Title: Seeing selfies with a "digital forensic gaze": Filter This!
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Abstract: (500 w)

This presentation explores mobile phone photographic technologies and their influence on digital sociality and the operation of cultural scopic regimes. More specifically, we will describe filtering behaviors within selfie practices in order to prompt a dialogue on the ways that cultural and technological apparatuses, show or hide, a quickly changing politics of looking. We will draw on a three-year study undertaken in 3 Canadian cities, where we conducted over 20 photo-elicitation focus groups to tease out how people understand and reflect on their own uses of selfie filters and view those of others. By "organizing interviews around photographs" (Harper 2001, 16) we provoked personal narratives that in turn manifested fascinating insider discourses. Finally, we will discuss how people edit their selfies, imagine potential audiences and their responses, how they identify and evaluate the use of filters in others, the kinds of judgments and policing that filters provoke, as well as gendered, raced, classed and affective dimensions of editing behaviors.

Selfies are just those 'images among us' that are both "comforting and threatening." As photographic images they are more than "mediators between the world and ourselves" and have serviced those Flusser calls "envisioners" (2011). He explains, "Technical images result from a gesture that is doubly self-involved" (p. 20), where a human intention works against the autonomy of the apparatus. Filters afford both moments of "envisioning" as well as tendencies to fold the human intention into "the apparatus's inner instructions" (p. 20). We question what the "work" of filters is, visually and socially, and how users in turn work them. How can examining filter usage help us understand shifts in relationships between truth, representation, the performance of self and authenticity triggered by selfie practice and digital sociality in digitally mediated photography.

This paper claims that looking at selfies is animated by what we call a "digital forensic gaze" that presumes the use of filters: as such, selfie looking practices are highly sensitized to the tensions between artifice and authenticity.

We will explore these ontological confusions, and also consider how filters generate forms of self-objectification that allow the subject to simultaneously display and conceal the self through filters such as the dog face app, which places nose, ears, whiskers over the selfie. We will also critically examine how these filters point to the power relations at play in the creation and sharing of selfies that are racialized (i.e. skin lightening), gendered (i.e. heteronormative gender norms that are organized by age, weight, class), that often get flattened in analyses.

Filters are central to understanding the popularity and appeal of selfies. The ability to manipulate your appearance is intuitively appealing and lends itself to the identity work of adolescence and young adulthood. We explore how the ability to "filter" photographs – edit lighting, photoshop faces and bodies, as well as add stickers onto faces - facilitates a kind of game of virtual dress up, which is linked with the discourse of "control" that permeates selfie discourse and epistemologies and is fraught with tensions (Lavrence and Cambre 2019).