

# Book Reviews



# Social Media and New Femininities

## Review of *Digital Femininities: The Gendered Construction of Cultural and Political Identities Online* by Frankie Rogan, London: Routledge, 2022

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In *Digital Femininities: The Gendered Construction of Cultural and Political Identities Online*, Frankie Rogan offers a thoughtful consideration of the gendered nature of digital practices and social media. As Rogan argues, social media is often discursively imagined as “the ‘domain of the young’ but, more specifically, the domain of the young woman.”<sup>1</sup> The cultural construction of social media is not only young but also feminized. The book’s central lines of analysis begin with: How do social media platforms participate in the production and maintenance of young women’s identities? How do we understand the ambivalences in girls’ engagements with digital spaces, which simultaneously presents users with incitement toward the social “(self-)surveillance and (self-)regulation” of their bodies and peers, and also with opportunities for political education, organizing, and action?<sup>2</sup>

Drawing from focus group discussions with young women in the United Kingdom between the ages of twelve and eighteen, Rogan explores these questions and analyzes how gender and youth inflect how young women navigate digital spaces. By synthesizing her focus group data with theoretical

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1. Frankie Rogan, *Digital Femininities: The Gendered Construction of Cultural and Political Identities Online* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2022), 7.

2. Rogan, *Digital Femininities*, 2.

considerations of postfeminism and neoliberalism, Rogan provides both granular and wide-ranging insights into how digital platforms cooperate in the construction of new femininities for young people. Rogan lets her focus group discussions guide her analysis, emphasizing the digital spaces and platforms that “emerged as particularly prevalent in discussions with participants: namely, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, YouTube and Twitter.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout *Digital Femininities*, Rogan calls attention to how these digital platforms function as new, highly gendered, and age-based grounds upon which to produce, perform, and adjust new (media) femininities.

The first half of *Digital Femininities* sets up a theoretical foundation that supports the analysis of focus group data that makes up the second half of the book. Drawing from scholars like Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill, chapter 2 locates Rogan’s study within larger conversations about neoliberalism and postfeminism, which serve as the book’s “cultural and political backdrops.”<sup>4</sup> Rogan highlights how neoliberalism “operates as a social and cultural sensibility at the level of the everyday” to shape gender identities and politics.<sup>5</sup> Rogan then turns to the “heavily gendered” nature of the cultural construction of “young millennials in a digital age” within these frameworks in chapter 3.<sup>6</sup> Foregrounding questions regarding visibility and the blurring of the boundaries of public and private, chapter 3 explores how youth and femininity figure into the gendered nature of digital worlds. Chapter 4 narrows the scope further, examining “how the rise of digital cultures has transformed traditional understandings of engagement and activism” in politics.<sup>7</sup> Contrasting with the “either/or” assumptions that insist that young women either use digital spaces “to post selfies and engage in cultural communities

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3. Rogan, 6.

4. Rogan, 44.

5. Rogan, 21.

6. Rogan, 10.

7. Rogan, 10.

or they use it to engage in new forms of activism and political communities,”<sup>8</sup> Rogan points to the ways that these spheres are intertwined.

Together, chapters 2, 3, and 4 equip readers to understand Rogan’s focus group data within the sociocultural contexts of postfeminism and neoliberalism in relation to contemporary constructions of youth and femininity in a digital age and in relation to British political culture and action. Following the robust consideration of the scholarly and cultural conditions from which her study emerged, Rogan is able to situate her conversations with British teenagers in the 2010s in relation to larger questions of how cultural and political identities are made and remade online.

The second half of *Digital Femininities*, consisting of chapters 5 through 8, actualizes Rogan’s claim that the everyday online practices of young women and girls transcend and complicate understandings of social media as a monolith that can only be a “handmaiden of neoliberal governmentality.”<sup>9</sup> These chapters also disrupt binary assumptions that imagine social media as unilaterally good or bad, useful or useless. Each chapter highlights a different aspect of young women’s discussions of their interactions with digital media spaces, from surveillance, to beauty, to celebrity and influencers, to politics and activism.

Throughout, Rogan adeptly navigates a wealth of fascinating focus group interviews. She takes her subjects’ perspectives seriously, and it is clear from both the discussion excerpts and her analysis that she created a space for the girls and young women to speak candidly about their feelings and experiences. Rogan asserts that using focus groups as a research method is well-suited for feminist analysis that features young participants, and is also an innovative approach to understanding digital cultures because of the social network “group effect” of focus groups and because the focus group format is “traditionally less controlled and less dominated by the researcher

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8. Rogan, 85.

9. Rogan, 74.

than individual interviews.”<sup>10</sup> In her analysis, Rogan points out moments of contradiction, ambivalence, and ambiguity within her participants’ accounts of their experiences.

In chapter 5, for example, Rogan calls attention to a moment in which a participant expresses concern that social media creates a situation in which personal information is “just out there” for “everyone [to] know about it in an instant.”<sup>11</sup> For Rogan, this moment illustrates how young women apprehend the ways digital cultures rework privacy and intimacy: “She suggested that social media compromises the possibility for private intimate relationships, believing instead that such intimacy almost immediately becomes public property.”<sup>12</sup> Further, Rogan highlights how digital platforms alter the “nature of public/private space” while also acknowledging that “digital space can become structured by gender in much the same way as the material world” as reworked understandings of privacy and intimacy may contribute to the surveillance and regulation of young women’s bodies and sexuality.<sup>13</sup>

Chapter 6 extends Rogan’s analysis of social media platforms in relation to ideas of beauty, perfection, and “appropriate” femininity. For Rogan’s participants, “being attractive was almost unanimously believed to be the most important and desirable trait for women to have in online contexts,” indicating “the centrality of the body and projects of self amongst participants and how these projects are often informed by wider discourses of both ‘respectable’ femininity and celebrity culture.”<sup>14</sup> Rogan details how her participants continually expressed a desire for being perceived as attractive online and yet critiqued “other girls” who sought approval too explicitly. Rogan also indicates the importance of platform affordances, such as likes and comments, and celebrity cultures to the construction of socially sanctioned beauty and femininity.

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10. Rogan, 8, 9.

11. Rogan, 106.

12. Rogan, 106.

13. Rogan, 98, 107.

14. Rogan, 118.

Rogan expands on the relevance of celebrity for digital femininities in chapter 7, which considers the role of influencers, particularly Instagram fitness influencers and YouTube beauty/lifestyle vloggers, in shaping participants' understanding of themselves. These digital microcelebrities often express postfeminist, neoliberal ideology in suggesting that "perfect" femininity can be achieved through "hard work" and/or consumerism. However, even as Rogan's participants expressed "internalised messages of postfeminism and neoliberal femininity," they also "offered interesting critiques of these constructions of femininity, particularly in relation to consumer culture."<sup>15</sup> In this regard they exemplify Rogan's critiques of binary understandings of how young people relate to social media.

Continuing to consider how young women experience the online constructions of gender in complex and ambivalent ways, chapter 8 turns to questions of politics. Rogan illustrates that although young people are stereotyped as politically passive or apathetic, her participants demonstrated investment in a variety of political issues. She writes that "many of them used social media, at least in some ways, for political purposes," even as "very few of them conceptualised their actions or behaviours online as necessarily 'political,' which is a word they tended to reject as being largely irrelevant to them, their lives and their concerns."<sup>16</sup> Rogan's analysis of how young people use social media for political conversation, organizing, and education, despite their rejection of "traditional political spaces and traditional political broadcast," is especially illuminating for scholars interested in young people's political activity online.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, *Digital Femininities* provides a compelling investigation into how young women's identities are shaped by and through social media and will appeal especially to scholars interested in the intersections of digital cultures, gender, and age. Further, the book models how focus group data

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15. Rogan, 156.

16. Rogan, 165.

17. Rogan, 167.

coming out of a specific time and place can nevertheless provide useful, portable insight into the sociocultural workings of digital spaces more broadly. *Digital Femininities* represents a valuable contribution to the ongoing conversation about how social media participates in the production and maintenance of sociocultural identities.