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“Digitized Dysmorphia” of the female body: the re/disfigurement of the image

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ABSTRACT What has the digitization of female appearances, the altering of female bodies not only in media but individually among the general public through the use of apps, done to human sexual interactions and senses of self? Western society’s booming beauty and sex industries have hyper-sexualised society, over-selling the female image as a currency and commodity of desire. Yet, media no longer has exclusive power over regulating representations of female aesthetics. Nowadays, particularly in Western culture, we can digitally alter ourselves through Photoshop and apps such as *Perfect365*, producing our own notions of normativity. Not only do we critique our bodies in mirrors, but now we can digitize our dysmorphia by virtually modifying what we dislike, creating “perfect” selves instead. How do these online ideal images affect women’s relationships to their material bodies, do these digital images provide the freedom to express a self that would otherwise be overlooked or simply accentuate the disparity between female bodies and the images women feel they must embody? In positing the new term of “Digitised Dysmorphia”, I question whether transforming oneself into a virtual ideal, manipulating the image, is an act of dissidence, or a demonstration of how fully regulated we are by social norms, whereby digital modifications simply enable us to reach normative ideals. Alternatively, perhaps this enablement irrevocably changes definitions of “normativity” as we alter our relations to the body and image. Ultimately, this article offers an initial exploration into how this digitized dysmorphia affects our perception of self individually and as a collective society. This article is published as part of a collection dedicated to multi- and interdisciplinary perspectives on gender studies.

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Introduction

The female body has continuously been a battlefield of diverging concepts, regulations, values and modifications. It is seen as reproductive, sexual, insatiable, as a commodity, a place of purity, as Mary and Eve, of sin and flesh and monstrous appetites—a map of spatial, temporal and lived female experiences. The relationship between women and media representations of beauty, sex and youth have been extensively explored and critiqued by gender and feminist theorists alike (such as Susan Bordo, 1993; Amy Shields Dobson, 2007, 2011, 2014; Susie Orbach, 2009). Yet, as the age of digitized beauty progresses, alongside a growing personal capacity to technologically modify our own images as many in Western society, and other societies, now can, there is a greater need for discussion as to how this is affecting women's relationship to their bodies. This article examines women's relationship to media and cultural representations of female beauty standards and how this has filtered into the presentation of self via digitally modified images, ultimately positing that this disjuncture between body and image produces a socially collective "Digitised Dysmorphia". To briefly clarify the context of this discussion, the female material body and its transcending digitized-image are being considered in relation to specifically prescribed types of femininity within a Western, patriarchal, mainstream or "malestream", heterosexual society.

As an introductory paper intended to initially conceptualize the term "digitised dysmorphia", I will explore its relation to image-editing technology, body theory and the way in which the image materialises in place of the body to question how the digitization of one's image, an "ideal" version of an individual's appearance, has further skewed what is considered a "standard" body, particularly a standard female body. I will posit that digitized dysmorphia manifests through the digital image, as the altering of supposedly undesirable parts of the self through modifying and fixing the visual and virtual appearance of an individual's self through various apps. This is considered within the context of both collective and individual editing of the female body, using digital technology to sculpt the body's image into virtual proportions based on society's imposed standards of unattainable, unrealistic and specific types of feminine aesthetics (often narrowly modelled on stereotypical, white, slim, able-bodied Westernized aesthetics), which saturate today's culture. This article is in no way exhaustive, but merely treading initial ground to posit the term of Digitized Dysmorphia in order to begin to articulate the ever-growing experience of disparate relations between women's bodies and their digitized images.

I suggest that digitized dysmorphia exists on a spectrum with Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), but as a socially conditioned dysmorphia, shaped collectively by societal pressures, constructs of beauty and the technology presently available to attain these standards in image form. Advances in image technology have arguably further enabled and intensified this socially dysmorphic perception of female bodies through the way in which the digitally modified image has so greatly infiltrated fashion and advertising imagery, so that social perceptions of women's bodies are no longer truly based on natural (digitally unmodified, un-tampered) bodies. Nowadays, women not only feel pressured to bodily compete with socially generated beauty standards, but to compete with their own image too—in some ways the image offers the only way to attain the unattainable beauty standards. Yet, through this, women are merely perpetuating this skewed perception of what female corporeality "should" look like. Subsequently, I will posit that digitized dysmorphia manifests among women, particularly in image-driven Western culture, who see their bodies as flawed in reality, and who therefore edit their images to digitally correct what they see as "wrong", enabling the image to transcend the material, anatomical body and

form a digitally reconstructed ideal self-image. Many women are trading in their material bodies for photographic copies that represent what they want to be, should be, could be, *need* to be within Western society. The unfortunate reality of this phenomenon is that in years to come many of us will be unable to recognize ourselves within the images created through digital modification.

However, and I stress this point, I do not intend to posit digitized dysmorphia as an exclusively negative term, loaded in the same way as BDD. Although I suggest that digitized dysmorphia stems from a negative socially constructed pressure to attain beauty standards and therefore the reasons behind this dysmorphia are negative ones which need to be addressed, the dysmorphia itself potentially has both negative and positive possibilities where women can take agency of how they are perceived, despite existing within the framework of women's beauty-oppression. The technology behind such modifications could arguably allow a level of transgression or dissidence around how an individual grapples with notions of self-representation. Yet, since the choices one is capable of making when digitizing one's dysmorphia are restricted to the prescribed beauty norms offered by software designers, perhaps such editing transgressions are already thwarted. Since the image modifications are enabled within a pre-determined criteria with only certain enhancements made possible, these image-technology specialists have still designed specific looks and advocated what one should be aiming to achieve and what should be desirable, possible and attainable.

To use Bryan Turner's term, we live within a "somatic society" (Turner, 2008: 1) in which the body is positioned as the site where major political and personal issues are expressed, problematised and worked through. The female body has become the site of such issues pertaining to notions of beauty and body image, and how this body may be digitally, technologically reconsidered. Western culture's idealized standards of beauty are ones that can never fully be embodied by any individual. However, because of photo-editing software, such as *Perfect365* that has been made accessible to the general public, many can now manipulate images of themselves to fit their image ideals, which ultimately transcend the boundaries and limitations of the physical, material body. Society as a whole has produced a dysmorphic perception of what the female body should look like. This has occurred not only through the products which weight, surgical, beauty, sex and fashion industries continuously offer to women while simultaneously putting pressure upon them to fix, alter or modify their bodies in some way, but through the technology that has been created to assist this process digitally. Nowadays, what the body cannot achieve, the image can, and this notion and the relation this particularly creates between women and their body images, are key points to this article.

Body dysmorphic disorder and the female body

First, I will outline Body Dysmorphic Disorder and the shared similarities it has to what I term "digitised dysmorphia", which is arguably created through the use of digital modification apps. Following this, through examining theories pertaining to the body and the problematic relationship many women have to their body images, I consider how digitized dysmorphia has occurred within Western Society, particularly among young women. Since the early 1980s, Body Dysmorphic Disorder, or BDD, has been gaining greater acknowledgement within the field of psychological disorders. Phillips (1998), a leading expert in BDD, outlines the commonalities found among patients with this disorder, articulating that:

Everyone with BDD is concerned with some aspect of their appearance that they consider ugly, unattractive, or "not right"

in some way. Everyone is preoccupied—thinking and worrying about their body excessively. Everyone is distressed or doesn't function as well as they might because of their preoccupation. The details differ from person to person, but these basic themes are shared by all. (Phillips, 1998: 32)

In severe cases, the individual suffering from BDD experiences significant anxiety about their appearance and can develop obsessive and often compulsive habits and routines, such as continuously grooming, checking their appearance in mirrors and camouflaging the “offending” body area, for example with make-up or clothing, when out in public. These behaviours can disrupt and significantly impact the sufferer's ability to function in their day-to-day life.

During Phillips' research, she noted the statistical differences in the severity of BDD and the relation this had between men and women. She questioned the assumption that it must be more common for women to suffer from BDD than men, because of women appearing more focused on their appearance since society places a higher premium on their levels of attractiveness, stating that: “Indeed, research findings from the general population indicate more women than men are unhappy with their appearance” (Phillips, 1998: 155). This may shed light onto why studies into mild cases of BDD often find that women *are* more affected than men within their research, due to the societal pressures placed upon women generally. Yet, comparatively, Phillips (1998) stated that in moderate to severe cases of BDD, “out of the several hundred people I've seen, 51% have been men”. (155–156). This gender difference between mild cases and moderate to severe cases arguably demonstrates how this disorder is deemed more than an issue that has simply been societally produced by the pressure upon women to look a certain way, since men suffer from this disorder as much as women in moderate to severe cases. Subsequently, this is where digitized dysmorphia diverges from BDD. I believe digitized dysmorphia is generated by societal pressures to look a certain way, and is currently directed more towards women's than men's bodies to meet such criteria and standards.

However, with the rise in male media imagery, which now idealizes a toned, slender physique of a well-groomed male body, perhaps this will not always be the case. In fact, recent studies have begun to find that “there has been a growing preoccupation with weight and body image in men, which parallels this increased ‘visibility’ of the male body ...” (Grogan, 2008: 30). Consequently, whilst society has normalized the preoccupation women perceivably have over their looks, the similar effect that increased visibility of the male body has had upon men suggests a highly influential link for both men and women between bodyimage and societal pressures upon this image—slowly body-image satisfaction or dissatisfaction is becoming more than just a women's issue. The preoccupation over one's looks has been normalized to such an extent for women that this is not seen as pathological in itself, yet interestingly, because of the increase in male media imagery, when men exhibit body-image dissatisfaction, anxiety and image concerns that mirror the preoccupation normalized for women even to a small degree, this can be perceived as pathological. This difference in societal perception not only highlights the unequal nature of prescribed gender norms, but also qualifies this preoccupation and fixation on looks as unhealthy, culturally perpetuated through the pressures induced by our idealized-image-saturated society. Ultimately however, digitized dysmorphia is still a gendered issue that I believe focuses upon women and the unattainable standards of femininity because of the amount of exposure, visibility and pressure that has been placed upon the female body to perform certain looks.

I use BDD as a comparison to digitized dysmorphia because of the way in which findings from mild cases have reflected how societal pressures currently impact women in greater ways than men, suggesting that women generally show more signs of body dissatisfaction, preoccupation with appearance matters and a social body dysmorphia of what the female body should look like. Subsequently, the sociocultural factors that play a role in mild BDD can be seen as influential in alternative forms of body dysmorphia too, whether socially or digitally experienced. Appearance matters are advertised, marketed, documented and broadcast in daily TV shows, women's magazines, fashion adverts and media images, or even the perfectly proportioned, shaped mannequins of fashion store window-displays. Studies have shown that media imagery has an influential effect on those susceptible to body dissatisfaction and dysmorphia, particularly young women who perhaps identify more often with the models displayed within such media. According to Leon Festinger's social comparison theory (1954), “we desire accurate, objective evaluations of our abilities and attitudes. When unable to evaluate ourselves directly, we seek to satisfy this need for self-evaluation through comparison with other people” (Grogan, 2008: 118). This comparison can take place between an individual and media images too, suggesting the power media images can have over individuals, particularly young women who are most prevalently imaged within media. When an individual can see the perceived similarities and dissimilarities between their self and images of idealized, relatable bodies of similar ages, genders, ethnicities, bodies that are perceived to embody Westernized cultural standards of beauty, this comparison can create either body-image dissatisfaction or satisfaction within the individual.

Within *Bodies* (2009), Susie Orbach reflects upon the expanse of body-image dissatisfaction and the skewed dysmorphic relation women have to their bodies from being socially conditioned, or at least continuously told, that their bodies in their current states are never good enough and always need more work to be shaped and moulded into the ideal:

The numerous industries—diet, food, style, cosmetic surgery, pharmaceutical and media—that represent bodies as being about performance, fabrication and display make us think that our bodies are sites for (re)construction and improvement. Collectively, they leave us with a sense that our bodies' capacities are limited only by our purse and determination. (Orbach, 2009: 104–105)

Orbach highlights how the industries play upon women's body insecurities, collectively turning a hyper-critical eye towards female bodies and all their supposed physical faults. Something can always be enhanced or modified and for every defect there is a solution, or so we are made to believe by those involved in shaping notions of beauty. Rather than being naturally beautiful in a person's own individuality, society continually prescribes a Westernized standard of beauty that unceasingly narrows, not just in waist size, but in the generic, homogenous perception of beauty it idealizes, which is often considered as white and able-bodied. Therefore, while BDD is clinically perceived as a disorder, the prevalence of social body dysmorphia, which I argue is a precursor to digitized dysmorphia, could be considered a collective phenomenon fuelled by the increasing power of beauty-related industries and the cultural norms they inscribe for female bodies. Nonetheless, this now goes further in that women are not only competing with unmodified images in the media or with each other, but with edited photo-shopped images and “digital beauties”; artificially produced digital subjectivities that proffer an ideal woman, which have ultimately enabled

women's social body dysmorphia to extend into a digitized dysmorphia of how female bodies should look, can look; need to look.

When considering social norms in relation to the formation of bodies, Butler (2004) articulates how:

The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty, that to which I lay claim as my own. (Butler, 2004: 21)

Physical bodies are coded and marked by certain groups and categories and therefore, the body is never a natural product. This public dimension is never in an individual's control nor exclusively through the choices they have made to present their body in a certain way. Bodies can be marked by social norms without the desire to be identified in such a way—this is especially so for women, when certain types of femininities and female aesthetics have been commodified and capitalised upon within beauty and sex industries. While social norms govern more than the individual's physical body, the performative realities of the body's aesthetic inscription which adhere to certain norms are often the way in which one can initially recognize or misrecognize an individual's social identity. As a result, while individuals have the capacity to resist social body norms in the material world and may even attempt to resist, it is not always easy to subvert the labels which others may nevertheless seek to impose upon material bodies. Nonetheless, the digitized, dysmorphic image that proffers an alternative visualization of self may arguably highlight the more explicit, overt attempts at a subversive resistance to this external labelling. Subsequently, the ability to digitally alter one's image can provide the opportunity to modify the body-image to how one wants to be perceived by others, and even by oneself.

The pressure to be beautiful: the modified image and feminine Masquerade

After considering the public dimension of the body and the industries that shape the societal constructs of what the body should supposedly look like, this section explores the position of femininity and this societal pressure to attain certain beauty standards in relation to the technology that allows users to digitally alter their images. The notion of feminine "masquerade" was originally theorised by Joan Riviere (1929), yet later reconsidered by various theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Amelia Jones, Laura Mulvey and Mary Anne Doane, whose working theories may provide better understanding in this article's context. Doane (1982) articulated how, "the masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed" (81). In other words, femininity is never fully "owned" and embodied by women, it is a façade worn by women for men, a masquerade of what is expected of women. Irigaray (1985) sheds further light on this by defining "masquerade" as "An alienated or false version of femininity arising from the woman's awareness of the man's desire for her to be his other, the masquerade permits women to experience desire not in her own right but as the man's desire situates her" (220). This consideration of femininity is apt in situating the highly heteronormative and capitalised way in which patriarchal, Western society has manufactured women's aesthetics for the male gaze. Yet, the expectation and pressure to perform this masquerade has now extended past the reality of the body and the varying physical modifications it may undergo into

the virtuality of one's photographed body-image as representative of the self.

What the body cannot achieve, the image can through apps that serve to reiterate acceptable/desirable standards of femininity, such as *Skinny Camera*, that says "Forget about diet and weight! Slim down, pose and look thin with Skinny camera", or *Photowonder* that claims to have over 100 million users in 218 countries. However, one of the most striking apps for digitizing your dysmorphia is *Perfect365*, which won the 2012 CES award for innovation in design and engineering, and offers to give you precise beauty by adjusting your face and make-up. The software was created and manufactured by ArcSoft, "the global leader in imaging intelligence technology" (ArcSoft, 2015) who proudly proclaim the extent of their presence in improving images by stating "there's a great chance ArcSoft has already improved an image you've seen." (ArcSoft, 2015). *Perfect365* is also accessible as a "free makeup app for iPhone, Android, and Windows Phones" (ArcSoft, 2015), which offers in-app purchases, however, to download it to your Windows PC costs US\$49.99, which arguably blurs the boundaries further over the issue of beauty and types of femininities as commodities.

It is difficult to ascertain the percentage of female users from the software's approximated 60 million users because of the company's confidentiality and privacy policies. Nevertheless, by examining the product's advertising strategies and marketing tools, it is apparent that they have purposefully targeted their advertising for female consumption, far more than male consumption, something which is particularly evident when they highlight tools to alter and experiment with make-up and hair styles. When viewing *Perfect365*'s main advertising page, www.perfect365.arcsoft.com, the example images that "needed correction" were exclusively female, as they were in their promotional video, which was also voiced by a woman. Additionally, the app boasts how easy it is to link the app with Facebook, Instagram and various other social networking sites in order to upload edited photos straight from your phone to an online platform. Subsequently, although this app is only specifically free (with minimal in-app purchases) to those using iPhones, Android or Windows Phones, and therefore is not accessible to everyone, in the United Kingdom alone 76% of adults own a smartphone (Deloitte, 2015) and have the potential to download and use this app, or similar ones, at the press of a button. Technology, particularly in Western culture, has integrated with society where most restaurants, cafes, pubs and even stores and shopping centres advertise free Wi-Fi or access to paid Wi-Fi. For many this means that anytime, anyplace, they can continue to manufacture notions of ideal selves and normativity by creating digitized images—reconstructed, edited images—that can then be posted in online settings. Alongside critiquing female bodies in mirrors, we now have digitized dysmorphia: critiquing the digital image through having the choice and control to virtually modify what we dislike to create idealized selves for online identities instead.

Yet, what struck a dissonant chord was the way in which, Sean Mao, the VP of Consumer Products at ArcSoft, spoke of *Perfect365*, articulating that,

People have always expressed themselves through personal fashion and makeup, but photos and images were almost always controlled by others, [...] Selfies, and the precise makeup placement and edits *Perfect365* provides through its Face Detection technology, give users power over their own images and allow for creative expression through digital self-portraits. (Spring Lake Equity Partners, 2014)

The selfie trend gives some sense of control back to the subject of the photograph, since the subject becomes their own object. However, “the precise makeup placement”, as well as *Perfect365*’s “pre-set templates for flattering” (Spring Lake Equity Partners, 2014) posit a contradictory perception of the supposed control and power the user has over their images. If one is bound to adhere to a fixed criteria of enhancements, even if there are numerous possibilities, the pre-set or specified nature of such templates and tools still influences and advocates the type of image one should be aiming to achieve and what should be possible or acceptable for the edited, digitized, dysmorphic version of self. Although this app, to a certain extent, extends the liberty of creative digital self-expression, enabling the image to transcend the material body in innovative ways, the app still has limitations, guidelines and an agenda, supplying certain modes and types of feminine (or masculine) aesthetics that arguably adhere to social norms, trends and styles.

The agenda behind such technology may lie in the fact that image technology has firstly facilitated the shaping of an “ideal” beauty standard (creating the problem and the demand) and then provided the templates and tools for the general public to gain such standards (providing the solution and the supply). The use of photo-editing has been acknowledged by many theorists, particularly Sarah Grogan (2008) and her review of body theory, highlighting how,

digital modification of images in magazines now means that virtually every fashion image is digitally modified. Susan Bordo (2003) notes that digital modification of images means that we are being educated to shift our perception of what a normal woman’s body looks like, so that we see our own bodies as wanting because they do not match an unrealistic, polished, slimmed, and smoothed ideal ... (Grogan, 2008: 25)

Consequently, these types of femininity and supposed social standards of beauty are in themselves skewed, no longer based upon anatomical, material bodies, but upon the way in which the female body can be and has been manipulated by technology itself. Similarly, O’Riordan (2007) examines how “Information and communication technologies, through cyberspace, reproduce normative simulations of naturalized female bodies and this normativity is intensified through digital forms” (232). Her paper’s central focus is on the mediation of natural physical female bodies through those designated as artificial physical digital images (O’Riordan, 2007: 233). These “Digital beauties” take form through popular culture within computer games, adverts, websites, and VR scenarios to name a few and alarmingly viewers are not always aware of the difference between physically natural and artificially simulated female bodies. O’Riordan (2007) highlights how these virtual bodies almost take on an ontological status through their simulation of movement and “discursive creation that must draw on stereotypes of femininity in order to signal ‘female’” (240). She concludes the analysis by articulating how these “digital beauties” contribute to how female bodies become reduced to simply “the body” in many forms of popular digital culture, “contained, mapped, inverted as a template, and re-produced as a model of how bodies ‘should’ be, through the power of a generalized concept of normality” (O’Riordan, 2007: 240). And yet, Western society’s booming beauty and sex industries continue to fuel this epidemic of stereotypical femininity through hyper-sexualising and aestheticising the images of female bodies, and now digital beauties, as currency and commodities to desire, obtain and perfect in any way possible. Digital technology, or at least the way in which many now use it, has enabled us to extend this beyond the material body itself; in our digitized culture, the image, rather than the

material body, holds power and is a currency to bargain with. This is clearly demonstrated and exploited by the various industries pertaining to the body, such as the dietary, surgical enhancement and fashion industries, and by individuals such as Instagram stars who have marketed themselves via their body image.

The issues, concerns and social fixations on female beauty standards are unfortunately not new ones. Within *The Beauty Myth* (1990), Naomi Wolf highlights how societal pressures to be beautiful have gradually intensified as a backlash to feminism:

The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us. [...] During the past decade, women breached the power structure; meanwhile, eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing medical speciality. (Wolf, 1991: 10)

While women may presently be experiencing more social power, society has undermined women by increasingly valuing their worth by their aesthetic image, pressurizing women to focus on their bodies and standards of beauty. While women compete with men in employment, education and society, in return they are expected to adhere to feminine protocols in order to aesthetically please the male gaze within a public sphere that was originally perceived as his. Twenty-six years after Wolf’s critique, this remains an issue, where image-saturated media continues to emphasize what women should be striving for with adverts such as, “Are You Beach Body Ready?” and Victoria’s Secret’s “Perfect Body”.

As Sean Mao, VP of Consumer Products at ArcSoft, considers *Perfect365* to do, digital-images perhaps allow individuals to reclaim the body as one’s own in Western society’s digital culture—to take control of the body’s public dimension, going beyond the limitations of the material body into the alternative possibilities, as well as expectations, of digitally edited images of selves. Digital body-modifications provide an outlet for individuals to decide who and how they want to be. Rather than being governed by social norms, perhaps we have the subversive prospect of governing them. Technology enables us to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct the self to our individual specifications, on our own terms—an opportunity for multiplicity, fluidity and disguise of the self that prior generations have never had. Therefore, the use of such technology may be seen in an alternative light as combating beauty culture’s oppression by playing with its rules and boundaries. Nevertheless, most often these terms are geared towards embodying the standards pressured upon women in the material world, and the opportunity for diverse and multifarious self-expression is often quashed.

Agency and the “interpretative flexibility” of technology

In previous sections of this article, I continually return to the conflicting position of digitized dysmorphia, which I see as both a potential obstacle to women’s liberation and perhaps a dysmorphia that provides a level of agency and liberation to the user in that the modified images provide a form of “negative freedom” (Berlin 1969) from bodily pressures that their material body cannot readily escape. Digitized dysmorphia is in itself a form of negative dysmorphia that has arisen due to the harmful societal pressures placed upon women’s bodies to look a certain way and industries have capitalized upon this, manufacturing technology to assist this desire to attain beauty ideals. The fact that women are inclined to alter their body images, due to pressures to look a

certain way, one they feel is unattainable within themselves, but is necessary to achieve in order to obtain social acceptance, is a negative, problematic, alienating and socially created relationship between women and their bodies that needs to be further addressed.

Having said this, perhaps the counter-argument is that although digitized dysmorphia is a largely negative phenomenon, shaped by prejudice and the belief that one can only attain such ideals of beauty through modifying the image of oneself, there is a certain liberation, a relief of sorts in that these technologies, while the perpetrators of such ideals, enable a person to finally embody these previously unattainable social standards and their own internal ideals of self-image. Fahs (2014) considers the Marxist notion of a freedom *to* and freedom *from* model—the freedom to do what an individual wants to do while also having the freedom from the demands of others and oppressive structures. Fahs considers the neglect of negative liberty within the narratives of the sex-positive movement that largely focused on the positive liberty, the freedom to express and expand sexual diversity, rather than the freedom from oppressive constructs of female sexuality. Similar to the politics of sexual freedom, the dualism of negative and positive liberty articulates the problematic positioning of digitized dysmorphia within the discussions of aesthetic freedom for women's bodies, their images, and women's agency and choice in these aesthetics. On the one hand, there is the need for freedom from societal pressures and unrealistic ideals inscribed upon female bodies that continue to find new ways of fashioning, dieting, surgically enhancing and digitally altering these bodies to obtain such standards. On the other hand, an individual should have the freedom to use such image-apps, fashions, diets and surgery; to choose to do what they want to do with their own bodies. Nonetheless, this positive liberty is arguably still firmly embedded and created within the confines of the oppressive pressures placed upon female bodies and therefore a false sense of liberty, where both the negative and positive liberty is ultimately negated. Theorists such as Davis (1995) have highlighted the dualism of such beauty pressures, noting that women are not ignorant to their own oppression, they see through their oppressive conditions even as they may comply with them. Women are knowledgeable and active agents who make their own body-image decisions, even if these are decisions based on a constricting range of acceptable options. The choices women make are still seen to be choices as they are undertaken, even if they are limited and defined culturally by what is societally perceived as beautiful and what is actually available to assist them to reach these standards. Davis argues that women's agency needs to be acknowledged, yet equally placed within a framework that considers women's bodies as commodities and therefore shapes the choices women may feel able to make regarding their bodies. In this regard, digitally altering one's body image is a choice, one that women have agency over, even if they are aware of the surrounding framework that restricts their self-expression.

Arguably, women may feel more control and agency within such a context of digital modification because of the ability to change one's image themselves, rather than relying on a surgeon or beauty technician, and they equally have the capacity to alter parts of themselves that perhaps cannot be accurately altered physically. Therefore, what type of online freedoms does this enablement offer to individuals who have digitally moved past their anatomical body's appearance and the supposed flaws or abnormalities they believe their bodies to have? Perhaps the editing of an individual's image may provide the freedom to express alternative selves, which conceivably buck the beauty trend and are truly individual. Yet is it naïve to suggest this, is the editing process ever as transgressive and dissident as this digital software potentially allows, since the choices one makes are always restricted by, or related to, cultural definitions of beauty?

Consequently, does this modifying and editing of one's image merely demonstrate how regulated we are by social norms, and how inter-connected the virtual and material world are to the shaping of each other, whereby cyber-spaces, where we can interact with digitally modified images, simply enable us to reach normative ideals? It is questionable as to whether the "interpretative flexibility" of the technology used within the visual manifestation of digitized dysmorphia, the modified images and the dysmorphic view of self they generate provide the freedom to play with or escape labels that have been societally inscribed upon material female bodies. Does this allow for agency, expressing a more fluid, diverse or multiple form of self, or does this digitized dysmorphia simply accentuate the masquerade and disparity between digital and material realities of female bodies?

The "interpretative flexibility" of imaging software has arguably enabled individuals to take control of the "out-of-control"—the beauty standards imposed upon women—allowing for the digital reimagining of bodies and along with this the re-representation of selves, perhaps in the individual's own terms, beyond the boundaries they experience within their material bodies. Wajcman discusses technologies' "interpretative flexibility", articulating how:

technological change is a contingent and heterogeneous process. Different groups of people involved with a technology can have very different understandings of that technology, including different understandings of its technical characteristics. Thus users can radically alter the meanings and deployment of technologies. (Wajcman, 2006: 37)

Yet, the way in which these imaging apps are advertised and used by Instagram stars (people who are not famous through a traditional route but through an Instagram career) and celebrities alike, suggests that the real opportunity and possibility for control of the image often merely intensifies the desire and ability for the individual to fit their ideal self-image, based on social body norms. Digitized dysmorphia is a socially constructed condition that is enabled by digital technology, yet it stems primarily from the cultural commodification of beauty and certain types of femininity. Yet, this form of modification has been normalized almost to the point of being expected in our current beauty culture, perhaps most starkly among Instagram stars and their viewers. The repetitive societal saturation of such modified images within the media has likely normalized these aesthetics to such an extent that any mode of subversive innovation with non-traditional beautifying options was likely thwarted before these technologies even became available for public consumption.

Furthermore, one can argue that there is only so much potential for "interpretative flexibility" when certain technologies are produced with male-dominated patriarchal values, sexism and misogyny behind their creation. For example, Wajcman, (2006: 62) observes that pornography is often "designed for a predominantly male audience and reflecting their choices. Moreover, cybersex entrepreneurs were the driving force behind key technical innovations, such as interactive CD-ROM soft-ware and improved on-screen image definition". This exemplifies how the disparate power-dynamics and material resources of patriarchal and heteronormative Western society mean that while one can create a level of "interpretive flexibility" in how this technology is then used, the original intentions and marks of the makers leave traces within these technologies. Therefore, not only are we digitizing a dysmorphia bred by male-dominated patriarchal views of what women should look like, but we are also using male-dominated patriarchal technology to do so.

Similarly, Wajcman critiques the actor-network theory, a theory described by John Law as one that considers all objects, human and

non-human in the natural and social worlds, to generate and be in a continuous web of relations with each other from where they are located. Consequently, there is no reality or form for anything outside the performance of these relations (Law, 2009). Wajzman highlights an overlooked aspect of this theory in that:

it is less alert to the inevitable gendering of this process. Such approaches do not always recognize that the stabilization and standardization of technological systems necessarily involve negating the experience of those who are not standard. Networks create not merely insiders, but also outsiders, the partially enrolled, and those who refuse to be enrolled. (Wajzman, 2006: 42–43)

Through this one can posit how man and masculine as the universal, the norm and the positive to be measured against, always finds woman and feminine to be lacking, the Other, and the negative in binary opposition. All who do not fit the standard can arguably find technological systems reproducing the same social prejudices as the offline world.

One could argue that photo-editing technology in fact requires subjects who are “not standard” to mould and be fixed into standardised individuals. Yet, similarly, this technology contains the continuing dualistic nature of “interpretative flexibility” and standardization which can be evidenced through the experience of Essena O’Neill, an 18-year-old Instagram star who recently exposed the truth of her dissonant online and offline self-images and how she became consumed by social media due to the validation of self she received via followers liking her images. The “interpretative flexibility” of imaging technology and various media platforms gave O’Neill the opportunity to promote herself in a certain way, with a type of femininity that enabled her to gain publicity, sponsorships and modelling contracts. Conversely, through a complete reconstruction of her online profile, including deleting images and re-captioning those which remained, O’Neill bravely exposed the feminine standardization of these digitally modified images, articulating the reality of her constructed image and how inauthentic she felt. She was gaining sponsorship to wear certain clothes in the photos and would take photo shoots over and over again to get the right “candid” pose and position before editing selfies for hours in order to get the perfect look, a look very much based on the normative ideals generated by the fashion and beauty industries. Rather than simply leaving social media, O’Neill decided to first re-write the captions under certain images to shed light on the mental state and perception of her material, offline self behind the perfect digitalized images and through this, the online representation of self she had created.

Although the vast majority of her pictures have now been deleted, journalists and fans have copied her heartfelt truths, including a personal video uploaded to her YouTube channel exposing the reality of her media-consumed existence. One photo caption read:

Please like this photo, I put on makeup, curled my hair, tight dress, big uncomfortable jewellery ... Took over 50 shots until I got one I thought you might like, then I edited this one selfie for ages on several apps- just so I could feel some social approval from you. (BuzzFeed, 2015)

And another:

The only thing that made me feel good that day was this photo, [...] How deeply depressing. Having a toned body is not all we as human beings are capable of. (BuzzFeed, 2015)

This constant option provided by technology to alter the body’s image, where the image ultimately goes beyond the boundaries of the material body and the limitations or constraints the physical body may have, has both positive and negative repercussions on how we perceive ourselves both offline and online, which warrants further exploration. O’Neill’s broaching of the disparate nature of online and offline realities of body image reflects the notion of feminine masquerade on a highly visible level and how alienated women have arguably become from their bodies. Nowadays, one can edit their appearance of self, electing certain parts to show to online audiences, and while the technology provided to do this may appear flexible in how users consume such apps, this technology frequently emphasizes and perpetuates certain standardizations of femininity. It thus creates a digitized dysmorphia of female bodies that merely contributes to a vicious cycle of the beauty standards expected of women and the difficulty this places on the material body’s ability to resist societal norms.

“Digitized Dysmorphia” and the online and offline representations of self

While I have considered digitized dysmorphia in relation to women’s body image and the societal pressures behind the desire to attain such ideals, how may the altered image be used online? The use of image modification has been discussed in relation to O’Neill’s Instagram photos, yet the image can arguably be used within other online contexts, which warrant deliberation. Although there is an expansive array of CMC (Computer Mediated Communications) that now incorporate live video and audio, such as Skype, Webcams and Facetime, there are still dating sites such as Tinder, chat rooms and social networking sites, such as Myspace, Instagram and Facebook, that heavily rely upon the use of still-images and written text. Consequently, not only does digitized dysmorphia exclusively metamorphose based on the choices made within the editing process of an individual’s digital image, but through the way in which these modifications may influence, and ultimately alter, an individual’s online representation of self and the way people interact with them. While the use of still-images has been considered with regard to the Instagram star O’Neill, what happens when these digitally altered images are used to represent the self in the formation of online relationships? In the context of online dating sites, chat rooms and social networking sites that exclusively allow or can be used predominantly with still-images and text, 2D interaction allows users to choose to maintain an unreadable and unverifiable level of self, which is perhaps restricted and ultimately less trustworthy than the physical self and the material body language this offers. However, Whitty and Carr (2006) undertook a study that compared nonverbal offline flirting, structured on Givens’ five phases of courtship, to cyber-flirting, demonstrating how we are in fact adapting to cyber-interactions with one another, finding alternative ways to incorporate the material body into cyber-relations.

When analysing how these stages, cues and codes took place in online settings, Whitty and Carr focused on “how the body is presented in cyberspace—even if it is not one’s ‘actual’ body.” (Whitty and Carr, 2006: 30). In this sense, rather than the tangible, physical body, the way in which online users reconstruct and represent their bodies takes precedence instead,

For instance, people describe what their bodies look like and feel. Moreover, individuals have the option of selecting photographs or videos to represent their physical self—even

if this is not always photos of their actual bodies. (Whitty and Carr, 2006: 44–45)

It is interesting that Whitty and Carr point out the fact that these photos may not always be the actual material body of these individuals, yet what becomes more important within online interactions is the representation of the body, the way in which the individual desires it to be presented. The use of emoticons, laughter and bringing attention to one's attractiveness or joking with a sexual undertone were other ways of expressing nonverbal flirting cues in an online setting. Therefore, the material body is still present in its reconstructed, translated form and this is necessary in order for cyberspace flirting to occur. Whitty and Carr go so far as to state that, "the reconstruction of the body is imperative to the success of many interactions over the internet." (Whitty and Carr, 2006: 45). This suggests that whilst flirting and other online interactions have great success without the physical presence of the material body, this does not mean the material body is not incorporated and translated in some way in order for these interactions to be effective. In similar terms to Winston Churchill's well-known statement, ultimately, we shape technology and thereafter it shapes us, altering communication and ways of interacting to one another by finding alternative ways to incorporate and translate our bodies. Digitally modified images, where the user has the ability to choose their bodily representations, are perhaps just one way of achieving this.

In addition to this, Whitty and Carr found that those intentionally seeking romantic relationships by registering on online dating sites often wanted to move the online relationship offline as soon as possible in order to find out the authenticity of the individual. The analysis of research participants suggested that:

online daters do not want to waste time getting to know one another online. In fact, 65 per cent of the sample stated that they typically met their date within a week of first making contact online [...] The explanation given for meeting people so quickly included [...] a lack of trust in people's profiles, and a desire to get to know the 'real' person behind the profile as quickly as possible. (Whitty and Carr, 2006: 127).

This contrasting approach to online cyber-relations debatably proposes that depending on the individual's intentions and the cyberspaces they choose to inhabit, the way in which technology and the digitally altered image impacts upon the person's offline or online selves can be more or less pronounced. The level of digitized dysmorphia may vary depending on the intentions of the individual in performing such alterations of self-image, whereby in this instance, the ability to form a dating-profile, in which the individual knows they are within a space where they are specifically looking to impress and attract others, can lead them to go further than "showing their best side" by altering their image into an idealized version of themselves, expanding the disjuncture between body and image. The lack of trust in people's profiles equally highlights that we are implicitly aware of the potential inauthenticity of how people may choose to digitally imagine themselves online, given that online daters often look to meet in order to disprove the pre-determined assumption that their date may not be who they say they are.

Comparatively, let us once again consider how the reality of the material body can affect the online self-image presented by individuals and the reasons one may decide to digitally modify their image, dysmorphically skewing their perception of self. Conceivably, escaping the physical body through inventing cyber-identities around digitally modified images can liberate some from the realities of their anatomical, material bodies and

interactions within the physical society around them. Through examining the Instagram star O'Neill and Whitty and Carr's research on online-dating habits, one can recognize how these selves function in tandem for the individual, demonstrating how online discourses are constrained and shaped by the lived experiences of the individual within the material world and sometimes vice versa. Rather than disparate spaces, material and virtual worlds are equally fundamental to the formation of one another, having the power to influence and mould each other. Thus-far this discussion has focused on many of the negative impacts of digitized dysmorphia and merely alluded to the more liberating or subversive potentials this dysmorphia of self-image may create for users online. However, for some, the internet enables people to forge more positive relationships to themselves, as well as to others, in ways they would struggle to do in face-to-face interactions because of being shy, socially anxious or lacking social skills.

For example, when Turkle (2012) interviewed Audrey, a 16-year-old junior, within her analysis of online user activity and socializing habits, Audrey expressed how online platforms gave her the opportunity to try out certain behaviours and looks. By doing so, she could gauge the reaction of other users and therefore increase the behaviour or style, if she gained good feedback from performing herself in such a way. Likewise, when she gained negative feedback from certain behaviours and modes of self, such as when she tried being ironic or witty, she would then retreat and decrease this behaviour. Subsequently, these online platforms served as an educational tool for learning how to perform the self. Arguably, modifying an individual's look via image-technology has the potential for the same experimentation with visual identity. One can try on a new look and see what feedback they gain and whether it is the way they want to truly be perceived or not. Digitized dysmorphia is in some ways a test of how we interpret the social dysmorphia of female appearances and whether what one believes is the ideal truly suits their image.

Ultimately, this experimentation with the performance of self has a positive/negative impact for many upon their online and offline lives, where Audrey, for example, expresses how "her online avatars boost her real-life confidence" (Turkle, 2012: 192), which may be the same for those who gain positive online feedback from their modified images of self. Conversely, one must always be wary of how these online interactions can also be detrimental to self-expression, when one's creative outlet is met with cyber-bullying, misogynistic trolling or "flaming" responses. The TV movie, *CyberBully* (2011), articulates the detrimental impact this negative feedback can have upon an individual and their self-image, both in how they retreat from online interaction, but equally offline interaction too. While individuals can hide behind a screen during their communication with each other, the words can still hurt and psychologically affect those who suffer them more than the perpetrators may at first even realize, demonstrating how the online and offline realities of individuals can intermingle and produce both negative as well as positive effects. Subsequently, online is not immune to offline nor vice versa and both spaces have the potential to impact an individual and their body-image negatively or positively.

To conclude, the often standardised, homogenized, conventionally attractive, feminized body in Western society's current beauty culture has become a display piece, performing the culturally inscribed normative standards in order to be deemed an "acceptable" body. Women see their flaws, defects and imperfections and are told by the beauty industries that there is always a solution, a way to fix the female body that does not fit regulated beauty standards, but must be moulded into them. Yet, the addition of digital technology, which enables the digital modification of the image, arguably alters the already modified

Western material body further, affecting the relationship women have to their material bodies and body-image in both positive and negative ways, intensifying the disjuncture between the body and the image further. The ability to extract oneself from the physical body could be liberating for some by removing the body prejudice often experienced in everyday lives by those who do not convey an acceptable body, transcending the limits of one's physical body. However, the necessity and pressure to alter one's image only highlights how socially coerced and pressured individuals (particularly women) are to strive for a more "perfected" image of self.

The popularity of apps aimed at perfecting the body, airbrushing and erasing the raw image in exchange for an increasingly narrow, standardising perception of female beauty that excludes, marginalizes or simply overlooks differences in race, able-bodiedness and even gender identities (whereby female transgender identities are presented with restrictive forms of femininity to adhere to), emphasizes how entrenched with homogenized, Westernized and unattainable beauty standards our image-saturated culture has become. The use of these digital tools simply presents an extension and intensification of the material world's gendered aesthetic contradictions and inequalities, exposing the pressures and extent to which femininity has been commodified and how the photoshopping of models' images within the media and advertising, as well as the use of digital beauties has hyper-idealized expectations of feminine aesthetics. The playing field has been levelled by enabling widespread public access to such technology, to those who have the money or gadgets to download these apps, allowing us to compete with better odds. Yet, the reality that such competition and necessity to reach such beauty standards is becoming so entrenched as to warrant the use of digital modification, and is creating pressure not only for the physical body, but the image too, is arguably quite alarming and needs further consideration. Depending on the perspective, we suffer from, or flourish through, digitized dysmorphia, either to make the best of commonplace aesthetic oppression or to liberate oneself from the shackles of the physical body, enabling the individual to transcend the boundaries of their material bodies and the oppressive reality of unattainable beauty standards.

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Data availability

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Additional information

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