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Photograph Manipulation, Body Expectations and Mental Health

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Photograph Manipulation, Body Expectations and Mental Health

“It’s interesting to see yourself Photoshopped — it’s the perfect version of yourself according to each editor. You think, ‘Oh they don’t like that mole, or that bump in my nose.’ Even I look at an airbrushed photo and think I wish I was as beautiful as that picture of me,” – Jessica Simpson, 2014

On March 23rd, 2020, our lives changed. Government guidelines stopped people from going out due to the Covid-19 outbreak. This has left people more reliant on social media which has replaced face to face interactions. I have my own anxieties regarding my body confidence which links with the expectations created by people I do not even know, over the internet. The lockdown has the potential to impact on the mental health on a vast number of people.

For my dissertation I propose to explore the links between photograph manipulation, body expectation and the impact this has on mental health. These subjects are of interest to me and have influenced the way in which I produce my own work. To do this I will be exploring different artists and artworks which relate to this theme and compare this to images that appear every day on the internet to gain a better understanding of how images have varied impacts on different people.

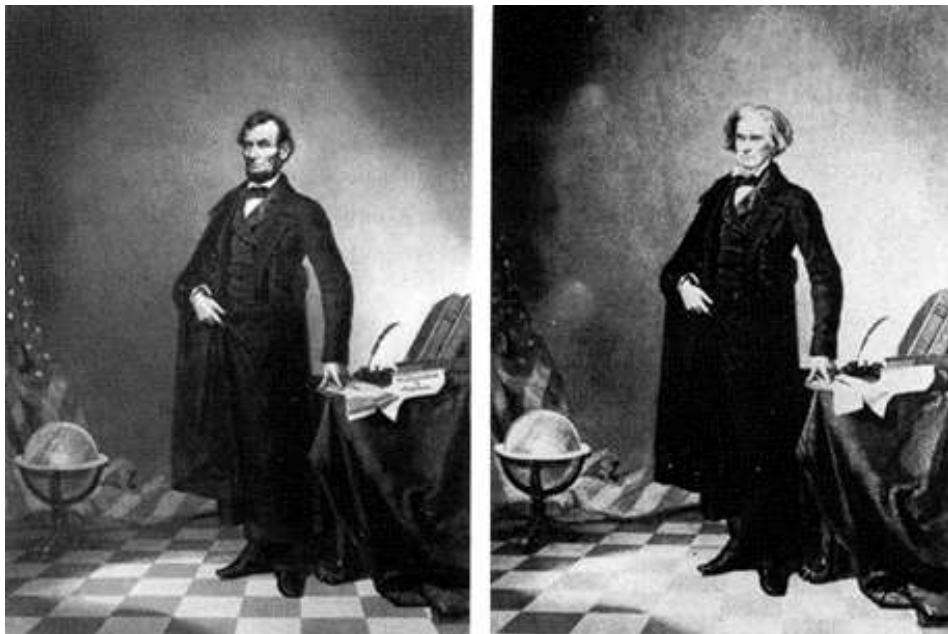
Photograph Manipulation

Before photography, images were captured in portraits. Although these can show accuracy, the image would be based on what the artist wanted us to see. Going back to Tudor times, while in search for his fourth wife, King Henry VIII commissioned Hans Holbein the younger to paint a portrait of Anne of Cleves, daughter of German Duke, John III.

Holbein was instructed to make the portrait as accurate as possible of Anne who was described as attractive for Henry to then assess her suitability. Upon the viewing it he agreed to marrying her and although there was no recorded reaction from him, he

rejected her as soon as he met her although he had to go through with the marriage. The act of manipulation within photography is not just a contemporary issue. Although is it used to ridiculous measures in this day and age, it is known to have been happening since 1860. To show an example of this, the portrait of former US president, Abraham Lincoln. The image presents Lincoln's head being placed on the body of politician, John Calhoun. This just shows to me that people have been unsatisfied with the views they have on themselves for a long period of time.

These images show Abram Lincolns Portrait in comparison to John Calhoun.



The main culprit for manipulation within imagery is the media. Most companies use forms of photoshop on models as a way of enhancing features in means to make them look more appealing to the eye. This can involve airbrushing skin, squeezing a waist to make it 'more attractive'. I believe that this is one of the main problems which today's society have regarding their own body image; they are under the influence of unrealistic beauty expectations. I believe the use of manipulation is misused to extreme measures. Although it is acceptable to be used in some areas. However, the power of manipulation has been abused. Anybody who has access to a phone, laptop etc, has the power to manipulate images, it is simple. There are multiple platforms

editing software, which is accessible, free of charge. I can say, up until the age of around 17 I heavily edited my images in way which made me feel more confident about the way I looked. Although I never adjusted the shape of my face, cover blemishes etc, I would change the images to black and white and only show certain sections of my face. **Example below**



How are people supposed to tell the truth from the lies? Why am I constantly comparing myself to images of people who I have seen online, knowing that the images have a high chance of some form of manipulation?

Photograph Manipulation is usually used in order to make a subject be seen at a standard which is 'more beautiful' than the natural form. An example of manipulation being used against this strategy is 'Closed Contact'. Collaborative project by artist Jenny Saville and fashion/filmmaker, Glen Luchford explores the different stereotyped perceptions of beauty of the female body. The work which was inspired from the topic of plastic surgery and the beauty, which is seen to come from it, shows the subject, Saville, laying above a piece of Perspex while the images have been taken from below showing all sorts of distorted angles, from looking close up, it is almost

unrecognizable that we are looking at the human form.

The images have a bodily reality which has not been achieved through photo editing and instead been created in real life.



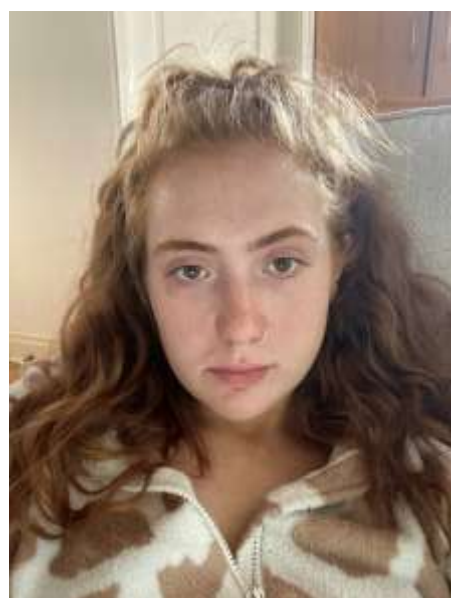
Body Expectations

“Female dissatisfaction with appearance - poor body-image - begins at a very early age. Human infants begin to recognise themselves in mirrors at about two years old. Female humans begin to dislike what they see only a few years later.”-
(Fox, K. 1997)

We all build up an idea of what we look like through looking in a mirror, therefore when we are shown photographs of ourselves, we are usually dissatisfied with the way we look in them. When taking photographs on my phone I am usually a lot happier with the ones I take on snapchat rather than the actual camera application this is because the snapchat camera does not flip the image and I recognise the person in the photo because it is how I see myself in the mirror.

Although the images are not significantly different, some attributes differ which causes a disconnection as the face appears to be unfamiliar.

The images below are photographs taken within seconds of each other but taken on different apps. The left photo was taken on the popular app, Snapchat which uses mirror imagery whereas the photograph on the right was taken on the iPhone camera app which takes the images in the correct orientation. I am more satisfied with the image on the left as it is the face which I see in the mirror whereas the picture on the right, I feel distorts the features which I am usually happy with when I look at myself in the mirror



Could the reason in which snapchat is of high popularity be caused due to people being more satisfied with the pictures they are presented with? In January 2020, the percentage of female snapchat users was at 61%. I always use the snapchat camera to take selfies as I am usually a lot happier with the way I look in them.

The body of work created in 2010 by Julian Wolkenstein titled, *Echoism* explores the idea of facial symmetry and was created due to the idea of people being more attractive if they have a symmetrical face. The subjects were photographed front to the camera and were told not to express any emotions or character.



Perceptions surrounding beauty and body types not only vary by culture but have evolved significantly throughout history (Science of people, unknown date).

An example of the different types of standards given to women, can be shown in a video released by BuzzFeed in 2015, titled “*Women's Ideal Body Types Throughout History*”. The video shows the drastic changes as well as the different measures in which women would go to in order to be the definition of beautiful. An example of this would be the wear of corsets for the appearance of a smaller waist. Women were to be considered as the disfigured versions of men. This makes me think, who started the different trends? Who decided that women should have an ideal body type and the way it should be?

“If we consider society’s idea of the perfect body image for women based on the average fashion model, we would think that the perfect woman was about 5’10” and weighed only 120 pounds.” (Mirror Mirror, unknown date)

I come to wonder, if this is happening now and has happened throughout history, will women always be judged and frowned upon for the body they are given? No matter what, people will always have comments about others whether they’re too skinny, too fat, too tall [etc]. People will always have those opinions but who gave them the audacity to judge what somebody looks like? Is it the history of male dominance repeating now and playing part of where these expectations have come from?

Within photography it can be hard to capture the beauty of the human body, although the images themselves are able to be produced, a lot of the time it can be seen in a sexual way. The beauty of previous work produced by Glen Luchford and Jenny Saville is a prime example of work which is not seen in a sexual way, due to the positionings and frames. However, I want to highlight another photographer who manages to capture the beauty and strength of the human body.

Instagram photographer [@PrettyPuke](#) is another example of a great body positive
Untitled images by @PRETTYPUKE



While finding the Instagram page and scrolling through, I found the collection of different images rather confusing and found myself feeling unsettled. The photographer has managed to capture what society has classed as “ugly” on such a beautiful, natural thing. In an interview with Complex, he said “A lot of the girls in my images are just strong, autonomous females” (Complex, 2015)

While exploring perceptions of the body expectations of women it has triggered a lot of questions, and feelings which I feel deeply passionate about. As a young woman, I cannot begin to explain the stress and anxiety which I have reached in order to feel happy within my body after seeing other people suffer with hate due to their body appearance. It really interests me to see how many other people have struggled like I have and why other people’s opinions on such topics have such an impact on us.

Mental health

Body image in relation to social media has been a highly spoken matter and has led to discussions about how negative body image can affect somebody and how it can even lead to problems involving mental health issues such as depression and anxiety as well as eating disorders. One of the most common features which attributes to eating disorders is in fact, body image. Body dissatisfaction is a risk factor for restrictive diets which with time can get more serious and can turn into serious eating disorders such as Anorexia and Bulimia.

An article written for The Guardian titled “*Forty years since Fat Is A Feminist Issue*” was an article by Susie Orbach, author of “*Fat Is A Feminist Issue*” 1978. The interview consisted of Orbach explaining how she never expected her book, written 40 years ago, would be so relevant and important today. “*Fat Is A Feminist Issue* talked about our lived experience: how preoccupied we could become with eating, not eating and avoiding fat. Emotionally schooled to see our value as both sexual beings for others and midwives to their desires, we found ourselves often depleted and empty and caught up in a kind of compulsive giving. Eating became our source of soothing. We stopped our mouths with food, and I proposed we could learn to exchange food – when we weren’t hungry – for words.” (Orbach, S. 2018) The author then goes on to compare the difference between now and then, for example explaining how fashion magazines would be normalizing pornographic images of girls and how rather being taught about the realness of the human form they would just be exposed to fake imagery. Then by comparing it to the current day she highlighted that girls are practically living on their phones and are being more worried about the opinions and likes of other people before their own. I found this article remarkably interesting due to how it can relate to the Mental Health aspect of things, to explain this I mean, girls are growing up around all of the falseness and comparing themselves to that, because its what they have been taught to do. Constantly in need of approval from others rather than approval from themselves.

I have explored a lot of artists which have a common interest in Mental Health and I came across an exhibition titled “Identity” which explored what life is like living with Body Dysmorphia Disorder (BDD). BDD is an illness which results in obsessiveness over perceived flaws which often come unnoticeable from anybody else, it can lead into other more serious issues such as depression, which is why I am addressing it, as I feel it is a starting point for a lot of people. Due to past experiences, I found the different exhibition pieces rather interesting however the work from Meltem Isik stood out to me the most as I found it the most relatable and genuinely daunting. Reason for this being, when I look in the mirror, I am absolutely horrified at the size of my stomach, although I know that realistically it is not big, I still fret that if I can see myself as this way, what do others see?



From exploring these 3 key elements, I have learnt that Photograph Manipulation, Body Expectations and Mental Health all have underlying connections to each other. This sparked many questions for me and led me to find the working question for my final dissertation which will be “How has both portraiture and self-portraiture caused a variation of different issues throughout history to the current day?” I will use this as a starting point but there is no doubt that I will also find other sub questions to answer along the way.

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