

Retouching physical truth creates deadly falsehoods

Computer-enhanced images trick women into trying to attain artificial perfection

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Women are dying to look perfect.

Literally. Last year's toll included a music promoter who expired on the operating table while undergoing cosmetic surgery, and a couple of fashion models who

starved themselves to death. High profile enough to have made headlines, these women may represent just a fast glimpse of the beauty industry's dark lining.

But they have no one but themselves to blame for the risky lifestyle choices they made in pursuit of looking good. Or do they?

The U.K. Periodical Publishers Association has launched an inquiry into the pervasive practice of digitally enhancing photographs. The initiative was inspired by a report commissioned by the British Fashion Council into the industry's regrettable influence on women's body image. And the council's report? It was prompted by public outrage over the death of the models and the destructive definition of ideal femininity perpetuated by fashion media.

It should be an old story. Women's groups have been protesting unattainable beauty standards for decades. Here in Canada, Media Watch spent more than 25 years conducting research, delivering educational seminars, meeting with regulators and mobilizing consumers around the need for more responsible media portrayals.

Despite such activism, and greater public awareness, some aspects of the situation have gotten worse, not better. Magazine cover stories sensationalize celebrity crimes against body image every week; reality TV shows regularly invent new ways to exploit women's insecurities; and the digital distortion of



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Photo-shopped images fuels exponential growth in cosmetic surgery procedures, despite the health risks attached to many.

So the move by British magazine publishers to explore the development of an ethics code on retouching is long overdue. Why shouldn't magazines be held to the same ethical standards that newspapers follow? Consumers have a right to expect authenticity from the photos they disseminate. If we can't trust that the images we're looking at reflect reality, why should we credit the words that appear alongside them with any greater truth?

An even more compelling case can be made for the images that appear in ads. When cosmetic companies claim that their lotions and creams will reduce the appearance of wrinkles and cellulite, it's reasonable to expect that the photographs purporting to illustrate such results have not been altered. How is "truth in advertising" served when models promoting dietary aides and foundation makeup have achieved their slim silhouettes and flawless complexions with the help of an airbrush artist?

The increasingly popular trend among supermarket tabloids to feature undoctored images of makeup-free celebrities looking shockingly ordinary offers the welcome relief of a little Schadenfreude – being reminded that not even Halle Berry looks like Halle Berry without digital enhancement reassures us about our own imperfections. And the staggering success of Dove's campaign for "real beauty" underscores the appeal of authentic imagery.

This shouldn't be a surprise. A growing body of research documents the damage done by increasingly unattainable physical ideals on the self-esteem of young girls and adult women alike. The punishing comparisons with perfection help to trigger anorexia in those predisposed to it, and health professionals are clear that commercial media images are significant contributing factors to depression, bulimia and the skyrocketing increase in cosmetic surgery procedures.

The good news is that avoiding exposure to such imagery can have a remarkably positive impact on the way women feel about themselves. And when people become more aware of this, they're increasingly likely to either press for the kind of responsibility being considered in the U.K., or to stop buying the magazines entirely.

Consider the views of the fashion industry's most sought-after target market. Last year, with the professional assistance of EKOS Research, Media Watch – recently renamed Media Action/Action Media – conducted focus groups with young women from across Canada who were asked their impressions of the dominant image of women in popular media.

"Skinny," "sleazy" and "stupid" were the representative adjectives volunteered by the 14- to 24-year-olds who were canvassed in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver. All the young women expressed universal frustration with pervasive images of "flawless" female bodies (read slim and large breasted), and the disproportionate attention seemingly paid to those women eager to minimize the amount of fabric between their skin and the camera.

While current media practices unfortunately suggest that Media Action remains as relevant today as it was 25 years ago, the savvy cynicism and growing trend among young women to create their own alternative media content is fuelling renewed activism and – hopefully – much needed change.

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