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## **I. Introduction**

As an 18-year-old girl, I can't say that I've never wished to be beautiful. Nor can I deny having marveled at random photos of flawless-looking women on my Instagram and wondered why I was not as pretty. Without much thought, I based my own standard on one potentially created at the hand of Photoshop. This utterly familiar technology is said by the Washington Post to have "changed the way we see reality"<sup>1</sup> in the last 25 years. First released in 1990, the software went through two decades of development before allowing for specific alterations of a person's appearance to match the social norms of *beauty*: slimming body, removing skin blemishes, and perfecting any imperfections<sup>2</sup>. Over the year, this aspect of photo manipulation has earned notoriety for depriving adolescents of their confidence in their own skin, causing persistent low self-esteem and eating disorders. However, it's important that we acknowledge that this issue is probably more multifaceted than commonly believed, raising the question of how Photoshop

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<sup>1</sup> Caitlin Dewey, "How 25 years of Photoshop changed the way we see reality?" *The Washington Post*, published February 19, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Ashley Brown, "Picture [Im]Perfect: Photoshop Redefining Beauty in Cosmetic Advertisements, Giving False Advertising a Run for the Money," *Texas Review of Entertainment & Sports Law* 16, no. 2 (2015), 90.

causes these problems under different circumstances. This paper argues that among female adolescents, Photoshop leads to varying levels of beauty standard internalization and body-related concerns across conditions regarding media and self-photos, media literacy, social contexts, and personal attributes. This interpretation will provide a foundation for new actions as well as an examination of current measures against the potential harms of photo manipulation to the young generation.

## **II. Photoshop in the context of media images**

The prevalence of photo manipulation in the media world has been undeniable across various segments in the media world. Photoshop in itself is a form of art that, if used moderately, can provide aesthetic qualities to images.<sup>3</sup> However, it can be taken to the extreme where it becomes “a requirement in the production of commercial images” often considered blatant in the fashion, film, magazine, and advertisement industry.<sup>4</sup> Cosmetic companies have been using photo modification to give false impressions of the effectiveness of their products, which unfortunately adds to the idealized physical attractiveness. Here we should also get a clear idea of what defines the so-called beauty standard. Some people say that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” but in a not-so-perfect world, the media does unanimously promote an idealistic appearance that is “predominantly slim, yet incredibly toned and curvaceous, with perfect skin and hair.”<sup>5</sup> Researchers have also argued that this ideal is more harmful on female adolescents than other groups because during their process of perception-forming and self-definition, they are

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<sup>3</sup> Nadine A. Schirmer et al., “Consumer Response to Disclosures in Digitally Retouched Advertisements.” *Journal of Public Policy* 37, no. 1 (2018), 132.

<sup>4</sup> Kristen Harrison and Veronica Hefner, “Virtually Perfect: Image Retouching and Adolescent Body Image.” *Media Psychology* 17, no. 2 (2014), 135.

<sup>5</sup> Chiara Rollero, “I know you are not real”: Saliency of photo retouching reduces the negative effects of media exposure via internalization” *Studia Psychologica* 57, no. 3 (2015), 195.

continuously told, both explicitly and implicitly, to look like something they're not by the popular images of perfect-looking models.<sup>6</sup>

Generally, many people see photographs as an “a product of science” and thus an “accurate representation of truth,” yet that *truth* is now more ambiguous than ever as technological advancement can make photo manipulations realistic and virtually unidentifiable.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, humans themselves are not adept at recognizing subtle changes in images.<sup>8</sup> Those exposed to images of a perfect appearance, therefore, may not attribute it to Photoshop.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on this point, some scholars have reasoned that the effect of Photoshop is more significant on adolescents who lack the ability to identify or are simply unaware of photos having been modified.<sup>10</sup> One study randomly assigning 151 female undergraduates to view the same four photos in three different conditions: retouching, no retouching, and retouching salience showed that those made aware of manipulation by reading a sentence that mentioned digital alteration experienced lower internalization of perfection in body images.<sup>11</sup> This finding justifies the approach toward improving media literacy and using warning labels on photoshopped advertisement as gaining “a critical evaluation of media content” can help young girls challenge social ideals and mitigate their tendency to set unachievable goals for themselves.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mariska Kleemans et al., "Picture Perfect: The Direct Effect of Manipulated Instagram Photos on Body Image in Adolescent Girls", *Media Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2016), 103.

<sup>7</sup> Yao, Qingjiang Q. J.; Zhaoxi, Liu; Perlmutter, David, “How Can We Tell If It Is Ethical?: An Examination of Public Acceptance as the Standard of Photo Alteration” Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association, 2011*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Harrison and Hefner, 138.

<sup>9</sup> Schirmer et al., 313.

<sup>10</sup> Rollero, 200.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

On the other hand, in today's society where Photoshop is prevalent to the point where many people have approached it with "overwhelming indifference,"<sup>13</sup> the commonly recognized relationship between media literacy and internalization of the unattainable beauty standard can be more complicated, if not inverted. Social comparison theory states that people can experience inferiority when making upward comparison with those who are better off, implying that awareness of image manipulation should make adolescents less self-conscious since they no longer see the photo subjects as genuinely more attractive than themselves.<sup>14</sup> However, in a study with a relatively similar procedure to that of Rollero, Harrison and Hefner revealed a contrasting outcome in which awareness of digital editing actually led to increased body dissatisfaction and decreased self-esteem in adolescents.<sup>15</sup>

A possible explanation underlying this "boomerang effect of retouching awareness"<sup>16</sup> is that even though adolescents have difficulty pointing out the edited elements, they still expect the presence of manipulation in most photos. Therefore, awareness of retouching having occurred may have "little or no effect compared to simply viewing the retouched photo".<sup>17</sup> The authors also suggest that acknowledgment of Photoshop might have served the purpose of priming adolescents' thought rather than informing them.<sup>18</sup> To put it simply, when no longer bothered by the fact that a photo has been edited, they shift their focus onto its other aspects that actually cause their beauty standard internalization and body concerns. An accompanying survey shows that there is a positive relationship between adolescents finding the photo subjects attractive and higher body-

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<sup>13</sup> Brown, 90.

<sup>14</sup> Harrison and Hefner, 137.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 139.

consciousness in the retouched-aware condition, suggesting that awareness of retouching may have made participants perceive the photo “in terms of attractiveness” and in turn internalize that attractiveness.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, outside the context of social media, Photoshop is often used to create the best images of people “for some legitimate purpose”.<sup>20</sup> This can be seen in advertisements and movies where actors and models have the privilege of being photoshopped to present a flawless appearance to the audience. Therefore, when aware of photo editing, adolescents may feel inferior to the photo subjects’ status and thus experience lower self-esteem.<sup>21</sup>

The two studies by Rollero (2015) and Harrison and Hefner (2014) suggest two contradictory perspectives on the effect of retouching awareness yet, at the same time, an important implication for the current intention of policymakers to disclose photo manipulation in advertisements. In both studies, participants were made aware of retouching by simply viewing the after images and reading a sentence that indicated the use of Photoshop. Therefore, we should consider that different approaches toward disclosures may have different effects on adolescent consumers. Disclosures illustrating specifically how and where editing has occurred might discourage the “boomerang effect” by directing adolescents’ attention to the act of photo manipulation itself.<sup>22</sup> A study has shown that rather than a text warning that restricts the ability to tell the difference between original and enhanced images, a clear visual demonstration of the subjects’ transformation allows women to “identify the bias clearly,”<sup>23</sup> which reduces beauty ideal internalization. Furthermore, as female adolescents are more concerned with substantial body-part retouchings like leg-lengthening and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>23</sup> Borges, Adilson, "The Effects of Digitally Enhanced Photos on Product Evaluation and Young Girls' Self-Esteem." *Recherche et applications en marketing (English edition)* 26, no. 4, 18.

waist-slimming than minor background and stylistic changes, disclosures should be particularly focused on higher level of Photoshop.<sup>24</sup> Schirmer et al. discovered in their research that despite general expectation of image editing, most consumers aren't certain if they can identify the use of airbrush in images.<sup>25</sup> This is a supporting claim for the use of retouching disclosures on photos and products; however, it should be done in a way that doesn't accidentally prime thoughts of adolescents' own physical imperfections and sense of inferior prestige.<sup>26</sup>

### **III. Photoshop in the context of self-photo editing and sharing on social media**

The effect of photoshop on adolescents' internalization of the perfect ideal and body-related concerns on social media might be more significant because of its "highly interactive and self-exposing" characteristics.<sup>27</sup> Social media allows for peer interaction and "peer scrutiny"<sup>28</sup> among adolescents, which can be seen explicitly through public comments and the number of likes on pictures. Even though celebrities are often criticized for contributing to the highly idealized body by posting their manipulated self-images on social media, research has shown that young people actually compare themselves more to the self-photos of their friends because they base their standard on those they consider higher in similarity with themselves.<sup>29</sup>

The advancement of Photoshop has simplified the once-complicated retouching process so that it can be attempted by "anyone capable of turning on a computer".<sup>30</sup> In the context of the

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<sup>24</sup> Schirmer et al., 138.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Harrison and Hefner, 151.

<sup>27</sup> McLean SA et al., "Photoshopping the Selfie: Self Photo Editing and Photo Investment are Associated with Body Dissatisfaction in Adolescent Girls," *The International Journal Of Eating Disorders [Int J Eat Disord]* 48, no. 8 (2015), 1133.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Kleemans et al., 94.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, 99.

immense popularity of social media, photo-based activities have become more commonplace than ever. In particular, young females are especially prone to manipulating their appearance prior to posting images on social media.<sup>31</sup> McLean et al. revealed that those with “higher appearance-based Internet use”, such as taking and sharing photos, place greater importance on the shape and weight of the body.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, as social media allows adolescents to access others’ self-photos and having their own images accessed by their peers, young girls continuously exchange their idea of a desirable appearance in a highly interactive manner. Consequently, they may experience a level of “self-scrutiny” unfound in any other passive forms of media.<sup>33</sup>

Regarding the impact of self-photo manipulation on adolescents itself, more frequent use of self-image editing is associated with greater body concerns and beauty ideal internalization.<sup>34</sup> This indicates an interesting “bi-directional and mutually reinforcing” relationship between social media photo activities and body-dissatisfaction in which Photoshop simultaneously acts as a “manifestation” and a “maintaining factor.”<sup>35</sup> When female adolescents are worried about their appearance, they will likely be drawn to manipulating their own photos to present a more perfect self-image on social media, which in turn makes them susceptible to internalization of the newly created standard and, ironically, the persistence of their body-related concerns.<sup>36</sup> It is like a downward spiral in which the dependence on Photoshop can be hard to stop once it has started.

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<sup>31</sup> Kleemans et al., 94.

<sup>32</sup> McLean et al., 1137.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 1138.

<sup>34</sup> McLean et al., 1137.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 1133 & 1138.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1133 & 1139.

Furthermore, the above interpretations also suggest that Photoshop's impact on female adolescents may vary depending on some certain personal attributes. Since social media provides a platform for adolescents to judge themselves based on their peers, there is possibly an association between adolescents' tendency toward social comparison and how much they are affected by the idealized beauty. Research has shown that girls more prone to make social comparison are more vulnerable to body-dissatisfaction and self-consciousness, especially after viewing edited photos, while those with lower predisposition to compare themselves to others maintain a steady level of body image.<sup>37</sup> On another note, adolescents with varying levels of self-confidence are affected differently by manipulated beauty ideals. Considering the bi-directional relationship between image manipulation and body concerns, the negative effect of Photoshop is more substantial on those lacking the confidence in their body. Young girls shouldn't have to seek Photoshop for gratification in the first place if they know how to embrace their unique features against the widely promoted idea of beauty.

These insights provide potentials for early prevention of body-consciousness in the domain of self-photo manipulation. Policymakers should focus more on monitoring photo-manipulation on social media and in everyday life, possibly limiting features of Photoshop apps that can drastically alter a person's appearance. Another plausible action is to establish educational programs guiding adolescents on editing their self-photos moderately instead of excessively, which will help them not to accidentally create beauty ideals for themselves while still enjoying the aesthetic merits of Photoshop. Furthermore, effective preventions can be achieved through improving individuals' self-love and self-confidence. This poses a task for parents, body positivity

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<sup>37</sup> Kleemans et al., 103.

activists, the education system and society as a whole to continuously encourage female adolescents to understand that conforming to the so-called beauty ideal is not a guaranteed ticket to a fulfilling life and thus not something for which they should sacrifice.

#### **IV. An examination of current actions against the impact of excessive Photoshop use**

On a governmental level, approaches have been mostly directed towards improving women's confidence in their own body. In 2009, Australian National Advisory Group on Body Image initiated a Code to encourage the fashion, media and advertising industry to use models of all sizes who are "clearly of a healthy weight" and refrain from digitally perfecting their models' image.<sup>38</sup> Private organizations and companies have also been promoting an inclusive marketing trend that embraces body-positivity. A lingerie retailer, Aerie, has been widely praised for their "Aerie Bras Make You Feel Real Good" campaign which encourages women with all body types, medical conditions and disabilities to cast for their advertisements by submitting a video saying why their body types should be included.<sup>39</sup> By giving everyone a chance to raise awareness about self-love and letting women know they are not alone in their suffers, Aerie has successfully got across the message of self-confidence.

Regarding the disclosure approach on photoshopped images, Israel issued a Photoshop Law in 2013 that requires manipulated photos to clearly state the presence of Photoshop and additionally, the reason why Photoshop is used.<sup>40</sup> This is very interesting because to a certain extent, it works in the same manner as the aforementioned approach of visually demonstrating the

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<sup>38</sup> Marilyn Krawitz, "Beauty is only photoshop deep: Lesgilating Models' BMIs and photoshopping images", *Journal of law and medicine* 21 (2014), 865.

<sup>39</sup> Aaron Horwath, "Photoshop, Models, and the Law: How Far is Too Far?" Pixelz Blog, published April 19, 2016, <https://www.pixelz.com/blog/photoshop-models-laws/>

<sup>40</sup> Marilyn Krawitz, 868

transformation as it also prompts adolescents to critically identify and thus refrain from the manipulated perfection. Besides large-scale efforts, celebrities and influential individuals are also giving a hand in revealing the truth behind manipulated media photos of themselves. In 2015, actress and singer Zendaya raised her voice when posting on her Instagram with multi-million followers the before and after-manipulation pictures of her photoshoot with *Modeliste Magazine* and stating specifically which of her body parts had been modified, sharing her objection against deceptive retouchings and support for “honest and pure self-love.”<sup>41</sup>

## **V. Conclusion**

To conclude, this paper puts Photoshop into two contexts of media and self-photos to emphasize the claim that the potency of Photoshop’s impact on female adolescents varies across various circumstances like media literacy, technological development, social media, and personal attributes. It provides a multi-directional insight into the widely held view of Photoshop as the promoter of the unattainable beauty ideal that leads to ideal internalization and appearance-related concern among young girls. Based on this, current measures taken against this issue are assessed and new solutions are proposed. Further research is needed to explain exactly how different types of disclosures on manipulated photos have different effects on young females and to hopefully discover the most effective and safest disclosure approach. To round up my conclusion, I want to take the story of Photoshop back to a personal perspective. Again, as an 18-year-old girl, there were and still are times when I feel unsure about my appearance looking at actors with flawless complexion on Korean dramas and perfectly pretty selfies my friends post on Facebook. However, I’ve found myself a way out of the maze created by Photoshop and learnt to become less

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<sup>41</sup> Aaron Horwath

susceptible to the ideal beauty by focusing on embracing and improving my other positive traits. Now, I feel grateful for having realized along the way that I don't have to look as good as anyone else to be loved, respected and recognized.

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