ME, MY SELFIE AND I

MWYO

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CONTENT

ABOUT US	04
BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES	05
METHODOLOGY	06
FINDINGS	10
ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION	18
SUGGESTIONS	23

WHO ARE WE

MWYO is a youth-oriented think tank. Established in 2015 by Mr. Ming Wai Lau to assist him in his role as then Chairman of the Commission on Youth, MWYO has grown and evolved into a policy research institute that studies issues affecting Hong Kong's young people.

Our mission is to listen to Hong Kong's youth, and channel their views and concerns into the public policy making process.

MWYO's past research covers a wide range of topics in youth development, such as sex and relationship education, financial literacy and independence, comparative and historical studies of youth policies and youth development strategies, and a Hong Kong-specific Youth Development Index. Its findings have been presented or submitted to the Government, secondary schools, tertiary institutions, libraries, charities, non-governmental organisations, youth associations, and other stakeholders.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

"Selfie" became an Oxford-recognized vocabulary in 2013, meaning "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website". A search on Instagram of #selfie reveals 350 million posts as of 1 July 2018, and it is not hard to see that they are dominated by images of young, attractive females. Selfiecity, a global project analyzing 3,200 selfies across 5 cities, found that women are significantly more likely to take selfies than men, and that the average age of selfie takers is 23 years old. While not a female- or youth-specific act, "selfie" does represent an aspect of contemporary culture that is especially popular among young females.

Incidentally, the act of posting selfies is increasingly associated with editing. For example, one survey found that Hong Kong young females commonly use the beautifying app Meitu to enhance their looks. This may be because females experience constant pressure from social media to attain beauty standards and alleviate body dissatisfaction. U.S. psychologist Renee Engeln has warned against girls' obsession to achieve beauty and called it "beauty sickness", that is, females pursue beauty at the expense of their wellbeing and the quality of other aspects of their lives, such as relationships and career. A recent study by The Women's Foundation suggests that "beauty sickness" is also a problem in Hong Kong. It is found that women who are saturated by media messages are more likely to be unhappy with their bodies, leading to low self-esteem, and 9 out of 10 women think about their weight all or some of the time. This begs the question: do women who edit their appearance in photos feel better about themselves (that is, have higher self-esteem)? More broadly, how does selfie-editing affect females' wellbeing as a whole?

While there is research on the harms of social media use on wellbeing (e.g., addiction, stress, anxiety, and lowered self-esteem from "Insta Lie", that is, using social media to present an ideal version of self and one's life to receive validation), no study has examined the relationship between selfie-posting and -editing with wellbeing. **The project studies if there is any correlation between editing and posting selfies with young females' wellbeing.**

Beyond research, this project hopes to achieve wider objectives of advocacy and awareness-raising on the need for media literacy education in Hong Kong. Selfie is merely one form of social media interaction. The bigger picture is that social media is omnipresent and is likely to remain so in the future. We cannot rely only on individual self-regulation to counter its power, especially not for this or future generations of young people who would have had exposure to social media since they were children. Our message is not only to young people, but also to parents, educators, NGOs, and the Government insofar as education and intervention is concerned. Boys and men should also be recipients of these messages, for their perception of women (which is invariably influenced by media) plays a huge role in reinforcing or breaking down gender and beauty norms.

The truth is each girl experiences and reacts to media-portrayed gender and beauty norms in their own ways. This project recognizes that this experience is necessarily personal, but is also profound to individuals. It hopes to plant the seed for self-reflection and empowerment. If it were to have one key message, it is that we understand all girls, at one point or another, will have gone through daily struggles before feeling comfortable with their bodies and being confident in themselves. Hence, the title, "Me, My Selfie and I".

METHODOLOGY

#01

THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED IN 3 STAGES FROM FEBRUARY TO JUNE 2018. STAGE 1 WAS A PRELIMINARY FOCUS GROUP STUDY. STAGE 2 WAS A SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE. STAGE 3 WAS A POST-SURVEY FOCUS GROUP.

STAGE 1
PRELIMINARY FOCUS GROUP

From February to March 2018, MWYO conducted preliminary focus group discussions among 21 females aged 16-21 in Hong Kong. Participants came from various cultural backgrounds. Some of them were from elite local secondary schools in Hong Kong, also traditionally known as "band 1" schools, while others were from "band 2" and "band 3" schools as well as international schools. Stage 1 focus groups provided preliminary findings on how Hong Kong young girls viewed beauty, body dissatisfaction, social media and selfies, and these findings helped to inform survey design.

STAGE 2
SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

From March to April 2018, MWYO commissioned Consumer Search Group (CSG), an independent market research company, to conduct a street-intercept survey among females aged 16-34 in Hong Kong. The survey was administered among a total of 1,010 respondents, with a 50:50 split of females aged 16-24 and females aged 25-34. The duration of the survey was about 20 minutes. Quantitative data was analyzed using factor analysis and path analysis.

METHODOLOGY

STAGE 3
POST-SURVEY FOCUS GROUP

From April to June 2018, MWYO commissioned CSG to conduct post-survey focus group discussions among 15 respondents, including 5 females of the ages 16 to 24, 5 females aged 25 to 34 and 5 male participants aged 16-34. These discussions gave elaborations on survey findings.

FINDINGS

02

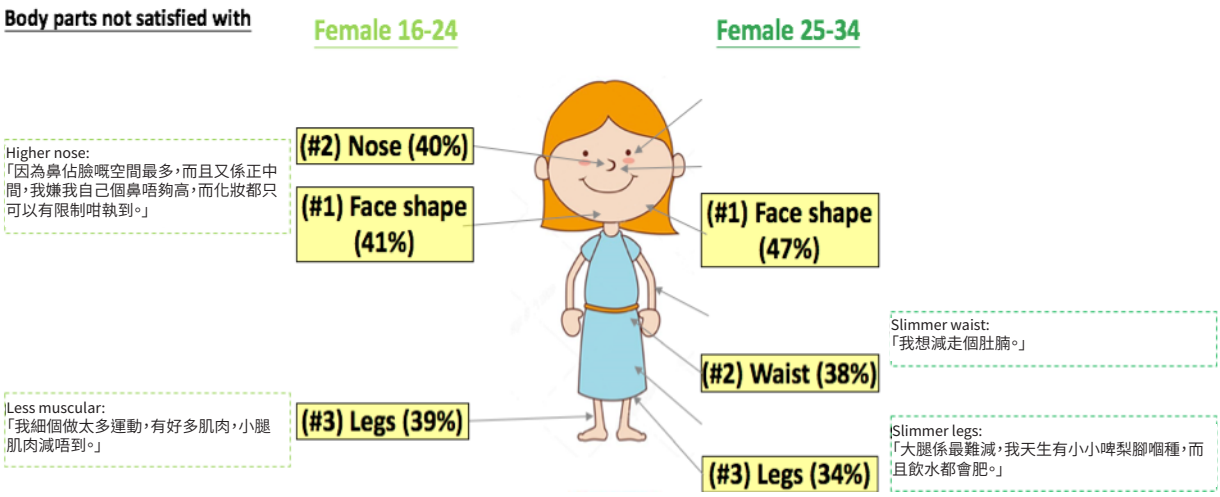
FINDINGS

THIS SECTION GIVES AN OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS UNDER TWO THEMES: (I) BEAUTY STANDARDS AND BODY DISSATISFACTION, AND (II) SELFIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA. THE NEXT SECTION CONSOLIDATES AND ANALYSES FINDINGS IN LIGHT OF THE CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION (THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDITING AND POSTING SELFIES, AND YOUNG FEMALES' WELLBEING).

BEAUTY STANDARDS AND BODY DISSATISFACTION

BODY DISSATISFACTION IS UNIVERSALLY EXPERIENCED BY FEMALES OF ALL AGES

Among all respondents, only 37% are satisfied or very satisfied with their physical appearance. Respondents gave facial features as the body part that they are most dissatisfied about, especially skin tone / quality. This is followed by body figure – even for the respondents with a normal BMI, most consider themselves to be fatter than they would like to be.

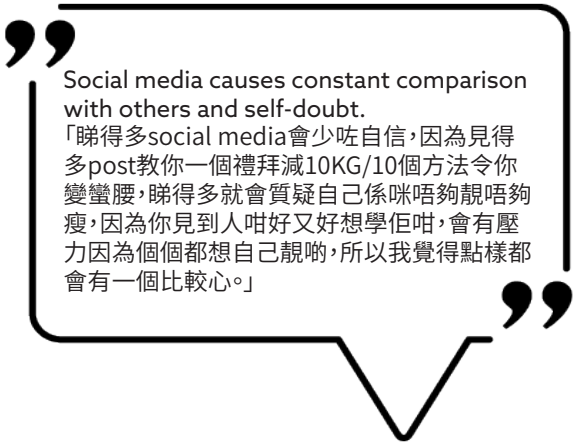


YOUNG FEMALES ARE MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE IN FEELING BODY DISSATISFACTION

Respondents of all ages attribute their body dissatisfaction to considerations about their own health, the opinion of their significant others, and peer evaluation, in order of importance.

Factor	% - all respondents	% - aged 16-24	% - aged 25-34
Your health	34%	28%	40%
Significant others	29%	25%	35%
Friends	25%	31%	18%
Social media	7%	10%	5%
Family members	2%	2%	2%

While social media is not the most influential in causing body dissatisfaction, younger respondents aged 16-24 are more susceptible to social media influence than those aged 25-34.



AGE ALLEVIATES BODY DISSATISFACTION

Generally, older females display less body dissatisfaction. A higher percentage of the age group 25-34 is satisfied with their appearance than the age group of 16-24 (39% compared to 34%). Three explanations are gathered from focus group discussions.

• One, females become more comfortable with their bodies over time. Among the older age group, quite a number of respondents said they have learnt to see what used to be "flaws" in a positive light, as flaws make up who they are as unique individuals. This process of realization and self-acceptance takes time and life experience.

• Two, older females place much less emphasis on the pursuit of physical beauty. Their notion of beauty derives equally from attributes not related to physical appearance, including self-confidence, health and career success.

• Three, older women are able to distinguish between beauty judged by society norms, and their value to a selected few who are important to them, such as their significant others.

WOMEN AND MEN EVALUATE BEAUTY DIFFERENTLY, BUT MALES' EVALUATION AFFECTS FEMALES

Women take into account character and temperament when evaluating beauty, in addition to physical attributes. Female respondents looked for traces of personalities and values from photos, for example, an athletic figure was considered "beautiful" because it represents hard work and health. In contrast, men's evaluation is based more on visual, physical attributes. Male respondents ranked "S-like body shape" as the most important asset, and very few mentioned character traits as a factor influencing beauty evaluation.

Yet men's evaluation affects women's body image, and contributes to body dissatisfaction. Alarmingly, men consider comments on beauty to be harmless and they are generally not aware of the impact on women.

Girls said:

「如果我男朋友喺Instagram follow啲靚女我會嬲，但我就會知道佢鐘意啲咩類型從而去嘗試迎合佢。」

「靚啲人都會自信啲同開心啲，起碼自己望住鏡都會開心啲，或者男朋友都會開心啲。」

「男朋友接受到我，唔嫌棄我個樣同身材，我已經覺得有自信。」

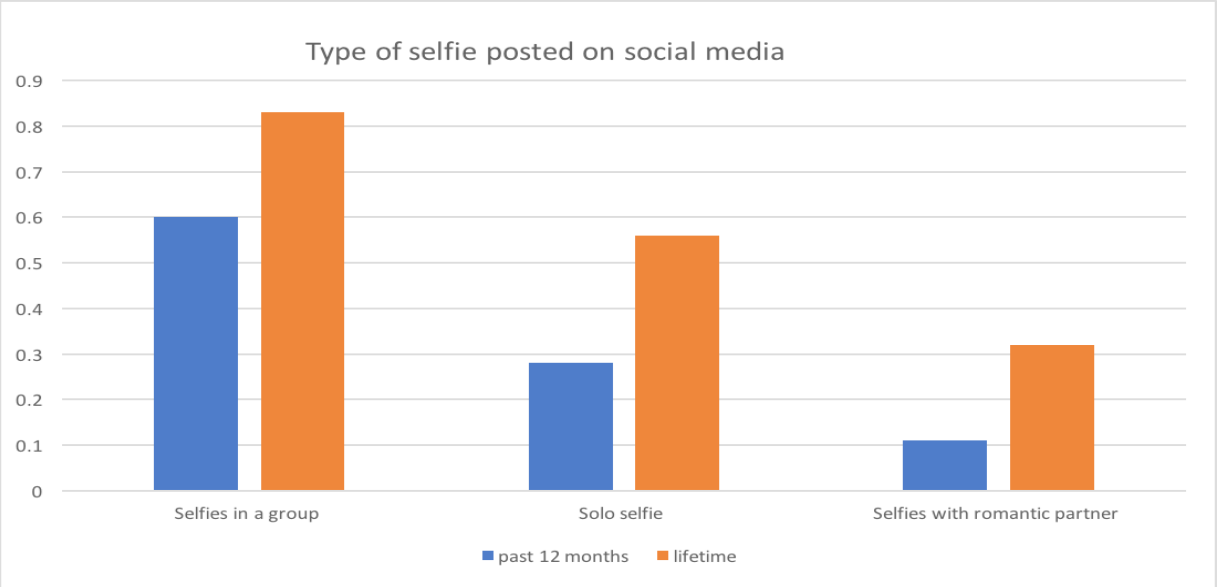
Boys said:

「我成日都會玩佢手臂，又會話佢雙下巴出晒嚟，但都係玩下咁講啫。」

「我成日都話佢腳好粗，比例唔係好啱，佢自己都知，所以我會捉佢去運動。」

SELFIES VS. WEFIES

Most young females prefer to take selfies with other people (also "wefies") rather than a selfie of herself alone. They also prefer to post wefies on social media, instead of individual selfies.



SELFIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SELFIE BEHAVIOURS AMONG YOUNG FEMALES OF 16-24

• Instagram (**92%**) is the most popular among young females, followed by Facebook (85%) and Snapchat (85%).

• Most (**90%**) young females access Instagram daily and spend **1.5** hours on average.

• Over half (**52%**) usually use social media to read updates and posts from friends and family. Only **20%** actively post photos or videos often.

• All of them have taken selfies.

• Most (**85%**) have posted selfies on social media, especially on Snapchat and Instagram. On average, they post around **1.9** selfies per week.

• An average of **4.2** selfies are needed before one arrives at a good one for posting. However, overweight respondents take **7.4** selfies before posting, significantly higher than average.

• Among young females who have posted selfies, half (**50%**) have edited their photos before posting. Nearly all (**94%**) editing is done on photos with themselves in it, including selfies. An average of **5.6 minutes** is spent on editing.

• Snapchat (**63%**) is the most used app among young females for photo-editing, followed by Snow (**56%**) and Meitu (**47%**).

• Editing can mean directly changing one's physical appearance, or editing other aspects of the photo unrelated to appearance. While the majority (**85%**) edits aspects of the photo unrelated to appearance, more than half (**54%**) also use editing functions to improve appearance. The most edited feature is skin / skin tone (**81%**), followed by facial features (**55%**).

MOTIVATIONS

MOTIVATIONS FOR POSTING SELFIES

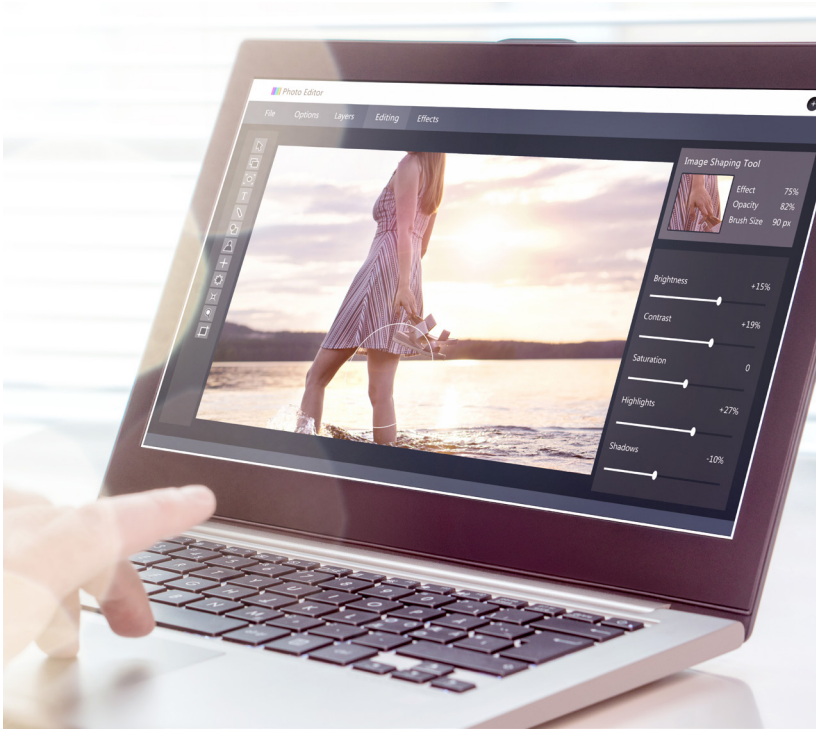
Young females post selfies primarily to preserve memories and connect with friends.

PRESERVE MEMORIES	CONNECT WITH FRIENDS
「Post上網打番呢一日同朋友做過啲咩，點解一齊食飯影相，做個記念。」 「如果我同朋友食飯會post做記念，因為有時Facebook會提你3年前做過啲咩，見到就覺得係時候約朋友。」	「純粹想俾朋友知下，無乜特別原因。」 「只係想俾朋友知道你仲生存緊，唔會因為post上去社交媒體令我自信多啲，因為都係share啲生活嘢俾大家睇。」 「我有個準則就係對方post我都會post，如果我唔post好似我唔重視呢個約會咁，post就代表呢個約會好值得記念，係一個表態。」

MOTIVATIONS FOR EDITING SELFIES

Young females edit selfies or photos of themselves to present their “best face”. Some explain their behavior on account of seeking external validation; some are driven by the boost in self-esteem.

EXTERNAL VALIDATION	SELF-ESTEEM
「我嘅觀點係擺得上網即係好多人都會睇到，咁我自然想表現一張靚嘅相俾人睇，所以會執咗張相擺上去，覺得呢張相靚大家都會睇。」 「我會執樣，每張會post嘅相我都會執少少，唔係話執到第二個樣，只係想令人覺得自己靚咗，但又唔好俾人知執咗相。」 「如果係send俾啲好親近嘅人/男朋友，就通常係醜樣嘅自拍，但俾唔熟嘅朋友睇到嘅就會係靚樣，因為要保留形象。」	「平時執相對於我嚟講唔係想多啲like，而係唔想自己太樣衰，自我感覺良好啲。」 「P完之後自己會開心啲、滿足啲、自信啲，之後睇返自己張相，都會覺得自己好靚、好開心。」



YOUNG FEMALES DO NOT SEE ADDING FILTERS AS EDITING, AND ARE NOT OPPOSED TO EDITING PER SE

Importantly, young females distinguish between adding filters and other photo-editing functions. At pre- and post-survey focus groups, many respondents who, at the start of the discussion, denied having edited their photos, later admitted that they used filters. They thought that filters did not count as artificial enhancement, even though filters do change physical appearance somewhat. They explained that many selfie-taking apps (e.g., Snow and Snapchat) have built-in filters, and they have been so used to these apps that they did not consider filters to be editing.

Generally, most young females saw nothing wrong with photo-editing "as long as it does not look too different from the original self". Some explained that they did not edit photos not because they were opposed to editing per se, but only because they did not know how to use more complicated functions other than filters. By extension, if editing functions became easier to access and use as technology advances, there will be greater usage and acceptance of photo-editing. This is significant as the analysis later demonstrates that editing is negatively correlated with overall wellbeing of young females.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIO

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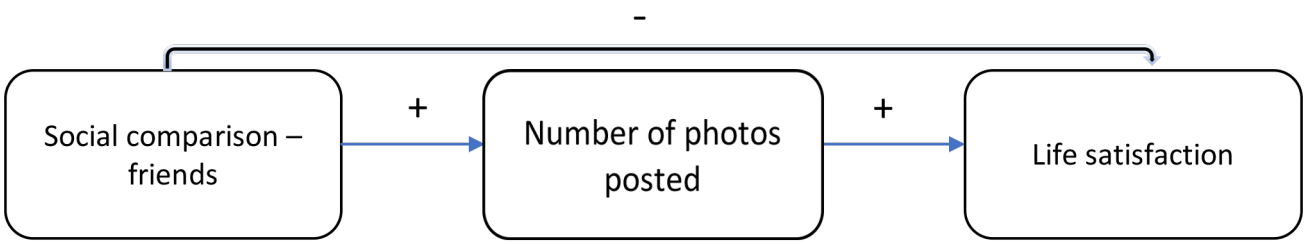
POSTING SELFIES CAN IMPROVE LIFE SATISFACTION [FINDING 1]

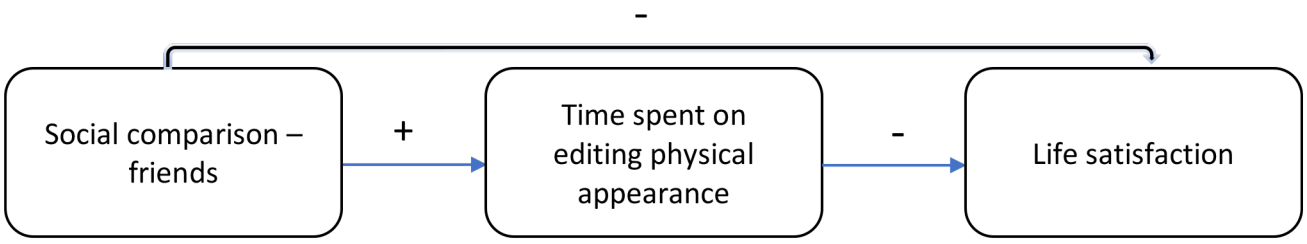
There is a positive correlation between the number of selfies posted and life satisfaction. One caveat is that this positive effect of posting selfies on life satisfaction is observed only amongst females aged 25-34, but not younger females aged 16-24. As explained by respondents of the older age group at focus groups, they derive life satisfaction mostly from relationships and people whom they value, and are less concerned about whether they are "beautiful" by social norms. As such, they are able to look beyond external feedback, positive or negative, of selfies posted and appreciate how these posts help them to preserve memories and re-connect with friends.



(Base: respondents who have posted selfies *but not edited* photos)

EDITING SELFIES, ON THE OTHER HAND, CAN LOWER LIFE SATISFACTION [FINDING 2]

On the other hand, the more time a respondent spends on editing her physical appearance in photos, the lower her life satisfaction. This holds true among females of both age groups.

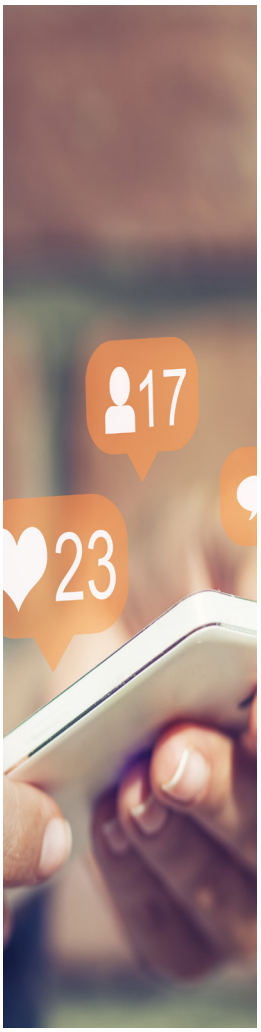


(Base: respondents who have posted selfies *and edited* their physical appearance)

Findings 1 and 2 together show that photo-editing plays an important mediator role in promoting or undermining a person's life satisfaction. Simply put, a person who posts selfies but does not edit them will likely experience a higher life satisfaction than the same person who posts selfies but edits them.

EDITING SELFIES IS CORRELATED WITH LOWER HAPPINESS [FINDING 3], BUT ASSOCIATED WITH HIGHER SELF-ESTEEM [FINDING 4]

Comparing findings from respondents who have edited photos ("editors") versus those who have not ("non-editors"), editors have a lower life satisfaction and happiness than non-editors. Yet, editors have a higher self-esteem than non-editors. Findings 3 and 4 apply to females of both age groups of 16-24 and 25-34.



CONCLUSION: POSTING AND EDITING SELFIES AFFECT FEMALES' WELLBEING IN DIFFERENT WAYS, LIKELY DUE TO THE DIFFERENCE IN UNDERLYING MOTIVATIONS

Posting selfies and editing photos are driven by entirely different motivations, and these motivations can explain the difference in implications on various aspects of wellbeing.

When a female posts selfies to preserve memories and connect with friends, rather than to seek external validation or to boost self-esteem, data shows that posting selfies can improve life satisfaction, happiness and overall wellbeing.

Editing selfies, however, has a more complex relationship with wellbeing. Although it is correlated with higher self-esteem, it can lower life satisfaction and happiness. As it is driven by the motivation to seek external validation and to boost self-esteem, on one hand, it does achieve this intended positive effect on self-esteem. Self-esteem is affected by how a person sees herself through the eyes of others and her self-evaluation after social comparison, so to an editor, editing will have improved her physical appearance, promoting a positive self-evaluation. On the other hand, it is likely that editors have placed too much emphasis on how selfies represent themselves and have neglected the social functions of social media interactions in general. The upshot is that editors fail to reap the social benefits of posting selfies and they do so at the expense of life satisfaction and overall wellbeing.

SUGGESTIONS

#04

FOR YOUNG FEMALES

Young females should be mindful of the influence that social media and technology has on their lives, specifically the pressure and ease of presenting an ideal version of themselves using photo-editing tools and the negative implication on wellbeing. As social media has become an inextricable part of youth's lives, filters too have infiltrated the lives of tech-savvy young people. This has shifted youth's attitudes towards authenticity, and the line between true and altered selves has become blurred. As technology advances, other editing functions will only become easier to access and use. Thus, it is all the more critical that this and future generations of youth realize that their behaviors and attitudes have been shaped by social media and related technology. Young females should also be reminded that social media's original intent was to connect people, and strive to use it for meaningful interactions and building quality relationships.

FOR FEMALE ADULTS

Female adults can act as role models to inspire younger females. They can tell their journeys of overcoming body dissatisfaction and how they have come to appreciate their individualities. They can encourage younger females to not let other people's beauty judgment dictate their happiness and to look beyond the pursuit of beauty to relationships, career and other aspects of life in building self-esteem.

FOR BOYS AND MEN

Men should realize that the media has contributed to unrealistic expectations for female beauty. They should also understand that their judgments have significant influence over women, as these judgments are often internalized by females and contribute to their body dissatisfaction. Men's views shape the discourse in society on gender and beauty norms on a wider scale.

Young boys should be cognizant of the power of social media and the technology of photo-editing in altering their perception of "reality". The dangers of an overly-individualistic approach to social media, to the point of neglecting its function to promote social connections, also apply to young boys. Boys should be encouraged to use social media to connect with people in a meaningful way.

FOR PARENTS

The first place where children are confronted with media is the family. It is the family that determines their children's media experience, which will later influence their media consumption and usage well into their teenage years. Therefore, parents play a crucial role in media education, and they should teach their children about media since young. For there to be effective media education at home, parents must know what media their children access and use, how they use it, and their reasons for using it. With ever growing and evolving social media platforms, parents should be constantly learning about new platforms and forms of interaction, and understand the role that these interactions play in their children's lives.

In communicating with their children about social media, parents should address the issues of false reality and the danger of seeking external validation, and teach their children to form value judgments independent of stereotypical gender and beauty standards.

FOR THE GOVERNMENT / EDUCATION SECTOR / NGOS

EDUCATE YOUNG FEMALES

Media literacy education in Hong Kong is grossly lacking when compared to other countries. For example, in the UK, Media Studies is an established subject in formal education within the secondary, further and higher education curriculum, with specifications, qualifications and measurable assessment outcomes. In 2014, it was reported that UK is very well placed to deliver media literacy on a broad scale, through Media Studies as an established curriculum subject , teacher training and professional development, networking associations and resource providers.

In contrast, Hong Kong lacks the requisite policies and hard and soft infrastructure for successful media literacy education. The most recent official remarks were made in a Legislative Council note in 2012, explaining that media literacy education is embedded as a key learning area within the subject of Personal, Social and Humanities Education from Primary 1 to Secondary 3, and included in the core subject of Liberal Studies from Secondary 4 to 6. That said, there has been no development in recent years to strengthen media literacy education to address social media omnipotence. As of 2015, the Women's Foundation noted that there were very few media literacy programmes in Hong Kong available for children and young adults.

The Government, the education sector, and NGOs should join hands to explore ways to deliver media literacy education to children and youth of this generation. Apart from reviewing official curricula, efforts should be spent on building teachers' capacity, developing resources and supporting NGO programmes through funding. In addition to the correct attitude towards and usage of social media, educators may consider addressing the distinct topics of beauty sickness and photo-editing.

EDUCATE YOUNG MALES

The inadequacy of media literacy education programmes in Hong Kong is observed across genders, for both young females and males. The Government, the education sector, and NGOs should jointly explore ways to provide media literacy education to young males. Apart from the topics suggested above for young females' education, male-targeted education should also address gender stereotypes and beauty norms.

SUPPORT PARENTS

Parents need support in delivering media education at home. The Government, the education sector and NGOs are encouraged to develop parents' education initiatives. A study on media literacy in Europe by the Evens Foundation recommends as a good practice workshops that parents and children can attend and experience new media together. These activities are found to be effective in opening up communications between parent and children on media usage, and in empowering parents to discuss media usage with their children.

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