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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Doing Gender Online: Memetic Performances and the Digital Construction of Femininity

Gustavo González-Calvo[1] · **Jonathan Ospina-Betancurt**[1] · **David Hortigüela-Alcalá**[2]

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Abstract

This study explores how femininity and the female body are socially and culturally constructed within digital contexts, focusing on memes as sites of gendered meaning-making. Grounded in West and Zimmerman's (Gend Soc 1(2):125–151, 1987. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002) *doing gender* framework and informed by feminist theories of performativity (Butler in Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity, Routledge, 1990) and digital embodiment, the research examines how women negotiate, reproduce, and resist normative ideals of beauty and bodily worth. Using a socio-narratological and visual methodology, twenty-one women enrolled in a Master's program in Feminist Studies created or selected memes to represent their experiences with body image, media influence, and social expectations. The narrative and visual analyses revealed four interconnected themes: (1) the persistent pressure to be and to feel thin; (2) the regulatory role of mass media and social networks; (3) the transformative potential of self-acceptance and feminist consciousness; and (4) the impact of gendered social differences on bodily perception. Findings show that women continually *do* and *undo* gender through digital practices that reflect both subjection to and resistance against patriarchal norms. Memes functioned as ironic and critical spaces for re-signifying femininity, demonstrating the potential of digital humor to foster feminist awareness and collective empowerment. The study contributes to contemporary debates on gender performativity, self-objectification, and digital feminist culture by situating *doing gender* within the visual logic of online communication.

Keywords Body-politics · Digital culture · Memes and media culture · Feminist theory · Gender norms

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

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Introduction

The social construction of the female body has long been a central concern within the social sciences, where scholars have argued that ideals of beauty function not merely as aesthetic norms but as mechanisms of cultural control and domination (Novella et al., 2015; Seekis & Barker, 2022). Across diverse societies, women have been subjected to persistent surveillance, faced with bodily expectations that rarely correspond to lived realities (Bordo, 2003). These ideals are deeply embedded in media representations, which continually reproduce the notion of thinness as the ultimate symbol of feminine beauty (Roca, 2018). Such standards are not only unattainable for the vast majority of women but also carry severe implications for their physical and psychological well-being, contributing to widespread body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and diminished self-esteem (Forbes et al., 2007; Vasile, 2015).

Over the past century, women's bodies have been shaped by shifting aesthetic ideals that fluctuate across historical periods (Boyce et al., 2013; Forbes et al., 2007). Yet one constant has remained: women are expected to devote time, resources, and energy to conforming to predominantly unattainable standards, a phenomenon conceptualized as "normative discontent" (Rodin et al., 1984). This dynamic fosters self-objectification, whereby women come to perceive themselves not as autonomous subjects but as objects to be continually monitored and adjusted in line with external expectations (Roca, 2018).

Media systems play a pivotal role in the reproduction of these ideals. Recent studies indicate that exposure to idealized bodies in video games intensifies pressure on women to align with hyper-stylized and often unattainable beauty ideals (Matthews et al., 2016). Similarly, research on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok shows that repeated exposure to appearance-focused content amplifies body surveillance, comparison, and dissatisfaction among women (Roca, 2018; Seekis & Barker, 2022; Li et al., 2025). Platform algorithms perpetually reinforce such imagery, generating a feedback loop in which women not only consume but also reproduce these ideals by disseminating self-representations that seek to comply with prevailing aesthetic norms (Seekis, & Barker, 2022). In this process, women assume the dual role of both surveillants of their own bodies and objects of surveillance, internalizing the male gaze and the imperative to sustain a body deemed "acceptable" for social approval (Sæle et al., 2021). This self-objectification has deleterious effects on women's mental health, as constant comparison with idealized images engenders cycles of body shame, disordered eating, and related psychological distress (Alleva et al., 2014; Kaplan et al., 2023; Li et al., 2025; Sæle et al., 2021).

Sociocultural analyses of the female body have further underscored the ways in which beauty standards operate as mechanisms of oppression. Such practices are not trivial matters of personal preference but rather forms of patriarchal control that constrain women by directing their attention toward superficial aspects of appearance rather than toward agency, competence, or autonomy (Bordo, 2003). In so doing, they perpetuate gender inequality by reducing women's value to their physical appearance, thereby reinforcing social structures in which men maintain symbolic power over women's bodies (Duncan, 2006; Forbes et al., 2007; Jeffreys, 2005).

The primary objective of this study is to examine how the female body has been socially and culturally constructed in accordance with the bodily expectations imposed by Western society, employing visual methodologies such as the analysis of memes. Specifically, it seeks to elucidate how Western beauty ideals—centered on thinness and disseminated through mass media and social networks—not only reproduce unattainable standards for most women but also operate as instruments of cultural control and oppression. Accordingly, we treat the construction of the female body as a key dimension through which femininity is produced, negotiated, and regulated in digital culture.

Doing Gender in Digital Embodiment: Performing and Resisting Femininity

The concept of *doing gender*, first articulated by West and Zimmerman (1987), serves as the theoretical foundation of this study, providing a framework to understand how femininity is continuously performed, negotiated, and contested through everyday and digital practices. In this article, we use femininity primarily in an embodied sense: the socially regulated meanings and expectations attached to women's bodies and physical appearance (e.g., thinness, youthfulness, desirability), rather than femininity in all its possible social and psychological dimensions (Bartky, 1990; Gill, 2007b). Rather than a static attribute or personal essence, gender is a social accomplishment—an ongoing process through which individuals reproduce and sometimes resist normative expectations of femininity and masculinity. As West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 126) argue, "doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities" that sustain hierarchical relations of power. This understanding aligns with Connell and Pearse's (2015) view of gender as an organizing principle of social life, one that structures access to resources, recognition, and authority. In this sense, gender is simultaneously enacted and regulated through cultural scripts that define which forms of embodiment are intelligible, desirable, or legitimate. Drawing on Butler's (1990) notion of performativity, these repetitive acts of gender are both constrained by social norms and capable of subversion; each performance carries the potential to reproduce or challenge the very structures it enacts.

Within contemporary visual and digital cultures, the process of *doing gender* acquires new significance. The participants in this study, through the creation or selection of memes, not only reproduced certain aesthetic ideals but also critically reflected upon them, transforming irony into a tool of resistance. This dynamic reveals that *doing gender* in digital contexts entails both surveillance and agency: women are subject to visual regimes that demand constant self-presentation, yet they also use humor and parody to expose and destabilize those same regimes (Dobson, 2016). Thus, memes function as cultural artefacts through which participants reframe the meanings attached to femininity, engaging in what Butler (1990) calls the re-signification of gender norms.

Gender, as West and Zimmerman (1987) and subsequent scholars (Crawford & Chaffin, 1997; Messerschmidt, 2009) have emphasized, operates through interwoven

sociocultural, interpersonal, and individual processes. These dimensions cannot be understood in isolation: they interact dynamically, shaping how individuals experience, embody, and contest gender. At the sociocultural level, gender functions as a system of symbolic and material power that defines which bodies matter and which do not. Institutions such as the media, education, and the beauty industry establish and perpetuate hierarchies that privilege thinness, youth, and whiteness as signs of feminine success (Bordo, 2003; Jeffreys, 2005; Gill, 2007a; Connell & Pearse, 2015). This is vividly reflected in the participants' narratives discussed in the Results section *"The pressure to be (and to feel) thin"*, where the pursuit of slenderness becomes not merely an aesthetic goal but a moral obligation—a performance of discipline and control that signals social conformity.

At the interpersonal level, gender emerges through social interactions in which individuals are held accountable to normative expectations. These everyday encounters—whether in physical spaces or online—reinforce and reproduce gender norms by rewarding conformity and punishing deviation. The section *"The influence of mass media and social networks on the sociocultural construction of the body"* illustrates this mechanism: participants describe how likes, comments, and visual comparison on platforms such as Instagram intensify self-surveillance and internalize the male gaze. Digital environments thus operate as powerful feedback systems that discipline the feminine body through mediated recognition, a process consistent with Gill and Orgad's (2018) argument that postfeminist media culture transforms self-objectification into a mode of self-expression.

Finally, on the individual level, gender becomes an internalized aspect of identity—an embodied schema through which individuals interpret their worth and belonging. Many participants articulate this process in *"The importance of self-acceptance and the deconstruction of stereotypes"*, where self-knowledge and feminist awareness lead to what Deutsch (2007) conceptualizes as *undoing gender*: conscious efforts to detach self-value from compliance with patriarchal norms. By embracing bodily diversity, participants destabilize the dichotomy between femininity and masculinity that structures their early experiences, creating spaces for new modes of subjectivity grounded in autonomy and self-recognition. This reflexive dimension also emerges in *"Gendered social differences and their influence on body perception"*, where participants critically analyze linguistic hierarchies, exemplified in Spanish by the asymmetrical connotations of *señora* ("madam" implying aging and diminished desirability) and *señor* ("sir" implying dignity and respect), and media double standards around aging, exposing how femininity remains tied to appearance while masculinity is linked to authority. These examples confirm that gender is not a property individuals possess but an ongoing accomplishment enacted through discourse, appearance, and relational positioning (Messerschmidt, 2009).

Altogether, the *doing gender* framework provides an interpretive lens through which the participants' experiences can be understood as situated performances within a wider cultural system of power. Their narratives reveal how femininity is simultaneously disciplined and destabilized, how digital visuality amplifies gendered control while offering new avenues for critique, and how the act of creating or sharing memes can become a site of resistance and collective reflection. In this sense, *doing gender* is not only a descriptive concept but also a political one: it exposes the

mechanisms through which gendered inequalities are sustained and highlights the everyday possibilities of transformation that emerge when women reclaim their bodies, their humor, and their right to narrate themselves.

Methods

The study design was conceptually grounded in West and Zimmerman's (1987) notion of *doing gender*, Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, and recent scholarship on digital embodiment (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015). These perspectives informed the selection of memes as visual prompts capable of capturing everyday performances of femininity, as well as the interpretive lens applied in data analysis. Thus, the theoretical framework shaped the entire research cycle (from the construction of prompts and focus-group discussions to the coding and interpretation of narrative meanings).

The study was grounded in socio-narratology (Polkinghorne, 1988), an approach which considers how narratives inform the way people construct and make meaning of their experiences and identities. The notion that people live in story-shaped worlds and use stories to make sense of experiences is well established within the realm of qualitative research (Riessman, 2008); narrative inquiry and narrative analysis now have significant scholarly traditions in centring storytelling to understand the relational and cultural fabric of human lives (Frank, 2010). Stories are a research tool that have been successfully used within sociology and education, for instance for research in physical education and sport (e.g. Duncan et al., 2018; McMahon & McGannon, 2019). Stories can facilitate the exploration of sensitive topics (Blodgett et al., 2017; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2018) and elicit people's perceptions of issues or phenomena which they may not (yet) have personally experienced. When created as part of a dialogic research process, storytelling methods can also afford participants some agency to decide what they want to say and what they prefer not to share (McMahon & McGannon, 2019); the value of this is especially pertinent when considering the effects that recounting difficult or painful events may have on participants, who may better control what they would like to disclose and how that might be portrayed in stories that result from the research (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014). This study advances this approach, combining focus groups that involved visual methods techniques and a generative form of narrative analysis to produce creative stories which synthesise and offer an analysis of participants' experiences and expectations.

In this study, we also employed visual methods as a research tool. This choice stems from the centrality of 'the visual' in the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies (Phoenix & Rich, 2019), particularly among the younger demographic. Memes are understood not as a fixed or narrowly delimited digital genre, but as participatory visual–textual artifacts that circulate widely in online culture and are commonly used to express, critique, or parody social norms (Milner, 2016). While early conceptualizations emphasized standardized image–macro formats, contemporary vernacular usage has significantly broadened the term to include a wide range of digitally shared images, illustrations, and comic-style compositions accompanied by ironic or reflexive commentary. Following this expanded

understanding, we operationalised memes as any visual artifact (whether created by participants or sourced from online platforms) that participants themselves identified as a "meme" and used to narrate, symbolise, or critically reflect upon their embodied experiences of femininity. The analytical focus therefore rests not on formal visual conventions, but on the meme's social function as a meaning-making device within digital culture. In particular, we have employed memes as a visual strategy. In recent times, memes have emerged as an interesting methodological tool in the study of psychological distress among young populations. These images, videos, and texts shared on social media have become a means to explore the feelings, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals, particularly in relation to intensive technology and social media use (Chateau, 2020). Therefore, one way to delve into the concerns and expectations among young people is through the use of 'memes,' a widespread phenomenon across all social media platforms.

Participants

The participants were 21 women aged 26–58 enrolled in a Master's program in Feminist Studies at a public university in Spain. Most combined academic study with professional or caregiving responsibilities. Coming from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, ranging from education and social work to communication, they shared a commitment to feminist inquiry and critical reflection on body politics. Their participation was voluntary and motivated by both academic interest and personal engagement with issues of self-representation and digital culture.

After completing the course taught by the first author, he suggested that the students reflect on their process of social and cultural construction of their bodies. Specifically, he asked them to consider what sociocultural influences they had experienced throughout their lives that led their bodies to either 'try to fit in or escape' the molds imposed on women. As part of this, he invited them -entirely voluntarily- to choose or re-create a 'meme' as a form of ironic social and cultural expression that could help them build narratives of their experiences and culture with which they identified. The meme served as a starting point for discussions on the social and cultural construction of the female body. Out of the 50 students in the Master's program in Gender Studies, 21 participants completed the voluntary task.

Ethical Approval was obtained for the study from the author´s institution's Ethics Committee (code: PI 22-1995-NO HCUV in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki). All participant names mentioned here have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity.

Data Collection

Data were generated through a combination of focus-group discussions, individual reflective narratives, and the production or selection of memes that served as visual prompts for dialogue. This multimodal strategy was designed to capture both the discursive and visual dimensions of gender performance in digital culture, consistent with the *doing gender* framework (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and feminist theories of performativity (Butler, 1990). By incorporating visual materials into narrative

inquiry, the study aligned with the emphasis on the centrality of the visual in contemporary social life and its influence on self-representation (Phoenix & Rich, 2019).

Two focus-group sessions were conducted with the twenty-one women participating in the study, each lasting approximately ninety minutes. Sessions were held in a seminar room within the Faculty of Education to create a familiar and non-hierarchical environment conducive to open discussion. The first session focused on collective reflection about sociocultural pressures related to the female body, while the second explored how humor, irony, and self-expression through memes could challenge or reproduce normative expectations. Both sessions were facilitated by the first author, who acted as a guide rather than an instructor, encouraging participants to co-construct meaning and share experiences in their own terms.

Each participant was invited to create or select one meme that represented her personal experience or perception of "body image, gender norms, or cultural expectations," with an explicit focus on how these norms become embodied in women's relationships with their physical appearance. They were also asked to provide a short written explanation describing why the meme resonated with them. This approach drew on socio-narratological principles that emphasize storytelling and symbolic representation as ways to access lived experience (Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008). The meme, whether self-produced or chosen from digital platforms, became a narrative and visual artifact through which participants articulated how femininity is performed, regulated, and potentially subverted in everyday life. Participants were given the option to either create their own memes or select existing ones encountered on social media or other online platforms. Participant-created memes tended to be more explicitly autobiographical and reflexive, often directly referencing personal bodily experiences, emotional struggles, or feminist learning processes. By contrast, memes sourced from online spaces more frequently relied on shared cultural templates, familiar visual tropes, and collective humor. Analytically, however, both forms functioned in similar ways: they served as narrative prompts that facilitated storytelling, critical reflection, and group discussion. For this reason, the distinction between created and found memes was not treated as a primary analytical category, though it is acknowledged here as an important dimension of how participants engaged with digital visual culture.

The discussions were guided by open-ended questions designed to connect participants' lived realities to the study's theoretical framework. Examples included: "In what ways do media and social networks influence how you perceive your body?"; "How do memes represent or challenge ideals of femininity?"; and "Can humor or irony become forms of resistance?" These prompts encouraged participants to reflect on their own practices of *doing gender* in online and offline contexts (West & Zimmerman, 1987), while allowing space for emergent, participant-led conversations.

All discussions were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken during sessions to document non-verbal cues and contextual elements of interaction. Each meme was catalogued with a pseudonymized identifier and analyzed alongside its accompanying narrative to preserve the contextual relationship between image and interpretation.

The integration of visual and narrative data provided a multilayered understanding of participants' embodied experiences. This methodological triangulation enabled the

researchers to explore how gendered subjectivities are constructed through both language and image, aligning with previous feminist research emphasizing the value of combining visual methods and storytelling to access complex, affective, and culturally situated dimensions of embodiment (Frank, 2010; Phoenix & Rich, 2019). The resulting corpus (e.g. comprising transcriptions, reflective texts, and memes) offered a rich dataset from which to analyze the processes through which femininity is performed, negotiated, and resisted in digital culture.

Data Analysis

We analysed the data following the principles of narrative analysis. Riessman (2008) describes narrative inquiry as a family of methods based on analysis of the stories people tell. The stories that the participant shared represent the lenses through which we can come to understand their personal experiences, and narratives can help us understand those experiences within a social world (Jewett et al., 2019). The first stage of analysis involved an early submersion in the data by listening to the interviews and making notes of initial interpretations in a reflexive journal. We conducted a thematic analysis with the data starting with a 'narrative indwelling' (Smith & Sparkes, 2019), that is, reading the transcripts and writing notes related to participants' relationship with their bodies and past experiences. For example, some of the themes we constructed from the data include "the pressure to be thin", "the influence of the media on the sociocultural construction of the body", and "gender-based social differences". Then, we identified patterns in the data and relationships, where we discussed our multiple interpretations of the data. In this study, the terms *categories* and *emergent themes* are used to denote different but complementary analytical levels, consistent with narrative and socio-narratological approaches rather than with strictly code-based thematic analysis. *Categories* refer to broader, interpretive domains that organize participants' narratives around key dimensions of embodied experience (e.g., media influence, thinness, self-acceptance). They function as higher-order narrative frames that capture how femininity is socially produced and negotiated. *Emergent themes*, by contrast, denote recurring patterns of meaning, affect, or practice that emerge within each category and cut across individual stories (e.g., moralized body control, algorithmic surveillance, irony as resistance). This distinction allows for an analysis that remains attentive to both the structural organization of narratives and the nuanced meanings articulated within them.

Through this process, four interconnected categories were identified (see Table 1), each representing a core dimension of how femininity is performed, regulated, and resisted in digital culture.

Results

This study reveals various factors that affect, either positively or negatively, the ways in which women have constructed their bodily subjectivity in accordance with Western sociocultural expectations and their relationship with their own bodies. Accordingly, it uncovers experiences and expectations characterized by doubt,

Table 1 Categories and emergent themes

Category	Emergent themes
The pressure to be (and to feel) thin	Cultural ideal of thinness; classed and moralized body control; seasonal anxiety and dieting; irony as resistance
The influence of mass media and social networks on the sociocultural construction of the body	Algorithmic visibility and self-surveillance; pursuit of male validation; emotional impact of comparison; digital irony as critique
The importance of self-acceptance and the deconstruction of stereotypes	Feminist awareness and empowerment; body diversity; authenticity over appearance; humor as collective resistance
Gendered social differences and their influence on body perception	Linguistic asymmetry ("señora/señor"); aging and visibility; discomfort with gendered expectations; parody as feminist re-signification

disillusionment, and dissatisfaction with the body, as well as positive, hopeful, and empowering perspectives that emphasize the need to move away from normative and patriarchal body standards. The findings are organized into four categories: (1) the pressure to be (and to feel) thin; (2) the influence of mass media and social networks on the sociocultural construction of the body; (3) the importance of self-acceptance and the deconstruction of stereotypes; and (4) gendered social differences and their impact on body perception.

The Pressure to be (and to Feel) Thin

The pressure to display a slim body is common among women (Bordo, 2003; Seekis & Barker, 2022). The dominant beauty ideal is that of the white Western woman; those who do not fit this stereotype face greater pressure to conform to a canonical body ideal that excludes them. Moreover, the pressure to be thin is also shaped by social class, since access to healthy food, leisure time for exercise, and the availability of aesthetic treatments are often beyond the reach of women of lower socioeconomic status (Forbes et al., 2007; Jeffreys, 2005) (Fig. 1).

> *"You can always be happy as long as it makes fun of a normative body that is not socially accepted. In other words, it ridicules a person who doesn't wear a size 2, but it does so very cruelly, in my view, because it plays with the 'irregularities' of the body. That is, it says I can always be happy, but makes it clear that if I have 'love handles,' then I cannot." (Carla, age 27).*

This social pressure to achieve a slim body is perceived by some participants as more stressful at certain times of the year, such as summer (Fig. 2):

> *"I feel like I spend the whole year chasing a specific body type, which I never manage to achieve, and that frustrates me, year after year. […]. It's the idea of the 'bikini operation': how you spend the entire year pursuing a body that, when the 'season' arrives, you still haven't achieved." (Paula, age 32).*

Fig. 1 "When you are happy, even your body smiles"

Several participants admitted resorting to extreme diets and excessive exercise in an effort to reach this bodily ideal which, however, *"slips through their fingers like water"* (Laura, age 36). Thus, participants revealed a desire to attain an ideal body, disguising this aspiration as something beneficial from a medical or physiological standpoint (Fig. 3):

> *"When I reached adolescence, I began to feel insecure about my physical appearance because it didn't fit the beauty standard of the moment. On television I saw beautiful, slim women, with whom I compared myself and, to some extent, envied because I wanted to be like them. My body was a major source of conflict for me, so I tried to modify it to my liking by exercising a lot and eating very little. I convinced myself that, from a medical point of view, it was the healthiest option, when in reality it was an obsession that responded to a cultural expectation." (Marta, age 29).*

Fig. 2 How I expected my body to look in summer: Expectations vs. reality

Fig. 3 Robin says: "I work out only for health." Batman replies: "Stop lying"

The participants' narratives highlight how thinness operates as a powerful cultural mandate that is both gendered and classed. While many women internalize the demand to pursue a slim body, often through restrictive diets and excessive exercise, they also recognize the unattainable and exclusionary nature of this ideal. The accounts reveal a cycle of frustration and insecurity reinforced by seasonal pressures and media discourses, underscoring how normative beauty standards continue to shape women's bodily subjectivities and everyday practices. From the perspective of *doing gender*, the participants' experiences of bodily regulation reveal how femininity is enacted as a disciplined performance that demands constant surveillance and

correction (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Bordo, 2003). Thinness emerges as a cultural code through which women demonstrate their ability to comply with dominant norms of self-control, productivity, and desirability. These practices (e.g. dieting, exercising, and self-monitoring) constitute a moralized enactment of gendered responsibility, where failing to achieve a "fit" or "healthy" body signifies a failure of femininity itself. The memes chosen by participants function as ironic commentaries on this performative labor: by exaggerating or parodying the "bikini operation" ideal, they expose the absurdity of an endless bodily project sustained by patriarchal expectations. This ironic distance allows for what Deutsch (2007) describes as moments of *undoing gender*, where the act of humor becomes a subtle refusal to inhabit normative femininity on its own terms.

The Influence of Mass Media and Social Networks on the Sociocultural Construction of the Body

Several participants acknowledged the negative impact that mass media and social networks have on the sociocultural construction of the female body. One participant noted that *"women's fashion stores and brands present images in their advertising campaigns that are practically sickening"* (Sara, age 41), creating an unrealistic pressure on women to conform to a narrowly defined bodily ideal. Diana (34) explained how comparing her body with media representations had deeply affected her own life (Fig. 4):

> *"I was born with a congenital health condition that affects the physical appearance of my legs. I was a cheerful child, in a normative family, with no evident limitations, of average weight, and with strong social skills. It was expected of me that I would be a happy girl, fulfilled and without any complexes. […]. I remember crying every spring for as long as I can recall. The arrival of good*

Fig. 4 "I feel incomplete." "It's just a phase."

weather, which meant revealing my body, was for me a source of profound sadness. I have spent entire summers without going to the beach or the pool because, in my opinion, I was deformed. It is true that I did not have a realistic perception, and when, during a mentally stronger period, I decided to show my body, and even when I look at one of the few photos I have, I can—objectively—see that it was not so exaggerated. But the social pressure, the constant comparison of my body with the idealized bodies in magazines, on Instagram, and in movies, is an enormous burden for me that I don't know if I will ever overcome." (Diana, age 34).

This media pressure can also lead women to seek male validation over their own interests and ideals (Fig. 5):

"Throughout our lives women receive a bombardment of information and advice about how our bodies and our appearance must be in order to be successful. Even if we don't achieve the perfect body (because it can never truly be achieved), we must at least 'camouflage' it so that it resembles the beauty ideal. For this reason, we often choose clothes not for comfort or personal preference, but to feel closer to that supposed ideal of beauty—and ultimately to obtain male validation." (Blanca, age 44).

The participants' accounts illustrate how media discourses and digital platforms operate as powerful mechanisms of regulation, shaping women's relationships with their bodies through constant comparison, unrealistic ideals, and the search for external validation. These narratives reveal how beauty standards imposed by mass culture foster both psychological distress and conformity to patriarchal expectations, under-

Fig. 5 "My fashion style: rotating the 4 outfits that don't make me cry."

scoring the central role of media in the reproduction of bodily oppression. Within the logic of *doing gender*, social media platforms constitute powerful arenas of accountability (West & Zimmerman, 1987), where users are continually evaluated through images that measure proximity to idealized femininity. The participants' testimonies demonstrate how digital visibility transforms the private act of self-presentation into a public performance governed by the male gaze and algorithmic amplification. In this context, as Dobson (2016) and Gill and Orgad (2018) argue, self-objectification becomes an interactive and affective practice—an attempt to gain validation through adherence to aesthetic norms that are both internalized and externally reinforced. The narratives of Diana and Blanca reveal that these processes of visual comparison and self-censorship are not merely individual anxieties but manifestations of gender as a social order reproduced through media infrastructures. However, the use of memes also creates fissures in this system: through irony and exaggeration, participants reappropriate digital symbols of beauty, turning them into instruments of critique that destabilize the very standards they appear to reproduce.

The Importance of Self-Acceptance and the Deconstruction of Stereotypes

Despite the enormous social pressure many participants experienced to conform to normative body molds, several shared their journeys of self-acceptance and the importance of challenging imposed beauty standards (Fig. 6):

> *"I always preferred comfort over being fashionable. Moreover, from a very young age I was clear that what really matters in people is not their physical appearance. For that reason, I never gave it more importance than it deserved, and one could say that social and cultural constructions regarding the body have not influenced me much." (Esther, age 36).*

Some participants emphasized the need to recognize beauty in bodily diversity, rejecting the idea that there is a single normative body that embodies an ideal of beauty. For instance, Covadonga described a personal process of learning (Fig 7):

> *"Over time, as I reached adulthood, I understood that stereotyped beauty standards were established by the industry, and that 'real' women are not like that. It was a process of self-discovery and acceptance that helped me gain more confidence to express myself through clothing and to understand that there is a diversity of bodies, all beautiful in their own way." (Covadonga, age 52).*

For others, individuality and the refusal to define personal worth according to physical appearance were linked to the influence of feminist theories in their everyday lives. These perspectives allowed them to gradually dismantle patriarchal imperatives around gender (Fig. 8):

Fig. 6 "Born to live, not to style my hair."

> *"For a long time, I had long hair, wore heels and short dresses on weekends, put on earrings, wore makeup […]. I couldn't leave the house without makeup, and I was terrified that someone other than my partner or close family might see me with a 'bare face.' […]. Fortunately, feminism came into my life—late, but it came—and little by little I freed myself from many of the patriarchal imperatives that had conditioned me." (Iria, age 41).*

Taken together, these accounts underscore the transformative potential of self-acceptance and feminist consciousness in destabilizing rigid beauty ideals. By reclaiming agency over their own bodies and embracing diversity, participants not only challenged cultural stereotypes but also articulated alternative ways of valuing themselves beyond appearance. Their narratives reveal that resisting normative standards can become both a personal act of empowerment and a collective pathway toward redefining femininity. These narratives exemplify a process of *undoing gender* (Deutsch, 2007) in which participants consciously challenge the alignment between femininity and bodily compliance. Through self-reflection and feminist awareness, they disrupt what Butler (1990) terms the "compulsory repetition" of gender norms, reinterpreting beauty and value as plural rather than hierarchical. Their emphasis on

Fig. 7 Body positive

comfort, authenticity, and diversity redefines the embodied expression of femininity, suggesting that gender can be performed differently without forfeiting social intelligibility. Moreover, the participants' use of body-positive memes functions as a digital enactment of resistance: by circulating images that celebrate imperfection or reject

Fig. 8 "How did I fall for the trap of male validation?"

glamour, they participate in what Mendes et al. (2019) describe as feminist counter-publics (online spaces where humor and solidarity become strategies for dismantling oppressive discourses). In this sense, self-acceptance is not merely psychological but political, as it reconfigures the conditions through which gender is collectively "done" and "undone."

Gendered Social Differences and their Influence on Body Perception

Sociocultural norms and labels shape gendered differentiation and influence how women and men construct their bodies. For example, two participants criticized the negative connotations embedded in language when referring to women (Fig. 9):

> *"When a woman is called 'señora' [ma'am], what we hear is 'old.' And by old, we understand a wrinkled, small, weak, slow woman, worth little or nothing. By contrast, when a man is called 'señor' [sir], he is exalted; it is a title of power and respect, of wisdom. This association, though jocular, stems from the role of 'woman as decorative object' to which we have been subjected." (Laura, age 37).*

> *"Recently, singers Madonna and Beyoncé were in the news. The media say they are already too old to keep doing what they do. For example, they say Madonna at 64 is 'a grandmother who should retire,' but Mick Jagger at 76 'still has plenty of energy left.'" (Maribel, age 51).*

The sociocultural construction of the body also manifests when social norms dictate how the female body should look and behave. Women who do not conform risk exclusion:

Fig. 9 "When they call me 'old'"

"As a child, I remember my mother insisting I dress like a 'girl,' but I preferred to wear comfortable clothes like my brother's. In adolescence, my appearance and style of dress, together with the activities I enjoyed, led to me being labeled as a 'tomboy.' […]. There are times when I try to fit into what is expected of me as a woman, but whatever I do, I always end up feeling as if I am wearing a disguise: when I try to conform to what is considered feminine, I feel uncomfortable, and when I dress in my own style, the way others treat me feels misaligned with how I feel inside." (Elena, age 28).

This illustrates how the pressure to conform to gender norms produces discomfort for women, reinforcing standards that ultimately serve male comfort (Fig. 10):

"I remember feeling ashamed of being taller than the boys in my class, because being tall was associated with masculinity, and that made me feel big, clumsy, and not feminine at all." (Irene, age 31).

Together, these accounts reveal how deeply ingrained gendered double standards shape women's bodily experiences from an early age. By linking worth to femininity and physical appearance -while valuing men for intelligence, professional success, or

Fig. 10 "When you're… the so-called greatest."

leadership- these norms perpetuate inequality and reinforce a symbolic hierarchy that privileges male bodies and identities over female ones.

This final theme illustrates the linguistic and cultural dimensions of *doing gender*, showing how everyday discourse codifies gender hierarchies that extend beyond the body. As West and Zimmerman (1987) emphasize, gender is accomplished through social interaction (e.g. through words, gestures, and evaluations that reaffirm the gender order). The participants' reflections on terms such as *"señora"* and *"señor"* demonstrate how language itself becomes a performative act that assigns status and legitimacy unevenly. Similarly, references to the aging female body reveal how cultural narratives regulate visibility and desirability across the life course, a phenomenon that Connell and Pearse (2015) interpret as the intersection of gender with age and power. By creating and analyzing memes that parody these asymmetries, participants expose the subtle mechanisms through which gender difference is naturalized, making visible the cultural work required to sustain male privilege. In doing so, they transform digital humor into a critical feminist practice that reclaims narrative agency and contests the symbolic subordination embedded in everyday speech and media representation.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to examine how the female body is socially and culturally constructed through the visual and narrative practices that circulate in contemporary digital cultures, with particular attention to the role of memes as tools for both reproducing and contesting normative ideals of femininity. Drawing on the framework of *doing gender* (West & Zimmerman, 1987), the research sought to uncover how gendered norms are enacted, negotiated, and occasionally subverted in women's reflections on their bodily experiences. Through a socio-narratological and

visual methodology, the analysis illuminated the complex interplay between structure and agency, revealing how women internalize, perform, and resist dominant discourses surrounding beauty, thinness, and social legitimacy.

The findings demonstrate that femininity (approached here through its embodied dimension) is not merely a category of identity but an active process sustained through everyday practices of surveillance, discipline, and comparison. Across the four thematic areas (pressure to be thin, the influence of media and social networks, self-acceptance and deconstruction of stereotypes, and gendered social differences), participants' narratives expose the mechanisms by which femininity is produced and regulated through the ongoing evaluation and disciplining of the female body within a patriarchal cultural order. The recurrent emphasis on thinness and aesthetic conformity illustrates how sociocultural expectations operate as moral imperatives, shaping women's self-perception and daily conduct. Yet these same narratives also reveal cracks in the normative system: moments of irony, humor, and feminist reflexivity through which participants critically engage with and re-signify gendered ideals. The memes they created or selected serve as both mirrors and weapons, reflecting cultural oppression while enabling subtle acts of resistance that destabilize dominant aesthetic hierarchies.

By integrating the *doing gender* framework with digital feminist scholarship (Butler, 1990; Dobson, 2016; Mendes et al., 2019), this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how embodied gender performativity, and specifically the construction of the female body, unfolds in online spaces. It shows that digital environments, far from being neutral, intensify the visibility and accountability of gender performances; however, they also offer creative opportunities to "undo" gender (Deutsch, 2007) through irony, parody, and collective critique. Memes, as accessible and participatory visual texts, allow women to narrate their embodied experiences in ways that both expose and transcend cultural constraints, reconfiguring what it means to inhabit a female body in the age of social media. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory role that memes can play in feminist critique. While humor and irony may expose the arbitrariness of beauty norms, they do not operate outside the dominant visual regimes that structure femininity. Several memes discussed in this study rely on cartoonized or stylized representations of women's bodies that remain youthful, slim, and conventionally legible as feminine. Similarly, memes addressing aging or being labeled as "old" (e.g., Fig. 9) may do so without visually representing bodily markers commonly associated with aging, such as wrinkles or grey hair. These visual choices risk reproducing the very standards they seek to undermine by implicitly reaffirming which bodies are considered recognizable, shareable, or aesthetically acceptable within digital culture. Rather than undermining the study's conclusions, this tension highlights a central insight of doing gender in online contexts: acts of resistance are often partial, constrained, and negotiated within existing norms. Memes thus function not as inherently emancipatory tools, but as contested sites where feminist critique and normative reproduction coexist.

These insights carry significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the research extends the *doing gender* approach by situating it within digital and visual cultures, illustrating that the construction of gender today cannot be under-

stood without considering algorithmic mediation, online visibility, and participatory humor. Practically, the findings suggest that visual and narrative methodologies (especially those employing memes) can serve as powerful pedagogical and emancipatory tools in feminist education and digital literacy. Encouraging critical engagement with online representations of the body may help dismantle internalized ideals and foster communities of resistance grounded in self-acceptance, diversity, and care.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge certain methodological limitations that qualify the scope of these findings. In this sense, this study relies on a self-selecting sample of postgraduate women students enrolled in the Feminist Studies programme at a single Spanish university, which already limits the potential for transferability. While memes proved to be effective catalysts, the reliance on self-reported narratives may further amplify more reflexive voices and risk under-representing dissenting or non-normative perspectives. Future research should broaden gender identities, include cross-platform comparisons, and employ more intersectional sampling strategies.

In sum, this study underscores that gender is continuously "done" and "undone" through embodied, visual, and discursive practices. Women's engagement with memes reveals a dual dynamic of compliance and contestation, reflecting both the persistence of patriarchal beauty regimes and the transformative potential of feminist creativity. By listening to and analyzing these digital narratives, we gain deeper insight into how contemporary femininity is lived, negotiated, and reimagined: one meme, one story, and one act of self-representation at a time.

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Declarations

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Authors and Affiliations

Gustavo González-Calvo[1] · Jonathan Ospina-Betancurt[1] · David Hortigüela-Alcalá[2]

✉ Gustavo González-Calvo
gustavo.gonzalez@uva.es

Jonathan Ospina-Betancurt
jonathan.ospina@uva.es

David Hortigüela-Alcalá
dhortiguela@ubu.es

[1] University of Valladolid, Valladolid, Spain

[2] University of Burgos, Burgos, Spain