(Self-)Envy, Digital Technology, and Me

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Abstract

Using digital technology, in particular social media, is often associated with envy. Online, where there is a tendency for people to present themselves in their best light at their best moments, it can feel like we are unable to turn without being exposed to people living out their perfect lives, with their fancy achievements, their beautiful faces and families, their easy wit, and wide social circles. In this paper, I dive into the relationship between envy and digital technology. I offer an enriched account of envy that aims to establish both the situated nature of envy, as well as (more controversially) the possibility of self-envy. I explore how features of digital technology not only increase the frequency with which we might experience envy directed at others, but also envy directed at other versions of one's self. For online, we not only encounter idealized versions of others but digitally idealized versions of our selves. Moreover, I argue that digital technology does not only increase the likelihood of experiencing self-envy but makes the experience less cognitively onerous. I conclude by considering how current digital technology shapes *what* we envy.

Keywords Envy · Self-Envy · Digital Technology · Situated Affectivity · Cognitive Offloading

1 Introduction

Envy is an unpleasant emotion prompted by negative social comparison. It is a painful, aversive feeling that involves experiencing oneself as lacking in light of someone possessing something that you want and value. It is a feeling that intermingles inferiority and covetousness, while begrudging the person their perceived superiority.

Social media platforms seem like fertile grounds for envy. Social media exposes us to all manner of people to whom we can compare ourselves, even when we are not physically present with them; a constant stream of others who we can hold ourselves up against. Even worse, people tend to post information, pictures, and videos of themselves online at their best and most interesting. As Protasi (2021a) puts it: "on social media the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, because people are much less inclined to post photos of their lawn's yellowy patches. And when all of our neighbor's lawns *appear* to be greener than ours (even

when in fact they are not), we are more likely to develop feelings of envy" (2021a, 5). Compounding this, posts often do not show the efforts that background them — the numerous drafts, the careful posing, the long-curated wardrobe or living room, the timed release. In a world of carefully tended public profiles and stylised self-expression presented as spontaneous and off-the-cuff snapshots, it is no surprise if negative social comparison thrives, making way for the green-eyed monster.

In this paper, I provide a novel exploration of the relationship between envy and digital technology. I draw attention to the way in which digital technology drives experiences of envying other people, as well as experiences of *self*-envy. I argue that digital technology — by creating, storing, and presenting us with digital representations of ourselves — allows us to adopt a third-person perspective to past, projected, or imagined versions of ourselves in a way that makes self-directed envy possible. It further renders experiencing self-envy less cognitively onerous, for the work of remembering or imagining other versions of ourselves from a third-person perspective is offloaded onto the technology. This analysis shines light on the way that digital technology not only affords social comparison but self-comparison.

In addition to considering how using digital technology might contribute to the frequency and ease with which we

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might experience both other- and self-directed envy, I also suggest that digital technology plays a role in shaping *what* we envy. It is commonly argued that we envy others when they possess goods that we take to be important for our identity (e.g., Ben Ze'ev 2001; Protasi 2021b). However, what we find important for our sense of self is influenced by the contexts in which we find ourselves. In a culture that valorises the virtues of the hard-worker and holds dear the proofs of hard-work in terms of status and material possessions, one is likely to find a highly-paid, status-granting job important for one's identity and, thus, another's possession of such goods potentially enviable. Influenced by the work of Heather Widdows (2018), I suggest that digital technology further embeds the value of visual markers of our self-identity, and, in doing so, plays a role in shaping what we envy. In doing so, I offer a situated account of envy that highlights how the socio-political and material environments we find ourselves in profoundly shape our affective lives.

In Sect. 1, I set out an overview of the emotion envy. I then expand on the outlined account of envy by emphasising the *situatedness* of envy, highlighting the role socio-cultural and material environments play in influencing both what we envy and who is disposed to experience envy. Much philosophical work has been done conceptualising the emotion envy (e.g., Ben Ze'ev 2001; D'Arms and Kerr 2008; La Caze 2001; Protasi 2021a, b, 2022; Neu 1980; Roberts 2003; Thomason 2015; Salice & Montes-Sanchez 2019; Ferran 2022). For the purposes of this paper, I will primarily draw on Sara Protasi's extensive work on this topic. In doing so, I adopt a broad definition that incorporates various shades of envy from the more malignant to the more benign. It should be noted that this broad definition is not, itself, uncontroversial. As such, there may be some experiences explored here that others may not want to describe straightforwardly as envy. The aim of my analysis, however, is not to debate the merits of defining envy broadly or not, nor to consider what words are best used to pick out the experience of envy in ordinary language. I take it that this broad definition of envy is justified here by my claim that these various kinds of emotional experiences can be scaffolded by digital technology.

In Sect. 2, I explore how digital technologies can drive envy. Here, I analyse how social media platforms, in particular, increase the frequency with which we encounter idealised versions of others, bring more people into our emotional environment and social comparison sphere, and heighten our awareness of the popularity of various people and goods through quantified liking systems. In Sect. 3, I introduce the idea that, contrary to common definitions, envy need not necessarily be 'other-directed' but can also be 'self-directed'. I explore how our ability to adopt a

third-person perspective in relation to our past, future, and counterfactual selves in memory and imagination grounds the idea that our current self can be enviously directed towards, what I describe as, 'other versions' of ourselves without falling into contradiction. In Sect. 4, I argue that there are multiple ways in which we can encounter digital representations of ourselves online that we experience as possessing goods that we lack, and in light of which we feel lacking, thus making a potentially unusual experience like self-envy more common. I conclude, in Sect. 5, by considering one example of how digital technology shapes what we take as desirable for our identity, thus playing a role in shaping what becomes enviable in the digital age.

2 Envy

2.1 Introducing Envy

Envy is an aversive emotion that can be experienced in the face of another having something that we covet or desire. It has a tripartite structure: it involves the person experiencing envy (the *envier*), the person towards whom the envy is directed (the *envied*), and the object that the envier perceives themselves to be lacking (the *good*) (Protasi 2021b). We can envy others for things that they have, e.g., their impressive book collection or fancy office, as well as for who they are, e.g., for their kind disposition or intellectual prowess. We might envy them having these goods because we hold those goods to be inherently worth having or because we see their instrumental worth (e.g., having them impacts how others treat you or gains you access to other things). In cases of so-called existential envy, where we envy the very way someone is in the world, the distinction between the envier and the good blurs, as it is the envied person's very being that we desire to be ourselves (Ferran 2022; Scheler 2010).

Envy involves negative social comparison and is, therefore, assumed to be necessarily other-directed (Protasi 2021b; Thomason 2015; Salice and Montes Sánchez 2019).[1] It arises when we compare ourselves to another who has or is something that we wish to have or be.[2] Envy is a painful

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[1] While the emphasis is usually on how we envy *individual* others, I take it that we can also direct our envy at groups (Hughes 2020). I might envy my Exeter friends for being together this weekend or envy my students' youthful energy. Interestingly, Kerr (2022) has recently argued that we might also envy an algorithm, exploring the possibility of being able to envy the computer program AlphaGo for its gaming skills, and Aaron Ben Ze'ev (2001) thinks that there might be atypical cases of experiencing envy for animals or even inanimate objects.

[2] Note that while psychological literature often characterises envy as an emotion that involves feeling the other unjustly possesses the good, philosophers typically reject this, making a distinction between

emotion, often intensely so. It is in light of the other's possession of the good that we find ourselves wanting, of being shown up as inferior, and we begrudge the other for having what we do not. It could be that we are wrong about these self-perceptions. I might envy my sister's sense of style, even though others see me as just as stylish as her. Nevertheless, *I* feel this lack, this inferiority, in the face of my well-turned-out sister. Envy, then, is entwined with our own self-perception.

Envy is often thought of as a 'nasty' emotion, involving hostility to the envied individual (e.g., D'Arms and Kerr 2008; Salice & Montes-Sanchez 2019). However, many argue that envy can come in both hostile and benign forms, where hostile envy involves wishing that the envied person lose the good or suffers some harm and benign envy does not (e.g., Neu 1980; Protasi 2021b; Roberts 2003). Protasi (2021b), highlights four variables that impact the character of envy: a focus either more on (1) the good or on the (2) envied person, and the envier feeling (3) more or (4) less capable of getting the good themselves. She uses these variables to outline four kinds of envy (the first two of a benign nature, the second two of a hostile one):

Emulative envy where the envier is focused on the good and believes themself capable of obtaining the good for oneself. This motivates the envier to 'level up', to emulate the envied person.

Inert envy where the envier is focused on the good and doesn't believe themself capable of obtaining the good. This can lead the envier to feel despair and despondency.

Aggressive envy where the envier is focused on the envied and believes themself capable of taking the good away from the envied. This can lead the envier to try and steal the good.

Spiteful envy where the envier is focused on the envied and believes themself incapable of taking the good away from the envied. This can lead to the envier attempting to destroy the good, thus 'levelling down' the envied.

Protasi's framework helpfully captures the felt difference between these different flavours of envy, as well as how envy can motivate us to act in various different ways. Note that more hostile forms of envy seem to be particularly painful when we are focused not just on the envied individual, but an idealised version of them. For instance, when I envy a specific good or talent that someone has in a way that masks, or entirely ignores, the effort they might have put into honing that talent, the cost of the good, or the

difficulties of living that life, my sense of inferiority and my feeling of envy for that person can be further exacerbated. Envy, then, is often selective in how it presents the other and, at worst, seems to aim at some constructed (or at least simplified) version of them.

Importantly, we do not envy just anyone for just anything. It is generally accepted that we envy people who we take to be suitably similar to us in some way (Protasi 2021b; Thomason 2015; Ben Ze'ev 2001). I might envy my sister's sense of style while only feeling admiration for Marlene Dietrich's iconic looks. We envy those who are in a 'comparison class' with us and we tend to envy people who are just a little ahead of us, not 'out of our league' so to speak (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007).[3] As Bacon (1868, 32) has it: "Where there is no comparison, no envy; and therefore kings are not envied but by kings". Ben Ze'ev (2001) also suggests that we envy those who are close to us. He describes envy as a 'partial emotion', one that we feel in relation to those "who belong to our emotional environment, that is, those of emotional significance for us" (2001, 287).

Theorists also highlight that we only envy people for having goods that we care about, that are important to our sense of identity (e.g. Protasi 2021b; Vendrall Ferran 2022; Ben Ze'ev 2001).[4] Thus, I might envy my sister's new green coat because being stylish is something I care about. Yet, while I deeply admire my sister's beautiful piano playing, I do not envy it because being good at the piano is not something I consider important to my identity, to who I am.

2.2 Situating Envy

Our environments shape our affective lives. Being in a particular environment can elicit certain emotions from us. For instance, being in a busy and high-pressured working institution replete with technology that keeps me 'always on' can scaffold feelings of responsibility, guilt, and anxiety (Slaby 2016; also see: Stephan and Walter 2020; Maiese and Hanna 2019). As Imke von Maur (2021) has stressed, our socio-cultural practices and forms of living also work to shape our emotional lives by shaping what we care about and how we evaluate the world around us. Our affective lives unfold within cultural emotional repertoires or emotional regimes.[5] Our affective lives are not, therefore, just influenced by the current situation in which we find ourselves, but are more

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envy and the moral emotion resentment. Protasi 2021a,b; Arms 2002 for a discussion of this.

[3] Again, see Hughes 2020; for an interesting account of the under-researched phenomenon of 'envying down'.

[4] Note that children often seem to envy indiscriminately, however, as they grow and their sense of identity stabilizes, their envy narrows towards goods that are experienced as important to their identity (see Protasi 2021b, 22–23) for a discussion of the empirical literature on this point.
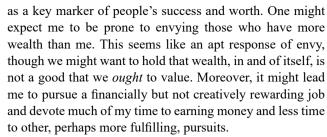
[5] For a discussion of how colonialism can enforce emotional regimes on others, see Archer and Matheson 2022.

broadly shaped by the situation of our lives, the cultures in which we grew up, the values which we learn and hold, and the emotional habits that we inherit (also see: Cherry 2021; Leboeuf 2018; Munch-Jurisic 2022).

What we find enviable, therefore, is a situated matter. For instance, what we take to be important to who we are is shaped by the environments in which we grow up. As someone who grew up in the UK, among the many things that I value when it comes to my sense of identity (even if I am loathe to admit some of them) are success, social status, and good looks. When I envy my colleague their popular article, my friend's easy friendships, and my neighbour's beauty, I can feel pain in the face of their possessing goods that I have, at least in part, been socially conditioned to value. Indeed, often we value goods *as* important for our sense of self precisely because of the way that others treat us or others for possessing them. Moreover, what counts as success, status, and good looks are also culturally inflected.

Socio-cultural environments may dispose certain people to experience envy more often than others. It is common for envy to be associated with women. When we conjure up images of envy we picture Medusa, fairy tale stepmothers, petty schoolgirls, bitter old women, and spiteful witches. Envy is poison, the archetypal women's weapon. It is famously directed at penises. No doubt being associated with women does no favours for envy's reputation as a nasty emotion. However, I am inclined to think that envy's association with women is no accident. We might expect that women situated in societies that place them in positions of inferiority and disadvantage, seeding feelings of self-doubt and imposter syndrome, are more prone to experiencing envy; especially in societies that simultaneously peddle gendered expectations of perfection while placing many of the valued goods out of easy reach and one another in competition for such goods. When considering the situated nature of envy, then, it is important to consider how particular groups might be positioned to experience envy more often than others.[6]

Such insights also prompt us to reflect on how envy might motivate us to covet, even strive, for goods which may not be inherently valuable or that might not actually contribute to our own well-being or flourishing as a person. Just imagine if I grew up in a society that views wealth as a key marker of people's success and worth. One might expect me to be prone to envying those who have more wealth than me. This seems like an apt response of envy, though we might want to hold that wealth, in and of itself, is not a good that we *ought* to value. Moreover, it might lead me to pursue a financially but not creatively rewarding job and devote much of my time to earning money and less time to other, perhaps more fulfilling, pursuits.

In short, when viewed through a situated lens, envy is revealed to be not simply about negative social comparison involving one's own feeling of individual lack, but something fed by societally inherited and sustained expectations, value-systems, and habits of self-evaluation.[7] It is shaped and scaffolded by our environment.

3 Digital Technology and Envy

Philosophical work on the ways in which digital technology provides environmental scaffolding that drives and shapes cognition is well-established (e.g., Clowes 2015; Heersmink and Sutton 2020; Smart 2017). More recently, though, there has been growing attention devoted to investigating how using digital technology impacts our affective lives – our moods, our emotions, and our ability to regulate these (Krueger and Osler 2019). I want to explore how digital environments can foster feelings of envy. In doing so, I am not attempting to suggest that social media platforms only foster such feelings; they are complex places that can evoke a wide variety of moods and emotions, many of which are positive.[8] Nevertheless, I want to point to a number of features that support the view that digital technology, particularly social media platforms, provides fertile soil for

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[6] Being primed for envy may even give rise to affective injustice. For example, tropes about envy being 'a woman's emotion' may lead to women's envy not being taken seriously but merely as evidence of womanly disposition and, in turn, work to silence women's apt expressions of envy, as well as giving rise to the need to regulate unpleasant emotions that women's environment prompt. For work on affective injustice, see: Archer and Mills 2019; Krueger 2023; Osler et al., forthcoming; Pismenny et al. 2024; Srinivasan 2018; Whitney 2018. Thank you to the reviewer who encouraged me to include this connection in the paper.

[7] Thinking about how envy is socio-culturally situated, also helps bring into view ambivalent experiences of envy. For instance, I might envy someone for being thinner than me. In one sense, my envy seems to pick out a good that I hold to be valuable. Moreover, a good that socio-culturally speaking, makes sense for me to value. Yet, at the same time, I might feel that my envy does not pick out something that I truly hold as value for living a worthwhile life. Being situated in a way that one often experiences ambivalent emotions might, itself, be a case of affective injustice, as it may undermine one's trust in one's own emotional reactions.

[8] Indeed, this paper is intended to contribute to an exciting and growing literature investigating the way digital technologies impact and shape our affective lives. On the one hand, we find work on how increased use of digital technologies can drive loneliness (Candiotto 2022; Turkle 2017), anger (Tanesini 2022), outrage (Nguyen and Williams 2020), shame (Dolezal et al. 2021; Norlock 2017), indignation (Osler 2023), rage (Tietjen and Tirkkonen 2023), grief (Lindemann 2022), humiliation (Taylor 2023), even hatred (Richardson-Self 2021). On the other hand, we find work stressing that digital technologies can promote experiences of togetherness (Osler 2020; forthcoming a), belonging (Eickers 2024; Hughes 2018), friendship (Elder 2014), comfort (Krueger and Osler 2022), emotion regulation (Bortolan 2023; Krueger and Osler 2019), even love (Ben-Ze'ev 2004).

envy (Appel et al. 2016; Vries et al. 2018; Protasi 2021a; Tandoc and Goh 2023).

The features I want to draw attention to are: (i) encountering idealised versions of others online, (ii) the extension of the number of people that inhabit our emotional environments, (iii) the expansion of our comparison class, and (iv) the way quantified metrics of success can mark something as enviable, while also becoming a source of potential envy themselves. Such features will not necessarily lead to envy; however, I suggest that they can scaffold such feelings, making their occurrence more likely. To put it another way, being situated in a world saturated with digital technology increasingly primes us for envious feelings.

3.1 Encountering Idealised Others

Online we are exposed to snapshots, often quite literally, of others' lives. While there are some who disclose the complexities, even mundanity, of their lives online, it is common for people to post the highlights. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok feeds are filled with posts showing off beautiful young bodies, gorgeous homes and holiday locations, physical and intellectual achievements, and (depending on your algorithms and your age) happy families. We tend to show ourselves off in our best (even fictitious) light online — cherry-picking the flashes we give others into our worlds. Self-tracking apps, that allow us to record our fitness achievements, our foreign language progress, the books we have read, increasingly have a social dimension to them, often explicitly prompting us to share our successes to our followers. Online we are exposed to all manner of people with their goods on display.

Not only are the goods of their lives on display, they are often presented in isolation from the work that gave rise to such goods. When I see someone's new paper online, I do not see the hours of work and self-doubt that accompanied the writing, the rejections, or the tricky questions at a research seminar. When I see someone's smooth dewy skin on TikTok, I do not see the many takes, the cabinet of expensive face cream, or the filter that's been applied over the top. When I see someone's extensive Goodreads list, I do not see the half-read paperbacks discarded on the bedside table. We are exposed to the peaks of other people's lives and achievements and they come scrubbed of context and complexity, even masking their sometimes illusory nature. When we encounter others online, we don't have to work to idealise the other. In selectively curating and tailoring their posts, they do that for us. And with sleek filters and de-contextualised feeds, our technology adds further aid.

Being flooded by the highlights of others' lives can make it difficult to resist drawing comparisons, especially ones that leave us feeling like the inferior party; the full reality of our lives paling into insignificance in light of their fantastic(al) ones. While such posts could, of course, elicit admiration or even simple desire for the goods on display, this polished perception of others can make our own perceived inferiority sing. This is likely compounded by the contextual scrubbing which might amplify the painful sense that others possess these goods with ease, that they are better than us at attaining these goods, even perhaps undeserving of them.[9]

Moreover, being exposed to goods in an online setting in their best light may inhibit our ability to recognise when we already possess the relevant good, perhaps increasing the likelihood of mistakenly perceiving ourselves to be lacking in something that we do in fact have. My garden may have as green grass as yours much of the year round, but the greenness of yours lives on in your post while mine has to exist in the messy world of weather and seasons. Thus, social comparison might increasing involve comparing (real-world) apples with (digitally disguised) oranges.

3.2 Extending our Emotional Environments

Social media platforms also work to broaden the number of people that inhabit our emotional environments. When I move to a new city, I might no longer compare myself to my fancy neighbour, as I do not walk past her every day on my way to work. However, if I find myself following her on Instagram, I can keep my envy for her beauty alive and kicking despite our physical distance. In multiplying the number of people we are in contact with, social media drives up the number of people we can compare ourselves to. While this, in and of itself, does not lead to envy (I might be perfectly comfortable with who I am, even believe myself to be in possession of more goods than those I virtually associate myself with), it widens the pool of people we might feel envy for. Using Ben Ze'ev's language, it renders a wider array of people close enough to elicit envy, because our social and emotional environments are no longer constrained by geography.

3.3 Expanding our Comparison Class

Online who we take to be in our 'comparison class' might also be expanded. For instance, Chae (2018) describes how social media users experience social influencers as closer to 'normal' people, and therefore themselves, than traditional celebrities. Influencers often give their followers access to their (supposedly real) lives, arguably making them easy to identify with. This can work to bring others with certain goods in abundance, such as wealth, youth, beauty, and fitness, into our sphere of social comparison. People we might

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[9] For an interesting discussion of the aesthetics of effortlessness, see Montero (2016).
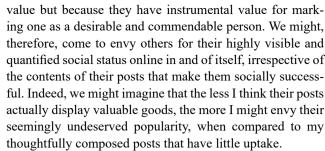
not have compared ourselves to previously, people who we likely follow specifically because they excel at or possess things we value, come into focus in a different way, as people not only to admire from afar but to hold ourselves up against.

Indeed, eliciting envy has long been a key feature of marketing (Turow 2008) and, given that influencers are often in the marketing game (be it marketing themselves, their lifestyles, or their own or other's products), there is financial incentive in making themselves enviable — trigger envy, while promising a quick fix to that envy with an easy to click link to the good being showcased. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that there is an exploding literature in marketing and advertising exploring the relationship between social media users' experiences of envy and their purchasing intentions (for an overview, see: Wenninger 2021).

3.4 Visual Measures of Success

I might feel an initial burst of envy when I see that a peer of mine has secured a huge grant on a topic I am myself working on, but I can also see the hundreds of likes their post has received. This can work to intensify my envy in a number of ways. The mass of likes can act as confirmation of the value of being successful at work — this is not just something that *I* value but something my community at large values and celebrates. As noted above, our perception of what is valuable for one's identity is situated in the broader socio-cultural environment. While one may certainly envy goods that most others do not view as valuable (e.g., excellent role-playing skills), when we perceive ourselves as lacking goods that appear widely valued, this can work to elicit feelings of inferiority in relation to goods we take to be important for our social standing and identity more broadly. It might also be harder for me to quell an initial twinge of envy by reminding myself that grants are scarce and not having one is not instant proof that I am an inferior philosopher. For the growing like tally might appear to provide objective proof that this is something I really should care about and the lack of which is a source of embarrassment.

There is also the potential for a doubling effect to occur online; for the likes themselves might be a source of envy. As the like tally on my peer's post keeps on ticking upwards, this not only might act as confirmation of the value of the achievement but quantified evidence of the grant winner's social status. The quantification mechanisms that make social capital so salient online can act both as a way to shape what we find enviable while also becoming a source of envy in and of themselves.[10] As mentioned, many goods are enviable not just (or at all) because they have inherent

value but because they have instrumental value for marking one as a desirable and commendable person. We might, therefore, come to envy others for their highly visible and quantified social status online in and of itself, irrespective of the contents of their posts that make them socially successful. Indeed, we might imagine that the less I think their posts actually display valuable goods, the more I might envy their seemingly undeserved popularity, when compared to my thoughtfully composed posts that have little uptake.

Looking at our own likes also acts as a metric for measuring our own status; giving us a seemingly objective way of comparing ourselves against others and, where we fall short, potentially acting as evidence of our own inferiority. A metric that is not only available to us but is painfully on show for others to see.

3.5 Digitally-Enabled Envy

Social media, then, shapes how we encounter other people — rendering them just close enough for social comparison while also hiding just enough to present them in an oft-idealized, and thus more enviable, form. Moreover, the design of the platform works to provide us with quantified information about people's popularity and status, giving us quick, and seemingly objective, evidence of how we are faring against others. In addition to being exposed to goods that others (appear to) have, posting perfect images of one's life and achievements becomes a norm. This pressure itself might leave us vulnerable to begrudging those who are 'winning' at social media.

In a world of social media, where we are so easily able to compare ourselves to others and unrealistic images and expectations abound, it is easy to believe that we are in an envy-saturated age. Interestingly, there seems to be some colloquial acknowledgment of our feelings of envy when it comes to encountering others online. The phrase 'hate liking' has been coined to precisely capture instances of liking someone's posts that fill us with intense feelings of envy. Envy is such a common currency online that posters may post precisely to elicit envy in others, to chase hate likes.

As noted above, in marketing literature, there is much emphasis on the idea that social media gives rise to envy that leads to the purchase of goods. Providing links to goods that are being displayed may give users the feeling of such goods being obtainable and, in Protasi's language, we might suppose that this is likely to elicit emulative envy even straightforward admiration. However, it seems plausible to me that many cases of digitally prompted envy do not involve feeling that the goods on display are obtainable. First, many of us simply do not have the finances to just buy the goods that fill our phone screens. Second, envy can be more generally directed at, for instance, an influencer's

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[10] For excellent discussions of likes, value, and digital social capital, see Nguyen (2021) and McDonald (2021).

lifestyle, which the receipt of the newly purchased trainers does not abate. Third, some goods might be experienced as nigh on impossible to obtain — especially if they are generated through the lens of filters, creating something that may in fact be unattainable in reality. As such, it seems there are many reasons to suppose that exposure to digitalised lives of others might equally prompt inert or spiteful envy. That this may be the case seems to be supported by psychologist's concerns that social media use not only drives envy but this can, in turn, lead to depression and anxiety (e.g., Appel et al. 2016; Pera 2018; Tandoc et al. 2015), and the increase of spiteful comments that litter the comments under posts.

Interestingly, though, digital technology does not just expose us to the idealised versions of others. It can, and often does, put us in contact with idealised versions of ourselves. Google Photos might show me myself from 5 years ago glowing with (relative) youth, I can use filters to see what I would look like with 80s hair and unblemished skin, logging onto a virtual world lets me wander about in an avatar rendition of myself, and, in the not too distant future, I might ask an AI version of me to trawl the internet to find relevant research papers on envy and summarise them for me. In presenting us with these digital representations that I, at least in part, identify with, I think that digital technology might scaffold *self*-envy.

Before jumping into the potential relationship between digital technology and self-envy, I first want to set up the concept of self-envy in the context of analogue settings. While few have defended the idea self-envy, I want to make the case that it is possible to envy ourselves. However, I suspect that even those who are open to the notion of self-envy in principle, may suppose that experiences of self-envy might be quite unusual. This will lead me to claim, though, that when we do bring digital technology into the mix, the experience of self-envy gains more traction, not least because I argue that digital technology makes experiencing self-envy easier by storing or creating versions of oneself in relation to which we might be enviously directed.

4 Self-Envy

4.1 Introducing Self-Envy

Very little has been written about self-envy in philosophy. This is perhaps unsurprising. For self-directed envy initially seems logically absurd. When we envy someone, we envy them for having something that we perceive ourselves as lacking. To speak of self-directed envy would involve us perceiving ourselves as having some good and simultaneously perceiving ourselves as not having that good. On first

blush, then, it makes sense to conclude that envy is essentially other-directed.[11]

I'm of the opinion that we should not be too hasty in accepting that envy can only be other-directed. I take my lead from some suggestive thoughts found in the work of Aaron Ben Ze'ev and Íngrid Vendrall Ferran. Ben Ze'ev (2001, 302) briefly considers the idea that we might experience self-envy in the context of nostalgia. Nostalgia is a bittersweet feeling that involves both a longing for a past place or time in one's life, while also the painful knowledge that this moment is gone and cannot be returned to. If we take our past self and our present self to be one-and-the-same, at least in some senses, then (at least some cases of nostalgia) we might take ourselves to experience not only a longing for that past moment, but an envy directed to our past self. In a similar vein, Vendrall Ferran (2022, 90) alludes to the idea that one's present self could envy a past self who was in a better position to obtain a currently desired good. Elsewhere, Vendrall Ferran (2019) also describes self-envy as something that can occur between one's factual self and a possible self in relation to possibilities that one has not realised. Below, I build upon these thought-provoking examples and outline a variety of ways we might experience self-envy.[12]

How, though, might we get the notion of self-envy off the ground? The idea that emotions can be self-directed is not itself new. We talk about loving oneself, being proud of oneself, being ashamed of oneself, hating oneself. These are often described as self-conscious emotions. What makes such emotions self-conscious is that they involve an evaluation of the self and are directed at the self — the emoter and the object of the emotion are one and the same. Envy involves a self-evaluation (i.e., taking oneself to be inferior), but it is towards the other that one's envy is directed. So while envy involves the evaluative dimension, it does not fulfil the criteria of being directed at oneself. Moreover, as mentioned above, it seems hard to see how I could envy myself for having something that I also experience myself as not having. However, I suggest that we can experience self-directed envy when we adopt an 'other-like' relationship to remembered or imagined representations of ourselves that possess goods which we currently lack.

When we remember ourselves in the past, we can do so from a first-person perspective. For instance, I can re-live what it was like to live in a beautiful flat in Copenhagen.
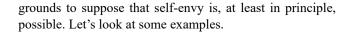
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[11] Indeed, many have made this claim: e.g., envy "necessarily involves comparing oneself to another" (Protasi 2021b, 21), "the precise object of envy is other people" (Thomason 2015, 45), and "it is not possible for envy to come about in a nonhetero-induced form" (Salice & Montes Sanchez 2019, 235).

[12] This also builds upon some initial suggestions about self-envy I have written about in Osler (forthcoming b).

However, I can also do so from a third-person perspective, picturing myself from an observer's point of view lounging around in my Scandi-chic living room.[13] When I relate to myself from this outsider perspective, I do not lose a sense of this person being me, I still identify her as myself in some manner and do not mistake her for an entirely different person. However, I am also able to make judgements and evaluations about her as if she were another person in some respects. In such a situation, I think it possible to say that envy can be experienced by one's current self who experiences themselves as lacking something that this other remembered version of themselves once had; thus, meeting both the criteria of involving a self-evaluation and being directed towards what we might describe as a past version of one's self.

The same kind of relationship can be established regarding imaginings about oneself. I can imagine what it would be like from my own first-person perspective to move to a different country for a new job, or I can imagine from a third-person perspective what this future self would be like in this new setting. Again, when I imagine my future self from the outside, so to speak, I still identify with her as me, but in imaginatively picturing her I am also able to relate to her in a third-person manner, having feelings, thoughts, and judgements about her. I can also adopt this third-person perspective when I engage in counterfactual imaginations of what I would have been like had I not, for instance, moved to Denmark.

I do not think that what I am positing here is some unusual mental gymnastics simply to justify talk of self-envy. While discussions of self-conscious emotions often focus on cases where we are directed towards our current self, we are not restricted to feeling them in this way. We commonly talk of feeling proud of our past selves, of coming to love our younger selves, of anticipating hating oneself. Perhaps most tellingly for our purposes, we can experience these self-conscious emotions in relation to our past or future versions of our selves that have qualities that we currently do not have. For instance, I might feel shame for my younger self's music taste which I have moved on from, I might feel love for my teenage self's naïveté while no longer thinking myself naïve, and I might anticipate hating myself after taking an action that I think will change who I am. As such, even if one is inclined to think that we do not often envy ourselves, I suggest that we should not reject this idea on the basis of not being able to be emotionally directed to remembered or imagined versions of one's self. Quite the contrary, I think that we are able to feel many emotions in relation to these versions of oneself and, as such, I think that there are

grounds to suppose that self-envy is, at least in principle, possible. Let's look at some examples.

4.2 Three Examples of Self-Envy

4.2.1 Envy Towards Our Past Selves

As both Ben Ze'ev and Vendrall Ferran have suggested, I think we can experience envy for our past selves. I might envy the me who used to run without my knees hurting, the me who used to jump out of bed each morning at 5.30a.m., the me who went sea-swimming every morning in Copenhagen, and (even though I might wish I didn't) the me with more taut skin. I might envy a fairly vague sense of my past self, who had so many forking paths of possibility before her. I also think we could envy the past version of ourselves experiencing certain things for the first time — e.g., falling in love — new experiences that, by definition, one can never experience again (even perhaps in memory). In these latter cases, I seem to envy the possibilities ahead of my past self, possibilities that I no longer have because I have already lived them.

These experiences of envy include ones that are primarily directed at certain goods one used to have (e.g., non-creaky knees), in others to goods that one's past self still had ahead of them (e.g., certain possibilities). Others seem to be cases of existential self-envy, envy for a being-in-the-world that one no longer inhabits (e.g., living in Copenhagen, being younger). Some are very specific, others more diaphanous, a more general yearning for how things were that painfully place one's current self in an inferior light.

4.2.2 Envy Towards Our Future Selves

In moments of tiredness, frustration, or boredom, I think one could envy a future version of one's self. I might envy the me who has already finished the brutal spin class, the me that got to the end of term, the me that has actually finished writing this paper. I can picture her smugly enjoying the fruits of my *current* labour. One might also experience envy for one's future self when feeling stuck or uncertain about something. For instance, I might feel envy for the self that has already decided whether or not she wants to have children. I'm not sure what decision she has made, or even if she is happy with the decision, but I damn sure envy her the relief of having the decision-making over and done with.

4.2.3 Envy Towards Our Counterfactual Selves

As Vendrall Ferran notes, it seems that I can envy possible selves that realised certain possibilities that my empirical self did not. For instance, I might envy the me that took the

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[13] For discussions of first-person and third-person memory perspectives, see McCarroll and Sutton 2017; McCarroll 2018.

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risky job offer, the me that jumped into a love affair, the me that moved countries. Possibilities that, in not taking up, I lost. I also think is possible to envy counterfactual versions of oneself that one did not have the possibility of realising but that can nevertheless be imagined. For instance, you might envy an imagined you that was not born in the 1980s but in the 2000s. A you that had grown up in a (comparatively) more open culture and who knew they were queer before their late twenties.

4.3 Really Envy?

One might wonder whether the examples I've given above really constitute self-*envy*. Why not simply regret or longing? Certainly many of the examples I have given could give rise to regret and longing. However, when we adopt this third-person perspective on one's remembered or imagined self, one's emotion may not simply be about the good that one regrets not having or longs to have. The pain of the experience might lie in feeling oneself inferior in the face of this version of one's self represented in recollection or imagination and the emotion is directed *at* them. Relating to one's self through this third person perspective does, in principle, allow for the tripartite structure of envy to hold.

Examples where we feel that these versions of our selves did not deserve the good seem to bring this tripartite structure most clearly into view. For instance, intermingled with the experience of lacking goods one once had can be a sense that not only did your past self have these things you now lack, but that she possessed goods that she did not even appreciate, even goods that she did nothing to deserve or warrant. As is often the case, it might be in their loss that the value of such goods surfaces. Indeed, one can imagine how one could both envy one's past self for having these precious things and, at least sometimes, resent her for not realizing how good she had it — begrudging her the good and bringing sharply to mind the old adage 'youth is wasted on the young'.

Adopting this third person perspective of oneself may be more likely in certain scenarios. For instance, I think it plausible that the longer the temporal gap between my current self and my remembered self, the more likely I am to relate to this past me from an 'outside' view. This may be because I am less likely to remember the details sufficiently to re-live the past events from a first-person perspective, and are thus much more likely to remember myself from a third-person perspective. In a similar vein, if I am imagining myself experiencing something that I have not experienced before, I may be more likely to imagine this from the 'outside', rather than attempting to fill out this experience from the 'inside'. We might think that something similar happens when we are remembering or imagining ourselves on the

other side of a transformative experience, such as having a child, moving countries for the first time, or quitting a secure job to become an artist. As the name suggests, these experiences are ones that transform us (Paul 2014). That we cannot know exactly what it would be like to be on the other side of a transformative experience, or really put ourselves perfectly back into the shoes of not having gone through one, may make it more likely that we relate to our recollected or projected selves from this other-like perspective.

Nevertheless, while I think it possible to have experiences of self-envy in our analogue lives (indeed, many of the examples above are based on one's I myself have experienced, I will leave it to you to wonder which), some might think that such experiences are fairly uncommon and are likely to be relatively fleeting. This might be because we suppose it cognitively rather hard-work to construct a representation of this past, future, or counterfactual me from an outside perspective in rich enough detail for me to harbour feelings of envy in relation to.

5 Digital Technology and Self-Envy

No matter what your view on the frequency with which we might experience self-envy in our day-to-day lives, I now want to show how digital technology can be a powerful tool for supporting experiences of self-envy by presenting me with (often visual) representations of myself. Not only do I think that digital technology might scaffold self-envy, but in doing so make it an easier, and potentially more common, experience.

5.1 Digitally-Enabled Self-Envy

Think of how Google Photos serves me up photos of me in the past. Me on holiday, me in a happy past relationship, me with my grandmother when she was still alive. Or how going down my own Instagram page takes me back to the past, watching myself getting younger and fitter as I scroll. Just like photos of others, the photos I take are not just portals into my life, but often store memories of myself at my happiest. As such, digital technology often presents me with the memories that I felt warranted capturing and preserving, me "living my best life".

It is easy to see how exposure to these selective images of my past might drive experiences of self-envy for this past me. Seeing myself in these photos can put me in an observer-like relationships with my past self, allowing for me to evaluate my current self in light of this younger me. In doing so, it seems to create the sense of distance between my current self and past self that allows for me to relate to

myself in an 'other-like' manner. As Philip Larkin puts it in his poem 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album':

In short, a past that no one now can share,
No matter whose your future; calm and dry,
It holds you like a heaven, and you lie.
Unvariably lovely there,
Smaller and clearer as the years go by.[14]

And, where these photos present me with goods that I no longer have, they are apt to prompt a sense of having lost what I once possessed, and potentially leading me to feel envy for this past me. As mentioned above, this might not be a wholly negative experience. One may also feel wistfulness for this past me too, a pleasure in remembering; perhaps giving rise to the bittersweet experience of nostalgia, a pleasure tinged with self-envy.

But digital technology not only allows us to encounter these past selves to whom we might feel envy. They also allow us to construct imagined selves. We can, for instance, create avatars of ourselves in virtual social and gaming spaces. While many people experience these avatars as an extension of themselves, they are also experienced as ways of trying out different social identities and ways of being (Turkle 2017). Creating an avatar might, in some circumstances, involve the kind of counterfactual imagination we spoke of above, where users can play around with exploring other ways they might be, or have been, in the world.

Liao (2011) describes how users can experience what she terms "avatar envy" for the goods that their avatars might have. An avatarial self might be envied for possessing all manner of goods, from the material, such as tattoos and clothes, to the existential, their style, looks, or life. While we might suppose that the envy here is directed at the avatar (perhaps akin to Duncan Kerr's (2022) envy directed at an algorithm), I think it could plausibly be felt as a kind of counterfactual self-envy. For in identifying, at least in part with one's avatar, one might experience envy as being directed at a digital version of yourself.

Perhaps more commonly, we can also use filters to create counterfactual versions of ourselves. When I open Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok, I can use filters to see myself younger, more elfin, disney princessified, even as a cat. Face filters give us access to (supposedly) idealised versions of ourselves. I can see in these images what it would be like if I had higher, more pronounced cheekbones, a smaller nose, or bigger eyes. The beauty ideals I (am told to) value can be realised on my own face. I don't have to imagine what I would look like with these goods, I can see it at a click of a button. Indeed, while we can consciously use filters,

cameras are increasingly made with in-built features to smooth, plump, and perfect ourselves.

The complexity of the digital versions of ourselves that we can create is also on the rise. Technologies are being designed that allow us to build (AI) models modelled on ourselves, e.g., models based on our physical health, models that can carry out various tasks or work processes for us. Being exposed to our so-called digital twins could lead us to encounter digital realisations of our better selves. A digital me that is a better instantiation of me and my values than I am. Take, for instance, Holly Herndon's digital creation of a choral companion Holly+. In a recent interview, Herndon reflects: "She's definitely a better singer than I am".[15] One might well imagine how this could lead to envy for this digital twin, this digital self that is me and not-me, a perfected digital copy. Whether one wants to describe this as self-directed or other-directed likely hangs on one's metaphysical conception of these digital twins, and may well vary depending on how the envier experiences it. I am not strongly wedded to either interpretation, but I certainly think that digital twins, in creating potentially perfected (at least in some sense) versions of us, opens up new ways in which envy might take hold.

Exposing ourselves to these perfect digital versions of ourselves (both the more mundane social media versions and the new possibilities of digital twindom) may even give rise to envying our very digital selves — the self that exists in the digital sphere. The self that looks better, that is popular, that always has a witty response to the world. I might envy this virtual version of me her poise, her chilly perfection. It strikes me as plausible that I might even experience a kind of existential envy towards this digital me — envying her very digital nature, her ability to transcend the messy reality of being an embodied, aging being, her existence outside the realms of finitude, beyond body and beyond death.[16]

5.2 Digital Technology and the Ease of Envy

I think that as we come into contact with digitized versions of ourselves, experiences of self-envy are not only more frequent but also easier and more seductive. When digital technology is involved, much of the cognitive effort involved in self-envy is offloaded onto the technology itself. As mentioned above, one might think that what could undermine the notion of self-envy is the difficulty of constructing a rich enough memory or imagination of other ourselves in order for envy to really take hold. With digital technology, however, that cognitive work is done for us.

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[14] Thank you to Tom Roberts for suggesting this passage.

[15] https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/11/20/holly-herndons-infinite-art.

[16] Indeed, we might see this kind of envy at play in certain transhumanist discussions and communities.

We use digital technology for all manner of tasks to ease cognition. For instance, using Keep Notes to store our to-do lists, Clockify to keep track of our workloads, Goodreads to record the books we have read, calendars to schedule appointments and remind us of birthdays. Such technology creates and stores information for us, often allowing us to have much greater recall than if we had to rely on our own organic bodies alone (Heersmink and Sutton 2020; Heersmink 2018). By using these digital tools, we can distribute our memory process into the world around us, offloading part of the process, making it easier for us to remember all manner of things.

Such offloading also can work in relation to imagination. For instance, take Holly Herndon's interaction with Holly+, where her on-going interaction with the AI's choral parts become intertwined with her own creative process, likely allowing her to produce something that she would not otherwise have been able to create.[17] Or think of how we might use ChatGPT to feed us writing prompts or story outlines that can spark our writing. Here, these digital tools do not hold or evoke memories but can scaffold imaginative and creative processes.[18] We also can use technologies to affectively offload, such as using Spotify to play music that allows us to access thoughts, behaviours, and emotions, or Google Photos to store photos of my family that scaffold strong sentimental reactions.

The thought, here, is that experiencing self-envy requires us to relate to oneself from an other-like third-person perspective and using digital technology can make doing so less cognitively onerous. First and foremost, by creating external representations of ourselves, it likely makes it easier for us to adopt this other-like relationship, where we can perceive a representation of ourselves that is both me and not-my-current-experiencing-self. In doing so, I think that digital technology also does a lot of cognitive heavy-lifting for us. It stores our memories of our past selves for us. It creates images of what we could look like or industrious digital twins that represent what we *could* be like if only we worked harder or were freed from the inconveniences of embodied, tired flesh. Consequently, it renders it easier for us to compare ourselves to these other seemingly-better versions of ourselves. Indeed, these images are often foisted upon us or promoted as a fun activity, thus not just facilitating but exposing us to moments of negative self-comparison.

Moreover, we might find the images of our past selves living our best lives or the filtered images of our faces smoothed of weariness or with laser-sharp cheekbones,

unusually seductive. While I might be envious of someone's beautiful bone structure, in some ways it remains out of reach for me, whereas seeing my own face morphed into these finer shapes might be particularly tantalizing. The smooth perfection offered up by a photograph might make these other versions of myself more real. Our screens acting as the thin transparent veil between who we are and who we could be.

6 Digitally-Shaped Envy

"Tell me what you envy and I will tell you who you are" Protasi (2021b, 20); shape what people envy and you shape who people want to be. There is power in envy. It is, therefore, important to ask how using digital technology plays a role in *what* we find enviable. I want to close with a few thoughts about how digital technology amplifies certain forms of self-presentation and self- and other- assessment. In doing so, we move away from thinking merely about how digital technology might increase individuals' experiences of envy, to reflecting upon the way digital technology shapes the landscape of envy more broadly.

As we increasingly express who we are through digital media, we might expect that the kinds of goods we take to be important for our identity will tend towards those that are easily expressible online. Virtual worlds, far from rendering the body irrelevant, are dominated by visual images. With the rise of selfie culture, static images and short videos abound, and the importance of (self-)image reigns supreme. While judging someone on their appearance is hardly a new phenomenon, how one looks is highly valued, even coming to stand in for *who* you are. Even activities such as traveling, cooking, acts of kindness and work often are judged on their visual or communicable merit. Think of the Instagramification of cafes, parks, and galleries saturates our offline worlds — selling their appeal based on how they translate to the digital sphere.

In her book, *Perfect Me*, Heather Widdows (2018, 61) describes how, with the rise of digital technology, young women increasingly value beauty more than other attributes. What is more, they are "judging themselves against images drawn from across the global virtual community" (ibid.). As we have noted above, their own appearance can be compared against the images of others, their internalized beauty ideals, and also be held up against their filtered appearance. Filters entrench and perpetuate particular beauty standards with preset aesthetic algorithms. Widdows emphasises that young girls and women want to look like these perfect images, even though they are aware that they are doctored in various ways. Appearance, as something to be valued for one's identity, becomes incredibly important,

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[17] For a fictionalist account of how artists might use AI as collaborative partners, see Krueger and Roberts (2024) and Roberts and Krueger (2022).

[18] For an account of scaffolded creativity, see Saarinen and Krueger (2022).

but, simultaneously, the beauty ideals that are coveted are, at least for most of us, unattainable or unattainable without taking extreme measures.

Indeed, there has been ample research linking the rise of selfie culture with rise in eating disorders and the popularity of cosmetic surgery. For instance, rather than taking in photos of celebrities that patients want to look like, cosmetic surgeons are increasingly being handed images of the patient themselves created by social media filters (Rajanala et al. 2018). Note that feelings of envy for others or filtered selves, may well be one of the ingredients that motivates individuals to emulate these digitalised ideals. While it is a 'benign' form of envy, in the sense that it does not attempt to take the good away from the envied, many would be quick to point out that pursuing extreme body modifications through exercise, diet, disordered eating, or surgery, does not always look so benign. Especially when there are financial benefits to be reaped from nudging people in the direction of envy.

The importance of beauty is underscored by the barrage of adverts for fitness regimes, face yoga, age-defying cream, and diet apps that are embedded in users' feeds. Companies want consumers who are tempted by youth-preserving products, fast fashion, diet programmes, or fancy hotels in which to post from. They are easier to sell to than users who envy their friend's patience or work ethic. While companies might not be invested in promoting particular beauty ideals or standards specifically, they are invested in promoting enviable goods that are easy to market. Adverts also come tailored to the user, predicting what kinds of products they might value based on who they follow and engage with, as well as profiling based on age and gender. These can be used to put products in view that might help someone ameliorate their envy, but can help embed expectations that aggravate envy. For instance, filling a 35-year old's social media feeds with face-tightening gadgets and creams, reinforces expectations about beauty, making envy for youthful faces online more likely and, in turn, increase the likelihood of someone buying these goods.

There is, then, a tight feedback loop between the visual markers of identity that the design of digital technology makes so desirable and thus enviable, and companies explicitly catering to our desire for these goods. We might imagine that if adverts come to the point of not only tailoring the products to our interests but by generating personalised adverts of what we might look like when we use or wear these products, that advertising will be making the move to capitalising on the seductive power of self-envy. Cornering the market on envy props up the companies who use digital platforms to advertise to us, in turn propping up the social media platforms who generate their income through advertising and data collection. And, as such, we need to be

critical when thinking about how these companies spread envy-friendly manure on already ripe digital soil.

7 Conclusion

The association of digital technology with envy is not a new idea. Alongside others, I have argued that when we go online, we are more likely to encounter others at their best, and therefore their most enviable. I have built on this analysis, by pointing to the way that digital technology brings more people into our comparison class, our emotional environment, and the way that reaction buttons can give us a seemingly easy and objective metric by which to judge how well we are doing against others. While these do not determine experiences of envy, they certainly provide a fecund environment for envy.

However, I've also emphasised that online we do not just meet idealised versions of others but idealised versions of ourselves. Encountering photographs of our past selves and avatars, filters, and digital twins can prompt experiences of self-envy – envy for these 'better' versions of ourselves that exist in the digital sphere and to whom our envy might be directed. Indeed, I've suggested that as digital technology provides us with externalised representations of ourselves against whom we can compare our current selves, it goes some way to getting the very idea of self-envy off the ground. While I have not explored this here, we might suppose that encountering these digital representations of ourselves can also prompt other self-conscious emotions, more broadly scaffolding acts of self-comparison across time and imagination.

I've suggested that the dominance of the visual for self-expression is one way that digital technology shapes what we find enviable. Online, visual markers are a core way to communicate who we are. As such, in these realms, we not only see an increasing visual materialisation of our values, new values materialise, including a further entrenchment of beauty as important for one's identity. Moreover, I have suggested that this is not just a byproduct of interacting with people through a highly visual medium but is nurtured by companies saturating our digital environments with product-placement that capitalises on visual markers of self-identity – both reinforcing these values and, themselves, driving envy of these values.

There remains much more to be said about how digital technology shapes envy. I think this is particularly interesting to consider in the context of how digital tools support self-expression and the creation of digital self-representations. The digital versions of ourselves that we can, and will be able to, create are normatively saturated. For instance, if digital twins are increasingly created to work efficiently

and productively, this underscores the importance of these as virtues that we should ourselves value and strive for. The norms that these digitalised twins represent are likely shaped both by the norms of the companies who create them and by the constraints of the technology itself. What we continue to and come to value, and thus find enviable, may, therefore, be intimately tied up with developments in digital technology.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares that she has no conflicts or competing interests.

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