# THE BODY IN PAIN ONLINE: EXPLORING DIGITAL AFFECT THROUGH USER-GENERATED SUFFERING

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## Abstract
Images of self-inflicted pain propose a dilemma for current thinking on the visual representation of suffering. As online platforms increasingly host a myriad of unfiltered, user-generated images of pain, the question as to how these images shape our imagining of violence, suffering and trauma takes on a pressing significance. Drawing on a series of interviews with the producers of self-injury imagery, as well as visual narrative analysis of Tumblr images and gifs themed self-injury, this paper explores how online images of suffering help place viewers into the skins of similar others and virtually embody the others' pain as their own. The potential of affective connectivity self-injury images entail calls into question the shareability of other's pain beyond apparent material shareability of digital imagery.

## Introduction
Three decades ago, Elaine Scarry (1985) stated that pain refuses to be shared. Unlike love, fear, hunger, or other emotional, perceptual, and somatic states, pain is fundamentally confined to an individual, thus uniquely unimaginable and unshareable. For Scarry, pain can only be imperfectly expressed through the visual, and viewers experience it only in a surrogate and voyeuristic manner. Three decades later, Scarry's argument is still relevant, yet takes on renewed significance as online platforms increasingly host a myriad of unfiltered, user-generated images of pain. Hostages beheaded or burned alive by masked militants, teens sexually assaulted and video-recorded by their classmates, and suicides broadcasted live over the Internet (so-called "deathcasting") are among such images that force us to bear witness to other's suffering hitherto hidden from public view.

To date, most discussions on the visualized suffering have focused on the violence against others, captured by, leaked to, and circulated by the mass media. Critical thinkers have concerned with the ethical implications of using and re-circulating such

images for political and pedagogical projects, as the visuals may distance viewers from the embodied experience of the sufferers and even let viewers feticize others' pain (e.g. Sontag, 2003; Butler, 2009; Dauphinée, 2007). However, there are as yet few critical explorations into how online imagery, especially *user-generated images of self-inflicted pain* generate new ways of imagining violence, suffering, trauma and death. How do pains portrayed by lay people inform our understanding of human suffering? What if the body is injured, photographed, and uploaded online by the very person inhabiting it?

Photographs of self-injury (SI) are among those enigmatic images that propose a dilemma for current thinking on the visual representation of (self-inflicted) suffering. Although SI has long been described as a symptom of mental disorder and thus seldom made appearance outside clinical settings, the advancement of online publication platforms has spurred the proliferation of SI imagery online. Researchers and clinicians have expressed concern that user-generated SI content, especially graphic portrayal of self-wounding, may be detrimental to those who access it (Whitlock et al., 2006; Baker & Lewis, 2013), while mass media has focused predominantly on potential risks of such content.

## Method
In response to dominant psychomedical and popular media approach, this paper employs a critical and interdisciplinary perspective to identify how SI images are actually perceived by those who self-injure and whether these visuals enable or disable the imagining of others' pain. The following discussion draws on empirical findings from a series of semi-structured online interviews with 17 producers of SI images conducted via email and chat, as well as in-depth visual analysis of 300 SI images uploaded on a micro-blogging network, Tumblr.

## Findings
Thematic analysis of participants' narratives reveals that the SI images often mobilize empathy and a sense of community among those who self-injure. For some image producers, photographs of their wounds and scars carry an exquisite memory of self-wounding that invite similar others to share their struggle. When they see others' SI images online, the visible similarity enunciated by the photographed bodies serves not only to evoke the awareness of the invisible struggle behind the wounds, but also to raise solidarity with the photographers. Participant narratives indicate that these images are often interpreted as a "visual proof" of the fact that there are others out there who have inscribed similar wounds onto their bodies, which allow them to alleviate a sense of isolation, alienation and fear.

Moreover, SI photographs are sometime conceived as a substitute for SI itself, especially when the viewers are triggered but not able to carry out SI due to situational constraints (e.g. when they are at school or at work). Some participants interpret SI images as "a placebo" that offer a catharsis and vicarious relief and thus help them curb the urges to actually self-injure. For these people, SI photographs help place themselves into the skins of others and virtually experience the pain to mitigate mental distress and agony.

## Discussion/Conclusion

Narratives of SI image producers indicate a potential of painful images to facilitate embodied experience among viewers. First photographed then circulated over digital network, hitherto pathologized bodies of self-injurers are transformed into the social currency (van Dijck, 2008) to be shared, vicariously felt and empathized. Unique affordances of online imagery are of particular relevance to this context: once uploaded, they become persistent, replicable, scalable, searchable (boyd 2010), and thus capable of soliciting affect among asynchronous spectators. With these new affordances and the resultant sociality of images, SI has entered into public imagination via a multitude of online voices, which potentially makes the pain of others imaginable and sharable – at least among those who share the same mental and physical pain. In so doing, the images transform the owners of self-harmed bodies, who have normally been represented by others (usually medical experts), into agents of their own images. This also suggests a potential of these images to be used for raising social awareness and mobilizing community efforts toward reduction of stigma and discrimination associated with SI.

However, once shared online, SI photographs can go outside the intimate circle of self-injurers. It is yet uncertain if the self-inflicted pain can have the same affective impacts on those who do not share the same experience and how witnessing self-inflicted suffering impacts the subject positions of the spectators. This paper concludes by questioning how online imagery of pain can be ethically used to counteract unshareability of pain and to stimulate active thought beyond apparent material shareability of digital imagery.

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