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Young people's digitally-networked bodies: the changing possibilities of what a gendered body can be, do and become online

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on data from creative and visual group interviews undertaken in 2018 with five LGBTQ+ young people aged 15–8 years old in the South Wales valleys, this paper explores the gendered experiences of the body online. In line with wider research, participants illustrated that commodified gendered and sexualized norms were intensified online through the everyday forceful intrusion of idealized bodies and abusive body-shaming comments. However, they also pointed to the role of food and pet content in experiences of embodied pleasure and feeling good online. Inspired by feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship, this paper examines how food and pet photography plugs into masculinizing and feminizing bodily assemblages. In so doing, it not only makes an empirical contribution to the field of gender studies, but also offers a contribution to the methodological literature by developing a theoretically informed approach, which expands the boundaries of what a gendered body may be, do and become online.

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Introduction

The dispersal of social media into young people's social lives has significantly impacted the way gender and sexuality are regulated, negotiated and expressed through the body. While the relationship between young people's bodies and social media has been an ongoing area of concern for policy-makers and practitioners, research is only just beginning to engage with the complexity of young people's digitally networked bodies. This paper contributes to these debates by demonstrating how engaging with what makes young people feel good online can expand our understanding of what a gendered body can be, do and become. To date, much of the extant research focuses on how photo-sharing applications, such as Instagram contribute to low self-esteem and dissatisfaction about appearance amongst young people, with teenage girls positioned as especially vulnerable to feelings of bodily malaise (Royal Society for Public Health, 2017). For example, a 2021 survey of over 2000 girls and young women in the UK found that 40% of those aged 11–6 years old had encountered images online that 'made them feel insecure and less confident about themselves' (Girlguiding, 2021).

Feminist media scholars note that social media platforms promote a post-feminist and neo-liberal sensibility focused on the normalization of self-optimization, entrepreneurialism and self-branding (Chen & Kanai, 2021). Within this cultural context gender equality is assumed to have been achieved thereby disavowing the workings of power inequality and asserting individualist discourses of

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empowerment, choice and freedom (McRobbie, 2008). Investment in the body and participation in intimate forms of body exposure online is seen to aid girls and young women's social mobility yet comes with 'intense forms of surveillance, scrutiny and individualism' (Rich & Evans, 2013, p. 20) that operate as new modalities of constraint.

Despite cultural shifts in bodily norms with boys and young men taking up forms of sexual self-presentation previously associated with women (Hakim, 2019; Harvey & Ringrose, 2015; Manago, 2013; Siibak, 2010), masculine body practices have received comparatively little attention in research, policy and practice. Gill (2011) observes that men's bodies have been increasingly 'on display' since the mid-1980s. More recently, Hakim (2019) has explored the rise of young men displaying their worked-out bodies on social media. Images of muscular backs and six-packs have also been positioned as relatively commonplace amongst teenage boys (Albury, 2015; Harvey & Ringrose, 2015). Research indicates that boys have more freedom than girls to 'publicly display their bodies without risking adult or peer condemnation' and are socially rewarded if their bodies fit with dominant socio-cultural understandings of muscular and fit masculine embodiment (Albury, 2015, 1742; Ringrose and Harvey 2015). However, not all boys and young men are able to accrue value from bodily displays which can be stigmatized as too desperate, vain, cowardly or effeminate (Setty, 2019).

Many of the bodies idealized on social media link with binary conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity as exclusive, dichotomous categories, but social media has also expanded notions of the ideal gendered body. Scholars have noted the phenomenon of 'fitspiration' where women are posting their muscular, toned worked-out bodies on social media (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021). Furthermore, Chen and Kanai (2021) observe that some of the most popular beauty influencers on Instagram are gay men who embody idealized forms of neo-liberal femininity predicated on a white, middle-class and heterosexual norm. Although these influencers upset the heteronormative grid of male/masculine/heterosexual, they do so by promoting a neo-liberal post-feminist sensibility that requires transformation through modes of consumption. Sexual and gender minorities may be visible and intelligible in new ways, but this does not necessarily upset the status quo. Despite this changing visibility, the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) youth remains largely under-represented in research on social media and the body.

While this paper does not address the substantive gap in representation of LGBTQ+ young people in the literature on social media and the body, it does creatively engage with data produced by five LGBTQ+ young people aged 15–8 years old in the South Wales valleys to activate new ways of seeing the gendered body online. In the following sections, I detail how I employed participant-led creative and visual research methods to engage with young people's experiences of the body online. I note how engaging with questions of embodied pleasure and what feels good in the body worked to de-centre the role of the human body on social media. Specifically, participant-selected content illustrated how food and pet photography can plug into masculinizing and feminizing bodily assemblages. I then detail how feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship enabled me to theorize the salience of the more-than-human content that participants discussed. The empirical sections address how commodified gendered and sexualized norms are intensified online before exploring how food and pet content invite us to reconsider the boundaries of the gendered body online.

Researching young people's digitally networked bodies through creative and visual methods

The research explored in this paper draws from creative and visual group interviews undertaken in 2018 with young people attending an LGBTQ+ youth group in a post-industrial urban town in the South Wales valleys. The research was approved by the ethics committee of Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences. Besides from the author, all names in this paper are pseudonyms including

the name of the town (Castell) and the youth group (Castell Q). The research project was promoted to potential participants via the Castell Q youth worker and a taster workshop led by the author. This workshop offered them the opportunity to try out research activities, ask questions about the research project as well as collect information and consent forms. In the context of a weekly youth group attended by a small number of young people, I was concerned that some members may feel obliged to participate because their peers were involved. This was mitigated by spacing out my visits to the group so they did not dominate the nascent youth group's schedule and clearly advertising to the young people when I would be facilitating research activities.

Throughout the fieldwork, I checked in with participants to remind them of the purpose of the study, the right to withdraw, the methods to be employed and how data was being recorded. This included embedding 'ethical talk' throughout the fieldwork sessions, such as asking participants if I could turn on recording equipment and intermittently reminding them that they were being recorded (Renold et al. 2008). Furthermore, the creative and visual research activities I employed were designed to be flexible, allowing participants to 'tune out or withdraw from an activity or moment, without necessarily having to articulate this desire explicitly' (Renold and Ringrose 2019, p. 5). Creative and visual methodologies are also valuable for exploring sensitive topics with young people as different modes of expression can tap into experiences that rarely surface in traditional language-based research as well as prompt different connections and perspectives (Marston 2019; Leavy, 2015; Mannay, 2016).

After introducing Castell Q to the research project, Alex (aged 17), Tess (aged 18), Lucy (aged 16), Sarah (aged 15) and Jen (aged 16) signed up to participate. All were White British and had grown up in or around the urban town of Castell, which they described as 'rough' and 'chavvy'.¹ Historically, the area was a centre of industrial development in South Wales through mineral extraction and processing which drove initial growth. However, rapid deindustrialization in the 1980s led to a drastic increase in unemployment and economic inactivity resulting in communities that have struggled to transform economically, socially and culturally (Mannay, 2016; Walkerdine & Jiminez, 2012).

The visual data discussed in this paper was generated through two creative and visual group interviews lasting approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. In the first group interview, Alex, Lucy, Sarah and Jen attended and were invited to assemble a map of their digital world through drawing and/or collaging (see Figure 1a). Participants were provided with A3 card, magazines, newspapers, a selection of social media and gaming icons, multi-coloured pens, glitter, stickers, scissors and glue sticks. This activity aimed to offer an engaging way for participants to articulate the different digital cultures they were part of, rather than focusing on a pre-defined set of digital practices (Driver & Coulter, 2018). Conversations jumped tangentially from topic to topic, including Instagram celebrities, Ru Paul's Drag Race, Snapchat, gaming, do-it-yourself projects on YouTube, travel blogs, queer activists and so on. This generated insights into the complex ecology of digital content, contact and conduct with which the young people at Castell Q engaged.

In the second group interview, Alex, Tess, Lucy and Sarah attended and discussed the maps and observed that the body was a common theme across all four. I invited them to take screenshots of content that further illustrated social media's visual culture of bodily display and these were drawn upon to elicit group discussion. For the first set of screenshots the participants chose to focus on idealized bodies on Instagram and the difficult feelings these brought up. However, for the second set of screenshots, I invited participants to capture content that made them feel good in their bodies. This set of screenshots focused largely on more-than-human contents such as food, pets and nature. Capturing screenshots presented further ethical issues around who and what is searchable, as well as what should be gathered and reproduced in publications (Marston 2019). Ethical protocols were discussed with participants at the outset of this activity to guide how the task was undertaken. For example, screenshots did not include identifiable others unless they were celebrities, or it was of a sponsored advertisement. I do not represent the images of people that participants captured and only share images of more-than-human contents such as food, pets and nature.

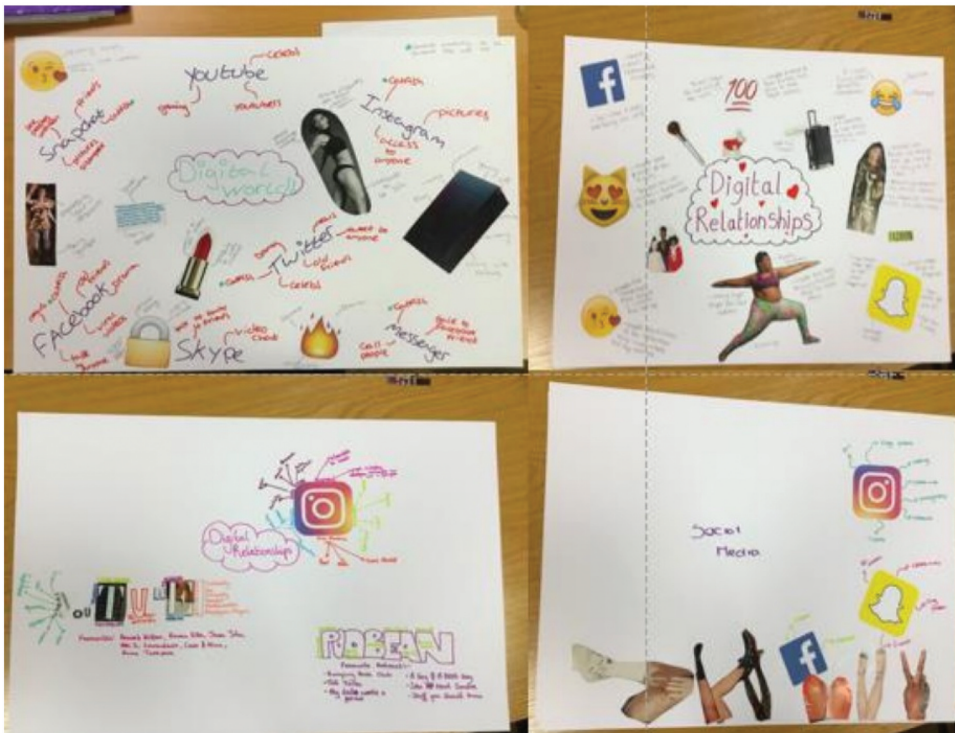


Figure 1a. Castell Q maps.

Theorizing gender and the digitally networked body

In this section, I detail how feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship informed how I theorized gender and the body, which in turn shaped my analytic approach. I employ the term digitally networked bodies in recognition that bodies are affective assemblages that can be the site of 'alternative modalities of belonging, connectivity and intimacy' (Puar, 2007, p. 208) that expand gender and sexuality beyond identitarian frames and entangle with the more-than-human. Feminist, queer, post-structural and post-colonial scholarship has long critiqued how the body is treated as a 'biological given' captured in simplistic gender binaries that privilege heteronormative formations and block other bodily possibilities (Kerpen and Marston 2019). Building on this work, feminist posthuman (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2016) and new materialist (Barad, 2007; Bennett 2010) scholarship questions the privileging of the human body as the locus of gender and sexuality. The human is decentred as the privileged category of analysis to demonstrate the emergence of subjectivity through and within relational networks that cut across natural, cultural and technological realms (Delanda, 2006, p. 11). Instead of ontologically prior bounded entities bodies are understood to be produced through shifting sets of relations that are not fixed and static (Blackman, 2008).

Feminist scholars have appropriated Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of agencement or 'machinic assemblage' to account for the multiple, messy and complex sets of material, discursive, natural, cultural, biological and technological connections through which the gendered body emerges (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). To view the gendered body as an assemblage extends focus beyond the fleshy human body towards a collective web of forces that cut across and join together the human and more-than-human (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010). With the concept of assemblage 'what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what is "between" them', that is the agentic force relations between 'a set of relations that are inseparable from each other' (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987; p. viii; Puar, 2012). This conceptualization not only focuses on what the body has been constituted as

but on how gender is assembled in particular configurations and what the gendered body can be, do and become (Fox & Alldred, 2013).

To attend to the different functions of these assemblages, scholars employ affect theory which attunes to the perceptual, bodily and sensory changes of state created in encounters with the world (Sampson et al., 2018). Driven by an awareness of the limitations of inquiry focused solely on issues of ideology, meaning and representation, theorizations of affect have proved popular for addressing the vitality and liveliness of everyday encounters with media. In their work on popular media culture, Ringrose and Coleman (2013) reconsider the relationship between bodies and images by discussing media affects rather than effects. This approach encourages a consideration of popular media images not as ideological impositions on bodies but affective relations that produce particular impulses and inclinations to perceive (Coleman, 2011). Consequently, media images are neither inherently good nor bad and the affects that are produced in-relation with young people are unpredictable. Attention to media affects does not necessarily neglect the way commodified gendered and sexualized norms online promote specific kinds of embodiment, but considers how young people become *with* not *like* these images in ways that are not predetermined or easily articulated (Coleman, 2011, p. 160).

Consideration of affect was key to my analytic approach which was an ongoing and iterative process of engaging with the data. This involved shifting attention from visual data as objects to be 'read' to considering the affects that arose when participants were in-relation with social media images and what they do. During transcription, I listened carefully to the data and tuned into pauses, laughter, hesitation, changes in intonation and other non-verbal exclamations, as well as the sound and movement of the fieldwork sessions. Such affective analysis does not hasten to fix definitive interpretations of data but keeps meaning on the move. Attending to the affects that circulated in these research encounters tuned me into the palpable depressive mood that circulated when Instagram was discussed. It also prompted me to consider how young people's digitally networked bodies could be sites of pleasure by asking them about digital content that made them feel good in their bodies. Feminist scholars have noted that pleasure is too often absent from gender and sexuality research, which continues to treat young people's bodies as objects of risk (Austin, 2017).

Working with feminist posthuman and new materialist theories also prompted me to follow 'the scent' of the more-than-human in my analysis (Bennett, 2009). Correspondingly, when participants highlighted food and pet photography as sources of embodied pleasure, I lingered on this content and participant's talk to consider how it activated different ways of seeing gendered bodies online. I considered the data in relation to research and theorizing from others as well as my own affective entanglements in order to pay attention to the ways different digital content was drawn into masculinizing and feminizing assemblages (Jackson & Mazzei, 2011; Maclure, 2013). In the next sections, I turn to consider the empirical data by exploring the participants accounts of encountering idealized bodies on Instagram before examining food and pet photography in more detail.

Idealized bodies on instagram

Instagram is a photo and video-sharing social networking site, which allows visual content to be edited with various filters and organized with tags and location information. It was a popular platform amongst the participants, who described it as 'inspirational' and 'idealistic' (Alex's words). However, they also noted the contradictory messages of social media's post-feminist visual culture where stereotyped feminine 'sexiness' and the increased objectification of men are seen as a normal and banal part of social media connectivities (Ringrose & Coleman, 2013). This was illustrated by screenshots captured from the 'Explore' section of Instagram by Lucy and Alex. The 'Explore' page presents a collection of images algorithmically selected based on the recorded activity of each user. The participants expressed confusion regarding the way posts were selected for the 'Explore' page and whether they reflected their practices on the platform. As Leaver et al. (2019) note, Instagram's algorithmic activities remain invisible to users and difficult to understand but can be seen to

perpetuate social norms. For example, Lucy's and Alex's screenshots featured images focused on the breasts, bums, waists and legs of women and muscular torsos of men, illustrating how Instagram aggregates and bifurcates bodies along familiar gender normative lines. In the following exchange, the participants describe these images as 'just like casual' but also problematize them as a source of anxiety and concern.

Alex: Yeah, like that one has got like pictures of topless people, and like models, and stuff and it's kind of like, it's kind of just like casual but it's not like no-one looks like that coming out of the sea

Tess: Yeah, this isn't how people look but it's making it look like this is everyday normal stuff

Alex: Yeah

Lucy: And they suggest this kind of stuff to you as well

Kate: That's your one, you've got a similar one

Lucy: Yeah, I think I've done like mostly girls for mine but it's like body differences, on the beach picture again, topless men again, they suggest it to you like a lot on Instagram

Kate: And this is the discovery bit?

Lucy: Yeah, you go into there and it's usually suggested things from stuff you've been to before, but considering mine is a rabbit Instagram you wouldn't think they'd suggest things like that ... all I follow is rabbits, horses

In this group interview extract, Lucy, Alex and Tess critique how Instagram pushes pictures of 'topless people' and 'models' onto them as though these images are 'everyday normal stuff'. Although the 'Explore' page is supposed to show content tailored to each users recorded activity, Lucy and Alex observe the similarity between their screenshots and the content Instagram suggests to them. Rather than being passive consumers of Instagram, the above exchange illustrates the participant's critical engagement with its content. Yet, they went on to note that the everyday intrusion of these images still materialized into a 'horrible' 'pressure to change how you look' (Tess's words). Participants at Castell Q indicated that 'people are forced into thinking you need to be skinny to be liked' (Sarah's words) which was compounded by the difficulty of finding clothes that fit them in shops and the frequency of hateful comments when a 'bigger girl' tries to 'show off their body' online (Lucy's words).

Notably, it was not only the impossibility of looking like these images they criticized but also the seeming inescapability of encountering idealized bodies on Instagram. Lucy highlights that her account is a 'rabbit Instagram' and all she follows is 'rabbits, horses'. While Lucy primarily used Instagram to pet-work, that is connect with other animals through her pet rabbit, the platform regularly plugged her into an anthropocentric gallery of images that centre the human body. The participants' comments emphasize the weight exerted by the sheer volume of these images on social media and a palpable depressive mood circulated in the room as the participants talked about their Instagram screenshots. After hearing how Instagram evoked a pervasive feeling of bodily malaise, I invited participants to screenshot content that made them feel good in their bodies. As illustrated in [Figure 1b](#), this second set of screenshots produced a different gallery of images in which the human body was largely decentred.

These screenshots provide an insight into the appeal of Instagram for the participants whose selected images included food, travel, swimwear adverts featuring 'bigger girls' and animals. Despite the algorithmic centring of the human body on the 'Explore' pages, the participant selected content indicates that human bodies on Instagram are emergent in a relational field in which more-than-human visual content is equally at play. To explore these connections further, in the following sections I consider the significance of food and pet photography on young people's digitally networked body cultures and whether this content offers opportunities to temporarily displace social media's disciplinary post-feminist gaze from the human body (Riley et al., 2016).

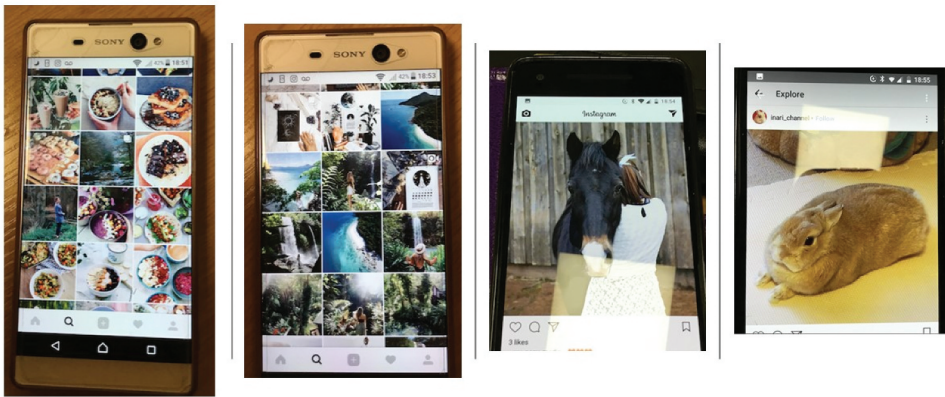


Figure 1b. Castell Q screenshots.

Mediated masculinity and food porn

Food was identified by Alex at Castell Q as an example of Instagram content that made him feel good in his body. Stylized food images and videos like those displayed in Figure 2 are a prominent feature of platforms, such as Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube. This content is often dubbed ‘food porn’ which further indicates how it is associated with embodied pleasure online. Scholars have noted the visceral ‘aesthetic of excess’ conveyed in such food production and consumption content which entangles with body politics and gendered embodiment in interesting ways (Dejmanee, 2016; Lupton, 2019).

Dejmanee (2016, p. 430) argues that food content operates as an important site of ‘feminized media production’ that offers women a means of displacing the regulatory post-feminist gaze from their bodies onto food. However, she also argues that this content fetishizes domesticity and often portrays oozing, dripping food in a manner that recalls the ‘leakiness’ associated with female embodiment (Dejmanee, 2016, p. 438; see also Irigaray 1985). Similarly, Lupton (2019, p. 160) observes the ‘often bizarre’ and ‘extreme ways’ that a ‘visceral desire for meat’ is ‘equated with male sexuality and violence against women’ in digital food media. She describes, for example, how a popular YouTube channel called ‘Epic Meal Time’ features men cooking and messily consuming fatty meats, alcohol and cheese while making sexualized analogies to women’s bodies.

Both Dejmanee and Lupton reference ecofeminist Adams (1990), whose influential work addressed the way meat has stood in for a hegemonic phallogentric masculinity that seeks to subjugate and consume both animals and women. Adams extends ‘theories of objectification and male violence against women to human violence against animals, claiming that these processes connect to and reinforce one another’ (Hamilton 2019, 2016, p. 114). While Adams’ work offers valuable insights into the connection between misogyny and the exploitation of animals, the theoretical framework she draws upon relies on a binary and fairly rigid gender hierarchy between men and women (see Hamilton, 2019 for a contemporary critique). It is, therefore, limited in its ability to address the cultural variability, historical specificity and multiplicity of masculinities and femininities and the role that food plays in these shifting formations.

Cultural shifts in masculine bodily display invites a more nuanced analysis that takes into account the variable ways that social media platforms, muscles, meat and other foods plug into masculinizing and feminizing assemblages. The pressure to adhere to idealized norms of strong muscularity on social media was noted by Alex at Castell Q who associated Instagram with ‘body image’, ‘pressures’, ‘steroids’ and ‘gym’ on his map (see Figure 3). These annotations highlight the kinds of aesthetically motivated measures that have become normative in efforts to achieve impossible ideals of masculine bodily perfection (Coffey & Ringrose, 2016). However, Alex was a white Welsh queer-identified



Figure 2. Alex's screenshot.

17-year old whose tall, slender figure and long hair countered dominant socio-cultural understandings of masculine embodiment. Furthermore, he spoke passionately about engaging with feminist, queer and vegan politics online.

This is particularly significant given Renold's and Ivinson's (2019, p. 4) observation that 'for many boys, and queer youth more widely, expressions of non-(hetero)normative genders and sexualities continue to be fraught in valleys' schools and communities' (see also Renold & Ringrose, 2016). These localities have struggled to transform economically, socially and culturally following rapid deindustrialization which led to a drastic increase in unemployment and economic inactivity (Walkerdine & Jiminez, 2012). These conditions have had a significant impact on how gender and sexuality is mediated with scholars noting that 'securing a socio-historical hegemonic masculinity [...] operated as community survival' and heteronormativity continues to loom large in what young people are expected to do and become (Renold & Ivinson, 2015, p. 241; see also Renold & Ringrose, 2016;

Walkerdine & Jimenez, 2012). For example, Ward (2016) observes that rugby's powerful position in Welsh culture nostalgically invokes an exalted form of masculine heroism, pain and toughness associated with Wales' industrial past and marginalizes other ways of doing masculinity in the area.

Interestingly, rugby and meat-eating came together in an anecdote Alex shared about his older brother's rugby team playing a game with a frozen chicken that they went on to cook and eat for lunch. This story stuck in my mind for how it contrasted with Alex's own food politics and gendered embodiment. It is indicative of how dead animals can be incorporated into the homo-social rituals of a traditionally male-dominated sport and offer the kind of protein-rich flesh seen to fuel the bulky muscular physiques of rugby players. Meanwhile, plant-based diets such as Alex's continue to be stigmatized as feminizing through their association with low muscle mass, weakness and dietary restraint (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2018). While this may seem to support Adam's treatise about meat, I am not arguing that muscular, sporty bodies are in themselves indicative of sexist and aggressive masculinity nor do I believe that plant-based diets alone offer a significant form of resistance to masculinizing processes.

As Janell Watson (2015) argues, existing models of masculinity can lend spare parts to new ones assembling different kinds of gendered power relations where seemingly 'softer masculinities' obscure enduring hetero-patriarchal dividends (see also Connell, 2000; Demitrou, 2001). This is notable, for example, in the adverts produced by the animal rights organization PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) that assert vegetables are good for men's sexual stamina and feature men energetically waving their phallic vegetable genitalia (PETA, 2019). These adverts recall the way the common use of the eggplant emoji as a stand-in for the penis has rendered a staple vegetable in plant-based diets into a material agent of phallicentric masculinity in digital communication.

In contrast to the sexual dominance promoted in the PETA advert, however, Alex's veganism appeared driven by a concern for the environment. He spoke at length about learning to cook vegan food as well as making beeswax food wraps, charcoal toothpaste and soaps from YouTube. All of these are domestic pursuits that might typically be coded as feminine. Furthermore, when asked to produce an image of Instagram content that made him feel good in his body Alex shared a screenshot that focused on light-hearted glossy food images that he described as 'warm' and 'comforting' (see Figure 3). The array of stylized, neatly arranged foods with pink and purple accents displayed in Alex's screenshot convey the indulgent pleasure of food as opposed to the bland functionality of using a frozen chicken as a ball and then eating it.

By considering Alex's queer veganism as part of a wider apparatus of relations that plug him into environmental politics, domestic pursuits and the indulgent mediated foodscapes of Instagram, I argue that his way of doing masculinity constitutes an 'alternative figuration' (Braidotti, 2011,

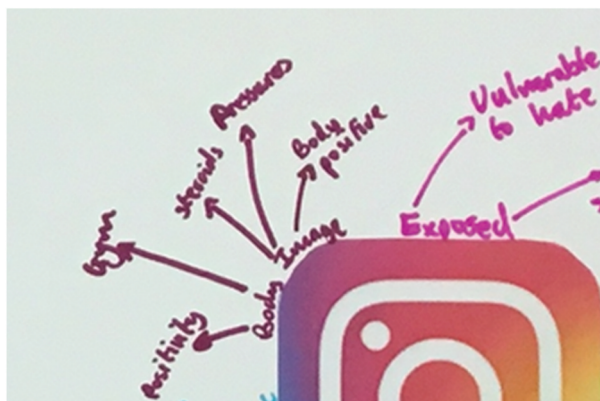


Figure 3. Excerpt from Alex's map.

p. 248). Alex's digital practices displace the vision of mediated masculinity 'away from heteropatriarchal discourses and the phallogocentric mode' that ties masculinity with meat, strong muscularity and the subjugation of women and animals (Braidotti, 2011, p. 248). His engagement with vegan politics online and the way this materialized into domestic pursuits offline significantly ruptures dominant discourses around the gendered politics of food.

The body politics of pet-working and pet influencers

In this section, I consider the social media phenomenon of pet influencers and pet-working. Social media influencers are micro-celebrities who accumulate a following through 'textual and visual narration of their personal, everyday lives, upon which paid advertorials . . . for products or services are premised' (Abidin, 2016, p. 1). Such social media practices are commodified and exploited by a multitude of actors and agencies who profit not only from the advertising revenue but through the rendering of fleshly bodies into digital data for the knowledge economy (Lupton, 2016). While the practice is typically associated with young men and women, an increasing number of companies are turning to domestic animals on social media to promote their products or brands.

For example, one of the Instagram images selected by Lucy at Castell Q was of a Netherland Dwarf rabbit whose account has over 12,000 followers and intermittently promotes food products, watches along with branded rabbit t-shirts (see Figure 4). Although the rabbit does not command a massive following such micro-influencers make up a significant portion of the pet influencer market and are indicative of the role pets can play in generating an income through social media (Urban Paws, 2020). The million-dollar industry of pet influencers on Instagram reiterates the surprising material equivalence between humans and more-than-humans in advanced capitalist societies (Braidotti, 2013). The following exchange details how the young people responded when the rabbit screenshot in Figure 4 appeared on the screen during the group interview.

Everyone: Aaaw!

Tess: It's a luff!

Lucy: To me that is literally me reincarnated as a rabbit

(Giggles)

Kate: Is this your rabbit?

Lucy: No, I wish. If my rabbit was that obese though I'd be a bit concerned but yeah

Tess: It makes for a good stew

(laughter)

The appearance of the rabbit produced an eruption of 'aaws', giggles and laughter amongst the group as the room fell momentarily into the 'disorganizing state of squee' (Steinbock, 2017, p. 165). These exclamations reveal the affective force of cute animals that companies seek to levy and exploit when they employ pet influencers in service of their brand. In her work on the aesthetics of cute, however, Ngai (2015) observes that the experience of cuteness inspires ambivalent and contradictory responses.

On the one hand, cuteness is the 'aestheticisation of powerlessness' and hinges on a sentimental attitude towards the infantile, unthreatening 'squishy blob' form that the rabbit takes in this post (Ngai, 2015, p. 64–65). On the other hand, the rabbit's cuteness is capable of making a powerful affective demand on the group that both deverbilises and infantilises their language, such as when Tess describes the rabbit as 'a luff!'² (Ngai, 2015). Cuteness can be experienced as a 'demand for care' (Ngai, 2015, p. 3). However, the suggestion that the rabbit 'makes for a good stew' also calls forth Ngai's (2005, p. 820) claim that the ultimate 'index of an object's cuteness may be its edibility'.

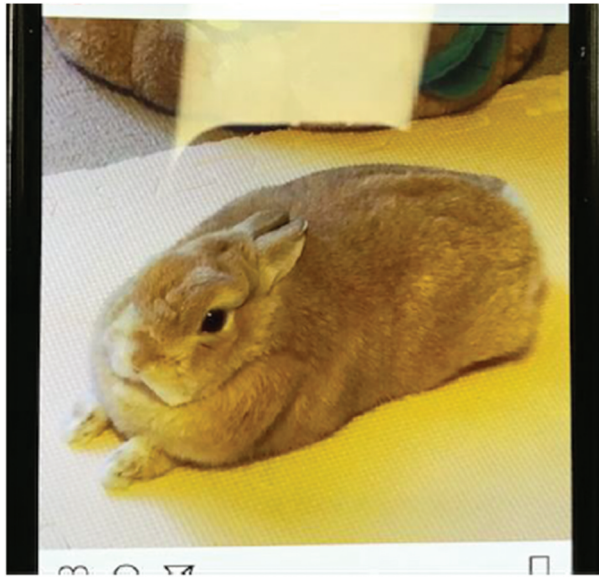


Figure 4. Lucy's screenshot.

Ngai (2015) asserts that there is a sadistic side to cuteness which can simultaneously provoke tenderness and aggression.

Earlier I detailed how Instagram evoked a melancholic mood amongst the participants at Castell Q, however, the picture of the rabbit disrupted this bodily malaise. Furthermore, Lucy's joke that the rabbit is her 'reincarnated' not only reveals an identification with the animal but suggests a desire to inhabit its body. Perhaps because this is a body whose roundness, softness and squishiness is cute rather than detested like the 'bigger girls' who display their bodies on Instagram. Nevertheless, it does not take long for the rabbit's excessive flesh to be subject to a familiar moral economy of looking and viewed as a source for concern (Skeggs & Woods, 2012). By referring to the rabbit as obese, Lucy draws on the medicalization and shaming of fat embodiment that feeds into the hate faced by 'bigger girls' online (Rich et al., 2011). In this case, it is the owner of the 'obese' rabbit that is judged for their presumed unhealthy choices in their pet care.

Obesity is a contested area of public health shaped by uncertain and contradictory science and framed through the hyperbolic language of a 'crisis' (Francombe-Weber et al., 2016). This framing has fuelled a moral panic contributing to increased weight stigma along with disordered eating and exercise practices (Rich et al., 2008). Notably, the 'obesity crisis' is not only seen to impact humans but their pets too. The 'one health' approach to preventing obesity in people and their pets further underlines the intertwined existence of humans and their companion animals (Day, 2017). However, 'one health' obesity interventions reiterate the logic of individual, rational decision-making vis-a-vis healthy choices at the expense of engaging with the broader social and cultural inequalities shaping the entangled health of people and animals (Quinn, 2013).

Lucy's comments highlight how digital media portrayals of pets can equally be caught up in binary notions of excess and control 'underpinned with moral meanings concerning bodily deportment and appearance' (Lupton, 2019, p. 162). At the same time, Tess's suggestion that the rabbit 'makes for a good stew' can be read as a refusal of such body-shaming discourses as the rabbit's excess flesh is rendered a source of sustenance rather than concern. Given that meat-eating is coded as masculine, viewing the rabbit as food rather than a cute pet can be read as doubly subversive.

Conclusion

This paper set out to advance understandings of the way young people's gendered embodiments can be assembled with and through digital networks. Mainstream debates often focus on whether social media's visual culture of bodily display is either 'good' or 'bad' for young people (Allen 2015). Rather than assigning social media's visual content to distinct categories of meaning, I have explored the variety of ways that gender and sexuality assembles through the digitally networked body. Bragg, Renold, Ringrose and Jackson (2018) note that maintaining such an exploratory approach to how gender matters in young people's lives not only allows for more dynamic accounts but highlights possible interventions.

The relationship between young people's bodies and social media has been an ongoing area of concern for policy-makers and practitioners with interventions often focusing on teaching young people critical media literacy (Bragg, 2015). In line with wider research, this paper demonstrated how commodified gendered and sexualized norms are intensified online through the everyday forceful intrusion of idealized bodies and abusive body-shaming comments. Despite the participants' ability to critically engage with this content, it still exerted a considerable pressure that delimited what the young people felt they could do with their bodies. Moving beyond a sole focus on risk and harm, however, this paper also made a case for engaging with embodied pleasure. By engaging with what makes young people feel good online I began to illuminate cracks and ruptures in the over-coded way young people's gendered bodies are usually fixed. I argued that Alex's enjoyment of indulgent mediatised foodscapes and queer veganism operated as an alternative figuration to the phallogocentric mode that ties masculinity with meat, strong muscularity and the subjugation of women and animals. I also considered how Lucy's engagement with pet photography on Instagram disrupted and recouped the disciplinary post-feminist gaze surrounding fat embodiment.

These are just two examples of the way digital technologies are recomposing the boundaries of the gendered body. Further research is needed into the way social media's rich visual landscape is reshaping the gendered terrains of young people's lives.

Notes

1. The words 'chav' or 'chavvy' are typically used in a derogatory way to refer to the white working-class in Britain (Tyler 2008).
2. Luff is a cutesy slang term for love.

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Notes on contributor

Kate Marston is an ESRC funded Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Wales. Their research sets out to foster creative, curious and imaginative ways of attending to how gender and sexuality comes to matter in young people's everyday digitally networked lives.

Ethics

The research was approved by the ethics committee of Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences. In line with institutional protocols around informed consent, all participants and settings involved were provided with an information sheet and consent form. Parental consent was required for participants under the age of 16.

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