Photo Editing Behaviour Among Malaysian Social Media Users: A Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

Photo editing has become a widespread practice on social media, enabling users to manage their digital identities and present idealized versions of themselves online. While many studies have explored the psychological and social motivations behind photo editing, few have integrated these perspectives into a unified conceptual framework. This paper proposes a novel model that combines Self-Presentation Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour to explain how internal motivations, perceived social pressures (subjective norms), and behavioural intentions interact to shape photo editing practices. The framework posits that self-presentation influences users' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, which together form their intentions and ultimately lead to actual photo editing behaviour. This integrated approach provides a clearer understanding of digital self-modification, particularly within cultural contexts where appearance and social feedback are highly valued. The proposed model addresses a notable gap in existing research and offers a strong foundation for future empirical investigations and practical interventions aimed at fostering healthy digital self-awareness and mental well-being.

Keywords: *Photo Editing, Self-Presentation, Behavioural Intention, Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Attitude, Subjective Norm, Perceived Behavioural Control*

1 INTRODUCTION

In the current digital era, a person's appearance is no longer judged solely by their reflection in the mirror, but more by what is displayed on social media. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have become the main spaces for visual self-expression, where photo editing has become a routine for users of various ages and backgrounds. The rapid evolution of mobile cameras and digital applications has revolutionized the field of photography (Azuddin et al., 2018), empowering every individual to easily and quickly edit and enhance their own images (Alauddin et al., 2022). This technological development not only facilitates the editing process but also normalizes and integrates photo editing practices into today's cultural fabric (Shafie et al., 2018).

This phenomenon has led to changes in beauty and authenticity norms, where curated and perfected images are often considered the new digital beauty standard. As a result, many individuals feel pressured to always appear perfect in the virtual space. This development is closely linked to psychological

aspects, especially how one visually presents themselves to meet societal, family, and peer expectations (self-presentation). However, comprehensive studies on the psychological and social factors behind photo editing among Malaysian social media users remain limited and require further attention.

Furthermore, there is still a lack of comprehensive theoretical frameworks to understand the combination of psychological and social factors influencing photo editing practices among Malaysian social media users. Accordingly, this article proposes a new conceptual framework integrating both perspectives to strengthen understanding and discussion about photo editing behaviour in the local context. Therefore, understanding this phenomenon requires a theoretical framework that can explain the interaction between psychological motivation, social pressure, and user behaviour in today's social media context.

2 EVOLUTION OF PHOTO EDITING

In the early stages of photography development, image editing could only be performed by highly skilled professionals. Traditional editing was done manually in darkrooms using techniques such as dodging, burning, and airbrushing, requiring precision and deep knowledge of technical photography aspects (Batchen, 2001). At that time, editing results were limited, difficult to execute, and time-consuming.

The digital revolution at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century brought significant changes to photography and image editing (Sa'ad et al., 2023). Computer software such as Adobe Photoshop and Lightroom were introduced, allowing photographers and graphic designers to perform editing more easily and with advanced features like colour adjustment, composition, and image merging (McGovern et al., 2022; Sharma & Sharma, 2017). However, using these programs still required specialized training and technical skills.

The most significant development occurred with the advancement of smartphone technology and mobile applications, making photo editing practices more accessible to all layers of society. Applications like VSCO, Snapseed, Facetune, and PicsArt, along with built-in filters on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, enable users to edit photos with just a few taps on their phone screens ((Alauddin et al., 2022). This evolution transformed photo editing from an exclusive skill to a daily activity performed by virtually anyone, without the need for technical knowledge or professional training.

This phenomenon not only broadens the space for visual expression but also changes the visual culture of society, where photo editing becomes part of the social communication process, digital identity formation, and fulfilment of aesthetic expectations in the era of social media.

2.1 The Phenomenon of Photo Editing in Malaysia

The phenomenon of photo editing is increasingly widespread among Malaysians, in line with broad digital connectivity and high social media usage rates. According to Howe (2024), 97.4% of Malaysia's population are active internet users, with 83% of them holding social media accounts and spending an average of 2 hours and 48 minutes daily on platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok Kemp (2024) These platforms have become key spaces for sharing images and videos, thereby driving the popularity of photo editing practices in daily life.

The availability of easily accessible editing applications such as VSCO, Snapseed, Facetune, PicsArt, along with built-in filters on social media apps, allows users to create more attractive and aesthetic images that meet current beauty standards without requiring professional skills (Alauddin et al., 2022) This phenomenon is especially evident among the younger generation, who tend to use various editing tools to create ideal images aligned with contemporary beauty norms and social expectations.

In most cases, these edited images serve as a medium of self-presentation, constructing digital identities and gaining recognition from communities, friends, and followers (Chae, 2017; Goffman, 1956). The habit of editing photos before sharing on social media has become a normalized trend, influencing society's perception of authenticity and beauty standards in digital culture.

2.2   Psychological and Social Implications of Photo Editing

Although photo editing on social media offers space for creative expression, identity construction, and increased self-confidence, it also brings various psychological and social implications, particularly when the practice is excessive. Several studies show that frequent photo editing is linked to increased body dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, and growing social pressure among social media users, especially women and adolescents (Ahadzadeh et al., 2017, 2023; Lau et al., 2022; Tiggemann et al., 2020).

The culture of comparing oneself with edited images on social media drives unhealthy "social comparison" phenomena, reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards in society (Chae, 2017; Gioia et al., 2023). Individuals who frequently edit photos tend to feel pressured to always look attractive and perfect, which may lead to social anxiety, self-objectification, and body image disorders (Tiggemann et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2023)

In addition, social pressures from peers and online communities play a major role in motivating individuals to edit their photos. Tan & Balaraman (2023) found that individuals who do not edit photos before uploading are more susceptible to criticism, mockery, or cyberbullying, reinforcing photo editing as a social necessity rather than a mere personal choice.

More worryingly, the widespread normalization of photo editing can lead society to undervalue authenticity and judge themselves or others based on unrealistic visual standards. These implications affect not only individual psychological well-being but also alter social dynamics, self-acceptance, and societal perceptions of beauty, authenticity, and digital identity.

2.3   Self-Presentation and Motivation for Photo Editing

The concept of self-presentation is closely related to photo editing practices, especially on social media. Individuals, consciously or unconsciously, strive to control others' perceptions by displaying modified or enhanced images (Goffman, 1959). Studies by Lowe-Calverley & Grieve (2018) and McLean et al. (2015) show that the motivation to edit photos is often driven by the desire to appear more attractive, meet social expectations, and gain appreciation and validation from peers and followers.

Furthermore, social norms, peer influence, and culturally accepted beauty standards play important roles in shaping photo editing behaviour (Chae, 2018; Mustafa & Akram, 2022). Tan & Balaraman (2023) found that failure to meet these norms exposes users to criticism or cyberbullying, reinforcing the notion that photo editing often occurs as a response to social pressures.

Overall, photo editing is not only driven by internal motivations to present the best identity but also influenced by dynamic social pressures and expectations in the digital media era. This highlights the need to examine the relationship between psychological motivations and social factors within a comprehensive conceptual framework.

2.4   Local Studies and Research Gaps

In Malaysia, studies related to photo editing practices remain limited and mostly focus on specific populations such as university students or young women. For example, Lau et al. (2022) found that university students who frequently edit photos tend to experience lower self-esteem and social anxiety. Similarly, Ahadzadeh et al., (2023) reported that individuals with low body confidence are more likely to edit photos before sharing, particularly among women.

However, most existing local studies have yet to explore in depth the relationship between psychological factors such as self-presentation, self-esteem, and motivation, and social factors like societal norms, peer influence, and digital culture, within a comprehensive theoretical framework. Many findings are also heavily influenced by foreign studies and offer limited insight into the photo editing behaviour of typical Malaysian social media users.

Additionally, existing conceptual frameworks often focus on a single aspect—either psychological or social without examining the dynamic interaction between both in shaping intentions and behaviours related to photo editing. This indicates a critical research gap, especially in understanding how internal motivations, social pressures, and behavioural tendencies interact in the local cultural context.

Therefore, this study proposes a new conceptual framework that integrates psychological and social factors to broaden understanding of the photo editing phenomenon among Malaysian social media users.

3   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Self-Presentation Theory, introduced by Erving Goffman (1959), emphasizes that individuals constantly strive to manage others' perceptions of themselves through "impression management." In the context of social media, this theory explains how users select, edit, and arrange images to build an ideal self-narrative aligned with social expectations (McLean et al., 2015; Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2018).

Goffman introduced the concepts of "front stage" and "back stage" to differentiate between the public persona shown to the audience and the private side shared only in intimate settings. On social media, the "front stage" refers to carefully edited and selected images aimed at gaining recognition, praise, and social acceptance, while the "back stage" represents the true self rarely revealed openly (Orth, 2016).

Photo editing is seen as a primary strategy in digital identity management, where individuals use various editing tools to highlight positive features and conform to current beauty norms and standards (Chang et al., 2019; Gioia et al., 2023) Through this process, individuals not only improve physical appearance but also construct a digital image expected to attract acceptance and validation from the online community.

Overall, Self-Presentation Theory provides a crucial foundation for understanding why photo editing practices are increasingly prevalent, especially among social media users constantly exposed to social pressure and dynamic digital culture.
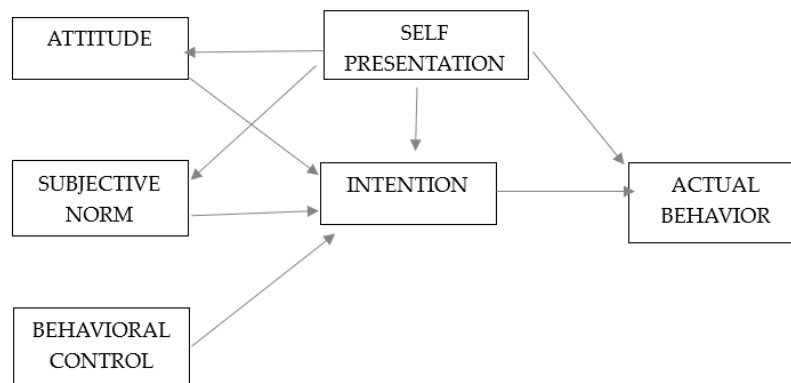
Figure 1 Proposed Conceptual Framework: Integrating Self-Presentation Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to Explain Photo Editing Behaviour on Social Media

In this model, self-presentation acts as the primary driver influencing three main constructs of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB): attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control. Individuals motivated to manage their digital image tend to exhibit positive attitudes toward photo editing, experience social pressure from norms and peer expectations, and feel confident in their ability and access to perform editing.

These three constructs collectively form the behavioural intention, which serves as the key predictor of actual behaviour that is, the frequency and manner in which individuals engage in photo editing before sharing images on social media.

Furthermore, the model accounts for Malaysia's collectivist cultural context, where social norms and peer pressure significantly influence the formation of digital intentions and behaviours. The pressure to conform to group norms and gain social acceptance is a crucial factor in photo editing practices.

The integration of these theories was chosen because they complement each other: Self-Presentation Theory focuses on internal motivation and self-image management, while TPB provides a robust empirical framework for predicting behaviour based on attitude, social norms, and perceived behavioural control. This approach offers a more holistic understanding of the interaction between internal psychological factors and external social influences in shaping photo editing behaviour, while adapting the theories to Malaysia's unique and complex socio-cultural characteristics.

3.1 Limitations Relationships Among Constructs and Hypotheses

Based on the proposed conceptual framework, this study presents several hypotheses to examine the relationships among the key constructs within the model. These hypotheses aim to explore how self-presentation, attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control influence behavioural intention and actual behaviour in photo editing practices on social media.
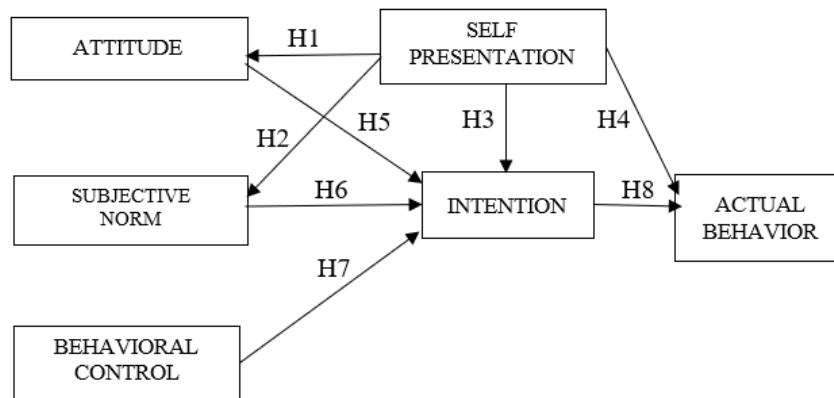
Figure 2 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework along with the hypothesized relationships (H1 to H8) among the key constructs. These hypotheses are developed to guide the empirical testing of the model in future research.

The hypotheses developed are as follows:

- H1: Self-presentation has a positive relationship with attitudes toward photo editing practice.
- H2: Self-Presentation has a positive relationship with subjective norm towards photo editing practice.
- H3: Self-presentation has a positive relationship with social media users' intention to engage in photo editing practice.
- H4: Self-presentation has a positive relationship with social media users' actual behaviour in photo editing practice.
- H5: Attitude has a positive relationship with social media users' intention to engage in photo editing practice.
- H6: Subjective norms positively influence social media user intentions to engage in photo editing practice.
- H7: Perceived Behavioural Control (PCB) has a positive relationship with social media users' intention to engage in photo editing practices.
- H8: The intention of social media users has a positive relationship with their actual behaviour in photo editing practices.

These hypotheses are formulated to provide a conceptual guide for understanding the relationships among the key constructs in the proposed research framework. Although this study is conceptual and does not involve empirical data collection, the hypotheses can serve as a strong foundation for future research aimed at empirically testing and validating these relationships. This approach also helps clarify the mechanisms through which self-presentation, attitude, social norms, and perceived behavioural control interact in shaping the intentions and photo editing behaviours within the context of Malaysian social media users.

4 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is conceptual, focusing on developing a theoretical framework to understand photo editing behaviour among Malaysian social media users. Therefore, it does not involve direct empirical data collection, which may limit the applicability and generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the focus is solely on the Malaysian context, meaning the results may not be fully generalizable to other countries with different cultural backgrounds.

For future research, it is essential to conduct empirical studies to test and validate the relationships among the constructs proposed in this framework. Quantitative studies such as surveys involving diverse groups of social media users in Malaysia can provide clearer insights into the psychological and

social factors influencing photo editing practices. Qualitative research could also be employed to gain deeper understanding of user motivations and experiences in real-life contexts.

Furthermore, future researchers may consider applying this framework in different cultural or demographic contexts to examine its validity and effectiveness on a broader scale. Future studies could also expand to explore the mental health and social implications for users actively engaged in photo editing.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper introduces a conceptual framework integrating Self-Presentation Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour to explain photo editing behaviour among Malaysian social media users. The framework provides a valuable guide for understanding how internal psychological motivations and external social pressures interact to shape digital behavioural intentions and actions.

The researcher plans to conduct empirical studies based on this framework to validate and deepen the understanding of photo editing practices within the local context. These future studies are expected to provide useful data for theory development and practical applications, particularly in designing strategies to promote more responsible and healthy social media use.

Moreover, this framework also has the potential to assist application developers, educators, and social media practitioners in creating interventions that support mental well-being ethical and positive digital image management among Malaysian users.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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