



Framing Motherhood: Hypervisibility, Consumerism, and Gendered Expectations in the Digital Age

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Abstract. The hypervisibility and commercialization of feminine bodies through pregnancy photoshoots have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary visual culture. This paper explores how the representation of pregnant bodies in commercial and social media spaces affects societal perceptions of femininity, motherhood, and gender discourse. Drawing from feminist theory, media studies, and sociology, the study examines how these curated images contribute to the commodification of women's bodies, reinforcing traditional gender norms while simultaneously offering spaces for empowerment and self-expression. The paper argues that while pregnancy photoshoots can provide agency to expectant mothers by celebrating bodily changes and reclaiming visibility in a culture that often marginalizes maternal bodies, they also serve capitalist interests by aestheticizing and standardizing maternal experiences. These images frequently emphasize a narrow ideal of beauty—glamorous, glowing, and effortlessly maternal—which can place immense pressure on pregnant individuals to conform to unrealistic bodily standards during a physically and emotionally transformative period. As such, the aesthetics of pregnancy are not neutral but laden with expectations that tie femininity to performative beauty and consumerism. This duality—where empowerment is entwined with commodification—raises critical questions about who benefits from these visual narratives and how they shape public understandings of motherhood and the pregnant body.

Keywords: pregnancy, photoshoot, hypervisibility, digital age, consumerism

1. Introduction

In the era of digital technology, the pregnant body is no longer limited to the private domains of the clinic and home. The advent of digital platforms and visual culture has made pregnancy a very marketable, performative, and public experience. From stylized maternity photoshoots to curated “bump updates” on Instagram, the visibility of pregnancy in online spaces has redefined how motherhood is perceived, performed, and consumed. (Banet-Weiser, 2018) This shift is not merely technological; it is deeply cultural, shaped by gendered expectations, capitalist logic, and aesthetic norms that inform and constrain the pregnant subject's expression of identity and autonomy (Flynn, 2021).

This new visibility does not exist in a vacuum. It is embedded within a broader media environment where the female body, particularly during periods of reproductive transformation, becomes a site of fascination, surveillance, and commodifica-

tion.(Wolf, 2002) The hypervisibility of pregnancy, especially among celebrities and social media influencers, has normalized a highly curated version of maternal embodiment. These representations frequently reinforce prevailing conceptions of femininity while marginalizing varied, non-normative experiences of pregnancy by reflecting limited norms of beauty, tranquillity, and selflessness(Bordo, 2003).Digital tools and platforms, on the other hand, give expectant mothers the chance to express themselves and take charge of their stories, which blurs the line between oppression and empowerment(Lazar, 2005).

In particular, pregnancy photo shoots have come to represent this digital revolution. They are now an essential part of the visual economy of contemporary motherhood, having previously been a private act of memory. These photos influence how pregnancy is perceived in society, whether they are shared by well-known people with millions of fans or regular people in private networks. The pregnant figure is frequently shown as radiant, calm, and glamorously dressed, implying that following an aesthetic script is necessary to be visibly pregnant in public(Douglas & Michaels, 2005) This introduces new forms of pressure on pregnant individuals to perform their identities in line with social expectations, while simultaneously navigating the deeply personal and sometimes vulnerable experience of gestation (Kloß & Villinger, 2025).

The scope of this paper is to analyze how pregnancy is visually and discursively framed in the digital age through feminist and cultural theory. Located within descriptive and analytical research, the paper interrogates how digital technologies, aesthetic conventions, and social media economies reshape the representation of motherhood and the pregnant body by analytically engaging with the existing studies and extending it with newer theoretical insights. Central to this inquiry is the tension between agency and conformity: To what extent are individuals empowered by the ability to share and aestheticize their pregnancy, and to what extent are they constrained by the normative frameworks that these digital performances often reinforce?

By framing the pregnant body as a cultural construct that is increasingly mediated through digital tools and visual aesthetics, this paper aims to open up a critical dialogue about what it means to be visibly pregnant today. It calls into question not only the meanings attached to such visibility but also the institutional and ideological structures, gender norms, capitalist markets, and legal silences that shape and govern it. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary feminist legal and media scholarship concerned with embodiment, representation, and autonomy in a digitized world.

2. Hypervisibility, Gender, and Body Politics

The conceptual terrain for analyzing pregnancy in the digital age requires considering hypervisibility, gender performativity, and body politics. These ideas highlight the commodified, aestheticized, and controlled ways in which the media presents the pregnant body. Particularly when connected to prevailing cultural beliefs and capitalist imperatives, hypervisibility might serve to further surveillance, homogenization, and exclusion rather than to promote liberation. According to feminist media theory,

hypervisibility is the paradox where some bodies, typically racialized, gendered, or maternal, are narrowly depicted but widely visible. Nowadays, pregnancy is frequently depicted in visual media via idealized glasses, which reinforces prevailing assumptions and ignores a range of pregnant experiences (Lazar, 2005).

Maternity is enacted through recurrent cultural performances, just like gender, as explained by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990). Fashion, positions, captions, and meticulously planned timelines are all used to stylize pregnancy in digital spaces, portraying a loving, calm, and attractive image of women. While excluding people who don't fit these stereotypes, these performances affirm the conventional connections between motherhood and femininity (Butler, 2006). This concept is strengthened by Susan Bordo's body politics perspective (1993), which demonstrates how the body becomes a place of cultural inscription. It is required of pregnant women to strike a balance between power and elegance, modesty and visibility, and beauty and health. The mother's body is socially produced and evaluated in addition to being biologically shaped, particularly in digital and public contexts (Bordo, 2003).

Social media platforms encourage conformity to prevailing aesthetics through likes, comments, and algorithmic rewards, transforming the pregnant subject into a self-monitoring and curating content for public gaze. (Banet-Weiser, 2018) Consumer capitalism intersects with gendered norms, making pregnancy a site of market engagement. Maternity clothes, wellness packages, and photoshoots are offered as tools of self-care and expression, but function within a commodified framework. Visibility in this context is unevenly distributed, often favouring affluent, white, cisgender individuals while marginalizing others (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). The framework highlights the contradictions of digital maternity, highlighting how hypervisibility offers control and self-representation, but also normalizes and disciplines markets, prompting feminist critique to question not only who is seen but also how. (Lazar, 2005)

3. Representing Pregnancy: From Private Experience to Public Display

Historically, pregnancy was a private experience concealed due to modesty norms, patriarchal control, and medical regulation. Today, digital media has reversed this privacy, turning pregnancy into a highly visible, performative, and interactive experience. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube showcase curated maternity moments: "bump updates," gender-reveal videos, and aestheticized maternity shoots. This transformation reflects not only technological shifts but also deeper changes in how femininity and identity are imagined and enacted (Kloß & Villinger, 2025).

The celebrity culture significantly influences the visual representation of pregnancy, with figures like Beyonce and Rihanna defining it as a style statement, branding tool, and aspirational event, establishing a benchmark for radiant, fashionable, and emotionally resonant displays (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Social media influencers are creating personal brands around pregnancy journeys, blending personal experience with com-

mercial promotion, resulting in highly curated aesthetics and idealized versions of maternity, shaping expectations for fans and everyday users (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). Visual norms often favour able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, slim, fair-skinned, affluent women, while marginalized identities, Black and Indigenous mothers, disabled parents, working-class families, queer, and trans individuals are often invisible or underrepresented. Their absence reinforces a narrow script of what counts as “acceptable” or “celebrated” pregnancy (Wolf, 2002).

The shift toward public performance also redefines what it means to be maternal. Pregnancy is no longer just experienced; it must be documented, styled, and shared. Hashtags like #PregnancyGlow and #BumpStyle signal a shift toward content creation. Even those who are not part of the celebrity culture may feel pressured to curate their content about their changing bodies (Flynn, 2021). However, there is a price for this visibility. Those dealing with complicated realities, such as physical discomfort, mental health issues, financial stress, or pregnancy loss, may feel alienated by the expectation to project a flawless pregnancy that is joyful, fashionable, and problem-free. The feelings of inadequacy or invisibility are frequently evoked when contrasting carefully chosen digital representations with lived experiences (Lazar, 2005).

Furthermore, public visibility attracts criticism. When a pregnancy enters the public glare, so do choices, looks, and feelings. Likes, comments, and silence from online viewers can be used to control behaviour. Those who conform to visual conventions receive praise, while those who don't receive it receive criticism or neglect (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The computerized performance of pregnancy becomes a double-edged sword in this situation. It allows for visibility, storytelling, and connections, but it also limits expression within frameworks that are acceptable to the market and culture. Only when she acts within the appropriate bounds of femininity, beauty, and class privilege is the digitally pregnant subject celebrated (Butler, 2006).

4. Commercialization and Consumerism in Maternity Representation

Pregnancy has been intricately linked to commercial culture in the digital age. It has evolved into a stylish, marketed experience that is no longer limited to a personal or medical realm. The pregnant figure has become a commodity and a customer thanks to everything from luxury picture shoots and influencer sponsorships to designer maternity gear and prenatal wellness initiatives (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). According to the maternity industry, the ideal parental subject wears the appropriate clothes, shows up for appointments on time, and maintains an elegant and calm appearance. This model privileges middle- and upper-class experiences, marginalizing those who lack the financial means to participate in such curated performances (Bordo, 2003).

The social media influencers monetize their pregnancies through brand collaborations, product placements, and sponsored content. Their storytelling often reinforces a neoliberal image of empowered motherhood, while packaging vulnerability and

shared struggles blurs the line between authenticity and branding, promoting consumption-driven consumption.(Banet-Weiser, 2018). From intimate memories to upscale services with expert styling and customized aesthetics, pregnancy photo shoots have changed over time. These pictures are shared within personal networks and are used as digital currency for social validation, brand collaborations, and influence(Kloß & Villinger, 2025).

Inherently, this commodification is gendered. Consumer culture, as Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels contend, reasserts old gender norms while feigning empowerment. Women are informed that they have options, but usually those options involve controlling their identity, feelings, and appearance to conform to a lucrative ideal. Despite being unpaid, the effort to “look good while mothering” is constantly urged(Douglas & Michaels, 2005).When a woman becomes pregnant, the drive for constant visibility continues. The influencer-mother often transitions seamlessly into the “mommy-blogger,” continuing the cycle of visual consumption from bump to baby. Motherhood is reinforced as an identity linked to branding and performance, making content creation a lifetime endeavour(Flynn, 2021). The model ignores experiences that are frequently disregarded because of consumer maternity culture, which frames and eliminates these narratives, such as miscarriages, high-risk pregnancies, financial difficulty, and non-binary or trans motherhood(Lazar, 2005).

This consumption-based conception of maternity is important because it aligns with a larger neoliberal ideology that privatizes reproductive labour. It is expected of expectant mothers to manage their pregnancies by self-care and consumption, while structural injustices such as paid leave or limited access to healthcare are disregarded. Empowerment is reinterpreted as self-branding and aesthetic control(Banet-Weiser, 2018).The commercialization of pregnancy has a big impact on how people view and value maternity; although some people profit from this economy, others are left out or under pressure to fit in. The aestheticization, commodification, and class, racial, and gender stratification of care and reproduction must all be further explored by feminist critique.

5. Gendered Role and Normative Motherhood

The traditional gender standards are frequently reinforced by dominant images, even when digital maternity is seen as empowering. It is common for pregnancy to be framed by well-known cultural scripts that emphasize caring for others, emotional sacrifice, and physical attractiveness. By presenting motherhood as an inevitable and natural progression of femininity, these representations idealize women as altruistic and nurturing even before the child is born(Butler, 2006). In the digital sphere, these gendered expectations are intensified. Visual media repeatedly promote the same aesthetic codes: pregnant individuals posed in flowing dresses, glowing with serenity, gently holding their bellies. These images circulate widely and become templates for how motherhood should appear: docile, devoted, and beautiful (Bordo, 2003).

Rosalind Gill (2007) refers to this as the performance of “new femininities” rebranded as choice, yet closely mirroring traditional patriarchal roles (Gill, 2007). Visual scripts influence visibility, excluding fathers, co-parents, and queer, trans, and non-binary pregnancies from mainstream culture. This exclusion reinforces the myth that pregnancy is a cisgender, female experience, leading to legal and institutional erasure, affecting access to healthcare, documentation, and recognition (Browne, 2022). Race and class further define these visual scripts. The dominant maternity image features white, upper-middle-class women who can afford curated maternity experiences (Spade, 2015). In contrast, working-class, Black, Indigenous, or immigrant mothers are either underrepresented or depicted through stigmatizing lenses, portrayed as risky, irresponsible, or excessive. Dorothy Roberts (1997) calls this the “regulation of motherhood,” where only certain women are deemed worthy of celebration and support (Roberts, 1997).

The visual ideal of maternal responsibility often overlooks structural realities like poverty, housing insecurity, and medical racism, placing disproportionate blame on the individual and ignoring the need for strict control over their bodies, eating well, and avoiding stress (Lupton, 2016). These expectations persist beyond birth. The same pregnant subject once expected to be glowing and graceful is now expected to “bounce back” quickly, care selflessly, and embody joy. The ideal mother narrative continues, shaping a lifetime of social pressure and self-regulation (McRobbie, 2009).

The feminist and queer scholars call for more inclusive and plural representations, ones that show pregnancy as complex, painful, ambivalent, joyful, or non-normative (Taylor, 2008). Representations of homebirths, queer parenting, disability, or reproductive resistance challenge the idealized scripts and expand public imagination (Piepzna & Leah, 2018). While digital culture can reinforce these normative scripts, it can also offer space for rupture. Feminist critique must push for visibility that disrupts, rather than conforms to visibility that reflects a broader range of experiences, identities, and truths in reproduction and parenting (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

6. Agency, Choice, and Social Conformity

The digital pregnancy aesthetics often present themselves as empowering tools for pregnant individuals to reclaim visibility, document transformation, and assert control over their narratives. Sharing bump photos, participating in maternity photoshoots, or curating content online can feel like acts of self-celebration, especially in cultures where maternal bodies have long been hidden or medicalized (Bordo, 2003). The digital self-representation challenges traditional narratives of modesty and passivity, allowing individuals to express bodily agency, affirm pregnancies, and embrace visibility on their terms, providing support, affirmation, and community for those with hard-won, stigmatized, or previously silenced pregnancies (Abidin, 2016).

The rise of maternity content has led to increased expectations for participation, with pregnant individuals often documenting their journeys to align with socially celebrated norms of joy, femininity, and aesthetic control (Duffy & Hund, 2015). This choice

is often shaped by peer networks, platform trends, and internalized norms. This tension reflects what Angela McRobbie (2009) calls the “postfeminist masquerade”, the illusion of freedom, where choices are framed as autonomous but structured by powerful social, economic, and gendered forces. In this framework, only certain expressions of pregnancy are rewarded: glowing, curated, emotionally positive. The pregnant body is “free” to be visible, but only if it is photogenic, compliant, and on-brand (Gill, 2007).

The current narrative system marginalizes marginalized groups, such as Black and Brown pregnant people, disabled individuals, queer and trans parents, and those navigating trauma or loss, often leading to erasure or algorithmic invisibility, reinforcing narrow limits around what is considered shareable or acceptable (Spade, 2015). The performance of visibility is not just aesthetic but also emotional, with individuals expected to project calmness, gratitude, and joy, even in challenging times. Opting out of digital sharing can be seen as secrecy or deviance, reinforcing gendered expectations of maternal sacrifice (Taylor, 2008).

The digital maternity culture often frames visual resistance, such as sharing postpartum depression or non-linear family experiences, as niche rather than central to reproductive life, limiting true agency and promoting conditional autonomy (Tasker & Negra, 2014). To comprehend digital motherhood, one must acknowledge the conflict between empowerment and discipline, choice and obedience. Celebrating visibility alone is insufficient; we also need to examine the structures that determine who is viewed, how, and for what purposes (Butler, 2006).

7. Legal and Ethical Aspects: Digital Maternity Rights, Regulation, and Representation

The legal and ethical frameworks governing this visibility are still in their infancy, despite the fact that digital maternity has revolutionized the way that pregnancy is communicated and perceived. These developments pose issues of privacy, consent, identification, and commodification that feminist legal study must address, not only for the pregnant individual but also for the fetus, platform users, and the general public (Spade, 2015). Privacy is one of the main issues here. Because visibility is rewarded and promoted on social media, users are more likely to publish prenatal photos, ultrasound videos, birth plans, and extremely personal moments. Once posted, however, this content is susceptible to algorithmic tracking, data extraction, and unlawful usage. Digital places function with minimal accountability, in contrast to medical settings with well-established privacy regulations (Flynn, 2021).

The consent is complicated, particularly for pregnant people who could share their content online. Prenatal sonograms and fetal images are exchanged, leaving digital traces of a person without legal status. Concerns regarding personhood and unborn rights may arise from these depictions, which might remain online indefinitely (Taylor, 2008). The stakes are higher when pregnancy is made profitable by commercial maternity pictures or influencer marketing. Expectant bodies are used

as branding tools, and it becomes unclear who is the owner of the content. The mother or expectant person frequently has no influence about how their photograph is used or shared, while platforms and advertisers profit monetarily from interactions (Gillespie, 2010).

According to Banet-Weiser (2018) and McRobbie (2009), feminist legal perspectives draw attention to the uncontrolled online visibility of female bodies that are tracked, promoted, and policed. Pregnant people who don't fit the normative scripts are either wiped out or overexposed, fetishizing difference without providing protection. There is a lack of clarity in the law when it comes to maternity-specific issues, and current consent and privacy rules frequently fall short in protecting biometric data, fetal imaging, and abused maternity content. There may be no way to hold influencers accountable for abuse, and emotional disclosures frequently violate existing data protection laws (Lupton, 2016). The inclination to disregard the experiences of mothers as private, sentimental, or outside the purview of the law is reflected in this judicial silence, which is not an isolated instance (Fineman, 2004). Despite their significant influence on identity and citizenship, feminist legal theorists have frequently noted that caring job, embodiment, and reproduction are routinely underappreciated in legal discourse (Nedelsky, 2011).

However, the platform governance is essential because it uses moderation tools, algorithmic visibility, and content regulations to enforce cultural standards. Bans on “nudity” or “explicit content” have disproportionately censored reproductive health content, queer parenting, and birth-related imagery (Gillespie, 2010). Moreover, the digital pregnancy visibility raises urgent legal and ethical questions that the law has been slow to answer. As the boundaries between public and private blur, feminist legal scholars must demand frameworks that acknowledge and protect the lived complexities of digital reproduction centring care, consent, and inclusive representation (Fineman, 2004).

8. Conclusion: Reimagining Maternal Visibility in the Digital Age

In the above study we have observed and analysed that how digital spaces are shaping the way pregnancy is seen, celebrated, and sometimes sold. The online world gives many expecting individuals a chance to share their stories, find community, and take pride in their journeys but it's not the full picture. What we often see are carefully curated versions of pregnancy that cater to privilege: polished, beautiful, heterosexual, and affluent. This leaves out too many others: queer parents, people of colour, disabled bodies, and those facing loss or trauma—who rarely find space in mainstream digital narratives.

However, behind the filters and hashtags, pregnancy has become something to perform and consume. Influencers, brands, and platforms profit from this glossy version of motherhood, turning a deeply personal life experience into marketable content. This kind of visibility can be comforting for some, but exclusionary for many. That said, there are powerful moments of resistance. Artists, parents, and storytellers are

challenging this dominant narrative by showing what pregnancy really looks like in all its complexity grief, uncertainty, disability, joy, and everything in between. But their work needs more than just online applause. It needs recognition, legal safeguards, and meaningful platform accountability.

Moreover, right now, the law hasn't caught up. Issues like data consent, privacy, digital exploitation, and maternal identity in commercial spaces remain largely unaddressed. This gap puts pregnant people especially those on the margins at risk. If we truly want digital pregnancy spaces to be empowering, then feminist legal frameworks must step in to protect autonomy, ensure consent, and demand fairer representation.

The way forward isn't just about changing the visuals it's about shifting the systems that shape them. Media, platforms, policy, and law all have a role to play. Future legal research must focus on building protective, inclusive, and rights-based digital environments where every form of pregnancy not just the idealized ones can be seen, respected, and supported. Visibility alone is not justice. If we want meaningful change, we have to center care, dignity, and equity both online and off.

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