

Rosalind Gill, **Perfect: Feeling Judged on Social Media**, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2023, 256 pp., \$22.95 (paperback).

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In ***Perfect: Feeling Judged on Social Media***, Rosalind Gill offers a compelling and empirically grounded analysis of young people's everyday engagements with social media, foregrounding the affective, relational, and embodied dimensions of digital life. Drawing on surveys and interviews with women aged 18 to 30, Gill examines how platformized cultures shape experiences of selfhood, visibility, and judgment. The book intervenes in long-standing debates within media and cultural studies by challenging polarized narratives that frame young social media users either as passive victims of digital technologies or as empowered and media-savvy digital natives. Instead, Gill develops a nuanced account of ambivalence, demonstrating how pleasure, creativity, connection, anxiety, and self-surveillance coexist within contemporary social media practices.



One of the book's most significant contributions is its refusal of binary thinking. Gill situates contemporary anxieties surrounding social media within a longer history of moral panics about new communication technologies. Much like earlier concerns about television, video games, and the Internet, social media is frequently portrayed as a threat to well-being, self-esteem, and social cohesion. Conversely, media and cultural studies scholars have often emphasized audience agency, participation, and creativity. Rather than endorsing either position, Gill demonstrates that young women's experiences cannot be reduced to simplistic narratives of victimhood or empowerment. The strength of the book lies in its ability to capture this ambivalence. Participants are neither passive cultural dupes nor entirely autonomous agents; they are critically aware of the unrealistic standards circulating online while simultaneously finding themselves affected by them.

At the center of Gill's analysis is the concept of "feeling judged," which captures the pervasive sense of being constantly observed, evaluated, and measured against unattainable standards of perfection. The book demonstrates how social media intensifies pressures not only around physical appearance but also around personality, affect relationships, and lifestyle. Young women are expected to present idealized versions of them while simultaneously appearing authentic, effortless, and relatable. Gill effectively illustrates the contradictory nature of these expectations. Participants repeatedly describe feeling caught between the demand to cultivate a "perfect" online presence and the fear of appearing overly curated, artificial, or attention-seeking. Posting too much, posting too little, using too many filters, or failing to receive sufficient engagement all become potential sources of anxiety. Social media emerges as a space structured by impossible expectations in which visibility is both desired and feared.

Methodologically, one of the book's greatest strengths is its commitment to listening. Gill foregrounds participants' voices throughout the text, allowing their stories, contradictions, and reflections to guide the analysis. Although the book is not explicitly framed as a grounded theory project, it shares many of its strengths. Rather than imposing predetermined theoretical frameworks onto participants' experiences, Gill develops her arguments inductively through the narratives and emotions expressed by social media users themselves. The result is a richly textured account that captures the complexity of digital life without reducing it to predetermined conclusions. The reader gains direct access to the lived experiences of young women navigating the contradictory demands of visibility, authenticity, and belonging.

The book is organized around several interconnected themes, including visual culture, surveillance, online harassment, self-presentation, and what Gill calls the "beauty industry on the phone" (p. 74). Particularly compelling is her discussion of image-based platforms and the ways aesthetic norms become internalized through everyday practices of filtering, editing, and posting. These activities are not merely superficial forms of self-expression. Rather, they constitute forms of digital labor requiring significant investments of time, skill, and emotional energy. In this regard, the book extends Gill's earlier analyses of postfeminist media culture by demonstrating how neoliberal imperatives of self-management and self-improvement have become embedded within platform infrastructures (Gill, 2007).

Gill successfully discusses the labor involved in social media participation. Participants describe carefully selecting locations, clothing, poses, lighting conditions, and camera angles before taking photographs. Yet the work does not end once the image has been captured. Considerable effort is devoted to filtering, editing, captioning, and curating content for different audiences. Even leisure activities become shaped by the anticipation of future visibility. As Gill demonstrates, social media participation increasingly resembles a form of affective and aesthetic labor in which users become managers of their own personal brands. The expectation that perfection should appear natural and effortless obscures the extensive labor required to produce it.

Among the book's most original contributions is its analysis of what Gill terms a "forensic" way of seeing (p. 98), in which she argues that young women do not simply look at photographs; they scrutinize them, searching for flaws, imperfections, and signs of failure. Chapter 3 is particularly effective in tracing the emergence of these new forensic ways of seeing through smartphone technologies, beauty applications, photo-editing software, and platform affordances. Users become accustomed to viewing themselves and others through increasingly metricized forms of evaluation, measuring worth through likes, comments, shares, and visual perfection. The result is an intensified culture of self-monitoring and self-surveillance.

The discussion of the "beauty industry on the phone" (p. 74) effectively extends Gill's earlier work on postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2007). Gill argues that contemporary smartphones function as portable beauty industries, constantly encouraging users to optimize and improve themselves. Beauty apps, filters, and editing tools normalize the idea that imperfections should be corrected and deficiencies fixed. The body becomes an ongoing project requiring continuous monitoring and improvement, reflecting broader dynamics of postfeminist and neoliberal femininity (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2015). Participants frequently express the feeling that the unfiltered self is somehow inadequate. With the growing accessibility of AI-enhanced editing

technologies, these pressures are likely to intensify further. The book raises important questions about what is excluded, erased, or rendered invisible when perfection becomes the dominant aesthetic ideal.

The book uses intersectionality framework as an analytical tool. Gill consistently demonstrates that experiences of judgment and perfection are shaped by race, class, sexuality, disability, body size, and health status. Participants discuss the dominance of white beauty ideals, the marginalization of disabled bodies, the underrepresentation of working-class experiences, and the racialized sexualization of Black women. By foregrounding these inequalities, Gill avoids universalizing young women's experiences and instead situates platform culture within broader structures of social power. Importantly, participants are not portrayed as passive recipients of these norms. Many display a sophisticated awareness of how systems of privilege and exclusion operate online and actively critique the standards they feel pressured to meet.

In this sense, the book captures the duality of participants' experiences. The author successfully mirrors the contradictions that characterize social media engagement. Alongside narratives of anxiety, self-surveillance, and fear of judgment are stories of creativity, friendship, support, and connection. Participants often recognize the unrealistic nature of dominant beauty ideals and consumerist values while nevertheless struggling to escape their influence. Gill also emphasizes moments of resistance and what she terms "quiet refusal" (p. 24), demonstrating that dominant norms are neither universally accepted nor uncontested. Alternative communities, feminist critiques, LGBTQ+ networks, and supportive online spaces reveal the possibility of challenging dominant ideals rather than merely reproducing them.

If the book has a limitation, it lies in its relatively limited engagement with platform governance and political economy. While Gill provides a sophisticated account of lived experience, a more sustained analysis of algorithmic systems, platform ownership, and the economic structures shaping visibility would have strengthened the discussion. Given the growing influence of recommendation algorithms and data-driven platform governance, greater attention to these structural dimensions would have complemented the book's rich analysis of everyday experience.

Ultimately, *Perfect: Feeling Judged on Social Media* is not simply a book about social media. It is a book about contemporary subjectivity under conditions of platform capitalism. By centering affect, embodiment, and lived experience, Gill offers a sophisticated account of how young women navigate the contradictory demands of perfection, authenticity, visibility, and belonging. The book's greatest achievement lies in its refusal of simplistic conclusions. Rather than asking whether social media is inherently good or bad, Gill demonstrates that young people's experiences are fundamentally ambivalent—marked simultaneously by pleasure and pain, agency and constraint, critique and participation. As such, the book makes an important contribution to media and communication studies, feminist scholarship, sociology, and digital culture studies, and will be of considerable interest to scholars seeking to understand the emotional and social complexities of platform-mediated life.

References

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- McRobbie, A. (2015). Notes on the perfect: Competitive femininity in neoliberal times. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30(83), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2015.1011485>