows how the digital gaze works as both a limiting factor and a chance for change. It stresses how important it is to think critically about platform structures, algorithmic governance, and feminist digital discourse in order to support real self-representation that goes beyond engagement metrics.

Keywords: Digital gaze, self-surveillance, algorithmic visibility, feminine identity, gendered surveillance, feminist theory, digital empowerment, neoliberalismplatform capitalism, online activism, digital feminism.

Introduction

Social media has changed the way femininity is expressed and understood in online environments. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube offer women ways to express themselves, but they also tend to uphold traditional beauty standards through how content is curated and what gets more visibility based on engagement. Petersfield (2024) suggests that social media promotes self-surveillance, leading women to shape their online identities in accordance with prevailing aesthetic trends, which are frequently influenced by the male gaze.

This digital self-presentation isn't just about expressing myself; it's also a way to navigate societal expectations and the algorithms of platforms that favor certain types of femininity. Researchers have been looking into how gender and digital culture connect, especially how social media promotes post-feminist ideas. Patouras and Tanner (2024) suggest that platforms like TikTok present a redefined version of

femininity that seems empowering but actually strengthens self-discipline and aesthetic labor. Moran and Carroll (2020) point out that women participate in consumptive practices that fit with neoliberal ideas of self-improvement, which subtly reinforces traditional gender norms. The dynamics here create a situation where social media acts as both a place for personal expression and a platform for monitoring based on gender.

Additionally, the idea of the digital gaze goes further than just male viewers; it also includes watching each other and keeping an eye on ourselves. Pieters et al. (2024) present the concept of a “girlfriend gaze,” which describes how women influence each other’s looks and actions in online beauty communities. This connects with the analysis by Arnesson and Carlsson (2023) on gynaeopticism, which refers to how digital platforms enhance gendered self-surveillance via influencer marketing and curated aesthetics. According to Woolley (2022), social media takes traditional forms of feminine control and presents them as personal consumer choices, which makes self-monitoring a fundamental part of our digital identities. This paper looks into how social media platforms continue the male gaze through the way individuals present themselves and how algorithms influence visibility. It raises the question of whether these digital spaces provide freedom or just a different kind of gendered surveillance. This research looks at self-surveillance, algorithmic curation, and how femininity is turned into a commodity to understand how digital culture influences modern feminine identity.

Theoretical Framework

The idea of the digital gaze goes further than just the usual feminist critiques of the male gaze. It includes aspects like self-surveillance, how algorithms make us visible, and how we regulate femininity among peers in online environments. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have changed the way gender is expressed and observed, leading to a situation where women participate in self-surveillance as a type of digital work. Petersfield (2024) points out that the increase of virtual femininity in digital self-imaging shows how women are actively shaping their online identities while following social and algorithmic norms. This process shows Foucault’s (1975) idea of panopticism, where people take in societal norms and change their behavior because they feel like they are always being observed. Additionally, the way neoliberalism and digital culture come together is critical in influencing modern ideas of femininity. Moran and Carroll (2020) suggest that self-surveillance is closely linked to consumer culture, highlighting how women are prompted to participate in beauty labor due to social media’s promotion of aspirational lifestyles. This idea connects with what Evans and Riley (2014) discuss in *Technologies of Sexiness*, where they critique how post-feminism has transformed traditional forms of female oppression into choices that are presented as empowerment. In a similar way, Arnesson and Carlsson (2023) present the idea of gynaeopticism, which refers to the gendered peer surveillance happening in influencer marketing and social media aesthetics. This perspective highlights how women influence each other’s online self-presentation, helping to sustain a culture

where dominant beauty standards are upheld through social approval instead of direct control by men. Additionally, TikTok and other short video platforms have become venues for showcasing dominant ideas about femininity. Molinar (2023) looks into how digital spaces establish new bases for redefined beauty and wellness standards, presenting self-improvement as something that is both desirable and essential for social interaction. This paper connects with the work of Pieters et al. (2024), who point out the rise of the girlfriend gaze, where beauty influencers produce content that both adheres to and challenges conventional beauty standards. The emergence of these digital aesthetics shows the contradiction of online femininity—social media provides new ways to be seen, but it also emphasizes the necessity for constant self-monitoring.

The digital gaze is used as a framework to look at self-presentation, algorithmic governance, and gendered surveillance in this paper. It draws on feminist media studies, surveillance theory, and critical digital culture research. Social media gives women a chance to shape their own stories, but it also brings along new limitations that influence how femininity is expressed and viewed online.

Self-Surveillance and Algorithmic Visibility

Social media platforms, driven by engagement metrics and algorithms, foster an environment where self-monitoring is not only encouraged but also crucial for visibility. The ongoing assessment of online identities through likes, shares, and algorithm-based visibility creates an

environment where people, especially women, feel the need to keep track of and shape how they present themselves. Kent (2023) suggests that social media acts as a professional tool and a means of self-surveillance, where how visible someone is depends on a continuous negotiation between personal choice and the perspectives of online communities. This connects with Foucault's (1975) theory of panopticism, where people start to internalize the feeling of being always observed, which results in self-regulation to stay socially acceptable. The growing impact of postfeminist media culture makes this situation even more complex. Gill (2007) discusses the transition from objectification to subjectification, noting that women now participate in self-monitoring not only for the sake of male approval but also within a neoliberal context that encourages self-optimization and empowerment through being visible. Pritchard (2024) points out that platforms such as TikTok influence how we create our digital selves by strengthening the performances of identity that align with what the algorithms prefer. This phenomenon goes beyond just gender, as Desporte (2022) looks into how marginalized communities, like queer and BIPOC users, manage their presence in digital spaces through careful self-surveillance to find a balance between being seen and staying safe.

Additionally, the concepts of digital capitalism closely influence how we present ourselves online. Maddox (2021) looks into the #StrongIsTheNewSkinny

movement, showing how self-discipline and fitness culture are presented as personal choices, yet they are still influenced by wider gender expectations. This focus on individual choice hides the underlying structural forces, where algorithms favor content that fits marketable aesthetics. Jules (2023) builds on this analysis by looking into menstrual tracking apps, showing how digital health technologies turn biological processes into areas of self-surveillance while pretending to offer empowerment.

In the end, self-surveillance and algorithmic visibility come together to form a confusing mix of empowerment and control. Social media platforms give people a chance to express themselves, but they also create a pressure to constantly keep an eye on and follow the rules set by the platforms. This research indicates that being visible online isn't automatically freeing; instead, it's a space where control is shaped by surveillance, algorithms, and societal norms.

The Illusion of Digital Empowerment

Social media is usually considered a platform that empowers women to share their stories, but it can also strengthen old-fashioned ways of controlling gender roles while pretending to promote self-expression. Banet-Weiser (2018) discusses how modern feminism has become commodified through branded empowerment, suggesting that success is now gauged by digital influence instead of real structural change. Women are often pushed to feel “empowered” by purchasing beauty products, participating in fitness culture, or adopting aspirational lifestyles,

all while still meeting the standards set by the male gaze. In a similar way, Taylor (2022) discusses the idea of authenticity on social media, pointing out that how we present ourselves is often more about performance influenced by market forces than true self-expression. This creates a situation where it seems like women have more control over their online identities, but their visibility is still influenced by algorithms and societal expectations.

Additionally, the stress of keeping up a perfect online image can really affect mental health. Tiggemann and Slater (2014) point out the connection between using social media and feeling dissatisfied with one's body, showing how these platforms help people adopt unrealistic beauty ideals. This perspective connects with Crano's (2019) analysis of Instagram's scopical field, where users feel both empowered and disindividuated, caught between wanting validation and fearing the loss of their digital presence. The process of sharing posts, getting likes for validation, and feeling the need to keep a perfect feed creates a sense of constant self-monitoring. This transforms social media into a platform for scrutiny instead of genuine self-expression. Additionally, the politics of gaze in digital culture makes the idea of empowerment more complex. Ibrahim (2019) points out that being visible online usually means giving up some control over how you are perceived, since the platforms set the rules for interaction. This is especially clear in influencer culture, where women have to constantly adjust how they present themselves to fit in with trends and what sells. Gallese (2024) discusses how digital platforms lead to a fragmented sense

of self, suggesting that our identities are influenced more by external validation than by our own internal sense of autonomy. This idea supports what Cao (2025) calls illusory empowerment, where it seems like digital agency is freeing, but in reality, it's limited by algorithmic curation and social norms.

Even though there are challenges with the idea of digital empowerment, some people and communities are using social media to push back and resist. Weatherby and Vidon (2018) look into how female influencers in non-traditional areas, like outdoor adventure content, push back against the usual male perspective by changing what visibility means in wilderness settings. In a similar way, Scarcelli and Farci (2024) suggest that social media serves as a space for young individuals to discuss gender norms and develop different portrayals of femininity. Newlin (2016) points out that digital engagement can actually strengthen existing power structures, since even attempts at resistance are influenced by platform moderation and algorithmic control. Overall, even though social media gives women more visibility, it doesn't automatically mean they have more control or influence. The online world commercializes empowerment, treating it more like a product than a personal journey. To really understand empowerment, it's important to critically look at how platforms work and work together for real change. This way, we can redefine digital feminism in a way that goes beyond just numbers and visibility.

Challenging the Digital Gaze

Even with the challenges that come from the digital world, many women are using social media to push back against gender norms and question the usual ways femininity is portrayed. Digital spaces are places where people face both limitations and opportunities as they navigate their presence in a system that focuses on algorithm-driven interactions. Scribano and Lisdero (2019) argue that digital life broadens how people perceive themselves and interact with others, but this broadening is frequently influenced by the structural inequalities present in visual culture. Women who push against traditional beauty standards often feel torn between expressing themselves and dealing with the pressures of being visible online, as social media algorithms both highlight and commercialize their resistance.

A really notable example of digital resistance is the body positivity movement. It has used social media to promote different body types and encourage genuine self-representation. Hashtags like #EffYourBeautyStandards and #BodyPositivity are becoming more popular, offering different stories that push back against traditional beauty standards (Jones, 2020). These movements create opportunities for women to confront the male gaze by taking back control of their bodies and stories in ways that feel right to them. As noted by Skains (2016), digital activism frequently encounters the issue of co-optation. Brands and influencers often take body positivity and turn it into something that can be sold, fitting it into a capitalist model, which ends up weakening its original, powerful message.

As a response to the pressures of our online image, feminist digital activism has emerged, challenging traditional beauty standards. The #MeToo movement showed how social media can be really effective in bringing people together to challenge patriarchal systems. Digital platforms have become a way to hold people accountable and critique systems by amplifying the voices of survivors (Kalema, 2023). In the same way, movements like #TimesUp and #SayHerName emphasize the importance of intersectionality in feminist activism, making sure that the voices of marginalized groups are part of discussions on justice and representation. However, as Crano (2019) highlights, the visibility provided by these movements doesn't always lead to real systemic change. Social media can be a space for resistance, but it also puts activism under the influence of digital capitalism, where things like engagement metrics and brand partnerships often determine how successful and lasting social movements can be.

Additionally, feminist approaches in visual culture seek to challenge the politics of gaze within digital environments. Ibrahim (2019) suggests that being visible online usually means that people have to align with prevailing aesthetic and ideological standards, even while trying to push back against them. Such an environment creates a situation where women have to carefully manage how they present themselves to be noticed and acknowledged, all while pushing back against the pressures to be treated as commodities. Gallese (2024) discusses how digital platforms break apart the experience of self, making people

present their identities within the limits set by social media's visual landscape.

The question is whether these acts of resistance can lead to lasting change or if they'll just be absorbed into the larger system of digital capitalism, where empowerment gets turned into something marketable. According to Westling (2019), the technological gaze is constantly changing and adjusting to new ways we engage with digital content. Feminist digital activism is really pushing back against traditional power structures, but it also has to deal with the constantly changing world of algorithmic governance, platform rules, and the economic factors that influence what we talk about online. In the end, addressing the digital gaze needs a continuous, intersectional strategy that extends past just individual acts of resistance. By examining digital infrastructures and promoting accountability for platforms, feminists can work towards creating a more inclusive and fairer online environment. The chance for change is found not just in taking back our digital presence but also in reworking the systems that control it.

Conclusion

Social media creates a complex situation for how women represent themselves. Digital platforms offer chances for us to express ourselves, but they also bring about the pressures of the male gaze through constant self-monitoring and the visibility shaped by algorithms. Women move through these environments by expressing femininity in ways that feel empowering to them while also aligning with societal expectations. The idea of digital freedom is

influenced by the underlying forces of platform capitalism, where algorithms decide who is visible and how feminine identity is presented.

To really challenge the way we look at things online, we need to carefully examine how social media platforms influence how we present ourselves. Feminist discussions should go beyond just focusing on personal empowerment stories and really tackle the larger systems that keep gendered surveillance going in online environments. Only then can social media really become a place of genuine agency instead of just another way to self-regulate within patriarchal norms.

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