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Being naked on the internet: young people's selfies as intimate edgework

Matt Hart

Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I examine how young selfie sharers engage in intimate edgework in the visual social media site tumblr. Originally devised by Stephen Lyng, edgework is defined as the purposeful engagement in risky behaviour as a result of the seductive character of the experience, and the rewards of doing so brings. The article is based on data gathered from in-depth, online interviews with 25 young people who post naked self-photographs to their tumblr blogs, and participant observation between mid-2014 and late 2015. Through their online practices, I show how young selfie sharers gain a range of benefits similar to those leveraged by people engaged in archetypal forms of edgework – such as skydivers – without the threat of physical danger. Young people negotiate the societal boundaries of morality/immorality and order/disorder; prepare and deploy specific skills in their edgework; and maintain a perception of control. Through being naked on the internet, young people feel a sense of well-being and belonging, thus engaging in 'intimate edgework'. This article answers the call for further development of a feminist model of edgework that uproots its original hegemonic masculine ideals by elaborating on how individuals negotiate emotional edges in the digital age.

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Introduction

What motivates some people to throw themselves out of a plane at 35,000 feet up in the air; or others to swim with sharks without the safety of a cage? Stephen Lyng, who originally developed the sociological concept of edgework, argues that those who purposefully choose to engage in risky behaviour do so as a result of the 'extremely seductive character of the experience itself' (2005, 05). Edgework involves 'treading boundaries' (Shay 2015), the 'edges' between life and death; consciousness and unconsciousness; order and chaos (Lyng 1990). The 'challenge' of edgework is to get as close to the edge as possible, through utilising skills and knowledge, without suffering fatal injuries, losing one's sanity, or general well-being. The seductive character of edgework, then, stems from the thrill that accompanies successful edgework and the authenticity of need fulfilment.

Lyng's (1990) initial edgework concept was illustrated using an ethnographic study of skydivers, and indeed in its most archetypal form edgework involves physically dangerous

activities. In the years that have followed, a number of scholars have opened up edgework theory to analyse the 'dirty work' of bike messengers (Kidder 2006); the 'pro-anorexia sub-culture' (Gailey 2009); rogue stock traders (Wexler 2010); and academics taking career risks (Hamm 2005), to name a few. Fewer studies have involved the emotional aspect of voluntary risk-taking, such as women negotiating violent domestic relationships (Rajah 2007), or those dealing with pleasure and pain in sadomasochistic sexual relationships (Newmahr 2011a). While the archetypal edgework model prioritises the physical dangers of 'masculine' leisure activities (Laurendeau 2008), others have taken steps to show that emotional edgework *does* involve its own edges (Newmahr 2011a). People put their emotional stability, status, career prospects, or spiritual well-being on the line, beyond which damage can be incurred (Shay 2015). No studies have as yet framed the sharing of erotic or naked self-shot imagery on social media as edgework. In this paper, I argue that is precisely what young people are doing on tumblr.

Literature review

Lyng (1990) introduced the term 'edgework' as means of understanding the phenomenon of voluntary risk-taking through the willing negotiation of boundaries – between life and death, order and chaos, sanity and insanity, and consciousness and unconsciousness. Edgework activities share a common characteristic in that they all possess a 'clearly observable threat to an individual's physical or mental wellbeing or sense of ordered existence' (Lyng 1990, 857). Austin (2010) describes the conceptual relationship as being best imagined as circle, in which he states that: 'ideas of safety, security, and stability are "inside", while insecurity and instability are "outside" (the circle), delineated by the "edge"' (19). Thus, to engage in edgework is to 'flirt' between the inner and outer edge of the 'circle'. The challenge is doing so (skilfully) without being adversely affected, injured, or killed. Shay (2015) notes that edgeworkers 'also enjoy feelings of specialness, believing that their experiences are ineffable and understandable only by others who master the same skills and activities' (2).

Lyng's (1990) initial edgework concept was illustrated using an ethnographic study of skydivers, and indeed in its most archetypal form, edgework involves physically dangerous leisure sports activities (Lyng 2005; Simon 2005). Lyng's early writings on edgework did not limit its application to dangerous sports or occupations, rather, what matters is that there are 'high stakes on the line ... but not necessarily one's body or life' (Shay 2015, 2). Following this line of thought, other scholars have argued this position to conceptualise religious practices (Bromley 2007), rogue stock traders (Wexler 2010), career risks (Hamm 2005), anorexia (Gailey, 2009), and women's experience with domestic violence (Rajah 2007) as edgework.

There are disagreements within the field as to what risk-taking behaviour constitutes as edgework, particularly when attempting to promote a feminist model of edgework. Rajah (2007) posits that any activity in which specialised skills are used to negotiate risks and gain emotional rewards counts as edgework. Newmahr (2011a) has called for a more 'feminist approach to edgework', in which to counter the 'hegemonic masculine ideologies' interwoven in Lyng's original concept (685), though she argues that the empirical work of Rajah (2007), Gailey (2009), and Lois (2005) dilutes the theoretical usefulness of the edgework concept, in a number of ways. First, while examining women's experiences of

edgework each theorist examines physical (masculine) edges – control found through violence, or the body. Even Lois (2003), who examines emotion management, still focuses on the physicality of rescue work. Newmahr (2011a) contends that a feminist expansion of edgework treats ‘emotional edgework’ not merely as the emotions (and emotion management) which accompany edgework experiences, but as the risk in emotional *experiences*. Simplifying further, feminist edgework is not about the emotional aspects of edgework, but rather ‘edgework that negotiates *emotional edges*’ (700). Second, previous attempts at a feminist model of edgework have abandoned the fundamental crux of Lyng’s edgework concept, thus reducing its effectiveness as an analytical tool for a particular social phenomenon. What differentiates edgework from everyday risk-taking, and indeed what makes edgework *edge work*, is the ‘acquisition and exercise of skills necessary to get near the edge, the point beyond which the stakes at risk could be lost, without actually going over’ (Shay 2015, 2) via *leisure* activities.

Both Newmahr (2011a) and Shay (2015) offer interesting new avenues to develop edgework theory in their attempts to move beyond the scope of the original concept, whilst preserving its foundation. Newmahr’s (2011a) study of sadomasochism tells of those who enter into risky trust arrangements that place their emotions and well-being into the hands of their sexual partners. Conversely, Shay (2015) studies the risks taken by role-playing gamers who she positions as ‘virtual edgeworkers’, those who do not negotiate physical dangers but seek the rewards enjoyed by other edgeworkers, such as freedom, control, and excitement through their negotiation of specific boundaries and specialised skills. I propose that studying the naked selfies created and shared by young people on tumblr can help extend this discussion of feminist edgework further.

The social media website tumblr is self-described as a ‘microblogging platform’. It was launched in 2007, and has grown to host over 260 million unique blogs.¹ Users frequently blog and share textual, visual, and audio user generated and created content. Parallels between blogs and online diaries are not entirely misplaced, as online diaries are noted for their ability to ‘chronicle intimacies of both the soul and the flesh’ (de Laat 2008, 60). Tumblr is known colloquially for its copious amount of ‘cat pics and porn’, with much of its content marked or annotated as ‘Not Safe for Work’ (NSFW) (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz 2015). Tumblr is increasingly drawing the attention of scholars (Hart, 2015; Fink and Miller 2013; Renninger 2014; Tiidenberg 2013); however, empirical studies of the intersections of youth, risk, and selfies are under-examined.

Selfies are defined as a self-shot photograph, taken at arms-length or in front of a mirror, and are simultaneously a ‘photographic object that initiates the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship’, and a ‘practice or gesture that can send different messages to different recipients’ (Senft and Baym 2015, 1589). Selfies are simultaneously a cultural phenomenon, and a site of alternate articulations of intimacy in the digital age. Selfies ‘merge the self-portrait vision into an embodied performative practice’ – one which enables and drives users into the direction of self-awareness, tactility and sensuality, and is fast becoming a ‘normative part of flirting and intimate exchanges’ (Gómez Cruz and Miguel 2014, 72). Selfies depicting naked bodies are regularly tagged #NSFW, though Tiidenberg (2014) refers to them as ‘sexy selfies’ – those which ‘present narratives of sexual and embodied empowerment (that) can lead to an appropriation of the definition of sexy’. For ease of comparison, the interviewee’s selfies are here after referred to as *risky* selfies. In this context, taking and sharing risky selfies on tumblr can positively

affect one's relationship with one's own body, and increase sexual self-satisfaction. For some, the act of taking and sharing these selfies online should be regarded as a therapeutic practice whereby one can create a safe space for self-reflective exploration of one's sexual identity and being (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz 2015).

In spite of this optimism, cautionary tales regarding young people's sexuality and their new media use 'permeates the daily news cycle' (Pascoe 2011), such that the cultural meanings of selfies have often been subjected to extreme discourses of pathology and narcissism (Senft and Baym 2015), moral outrage (Vanity Fair 2014), and unethical behaviour (Siegel 2015). Indeed, the production and distribution of selfies depicting naked bodies is seen by some as a 'technological, sexual, and moral crisis' (Hasinoff 2012). Consequently, sharing risky selfies on the internet thus violates 'mainstream cultural norms which deplore public nudity' (Tiidenberg 2014). To do so, if caught, risks judgement or alienation from peers, family, or friends. As a result, many follow a set of common practices in order to protect their 'plausible deniability' (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz 2015), through various practices of censoring their own images, such as by blurring tattoos and birthmarks, or cropping out recognisable faces, props, or landmarks.

However, there are some young people on tumblr who make no little or no attempt to protect their plausible deniability. Indeed, these particular young people are cognisant that their tumblr blogs are (unless specifically altered) within the public domain, and that given enough time, an image uploaded there could be found by someone they know, thus creating a potential for harassment, stalking, or sexual predation. Yet they choose to do so anyway, believing that they can be their 'true selves' through authentic performances of self (Hart, 2015). What I propose here then is that risky selfies on tumblr are a form of 'intimate edgework'. Intimacy is commonly defined within sociological literature as the deep sense of knowing and closeness between people (Jamieson 1999) generated through sustained physical co-presence, emotional disclosures, and interaction (Valentine 2006). However, I have argued previously that young people on tumblr are actively engaged in articulating a diversity of intimate relationships that can be legitimated and sustained purely in the virtual sense (Hart, 2015). Intimate edgework extends Shay's (2015) notion of 'virtual edgework', being naked on the internet presents physical and emotional dangers, but successful negotiation generates a sense of freedom, control, and excitement. By displaying images of their naked bodies within the networked public of a social media platform, risky selfie bloggers negotiate boundaries between different chaos and order both online and offline.

Research setting, method, ethical considerations, and limitations

The research involved interviewing a sample of 25 young people, 22 females and 3 males, between the ages of 18 and 25 (mean age 20). Participants were recruited via purposive sampling; eligibility for participation meant that an individual had to be legally able to provide consent, and operate a tumblr blog in which NSFW selfies were posted with relative frequency (deemed to be at least one upload per month), and whose selfies revealed faces and other identifying features. Selection bias was countered by sending invites to any young person who met these criteria, rather than consciously (or unconsciously) favouring particular individuals. The participants were given a choice of either video, audio, or textual interviews (online chat) via Skype messaging service. All participants

nominated to use the online chat feature. The semi-structured interviews lasted 60 minutes each. This form of interviewing method is useful for understanding 'why' rather than the 'how' of young people's selfie production and how these practices unfold on tumblr. Such a method provides the flexibility necessary for engaging with a diverse cohort of research participants (Fylan 2005, 66). Informed consent was gained through providing information sheets prior to the interviews commencing, in which participants were made aware that participation was voluntary and that any data they provided would be anonymised in accordance with the ethical requirements of the University which had endorsed the research project.

Questions related to a variety of issues concerned with the use of tumblr, the affect associated with NSFW content production, and how boundaries and norms were negotiated. Such questions included 'What sort of NSFW content do you like to view on tumblr, and how is that similar or dissimilar to the selfies you make and share there?'; and 'Are there times when you feel unsafe sharing your selfies on tumblr? How do you navigate those risks?'. The questions were not intended to compromise a rigid or exhaustive list, but were intended as a guideline that could be altered depending on the direction each participant took as their narrative developed.

Research such as this does present potential ethical dilemmas, and contains limitations. For example, the sampling method might be considered 'cold-calling', and as such present as a nuisance. However, it proved to be an efficient means of recruiting participants – despite the sensitive nature of the research, all 25 individuals were recruited over a period of 4 months. Furthermore, cognisant of my position as a white, male researcher attempting to approach both young men and women to talk about images depicting their naked bodies, measures were taken whereby I could ensure my credibility and authenticity. Doing so required carefully creating a recruitment pitch that made visible my academic 'online footprint' as much as possible; this was achieved by providing links to professional and academic online profiles. One participant in particular commented that she had initially thought I was 'just another photo creep' but was relieved to be able to find me through Google and ascertain my sincerity. With a sample size of 25, the findings and discussion are not intended to be conclusive; but a means of injecting new scholarly debate. Likewise, the gender of participants was heavily skewed with a higher percentage of women participating than men. This raises unique questions pertaining to the gendered nature of young people's risky selfies, which must be explored at a later time outside of the scope of this paper.

Findings

At its core, edgework involves 'a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental wellbeing or one's sense of an ordered existence' (Lyng 1990, 857). The findings of the study indicate that there are resonances with young people's selfie sharing practices on tumblr and Lyng's (1990, 2005) edgework concept. To qualify risky selfie sharing as edgework, I discuss the boundaries negotiated by young people online in this context, alongside the preparation, skills, and sensations involved with their selfie-sharing practices.

Boundaries

The four kinds of boundaries edgeworkers can negotiate are life and death; consciousness and unconsciousness; sanity and insanity; and an ordered or disordered sense of self or environment (Lyng 1990). Risky selfie bloggers, unlike other edgeworkers, engage in intimate edgework, because they test their bodies *and* their emotions. Sharing naked images of one's body invites the other to knowing deeply personal things about one's self; their physical flaws, of being objectified, of being recognised and vilified professionally and socially. Newmahr (2011b) argues that emotional edgework is that which deals with emotional edges. Importantly, is not about the management of emotions, as in Lois' (2003) work, but about the risks inherent in emotional experiences themselves (163). I read this to mean that like emotional edgework, intimate edgework explores the edge between emotional chaos and emotional order, and between the self and a loss of self in particular. Beverly, an 18-year-old white girl, explained that she was a firm believer in that 'gaining success requires a loss of innocence or naivety', and that when she posts a nude selfie, she 'may lose some innocence', but the payoff was learning about what her limits were:

There's an internal risk of losing sight of your 'value' as a human, and the value of your body. If you don't have a strong sense of who you are, if you don't know how to handle being objectified by horny men, or if you get hooked on the attention, it can have a negative effect on you, you know? (Beverly, interview)

The chaos/order line is thus conceptualised in negotiating the balance between tasteful imagery and porn. Many bloggers spoke about how important it was for them to draw a line between what they would show (tasteful) and what they would not (sexually explicit images depicting sex acts or sexual genitals). For instance, Alice's response to a question about what qualified as #NSFW content and what did not illustrate her desire to maintain her own 'self-worth':

Mostly I post topless pics ... people on tumblr will never see my vagina. Ever. It isn't necessary. I'm not here to make porn. Nude selfies are different to porn in that as women we get to choose what we want to share. You can always say no, you're not being directed by someone else ... So if anyone that begs or badgers me for a pic of my pussy gets blocked. I post pics for me, and how it makes me feel.

The implication in Alice's response is that failing to resist the desires or impulses of others constitutes failed edgework. For her, anything other than a topless picture meant she had gone too far into chaos and a loss of self.

Another way in which the line between chaos and order was treaded was through a balance between privacy and publicity. This was a common theme amongst many of the participants: how to successfully balance the seductive desire of sharing risky selfies with being caught and ostracised in their professional and personal lives. Risky selfie bloggers open themselves up to social repercussion if their images are discovered by friends, family, or co-workers and employers. Many expressed a fear of what would happen if their images were discovered and leaked by or to people they knew. Jessica, a 22-year-old white American girl, explained:

Look, it's a very real prospect when I think about it. Well, I mean we are in the age of technology; it's so easy to find anything nowadays, if you've got the time. For me, there's always the

fear of not being able to procure a job because of someone getting a hold of my nudes. Like my job finding out, and me being fired because I, all of a sudden, don't fit their 'profile' of a respectable employee, or whatever. Or being slut-shamed by people I know after someone posts my images all over my friends' Facebook walls. I keep my tumblr life and my real life VERY separate.

Jessica implied that any blurring of the line between public and private constituted failed edgework. In her instance, the utter paranoia and fear of going over the edge ensured that she took measures to safely negotiate the edge as best she could.

Preparation

Those engaged in edgework commonly conduct a great deal of preparation prior to treading their respective edges and boundaries, such as checking equipment, mapping and planning trips and routes, and steeling themselves mentally (Lois 2003; Lyng 1990). Selfie bloggers likewise invest time and effort into preparing for their image: they groom themselves and take time in planning themes, angles and lighting for their shoots; while many young people upload selfies ad hoc, there are also those who take into consideration upcoming cultural or temporal events on tumblr, such as days of the week in which particular selfies are circulated. Others consume recreational drugs to steel their nerves or to get into a particular mood to take images. What this shows is the importance these young people place on preparing themselves physically and mentally before putting their naked bodies on the internet. Rose, a 20-year-old white girl from America explained how she physically prepared for her selfies:

I take time to pick out an outfit that I'm going to strip out of. I play up my makeup, most of which goes unseen – but for me, it makes me feel sexy and confident. I put on red lipstick, squeeze my boobs together, and take a picture. Choosing what outfit or what make up to wear is important, and it takes a lot of time. I make sure I get the lighting and pose right, then upload, and sit back.

Conversely, other responses indicated mental approaches to their edgework preparation, which often included alcohol or recreational drugs. Larry, a 21-year-old from Australia, explained how alcohol helped him gain the courage to take his selfies:

If I feel like posting a new selfie, it'll be when I've come home after being out, drinking, and have gone to something like an underwear party. I'll snap a couple of photos of me in my outfit while I'm in the bathroom, and upload them to my blog. I usually regret that the next morning.

Evelyn, a 19-year-old white American girl, very openly explains that drugs influence her selfie practices. In one post on her blog, she openly states: 'Getting high and stuffing my boyfriend's dick down my throat and taking pics is a hobby of mine'. Indeed, there are various tags on her selfies related to her drug use, such as #420, #weed, #chronic, and so on. Prior to taking selfies, Evelyn gets high because it 'puts her in the mood' and helps overcome any shyness or reservation she might normally feel. In this sense, being in a drug-induced state helped Evelyn focus and succeed on her edgework, or in simple terms 'from chickening out'.

In contrast, Layla, an 18-year-old black woman from the USA, described how she planned her selfie practices in advance, often noting particular selfie events that she could participate in.

There was this thing coming up called TheBlackOut, it was a movement to increase black visibility on social media. People were going to participate by sharing photos, art, music etc. about blackness. I had to be careful though, because if I put up my nudes with #theblackout tag, anyone would be able to see them if they searched that.

Layla went on to explain that she consulted with other black selfie bloggers on tumblr about how to participate in the event while reducing her likelihood of being potentially recognised if someone she knew was curious enough to look into #TheBlackOut. By swapping tips on what tags to use or not to use, at what time during the day, or how to hide specific elements of one's face or body while not cropping it out entirely, selfie bloggers could increase their potential for successful edgework, similar to how Shay's (2015) gamers consulted with each other and devised strategies to succeed in role-playing games.

Skill and control

Edgework involves the use of special knowledge or skills that make a dangerous activity safe enough to be engaged; it requires the 'ability to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos, a situation most would regard as entirely uncontrollable' (Lyng 1990, 859). Recent studies have found that many young people lack the competency to manage their privacy settings online in order to protect their information or reputation (Livingstone et al. 2012). However, the participants placed great emphasis on the importance of managing their privacy as it directly factors into their explanations of what it takes to be safe as an NSFW selfie blogger on tumblr. Consider the following example of one respondent who learned how to share her selfies with more safety and greater success after failing to negotiate the edge:

Julia, a 19-year-old Trans girl, began taking nude selfies and performing webcam shows with her best friend when they were both under the age of 18. For her, there was an erotic thrill in performing for adults and the illegality of her actions. Despite not indicating her age, an individual from what she described as the 'Hispanic equivalent of 4chan' stalked her other social media pages and leaked her personal information to an online forum. Consequently, Julia was subjected to a prolonged period of abuse, death threats, solicitations, and blackmail. Out of fear, she deleted her online footprint entirely and went 'offline' to recover from the ordeal. Being a self-described exhibitionist, however, meant that her online hiatus could not go on indefinitely, and started a blog on tumblr. Julia explained that she learned that if she was to succeed in this endeavour, she would need to find a space in which she could have an audience, but not be found so easily. In her own words, tumblr was great because it is 'like hiding in plain sight', the sheer mass of blogs and content on tumblr made finding her blog akin to the proverbial needle in the haystack.

Other strategies cited by the bloggers elaborated on this obfuscation skill, which involved using a pseudonymous identity and avoiding tagging their images all-together (with a limited search functionality on Tumblr, content and blogs are sorted/found through tags). Negotiating a pseudonymous identity involved a range of practices, as one interview explained:

I use an alias. I use a variety of emails for my personal life. I never use my work email for anything other than work. I never share my real life location, or post anything that might give it

away. If I'm asked, it's some place I visited once, or if they're really bugging me, I tell them Antarctica. (Debra, 19, USA, interview)

Contra to motorcycle riders, who use conspicuous gear or riding equipment to increase their visibility and safety (Austin 2010, 70), selfie bloggers place primacy on *inconspicuousness*. Beyond not using one's real name, or linking one's tumblr blog to any external social media, some ran two separate blogs – a 'regular' blog, used for blogging about everyday life, and a covert NSFW 'side blog' for sharing and re-blogging their selfies or other erotic content. Inconspicuousness was taken by some to an even further level by opting not to tag their photos altogether. A common practice amongst tumblr users is to tag their content – to classify it, and make it searchable by others. Many young people were observed to tag their selfies as #Selfie, #me, or #GPOY²:

I know for a fact a lot of tumblr users (and non-users) use scripts or bots to search specific tags. I've seen one that's set to scrape anything tagged #selfie ... I don't tag my selfies at all – with the sheer volume of stuff that gets uploaded every minute, no one's really going to have a chance to see my images. (Evelyn, 19, USA, interview)

A large number of participants explained that they had learned to routinely change the names of their tumblr accounts, and indeed during the interview process, several participants did just that. A tumblr account name is directly linked to its web address – change the name, and the web address also changes. This means that even if someone was to save a particular tumblr blog in their web browser, the viewer will be redirected to a webpage stating 'there's nothing here!' Sometimes, participants would simply deactivate their tumblr blog and start anew. This is a form of self-imposed witness protection, or rather self-protection, in which risky selfie bloggers have learned to adapt fluid, temporal identities that can be constantly shifted to avoid recognition.

Sensations

Lyng (1990) describes a number of sensations relating to the edgework experience; such as self-actualisation, and altered perceptions of time (860). Importantly, there are emotions which accompany the edgework sensations, such as fear (initially), and adrenaline or euphoria (during conclusion and reflection upon the edgework experience). Lyng refers to self-actualisation as being truly alive, along with emotions of 'exhilaration', 'omnipotence' (1990), and 'empowerment' (2005, 26). Selfie sharers often gave responses which described feelings of exhilaration or empowerment as a consequence through sharing their nude self-imagery on tumblr. In many cases, the young women in particular felt sexier and more body-confident than they did outside of tumblr. For example, when asked 'why do you share your nude self-imagery on tumblr?' Beverly said:

I was brought up by parents that believe the body is private, for my eyes only, so it's freeing and adrenalizing to put something considered so intimate on the internet of all things for everyone to see ... I've always lived a rebellious life ... I'm very much the daredevil.

Similarly, a number of male participants also described their own sense of empowerment that was derived from sharing NSFW selfies on tumblr, such as Scott, an 18-year-old white man who described feeling a boost in confidence:

I don't always feel great about myself ... I've never thought of myself as attractive or anything beyond average ... But I can post a picture, and people respond positively which gives me a great feeling about myself.

What is exhilarating for them is not only deliberately putting a nude selfie on the internet that has the potential to get recognised, but in the anticipation of the reaction others will have to their images. Beverly wants to 'see what (she) can get away with', and a review of her blog shows that over time her NSFW selfies have indeed become more daring. What started out as suggestive and coquettish poses with hands covering body parts, eventually becomes explicit displays of sexual suggestion and invitation. As her selfies became more explicit, so too did the praise and support of her tumblr followers.

One of the other participants, Arden, a 19-year-old, likewise gave a response which illustrated how salient it was being able to have embodied experiences that they did not feel were possible elsewhere:

Tumblr is a space I know that is safe to express myself. Before then, I felt like I was forced to be comfortable with a body that I didn't identify with, like trying to feel sexy in a sumo suit ... I came out as trans over a year ago on tumblr, however my family still has no idea. I wouldn't know how to tell my conservative parents their 'daughter' has been living as a man for the last year or so.

Only by being able to take NSFW selfies of her male body, a practice made possible through her tumblr usage, is Arden able to find a congruence between their bodily appearance and their preferred gender expression. The risk of being discovered as a man by people she knows offline is overruled by the exhilaration of being free to express himself and enjoy the positive attention his body receives.

An altered perception of time is another noted aspect of edgework, in which time passes either quicker or slower than it does in reality (Lyng 1990). Recalling the preparation some selfie bloggers engage in, a number of respondents experienced time compression, with reports of starting their photographic processes early in the evening, and finishing early in the A.M. Jean, a 25-year-old white girl, explained this through outlining her photographic process:

Usually I set time aside, and pick out what to wear for a photoshoot I have in mind. I do a mini-snapchat to a girlfriend to see what she thinks of the outfit, makeup, angles I'm thinking of using, stuff like that. It's become a bit of a nightly ritual. I light candles, smoke some weed, find some mood music, and kinda throw myself into it.

Indeed, the experience of time for the edgeworker often contrasts with what is happening to those external of the experience (Shay 2015, 16). In the above excerpt, recent photography session commenced when Jean's roommate left their apartment on a Friday night to go clubbing. When her roommate crawled back to their apartment in the very early hours of Saturday morning, she explained to a dumbfounded Jean that she was in the exact spot, camera in-hand, as when the roommate had left the previous evening. Much to Jean's embarrassment, she had not realised how much time had passed during the evening as she was too engrossed in her ritual photography session.

Edgeworkers often regard their experience as ineffable, that their experiences could only be understood by others who have also mastered learned skills and activities (Lyng 1990). Risky selfie sharers also held the belief that what they did made no sense

to outsiders, and older adults unfamiliar with technology in particular. As Shay (2015) posits, edgework is a proprietary and subjective element; specifically, that you will not 'get it' without doing it. This held true for those sharing their risky selfies on tumblr just as it does for skydivers (Lyng, 1990), motorcycle riders (Austin 2010), or firefighters (Desmond 2007). Kimberly, a 20-year-old white American girl told me how she had listened in on a conversation that her mother and her mother's friends were having about nude selfies after the celebrity phone hacking scandal of 2014.³ She explained how they had spoken with disgust about how 'stupid' the actresses were for taking the photos in the first place, and made comments like 'what kind of slut takes naked pics of herself anyway?' It meant that she knew she could never talk to her family about her interests, because their ideals and morals were incompatible:

It may be because they're older, different generations come with different moral codes and ways of living, or it could be because they aren't used to how young women in this country are treated. They wouldn't get it even if I tried to explain it, they'd just call me a whore and that I was going to hell.

Others blamed society and the media for how selfies and those who take them are portrayed, and expressed frustration at their technological literacy being underestimated. Rose said,

The media has a tendency to make the younger generation seem like they don't know what they're doing when they put their selfies out there, like as if once they're on the internet they can never go away, and that we're so obsessed with ourselves. I could try and reason that digital selfies are this generation's version of the dirty polaroids that our parents kept, but they still wouldn't get why we share them on the internet. And they wouldn't believe that I know what I'm doing or that I know how to avoid stalkers and shit like that ... You know, it's really fun and empowering, if I knew how to explain it other than that I would.

Discussion and conclusion

Posting a naked image of one's self does not carry the same physical intensity or risks as jumping out of an aeroplane high up in the sky, or free-diving with sharks, though there are real-world risks – in choosing not to crop or censor identifying features, there is a potential for the loss of employment and social standing, or emotional well-being through cyberbullying or stalking. Creating and sharing risky selfies on tumblr can help young people feel empowered, free, and excited or aroused. They experience alterations in the flow of time, losing hours as they pose, capture, and edit their images; find a connection to their bodies that they could not elsewhere; and hold the belief that only other selfie bloggers can truly know or appreciate what it means to do so. While not the same as skydivers, drug-drivers, or motorcycle riders, sexy-selfie bloggers are involved in a more 'everyday' form of intimate edgework.

Roth (2010) and Simon (2005) point out that everyday life is full of risk; car accidents, crime, workplace hazards, tenuous employment stability in an era of casualisation, and so forth. Milovanovic (2005) suggests that we 'all engage in edgework at some time' (51–52), with differing experiences of intensity, duration, manner, and form to our edgework experience. Following this, a number of scholars have applied edgework theory to a range of risky endeavours, such as unconventional religious practices (Bromley 2007); rogue traders taking financial risks (Wexler 2010), and role-playing gamers (Shay 2015).

However, Newmahr (2011a) argues that if we apply the 'edgework label' to all risky behaviours and intense sensations, we lose the value of edgework. Indeed, at times, the risks associated with the life events described by Roth (2010) and Simon (2005) are often not voluntarily courted at all, and simply considering engaging with these risks as a form of edgework dilutes Lyng's original framework. Newmahr (2011b) suggests that a feminist approach to edgework opens up new ground through moving 'beyond the particular masculinist conceptualisations of 'the edge' through focusing on the emotional dynamic of voluntary risk-taking, while preserving its fundamental core: skill-based, voluntary risk-taking that seeks (and does) negotiate extreme boundaries of chaos and order' (159–160).

Previous attempts at this, while worthy contributions, have still fallen short – emotional aspects of edgework have been examined; however, they remain rooted in studies of masculine endeavours (cf. Lois 2003). The intent of this paper was to extend Newmahr's (2011a) contention that feminist edgework should focus on emotional edges through examining the non-physical risks attached to risky selfies. Indeed, the majority of the interviewees were young women, who spoke of their experiences of trust, self-awareness, introspection, and self-restraint. However, while there are indeed emotional edges which risky selfie bloggers negotiate – boundaries between order and chaos, a sense of self or an obliteration of self – the analysis shows that there are still physical edges that must be contended with. A failure to negotiate both physical and emotional edges in this context can lead to a loss of self-worth and mental well-being, but there is also the danger of being professionally or socially ostracised for engaging in behaviour that the media and broader public pathologies as narcissistic and immoral. Newmahr (2011a) and Shay (2015) have both offered valid and solid contributions to expanding the edgework concept to include non-physical forms of risk-taking; however, the findings and analysis presented here suggests that intimate edgework is not strictly 'virtual edgework' (Shay 2015), nor is it entirely contained within the realm of emotional edges (Newmahr 2011a), either.

I do concur with Shay (2015) however that as digital practices are increasingly becoming subsumed into the everyday, the canonical edgework framework will become less appropriate. Smartphones containing social apps and online dating profiles are ubiquitous, and within the context of risky selfies there are physical and emotional risks pertaining to privacy, the body, and moral ethics attached to them. If edgework is to continue to provide a useful means of understanding voluntary risk-taking, then a model that takes these practices into account must regard intimate edgework as a legitimate direction to take edgework theory. I have only just begun to scratch the surface of intimate edgework, and there is much scope for further work, particularly within a feminist perspective, and on the debate concerning young people and consumption of online pornography. Many interviewees spoke on the gender disparity amongst risky selfie bloggers, and of the distinction between porn and erotica; however, these were beyond the initial scope of this article and would provide a starting point for further discussion.

The literature on risk-taking in the context of young people has concentrated on negative impacts. While risk-taking in the 'adult-world' is seen as a cultural norm and acceptable form of behaviour, when it comes to the relationship between youth, risk, and pleasure, young people's experiences are given little attention (France 2010; Kelly 2000; Kemshall 2009). Edgework theory allows a fresh perspective on youth as 'at risk' (Follesø 2015) or 'troubling' (Blackman 2011). The intimate edgework explored here is similar to that

described by Newmahr (2011b); it can be collaborative, but it is also about access. When one is naked on the internet, one is effectively bared for all to see, and risks rejection on a number of levels, it is the 'access to emotional and physical experiences of others that we consider inaccessible to most people' (171). What is interesting here, however, is that tumblr turns intimacy on its head – it is not performed in absolute privacy; it is an intimacy performed in networked publics and one which is only just beginning to be understood.

Notes

1. www.tumblr.com/about
2. An acronym for 'Gratuitous Picture of Yourself'.
3. In which dozens of female celebrities had private nude images hacked from the Cloud and distributed online.

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