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## Lolita Themes in Photography: An Ethics Case Study

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## Abstract

The following case study involves the highly controversial South-Korean photographer, Rotta, and his erotic depictions of women with visual insinuations of underage children, more commonly known as the Lolita aesthetic. These controversial events form an important ethical case study, which I evaluated through the TARES framework by Baker and Martinson (2010). Conducting the case analysis using the framework's five ethical criteria, I found Rotta to be in violation of all aspects of the TARES principles. In conclusion, despite not breaking federal law, Rotta communicates highly unethical and morally unsound messages to the public through his photography of women.

## Background

South-Korean professional photographer and Instagram-user Choi Won-Suk (stage name 'Rotta') and his erotic photography depicts women in ways that caused internet users and even South Korean media outlets to accuse him of pedophilic *Lolita* themes in his works. He established his reputation and media presence through Instagram. His photos depict women in positions that emphasize the breasts, vaginal area, legs and/or buttocks with minimal, childish clothing.

### What is Lolita?

The term '*Lolita*' comes from the 1955 novel '*Lolita*' by Vladimir Nabokov. The plot is centered on the pedophilic relationship between the narrator and a 12-year old girl, who he calls '*Lolita*' and engages in sexual intercourse with. The name '*Lolita*' in East Asian countries is now synonymous with 'softcore' sexualized depictions of children, which may or may not have pedophilic intent.

### Controversial Events:

Rotta incited outrage from the South Korean public in several instances, including:

1. In August of 2016, Former member Sulli of the K-pop group "F(x)" uploaded a photo taken by Rotta to her personal Instagram. The photo depicts her and another Korean-pop idol wearing a one-person, skin-tight t-shirt with the Johnson's Baby Oil logo.
2. In February of 2017, Rotta uploaded a 'hidden camera' style photograph of a female kindergartener while in Osaka, Japan.

### Accusations:

Internet users/Viewers accused Rotta of the following claims:

- The way the women pose in a lot of his photos hide their hands/feet, emulating a type of pedophilia where men cut the hands/feet off of children to make rape easier.
- The use of underage girl's school uniforms communicates *Lolita* and pedophilic intent.
- His 'hidden camera' photo of the kindergartener was taken without permission.
- As he regularly takes erotic photos with *Lolita* themes, there was no doubt he took the photo with sexual/pedophilic intent.

## Ethical Criteria: The TARES Test

The ethical criteria used for evaluation are the five principles of **the TARES test**, a test that uses guiding principles and their guiding questions, to assess the moral boundaries and consequences of persuasive communication (Baker & Martinson, p. 159). This test was chosen as Rotta's work promotes a morally gray depiction of feminine sexuality to the public.

### The TARES test consists of five principles:

1. Truthfulness of the message
2. Authenticity of the persuader
3. Respect for the persuadee
4. Equity of the appeal
5. Social responsibility for the common good

### Guiding Questions:

- Are you (the persuader) purposely create *false* images?
- Do people have reason to question your *trustworthiness*?
- Do your actions have *noble* intent? Are you engaging in *evil* or encouraging it in others?
- Do you have *good* justifications for your messages?
- Do you promote *self interest* to the harm of others, or consider their well being?
- How would you feel if the same messages were directed at your loved ones?
- Are you targeting *vulnerable* audiences?
- Does the messages you promote cause *harm* to others?
- Do you hold yourself accountable for any *harm* caused to others/other groups?

References: Baker, S. & Martinson, D. L. (2010) The TARES test: Five principles for ethical persuasion. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 2(3), 148-175

## Case Study Subject's Sample Photographs



## Ethical Analysis: Utilizing the TARES Principles

The following analysis is conducted with the five principles of **the TARES test** and the guiding questions.

### 1. Truthfulness of the message - VIOLATED

- He insists he is not a pedophile, but does not change his content despite consistent interpretations of pedophilia and *lolita* themes in his work.
- If he is truly being honest, he is creating false images by not changing his content.

### 2. Authenticity of the persuader - VIOLATED

- His only reason for his work is to recall his 'memories of first love as a young boy'.
- His actions are not noble, do not serve any noble cause, and are self-serving.

### 3. Respect for the persuadee - VIOLATED

- He does not claim accountability for extreme sexual depictions of women in his work, who may suffer negative effects of objectification.
- His photography generally does not communicate respect for women.

### 4. Equity of the appeal - VIOLATED

- Rotta does not want his loved ones to be objectified, despite the way he objectifies women in his work.
- He also targeted young children and their guardians without letting them know about his controversial reputation.

### 5. Social responsibility for the common good - VIOLATED

- Despite numerous accusations and outrage, he has continued his work without clarification.
- He does not acknowledge the potential impacts of pedophilic interpretation and objectification of women towards vulnerable groups.

## Conclusion

Based on the application of the TARES test and the subsequent analysis on the ethical case study of Rotta and his controversial photography, Rotta has violated all principles of the TARES test. Despite not violating federal laws regarding the sexual depiction/abuse of children, the messages communicated to viewers of Rotta's erotic photography are ultimately unethical and morally unsound.