

Researchers call for industry regulation to stop 'photoshop' frenzy in advertising

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An analysis of legal and regulatory strategies that may help combat rampant "photoshopping" and the portrayal of unrealistic beauty standards in advertising has been published in the *American Journal of Law & Medicine*.

Researchers from Harvard University, Dickinson College and Michigan State University College of Law are calling for industry regulation to curtail the digital alteration of images in advertising. Researchers say the well-documented connection between misleading beauty standards and harmful effects on public health—such as increased risk for eating disorders—makes the need to scale up prevention efforts an urgent matter.

"Many studies indicate exposure to unrealistic standards of beauty, such as through digitally-altered imagery, contribute to body dissatisfaction and disordered weight control behaviors," said Dickinson College Associate Professor of Psychology Suman Ambwani, a coauthor of the study. "Given the seriousness of eating disorders, which impact millions of Americans across genders, racial and ethnic groups and socioeconomic statuses, we must consider [public health](#) strategies to reduce eating disorder risk."

"We've known for years how harmful these ad images are to young people, especially to those struggling with [body image](#) and [low self-esteem](#)," said study principal investigator Professor S. Bryn Austin from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "But what we haven't

known is what options we have to combat these images. In the U.S., where we have strong First Amendment rights that include advertisers too, we knew we'd need to come up with creative ideas to encourage businesses to do the right thing. Our study suggests that incentivizing companies to promote healthier advertising images will be good for business and good for the mental health of [young people](#)."

The analysis is the basis for #theRealMe Bill, which was introduced in the Massachusetts Legislature by Representative Kay Khan (D-Newton). The proposed legislation aims to accelerate change by providing [tax incentives](#) for companies using "realistic advertising"-images that do not change a model's [skin tone](#) or texture or [body size](#) and shape.

The researchers list tax incentives, like those offered in the Massachusetts bill, as one of several strategies to combat the proliferation of digitally altered images. They also examined the possibility of direct taxes, Federal Trade Commission regulation, voluntary incentives and industry self-regulation to change advertising behavior. They conclude that as pressure rises from consumers challenging digital manipulation practices in advertising and some companies adopt "no-photoshopping" campaigns, the time is ideal for policymakers, advocates and corporations to consider the options available to create innovative policy and improve health by reducing the harm caused by digitally manipulated images.

More information: Caitlin McBride et al, Digital Manipulation of Images of Models' Appearance in Advertising: Strategies for Action Through Law and Corporate Social Responsibility Incentives to Protect Public Health, *American Journal of Law & Medicine* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0098858819849990](https://doi.org/10.1177/0098858819849990)

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