

Decoding Unreal Beauty in Digital Campaigns

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Abstract

Global fashion and beauty brands increasingly promote unrealistic beauty standards through digitally altered campaigns that feature extremely thin models and unblemished skin. These representations, which are widely disseminated on social media platforms, establish misleading ideals and contribute to reduced consumer self-esteem and adverse mental health outcomes.

The contrast between digitally enhanced imagery and actual consumer experiences demonstrates a significant ethical concern within advertising practices. Recent incidents, including public criticism of Zara's campaign, illustrate heightened awareness of the psychological harm associated with such portrayals.

This study explores ways to enhance transparency and inclusivity in digital advertising through technological and policy interventions. It proposes using artificial intelligence (AI) applications that let consumers view unaltered representations, which promotes self-acceptance and diversity. Additionally, the paper recommends that regulators require brands to disclose their use of digital enhancement tools, such as Photoshop and AI filters, to ensure accurate communication and accountability.

This research advances the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically, SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). By emphasizing ethical innovation and responsible media practices, authentic representation of beauty can enhance consumer trust and shape brand identity in the digital context.

Keywords: Unrealistic Beauty Standards, Digital Manipulation in Advertising, Consumer Mental Health, Inclusivity and Transparency in Branding, SDG 3, 9, 10, 12

Introduction

Beauty, as a cultural construct, has never been static. Each era has negotiated its own aesthetic ideals, shaped by art, fashion, cinema, and social expectations. However, the introduction of digital technologies into the beauty economy has radically accelerated and intensified this evolution. What once required hours of professional photography, sophisticated lighting setups, and expert makeup artistry is now achieved with a few taps on a smartphone. Tools powered by artificial intelligence such as generative filters, face-modifying algorithms, and body-sculpting AI have democratized beauty manipulation to the extent that any individual, whether a global brand or a teenager, can produce hyper-perfect imagery in seconds.

The fashion and beauty industries have embraced these tools aggressively to maintain competitive advantage in an oversaturated digital ecosystem. Consumers now encounter endless streams of images featuring impossibly luminous skin, impeccable symmetry, elongated legs, poreless faces, and stylized body proportions. These representations are far removed from biological reality yet are presented as achievable standards. The result is a widening gap between authentic bodies and digitally fabricated ideals.

This widening gap has significant implications. Unrealistic digital beauty affects self-esteem, body image, identity formation, and social perceptions of attractiveness. Adolescents who are still developing their self-concept absorb these standards with heightened vulnerability. Women experience increased societal pressure to conform to these digitally constructed ideals, reinforcing gender inequalities and perpetuating emotional distress. As a result, the issue of unreal beauty intersects deeply with SDG 3 (mental well-being) and SDG 5 (gender equality). Beyond personal impact, unreal

beauty also affects cultural values, economic behavior, and media credibility, raising ethical concerns aligned with SDG 16's emphasis on transparency and accountability.

The proliferation of unreal beauty thus demands scholarly investigation. It is no longer merely a trend but a structural phenomenon embedded within digital capitalism, data-driven platforms, and the aesthetics of modern branding. This paper examines the roots, mechanisms, and consequences of this cultural shift while exploring pathways for ethical transformation.

Literature Review

Scholars across disciplines have extensively studied the effects of beauty standards on individual psychology and cultural norms. Perloff (2014) highlights that exposure to idealized beauty imagery, particularly on digital platforms, significantly predicts body dissatisfaction among women. This dissatisfaction stems from constant social comparison, which is more intense online due to the curated nature of social media.

Digital modification tools have further complicated the landscape. Farid and Kee (2021) argue that the accessibility of advanced editing technologies has blurred the distinction between professional retouching and everyday content creation, leading to a normalization of unreal beauty. Their work shows how AI-based beautification filters automatically reshape facial features to fit standardized beauty ideals narrow noses, larger eyes, sharper jawlines without explicit user intent.

Social media algorithms reinforce these trends by amplifying content that aligns with platform-specific aesthetic norms. Posts featuring enhanced faces and bodies tend to receive more engagement, leading algorithms to prioritize them. As a result, consumers are repeatedly exposed to edited imagery, which reinforces a narrow understanding of beauty. This systemic preference deepens appearance-based inequalities, disproportionately marginalizing individuals with diverse features or non-Eurocentric traits, thus contradicting SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Psychological literature consistently demonstrates the negative emotional consequences of exposure to digitally manipulated beauty. Fardouly et al. (2015) show that adolescent girls experience increased anxiety and depressive symptoms when comparing themselves to digitally enhanced images. Body dysmorphia, self-objectification, and low self-esteem are increasingly common outcomes of prolonged exposure to unreal beauty.

This convergence of technological amplification, cultural normalization, and psychological harm underscores the urgent need for responsible media practices aligned with sustainability and ethical governance principles embodied within the SDGs.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach that synthesizes psychological studies, fashion campaign analyses, social media discourse, and ethical reviews of technological tools. Central to the analysis is a case study of Zara's 2023 campaign, which sparked widespread criticism for digitally distorting models in ways that appeared unsettling and unattainable. The case functions as a lens through which to understand broader patterns of manipulation in contemporary fashion media.

The methodology includes content analysis of visual campaigns to identify patterns of digital distortion, semiotic analysis to understand the symbolisms embedded within unreal beauty, and conceptual integration of SDGs to evaluate the societal and ethical implications of these practices. This multi-layered methodology enables a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of unreal beauty as both a technological phenomenon and a sociocultural force.

Digital Manipulation in Fashion and Beauty Campaigns

The use of digital enhancement in fashion and beauty campaigns has become so ubiquitous that consumers may not recognize when an image has been manipulated. AI-based editing tools now modify body proportions, facial features, skin texture, and even emotional expressions. What distinguishes this new era of manipulation is not just the level of perfection achieved but the subtlety with which these adjustments occur.

A prominent example is Zara's 2023 campaign, which generated global backlash. Critics described the models' bodies as unnaturally thin, elongated, and eerily lifeless, resembling digitally distorted mannequins rather than real humans. Their facial features appeared heavily edited, stripped of natural texture and human warmth. Consumers voiced concern that such images promoted dangerous body ideals, especially among teenage girls. The backlash demonstrated a growing public discomfort with hyper-manipulated beauty, signaling a shift in consumer expectations and increasing demand for transparency and authenticity.

Digital manipulation affects consumers psychologically and emotionally. On one level, unreal beauty elevates aspirational appeal, attracting attention and increasing engagement. On another level, prolonged exposure erodes authenticity, fuels insecurity, and damages mental well-being. Many consumers express fatigue and distrust towards overly edited images, preferring more relatable aesthetics.

The conflict between aspirational imagery and authentic representation lies at the heart of modern fashion branding. If left unregulated, this tension perpetuates unrealistic consumption expectations and contradicts SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), which emphasizes transparent marketing and consumer empowerment.

Psychological Effects of Unreal Beauty

The psychological consequences of unrealistic digital beauty are profound and far-reaching. When individuals repeatedly encounter digitally enhanced images, they subconsciously internalize these representations as benchmarks for their own appearance. This creates a persistent sense of inadequacy, as natural human features cannot compete with artificially constructed perfection.

Research indicates that exposure to manipulated imagery contributes to heightened body dissatisfaction, mood disturbances, and increased self-objectification. Adolescents, particularly girls, are highly susceptible to these influences. Many teenagers report reluctance to post unfiltered photos online due to fear of judgment or comparison. They may obsessively use beautification filters to modify their selfies, gradually losing connection with their authentic appearance. This results in a distorted self-image, contributing to mental health challenges. Such emotional distress directly contradicts SDG 3, which promotes mental health and well-being.

The gendered nature of beauty expectations is equally concerning. Unreal beauty standards disproportionately target women, reinforcing harmful stereotypes about femininity, attractiveness, and worthiness. This intensifies gender-based pressures and undermines the progress toward SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Furthermore, digital beauty filters often privilege Eurocentric features, marginalizing those who do not conform to these standards. This amplifies social inequality and contradicts SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Thus, unreal beauty is not simply a personal issue but a systemic one with widespread social impact.

Ethical Concerns and Industry Accountability

Beyond psychological harms, unreal beauty raises critical ethical concerns. The absence of disclosure regarding image manipulation creates a deceptive visual environment. Consumers are misled into believing that hyper-perfect bodies and faces are naturally attainable, violating the principles of transparency and ethical advertising central to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

The use of AI tools also introduces concerns about algorithmic bias. Many editing applications embed Eurocentric beauty ideals into their design, altering faces in ways that lighten skin, narrow noses, or reshape eyes. These implicit biases exacerbate racial, ethnic, and cultural inequalities.

The pressure to conform to digitally enhanced beauty standards also affects models themselves. Some models report anxiety, eating disorders, and emotional distress when they see their digitally manipulated images that depict an idealized version of themselves that they cannot achieve physically. This phenomenon reveals that the harms of unreal beauty extend to those within the fashion industry as well.

Ethically, brands must acknowledge the responsibility they hold in shaping cultural norms and psychological health, aligning their visual practices with SDG 12's emphasis on responsible production and SDG 16's call for transparency.

Towards Ethical and Sustainable Solutions

Addressing unrealistic beauty standards requires a multi-pronged approach involving technology, regulation, industry practices, and consumer education. AI can be repurposed for positive impact by creating authenticity verification tools capable of identifying digitally manipulated content. These tools can empower consumers to distinguish between real and enhanced images.

Mandatory disclosure policies, adopted in countries like France and Norway, require brands to label edited images. Such regulations promote transparency and accountability, contributing to the achievement of SDG 16. Brands can also voluntarily adopt more inclusive representation practices, showcasing diverse body types, skin tones, ages, and identities, directly supporting SDG 5 and SDG 10.

Consumer education initiatives, such as digital literacy programs, can help individuals recognize manipulation and reduce internalization of unrealistic standards. Integrating such programs into school curricula advances SDG 4 (Quality Education).

A cultural shift is also needed within the fashion industry. Brands must recognize that authenticity is not the enemy of aspiration. Increasingly, consumers reward honesty and relatability, and brands that embrace authenticity build stronger emotional connections with their audiences.

Discussion

Unreal beauty in digital campaigns illustrates the complex interplay between technological innovation, aesthetic ambition, and societal pressure. While digital tools have transformed creative possibilities, they have simultaneously intensified cultural pressures surrounding beauty. Addressing these issues requires not only technical solutions but also ethical reflection and systemic change.

Unreal beauty reflects broader cultural anxieties about identity, perfection, and self-worth in a digital age. As technology continues to evolve, the challenge for the fashion and beauty industries is to balance innovation with responsibility, creativity with authenticity, and aspiration with well-being.

When aligned with the SDGs, the fight against unrealistic beauty standards becomes part of a global movement toward a healthier, more equitable, and more transparent digital culture.

Conclusion

Unreal beauty represents one of the most urgent ethical challenges in contemporary fashion communication. As digital manipulation becomes more sophisticated and widespread, its psychological, cultural, and societal impacts intensify. The consequences ranging from damaged self-esteem to reinforced gender and racial inequalities are too substantial to ignore.

The Sustainable Development Goals offer a powerful framework through which to address these challenges. Unreal beauty directly conflicts with SDG 3 by jeopardizing mental well-being, undermines SDG 5 through intensified gender pressures, contradicts SDG 10 by reinforcing racial and cultural biases, and violates SDG 16 by promoting opaque and deceptive advertising practices. Aligning beauty communication with these goals is not merely a matter of corporate ethics but a global responsibility.

A future where beauty is represented truthfully, inclusively, and responsibly is both necessary and achievable. By implementing transparent practices, embracing diverse representation, leveraging AI for authenticity rather than

distortion, and adopting policies that protect consumers, the fashion and beauty industries can foster healthier beauty cultures and contribute meaningfully to a more equitable and sustainable digital world.

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