Standard Article

‘Hang on, why am I editing my photos?’ Disrupting the virtual gaze through selfie-editing workshops

Qualitative Research
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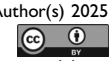

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Abstract
This article presents findings from a qualitative study that aimed to provide some of the first detailed accounts of how young people use selfie-editing apps, and the implications for young people’s embodiment, body concerns and wellbeing. In particular, the article introduces the method of ‘smartphone live capture’ in selfie-editing workshops as a way of studying the actual practice and meanings associated with editing in ‘real time’ with small groups of young people, which can also work to unsettle the normalisation of a ‘forensic gaze’. Participants described how the process of editing ‘out loud’ altered their understanding and experience of editing. Some registered a new sense of ‘strangeness’ about their self-talk while editing. Others described the method as assisting them to feel a sense of solidarity and unity with others: ‘I’m not alone’. Other examples showed how the process of editing alongside someone else helped them to see how critical others are of themselves, and to interrupt their own critical reading of their ‘flaws’ while editing: ‘I don’t see what you see’. Overall, through aspects of the workshop’s collaborative processes, including collective discussion and analysis, the selfie editing workshop method indicated possibilities of interrupting the silent, closed loop of identifying ‘flaws’, then resolving them through

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'correction', again and again. This method, we suggest, could thus open up the individualising impacts associated with selfie editing, which is usually viewed as a pathologised or risky practice harmful to body image and self esteem for young people.

Keywords
selfie, gender, images, qualitative, feminism

Introduction

Young people must navigate a rapidly changing digital landscape of self-presentation and appearance. The proliferating aesthetic standards of femininity as 'perfect' beauty are presented as normal and everyday in digital and social media content (Gill, 2023; Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2021). Young people are encouraged to 'optimise' themselves and undertake body work to improve appearance as a crucial form of (gendered) self-work required in youth cultures. Against this backdrop, image editing tools in specific selfie-editing apps like Facetune and Faceapp promise professional-quality photoshopping and airbrushing editing tools (see Cambre and Lavrence, 2023; Elias and Gill, 2018). They offer entirely new in-phone editing tools, including 'perfecting' the face and body, mimicking cosmetic surgical alterations, and 'playful' features including an 'ageing' filter and 'gender swap' tool. The new capabilities provided by these apps emerge at a time when body and image-based appearance pressures are a pervasive and enduring issue of concern for Australian youth (Mission Australia, 2020). This study sought to understand how image-editing apps and tools are understood and navigated as aspects of digital practice for contemporary young people. The cultural dynamics of bodily display on social media are contested and complex, and require careful attention to the relationship between bodies and images, and on- and offline contexts (Toffoletti et al., 2023). This article contributes to this area of study by exploring how the relationship between bodies and selfhood may be changing through image editing capabilities which are now 'standard' in all new smartphones, as well as dedicated image-editing apps.

This article presents findings from a qualitative study that aimed to provide some of the first accounts of how young people actually use selfie-editing apps, and the implications for young people's embodiment, body concerns and wellbeing. In particular, the article discusses the methodology and method of selfie-editing workshops as a way of studying the actual practice and meanings associated with editing in 'real time' with small groups of young people. This method asked young people to work in pairs, and to take a selfie and then show their research partner how they would typically edit it, while using the screen record function. These screen recordings were then shared with the researchers and used as data. This method was intended to provide a way for us to explore how young people understand and experience selfie-editing apps in relation to the embodied self. Through this method, we devoted particular attention to how bodily and social norms and inequalities are felt and navigated through the practice, and the associated visual digital literacies young people draw upon or develop during the process. As we will discuss, the method provided a range of rich and interesting data stemming from these questions. We also found that some unexpected themes and key points emerged through this method, where participants reflected on the impact or

meaning of the method of selfie-editing workshops as a way of offering insight to them, not just the researchers, on the meanings of their own practices as well as those of others in the workshop. In this article, we explore how the method of selfie-editing workshops, underpinned by the insights from feminist new materialist and participatory methodologies, might be used to not only provide new meanings and understandings of the digital editing of selfies for researchers and participants, but also produce new possibilities for collectivities and collaborations, and, crucially, the potential to intervene in and disrupt some of the sharply individualised discourses around selfie-editing and body-image concerns. First, we examine some key background literature informing the topic.

Selfies, young people and appearance-based pressures

Young people's preoccupation with selfies is often dismissed as frivolous and self-absorbed, or couched in pathologising terms linked with eating disorders, body dysmorphia, depression, low self-esteem and anxiety. For example, a psychological study widely reported in popular media links selfies with the 'dark triad' of 'narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathology' (Fox and Rooney, 2015). These arguments reveal traces of a moral panic, often with highly gendered undertones. They target populations that are traditionally more 'socially policed' such as women and youth (Burns, 2015; Senft and Baym, 2015). While a body of work in sociology and cultural studies has moved beyond these pathologising accounts and unpacked the social structures which contextualise young people's image-sharing practices (Abidin and Gwynne, 2017; Dobson, 2015; Tiidenberg and Cruz, 2015; Warfield, 2016), image-editing apps and features present relatively new techno-social developments, and are yet to be extensively explored in terms of the techniques, decisions and feelings involved in the specific practice of editing one's own self-images are. Recent studies by Cambre and Lavrence (2023) highlight the contradictory feelings associated with selfies, where participants would describe the process as 'fun' and moments later, as provoking loneliness, sadness or envy. The practice of editing selfies therefore raises particular questions about how young people navigate the dramatic capabilities for alterations and 'improvements' to appearance afforded by selfie-editing apps in a social media landscape that demands and rewards particular gendered, racialised and aged forms of visibility and styles of self-presentation.

Young people's embodied identity (including body-related concerns, or body image) is forged in relation to prevailing gendered and racialised body ideals (Coffey, 2016). These ideals are intensified through the heavily visually focused digital cultures of contemporary social media (Lupton, 2016; Reade, 2020). The proliferating aesthetic standards of 'perfect' beauty are presented as normal, natural and everyday in social media. Cultural studies accounts show how this pressure manifests in self-branding as an increasingly common-sense way of negotiating social digital media (Abidin, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2012). This study situates young people's selfie-editing practices in this context, wherein young people are encouraged to 'optimise' themselves through 'body work' to improve appearance as a crucial form of (gendered) self-work required in digital youth cultures. Feminist sociological literature has begun preliminary analysis of the capabilities of selfie-editing apps and their potential to exacerbate image-based pressures (Elias and Gill, 2018), but this work remains focused on the technological

features of the apps themselves, rather than on the practices through which young people make sense of and use selfie-editing apps. The tools for 'perfecting' and 'improving' appearance provided by selfie-editing apps are indicative of how technological filters are intimately shaped by social and cultural norms (Rettberg, 2014). The 'make me pretty' button in Facetune, for example, is a tool that automatically 'corrects' the user's facial features to appear 'more beautiful' in line with conventional cis-heterosexy femininity. Gendered and racialised bodily ideals which privilege heterosexuality and whiteness are 'baked in' to the design of selfie-editing apps (Noble, 2018), for instance through algorithms that automate skin lightening, Caucasian-ification of facial features including lips and eyes, and smoothing and de-wrinkling of skin towards youthfullness. This project sought to explore how young people understand and navigate the gendered and racialised dynamics of technological-cultural filters and editing practices.

The research builds from several decades of scholarship and theorising in feminist, queer and antiracist/critical race studies of the beauty industry and media representations (e.g. Betterton, 1987; Craig, 2021; Elias et al., 2017; McCann, 2017; McRobbie, 2015; Ryan-Flood and Murphy, 2024; Tate, 2005; van Zoonen, 1994). More specifically, it contributes to a growing body of research exploring young people's social media practices (e.g. Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Kanai, 2019; Riley et al., 2022; Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2021; Toll and Moss, 2021). Research indicates young people are developing highly sophisticated semiotic and social digital literacies as part of the everyday practice of negotiating contemporary digital cultures including refined capacities to differentiate and classify individuals, intensifying normative classifications of gender and race (Kanai, 2016). These image-based literacies also respond to the highly competitive structures of social media platforms (Marwick, 2015) which encourage young people to think about and guess algorithmic logics of image visibility and popularity (Carah and Dobson, 2016; Kant, 2020). These evaluative practices have been established in relation to digital 'meme' culture more broadly (Halliday, 2018; Kanai, 2016) but have not yet been explored in relation to photographic self-presentation cultures where their own bodies are subject to evaluation. We do not know what kinds of new literacies and norms young people are developing in relation to the practices of sometimes dramatic editing, retouching and filtering their own selfies. This means that we still do not understand how young people make sense of the explosion of self-and-peer produced digitally altered images in their own lives, and discourses in policy, education and other kinds of interventions often position young people as passive or pathologised receivers rather than creators of images.

Theorising embodiment in digital cultures

Our theoretical framework extends approaches in feminist and youth sociology and cultural studies which focus on the body and affect as central for understanding social and cultural phenomena (Budgeon, 2003; Coleman and Ringrose, 2013). We draw on a conceptualisation of 'everyday embodiment' to understand selfie-editing as an embodied digital practice (Coffey, 2021). This approach moves beyond understandings of the body as a 'blank slate' or passive receiver of social and cultural norms – the perspective that underpins much research on gendered body image (Coleman, 2009). Feminist scholarship has been at the forefront of developing new theorisations of the body's enduring

significance in digital cultural practices. A range of work has approached bodies and images as relational and affective (Coleman, 2009; Warfield, 2016), to understand how embodied experience is formed through 'intersecting modalities of practice: flesh, selfhood and cultural context' (Tiidenberg et al., 2020). Selfie-production has recently been explored as a 'socio-technical affective practice' (Hynnä-Granberg, 2022: 1) as a way of deepening understandings of the physical registering of tensions and ambivalences which abound in selfie practices (see Cambre and Lavrence, 2023; Tiidenberg et al, 2020). The concept of affect as embodied sensations helps to analyse the complexities informing digital embodiment, including the sensate dimensions mediating social relations between other bodies and images. This focus on editing as an embodied and relational affective practice gets us beyond the simplistic idea of selfies being a problem of 'culture' or 'technology' acting on young people and shaping their attitudes and self-esteem. Whilst acknowledging the real struggles and concerns they felt, this approach moves us towards an understanding of how young people 'materialise' their bodies through digitally mediated practices.

This framework places analytical focus on the dynamic and relational dimensions of digital and embodied practices. We use the concept of affect as embodied sensations as a way of studying the sensate dimensions mediating social relations between other bodies and images (Coleman, 2009) in the practice of image editing. This approach is used to account for the relational and embodied dimensions associated with a range of different editing tools to be explored; for example, from the mundane use of filters and light corrections to the intensive affordances of 'make me pretty' and cosmetic surgery tools, and 'playful' dimensions of 'gender swap' or animal filters (dogface). This approach foregrounds the 'embodied qualities of feeling' associated with bodily scrutiny in gendered neoliberal contexts (Coffey, 2021) to be explored, enabling us to study the affective push and pull informing editing practices as a significant aspect that shapes how young people experience body and appearance norms and read and evaluate images and navigate bodily appearance ideals (Kanai, 2019). This understanding of affect also foregrounds the *social* relationality of affect, in how it can create surfaces and boundaries (Ahmed, 2004) that can orient bodies towards individualisation and collectivisation.

The only research to date on the impact of selfie-editing on body image has used quantitative survey-based methods. Surveys have found that the use of photo editing applications can increase the acceptance of cosmetic surgery for women (Sun, 2020), and can detrimentally impact mood and 'facial satisfaction' (Tiggeman et al., 2020). However, these studies do not answer why and how selfie-editing impacts body image, because they do not ask participants, or critically analyse the social context informing selfie-editing. Given the profound significance of digital visual cultures of self-presentation in young people's lives today (Dobson and Delaney, 2023; Elias and Gill, 2018), it is critical to investigate how selfie-editing apps are understood and used in day-to-day life.

Selfie editing workshops and the 'smartphone live capture' method

We conducted 33 in-depth semi-structured interviews and 13 participatory 'selfie editing' group workshops with a further 56 young people aged 18-24 who take selfies, and who

use editing apps in Melbourne and Newcastle, Australia. As sociology and media studies scholars, all authors have experience researching related topics including young people's social media practices, embodiment and gender. Whilst we do take and post selfies as part of our own day-to-day lives, none of the authors had experience in using editing apps prior to commencing the study. This meant that whilst we were all familiar with the gendered landscape informing the demands of self-presentation on social media, we were 'outsiders' to the practices and techniques young people were using to edit their selfies. The project's methodology aimed to produce multiple different forms of data, including narrative (interviews) and visual data (edited selfies, photo elicitation and a new 'smartphone live capture' method to study selfie editing in real time in group workshops). These different approaches enable the relational dimensions of selfie-editing, including embodiment and sensation, to be explored, capturing the affective and hard-to-articulate processes by which selfies are edited by young people in the workshops, and the meanings made of the body, self and others. Following Taguchi (2012) and Coleman (2009) these approaches aim to highlight the significance of affective relations between images and bodies to show how young people 'materialise' their bodies through digitally mediated practices. The broader study used methods of in-depth interviews, selfie-editing workshops and focus groups to understand how the capacities and tools enabling dramatic self-alteration provided by image-editing apps are used and understood by young people themselves. In this article, we focus solely on the selfie-editing workshop method to draw out the particular affordances and significance of editing in this group setting. Most qualitative studies of selfie-taking are small-scale and use interviews or focus group methods to reflect on images of others, such as celebrities or influencers (Lavrence and Cambre, 2020). The key difference and innovation of this study is that it developed a new method to study the processes by which participants take and edit their own selfies. The 'smartphone live capture' method is a participatory visual activity and data collection technique in which participants used their smartphones to screen-record and narrate the process of editing their selfies 'out loud' in pairs with another workshop participant.

This enables participants' idiosyncratic practices and associated meaning making to be studied in 'real time'. There have been no studies that have used a workshop method that is able to study the actual processes and meanings associated with editing and crafting selfies. We designed the 'smartphone live capture' method to use in selfie-editing workshops in this way because during interviews we learned that participants were rarely using just one app, like Facetune, to edit images. Rather, they were using an array of different apps and tools, often toggling in and out of each one to utilise different editing functions. For this reason, we designed the study to make use of participants' own devices, rather than providing them with a tablet with a pre-loaded editing app, which we had initially planned to do. Most participants took a photograph in the workshop space and edited that photo; a small number worked on an existing selfie from their camera roll. Participants then volunteered to discuss their experience of editing with a partner in a whole-group discussion. Group discussion questions asked what it was like to use the apps; and how it felt to alter their bodies and faces with a partner; what they noticed about gender, race and other appearance-related norms through the filters and editing options. We were aware that discussions could connect with body image topics, which could be uncomfortable for some participants, particularly in a group setting. We were deliberate in not probing about themes related to individual body image or body concerns in the group discussion for this reason and were ready to steer the conversation to more

general topics about editing practices if the need arose. The management and facilitation of workshop interactions were also crucial to ensure participants are comfortable to engage in paired discussions and the group discussions which followed. The group discussion, as well as subsequent conversations one on one after the workshop with participants if they need to, provides an opportunity to 'debrief' and check in to see if they need further support. Any further use of the selfie-editing workshop method should also be aware of the need for a supportive framework for participants given the discussions related to body concerns in a group setting. This method differs from the widely used 'scroll back method' (Robards and Lincoln, 2017), which asks participants to narrate a past digital timeline. Instead, the smartphone live capture method asks participants to narrate a present aspect of their digital practice in real time, documenting the 'live' and present aspects of selfhood, image and the apps and tools they are using in their smartphone photo editing. The capture of real-time aspects of participants' personal platform practices through smartphone screen recordings extends and expands photo voice approaches to study the affective and relational processes (Coffey, 2021; Higgins, 2016) of digital practice, and can also be understood as a 'live method' for capturing the dynamics of everyday life (Back and Puwar, 2012). Workshops were facilitated by the authors in different pairs (the first three authors with research assistants in each location). One person would facilitate the workshop, while the other assisted in setting up video and audio recordings, managing participant forms and information, and managing the transfer of screen recording files securely at the end of the workshops app set–up and iPad functioning and managing the collage image files. Pair and group discussions were audio–recorded to capture how participants engage with each other and the app's tools, filters and features. Participants gave permission for their anonymised images and screen recording videos to be used in presentations and publications. Images and videos were anonymised by using the 'artistic tools' feature in Powerpoint. The project was approved by the University of Newcastle's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Participant details and analysis

Participants self-identified their gender and were predominantly cis-gender women identified as 'female' or 'cis woman' (56), followed by 'non-binary', 'genderfluid' or 'questioning' (12) and 'male' / 'cis man' (11). They identified as from a range of ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds, with majority as 'White Australian' or 'Caucasian' (41), or 'of Asian descent' (27). Most were studying at university and working and were from a range of class backgrounds, some with parents working in trade and mining industries, ranging to others from families with professional backgrounds as public servants, doctors and lawyers. Facetune was the most widely-used facial editing app used by the participants, with Snapseed, Meitu, VSCO, Lightroom and the built-in beauty filters which are now standard in newer Apple or Samsung smartphones.

We used established qualitative techniques of narrative and thematic analysis of textual interview data (Nowell et al., 2017), and visual analysis of photo elicitation and selfie images (Bell, 2012). These visual and textual analytic approaches focus on exploring the interplay between technological affordances of smartphones and editing tools and affective, embodied relations as central in guiding the meanings and practices of selfie-editing. These analytic techniques capitalise on the different forms of data

created by the mixed methods approach and foreground the role of bodily practices and affect in understanding the significance of selfie-editing apps in contemporary youth digital cultures. Interviews were fully transcribed by a transcription company, and transcripts were uploaded and initially coded using Nvivo software. Transcripts were coded by the research team as a means to organise the data and enabled early themes to emerge. Further thematic and narrative analysis was then undertaken by [blinded] which enabled the key themes we discuss here to be more fully developed and written. This included descriptive analysis, and case study narrative processes, where the researchers re-watched the video recording of interviews alongside the transcript and Nvivo codes, and wrote their own impressions and summaries of the interviews, incorporating their own embodied emotional and sensate responses to the textual and video data.

Findings: Tensions and opportunities in group selfie-editing workshops

In the analysis below, we discuss how the workshop methods shaped not only our understandings of selfie editing practices, but also participants' understanding of their own personal practices, and those of others. Participants described the process of editing with a pair, and discussing their editing in a group, sometimes altered their understanding of their own practices, and changed how they felt about it. Some said that editing in the workshop changed how they viewed the practice and introduced an element of critical reflection. Others described the method as assisting them to feel a sense of solidarity and unity with others: 'I'm not alone'. Other examples showed how the process of editing alongside someone else helped them to see how critical others are of themselves, and to interrupt their own critical reading of their flaws while editing: 'I don't see what you see'.

When we began the project, we initially expected that selfie editing practices would have a social dimension; meaning that participants would be familiar with and used to experimenting with editing tools and apps with their close friends as an extension of the kinds of digital social practices which are known to characterise young people's visual digital cultures (Boyd, 2014). However, participants told us that the practices of selfie-editing were almost always done 'privately', and carried significant baggage as an activity which could lead them to suffer significant judgment or vilification for being 'narcissistic', vain, or 'fake' (see also Gill, 2023). At the same time, we heard that it was 'assumed' or 'expected' that most people's selfie images posted online would have been edited or 'touched up'. The 'trick' often described to us was to be skilled enough for the editing to be 'undetectable' (see Coffey et al., 2025), with the consequences that if one's editing was thought to be recognisable, this was often characterised as humiliating for the subject. We thus ensured in recruitment that it was clear in the description of workshops that participants would be editing 'in real time' with others. At the conclusion of the first workshops we asked what it was like editing with someone else. We did this to check to see whether participants were comfortable undertaking the paired editing discussions and to ensure that the activity was not causing undue stress or discomfort, in line with our ethical responsibilities to care for participants' welfare. Group discussions where participants reflected on the process of editing 'out

loud' in a pair highlighted editing practices as involving solitude and involving an internal thought process; participants noted almost always editing images while alone.

Participants generally described being initially 'tentative' about what it would be like to edit their own images and discuss the process in a group setting because the practice is generally private, personal and not shared about openly:

> Irene: Efditing for me, it's a very personal thing to be honest, you just do it on your own time whenever you want to.
>
> Bridget: For me, I feel it's quite a normal part of my life and I recognise it goes on a lot in social media usually with more celebrities and stuff. But it's good to talk about it with other people, and I think it's fun sharing like seeing how people edit their photos versus how you edit yours. (Workshop 9, Melbourne)

These admissions showed that whilst being a 'normal' or everyday practice, there was also the sense that discussing editing with another person was transgressive or unusual. Participants discussed how the process of speaking about editing and narrating their editing decisions felt different and unusual too.

Seeing editing as 'strange': Collaborative editing as intervention

Below, Sandra's example illustrates how editing her photo with someone watching on made her aware of how the process of applying a filter is usually a 'subconscious' process. Editing with another person interrupted the 'act' of editing and brought the actual practice of editing to her attention:

> When you're the person showing how you edit the photos sometimes it does put it into perspective for you because a lot of the time editing is just this subconscious action, like we take a picture and we think "Oh, I'll just pop that filter on and do this", like that's just a normal thing, but when there's someone in front of you watching I think you're more aware of what you're doing and you kind of take a step back and think "Oh wow, what am I doing? … Why am I doing this?" [Sandra, Workshop 8, Newcastle]

Similarly, the process of being witnessed editing with another participant in the workshop was described in the group discussion between Katy and Jacinta, where the thoughts, motivations, or senses that accompany their editing processes are usually obscured, or left unexamined. At this point in the workshop, the discussion between participants is particularly dynamic. The interactions between the three participants, but particularly between Katy and Jacinta, below, shows they are so 'in tune' they are finishing each others' sentences constantly. Below, Katy discusses how the activity where she edited her selfie and described the changes aloud to Jacinta, raised an awareness of the 'internalised self appraisals' she 'automatically' has when using the editing tools to 'correct' her image.

Katy: The thing is for me that's blowing my mind right now is if I didn't come to this [workshop] I would not be thinking this at all. I know deep down that it's messed up that I have these internalised like negative, like self-appraisals about myself, and I always internalise problems. If I didn't come to this I would not be thinking this at all.

Jacinta: Because it's just autonomous, like this is just it, you don't really sit down and go "Hang on…

Katy: Yeah, that's what I mean…

Jacinta: …why am I doing this?".

Katy: …there's no space in life where I sit down and think, why am I editing my photos. Even after you post it I never think *why did I do that*, and that's like weird because there's no opportunity to self-reflect, it's just – it's instant gratification, you do it, you move on, it's out of mind out of sight…

Jacinta: Yeah.

Katy: …you never think about it again, unless like with me, like that haunting image that I have…

Jacinta: [laughs] I want to see the image again.

Katy: …but like no, it's just there's no time to think about it, you move on.

Jacinta: Mm. [Workshop 8, Central Coast, group discussion]

In this example, the process of describing the practices and techniques of editing has the potential to interrupt what would otherwise be unrecognised or automatic. This new awareness is similar to how Steph discusses catching herself looking in the mirror ('this is actually it') through the method of digital photo-voice, which helped to register embodied practices differently with the potential to interrupt or challenge normative body-image discourses and affects like bodily scrutiny in the mirror (Coffey, 2023). We suggest that witnessing their own and others' selfie editing practices and associated body-image concerns creates the possibility of critically interrogating the practice, creating some distance from normative gendered body ideals that, until that point, may have been operating 'automatically' or beneath the register of being articulated.

In addition, the speed of social media image-posting rhythms mean there is usually no time or opportunity for reflection or interrogation of the practice of posting or reasons for editing; or to interrupt the negative self-talk which goes on internally via often unconscious ideas and embodied sensations. Katy further reflected that 'the moment' of editing became able to be examined, or apprehended, through the selfie editing activity with Jacinta. Katy articulated a feeling she often has while editing ('I feel gross, I hate my eyes') – which can be heard on the audio and screen recording accompanying her editing practices:

Katy: Ooh. I want to change… I think I did change my eye colour once.

Jacinta: Oh, did you?

Katy: I think I did.

Jacinta: What have you got, brown eyes?

Katy: I have ugly-arse… I have ugly brown eyes.

Jacinta: You don't have ugly…

Katy: I will never be comfortable changing my eyes, but I mess around with filters. [Workshop 8, paired discussion]

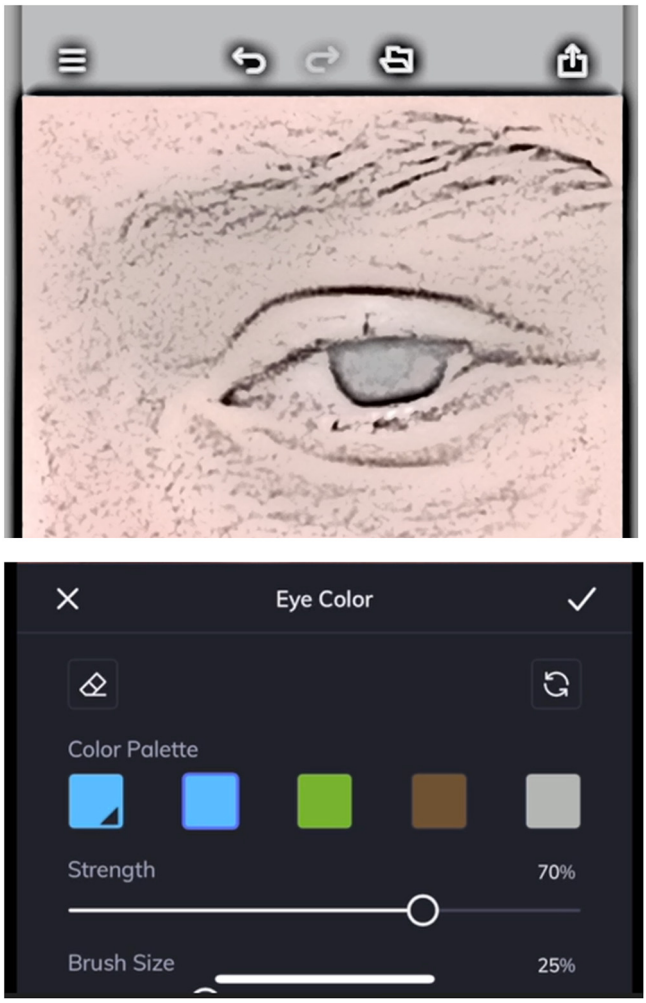

Image: Katy screenshot from paired editing; eye colour edit

She raises this point again later in the group discussion as a moment in which she realised and recognised her 'internalised' affective response of negative judgment where she 'turns on' herself and criticises 'flaws' in her appearance which run as an undercurrent

while she edits. She says she 'felt that [internalised criticism of appearance] over there', referring to the paired editing activity she had been doing with Jacinta:

> Katy: And then it's like I felt all that over there but I don't in the moment think why am I feeling this, it's always like reflective, like why do I feel gross about that, but it's…
>
> Jacinta: Yeah, I need to fix this, okay.
>
> Katy: Yeah, but there's no self-awareness, there's no conscious – it feels like an automatic response for me, like I don't know why, I'm thinking why did I feel gross about my eyes, because I was saying the other eye felt a bit dark and it was bad lighting.
>
> Jacinta: And you were saying like your cheekbone, like what's wrong with your cheekbone?
>
> Katy: Yeah, it's a learnt thing that I immediately turn on a certain image.
>
> Jacinta: But where's it coming from, like the initial response where you have these things that you want to fix?
>
> Katy: Yeah, because I'll say "Oh, my God, I hate my eyes", like I just felt this, yeah, internalised stuff. Yeah, now I'm reflecting it and I feel sad that I feel that way because it's my face and like no one else has my face. It's unique. [Workshop 8, group discussion]

Katy articulates how through this discussion she begins to question the 'automatic' negative judgments about her features and appearance ['why did I feel gross about my eyes?'] and realises that this undercurrent of running commentary usually causes her to 'turn on' an image or photograph of herself. At the same time, Jacinta is gently questioning and deconstructing Katy's negative self-judgments about her 'flaws' ['what's wrong with your cheekbones?'] and encouraging her to locate these feelings as coming from external pressures, rather than her own internal dialogue ['where's it coming from?'] Caucasian bias, including the idealisation of blue eyes, has long been an aspect of Western beauty ideals, and this is often coded into beauty filters (Riccio et al., 2024).

In this example, Katy's negative self-talk whilst editing is apprehended and critically explored collectively through Jacinta's supportive, yet questioning tone and gentle disagreement counteracting the negative judgments ['you don't have ugly eyes']. This is not necessarily to say that Jacinta replaces Katy's self-assessment with a more authoritative claim to truthfully describe her eyes, but that she offers a counter-gaze, a mode of interruption of this internalised forensic gaze. This method, through a collaborative analysis and critical appraisal of editing as itself a process, rather than a naturalised activity, potentially helped to complicate and interrupt the normative judgments informing the digital forensic gaze (Cambre and Lavrence, 2023) which selfie editing practices are premised upon.

Selfie solidarities: 'You're your own worst critic'; 'You realise you're not alone'

Other participants in a different workshop also discussed how the process of editing with another person illuminated how differently their partner would view their editing or perceived 'flaws'. Similar to Katy and Jacinta's interactions above, participants spoke

encouragingly to each other and were often surprised at what others saw as 'flaws' to be corrected. Chloe, for example, described being taken aback hearing Cassie's dialogue while editing, saying she would 'never notice' what Cassie had seen to correct:

> Chloe: I think it was interesting too like I know when I was watching Cassie edit there were things that she was doing and I was like "Oh, my God, I've never even noticed that about you", like "Oh, I'm going to smooth this out because I don't like this on my face", and I was like "I have never even had a second thought about that", you know me, like…
>
> Cassie: That's why I feel like your insecurities sometimes aren't necessarily something that people would notice but…
>
> Chloe: …it's good to do it to your own photo because at least it makes you feel better about yourself and nobody else will probably even care or notice.
>
> Sandra: Zac and I were also talking about that too, like I showed a recent photo of me when I went to the sunflower field and I was pointing out all of my imperfections, like I didn't like my arms, I didn't like this, and Zac goes "Look, I wouldn't even have noticed, I think you look really pretty" which was so sweet of him to say but, yeah, I think we are our own worst critic at the end of the day. [Workshop 7, Newcastle]

The experience of editing 'out loud' with others in the workshop showed participants that their private 'insecurities' and appraisals of features which require 'correction' through editing were usually imperceptible to others. This suggests that the digital-forensic gaze (Cambre and Lavrence, 2023) is particularly pernicious when it is directed to one's own face and 'flaws'. In Cambre and Lavrence's study, the concept of the forensic gaze is developed through analyses of celebrities' editing practices, where participants detected and discussed others' 'corrections'. Elias and Gill's (2018) concept of 'nanosurveillance' may be more useful here for understanding the implications of such intensive self-scrutiny when such forensic attention is turned on oneself. Gill (2023, p.94) articulates how the practices of selfie editing requires forensic appraisal of the self through a 'pedagogy of defect', which produces even more intensive forms of self-scrutiny for young women in particular.

The apprehension of others' intensive self-scrutiny in workshops, however, sometimes created new solidarities in the form of agreement and support for each others' 'struggles'. Participants in workshop 6 discussed how the support and encouragement from others after discussing their editing practices helped them to feel they are 'not alone':

> Chrissy: I feel like it kind of helped us be a bit more… Think about what we're actually doing. I don't think I've ever actually sat down and discussed…
>
> Amber: Yeah.
>
> Chrissy: And to know how I feel…
>
> Brittney: And you're not the only one.
>
> Chrissy: Feeling the exact same way. It's like, "This is actually normal."

Brittney: Yeah.

Amber: Yeah.

Sara: Yeah.

Chrissy: A nice experience for everyone.

Chrissy articulated how editing is not something that is usually discussed openly, and that the workshop helped her to feel that her private struggles and insecurities were 'actually normal'. The workshop discussion enabled the 'secret' or 'private' act of editing to be brought into the light, and gently disrupted or challenged by others who did not perceive the same flaws but could empathise with feeling the same intensive forms of self-scrutiny, pressure and judgement (Gill, 2023).

Validation and 'healing': 'How do I want to take up space online?'

Some participants found the experience of discussing selfies and editing in a group 'validating', and as offering a chance to collectively and personally reflect on 'their place' in an online visual culture. Marie, for example, discussed feeling a sense of relief that her perspective and experience was shared and understood by others in the workshop:

> I think sometimes, especially for young women, it can feel like that type of conversation, you are sort of dismissed or you are made to feel small or silly and that sort of stuff. Whereas having a conversation like this is like "yeah" [sigh of relief]. I think even though I don't believe that thinking a lot about your selfies is narcissistic or a silly thing to do or whatever, that can be the perception. …Having a conversation like [it felt] nice to know that you are in a place where people say something and it will be understood. [Marie, Workshop 8, Melbourne]

Marie articulates the cultural associations of selfie-taking as having 'vain' or 'narcissistic', aligning with broader gendered norms where feminised and youthful practices are devalued, ridiculed and pathologised (Dobson, 2015; Tiidenberg and Cruz, 2015). For Marie, the workshops provided an opportunity to discuss her experiences with selfie editing and to be 'understood' without needing to defend herself against these unhelpful cultural associations. In this sense, the workshops created a space for validation and connection.

Similarly, Avery and Una in a different workshop described the collaborative experience of selfie-editing workshops as 'healing', through offering the opportunity for reflection and camaraderie:

> Avery: I actually found this quite healing. I was unsure coming in but I felt like Una was a really generous listener and it's amazing what happens when you find yourself in [such a] lovely safe space…as I was talking things were just kind of coming out of me because this is not only about 'how do I edit or engage with the camera' but it's also like 'how do I take up space in online worlds', right? That gets to the very core. I think of a lot of young people at the moment [are] figuring your shit out, how do you take up space confidently, and it's, yeah, been really delightful to kind of unpack a little bit of that.

Una responded, affirming Avery's reflection and noting that her attunement also assisted them to think critically about the shame they felt:

Una: Yeah, it's been delightful, I think you were also a very good listener. I feel like the element of shame around vanity and talking about taking photos. Like people don't really talk about this… everybody is taking photos all the time of themselves, but if you're talking about it, like, that's weird, it seems vain. But actually thinking about it, talking about it, I don't know, it's made me feel a bit more hopeful about my relationship with this in general. I think it's been really interesting to not only hear about other peoples' experiences and how it's very similar to my own, but to like think about my experiences a bit more and be a bit more reflective about them. [Workshop 10, Melbourne]

Avery and Una, like Marie, described the workshops as providing a 'safe space' to discuss their experiences of taking and editing selfies and participating in online visual digital cultures more broadly. They said having the opportunity to think, talk, be heard and 'reflect' in a space with others who share understanding of the dynamics and tensions can counter any sense of 'shame' or assumption of 'vanity' that can accompany discussing taking and editing one's photos. Avery described the process as 'healing', and Una felt 'hopeful' about what her relationship with taking, editing and sharing photos of herself online might be in the future.

Discussion

Participants' reflections on the impact or meaning of their selfie-editing in these workshops worked to generate insights for themselves, as well as for us, as researchers. Amidst calls to 'love one's body' and be 'authentic' (Banet-Weiser, 2021) and the intense pressures of perfection that come with the visibility of bodies in social media culture (Gill, 2023), appraising one's body and its defects is a highly affective practice, the weight of which is usually not acknowledged in the deft editing work done in private, in a silent conversation with between one's own sense of body image and the editing interface. These workshops confirmed, alongside previous data collection for this project, that selfie editing is not only conducted alone, it is not discussed with friends, acquaintances or family. Users are invited into a step by step process that increasingly feels intuitive: first forensically examine the face, identify, then 'correct' flaws. Selfie-editing thus often operates as a seamless closed loop; spotting the 'flaw', quickly correcting it, and sometimes, posting it to supportive comments and likes by friends online. Making this inward work of self-perfection 'public' in a workshop amongst others with similar experiences and practices helped to interrupt this loop, bringing one's negotiation of such social contradictions into conversation with others. Workshop discussions showed how body image concerns could be activated – or apprehended – by participants as they edit their images in the workshop. As participants verbalised negative critical comments about their 'flaws' as they edit, bringing such feelings to the surface, this self-criticism and taking apart of the face into correctable components could be challenged supportively by their workshop partner. Participants described that showing each other how they edited their photos had the potential to trouble the surface of the finished edited presentation of self; bringing to light the private, 'subconscious' and 'automatic' comments and judgments that are not usually 'sayable'. Making the felt and personal aspects of image editing 'sayable' has some important implications.

Participants described catching and questioning negative judgments: 'hang on, why am I doing this?' Collaboratively, they recognised that others do no perceive their flaws in the same way: 'I don't see what you see'. This experience in the group workshop setting provided a sense of shared understanding: 'this is actually normal'. This in turn created a sense of validation and support through a shared position of knowledge beyond individual pathologising selfie practices, and body image concerns: 'I don't have to explain or defend myself'.

These examples align with the process described in a different study, where the method of photovoice invited participants to narrate images captured of intimate and everyday moments where they felt embodied sensations related to well-being. Steph, for example, described a 'private' moment in a bathroom mirror where she 'catches' herself in the mirror, side on, examining her waist, hips and upper bottom as she stands in her underwear. Steph describes how this experience, and the method that meant she was talking to me about it, the methodology of photovoice invited different insights into her own body and experience: *It was a fun, creative way to express myself. This is it, the feeling in the moment…* (Coffey, 2023, p.857).

As in the example of photovoice, selfie editing workshops invite different understandings of the practice of editing, produced in the moment and collaboratively with other participants. This approach and methodology aimed to foreground the 'embodied qualities of feeling' associated with bodily scrutiny in gendered neoliberal contexts to be explored, theorising image-editing as an embodied and relational practice which mediates identity. The affective methodology was intended to enable the aleatory and open-ended possibilities held in everyday life to register and reverberate. Such an approach aims to explore different register of experience – including sensations, embodiment, thoughts, feelings – and potential to communicate the unsayable – the 'feeling in the moment' (Coffey, 2023, p.857).

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge the sheer increase in images of beauty, and associated technologies of 'tweaks', 'improvements' and 'optimisation', as a routine challenges for young people who are seeking ways to feel more ease and comfort in their embodiment. But we cannot presume particular consequences simply from noting the expansion and entanglement of beauty industries and technology. This project methodology and the 'smartphone live capture' method has been developed from the premise that it is crucial to understand young people's everyday lives and negotiations of a media-saturated world in not just their own words, but also through studying their actual digital practices of selfie editing in real time. In particular, it is important to foreground the *relationality* that shapes the social and material experience of being addressed as a subject of potential beautification. We have identified here that the apps used by participants addressed them individually; further, discourses of 'authenticity' combined with images of 'perfection' foreclosed possibilities of collective discussion as self-editing was seen as capitulating, or 'selling out'. This posed particular problems for our participants as it became clear that selfie-editing is not simply about the *implementation* of gendered and racialised beauty standards, but revealed questions of wellbeing when such practices were veiled in shame and thus rendered private, unshareable (Gill, 2023).

This paper contributes substantively to understanding how the entanglement of photographic and social media technologies are lived, and in particular how ideals of femininity and beauty are experienced, negotiated and potentially resisted. As such it adds to and develops a longstanding tradition of critically interrogating the ways in which gender, sexuality, race and class are mediated, and the processes of self-surveillance and judgment involved. Furthermore through its real-time paired or group methodology it offers a hopeful case study for intervening in everyday embodiment (Coffey, 2021). We suggest that this selfie editing workshop method might provide an approach which can be used to disrupt or unsettle aspects of the critical forensic gaze through analysis of their own 'flaws' through aspects of the workshop's collaborative processes, including collective discussion and analysis. This, we tentatively suggest, might provide a way of intervening to disrupt some of the individualised discourses around associated with selfie editing, which is normatively understood in neoliberal socio-cultural contexts as a pathologised or risky practice harmful to body image and self-esteem for young women particularly.

The implementation of these workshops, we suggest, indicate how shifting this relationality – fraying the closed loop between user, beauty ideal and technological interface – allowed for a different positioning of young people, so that they were able to 'hear out loud' their own concerns, questions and critiques. In this way, we sought to build on feminist traditions of collective questioning of what appears natural and normal.

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