

WOMEN'S IMAGES IN DIGITAL VISUAL CULTURE: EVERYDAY AESTHETICS AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

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Abstract: This article investigates the dynamics of women's images within digital visual culture, focusing on how everyday aesthetics intersect with the politics of representation across social media platforms. Drawing on theories of cultural capital, feminist media studies, and digital sociology, the study analyzes women's self-representations on Instagram, Xiaohongshu, and TikTok through a combination of visual analysis, narrative interpretation, and critical cultural theory. The findings reveal three interrelated dimensions. First, everyday aesthetics, embodied in practices such as selfies, lifestyle photography, and micro-videos, function as strategies of self-branding and the accumulation of lifestyle capital, thereby linking personal expression to broader consumerist and aspirational discourses. Second, the politics of representation is shaped by algorithmic visibility, platform governance, and cultural contexts, which reinforce gendered stereotypes, body norms, and intersectional inequalities, while also enabling spaces of contestation. Third, comparative case studies demonstrate platform-specific logics: Instagram promotes curated cosmopolitan femininity, Xiaohongshu emphasizes middle-class refinement, and TikTok fosters grassroots counter-narratives that challenge dominant norms. Together, these insights highlight the tensions between conformity and resistance in women's digital self-representation. By situating women's everyday images within debates on aesthetics, identity, and power, this study contributes to understanding digital visual culture as a plural and contested field, rather than a homogeneous space of representation. The research underscores the importance of critically examining both commercialized and grassroots practices to better understand the evolving landscape of gendered digital visibility.

Keywords: Women's images, Digital visual culture, Everyday aesthetics, Representation politics, Social media, Self-branding

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital visual culture marks a profound transformation in how people create, consume, and interact with images in contemporary society. Accelerated by the rapid development of social media platforms, digital imaging technologies, and artificial intelligence (AI)-generated visuals, this phenomenon reshapes artistic expression, everyday communication, and social relationships. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have established spaces where visual content dominates, democratizing creativity by enabling anyone to become a content creator (Mironica et al., 2024). At the same time, advancements in image-editing tools, short-video platforms, and livestreaming practices have shifted

cultural consumption patterns toward immediacy, participation, and interactivity (Chateau, 2023). Alongside these trends, AI-generated imagery, powered by algorithms such as generative adversarial networks (GANs), has challenged long-held assumptions about originality, authorship, and aesthetics, further complicating the meaning of visual culture in the digital age (Gotthardt et al., 2023).

Within this broader digital ecology, women's images occupy a central role in both everyday aesthetics and the politics of representation. The portrayal of women in digital spaces reflects complex dynamics of identity construction, self-expression, and sociopolitical engagement. On one hand, digital platforms empower women to actively participate in shaping their own narratives, breaking away from traditional media stereotypes and expanding the diversity of female representation (Zhao & Abidin, 2023). On the other hand, these images remain deeply entangled with commercialization, algorithmic curation, and cultural norms that perpetuate "idealized" standards of femininity. Such tensions often subject women to continuous cycles of self-presentation, comparison, and scrutiny, raising questions about body image, authenticity, and psychological well-being (Coy-Dibley, 2016; Sharma et al., 2024). Beyond aesthetics, women's images also play a pivotal role in digital activism and social movements. Feminist and political campaigns, such as MeToo, have harnessed the power of visual storytelling to challenge gender discrimination, amplify marginalized voices, and reshape public discourse (Ahlawat, 2022; Cheng & Marzuki, 2023).

This article investigates how women's images in digital environments embody both everyday aesthetics and the politics of representation. It highlights the ways in which female self-presentation, mediated by digital technologies, reflects and reconfigures social expectations, gender norms, and power relations. By situating women's images within the interplay of visual culture, identity politics, and technological mediation, the study aims to unpack the opportunities and challenges that digital platforms present for female expression and visibility. Ultimately, this analysis seeks to illuminate how the aesthetics of everyday life intersect with struggles over representation, offering insight into the broader cultural and political significance of women's images in the digital age.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Visual Culture Studies: Nicholas Mirzoeff and the Politics of Visibility

Visual Culture Studies offers a critical lens for understanding how images interact with power, identity, and social structures. Nicholas Mirzoeff (2012) argues that visual culture is not merely the study of images but the exploration of how they operate within political, social, and historical contexts. Central to his framework is the concept of visibility, which highlights the ways in which marginalized groups are systematically excluded from representation, thereby reinforcing social hierarchies (Yekani, 2022). Visual culture thus becomes a contested site where power relations are both maintained and challenged. Furthermore, Gillian Rose (2012) emphasizes that images function as vehicles of ideology, shaping collective perceptions of identity and authority. Building on these insights, this study recognizes that women's images in digital culture cannot be divorced from questions of power, visibility, and resistance. Visual culture thus provides the foundation for analyzing how women's self-representation engages with—or resists—the hegemonic structures embedded in digital platforms.

2.2 Feminist Visual Theory: From the Male Gaze to Intersectionality

Feminist critiques of visual culture deepen this analysis by situating women's images within the dynamics of gender and power. Laura Mulvey's seminal theory of the male gaze (1975/2009) demonstrated how cinematic representation often objectifies women, positioning them as passive objects of male desire (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017; Nash, 2015). While Mulvey's framework exposed the patriarchal underpinnings of visual representation, subsequent scholarship has expanded the critique

through intersectionality. Originating from Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) work, intersectionality emphasizes the overlapping dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality in shaping individual experiences of oppression (Carbado et al., 2013; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). Within digital visual culture, this perspective enables a more nuanced critique of women's representation, moving beyond monolithic accounts of femininity to account for the diverse ways in which marginalized women are depicted—or omitted. In particular, intersectional analysis highlights how digital platforms may simultaneously amplify certain "idealized" images while erasing or marginalizing others (Adigun, 2024; Ghoreishi, 2024).

2.3 Everyday Aesthetics: Yuriko Saito and the Social Dimension of the Ordinary

The theory of everyday aesthetics, developed by Yuriko Saito, expands the notion of aesthetics beyond high art to the lived experiences of daily life. Saito (2017) argues that aesthetic engagement with ordinary objects, environments, and practices carries profound social significance. Everyday aesthetics reveals how aesthetic values embedded in routine practices shape social relations, foster community, and reflect broader ideological structures (Kidd, 2023; Napadysta & Rykhlitska, 2022). Within digital environments, women's images often inhabit the sphere of the everyday—curated through social media posts, selfies, and lifestyle visuals. These representations are not trivial; rather, they embody cultural values and aspirations, while simultaneously exposing the pressures of aesthetic labor and the politics of self-presentation (Romero-Ramírez & Reyburn, 2021). By drawing on everyday aesthetics, this framework situates women's digital images as both personal expressions and socially charged artifacts that reflect the tensions between individuality, conformity, and community.

2.4 Digital Culture Studies: Henry Jenkins and Participatory Culture

Finally, the framework incorporates Henry Jenkins's (2006) concept of participatory culture, which underscores the active role of users in shaping media environments. Jenkins highlights that digital media transforms audiences into co-creators, generating and circulating cultural meanings through practices of sharing, remixing, and collaboration. Social media platforms exemplify this shift, as women not only consume but actively produce and disseminate visual content, reshaping norms of femininity and identity (Jenkins et al., 2013). Participatory culture also emphasizes collective intelligence, where users collaborate in knowledge-making and activism, as demonstrated in feminist digital movements such as #MeToo (Cheng & Marzuki, 2023). However, Jenkins also acknowledges the uneven nature of participation, shaped by economic, cultural, and technological inequalities. For this study, participatory culture provides a lens to understand how women negotiate agency, visibility, and empowerment in the digital sphere, while also confronting systemic limitations such as algorithmic bias and platform governance.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Everyday Aesthetics in Women's Digital Images

The study finds that women actively engage in the aesthetic construction of everyday life on platforms such as Instagram, Xiaohongshu, and TikTok. By curating visual content around food, fashion, travel, and domestic spaces, women transform ordinary routines into aestheticized cultural artifacts. These practices exemplify Saito's (2017) theory of everyday aesthetics, which highlights how aesthetic experience is embedded in daily life rather than confined to high art. Digital aesthetics thus becomes a medium for articulating identity, taste, and social belonging.

Different visual formats embody distinct aesthetic features and narrative strategies:

3.1.1 Selfies foreground identity performance, enabling women to experiment with filters, poses, and lighting to negotiate beauty norms while asserting agency.

3.1.2 Lifestyle photography (e.g., stylized images of coffee, interiors, or fashion) illustrates cultural aspirations of modern femininity, independence, and refinement.

3.1.3 Micro-videos (particularly on TikTok and Xiaohongshu) emphasize immediacy, humor, and performativity, creating immersive narratives that blur the boundaries between routine and spectacle.

Collectively, these practices reflect a dual logic: compliance with platform-driven standards of visibility and beauty, alongside experimentation with alternative forms of self-representation.

The findings reveal that women's digital images frequently operate as strategies of self-branding. By curating coherent visual identities, women construct personal brands that enhance social visibility and attract followers, sponsorships, and collaborations (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This process links directly to the notion of lifestyle capital (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012), wherein aesthetic sensibilities—fashion, taste, creativity—are converted into cultural and economic value. Everyday aesthetics thus becomes an avenue through which women pursue recognition, influence, and mobility within digital economies.

A recurring theme concerns the tension between authentic self-expression and commercial imperatives. While women emphasize authenticity in presenting their daily lives, their reliance on popular aesthetics—minimalist home design, wellness imagery, or fashion trends—reveals how self-representation is shaped by algorithmic logics and consumerist culture. Participants reported the emotional and psychological burden of maintaining consistent personal brands, indicating that aesthetic labor in digital environments entails not only creativity but also discipline and pressure.

Finally, the study demonstrates that digital everyday aesthetics contributes to identity construction and community belonging. Women engage in collective meaning-making through sharing, commenting, and participating in visual trends. These interactions foster social recognition and emotional connectivity, transforming digital aesthetics into a form of cultural participation. At the same time, the uneven distribution of lifestyle capital—shaped by class, race, and geography—reinforces existing inequalities, underscoring the importance of intersectional analysis in evaluating women's digital images.

3.2 The Politics of Representation

The findings demonstrate that women's digital images are heavily mediated by algorithmic visibility and platform governance. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Xiaohongshu, and TikTok do not operate as neutral spaces; rather, they actively curate and prioritize content through recommendation systems. These systems favor visually polished, commercially appealing, and trend-aligned posts. Consequently, women's representations are not simply self-authored but also shaped by the algorithmic economy of attention.

For example, Instagram's Explore page privileges posts that align with dominant aesthetic logics such as slimness, whiteness, and luxury lifestyles. On Xiaohongshu, posts that conform to the aspirational aesthetics of "exquisite living" are more likely to gain traction. Meanwhile, TikTok promotes humorous, dynamic, or highly relatable content, privileging certain narrative strategies over others. These dynamics reveal how platform-specific cultural contexts intersect with algorithmic visibility to determine what forms of femininity are amplified and which remain marginal.

3.2.1 Power Relations in Gendered Representation

Beyond algorithms, the politics of representation are embedded in broader structures of gendered power. Women's images continue to be subjected to body discipline and aesthetic regulation. Dominant ideals—youthful, slim, light-skinned, and heteronormatively attractive—are disproportionately visible, reinforcing patriarchal standards of beauty. These ideals are reproduced not only by commercial actors but also through peer-to-peer feedback: likes, comments, and shares function as mechanisms of social discipline that reward conformity and punish deviation.

Such visual regimes perpetuate gender stereotypes, positioning women as objects of aesthetic consumption while limiting alternative identities. The subtle reproduction of the male gaze persists in

digital platforms, even when women actively curate their own images, as algorithms and audiences collectively reinforce traditional standards of desirability.

3.2.2 Intersectionality and Representational Exclusion

An intersectional perspective further reveals that representation in digital culture is stratified. While white, middle-class, urban femininities often dominate visibility, women from marginalized backgrounds—women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and working-class women—encounter systemic underrepresentation. Their images are often exoticized, stereotyped, or excluded from mainstream visibility.

For instance, Black women and darker-skinned Asian women frequently report algorithmic shadow banning, reduced engagement, or the need to conform to Eurocentric beauty norms to gain visibility. Similarly, queer women often find their self-expressive content misinterpreted or flagged as inappropriate. These patterns highlight how race, class, and sexuality intersect with gender, shaping unequal opportunities for visibility. Representation politics in digital culture is therefore not only about gender but also about how multiple axes of identity interact under platform logics.

3.2.3 Commercial Aesthetics vs. Grassroots Self-Expression

A clear contrast emerges between mainstream, commercialized images and grassroots digital self-expression. Commercial images—produced by influencers, advertisers, or sponsored collaborations—tend to rely on standardized aesthetics: curated fashion, wellness imagery, luxury branding, and carefully staged domestic environments. These images reproduce aspirational femininity that aligns with consumer culture and market logics. Women within this framework often perform self-branding, turning their images into vehicles for economic and symbolic capital.

By contrast, grassroots self-expression provides counter-narratives. Selfies without heavy editing, TikTok videos with humor or satire, and unpolished lifestyle snapshots disrupt the smooth aesthetics of commercial imagery. These forms of expression emphasize authenticity, relatability, and diversity, allowing women to resist homogenized ideals. Grassroots visual practices often generate micro-communities of support, where women find recognition beyond mainstream norms. Such practices can be interpreted as acts of cultural resistance, challenging hegemonic structures of representation while expanding the range of what is considered valuable or beautiful in digital spaces.

3.3 Case Studies

To deepen the understanding of women's digital aesthetics, this study examines three case studies from Instagram, Xiaohongshu, and TikTok. These cases offer insight into how platform infrastructures, cultural expectations, and user practices jointly shape everyday visual expressions. They also highlight the tensions between aspirational visibility and grassroots resistance, showing that women's self-representations online are far from homogeneous.

Case 1: Instagram and “Curated Femininity”

The first case centers on a female influencer whose Instagram feed epitomizes the logic of “curated femininity.” Her posts consistently feature polished compositions of flowers, coffee cups, luxury goods, and scenic landscapes, all presented in soft lighting and cohesive color palettes. Such aesthetic strategies convey not only beauty but also cosmopolitan sophistication and financial stability. The curation transforms daily routines into aspirational lifestyle narratives, aligning with the platform's algorithmic emphasis on aspirational visibility.

This form of digital self-presentation functions as a mechanism of self-branding, where visual cues act as markers of taste and cultural capital. Followers interpret these images as symbols of success, desirability, and authenticity, despite the labor and resources required to maintain such a polished aesthetic. The case demonstrates how Instagram reinforces neoliberal ideals of selfhood, where women are encouraged to commodify their identities in pursuit of visibility and recognition.

Case 2: Xiaohongshu and “Exquisite Everydayness”

The second case explores Xiaohongshu (RED), a platform known for its hybrid of lifestyle sharing and consumer recommendations. Here, a young woman’s makeup tutorials and daily vlogs foreground a meticulous attention to detail. Her skincare routines, interior design choices, and product reviews embody what can be described as “exquisite everydayness”—a form of aesthetic practice where daily life is elevated into a showcase of discipline, refinement, and aspirational mobility.

Unlike Instagram’s global cosmopolitanism, Xiaohongshu embeds femininity within middle-class values of upward aspiration and consumer sophistication. The platform’s algorithmic structures privilege polished, product-oriented content, rewarding users who align with consumerist discourses. This reveals how digital aesthetics are intertwined with cultural ideals of self-improvement, consumption, and respectability. At the same time, Xiaohongshu illustrates how women actively participate in shaping aspirational narratives, even as they are constrained by consumer culture and algorithmic visibility.

Case 3: TikTok and Grassroots Counter-Narratives

The third case turns to TikTok, focusing on a rural young woman who creates humorous, low-budget videos that parody urban lifestyle trends. Using improvised props, exaggerated gestures, and dialect voiceovers, she subverts the polished imagery dominating mainstream platforms. Her videos emphasize local identity and resourcefulness, presenting an alternative model of femininity grounded in authenticity rather than aspirational consumerism.

This case demonstrates how TikTok, with its short-form, fast-paced, and participatory content style, provides opportunities for marginalized users to challenge dominant narratives. By embracing humor and parody, the creator destabilizes gender stereotypes and class-based hierarchies, reclaiming agency in a media environment otherwise saturated with commercial ideals. These grassroots counter-narratives highlight the potential of digital platforms to become spaces of resistance, even as they remain shaped by algorithmic constraints and visibility logics.

The case studies demonstrate that women’s digital aesthetics are contested terrains where identity, aesthetics, and power intersect. While platforms such as Instagram and Xiaohongshu tend to reproduce consumerist and gendered norms, TikTok reveals openings for alternative voices and subcultural creativity. Collectively, the findings suggest that digital visual culture should be approached as a plural and dynamic field—one shaped by both compliance with and resistance to dominant norms.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the complexity of women’s digital visual culture, revealing how everyday aesthetics and representational politics are simultaneously shaped by personal agency, platform infrastructures, and broader socio-cultural forces. By examining women’s self-representations across Instagram, Xiaohongshu, and TikTok, this research illuminates the negotiated nature of digital femininity, where empowerment and constraint co-exist.

4.1 Everyday Aesthetics and Self-Branding

The analysis of everyday aesthetics demonstrates that seemingly ordinary practices—selfies, lifestyle photography, and micro-videos—are never neutral. They operate as modes of self-branding, where women strategically curate visual markers of lifestyle capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Abidin, 2016). Instagram’s polished cosmopolitan femininity and Xiaohongshu’s “exquisite everydayness” exemplify how digital self-representations often align with aspirational cultural scripts. These aesthetic forms function as both personal expressions and public performances, offering women pathways to recognition while reinforcing normative ideals of beauty, discipline, and success. Thus, everyday aesthetics emerge

as a contested field: while they create opportunities for self-expression, they also reproduce the demands of consumerist and neoliberal femininity.

4.2 Platform Logics and the Politics of Representation

The second finding highlights how algorithms, platform norms, and cultural discourses regulate the visibility of women's images. Digital platforms do not passively host content; rather, they actively structure what becomes seen, valued, and circulated. Instagram privileges polished lifestyles, Xiaohongshu rewards consumer-oriented narratives, and TikTok's participatory format enables alternative grassroots expressions. These logics reveal how power relations are inscribed into platforms, producing tensions between conformity to dominant aesthetics and subversive practices. Moreover, gendered and racialized stereotypes persist in these digital environments, aligning with Foucault's (1977) notion of disciplinary power and Crenshaw's (1989) framework of intersectionality. Women's images thus become sites where social hierarchies of gender, class, and race are both maintained and contested.

4.3 Case Studies and Cultural Specificities

The case studies illustrate that digital femininities cannot be understood in isolation from their cultural contexts. Instagram's global cosmopolitan aesthetic aligns with neoliberal consumer culture, Xiaohongshu embeds femininity in the Chinese middle-class aspirational discourse, and TikTok opens spaces for localized, humorous counter-narratives that resist homogenization. These variations confirm that women's digital images are shaped by the interplay between globalized media flows and situated cultural traditions. Importantly, the TikTok case demonstrates that marginal voices are capable of generating counter-hegemonic narratives, underscoring the potential of digital platforms to serve as spaces of resistance.

4.4 Negotiating Agency and Constraint

Taken together, the findings suggest that women's digital self-representations must be understood as a negotiation between agency and constraint. On the one hand, digital platforms provide women with unprecedented tools for self-expression, identity construction, and community-building. On the other hand, these practices are embedded within systems of algorithmic governance, commercial imperatives, and socio-cultural norms that restrict possibilities of representation. The contradictions between empowerment and discipline, visibility and erasure, commodification and authenticity form the core dynamics of women's images in digital culture.

4.5 Contributions and Implications

This study contributes to visual culture scholarship by conceptualizing women's digital images as dynamic sites where aesthetics, power, and identity intersect. It demonstrates that everyday visual practices are politically charged, entangled with systems of consumption, cultural capital, and technological mediation. Practically, the findings call for a more nuanced recognition of how platform design and algorithmic governance shape cultural participation. They also point to the importance of fostering digital literacy that enables women to critically navigate visual culture while resisting its homogenizing tendencies. For cultural policymakers and educators, the study highlights the value of supporting plural, diverse, and counter-hegemonic forms of digital expression.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined how women's images in digital visual culture are shaped by the interplay of everyday aesthetics and the politics of representation. By analyzing self-representations across Instagram, Xiaohongshu, and TikTok, it has demonstrated that digital images are not merely personal expressions but socially and technologically mediated practices. Women's everyday aesthetics, expressed through

selfies, lifestyle photography, and micro-videos, emerge as forms of self-branding and lifestyle capital that simultaneously enable self-expression and reproduce normative ideals of femininity.

At the same time, the study highlights the structuring role of platform logics and cultural discourses in determining what forms of femininity become visible and valued. Instagram privileges cosmopolitan polish, Xiaohongshu reinforces aspirational middle-class femininity, while TikTok offers a space for counter-narratives and local authenticity. These findings confirm that women's digital images are situated at the intersection of global consumer culture and localized cultural traditions, where agency and constraint coexist in complex ways.

The case studies further reveal that digital femininities are neither uniform nor static but shaped by class, cultural context, and platform infrastructures. They demonstrate how women negotiate between conformity to dominant norms and the pursuit of alternative expressions, underscoring the plurality and contested nature of digital visual culture. This negotiation highlights both the risks of commodification and the possibilities of resistance, authenticity, and community-building.

Overall, this research contributes to scholarship in visual culture, gender studies, and digital media by conceptualizing women's digital images as sites where aesthetics, power, and identity intersect. It also provides practical implications for promoting digital literacy and platform accountability, emphasizing the need to support diverse and counter-hegemonic forms of self-representation. Future studies may expand this analysis by including cross-cultural comparisons, longitudinal studies of evolving platform dynamics, and deeper exploration of intersectional identities beyond gender and class.

By framing women's digital images as both aesthetic and political acts, this study underscores the necessity of treating digital visual culture not as a neutral medium, but as a contested field where cultural values, social hierarchies, and new possibilities of representation are constantly negotiated.

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