Photoshop: The Tool to Being Unrealistically Gorgeous

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The Truth in Advertising Act, also known as H.R. 4341, was introduced to Congress on March 27th, 2014. Sponsored by Republican Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Democrat Lois Capps, the bi-partisan bill urged the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to develop a regulatory framework for monitoring the degree of distortion found in advertisements that significantly change the physical appearances of people through image-altering techniques such as Photoshop.¹ Congress stated the following findings:

“1. Advertisers regularly alter images used in print and electronic media to materially change the physical characteristics of models’ faces and bodies.
2. Such altered images can create distorted and unrealistic expectations and understandings of appropriate and healthy weight and body image.
3. Academic evidence links exposure to such altered images with emotional, mental, and physical health issues, including eating disorders, especially among children and teenagers.”¹

An Industry Standard

The use of Photoshop is widespread and expansive in the world of mass media. Self magazine’s editor-in-chief Lucy Danziger explains, “Yes, of course we do post-production corrections on our images. Photoshopping is an industry standard.”²

Since its creation in 1988, Adobe’s Photoshop has been through twenty version updates.³ It is currently available in 25 languages and is the most common photo editing software used in advertising.⁴

Jennifer Lau, a senior graphic designer and photographer with years of experience in professional portrait retouching, reveals, “Retouchers edit everything: They elongate necks. They tuck in arms. They take out veins. If someone is sitting and their stomach looks unflattering, they will remove the extra skin from the image to make it look more attractive...Depending on the to-do list, it can take anywhere from a day to a week... that [magazine] cover is more of an art piece than a photograph...With all the advances in digital photography, we’re constructing people that don’t exist.”⁵
**Seeing is Believing**

Tricks with background lighting, camera angle, and professional makeup already obscure reality enough without Photoshop’s ability to stretch a person up and down, left or right.

**What is outside the frame of a photo is commonly forgotten** in the face of a beautiful image. It is easy to forget that regular men and women cannot be held to the same standard of maintain strict diets, workouts, and facials.

*Images taken as screenshots from the Youtube video: Body Evolution - Model Before and After* 

In today’s commercial world, adjustments and digital manipulation have simple become an expectation, even as the public still continues to believe and demand that photographs represent the real.

**Does Photoshopping matter?**

Though the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2000) reports that “no exact cause of eating disorders have yet been found,” they do admit that “the development of the illnesses, which include low self-esteem, fear of becoming fat, and being in an environment where weight and thinness are emphasized, are all shown to be related to media depictions of idealized bodies, which is all but inescapable.”

Researchers have proposed that eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia are due, in part, to an extreme commitment to attaining the cultural body ideal as portrayed in media.
Chasing after the Perfect Body

Eating disorders have the highest mortality of any mental illnesses, but only 1 in 10 people receive treatment. In the U.S. “20 million women and 10 million men suffer a clinically significant eating disorder at some point in their life.”

While representations of women’s bodies across the media spectrum have shrunk dramatically in the last three decades, rates of eating disorders have skyrocketed; Susan Ice, MD, an expert in eating disorders and medical director of the Renfrew Center in Philadelphia, reported, “The incidence of eating disorders has doubled since the 1960s and is increasing in younger age groups, in children as young as seven.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics confirmed a “119% increase in the number of children under age 12 hospitalized due to an eating disorder between 1999 and 2006.”

The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders states

- 42% of girls in 1st-3rd grade want to be thinner
- 81% of 10 year olds are afraid of being fat
- 47% of girls in 5th-12th grade reported wanting to lose weight because of magazine pictures
- 69% of girls in 5th-12th grade reported that magazine pictures influenced their idea of a perfect body shape

The average American woman is 5’4” and 140lb; the average female fashion model is 5’11” and 110lb. The body type portrayed in advertising is possessed naturally by only 5% of American females. By the time they are 17, girls have seen 250,000 TV commercials telling them that this is the norm for beauty, a body size almost none can achieve. With digital enhancements, not even fashion models can live up to their photographs.

The American Medical Association

In 2011, the American Medical Association adopted a policy encouraging advertising associations to work with public and private sector organizations to develop guidelines for advertisements that would discourage the altering of photographs in a manner that could promote unrealistic expectations of appropriate body image.
**Result**

Although the American Medical Association began discouraging the over-use of Photoshop in 2011, little in the industry has changed in the span of four years. Major makeup companies such as Revlon, Maybelline, Sephora, and Covergirl constantly misrepresent beauty products with deceptive commercial ads of airbrushed models who live in plastic skin devoid of pore or blemish. Virtually all major magazines, Vogue, Marie Claire, Glamour, Elle, Instyle, Self, Cosmopolitan, Seventeen, etc., all practice Photoshop religiously.¹

It now seems fresh, even praiseworthy, when a magazine presents an unvarnished image. For example, an issue of Life & Style took the unusual step of declaring that a cover photograph of Kim Kardashian was “100 percent unretouched”; People magazine, in its “100 Most Beautiful” issue this month, included images of 11 celebrities “wearing nothing but moisturizer.”¹⁴

“Fashion magazines are always about some element of fantasy,” said Cindi Leive, the editor of Glamour, “but what I’m hearing from readers lately is that in fashion, as in every other part of our lives right now, there is a hunger for authenticity.”¹⁴

**Is Change Even Possible?**

The once in a blue moon candid photo is not enough. Readers and consumers crave to know the original, unaltered photographs of all photos, not just one or two.

In 2013, Verily magazine finally rose up to the challenge. As a women’s fashion and lifestyle magazine aimed at the 18-35 demographic, Verily succeeds in empowering and inspiring women to be the best versions of themselves. With a strict no Photoshop policy, Verily never alters the body or face structure of models, even bringing in the magazine’s staff as models to better represent real women. Their motto states, “less of who you should be, more of who you are.”¹⁵

Almost a year ago, American Eagle announced that underwear brand Aerie would be saying goodbye to Photoshop with Aerie Real, an ad campaign that pledged to leave all promotional materials un-retouched moving forward.¹⁶

**Is Less More?**

After 2 years of no Photoshop, Verily magazine has enjoyed an 8% increase in readership.¹⁵ In a conference call with investors, executives said sales of Aerie lingerie soared 9% last quarter.¹⁷

Originality Sells!
The Federal Trade Commission

Currently, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is responsible for preventing business practices that are anticompetitive, deceptive, or unfair to consumers. It has the power to regulate advertisements, but typically only investigates specific cases of unfair Photoshop distortions. No overarching law presides over the disclosure of digital enhancement usage in images.¹⁹

Hopefully, the secrecy of before and after photos will finally be disclosed to the public by 2016. The Truth in Advertising Act mandates that the FTC submit a report to congress by September 2015.¹ The report will contain:

“A strategy to reduce the use, in advertising and other media for the promotion of commercial products, of images that have been altered to materially change the physical characteristics of individuals¹"

Possible Solutions

Possibilities the FTC may explore include: maintaining current procedures, mandating disclosure labels on ads, adding ratings to ads, limiting where advertisers can run excessively photoshopped ads, opening up civil or criminal liability, etc. The possibilities are really endless.

Other countries have already implemented new laws regarding the use of programs like Photoshop in media. For example, in 2009, France introduced advertising legislation that stated retouched images had to be explicitly identified. Unidentified photos would be subject to a fine of 30,000 euros (about 48,200 dollars) or 50% of the campaign cost.²⁰

Israel’s new Photoshop law stipulates that any ad that uses airbrushing, computer editing, or any other form of Photoshop editing must clearly state that fact. Advertising campaigns created outside of Israel must comply with the legislation's standards.²¹

Models who want to work in print ads and runway shows in Israel must provide potential employers with medical proof certifying that they have a body mass index (BMI) of at least 18.5. According to that BMI standard, a female model who is 5’8” tall can weigh no less than 11.9 pounds.²¹ The accuracy of BMI is controversial, but at least now models will strive toward healthier weights than before.

Little can be done to restrain the flow of photoshopped media from the web; therefore, it is imperative that the U.S. modernizes FTC regulations to keep up with the growing presence of doctored images. Simply educating more people, especially adolescents, on the extent of Photoshop and other editing software usage in media would benefit the public’s health immensely.
Conclusion

The Truth in Advertising Act does not impose new regulations; it asks the FTC to work with stakeholders to investigate how to reduce the negative health impact of photoshopped images in advertising. Any new laws must ensure that the freedom of speech is protected. Consumers have the right to know exactly how physical appearances are digitally enhanced to sell clothing, makeup, and other products just as advertisers have the right to use digitally enhanced photos as an artistic expression of persuasion. There must be a balance between truth and fantasy.

In a world where apps for Instagram can allow users to auto-enhance selfies in under two seconds, fantasy wins. Photographs in media can no longer be viewed as accurate snapshots of people or life. There are infinite ways to tweak and adjust, but only one image remains the original.

If an abundance of images of impossible bodies elevated beauty into unreachable standards, future regulation for disclosure of before photos to the public may finally bring cultural idealizations of beauty back into the realms of reality. The world needs a little more truth for the runway to finally meet the real way.

Notes


