# Selfie-editing apps fuel surge in plastic surgery and mental health struggles among young people



Like many of her peers, Abigail (21) actively engages in the world of selfies, meticulously editing her images with various apps before sharing them on social media. She voices a growing concern among young people: the allure of an idealised self-image crafted through technology can warp one’s perception of reality. “You look at that idealised version of yourself and you just want it – you just want it to be real,” she observes, highlighting how these editing tools can foster a longing for unattainable beauty standards.

Recent research, including a study published in *New Media & Society,* supports Abigail's sentiments. A team of researchers interviewed nearly 80 young people and found that the advent of selfie-editing technologies is significantly impacting body image and overall well-being among youth. With apps like Facetune, Faceapp, and Meitu becoming increasingly popular, young people are able to transform their images with a breadth of tools—from lighting adjustments to comprehensive “structural” edits that simulate cosmetic surgeries. This expansive capability encourages users to scrutinise their physical appearances, leading to a cascade of micro-changes that can blur the boundaries between reality and digital alteration.

The age of constant visibility in a digitally-networked world compels many young individuals to present their “best selves” online. This digital curation is often a response to the pervasive pressure to conform to societal beauty ideals, intensifying feelings of inadequacy among users. Participants in the research noted that they perceive everyone else's photos to be edited, creating an unspoken expectation that they must also engage in this visual enhancement to avoid falling behind. This phenomenon resonates with studies indicating that social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat can act as “toxic mirrors,” exacerbating body dissatisfaction and self-objectification, especially among adolescents.

Many interviewees articulated a troubling but growing trend: a desire to change their appearance in real life to match their edited personas. For instance, Amber (19) candidly stated that “a lot of plastic surgeries are now one step further than a filter.” This sentiment reflects a broader societal shift where tools designed for playful enhancement now serve as precursors to invasive cosmetic procedures. Similarly, Freya (20) mentioned that editing her body in photos directly influenced her decision to undergo lip and cheek fillers. This underscores a concerning link between digital alterations and physical changes, often described as “Snapchat dysmorphia”—a term reflecting the struggle of individuals who seek aesthetic surgery to align their looks with their digital images.

The implications of these trends extend to mental health, particularly concerning young people’s body image. A study found that female undergraduates who posted retouched selfies experienced heightened anxiety and diminished self-esteem compared to those in a control group. This aligns with wider research highlighting how image-altering technologies contribute to negative mental health outcomes, including exacerbated body dysmorphic concerns. The constant exposure to idealised, edited images can warp perceptions and create a cycle of dissatisfaction, where the pressure to achieve an unattainable standard fuels disordered eating and body image issues.

As technology advances, particularly with the integration of artificial intelligence in beauty apps, the potential for these platforms to alter young people's self-perception and mental health continues to grow. The increasing sophistication of “beauty cam” features that offer hyper-realistic “before and after” visualisations may further distort the relationship between technology and the human experience.

In summary, the use of selfie-editing tools is not merely a harmless pastime; it is a complex social phenomenon that has profound implications for identity, self-worth, and mental health among the youth. Understanding and addressing these impacts is crucial as society navigates the challenges posed by the digital landscape.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
2. Paragraph 4
3. Paragraph 5
4. Paragraph 6
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6. Paragraph 6
7. Paragraph 3

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://theconversation.com/perfect-bodies-and-perfect-lives-how-selfie-editing-tools-are-distorting-how-young-people-see-themselves-257134> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://time.com/4459153/social-media-body-image/> - This article discusses how social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat serve as 'toxic mirrors' for teens, exacerbating body image issues. It highlights studies linking social media use to negative body image, including concerns about dieting, body surveillance, and self-objectification among adolescents. The piece emphasizes the pressure teens feel to present idealized versions of themselves online, leading to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. It also notes the rise of 'wellness' and fitness celebrities online, promoting unhealthy body ideals under the guise of health.
3. <https://time.com/5357262/snapchat-plastic-surgery/> - This article highlights the phenomenon of 'Snapchat dysmorphia,' where individuals seek plastic surgery to resemble their filtered selves from apps like Snapchat and Facetune. It discusses how these filters present unattainable beauty standards, causing patients to blur the lines between fantasy and reality. The piece also notes that while 'Snapchat dysmorphia' is not a recognized clinical condition, the behavior could exacerbate body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), characterized by an obsession with perceived flaws.
4. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30149282/> - This study experimentally tested whether taking and posting selfies, with and without photo-retouching, elicits changes to mood and body image among young women. Female undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: taking and uploading either an untouched selfie, taking and posting a preferred and retouched selfie to social media, or a control group. The study found that women who took and posted selfies reported feeling more anxious, less confident, and less physically attractive afterward compared to those in the control group.
5. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snapchat_dysmorphia> - This Wikipedia article defines 'Snapchat dysmorphia' as a psychological phenomenon where individuals seek plastic surgery to replicate their filtered selfies or altered images. It discusses how the increasing availability and variety of filters on social media apps like Snapchat and Instagram allow users to edit and apply filters to their photos instantly, creating unrealistic expectations of one's appearance. The article also notes that this distorted perception can potentially evolve into body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), affecting one in 50 Americans.
6. <https://time.com/6098771/instagram-body-image-teen-girls/> - This article examines Instagram's impact on the mental health of teenage girls, particularly regarding body image. Research by Facebook, Instagram’s parent company, revealed that the platform exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and self-harm among many teens. Critics argue that Instagram’s reliance on image sharing creates an inherently appearance-focused environment that is difficult to change. Proposed solutions include diversifying content and adding reminders to limit usage, though some experts remain skeptical about their effectiveness given Instagram’s profit-driven model.
7. <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1001/jamafacial.2019.0328> - This survey study of 252 participants investigated the association between the use of social media and photograph editing applications, self-esteem, and attitudes toward cosmetic surgery. The study found that increased investment in the use of social media platforms was associated with increased consideration of cosmetic surgery. Participants who reported using specific applications, such as YouTube, Tinder, and Snapchat photograph filters, had an increased acceptance of cosmetic surgery; use of other applications, including WhatsApp and Photoshop, was associated with significantly lower self-esteem scores.