IDEALOGY
JOURNAL

Photo Editing in The Age of Social Media: A Critical Literature Review and Future Research Directions

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ABSTRACT

In an era increasingly defined by visual communication, photo editing has become a normalized and socially embedded practice among social media users. Platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok promote curated self-presentation through filters and enhancement tools, raising important questions about the psychological and social effects of such behaviours. This paper synthesizes recent empirical research on photo editing behaviour, focusing on four dominant themes: body image dissatisfaction, social comparison, intentions for cosmetic enhancement, and the use of editing in tourism and experiential memory. The review also highlights the methodological patterns shaping current research, notably the dominance of cross-sectional survey designs and limited use of qualitative and longitudinal methods. Conceptual gaps, including underexplored demographics, theoretical limitations, and ethical concerns about algorithmic beauty and authenticity, are critically examined. In response, the paper outlines directions for future research, emphasizing the need for more diverse sampling, longitudinal designs, and integrative theoretical models such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Self-Presentation Theory. The study calls for a more culturally inclusive and ethically engaged approach to understanding how users navigate visual identity in a digitally mediated world.

Keywords: Photo editing, social media, self-presentation, body image, digital identity, social comparison, future research

1 INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, where social interaction, self-expression, and identity construction are increasingly mediated by visual content, photo editing has emerged as a ubiquitous and socially significant behaviour. The rise of image-centric social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok has normalized the use of filters, retouching tools, and beauty-enhancing applications as part of everyday visual communication (Feerick, 2021). For many users, particularly adolescents and young adults, photo editing is not merely a technical activity but a form of strategic self-presentation, influencing how they are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves. While editing can serve artistic, playful, or aesthetic purposes (Holt, 2015), growing evidence suggests that it may also

contribute to appearance-related anxiety, social comparison, body dissatisfaction, and in some cases, interest in cosmetic modification.

As photo editing becomes increasingly embedded in online visual culture, scholars have begun to examine its psychological, behavioural, and social implications. Research in this area has explored a range of themes, from body image concerns and social comparison to cosmetic surgery intent and the construction of idealized digital identities. The growing prevalence of editing tools many powered by AI and embedded within social media platforms has also raised ethical and cultural questions regarding authenticity, normative beauty standards, and user autonomy. Despite this emerging literature, gaps remain in our understanding of who engages in editing, why they do so, and how this behaviour intersects with deeper identity, cultural, and technological factors.

This paper aims to synthesize and critically analyse recent empirical studies on photo editing behaviour, with a particular focus on the motivations, psychological outcomes, and sociocultural dynamics involved. It begins with a thematic literature review that highlights major areas of investigation, followed by a methodological critique of current research practices. The paper also identifies conceptual and empirical gaps and proposes directions for future scholarship, emphasizing the need for more inclusive, cross-cultural, and theoretically grounded approaches to understanding this rapidly evolving digital behaviour.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the digital landscape shaped by image-centric platforms and mobile editing tools, the act of photo editing has evolved into a significant mode of self-presentation. Scholars have increasingly turned attention to this behaviour, examining not only the psychological implications but also its cultural, social, and commercial dimensions. The following review presents the emerging themes derived from the empirical studies summarized in Table 1. These selected studies serve as the foundation for identifying key patterns and insights into photo-editing practices across psychological, behavioural, and social dimensions.

2.1 Body Image Disturbance and Appearance Anxiety

One of the most consistent findings in the literature is the connection between photo editing and body dissatisfaction. Empirical studies show that frequent editing contributes to heightened self-objectification, body surveillance, and appearance-related anxiety. For instance, McLean et al. (2015) and Tiggemann et al. (2020) revealed that adolescents and young women who frequently edited selfies were more likely to internalize thin ideals and report dissatisfaction with their appearance. Likewise, Wick and Keel (2020), Beos et al. (2021), and Bozzola et al. (2024) documented the association between image manipulation and disordered eating behaviours. Further, Ramseyer Winter et al. (2021) and O'Neill (2021) emphasized that this dissatisfaction often extends to facial features, with implications for facial self-esteem and mood regulation

2.2 Social Comparison and Peer Influence

Another dominant theme concerns the role of social comparison in motivating photo-editing behaviour. Social media creates environments where edited and idealized images proliferate, prompting individuals to conform. Chae (2017) found that frequent social media use and selfie-taking correlated with increased editing, largely driven by upward social comparisons. Bloom et al. (2021), Vendemia and DeAndrea (2021), and Wolfe and Yakabovits (2024) reported that peer exposure to edited images reinforces internalization of beauty ideals and intensifies editing behaviours. This continuous comparison loop undermines self-esteem and contributes to a culture of visual perfectionism

2.3 Psychological Traits as Predictors of Editing Behaviour

Several studies have explored how personality and emotional traits contribute to photo-editing tendencies. Kim et al. (2016) established a link between narcissism and selfie-posting frequency, while Bardsley (2023), Mustafa and Akram (2022), and Felig (2020) identified public self-consciousness, social anxiety, body shame, and self-objectification as key predictors. Gender differences were also reported, with women generally exhibiting higher susceptibility to editing-related pressures. These findings suggest that editing is often a psychological coping strategy rooted in self-evaluation and a desire for social approval.

2.4 Intentions for Cosmetic Enhancement

A growing concern in the literature is the link between digital image modification and real-world cosmetic procedures. Othman et al. (2020), Martel et al. (2020), and Agrawal and Agrawal (2021) reported that individuals especially young women who frequently edit their photos are more likely to express intentions to undergo cosmetic dermatology or plastic surgery. Chen et al. (2019) and Misra et al. (2025) echoed these findings, indicating that dissatisfaction with one's unfiltered appearance may lead users to pursue physical alterations that align with their edited self-image.

2.5 Mental Health Implications

Beyond body image concerns, editing behaviours are frequently associated with broader mental health outcomes. O'Neill (2021) found that frequent editing was linked to reduced self-esteem, while Ozimek et al. (2023) reported that higher levels of editing correlated with depressive symptoms and anxiety. Felig (2020) further noted that such behaviours may reduce clarity in self-concept, particularly among heavy users of appearance-focused platforms. These findings highlight the emotional toll of maintaining an idealized digital self.

2.6 Digital Identity Construction and Online Self-Presentation

The act of photo editing is not merely cosmetic—it is also a form of self-expression and identity construction. Jang (2023) used a phenomenological approach to uncover the nuanced motivations behind editing, such as online acculturation, aesthetic experimentation, and identity projection. Users navigate platform-specific social rules while balancing authenticity with idealized portrayals. Cheon et al. (2019) and McCrackin et al. (2025) emphasized that editing serves both personal and performative functions, enabling users to craft identities that resonate with social media audiences.

2.7 Cultural and Gendered Dimensions of Editing

Photo-editing behaviours are shaped by cultural norms and gender expectations. Maharani et al. (2020), Misra et al. (2025), and Wang and Gu (2022) highlighted how cultural attitudes toward beauty and femininity influence the acceptability and purpose of editing. Gender plays a significant role, with women consistently reporting greater pressure to adhere to appearance norms and more frequent use of beauty filters and editing apps. These findings suggest that photo editing is not a neutral practice but one embedded within socio-cultural expectations.

2.8 Expressive, Experiential, and Functional Roles of Editing

One Beyond self-presentation, photo editing plays a role in emotional expression and memory preservation. Li et al. (2023) and Mäenpää and Seppänen (2022) found that edited travel photos contributed to deeper emotional engagement and enhanced memorability of personal experiences. Meng et al. (2024) also reported that users used editing as a means of crafting visual narratives that conveyed

idealized versions of their lives. In these contexts, editing serves not as deception, but as an artistic and affective tool

2.9 Commercial and Consumer Implications

Photo editing is increasingly used in commercial contexts to influence consumer behaviour. Guo and Wang (2024) and Wang and Guo (2024) found that merchants and influencers strategically use editing to enhance product appeal. Interestingly, moderately edited images that maintain perceived authenticity are more effective in generating consumer trust and purchase intention. These findings underscore the persuasive function of editing in digital commerce

2.10 Ethical Concerns and Social Trust

Finally, ethical issues related to authenticity, trust, and social deception are gaining prominence. McCrackin et al. (2025) and Wang and Gu (2022) raised concerns about the ethical use of editing tools, noting that overly manipulated images can erode trust in interpersonal communication and public discourse. As editing becomes more accessible, users and platforms alike are grappling with the balance between creative freedom and social responsibility

Table 1 Past Studies on Photo Editing

Author (Year)	Objective	Research Method	Main Findings
McLean et al. (2015)	To examine the relationship between self-photo editing, photo investment, and body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls.	Cross-sectional survey study with 101 Grade 7 girls (Mean age = 13.1), using self-report questionnaires on social media use and body-related concerns.	Girls with higher engagement in photo editing and investment reported greater body dissatisfaction, dietary restraint, and internalization of thin ideals.
Kim et al. (2016)	To examine predictors of selfie-posting behaviour on SNSs by applying and extending the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) with narcissism as an added variable.	Quantitative survey and follow-up content analysis of Instagram posts from 89 users over six weeks.	Attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and narcissism significantly predicted selfie-posting intentions; intention strongly predicted actual selfie-posting. The extended TPB model is effective for explaining selfie behaviour on SNSs.
Chae (2017)	To examine how selfie-taking, social media use, public self-consciousness, and satisfaction with facial appearance influence selfie-editing behaviour via social comparison.	Two-wave longitudinal online survey among young South Korean women (N = 1064 at Wave 1; N = 782 at Wave 2), analysed with mediation analysis.	Frequent selfie-taking, high public self-consciousness, and social media use led to social comparison with friends, which then indirectly predicted selfie-editing. Dissatisfaction with appearance did not directly drive editing; desire for ideal online self-presentation did.
Bij de Vaate et al. (2018)	To identify selfie-makers' motivations, selfie behaviour, and psychological mechanisms in young adults.	Survey of 224 Dutch participants (79.9% females), M_age = 21.66 years.	Identified six motivations: entertainment, moment retention, self-presentation, self-expression, belonging, and self-approval. Facebook/Instagram used most.
Lee & Lee (2019)	To examine if photo editing moderates the link between media pressure/internalization and body satisfaction.	Survey of 133 Korean female SNS users in their 20s.	Photo editing behavior buffers negative effects of media pressure and internalization on body satisfaction.

Chen et al. (2019)	To assess whether self-esteem and the use of social media and photo editing apps are associated with cosmetic surgery attitudes.	Population-based survey (n=252) conducted online across multiple platforms. Measures used include Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, Contingencies of Self-worth Scale, and Acceptance of Cosmetic Surgery Scale.	Use of social media and photo editing apps was associated with lower self-esteem and higher acceptance of cosmetic surgery. Users of platforms like VSCO, WhatsApp, and Photoshop had significantly lower self-esteem. The findings highlight how photo-editing behaviour links to appearance-related attitudes.
Lonergan et al. (2019)	To investigate how editing and posting selfies relates to body dissatisfaction, appearance comparison, and self-objectification among men and women.	Cross-sectional survey; N = 276 (137 men, 139 women), aged 18–65. Participants completed measures on selfie-editing/posting, body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, and appearance comparison.	Editing and posting selfies were significantly associated with greater body dissatisfaction and self-objectification for both genders. However, the relationship was stronger among women. Appearance comparison mediated these associations, suggesting that editing/posting behaviours may foster harmful comparison tendencies that negatively impact body image.
Maharani et al. (2020)	To explore the role of Instagram photo editing in shaping female teens' body image.	Descriptive qualitative study via interviews with teenage Instagram users (aged 12–18) in Indonesia.	Some teens edit due to insecurity and fear of judgment; others are confident and do not edit.
Felig (2020)	To investigate how photo manipulation affects self-objectification and self-concept clarity.	Experimental study with 231 women, following a pilot correlational study.	Longer editing decreases self-concept clarity; no significant effect on self-objectification.
Wick & Keel (2020)	To determine if posting edited selfies increases eating disorder risk.	Experimental survey with exposure manipulation.	Posting edited selfies is linked to greater body surveillance and higher eating disorder risk, especially for those with existing body dissatisfaction.
Othman et al. (2020)	To explore influence of face-editing apps on facial plastic surgery interest.	Survey of 70 patients.	Social media and editing apps increased interest in cosmetic procedures, especially among younger women.
Tiggemann Anderberg & Brown (2020)	To examine the effects of uploading edited selfies on body image.	Experimental study involving 30 women participants aged 18-30 years	Uploading edited selfies led to increased facial dissatisfaction and greater body surveillance.
Martel, Powell & Murina (2020)	To assess how Instagram and photo editing influence decisions to seek dermatologic care.	Survey and clinical observation.	Social media and photo editing practices are linked to increased dermatological consultations, driven by appearance concerns.
Lee & Lee (2021)	385 South Korean female social media users (aged 20–30)	Cross-sectional online survey	Photo activity was linked to higher internalization and appearance comparison, which in turn reduced body satisfaction. Photo-editing behaviour strengthened these negative effects.
McComb et al. (2021)	To assess the effect of self-disclaimer captions on body image and mood.	Experiment with 311 undergraduate women aged 18–25.	No type of disclaimer improved mood or body image; specific disclaimers reduced comparison among high-frequency photo editors.

O'Neill (2021)	To examine the relationship of social media engagement and photo editing with mental health.	Survey of 325 participants using multiple psychological measures.	Photo editing involvement predicts higher anxiety and depression, and lower self-esteem.
Agrawal & Agrawal (2021)	To assess dermatology-seeking behavior among social media users who edit photos.	Online structured questionnaire (n=550), cross-sectional design.	Photo editing correlates with greater motivation for skin procedures, often sought from non-dermatologists due to cost/accessibility.
Beos, Kemps & Prichard (2021)	To investigate whether photo manipulation on social media predicts facial dissatisfaction and attitudes toward cosmetic procedures, and if self-discrepancy moderates these relationships.	Quantitative cross-sectional survey of 227 young Australian women aged 17–25; moderation analysis used.	Photo manipulation significantly predicted more positive attitudes and intentions toward cosmetic procedures. Appearance-based self-discrepancy moderated the relationship between manipulation and dissatisfaction—those with lower self-discrepancy reported greater dissatisfaction when editing photos.
Gioia et al. (2021)	To revise and validate the Photo Manipulation (PM) scale and to test a moderated mediation model linking selfie-expectancies, body image control in photos (BICP), and photo manipulation.	Two studies: Study 1 (N = 1,353) psychometric evaluation of PM scale. Study 2 (N = 453) tested mediation by BICP and moderation by gender using structural equation modelling.	The revised PM scale was reliable. BICP mediated the link between selfie-expectancies and PM. Gender moderated the mediation; being male strengthened the indirect relationship. Results underscore gender differences and the impact of selfie practices on appearance concerns.
Vendemia & DeAndrea (2021)	To examine the psychological effects of engaging in photo modification and receiving feedback on selfies	Two experiments with U.S. college students	Editing photos led to reduced self-esteem and authenticity; positive feedback increased social anxiety.
Pham et al. (2022)	To analyze how online photo editing relates to offline body image intentions.	Survey of Vietnamese adults, analyzed with structural equation modeling.	Editing self-images predicts intent to change real body; no moderation by private self-consciousness.
McGovern et al. (2022)	To review links between photo-editing behavior and body concerns in females.	Systematic review of 22 quantitative studies.	Results are mixed; photo-editing and body concerns show a complex, multifactorial relationship.
Mustafa & Akram (2022)	To assess the impact of self-consciousness, self-objectification, and social anxiety on photo editing behaviour among emerging adults.	Quantitative, correlational design using convenience sampling; 414 university students (aged 18–25); survey instruments for self-consciousness, objectified body consciousness, photo manipulation, and social anxiety. Data analysed via correlation and regression.	Women exhibited higher self-consciousness and social anxiety compared to men. Self-objectification and body shame significantly predicted photo editing behaviour. The study underscores how psychological traits shape digital self-presentation practices, contributing to literature on photo editing in the digital age.
Mäenpää & Seppänen (2022)	To explore how digital photo editing is integrated into everyday photographic practices and how it shapes visual culture.	Qualitative ethnographic approach based on interviews and observation of hobbyist and professional	Photo editing is deeply embedded in the everyday practice of photography and is perceived as part of the creative process rather than deception. Editing was seen

		photographers.	as enhancing expression and storytelling, not just manipulation. The study highlights editing as a socially meaningful activity.
Wang & Gu (2022)	To explore ethical concerns in the design of beauty and photo filter apps.	Conceptual-empirical case study using app analysis and user narratives.	Filter apps commodify beauty and promote narrow ideals; app design ethics must consider social consequences like appearance anxiety.
Engin et al. (2023)	To examine if social appearance anxiety mediates the link between photo editing and social withdrawal.	Moderated mediation model using data from 420 females.	Editing linked to social withdrawal via social appearance anxiety; self-monitoring did not moderate the relationship.
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3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH OF PAST STUDIES

Body A review of methodologies used in past research on photo-editing behaviour reveals a clear dominance of quantitative approaches, particularly cross-sectional survey designs. Most studies relied on self-administered questionnaires to assess variables such as body image, self-esteem, social comparison, editing frequency, and cosmetic surgery intent. These instruments were typically distributed online, targeting diverse populations such as adolescents, university students, and social media users. For example, McLean et al. (2015), Kim et al. (2016), Chen et al. (2019), and O'Neill (2021) used large-scale surveys to explore associations between photo-editing behaviour and psychological constructs like body dissatisfaction, narcissism, and anxiety. Analytical techniques such as correlation, regression, and structural equation modelling were frequently employed to test hypothesized relationships and mediation effects.

While survey methods dominate, experimental designs have also been utilized, though to a lesser extent. These studies tend to expose participants to manipulated photo conditions or editing tasks to measure causal effects on psychological outcomes. For instance, Tiggemann et al. (2020), Wick and Keel (2020), and Wolfe and Yakabovits (2024) conducted experiments to examine how uploading or viewing edited selfies affects mood, self-objectification, and self-perceived attractiveness. These controlled settings allow for stronger causal inferences, although they often involve smaller sample sizes and short-term exposure effects.

Qualitative approaches remain underrepresented but are gaining traction in recent years. A few studies, such as those by Maharani et al. (2020), Mäenpää and Seppänen (2022), Jang (2023), and McCrackin et al. (2025), adopted interviews and ethnographic techniques to explore deeper motivations, cultural influences, and ethical concerns surrounding photo editing. These studies provide rich contextual insights that are often overlooked in quantitative research, revealing nuanced understandings of how users rationalize their editing practices and perceive social expectations.

Mixed-method designs, although still limited in number, are emerging as a valuable strategy to triangulate findings. Research by Guo and Wang (2024), Li et al. (2024), and Wang and Guo (2024) combined scenario-based experiments, qualitative interviews, and comparative analyses to examine how photo editing affects consumer perceptions and travel experiences. These studies highlight the strength of integrating quantitative rigor with qualitative depth, particularly in contexts that involve commercial or tourism-based implications of visual editing.

Overall, the field has been largely driven by quantitative methodologies aimed at identifying predictors and outcomes of photo-editing behaviour. Experimental and qualitative approaches, while less common, offer important contributions to understanding causality and contextual meaning. There is still room for more longitudinal and ethnographic studies to capture the evolving nature of editing practices over time and across different sociocultural settings.

4 GAPS AND LIMITATIONS IN EXISTING LITERATURE

Although the volume of research on photo editing and digital self-presentation has increased, the field continues to exhibit significant gaps. A primary limitation lies in the overrepresentation of young female participants, particularly adolescent girls and women in their twenties. For instance, studies by McLean et al. (2015), Maharani et al. (2020), and Wick & Keel (2020) focused exclusively on female participants, while others such as Mustafa & Akram (2022) observed higher editing tendencies among women but provided limited gender comparisons. This gendered skew restricts the ability to generalize findings across more diverse populations, including men, older adults, and non-binary individuals, whose experiences with photo editing remain underexplored.

Another limitation concerns the geographical concentration of research efforts. Many studies originate from East Asian and Western contexts—such as South Korea (e.g., Chae, 2017; Lee & Lee, 2021), Australia (e.g., Beos et al., 2021), and the United States (e.g., Vendemia & DeAndrea, 2021). While some progress has been made in incorporating other cultural perspectives—e.g., from Indonesia (Maharani et al., 2020), Vietnam (Pham et al., 2022), and Kazakhstan (Issakhanova et al., 2025)—comparative or cross-cultural analyses are still limited. The contextual specificity of beauty norms, digital behaviours, and editing motivations necessitates broader cultural representation to capture the global diversity of photo-editing practices.

Methodologically, the literature is dominated by quantitative cross-sectional survey designs, as seen in studies like Lonergan et al. (2019), Agrawal & Agrawal (2021), and Yan & Li (2025). While such approaches offer valuable correlational insights, they often rely on self-reported data prone to bias. Only a small number of experimental (e.g., Wolfe & Yakabovits, 2024; Wick & Keel, 2020) or longitudinal studies (e.g., Chae, 2017) have been conducted to investigate causal or temporal relationships. Qualitative investigations remain rare but offer rich narratives and contextually grounded insights, as seen in Jang (2023), McCrackin et al. (2025), and Li, Meng & Martin (2023). Ethnographic and phenomenological approaches are especially underutilized despite their potential to reveal complex, subjective experiences with photo editing.

Theoretical frameworks applied across the reviewed studies also reveal uneven application. Although some research draws from established theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Kim et al., 2016) and Self-Objectification Theory (Felig, 2020; Ozimek et al., 2023), many others are atheoretical or lack robust conceptual grounding. The overuse of appearance-related constructs (e.g., body dissatisfaction, social appearance anxiety) may overlook broader psychosocial processes, such as digital identity construction, social capital, or impression management. Jang (2023) and McCrackin et al. (2025) begin to address some of these themes, but a more consistent application of digital behaviour and media theories would enhance interpretative depth.

Critical ethical and technological issues remain underexplored. While Wang & Gu (2022) and Misra et al. (2025) acknowledge concerns about filter design and appearance pressure, only a handful of studies adopt a critical lens toward the broader impact of platform architecture and algorithmic influence. The normalization of unrealistic beauty standards, commodification of user appearance, and diminishing boundaries between authenticity and artificiality are rarely interrogated in mainstream research. As beauty filters grow increasingly AI-driven, future scholarship must also grapple with the implications of synthetic content, deepfake aesthetics, and automated enhancement tools on user agency and psychological well-being.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

FUNDING

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors played equal contributions towards the production of this paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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