

The Surveillance of Women in Contemporary Society: Are today's standards of surveillance endangering young girls?

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Surveillance is defined as the act of observing with regard to one's personal safety, power, and relationships; to watch over, in a general sense (Peterson, 2012). The term implies efforts to enact a sense of control over personal data, insinuating a use of power or influence over another person (Duffy and Chan, 2018). As members of a so-called advanced society, we are exposed to more surveillance than has ever been known before. What was once originally a process of human behaviour, simply to watch, has advanced into complex intelligence tools which were initially a luxury to the most noble and wealthy divisions of the upper class.

Since this, we have seen mass booms in the development of surveillance technologies from CCTV, ring doorbells, body scanners to sophisticated sensors, computer software, and databases (Peterson, 2012). Though there is a vast range of modern forms of surveillance in society as we know it today, each one just as important as the other in our interpretation of the contemporary world. Throughout this reflection I will be focusing on social media and how its intense surveillance of women is endangering generations of young girls that are growing up in this world and those yet to come.

Social media is a new form of surveillance with its main growth taking place within the last decade. It

provides a platform where a range of different groups - from individuals to institutions to businesses to police - are able to converge and interact on a level of which has never been possible before now (Trottier, 2012).

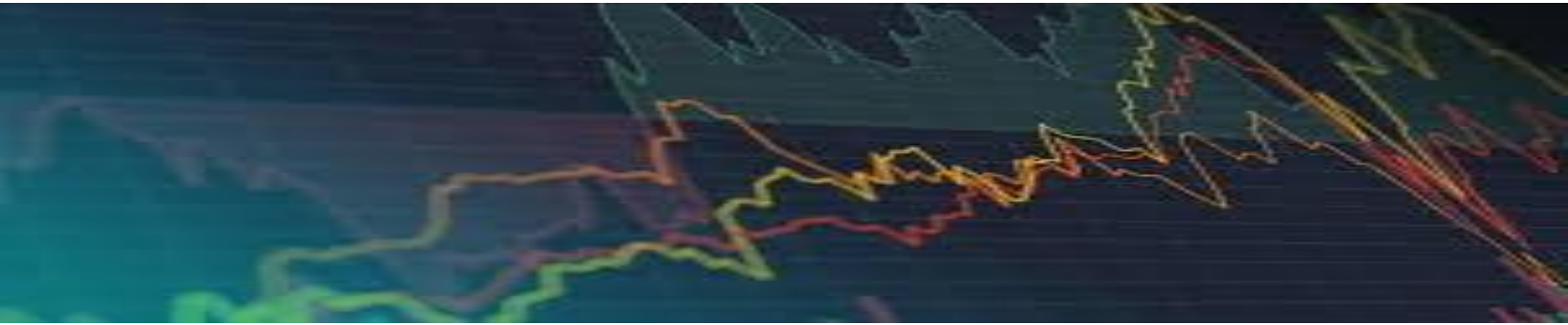
While on the surface level, this can be seen as a form of connectedness and interrelatedness between friends and family across vast distances through communication apps such as *Snapchat* or sharing

personal photos and daily updates on platforms like *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and *Twitter*, there is a deeper side to this substantial human activity with its over 1.19 billion daily users all becoming unknowing subjects of data collection and extreme observation at

the hands of social media providers as well as agencies and corporations involved in this process (Brown, 2014).

This is known as routine surveillance, in which social life is organised around the information that is gathered from its members; what we buy, our tastes, lifestyles, our spending capacities, all of these things must be thoroughly observed in order to arrange our complex modern world (Webster, 2006). However, it is not just the higher powers in this apparent hierarchy that engage in this practice of surveillance, but all of us individuals as members of an information society. Lyon suggests that we are now





living in a “surveillance culture” in which surveillance becomes a new way of life that we all take part in, which has been “mediated by increasingly fast and new powerful technologies” now heavily incorporated into our everyday lives through social media engagement, information infrastructures, and our reliance on the digital (2017: p.826). Webster argues that as a society we have become compliant with widespread surveillance through the normalisation of its different aspects, we are now heavily dependent on social media and mobile phone entertainment to fill up our leisure time, with some claiming they now “live on the Internet” (Lyon, 2017: p.829).

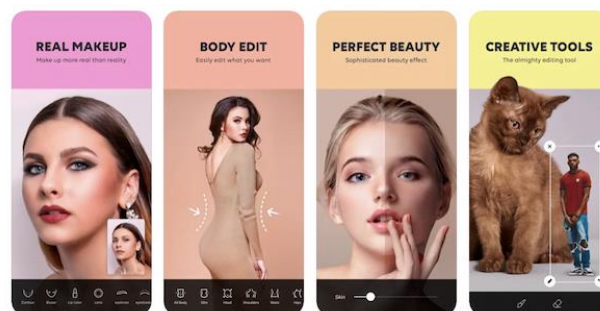
The ways in which we use social media now have contributed to imaginaries and practices of surveillance which entail how people expect and engage with the notion of surveillance and activities regarding being surveilled or taking part in the surveillance themselves (Duffy and Chan, 2018). Not only is this the act of surveilling others, but through social media individuals also push the process onto themselves. Duffy and Chan find that in efforts to maintain separate identities individuals use a variety of self-surveilling practices including adjusting privacy settings (to manage their audience), platform-specific presentations (to manage their content), and the use of different aliases (to control the connection to their own identity) (2018).

This refers to the concept of synopticism in which represents a “situation where a large number focuses on something which is condensed”, while this can be significant to many areas of life since our transition into modernity it characterises societies current obsession with social media well stating we now live in a “viewer society” (Mathieson, 2010; p.510). Through social media, not

only are we constantly viewing others, but also working on how other people are going to view us.

In contemporary society, we have seen a wide range of socio-economic changes - in the last few decades especially - our social life is no longer predictable and stable as it once was, Lash and Urry even go as far to suggest that all that was solid about our society: organised capitalism, class, and collectivity has melted into air (in Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). Due to our new and diverse lifestyles and ways of being, the significance of traditional constraints, such as religion, class, and gender has diminished and these boundaries are rejected.

This becomes a source of stress and anxiety due to the increased uncertainty about where to turn to when forming one's own identity (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). As a consequence of the lack of structural sources, people in today's society turn towards social media and those they see on there in order to aid their “identity work” (Brown, 2014; p.2). This is particularly prevalent for women and young girls who are constantly faced with a number of issues surrounding mass media, social media, and beauty culture and the ways in which women are presented within these platforms.



Due to its strong hold over society through mass outlets like television, magazines, and advertising, the media has a lot of power in the way it conveys traditional beauty through body type, facial features, and hair amongst other characteristics (Mills et al, 2017). This in turn

plays a role in how individuals form their self-image by “reflecting what people consider to be beautiful” (Mills et al, 2017; p.145).

By constantly promoting young and thin women throughout the media it suggests to women and girls that this is what they must look like in order to be considered attractive (Mills et al, 2017). This is also carried out by “beautification” apps, which edit or enhance your photos to give you a new smile with whiter teeth, a reshaped nose, brightened blemish-free skin, or to appear a few pounds skinner (Elias and Gill, 2017; p60).

Not only is it the media itself creating these unhealthy beauty standards, but women themselves who partake in sexualised labour on social media platforms as what people call “influencers”; for them their body plays a critical role in their aim to gain capital in what Dreten et al call an “attention economy” through the monetization of likes and follows (2020; p.42). These women create presentations of themselves based on conforming to Western, heteronormative ideals of femininity (Dreten et al, 2020); an act of entrepreneurial femininity, whereby women display themselves as a brand to be consumed online (Duffy and Hund, 2015).

According to Elias and Gill (2017), all of these surveillance measures partake in the intense beauty culture standards of society today as well as others including women's magazines, celebrity culture, cosmetics companies, and the fashion industry, and therefore have an undeniable involvement in the effect this has on the self-image and body dissatisfaction of women and young girls aiming to achieve these societal ideals (Mills et al, 2017).

Applying Lash’s notion, I would argue this in turn creates a society of what he calls “reflexive winners

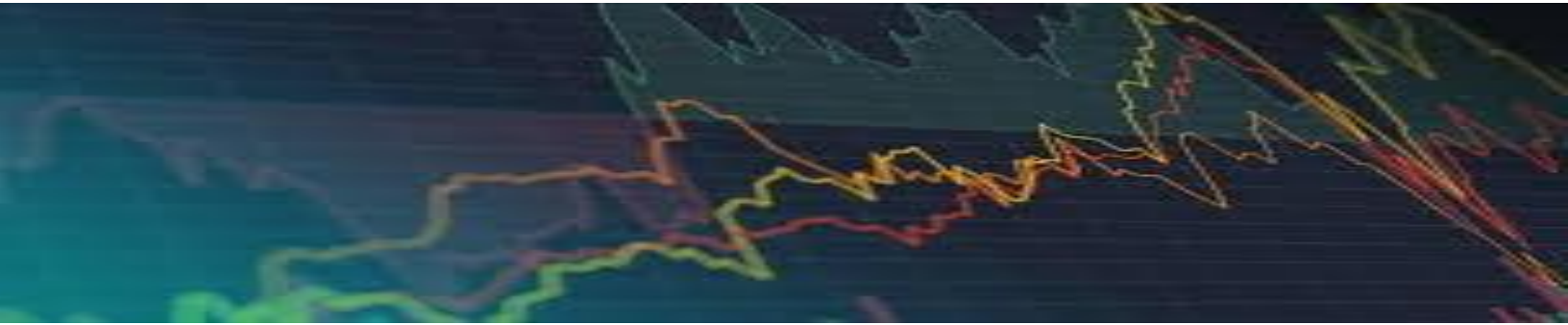
and losers” (cited in Adams, 2006; p.521), in which women are using their newfound freedom in a postmodern world to liberate themselves on social media; yet, young girls on the opposite end of this spectrum will be subject to intense self-surveillance due to the body ideals created by these influencers. These industries have created a “politics of looking” in which females discuss images of themselves and other women and in so doing this produce new forms of regulation shaping how girls “make sense of themselves as valuable women” (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013 cited in Riley et al, 2015: p.98).

Murray argues that young girls have become consumed with a “troubling consumerist fixation” surrounding self-imaging, of which can be seen through the superficiality of social media selfies and media craze (2015: p.490). Their heavy reliance on social media influence their own perceptions of body image leading to an internalisation of Western thinness as beauty and the prioritisation of physical appearance (Perloff, 2014).



Through mass media, girls are exposed to the ‘perfect body’ – from exposure to *Barbie* dolls to the celebration of “ultra-thin models” in television and advertisements (Perloff, 2014: p.2) - and in late modernity the proliferation of influencers selling their body on social media apps creates further platforms for self-

objectification. This internalisation of appearance value has been linked with greater body dissatisfaction in young females especially, who are more likely to discuss body image ideals (Scully et al, 2020). Body dissatisfaction is one of the major risk factors leading to a number of unhealthy coping behaviours, including clinical eating disorders and chronic dieting (Mills et al, 2017).



This appears alongside a significantly higher level of mental health symptoms in female adolescents with a social media profile, including depressive mood and lower self-esteem (Raudsepp and Kais, 2019).

This critical reflection has explored the growth of social media as a form of surveillance and how this leads to intense methods of self-surveillance in women due to the way it is heavily incorporated in beauty culture and body ideals through different media platforms, apps, and influencers. I concluded by looking into the risks this poses for young girls subject to these standards from adolescence. Social media offers a beneficial platform for women willing to sell their body in return for capital in a patriarchal society, it damages those on the receiving end.

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