Abstract: Online social interaction has become integral to contemporary social life, adding new dimensions to how young people learn, interact, and perceive themselves and one another. We present findings from a yearlong ethnographic study within a Scottish state secondary school to explain pupils’ informal social relationships. We particularly investigate how school pupils experience social life inside and outside of school in relation to presenting themselves on social media and consider how they negotiate the overlap between their online (social media) representations and offline (school) encounters with their peers. Our findings evidence that pupils engaged in self-presentation within and across online and offline social contexts, whilst experiencing pressure to ‘keep up appearances’ between the two. The online environment afforded pupils greater control over self-presentation, especially in relation to bodily appearances. Here, pupils had time and tools to construct idealised fronts and to amass online capital. In some circumstances, this capital could have exchange value within offline environments. However, young people were at continual risk of having their carefully constructed identities discredited when in an in-person setting. We explore these issues in relation to pupil health, wellbeing, and learning, and we consider how educators may respond.

Keywords: social media; self-presentation; the body; schooling; youth; ethnography; Bourdieu; Goffman

1. Introduction

The teenage years are intense and highly influential in relation to identity construction [1,2], with perceptions of the body and bodily appearances being very influential to a young person’s sense of self [3]. Body dissatisfaction and pressures to embody an ‘ideal’ appearance can also be particularly strong during adolescence [4]. Within neoliberal societies, bodily ‘perfection’ often centres on narrow and predominantly gendered ideas of beauty and virtue, linking strongly to one’s identity and sense of belonging, and these discourses often implicate young women especially [5,6]. Social pressure to attain and maintain an ‘ideal’ body can be omnipresent, especially when ‘ideals’ become associated with being a ‘good’ person—happy, healthy, confident, successful, and self-disciplined [7]. For example, McRobbie [8] highlights how perfection becomes an expectation for young women, tied up in definitions of femininity that relate to appearance but also to how one lives so that they are under pressure to achieve ‘it all’ through personal effort, sacrifice, and financial investment. These discourses of individual responsibility are persuasive, with self-guilt and anxiety potentially afflicting both those who feel they fail to meet such ideals and those who do appear to embody ‘perfection’ (which is always precarious) [5]. Young people can feel especially troubled when they hope to embody a particular image but lack the opportunity, choices, or resources to do so [9].

Body ‘ideals’ are constructed and negotiated across a range of social contexts, one being formal education, and research evidences the intensity and lasting impact that
schooling experiences can have on one’s sense of self [10]. The socially competitive school environment can intensify pressures to embody perfection, with young people experiencing strong bodily scrutiny within this setting [11,12]. Within schools, bodily appearances are often linked to social status, popularity and attention [13,14]. The school environment also facilitates the development of peer relationships, another important aspect within adolescent identity development, where peer acceptance and validation are highly valued [15]. Young people can also become acutely aware of negative social outcomes that can result from not conforming to body ‘ideals’—for example, gossip, name-calling, or peer isolation [16]—and can become unsympathetic not only towards others but towards their own perceived ‘shortcomings’. For example, when investigating school physical activity experiences, Knowles et al. [14] evidence girls singling out specific parts of their bodies that they hate and long to change, considering their self and their bodies to be of little value. The body, therefore, can be symbolic of the self and something which young people become alienated from, with primacy given to ‘self-policing’ outward appearances at the expense of inward feelings, emotions, and sensations [17,18]. Such routines of bodily self-surveillance and self-scrutiny and feelings of body dissatisfaction and anxiety can also become normalised by teachers, the curriculum, and pupils [19].

The avenues through which young people form relationships and construct and negotiate bodily knowledge and perceptions are ever-evolving. Therefore, it is important to understand the wider social, cultural, and political landscapes that underpin school life [20]. Beyond formal schooling, digital and online spaces are increasingly powerful forums for ‘public pedagogy’ [21]. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, are especially influential digital spaces where young people form meanings around their bodies, and these are now ubiquitous in young people’s everyday lives [22]. These platforms facilitate social interaction and can become an extension of the face-to-face school social environment. Creating profile pages, sharing, liking, and commenting on content therefore become important social processes for young people, allowing them to connect with friends, while removing barriers to interaction such as distance and time [23]. Boyd [24] explains how young people lacking online presence can feel isolated from significant social events. As such, social media becomes an important site for seeking affirmation, acceptance, and popularity despite any associated risks such as ridicule or cyber-bullying [22].

Social media is also a significant site for identity construction where young people create (intentional and unintentional) impressions of themselves in front of potentially large audiences and intense public scrutiny [12,15]. Experiences of social media also influence how young people perceive themselves [23]. Here, they might make comparisons with others’ lives, resulting in feelings of inadequacy [25]. These feelings can be especially strong when individuals compare themselves not only to famous celebrities or influencers but also to peers whom they consider to have similar opportunities and resources to themselves [26]. Although individuals might underestimate how others tightly manage, censor, and embellish online representations of their bodies or lifestyles, many people do engage with online social spaces because of these possibilities for strategic and flattering self-presentation [25]. For example, Yau and Reich [15] evidence young people engaging in strategic self-presentation on Facebook and Instagram, with girls especially wanting to appear ‘attractive’ and attempting to achieve popularity through engaging in photo editing.

Social media is also home to a wealth of body-related content with sites such as Instagram being home to large fitness and health communities comprising many fitness ‘influencers’ who regularly post visual content about how to achieve the ‘perfect’ body [5]. Camacho-Miñano, MacIsaac, and Rich [27] have examined how young, school-aged women engage with fitness content on Instagram and have investigated how this shaped their experiences and subjectivities. The young women in their study were regularly exposed to exercise-related content including images of slim, toned, and fit bodies accompanied by ‘inspirational’ rhetoric related to self-improvement. This exposure encouraged participants to see exercise as an ‘aesthetic labour’ and to believe that continual bodywork is necessary
to ‘be happy, confident and powerful’ (p. 659). Whilst some individuals actively search for such content, others can be exposed to it inadvertently through algorithmic means. As Sandford and Quarmby [28] highlight, people create networks on social media through their shared interests, leading them to share similar content and be exposed to more of such content, which serves to reinforce particular discourses and beliefs.

In all, research has long evidenced that bodies and bodily appearances are important within schools, with this being especially pertinent for young women [29,30]. However, the ways in which young people are interacting are constantly evolving and changing. Research is increasingly examining how engagements with online social spaces affect people’s identities and their relationships with, and perceptions of, their own and others’ bodies [31]. The present study aims to bring such research together in order to consider young people’s engagements with online social spaces in relation to the school environment and to consider how young people construct their identities and negotiate social relationships within and across these two inter-related contexts. Specifically, we consider how school pupils experience social life inside and outside of school in relation to presenting themselves on social media and consider how they negotiate the overlap between their online (social media) representations and offline (school) encounters with their peers.

**Theoretical Insights**

Throughout this paper, we explain young people’s engagements with social media and their interactions within a school context by synthesising the work of Bourdieu [32] and Goffman [33], particularly when attempting to explain the mediating role of the body and physical appearances within identity construction. Bourdieu [32] argued that the body offers insight into a person’s inner nature, becoming an indicator of “moral uprightness” (pp. 192–193). In order to achieve bodily ‘excellence’, individuals must remain vigilant of their bodies and consciously labour to cultivate, maintain, and manage the ideal appearance through a variety of practices such as dieting, exercising, skin regimes, hair styling, and cosmetic surgery [34]. Striving relentlessly for perceived perfection can consume a lot of time, energy, and thought space [35]. However, if people are aware of the “material or symbolic profit” that might be gained from investing in such self-presentation, they might consider such sacrifice worthwhile [32] (p. 202). Here, the body becomes a currency (physical capital), affording or denying individuals certain privileges, and influencing how people are categorised, labelled, and positioned socially (social capital).

Physical and social capital can be built through strategic self-presentation. Goffman [33] explains how individuals are continually aware of the presence of others (their ‘audience’) when constructing their identities. External appearances become part of an individual’s ‘front’ whilst ‘audiences’ glean clues from how people look to inform their judgements about who that person is, what they are like and how worthy they are [33]. Goffman’s work also implies that individuals aim to project an idealised impression “close to the sacred centre of the common values in society” [33] (p. 36). Therefore, wider social forces also influence how individuals monitor, manage, and regulate their bodies [36]. This can be especially pertinent for women since the female body is so often objectified and commodified within societies, leading girls and women to judge and perceive themselves from an observer’s perspective, with such judgements mediating their actions and their thoughts and feelings about themselves [37]. Similarly, within post-feminist cultures, femininity is often perceived as a bodily property [38]. Here, women are considered to have an active choice in presenting themselves as sexual subjects, and self-policing and disciplining practices around the body are framed as empowerment, without acknowledgement of the surrounding power inequalities and constraints that women and girls are subject to. These post-feminist values around the body dominate within digital health cultures especially [27,39]. For example, Elias and Gill [40] explain how beauty apps intensify the surveillance of women’s bodies, becoming tools through which young women learn to forensically scrutinise, self-monitor, and work upon their bodies. Lavrence and Cambre [41] similarly highlight how now normalised practices such as engaging in photo-editing and
image filtering enhance the objectification of young women’s bodies so that their appearances are intensely dissected both by themselves and others, with appearance validation being framed as ‘empowering’. Interestingly, their findings evidence how young women can be strongly affected by images they know have been edited, meaning they emotionally respond to such images as if they were real.

Social media, photo-editing software, and beauty apps do allow individuals more control over how they appear to others. However, even when engaging in tightly managed self-presentation, individuals cannot completely control their audiences’ interpretations. Therefore, social interaction is inherently risky—especially when an individual attempts to manage self-presentation across multiple contexts [42]. To explain this further, physical and social capital exist within structured and bound socially inscribed networks and arenas (“fields”, as Bourdieu [32] named them). These fields comprise social positions, divisions, and power relations informing meanings, norms, and values, which shape the construction and negotiation of status (capital) within them [43]. School pupils constantly interact within the social field of the school whilst forming their identities, an informal social network of young people all socially connected through their common association of belonging to their particular school. Status (physical and social capital) is anchored within but is not confined to the school as a physical location. Therefore, young people also navigate online fields such as those formed within social media platforms, which entwine and overlap with the school social field [44]. Online environments can be significant socialising spaces for young people but also arenas where identities and power relations are constructed and established both distinctly from and in connection with offline environments. Here, online and offline identities become ‘blended’ as individuals construct versions of themselves online which influence and merge with their offline identities, impacting how they (can) act offline and how others perceive them in subsequent offline social interactions [45,46]. As Chambers and Sandford [23] argue, young people’s identities are constructed across a variety of spaces—online, offline, and in many cases, hybrid spaces with fluidity between these arenas.

2. Materials and Methods

This research was part of an ethnographic study exploring young people’s learnings around health and the body. The lead author was immersed in a school environment to negotiate and build relationships and gain genuine and nuanced understandings of socio-cultural practices within the selected (state) secondary school in Scotland. During this time, data were collected via participant observation, supported by informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. Data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1. Procedure

Participant observation was used as an ethnographic tool to ‘get close’ to participants and their everyday situations [47]. To achieve this, the lead researcher—a qualified teacher herself—was positioned as a teaching assistant in a state-funded comprehensive secondary school in Scotland, located in a suburban area with a school population of around 1200 pupils. The majority of pupils were White, with smaller numbers of Black and Asian pupils. The school population was of mixed socio-economic status. The lead researcher adopted the position of teaching assistant for 2–3 days per week for the period of one academic year. During this time, she assisted with teaching and learning during curricular Physical Education lessons, as well as engaging in extra-curricular activities and after-school events. Her aim was to, as far as possible, experience life in the school as an ‘insider’. As a participant observer, it was important to build rapport and develop a trusting relationship with pupils and staff. To do so, she thoughtfully and reflexively observed and engaged in conversations with participants while being fully committed to her role as a teaching assistant. Conversations and observations were subsequently noted in a field journal. These notes formed ‘pen portraits’ of participants and social groups, how individuals and groups interacted as well as non-verbal communication and
spatial behaviour. Importantly, these notes were taken privately during the school day, then expanded upon as soon as the school day ended. This afforded time to ensure that descriptions were as ‘thick’ [48], full, and accurate as possible.

After an initial period of time (6 months) in the school to understand context and build relationships, a combination of paired and focus group qualitative interviews were conducted with pupils, selected through an organic process of purposive and volunteer sampling. Several interviews included pupils whom the researcher had built rapport with. However, the majority were selected using the field notes to identify pupils of different ages, gender, social backgrounds, and friendship groups, ensuring to include those who claimed to be actively engaged with social media on a regular basis as well as those who engaged with it more passively. In order to make all participants feel comfortable during the interview process, all groups/pairs were single sex, and participants were interviewed in friendship groups. This resulted in 14 interviews of between two and six participants and which included 21 girls and 19 boys aged between 12 years and 17 years (8 participants in early adolescence, 21 in middle adolescence, and 11 in late adolescence).

The interview questions were initially based around how pupils interpreted and formed meaning in relation to health and the body and how they perceived and engaged in social relationships within the school. For example, participants were asked questions such as how important is your body’s image to you, what does it mean to be healthy, how do people make friends in school, how do you want others to see you, and where do you feel most comfortable socialising? Questions were also related to themes that emerged from the participant observations—for example, issues that participants had mentioned in previous conversations. Given that many of the participants had previously spoken at length about their engagement with social media, this became a significant topic of discussion during the interviews. Questions did not necessarily investigate pupils engagements with specific social media platforms but focused more on the pupils’ experiences and perceptions in relation to social media in general and the interplay between this and school social life. At the time of data collection, pupils cited Instagram as being especially popular amongst the pupils in the school. Following consent, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted an average of 45 min.

2.2. Data Analysis

Field notes and interview transcripts were analysed in similar ways. First, they were read and re-read in order to take initial notes, and data were sorted into smaller units of text, a process similar to ‘open coding’ [49]. Categories were initially descriptive—for example, ‘pupils defining health’ or ‘references to social media’—and were later more inferential, e.g., ‘desires for affirmation’ or ‘healthy as fashionable’. Raw data were continually revisited to ensure that nothing was being taken out of context. With time, some categories were collapsed into one another (if they were too similar), and some were grouped together under over-arching categories, thus becoming sub-categories. Once observation field notes and interview data had been organised into categories and subcategories, abduction was then used to further explain the data. Abduction involves reinterpreting or re-describing a specific concrete event or statement as something more general and abstract [50]. For example, a pupil tugging their t-shirt down to ensure no bare skin was visible may, in some contextual circumstances, be reinterpreted as that pupil attempting to conceal a stigmatised body. At this stage, a variety of theoretical explanations were critically analysed, compared, contrasted, and integrated to develop credible and plausible explanations. There was then a process of working backwards from the data to consider explanations for what was seen or heard. Questions were asked such as the following: Why did what we observed happen? What caused it to happen? What enabled it to happen? Layers of explanation were constructed to form a picture of how the various identified influences may have interacted, reinforced, and contradicted each other. This whole process was supported by the two co-authors who regularly posed questions to explore and ‘test’ the lead researcher’s interpretations [51].
2.3. Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity was important when collecting and analysing data. The lead researcher was a young woman (in her 20s) who had the experience of being immersed within a sporting culture where ‘thin’ bodies were idealised and of experiencing body image pressures herself. She personally engaged with social media but was not an overly active user of it. Whilst some of the lead author’s personal experiences may have strengthened her insight as a researcher, care was taken to protect against constructing an account where the researchers’ own experiences overpower participants’ voices [52]. This was done by continually reflecting upon how the lead researcher’s own perceptions, experience, and identity may have influenced the research data, with the second and third authors helping to problematize this and ask critical questions.

There is a very strong representation of young women’s voices within this paper, despite both boys and girls being observed and interviewed. Girls spoke much more extensively about issues relating to the body in general and issues relating more specifically to the body within online social spaces. Although research has evidenced that young women can especially feel under pressure in relation to bodily appearances and identity construction on social media, it is possible that the lead author’s identity as a young woman influenced the extent to which she intuitively noticed and interpreted the nuances of boys’ talk, behaviours, and interactions compared with those of girls. It may also have impacted how boys perceived and related to her and how open and comfortable they felt speaking with her.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

The British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines [53] were adhered to throughout the study, and the university ethics committee granted ethical approval. Voluntary informed consent was sought from all participants, their parent/guardians, and the participating school prior to their involvement in the study. Some additional ethical considerations were required in relation to participant observation, and particular care was taken to ensure participants would not be negatively impacted upon by being observed [54]. Material disclosed by participants, advertently or inadvertently, was only reported if it would not cause harm to themselves or others and only when it was possible to keep the identities of those observed and referred to completely anonymous. Pseudonyms for participants have been used throughout the paper.

3. Results and Discussion

Four themes explain the participants’ bodily practices and perceptions as they engaged in informal social relationships within and across online and offline social contexts. First, pupils felt that their bodies were hyper-visible and hyper-surveilled on social media and within the school setting. Second, this led them to tightly control their self-presentation and bodily appearances by constructing an online-idealised front. Third, they were then able to amass online capital (physical and social) which, in some instances, they could exchange within the face-to-face school environment. Fourth, being coherent across both contexts was important with pupils embellishing the body to an acceptable—i.e., believable—extent but avoiding any online–offline discrepancies that could lead to their identity being discredited. Each of these themes is discussed before suggesting implications for those working with young people in the school setting.

3.1. Hyper-Visible and Hyper-Surveilled Bodies

The body was central to how pupils formed meanings around and attributed worth to themselves and others and to how they exercised power within the school. They valued physical capital in the form of bodily appearances and could convert this to social capital in the form of friendships and popularity. Friendships were claimed to be “the thing that gets you through school”, and without friends, school life would be “shitty”, “horrible”, “boring”, and “depressing”. Pupils were acutely aware that perceptions and judgements of
physical attractiveness were considered to be representative of both self and social status and, resultantly, “pretty much what people judge you on”. Pupils felt “judged” by a variety of body-related aspects such as “what you wear”, “how you are dressed”, “if you have nice hair”, and “prettiness”.

Perceptions of the body were also central to pupils’ engagements with social media. Pupils engaged with a variety of social media platforms and claimed that both their own bodies and those of others were viewed and visible ‘everywhere’ online. They felt constantly bombarded by pictures of their peers, celebrities, athletes, and fitness influencers as the following conversation with a group of 16–17 year old pupils implies:

Researcher: Do you think things like social media make you think about your body?
Chloe: Hm, so much... like seeing people, like especially on Instagram you always see people.
Lucy: You always see people.
Emma: Seeing people, like on Instagram, if you follow like famous people...
Chloe: ... there’s accounts which are like fitness motivation and stuff... I follow some of them and they all have like loads of pictures.
Lucy: Yeah they just upload like constant pictures of girls that are literally just like perfect.
Emma: But then scrolling through your feed you always see pictures of girls with like abs and stuff like that.

As Chloe explained, she purposefully ‘followed’ specific accounts or pages where pictures of the (usually ‘perfect’ types of) body were circulated. However, other pupils reported coming across such content more inadvertently, complaining that it was “tiresome” always seeing “selfie after selfie, after selfie” or pictures of other people shared by their peers. It could be that their continual exposure to ‘algorithmic media’ [55,56] led them to be exposed to a lot of bodily images within their online ‘feeds’, many of which were framed as ‘perfect’.

With the hyper-visibility of the body came hyper-surveillance. Pupils reported using social media to scrutinise pictures of others, claiming that “social media is for looking at other people basically”. Scrutinising other people’s bodies involved making very detailed comparisons between themselves and close friends, pupils from other peer groups and schools, and online celebrities and influencers. These pupils frequently engaged in ‘upward comparisons’ [57] by comparing themselves against those perceived to be ‘better’ than them, illustrated in the following exchanges:

Chloe: But like other people my age, other people our age, I’d be like oh I wish I had their body.
Lucy: Yeah so much.
Emma: Yeah, like you know from different schools.
Researcher: Okay, so people from different schools, would that be people you follow on social media?
All: Yeah.
Researcher: ... So how does that make you feel when you see their bodies and you are like oh I want to look like them?
Chloe: How do they do it, like what’s their secret? ... Like I dunno, there is a girl who I am really good friends with who works like so hard to get a good figure and she’s got like such a good body and I am like I wish I had the determination... you’re like oh why don’t I have that determination?
Lucy: Yeah like she goes to the gym like 5 times a week, she’s got such a good body, literally.
Emma: Yeah like when we asked her how many times she went to the gym, cause we had never spoken to her about it, and then she told us that I was like oh God, I should probably go a bit more, like it makes you feel bad that you don’t go as much I suppose.

Lucy: And she eats so healthy as well though, like she’s just like, she’s got her health like on point but it’s like hard work.

Upward social comparisons led them to feel frustrated and disappointed with themselves when they did not live up to their own expectations, especially when they considered other people to have met these. In all, a culture of detailed scrutiny and judgement was normalised online. This culture was mirrored within the school environment where pupils felt they were constantly being ‘judged’ by others to “the furthest extent possible” and that this was just part of school life. As Freddie (aged 13) claimed, “It’s just the way things are and will always be... everyone is judgemental”. Katie (aged 17) also claimed that “everyone more has their guard up in school”. Feelings of judgement and scrutiny influenced how comfortable these young people felt (or did not feel) within the school setting, with some reporting feeling ‘on edge’ as they walked along corridors or through social spaces.

Perceptions around the depth and detail in scrutiny strengthened pupils’ self-conscious feelings, and the body ideals that pupils upheld were very comprehensive and specific. Pupils, especially girls, not only wanted to be a certain size or shape but also wanted to develop certain lines, grooves and very specific features and looked for these in others. For example, Natalie (aged 13), referring to her upper arms and biceps, stated, “it is better if you don’t have a bulge”, meaning too much muscle. Then, pointing along the inside of her bicep, explained, “it is okay if you have that line here like Lisa [another pupil] has, but not a bulge”. Natalie and her peers also talked about their desires to develop certain lines along their rib cages; looking for selected bony protrusions along their hip and collarbones; and wanting to develop specific lines and indentations in their stomachs as they sought after “faint abs”. Pupils were also very particular about the ideal facial appearance. For example, Charlotte (aged 13) asserted a jawline “should not be too long or too short and round” desiring hers to be more “angular” whilst also explaining how she would like to change the arch of her eyebrows and stating the importance of having flawless skin, “smooth with no spots or bumps”. These ideals were often difficult to attain ‘in the flesh’. However, as the following section explores, pupils found that they could be met much more easily within the online realm.

3.2. Hyper-Controlled (Online) Idealised Fronts

Pupils had enhanced control over self-presentation within online social spaces compared to when in school, adding further dimensions to the aforementioned practices of bodily scrutiny and social comparison. The young people in this study considered it very important to have control over ‘published’ images. For example, those posting ‘selfies’ explained that they would practice their poses, experiment with angles and lighting, apply various filters to images, and use ‘apps’ or photo-editing software to edit their pictures. Some online social spaces had in-built features for doing this such as pre-selected and easily applicable filters that could enhance and alter images. As observation field notes describe:

The girls are chatting about an app which can alter appearances in photographs. I ask them what the app does and they respond: “it can make faces thinner and eyes bigger and it changes cheek bones so you can see them more”; “it makes you look prettier and slimmer”; “if you use it, you can see these bits more [pointing to her collarbones] so it looks like they stick out more and the same with here [puts her hands around her ribcage], you can see the lines between the bones more” (field note).

Young people have long employed strategies such as wearing make-up or flattering clothing to create an ‘idealised front’ [33,58]. However, within a contemporary context, these pupils had access to new possibilities to help them to emphasise and replicate
appearance ideals, many of them ‘unreachable’ ideals that would only have been previously possible to achieve through drastic measures like extreme dieting or plastic surgery. They could now use digital tools to embellish the ‘good’ parts of their bodies and hide the ‘bad’, therefore super-aligning to dominant body ideals rather than challenging them. It was mostly girls who spoke of engaging with such apps, which is perhaps unsurprising given that these technologies have been theorised to intensity the self-monitoring and aesthetic labour so central to post-feminist culture [40].

The more aligned an individual was to societal body ideals, the more they would be socially rewarded online. Therefore, pupils often embarked upon digitally altering their body in search of social approval in the form of ‘likes’ or positive comments. For example, Charlotte (aged 13) explained:

When you put your picture up, you are waiting for people to like it or comment. If they don’t I will change it a bit then put it back up again [laughs].

Crude measures such as numbers of ‘likes’ were used by pupils to ascertain how worthy they and their bodies were in comparison to others and they experienced pleasure and social reward when enacting idealised roles online. Significantly, sometimes these were rewards they did not usually receive offline. As Mollie (aged 12) explained, “people tend to compliment you more on social media than in school”. This helped her to feel “quite accepted” and “kind of good” about herself. The online environment provided a social space where she was told she was beautiful and felt popular. This contrasted with her offline experiences where she endured body-related teasing and bullying. For example, Mollie and her friend Mia (also 12) explained how unkind comments about their appearances at school influenced how they felt about and valued themselves:

Mia: I mean after being bullied you kinda you don’t know where to … what to think … if you’re fat or if you’re normal or… Cause you get people telling that it’s perfectly normal but then you kinda think back to when you got bullied and you kinda listen to the bullies and yeah.

Mollie: Cause em, cause there is so many different people that have bullied me I will start, like I have started to think, well what they are saying must be true cause it is so many different people saying the same things.

Digitally working on the body and interacting within online social spaces can help young people like Mollie be who they want to be and to more easily perform the roles that they would want to play were there no external constraints on them—achieving what Zhao et al. [59] (p. 1830) describe as their “hoped for possible self”. In one sense, this could be considered to be a playful practice [21]. Pupils could use the online environment as a means to creatively experiment with who they were and what they looked like, playing at being ‘acceptable’ or ‘attractive’—roles which were difficult for them to perform offline. Despite being heavily manufactured, pupils were afforded increased ‘freedom’ in relation to their bodies which was not so constrained by their own physicality [60]. However, these are not necessarily roles that these young people would intrinsically desire to play were they not concerned about the opinions and acceptance of others. Further, for pupils like Mollie, the exchange value of accumulated capital was largely limited to the online context. They could amass social capital in the form of compliments from others, visible approval or ‘likes’ from peers and feelings of friendships and acceptance on social media platforms, but this contrasted with how they were treated in school and with the capital they were able to accumulate offline.

3.3. Accumulation and Exchange of Online Capital

For some pupils, online capital did have exchange value offline, carrying ‘real life’ consequences. This makes sense when we conceive the school social field to overlap with the field of social media [23]. Girls explained that it was possible to build up an online reputation of being “really pretty” or “really hot” by amassing social capital in the form of followers, ‘likes’, and public comments from others. These indicators became a form of
symbolic social capital, working to define and validate what was valued within the social field as a whole [44]. For example, Kaylee (aged 16) explained how those who “always look amazing in their [Instagram] photos” are pupils who others “look up to,” want to be like and “suck up to” in school. As Kaylee further explained, these pupils, who were very active within online social spaces and who received lots of online attention in relation to their appearances, also received attention in daily life, even from pupils in other schools:

Say they go to the boys’ football games on Saturdays and people know them, everyone knows them. Everyone’s wanting to speak to them (field note).

Becoming an online ‘celebrity’ led these pupils to be treated like ‘celebrities’ daily where they were accordingly admired and respected across numerous social contexts [12]. Further, as Tegan (aged 17) explained, once a number of people begin to think and indicate that an individual is beautiful and popular, other people seem to “latch on to that idea”. Therefore, pupils like Danielle (aged 15) claimed it was important to be “made out” to be popular and beautiful because, in a self-fulfilling fashion, that is what that person would become—both in online and offline settings.

Bowen [60] explores how online environments can become ‘rehearsal spaces’ for real life performances and encounters, for both performer and audience. By enacting a particular character online, individuals can gain more confidence to enact that role in the flesh and therefore play that role more convincingly. In Goffman’s [33] terms, they can be taken in by their own act, and so can their audience as the performer plays their role with sincere conviction. Additionally, an individual’s online performance can alter their audiences’ perceptions, expectations and frames of reference as to who that individual is and how they should be in the offline realm [45,46]. Nevertheless, since capital acquired online could be exchanged offline in some instances but not in others, it was clear that pupils could embellish or enhance their idealised fronts online but could not create a completely new self. They could not entirely segregate their offline and online audiences, and in many ways, what these young people could ‘be’ online was still largely constrained by who they were within the school. Physical and social capital amassed online only had exchange value for those who could ‘get away with’ performing their idealised identity, at least to an extent, in the flesh—that is, those who were at least somewhat valued both physically and socially in the first instance (without their online idealised front). Further, it was often those who were already popular offline who received lots of positive comments and ‘likes’ on social media so that social media amplified and bolstered the pre-established social norms and social power relations that were already in existence within the social sphere of the school [61].

3.4. Importance of Coherence across Online and Offline Environments

Strategically presenting the self is increasingly becoming a ‘normal’ feature of daily life within contemporary societies, and knowing how to negotiate this culture, in many ways, becomes a life skill [62]. As more pupils engage in practices like editing selfies, there is potential pressure on others to do so too, or do more, in order to remain socially competitive across school and online social fields. There was a consensus amongst pupils that it was common and accepted practice to alter self-images (“everybody does it”). Therefore, pupils were aware that much of what they were seeing online was not entirely ‘real’. Some also claimed they would feel uncomfortable if an unedited version of themselves appeared on their social media accounts:

Chloe: Like putting a filter on a photo…
Emma: Like on Instagram you can edit.
Researcher: Would you be happy putting pictures up without filters and things?
Chloe: No! [Laughs]
All: [laugh]
Emma: Probably not!
Lucy: It’s too like real. . .
Chloe: But they make your skin look more tanned everything.
Lucy: Yeah you just want to look better.
Researcher: So how does it feel when you look at a picture of yourself and you’ve put filters and things on it?
Chloe: You’re like oh like I look better in this picture yeah.

These pupils wanted others to consider them as having the ‘ideal’ body perhaps almost as much as actually having that body. They felt good and proud when they thought others viewed them as beautiful, even though they knew that what others were seeing was an embellished image. Embellishing the self was considered a normal part of online social interaction. As Goffman [33] explains, what is considered a misrepresentation amongst some groups of people or within certain sociocultural contexts can also be considered merely ‘decorative’ amongst others (highlighting for example, the socially acceptable practice of dying grey hair). In a sense, the online modification of appearance was akin to a new layer of decorative creativity in presenting the self, similar to wearing make-up. With the perception that “everyone” is doing it, there is potential for the young people’s frames of reference for judging one another to become altered. For example, with a belief that all have access to the same tools and resources comes a conclusion that those presenting the most idealised fronts are those who have a better ‘starting point’ to begin with as opposed to being the most skilled embellishers.

Although boundaries between private and public lives are becoming increasingly blurred within online environments [21], individuals often maintain distance from their audiences by presenting a ‘finished product’ to one another, meaning there are elements of mystification and uncertainty around the extent to which individuals have embellished or censored how they present themselves [46]. However, with image altering so normalised within pupil culture, pupils’ awareness of the relative (lack of) authenticity of images and online content was often viewed as acceptable:

Researcher: How do photo-shopped images make you feel?
Nadine: Ugly and fat. . . they are so skinny, they have nice faces and bodies and you’re just sittin’ there all fat and ugly.
Researcher: But if you knew they were photo-shopped, would that change it, even if you knew that’s not what they really look like?
Nadine: No. . . cause they are still being looked at in that way, people still see them as perfect.
Researcher: So if you saw a friend’s picture and it had filters on it but you knew that was not what they really looked like, would it still make you feel a bit rubbish?
Nadine: Yeah, cause they would be getting lots of likes and nice comments, like aw you look amazing. Then you put up something and you don’t get that.

Therefore, even if the ‘truth’ about a peer’s appearance was known, these young people still judged themselves against that person’s enhanced online image. This aligns with findings from research with young adult women [41] and shows that adolescents can also be well aware that an image is altered yet still respond emotionally to the image as if it were real. Pupils like Nadine evaluated others within the unrealistic online realm but significantly transferred the same standards of comparison to their evaluations of themselves within the flesh. This reveals a key dualism at the centre of such social performances. On the one hand, it was possible for individuals to feel jealous of what they knew and fully understood to be digitally enhanced appearance, yet on the other, the existence and power of such value-judgements of the virtual digitally enhanced self offered the possibility of a socially desirable front to be presented and curated by these same young people themselves.
While some embellishment was deemed ‘acceptable’, young people demonstrated a nuanced spectrum of acceptability between permitted embellishment and duping an audience. Some pupils complained about peers who “look completely different in their pictures than they do in real life”. For example, whilst a group of girls were talking about a peer who had digitally been making herself slimmer in photographs, one pupil claimed scathingly, “you could tell, cause it was all like bent in the background”. Again, similar to young adult women [41], images could be carefully edited but not obviously so. Interestingly, the young adult women in Lavrence and Cambre’s study [41] distanced themselves from what they considered the adolescent practice of obviously ‘trying too hard’ when editing social media images. However, the teenage women in our study were also aware that this was not socially acceptable. Since ‘audiences’, like the young people here, are aware that they are vulnerable to performers potentially misleading them, they often look for cues that contradict an individual’s claims about who they are. As Goffman [33] showed, a performer ‘caught’ playing a role inauthentically might have their positive reputation tarnished, might lose associated social rewards, and might also be slandered or ridiculed. Pupils explained that keeping up appearances within the offline realm was important so others would not make assertions such as, “she’s pretty in her pictures but in real life she is ugly”, and to prevent others explicitly outing and/or ridiculing the discrepancy between their online-idealised front and their actual self. The threat of being ‘found out’ can impact an individual’s emotional state, making them feel ashamed, humiliated, anxious, and distressed whilst also feeling inferior, disappointed in themselves, and bad about themselves as a person [63]. These negative feelings can manifest in individuals who perceive their image to be threatened or even at risk of being threatened. Therefore, constructing a coherent sense of self is important as it contributes towards an individual’s emotional wellbeing and how they feel about themselves. This had further importance within a school context as these pupils were seeing each other frequently online but just as frequently offline in the school environment.

In one sense, the process of constructing an online-idealised front could be a process of duping an audience and hiding an ‘actual’ self behind a digital façade. However, we must consider whether or not the young people themselves actually considered their embellished self to be a misrepresentation and, even if they did, whether or not that ‘misrepresentation’ was any less part of them than their supposed ‘real’ self [46]. These pupils protected their online representations of self, which were associated with positive and negative social implications but which were also part of who they were. Therefore, when a pupil’s online identity was attacked, threatened, or deconstructed, their emotions may have been just as negatively affected as when any other aspects of their identity unravelled. We could argue that there is no falsity in creating and enacting multiple ways of being, particularly when there are attempts and desires for these multiple ways of being to align and complement one another. Pupils may have been playing certain roles online or presenting themselves in particular ways, but that is not to say that such representations were not real. These self-representations had real consequences for how these young people lived their lives and had real feelings and emotions attached to them. As Goffman [33] (p. 43) claimed, while we could retain the common-sense notion that fostered appearances can be discredited by a discrepant reality, there is often no reason for claiming that the facts discrepant with the fostered impression are any more the real reality than is the fostered reality they have the power of embarrassing.

As such, the issue of concern is not about which facet of the self is more real and authentic than any other. Instead, it is about whether and how any facet of an individual’s self-presentation has potential to be discredited, damaged, and disrupted. This is especially so if it is an aspect of themselves that they hold dear, that they value and consider imperative to protect, and this can have very important implications for those working with young people in schools.
4. Conclusions

The findings from this yearlong ethnographic study have helped us to understand the nuanced ways that young people engage with social media, and how these engagements influence their bodily perceptions and body-related social actions within the school context. The study was initially exploratory in nature, and broad research aims narrowed and evolved as data were collected. This research design facilitated investigations into what participants themselves considered important and resulted in a rich picture of young people’s perceptions, relationships, and interactions around the body within a contemporary context. These young people’s perceptions of their own and others’ bodies were central to their engagements with social media, which involved them engaging in detailed scrutiny and making continuous comparisons. Many participants were highly skilled at embellishing their online self in order to gain social capital and to experience positive affect that they did not experience offline. For some, capital amassed online could be exchanged offline, but for others, this was not achievable, and there was always a risk of being ‘found out’ to have ‘duped’ their audience. This risk was ‘felt’, given that there were real consequences for them when threats were posed to their online identities and given that their online and offline identities were not separate—they were negotiated and constructed across many overlapping social fields (including the social field of the school). This point is critical to our findings; all of the young people’s engagements with social media had material consequences for them, their wellbeing, and their bodies, which ultimately affected their school experiences.

To build upon the insights gained in this study, there is a need for future research investigating more how boys’ and young men’s engagements with online social spaces are influencing their perceptions of the body and their body-related actions and social relationships. Research is also needed to investigate further the mediating influence of demographics such as age, social class, and race. The influence of specific internet sites, tools, and modes of interacting could also be explored, as opposed to examining the influence of online social spaces in general. Finally, since this study gave voice to those who were invested fairly heavily in maintaining ‘ideal’ appearances both online and within the school, further research exploring the perceptions of those resistant to such culture would be extremely worthwhile. Research is also required to examine in more depth what teachers are actually doing to address such issues and support pupils. Action research, which involves teachers developing responses suitable for their own contexts, would be especially enlightening.

How young people engage with social media (and digital technology) is relevant to and has significant implications for teachers, the curriculum, and future policy developments. Our findings support previous claims that schools, teachers and the curriculum will need to move beyond instrumental approaches that solely teach young people how to engage with digital technologies and social media safely [23]. Therefore, digital health education must pay attention to helping young people understand information accessed online, discern good knowledge from bad knowledge, and understand how and why information is shared. However, young people should also be supported to explore how they feel about themselves through this so that they become better equipped to navigate hybrid worlds in a way that supports their health and wellbeing. Further, they should be supported to critically inquire around the impact that technology can have on their embodied identities, their social relationships, and their health and wellbeing, and how their online practices impact their non-digital lives. When attempting this, researchers, teachers, and policy makers must better understand young people’s virtual lives, recognising that they are often inseparable from their ‘real’ lives and have real (physical, social, emotional, and mental) consequences. Therefore, we must widen our understandings of the concept of health and wellbeing, extending it into the digital world, and considering it in relation to young people’s identities, lives, inequalities, resources, social networks, and bodies.
Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.M., S.G. and J.K.; methodology, S.M.; data analysis, S.M.; writing—original draft preparation, S.M.; writing—review and editing, S.M., S.G. and J.K.; supervision, S.G. and J.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by Moray House School of Education and Sport Ethics committee (University of Edinburgh) (date of approval is 18 February 2015).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: The authors wish to thank the participating school and all participants who were part of this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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