How the Use of Photoshop on Advertisements Impacts Women’s Body Image

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Abstract

Advertisements frequently alter *photographs* to enhance and adjust the appearance of models’ bodies and facial features, which can ultimately contribute to the unrealistic expectations of an appropriate *body image*- especially among impressionable children and adolescents. Photoshop has consistently made an impact on thousands of advertisements from around the world, sometimes in cases that the original model or object does not even resemble the outcome. This brings up the bulk of my research project- how has *photoshop* impacted those who are faced with advertisements? And, in more in-depth research, should *advertisements* be able to use photoshop on their models? This is a highly important topic due to the fact that millions are faced on a daily basis with the unrealistic images ads possess, which in turn can result in unhealthy eating disorders, and in severe cases, death all because one tries to resemble the impractical model. In the article, “Photoshop in the Media,” the author quotes feminist author, Jean Kilbourne, in her latest film “Killing Us Softly 4,” by saying, “Because our society is regularly exposed to the media, young girls have no choice but to be brainwashed by advertisements. Whether it's through modeling, magazine advertisements or commercials, women are perceived as objects or sex symbols,” (Kilbourne). Even though the media portrays women in a more downgrading way, men are also affected by the results of photoshop. As a result, my research paper and project will focus on how photoshop is used in advertisements, and how this impacts women’s body image.

Keywords- photoshop, body image, photographs, advertisements

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In today’s era, women are becoming more obsessed about their appearance, especially when it comes to their body and shape. Where do these obsessions and unrealistic standards develop? From an extensive amount of research, the media is the accusation that presents society with unrealistic body types promoting people, especially women, to look like them through the use of TV shows, commercials, magazines and any form of advertising. As a result, the media enforces a certain body type which women emulate and strive to become, which sometimes, unfortunately leads to eating disorders of many types. The adjustments and edits used on an image in an advertisement by an editing software program, such as photoshop, can impact women’s body image by creating unrealistic desires and standards.

**What is photoshop?**

Throughout the past decade, photoshop, as well as other editing software programs have made impeccable strides to users around the world. From adjusting the lighting on a rather dull photo, to advancing an image with a preset filter, to, in some cases, altering a size twelve model to a size two. No matter the case, in today’s society, seeing an image without some type of editing is extremely rare. According to the University of Washington (2017), they described photoshop as “A predominant photo editing and manipulation software on the market. Its uses range from full featured editing of large batches of photos to creating intricate digital paintings and drawings that mimic those done by hand” (para. 1). Schools around the globe incorporate photoshop into their digital media, graphic design, and other technological based courses for students to understand the basics of changing a way in which an image appears. Businesses and companies use editing programs in order to enhance the look of their advertisements. Brown (2015) stated that

for the remainder of the 19th century, and for most the 20th, photographic technology advanced at a steady rate with the potential for manipulation increasing each step of the way. However, in 1987, Ph.D. student Tom Knoll revolutionized the world of photography when he developed the computer application: Display-credited as the “unofficial father of Photoshop. (p.90)

If one were to take a walk downtown in any urban area, he/she would notice almost in every direction an advertisement. According to Cortese (2008), “advertising is a message that has been called to the attention of a public audience, especially by paid announcement” (p.3). Therefore, some individual’s careers are to edit images to hopefully increase revenue once the advertisement is displayed. However, photoshop can also have serious impacts on ads once someone notices a drastic change in the original. For example, Steve McCurry, famously known for his National Geographic photography, was recently hustled into a photoshop scandal once viewers noticed the drastic changes in his original photo. He went as far as removing people from the scene, which created a lot of controversy, especially to his former employees. This example simply illustrates how photoshop can not only distort an image into something completely different, but can also create emotion with outside viewers. One of the most befuddling ways in which advertisements create change, havoc, and emotion with an audience is through the use of women models. Advertising is now a $180-billion-per-year industry and television commercials cost as much as $246,000 to produce (Cortese, 2008, p.4). Typically, through the use of the advertisements and commercials, women are the main characters who publicize anything from hair products, to alcohol, to perfume, to a box of chocolates, and anything in between. Like O’Neil (2014) states, “Kantar Media, an advertising strategy firm, reported that $6.8 billion alone was spent on advertising for personal care products in 2012, such as makeup, skin and hair care products, perfumes, cosmetic surgery, health clubs, and weight loss products” (p. 620). Consequently, overtime the models have become more thin, lengthy, covered with makeup, and unrealistic, which in turn has led to multiple problems for the viewers. In particular, women, especially at younger ages, are viewing these advertisements, and wishing one thing…”I wish I looked like her.” Little do they know, but becoming like “her” is nearly impossible because the models themselves do not even look like that. Therefore, women’s ideal body image is distorted to an unrealistic advertisement controlled by editing software programs.

**What is body image?**

According to the Butterfly Foundation (2016), “Body image is the perception that a person has of their physical self and the thoughts and feelings that result from that perception.” Body image can be a struggle for anyone, at any age, and for any gender, however, the media has created unrealistic standards for the perfect woman. According to Jean Kilbourne in a TED talk relating to her book *Can’t Buy Me Love,* (1999), “Women need to be tall, thin, tan, busty, blemish free, a size zero, and perfect.” And where do these notions come from? In the article titled, “Media, Body Image, and Eating Disorders” (2016), “On average, every week, girls spend 31 hours watching TV, 15 hours online, and 3.5 hours looking in the mirror. They are also faced with 200 unrealistic advertisements per day.” Therefore, these ideal and unrealistic standards flood their brain distorting them to have a negative body image. By having a negative body image, one is focused primarily on their weight, and their appearance. Per Kilbourne (1999), “Being obsessed about one’s weight is made to seem normal or even appealing in ads for unrelated products,” (p. 136). Most people are familiar with the image that displays a overly thin, most would call anorexic, women looking in the mirror and seeing a plump figure as the resemblance. This is only one example that shows how body image can vary amongst individuals. Andrist (2003) states that “Over 80 percent of 10-year-old girls are afraid of being fat.” Hence why children at younger and younger ages are wearing makeup, doing their hair, and trying to be more socially accepted. O’Neil (2014) claims that “these unrealistic portrayals have led to increasing concern about the effects of advertisements on body image and self-esteem, particularly in the wake of the growing numbers of eating disorders among young girls and women,” (p. 620). Not only are these women looking themselves in the mirror and feeling bad about their body, but they are turning to unhealthy diets and eating habits to look more like a model. Now, as a child growing up, TV and advertisements are not the only way these preconceived notions arose. A toy such as a Barbie doll- an overly thin, tall, and flawless figure played with my millions of girls- can create a notion. It’s no wonder why 80 percent of 10-year-olds are afraid of being fat because Barbie never looked like that. If one were to compare the 90’s Barbie to the 00’s Barbie, the difference would be obvious, like comparing an original photo to the “after photoshop” photo. All in all, because women are constantly faced with unrealistic advertisements each day, their ideal body image is distorted which could later result in eating disorders and body dissatisfaction.

**Visual Attraction and Body Display in Advertisements**

By using an editing software, like photoshop, on images, one is able to convey a certain kind of message within the ad. According to Cortese (2008), “Successful advertising is able to manifest rich, intimate, and astute cultural and subcultural messages and representations as well as universal biological desires,” (p. 29). By simply glancing at an ad, one is able to decipher the meaning just by looking at the expression, posture, or gesture of the models. Body language is a key power to reveal a model’s mood or attitude, therefore in most advertisements, the body language is clear, and in most cases, sexual. Cortese (2008) states that “attraction is both socially constructed and biologically shaped to be an instantaneous decision. Whether a female is attracted to a male or vice-versa is based on biological unconscious signals of sexual interest,” (p.33). This illustrates why a majority of advertisements either have a lead male or female role, and sometimes both, to lure the audience’s attention. By placing a model a certain way, different symbols can arise. For example, Cortese (2008) says, “An exaggerated leg length appears to be more adult, and therefore sexier. A smile symbolizes approval or attraction. How women’s breasts are displayed is a key part of sexual attraction. Thus, advertisers are the kings of soft pornography,” (p.34-35). The placing of a model not only signifies a meaning, but can also grab the attention of the viewers and make them more interested, want, or even desire the product. Young adolescents grow up gawking into the face of the advertisement wondering why they can’t have that, look like that, or be more like the media? “If sex doesn’t sell it, it certainly catches one’s attention,” (Cortese, 2008, p.55). Overtime the advertisements have changed, but unfortunately, the message is still clear.

**The Average Body Size of Then vs. Now**

The American body ideal for women has fluctuated throughout the 20th century by creating social norms and images in advertisements. Starting in the 1900s-1910s, the Gibson girl was a beauty ideal who was “slender and tall, albeit with a voluptuous bust and wide hips,” (Kelly, 2016). Flowing into the 1920s, “The Flapper” was known to be the style of the decade by revealing the ankles, knees, and legs, but unlike the past decade, large busts were frowned upon. Still, heavy makeup was to be seen on women to cover-up their flaws. Moving to the 1930s-1940s, per Kelly (2016), “Celebrity image was almost at reach of the average woman because while the average woman had a BMI of 23.6, many celebs ranged from 18.5 (Barbara Stanwyck) to 20.3 (Lena Horne)- a gap, to be sure, but not an extraordinary one.” As the 1950s approached, a fuller figure was appreciated like the model Marilyn Monroe and Grace Kelly. However, once the 1960s appeared, curve was not accepted, only thin and twiggy was prominent. Kelly (2016) stated that “this decade, the average woman's BMI rose to 25.2-taking her quite a distance from celebrities like Soledad Miranda (17.6) and Jessica Lange (20.4).” Continuing into the 1970s, thin was still in, and anorexia nervosa first began to receive mainstream coverage. It wasn’t until the 1980s when the ideal body type altered. “An increased emphasis on fitness, but not overly muscular bodies were prized, and aerobic exercise shows and videotapes became widespread trend- dieting was no longer the way that women were expected to keep a perfect figure,” (Kelly, 2016). Stepping into the 1990s, Kelly (2016) said, “Women with an average BMI of 27.5 were left to compare their bodies to Keira Knightley (17.2) and Natalie Portman (19.5).” Thus, the trend continued into the 20th century, where models BMI remains consistently lower than the average woman. Kilbourne (1999) states that “The average model weighs 23 percent less than the healthy woman,” (p.124). Overall, the ideal body image has changed over time, but in recent decades, a beautiful woman is almost unhealthy thin and bony with a substantially large breast. Meanwhile, the BMI ratio gap has only increased between the average woman and a model, making it impossible to achieve a state of satisfaction within women.

**“Covering up”- beauty supplies**

“The beauty and fashion industries sell consumers, mostly women, products to make them thinner, younger, and more attractive,” (O’Neil, 2014, p. 620). If one were to watch television for an hour, the amount of advertisements trying to sell women products to “make their skin look younger”, “lose 25 pounds quick and fast”, “enhance their eyelashes to be big and bold”, and others, it would be obvious what the advertisements were trying to say. Many advertisements try to sell beauty products, almost entirely focused on women consumers. In 2016, according to Statistics Portal, revenue of the United States cosmetic/beauty products was at an all-time high of 62.46 billion dollars, with hair and skin care products raking in the most money at 24% and 23.7%. People are spending more money than any year before on products, more than likely displayed by advertisements. Women are bombarded constantly with products through advertisements in which they hope to transform into the flawless models if they use this item. However, more than likely, the advertisement with the product was altered by photoshop to have the models eyes look larger, lashes look longer, hair look shinier, and waist a bit thinner. According to Kilbourne (1999), “It is almost impossible to imagine what our culture would look like if women’s bodies weren’t objectified and dismembered,” (p. 259). Even when women are supposed to buy all these products to change themselves into more perfect people and cover their flaws, they are also taught to be sexy and revealing.

**“Revealing”-sexy, skimpy clothing**

Besides women having the need to cover themselves in makeup products and hair care to look more presentable, today, they are also supposed to be revealing and sexy. In most advertisements, a woman is displayed in several different sexual poses, or viewed in a little amount of clothing. This leads to a younger generation becoming more sexually interested due to interactions of the media. Kilbourne (1999) states that

of course, advertising and the media are not solely to blame, but they are a leading source of sex education in the nation and they create a climate which encourages a very cavalier attitude towards sex. The typical teenager watches an average three to five hours of television a day sees a minimum of two thousand sexual acts per year on television alone, (p. 147).

With that being said, the way in which a sexual advertisement is shown can have a correlation with teen pregnancy, as well as increasing the amount of uneducated people when it comes to sexual intercourse. Kilbourne (1999) later states that, “At the same time, there is rarely any accurate information about sex (the networks refuse to run condom ads) and certainly never have any emphasis on relationships or intimacy,” (p.147). If one were to take a glance at any women’s magazine, the same type of situation would be demonstrated- a woman looking less dominant compared to the man figure, and wearing bare minimum clothing. Now, how does this impact adolescents who grow up facing these images? According to Andrist (2003) “63 percent of girls think the body image represented by the fashion industry is unrealistic and 47 percent think it is unhealthy, yet 60 percent say that they compare their bodies to fashion models, 48 percent wish they were as skinny as the models in fashion magazines, and 31 percent of girls admit to starving themselves or refusing to eat as a strategy to lose weight.” Most people have heard the quote, “a picture is worth a thousand words” therefore, when one looks at an image of a slim woman, revealing more than half of her body, showing a certain look on her face, the viewer would have a want to look and act like that. However, Kilbourne (1999) points out the fact that, “A survey in Massachusetts found that the single largest group of high school students considering or attempting suicide are girls who feel they are overweight. Imagine. Girls made to feel so terrible about themselves that they would rather be dead than fat,” (p. 134). All in all, the way in which an advertisement is constructed can have large, devastating impacts on teens and women.

**How Advertisements Impact Body Image**

According to Kilbourne (1999),

It’s a multifaceted problem there is no simple cause. However, it is clear that the current crisis goes beyond individual psychological development and pathology. Indeed, it cannot be understood without recognizing that our children are growing up in a toxic cultural environment, one made more toxic by advertising. No one can escape it, just as no one can escape air pollution or pesticides in our food. And this is increasingly a worldwide phenomenon. The world is fast becoming a global marketplace controlled not by individual governments, but by transnational conglomerates interested only in profit. As Americans export our economic system like a lifestyle, we also export the addictions, diseases, and psychological problems associated with it- the hazardous cultural environment, (pp. 28-30).

**Eating Disorders/Poor Body Image**

Thus, more and more women are faced with an eating disorder and/or poor body image and dissatisfaction. Per the Butterfly Foundation (2016), “People experiencing body dissatisfaction can become fixated on trying to change their body shape, which can lead to unhealthy practices with food and exercise that usually don’t achieve the desired outcome,” (sec. 1, para 1). By trying to resemble a model in a photoshopped image, or become more like a Barbie doll, one is risking their life, and taking a chance on becoming extremely unhealthy. As the Butterfly Foundation titles it a, “serious, potentially life-threatening mental illness” Anorexia Nervosa, a disease otherwise known as restrictive dieting and excessive exercising, is a leading problem in many people across the globe. Like earlier stated, the media might not be the direct cause, it still can increase one’s desire to become more thin. The Butterfly Foundation also point out that “The reasons behind the development of Anorexia will differ from person to person; known causes include genetic predisposition and a combination of environmental, social and cultural factors,” (para. 2). Women are more likely to use dieting behaviors to achieve the type of culturally constructed thin ideal that advertisements with severely small models portray. Thus, advertisements have a significant impact on body image for women of all ages.

**Accepting Yourself for who you are**

In conclusion, even though Photoshop has made its mark on millions of images from around the world, constructing and altering an image to fit the ideal standards in today’s society, one must look past the advertisement in order to see one’s true potential. As Kilbourne (1999) states, “We need connection-it’s time for us to fight back, to resist the name-calling and to redefine freedom, liberation, and rebellion in our own terms. We can turn these advertising messages inside out,” (p. 311). By looking beyond an unrealistic advertisement, a positive body image can be achieved, goals can still be met, and self-acceptance can be obtained. Women must remember to be who they want to be, not how the media portrays, depicts, and sculpts them to be.

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