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# POSITIVE EFFECTS OF PHOTOGRAPHY ON WOMEN'S SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-IMAGE: WHEN ART MEETS PSYCHOLOGY

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the impact of artistic representation in pregnancy photography on women's self-esteem and self-perception during significant physical and emotional changes. Grounded in Cooley's "Looking-Glass Self" theory and Fredrickson and Roberts's objectification theory, the research examines how external evaluations and cultural norms shape self-perception. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study explores the dual role of social media as a platform that both supports and challenges women's body image through social comparison and idealized standards. The findings highlight that artistic elements in photography, such as specific lighting techniques and personalized posing, positively influence self-esteem by emphasizing individuality and beauty. Ethical considerations in photo retouching are addressed, advocating for a personalized approach that balances technical possibilities with psychological needs. The novelty of this work lies in its interdisciplinary perspective, combining psychological theories with artistic practices to offer insights for professionals aiming to enhance psychological well-being among pregnant women through supportive photographic experiences.

**Keywords** Pregnancy photography, self-esteem, self-perception, looking-glass self, objectification theory, social media, body image, artistic representation, ethical retouching, psychological well-being.

## INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy photography holds a unique place in the modern cultural and social context, reflecting complex interactions between individual self-perception and societal beauty norms. In the era of digitalization and the proliferation of social media, visual images play an increasingly significant role in shaping identity and self-esteem [5]. Pregnant women, experiencing substantial physical and emotional changes, are turning to artistic photography as a means of reflecting on their changing bodies and affirming their social roles.

The rise of social media creates a platform for publicly sharing personal images, amplifying the

impact of external judgment on internal self-perception [4]. The posting of pregnancy photos becomes not only a way to capture an important life stage but also a means of social interaction, reflecting a desire to conform to or resist existing standards of beauty and motherhood.

However, visual representations presented on social media are often subject to retouching and styling aimed at aligning with idealized images [6]. This raises important questions about how such images influence women's self-esteem and self-perception, especially during the vulnerable period of pregnancy. On one hand, artistic

photography can promote a positive body image and boost confidence. On the other, it may enhance feelings of inadequacy and contribute to self-objectification.

This study aims to analyze the impact of artistic representation in pregnancy photography on women's self-esteem and self-perception. Drawing on Charles Cooley's looking-glass self-theory [1] and the objectification theory by Fredrickson and Roberts [2], the mechanisms of self-esteem formation through external evaluations and visual images will be examined. Special attention is given to the role of social media as a catalyst for these processes and its impact on the psychological state of pregnant women.

Additionally, the study explores the aesthetic aspects of photographic practice, including the use of lighting, posing, and styling, and their effects on self-perception. Ethical considerations related to the practice of photo retouching are also central to the research, as they touch upon the balance between supporting the client and potentially distorting reality.

### **1. Psychological Foundations of Self-Perception**

Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying self-perception is key to analyzing how women experience pregnancy with its significant physical and emotional changes. The looking-glass self-theory, proposed by Charles Cooley in 1902, provides a valuable framework for understanding the formation of self-esteem and identity. According to Cooley [1], individual self-perception is shaped by perceptions of how others see and evaluate us. A person imagines their reflection in the eyes of others, interprets their reactions, and builds self-perception based on this interpretation. During pregnancy, when a woman's body undergoes noticeable changes, these processes can become especially intense.

Bodily changes can evoke both positive and

negative emotions in women. On the one hand, pregnancy is often associated with joy and anticipation; on the other, it can bring feelings of vulnerability and insecurity due to perceived deviations from societal beauty standards. In this context, visual representation through photography becomes an important tool for understanding and accepting one's changing body. Photographs allow women to see themselves from a new perspective, facilitating the development of a positive image and strengthening self-esteem.

Complementing Cooley's theory, the objectification theory developed by Fredrickson and Roberts [2] provides insight into how cultural and social factors influence body perception. Objectification theory posits that in patriarchal societies, women are often viewed and view themselves as objects to be judged based on outward characteristics. This leads women to adopt the perspective of an external observer, resulting in constant self-monitoring and dissatisfaction with their bodies.

During pregnancy, objectification can manifest particularly acutely. Women may feel pressured to conform to certain ideals of motherhood and appearance, intensifying internal monitoring and potential dissatisfaction. Research indicates that heightened attention to appearance can lead to negative psychological outcomes, such as reduced self-esteem and increased anxiety [2].

However, awareness of these psychological mechanisms opens up opportunities for positive change. Professional pregnancy photography, with an emphasis on artistic representation and individuality, can serve as a means to counteract the negative effects of objectification. It allows women to reconsider their bodies, recognize their beauty and uniqueness, and enhance self-esteem and self-acceptance.

Additionally, support from loved ones and professionals, such as photographers and

psychologists, plays an important role in shaping a positive self-perception. Creating a safe and supportive environment allows women to openly express their feelings and experiences, fostering a healthier attitude toward their bodies and the changes occurring during pregnancy.

## **2. The Role of Social Media in Body Perception and Self-Esteem**

Social media has become an integral part of modern life, significantly influencing the formation of self-perception and self-esteem. For pregnant women undergoing profound physical and emotional changes, social platforms play a particular role in reflecting and perceiving their bodies. Sharing pregnancy photos on social media has become a common practice, allowing women to share their experiences and receive feedback from a wide audience.

However, engagement with social media brings both opportunities and risks. On one hand, it provides a platform for self-expression and support; on the other, it intensifies pressure to conform to idealized beauty standards. The idealized images presented on social media set high standards of appearance, which can be especially challenging to attain during pregnancy. When women compare themselves to these images, they may experience feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with their bodies [6].

Studies indicate that constant engagement with social media reinforces the pursuit of an idealized image, which can negatively impact self-esteem. Perloff [5] notes that social platforms foster a culture of objectification, where an individual's value is often assessed based on appearance. For pregnant women, this can mean a dual pressure: the need to conform to traditional notions of motherhood and modern standards of attractiveness.

Posting photos on social media is often accompanied by an expectation of external validation in the form of likes and positive comments. Meier and Gray [4] found that the quantity and quality of feedback can directly affect self-esteem. Positive reactions may temporarily boost confidence, while a lack of expected support or negative comments can lead to doubt and anxiety. This makes self-esteem dependent on external factors, intensifying internal tension and vulnerability.

Moreover, social media promotes the phenomenon of social comparison, where users continuously compare themselves to others. During pregnancy, when the body undergoes significant changes, such comparison can be especially distressing. Tiggemann and Slater [3] emphasize that the negative impact of social comparison is amplified by interactions with idealized and retouched images, which create unrealistic standards.

However, social media can also serve as a source of support and positive interaction. Communities and groups dedicated to pregnancy and motherhood provide a space for sharing experiences, receiving advice, and gaining emotional support. This can strengthen a sense of community and self-acceptance. These platforms must encourage authenticity and diversity, representing the real experiences of women during pregnancy.

A key factor in minimizing the negative impact of social media is a critical perception of presented images and an awareness of their unrealistic nature. Educational initiatives and campaigns aimed at improving media literacy can help women develop a healthier attitude toward their bodies and reduce the influence of negative factors [5].

Engagement with social media during pregnancy is a complex and multifaceted process that significantly affects self-esteem and self-perception. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing strategies to support

women during this vulnerable period. Professionals, including photographers, psychologists, and healthcare providers, can play an important role in encouraging positive and realistic representations of pregnancy on social media, thereby strengthening women's self-esteem and psychological well-being.

### **3. Artistic Aspects of Photography and Their Impact on Self-Perception**

Building on previous points, it can be noted that artistic pregnancy photography has a unique ability to influence the self-perception of women undergoing profound physical and emotional changes.

The use of specific lighting techniques is one of the most powerful tools in a photographer's arsenal. Backlighting, where the light source is positioned behind the model, creates a glowing halo effect around the figure. This technique highlights the body's silhouette, drawing attention to the smooth lines and forms characteristic of the pregnant female body. This approach is aesthetically appealing and allows the woman to see herself in a new, elevated light, enhancing the sense of beauty and uniqueness of her condition.

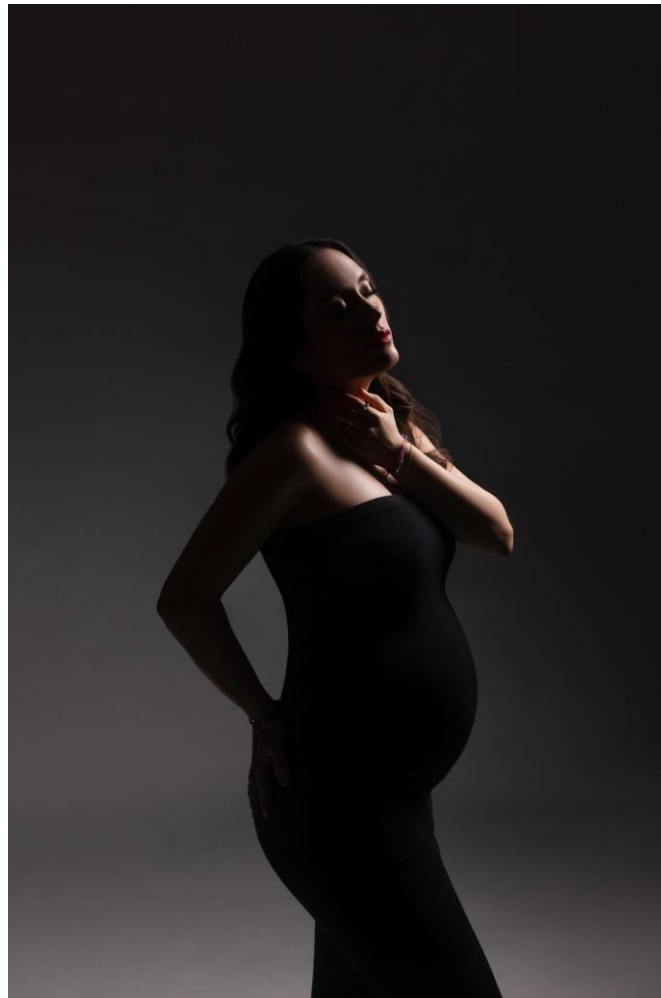


Figure 1 – Backlighting

In contrast, hard lighting, characterized by sharp contrasts between light and dark areas, adds drama and depth to the image. This method accentuates textures and details, creating powerful

and emotionally charged visuals. In the context of pregnancy photography, hard lighting can symbolize strength and resilience, reflecting the inner confidence of the woman during a period of significant change.



**Figure 2 – Hard Lighting**

Composition and posing also play a crucial role in shaping positive self-perception. The choice of poses that emphasize the woman's strengths and individual features helps create images she can identify with and feel proud of. For example, poses that demonstrate the bond between mother and unborn child enhance the emotional depth and significance of the moment. Styling, including the

selection of clothing, accessories, and background, complements the overall aesthetic concept, allowing the expression of the woman's personal style and preferences.

Psychological studies confirm the effectiveness of using artistic elements to boost self-esteem. Slade (1994) notes that visual interventions aimed at positive body representation can help alter

negative beliefs and attitudes toward one’s body. Applying such methods in pregnancy photography enables women to reevaluate their attitudes toward physical changes, perceiving them as a natural and beautiful part of their life journey.

The process of the photoshoot itself can have a therapeutic effect. Interaction with a professional photographer who creates a supportive and respectful atmosphere allows the woman to feel comfortable and confident. This reduces anxiety and self-consciousness related to body display. Moreover, active participation in the creative process gives the woman a sense of control and autonomy, positively affecting her psychological state.

It is essential to recognize that an individualized approach is a key factor for success. The photographer must be attentive to the client’s needs and desires, offering solutions that align with her personal preferences and comfort level. This includes discussing ideas, selecting a style, and determining the level of retouching, which will be explored in the following section. Such a personalized approach strengthens trust and fosters the creation of images that genuinely reflect the woman’s individuality and inner world.

In the context of modern society, where beauty ideals are often dictated by media and may be unattainable, artistic photography offers an alternative path toward acceptance and

celebration of natural beauty. It provides a new perspective where bodily changes are viewed not as imperfections but as symbols of life, growth, and strength. This is especially relevant for pregnant women, who may experience conflicting feelings about their appearance.

**4. Ethics and Practice of Retouching: A Personalized Approach**

The ethical issues surrounding the practice of retouching in pregnancy photography represent a complex and multifaceted aspect that requires careful consideration. In modern society, where beauty ideals are often imposed by media and societal standards, retouching can either reinforce negative stereotypes or serve as a tool for supporting and enhancing a woman’s self-esteem during pregnancy.

Retouching in photography is traditionally associated with altering appearances to fit certain beauty standards, which may contribute to objectification and amplify feelings of inadequacy among women [7]. However, in the context of pregnancy photography, retouching can take on a different character and purpose (Table 1). During this period, women experience many physical changes, some of which may cause discomfort or insecurity. Temporary changes, such as swelling, skin pigmentation, or other physiological effects, can negatively affect self-perception.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Approaches to Retouching in Pregnancy Photography

<b>Retouching Approach</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Ethical Considerations</b>	<b>Psychological Impact</b>
Minimal Retouching	Color, brightness, and contrast correction; removal of minor flaws.	Maintains authenticity; respects client’s natural appearance.	Supports self-acceptance; minimizes the risk of unrealistic standards.
Moderate	Removal of temporary	Balances client comfort	Enhances confidence;

Retouching	imperfections (acne, pigmentation); slight shape correction.	with realism; requires consent.	may improve self-esteem.
Intensive Retouching	Significant alteration of body and facial features; changes in proportions.	Risk of distorting reality; may increase objectification.	Temporarily boosts confidence; may negatively impact long-term self-perception.
Personalized Retouching	Individual approach based on client preferences.	Respects client autonomy; requires open communication.	Supports psychological well-being; reflects personal needs.

A personalized approach to retouching involves close collaboration between the photographer and the client, grounded in open communication and respect for her individual needs and desires. The retouching process must aim not at creating an idealized or unrealistic image, but at reflecting the woman’s uniqueness and authenticity, helping her see herself in a positive light. Discussing expectations and preferences helps establish boundaries and determine the degree of intervention in the original image, fostering trust and satisfaction with the outcome [6].

Ethical retouching practice in this context focuses on supporting the woman’s psychological well-being. Removing minor temporary imperfections can help her feel more confident and comfortable, which is especially important during the vulnerable period of pregnancy. However, excessive retouching should be avoided, as it may lead to a distortion of reality and an increased sense of inadequacy when compared to her everyday reflection.

Photographers working with pregnant women bear the responsibility of fostering self-esteem and positive self-perception through their work. This involves not only the technical aspects of retouching but also creating a supportive and respectful atmosphere during the photoshoot. Empathy and understanding of the client’s

emotional state help establish a deeper connection, ensuring that the final result aligns with her inner needs and promotes psychological comfort.

An essential aspect is also the awareness of cultural and social factors influencing perceptions of beauty and the body. The pursuit of universal standards of appearance can lead to homogenized images and loss of individuality. A personalized approach should therefore consider each woman’s unique traits and characteristics, highlighting her individuality and story. This contributes to creating images that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also personally meaningful.

Psychological research underscores the importance of authenticity and self-acceptance for psychological well-being [2]. Retouching aimed at removing individual traits or creating an unrealistic ideal may undermine these values. In contrast, a supportive and respectful retouching practice can foster positive self-regard and mitigate the negative effects of objectification.

Moreover, in the era of social media, where images are quickly disseminated and become part of the public sphere, the responsibility of both photographer and client increases. Retouched photos can impact not only the woman’s self-perception but also the perception of others, setting certain standards and expectations. Therefore, a conscious approach to retouching is

important not only on an individual level but also on a social level.

### **CONCLUSION**

The visual representation of pregnancy through artistic photography profoundly impacts women's self-esteem and self-perception during a period of significant physical and emotional change. Drawing on the psychological theories of the looking-glass self and objectification, the mechanisms of self-esteem formation under the influence of external evaluations and cultural norms have been explored. Social media, as a modern communication tool, plays a dual role, offering both opportunities for support and self-expression and the risk of amplifying the negative effects of social comparison and objectification. The artistic aspects of photography, including the use of specific lighting techniques and a personalized approach to posing, help strengthen positive self-perception, allowing women to see their uniqueness and beauty. The ethical considerations of retouching practice emphasize the importance of balancing technical capabilities with psychological needs, advocating for a personalized approach based on respect and open communication. Overall, integrating psychological insights and artistic practices in pregnancy photography contributes to a supportive environment that enhances women's self-esteem and promotes their psychological well-being during this special period of life.

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