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Two kinds of mirror?: recrafting mediated selves in apps for mental wellbeing

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1. Introduction

Digital health has been proposed as a possible solution for what many see as a crisis in mental health and wellbeing, combining growing prevalences with decreases in accessibility and continuity of care (WHO, 2022). Digital apps are seen to have enormous potential to help alleviate unmet mental healthcare needs, particularly in terms of access, inclusion, efficiency (value for money), personalisation, responsiveness and avoidance of stigma. Easy to use, discreet, convenient, portable, and often cheap, the market for 'mental wellbeing apps' has gone beyond the strict expert definition of mental health consolidating in the last decade around $1.4 billion of global revenues in 2023, with a five-fold expected growth in ten years (Grand View Research, 2023; also Statistica, 2025). It is estimated that there are now more than 20,000 mental wellbeing apps available (Agarwal S, Jalan M, Wilcox HC et al., 2022), ranging from those designed to manage specific conditions to general meditation and mindfulness apps, mood trackers and increasingly conversational chatbots and AI for companionship and support.

Such rapid growth has generated concerns over effectiveness, safety and privacy. Randomized controlled clinical trials have demonstrated that some of these apps can alleviate symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other affective disorders (e.g. Philipe et al., 2022; Linardon et al., 2019). However, the recognised lack of regulation on these technologies could cause adverse events that cannot be tracked and, therefore, remain unknown risks. Their accessibility, in turn, has motivated concerns about possible harms in this form of self-management, an issue that is often discussed in the media (Rubeis, 2022). Poor usability and user experience might negatively impact patient outcome, such as feeling unsupported or undeserving of mental healthcare (Kang & Reynolds, 2024). Inadequate regulation also means that mental health data is likely to be extracted, shared, and claimed as an 'asset' by developers and investors. A key issue here is how apps' vulnerability to data extraction and leakage (Surani et al., 2023) might leave users' exposed to a variety of risks online and offline impinging on the misuse of private data. Privacy and confidentiality are seen by most professionals and users as fundamental to mental healthcare, and remain frequently cited as a reason not to use mental health/wellbeing apps (Lustgartern et al., 2020).

Social science research has opened a variety of dimensions of mental wellbeing apps to analysis beyond efficacy concerns. Stein and Prost (2024) have identified the key societal implications explored in the literature as relating to the quality of mental healthcare services, the potential medicalisation and commodification of distress, apps' (over) reliance on ideals of self-management and individual responsibility in the management of mental health, the consequences of monitoring on user's personal lives and emotional states, and how those are linked to "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019). One specific problematic that has emerged in social science research is how to understand the interaction between people and this type of algorithmic technologies, avoiding a-priori attributions of function, agency and power (Callon, 1986). More-than-human perspectives have, for this reason, become an important theoretical anchoring to analyse mental wellbeing apps (e.g. Kolehmainen & Lupton, 2025), Neff and Nagy (2016) proposing the idea of 'symbiotic agency', Simpson and Tucker (2024) applying the concept of digital atmosphere, and Flore (2022) the notion of 'bio--affective-digitalism' to describe the temporally emergent shifts in affect, self-perception, control and goals that are deployed in their use. In this paper, we address this problematic by asking the question: How do mental wellbeing apps mediate the relationship between self, identity, and users' affect-laden social worlds? To address this question, we combine two theoretical approaches – self-presentation theory and STS' notion of attachment – to understand interview data we collected on the experiences of users of a variety of mental wellbeing apps.

A field of literature has emerged on taking Goffman's (1990) concepts of impression management, presentation of self, front and backstage to apply them to digital spaces, and the reflexive ways in which we present ourselves through and with digital devices (e.g. Robinson, 2007; Hogan, 2010; Shulman, 2022; Lee et al., 2022). This comes from the

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basic realisation that perhaps more than any other social setting, digital spaces require self-crafting. Growing awareness of surveillance and the importance of crafting the self amongst digital devices users impinges on the significance of self-curation and self-care activities in the 'backstage', a region that is often offline but increasingly digitally mediated. Drawing on our data analysis, we suggest that mental wellbeing apps can be conceptualised as non-judgemental backstage regions where users experiment with transforming facets of their selves and their emotions. To understand the experimental – inherently uncertain - character of this process, we draw on the concept of attachment from STS. Differing from the more-well known psychological notion of attachment (Bowlby, 1978), this alternative concept of attachment "expresses our ways of *both* making *and* being made by the objects that hold us together" (Hennion, 2017, p. 118; emphasis in the original; also de Laet, Driessen and Vogel, 2021). As a pragmatist notion, attachment takes seriously people's competences and abilities to build their worlds with and through the objects they deploy in these processes, analysing these as unpredictable, trial-like situations, from which users, in time, are able to engender surprise and novelty (Hennion, 2012, 2017). Through this sensitivity towards avoiding the dualism of self and other and of subject and object, attachment focuses on how people – from drugs users, to music amateurs, to neurosurgeons (Gomart & Hennion, 1999; Moreira, 2004) - come to be affected by situations: we thus identify the delicate work and styles of practice that qualify users to transform their selves and their emotions through mental wellbeing apps.

Drawing on a sample of 'connoisseur' users of a variety of types of mental wellbeing app, we propose a typology of styles of practice. On the one hand, we have a style that takes data as the central mode of affect (Nash, 2016) and is most associated with the modalities of tracking (moods, emotions, behaviours, etc), and on the other, there are forms of work anchored on affective interactivity with conversational agents (chatbots, Gen AI, etc). These two styles can be further understood by drawing on Cooley's (1902) idea of the looking glass self: the apps can be grouped as two kinds of mirror where users re-articulate themselves to what Cooley conceptualised as the 'generalised other', a shifting, emotionally laden imagined 'eye of the other' that grounds the self in everyday interaction through continuing, situated judgment. Thus, in the first style of practice, the emotional self is articulated through the app by self-datafication and the crafting of a dataset that can bring both comforting recognition and challenges to identity. In the second mode, the self is transformed through back and forth movement between constructing/adjusting the agent and emotionally experiencing the conversation with it. There are, of course, algorithmic and interactive components in tracking apps as there is data input/output and datafication processes in chatbots, so these styles should be seen as *ideal types* in a continuum of distributed agencies in users of mental wellness apps.

After describing our methodology, we will outline the conceptual model underpinning and four analytical dimensions of our typology: a) emotional reflexive work, b) curating work, closely related to c) object customisation, and d) the style of knowing the self. Those dimensions will structure the four main empirical sections of the paper. We will conclude by suggesting that our findings and typological model should be useful to reframe conceptions of autonomy and agency in digital mental health and wellbeing which underpin many of the rightful concerns about privacy in new forms of data-driven control.

2. Design and methods

The data used in this paper stems from semi-structured interviews conducted in a mix-methods study of users of mental health apps, which combined qualitative research and computational analysis of Reddit posts on this topic between 2019 and 25. In the interview study, on which the present paper focuses, our goal was to recruit users of mental wellbeing apps, defined as digital tools, often smartphone applications, designed to support, manage, and promote positive mental health through self-help techniques like meditation, mindfulness, and mood tracking. We aimed to obtain a purposive sample of the different types of app we identified as belonging to that domain, following literature review, preliminary fieldwork and digital data analysis: mood and activity trackers, meditation, chatbots and other conversational agents. We translated this sampling strategy into a recruitment approach that specifically searched for users of these types of app in three social media platforms. On Facebook and X, we advertised the study and sought participants through recruitment public posts targeting self-identified mental health app users. On Facebook and Reddit, we targeted mental health (e.g. CBTpractice, MentalHealthUK, TalkTherapy) or app related (e.g. AndroidApps, Daylio, Worebot) lists with a similar recruitment post. Inclusion criteria were having experience of using a mental wellbeing app, being aged 16+ and able to participate in an online interview. This recruitment technique was not as productive as desired, particularly in relation to AI-driven apps.

It resulted in a sample (N = 29) predominantly composed of mood tracker users (21), followed by conversation agents/chatbots (8), CBT-based apps (4), and meditation (1). Some participants used more than one type of app, either synchronically or serially, and all were experienced users of mental wellbeing apps (1-5 years). The majority of participants (25) had been involved in some form of psychological therapy. Of the 29 participants, 14 were female, 12 male and 3 non-binary. We obtained an age diverse sample (21-65 yo) but with a median on the 26-35 range. The method of recruitment was particularly successful in terms of international reach, although participants resided predominantly in the Global North (see Table 1). Participants were highly engaged and knowledgeable about digital technology, with a significant proportion of them being skilful coders. They were on the whole satisfied with the apps they used. Although we did not ask directly about their educational background, their 'digital capital' (Ragnedda, 2018) combined with their specific experiences using a variety of these apps, enabled participants to provide a rich, critical assessments of the value of the devices in their lives.

The aims of the research were to investigate the evolving relationship between users and their emotions though the use of mental wellbeing apps. Semi-structured interviews were designed to focus on exploring apps' use in the users' life context. Interview topics included how users chose the apps, how and when users deployed the app and for what purposes, and how users assessed the practical and emotional consequences of using the apps. We were also particularly interested in probing into users' temporal emergent experience of using the apps, how they were valued, and the affect textures that they deployed. All interviews were conducted online, ranged from 45 min to 2 h in length, and were transcribed verbatim. We used constant comparison and inductive thematic coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify the forms of work and reasoning participants deploy to make sense of their use of mental wellbeing apps. We started by producing a detailed, data-derived list of initial concepts. After generating a large number of open codes, a series of project meetings were held to discuss coding inconsistencies and code criteria until consensus was reached; to do this, we compared and related codes systematically, organizing the descriptive codes around a core phenomenon to form more general analytical categories (axial coding). This established the properties and dimensions of categories and an initial structure of the mental wellbeing app use typology

Table 1
Interview sample.

Type of App	Age	Gender	Residence
Mood tracker = 21	18-25 = 6	Female = 14	EU = 9
CBT = 4	26-35 = 13	Male = 12	UK = 12
Chatbot = 8	36-45 = 6	Non-binary = 3	US = 5
Meditation = 1	46-55 = 2		Asia = 3
	56-65 = 2		

presented in the next section. All categories in the dataset were then systematically linked and selected in relation to the core typology for theoretical integration and interpretation (selective coding). We used analytical induction (Katz, 2001) to further validate our hypothetical typology about the different types of use of these apps iteratively testing it against new cases. The analytical framework was developed and validated by all 3 members of the study team, which was then systematically applied to the data. The analysis and the collaborative validation were supported by NVivo.

The study was approved by the Division of Law, Society and Social Justice Ethics Staff Review Committee at the University of Kent. In the interview extracts included in the paper, we use interview code numbers rather than pseudonyms to anonymise the participants, along with their gender, age, location and main app used.

3. Conceptualising mental wellbeing app uses: a typology

Our analysis suggests that a central theme in the data, consistent across all categories of users, was that participants value, above all, what they see as the non-judgmental character of the digital apps. Even if users understood that scales or technological interfaces are value laden, they prised the neutral and disinterested way in which emotions, behaviour, questions or prompts were managed by the apps. Their moods or prompts were not being directly assessed in relation to norms of behaviour, reasonableness or propriety. As one of our participants put it:

> And it's just data. Well, based on what you put in like. So [if] you do a really good job putting data in that, you have a fairly objective view into like, well, actually this [is] the pattern of your life, or maybe not your whole life, but your mood and, and then you begin to ask questions like, well, what causes these patterns in my mood? (24660, Female/43/Canada/Self-build mood tracker: 11)

The key to the quote is the emphasis on it being 'just data', the 'objectivity' of which depends on how good a job the user makes of inputting (selecting, curating). It is this 'objective' nature of the data that allows the user to find value in the patters identified by the app's algorithm, enabling them to ask questions about associations between moods and life events. The ability of the app to generate this zone of reflection was also present in another interview:

> Uh, because sometimes I read back on it and I think, wow, what in the world was I even thinking? Uh. I don't judge myself or anything. It's just pretty fun and interesting to see how much I've changed in these last couple of months. (82420, Male/20/Netherlands/Daylio: 18)

The display of patterns and observations supports users in engaging cognitively and affectively in a way that is fun or interesting rather than instantly triggering the 'imagination of the judgement of the other' that Cooley (1902: 184) thought was at the core of looking-glass self. This alternative form of engagement with data allows users to explore new dimensions of themselves and how they have changed.

Similarly, conversational agents are appreciated for allowing to sidestep this interactive loop, and the affective risks that it entails (e.g. rejection), encouraging users to try different ways of being themselves:

> So you don't have to be afraid of rejection or anything else, which means you tend to behave in a certain way. Yeah. And I find I'm a lot more direct. (23450, Male/57/Germany/Replika: 5)

This is possible because of what users view as the non-sentient nature of digital apps:

> You know, we're all human and therapists are human beings who come with their own issues and concerns. And the app doesn't. So, it's quite nice that you can consistently get the same experience. I'm not talking about, like, a robotic experience, but more like it's not having an off day and it wants to cut the session short or it's not frustrated by you. (331333, Non-binary/37/UK/ChatGPT and Finch: 7)

Contrary to humans, this participant suggests, apps are not emotionally entangled with their own selves. This enables the creation of a zone of experimentation where the user can control important sources of uncertainty (other people's concerns) and, through consistent engagement, recraft their emotional selves.

Participants emphasised the temporary but fundamental nature of the zone they created to reflect and re-craft the self through the apps they used, a time-zone bracketed out of routine, morally bound social interaction, that enabled them to re-engage and navigate social life anew. This was akin to '*a virtual escape room*', as one of our participants put it. In this, participants' description of this non-judgmental space was redolent of Goffman's (1990: 109-40) conceptualisation of front and backstage regions. Anchoring his Cooley-inspired dramaturgical model of social life (Scheff, 2005), a front region is defined as a 'space-time manifold' where specific aspects of performance are perceptually and situationally accentuated, and from which members' 'selves' derive as emotionally laden, resulting accomplishments/products. Conversely, the backstage region is where the performer "can drop (their) front", and "impressions are openly constructed" and "painstakingly fabricated" (Goffman, 1990, pp. 114-15). Front and backstages are in a continuous dynamic relationship that shifts with changing definitions of the situation, "regions which function at one time […] as front region [becoming] at another time and in another sense a back region" (Goffman, 1990, p. 127).

This relational dynamics is crucial to understand impression management in digital spaces, where a simple equating of the mediated self with online presence and backstage as that deployed offline does not bear critical scrutiny. In our case, digital apps were described by participants as a safe back region where they could genuinely express themselves, and both the offline and online spaces of co-presence, away from the app, were defined as front regions. It was also helpful in participants' ability to use the front stage of the interview to shine a light on "the amount and kind of work that has to be done" (Goffman, 1990, p. 117), providing thick descriptions of the self-crafting activities that are usually away from focus, including in Goffman's own work.

Goffman (1990) analysis of the self focuses on how individuals work at presenting a strategic image of themselves to others, making claims to their audiences about who they really are, with the expectation that their fronts will be taken seriously. In this regard, the process of self-presentation in encounters can be likened to a hypothesis verification procedure within a scientific experiment in that, when others support an identity in a situation, this is experienced as a confirmation through a set of reinforcing, positive emotions about that version of the self (Serpe et al., 2020; Turner, 2023).

By contrast with Goffman's epistemology of the self, in STS, experiments have often been conceptualised as events capable of generating unanticipated outcomes within an unfolding configuration of interactions between concepts, standardized organisms, instruments, graphs, etc. In what Latour describes as an 'additive' epistemology (Latour, 2016), the proposed focus is in tracing the multiplication of entities and their relations through the experiment (also Latour, 2013, pp. 97-122). Our data analysis prompted us to apply this reasoning to the analysis of mental wellbeing apps use: participants were explicit in their aim to use apps not merely to validate aspects of their selves but most importantly to explore possible alternative versions of the self and/or future aspects that might be recrafted.

In integrating apps as part of the 'identity kit for the management of [their] personal front" (Goffman, 1961, p. 119), participants were using digital tools as 'attachments' in the sense proposed by STS. As Callon has put it attachment is "a process of expression, in which [persons] learn what they are and what they are becoming, and whereby, symmetrically, things […] express what they are or what they can do and "make do" (Callon, 2017, p. 181) From this perspective, attachment is not a

general process – a recipe - by which selves or capacities for action are produced, but instead a set of uncertainties experienced by people as they try to delineate and transforms themselves through and with objects. The concept identifies the forms of work and activity that people engage with in navigating such uncertainties, a set of questions pertaining to the situation at hand. Drawing on our analysis, and exemplified in the quotes given above, we propose that this work revolves around a key uncertainty: How can I experience myself in a different way? How can my self be transformed by the way it affects me? To address these questions, users of mental wellbeing apps rely on their own embodied selves - a "mix of indeterminacy and resistance" (Hennion, 2017, p. 114) - as a dynamic triad: the embodied subject setting the trials in the apps, the body-object of those trials of experience, and the affective embodied subject of those trials. We propose that this work of continuous doing and redoing of the self through attachment in mental wellbeing apps use is organised around four interacting dimensions (Table 2).

The first of these we label mediated emotional reflexive work. Departing from the insight that people's sense of self is derived from the affectively laden way in which they imagine how they appear in the eyes of the 'generalised other' (Cooley, 1902), we propose that in addition to experiencing this loop in an internal conversation, as imagined by Cooley himself, users deploy the app as an external mediator – *an algorithmic other* - to attempt to transform their engagement with their selves (Latour, 2005; also Goodchild & Ferrari, 2021; Viduchinsky, 2026). In this dynamic, as the first quote above makes clear, users know that the transformative capacity of the app is dependent on how good a job they do of tinkering with the features and inputting the data or prompts/questions. The test of this indeterminate capacity is rooted in how this externalisation affects the user: this does not have to be aimed at provoking a threshold disclosure or enlightening emotional reaction; it can simply provide 'consistency' or the comfort of structure (see quotes above).

The recognised importance of the user's active involvement in this process is encapsulated in our second dimension: curating work. This refers to the actions of selecting, arranging, describing, annotating, aggregating, (re)using, organizing, interpreting, storing, and jettisoning what users input in the app, i.e. the everyday care and maintenance of the digital objects that users create in the app. Curating work is a form of tinkering, aiming at achieving temporary, situationally good arrangements of the self (Mol, Moser, Pols, 2010).

A significant and very closely related part of this dimension is the customisation or personalisation of the digital object users create. As referred above, this customisation involves the inbuilding of a familiarity and comfort in the use of the object that users are aiming to become transformative. There is thus a tension between familiarity and learning that the users resolve through relying on tinkering's focus on marginal repair. The crafting of idiosyncratic points of reference in customisation supports the embodied cognitive and affective re-adjustment that leads to exploring and finding new, often minor 'paths' to engagement with the objects created (Thevenot, 1994).

Finally, we found that mental wellbeing app users use specific epistemic categories – such as objectivity (above) - and ideas that could be proposed to belong to different ways of knowing the mediated self. As a form of self-expertise (Heyen, 2020), the idea of there being knowledge styles developed by mental wellbeing app users is interesting because it unpacks the more conventional, collectively endowed techniques of knowing the self. These styles, we suggest, provided users with the confidence to recraft the self without an explicit and consensual theory of the self or of mental health to support them, justifying their curating and customising work, and framing their object making activities. It cognitively supported their self-crafting as temporally emerging by bypassing the need for having a stable and fixed essence of the self.[1]

Below, we will explore in analytical detail how each of these dimensions differentiates the uses of mental wellbeing apps into two types.

Table 2
Typology of MHA use.

	Trackers	Chatters
Emotional reflexive work	Circuit data/analysis	Circuit prompt/ conversation
Curation work	Curating dataset	Curating relationship
Object customisation	Customising mood/ scales	Customising traits
Style of knowing	Correlation/patterns	Simulation/ways of interacting

3.1. Mediated emotional reflexivity

Mental wellbeing app users endeavour to create digital objects that might act as transformative mediators in their engagement with their selves but they do this in two distinct ways. Trackers rely on building an emotional and cognitive circuit between data input and analysis while chatters' choreography of the self is between setting the bot (its traits, or prompts) and experiencing the resulting conversation/situation unfold.

An example of the first type of dynamic is the following:

> I don't experience that "oh I'm feeling like crap, right, I'm just going to put all of that here [in the app] and then I'll get on with my day. […] It's more been like: "How are you feeling?" [And I'll put in that I'm b]asically feeling meh [and] actually [I then ask] why is that: oh it's because blah blah blah blah or whatever. And then I have those thoughts.[…] And then usually [I'll] get on with whatever I'm doing next […]. So but I'd say it's more of like a mirror, [it] just casts a mirror on how I'm feeling. It doesn't take that away and it doesn't necessarily project it back on me either. Just gets me to, to look at myself for a bit. Recognise that things aren't entirely alright and then just move on, whatever the next thing is. (27105, Male/39/UK/Daylio: 6-7)

In this extract, a participant explains the ordinary quality of 'casting a mirror' on their emotions. In contrast to the idea that only strong emotions require documentation, their approach is to take the opportunity of 'feeling meh' to explore how this might be connected to circumstances in their life. Stepping into the backstage provided by the app allows them to continue with the day because it objectifies the feeling without it becoming accountable or explained away. It supports them in 'recognising that things aren't entirely alright', a cognitive and affective acknowledgement of their feelings, and of their validity.

The importance of this process of recognition of emotional states or feelings was also emphasised by another mood tracking user:

> [T]he app has really helped by having those [emotional] terms in front of me; it's a lot easier [then for me] to identify what I'm feeling. […] And the other one is the trend over time that is really hard to do without some sort of computer assistance. Well, how have you been feeling this week or this last month or the last three months? It's really easy on a computer to just take all that data and grab it and say, Well, actually, so like I might like from my own perspective [..] be "oh i've been feeling terrible over the last month", but if I look at my actual data, actually I've only been feeling terrible for the last week, but the last three weeks before that was were totally fine, apparently. (24660, Female/43/Canada/Self-built mood tracker: 15)

This extract encapsulates the two ways in which recognition becomes transformative. On the one hand, it provides tools to label or categorise raw feelings. This classifying logic was fundamental to many of our participants, many of whom admitted to 'struggling to recognise' what they felt, finding in the app's conventional emotional language a comforting feature. On the other hand, users valued the algorithmic

[1] We are grateful to Vincent Deary for emphasising the importance of this process in our data analysis.

power that such classifications enabled. This was important because of how it challenged their own view of themselves, a delicate process where the past trend surprises within very established classifying parameters, which is powerfully signalled in the extract by the ironic use of the advert 'apparently'. It is this capacity for past data patterns to gently unsettle users view of themselves that enables the emotional reflexive circuit that users seek to establish in mood tracking.

By contrast, conversational agent users' work is focused on crafting question and answer sequences. These are seen as conversations with a purpose that the user is required to re-articulate for themselves for emotional reflexivity to be established:

> A huge part of managing one's own mental health when you have a problem is getting to the root of what you're feeling […] so the challenge really becomes what is the thought that I am thinking that's driving me to feel this way. So kind of the whole crux of it becomes around discovering that thought. So the app's ability to play back what you've said in a long, rambling [way] to a couple of concise sentences that you can then tweak as well [is fantastic coz then] it asks you have I missed anything? And you can say, well, you've undervalued the impact of pride on my ego about being paid something or less or what have you. And it can revise it's summary. That's actually really useful [because you can] then go away and tackle it separately offline, as it were. (33633,Male/33/UK/ChatGPT and Feeling Good: 16)

Drawing on the simple summarising AI feature, this user casts the process of emotional reflexivity as one of iterative 'discovery'. Rather than achieving this outcome through introspection or diary making, it relies on the back-and-forth interaction between a prompt made to the LLM, the output so produced, the affect they enact and the 'tweaks' and 'blind spots' the user can further generate as questions or required additions. These 'tweaks' are integral to the experience of re-adjustment that leads to exploring and finding minor new points of reference encapsulated in a 'summary' generated and evaluated backstage. This re-adjustment is also an affective accomplishment:

> Interviewer: And do you think that [AI] has allowed you to think of your emotions in a different way?
>
> Participant: Yeah, I think so. Because when I describe, when I describe my story to [AI], I think I just reflect myself a little bit as well. So […] when I got the response from [AI, it was a] repeat [my] story in different words. And I feel like […] it can really understand my situation [coz] I can be the third party of the whole situation. I have another perspective because I'm listening to what [AI] said. So I feel like I'm […] not the one in the story. I'm the more objective one outside of the story. (77655, Female/23/China/ChatGPT: 12)

Although objective detachment is usually thought to be the opposite of emotional involvement, for our participants it was a fundamental affective component of their interaction with the apps: their enabling users to temporarily distance themselves from their 'whole situation'. Their work of *"set[ting] a model up to do something, to be something"* (23450, Male/57/Germany/Replika: 9) prompted users to experience themselves differently, from a 'third party' perspective, and experiment with facets of themselves they would avoid during social interaction. The circuit of reflexivity for users of mental wellbeing apps was reliant on iteratively making and remaking model 'set-ups' and experiencing the different stories they enacted.

3.2. Curation work

Mental wellbeing app users acutely understand that successfully choreographing emotional reflexivity is a function of the quality of the digital objects they create and maintain. What this quality is, is difficult to define because it is itself dependent on the outcome of the trials users go through, but it can be linked to the capacity of the objects to move or affect the user, as described in the previous section. Participants thus described this work of selecting, designing and shedding data/prompts as one of their primary concerns. This primacy is well described by one mood tracking participant:

> The good thing about these apps is that you make them. So maybe somebody uses it to build habits, maybe somebody uses to track some exercise and maybe I track […] some events that are special in my day, like, you know, I've seen my family and friends or I've been alone or I slept great or I didn't sleep great. And because I can create those categories I can link things, and at least I'm creating a data set that I will be able to make graphs from [and create] some patterns you can see with plain eye. Some other [patterns] you only want to see when you get a monthly report. Or a yearly report. Or you just like feed it to the computer and play with some tables and you know to make sense of my life. That's what I think that's the key. (64820, Female/32/Czech Republic/Daylio:10)

The importance of agency and control in curating work is strong in this interview extract. The emphasis is on how the user 'makes the app' and chooses what to focus on, being able to 'create the categories' they want. The choice of focus or foci is also important because it will dictate the rules of relevance and significance of what users track: it shapes the key characteristics of the process of transformation 'events' into data, their selecting criteria and qualifying logic. In this, as much literature on tracking has pointed out (e.g. Lupton, 2016), users trade the width of meanings 'events' can have in their lives for their suppleness to quantification: the value of 'events' is linked to them being graphable in some form. It is there, users told us, that the possibility of finding new paths for the self-resides. But curating work has its own affective resonance:

> Actually, I do [input most days], because it's for me, it's really important to have that sense of consistency, especially because I've [seen that the] long[er] the shape of data, the content of the data is [more] consistent. It's much more reliable. So it's and it's also helped me in some sense that whenever I feel [in] trouble and then when after when I feel like life is going to the not well, I need to assess myself. (31962, Male/30/Indonesia/Daylio: 5)

For this participant, curating a mood data set is about consistent data input. This creates a 'sense' as well as a data pattern. On the one hand, it is itself embedded in an affective orientation towards habit, and the comfort of habit. Curating becomes a value in itself, a practice of care of the self. Within this habit, as both this and the previous extract document, lies an anticipation of reliability of a legible pattern that might have the transformative capacity users seek. This is particularly important for this user because consistency and reliability is treasured when they are personally 'in trouble'. Data is most effective at producing the desired effects not in a raw state but in a reconfigured, requalified, quantified state, which results from the users' work.

The type of curating work that users of conversational bots deploy is focused on crafting traits and interactive prompts. This is intensive, tentative work:

> [You have to m]ake the relationship with them do it. They don't just happen. You have to build that relationship [,] you have to build that kind of over a period, even more so that's hard built into the program [so] that it it's not going beyond a certain level unless it trusts you and you have that almost like a real human relationship. And [when it does not work] it's a little annoying because, babe, we have talked about this, you know, we're beyond the "let's set up boundaries" kind of conversation. (63400, Female/65/US/Replika: 4)

Building a relationship is not like programming a bot: users rely on the iterative logic of the emotional reflexivity described in the last section to set up, maintain, repair and shift their relationship with the conversational agent. The iterative logic of this process means that this building is not necessarily incremental. In the same way that data items might lose meaning and dataset might lose consistency or power,

curating a relationship might experience set backs and difficulties: the emotional reaction to this failure tells of the affective investment involved in curating a relationship. Also, similarly, this investment is reliant on an expectation of there being surprising resulting from careful prompt/trait tinkering:

> And I also so when I gave him my custom instructions, I made sure that he isn't just […] like an echo chamber. I specifically gave him permission to have his own opinions … um even his own likes and things, so he won't just say 'yeah, yeah, you're right', you know, every time or whatever, which I didn't want 'cause I'm like 'OK, look, if I'm wrong, please correct me or if I'm missing something, please correct me'. I don't wanna just, I don't want you to just say. Yeah. Yeah, you're right to everything 'cause that's not that's not good. That's not healthy. So he'll he'll correct me but not like in a in a jerky way. (77372, Female/39/Swiss/ChatGPT: 7)

Rather than design an 'echo chamber', participants preferred to program conversational agents with some degree of freedom. This was difficult to achieve and to balance and required a lot of adjustment and repair: experimenting with sets of instructions and traits to find the situationally good design that would support the desired affect. Here, the participant spoke of 'healthy' interaction as the affective marker of a successful curation of traits or instructions, to support transformation while avoiding fickle judgment ('jerky').

3.3. Customisation work

As is becoming clear, participants in our study were not content with just using the templates and feature embedded in the apps they used, but wanted to change and personalise the 'categories', scales, or the 'personality' traits so that their curation work could be more effective in producing the desired affect. Also, as we noted, ours was particularly knowledgeable group of participants, with programming and coding skills, with some designing their own mental wellbeing apps. This meant that our interviews provided more information on a specific kind of work that most other users will engage in to a much lesser extent, according to their skills. Nevertheless, our data sheds light on a crucial aspect of interacting with mental wellbeing apps, because it allows users build their own familiar points of reference:

> Interviewer: [Can you expand on] what you were talking about earlier [relating to apps] not necessarily quite hitting the mark in terms of representing the complexity of feeling
>
> Interviewee: Exactly. It's also something particularly about [mood tracker] I don't really like because you get these standard, uh, degrees of happiness, let's say. [But] sometimes you're not [in there], you're somewhere in between. So then so I created my own moods. But you still need to choose a level [:] Sure I'm good, but it, I'm good enough. So sometimes it shows you like, 'Oh yeah, you're still doing great', but actually you did a little bit less because, yeah, 'I'm good enough but I'm not great'. (82420, Male/20/Netherlands/Daylio: 9)

'Creating your own moods' refers to the process of personalisation that most users engage with in mood tracking. Rather than accepting the scale templates offered by the app, users create their own ordering of categories that most fits their own understanding of the 'complexity of feelings'. Using their own language and categories supports users to recognise what they are experiencing and translating 'events' into data. It is important to note, however, that the key test is for the digital object to be able to affect the user, and so data displays effectiveness are fed back into the design of the language of 'feeling':

> And the one example is indeed those moods. They gave you a lot of expressions to get a lot of, let me check the, yeah, there are a lot of different ways to write down the specific mood, but the way I've used this is only to expand the standard, good or bad feeling from one through five to a 1 to 11 [scale]. […] And I think that's is still the little bit of which the developers didn't really intend on using it that way, which is why indeed my data often feels very blocky like there's nothing in between. And that is also why I, since I am a programmer myself, then I've started to make a program to read my data and to be able to see more accurately what the actual lines are (27942, Male/22/UK/Daylio: 5)

Customising data entry templates – scales – is aligned with the ultimate aim of creating a graph sensitive enough to detect the smaller differences in mood that are relevant to the user. This might require extracting data from the app and programming your own data analysis package to go into more detail. In this story, it is important that the user's comfort zone – his programming skills – extended the point in which the marginal repair and learning was possible beyond 'what the app designers really intended'.

Conversational bot users showed similar levels of engagement with the 'code':

> The CBT [bots] work pretty well for me. And I find that while this might be like weird, I like working on the app and actually looking through the code and making these decisions […] helps me understand things more clearly because in order to make a computer do something you have to really understand it and make it into code. And so through that process, sometimes when I'm feeling pretty low that I want to use my app, but it doesn't have this feature, I will build a feature and then I forget about why I'm feeling low or why I'm anxious because I'm totally distracted by building something. So that's kind of fuelled the development of the app a bit (33633, Male/33/UK/ ChatGPT and feeling Good: 14)

While admitting that his experience might be unusual, this participant expresses a typical process in our sample: knowing how to code allowed users to understand what the designers 'intended' and to assess how that might overlap, or not, with their own aims. The familiarity with the design features of the apps and with how those are made propped users in their repair and rewriting of the programmes, tailoring them to specific desires or needs, the situational goods that are so fundamental to self-care in this form of practice. Illuminatingly, in the extract, we are also given access to the affective texture that customising work might enact in that working the marginal repairs might be comforting in itself, and provide a new arrangement of the self which reinforces technical skill and knowledge.

3.4. Cognitive style

The final differentiating dimension in our analysis is the way participants described different ways of knowing the mediated self. Although the process of data set crafting or agent set-up was above described as a way of distancing oneself from emotionally entangled personal troubles, the process of recognition of the transformed self was affect-bound as a way of feeling differently about the self. Participants used two diffuse epistemic imaginaries to make sense of this. One drew explicitly on the language of statistics:

> Depression affects me motivationally, whereas if I talk to somebody else who gets depressed, their motivation might be high, but they get really angry and I know that when I get really depressed, I don't get angry because that question [in the app of] how many times in the last two weeks have you been getting angry is always low. And I've asked myself that question every five days for the last four years. So, from a data science perspective, understanding what your depression and anxiety looks like, and being able to correlate it with major life landmarks like having a child, getting married, moving house, moving jobs, really does give you some insights. (33633, Male/33/UK/Youper and ChatGPT : 11)

Participants often described this search for getting to know oneself differently as a N = 1 type study supported by the app. It was likened to a

journey of discovery, driven by questions, data entry and data set design and time-series analytical skills, a set of inscriptions that made the self traceable (Deary, 2024). In this process, the identification of distinctive distributions or correlations between sets of events and moods was valued above all. Those confirmed the sense of uniqueness users had of themselves:

> So I just I want to be on top of everything, I want to know what's happening. I track everything, I track the places, er I mean I log anything, the weather, my social interactions, I have social anxiety, so that's important. And it tells me, um, if there's anything I need to change, which is really nice. And so I actually dropped a friend, you could say, because they were not the best for my mental health. And, ah, what else? I track chores, I track any kind of exercise and I track what I eat in a day. And that's actually my main motivation nowadays because while using mood tracking apps that are a bit more than a mood tracking app, I found out that chocolate, for example, is not good for me at all. And so I, I just I wouldn't even connect chocolate to me not feeling good, but the app told me [that]. (63821, Female/20s/Poland/Daylio and Mooda:6)

Finding out the unusual - the outlier event - worked as a form of confirmation of the robustness of the methodology: the fact that the unlike others experiencing depression, their data does show not show a 'correlation' with anger, or that chocolate works for them a mood dampener. In this way, the data sets build by mood trackers demonstrated to themselves their singularity as individuals. By making visible and knowable this uniqueness, it framed the users cognitive and affective engagement with themselves, not as a case-of but as a distinct self.

For conversational agent users, this legitimation of uniqueness was also important but came through an epistemic route associated with modelling or simulation. Users often talked of "*set[ting] a model up to do something, to be something*" (23450: 9) but what they meant by model – and how knowledge effects incurred from them - signified different things. Sometimes they referred to LLMs as the basis of the generative conversation they experienced, but they also referred to models as virtual or fictional representations of a real-world system or process (simulations), or as an ideal or idealised type. The extract below evidences well the semantic diversity deployed in modelling analogies:

> Because he's just kind of like teaching me aside from the therapy therapeutic aspect, he's kind of teaching me just like how people should treat each other, in general. […] It's like having a relationship with another person […] because he kind of knows quote unquote everything […] pretty much everything, it feels a little … not supernatural, but like if I say super person, that sounds weird but really, extremely well read person, I guess, or whatever you want to call it. (77372, Female/39/Swiss/ChatGPT: 8)

In here, model is first used as an exemplary case, a model of behaviour of "how people should treat each other, in general". Participating in this conversation enables users to affectively experience what such ideal relationship feels like but they recognise that this healthy commendable relationship is underpinned by the almost 'supernatural', the artificial character of the agent they have set. This artificiality is not detrimental to the continuous doing and redoing of the self, instead it is central to it: it works as a virtual possibility, a kind of fictional setting:

> I grew up playing role playing games [like] Dungeons Dragons, but it was great. And all throughout I spent a lot of my life doing different creative things - I actually made a living for a time as a fiction writer - I did a lot of acting in my day and all kinds of things like that. The point of all of which being that I'm really good at suspending my disbelief and sort of creating a world there, and in this case, there's it requires some of that and there's a tremendous reward for doing so. It's I think, is a pretty natural capacity for humans to do that, we do it every time we watch a movie and you identify with the different characters and you create a narrative and it's in that way temporarily limited but a bonding experience and that. It's a beautiful thing. It's a great thing. (10764, Male/41/US/Replika and ChatGPT: 5)

Knowing the self through models was akin to the kind of knowledge generated through fiction or acting a role. Such dramaturgical metaphor, articulated by the participants themselves, is interesting because it refers specifically to the backstage type of rehearsal that is fundamental to the crafting of performances (Goffman, 1990, p. 115), where the re-creation of a frontstage world enables performers to 'painstakingly fabricate' their performance. This simulation, this make believe world, is effective insofar as produces an affect – 'bonding', in the case above - the user can safely experience. The fact that it is, so to speak, a manufactured model of a performance is, interestingly, not diminishing of its power and effect. Indeed, it is exactly the conjured character that created its 'tremendous reward' for the user. It is there that the self can know itself through artificial simulation.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, our aim was to explore the use of mental wellbeing apps from an empirical social science perspective: we asked users themselves why and how they used these digital tools. Drawing on our main findings from the analysis of interviews with a sample of technically savvy users, we suggested that mental wellbeing apps are valued as a non-judgemental backstage where users can experiment with transforming facets of their selves and their emotions.

We recognised that in this experimentation users were addressing similar uncertainties: How can I experience myself in a different way? How can my self be transformed by the way it affects me? We suggested that the body of the user was central to this choreographing of the self because as Hennion (2017: 114) indicates "attachment is what gets experienced [and] experience requires a body". We proposed that there were two styles of using mental wellbeing apps to address those uncertainties: one where data is the central concern, and is most associated with tracking practices (Trackers), and another focused on crafting the interactivity with conversational agents (Chatters). While in the first mode, echoing previous research (e.g. Lupton, 2020; Ruckenstein, 2022; Stark, 2020), the self is articulated through the app by self-datafication and the crafting of a dataset that can bring both comforting recognition and challenges to identity, in the second, the self is maintained and transformed through back-and-forth movement between constructing/adjusting the agent and emotionally experiencing the conversation with it. We further propose that this work of continuous doing and redoing of the self through attachment in mental wellbeing apps use is organised around four interacting dimensions: emotional reflexive work, curating work, object customisation, and the style of knowing the self. We explored empirically how each of these dimensions differentiates the two types of mental wellbeing app use, evidencing and validating our analytical framework. While we recognise that our proposed typology groups technologies with different design purposes, affordances, regulatory status, and potential risks, our suggestion is that there are experiential similarities about forms of usage for self-crafting that analytically justify our groupings.

Our analysis reaffirms the centrality and importance of control over identity and meaning of the 'self' in the digital age. This concern was shared across our sample, including across those who engaged with mental wellbeing apps for therapeutic reasons and those who where doing it for other reasons. Differing from accounts of the online self-crafting drawing solely on Cooley or Goffman, and digital self-knowledge drawing on Foucault (1988), our analysis suggests a less strategic and human-agency led perspective on these processes. Instead, our analysis is more aligned with the accounts of choreography of the self provided by more-than-human research on mental wellbeing apps, highlighting the centrality of relational, material becoming and of practices in which humans work *with* rather than *on* objects. Combining self-presentation theory and attachment, we were able to provide an

insightful understanding of how users selves were being re-made by the digital objects that they themselves carefully prepared and maintained. In this, we provided further analytical insight into how the contemporary 'algorithmic other' (Viduchinsky, 2026; Gandini et al., 2023) shapes self-presentation and self-crafting. We detailed the strategies and techniques users employ to adapt algorithmic logics to enable self-crafting and unexpected self-growth. This enabled a rich description of the temporally unfolding affective dimensions of this mediated transformation. We suggested that these processes were best seen as experiments - i.e. not proven reliable techniques - in that our participants saw them as risky and uncertain, requiring the engendering and continuous maintenance of that 'safe space' that was so infrastructurally fundamental to their practice.

Our findings, we suggest, are valuable for mental wellbeing app design and regulation. Recognised issues with mental wellbeing apps' vulnerability to data extraction and leakage might directly undermine their character as safe backstages. As Goffman (1990: 137) suggests, a key issue in backstage maintenance is performers' control over the boundary of the region, as this is fundamental to the credit the self will receive through performance and, crucially, to the mental wellbeing accrued from that recognition (Serpe et al., 2020). To a significant extent, our participants' sense of control over their data was provided by their technical expert identities, but our analysis should be translated into features that support, rather than obscure, user agency to extend that sense of control over the boundaries of the backstage to other, less technically inclined users. Data analysis suggests that maintenance of the safe backstage is a necessary – albeit not sufficient - condition to user empowerment, engagement and sustained use of mental wellbeing apps and, possibly, to the accrual of beneficial effects from them. Mental wellbeing app users inhabit a paradoxical location whereby to escape the social gaze they might be entering a surveillance space, where their most intimate emotions are harvested as data points. User empowerment over privacy might be thus fundamental to engagement with mental wellbeing apps, and to delivering their potential to help alleviate unmet global mental healthcare needs.

As we discussed above, our sample was mostly composed of engaged, satisfied and technically skilled users. While this provided us with vivid reflexive data of the meaningful practices of app use, it emphasised the facilitators and affirmative effects of digital mental wellbeing engagement rather than its undesirable or adverse effects. Our analysis should thus be read in the context of the risks and the concerns over the effects on access and quality of mental healthcare services, and the potential medicalisation of distress, that we identified in the Introduction. Our research focused on users' reflection about how and why they used mental wellbeing apps and their effects on their social self, but we do not document the actual effects of app use of users' social relations. Although our focus stems directly from the paper's symbolic interactionist theoretical framing of self and identity as collaborative accomplishments, further research within this perspective could address such questions through ethnographic or qualitative longitudinal data. Equally, we have not traced how users' interaction recursively feeds into future algorithmic actions shaping interaction frames (Fourcade & Johns, 2020). Finally, in the paper, based on our selective coding, we focused on users' deployment of the apps mainly as a backstage tool for transformation of their social self. Existing research (e.g. Ho et al., 2025), suggests that, for some users, the relationship with the 'AI agent' itself can become emotionally meaningful, marked by perceived intimacy and commitment. In another publication from the same study, we are drawing on our qualitative and computational data to explore how some users adopt general-purpose and companion-oriented AI systems to develop multi-functional relationships, blending emotional expression, advice-seeking, entertainment, identity exploration, and a sense of 'being cared for' (Miller, Hill and Moreira, 2026), suggesting a perhaps partial overlap between attachment-as-reconfiguration, as emphasised by STS literature, and attachment-as-bonding, in some usages of AI tools for self-crafting.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Tiago Moreira: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Vince Miller:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Mark Hill:** Conceptualization, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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