Self-Tracking Health Over Time: From the Use of Instagram to Perform Optimal Health to the Protective Shield of the Digital Detox

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Abstract

Instagram and self-tracking technologies enable multiple ways to perform and represent the body and health. No research has yet explored how self-tracking technologies and self-representations of health identity on social media, in particular Instagram, influence health “sharing” online and individual health management offline. To enable a thorough investigation of how self-tracking mediations of identity construction work in practice, through a textual and thematic analysis of empirical ethnographic data from online content, reflexive diaries and semi-structured interviews with 14 participants, this research examines the use of these converged technologies to share health-related data on Instagram in the performance of optimal health identities. Participants identified pressures that arose from this continual performative identity of being a healthy role model under persistent self- and community surveillance, which also led to the development of powerful compulsions to use these technologies to document and share many aspects of health and lifestyle. Over time, the participants attempted to disengage and detox either temporarily or permanently from Instagram, to enable a protective shield from the pervasive, normalized surveillance and community practices. Most interestingly, even when they removed these technologies and platforms from their daily lives, participants still felt neglectful to their devices, to themselves, and to their communities online in their abstinence and resistance to perform optimal health practices.

Keywords

Instagram, self-tracking, identity, representation, surveillance, digital health, social media addiction, digital detox

Introduction

Social media platforms, in particular Instagram, and self-tracking technologies enable multiple ways to perform and represent the body and individual health. Using data and other visual indicators of health improvement, users share content from these devices on Instagram to perform specific healthy identities for their online communities’ gaze. Instagram users “construct their identities and simultaneously express their belonging to a certain community. Thus, performing the self is at once a private act as well as a communal and public activity” (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015, p. 8). The everyday sharing of self-tracked health and fitness-related content on Instagram for these individuals motivates commitment to personal goals through being accountable to their community, and in performance of being a health-optimizing role model for their participatory audiences. As Kristensen and Prigge (2018) recognize, “the subject doing the measuring, is also ‘delivering’ that material to be measured, interpreting the data and acting on these,” thus contributing to a continually evolving, involved, and expanding relationship with technology, the body, as well as distinguishing parameters and determinants of optimal health (p. 44).

Surveillance of the body, health, and fitness through these devices and platforms can be understood as “Self-tracking practices [that] are directed at regularly monitoring and recording, and often measuring elements of an individual’s behaviours or bodily functions” (Lupton, 2016, p. 2). Surveillance, therefore, is a practice that is at times voluntarily embodied (self-surveillance) and at times used as a

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performance for the gaze of others (peer/community surveillance). Therefore, this construction of a “data self” (Kristensen & Prigge, 2018) entails a new conception of lived experience, where the self is known through data, and the data simultaneously informs the self. These visual representations provide the ability to capture the messiness and multi-dimensional aspects of one’s health-related lifestyle behaviors into “controllable life slices” (Kristensen & Ruckenstein, 2018, p. 6). These practices of sharing personal data to achieve specific health goals is also known as “social fitness” (Lupton, 2015, p. 8). Individuals using self-tracking technologies and sharing health-related data on Instagram become both subjects and subjected; they are constructed and conceived. These often immaterial and de-corporealized representations of the body restructure users’ experience of everyday life (Ajana, 2013; Lupton, 2014; Moore & Robinson, 2016; Sherman, 2016), particularly with regard to how individual health is understood, performed, and managed in everyday life (Kent, 2018).

Much literature has speculated on how users’ engagement with self-tracking technologies fails to reflect on the process of using these technologies (Butt, 2012; Lupton, 2012, 2013; Quigley, 2013; Shahini, 2012; Swan, 2012, 2013; Waltz, 2012), particularly in regard to how sharing self-tracking data can enable specific self-representations of health and constructions of health identities on social media, and can influence health behaviors offline. Furthermore, identity research on Instagram has centered primarily around the “selfie” phenomenon (Lim, 2016; Manovich, 2016; Warfield, 2016). No research has yet explored how self-tracking technologies, and self-representations of health on social media, in particular Instagram, affect and influence health “sharing” online and health management offline. Furthermore, to enable a thorough investigation of how self-tracking mediated presentations of identity construction work in practice, this research examines their use in the context of the norms and practices of social media and wider discourses of health responsibilization and self-optimization. As Kristensen and Ruckenstein (2018) argue, within these dynamics, “Neoliberal and corporate forces are at play in terms of self-tracking; self-monitoring practices are known to accelerate self-responsibilization in terms of health and well-being” (p. 3). This article explores the many representational tools participants adopted in an attempt to perform optimal health identities on Instagram and how the surveillance and feedback from the community over time influences individual health management and decisions in their offline everyday lives. This is achieved through a detailed textual and thematic analysis of the participants’ screenshots of their shared online content, diary reflections, and semi-structured interviews over a 9-month research period. From this analysis, four key findings emerged which will be explored in this article. First, participants were motivated to track and share health-related data on Instagram to perform optimal health. The second analytical section explores the pressures that arose from this continual performed identity of a healthy role model, under constant community surveillance. In the third analytical section, the development of compulsions to using these technologies as daily companions is examined. Finally, the final analytical section identifies how over time, this led participants to disengage and detox only temporarily or permanently from Instagram, often to shield and protect themselves from community surveillance. Most interestingly, even when they removed these technologies and platforms from daily lives, they still felt a commitment and responsibility to their devices, to perform optimal health behaviors for their communities online.

**Self-Tracking Technologies and Instagram as Health Management Tools**

Different platforms shape the performance of identity in particular ways. In particular, Instagram can be conceived as a space for “for aesthetic visual communication” (Manovich, 2016, p. 11), due to the variety and types of images and content shared (Hu et al., 2014; Tifentale & Manovich, 2015). This research identifies both the qualitative and quantitative uses of self-tracking data and social media sharing as all forms and modes of self-tracking. This research defines the self-representation practices enabled through self-tracking and Instagram through the lens of Goffman’s (1959) work, which identifies self-presentation as a performance. Therefore, Instagram is defined as a performative sphere for the construction of identity including the social, cultural, and psychological aspects of behavior, through communication technologies (Jakala & Berki, 2004), which “involves the entanglement of movement [. . . placed] across temporal, geographic, electronic, and spatial dimensions” (Hjorth & Hendry, 2015, p. 1).

Much research has now explored the use of self-tracking technologies in multiple settings, such as employment and insurance schemes, in schools, within self-quantification/tracking communities, and in leisure pursuits (Ajana, 2017, 2018; Fotopoulou & O’Riordan, 2016; Goodyear et al., 2017; Kristensen & Prigge, 2018; Lupton, 2014; Moore, 2017; Moore et al., 2018; Rettberg, 2014, 2018; Ruffino, 2018; Spiller et al., 2018; Till, 2018). There is, however, a paucity of research on the use of these technologies in representations of “health” on social media, with particular reference to how these performed health identities affect users’ health behaviors in their offline daily lives. Advocacy for the use of self-tracking technologies is increasingly evident in international policy (Rich & Miah, 2017), seen to provide “cost-effective preventative solutions to rising levels of obesity, sedentary behaviour and associated non-communicable diseases” (Goodyear et al., 2017, pp. 1–2; World Health Organization, 2011). Whereas biometrics have become shadowed by a dystopian surveillant discourse (Ajana, 2012, 2013, 2018; Magnet, 2011), self-tracking technologies...
through these health promotion strategies advocated by the neoliberal states and the corporations who market their benefits have until very recently evaded such critique. Indeed, they have primarily been promoted as revolutionary tools for health betterment. Lupton (2013) articulates this as a “data utopian discourse on the possibilities and potential of big data, metricisation and algorithmic calculation for healthcare” (p. 14). In conceptualizing self-surveillance through self-representation within these digital cultures, we can understand it through participatory audiences, alongside the performance and presentation of the self (Cheng, 2004; Yee & Bailenson, 2007) through data sharing. As Kristensen and Ruckenstein (2018) argue,

Self-discovery through numbers promoted by the Quantified Self [and self-tracking practices] conforms to the model of the ideal neoliberal citizen: the self-optimising individual who voluntarily collects data on their own health and well-being, taking control of and regulating physiologies and everyday behaviour. (p. 4)

These perspectives reflect earlier research into the sociology of the body from Shilling (2005), who conceived the “commercialised body as increasingly central to people’s sense of self-identity, a shift that was associated with a corresponding change in the structure of advanced capitalist societies in the second half of the twentieth century” (p. 2). As Turner (1984) argued, these practices imbued an embodied drive toward hedonistic productive and self-regulatory consumption. Therefore, human beings’ desire to reflexively monitor aspects of our lives is not new (Rettberg, 2014). What makes self-tracking new in the context of this research is its digitization and subsequent engagement with performativity on social media. Identity formation enabled through self-representation and online communication practices are increasingly mediated and reformed through digital modes enabled by a “paradigm of mobility” (Elliot & Urry, 2010), the participatory and sharing affordances of Web 2.0, social media, and in particular, Instagram (p. 7). Self-tracking users understand the self through body consciousness; when sharing these data on Instagram, the platform can function as an “an archive in the process of becoming” (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015, p. 7). Gathering data and relationship to goals bring out digital forms and understandings of self through community and sharing on Instagram, through self-representation, self-documentation, self-improvement, and self-knowledge (Rettberg, 2014). As Mennel et al. (1992, p. 36) highlight, “the social value attached to food, health and physical beauty has risen constantly in the second half of the twentieth century,” thus blurring the ideological boundaries between “health” and “lifestyle” (Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Davies, 2016; Lewis, 2008; Moore, 2017; Shilling, 2005, 2007; Turner, 1984). Furthermore, Shilling’s (2007) research has identified how “analysts of consumer culture identified appearance, body shape and physical control as having become increasingly central to people’s sense of self identity” (p. 6). This research is concerned with the practice of knowing one’s body and “health” through using self-tracking apps and devices to self-regulate the fit and idealized “healthy” subject, as well as the promotion of such lifestyles through the comparative and competitive practices embedded within social media platforms such as Instagram. These examples and practices extend Lucivero and Prainsack’s (2015) arguments around technologies as lifestyle products, which blur the boundaries between regulated medical devices and consumer products. Not only does capturing “health” become life-stylized with these ambiguously defined devices, but so too does exercise and evidence of “health” through representations on Instagram.

Surveillance and visibility, therefore, become an integral practice of interpersonal relations within these platforms. Public and private binary distinctions are often insufficient for describing the role of social media in everyday life as they “organise relations between peers. Not only are interpersonal social ties mediated on an organisational platform, but interpersonal activity also becomes asynchronous. Peer relations become more surveillant in nature” (Trottier, 2012, p. 320). Interpersonal surveillance is considered a pervasive condition of social media. This “intervisibility” (Brighenti, 2010) ensures that interpersonal surveillance is mutual, whereby privacy violations are normalized between users through social media visibility. There is a “trade off” between managing privacy and achieving public exposure (boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Tufecki, 2008). Within these online platforms, users put on their daily lives as staged performances where they deliberately use the differentiation between private and public discursive acts to shape their identity. Each construction of self entails a strategy aimed at performing a social act or achieving a particular social goal. (van Dijck, 2013, p. 212)

Therefore, we can understand self-representation on Instagram, with the transformative use of self-tracking data, as a salient narrative of the technologically mediated life in the digital age.

From the perspectives of the research participants, the many habitual practices and processes related to the everyday sharing on Instagram led to compulsive behaviors, including the habitual surveillance of others within these networks. “Addiction” to social media, which refers to compulsions toward its use and its negative impacts on wellbeing (Lupton, 2016), is becoming a common discourse that academic literature is now attending to. For example, psychiatric research identifies social media addiction as a specific form of technology addiction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), which manifests itself in addiction-like symptoms, including salience (preoccupation with the behaviour), mood modification (performing the
behaviour to relieve or reduce aversive emotional states), tolerance (increasing engagement in the behaviour over time to attain the initial mood modifying effects), withdrawal (experiencing psycho-logical and physical discomfort when the behaviour is reduced or prohibited), conflict (putting off or neglecting social, recreational, work, educational, household and/or other activities as well as one’s own and others’ needs because of the behaviour), and relapse (unsuccessfully attempting to cut down or control the behaviour). (He et al., 2017, p. 84)

This article does not attempt to determine in psychiatric terms whether social media addiction should be an established clinical classification (He et al., 2017). However, what is of importance in this research is examining the impact and characteristics of these compulsive traits upon users’ everyday lives, and how these symptoms were in many respects similar to established addictions (Dong & Potenza, 2014). In relation to the participants’ use of Instagram and self-tracking technologies, the traits of addictive behaviors as outlined above by He et al. (2017) were exhibited by all the participants; over time, this contributed to participants digitally detoxing temporarily and sometimes quitting permanently from Instagram and self-tracking platforms.

Methodology

The aim of this research is to explore the influences of self-tracking technologies and Instagram upon self-representations of health, as well as to examine the influence of this upon offline health behaviors. To achieve this, the project undertook empirical ethnographic research over a 9-month period with 14 participants who self-selected through a call for participants on Instagram: seven women and seven men (pseudonyms used), between 26 and 49 years of age who regularly (daily/weekly) share health and fitness-related content on Instagram. Ethical approval was granted by King’s College London Research Ethics Committee (Ref: LRS-15/16-2156). These participants were located within the United Kingdom, Europe, and New Zealand, and ranged from the everyday layperson, those who were dieting or training for marathons, to those dealing with illness or disease. The content shared on Instagram came in the form of self-tracking data from applications (e.g., Map My Ride or Nike Running Club) and devices (e.g., Fitbit or the Garmin Watch), gym or fitness videos, and more general “healthy” lifestyle self-representations such as landscapes representing locations to perform health and fitness-related practices. These methods provide a unique insight and critical long-term temporal reflection on these practices from the perspective of users, which is lacking in current digital culture research.

Ethnographic methods come from the philosophical paradigm that “privileges the body as a site of knowing” (Conquergood, 2009, p. 180). This paradigm identifies that cultural meaning is created through social behaviors and interactions, highlighting the importance of the social context from and space in which the interaction and analysis takes place. Textual and thematic analysis of the online content (provided as a screenshot of daily/weekly sharing), enabled an examination of a carefully curated self-representational text of their bodies, health-related activities, and lifestyles. Analysis of the interviews and reflexive diaries enabled an examination of how participants and online communities interpreted that text through “lived experience” (McRobbie, 1992/2003), in their individual everyday lives, both online and offline. To identify these influential relationships, textual and thematic analysis was chosen as the critical method from which to examine the characteristics, content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in the participants’ written (reflexive diaries), verbal (semi-structured interviews), and visual texts (screenshots of shared content) (Bryman, 2016; Mason, 2002; Punch, 2014). Utilizing a number of methods over the 9-month period enabled the researcher to cross-reference data, to ensure that the analysis did not fall victim of providing a partial investigation of ethnographic accounts (Murphy & Kraidy, 2003). These findings were then textually analyzed to extract core themes that could be distinguished between and within the three different types of text (Bryman, 2016).

This research does not position itself as solely a “digital ethnography” (Murthy, 2008), as it perceives this term as too limiting as it can “exoticise” online data, drawing unhelpful distinctions between “online” and “offline” communications; presenting these as overtly challenging or difficult to analyze (Georgakopoulou, 2013). However, the platforms, applications, and devices in which the participants are engaging are, of course, digital. Rather than focusing in detail upon the digital platforms themselves, this research analyses the participants’ interpretations of their usage. Participants’ representations of their “health” through sharing content are contextualized through the other methodologies of semi-structured interviews and reflexive diaries. This triangulation also takes into consideration the ethnographic priority of context being an interactional achievement (Blommaert, 2007), particularly important in the context of how these practices transcend spatial and temporal boundaries, where interaction within Instagram feeds back into participants’ daily lives. This enables a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ life worlds and not just “digital slices” of their everyday (Varis, 2014). These platforms are not seen as separate contexts, detached from other “offline” spheres of life. Combining a variety of research methods over an extended period of time enabled the researcher to identify a continuity in examining the participants’ lives, contributing to a comprehensive empirical analysis which enables interrogation of the online representations, offline realities, and lived experiences of these individuals. It also provides an examination of broader online-offline dynamics, recognizing digital spaces as being entwined with the offline world.
Performing Optimal Life-Stylizations of Health on Instagram

This section will examine in depth the representational tools participants employed to perform optimal health, and will question why the life-stylization of “health” became such an effective theme in their “healthy” identity creation. For the participants, styling representations of “healthy” behaviors in locations they visited was a common practice; beautiful surroundings were “enhanced” for the participants by exercising in these locations, as well as providing a scenic backdrop for capturing and sharing content. Sharing data alone from self-tracking technologies was considered uninteresting by the participants. Therefore, they life-stylized their posts, by taking pictures of where they were exercising, in an attempt to make their behaviors more relatable to others. Feedback from the online community, related to both exercising and the picturesque setting also provided additional pleasure:

We visited the highest viewing platform in Europe so of course the first thing in my mind (other than the amazing view) was to get a pic of myself doing a handstand! This is something I am slightly obsessed about doing in special locations […] It’s partly a way of expressing my sheer delight in a yogi style about being in such beautiful and special surroundings. Reasonable amount of feedback. Some for the fact I carried out a tricky pose with my snowboard boots on and others expressing happiness for me being there and doing what I did. I was already buzzing today from everything else but the likes, feedback etc. added to my pleasure for sure :). (Tim, Diary Entry, 34, M)

Once fitness and training have been documented in a life-stylized way, and positively received by the community in the form of likes and written affirmations, this opens the representational door for other more creative ways to portray personal progress and achievements—demonstrated by Lou’s photograph, which captures an empty pathway lined by brown leaves, against a ’grey’ sky; captioned by a play on the lyrics to the famous “Californian Dreamin” song by The Mamas and the Papa’s:

Motivation for sharing—lyrics stuck in my head on the run as it was grey and a bit grim outside. Some likes of photo—which was a positive. (Lou, Diary Entry, 29, F)

Gratified by the likes received from her online community, Lou explained in her final interview that this photo was born from a desire to want to document her training in different ways and not just to share the self-tracked quantification of her runs. This image (Figure 1) captures a representation of more than the identity of a solitary isolated runner and demonstrates her love of music and the outdoors. Sometimes this desire to capture a “picturesque” running location detracted from the participants’ enjoyment of what they were actually doing. In this way, we can see the life-stylization of health occurring, as well as the collaborative aspect of individual health in these content sharing spheres. These examples and practices extend Lucivero and Prainsack’s (2015) arguments identifying these technologies as lifestyle products, which blur the boundaries between regulated medical devices and consumer products. Not only does capturing “health” become life-stylized with these ambiguously defined medical/consumer devices, but so too does exercise and evidence of “health” through representations on Instagram. “Healthy” behaviors are enacted by the individual, captured and represented, for their own benefits, as
The different types of content and self-representations shared on Instagram by the participants enabled performance of different health identities for the online community. Surveillance of other users’ Instagram accounts and sharing online affected the participants’ own health practices (Ziebland & Wyke, 2012). This voyeurism was identified as a common community practice on Instagram and was employed as a competitive and comparative tool. Achieving certain goals either individually or competitively within the community was considered “good enough” to be shared because it demonstrated individual improvement. Combining the use of Instagram and self-tracking platforms can provide a dual function for participants: users self-track, quantify, and record their health practices, as well as share and compare themselves with others, which in turn motivates and informs their health choices. As demonstrated by Sophie,

The app would tell me afterwards if you’d set a record, so you could share that on Instagram. And then there’d often be challenges as well, and you could see what your friends were doing and there’d be a leader board. (Sophie, First Interview, 31, F)

We can liken this competition to gaining recognition or positive feedback online within scoring systems of measurement, encapsulating practices of a “feedback economy” and a metrification of status (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Ajana (2013) argues that “when the body is viewed beyond its somatic and material contours, what ensues is a problematization of the very distinction between materiality and immateriality, and, with it, the distinction between the ‘material’ body and the body as information” (p. 7). When the body is viewed as a data representation, in this case, statistics (route, time, and distance) captured on a self-tracking app for a competitive running event, and then shared on Instagram, it removes individual context for those competing if their decontextualized data (“body as information”) is shared online; it becomes comparable (and at times embarrassing) to those running and documenting longer routes:

[I] did then get a bit unnerved seeing other people also training, who had run further. [. . .]. This was the first time that I had been worried by using social media and comparing myself to others. (Lou, Diary Entry, 29, F)

I was noting other people that weekend that had done the marathon and were all posting their times, I didn’t post my time because, what I shared, it was honest but there were bits that were missing because I didn’t want to admit how long it took me. I was proud of the fact that I’d done it, but I didn’t want anyone else to judge how long it took me. (Lara, Final Interview, 28, F)

Omitting her time (versus distance) statistics ensured Lara (above) could evade any potential judgment from the community, with regard to her “slow” time. The status attached to times versus distance, deemed reputable enough to “share,” ensures that any developments or times that do not fall into reputable categories are not shared online.

In this extract taken from his final interview, Fet explained in detail why he chose to include this variety of photos, constructed on “Pic-Collage” (Instagram application). Like Tim, Fet spent a lot of time photographing in creative ways what he perceived as different aspects of his identity (cycling hat, jersey, and vintage bicycle), and screenshotting his commuting route and data from his self-tracking app (Figure 2). Utilizing his technological literacy, this was an attempt to document his cycling progress in an imaginative way and to put forward a more holistic representation of identity as a “stylish” and “healthy” cyclist.

**Competition and Community Surveillance on Instagram**

The different types of content and self-representations shared on Instagram by the participants enabled performance of life-stylization of “health” includes the documentation of fitness and skill progression, as well as technological fluency. For example, Fet’s posts (below) combine self-tracking data from his “My Ride” app, with images of his cycling attire and bicycle:

I was on sitting on the train and thought “maybe I can mix my map, my time and particularly my jersey.” I’m not going to lie, I love my vintage jerseys. No one else has them. Even if I’m cycling next to someone, they always comment on the jersey. It’s nice to get, in this case, face-to-face validation of what you’re wearing. It’s cool. I guess I wanted to jazz up my post by adding these collages. And I have my post with the saying, “ride fast, die last” written on my hat, maybe a picture of my bike because I know my bike is sick. It’s a vintage bike. I just thought if I do have an audience, they might like this more. They might like to see who I am actually, rather than just seeing a picture of the map and numbers. But I never posted my face or anything. (Fet, Final Interview, 30, M)

In this extract taken from his final interview, Fet explained to “share,” ensures that any developments or times that do not fall into reputable categories are not shared online. In
turn, the “material body” (Ajana, 2013) is removed from its context. In many of the participants’ cases, sharing some content deemed too “transparent” caused embarrassment, when considering the gaze of the community. Censorship, therefore, was actively managed, either wholly or partially, based upon perceived and imagined negative judgment. Privacy, therefore, is perceived as relative (Allan, 2000), prioritized, and enacted with the awareness of imagined community surveillance for these participants. These tracked practices become a visual competitive driver, to encourage further modifications to health behaviors, creating a spreadsheet-like relationship with the body (Gregory, 2013), which is marked against others within the community.

Sharing reputable times or achievements is not always driven by wanting congratulatory feedback from the online community. While this is positively received, it becomes particularly important to receive credit from others at a comparable level of fitness or goals. This competition arguably presents the individual who has reached these fitness goals as more advanced, improved, and optimal compared to others.

Figure 2. Fett’s cycling “piccolage.”

As Goodyear et al. (2017, p. 8) identified, “peer comparison therefore, functioned as an important part of ongoing surveillance and regulation of actions” (p. 8). As demonstrated by Roy,

Middle splits came up during chats a couple times, so I decided to put one on Instagram. It’s one of those things that a lot of people have been working on, but nobody got yet. There certainly is a bit of a showing-off or competition element in sharing middle split progress [...] like look at me I’m so far ahead. (Roy, Diary Entry, 26, M)

Participants who were reaching personal targets or personal bests (PB), considered reputable enough to share, often became the object of admiration, being seen as representative of an ideal fitness standard, enacting optimal health and considered a role model by others within the community (see Figure 3). “Showing off” was not considered a negative presentation of self if in relation to something that others, or very few within the online community, had not yet achieved. Reaching these goals mitigated the self-aggrandizing post,
and often any anxiety about how it would be perceived. The balance between oversharing and “showing off” was also determined by the levels of sharing from other individuals in the community. For example, those who share do not see it as showing off, as opposed to those who do not share. The participants also explained that when it came to deciding if something was “oversharing” and thus concealed, or “showing off” (in a good way), and thus shared (if in relation to a specific practice, training, or PB), they were not overly concerned about the perceptions of the wider community. Anxiety over being perceived in the right way only centered around those who did similar practices (other yogis, weightlifters, runners etc.). A fascinating motivation to share came from Roy, when he explained how he posted to make others jealous, which he believed then motivated them:

Well I definitely post that to make people jealous. It’s not a mean kind of thing, but there is that competition element [. . .] it’s about making people jealous to motivate them. (Roy, Final Interview, 26, M)

Generally, it’s quite a selfish thing. Even if it’s saying that it’s helping others, you get all these fitness public figures that are saying they are doing it to help others but then actually I think it’s to do with themselves. (Annie, Final Interview, 28, F)

Many of the participants shared Annie’s perspective, in that self-congratulation on Instagram was always driven by a motive to show off, gain admiration and attention. Therefore, the balance between sharing (performing) and concealing is mediated through “traditions of his group or social status [that] and not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression” (Goffman, 1959, p. 39). Furthermore, showing off was also practiced and mitigated by the frequency of the participants’ posts; quality over quantity of content. As well as the judgment of posts; this competition between social media members can operate as a tool for comparable as well as unintended surveillance. For example, Lou was marathon training, and her posts were being monitored by a friend’s boyfriend through her friend’s Instagram account, as discussed in her final interview:

It was quite funny, a friend of mine; her boyfriend was also training and using my Instagram posts through her to work out if he was on track or not. I’d constantly get “oh Kev was asking how far you’d run this week. I showed him your post. It was 18 miles.” I was worried that someone else is using me as a guide, I’m like “stick to your own plan, I don’t know what I’m doing [. . .]’ I think I had one week where I dropped down, I just did a 10 mile run, and she was like ‘he’s asked why, he looks really worried.” I was like “no, no, no. My plan just had a slightly lower distance this week to then build up next week. I think it’s just to give your body a break,” and she was like now “he thinks his plan is wrong” and I was like “no, tell him not to stress. Tell him I was being lazy.” (Lou, Final Interview, 29, F)

In this instance, intriguingly, the individual who was marathon training was using his girlfriend’s Instagram account (a close friend of Lou’s), to view and track Lou’s posts as a guide for his own development. As Lou described when she tapered her runs, her friend’s boyfriend was worried his training plan was “wrong” as he considered Lou a demonstration of expertise and a role model. In turn, Lou felt she had to legitimate her shorter run, describing it as “lazy” to
her friend, so the other user did not feel anxious that his training plan was incorrect. This interaction demonstrates how, once the participants’ posts were shared on Instagram, surveillance from others extended further than their identified and authorized online community, that is, into their online communities’ extended social network, both online and offline. Surveillance, therefore, is indeterminable and not bounded within online networks or who the individual’s users allow to “follow” them. The participants acknowledged that knowing individuals within and outside of their online community were using their posts as a guide and tool for their own training practices became a real pressure. Being aware of this, the participants then felt they had to undertake certain optimal health practices and document them for the now known extended community’s gaze. As Lou identified, it did become a self-perpetuating thing of like actually now do I need to do that, so he feels that he’s on track or because of that lower week, I’m a few miles behind every week. Is that going to make him feel better? It became a bit too much. (Lou, Final Interview, 29, F)

Once Lou knew another user was using her as his training guide, Lou then felt compelled to keep tracking and sharing her runs for his benefit, to ensure he could track his developments against her. In addition, Lou ensured she included context in her posts to let others know where she was in her training plan. For example, in the screenshot (Figure 4), she details that after a 20-mile run, she will now be “tapering” to give her body a break, before the marathon in a few weeks’ time.

Simultaneously, this level of accountability to these now known and imagined communities was no longer simply a motivator for Lou, but a pressure to be the guide and motivator for others watching (see Figure 4). For fear of negative community comparison and competition, participants adopted more extreme or intense exercise behaviors (Goodyear et al., 2017, p. 8). In turn, posts were personalized to provide context for other users, with the hope that the community would similarly personalize their own training plans. Participants identified that these pressures when prolonged over months of marathon training felt distracting, and led to them at times being unable to focus on their own training plan and personal goals.

Compulsions to Share

Many of the participants described themselves as having addictive tendencies toward Instagram and self-tracking technologies. For those that did not refer to themselves as “addicts,” did indeed all demonstrate compulsive behaviors in relation to platform use. Frequently, the impulse to simply share for sharing’s sake became, for most of these participants, a daily occurrence, which evolved into an increasingly inherent desire to divulge all aspects of their lives on Instagram. The participants became “overly concerned about social media activities, driven by an uncontrollable motivation to perform the behaviour” (Turel et al., 2017 p. 84):

Figure 4. Lou “tapering” canal run.
In my head, whenever I was doing anything I was thinking [. . .] “what can I share online?” [. . .] I was obsessed. Even if it wasn’t necessarily to do with fitness, if there was an occasion or event I was thinking already: “how am I going to put this on social media.” (Sophie, Final Interview, 31, F)

Being invited to an event or making plans socially or professionally provided participants with a gratifying sense of life being busy and social, and contributing to a form of status and identity as busy professionals in contemporary digital capitalism (Wajcman, 2014). To extend Wajcman’s (2014) argument, what was of particular interest was that alongside the ability for performative self-representation, was the participants’ sense of elation in knowing such “events” enabled opportunities to capture and share such identities. Interestingly, gratification from posting at times became the dominant focus and motivation for these participants to attend events, socialize, and undertake certain activities, demonstrating the naturalized embedding of these technologies in their everyday lives (Dong & Potenza, 2014). In turn, the representation of an idealized online life captured and shared, motivated the offline and lived experiences of these individuals, interfering with and directly molding offline experience:

I was running and I would take a photo on my run of what I saw or something interesting and then I’d post it and be like “hey look what I’ve done this morning” and I was like “oh god, I haven’t seen anything interesting and I’m almost at the end, it’s going to have to be a picture of my shoe or something rubbish.” I was like “no, you’re not running to get a picture, you’re running to get the distance that you’ve done. You’re just going to have to not post anything today.” It just became a bit ridiculous. I’m freaking out, not over the fact that I’ve not run far enough, more that I’m nearly home and I’ve not got a picture. I think that made me reassess what I was doing, it shouldn’t make you that stressed. (Lou, Final Interview, 29, F)

Here, Lou reflects in her final interview, while marathon training, she became extremely concerned about capturing a scenic representation of her training runs. For many of the participants, if they were unable to capture a picturesque image while exercising, they would continue their practice to find a more visually attractive location to share. If not, they felt anxious that they were unable to document their healthy behaviors in a way the Instagram community would deem interesting or aesthetically pleasing. Exercising then, can be at times motivated by the desire to want to get a photographic representation to share on Instagram. This often replaced their sense of emotional fulfillment from achieving personal optimal health goals. Although the participants recognized these frustrations as “ridiculous” and “distracting them” from the purpose of why they were exercising, these visual defeats become a genuine source of personal disappointment. Even when training and optimal health goals were met, the lack of representation of this, interfered with their sense of pleasure and the gratification they gained from exercising (Dong & Potenza, 2014). This demonstrated how time estimates, compulsive behavior, overuse, and tolerance became justified through personal bias (Lin et al., 2015; Rau et al., 2006), toward achieving representational goals and in this case the “perfect image.” This inverted panoptic gaze adopted by many of the participants (Lupton, 2012) (the surveillance of the community surveying her) contributed to their sense of identity as an optimal healthy role model on Instagram. Checking “likes” and feedback from the community to determine if it had been positively and “correctly” received, took up large amounts of the participants’ time, often distracting them from their everyday lives:

My phones glued to my hands every night. Last night I was just checking my phone, how many likes have I got. Why does it matter if you get loads of “likes,” but you feel good or if you don’t get hardly any [you don’t feel good]? It just becomes obsessive. (Sophie, Diary Entry, 31, F)

Alter (2017) argues that neoliberal and developed societies hold an expectation of convenience, which has “weaponised temptation.” These research findings identify the use of self-tracking technologies and social media as such tools of temptation. As Nafus and Neff (2016) argue: “every time we glance at our smartphones to see how many steps we have taken is an opportunity to ask questions about how we want to make sense of our worlds” (p. 188). This research challenges such an assumption. None of the participants could identify why the habitual and addictive nature of checking their phones was such a pervasive compulsive practice in their everyday lives:

I did get distracted by yoga photos on Instagram—still haven’t done any yoga as a result of scrolling. Feel I need to put boundaries on my time I scroll. (Lara, Diary Entry, 28, F)

I do get the aimless scrolling thing. Sometimes I get locked into it. (Annie, Final Interview, 28, F)

I felt the need to stop sharing because I was getting more and more drawn into my devices. (Fet, Diary Entry, 30, M)

Scrolling similar accounts were common practice for Instagram users. It frequently diverted the participants’ attention, drawing them into a compulsive surveillance practice, at times distracting them from personal goals. The obsessive yet mesmerizing practice of surveillance of others on Instagram held within its own process the same compulsive traits of sharing the participants’ own lives. The only way participants felt they could reject the compulsive “hold” these practices had over their lives was to “detox,” which referred to deleting the platform for a period of time or quitting altogether.
Digital Detoxing

This final section examines the reasons behind the participants’ shifting social media practices over time, in consideration of their increasing moves toward digital detoxing and final decisions to quit altogether. A key motivation for the participants to detox and “break” from these platforms was when life was becoming too busy or stressful. This motivation was twofold. First, when individual lives were stressful this often took time away from being able to enact healthy behaviors such as eating well and going to the gym. Second, when personal and/or professional life was demanding, they felt they could not contribute to optimal representations of “healthy” lives or view others doing so on Instagram as this contributed to feelings of comparative anxiety, inadequacy and personal disempowerment. This negatively affected their sense of optimal health identity:

At the beginning of this year, I had a bit of a breakdown and I just couldn’t really cope with anything, so I’ve come off social media. (Annie, Final Interview, 28, F)

I guess I felt that my daily commute is stressful enough to add another thing to it. I just felt I had had enough and no longer wanted to be burdened by it. As someone who now rarely shares anything online, I feel good because I no longer feel any pressure to post. (Fet, Diary Entry, 30, M)

These extracts demonstrate both the seductive and persuasive nature of these technologies as well as the labor-intensive aspect of maintaining the representation of a an optimal “healthy” lifestyle. Looking to the future, all the participants saw themselves continuing with their “health” and fitness practices but were unsure if they would use self-tracking devices to capture these practices or Instagram to document them. Participants who had “detoxed” from these platforms were motivated to do so as they felt their use was damaging their mental health but struggled with abstaining due to their previous habitual use. Interestingly, this was due to feelings of neglect toward the devices and platforms, as well as their online communities:

I still feel guilt sometimes […] If I do a post, nothing really gets commented on but when I used to do it tonnes of people would tune in. I still feel like a let-down to people. (Annie, Final Interview, 28, F)

As Annie demonstrates here, participants who felt that they missed sharing their lives online and missed these connections, often felt a responsibility toward them. This responsibility manifested as a desire to keep others online updated about individual life events (“health”-related or not). Expected sharing within the community was an embodied pressure, as Annie’s example (above) highlights. Interestingly, these feelings are still prevalent even when social media or self-tracking is identified as a being detrimental to the participants’ mental health.

Discussion

This article has examined how users of self-tracking technologies and Instagram share representations of optimal health, including the role of community surveillance in influencing their health management practices offline. Different health identities are constructed and performed with consideration to social media community norms and etiquettes, which changed and shifted during the research period, in line with participants’ own changing personal circumstances. Balancing considerations of sharing for support or motivation, to be a role model or in avoidance of oversharing, the participants performed most of their practices with the view to represent an optimal healthy body. Gratification was felt when positive feedback is received from the community, which motivates further “healthy” practices and sharing, but over time, being the object of others’ gaze, comes with pressures, which in turn can distract the user from personal goals. Community surveillance, in the form of feedback on posts, ensured the participants’ representations of their “health” become collaborative, as well as competitive and comparative. If self-censorship is not appropriately maintained, the sharing of certain health practices is perceived (whether real or imagined) by the wider community in a critical light as “oversharing” (Kent, 2018, p. 67) and associated with attention-seeking gratification. Competition and comparison are meaningless “unless there is not only some sense of equivalence amongst those deemed to be competitors, but also some outlet for contingent differences to be represented” (Davies, 2015, p. 57). Friendly surveillance and comparison online were appreciated by many of the participants. Being used as a training guide, or role model made it challenging to focus on themselves; participants were frequently concerned with how others were perceiving them.

Initially, for all participants, using self-tracking technologies and sharing health-related content on Instagram was a habitual everyday practice, integral to their daily routine, inseparable from the offline world. Therefore, when the participants chose not to share or use certain platforms and wanted to detox digitally, these platforms were conceived as spaces which had to be physically stepped away from; highlighting the pervasiveness of these interpersonal and surveillance relationships (Trottier, 2012), and the dominant role these technologies played in their daily lives. This resistance to technology was achieved by some of the participants, but they often had to reframe their resistance in medical terms to legitimate their “detox”; “just quitting” was not a discourse any of them employed, rather they described abstinence as “giving up,” “quitting” or going “cold turkey.” The participants frequently recognized this digital detoxing as a challenge for the benefit of their mental health, but also as something that was an internal negotiation and often an internal contention, pulling at their compulsions toward using it.

Aside from participants’ compulsive traits and behaviors, what is also worth noting, from the perspective of the social sciences, psychiatry, and the medical humanities, is the challenge of identifying the boundaries that constitute such
“addictions” (Turel et al., 2011). Another challenge for researchers is that the appropriate language and clinical terminology used to describe these behaviors and neuro-physiological states is not agreed upon (Lortie & Guitton, 2013). The distinction between an addiction (the indulgence of which brings pleasure) and a compulsion (the indulgence of which merely brings relief from restless anxiety) (Alter, 2017), for example, blurs linguistic and psychiatric boundaries with the use of these technologies. In digital societies, it has arguably become culturally assumed and somewhat expected that for many, checking our devices and engagement with social media has become compulsive. To put it in one of the participant’s terms, “we are phone people” (Sophie, Diary Entry, 31, F). Therefore, these findings contradict Nafus and Neff’s (2016) proposition that many self-trackers use data to create new healthy habits, as for these participants, they stoked new anxieties, which were often detrimental to the participants’ mental and physical health. This manifested itself as participants comparing themselves to others’ behaviors or exercise routines. Although community surveillance is a key motivator, over time, this simultaneously comes not only with gratifying rewards, but with complications, contradictions, and pressures generated through being the object of the communities’ gaze. Due to their seductive entanglements with the technology, participants were frequently distracted from personal goals, personal gratification, and perhaps most worryingly, personal experience.

These technologies became addictive companions and extensions of participants’ physicality, attached to their being while emotionally and technologically mediating everyday lives and individual identities. Not knowing why, they returned to check feedback, participants were still seduced by the socio-technological affordances of Instagram. Not posting then, can be seen as indicative of the participants’ attempts at enabling privacy, protectively shielding themselves from surveillance online, needing personal time and space away from Instagram, particularly during challenging times of their lives. The continual self-regulation needed to self-track, capture, document, and share became an exhausting process for all the participants at some point during the research period. Interestingly, even though the participants recognized that many users must feel this way, those that did detox temporarily or quit altogether, embodied feelings of being unique. Guilt associated with not sharing is not (as one might expect) diminished through the realization that using these technologies, both tracking and sharing, negatively affects one’s sense of self and health identity. These technologies then, hold persuasive and influential power over users’ lives, for even when they are resisted and no longer used, users still feel a duty toward their integration in their everyday life.

**Limitations and Further Research**

A limitation of this research could be conceived in terms of the relatively small number of participants (14) who took part in the research. However, this research was concerned with analyzing in detail the practices and processes of using Instagram and self-tracking technologies in self-representations and the individual management of “health.” Therefore, the triangulated methods provided a great depth of insight and analysis, and to apply the same methods of data capture to more participants would have produced an unviable amount of empirical data to analyze within the scope of this research project. When considering future research avenues, it is worth recognizing the utility of accessing user insights and practices through the specific ethnographic methodologies used in this research which could similarly be adopted for further investigation of (social) platforms from a user perspective. The triangulation of the methodological approaches and, in particular, the inclusion of the under-used method of reflexive diaries enabled attention to be usefully drawn to the private minds of the users, in combination with the capture of online data to gather text from which to draw reflections, while contextualizing findings through semi-structured interviews. This enabled attention to be drawn to the critical and long-term temporal reflection on these user practices, as well as personal insights for the research participants, providing empirical research currently missing from digital cultures literature.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by the European Research Council as part of the “Ego-Media” project held at King’s College London: http://www.ego-media.org/

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