Rethinking digital media literacy to address body dissatisfaction in schools: Lessons from feminist new materialisms

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Abstract
The increasing prevalence of body dissatisfaction among young people is now well recognised with much of the existing literature making connections between media imagery and body dissatisfaction. Media literacy-based interventions continue to be rolled out in schools across the global north in an attempt to prevent body dissatisfaction. However, the pervasiveness of digital media in young people’s lives has prompted questions about the adequacy of current theories of media literacy and associated school-based interventions. We explore how feminist theories focused on the affective, material and more-than-human offer different insights into new digital configurations of agency and mediated learning. We reflect on this potential through analysing empirical data from a study involving arts-based workshops in two schools in the South West of England. Our focus on affect and agency as relational and entangled has important implications for theory and practice in school-based body image programmes and media literacy approaches.

Keywords
Body image, body pedagogy, digital technologies, media literacy, new materialism

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Introduction

It is estimated that between 25% and 61% of adolescents experience body dissatisfaction (Al Sabbah et al., 2009), with body dissatisfaction often framed as risk factor for other health problems (Diedrichs et al., 2020). Over the last decade, literature has examined the relationship between levels of media literacy and body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Levine and Kelly, 2012; Levine and Murnen, 2009; McLean et al., 2016a, 2016b; Rodgers et al., 2019). This literature explores the impact that distorted and unrealistic media images can have on young peoples’ embodied subjectivities. In response to this body of research, various media literacy interventions have been rolled out in schools across the Global North with the good intentions of enhancing young people’s ‘literacy’ and reducing their vulnerability to distorted and negative media images of the body. Critical media literacy approaches often seek to ‘empower’ young people to evaluate, critique and create alternative media and hence they rely heavily upon individualised notions of agency in conceptualising learning.

Many of these interventions have provided important steps in helping young people develop more critical engagements with the pervasive imagery of the ideal body, particularly those who might be deeply troubled by weight-centric imperatives circulating in these media. However, in this article, we offer two critical points in developing a different conceptual approach. First, we argue that these interventions are enacted as forms of ‘governance’, or rather using the language of Ringrose’s (2013: 9) more affective conceptualisation, as a ‘key technology’, which tasks the individual with the responsibility of equipping themselves with literacy skills and competencies to ‘resist’ contemporary media imagery. Second, we question the adequacy of the theoretical assumptions that underpin media interventions in terms of the affective and material relations of learning in the digital era. The impact of new digital media on body dissatisfaction is far reaching, but existing conceptualisations of media literacy and their accompanying school-based interventions fail to adequately foreground young people’s entanglement with these new media configurations (Mendes et al., 2019). In response, this article aims to contribute to the literature on media use and body dissatisfaction by drawing upon feminist theories of affect and materiality to explore the complexities of young people’s engagement with digital media and new pedagogic approaches in schools. We argue that questions concerning the affective relations shaping young people’s media use are yet to be explored as a means of reimagining individualised body image programmes. As such, our position is not that there is no place for media literacy. We use the term literacy and engage conversation about how to advance ‘media literacy agendas’ in policy and education. However, we simultaneously remain critical of the humanist assumptions about the subject inherent in this concept. The term media literacy is used throughout so we can engage in these conversations while staying committed to advancing an understanding of mediated learning as an affective, relational process.

Key to our understanding of media, learning and body dissatisfaction is the concept of affect. Over the last decade the ‘turn to affect’ has been evident in pedagogical and media research that acknowledges the limitations of privileging rational, cognitive, and human centred processes (Massumi, 2002). While there are numerous ways in which to conceptualise affect, much of the work in this area draws substantively on the work of
Deleuze (1994) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Hickey Moody (2013: 79) employs Deleuze and Guattari to describe affect as ‘what moves us’, ‘a hunch’, and ‘a visceral prompt’. We draw upon this theorisation of affect as a means to expand our pedagogical enquiry to include what Ellsworth (2005: 25) suggests are those ‘opportunities and capacities to encounter the limits of thinking and knowing and to engage with what cannot, solely through cognition, be known’. Affect as a conceptual resource (Gregg et al., 2010) enables us to move beyond normative ideas of body pedagogy and body dissatisfaction as problems of faulty thinking or information dissemination, to focus on the process of learning about and through bodies that materialise through dynamic visual and visceral digital cultures. We use the term body disaffection from here on out to signal our departure from individualised understandings of body dissatisfaction or ‘body image’. As a relational concept, body disaffection includes a broad range of experiences of discomfort with the body that come to matter beyond particular behaviours/feelings/statements captured by a set of diagnostic criteria for ‘poor body image’. We endeavour to conceptualise experiences of body disaffection not as a ‘problem’ of the individual, and instead as produced through material-discursive relations that are felt.

The limitations of media literacy approaches to body dissatisfaction

Livingstone and colleagues’ work has significantly contributed to the advancement of media literacy approaches while critically engaging with the field and very concept itself (Livingstone, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2009, 2014; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006, 2010). Our aims are similar in critically considering how media literacy pedagogies can support school-based approaches to addressing body dissatisfaction. While conceptualisations vary, Livingstone (2004: 5) highlights the most widely adopted definition:

Media literacy – indeed literacy more generally – is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993; Christ and Potter, 1998). These four components – access, analysis, evaluation, and content creation – together constitute a skills-based approach to media literacy.

We question what becomes obscured when we conceptualise media engagement (and body dissatisfaction) only in terms of critical literacy skills. It is now over a decade since Livingstone (2008) urged researchers to explore the assumptions inherent in framing media engagement in terms of literacy. She advances this case by asking if the concept literacy does the critical work we require of it, or whether it risks leaving traditional inequalities unchallenged?

These questions are important in relation to the growing variety of school-based body image prevention initiatives that have developed over the last decade. Turning to the context of the study in this article, in the United Kingdom this has included examples like the BeReal ‘Body Confidence Toolkit’, Dove’s ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’, Dove’s work with the World Association for Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, ‘Free Being Me’, or the similar ‘True to Me’ for youth groups outside of Girl Guides, ‘The Body Project’ and ‘SUCCEED’. Typically, body image programmes have tended to adopt psychologised,
‘cognitive’, understandings of an agentic individual who can separate themselves from the world around them (Wright and Leahy, 2016). When someone is said to have poor body image, the implied meaning is that how they view their body is in some way flawed, incorrect or negative. Increasingly, however, advertising, media, and the saturation of imagery online that provides ‘unrealistic’ representations of the body are recognised as a significant influence. While body image programmes typically blend a variety of psycho-educational approaches, media literacy pedagogy has been identified as the most common approach in popular school-based programmes aiming to address body dissatisfaction (Yager et al., 2013).

Many body image programmes have progressed to place greater weighting on societal pressures. This includes some of those programmes mentioned above, such as the work with young people by The Centre for Appearance Research and Dove, that includes measures to assess sociocultural appearance pressures (Bird et al., 2013; Diedrichs et al., 2020), or draws more broadly on conceptualisations that emphasise factors beyond the individual (e.g. bio-psycho-social models) (Lacroix et al., 2020). While the above examples do demonstrate positive progress within the field, we share the concerns of Wright and Leahy (2016) who remain critical of dominant deployments of media literacy in body image programmes. Body dissatisfaction is still typically posited as a ‘problem’ of the individual and solutions are framed in this way. These approaches rely on the assumption of a ‘rational’ young person, who, through self-determination and the development of a series of literacies can learn to resist potentially damaging media images and messages. We extend LaMarre et al.’s (2017) critique of cognitive dissonance based approaches to argue that the ability to espouse critique and ‘literacy’ surrounding media does not automatically map onto the ability to resist the affective desires that can arise in media entanglements.

We argue that those media literacy approaches looking to address the highly affective issue of body dissatisfaction need to recognise the powerful negative and pleasurable affects that can be produced in intra-actions with the visually normative, regardless of an individual’s ‘literacy’ (Frith et al., 2014; Raisborough, 2014). Our central claim here is that critical media literacy does not provide immunity against affects produced through engagements with the visual. Digital media certainly recognises, and capitalises from, the very real power of such affects (Carah, 2014; Carah and Dobson, 2016), and so it is a matter of urgency that media literacy approaches begin to address these dynamics.

New materialist perspectives on learning, affect and media

In critically examining these approaches, we look to rethink the underlying pedagogical assumptions made about learning through engaging media. To do so we draw on relational theories of pedagogy as embodied, affective, and material. We recognise that all pedagogical activity can be conceptualised as ‘embodied’ (Shilling, 2005) and as an affective process (see Probyn, 2004). Our focus here is not just the presence of bodies in the pedagogical moment, but of what is being ‘taught’ about practices of the body. As such, we are concerned with debates surrounding modes of teaching and learning that involve body practices (such as, physical activity, eating, etc.), otherwise known as body pedagogy (Rich and Evans, 2007: 41):
**Body pedagogies** refer to any conscious activity taken by people, organisations or the state that are designed to enhance individuals’ understandings of their own and others’ corporeality. Occurring over multiple sites of practice, in and outside schools, they define the significance, value and potential of the body in time, place and space.

Sociologists of the body and physical education conceptualise such processes as ‘body pedagogies’ (Evans et al., 2008), which occur through learning in both formal spaces such as schooling, but also beyond as part of the more ‘general forms of body pedagogics’ (Shilling, 2010: 151). According to Evans et al. (2008: 84) such body pedagogies ‘foster particular corporeal orientations to one’s own and others’ bodies in time, place and space’.

Relational understandings shift conceptualisations of pedagogy, and body pedagogy, away from broad definitions that often assume individuated subjects, or frame pedagogy as an act of information ‘transmission’ (Burdick and Sandlin, 2013). While education researchers have emphasised pedagogy as a process of transformation (Gaztambide-Fernández and Arráiz Matute, 2014), meaning making (Savage, 2010, 2014) and becoming (Ellsworth, 2005), they largely remain confined to an imaginary of individuated humanist subjects that ‘inter-act’ with each other or inert objects. It has been more recent feminist work across education, gender and media that has theorised the significance of affective relations and the non-human, such as digital devices, in the highly visual dynamics of learning (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016).

To advance a more nuanced understanding we draw upon Barad’s (2007) contribution to feminist new materialist thinking through the relational concept of ‘intra-action’. The term ‘new materialism’ includes a broad range of approaches that draw on, revisit, extend or are inspired by theories that pay attention to the significance of matter. A key contribution of new materialist thought has been the consideration of bodies, things, ideas and social formations as relational phenomena that are ‘mutually constituted’ (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2018, p. 469). The Baradian concept of intra-action moves beyond constructionist assumptions about pre-existing human subjects interacting and influencing each other (and non-human objects), in favour of an ontological understanding of all phenomena (human and non-human) as co-constituted ‘by each “agential cut” into, and out of, the indeterminacy of matter’ (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2018: 469). Through employing Barad’s agential realism, we move beyond understanding pedagogy as an ‘inter-action’ between pre-existing phenomena (subjects and their/other bodies, subjects and digital devices, platforms, images). Rather, we extend the work on body pedagogy to consider how learning about and through bodies is produced via multiple ‘intra-actions’, that are formal (school) and informal (social media), and that produce material-discursive phenomena, such as body dissatisfaction. Eating distress, troubled relationships with one’s body and digitally mediated learning practices are entangled in the phenomena of body dissatisfaction as it emerges and become intelligible within the materiality of young people’s everyday lives. In this sense, conceptualising body pedagogy as an ‘intra-action’ allows us to explore some of the micro-political complexities of how young people come to be through entangled and affective learning experiences across schooling, engagements with media, etc.
Media literacy, affect and body disaffection

The media literacy pedagogy that forms part of school-based body image prevention often relies on the assumption that media ‘interacts’ and has an effect on agentic learners who, with the right rational knowledge, can choose to resist negative messages. In contrast, we draw on feminist media studies work that conceptualises bodies, rather than simply minds, as ‘becoming’ through their relations with images (Coleman, 2008; Featherstone, 2010). Coleman (2008: 169) argues that these ‘relations between bodies and images produce particular affects, some of which – like ‘feeling bad’ – might be limiting to the becoming of bodies’. This perspective recognises the materiality of media images as they intra-act with bodies in particular ways that can open up or close off capacities to act. Focusing on how affects can limit or enable the agential capacities of becoming bodies challenges ‘media effects’ theories and offers a more relational understanding of what media and bodies ‘do’ together in learning processes.

Visual media, and the increasing complexity of new digital media, further highlight the need for more nuanced understandings of pedagogy in media literacy approaches to body disaffection. Our empirical analysis explores how body disaffection is mediated in particular ways within digital cultures, particularly the increasingly pervasive image based ‘social media’ being used by an increasing number of young people to learn about the body and health (see Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Rich, 2019). One of the new features emerging in these digital spaces is ‘algorithmic media’ (Carah, 2014), whereby social media has built in algorithms that tailor content to characteristics such as a user’s likes, interests, or previous searches. Rich (2019) found that algorithmics and their associated human practices (e.g. liking, sharing) led to young people exposed to images which classify and hierarchize bodies. Algorithmic social media platforms also serve to complicate our understandings of photo manipulation as filters have become integrated, targeted, commonplace features of advertising, shopping, communication, tourism and leisure practices online in ways that are both subtle and hyper-obvious or ironic (Hawker and Carah, 2020). In providing young people with guidance/support in navigating this rapidly changing terrain, there is a need for further nuancing ideas of agency and recognising that ‘gendered apparatuses of bodily production’ limit ‘potential expressions of self’ (Warfield, 2016: 4; Dobson, 2018). In acknowledging photo manipulation as an increasingly commonplace feature of our online/offline lives, we may look towards media literacy that focuses not only on identifying/discouraging edited images but that explores how we can foster the conditions for a broader range of affirming expressions of the self to be encouraged on/offline.

As a result of the increasing complexity of digital media, media literacy approaches that encourage young people to rationally critique what can be articulated, seen, and separated from the self may provide little guidance in navigating entanglements with these aspects of new media. We explore how body disaffection encompasses sensations and feelings of embodied discomfort that cannot always be clearly articulated or ‘known’ through language, or self-consciously separated from preoccupations with normative identities. Our affective conceptualisation that understands body disaffection as produced relationally, rather than as a cognitive event, pushes us to re-think how agency and learning are framed in media literacy approaches that form part of body image programmes.
Methodology

The below empirical data originate from the lead author’s PhD ethnographic fieldwork, carried out between January and June of 2018. The study received ethical clearance through the University of Bath’s REACH Ethics Committee. The PhD research involved working with the students and teachers of two schools in the South West of England to evaluate current pedagogical responses to body disaffection and co-create alternatives. The two schools that participated in the research, Henham and Rushford, were situated within different educational contexts. Henham is a large mixed gender state school that forms part of an academy trust. Rushford is a single gender fee-paying school ‘for girls’. The qualitative research conducted with these schools involved developing and delivering 39 workshops, conducting 11 staff interviews, 5 student focus groups and facilitating a 5-week creative project over lunchtimes in one of the schools. The co-creative element involved collecting feedback from students (feedback forms after each lesson in one school, Rushford) and teachers (through email, meetings and forms across both schools) after each workshop as part of informing the approach, content and style of the following workshop. The level of feedback and ‘co-creation’ varied across the two schools. In Rushford, it was possible for the lead author to facilitate workshops and therefore be more responsive to what emerged through working with students in these sessions. In Henham, nine tutors facilitated the workshops, however, the lead author was able to move around classrooms observing the workshops and could communicate with the teachers after class and over email to gather feedback. This co-creative element shaped the focus of the research project and this writing, as students’ and teachers’ reactions and engagement with planned activities/content surrounding body dissatisfaction and media challenged our assumptions and nuanced our thinking surrounding these issues. The majority of below data extracts are taken from the student focus groups that were conducted after the workshops in both schools. The student focus groups in both schools were conducted with approximately eight young people per focus group. The teachers selected the young people included in these focus groups. Demographic information was not collected as part of these focus groups, but the groups were majority white and the young people were between 11 and 13 years of age. A semi-structured interview schedule that asked the young people about body disaffection, and the teaching and learning they received in relation to such topics, was used to guide the focus groups.

This analysis was conducted with a new materialist, post-qualitative sensibility. New materialist theory allowed us to rethink (positivist) quality criteria in research. Rather than coding for themes, we favoured the analytic approach of ‘thinking with theory’, as outlined by Jackson and Mazzei (2012). By thinking with new materialist theory we enact specific assumptions about ‘data, voice, and truth’ (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013: 262). In line with our post-qualitative commitments (Fullagar, 2017), adopting a ‘thinking with theory’ approach refuses the primacy of voice itself in favour of exploring what voices do and how they have material effects (Fullagar et al., 2019).

We approached the data with the following analytical questions informed by new materialist thought:
• How does body disaffection arise in young people’s everyday intra-actions with media and what role do media literacy pedagogies play in these intra-actions?
• How can media literacy pedagogies benefit from feminist materialist and affect theories?

Producing data for inclusion in the article involved attuning to affective ‘glow’ moments. This was opposed to ‘approaching the data in search of patterns or themes’ or by trying to figure out what the participants in the study ‘mean’ (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013: 265). In doing so, we adopted a ‘visceral orientation to listening’ (Fullagar et al., 2019: 38). Blackman (2015: 28, emphasis in original) describes this as paying attention to a statement’s ‘liveliness’. When reading the data, guided by our analytic questions, we tried to shift focus from ‘what was being said’ to being attuned to the affects and effects produced in intra-actions. This was a very productive approach when engaging the data set as there were inchoate affective ‘glow’ moments that were of significance in relation to our analytic questions but resisted grouping within larger themes. Affect has the power to disrupt narratives and move both researchers and participants in unexpected ways. Our emergent researcher subjectivities, albeit with differing positionalities as PhD candidate and supervisors, were implicated in the process of producing ‘glow’ moments and making cuts surrounding which data would be included in the thesis and this article. This ‘thinking with theory’ approach (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013: 265) allowed for an analysis that moved beyond what was being said by individuals, to what was being done (by affective, material, discursive, human and non-human forces) when considering young people’s engagements with media.

**Media literacy and affective learning**

The first focus group with the Year 8 girls at Rushford school created a space for discussion about some of the media literacy pedagogies they engaged with at school. These included videos and materials from some of the popular ‘body image programmes’ offered to UK schools. We traced the affects that became felt through our engagement with the below data extract to explore how watching these videos can act as powerful pedagogical moments, although not always in the ways intended.

Karina: Didn’t they show that to us in PSHE like last year or something like that.
Many: Oh Yeah.
Daisy: The models, they said she was like really fat and then they cropped her to like really thin?
Karina: And like a Dove product, a product? A project? Eh? Dove product or something . . . Eh ya they put the Dove on it, but they are like covered in makeup and they did their hair all like.
Hattie: And it’s like, it looks so natural and so real and then you sort of see it on the side and you think why am I not that skinny?
Yeah! (Laughter)
Hattie: And then you’re sort of walking about thinking and then they’re . . . there! There . . . I feel really uncomfortable today . . . and that’s another thing that makes people go anorexic and
Although the video that the girls speak of was shown as part of critical pedagogy surrounding photoshop, a frisson of powerful and unexpected affects emerged in the girls’ intra-action with the imagery (‘it looks so natural and so real’). The media literacy approach assumed a rational agentic learner who could separate herself from her body and dominant representations of the feminine in order to produce critique. However, as young people become through their relations with imagery (Coleman, 2008; Featherstone, 2010), this intra-action brought the visibility of their embodiment into sharp focus for the purposes of comparison (‘and then you sort of see it on the side and you think why am I not that skinny?’). Rather than adopting a detached critical mindset, through their relations with the imagery the young people were affectively engaged in learning about how different bodies are valued in the world. Such insights highlight the limitations of media literacy approaches to body disaffection which rely only on cognitive notions of ‘media effects’ and demonstrate the need for engaging media as an embodied affective learning process (Rich, 2019).

Many young people can offer rational critique and awareness that popular images are photoshopped, but this is not the same as producing capacity to move outside of entanglements of desire with these images. There is increasing recognition that simply learning about photoshop does not decrease desire or disaffection (Devon, 2020; Rich, 2019). The affective intensity of the below data extract drew us to explore the value of such media literacy pedagogy surrounding photo manipulation within the context of body disaffection prevention:

Daisy: Things is like, ehm like, I know that things are like being like photoshopped and stuff, but it’s just like that thing like oh do I actually, like, I want to be like her but I just know it’s photoshopped, so like yeah.

( . . .)

Hattie: Ya, why, why isn’t that me?

Regardless of whether a photo is ‘real’ or ‘fake’, the materialised affects we sense from the data produced with Daisy and Hattie are powerful. One can be aware that ‘things are like being like photoshopped and stuff’ and yet experience a sense of desire in intra-action with the visually normative. Media literacy pedagogy expects young people to critically dissect individual images and subsequently ‘block out’ negative messaging. This can be made even harder for young people by algorithmic digital medias that frequently feature and centre ‘productions of visual and affective hotness’ (Carah and Dobson, 2016: 1) in ways that can make them unavoidable:

Hattie: If you go on to the camera part of snapchat and then swipe right there’s just loads of different stories and stuff of just like random people and some of them you just like don’t want to see because there’s like ladies in bikinis and stuff . . .

Daisy: Oh the stories!

The interactive, pervasive and social features of new media require different approaches to supporting young people with learning about and through the multiplicity of mediated bodies, given the highly normative and entangled relations with digital
media in everyday life. Research has identified how avoiding forms of mediated connection increasingly feels like less of a viable option (Goodyear et al., 2021; Hardey and Atkinson, 2018). The constant onslaught of imagery young people engage through these sites makes critically dissecting, separating oneself from, and rejecting every image very difficult. The affective dimensions of intra-acting with the visual are highly significant as they are implicated in young people’s process of becoming in less conscious ways (‘why, why isn’t that me?’). Through our engagements with the data, we understood that current critical media literacy approaches were not sufficient in addressing the complexity of young people’s entangled experiences of mental health and engaging media.

Jessie: I wish we had more classes on not just recognising photoshop and airbrush is there, but that we should be doing, helping each other to get our mental health up, better.
Many: yeah.
Jessie: Cause it’s all well and good just saying oh it’s photoshopped don’t worry it’s, it’s not real, but when like, I think we can all say that when we’ve been going through like Instagram or something, when we look at like uh a photo of a girl, we don’t think oh! Airbrush! We think like Kate said ‘she’s really pretty’, so I think that we should be doing more things to eh kind of improve our mental health instead of just the awareness of . . .

The focus group enabled some of the frustrations and limitations surrounding the media literacy pedagogy that is a central feature of many schools’ approach to body disaffection prevention to surface. From reading the above data, we understand that the participants at Rushford had engaged a video clip that forms part of the media literacy session of a popular body image programme in the UK (Bird et al., 2013). The young people had therefore engaged learning intended to make them more ‘media literate’ and we understand that many were indeed able to perform awareness and critique surrounding practices like photo manipulation. In re-reading the data produced with Jessie, we get a sense that this ‘awareness’ represented little threat to the forces shaping young people’s experiences of mental health. From our analysis, we understand that media literacy approaches, as currently imagined, provide little guidance in navigating the embodied affective learning that happens in intra-action with media, and that can be implicated in experiences of body disaffection (LaMarre et al., 2017). We argue for more complex, collective, new materialist informed media literacy approaches that aid young people in disrupting and challenging the normative affects that can be produced in intra-action with the visual.

The capacity to enact media literacy as relational

In the following section, we expand on our critique of dominant media literacy approaches by considering how a young person’s ‘capacity’ to perform literacy in the ways expected is entangled within the relations and complexities of their lives. In line with our new materialist approach, we pay further attention to some of those ‘hotspots’ within the data set that encourage us to consider and explore the variance in young people’s experiences with media literacy pedagogies and media engagement. Across both schools, the focus
groups gave rise to accounts of how some young people found aspects of media literacy pedagogy helpful.

Ella: Ehm I think, well we did a whole PSHE lesson on like airbrush, airbrushing and ehm like the different uses of advertising. And it actually made me think I don’t really want to be like them because look at how much they’ve had to like go through to have their like body changed to look perfect.

We recognise how media literacy pedagogies improved some young people’s experiences of engaging media. In considering why some young people were more likely to report an ability to control and create positive experiences of engaging media, we move away from a sole focus on the idea of individual intellectual competencies or ‘literacies’, and towards considering the role of the emergent material body. Through the media literacy pedagogies that formed part of PSHE at Rushford, young people like Ella learn to frame media engagement in terms of choice and personal responsibility. We explore the data extract below in terms of its material-discursive co-constitution.

Ella: I also think with social media it’s in your control as much as you like say. I know you see adverts and stuff, but you’ve just got to be aware of what you do, so if you post a picture of yourself, which is fine, but you’ve got to be aware that you know like anyone who you allow to follow you is open to see that and do that. So it is in your responsibility slightly and you’ve just got to be aware when you do do that, that it’s not like, it is obviously their fault, but you’ve got to like, when you make that decision you’ve got to realise the consequences that could follow.

Our new materialist reading of the above data takes us away from a focus on individual responsibility and towards considering how young people’s emergent embodiments, and how they are received, enables positive accounts and experiences of engaging media. Research has demonstrated how a young person’s body is received can relate to how they become in intra-action with certain health discourse/pedagogy (Cairns and Johnston, 2015; Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019). In their study of girls’ learning through engaging fitness content on Instagram, Camacho-Miñano et al. (2019), explored the centrality of young people’s embodiment. Similar to Cairns and Johnston (2015) findings in relation to food choices, Camacho-Miñano et al. (2019: 658) found that ‘girls who possessed the privilege of embodying the (slender and fit) feminine ideal’ were more likely to readily articulate ‘postfeminist discourse around physical activity’. It is worth mentioning that Ella embodied such an ideal. Here we contribute the insight that similar tendencies can also be found in intra-actions involving media literacy pedagogy. Those bodies that become in positive ways in intra-action with dominant representations of the feminine can be more likely to find the positive messaging of media literacy pedagogy helpful. However, this positive messaging can be limited in addressing the anxieties produced among those who do not always emerge as the embodiment of such ideals, or what Skeggs (2001) refers to as ‘recognised’, from media engagements.

Hattie: Sometimes it helps when people say like, oh you’re not fat at all, but like Jessie if you think you are and I’m looking at you thinking no, just no.
Daisy: No way.
Hattie: And you’re sort of saying like oh ya, but there’s part in the back of your mind you’re thinking is she right? Is she not?

Despite engaging with the same rationalist positive messaging, affects of anxiety surrounding the emergence of the body lingered and circulated among some of the girls. Simply being assured that one’s body is acceptable or ‘not fat’ does not challenge the negative affectivities or discriminations that larger bodies become entangled within on and offline (Cameron and Russell, 2016). While bodies that emerge in proximity with beauty ideals may be more likely to experience reassurance and positive affect from feel good media literacy messaging, this approach does little to transform the more stigmatised affects that tend to ‘stick’ (Ahmed, 2004) to larger bodies. In order to disrupt these territorialising normative affects, media literacy approaches may look beyond a rationalist focus towards engaging, exploring and re-imagining experiences of various embodiments in schools and online.

**Media literacy and inequality**

Through the following analysis, we examine the materialised effects of classed and gendered relations on young people people’s intra-actions with digital media and social networking sites (SNS) to explore how media literacy pedagogies may best respond. Our engagement with the below data extracts allowed us to further understand how economic relations are entangled with embodied performativity in ways that challenge the assumed dualism between ‘online’ and ‘offline’. One of the focus groups in Henham gave rise to discussion surrounding some of the more-than-human complexity of gaining approval or ‘recognition’ (Skeggs, 2001):

Anna: I think on Instagram and social media it’s not so much with the fitness it’s more of your . . .
Georgia: Money.
Anna: Yeah money, your appearance, what you can afford to get, so like ehm one girl might post something like, oh really fancy like Adidas or something and that will get like all the likes and you’ll be really popular. But, if someone posts something showing their pet or just doing something that they find interesting they might not get as much popularity or be as accepted as much, because it’s just seen as not the popular thing to do so you get discriminated against.
Researcher: Okay so it’s not just about the shape of your body it’s what you have on your body as well.
Anna: Yeah.

Through our engagement with these data, we come to understand how gaining approval or recognition was not just dependent of the materiality of the body alone, but also on how the body became with non-human signifiers of wealth and trend consciousness (i.e. the Adidas clothing) (Featherstone, 2010). Those young people whose bodies could become with such non-human objects as part of careful gendered and classed performativities gained the capacity to affect others:
Ismail: Maybe like school if you see like popular people and you’re like jealous that they’re like, not rich, but have money to buy like lots of makeup and look really pretty and all of that and these other girls are like jealous and all of that, yeah.

However, this embodied capacity is not equally available to all. The profit-driven, biased algorithms, that work in intra-action with young people’s SNS and digital media use, tended to reify certain co-implicated non-human signifiers of wealth in ways that made the affective body less accessible to some. Dominant media literacy pedagogies that focus on hermeneutic analysis of the visual can neglect how new media and their profit-driven algorithms can lead to forms of inequity in ways that are not so visible. The materialities of some young people’s lives left them less likely to emerge with increased capacity and positive affect as a result of media engagement.

Georgia: Yeah, I think like people on social media post like if there’s like this new product that’s just come out. And like everyone’s like obsessing over it and like one of your friends gets it and you’re like really like upset cause you’re like ‘oh my mum would never let me get that, like what am I supposed to do like’, things like that.

In engaging this performative account, we understand that through her entanglements with digital media, Georgia learned to desire certain reified products and subsequently emerged as lacking as a result of the material economic relations of her life. Framing media literacy in terms of intellectual competency places the responsibility for such negative affect on the young person instead of on the co-implicated broader forces at play in this intra-action. Media literacy discourses have been criticised for their tendencies to responsibilise by tasking the individual with the onus to develop skills and competencies to ‘free themselves’ of pressure (Livingstone, 2008). We argue that the avoidance of negative affect is not the result of a ‘literacy’ developed in exchange between actors (e.g. student and teacher, text and reader) and is more dependent on situated relations. Our attention here is directed to how the idea of ‘literacy’ is performed and practised as part entanglements between digital, peers, gender discourses, and other non-human elements (Fullagar, 2017). We argue that these individualised discourses are not merely a conceptual issue, rather they have materialising effects. We explore this idea further by tracing how critical media literacy pedagogies unfold within the context of young people’s lives.

Through the focus groups at Rushford we came to understand how digitised/mediated intra-actions with peers occurred within gendered entanglements that similarly enacted certain expectations and constraints.

Karina: Following on from what you said, like if it’s a model you think yeah she’s probably been airbrushed or he’s been airbrushed, whatever, but when it’s your friend or just someone.
Jessie: That doesn’t come into it.
Karina: Or just someone from like school, you couldn’t have been airbrushed, so is that actually how you look or are you made up, like have you had loads of makeup on for that, so you’re uncertain when it comes to your friends.
Jessie: Cause yeah you don’t want to question them about it you don’t want to.
Hattie: . . . Cause they’re like your friends.
Karina: You don’t want to go up and say ‘how did you do this?!’
Jessie: Or even if you’re like jealous you don’t want to let them know that so you just kind of think mmm hmm.
Jessie: And you feel like you have to comment on their pictures ‘oh that’s so pretty’ and stuff . . . It’s all artificial.
Hattie: Cause you also, it’s also all about pleasing people, cause like if you don’t, sometimes if I feel like I don’t please a certain person, then, what’s the point?
Jessie: Mmm . . . Yeah.

From our engagement with these data, we suggest that critical media literacy approaches that expect young people to privately/publicly critique media practices they deem suspect can come into conflict with gendered social norms that require young girls to please their peers through conformity and displays of ‘niceness’ (Hey, 1997; Paechter and Clark, 2016). The relationalities of mediated spaces left certain young people with very little capacity to enact critical media literacy in intra-action.

Hattie: But like when you’re, when you’re on something like that [SNS] and you sort of see images of people you sort of think well that’s obviously photoshopped and then there’s like a . . . evidence of it being photoshopped. You don’t want to challenge it and you don’t want to think, well . . . or if there’s like bullying or anything you don’t want to ever challenge that cause you always think well I’m just going to become like the laughing stock or the one who challenged the popular one.

In analysing this performative account, we draw attention to how Hattie’s encounters with suspect online practices (e.g. photoshop and bullying) do not occur within a critical rational vacuum. Rather they must negotiate intra-actions with such practices within the context of their networked social life (Mendes et al., 2019). We understand Hattie’s reluctance to perform ‘media literacy’ by calling out such practice as having less to do with a lack of awareness surrounding media and more to do with the felt anticipation of affective losses/costs. There is need for further consideration surrounding what performing the ‘literacies’ asked of young people might look like/mean within the contexts of their lives, and the risks associated with this.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that theorising body disaffection through feminist new materialist approaches opens up promising new directions to advance pedagogical responses to body disaffection among young people. Specifically, we explored the limitations of dominant pedagogical responses to young people’s media engagement and body disaffection and argued that the complexity of new media means there is an urgent need to move beyond rationalist, individualised pedagogies which assume a humanist learner in the context of digital media. Our analysis of empirical data revealed how the entanglement with such digital media emerges as an embodied, affective learning process (Rich, 2019). We found the capacity to perform ‘media literacy’ and experience positive affect in mediated environments can be more dependent on how the body becomes through its relations with media (Coleman, 2008; Featherstone, 2010), than on a set of learned competencies. We identified how young people’s (largely young women’s) experiences of body disaffection when engaging media were relationally enabled
and dependent on their experiences of intra-acting with others (human and non-human) within their mediated worlds. Those media literacy pedagogies that obscure this through a focus on individual agency risk further inscribing these relations. Put simply, for some young people, it can feel like dismantling the very digital media through which they express themselves, if they are tasked with assuming a detached criticality. There is a need to recognise more strongly the way in which the body is enmeshed with these digital and virtual environments. We argue for a new materialist reimagining of the media literacy pedagogies that form part of school-based responses to body disaffection. In response to Livingstone (2008), we argue that the concept of media literacy, as currently deployed in many body image programmes, risks leaving traditional inequalities unchallenged, and furthermore, embodied learning unacknowledged.

In terms of developing pedagogical responses to body disaffection in schools, this new materialist understanding of media engagement shifts from placing the onus on individual young people to emphasising the need to make visible and challenge those relations and forces shaping young people’s mental health. Understanding young people’s ‘capacity’ when engaging media as relational orients pedagogical approaches concerned with ‘contextually specific experience’ (Hickey-Moody and Willcox, 2019: 264), and how the support, resources and conditions in which to navigate online learning may be collectively fostered. Hickey-Moody and Willcox (2019: 264) highlight the processes of intra-acting, rather than intervening, in their arts workshops with young people as one in which they ‘learn and feel and change with the people with whom we work, as opposed to measuring and quantifying their being’. New materialist informed creative methods can serve as ‘non-prescriptive’ tools with which to extend and re-imagine media literacy approaches in the digital era. It is not our position that current media literacy approaches have no value, rather we offer our new materialist perspective to highlight how pedagogy could further support young people in navigating the multiple dimensions and complexities of engaging media in the digital era. We argue that this new materialist shift in conceptualising young people’s experiences when engaging media can have profound implications for how we develop pedagogies surrounding media use more generally, and those developed in response to body disaffection in particular.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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