

Photographic Manipulation and It's Impact on Women's Self-Image



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I see the magazines working that Photoshop
We know that sh*# ain't real
Come on now, make it stop
If you got beauty beauty just raise 'em up
'Cause every inch of you is perfect
From the bottom to the top

- Meghan Trainor (from "All About That Bass")

In this song, Trainor is calling foul on the photographic manipulation that goes on in the magazines we see every day. She also asks for it to stop and for people to embrace the beauty they possess without the help of digital enhancement. If only it were that easy. These digital enhancements will be explored along with the effects these images can have on female self-image and what might be done to change the habits of these magazines when it comes to how they portray women.

In this critique of photographic manipulations it is important to draw lines in what it means to enhance an image to correct for technical concerns verses changing a person's body.



In 2014, there was public outcry because of this image of Prince George above being manipulated in post-production by *Us Weekly*. Many people asked, "What? They are Photoshopping babies?" and claimed this was going too far. However, in this image, the only major manipulation is that a color correction has been done. The white balance of the image is slightly bluish and so the retouch artist simply adjusted the image to appear warmer in tone. Is this going too far? Well to those critics, one might ask them, do you ever use the edit button on your smartphone after snapping an image? One of the major things the edit does is contrast and color edits. This critique of the Little Prince photo may be

taking the argument too far according to some. *Us Weekly* claims that they were making the changes for printing purposes (Eley).

When one looks at magazine images, and especially those depicting women, however, the amount of manipulations become much more extreme and crosses over the line from technical color cast issues and moves into the arena of body altering, often to a major degree. In looking at this image, these changes can be extreme.



(Kite)

This is a photo of the same woman in two different images and while there is surely Photoshop editing going on in the one on the right, the one on the left has quite drastically altered her body to what most people consider to be unhealthy proportions. Many see this type of editing to be dangerous to women's health by fostering unreal expectations of what a woman's ideal body should look like. The fact is, that most of the time in these fashion magazines, the woman depicted cannot even live up to the image presented as the image is truly not her.

What these manipulated images do not convey is the amount of work it took to get the women looking like this. Cameron Russell, a super model, describes what we see in these images is not a real person but rather a construction. She tells in her TED talk how not only are images Photoshopped by professionals for hours, but also, there are many hours put into the makeup, hair styling, photography, and lighting to capture the image before it ever goes to the retouch artist (Russell). There are many people involved getting paid a lot of money to create these photos. Even the super model, herself, cannot live up to the image.

A very egregious example of this false image shown by magazines occurred in 2009 with an image of Kelly Clarkson on the cover of *Self* magazine. The image on the left is as Clarkson appeared at the time of publication, and the image on the right shows Clarkson the cover of *Self*.



There was strong public reaction to this portrayal of Clarkson. When the editor of *Self*, Lucy Danziger, was asked about the obvious discrepancy between reality and what the publication portrayed, she responded:

“Did we alter her appearance? Only to make her look her personal best... But in the sense that Kelly is the picture of confidence, and she truly is, then I think this photo is the truest we have ever put out there on the newsstand” (Kite).

Very interesting for the editor to think that this is the truest image they ever put on the cover. Really? Dr. Kite and Kite who work to redefine beauty in the face of all these magazine covers have a response to this statement:

It’s hard to believe anyone’s “personal best” is a fake representation of herself. They’ll plaster “body confidence!” all over the magazine and quote Kelly talking about her own real body confidence, but they refuse to show us her actual body (Kite).

What are the effects on women from such false portrayals? It is best to hear straight from them.

There are many mixed emotions that women go through when looking at these images. Annette Okonofua states, “I know that most of these girls on magazine covers are photoshopped, airbrushed and

edited but yet, when you're looking at those photos physically, you can't help but think, "Wow. I wish I looked like that" (Kite). Another woman describes her thoughts:

I buy them as a form of self-abuse. They give me a weird mixture of anticipation and dread, sort of stirred-up euphoria. Yes! Wow! I can be better starting right this minute! Look at her! Look at *her!* But right afterward, I feel like throwing out all my clothes and everything in my refrigerator and telling my boyfriend never to call me again and blowtorching my whole life. I'm ashamed to admit I read them every month (Kite).

The effects on many, if not all, women in our society cannot be denied. The allure of these images both encaptivates the viewer while simultaneously creates self-loathing. Women buy the magazines, but also despise them. This is a strange bag of emotions to hold.

So what can be done to counter all this false imagery for the sake of selling magazines? Some have asked for laws to be put into place to make magazine disclose how much editing goes into the images they produce. Kaitlin Menza proposes a very good question: "It's mandatory for food and medicine to be labeled accurately for the physical health of consumers--why shouldn't images be labeled if they will affect the mental health of the reader?" (Menza). What prevents this from happening is the First Amendment rights that the magazines are allowed to practice under the US Constitution. A law that Menza is asking for can never get traction in the US because of this. Other countries with different laws can actually make publications disclose this information, Israel being one of them. So if a law cannot be put into place, is there any hope?

The reality is that consumers must know the power they wield because without consumers, the magazines and all the companies who advertise in them would not be in existence. The consumers can demand accuracy. In 2012, Julia Bluhm started a petition on change.org to call on *Seventeen* magazine to be more honest in their portrayal of teens in their publication. In response *Seventeen* published this page:



The magazine vowed to reveal edits they make to their images. So consumers do have power to change the behavior of magazines. But as Kite and Kite point out the cover of issue that contained this article looked like this:



So the cover still is promoting body image as a major part of its marketing technique. There seemed to be many mixed and confusing messages being sent to women. Is there really any solution?

Overall, there has been progress. The Dove Beauty Campaign has created videos to show how much altering goes into photographic images we see of women and they have also created advertisements with models of all different sizes. Other companies are following this trend, but it is still not as widespread as many would like it to be. The question to ask: if these magazines bother a woman so much, why does she buy them in the first place? Maybe it is time for women and men to vote with their dollars and stop purchasing these magazines? A massive boycott would have the effect for which many wish. Until that time, if ever, the most important thing is to be very wary of what one sees on a magazine. If it's a photo of an ice cream cone, by law, it has to be truthful, but when it comes to a human, there is no limit to the amount of deception that can be rendered before our very eye.

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