

**Exploring young people's digital sexual  
cultures through creative, visual and arts-  
based methods**

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June 2020

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank the young people who took part in this research project. It would not have been possible to write this thesis had it not been for their enthusiastic engagement. My encounters with them over the course of the project were thought-provoking, inspiring and often joyful. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with and hear from every single one of them.

Secondly, I would like to thank my supervisors, EJ Renold and Dawn Mannay, for their invaluable academic guidance, attentiveness and lively engagement with my work as well as their warm pastoral care over the past five years. It has been a deeply felt privilege to work with academics so committed to co-production and making a difference. I continue to be inspired by their work.

I am also grateful to have had the opportunity to collaborate with Bryony Gillard and Ailsa Fineron on the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*.

I would like to thank my incredible friends for supporting me throughout this process. Fiona, thank you for offering the guidance that ensured I could apply for the PhD to begin with. Nat and Colin, thank you for always being there for me and letting me use your spare room when I needed to travel. To my queer feminist friends, Catt, Harriet, Rowena and Rosie, thank you for all the dancing, music and activism that kept me going as I wrote my thesis. Last but not least: Tari, I am always grateful for your unwavering emotional support and uplifting phone conversation. Thank you for teaching me so much over our fifteen years of friendship.

Finally, thank you to Li for providing a warm and welcoming home for me to stay in as I completed my thesis. I am so grateful for all that you do for us. My queer species kin, Che and Frida, deserve special mention for their emotional support. Most importantly, thank you to my partner Ellie for accompanying me on this journey. It was made so much more enjoyable and enriching by your presence, you encourage and inspire me in everything that I do. I look forward to returning the favour as you embark on your own PhD.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how digital technologies such as social media, smart devices and gaming platforms are shaping young people's sexual cultures. While the majority of research on young people's digital sexual cultures has maintained a narrow focus on risk and harm, and limited what digital practices are considered relevant and for whom, this thesis contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to support children and young people to navigate the complexities of an ever-changing digital sexual age. I worked with a socio-economically and culturally diverse sample of twenty-five young people aged 11 – 18 years from England and Wales. Rather than focusing on a pre-defined set of digital practices, I set out to foster a creative, curious and open-ended approach that allowed participants to identify which digital practices mattered to them. Over a period of fifteen-months, I employed a range of creative, visual and arts-based methods in group and individual interviews to explore a flexible set of core issues including digital worlds, relationships, networked body cultures and media discourses.

Taking inspiration from feminist posthuman and new materialist concepts of 'assemblage', 'affect', 'phallogocentrism' and 'feminist figurations', I trace normative articulations of gender and sexuality as well as activate different ways of seeing and relating to young people's digital sexual cultures. My data highlights the enduring force of heteronormative and phallogocentric power relations in young people's digital sexual cultures through the publicisation of intimate relations online, social media's visual culture of bodily display and gendered harassment online. However, it also maps ruptures and feminist figurations that displace vision away from the heteronormative and phallogocentric mode. I illustrate how young people's digital sexual cultures can be the site of unexpected and unpredictable relations that move beyond normative notions of (hetero)sexuality and towards possibilities for re-imagined sexualities that exceed heteronormative and phallogocentric norms.

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# CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen rapid transformations in the kinds of technologies through which children, young people and adults connect with and relate to one another (Baym 2010). As social media, smart devices<sup>1</sup> and gaming platforms become increasingly integral to the formation and maintenance of young people’s everyday relationships, research has sought to find ways to engage with and critically reflect upon how children and young people are navigating this ever-changing digital sexual age. This thesis contributes to these debates by investigating how digital technologies such as social media, smart devices and gaming platforms are shaping young people’s everyday social practices, relationships and experiences of gender and sexuality. By employing a creative, visual and arts-based methodology inspired by feminist posthuman and new materialist theories, this project set out to experiment with what else digital sexualities research can be, do and become (Renold and Ringrose 2017).

My thesis is situated within the field of youth sexuality studies (Allen and Rasmussen 2017; Renold, Ringrose and Egan 2015; Delameter and Plante 2015). Much of this work explores how socio-cultural ideas of gender and sexuality are constructed in heteronormative ways that reproduce gender inequalities and marginalise certain gendered and sexual subjectivities. In recent decades, scholarship has sought to attend to the salience of digital technologies to young people’s emerging gender and sexual subjectivities (Scott et al. 2020; Thomson, Berriman and Bragg 2018; Driver and Coulter 2018). In a policy and practice context where digital technologies are positioned as risky sites of contamination, much of this work critiques the assumptions made about how children and young people experience digital technologies and the enduring silences and

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<sup>1</sup> A smart device is a wireless internet-enabled electronic device.

spectacles surrounding matters of gender and sexuality (Livingstone and Mason 2015; Livingstone and Bulger 2014; boyd 2014; Buckingham, Bragg and Kehily 2014).

The majority of research on young people's digital sexual cultures has focused on negative developmental outcomes such as gaming addiction, body dissatisfaction, bullying and suicidal ideation, representing young people as passive consumers of digital media (Keles, McCrae and Grealish 2019; Science and Technology Committee 2019; Royal Society for Public Health 2017; Rodgers 2016). However, many scholars have rejected the overstatement of the risks posed by digital technologies within academia, education policy and practice and popular media discourse. In her substantial contribution to the field of young people and digital technologies, Sonia Livingstone has long argued that the emphasis on risk does not 'allow for children's participation even in risky opportunities' (Livingstone and Bulger 2014, p. 1; Livingstone and Helsper 2010). This thesis seeks to contribute to a growing body of work focused on supporting children and young people to navigate an ever-changing digital sexual age and advancing their digital sexual rights (Livingstone and Mason 2015).

In my study, I worked with a socio-economically and culturally diverse sample of twenty-five young people aged 11 – 18 years old from England and Wales. Rather than focusing on a pre-defined set of digital practices, I set out to foster a creative, curious and open-ended approach that allowed participants to identify which digital practices mattered to them. Over a period of fifteen-months, I employed a range of creative, visual and arts-based methods in group and individual interviews to explore a variety of experiences with digital technologies. My project, therefore, contributes as much to the methodological literature as it does to the substantive literature on young people's digital sexual cultures. This thesis addresses how young people's digital sexual subjectivities are shaped by normative discourses surrounding gender and sexuality as well as how their digital practices exceed, rupture and reconfigure these discourses. My research offers an expansive understanding of young people's digital sexual cultures, engaging with a number of practices that are not typically addressed in policy and practice on young people's digital sexualities.

Theoretically, I was inspired by feminist posthuman and new materialist conceptual (Haraway 2016; Braidotti 2013; Bennett 2010; Barad 2007; Grosz 1994) and empirical work (see Chapter Two). These are heterogeneous fields of thought without a unitary genealogical history but they are frequently brought together due to their focus on distributive agency and relationality; the prioritisation of affect; attention to the politics of matter; and re-thinking of the nature / culture binary (Truman 2019). This allows for a conceptualisation of sexuality that decentres the human as the privileged category of analysis. Attention is shifted to the complex configurations through which sexual subjectivity is assembled that cuts across the natural, cultural and technological realms (Delanda 2006, p. 11). In Chapter Two, I outline how the feminist posthuman and new materialist concepts I draw on in this thesis perform a double function that critically traces normative articulations of gender and sexuality as well as activate different ways of seeing and relating to young people's gendered and sexual subjectivities.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I provide some background to the cultural context in which my research took place. After providing some brief working definitions of key terms that I draw on throughout this thesis, I focus on the ways in which young people's digital practices are commonly portrayed in the media, education policy and practice as well as through academic scholarship. This cultural context offers a point of departure for exploring young people's lived experience of their digital sexual cultures. In the final part of the chapter I outline my research aims and questions as well as providing an overview of the subsequent chapters that form this thesis.

## **1.2 SEXUALITY AND GENDER DEFINITIONS**

My thesis adopts an expansive understanding of sexuality as encompassing a range of social, technological, material, cultural and bodily practices. Rather than tied to reproduction and genitals, 'sexuality is everywhere' (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, p. 293) as a vital 'complex, multi-layered force that produces encounters, resonances and relations of all sorts' (Braidotti 2011b, p. 148). Sexuality is therefore capable of producing spaces of intimacy, experimentation and relation to others that might be 'subversive and

unforeseeable' (Beckman 2011, p. 11). This is an approach to sexuality that questions what bodies can do, feel and desire in particular socio-cultural-historical settings, and how sexual subjectivities are produced (Fox and Alldred 2013).

Taken for granted assumptions about what constitutes sexuality often reproduce narrow heteronormative ideas that heterosexuality is the default and 'normal' sexuality (Jackson 2006). Children and young people's sexual cultures continue to live under the burden of social anxieties around sexuality as a developmentally inappropriate, risky and dangerous topic (Renold 2013, p. 22). However, this thesis recognises that children and young people derive an understanding of sexuality from a multitude of sources that are 'contingently assembled' from first-hand experiences, peer relationships, family, school, popular culture, as well as social media and other digital technologies, which can offer fluctuating and multiple sexual meanings, values and norms (Nayak and Kehily 2017, p.22). I prioritise how children and young people themselves negotiate, reproduce, challenge and subvert prevailing sexual norms and make sense of their emerging sexual subjectivities in the context of their everyday lives.

I use the term gender in this thesis to refer to the way in which notions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' manifest through a range of social, material, cultural, technological and embodied expressions. Gender is understood not as something that young people have, but something that they 'do' and continually 're-make' through everyday expressions and practices. Again, this thesis prioritises young people's own understanding of how, and to what extent, identities, bodies, images, objects, emotions and social relations are imbued with gendered meanings. In Chapter Two, I offer a more detailed exploration of the theorisations of gender and sexuality that have informed this thesis.

### **1.3 YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES**

A growing body of work is exploring the effects of digital media on young people's experiences of sexuality: ranging from exploring its role in forging romantic and sexual connections (McGeeney and Hanson 2017); searching for information and advice about

sex and relationships (Attwood, Hakim and Winch 2017; Hillier and Harrison 2007); the sharing of sexually explicit content, also known as 'sexting' (Hasinoff 2015; Albury 2015; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone and Harvey 2012); gendered and sexual experiences of selfies (Warfield 2017; Kofoed and Larsen 2016); as well as examining other 'kinds of connection that impact on people, and on which they depend for living' (Berlant 1998 , p. 284; original emphasis; Marston 2019a). As web, social media and mobile communication technologies become increasingly entwined with young people's intimate practices, fears and anxieties about young people's premature sexualisation have exacerbated (Etheredge 2016; Allen 2015; Albury et al. 2013). New technologies are often positioned as unnatural 'sites of sexual contamination and corruption of childhood innocence' with interventions seeking to limit and contain young people's digital engagements (Etheredge 2016, p. 549; see also Robinson 2013; Stockton 2009; Edelman 2004).

Concerns about the threat posed by new technologies can reify simplistic dichotomies of online-offline social worlds, risks versus opportunities, private versus public as well as gendered notions of at-risk girls targeted by an unremarkable and predatory culture of toxic masculinity.<sup>2</sup> A growing body of scholarship critiques this narrow focus on risk and harm for limiting what digital practices are considered relevant and for whom without offering due consideration to the way enduring sexual and gender inequities shape digital relationships (McGeeney and Hanson 2017; Albury and Byron 2016; Ringrose et al. 2012). The findings that I present in this thesis add to existing scholarship that refutes simplistic moral panics around young people's digital engagements by challenging the assumptions

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<sup>2</sup> 'Toxic masculinity' is increasingly used in public discourse to describe violent and sexually aggressive expressions of masculinity. In this thesis, 'toxic masculinity' is understood as a particular configuration of practices and performances that reproduce the hegemony of white hetero-masculinity and the subjugation women, trans and gender diverse people as well as some men (Hickey-Moody 2019). It can be 'vehement and violent' as well as 'quiet and implicit' in its reassertion of the hetero-patriarchal organisation of power (Connell 2000, pp. 10 - 11).

that underlie the popular imaginary around digital technologies. I use the term digital throughout this thesis to refer to technologies such as social media, smart devices and gaming platforms in recognition that these are ‘embedded, embodied, everyday phenomenon’ (Hine 2015, p. 1) in contrast to earlier conceptualisations of the internet as a somewhat disembodied ‘cyber’ or ‘virtual’ world (Markham 2018). The digital, therefore, is understood as something that is always, already social.

#### **1.4 THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF DIGITAL RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS**

With Relationships and Sex(uality)<sup>3</sup> Education (RSE) poised to become compulsory in England in 2020 and Wales in 2022, research on young people’s digital sexual cultures has the potential to influence future developments in policy and practice. The way digital technologies have become integral to young people’s intimate practices has wide-ranging implications for relationships and sex education, however, to date interventions have struggled to keep up with technological advancements and the lived experience of young people (Quinlivan 2018). Despite campaigns for a comprehensive sexuality education that is relevant to young people’s increasingly digitally networked lives, digital practices have largely been marginalised in relationships and sex education with the focus limited to a particular set of problems’ (Ringrose et al. 2019). For example, the recently updated English guidance on RSE has minimal references to digital technologies beyond acknowledging that ‘sexting’ amongst those under 18 years of age is illegal (Department for Education 2019).

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<sup>3</sup> I use the bracketed term sex(uality) in recognition that England employs the title Relationships and Sex Education whereas Relationships and Sexuality Education is the title in Wales. The latter is the preferred term in Wales as it communicates a broader focus than the physiological aspects of sexed bodies and sexual and reproductive health to address the wider socio-cultural aspects of sexuality (Renold and McGeeney 2017, p. 14).

The risk-based approach of 'sex education' has been criticised for focusing on individual behaviour change while paying little attention to how intersecting gender and sexual inequities shape digital relationships (Dobson and Ringrose 2015). Policy and practice have not only lacked a sustained analysis of the gendered and sexual politics of young people's digital media cultures, but it can uncritically reinforce the view that girls are particularly at risk from the shame of public display online whereas boys are largely overlooked (Dobson and Ringrose 2016). The salience of digital technologies to the lives of sexual and gender minorities has also received little acknowledgement in mainstream public discourse (Albury and Byron 2016; McGeeney and Hanson 2017).

In contrast to England, Wales has adopted a more expansive understanding of young people's digital sexual cultures within their Welsh guidance on RSE. The new Curriculum for Wales (2020) requires Welsh schools and colleges to have an explicit agenda to develop whole-school approaches to healthy relationships education, which highlights the potential role of social media in supporting respectful relationships. Schools and colleges are also impelled to enhance 'learner voice and agency' in the development of the RSE curriculum with several resources available to support this practice (Welsh Government 2020, p. 40). For example, 'AGENDA: Supporting Children and Young People in Making Positive Relationships Matter' (2019a) is an open access, bi-lingual (Welsh/English), interactive online resource that was co-created with young people for young people to address gendered and sexual violence.

The resource features youth-led case studies that address how social media can help celebrate gender and sexual inclusivity, as well as highlights the role of hashtag campaigns



such as #MeToo<sup>4</sup> in raising awareness of gender inequality, sexual violence and domestic abuse. AGENDA shifts from offering ‘a clear-cut unambiguous “what is” approach to “healthy relationships education” and into a more curious and questioning “what if” approach to what more “healthy relationships education” could be/come’ (Renold 2019a, p. 215). As a member of the AGENDA outreach team, the approach I have developed in this PhD research project has been significantly influenced by the resources’ use of the expressive arts to create engaging and safe environments within which to explore difficult topics. Overall, these policy developments offer some real potential for digital sexualities research to influence future RSE and to facilitate creative interventions that might address the enduring gender and sexual inequities shaping young people’s digital sexual cultures.

### **1.5 RESEARCHING YOUNG PEOPLE’S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES**

Over the last two decades, much of the research on young people’s digital sexual cultures has reflected wider discourses focused on whether particular digital practices are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for young people’s health and wellbeing (Allen 2015). This has been largely shaped by funding constraints that require research to be responsive to policy concerns (Strassheim and Kettunen 2014; Biesta 2010; Davies 2003). Consequently, my research presented an opportunity to undertake an exploratory inquiry into differently positioned young people’s experiences of digital relationships in England and Wales that was not limited to particular digital content, contact and conduct. Mindful of how young people’s digital practices come to bear the burden of adult anxieties and projections over what is developmentally inappropriate, risky and dangerous, I was keen to foster spaces for

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<sup>4</sup> The #MeToo movement is a campaign against rape, sexual assault and harassment. The ‘Me Too’ campaign was initially founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke to draw attention to sexual violence against women of colour in communities where sexual assault services were under-resourced or non-existent (Adetiba 2017). In October 2017, the hashtag exploded on social media in response to growing reports of sexual predation in Hollywood (Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019). It is credited with bringing conversations about sexual violence into the mainstream.

playful, curious and creative explorations of young people's digital relationships that still accounted for how enduring gender and sexual inequities shape young people's digital relationships.

Childhood researchers have long noted the value of creative, visual and arts-based methodologies for exploring sensitive and taboo topics without forcing children and young people to reveal too much of themselves (Mayes 2016; Austin 2017; Renold 2017). For example, EJ Renold (2017) has explored the use of the visual arts including sculpture, poetry, soundscapes, movement, glitching, body projections and jars to communicate and raise awareness of sexual violence amongst teenage girls in Wales. Similarly, Kathleen Quinlivan (2014) has considered how painting may enable an exploratory context for considering issues around pornography and the commodification of sexuality in young people's lives. Rebecca Coleman (2009) has employed collage with teen girls to explore the gendered bodily experiences that media, photographic and mirror images make possible. Furthermore, Ringrose et al. (2019, p. 259) have drawn on Play-Doh sculptures of vulvas and felt-tip drawings of penises to 'resist and refigure unsettling experiences of receiving unsolicited digital dick pics' as well as the phallogentric orientation of RSE. Sex/uality educators are also increasingly incorporating the expressive arts into their work with young people (Hoyle and McGeeney 2019; Sexplain 2017; Tender 2012).

Inspired by this work, this thesis considers how facilitating a series of participant-led creative, visual and arts-based activities informed by feminist posthuman and new materialist theories set fresh lines of inquiry in motion. Informed by conceptualisations of the digital as omnipresent and existing beyond the presence of devices and platforms, this thesis follows other scholarship that has highlighted the importance of investigating everyday experiences of the digital that traverse online and offline spaces (Jaynes 2020; Hine 2015; Markham 2018; Lupton 2014). Correspondingly, it does not address the question of whether particular digital practices are good or bad for young people but seeks to agitate the 'production of previously unthought questions, practices and knowledge' that do not shame and blame young people for their digital entanglements (Allen 2015, p. 121).

This strand of scholarship avoids creating binaries between good and bad, risk and opportunity, online and offline. Instead, it is built on an assumption that young people's experiences with digital technologies are far more complex and ambivalent than such binaries indicate. Defying the tendency to generalise and unify knowledge about young people's digital cultures, this thesis engages in promiscuous and speculative modes of thinking that weaves together a multiplicity of stories from my participants (Ellingson and Sotirin 2020; Haraway 2016). I endeavoured to foster an openness to the marginalised and unpredictable dimensions of young people's digital sexual cultures and paint a heterogeneous picture of young people's digital sexual cultures.

## **1.6 RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS**

The broad aim of my research is to respond to the need for a more expansive understanding of young people's digital sexual cultures that engages with the complexity of young people's experiences of digital sexuality. By shifting away from a specific set of digital practices considered to be sexual by wider policy and practice discourse, this project explores how young people themselves come to understand, experience and negotiate particular digital practices in sexualised and gendered ways. From these broad aims, as well as my engagement with the participants and the wider literature, I developed three central research questions:

1. In what ways do digital technologies (social media, smart devices, gaming platforms) shape young people's sexual cultures?
  - a. In what ways are young people's digital relationships shaped by normative gendered and sexual discourses?
  - b. To what extent and in what ways do young people's digital practices exceed and reconfigure normative understandings of youth sexuality?
2. What do creative, visual and arts-based methodologies enable in research on young people's digital sexual cultures?

3. How can arts-based approaches be employed in co-productive engagement work to re-imagine young people's digital sexual cultures and communicate their complexity?

## **1.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY AND THESIS OUTLINE**

In this introductory chapter, I have outlined the policy and practice context in which my PhD project emerged. I illustrated how gender and sexuality continue to be viewed as risky and dangerous to children and young people, with fears exacerbated by the dispersal of digital technologies into their everyday social lives. I also detailed how dominant discourses about digital technologies reify simplistic dichotomies of online-offline social worlds, private versus public as well as the heteronormative bifurcation of active male sexuality and passive female sexuality. Finally, I outlined how I set out to undertake an exploratory inquiry into differently positioned young people's digital sexual cultures by drawing on participant-led creative, visual and arts-based approaches informed by feminist posthuman and new materialist theories.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the empirical and theoretical literature on youth sexualities and digital culture to outline the conceptual framework for my study of young people's digital sexual cultures. In the first part of this chapter, I detail how interactionist and discursive theories have shaped investigations of gender, sexuality and subjectivity in a digital age. I argue that these approaches tend to focus on the role of digital technologies in re-asserting or re-ordering hegemonic heteronormative regimes of gender and sexuality by focusing on practices of self-presentation online. Correspondingly, much of this work retains a limited focus on the individual subject as the locus of gender and sexuality and struggles to account for experiences that exceed the heteronormative bifurcation of predatory boys and at-risk girls. In the second part of this chapter, I explore how feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship offers a fruitful conceptual repertoire for considering sexuality in expansive and non-identitarian ways. I weave together theoretical and empirical literature to outline what concepts such as 'assemblages', 'affect',

‘phallogocentrism’ and ‘feminist figurations’ can do in qualitative research on young people’s digital sexual cultures.

In Chapter Three, I map the rhizomatic research process and attend to the different elements that came together to produce my research methodology. This includes the participants (N=25; 19 girls; 6 boys), the research sites where the fieldwork sessions took place, and the three phases of my data production. In phase one of my research, twenty-five participants took part in group interviews that incorporated a range of open-ended participant-led creative and visual research methods. These were designed to elicit insights into a flexible set of core issues related to my research questions (for example, digital worlds, body cultures, relationships, media discourses). In phase two, seventeen of the initial twenty-five participants took part in elicitation interviews that explored contributions made throughout the creative and visual group interviews (for example, maps, avatars, screenshots). In phase three, ten of the twenty-five participants from one fieldwork school were invited to re-animate research materials through different arts-based methods including poetry, digital storytelling, sculpture and textiles. This chapter addresses research question two by considering what my creative, visual and arts-based approach enabled the research to do or not do.

Chapter Four is the first of the three empirical chapters. In this chapter, I begin to explore how smart devices, social media and gaming platforms are shaping young people’s sexual cultures by focusing on their facilitation of new visibilities and connectivities for performing gender and sexuality. Drawing on the work of Lauren Berlant, I map how heteronormative fantasies of ‘the good life’ remain a powerful structuring force in young people’s digital sexual cultures. This chapter illustrates how young people’s digital sexual cultures are shaped by dominant discourses that bifurcate online-offline social worlds, private versus public as well as active male sexuality and passive female sexuality. I consider how this underpins the enduring gender and sexual inequalities in young people’s peer cultures including the marginalisation of sexual and gender minorities. In addition to tracing the enduring heteronormativities surrounding what can appear as

'intimate' online, I also map how 'the good life' is being reconfigured and re-ordered by the increasing dispersal of digital technologies into young people's everyday lives.

In Chapter Five, I continue exploring how digital technologies are shaping young people's sexual cultures by examining the changing possibilities of what a body can be, do and become online. This chapter illustrates how the body operates as a key site through which gender and sexuality are regulated, negotiated and expressed. In line with existing research, it outlines how commodified gendered and sexualised norms are intensified online, as well as builds on this work by decentring the human body as a central focus of concern (Hakim 2019; Dobson 2015; Ringrose 2011). This chapter demonstrates how young people's bodies are becoming increasingly more-than-human by looking at them as sites of 'unexpected and unpredictable linkages' that blur the boundaries between human/more-than-human, organic/technical, masculine/ feminine, natural/unnatural (Grosz 1994, p. 181). I argue that these connections have the capacity to temporarily free young people's digitally networked bodies from the pressures of dominant discourses around gender and sexuality, as well as map some sustained lines of flight from heteronormative embodiment.

In Chapter Six, the final empirical chapter, I detail the development and direction of the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*. This formed part of the final phase of my research project. I detail how sixteen young people from one fieldwork school were provided with the opportunity to work with me and two professional artists to produce cut-up texts and life-size body fabrics that re-imagined what bodies might do, be and become in the future. Supported by the Wales Doctoral Training Partnership 'Knowledge Exchange' fund, this workshop put emerging findings from my doctoral study to work in the formalised place of the school timetable and engaged a wider cohort of young people in the research topic. In this chapter, I outline how I came to work with speculative fiction and fabrication as means of interrupting sedimented practices around online safeguarding education, before engaging in a detailed analysis of some of the artifacts the participants produced.

In the final chapter of this thesis, Chapter Seven, I discuss how the emerging findings from the young people's engagement with the research process addressed each of my research questions. I outline how the data that I discussed throughout the empirical chapters makes a substantive contribution to the field of youth sexualities as well as illustrates the value of creative, visual and arts-based methods to studying young people's digital sexual cultures. The most substantive contribution of my work is related to the advancement of creative, visual and arts-based methods as a means of fostering curious and open-ended explorations of young people's digital sexual cultures (Driver and Coulter 2018). In the final parts of chapter seven, I reflect on the limitations of my study, make some suggestions for future research and briefly consider how my project might impact educational policy and practices.

## CHAPTER TWO - MAPPING THE ACADEMIC FIELD

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I discuss the empirical and theoretical literature on youth sexualities and digital culture and outline the conceptual framework used in this study of young people's digital sexual cultures. Given the broad focus of my research, my overview of the literature is not exhaustive but it does make the case for key concepts and ideas that underpin this thesis. The chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, I explore how interactionist and discursive theories have continued to shape investigations of gender, sexuality and subjectivity in a digital age. I detail how these theories have played out methodologically to illustrate their capacities and limitations for researching digital cultures, before summarising the knowledge this body of work has contributed to understanding young people's digital sexual cultures.

In the second part of the chapter, I explore how feminist posthuman (Braidotti 2013; Haraway 2016) and new materialist (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010) scholarship has shaped the conceptual tools that I draw upon in this study. I will argue that concepts such as 'assemblages', 'affect', 'phallogocentrism' and 'feminist figurations' are useful for engaging with the complexities and ambivalences of young people's digital sexualities. Specifically, I detail how these concepts perform a double function that critically trace dominant discourses as well as highlight gendered and sexual practices that exceed these discourses. I illustrate this by drawing on a small but growing body of empirical literature that is putting feminist posthuman and new materialist theories to work in their exploration of young people's digital sexual cultures. While I outline some of the limitations and gaps in the research, I note that this existing work demonstrates the capacities of these concepts to explore enduring sexual and gender inequities alongside mapping feminist figurations of youth sexualities.



## 2.2 HETERONORMATIVITY

A key concept that is referenced throughout this thesis is heteronormativity. Coined by Michael Warner (1991), the term heteronormativity refers to discursive, social, material, and institutional processes and practices that construct heterosexuality as the default, normal, and natural sexual orientation. The concept grew out of feminist theory that brought together analyses of gender with the topic of sexuality and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) politics. From Monique Wittig's 'The Straight Mind' (1992), Adrienne Rich's 'compulsory heterosexuality' (1980), Gayle Rubin's 'the charmed circle' (1984), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'epistemology of the closet' (1990) to Judith Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' (1990) a rich body of theoretical work has advanced critiques of heterosexuality and illustrated how oppressive gendered hierarchies are inextricably embedded in and produced through heterosexual practices.

The concept of heteronormativity not only addresses marginalised sexualities and genders but also considers the way heterosexuality regulates those seemingly within its bounds. Feminist scholars have examined how traditional heteronormative family dynamics remain a powerful mechanism through which the gendered division of labour is upheld ensuring women are kept in devalued care roles and men retain economic control (Mannay 2016a; Warren 2003; Pateman 1988). These inequalities are reproduced through structural mechanisms such as the law, state policy and other institutional practices that validate certain relationships over others as well as socio-cultural understandings of 'natural' gender roles (Jackson 2006). Butler's (1990) work on the 'heterosexual matrix' has been particularly influential to understanding the naturalisation of certain bodies, genders and desires: outlining the assumed alignment and complementarity between reproductive organs, gender identities and sexual desires (female – feminine -attracted to men) that are oppositionally (female ≠ male) and hierarchically defined (heterosexual > homosexual) (see Kerpen and Marston 2019). Butler's work has shaped the understanding that any change in our normative construction of sexuality may challenge the construction of gender, and the unequal power relations between men and women and vice versa. I discuss Butler's work in

further detail in section 2.3.2 of this chapter.

Heteronormativity is not constant but open to re-ordering, re-articulation, and re-stabilising in historically specific socio-political moments. Angela McRobbie (2009), for example, drew on Butler to examine how heteronormativity continued to regulate the lives of girls and young women within neo-liberal and seemingly de-politicised post-feminist times. Neo-liberalism is a contested term but this thesis is informed by the work of political theorist Wendy Brown (2015, p. 10) who defines it as the infiltration of market logic and market mechanisms into everyday life where 'all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetised'. This is a cultural context in which gender equality is assumed to have been achieved thereby disavowing the workings of power inequality and asserting individualist discourses of empowerment, choice and freedom (McRobbie 2008). As some women gained access to traditionally 'male' spheres of power, McRobbie (2009) argued that they had to diffuse their presence by projecting a hyper-femininity that re-stabilised heteronormative gender relations. More recently, scholarship has considered how this gendered neo-liberalism continues to operate 'despite – and in some ways operating through – its coexistence with a revitalized feminism' (Gill 2017, p. 620; Rottenburg 2018).

In addition to the consumer-led sexual freedoms of women, queer scholarship has explored how heteronormative forces endure even in times of expanding citizenship rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and, to a lesser extent, transgender (LGBT) people. Empowering narratives around LGBT equality subvert some sexual and gender hierarchies, while reproducing a multitude of heteronormative forces that re-stabilise the binary organisation of gender and sexuality in oppositional and hierarchical ways (Martinsson and Reimers 2010, p. 3). Unprecedented legislative changes in the UK over the past twenty years may have expanded opportunities to live outside of heterosexual unions, however, heterosexuality nevertheless remains a nexus for social life (Mercer et al. 2013). To enhance the critical utility of heteronormativity in these changing times scholars have developed new conceptual repertoires to address the impact of lesbian and gay liberal rights discourses.

Lisa Duggan's (2002) work on *homonormativity* describes the growth of a commercialised, commodified and depoliticised LGBT movement that strengthens rather than subverts heteronormative institutions of monogamy, marriage, and reproduction. Sexual and gender minorities may be visible and intelligible in new ways but this does not necessarily upset the status quo (Shaw and Sender 2016). Furthermore, Jasbir Puar's (2007) conceptual framework 'homonationalism' addresses how 'visibility identity politics' can replicate narrow racial, class, gender, and national ideals of sexual exceptionalism, which justify interventionist foreign policy in the name of sexually progressive multiculturalism and LGBT equality. These additions illuminate how efforts to unsettle heteronormativity can mobilise other forms of domination and control, which continue to organise gender and sexuality in multiple and often unexpected ways.

## **PART ONE: FROM PERFORMANCE TO PERFORMATIVITY**

### **2.3 INTERACTIONIST AND DISCURSIVE THEORIES OF GENDER, SEXUALITY AND THE BODY**

Gender and sexuality can feel so personal and interior that it is often taken-for-granted as an essential feature of the body (Fox and Alldred 2013). However, scholars have drawn upon a range of philosophical positions to account for cultural variability, historical specificity and multiplicity in experiences of gender and sexuality. Critiques of an innate sexual and gender subjectivity have been advanced within strands of psychoanalysis, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, poststructuralism, feminist and queer theory, postcolonial studies and posthumanism. These theories are multifaceted, offering perspectives on gender and sexuality that converge and diverge at various points depending on their onto-epistemological conceptualisation of the social world. In the next two sections, I offer a brief outline of interactionist and discursive approaches to gender and sexuality as they have proved particularly influential in the empirical literature exploring young people's digital sexual cultures. Providing an outline of these theories also lays the groundwork for understanding theoretical moves to

decentre the human body as the locus of gender and sexuality within the feminist post-human and new materialist scholarship that informed my study.

### **2.3.1 INTERACTIONISM**

The idea that gender and sexuality are socially performed can be traced in part to work in ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism. Ethnomethodologists such as Harold Garfinkel (1967), Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1978) as well as Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) shaped understandings of gender as a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday social interaction. For example, Garfinkel's (1967, p. 116) landmark case study of Agnes, a trans woman, illustrated how supposedly 'natural' gendered behaviours are not a material property of the body itself but a 'managed achievement' through speech, action and other visual social cues. Furthermore, Kessler and McKenna (1978) advanced the broad use of the term 'gender' to encompass biological sex to signal the implication of sex characteristics such as genitals within cultural practices of interpretation. While these early studies have been critiqued by trans scholars such as Henry S. Rubin (1999) for silencing the voices of their trans participants and obscuring the specificity of trans people's gender work, they also informed debates within the field of transgender studies on the constructed and oppressive nature of compulsory gendering as a whole (Bornstein 1994).

Meanwhile, symbolic interactionists such as John Gagnon and William Simon (1973; 1987; 2003) informed a theory of sexual scripts through their observation that sexual practices are subject to 'socio-cultural moulding' that defines how romantic and sexual relationships develop (1973, p. 26). For example, they observe how hetero-sex is highly patterned through a sequence of events such as: 'Kissing, tongue kissing, manual and oral caressing of the body, particularly the female breasts, manual and oral contacts with both the female and male genitalia, usually in this sequence, followed by intercourse in a number of positions' (Gagnon and Simon 1987, p. 2). Gagnon and Simon (1987) acknowledge interpersonal and intrapsychic differences in the enactment of these scripts allowing for an analysis of how sexual scripts emerge, evolve and change. Accordingly,

sexual scripts are not closed texts but open to being actively interpreted by agential subjects who structure themselves within these social constraints.

Erving Goffman (1959) also famously drew on dramaturgical metaphors to explore social interactions in terms of people performing for each other as though actors in a play and how they try to convey an identity consistent with the expectations of their audience and stage. Even though Goffman paid little attention to sexuality, his work on social stigma and impression management has influenced studies on the disclosure of marginalised sexual identities and managing the expectations and reactions of others (Orne 2016). In later work Goffman (1977, p. 319) also explored the social reproduction of gender inequality by examining how 'irrelevant biological differences between the sexes' are socially elaborated through the 'segregative punctuation' of the day. For example, he noted how 'schools provide coeducational classes, punctuated by gym, sports, and a few other activities that are sex-segregated' and addressed the 'cultural matter' of 'toilet segregation' (Goffman 1977, p. 316). In exploring how sexual difference unfolds in these socially conditioned temporal and spatial locations Goffman understood segregating practices not to be honouring sexual difference but producing it.

Overall, interactionist perspectives emphasise how gender and sexual meaning is created, modified and put into action in everyday life (Brickell 2006). This perspective has helped draw attention to the situated particularity of social interactions and embodied practices as well as offered valuable descriptive and observational methods for attending to the dynamics at play in everyday social scenes. These theories also grant subjective agency by arguing that structures condition but do not entirely determine the production of subjects whose talk and actions can be implicated in reproducing or resisting dominant social structures (Brickell 2005). While the body is considered a key vehicle for self-expression within this work, the material corporeality of the flesh is hidden by the central focus on the social construction of the body in everyday interaction. Correspondingly, interactionism is limited in its ability to address the body as an active participant in the production of sexuality and gender.

### 2.3.2 DISCURSIVE THEORIES

While interactionist sociology explores how sexuality and gender come to be defined through everyday social interaction, discursive theories of sexuality have elaborated how the very idea of sexuality and gender emerged. Michel Foucault's (1978) pivotal study on the 'History of Sexuality' explored how social, economic and political forces have shaped sexual knowledgeabilities over time. Challenging the 'repressive hypothesis' of sexuality as silenced by cultural prohibitions, Foucault (1978, p. 156) posits instead that sexuality is 'an imaginary element' produced through different 'systems of knowledge', or discourses, that govern how it can be thought, talked and reasoned about at a particular historical moment. Rather than viewing biological sexual differences as relevant only in terms of their social perception, meaning and value, Foucault (1978) critically appraises the very idea of scientifically defined biological sex as a natural foundation for gender and sexuality by revealing the historical development of this discourse and how it came to be invested with scientific legitimacy.

Key to Foucault's (1978) argument is a re-conception of power which challenges top-down structural understandings to consider instead a shifting nexus of regulatory forces that are produced and negotiated through institutions, practices and the materiality of the body. He develops the concept of 'biopower' to address a shift during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century away from the external discipline of the body towards various forms of internal self-monitoring and self-regulation that involves the compliance and active participation of the subject (1978, p. 140). For example, Foucauldian feminist scholars such as Bordo (1993) and Bartky (1990) have drawn on this work to explore beautification practices amongst women as a form of disciplinary power whereby women internalise the media's idealisation of slim, young, white women's bodies and regulate themselves according to these ideals. Crucially, Foucault argues that power is not just restrictive it is also productive giving rise to a multiplicity of complex effects that can be both positive and negative. Power, therefore, is not absolute but always accompanied by the possibility of resistance due to the multiple and heterogeneous discursive formations available at any historical moment (Foucault 1978).

Building upon Foucault's (1978) understanding of the body as laden with discourse, Butler (1990) influentially argued that the body is constituted from discourse. With the concept of performativity Butler accounts for gender identity as 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (1990, p. 33). Unlike the reflexive, acting subject assumed in the dramaturgical metaphors of interactionist thought, the subject in Butler's work is an illusory effect produced through acts, gestures and speech that reiterate social norms (Butler 1990). Since these identity signals need to be continuously repeated to produce a coherent sexual or gendered subject there is scope for subversion where typical iterations of gender and sexuality elide, alter and shift (Butler 1990). Butler's (1990) work in *Gender Trouble* has been critiqued for not maintaining a clear sense of subjective agency or detailing how these stylistic subversions might work in practice (Brickell 2006). However, in subsequent work Butler (1995; 2004) has continued to provide a more thorough account of the relationship between gender and sexuality than interactionist perspectives. Consequently, her work has proved influential across the social sciences.

While Foucault's analytic of power and Butler's performative elaboration link discursive practices to the materiality of the body their work can over-determine the productive effects of the cultural and discursive at the expense of the natural and material (Barad 2003; Kirby 2006). Although Foucault (1982) did acknowledge in later work that the body exceeds its discursive construction, discourse appears to be all-encompassing with subjects captured within the structural/discursive order throughout much of his work. Similarly, Butler (2004) conceded that her conceptualisation of nature was limited due in part to an acute mistrust of nature's malicious political deployment to condemn non-heteronormative genders and sexualities. Correspondingly, the complexities of the material body are somewhat lost in discursive theoretical perspectives as analytic attention is restrained to representation and signification where the normative gravity of the textual, discursive and institutional become the dominant framework through which sexuality, gender and the body are understood (Lambveski 2005).

Although Foucault and Butler outline a space for agency amidst their exploration of the disciplinary inscription of the body, it is explored 'primarily as a strategy of displacement of constraining symbolic norms, rather than, in more active terms, an appropriation of cultural resources arising from a broader struggle' (McNay 1999, p. 189). As such, social change is hard to explain as there is no clear indication of why, or how, certain subjects might take up or reject discourses. In section 2.8 of this chapter, I outline how I find theoretical shifts to understanding bodies as processes as opposed to bounded entities useful for exploring the complex ways that masculinities and femininities assemble in young people's digitally networked peer cultures and how they might be assembled otherwise to challenge binaries such as masculine/feminine, human/more-than-human).

### **2.3.3 THE INTERCONNECTION OF GENDER, SEXUALITY AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY**

Interactionist and discursive approaches to gender and sexuality are relevant to my thesis because they have shaped much of the empirical literature exploring young people's digital sexual cultures. Since the emergence of internet research, scholars have been curious about the emancipatory potential of digital technologies to re-order hegemonic regimes of gender and sexuality (O'Riordan and Phillips 2007; Shaw and Sender 2016). As Susanna Paasonen (2011, p. 337) observes, 'the prefix "cyber" was floating rather freely in the discourses of the early 1990s in the plethora of references to cyberculture and cyberspace' as well as through the amalgamation of 'cyber' with 'queer' and 'feminism' in critical analyses of gender, sexuality and new technology. While the prefix 'cyber' can be traced in part to cybernetics, an interdisciplinary field of investigation into the automatic control systems of machines and living organisms that are analogous to one another, it was often used more generally to refer to activities situated online (Paasonen 2011a, p. 336). William Gibson's (1984) science fiction novel *Neuromancer* has had an enduring influence on popular conceptions of 'cyberspace' as a disembodied parallel reality that facilitates 'bodiless exultation'. This idea of cyberspace has informed understandings of online life as separate from offline life, as well as the disembodied figuration of the subject online in research, policy and practice (Brians 2011).



Although the fields of cyberqueer and cyberfeminist studies drew on a sporadic set of theories, debates and practices, they have been key arenas in which discursive theories of gender and sexuality have been explored in relation to digital technology (Milford 2015; Paasonen 2011a; Wakeford 2000). The ‘bodiless exultation’ of online life was seen to create new visibilities and intelligibilities for performances of gender and sexuality that were seemingly disentangled from the heteronormative constraints of offline contextual boundaries (O’Riordan and Phillips 2007). A body of research developed that explored how gender and sexuality were performatively and discursively produced through digital platforms and content that reframed the ‘iterative moment’ (Macintosh and Bryson 2008, p. 138). Queer and feminist readings of online platforms initially focused on the subversive potential of new modes of categorisation and communication online but shifted to consider the surveillance oriented and regulatory architecture of social media platforms that tied online performances to offline bodies and social networks (Kanai 2015). Despite the growing recognition that online performances are tied to offline identities, discursive analyses provided little insight into the lived experience of people using digital technologies and the implication of online activities in everyday life. Consequently, issues of identity formation were reduced to a focus on self-presentation online (Wakeford 2002).

To consider the embeddedness of digital technologies in everyday life several scholars have refurbished classic interactionist accounts for the digital age (Setty 2019a; Duguay 2016a; Marwick and boyd 2011). These studies take into account the sexual and gendered meanings people attach to their online practice and how online platforms frame these interactions. Drawing on Goffman’s theories of impression management, danah boyd developed the concept of ‘context collapse’ in her solo writing and work with others to address the flattening of spatial, temporal, and social boundaries online that otherwise separate audiences (Marwick and boyd 2011; see also Wesch 2009). This has resulted in research that explores how young people manage their identities across different online/offline contexts (Duguay 2016a; Marwick and boyd 2014). Within these studies, the ‘reflexive, acting subject’ is seen to resist these constraints through ‘small scale attempts to reorganise or supplement these frames’ (Brickell 2005, p. 36) such as employing

strategies for 'separating audiences to rebuild contexts' on Facebook (Duguay 2016a, p. 10).

Interactionist and discursive theories share an overall concern with how sexual and gender meaning is produced and defined in relation to normative understanding of gender and heterosexuality. Correspondingly, some scholars integrate the methodological approach of the former with the theoretical insights of the latter (Van Doorn 2010; Duguay 2016a). Just as interactionism exerted a considerable influence on the development of methodological work in sociology, these theories have informed the recalibration of descriptive and observational qualitative methods to explore how digital technologies frame social action (Housley and Smith 2017; Atkinson and Housley 2003).

## **2.4 WHAT DOES RESEARCH INFORMED BY INTERACTIONIST AND DISCURSIVE THEORIES TELL US ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES?**

Before outlining the theoretical approach that has informed my research, in this section I consider how interactionist and discursive theories have been employed in empirical research on young people's digital sexualities. Since these theories have informed a significant number of contributions in the academic field of youth sexualities, this section serves to outline some of the current 'knowledge' about youth sexualities and digital culture.

### **2.4.1 NEW VISIBILITIES FOR PERFORMING GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

A key dichotomy underpinning debates about young people's digital sexual cultures is the changing nature of the private versus public divide, where the so-called private world of sexuality is finding new expression and visibility in the public arena of social media, mobile communication and digital gameplay (Naezer and Ringrose 2018; Duguay 2016a; Sunden and Svengisson 2012). The majority of work in this area has explored the influence of social media on young people's intimate practices. danah boyd argues that social media environments operate as networked publics characterised by four key properties: 'Persistence: the durability of online expressions and content; Visibility: the potential

audience who can bear witness; Spreadability: the ease with which content can be shared; and Searchability: the ability to find content' (boyd 2014, p. 11; Marwick and boyd 2014). Although this analysis is troubled by the increasing popularity of ephemeral, disappearing content on newer applications such as Snapchat and the replication of these features on established platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, the characteristics boyd identified still dominate perceptions of how social media platforms reconfigure the boundaries of our private, personal lives (Naezer and Ringrose 2018). Correspondingly, numerous studies have explored how digital technologies are creating new visibilities for the performance of gender and sexuality online (Cho 2018; Renninger 2015; Ringrose and Harvey 2015a).

#### **2.4.2 GENDER RELATIONS AND SEXUAL DOUBLE STANDARDS**

In a postfeminist media context where gender equality is assumed to have been achieved and women are supposedly enjoying the same sexual freedoms as men, the new visibility afforded girls and young women by web-based platforms has been treated as a means to girls' empowerment (Kanai 2015). For example, in her early qualitative analysis of adolescent girls' personal home pages, Samantha Stern (2007, p. 176) argued that the web offered a potential 'safe space' for girls' self-expression as they could openly share thoughts and 'create a public identity'. This utopian promise did not play out however as negotiating contemporary femininities online proved to be more complex, particularly with the advent of social media and mobile communication technologies. In her analysis of Myspace profiles, Amy Shields Dobson (2015) demonstrated how girls and young women are 'invited, and sometimes culturally required, to participate in intimate forms of self and body exposure online' that gesture towards sexual agency and desire. At the same time, however, the visibility of their gendered performances of sexuality are subject to harsh judgement as attention-seeking or self-exploitative.

The surveillance of girls and young women's practices of self-presentation has been especially illustrated through widespread policy concerns around 'sexting'. Typically understood as the creation and circulation of 'sexually suggestive, nude or nearly nude

images' through mobile devices and online media (Lenhart 2009, p. 3), 'sexting' is an imprecise term that covers a broad typology of digital images produced by young people (Albury 2015). Studies have shown that the 'problem' of sexting relies on individualised notions of victim/perpetrator and 'self/peer exploitation' at the expense of engaging with the gender and sexual politics of digital image exchange (Karaian 2014). Furthermore, attitudes towards young people's digital image exchange are shaped by age-old sexual double standards regarding bodily display. In their study of sexting and young people aged 13 – 15 years old in the UK, for example, Ringrose et al. (2012) found that images of girls' bodies were shamed and highly regulated while boys gained reputational reward for possessing images of girls bodies (see also Albury, Crawford, Byron and Mathews 2013).

Sexual double standards are not only evident in young people's peer networks but uncritically reinforced through online safeguarding programmes that charge girls with the gendered responsibility of guarding their virtue (Dobson and Ringrose 2016; Karaian 2014). Educational policy and practice have been critiqued for foreclosing the possibility of girl's sexual agency and desire in creating these images and constructing them as 'the victims of an assumed predatory and unremarkable culture of masculinity' (Harvey and Ringrose 2015, p. 353). The underlying problem of non-consensual image exchange is often left unaddressed in e-safety education. Furthermore, UK educational discourses around sexting have positioned it as a particular problem for Black and mixed-race teenagers which channels racialised and classed discourses around excessive and out of control sexuality in contrast to white middle-class norms of respectability (Harvey and Ringrose 2015). To date, much of the work on sexting has focused on teenagers, but studies are beginning to examine the self-presentation strategies of pre-teen girls aged 11 – 13 years old in the context of sexting (Garcia-Gomez 2018).

While feminine self-presentation has garnered a great deal of attention in research, policy and practice, masculine body practices have received comparatively little. This is despite cultural shifts in bodily norms with boys and young men taking up forms of sexual self-presentation previously associated with women (Manago 2013; Siibak 2010; Hakim 2019; Harvey and Ringrose 2015). 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 (Harvey and Ringrose 2015; Albury 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; Ringrose and Harvey 2015b). However, not all boys and young men are able to accrue value from bodily displays which can be stigmatised as too desperate, vain, cowardly or effeminate (Setty 2019b; Ringrose and Harvey 2015b; Gill 2011).

Another arena in which young people's practices of bodily display have been explored is through YouTube videos. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2011) has explored YouTube as a site where girls experiment with 'self-branding' in line with post-feminist celebrity culture, while Nur Shazlin Abdul Rahman (2012) details how Muslim women's YouTube videos can disrupt hegemonic discourses about the hijab as a tool of patriarchal oppression. Rahman (2012) notes how YouTube provides a popular platform for Muslim femininities that are under-represented in the mainstream media (see also Rahman 2019).

In her exploration of the self-presentation practices of 12 to 17-year-old boys on YouTube, Claire Balleys (2017) found that they explore intimate topics such as puberty, sexuality, body experience and relationships. Although such public talk about feelings signals another shift in ways of doing masculinity, Balleys (2017, p. 237) argues that the performances of masculinity on YouTube were still 'deeply imprinted' with heteronormative presentations of 'a "naturally" heterosexual masculinity that is obsessed with sex and considers girls as beings who are "naturally" frightened or even disgusted by sex'. In line with the aforementioned literature on sexting and digital image exchange, Balleys (2017) also found that boys could display their naked torsos in videos without garnering negative comments whereas a video of a girl in short shorts elicited dozens of abusive comments.

Numerous studies have documented the gendered and sexualised harassment and abuse that women face online with social media and gaming platforms found to be sites of unprecedented hostility towards women (Amnesty International 2019; Jane 2016; Shaw 2014; Rightler-McDaniels and Hendrickson 2014). The disproportionate and intensified vitriol that women experience online was particularly brought to the fore by #gamergate, an online harassment campaign that targeted several women in the video game industry with sustained abuse, rape and death threats (Taylor and Vorhees 2018). Ostensibly a backlash to the push for more diversity and inclusivity in a gaming culture that has historically marginalised women and gender identities that trouble heteronormativity, #gamergate converged with a rising tide of anti-feminist and misogynistic sentiment that has gained political potency over the last decade (Ging 2019). Online abuse is inflected by gendered as well as raced and classed differences and has become a growing area of public policy concern as girls, women and other feminised subjects are forced out of social media spaces as well as wider public life (Amnesty International 2019; Jane 2016; 2014; 2012; Shaw 2014; Rightler-Mcdaniels and Hendrickson 2014).

Despite the hostility that girls and women face online, social media and mobile communication have also been taken up in powerful ways to foster feminist solidarity and activism that speaks back to intersectional gender inequities (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019; Keller 2015; Williams 2015). Feminist scholars have noted how Twitter hashtags can provide entry points to broader feminist communities, as well as ‘comforting solidarities and connections between strangers’ (Keller, Mendes and Ringrose 2018, p. 12; Williams 2015). For example, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller (2019) explore how teenage feminist activists draw on Twitter to challenge rape culture in and around schools. At the same time, however, feminist hashtags can draw upon, and rearticulate, long-standing inequalities within feminist activism (Khoja-Moolji 2015).

### **2.4.3 QUEER SOCIALITIES ONLINE**

A growing body of research has also considered the implications of digital technology for ‘queer socialities’, particularly through investigating how sexual and gender minorities

signal their identity online (Macintosh and Bryson 2008, p. 134; Alexander and Losh 2010). Given the risk of isolation, loneliness and rejection by friends and family amongst LGBT young people, digital platforms can offer vital spaces to foster a sense of closeness or belonging with a broader community (Duguay 2016a; Vitak and Ellison 2012; Hillier and Harrison 2007). Over the last decade, studies have explored how young people disclose their sexual or gender identity through social media profiles (Duguay 2016a; Taylor, Falconer and Snowden 2014; De Ridder and Van Bauwel 2015) or 'coming out videos' on YouTube (Alexander and Losh 2010). In addition, research has addressed the different experiences of trans young people who document their gender transition through blogs and YouTube videos (Raun 2016).

This work highlights how digital platforms ease and accelerate 'coming out' processes, but also expose young people to premature 'outing' and the potential for homophobic, biphobic and transphobic harassment due to the 'public by default setting' of dominant social media platforms (Duguay 2016a; Baym and boyd 2012; Cho 2018). For example, Facebook's policy requires user profiles to reflect a singular authentic identity and foster connections with existing offline networks (Facebook 2020). This has been critiqued for rehearsing a standpoint that 'being-in-public is somehow neutral, low-risk, unraced, ungendered, and unsexed' (Cho 2018, p. 3190). Correspondingly, scholars have noted a preference for more anonymous and ephemeral platforms such as Tumblr amongst young people who wish to explore their gender and sexuality (Marston 2019a; Cho 2018; Warfield 2016; Wargo 2015; Renninger 2015). In his study of queer young people of colour in the United States, for example, Alexander Cho (2018) found that Tumblr 'allows for the vibrant circulation of counter-hegemonic cultural comment' due to its 'design away from default publicness' and focus on a shifting gallery of text, image and video (see also Cho 2016).

Social media platforms offer vital resources for young people to explore their sexual and gender identity with numerous scholars noting the increasing visibility of LGBT celebrities online (Bragg, Renold, Ringrose and Jackson 2018; Lovelock 2017). While these figures have been critiqued for promoting a narrow vision of LGBT life based on a particular

'minority identity deemed "acceptable" for integration within the status quo' (Lovelock 2017, p. 13), researchers have also noted how young people's gender and sexual politics are becoming more creative and expansive. In her study of Tumblr, for example, Christine Feraday (2018) examines the 'neo-identities' that young people are using such as demisexual, homoromantic, pansexual and genderfluid to challenge binary sexuality and gender identity labels as well as open up new conversations about sexual and gender relations. Furthermore, Rob Cover (2018) observes how this emerging taxonomy of non-binary, fluid classifications and descriptors works to accommodate complexity, intersectionality and fluidity into existing liberal-humanist understandings of identity and selfhood. In light of the ever-expanding identity categories young people are using to describe their sexuality and gender, researchers and practitioners are increasingly adding a plus at the end of the LGBT acronym to signal inclusivity.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to self-disclosure, attention has been paid to the socio-sexual connections and relationships fostered through social media sites and mobile 'hook-up apps' which can play out solely online, lead to sexual encounters or foster offline socio-political gatherings (McGeeney and Hanson 2017; Albury and Byron 2016; Downing 2013). Although social media platforms can be key sites where same-sex relationships are fostered, research indicates that lesbian, gay and bisexual teens are less likely to show-off their relationships online than their heterosexual peers due to the fear of negative responses (Naezer and Ringrose 2018; De Ridder and Van Bauwel 2015). Little research exists on the dating experiences of transgender teens or how this is shaped by online platforms (McGeeney and Hanson 2017). Furthermore, Albury and Byron (2016) note how research, policy and practice on digital image exchange amongst young people tend to overlook the

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<sup>5</sup> In the methodology and findings chapters of this thesis, I employ the term LGBTQ+ to refer to young people who self-defined as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (including non-binary or other trans identities), queer or questioning in my study. The plus symbolises the ever-expanding identity categories young people are using to describe their sexuality and gender, such as asexual, homoromantic or pansexual. This acronym is employed as it reflects the language used by participants. However, I recognise its limitations as an acronym seeking comprehensive inclusivity and masking the antagonisms between the terms (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) whose interests do not always come together (see Gilbert, 2014, p. 106).



experiences of sexual and gender minorities.

As I noted in section 2.4.2, gaming platforms have historically been considered hostile sites for gender and sexual minorities. However, a growing body of research is studying LGBT content, players and game creators as well as ‘excavating the queer potential’ of video games to unsettle sexual and gender norms (Ruberg and Shaw 2017, p. x). For example, Sunden’s (2012) ethnography of the massive multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft* explored how ‘players who orient themselves as non-straight have made themselves “at home” in the game’ through an LGBT specific guild (Sunden and Svengisson 2012, p. 19). While Sunden’s work is focused on adults, it resonates with findings from my study on LGBTQ+ young people’s digital practices in which two trans participants detailed their enjoyment of *World of Warcraft* (Marston 2019a). Specifically, they described how their characters evolving genders and sexualities offered an opportunity to ‘vicariously experience...how having that kind of society would be’ (Marston 2019a, p.284). Correspondingly, video games can be sites where young people engage in gendered and sexual practices that might be unavailable in their everyday lives.

## **2.5 LIMITATIONS OF INTERACTIONIST AND DISCURSIVE APPROACHES**

In part one of this chapter, I explored how interactionist and discursive approaches to gender and sexuality have shaped research into young people’s digital sexual cultures. Much of this work has focused on young people’s representational practices online and how this reproduces or subverts the heteronormative organisation of gender and sexuality. Discursive and interactionist research has highlighted an enduring sexual double standard with regards to young people’s bodily display online whereby girls are required to, yet denigrated for, displaying their bodies whereas boys are largely socially rewarded for displaying their bodies and possessing images of girls bodies. Most of this work is focused on older teenagers however a small body of work has addressed the experience of young people aged 11 – 13 years old (Ringrose et al. 2012; Garcia-Gomez 2018). Additionally, the experience of LGBTQ+ young people has not been researched to the same extent as (assumed) heterosexual youth. Although a growing body of research

explores how digital technologies are making sexual and gender minorities visible and intelligible in new ways this work also demonstrates that heteronormative forces endure online (Lovelock 2017; Duguay 2016a; Van Doorn 2010). Again much of this work has focused on older teenagers and University-aged young people.

Methodologically, I have noted that discursive approaches have largely focused on analysing online content without consulting the views of those who created the content (Dobson 2016; Van Doorn 2010). This leads to a limited understanding of how these digital practices are implicated within offline contexts. It can also foreclose a discussion of agency and whether subversions of gender and sexual norms online are intentional. Indeed, some scholars have critiqued Butler's theory of performativity as too abstract for practical implementation into the study of gender and sexuality in everyday life (Brickell 2006; Brickell 2005). In contrast, interactionist theories have advanced descriptive and observational methods that account for the situated particularity of social interactions online and offline, as well as the sexual and gendered meanings people attach to their digital practices. While these studies recognise that online platforms frame social interaction, subjects retain an agential capacity to structure themselves within the constraints of these frames. Correspondingly, scholars have been able to account for the way young people employ strategies to rebuild contexts and maintain privacy online (Duguay 2016a, p. 10; Marwick and boyd 2014).

Discursive and interactionist perspectives are not always applied separately as they share an overall concern with the human mobilisation of language, meaning and power. Some of the scholarship that I have discussed in sections 2.4.2 and 2.4.3 integrate interactionist methods with the more nuanced theoretical insights of discursive theories of gender and sexuality (Duguay 2016a; Van Doorn 2010). There is however a wider methodological debate regarding the commensurability of the post-structuralist theories of Foucault and Butler with traditional qualitative methodologies (St. Pierre 2013; Lather and St. Pierre 2013; Maclure 2013). Elizabeth St. Pierre (2014) has influentially argued that post-structural research impels researchers to continually rethink the conditions under which empirical research is conducted in ways that break down the false binary between theory

and practice. I explore this in further detail in section 2.7.

Additionally, interactionist and discursive approaches have been critiqued for retaining a narrow focus on the individual subject as the locus of gender and sexuality. Efforts to understand how digital practices subjectify young people into discourse 'positions' of masculine/feminine, sexual/innocent, straight/queer remain trapped within narrow and normative understandings of sexuality (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015; Lambevski 2005). Many researchers struggle to highlight experiences that exceed dominant discourses and imagine young people's digital sexual cultures beyond the heteronormative bifurcation of predatory boys and at-risk girls. In part two of this chapter, I explore how feminist post-human and new materialist theories can enlarge the scope of inquiry in important ways that disrupt existing sexual categorisations and hierarchies.

## **PART TWO: DECENTRING THE HUMAN**

### **2.6 FEMINIST POSTHUMAN AND NEW MATERIALIST APPROACHES TO GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

Building on feminist, queer, post-structural and post-colonial critiques of the hierarchies and exclusions imposed by Eurocentric, colonialist and hetero-patriarchal forms of humanism, feminist posthuman (Braidotti 2013; Haraway 2016) and new materialist (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010) scholarship works to incorporate the more-than-human others that have been routinely excluded. Although these heterogeneous fields of thought do not have a unitary genealogical history they are broadly brought together by their focus on distributive agency and relationality; the prioritisation of affect; attention to the politics of matter; and a re-thinking of the nature/culture binary (Truman 2019). 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).

A number of scholars have applied feminist posthuman and new materialist perspectives to the study of sexuality (Allen 2018; Quinlivan 2018; Renold and Ringrose 2016; Austin 2017; Thomas 2016; Huuki and Renold 2016; Renold and Ivinson 2014; Holford, Renold and Huuki 2013; Fox and Alldred 2013; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Ringrose 2011; Lambevski 2005). Rather than debating what a sexual subject is analytic attention shifts to how sexuality is assembled in particular configurations and what the sexual body can do, be or become (Fox and Alldred 2013). This study set out to respond to the feminist posthuman and new materialist call to consider sexuality in expansive and non-identitarian ways as well as engage with the more-than-human of sexual cultures. In the following sections, I weave together theoretical and empirical literature to outline what concepts such as ‘assemblages’, ‘affect’, ‘phallogocentrism’ and ‘feminist figurations’ do in qualitative research on young people’s digital sexual cultures. First, however, I outline the politics of feminist posthuman and new materialist research.

## **2.7 THE POLITICS OF RESEARCH**

Feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship offers a fruitful conceptual toolkit to enquire into the complexities and contradictions of living in an increasingly ‘mixed-up, boundary blurring [...] and ethically confronting world’ (Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Blaise 2012, p. 81). Putting these concepts to work is not about fitting a pre-existing theoretical grid that determines and pins down young people’s digital practices as either good or bad, sexual or innocent, human or more-than-human, normative or non-normative. Rather this conceptual repertoire performs a ‘double movement of critique and innovative creation’ (Lenz-Taguchi 2016, p. 39). Correspondingly, working with these theories helps scholars to critically trace normative articulations of gender and sexuality in line with familiar either/or binaries and coercive hetero-patriarchal norms as well as engage in ‘an experimental mapping exercise’ that activates different ways of thinking, knowing and relating to the world (Lenz-Taguchi 2016, p. 39; Springgay and Truman 2018; Stengers 2008). Deleuze and Guattari (1983; 1987) distinguish mapping from the repetition of tracing patterns that highlight what we already know. Instead, mapping attends to the connections between different relations that constitute an assemblage in

order to chart new territories and deterritorialise data from fixed, molar categories.<sup>6</sup>

This double move connects to wider post-qualitative<sup>7</sup> shifts towards more ontologically nuanced research that does not just report on social realities, but experiments with different ways of being in and making a difference in the world (Lather and St. Pierre 2013; Coleman and Ringrose 2013). The direction of this work is informed by long-standing critiques of conventional humanist qualitative methodologies within post-modern, post-structural, feminist as well as posthuman and new materialist approaches, which have unsettled the illusion of human control over research processes (Pederson and Pini 2017). Standard approaches to qualitative inquiry carry the ‘epistemological promise that the world is accessible for us as researchers and possible to understand and conceptualise as a source of endless scientific knowledge production and accumulation’ (Pederson and Pini 2017, p. 1051). However, feminist posthuman, new materialist and post-qualitative scholarship disrupts the vision of knowledge production as an individualised cognitive act and adopts an onto-epistemological approach to research as ‘an enactment of knowing-in-being that emerges in the event of doing research itself’ (Taylor 2016, p. 18; Ellingson and Sotirin 2020).

Therefore, a recurring concern in the literature I discuss in the following sections is how to

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<sup>6</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1987) employ the term ‘molar’ to refer to the dominant forces of surveillance and judgement that fix bodies in place whereas the ‘molecular’ refers to ‘imperceptible ruptures’ and ‘little cracks’ that can change the way power flows (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, pp. 131–2).

<sup>7</sup> Post-qualitative inquiry seeks to dispense with the categories and presumptions of traditional humanist qualitative research (e.g research problem, research questions, literature review, methods of data collection, data analysis, and representation) that privilege knowing over being. It asks what comes next for qualitative research following the radical rethinking of humanist ontology within post-structural, post-modern, post-colonial and post-human theory and calls for more philosophically informed research that shifts its focus from the epistemological subject to ontological questions about the nature of being (St Pierre 2014; Lather and St Pierre 2013).

'do research' using feminist posthuman and new materialist theories, which profoundly unsettle the orthodoxies of empirical inquiry and question the place of methodology and method (Pederson and Pini 2017). Research does not begin with the rational subject setting out the logic of a formalised, systematised and instrumental inquiry that validates the knowledge it produces through particular methods. Instead, it begins in the middle with a 'situated and responsive' researcher who is already entangled with what they seek to study (Springgay and Truman 2018, p. 206). It is not the case that feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship completely rejects or refutes social science research through the creation of new methodologies and methods. Instead the empirical literature I discuss reworks familiar methodologies such as interviews and online observations, participatory creative and visual methods into feminist posthuman and new materialist frames that call forth new ways of noticing (Taylor 2016; Coleman and Ringrose 2013). This includes, for example, having greater attentiveness to the ecologies of the research and research apparatus (Warfield 2017); playing with methods that are emergent and processual (Ringrose et al. 2019) or beginning with '*concept as method*' (Lenz-Taguchi and St. Pierre 2017, p. 1087; Ringrose 2011).

## **2.8 DIGITAL SEXUALITY ASSEMBLAGES**

Feminist appropriations of the Deleuzo-Guattarian (1987) concepts of agencement<sup>8</sup> or 'machinic assemblage' have proved key in accounting for the messy and complex social configurations through which sexual and gender subjectivities emerge. To view sexuality as an assemblage extends our analytic focus beyond the unitary subject towards the collective web of forces that cut across and join together human and more-than-human bodies (Hultman and Lenz-Taguchi 2010). With the concept of assemblage 'what counts

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<sup>8</sup> The English word 'assemblage' is an 'awkward translation' of the original French term *agencement* used by Deleuze and Guattari. The two words do not mean the same thing. While the French and English definitions of assemblage suggest a bringing, coming together or union of things, the French word *agencement* means to layout, arrange, piece together relations. The latter term supports Deleuze's and Guattari's theoretical efforts to reject unity in favour of multiplicities and develop a relational understanding of agency (Puar 2012; Nail 2017).

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 and Parnet 1987, p. viii; Puar 2012).

In her solo writing and work with co-authors, Jessica Ringrose (2011; Kofoed and Ringrose 2012; Ringrose and Coleman 2013) employs the concept of ‘machinic assemblage’ as a way to think about the shifting patterns of force relations between social media and school environments that work to shape localised peer cultures. Rather than singular and separable entities both young people and social media platforms are understood to be constituted by ‘relations of exteriority’ to other people, ideas, objects, technologies, regulatory norms, social formations and so on (Delanda 2006, p. 11). Correspondingly, analytic attention is drawn to the dynamics of engagement between and through these patterns of relations. Drawing on theorisations of affect (see section 2.9), Ringrose maps ‘assemblages that transfer, amplify or dissipate energy’ (Bogard 1998, p. 67) across the intertwined relations of school and social media and the agential capacity of these relations to affect or be affected by one another. The exchange and connection of affective energies across these relations temporarily coalesce to constitute the function or potential of young person and social media platform.

In her study of the social media platform Bebo, for example, Ringrose (2011) observed how the site was comprised of various component parts (profile pictures, skins, links to favourite songs/videos/TV shows/brands, quizzes, comments) that channelled commercialised norms of consumption and bodily display in line with heteronormative gendered ideals. Bebo skins represented ‘masculinity as predatory, epitomised through the purchase of consumer goods (for example, cars and shoes) with which to gain access to a sexually commodified female body’, while femininity was ‘epitomized by performing the position of sexually desirable “baby girl”; passive and ready to service the phallus’ (Ringrose 2011, p. 604). These features not only constrained and defined possibilities for expression online but fed into and shaped performances of femininity and masculinity at school intensifying the pressure on girls to perform hetero-sexual femininity. Ringrose (2011) highlights the importance of both tracing the reproduction of gender and sexual

norms through discursive subjectifications as well as mapping cracks and ruptures that allow for temporary change. For example, Ringrose (2011) demonstrates how Bebo created opportunities for young people to reconfigure their identities through creating profiles that were disconnected from their school peer group. Such shifts in the relations of exteriority between social media and school assemblages offered a temporary escape from the classed and gendered ways in which young people's bodies were fixed.

Louisa Allen (2015) also draws on the concept of assemblage in her visual study of sexuality at school. She details how this concept expanded her focus to the more-than-human in participant produced photographs, which documented how they learnt about sexuality at school and allowed her to notice the significance of mobile phones. While mobile phones were rarely mentioned explicitly by participants, Allen (2015) found that they featured heavily and repeatedly in her visual data. By de-centring humans and human meaning-making in her analysis, Allen notes how youth sexuality can be seen as emerging in-between mobile phones and young people and not as a distinct property of either. Although the participants did not draw her attention to the role of mobile phones in their sexual lives they nevertheless 'made their presence felt' and increased her 'attentiveness to young people's strong relations to mobile phones' (Allen 2015, pp. 124 - 126). Mobile phones are not just inert objects instead their size and shape provoke 'a particular muscular response' in the way young people lean in and tilt their heads to share a screen which elicits a particular kind of relationality (Allen 2015, p. 129). In my research, I have also noted how screen sharing evoked intimate, semi-private exchanges between participants that produced a tangible shift in the dynamic of the research encounter (Marston 2019a).

This focus on distributive agency and relationality has also shifted scholars understanding of bodies as ontologically-prior bounded entities to explore instead how they are produced through shifting sets of relations that are not fixed and static (Blackman 2008; Grosz 1994). In a DeleuzoGuattarian sense bodies do not necessarily refer to the fleshy human body, but instead to a multiple and diverse set of connections across the always entangled territories of the material, discursive, natural, cultural, biological and



technological (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Alaimo and Hekman 2008). This conceptualisation not only focuses on what the body has been constituted as – as in Butler’s theorisation of subjectivisation (see section 2.3.2) – but in what these shifting sets of relations, territories and affects enable bodies to be, do and become. For example, Retallack et al. (2016) map how a group of teenage girls were able to reconfigure and disrupt the meaning of their ‘learning bodies’ in online and offline spaces through the productive exchange of energies between the various components of the school girl-smartphone-social media assemblage that plugged them into feminist activism.

## **2.9 PRIORITISING AFFECT**

To attend to the different functions and potentials of digital sexuality assemblages, scholars have drawn on affect theory which attunes research to the perceptual, bodily and sensory changes of state created in encounters with the world (Sampson, Ellis and Maddison 2018; Hillis, Paasonen and Petit 2015). Driven by an awareness of the limitations of inquiry focused solely on issues of ideology, meaning and representation, theorisations of affect have proved popular for addressing the vitality and liveliness of everyday encounters with smart technology, social media and gaming platforms. From the mesmerising force of a looping animated graphics interchange format (GIFS) to the surge of feeling facilitated by a cute animal picture or the affirmative jolt of an emoji reaction, digital technologies are energetic affective landscapes ‘fuelled as much by a search for shivers of amusement, interest, anger and disgust as conscious, cognitive decision-making’ (Marston 2019b, p. 608; Sampson, Ellis and Maddison 2018; Hillis, Paasonen and Petit 2015). However, affect is a slippery concept that is used in divergent ways across the literature to account for various registers of experience.

For scholars working from the insights of psychologists such as Silvan Tomkins, affects are biologically, physiologically and neurologically hard-wired ‘within’ the body although they may escape or exceed its bounds (Coleman 2011, p. 31). Correspondingly affect is understood in more concrete terms as particular emotional states or identifiable physiological reactions such as disgust, joy, interest, anger, shame, fear, surprise

(Paasonen, Hillis and Petit 2015). This perspective has been described as offering a kind of inside-out direction to affect where it arises within an individual's body in response to another body or object but no causal connection exists between a particular encounter and the affect it evokes (Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Wetherell 2012).

In her study of how femininities are affectively produced on Tumblr, Akane Kanai (2017) draws on an affective-discursive approach advocated by social psychologist Margaret Wetherell. She observes how GIFs are employed on Tumblr in ways that are 'expected to be intelligible and legible to others' as expressing pride, self-satisfaction, desire and so on. Conceptualising affect as enmeshed within emotional and discursive meaning offers a pragmatic approach to analysing how textual artefacts in digital spaces 'operate on a premise of shared girlfriend knowledges in which readers and bloggers may feel "relatably" feminine' (Kanai 2017, p. 244).

Other scholars draw on the philosophical works of Gilles Deleuze, Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson in their conceptualisation of affect as a 'pre-personal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution of that body's capacity to act' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. xvi). By addressing affect as an intensive change of state that registers on the body before it can be comprehended, affects are understood in much vaguer terms that are 'not so easily expressed, and indeed might escape or exceed their expression in language' (Coleman 2018, p. 1334). This perspective has been described as offering an outside-in direction where affect is relational, circulating amongst and between bodies but not attributable to a single source. For example, in her study of young women who self-proclaimed to be 'avid selfie takers', Warfield (2017, p. 68) draws on affect theory to examine how the interview room, the lighting, mobile devices, the 'embodied vibrations' of the participants and her affective presence as the researcher shaped the selfies that were produced in the research encounter.

These differences in directionality may seem incompatible but they can resonate at particular points to attend to both the 'proprioceptive and visceral shifts' in heat, speed

and movement that bubble away in encounters with the world as well their 'corporeal expression in bodily feelings' (Anderson 2006). Ringrose and Renold (2016), for example, consider the incendiary and fiery exchange of feminist activist energies across social media and teenage peer groups as well as their expression into shared bodily feelings of outrage, relief and belonging. They detail how affect acts as a 'conceptual glue' that holds various registers of experience in play at once from the transpersonal to the embodied, situated and psycho-social (Ringrose and Renold 2016, p. 225). While this definitional malleability can set fresh lines of inquiry in motion, a concern with fluidity, multiplicity and dynamic engagement with the world can also result in the hasty dismissal of established forms of thought (Sampson, Ellis and Maddison 2018).

The recognition that the reductive use of representational schemas can constrain critical thought does not equate to a wholesale rejection of representational thinking but instead accounts for this as part of an assemblage of factors shaping the social world (Paasonen 2011b). Nor does turning to affect mean that scholarship turns away from the 'grinding stability and exploitative continuity' of classed, gendered and raced inequalities along with other material conditions (Blackman et al. 2008, p. 19). Affect is inherently political as it is about changes of state (Massumi 2015). The dynamic affective flows shaping the social world are not open-ended but permeated by hierarchical and stratified relations of power that capture and contain bodily capacities (Massumi 2015; see also Ringrose and Renold 2014; Karatzogianni and Kuntsman 2012). In the next section, I demonstrate how scholars have drawn on affect theory to attend to the enduring force of phallogocentric power relations in young people's digital sexual cultures.

## **2.10 THE ENDURANCE OF PHALLOGOCENTRIC POWER RELATIONS IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL CULTURES**

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1983; 1987), affects may flow in ways which 'conjugate' under the dominance of molar (normative) lines of demarcation that define and stabilise – 'territorialise' – the fluid multiplicities of an assemblage. These territorialities are 'shot through with lines of flight testifying to the presence within them

of movements of deterritorialisation and reterritorialization' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 62). Deterritorialisation works to 'free up the fixed relations' and expose an assemblage to new modes of organisation (Parr 2010, p. 69). However, these lines can also be readily re-captured or reterritorialised into the dominance of molar lines. In their feminist take on Deleuze and Guattari, Renold and Ringrose (2017; 2018) draw on the concept of phallogocentrism to account for the enduring force of the Oedipal plot<sup>9</sup> and hetero-patriarchal power relations in young people's lives that work to limit and contain bodily capacities. Coined by Jacques Derrida (1981), phallogocentrism refers to the hierarchical ordering of sexual relations around the masculine phallus as the privileged signifier and bearer of power with the feminine objectified and constituted as lack, always in service of phallic masculinity (see also Irigaray 1985). By attending to the repeated micro-forces of hetero-patriarchal domination and control researchers can see how phallogocentric territorialisations are maintained, as well as map affective flows that trouble, rupture and exceed them (Bogard 1998, p. 70).

The language of phallogocentrism is particularly relevant to the study of young people's digital sexual cultures as these continue to be oriented around the phallic referent (Butler 2005). This is most clearly evidenced by the relative ubiquity of unsolicited 'dick pics' that girls and women receive online (Ricciardelli and Adorjan 2019; Ringrose et al. 2019). However, it can also be found in the intensification of the phallic male gaze online. Phallogocentric models of vision assume a strict distinction and hierarchical relationship between the perceiver and the perceived which maintains the visual mastery of the active

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<sup>9</sup> Freud (2011) described 'normal' sexual development as tied to the family relations of the father, mother, and child. This triangulation of relations secures the subjects entry into heterosexual desires. The Freudian term 'Oedipal complex' refers to the unconscious sexual attraction of boys towards their mothers and of girls towards their fathers, which results in identification with the same-sex parent and produces heterosexual desire in adulthood. Correspondingly, psychoanalysis ties sexuality to the differences between the two sexes. Freud argued that boys' discovery of sexual difference from the 'shock of the mother's vagina' evokes fear of penile castration and ensures their identification with their fathers (Berlant 2012, p. 32). For girls' penis envy leads them to desire their fathers and the penis. Freud's theory, therefore, constructs women as the lacking other of men.

masculine subject over the passive feminine object (Marks 2002; Mulvey 1975). For example, in section 2.4.2 I noted how girls' and young women's bodies are subject to invasive negative commentary that perpetually scrutinise and fix them as objects of sexual stimulation for men (Jane 2016; 2014; 2012). Rarely are girls and young women granted agency to constitute themselves as desiring or desirable sexual subjects. In contrast, boys and young men can gain value as desiring subjects who possess images of girl's bodies as well as through producing 'sexy' desirable images of their own bodies (Ringrose and Harvey 2015b; Albury 2015). This double standard points to the enduring patriarchal equation of masculinity with phallic power.

While feminist work on the phallic male gaze often implies a fairly rigid gender hierarchy between men and women, feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship examines how masculinities and femininities are produced through shifting sets of relations that are constantly moving, changing and variable. Correspondingly, the phallic male gaze is not understood to operate through the one-way imposition of masculinist fantasies onto girl's and women's bodies, but through affective relations that produce particular inclinations to perceive (Coleman 2011, p. 152). For example, Ringrose and Coleman (2013) note how the repetitive circulation of images of ideal boy and girl bodies in advertising, popular media and social media over-scores what constitutes an ideal gendered pose and shapes what young people can do with their bodies in digitally networked peer cultures. Common visual tropes include an emphasis on girl's breasts which are saturated with affects that render them into sexualised and fetishised objects to be valued, measured and commented upon from a masculinist point of view (Renold and Ringrose 2017).

By engaging in a new materialist analysis of images of girl's breasts on social media, Renold and Ringrose (2017, p. 3) view them as more than 'symbolic representations of objectified female body parts' but agentic material actants. They map how images of the cleavage can plug into different multi-modal multi-directional assemblages in ways that shift from victimising and controlling girl's bodies to queering masculinity and unsettling phallogocentric power (Renold and Ringrose 2017, p. 11). Renold's and Ringrose's (2017, p. 10) reading complicates the shame versus agency dichotomy in discussions of young

people's bodily display and explores the 'endless possibilities' of what a sexual selfie can do to rupture (even if only momentarily) the phallic status quo. While social media facilitates new forms of objectification that re-assert the heteronormative and phallogocentric bifurcation of active male sexuality and passive female sexuality, Renold and Ringrose (2017) also observe how digital technologies create the potential for phallogocentric flows to be re-routed and overthrown. In the next section, I consider in more detail how feminist and queer scholars draw on posthuman and new materialist concepts to foreground feminist figurations of gender and sexuality.

### **2.11 FOREGROUNDING FEMINIST FIGURATIONS IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL SEXUALITY ASSEMBLAGES**

To displace the 'vision of consciousness away from the phallogocentric mode', feminist posthuman and new materialist scholars have embraced the affirmative force of feminist figurations (Braidotti 2011a, p. 248). These have a long history in feminist thought which can be seen, for example, in the reconfiguration of women's bodies as sites of suppressed onto-political wisdom (see, for example, Irigaray 1985; Cixous 1976; Lorde 1984).<sup>10</sup> Validating the leaky, reviled and desiring female body as a complex set of relations and openings was seen to offer points of departure from phallogocentric schemes of thought (Braidotti 2011a). Drawing on this tradition, Ringrose et al. (2019, p. 286) explore how 'creating Play-Doh feminine genitals' with young people 'materially reshapes the masculinist focus on disease and risk via the object of the male penis' in RSE and creates opportunities to discuss pleasure, bodily diversity, gender, menstruation and more.

In the same paper, Ringrose et al. (2019) also consider the multiplicities of what else the phallus can do. They noted how the practice of girl's drawing unsolicited dick pics worked to reorient the workings of phallogocentric power. Significantly, this participatory drawing

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<sup>10</sup> This is not a cis-normative valuation reinforcing exclusive notions of the essential female body, but rather, a valuing the female body as 'multiple, subject to transformation and self-definition (there is not one, but many)' thus potentially validating all sexualities, genders and bodies (Withers 2010, p. 240).

activity emerged within the research assemblage at the participant's tentative suggestion that they draw some of the unsolicited dick pics that they had received. This activity responded to the need for a method that enabled participants to recall sexual content that disappears such as on Snapchat. By going with the flow, Ringrose et al. (2019) note how using a genre associated with childhood innocence (felt-tip drawings) and displays of laddish masculinity (drawing penises) empowered the girls in their study to re-imagine the invasive phallogocentric force of dick pics. Furthermore, Ringrose et al. (2019, p. 286) suggest that the child-like drawings the participant's produced might jolt 'adults out of complacency' around the prevalence of non-consensual image exchange in young people's peer groups.

In addition to exploring what else the phallic referent might do, feminist and queer scholars have also examined disruptions to the phallic male gaze online. In her online ethnography of Tumblr, for example, Susan Driver (2018) looks at LGBTQ+ young people's selfies as lines of flight that disrupt oppressive identity categories and hierarchies. She argues that by engaging in materialist-affective ways of thinking about selfies it is possible to move beyond viewing them as prefixed, inert and reflective of a unified subject (see also Marston 2019a). Appreciating the 'materiality of our media pulls us away from a symbolic understanding and toward a shared physical existence' (Marks 2002, p. xii). Laura Marks' (2002) work on 'haptic visuality' has proved influential for studying images that draw on 'other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics' to involve the body on a more visceral level than optical visuality. She argues that 'haptic visuality' is a 'feminist visual strategy' capable of disrupting phallogocentric models of vision founded on the distancing of perceiver and the perceived as it invites the 'viewer to dissolve his or her subjectivity in the close and bodily contact with the image' (Marks 2002, p. 13). She compares the tactile, close-up way of looking engaged by this 'underground visual tradition' to other subordinated and feminised artistic traditions such as textile art, weaving, embroidery and decoration that invite a 'small, caressing gaze' (Marks 2002, p. 6). Significantly Marks' (2002, p. 3) concept 'emphasizes the viewer's inclination to perceive' and therefore, as Coleman (2011, p. 84) argues, draws attention not only to the content of an image but to what an image does.

Donna Haraway (2008) also invites scholars to think with touch and foster a curiosity about what happens in the contact zones between humans and their more-than-human counterparts. She asserts that humans cannot be separated from non-humans conceptually, as we are constantly in contact with other animals, materials and technologies as we go about our everyday lives (Haraway 2008). Like many of her concepts, Haraway (2004) draws the notion of 'contact zones' from speculative fiction as a means of positing affirmative and empowering feminist figurations that address the ever-shifting terrain of our technological, political, economic, environmental and social landscape. She encourages other scholars to work with speculative fabulation to imagine alternatives to the mundane fiction of nature/culture, human/more-than-human, male/female binaries. Departing from the focus on female morphology in earlier feminist thought, Haraway (1991, p. 149) proposes a cyborg creature 'simultaneously animal and machine' as a new figuration for feminist subjectivity in a world that is 'ambiguously natural and crafted'. The cyborg is one of 'a whole kinship system' of feminist figurations in Haraway's (2004, p. 327) work.

For example, Taylor and Blaise (2016, p. 592) draw on Haraway's 'companion species' figure to re-imagine the field of sexuality education beyond the anthropomorphic constraints of identity categories. They argue that these limit the 'potential to think beyond the pervasively normative liberalist (and humanist) construct of the free and agentic individual (human) subject' (2016, p. 592). Blaise and Taylor's (2016; 2014) work attends to boundary-crossing performances of child-dog and child-kangaroo relations where close, filial identifications emerged. They note how these encounters playfully tap into new relational possibilities with other species as kin in ways that exceed heteronormative imaginaries of the family as 'blood' relatives and 'the nature/culture orderings that would enforce a categorical separation between humans and all other living beings' (2016, p. 602). Notably, Haraway's work resists the powerful imposition of traditional Oedipal family narratives which fail to recognise the 'other histories to be told about the structuring of the unconscious' that are not as conservative, heteronormative, familial and exclusive (Penley, Ross and Haraway 1990, p. 14).



Braidotti's (2011a) feminist figurations also aim at dislodging the Oedipal plot from its culturally hegemonic position but recognises that these psychoanalytic narratives are an adequate reflection of the dominant phallogocentric regimes of our culture (see also Braidotti 2006a). Informed by Deleuze and Guattari, Braidotti (2011a) calls for feminist scholarship to bring forth 'alternative figurations' that 'illuminate the complexity of ongoing processes of subject formation' (Braidotti 2019, p. 217) as well as maps 'the steps, the shifts, and the points of exit that would make it possible for women to move beyond the phallogocentric gender dualism' (Braidotti 2011a, p. 170). Drawing on this theoretical work, Renold and Ivinson (2014) employ assemblage theory to explore the socio-material-historical legacies of girls' relationship with horses in the South Wales Valleys. Moving away from phallic figurations of girls' desires for horseback riding, they offer an alternative figuration of these more-than-human relations where 'girl and horse fuse together as a working unit' that can 'go wherever' in moments of 'spontaneous liberation' (Renold and Ivinson 2014, p. 370).

In summary, feminist figurations offer an 'alternative – affirmative – feminist subjectivity, articulated in the figurative form' that point to ways out of the hegemonic heteronormative and phallogocentric coding of gender and sexuality (Lykke 2010, p. 205). Figurations challenge 'the separation of reason from imagination' (Braidotti 2002, 3) by creatively expressing an imagined elsewhere in ways that critique and urge us to re-think the here-and-now situation. Inspired by Haraway's (2016; 2008; 1997; 1991) work, I sought to engage in promiscuous and speculative modes of thinking throughout this research to unsettle the familiar 'prick tales' that thrust young people towards heteronormative future imaginaries (Haraway 2016, p. 39). I draw on a number of her feminist figurations to question what could be made possible by taking seriously young people's lively engagements with other species as kin. At the same time, I acknowledge the enduring force of phallogocentric power relations and endeavour to map the steps, shifts and points of exit from the gender-polarised system (Braidotti 2011a).

## **2.12 LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH WORKING WITH FEMINIST POSTHUMAN AND NEW MATERIALIST THEORIES TO EXPLORE YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES**

As the previous sections demonstrated a small but growing body of work is employing feminist posthuman and new materialist concepts in empirical research on young people's digital sexual cultures. This work maps the enduring regulation of young people's sexual subjectivities in line with heteronormative and phallogocentric norms as well as highlights feminist figurations of youth sexuality that reconfigure and rupture these ties. Many of these studies foreground the experience of girls and young women with research continuing to be skewed towards young adults and older teenagers (Hickey-Moody and Wilcox 2019; Handyside and Ringrose 2017; Warfield 2017; Ringrose and Coleman 2013; Kofoed and Ringrose 2012). Much of this work focuses on particular digital content, contact or conduct such as selfies (Warfield 2017; Driver 2018), sexting (Ringrose and Coleman 2013), Facebook tagging (Renold and Ringrose 2017) or body-positive art (Hickey-Moody and Wilcox 2019) as opposed to looking at the way multiple digital devices and platforms assemble in young people's sexual cultures. In addition, studies such as Allen's (2015) were not designed with young people's digital cultures as a central focus but found that this emerged as a particular hotspot in their data.

In section 2.7 I noted how feminist posthuman and new materialist theories invite more creative, experimental and craft-based approaches to research. However, in the context of neo-liberal research agendas focused on evidence-based outcomes (Biesta 2010; Davies 2003), researchers can struggle to secure funding for projects that do not address young people's digital cultures in line with mainstream policy and practice concerns.

Correspondingly, researchers have often applied feminist posthuman and new materialist concepts to research data produced in projects that were not designed with these concepts in mind. For example, Ringrose has revisited data from a qualitative study into sexting (Ringrose et al. 2012) funded by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) across several papers (see for example Renold and Ringrose 2017; Ringrose and Coleman 2013; Kofoed and Ringrose 2012). Similarly, Warfield's (2017) study of young women's experiences of taking selfies employed humanist interview and photo-

elicitation methods that initially viewed the research encounter as an interaction between the researcher and the participants as bounded entities. In her paper (Warfield 2017), she revisits her notes and visual data in order to re-materialise the research encounter. Extending her analysis beyond the occularcentricism of the visual method, Warfield observes how listening carefully to the data tuned her into the entanglement of research entities, for example, participants, research methodology, recording tools, data, and researcher.

Due to these limitations on funding few studies to date have employed creative and arts-based approaches to the study of young people's digital cultures. Exceptions include Renold's (2013) exploration of young people's gaming cultures in a creative and participatory study on gender and sexuality (see also Renold and Ivinson 2015). In addition, Ringrose et al. (2019) employed creative and arts-based approaches in their study of non-consensual image exchange online. As I highlighted above, the participatory drawing activity in their study emerged within the research encounter at the tentative suggestion of the participants. Therefore, it exemplifies the 'situated and responsive' nature of feminist posthuman and new materialist inquiries, which can play with methods that are emergent and processual. Participatory arts-based research situated within a feminist posthuman and new materialist frame departs from other co-productive methodologies as they adopt an understanding of change as occurring through shifting affective assemblages that cannot be predicted in advance (Renold and Ivinson 2019; Renold 2017; Ringrose and Renold 2016). The researcher is decentred as the sole agent of change involved in facilitating participatory processes. Instead, attention is sharpened to the broader ecology of research encounters that work to amplify or diminish a participant's capacity to speak and act (Ellingson and Sotirin 2020).

### **2.13 EMPLOYING A CREATIVE, VISUAL AND ARTS-BASED APPROACH TO STUDYING YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES**

My research offered a unique opportunity to explore what creative, visual and arts-based approaches could bring to the study of young people's digital sexual cultures. It

contributes to a body of work that explores how feminist posthuman and new materialist concepts can re-imagine what else digital sexualities research might be, do and become. Not only do these theories encourage us to attend to the material, embodied and sensory dimensions of the digital technologies that shape young people's sexual cultures but they call forth a consideration of the politics of social inquiry and how our research practice comes to matter (Barad 2007; Renold 2017; Coleman and Ringrose 2013). This concern is captured in research question two ('What do creative, visual and arts-based methodologies enable in research on young people's digital sexual cultures?') and research question three ('How can arts-based approaches be employed in co-productive engagement work to re-imagine young people's digital sexual cultures and communicate their complexity?').

My research approach differs from much of the previous work on young people's digital sexual cultures as I do not explicitly focus on particular platforms, devices or practices such as sexting, selfies or cyberbullying. Instead, I adopted a broad and open-ended approach that questioned: In what ways do digital technologies such as social media, smart devices and gaming platforms shape young people's sexual cultures? This enabled the digital to emerge through what the participants articulated was important to them. This approach is an important addition to the existing literature as it allowed me to attend to the off-the-radar ways that young people are entangled with digital technologies, such as considering the role of social media pets in young people's experiences of their digitally networked bodies (see Chapter Five, section 5.5). In turn, this allowed me to consider how a variety of digital practices can become gendered and sexualised in unanticipated ways.

## **2.14 CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter has discussed a range of theoretical approaches to studying young people's digital sexual cultures, as well as outlined previous research in the field. In part one, I explored how interactionist and discursive approaches to gender and sexuality have informed the empirical literature on young people, sexuality and digital technologies. I argued that this research has been valuable in highlighting whether young people's

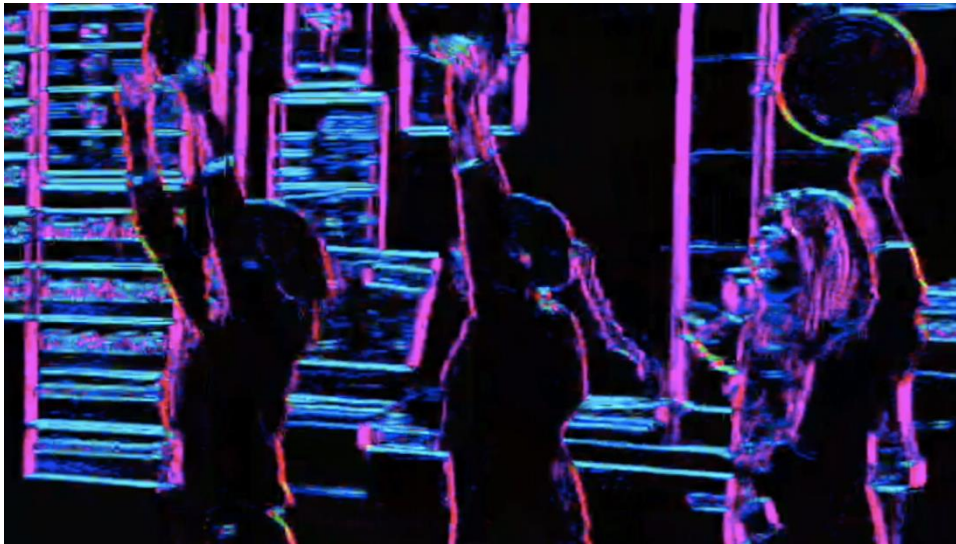
representation practices online reproduce or subvert the heteronormative organisation of gender and sexuality. However, it has also been limited in its ability to exceed dominant discourses and imagine young people's digital sexualities beyond the heteronormative bifurcation of active predatory boys and at-risk passive girls.

In part two of this chapter, I explored the feminist posthuman and new materialist call to consider sexuality in expansive and non-identitarian ways as well as engage with the more-than-human features of sexual cultures. I discussed how concepts such as 'assemblages', 'affect', 'phallogocentrism' and 'feminist figurations' have been employed in empirical literature to map complex and ambivalent relations in young people's digital sexual cultures. I argued that these concepts perform a double function that critically traces normative articulations of gender and sexuality as well as activate different ways of seeing and relating to young people's gendered and sexual subjectivities.

In this chapter, I argued that feminist posthuman and new materialist concepts unsettle the orthodoxies of qualitative research methodologies, which presents a challenge around how to 'do research'. As Lather (2013, p. 635) argues, 'there is no methodological instrumentality to be unproblematically learned'. In chapter three I illustrate how I drew on these concepts to devise a creative, visual and arts-based research methodology with young people aged 11 – 18 years old that sought to rupture established ways of researching young people's digital practices. I detail how my study allowed for diverse experiences to emerge and offered opportunities to imagine digital sexual cultures otherwise.

## CHAPTER THREE - 'WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!': EXPERIMENTING WITH CREATIVE, VISUAL AND ARTS-BASED METHODS IN DIGITAL SEXUALITIES RESEARCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

*FIGURE 1: EXCERPT FROM FIELDWORK SESSION*



### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The words that form the title of this chapter, and their accompanying short film, come from a particularly raucous fieldwork session. I chose to begin the chapter with these words, images and sounds in an effort to articulate the feel of some of the research encounters that unfolded over the course of my research, as well as to respond to the question the participant posed. Not only does this question get to the heart of what this methodology chapter seeks to address, namely how I went about researching young people's digital sexual cultures but it also prompts a consideration of some of the key theoretical assumptions underlying my methodological approach.

By jovially shouting 'What have you done?!' at me, the participant holds me responsible for the chaotic flow of events in that session. While I would like to take the credit for this outburst, it was one of many moments in the fieldwork in which I felt like merely a

spectator to the inventive, playful and creative ways the participants took to the research materials. In many ways, this fieldwork session encapsulated how experimenting with creative methods could ignite passionate responses and offer participants opportunities to express a range of experiences. However, it also challenged me to think critically about the particularity and specificity of this moment and not to simply celebrate it as a powerful example of youthful expression (Ringrose and Renold 2014).

Informed by a poststructuralist<sup>11</sup> scepticism towards the idea that there are 'true' or 'authentic' youth voices to uncover through research, my project sought to engage with the politics of knowledge production and the mobility of meaning-making.

Correspondingly, I did not assume a singular, given reality could be gathered together as data, analysed and known (St. Pierre 2013). Instead, my project was framed by the assumption that as a researcher I was not simply reporting on a world 'out there', but 'creating and experimenting with an emergent one' (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008, p. 512). Consequently, the choices that were made throughout fieldwork and analysis were always a process of making and unmaking young people's digital sexual cultures (Jackson and Mazzei 2011).

Drawing on Karen Barad's radical re-thinking of causality through her concept 'intra-action', research events, like the one above, are not understood to be happening to or from separate entities that precede their 'acting upon one another' (Kleinman 2012, p. 77). Instead, they emerge as a 'consequence of the mutual relationships in/between humans, non-humans and matter' (Mitchell 2017, p. 173). Rather than solely being the result of something I had deliberately 'done', the raucous fieldwork session can be seen as the consequence of a complex and shifting web of force relations between the participants, myself, the institutional context of the school, the architecture of the

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<sup>11</sup> Post-structuralism is a theoretical movement associated with thinkers such as Foucault, Butler, Deleuze and Guattari and Braidotti. It builds upon and critiques the intellectual project of structuralism. Its principal characteristic is a rejection of the idea of universal truth and objective knowledge, 'asserting that truths are always partial, and knowledge always "situated"' (Maclure 2013, p. 167).

classroom, the time of day, the Ipad camera, pens, paper, plates and other materials that had been brought into the room (Fox and Alldred 2015).

While the research events were ‘only very partially under any form of deliberate control’ (Law 2004, p. 42), I recognise that I am always, already unevenly entangled in shaping what becomes ‘known’ in this inquiry as an active participant in the apparatus of observation (Barad 2007). This thesis materialises the research encounters in particular ways and I am wary of retrospectively converting it into a linear, rational process when it was, in fact, unpredictable, messy and fraught with my anxieties as an emerging researcher. The very act of writing has been a tentative process of bringing together the disparate and moving elements that comprised the research in order to account for the knowledge produced (Stewart and Berlant 2019, pp. 186 - 187).

In this chapter, I set out to map the rhizomatic<sup>12</sup> research process, attend to some of the intra-active relations that assembled in the research encounters, and consider what they allowed the research to do or not do (Fox and Alldred 2015). To illuminate the way my methodology operated I have incorporated data throughout and paid attention to what creative, visual and arts-based methods enabled in this study on young people’s digital sexual cultures. Consequently, the chapter not only details how I went about the research but also addresses research question two (‘What do creative, visual and arts-based methodologies enable in research on young people’s digital sexual cultures?’). Although addressing a research question in the methodology chapter is somewhat unconventional, it is in keeping with an onto-epistemological approach that increasingly questions the place of method and methodology, and unsettles the orthodoxies of traditional humanist research (Pederson and Pini 2017; Springgay and Truman 2018; Taylor 2016; Coleman and Ringrose 2013; St. Pierre and Lather 2013; see Chapter Two, section 2.7).

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<sup>12</sup> Rhizome is a term employed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 21) to describe how energies can split off in multiple, branching, reversing, coalescing, and rupturing directions that disrupt any linear trajectory.



The chapter is divided into seven key sections. In the first section, I detail the preparations that I made to gain access to the research sites including the ethical protocols I put in place, the responses I received and how each of these settings shaped the research encounters. I then move on to explain the strategy I employed to recruit participants in these settings and introduce the participants who took part in my study. In the second section, I account for the methodological approach I devised for this study and the specific creative, visual and arts-based methods I employed. In the third section, I begin to address research question two and consider what these creative, visual and arts-based activities enabled in this PhD project. I then provide an account of how my researcher subjectivity shaped the research (section 3.6), before discussing my engagement with the data and analytical process (section 3.7) and summarising my findings for research question two (3.8).

## **3.2 RESEARCH PREPARATIONS, ACCESS AND RECRUITMENT**

### **3.2.1 ETHICAL APPROVAL**

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 (Appendices A, B and C). The process of obtaining ethical approval required several iterations as I made adjustments to my project in response to fieldwork developments.

Firstly, an LGBTQ+ youth group expressed an interest in hosting the research project, which required outlining additional ethical protocols. I had originally proposed to work only in schools, but after some difficulties recruiting a school in Wales, my supervisor Professor EJ Renold put me in contact with a youth service in south Wales. This contact suggested working with a newly formed LGBTQ+ youth group, which appealed to some of my research interests (see Marston 2019a). As I outlined in Chapter Two, LGBTQ+ young people's experiences online have not been researched to the same extent as (assumed) heterosexual youth (Naezer and Ringrose 2018). Consequently, I was keen to take up the opportunity to work with the group when they expressed an interest in the research. After

an initial phone call with the youth worker in charge of the LGBTQ+ group, I pursued ethical approval for this setting. I refer to this group by the pseudonym Castell Q throughout the remainder of this thesis.

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 youth group's schedule and clearly advertising to the young people when I would be facilitating research activities. I also arranged for individual interviews to be conducted in a separate area, away from the group's regular activities with the youth workers still in view. While these measures offered participants opportunities to opt-out of the research, I found it challenging to ensure that young people felt genuinely able to opt-out when their peers displayed enthusiasm for the activities. For example, one participant at Castell Q appeared to complete the consent form because her girlfriend expressed an interest in participating. However, this member remained a silent observer throughout this fieldwork session and did not engage with the research activities. Although her presence in the room arguably still shaped the research encounter, I have decided not to include this participant in my final recruitment numbers due to her withdrawal from the process (Renold, Holland, Ross and Hillman 2008).

The second iteration of ethical approval followed after staff in the school settings advertised the research project to all school years and a significant number of Year 7's (age 11 – 12) expressed an interest in the research. Given that most social media sites do not allow children under 13 to register, I had initially proposed to work only with children from Year 8 (aged 12 – 13) up to Year 13 (aged 17 – 18) to develop an exploratory sense of differences across age cohorts. However, I was aware that children under the age of 13 do register for social media accounts and an increasing number of platforms are developing pre-teen specific versions of their applications (Ofcom 2019). Consequently, I received further ethical approval to include Year 7's (aged 11 – 12) in the research project.

In keeping with the institutional guidelines, parental consent was required for participants under the age of 16. Parents/guardians were provided with information about the nature of the project and their children's right to withdraw, offered an opportunity to meet or telephone me and asked to complete an opt-in consent form (Appendix A). Consent forms were provided in a stamped addressed envelope for ease of return. Several reminders were sent to parents and guardians to secure written parental consent for all young people eager to participate. Unfortunately, due to unreturned parental consent forms some young people who expressed an interest in the research were unable to participate.<sup>13</sup>

For all participants 'freely given informed consent' (British Sociological Association 2002, p. 3) was required. This presents challenges for researchers working with children and young people, especially when opting out may have consequences for one's relationship with peers or adult guardians (Renold et al. 2008; Skelton 2008). Below, I discuss in further detail some of the steps I took to seek voluntary and informed consent. This included providing information and consent forms in clear and accessible language, creating a research 'trailer' film<sup>14</sup> to explain the research (Hammond and Cooper 2010), holding a taster workshop to allow participants to try out research activities and ask questions as well as providing time for participants to consider their participation before completing the consent forms (Appendix B).

I regularly checked-in with participants throughout the fieldwork 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).

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<sup>13</sup> Where young people were unable to participate in the research project due to unreturned parental consent forms their head of year and/or form tutor informed them that this was the case.

<sup>14</sup> The research trailer is available to view via [this weblink](#).

Furthermore, the research activities 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).

Overall, I view the pursuit of ethical practice as an ongoing and situated process, progressing through initial research aims to fieldwork, analysis, writing and dissemination. While my practice was underpinned by the ethico-political commitment to foreground young people’s perspectives on their digital sexual cultures, I do not believe it is possible to judge ethical practice in advance or view ethics as a series of resolvable ‘dilemmas’ (Renold et al. 2008). In striving to be an ethical researcher I evaluated relations as they emerged and seek in this thesis to seriously engage with the ambivalent and uncertain feelings that this research project stirred up. Striving to uphold a creative and participatory approach at the same time as navigating youth work and school-based constraints produced some exclusions, which I discuss in section 3.5 (see also Ollis, Coll and Harrison 2019).

### **3.2.2 ACCESS**

The research project set out to undertake an exploratory inquiry into differently positioned young people’s digital sexualities in England and Wales. Overall, twenty-five participants aged between 11 – 18 years old were recruited from a sample of two state-funded secondary schools, one state-funded Sixth Form College and one youth group. In approaching research sites, I considered geographical factors, for example, urban or rural, along with the socio-economic status and ethnic diversity of the settings in an effort to engage children and young people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds.

Once the study had been approved by the ethics committee of Cardiff University’s School of Social Sciences, I began contacting institutions that worked with children and young people aged 11 – 18 years old. This involved drawing on contacts I had developed through my time working for an educational charity in England, as well as my supervisor’s established relationships with schools and youth services in Wales. For the sake of

clarifying my role as a doctoral researcher, I avoided settings where I may have previously worked with young people in another professional capacity.

An initial e-mail was sent to a senior member of staff in each setting, providing an overview of the research project and inviting participation (Appendix C). In total, I contacted nine schools, one Sixth Form College and a youth service. The youth service also contacted several local schools on my behalf to help advertise the research project. While the college and the LGBTQ+ youth group responded positively, several schools I contacted declined the invitation due to a lack of time and resources. Nevertheless, many viewed the topic of young people's digital sexual cultures to be a timely one and were eager to learn more about the matter.

As a result of these recruitment efforts, I secured access to four research sites. This included: Westland College, a Sixth Form based in a small coastal town in England catering to a predominantly white middle-class pupil population aged 16 – 18 years old; Castell Q, a newly established LGBTQ+ youth group hosted in a post-industrial urban town in the South Wales Valleys; Green City School, a secondary school situated in an affluent and centrally-located suburb of an English city that drew pupils from socio-economically and ethnically diverse backgrounds<sup>15</sup>; and Ysgol Mellt, a secondary school located in a small village in south Wales accommodating largely white working-class pupils from the surrounding rural villages.

After these settings expressed an interest in participating in the research, a project meeting was set up to discuss the practicalities of the research process. This meeting provided an opportunity to re-visit the aims and purpose of the fieldwork, discuss the ethical framework in place, identify which groups of young people I could work with and schedule when fieldwork could take place. As I detail below, settings varied significantly in

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<sup>15</sup> For 31.7% of pupils, English was not their first language compared to 16.5% national average. Pupils eligible for free school meals was also higher than the national average.

the time and space they allowed with the participants and this shaped the research process in various ways.

### **3.2.3 RESEARCHING DIGITAL SEXUALITIES IN SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND YOUTH GROUPS**

Working in schools, colleges and youth groups provided significantly different institutional contexts for the research. While it took considerable time and effort to gain access to the secondary schools I worked with, the youth group and college were able to grant access with much more ease. This was somewhat reflective of the differing institutional contexts of each setting.

Schools are institutionalised hierarchical spaces that transmit knowledge through power differentiated patterns of teaching and learning (Evans, Rich and Holroyd 2004). Hierarchies between staff and pupils are maintained through standardised pedagogical practices, such as the ongoing judgement of pupils' abilities or the monitoring of behaviour. A wealth of research has documented how pupils emerge through these practices as obedient and self-disciplined (Bragg 2007; Gallacher and Gallagher 2008). For example, at Green City School I observed a concerted effort to promote 'Green City School Manners' through assemblies, school displays and a short film produced with pupils to delineate behavioural expectations around common courtesy. Correspondingly, for a short period, I noticed how pupils would consistently open doors for me as I was walking through the school.

Scholars have also documented how schools are sites in which gender and sexuality are policed and controlled through various curricula and disciplinary protocols, such as uniform policies, gender-segregated spaces and the RSE curriculum (Harrison, Hillier and Walsh 1996; Rasmussen, Rofes and Talburt 2004; Allen 2005; Ingham 2014). Furthermore, digital technologies are often excluded and penalised in classroom contexts (and beyond) rather than embraced as valid sites of learning and enquiry (Kim and Ringrose 2018). Given the authoritarian context of schools, I gave special consideration to how I might disrupt the power differentials between myself and the participants. This included using my first name, wearing casual informal clothing and, as I will expand upon in section 3.3.1,

employing research activities that endeavoured to 're-route established teaching practices' and provide fun, playful and creative ways into the research topic (Renold 2017, p. 5).

Participants at Green City School and Ysgol Mellt did appear conscious at the beginning of fieldwork about my position as an adult at the school. They invariably called me 'Miss' despite knowing my first name and sought my permission to engage in certain behaviours such as getting their mobile phones out. Throughout fieldwork, I remained open to the research activities being redirected and contested and refrained from intervening in or challenging the participants' behaviour unless it was a threat to their safety (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008). Correspondingly, over time participants began to express themselves in ways that would have been disciplined in the wider school context such as swearing or engaging in creative web searches to show blocked website content, for example, Roblox, a children's gaming website. Efforts to disrupt institutional power differentials were constrained by my anxieties about maintaining a good relationship with the gate-keepers and access to the school (Ollis, Coll and Harrison 2019). For example, I was much more likely to direct the participants' engagement on occasions when a member of school staff was in the room.

It was not only my intentional practices that helped shape the research encounters. For example, holding the fieldwork sessions in one of the art rooms at Green City School over a Friday lunchtime became significant in several ways. Friday lunchtimes were an extra ten minutes long, and the most sustained period of 'informal' time in Green City School's schedule. In the context of this over-subscribed city school, the spaces and places designated for pupils to be together at this time were invariably overcrowded. Consequently, the research sessions offered a privileged and intimate space away from the hustle and bustle of the school crowds. The art room was also less seriously structured than other classroom settings, colourfully decorated with pupils' artwork, featuring three tall, long tables and two large sinks it emphasised creativity, collaboration and messiness (Renold 2017). These temporal, spatial and material forces may have intra-acted with the

participants' own desires for creative freedom and shaped their animated engagement with the research process.

In contrast, at Ysgol Mellt fieldwork sessions took place in a portacabin classroom that was dedicated to providing additional pupil support outside of lessons, particularly for unruly 'misbehaving' pupils. The classroom was comprised of four octagonal tables, which I usually combined to create a large collaborative working space for the participants. One side of the classroom was lined with desktop computers that we used for some of the research activities. Fieldwork sessions were conducted over four visits to the school lasting 1 hour and 30 minutes each, including the end of lunchtime and the last lesson of the day on a Tuesday. Occupying the portacabin classroom over lunchtime drew the attention of other pupils and the fieldwork session was frequently interrupted by boys bursting into the room and asking questions about why I was there. In comparison, the final hour of the fieldwork sessions provided a calmer and quieter space for undertaking the research tasks.

At Westland College staff and participants were reluctant to dedicate lesson time or study periods to the research. While Sixth Form Colleges typically grant pupils more independence, these freedoms are the result of the self-discipline pupils are expected to have gained through the course of their school career. The competitive culture of university preparations was a notable preoccupation amongst the participants at Westland College. Correspondingly, I gained the impression that providing them with an opportunity to work with a PhD student appealed to the Head of Sixth Form with the research evaluated by staff and participants on the basis of its potential academic merits. Fieldwork sessions often competed with the participants other academic and extra-curricular responsibilities and were ultimately limited to 30-minute lunchtime slots over the course of seven visits to the college.

Castell Q was the most informal fieldwork setting and there were few limitations on the time and space I was allowed with participants. However, I was conscious not to dominate this nascent youth group with my research agenda. Therefore, the fieldwork was



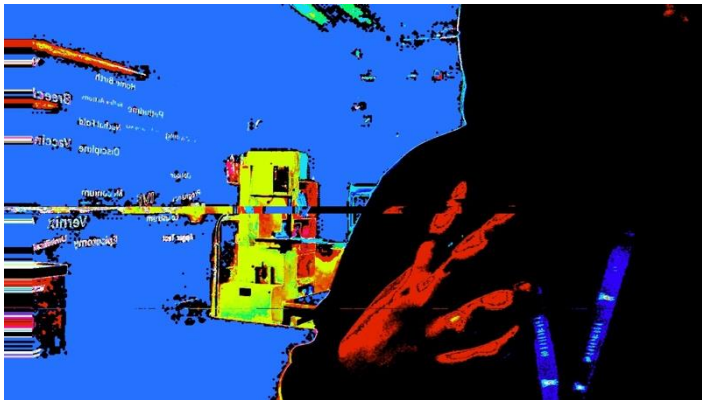
comprised of four visits lasting one hour and thirty minutes conducted over a period of three months. Jaynes (2020, p. 206) observes that youth work strikes a 'careful balancing act between professionalism and friendship, fluidity and rigidity, formality and informality'. This was notable in the way that youth workers at Castell Q actively participated in the research with participants. For example, they occasionally asked their own follow up questions to learn more about the young people's interests or bonded with them over their shared love of YouTube D.I.Y videos. As a small intimate group that met around a large table in an undecorated community hall, these sessions were quiet and sedentary. The group dynamic lent itself to engaging with group discussions but efforts to introduce activities that involved moving from or around the table were often awkward and stilted.

#### **3.2.4 ENGAGING PARTICIPANTS**

The research project was promoted to potential participants via a talk or assembly in which I introduced myself and my role as a social science PhD student as well as played a one-minute Imovie research 'trailer' to introduce the research project. During the talk, young people were invited to sign up for a taster workshop that offered them the opportunity to try out research activities, ask questions about the research project as well as collect information and consent forms.

The taster workshop was adapted from Matt Abraham's, EJ Renold's and Jên Angharad's (2017) work with glitch-art and the physics curriculum. Prior to the taster session, I created a series of prompt cards with key 'forces' concepts from the physics curriculum (such as distance, speed and friction) along with simple definitions of each concept. I also downloaded a glitch-art application called Hyperspektiv to my Ipad, which worked to corrupt and manipulate images recorded in real-time (for example see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: EXAMPLE GLITCH IMAGE



At the start of the taster workshop, I spread out a long roll of paper across multiple classroom tables and scattered multi-coloured pens and the force concept cards around the edges. I also set up the Ipad on a tripod separately from the table and turned the glitch app on. During the session, the participants were invited to graffiti the long roll of paper with their thoughts and feelings about how digital technologies shape their peer relationships, using the physics concepts as prompts (Renold 2017). In small groups, they were also invited to take turns speaking or performing their annotations in front of the glitch-art app and asked if glitching themselves helped further animate their thoughts and feelings about digital relationships. With the workshop participant's permission, any glitch recordings they made in this session were deleted once they had finished. Potential participants asked questions about the research project throughout the session, and fifteen minutes were dedicated at the end of the session to hand out information and consent forms and allow potential participants an opportunity to ask further questions.

This taster session aimed to spark interest in the research project as well as disrupt associations with established teaching practices around online safeguarding. As I detailed in Chapter One (section 1.3.1), online safeguarding strategies are dominated by risk and harm discourses that tend to focus on a limited number of digital practices and fail to account for the diversity of young people's digital experiences. This participatory activity mobilised force concepts and glitch-art filters to support participants to think about the role of digital technologies in their peer relationships. In total across all four sites,

approximately fifty-eight young people attended the taster workshops and expressed an interest in the study. However, despite efforts to chase-up consent forms and follow-up with those who had expressed an initial interest, only twenty-five young people returned the necessary forms required to take part. Once consent forms had been returned, participants were provided with a further opportunity to ask questions about the research project before the formal process of data production began.

### **3.2.5 PARTICIPANTS**

The research was comprised of three key parts and participants were invited to take part in some or all of the research activities. Twenty-five participants aged between 11 – 18 formed into six groups and took part in group interviews (16 from England; 9 from Wales); seventeen participants took part in follow-up interviews (13 from England; 4 from Wales); and ten took part in the arts-based activities (all from England). See Table 1 on page 86 for a summary breakdown of participant involvement across all three phases. Other than age and location, there were no specific criteria for participation. While I did try to ensure that participants were from a variety of backgrounds, a larger portion of participants were from England than Wales. The participant sample is also skewed towards White British young people (21 participants) and young people who identified as girls (19 girls / 6 boys). However, the study does offer insights into under-explored demographics within existing empirical research on youth digital sexualities which has tended to focus on specific digital practices, such as selfies, sexting, Snapchat and Tumblr, amongst older teenagers and University educated young people (Warfield 2017; Handyside and Ringrose 2017; boyd 2014; Duguay 2016a).

I did not ask participants for biographical details in a formalised way but instead allowed these to emerge through my interactions with them over the course of the fieldwork. Consequently, the biographical data that emerged was partial, inevitably shaped by the participant's desires to come across in particular ways as well as my own interests, assumptions and biased perceptions. The descriptions of participants I share in this section were also guided by my need to protect participants' anonymity. In describing who

participated in my study, I recognise that this act is not value-neutral and I reflect upon this process in more detail in section 3.6.

Inspired by researchers who work with queer theory (Butler 1990; Nigianni and Storr 2005), I did not ask participants to directly define their sexuality or gender. Many of the participants described their gender over the course of the fieldwork with nineteen participants indicating they identified as girls (pronouns she/her) and six participants indicating they identified as boys (pronouns he/him). Besides from the five participants attending the Castell Q youth group who self-identified with the LGBTQ+ umbrella term, few participants explicitly labelled their sexual identity. However, the majority of participants referred only to hetero-couplings when discussing their own and their peers' romantic relationships.

The follow-up interviews usually provided a space for participants to describe their family set-up and their relationship with family members, parental occupations and, for the older age cohort (15 – 18 years), their hopes and plans for life after school. While this offered some insights into the participants' socio-economic backgrounds, I am mindful that the lived and felt experience of classed identities is complex in ways that preclude any straightforward classification (Skeggs 1997). Similarly, only some participants made explicit reference to their ethnic, cultural and religious heritage. In the following sections, I contextualise each of the groups that participated in the research to provide a better understanding of the relational dynamics at play during the fieldwork sessions.

#### **3.2.5.1 WESTLAND COLLEGE YEAR 13'S**

Irene, Bernard, Dan, Tom and Claire were classmates aged between 17 – 18 years old from Westland College. All of the participants were White British and had grown up in the small coastal town of Portland, which they described as 'safe', 'quiet', and 'sheltered'. They had all attended Portland Secondary School prior to Sixth Form and were preparing to attend

university at different locations around the UK following their A-levels.<sup>16</sup> They all participated in the first phase of the research, and Irene, Bernard, Dan and Claire also took part in follow-up individual interviews.

### **3.2.5.2 CASTELL Q YOUTH GROUP**

Lucy, Sarah, Alex, Jen and Tess participated in fieldwork at Castell Q youth group and were aged between 15 – 18 years old. All five identified with the LGBTQ+ umbrella and had been attending the youth group since its inception. All of the participants were White British and had grown up in or around the urban town of Castell in the South Wales Valleys, which they described as ‘rough’ and ‘chavvy’. While Alex and Tess attended college, Lucy, Sarah and Jen were still in secondary school. They all participated in the first phase of the research, and Alex, Tess, Lucy and Sarah took part in follow-up individual interviews. At the time of the research, Alex was preparing to study a subject in the field of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) at University and Tess and Lucy hoped to undertake vocational training to work with children or animals.

### **3.2.5.2 GREEN CITY SCHOOL YEAR 7’S: ‘MIA, ISABELLA, SAFA AND IMOGEN’ AND ‘OLIVIA AND CHIARA’**

#### *MIA, ISABELLA, SAFA AND IMOGEN*

Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen were a newly formed group of Year 7 friends (all aged 12) who participated in all stages of the fieldwork across Year 7 and the beginning of Year 8. Although this group was not representative of the social intake of the ethnically and socio-economically diverse Green City School they attended, they were differentiated by class and race. For example, Mia and Isabella were from notably more affluent backgrounds

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<sup>16</sup> A-levels are an academic qualification in England and Wales which some young people take when they are seventeen or eighteen years old. A-levels are typically required if a young person wants to go to University.

than Safa and Imogen. While Mia, Isabella and Imogen were White British, Safa had South Asian and Sikh heritage.

Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen were invested in a number of extra-curricular school activities, earning them a reputation for being helpful 'superstars' by their teacher. However, their assistance with wider school activities also secured them the derisive moniker of 'Sparkle Committee' from some of their peers. The group described themselves as 'weird people through and through', asserting that there is 'no such thing as a normal person because every person is different!' and often introduced themselves to the audio-recorder at the beginning of interviews with variations on: 'Hi guys! And welcome back to our YouTube Channel, We Are The Weirdos!'

#### *OLIVIA AND CHIARA*

Olivia and Chiara were form tutor classmates at Green City School, both aged 12 and White British. They participated in the first three group interviews as a pair and, with everyone's enthusiastic agreement, were invited to work together with Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen for the final group interview of phase one and the arts-based sessions of phase three. This decision was taken to maximise the number of fieldwork visits I could complete with the Year 7's and to share experiences across the groups. While Olivia left Green City School partway through Year 7, Chiara continued to participate throughout all three phases of the research with Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen.

#### **3.2.5.3 GREEN CITY SCHOOL YEAR 8'S**

Basar, Jalil, Layla, Karma and Droshux were form tutor classmates at Green City School and aged between 12 – 13 years old at the start of the fieldwork. All five participated in all stages of the fieldwork across Year 8. The boys, Karma and Droshux, were both White

British and neurodiverse.<sup>17</sup> The girls, Basar, Jalil and Layla, were from different ethnic and religious backgrounds including South Asian and Muslim heritage. All five participants were friendly and familiar with each other from class and appeared to share an investment in academic success. For example, they competed over class scores in different subjects and celebrated their academic achievements in fieldwork sessions. In addition, Karma and Droshux were members of a computer skills based extra-curricular club, and Basar was an active member of school sports teams. Only Basar's, Jalil's and Layla's friendship appeared to extend beyond the school gates.

#### **3.2.5.4 YSGOL MELLT YEAR 7'S AND 8'S**

Aislinn, Neve, Natalie and Leah were friends aged 11 – 13 years old from Ysgol Mellt who participated in the first phase of the fieldwork over the course of five sessions. While Aislinn, Neve and Natalie were all in Year 7, Leah was Natalie's elder sister and in Year 8. All five were White British and lived in rural locations in the South Wales Valleys. They were referred to by their teacher as 'quiet' and described themselves as having bonded over shared experiences of being bullied at the primary school they all attended.

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<sup>17</sup> I use the concept neurodiverse in recognition that humans vary widely in their neurocognitive functioning, specifically Karma and Droshux identified themselves as autistic.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Phase One: Creative and Visual Group Interviews</b>	<b>Phase Two: Follow-up interview</b>	<b>Phase Three: Arts- based methods</b>
Irene	18	Westland College	Yes	Yes	No
Bernard	18	Westland College	Yes	Yes	No
Dan	17	Westland College	Yes	Yes	No
Tom	17	Westland College	Yes	No	No
Claire	17	Westland College	Yes	Yes	No
Lucy	16	Castell Q	Yes	Yes	No
Sarah	15	Castell Q	Yes	Yes	No
Alex	17	Castell Q	Yes	Yes	No
Jen	16	Castell Q	Yes	Yes	No
Tess	18	Castell Q	Yes	Yes	No
Mia	12	Green City School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Safa	12	Green City School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Isabella	12	Green City School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Imogen	12	Green City School	Yes	No	Yes
Olivia	12	Green City School	Yes	No	No
Chiara	12	Green City School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Basar	13	Green City School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jalil	13	Green City School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Layla	13	Green City School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Karma	13	Green City School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Droshux	13	Green City School	Yes	Yes	Yes
Aislinn	11	Ysgol Mellt	Yes	No	No
Neve	11	Ysgol Mellt	Yes	No	No
Natalie	11	Ysgol Mellt	Yes	No	No
Leah	13	Ysgol Mellt	Yes	No	No



### **3.3 DEVISING A FEMINIST POST-HUMAN AND NEW MATERIALIST METHODOLOGY FOR RESEARCHING YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES**

The formal stage of data production began once participants had completed and returned the necessary consent forms. The methods I employed were developed with my research aims in mind. This included a desire to map how social media, gaming and smart devices are shaped by and re-shaping (hetero)normatively gendered and sexualised relationship cultures, as well as hold in play the 'off the radar' ways young people are affected by their entanglement with digital technologies (Taylor and Blaise 2014, p. 385). As I detailed in Chapter Two, I set out to respond to the feminist posthuman and new materialist call to consider sexuality in extensive and non-identitarian ways and engage with the more-than-human of sexual cultures.

Building on feminist, queer and post-structural observations of how human sexuality is caught in binary machines that privilege heteronormative formations and close off other bodily possibilities, feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship accounts instead for the unpredictable entanglements through which a body can become (Braidotti 2013; Holford, Renold and Huuki 2013). The anthropocentric sexual subject is decentred to demonstrate the emergence of subjectivity through and within assemblages made up of multiple external relations that cut across natural, cultural and technological realms (Delanda 2006, p. 11).

Correspondingly, methodological approaches have become necessarily expansive and experimental as researchers seek to find new ways of putting these theoretical concepts to work. Following other research that has combined creative techniques with assemblage theory, I employed a multiplicity of participant-led creative, visual and arts-based methods in order to consider how the relative life force of these different relations call forth new ways of understanding young people's digital sexual cultures (Austin 2017; Bragg, Renold, Ringrose and Jackson 2018; Renold and Ivinson 2019; Hickey-Moody 2017). This included creative and visual group interviews (Phase One), follow-up visual elicitation interviews drawing on the participant-produced materials (Phase Two), and a series of arts-based

interventions designed to re-animate emerging findings (Phase Three). Employing a multiplicity of methods across a multi-phase research design provided an opportunity to explore different facets of young people's digital sexuality assemblages, including the micro (singular affects, non-dominant discourses) and the macro (aggregate affects, dominant discourses), the human and the more-than-human (avatars, pets, nature, food, slime), the material and the virtual, the private and the public.

In section 3.4.3, I detail how I worked with affect theory to think relationally about the multifaceted assemblage that constitutes young people's digital sexual cultures and to map the shifting patterns of force relations between bodies, digital devices and platforms that work to limit or extend bodily capacities (Fox and Alldred 2013). I argue that drawing on affect theory throughout the research process, from data production to analysis and beyond was critical to addressing all three of my research questions, as well as underscored the ethical and political commitment to foreground young people's perspectives on their digital sexual cultures.

The fieldwork sessions were undertaken over a period of fifteen-months from the autumn of 2017 to the spring of 2019. This longitudinal multi-phase design allowed me to establish rapport with the participants. While the overall research design was largely determined in advance, I sought to be responsive to the participants' ideas for the research process and whether they wanted to linger on a particular topic or method. Overall, data is seen to have been co-produced with the young people rather than 'collected' from them (Mayes 2016, p. 109). Before I discuss the rationale for my methodological approach in detail, I will outline below what each phase of the research entailed.

### **3.3.1 RESEARCH ACTIVITIES**

#### **3.3.1.1 PHASE ONE: CREATIVE AND VISUAL GROUP INTERVIEWS**

The first phase comprised of group interviews that drew on creative activities and visual-discursive prompts to elicit discussion. Twenty-five young people aged 11 to 18 formed into six groups. A range of open-ended, participant-led creative and visual research

methods were employed to elicit insights into a flexible set of core issues related to my research questions (digital worlds, body cultures, relationships, media discourses). As the amount of time available varied in each setting, some groups completed the activities across two meetings (totalling approximately 3 hours) and some completed the activities across four to five shorter meetings (totalling approximately 2.5 hours).

Participants self-selected their research groups which was intended to create a safe and intimate environment for the activities. While group interviews can lead to the rehearsal of normative public discourses (McGeeney 2013), they also offer a less intimidating introduction to research and allow for the emergence of shared experiences (McLelland and Fine 2008). Over the course of the interview series, there were minor variations in the size of the groups as some participants could not attend all sessions, but as I detailed above they were largely made up of two to five participants who knew each other either as friends or classmates.

By employing an unstructured interview schedule that utilised a range of creative activities and visual-discursive prompts, the participants were able to direct the flow and focus of our conversations and pause on key issues that mattered to them. This did mean that certain areas were under-explored in some settings as tasks were not deployed due to timing constraints or participant feedback. For example, participants at Westland College expressed a preference for a talk-based approach to the research and rejected the creative activities. In contrast, at Green City School I did not use the photo-elicitation task as participants were keen to linger on designing digital avatars. Overall, the ethical imperative to foreground the young people's perspectives and be responsive to their ideas for the research took precedent over imposing a rigid schedule of activities.

#### *TASK ONE: MAPPING YOUR DIGITAL WORLD*

In the first group interview, participants were invited to assemble a map of their digital world through drawing and/or collaging. 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. They had the choice of working on their maps individually, in pairs or as a whole group. Fourteen participants chose to construct their map on their own and two (Karma and Layla) chose to construct their map together. The five participants from Westland College did not engage with the mapping activity rather they drew on the materials I brought in, including social media and gaming icons, magazines, as visual elicitation tools that prompted debate and discussion amongst the participants. Overall, 15 maps were produced and these are displayed in Appendix D.

The mapping activity aimed to offer an engaging way for participants to articulate the different digital networked cultures they were part of, rather than focusing on a specific set of digital practices (Driver and Coulter 2018). The finished maps broadly trace how the participant's digital networked cultures varied by age. For example, the maps in which the gaming icons of Minecraft, Sims, Pokemon Go and Candy Crush dominate correspond to participants aged under 13 whereas these gaming icons are notably missing from the maps of participants aged 13 and over. However, I was most interested in the process of producing the maps and how conversations jumped tangentially from topic to topic, illuminating the complex network of relations that composed the participants digitally networked lives (Mannay 2016b; Coleman 2009).

#### *TASK TWO: RELATIONSHIP SELFIES PHOTO-ELICITATION*

After participants at Westland College rejected the map-making activity, I introduced a photo-elicitation task using a collection of researcher-selected images (see Appendix E). Guided by findings from my previous research on young people's digital sexual cultures (Marston 2019a) and emerging findings from this study, the selection of social media images and emoji icons I presented were intended to represent the different ways relationships are portrayed on social media, including romantic relationships, friendships, and pets. Overall, thirteen participants took part in the photo-elicitation task which elicited discussions on how the visual culture of social media shaped relationship dynamics.

### *TASK THREE: DIGITAL TOUR*

In this task, participants were invited to navigate significant social media and gaming applications and screenshot content that further illustrated a digital practice they had outlined on their map. For example, at Castell Q participants honed in on the visual culture of Instagram and discussed this platform in more detail. Digital tours, or scrollbar methods, have been previously employed in research on young people's social media practices (Renold and Ringrose 2017; Duguay 2016b; Robards and Lincoln 2017). I found the process useful for attending to the visual and affective register of social media (Marston 2019b).

Capturing screenshots presents ethical issues around who and what is searchable, what should be gathered for research and what can be reproduced in presentations and publications (Marston 2019a; Kinder-Kurlanda and Zimmer 2017). 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. Consequently, many of the screenshots captured focused on adverts, celebrities, animals and memes. While this may seem like a limitation, it was productive for considering the more-than-human relations in the participant's digital networks. Furthermore, not all participants took screenshots of content and many simply scrolled through apps and images on their phones while narrating the significance of their content.

While I introduced the digital tours as a follow-up to the map-making, it was an activity that participants returned to throughout the fieldwork if they wished to illustrate a particular digital practice. The content they shared acted as participant-generated visual elicitation tools that enabled us to explore the broad visual ecology of social media and decentre the human body as the focus of young people's digital sexual cultures (Pauwels 2015; Mannay 2016b). In total, 18 screenshots were captured by ten participants (see Appendix F for a sample of screenshots).

#### *TASK FOUR: DESIGNING DIGITAL AVATARS*

For participants in the 11 – 13 age cohort, I introduced the digital avatar activity to focus on the materiality of the body online and the sartorial practices associated with the gaming and social media platforms they had outlined on their maps. The decision to include this activity came as fieldwork sessions with participants in the 15 – 18 age cohort was coming to a close. Amongst this cohort, the topic of young people’s digitally networked body cultures emerged as a key theme, particularly in relation to image-based apps like Instagram and Snapchat. I continued exploring the topic of digital body cultures with participants in the 11-13 age cohort but also opened it up to a consideration of gaming platforms.

Using the craft materials left over from the map-making activity, participants were invited to design an avatar that represented how they might present themselves on a particular social media or gaming platform detailed on their map. Some participants designed a version of their Sims avatar, others attempted to draw from selfies they had on their phones and many created fantasy avatars that did not directly relate to an existing platform. As they designed the avatar we discussed what preparations they would make, what they would wear and how they would look on this particular platform. Fourteen participants took part in this activity, producing 14 avatar designs (see Appendix G for a sample of avatars). These designs generated rich narratives about the enduring regulation of young people’s bodies along heteronormatively gendered lines on digital platforms and at school, as well as glimpses into transgressive bodily practices.

#### *TASK FIVE: STATEMENT ELICITATION*

This task was a sorting activity to generate discussion about the statements frequently reported in the media around the influence of digital technologies on young people’s sexual cultures (see Appendix H for the list of statements). Participants sorted the statements along a sliding scale of ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. The task was introduced towards the end of fieldwork to focus discussion on key issues of concern to

parents, teachers and policy-makers, and consider participant's perspectives. The task elicited discussion around dominant discourses about the gendered dynamics of digital relationships and illuminated the multiple meanings that participants attached to these statements. Eight participants took part in this activity.

#### *TASK SIX: STOP-START PLATES*

The final task was adapted from *AGENDA: Supporting Children and Young People in Making Positive Relationships Matter*. It facilitated a general discussion in which the participants were asked what they considered to be the key messages for change for teachers, parents, youth workers and policy-makers on the issues raised during the group interviews. Participants were provided with red plates on which they wrote one thing they would like to stop happening, and green plates on which they wrote one thing they would like to start happening to make digital relationships more equitable and fair. Eight participants participated in this task producing 16 plates, a sample of which are displayed in Appendix I.

#### **3.3.1.2 PHASE TWO: FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS**

Phase two was comprised of loosely structured follow-up interviews. Seventeen participants aged 12 – 18 years old participated in the follow-up interviews. Participants undertook these as individuals or pairs, although one group (Safa, Mia and Isabella) returned as a three. In these interviews, I elicited discussion by returning to contributions made throughout the creative and visual group interviews (maps, avatars, screenshots), as well as the annotated roll of paper from each settings taster workshop. While I did have a list of topics that I wanted to re-visit in the context of the follow-up interviews, the order of the topics varied in each interview and I followed the participants' lead in guiding the conversation.

The follow-up interview addressed both parts of research question one ('In what ways do digital technologies (social media, smart devices, gaming platforms) shape young people's sexual cultures?') by situating the participant's accounts within the context of their

everyday peer relationships and individual biographies. In these interviews, many participants shared their feelings about their place in the wider peer culture at school, how this was shaped in part by their digital practices and the role that parents played in facilitating access to digital platforms. These interviews also addressed research question two ('What do creative, visual and arts-based methodologies enable in research on young people's digital sexual cultures?'), by providing space for the participant's to share thoughts and reflections on what the creative, visual and arts-based methods had elicited.

### **3.3.1.3 PHASE THREE: RE-ANIMATING RESEARCH MATERIALS THROUGH ARTS-BASED METHODS**

In the third, and final, fieldwork phase ten participants from Green City School were invited to re-animate research materials through different arts-based methods including poetry, digital storytelling, sculpture and textiles. The purpose of this phase was to address part of research question two ('What do creative, visual and arts-based methodologies enable in research on young people's digital sexual cultures?') and research question three ('How can arts-based approaches be employed in co-productive engagement work to re-imagine young people's digital sexual cultures and communicate their complexity?'). Inspired by Renold's (2017; 2019a; 2019b) theorising of the making and mattering of *darta* and *dartaphacts* in their solo work and writing with co-authors (Renold and Ringrose 2019; Renold and Ivinson 2019), I was interested in how the participants could be given the space to craft and communicate experiences through objects, films and creative writing that might carry affects and feelings into new places and spaces.

Drawing on Brian Massumi's (2013, p. 57) assertion that 'art is about constructing artifacts – crafted facts of experience', Renold (2017, p. 50; 2019a; 2019b) coined the terms '*darta*' to refer to 'arts informed data'. In their influential work on youth sexuality they draw on



artistic practices to ‘trouble what counts as social science data’ and ‘dartaphacts’<sup>18</sup> to express how the resulting art-ful material objects can act as ‘partial enunciator(s)’ (Guattari 1995, p. 131) that communicate experiences in powerful ways (Renold and Ringrose 2019, p. 4). Informed by this work, I experimented with different artistic strategies for creatively re-working and re-mixing research data including excerpts of interview transcripts, screenshots, glitched films and photographs of research sessions. Re-working and re-mixing these materials provided an opportunity to de-individualise data (Hultman and Lenz-Taguchi 2010) and find new ways of creatively disseminating research (Mannay 2016b; Renold 2017). By employing arts-based methods, I hoped to open up the process of data analysis and enable the participants to respond to and re-imagine the research data.

I completed this phase at Green City School as I had the most established relationship with this setting having regularly attended the school on Friday lunchtimes over 9 months. The creative practices I had established through phase one progressively built up to the darta tasks, so that when these were introduced the participants were already primed to play with the possibility of what data could become (Renold 2017). As I outlined above, I cannot downplay the significance of the fieldwork sessions taking place in the art room in enabling these creative practices and experiments to flow.

In developing this final phase, I began by trialling several darta activities with Green City School participants towards the end of the summer term. These tasks were offered to participants as opportunities for them to produce a dartaphact that communicated what they wanted others in their school (peers, teachers, parents) to know about how digital relationships matter to them. These activities emerged out of ongoing engagement with the participants at Green City School and sought to respond to their concerns. Following

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<sup>18</sup> In the term ‘dartaphacts’ the ‘ph’ replaces f to emphasize the posthuman nature of how art is crafted from human and more-than-human experience (and encourage a move away from fixed and knowable ‘facts’) (Renold 2017, p. 51).

on from these initial darta sessions I pursued funding to work with two professional artists to support the development and delivery of a dedicated half-day arts-based workshop to explore an emerging research theme with a wider cohort of young people at the school. Below I detail each of the darta tasks I facilitated, as well as briefly outline the half-day arts-based workshop.

#### *DARTA ACTIVITIES WITH WESTLAND YEAR 8'S*

Working with Droshux, Karma, Basar, Jalil and Layla I experimented with cut-up poetry and digital story-telling as a way of re-mixing data from their previous fieldwork sessions. These activities sought to respond to the participant's frustration that teacher's only focus on how social media and gaming can be 'bad' by working with the participant's articulations of how social media and gaming made them feel good in their bodies.

For the cut-up poetry task (Mandlis 2009)<sup>19</sup>, I selected excerpts from their interviews that expressed how digital media could make them feel and invited the participants to cut and connect words and phrases to compile new texts. Working with the transcript excerpts was an opportunity to open up language to its more-than discursive potential through harnessing the affective power of poetry to 'touch us where we live, in our bodies' (Richardson 1992, p. 26; Borovica 2017). I demonstrate how this worked in section 3.4.3 of this chapter as well as in Chapter Five (section 5.6.2) and Chapter Six (section 6.4.2).

Following on from the cut-up poetry task, Droshux, Karma, Basar, Jalil and Layla were invited to compile a digital story on Imovie that brought together their various research creations (maps, screenshots, poems, quotes) in one media text. By synthesising images, video, audio and text, the digital stories added liveliness to the materials the participants produced over the course of the research by, for example, zooming in on a particular

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<sup>19</sup> The cut-up method is an experimental writing technique that involves cutting up and juxtaposing pre-existing material (Hollings 2015).

section of their map or animating their quotes (Maclure et al. 2010; Gubrium and Turner 2011). Compiling the digital story enabled participants to provide their own account of the research process and display digital practices that made them feel good in their bodies. With the participant's permission, the film was shared with their Head of Year and displayed to other young people at the beginning of the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* (see Chapter Six, section 6.4.1).

#### *DARTA ACTIVITIES WITH WESTLAND YEAR 7'S*

Working with Safa, Mia, Isabella, Imogen and Chiara, I experimented with crafting emojis as a way of holding in play the mix of emotions they had expressed over digitally networked peer relationships at their school. This activity was inspired by Renold's and Ringrose's (2019) jar-ring praxis and Claisse's and Sun's (2015) emoji quilt. Over two lunchtime sessions, the participants were invited to craft emojis that expressed how digital relationships can feel. The participants were provided with several clear plastic baubles, glass paints, paintbrushes, permanent marker pens, glitter, pom poms, felt, pipe cleaners and small pieces of multi-coloured paper.

The crafting emojis activity drew on a cultural form that was not only popular with the participants but has been rendered into numerous material spin-offs (cushions, squishies, keyrings, stationery, cakes, and more). It gave participants space to be as creative as they liked using imaginative abstract patterns to communicate how digital relationships matter to them. At the end of the workshop, the emojis were strung together to create a mobile display (see Figure 3).

I had hoped to share the emoji display along with other dartaphacts with teachers at the school, such an opportunity did not come to fruition due to constraints on staff time and availability. The emojis were however shared again with other pupils at Green City School

over a lunchtime workshop in connection with *Safer Internet Week 2019*<sup>20</sup> and further pupils were invited to create their own emojis that communicated how they felt digital technologies shaped their peer relationships.

*FIGURE 3: EMOJI CRAFTING WORKSHOP*



*FABRICATING FUTURE BODIES DARTA WORKSHOP*

Funded by Wales' Doctoral Training Partnership 'Knowledge Exchange' fund, the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* formed the last activity of my PhD fieldwork. Sixteen young people aged 11 – 13 years old from Green City School were provided with the opportunity to work with myself and two professional artists to explore an emerging research theme around digitally networked body cultures. Drawing from speculative fiction and visual arts, the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* guided participants

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<sup>20</sup> Safer Internet Day is an annual UK-based awareness raising event coordinated by Childnet International, the Internet Watch Foundation and the South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL). Hosted every February, it offers schools a suite of resources to 'promote the safe and responsible use of technology for young people' (Safer Internet Day 2020). At Green City School they delivered these activities across a whole week.

through creating cut-up texts and large-scale body tapestries to re-imagine what bodies might do, be and become in the future.

Safa, Mia, Isabella, Imogen and Chiara opted to take part in the workshop alongside ten Year 7's who were invited by their Head of Year on the basis that they were reflective of the school demographic. The workshop was one of a number of activities tied into Green City School's *Safer Internet Week 2019* that endeavoured to allow a wider cohort of young people to respond to the topic of digital relationships through assemblies and workshops. While all participants were required to return parental consent forms to participate in the workshop, for the purpose of this thesis I focus on the five young people who participated in my study from the outset. In Chapter Six, I discuss in detail how the workshop was devised and delivered in collaboration with artist facilitators Bryony Gillard<sup>21</sup> and Ailsa Fineron<sup>22</sup>.

#### **3.3.1.4 AUDIO-RECORDING, PHOTOGRAPHING AND FILMING SESSIONS**

With the participants' permission, the fieldwork sessions were audio-recorded as well as filmed and photographed at different points to capture how the participants were engaging with the different activities. Engaging participants in 'analytical talk' through the creative and visual group interviews provided an opportunity to elucidate the significance of the digital content, contact and conduct they shared with me (Holland et al. 2010, p. 372). Spyrou (2011) also notes the importance of attending to the non-verbal actions such as the movement and noises the creative activities elicited that might be 'more revealing of voice than the actual words used' (p. 158). For example, as the following exchange

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<sup>21</sup> Bryony Gillard – [www.bryonygillard.co.uk](http://www.bryonygillard.co.uk)

<sup>22</sup> Ailsa Fineron - [www.ailsaferon.com](http://www.ailsaferon.com)

exemplifies, Mia and Isabella from Green City School found it amusing to disrupt efforts to transcribe their talk by making non-verbal sounds:

Isabella: Wait are you gonna have to type up everything that we saying right now?

Interview: Yeah

Mia: What?! I'm gonna make it really difficult

Kate: Ah thanks

Mia: (shouting) blah-di-blah blah blah blah

Isabella: Supercalifragilisciousexpialidoscious

Mia: (singing) Laaaaaaa

Kate: Oh wow

Safa: This is what I wore to my brother's engagement so I don't know how to draw it

Mia: Ding-dong-ding-dong-ding-dong

Isabella: (*inaudible sounds*)

Kate: Where did you send that picture, oh that's

Safa: It's our little group chat, it's called we are weirdos

Mia/Isabella: Ding-dong-ding-dong-ding-dong-ding-dong!!!

Mia: Moo!!

Kate: Oh that's the three of you?

Safa: No four, Olivia is on it as well

Isabella: She's the one who's not here today

Kate: Yeah

Mia: Moo!! We are the weirdos!

Audio-recordings were valuable as they captured what the young people said and laughter, gasps, sighs and other exclamations: illuminating the affective resonances of various digital content, contact and conduct. The filming and photography also facilitated other ways of 'noticing' what was happening in the room and how participants were engaging with the research activities (Coleman 2016; Blackman and Venn 2010). The videos and photographs added extra layers of visual data that allowed me to consider specific movements and the relations between human and more-than-human materialities. To anonymise the video data, I used a glitch-art application that distorted images in real-time.

Notably, the glitch filters and audio-recordings worked to animate the participants in particular ways. For example, the glitch filter invariably caused participants to inspect their faces, waggle their tongues or wave their hands in front of the camera to see how the filter responded. Similarly, as noted in section 3.2.5.2, the process of audio-recording Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen led them to express themselves in a 'YouTube voice' beginning recordings with the characteristically chipper YouTube introduction 'Hey Guys!'

(Berryman and Kavka 2018). These examples demonstrate how the observational tools of the research worked to shape the encounters in particular ways and were agential co-participants in the construction of knowledge about young people's digital cultures (Barad 2007).

#### **3.3.1.5 DATA RECORDING AND STORAGE**

Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and in full. Sounds, as well as pauses of three seconds or more, were included in the transcripts. To protect participant identities only hands were included in photographs and filming was distorted in real-time using the glitch application. Participants were also provided with an opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms, however where participants could not come up with a pseudonym, settle on a single pseudonym or the pseudonyms could potentially identify them, I have assigned one to them. Digital versions of interview transcripts, photographs and films were saved in three separate locations and will be retained for a minimum of five years. Original hard copies of creative outputs (maps, drawings, screenshots) and dactaphacts (poems, emojis, body tapestries) will be stored in a locked cupboard for a minimum of one year upon completion of the project. A summary of the data produced is given in Table 2. A more detailed summary of data produced is provided in the table in Appendix J, K and L.



TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF DATA PRODUCED IN EACH PHASE

	Method	Number of participants	Type(s) of data produced	Audio-recordings	Video recordings	Transcripts
<b>Phase 1</b>	Creative and visual group interviews	Twenty-five	15 Maps 18 Screenshots 12 Avatars 2 films 16 Plates Transcripts Photos of fieldwork sessions	09:22:18 (range: 00:21:17 to 01:19:00)	00:35:12	66,738 words (range: 2674 words to 8377)
<b>Phase 2</b>	Follow-up interviews	Seventeen	Transcripts	05:22:03 (range: 00:12:40 – 00:36:40)	N/A	51579 words (range: 2020 words to 7644 words)
<b>Phase 3</b>	Arts-based workshops	Ten	6 Cut-up poems 2 Fabric Figures 8 Emojis 1 digital story Photos of fieldwork sessions Transcripts	01:57:01 (range: 00:30:05 to 00:51:00)	00:09:11 (ranging from 00:01:45 to 00:05:06)	9214 words (ranging: 2459 words to 3556 words)

### **3.4 ‘EVERYONE IS USING THEIR IMAGINATION, AIN’T THEY?’: RESEARCHING YOUNG PEOPLE’S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES WITH CREATIVE, VISUAL AND ARTS-BASED METHODS**

The dispersal of social media, gaming and smart devices into our biological and social lives has elicited numerous methodological innovations, particularly with regards to digitised methods that offer new ways of generating and recording vast amounts of data (Zylinkska and Kember 2012; Lupton 2014). These computational approaches have been used alone and in combination with in-depth qualitative methods such as discourse and content analysis to consider digital culture at different scales (Faulkner, Vis and D’Orazio 2017).

While these quantitative and mixed-method approaches offer rich systematic frameworks for examining digital content, conduct and contact, they can be ill-equipped to address how digital technologies are embedded in everyday life.

Informed by conceptualisations of the digital as omnipresent and existing beyond the presence of devices and platforms, scholars are increasingly investigating everyday experiences that traverse online and offline spaces (Markham 2018; Hine 2015; Lupton 2014). Thinking qualitatively about these practices has seen a recalibration of time-honoured interview-based, focus group and ethnographic methods which may incorporate digital technologies but are not always directed at digital devices and platforms (Jaynes 2020; Lupton 2014). Alone each approach has its limitations but combined they offer a broad methodological toolkit to explore how digital technologies are entangled with our everyday lives and attend to the diverse ways people make sense of their digitally networked experiences (Marston 2019b).

Importantly, the affordances of digital platforms not only open up new opportunities and avenues for research but bring a number of ethically challenging dynamics to the table. This includes the 'expansion of actors and risks in distributive communicative environments, particularly where actors have unequal power and where there is a loss of control over social media activities, content and communication' (Kinder-Kurlanda and Zimmer 2017, p. 301). Researchers increasingly have to navigate the unpredictable influence of digital labour practices, algorithms, platform providers, advertisers and different crowds of users on their research practice (Kinder-Kurlanda and Zimmer 2017). While there are no clear-cut solutions to the challenges of researching digital culture, these ongoing debates and developments demonstrate that it is an area that remains ripe for methodological experimentation.

My intervention into these methodological debates is to consider what creative, visual and arts-based methods might enable in research on young people's everyday entanglements with digital technologies. This study is influenced by and contributes to a growing body of research that is adopting more artful and craft-based approaches to

researching the social world (Back and Puwar 2012; Lury and Wakeford 2012). Creative, visual and arts-based methodologies have an established history within the social sciences (see Wang, Coemans, Siegesmund and Hannes 2017) but to date, few studies have utilised them to research digital culture (Ringrose et al. 2019; Renold and Ivinson 2015).

Employing an approach that engaged the participant's imaginations adopted a 'fluid and less fixed view of meaning' giving 'space to emerging process that are seeds to ideas, that when combined can create new possibilities, new forms and new shapes rather than focusing on what is already there' (Leavy 2019, p. 93). In the following sections, I detail how I have conceptualised creative, visual and arts-based methodologies, how they supported ethical research practices with children and young people as well as their ability to attune to the material, visual and affective modalities of digital culture.

#### **3.4.1 CONCEPTUALISING CREATIVE, VISUAL AND ARTS-BASED METHODOLOGIES**

Creative, visual and arts-based inquiries are not mutually exclusive, but I have drawn distinctions between them and how they were utilised in this study (Mannay 2016b; Wang et al. 2017). As I detailed above, the first two phases of the research drew on creative and visual methods to elicit insights into a range of topics related to young people's digital sexual cultures. While I could engage in an analysis of how some of the materials the participants produced communicated non-verbally through compounds of colour, texture and icons (Hickey Moody 2017), my focus remains on the process of their production and the participant narratives that frame them (Mannay 2016b).

In contrast, the arts-based methods I employed were understood as modes of inquiry that focused on making artful objects through techniques such as poetry, digital storytelling, sculpture and textiles to materialise and communicate the participant's experiences. While I remain equally attentive to the process of crafting these artful productions and the participant narratives that surround them, I am also concerned with the evocative potential of the artifacts they produced (Renold 2017; Renold and Ringrose 2019; Renold and Ivinson 2019). These arts-based workshops aimed to encourage participants to creatively experiment with their research data, explore different possibilities for its

representation and consider how they might communicate their experiences to different audiences (teachers, peers, parents) in evocative ways.

### **3.4.2 RESEARCHING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

Childhood researchers have long noted the value of creative, visual and arts-based methodologies for exploring sensitive or taboo areas in young people's lives, which may be difficult to articulate in traditional language-based research (Mannay 2016b). Employing different modes of expression not only maximises opportunities for young people to communicate experiences that are important to them but it can tap into experiences that rarely surface in solely discursive approaches. Patricia Leavy (2015) argues that creative and arts-based methods can prompt different connections and interconnections, as well as jar people into seeing things differently. This was noted in some of the participant's reflections on the research project.

For example, in the following extract from Alex's (Castell Q) individual interview, he describes how starting with the map-making activity offered a less intimidating way into the research, and sparked different associations than might have been prompted by a standard interview-based approach.

Alex:...I feel like when you ask straight off the bat it's a bit like overwhelming, it's a bit like well, where do I start. But when you put it down on paper it's kind of like, one thing stems from another [Kate: Yeah] So I found like, putting one word down and then I was like ooh what about this, what about that sort of thing, that's what I really liked about that

Inviting participants to map out their digital worlds before capturing screenshots away from my gaze also provided them with a chance to reflect on what they wished to share, with whom and in what way (Holland et al. 2010, p. 373). This was significant given that, as Irene observed: 'everyone's social media world is very personal, what they follow and what they look at, what they enjoy'. Driver (2018) warns that the desire to hone in on young people's digital practices can enhance the surveillance of their digitally networked lives. Utilising participant-led creative methods were, therefore, key to enabling participants to share digital practices without revealing too much of themselves.

I was mindful of how young people's digital practices come to bear the burden of adult anxieties over what is developmentally inappropriate, risky and dangerous. Therefore, I aimed to create research environments that fostered open-ended and curious explorations of their digital cultures rather than generalised and unified knowledge about youth and digital technologies (Driver and Coulter 2018). Employing a combination of collaging, drawing, screenshots, digital storytelling, poetry, textiles and talk-based approaches was conducive to communicating experiences in ways that were not invasive or bound up with rigid moral evaluations (Bragg et al. 2018).

Notably, Chiara and Isabella from Green City School commented that they felt the research project was a non-judgemental space that enabled them to share their feelings and experiences. In her individual interview Chiara made the following observations:

Chiara: I mean, I think it's good because I can share stuff and I know it will be kept anonymous even if it's really, really obvious and I know I can just talk about stuff without being judged and also, I love colouring, arts and crafts so it's really fun, and glitter, lots of glitter

These sentiments were echoed by Isabella in a written annotation in which she described her experience of the research project:

Isabella: I love it! It's where we can talk about how we feel social media changes stereotypes and how it affects our friendships and other relationships. It's made me think in so many different ways and I feel like I can truly say that I don't like a certain site without being judged or told that I'm being weird (participant's emphasis)

While using 'colouring', 'arts and crafts' and 'lots of glitter' may seem counter-intuitive to the study of young people's digital cultures, these activities offered affirmative ways into a topic that too often starts from a point of risk and harm (Austin 2017; McLelland and Fine 2008). Chiara's and Isabella's assertion that they found the study 'really fun' and 'love(d) it!' reflects the reverie I witnessed in many fieldwork sessions where the creative activities appeared to enliven the participant's engagement with the study. The pleasure of being absorbed in creative pursuits was reiterated by participants at Ysgol Mellt where Leah praised how 'everyone's using their imagination' and Aislinn declared that this is 'the best

[she's] ever done for creation because [she] normally never create[s], because [she is] really bad'.

Starting in an open-ended way with creative materials and visual elicitation tools engendered a variety of experiences with digital technologies, rather than limiting the research to a pre-defined set of topics. In her annotation, Isabella echoes Alex in stating that the research enabled her to 'think in so many different ways' about digital relationships. She observed that it was both a space to explore how 'social media changes stereotypes' and to express her dislike of certain social media platforms without being called 'weird'.

Notably, not all participants were undaunted by the use of creative, visual and arts-based methods. Scholars have also observed that calls to creativity can be anxiety-provoking due to their association with artistic ability and the proficiency of a schooled subject (Mannay 2016b). This was evident, for example, in Aislinn's suggestion that she is usually 'really bad' at being creative. While Aislinn's comment indicated that the research provided a creative outlet for her, it also highlights the cultural baggage of creativity being assessed according to particular standards. Creative, visual and arts-based methods are not ingenious techniques capable of unleashing youthful expression but can be rejected by participants, inadvertently reinforce power differentials and reinstate our own interpretive frameworks through analysis (Spyrou 2011).

For example, Jen at Castell Q initially struggled to get started with the map-making activity. She set out hesitantly copying the way her peers were completing the task before becoming absorbed with cutting out limbs and appendages from the magazines and sticking them on her card (see Figure 4). While Jen's map still sparks connections in my mind to the groups broader conversations about body cultures in an inventive and novel way, I am also mindful that her approach may have been an act of subterfuge giving two fingers to the map-making task (see the bottom right-hand corner of Figure 4). Notably, Jen did not participate in the follow-up interview and I did not have an opportunity to discuss her map in more detail.

FIGURE 4: JEN'S MAP



The creative, visual and arts-based methods of data production I utilised have much in common with participatory approaches that seek to disrupt hierarchies of researcher/researched and enable participants to shape the production of knowledge about their lives (Mannay 2016b; Thomson, Berriman and Bragg 2018). Participatory research has been broadly conceptualised: ranging from consulting participants about the process to collaborating with them throughout to formally training participants in social research methods so they may take ownership of the practice (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell 2015, p. 63). This approach has proved popular with childhood researchers as participants are recognised as ‘agents of knowledge about their own lives’ and ‘active participants’ in the research endeavour capable of developing important insights into the area under study (Mallan, Singh and Giardina 2010, p. 259). However, contemporary childhood scholars have increasingly problematised some of the key tenets of participatory research and the naïve romanticisation of participatory processes as somehow able to transcend power relations (Holland et al. 2010; Gallagher 2008; Gallacher and Gallagher 2008).

Holland et al. (2010) note that ‘agency’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘voice’ are contested concepts within participatory research but often theorised as something ‘enabled, promoted or “given” by the “adult researcher”’ (p. 362). This posits a duality that simplistically and statically separate adults as ‘powerful and independent’ from children as

‘powerless and dependent’ (Holland et al. 2010, p. 362). Furthermore, Mannay (2013, p. 143) notes that participatory research routinely considers the ‘intrusive presence’ of the researcher but overlooks the influence of ‘significant others’ such as ‘friends, parents, adults’ in shaping, restricting and controlling the data produced. She suggests that rather than trying to exclude these intrusions we should recognise that they are part of the complexity of lived experience and ‘examine the ways in which they can act to further our understandings’ (Mannay 2013, p. 144).

This study understands children and young people’s agency to be relationally negotiated and distributed within wider socio-material-discursive arrangements not just located within the individual (Mayes 2016). I recognise the ‘significant others’ of research to include more-than-human agents like the timing and space of the fieldwork sessions, the materials I brought into the room (audio-recorder, Ipad, arts and craft materials), the materials the participants brought into the room (food, smartphones, bags). This conceptualisation of agency recognises that participants and researchers are not the only actors shaping the encounters. A variety of research components can come together to affect or be affected in multiple and multi-directional ways.

The methods I used were not capable of erasing the ethical and political dilemmas of research but were intended to enable a degree of ‘experiential engagement’ through which the hierarchies of research might be recognised and reconsidered (Gallagher and Gallacher 2008; Driver 2018). Rather than being preoccupied with how much control the participants were given over the process, I have endeavoured to pay close attention to how participation was enacted and how the ‘heterogeneous entanglements of practice’ worked to shape the data produced (Gallagher and Gallacher 2008, p. 506; Holland et al. 2010; Renold et al. 2008). For example, the descriptions of the research settings (section 3.2.3 of this chapter) consider how each shaped the way the research unfolded.

Considering affect was key to attending to the complex ethical and political relationalities that circulated within this participant-led creative, visual and arts-based study as it sharpens attention to the way devices, materials, objects, spaces and other research tools



work to compound relations and amplify or diminish a body's capacity to act (Manning 2009; Ringrose and Renold 2014). In the next section, I explore in further detail the affective dynamics of the research and how I set out to put affect theory to work in my methodology.

### **3.4.3 ATTENDING TO THE MATERIAL, EMBODIED AND SENSORY DYNAMICS OF DIGITAL NETWORKS**

In Chapter Two, I discussed the increasing turn to affect in digital culture scholarship. Driven by an awareness of the limitations of inquiry focused solely on issues of ideology, meaning and representation, this work argues that separating human meaning-making from the other forces at play online serves to cool and flatten the lived and deeply felt sociality of digital technologies (Sampson, Ellis and Maddison 2018; Hillis, Paasonen and Petit 2016; Karatzogianni and Kuntsman 2012). Scholars have grappled with the methodological question of how to operationalise affect theory and attune to perceptual, bodily and sensory experiences of digital devices and platforms that exceed neat capture in semantic and symbolic systems of containment (Stewart 2007).

The difficulty of capturing and conveying the elusive quality of affects that are felt, rather than seen, has been widely discussed in the literature (Blackman et al. 2008; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Paasonen, Hillis and Petit 2016). This challenge has elicited creative ways of tuning into the feelings and forces that circulate in encounters with digital technologies. Techniques include inviting participants to describe their bodily sensations or psychic states in relation to particular digital practices, as well as listening carefully to what is happening in the room and the affects that registered across the researcher's body in relation to the research encounter (Handyside and Ringrose 2017; Warfield 2017). Scholars have also undertaken close analyses of the materiality and mobility of digital content that considers the power and feel of the media we see, how it moves us and is moved by us (Ash 2015; Cho 2015; Marks 2002).

Another approach to putting affect theory to work has been re-casting established creative, visual and arts-based methods as a means of engaging participants in the research process in embodied and sensory ways (Austin 2017; Renold 2017; Renold and

Ringrose 2019; Hickey-Moody 2017). Language-based research may reduce complex embodied and sensory experiences to the level of explanation, whereas creativity can encourage us to grapple with events we can ‘scarcely comprehend’ and the unexpected connections they spark (Maclure 2013, p. 181). In devising this study, I was interested in how creative, visual and arts-based methods might witness and evoke the material, embodied and sensory dynamics of encounters with digital technologies. For example, utilising image-making sessions in a previous study on social media illuminated the unspoken intensities surrounding emojis and how they mediated a range of sensations and ambivalent affects in young people’s sexual cultures (Marston 2019a).

In this study, I sought to further mobilise ‘the force of things’ such as social media and gaming icons, emojis, selfies, glitch filters, glitter glue, marker pens, fabric and paints to see how they might evoke the affectivity of digital culture (Bennet 2004; Hickey-Moody 2017). The research materials were popularly received by many of the participants and animated their engagement with the study as they became carried away with experimenting with glitch filters, squeezing the glitter glue over everything, cutting out emojis and writing with multi-coloured marker pens. I argue that deliberately cultivating imagination, play and craft in a study on young people’s digital sexualities worked to disrupt established thought patterns that posit a neat opposition between the material and the virtual, online and offline, human and more-than-human (Bragg et al. 2018; Coleman 2016).

For example, the decision to include glitter glue was inspired by Coleman’s (2019) work on the vibrancy of glitter and intended to offer an engaging material with which to work (see also Coleman and Osgood 2019; Osgood 2019). However, working with this material also tapped into a similarly messy, enchanting and tactile trend for slime, putty and squishies in contemporary youth culture. The glitter glue elicited stories amongst the pre-teen participants about these other materials that are the subject of dedicated YouTube channels, illuminating how digital platforms are already formed by and implicated with the marvellous material specificity of things (Bennett 2009). By attuning researchers to the perceptual, bodily and sensory experiences created in online and offline encounters

with vibrant materials such as slime, affect theory draws us to the dynamic web of forces that cut across and join together bodies, matter, digital devices, and platforms with profound embodied consequences that curate the shape of our sociability (Paasonen 2016, para 4). In Chapter Five, I expand upon the significance of slime and other digital materialities to young people's sexual cultures.

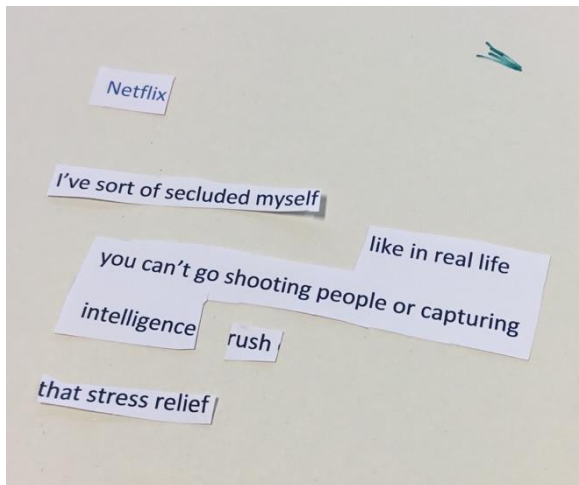
As an intensive change of state that registers on the body before it can be perceived or comprehended, affects are not easily translated into scholarly writing and often exceed their expression in language (Coleman 2018, p. 1334). Efforts to describe affective encounters with digital technologies have evoked experimental and evocative forms of writing that endeavour to convey the visceral and multisensory force of these bodily impressions (Marks 2002; Paasonen, Hillis and Petit 2015). Some of these efforts have been critiqued for limiting analysis to a consideration of the embodied experiences of the researcher alone (Rose 2016). However, it is notable that our affective entanglements with the world are never simply our 'own' as they are always emerging in a relational field (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Massumi 2015).

As previously discussed (section 3.3.1.3), I drew inspiration from Renold's (2017) work on the making and mattering of darta and dartaphacts to explore the participatory possibilities of re-animating data in ways that might communicate the participant's experiences in more lively ways than standard academic outputs allow. Working with the generative affective qualities of poetry, film, sculpture and textiles, participants were invited to craft art-ful objects that might transmit feelings and experiences into new spaces and places (Renold 2017; Renold and Ringrose 2019; Renold and Ivinson 2019; Hickey-Moody 2017).

For example, I employed cut-up poetry so participants could experiment with representing their experiences in 'more easily "consumable", powerful, emotionally poignant and open-ended' ways (Guiney, Yallop, Wiebe and Faulker 2014, p. 3). I first experimented with this activity over a lunchtime session with the Year 8's at Green City School, inviting them to cut-up and re-assemble extracts from their interviews. While

many of the participants played with juxtaposing random words and phrases to produce absurd and comedic poems (see Appendix M), the session also demonstrated the evocative potential of cut-up poetry to communicate their embodied relationships with digital technologies (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: LAYLA'S CUT-UP POEM



Layla's poem succinctly communicates the vitality of her embodied relationship with Netflix. Earlier in the workshop, Layla asserted that 'Netflix is [her] life!' and throughout the fieldwork Layla and Jalil energetically detailed the plots to various supernatural teenage Netflix dramas. This claim not only highlights the importance of Netflix to her but also indicates its liveliness as a platform. Netflix was a productive force in Layla's life, algorithmically predicting her likes/dislikes and animating friendships with peers such as Jalil. By picking out forceful words and phrases from the participant's transcript excerpts, Layla conveys how watching Netflix is experienced a 'rush' followed by a sense of release. These words resonate with my own experience of getting carried away with an eventful drama series.

Notably, the words utilised in this poem combine Droshux's and Karma's descriptions of playing video games with Layla's and Jalil's accounts of Netflix. Correspondingly, it works to redistribute experience from the personal to the collective and blurs the boundaries between two typically gendered media forms that are not often discussed together. As I

will explore in Chapter Five (section 5.6.2), this poem inspired further readings of video games and teen Netflix dramas through and against one another. Experimenting with cut-up poetry also inspired me to revise and revisit the activity in the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*. In Chapter Six, I consider in more detail how arts-based methods can convey the complex affective dynamics of young people's encounters with digital technologies.

#### **3.4.4 BECOMING PARTICIPANT**

Attending to affect also underscores the political impetus of research as it supports greater 'attentiveness towards the objects, materials, environments and configurations that serve to compound relations and amplify a body's capacity to speak and act' (Mayes 2016, p. 119). In facilitating research activities, I remained attentive to what was happening in the room as the participants engaged with the research materials and how affects registered across my body. In previous work, for example, I have considered how facilitating the digital tours prompted participants to withdraw into the privacy of their mobile phone screens in a way that evoked feelings of alienation for me as a researcher but also illuminated the role of screen-sharing in establishing intimacy in peer relationships (Marston 2019a). Similar responses occurred in this study as some participants shielded their screens and communicated with each other in hushed, muttered tones affirming the private and intimate boundaries of their mobile devices as they collected screenshots.

These exchanges gave rise to micro-ethical moments that illuminated the ebb and flow of 'becoming participant' as some of the participants appeared to take the task as an opportunity to momentarily switch-off from the research and did not produce any visual materials for the discussion (Renold et al. 2008). Facilitating the digital tours could be unsettling as I found myself competing with the mobile phones magnetic power over the participant's gazes. However, paying attention to the affects that registered across my body illuminated how the mobile phone as an everyday, seemingly mundane and inanimate object made its presence felt with a force that worked in different ways on

multiple bodies in the room (Allen 2015). These encounters not only illustrated the strong attachment that many young people have to their mobile devices but also revealed my anxieties over the way participation was enacted in this study.

The participants' withdrawal could feel like a failure on the part of the research, particularly as childhood literature often promotes active participation as a sign of good practice (Gallagher and Gallacher 2008). It was especially disconcerting in the presence of teachers and youth workers who can view digital technologies as an unwanted intrusion. For example, in her work Jaynes (2020) observes how youth workers perceived mobile devices to be undermining their ability to establish rapport with young people and a threat to their practice, concerns that were particularly heightened given the current chronic under-investment in youth provision across the UK (Youdell and McGimpsey 2015). Acknowledging my affective investments in these research encounters is significant given that adults often appeal to rationality while concealing their own emotive responses to young people's digital practices (Driver 2018).

### **3.5 EXCLUSIONS**

Despite efforts to engage children and young people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, my research methodology did not work for everyone and exclusions took place. Working predominantly in schools with young people who freely volunteered to give up their time to participate in the research activities was inflected by the classed, raced and gendered politics of education in which participation arguably relied upon resources disproportionately available to and deployed by White, middle-class young people (Francis and Skelton 2005; Mirza 1992).

I noted in section 3.2.4 how a larger number of young people expressed an interest in the research than went on to return the necessary consent forms. The process of seeking parental consent may have favoured those participants whose parents were already familiar with navigating school-home information links. Research has indicated that middle-class parents tend to be more confidently school-oriented and exercise greater power and privilege around decision-making structures (Reay 2006). These structures also

work to alienate parents for whom English is not a first language, and may have a disproportionate effect on certain pupils depending upon their ethnicity or the migratory routes of their families (Benkorichi Graoui 2019). While I did seek each settings advice about translating consent forms into community languages, none of them requested for this to be done and the process also presented practical issues. For example, over 40 different languages were spoken amongst the pupil population of Green City School and I did not have the time or financial resources to translate the research materials to such a degree.

While the invitation to be creative was enthusiastically taken up by the majority of the participants in this study, this approach may have been disconcerting for others. For example, it could still be perceived as encouraging the kind of self-reflexive discussion bound up with the power and privilege of middle-class young people more experienced with speaking to unknown adults and shaping their own narratives (Skeggs, Thumim and Wood 2008). Some young people can also reject creative methods as childish or infantile (Johnson et al. 2012). Methods do not have to be conventionally arts-based to be creative in unlocking and processing experiences, sensations, feelings and embodiment (Coleman, Page and Palmer 2019). However, the activities I employed in my study largely relied on working in a tactile and hands-on way with art materials, which may have discouraged some young people from engaging with the study.

### **3.6 THE POLITICS OF LOCATIONS**

So far in this chapter, I have considered how a variety of factors affected the research process, including the settings, the relational dynamics between the participants, and the tools and techniques of the research. Here I explore in more detail how I was a key component in the research-assemblage, and how my background, research expectations, as well as theoretical and political investments shaped the relational dynamics with the participants. Acknowledging that the production of knowledge is embodied and embedded work has a long history in feminist theory and activism, propelled in particular by the radical work of Black feminists who challenged the erasure of intersecting

racialised, sexualised, classed and gendered differences within the women's movement (Ahmed 2017; hooks 1994; Hill-Collins 1990; Combahee River Collective 1986). Such critiques of hegemonic White Western feminist discourse gave rise to the practice of 'the politics of locations' (Rich, 1987) and 'situated knowledges' that challenge the 'god trick of seeing everything from nowhere' by locating meaning-making practices within 'a body', albeit a 'complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body', that is answerable for what it learns 'how to see' (Haraway, 1988, p. 584).

Foregrounding how my researcher subjectivity as a normatively centred White (lower) middle-class lesbian feminist researcher came to matter is an ethico-political commitment to remain 'in touch with the materiality of intra-human political struggles around race, gender, class, sexuality and ability' (Snaza, Sonu, Truman, Zaliwska 2016, p. xviii). Accordingly, I paid close attention to if and how socio-cultural markers of difference emerged as part of the fieldwork activities and on what terms (Mulholland 2017). Given that I am only partially present to myself and my prejudices I am not best positioned to determine the when, where, how and for whom those differences came to matter. This task is left to the critical reader.

Media, policy and academic debates about young people's sexual cultures continue to centre the normative White subject and silence racialised others or subject them to a fetishising colonial gaze (Bhana 2017; Mulholland 2017; Kromidas 2015; Harvey and Ringrose 2015). An early point in which I grappled with the racialised dynamics of my research was in relation to the ethnic diversity of participants at Green City School. Notably, the participants who signed up to the research project were not reflective of the social intake of the school and skewed towards White British participants. In the previous section, I offered some reflections on the exclusions that my research methodology enacted but I also want to consider how I as a researcher may have shaped this dynamic. Although there was no explicit mention of my whiteness by any of the participants, I argue that its significance was nevertheless felt.



In the follow-up interview with Safa, Mia and Isabella, for example, Safa critiqued the lack of Black and Asian teachers at Green City School in comparison to the pupil body (see also Benkorichi Graoui 2019). Her comments highlighted how my very presence in the room as a White adult exercising a degree of authority over-scored long-standing inequalities with regards to who gets to occupy these positions. The racialised dynamics of schooling were further underscored by Jalil, Layla and Droshux who shared stories of teachers using language they deemed racist to refer to boys called out for bad behaviour. Specifically, the notion that Muslim boys were a particular problem appeared to be a latent racialised discourse that shaped the participant's experiences of classroom dynamics. For example, when the teacher and I had discussions with the Year 7's at Green City School about extending the research to other pupils during phase three Mia and Isabella asserted 'No Ahmed's' and 'No Iqbal's'. Later in the fieldwork, however, they critiqued how Black and Muslim boys were treated differently in class. These observations highlight how the absence of boys from these backgrounds in my study ties into broader practices of exclusion around certain classed, racialised and religionised masculinities.

In regards to class, my position as a university student was raised in classed ways. Universities are middle-class institutions that are not traditionally frequented by working-class people and often work to reproduce White middle-class values (Crozier, Reay and Clayton 2019). Correspondingly, Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2002) observe how research can be complicit in imposing a surveillant and pathologising gaze on working-class participants. This dynamic was called to mind when Natalie at Ysgol Mellt questioned whether I had gone back and 'told people at the University what we've said?' While this presented an opportunity to re-iterate the ethical protocols of the research (see Appendix B), this sense that I was immediately reporting back to the institution highlighted how research can feel surveillant. In contrast, Karma at Green City School noted in one fieldwork interview how I was 'just a university student' with the modifier 'just' serving to minimise the significance of my status at the University.

My identity as a woman also appeared significant to the relationships I developed with the participants. For example, Safa encouraged me to refer to her group as 'my girls' in a

manner that evoked a dynamic of hetero-feminine 'girlfriendship' (Winch 2013). I also wonder whether the Year 7's at Green City School would have brought up the topic of feminism and sexism themselves had I not been a woman. While the introduction of these topics by the Year 7 participants at Green City School led me to share with them that I identified as a feminist researcher, I did not disclose this at all of my fieldwork settings. Feminism proved to be a contentious topic at Westland College, for example, with participants of all genders expressing anti-feminist views and asserting that the term implies wanting to be a 'supremacist' (Bernard's words).

Despite the topic of LGBTQ+ sexuality being raised by participants in affirmative ways, including an extended discussion amongst participants at Ysgol Mellt about whether any of them 'know someone who is gay', I did not disclose my identity as a lesbian. Deborah Youdell (2004) discusses the discomforts and tensions involved in negotiating whether to 'come out' as a queer researcher particularly within the constraints of school-based research. While I went into the research thinking I was willing to talk about my personal life if it seemed relevant and appropriate, I often deflected from disclosing details in the moment. For example, in one fieldwork session, Karma and Droshux questioned whether 'buying a house', 'having lovely kids' and 'getting a nice wife' was 'normal anymore' and mentioned that they did not know much about me. Instead of taking this as an opportunity to talk about my life, I returned the questions back to them. While this was due to my desire to foreground the participant's themselves in my research, I am aware that not disclosing my sexuality was also shaped by fear and the pervasive silencing of non-heteronormative sexualities in schools (Jones et al. 2019; Telford, Epstein and O'Flynn 2003). Ultimately, the only personal relationship any participants learnt about was in relation to the cats I live with after one had left a paw print on one of Mia's drawings.

Although my background, research expectations, as well as theoretical and political investments were not always transparent to the participants, they nevertheless shaped the relational dynamics that developed over the course of the fieldwork. This section has partially outlined how my researcher subjectivity came to matter in the research

encounters in order to locate my meaning-making practices. In the following section, I move on to describe my analytic process.

### **3.7 THINKING WITH THEORY: AN AFFECTIVE AND DIFFRACTIVE ANALYSIS**

In this final section of my methodology chapter, I discuss how I conceptualised data analysis, before detailing the specific practices and processes which comprised this phase of the research and outline my analytic approach.

#### **3.7.1 WHAT IS DATA ANALYSIS?**

Qualitative data analysis has typically been understood as a distinct research phase associated with 'identifying recurring themes, categories or concepts' that make meaning of data by allotting it to a schema of representation that comprehends it (Maclure 2013, pp.164 - 168). However, in Chapter Two (section 2.7) I outlined how long-standing critiques of traditional humanist research have started to unsettle the orthodoxies of qualitative methodologies (St. Pierre 2014; Lather and St. Pierre 2013). Koro-Ljungberg and MacLure (2013, p. 219) problematise conceptualisations of data as 'inert objects' waiting to be 'granted shape and significance through the interpretive work of researchers' and call for 'more complex, creative and critical engagements with data'. This methodological direction involves researchers recognising the centrality of affect to our interpretative practices where data works on and moves us, even as we work on it. Correspondingly, Maclure (2013, pp. 172 - 173) advocates that researchers spend time considering affective relations to data that both disconcerts and creates a sense of wonder at various points throughout fieldwork, analysis and beyond. Such affective analysis does not hasten to fix definitive interpretations of data but keeps meaning on the move. It examines not so much what data *is* but what it *can do* (Ringrose and Renold 2014; Blackman and Venn 2010).

Since the knowledge we produce has the potential to make a difference in the world, data analysis can be treated as an ethical responsibility to intervene in the way power is understood and relayed. Ringrose and Renold (2014, p. 778) argue that 'attending to

glowing, disconcerting data is most useful when it propels us to do something'. The concept of diffraction as developed by Haraway (1997), Barad (2007) and Lenz-Taguchi (2012) is a useful tool for analysis that seeks to make a difference in the world. Describing 'the way waves pattern as they overlap, bend and spread' creating change (Allen 2015, p. 949 drawing on Barad 2007), diffraction is an optical metaphor for attending to patterns of difference rather than reflecting back and mirroring what is already known. Barad (2007, p. 30) argues that diffraction is a valuable concept for 'attending to entanglements in reading important insights and approaches through one another'. In this thesis reading data diffractively and recursively through and against each other, in light of my own affective entanglements and in relation to research and theorising by others provided an opportunity to critically rethink the relationality of young people's digital practices. Diffractive analysis can enable researchers to performatively intervene in and re-imagine young people's digital sexual cultures in a manner that ideally contributes to more socially just futures (Ringrose and Renold 2014).

### **3.7.2 ENGAGING WITH THE DATA**

In this study analysis was an ongoing and iterative process of engaging with the data. The analytic process began during fieldwork sessions as the participants and I compared and contrasted digital practices. It continued with transcription where 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 (Bird 2005). Reading over transcripts from initial fieldwork sessions informed the shape of subsequent visits and looking at the materials produced by one group of participants informed the way I facilitated the research activities with another. For example, the topic of digitally networked body cultures was raised at Castell Q and Westland College through the map-making, digital tours and the statement elicitation tasks. In turn, this shaped the introduction of the design a digital avatar activity at Green City School and Ysgol Mellt as well as the development of the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*.

One of the ways I sought to develop creative and critical engagements with the data was

by working with participants at Green City School to re-animate research materials through different arts-based methods (Renold 2017; McGeeney 2017; Maclure et al. 2010). Inviting participants to playfully re-work and re-mix data through cut-up poetry and fabricating future bodies offered a means of de-individualising both the data and the analysis (Lenz-Taguchi 2013). These workshops fostered a collective engagement with the data that allowed ideas to be re-patterned and re-materialised into artful objects. Observing the participants as they participated in these arts-based activities offered another wave of engagement with the data, which set different lines of inquiry in motion. For example, noticing the gendered pain articulated in the participant's fabricated figures prompted me to go back through my data to map how emotions had shifted over the course of the fieldwork.

In addition to the analytic practices I employed throughout the research process, I also engaged in a period of intensive and sustained data analysis once the final phase of the fieldwork had been completed. I listened to audio-recordings and watched the glitch videos many times, I pored over the transcripts, creative materials and daptaphacts as well as made annotations and discussed the data with my supervisors. I recalled what others had written and plugged in different theoretical concepts to consider the data from a variety of angles (Maclure 2013; Jackson and Mazzei 2011).

### **3.7.3 ASSEMBLING DATA**

In assembling the data for this thesis I was keen to trace the enduring force of (hetero)normative sexualised and gendered hierarchies in young people's digital sexual cultures while holding in play the potentialities of data that did not fit neat codes and tied up explanations. As I outlined in Chapter Two, feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship performs a double move of critically tracing 'normative articulations and practices' in line with familiar either/or binaries as well as 'an experimental mapping exercise' that might illuminate what else is happening in young people's digital sexual cultures (Lenz-Taguchi 2016, p. 39; Stengers 2008; Taylor and Hughes 2016). As I detailed in Chapter Two (section 2.8), I found theoretical shifts to understanding bodies as

processes as opposed to entities useful for exploring how masculinities and femininities are produced through shifting sets of relations that are not fixed and static but constantly moving and changing. I paid particular attention to the ways in which digital content, contact and conduct plugged into masculinising and feminising assemblages in a variety of unpredictable ways. When data appeared to exceed or reconfigure heteronormative and phallogocentric modes of organisation, I considered the conditions that enabled these ruptures.

In contrast to much of the existing literature in the field of young people's digital sexual cultures (Driver 2018; Renold and Ringrose 2017; Warfield 2017; Dobson 2015; Ringrose et al. 2012; Duguay 2016a; Van Doorn 2010), I was not only interested in looking at how a specific digital platform or practice entered into and shaped young people's sexual cultures. Rather I adopted an eclectic and open-ended approach inspired by Haraway's call for speculative and promiscuous modes of thinking. She encourages scholars to 'follow the threads where they lead in order to track them and find their tangles and patterns' (Haraway 2016, p. 3) and 'pay more attention to the "off the radar" ways we are affected by our entanglement with the common world' (Taylor and Blaise 2014, p. 385). Therefore, the data I assemble in this thesis also illuminates unexpected and unpredictable connections in the participant's digital sexual cultures. This study considers digital technologies that might ordinarily be studied separately by looking, for example, at the way mobile gaming, photo editing applications and Instagram models work together to re-shape gendered beauty norms (see Chapter Five, section 5.7). Following the way in which 'pets' figured in my data prompted a consideration of how this entangled with other digital practices and might reconfigure the way we think about the digitally networked body (see Chapter Five, section 5.5). Haraway (2016) argues that speculative fabulation is an important feminist practice for thinking beyond the mundane fiction of nature/culture, human/more-than-human, male/female binaries. Speculative thinking finds other ways to account for what matters in young people's digitally networked peer cultures than that which anthropocentric approaches have to offer.

I spent many months engaging with the data from this research project, each time

encountering the participant's research contributions from a different socio-historical moment. This inevitably shaped how the data came together as different cognitive, emotional, affective and physical relations came to the fore each time. Assembling the data for this thesis over a year allowed me to consider how the feelings that emerged during live research encounters shifted over time and provoked new questions. While I began this chapter with an excerpt from a particularly raucous and joyful fieldwork session, the time that has passed since this moment has enabled me to think critically about the particularity and specificity of the participant's response. In Chapter Four and Six, I consider how the groups change-making energies shifted in different configurations over the course of the research process producing multiple effects.

### **3.8 WHAT DO CREATIVE, VISUAL AND ARTS-BASED METHODOLOGIES ENABLE IN RESEARCH ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES?**

By incorporating interview data and participant's research creations this chapter has illustrated what creative, visual and arts-based research methods, informed by feminist posthuman and new materialist theories, can do in research on young people's digital sexual cultures. To date, scholarship on young people's digitally networked lives has focused on re-calibrating established qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and ethnography by incorporating digital devices or online observations (Jaynes 2020; Hickey-Moody and Wilcox 2019; Ringrose 2011; Warfield 2017; Lupton 2014). However, the desire to make visible young people's digitally networked experiences risks enhancing the surveillance of young people's sexual cultures.

The multiplicity of methods I employed fostered open-ended and curious explorations of young people's digital cultures which enabled them to exercise choice over what they wanted to share, and with whom, without revealing too much of themselves (Driver and Coulter 2018). I have outlined in this chapter how participants commented that research sessions felt like a non-judgemental space where they could explore what mattered to them. This was significant given that young people's digital practices have come to bear the burden of adult anxieties and concerns. Participants also observed that beginning the

research with group interviews that drew on various creative activities and visual-discursive prompts offered a less intimidating way into the research and sparked connections that may not have been prompted by a more traditional interview-based approach. It also enabled them to direct the flow and focus of the conversation, as well as pause on key topics.

Drawing on feminist posthuman and new materialist concepts ensured that I was attentive to the affective dynamics of the research. For example, I have observed in this chapter how the creative, visual and arts-based methods I employed seemed to enliven the participant's engagement and tapped into experiences that rarely surface in solely discursive approaches. Cultivating imagination, play and craft in this study offered affirmative ways into a topic that too often starts from a point of risk and harm. In addition, mobilising the materiality of art supplies opened up space for considering how digital platforms are formed by and implicated with the marvellous material specificity of things (Bennett 2009).

Many of the creative, visual and arts-based activities I employed in this study emerged through the research process and in response to participants. My eclectic approach to data production was therefore messy, branching off in unexpected directions and illuminating different facets of the participant's digital sexuality assemblages. While this defied linearity and rigid organisation, it did call forth different ways of noticing what was happening in young people's digital sexual cultures. Bringing together the mess of heterogeneous data that participants produced in this thesis has allowed me to create assemblages in each chapter. I hope that these assemblages have 'significance, salience, and meaning for those people who experience' them as well as invite a more curious, creative and open understanding of how digital practices come to matter for young people (Markham 2013, section 4.2, n.p).



### 3.9 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter outlined the methodological approach of my research project. I employed a multiplicity of participant-led creative, visual and arts-based methods over three phases of fieldwork that spanned fifteen-months. I also began to address research question two by considering what creative, visual and arts-based methodologies enabled in this research project.

I argued that cultivating imagination, play and craft in explorations of young people's digital sexualities disrupted established thought patterns that limit what is considered relevant and for whom (Bragg et al. 2018; Coleman 2016). Inviting participants to get creative opened up possibilities for what an inquiry into young people's digital relationships could be, do and become. For example, it was not limited to a set of pre-defined issues that dominate mainstream debates about young people's digital practices. Participants indicated that the research sessions prompted them to think differently about their digital relationships by drawing different connections as well as hearing other participant's perspectives.

The chapter also considered some of the limitations of my methodological approach. For example, I noted that the creative and arts-based approach may have been intimidating to some due to its association with artistic skill. I set out to pay close attention to how participation was enacted and how the 'heterogeneous entanglements of practice' shaped the way in which the research unfolded (Gallagher and Gallacher 2008, p. 506). I continue to explore this throughout the empirical chapters and consider the strengths and weaknesses of my methodological approach.

The empirical chapters in this thesis are structured around young people's digital intimate publics, the digitally networked body and the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*. In Chapter Four, I consider the extent to which digital technologies shape young people's affective attachment to 'utopian, optimism- sustaining versions of intimacy'. This chapter highlights the enduring (hetero)normativities surrounding what can appear as 'intimate'

online as well as considers experiences that appear to exceed normative understandings of gender and sexuality. In Chapter Five, I explore how digital technologies are shaping young people's digital sexual cultures by examining the changing possibilities of what a body can be, do and become. Specifically, I explore how young people's bodies are increasingly more-than-human by looking at them as sites of 'unexpected and unpredictable linkages' that blur the boundaries between human/more-than-human, organic/technical, masculine/feminine, natural/unnatural (Grosz 1994, p. 181). Finally, in Chapter Six, I outline the development and direction of the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* which sought to put the emerging research findings to work in Green City School.

## CHAPTER FOUR - FANTASIES OF THE GOOD LIFE

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I begin to explore the way smart devices, social media and gaming platforms are shaping young people's sexual cultures by focusing specifically on their facilitation of new visibilities and connectivities for performing sexuality and gender. As I outlined in Chapter Two, a key dichotomy underpinning concerns about young people's digital sexual cultures is that of private versus public and the unprecedented intrusion of digital technologies into our everyday intimate practices. Sexuality is often considered to be a private, personal and intimate matter that is experienced between two people or in the confines of the hetero-familial home. However, as Wendy Chun and Sarah Friedland (2015, p. 6) observe, digital technologies such as social media and mobile communication are 'driven by the profound confusion of the private and public, and the online and offline'.

Drawing on Lauren Berlant's concept of intimate publics, this chapter assembles data that addresses the changing nature of intimacies in young people's increasingly digitally networked lives. For Berlant (2008, p. viii), mass media discourses and texts create intimate publics that flourish 'as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an "x"'. She works to unpick 'utopian, optimism-sustaining versions of intimacy' that promote (hetero)normative fantasies of 'the good life' and highlights the phenomenon's inherent vulnerability, ephemerality and 'potential failure to stabilise closeness' (Berlant 1998, p. 282). Asserting that intimacy may operate publically and at any distance, Berlant (1998, p. 284) observes that the 'kinds of connections that impact on people, and on which they depend for living (if not "a life"), do not always respect the predictable forms'. By attending to the vulnerability and ephemerality of digital intimacy, this chapter illustrates the 'inherent promiscuity of new media' (Chun and Friedland 2015, p. 3).

In this chapter, I explore many facets of the participant's digital sexuality assemblages including intimate entrepreneurship on Instagram and YouTube, the hetero-family on mobile gaming platforms, digitally networked peer cultures and compulsory coupledness, LGBTQ+ counterpublics, direct messages and dick pics, as well as emojis and feeling rules. I consider participants' orientation towards 'utopian, optimism-sustaining versions of intimacy' as well as touch upon examples of the non-standard intimacies circulating in their digitally networked peer cultures. While I used an array of creative, visual and arts-based methods in my study, this chapter largely draws on participant's talk during group interviews and follow-up interviews. I do however conclude by drawing on data from the emoji crafting session with the Year 7's at Green City School. This chapter weaves together insights from many young people to look at the different ways that relationships surfaced in their talk.

#### **4.2 THE GOOD LIFE: #RELATIONSHIPGOALS AND INTIMATE ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

In *Mediated Intimacy*, Barker, Gill and Harvey (2018) observe how discourses of management, work and entrepreneurialism are increasingly shaping the way intimate life is discussed (see also O'Neill 2018). They describe a growing culture of 'intimate entrepreneurship' whereby relationship activity is broken down into 'separate component elements or operations to be organised in a rational and linear process, rather like a factory production line' (Barker, Gill and Harvey 2018, p. 109). This entrepreneurial relationship culture was evident in many different aspects of the participant's digital practices, and this section focuses on examples from Instagram, YouTube and mobile simulation games.

Instagram is a photo and video-sharing social networking site which allows visual content to be edited with various filters and organised with tags and location information. It was a popular platform amongst the participants, who described it as 'inspirational', 'idealistic' (Alex, Castell Q) and 'like an ideology of what you want to have in the future' (Bernard, Westland College). Notably, participants at Westland College described how stylised,

'staged' photos of 'strangers' doing 'romantic', 'cute', 'couple-y things' circulated on the platform with the hashtag 'Relationship Goals'.

Hashtags are metadata tags that work to link content according to a theme or message and are shaped through the communicative habits of those using the platform as well as through the platform affordances prioritising certain modes of expression (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen and Carter 2015). Hashtag tropes often develop in response to the specific features of social media platforms (Highfield and Leaver 2016 p. 50). For example, #RelationshipGoals is part of a wider #Goals subgenre that responds to Instagram's circulation of aestheticised, beautified and idealised lifestyle content - #lifegoals, #breakfastgoals, #makeupgoals, #friendshipgoals.

To illustrate the #RelationshipGoals trope, Bernard scrolled to an Instagram image of a modelesque hetero-coupling walking hand in hand past a designer fashion store. Other examples noted by Westland participants included couples on the beach, couples having breakfast in bed and couples doing yoga together. These were often posed and professional shots with participants jokingly asking: 'Who's taking that picture?' (Tom, Westland College). While the implication that a third person is documenting these intimate scenes troubles the monogamy of the hetero-couple form, the circulation of such commercialised images of couples on Instagram nevertheless worked to promote certain expressions of romance and intimacy. Specifically, #RelationshipGoals packages coupledness into separate component operations of shopping, eating, travelling and exercising together and places these consumer-led practices as the pinnacle of intimate bonding (see O'Neill 2018; Barker, Gill and Harvey 2018). In section 4.4, I detail how these visual norms entered into and shaped young people's digitally networked peer cultures.

Intimate entrepreneurship was not only confined to Instagram but circulated widely through the cross-platform practices of social media celebrities. As Crystal Abidin (2018) outlines, internet celebrity is no longer a case of one-hit viral wonders, it is a rapidly diversifying and evolving economy that is changing the face of celebrity culture. The video-sharing site YouTube has become a key platform for launching celebrity careers with

amateur and entrepreneurial uses coexisting and coevolving on the site (Burgess and Green 2013, p. 103). YouTube celebrities are proving to be increasingly central figures in popular and youth culture. For example, Droshux at Green City School detailed how he had 'always been inspired by YouTubers' because of 'their energy'. Furthermore, a classroom display board dedicated to 'aspiration' at Ysgol Mellt was filled with pupils' posters about YouTube celebrities.

As Aislinn from Ysgol Mellt exemplifies below, popular YouTube content often documents intimate scenes of everyday life through daily video logs (vlogs):

Kate: So what YouTubers do you like to follow?

Aislinn: I follow the Ingham Family

Kate: Ok, who are they?

Aislinn: Erm a YouTube family of five, they live in England and they do daily vlogs like every single day and they're almost at one million subscribers

Kate: What sort of stuff do they put in their vlogs?

Aislinn: They do like the adventures they go on, and what holidays they go on, and [...] they tell haters as well that they don't like them [Kate: Yeah] cos haters they just wanna pull you down with them, and you should just get back up

Kate: What sort of haters, what do people say against them?

Aislinn: They say like you can't even blog right, you brag so much about going on holiday and stuff like that and they said that's our choice, they have the money and if they want to take their children on holiday they can, it's up to them, it's not the haters

Kate: What do you enjoy about watching the videos?

Aislinn: What I love about it, is just like how they do like shoutout and they want to include subscribers who actually give them good comments, at the end of every video they have a few videos [...], and they wanna just say why we love the Ingham family, and I tried to but I just couldn't in the end

Kate: You wanted to do a vlog as well?

Aislinn: I wanted to do a video to send to them, but I just didn't in the end

Kate: What would you have put in it?

Aislinn: Erm, I would have said that I love their vlogs, and I've entered a lot of their giveaways, but I've never see but I don't care, watching you guys makes me happy every single day

The Ingham Family YouTube Channel grants Aislinn access to everyday scenes of familial domesticity along with escape through 'adventures' and 'holidays'. The channel functions as a scene of attachment for a larger intimate public, inviting subscribers into their 'now more than 1 MILLION STRONG FAMILY' (The Ingham Family 2020a). The commitment to uploading vlogs of their lives 'every single day' manifests the 'optimistic drive' for 'sustained intimate contact' with their expansive 'family' of subscribers (Berlant 2012, p. 89). Unlike the posed and poised #RelationshipGoals content, YouTube vloggers function within an economy of authenticity often filming on handheld devices and cultivating an amateur aesthetic amidst more polished and edited content. Abidin (2017, p. 6) details how this 'calibrated amateurism' enables successful social media celebrities to strategically re-enact their 'original appeal as "real people"' whose ordinariness has been overcome with the power of self-invention.

Far from amateur, however, The Ingham Family is a commercial enterprise complete with its own branded merchandise and attracting followers through competitive 'giveaways'

that reward subscribers who 'give them good comments' with Ipads, dolls, merchandise bundles and more. The channel's content focuses heavily on their three young daughters (aged 13, 9 and 7) with the eldest commanding her own spin-off channel. Furthermore, much of their merchandise is emblazoned with princesses, unicorns, rainbows, sassy phrases and 'girl power' slogans (The Ingham Family 2020b). Correspondingly, the channel ties into a broader global tween market geared towards pre-adolescent girls as an emergent consumer demographic (Kennedy 2018).

The channel's focus on competition, individual choice, resilience ('you should just get back up') and girl power highlight an emotional register centred on cultivating the character and disposition required for surviving in a postfeminist neo-liberal society (Gill 2017). This is a cultural context in which 'can-do girls' are celebrated as the ideal subjects of late capitalist society embodying unambiguous success through discourses of empowerment, choice and freedom (Harris 2004; see also Renold and Ringrose 2008). Rather than liberating girls, these consumer-led choices have proved to be highly restrictive demanding a relentlessly upbeat, confident and happy affective state that acquiesces to the exploitative and unequal operations of hetero-patriarchal capitalism (Dobson and Kanai 2018).

This 'postfeminist sensibility' can be seen in Aislinn's affective acquiescence to being a good subscriber who purports to be made 'happy every single day' by The Ingham Family (Gill 2017). The chipper way she details her fondness for The Ingham Family echoes the emotional register of the YouTube channel, materialising the affectivity of the videos in her own embodied practices. However, Aislinn's claim to happiness can be seen as a relation of cruel optimism, whereby attachment to an 'object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle to fulfilling the very wants that bring people to it' (Berlant, 2011, p. 227). For Aislinn, the promise of reward by, and sharing in the success of, the Ingham Family through winning a giveaway or featuring in a vlog becomes less attainable the larger the subscriber base gets. Yet, these features exist for the very purpose of enhancing The Ingham Family's reach and the monetary value of their channel. Correspondingly, the promise of reward for being a good subscriber becomes a continuously receding horizon.



Following Berlant (2011, p. 15), I am however mindful of turning ‘the objects of cruel optimism into bad and oppressive things’ that simply enrol young people into a regime of compliance with the status quo. The Ingham Family is not a straightforward celebration of the heteronormative family form. For example, the derisive attitudes and ‘hate’ expressed towards them and their boastful displays, undermines the promotion of wholesome hetero-family life as a force for social good. Instead, The Ingham Family’s explicit publicisation of intimate scenes of domesticity can be perceived as a dangerous corruption of ‘private’ hetero-familial bonds as the ideal primary source of intimacy (Dobson, Robards and Carah 2018). Incorporating their daughters into The Ingham Family franchise may also be viewed as controversial given the focus of online safeguarding discourses on privacy warnings for girls.

The hetero-family form also featured heavily in the mobile gaming practices of participants at Green City School. Fisher and Jenson (2017, p. 89) observe that an overwhelming number of games marketed towards girls focus on ‘reproducing the sexual division of labour through a variety of domestic role-playing scenarios’. For example, Olivia (age 12) and Chiara (age 12) described their enjoyment of the game *Virtual Families*, the goal of which was to foster a successful family life through a range of caring practices. Olivia described how ‘you start with one person and then you get married’ and ‘if your couple doesn’t have any children that means you lose all your money that you’ve earned in the bank’. Like The Ingham Family, this game promotes a familiar good life centred on the ‘rewards’ of the heteronormative family form. However, the gamification of socio-economically de-valued care did not necessarily translate into an affective investment in these practices. For example, Olivia reported how she regularly gets ‘fed up’ with her virtual family and ‘wait[s] for them to die’ so she can start again.

Attachment to the hetero-family form is also potentially diluted by the rising fame of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender YouTube vloggers (see Marston 201a9; Lovelock 2017; Raun 2016). This content is not niche but highly visible on the platform and participants across my study demonstrated their familiarity with gay and lesbian YouTube

celebrities. As Alex (age 17) from Castell Q detailed, these vloggers could spark thinking about young people's own intimate lives:

Kate: So I was wondering if any of those spoke to you about how relationships are presented online not just romantic but friendships and other kinds of relationships, and if there's an image that kind of resonates?

Alex: Yeah, the one with Joey and his boyfriend

Interview: Yeah

Alex: Cos I used to watch, before I came out, I used to watch YouTubers like him and when I saw him with his boyfriend I was like ah I'd love to have something like that

Interview: Why, what are they like together?

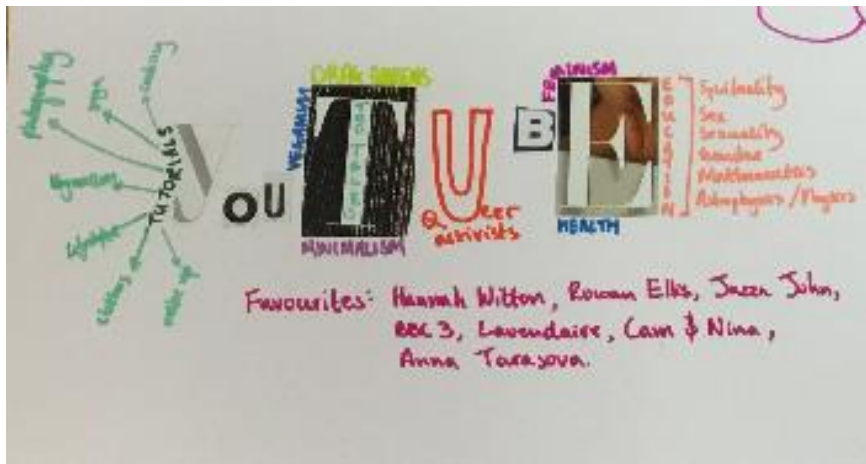
Alex: They're just like really fun, and like easy-going and they do like really, I remember them doing like really fun videos and like on day outs and stuff and it's just lovely to see

In the above individual interview extract, Alex details his past enjoyment of the everyday documentation of same-sex intimacy in Joey Graceffa's YouTube videos. Described in the UK press as 'the ultimate YouTube success story' (Griffin 2019, para 1, n.p), Joey Graceffa is an American YouTube personality with over 8.9 million subscribers who produces daily life vlogs and gaming videos. His vlogs often feature his boyfriend Daniel Preda who is a lifestyle blogger, model and Instagram celebrity (Preda 2020). Both Joey and Daniel are young, white, lean muscular men with clean-cut good looks. Correspondingly, the success they embody is not only tied to neo-liberal values of 'entrepreneurialism and individual enterprise' but minority identities 'deemed "acceptable" for integration within the status quo' (Lovelock 2017, p. 13). Similar to #RelationshipGoals, Joey and Daniel's YouTube videos convey their union through component relationship steps such as 'Our Love Story!' and 'Moving Into Our New Home!'

Experienced as 'fun', 'easy-going' and 'lovely to see', these videos offered Alex fantasies of having 'something like that' that might have otherwise seemed unattainable in a small town in south Wales. As I detailed in Chapter Three, Castell Q was a nascent LGBTQ+ youth group located in the post-industrial south Wales Valleys where historical legacies of heteronormatively gendered and sexualised community relations loom large in expectations of what young people can do, be and become (Renold and Ivinson 2019; Walkerdine and Jiminez 2012). Joey Graceffa can be seen to offer a form of 'aspirational normalcy' that promises to fulfil the 'desire to feel normal and to feel normalcy as a ground of dependable life' (Berlant 2007, p. 281). In keeping with the seemingly compulsory emotional 'positivity' of visual social media (see Berryman and Kavka 2018; Kanai 2019; Dobson, Robards and Carah 2018), Joey Graceffa's chipper, playful and comic tone is an appealing reprieve from the mainstream media's historic focus on negative and caricatured portrayals of sexual and gender minorities (McInroy and Craig 2016). However, the valorisation of these figures as valuable 'role models' for LGBTQ+ young people can paradoxically position 'heteronormativity as a potentially enabling force for lesbian and gay youth in the context of neoliberalism' through reifying monogamy, domesticity and marriage (Lovelock 2017; Duguay 2016b).

Significantly, this LGBTQ+ content does not sit in isolation but is always in-relation to social media's broader visual culture. For example, Alex's map (see Figure 6) illustrated how YouTube operated as a complex ecology of content ranging from drag queens, queer activists, feminism, veganism, spirituality, sex, sexuality, mathematics, astrophysics, health and more.

FIGURE 6: EXCERPT FROM ALEX'S MAP



Alex's 'fluid spectatorial identifications' extended connections to multiple networks online and offline, offering different tools with which to negotiate sexuality and gender and was described as expanding his imaginative possibilities rather than diminishing them (Bragg 2015, p. 98). I was struck in particular by his description of how early teen friendships in connection with YouTube fostered an interest in feminism:

Alex:...I started getting into when I, I joined a friendship group in school and they were quite liberal and like when I was about 13, like still then I didn't really know what being gay or what like the patriarchy was and all this stuff, so when I heard these people talking about it I was like 'What? What is this?' (*laughs*) and then they started talking about YouTubers and all this kind of stuff and I came across Hannah Witton and she's quite a big feminist on YouTube [...] I was like woah her videos are really cool and I started watching other YouTubers like her and then it just exploded and like all, like many of the subscriptions I have on YouTube are like so many of them are feminists now and it like just started from one little one I just come across

Alex's story resonates with wider research mapping the unprecedented uptake of feminism amongst teenagers in school and online in recent years (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019; Bragg et al. 2018; Ringrose and Renold 2016; Retallack et al. 2016). As I noted in Chapter Two, Ringrose and Renold (2016, p. 220) describe feminism as an 'incendiary and fiery' force that spreads and catches through group affects 'generating fierce reactions' amongst young people. Similarly, Alex detailed how a young teen friendship group plugged into a larger network of YouTube feminists sparked a fascination that

'exploded' into a voracious and sustained appetite for feminist content through YouTube subscriptions, podcasts and books on sex and relationships. This content introduced a new vocabulary around 'being gay' and 'the patriarchy' which was described as enabling him to 'better equip' himself than in school where 'some things are missing' (Alex's words). Notably, Hannah Witton's (2017) feminist-inspired sex and relationship advice offers important critiques of heteronormative and phallogocentric sexual cultures covering consent, pleasure, sexual diversity, healthy relationships, sexual violence, period stigma and much more.

On the one hand, this popular mode of feminism remains tied to postfeminist neo-liberal logics that reformulate deeply entrenched intersectional gendered inequities into manageable obstacles to be overcome with the right knowledge and attitude (Dobson and Kanai 2018). For example, Alex's efforts to 'better equip' himself still hail to the rules of self-optimisation and personal responsibility required by a neo-liberal entrepreneurial relationship culture. On the other hand, Alex's passionate investment in feminist content produced by young women on YouTube exemplifies some of the recent shifts in how young people can 'identify (or disidentify) with and "do" gender' (Bragg et al. 2018, p. 2). This does not negate the continuing force with which heteronormative gender binaries structure young people's lives, or how their everyday intimate practices are confounded by the neo-liberal frame of reference they are working in. However, it does point to the 'provisional, messy and ambiguous relations' to digital media 'through which young people learn over time' and through diverse modes of engagement (Driver and Coulter 2018, p. 2). In Chapter Five, I consider in further detail how Alex's digitally mediated masculinity opens up alternative figurations to hegemonic heteronormative and phallogocentric norms (Braidotti 2011a).

Overall, by detailing the simultaneous marketisation of coupledness, family life, LGBTQ+ relationships and feminist sex advice on social media and gaming platforms, this section has painted a complicated and paradoxical picture of the way intimate life is addressed in young people's digital media cultures.

### **4.3 ‘SOMETIMES I WANNA KNOW, BUT I DON’T WANT TO GET MYSELF INTO TROUBLE FOR KNOWING IT’: INNOCENCE VERSUS KNOWLEDGE IN DIGITALLY NETWORKED PEER CULTURES**

The previous section outlined how digital technologies facilitate access to a range of knowledge, providing young people with new technologies for the making and mattering of sexual and gendered subjectivities. As social media, mobile communication and gaming technologies become increasingly entwined with young people’s intimate practices, fears and anxieties about the premature ‘sexualisation’ of children and young people have been exacerbated (Etheridge 2016; Ringrose, Renold and Egan 2015). In Chapter One, I outlined how digital technologies are positioned as unnatural contaminators of childhood ‘innocence’ and a threat to the linear developmental trajectory of achieving a healthy (hetero)sexuality (Robinson 2013; Egan 2012; Stockton 2009; Egan and Hawkes 2008a; 2008b; Edelman 2004). Widespread social anxieties over the corruption of the innocent child have fuelled a ‘scary futurology’ of increasingly early sexual maturation (Smith 2010; Ringrose, Renold and Egan 2015) that ties into concerns over the fraying fantasies of the good life where lively, durable intimacy has less traction in the world (Berlant 2011).

Driver and Coulter (2018, p. 2) argue that adult efforts to contain and control young people’s digital practices ‘appeal to rationality and often conceal their own affective investments’. Furthermore, they overlook the way children and young people are entangled in a ubiquitous digital media-scape that enlivens their everyday peer relationships in unpredictable ways. Across my study, I found significant differences within peer groups in terms of digital access and engagement, painting a heterogeneous picture of young people’s digital cultures. This was notable amongst the pre-teen participants who, despite being technically too young to have accounts on most major social media and gaming platforms, were already accessing these technologies or had friends who had access.

The unevenness of participants digital cultures was exemplified by Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen a group of friends from Green City School who I introduced in Chapter Three. Although their friendship extended into digital spaces via a Whatsapp group chat, they

had strikingly different levels of access with broader social media and gaming platforms. Mia and Isabella were subject to strict parental regulations around their access to digital media, whereas Safa and Imogen had comparatively few restrictions on their use of apps and games. These differences were inflected by a classed and racialised politics of parental choice with Mia's and Isabella's restrictions linked not only to safety but what was deemed a prudent investment of their time. In contrast, Safa's and Imogen's nonchalant relationship with digital technologies was integrated with their broader family dynamics and sociability. For example, Safa detailed how Whatsapp and Snapchat enabled her to maintain transnational connections with family in South Asia and around the world (Cabalquinto 2017).

These differing classed and racialised cultures shaped Mia's, Isabella's, Safa's and Imogen's experience of Green City School's digitally networked peer culture. Social media and mobile communication played a key role in making and breaking friendships for Year 7's at Green City School, contributing to the unsettling flux of newly formed peer relationships. The friendship groups differing levels of engagement with these technologies was a notable source of discord and disagreement which expanded throughout Year 7 and into Year 8. For example, in the following extract from an interview conducted towards the end of fieldwork, their different experiences came to the fore:

Mia: Quite often when people can't work out how to talk to other people, they end up doing it through the internet and it's really bad [...] So I've heard people talking like 'oh did you hear about this? Did you hear about this? It was on Instagram'. It's like about people in our school, and it's like why should that be on the internet when it's about them and about something that's happening to them that's so minor, and could actually cause them a lot of trouble if people know [...] Because they make it into a big deal, it magnifies it

Kate: It like spreads?

Safa: The thing is err like take no offence from this [Mia, Isabella] you two don't have like social media so you don't really under, I mean you do a bit

Isabella: I don't want it

Mia: Yeah

Safa: I mean you don't understand how it goes, people go on Twitter 'I'm sad!' Snapchat: Claire says like 'don't, don't tell me I've done something when I haven't done it', like everyone tells their emotions online. Instagram (*feigning sad voice*) 'oh, me and my boyfriend just broke up'. Oh, like there's like a tonne of stuff you can get from the internet and you, and even if it's not right or anything, or like you know, you're in his, their personal business, they're the one who's, who's shared it and even if they're like oh you're gonna share it like 'oh my best friend's sad' or like

Mia: Yeah, what I meant was when other people say it [...] so when people tell someone they put it in their confidence about something and then they post it on the internet, or on Instagram or something, then anyone can see it and people don't tend to realise that, that can actually cause a lot of problems for the person because then anyone can find out stuff about them

In this group interview extract, Safa and Mia make different claims to knowledge about social media. Safa argues that Mia and Isabella do not understand the affective sociality of social media, portraying it as an outlet where 'everyone tells their emotions'. She indicates how platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat operate as digital intimate publics whereby people's 'personal business' is refracted through a general audience creating a shared emotional knowledge (Berlant 2008, p. viii). In contrast, Mia suggests that she has a clearer understanding than others who 'don't tend to realise' that sharing personal details on social media can 'cause a lot of problems'. Mia's suggestion that posting it on the internet 'make[s] it into a big deal' and 'magnifies' it reflects wider safeguarding discourses about social media that moralise certain 'excesses' of emotion and personal information (Dobson, Robards and Carah 2018) and seek to 'govern acceptable models of young people's public participation and visibility' (Berriman and Thomson 2018). Safa enters the moralising terrain of this debate asserting that 'even if it's not right' they are 'the one [...] who's shared it'.



Mia's concerns are arguably tied up with socio-cultural constructions of intimate knowledge as difficult or troublesome for children and young people (Robinson 2013), as well as gendered discourses around the relational dynamics of gossip (Ringrose 2012). While Safa and Imogen did acknowledge that they exaggerated stories at times, their investment in the emotional world of social media appeared to offer a vital resource in navigating the fractious landscape of Year 7 break-ups and make-ups (Hey 1997). However, Mia's wariness that peers may be betraying intimate details that have been told 'in confidence' and her assertion that the details are often 'so minor' echoes the way the feminised world of gossip is devalued as petty, insignificant and untrustworthy. Mia's eagerness to avoid the social knowledge facilitated by her peers on social media can be seen as an effort to navigate the complex ideals of age-appropriate 'good' girlhood by performing a smart, mature and critically distant middle-class respectability that is free from the contaminating influence of petty social media gossip (Skeggs 1997; Naezer and Ringrose 2018).

However, Mia's performance of mature critical distance sat in tension with the childishness and innocent attitude she displayed in other research encounters. As I outlined in Chapter Three (section 3.3.1.4), Mia often communicated in fieldwork sessions by singing, humming, moo-ing, coughing, giggling and fake laughing, as well as repeating the word banana over and over. When Mia returned in Year 8, she described herself as acting 'like a child' in previous fieldwork sessions and began contributing to group discussions more earnestly. Nevertheless, she continued to express herself in playful ways in fieldwork through singing and hiding under tables. Mia's actions complicate the notion of a uni-directional transition between childhood, tweenage and teenage, as she shifted back and forth between positions of mature knowingness and childish innocence in her efforts to navigate discussions about Green City School's digitally networked peer culture.

The push and pull of Green City School's digitally networked relational drama was also raised by Chiara (age 12) who participated in fieldwork across Year 7 and the beginning of Year 8. Throughout Year 7 Chiara appeared to be relatively socially isolated and on the fringes of more established friendship clusters like Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen. Her

seemingly unpopular status was further consolidated by the fact that she had 'never really been in a group chat' with her school peers (Chiara's words), a significant means of shaping the boundaries of friendships at school and beyond. Despite this relative alienation from social media and her peers, Chiara was still affectively invested in the whirlpool of social media gossip at school, finding it 'exciting' and 'annoying' when 'rumours go around [...] about online' and 'everyone's talking about it' but she 'can't see what it is'. Over the course of my fieldwork visits she returned several times to an incident in which a social media conflict had erupted in the changing rooms at school:

Chiara: ...One time when we were changing for P.E this girl was crying and then apparently she had sent mean things over Instagram or something or Snapchat, and when I asked what was happening somebody asked me, when I asked them they said 'Do you have Snapchat? Instagram or Facebook?' I was like of course not, I'm under-aged [Kate: Yeah] so then they were like 'ok, well you probably wouldn't understand' and then I saw erm Sa-bob go up to Il-bob and say stuff like 'did you send those really mean', I don't know, 'texts to me over Instagram?' And she was like, 'no I didn't!' and then like they kept insisting that she did and then she was crying and everyone was like, some people were like leave her alone, and some people were just like trying to figure out what happened, and some people were just like I'm gonna get on with my life now

Chiara's story illustrates how the inflammatory affects of alleged 'mean texts' sent online travelled into the offline confrontation of the changing room, affecting bodies beyond those immediately involved (Kofoed and Ringrose 2012). The energy of the conflict dispersed amongst 'everyone' in the P.E class causing a flurry of action ('some people were like leave her alone') and intrigue ('trying to figure out what happened') as well as indifference ('I'm gonna get on with my life now'). This dispersal of feeling fuelled further processes of inclusion and exclusion across the peer group as Chiara reports being told she 'wouldn't understand' the unfolding drama due to her absence from platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook. This echoes Safa's point to Mia, highlighting how the knowledge facilitated by social media could operate as a form of social currency amongst peers and underpin social exclusion for those rendered digitally ignorant (Ringrose 2012; Hey 1997).

Notably, the changing room appeared several times throughout fieldwork discussions with Chiara as a key site where relational drama unfolded. Previous research has observed how

changing rooms operate as unique zones for informal learning about embodied sexuality at school, often with a focus on them as sites of hostile heteronormative gender policing (Kajran 2019; Allen 2017; Atkinson and Kehler 2010). As liminal school spaces away from the regulatory gaze of teachers, they can open up different ways for pupils to enact their subjectivities than are allowed in the wider school context. Allen (2017) observes that the vital materiality of the changing room architecture, for example, windowless and enclosed, entangles with young people's embodied practices to shape sexual and gender relations. In particular, she notes how these spaces offer young people opportunities to constitute themselves as sexual in contrast to school efforts to contain sexual expression. Although Allen is referring to research with teenagers, her work resonated with a story Chiara and Olivia shared during a paired interview:

Olivia:...In the changing rooms some of the girls they often take pictures like they're on Instagram and stuff aren't they

Chiara: Yeah and I try and like get out of the frame

Kate: Yeah

Olivia: Yeah they keep on taking pictures of everybody and then posting them

Chiara: Like it's really hard with changing rooms because the teachers can't

Olivia: Come in

Chiara: Hook up surveillance in there otherwise it would be quite weird [Kate: Yeah] but they can't exactly stop people in the changing rooms acting crazy

Kate: How do you feel when that happens?

Chiara: Well when it's pictures I just

Olivia: I just get out the picture

Chiara: I just try and not be a part of it cos like we're getting undressed here and like people are taking pictures, crazy! And they start like laughing when they take pictures of each other and stuff cos it might be blurred or something, I don't know

Kate: It causes a lot of like excitement?

Olivia: Mmmm

Chiara: Like sometimes I wanna know but I don't want to get myself into trouble for knowing it

In this extract Olivia and Chiara highlight the transgressive pleasure and excitement of unleashing Instagram in the girls' changing room. Their description reveals how the materiality of the enclosed changing room entangles with the embodied practice of 'getting undressed' and the photographic affordances of mobile devices and Instagram to animate bodies into a blurred movement as they endeavour to get in or out of the frame. According to Chiara's account, harnessing the curious power of mobile cameras to produce dramatic effects appears to be a form of peer bonding that generates laughter and commotion amongst some of the girls. This stirs an ambivalent curiosity for Chiara who wants to 'know but [...] don't want to get [herself] into trouble for knowing' what is going on in the pictures. Chiara's contradictory desires highlight the push and pull of good feminine subjectivity versus bad 'knowing' sexual subjectivity that regulates the bodies and desires of women and girls (Renold and Ringrose 2011). She is intrigued by the fray of these pre-teen antics and perhaps craves the gratification of inclusion. Yet active participation in such bodily explorations could taint her as troublesome and disruptive by teachers, parents, and other pupils.

The practice of pre-teen girls taking pictures of 'everybody' in the changing room as they are 'getting undressed' and posting them to Instagram unsettles dominant protectionist discourses around 'sexting'. In Chapter Two, I outlined how sexting is typically understood as the creation and circulation of 'sexually suggestive, nude or nearly nude images' through mobile devices and online media (Lenhart 2009, p. 3). The 'problem' of sexting has constructed 'young girls as primarily the victims of an assumed predatory and unremarkable culture of masculinity' in a manner that reinforces essentialised heteronormative bifurcations of active male sexuality and passive female sexuality (Harvey and Ringrose 2015, p. 353). In contrast, Olivia and Chiara describe how some of the girls in their class are actively taking pictures of themselves and others. While qualitative research has complicated understandings of sexting as a singular phenomenon and challenged the cultural conflation of nudity with sexual activity (Hawkes 2004; Albury 2015), educational policy and practice continues to rely on individualised notions of victim/perpetrator and 'self/peer exploitation' to understand these digital picture sharing practices (Karaian 2014; Albury and Crawford 2012).

Within this context, the above changing room events might be reduced to a problem of innocent 'good' girls objectified by savvy navigators of Instagram's (hetero)normative visual culture of bodily display. However, Chiara highlights the push and pull to occupy both these positions at once. Rather than belonging to and/or emerging from individual bodies and devices, my analysis foregrounds how the changing room gives rise to different relationalities where bodies and digital devices collide in ways that might generate new gender and sexual meanings. The spatiality of these encounters matter, confounding teacher's efforts to intervene as it would be 'quite weird' to 'come in' or 'hook up surveillance'. Although these changing room practices raise issues of privacy and consent in a social media culture where 'feminine body parts are understood as the collective property of others to survey and regulate in complex ways' (Ringrose and Harvey 2015, p. 209), they also illustrate the limits of safeguarding strategies that simply rely on intensifying the surveillance and regulation of girl's bodies.

Another area where girls walk a tightrope between sexual innocence and knowingness is through their relationships with boys. Girlhood scholars have long noted that boys can confer popularity and status onto girls through enhancing their achievement of heteronormative femininity (Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz 2007). However, they can also be a source of conflict and competition as girls must manage their 'reputation' (Ringrose 2012). At Ysgol Mellt the participant's talk turned often to their crushes on boys, their multiple ex-boyfriends and the lively dynamics of boyfriend-girlfriend cultures at school. Entry into hetero-romantic relationships is often taken as disturbing evidence of 'premature' sexualisation by white middle-class moral panics surrounding childhood innocence (Allen 2015; Huuki and Renold 2016). However, research has found that boyfriend-girlfriend relationships are not only prevalent in children and young people's social worlds but experienced in locally and culturally specific ways (Renold 2013; Renold 2005).

Renold and Ivinson (2015, p. 241) detail that in the economically deprived former coalmining communities of south Wales 'serving the institution of heterosexuality as girlfriend, wife and mother operated historically as a way of saving and securing a socio-historical hegemonic masculinity that in many ways operated as community survival' (see also Walkerdine and Jiminez 2012; Renold and Ringrose 2017). Correspondingly, the push to couple up in schools such as Ysgol Mellt should be understood within the context of south Wales' post-industrial landscape, which continues to mediate young people's sexuality and underpin hetero-patriarchal gender relations (Renold and Ivinson 2015; Walkerdine and Jiminez 2012). These socio-cultural associations are rendered more complex by globalisation as evidenced by the fact that participants at Ysgol Mellt employed Japanese anime and manga terminology to discuss boyfriend-girlfriend cultures at school. For example, they referred to crushes as their 'senpai' which Leah clarified 'doesn't mean crush, it's like somebody who is like older' by 'a whole grade'. In Japanese culture, the term senpai 'dictates a hierarchy amongst interpersonal relationships' meaning 'senior' or someone of 'higher rank or status' (Sano 2014, p. 59). Referring to boys as their 'senpai' was indicative of the enduring hetero-patriarchal organisation of gender relations in Ysgol Mellt's peer culture.

Significantly, the group appeared to have learnt the term 'senpai' from the stealth action video game *Yandere Simulator*, which centres on 'stalking a boy and secretly eliminating any girl who has a crush on him, while maintaining the image of an innocent schoolgirl' (Yandere Dev 2020). Designed by a California-based developer, *Yandere Simulator* combines stealth action with the Japanese genre of otome which are typically romantic story-based video games targeted towards women and girls (Tosca and Klastrup 2019). Yandere is a word for an anime or manga character who is initially caring until their affection becomes destructive and brutal in nature, the term is a 'portmanteau of the words *yanderu* (病んで), meaning (mentally or emotionally) ill, and *deredere* (でれでれ, "lovey dovey"), meaning to show genuinely strong romantic affection' (Animanga Wiki 2020). The term exemplifies the double bind that girls find themselves in as femininity and feminine desire is pathologised as duplicitous, irrational and excessive in popular culture (Creed 1993).

Although *Yandere Simulator* is still in development, it has garnered a cult following with 2.7 million subscribers following its progress via the developer's YouTube channel (Yandere Dev 2020). Test builds have featured in the gaming reviews of prominent YouTube celebrities such as the aforementioned Joey Graceffa (see section 4.2). The game has already courted controversy and been banned from the live streaming gamer website Twitch due to its depiction of violence and sexually explicit content, including the ability to take pictures of girls' pants as a form of currency to gain competitive advantage (Frank 2016). While the games eroticisation of school girls can be seen as evidence of a mainstreamed paedophilic gaze where 'sexiness and innocence cohere in a schizoid formation that troubles distinct linear developmental lines' (Renold and Ringrose 2011, p. 393; Bray 2008), its circulation amongst prominent gay YouTubers and pre-teen girls resists a singular reading. The game can also be seen to satirise and exaggerate the competitive world of heterosexualised dating (Madill 2015). For example, Leah described how she discovered the game through YouTube and thought it was 'just funny'. It is also possible that *Yandere Simulator* offers a cultural resource through which aggressive fantasies can be realised offering girls an opportunity to express themselves in ways less available or perceived as too risky and dangerous in offline contexts.

In contrast to participant's at Ysgol Mellt, Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen shared an overt rejection of (hetero)sexualised dating culture. Although research suggests desiring relationship talk of 'liking', 'fancying', 'having a crush on' or 'loving' other people can be an everyday feature of girl's pre-teen friendships (Allen 2015; Renold 2013), this group of friends notably distanced themselves from the topic. The following excerpt from a group interview offers a rare instance in which talk of crushes came up:

Isabella: We asked Alexa who she had a crush on and she said R2D2

Kate: Do you talk about crushes in your year? Do people...

Isabella: No!

Everyone: Nooo

Isabella: Well the populars do

In this exchange the group were quick to shut down my question about whether they discussed crushes, answering with a loud and resounding 'no!' While the assertion that 'the populars' talk about crushes suggests that participating in romantic dating rituals was associated with higher social status at Green City School (Renold 2005), Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen consistently dismissed or trivialised the topic. For example, in one interview Safa told me how she had sent a YouTube video on 'How to Talk to Your Crush' to their Whatsapp group chat but asserted that she thought it would 'just be really funny just to laugh at!' and whispered to me 'I don't have crushes'. I was, therefore, curious to hear how the girlhood ritual of discussing crushes came up in the questions they posed to the virtual personal assistant Alexa. This can be seen as another jocular way of broaching the topic of pre-teen desire but it also poses questions about the role of artificial intelligence in children and young people's emerging gender and sexual subjectivities.



The home is often positioned as the true and proper site for children and young people's sexuality education by a 'hetero-patriarchal framework of privatized intimacy, boxed and bounded within families' (Dobson, Robards and Carah 2019, p. 7). However, the advent of virtual personal assistants like Alexa available through smartphones, tablets and stand-alone devices like Amazon Echo indicate how family life is becoming increasingly digitally networked. Across Euro-Western society, the technological shift towards home automation or 'smart homes' whereby everyday domestic appliances are connected to the internet and controlled through voice interaction (Schiller and McMahon 2019), raises a potential challenge to the sanctity of the hetero-patriarchal family form. For example, stories abound of smart devices recording private family conversations and sharing them with phonebook contacts (Wolfson 2018).

In addition to potentially breaching the privacy of family life, the above extract illuminates how children and young people can develop a sense of intimate companionship with these smart technologies. For example, Safa also shared how the Apple virtual personal assistant Siri had told her 'a love story'. Consequently, the virtual personal assistants Alexa and Siri can be seen to be taking on familiar intimate roles of friendly confidant and parental story-teller. These examples differ from the new kinds of intimate companionship imagined in films like Spike Jonze's *Her* (2014) in which a man called Theodore falls in love and develops a sexual relationship with his operating system, Samantha. Nevertheless, they equally demonstrate a blurring of the dichotomy between the technical and the organic challenging the humanist assumption that sexuality is bound to the flesh and blood of human bodies (Austin 2017).

Notably, *Her* has been critiqued for reasserting heteronormative gender relations in its portrayal of Theodore's and Samantha's relationship despite its efforts to re-imagine sexual relationships beyond the human body (Henderson 2014; Austin 2017). However, the gendered politics of the film is reflective of the current state of affairs with artificial intelligence. Virtual personal assistants like Alexa and Siri are predominantly given feminine names, identities and voices, which has been linked to the socio-cultural association of femininity with subservience and subordination (Manton 2018). Prominent

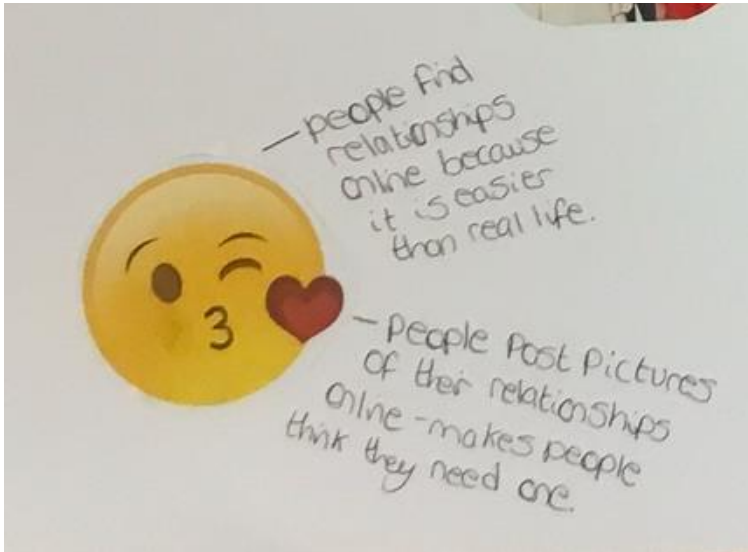
advertises for Alexa and Amazon Echo centre on their ability to aide fathers in their childcare responsibilities towards their daughters while mothers are notably absent (see Joint London 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2016). Rather than offering technological liberation from oppressive gendered divisions of labour through domestic automation, however, domesticity and childcare remains tethered to a docile and compliant feminine figure that operates as a housewife 2.0 (Schiller and McMahon 2019; Jarrett 2015). Furthermore, in one advert entitled 'Dad's Day' a working mother appears to have dutifully pre-programmed Amazon Echo to remind her partner what to do on his 'day' at home (Joint London 2019a).

The advent of domestic smart devices like Alexa and Amazon Echo are indicative of the ways in which (hetero)normative fantasies of 'the good life' are being reconfigured in relation to digital technologies. These devices simultaneously trouble the hetero-patriarchal framework of family life by extending kinship to more-than-human technological others, and reify gendered divisions of labour. They also demonstrate the increasing vulnerability of the intimate sphere to intrusion by large multinational technology companies in their efforts to improve product development and accrue private capital. Concerns about the contaminating influence of digital technologies on children and young people tend to focus on spaces shared with peers and how they loosen the grip that families and institutions have over children's sexual and gendered becomings (Etheridge 2016). However, Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen's story of engaging Alexa in relationship talk exemplifies how domestic smart devices can become entangled in their intimate lives in unpredictable ways.

In this section, I have explored how the pre-teen participants navigated the push and pull between sexual innocence and sexual knowingness in the digitally mediated peer cultures. The intimate knowledge facilitated by social media and gaming platforms can be considered troublesome and a threat to the linear developmental trajectory of achieving a healthy (hetero)sexuality however this is not straightforward.

## 4.4 COMPULSORY COUPLEDOM





FIGURE 7: EXCERPT FROM SARAH'S MAP



In this section I consider the way in which participants were invested in or positioned themselves in relation to digital romance. As exemplified by the above map excerpt from Sarah (age 15, Castell Q), many participants discussed how digital technologies were incorporated into their romantic relationships. A number of participants highlighted the role that social media's multimodal forms of expression such as emojis and pictures, played in navigating their own and others dating practices. While research has begun to document the impact of technologies on young people's processes of meeting, flirting, starting relationships, communicating and breaking-up (Pascoe 2010; McGeeney and Hanson 2017; Naezer and Ringrose 2018), analysis of the multimodality of digital romantic and sexual communication remains minimal. Therefore, I focus here on some of the visual modalities of digital sexualities that surfaced in my research.

With platforms such as Instagram or Snapchat becoming significant sites where young people's romantic relationships were instigated, participants highlighted the practice of signalling one's relationship status with emojis in the bio section of their profiles. An emoji is a small digital icon that textually mediated affects, which might otherwise be conveyed

through facial expressions, gestures or tone of voice (Paasonen 2015). For example, the ‘blowing a kiss’ emoji on Sarah’s map (see Figure 6) typically conveys feelings of love and affection. Emojis also include food, flags, animals and other symbols, which have varying connotations depending on sociocultural conventions (Highfield and Leaver 2016).

At Westland College participants observed how their peers would place a padlock () next to a holding hands emoji () and their partner’s initials to indicate that they were ‘taken’ (Irene, aged 18). These emojis operate as communicative gifts through which couples visibly signal their union and affirm their commitment to one another (Abidin 2016, p. 58). Other notable relationship status emojis included the world emoji () and the beating heart emoji (), which carry the networked affects of ‘life’ and liveliness. Correspondingly, such symbols work to buttress the couple form as constituting ‘a life’ (Berlant 1988, p. 282).

Although the above emojis emphasise exclusivity and privacy, sexual and romantic relationships were found to be profoundly social (Pascoe 2010). The young people’s talk revealed how these performances occupied a prime place in social media’s ‘regime of attention’, and the visibility, replicability and measurability of these intimate relationships on social media resulted in a different kind of scrutiny and affective witnessing amongst their peers (Lasen and Hjorth 2017, p. 126). For example, the circulation of relationship selfies was one of the ways the demand for ‘compulsory coupledness’ was ‘intensified’ (Renold and Ringrose 2017, p. 7). The participant’s talk demonstrated how encountering these images on social media was laden with affects that provoked a significant degree of suspicion, derision and jealousy along with desire, connection and intimacy.

On her map (see Figure 6), Sarah suggests that the circulation of other people’s relationship pictures online contributes to a sense that such relationships are a necessity. She elaborated in her individual interview how she sees people ‘posting pictures of their partner’ along with inscriptions such as ‘my world’. These words echo the expressive relations of the above emojis, indicating the hierarchical ordering of relationships whereby the romantic partner is viewed as all encompassing and having greater importance than

other relationships. Notably, Sarah (age 15) returned to the topic of relationship selfies several times throughout the fieldwork at Castell Q and troubled the perfect relationships portrayed on social media.

Kate:...Is there anything else on here that you think is important to talk about?

Sarah: Not really, except for like people pretending to have like perfect relationships online and then you see them in real life and they are always arguing, but they want to look good and make other people jealous

Kate: Do you think that happens a lot like people comparing themselves to people's relationships?

Sarah: I think so yeah

Kate: Do you ever do that?

Sarah: I never post anything, but sometimes I think like 'oh I wish our relationship was as close as this' so

Kate: But then you think oh actually this isn't really what the relationship is like?

Sarah: Yeah, they're just posting the best bits

Sarah expresses cautious distrust when people lay claim to 'utopian, optimism- sustaining versions of intimacy' on social media, suggesting that these performances are artificial (Berlant 1998, p. 282). While Sarah admits to occasionally coveting the closeness she perceives between couples online, this is viewed as ultimately unachievable and based on a selective sharing of the 'best bits'. In contrast to the distant telegenic celebrities of Instagram and YouTube discussed above, the closeness performed by peers on social media was accompanied by the contradiction of seeing the couple 'always arguing' in 'real

life'. Rather than distinct spheres, we can see here how disjointed scenes of online / offline coupledness thread through one another to shape Sarah's cynicism towards other people's relationships. What she sees is the failure of 'perfect relationships' online to fulfill their promise as they are haunted by the intractable fractures and incoherence that are part of the very phenomenon of intimacy (Berlant 1998).

Sarah's suggestion that people share these images because they 'want to look good and make other people jealous' connects to Ringrose's observation that young people often feel they have to 'look good' in order to plug into social media assemblages (Ringrose and Coleman 2013, p. 133). The jealousy referred to here is not individualized to one person's feelings about a particular couple but operates as a 'transpersonal force' engendered through relationship selfies in a network of 'other people' (Handyside and Ringrose 2017, p. 352). The meaning and experience of 'looking good' is contingent and shaped by the broader mass media flows of discourses, images and affects that I outlined in section 4.2, which continue to circulate idealized gendered bodies in line with heteronormative formations (Ringrose and Coleman 2013; see Chapter Five, section 5.2). The perceived desire to convey perfection and provoke jealousy assumes a competitive relationship culture whereby coupledness is the pinnacle of relational success. Correspondingly, gender and sexuality continue to be organized in linear, oppositional and hierarchical ways familiar to heteronormativity.

Sarah's critique of perfect relationships online was echoed by participants at Westland College, who expressed similarly disparaging attitudes to public displays of affection amongst their peers (McGlotten 2013). Scrutinising others' romantic practices on social media proved to be an energizing topic during group interviews and participants were equally wary of excesses of intimacy through 'overtly emotional confessions' of love on social media (Lambert 2016, p. 2568). For example, Irene (age 18, Westland College) detailed how she and her friends responded to another friend's relationship content on social media.

Irene: ...one of my best friends had a relationship [...] and they were always like quite lovey dovey and me and my other friends would comment like 'ergh!' 'vom!' (*laughs*) and like she wouldn't mind, she thought it was funny. We would wind them up, they didn't care. They were doing it on social media, but it was just funny like we'd always comment like 'gross!' and stuff. But erm, I think it's funny because if a girl posts a picture of her and her boyfriend everyone's like 'oh I don't care', but if a boy posts a photo of a girl like oh you know 'got into a relationship', there is so many likes on it, people are like 'aaw!'

In Irene's story we can see again the porous boundaries of the couple form whose public displays of affection facilitate multiple audience identifications. Irene and her friend's jokey exclamations of revulsion at the couple's 'lovey dovey' posts further highlight the ambivalent nature of intimacy, which can affect or be affected in multi-directional ways (Berlant 1998). The feelings conveyed in these posts are not bounded with the couple, but have a permeable influence on the surrounding friendship group. Rather than alienating Irene (Lambert 2016), her friend's performance of 'lovey dovey' romance becomes a scene of connection with and between Irene's friendship group through their gentle mockery of the couple.

The comment also refers to the gendered politics of digital romance. The indifference Irene perceives when a girl posts a relationship selfie with her boyfriend is contrasted with the value boys accrue through 'likes' and comments on similar posts. This shift in the regime of attention points to the changing gender dynamics of romantic practices. Perceived as something girls and women have more investment in, romance and its emotional attachments are typically coded as feminine. However, scholars have explored how romance is becoming a resource for young men to reflect a new heterosexual masculinity in response to social contexts where sensitive and emotionally articulate masculinities are increasingly expected (Allen 2007).

Rather than indicating more equitable gendered power relations, such expressions of romance can bolster dominant heterosexual practices that reinforce gendered hierarchies (Allen, 2007). Conveying one's success with girls and women are key resources in the

construction of heteronormative masculinities (Allen 2007; Harvey and Ringrose 2015). However, Allen (2007, p. 146) notes that successfully levying romantic masculinity to bolster one's status requires a balancing act with not appearing 'too romantic'. In practice engaging in romantic displays online was fraught with tension and anxiety. For example, Claire shared the following story in response to Irene's comment:

Claire: But I think it can come back to haunt you, cos like I know somebody who was in a relationship and he thought they were gonna like get married so he wrote like paragraphs every day to her, like little love poems, and they broke up like 3 weeks ago

Irene / Bernard: Oooh

Claire: And now that's online forever

Claire's story highlights the precarity of coupledness along with the vulnerabilities of enthusiastically investing in traditional discourses of love, commitment and imagined heteronormative futures of marriage. In contrast to Irene's friends who are described as doing 'love y dovey' romance together on social media, the outpouring of feeling engendered in writing 'paragraphs every day to her, like little love poems' appears unidirectional and is linked to the relationship ending. The warning that things can be 'online forever' is a persistent refrain of online safeguarding programmes, and was repeated by participants throughout my research (Chun and Friedland 2015). Here Claire highlights the particular challenge of disentangling from relationships online which can be resurrected and revived due to affordances such as tagging that link social media profiles together (see also Renold and Ringrose 2017).

Consequently, the failure of the relationship can 'come back to haunt you' granting them more permanency than the 'happily, ever after' fantasy of the heteronormative good life (Berlant 1998). In response many of the participants expressed ambivalence about the publicisation of their own and peer's intimate relationships online as the couple form is plagued by a latent instability. The visibility of break-ups online not only publicized the precarity of intimacy but was subjected to the moralising gaze of peers. For example, it was suggested that if your relationship status changes regularly 'you've got a problem with you' (Bernard's words) and that it is more acceptable to signal one's relationship



status if it is 'a long, long term relationship' or you are 'getting married' (Irene's words). Echoing Naezer and Ringrose (2018), we can see here the investment in specific types of serious, committed and 'mature' sexual practices tied to heteronormative imaginaries. In contrast the brevity of young couplings and their publicisation through social media was coded as naïve, 'excessive' and at times pathological (Abidin 2016).

#### **4.4.1 INTIMATE COUNTERPUBLICS**

The previous section detailed some of the ways digital technologies are incorporated into teen dating cultures. However, the possibility to engage in these intimate practices online were not evenly distributed. Despite social media facilitating greater visibility for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender relationships, scholars have found that participating in intimate rituals online can be more complicated for sexual and gender minority youth as 'every (semi) public statement about that relationship feels like a highly political and potentially dangerous revelation' (Naezer and Ringrose 2018, p. 423; De Ridder and Van Bauwel 2015). For example, it is notable that Sarah, who was in a relationship with fellow Castell Q member Lucy, stated that she did not post couple photos. She noted that she had an aversion to 'PDA' (public displays of affection) and that Lucy is 'really fussy' and 'doesn't like pictures' (Sarah's words). This raises questions about what relationships can 'look good' enough to be recognised and valued within young people's digitally networked peer cultures.

Echoing the wider literature on LGBTQ+ youth, participants at Castell Q indicated that social media afforded them vital spaces to foster a sense of closeness or belonging with like-minded others (Cho 2018; Quinlivan 2018; De Ridder and Van Bauwel 2015; Taylor, Falconer, and Snowden, 2014; Downing, 2013; Hillier and Harrison 2007). However, these connections occurred away from the gaze of peers through elaborations in the margins of social media (Berlant and Warner 1998). For example, in the following excerpt from Tess's individual interview, she explains how she met her girlfriend through an LGBTQ+ Facebook group set up by other young people.

Tess: Erm we were erm through Facebook added to the same, it was kind of like a group page sort of thing for LGBTQ+ individuals and we were both added to that and upon being added you had to do like a little intro page, like a selfie and like a little bit about yourself and stuff and she commented on mine, and I commented on hers so we started talking

The LGBTQ+ Facebook group pre-dated the Castell Q youth group through which I met Tess, and offered her a means of developing local socio-sexual connections within a small post-industrial town in south Wales. Such 'scenes of association and identity' have been described as counterpublics which provide subordinated groups a way to offset the 'participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies' (Fraser 1990, p. 68; Warner 2002). Counterpublics are not confined to a specific site but configured through the circulation of a diversity of cultural forms across a range of contexts (Renninger 2015). In her work on counterpublics, for example, Fraser (1990) points to a rich history of feminist cultural production in the U.S as an example of how they mobilised counter-discourses around gendered violence that offered new terms to describe social realities. While counterpublics are not new, there is a growing interest in the way they are restructured by networked technologies (Renninger 2015; Cho 2018).

For example, we can see that the LGBTQ+ group's use of selfies accompanied by an 'intro page' that tells people 'about yourself' replicates Facebook's broader platform design with its focus on authentic identities. Warfield (2016) describes such practices as 'affordance hacking' whereby users creatively and intentionally re-appropriate the interface affordances of a platform to meet their specific needs. While scholars have also observed that Facebook's default publicness and privileging of connections with extant offline networks can leave LGBTQ+ young people vulnerable to unwanted exposure (Cho 2018; Duguay 2016a), this carefully demarcated microcosm of Facebook appeared to provide Tess with a space where she felt able to display her body and sexuality and thus amplified the possibility of new romantic affiliations and connections.

The candid process of self-imaging and life-narration that Tess describes notably contrasts with the aforementioned practice of discretely indicating one's relationship status through emojis. Given warnings against young women displaying their bodies online, the practice Tess describes can be seen as a 'double violation' (Tolman 2002, p. 185). She not only

visibly expresses her desire for intimate connection online but pursues that intimate connection with other girls (Tolman 2002, p. 185). Notably, Tess' story was the only time a girl in this study described posting a (non-disappearing) selfie on social media. In Chapter Five, I elaborate how girls across all four fieldwork sites expressed reluctance to share images of themselves online due to the 'hate' that women and girls receive when they 'show off their bodies' (Tess's words). In the above account, however, we can see that the LGBTQ+ Facebook group disrupted some of the enduring heteronormativities surrounding what can appear as 'intimate' online.

#### **4.5 SLIDING INTO THE D-M'S: EGGPLANTS, DICK PICS AND CONTROL**

So far I have looked at exchanges in networks publics and counterpublics. In this section, however, I consider the practice of 'sliding into the D-M's' which was a term used to describe sending someone a private or direct message on social media. For the older participants, this practice operated as one of the 'hidden ways of being like, oh I kind of like you' (Irene's words) and instigating romantic or sexual contact. However, the participant's talk about the dynamics of direct messaging highlighted the continued orientation of relationships around phallogocentric power dynamics. For example, in the following extract from a group interview at Westland College Irene notes how emojis also have 'secret meanings' that play a role in sexual communication with a focus on the phallic referent:

Irene: I think it's it's very much implied like online, like you have all these emojis that have like secret meanings [...] like it's a good thing having emojis with like secret meanings, not secret but like underlying meanings because it's like a new way of communicating online without having to write like the word (*whispers*) 'penis', which might be a bit like intense for young people or something but I feel like at the same time it's kind of stopping people from talking about things like normally, you're chatting about things through emojis, it's just strange, it's like losing language but at the same time I think it's quite good cos it's like another form of communication

Irene's comments echo McGeeny's and Hanson's (2017, p. 6) observation that emojis offer 'ambiguous, coded content' that young people find useful for playful flirting. However, Irene also expresses some ambivalence about the role of emojis in young

people's sexual communication. Referring to the eggplant emoji, which was understood by the participant's as a stand-in symbol for the penis, Irene states that emojis offer a 'good' alternative means of communication. However, she also notes that it is 'strange' and might be hindering proper sexual communication. Although the young people at Westland College had asserted in earlier group interviews that 'nowadays sex isn't as big of a deal' (Claire, aged 17), Irene indicates here that talking about sex and genitals is still hidden, taboo and 'a bit like intense'. Stating the word 'penis' in a hushed, whispered tone demonstrates its continued status as a 'private part'.

As I outlined in Chapter Two (section 2.10), the penis is also mediated by publics as part of the wider organisation of sexual relations around the phallic referent (Berlant and Warner 1998, p. 547; Ringrose et al. 2019). Arguably, it is our familiarity with such phallic imagery that renders the eggplant emoji recognizable as a penis. The cartoon-like digital icon may have a comedic quality but it also materialises the penis in familiarly powerful ways as erect and large (see Lawrence and Ringrose 2018). The group discussion of emojis moved quite swiftly to focus on the eggplant emoji as penis along with 'the squirt' or water droplets emoji as ejaculate. Salacious affects stick to the eggplant, with the participant's asserting that 'you cannot use them for anything else' (Tom's words) and expressing shocked amusement at tales of parental 'misuse' of the emoji. Operating as a material agent of masculinity, the eggplant emoji reinforces the enduring heteronormativity and phallogocentrism surrounding what can appear as 'intimate' online (see also Wolfe 2018).

In contrast, there was no discussion of vulvas, vaginas, or other genitalia. Indeed, the lack of an equally popular vulva equivalent to the eggplant emoji has been the subject of much commentary in the media (Goldfine 2019; see also Ringrose et al. 2019; Mowat et al. 2018). While a number of emojis have been suggested to operate as a stand-in for the vulva (Alptraum 2020; Howard 2015), these do not command the same widespread consensus as the eggplant. The participant's discussions, therefore, indicate how sexual relations continue to be oriented around the phallic referent, with feminine sexuality othered, evading capture and representation (Derrida 1981; Irigaray 1985). This was further highlighted by the sometimes invasive force relation of 'sliding in the DM's' which

seemed to be the preserve of boys and men. For example, Irene described how she does not tend to slide into people's direct messages if she likes them but there were lots of 'fuck boys' who were always 'popping up' in private messages to 'ask them for like pictures and things like that'.

In addition to boys perpetually 'popping up' in their direct messages, the force of phallogocentric power relations was highlighted by the phenomenon of girls receiving unsolicited dick pics:

Claire: Well I think Snapchat now is just like guys will just send a dick pic and then like two question marks and a kiss and you'll be like, right so is that supposed to be like attractive to me? Is that supposed to be like am I supposed to be like ok, great! What do you want me to respond to that?

Bernard: It was when somebody in our year sent a picture on Snapchat and then it was a big like, 'I can't believe he sent that to me' and all of her friends were like, 'it's *him* what do you expect?'

In this extract from a group interview, Claire echoes wider research documenting how dick pics are seen to be 'a normal tedious part of life' for girls and young women (Ringrose et al. 2019, p. 271; Paasonen, Light and Jarrett 2019; Ricciardelli and Adorjan 2018; Lawrence and Ringrose 2018). Although Claire struggles to understand the motive for sending 'dick pics', Bernard points to it as a relatively unremarkable and unsurprising practice amongst boys. This feeds into the heteronormative and phallogocentric formation that boys and men possess a forceful uncontrollable sexuality (Bragg 2015; Herman 1978). Although in this group interview Claire expressed amused bewilderment at the reception of 'dick pics' on Snapchat, in her individual interview Claire highlighted how Snapchat could be 'quite scary'. Specifically, she recalled how she did not initially know how to turn off Snapchat's location-sharing feature meaning she had received menacing messages stating 'I'm outside your house, you live here' (see also Renold 2013). Both Claire and Irene at Westland College painted a picture of having to manage invasive messages on their personal devices.

Significantly, Claire not only highlighted how boys could invasively enter their direct messages but observed how boyfriends could block their girlfriends from communicating with friends:

Claire:... we had another friend who did the same thing like a year and half a go. Her boyfriend wasn't cool with us so she blocked us all [Kate: Oh right] re-added us like a month ago and I'm kind of like, well that's fine but I'm not gonna make a big deal out of it because you've just re-added me on social media like it doesn't mean we're friends again

Kate: Why wasn't her boyfriend ok with you?

Claire: I don't know I never met him so (*laughs*), he wouldn't ever meet us but he was just a bit controlling [Kate: Yeah] a bit of a strange one (*laughs*)

In this extract from Claire's individual interview, she indicates how social media and mobile communication can play a role in coercing and isolating romantic partners (McGeeney and Hanson 2017; Young et al. 2017; Lenhart, Smith and Anderson 2015). This recalls Berlant's (1998) observation that fantasies of the heteronormative good life can bribe us into living what should be unlivable lives of domination and control. For example, the hierarchical ordering of relationships through which the romantic partner is viewed as all-encompassing can underpin such controlling and abusive patterns of behaviour.

#### **4.6 "I WANT MEN TO STOP EXPECTING US TO FOLLOW MEN'S ORDERS": AFFECTIVE DIVESTMENT FROM THE HETERO-PATRIARCHAL GOOD LIFE**

While the previous section explored how digital relationships continue to be organized around heteronormative and phallogocentric power relations, here I want to consider how the pre-teen participant's questioned the normalization of hetero-patriarchal power. The girls I worked with in this study grew up in a post-feminist culture defined by the myth that gender equality had been achieved. In the complex world of late modern, globalised and de-industrialised societies, girls are positioned as the primary benefactors of changing socio-economic conditions with contemporary girlhood bearing the weight of adult anxieties and hopes about the future (Pomerantz and Raby 2017; Harris 2004; McRobbie

2008). Feminist scholars have noted how girls and women are regulated by certain 'feeling rules' that demand affective investment in hetero-patriarchal, post-feminist neo-liberal social systems through conveying happiness, positive mental attitude and resilience (Hochschild 1983; Gill 2017; Kanai 2019). In section 4.2, for example, I observed how the seemingly compulsory emotional positivity of social media content such as The Ingham Family promotes a post-feminist, can do, girl power sensibility (Gill 2017; Kanai 2019). Furthermore, in section 4.3 I noted how the video game *Yandere Simulator* plays on the pathologisation of female aggression and negative emotion as excessively deviant. Girls and young women who express these emotions are positioned as at-risk for defying the call to neo-liberal success and self-transformation (Ringrose 2011).

In this context, it was interesting to observe how the neo-liberal utopian, optimistic affective orientation of the Year 7's at Green City School sat in tension with their frustration at the multitude of practices that worked to regulate and shape the meaning of their gendered and sexual bodies (Ivinson and Murphy 2007; Ivinson and Murphy 2003; Lesko 1988). The topic of gender inequality was a thread that ran through fieldwork discussions with the Year 7's after a conversation during the design a digital avatar task, in which the participant's discussed the change they would like to see in the world. I provide an extended extract from this exchange below as I am keen to highlight how the topic arose in a playful, girl-ish way in which fantasies of being a unicorn and transforming into a mermaid accompanied talk of halting global warming and taking down Donald Trump.

Kate: So what else, what can your avatars do when they're a unicorn?

Mia: Mine farts rainbows

Kate: Farts rainbows?

Isabella: Delightful

Mia: That's what unicorns do!

Safa: Mine can make her imagination real so like if she like imagines something it just goes

Kate: Oh wow

Safa: or if she wants to stop global warming in her head she'll stop global warming

Kate: That's cool, do you wish you could change things?

Safa: Yes

(all talking at once)

Kate: What would you change?

Safa: I want to be a mermaid, if I couldn't be a human I'd be a mermaid

Mia: I would change that Donald Trump was born

Isabella: Ooooh me too, me too!

Safa: I would change Hitler!

Isabella: Ooh yeah!

Mia: We would stop lots of bad things from happening and then we would probably not be alive, because that wouldn't have happened so nothing would change

Kate: That's very philosophical

Mia: Hahahaha!

(all talking at once)

Safa: Miss, what do you think about sexism?



Kate: Sexism, I don't like it. What do you think about sexism?

Safa: Well we had a discussion about it yesterday

Following this exchange, and throughout several fieldwork sessions, the Year 7's shared with me their frustration at the range of everyday sexism they had observed at school and online. They asserted that 'it's evil!' to differentiate between 'boy's sports and girl's sports' noting how Green City School's physical education (P.E) policy required boy's to do parkour<sup>23</sup> and girl's to do gymnastics. They thought 'boys should be allowed to wear skirts' and questioned why girl's clothes always 'shows more of our body' (Safa's words). Safa also highlighted that the school's uniform policy unfairly impacted religious pupils like her who are not 'allowed to wear skirts'.

The Year 7 participants were also critical of the hetero-patriarchal narratives they encountered in wider popular culture including on social media and gaming platforms. They problematized the music videos they saw on YouTube where 'the boys were topless' and 'the girls were wearing hardly anything' (Mia's words). They engaged in an extended critique of the gendered politics of older Disney films such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989) noting how 'girls are always expected to sacrifice something'. Safa questioned why 'girls always have to meet the expectations of [...] boys, when they should meet our expectations!' and Isabella rejected the idea that women should just 'stay there, look pretty and look after the baby!' Chiara and Imogen also noted how they were treated differently in online video games because they were girls (see also Jensen and Castell 2013; Walkerdine 2007). For example, Chiara observed how her brother's friends 'kept promoting [her], demoting [her], promoting [her], demoting [her]' on the video game *Clash Royale*.

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<sup>23</sup> Parkour is a discipline developed from military training that involves running, swinging, vaulting, and climbing through a typically urban environment in the fastest and most efficient way possible (Parkour UK 2020).

The participants were raucous and energetic in expressing their feelings about the competing and contradictory demands of ‘this whole gender thing’ (Mia’s words). They punctuated their points by leaping on tables and swinging between chairs. When I concluded the first phase of research by dedicating a fieldwork session to the stop-start plates (see Chapter Three, section 3.3.1.1), the participant’s paraded around the classroom with their plates chanting ‘Change the world! Change the world! Change the world!’ They discussed how they could create change if they ‘just refuse to go to school!’ and ‘strike’ (Isabella’s words), ‘sit in the playground cross-legged and say I want shorts!’ (Mia’s words) or sign the already circulating petitions that were demanding changes to the school uniform and P.E policy. They also offered up cartoonish plots to assassinate the US President Donald Trump, a symbol of virulent racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia and far-right populism, by ‘drowning him in orange juice!’ (Isabella’s words) or ‘fake tan spray’ (Imogen’s words) (Strom and Martin 2017, p. 12).

Despite offering powerful and sustained critiques of the way hetero-patriarchal culture regulated their bodies and thrust them towards heteronormative future imaginaries, the Year 7 participants disassociated with socio-political movements such as feminism in a post-feminist fashion. When I asked if they had heard of feminism in a follow-up interview with Mia, Isabella and Safa, they answered in the affirmative but disagreed on whether feminists ‘take it too far’ (Mia’s words). While Safa was supportive of feminism and noted that her cousin was a feminist poet, Mia and Isabella did not like the word ‘feminism’ because ‘it doesn’t show that it’s wanting it to be equal, it shows them as only wanting rights for women’ and preferred the term ‘equal-ist’. These comments highlight a ‘quintessential dynamic of postfeminism, where feminism and gender equality has to be blended into a generalised equality remit deemed to be more equal’ (Retallack et al. 2016, p. 90; David 2014).

Despite sexism continuing to shape their lives, the Year 7 participant’s struggled to move out from under the weight of discourses that demanded a continued orientation towards can-do girl power trajectories. Rarely did the participants acknowledge the struggles or stresses that accompanied the everyday gendered inequalities they experienced, instead

there was a levity and playfulness to their critiques. In Chapter Six, I explore how the rebellious zest of the Year 7's was channelled into and took on a different form in the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* at Green City School.

#### **4.7.1.1 FEELING RULES**

In an effort to hold in play the mix of feelings the Year 7's at Green City School had expressed over the course of the first two phases of fieldwork, I experimented with facilitating an emoji crafting activity in the final two fieldwork sessions before the summer holidays. As I detailed in Chapter Three (section 3.3.1.3), this formed part of the final phase of fieldwork whereby participants were invited to creatively re-animate data and communicate experiences through objects, films, textiles and creative writing. Working with emojis was an experimental effort to harness and re-work a popular cultural form which has purchase in young people's digital sexual cultures. It has been argued that emojis work by softening and disguising the regulative dynamics of neo-liberal society through their 'adorable exuberance' which contains and constrains feeling in line with broader feeling rules (Stark and Crawford 2015, p. 1; McRobbie 2008, p. 54). By inviting participants to craft their own emojis I drew inspiration from Renold's and Ringrose's (2019, p. 8) jar-ring praxis and sought to offer the participants a 'dedicated outlet' to express 'difficult to articulate' feelings in imaginative ways. Participants were invited to craft an emoji that expressed how they feel about the role of social media in their relationships including 'everything that [they had] been talking about, about feminism, sexism' (Safa's words).

For example, Imogen's emoji (Figure 8) focused on messages of affirmation around LGBTQ+ rights indicating how this digital form can circulate 'affective solidarities' (Retallack et al. 2016). In contrast, Mia's, Isabella's and Safa's crafted emojis were more ambivalent. Mia produced an 'I feel fine' emoji (Figure 9) with a neutral non-smiling face which opened up to reveal a mix of more emotive smiling and frowning faces circulating around a brain. Similarly, Isabella's crafted emoji was filled with feeling words with one slip of paper uncertainly questioning 'um.....how should I feel?' (Figure 10). Meanwhile,

Safa played abstractly with the colour blue to reflect that she does ‘have mixed emotions sometimes’, is ‘always in a sea of thoughts’ but eventually ‘finds what [she] love[s]’ such as ‘the ocean’ and ‘sparkles’ (see Figure 11). While Imogen’s and Safa’s emojis maintained an optimistic orientation, the Year 7’s crafted emojis also appeared to give ‘form-force’ to the complex and ambivalent feelings that bubbled away under their exuberant demands for a more equitable society (Renold and Ringrose 2019, para 16).

FIGURE 8: IMOGEN'S EMOJI



FIGURE 9: MIA'S EMOJI

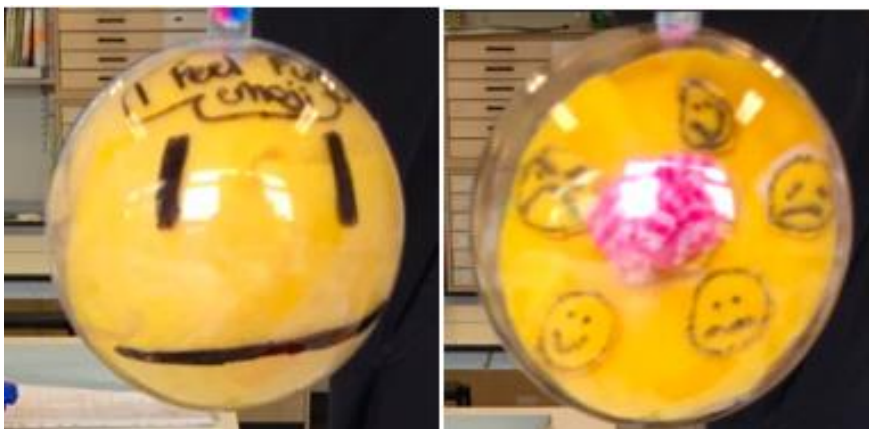


FIGURE 10: ISABELLA'S EMOJI



FIGURE 11: SAFA'S EMOJI



Despite the Year 7 participant's vibrant critiques of gender inequality, it was notable that their change-making energies were blocked by the resilience of gendered policies and practices at Green City School. For example, Imogen observed that her elder sister's year had succeeded in gaining access to parkour lessons for a short period only for the practice of gender segregating P.E to return the following year. Similarly, Safa detailed how boys in her older cousin's year had attended school in skirts en masse to protest the uniform policy but it remained the same. During the second emoji crafting session, another story emerged about a boy at Green City School who had been told to go to the isolation room that day for wearing a skirt. In yet another example of the resilience of the school's gendered policies, this protest had been met with punitive responses from some teachers.

Chiara summed up the group's incredulity at the hypocrisy of this when she asserted that Green City School were 'all about not being sexist and now [they are] being sexist so what the fuck is up with that?!'

After months of observing participants' playfully express their frustration with the school, the force of Chiara's words came as a surprise and functioned as an 'affective hotspot' that lingered uneasily after the session (Maclure 2013). I wondered if any teachers had overheard and feared that I would get into trouble for allowing the participants to swear. Chiara's use of the word 'fuck' was an 'embodied, transgressive response' that at once overturned 'repressive expectations of femininity' and childhood innocence as well as challenged the regulatory power of the school (Wood 2019, pp. 610 – 614). The strength of response I felt at hearing Chiara swear brought into sharp relief the regulatory feeling rules that girls are subject to which forbid such overt expressions of anger and frustration. It prompted me to question whether the emoji crafting activity still operated to soften and disguise the participant's feelings of outrage at the enduring restrictions placed upon their bodies or whether it had helped foster a space where normative discourses around girl's feelings were troubled and re-worked.

Overall, the emoji crafting activity was a tentative attempt to create the space for participants to imaginatively express their feelings in a tangible way that might be shared with others. As I noted in Chapter Three, however, this opportunity did not come to fruition as I was unable to secure the engagement of the teachers at Green City School due to pressures on staff time. This early experiment with employing arts-based methods to communicate the complexity of young people's feelings about and experiences of their digitally networked peer cultures was nevertheless responded to with enthusiasm by the participants. It fostered an alternative way of exploring and working with the feelings that surround digital relationships as well as challenged the 'dispassionate rationality' implicit in online safeguarding discourses (Niccolini 2016a, p. 3). In Chapter Six, I explore how the half-day arts-based *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* provided a further opportunity for participants to explore difficult emotions that are often privatized and pathologised.

#### 4.7 'I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S NORMAL ANYMORE': FRAYING FANTASIES OF THE GOOD LIFE

So far in this chapter, I have explored how social media, smart devices and gaming platforms represent, circulate and sell certain 'fantasies of the good life' as well as the way in which young people's relationships are orientated towards heteronormative future imaginaries. I have also considered how these imagined futures are tied to a neo-liberal sensibility that foregrounds enterprising and entrepreneurial approaches to intimacy. However, neo-liberalism has also sabotaged many of modernity's secure institutions of intimacy and reciprocity that made the promises of 'upward mobility, job security, political and social equality and lively, durable intimacy' achievable (Berlant 2011, p. 3). The hetero-patriarchal 'good life' remains a powerful structuring force while bearing less and less relation to how people can and do live (Mercer et al. 2013). This was highlighted during the following interview with Karma and Droshux at Green City School:

Karma: ...Do you think the government is watching you through this? (*points to the camera on my laptop*)

Kate: Sometimes I worry, yeah

*(Karma laughs)*

Kate: Do you think they are?

Karma: No I don't think it's true, why would they spy on you? Out of all the people, why you? Why do you matter? Well not saying that you don't matter

Kate: Ha thanks

Droshux: What's so special

Karma: What would the government have on you?

Droshux: Who is spying on you?

Karma: Your webcam

Kate: Sometimes they can access these things

Karma: Yeah but it's like, why, why would you [...] there's nothing you've committed, you don't have a criminal record I don't think

Kate: No

Karma: You're just a university student, I mean

Kate: Yeah

Karma: Nothing is abnormal about your life, not saying it is normal. No one's life is normal

Droshux: I mean how do you know, you don't know much

Karma: Define normal

Droshux: Exactly

Karma: Is normal buying a house? Having lovely kids? Getting a nice wife?

Kate: What do you think?

Karma: I don't know. I don't know what's normal anymore

In this discussion, Karma points to an enduring orientation towards the promises of the hetero-patriarchal 'good life' of 'buying a house', 'having lovely kids' and 'getting a nice wife' at the same time as placing question marks over them as indicators of normality. These life plots are further que(e)ried by the openness of his questions and my



uncertainty at the time as to whether they were addressed to me. In my lifetime lesbian women like myself have been granted the 'right' to accrue signifiers of the good life such as 'a nice wife', 'lovely kids' and 'a house'. However, marriage, child-rearing and home-ownership are proving increasingly unattainable and/or undesirable 'life choices' in the context of precarious employment and spiralling house costs (Mercer et al. 2013).<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Karma's questions are premised on an awareness of the potential vulnerability of the family sphere to intrusion by our technological devices. Consequently, Karma's questions bring into sharp relief the fading coordinates of the good life fantasy in favour of a mounting sense of contingency, unpredictability and technological surveillance.

#### **4.8 CONCLUSIONS**

In this chapter, I have considered the extent to which digital technologies shape young people's affective attachment to 'utopian, optimism-sustaining versions of intimacy' and the enduring heteronormativities surrounding what can appear as 'intimate' online. This chapter has mapped the complex configuration of digital relations through which sexual and gender subjectivities emerge, as well as attended to the dynamics of engagement between and through the relations that comprised the participants' digital sexuality assemblages. I began by outlining how digital platforms represent, circulate and sell the couple and the hetero-familial form as the pinnacle of relational success and questioned the extent to which these traditional ideas of intimacy have been extended to minoritized sexualities. Despite the increasing visibility of gay social media celebrities, I noted that these figures do not necessarily threaten and may, in fact, reify the organisation of society around the heteronormative institutions of monogamy, domesticity and marriage. I demonstrated how this hierarchical ordering of relationships endured in young people's digital networks through the intensified demand for compulsory coupledness and signalling

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<sup>24</sup> As Skeggs pointed out in an interview with Berlant, this fantasy has always been unstable for working-class people and it is the middle-classes who are most affected by the destabilisation of social mobility and aspiration (Taylor 2012).

that the romantic partner as all-encompassing. The chapter also explored the harmful and violent consequences of heteronormative intimacy which normalises hetero-patriarchal forces of domination and control.

In addition, this chapter mapped how digital technologies further publicise the inherent vulnerability and ephemerality of intimacy and considered the moralisation of public display online. Despite hetero-coupledness occupying a prime place in social media's regime of attention, the participants expressed disparaging attitudes towards public displays of affection. These comments highlighted how in digitally networked peer cultures the failure of relationships can be granted more permanency than the 'happily, ever after' fantasy of the heteronormative good life. Focusing on the pre-teen participants, I also detailed how the knowledge facilitated by digital technologies is considered troublesome and a threat to the linear developmental trajectory of achieving a healthy (hetero)sexuality. The participant's talk demonstrated the difficulty of navigating the push and pull between sexual innocence and sexual knowingness in digitally networked peer cultures.

This chapter also considered how orientations towards 'utopian, optimism-sustaining versions of intimacy' are sustained through the seemingly compulsory emotional positivity of social media as well as the extent to which young people may be divesting their energies from heteronormative future imaginaries. I outlined how participants at Castell Q found ways to disrupt some of the enduring heteronormativities surrounding what can appear as intimate online through LGBTQ+ counterpublics on Facebook. By displaying her body in an LGBTQ+ Facebook group and fostering a romantic relationship with another girl, Tess momentarily ruptures the enduring rules and regulation surrounding young women and public bodily display. In the next chapter, I move on to consider young people's digitally networked body cultures in more detail.

## **CHAPTER FIVE - YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITALLY NETWORKED BODY CULTURES**

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

In Chapter Four, I mapped how heteronormative fantasies of 'the good life' remain a powerful structuring force in young people's digital sexual cultures and considered some of the ways 'the good life' is being reconfigured by the increasing dispersal of digital technologies into our everyday lives. In this chapter, I continue exploring how digital technologies are shaping young people's digital sexual cultures by assembling data that points to the changing possibilities of what a body can be, do and become. Not only does the body operate as a key site through which gender and sexuality are regulated, negotiated and expressed (Renold 2013) but contemporary media culture positions it as the centre of activity for materialising a better future (Coleman 2011). Due in part to the use of digital technologies to modify and edit the body, young people's bodies are increasingly more-than-human in their 'biological and material manifestations of becoming someone newer and better' (Coffey and Ringrose 2016, p. 181; Elias and Gill 2018).

Bodies featured heavily in the participant's talk and creative expressions about social media, smart devices and gaming platforms stirring up a mixture of anxiety, shame, fear, fascination, desire and pleasure. This chapter approaches bodies not as ontological units with inherent boundaries and fixed properties but as composed through shifting sets of relations that are constantly moving and changing rather than fixed and static. As with Chapter Four, I again felt an ethical responsibility to examine empirical data from many of the participants who participated in this study as opposed to a small number of case studies. By drawing on a range of participant contributions, this chapter examines young people's digitally networked bodies as affective assemblages that are the site of

'unexpected and unpredictable linkages' which blur the boundaries between the human/more-than-human, organic/simulated, masculine/feminine, natural/unnatural (Grosz 1994, p. 181). By expanding my analysis beyond an anthropocentric view of the body, I consider a variety of ways that digitally networked body cultures reproduce heteronormative ideals of gendered embodiment as well as afford possibilities to reconfigure the meaning of their bodies.

## **PART ONE: WHAT CAN A BODY BE?**

### **5.2 'INSTAGRAM IS SOMETHING EVERY PARENT WORRIES ABOUT': POST-FEMINIST VISUAL CULTURES ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

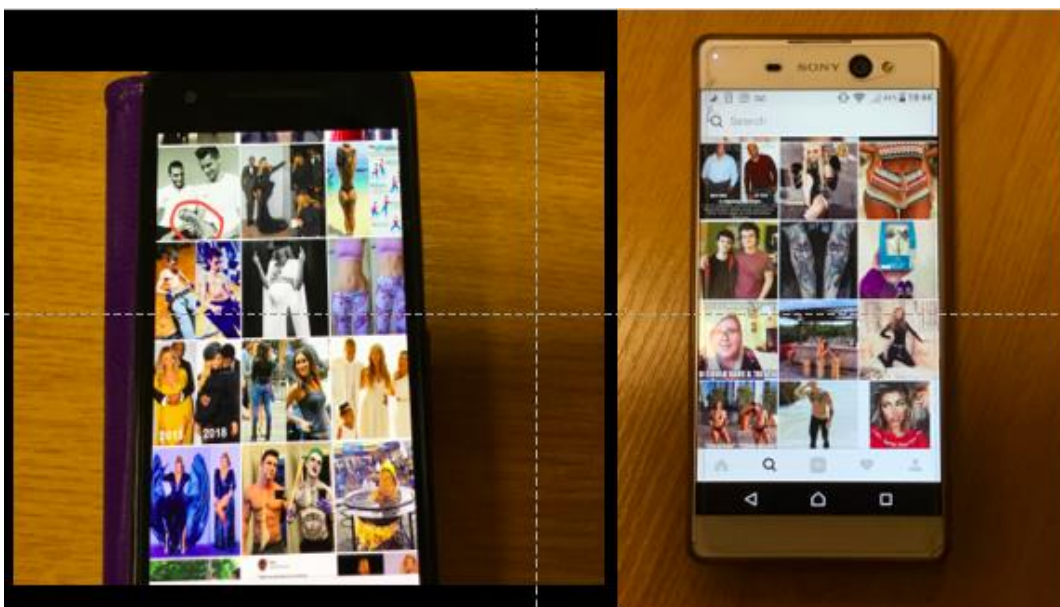
Online safety agendas frequently pathologise social media as contributing to low self-esteem and dissatisfaction about appearance amongst young people with image-focused apps being a particular source of concern (Rodgers 2016). For example, in 2017 Instagram was ranked as the 'worst for young mental health' especially with regards to 'body image' in The Royal Society for Public Health survey and, as the above quote indicates, participants in this study noted that Instagram was a particular source of anxiety for their parents. As social media and mobile communication becomes increasingly saturated with visual forms of expression, fears and anxieties about their influence on young people have become heightened. However, these concerns reiterate a much-critiqued media effects logic whereby young people are positioned as passive consumers of media content that is seen to penetrate their minds in damaging ways (Buckingham, Bragg and Kehily 2014).

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 (Coleman 2011). Consequently, media images are neither inherently good nor bad and the affects that are produced in-relation with young people are complicated and

potentially unpredictable (Ringrose and Coleman 2013). Attention to media affects does not necessarily neglect the way images promote specific kinds of embodiment but it does recognise that images 'move us' in inchoate ways that are not pre-determined or easily articulated (Featherstone 2010, p. 195).

In Chapter Four, I detailed how Instagram was popular amongst many of the participants who described its circulation of aestheticized, beautified and idealised lifestyle content as inspirational and aspirational. Much of the content they discussed was shown to reinforce a heteronormative entrepreneurial relationship culture which appeared to be both a scene of fascination and derision amongst the participants. Alongside their ambivalent relationship with the platforms commercialised relationship content, many participants acknowledged the contradictory messages of social media's post-feminist visual culture. This is a culture in which stereotyped feminine 'sexiness' and the increased objectification of men are seen as a normal and banal part of social media connectivities (Ringrose and Coleman 2013; Gill, Henwood and McLean 2005) which was illustrated by Instagram screenshots captured by Lucy (right-hand screenshot, Figure 12) and Alex (left-hand screenshot, Figure 12) at Castell Q.

*FIGURE 12: LUCY'S AND ALEX'S INSTAGRAM 'EXPLORE' PAGES*



The above set of screenshots were drawn from Lucy's and Alex's Instagram 'Explore' page which presents a collection of images algorithmically selected based on the accounts a user follows or the posts they like. These pages appeared to aggregate and bifurcate bodies along familiar gender normative lines, featuring a selection of images focusing on the breasts, bums, waists and legs of women and muscular torsos of men. The commonality of these images was acknowledged by the participants as 'just like casual' but also problematised 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

Echoing Coleman's (2009) work on young people's body cultures, the participants note the impossibility of looking like the people on Instagram. Across the interviews, they

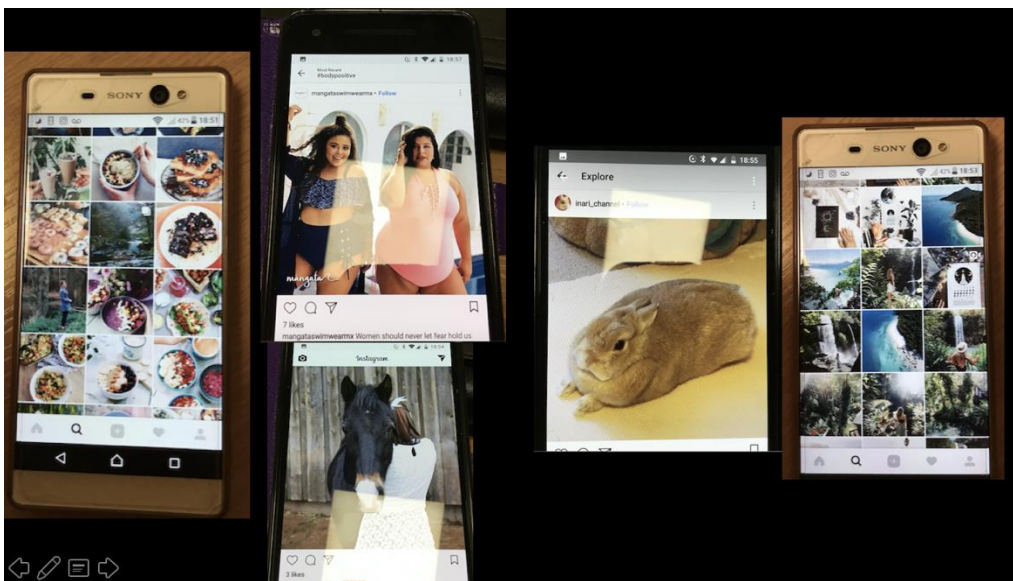
demonstrated an awareness of the wider technologies of airbrush filters, financial sponsorship, professional photography, diets, drugs, work out routines and algorithmic cultures that were at play in producing popular Instagram images. The participants critiqued Instagram for suggesting this content and making it look like 'everyday normal stuff'. In section 5.7, I explore how these technologies are becoming increasingly available to young people through the proliferation of beauty applications on smartphones and discuss the challenges of engaging with these technologies. Interestingly, it was not only the impossibility of looking like these images they criticised but also the impossibility of escaping the platforms anthropocentric gaze. Lucy highlights that her account is a 'rabbit Instagram' and all she follows is 'rabbits, horses'.

Despite Lucy's desire to pet-work, that is to connect with other animals through her pets, Instagram's explore feature plugged her back into an anthropocentric gallery of images that centre the human body. These comments point to the vitality of the digital data assemblages of which Lucy and her pets are a part which appears to have a life of their own beyond their control. Despite Instagram's assertion that the explore section offers personally tailored content, the algorithm is generated by a whole host of other humans, living species, big data and artificial intelligence that appears to exceed Lucy's actions on her account (Lupton 2016). I explore Lucy's pet-working practices in more detail in section 5.5.

Rather than being passive consumers of Instagram, the above exchange illustrates the participant's critical engagement with its content. Yet, the everyday intrusion and inescapability of these images materialised into a horrible 'pressure to change how you look' (Tess, aged 18). Participants at Castell Q indicated that 'people are forced into thinking you need to be skinny to be liked' (Sarah, aged 15) 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). Their comments emphasise 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 visual social media evoked a pervasive feeling of bodily malaise, I drew inspiration from Austin's (2017) work and invited the participants to screenshot content that made them feel good in their bodies. As illustrated in Figure 12, this second set of screenshots produced an entirely different gallery of images in which the human body was largely decentred.

FIGURE 13: CASTELL Q SCREENSHOTS



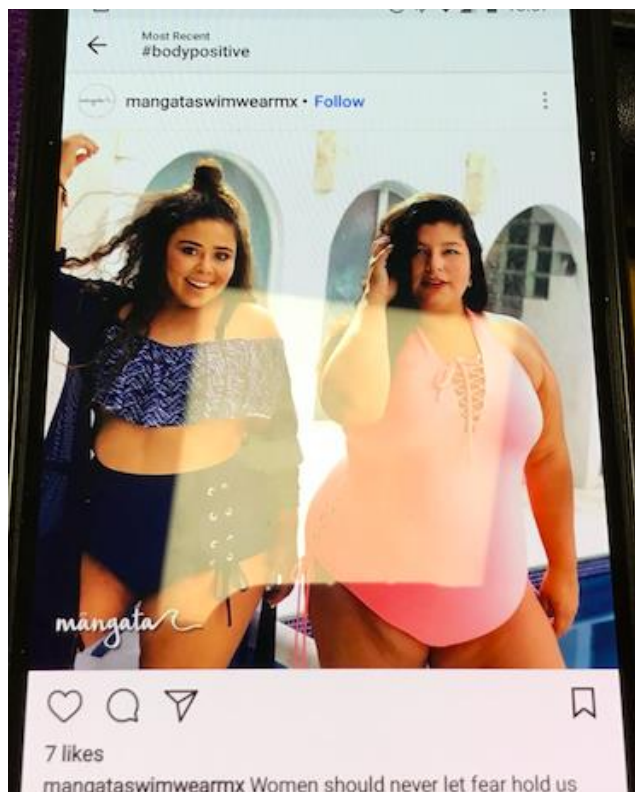
The screenshots in Figure 13 provide an insight into the appeal of Instagram for the participants whose selected images included food, travel, swimwear adverts featuring 'bigger girls' and animals. Despite the algorithmic centring of the human body on the explore pages, the participant selected content indicates that human bodies on Instagram are emergent in a relational field in which more-than-human visual content is equally at play. They also point to the body positivity movement as a potential challenge to the restrictive body politics of social media. To explore these connections further, in the following three sections I consider the significance of body positivity, food and animal content on young people's digitally networked body cultures and whether this content



offers opportunities to temporarily displace social media's disciplinary post-feminist gaze (Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz 2016).

### 5.3 BODY POSITIVITY: RUPTURING OR REINFORCING BODY IDEALS?

FIGURE 14: BODY POSITIVITY SCREENSHOT



In recent years, 'body positivity' has achieved a heightened presence on platforms such as Instagram and Tumblr as a means of speaking back to unrealistic bodily ideals and promoting acceptance of all body shapes and sizes (Cwynar-Horta 2016; Sastre 2014). On social media, body positivity is comprised largely of women who post messages of confidence and self-love, challenging demands to adhere to norms regarding skin type, complexion, appearance, body size and shape. The body positivity movement has been the subject of significant critique amongst feminist scholars who point to its still limited diversity and compliance with a neo-liberal post-feminist media culture (Cwynar-Horta 2016; Gill and Elias 2014; Sastre 2014; Lynch 2011). For example, the swimwear advert

shown in Figure 14 is indicative of the way a search for the hashtag 'body-positive' brought up consumer-capitalism-friendly content for Lucy that asserts that women should 'never let fear hold [them]'. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006, p. 257) argue that the focus on individual empowerment justifies 'the renewed objectification of women's bodies' at the expense of seriously engaging with how gendered, sexual, raced, aged, classed and able-bodied norms shape embodied experiences.

The topic of body positivity on social media was commented upon by a number of participants during the mapping activity and digital tours, however, I revisited the topic more explicitly through the statement elicitation interviews. In the following extract from Westland College's statement elicitation interview, Bernard and Claire discuss the limitations of body positivity:

Bernard: (reading quote) Social media has the potential to combat unrealistic appearance ideals and stereotypes.

Claire: I think it does and it doesn't

Bernard: Like it has the ability to be like this is me, this is who you are but you're always searching for that person who has the characteristics you want

Claire: Yeah I mean I think like, like social media for me, like whenever I've been, like I don't have an Instagram account but whenever I've been on people's Instagram accounts I always go and like search the sort of like lifestyle I'd like to have but really don't and I think it does encourage people to sort of be like well why isn't my life like that, why can't I be like that and I think also it causes so many body issues like especially, I think in guys and girls now cos guys it's the pressure to be like this 6 foot, muscly tanned

Bernard: Cos I think it's gone like exact the opposite, cos like you know there was always the thing, it was always girls have the pressure but since there's been the thing like there's so many different girls body shapes and the empowering women

Claire: Yeah, there are so many

Bernard: And now it's just gone to like if you don't have a six-pack you can't be classed as like Instagram famous, if you don't go to the gym you can't have Instagram followers

Here Bernard and Claire observe how social media simultaneously celebrates 'this is me' as well as the possibility to transform into something better through its circulation of inspirational and aspirational lifestyle content. While Claire acknowledges that this can cause 'many body issues' for 'guys and girls', Bernard and Claire go on to suggest that it is men in particular who are experiencing increased 'pressure' to be '6 foot' 'muscle' and 'tanned' in contrast with the 'many different girls body shapes' that are circulating online and 'empowering women'. Their argument reiterates the way girls and women are positioned as the primary benefactors of postfeminist neo-liberal conditions and introduces a politics of recuperative masculinity where men are seen as the victims of a new gender order (Garcia-Favaro and Gill 2016; Lingard 2003).

While the objectification of men's bodies according to a limited set of characteristics such as a six-pack, tall, and tanned, is a notable feature of contemporary visual culture (Hakim 2019; Gill, Henwood and McLean 2005), this has not abated the intense surveillance of women's bodies according to an ever-changing ideal. The prominence of 'different girls body shapes' on social media still positions the body as the locus of women's value (Camacho-Miñano, MacIsaac and Rich 2019, p. 653). Furthermore, the primacy of visual content online can reinforce the constant judgment of girls and women's appearance (Lazar 2011). This burden was observed by Claire later in the interview when she described how her body was constantly commented upon:

Claire: Well, I've personally had it where I've like been called fat and then the next day been called too skinny and then the other week I got called fat again and then somebody was like oh you don't eat, you're starving yourself and it's just like this mish mash of like, like sort of I don't know, people just can't seem to make up their mind and I'm like I don't really care what size you think I should be, I'm very happy with the way I am, I'm not going to aspire to some unrealistic picture

Kate: Is that at school or people comment on your pictures?

Claire: I don't post pictures online cos I'm scared of the like comments, so I won't ever post anything picture-wise of me online [...] it will just be like general, like outside of school and it doesn't really happen like inside school it's more outside of school

Claire's contribution highlights the contradictory and impossible demands placed on girl's bodies as she faces constant critiques over being 'too fat' *and* 'too skinny'. Despite asserting that she is 'very happy' with the way she is, it is notable that Claire does not post pictures of herself online due to fear over the comments she might receive. This was a pattern across all four fieldwork sites in which reticence about posting selfies and talk of body-shaming comments online emerged much more frequently in relation to the girls than it did in relation to the boys. Despite the prevalence of 'many different girls body shapes' on social media, bodily display was still experienced as especially risky for the girls.

For example, in the previous section, I noted how Lucy from Castell Q observed the frequency of hate towards 'bigger girls' who display their bodies online. Furthermore, in Claire's individual interview she detailed how a close friend had struggled with an eating disorder after receiving comments on Instagram calling her 'ugly', 'fat', 'disgusting' and telling her to 'lose some weight'. Similarly, Aislinn (age 12) from Ysgol Mellt observed that the problem with 'putting yourself out to the world' is people can say 'you look fat' and other 'mean things'. A recurring refrain in these comments was the 'injurious' force of being called 'fat' online which worked to reassert the idealisation of slim feminine embodiment (Ringrose 2011).

The difficulties the participants outlined resonate with Iris Marion Young's (2005, p. 44) argument that women and girls live in discontinuation with their bodies because to live their bodies in 'free, active, open extension' is to 'invite objectification' that fix them in place (see also Bordo 1993; Orbach 1978). The participant's embodied response to the pervasiveness of body-shaming abuse was to withdraw from social media and, in the case of Claire's friend, channel it into an internalised aggression through disordered eating and body hatred (McRobbie 2008). This demonstrates the very real material effects that these digital expressions have on the bodies, desires and everyday practices of young women

(Gill 2017; Camacho-Miñano, MacIsaac and Rich 2019). Although Claire's friend had deleted her Instagram account, Claire observes that 'those comments still [...] haunt her' indicating how the affective intensity of abusive online comments endure, assembling with the present and the future to shape bodily capacities past the point of viewing (Coleman 2008).

Contrary to Bernard's and Claire's suggestion that the tables have turned in terms of gendered bodily ideals, the above stories indicate how the objectifying disciplinary gaze of a sexist media culture is intensified online. This is supported by wider research documenting the disproportionate scrutiny, hostility and abuse that women, girls and other feminised people are subject to online which is inflected by raced and classed differences (Amnesty International 2019; Jane 2016; 2014; 2012; Shaw 2014; Rightler-Mcdaniels and Hendrickson 2014). Correspondingly, some feminist scholars argue that the notions of empowerment and choice embedded in body positivity have become key modalities of constraint as they reify the demand for women and girls to cultivate a confident, resilient and positive disposition towards their bodies in the face of intensified hostility (Gill 2017; Retallack et al. 2016).

### **5.3.1 'ALWAYS BELIEVE IN YOURSELF': THE MEDIATED FEELING RULES OF BODY POSITIVITY**

The focus on confidence, shamelessness and resilience in body positivity content ties into the regulatory 'feeling rules' surrounding girlhood that I began to outline in Chapter Four (section 4.6). Within this context, it is not only the body that needs to be transformed but one's psychological attitude to ensure one cultivates 'the "right" kinds of dispositions for thriving in a postfeminist neoliberal society' (Gill 2017, p. 606). This was evident in a group interview at Green City School in which Safa detailed her enjoyment of the Merrell Twins, a celebrity YouTube duo who promote messages of confidence and self-love:

Safa: [...] I had these like YouTubers they are called the Merrell Twins and I watch them and they're the sort of YouTubers who are like always believe in yourself, it doesn't matter like what you look like and stuff like that and they made a mirror, called mirror plus plus and it was like a mirror and it had YouTube tutorials and make-up tutorials and a little err, it had your google reminders in there and it had little messages come up like every day or hour or

something and it was like, always believe in yourself, do the best you can today and stuff like that

In this extract, Safa describes a Merrell Twins series called 'Project Upgrade' that encourages girls to be interested in science by working with a team of female engineers and computer coders to create a smart mirror (King 2018). Similar to virtual voice assistants, smart mirrors are indicative of the way that everyday domestic appliances are becoming increasingly internet-enabled. Although technological gadgets are typically coded as masculine (Daniels 2009), Coleman (2011) argues that girls and young women are positioned as the ideal consumers of smart mirrors as they are seen to embody the capacities for experimentation and transformation. Furthermore, the key features of the Merrell Twins smart mirror encapsulate the post-feminist demand to transform the body through make-up tutorials and the mind through affirmations such as 'always believe in yourself' and 'do the best you can today'. These technologies are part of an increasingly digitally networked 'postfeminist sisterhood' that expands the reach of 'intimate networks of comparison, feedback and motivation [that] are necessary in controlling body image' (Winch 2013, p. 2).

While the aim to 'empower young girls' through showcasing women in science and devising a mirror that encourages girls to 'go confidently into the world' may seem admirable (Merrell Twins 2018), the series' focus on developing an empowered individualistic self overlooks the deeply ingrained barriers to women entering and staying in STEM fields (see Burke and Mattis 2007). Rather than upgrading the mirror, the Merrell Twins' series functions in a paradigm of self-transformation that incites girls to upgrade to a confident selfhood at the expense of feminist socio-political critiques of enduring gender inequalities (Kanai and Gill 2019; Favaro 2017; Gill and Orgad 2015). It is part of a culture of 'fashion feminism' whereby girls and women 'endeavour to achieve empowerment by exerting their consumer agency and using their bodies as political tools within the parameters of a capitalist economy' (Genz 2006, p. 333).

Scholars of post-feminist media offer detailed analyses of how these cultural representations underpin the affective and psychic life of neo-liberal capitalism (Gill 2017;

McRobbie 2008). Despite the ubiquity of ‘love your body’ affirmations online, body-positive content is a diverse genre which exemplifies the competing and contested articulations of feminism in contemporary culture (Gill and Elias 2014). For example, Marissa Wilcox’s work on queer and feminist Instagram artists demonstrates that body-positive content can initiate more nuanced conversations around the body and channel anger at the media’s reduction of women’s bodies to ‘a piece of meat’ for the ‘male gaze’ (Hickey-Moody and Wilcox 2019, p. 14). In Chapter Six, I explore how Safa and Imogen offered a powerful critique of social media’s visual culture in discordance with the regulatory post-feminist and neo-liberal logic of self-belief, positivity and confidence espoused online (Gill and Kanai 2019).

#### **5.4 THE BODY POLITICS OF MEDIATISED MASCULINITY AND FOODSCAPES**

*FIGURE 15: ALEX'S SCREENSHOT*



While the previous section observed the enduring regulation of girls and young women's bodies on social media, I turn now to consider the body politics of mediatised masculinity and foodscapes. Food was identified by Alex at Castell Q as an example of Instagram content that made him feel good in his body. Stylised food images and videos like those displayed in Figure 15 are a prominent feature of platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube. Often dubbed 'food porn', scholars have noted the visceral 'aesthetic of excess' conveyed in food production and consumption content which entangles with body politics and gendered embodiment in interesting ways (Lupton and Feldman 2020; Dejmanee 2016).

Dejmanee (2016, p. 430) argues that food content operates as an important site of 'feminised 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 fetishises 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 sexualised analogies to women's bodies.

Both Dejmanee and Lupton reference ecofeminist Carol J. 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 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

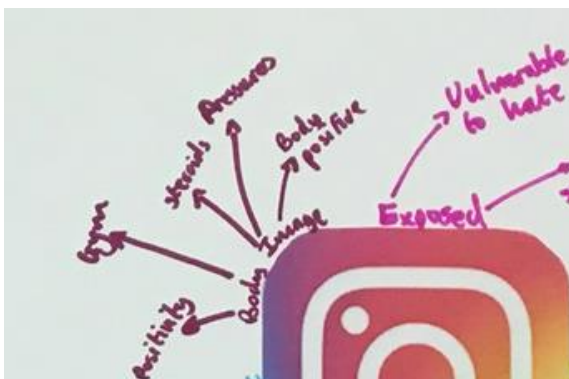


variability, historical specificity and multiplicity of masculinities and femininities and the role that food plays in these shifting formations.

In Chapter Two, I outlined social and cultural shifts in masculinity and gendered embodiment whereby men's bodies are also becoming 'meat' to be consumed online. As I quoted in section 5.3, Bernard and Claire observed the increasing objectification of men according to ideals of being six-foot, muscular and tanned stating that 'if you don't go to the gym you can't have Instagram followers' (Bernard's words). These cultural shifts invite a more nuanced analysis of the gendered politics of masculine embodiment that take into account the variable ways that social media platforms, muscles, meat and other foods plug into masculinising and feminising assemblages.

The pressure to adhere to idealised norms of strong muscularity on social media was noted amongst the older boys in my study. For example, Alex who was the only boy in attendance at Castell Q associated Instagram with 'body image', 'pressures', 'steroids' and 'gym' on his map (see Figure 16). These annotations highlight the kinds of aesthetically-motivated measures that have become normative in efforts to achieve impossible ideals of masculine bodily perfection (Coffey and Ringrose 2016). However, Alex was a white Welsh queer-identified 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.

FIGURE 16: EXCERPT FROM ALEX'S MAP



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 and Ringrose 2016). These localities have struggled to transform economically, socially and culturally following rapid deindustrialisation which led to a drastic increase in unemployment and economic inactivity (Mannay 2016c; Walkerdine and Jiminez 2012). These conditions have had a significant impact on how masculinity is mediated. For example, Mike 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 marginalises other ways of doing masculinity in the area. At the same time, scholars are observing how some celebrity Welsh rugby union players conform to and challenge heteronormative rugby playing masculinities (Harris and Clayton 2007).

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 stigmatised as feminising through their association with low muscle mass, weakness and dietary restraint (Greenebaum and 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 masculinising 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

organisation 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 has rendered a staple vegetable in plant-based diets into a material agent of phallogocentric masculinity in digital communication (see Chapter Four, section 4.5).

In contrast to the sexual dominance promoted in the PETA advert, however, Alex's veganism appeared primarily 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 15). 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 2011a, 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 materialised into domestic pursuits offline significantly ruptures dominant discourses around the gendered politics of food.

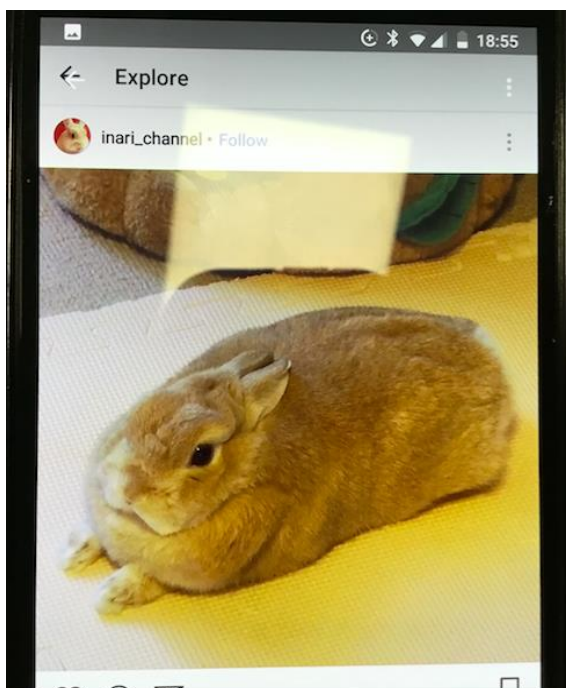
## **5.5 'I HAVE MORE PICTURES OF CATS ON MY PHONE THAN PEOPLE': PET INFLUENCERS AND PET-WORKING ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

In this section, I consider the social media phenomenon of pet influencers and pet-working. As the titular quote from Basar (Green City School) indicates, several participants

observed that animals were a prominent feature of their digital practices. Social media influencers are micro-celebrities (Senft 2013) 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 (Ungerleider 2016).

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 17). 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 UK 2020).

*FIGURE 17: LUCY'S RABBIT INSTAGRAM SCREENSHOT*



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). In *When Species Meet* (2008), Haraway details how pets have always played a multi-faceted and lucrative role in the market economy as co-consumers, commodities and workers. The phenomenon of pet influencers is just one of the more recent ways that humans and animals have found themselves tangled up with wealth production in the regime of lively capital (Haraway 2008). Digital pet cultures are equally multifaceted with domestic animals online co-consuming a variety of pet products, circulating as valuable viral commodities complete with their own branded paraphernalia and undertaking visible and affective labour as product endorsers (Ungerleider 2016).

The world of pet influencers appears to reproduce the subjugation of animals whereby pets are 'indulged but unfree fashion accessories in a boundless commodity culture' (Haraway 2008, p. 206). However, Haraway (2008, p. 62) asserts that animals are not just 'passive raw material to the action of others' but agentic in their undertaking of these roles. Humans and their companion animals do not emerge unaltered through their interaction with digital pet cultures but are mutually adapted partners. Accordingly, we should take seriously what might be happening when we encounter pet influencers on Instagram and consider how these images affect us and act on us – even as we act on them.

For example, the following exchange details how the young people responded when the rabbit screenshot in Figure 17 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 'disorganising 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, Sianne 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 toward the infantile, unthreatening 'squishy blob' form that the rabbit takes in this post (Ngai 2015, pp. 64 - 65). On the other hand, the rabbit's cuteness is capable of making a powerful affective demand on the group that both deverbalises and infantilises their language, such as when Tess describes the rabbit as 'a luff!' (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 objects cuteness may be its edibility'. Ngai (2015) asserts that there is a sadistic side to cuteness which can simultaneously provoke tenderness and aggression. Accordingly, the cuteness of the rabbit picture can be seen to evoke a power struggle and not simply a static power differential between humans and animals.

### 5.5.1 DIGITAL BODY / FOOD / PET CULTURES

In section 5.2 I detailed how Instagram evoked a melancholic mood amongst the participants at Castell Q, however, the picture of the rabbit disrupted this bodily malaise. 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 and Wood 2012; Jensen and Ringrose 2013). By referring to the rabbit as obese, Lucy draws on the medicalisation and shaming of fat embodiment that feeds into the hate faced by 'bigger girls' online (Rich, Monaghan and Aphramor 2011; Lupton 2017; Cooper 2016). 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-Webb, Depper and Rich 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 effect 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 (see section 5.4), viewing the rabbit as food rather than a cute pet can be read as doubly subversive. Overall, the above exchange gestures towards different instances of rabbit boundary-crossing – entering the flesh, excessive flesh, consuming the flesh. These different bodily imaginaries unsettle anthropocentric and gendered understandings of embodiment online tapping into new relational possibilities between the bodies of young people and animals.

### **5.5.1 PET-WORKING AND KINSHIP**

In the previous section, I considered the surprisingly powerful yet conflicting affective demands that pet influencers make in consumer culture as well as their entanglement with digital body politics. While I do not wish to suggest that pet influencer practices are free from exploitation, I have argued that the role they undertake is not simply that of subjugated accessory. To further explore how something more than exploitation might be going on in our encounters with pets online, I want to briefly consider Lucy's care for animals and pet-working practices.

During the group and individual interviews, Lucy discussed how she and a friend used to ride horses at a local farm, the Instagram account she runs for her rabbit, as well as her desire to study animal management and have her own farm in the future. In the following exchange, we briefly explored her different relationships to horses, dogs and rabbits and the connections she has with these animals.

Kate: What is it that you enjoy about horse riding?

Lucy: Everything, I dunno it's not like one thing, it's like the connection with an animal that like you don't get through like any other animals cos obviously like you know you're doing something together rather than like separate.

Kate: Yeah



Lucy: That's why, I always liked erm dog like agility as well where they like do jumps and like go over the like thing and like Crufts and things like that. I used to like, when I had dogs I was really like, I used to love like things like that

Kate: What's your connection with the rabbit?

Lucy: It's different, smaller animals are like not as connected cos they are like more like shy cos like, my rabbit doesn't really like, it will let you pet it but like it doesn't want to be petted all the time but bigger animals like cats, dogs, horses like they don't mind, you just pet.

Kate: Through taking photos of the rabbit is that like a different...?

Lucy: Yeah that's like my different connection cos like obviously he's very adorable, he is. So I just take pictures.

Lucy's descriptions of horse riding and dog agility as 'doing something together rather than like separate' indicate that these activities provide an opportunity for human and animal to work together (see also Renold and Iverson 2014). Haraway (2008) herself has outlined the deep bonding that occurs between dog and owner through training for the competitive sport of agility. I would argue that pet-working too can be considered a site of bonding as Lucy's rabbit Instagram account functions through a lively combination of herself, her rabbit, Instagram and her smartphone camera working and learning together. Like dog agility training, the phenomenon of pet-working and pet influencers can be seen as a 'controversial, modern relationship' undertaken by 'historically located, multispecies' in 'a contact zone fraught with power, knowledge and technique, moral questions' as well as 'the chance for joint, cross-species invention that is simultaneously work and play' (Haraway 2008, p. 205). The practice of pet-working and pet influencers, therefore, raises political questions about collective living and kinship whereby humans, animals and technology learn to communicate and articulate their bodies to each other.

The articulating of bodies to each other is evident in Lucy's account of her rabbit's relationship to being petted. The 'shy' rabbit who 'will let you pet it' but 'doesn't want to be petted all the time' exercises a degree of agency over how it becomes available to Lucy and she too has become attuned to the rabbit. The photos she takes arguably operate as another means of seeing, connecting with and expressing her affection for the rabbit. Consequently, Lucy's pet-working appears tied to having 'courteous regard' for and looking back at the rabbit in a way that 'takes us to seeing again, to *respecere*, to the act of respect' (Haraway 2008, p. 19).<sup>25</sup> Pet-working can, therefore, be seen as an expression of the deep bonds we develop with our pets and may have a part to play in nourishing greater kinship with our companion species. While digital technologies are often oppositionally positioned as a threat to children's connection with nature and animals (Louv 2008), Lucy's comments indicate that digital technologies can also support these relationships. Scholarship has begun to explore how mobile media and digital technologies can play a role in supporting young people to engage with, explore and learn about nature (Patrickson 2019; Bates 2020).

This section mapped how the circulation of pet images on Instagram both disrupts and recoups normative post-feminist logics of bodily display and looking online. On the one hand, these images offered a route out of the bodily malaise that took hold at the sight of Instagram's filtered, toned and preened bodies. For example, the rabbit image provided opportunities to see round and squishy bodies as alternatively cute and sustaining. On the other hand, viewing pet images channelled familiar visual, moral economies around bodily appearance, size and weight that led to judgements around the owner's pet care practices.

Considering pet influencers and pet-working practices put us 'inside the complexities of instrumental relations' and the asymmetrical power structures of companion animal

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<sup>25</sup> Haraway (2008) uses the Latin root of the English word respect, '*respecere*', in this quote which means to look at and behold.

industries (Harraway 2008, p. 47). Caring for others is often a ‘fraught, affective, contested, and compromised practice’ (Nxumalo and Pacini-Ketchabaw 2017, p. 1422). However, these power relations do not always operate in the expected direction. For example, Lucy’s efforts to avoid the intrusive presence of her affection for her rabbit, through taking pictures rather than petting it, brought her into intrusive contact with images of idealised human bodies that exerted ‘pressure’ to ‘be slim’ (Lucy’s map annotation) and ‘change how you look’ (Tess, 18).

In part one of this chapter, I have undertaken an expanded analysis of social media’s visual culture by considering in detail the visual content that participants at Castell Q stated made them feel good in their bodies. By examining body positivity, mediatised foodscapes and pet-working on social media, I considered the extent to which young people are able to displace the disciplinary post-feminist gaze from their own bodies onto more-than-human content.

## **PART TWO: WHAT CAN A BODY DO?**

### **5.6 THE GENDERED POLITICS OF MEDIA ENGAGEMENT**

In part two of this chapter, I consider the question of what a body can do by examining the role of video games and Netflix in the regulation and reproduction of heteronormative gendered embodiment. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a detailed exploration of the literature on gaming and streaming platforms, decades of research in these fields have examined the masculinisation of video games and the feminisation of fandom (Taylor and Vorhees 2018; Click and Scott 2018; Hemphill, Kocurek and Rao 2018; Jenkins, Ito and boyd 2015; Walkerdine 2007; Driscoll 2002). These gendered patterns of media engagement were notable amongst the Year 8 participants at Green City School. While Karma and Droshux spoke at length about first-person shooter video games such as *Team Fortress 2* and *Overwatch*, Jalil and Layla energetically detailed the complex heteroromantic love plots to supernatural dramas such as *The Vampire Diaries* and *Shadow*

*Hunters.*

Research on video games and fandom has typically posited a distinction between the different kinds of embodied engagement these technologies elicit which channels the heteronormative bifurcation of active male sexuality and passive female sexuality. Digital gameplay is seen to go beyond the passive spectatorship of film and television by activating and propelling the body into the unfolding events (Sunden and Svengisson 2012; Walkerdine 2007). For example, Droshux described ‘the adrenalin rush’ he got from the ‘intensity of combat’ in gameplay noting that video games make ‘people feel they’ve got more power’ as with ‘a single tap of a button things can change’. While the embodied action of digital gameplay ties into dominant socio-cultural understandings of masculinity as active and physical, the supposedly passive spectatorship of television fandom connects to the docility and impressionability associated with feminine embodiment (Driscoll 2002).

However, in this section, I consider how experimenting with cut-up poetry provided an opportunity to run interference into these gendered patterns by redistributing experience from the personal to the collective. As discussed in Chapter Three (section 3.3.1.3), the cut-up poetry workshop formed part of the final phase of fieldwork at Green City School in which participants were invited to creatively re-animate the research data. In this thirty-minute lunchtime workshop, I provided participants with a selection of anonymised quotes from previous fieldwork sessions and invited them to compile a text that expressed how digital technologies can make them feel good in their bodies. This was both an opportunity to respond to Basar’s assertion that too often teachers ‘don’t consider the good bits’ of their digital cultures, as well as revisit the question I had introduced at Castell Q (see section 5.2).

### **5.6.1 ‘THE BOYS LIKE FORTNITE, FIFA’: VIDEO GAMES AND MASCULINITY**

As this titular quote from Jalil suggests, video games are typically coded as male. Numerous studies have documented how they operate as a vehicle for the achievement of contemporary masculinity, through mastering certain forms of skill, control and competitive gameplay (Walkerdine 2007). Given the overwhelmingly racist, sexist,

heterosexist and militaristic action dominating video game content, the popular imaginary of the 'gamer' has been linked to particularly vehement and violent expressions of hegemonic white hetero-masculinity (Taylor and Vorhees 2018; Jensen and Castell 2013). As I outlined in Chapter Two (section 2.4.2), girls, women and gender identities that trouble heteronormativity are found to be marginalised in video games as well as subject to various forms of harassment and abuse when they do play (Jensen and Castell 2013; Walkerdine 2007). The naturalisation of video games as the boy's domain was a recurring feature of discussions amongst the Year 8's at Green City School. In the cut-up poetry workshop, however, the participant's attempts to attribute anonymised quotes to one another prompted Basar to reveal her enjoyment of the popular online game *Fortnite*:

Karma: It's either me or Droshux. If we're talking about video games, it's either me or Droshux

Layla: Yeah I don't play video games for some reason

Basar: I might be talking about video games because, I don't do it much, but I like to play on my brother's X-box sometimes, but I don't do it much.

Kate: What video games do you play?

Basar: I usually just play Fortnite

Kate: You're into Fortnite?

Karma: Oh no!

Basar: I'm not like into it, I just play it sometimes

Kate: Yeah

Droshux: It's a good game. It must be a good game if everyone likes it so much. I just don't like it

Basar: It's alright, I just play it sometimes because like I don't have any other games but Fortnite's free

Kate: What do you do with Fortnite? How do you play?

Basar: I usually just die

Karma: Fortnite is a rubbish game!

Basar: What's wrong with it?

Karma: The idea is rubbish, it's not original

Droshux: It's not original, but they did it well. I'm just saying, I don't like Fortnite

Since its launch in 2017, *Fortnite* has become a cultural sensation attracting over 125 million players worldwide. Its popular free-to-play Battle Royale game mode allows up to one hundred players to battle it out to be the last person standing. Although the above exchange is the first time Basar mentioned playing *Fortnite*, her suggestion that the video game quote might be hers tentatively challenges Karma's and Droshux's sole claim to this domain. Notably, Basar was no stranger to pursuits typically coded as masculine as she spoke in other fieldwork sessions of playing football competitively at school and socially with her neighbours. In this exchange, however, video games are quickly re-entrenched as a masculine territory with Basar's clarification that she only 'play(s) it sometimes' on her brother's X-box and 'usually just die(s)'. Correspondingly, Basar positions *Fortnite* as a

casual pursuit at which she is not competitively skilled, relinquishing a sense of ownership over or sustained investment in digital gameplay.

Meanwhile, Karma's dismissal of *Fortnite* as 'rubbish' and 'not original' asserts his position as an expert arbiter of what games should be judged proper and superior. His interjections resonate with wider observations of the lower status conferred on *Fortnite* by some gamers who view its popularity as exemplifying the increasing casualisation and feminisation of digital gameplay (Chess and Paul 2018). *Fortnite* not only features playable characters that embody a variety of gender expressions but its cross-platform design enables people to play whether they have an X-box, a Playstation, a tablet or a smartphone. This versatility signals a key shift in the economy of video games where increased revenue and gameplay occurs through casual and mobile gaming which have historically been markets dominated by girls and young women (Chess and Paul 2018). Correspondingly, *Fortnite* has been credited with attracting under-represented demographics to the shooter genre including girls and young women (Song 2018).

Despite the diversifying demographics in digital video games, however, studies continue to show that the social and economic rewards of competitive gameplay remain the preserve of boys and men (Jensen and Castell 2018; Taylor and Voorhees 2018). Commentators have questioned, for example, why none of the players to compete in the *Fortnite World Cup* were women: noting that elite gameplay is still hyper-masculine (Stuart 2019). Similarly, in the wider peer context at Green City School *Fortnite* played a role in shoring up masculinity with Droshux observing that boys in his class persistently questioned each other: 'What tier are you?! What tier are you?!' *Fortnite's* tier system exemplifies the kinds of 'status-building' technologies built into video games that enable players to signal their competitive prowess, hard work and skill (Taylor and Vorhees 2018, p. 10). Although Droshux was an avid gamer, he was notably excluded from these masculinist displays of 'embodied/cybernetic' ability (Taylor and Vorhees 2018, p. 10) because he did not play *Fortnite*. He described how there was a lot of judgement based on how good you were at the popular games and referenced being told to 'shut up' by other boys because he was 'still stuck on' the creative world-building game *Minecraft*.

Basar's and Droshux's contributions indicate that the relationship between digital video games and masculinity is not static, but shifts and changes in different configurations. In the context of the fieldwork session, Basar's enjoyment of *Fortnite* was dismissed by Karma in a manner that asserted his masculinist mastery and knowledge of video games. His comments point to the way in which games such as *Fortnite* can be feminised. In the wider context of Green City School, however, not playing *Fortnite* served as a means for other boys to belittle Droshux's gaming practices. His comments echo the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion that I observed in Chapter Four (section 4.3) with regards to the intimate knowledge facilitated by social media. Gaming could similarly operate as a form of social currency amongst the boys at Green City School as well as underpin social exclusion for those rendered digitally impotent for not mastering popular games such as *Fortnite*.

#### **5.6.2 'NETFLIX IS MY LIFE!' FANDOM AND FEMININITY**

Layla's assertion that 'Netflix is [her] life' and her passion for supernatural Netflix dramas such as *The Vampire Diaries* and *Shadow Hunters* exemplifies the avid, enthusiastic investment in popular culture often associated with girlhood (Driscoll 2002). Unlike the active embodied relation to video games, film and television spectatorship has been viewed as a far more passive encounter (Sunden and Svengisson 2012). Furthermore, some feminist media scholars have expressed concern about whether the contemporary teen vampire genre, including shows such as *The Vampire Diaries*, promote women's subordination and normalise gendered violence by portraying 'strong, dangerous, emotionally troubled' male vampires who struggle to control their urge to consume their female love interest (Franiuk and Scherr 2013, p. 14; Taylor 2014; Borgia 2014). These gendered tropes were notable in the following extract from Jalil's and Layla's paired interview in which they discuss the appeal of the character Damon in *The Vampire Diaries*:

Kate: What, like what do you like, what's appealing about these characters?

Jalil: Their looks, mostly



*(Layla giggles)*

Kate: What, what's good...

Jalil: Their personality

Layla: But, but he's a psychopath

Jalil: I know! *(giggles)*

Kate: What is, like what makes someone good looking in those shows?

Layla: I don't know, he's ripped! *(giggles)*

Jalil: And the, the way he's like so like, like, like the first season where they introduce Damon he's just like

Layla: *(in a deep voice)* Hello, brother

Jalil: Yeah, like 'Hello, brother' and that's like, that's just like so cool and intimidating

Layla: And you're like, like yes!

The above exchange details how *The Vampire Diaries* reproduces dominant notions of esteemed white hetero-masculinity based on being physically 'ripped' (muscular), 'cool', 'intimidating' and 'a psychopath' (in other words lacking empathy) in line with the dangerous erotic charge of the vampire (Driscoll 2002). Rather than viewing Layla and Jalil as passive dupes to media messages about desirable hetero-masculinity, however, it is

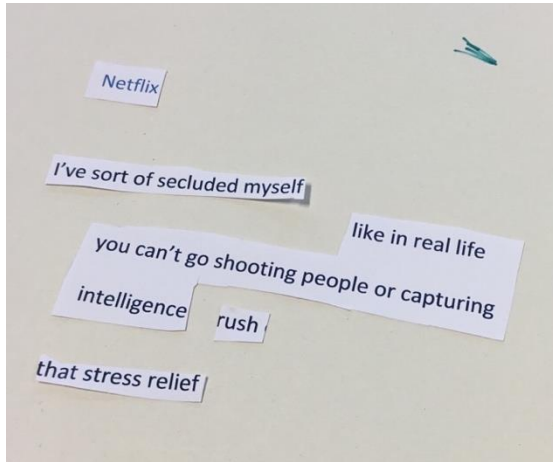
possible to map agentic movements performed by the girls at the intersection of powerful racialised, sexualised, and religionised discourses about femininity (Allen and Ingham 2015, p. 154). For example, Jalil's articulations of desire for Damon arguably constitutes a line of rupture from the over-coded way her body is usually fixed as a veiled Muslim thirteen-year-old girl.

Zarabadi and Ringrose (2018, p. 93) observe that Muslim girls are 'read primarily in terms of religious, racial, (a)sexual, and cultural dimensions as simultaneously victims and as potentially dangerous through the excessiveness of their religious dress and its implications' (Zarabadi and Ringrose 2018; Mirza and Meeto 2017). These discourses evidently shaped Jalil's experience of girlhood who described how boys were 'dissing' her in class because of her 'heritage' and referenced a letter circulating on social media that incited people to forcibly remove headscarves from Muslim women as part of 'Punish a Muslim Day' (Joseph 2018). Zarabadi and Ringrose (2018, p. 90) note how the desire to unveil Muslim women is an 'inherently sexualised' component of contemporary racism in response to the 'compulsory vagueness' of Muslim feminine subjectivity as simultaneously desiring and seduced. Jalil's talk about *The Vampire Diaries*, however, does not fit the frame of asexual silenced victim nor that of the hypersexualised feminine threat whose desire operates as a proxy for Muslim male sexual dominance (Zarabadi and Ringrose 2018). By constituting herself as a sexually desiring subject, Jalil simultaneously challenges non-agentic framings of Muslim girls' desire and re-asserts the regulatory norms of white hetero-masculine sexual dominance that Damon embodies.

It is also possible to see how *The Vampire Diaries* propels Jalil and Layla into other territories by attending to the bond it helps shape between them. Netflix played a key role in Jalil's and Layla's friendship with the two of them speaking at disorientating speed about the evolving plotlines of *The Vampire Diaries* and *Shadow Hunters* as well as competing over who had consumed the most episodes in a series. While Netflix may appear to invite a more sedate encounter than the action of playing a video game, commentators have suggested that the streaming platform is gamifying television viewing where 'each episode becomes a level to unlock' as audiences compete over the speed of

consumption and reaction (Poniewozik 2015). Correspondingly, Layla's declaration that 'Netflix is [her] life' can be understood as an expression of the platforms lively and productive force in her life which enters and shapes peer sociality.

FIGURE 18: LAYLA'S CUT-UP POEM



The affective pull of Netflix was further articulated in Layla's cut-up poem which managed to convey in twenty-three words the intensity that bubbled away in discussions between Layla and Jalil over several months of fieldwork. By drawing on forceful words and phrases from Droshux's description of playing video games, Layla vividly articulates the embodied pleasure of getting carried away with an eventful Netflix series and indicates that her body is also activated by the unfolding events (Figure 18). In contrast to the passive construction of girl's relationship to popular culture, Layla's poem conveys the affective appeal of these shows which are experienced as a 'rush' followed by relief moving through the body. This encounter with Netflix is reminiscent of an orgasmic experience (Austin 2017). It is also significant that Layla's poem focuses on the action of 'shooting people or capturing intelligence' as opposed to the hetero-romantic love plots to the aforementioned Netflix shows. This recalls Layla's and Jalil's observation in their paired interview that the violence of *The Vampire Diaries* where characters 'rip out hearts', 'behead people' and 'cut off people's hands' was also 'really cool to watch'.

My discussion in this section has pointed out how video games and Netflix travel into and shape peer sociality. For example, I detailed how video games work in different configurations to assert masculinity as well as highlighted the girl bonding fuelled by supernatural Netflix series'. While my findings are limited to participant's talk about these media practice as opposed to observing direct engagements with these technologies (Walkerdine 2007), I have discussed how working with cut-up poetry provided one way of tapping into their embodied relationship to these media formats. By redistributing experience from the personal to the collective, the cut-up poetry activity kept the energising affects of these media forms in flow and troubled the tendency to separate and capture them in heteronormative formations of active male sexuality and passive female sexuality. Given the increasing casualisation of gameplay through mobile devices and the apparent gamification of television viewing through streaming platforms, I argue that the empirical experiences of bodies that are moved by and with these technologies are worthy of further exploration.

## **PART THREE: WHAT CAN A BODY BECOME?**

### **5.7 DIGITALLY NETWORKED BODY TRANSFORMATIONS**

A wide body of literature has documented the organisation of contemporary social and cultural life around self-transformation and observed how the body increasingly operates as a focal point for efforts to materialise a better future (Coleman 2011; Elias, Gill and Scharff 2017; Hakim 2019). Feminist scholars have detailed how incitements to transform the body intensified in the 2000s through the proliferation of make-over reality television which worked to normalise a neo-liberal ethos of continuously maximising, bettering and reinventing the self in line with post-feminist gendered beauty ideals (Walkerdine and Ringrose 2008; Kavka 2008).

From make-up tutorials and dermatological procedures on YouTube, live-streamed cosmetic surgeries on Snapchat to reality drag queen competitions on Netflix, participants

across my study were engaging with a range of body transformation narratives enabled by new forms of digital cultural production (Hakim 2019; Berryman and Kavka 2018; Bishop 2018). In this section, I consider the make-over paradigm in relation to participant's talk about simulated avatars and selfie editing applications as well as the relationship between these technologies. I then move on to consider how new genres of YouTube content such as spot squeezing and slime videos are taking the transformation imperative into newly sensuous directions. In doing so, this section explores the different ways the digitally networked body can be/come and how this is transforming the gendered, sexualised, racialised and classed arena of body politics.

### **5.7.1 SIMULATED BODIES**

In Chapter Four, I discussed how life simulation video games such as *Virtual Families* promoted a familiar good life centred on the 'rewards' of the heteronormative family form. While I noted that participant's talk about these games did not necessarily reflect an investment in their heteronormative domestic fantasies, here I consider the role of avatars in reinforcing and rupturing heteronormative beauty ideals. Specifically, I explore participants talk about *The Sims* which is one of the best-selling video games of all time. Akin to a digital dollhouse, *The Sims* allows players to re-create suburban life through designing domestic spaces as well as creating and directing various avatars. In contrast to the heteronormative narrative structure of *Virtual Families*, *The Sims* lacks any defined gameplay goals and has been celebrated for its progressive approach to gender and sexuality. It introduced same-sex relationships, marriage and parenting in the 2000s as well as removed restrictions related to the gender expression of avatars in 2016 (Duffy 2016).

Before the introduction of gender-fluid features, scholars have observed that *The Sims* offered children and young people the opportunity to exceed the constraints of their sexed and gendered bodies. For example, Renold (2013, p. 125) found that *The Sims* provided some girls in her study with the space to 'create an alternative fantasy world' in which they could 'experiment with "older" identities' and 'engage in behaviours that were

unavailable or too risky in their own lives'. Similarly, participants in my study indicated that *The Sims* gave them a sense of 'control' (Leah's words) and an opportunity to 'see what [their] life would be like if [they] were that rich and [they] could decide what happens' (Chiara's words). In Chapter Four (section 4.6), I outlined how the Year 7 participants at Green City School expressed frustration over the way their bodies were regulated through the gendering of clothes. In line with Renold's (2013) work, Olivia noted that she enjoyed making her avatar look different to her by giving her 'really, really blonde hair and stuff that [she] wouldn't normally wear' such as a 'very sporty outfit' as well as clothes she was not allowed to wear such as 'shoulderless tops'.

FIGURE 19: CHIARA'S AVATAR

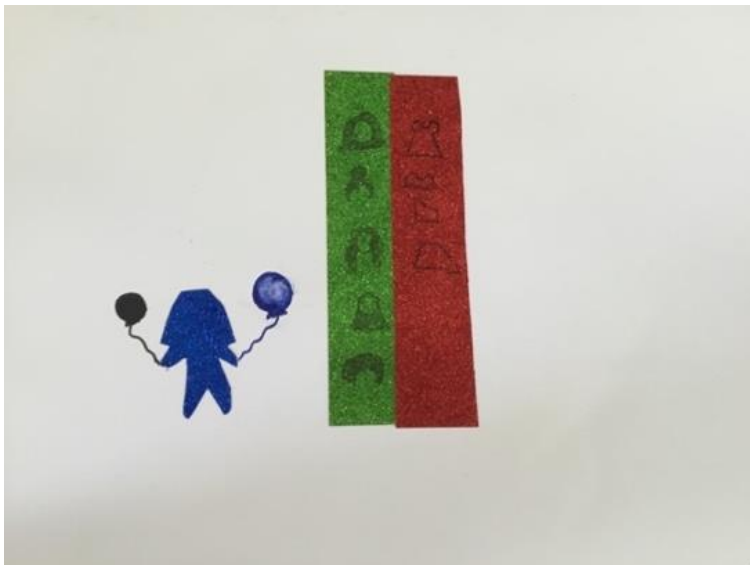


FIGURE 20: OLIVIA'S AVATAR



The creation of avatars on *The Sims* was a central component of the game with Imogen observing that she spends ‘hours making each character’ as you can design ‘as many outfits as you want’. Similarly, Olivia and Chiara crafted an image of *The Sims* customizing tool during the design an avatar research activity illustrating the various options to dress and style their Sims clothes and hair (see Figures 19 and 20). Despite *The Sims* offering opportunities for young people to play with their identities, make their avatars look ‘really mad’ (Chiara’s words) and get creative with gender expression, heteronormative body ideals still shaped the participant’s avatar creations. In the following extract from a paired interview, for example, Chiara highlights the continued role that hair plays in ensuring her avatar conforms to recognized standards of gendered intelligibility by giving it ‘quite long hair unless it’s a boy’ and Olivia details how make-up ensures her avatars are ‘perfect’ and ‘really pretty’ (Butler 1990).

Kate: Does it take you long to create your avatars?

Chiara: Yes

Olivia: I want to make them perfect and it's just like make them really pretty

Chiara: Or really mad or whatever, it's especially hard cos with my Sims on the mobile I'm trying to get it to look good but the nose keeps on like arching and it looks terrible and it's really, really hard to perfect it

Kate: Yeah, can you do all sorts like control their faces?

Chiara: Yeah, you can make them have a nose like that (*gestures a long upward nose*)

Kate: What sorts of things do you think about when you're making an avatar?

Chiara: I think about its personality and do what they look like according to the personality, I don't usually do short hair, I usually do quite long hair unless it's a boy

Kate: What about you Olivia?

Olivia: Erm, I often try to kind of make a like imaginary like people who I kind of think of in my head, I always try and kind of make them

Chiara: I would try to do that but it doesn't really have the correct costumes for it

Kate: Why? Who is in your head?

Chiara: Fairies and elves and stuff

Kate: Oh

Chiara: That would be quite cool



Kate: Yeah

Olivia: I often think of like really, really like perfect looking people like yeah

Chiara: Yeah, it just never comes out the way you expect it to

Kate: What's a really perfect looking?

Olivia: I dunno someone who doesn't, who's not like completely covered in make-up someone who's like

Chiara: Naturally

Olivia: A little bit of make-up but they don't, they kept it natural [Kate: Yeah] erm someone...I don't know who, has like really nice clothes and...I don't, I don't really know I just kind of look at the things and then kind of decide from there

Olivia's talk of ensuring her simulated avatars have 'kept it natural' with a 'little bit of make-up' but not 'completely covered' channels the paradoxical as well as powerfully gendered, classed and racialised ways that cosmetics industries have invoked nature in order to sell their products. In her social history of American beauty culture, Kathy Peiss' (1998) details how the cosmetics industry sought to shift the association of make-up with the immorality of 'painted women' (sex workers) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by advertising it as an enhancer of natural beauty and virtue. While the 'natural look' requires a 'box full of beauty devices', it masks the labour involved and trains 'the eye to perceive make-up as a natural feature of women's faces' (Peiss 1998, p. 152). In contemporary postfeminist beauty culture, the 'natural look' continues to operate as a superior mode of embodiment associated with normative White middle-class femininity (Negra; McCann 2015). For example, Hannah McCann (2015, p. 238) points to the derision of excessive make-up on the reality show *Snog, Marry, Avoid* where working-class participants undergo a 'make-

under process' that transforms them into a form of acceptable 'natural beauty'.

In line with feminist scholarship highlighting the entanglement of the 'child's world of dolls' with the 'adult feminine activity of beautification', Olivia's efforts to make her avatars 'perfect' and 'really pretty' in *The Sims* is indicative of the various ways 'aesthetic labour' becomes recontextualised as 'girly fun' and 'play' (Lazar 2017, p. 59). Crucially, children's dolls do not only offer a place to practice beauty work but also shape beauty norms. For example, Coffey and Ringrose (2016, p. 180) have considered how women become 'in some part plastic' through the 'bringing of silicone into the body' to materially change their shape and fit the ideal proportions of the Barbie doll prototype. Similarly, *The Sims* can be seen to be part of a wider global assemblage of consumer-based feminine beauty norms in which people digitally alter their photographs to fit impossible ideals of bodily perfection. While Olivia and Chiara suggested that *The Sims* was unique in allowing them to 'change [their] face shape' as they 'can't exactly go on a computer and go like edit me' (Chiara's words), beauty apps that enable people to edit their face like a Sims character are a rapidly growing arena of smartphone technology (Elias and Gill 2017).

Participants at Castell Q discussed FaceTune and Photoshop which allows people to erase blemishes, whiten their teeth, remove bags from their eyes, brighten their complexion and reshape their face (see Figure 21). Lucy stated that she was 'shocked' to hear that her friend put her photos through four of these beauty apps before posting them online. In addition, Alex noted that he and a friend sometimes tried to guess how people had edited their selfies on Instagram. Elias and Gill (2017, p. 23) argue that these technologies do not simply reinforce 'established cultural ideas about female attractiveness' but intensify the regulatory gaze upon women and create 'new arenas of moral wrongness'. Echoing critiques of excessive make-up, users of beauty apps have to be 'subtle enough to pass as natural' (Jennings 2019) and careful not to go 'overboard' by 'smoothing their selfies into amorphous avatars or slimming their bodies to the point of anatomical impossibility' (Solon 2018). As Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund (2019, p. 4987) observe, these 'gendered criticisms of fakery' on social media are 'evocative of longstanding patriarchal fears that women will disguise their "authentic" selves with tools of artifice and

deception’.

FIGURE 21: TESS'S SCREENSHOT FEATURING ARTWORK BY ANNA HILL<sup>26</sup>



The boundary between the real and the fake, the organic and simulated is however increasingly hard to read online. During the digital tours at Castell Q, for example, Lucy shared an Instagram image of the social media model Lil Miquela. Lucy noted how Lil Miquela ‘looks like a Sim’ and referenced the controversy over whether she was a real person or not. Lil Miquela is a thin, ‘Latina’ social media model who initially kept people guessing as to her ‘realness’ and was rumoured to be a cosplay<sup>27</sup> marketing gimmick for *The Sims* until she ‘came out’ in 2018 as a ‘sentient robot’ (Tiffany 2019). Lil Miquela is, in fact, the product of a Los Angeles based start-up called Brud which describes itself as ‘a transmedia studio that creates digital character driven story worlds’ (Sequoia Cap 2020).

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<sup>26</sup> Anna Hill was a student from East Carolina University who produced a series of ads parodying the impact of Photoshop on women’s bodies (Reimold 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Cosplay is a portmanteau of the words costume play. It describes the practice of dressing up as a character from a film, book, or video game, particularly one from the Japanese genres of manga or anime.

Lil Miquela has featured in adverts for Calvin Klein, Prada and Supreme as well as released her own music through Brud records.

Hess (2018) observes that projects such as Lil Miquela illustrate the 'cyborg nature' of fame itself where women's bodies are 'constantly resized, customized and upgraded to please their followers'. Notably, in a 2019 Calvin Klein advert featuring Lil Miquela kissing the human model Bella Hadid, the distinction between the digitally fabricated and the human is not immediately apparent as the models look oddly similar with 'Barbie-smooth skin' (Hess 2018). While Lil Miquela's digitally fabricated racial ambiguity perpetuates the post-race sensibility of other advertising trends in which race is dissociated from racialised power structures and darker skin tones are presented as stylish, fashionable and beautiful (Gill and Kanai 2019; Phillips 2018; Valluvan 2016), it was Hadid's authenticity as a heterosexual woman engaged in a same-sex kiss that was challenged in response to the Calvin Klein advert (Elizabeth 2019).<sup>28</sup> By portraying a sexual relationship between a digitally fabricated model and a human, this advert challenges the humanist assumption that sexuality is tied to skin and flesh and plays out the 'techno-fantasy' of exceeding the enfleshed body (Haraway 1991). At the same time, however, the cyborg other is purposefully packaged as a queer woman of colour in a manner that appropriates and 'ventriloquizes' (Phillips 2018) these markers of difference for profit without troubling old and established norms around racism, sexism and homophobia (Braidotti 2006b).

This section has highlighted some of the ways that digital technologies have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between the natural and artificial (Haraway 1991): creating new binds for girls and young women to navigate around classed, raced,

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<sup>28</sup> Calvin Klein issued an apology for featuring Hadid, 'someone who identifies as heterosexual' in a 'same-sex kiss' and acknowledged that this may be perceived as an exploitative tactic. They asserted that the advert was intended to explore 'the blurred lines between reality and imagination' (Richards 2019, para 4).

gendered and sexualised criticisms of fakery and deception. Building on earlier observations about the relationship between dolls and consumer-based beauty norms, I have considered how the participant's talk about creating avatars for *The Sims* digital dollhouse connects to wider shifts towards simulated beauty. The emergence of beauty apps and digitally fabricated models is transforming the arena of appearance politics but further research is needed to explore how they are being taken up and responded to by young people as well as how this entangles with broader material-discursive enactments of gender and sexuality.

### **5.7.2 THE SHEITGEIST: HAPTIC VISUALITY OF THE BODY ON YOUTUBE**

Despite the increasingly blurred boundaries between the organic and the simulated that I outlined in the previous section, social media is nevertheless teeming with the haptic visuality of the leaky tactility of the fleshy body. This was exemplified in this study by participant's talk of the strangely satisfying pleasures of spot squeezing and 'poopsie slime' videos which proliferate on YouTube. While spot squeezing videos centre on professionals and amateurs unearthing congested pores, slime videos explore the different textures and sounds of a popular children's toy that is often marketed as a form of colourful excrement. The current 'sheitgeist' for the mesmerising material force of pus and scatological slime indicates how the digital sphere is formed by and implicated with the materiality of the body and bodily waste (Robinson 2019). In this section, I consider how these YouTube videos take the transformation imperative prevalent in wider popular culture into newly sensuous directions (Marks 2002).

Spot squeezing and slime videos are illustrative of 'haptic visuality'. As I outlined in Chapter Two (section 2.11), this is a form of visuality that draws on 'other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics' to involve the body on a more visceral level than optical visuality (Marks 2002, p. 2). These YouTube videos reduce the distance between object and subject, featuring a close engagement with the surface detail and texture of skin and slime as hands prod, probe and squish the materials. Spot squeezing and slime videos rely 'heavily on communicating a sense of touch to the viewer'

(Mowlabacus 2018) inviting a mode of spectatorship that is 'more inclined to graze than to gaze' (Marks and Polan 2000, p. 162). While Marks (2002) considered 'haptic visuality' a 'feminist visual strategy' capable of disrupting phallogocentric models of vision founded on the distancing of perceiver and the perceived, in this section, I outline how this 'underground visual tradition' is garnering a mass audience through platforms such as YouTube. I consider how these videos function as part of a broader consumer-based digital economy focused on self-transformation before discussing their feminist and queer potential.

#### **5.7.2.1 SPOT SQUEEZING**

In her individual interview, Irene from Westland College listed spot squeezing videos as an example of the 'random videos' she watches when she has 'finished all [her] work', feels 'bored' and wants to 'laze around'. She described how YouTube is like 'a black hole' where 'you watch one video and then you're like oh what's this and what's this' until 'like 3 am in the morning'. When I asked Irene about the appeal of spot squeezing videos, she struggled to articulate why she watched this 'really weird' digital form that she loves and finds 'satisfying' but others think is 'gross' and 'disgusting':

Irene: Oh my god, I love it erm I don't know why I like spot squeezing videos it's really weird like, like if you got, people have like insects in their skin and get them pulled out I don't know why I find that, some people find it gross and other people love it, it's really weird. So my brother finds it disgusting and me and my sister are like 'ooh'. I don't know, I just don't know why I find that satisfying but clearly quite a lot of people do because it's online, millions of people are watching these videos

Irene's repeated exclamations of 'I don't know why' illustrates the limits of language to capture and articulate the material, embodied and sensory specificity of such digital content. Yet, as Irene observes, spot squeezing videos clearly have an appeal as 'millions of people are watching'. Dermatologists such as Dr Sandra Lee, a.k.a Dr Pimple Popper, have leveraged online videos of blackhead, whitehead and cyst extractions into a lucrative social media career and skincare empire (Lee 2010). Such medical practitioners are regular

features of make-over programmes advising alongside other experts on the best way to transform what is in most cases a woman's body (Coleman 2011). On YouTube, their practice takes centre stage offering a lingering forensic look at the clogged pores and uneven textures of the epidermis.

Contrary to the format of traditional make-over programmes, spot squeezing videos do not typically offer identification of/with a distinct 'figure' undergoing transformation (Marks 2002). Instead, it is often unclear where on the body the extraction is being performed as the skin is rendered into an alien landscape. The before and after narrative reveal of the make-over is replaced with the 'suspense and surprise' of waiting to see what substance and how much of it will erupt from the skin lending the videos a 'hypnotic power' (Doherty 2016, para 14). By lingering on seeping spots these videos displace the regulatory gaze from the over-coded female body and offer a counterpoint to the aforementioned beauty apps that remove all signs of blemishes. While beauty apps unsettle the border between the organic and the simulated, spot squeezing videos draw the viewer into a forensic look at the skin as a living organism.

Spot squeezing videos call to mind Julia Kristeva's (1982, p. 4) psychoanalytic notion of the abject, that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules' but 'disturbs identity, system, order'. Pus is abject and evokes disgust because such bodily fluids 'attest to the permeability of the body' the 'irreducible "dirt" [...] that lurks, lingers and at times leaks out of the body, a testimony of the fraudulence or impossibility of the "clean" and "proper"' (Grosz 1994, pp. 193 – 194). The abject is horrifying and repellent but also fascinating. Kristeva (1982) argues that cultures respond to this threat to bodily integrity through cleansing and purification rituals and practices that cathartically purge the abject from the body. Accordingly, it could be argued that spot squeezing videos bring about a confrontation with the abjection of pus and people getting 'insects' pulled out their skin as a contemporary purification ritual at a time when the border between the organic and the simulated is harder to read. Perhaps spot squeezing videos work by breaching, and thus paradoxically sustaining, the skin as a bodily boundary.

### 5.7.2.2 SLIME

Slime videos also centre on a material that might be considered abject, eliciting comparisons of bodily waste and evoking disgust. Rather than jettisoning disorder, as I have argued spot squeezing videos do, these videos can be read as an example of the containment and control of disruption. Slime was having a notable moment during the course of my fieldwork with many of the pre-teen participants referencing this viscous, squishy and oozy substance. In 2017 'How to make slime?' was the most popular Google query and slime content continued to generate over 25 billion views on YouTube in 2018 (Bureau 2017; Marshall 2019). These statistics indicate how the materiality of slime has taken on a sensory and affective charge that has been intensified by the visual and viral affordances of social media platforms, oozing its way into playground cultures, family activities and young people's media practices. In the following extract from a group interview at Ysgol Mellt, for example, Aislinn details her enjoyment of the YouTube series Dr Squish which features lots of slime videos.

Aislinn: So Dr Squish is someone who has lots of different squishies, lots of different toys and she has all the different slimes and she'll review them and give them, sometimes a good rate out of ten and sometimes she'll just cut them out for fun and I watch the videos because I love slime and squishies, but I just don't want to get any until I know that they're good so I've only got these slimes because my friend showed me them before and they were really good last time, so that's why I decided to get them this time

Here Aislinn positions herself as a discerning consumer of slime indicating how Dr Squish's slime videos operate as a new form of advertising that mobilises a desire for consumption (Mowlabacus 2018). While the resurgent popularity of slime via YouTube has fuelled a growing market of slime products, the 'messy, anarchic qualities' of this malleable substance have a long-standing history in children's television and toy industries (Onion 2015, para 9). Celebrity slimings and gungings operated as a staple feature of children's entertainment throughout my own childhood in the 1980s and 1990s. Banet-Weiser (2007, p. 89) observes that slimes 'messiness, its refusal to stay within the conventional spatial borders, its sheer disgustingness and audacity' was employed heavily by the children's television network Nickelodeon as a symbol of 'a "new order" for children' that



rejects the 'rituals of the adult world'. She argues that the 'liberation' that slime symbolizes was purposefully 'contained and commodified' through numerous consumerist artefacts that linked rebellion to consumption (Banet-Weiser 2007, p. 92).

A similar process of commodification can be seen in the current trend for slime, however, it has also taken it into newly sensuous directions. Slime has proliferated from Nickelodeon's neon green liquid into infinitely variable textural and visual forms that crunch, glitter and glow. Dr Squish has an entire YouTube channel dedicated just to the sound and sight of various slime textures as they are kneaded, swirled, squeezed and stretched. The multi-sensory and tactile qualities of slime and slime content connect to another well-documented social media phenomenon known as Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR). This quasi-scientific term emerged from online health and wellness forums to refer to pleasurable physical responses triggered by certain sounds, touch and movement (Harper 2020; Iosifidis 2017; Waldron 2017; Andersen 2015). For example, in the following extract from a group interview at Ysgol Mellt, Aislinn describes the cathartic qualities of slime which 'bubbles' and has a 'good click to it':

Kate: Oh you've done slime, what's special to you about slime?

Aislinn: Erm err, I get stressed a lot cos that's one of my main problems that I got, and when I have slime and I'm really stress, I just play with it and it calms me down a lot! My parents think there's nothing with it that I love, but I absolutely love it!

Kate: Yeah, how does it calm you down – what do you do with it?

Aislinn: Erm, you can play with it. You can make bubbles with it, it has a good click to it.

Natalie: It kills time

Kate: It kills time, oh yeah you've put slime down as well

*(Aislinn giggles loudly)*

Kate: How about, what do you enjoy about slime?

Natalie: It's just, it's just, I dunno it's satisfying

In this exchange, Natalie struggles to articulate the appeal of slime and echoes Irene's talk about spot squeezing videos in observing that it is 'just satisfying' and 'kills time'. Similarly, Aislinn's observation that she loves slime but her parents 'think there's nothing with it' resonates with Banet-Weiser's (2007, p. 91) argument that slime appeals as it is 'precisely what "adults don't get"'. At the same time, however, Aislinn makes the case for slime as a stress reliever that 'calms [her] down a lot' highlighting how slime play can be interpellated into discourses of health and wellbeing. This is further exemplified by the medical prefix of Dr Squish which implies that her videos have a medicinal and healing quality. Pathologising and individualising experiences of stress as one of her 'main problems', Aislinn's justification for slime recalls the therapeutic imperative to transform one's psychological attitude as well as one's body in line with 'neoliberal capitalism's requirements for emotionally robust entrepreneurial subjects' (Reveley 2016, p. 500). Correspondingly, Aislinn's observation suggests that the current trend for slime does not just work to commodify rebellion but can be employed to contain and constrain unruly emotions.

Although pus and slime may appear to disrupt and exceed borders, I have questioned whether these videos bring about a confrontation with the abject qualities of these materials to paradoxically re-assert a sense of order and control. In the next section, however, I consider the feminist and queer potential of spot squeezing and slime videos.

### **5.8.3 HAPTIC PLEASURES**

Spot squeezing and slime videos are another form of feminised media production that work to displace the disciplinary gaze from women's bodies and 'direct it toward their creative and entrepreneurial capacity' (Dejmanee 2016, p. 430). While scholars have observed how this content draws on gendered notions of care and domestic labour, they also note that these videos elude easy categorisation and interpretation (Iossifidis 2017; Andersen 2015). As I noted in the introduction to this section (5.9), Marks (2002) considers haptic visibility to be a feminist visual strategy that disturbs the dichotomy between the perceiver and the perceived to point to their permeable influence on one another. By drawing the viewer into close encounters with skin and slime, these videos are exemplary of the complex and subtle forms of intimacy proliferating online. The participant's talk about the strangely satisfying pleasures of these videos demonstrates that the 'kinds of connections that impact on people, and on which they depend for living (if not "a life"), do not always respect the predictable forms' (Berlant 1998, p. 284). For example, Aislinn and Natalie indicated in a group interview that slime was a key relationship that they enjoyed online. While my discussion in this chapter is limited to a focus on participant's talk about spot squeezing and slime and their struggles to articulate the satisfaction they elicit, these 'body genres' are worthy of further exploration as a site of possibility for exploring young people's digital pleasure (Waldron 2015; see also Harper 2020; Waldron 2017). This is especially significant given that pleasure is often absent from sexuality education and classroom practices which continue to treat young people's bodies as objects of risk.

### **5.9 CONCLUSIONS**

In this chapter, I explored how digital technologies are shaping young people's sexual cultures by examining the changing possibilities of what a body can be, do and become. Mainstream debates often focus on whether visual cultures of bodily display on social media are 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. I have examined how young people's digitally networked bodies are assemblages that extend relations to all manner of more-than-human beings which transfer, amplify and dissipate affective energies and shape what a young person's body can do.

In line with wider research, I began the chapter by demonstrating how commodified gendered and sexualised norms are intensified online through the everyday forceful intrusion of idealised bodies and abusive body-shaming comments. This operated as a powerful and painful form of bodily capture that delimited what the girls, in particular, felt they could do with their bodies. At the same time, I observed the increasing objectification of boys and young men's bodies as media spectacles according to a limited set of characteristics. Despite the visibility of different body shapes and sizes on social media, I outlined how this appeared to compound the demand to transform into something better by working on one's body and psychological attitude.

Building on existing literature, this chapter worked to complicate understandings of young people's digitally networked bodies by decentring the human body as a central focus of concern. Specifically, I looked at the ways in which more-than-human content such as food, pets, spots, and slime plug into feminising and masculinising assemblages in unpredictable ways. Such content are key sites of feminised media production that work to displace the disciplinary phallic male gaze from the over-coded female body online. I argued that Alex's queer veganism and enjoyment of indulgent mediatised foodscapes operated as an alternative figuration to the phallogocentric mode that ties masculinity with meat, strong muscularity and the subjugation of women and animals. However, I also indicated how pet cultures on Instagram can channel a familiar moral economy of looking that judge particular forms of bodily deportment and appearance.

By considering the question of what made the participants feel good in their bodies, this chapter mapped out some experiences of digital pleasure. Specifically, I considered the extent to which the phallic male gaze is disrupted online by the proliferation of haptic content which operates in material, embodied and sensory ways that blur the boundaries

between perceiver and perceived. The pleasure of being drawn into a lingering forensic look at the mesmerizing materiality of skin and slime is indicative of queer intimacies online. This content exemplified the need for researchers to expand our methodological approach to explore young people's digital intimacies and digitally networked body cultures. At the same time, I questioned whether this focus on the leaky tactility of pus and slime works to paradoxically re-assert a sense of order and control at a time when the border between the organic and the simulated is increasingly hard to read.

Reading different digital practice through one another invited an exploration of how the body is becoming increasingly simulated through the gamification of body modification in virtual life video games, advances in selfie editing applications and the emergence of digitally fabricated social media models. This chapter indicated that heteronormative bodily ideals are shifting and changing as digital technologies transform the arena of appearance politics. This creates new binds for girls and young women to navigate around classed, raced, gendered and sexualised bodily norms. Further research is needed, however, to consider how these beauty technologies are being taken up and responded to by young people.

Finally, this chapter considered how cut-up poetry reconfigured the way young people's digital relationships are typically understood and relayed in educational settings. I noted how gaming and television fandom are seen to elicit different kinds of embodied engagement in ways which channel the heteronormative bifurcation of active male sexuality and passive female sexuality. Seeking to complicate this equation, I explored how cut-up poetry offered a means of tapping into the participant's embodied relationship to these media formats. By redistributing experience from the personal to the collective, the cut-up poetry activity kept the energising affects of these media forms in flow and troubled the tendency to separate and capture them in heteronormatively gendered formations. In the next chapter, I outline how I continued to work with arts-based methods such as cut-up poetry to explore young people's digitally networked bodies and respond to research question three ('How can arts-based approaches be employed in co-productive engagement work to re-imagine young people's digital sexual

cultures and communicate their complexity?').

## CHAPTER SIX - FABRICATING FUTURE BODIES: MAKING DIGITAL SEXUALITIES RESEARCH MATTER

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Three, I mapped how (hetero)normative fantasies of ‘the good life’ are reproduced and reconfigured in young people’s digitally networked peer cultures. In Chapter Four, I then considered the digital body as a site for materialising a better future and outlined the increasingly more-than-human manifestations of what a body can do, be and become. In this final findings chapter, I detail how I drew on speculative fiction, cut-up poetry and textile arts to put this knowledge to work in schools. This chapter draws on data from an arts-based workshop at Green City School to attend to research question three: How can arts-based approaches be employed in co-productive engagement work to re-imagine young people’s digital sexual cultures and communicate their complexity?

As discussed in Chapter Three, I was inspired by Renold’s (2017; 2019a; 2019b; Renold and Ringrose 2019; Renold and Ivinson 2019) work on the making and mattering of darta and dartaphacts to explore how a participatory, arts-based workshop could provide young people with the opportunity to craft objects and texts that might carry experiences and feelings about digital technologies into new places and spaces. While my initial experiments with arts-based methodologies through crafting emojis and cut-up poetry were discussed in Chapters Four and Five, here I detail the development and delivery of a half-day participatory arts workshop entitled ‘Fabricating Future Bodies’. This workshop differed from the previous group work in this study as it took place within the formalised place of the school timetable and engaged a wider cohort of young people in the process.

The Wales Doctoral Training Partnership ‘Knowledge Exchange’ fund supported the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*. This enabled sixteen young people from Green City School to work with me and two professional artists to produce cut-up texts and life-size body fabrics that re-imagined what bodies might do, be and become in the future. With

their permission, the artifacts the young people produced were then shared with the wider school community as part of the UK-based annual awareness-raising event *Safer Internet Day 2019*. In this chapter, I map out the development and direction of this arts-based intervention and how I came to work with speculative fiction and fabrication as means of interrupting sedimented practices around digital relationships education, before engaging with some of the artifacts the participants produced.

## **6.2 INTERVENING INTO *SAFER INTERNET WEEK 2019***

In developing this workshop, 'knowledge exchange' was understood not as the transfer of knowledge from research to practice communities but as an intra-active process of bringing different knowledge-making communities and materials together to open up conversations about young people's digital sexual cultures (McGeeney 2017). Rather than conveying clearly defined research findings to a particular audience, therefore, this workshop played with the possibilities of what the emerging research findings (outlined in section 6.2) could do to unsettle how young people's digital relationships are typically understood and relayed in educational settings. This workshop differed from the creative and arts-based group work of earlier fieldwork as it explored how these arts-based techniques could travel into the formalised space of Green City School's timetable and create opportunities for a wider cohort of young people to explore digitally networked bodies.

Delivering the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* in connection with Green City School's *Safer Internet Week 2019* offered an opportunity to run interference into the scripted format of this annual UK-based awareness-raising event. Coordinated by Childnet International, the Internet Watch Foundation and the South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL), *Safer Internet Day* offers schools a suite of lesson plans, assembly scripts and posters to 'promote the safe and responsible use of technology for young people' (*Safer Internet Day 2020*). Hosted every February, it creates a valuable space for schools to facilitate conversations with young people about how to navigate a rapidly changing digital age. At Green City School, they delivered this work across a whole week to create



more space for these conversations. However, as I discussed in Chapter One, such online safety agendas have been critiqued for their narrow focus on young people's individual, rational decision-making regarding safety and responsible use (Ringrose and Barajas 2011). Much of this work limits what digital practices are considered relevant and for whom, at the expense of engaging with the broader sexual and gender norms shaping young people's digital sexual cultures (Dobson and Ringrose 2016).

Across Chapters Three and Four, I outlined how young people's digital sexual cultures continue to be shaped by heteronorms and considered some of the more 'off the radar' ways that young people are affected by their entanglement with digital technologies (Taylor and Blaise 2014, p. 385). For example, I explored intimate companionships with virtual voice assistants (Chapter Four, section 4.3), the becoming-vegetable of the phallus (Chapter Four, section 4.5), the desire to be reincarnated as a celebrity Instagram rabbit (Chapter Five, section 5.5), the 'natural' make-over of simulated avatars and the mesmerising materiality of spots and slime on YouTube (Chapter Five, section 5.7 and 5.8). These findings were generated as part of my doctoral thesis about young people's contemporary sexual cultures. However, a number of them resonated with plotlines for speculative fiction. Correspondingly, I became curious about working with speculative fiction as a 'mode of attention' (Haraway 2016, p. 230)<sup>29</sup> that could throw 'open the question of pedagogy to consider how we might learn from being affected by the inherent queerness of the world' (Taylor and Blaise 2014, p. 389).

As Ollis, Coll and Harrison (2019, p. 10) highlight, efforts to put participant-led research to work in schools presents dilemmas around how to 'uphold a participatory ethic with young people while also navigating the context of school-based constraints and requirements'. In the following section, I discuss how the *Fabricating Future Bodies*

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<sup>29</sup> Haraway draws this term from her former student Joshua LeBare (2010, p. 4) who calls speculative fiction 'modes' rather than genres to argue that the speculative is 'available to all forms of practice, production, and interpretation'. It is a 'way of experiencing' a text guided by a 'sense of wonder' (Labare 2010, p. 5).

*Workshop* was shaped by the participants and staff at Green City School. I also outline how I worked with the artist practitioners Bryony Gillard and Ailsa Fineron to carefully compose arts-based activities for the workshop that drew on emerging research findings.

### **6.3 RE-VISITING GREEN CITY SCHOOL**

The *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* was hosted by Green City School as I had the most established relationship with this setting. At the end of the summer term in 2018, it was agreed with the staff and the participants that I would return in the autumn to explore how we could share some of their research creations about digital relationships with other members of the school community, as well as support a wider cohort of young people to creatively respond to the research topic. While Droshux, Karma, Basar, Jalil and Layla gifted their digital story (see Chapter Three, section 3.3.1.3) to inform this final part of the research study, Safa, Mia, Isabella, Imogen and Chiara were eager to be actively involved when they were in Year 8. Correspondingly, over several visits between September 2018 and February 2019, we discussed the development of the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* as well as planned an assembly and emoji crafting workshop as part of *Safer Internet Week* at the school.

As I outlined in Chapter Three, Safa, Mia, Isabella and Imogen had earned the derisive nickname ‘Sparkle Committee’ in Year 7 due to their eagerness to assist with school activities. Despite their eagerness to be involved in sharing their research creations in Year 8, they were anxious about how these *Safer Internet Week* activities would be received by pupils in their year and above and requested that they only work with younger pupils in the year below. In addition, the Head of House and Safeguarding Lead were keen to ensure that the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* engaged a range of pupils who were reflective of the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the pupil population at Green City School. Consequently, the staff took responsibility for identifying and inviting Year 7 pupils to engage in the workshop. In total, ten Year 7 pupils signed up to take part alongside Chiara, Safa, Mia, Isabella, Imogen and an additional Year 8 who was friends with them.

As I noted in Chapter Three, working with young people who freely volunteered to give up their time to participate in this study led to a number of exclusions that were inflected by the classed, raced and gendered politics of education. While the staff identification of Year 7 participants was intended to overcome these exclusions, this approach to recruitment did not allow for the same considered process of ensuring freely given informed consent that I had undertaken at the start of the digital relationships research project (see Chapter Three, section 3.2.4). For example, there was a clear expectation from the staff that once participants had arrived at the workshop they would remain for the whole morning. This was driven in part by the school's safeguarding and behaviour management policies that prohibited pupils from walking the school halls unsupervised in the middle of lessons. Consequently, the Year 7 pupils who engaged in the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* are not considered here as research participants and my observations in this chapter focus solely on Chiara, Safa, Mia, Isabella and Imogen. The Year 7's did, however, have the opportunity to share their workshop creations with the wider school community as part of *Safer Internet Week*.

Although focusing on these five participants perpetuated the same privileging of particular pupils 'voices' over others in this thesis, it allowed me to consider what was opened up and what was shut down by putting the research to work in the wider school context. The workshop observations shared in this chapter were undertaken by recording field notes on the day, photographing and glitch filming some of the arts-based activities in process, and engaging Chiara, Safa, Mia, Isabella and Imogen in a follow-up interview about the workshop. In the next section, I outline how the workshop was prepared in collaboration with the artist practitioners Bryony Gillard and Ailsa Fineron. In 2018, Bryony and I had been working together on a feminist heritage project during which I learnt about her practice co-producing speculative fictions in participatory arts workshops with young people. We began to discuss how these techniques might be adapted to re-animate emerging findings from my doctoral research and Bryony also introduced me to her colleague Ailsa, a visual artist and writer, whose previous work has explored topics related to body image and sex and relationships education (SRE) in schools. Together the three of us began to develop the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*.

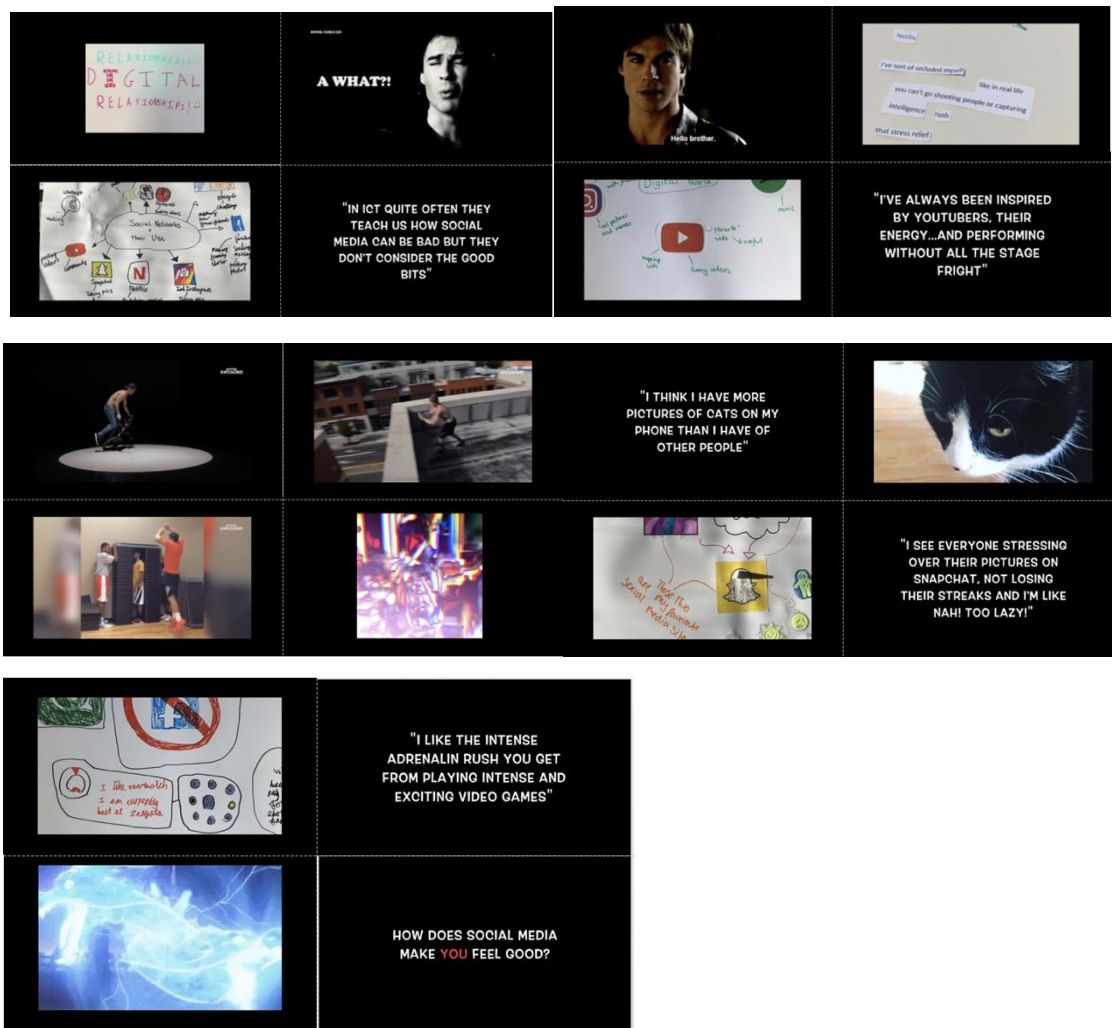
## **6.4 OUTLINE OF THE FABRICATING FUTURE BODIES WORKSHOP**

The *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* was comprised of three key elements, the introduction and the warm-up; assembling speculative fictions; and fabricating future bodies. Inspired by Haraway's (2016, p. 12) refrain that it 'matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with', for each arts-based activity Ailsa, Bryony and I took care to choose art materials, texts and empirical data that picked up on key threads of the research study and mobilised the politics of matter to ignite imaginative and spontaneous responses. In-person and via a google drive I shared images and quotes from fieldwork with Ailsa and Bryony and suggested a range of fabrics that connected to research threads. In addition, we collectively compiled a word document full of quotes that provided rich descriptions of bodies, feelings and/or technologies. This process is outlined in further detail in sections 6.4.2 and 6.4.3.

### **6.4.1 INTRODUCTION AND WARM-UP**

After introducing myself, Bryony and Ailsa, the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* began with a series of short warm-up activities to get participants thinking about digital relationships. Firstly, I introduced the digital story that Droshux, Karma, Basar, Jalil and Layla had gifted to the workshop. Opening with Basar's assertion that 'in ICT quite often they teach lessons about how social media can be bad but like they don't consider like the good bits of social media'. The digital story provided examples of digital practices that made these participants feel good in their bodies from video games to Netflix shows to cat pictures to Snapchat filters. It brought together various research creations (maps, screenshots, cut-up poems, quotes) that these five participants had produced throughout the fieldwork sessions and provided an account of the research project to date (see Figure 22).

FIGURE 22: SCREENSHOTS OF DROSHUX'S, KARMA'S, BASAR'S, JALIL'S AND LAYLA'S DIGITAL STORY



After watching the video, workshop participants were divided into four groups of four and provided with print-outs of screenshots that had been gathered throughout the research project. In their groups, the workshop participants were invited to sort the images into three different categories of their choice. Once they had sorted their images into categories we discussed the process as a whole group. The purpose of the task was to encourage the workshop participants to think about the different kinds of bodies and materials we encounter through social media and video games as well as how we view such visual content differently. For example, Chiara's group sorted their screenshots into 'fake' including a screenshot of the singer Beyonce, 'real' including an image of slime and the rabbit screenshot but struggled to come up with a third category for the other images.

In contrast, Safa's group sorted their screenshots into 'emotion' including Beyonce because she looked 'fierce', 'time' including a before and after make-over image and 'stuff we like' including the horse screenshot.

The final warm-up activity brought the focus onto the participant's own bodies through an activity in which they hand-drew 'selfies'. This activity was introduced by Bryony who invited the participants to place a felt pen at the top of a piece of A3 paper, place their free hand at the top of their forehead and close their eyes. They were then prompted to trace the contours and features of their faces with their fingers translating these lines to the paper through one continuous drawing motion (see figure 23). Bryony called this activity 'drawing out feelings' as the gentle drawing action brought attention to the body and enabled a variety of feelings to surface. The room fell quiet during this activity except for the sound of felt pens moving across paper. Once the participants opened their eyes to view their 'selfies', the room erupted with laughter at the way the hand-drawn contours had distorted their faces. Bryony prompted the group to consider what emotions were conveyed through their 'selfies'.

*FIGURE 23: EXAMPLE HAND DRAWN 'SELFIES'*



#### 6.4.2 ASSEMBLING SPECULATIVE FICTIONS

Following the introduction and warm-up activities, the groups were asked to imagine it was the year 2119 and consider: What will our bodies be made of? How will we express our feelings? How will we know what other bodies are feeling? Each group was provided with a selection of texts and invited to underline and cut out words or phrases that grabbed their attention to assemble a piece of speculative fiction that responded to one of these questions. Building on the cut-up poetry activity I outlined in Chapter Five (section 5.6), participants were provided with anonymised research quotes alongside a selection of extracts from speculative fiction literature, popular culture, contemporary art, news reports and academic texts that provided rich descriptions of bodies, feelings and/or technologies (see Appendix N).

Drawing on a wider range of texts was inspired in part by Maclure, Holmes, McRae and Jones (2010, p. 546) who argue against the impossible insulation of research from 'contamination by art, cinema, journalism or popular culture'. In their study, they purposefully interfered with the 'everyday banality' of video data from a classroom ethnography by intercutting it with visual images and texts from a range of contexts to 'spark new thoughts, sensations or reflections' (MacLure et al 2010, p. 546). Similarly, Markham (2013, section 4.2, n.p) calls for a 'collaborative remix' approach to inquiry that creatively reimagines how elements might be put together producing 'an assemblage that one hopes has significance, salience and meaning for those people who experience it'. Significantly, the texts we introduced were carefully selected to not only provide inspiration for the participant's speculative fictions but to inject a plurality of critical and creative voices that challenged dominant narratives around bodily ideals, feelings and technologies. This process of selecting texts with which to imagine different futures mobilised a citational practice that was wary of 'reproducing the world around certain bodies' and engaged with the wider politics of speculative fiction (Ahmed 2013; Truman 2018).

As Ella Briens (2011, p. 121) observes, speculative fiction has long shaped the popular imaginary around new technologies and operated as a site where advances in science and technology are debated, elaborated, and re-imagined. While mainstream speculative fiction has tended to uncritically reinforce the figure of the white male saviour and his Western imperialist vision of rational scientific progress, the genre has a long-standing history of challenging normative understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, ability and race as they intersect with techno-science (Truman 2018). Numerous anthologies have documented the flourishing of feminist speculative fiction in the 1960s through to the 1980s which occurred alongside the women's liberation movement and offered further political and technological critiques of hetero-patriarchal white supremacist culture (VanderMeer and VanderMeer 2015).

Aligning with this tradition, we incorporated quotes from Octavia Butler<sup>30</sup> and Ursula K. Le Guin<sup>31</sup> as well as contemporary examples of feminist speculative fiction from Nnedi Okorafor<sup>32</sup> and Kelly Barnhill<sup>33</sup> (VanderMeer and VanderMeer 2015). We also included lyrics from the critically acclaimed album *Dirty Computer* by the musician Janelle Monae (2018) whose fifteen-year sci-fi discography has been in ongoing dialogue with this twentieth-century era of feminist speculative fiction (Romano 2018). Furthermore, we selected extracts from the theoretical work of Haraway (2016) who calls for speculative fabulation as an important feminist practice for thinking beyond the mundane fiction of

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<sup>30</sup> Octavia Butler was an African American science fiction author whose work explores topics such as sexual identity and racial conflict. In 1995, she became the first science fiction writer to receive a MacArthur Fellowship for extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits (Aguirre 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin was an acclaimed American author best known for her works of feminist speculative fiction such as the Earthsea fantasy series. Her 1986 essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' influentially disputed the notion that the phallic spear was the earliest human tool, proposing that it was instead the receptacle (Le Guin 2019).

<sup>32</sup> Nnedi Okorafor is a Nigerian-American writer of fantasy and science fiction for children and adults.

<sup>33</sup> Kelly Barnhill is an American author of children's literature, fantasy, and science fiction.



nature/culture, human/more-than-human, male/female binaries. From her boundary-blurring feminist cyborg to her more recent figuration of the tentacular chthulucene<sup>34</sup>, Haraway has drawn on feminist speculative fiction throughout her writing to offer hybrid nature-culture reconfigurations that address our entanglement with the more-than-human world (Haraway 2016). Working with speculative fictions, therefore, supports efforts to foreground feminist figurations that express affirmative ideals and displace the 'vision of consciousness away from the phallogocentric mode' (Braidotti 2011, p. 248; Haraway 2004).

Inspired by this tradition of feminist speculative fiction, this workshop sought to harness the ability of the speculative mode to foreground feminist figurations and disrupt 'habitual ways of knowing' (Truman 2018, p. 31) in order to consider the multitude of ways that the body is being recomposed in connection with digital technologies. Drawing on some of the threads that I mapped out in Chapter Five, I also gathered together a selection of text descriptions of the FaceTune mobile application and SIMS 4, transcripts from Dr Squishies' slime videos and the Merrell Twins Project Upgrade along with related anonymised research quotes from participants. In addition, Ailsa and Bryony gathered together texts from literature on contemporary art that explored the relationship between technologies and the body. For example, I discuss in section 6.6 how an extract from an art critics essay on the influence of digital technology on body posture was taken up in interesting ways by Mia, Isabella and Chiara (Harbinson 2017).

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<sup>34</sup> Haraway draws the term chthulu from a species of spider known as the *Pimoida Cthulhu*, using 'the spider's web as a metaphor for a vision of the world in which there is no hierarchy between humans and nonhuman animals, where instead all lives are interwoven' (Basciano 2017, para 4). She offers the term 'Chthulucene' as a call to action against the Anthropocene, which denotes the current geological age where human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

Starting with a range of text prompts that the participants could cut-up and re-assemble offered an accessible way into the task and avoided the blank page syndrome that often impedes creative writing. Chiara regarded this as a positive aspect of the workshop and suggested that ‘this is what [they] should always be doing’ in lessons. In the space of twenty-five minutes, all of the groups had created a short piece of speculative fiction. Re-working and re-mixing research data with a range of other texts nurtured unlikely connections between different stories, ideas, feelings bodies, technologies and practices that sparked new thoughts and connections. In section 6.6 and 6.7 of this chapter, I consider what these speculative fictions do and how they worked in connection with the fabricated body figures to ‘add liveliness’ to the research data about young people’s digital sexual cultures (Maclure et al 2010, p. 547).

#### **6.4.3 FABRICATING FUTURE BODIES**

After every group had read out their speculative fictions, they were asked to create a bodily pose that reflected a feeling from their cut-up text. A volunteer from each group then took up the pose by lying on a large sheet of felt and, once comfortable, other members of their group carefully drew around the body contour. The resulting body shapes depicted power poses, exuberance and movement as well as vulnerability, protectiveness and tension. At this point, the workshop participants took a mid-morning break during which Bryony and Ailsa cut out the felt body contours and lay them on protective polythene sheets. Meanwhile, I prepared the room with fabric pens, paints, scissors, fabrics and other materials that could be used to colour, pattern, annotate and embellish the fabricated future bodies.

Using felt fabrics as the base for their body contours harnessed felt as both a material and as a past participle of the verb ‘to feel’ (Vaccaro 2015): connecting to my research interest in the felt and affective register of digital technologies in their everyday peer cultures. The other fabrics and materials picked up on threads from the research project by including, for example, faux animal furs that connected to Castell Q’s discussions of digital pet cultures (Chapter Five, section 5.5), a shimmering fish scale fabric that linked to Safa’s talk

about the ocean and mermaids (Chapter Four, section 4.6) and metallic studs that were akin to those worn by Droshux's favourite *Overwatch* character JunkRat. These fabrics offered different materials to think-with which we hoped might engage the participant's imaginations.

Returning from their break to a room full of colourful, tactile textiles was immediately met with participants draping, swooshing and cloaking the fabrics over themselves, creating new intimacies between their bodies and the materials that would form their future body visions. After they had selected the materials they wanted to work with, each group set out on the tactile and hands-on process of cutting and sticking fabrics, squeezing paints into swirls across the bodies and pressing fabric pens into the felt. Building on the cut-up texts with the Fabricating Future Bodies activity enabled participants to give form-force to their future body visions in a way that also engaged their bodies in the process (Renold and Ringrose 2019, para 16). It was a practice akin to body mapping within wider sexualities research and education which works with and on the body to explore the sensual and emotional aspects of bodily norms in safe, lively and dynamic ways (Chenhall et al. 2013; Renold and Iverson 2019).

While utilising a craft-based hands-on approach may seem counter-intuitive to the exploration of young people's digital body cultures, the task tapped into the material history of subordinated and feminised textile arts which are also connected to the hidden history of women's involvement in the field of computer science (Brown 2019; Hicks 2017).<sup>35</sup> In Chapter Two, I noted how these artistic traditions are seen to engage 'alternative economies of embodied looking' that disrupt phallogocentric modes of vision

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<sup>35</sup> The intricate Jacquard loom and its innovative punch card input method inspired the development of the early computer. English mathematician Ada Lovelace is widely credited with publishing the first algorithm to be carried out by this Analytical Engine (Brown 2019).

that capture and contain bodily capacities (Marks 2002, p. 6). This tactile approach connects to the haptic viscosity of visual social media content (see Chapter Five, section 5.9) which is much 'more inclined to graze than to gaze' (Marks and Polan 2000, p. 162) at the marvellous material specificity of things (Bennett 2009). Furthermore, by deliberately cultivating invention, deception and craft in the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*, this speculative intervention endeavoured to disrupt the categorical distinctions between the real and the fake, material and the virtual, online and offline, human and more-than-human that underpin dominant online safeguarding discourses.

## 6.5 FELT EVENTS

Bringing the Year 7's and Year 8's together with a range of texts and materials in this workshop was intended to open up conversations about young people's digital sexual cultures. However, this process was equally capable of shutting down and blocking the workshop participants' power to speak and act (Mayes 2016). Moving from the relative freedom of the small group Friday lunchtime fieldwork sessions to working with sixteen pupils in the formalised space of the school's Monday morning timetable presented several challenges. Despite the best intentions to run interference in the way power is typically understood and relayed in classroom settings, renegotiating pedagogic relationships proved to be a destabilising, precarious and ambiguous process (Ollis, Coll and Harrison 2019).

The workshop required the participants to work in small groups of four. In preparation, the school staff had encouraged Mia, Isabella, Safa, Imogen and Chiara to work with the Year 7's as peer leads to support their engagement with the activities. On the day, however, the prospect of working with unfamiliar pupils in mixed-gender and mixed-aged groups was met with protestations from the Year 7's and the Year 8's. While during the warm-up activities Mia, Isabella and Chiara worked separately with groups of Year 7's and Safa and Imogen worked together with two Year 7 boys, these group dynamics were a challenge. For example, Chiara dominated her group discussions during the image-sorting activity shutting down some of the Year 7's ideas whereas Mia stepped back from this

activity engaging with little enthusiasm (see Gallagher 2008). Furthermore, the workshop participants quickly splintered into friendship clusters every time there was a transition from one warm-up activity to another.

Correspondingly, when it came to 'assembling cut-up texts' and the 'fabricating future bodies' activities we allowed Mia, Isabella and Chiara to work together. This also enabled the majority of Year 7's to work in peer groups with which they were more familiar and seemingly comfortable. Tensions were not calmed however as Mia, Isabella and Chiara quietly sniped at each other about the direction of their speculative text and fabricated future figure. Similarly, Safa and Imogen were at odds with the Year 7 boys in their group who they described as 'irritating' in the follow-up interview due to their struggle to engage in some of the activities. As I will discuss in the next section, Safa and Imogen managed to manoeuvre the workshop activities so they worked independently from the boys in their group.

Despite the hopeful rhetoric of bringing different knowledge-making communities 'together', this workshop manifested in much more divisive, tense and complex group dynamics. Navigating fractious peer relationships left me with ambivalent feelings about the workshop and prompted me to question my motivations for delivering it (Ollis, Coll and Harrison 2019). Bringing the Year 7's and Year 8's together over the course of several visits may have proved a better model for building relationships. However, the half-day format was circumscribed by the pressures on Green City School with regards to the time, space and staff resources they could offer. Even with additional time and resources, numerous scholars have documented the challenge of interfering in classroom dynamics within participatory research (Gallagher 2008; Mayes 2016; Fields, Gilbert and Miller 2015; Ollis, Coll and Harrison 2019). Rather than viewing these peer tensions as intrusions upon the work, I take heed from researchers who argue that these difficult peer dynamics can operate as important sites of knowledge (Fields, Gilbert and Miller 2015; Ollis, Coll and Harrison 2019).

## 6.6 STAYING WITH THE TROUBLE

Inspired by Haraway's (2016) call to 'stay with the trouble', Niccolini, Zarabadi and Ringrose (2018, p. 325) see tension as an activating and agentic force in the 'troubled life of the classroom' that can be 'worked, rather than worked through or resolved'. They suggest that arts-based practices cannot promise harmony but can provide a 'contact zone' that 'enables new affective relationalities between humans and nonhumans' which might open up new avenues of inquiry (Niccolini, Zarabadi and Ringrose 2018, p. 325). In this section, I consider how Safa's and Imogen's group worked together-apart and how this shaped their workshop creations.

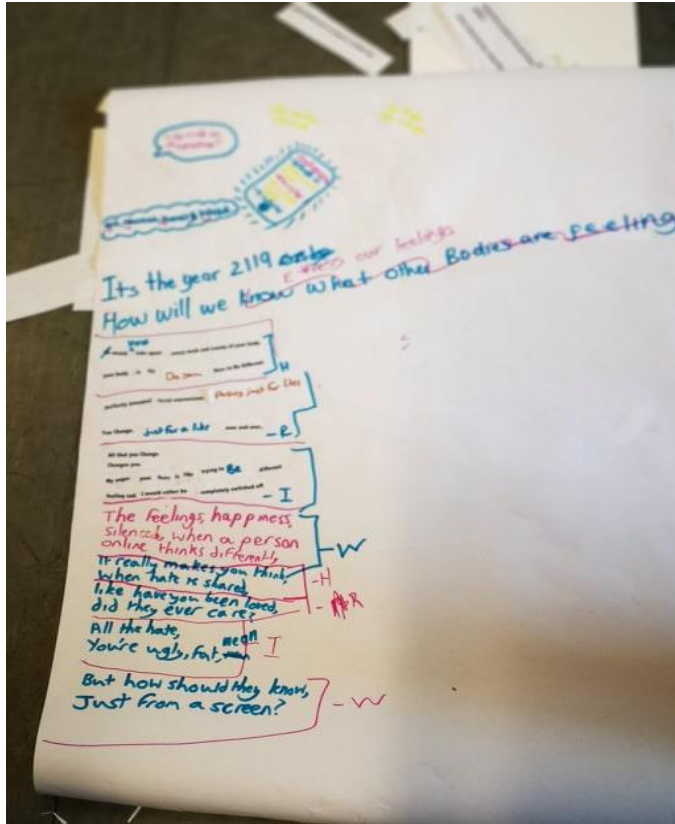
For Safa and Imogen, the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* was the culmination of their dedicated engagement with the research project over 12-months. They came to the workshop enthusiastic and primed to play with the possibilities of what arts-based methods could do. While the boys in their group struggled to get started with the activities, Safa and Imogen pressed ahead on their own terms. During the 'assembling speculative fictions' task, for example, they moved away from the cut-up technique halfway through to express themselves in their own hand-written rhymes (see Figure 24). In addition, they manoeuvred the 'Fabricating Future Bodies' task so that they could work separately from the Year 7 boys by creating two connected body poses (see Figure 25). Despite the difficulties that Safa's and Imogen's group had in working together, the *dartaphacts* they produced materialised this peer tension in dynamic and productive ways.

### 6.6.1 EVERY NOOK AND CRANNY

In Chapter Four (section 4.3), I outlined how Safa and Imogen had been eager to emphasise their enjoyment of social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat in fieldwork sessions with Mia and Isabella: suggesting that 'there's not really anything bad on social media' (Imogen's words). Furthermore, Safa pointed to the messages of body positivity and confidence that she encountered through social media celebrities such as The Merrell Twins. However, working together in this workshop enabled Safa and Imogen

to explore different experiences with and feelings about social media than had surfaced in fieldwork sessions with Mia and Isabella. For example, in their poem, Safa and Imogen addressed some of the pressures of plugging into social media's post-feminist visual culture of bodily display.

FIGURE 24: SAFA'S AND IMOGEN'S CUT-UP POEM



*POEM ONE: EVERY NOOK AND CRANNY*

Would you take apart every nook and cranny of your body?

Your body is fat. Do you dare to be different?

Perfectly executed facial expressions, posing just for likes

You change, just for a like, over and over

All that you Change

Changes you

My anger, your fear is like trying to be different

Feeling sad, I would rather be completely switched off.

The feelings, happiness

Silenced when a person online thinks differently.

It really makes you think when hate is shared

Like have you been loved,

Did they ever care?

All the hate,

You're ugly, fat, mean

But how should they know,

Just from a screen?

This emotive poem powerfully articulates the demands placed upon young people's bodies in a 'scopic biotechnological landscape of image creation and exchange' where existing commodified gendered and sexualised norms are intensified (Renold and Ringrose 2017, p. 1066; Ringrose and Harvey 2015; Elias and Gill 2018). The collective cut-up and handwritten composition gives the poem a multi-vocal quality: exemplifying how poetic inquiry can distil complex experiences into affectively powerful forms that reach out and exceed the specificity of Safa's and Imogen's personal experience. Although they do not



directly work with other participant's quotes in this poem, the cut-up technique inspired a creative re-visioning of the digitally networked body that pulls together a number of research threads from this thesis.

For example, the poem's second line ambiguously appeals to the body positivity movement that I discussed in Chapter Five (section 5.3) with the matter of fact assertion: 'Your body is fat. Do you dare to be different?' Inducing a sense of ambiguity is key to the art of poetry which defies the closure of singular definitions and coherent argumentation by inviting multiple readings (Wolosky 2001). This line can be read both as a call to embrace different body shapes as well as a demand to transform one's body. In its ambiguity, it encapsulates the competing and contradictory demands of a globalised post-feminist media culture that simultaneously celebrates individuality and punishes non-conformity (Ringrose 2012; Braidotti 2011). Notably, the poem goes on to observe the forceful idealisation of slim embodiment through the injurious force of being called 'ugly' and 'fat' online which was a recurring refrain across my study (see Chapter Five, section 5.2 and 5.3), and in earlier work with young people in this area (Ringrose 2011).

While the future-orientation of Safa's and Imogen's poem is less overt than those produced by their peers (see section 6.7), it's framing as speculative fiction nevertheless invites imaginative readings. For example, the opening question of 'tak[ing] apart every nook and cranny of your body' not only acknowledges the intense scrutiny that bodies are subjected to but conjures a literal image of a body that can be disassembled. It resonates with participant's illustrations of how body parts, such as boobs, bums, legs, waists, torsos, are 'cut, cropped and cast out across cyber-socialities' (Renold and Ringrose 2017, p. 1067) as well as taken apart through dermatological procedures (see Chapter Five, section 5.9.1). The poem further troubles the boundaries of the human body with the observation: 'Feeling sad, I would rather be completely switched off.' This line evokes a hybridisation of machine and organism whereby the body is capable of shutting down the transmission of signals in its sympathetic nervous system just as a computer or smartphone can power down its electrical circuit (Haraway 1991).

Switching off from social media content and contact is often promoted as a healthy lifestyle choice by online safeguarding discourses and young people themselves (Coughlan 2019; Marsh 2016). However, participants across my study highlighted the practical difficulty of disentangling from social media's lively visual ecology. In Chapter Five (section 5.3), I outlined how Claire and her friend from Westland College continued to be haunted by the mediated memories of abusive body-shaming comments on Instagram despite deleting the application (Handyside and Ringrose 2017). Similarly, participants at Castell Q described how Instagram's explore pages routinely plugged them back into a gallery of images that centred slim, muscular and toned bodies regardless of the content they followed. These accounts highlight the limits of a simply prosthetic understanding of young people and social media applications as unified entities that can be easily defined and disconnected. Charged affective encounters in young networked peer cultures can live in and on the body past the point of viewing. Correspondingly, the desire to be 'completely switched off' can be understood as a powerful articulation of the way young people's lives are rendered temporarily un-liveable through the life-destroying affects of encountering body-shaming comments and idealised bodies on social media (Ringrose 2011; Butler 2004).

In its expression of bodily feelings such as 'sadness', 'anger', 'fear' and 'happiness, silenced', Safa's and Imogen's poem taps into the palpable feelings of disaffection that weighed heavy in fieldwork discussions about digital bodily display. Despite the melancholic tone of the poem the process of assembling it was a seemingly affirming one for Safa and Imogen who read it out loud proudly and emphatically in the workshop. Through their poem typically pathologised and privatised emotions were given vivid expression in the semi-public space of the workshop without necessarily being reduced to the personal or confessional (Renold 2017). Detached from the workshop context however this poem risks being re-absorbed into the narrative comfort of pathologising social media as a source of bodily malaise for young people (Maclure et al. 2010). The plurality of the poem is arguably lost when presented in a neatly typed up form or read aloud by a single person. Considering the poem in relation to the fabricated future bodies that Safa, Imogen and the Year 7 boys produced not only keeps the plurality in play but

situates the disaffection in relation to broader modalities and spatialities of gendered embodiment at Green City School.

### 6.6.2 FABRICATED FIGURES

FIGURE 25: FABRICATED MASCULINE AND FEMININE FIGURES



As I noted in the introduction to this section, Safa and Imogen manoeuvred the 'Fabricating Future Bodies' task so that the boys could contribute but still work independently from them by creating two connected body poses (see figure 25). They tasked the Year 7 boys with working on the figure on the left, which Safa and Imogen referred to throughout as 'he' and described as 'free' and letting 'his emotions show'.

Meanwhile, they worked on the figure on the right which they referred to throughout as 'she' and described as 'trapping her emotions inside' and 'weighed down by emotions'. Here I discuss how the juxtaposition of these figures builds on Safa's and Imogen's poem as well as gives form to the troubled gender relations at Green City School that their friendship group had discussed in earlier fieldwork sessions.

The fabricated feminine figure on the right is in a closed protective posture, waves of feeling ('depressed', 'sad', 'trapped') are shown rising up her legs and through her stomach to a broken heart cut from tin foil and hidden behind reflective mirrored card. The figures inhibited pose resonates with Young's (2005) observation that girls and young women embody the risks of objectification through introverted bodily comportment which hinders their capacity and willingness to engage in certain activities. For example, in Chapter Five (section 5.3) I noted how Claire at Westland College was scared to post pictures of herself online due to fear of body-shaming comments. Similarly, the head of the fabricated feminine figure is full of critical commentary such as 'fake, so ugly', 'she's weird', 'she has issues', 'what is wrong with her?' 'who was mad enough to like her pic?' An additional speech bubble shows the figure pondering: 'Am I ugly? I guess I am if they say so, I look bad in my clothes and I don't fit in'.

By glueing pejorative and pathologising speech bubbles to the figure, Safa and Imogen materialise how online comments can stick to and fix bodies in place. Terms such as 'weird', 'ugly', 'fake', 'wrong' and 'mad' are powerful points of discursive fixation as well as affective capture that over-score the felt force of post-feminist pathologies and embodied gender norms (Kofoed and Ringrose 2012). The fabricated figure was so encumbered with these cut-out speech bubbles that it was hard to move it without the comments becoming unfixed. The fragile quality of the fabricated figure symbolises both the way in which such terms pin bodies in place as well as the potential for movement to loosen the grip of these subjectifying forces (see Borovica 2017; Austin 2017). Movement, however, is presented as the preserve of the fabricated masculine figure in this dactaphact. The exuberant leap and outstretched arms of the left-hand figure depicts a body unencumbered by post-feminist pathologies. Instead, the figure's chest is filled with

affirmative feelings of 'freedom', 'love' and 'peace' and its head bears a crown annotated with the words 'you can be anything'.

The fabricated masculine figures animated pose calls to mind Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen's frustration at Green City School's policy of gender segregating P.E requiring boys to do parkour and girls to do gymnastics (see Chapter Four, section 4.6). Notably, YouTube clips of muscular young men engaging in parkour had featured in Droshux's, Karma's, Basar's, Jalil's and Layla's digital story on 'What feels good in the body?' which we played at the outset of the workshop (see Figure 22). Both parkour and gymnastics centre on skills such as balance, endurance, spatial awareness, agility, precision, and coordination. However, parkour is an outdoor sport that involves moving 'freely over and through any terrain using only the abilities of the body' whereas gymnastics is an indoor sport performed in constricted spaces such as a 12-meter by 12-meter events floor (Parkour UK 2020). The spatiality of gymnastics, therefore, channels the confinement that girls and young women are found to embody in everyday life (Young 2005). Despite the strength requirements of gymnastics, scholars have noted how it can be feminised and devalued through its focus on aesthetics, artistry, grace and perfection (Krane 2018; Cohen 2013; Petca, Bivolaru and Graf 2012). In a similar fashion to the visual culture of social media explored in Safa's and Imogen's poem, gymnastics is a sport in which 'perfectly executed' poses are rewarded with quantified scores. By juxtaposing the inhibited fabricated feminine figure with the animated fabricated masculine figure, this daptaphact appears to put cultures of bodily display on social media into conversation with the broader gendered body politics at Green City School.

The inhibition depicted in the fabricated feminine figure was particularly striking given how animated and raucous Mia, Isabella, Safa, Imogen and Chiara had been in fieldwork sessions throughout my study. As I noted in Chapter Four (section 4.6), this group expressed frustration at what they observed to be sexist practices of gender segregation at Green City School and punctuated their points by leaping on tables, swinging between chairs and parading around the classroom chanting 'Change the world! Change the world! Change the world!' This desire for change also appeared to bubble away amongst the

wider pupil body at Green City School as Mia, Isabella, Safa, Imogen and Chiara shared anecdotes about pupil-led surveys calling for girls to take parkour lessons as well as boys challenging the school's gendered uniform policy by wearing skirts en masse (see Chapter Four, section 4.6). However, as I noted in Chapter Four, pupil-led efforts to instigate change were met with the resilience of gendered policies and practices.

The movement and revelry of earlier fieldwork sessions were notably missing from the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*. For example, where anger and frustration had been playfully voiced in other fieldwork sessions, in this workshop their contributions could be read as pensive expressions of immobility and stuck-ness. The fabricated figures give form to the complex ways that young people's bodies were restrained by the material-discursive forces of gender segregating practices at Green City School and, in combination with the poem, points to the intensification of these norms online through social media's visual culture of bodily display. This is not to suggest that Safa and Imogen necessarily felt more inhibited in the context of *Fabricated Future Bodies Workshop*. On the contrary, their cut-up poem powerfully articulated difficult feelings of bodily malaise that were unvoiced in earlier fieldwork sessions. Furthermore, the decision to expand the fabricated figure into two poses meant that Safa and Imogen's group took up more lateral space than any other. While this emerged from a spontaneous effort to overcome the difficulties the group had in working together, it also challenged moves to set pupils apart from each other along gendered lines. The fabricated masculine and feminine figures remain tethered to one another and the product of opening a 'contact zone' between Safa and Imogen and the Year 7 boys.

While the collective making of these dartaphacts evoked a different way of pupils being in relation to one another and occupying space together (Halberstam 2018), I am mindful that the Year 7 boys who participated in this group are silenced for the reasons I outlined in section 6.3. My supervisors highlighted that the left-hand masculine figure is harder to read as a recognisable human form. Perhaps this fluidity of form can support an understanding of masculinity that is complex, shifting and open to movement and change. However, the reading I have offered in this chapter risks reifying a monadic understanding

of masculinity. My analysis is based on observations of its creation and discussions with Safa and Imogen who described the fabricated masculine figure as free and unencumbered by bodily pressures. Yet in this research, I have observed how boys did encounter pressure to adhere to idealised norms of strong muscularity on social media (Chapter Four, section 5.4) and the way masculinist displays of embodied ability online could be socially rewarded offline (Chapter Five, section 5.6.1). I have also considered the extent to which dominant socio-cultural understandings of masculine embodiment were subverted through participant's fluid spectatorial identifications online (Chapter Four, section 5.4).

Significantly, all the boys to participate in my study were white and predominantly middle-class. This was not the case with the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* as staff had endeavoured to ensure it was reflective of the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the pupil population at Green City School. In Chapter Three (section 3.6), I observed how latent discourses that constitute particular classed and racialised masculinities as 'problems' in educational policy and practice were evident in participants talk about Green City School. Therefore, I am aware that the Year 7 boys who participated in this workshop were not unencumbered by bodily regulation. Missing from my analysis in this chapter is thus an understanding of how local raced and classed norms intersect with the gendered body politics explored in these fabricated figures.

## **6.7 FUTURE GIRL?**

In this section, I discuss the cut-up poem and fabricated figure created by Mia's, Isabella's and Chiara's group. Earlier in this chapter, I noted how a piece of text on 'shifting postures in light of connective technology' (Harbinson 2017) provided the initial inspiration for Mia's, Isabella's and Chiara's cut-up poem. Specifically, a misreading by Mia of the line 'spines curve over laptops' prompted the group to think about digital technologies being pushed into the very fibres of the human body as opposed to the texts intended reference to the way bodies comport to accommodate technology. While in chapter two I noted how science fiction had inspired fantasies of escaping the flesh, here Mia, Isabella and

Chiara consider what happens when the inhuman forces of technology find their way into the body.

*POEM TWO: TEST SUBJECT 15066*

We haven't always been like this  
Not quite one thing and not quite the other  
Technology is part of our lives and it  
Has become  
Part of our evolutionary journey  
All that you change  
Changes you  
You can easily transform yourself  
We change between states  
We will become something else  
Spines curve over laptops and minds hum from blue light  
"To make robots practical, flaws must be removed.  
To make robots endearing, flaws must be added"  
Life is bigger than your programming  
My whole life I felt as though I lived between two states  
Now, the sun falls.

This atmospheric poem was translated into a disconcerting fabricated figure of a girl pinned down by several hands and chained at the wrists (see Figure 26). A green microchip is sticking out of her brain. The fabricated figure is annotated as 'test subject 15066' with the group elaborating in the workshop that 'she' is now an 'it', one amongst many to voluntarily undergo this micro-chipping procedure.



FIGURE 26: FABRICATED FUTURE GIRL



The groups striking, dystopic vision of girlhood powerfully unsettles the idealised images of girls as vanguards of social change which I discussed in Chapters Four and Five (McRobbie 2008; Harris 2004). Picking up on similar themes to Safa and Imogen, Mia's, Isabella's and Chiara's cut-up poem references the seeming ease with which you can 'transform yourself' in contemporary social and cultural life as well as the careful balancing act required between being too flawed or too flawless, too real or too fake. Investment in the body is seen to aide women's social mobility yet comes with 'intense

forms of surveillance, scrutiny and individualism' that operate as new modalities of constraint (Rich and Evans 2013, p. 20). While Mia, Isabella and Chiara stated that the fabricated future girl volunteered to be micro-chipped, this 'choice' is accompanied by several hands interfering with and seemingly restraining her body. Labelling the fabricated girl figure 'test subject 15066' also suggests a lack of agency indicating that this is an experimental procedure that has been conducted with unknown results on thousands before. Rather than upgrading to the empowered self, the fabricated future girl complicates neo-liberal logics of rational consent and individual humanist agency which underpin the construction of girls as newly free (Evans and Riley 2014; see Chapter Four, section 4.6).

In this thesis, I have evidenced the persistence of conservative gender and sexual relations in part through the participant's everyday encounters with feminised technology. For example, in Chapter Four (section 4.3) I discussed the docile and compliant virtual personal assistants Alexa and Siri and in Chapter Five (section 5.7) I noted the emergence of digitally fabricated social media models such as Lil Miquela. These technologies are part of a long-standing tendency to feminise and eroticise technology in times of unprecedented social mobility for women which betrays a continued hetero-patriarchal desire for control over women's bodies.

Braidotti (2013, p. 105) details how the machine-women of Marcel L'Herbier's film *L'Inhumaine* (1924) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) re-cast fear and desire towards the technological innovation of the industrial revolution into 'an ancestral patriarchal suspicion towards women and women in positions of power'. In more contemporary films such as Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) 'masculine fantasies of sexual compliance and desire for a beguiling female robot [...] play out alongside fears of the return of the monstrous feminine [...] the castrating "other" to the vulnerable human male' (Taylor 2016, p. 12). The current fixation on feminised technology is occurring at a juncture when 'automation threatens not only unskilled labour, but also such bastions of middle-class masculinity as the lower echelons of banking, insurance and law' (Hayter 2017).

Feminised technology re-inscribes particular ideas of womanhood as compliant, responsive and endearing in a manner that risks becoming a new 'measure of living women' operating like a 'Turing Test in reverse' (Avner 2016).<sup>36</sup> In Chapter Four, for example, I observed how Alexa has been marketed as a kind of digital housewife 2.0 who replaces absent mothers and assists fathers in raising their daughters. Furthermore, in Chapter Five, I noted how the distinction between digitally fabricated models and human women on Instagram is increasingly hard to read as simulated smooth skin becomes a new standard of beauty. Given the presence of digitally fabricated women in participants lives it is perhaps unsurprising that Mia's, Isabella's and Chiara's future vision of girlhood conveys anxiety over the ever-shifting boundaries between human and machine. The poems portrayal of a body in transformation, shifting 'between states' and in the process of becoming 'something else' as the 'sun falls' could be read as an allegory of the physiological flux of sexual puberty and entry into womanhood, particularly as it was created by pre-teen girls at an age typically associated with pubescence. Here sexual maturation is marked not by the onset of menarche but the force of technological intrusion, capture and control.

Puberty has long acted as a site for societal and cultural anxieties surrounding girls as 'both bearers of power and objects of risk' (Renold and Ringrose 2013, p. 248). In line with popular representations of 'possessed', 'demonised' or otherwise monstrous pubescent girls (Creed 1993), Mia's, Isabella's and Chiara's vision of adolescent transformation resembles a Frankensteinian monster that has been rendered into a dehumanised and monstrous 'it' through technological experimentation. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* tells the story of an over-reaching young Enlightenment-era scientist who attempts to master nature by creating new life forms but succeeds only in

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<sup>36</sup> The Turing Test was developed by the English mathematician and computer scientist Alan Turing in 1950, to test a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behaviour that is equivalent to or indistinguishable from that of a human being.

constructing a hideous monster. Crucially, however, the scientist fails to master the monster he makes as he cannot control its mind or its feelings (Stryker 1994).

Similar to Frankenstein's monster, the fabricated future girl is granted a voice through the cut-up poem which questions what it is in the process of becoming and asserts that 'life is bigger than your programming'. This line suggests an ability to undo the coding of the body. Furthermore, the fabricated future girl refuted and exceeded Mia's, Isabella's and Chiara's own creative intentions as they observed that she was meant to look sad, not scary. The figures sharp teeth and beaming red eyes give the restrained figure a threatening edge as if it might rip itself free from its chains and wreak havoc on its creators.

### **6.7.1 REBEL GIRLS**

With their dystopian vision of future girlhood, Mia, Isabella and Chiara stated that they wanted to challenge the presumption that the future will be positive. This called to mind an observation that Chiara made in my first fieldwork session with her and Olivia. A passing reference to a YouTube video on the 'top ten things that are gonna happen in the future' (Olivia's words) prompted the following exchange:

Kate: Do you think about the future of technology?

Olivia: Yeah, I'd like to think it would be like, we would get like sky pods and stuff where there little, little kind of spaceships that fly around in the sky

Kate: Oh yeah

Chiara: I think what most people think is actually like tonnes of sci-fi spaceships and stuff like that whereas actually I think it's not going to be like that, I think the earth will like die out before that happened

As this exchange indicates, the threat of ecological destruction loomed large in participant's thoughts about the future. This was further highlighted towards the end of fieldwork at Green City School when Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen became involved in the school climate strikes. Inspired by the solitary protest of Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg<sup>37</sup>, millions of children and young people worldwide went on strike from school in 2019 to call attention to the urgency of climate change (Barclay and Resnick 2019). This mass movement is part of a wider socio-cultural juncture in which youth-led, and often girl-fronted, activism is becoming increasingly visible around the world (Strom et al. 2019; Renold 2019a). Despite the explosion of interest in girlhood at the turn of the twenty-first century, cultural and scholarly concern has tended to focus on their role as entrepreneurial and consumer citizens with research still catching up to their political activism (Taft 2010; Ringrose and Renold 2016; Keller 2015; Renold 2019a; 2019b).

While Thunberg's stratospheric rise as a global icon of climate activism has captured the imagination of the world's media and brought renewed attention to the change-making energies of girls, the mainstream reception of Thunberg's activism works to re-centre the individual empowered white, European middle-class girl as the locus of social change (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012; Renold 2019a). Media accounts of the 'Greta Thunberg effect' erase rich histories of collective climate action led by girls and young women outside of Europe as well as side-steps the colonial, classed, raced and gendered politics of climate change (Unigwe 2019; Nxumalo 2018; Nxumalo and Cedillo 2017). In her work on the figure of Malala Yousafzai, another prominent girl activist whose story and voice brought worldwide attention to the need for girls' education in Pakistan, Shenila Khoja-Moolji (2015b, p. 540) has observed how 'mainstream affective attachments' to Malala 'reinscribe molar representations of Muslim women as objects of loss, pity, and compassion'. In a similar vein, mainstream affective attachments to Thunberg risk further

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<sup>37</sup> Greta Thunberg is a Swedish environmental activist who gained international recognition for sparking a global movement of school strikes demanding action against climate change (Thunberg 2019).

entrenching the human-focused, euro-centric and self-aggrandising thinking that created environmental precarity in the first place (Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Blaise 2012).

Khoja-Moolji (2015b, p. 552) also demonstrates, however, that Malala ‘emerges as an assemblage of positions and affects’ through ‘molecular’ readings of her writing which make different knowledges possible in relation to collective Muslim femininities. Inspired by Khoja-Moolji’s (2015) analysis, I argue that Thunberg can also be considered as an ‘assemblage of positions and affects’. For example, it is significant that Thunberg has attracted the ire of many adult, particularly white male, commentators in gendered and ableist ways. In particular, she has been ridiculed for her supposedly robotic body language and facial expressions with one white male French ‘intellectual’ describing her as having ‘a cyborg face that ignores emotion’ like ‘those silicon dolls heralding the end of humanity, the post-human era’ (White 2019, para 1, n.p). The comparison of Thunberg, who has been outspoken about her Asperger’s Syndrome, to a robot not only plays on the ableist trope that people with Asperger’s are machine-like but blurs the boundaries between the social categories of ‘girl’ and ‘machine’ (North 2019). This recalls the long-standing associations made between ‘the female body and the accelerating powers of technology’ indicating that the figure of Thunberg unsettles and threatens humanist, male-centric forms of being in the world (Braidotti 2013, p. 105).

While the current trend for compliant and amenable automatised silicon dolls, virtual personal assistants and digitally fabricated models feed into the perennial masculinist fantasy of mastery and control, these technologies co-exist with heightened fears about the destructive potential of technology to overturn the dominant hetero-patriarchal order. Thunberg appears to tap into these anxieties about the return of the monstrous feminine as a teenage girl who unflinchingly chastises adult policy-makers for their failure to tackle the climate crisis and harnesses the power of social media to amplify her voice. In this sense, Thunberg is a cyborgian figure whose activist affects travel through the productive linkage and exchange of energies across social media and wider communities of young people. For example, Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen had learnt about Thunberg through Instagram which prompted them to co-create a ‘huge’ Whatsapp groupchat that

reached over a hundred classmates and facilitated their participation in the climate strikes. Not only does Thunberg forego subservience to those in power but she has inspired other young people to challenge the hierarchical institutional structures of education too by staging school walkouts. Correspondingly, Thunberg's networked activism works to temporarily re-route the circuits that bind technology to hetero-patriarchal power structures.

Participating in the school climate strikes plugged Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen into a public political protest that connected them to other young activists beyond the confines of Green City School which struggled to support their change-making energies (Jackson and Mazzei 2011). Joining this mass movement disrupted and refigured how their bodies were usually fixed and the bodily regulation that they strongly felt at school and online (Ringrose and Renold 2014; Retallack et al. 2016). Following the first climate strike, they shared images with me of them stood in fountains outside a city council building, shouting and brandishing placards and banners that expressed their anger at adult inaction, including one that stated 'my angry won't fit on this placard' and another urging people to 'raise [their] voice not the sea levels'. The group spoke energetically about how their activism had garnered visibility with people wanting to photograph their placards and banners for the local news. Not only did the protests disrupt the way in which their bodies were usually fixed and restrained but by participating in their local climate strike they joined hundreds of children and young people who collectively brought their city centre to a standstill for an afternoon by blocking the movement of cars through the streets. In contrast to the inhibition and restraint conveyed in their fabricated figures through this public political protest, the girl's actively impeded the movement of adults.

## **6.8 DISSEMINATION IN SAFER INTERNET WEEK 2019**

So far in this chapter, I have explored how the dactaphacts produced by Safa, Imogen, Mia, Isabella and Chiara compellingly articulate and animate the complexity of contemporary girlhood. Touching upon the various ways that participants feel fixed in place and constrained their creative visions could serve as powerful teaching tools that

might further animate educational thought and practice around young people's digitally networked body cultures. While Safa's and Imogen's group put the pressures of online bodily display into conversation with the broader gendered body politics at Green City School, Mia, Isabella and Chiara created a haunting dystopian vision of adolescent transformation that questions the reconfiguration of feminine embodiment through digital technology.

Unfortunately, when the cut-up poems and fabricated figures were displayed in Green City School as part of *Safer Internet Week* very few teachers came to see them. Schools have different restrictive, regulatory challenges to be worked through and the time pressures on Green City School's overstretched staff appeared to inhibit their ability to engage with the process (see Ringrose and Renold 2016; Renold and Ringrose 2016). The fact that the fabricated figures are now folded up in my cupboard somewhat mirrors the participant's feelings of fixity and restraint. With the participant's permission, however, the dartaphacts have been able to break free and move to affect other young people and practitioners through youth events and academic conferences allowing new connections and possibilities to emerge. In addition, the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* will feature as a case study in the activist resource '*AGENDA: supporting children and young people in making positive relationships matter*' which continues to interfere with and transform the 'normative practices of how healthy relationships education [...] can come to matter' (Renold 2019a, p. 231).

## 6.9 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter examined the development and direction of the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* which sought to run interference into the way young people's digital relationships are typically understood and relayed in educational settings. As I outlined in section 6.2, online safety interventions have tended to rely on scripted curricula which narrowly focus on young people as individual rational agents navigating risk and harm without addressing the way broader sexual and gender norms inflect digital relationships. By working with artist facilitators to co-compose creative encounters that picked up on



and re-worked emerging doctoral findings on the digitally networked body, this workshop moved beyond solely discursive online safety interventions and the scripted format of *Safer Internet Day* in particular. This chapter demonstrated how the process of assembling cut-up poetry and fabricating future bodies allowed experiences to come together in new and unexpected ways. Over the course of a half-day arts-based workshop, the participants produced dartaphacts that powerfully articulated experiences of bodily regulation and brought the topic of young people's digitally networked bodies to life in new ways.

Drawing inspiration from speculative fiction invited imaginative responses that moved beyond the 'mundane fiction' of dichotomous online and offline worlds, human and more-than-human and the heteronormative bifurcation of boy bodies and girl bodies that continue to shape dominant online safeguarding discourses (Haraway 2016). The artist Victoria Sin (2019, pp. 5 - 6) argues that speculative fiction prompts us to question 'what if things follow on the path they are currently on', 'realise the absurd or corrupt within the familiar' and imagine if things were radically different. For example, I discussed how Mia's, Isabella's and Chiara's fabricated future figure offered a dystopian vision of the already blurred boundary of girl-woman-machine in a manner that left open the possibility for rebellion. Correspondingly, the participant's dartaphacts could be seen to complicate and re-work simplified fear-driven narratives surrounding young people's digitally networked bodies. Focusing on future bodies also functioned as a distancing technique that allowed participants to explore the sexualised and gendered topic of digitally networked bodies without revealing too much of themselves (Renold 2019a).

I have also demonstrated how framing the participant's dartaphacts as speculative fictions invited imaginative readings that conjured evocative images. While this chapter is just one attempt to draw attention to all that these dartaphacts could be and become, I have outlined how they sparked recognition and imagination through my own in-depth engagement with and affective responses to them. Due to the limited engagement of staff at Green City School, however, I was unable to explore what these dartaphacts provoked for practitioners. I had hoped that the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* might highlight the gap between 'adult' perceptions of young people's digital practices and young

people's lived experiences by engaging teacher's with young people's experiences of digitally networked bodies through objects and poetry (Renold 2019a; 2019b; Renold 2017; Renold and Ivinson 2019; Renold and Ringrose 2019; Ringrose et al. 2019). The question of how these artifacts detached from the workshop and travelled into other spaces to affect others remains to be addressed. This could be an area of future research as the fabricated figures set out on new journeys and invite others to respond to young people's digital sexual cultures in new ways.

This chapter has also addressed how the workshop gave rise to relational difficulties between the pupils. As I discussed in Chapter Three (section 3.4.2), arts-based methods are not ingenious, pre-planned techniques capable of erasing the ethical and political dilemmas of methodological-pedagogical encounters. Rather than viewing these difficulties as unwelcome intrusions, however, I have suggested that the workshop provided an opportunity to work with these tensions in creative and productive ways (Niccolini et al. 2018). Specifically, the fabricated figure created by Safa's and Imogen's group was produced in part through the difficulties that the group had in working together. Instead of suggesting that future workshops ensure young people work in friendship groups only, observing Safa's and Imogen's group invites a consideration of how we develop arts-based practices that are 'responsive to the inheritances, differences, and situatedness that move and entangle in classrooms' (Niccolini et al. 2018, p. 337).

## CHAPTER SEVEN - CONCLUSIONS

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis has explored how social media, smart devices and gaming platforms are shaping young people's sexual cultures. I spent fifteen-months working with twenty-five participants aged between 11 – 18 years old in England and Wales. My project was underpinned by the argument that research, policy and practice to often limits what digital practices are considered relevant and for whom without offering due consideration to the way enduring sexual and gender inequities shape young people's digital sexual cultures. This thesis also sought to respond to the need for a more expansive understanding of gender and sexuality that engages with the human and more-than-human facets of young people's digital sexuality assemblages.

To foster an open-ended and curious exploration of young people's digital sexual cultures, I devised a longitudinal and multi-phase creative, visual and arts-based methodology that allowed young people to explore a range of experiences with digital technologies (Driver and Coulter 2018). My methods included group interviews that drew on a variety of creative activities and visual-discursive prompts to elicit discussion (25 participants), follow-up elicitation interviews (17 participants) and arts-based workshops that incorporated poetry, digital storytelling, sculpture and textiles (10 participants). I drew on feminist posthuman and new materialist concepts such as 'assemblage', 'affect', 'phallogocentrism' and 'feminist figurations' to critically trace normative articulations of gender and sexual practices as well as engage in 'an experimental mapping exercise' that accounted for experiences that exceeded or unsettled dominant discourses (Lenz-Taguchi 2016, p. 39).

In this chapter, I draw together and discuss the findings from my empirical chapters and my methodology chapter. I consider their implications in relation to the wider literature

on young people's digital sexual cultures as well as my research questions. This thesis was guided by the following questions:

1. In what ways do digital technologies shape young people's sexual cultures?
  - a. To what extent, and in what ways, are young people's digital relationships shaped by heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality?
  - b. To what extent, and in what ways, do young people's digital relationships exceed heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality?
2. What do creative, visual and arts-based methodologies enable in research on young people's digital sexual cultures?
3. How can arts-based approaches be employed in co-productive engagement work to re-imagine young people's digital sexual cultures and communicate their complexity?

## **7.2 IN WHAT WAYS DO DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES SHAPE YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES?**

In the introductory chapter and the review of the literature, I argued that research, policy and practice tend to overlook how enduring gender and sexual inequities shape online relationships while uncritically reinforcing simplistic dichotomies of online-offline social worlds, private versus public as well as the heteronormative bifurcation of active male sexuality and passive female sexuality (McGeeney and Hanson 2017; Albury and Byron 2016; Ringrose et al. 2012). By focusing on digital technologies as sites of contamination and corruption that contribute to negative developmental outcomes, young people's digital relationships continue to live under the burden of adult anxieties and fears. This study employed a multiplicity of methods to explore various facets of young people's digital sexuality assemblages and paint a heterogeneous picture of their digital practices.

As I observed in Chapter Three, participant's digital worlds were complex ecologies that could be 'very personal' with 'what they follow and what they look at, what they enjoy' differing for everyone (Irene's words). Inviting participants to map their digital worlds through collaging, screenshots and avatar illustrations provided an opportunity to follow the threads that ran through all of their work and consider some of the 'marginalia and odd details' of their digital practices that might ordinarily have been omitted from other research on young people's digital sexual practices (Maclure 2013, p. 174). Incorporating photo and statement elicitation interviews enabled participants to respond to dominant discourses about their digital sexual cultures while facilitating follow-up elicitation interviews with individuals, pairs or smaller groups enabled participants to situate their accounts within the context of their everyday peer relationships and individual biographies. Finally, experimenting with arts-based approaches such as emoji crafting, cut-up poetry, digital storytelling and textile arts provided an opportunity for participants to re-animate emerging findings from the previous research phases.

In the following sub-sections, I summarise how this thesis traced the endurance of heteronormative and phallogocentric power relations in young people's digital sexual cultures, before illuminating gendered and sexual digital practices that exceed these dominant discourses and offered feminist figurations.

### **7.2.1 THE ENDURANCE OF HETERONORMATIVE AND PHALLOGOCENTRIC POWER RELATIONS IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES**

In Chapters One and Two, I discussed how dominant discourses about young people's digital sexual cultures continue to produce girls and young women as especially at-risk from an unremarkable and predatory culture of toxic masculinity. I discussed studies that highlighted how girl's and young women's bodies online are subject to invasive negative commentary that perpetually scrutinise and fix them as objects of sexual stimulation for boys and men (Amnesty International 2019; Jane 2016; 2014; 2012; Shaw 2014; Rightler-Mcdaniels and Hendrickson 2014). Many of these studies demonstrated how girls and young women are charged with the responsibility to protect their 'virtue' online and denied the opportunity to constitute themselves as desiring subjects (Dobson and

Ringrose 2016). In addition, I pointed to research that documents the continued marginalisation of gender and sexual minorities despite the increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ content online (Cho 2018; Naezer and Ringrose 2018; Albury and Byron 2016; Duguay 2016a;). In line with these dominant discourses, across the findings chapters, I traced how young people's digital sexual cultures continue to channel the heteronormative and phallogocentric bifurcation of active male sexuality and passive female sexuality.

In Chapter Four, for example, I explored how digital technologies shape young people's affective attachment to 'utopian, optimism- sustaining versions of intimacy' predicated on heteronormative fantasies of 'the good life'. Drawing on talk generated as participant's engaged with a multiplicity of creative materials and visual-discursive prompts, I was able to explore how social media, smart devices and gaming platforms promote the 'rewards' of a heteronormative future. Participants at Castell Q and Westland College indicated that the hetero-couple circulated as a symbol of success in their digitally networked peer cultures. Irene and Claire at Westland College also referenced the continued orientation of digital relationships around the phallic referent and phallogocentric force relations with boys perpetually 'popping up' in their direct messages to solicit sexual activity or send unsolicited 'dick pics'. In the group interviews, this was portrayed as a relatively unremarkable feature of everyday life but the follow-up individual interviews highlighted some of the girl's discomfort and fear around unsolicited contact on social media. I also noted how prioritising the heterosexual union above all else can reinforce abusive relationship dynamics with Claire pointing to the role that social media plays in coercing and isolating romantic partners.

Working with differently positioned young people in this study allowed me to consider experiential continuities and differences across age, gender, sexuality and location. For example, discussions with participants at the Welsh LGBTQ+ youth group Castell Q highlighted that the ability to engage in public displays of affection online were not evenly distributed. Despite social media facilitating greater visibility for gender and sexual minorities, none of the participants at Castell Q spoke of explicitly publicising their relationships on social media. In line with wider research on LGBTQ+ young people online,

participants at Castell Q utilised counterpublics such as an LGBTQ+ Facebook group to foster connection and intimacy with others (Marston 2019a; Cho 2018; Warfield 2016; Wargo 2015; Renninger 2015). Despite this unevenness in visibility, I observed how public displays of affection amongst hetero-couples on social media did not equate to a straightforward celebration of heteronormativity. These arguments are summarised in further detail in section 7.2.2.1 of this chapter. Furthermore, I highlighted how counterpublics fostered a space where enduring heteronormativities and phallogocentrism surrounding what can appear as intimate online were challenged. For example, by posting a selfie in an LGBTQ+ Facebook group Tess at Castell Q was able to position herself as a desiring subject who actively pursued connection with other girls.

This thesis also advanced an understanding of pre-teen young people's digital sexual cultures which have been underexplored in the literature to date. As I outlined in Chapter One and Two, pre-teen young people's engagement with social media, mobile communication and some gaming platforms can be taken as disturbing evidence of accelerated sexualisation by white middle-class moral panics that perpetuate classed, raced and heteronormative developmental linearities (Etheredge 2016, p. 549; Allen 2015; Albury et al. 2013; see also Robinson 2013; Stockton 2009; Edelman 2004). Moral panics around pre-teen young people's digital engagements recirculate gendered assumptions that construct girls as passive and vulnerable to victimisation whereas boys are either overlooked or considered at-risk of developing aberrant and predatory behaviours. Given that the majority of my participants were girls aged 11 – 13 years old, a thread running throughout the findings chapters was related to the competing and contradictory demands of contemporary digital girlhood.

In Chapter Four, I looked at the Year 7 friendship group comprised of Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen who demonstrated how pre-teen young people's digital practices were shaped by a classed and racialised politics of parental choice. While Mia and Isabella were highly restricted in their digital access, for Safa and Imogen social media and gaming technologies were integrated with their broader family dynamics and sociability. Drawing on the pre-teen participant's talk about the social knowledge facilitated by social media, I

observed how digital intimate publics were not confined to participant's use of particular devices or platforms but exceeded their bounds, circulating in peer groups and affecting bodies in a variety of ways. This was a source of discord amongst the Year 7 peer group as the participants struggled to navigate complex ideals of age-appropriate 'good' girlhood that was free from the contaminating influence of social media and mobile communication.

Positioned as the primary benefactors of late modern, globalised and de-industrialised societies, this thesis also explored how girls and women are regulated by certain 'feeling rules' that demand affective investment in hetero-patriarchal, post-feminist neo-liberal social systems through conveying happiness, positive mental attitude and resilience (Gill 2017; Kanai 2019). This was evidenced in this thesis by some of the YouTube channels that the pre-teen participants engaged with which asserted individualist discourses of empowerment, choice and freedom at the expense of addressing power inequality. For example, Aislinn's (Ysgol Mellt) talk about The Ingham Family and Safa's (Green City School) talk about The Merrell Twins highlighted how these videos centre on cultivating a relentlessly optimistic and can-do disposition required for surviving in a postfeminist neo-liberal society. Building on feminist media and cultural scholarship that addresses how these cultural representations underpin the affective and psychic life of neo-liberal capitalism (Kennedy 2018; Gill 2017), I observed how Aislinn and Safa appeared to materialise the affectivity of these YouTube videos in their own embodied practices and chipper optimistic tone.

By adopting a longitudinal approach and working with Mia, Isabella, Safa, Imogen and Chiara at Green City School over a period of fifteen-months, however, I was also able to examine how their feelings shifted and changed in different configurations. For example, in Chapter Four, I noted how the neo-liberal utopian, optimistic affective orientation towards an equitable future sat in tension with their frustration at the multitude of practices that continued to regulate and shape the meaning of their gendered and sexual bodies (Iverson and Murphy 2007; Iverson and Murphy 2003; Lesko 1988). In section 7.2.2.3, I summarise findings from Chapter Six to demonstrate how the Year 7 participants



at Green City School vividly articulated negative emotions as well as powerfully complicated neo-liberal logics of rational consent and individual humanist agency that underpin the construction of girls as newly free.

The post-feminist notion that gender equality had been achieved was also evident in the participant's talk about digitally networked body cultures. In Chapter Five, I shared participant produced Instagram screenshots from Castell Q that illustrated the increasing objectification of men's bodies according to a limited set of characteristics. Drawing on the statement elicitation interviews, I highlighted how participants at Westland College reiterated dominant discourses that position men as the victims of a new gender order. Despite boys in this study observing the increasing pressure to adhere to idealised norms of strong muscularity on social media, I argued in that this has not abated the intense surveillance of girl's and women's bodies. I noted how girls across all four fieldwork sites were reluctant to share images of themselves online due to fear of body-shaming comments. Participant's highlighted how the forceful idealisation of slim embodiment through injurious comments and common visual tropes online worked to contain and constrain what girl's felt they could do with their bodies. At the same time, the post-feminist messages of empowerment, resilience and choice embedded in the body positivity movement online placed a psychological demand upon women and girls to cultivate a positive disposition towards their bodies in the face of intensified hostility and scrutiny.

I also considered the role of video games and Netflix in the regulation and reproduction of heteronormative gendered embodiment by looking at the way they shaped peer socialities. The Year 8 participants at Green City School painted a picture of boys dominating the classroom space with masculinist displays of 'embodied/cybernetic' ability by boasting about their competitive prowess, hard work and skill in popular video games such as *Fortnite* (Taylor and Vorhees 2018, p. 10). These public displays of skill appeared to enable some boys to 'gain accumulative ascendance in competitive masculine peer group hierarchies' (Renold and Ringrose 2017, p. 4). However, the social and economic rewards of competitive gameplay were not available to everyone. I observed how Basar's

engagement with *Fortnite* was dismissed by Karma in the context of the fieldwork session in a manner that re-asserted video games as a masculine domain. At the same time, Droshux described how his gaming practices were belittled amongst the wider peer group as he had not mastered popular games such as *Fortnite*. In contrast to the public attention afforded masculinist displays of ‘embodied/cybernetic’ ability, Jalil’s and Layla’s passion for supernatural Netflix dramas appeared to bubble away in more private exchanges. In section 7.2.2.2 of this chapter, I summarise how cut-up poetry provided an opportunity to illuminate the girl’s embodied relationship with Netflix.

Across these chapters, I demonstrated various ways in which young people’s digital sexual cultures continue to be organised around the heteronormative and phallogocentric bifurcation of active male sexuality and passive female sexuality. In Chapter Six, this gendered formation was given potent ‘form-force’ through Safa’s and Imogen’s fabricated figure (Renold and Ringrose 2019, para 16). Their dartaphact juxtaposed an animated fabricated masculine figure with an inhibited fabricated feminine figure materialising the way in which young people’s bodies were restrained and fixed in place by gender segregating practices at school and online.

### **7.2.2 DISRUPTING HETERONORMATIVE AND PHALLOGOCENTRIC POWER RELATIONS IN YOUNG PEOPLE’S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES**

While attending to the ways in which young people’s digital sexual cultures were shaped by enduring gender and sexual inequalities was an important feature of this thesis, I was also eager to map feminist figurations of youth sexuality that displaced consciousness away from the heteronormative and phallogocentric mode (Braidotti 2011a; Haraway 2004). As I outlined in Chapter Two, feminist posthuman and new materialist theories offer a fruitful conceptual toolkit for illuminating gendered and sexual practices that exceed dominant discourses. In the following sections, I summarise how I drew on these theories to activate different ways of thinking about, knowing and relating to participant’s digital sexual cultures.

### 7.2.2.1 RECONFIGURING HETERONORMATIVITY

By foregrounding relationality and distributive agency in Chapter Four, I observed how publicising relationships on social media could unsettle heteronormative understandings of intimacy as a private, personal matter shared between two people or in the confines of the family. Combining affect theory with creative and visual elicitation interviews, allowed me to attend to the affects that emerged when participants were 'in relation' with digital relationship content (Allen 2013). Specifically, I was able to observe how the feelings conveyed in relationship posts were not bounded to the couple but could have a permeable influence on the surrounding peer group provoking suspicion, derision and jealousy along with new kinds of connection and intimacy. For example, Irene highlighted how the gentle mockery of a friend's romantic relationship posts could operate as a site of connection amongst her wider friendship group.

Online visibility could also publicise the inherent precarity and vulnerability of heteronormative institutions of monogamy and marriage. Participants at Westland College expressed ambivalence about the explicit publicisation of romantic relationships online indicating that the failure of a relationship can be granted more permanency than the 'happily, ever after' fantasy of lively, durable intimacy. Similarly, Aislinn at Ysgol Mellt noted how The Ingham Family received hateful comments on their videos, which indicated that publicising everyday scenes of familial domesticity could function as a dangerous corruption of the private hetero-familial form.

I also considered how the 'hetero-patriarchal framework of privatised intimacy, boxed and bounded within families' is challenged by the advent of virtual personal assistants such as Amazon's Alexa and Apple's Siri (Dobson, Robards and Carah 2019, p. 7). I detailed how Alexa is coded as a docile and compliant housewife 2.0 who operates in service of men. In addition to reifying the gendered division of labour, however, Alexa is also paradoxically a promiscuous figure who leaks private familial information to large multinational technology companies (Chun and Friedland 2015).

While feminist scholars have argued that such feminised technologies betray a continued hetero-patriarchal desire for control over women's bodies (Hayter 2017; Taylor 2016; Braidotti 2013), few studies have explored how children and young people are relating to these technologies. In Chapter Four, I explored how the Year 7's at Green City School stated that they engaged Alexa and Siri in intimate relationship talk in ways which appeared to extend kinship to these more-than-human technological others as friendly confidants and parental story-tellers. I argued that children's and young people's relationship to domestic internet-enabled technologies is worthy of further research, particularly from a perspective that considers how children and young people reproduce, challenge and subvert the gender and sexual norms embedded in these technologies.

Significantly, Alexa and Siri were not the only feminised technologies that I encountered over the course of this study. In Chapter Five, I noted how Lucy at Castell Q drew attention to Lil Miquela, a digitally fabricated social media model. Similar to Alexa and Siri, the existence of digitally fabricated social media models re-inscribe particular ideas of womanhood. For example, Lil Miquela's presentation as a queer woman of colour perpetuates a homonormative, post-race and post-feminist sensibility which depoliticises and commodifies difference as stylish, fashionable and beautiful. Although Alexa, Siri and Lil Miquela challenge the humanist assumption that sexuality is tied to skin and flesh and play out the 'techno-fantasy' of exceeding the en fleshed body, they do so without troubling old and established norms around racism, sexism and homophobia (Braidotti 2006). I questioned whether these feminised technologies risk becoming the measure of living women.

By reading insights from the pre-teen and the teen participants together and through one another, I drew links between the consumer-based feminine beauty norms promoted through CGI social media influencers, digital beauty applications and the aesthetics of *The Sims* digital dollhouse. I argued that this shift to simulated beauty norms enhances the regulatory gaze upon girls and young women, creates 'new arenas of moral wrongness' around appearance and renders thoroughly ambiguous the boundary between the organic and the simulated (Elias and Gill 2018, p. 23). My findings point to the need for further

research that addresses how feminised technology and simulated beauty norms are re-shaping classed, raced, gendered and sexualised politics of the body. Overall, the discussions I have summarised in this section highlighted the increasingly promiscuous and more-than-human configurations of heteronormativity in young people's digital sexual cultures. They helped map out how heteronormative and phallogocentric force relations operate differently in digital spaces. In the next section, I summarise how unsettling anthropocentric readings of young people's digital sexual cultures in this thesis also illuminated cracks and ruptures in heteronormative and phallogocentric power relations.

#### **7.2.2.2 QUEER INTIMACIES**

In Chapter Two, I outlined how heteronormative and phallogocentric force relations can be found in the intensification of the phallic male gaze online which assumes a strict distinction and hierarchical relationship between the perceiver and the perceived. In section 7.2.1, for example, I outlined how invasive negative commentary on girl's and young women's images works to maintain the visual mastery of the active masculine subject over the passive feminine object (Amnesty International 2019; Jane 2016; 2014; 2012; Shaw 2014; Rightler-Mcdaniels and Hendrickson 2014). However, here I want to outline instances in this thesis that disrupted and re-routed the phallic male gaze. In Chapter Five, I explored how more-than-human Instagram and YouTube content worked to displace social media's disciplinary post-feminist gaze from the over-coded female body online. I considered how food, pets, spots and slime content plugged into feminising and masculinising assemblages in unpredictable ways.

Existing feminist scholarship on social media 'food porn' and masculinity has tended to examine how this content channels hegemonic phallogocentric forms of masculinity that seek to subjugate and consume both animals and women (Lupton, 2017; Dejmanee 2016). I argued that this work relies on a binary and fairly rigid gender hierarchy between men and women and is limited in its ability to address the role that food places in shifting formations of masculinity and femininity (Hamilton 2016; 2019). Drawing on recent

Deleuzian inspired work on masculinities (Hickey-Moody 2019; Watson 2015), I explored Alex's queer veganism as part of a wider apparatus of relations that brought together environmental politics with domesticity and the indulgent mediatised foodscapes on Instagram. In the context of the post-industrial South Wales Valleys where older presentations of masculinity continue to regulate the kinds of gendered performances deemed acceptable (Renold and Ivinson 2019; Ward 2016; 2015), I argued that Alex's digital practices displaced dominant discourses that associate masculinity with meat, strong muscularity and the subjugation of women and animals (Braidotti 2011, p. 248).

I also considered the role of pet influencers and pet-working in young people's body cultures. Again this content works to temporarily displace social media's disciplinary post-feminist gaze from the over-coded female body online. I detailed how the participant's affective response to Lucy's screenshot of a rabbit disrupted the bodily malaise that had taken hold in previous discussions of Instagram. I also considered whether Instagram pet cultures offer a space where the roundness, softness and squishiness of a fat body can be experienced as cute rather than abject. Although I highlighted how pet images could be subject to a familiar moral economy of looking online, I was also eager to highlight how pet-working provokes different bodily imaginaries for young people that might tap into new relational possibilities with their own bodies as well as between the bodies of young people and animals.

I identified the relevance of spot squeezing and slime videos to young people's digitally networked body cultures. Although pus and slime may appear to disrupt and exceed borders, I questioned whether these videos bring about a confrontation with the abject qualities of these materials in order to paradoxically re-assert a sense of order and control. I argued, for example, that spot squeezing videos work by breaching, and thus paradoxically sustaining, the skin as a bodily boundary in the context of the increasingly blurred boundaries between the organic and the simulated. Similarly, I noted how Aislinn's talk of the cathartic qualities of slime suggested that it can be employed to contain and constrain unruly emotions. Participant's talk about these videos highlighted how they could also be interpellated into wider health and wellbeing discourses in line

with the imperative to continually maximise, better and reinvent the self which is prevalent in wider inspirational and aspirational social media content. At the same time, however, these videos are taking the transformation imperative into newly sensuous directions.

The participant's struggle to articulate the strangely satisfying pleasures that these videos evoke was illustrative of their material, embodied and sensory quality and how they might open up different ways of relating to the body. I argued that these videos are indicative of the complex and subtle forms of non-heteronormative intimacy proliferating online. Correspondingly, these 'body genres' are worthy of further exploration as a site of possibility for exploring digital pleasure as well as displacing vision away from the heteronormative and phallogentric mode (Harper 2020; Waldron 2017; Waldron 2015). My discussion of the visual, sonic and tactile qualities of this content was limited by the fact that I was only able to draw on the participant's talk about these videos. In section 7.3 of this chapter, I argue that researchers need to expand their methodological imagination to engage with the haptic quality of online content and young people's embodied relationship to digital media.

One way in which I worked with participant's talk to attend to embodied digital pleasures was through experimenting with cut-up poetry. In Chapter Five, I explored how Layla's cut-up poem succinctly articulated the embodied pleasure of watching Netflix. Described as a 'rush' followed by relief, Layla's account of Netflix was reminiscent of an orgasmic experience (Austin 2017). Significantly, it was the action and violence of Layla's favourite Netflix shows as opposed to their hetero-romantic love plots that she prioritised in her poem. Therefore, I argued that this poem worked to unsettle dominant constructions of girl's desire. While girls are often positioned as passive dupes to media messages about desirable phallogentric hetero-masculinity (Driscoll 2002), I highlighted how it was possible to map agentic movements performed by Jalil and Layla at the intersection of powerful racialised, sexualised, and religionised discourses about femininity (Allen and Ingham 2015, p. 154). Although Jalil's expressions of desire for Damon in *The Vampire Diaries* bolstered norms of white hetero-masculine sexual dominance, it also challenged

non-agentic framings of veiled teenage Muslim girls. In addition, I observed how Jalil's and Layla's love of Netflix shows such as *The Vampire Diaries* functioned as a lively and productive force that animated their friendship and shaped the bond between them. Rather than simply signalling an investment in the hetero-patriarchal gender relations that these Netflix shows depict, I argue that Jalil's and Layla's love for these shows moved in multiple directions. It, therefore, remains to be seen what this desire could enable and do.

### **7.2.2.3 UNSETTLING VISIONS OF CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL GIRLHOOD**

As I noted in section 7.2.1, a thread running throughout this thesis was related to the competing and contradictory demands of contemporary digital girlhood. In addition to observing how girls continue to be regulated by discourses that position them as especially at-risk and vulnerable, I also considered how their digital practices could complicate dominant protectionist discourses. In Chapter Four, for example, I explored Chiara's and Olivia's description of how their peers would take photographs of everybody getting undressed in the school changing rooms and post them to Instagram. Not only do these changing room events challenge dominant discourses around young people's digital picture sharing practices and 'sexting' but they also illustrate the limits of safeguarding strategies that simply intensify the surveillance and regulation of girl's bodies. My analysis foregrounded the spatiality of these encounters and the way in which the changing room gave rise to different relationalities between girl's bodies and digital devices at school. I argued that individualised notions of victim versus perpetrator, as well as safeguarding responses that intensify the surveillance of young girl's bodies, are inadequate for engaging with these digital picture sharing practices. Further research is needed to consider the digital picture sharing practices of pre-teen young people that moves beyond dominant protectionist discourses about at-risk girls and predatory boys.

I also introduced the cult video game *Yandere Simulator* which further complicates dominant discourses of childhood innocence. Sexiness and innocence cohered in this cult video game's eroticised depiction of schoolgirl violence (Renold and Ringrose 2011). While this could be seen as evidence of a paedophilic gaze in video game culture (Bray 2008), its



appeal to Leah at Ysgol Mellt suggests that the game could work to satirise and exaggerate the competitive world of heterosexualised dating (Madill 2015). Furthermore, the game may be premised on the pathologisation of girl's aggression, however, it also offered an arena for girls to be predatory and violent in ways less available or perceived as too risky and dangerous in offline contexts. Overall, the investment in Japanese anime and manga culture amongst the Year 7 girl's at Ysgol Mellt highlighted how socio-cultural legacies of hetero-patriarchal gender relations in the post-industrial South Wales Valleys are rendered more complex by globalised digital media cultures.

This thesis also examined how girls are regulated by certain 'feeling rules' that deny outward expressions of negative emotion and demand happiness, positive mental attitude and resilience (Hochschild 1983; Gill 2017; Kanai 2019). For example, I observed how YouTube content such as The Ingham Family and The Merrel Twins, mobile games such as *Virtual Families* along with emojis worked to soften and disguise the regulative dynamics of hetero-patriarchal, post-feminist neo-liberal social systems (Stark and Crawford 2015; McRobbie 2008). However, this thesis mapped how the neo-liberal utopian, optimistic affective orientation of the Year 7's at Green City School sat in tension with their powerful and sustained critiques of the way hetero-patriarchal culture continued to regulate their bodies and thrust them towards heteronormative future imaginaries. In Chapter Four, I detailed how the Year 7 participants playfully expressed their frustration at the regulation of their bodies at school and online.

Over the course of several fieldwork sessions, the Year 7's at Green City School energetically ruptured the way in which their bodies were contained and constrained by the enduring force of hetero-patriarchal gender relations. They leapt on and between tables, swore, marched, chanted and plotted the downfall of the US President Donald Trump, a symbol of virulent racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia and far-right populism (Strom and Martin 2017, p. 12). I noted that there was a lightness and levity to their accounts which did not initially dwell on the struggles or stresses of these everyday gendered inequalities. The Year 7 participant's maintained an optimistic orientation towards can-do girl power trajectories and, with the exception of Safa, largely

disassociated themselves from socio-political movements such as feminism in a post-feminist fashion. However, I explored how experimenting with arts-based activities such as emoji crafting began to give ‘form-force’ to the ambivalent and mixed emotions that bubbled away under their exuberant demands for a more equitable society (Renold and Ringrose 2019, para 16).

Despite the participant’s investment in can-do girl power discourses, in Chapter Six, I explored how the dartaphacts produced in the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* powerfully unsettled idealised images of girls as vanguards of social change. Contrary to earlier affirmative messages of confidence and self-love, Safa’s and Imogen’s cut-up poem articulated the way young people’s lives are rendered temporarily un-liveable through the life-destroying affects of encountering body-shaming comments and idealised bodies on social media (Ringrose 2011; Butler 2004). At the same time, their fabricated figure challenged the tendency to pathologise social media by situating this bodily disaffection in relation to the broader modalities and spatialities of gendered embodiment at Green City School. While Mia’s, Isabella’s and Chiara’s poem and figure explored similar themes around the seeming ease with which you can ‘transform yourself’ in contemporary social and cultural life, they took this into a more monstrous, dystopic direction.

In contrast to the optimistic orientation I observed in earlier fieldwork sessions, the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* inspired Mia, Isabella and Chiara to challenge the presumption that the future will be positive as they explored how technological advancements could continue to restrain and constrain girl’s bodies. Mia’s, Isabella’s and Chiara’s poem and figure conveyed anxiety over the ever-shifting boundaries between the social categories of ‘girl’ and ‘machine’. I argued that their vision of physiological flux appeared to depict a process of sexual maturation marked by the force of technological intrusion, capture and control. This was perhaps unsurprising given the participant’s everyday encounters with feminised technology such as Alexa, Siri and Lili Miquela which re-inscribe particularly ideas of womanhood as compliant, responsive and endearing. While the current fixation on feminised technology betrays a continued hetero-patriarchal desire for control over women’s bodies, I also explored how the pre-teen girl’s digital

engagements could re-route the circuits that bind technology to hetero-patriarchal power structures. For example, Mia's, Isabella's and Chiara's poem suggested an ability to undo and exceed the coding of the body. In addition, their fabricated future girl retained a threatening edge with beaming red eyes and gnashing red teeth.

The ability of girls to unsettle and threaten humanist, male-centric forms of being in the world was further highlighted by the participant's engagement with teenage activist Greta Thunberg. While Thunberg's celebrity activist status can work to re-centre the individual empowered white, European middle-class girl as the locus of social change, I argued that she also symbolises the return of the monstrous feminine as a teenage girl who unflinchingly chastises adult policy-makers for their failure to tackle the climate crisis. Comparisons of Thunberg to a robot draw on long-standing associations between 'the female body and the accelerating powers of technology' that heighten fears about the destructive potential of technology to overturn the dominant hetero-patriarchal order (Braidotti 2013, p. 105). By harnessing the power of social media to amplify her voice, Thunberg's activist affects travel through digital networks to invoke other young people to challenge the hierarchical institutional structures of education. I observed how Thunberg inspired Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen to collectively engage in the climate strikes and stage a school walkout. Not only did this action unsettle the vision of the individual empowered girl but their participation in the climate strikes powerfully disrupted and refigured the ways in which their bodies were usually fixed and regulated at school.

### **7.3 WHAT DO CREATIVE, VISUAL AND ARTS-BASED METHODS ENABLE IN RESEARCH ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES?**

This thesis contributed to methodological debates by considering what a creative, visual and arts-based approach, informed by feminist posthuman and new materialist theories, might enable in research on young people's digital sexual cultures. Although childhood researchers have long noted the value of creative, visual and arts-based methodologies for exploring sensitive or taboo areas in young people's lives, to date few studies have employed these approaches to study children and young people's digital cultures. Much of

the existing scholarship on young people and digital technology focuses on re-calibrating established qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and ethnography by incorporating digital devices or online observations (Jaynes 2020; Lupton 2014). As I outlined in Chapter Three, however, Driver (2018) warns that the desire to hone in on young people's digital practices can enhance the surveillance of their digitally networked peer cultures. Employing a multiplicity of participant-led creative, visual and arts-based methods was therefore fundamental to fostering an open-ended approach that enabled participants to exercise choice over what they wanted to share, and with whom, without revealing too much of themselves. Given that much of my research was school-based, it also offered a practical way for participants to illustrate a range of digital practices in contexts where digital access was heavily curtailed and blocked by firewalls.

The first phase of the research was comprised of group interviews that drew on various creative activities and visual-discursive prompts to elicit discussion on a flexible set of core issues related to my research (digital worlds, body cultures, relationships, media discourses). Instead of focusing on a pre-given area of young people's digital cultures, the research activities I employed let participants illustrate which digital practices they engaged with, direct the flow and focus of the conversation, as well as pause on key topics that mattered to them. Alex at Castell Q observed that commencing with the map-making activity offered a less intimidating way into the research and sparked connections that may not have been prompted by a more traditional interview-based approach. The map-making allowed participants to illustrate the digital networks they were part of, and it also provided an opportunity to draw links between their creations. For example, when participants at Castell Q noticed that the digitally networked body was a common thread running through each of their maps this prompted a focus on the body during the digital tours.

Drawing on feminist posthuman and new materialist concepts shaped my approach to these creative and visual group interviews. As I have already noted in section 7.2.2.1, I remained attentive to what was happening in the room as participants engaged with the research activities and the affects that emerged when they were 'in relation' with their

research creations (Allen 2015). While the participant's talk about Instagram indicated their ability to critically engage with the visual culture of this platform, attending to the affects that circulated in these encounters tuned me into the palpable depressive mood that circulated when Instagram was discussed. The screenshots illustrated how images of idealised bodies could saturate their feeds with participant's talk of the 'force' and 'pressure' exerted by these images highlighting how they touched the participant's bodies in invasive ways. Drawing on data from a variety of sources offered a wider picture of the affective flows that circulated within Instagram's digital sexuality assemblages. For example, I detailed in Chapter Five how I invited participants at Castell Q to collate a second set of screenshots after Lucy indicated that she used her Instagram account primarily to look at horses and rabbits.

Feminist posthuman and new materialist theories prompted me to follow 'the scent' of the more-than-human in my research (Bennett 2009). The second set of screenshots focused on content that made the participants feel good in their bodies and indicated that human bodies on Instagram are emergent in a relational field in which more-than-human visual content is equally at play. This content had a notable effect on the dynamic of the room, producing an eruption of giggles and laughter that seemed to free up and lighten the mood. By lingering on participant's talk about pet cultures and food cultures on Instagram, I was able to move beyond the anthropocentric understanding of young people's digital networked bodies that dominates the broader literature (Maclure 2013).

Paying attention to the affective dynamics of the research also illuminated the pleasure that some participants derived from being absorbed in creative, visual and arts-based methods. In Chapter Three, I argued that deliberately cultivating imagination, play and craft in a study on young people's digital sexualities offered affirmative ways into a topic that too often starts from a point of risk and harm. Employing a combination of collaging, drawing, screenshots, digital storytelling, poetry, textiles and talk-based approaches was conducive to communicating experiences in ways that were not invasive or bound up with rigid moral evaluations (Bragg et al. 2018). For example, Chiara and Isabella at Green City School observed that the fieldwork sessions offered a non-judgemental space conducive

to sharing their feelings and experiences with social media and other digital technologies. This is significant given that digital technologies are positioned as risky sites of contamination for pre-teen young people. This research has shown how employing different modes of expression can enliven the participant's engagement and tap into experiences that rarely surface in solely discursive approaches.

For example, in Chapter Four, I detailed how inviting participants at Green City School to design digital avatars prompted them to create fantasy avatar figures which tapped into their change-making energies as they began to fantasise about changing the world. Engaging the participant's imaginations adopted a 'fluid and less fixed view of meaning' giving 'space to emerging process that are seeds to ideas, that when combined can create new possibilities, new forms and new shapes rather than focusing on what is already there' (Leavy 2019, p. 93). Responding to this chance intrusion became an important breakthrough in the fieldwork as it opened up space for the participants to articulate their frustrations at the continued gendered regulation of their bodies online and at school. With hindsight, I can also see that it was one of the seeds to the idea of the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*.

Adopting a hands-on craft-based approach to researching young people's digital cultures also opened up space for exploring how digital platforms are formed by and implicated with the marvellous material specificity of things (Bennett 2009). The participant's explorations of the tactile qualities of the materials I brought in elicited discussions about slime videos on YouTube. While I did not set out to explicitly consider the role of haptic visibility on YouTube, I have argued that creative, visual and arts-based approaches can make a valuable contribution to the exploration of D.I.Y cultures in young people's digital sexual cultures. Using hands-on craft-based activities worked to disrupt established thought patterns that posit a neat distinction between the material and the virtual, online and offline, human and more-than-human (Bragg et al. 2018; Coleman 2016). There are still many unanswered questions about these 'body genres' on YouTube. However, my initial findings highlight the need for researchers to expand their methodological imagination when exploring young people's digital body cultures to move beyond

occurcentric considerations and engage with the rich tactile and sonic qualities of this content.

One of the ways in which I sought to expand my methodological imagination over the course of this research project was through phase three of the study. As I outlined in Chapter Three, creative, visual and arts-based methods are not mutually exclusive but I did draw a distinction between them and how they were utilised for the purpose of this study (Mannay 2016b; Wang et al. 2017). Despite drawing on a range of creative activities and visual-discursive prompts in the first and second phase of the research, my analysis was focused on the process of their production and the participant narratives that framed them. I did not address how the materials participants produced communicated non-verbally through compounds of colour, texture and icons (Hickey Moody 2017). Instead, this was reserved for my analysis of the dactaphacts produced during phase three of the research in which I employed arts-based methods such as cut-up poetry, emoji crafting and textile arts to re-animate emerging findings from the study.

In Chapter Four, I outlined how facilitating emoji crafting sessions with the Year 7 participants at Green City School provided an opportunity to explore complex, ambivalent and mixed emotions. This workshop invited the participants to be as creative as they liked using imaginative abstract patterns to communicate how they feel about the role of social media in their relationships including ‘everything that [they had] been talking about, about feminism, sexism’ (Safa’s words). Although a number of the participant’s crafted emojis maintained an optimistic orientation that affirmed gay rights or their love of the ocean and sparkles, they also provided a space where more mixed emotions and uncertainty came to the fore. In addition, during the process of facilitating the workshop I observed how a swearier interjection from Chiara functioned as an ‘embodied, transgressive response’ that overturned ‘repressive expectations of femininity’ and childhood innocence as well as challenged the regulatory power of the school (Wood 2019, pp. 610 – 614). This raised important critical questions as to whether the emoji crafting activity still operated to soften and disguise the participant’s feelings of outrage at

the enduring restrictions placed upon their bodies, or whether it had helped foster a space where normative discourses around girl's feelings were troubled and re-worked.

In Chapter Five, I outlined how I experimented with cut-up poetry to trouble the tendency to separate and capture young people's digital practices into heteronormative formations of active male sexuality and passive female sexuality. By redistributing experience from the personal to the collective, the cut-up poetry activity kept the energising affects of these media forms in flow and blurred the distinction between two typically gendered digital media formats. Working with cut-up poetry also tapped into their embodied relationship to video games and Netflix. By drawing on forceful words and phrases from Droshux's description of playing video games, Layla vividly articulates the embodied pleasure of getting carried away with an eventful Netflix series and indicates that her body is also activated by the unfolding events.

Significantly, not all of the participants were enamoured by the use of creative, visual and arts-based methods. In Chapter Three, I detailed how participants at Westland College rejected the call to creativity and expressed a preference for a talk-based approach to the research. Correspondingly, I incorporated photo and statement elicitation interviews. Both of these methods allowed the research to engage with dominant discourses about young people's digital sexual cultures. For example, the photo-elicitation task was designed to elicit discussions about the visual culture of social media. While the images I included were guided by previous research on young people's digital sexual cultures (see Marston 2019a) and emerging findings from this study, the photo-elicitation task was centred on humans (see Appendix E). Even where pictures of animals were included, these were still with people and not on their own. It, therefore, highlighted the value of the digital tours for moving beyond pre-conceived understandings of young people's digital cultures as these allowed for more-than-human visual content to come to the fore and to focus on non-dominant discourses around social media's visual culture.

Employing a multiplicity of creative, visual and arts-based methods across a multi-phase research project provided an opportunity for the research to branch off in many



unexpected directions and explore different facets of young people's digital sexuality assemblages. Rather than adopting a systematic linear pre-planned approach to data collection, many of the activities I employed emerged through the research process and in response to participants. The range of creative, visual and arts-based methods I employed produced a mess of artefacts including maps, screenshots, drawings, emojis, cut-up poems, fabricated figures, transcripts, glitch videos, field notes and so on. Assembling this data defied linearity and rigid organisation but opened 'thought up to creative constructions' and 'contingent associations' that called forth different ways of noticing what was happening in young people's digital sexual cultures (Lather 1993, p. 680). Reading this mess of heterogeneous data diffractively and recursively through and against each other, in light of my own affective entanglements and in relation to research and writing by others was an ongoing tentative yet lively process (Ellingson and Sotirin 2020). Bringing the data together allowed me to create assemblages in each chapter of this thesis that I hope have 'significance, salience, and meaning' for those who experience them as well as invite a more curious, creative and open understanding of how digital practices come to matter for young people (Markham 2013, section 4.2, n.p).

#### **7.4 HOW CAN ARTS-BASED APPROACHES BE EMPLOYED IN CO-PRODUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT WORK TO RE-IMAGINE YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL SEXUAL CULTURES AND COMMUNICATE THEIR COMPLEXITY?**

In Chapter Six, I set out to answer the third and final question that guided my study by exploring the development and direction of the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*. Building on my experiments with arts-based activities such as emoji crafting and cut-up poetry, this dedicated half-day workshop sought to run interference into the scripted format of the annual UK-based awareness-raising event *Safer Internet Day*. As I outlined in Chapter One, online safety interventions have tended to rely on scripted curricula which treat young people as individual rational agents navigating risk and harm without addressing the way broader sexual and gender norms inflect digital relationships. Online safety strategies also limit what digital practices are considered relevant and for whom in a way that can reinforce the heteronormative bifurcation of active male sexuality and

passive female sexuality. By working with artist facilitators to co-compose creative encounters that picked up on and re-worked emerging doctoral findings on the digitally networked body, the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* set out to move beyond discursive interventions and throw 'open the question of pedagogy to consider how we might learn from being affected by the inherent queerness of the world' (Taylor and Blaise 2014, p. 389).

In order to re-imagine young people's digital sexual cultures, this workshop harnessed the ability of the speculative mode to queer perception and disrupt 'habitual ways of knowing' (Truman 2018, p. 31). As I outlined in Chapter Two, Haraway (2016) calls for speculative fabulation as an important feminist practice for thinking beyond the mundane fiction of nature/culture, human/more-than-human, male/female binaries. Furthermore, speculative fiction has long shaped the popular imaginary around new technologies and operated as a site where advances in science and technology are debated, elaborated, and re-imagined (Brians 2011). Building on these observations, this study demonstrated how speculative fiction offers a valuable means with which to open up conversations with young people around the multitude of ways that digital technologies are reconfiguring the body. Focusing on future bodies also functioned as a distancing technique that allowed participants to explore the sexualised and gendered topic of digitally networked bodies without revealing too much of themselves (Renold 2019a; 2019b).

Collaborating with artist facilitators Bryony Gillard and Ailsa Fineron, we worked to incorporate a wide range of speculative texts from art, cinema, journalism and popular culture that aligned with a long-standing tradition of feminist speculative fiction. From a practical perspective providing participants with a range of text prompts that they could cut-up and re-assemble offered an accessible way into the creative writing task. However, it also served a political function as these texts injected a plurality of critical and creative voices which challenged and disrupted dominant narratives around bodily ideals, feelings and technologies. Similarly, the use of textiles in the fabricating bodies activity tapped into the material history of subordinated and feminised textile arts that entangle with the gendered politics of modern computing (Brown 2019; Hicks 2017). In Chapter Two, I noted

how these artistic traditions are seen to engage 'alternative economies of embodied looking' that disrupt phallogentric modes of vision which capture and contain bodily capacities (Marks 2000, p. 6). This tactile approach connects to the increasingly haptic visuality of social media content (see Chapter Five, section 5.9), which is much 'more inclined to graze than to gaze' (Marks and Polan 2000, p. 162) at the marvellous material specificity of things (Bennett 2009). Furthermore, by deliberately cultivating invention, deception and craft in the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*, this speculative intervention disrupted the categorical distinctions between the real and the fake, material and the virtual, online and offline, human and more-than-human that underpin dominant online safeguarding discourses.

Inviting participants to borrow, sample and remix texts and textiles allowed experiences to come together in new and unexpected ways that were significant to communicating the complexity of young people's digital relationships. Over the course of a half-day workshop, the participants produced dartaphacts that powerfully articulated experiences of bodily regulation and brought the topic of young people's digitally networked bodies to life. In my discussion of the dartaphacts, I outlined how they weaved together various research threads that sparked recognition through my own in-depth engagement with and affective responses to them. For example, Safa's and Imogen's cut-up poem illustrated how poetic inquiry could distil complex experiences of bodily malaise into affectively powerful forms that reached out and exceeded the specificity of their personal experiences. The multi-vocal qualities of their poem challenged individualised understandings of social media body pathologies. In addition, I noted how poetry defies the closure of singular interpretations by inviting multiple readings which worked to encapsulate the competing and contradictory demands placed upon girl's bodies in a globalised post-feminist digital media culture (Ringrose 2011).

Working in the speculative mode also invited imaginative readings that troubled the boundaries of the human body. For example, I noted how the desire to be 'switched off' expressed in Safa's and Imogen's poem evoked a hybridisation of machine and organism which pointed to the difficulty of disentangling from social media's visual ecology. In

addition, I observed how Mia's misreading of the line 'spines curve over laptops' prompted her group to think about digital technologies being pushed into the very fibres of the human body. As I noted in section 7.2.2.3, their dystopic vision of future girlhood powerfully unsettled the notion that young people are individual rational agents navigating risk and harm online. Their dartaphacts highlighted how speculative fiction can question the trajectory of technological advancements as well as 'realise the absurd or corrupt within the familiar' call to transform yourself (Sin 2019, pp. 5 - 6). By leaving open the possibility of rebellion and exceeding one's programming, however, the fabricated future girl could be seen to complicate and re-work simplified fear-driven narratives surrounding young people's digitally networked bodies.

In Chapter Six, I explored how the collaborative approach to the workshop gave rise to some difficult peer dynamics. For example, I observed that Safa's and Imogen's mixed-gender and mixed-age group had struggled to work together. Rather than viewing these relational difficulties as unwelcome intrusions, I considered how tension could operate as an activating and agentic force that opened up new avenues of inquiry. By working together-apart on their fabricated figures, Safa's and Imogen's group materialised the tension between active masculinity and passive femininity that I have explored throughout this thesis. By juxtaposing the inhibited fabricated feminine figure with the animated fabricated masculine figure, their dartaphact not only gave form to the heteronormative bifurcation of young people's bodies but it also communicated some of the complexity of how these categories are sustained. I noted how reading the cut-up poem and fabricated figures together put social media's visual culture of bodily display into conversation with the broader gendered body politics at Green City School. By keeping the fabricated masculine and feminine figures tethered to one another, their dartaphact also challenges moves to set young people apart along heteronormatively gendered lines. The arts-based practice opened up a 'contact zone' between Safa and Imogen and the Year 7 boys evoking a different way of young people being in relation to one another and occupying space together (Halberstam 2018).

As I noted in Chapter Six, I had hoped that the objects and poetry produced in the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* would provide an opportunity to engage teachers with young people's lived experience of their digitally networked bodies and challenge preconceptions about young people's digital practices. Due to various pressures on staff at Green City School, however, such an opportunity did not come to fruition. It would also have been interesting to explore how these dartaphacts could open up conversations with other young people. For example, how do differently positioned young people relate to the juxtaposition of an animated figure unencumbered by body pathologies and bearing a crown asserting its ability to 'be anything' compared to an inhibited figure weighed down with pejorative and pathologising comments? While it was beyond the scope of this research project to map how these dartaphacts might travel to affect others and provoke new thoughts, reflections and connections, this thesis has illuminated how arts-based methods can interfere with and transform normative practices around online safety interventions (Renold 2019).

## **7.5 SUMMARY**

In this section, I will summarise and discuss what my findings tell us about young people's digital sexual cultures. Developing a creative, visual and arts-based approach to my research generated data on many facets of young people's digital sexuality assemblages including a variety of platforms, relationships, media discourses and body cultures which produce multiple norms and affects. In section 7.2.1, I traced how young people's digital sexual cultures continue to be organised by limiting heteronormative and phallogocentric formations that bifurcate active male sexuality and passive female sexuality, before moving on in section 7.2.2 to discuss how heteronormative and phallogocentric power relations are reconfigured by the increasing dispersal of digital technologies into our everyday lives. I noted that the increasingly promiscuous and more-than-human form that relationships can take in young people's digitally networked lives have the potential to de-territorialise normative anthropocentric understandings of gender and sexual relations. For example, the publicisation of hetero-romantic relationships online could advertise the inherent precarity and vulnerability of lively, durable intimacy. At the same time, however,

digital technologies can re-territorialise established norms of gendered sexuality by continuing to shape young people's affective attachment to the 'rewards' of heteronormative future imaginaries.

I explored how young people's digital engagements are capable of producing relations that might be 'subversive and unforeseeable' (Beckman 2011, p. 11). For example, Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen's kinship with Alexa raised questions as to how children and young people reproduce, challenge and subvert the gender and sexual norms embedded in domestic feminised smart technologies. Considering the multiplicities of what else the participant's digital relationships could enable and do also drew attention to the role of more-than-human visual content on social media. In section 7.2.2.2, I observed that participant's talk and illustrations of food, pets, spots and slime content online demonstrated how these could plug into feminising and masculinising assemblages in multiple ways. For example, Alex's engagement with queer veganism online operated as part of a wider apparatus of relations that disrupted associations of masculinity with meat, strong muscularity and the subjugation of women and animals. Although more-than-human visual content on social media could be re-territorialised into familiar moral economies of looking and heteronormative modes of care, they also had the potential to evoke different bodily imaginaries and intimacies that tapped into new relational possibilities between young people, animals and materiality.

In addition, my findings have advanced an understanding of pre-teen young people's digital sexual cultures and, in particular, contemporary digital girlhoods. Although digital technologies can intensify the regulatory sexual and gender norms that continue to contain and constrain what girls can do with their bodies, I have also observed how the pre-teen participant's digital relations could re-route the circuits that bind technology to hetero-patriarchal power structures.

My findings did not resort to binary understandings of digital practices as either 'good' or 'bad' but sought to agitate different ways of relating to young people's digital entanglements and keep meaning on the move (Allen 2015, p. 121). Bringing the data

together allowed me to create assemblages in each chapter of this thesis that communicated the complexity of young people's digital relationships. I also explored how arts-based methods can interfere with and transform normative practices around online safety interventions. Inviting participants to borrow, sample and remix texts and textiles enabled them to creatively re-imagine how the research could be put together and produce their own data assemblages that communicated how digital practices come to matter for young people.

## **7.6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

In addition to its potential, there are limitations to adopting an open-ended and curious approach to researching young people's digital sexual cultures. My expansive study weaved together many different facets of young people's digital cultures but did not allow for a more in-depth exploration of specific practices. I touched upon a range of topics throughout this thesis that would welcome their own dedicated study. For example, I argued that further research is needed into children and young people's relation to domestic smart technologies. While some studies have considered the increasing automatisations of the home (Kennedy et al. 2020), few engage in an analysis of how the gendered and sexual politics of domestic smart devices shape children's and young people's identities, relationships and cultures. This is particularly significant given that the home is often positioned as the true and proper site for relationships and sex education by a hetero-patriarchal framework of privatised intimacy (Dobson, Robards and Carah 2019, p. 7).

In this thesis, I pieced together data from the pre-teen and teen participants on avatars, beauty applications and digitally fabricated models to point to shifts towards simulated beauty norms online. Not only do simulated beauty norms highlight the continued entanglement between children's (digital) doll cultures and adult beautification but they illustrate how appearance politics is being transformed in classed, raced, gendered and sexualised ways. Further research is needed to explore how these technologies are being taken up and responded to by young people.

Another thread running through this thesis was the relationship between digital technologies, young people and the environment. Although popular discourse positions digital technologies as a threat to the innate connection between children, nature and animals (Louv 2008), I have suggested that digital technologies may play a role in supporting young people to connect with, learn about and advocate for the natural environment and animals. Drawing on Lucy's talk of Instagram, I suggested that digital pet-working practices can nourish greater kinship between young people, animals and more-than-human others. In addition, Alex's queer veganism illustrated a feminist figuration of masculinity shaped by care for the environment. I also pointed to climate activism amongst participants at Green City School that was inspired by and facilitated through social media. Further research is needed to explore the role of digital technologies in disrupting anthropocentrism and supporting young people to foster greater kinship with more-than-human others.

While I was keen to hold in play the 'off the radar' ways young people are affected by their entanglement with digital technologies, I am also mindful that rendering these practices more visible can be co-opted into producing new normative scripts for young people. For example, I was eager to highlight the feminist and queer potential of haptic visibility on YouTube and the subtle forms of intimacy proliferating online. However, I also observed how weird and wonderful digital practices such as spot squeezing and slime videos can be interpellated into normative health and wellbeing discourses that reinforce the imperative to transform oneself. For example, Aislinn's discussion of slime as a solution for her problem with stress suggested that it can be used to contain and constrain unruly emotions in line with individualistic neo-liberal agendas (Reveley 2016). Similarly, I questioned whether the use of arts-based approaches such as emoji crafting could paradoxically work to soften and disguise the participant's feelings as opposed to trouble and rework normative 'feeling rules' (Kanai 2019; Gill 2017; McRobbie 2008). Dartaphacts such as Safa's and Imogen's cut-up poem also risked being re-absorbed into the narrative comfort of pathologising social media as a source of bodily malaise for young people.



It is impossible to control how this research is taken up and read by others. However, I hope that it continues to move in ways that unsettle everyday assumptions about how digital technologies come to matter in the lives of children and young people and inspires others to address digital sexual cultures in playful, curious and creative ways. In section 7.7.3 I highlight some of the ways in which my research is continuing to travel into policy and practice landscapes.

## **7.7 KEY CONTRIBUTIONS**

### **7.7.1 CONTRIBUTION TO YOUTH SEXUALITIES RESEARCH**

My study is situated in the field of youth sexualities research and I have indicated throughout this thesis how I contributed to this body of literature. Much of the research in this field has drawn on interactionist and discursive understandings of gender and sexuality which can retain a narrow focus on the individual subject as the locus of gender and sexuality. Inspired by feminist posthuman and new materialist theories, I adopted an expansive understanding of sexuality that encompassed a range of social, technological, material, cultural and bodily practices. By opening up sexuality beyond conventional conceptualisations, I was able to explore how young people's digital sexual cultures produce 'encounters, resonances and relations of all sorts' which blur the boundaries between the human/more-than-human, private/public, organic/simulated, masculine/feminine, natural/unnatural (Braidotti 2011, p. 148). I argued that these relations can over-score heteronormative and phallogocentric territorialities but also have the capacity to open up new patterns of relations that temporarily free young people from the weight of dominant discourses around gender and sexuality.

By foregrounding relationality and distributive agency, this thesis observed how young people's digital practices could have a permeable influence on their surrounding peer group and exceed the bounds of the individual subject and/or device. Rather than unified entities that can be easily defined and separated, my findings highlighted how the affects of online encounters could travel and disperse amongst peer groups affecting bodies beyond those immediately involved. In addition, I observed how charged affective

encounters in young digitally networked peer cultures could live in and on the body long after one has switched off from social media. Correspondingly, I argued that efforts to contain and curtail young people's digital engagements are limited as they rely on a prosthetic understanding of young people and digital platforms that struggles to account for the lived and deeply felt affective sociality of digital technologies.

To date, much of the research on young people's digital sexual cultures has focused on questions of self-presentation online in anthropocentric and identitarian ways. In line with wider research, this thesis illustrated how commodified gendered and sexualised norms are intensified online. However, it also worked to complicate understandings of young people's digital sexual cultures by decentring the human body as a central focus of concern. This research project generated data that made visible a number of 'off the radar' ways that digital technologies entangle with young people's sexual cultures, including the queer sociality of more-than-human encounters with food, animals, pus and slime online. I highlighted how digital platforms are implicated with the marvellous material specificity of things which have profound social and embodied consequences (Bennett 2009). Although these more-than-human relations can still channel familiar heteronormative and phallogocentric force relations, I argued that they also foster alternative modes of intimacy that could rupture heteronormative imaginaries.

The majority of scholarship on young people's digital cultures focuses on older teenagers use of social networking sites with few addressing the experiences of pre-teen young people (Handyside and Ringrose 2017; Warfield 2017; Duguay 2016a Ringrose and Coleman 2013; Kofoed and Ringrose 2012; Van Doorn 2010). This thesis has made a key contribution in addressing this gap by working with a diverse cohort of 11 – 13-year-olds in England and Wales. I painted a heterogeneous picture of pre-teen young people's digital practices noting how they are inflected by a classed and racialised politics of parental choice. This thesis outlined how digital technologies facilitated access to a range of knowledge, providing young people with new technologies for the making and mattering of sexual and gendered subjectivities. I also highlighted how the pre-teen participants shifted back and forth between positions of mature knowingness and childish

innocence in their efforts to navigate the intimate knowledge facilitated by digitally networked peer cultures. While concerns about the contaminating influence of digital technologies on children and young people tend to focus on spaces shared with peers, I observed how domestic smart technologies can also entangle with young people's intimate practices in curious ways. By adopting an expansive understanding of sexuality, my research offers a significant contribution to the field and has opened up new avenues of inquiry.

### **7.7.2 CONTRIBUTION TO FEMINIST POST-HUMAN AND NEW MATERIALIST RESEARCH**

In addition to contributing to the field of youth sexualities research, my thesis also made a contribution to a growing body of feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship that seeks to re-imagine what else sexualities research might be, do and become (Allen 2018; Quinlivan 2018; Renold and Ringrose 2016; Austin 2017; Thomas 2016; Huuki and Renold 2016; Renold and Ivinson 2014; Holford, Renold and Huuki 2013; Fox and Alldred 2013; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Ringrose 2011). This work not only draws attention to the more-than-human others that have been routinely excluded from research on young people's gender and sexual cultures but it invites a consideration of the politics of social inquiry and how our research practice comes to matter (Strom et al. 2019; Pederson and Pini 2017). My research project experimented with and re-imagined what a digital sexualities research project could look and feel like by embracing creative, visual and arts-informed practice. I did not begin with a formalised and systematised process of data collection but adopted a curious and open-ended approach that began with a multiplicity of creative materials and visual elicitation tools. This orientation meant that I was able to tap into participant's experiences with a variety of digital technologies and follow where different threads might lead, rather than limit the research to a pre-defined set of topics.

Much of the feminist posthuman and new materialist scholarship on digital sexualities has focused on particular digital content, contact or conduct such as selfies (Warfield 2017; Driver 2018), sexting (Ringrose and Coleman 2013), Facebook tagging (Renold and Ringrose 2017) or body-positive art (Hickey-Moody and Wilcox 2019). Building on this

work, my study considered how feminist posthuman and new materialist concepts could be put to work to unsettle what counts as digital sexualities research and where it can go. The thesis mapped many facets of young people's digital sexuality assemblages and read these digital practices diffractively through and against one another in order to draw different patterns of relations and engage in a critical rethinking of their relationality (Barad 2007). This approach set fresh lines of inquiry in motion for considering how digital technologies are reshaping young people's sexual cultures. For example, I was able to examine the way mobile gaming, photo editing applications and digitally fabricated social media models entangle to produce new gendered beauty norms.

While feminist posthuman and new materialist researchers have increasingly adopted creative and craft-based approaches to unlock and process a range of embodied, material, spatial, and affective experiences (Quinlivan 2018), the digital sexualities research in this field has predominantly experimented with digital methods such as online observations (Ringrose 2011), Instagram live interviews (Hickey-Moody and Wilcox 2019), scroll-back elicitation interviews (Coleman and Ringrose 2013) and video interviews (Warfield 2017). This thesis differed by mobilising the materiality of social media and gaming icons, emojis, selfies, glitch filters, glitter glue, marker pens, fabric and paints to see how they might activate different ways of relating to young people's digital sexual cultures (Hickey-Moody 2017). I have argued that cultivating imagination, play and craft in digital sexualities research can get to some of the complexities of young people's digitally networked experiences. Specifically, I have demonstrated how re-making digitally networked bodies materially and relationally can call us to think anew about the boundaries between the material and the virtual, the online and offline, the masculine and feminine as well as the human and more-than-human (Bragg et al. 2018; Hickey-Moody & Page 2015; Coleman 2016).

My research also experimented with cultivating open and experimental methodological-pedagogical encounters that engaged young people more directly in digital sexualities research and education. Inviting young people to rework, remix and reanimate data allowed experiences to come together in new and unexpected ways. The dartsphacts the

participants produced vividly articulated their embodied knowledge of how their bodies are fixed in place by heteronormative and phallogocentric forces that traverse online and offline contexts. At the same time, the process of producing the dartaphacts cultivated space for creative movement and connection that evoked different ways for young people to be in relation to one another. Overall, my project demonstrates how combing a multiplicity of methodological and theoretical tools (for example, creative and visual group interviews, assemblage theory, affect, phallogocentricism, arts-based methods, feminist figurations) enabled me to engage with and communicate the complexity of young people's digital sexual cultures. My findings will be of interest to other feminist posthuman and new materialist scholars keen to re-imagine what a digital sexualities research project can be and become.

### **7.7.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE**

Research on young people's digital sexual cultures has the potential to influence policy and practice particularly with RSE poised to become compulsory in England in 2020 and Wales in 2022. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to outline in detail the implications of my research to those working in the field of relationships and sexuality education. However, this section briefly summarises how my research is continuing to travel in ways that might influence future RSE pedagogy and practice as well as address the enduring gender and sexual inequities shaping young people's digital sexual cultures.

A selection of dartaphacts from the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* were presented to an audience of academics, education practitioners, university students and artists at the Gender and Education Association International Conference 2019, hosted by the University of Portsmouth. In addition, the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop* is being developed into a case study for 'AGENDA: supporting children and young people in making positive relationships matter'. This online activist resource continues to interfere with and transform the 'normative practices of how healthy relationships education [...] can come to matter' in school and youth work settings (Renold 2019a, p. 231). This resource has

been well-received by teachers and youth workers in England and Wales, as well as internationally.

In addition, several research moments from my thesis are being adapted into case studies for a new teacher training resource entitled *Crush: Transforming Sexuality and Relationships Education* (Renold, McGeeney and Ashton 2020). This resource is designed to provide a creative and interactive way of engaging with academic research that might enable teachers to 're-imagine what RSE can be and become with and for children and young people' (Renold et al. 2020, p. 4). In September 2019, I presented research moments related to Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen's kinship with the virtual personal assistant Alexa and Lucy's Instagram pet-working to an audience of researchers and education practitioners who are supporting the development of the *Crush* resource. These stories are currently being adapted to form part of the resource alongside work from other gender and sexuality scholars.

## **7.8 CONCLUSIONS**

This thesis has mapped out how digital technologies such as social media, smart devices and gaming platforms are shaping youth sexualities in England and Wales. I began this thesis by arguing that young people's sexualities continue to be viewed as risky and dangerous, with fears exacerbated by the dispersal of digital technologies into their everyday social lives. I also argued that research, policy and practice too often limits what digital practices are considered relevant and for whom without offering due consideration to the way enduring sexual and gender inequities shape young people's digital sexual cultures. My research project addressed many facets of young people's digital sexual assemblages including digitally networked peer cultures, YouTube and Instagram celebrity, compulsory coupledness, LGBTQ+ counterpublics, pet-working, mediated foodscapes, gaming and Netflix fandoms as well as slime and spot squeezing on YouTube.

I employed a range of creative, visual and arts-based methods in group and individual interviews informed by feminist posthuman and new materialist theories to trace

enduring heteronormative and phallogocentric patterns in the way young people experience digital sexualities. However, I also mapped ruptures and feminist figurations that activate different ways of seeing and relating to young people's digital sexual cultures (Braidotti 2011a; Haraway 2004). My data highlights how the heteronormative bifurcation of active male sexuality and passive female sexuality along with the thrust towards heteronormative future imaginaries remain a significant force in the digitally networked lives of many young people. I also illustrated how young people's digital sexual cultures can be the site of unexpected and unpredictable relations that move towards possibilities for re-imagining gender and sexuality beyond heteronormative and phallogocentric norms.

While it is important to continue to point out the enduring inequalities that limit what young people can do with their bodies, this thesis offered more dynamic accounting that considered how heteronormative and phallogocentric force relations work in unknown ways through young people's entanglement with digital technologies. The rupturing moments that I highlighted in this thesis activated new ways of thinking about young people's digital sexual cultures which challenged the mundane fiction of human/more-than-human, online/offline, masculine/feminine, nature/culture binaries. In turn, these moments informed methodological-pedagogical encounters that set out to unsettle the over-coded world of young people's digital sexualities. Moving forward the participant's research creations continue to travel in ways that complicate taken for granted assumptions about young people's digital sexual cultures and communicate their complexity to new audiences.

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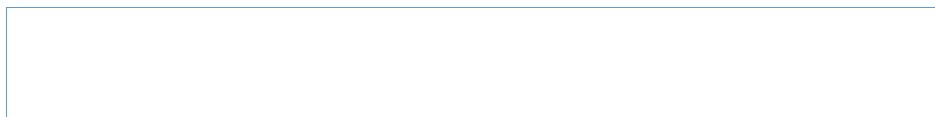
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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A Parental Consent Form

**YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL RELATIONSHIPS:  
A CREATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY STUDY WITH  
YOUNG PEOPLE IN ENGLAND AND WALES**

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact me on [marstonke@cf.ac.uk](mailto:marstonke@cf.ac.uk) or 07772816746.

Alternatively, if you have concerns about the conduct of this research you can contact my supervisors:

Professor Emma Renold  
[renold@cf.ac.uk](mailto:renold@cf.ac.uk)

Dr Dawn Mannay  
[mannydi@cf.ac.uk](mailto:mannydi@cf.ac.uk)

**ABOUT ME**  
My name is Kate Marston, I am a PhD student at Cardiff University.  
This leaflet tells you about a research project I am inviting your child to take part in.

This research is funded by the Economic & Social Research Council and Cardiff University.



### WHY YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL RELATIONSHIPS?

I would like to know what young people think about the role of digital technologies, such as mobile phones, social media and the web, in their relationships with each other.

We often see lots of books and reports about opportunity, risk and safety in young people's digital worlds. Usually this technology is talked about in the context of harassment and bullying. I am interested in this but I would also like to know what topics young people would choose to focus on. Few studies have asked young people what they think, from their own experience, about the role and impact of these technologies on their peer relationships. What adults think about young people's digital relationships may be different from what young people think matters most.

### MY CONSENT

Please tick each box if you agree with the statement:

I have read and understood the information leaflet detailing the nature of the study and my child's involvement.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am happy for my child to have what they say recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that any data collected will be anonymized to protect my child's identity and the identity of others in any reports or visual materials.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know that if the researcher becomes aware of any information that suggests a child might be at risk, the school's child protection procedures will be followed and the appropriate support put in place.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know that my child can decide not to take part in the project at any time without giving a reason.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name:.....

Name of Your Child:.....

Signature (and date):.....



## HOW MUCH TIME WILL IT TAKE?

The research will take place at your child's school at a time and location where school staff are present. A room and a time has been negotiated with the school and the participants. The research could involve a one-off visit or meeting regularly depending on how they would like to take part. Anyone who takes part will be a volunteer and can change their mind at any time.

## SAFETY AND WELLBEING

Safety and well-being are very important. If any young person becomes unduly distressed, a nominated person (e.g. a teacher they can confide in) will be notified and the appropriate support put in place. All research will follow the school's child protection procedures and all young people will be made aware that matters involving risk to themselves or others will be referred to an appropriate person.

## WHAT DOES IT INVOLVE?

I would like to work with young people to explore the best ways of expressing their experiences and feelings about digital technologies in peer relationships. We could talk about friendships, their favourite social media platforms or games, the content they share online or anything else the young people think is interesting about their digital relationships.

These topics could be explored via a range of youth friendly activities, such as:

- Creating mind maps of the things and people in their digital worlds
- Taking screenshots of games, 'apps' or social media sites that are significant to young people
- Sharing their thoughts and feelings about digital relationships through collage, photography, creative writing or another creative method
- Participating in a friendship group and/or individual interviews about areas of their digital relationships that matter to them.

## WHAT HAPPENS TO THE THINGS THEY PRODUCE?

With your child's permission, I will record the process of talking about these things. This could involve audio-recording our conversations, taking photographs of materials produced and keeping notes about what happened during each visit to your child's school.

Any 'data' produced will be kept securely in strict accordance with the Data Protection Act. It will be used to inform my PhD 'thesis' on young people's digital relationships. Names and identifying characteristics will be anonymised in any written materials I produce. In accordance with University guidelines, at the end of the project all data will be securely stored for a further 5 years.

I also hope that what the participants share could help other young people, parents and teachers understand some of the good and bad things about young people's digital relationships. They will have an opportunity to decide if and how what they tell me is shared with such people. For example, if they wanted to deliver a workshop for teachers on the research I could support them to do so. A separate information leaflet and consent form will be produced for such dissemination activities.

## HOW DOES MY CHILD GET INVOLVED?

Permission to undertake the research has already been sought from your child's school and they have agreed to support the research activities.

If after reading this leaflet you are happy for your child to be involved then simply read and sign the consent form on the next page. Once signed please return it using the stamped addressed envelope provided or by handing it to the school receptionist. If you have any questions about the project, I am happy to telephone to discuss the research in more detail.

## Appendix B Young people's consent form

**YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL RELATIONSHIPS:**

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact me on [marstonke@cf.ac.uk](mailto:marstonke@cf.ac.uk) or 07772816746.

Alternatively, if you have concerns about the conduct of this research you can contact my supervisors:

Professor Emma Renold  
[renold@cf.ac.uk](mailto:renold@cf.ac.uk)

Dr Dawn Mannay  
[mannydi@cf.ac.uk](mailto:mannydi@cf.ac.uk)

**A CREATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY STUDY WITH  
YOUNG PEOPLE IN ENGLAND AND WALES**



**ABOUT ME**

My name is Kate Marston, I am a PhD student at Cardiff University.  
This leaflet tells you about a research project I am inviting your child to take part in.



This research is funded by the Economic & Social Research Council and Cardiff University.



**WHY YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIGITAL RELATIONSHIPS?**

I would like to know what young people think about the role of digital technologies, such as mobile phones, social media and the web, in their relationships with each other.

We often see lots of books and reports about opportunity, risk and safety in young people's digital worlds. Usually this technology is talked about in the context of harassment and bullying. I am interested in this but I would also like to know what topics young people would choose to focus on. Few studies have asked young people what they think, from their own experience, about the role and impact of these technologies on their peer relationships. What adults think about young people's digital relationships may be different from what young people think matters most.

**MY CONSENT**

Please tick each box if you agree with the statement:

I have read and understood the information leaflet detailing the nature of the study and my child's involvement.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am happy for my child to have what they say recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that any data collected will be anonymized to protect my child's identity and the identity of others in any reports or visual materials.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know that if the researcher becomes aware of any information that suggests a child might be at risk, the school's child protection procedures will be followed and the appropriate support put in place.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I know that my child can decide not to take part in the project at any time without giving a reason.	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Name:**.....

**Name of Your Child:**.....

**Signature (and date):**.....



### HOW MUCH TIME WILL IT TAKE?

The research will take place at your child's school at a time and location where school staff are present. A room and a time has been negotiated with the school and the participants. The research could involve a one-off visit or meeting regularly depending on how they would like to take part. Anyone who takes part will be a volunteer and can change their mind at any time.

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Safety and well-being are very important. If any young person becomes unduly distressed, a nominated person (e.g. a teacher they can confide in) will be notified and the appropriate support put in place. All research will follow the school's child protection procedures and all young people will be made aware that matters involving risk to themselves or others will be referred to an appropriate person.

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These topics could be explored via a range of youth friendly activities, such as:

- Creating mind maps of the things and people in their digital worlds
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Any 'data' produced will be kept securely in strict accordance with the Data Protection Act. It will be used to inform my PhD 'thesis' on young people's digital relationships. Names and identifying characteristics will be anonymised in any written materials I produce. In accordance with University guidelines, at the end of the project all data will be securely stored for a further 5 years.

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Permission to undertake the research has already been sought from your child's school and they have agreed to support the research activities.

If after reading this leaflet you are happy for your child to be involved then simply read and sign the consent form on the next page. Once signed please return it using the stamped addressed envelope provided or by handing it to the school receptionist. If you have any questions about the project, I am happy to telephone to discuss the research in more detail.

## Appendix C School invite letter

Dear (name of school),

### **Cardiff University PhD Research Project:**

#### **Young People's Digital Relationships**

Would you like to learn more about your student's digital health and wellbeing? I am writing to invite your school to participate in a PhD research project exploring the ways the internet, mobile devices and social media shapes young people's relationships with each other. I am a doctoral researcher at Cardiff University undertaking a PhD in Contemporary Childhoods focusing on the experiences of young people aged 13 - 18 in England and Wales. The research project is informed by my 5+ years' experience as a voluntary sector practitioner working with young people, as well as a small-scale research project on young people's digital worlds completed as part of my Msc in Social Science Research Methods.

The research project seeks to create space for young people to articulate areas of their digitally-mediated relationships that matter to them. Topics covered may include: friendships; girlfriend/boyfriend cultures; lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans identities; bullying including sexist, homophobic and gender-based harassment; body image; social media celebrities; or digital activism. I am seeking permission to work with students on a regular basis between now and December 2018. Please see the attached information sheet for further details about the research.

To help promote the research project to your students I would be happy to facilitate activities, such as assemblies, PSHE or related subject lessons, exploring digital health and wellbeing. This could draw upon my experience as an anti-bullying practitioner for the charity [EACH](#), as well as an AGENDA Wales outreach team member: promoting whole-school approaches to addressing gender-based and sexual violence through the interactive [AGENDA toolkit - A Young People's Guide to Making Positive Relationships](#)

Matter.

Upon completion of the study, a summary of research findings will be presented to school staff which may usefully inform your work on health and wellbeing. If your school would welcome supporting the research I would be happy to meet to discuss the project in more detail. If you have any questions or would like to arrange a meeting please contact me on (e-mail address) or (telephone number).

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely,

Kate Marston



## Appendix D Participant produced maps

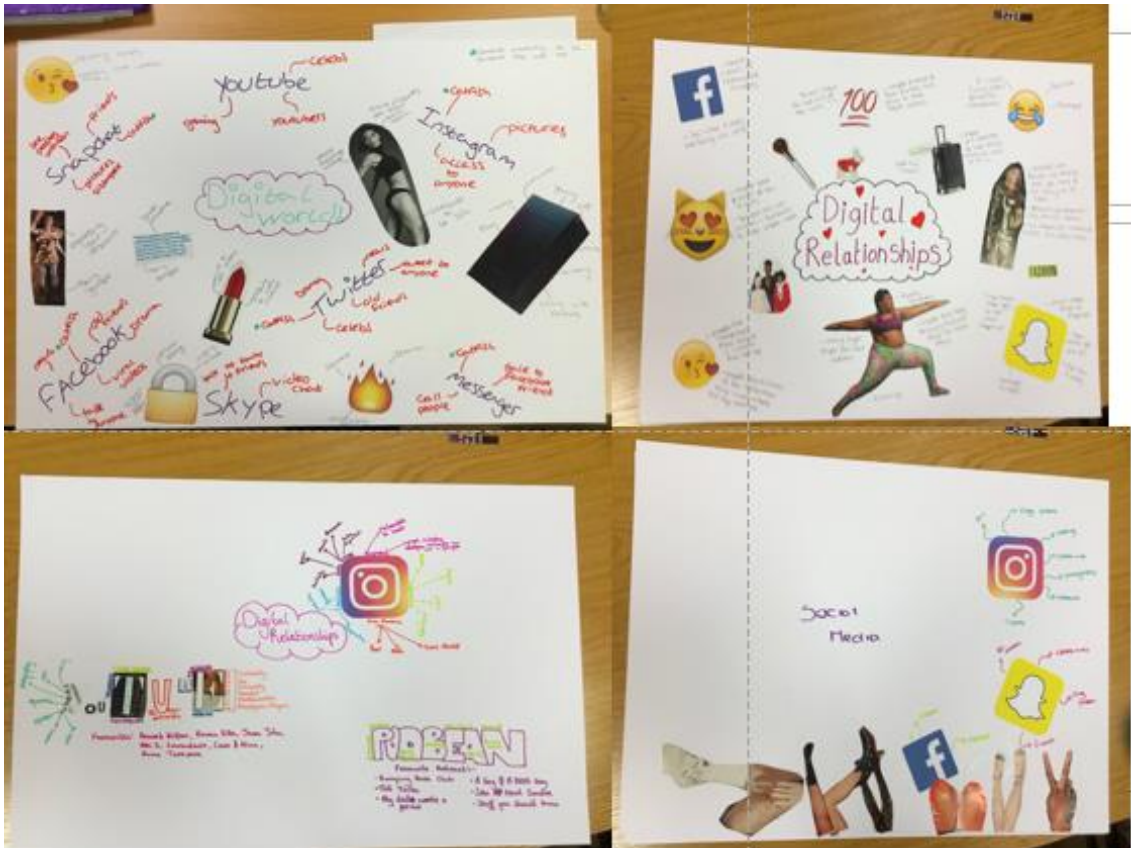
### GREEN CITY SCHOOL YEAR 7'S



### GREEN CITY SCHOOL YEAR 8'S



CASTELL Q

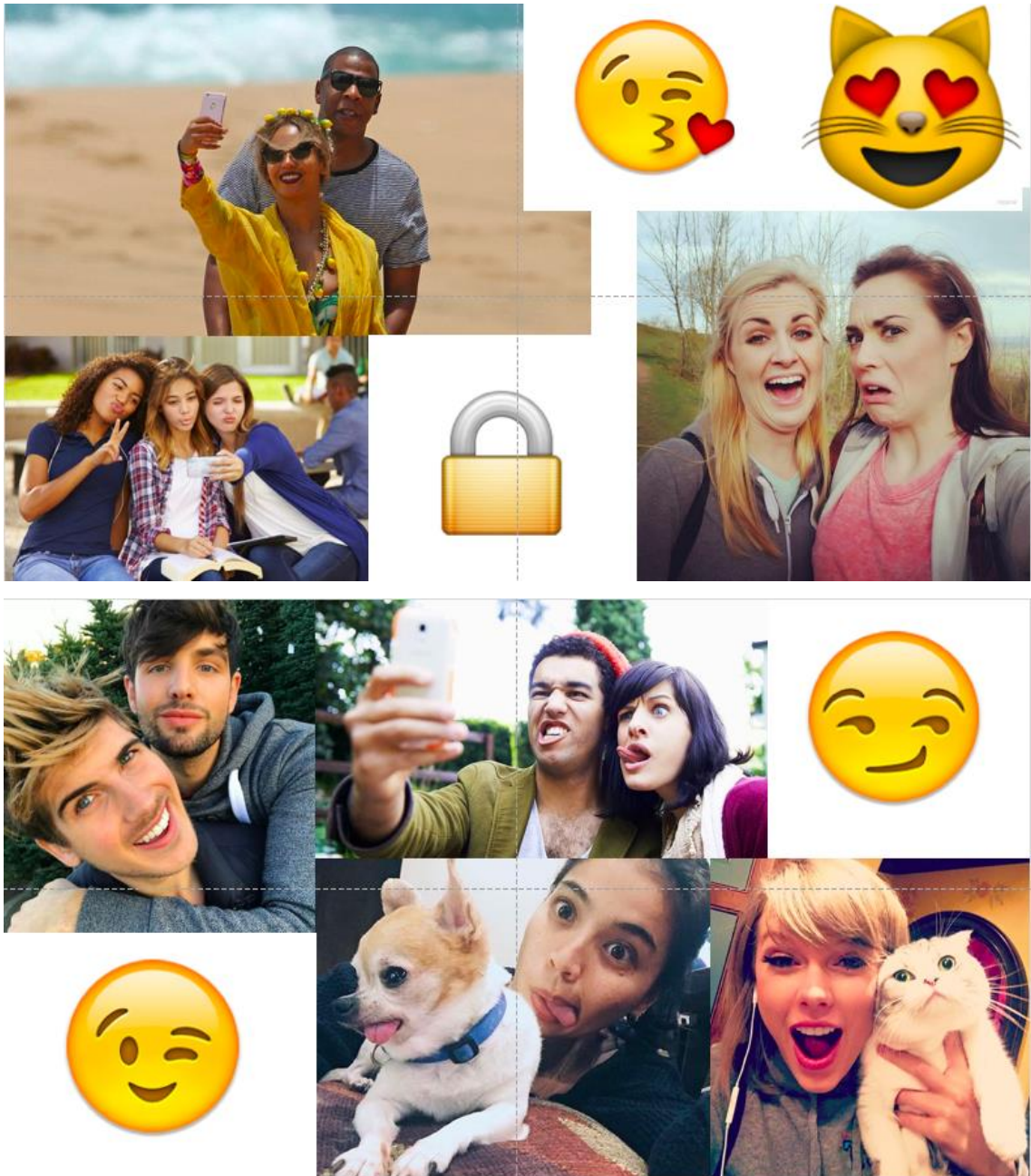


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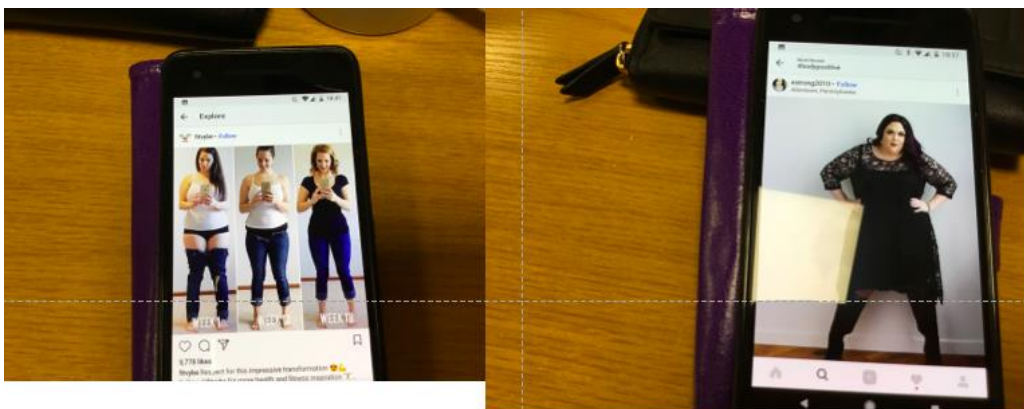
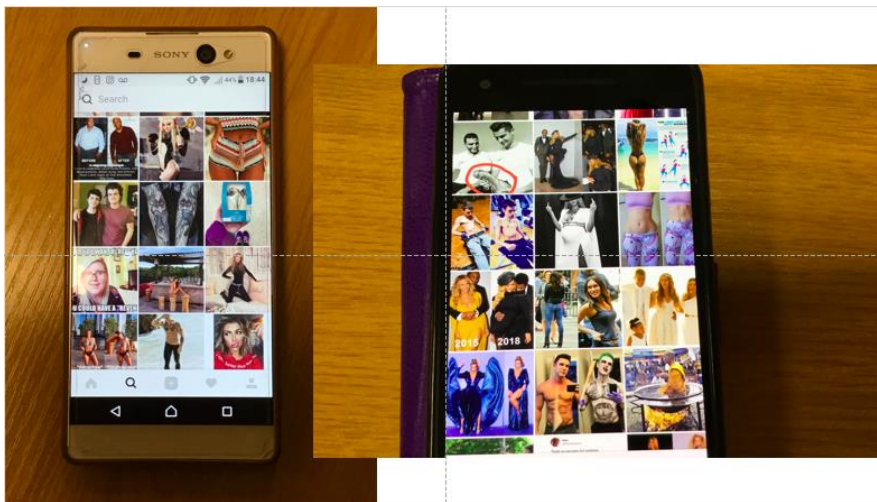
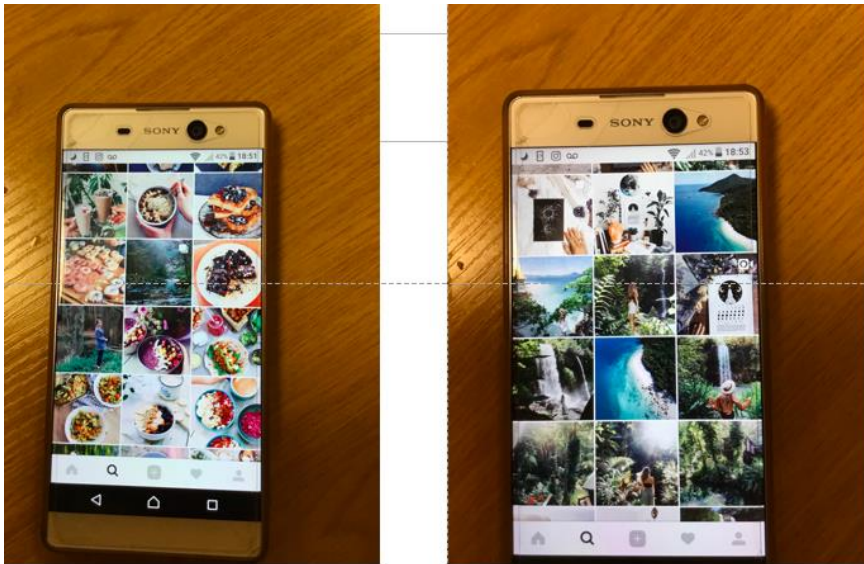




Appendix E Image sorting task



Appendix F Sample of participant produced screenshots





Appendix G Sample of participant's avatar designs



## Appendix H Media statements for sorting activity

Digital media offers potential for young people to learn about relationships in ways that are completely neglected by schools.

There's a pressure for young people to be involved 24/7 and keep up with their peer group or they will be left out and socially excluded.

Snapchat streaks and messaging everyday helps to build close friendships

Digital flirting could be an easy and fun way to get know someone, or even a means of starting intimate and long lasting relationships.

Digital flirting feels less emotionally risky than flirting face-to-face

Sexting is talked about a lot, and does happen, but I'm not sure if it's as common as people make out

Sexting happens more in schools where everyday sexism and gendered double standards are a problem e.g girls are shamed for sexual behaviour more than boys

Social media has a huge effect on young people's body confidence, boys feel like they need to be muscular and girls feel they need to be pretty

Social media has the potential to combat unrealistic appearance ideals and stereotypes.

Appendix I Sample of participant's stop/start plates



**Appendix J Extended summary of data produced (Phase One)**

Participant pseudonym	Age at start of study	Phases	Phase 1: Creative and Visual Group Interviews			
			Audio-recording	Video recording	Transcript	Other
Irene	18	2	00:56:09	N/A	12017	N/A
Bernard	18	2	02:07:24	N/A	22402	3 screenshots
Dan	17	2	01:11:15	N/A	10385	2 screenshots
Tom	17	1	01:38:16	N/A	16924	N/A
Claire	17	2	02:07:24	N/A	22402	2 screenshots
Lucy	16	2	02:23:09	N/A	4463	1 map, 6 screenshots
Sarah	15	2	02:23:09	N/A	4463	1 map
Alex	17	2	02:23:09	N/A	4463	1 map, 3 screenshots
Jen	16	1	02:23:09	N/A	4463	1 map
Tess	18	2	01:04:09	N/A	1108	1 screenshot
Mia	12	3	02:13:06	00:29:18	18295	1 map, 1 avatar, 2 plates
Safa	12	3	02:13:06	00:29:18	18295	1 map, 1 avatar, 2 plates
Isabella	12	3	02:13:06	00:29:18	18295	1 map, 1 avatar, 2 plates
Imogen	12	3	01:02:49	N/A	7355	1 drawing, 2 plates
Olivia	12	1	01:57:38	N/A	1587	1 map, 1 avatar, 2 plates
Chiara	12	3	01:57:38	N/A	1587	1 map, 1 avatar, 2 plates
Basar	13	3	01:29:52	00:29:14	11126	1 map, 1 avatar
Jalil	13	3	02:00:00	00:29:14	15331	1 map, 1 avatar, 2 plates
Layla	13	3	01:38:43	N/A	12250	1 map, 1 avatar, 2 plates
Karma	13	3	01:08:35	N/A	8045	1 map, 1 avatar



Droshux	13	3	02:00:00	00:29:14	15331	1 map, 1 avatar, 2 plates
Aislinn	11	1	01:00:39	N/A	6187	1 avatar, 1 screenshot
Neve	11	1	01:00:39	N/A	6187	1 avatar, 1 screenshot
Natalie	11	1	02:27:45	N/A	12382	1 map, 1 avatar, 1 screenshot
Leah	13	1	02:27:45	N/A	12382	1 map, 1 avatar, 1 screenshot

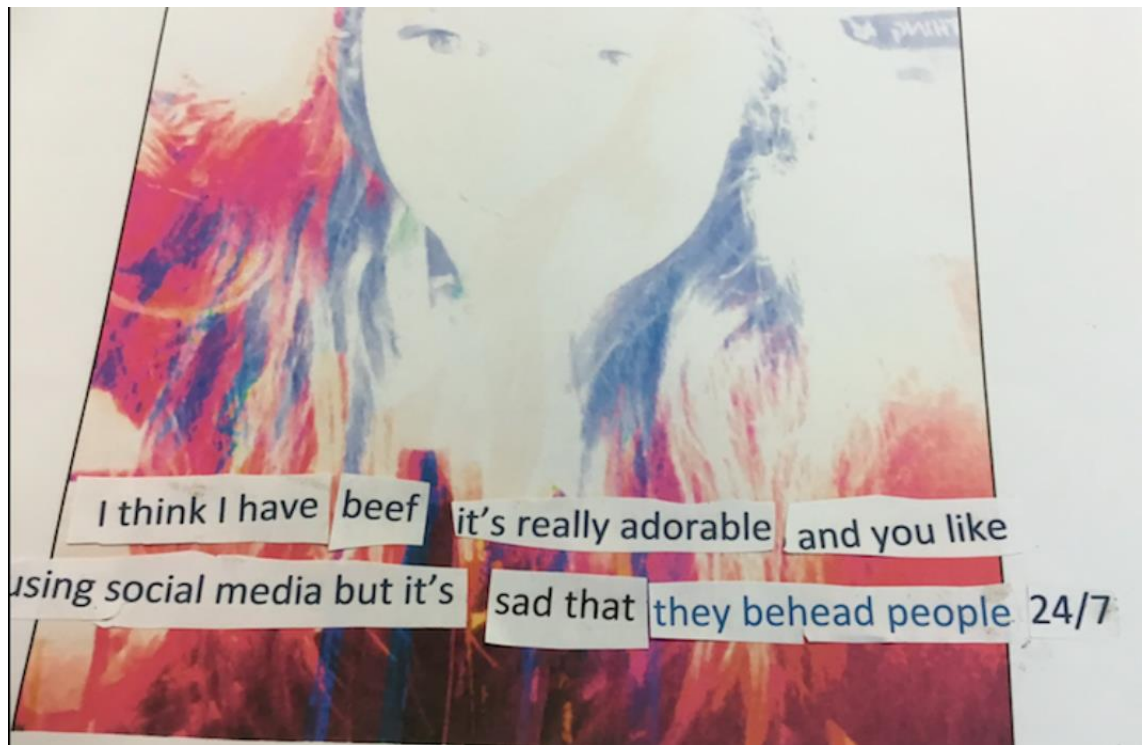
**Appendix K Extended table of data produced (Phase Two)**

Participant pseudonym	Age at start of study	Phases	Phase 2: Follow up interviews	
			Audio-recording	Transcript
Irene	18	2	00:36:40	7644
Bernard	18	2	00:36:00	6131
Dan	17	2	00:29:10	2817
Claire	17	2	00:30:22	4720
Lucy	16	2	00:22:25	3971
Sarah	15	2	00:18:01	1931
Alex	17	2	00:24:16	3371
Tess	18	2	00:29:11	4137
Mia	12	3	01:13:21	9074
Safa	12	3	01:13:21	9074
Isabella	12	3	01:13:21	9074
Imogen	12	3	00:32:11	2451
Chiara	12	3	00:30:05	3351
Basar	13	3	00:12:40	2020
Jalil	13	3	00:18:14	3133
Layla	13	3	00:18:14	3133
Karma	13	3	00:23:54	3375
Droshux	13	3	00:30:08	3803

**Appendix L Extended table of data produced (Phase Three)**

Participant pseudonym	Age at start of study	Phases	Phase 3: Arts-based workshops			
			Audio-recording	Video-recording	Transcript	Other
Mia	12	3	01:00:52	N/A	6302	2 emojis, 1 fabric figure, 1 cut-up poem
Safa	12	3	01:00:52	N/A	6302	2 emojis, 1 fabric figure, 1 cut-up poem
Isabella	12	3	01:00:52	N/A	6302	2 emojis, 1 fabric figure, 1 cut-up poem
Imogen	12	3	01:00:52	N/A	6302	2 emojis, 1 fabric figure, 1 cut-up poem
Chiara	12	3	01:00:52	N/A	6302	2 emojis, 1 fabric figure, 1 cut-up poem
Basar	13	3	01:25:09	N/A	6015	1 cut up poem, 1 digital story
Jalil	13	3	01:25:09	N/A	6015	1 cut up poem, 1 digital story
Layla	13	3	00:34:09	N/A	3556	1 cut up poem, 1 digital story
Karma	13	3	01:06:54	N/A	6908	1 cut up poem, 1 digital story
Droshux	13	3	01:57:54	N/A	9367	1 cut up poem, 1 digital story

Appendix M Sample of cut-up poems



## Appendix N Texts for the Fabricating Future Bodies

### Workshop

Humans said one thing with their bodies and another with their mouths and everyone had to spend time and energy figuring out what they really meant.

(Source: Butler, O. *Lilith's Brood: Dawn, Adulthood Rites, and Imago*. New York: Open Road, P. 1231)

My whole life I have felt as though I lived between two states... I'm not quite one thing and not quite the other, and I do think that's why I have always been so interested in stories of selkies [seals in water, humans on land] and mermaids because the key to those stories is that they change between states

(Source: Hughes, S. 2018. Magical and gender-fluid, the enduring appeal of mermaids. *The Guardian* 7 Jan)

No matter how well you wash, nearly every nook and cranny of your body is covered in microscopic creatures.

(Source: Gallagher, J. 2018. More than half your body is not human. *BBC News* 10 April)

In the past, it seemed like a sensible and simple idea to put living creatures – including animals, plants, fungi, bacteria and so on – into different categories called “species”.

(Source: Kover, P. 2018. Curious Kids: what is a species? *The Conversation* 27 November)

Smaller animals are not as connected cos they are more shy cos, my rabbit doesn't really like, it will let you pet it but it doesn't want to be petted all the time but bigger animals like cats, dogs, horses they don't mind, you just pet.

(Source: Research quote)

Going to sleep is like putting a computer into “sleep” mode. The computer is not completely switched off, it just is not working as hard. When we go into sleep mode, we can rest and save our energy but we don't fully turn ourselves off.

(Source: Rogers, S. 2018. Curious Kids: Where do dreams come from? *The Conversation* 10 December)

Your body expresses yesterday in what it wants today.

(Source: Irigaray, L. 1985. *The Sex Which is Not One*. New York: Cornell University Press, p. 214)

They started calling us Computers. People began vanishing – and the Cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all.

(Source: Monae, J. 2018. *Dirty Computer*. Los Angeles: Atlantic Records).

When computers that can read your mind exist...when you make a social media account you can't lie about your age you know? It reads your mind to see how old you are and then it can tell whether you're like a normal person or a potential freak

(Source: Research quote)

Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.

(Source: Haraway, D. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*.

London: Free Association Books, p. 181)

My anger and your attendant fears are spotlights that can be used for growth

(Source: A, Lorde. 1984. The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism. In: Lorde, A. *Sister Outsider: Essay and Speeches*. Berkely: Ten Speed Press, p. 263)

When you wake up one of the first things you do is you look in the mirror, what if there was a mirror that helped you out, maybe it gave you reminders, it had a calendar, it had texting, it played music, live chatting, make-up tutorials...and gave you confidence

(Source: Merrell Twins. 2018. *Project Upgrade – Episode 4*. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-FjUZf8Rro&t=126s> [Accessed 28 Feb 2020].)

This robot monk guy called Zenyatta, he has a ring of floating balls around his head and he sort of shoots them at people, but he can also put special orbs on people that heal them or he can put special orbs on the enemy that means they take more damage and he also charges out like a multi-shot

(Source: Research quote)

It's not cos you like violence, you just like the visual and the adrenalin rush of intensity of combat rather than like you like killing people, not cos you're a psychopath, you like the intense adrenalin rush from playing intense and exciting games.

(Source: Research quote)

The Palm Tree Bandit was a nameless wandering woman with no man or children. And she had powers. And if a woman prayed hard enough to her, she'd answer their call because she understood their problems. Legend had it that she had legs roped with muscle that could walk up a palm tree without using her hands, and her hair grew in the shape of palm leaves. Her skin was shiny from the palm oil she rubbed into it and her clothes were made of palm fibers.

(Source: Okorafor, N. The Palm Tree Bandit. In: VanderMeer, A. and VanderMeer, J. eds. 2015. *Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology*. Oakland: PM Press, p. 40)

Meduse move like water when at war....The Meduse in front of me was blue and translucent, except for one of its tentacles, which was tinted pink like the waters of the salty lake beside my village.

(Source: Okorafor, N. 2017 *Binti*. New York: Tor Books, p. 48)

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

(Source: Research quote)

Today the thick, glossy facial hair is as much a part of her striking personal style as her electric-blue turban and perfectly executed winged eyeliner.

(Source: Khaleeli, H. 2016. The Lady with a beard: 'If you've got it, rock it!' *The Guardian* 13 September)

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change, Changes

(Source: Butler, O. 1993. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows)

Seahorses and their close relatives the pipefish and the seadragons are very unusual, because it is the males that get pregnant and give birth to the babies.

(Source: Whittington, C. 2018. Curious Kids: Is it true that male seahorses give birth? *The Conversation* 25 March)

At initiation at age fifteen, as a coming-of-age gift the second Camille decided to ask for chin implants of butterfly antennae, a kind of tentacular beard, so that more vivid tasting of the flying insects' worlds could become the heritage of the human partner too

(Source: Haraway, D. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 152)

Face Swap lets you swap face with super stars and cute animals. You can easily transform yourself to any new face you like in a second.

(Source: BN Infotech. 2017. Face Swap – Face Changer. *Google Play* 6 July)

Our designers can create objects or special pieces of clothing that enhance an emotion that a Sim is already feeling... For example, a painting with a sad theme could have an impact on a nearby Sim who is already feeling sad.

(Source: Jovic, J. 2014. The SIMS 4 – More About Emotions. *Sims Community* 8 January)

Facetune users go overboard, smoothing their selfies into amorphous avatars or slimming their bodies to the point of anatomical impossibility.

(Source: Solon, O. 2018. FaceTune is conquering Instagram – but does it take airbrushing too far? *The Guardian* 9 March)

You're chatting about things through emojis, it's just strange, it's like losing language but at the same time I think it's quite good cos it's like another form of communication

(Source: Research quote)



They have no recognized language, save for a complicated pageant of gestures and movements, accompanied by a codified set of facial expressions

(Source: Barnhill, K. 2015. The Men Who Live in Trees. In: VanderMeer, A. and VanderMeer, J. eds. 2015. *Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology*. Oakland: PM Press, p. 137)