



## Neoliberal and postfeminist intensification of gynaeoptic surveillance on beauty standards and the gendered female gaze

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This contribution explores how neoliberal and postfeminist values have caused surveillance to intensify into a gendered female gaze where women watch other women and face pressure to compete with themselves and one another to achieve societal beauty standards. Due to advances in technology and the wider use of social media sites, women are constantly exposed to one another meaning the competition to reach beauty ideals is ever-growing. Gill (2007: 163) argues that postfeminist and neoliberal values can be seen to interchange as 'an autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism'. Against this context, this critical reflection will also examine the negative consequences of the constant surveillance and expectations for women to strive to become better versions of themselves by drawing on Walker et al. (2019) that it often leads to issues surrounding body image, body dysmorphia and cosmetic surgery, thus leaving us to question how much free choice women really have in modern society.

Winch (2019) suggests that neither panoptic nor synoptic forms of surveillance accurately explain modern day surveillance as the main form of surveillance is now focused on women. Wider access to media and photographic applications such as *Instagram* and *Facebook* have incited women to surveil other women's bodies, creating

tightly bound gendered networks where women can gaze and be gazed upon (Gill, 2019). This has been referred to as gynaeoptic surveillance and explains the way contemporary media culture allows women to compare differences in appearance surrounding weight, facial features and skin texture and compete with one another to reach societal beauty standards (Elias et al., 2017). Winch's (2019) notion of scopophilic surveillance explains the way women judge one another through a range of comparative and competitive gazes, such as desirability and hostility. This is used as a way to both appreciate and attack other women in a form of 'intimate homosocial policing' (Gill, 2019: 21).



Living in a neoliberal society means every citizen is an agent of their own destiny and particular mindsets and attitudes are deemed to be more or less valuable (Gill and Scharff, 2013), the ideal neoliberal citizen is someone who values self-discipline and self-transformation and is expected to interpret their

individual biographies 'in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice' (Gill and Scharff, 2013: 6). Stable self-identity, Gill and Scharff (2013) argue, no longer derives from a person's position in the social structure and is now ground in the body as individuals become preoccupied with themselves in order to be valued and gain capital. Gynaeoptic forms of surveillance can be seen to reflect neoliberal values of entrepreneurial selfhood as these subjects relate to themselves as if they were a business as they are constantly self-regulating, thereby encouraging women to focus



on themselves makes it easier to circulate and sell them in the marketplace.

To gain capital in modern society, the way a woman presents herself and especially her body is important as this allows her to be marketised and consumed by others (Scharff, 2016), benefitting neoliberalism which is driven by material well-being and profit accumulation (Romstein, 2017). The self-verification theory suggests that advances in technology allow women to gain visual capital as they now have a greater ability to receive feedback on images they post of themselves through likes, comments and shares across social media platforms.

However, for those who do not meet the beauty standard, this only leads to constant seeking of validation and comparison between themselves and others. Neoliberalism has been critiqued for causing depression and anxiety amongst its subjects for the constraints placed on its values to self-transform and the blaming of the individual, rather than society, if they fail to do so (Wineguard and Wineguard, 2011). Khanna and Sharma (2017) found that young women who spend the most time on *Facebook* are more likely to suffer from self-hate and have an increased want to lose weight.

Coerced forms of surveillance such as biometric monitoring are used to control populations by creating gendered, racialised, able and disabled bodies through digital means, placing individuals into categories and suggesting the way they should aim to look. Female surveillance can therefore be seen as a neoliberal practice as young women, in particular, are ideal subjects of neoliberalism as they face the most pressure on their appearance and self-transformation in order to gain capital in society (Gill and Scharff, 2013). Gill (2019: 14) contends that 'the surveillance of women's bodies

constitutes the largest type of media content across all genres and media forms'. This leads to women becoming obsessed with self-presentation and measuring the self by constantly judging and comparing one another's appearances in an attempt to reach beauty ideals.

The desire to fit into modern neoliberal culture in fear they may be socially excluded if not means women submit themselves to gynaeoptic forms of surveillance, where they face direct objectification as they are valued predominantly based upon their appearance, resulting in appearance changing strategies due to inability for everyone to reach beauty ideals. This reflects neoliberal attitudes regarding citizens being the agents of their own destiny, which in this case unfolds as changing one's appearance to reach societal beauty standards.

However, due to applications that allow women to edit the shape, complexion and overall appearance of their face and body, which creates an unrealistic beauty ideal, it can be argued that this cannot usually be

obtained without surgical treatments (de Vries et al., 2014). Women face huge pressures to produce the desired physical form but not all have the capabilities of doing so. Critical Race Theory argues that not all women are able to reach these beauty ideals, depending on their skin colour, weight and whether they have disabled/able bodies (Riley et al, 2017). A woman who is highly invested in her appearance may therefore have a greater desire to undergo cosmetic surgery.

This shows that although in a neoliberal and postfeminist society women are given the option for choice, freedom and empowerment, not all women have this option as they are bound by constant surveillance, pressure to conform to





beauty ideals they cannot reach and scrutiny for their failure to self-transform and reach them. McRobbie (in Gill, 2019) argues that there is too much pressure on girls to recognise themselves as successful and empowered without much thought to the self-scrutiny they experience when surveilling themselves in comparison to other women and the feeling of failure for those who cannot meet the beauty standards they see.

Rather than placing the blame on society for exerting this pressure on women, the individual is held accountable for failing to conform to neoliberal values and is incited to self-transform to meet societal beauty standards. This alongside the gendered nature of surveillance, which exposes women to further comparison and self-scrutiny, causes risks. The intensified use of social media has been related to wider body image concerns and eating disorders (Walker et al., 2019). Brown and Tiggemann (in Walker et al., 2019) found that viewing pictures of attractive peers on *Instagram* has a negative effect on a woman's mood and body image, suggesting that high usage of photographic media can be harmful for certain individuals regarding their mental health, including lowered self-esteem and increased risk of anxiety and depression.

The exposure to unrealistic beauty ideals and constant surveillance of the self and of other women also results in an increasing number of young girls forming Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), due to their rigid beliefs regarding the way they should look which leads to negative self-evaluation and low self-esteem. BDD has consistently been found to be related to the desire to undergo cosmetic surgery and among individuals who seek cosmetic enhancements, it is estimated that 7% to 15% have the condition (Walker et al., 2019). Individuals with BDD who

engage in cosmetic surgery as a way to treat the condition often display negative outcomes, such as being dissatisfied with the result of the surgery, resulting in higher levels of mental health issues and low self-esteem (Mulken et al. 2012).

This shows that gynaoptic surveillance leads to women forming concerns around their body image



and, due to constant pressure to self-transform, striving to meet the beauty ideals they see across social media platforms through cosmetic surgery. However, this neoliberal incitement to strive for better is never ending and women are still valued based upon how they look, meaning even when they undergo surgery they are never fully satisfied with

their appearance. This leads to further self-scrutiny and feelings of low self-esteem.

This reflection has explained that wider access to photographic technology and social media allows women to observe one another through comparative and competitive gazes in an attempt to reach societal beauty ideals. This is because neoliberal and postfeminist values encourage individuals to be self-regulating, free to make their own choices and strive to be better versions of themselves.

However, it has also argued that even when beauty practices are seemingly freely chosen, values around a woman's appearance are subject to profound discipline and regulation (Gill, 2019), leading us to question how free and empowered women really are. Practices of surveillance such as gynaoptic surveillance only really expose women to become subject to particular kinds of observation and scrutiny and McRobbie argues that women experience a 'double entanglement' in society as they are promised fluidity, freedom and empowerment in an exchange for self-transformation and reflection (Gill, 2019: 8).



With this pressure comes risk, as due to neoliberal values blaming the individual for their own failure to conform, women who are incapable of reaching beauty ideals develop feelings of low self-esteem, self-hate and body image issues such as BDD, leading them into a life of cosmetic surgery in desperation to meet societal values. This leaves us to question whether women are actually ever free from the constraints of surveillance, beauty ideals and the values of a neoliberal and postfeminist society.

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### Pictures:

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