An investigation into the acceptable limits for photo manipulation and its practice by Pakistani advertising agencies

by

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Abstract

The goal of this research paper is to investigate the ethics and consequences of photo manipulation in advertisements. The purpose of this research is to determine what constitutes ethical and unethical advertisements involving the use of photo manipulation techniques in Pakistan, as well as the perspectives of various advertising stakeholders on the subject. Secondary data is used to shed light on theories and practices concerning the effects of advertising and photom manipulation on society, as well as relative majors taken by other countries in this regard. The analyses are based on primary research, which was mostly conducted through semi-structured interviews with members of the advertising industry to reflect on the medium and visual methods used by Pakistani advertising agencies to market a product, as well as the significance of photo manipulation in this process, b) the understanding of ethical advertising and its guidelines by advertising agencies, c) the laws and ethical standards imposed by the state in Pakistan concerning advertising and photo manipulation activities. The analysis also includes the results of a survey that was conducted as part of primary research data to determine the visual literacy of the Pakistani audience in terms of photo manipulation used in promotions.
Introduction

This paper investigates the concept of photo manipulation and its implications in terms of how much image alteration is acceptable in this digital age, where there is a massive influx of images that plays a vital role in constructing new standards and influencing people's choices and behaviors. This paper will delve deeper into the use of these image alteration techniques in the world of advertising, specifically in the context of Pakistani advertising agencies, to determine what approach they are taking to promote brands responsibly.

In today's digital age, there is countless photo adjusting mobile applications available for the general public who owns a smartphone or tablet, which allows them to virtually alter every aspect of their personal images to be uploaded on social media. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the types of adjustments, such as photo editing and photo manipulation. The terms are frequently used interchangeably, but when put into practice, they have a significant difference.

The main elements that are changed in photo editing are the color and exposure of an image, which are used to improve the raw or original photograph. Tone curves, hue adjustments, spot adjustments, and color balance are among the techniques used in this type of adjustment. These post-processing techniques enable an image to be stylized in ways that are not possible in-camera. As a result, photographers have more creative freedom to capture and create images in their distinct styles, which improves an image's original appearance.

Whereas the process of photo manipulation entails making changes to an original photograph using a variety of methods and techniques to achieve the desired result. When this process of transformation or alteration is applied to a photograph, a significant difference between
the original and the manipulated one is visible, which includes not only color and exposure but also the original content of the photograph as a result of replacing, tweaking, and adding new elements to the image. Some photo manipulation works involve the alteration of images to create inspiring and thought-provoking works of art, such as surrealist artwork created by combining different objects from different images and opening a new world for the viewer’s imagination. Thus, artists’ creative power is liberated by allowing them to create whatever they want rather than being confined by the objects in a real image.

This surrealist photo manipulation style arose in Paris following World War I as a result of an art movement known as Dadaism, which sought to escape harsh reality – the horrors of war and death – through art, that challenged the viewer’s point of view, by conducting artistic experiments in literature, illustration, and in the form of photography. Surrealism considers dreams and the human subconscious mind to be an important element in order to challenge the viewer’s perspective by developing an image from objects in their unusual context, thus playing with their perception of what is fiction and what is reality (Hermand-Grisel, 2021).

This concept of blurring the line between reality and fiction, and playing with the viewer’s perception can also be seen in another type of photo manipulation which is used to deceive the public by portraying fake reality in order to engage in unethical activities, rather than to create an art form. For example, using photo manipulation techniques to spread a political agenda, creating fraudulent composite images in photojournalism to change the public’s perception of reality, and finally, making major changes in the appearance of a person's body, in fashion, and advertising.

In advertising, photographs and images are essential for increasing brand awareness and driving engagement. Because what catches the customer's attention is an appealing image of the goods or services that advertisers present to the audience. It can also be thought of as a work of art
in which great care is taken to capture the mood and emotion that a product or service can evoke in the viewer. As a result, photo manipulation techniques along with photo editing can be used to persuade the target audience. But the question is whether these photographs and images adhere to what is considered to be the truth in advertising. Because sometimes the audience might perceive the product depicted in the advertisement to be an accurate representation of the real product.

**Literature Review**

Photography is a very influential and powerful medium that is perceived to be the most accurate representation of reality. In most cases, it serves as evidence of reality, so little attention is paid to how this piece that depicts reality could have been altered by humans (Bock, 2011; Sontag, 1977). Photographs have been manipulated for a long time; darkroom techniques were used back then, where negatives or photos were put together to manipulate the image. But things have changed. Photoshop, the software program by Adobe, is used for photo manipulation, which is now widely practiced in the cultural industries (Lazard et al., 2020).

Photoshop was developed in the late twentieth century and first released in the 1990s, making it nearly three decades old. The use of this software has resulted in significant changes in the advertising industry, which can be easily traced by Googling images from advertisements created in the 1980s and 1990s. There is a significant difference in image quality, particularly in color. Other factors, such as the use of better cameras, may have contributed to this change, but Photoshop was primarily responsible for the improvement in retouching (Loshaj, 2012).

In today's digital age, the concept of retouching abilities is frequently derived from Photoshop knowledge. Regardless of what software is used, the popularity of this program has
made the term "Photoshopping" a common phrase for retouching or photo manipulation (Spalter and van Dam, 2008). Photoshop has evolved into a must-have tool for both print and digital media and this paper will further explore this practice in the context of Pakistan. Advertisement designers rely so heavily on this software that photo manipulation has become as important in the cosmetics industry as makeup, lighting, and styling. The software is being used to create a work of fiction by magically removing skin flaws like pounds and wrinkles and making models and celebrities appear younger and thinner (Diller, 2011).

Photoshop's liquify tool can be used to change the shape of literally anything, from a model's body to a burger. As a result, these image changes influence people to believe in something that is not true by creating a narrative of social expectations, which may affect the general public's practices and emotions to follow the manipulated standards (Diller, 2011). As a result, the availability of this software to a wide range of people, from professional photographers and photo editors to the general public, has raised concerns about the lack of ethical guidelines for photo manipulation used in advertising (Reaves et al., 2004).

The public and industry debate over photo manipulation ethics are based on the close relationship between reality representation and photography. However, the work done to contribute to such debates only focuses on the ethical guidelines of photography which are typically found in the realm of journalism. The darkroom principles and other digital manipulation ethics codes exist outside of the category of advertising (Harris, 1991; Mäenpää & Seppänen, 2010). Therefore, the primary goal of this research is to determine the ethical guidelines present in the domain of the advertising industry around the world in comparison to the ones in Pakistan.

There has been very little work on the ethics of photo manipulation in advertising, such as body image studies, and aside from that, advertising has been almost completely left out of the
conversation, in a disconcertingly liberating manner. (Holmstrom, 2004; Harrison and Hefner, 2014) Furthermore, even scholars and researchers in the field of advertising have not emphasized much about the impact of photo manipulation's persuasive techniques on audiences, such as making unrealistic changes to the skin, facial features to attract the audience and portray the efficacy of the product in cosmetic advertisements in incorrect ways. As a result of this silence, these practices have been motivated and have become the norm in the advertising industry; as a result, the advertising industry is regulating based on maximizing profits (Lazard et al., 2020).

Some recent observations suggest that the government should intervene to regulate photoshopping to promote truth-in-advertising for the advertisement of commercial products (Dumenco, 2014). Countries such as Israel, France, and Norway have already taken steps to limit the use of photo editing techniques in the media and advertising. Adi Barkan, an Israeli fashion photographer, initiated 'The Photoshop Law' in 2007 after an Israeli model who was also his friend died as a result of major weight loss and anorexia – the fear of gaining weight, resulting in abnormally low body weight due to eating disorders. The law went into effect on January 1, 2013, and it required edited photographs to be clearly labeled to notify the alterations made, as well as adult models from the fashion and commercial industry to have a minimum body-mass index (BMI) of 18.5 to ensure their health (CIE, 2021).

France quickly followed suit. From October 1, 2017, France made it mandatory to label retouched photos in print and digital media where the model's body is made thinner or wider. To combat eating disorders, models must also have their health checked every two years (Daldorph, 2017). Furthermore, on June 2, 2021, the Norwegian Parliament amended their Act of 9 January 2009 no. 2 on control of marketing and contract terms, etc., requiring influencers and advertisers
to disclose when an image has been edited or filtered to address mental health issues caused by unrealistic portrayals of physical beauty (Gray, 2021).

However, these acts may be still concerned with the representation of body image - which calls attention to the transparency of photo manipulation - rather than the believability of photographs used for persuasive advertising of products other than cosmetic ones. This paper will delve deeper into this topic, as well as examine laws and movements about the unrealistic portrayal of body images, particularly in the context of Pakistan.

Nonetheless, it would be beneficial to better understand the relationship between policy and ethics as it corresponds to photo manipulation, as well as what different stakeholders, such as policymakers, scholars, advertising agencies, and consumers perceive photo manipulation (Lazard et al., 2020). Besides that, the majority of discussions about ethical issues in photo manipulation have focused on the opinions of editors and readers of the image, while the photographer's perspective has always been a dearth of research in this area (Sharma and Sharma, 2020).

Since the advent of social media, advertising has changed dramatically. In today's digitalized world, consumers are bombarded with visually appealing advertisements designed to persuade them to buy. Brands are increasingly investing in digital channels rather than traditional ones. Consumers today spend the majority of their time on social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, TikTok, Pinterest, and YouTube. Therefore, a brand can now reach an audience that they never imagined was possible. Because brands engaging with their customers virtually daily has become an important part of advertising, it is safe to say that the influence of today's advertising is far greater than in the past (Raudeliūnienė, 2018).
As a result of the availability of filters on such social media applications, a new type of photo manipulation has emerged. Aside from that, advertisers are actively inviting users to participate in the creation and distribution of advertisements these days (Lazard et al., 2020). People are being manipulated through highly enhanced photos in conventional and digital media, and, unfortunately, many people do not mind if the depiction of an object differs from reality, so they keep buying the product (Coffaney, 2011). This paper will also explore this idea of increased use of content editing techniques by the general public from a different lens; it will examine how it has contributed to the increased number of digital marketing agencies, and hence the emergence of social media influencers in Pakistan.

Heavy content consumption via digital media has changed trends all over the world in today's age. Photo editing has become so common in people's lives that they have become desensitized to edited images because everyone is now simply portraying an unattainable reality. However, these practices continue to influence beauty standards and paint an image of perfection in the minds of the public, making them unappreciative of their true selves. Despite the lack of ethical guidelines in many countries, some brands, organizations, and influencers are speaking out against this issue. For example, Getty Images, a British-American visual media company that also sells stock images, has banned photos of models whose body shapes have been altered to portray a completely different body type, such as making them thinner or wider (“These Activists are”, 2019).

Furthermore, in 2010, Dove launched a Body Evolution campaign to demonstrate how photoshopping distorts women's bodies. This influenced other brands, including ModCloth, which was also the first brand to sign an anti-photoshop pledge in 2014. Similarly, brands such as Target and Aerie have refused to use photoshopped women to promote their products. Furthermore, anti-
photoshop Instagram accounts such as exposingcelebphotoshop emerged with a large number of followers, pointing out the difference between photos of celebrities before and after they were photoshopped ("These Activists are," 2019). In addition, a British actress, Jameela Jamil, expressed her thoughts on photo retouching and the use of filters in a BBC piece and on her personal Twitter account. “I think it's a disgusting tool that has been weaponized, primarily against women, and is responsible for so many more problems than we realize because we are blinded by the media, our culture, and our society,” she wrote, adding, “I suffered from eating disorders as a teenager and so I know how damaging “perfect” images in magazines can be” (Baliauskas, 2018).

It is critical to understand whether users are aware of photo manipulated advertising of products and whether having symbols attached to the product indicating the presence of photo manipulation will make them indifferent to the products, even to those products that are not related to the context of body images (Lazard et al., 2020). Therefore, in the absence of any defined guidelines for photo manipulation and advertising, this paper will also investigate the response of the general public, brands, and influencers in Pakistan to highly edited conventional and digital branding of a product, as well as their views on truth-in-advertising.

The overall key findings indicate that not much has been done on official grounds to cater to the photo manipulation ethical guidelines in the area of advertisement, while the question of photography's credibility is only concerned with photojournalism, with the notable exception of representation of body images. Furthermore, many countries continue to underestimate the importance of raising awareness about how sensitive the issue of photo manipulation is in transforming a society's minds, and in some cases, the advertising industry is not even held accountable by consumers, who are the primary target of advertising. As a result, the question of
how much truth should be shown in the advertisement, as well as the ethical burden that designers and their employers bear, arises, which this paper will attempt to analyze further.

**Research Methodology**

The main objective of this study was to investigate the acceptable limits of altering and transforming images using photo manipulation techniques, as well as to assess what is considered the ethical boundary in Pakistani advertising agencies when using these techniques as part of their services to create marketing content for various brands in Pakistan. As a result, data for this study was gathered through both primary and secondary research.

The primary research was based on two different methods;

a) Experts Interview – This method entailed conducting qualitative interviews based on semi-structured questions to learn about the use of photo manipulation in the specific field of advertising through the experience of people who work in the advertising industry in Pakistan. A total of ten individuals from various advertising and digital marketing agencies in Pakistan were interviewed, and they shared detailed insights into the ethical limits of photo manipulation in the advertising industry and how it is practiced, particularly in Pakistani advertising and digital marketing agencies.

The interviews were conducted through a recorded zoom call meeting, which entailed asking approximately forty open-ended questions to participants to engage in a discussion-
based interview, which assisted in the generation of qualitative and valuable information about the study.

Participants for the study were contacted via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The study's purpose was shared on the researcher's timeline as well as in several closed Facebook groups, including WIN - Women in Numbers, Habib Universities' Student Forum, Pakistan Advertising Group, Pakistan Filmmakers Society, and Graphic Designers Pakistan. In addition, some participants were contacted via Instagram and LinkedIn, where search terms such as photo editors, graphic designers, creative directors, advertising agencies, and digital marketing were used to find the relevant individuals for the research. The Career Service Department at Habib University also assisted in recruiting participants for the study by sending an email to various advertising and digital marketing firms inviting them to participate in the research.

b) Google forms survey – this method involved the use of images from Allison J. Lazard, Mary A. Bock, and Michael S. Mackert's Journal of Visual Literacy study titled 'Impact of photo manipulation and visual literacy on consumers' responses to persuasive communication' (Lazard et al., 2020). The images in the survey were advertisements for three different personal care product brands, one with extensive photo manipulation and the other with minimal editing based solely on darkroom principles. To assess the visual literacy of the Pakistani audience, participants were asked to choose one of them based on their preferences, yielding 55 responses from the city of Karachi.
The reason for using images from previously completed research was due to time and resource constraints for this study. Producing and conducting research on such advertisements from start to end in sixty days was a difficult task that demanded a high level of expertise with the editing software to match the quality of work done in Lazard’s research. Nonetheless, this survey generated valuable qualitative and quantitative data for research.

While secondary research entailed searching the internet, online journals, websites, and digital newspaper articles from around the world to learn about the ethics, laws, and movements surrounding photo manipulation and advertisement in a broader context.

**Research findings**

**Importance of visuals in Pakistani advertisement**

Pakistani advertising agencies work with a wide range of brands, including fast-moving consumer goods, clothing, fashion, personal care products, food, and other service providers such as banks, hospitals, insurance, and telecommunications. These agencies produce content for traditional, electronic, and digital media by creating advertisements, planning how, when, and where the advertisements should be presented, and handing it over to their clients, who are primarily brands. These advertising agencies make every effort to sell their clients' products and are not reliant on any organizations. The target audience for each brand varies, and agencies must keep an eye out for every changing trend and try to reach out to the audience through the best medium that gets them the most exposure for the brand's product.¹

In Pakistan, brands spend a lot of money on traditional media marketing, but things are changing and a great proportion of the marketing budget is now going to digital marketing. Due to
their specific image in the market, old established brands typically prefer to keep their primary medium of marketing the traditional media with some use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. While new emerging brands experiment with TikTok as a medium to reach their target market.²

Today's advertising relies heavily on visual content. Unlike previous forms of text-based advertising, image-based advertising has become a powerful way to capture the attention of a target audience. Videos and images communicate a hundred times more effective than spoken or written text. Furthermore, they enable advertisers to generate engagement and persuade consumers to purchase a product more efficiently and successfully. Therefore, photo manipulation techniques play a significant role in creating appealing visuals to attract the Pakistani audience.³

What’s ethical in Pakistani advertising?

Because brands are acting in their own best interests, the use of photo manipulation techniques in advertising can be both beneficial and harmful. Therefore, due to the brand’s competing interests, the line between ethical and unethical advertising may become blurred. Advertisements have tremendous communication power that entices consumers to participate in the narrative but does not allow them to feel like passive recipients of the communication

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¹ Interview with Maliha Khan, conducted by Faiza Adnan on November 26th, 2021 over Zoom.
² Interview with Fatima Shahid, conducted by Faiza Adnan on November 27th, 2021 over Zoom.
³ Interview with Rushna Batool, conducted by Faiza Adnan on December 3rd, 2021 over Zoom.
campaign. According to Williamson, “It is not the advertisement that evokes feeling, it simply invokes the idea of a feeling; it uses feeling as a sign which points to the product. But then emotion is also promised when you buy the product. So, the feeling and the product become interchangeable as signifier/signified” (Williamson, 1978, pg. 31).

As a result, it is critical for those in charge of advertising products and services to consider the impact their actions may have on society. Unfortunately, in the Pakistani advertising industry, there are no defined codes of ethical and unethical advertising; it varies from agency to agency.⁴ There is a lot of thought that goes into how a product or service will appear in an advertisement. And when it comes to photo editing and retouching, there is usually a separate department that works tirelessly on these visuals. Each brand with which an advertising agency works has its own design team. These teams are made up of creative heads, content creators, and designers who collaborate to create the best visuals that will help a brand be remembered by the audience.⁵

Agencies have the authority to decide how much photo manipulation will be done on the images; they have this creative freedom because that is what their services are for. However, everything that is produced is first approved by the brand, and the agency is required to follow the brand guidelines, but there has never been any mention of the ethical guidelines regarding photo manipulation.⁶ If a brand requests that the images of a model be changed to make them look completely different than they do in reality, the agency is obligated to do so because the brand is also a customer of the agency, and in the business world, demand creates supply, not vice versa.⁷

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⁴ Interview with Ibaad Kashif Hanfi, conducted by Faiza Adnan on November 13th, 2021 over Zoom.
⁵ Interview with Daniyal Bin Sabir, conducted by Faiza Adnan on November 27th, 2021 over Zoom.
⁶ Interview with Fareeha Khan, conducted by Faiza Adnan on November 15th, 2021 over Zoom.
⁷ Interview with Momina Qadri, conducted by Faiza Adnan on December 10th, 2021 over Zoom.
Advertising photography also plays an important role in making the product appear better and more enhanced than it is. The main goal of the brand is to make its products and services look the best and most appealing, and in this struggle, a product is enhanced 20 times more than what it is in real life. As a result, some agencies in Pakistan refuse to admit that it is their responsibility to promote healthy visuals and that if it brings nothing positive, it should not be the cause of igniting a negative trend. They believe it is the brand’s responsibility to not ask agencies for such fictitious information portrayal because this is the brand's approach and agencies are simply providing their services. Therefore, some agencies have no guidelines regarding photo manipulation; if a brand requests authenticity, they go for it, until then they don’t consider it their responsibility.

However, some agencies refuse to work with the brands that demand highly photoshopped images of models that influence the beauty standard. According to Daniyal Ejaz, CEO of a newly established digital and marketing agency who has been working in the advertising industry for nearly 18 years, Photoshop has been an innovative tool for the advertising industry, with photo manipulation being the major factor in producing high-quality photos. The term “photo manipulation” can, however, be interpreted in a variety of ways. Adjusting colors, lightening undereye, using the healing brush tool to remove blemishes, and adjusting flying baby hair are all examples of acceptable and ethical photo manipulation in his opinion. But he and his agency have never used a tool like liquify or the stamp tool to completely distort the image of a model or an actor. This is highly unacceptable in his agency, which has established strict ethical guidelines,

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8 Interview with Tariq Habib, conducted by Faiza Adnan on November 26th, 2021 over Zoom.
and if a brand demands anything that crosses their line with ethical manipulation, they will drop that brand from their client list (Ejaz, Danish, personal interview, November 15, 2021).

In addition, Ibaad Kashif Hanfi, co-founder of another newly startup marketing agency, shares Daniyal Ejaz's thoughts on photo manipulation, and his agency has also developed a strong ethical guideline that strongly discourages the use of distortive photo manipulation techniques of any human figure in the content of advertisement they produce. Ibaad believes that manipulated images of women, in particular, have created a standard in Pakistani society that forces girls to look a certain way. Women on billboards, packaging, magazine covers and social media are made to appear stick thin with smooth, extra-glowy skin that is frequently recolored, which is destroying society's perspective on loving yourself. As a result, his agency prefers to promote real-time content rather than creating visuals that rely heavily on Photoshop or filters to create a distorted representation of reality. (Hanfi, Ibaad Kashif, personal interview, November 13, 2021).

**Laws in advertising and photography**

The Punjab Local Government & Community Development Department issued an amendment notification in Punjab Local Government Act, 2013 (XVIII of 2013) via Advertisements Byelaws 2017. The amendment notification has twenty-one headings, and under the eighth heading, ‘*Policy and criteria for advertising substance,*’ it states that “Any advertisements contrary to social norms, public morality, promoting obscenity, public decency and against the state, any religion or creating ethnic or sectarian conflict, considered misleading to the general public shall not be allowed and any such display it shall be removed immediately, without any prior notice and action according to law shall be taken.”
In addition, the 'Pakistan Advertisers Society' has created The Code of Advertising Practice (CoAP), which aims to promote the best ethical and professional practices in the field of advertising to ensure that the liberty to advertise is a responsibility towards consumers and society in general. These codes apply to all Pakistani media owners, advertisers, and advertising agencies. According to these codes, one of these ethical standards is not to advertise false or misleading content, either visually or verbally. And these codes apply to all print, traditional, and non-broadcast electronic media, including computer games and the internet.

The ministry of information technology and telecommunications recently issued a new set of social media rules in October 2020. The primary goal of these rules is to strengthen the government of Pakistan's control over social media. The government will intervene in situations where illegal content is shared or created, and it will have the authority to remove and block it. These rules, however, are aimed at protecting users from terrorism and fake news on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. While the domain of digital advertising is still largely unregulated.

People who work in advertising and digital marketing agencies are often unaware of the laws and regulations governing photography and photo manipulation. There hasn't been much detail provided about what constitutes false or misleading advertising to determine whether or not these laws apply to advertisements that use photo manipulation techniques to change the physical appearance of models and products. Even though these laws and codes emphasize that interpretation of certain areas is subjective, there is no case in the record where the issue of
extensive photo manipulation techniques was brought to the government level or even by other associations such as the Pakistan Advertising Association.  

However, certain factors, such as religious and cultural constraints, act as impediments to advertising a product in Pakistan. These factors are more concerned with religious and cultural norms, and advertisements that violate these norms are subject to criticism. For example, the marketing and promotion of a Pakistani birth control product, namely Josh, was prohibited by Pakistan's media regulatory after it received backlash from the public and was deemed immoral and contrary to religious norms. There are policies in place that limit the promotion and advertisement of certain other products and services, such as cigarettes, alcohol, and lingerie. Aside from that, a model or actor in any form of print or digital must be dressed following Pakistani cultural norms, with no excessive skin showing.

**Advertising stakeholders and photomanipulation**

People in Pakistan are extremely brand loyal, and what motivates brands and agencies to continue using highly enhanced photos is the level of engagement they receive from consumers. Before launching any campaign, agencies conduct A/B testing to perform statistical analysis by comparing two versions of a post or visual to determine which one performs well in terms of

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9 Interview, Daniyal Bin Sabir ibid.

10 Interview with Danish Ejaz, conducted by Faiza Adnan on November 15th, 2021 over Zoom.

11 Interview, Ibaad Kashif Hanfi, ibid.
increasing engagement for the brand's product. As a result, these findings influence the type of advertising campaign that will be implemented.\textsuperscript{12} Because advertising agencies operate on a business-to-business model, they strive to stay ahead of the competition in the market by providing the best marketing services that increase brand sales. Therefore, consumer choices matter for brand and brand preference to agencies. Considering the trend in the market brands also refuse to work with agencies that have strict ethical guidelines because they are too afraid to take risks and ethically try new things to change the narrative.\textsuperscript{13}

Aside from that, actors and models expect their photos to be edited in a way that makes them appear ten times prettier, with flawless skin, lighter skin tone, and a slimmer body and face. During promotional shoots, one of the most popular and well-paid Pakistani actresses, who has represented Pakistan on numerous international forums and red carpets, has asked to make her waist look thinner and her nose looks sharper. The aforementioned actress also runs a social media platform for young Pakistani women that promotes narratives such as body positivity, being comfortable in one's skin, and loving oneself. Thus, specific photo manipulation demands from such celebrities create paradox.\textsuperscript{14}

However, some celebrities request that their photographs be altered to avoid Pakistan's trolling culture. Celebrity endorsement is another form of persuasive advertising, and because star culture is on the rise in Pakistan, celebrities want to maintain a certain image of themselves, because, at the end of the day, it's their job to sell their looks. There have been instances where,

\textsuperscript{12}Interview, Maliha Khan \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{13}Interview, Daniyal Ejaz \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{14}Interview, Ibaad Kashif Hanfi \textit{ibid}.
actors requested that their belly fat be removed or that their baldness be concealed because they were concerned about trolling culture. Furthermore, trolling affected a campaign that attempted to change the narrative positively. For example, a Pakistani clothing brand selected plus size models to promote body positivity, but received a barrage of negative comments and trolling from the Pakistani audience, who are oblivious to how these things affect the country's beauty standards, and thus their own lives.15

Visual literacy of the audience

When faced with visual content a viewer reads that image to derive meaning from it, this concept is known as visual literacy. It helps a brand to understand how their consumers interpret and interact with visual content, hence it is crucial to their marketing and branding success.

“Advertisements are one of the most important cultural factors molding and reflecting our life today. They are ubiquitous, an inevitable part of everyone’s lives.” (Williamson, 1978, pg 11). It is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid advertising in today's digital world. Because the advertising industry is no longer restricted to the four walls of print and electronic media, even those who try to avoid reading newspapers or watching television, are occasionally forced to consume advertisements in some form or another. There is a constant barrage of advertising that one cannot escape, whether at home, work, or on the road.

15 Interview with Hafsa Khalid, conducted by Faiza Adnan on December 1st, 2021 over Zoom.
Since the industry is expanding its horizons, it has incorporated social media platforms along with outdoor spaces such as billboards, signboards, posters, and banners, to accommodate the perseverance of advertising messages. Every scroll on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, or TikTok presents you with a new advertisement, and its graphic elements are so compelling, that nobody can resist at least having a glance at it. As a result, the continuous processing of all visual content consumers encounter leads to the development of a set of ideas and, as a result, builds narratives in society, with far-reaching consequences.

Because a picture is worth a thousand words, primary research using brand advertisements was conducted to gain insights into what Pakistani audiences prefer in terms of advertising visuals. The survey had a total of six questions. The first two questions were designed to elicit information about the participant's age and gender demographics. The following three questions were visual advertisements using images from Allison J. Lazard, Mary A. Bock, and Michael S. Mackert's Journal of Visual Literacy study titled 'Impact of photo manipulation and visual literacy on consumers' responses to persuasive communication' (Lazard et al., 2020). The sixth and final question was designed to generate qualitative data about the factors that influenced the choices made in the previous questions.

Advertisements for three different personal care product brands were placed alongside, in the questions that contained visuals; one with extensive photo manipulation using Photoshop tools and the other with minimal editing based solely on darkroom principles. Participants were asked to choose a product that they would like to buy for themselves, a friend, or a family member, with the prices remaining the same for both products advertised. This survey, which received 55 responses, included both male and female participants.
According to Figures 1 and 2, the participants ranged in age from eighteen to fifty years old. There were 31 female responses, 19 male responses, and 5 participants who preferred not to disclose their gender. The majority of responses came from people aged 18 to 24. This age group had a high proportion of female participants. While the majority of male participants were between the ages of 35 and 44, and 45 to 50 and older.

Considering that the prices are the same, choose a product that you would like to buy for yourself, a friend, or a family member. *

- Facewash - Product A
- Facewash - Product B

Appendix 1
As shown in Appendix 1, the participants were given the option of choosing between two advertisements for facewash. Facewash - Product A included a photo of the model that had been heavily enhanced in Photoshop, such as sharpening the jawline, making the face thinner, and making the eyes larger, whereas Facewash - Product B had no major changes. Figure 3 shows that 67.3 percent of participants chose Facewash - Product A, with the majority of these participants being female.
Considering that the prices are the same, choose a product that you would like to buy for yourself, a friend, or a family member.*

Appendix 2

Considering that the prices are the same, choose a product that you would like to buy for yourself, a friend, or a family member.
55 responses

Figure 4

As shown in Appendix 2, Shampoo – Product A was the photoshopped one in this question, where volume was added to the model's hair as well as sharpened facial features. In terms of light and
shadows, Shampoo – Product B received minimal editing. The results of this question, as shown in figure 4, indicate that the majority of participants, approximately 69.7 percent, preferred Shampoo – Product A over Shampoo – Product A. Although the majority of the female participants influenced this result, Product A over Shampoo was also the choice of male respondents based on the sum of responses as compared to their total percentage.

Considering that the prices are the same, choose a product that you would like to buy for yourself, a friend, or a family member. *

☐ Maskara - Product A

☐ Maskara - Product B

Appendix 3
The third question, which contained an advertisement for a beauty product, namely Maskara, as shown in Appendix 3, had Maskara – Product A with visuals in which the model's facial features were completely transformed with big eyes, rich eyelashes, a thinner nose, and a sharp jawline through the use of photo manipulation techniques. In the Maskara – Product B visual, the model's facial feature was left untouched. Maskara – Product A drew the attention of 70.9 percent of the participants in this question as well as shown in figure 5.
When participants were asked to describe what factors influenced their decisions, a large number of them chose options indicating that visuals were the most important deciding factors. For example, as shown in Figure 6, the majority of participants chose Product A (which was photoshopped in all three questions) because the advertisement had better visuals or the product was better displayed on the model than Product B (slightly edited ones).

30.9% of the participants also stated that their decision was based on their prior experience with the brands. Nonetheless, this survey confirms that text is given less importance than visuals, as only 16 participants cited simple and clear product information as deciding factors. Though this small group of 55 participants cannot represent the overall level of visual literacy of the Pakistani audience, it does reflect their preferred direction – i.e., People in Pakistan prefer advertisements in which models are subjected to extensive photo manipulation to make them appear flawless, with smooth skin, a thinner face and other stereotypical facial features.
Conclusion

Advertisements that harm social standards are a result of capitalism and the oblivious nature of the Pakistani audience. Few people in Pakistan speak out against advertising that promotes social and beauty standards; they create a new trend on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook for a few days, but it quickly fades, and no one is interested in taking practical action, which may drive the government's attention to take this matter seriously and release laws or policies related to unethical photo manipulations, as other countries around the world have. But, as long as people continue to buy products from big brands that take advantage of brand loyalty and continue to register and cash in on beauty standards in the Pakistani audience, there is little hope that these advertisements will be called out for manipulating audience psychology.
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Appendix 1 – Facewash Product A

Before photo manipulation  After photo manipulation
Appendix 2 – Shampoo Product A

Before photo manipulation

After photo manipulation

Appendix 3 – Maskara Product A

Before photo manipulation

After photo manipulation