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Is Photoshop Destroying America's Body Image?

Vivian Diller, PH.D. (July 8, 2011)

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/vivian-diller-phd/photoshop-body-image_b_891095.html

Has Photoshop gone too far? Kate Winslet and Brad Pitt are among several public figures who think so and the American Medical Association (AMA) is now backing them up.

Winslet was one of the first to break ground when she took action against GQ magazine for digitally altering her body in its photographs -- making her unrealistically thin. Pitt requested that there be no retouching on his *W* magazine cover, personally selecting, Chuck Close to shoot it, a photographer known for his extremely detailed portraits that expose skin flaws. While most people dream of magically removing their pounds and wrinkles -- and some celebs demand it -- more and more are seeing Photoshop as dangerous terrain.

The American Medical Association (AMA) recently announced it was taking a stand against image manipulation in advertising, stating that alterations made through processes like Photoshop can contribute to unrealistic body image expectations, eating disorders and other emotional problems. Surprisingly, professional and public reactions are mixed.

One eating disorder specialist, Carrie Arnold, reacted with "show me the evidence." In her piece, "What's Photoshop Got to Do With It," she quotes the AMA as saying "a large

body of literature" exists linking media exposure to eating disorders, but after Arnold did her research, she found little scientific evidence to support the statement. The studies AMA cited just don't connect Photoshop to diagnosable eating disorders, as spelled out by the DSM-IV. She writes, "We don't think ads for disinfectant somehow promote OCD. We also don't think that those Bluetooth headsets promote schizophrenia because it looks like you're talking to yourself." Condemning Photoshop may make for a good media story, but Arnold questions its validity.

In a post here entitled "Photoshop Isn't Evil," Elizabeth Perle wrote that her "knee jerk reaction to hearing this news was a long, exaggerated eye roll." The AMA's statement against Photoshop, she believes is "too little too late," adding it "frankly might make it worse for models, actresses, singers and other performers, for whom the pressures to alter their bodies will only be heightened."

Photographers and artists have their own take on this issue. "We have wonderful tools to create images, new digital cameras and photographic digital printers and powerful tools such as Photoshop and we are expected to do what -- nothing? I don't think so," says Jeff Schewe of Photoshop News. Some feel the AMA misses the point. Michael Graupman, in "Photoshop on the Chopping Block" writes, "perhaps it is time for a refresher course for the media and Americans of what Photoshop was created for originally: bringing a subject more into focus, not creating works of fiction." Denouncing Photoshop, many believe, will have

little impact on America's distorted view of beauty and that the alteration of images in photography should not be singled out.

I disagree. The importance of the AMA's recent policy statement is that it is headed in the right direction. First, let's get the facts straight. Denouncing Photoshop sounds newsworthy, but it was not the focus of the AMA's statement. No one in the medical association -- which joins physicians to promote professional and public health issues -- talked about completely banning this creative technique from photography. Second, although physicians are studying links between photo distortion in advertising and the rise of eating disorders and other body image pathology, the connection and the solutions have yet to be determined.

The AMA is just beginning to raise public awareness about the impact of image manipulation on childhood development. They want us all to reflect upon the way in which unrealistic imagery may serve as a contributor to adolescent health problems -- and to consider creating ground rules for those who present these images to the public. As part of a general move toward overseeing potentially harmful media influences, the AMA suggests that ad agencies work with child and adolescent-focused health organizations to create guidelines for future advertising.

Clearly, these are complicated psychological and sociological issues, in terms of both the underlying causes for the recent explosion of adolescent eating disorders as well as the subtle



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(and not so subtle) ways the media influence these problems. Just as there have long been questions about the connection between violence on TV and childhood aggression, or between cigarette ads and adolescent smoking, more research is required to know how to move forward on the cultural impact of Photoshop. No doubt, the AMA's recent statement is a step in that direction.

Perhaps we are headed toward more dramatic policies, like the ones proposed in Europe. Two years ago, French Parliament member, Valerie Boyer, suggested that all published images that are digitally enhanced -- including advertisements, press photos, political campaigns, art photography and product packaging -- come with a warning label that reads, "Retouched photograph aimed at changing a person's physical appearance." Failure to do so would lead advertisers to be fined of up to 50 percent of the cost of the publicity campaign in question. With their first lady, Carla Bruni, having been airbrushed hundreds of times as a former supermodel and even President Sarkozy having his picture Photoshopped in Paris Match magazine, this new policy did not go over easily in the French parliament. But, according to Boyer, the proposal was not an attempt to "damage creativity of photographers or publicity campaigns, but to advise the public on whether what they are seeing is real or not."

While America is no stranger to the importance of promoting public health and protecting consumers from false advertising -- one of the principal missions of the U.S. Federal Trade Commission since its inception in 1914 -- it may take many more years before

measures like the one in France take off here. Some believe that American photographers, models and the media -- who are used to showing off our celebrities as stick-thin and blemish-free -- won't go for it. Photoshopping and airbrushing, many believe, are now an inherent part of the beauty industry, as are makeup, lighting and styling. They believe photography is a creative art, a freedom not to be denied for any reason, regardless of its psychological or physical impact. Ultimately, it is hard to know where to draw the line between what requires regulation and what is part of the artistic process.

Yet we cannot waste any more time arguing about the pros or cons of the AMA's current decision to raise awareness about the health risks of Photoshop. Rather, we need to support the intervention and move it further along. Sure there are debatable issues: Is there enough research to support AMA's concern? Is questioning Photoshop extreme enough? Does it encroach on artistic freedom? Does it deflect from the larger issues -- the objectification of women, dehumanization of beauty?

But what is clear is the imperative to relieve our youth of the rampant pressures they feel when it comes to their bodies. We need to question the unrealistic goals set not only by the distorted images in magazines but by those promoted through celebrity makeovers, reality shows and parents who undergo radical transformations through plastic surgery. I see nothing negative in having medical and psychological experts join with the beauty and advertising industries in an effort to more positively influence young boys and girls. In fact, I applaud them.

Tell us how you view the impact of Photoshop on our culture? Do you believe that restricting image manipulation in advertising is a positive course correction or an encroachment on artistic freedom?

