

Young Women's Attitudes Towards Chinese Beauty Apps

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### Abstract

Recently, beauty apps have become very popular among young women. However, there are a lot of research concern about the behavior of daily selfie editing and posting on social media among young women. This study is a case study of a popular Chinese beauty app called Meitu. The study is aimed at learning how beauty apps that benefited from their connection to social media will change women's lives. By utilizing qualitative research method to conduct focus group interviews, women's attitude and experience is examined. The participants believe that beauty apps have brought the change of lifestyle, culture, and definition of beauty. The discussion of Meitu also give rise to the discussion of different gender expectations among Chinese society. The surveillance and examination on one's body image is detected. The third-person effect also plays a role when women refused to see themselves as part of the problem under the same circumstance.

*Keywords:* Beauty apps, social media, body image, women's health, beauty

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### **Young Women's Attitudes Towards Chinese Beauty Apps**

When the world's first photo-editing Software, Adobe Photoshop, was released in 1987, people's lives entered a new era of photo-editing. As accessibility and affordances of mobile communication increased, the first mobile photo editing app Fotlor Photo Editor was developed in 2011. Nowadays, this technology has evolved into commonplace beauty apps. Beauty apps are aimed at aestheticizing and enhancing digital self-portrait by applying filters, virtual makeups or cinematic modifications to body and face.

A Chinese leading beauty app is called Meitu, which has attracted 1.5 billion unique devices installation, generated 6 billion pictures per month, and has reached over 39 countries ("Meitu", n.d.). Meitu offers instant beautification: ranging from flawless skin, sparkly eyes, whitened teeth, and even changed their body size, and directly share photos to social media. Because of the affordance and user-friendliness of beautify apps, everyone can utilize them to make their photos more attractive. Then they upload retouched photos into Instagram or other social media sites, waiting for "Likes" and comments.

Despite how popular beauty apps are, people concern about how photos are edited by beauty apps and posted on social media. For example, Instagram may potentially have negative influence on body image of young women when they see these "perfect pictures" with extremely thin body sizes (Kleemans, Daalmans, Carbaat, & Anschütz, 2018). As many celebrities and models use photo-editing apps to improve their photos by using retouching techniques, they normalize an unrealistic look (Sullivan, 2014). This reflects the mainstream value of pursuing beauty and thinness, in which models and celebrities are encouraged to use photo-editing device to create unrealistic images.

Not only social media normalize unrealistic looks is problematic, but beauty apps promote the idea of “Face Changer”, “One-tap makeover solution”, and “Restore the flawless skin you were born with”. For example, “Face Changer” can reshape the look of face, “One-tap makeover solution” can put on virtual makeup, and “Restore the flawless skin you were born with” can conceal black pores and acnes to make the skin look smooth and lightening.

This study critically examines women’s experience of living in the illusions of having a perfect and thin body, smooth skin, and bigger eyes. These appearance-enhancing tools are uniquely effective tools for manufacturing perfection because they create outcomes that cannot be achieved through natural means (Harrison & Hefner, 2014). Combined with the promises of reshaping beauty that beauty apps create, these apps spread certain beauty standard on social media that might cause body dissatisfaction and even give rise to serious physical and psychological problems among women.

However, little research has conducted to study the women’s experience of using beautify apps. Why are women so attracted to use beautify apps? How will women feel when they notice the gap between the real self and the retouched selfies? What practices will women have in order to reduce such a gap? My goal is to examine what role beauty apps play in women’s daily life and how it may change women’s understanding towards beauty standards, body image, and self-identity.

### Literature Review

The pervasiveness of photo-editing technology has become a controversial topic in contemporary society. The study conducted by Chae (2017) states that women who used in utilizing beauty apps to edit selfies in their daily lives could be explained by the social comparison theory. Social comparison theory refers to human’s basic instinct to compare

themselves with others and evaluate their own abilities (Festinger, 1954). Selfie-editing behavior may result from women's self-evaluation of appearance, dissatisfaction about their selfies or their desires to look better than others. In particular, Chua and Chang (2016) found girls tend to edit their selfies to meet the beauty defined by peer norms. Plus, girls pursue evidence of popularity by looking at "followers", "likes" or "comments" in social media.

However, the fast development of social media platform also contributes to celebrity culture, in addition to allowing women to compare with peers. The affordability and convenience of mobile devices together with emerging social media apps such as Instagram helped shape a social environment in which "the everyday lives of individuals are being remediated into new contexts of social visibility and connection" (Vivienne and Burgess, 2013). With such huge exposure of social visibility and connection, social media celebrities or influencers can become another source of social comparison. When women compared themselves with those influencers who have thin body size in social media, they might feel dissatisfied with about their own appearance (Chae, 2017). As celebrities utilize beauty apps to edit their selfies to project their body size and appearance beyond normal standards, and they post on social media to gain more attention and support. Exposing these unrealistic images in media will lead to an increase of objectified consciousness and a decrease in self-esteem among females (Harrison & Hefner, 2014). Because beauty apps can bring the promise of making women closely resemble images of ideal femininity, women easily turn to beauty apps. Beauty apps utilize technology to create a "culture filter" to meet for the common beauty standard created by the society. Beauty apps create a problem that female body and face are rendered visible to, allow women to commodify their bodies, and "sell" their photos to social media. (Elias & Gill, 2017).

Indeed, such commodification causes a worse situation for women through the social media's reinforcing social stereotypes of beauty. According to Elias and Gill (2017), the surveillance on women's bodies (but not man's) has become a trending topic for the past 10 years among all media platform. The content is dominated by judgement on women for their "indecent appearance" like black pores, wrinkles, and fat. Media also plays an essential role in shaping beauty standard, which limits women to lean, gym sculpted bodies. Therefore, the influence of media is an important factor of women's dissatisfaction with their bodies. Instagram influencers share their fitness-content pictures to show their slender bodies and their choice of diet. With the pervasiveness and accessibility of ideal-body model images posted on Instagram. Women are encouraged to achieve such body size, which can in turn, lead to some harmful results like eating disorders.

Despite the harsh negative effects on women's health and body image brought by retouching techniques in media, several key debates arguing that photo-editing technology used in media may have positive aspects as well. Still considering the social comparison theory, individuals may be motivated to self-evaluate and identify positive traits in those ideal images posted by celebrities and influencers in the media. When comparing themselves with these positive attributes they see in celebrities, women may achieve self-improvement and positive personal growth in order to look similar to their ideal models (Festinger, 1954). Additionally, girls reflected that selfie-editing is a necessary process to achieve their ideal self-representation in social media to impress others and to solve their sense of insecurity and low self-esteem (McLean, Jarman, & Rodgers, 2019).

These debates continue, as it is hard to reconcile these perspectives. Some possible solutions have been found effective in solving the problem of low self-esteem and dissatisfaction with

body image among women. Countries and companies disagree on the excessive use of photo-editing technology as they hold the belief that it may harm women's body image. For example, the effort to spread positive images of women, The Dove Campaign, *Real beauty*, is aimed at changing the stereotypical images of women, increasing self-esteem, and expanding the definitions of the beauty standard (Lachover, & Brandes, 2009). However, even though media outlets can try to communicate a positive value towards self-image, mass media's power is not enough to counteract social media's influence and impact women's selfie-editing behaviors.

This study aims to fill the gap in existing literature in three ways. First, most of the studies focus on how mass media shape women's value and beauty standard and how to improve women's daily life but little research focuses on how social media influences on women's selfie-editing behaviors. This research is aimed at learning how beauty apps that benefited from their connection to social media will change women's lives. Second, most research utilizes quantitative methods to study possible effects of selfie-editing on women. This study applies qualitative research methods to study the experience of women using beauty apps to edit their selfies and upload them on social media. Third, most of the research focuses on the social context of social media usage rather than focusing on the users' behavior and meanings of images they upload on social media. This study will figure out women's user experience and thoughts on their usage of beauty apps.

### **Method**

In order to study women's experiences of using beautify apps, I will conduct the qualitative interviews with nine Chinese young women from a Midwestern University, who are users of Meitu. Three focus groups interviews were formed. Forming focus group interview will



allow participants to have open discussion on their experience and have interaction. The research is aimed at probing question in depth, and so a focus group can give more insights. The interview will be conducted in the Dept. of Communication and Media studies on the 7th floor of North Quad.

I will use purposive sampling method: I will recruit 3 Chinese students who are users of Meitu on campus and then use snow-ball sampling to recruit six of their friends who they know are also users of Meitu to form 3 focus groups.

The interview will be conducted in a semi-structured way with open-ended questions that were aimed to understand women's attitude and experience of beauty apps. Those questions were aimed at encouraging women to tell their true feelings and understanding about the usage of beautify apps and how their everyday lives might be affected.

Each interview lasted 20 to 60 minutes and was recorded and transcribed for a thorough analysis.

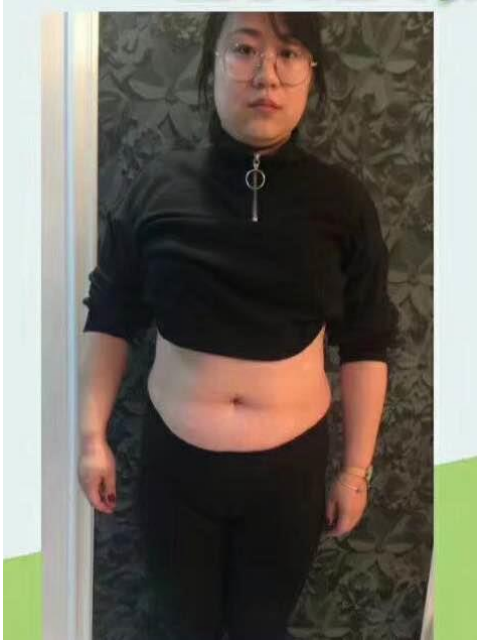
### **Filters Created by Meitu**

Most interviewees believe that Beauty apps like Meitu have changed their lives in different ways. Specifically, Tina identified a language change that developed in word creation that originated from the Meitu usage. Tina mentioned that the buzzword creation of "p-able" was inspired by editing techniques from Meitu, "P-able" (A photo that is able to be photoshopped) that means like some pictures can be edited, you know they don't look great but they are "P-able", they can save and photoshopped by Meitu and some pictures should be destroyed."

Before they used beauty apps like Meitu, no one could understand the meaning of the word "P-able". According to the research, the development of buzzwords tends to reflect the popular topics, relevant emotions and internal tendency of internet users (Tang, He, Li & Hu,

2014). The evolution of buzzwords related to Meitu shows that it has played a role in people's lives by shaping their way of communication and reflecting their personal values. In addition, the evolution of buzzwords reflects the popularity of Meitu among women. However, looking through the concept of "P-able", it shows that women unconsciously consider their photos as products that being produced in an assembly line and selected by their taste and will. The concept of "P-able" reshapes the meaning of photo. The traditional idea for photo is to memorize the moment but women use the standard of "P-able" to evaluate and examine each photo. According to the research, the appearance apps like beauty apps make women have greater punitive self-surveillance, involving them into intense metricized self-scrutiny (Elia & Gill, 2018). Indeed, the creation of P-able not just brings self-examination and self-surveillance, but also shows that women put their selfies in the market of competition: to select the best and knock out the worst. This is a way to objectify their own images.

Not only the interviewees examine their own selfies, they also have surveillance on other women's image. While Meitu is considered as a female-specialized beauty app, it also set a cultural beauty standard. During the interview, several participants were asked to show their usual editing process by using Meitu. However, all of them refused to edit their own photos. Hence, they were provided with an online picture of an ordinary woman (See picture 1). Their responses and operation in this picture were recorded through videos.



(picture 1.)

From the videos, their first reaction on the woman's picture was quite similar:

Gina: I will do the face part, because I prefer a small face, she is kind of fatty. I will make her face smaller. I prefer a round face then. Now I am making her eyes bigger. Oh, this is too fake. Just make her nose more straight and small. And I like small mouth, and the smile.

Cindy: I think she needs more exercise, I am doing the body shape first, hmmm, that's weird, the belly is kind of extra, try to make it smaller, the arms, the picture is blurry, I couldn't.

When talking about their attitude towards edited photo post on social media, most participants are open to the editing and posting behaviors and believe that it is "one's right to do so" (Tina).

According to the response, it reflects the definition of beauty among the participants. The picture was considered as partially "P-able": her face can be fixed but her body can't. Their most frequently used function of Meitu when they edited the photo is body/face reshape: a function to change the face shape and body size as they consider the woman in the picture "needs

more exercise” (Cindy) through their definition of “P-able”. As they consider her face is “P-able”, they used the “face reshape” to make her face small and eyes big. They consider her body size as not “P-able” because her belly can’t be shaped in an unnoticed way through Meitu. Moreover, the pursuing of beautification is deeply embodied in the editing process.

It is interesting to note that they show different attitudes towards their self-image and other’s image when they are under the same situation of using beauty apps. While they were editing the photos, they utilized the same process of editing their own selfies, but they found “pleased” and “amazing” (Gina) when they saw their edited photos. However, when it comes to the woman in the picture, they had surveillance on this woman. Similarly, when they were asked about evaluating other’s editing behavior, some participants hold critical insights on the ethical issues of beauty apps on women:

Tina: Like Victoria's secret hires too skinny models, that is, their pictures are well photoshopped and but it's like it' not the normal case for ordinary girls. it will put more pressure on them (ordinary girls), they want to keep on diet, it does not make sense because the models, their jobs are being models, but for ordinary girls, it's not.

The participants disclose the problem of edited photos post on social media and mass media. They describe some unrealistic photos edited by beauty apps and posted on social media as “unethical” (Zoe) when considering the possible impacts on ordinary women. This is consistent with the research, when women compared themselves with those influencers who post edited pictures with thin body size in social media, they might feel dissatisfied with about their own appearance (Chae, 2017). As celebrities utilize beauty apps to edit their selfies to project their body size and appearance beyond normal standards, and post on social media to gain their superiority and social attention. Exposing to these unrealistic images in media may lead to an

increase of objectified consciousness and a decrease in self-esteem among females (Harrison & Hefner, 2014). They value a self and social responsibility in using Meitu. The participants realize how the overuse of Meitu can impact their lives but they don't worry about it. From the participants' belief, they didn't consider using Meitu is unethical; instead, they believe that posting over-edited photos in social media is unethical. Even though they realize that Meitu can bring some negative impacts on women, the extent of the control of the usage of Meitu can prevent themselves from affecting by Meitu:

Tina: Cause I didn't edit my pictures too much, I feel like it's a legitimate area and I can control how much I want myself to be modified.

Endorsing the feeling of dominance and control make them unaware of how Meitu has changed their lives but hold a conscious view and judgment on other people's usage of Meitu.

From the participant's belief, Meitu is not the cause of increasing women's dissatisfaction with body image. Instead, the improper usage of Meitu is the cause of women's low self-esteem:

Zoe: Yeah, so for fun, or it's their jobs or something, that is all fine. There are some extreme cases I think it's an issue, someone they apply beauty apps for a different purpose: for fun, for commercial. It's about self-confidence, it's also about lying.

As the users believe that Meitu can become a way to conceal one's identity and creates lies. The usage of Meitu also brings the discussion of identity:

Zoe: (Using Meitu) It's kind of lying, you are false truth purposely, it's kinda like someone camouflage their identity.

Noteworthy is that, Zoe has different views on Meitu than other participants: she mainly uses Meitu for editing photos of her mother but not for herself. Hence, she has a critical view on Meitu users and considering editing and posting behavior as "weird".

The participants emphasize the right to use Meitu but they share the same concern of losing one's identity. The conception of self and identity plays an important role when they using Meitu. The participants emphasize "Original" and "Real" (Cindy) several times when they talking about how they edit their photos. However, the definition of "Real" and "Original" of one's photo is quite biased and subjective. While they consider others' over-edited behavior as "unethical" and commented on other's appearance, they still believe that Meitu has changed their life positively. In addition, the process of editing reflects their daily editing process dominated by a relatively subjective beauty standard. It is not clear what is the criteria for "P-able" or not. Since the participants refused to show their own photos, it is not clear that they evaluate their own photos and others' photos in the same criteria. The different attitudes towards oneself and the others among the interviewees may be influenced by the third person effect. The third-person effect refers to the presumed media effects on others tend to be greater than perceived media effects on themselves based on personal bias, and this has been robustly found across various types of media contents (Chung & Moon, 2016). From their comments on the Victoria's secret and the woman in the picture, the third-person effect plays a role in women's different attitudes towards themselves and others and a refusal to see their own editing behaviors as part of the problem.

### **A Change of Lifestyle**

Most respondents believe that Meitu is leading a trend of promoting one's image. Some believe that "I think it's a positive trend because more people are getting more concerned with

their own looks. It's a good phenomenon. (Cindy)” Following the trend of valuing appearance, photo-editing techniques by beauty apps lead to the self-promotion field:

Lydia: I even pay for the editing of my LinkedIn photos, because it is really important because if you have a good photo, you ask somebody to refer you, there is a better chance for being referred.

Moreover, good editing is considered as a technical skill which can make a profit or become a new field of learning:

Lydia: if that person is really good at editing, she should tell me how to do this, I am going to learn this skill.

This trending idea of focusing on beauty and appearance makes beauty apps become tools for self-promotion. Posting a well-edited selfie on social media can be described as a “performative act of brand or identity building” (Koliska & Roberts, 2015). Nowadays, Instagram celebrities post their retouched selfies through beauty apps to keep their attention and promote themselves by being beautiful and perfect. Fulfilling the need for self-promotion, the editing techniques brought by Meitu are ways to boost images of selfies and improve quality. Interviewees say that they will edit their photos by Meitu when “posting on social media” (Tina). As people are willing to present themselves through edited selfies in social media, they have a goal to gain social approval and positive impressions (Weiser, 2015). They care on other’s comments on social media; before posting photos, they usually examined the photo carefully and even “asked friends for opinions” (Yilia). The need for social approval and care for other’s comments reflects the necessity of using Meitu in women’s life.

The other way Meitu has changed women’s lives is to become a routine in their everyday life. When participants were asked to describe their editing behaviors after taking selfies, they

recognized them as “routines” and “habits” (Yilia). “Habit” is defined as “learned sequences of acts that have become automatic responses to specific cues, and are functional in obtaining certain goals or end-states” (Verplanken, 2006). Since selfies-editing is a “goal-directed” habit, it is important to learn the goals among women. There are multiple goals to form a habit. Most participants are more likely to take selfies when they have “special occasions” like events, social gatherings, birthday parties, or when they “have their make-up on” (Lydia).

Not only beauty apps like Meitu have changed the culture, but also it is designed in a way that is emerging in the contemporary culture. Meitu has the function of an instant makeup filter that can identify your face structure automatically and then put on virtual makeup. This function brings convenience and fulfills the needs of taking selfies among young women. Most then mention that they will be more likely to take selfies when they have their makeup on. Wearing makeup symbolized the contemporary culture of being dedicated and paying attention to one’s appearance.

In addition, Meitu designs filters that celebrate the traditional festival in an innovational and convenient way:

Cindy: It benefits my life. For example, I post a selfie on Halloween so I want to use Meitu to enhance my makeup on my face. I like to use the Halloween makeup filter. It can enhance the color in my face, make myself look better, so that's my experience.

Meitu meets the needs of people’s celebration of traditional festivals by combining its techniques with festival characteristics and traditions. This is one aspect that women believe using Meitu benefits their life.

### **A Gender Insight behind the Usage of Meitu**



However, Meitu not only brings changes in lifestyles but also poses the discussion of gender roles. Most interviewees hold the belief that Meitu is specially designed for and to serve as a tool for women:

Zoe: Well. I have like a close friend and he is not straight and he used (Meitu) a lot.

Cindy: For most girls, I think each girl, who uses that to change either the out looking or filter, but for boys, they barely notice that it depends.

Lydia: So if girls notice that I edit my photo, that is ok, cause we all know that. It's like experience sharing but if boys notice how I edit my photos, it means my photo editing skill is really bad.

From the interviews, it is obvious that the participants have an intention to separate males from the usage of Meitu. Zoe intentionally emphasizes her male friend who likes to use Meitu as “Not Straight” to distinguish males from using beauty apps. In their conceptions, things related to beauty and body image have no relationship with males. While examining critically in the beauty apps, it is built and set in a feminized style: it utilizes virtual female models as examples to show function and the whole app is designed in pink. In Asian culture, society has stereotypical gender expectations in which females are more likely to treat themselves as objects to be evaluated by appearance (Kim, Seo, & Baek, 2014). Meitu is designed in a way based on the cultural standard in Chinese society, which solidifies people’s stereotypes towards gender roles and expectations. The model to display virtual effects is based on women’s face and the word caption is around the word “beauty”, “skinny”, and “smooth”. The interviewees then believe that chasing beauty is the business of women not for men.

In addition, the interviewees believe that it is ok for other women to notice that they edit their photos. One is because other women did the same thing and the other aspect means that

they edit their photos in an unnoticeable way. There is a contradictory between authenticity and wanting to improve themselves. Men's notice serves as a standard for women to evaluate their photos as "too much" and "over-edited" (Lydia).

### **Conclusion**

Meitu has changed women's way of life in multiple ways. The development of Meitu is a necessity for women to pursue beautification. Most women believe they have pleased experiences of using Meitu and Meitu brings positive changes to their lives. The feeling of controlling the techniques prevents them from affecting by Meitu. However, the standard of "P-able" originated from Meitu reflects the self-examination and self-surveillance on one's photos by objectifying their images. The different attitudes on examining oneself and the others engage with the third-person effect: the refusal to see themselves as part of a larger problem.

Meitu serves as a role of self-presentation and self-promotion. As women edit their photos and post them on social media, they tend to edit in a way they wanted others to think them in that way. Using Meitu is a goal-directed behavior as women want to present themselves. The need for identification and social approval reflect the importance of Meitu in women's life.

Moreover, Meitu also brings the discussion of different gender expectations. Most women believe that using beauty apps is specialized for women not for men. The idea reflects the traditional social expectations in Chinese's society that women is more likely to be evaluated by their appearance. Women even used men's notice as criteria of their editing skills. The contradictory between wanting to promote themselves and cares for other's notice is common among women.

There are of course some limitations of this study. First, the study may have bias from both sides. For the interviewees, as a limitation of purposive sampling method, I recruited interviewees from people I know, and it was set in the focus group around people they know. It is possible that they might have self-report bias. They might hide their true feelings when it comes to some privacy or sensitive topics. This is because they wanted to have a good impression on them and meet for their social expectations. From an interviewer's side, since I knew some of my participants, I might have some presumption on them, which may increase bias in my study. In addition, the sample size is not big enough and the participants were from similar background: age, education level and demographic. Hence, the results may not apply to large population. The other challenge I also faced with was the different reactions and ways of expression among interviewees. Since it was a focus group and the interviewees talked about their opinions freely but some participants tend to remain relatively silent. The level of engagement was different among participants.

For future research, I might use random sample by recruiting more interviewees online and conduct more focus groups to promote social interaction. With large sample size and randomness, the results may be more representative and persuasive. I will also try to study other beautify apps all over the world as this is a case study in China and it might not be representative in all over the world.

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