Distorted Reality

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Just head to your local grocery store check out line and you’ll find rows of long-lasting gum, individually packaged Chapstick... and an unrealistic idea of beauty.

by KATIE DIEDERICHES
THE PRICE OF BEAUTY

We’ve all seen her—the blonde bombshell with mile-high legs, perky breasts, full lips, a flawless complexion and white teeth in perfect rows. All of these traits together make up the modern standard of beauty that we so often see. As a society, our perception of beauty is as distorted as the photographs that decorate our billboards and magazine covers.

Adobe Photoshop, arguably the most powerful image-editing program on the market today, was created in the late 1980s. It started as a rather primitive form of digital manipulation and has since become our virtual tweezers and concealer. Now, one can literally be given a complete makeover via Photoshop. Shedding a couple virtual pounds and changing the color of one’s hair takes just a few clicks of the mouse.

Dennis Chamberlin, assistant professor in the Greenlee School of Journalism and Mass Communication has taught several photojournalism classes and has seen photography evolve over the last decades. “What I’ve been stunned by is that I’ve seen examples of work from some really huge names in fashion photography before it goes to the photo retoucher, and the work they’re turning out would probably get a C in my class,” Chamberlin says. “But they take it to the photo retoucher, and for $100,000 people sit behind computers and make it look like this absolutely incredible photo.”

According to Chamberlin, just under five years ago, it was not unusual for a magazine like Esquire to have a budget for the cover photo that included up to $100,000 for photo retouching.

“So if that’s the case for Esquire, which is not a fashion magazine, what does Vogue have for a budget?” Chamberlin asks.

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

Magazine covers and advertisements today are plastered with unrealistic images of beauty. Chamberlin believes people have no idea how much manipulation most images go through before they ever reach the public eye.

ISU student Gina Palomo learned about photo manipulation firsthand.

“It was kind of strange when I first saw a picture of myself that had been touched up,” Palomo says. The junior, who is originally from Minnesota, modeled for Caryn International Agency in Minneapolis while she was in high school. At a photo shoot for a prom catalogue, Palomo was told to go barefoot so she would not be taller than the male model.

“When I saw the picture, I realized that they had [digitally] made my dress longer so that my feet weren’t showing,” Palomo says. “I didn’t know that they could do that.”

People may be unaware that seemingly unchangeable things such as clothing color and the height of a person can be easily altered with the right software.

“I think that people are used to seeing something that’s not real being put out there as reality,” Chamberlin says. “I mean if there was a warning on each [magazine] cover, kind of like on cigarettes, saying ‘this is not what the subject looks like in real life,’ people would be shocked.”

It may seem a bit drastic for magazines to run a flashy message along with each photo, listing the measures that were taken to achieve an unattainable level of perfection. Can you picture it?

“Warning: This model followed a strict diet, underwent hours of getting her hair and makeup done and has had an exceptional amount of help from Photoshop. Without all of this work, she looks kind of like you.”

Would these words of caution provide readers any service, or would they merely be skimmed over?

Chamberlin believes that although the majority of people don’t know the extent to which photos in the media have been altered, they do expect touch ups on some level.

This past October, Newsweek ran a cover photo of Sarah Palin that was digitally untouched. Some believed that the publication was making a political statement by not erasing her pores and removing her, gasp, facial hair.

“When they didn’t touch up Sarah Palin she looked horrendous, and you realize that’s what she really looks like,” Chamberlin says. “We’re so used to seeing them always smooth out the complexion and fix the eyebrows that it is truly shocking when they don’t.”

This distortion of what is real and what is beautiful may be having an impact on
today's young generations.  

"I have a 12-year-old daughter and she sees things in the media," Chamberlin says. "I can already see how it's influencing her. We're giving [young kids] some kind of unrealistic ideals that they are supposed to achieve. It's not the media's fault, though. Society is to blame. The media gives society what they want."

FLAUNTING FLAWS

Actress, Jamie Lee Curtis, stirred up the magazine world in 2002 when More magazine ran a photograph of the scantily clad 43-year-old movie star. In the picture, Curtis is wearing nothing but her underwear. The public was not as shocked with her wardrobe choice as they were with the fact that the photo was unaltered—untouched by digital software.

The picture captures her as she is in real life—love handles, saggy breasts, crow's feet and all.

It may seem odd that this photograph was given so much attention, but in an age where every dark circle and cellulite dimple can be erased, unaltered pictures in the media are rare, to say the least.

In the corresponding article, "True Thighs," Curtis admits that she has flaws, a risky move for any Hollywood starlet. "I don't want the unsuspecting 40-year-old women of the world to think that I've got it going on," Curtis says in her interview with More. "It's such a fraud. And I'm the one perpetuating it."

In addition to the picture of Curtis in her undergarments, the magazine ran a photo of the actress all made up, ready for a night on the town. This picture was also untouched digitally, but Curtis had it made known that it took a team of 13 people three hours to transform the middle-aged mother into a knockout, clad in a sleek black dress.

D.I.Y. MANIPULATIONS

Not only does the public expect photos in the media to be touched-up, some people are using the same techniques that are used in the commercial world to enhance their personal photographs.

Paul Anderson, co-owner of Universal Color, a digital imaging lab in Minneapolis, said it is not uncommon for people to come in and ask to have their own photos altered. Flaws have become unacceptable in the media as well as in our everyday lives.

"A lot of people want their wrinkles removed or their body to look thinner, but some of the requests are more complicated," Anderson says. "It's becoming really popular for people to ask us to add a person to a family portrait or to completely remove an ex-wife or old boyfriend from a photograph."

Some of these techniques used to require a huge amount of skill to execute properly, but are now becoming easier for the average person to do.

"I've seen examples from students who have taught themselves [how to use Photoshop] in a matter of a few weeks and they've done incredible jobs," Chamberlin says. "I'm amazed at how well they can do it. It used to be that it was impossible unless you really knew the software."

The power of Photoshop spans beyond enhancing the beauty of an image, and is now being used to distort reality. The media is not the only culprit. We too are guilty.

Today's technology has made it simple enough for people to touch up their own pictures, yet nearly impossible for the average person to detect which photographs reality and which images merely fabrications.

So is that blonde bombshell you're friends with on Facebook real or a Photoshopped masterpiece?