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5 Digital Pruning: Agency and social media use as
6 a personal political project among female
7 weightlifters in recovery from eating disorders
8

9 **Abstract**

10 In the past decade, a wealth of research has focused on women and social media. Typically
11 assembled according to the logic of ‘risk’ and ‘exposure’, this extensive work tends to operate
12 within a negative paradigm whereby women’s engagement with the digital produces harmful
13 outcomes for wellbeing. This paper makes a novel contribution to this literature by tracing the ways
14 in which women who are in recovery from eating disorders and engaged in weightlifting
15 strategically navigate their social media ‘worlds’ and give meaning to this process. Our data draws
16 on 19 in-depth interviews and our findings examine two key themes. Firstly, we challenge the
17 negative paradigm that frames women’s social media use and demonstrate how the digital can
18 support positive wellbeing for women in recovery. Secondly, we introduce the concept of ‘digital
19 pruning’, a personal political project framed within the language of self-care, which involves
20 unfollowing unhelpful or triggering content.

21 **Keywords:** Digital pruning, social media, agency, media-effects, feminism, eating disorders,
22 weightlifting.

23 **Introduction**

24 Within contemporary western cultural consciousness, social media looms as the boogiemanager for
25 issues relating to women’s body image and self-esteem, with reductionist and sensationalist media
26 reporting framing social media use as either ‘good’ or, more commonly, ‘bad’ (Gerrard, 2018; Gill,
27 2012). These prevalent digital skeptic discourses are reinforced by extensive work which evidences

28 a negative relationship between women’s holistic wellbeing and social media. Specifically, academic
29 research on the topic argues that women’s interaction with social media platforms predicts body
30 dissatisfaction, poor self-esteem, the internalisation of the thin ideal, increased self-objectification
31 and a heightened risk of developing eating disorder symptomology (Holland and Tiggemann, 2016).

32 Despite the negative associations between social media content and health, women are engaging
33 with social media more than ever. Between 2010 and 2017, the share of female respondents who
34 reported creating a profile on any social media site increased from 56 to 81 percent (Statista, 2018).
35 Moreover, research shows that the average UK adult spends approximately 12 hours a week using
36 social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (ComRes, 2018). While women are
37 warned against the potentially damaging nature of media-effects, the digital is incrementally taking
38 up more space in our everyday lives. This prompts the following conundrum; either women are
39 unconsciously causing themselves harm, engaging with social media to their detriment despite
40 overwhelmingly negative affect. Conversely, women may develop conscious and experience-
41 informed strategies to navigate potentially damaging social media content, a process which so far
42 remains absent from existing empirical research.

43 Our paper makes an original contribution to literature on new media by focusing on a sample of
44 women who, we argue, would be characterised as particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of
45 using digital spaces: women weightlifters with a history of eating disorders. Existing literature
46 typically focuses on the measured effects of women’s ‘exposure’ to social media and this particular
47 sample would be deemed ‘at risk’ of potentially damaging messaging, due to the transactional
48 media-effects associated with exposure to pro-eating disorderⁱ (pro-ED) content and ‘fitspiration’
49 discourses which promote the achievement of (often unrealistic) lean body-types through exercise
50 (Perloff, 2014; Valkenberg and Peter, 2013). In this respect, previous research has focused on the
51 ways in which the thin ideal and pro-ED content on social media negatively impacts women’s
52 wellbeing (Ghaznavi, and Taylor, 2015; Mingoia et al., 2017; Rodgers et al., 2016). More recently,
53 research in this field has explored the negative outcomes associated with the shift towards a more
54 muscular ideal for women, marked by the emergence of fitspiration on social media platforms
55 (Robinson et al., 2017; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015). Most women in our sample reported to
56 regularly observe thin ideal and/or pro-ED content online when suffering from an eating disorder,
57 as well as muscular ideal/fitspiration imagery when recovering through weightlifting. Due to their

58 exposure to this damaging content, these women lie at a specific intersection of expertise and lived
59 experience, making their insights on social media particularly significant and novel.

60 Our research details the ways female weightlifters in recovery from eating disorders strategically
61 and consciously navigate online spaces. By exploring how this population of women subjectively
62 reconceptualise and design their social media 'worlds' to enhance positive health and wellbeing, we
63 develop and extend existing work in this field, building towards a significant, more complex
64 framework for scholarship on women's relationship to the digital.

65 We begin by critiquing some of the ontological assumptions underpinning much of the work on the
66 relationship between women's wellbeing and social media. In particular, we interrogate the notion
67 of 'exposure' to the digital, drawing attention to its limitations before considering the need for
68 research which takes into account agency and subjectivity. We then overview the study methods,
69 emphasising the value of approaching the data using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA),
70 before moving on to our findings, which examine two key themes. Firstly, we challenge the negative
71 paradigm maintained by extant research on women's engagement with social media, by
72 demonstrating how digital spaces can positively support wellbeing for female weightlifters in
73 recovery from eating disorders. Secondly, we turn to the paper's novel theoretical contribution,
74 'digital pruning' - a personal political project whereby this population critically sift through social
75 media content and make informed decisions about the affectual impact of their online
76 environments. Finally, in the discussion, we critically engage with the neoliberal rhetoric
77 underpinning digital pruning as a subjective practice which places the responsibility for content
78 regulation firmly in the hands of individual users. We explore this in connection with postfeminist
79 literature, which theorises the centrality of 'choice' and self-knowledge to contemporary western
80 feminine subjectivity (Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2009).

81 'Exposure' and the vulnerable female gaze

82 The relationship between women's wellbeing and the internet has been extensively written about
83 since the arrival of social media platforms in the late 2000s/early 2010, with a particular focus on
84 sites that support the sharing and editing of digitally mediated images (such as Facebook, Youtube,
85 Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat). Significantly, studies which look at women's interaction with
86 social media find an overwhelmingly negative effect (Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann and Slater,

87 2013), with the exception of some notable work on the positive impact of self-compassion
88 messaging and body positivity (Cohen et al., 2019; Slater et al., 2017). According to this cache of
89 research, engagement with social media platforms facilitates self-comparison (Tiggemann and
90 Miller, 2010), body surveillance (Vandenbosch and Eggermon, 2012), and self-objectification
91 (Fardouly et al., 2018). Moreover, the reportedly high prevalence of thinspiration (images that
92 promote the thin ideal) and fitspiration (images that promote the achievement of a lean body-type
93 through exercise) within the social media landscape has directed the focus in much of this body of
94 research. This scholarship reveals that ‘exposure’ to thinspiration/fitspiration messaging predicts
95 greater body dissatisfaction and negative mood (Prichard et al., 2017; Tiggemann and Zaccardo,
96 2015). Furthermore, and of particular interest to our study, conceptual models have been
97 developed that attempt to link eating disorder symptomology to the viewing of these images
98 (Griffiths et al., 2018).

99 The language of ‘exposure’, which assumes a lack of protection from harm, proliferates within
100 scholarship on women’s engagement with social media (Slater, 2004). Yet there is little critical
101 engagement with the underpinning theoretical and ontological assumptions held by this frequently
102 mobilised terminology. Exposure also forms the basis of key methodological processes, most
103 commonly through experiments which replicate the encounter between social media users and
104 images that contain specific messaging (e.g. fitspiration, thinspiration, attractive celebrity images)
105 (Brown and Tiggemann, 2016; Griffiths et al., 2018; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015). Typically,
106 before and after a sample of women are ‘exposed’ to the chosen images, they are asked to
107 complete one or more measures relating to body image and wellbeing (for example, body
108 satisfaction and mood). The comparative results of these two time points are then utilised as
109 evidence of the effects of certain social media content on women’s wellbeing. While this research
110 offers some insight into women’s initial reactions to certain messaging, it fails to take into account
111 the dynamic and everyday use of mobile technologies (Ibrahim, 2015). Moreover, as Holmes
112 contends, “such a persistent emphasis on risk (as well as the insistence on the girl as a consuming
113 subject), directs attention away from questions of media production...as well as the digital practices
114 through which constructions of the self are actively negotiated and produced” (2017: 4). In this
115 regard, we question whether experiments concentrated around two distinct time points, with so

116 few opportunities to account for participant agency and subjectivity, accurately replicate user
117 experiences of social media.

118 Moreover, within writing on women and girls' engagement with the digital and the development of
119 eating disorders, a seductive discourse of contagion has emerged from the moral panic associated
120 with exposure to pro-ED spaces on social media, compounded by the assumed passivity and
121 vulnerability of the female gaze (Bell, 2009; Burke, 2006; Gerrard, 2018; Holmes, 2017). As Burke
122 writes, "the prevalence of the idea that women can 'catch' anorexic behaviours from looking at
123 each other or images of slenderness displaces feminist ideas about imagery oppressing women and
124 instead foregrounds a sensationalised, 'pathological' bodily schema" (2006: 316). This idea of
125 contagion within digital spaces is convincingly challenged by Gerrard (2018), whose study of
126 hashtags and pro-ED spaces reveals that social media platform moderation protects those who
127 might be characterised as 'at risk' but not those who are already embedded within these systems.
128 In addition, Chancellor and colleagues' (2016) work on lexical variation in pro-ED online
129 communities (for example the use of #thyghgapp instead of #thighgap) demonstrates that while
130 pro-ED content still exists on social media, it has to be actively sought out using special terms
131 developed within the subculture. However, there is a dearth of empirical literature relating to how
132 potentially vulnerable female populations experience social media environments.

133 We argue that the language of exposure and the methodology that accompanies it, deprives
134 women of agency and fundamentally falls short of the ways in which both platforms and users
135 operate. In their 2014 agenda setting piece, Prieler and Choi write, "it is necessary to differentiate
136 the effect of social media use through passive exposure to social media content from the effect of
137 the active use of social media, such as commenting, disseminating, seeking information, and
138 posting" (2014: 381). While we agree that there is a need to incorporate user agency into research
139 on women's social media use, we would go further to suggest that the very notion of 'passive
140 exposure' itself is not ontologically possible (Rose, 2016). Whether images are sought out, created,
141 or unintentionally viewed, there is a dynamic process occurring at the site of the user which
142 involves recognition, interpretation and absorption (Van Dijck, 2009). As Rose contends, "as images
143 circulate, pausing and materializing in specific places with specific people, cultural meanings are
144 encountered, interpreted, ignored, lost, liked, resisted and deleted. All this is friction" (2016: 343).
145 It is this process which remains entirely absent from writing on women's wellbeing and media-

146 effects and yet is crucial to understanding how individuals strategically engage with and react to the
147 discourses they observe.

148 Agency in the digital age

149 Research in the digital age requires a more dynamic, multi-sited approach to media-effects
150 scholarship, which takes into account both the capacity for individuals to subjectively design their
151 own personal online 'worlds' and the structural make-up of social media platforms. In this regard,
152 while the literature on women's wellbeing and 'exposure' to social media detailed above falls short
153 in sufficiently accounting for agency and subjectivity, it is important to also not take for granted the
154 socio-spatial geographies of the digital, which shape online environments in particular ways (Rose,
155 2016).

156 It is surely the case that individuals have more agency in their engagement with new media than
157 they did old media, and as such, a variety of concepts have been developed which characterise this
158 shift towards a more participatory media culture (Jenkins et al., 2016). For example, *convergence*
159 *culture* refers to a paradigm shift whereby 'consumers' of content can no longer be considered an
160 audience in the traditional sense, due to widespread access to the tools for production and
161 distribution (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008). In a similar vein, *produsage* describes "the collaborative,
162 iterative, and user-led production of content by participants in a hybrid user-producer, or produser
163 role" (Bruns, 2006). Moreover, these ideas have been adapted and extended with the advent of
164 social media, to account for the ever-increasing methods by which individual can act with and
165 through the digital (Jenkins et al., 2013). In this respect, social media users can exercise agency by;
166 choosing what or who to 'follow', interacting with content (through 'liking' or commenting), and
167 producing/editing theirs and others' content. Picone and colleagues (2019) have developed the
168 concept of 'small acts of engagement' (SAOE) which conceptually accounts for these kinds of
169 productive practices that constitute everyday user agency. In this respect, there is a wealth of
170 literature which accounts for the various ways the Web 2.0 has given rise to new ways of
171 communicating, creating and living.

172 However, the boundaries to user autonomy are unclear, as the architecture of social media
173 platforms is partially constructed by algorithms which sift and instrumentalise user data in
174 particular ways (Beer, 2009; Hayles, 2012; Rose, 2016). In this respect, feedback loops embedded

175 within a platform's design determine, to some extent, what kind of messaging an individual user
176 will be presented with in future interactions (Gerrard, 2018). However, the underpinning
177 mechanisms that metabolise and leverage data are not generally obvious or visible to the average
178 user, meaning the role these platforms play in shaping agency is not always clearly discernible
179 (Eslami et al., 2015). Boulton and Zook (2013) refer to the naturalisation of these structures as the
180 'duplicity of code', whereby "code works to produce space and, by doing so, defines the boundaries
181 of knowledge production, codifies the meanings of place, and delimits a field of potential practice"
182 (2013: 440). It could therefore be argued that digital platforms co-constitute action by making
183 certain activities possible and even desirable (van Dijck, 2009).

184 Significantly, as social media spaces are created in a 'for-profit' model, platforms are governed by
185 the logic of visibility, engagement and status, rather than social responsibility or public good
186 (Marwick, 2013). As a result, algorithms provide an architectural framework which often reifies
187 problematic social dynamics that are observable in wider society (Petre et al., 2019). In this regard,
188 those with power and status tend to enjoy an elevated exposure and normative beauty ideals (such
189 as thinspiration and fitspiration) proliferate (Carah and Dobson, 2016). This being said, platforms
190 are habitually required to adapt and evolve their regulations and ethics in response to user
191 demand. Consider, for example, Flat Tummy Co., a company who sells 'appetite suppressant
192 lollipops' and 'flat tummy tea', who accrued significant wealth by 'gaming Instagram to sell women
193 the unattainable ideal' (Wong, 2018). Famous influencers who endorsed these products include;
194 Kim Kardashian, who has 154 million followers on Instagram (as of December 2019), and Amber
195 Rose who has 19.2 million followers on Instagram (as of December 2019). This highly visible
196 campaign was met with significant resistance from feminists, body positive activists and health
197 professionals. This, among other contested instances of toxic messaging on platforms, led Facebook
198 and Instagram to tighten their restrictions on posts related to diet products and cosmetic surgery
199 (BBC, 2019). In this respect, the relationship between social media platforms and user agency is
200 mutually constituting, as the successful structural development of platforms relies on the push and
201 pull of user feedback and engagement.

202 When theorising agency within social media use, structural features of platforms such as
203 algorithms, the 'for profit' governance model, and content regulation policies, all impact user
204 experience by somewhat determining the "temporal and spatial horizons for experience" (Boulton

205 and Zook, 2013: 440). However, a wealth of literature has emerged in the field of new media and
206 communication focusing on the methods by which individuals and groups attempt to resist
207 algorithms by organising collectively or mobilising them to their own advantage (Cotter, 2018;
208 O’Meara, 2019; Petre et al., 2019; Velkova and Kaun, 2019). For example, research by Cotter (2018)
209 explores the conscious strategies mobilised by social media influencers to engage with Instagram’s
210 algorithm. This study demonstrated that this population of users have an acute awareness of how
211 to ‘play the game’ on social media, by strategically harnessing the algorithms’ power to increase
212 their own visibility. Moreover, Rheingold (2012) has written extensively on digital literacy and how
213 individuals can mindfully engage with the internet to achieve personal and collective
214 empowerment. In this regard, there is evidence that user agency is being enacted both materially
215 and discursively in relation to social media platforms and their internal structures.

216 Theorising agency within the context of social media is multifaceted and both digital structures and
217 user agency should be accounted for. For the purposes of this paper, we have chosen to explore
218 experiential accounts of social media use, from the perspective of female weightlifters in recovery
219 from eating disorders. To do this, we approach the data using Interpretive Phenomenological
220 Analysis, which asks the question, ‘what is this kind of experience like?’ (Shinebourne and Smith,
221 2009). In this sense, while we believe it important to acknowledge the role of structure in shaping
222 online experiences, and have done so here, this research is primarily interested in participants’
223 understanding of agency as it pertains to the digital. This is an important and highly original line of
224 enquiry given the lack of attention paid to female subjectivity in previous work on women and
225 social media, which has typically tended to operate according to the logic of ‘risk’ and ‘exposure’.

226 Our primary research questions are as follows:

- 227 1. What impact does social media have on wellbeing and recovery for female weightlifters in
228 recovery from eating disorders?
- 229 2. How do female weightlifters in recovery from eating disorders strategically navigate social
230 media spaces and give meaning to this process?

231 Methods

232 The data for this paper comes from a wider project on women’s use of weightlifting as a mode of
233 recovery from eating disorders. Female participants, aged 17 and over, living in the UK, who have a

234 history of eating disorders and are weightlifting during their recovery, were sought to take part in
235 the study. In order to ensure rigour in our recruitment strategy, a two-pronged approach to
236 sampling was used, which enabled us to recruit respondents from what could be defined as a 'hard
237 to reach' group (i.e. women weightlifters in recovery from eating disorders). Firstly, the study was
238 advertised in a selected group of gyms in England. Secondly, calls for participants were posted on
239 the lead researcher's Instagram and Twitter accounts and individuals who fit the study criteria were
240 identified and direct messaged through social media. These two methods in combination with
241 snowball sampling and recruitment by word of mouth secured the complete sample (n=19).

242 In-depth semi-structured interviews were then conducted with participants in various locations
243 across the UK (see table below). In terms of the ethnic make-up of the sample, 16 participants
244 identified as white-British, two as British-Indian, and one as Chinese. Their ages range from 17 to 38
245 and they live in various different locations across the UK. The women who took part in this study
246 were all amateur participants in a range of weight training styles. These included; bodybuilding,
247 strength training, powerlifting, strongwoman and CrossFit. Participants did one or a combination of
248 these activities on a weekly basis and had done so for a minimum of 8 months at the time of
249 interview.

250 This project employs a feminist approach to health and self-care which affirms "a positive view of
251 women as experts of their own health experiences" (Weaver et al, 2005, p.190); therefore, women
252 were asked to self-report their recovery status. While a minority of participants considered
253 themselves 'recovered', the majority of women self-identified as 'in recovery', despite often being
254 no longer considered clinically at risk, due to being weight-restored. Participants viewed recovery as
255 a daily practice and there was a great deal of discussion regarding the degree to which a person
256 ever *truly* recovers from an eating disorder. Two participants identified as 'still suffering' with an
257 eating disorder. Just under half of the women who took part had never received any treatment or
258 therapeutic support for their eating disorder. Of the participants who had at one time accessed
259 care, two were inpatients, three were outpatients and the remainder saw a therapist or
260 psychologist. However, many of these women reported struggling to engage with formal treatment,
261 citing weightlifting instead as the key driver for their recovery.

262 Mobilising the language of digital fitness culture, interviews were presented in recruitment
263 materials as informal discussions about participants' fitness and recovery 'journeys'. Interviews
264 were conducted by the lead researcher in a variety of locations (based on participants'
265 preferences), which were mostly cafes and university meeting rooms. The interviews were semi-
266 structured, lasting between 1-2 hours (averaging at 1.5 hours), and the interview guide was split
267 into three experiential categories; 1) weightlifting and strength, 2) eating disorder recovery, and 3)

***Pseudonym* Interview location Age Type of weightlifting In recovery from:**

268 social media usage. Five to ten questions were drafted for each category to prompt discussion;
269 however, interviews rarely followed a neat, linear format. Given that participants were extremely
270 well-versed and understanding of the internal mechanisms through which weightlifting and social
271 media impacted their recovery, the three categories were largely discussed at once, with
272 participants drawing connections between weightlifting, recovery, and social media in a narrative
273 style that is mirrored within social media spaces (Rettberg, 2018).

<i>Alice</i>	Plymouth	18	Strength training	Anorexia/EDNOS
<i>Ava</i>	Loughborough	30	Powerlifting/strength training	Anorexia/bulimia
<i>Charis</i>	Wolverhampton	20	Powerlifting/bodybuilding	Anorexia
<i>Ella</i>	Newcastle	24	Powerlifting	Bulimia
<i>Erica</i>	Leeds	31	CrossFit/strength training	Anorexia
<i>Eve</i>	Durham	20	Strength training	Anorexia
<i>Georgie</i>	Durham	20	Strength training	Anorexia
<i>Harriet</i>	Durham	19	Strength training	Bulimia
<i>Helena</i>	Glasgow	36	Strength training	Binge eating disorder
<i>Jess</i>	London	22	Bodybuilding	Anorexia
<i>Laura</i>	Nottingham	23	Powerlifting	Anorexia/binge eating disorder
<i>Lily</i>	Newcastle	22	Powerlifting/CrossFit	Anorexia
<i>Lizzie</i>	Newcastle	32	Strength training	Anorexia/bulimia
<i>Maddy</i>	Durham	21	Powerlifting	EDNOS
<i>Nisha</i>	London	36	Powerlifting/strength training	Anorexia/bulimia/binge eating disorder
<i>Polly</i>	London	17	Strength training	Anorexia
<i>Ruby</i>	London	24	Bodybuilding/strength training	Binge eating disorder
<i>Sarah</i>	Cardiff	18	Strength training	Anorexia
<i>Sonia</i>	Newcastle	26	Strongwoman	Anorexia

274

275 Due to the stigmatised and potentially vulnerable nature of the research participants in this study,
276 ethical considerations were embedded in the research design. Ethical approval was gained from the
277 host institution and participants were provided with written informed consent before any data was
278 collected. It was anticipated that discussing exercise and food during the interviews may be
279 triggering or interfere with recovery. This was not found to be the case as, when asked to reflect on
280 how the interview made them feel (immediately after the interview and in follow-up
281 conversations), participants reported the process to be positive, as it allowed them space to reflect
282 on their experiences in a non-therapeutic context. However, in situations where participants
283 disclosed that they were struggling to recover, they were signposted towards various
284 resources such as eating disorder helplines and information on how to access support.

285 The lead researcher conducted all interviews for this study due to having an ‘insider’ status through
286 her participation in amateur weightlifting and engagement with health and fitness social media

287 content. In order to facilitate an informal, conversational atmosphere, some personal experiences
288 with diet, exercise and social media were shared by the lead researcher when interacting with
289 participants. These attempts at connection served to readdress the power imbalance inherent
290 within the interviewer/interviewee dynamic, as well as allow for a rapport to be developed
291 (Cotterill and Letherby, 1993). In particular, the lead researcher's relevant experience was valuable
292 when the technical details of weightlifting (e.g. certain exercises or styles of training like
293 'hypertrophy') and social media (e.g. 'stories' on Instagram) were discussed (Kerr and Sturm, 2019).

294 A central aim of the study was to determine the role that social media plays in the use of
295 weightlifting as a mode of recovery. As a result, data was collected regarding participants' social
296 media use and its impact (if any) on health and wellbeing. Participants in this study have unique and
297 important insights to offer into current debates in this area. For one, this group of women have a
298 history of eating disorders and over half of the participants in the study reported to engage with
299 pro-ED content prior to starting their recovery. According to the extant research, this situates them
300 within the category of potentially most 'at risk' and vulnerable to negative social media messaging
301 (Perloff, 2014). Secondly, as they are all weightlifters and gym-goers, the women in this study
302 observe and engage with so-called 'online fitness communities' on social media. This makes them
303 well-placed to comment on fitspiration discourses which, research indicates, proliferate within this
304 online space (Griffiths et al., 2018). Finally, this group of women represent a range of voices within
305 the social media landscape. The majority are casual and active users, engaging with digital spaces to
306 document their weightlifting and recovery progress. Four participants have cultivated followings of
307 over 2,000 on Instagram and one participant could be considered to be 'influencer' statusⁱⁱ, due to
308 having over 201k followers of her Instagram account. It is noteworthy that two of the women in the
309 study did not use social media, for one participant this was due to a lack of interest and for another
310 her avoidance of social media was described as a conscious means of maintaining positive mental
311 health.

312 In terms of social media platforms, 17 of the sample used Instagram, citing it as their most
313 frequently used social media application. Some declared the use of the earlier established social
314 media platform Facebook to be 'dead' and 'somewhere your parents are at' (Erica). This is reflected
315 by research that demonstrates photo and video sharing is progressively the highest form of social
316 currency online, with image-based apps such as Instagram achieving increased popularity among

317 women and young people (Ibrahim, 2015; Rainie et al., 2012). As a result, a great deal of the
318 following discussion centres around Instagram, however occasional reference is also made to
319 Twitter, YouTube and Facebook.

320 We approached the data using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This analytic approach
321 is well suited to health-related research with small sample groups, as it seeks to interpret meaning
322 from the depth and richness of personal narratives within a given phenomenon (Shinebourne and
323 Smith, 2009). Moreover, at its core, IPA is interested in experience, subjectivity and relatedness,
324 which are central to the research questions for this project (Larkin and Thompson, 2012). With the
325 exception of work by Hill and colleagues (2015), IPA is seldom adopted in the field of new media
326 and communications. However, given the lack of agency theorised within previous research on
327 women's wellbeing and social media, we believe this approach facilitates access to highly novel and
328 important information on how groups of women (in this case, female weightlifters in recovery from
329 eating disorders) perceive their own self-efficacy as it pertains to the digital.

330 All interviews were transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms have been assigned to protect
331 anonymity. The data was inductively coded using Scrivener, a piece of software which facilitates the
332 compilation and sorting of multi-media data. Emergent themes were identified and organised into
333 clusters according to their conceptual relatedness. The final codes were then cross-checked
334 between the authors working on the project in order to ensure rigour and synergy of analysis.
335 Examples of salient codes that emerged from analysis on social media use included;
336 'following/unfollowing', 'media literacy' and 'online bodies'. Finally, while a handful of participants
337 have been quoted in the findings due to their explanation being illustrative of a particular practice
338 or sensibility, it must be noted that the themes they speak to resounded across the sample.

339 In practice, IPA attempts to get as close as possible to the viewpoint of the participants, while
340 acknowledging that researchers, who hold their own subjective and experience-informed
341 perceptions, will inevitably bring to bear their own conceptions of the data (Hill et al., 2015). In
342 efforts to make this visible by clearly demarcating the participant voice from the researchers', the
343 following sections are organised into; 1) findings, which centralise the participants' experience and
344 point of view, and 2) discussion and conclusion, in which the authors extend the analysis by
345 pointing to the wider implications of the findings.

346 Findings

347 Social media, wellbeing and recovery from eating disorders

348 Not all women in this study reported wholly positive relationships to social media, however there
349 was a coherent sense in which digital platforms are too readily mobilised to explain away social ills
350 such as negative body image, poor mental health and the development of eating disorders. In
351 particular, participants were highly alert to discourses in which social media is perceived to be
352 detrimental to self-esteem and body image. While they did not deny that engagement with certain
353 harmful content online can reinforce and reproduce negative affect, they expressed frustration at
354 the idea that social media might be the 'true cause' of poor wellbeing. For example, Lizzie contends:

355 *I think in the past it was just magazines and celebrities, whereas I think with*
356 *Instagram it's like real people, like someone from Sunderland doing things, it's so*
357 *much more real. And it's more realistic as well, so when people say things*
358 *negative about women's body image and the internet and social media and how*
359 *bad it is, I completely disagree, because I think it gives us more access to real*
360 *people and to people who are having the same thoughts as I might be having and*
361 *it's like a community and I think it's a lot better to have it than not have it*
362 *because if it wasn't there, I'd just be seeing the same things that I saw as a*
363 *teenager that made me think like this to begin with. Just skinny people in fashion*
364 *magazines that I'm tearing out photos of and sticking them on the wall as*
365 *'thinspiration' and I don't do that anymore, I don't buy those magazines anymore,*
366 *I use Instagram, and I look at the page of someone from Leeds, who's not skinny*
367 *but is well and happy and exercises (Lizzie)*

368 In this passage Lizzie delineates between social media, which facilitates agency and interaction, and
369 'old' more traditional forms of media in which consumption of images is a more passive experience.
370 In this regard, while magazines are externally curated, social media allows users to choose what
371 kind of content and imagery they engage with. Moreover, unlike traditional or 'old' forms of media,
372 no clear separation emerged between body and technology, or subject and object, when discussing
373 how the women in this study engage with social media. The digital appeared to be deeply
374 embedded in the everyday lives of the participants, so much so that their encounters with the

375 online 'worlds' they had meticulously curated were intimately related to the practice of recovery
376 from eating disorders. For example, Alice describes how posting on Instagram sustained her
377 recovery:

378 *So I went through in early recovery this phase of not wanting to get dressed or*
379 *leave the house or do anything because I just felt really ashamed that my body*
380 *was changing and I was eating and doing this thing that for so long I felt like I*
381 *shouldn't be doing. So this is one of the first days that I sort of got out of bed and*
382 *even though I felt really really bad about myself, I still got dressed, I still... and I*
383 *felt like, Instagram really helped with that because I tried to make myself post*
384 *once a day and I was like, well you can't post in your dressing gown, so I would*
385 *make myself get dressed and make myself do something productive. Even if I just*
386 *did that and then went back to bed for the rest of the day, it was just about*
387 *forcing myself to accept that life was still happening and that it couldn't*
388 *completely ground to a halt just because I needed to do this recovery thing. So,*
389 *like, that kind of having to have some self-discipline, even when it's really hard, is*
390 *difficult but I did it. I did get there- most of the time (Alice)*

391 In this passage, Alice describes posting on Instagram during her recovery as a method of keeping
392 herself tethered to the world. This act of presenting her body and everyday life through images
393 online aids her recovery by offering her opportunities to feel connected to the outside world from a
394 distance that feels safe and manageable. In her work on the co-constitution of the material and the
395 digital, Van Doorn writes, "the virtual can be understood as an immanent and immaterial form of
396 agency or potential: effectively but not formally or materially existing within the interstices of
397 everyday life" (2011: 533). The posting of images online offers the opportunity to act and be
398 present at a time when women are slowly coming to understand their bodies in new ways, as they
399 transition through recovery. In this respect, liminality is a useful theoretical tool for understanding
400 agency and transformation mediated by the digital, as Žižek (2012), among others, have
401 demonstrated (Turner, 1969; Horvath et al., 2018).
402

403 Participants made sense of this liminal phase through the process of documentation,
404 communication and reflection. In this sense, the act of posting on social media was found to
405 precede and co-constitute concrete action. As Nisha shared:

406 **shows picture of breakfast from Instagram**
407 *I broadly know when I've been in an okay place, because I'm okay to post about*
408 *food, and otherwise I just don't at all, ever (Nisha)*

409 Here, Nisha reveals that posting about food is intimately connected to the act of eating and
410 recovering. When she does not eat, she does not post. In this way, images on social media are more
411 than static placeholders for semiotic meaning and they do more than simply produce effects. For
412 most women in the sample, engaging with social media was integral to practicing everyday
413 activities, such as getting dressed or eating, which are integral to maintaining positive wellbeing.

414 The idea of *choice* was also central to participants' understandings of their social media use and the
415 women in this study viewed themselves as ultimate architects of their online 'worlds'. Underpinning
416 this logic was the central belief that 'it's all about who you follow' (Polly). Alice echoes this
417 sentiment, explaining:

418 *It's not a good or a bad thing, it's a tool and like anything else, it depends on the*
419 *way that you use it and the way that you engage with it. So you can either*
420 *engage with it and put out negativity and pro-anorexiaⁱⁱⁱ and all of this stuff that*
421 *has real influence but in a negative way or you can use it for good and to connect*
422 *with people and to learn and all of these things and I think it can be really helpful*
423 *in that way and it's not just the negative space (Alice).*

424 In this regard, social media was generally was perceived to be a neutral tool which would 'reflect
425 back' values, interests, opinions and state of mind. This being said, participants did report to
426 occasionally encounter harmful and objectifying messaging (such as thinspiration and fitspiration
427 content) due to somewhat externally determined factors, such as the existence of algorithms and
428 personalised advertising. However, this too was perceived to be within the realm of personal
429 control and something that could be navigated through strategic use of the platform. As Sonia, who
430 has two Instagram accounts (one personal and one for her job as a personal trainer), explained:

431 *Sonia: I have to go through and unfollow people sometimes. People that are just*
432 *unhelpful as well like when they start promoting laxative teas and stuff like that...*
433 *nah.*

434 *Interviewer: So, what does your feed look like now? What kinds of accounts do*
435 *you follow?*

436 *S: Mainly other trainers, my friends, loads and loads of dog accounts, a few*
437 *strong women, because I work behind a coffee machine, loads of coffee. So just*
438 *all stuff that I like, without, like, influencers... I feel like my personal training*
439 *account is totally different though. It comes up with 'suggested for you' all the*
440 *time and there will be like someone with their butt sticking out and I'm like, ugh.*

441 *Interviewer: Ah I see...*

442 *S: But it's just knowing who not to follow. (Sonia)*

443 This brings us to the second research question. If we are to agree that women have agency in their
444 encounters with social media, how then do they strategically navigate the semiotics of the digital?
445 And how do they give meaning to this process? We now turn to examine the practice of 'digital
446 pruning'.

447 [Digital pruning: the strategic design of social media 'worlds'](#)

448 The women in this study were highly media literate and regularly offered well-formulated
449 deconstructions of problematic social media content. Moreover, they were keen to explain how
450 they put their ideas about harmful messaging into concrete actions.

451 *I normally unfollow as an act of defiance, if I think someone is selling something*
452 *like skinny teas or like, skinny coffee or like, you know, those slightly awful like... I*
453 *instantly unfollow when someone does that. Purely because I think it's like a*
454 *political action. But um yeah so I'm quite good at unfollowing. Or if I think*
455 *someone is putting out a message that is damaging to other people... yeah*
456 *sometimes I'll unfollow as a little vote (Maddy)*

457 The women interviewed were highly attuned to both what they consume online and what they
458 produce. In this respect, participants talked about taking personal responsibility for the content
459 they follow and the messages they absorb, a cultivated form of consciousness that came about as a
460 result of repeated self-reflection and personal growth. As Sarah and Eve suggest:

461 *Social media is a good place because at the end of the day... it sucks that the 21st*
462 *century relies on it but that's just how it's gone and that's just how it's happened,*
463 *but if you're in a position where you're understanding and knowledgeable about*
464 *what triggers you, what's good for you and what's harmful and you're making*
465 *social media a safe place for you, that's fine (Sarah)*

466

467 *Obviously you have to be quite careful with who you follow. Because when I was*
468 *ill, I was like on pro-ana sites and all that kind of thing. So there's a lot of negative*
469 *stuff on the internet and you can follow a lot on Instagram where you're like,*
470 *"well I'm never going to look like that" ... so I'm quite careful. Somebody*
471 *mentioned like, Instagram is your personal magazine, and you curate your own*
472 *magazine. And I try and do that with it. So I try and make sure that it's, like, a*
473 *healthy place for me to be, instead of somewhere where there's like loads of*
474 *people calorie counting and being like, "this is what's in my food" or "this is my 4*
475 *hour workout" I try not to follow that but yeah... it is a balance (Eve)*

476 We have developed the concept of 'digital pruning', a new theoretical contribution and heuristic
477 tool to describe the process and practice of sifting through and unfollowing content that triggers
478 undesirable affect and negative state of mind. Digital pruning is framed by participants as an act of
479 self-care, requiring sustained reflection and evolved self-knowledge. This skill is acquired through a
480 long-term investment of effort, as it would often take participants a period of time to come around
481 to the decision that certain accounts were harmful to their wellbeing, as feelings of admiration
482 could occasionally mask feelings of inadequacy or insecurity. As Lily describes:

483 *Not everything you see is like how it is so I just disassociate myself with certain*
484 *things because I know that I can't... like recently my boyfriend has suggested that*
485 *I go through and mute and unfollow just people I don't know, people that trigger*
486 *me, people that I'm like... I am a lot better but sometimes you're looking through*
487 *people and you're like "god look at her she looks incredible, wow" just in*
488 *admiration but if I'm constantly seeing these things it's going to stick in my head*

489 *that I don't look like her. So I just mute people and unfollow them. So I did and*
490 *now I don't see those people come up anymore and it's quite nice (Lily)*

491 The participants in this study, many of whom had engaged with pro-ED content when they were ill,
492 viewed social media as a personal and political project of the self. While all participants who used
493 social media expressed pride in having developed healthy, connected and socially conscious digital
494 spaces, it became clear during interviews that this process had been one of trial and error. Like a
495 vaccine, women seemingly had to experience at least a small dose of negative affect, in order to
496 make the decision to protect against it.

497 Significantly, digital pruning was also framed by participants as a skill. As Maddy noted, 'I'm quite
498 good at unfollowing'. This attitude was reflected in a conversation with Jess, who explained:

499 *I think in terms of harms, like I said before, a lot of people will misinterpret their*
500 *place or misinterpret what they should actually be doing [um]... that there's a hell*
501 *of a lot of non-personal trainers that decide to sell fitness programmes and that*
502 *can be very frustrating [um]... but I think any harm of social media isn't*
503 *intentional. I think nobody apart from potentially skinny teas and companies like*
504 *that, they are there to take advantage of hypes, they are there to take advantage*
505 *of trends, but that's kind of a business and to some extent that's what all*
506 *businesses do... I think in terms of individual people there are absolutely brilliant*
507 *people and as long as you can remind yourself exactly why you are there and*
508 *what you are there for and what your aims are, that you are not this person, you*
509 *shouldn't aim to be this person, like, either their lifestyle or how they look. There*
510 *aren't necessarily any negatives. It's only really a negative if you are very easily*
511 *influenced (Jess)*

512 In this passage, Jess acknowledges the existence of harmful trends on social media that may
513 promote diet culture (skinny teas) and unrealistic beauty ideals, however she emphasises that it is
514 the individual's responsibility to not be influenced by this kind of content. Within this logic lies the
515 implicit assumption that everyone is equally capable of engaging with the critical and highly
516 conscious practice of digital pruning, to weed out unhelpful or potentially damaging messaging.

517 And for those who are not able to successfully ‘manage’ their affective relationship to social media,
518 abstinence is viewed to be the best option. Ella is one of two participants in the study who chooses
519 not to use image-based social media platforms. Here, she explains some of her reasons:

520 *I chose to get off Instagram and it has been really the best thing that I have done*
521 *and stuck to in the past couple of years. Not seeing those bodies lifting- that*
522 *typical body that I want, that kind of thick bum, thick legs, lifting.... “she lifts” kind*
523 *of mentality. I just had to get away from it (Ella)*

524 In this excerpt, Ella describes how certain images and certain bodies on social media created an
525 environment which she could no longer be a part of. In this regard, Ella’s relational understanding
526 of her own body alongside the bodies of others worked together to produce an affectual experience
527 that contributed to a negative sense of self (Coleman, 2008). However, instead of engaging in the
528 time consuming and affectively laborious practice of digital pruning, she decided to sever her
529 connection to the social media platform itself. Such an approach relies on the individual recognising
530 that messages promoted through social media are potentially having a negative effect on their
531 wellbeing, as well as resisting the social pressure to participate in social networks.

532 Discussion

533 Our findings explore how female weightlifters in recovery from eating disorders use social media as
534 a liminal form of agency, to sustain recovery and positively support wellbeing. Furthermore, from
535 this data emerged the practice of digital pruning, which describes the individual process of sifting
536 through and unfollowing content that prompts negative affect. Digital pruning, we argue, opens up
537 an interesting discussion for thinking about who is expected to take responsibility for harmful or
538 triggering messaging on social media. In what follows, we explore the wider implications of digital
539 pruning as a subjective practice.

540 For the women in this study, choice and the ability to design their online ‘worlds’ was central to
541 sustaining recovery, as they reported to often encounter unhelpful or damaging content in their use
542 of these platforms. However, it could be argued that this emphasis on individual culpability and the
543 strategic negotiation of risk through ‘digital pruning’ is problematic in numerous ways. For one, it
544 places the task of content regulation firmly in the hands of the user, which reflects a
545 characteristically neoliberal sensibility. While ‘neoliberalism’ has multiple definitions and meanings

546 in a variety of fields and substantive contexts, here we define it as ‘the conduct of conduct: a form
547 of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons’ (Gordon, 1991:
548 2), emphasising that individuals should take up responsibility for maximising their own potential,
549 rather than focusing on collective gain or structural change. Thus, instead of defining this term
550 according to specific set of political and economic rationalities, here we refer to a neoliberalism as
551 kind of *subjectivity*, which has come to permeate the logic of everyday life (Gill, 2008; Gill and
552 Orgad, 2018).

553 Due to the intersections with neoliberalism in the wider socio-political climate, contemporary
554 hegemonic western feminisms are defined by choice, individual culpability and personal
555 empowerment (Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2009). This cultural shift is characterised by the theory of
556 ‘postfeminism’, defined by McRobbie as “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and
557 80s come to be undermined... while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed
558 and even well-intended response to feminism” (2004: 255). Crucially, postfeminist rhetoric
559 champions individual agency above all else, with little nuanced acknowledgment of the socio-
560 cultural factors, influences and motivations that shape action (Budgeon, 2015; Gill, 2008). In this
561 regard, women are viewed to be autonomous agents, making choices free from the constraints of
562 inequality or structural power imbalances (Gill, 2007). In this regard, while the women in this study
563 regularly encountered problematic and potentially damaging messaging on social media, there was
564 a coherent sense among participants that it is the responsibility of the individual to avoid this
565 content (by ‘unfollowing’, ‘muting’ or ‘blocking’ certain accounts) and maintaining their own
566 wellbeing.

567 This is perhaps unsurprising when many interventions in this area take a similarly individualistic
568 approach (Gill, 2012). In this regard, body image researchers have done a great deal of work around
569 developing media-literacy interventions to combat disparities in critical engagement with online
570 content (Jeong et al., 2012). These interventions generally target ‘at risk’ groups (such as young
571 women) and aim to protect them from harmful media-effects by equipping them with the
572 knowledge and skills to mindfully assess, analyse and create content online. However, this
573 neoliberal logic of personal responsibility and the notion that we need to make young women more
574 resilient to media-effects is a supposition that surely absolves platforms, advertisers, and those with
575 the greatest influence from culpability (Gill, 2012). When speaking with participants, there was a

576 concerning sense in which this emphasis on choice and personal autonomy prevented any form
577 collective action against the systemic structural inequality that underpins toxic messaging. In this
578 regard, digital pruning and the underpinning 'choice' narrative espoused by participants, serves to
579 depoliticise inherently sexist or anti-feminist messaging, as well as reprivatise issues that have only
580 recently become public and collective (Gill, 2007; McNay, 1992). In this respect, as a novel
581 theoretical tool, digital pruning captures both the everyday practices and the socio-culturally
582 informed *subjectivity* that gives shape to contemporary relationships to new media

583

584 It is noteworthy that, for participants, digital pruning was framed as a skill. This assumes that
585 women will be able to acquire the ability to successfully navigate harmful content through a
586 concerted application of effort, discipline and practice. It is unclear whether developing self-
587 awareness and knowledge of one's own interior workings through therapy is a significant factor in
588 ensuring individuals are able to successfully engage in digital pruning. With regards to the women in
589 this study, just over half of the sample had (at one time) accessed support for their eating disorder
590 through inpatient/outpatient treatment or therapy. While there was no discernible difference in
591 'skill' between participants who had and had not received treatment, more research is needed to
592 understand the relationship between mental health support and relationships to social media.

593

594 In this respect, while we argue that women have agency in their engagement with social media and
595 regularly make conscious and experience-informed decisions about the content they view, there is
596 no guarantee that individual evaluations will always have positive outcomes for wellbeing. As Gill
597 aptly summarises, "the project of critique, dissection, comparison and deconstruction seems to rely
598 upon a model of the subject as unified and rational... it relies upon the idea of subjectivity as
599 coherent, rather than split or contradictory, with the assumption that affect follows knowledge in
600 rather a neat and obedient manner" (2012: 740). In this regard, women do not necessarily all have
601 equal access to the internal resources required to successfully engage in digital pruning as a
602 practice, and while the women in this study effectively manage their engagement with social media
603 and maintain positive wellbeing, this may not be true of other populations. Further research within
604 the realm of digital health and literacy is needed to understand where these inequalities lie, as well
605 as how digital pruning practices are successfully managed and maintained.

606 Conclusion

607 In this paper, we demonstrate how online worlds can be mindfully and intentionally constructed to
608 support positive health and wellbeing for female weightlifters in recovery from eating disorders.

609 This research reaffirms the degree to which the digital is embedded in health-seeking practices,
610 sustaining the everyday practice of recovery by providing access to a liminal and immanent form of
611 agency.

612 Our notion of digital pruning serves as a novel heuristic tool to explore an individuals' process of
613 sifting through digital content and designing their online space. This paper therefore lays a strong
614 foundation for future studies in the fields of sociology and new media and has the potential to
615 meaningfully inform how future research at the intersection of women's wellbeing and social media
616 approaches user agency. Moreover, extending beyond women's wellbeing and the digital, while the
617 specific behaviours of our sample may be not immediately generalisable to other populations,
618 digital pruning offers a new theoretical contribution and a useful conceptual lens for approaching
619 other groups' strategic use of social media to personalise online environments.

620 In our discussion of digital pruning, we point to the socio-political contexts in which this practice has
621 emerged as a set of skills. In particular, we are critical of the neoliberal rhetoric underpinning
622 discourses that place the responsibility for content regulation firmly in the hands of individual users.
623 Such an approach serves to absolve social media platforms and advertisers from accountability and
624 reproduces neoliberal sensibilities which favour the development of internal resources over
625 collective action. Furthermore, inequalities that exist with regards to the emotional and educational
626 resources available to individual actors surely inhibits many from engaging in the time consuming
627 and emotionally demanding practice of 'digital pruning'. Nevertheless, an awareness that some
628 populations of women are successfully negotiating and maneuvering in this online space - in some
629 cases to aid in their recovery from eating disorders - is in and of itself an important and significant
630 finding and points to fertile ground for further research.

631 While this article makes a novel contribution to literature on the everyday navigation of digital
632 media, more research is needed which theoretically and methodologically integrates both user
633 agency and the dynamic architecture of social media platforms. We argue that designing qualitative
634 methods that capture the transportable, scanning, in-the-moment nature of everyday technology

635 use, will provide access to new data on how social media use intersects with understandings of
636 health and subjectivity (Hayles, 2012). In this regard, rather than assessing technology as inherently
637 'good' or 'bad' for specific populations and groups, more is gained by exploring how technology use
638 changes and adapts depending on user needs, value-systems, circumstances and experience.

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ⁱ Pro-eating disorder (pro-ED) is a type of content that advocates for eating disorders as a legitimate identity and lifestyle choice. Subgroups of this form of content include pro-ana (pro-anorexia) and pro-mia (pro-bulimia).

ⁱⁱ An ‘influencer’ on social media is someone who has a large audience or following and is able to persuade others by virtue of their social capital and reach.