LUND
UNIVERSITY

Making her feel like a fairy:
A study of young women engaging with selfie applications in China

Yilin Yang

Supervisor: Helena Sandberg

Examiner: Michael Bossetta

MSc. in Media and Communication

Lund University

2022

Abstract

It's not unusual for young people these days to take and edit a selfie. With the rise of consumerist culture and the popularity of mobile Internet, nowadays selfie applications, including beauty cameras and photo-beautification applications, have become the most well-accepted products/brands among Chinese women, who have grown accustomed to showing only one exquisitely edited face in digital photos without any dirt or blemishes. Selfie applications led by Meitu and Ulike present a new form of technologies allowing individuals to exploring the self and constructing new kinds of relationships with themselves. What this thesis sets out to do is to investigate and understand how young women engaging with such technologies to change their digital appearance and represent themselves on social media.

The utilisation of Annette Hill's spectrum of media engagement can give us answers of the modes of young women's engagement with selfie applications. Ana Peraica's secondary pathological narcissism, Laura Mulvey's and Jacques Lacan's ideas of the 'gaze', and Michel Foucault's views on human body can help us gain an insight into women's self-representation through taking, editing and posting selfies with the assistance of digital technologies, and how users of mobile apps get themselves involved in China's contemporary selfie culture.

Researching urban Chinese women between the ages of 20 and 30 who use selfie applications such as Meitu and Ulike, this thesis reveals that selfie culture is a multilayered and multidimensional offering fantasy and entertainment, while also creating anxiety and mental health issues due to users' awareness and reflection on discrepancies between a digital self and an actual self. Through the mediation process, selfie app users try to meet their wishes of being authentic to themselves, Chinese moralities, as well as fitting into the ideals of modern women and beauty standards in the eastern part of the world. Even though they are aware of the pressure of discipline, young women are still unable to give up 'beauty' as not only personal pleasure but also social capital. Beauty practice on selfie apps has become a common and indispensable part of their daily media practices.

Acknowledgement

To my mother Yongying Xin for supporting me, letting me make my own opportunities and mistakes, and always showing me the way home.

To my thesis supervisor Helena Sandberg for her interest, guidance and patience.

To all my teachers and classmates in Lund University for helping me grow into the person I am today.

To my informants for participating in this study in spite of the time difference and long distance.

To my friends in China and Sweden for showing me that I have a home with them.

To the doctors for curing my disease, and all doctors and nurses for saving lives during the epidemic.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

Nowadays, women have become the driving force of consumption in China's economic society. Women decide about 80% of Chinese household consumption, including eating, drinking, education, cultural activities, and travel. According to IiMedia, the size of the female consumer market in China has reached over 4 trillion yuan. In such a trillion-level market of 'She Economy', the report 'China's She-Economy and User Behaviour Analysis 2019' pointed out that beauty cameras and photo-beautification applications have become the most popular products/brands among Chinese women (IiMedia, 2019). This drew the researcher's attention to the popularity of selfie applications in China today.

These years have witnessed a sea of photo-taking and photo-editing applications prevailing in China. According to CNNIC, the number of mobile users in China has reached over 932 million so far (2020, p. 1). Among them there are nearly 300 million monthly active users of beauty camera apps, and the number continues to increase (IResearch, 2020). Based on the traditional phone camera, these apps add rich features to help users make and edit pictures easier, the most representative of which include Meitu, Ulike, Face Tune, Perfect 365, et cetera (Liu, 2019, p. 48). With these applications that can automatically recognise human faces in the pictures, users are able to adjust every detail of their image: the eyes can be enlarged; the teeth can be whitened; the skin can be smoothed; the face can be reshaped. In a word, users can make their portraits look like Hollywood stars with minimal effort. These applications have penetrated into users' daily lives and even had an impact on the development of other types of media. To satisfy the users, even Alipay, the Chinese mobile payment application, has launched a new version that incorporated beauty filters into its face-scan payment system (Peng, 2020, p. 582). So far, digital photos processed by beauty apps have become a new visual culture in China, influencing individuals' digital image perception, transformation, and communication. Since the growth of these apps has greatly satisfied the demand of selfie lovers, which in turn has encouraged users to produce more selfies, In this thesis, the researcher focuses on how these apps affect users' media use with regard to selfies, and uses the term 'selfie application' to refer to all such beauty cameras and photo-editing apps with cosmetic features that allow users to produce selfies.

According to Foucault, contemporary culture is characterised by preoccupations of the self in multiple ways (Foucault, 1983, in Peraica, 2017, p. 56), and it would be critical to see how to elaborate new kinds of relationships with ourselves by exploring the self via technologies built through histories (Foucault, 1988). Therefore, the selfie applications, which help arouse women's self-awareness and inspire their self-reflection by digital technologies and new media (Shah and Tewari, 2016, p. 869), provide an appropriate site for researchers to gain an insight into the female culture in contemporary Chinese society.

The research critically investigates the opinions and values of individuals based on their experience of engaging with selfie applications. The researcher sets out to look at Chinese women between the ages of 20 and 30 who would recognise themselves as active or regular users of selfie applications and share their edited selfies on social media. The qualitative approach used for this research draws out thick descriptions of their subjective experiences to gain an insight into their multi-subjectivity, their perception of the notion of 'natural beauty', as well as their mediation process of self-representation on social media (Rapley, 2007, p. 15). Furthermore, the researcher aims to reflect on the visual culture of selfies and the appearance politics in today's China, which is deeply influenced by digital technologies, consumerism and the patriarchal ideology. Therefore, this thesis puts forth the following research questions:

- *In what ways do young Chinese women engage with selfie applications?*
- *How do users construct their self-image through beauty practices on selfie applications?*
- *How can we understand young Chinese women's self-representation through selfies online?*

These research questions will be answered by a qualitative study including eleven women living in China's first-tier cities who use mobile apps to take and edit selfies. Regarding this thesis, Chapter 2 is the literature review, which starts with a comprehensive review of the history of self-portrait and the rise of selfies in modern times and discusses the motivation

behind: performing the self. Next, this chapter distinguishes the concept 'self-representation' from 'self-presentation' and defines selfies, especially those taken and edited by mobile applications, as a visual form of self-representation, considering the selfie-takers create new media texts during the editing process. Then this chapter introduces two examples of selfie apps, Meitu and Ulike, which are typical of today's selfie technologies in China and the most commonly used apps mentioned by participants in this study. Also the researcher reviews the concepts such as 'authenticity' and 'simulacrum', and the development of selfie applications, reflecting on the trend of selfie culture and the influence of new technologies on today's visual culture. Finally, this chapter expounds on the concept of 'the gaze' (Lacan, 1977) and 'the body' (Foucault, 1979), which help the researcher deeply interpret selfies from both a psychoanalytic and a feminist perspective.

Then Chapter 3 concerns the methodology and methods employed in this research. In this chapter the researcher explicates the case of this study as well as the theoretical concept of 'media engagement'. Then it introduces the qualitative methods adopted in this study, including Byrne's semi-structured interview (2018), as well as Rivas' thematic coding (2018), and explains the research process.

In Chapter 4, this thesis elaborates upon the findings of this study: one, Selfie Production: as the Photographer and the Subject; two, Engaging with Selfie Apps: both the positive and the negative; three, Natural Beauty: the Mediation between Authenticity and Fantasy; and four, Self-representation: Mediation between Self-expression and Social Discipline. The first section details all sorts of media practices during selfie production. In this process, a selfie app user plays a dual role as a photographer a subject, exerting digital subjectivities. The second part understands users' engagement with selfie apps in the framework of 'the spectrum of engagement' (Hill, 2017). The third one explicates the concept of 'natural beauty' that most selfie app users pursue. The two indicators, 'authenticity' and 'fancy', are analysed in this chapter to understand how users strike a balance between the sense of naturalness and beauty of their selfies, producing an image of 'ideal self'. Then the analysis comes to the last part, which discusses how women represent themselves through selfies in the context of contemporary China.

Finally, Chapter 5 addresses the conclusions of this research, summarising the key findings mentioned above, answering the research questions, holistically reflecting on the broad implications of how young women treat their body and represent themselves under the gaze in contemporary China. In the end this chapter also calls for further research on macroscopic power relations in the practice of digital beauty, as well as the interaction between feminism and visual culture of selfies.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Photography and Self-portrait

According to Oxford Dictionary (2013), a selfie is a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically via smartphone and uploaded to social media. Although the vernacular coined word emerges from a convergence of new technologies, the phenomenon is not an entirely new one. It is humans' 'pure instincts' that one desires to be recognised and favoured (James, 1890, pp. 293–308), and we are accustomed to 'imagining ourselves as a picture' to be seen and appreciated by others (Jones, 2006). Throughout history, humans' appreciating and presenting themselves have been part of our culture (Rettberg, 2014, p. 2). In the 14th century BC, the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten Bak's sculptor left a portrait of himself and his wife in one of the sculptural plastics in the rulers' tomb (Peraica, 2017, p. 21). In ancient times, the portrait was the principal approach to self-presentation before the invention of photography, through which one can recognise, reevaluate and reproduce him/herself on paper.

On August 19, 1839, Louis Daguerre unveiled the daguerreotype technique at a joint assembly of the French Academy of Sciences and the French Academy of Arts, meaning the birth of photography (Dai, 2015, p. 6). Nevertheless, in the early days, few people owned cameras due to the lack of photography knowledge, the inconvenience of camera equipment and the high cost. It cost 400 francs to purchase a set of equipment, and it took 5 to 60 minutes to shoot a picture, for which taking a selfie seemed an impossible mission. Only with Kodak's launch and promotion of cheap film cameras in the early 20th century, photography made its way to the mass non-professional users. In 1918, the self-timer device was patented, allowing users to produce self-portraits with photographic equipment (Wang and Qiu, 2006, p. 70; Peraica, 2017, p. 20).

Then, in the 1990s, the digital camera was invented, which revolutionised the way of imaging from film to digital. Around the turn of the century, the first camera-phone was sold in Japan, and the combination of the camera and the phone made it more convenient to shoot pictures in everyday life (Peraica, 2017, p. 21). With mobile phone technology, eventually, all social

classes had a tool for self-reflection, self-representation, and self-promotion. The front-facing camera was invented and implanted in the mobile phone, making it easier for users to take selfies. In 2012, camera-phones even started competing with professional digital technology, introducing 42 million pixels on semi-professional DX-sensor (Ibid.). Modern photography technology not only assists people to record their life but encourages them to construct their identities and subjectivities in the way of taking and sharing their pictures (Liu, 2015, p.93). At the same time, the rise of social networks, which encourage people to record and share their lives, has given selfies a wider space to spread, making this new form of self-portrait a popular way to construct and present ourselves in this digital age. In 2013, the word 'selfie' became so prevalent that it was hailed as 'the word of the year' by Oxford Dictionary (Xie and Ma, 2019, p. 17).

Self-presentation and Self-representation

In his book 'presentation of the self' (1959), Goffman posited that the self is a unified whole held and exhibited through components such as presentation and performance. On the stage of social interaction, everyone plays a part in everyday performance. According to his Dramaturgical Theory, social interaction is a dramaturgical structure. In this structure, the individuals play a role in face-to-face environments. At the moment when one ends the interaction, he would return behind the scenes, shake off his role, refresh himself, and probably wait for the next on-stage performance. The idea of performance can still be applied to computer-mediated communication in the era of Web 2.0. Nowadays, online social networks have become the new stage for social interactions. For the new generations, an acceptable online identity acquired through positive online interactions in the virtual environment serves as an essential part (Merunkova and Slerka, 2019, p. 248). The self-presentation is enhanced due to users exploiting technological aspects in specific online channels to control the exchange of social information and manage their impressions (Walther, 1996).

In the social network environment, there generates a new context for self-presentation, in which selfies play an indispensable role. Through observing Chinese selfie-takers on various social platforms and conducting in-depth interviews with them, Zhaoxin Lei investigated the

relationship between selfies and the construction of the self (2019). As Lei saw it, the selfie image turns into a string of digital symbols that can be modified at will, bringing different presentation results to the selfie-maker. In the selfies posted on social media, people constantly reflect on themselves and construct their identities from the represented self and others' feedback to the pictures (Ibid., p. 37). Using in-depth interviews and participatory observation, Xu studied the media practices of Chinese social media users in their 20s (2020). According to his study, apart from photo-shooting, another significant aspect of selfie practices lies in photo exhibition and the interaction on social media. People show and share a beautiful self-image on social networks in order to win 'likes' and positive comments from the audience. In posting and sharing photos, individuals' situations and social relations are incredibly complex, and different interpersonal relationship circles lead to different ways of performing themselves. The photos posted by individuals on social platforms are carefully selected. Their selection, editing and sharing of the visual content tend to follow the existing hierarchy and the prescriptive etiquette of different social circles. The communication and interaction between social media users always abide by the discourse rules of the community and maintain social politeness. Immersed in their own performance on the social platform as well as the fantasy of their ideal self, these users may, on the one hand, obtain pleasure. However, they may also encounter the misidentification of their self-image and the dilemma of ambivalent self-identification on the other hand (Ibid., p. 61).

The previous studies tend to focus on observing and exploring the selfies displayed on social media, while this research attaches more importance to the process of modifying selfies on selfie applications, as most users at present would edit the original selfies before posting them on the public sphere. Through their practices on selfie applications, users actually generate new media texts. Therefore, in this thesis, the researcher consciously adopts the concept 'self-representation' rather than 'performance of self' or 'self-presentation'. What is worth mentioning is that to distinguish the two words is not to deny the correlation between self-presentation and selfies, nor the significance of the existing studies on self-presentation. Instead, this thesis serves as a supplement as well as an extension of work on the 'presentation' and 'performance of self'. However, compared with 'performance' and 'presentation', the term 'representation' places emphasis on the 'symbolic forms', or say 'texts' created and circulating, which differentiate edited selfies from one's original self-image (Enli and Thumim, 2012, p. 90). This research contends the importance of

distinguishing the notion of ‘self-representation’ from ‘self-presentation’, given that selfies, which are purposefully taken and edited by media users, belong to media texts whose meanings require interpretation.

The Self and Narcissism

The self is inseparable from others in an external social environment, or more particularly, the self with cohesion requires others’ approving, respecting, accepting attitudes towards oneself (Behrendt, 2015, p. 2). Hence, another notion is worth mentioning when we look at the motives and practices related to showing/sharing selfies: ‘narcissism’. As reckoned by Freud (1914), narcissism is a fundamental behavioural tendency to maintain self-regard or elevate self-esteem. The aim of such automatic tendency is to be loved, approved, and generally accepted by and thus feel connected to one’s social surround (Behrendt, 2015, p. 2–49). Inapparent as it may be, narcissism is closely associated with human personality, social behaviour, social structure, and other aspects surrounding the need to maintain self-esteem (Ibid., p. 1).

According to previous studies, there are different types of narcissism. Following Ralf-Peter Behrendt’s idea, narcissism can be divided into healthy narcissism and pathological narcissism (Ibid.). The former type concerns a set of adaptive behaviours and personalities for the purpose of enhancing our acceptability and approvability in the view of others. It contributes when we define ourselves, defend the norms, rules and even beliefs we use to define ourselves and attack what may threat the system that helps define our self and identity. However, when people excessively rely on those ‘narcissistic supplies’, that is, ask others for love, approval, recognition, or admiration in an inappropriate and even immoderate manner, they may be trapped in a state of pathological narcissism. In Ana Peraica’s work, she summarised two types of narcissism developed by Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm and Christopher Lasch: primary narcissism refers to an ordinary libidinal investment in the self, serving as a precondition for love; secondary narcissism is pathological and centred on self-grandiosity, usually turning into delusion like ‘pseudo self-insight’, ‘intense fear of getting old and ugly’, and ‘nervous self-deprecatory humour’, for example (2017, p. 49). The secondary narcissism is closer to the meaning people use in everyday life with a negative

connotation. Furthermore, Peraica claimed that there are variants of secondary pathological narcissism in this post-digital age since the experience on the internet allows the user to not only present 'a real self' but also reinvent and represent an exaggerated self who 'uncovers the hidden, subconscious drives, wishes, feelings, and ideas' (2017, p. 50).

Previous research has shown that narcissism is associated with a desire to have an extensive social network, a concern to gain attention from others, and an expectation to get positive feedback on social media (Bergman et al., 2011). It has also shown that the millennial generation has a stronger predisposition toward narcissism than other generations (Ibid.). In addition, researchers found that a selfie, used as a tool to enhance one's self-image, promotes levels of narcissism. With the qualitative interviews and the quantitative investigation, Alexa K. Fox et al. researched American youngsters who create and share their images on social media (2018). The study shows that narcissism was positively correlated with millennials' attitudes towards self-marketing and willingness to share visual content on social media. The findings also suggest that millennials seek selfies to express different self-images in different visual content-sharing contexts.

Authenticity, Filtered Reality and Simulacrum

What a person looks like is one matter; what he or she wants to appear is quite another. (Qi, 2015, p. 117)

As is mentioned above, it is universally acknowledged that online users strive for attention, approval and popularity by posting well-designed content on social media networks. Thus, selfies produced for these reasons are customised to represent an image that satisfies users' expectations or viewers' taste rather than what reflects reality (Shah and Tewari, 2016, p. 865), which leads to the discussion of 'authenticity'.

'Authenticity' basically refers to the quality or the acknowledgement of being 'genuine', 'real', and 'true'. Tracing the etymological roots of the word, McGee notes that the Latin word 'authenticus' was associated with the qualities of originality and genuineness, and the

pursuit of authenticity was a quest to discover a sense of self 'unsullied by the impact of socialisation' (2005, p. 171). Similarly, in the traditional Chinese context, the character '真', which represents 'authenticity', is also closely related to the values of ethics. Back to the Warring States, Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu used the notion '真' to describe things that are not made by humans (something original or natural), things that conform to objective facts (something true or genuine), and things that relate to justness (something right and moral) (Sun, 2007). Besides, this character is also connected with the supernatural in ancient China. For example, the word '真人' (the person of '真') is used by Taoism to describe a person who achieves enlightenment or becomes immortal. With the changing times, most of these meanings have survived into modern Chinese. Today, the character '真' (authentic/authenticity) is often accompanied by the characters '诚' (honesty), '善' (goodness), and '美' (beauty), forming all kinds of words to represent some good natures or qualities.

Currently, the term 'authenticity' is privileged by postmodern ethics, usually used to confirm something as trustworthy or reliable or described something as faithfully reconstructed (Grad and Frunza, 2016, p. 331). According to Gunn Enli (2015), authenticity plays an integral part in contemporary popular culture. Through studying reality television, she found that the audience always expects authenticity. That is, 'the media are normatively supposed to provide the people with trustworthy, balanced, and neutral information about the world' (Ibid., p. 3). Nonetheless, 'authenticity' is a richly nuanced and highly contested concept. In many cases, what seems authentic is actually a sort of illusion designed and presented by the producers.

> *'The overlay between the enacted and the represented bodies is [...] a contingent production, mediated by a technology that has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject.' (Katherine, 1999, p. xiii)*

Enli (2015) primarily talked about the mass media genres such as news and entertainment shows, while the theory of mediated authenticity can also apply to selfie posts. The images of themselves are not their actual bodies but the represented bodies, which are the digital codes

captured by the camera, saved and transmitted in the forms of pixels.

In her 'mediated authenticity' theory: there are four critical points regarding mediated authenticity: authenticity illusions, the authenticity contract, authenticity scandals and authenticity puzzles. As she sees it, the audience, more or less, knows the world on the screen is mediated (authenticity illusions) through a specific mechanism (authenticity contract). Constructing a sense of authenticity requires constant negotiations between the producer and the audience. However, once the producers transgressed or violated the authenticity contract, authenticity scandals and authenticity puzzles would arise. There is a negotiation between authenticity and selfie-editing, too. When it comes to selfies, if the image and role-play presented by the selfies are seen as unauthentic or artificial, it will leave negative consequences, too. Shaoqiong Wu studied selfies posted on WeChat moments by urban women born in the 1990s in China and found their selfies present a stereotyped image of unification (2017). Most of their self-portraits are elaborately dressed, presenting charming and girlish expressions, and excessively beautified in the later stage. Moreover, girls of different identities, professions and classes have a high degree of homogeneity in dress, body language and temperament (Ibid., p.I). As Wu viewed it, the actual value of the photographic presentation is supposed to 'record' the subject by the optical instrument. Wu opposed excessive beautification of self-image and even false presentation of personal image or role playing, given that the deviation between the photographic image online and the actual image offline would negatively affect the expectation of interpersonal communication and diminish the authenticity and the emotional value of real social interaction (Ibid., p. 72).

For most scholars who have studied selfies on social media, the value of authenticity seems to be self-evident, and the state of 'inauthenticity' is often associated with behaviours in a negative sense, such as performance, affectation and vanities (Wu, 2017; Lei, 2019; Xu, 2020). Nevertheless, Jill Walker Rettberg's concept of 'filtered reality' reveal what users may gain at the expense of the 'authenticity' of their selfies (2014, p. 20). In her study on Instagram, Rettberg looked at how filters process images and further influence social media users. Filter, which originally means 'to process or reformat (data) using a filter esp. so as to remove unwanted content', has extended its meaning in the realm of social media (OED, 2014 in Rettberg, 2014, p. 21). On Instagram, filters may remove data, for instance, by

making a colour image black and white. However, the perceived effect often adds to the image: boosting the colours, adding borders, creating a vignette effect or blurring parts of the image. Referring to Shklovsky's defamiliarisation (1988), Rettberg considered that the charm of the images comes from a sense of strangeness created by the filters. Even if the edited photo presents ourselves or our surroundings, the filter reminds us that the image is not entirely ours.

The filter anaesthetises our everyday lives (Rettberg, 2014, p. 21).

Rettberg concluded that the filter added to the original photo defamiliarise our lives, making the filtered reality look less authentic but more artistic. When the filter is applied to the self-portrait, some parts of the image would be filtered out, and certain flavours or styles would be added. Through selfie-filtering, the original image of one's body is mediated for specific identity-making and expression of individuality (Elias and Gill, 2018, p. 67).

Then, when the image is edited by tools such as filters and the authenticity of the image is 'damaged', can the edited image still be regarded as a representation of the subject of photography? In this sense, selfies, especially the edited ones, can be understood by what French social theorist Jean Baudrillard called 'simulacrum'.

Jean Baudrillard began his exploration on simulacrum by studying the semiotics of advertising and consumption (2006). Baudrillard saw four phases of the image: basic reflection of a profound reality; perversion of reality, which 'masks and denatures a profound reality'; pretence of reality, which 'masks the absence of a profound reality'; and simulacrum, which 'has no relation to any reality whatsoever' (Ibid., p. 456).

The Baudrillardian simulacrum displaces the idea of an 'original' and renders it obsolete (Ibid, p. 448). According to Baudrillard, a copy of simulacra either had no original or does not have an original any longer, as a simulacrum signifies something it is not, and thus leaves the original unable to be situated. Modeled on simulations, the society of simulacra is hyperreal, where the models and the ideals are reproduced in reality and come to structure and constitute

everyday life (Ibid.). Baudrillard pointed out that reality was being increasingly replaced by sign systems that redefined and substituted for the real, and he argued that a simulacrum is not a copy of the real, but becomes truth in its own right: the hyperreal (Ibid., p. 460). In his view, eventually, simulations in the postmodern times replace and become reality. People come to live in pure simulations, replications of reality that resemble it in all respects except that they are representations through and through (Ibid., pp. 466–471). All that people 'knew' or 'experienced' of them came to them through carefully controlled images. In such a situation, the digitally manipulated ideal models in commercials would be universally accepted and admired, and women would undergo extensive cosmetic surgery to emulate those beauty norms (Ibid, p. 448).

Following Baudrillard's idea, a 'perfect' model promoted by the selfie applications is not just a representation of the model herself, but a simulacrum of a beautiful human figure (see Appendix 8). The line between the real and the false is gradually blurred. The elaborately edited portraits replace what they are in reality, constructing people's perception of the world and of themselves, and becoming beautiful signs that people believe they can possess. Their self-identity is no longer defined by what they see in the mirror or the optical images captured by traditional cameras, but by the simulacra with different makeup or filters in beauty cameras or photo beautification apps.

Beauty Camera and Selfie-modification Application

From the early days of photography, obtaining flawless portraits has been a challenge, as this typically involves a high level of skill and expensive image editing software. For example, the image could be divided into different layers with 'pixel' as the minimum unit, analysed and altered by software such as Adobe Photoshop, the professional photo editing software released by Adobe Systems. For a long time, digital retouching has been prohibitive for the consumer market. Therefore, in terms of beauty, the perfect image is largely monopolised by glorious commercials or Hollywood movies. Due to the constant development of photography technology, including the increased processing power within handheld imaging devices and a range of new smart-imaging techniques, consumer devices can be equipped with applications of more sophisticated facial analysis algorithms. The barrier to editing a

photo for non-professional users has been eliminated; digital beauty now lies in the average consumer's hands. The most recent applications could cleverly process photos and allow users to edit their images creatively and enhance them according to their preferences (iResearch, 2020, p. 4).

The first and most well-known beautification platform in China is Meitu. Launched in October 2008, Meitu was just a photo-editing software like Photoshop at first. To distinguish itself from its rivals, Meitu re-oriented itself as a beauty application of human portraits. Just like its slogan, 'One step to become beautiful, even fools can handle it', Meitu was much easier to operate than professional software such as Photoshop. Even non-professional users can manage to edit their pictures with all those presets. During the Spring Festival of 2009, the updated version of Meitu came out and rapidly became a huge success (Xu, 2020, p. 13). By 2022, Meitu had 246 million monthly active users and produced 7.02 billion images per month (ZOL, 2022). Besides, Meitu was the only selfie application installed by all participants in this study, and it was recognised by these participants as the most popular one in China. Tao Liu, a journalism and communication professor at Jinan University, attributed Meitu's success to its 'popularisation' (2015, p. 93). Through a way of 'technological empowerment', it allowed every user to skillfully draw his or her own aesthetic world (Ibid.).

Another exemplar is Ulike, the fastest rising one among all selfie-taking and editing applications in China, with 44.9 million downloads in 2019 (Qimai, 2020). Launched in 2018, Ulike is a late starter in the industry, but it has captured the market at breakneck speed. It has become especially popular with young women residing in China's big cities. Obsessed with functions like fine-tuning, filter, and makeup, people share their selfies with comments like 'magic', 'too pretty to be recognised by my mom', 'like a cosmetic surgery' (Zhihu, 2020). Also, Ulike was named the 'favorite selfie app' by the most interviewees in this study. In general, Meitu and Ulike are the two brands most frequently mentioned by these interviewees.

Today's popular selfie apps have become very clever in manipulating input data to create improved images. First, like all image editing tools, the selfie app can adjust the basic parameters of the image as a whole, such as exposure, contrast, HSL (Hue, Saturation, Lightness), et cetera. Almost all selfie apps now offer 'smart fixes' that can compensate for

defects caused by poor lighting or other inadequate conditions during a photoshoot. Preset filters in these apps also help users quickly create artistic images. And then, with the technology 'face detection and tracking' introduced to digital imaging devices, these 'intelligent' imaging appliances are able to accurately and quickly detect, track, and analyse the local/overall pixels of the human body. In this sense, the digital face/body are fragmented into pieces to be modified. Corcoran et al. studied how today's techniques can modify facial pictures in detail (2014, pp, 55–59). They found the most crucial feature is a digital soft focus that can eliminate unsightly skin blemishes and irregularities, restoring youthfulness to the subject's face and producing a dreamlike image. Also, a digital model of the lips region can control the position, the plumpness, the texture and the hue of the subject's lips. Besides, a handful of algorithms are designed to enlarge the eyes, whiten the teeth, slim the facial contours, adjust the facial expressions. Further, with the accumulation of user data, more and more selfie apps have launched a series of presets to produce different styles of normative beauty, making their technical threshold lower and lower. In general, by redistributing and altering the pixels which make up the 'face'/'body', the selfie app produces a series of visual illusions that make the person in the picture look like he or she has undergone plastic surgery (Liu, 2019, p. 49).

Following Corcoran's idea, 'digital beauty', technologies that convincingly reconstruct our present reality, is a 'Pandora's box' that will lead us into an uncertain and unpredictable future (2014, p. 61). Today's scholars are divided on this topic. Taking Meitu as the research subject, Tao Liu noted that this selfie app has undoubtedly written the 'new body narrative' of our times, which packages individuals into a vast symbolic spectacle by reshaping and polishing the body (2015, p. 93). Liu, however, remained optimistic. She appraised that Meitu has incredibly liberated individuals' imagination, empowering average users the right and freedom to 'look forward to, weave and possess beauty', and believed that the aesthetics of daily life are discovered by selfie app users, who make the side of the world that was once 'trivial, irrelevant and deliberately ignored by history' now presents an unprecedented aesthetic potential (Ibid.).

On the other hand, some scholars are also critical. In his article, Altman Yuzhu Peng discussed the recent update of Alipay, which incorporates beauty filters into face-scanning

payments. Though Peng admitted that new version of Alipay may enhance Chinese women's inclusion in technology use, though, he contended that such a filter paradoxically impose control on their bodies by popularising 'the male gaze-based aesthetics of beauty' (2020, p. 582–583). He argued that such aesthetic disciplines Chinese women to approve forms of ideology that reiterate contemporary patriarchal values and the 'further entrenchment of chauvinist expectations of femininity' . In terms of the impact of beauty applications on individuals, women in particular, highly opposing and contradictory views appear. Some voices say such technologies are the liberation of women, while others say they are the confinement of women. This divergence is also one of the reasons that inspired the researcher to approach the study from the perspective of Chinese female users.

Beauty Norms in China

This study explores young Chinese women's beauty practices on selfie apps, which is inseparable from the aesthetic norms prevalent in China.

Nowadays, the aesthetics of 'white, thin, young' (白瘦幼) has been prevailing among Chinese social media, together with other buzzwords including 'A4 waist' (waist as wide as A4 paper), 'BM girl' (a girl who fits the size of Brandy Melville), 'cartoon legs' (legs like those of cartoon characters), 'fairy ears' (ears like those of fairy) and so on (Chen, 2021). As the name implies, 'white, thin, young', refers to fair and smooth skin, slim figure and limbs, and a sense of youth. Previous literature tends to ascribe it to the aesthetic of western and patriarchal culture (BAŞ, 2016). In the context of China, however, it is the result of the interweaving and interaction of history and modern consumer culture, eastern culture and western culture.

Tracing back to Chinese history, the mainstream aesthetics in different periods of society is also different (Zhang, 2016). In the ancient matriarchal society period, the beauty was strong and healthy; in the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, the beauty was weak and delicate; in the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, the beauty was natural and elegant; in the Chu and Han dynasties, the beauty meant having a thin waist; in

the Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties, the beauty was plump and graceful. Since the Song Dynasty, women's beauty ideals were gradually inclined to be willowy and delicate: slope shoulders, flat chest, slim waist, narrow feet. Then the trend of foot binding began to spread among the masses. As society increasingly restricted women, people in the Ming and Qing dynasties even promoted a sickly, melancholy, and fragile beauty (Ibid.). The pursuit of whiteness can also be traced back to the Spring and Autumn Period when the poem praising princesses of the State of Qi described beauties as 'having hands as tender as the buds of plants and skin as white as congealed grease (手如柔荑，肤如凝脂). To sum up, on the one hand, it can be confirmed that throughout the patriarchal society of ancient China, female beauty was often weak and non-threatening, even at the expense of physical health. On the other hand, it is the aristocracy that controlled the definition of beauty. It was the lifestyle of the privileged class that the aesthetic standards in ancient China, such as 'white, thin, young', reflected: 'White' means no exposure to the sun, 'thin' means no physical labour, 'young' means attention to maintenance.

In modern times, with the introduction of Western culture and the rise of the commodity economy, the aesthetic standard of 'white, thin, young' has become a part of consumer culture. From beauty makeup and skincare to medical beauty, weight loss and plastic surgery, more and more women attempt to create a perfect self. Industries related to appearance are also booming due to the market demand. The trend of 'white, thin, young' promoted by the industry is not only a symbol that brings visual impact but also a visual lure and visual hint sent from merchants to consumers, implying a cultural value of consumerism. Under this standard, the female body becomes the subject of consumption and is presented in all kinds of beauty and skincare advertisements, fashion shows and live network broadcasts. The female body became a commercial element, an important aesthetic carrier (Chen, 2021). In this sense, the aesthetic fashion of 'white, thin, young' is the result of marketing. Merchants deliberately magnify, boast and elevate these popular beauty norms through market propaganda so as to create more profits.

The Gaze and the Body

In China, most selfie-sharing users are young women born in the 1990s with relatively higher economic and educational levels (iResearch, 2015, in Wu, 2017, p. 2). In Shaoqiong Wu's study of post-90 females' selfies on social media WeChat, over 90% of the examined photos were clearly modified, or at least slightly beautified in terms of light and colour. On this basis, 34.90% of the photos were also added with various special effects such as filters or graphic decorations or inline image collages. In addition, 36.40% of the self-portraits were heavily beautified, the effects applied including 'skin beautification', 'face shape' and 'figure modification' (Ibid., p. 30). Targeting young female users, the technologies of digital beautification tend to be gendered. Images repeatedly represented in media usually promote the female's ideal beauty norms, which leads their audiences to reflect and evaluate their looks and imagine and pursue the stereotypical or idealised beauty images (Moeran, 2010). Such beauty norms, including features of big eyes, flawless skin, whiteness, slimness, and youthfulness, are usually regarded as the Western normative and the dominant patriarchal ideals (Baş, 2016, p. 12). Therefore, from a feminist perspective, it is of great significance to study the female body as the object of external gaze in their selfies.

In her research on narrative cinema, Laura Mulvey analysed the sexual imbalance in narrative films and developed the notions of a voyeuristic male gaze, which has been enormously influential on feminist critiques of patriarchal visuality (1989). 'Male gaze' refers to the active gaze of the male that controls females by turning them from a subject into a passive object, a 'spectacle' to be displayed and 'looked at' (1999, p. 837). The theory of the male gaze applies not only to film but to all aspects of contemporary visual culture and social life. Berger shed light on this concept in his book 'Ways of Seeing':

Men act, and women appear. Men look at women. (2008, p. 47)

Not only can this refer to men looking at women but also women watching themselves being viewed. Regarding the latter one, there are both a surveyor and the surveyed woman within a woman as two independent constituents of her identity as female. Women survey themselves and constantly revise their image in the eyes of others, especially of men, because how men perceive them is often closely related to whether they are perceived as successful in life. The surveyor of woman in herself is male, and she turns herself into 'a sight', an object of vision

(Ibid.). Diving into the male gaze theory, Frith et al. also found the differences in the traditions of the male gaze between Eastern and Western settings (2005, pp. 56–70). They argued that the perception of beauty in western countries might attach importance to the body shape, while people in the east would pay more attention to the face. This also explains why most of the selfies focused on in this study are women's face portraits taken with their phones' front-facing cameras.

However, the male gaze theory has also been questioned for its exclusivity and limitations because it assumes that women in this sense can only be represented passively as a castrated men, and men can only figure as voyeurs and fetishists (Rose, 2016, p. 114). Jacques Lacan's version of 'the gaze' provides more inspirations on how we might see women as subjects of selfies (1977). According to Lacan, the gaze is a form of culturally-constructed visuality rather than vision, the unmediated visual experience. It is an entire system of discourses inserted between the subject and the world that make up the gaze. For feminists like Kaja Silverman, Lacanian Gaze breaks down the binary distinction between the spectacle (women as image) and the spectator (men as the bearer of the look), suggesting that both women and men may look and may be looked at (Silverman, 1992, p. 151; Mulvey, 1999, p. 837). Thus, the gaze makes possible a more comprehensive range of ways of seeing, allowing individuals to identify with more types of bodies that were once considered inferior (Silverman, 1996, p. 2).

According to Michel Foucault, the human's body is not natural or neutral but governed by the social construction of power. Through social disciplining, including 'hierarchical observation' and 'normalising judgment', our bodies are regulated, evaluated, and reproduced according to the established norms (Foucault, 1979, p.170). Through examining the feminine identity elaborated in advertising, Everardo Rocha found that the women presented in advertisements are usually translated as property of a silent body and its part—hair, foot, hand, nail, eye, eyelash, leg, breast, buttock, tooth, skin (Rocha, 2013, p. 9). Their bodies are represented as 'possession' in pieces, and more importantly, something that must be 'embellished', 'enhanced' and 'accentuated' (Ibid.). For example, their bodies are expected to be 'elastic' 'stretched' with 'swing' (Ibid.).

In their study, *The Interpretation of Selfie* (2006), Wei Wang and Peng Qiu interpreted the selfie from three different angles—the woman body, the man body, and the social body (pp. 70–71). The researchers reviewed the history and contended that a woman's selfie was a way to challenge the patriarchal culture, for which Chinese women had been ashamed to show their bodies in public for thousands of years. Women used to be viewed as the object of men and asked to stay at home, playing the role of wife and mother. Digital technology and cyberspace provide an opportunity for them to present themselves as they wish, which can be viewed as a kind of liberation of their personalities and individualities for women. However, through the gaze and the symbolic power, men reshape their power relations and maintain a dominant position in the taste of the female selfies. As they viewed it, it is men who hold the right to define the ideal of a beautiful body for society (Ibid., p. 72). As the first Chinese academic work in this realm, Wang and Qiu's work has significantly inspired the subsequent research in China, including this thesis. Still, their study takes the binarisation of male spectator and female spectacle for granted , without discussing any possibility of women as spectators or other visuality than the male gaze. Adopting Lacan's 'the gaze', this thesis does not presuppose the gender of the spectators of the selfies but analyses and summarises conclusions based on the qualitative materials from the female selfie app users.

Apart from receiving the gaze, women are also pressured to monitor and regulate bodies. Seeing ourselves as 'data bodies' that can be altered for perfection, selfie-editing is inarguably a disciplinary practice (Rettberg, 2014, p. 61). Elias and Gill critically analysed the rise of beauty apps (selfie-modification apps, online beauty advisor apps, virtual makeovers/try-on apps, health assessment apps, facial rating apps) and argued that the female body has come under unprecedented degrees of scrutiny (2018). As they contend, selfie-modification apps intend to incite people to body aesthetic discipline even though they avoid admitting the fact. For the promotion of the product, the selfie-modification apps repeatedly remind the users of 'self disgust', which may result in the 'cultural pathologisation of femininity' (Ibid., p. 68–73).

Reflection on Previous Studies

In terms of the previous efforts, studies related to selfie technology, selfie users and selfie

culture mainly fall into the following three categories: First, the scholars focus on the content of selfies and conclude the holistic picture of the visual culture of selfies (Baş, 2016; Peraica, 2017). Second, the researchers analysed and evaluated the new technologies of editing selfies and assumed their social impact (Elias and Gill, 2015; Peng, 2020). However, such studies generally lack the analysis of user-based materials or only collect user data for quantitative research. Third, researchers looked at selfie-takers' media use and paid attention to the relationship between people's construction of self-image and their activities of posting selfies on social media, but most of the studies in this field tend to neglect other practices such as taking, selecting and retouching selfies (Warfield, 2015; Shah & Tewari). Considering that the beautification of selfies is a stage for self-makers to actively participate in producing media texts and representing themselves in the whole process regarding selfies, and it is common and necessary for young Chinese women in this era, this study believes that selfie applications are a better research site for insight into female selfie-takers than social media. Of course, this is not to say that this thesis turns a blind eye to these selfie-takers' activities on social media, but that the researcher can more comprehensively investigate young women's selfie-related media practices. Following what Flyvbjerg's consider as the strengths of qualitative studies, the thesis requires an in-depth study of the selfie app users with contextual knowledge taken into consideration, which allows the case 'unfold from the diverse, complex, and sometimes conflicting stories' (2001, p. 86). In this thesis, the researcher intends to shed light on the complexity of selfie app users' actions and values within their contextual realities.

Furthermore, the particular contexts of China make this research distinct from those situated in the western contexts, given the long history of patriarchy, the late start of feminism, the ethnically homogenous society, as well as the leap in technologies.

Chapter 3

Qualitatively Researching Users of Beauty Camera Applications

Guided by a social constructionist perspective, from which knowledge constitution is viewed as a product of 'the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other' (Burr, 2015, p. 4f), and knowledge about the world is socially constructed (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p.21), this thesis project holistically aims to examine the 'taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world' (Burr, 2015, p.2), that is, to inspect how young Chinese women understand the selfie-editing tools and construct their self-image as well as self-identity through digital selfies. Rooted in social constructionism, this research adopts a qualitative methodology (Ibid., p. 28). As Bazeley suggests, qualitative research pays attention to 'observing, describing, interpreting and analysing the way that people experience, act on, or think about themselves and the world around them' (2013, p. 4). This is in line with the design of this research, which concentrates on the media engagement of young Chinese women and analyse their knowledge of themselves and their perceptions of the outside world.

Case Study

According to pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty, 'the way to re-enchant the world is to stick to the concrete' (1991, p. 175, in Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 129). Also, Bent Flyvbjerg puts an emphasis on the power of example (2001, p. 66). He claims that 'context-dependent knowledge and experience' is crucial to phronetic social science, and a 'case study is especially well-suited to produce this knowledge' (Ibid., p. 71–72). Thus, in this study, the researcher has taken Meitu and Ulike as cases, instead of a large number of random photo-editing apps.

Using two case examples is a strategic approach that allows for a contextualised analysis of how female users engage with the selfie technologies within the context of contemporary China. In his reflection on the term 'case study', Flyvbjerg points out that while case studies can provide in-depth analysis of an individual example, it is incorrect to assume that they cannot provide reliable information on broader phenomena (Ibid, p. 66) Furthermore, he argues that in-depth, qualitative cases can actually make a significant contribution to the

scientific development, especially as a supplementary approach (Ibid., p. 77). Based on the pilot interview with the 23-year-old civil servant Meng, H. and the researchers' own experience, today's young women generally have more than one beauty camera or photo-editing app installed on their mobile phones and often switch from one application to another. For example, Meng sometimes used different apps to edit different kinds of self-portraits and at times wielded different tools of different apps to edit one photo severally. In this sense, young women tend to be active and diffuse users who engage with the selfie culture across multiple sites and online, offline settings, and this makes it unrepresentative to just select any single selfie application as the research site of this thesis project. By referring to the current market share of each app in China and the user habits of participants in this study (Xu, 2020; Qimai, 2020; Xu, 2020), the researcher finally took on Meitu and Ulike as cases, which are widely spread in China and are also the most commonly used and preferred selfie tools by young women.

Audience Research

The decision to conduct audience research in this study mainly takes into account the following two aspects: On the one hand, this is in accordance with Abercrombie and Longhurst's spectacle/performance paradigm in their studies of media audiences (1998, p. 159). This paradigm draws on ideas concerning diffuse and active audiences in late modern society, where 'spectacle and narcissism' play a dominant role in modern media, and performance of identity has become integral to our everyday lives (Ibid., pp. 77–98). In terms of this paradigm, the authors suggested multiple methods to critically investigate a variety of audience experiences for the cross media content (Ibid., p. 160). Although he spectacle/performance paradigm was proposed more than two decades ago, it is still applicable to today's media environments in which digital communications constantly reshaped our daily routines. In the digital media environments, 'the distinctions and alignments between medium, content, producers and consumer are blurred', and who used to be audiences now perform as active consumers, fans and users (Rose, 2016, pp. 257–264). Hence, researching the selfie app users rather than purely analysing the edited selfies or selfie-editing tools enables the researcher to investigate the sense-making activities via the audiences' active interpretation and engagement with the media, and better develop a nuanced view of reality instead of staying on an abstract theoretical level (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 72).

On the other hand, shifting between positive and negative engagement, or disengagement (Hill, 2019, p. 7), users may have various, ambivalent and even conflicting ideas and reflections of their experiencing reality (Ibid, p. 58). Their personal experiences of reality not only tell us the information about their practices and strategies engaging with selfie applications but help us gain the knowledge to understand their mentality, their living, and even the social culture in contemporary China. Therefore it is critical to listen to the real users' voices. This requires participant-oriented research to get close to users' dealing with selfie apps and how users perceive their media use in everyday life.

Media Engagement

Media engagement is a crucial analytical lens to explore selfie app users' feelings and thoughts, through which we can address how audiences interact with diversified media, both formally and informally, and learn more about the multi-faceted ways they engage with popular culture (Hill, 2019, p. 6) Corner contended that the intensity of engagement varies hinging on the audience's affective and cognitive work (2011). The affective work is related to one's subjective experience and emotion, while the cognitive work is connected with more objective factors such as 'critical appreciation and genre knowledge, storytelling, aesthetics and style' (Hill, 2017, p. 6). Inspired by Corner, Annette Hill argued for a 'spectrum of engagement': 'There is a spectrum that includes affective, emotional and critical modes, switching between positive and negative engagement, to disengagement' (2017, p. 8; 2019, p. 7). Hill's spectrum of engagement captures the dynamics and the multiform traits of engagement, highlighting 'the different positions and intensities of engagement' (2017, p. 7; 2019, p. 55). Positive engagement usually involves identification that invites sympathetic or empathetic feelings. Negative engagement might include emotional dis-identification that introduces an unsympathetic, disagreeable or disliking response. Disengagement, meaning the disconnection with the media, can be either a sudden action or a gradual process (2019, p. 12). The spectrum of engagement is a multi-layered approach to examine users' affective reactions to and critical reflection on things revolving around digital selfies.

Methods and Samples

Since qualitative research ensures flexible theoretical concepts and analytical tools for multiple empirical materials, this research adopts a mixed qualitative method, which offers diverse types of data to 'construct a picture of a problem or phenomenon' (Hill, 2012, p. 303). Byrne's method of semi-structured in-depth interview is applied to investigate users' media engagement with selfie apps (2016), and it is combined with Rivas' thematic coding that processes the qualitative data (2018).

The qualitative interview (Byrne, 2018) has been employed as the primary method to give the subjects a voice (Hill, 2015, p. 20). According to Brennen, conducting qualitative interviews is feasible to explore the respondents' ideas within 'their deeply nuanced inner worlds' (2012, p. 29). Through the in-depth interviews using semi-structured questions, researchers can invite them to give 'thick descriptions' about their subjective and lived experiences (Geertz, 1973 in Brennen, 2012, p. 30; Rapley, 2004, p. 15) and obtain 'a wealth of rich data' (Hill, 2012, p. 309). Corner suggested that researchers need to avoid groundless or unjustified assumptions about 'influence' and 'the passivity of audiences' (2011, p. 92). Instead, in order to delineate the relationship between media and subjectivity, researchers are expected to 'assume less and investigate more', as engagement concerns the participants' exploration of experiences, cultural resources, and attendant challenges (ibid.). Hence, instead of settling a whole list of questions, the researcher designed an interview guide that could allow room for listening and interaction. To situate the questions within users' lived experiences, this thesis refers to Dahlgren and Hill's parameters of media engagement, mapping their media use across six dimensions: contexts, motivations, modalities, intensities, forms and consequences (2020, p. 15). The final interview guide includes four themes: *photo-taking and editing*, *practices on social media*, *understanding and reflection*, and *other* (see Appendix 3). With the research aim in mind, the interview also involves questions concerning the concepts of 'self-representation', 'narcissism', 'authenticity' and 'the gaze'.

Snowball sampling was adopted in this research by asking personal contacts whether they knew someone who fits in the research and spread the sampling out to find more subjects meeting the sampling criteria. Given that the majority of beauty camera users are female and

people in their 20s (Wu, 2017, p. 13), the researcher finally decided to recruit young women ranging in age from 21 to 29 (see Appendix 1), who identify themselves as active or regular users of beauty camera applications. On the one hand, they belong to the typical selfie app users (Echo0908, 2020); on the other hand, they tend to have similar media experiences during their formative years (Bolin, 2017, pp. 22–35).

Eleven eligible young Chinese women participated in this research in total. From February 20 to March 23, the researcher conducted one pilot interview and ten interviews in Chinese. The interviews were carried out over either phone or video call with the assistance of the Chinese chat software WeChat. Given the geographical distance and the limited time, distant interviews are the most feasible way to access the respondents residing in China. Also, the decision was made to cope with the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2021). Every interview lasted no less than 50 minutes, during which the audience elaborated on her practices, motivations, feelings, emotions, lived experience and personal reflection. Then the researcher followed the steps of thematic coding from Carol Rivas (2018), which is crafted to illuminate the transcripts' themes and patterns and assist us in 'considering underlying concepts' (p. 876). All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using qualitative data analysis, where deductive coding and inductive coding were combined. Several categories were developed ahead of analysis based on the literature review (Ibid., p. 878). For example, the category spectrum of engagement, including its subcategories such as positive engagement, negative engagement and disengagement, refers to Annette Hill's spectrum of engagement (2019). Then, more inductive codes were generated by a detailed exploration of the empirical data (Ibid., p. 882). During the recursive process, the researcher reflected on and reviewed the coding works so as to provide reliable and quality results.

Overall, there are a total of three themes consisting of nine categories and 23 subcategories (see Appendix 5). The first theme spectrum of engagement includes the categories *positive engagement* (enjoyment, consumption, self-admiration), *negative engagement* (complaint, self-abasement), and *disengagement* (self-control, uninstallation). The second theme, practices of users, includes *selfie-taking* (pose, light, contexts), which describes interview subjects' habits of taking selfies, *selfie-editing* (basic adjustment, beautifying, makeup, filter), which reflects individual preferences of editing selfies, and *socialising* (communicating,

posting, sharing, interacting), which describes their media practices on social media. The third theme, understandings of users, concerns the interviewees' cognition, reflection as well as evaluation on the categories: *beauty norms* (popular aesthetics, natural beauty, individuality) and *the gaze* (appearance anxiety, body regulation).

Reflections on methods

Firstly, the researcher wants to reflect on the process of recruitment. Since the study asks participants to provide personal information, including their portraits and answer questions regarding attitudes toward personal issues (looks, bodies, genders, et cetera), a basic level of mutual trust is necessary. In the era of big data, cases of leaking and stealing personal information on the Internet emerge one after another (SPP, 2015; CAC, 2020). As a result, few netizens are committed to responding to the research recruitment from a stranger (the researcher) on open platforms, and it is also tricky for the researcher to verify the credibility of the information they provide. This study finally settled on the snowball sampling method, where an initial contact generates further informants. Starting from the personal social network, the researcher looked for the qualified information sources introduced by the researcher's contacts and then expanded the range of informants. It brings convenience samples that help generate both valid and relevant insights (Jensen, 2012, p. 269). On the other hand, it also leads to the risk that the samples are not typical. To cope with this, the researcher tried to recruit respondents from all walks of life and of different ages in their 20s to ensure the samples in this study can represent as wide a range of users as possible.

Secondly, the reflection is on the ethics. A consent form was sent to participants before the start of every interview via email. The texts were dictated to them as an interview opening over every video call interview (see Appendix 2). This ensures that informants were clear about what the research was about, their rights, and the consequences of getting involved. The informants needed to offer some general information, including age and occupation, which would be unveiled in the thesis. Besides, all the selfies presented in this thesis required their consent, too. However, they were particularly informed that their legal names, especially their given names, will not be used, guarantee anonymity and encourage them to express themselves more freely.

Thirdly, the researcher wants to reflect on the way of distant interviewing. Overcoming the barriers of time and space, online interviews provide great flexibility. Knowing the interview would be conducted over video/phone call, most people showed a greater willingness to participate, considering it would not take up their time to prepare for the physical meeting. Still, long-distance interviews are not as good as face-to-face communication in some respects because digital media filter out some non-verbal cues like body language and micro-expressions. It makes it difficult for the interviewer to fully perceive the subtle emotions and attitudes of interviewees and adjust the direction of the topic accordingly (Byrne, 2018). Besides, just as in the case of everyday communication, the interviewees do not always express themselves honestly or clarify what they mean accurately. This requires the researcher, as a communicator, to tease out the meanings and implications of the texts (Jensen, 2012, p. 270).

Lastly, the researcher would reflect on the personal position in this research. Given that the researcher is also a member of young Chinese women who live in the urban area, the researcher has similar media experience. Although the autoethnography was not applied, the researcher also explored the functions of several selfie apps to obtain a macro picture and better understand what the informants meant, which allowed the researcher to better communicate and empathise with respondents, but it also carried the risk of subjective bias. Therefore, the researcher tried to guarantee no misunderstandings by repeating, paraphrasing or concluding their answers. Moreover, prior to the interviews, the researcher asked informants to prepare a selfie or two that they were satisfied with or that could represent themselves. During the interviews, the respondents described how they took and edited the selfies and rated them according to their own criteria. After confirming that Meitu and Ulike were the two most commonly used selfie apps by users in this project, the researchers also browsed those apps' official web pages and collected their online posters on google play. Such work enabled the researcher to gain contextual knowledge, and gain an understanding of the prevailing beauty norms promoted by the consumer economy in this day and age. Throughout the study the researcher constantly reflected on the overall process, and developed viewpoints based on concrete examples to ensure that the analysis was convincing.

Chapter 4

Analysing Selfie Application Users' Engagement

Selfie Production: both the Photographer and the Subject

This section basically expounds informants' media practices on selfie applications, that is, how the users produce a selfie with the assistance of digital technologies.

Even though today's selfie apps try to cover as many features as possible to please users, such as video editing, poster design and AI face-changing, for the average users like the ones in this research, the core function of these apps is still photo production. While some people shoot selfies directly with a beauty camera with a filter, others choose to take photos with the original camera and fine-tune them using the selfie applications. Hence, the production of selfies is principally divided into two steps: photo shooting and photo editing.

Taking a Selfie

According to the interviews, the selfies taken by young women mainly fall into two categories. First, they take photos to record happy moments on special occasions such as travel, festivals, and events. In this context, they tend to dress up and put on makeup, and they are more likely to share such selfies on social media. Second, in daily life, they also take selfies for all kinds of random reasons, such as trying an interesting filter they stumbled upon, recording their skin status on a certain day, or taking a selfie to share their life with their relatives far away. In this case, they are more likely to present themselves as they are every day. These selfies are also generally not posted publicly or merely shared privately.

Regarding taking selfies, young women's knowledge about photography is empirical. Most of them have a set of know-how to exhibit their bodies in the camera lens, even though most have no professional photography training.

> Let me turn on the front-facing camera of the Huawei mobile phone and switch to portrait mode. I always pay attention to my expression management: eyes wide, smile. If I am in a group, I will stand back to make my face look not that big. (H. Meng, 23, civil servant)

> I would test out the lighting and the angle of the shot. With the right angle, the picture will be more satisfying. Also, I take care of my hair when I am in the photoshoot. I fix my hair to hide my big face. (X. Lv, 25, nurse)

> At the same time, I care more about the background because I think a selfie is not just to shoot the face but mainly to record a fairly happy mood in that environment. (R. Miao, 23, master student)

In general, the interviewees use the front-facing camera first as a mirror and then as a camera to look for adequate lighting, a neat appearance, a clean background and a pleasant environment. Almost all the informants are concerned with photographic tropes and conventions. They assess the quality of their self-images through general standards of photographic aesthetics, based on which they tirelessly adjust their expression, the exposure, the context and the composition. Besides, they seek angles and positions that make them look slim and stylish.

Dahlgren and Hill considered that media engagement is a 'powerful subjective experience', which also works for this case (2020). The subjectivity of selfie-takers partly lies in the fact that although they are the ones being photographed and represented, they also play the part of the photographers, controlling the way they present themselves as they wish. In recreating themselves on the selfies, they play a double role of both the producers and the subjects.

> There would be all kinds of unexpected factors if others took me a picture. For example, the person taking my picture might not be good at taking pictures, and I might have problems mastering my facial expression and finding the best possible angle. But I would know exactly what angle to take and what kind of expression to

> put on if I were taking a selfie. My eyes could entirely focus on the camera, and I could adjust every detail at any time. (R. Miao, 23, student)

Compared with other types of portraits, one reason for the popularity of selfies among young women is that they prefer to be handled by themselves rather than being photographed by someone else. R. Miao said she liked the feeling of 'everything within control'. X. Lu said everyone had a different aesthetic preference, and she was unsure that she would be satisfied with the way she looked in other people's lenses. She preferred to take selfies as she could ensure that 'every detail is right'. Phones with front-facing cameras and other technologies relating to selfies give individuals agency and domination over their digital bodies.

Editing a Selfie

When reflecting on the Oxford Dictionary definition of 'selfie'—a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically via smartphone and uploaded to social media (2013)—the researcher found it equated the making of a photograph with the taking of a photograph, but omitted the post-processing aspect of the photograph. It is widely accepted that a photograph is created at the moment a photographer presses the shutter, but in practice, post-processing has become an integral part of the production of selfies for ordinary people, given that emerging and evolving technologies have significantly lowered the threshold for image editing.

> Almost every time I take a picture of myself, I have to fine-tune it. (H. Meng, 23, civil servant)

The stage of editing selfies through mobile applications can be understood through Michel Foucault's technologies of the self. Foucault spent over twenty-five years sketching out different domains of human culture, including 'economics, biology, psychiatry, medicine, and penology' (1988, p. 18), to explore how human beings develop knowledge about themselves. As he saw it, four significant matrices of 'technologies' imply specific modes of training and

modification of individuals: technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power, and technologies of the self (Ibid.). Such technologies of the self exist during processing the selfie photograph, too. In the first place, mobile applications belong to 'technologies of production' that allow individuals to manage, manipulate, and produce the images of self-portraits. Then, the increasingly intelligent programming algorithms provide alternative 'technologies of the self', which enable selfie producers by their own means to operate on the digital pixels of their bodies, so as to 'attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality'. Furthermore, the functional design of a selfie application, heavily influenced by contemporary selfie culture, also reflects 'technologies of power', determining the conduct of individuals, submitting them to dominated photographic tropes and conventions, and objectifying themselves as photographic subjects (Ibid.).

> The most useful ones are the basic adjustments. The cropping, colour adjustment and exposure on the camera APP are generally used. I also use 'beautify' to adjust the character's eye size, face shape, skin colour and so on. (H. Meng, 23, civil servant)

> For selfie-editing, my usual procedure is: cropping, filter, brightness, and sometimes saturation and contrast, special effects, face reshaping, and in the end, collage. (Y. Zhang, 27, primary school teacher)

Just like their habits of shooting selfies, selfie app users generally have their own photo-editing habits. These photo producers use a variety of functions built into selfie applications to improve their selfies. The four themes emerging in the process of photo editing are *basic adjustment*, *beautifying*, *makeup* and *filter* (see Appendix 4). *Basic adjustment* refers to the basic practices of editing a picture, such as adjusting the size, brightness, contrast, warmth, saturation, et cetera. When the lighting is terrible, the composition is wrong, or the phone lens is not good enough, users tend to adjust the basic image parameters to remedy the picture. *Beautifying* pertains to fine-tuning the face and body of the subject, including whitening/smoothing the skin, reshaping the face, enlarging the eyes, whitening the teeth, erasing the under-eye puffiness/dark circles/spots/pimples/wrinkles, slimming the body and so on. This step is often the most time-consuming for users. They will modify different parts

of the selfies according to their features until they are satisfied. *Makeup* and *filter* respectively relate to the intelligent makeups (lipstick, blusher, eyebrows, et cetera) and the various filters that users apply to their selfies. With different makeup and filters, the same selfie can present contrasting artistic styles. Among the four themes, *basic adjustment* is basically a function that everyone would use, but the way to adjust the brightness and contrast of a selfie is almost the same as that of other photos. For selfie app users, it is the latter three themes that are the focus of editing selfies.

> Well, As far as I am concerned, beautifying and face-slimming are the most practical functions. (Y. Zhang, 27, primary school teacher)

The meticulous beautifying of the selfie body coincides with Foucault's idea of fragmented human body in his postulation of medical gaze (1973). Foucault thought that the human body, through the construction of the modern medical clinic, is diminished to fragmented components related to specific diseases, and he named it 'spatialisation' of the pathology (Ibid., p. xi). In the same way, selfie applications map the human body. Take Meitu, for instance. This app scans the picture, intelligently detects human faces and bodies in it, and divides them into pieces that can be modified independently (see Appendix 8.3). On the interface of 'Reshape' (see Figure 8.3.1), users can adjust six items: ratio (ratio of the face), face (shape of the face), eyebrow, eyes, noses, and lips. 'Ratio', for example, comprises of 'forehead', 'middle face', philtrum and 'lower face'; 'face' is comprised of 'face width, 'temple', 'cheekbones', 'chin' and 'lower jaw'. In short, the selfie app divides the digital face into different, adjustable areas, allowing users to customise the shape they want. But this is still not the whole story. Apart from 'Reshape', 18 other features on the interface of 'Beautify' help users modify every aspect of their digital bodies in detail (see Figure 8.3.2). Just like what Meitu's poster says (see Appendix 8.2, Figure 8.2.1)—'the level of medical beauty' (医美级美容), 'making high-definition, natural, goddess-like looks' (修出高清自然神颜)—selfie applications adopt the same strategy as the medical beauty industry, whose discourses suggest that the marked, aged, overweight, or unattractive body should represent 'an unhealthy body' and require 'intervention' (Dolezal, 2010, p. 367). In this sense, the selfie apps build a 'surgical table' in digital space where users operate on their fragmented bodies in photos. During this digital plastic surgery, a dull complexion, a fat figure, or

yellowish teeth would be seen as ‘sickness’ that require ‘treatment’; blemishes such as freckles would be viewed as ‘impurity’ that need removal; fair-skinned, slim, and clean looks would be ‘the state of health’ that signifies ‘recovery’.

Apart from the refinement of the fragmented body, users may also adopt special effects, such as makeups and filters, which allow them to make their self-portraits ‘look brighter, more muted, more grungy, or more retro’ than reality (Rettberg, 2014, p. 21):

> I just need to apply a little bit of makeup on it, and the selfie looks much better. (C. Han, 24, trainee reporter)

Nearly half respondents said they would apply the makeups of the selfie apps. M. Sun and X. Lv agreed that the effects of the selfie app could replace real-life makeups and let their skin breathe; R. Miao believed that virtual makeup can help her try on makeup online, let her know what kind of makeup effect was most suitable for her, and guided her cosmetics consumption.

> The filters I prefer to use are ‘texture’, ‘natural’, and ‘summer girlfriend’. The first two do not have too many complicated decorations and make the image look natural, with which it is easy for me to edit the pictures later. ‘Summer girlfriend’ is of the lovely style, and I occasionally use it. (R. Miao, 23, master student)

It is now quite common for users to add a filter to their selfies. Today’s selfie apps offer a wide range of different filters, to the point where some users find it hard to choose one from a sea of options. As of this study, the latest version of Meitu provides 114 filters, and the latest version of Ulike offers 94 filters and 215 ‘looks’ (the effect combining makeup and filter) (see Appendix 8.4). During the study, the researcher found the naming of the filters rather interesting. Selfie applications use a variety of metaphors to name their filters or makeup effects. Some names relate to places (Kyoto, Hokkaido, Paris, California, et cetera), some to food (Limes, Macaron, Mousse, Mojito, et cetera), some to nature (Mist, Rainbow, Summer, Tulip, et cetera), and some to people (Gypsy, Jisoo, Aglaia, Bunny girl, et cetera). As linguists

Mark Johnson and George Lakoff viewed it, metaphors appear ubiquitous in our everyday life, structure our language, and provide us with ways of 'understanding less concrete experiences in terms of more concrete and more highly structured experiences' (1980, p. 486). Selfie applications use plenty of metaphorical concepts to define different filters, associating abstract image processing algorithms with attractive symbols, which imparts the sensation, assists users' perception, and provides users with immersive experiences relating to specific situations. The metaphorical names also chime in with Rettberg's conception of 'defamiliarisation', which suggests the attraction of the filter is the filter's showing something with a with 'a machine's vision', something different from what we are used to seeing (2014, p. 26). For example, all the places used for filter names are foreign lands or historical sites for Chinese people, creating a sense of exoticism or vintage style. Filters create a sense of strangeness, making photos exotic or artistic and reflecting the user's individuality.

However, features like makeup and filter also serve as a double-edged sword. Artistic as they are, these effects also brutally change the colour parameters of an image. This has also led to dissenting voices from some users:

> I rarely use filters because they are very harsh on colour and brightness and keep their degree as low as possible because I want my selfies to look natural. (H. Meng, 23, civil servant)

With the updates, the selfie applications take up more of the phone's memory and give users a broader range of options. However, whether or not users apply beautifying, makeup and filters, and the extent to which the effects are used are matters of opinion.

Engaging with Selfie Apps: both the positive and the negative

In this part, the thesis discusses the ways in which users engage with selfie applications. Personal experience, as Annette Hill viewed it, generates emotions (2007, p. 195). Since young women always produce their selfies from a subjective perspective, the forms of their

engagement, in most cases, can be recognised as the emotional and affective modes that involves positive engagement, negative engagement, and disengagement (Hill, 2017, p. 8). Thereby, this part is analysed in the framework of Hill's spectrum of engagement.

Positive engagement

> This sticker is my favourite one, so I chose it. It is really interesting to add some stickers to it. (X. Lv, 25, nurse)

In this case, positive engagement comprises enjoyment, consumption, and self-admiration. Enjoyment means that users get fun and entertainment from using selfie apps. Especially if they are quite satisfied with the function of selfie apps, they may even spend money signing up for membership to unlock VIP services, which refers to consumption. Self-admiration represents a positive feeling of satisfaction or affection for the edited selfie, or say, their appearance edited by the apps:

> When I take a selfie I think: Nice girl; When I finish editing selfies I think: Wow, what a pretty girl. (X. Zhang, 22, master student)

It is worth mentioning that self-regard, according to the informants, is the primary motive for the users to get involved. Over half of the participants stated they had experienced appreciating themselves, such as 'I'm so pretty' while using selfie apps. This can be understood in the concept of 'narcissism', a human's instinct to maintain self-esteem and desire to be loved. Young women positively engage with selfie apps because they can help enhance the image they identify with, boost their self-confidence, and generate the pleasure of self-appreciation.

Negative engagement

As for negative engagement, two main categories have emerged from the texts: complaint and self-abasement. Complaint means the informants expressing their complaint about selfie apps because they felt that some of its features were not user-friendly, advanced, or most importantly, could not help them easily represent the image they want for their selfies. For instance, Y. Zhang complained to the researcher that she realised the options for the lipsticks had decreased after the new update. Self-abasement is a byproduct of self-appreciation, reflecting the negative feelings and ideas when young women realise the gap between how they really look and how they want to be (their looks in beautified selfies), or between themselves and the models on the apps. This type of negative engagement stems from a sense of self-discrepancies (Attrill, 2015, p. 37), a concept that will be explored in detail, when the researcher delineates the concept of 'fantasy' in the next section.

> I am actually trying to get out of it, because I always feel like, how can I be so ugly? It makes me feel sick. (C. Han, 24, trainee reporter)

It is worth mentioning that the positive and negative modes of engagement may not be mutually exclusive. In some cases, they can co-exist at the same time. Although C. Han was happy to see her image improved, using selfie-editing apps brought about anxiety over her appearance, making her question and feel insecure about her looks. Such negative feelings towards self lead to users' emotional dis-identification with selfie apps and even result in an impromptu shift from negative engagement to disengagement.

Disengagement

Across the spectrum, there can be flexible variation between positive engagement and negative engagement, while there can also be an abrupt switch between engagement and disengagement. Disengagement with selfie apps can be categorised as self-control and uninstallation. Self-control is mainly reflected in the fact that some users deliberately limit the time they spend on selfie apps because editing selfies is often considered a 'narcissistic' and 'worthless' activity. Uninstallation refers to uninstalling selfie apps from their mobile phones, either due to a frustrating user experience or a reflection on their own, either for a

short term or a long term.

> I am so disappointed with Meitu that I will never use it again. I had subscribed the VIP service, but I was not able to use those VIP features after I changed my phone. I emailed them to solve the issue but nobody replied. (M. Sun, 26, freelancer)

> At that point I felt like I was getting addicted, and I had better uninstall the application for a period of time. (X. Lu, 24, master student)

Disengagement can happen suddenly and easily, according to the interviewees above. With negative sentiments accumulating, when M. Sun decided that the value of the selfie app, as a commercial product, did not meet her expectations as a consumer, she abandoned the product and chose its rival. When X. Lu realised that she was getting too caught up in the selfie app and letting editing take up too much of her time, her positive engagement switched to disengagement of a sudden.

In general, users are mainly emotionally involved when they engage with selfie apps. Along with the affective engagement, there is the cognitive engagement of assessing the apps' features and critically reflecting on one's media use. Whether in terms of the positive mode, the negative mode, or disengagement, selfie app users' engagement basically lies in two dimensions. For one thing, they judge the app based on its features and services, and for another, through the platform of selfie apps, it is the digital portrait, which shapes their self-image, that young women are actually engaging with and seeking for.

Natural Beauty: the Mediation between Authenticity and Fantasy

In this section, the researcher is going to discuss the criteria of an ideal selfie, or say, what young women aim to pursue through using the selfie app and the ideal norms of a good selfie.

While many beauty apps claim to offer as many options as possible, according to the

advertisements posted by Meitu and Ulike, selfie apps still promote a set of algorithm-based aesthetic standards that cater to the popular beauty norms of 'white, thin, young'. In the Chinese version of these selfie apps, the models are all fair-skinned, slender Chinese women who appear to be in their 20s. On their faces or bodies, dirt or other impurities are not visible or are not allowed to exist. Everyone has an exquisitely edited face. And users who install selfie apps on their phones at least agree with the underlying logic of these apps: physical beauty is a value worth pursuing. The researcher found that when young women select the right makeup, posture, or other services provided by the apps, they tend to choose from those that have become embedded as the acceptable visual grammar of the female form in popular culture. Most users remove their blemishes and make themselves thinner according to the standards set by the apps. Many of them borrow conventions and poses from the photos on the apps to prepare their poses (see Appendix 8.1, Figure 8.1.3). However, this does not mean the features of selfie apps are always well-accepted:

> I have a very narrow face, but most beauty cameras have a face-slimming feature. I always turn it off. Otherwise, it looks like I have a horrible V-shaped face. (X. Lu, 24, master student)

Because the facial characteristics of users are different, the unified algorithm cannot meet the requirements of everyone. Most young women not only care about the popular photographic tropes and conventions, but also take their own features into consideration in order to present themselves in what they deem to be favourable ways.

> I think the left side of my face looks better than the right side, so I often choose this angle when I take selfies. At the same time, I will arrange my hair so that the curve can match the shape of my face (X. Lu, 23, bachelor student).

By this, the research found that, as for each respondent, the criteria of beauty are the result of a combination of popular aesthetics and personal characteristics. When they self-rate and adjust their selfies according to popular beauty standards, they choose the best ones to represent their strengths. For instance, among the interviewees, the 22-year-old student nurse

M. Zhang showed enthusiasm for the mild and lovely sense of Japanese style. In contrast, the 26-year-old freelancer M. Sun and 22-year-old master student X. Zhang preferred the aesthetic of the North American style. X. Zhang said she favoured the sexy style of American girls as her looks and body are easier to 'stand out' in that style, but she would not try the style of 'white, thin, young'. Although it is rather popular in contemporary Asia, Zhang thought that sort of beauty was 'diffident', 'vulnerable' and 'manipulated'. Young women are inclined to admire the beauty that they identify themselves with, and users' aesthetics is diverse on this point. But in the process of beauty practice on selfie apps, their taste in some aspects is relatively uniform.

> In fact, I think an ideal selfie is one that does not need photoshopping after it is taken. (R. Miao, 23, master student)

In searching for the right image most participants said they sought an image that they felt was natural, not staged and not forced. When asked about the measure of an ideal selfie, both M. Sun and Y. Zhang mentioned the concept of 'natural beauty'. The standard of naturalness seemed to have an intangible and visceral quality for the interviewees. Several young women used subjective words like 'comfortable', 'harmonious', or 'satisfying' to describe the portrait they considered as natural beauty.

> [Natural beauty is that] it looks comfortable at first glance, and no part of the picture looks out of place overall. The character is presentable; the makeup is appropriate and not exaggerated. (M. Sun, 26, freelancer)

> In my view, natural beauty captures the reality of that moment without too much embellishment or over-beautification. (Y. Zhang, 27, primary school teacher)

> In my opinion, the lowest standard of naturalness is to let others can recognise the character [in the photo] as you. (H. Meng, 23, civil servant)

As is shown above, according to Y. Zhang and H. Meng, a selfie with natural beauty reflects a sense of authenticity while being aesthetically pleasing. Parallel to this, when M. Sun, R. Miao and Y. Zhang characterised their favourite selfie applications, they said the advantage was that the photos processed by those apps looked 'real' and 'natural'. The sense of authenticity plays a significant part in what they recognise as natural beauty.

Authenticity

> One more thing, if I am taking a selfie with a beauty camera, I will try to lower the beauty parameters as much as possible. Otherwise, it will feel too fake. (X. Lu, 24, master student)

In this study, authenticity is mainly embodied in two dimensions: portrait and emotion. About the former one, the portrait needs to be a faithful representation of the subject's original features, or it at least cannot be visibly inconsistent with others' perceptions of the subject. H. Meng displayed the photo edited by herself and the one edited by her mother as examples.

Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2

For the researcher of this study, there is no significant difference between the two photos at

first glance. But for H. Meng herself, the two photos can be distinguished as ‘authentic’ and ‘too fake’. Based on the original photo, Meng applied ‘Smooth’ to make her skin smoother, ‘Reshape’ to make her face thinner, and ‘Skin Tone’ to lighten her face (Figure 1.1). Compared with the photo modified by herself, the person in the photo retouched by her mother appeared to have slightly bigger eyes and a slimmer face (Figure 1.2). The person on the right fits the popular aesthetic definition of beauty better than the person in the photo on the left. However, Meng said she would ‘never’ post the photo edited by her mother on social media as it looked ‘obviously photoshopped’ and did not fit her image in the minds of people who know her well. According to Meng, she has already had the imagined audience when making the selfie. Although the audience is not present around her, she presumes the existence of the audience on the network. She reflects on whether the forthcoming selfie image can meet the requirement of the gaze of the other and adjusts the degree of the beautification for the imagined audience. Meng’s words also imply that authenticity is an acknowledged virtue of others’ feelings about a selfie app user.

> I dislike selfies that are too uniform. I saw many classmates’ selfies in my WeChat moments, on which four or five of them all looked exactly the same. They wore the same makeup, then their eyes were of the same size, then their faces were the same thin, and then the distribution of their features was similar. I could not even recognise them in that photo. I think those selfies are a little overdone. Different faces are unified into a standard, but there is no beauty of diversity. (X. Lu, 23, bachelor student)

In addition to moral considerations, X. Lu’s argument also reveals the value of authenticity in another respect: diversity. Rejecting the formulaic beauty regulated by selfie technologies and acknowledging the individuals’ different facial features are the resistance to the hegemony of mainstream aesthetic discourse and the advocacy of the diverse definitions of beauty. Under this aesthetic preference based on the sense of authenticity, users try to keep the original shape of their faces and retain as much details as possible, and maintain the shade of makeup to restore the details and texture of their portraits.

For another, a selfie is also rated higher if the image is able to convey the authentic emotions

of the subject at that moment. X. Lu said she got tired of the selfies that only exhibited the monotonous 'photo smile' or a kind of 'superficial beauty'. She proclaimed the selfies she picked could express something other than her desire to be admired for her prettiness, such as the 'genuine happiness'. According to Y. Zhang, it is easy to see whether the person in the photos is stagy or not, and some photos that look less 'exquisite' may be more charming because people honestly express their feelings. Besides, as X. Lv put it, she strove to fine-tune her selfies as if the photos had not been touched up.

> I do not want my selfies to be seen as contrived, even though they are meticulously designed. (X. Lv, 25, nurse)

Nonetheless, there is expected to be other indicators than authenticity that selfie-takers are looking for, which may explain why some artificial effects, such as makeups and filters, are popular with young women. Therefore, this research turns to the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy.

Fantasy

> The peak of my prettiness in my whole life is the one in Ulike camera. [...] I know I look totally different in the selfie than I do in real life, but the beauty camera gives me a way to dream, fantasise about my beauty and live in an imaginary world. (X. Xin, 29, secretary)

Following Gillian Rose's idea, fantasy is not quite distinct from 'reality' but is seen as something that partly structures a subject's reality (2001, p. 125). Freud suggested that fantasy begins in the infant' dreams about pleasurable objects like breast milk (Ibid.). In the field of visual culture, feminist scholars explored the audience's visual pleasure of spectatorship in cinema. For instance, Cowie depicted fantasy as 'the putting into a scene, a staging, of desire' (1990, p.149). All fantasies' present a varying of subject positions' so that the audience may also imagine participating in the fantasy and probably taking up more than

one role (Ibid., p. 160). Such participation can be founded in the production of selfies, too. From the texts on the advertisements of Ulike, we can also know that Ulike provides plenty of 'magic' tools which permit the users to put on 'trendy styles' as they like, 'regain a fresh look' and become a 'cover girl' (see Appendix 8.1). The selfie-beautification application is promoted as a site for fantasy, and it does provide users with experiences they can hardly get in the offline world.

> It makes me feel like I am a fairy lady. (C. Han, 24, trainee reporter)

As above, C. Han thought the retouched portrait of herself looked like a fairy who could not exist in real life, and she identified herself with it. For young women like C. Han, they play the multiple roles of the dreamer (the audience), the dream maker (the producer), as well as the dream itself (the photographic subject) when participating in the fantasy of the selfie, from which they obtain the pleasure of narcissism. Therefore, this thesis combines the psychoanalytic concept of fantasy and Ana Peraica's perception of online narcissuses, given that they both emphasise the deep desire that individuals seek from an ideal model. As Gillian Rose states, desire refers to 'the pleasure gained from fantasising about lost objects' (2001, p. 125). A beautified selfie is the embodiment of a person's fantasy and his narcissistic 'digital self' as well (Attrill, 2015, p. 6).

In addition, such experience of users like C. Han can also reflect the extraordinary significance of Jean Baudrillard's simulacra to contemporary life (2006). For participants, the process of perceiving and extracting features of ideal portraits from the symbols provided by the selfie app, and then refining and even reshaping their photos on the digital platform, is surreal. Engaging with selfie applications, they sought not a faithful representation of their appearance, but a 'simulacrum' that they can identify with emotionally.

Although the construction of 'fantasy' and 'simulacrum', in most cases, gives the selfie-takers positive emotional experiences such as pleasure, it is also a source of negative emotions when there emerges 'self-discrepancies' between the ideal self and the actual self (Attrill, 2015, p. 37):

> I guess the beauty camera and some social phenomena have influenced my mentality. For example, I pay more attention to the state of my skin. Because, ah, like the photos on the internet, and the photos I take with my own selfie camera, the faces are hairless and poreless, and there are no spots, acne, or wrinkles. The whole face is fairly smooth. So if I see those in real life, I feel a little bit bothered. (R. Miao, 23, master student)

> When I looked at my selfie, I was like, 'well, it's fine, not bad. I need not lose weight', and then I probably accepted that image in my mind. Later, when I looked at myself in the mirror, I might feel really upset. (M. Zhang, 22, student nurse)

In her book *the manipulation of online self-presentation* (2015), Alison Attrill illustrated the self-discrepancies emerging in the self-regulatory systems (p. 22). Since the rise of mass media, individuals have been exposed to advertisements and commercials that put forward notions of the perfect self. They portrayed the image ideals of celebrities, aspiring the audience to imitate and accept these ideals as their self-guides. Nowadays, social media has gone one step further, as it displays the pictorial ideals of people's actual friends, making the benchmarks of those role models rather attainable. Therefore, online interactions with friends make it easier for a person to develop an 'ideal self' (whom he would like to be) and trigger the discordance between this 'ideal self' and the 'ought self' (whom he think he should be) (Attrill, 2015, pp. 15–23). In this research of engagement with selfie applications, there appears to be another form of self-discrepancy, since the apps can help individuals shape their own photographic ideals. As mentioned above, R. Miao (23, master student) and M. Zhang (22, student nurse) elaborated how the engagement with new media has evoked self-discrepancy of their cognition. Using the selfie applications, they equated the body image of their 'ought self' and that of their 'ideal self'. As they had been used to a 'perfect' image well edited by selfie applications and internalised it as their self-recognition, when they encountered their reflections in real life, a discrepancy emerged between their 'ought self' and their 'actual self' (peoples' notions of who they are) (Ibid., p. 15), thereby causing a sense of psychological discomfort.

One way to eliminate such discomfort is to adapt the 'actual self' to the 'ideal self'. H. Meng, for example, urged herself to stop staying up late to take care of her skin and started using cheek shadows in her daily makeup after using Meitu. X. Xin also said she got used to making up because of the selfie apps. On the other hand, in order to prevent such discrepancy, most users actually mediate the relationship between the 'actual self' and the 'ideal self' at the time of editing selfies.

> I care about the natural feeling [of the selfie] on the basis of beauty, and then, I hope the two can balance. But, if there were a conflict, I would probably stick with the sense of beauty. (X. Xin, 29, secretary)

Engaging with the selfie applications, a user experiences multiple dimensions of 'self': an actual self in real life, a digital self that reflects the ought self (and sometimes the ideal self), and a reflexive self that mediates the cleft between the reality and the fancy, between 'the actual self' offline and 'the digital self' represented via technologies.

As is summarised by Gunn Sara Enli and Nancy Thumim, mediation is a 'negotiated, open-ended and ongoing' process constituted through 'tensions', by which meanings are produced (Thumim, 2007, p. 230; Enli and Thumim, 2012, p. 89). To represent themselves via selfies, selfie application users such as X. Xin (29, secretary) undergo the processes of mediation, too. Xin wanted her selfie to be both natural and beautiful, but the two attributes could be incompatible. She needed to strike a balance between the two, making the image as authentic as possible while retaining the beauty of her portrait. The notion of 'natural beauty' is the outcome of mediation by most selfie-takers.

Furthermore, the mediation process will continue if a selfie is to be moved from a selfie-modification app to another platform: social media.

Self-representation: Mediation between Self-expression and Social Discipline

In this last part, the researcher is going to discuss the way young Chinese women mediate their selfies for self-representation on social media and thereafter how they regulate their bodies in the offline world.

The original Oxford Dictionary definition of the word 'selfie' is also 'photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website' (Warfield, 2015, p.1). Given the previous research, selfies and social media tend to go hand in hand (Shah and Tewari, 2016; Lehner, 2021). Nevertheless, based on dialogues with selfie-takers, the study found that the act of selfie-making does not necessarily lead to public sharing on social media. Selfies are used for various purposes, including offline collection and online socialising.

> For me, a selfie is like a diary, recording the mood of the moment. Or, when it comes to festivals or dinner parties, I take selfies to record myself with my friends and keep them as mementoes. (Y. Zhang, 27, primary school teacher)

Y. Zhang (primary school teacher) compared selfies to her diary and mementoes, reflecting the significance of self-photography in documenting her personal life. Nine respondents, including Zhang, said one of their goals in taking selfies was to please themselves. Under the circumstances, their target audience is not others but themselves. Thus, they have achieved that goal by the time they have retouched their selfies to their own satisfaction. Moreover, two respondents specifically claimed that they rarely post their selfies on social media at present, be they the original photos or the edited ones.

> Basically, I would not post my photos, mainly because I value my privacy. I have too many friends on SNS, including many strangers. I worry about the security of my information. (X. Lu, 23, bachelor student)

> I used to pay attention to their feedback, but now I feel like I haven't posted on WeChat for a long time. I have kicked the habit of bragging or showing off on social media these days. (C. Han, 24, trainee reporter)

As X. Lu (23, bachelor student) noted, one reason that had prevented her from posting her photos online was information security. Especially after she read the news that some netizens' personal information was stolen and used for the crime of fraud, she became wary of sharing her life publicly. As for C. Han (24, trainee reporter), her attitude toward posting selfies has undergone a turnaround. Han used to post her selfies on social media. She cared about her friends' feedback, i.e. 'thumb up' and comments, until she met a hypercritical girl who often judged others' selfies with words like 'look how ugly she is' or 'she posted those photos to be viewed first, so why cannot I say something about her photo'. Worried that she would also be the potential target of vitriolic criticism from viewers like that girl, Han became increasingly negative about sharing selfies. Additionally, Han reflected on herself, reckoning that it was vanity that made her care about other people's compliments on her selfies, and hence she 'kicked' the habit of 'showing off on social media'.

Nowadays, women's efforts to enhance their selfies and the motivations behind them are required to remain secret partly due to the 'selfie disgust' culture (Elias and Gill, 2018, p. 68). On Anne Burns's research blog, she analysed cases regarding selfie disgust, and she viewed the hatred, ridicule, pathologising and victim-blaming as strategies used to hold back selfie-takers, most of whom were young women (2014). Jill Walker Rettberg also documented how people who wrote blogs in the early days and posted selfies were labelled as narcissists and exhibitionists. She recognised such stigmatisation as a patriarchal discipline of women's self-expression (2014, pp. 17–19). In this study, similar discipline can be found in X. Lu's and C. Han's experience: if a selfie producer's privacy is violated, it is because she did not protect her personal information and released it to the public; if she is judged negatively, it is because she posted an imperfect selfie for others to view; if she seeks attention and praise, then she should be a vain narcissist. It is worth noting that neither of the two respondents was directly harmed, but they both prefigured their potential audience and felt insecure about unknown threats.

Unlike men, women are not 'full cosubjectivities' with 'a tacit body', as was admitted by Drew Leder, they must maintain self-awareness of the way they appear concerning 'physical attractiveness and other forms of acceptability' (Leder, 1990, p. 99). While most of the young

women in this research would post their selfies on social media, they all admitted that a large proportion of the selfies they took would be screened out when they planned to post on social media. Even after carefully editing on selfie applications, the photos would be selected a second time as they move from private to public. Moreover, although some apps like Meitu, the pioneer of photo beautification software/application in China with the largest number of users, have launched their visual communities for users to exhibit their selfies, the proportion of participants in total users is rather low. All respondents in this study explicitly stated that they would not use selfie apps to socialise.

> If I truly want to post a beautified selfie on my SNS, I will put on a line of text, like, 'post some pictures of a photo liar'. (X. Lu, 23, bachelor student)

> The photos posted on different social media will be different, I suppose. If it is WeChat Moment, where many of my relatives, friends, and colleagues are, then I will post some ladylike selfies that I do not touch up too much. If it is Tik Tok or Weibo, on which few followers know me in real life, I just post whatever I like. (X. Lv, 25, nurse)

To fend off the possible negative comments such as dissent and ridicule, young women took various measures. For example, X. Lu posted her well-edited selfies accompanied by words of self-mockery to prevent others from questioning the authenticity of the photos. X. Lv took different attitudes towards different social media. On social networking platforms for acquaintances, Lv only shows her well-mannered side for impression management. In contrast, she felt much freer to express herself on a social platform surrounded by strangers. If we take Attrill's definition of 'digital self' (also 'cyberself', 2015, p. ix)—the self that a person presents online—then Lv's statement illustrates that the digital self is unfixed, variable, and manifold across different social media. The selfies eventually uploaded to the platforms are results of the mediation between selfie-takers and socially constructed restrictions on self-representation. In terms of the pressures young Chinese women face in this mediation process, Xin's comment can be viewed as an example:

> I think the whole society really has different standards for men and women's body shape, ah, and appearance. Maybe, there are some historical factors in China, such as the tradition of 'male superiority', and thus people habitually think that there is no need for a man to have good looks, as long as he is an able man. However, girls need to look pretty, for example, and there are voices like 'getting married is the only way out for women'. (X. Xin, 29, secretary)

X. Xin (29, secretary) is a fashion lover, passionate about beauty and body management. As she reflected on her motivation to use the selfie application, she mentioned the external pressures she had felt in her life. In her opinion, China's traditional patriarchal culture plays a role in the social discipline of women. Society has adopted different evaluation criteria for the sexes, paying more attention to men's labour force but women's appearance value. C. Han (24, master student intern) and R. Miao (23, master student) also agreed that good looks give women a competitive edge in the workplace and elsewhere. Just as Luna Dolezal argued, physical attractiveness, as a form of 'corporeal capital', has been closely connected with women's well-being and individual success (2010, p. 364).

However, the tendency to equate physical attractiveness with normalcy and the practices of altering the original appearance go against the mainstream moral values in China. More than 2,000 years ago, the Chinese philosopher Confucius once said: '*Xiao* (孝, filial piety) is the foundation of virtue. [...] the body, hair and skin, all have been received from the parents, so one does not dare damage them—that is the beginning of *xiao*' (Zeng, 505–436 B.C.E, in Feng, 2008, p. 2). Traditional Chinese culture considers alteration of one's native appearance to be immoral and disrespectful. Besides, it values authenticity, humility, modesty, as well as self-discipline. This puts women not only to bear the stress of looking 'imperfect' but also to take the possible moral condemnation if they modify their appearance to the degree that is regarded as 'too much'. Visual studies scholar Derek Conrad Murray argues that selfies, as new forms of self-representation, contributes to the redistribution of the power of self-imaging, helping women 'reclaim' their bodies (Murray, 2015, p. 1). However, Such an optimistic assumption is idealistic in the context of China today. Although young women, as major participants and creators of the selfie culture, have gained power over self-representation unimaginable in the pre-digital age, their self-expression is still disciplined by

patriarchal culture, consumerism, and the gaze. Specifically, how they produce selfies, for whom they edit them, and they provide them require the negotiation between their subjectivity and external society.

When it comes to relevant offline beauty practices, most women admitted to the influence of selfie applications and social networks on their attitudes. Y. Zhang said the feedback of her selfies on social media sometimes increased the sense of disgust she often felt about her appearance and made her consider the possibility of some non-surgical procedures of aesthetic medicine. C. Han thought using selfie apps could remind her to maintain self-management. She planned to lose weight by dancing or exercising, but she would not opt for a jawline surgery just because she did not think she looked good enough. As for all the interviewees in this study, they all made it clear that they refused plastic surgery, given the factors including health risks and possible after-effects.

It is worth noting that young women are not entirely victims of patriarchal ideology during the process of regulating their bodies, nor are they purely exploitees ignorant of pervasive consumerism. In fact, all respondents in this research more or less showed an ambivalent and paradoxical mindset. On the one hand, they were conscious of the beauty norms promoted by popular culture and sometimes their potential adverse effects as well. On the other hand, they were not able to ignore the appeal of ‘beauty’ and thoroughly give up the social capital behind it. Just as they try striking a balance between naturalness and their beauty model when editing their selfies, they also try to mediate between self-expression and the discipline from both their viewers and themselves when representing themselves through the retouched selfies.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the young women's opinions and values based on their media engagement with selfie applications within the contemporary Chinese context. The above chapters demonstrate what has been observed and revealed through the course of this research. This chapter serves as the concluding part and reflects on the analysis as mentioned above regarding the research questions.

In what ways do young Chinese women engage with selfie applications?

Two primary modalities that young Chinese women engage with selfie applications are taking selfies with a beauty camera and editing photos with a selfie-modification app. Young women either use these apps to produce selfies on special occasions such as holidays and dinners or just record themselves in their daily lives. In general, users install more than one selfie application and roam across different platforms according to apps' distinctive features and users' personal preferences.

Selfie applications provide new forms of 'technology of the self', on which young women take photos of themselves and 'take care of' the portraits of themselves (Foucault, 1988, in Peraica, 2017, p. 57). In terms of shooting selfies, the three categories that young women care about most are 'pose', 'lighting', and 'context'. Selfie-takers brush up on their skills in both capturing the moment as a photographer and posing as a model. Despite that they have no professional photography training, experienced selfie app users know terms like 'focus', 'zoom', 'ISO' and so forth. They learn about the related knowledge through continuous practice of taking selfies and are keen to take better pictures of themselves. They take their cues from magazine models, internet celebrities, and influencers among their social media friends and learn about photographic conventions. With that in mind, they explore particular knacks to hide their 'defective' parts and showcase their strengths.

Satisfied selfies are then refined by an array of editing tools, during which the four categories

of selfie-editing practices are ‘basic adjustment’, ‘beautifying’, ‘makeup’ and ‘filter’. Strict selfie makers may start with adjusting the basic parameters (exposure, contrast, saturation, et cetera) of the whole picture before they fine-tune the portrait. Most of the young women participating in this research would not use the built-in ‘auto-beautifying’ of the apps but spend time manually touching up each part instead. From a perspective similar to Foucault’s medical gaze (1973), the selfie app divides the human body in a photo into fragmented parts, which enables users to tweak what they perceive as imperfections to achieve an unblemished image. Marks on the skin, from under-eye puffiness caused by an unhealthy lifestyle to natural wrinkles and freckles, are considered unclean ‘dirt’ and require erasure; fat figures such as round faces and double chins are seen as what women need to hide or reshape. Selfie app users perform ‘aesthetic surgeries’ on their digital bodies with the assistance of beautifying tools to achieve normalisation and avoid stigmatisation (Gilman, 1998, in Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 10). Moreover, female users may stylise their photos by selecting makeup or filters from a vast array of options. They are inclined to show a preference for the aesthetic styles that conform to their tastes or play to their strengths. During the production of selfies, they experience subjectivity as both the photographers and the photographic subjects.

With Hill’s spectrum of media engagement applied, users’ engagement with selfie applications includes the affective engagement of self-identification and the construction of self-image, the cognitive engagement of assessing the apps’ features and critically reflecting on one’s media, which shift between positive and negative engagement, or even disengagement (2017, p. 8). For one thing, the modes of engagement depend on the functions and services that the apps provide. Good user experience leads to positive engagement, and poor user experience results in negative engagement or even disengagement. For another, it is the way young women treat their selfies that decides their modes of engaging with selfie apps. If users can establish emotional identification with the selfies they produce and get the pleasure of self-admiration, they positively engage with the selfie apps. Otherwise, it may cause the feeling of self(ie)-disgust and appearance anxiety, switching the mode of engagement to negative engagement and perhaps disengagement.

How do users construct self-image through beauty practices on selfie applications?

As the audience for selfie apps, young women more or less accept the widespread aesthetic norms of ‘white, thin, young’ in contemporary China. When editing images, they tend to lighten their skin tones, remove blemishes and modify the shape of their faces and bodies. As for most experienced users, instead of opting for formulaic beauty controlled by the algorithm, they prefer to manually adjust the images to avoid their flaws and choose makeup, filters and styles that better highlight their strengths.

Despite the complexity of individual operations, this research still found a fairly uniform aesthetic standard among Chinese female users: natural beauty. The idea of ‘natural beauty’ embodies young women’s pursuit and mediation of two norms: authenticity and beauty ideals.

As a value emphasised by both traditional Chinese culture and postmodern morality, authenticity is not only used to prove something to be ‘real’ but also to endow it with a sense of moral correctness. The authenticity of a selfie is primarily reflected in the portrait’s authenticity and the emotion’s authenticity. On the one hand, although all camera lenses distort the subject to a certain degree, an ‘authentic’ selfie does not cause a cognitive discrepancy between the viewer’s impression of the image in the photo and that of the selfie subject in real life. Besides, a selfie that authentically reflects an individual’s facial features is also considered supportive of aesthetic diversity. On the other hand, an ‘authentic’ image honestly records and shows the heartfelt emotions of its subjects rather than contrived expressions (e.g., ‘Hollywood smile’; ‘poker face’). People tend to view such selfies as more vivid and attractive. In short, authenticity plays the part of ‘naturalness’ regarding the idea of ‘natural beauty’.

Beauty ideal, in this research, refers to the ideal beauty norms that the users identify with. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has pointed out, under the prevailing consumer culture, the ideology of ‘beauty’ have been merged with the ideology of ‘normalcy’, making a set of mandated standards of the female body has become a goal merited to be achieved (2002, pp. 10–11). On selfie apps, young women retouch their portraits to reconstruct the beautiful image they fantasise about, through which they achieve their desire and gain a sense of narcissistic pleasure. Nevertheless, such practices of beauty is also a double-edged sword. When post-editing visually modifies a female user’s original appearance, it may induce self-

discrepancy between her ‘ought self’, while also being her ‘ideal self’, and her ‘actual self’, leading to psychological discomfort and even negative self-perception. In order to cope with this, young women may try altering their ‘actual self’ offline, or they tend to adjust their image of ‘ought self’ online to avoid such self-discrepancy. Mediating between authenticity and fantastical beauty, users try to balance the two factors and seek the point of natural beauty in their refined selfies. Engaging with selfie applications, it is a simulacrum closest to what they think of as their perfect selves that they pursue, rather than what they are in the real world.

How can we understand young Chinese women’s self-representation through selfies online?

Selfies have long been seen as an adjunct to social media, the space for visually exhibiting the ‘digital self’ since it is because of social media that selfies are able to become a prevalent visual form (Attrill, 2015, p. 6). Nevertheless, when it comes to the media practices of young Chinese women, selfies are often independent of social media. Selfies are a visual form for recording their lives and moods, satisfying themselves by self-admiration, or keeping track of their health conditions, most of which are stored as private collections in the photo galleries of their mobile phones.

From a feminist perspective, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson stated that female bodies are ‘spectacles’ under the gaze and widely considered ‘pliable bodies’ that can be reshaped to conform to the given mandated standard (2002, p. 11). In this case, posting selfies on social media is often misinterpreted as an acceptance of the gaze towards female bodies. Negative feedback on the bodies shown in the selfies can discourage the initiative of some women in self-representation on social media. Besides, concerns over information security and the ‘selfie disgust’ culture, which hates, ridicules, and pathologises the act of sharing selfies (Elias and Gill, 2018, p. 68), also constitute factors that hinder women from expressing themselves through selfies.

Following Michel Foucault’s idea, individuals are objects that discipline makes through the

technique of power (1990, p. 170). Jill Walker Rettberg contended that seeing selfie posters as narcissists or exhibitionists is a reflection of patriarchal culture's disciplining women's self-expression (2014, pp. 17–19). When young women attempt to post their selfies on online platforms publicly, their self-representation is also under the pressure of the gaze. Some users set viewing permissions to block specific groups of viewers, bypassing the socially constructed taboos. Some post their beautified selfies with self-deprecating texts to fend off possible dissent and ridicule. Others display what Foucault calls 'docile bodies' on a particular platform to gain social recognition but choose another platform to represent themselves freely (1979, p. 135). For young Chinese women, self-representation through selfies is a mediation process between their desire for self-expression and the discipline on social media.

In this mediation process, young women have a contradictory state of mind about regulating their bodies, whether digital or physical. While they are aware of the patriarchal culture, consumerism and their potential adverse impacts, it is hard for them to resist the temptation regarding the social capital of 'being pretty' and abandon their beauty practices. According to the samples provided by those apps, most users of selfie apps are affected and pay attention to regulating their bodies, such as learning makeup, losing weight, and even considering using medical beauty technology to change their appearance. It is worth pondering whether, if we support young women's right to express and perform themselves, we should also uphold their freedom to represent an unauthentic self-image. Suppose part of women internalise social discipline as their own standards and actively seek regulation of their body and self-image. Will these women become one of the targets of feminist criticism against patriarchal aesthetics, as 'victims' or 'accomplices', and be disciplined a second time? There is still no clear and unified answer to these questions in Chinese society, and it requires further study. Compared with western feminism, there are few activist movements in the arena of appearance politics in today's China. Furthermore, such technologies of the self, in which people are involved, continue to emerge and evolve rapidly, making it difficult to form a unified set of ethics in today's Chinese society. What is clear is that the notion of the 'human body' so far has been extended to cyberspace, and the ever-developing technologies will only continue permeating and transforming every fragmented part of our lives. The gender gap still exists. As the major targets and participants of consumer culture, and the objects of the gaze since ancient times, women bear tremendous pressure on appearance and

are more likely to be disciplined. As for today's young Chinese women, they still have a long way to go in order to reclaim their power over their bodies.

Further research in relation to the research topic can investigate selfie application developers, opinion leaders in online selfie community or other specific subjects, so as to more comprehensively explore the interplay and power structure among individuals, institutions and society in the dimensions such as simulacra and simulation, feminism and digital visual culture in a big picture.

References

Abercrombie, N. and Longhurst, B. (1998). *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*. London: Sage.

Bao, G. (2015). Socio-cultural psychological analysis of the phenomenon of online selfies in the era of we-media. *Chuanbo yu Banquan.* 28, pp. 118–119.

Baş, B. (2016). *The construction of beauty by mobile applications.* PhD thesis. Bilkent University.

Baudrillard, J. (2006). The Precession of Simulacra. In: Durham, M. G. and Kellner, D. M. eds. *Media and Cultural Studies*. Blackwell Publishing. pp. 447–481.

Bazeley, P. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: practical strategies*. London: Sage.

Behrendt, R.-P. (2015). *Narcissism and the self. [Elektronisk resurs] dynamics of self-preservation in social interaction, personality structure, subjective experience, and psychopathology*. Palgrave Macmillan. Available at: https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.5521625&site=eds-live&scope=site (Accessed: 19 November 2020).

Berger, J. (2008). *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Classics.

Bergman, S.M. et al. (2011). 'Millennials, narcissism, and social networking: what narcissists do on social networking cites and why', Personality and Individual Differences. 50(5). pp. 706–711.

Bolin, G. (2017). Media generations: experience, identity and mediatised social change. Routledge. Available at: https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.4899955&site=eds-live&scope=site (Accessed: 19 November 2020).

Brennen, B. (2012). *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies*. New York; Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Burr, V. (2015). *Social Constructionism*. London: Routledge.

Byrne, B. (2018). Qualitative interviewing. In: Seale, C. eds. *Researching Society and Culture*. London: Sage.

Corner, J. (2011). *Theorising Media. Power, form and subjectivity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Corcoran, P. et al. (2014). 'Digital Beauty: The good, the bad, and the (not-so) ugly', *IEEE Consumer Electronics Magazine, Consumer Electronics Magazine, IEEE, IEEE Consumer Electron. Mag*, 3(4), pp. 55–62.

Couldry, N. & Hepp, A., (2017). *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Dahlgren, P. and Hill, A. (2020). *Parameters of Media Engagement*. [online] Available at: https://mediatheoryjournal.org/peter-dahlgren-annette-hill-parameters-of-media-engagement/ (Accessed: 1 October 2021).

Dai, L. (2015). *Research on the history of personal selfies*. PhD thesis. Southwest University.

Dolezal, L. (2010). The (In)visible Body: Feminism, Phenomenology, and the Case of Cosmetic Surgery. *Hypatia*, 25, pp. 357–375. Available at: https://doi-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01075.x (Accessed: 1 October 2021).

Elias, A. S. and Gill, R. (2018). 'Beauty surveillance: The digital self-monitoring cultures of neoliberalism', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21(1), pp. 59–77.

Enli, G. and Thumim, N. (2012). 'Socializing and Self-Representation Online: Exploring Facebook.' *Observatorio (OBS*)*, 6(1), pp. 87–105.

Enli, G. (2015) *Mediated authenticity: how the media constructs reality.* Peter Lang. Available at: https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.4551958&site=eds-live&scope=site (Accessed: 15 March 2021).

Feng, X. (2008). *XIAO JING—THE CLASSIC OF XIAO With English Translation*. [pdf] Tsoi Dug Website. Available at: http://www.tsoidug.org/Xiao/Xiao_Jing_Transltn.pdf (Accessed: 1 October 2021).

Firth, K. et al. (2005). The Construction of Beauty: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Women's Magazine Advertising, *Journal of Communication*, 55, pp. 56–70.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foucault, M. (1973). *The Birth of the Clinic*. Tavistock Publications.

Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Foucault, M. (1988). *Technologies of the self : a seminar with Michel Foucault.* London: Tavistock Publications.

Foucault, M. (1991). 'Governmentality', in G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller eds. *The Foucault Effect*, Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Fox, A.K. et al. (2018), 'Selfie-marketing: exploring narcissism and self-concept in visual user-generated content on social media'. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*. 35(1). pp. 11–21.

Garland-Thomson, R. (2004). Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory. *NWSA Journal*, 14 (3), pp.1–32.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday.

Grad, I. and Frunza, S. (2016) 'Postmodern Ethics and the Reconstruction of Authenticity in Communication-Based Society', *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala*, (53), pp. 326–336. Available at: https://search-ebscohost-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=116853029&site=eds-live&scope=site (Accessed: 15 March 2021).

Hill, Annette. (2012). Audiences in the Round: Multi-method Research in Factual and Reality Television. In: Jensen, K. B. eds. *The Handbook of Media and Communication Research*. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 302–317.

Hill, A. (2015). *Reality TV*. London: Routledge.

Hill, A. (2017). Reality TV Engagement: Reality TV Producers and Audiences for Talent Format Got to Dance. *Media Industries*, 4(1), pp. 1–17.

Hill, A. (2019). *Media experiences: engaging with drama and reality television*. Routledge.

James, W. (1890). 'The consciousness of self'. *The principles of psychology, Vol I*. New York, NY, US: Henry Holt and Co, pp. 291–401.

Jensen, K. B. (2012). The qualitative research process. In: Jensen, K. B. eds. *The Handbook of Media and Communication Research*. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 265–282.

Jick, T. (1979). Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: Triangulation in Action. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24(4), pp. 602–611.

Katherine, H., N. (1999). *How We Become Posthuman*. Chicago&London: The University of Chicago Press.

Lacan, J. (1977). *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by A. Sheridan. London: Hogarth Press.

Leder, D. (1990). *The absent body*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lehner, A. eds. (2021). *Self-Representation in an Expanded Field*. Basel: MDPI Books.

Liu, T. (2015). Meitu: "New Body Narration" in Our Times. *Creation and Criticism*, 12, pp. 92–94.

Liu, D. (2019). Image Anxiety: Digital Beautifying, Self-materialization, and Post-human Drama. *Journal of Northwest Normal University (Social Sciences),* 56(4), pp. 48–55.

Lei, Z. (2019). *Objectification and controllability: a study on the construction and interaction of 'The Looking Glass Self' in selfie images*. Master's Thesis. Shanxi University.

McGee, M. (2005). *Self-help Inc.: Makeover culture in American life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

McLuhan, M. (2003). *Understanding media: the extensions of man* (Critical ed.). Gingko Press.

Merunkova, L., and Slerka, J. (2019). Goffman's theory as a framework for analysis of self presentation on online social networks. *Masaryk University Journal of law and Technology*, 13(2), pp. 243–276.

Moeran, B. (2010). The portrayal of beauty in women's fashion magazines. *Fashion Theory*, 14(4), pp. 491–510.

Mulvey, L. (1989). *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Macmillan.

Mulvey, L. (1999). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In: Braudy, L. and Cohen, M. eds. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. New York: Oxford UP, pp. 833–844.

Murray, D. C. (2015). Notes to self: the visual culture of selfies in the age of social media, *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 18(6), pp. 490–516.

Niu, C. and Zheng, L. (2021). 'A life history perspective on women's body surveillance'. *Personality and Individual Differences*, p. 168.

Panofsky, E. (1982). 'Iconography and iconology: An introduction to the study of Renaissance art', In: Panofsky, E. eds. *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Chicago*, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. 26–54.

Peng, A. (2020). Alipay adds 'beauty filters' to face-scan payments: a form of patriarchal control over women's bodies. *Feminist Media Studies.* 20(4), pp. 582–585.

Peraica, A. (2017). Culture of the selfie: self-representation in contemporary visual culture. *Theory on Demand*, (24).

Qi, L. (2015). From portrait to Selfie: The construction and identity of self-image in the context of technology. *Contention in Literature and Art*, 12, pp. 116–122.

Rapley, T. (2004). 'Interviews,' in Seale, C. et al. eds. *Qualitative Research Practice*. Sage. Available at: http://search.ebscohost.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.5673929&site=eds-live&scope=site (Accessed: 15 November 2020).

Rettberg, J. W. (2014). Seeing ourselves through technology. [Elektronisk resurs] how we use selfies, blogs and wearable devices to see and shape ourselves. Palgrave Macmillan (Palgrave pivot). Available at: https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07147a&AN=lub.5582348&site=eds-live&scope=site (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

Rivas, C. (2018). Finding themes in qualitative data. In: Seale, C. eds. Researching Society and Culture. London: Sage.

Rocha, E. (2013). 'The woman in pieces: Advertising and the construction of feminine identity', *SAGE Open*, 3(4), p. 12p.

Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies: an introduction to researching with visual materials*. 4th edition London: Sage. ISBN: 9781473948907.

Silverman, K. (1992). *Male subjectivity at the Margins*. London: Routledge.

Silverman, K. (1996). T*he Threshold of the Visible world*. London: Routledge.

Shah, R. and Tewari, R. (2016). Demystifying 'selfie': a rampant social media activity. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 35(10), pp. 864–871.

Sun, T. (2007). *Chuang Tzu*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

Tewari, R., and Pathak, K. (2015). Impact of Social Media on the Vanity Level of Youngsters.

Media Watch, 3(3), pp. 309–317.

Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication research*, 23(1), 3–43.

Wang, W. and Qiu, P. (2006). Interpretation of Selfie on the Internet. *China Youth Study*, 4, pp. 70–72.

Warfield, K. (2015). Digital Subjectivities and Selfies: The Model, the Self-conscious Thespian, and the #realme. *International Journal of the Image*, 6(2), pp. 1–16.

Wolf, N. (2002). *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Wu, S. (2017). *A Study on Post-90 Females' Selfies in WeChat Moment under the Perspective of Social Relationship.* Master's Thesis. Shenzhen University.

Xie, Z. and Ma, Z. (2019). From Narcissism to Feminism: Another Interpretation of the Psychology of Selfie in the Mobile Internet Age. *Southeast Communication*, 175, pp. 17–21.

Xu, B. (2020). New Technology of 'Beauty': Research on Beauty software and Self-presentation. Master's Thesis. Nanjing University.

Zhang, J. (2016). The changes of female images in Ancient Chinese paintings. *Fine Arts*, 6, pp. 32–33.

Other references

CAC. (2020). *Be careful how your personal information can be disclosed* [Online]. Available at: http://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-06/04/c_1592820986397594.htm (Accessed: 19 December 2021).

Chen, G. (2021). Let go of 'white, thin, young' and we can all have 'aesthetic freedom' [Online]. Available at: https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_14984530. (Accessed: 19 December 2021).

CNNIC. (2020). *The 46th China Statistical Report on Internet Development*. [pdf] Cyberspace Administration of China. Available at: http://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-09/29/c_1602939918747816.htm (Accessed: 19 March 2021).

Echo0908. (2020). *Analysis of Competitive Products: BeautyCam VS Ulike — Reflections on the Future Product planning of Beauty Camera* [Online]. Available at: https://blog.csdn.net/Echo0908/article/details/105829976 (Accessed: 18 November 2020).

Iimedia. (2019). *Women Becoming the Driving force of Consumption: China's 'She-Economy' and User Behaviour Analysis* [Online]. Available at: https://www.iimedia.cn/c1020/67344.html (Accessed: 20 December 2021).

IResearch. (2020). *Report on Beauty Camera APP User Marketing Value* [Online]. Available at: https://report.iresearch.cn/report/202004/3550.shtml (Accessed: 20 December 2021).

Qimai. (2020). *Ulike becoming the year's download Top1, Meitu turing to transformation to the social media* [Online]. Available at: https://www.qimai.cn/zhuanlan/article/id/1217 (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

SHIVALI BEST FOR MAILONLINE. (2017). *Is Meitu RACIST? Chinese app that can beautify any picture is accused of applying a 'yellowface' filter* [Online]. Available at: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-4147814/Meitu-accused-applying-yellowface-filter.html (Accessed: 18 November 2020).

SPP. (2015). *Focus on personal information leakage: proprietors are duty-bound, consumers should be vigilant* [Online]. Available at: https://www.spp.gov.cn/spp/zdgz/201503/t20150318_93421.shtml (Accessed: 20 December 2021).

Zhihu. (2020). *The topic of Ulike* [Online]. Available at: https://www.zhihu.com/topic/21240837/hot (Accessed: 20 November 2020).

ZOL. (2022). *Women account for 89% of Meitu's 246 million monthly active users* [Online]. Available at: https://www.163.com/dy/article/GTI6757Q051189P5.html (Accessed: 13 February 2022).

Appendices

Appendix 1

Interviews

1. Meng, H., 23, civil servant. 59-minute-long pilot interview conducted February 20, 2020, over video call.

2. Sun, M., 26, freelancer. 1-hour-and-5-minute-long interview conducted March 13, 2021, over video call.

3. Zhang, M., 22, student nurse. 1-hour-and-11-minute-long interview conducted March 15, 2021, over video call.

4. Han, C., 24, trainee reporter. 1-hour-long interview conducted March 17, 2021, over video call.

5. Lu, X., 24, master student. 1-hour-and-13-minute-long interview conducted March 18, 2021, over video call.

6. Zhang, Y., 27, primary school teacher. 1-hour-and-10-minute-long interview conducted March 19, 2021, over video call.

7. Lv, X., 25, nurse. 1-hour-and-19-minute-long interview conducted March 20, 2021, over video call.

8. Lu, X., 23, bachelor student. 58-minute-long interview conducted March 20, 2021, over video call.

9. Zhang, X, 22, master student. 1-hour-and-3-minute-long interview conducted March 21, 2021, over video call.

10. Miao, R., 23, master student. 1-hour-and-11-minute-long interview conducted March 23, 2021, over video call.

11. Xin, X., 29, secretary, 54 minute-long conducted April 12, 2021, over video call.

Appendix 2

Consent form presented to participants ahead of in-person interviews

Consent form

Lund University

Researcher: Yilin Yang

This research will interview Chinese women, between 20 and 30 years of age, about how they use beauty camera or photo-editing applications. It will include questions about their daily media practices and opinions about their selfies. These interviews will be around 1 hour.

The data will be used in a Master's thesis for the Media and Communication Studies program at Lund University, which will be made available to the public later. The research will not use your legal name but will include general information, such as age, gender and occupation.

The researcher would like your written consent to record the interview and use the materials (including the photos) you provide to present their findings. You are welcome to say as much or as little as you want. You can also choose to not answer any of the questions or stop the interview at any time.

Please sign your name below if you agree to join this research.

Signature

_____

Full name

_____

Date (Day / Month / Year)

_____

Appendix 3

Interview Guide (final version)

Theme 1: Selfie-taking and editing

Intro

Could you please show me a sample/several samples that you edited with Beauty APP?

What effects/filters did you apply?

Which are your favourite?

Would you mind showing me the original version without effects? (optional)

Applications

- What are the applications that you use to take or edit selfies?
- What are their differences?

Taking photos

- Contexts: When? where? under what circumstances?
- How often?

What Functions do you use?

- Using the beauty camera or just retouching effect?
- What effects are used? Filters? Stickers? Special effects? Short videos?
- Which are your favourite ones?
- What aesthetic styles do you prefer/dislike?

What emotions do you have?

- Relaxed, anxious, worried, excited?

Theme 2: Practices on social media

- After using the app, would you just save the photos or post them on your social media? (or

sharing the photo with friends/families privately?)

- Any pressure on presenting yourself on social media？

Selfie and social media?

- How do you like presenting yourself on social media?
- What kinds of photos would you post online? (original photos or edited ones/selfies or group photos?)
- Would you feel anxious if you post an original photo / a photo with many effects?
- Would you set up specific groups (block some viewers)?

Interaction?

- What kinds of selfies on social media do you like/dislike?
- How much attention do you pay to the feedback after you post photos?

Theme 3: Understanding and reflection

Mediated self?

- What do you think of your appearance?
- If you look at an original photo of yourself, how does it make you feel?
- If you look at an edited photo of yourself, what emotions come up? Positive, negative？ Pride? Anxious？

If the selfies influence your attitude towards ...?

- Yourself
- Makeup and plastic surgery?
- Body regulation?

Beauty?

- How do you like natural beauty?

- What do you think about the trend/standard of beauty?
- Gendered beauty?

Reflection on the application and your usage?

Theme 4: Other

Do you have any other comments or thoughts you would like to add regarding selfie or beauty camera applications?

Appendix 4

Coding Scheme of Interview Transcripts

Theme 1 Practices of Users

Category	Subcategory	Definition	Examples
Selfie-taking		Selfie-taking describes interview subjects talking about their habits and preferences of taking selfies.	
	Pose	Pose describes users talking about their pose, posture, or expression of taking selfies.	Let me turn on the front-facing camera of Huawei mobile phone and switch to the portrait mode. I always pay attention to my expression management: eyes wide, smile. If I am in a group, I will stand back to make my face look smaller.
	Lighting	Lighting describes users talking about the lighting and exposure of taking selfies.	I am picky about the light. I like to take photos in the light that is bright, or gloomy but has a sense of atmosphere.
	Context	Context describes users talking about the contexts such as time, place, activities they choose for taking selfies.	At the same time, I will pay more attention to the background, because I think a selfie is not just to shoot the face, but mainly to record a fairly happy mood in that environment.
Selfie-editing		Selfie-editing describes interview subjects talking about their habits and preferences of editing selfies.	
	Basic Adjustment	Basic Adjustment describes users talking about how they use the basic functions of selfie apps to adjust the size, colour, exposure of the pictures.	Almost every time I take a picture, I have to fine-tune it, and the most useful ones are the basic adjustments. The cropping, colour adjustment and exposure on the camera APP are generally used.
	Beautifying	Beautifying describes users talking about their habits of beautifying faces and bodies.	I think I enlarged the eyes, made them sparkle a little bit, and then nothing else.
	Makeup	Makeup describes users talking about their preferences of makeup.	I just need to apply a little bit of makeup on it, and the selfie looks much better.
	Filter	Filter describes users talking about their	I applied Shuiwu（水雾）, which

		preferences of adding filters.	means ‘mist’ in English, because I think this one is the best for me.
Socialising		Socialising describes interview subjects talking about their media practices regarding selfies on social media	
	Communicating	Communicating describes users talking about exchanging information and ideas about selfie applications with friends.	It was recommended to me by my friend. I remember it was in the summer vacation of 2011 when I worked as an intern in Tencent. One day she recommended me the application, Ulike.
	Sharing	Sharing describes users talking about sharing their selfies through private message.	Of course, sometimes my mom photoshopped the photos so horrible that I’d photoshopped them before I sent them to her.
	Posting	Posting describes interview subjects talking about their posting selfies on social media.	But now I feel like I haven’t posted on WeChat for a long time. I don’t like bragging or showing off on social media these days.
	Interacting	Interacting describes users talking about their interaction on social media.	If I post a selfie on social media, well, I will care about whether my friends ‘like’ my post, give me a ‘thumb up’, and make comments under the photos. But this is once in a while, how to say... Sometimes I reflect on myself. I think it was because of my vanity. I used to pay attention to others’ feedback

Theme 2 Spectrum of Engagement

Category	Subcategory	Definition	Examples
Positive Engagement		Positive Engagement describes interview subjects describing their engagement with selfie apps in a positive way	
	Enjoyment	Enjoyment describes users talking about their enjoying the selfie apps.	This sticker is my favourite one, so I chose it. It is really interesting to add some stickers to it.
	Consumption	Consumption describes users talking about spending money or time on selfie apps.	So I gave it a try. I applied the filter to the short videos that I was recording for my university. I thought the filter was very beautiful, so I then applied for the VIP membership.

	Self-admiration	Self-admiration describes users talking about their narcissistic feeling when using selfie apps	It makes me feel like I am a fairy lady.
Negative Engagement		Negative Engagement describes interview subjects describing their engagement with selfie apps in a negative way	
	Complaint	Complaint describes users talking about their complaint about selfie apps.	Most of the applications tended to modify the pictures too much, like, and even distort the portraits.
	Self-abasement	Self-abasement describes users talking about their feeling self-abased when using selfie apps	I'm actually trying to get out of it, because I always feel like, how can I be so ugly? It makes me feel sick.
Disengagement		Disengagement describes interview subjects describing their disengagement with selfie apps.	
	Self-control	Self-control describes users talking about they control the usage of selfie apps.	I don't have other photo-editing application on my phone, because I don't like to spend too much time on taking or editing selfies.
	Uninstallation	Uninstallation describes interview subjects describing their uninstalling selfie apps.	At that point I felt like I was getting addicted, and I had better uninstall the application for a period of time.

Theme 3 Understandings of Users

Category	Subcategory	Definition	Examples
Beauty Norms		Beauty Norms describes interview subjects' reflection on the norms and standards of beauty	
	Popular Aesthetics	Popular Aesthetics describes users talking about the prevailing aesthetics like 'white, thin, young'.	In fact, initially, it was not camera apps that had an impact on the public aesthetic. It was the general aesthetic orientation of the public, to be white, thin and young, that influenced the designer of camera apps. The more relevant effects people apply, the more camera apps reinforce this aesthetic bias.
	Natural Beauty	Natural Beauty describes users talking about their	But Ulike works well. I just need to apply a little bit of makeup on

		opinion about naturalness.	it, and the selfie looks much better. Since then I've been using it.
	Individuality	Individuality describes users talking about their opinion about individuality.	Don't use technology to erase some distinctive facial features or manipulate them into a template for cosmetic surgery.
The Gaze		The Gaze describes interview subjects' reflection on their image, appearance and body via using selfie apps.	
	Appearance Anxiety	Appearance Anxiety describes users' reflection on appearance anxiety.	It's hard to say, I think I'm 50 per cent anxious and 50 per cent satisfied.I sometimes look at myself on the screen and think I have too many zits and my face is a little fat.That's when I get anxious.
	Body Regulation	Body Regulation describes users' reflection on their bodies regulation after using selfie apps.	All in all, it had a positive effect on me. I mean, I tell myself to get my skin right, get a good rest, that sort of thing.

Appendix 5

Transcript of Interview with C. Han (24, trainee reporter)

Q: Could you please show me an sample/several samples that you edited with Beauty APP?

A:

(The photo has been edited to preserve anonymity)

Q: What effects/filters did you apply? (Which are your favourite?)

A: I applied Shuiwu（水雾）, which means 'water and mist' in English, because I think this one is the best for me. The colour is my favourite one, so I usually choose it. Perhaps everyone has different preferences, and I do like this filter. It makes me feel like I am a fairy lady.

Q: Would you mind showing me the original version without effects? (optional)

A: I just used the special camera and it did not save the original photo.

Q: What are the applications that you use to take or edit selfies?

A: The application I use most is Ulike. It was recommended to me by my friend. I remember it was in the summer vacation of 2011 when I worked as an intern in Tencent. One day she recommended me the application, Ulike and I found its filters were quite unique, fresh, and different from those of some popular selfie applications.

Q: What are their differences?

A: I remembered I had installed Butter Camera and Meitu Camera. At that time the most popular beauty camera apps (in China) were Meitu, FaceU and B612. Most of the applications tended to modify the pictures too much, like, and even distort the portraits. But Ulike works well. I just need to apply a little bit of makeup on it, and the selfie looks much better. Since then I've been using it.

What's more, yeah, Ulike has quite a few distinctive filters. Some of those filters cost extra

money. Only VIP can apply them. Once I saw it had a one-week trial, so I gave it a try. I applied the filter to the short videos that I was recording for my university. I thought the filter was very beautiful, so I then applied for the VIP membership. As I see it, its unique filters might be one of the characteristics that distinguishes it from other apps.

Q: Do you still use other selfie applications apart from Ulike?

A: Yes, of course. For example, Butter Camera is responsible for taking pictures of objects and I use it to add texts to the pictures. Then, Ulike is responsible for taking selfies or short videos. I especially like using Ulike to shoot videos, as it does not limit the time and I can take a video longer than one minute. Moreover, Meitu Camera is used for cropping and collage. I don't have other photo-editing application on my phone, because I don't like to spend too much time on taking or editing selfies.

Q: In what contexts do you use the apps?

A: I use a beauty camera app when sometimes I have no makeup on, but I want to take a selfie or when I think I am wearing something nice and I just want to take a picture to record the memory.

Q: What do you think of the edited selfies compared with those unedited ones?

A: I just feel that my selfies would look ugly without any filter. I do not want to see my look if I wear no makeup on. After all everybody wishes he or she could look better.

Q: Do you share your selfies on social media?

A: Actually I seldom post my selfies on social media, like WeChat moment, because I feel that I don't look exactly the same in photos as I do in real life, which sometimes makes me feel kind of embarrassed. However, well, when I am in a good mood, surely I am willing to show my selfies online.

Q: How do you care about others' feedback on social media?

A: If I post a selfie on social media, well, I will care about whether my friends 'like' my post, give me a 'thumb up', and make comments under the photos. But this is once in a while, how to say... Sometimes I reflect on myself. I think it was because of my vanity. I used to pay attention to others' feedback, but now I feel like I haven't posted on WeChat for a long time. I have kicked the habit of bragging or showing off on social media these days.

Q: What do you think of trend/standard of the beauty?

A: Nowadays many people pursue 'white, thin, young', but I don't see the need to pursue this. I think people should follow their own standards of live a happy life, and not worry about it too much. But if, for example, the obesity already affect one's health, I agree that he or she is supposed to loss weight. As long as a girl is healthy, I think she has her own beauty. Or, a girl wants to pursue her ideal appearance. I think it is okay as long as it does not affect her health. Take myself as an example, I don't think I would accept facelift, liposuction or jawline

surgery just because I feel I am not good-looking enough. Instead, I may lose weight by dancing and swimming. I will get in shape in a healthy way. In fact I ate a lot the other days, and I can feel that I have gained weight now when I take a photo by the beauty camera. I am definitely going to lose weight, but this is my self-requirement. I don't think everyone must look for a celebrity-like body and shape, and I don't think that skinny appearance is good for everyone.

Q: What do you think of the male users of such applications?

A: Personally, I'm not prejudiced against guys just because they use beauty camera or such kind of selfie apps. On the contrary, I think guys need filters, too. And as I recall, some apps also have makeup presets designed for men. Now we can set the gender of the user. I remember that Meitu had such a function: if the software detected a boy in front of the camera, it would ask the user whether the user needs to put makeup on the boy. Guys will get a different style of makeup. I think the beauty camera app is moving forward as well.

As far as the guys around me, like my male friends, they don't really mind that men wear makeup. And then about using filters, I have many male friends who learn photography, and they also use filters as well. Some straight men I know also use selfie apps at times, which I think is common. But in general boys don't use apps like Ulike. From their perspective, Ulike is very feminine. Boys don't usually use those fancy special effects, either. But that's my opinion, and I don't know much else.

Q: What do you think about girls' anxiety about their appearance?

A: In terms of appearance anxiety, I think girls are really under a lot of pressure. I think most girls have the same experience with me. In life, women have suffered too much due to the demands of society and men's aesthetics.A woman has to be thin, beautiful and white.If not, she seems to feel very inferior due to the external pressure. I'm actually trying to get out of it, because I always feel like, how can I be so ugly? It makes me feel sick. Fortunately, my friends are very supportive. They have been encouraging me. They told me not to think like that, not to put myself down. Then I got better. However, boys seem to be quite different from girls in this respect. It's just that I think they're really confident. That is, they're not bothered by their looks. For example, in general, when people compliment a girl, they say, gee how smart she is, how good-looking she is;but when they compliment guys, they don't seem to place such a high value on their appearance. Men don't tend to feel inferior about their appearance.

But I don't think there's anything wrong with this camera. No matter how good-looking people are, they think it would be better to put a filter on their photos. It's just that people have a very different mindset about using a camera. I hope women are not too negatively affected.

I remember that there was a challenge on overseas Tik Tok, which asked you to turn off the filter and show your true self. Many people participated in it. Or, there was another challenge, which asked the participants to remove their makeup. Now people are more and more interested in makeup, and all pictures we can see on social media are well refined. Therefore, the true appearance is easy to make people feel inferior. You know, people think why other people are so good-looking, but they themselves look so ordinary. So, I was moved a lot when I saw such challenges on Tik Tok. You know, girls help girls. We have to eliminate our own discrimination against gender and appearance first, then we can help more people.

Q: What kinds of selfies on social media do you like/dislike?

A: I do care about looks, too. If you ask me what kind of blogger I like, I definitely want to follow good-looking bloggers or bloggers with good personality and humor. Good appearance and personality are what attract me. I don't mind all kinds of selfies, though I may not like the ones that are too revealing, but I don't judge the ones I don't like.

Yeah, one reason why I do not like to post on social media recently is because of one girl who always judge others. She likes to comment on others' photoshopped selfies. At first, I did not know her high school classmates or college classmates, but she would post pictures of her high school and college classmates to our chat group, and then said some bad things like 'look how ugly she is', 'she overedited that picture', and so on. I feel bad about it, because, first of all, we don't know her that well. Second, I think it is very rude to judge others' appearance. And then, at one point, I expressed my attitude. I told her it wasn't very polite of her to do that. And she said, 'gee, I just think they edit their photos too much. After all she posted those photos to be viewed first, so why cannot I say something about her photo'. I never responded to her after that. She still posted pictures of others in that chat group, saying something rude, but I did not respond to her. Whatever, I may have been influenced by her. Because I've always been mindful of that, and since then I've stopped posting selfies on SNS.

Q: Do you have any other comments or thoughts you would like to add regarding selfie or beauty camera applications?

A: I would wish women do not judge women's looks by the male gaze. In my opinion, people had better not to be hard on others on moral grounds and criticise others' appearance. One day, those bad words might come back to bother themselves. Besides, I think women already have a hard time. The things they have to go through, the things they have to endure are already much more difficult than men. I wish we could all be a little more tolerant.

Appendix 6

Samples of coding and categorisation

Transcript: Interview with Han on March 17

Reviewing the data, the researcher first marked the texts that should be

Q: What effects/filters did you apply? (Which are your favourite?)

A: I applied Shuiwu（水雾）, which means 'water and mist' in English, because I think this one is the best for me. The colour is my favourite one, so I chose it. Perhaps everyone has different preferences, but I do like this filter. It makes me feel like I am a fairy lady.

Q: Would you mind showing me the original version without effects? (optional)

A: I just used the special camera and it did not save the original photo.

Q: What are the applications that you use to take or edit selfies?

A: The application I use most is Ulike. It was recommended to me by my friend. I remember it was in the summer vacation of 2011 when I worked as an intern in Tencent. One day she recommended me the application, Ulike and I found its filters were quite unique, fresh, and different from those of some popular selfie applications.

Q: What are their differences?

A: I remembered I had installed Butter Camera and Meitu Camera. At that time the most popular beauty camera apps (in China) were Meitu, FaceU and B612. Most of the applications tended to modify the pictures too much, like, and even distort the portraits. But Ulike works well. I just need to apply a little bit of makeup on it, and the selfie looks much better. Since then I've been using it.

What's more, yeah, Ulike has quite a few distinctive filters. Some of those filters cost extra money. Only VIP can apply them. Once I saw it had a one-week trial, so I gave it a try. I applied the filter to the short videos that I was recording for my university. I thought the filter was very beautiful, so I then applied for the VIP membership. As I see it, its unique filters might be one of the characteristics that distinguishes it from other apps.

Q: Do you still use other selfie applications apart from Ulike?

A: Yes, of course. For example, Butter Camera is responsible for taking pictures of objects and I use it to add texts to the pictures. Then, Ulike is responsible for taking selfies or short videos. I especially like using Ulike to shoot videos, as it does not limit the time and I can take a video longer than one minute. Moreover, Meitu Camera is used for cropping and collage. I don't have other photo-editing application on my phone, because I don't like to spend too much time on taking or editing selfies.

Next, the marked texts were copied to another document where the researcher developed the

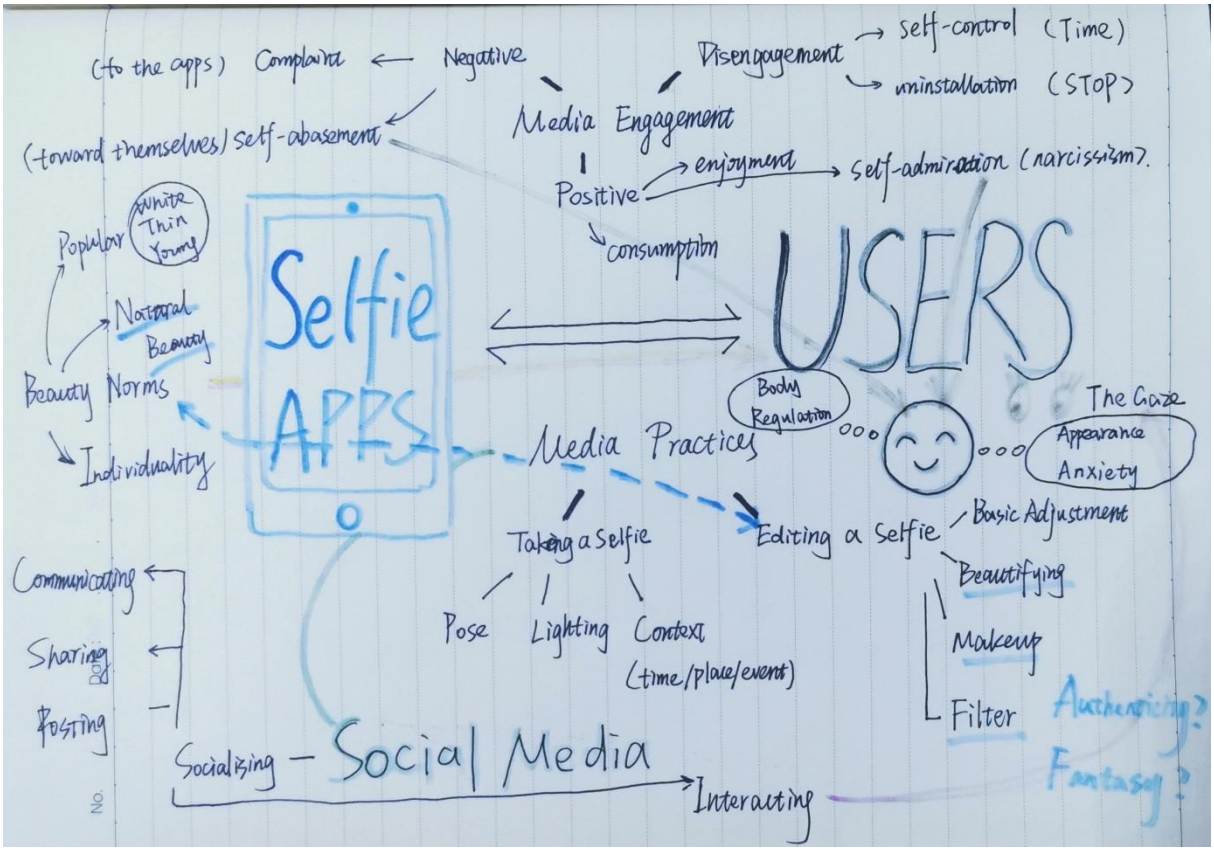
descriptive codes, thematic codes, as well as subcategories.

Text	Descriptive codes	Thematic codes	Subcategory
I applied Shuiwu（水雾）, which means 'water and mist' in English, because I think this one is the best for me	She would try different effects and choose the best one.	Applying the filter based on the effect	Selfie-editing
The colour is my favourite one, so I chose it. Perhaps everyone has different preferences, but I do like this filter.	She has her personal preference for the filter.	Personal preference	Enjoyment
It makes me feel like I am a fairy lady.	She feels like beautiful through the app.	Satisfies the user's narcissism	Narcissism
It was recommended to me by my friend. I remember it was in the summer vacation of 2011 when I worked as an intern in Tencent. One day she recommended me the application, Ulike.	The app was recommended to the user by her friend.	Share selfie apps with friends	Sharing
I found its filters were quite unique, fresh, and different from those of some popular selfie applications.	Ulike appealed the user through its unique filters.	Uniqueness and novelty are important.	Individuality Filter
Most of the applications tended to modify the pictures too much, like, and even distort the portraits.	Most apps the user used would change the original photo too much.	Complaint about distortion	Complaint
But Ulike works well. I just need to apply a little bit of makeup on it, and the selfie looks much better. Since then	She likes Ulike since it controls the degree of beautification	The desire for natural beauty	Natural beauty Makeup

I've been using it.	well.		
What's more, yeah, Ulike has quite a few distinctive filters.	She likes Ulike's unique filters.	Uniqueness is important.	Individuality Filter
So I gave it a try. I applied the filter to the short videos that I was recording for my university. I thought the filter was very beautiful, so I then applied for the VIP membership.	She became the VIP member as she likes the filters applied to her video.	Paying for the beautification	Consumption Filter
As I see it, its unique filters might be one of the characteristics that distinguishes it from other apps.	The unique filter is the strength of the app.	Uniqueness is important.	Individuality Filter
Butter Camera is responsible for taking pictures of objects and I use it to add texts to the pictures. Then, Ulike is responsible for taking selfies or short videos. I especially like using Ulike to shoot videos, as it does not limit the time and I can take a video longer than one minute. Moreover, Meitu Camera is used for cropping and collage.	She uses different apps for different aims based on their merits.	Different apps for different aims	Selfie-editing
I don't have other photo-editing application on my phone, because I don't like to spend too much time on taking or editing selfies.	She doesn't like spend long on selfies and she doesn't think she is obsessed with selfies.	Control of the usage of the selfie application	Self-control

Appendix 7

Mind map



Appendix 8

Samples of Selfie Applications

Appendix 8.1 Posters of Ulike (on Google Play)

Figure 8.1.1

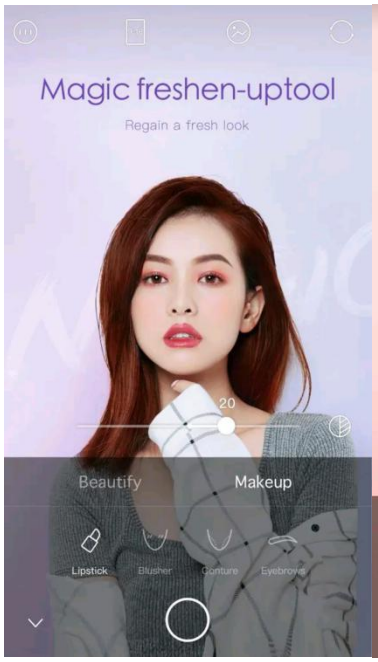


Figure 8.1.2

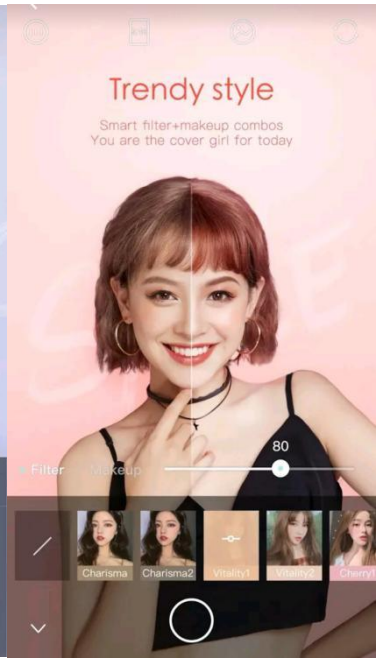


Figure 8.1.3

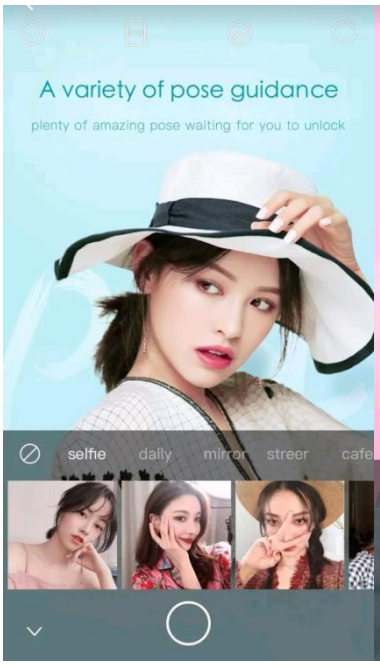
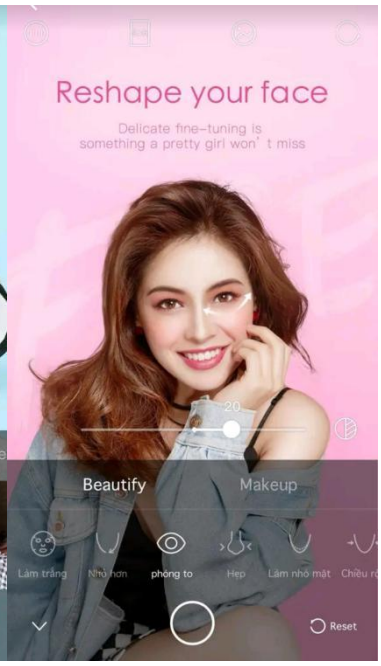


Figure 8.1.4



Appendix 8.2 Posters of Meitu (on Google Play)

Figure 8.2.1

Figure 8.2.2

Figure 8.2.3

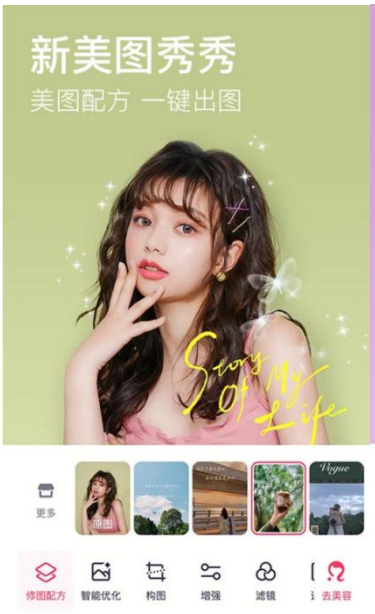


Figure 8.2.4

Appendix 8.3 Interfaces of Meitu

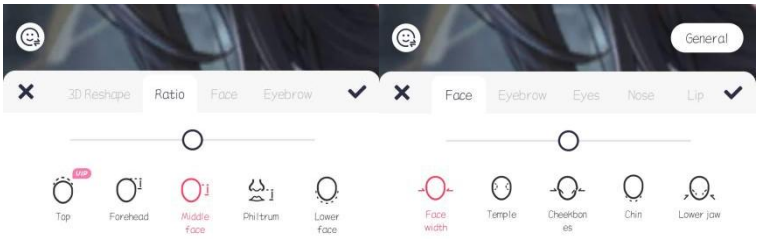


Figure 8.3.1 The Interface of ‘Reshape’

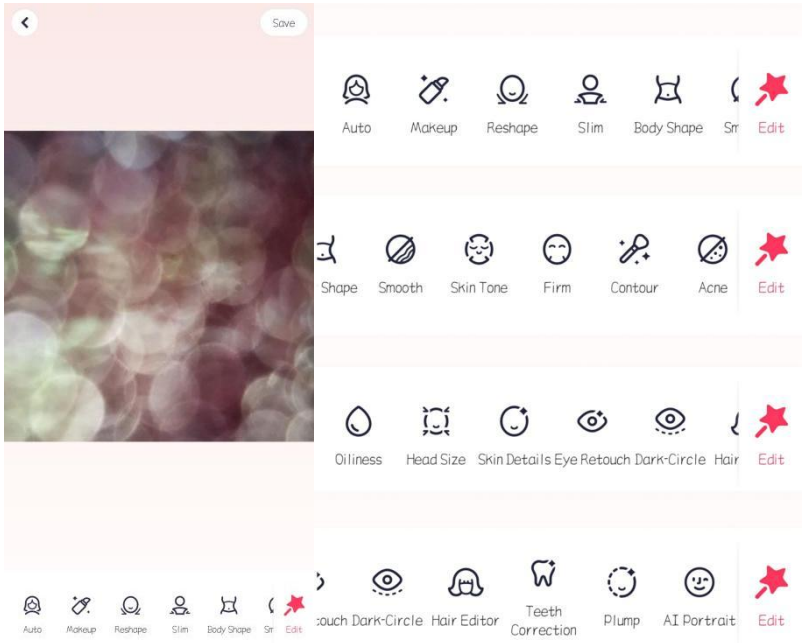


Figure 8.3.2 The Interface of ‘Beautify’

Appendix 8.4 Filters of Selfie Apps

Appendix 8.4.1 Ulike Filters

Figure 8.4.1 Ulike Filter

Nature (18)	Original, Nature, Brown, Switzerland, Kyoto, Gold Coast, Kamakura, Kenting, Town, Osaka, Carmel, Mocha, Showa, Showa2, Showa3, Clean, Bright, Cream
Explore shops (3)	Cake Roll, Mild Tea, Iced Coffee
VIP (32)	Moli, Soda, Ice, Bubble, Serenity, Pomelo, Miami, Spring, UI, Denim, Fuji, Chocolate, Hasselblad, Sweet Taro, Falling Blue, Berry, Tulip, Baby Blue, Pearl, Sea, Coral, Apricot, Cosy, Airy, Sugar, Paris, Retro1, Daily, Park1, Park2, Retro2, Retro3
Gray Tone (2)	Plain1, Plain2
Maiden (13)	Vacation1, Vacation2, Vacation3, Mousse, Haze, Clear, Icecream, Peach, Snow, Summer, Hokkaido, Pollen, Macaron
Western (14)	Island1, Island2, Island3, California1, California3, Jazz, Blossom, Dramatic, Winter1, Winter2, Winter3, Sea salt, Seattle, Amber
Film (12)	Mono, Once, Kawashima, California2, 1980, Koda, Moment, Fade, Mongkok, BW1, BW2, BW3

Appendix 8.4.2 Ulike Looks

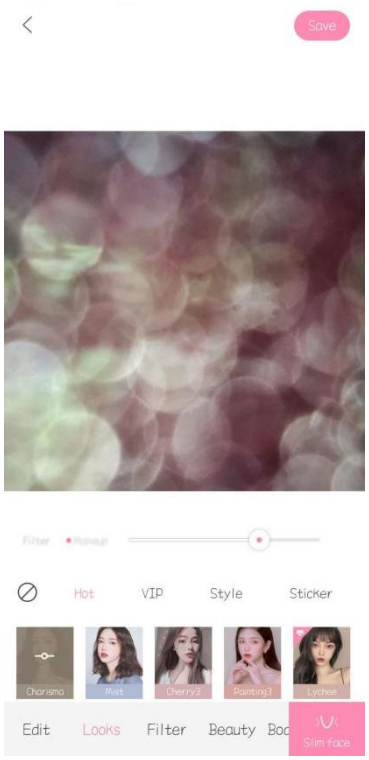


Figure 8.4.2 Ulike Looks

Hot (65)	Charisma, Mist, Cherry3, Painting3, Lychee, LowQuality, Over, Kira beauty, Gypsy, Honey, Persian, Eye mask, CT2, Blue eyes, Polaroid2, Doll face, Millennium, CLU, Princeton, Garden, DV5, Purity, Sakura, Big head, Drink, Doggy, Allergy, Honeyed, Dreaming, Bubles, Pony, Vito, Potra, Belle, Boyfriend, In love, Sunflower, Cow2, Polaroid, Cow, 2021, SpicyGirl, Aglaia, Marine, Red Wine, Deer, Samba, Mariposa2, Croissant, Winter Girl, Soymilk, DV4, Pretty Girl, Butterfly, Tea2, Monet Park, Y2K, Pure, Low pixel, Gray, Tea, Summer2, Mole, Misty, Silent
VIP (34)	La Belle, Butter face, Chill, Sweety, T2, Cold white, Salt soda, 1998, Radiation, NativeCam, Dazzling, Naughty, Silver, Gray eye, Bling Wear, Fisheye, DV, ABG, Tin, Poem, Shimmer, CCD, Rainbow, Hazy, Vanilla, VHS, Devil, Bunny girl, Baileys, Snowy, Meow, Elk baby, Purple, Dot
Style (38)	Lo-Fi, Chic1, Chic2, Picnic1, Picnic2, Mist2, Charisma2, Lover, Chrisma3, Vitality2, Cherry2, Painting, Painting2, Autumn, Vintage, Fantacy3, Vogue3, Shade, Maiden, Picnic3, Plain2, Plain3, Fantacy1, Vitality1, Sunset2, Bonjour, Plain1, Iceland, Summer, Sunset, Cherry1, Macaron, Vogue1, Vogue2, Mikako, Litely1, Litely2, Fantacy2
Sticker (78)	Mariposa, Fairy, Sparkles, Cherubic, Love, Shy cat, K.J.C. (Korean, Japanese, Chinese), VHS2, Highlight, 90s, Mojito, Cupid, Light, 2000ss, Jisoo, Kiss, Velvet, Candy, Raspberry, DV3, Peach, Party, DV2, Prism, Prism2, Hurt, Movie, Tan, Disco, Tear, Wolfing, Mankai, OOTD, Kira, Imp, Saffron, Crescent, Rabbit, Cream, Whisper, Romance, Angel, Demon, Floret, Emotion, Freckle, VC, Tanned, Crystal, Fireworks, Bubble, Ice Rabbit, Youthful, Heart, Leopard, Pictorial, Mouse, Hare, Bobule, Camellia, Swing, Word, Shiny, Moon, Flower, Gamer, 1970s, Poster, Mojo ring, Monster, Moster2, Cute2, Moonlight, Cute, Fluffy, Cover, KYOTO, Bambi

Appendix 8.4.3 Meitu Filters

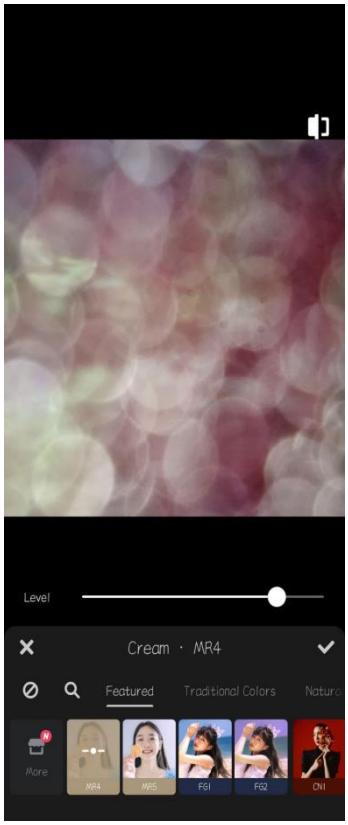


Figure 8.4.3 Meitu Filter

Featured (4)	Cream, Cold White, Kuriyama, Hirosue
Traditional Colors (6)	Scarlet, Blue & White, Dark Olive Green, Mangosteen Yellow, Rainy Grey, Dusk Brown
Natural (16)	Grey, Delight, Jungle, Moon, Luminous, Follow Spot, Highclass Grey II, Bunny Drop, Not Yet Lovers, Apricot, Room, Blur, Natural, Butter, Nude, Lotus Pink
Food (8)	Chef, Cozy, Brunch, Bakery, Reunions, Souffle, Picnic I, Picnic II
Oil Painting (7)	Soda, Oil Painting, Shimmer, Oil Painting II, Silk, Monet, Gentle
Film-like (9)	5207, ECN-2, X5, Photog, Hyperfocal distance, Tone, Development, Focus, Street Shot
Travel (6)	Beach, Jiangnan, Modern City, Western, Ancient Capital, Ubud
Creamy Painting (6)	Butter, Sweet Dream, Blue Haze, white moonlight, champagne, Candy
Meitu VIP (13)	Cure, Chic, Limes, Mint Blue, Tangerine, Neon, Romantic, Heartful, Backlight, Chrome, California, CCD, IMAX Film
Shade (6)	Cool Grey, Shade, Dream, Galaxy, Nightfall, Bordeaux
Loveliness (5)	Lazy, Naughty, Soft, Healing, Cute

Glitter (4)	Dream, Dazzling, Galaxy, GalaxyIII
Grey (4)	Store, White, Warm Grey, Brown
B&W (4)	Darkroom, Infrared, Instant, Moriyama, B&W
Movie (9)	Oak, Nice, Sicilia, Quiet, Pier, Le Mans, Antonia, Americano, Old Street
Intrigue (1)	Birthday
Film (2)	Dust frame, Outdoors
Sparkling water (3)	Avocado, Grape Soda, Summer Fish
Amusement Park (1)	Pink&Black