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*Editorial*

# Beyond Body Image: Youth, Embodiment, and Inequalities

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## 1. Introduction

Young people must navigate intense socio-cultural pressures related to their self-presentation and appearance. Issues connected with gendered bodily experience, embodiment, and body image are fraught and contested topics in studies of youth. This Special Issue invited contributions on topics of youth body image and its gendered and health-related implications. This Special Issue situates body image as a social and cultural, not individual, phenomenon, to extend beyond dominant pathologising approaches of body image. In doing so, this collection aims at complicating and unsettling theorisations where body image concerns are simplistically caused by a passive process of 'internalisation' or 'self-objectification', to move to a sociological understanding of embodiment and the social, cultural, and historical patterns informing how body and appearance concerns affect young people.

Below, the overarching theoretical approach to broaden understandings of youth body image is set out, followed by an overview of the papers in the collection. These are grouped under two key themes: managing gendered and racialised appearance ideals, health, and embodiment; and digital technology and social media spaces. The first theme explores how young people make sense of gendered and racialised ideals as they navigate identity and dominant ideals of health and fitness. The second theme explores how body work, digital appearance, and self-management strategies accompany young people's everyday lives in digital spaces, including managing safety and image-based sexual harassment off- and online. These articles add crucial knowledge about the current patterns informing the conditions for young people's everyday embodiments.

## 2. Beyond Body Image: Broader Understandings of Embodiment and Identity

Dominant theorisations of body image stem from psychological traditions which address it as an individual pathology. Poor body image is typically theorised through risk-based and pathologising frameworks of 'self-objectification' and 'internalisation'. Self-objectification theory understands the relationship between images and bodies as one of 'negative effects', using risk-based language ('exposure') [1]. This creates an impression that the young person (e.g., 'social media user') should receive educational intervention to deter 'use', similar to approaches aimed at mitigating drug or alcohol harms. Such studies of body image are predominantly premised upon positivist methodologies, for example, through attempting to measure exposure and effects through experimental study designs, such as self-rated surveys. These data show an association between viewing idealised social media images and 'negative effect' on young women's body image. For example, surveys have found that the use of photo editing applications can increase the acceptance of cosmetic surgery for women [2], and detrimentally impact mood and 'facial satisfaction' [3]. However, these studies do not answer why and how this context of social media images affects participants, because they do not ask them these questions, nor do they critically analyse the broader social and cultural contexts informing embodiment. Given the profound significance of digital visual cultures of self-presentation in young people's



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lives today, it is critical to investigate the social and cultural context of embodiment, and the practices and meanings related to appearance and identity undertaken by young people.

Recent feminist research in the fields of youth sociology and cultural studies focuses on the body and affect as central for understanding social and cultural phenomena [4,5]. This approach moves beyond understandings of the body as a 'blank slate' or passive receiver of social and cultural norms—the perspective which underpins most research on gendered body image. The body and social media images have been theorised as relational and affective processes of 'becoming' [6,7]. This approach addresses the social and embodied dynamics of digital practices, and understands the body as formed through intersecting modalities of practice: flesh, selfhood, and cultural context [8]. The concept of affect as embodied sensations enables the sensate dimensions mediating social relations between other bodies and images to be empirically studied through qualitative and creative methodologies [6]. Affect is significant for understanding how young people experience body and appearance norms [9], read and evaluate images, and navigate bodily appearance ideals [10].

This approach informs a framework that I have termed 'everyday embodiment' [11], which retheorises what we typically term 'body image' as formed through the socio-cultural and material conditions of everyday life. This framework includes (1) the conditions of youth as a biographical period (including patterns of education and work), (2) youth socialities including peer and family relationships and the body's centrality in modes of digital connectivity, and (3) the personal practices (body work) that they undertake to present their 'identity' and embodied self to the world.

This expanded framing takes us beyond the simplistic idea of selfies being a problem of culture acting on young people, and shaping their attitudes and self-esteem, for example, and moves us instead towards an understanding of how young people 'materialise' their bodies through a myriad of digitally and physically mediated practices. Embodiment includes a person's feelings about and appraisals of the body's appearance, including mind–body feelings and sense of self, negotiated through socio-cultural norms, and real physical sensations. This definition of embodiment covers what is typically referred to in psychological and popular understandings of 'body image', but broadens the concept beyond the negative associations which typify research on this topic. Embodiment takes in all aspects of a person's experiences as potentially significant for their experience of self and the body, including, for example, the full range of pernicious and debilitating body concerns associated with 'eating disorders', as well as the potential for ease and comfort in one's body. Embodiment is felt, sensed, and experienced bodily—it is not always a cognate experience nor is it adequately explained by rational, logical, or coded explanations. This more expansive perspective centres affect and sensate qualities of feeling to understand embodiment. Through this reframing, body concerns, for example, are understood as arising through the specific conditions and circumstances of young people's lives (patterned unequal relations of power), rather than an individually-held psychological condition.

## 3. Key Patterns of Appearance-Based Pressures: Gendered, Racialised, and Able-Bodied Norms

Young people's embodied identity (including body-related concerns, or body image) is forged in relation to prevailing gendered and racialised body ideals. These ideals are intensifying through a range of social, cultural, and structural dimensions which shape the conditions of possibility for identity and experience in young people's lives, including precarious and insecure working conditions, financial pressures, and the demands of a heavily visually focused digital culture of contemporary social media [11]. Feminist sociological work positions gendered body ideals as a key dimension in the formation of subjectivities in the postfeminist, neoliberal era [12]. In this landscape, it is 'mainly women who are called on to transform themselves' because of the importance of the body's appearance as the key locus of value in ideal feminine subjectivities ([13], p. 24). A large

body of research has looked at the norms of feminine visibility on social media platforms and how these are performed and negotiated to create visual currency around qualities like thin-ness [14]. Critiques have drawn attention to often-invisible classed and racialised dimensions of 'the ideal postfeminist subject', who is usually implicitly assumed to be from a Western cultural background, is white, young, heterosexual, able-bodied, thin, and conventionally attractive [15]. A recent study by Ringrose, Tolman, and Ragonese [16] explored how the classed and racialized contexts shaped embodiment and understandings of 'sexy femininities'. They found that the discourse of confidence is highly racialized, where the internalising of norms and technologies of "perfectibility" seemed to be 'an effect of proximity to whiteness and ideals of white femininity' ([15], p. 92). These points locate the relations of power cohering around intersecting dimensions of racialisation and dominant ideals of white subjectivity which inform embodiments and body ideals.

## 4. Body Work and Digital Appearance Pressures

The proliferating aesthetic standards of 'perfect' beauty are presented as normal and everyday in social media [17,18]. Cultural studies and sociological accounts show how this pressure manifests in self-branding as an increasingly common-sense way of negotiating social digital media [19–23]. Young people are encouraged to 'optimise' themselves and undertake body work to improve appearance as a crucial form of (gendered) self-work required in youth cultures [9]. Physical body work is also increasingly being expanded into digital forms, for example, through the rise of AI technology which now comes as standard in smartphones, or as a 'base' feature of social media apps such as Instagram and TikTok [24]. Facial editing apps such as Facetune promise professional-quality photoshopping and airbrushing editing tools, enabling a user to 'effortlessly enhance the attractiveness of their selfie'. The tools for 'perfecting' and 'improving' appearance provided by selfie-editing apps are indicative of how technological filters are intimately shaped by social and cultural norms [25]. The significance of image-editing apps for intensifying new norms and standards of perfectible femininity is an important area of focus [17,26]. Recent scholarship traces the new forms of visual literacies being produced through image-editing technologies, where young women, in particular, see themselves differently through intensified self-scrutiny, termed 'nanosurveillance' or a 'metric gaze' [12], or a 'digital forensic gaze' [27]. Further, the sense that one is not simply always available to be looked at, but through different viewpoints, suggests ever more intense and forensic forms of looking [17]. The implications of digital image-editing capacities for body–self relations are currently being explored as an important emerging area of feminist scholarship [24].

## 5. Managing Gendered and Racialised Appearance Ideals, Health, and Embodiment

The first theme in this Special Issue collection explores how young people make sense of gendered and racialised ideals as they navigate identity, and dominant ideals of health and fitness. In their article '"It Feels like You're a Stranger in Your Own Skin": Young People's Accounts of Everyday Embodiment', Octavia Calter-Dawe and Teah Ann Carlson provide an in-depth analysis of how prevailing systems of cultural privilege regulate embodiment, including processes of racialisation and gendering, as well as cisnormative, heteronormative, ableist, and healthist logics. They draw on a project which interviewed 56 young people in New Zealand and highlight the significance of bodily experiences for generating knowledge about youth wellbeing. In particular, their analysis shows how 'fleshy feelings of ease, belonging and comfort accrue unevenly along lines of privilege, settling most readily into bodies that are read as white, straight, cisgender and "healthy"' ([28], p. 1240).

Holly Thorpe and colleagues similarly provide an expanded conceptualisation and analysis of wellbeing and embodiment in their article '"If You Didn't Exercise during Lockdown, What Were You Even Doing?": Young Women, Sport, and Fitness in Pandemic Times'. Drawing on interview and creative visual data with 44 young women (16–24 years) living in Aotearoa, New Zealand, during the pandemic, they explore the varied ways the pandemic

shifted young women's relations with their own and others' moving bodies. In particular, the article illustrates how an 'affective intersectional approach' can disrupt individual-focused narratives of sports-participation metrics and deepen an understanding of the relational and community aspects informing young women's sport and fitness practices.

The article by Mihi Nemani and Holly Thorpe titled '"My Thighs Can Squash You": Young Māori and Pasifika Wāhine Celebration of Strong Brown Bodies' disrupts dominant social constructions of the 'ideal' physique for young women based on a Westernised lens that focuses on heteronormative, white, able-bodied aesthetics of beauty and femininity. Nemani and Thorpe draws upon wānanga, individual interviews, and digital diaries involving 31 young Māori and Pasifika to highlight the significance of cultural knowledge of taha hinengaro (which aligns with body pride) to challenge negative stereotypes and to frame their understandings of body image. The authors how despite young wāhine experiencing negative stereotypes and body shaming in various aspects of their lives (e.g., school or sport), they draw on taha hinengaro and culturally specific forms of body pride to embrace, and be happy with, their bodies.

Adriana Haro's article explores how young Latinx men navigated gendered embodiment through multiple relations, including sexuality, ethnicity, and place, against the dominant white heterosexual hegemonic masculine ideals in Australia. Haro draws on queer and feminist scholarship, including Munoz's [29] concept of disidentification, to show how femininities required careful management as a 'threshold' or potentially excessive quality of embodiment whilst navigating their particular identifications with masculinities as queer Latinx people. The article shows how performing gender, specifically masculinities, for Latinx men is an ongoing process of 'working and surviving' within dominant heterosexual and racialised contexts such as Australia.

## 6. Embodiment, Digital Technology, and Social Media Spaces

The second theme featuring in this Special Issue collection explores how body work, digital appearance, and self-management strategies accompany young people's everyday lives in digital spaces, including managing safety and image-based sexual harassment off- and online. The article led by Sarah MacIsaac titled '"She's Pretty in Her Pictures but in Real Life She's Ugly"' explores how secondary school students in Scotland navigated topics of body image and health. Managing tensions between their online and offline identities emerged as a key issue of concern for participants, centring particularly on navigating complex metrics of gendered capital alongside hyper-surveillance online from a range of different groups (peers, parents, and other adults). The authors highlight that young people experienced digital spaces as fraught, and that online and offline identities were not separate: 'all of the young people's engagements with social media had material consequences for them, their wellbeing, and their bodies, which ultimately affected their school experiences' ([30] p. 908).

Emma Rich's article 'A New Materialist Analysis of Health and Fitness Social Media, Gender and Body Disaffection: "You Shouldn't Compare Yourself to Anyone. . . but Everyone Does"' draws on a large-scale mixed method study of young people in England to explore the relationships between ideal images and body concerns. She develops an expanded theorisation of body disaffection as a relational phenomenon and far more multifaceted than a straightforward process of 'internalization of negative perceptions'. She provides an in-depth analysis of how and why disaffection materialises through a range of forces including discourses, bodies, digital objects, and platforms.

Anna Friedlander's article situates menstruation tracking apps alongside digital self-tracking tools, and the particularly gendered implications of menstrual tracking as part of the pursuit of idealised feminine subjectivity. Friedlander approaches menstrual tracking as a particular form of gendered body work, where health, beauty, and wellness ideals blend. Crucially, this form of self-work or body work becomes 'realised' and felt more convincingly when it is tracked through the gamified features of menstrual tracking apps: "it's a satisfying feeling when the watch vibrates and it gives you the little fireworks

and stuff" ([31], p. 698). She finds that tracking tools and their users are mutually, but asymmetrically, shaping one other. How data gathered by digital tracking tools are used is of particular concern in jurisdictions where access to abortion is restricted.

Amy Dobson and Maria Delaney's article explores parents' views on social media cultures and the gendered dynamics of sexting. Interviews with parents found that participants were more generally about the intensity of constant contact with their peers in the digital era, and the strategies for monitoring and 'policing' their online activities. They highlight particularly gendered 'attunements' of parents to signs of 'sexualisation' in the parents of teenage daughters. They highlight how gendered cultural "attunements to sexualization" are produced through the 'broader logics of neoliberal, post-digital psychopolitics to produce a kind of psycho-sexual pathologization of youth self-images'. They emphasise that for girls, 'broader cultural discourses around "sexualization" imply the public expression of any such signal as a "psychological issue" that needs attending to for the "optimization" and "healing" of souls' ([32], p. 1000). This analysis provides an incisive contemporary analysis of public concern about the intensive responsibilisation of youth around their own safety, privacy, and online self-presentation.

Emma Barker-Clarke's article 'Girls Navigating the Context of Unwanted Dick Picks: "Some Things Just Can't Be Unseen"' explores how young women in Aotearoa, New Zealand, use gendered strategies to manage digital sexual violations as a form of 'embodied safety work' where offline–online boundaries are difficult to delineate, as in MacIsaac's article in this collection. She highlights one strategy where girls must conceal their experiences with dick pics to avoid judgement or victim blaming, which amounts to a form of 'social silencing'. She shows how such cultures of silence, which disallow or discourage girls from discussing such violations, perpetuate both a broader acceptance of online sexism and the victimisation of girls.

The article 'Postdigital Bodies: Young people's experiences of Algorithmic, Tech-Facilitated Body Shaming and Image-Based Sexual Abuse during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic in England' by Jessica Ringrose and colleagues explores how young people navigated algorithmized body image and beauty ideals during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in England. They develop the concept of 'postdigital' to analyse the 'offline, affective, embodied and material dimensions of online harm, harassment and abuse' ([33], p. 1072). Interviews with young people highlighted the need for improved digital sex education, more support for victims, strategies to "educate the harasser", and better responses from both schools and social media companies to address misogynistic content and unequal gendered power relations online.

## 7. Conclusions

Together, these articles contribute vital new knowledge regarding the myriad contexts informing young people's embodiments. There is a strong focus here on destigmatising young people's practices, taking their concerns seriously, and highlighting the insidious inequalities which shape how they can live and move in the world. These articles produce in-depth examinations of how young people make sense of gendered and racialised ideals as they navigate identity, and challenge dominant ideals of health and fitness. They provide expanded understandings of the meanings and experiences of self-management including digital body work and the deeply attuned strategies that young people have developed to manage safety in the face of pervasive image-based sexual harassment off- and online. Articles re-theorise the dynamics shaping embodiment and body image as a process of 'materialisation', for example, where discourses, bodies, digital objects, and platforms inform a broader concept of how bodily 'disaffection' can emerge [34]. The concept of the postdigital [33], which highlights the entanglements between on- and offline contexts, is also crucial for understanding how embodiment, identity, and safety are simultaneously negotiated across digital and physical spaces. Future research which centres on the active dynamics of embodiment and socio-cultural contexts will enable responsive understandings of the diverse conditions of young people's lives. These articles

provide important new directions for future scholarship in youth studies to understand and respond to the dynamics of inequality shaping young people's lives.

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