

# Disclaimers on retouched photos don't solve problem of negative body image

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Labels that warn an image has been altered or enhanced do nothing to mitigate women's negative perceptions of their appearance, according to a study published in *Body Image* this week. More importantly, some

disclaimers heightened and even harmed body dissatisfaction in at-risk women, the study showed.

"Disclaimers aren't helpful. Once that image hits the brain, it has a profound effect on the way a woman thinks about how her body should look, says Jennifer Mills, associate professor in the Department of Psychology and senior author on the study. "Telling people that the image is not real doesn't change the fact that that image becomes internalized."

Mills and Sarah McComb, a Ph.D. student in Mills' lab and first author of the study, conducted a [systematic review](#) of 15 experimental studies and found that disclaimers were ineffective at reducing women's body dissatisfaction following exposure to thin-ideal images.

The goal of the study was to determine the effectiveness of media disclaimers in protecting women's [body image](#) and mood after exposure to thin-ideal media. The keywords "warning" or "disclaimer" and "body image" or "body dissatisfaction" were searched in the PsycINFO and MEDLINE/PubMed databases.

Researchers looked at several types of commonly used disclaimers on photos in the study. The 'specific' disclaimer tells the viewer which body part has been altered, the 'warning or consequence' disclaimer explains that the photo can be bad for body image or your health, the 'generic' disclaimer lets consumers know "This image has been digitally altered," and the 'information' disclaimer says the model is underweight.

"We found that specific disclaimers and warning disclaimers were harmful to women who were already very dissatisfied with their bodies—the disclaimers seemed to trigger their already [negative feelings](#) about their bodies," says McComb. "The warning disclaimer was especially harmful, because it also had negative impacts on women's

eating habits. Women who already had restrictive eating habits and who saw an image of a model with a warning label were actually found to eat less calories than when they saw the image without the disclaimer."

Overall, 11 studies found that disclaimers were ineffective at mitigating body dissatisfaction after exposure to thin-ideal images (relative to no disclaimer), three studies found medium effects that disclaimers were effective at mitigating increased body [dissatisfaction](#), and one study found a small-medium effect that [disclaimers](#) actually heightened [body dissatisfaction](#).

"If the disclaimer is too specific it draws the person's attention to parts of the body on a model that are unattainable or unrealistic," says Mills. "Individuals still want to look like the model despite knowing there is a disclaimer, because it draws our attention to the unrealistic [body](#) part. People tend to want what they cannot have."

**More information:** Sarah E. McComb et al, A systematic review on the effects of media disclaimers on young women's body image and mood, *Body Image* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2019.10.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2019.10.010)

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