Pervasive Unreality: Reining in Photoshop

By Andrew Bianco

ABSTRACT. The advertising industry utilizes tools such as Photoshop to alter the physical appearance of people and products before advertisements are released to the public. Due to the pervasive nature of advertisements, the public is bombarded with images of bodily expectations, and numerous youth who are exposed to magazines are influenced by the portrayal of beauty standards from the images in magazine photos. European legislatures are taking steps to ensure that advertisements do not promote extreme thinness or that disclaimers are used on modified images. United States legislatures have little legal requirements to limit the usage of Photoshop, despite public opinion on the subject. Some companies are voluntarily refraining from digitally altering their advertisements, but restrict their actions to single product campaigns. The problems surrounding Photoshop in advertising are examined through an episode of South Park, in which the series’ feminist character enters a campaign against Photoshop due to the impact on her classmates. The effort ends in failure and tears, and demonstrates the uphill struggle feminists face when challenging standard practice in pervasive industries. It is clear that the United States needs to take steps to reduce the impact that the advertising industry has on impressionable minds before it becomes too damaging.

Introduction

Advertising works. For a global capitalist economy to spend billions of dollars yearly on the industry (Austin, 2012), it must be profitable and successful, giving immense power to advertisers in choosing what is advertised and how it is advertised. This establishes a status quo in what is available and desirable to purchase and in what physical image people are expected to portray in their dress and appearance. In the past, advertisements had to rely on real images, trick photography, or cartoon illustrations in order to market their product. Now with creation tools like Photoshop, unrealistic portrayals of real situations, products, and bodies can be created and distributed that portray a false reality. This false reality is used to influence people not only into purchasing products they may or may not need, but also influencing people into believing this is the true or expected reality.
The perpetuation of this false reality is run by the status quo, a patriarchal society damaging to the minds and bodies of the population. The United States needs to join Europe in adopting policies limiting the use of photoshopped images in advertising, which will allow more realistic beauty standards for society to look up to.

In a society plagued with ideals and standards of how women should act, look, or dress, it becomes increasingly difficult for women to develop and maintain a sense of self-worth and self-identity. As discussed in Women’s Voices, Feminist Visions, our culture encourages girls to be competitive with each other about their looks, comparing their bodies against notions of youthful ‘beauty’ (Shaw & Lee, 2012). Our culture promotes unrealistic standards of what feminine beauty is supposed to look like through mass production of advertisements that objectify women or alter the photos in a manner in which advertisers try to make the model look ‘perfect.’ “These images of perfect bodies are fabricated by a male-dominated culture... [to appear] flawless and give the illusion of absolute perfection. In reality, these images tend to be airbrushed and computer enhanced...” (Shaw & Lee, 2012).

Due to these enhancements, eating disorders have been increasingly prevalent in our society. The National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) published an article called "Get the Facts on Eating Disorders (n.d.)," which shows the following startling impacts that false image portrayals in the media have on an individual's self-worth: 42% of 1st through 3rd grade girls want to be thinner. 81% of 10 year olds are afraid of being fat. Of American elementary school girls who read magazines, 69% say that the pictures influence their concept of the ideal body image shape; 47% say the pictures make them want to lose weight.

The idea that being healthy is less important that being thin is a harsh cry for help from the youth of our society that needs to be answered. It is necessary to start making changes as to how advertisers reach customers, even if it is a small change at a time

Foreign Policies

In recent years, foreign governments have begun regulating the practices of advertisers, particularly where it can affect to the self-image of women. In 2008, the lower house of French Parliament voted in favor of a bill that outlaws ‘publically inciting extreme thinness,’ which is specifically targeted at magazines, advertisers, and the fashion industry (Carvajal, 2008). This decision came after the 2006 death of an extremely thin model from Brazil, which prompted many
changes in the modeling industry to promote healthier models. In 2009, French politicians developed a law to put a “health warning” on photographs of models that are altered. Under the proposed law, all enhanced photos would be accompanied by a line saying: “Photograph retouched to modify the physical appearance of a person” (Hardach, 2009). While the law wouldn't ban altered images entirely, it would clearly inform the observer that the subject being viewed does not exist in his or her natural form.

British lawmakers have also started to take a stand against Photoshop, as Britain's Liberal Democrats are trying to ban photoshopping entirely in ads aimed at anyone under the age of 16, and requiring all other ads to carry a disclaimer describing the extent of their alterations (North, 2008). As a strong supporter of banning Photoshop, Member of Parliament Jo Swinson stated:

Today's unrealistic idea of what is beautiful means that young girls are under more pressure now than they were even five years ago. Airbrushing means that adverts contain completely unattainable perfect images no one can live up to in real life. We need to help protect children from these pressures and we need to make a start by banning airbrushing in adverts aimed at them.

MP Swinson expresses fears that young girls will internalize the way women are objectified in western culture through constant and pervasive advertising.

**Domestic Policies**

Actions against digitally altered images in advertising are not exclusively a foreign issue. Recently, the National Advertising Division (NAD) for the United States has begun to ensure that “claims made in national advertising are truthful, accurate and not misleading” as they specifically relate to the use of Photoshop in advertising (“Cosmetics advertising digest,” 2012). In 2013, the NAD investigated claims against Covergirl for advertisements on mascara. The NAD determined that when Covergirl “made a qualified performance claim [for mascara], but then artificially enhanced the picture of the model's lashes... the picture served as a false product demonstration” (“Nad finds p&g,” 2013).

Although the United States hasn't been as progressive as our European cousins with taking a legal stand on the representation of women in the media, it hasn’t stopped the rise in public outcry against the use of Photoshop in advertising. Some companies are voluntarily
omitting altered images in their advertisements. For example, American Eagle has chosen not to use any photo editing of their models for their Aerie line of lingerie (Dockterman, 2014). “They are still models, they’re still gorgeous, they just look a little more like the rest of us... We’re hoping to break the mold ... we hope by embracing this that real girls everywhere will start to embrace their own beauty.” Said Jenny Altman, a brand representative. The models shown with “tattoos, beauty marks, lines, dimples, fat, puckering and slight stretch marks... clearly on display” (Dockterman, 2014). Interestingly this comes nearly ten years after Dove’s *Real Beauty* campaign, which launched in 2004, using women of several shapes, sizes, and colors, and insists that the women used in the advertisements are devoid of digital retouching (Bahadur, 2014). This is in contrast to the Aerie lingerie campaign that still chooses to use “gorgeous” models for their line.

**Photoshop on South Park**

Public awareness of the impact of Photoshop is not limited to American clothing and hygiene companies. The usage of Photoshop in advertising and popular culture was addressed in the tenth and last episode of *South Park’s* seventeenth season, titled “The Hobbit” (Parker, 2013). *South Park* is the second longest running animated television show on prime-time television, and for at least the past decade has been a point of political and social commentary in the form of parody and satire. Interspersed with jokes of flatulence and feces are those golden turds that make *South Park* a Peabody and Emmy award winning series. In “The Hobbit” (Parker, 2013), Wendy Testaburger, attempts to dispel the notion that Kim Kardashian is naturally beautiful by photoshopping the class’s ugly girl, Lisa Berger, into the beauty standard the United States culture is accustomed to seeing in media and advertising (i.e. skinny, large breasted, long haired, fair, light-skinned, and wearing makeup). The plan backfires when all of the boys in school believe that the photoshopped image is representative of the girl’s worth instead of her true physical appearance. Disregarding for the moment that her entire worth is judged by her beauty over any other factor, it is her digital beauty that appeals to everyone regardless of her true physical appearance, indicating the impact that Photoshop has on the youth. A series of events unfolds resulting in the rest of the girls in school photoshopping their own digital images, Wendy becoming the ugly outcast, labeled a hater, and going on a political crusade against
Photoshop, only being talked into standing down and photoshopping her own digital image and uploading it to the internet in tears. Roll credits. No jolly ending music. No funny, embarrassing joke.

Instead of using the episode for its typical brand of humor, Trey Parker used it to blatantly call attention to the impact that society’s portrayal of women plays to the American youth. *South Park* accurately depicted the damage that false expectations of beauty can have on the self-esteem of young women and how it promotes the sexist viewpoints of society at large. In this depiction, even the staunchest supporters of feminism can bend under the enormity of patriarchal pressures at large. The character Wendy knows that giving in and giving up is the wrong thing to do, but eventually gives in to peer pressure. Unfortunately, the real world isn’t as simple as photoshopping your Facebook profile photo. The real world involves young girls and adult women trying to mold their bodies into the shapes and styles seen on magazine covers and advertisements, often to the detriment of their health. When the character Wendy experiences horizontal hostility from her classmates, that experience is episodic and singular. It will be gone in the next episode, whereas women and girls in the real world are pressured and bullied by their peers to conform to a societal standard that is constantly barraging them with falsified images and impossible expectations.

**Conclusion**

Advertising is effective. Advertising is smart. In many ways nothing can be done about that. Advertising brings in profits, so somebody is buying into what the advertisers are selling, and that somebody is us. The free market has its dangers. But as with regulations for safety in the workplace and for hazardous waste disposal, regulation on mental safety from advertising practices must overcome its obstacles. History has shown that it is the responsibility of lawmakers to protect the people, through at least marginal regulation, when profits encourage unsafe business practices. Photoshop is a particular target of recent attempts at advertising regulations due to prevalence in the fashion, makeup and beauty product spheres. It is the target of foreign and domestic policy change and scrutiny. It is the purpose for whole new advertising campaigns strictly devoid of its use. It is powerful enough to affect the self-esteem of millions of women and girls the world over. Its effects on the perceptions of both girls and boys are pervasive enough to be satirized in a popular comedy television series known for toilet humor. If
changes aren't made regarding how advertisers reach out to the children of society, the damage to youth expectations of beauty will only increase. It doesn’t take someone bullying a child to give them low self-esteem; all it takes is a society that continues to do nothing about a false reality.

**Andrew Bianco** is a senior at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. He is studying physics with academic research in astrophysics and cosmology. He identifies as feminist with interests in social issues stemming from economic inequities.

**References**


Nad finds p&g can support mascara performance claims, but recommends company disclose lash inserts in main message of ad or discontinue use of enhancements; company agrees to do so. (2013, September 27). Retrieved from http://www.asrcreviews.org/2013/10/nad-finds-p-company-agrees-to-do-so/

