

Call for Papers

Deadline February 1, 2024

Prof. Dr. Heike Steinhoff (Ruhr-Universität Bochum)

Prof. Dr. Katharina Vester (American University, Washington DC)

From Body Hacking to Body Activism: Redefining Bodies in Digital Media

Digital media has dramatically changed our understanding, knowledge, and experience of bodies. Body tracking apps and smart watches allow for new and intense practices of self-surveillance; social media platforms such as Insta and Tiktok present the constant work of body optimization as reasonable and desirable; selfie culture commonly serves to demonstrate willing compliance with new unachievable beauty standards. Filters, editing, lighting, and angling suggest that everybody can be brought into normative shape. Bodies are highly commodified when influencers link their accounts to LTK or amazon storefronts where products are being sold that suggest that youth, fitness, health, thinness, and beauty can be bought. Often pushing but not challenging the hegemonic fault lines of power established through structures of gender, race, and class, these new standards, technologies and practices produce continuously a (new) set of excluded bodies.

However, digital media also gives voice to these excluded bodies. New media with its seemingly less guarded access to substantial audiences outwardly has allowed more people to weigh in and created platforms for traditionally excluded bodies to be seen. It has contributed to a more diverse representation of bodies, given trans experiences a voice, made neurodivergency a household word and played a crucial role in the rise of body positivity and popular feminism in the 2010s. Thus, digital media have been employed to expose the systemic perpetuation of white male supremacy and ableism in body norms and the problematic social structures they produce. Activists increasingly aware of the complexities these forms of resistance entail, now call for "body justice," again using new media to create safe spaces for excluded and marginalized bodies to share their experiences.

We invite scholars and activists from the fields of cultural studies, media studies, gender studies, queer studies, critical race studies, American studies, literature, history, sociology and related disciplines, to join us for a 1,5-day-long symposium at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum from June 6 to June 7 to discuss their research on representations of bodies in digital media. The organizers are looking specifically for intersectional and interdisciplinary critiques of power produced through body discourses in digital media. Traditional presentations (lecture-format) should aim to be no longer than 20 minutes. We are also open to alternative presentation formats. Possible topics include:

- Mediated bodies and discourses of gender, race, class, age, nationality
- Beauty norms, gender, race and social media (including e.g. beauty instructions, mediated pregnancy, ageing, body activism, body positivity)
- Body justice and the (utopian) potential of new media
- Tracking apps, health apps, dieting apps, dating apps
- Selfie culture

- Hashtag activism
- Body hacking (smart watches and similar devices)
- Artificial intelligence and digital bodies
- Bodies and/in virtual reality
- The mediality of digital/virtual bodies

We ask prospective participants to submit an abstract (300 words) and a short bio by February 1, 2024.

The symposium is accompanied by a half-day-long workshop with students from high schools in Bochum discussing their experiences in new media and strategies to manage new beauty standards.

Contact:

Heike Steinhoff (heike.steinhoff@rub.de)

Katharina Vester (vester@american.edu)