Article

A New Materialist Analysis of Body Disaffection, Gender and Health and Fitness Social Media: 'You Shouldn't Compare Yourself to Anyone... but Everyone Does'

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Abstract: Recent research has documented the relationship between the promotion of 'ideal', 'fit' bodies in social media, body image and associated body concerns and conditions. This article expands this scholarship, focusing specifically on gender, body dissatisfaction and social media. Thus far, body disaffection has mostly been understood through a psychological framing, as a pathology residing within an individual and strongly associated with poor body image because of internalizing media images. In this paper, drawing on feminist new materialism, I offer a framing of body disaffection as a *relational* phenomenon. The paper draws on a mixed method study in England, with over 1000 young people examining their experiences with a range of digital health technologies. I focus specifically on their engagement with social media, to explore the relationship between ideal images and body concerns. Far from being a simple process of internalization of negative perceptions or image one has of their body, disaffection is formed through the body via a complex process of entanglement with social media and other elements. I outline how disaffection materialises as part of an assemblage of elements, including discourses, humans, bodies, digital objects and platforms. The paper reveals how entanglements with social media can generate powerful affects such as shame, pleasure and belonging along *gendered* lines, which may have significant implications for young people's relationships with their bodies. I analyse how social media events focused on the 'transformation' of bodies generate powerful affects, which open or limit capacities for what 'boys' or 'girls' bodies might become in deeply gendered and sometimes harmful ways.

Keywords: social media; body disaffection; healthism; pedagogy; body image; healthy lifestyles

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a rise in the prevalence of bodily concerns and mental health issues among young people, associated with what is commonly termed 'body image' [1]. These include a range of recognised conditions including, for example, body disaffection, lower self-esteem, disordered eating, anxiety and over-exercising. These have been made worse by the effects of the rapid growth in digital technologies focused on health and fitness or 'healthy lifestyles'. Digital technologies, particularly social media, are now recognised as having pedagogical capacities [2], with a growing body of work examining how young people now learn about their health through these networking platforms, particularly those that are image based [3–7]. Furthermore, studies are beginning to reveal the ways in which these platforms may be contributing to the growth of body image-related conditions [8–10]. These body concerns have worsened following the effects of COVID-19 lockdowns and the intensification of social media and fitness app usage during that time [10].

In response to this, various research studies and educational programmes (e.g., media literacy and body confidence) have focused on how to better 'equip' young people to develop resilience and resistance to powerful and often unrealistic images of 'ideal' bodies circulating in new media. These programmes focus on empowering young people to evaluate and critique such imagery so as to resist the internalization of these images.

However, concerns have been raised that such approaches perhaps do not go far enough and are often underpinned by dualistic framings such as body/mind, subject/object, digital/human and rationality/emotion [11]. This presents a tension and challenge; how do we develop critical pedagogies to enhance young people's embodiment without reducing body disaffection to a condition residing *within* the individual and thus placing the burden of change *on young people.*

To move beyond the trappings of binary thinking, this article draws on feminist new materialism to understand youth, body disaffection and engagement with health and fitness-related social media. To do so, I draw on empirical material collected through a study based in England, examining young people's experiences of digital health and fitness technologies. In this paper, I argue for a reframing of body disaffection away from focusing solely on the individualised, human-centred accounts often found within a focus on body image programmes and research. As Coffey (p. 4) observes, despite 'wider awareness of the issue of body image being broadly associated with social and cultural body norms, body image research and strategies are currently drawn primarily from psychological traditions which address it as an individual pathology' [10]. In this paper, I utilise new materialist thinking and theories of affect, rather than conceptualising body disaffection as something 'inherent' that resides *within* young people as the result of internalization. I thus examine body disaffection as something relational. These sociomaterial perspectives open up new ways for theorising the relationships between young people, social media and body disaffection which, following Flore (2022), focus on how their experiences are 'enmeshed in affective intensities and entangled with technoloy' [12]. More specifically, I examine body disaffection as a gendered relational affect generated through entanglements with social media and other elements.

I begin by outlining the epistemological, ontological and methodological framing of the research. Specifically, I discuss the generative potential of feminist new materialism [13]. The next section describes the study on which this paper is based. The research, which included over 1000 participants in England, examined young people's experiences of a range of digital 'healthy lifestyle' technologies, including apps, wearables, websites and social media. In this paper, I focus specifically on young people's engagement with social media content that promotes healthy lifestyles and ideals of 'fit' bodies. I then analyse how encounters with this material generate certain capacities or constrain what young people's bodies can *become* [14].

2. New Materialist Approaches for Understanding Digital Health

Recently, scholars have utilised new materialist and posthumanist approaches to analyse social media and in doing decentre the human subject and move beyond a focus on discourse and meaning. Such perspectives challenge conceptualisations of the body that ontologically give primacy to discourse and the way in which the body is inscribed with 'meaning' [15,16]. Whilst there are differing approaches that fall under new materialism, what they perhaps share is an understanding that the body is not a pre-existing bounded entity but instead emerges or *becomes* through entanglements with other entities. As Flore (2022) [12] suggests, this troubles the 'bifurcation of matter and human', and as such it is not that discourse, meaning and construction are no longer relevant, but they are not *privileged* as the focus of analysis. This has important implications for moving beyond analyses of the individual, which presently dominate understandings of body concerns.

Much of the existing work on young people and social media is framed in terms of the interactions between individuals and particular media, platforms, apps or devices. Ontologically, there is an assumed separation between these entities. Working against these binaries, as others suggest, we need to understand how young people's bodies are 'entangled agencies' [17] or are 'involved in the process of becoming-together' [12] and focus on the relations *between* their bodies and other elements. As such, my attention turns towards what Barad (2007) [13] terms 'intra-actions' between elements, such as human and non-human as well as social and material. For Barad, rather than discrete and separate

elements that act on each other, she articulates a framework for understanding relationalities between elements that emerge through 'intra-activity'. She suggests that neither matter nor human precedes the other, but they are constituted through intra-activity and are involved in process of 'becoming'. This 'mutual constitution of entangled agencies' [13] (p. 33) is described in new materialist theories as a 'more-than-human' [17,18] approach.

Informed by these perspectives, in this paper, analytical attention is not focussed on a particular social media platform (e.g., the impact of Instagram on body disaffection). Nor is primacy given to an individual's experience, interpretation of meaning or their perceptions of their bodies. Instead, I examine the relations between entities that come to matter and the generative potential or lack thereof that emerges through these entanglements [13]. The analysis draws on Ingram's (2019) [19] work on intra-action focused on the 'school ball', which offers a useful articulation of this approach to entanglements in relation to girls and femininity. Through her research, she describes the school ball as an entanglement in which 'girls, discourses of femininity and all manner of materialities are not individual pre-existing elements; instead, they only become 'distinct' in relation to one another through intra-active relations of entanglement' (p. 2). Her framing of events as not simply and chronologically in the past, but instead enfolding into 'past-present-future' provides an ontologically different way of conceiving of 'girls' and what comes to matter in particular intra-actions. In what follows below, I extend Ingram's articulation of this continual process of becoming, to the specific context of young people's engagement with social media.

Similarly, in their analysis of 'pandemic fitness assemblages', Clark and Lupton [20] argue it is the 'the convergence of media with non-media, the digital and more-than-digital that is of interest and that surfaces the intricate ways technologies, bodily practice and affective flows are woven together to produce specific embodied experiences' (p. 234).

As noted above, concerns have been raised that body disaffection is often framed as the 'effect' of a causal relationship between simply viewing an image and the development of low self-esteem [11,21]. There exists an important body of work that focuses on discursive framing or how these images influence what being healthy *means* to young people. Building on this body of work, the analysis below takes a different approach in asking what it is these engagements with social media *do*. Scholars elsewhere have recognised the relationships between bodies and images not as 'effects' but media 'affects' [22].

Thinking with and through feminist new materialism [13,18,23,24], we can begin to challenge arbitrary divisions between self and other, digital and physical, private and public, mind and body, human and non-human. Instead, these can be understood as collapsing through what Barad (2007) describes as *timespacemattering*. Relatedly, affect theory has drawn attention to what Massumi [25] describes as 'the capacity to affect and be affected' (p. 91), and scholars [26] have recently examined this in relation to social media. For example, Marston [27] suggests bodies themselves can be understood as 'affective assemblages' (p. 4).

Clark and Thorpe [17] observe that whilst there is a growing body of work examining the affective and sensory dimensions of human experiences of the digital, the 'bulk of this research retains its focus on human experiences of technology and draws conceptual distinctions between the human and non-human' (p. 14). In terms of understanding what has been termed 'body image', these concepts reframe our understanding towards a move away from a fixed subject or emotion residing within an individual and towards what Ingram (p. 289) describes as an 'intra-active becoming' [28]. Bringing new materialist thinking into an understanding of digital health pedagogies [2] enables us a move beyond a human-centric or device-centric approach, to focus instead on the relationality and entanglement of learning about health and the body through social media intra-actions. Ingram [19] describes it as how 'human and more-than-human are entangled in knowledge production' (p. 2). In this paper, I attempt to advance these understandings through integrating material and affective dimensions of learning about the body and health within and through social media; in particular, exploring intra-actions that produce ways of knowing and *doing* 'fit femininity' and 'fit masculinity'.

The analysis involves exploring the circulation of these body pedagogies [29] in and through these digital assemblages. I focus on how these pedagogies matter, in terms of the complexity of the embodied affects (fear, shame, longing) that are produced, tracing the ways pedagogies and affects circulate through digital assemblages. To do so, I focus specifically on 'shame' and the recent work of Joy Wolfe. Thinking with and through new materialist theory, the analysis below seeks to trace the affects, sensations and embodied subjectivities that emerge through these pedagogical entanglements. Verbal data fragments are presented in the discussion below and are understood through Ingram's [28] articulation that 'verbal data enact specific material-discursive assemblages' (p. 288). Fragments presented in this paper therefore emerge from what Maclure (2011) describes as 'hotspots' [30]. The analysis traces these entanglements, focusing on the 'experiences of gendered systems and structures' [14].

3. Methods: The Research Study on Young People's Digital Health Practices

In what follows, I draw on data from a project focused on young people's experiences of digital health technologies. Throughout the two-year study, which received funding from the Wellcome Trust, a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to undertake research with over 1000 young people aged between 11 and 18 years in South-West England. The study involved three separate phases. Phase 1 involved a survey completed by 1019 respondents aged between 11 and 18 in four secondary schools, mapping digital health use. The survey data findings showed a high use of digital technology use for health. A total of 70% of respondents reported using digital technologies for health purposes (learning about or tracking health behaviours), while 55% of respondents identified their smartphones as the main technology they used to learn about health (how to live a healthy lifestyle or find information about specific health concerns). Forty-two percent of the respondents said that they used digital health technology specifically to learn about how to improve their health and live a 'healthy lifestyle', while 52% reported using apps to track diet, fitness or health indicators (see Rich et al., 2020, for further details of the survey and its findings).

In Phases 2 and 3, which are the focus of the present analysis, the research team employed qualitative methods to build on the survey findings and gain a more in-depth understanding of how young people use digital health technologies. Phase 2 involved qualitative methods with 38 young people recruited from schools in phase 1 and via a qualitative research recruitment agency, used to expand the participant group beyond the schools already involved in the project. It included 30 semi-structured interviews with 15 boys and 15 girls aged between 14 and 18 years old. A focus group with a further 8 young people (2 boys and 6 girls) aged between 13 and 17 years old also took place. Phase 3, also involved an experimental approach using both interviews and Whatsapp as a method to engage with young people and their families as they used a wearable fitness technology for 8 weeks. The whatsapp data is not included in this paper.

The project was granted ethical approval by the Research Ethics Approval Committee for Health at The University of Bath. Informed consent was provided by all study participants and their guardians. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The research team ensured that young people were not harmed through participation in the research and utilised a range of approaches to ensure that young people's voices could make an impact. In each phase of the research, the care and wellbeing of participants was a priority, including participant safety and privacy.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Intra-Acting with Images of 'Fit' Bodies

It is perhaps not a novel finding that young regularly interact with social media in their everyday lives. Participants in the study indicated that Instagram was the most popular platform for learning about health. Instagram is a photo and video sharing social media platform and networking site that allows users to not only share media, but also edit it via

filters and tags. The survey data revealed that Instagram was the most popular platform, reflecting the broader pattern of social media being an everyday part of the young people's lives, as Steffi describes it, 'standard social media':

Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, (laughing) all of that stuff, the standard social media, I think the most popular ones. Yeah, it, kind of, sucks you in a bit. (Steffi, female, European, 17)

The analysis of qualitative data revealed that for many young people, their everyday digital health encounters were entangled with incessant flows of information about health and fitness, which included circulating images of sculpted lean bodies accompanied by moral imperatives to meet these body ideals. Young people described image-based social media as powerful sites through which to learn about 'fit femininity' or 'fit masculinity'. Many participants referred to the impossible ideals of masculinity and femininity and their associations with body perfection [31]. They described how through intra-active pedagogies of digital health technologies, they were learning particular ways to *do* gender [27]; by working on their bodies to sculpt and shape particular parts of their bodies that were considered to be distinctly gendered. Unsurprisingly, young people are entangled with gendered images that form part of the fitness-related 'feminizing or masculinizing assemblages' [27,32]. These media encourage girls/women and boys/men to work on different parts of their bodies. Through the analysis below, I outline how the 'fit girl' and 'fit boy' are being produced intra-actively [13]. The digital assemblages described are saturated with 'fit' sculpted body images that circulate within fitspiration and fitness-related social media [33]. Through these assemblages, the participants were learning that as a girl/boy, they should be working on particular parts of their bodies, producing girls' bodies as distinct from boys. Many of the girls described content focused on 'bums and tums', legs and waists:

My friends, some of my friends will talk to me about apps, squatting apps to make you have a big bum or something like that and I'm, "Alright, nice one". (Olivia, female, 15, white British)

Anna described how she learned about these gendered practices through the affective-material engagement with the influencer, Vicky Pattinson:

And she had like. . . because she used to drink loads and eat donner kebabs like every day and then she changed but then she got really skinny, she was like a size 6 but then she wasn't happy with that so then she put on a bit more because she wanted the figure of like boobs and a bum like that since that's come in to like. . . yeah. I just find it really like, like how much motivation she has and now she looks like amazing and she knows. . . like I just think she's a positive role model. (Anna, female, 15, white British)

In line with other research [34], many of the boys described intra-acting with 'worked out' muscular bodies online. They described being entangled with images of sculpted, toned bodies that emphasised muscular torsos, biceps and triceps:

I suppose sort of fitness like yeah, I guess, people, you know, showing off their muscles and stuff. . . . it is just like people who I know and that I am following anyway, yeah. (Henry, male, 17, white British)

Ehm I used to like when, so I do like exercise at home like push ups and like sit ups and stuff like that and like so, like 6 months ago when I started doing it, I like searched up for good exercises for core and like biceps and triceps and stuff like that. (Stephen)

The production of 'fit-girl' and 'fit-boy' bodies involves multiple relations, including one's own body, the bodies of friends, bodies online, gendered discourses, images and hashtags, amongst many other elements. Such practices form part of the broader emphasis on digital health, oriented towards individual responsibility and self-optimisation [35]. These ongoing intra-active processes mean even those whose bodies meet these expectations have to continually work on practices of self-care, a theme which I examine in the section below.

4.2. Past-Present-Future Bodies: Pedagogies of Transformation

Young people describe these intra-actions as both part of their everyday life and an almost benign routine. Paradoxically, they also make clear that these images are a source of concern. This tension was was particularly evident when describing the role of social media influencers. Many participants described regularly intra-acting with micro-celebrities or social media influencers [36] during their engagement with health and fitness-related social media. Following Hendry et al. [37], this involved engagement with what can be described as a form of 'influencer pedagogy' that relies on the performance of 'authenticity'. Young people described how influential this was because they were gaining some kind of insight into the personal lives of these influencers [38] and the everyday health practices through which they transformed their bodies. This aligns with the research of Topham and Smith (2023), who observe that 'through influencer pedagogy, viewers trust and feel connected to the influencers they follow, and may adopt their advice' (p. 3). As such, many participants felt a 'connection' [39] with health influencers.

Probably mostly Saffron Baker because she does like, I don't know, I like seeing what. . . because she goes to the gym a lot and like eats healthier, I like to see that and I like some celebrities like Charlotte Crosby. And like she's lost a lot of weight so I like seeing. . . she has her own book out and like Belly Blitz DVD that I have so I like to do that sometimes after school. . .. I don't really know, I kind of like always wanted to lose weight but I just find it really hard so I just always want to like see what sort of healthy things that I could do so I just like want to see what other people do, see how they lose weight and stuff so it's like looking at that, that's why. (Aria, female, 15, white British)

Through these entanglements, the influencer Saffron Baker materialises as a 'pedagogue' and therefore as a trusted source of expertise for Aria. Similarly, Rose feels a sense of 'guilt' for following influencers but justifies this seemingly inseparable connection on the basis of an influencer's assumed expertise:

Well, I'm quite guilty of following all these people on YouTube and Instagram, and on social media; so in some sense, to me, they are experts. I mean, it is their job, so that's what they've trained to do, and they've been training for years, so their progress has been put on YouTube for years as well. (Rose, female, 17, white British)

In part, these practices involve the promotion or selling of desire through the demonstrable 'transformation' of the body. Transforming the body is an idea that circulates through these social media spaces and is produced and enacted through images of progress, such as video or photographs which include 'before' and 'after' shots. The influencer emerges as pedagogue through this affective force; the user desires a body like mine, I, the influencer can help fulfil your desire through guiding you towards the appropriate consumption practices and action—if you take appropriate action - follow, like, share. The pedagogical message from these influencers is that I am the 'expert' and I have the 'authenticity' to help you transform *your* body.

I find that loads of people take progress pictures, and they see that as a way of... "Oh, that's what I was like three months ago. Now I can see my progress and everything," so that's a good burst of it. You know you're doing it for yourself then, you know, that you're... you see pictures on Instagram. . . posting them. (Rose, female, 17, white British)

Bethany describes seeing extreme bodily transformations captured on social media profiles and accompanying posts:

Yeah, especially when I see like other people who, like especially when I see like transitions of people who have gone from say being morbidly obese, this like skinny woman say like, it's not like, "Ooh, I want to be really skinny," but it's like, "Wow, they can do it, then why can't I just get up and go to the gym?" (Bethany, female, 16, white British)

Bethany's gendered body emerges as part of an affective-material entanglement with these transformative images, generating almost contradictory affects of both hope and

shame. As she sees others transform from a past ('obese') body to a present body ('skinny'), this impacts Bethany's own relationship with her sense of self and who she might *become*. Arguably, bodily transformation is being produced as a fulfilment of desire, materialising and enfolding through the intra-action of images of past, present and future (potentially 'transformed') bodies. Ingram [19] in her research on the school ball offers useful insights to make sense of these intra-actions. She suggests 'the past and future are key components' in 'spatial-temporal assemblage in that they are always already part of the present' (p. 3). For the Bethany and others, rather than unfolding in a linear manner, the imaginings of what their bodies can become move in and out of engagement with their own and others' past, present and future bodies. Ingram describes these multiple temporalities as 'past-present-future'

Social media images of successfully transformed bodies intensifies these affective moments of desire, hope and anticipation of *becoming* a body that meets neoliberal health imperatives. These imperatives emphasise the individual responsibility to work on one's body to achieve the muscular, toned, slender ideals that are imbued within physical culture [40,41]. These images are entangled with the enduring discourses of what Crawford describes as 'healthism' [42], invoking a moral and individual responsibility and duty to be healthy. At the centre of this discourse is the *promise* of realising 'effort'—the sort of mantras that circulate within the 'fitspiration' movement and images of fit, toned bodies [43].

> *Yeah, like I don't follow them but when I look at like Vicky Pattison she always puts on like Transformation Tuesdays and that of like her and I just like (inaudible) other people's things and it makes you want to lose weight even more because like seeing other people can do it so it's like—Yeah, I've seen. . . like actually yesterday I was on Twitter and like Scarlett Moffatt from Gogglebox it was a picture of her like in the mirror and then there was a picture of her, like I don't know where she was, and it was like a completely different angle, so that was like article pages that put that on of her and obviously she looked different so the person in that article was saying how like she hadn't actually lost weight and all this stuff because it's a different angle. Like, it makes me. . . because like I obviously watched I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here and she was on the after bit and she was like definitely thinner but then I don't know if she actually has lost weight because I can't properly see her but then also like it doesn't really matter, she can be whatever size she wants to be so.* (Arial)

Arial points towards the affective investment of hope that she might experience a corresponding transformation in her own body. As Ingram observes, in these 'past-present-future' temporalities, past experiences or images can (re)surface in affective expectations of hope, fear or even disdain. This is reflected in many of the experiences of the participants in the study. For example, Anna was someone who started regularly engaging with health and fitness social media and apps since 'year 5' (9–10 years old) after gaining 'a lot of weight'. Anna described herself as having 'poor body image':

> *Probably ever since I was. . . like Year 5 maybe because I like started to gain a lot of weight and I think that was just because of puberty and all this stuff and then I became like overweight because we took a test in Year 6 where they test your BMI and stuff and mine came back as overweight and it kind of knocked my confidence a bit so then I thought I would take it in to like my own hands and start like dieting a bit but I did find that really difficult, like cutting down on certain things, yeah. Yeah, when we were told about it some people were like we're not doing it but apparently you had to do it, I don't know if that was true, at the time they probably said that but I was so nervous to go in and like do it because I was scared that they were going to say something to me and then I remember I came home and my mum was showing me the letter and she was saying like oh you're overweight, like you can change it if you would like but you don't need to and all this stuff my mum. . . but kind of but kind of not, like she was like. . . she understood what I wanted to do but she didn't want me to like take it to the extreme which I took advantage of it I would say but now I know if I ever wanted to lose weight again or to like get healthier I*

know how to do it in a more like healthier way than how I did. Yeah, like to this day I still have problems with my like body image because of that and like I get worried that if I ever have to like at the doctors have to be weighed and stuff I get worried if that will come back and I'll have to do it all over again and that's probably not the most positive mindset to have. He's [Anna's brother] a lot older than me, like he's in his 20s and like my mum and my dad they don't really understand, like they understand certain technology but they don't really get why apps cost money and all this so it's normally my older brother who takes control of it and he tells me if I can have this or not. It depends what kind of health app it was, like if it was like a counting calorie one for example and it cost money then he would be like why would you want this and he would ask me why I would want this and he would be like you don't need it and all this stuff, as big brothers do. I normally use like these [social media apps]. . . When I see people like used to be really unhealthy and now they're like so much more toned and they're healthy then like that inspires me to use it and people that. . . like I admire people that have that outlook on life where they can go to the gym and do all this stuff. Anna [look at what other people about their health on social media] Yeah, a lot. I had a friend that came here but now she's moved away and she was really ill, like she had lost loads of weight and she had gotten really, really skinny and she was off school for ages and she wouldn't like contact any of us and we were really worried but then we found out that she was ill and like lost all this weight and she had to be like hospitalised. (Anna, female, 15 white British)

In this fragment, we can trace what Ingram [19] describes, as 'multiple temporalities (past-present-future)'. Anna refers to multiple bodies and a range of temporalities; past bodies, other's damaged bodies, future transformed bodies. Anna's engagement with health apps and social media is entangled with a past body that has been pathologized and even positioned as abject through her experience of being weighed at school and categorised as 'overweight'. Ingram's conceptualization of 'past-present-future' provides an instructive way of illuminating how, for Anna, this significant encounter of being weighed is no longer simply and chronologically 'in the past' but instead unfolds into intra-activity with digital health apps and media to help manage her weight. This materialises in a way that her engagement with technology is entangled with fear—'I still get worried'—as her past encounter continues to resurface as an affective force. She described experiencing problems with taking weight loss too far, driven by the fear of being weighed again, and using health apps and social media to mitigate future shame. She describes seeing images of other bodies transform—'I see people like used to be really unhealthy and now they're like so much more toned and they're healthy then like that inspires me to use it'—which fuels her anticipation and hope. Annas' body was entangled not only with media images but other girls' bodies, reactions and affective responses. Significantly, Anna feels she is left to manage the tension between not wanting to return to her past pathologized body and recognising the desire to 'take it to the extreme'—such was this risk that her brother had to step in and take control of which health apps she could use. Traces of fear, sensed through the body, therefore emerge in imagining their future selves and future bodies as disaffected, in Anna's case, describing one friend who 'like lost all this weight and she had to be like hospitalised'.

The 'past-present-future' [19] self is continually being (re)assembled through these digital entanglements; connections between bodies, non-human entities and discourses of health. As Ingram found in her examination of the school ball, these relationships are not linear. For Anna and others, these entanglements not only shape their embodiment but impact future projections of *who or what their bodies can become* or, to draw on Coffey, 'potentialities of ways of being otherwise' [10]. Hickey-Moody's [44] conceptualisation of affective pedagogies also helps us understand what is happening pedagogically in these intra-actions. Young people are learning through deeply affective modes which, following Hickey-Moody, not only changes what they *know* but also how they *feel* [13]. Rather than being understood as discrete, bounded events of the past, these events materialise into

ongoing digital and health practices. As Barad [13] suggests, the 'past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming' (p. 181).

These entanglements not only extend temporalities but also spatialities, challenging assumed boundaries between online and offline worlds. Young people's conversations about who to follow online permeate school environments and involve the entanglement of bodies, discourses, space and objects. As Erica describes it,

> *Erm. . . well, in the summer, I think it was last year, I really wanted to do more like workouts, like ab workouts, so I got this app and it was like you track how many. . . I think you have to do. . . I don't know how many you did, but like you had to do different exercises and they'd like tell you what to do every day and then you'd follow it and it was quite good. . . . Then I'd try and follow it and, yeah, it was good. And I'd like use some—I use this girl on YouTube. She did like videos on, like she just, you'd like follow her YouTube videos for ab workouts and stuff. Yeah, I just—well, my friends were talking about it because they used it before and they were saying, "Oh, she's really good," so I followed her and, yeah, she's really good.* (Erica, female, 15, white British)

> *Instagram, I think. She's like, this girl, I think her name is Stefanie Williams. I think she's got an Instagram account and she posts. I think that's, kind of, how she promotes it, as well. She's a massive gym-goer and everyone aspires to be like her, I guess.* (Steffi, female, 17, European)

These enactments are focused on which individual's or whose bodies matter. Through these intra-actions, spatial-temporal boundaries between bodies and, ostensibly, between online and offline environments become blurred. Young people describe learning to desire certain products, bodies or practices to bring about these bodily transformations. Some participants in the study noted how wider objects ('stuff', 'media') were significant. For example, images from social media are entangled with bodies, supplements, food and talk with others:

> *Yeah, I do think that sometimes, like sometimes I think when they like try and show you their vitamins and stuff like that I don't really believe it but like seeing some pictures I do believe, she just brought on a programme that I watched yesterday it's like that Body SOS thing and she's like trying to help other people lose weight so I watch that.*

Not transforming one's body to meet the ideals of 'fit' bodies can lead to feelings of failure, such as 'feeling fat'. This is significant in terms of how we understand 'body image' or 'body disaffection'; these affective forces materialise in highly sensory, embodied and visceral ways—or in Coffey's [10] words, they are 'felt' through the body. In this sense, as others have found [11], irrespective of whether an image is 'real' or 'fake', it can produce materialised affects. For example, in the data produced with Aria, these affects 'glow' [32] and may limit what bodies might become. What emerges in this extract is a central tension for how we best support young people through initiatives like those that develop critical media literacy. In this regard, young people may have the knowledge that images might be manipulated, but they still experience an intensive desire to transform into that body as a result of intra-action with the image of body ideals. Simply developing approaches that enhance young people's knowledge and awareness of media might not be enough to challenge these affective pedagogies. Material discursive practices come to produce 'fit girl' or fit boy' intra-actively and accordingly privilege those bodies that confirm with these ideals. The following fragment is from a focus group with young people in which they discuss the perfect 'summer bodies' as circulating on popular social media platforms:

> *It's all the modelling and everything. Everyone's kind of wanting a summer beach body, and a lot of younger people, they'll be training with... especially the older people, they'll be doing heavy weights, and that's just not good for young people growing. I'm pretty sure that stunts your growth, heavy weights. I think it's a lot about people seeing these summer bodies, or getting hate from other people; and it's just, like, little things that bug*

them can cause them... Yeah, build up, and then they start thinking, "Oh, three people have called me fat now. Am I actually fat?" (Harrison, male, 15, British)

Harrison refers to the images circulating in social media that were tagged as 'summer bodies'—these were described as intensified images of sculpted, lean bodies, often accompanied by incessant flows of 'instructional' information about exercise and diet. In the responses above, the desire to achieve the 'summer body' portrayed in images found online is also shaped by previous experiences of the 'stigma' and 'shame' [45] of 'being called fat'. Fat shaming is reportedly rife in social media [46], and there is an established body of work that reveals how negative weight-related experiences and internalised weight stigma have been found to be associated with poorer body image in adolescents [47,48]. The circulation of 'fat talk' and 'body shaming' have contributed towards what can be described as 'affective atmospheres' [49,50], which transcend online/offline boundaries. In this sense, affects emerging relationally are compounded through moralising practices (e.g., if I am fat, I must exercise). Harrison described the 'material-discursive imaginaries' [51] of 'being fat', produced through the entanglement of 'hate', seeing sculpted summer bodies online, and intra-actions with the words of others. Images of summer bodies are entangled with bodies and emotions, for instance, feelings of uncertainty (am I actually fat?), stigma, shame and critique. Feeling fit or 'fat', produced in this intra-activity, limits or extends some bodies. Following Ahmed (2010), affect 'sticks' to certain bodies over others [52] and arguably sustains the connection between these various elements Harrison is describing in powerful ways that make it difficult to move outside of harmful relations with socio-cultural ideals. In this way, it is unsurprising that many young people 'feel' like the problem lies within them.

4.3. Shame Disaffection and the Double Burden of Post-Feminism

Following Shuilleabhain et al. [11], engagement with these digital media may produce difficult 'sensations and feelings', some of which 'cannot always be clearly articulated', or perhaps even 'known' through language'. Alarmingly, when disaffection with the body is felt, but young people cannot articulate this, the body may ironically become the very vehicle for that expression [53]. For some, this can lead to forms of harmful relations with the body, diet and exercise:

I know that's not how it works, but a lot of people want that instant gratification, so a lot of people carry on pushing it further and further, until their body can't really take it anymore. (Leif, male, 14, white black Caribbean)

Leif is describing the intensive flows of affect that intra-actively produce body disaffection as an affective-material process. For many, this was not something that could be clearly articulated but was felt in and through the body, or as Daphne describes 'you don't realise it':

Yeah, I did follow some like obviously models and fitness bloggers and stuff, but part of overcoming the sort of situation was to unfollow those people because they sometimes can influence negatively when you don't realise it. (Daphne, female, 15, white British)

Yeah, I think there's a lot of pressure, especially today, on young people to look a certain way, and to fit a certain mould; and I think one of the risks, maybe, with sharing data like that online, and being able to see what everyone else is doing—if you're not doing as well as everyone else, then you're going to potentially put yourself at harm trying to get to the stage everyone else is at. (Maggie)

In the above focus group discussion, participants were describing these media as everyday and normal whilst also critiquing the associated health imperatives. Far from being passive victims, they were able to demonstrate a critical awareness or knowledge of the harms and risks of gendered body ideals. Many young people offered what could be described as a rational critique and awareness about the production and editing of transformation images; this included a recognition that many images were photoshopped

and/or used filters or that 'perfected bodies' were produced through consumption practices that most are not able to afford (involving personal trainers, surgery, supplements).

> *Yeah, because I think like these people like although you see pictures of them you don't know what they're really doing, like they could have like a protein shake for example in the background as if they've been drinking it when really they probably haven't, they've just put it there for effect whereas like real people that aren't celebrities or something they haven't got all the money and that to be paying for like their own personal trainers and all these supplements and vitamins and that so they've done it all naturally, so I would like kind of believe it more and it makes me believe it more than celebrities.* (Aria, female, 15, white British)

However, there is a growing recognition in the literature on body disaffection that simply developing media literacy (e.g., learning that images are photoshopped or not real bodily progression) may not be sufficient to decrease desire or disaffection [11]. Regardless of whether transformation or progress pictures are 'real' or 'fake', the materialised affects are significant. Through a new materialist ontology, we can not only examine what these images mean to young people but also trace what images of perfected bodies *do* to other bodies. Aria recognises it might be different for 'real people', and she is aware of the 'meaning' of these images, already articulating an understanding or literacy that they may well be fake. However, beyond her 'perception', there are other important elements of this engagement. Significantly, her intra-action with these images *still produces* the *desire* to achieve the same perfected body. Despite being exposed to campaigns in schools about body positivity and critical literacy, some of these affects circulated in ways that had enduring impacts and, in some cases, contributed towards disordered practices:

> *I've had friends who obviously follow Instagram models, who are really skinny and beautiful and I know they're Photoshopped, but they look really real, so my friends have had... well, not my friends, but people in the school have had eating disorders and yeah, there's been a lot of stories in the school, especially because it's a girl's school and everyone's trying to compare themselves to each other. Some of them are trying to look like them. So there's been a lot of eating disorders and stuff like that. But then the school gets involved and most people are fine now, but yeah....* (Cassie, female, 15, white British)

Some participants referred to the paradoxical feelings of shame and joy, a tension also found in the work of Wolfe [45], which she describes as having the potential to 'forcefully direct and refract bodies' (p. 731). This has important implications for future interventions around body image and media, as these affective moments can therefore expand or reduce capacity, or as Coffey (142) articulates it, 'the potential to become otherwise'. These limitations and potentials can form *regardless* of whether or not young people have the right 'knowledge' to critique idealised body images.

Many participants reported continuing to work on their profiles in social media or apps in relation to body ideals, specifically along gendered lines. In some cases, this required the investment of time and effort but also a process of learning, for example, how to edit, what to like, or where to share particular images of themselves or others. As others observe [7], these are spaces that have the capacity to be both helpful or harmful. For many, opting out of social media was not an option, reflecting Hardey and Atkinson's [54] observation that there are rising social anxieties about being locked into digital communication systems but that it remains incredibly difficult to simply 'opt out'. Aligning with the observations of other scholars [3], for most of the young people in the study, opting out or untangling themselves from these ubiquitous technologies was described as too difficult or unimaginable. Instead, tried different ways of managing their social media engagement—for example, removing harmful or unhelpful content from their feeds, blocking or unfollowing particular accounts, and removing content or apps. In more extreme cases, some described being unable to manage this, and adults intervened, for example, to remove apps that were deemed to be 'harmful'.

I used to have an app as well where you log like your food and sports, but then that became a bit more obsessive so I deleted that [...] It was me and my sister. . . . when I was in that sort of situation it was more . . . I would be disappointed, but now I've learnt to not do so, so . . . Yeah, I did follow some like obviously models and fitness bloggers and stuff, but part of overcoming the sort of situation was to unfollow those people because they sometimes can influence negatively when you don't realise it. That app previously, the food one, that I mentioned earlier, that was quite dangerous . . . Yeah, me and another of my friends, our parents never ask to look at our phones or anything, like I had that app for 200 days before anyway knew, so . . .I only follow like a few fitness bloggers now. (Daphne, female, 15, white British)

Maggie described just how difficult/near impossible it was for them to remove themselves from encountering these images.

So, on Instagram, there are a lot of accounts that post, like, 'thinspo' and 'fitspo', so even the bodybuilders and that, they're not actually healthy. They're just there for the image, and if a ten-year-old boy sees someone like a bodybuilder and says, "I want to be like him," it just creates this endless cycle. (Maggie, female, 16, white South African)

For some, remaining entangled in these digital health assemblages can constrain capacity for more positive relations with their bodies/food, or what might be recognised in existing frameworks and literature as 'body disaffection'. In some cases, this can manifest as trauma to the body, through which disaffection is experienced and managed via more extreme measures such as disordered eating or over-exercising or by working on their bodies as a 'boundaryless project' [55], with no limits:

Because it is, like, well you have reached a goal. There is no finish. There is never a finish. You need to keep going... we will see a video of something, or someone will see a video and then they will tag me in it and be like, "Oh, I tried this today. I can do 10–10 reps, 10 sets". Or whatever. And then you would be like, I can be even stronger than him, I need to do more than him. I will do even more. I will do 12 and then I will... like, I will do 14 and it is kind of like a... it is a competition at the end of the day. (Tyler, male, 17, black British)

Anna was deeply affected by the 'ugly feelings' Coffey [56] describes as feelings of worry that turn to bodily disgust and more rigid affective relations [56]:

Yeah, a lot. I had a friend that came here but now she's moved away and she was really ill, like she had lost loads of weight and she had gotten really, really skinny and she was off school for ages and she wouldn't like contact any of us and we were really worried but then we found out that she was ill and like lost all this weight and she had to be like hospitalised. (Anna, female, 15, white British)

Being reassured by teachers, significant adults or even their peers that they should not compare themselves does little to challenge the negative affectivities young people become entangled with through these online–offline temporalities. Kennedy et al. [1] observe that 'fat talk' involves reciprocity in 'expressing one's fear of fatness or disappointment in their body shape or size, but then having this challenged, that 'no, you're not fat. . .' by one's peers and significant others.

Yeah, I don't really know what to say. Yeah, I mean, I've had friends who've told me about their eating disorders and things like that and I've just tried to tell them that they're beautiful and they don't need to do that kind of stuff. (Cassie, female, 15, white British)

Which everyone's is kind of like . . . like everyone always goes like, "Oh, you shouldn't compare yourself to anyone," or whatever, but everyone does, and I think like even just by doing that a bit like it does . . . like, if you're morbidly obese and you see someone that is ridiculously skinny you're going to think, "Oh, I'm fat," and I think like even though it's bad for you comparing yourself I think it can actually boost you a little bit. (Bethany, female, 16, white British)

In the extract above, Bethany recognises that those bodies that are closer to these ideals are more likely to benefit from these messages, through a temporal state of pleasure, which emerges through a 'flow of affect' (Fox, 2015), or as Bethany describes it, 'a boost'. Feeling good in relation with one's body is produced through the intra-activity of these various elements and is thus not fixed but always becoming [57,58]. For those larger bodies, the stigmatised affects 'stick' (Ahmed, 2010) in ways that might have significant consequences. In the fragments above, young people therefore described wanting to *feel* differently within, through and about their bodies. Yet, they also feel that it is down to them as individuals to demonstrate resilience and manage powerful affects of disappointment, disaffection, stigma, and bodily shame associated with the 'fat' or abject body. Aria, for example, described herself as 'lacking' in terms of matching the motivation and drive promoted and performed by others (particularly influencers), which she felt unable to 'find' in herself:

> *Like I probably prefer Instagram because people share footage of themselves and you can kind of see what they do and like how they get fit and what they do in their life so you kind of think oh well if they can do it then like you can, like that sort of stuff.* (Aria, female, 15, white British

This was a tension experienced intensely by many of the girls, who noted that expressing or talking about disaffection was akin to failing or feeling like a victim, which was acutely at odds with the post-feminist discourse that circulates through social media around choice and empowerment [5,41]. The idea that girls can simply 'choose' whatever they want to be materialises into a burden, where they also must be seen to not be *easily swayed* by digital media, to not be a cultural 'dupe' but rather someone who actively chooses. The idea that they are 'disaffected' by these media images is therefore deeply at odds with this post-feminist rhetoric of choice. Indeed, the expression of disaffection within their peer culture was produced in contradictory ways as both 'cool' and at the same time 'weird' or abject:

> *I think it's down to these whole like Tumblr things where these girls are like starving themselves or saying that they have depression or even self-harming and stuff like that. And then people saying that's so edgy or that's so cool or whatever. Yeah. It's like a massive buzzword at the moment. It's like I'm depressed or I've got anxiety, but they don't actually. It's like trendy. It's a bit weird. Yeah. And it's like that whole starving artist thing as well. (Laughing) Like trying to be really edgy and…Since I've been in secondary school, yeah. Yeah, I know like there's a few groups in my year that kind of do that sort of stuff.* (Cassie, female, 15, white British)

In this data fragment, 'disaffection' is produced as a complex process tied to individual intention, action and choice—described as a 'buzzword' or something girls choose to do to follow a trend of being 'cool' or 'trying to be edgy'. Disaffection is assembled in ways that undermine the authenticity of deeply harmful affective bodily experiences. These bodily experiences are not simply the result of individual will or action (or a lack thereof) but are produced in relation with other elements. Enfolded in these intra-actions are moralising practices around disaffection that generate feelings of belonging or inferiority and are deeply connected to bodily shame. To feel or show disaffection about one's body materialises as being a 'cultural dupe', someone who is easily swayed by others ('a few groups in my year') and media imagery. Recent research by Wolfe [45] offers a rich conceptualisation of shame through which to analyse these intra-actions, what she refers to as a 'faux linear *cause and effect* relationship', which takes place through an 'essentialisation of self' and through which shame becomes 'integral to self' (p. 728). In this way, rather than body disaffection being understood as the product of these complex relationalities, an assumed 'deficit self *is* the cause of shame' (p. 728). This is the sort of logic that is regularly promoted through post-feminist articulations of girlhood and 'fitspiration' media. This closes off the possibility of the critique of dominant gendered body ideals but also further stigmatises those bodies that display disaffection. Instead, powerful body ideals are

recognised as potentially harmful but, contradictorily, to be managed through individual action or mental health resilience, as Georgie suggests:

> *Yeah, like nasty comments and stuff, but I think that can be quite easily dealt with, like block them and then get rid of them.* (Georgie, female, 15, white British)

The idea that nasty comments can be 'dealt with' implies a level of responsibility and agency and of building 'resilience' against them within a post-feminist discourse. Thus, whilst many of the girls in the study were able to rehearse a narrative that was critical of social media, their own bodily disaffection and bodily concern was what Wolfe (2017) describes as 'enfolded in shame' (p. 730) and thus, at times, unspoken. These tensions are understood as something to be managed, addressed through building resilience to these images or by simply 'blocking them out'. Such practices are deeply troubling in terms of how young people may therefore come to manage deeply affective and complex relationships with their bodies.

5. Conclusions

Thinking with feminist new materialism, in this paper I attempt to advance the current knowledge around body disaffection and social media. In part, the paper responds to the call by scholars such as Coleman [57,59] and Coffey [10] to move beyond perspectives of body image and body concerns as the result of thin-ideal-internalisations and instead address important and complex embodied dynamics. As such, I examined the ways bodies as 'becomings' ([57]) are entangled with social media, exploring not what these entities *are* but what they *do* as they interact with each other and, therefore, how disaffection, to draw on Allen (2015, p. 2), 'comes into being' [60]. This entails an ontological shift away from an understanding of the relationship between body disaffection and social media as discursively produced, or what it means or represents. Such work has made important contributions to understand how distorted or negative perceptions of one's image of their body. I instead I adopted a relational approach that conceptualises both media and young people's bodies as 'generative material, rather than passive objects' [12]. This afforded an an examination of the entangled relations between young people, social media and relationships with their bodies to understand how body disaffection can come into being. Viewed this way, rather than seeing disaffection as a negative emotion (pathology) or feeling residing *within* the body, disaffection is produced through entanglements with what Ingram describes as 'particular spatial-material arrangements'. The analysis reveals how social media events, particularly the recent phenomena of social media posts that focus on body 'transformation', generate powerful affects, which may open or limit capacities for what 'boys' or 'girls' bodies might *become* in deeply gendered ways.

Participants describe moments of encountering health and fitness-related media entangled with other elements such as discourses, other bodies, previous experiences and affects. In line with Ingram's work on past-present-future bodies and Wolfe's articulation of shame as a relational affect, I focused on the ways in which disaffection is co-constructed through intra-actions with social media. For some, powerful affects of shame can materialise into embodied distress. As such, the paper extends the current knowledge on young people, mental health and social media by revealing the complexity of young people's entangled bodies in these assemblages.

This makes the development of educational programmes focused on body image challenging. The ways in which young people's gendered bodies *become* with these digital media cannot be easily predicted. Moreover, we cannot simply reduce body image or disaffection to some perception residing within the individual. Rather than framing particular social media and the imagery circulating within them as causing harm in casual or linear ways, I examined the complex ways in which deeply powerful affects emerge through entangled assemblages. As such, health and fitness social media is not something that can be simply defined as either inherently 'risky' or 'liberating'. Rather, young people's entanglements with social media can be understood as something that is constantly being reconfigured, sometimes in new and unexpected ways. Even well-intended media can

be consumed in ways that produce bodily distress. Whilst I focus mostly on those affects that might be considered damaging or harmful to young people's relationships with their bodies, these were not the only affects that were being generated. In the wider research study, young people also described those intra-actions that were more pleasurable. Such potentialities could be the focus of future research, as others are beginning to explore, for example, by examining how 'young people's digitally networked bodies could be sites of pleasure (Marston, 2023) (p. 5).

In the various enactments described above, bodies and digital technologies are entangled within different spaces. In this regard, it is important to understand how social media influences or images extend *beyond* the boundaries of the digital—they cannot be understood in isolation. Young people's engagement with the social media described in this paper involved multiple human bodies and images of bodies; friends, influencers, parents, coaches. In these enactments of objects, bodies, spaces and feelings, affective forces can 'stick' [52] to some bodies in ways that can have damaging consequences. In this sense, disaffection can be understood as being produced in the intra-actions, with enduring affects.

Media literacy programmes have been critiqued for their over-reliance on individualism, placing the onus of responsibility on the individual to protect themselves and 'free themselves' from the pressure of media discourses [11]. The problem with this, as explored in this paper, is that such critical practices do not necessarily displace the regulatory mechanisms and affective investments in bodily perfection. Despite their admirable concerns, attempts to better equip young people to be 'resilient' to these social media messages may further (re)produce binary thinking around young people (mind–body). In this regard, I would argue young people's agency (resilience) ought to be understood not as something rational, autonomous and located within the individual, but continually (re)produced relationally and in a constant state of renegotiation.

These complexities raise new questions and potential areas for future research. Firstly, the ubiquitous influence of the health content described above makes it challenging for young people to untangle themselves from these intra-actions and presents a significant challenge for health practitioners, teachers, carers/parents and policy makers to know how best to support young people. There is a need for further research that critically examines how to translate these insights into pedagogical practice. Secondly, we need a more nuanced understanding as to why certain bodies might feel the affective force of these social media intra-actions more than others. How do these affects translate in ways that position particular gendered bodies (beyond boy–girl dualisms). In her framing of 'everyday embodiment', Coffey offers some important suggestions for 'potentialities of ways of being otherwise' [10], where gender and fitness can be aligned with more-than-binary embodiments. Examining how young people's embodiment is formed through the socio-material conditions of their day-to-day lives, she also looks towards 'broader conditions of possibility which inform young people's embodiment', particularly those that 'enable more open orientations to the body' (p. 143). She argues there is a pressing need to make visible the queer potentials for embodiment that might help take us away from the 'constraints of hetero-normative gender assemblages'. Given how difficult it is to move away from the constraints of images of perfected and highly gendered bodies circulating in social media, her point about examining the broader potentials of embodiment through, for example, non-binary identifications is arguably a crucial avenue for future research.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The project was granted ethical approval by the Research Ethics Approval Committee for Health at University of Bath.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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