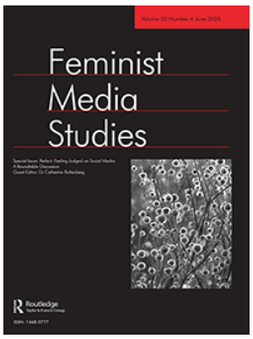

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Behind perfection: daylong obsession, Joy, and torment of social media

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Perfect: Feeling Judged on Social Media is a book that so many young people can relate to. Reading this book is like flipping through a diary co-authored by me and my close friends. We share the highlights of daily life and at the same time, we are under scrutiny.

Quitting social media is not seen as a practical solution for many young people, since it serves as the primary platform for them to get connected and maintain intimacy, especially in a situation when everyone is scattered everywhere. I have no doubt that other readers will share the same feeling. In the book, participants described feeling "jolts of recognition" when they heard Ros Gill talk about the research (p. xii). Ros also mentioned many people said to her, "It's me!" "That's my life you're describing!" Given the powerful resonance of young people's experience with social media, in this review article, first, I explore the new ways of understanding perfection presented in the book. Young women perceive themselves through what Susan Bordo (1993) called a "pedagogy of defect," which facilitates the pursuit of perfection portrayed in the media. Consequently, they undertake unceasing self-scrutiny and self-correction, creating images of physical perfection and exhibiting a level of perfection in their behaviour. I draw parallels with my own research on contemporary Chinese reality dating shows. By means of the pedagogy of femininity, reality TV actively engages in constructing the gender performance of an idealized and eligible dating partner. Ultimately, I advocate for a new feminism that resonates with people's everyday experience, one that is easily accessible via social media and provides opportunities for online feminist activism.

In *Perfect*, Ros argues that perfection encompasses not only physical appearance but also the ideal of perfectness operating across all aspects of life. Research on resistance to socially constructed beauty norms is, today, commonplace in feminist media studies. What struck me is the persistent and increasingly pervasive culture of surveillance focused on physical appearance on social media and its detrimental impact on the wellbeing of young people and their relationships with themselves and others. Particularly concerning is the fact that young women are subjected to what has been described as the "forensic and metric" gaze on social media (p.174). Many also later find themselves internalizing this scrutiny, which often leads to "new ways of seeing" (p. 6). This internalization causes

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individuals to become harshly critical of both their own physical appearance and that of others, perpetuating a cycle of self-doubt and dissatisfaction.

While reading the book, I found myself contemplating the roles of body positivity and the advertising strategy known as femvertising, as well as their reception on social media (Xintong Jia 2022). These concepts intersect with the cultural demand for perfection and the emotionally charged nature of striving for it. I see a clash of competing forces: on one side, the ethos and urgent imperative for diversity and inclusiveness in media representation, while, on the other, the embrace of the hierarchy established by the pursuit of perfection.

As described by Angela McRobbie, perfection functions as a "horizon of expectation" for all women (McRobbie 2015, 3). Presenting a perfect life on social media entails sharing meticulously curated photos and video clips that are deemed instagrammable, showcasing ideal outfits, immaculate makeup, gourmet food, friends, stylish location and venues, while also projecting the "right" attitudes and dispositions. These "right" attitudes include appearing happy, cool, positive, sociable, and relatable. This form of self-representation adheres to elevated regulatory standards, characterized by a uniform modality, and demands considerable mental, material, and temporal investment. It has also transcended the "horizon of expectation" (ibid.) into an interpellation that is hard to resist, almost becoming obligatory. The imperative to portray proper dispositions on social media resonates strongly with the unwritten rules of gendered performance observed in my research on reality dating shows, where dating contestants are anticipated to present themselves as desirable partners by embodying the "right" characters (Jia 2023).

I have been conducting research on the gender representation and audience reception of a reality dating show called *Chinese Dating with the Parents*. Premiering in 2016, the show provides a platform primarily for urban and heterosexual individuals seeking potential partners. As the name implies, candidates bring their parents on set to observe, evaluate, and safeguard the matchmaking process. Female candidates on the show are often characterized by striking figures, higher educational backgrounds, and a willingness to assert their new and independent female identities. Nevertheless, they are often exhorted to transform and upgrade themselves during the matchmaking process to emerge as the "winner" of reality dating shows.

Reality dating shows have established public arenas for scrutinizing people's expectations regarding intimate relationships, particularly through the evaluation of gender performance. These shows inherently provide guidelines for shaping one's sense of self, placing emphasis on the gendered dimension of one's identity. They achieve this through the incorporation the competition and reality game show formats, prompting candidates to compete against each other to emerge victorious. Dating shows also provide guidance on how to present oneself as a perfect dating partner, with advice often coming from both the presenter and the self-proclaimed dating experts.

Reality dating shows convey a pedagogy of femininity by packaging it in the form of a public lecture. Young women are expected to exhibit the appropriate traits, such as confidence, independence, and the ability to thrive in a highly competitive society. Simultaneously, they are compelled to put on the female masquerade, concealing their intellectual prowess, rebellious nature, and assertiveness to appear appealing and approachable to male candidates and their families.

The implicit rules and expectations for young women to present themselves as eligible and flawless dating partners are treated as a moral imperative within the realm of dating TV.

Beyond the social expectation of perfection through media representation, no one can evade the torment inherent in the pursuit of perfection, as evidenced by the vulnerabilities associated with the apprehension of "getting it wrong" on social media. In *Perfect*, instead of suggesting young people quit social media for the sake of their well-being, Ros extends a felt sense of sympathy and understanding towards their experiences of feeling judged, being trolled, and reacting fearfully to making mistakes when posting on social media. In the concluding chapter, Ros notes that there are changes occurring, citing the rapid development of the photo-sharing app BeReal and the rise of TikTok as examples that promote diversity and authenticity in media representation.

Social media provide a space for resistance and opportunities for feminists to engage in collective activism. Recently, a group of female influencers has adopted a novel approach by imitating oily, sleazy, and self-absorbed male personas in everyday life contexts. This satirical tactic aims to push back against the ubiquitous male gaze ingrained in daily life. This performative strategy aligns with the logic of the Boggart-Banishing spell Riddikulus from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, which defeats the Boggart by transforming it into a humorous form, thereby neutralizing its ability to terrorize. Influencer Fang Tou Ming on TikTok is a pioneer of this approach. In one of her videos, she portrays a man stealthily taking photos of women on the subway. Fang Tou Ming's performance is exceptionally vivid, incorporating subtle gestures of touching the genital area and a fleeting glance with a concealed smirk. Audiences note that the video raises awareness of sexual harassment in public sphere and alleviates women's fear of it. Through such acts, social media provides an avenue to convey feminist care and solidarity in a manner that is both profound and humorous. These new forms of mediated feminism have become integrated into daily social media use; instead of being confined to gender studies classrooms, they are tailored to be media-friendly and readily accessible to young people.

Ros writes that in relation to social media, "young women [are] far from passive, but [are] involved in what Lauren Berlant (2013) has called 'the defensive, inventive and adaptive activity of getting by' in a world not of their making" (p. 187). It is heartening to note that participants in *Perfect* describe their involvement in the research on young people's lives on social media as "like a detox" (p. 182), as they could openly discuss challenging issues and experiences. This highlights the ongoing need for further feminist media studies.

Perfect provides a timely opportunity for us to engage in intimate conversations about contemporary social media experiences. I believe that this book has the potential to catalyze a transformation within digital culture, considering the commonality of these experiences with social media. It also holds the potential to foster connections, evoke emotions, and shape a new reality.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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