

The Impact of Modern Media on Body Image and Self-Perception in Young Women

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Saturday 28th December 2025

1. Introduction

Body image is not formed in isolation but is socially and culturally produced. For young women, modern media acts as a dominant source where ideals of beauty, desirability, and femininity are constructed and then reinforced. The rise of image-based platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and even online pornography, has caused the female body to become increasingly commodified and standardised (Gill, 2007).

In this paper, I aim to explore how modern media impacts young women's self-perception, with two major focus points: the normalisation of cosmetic procedures and the pervasive influence of pornographic imagery. From a feminist perspective, these trends are not neutral expressions of choice but are embedded in power structures that privilege male desire, capitalist profit, and visual control over women's bodies. This research supports drawing studies rooted in feminism by providing a theoretical foundation for visual resistance to these norms.

2. Feminist Theoretical Framework

Feminist scholars have long argued that women's bodies are sites of social control. Berger's (1972) assertion that "men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at" remains central to understanding and comprehending contemporary media. This internalisation of the gaze is further developed in Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze, which positions women as objects for visual consumption rather than autonomous subjects. This theory of the male gaze has also become a weaponised viral trend on platforms such as TikTok in order to further push the 'ideal look' onto young women and girls.

Objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) explains how repeated exposure to sexualised and idealised imagery encourages women to view their bodies from an external perspective rather than an inner body one. In visual culture, these effects are intensified by constant comparison and algorithmic reinforcement of narrow, unnatural and unrealistic beauty ideals.

3. Social Media and the Illusion of Choice

Social media platforms promote an aesthetic that appears diverse and yet it is highly regulated and built upon a foundation of catering to the male gaze. While it may be framed as empowering spaces of self-expression, these platforms often reward conformity to specific

body standards: slim yet curvaceous, youthful, hairless, and sexually appealing (Duffy and Hund, 2015).

Filters, editing tools, and influencer culture blur the line between reality and fabrication, and this has only worsened with the rise of AI generated material in everyday media. Research indicates that exposure to edited images correlates with increased body dissatisfaction and appearance comparison among young women (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). The feminist concern here is not merely representation, but how these images discipline women into constant self-surveillance under the guise of empowerment.

4. Normalisation of Cosmetic Procedures

The increasing visibility of cosmetic procedures such as surgical enhancement, and “preventative” treatments has shifted cultural expectations of the female body. Procedures are often presented on social media as routine self-care, minimising medical risk and psychological consequences (Elias and Gill, 2018).

This normalisation reinforces the idea that the natural female body is inadequate and in need of correction as it is not considered up to par or desirable in its raw and natural form. The rhetoric of “choice” obscures structural pressures that make opting out socially costly. Young women may feel compelled to alter their appearance to remain competitive in social, romantic, and even professional structures.

Studies have also linked cosmetic procedure normalisation to an increase in body dissatisfaction and internalised appearance ideals, especially among younger women (Tiggemann and Anderberg, 2020). The body becomes a perpetual project rather than a lived experience, reinforcing disconnection and shame in those not willing to conform.

5. Pornographic Media and Sexualised Body Ideals

Pornographic media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of women’s bodies and sexuality. Mainstream pornography frequently presents a narrow, highly stylised version of femininity characterised by exaggerated physical traits and performative sexuality (Dworkin, 1981; Jensen, 2007).

For young women, exposure to these images, whether directly or indirectly, can influence expectations of how their bodies should look and function. Research suggests that internalisation of pornographic ideals is associated with increased body monitoring, reduced sexual self-esteem, and pressure to conform to unrealistic standards (Sun et al., 2016).

Feminist critics argue that pornography operates within a system that prioritises male pleasure and consumption, often reducing women to interchangeable visual commodities. Even when framed as consensual or empowering, the dominant aesthetics remain rooted in objectification and bodily control (Gill, 2012). Even the material framing the woman as the

partner in the dominant position is often catered to male pleasure and fetishes where the ultimate goal is still the pleasure and satisfaction of the male.

6. Psychological and Social Consequences

The cumulative impact of modern media contributes to a fragmented sense of self meaning that young women may experience their bodies as objects to be perfected rather than integral to their identity. This disembodiment is linked to anxiety, depression, disordered eating, and reduced self-worth (Grabe, Ward and Hyde, 2008).

These outcomes are not individual failures but predictable responses to sustained exposure to oppressive visual systems during the major developmental stages of childhood and adolescence. The harm lies not only in individual images but in their repetition, normalisation, and cultural authority.

7. Implications for Feminist Art Practice

Feminist artists have historically challenged dominant representations of the female body by foregrounding imperfection, vulnerability, and lived experience. Artists such as Tracy Emin, Vanessa Raw and Marine Abramovic disrupt idealised imagery and reclaim bodily agency through confrontation and critique.

In drawing practice, resisting polished aesthetics and embracing raw, expressive marks can function as a political act. By exposing distortion, repetition, and fragmentation, feminist drawing can visualise the psychological impact of media and offer alternative ways of seeing the body beyond consumption by showcasing natural bodies which are rejected by the ideal standards.

8. Conclusion

Modern media significantly shapes body image and self-perception in young women through the normalisation of cosmetic modification and the pervasive influence of pornographic aesthetics and materials. These forces operate within a patriarchal visual economy that prioritises control, profit, and objectification over wellbeing, a repeating theme in media and only growing ever stronger.

A feminist analysis reveals that what is often framed as personal choice is deeply structured by social power. For fine art practitioners, understanding these dynamics enables the creation of work that not only reflects personal experience but also challenges oppressive visual norms. Through critical engagement and visual resistance, feminist art can reclaim the body as a site of agency rather than surveillance.

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