



THE GREAT brush off

IS GLOSSING OVER STARS' LUMPS AND BUMPS FEEDING OUR LUST FOR THE ETHEREAL CELEBRITY OR FUELLING OUR OWN BODY ISSUES? EMIRATES WOMAN REPORTS ON THE COST OF PURSUING PERFECTION...

WRITTEN BY AOIFE STUART MADGE

Earlier this summer, Hollywood actress Hilary Duff was photographed by paparazzi wearing a bikini on holiday in Mexico. Three months after giving birth, the 24 year old still had the ghost of a baby bump, her thighs looked slightly fuller than usual and she was make-up free. She looked like an average girl enjoying some downtime with her family. But the pictures prompted outcry from fans, who lambasted Duff for daring to step out looking less than picture perfect. "I'm convinced she doesn't even care how she looks, gross" sniped one online critic. These days it seems, thanks to the wizardry of Photoshop, the public like their celebrities immaculate.

While deep down we know that the A-list get cellulite, spots and bad hair days, just like the rest of us, Jill Downie, a fashion and beauty PR based in Dubai, believes that these imperfections should be covered up. "When someone picks up a glossy magazine, they're not looking for mundane reality," she says. "They're looking for escapism; figures to admire and to aspire to – it's an indulgent fantasy. We know the models have been airbrushed to get that flawless silky glow but, ultimately, beauty sells, and that's what entices consumers to pick up the magazines in the first place."

chasing a false ideal

But digitally slimming and enhancing models and celebrities for the sake of a dreamier image can have nightmarish repercussions, claims Dr Margo Maine, a clinical psychologist who specialises in eating disorders. "Research tells us that the images women see in the media affect their body image, self-confidence and self-worth. Today, the images in the media are so distorted and technically altered that, actually, no one can look like them. So women are constantly comparing themselves to an image that is not real and can never be achieved." Maine adds: "These images place pressure on women and can lead to eating disorders."

And in the post-Twitter age, women have no escape from potentially damaging images of an unachievable aesthetic, warns Joan Jacobs Brumberg, a Professor Emerita of History and Human Development at Cornell University in New York and author of *The Body Project: An Intimate History Of American Girls*. "We see unrealistic

representations of women in everyday life: on TV, in films, in print media and on the internet. These images construct our visual world and influence the choices we make as women and girls. By raising the bar with digitally altered photos – that is, false, unreal people – the perfectionism that is one part of anorexia nervosa may well be heightened."

Kimberly Riggins, a body image expert (kimberlyriggins.com), has seen first-hand the dramatic steps that women will take to try and emulate the perfection they see in the media. "Even though women are being told that these images are digitally enhanced, they are still doing crazy, unhealthy things to their bodies to try to emulate these 'beautiful' models. They are over-exercising, starving themselves, cutting out food groups, taking diet pills, drinking excessive amounts of coffee, smoking cigarettes to help curb their appetite and abusing laxatives."

When these drastic measures inevitably don't produce the desired results, some women may even resort to plastic surgery in an attempt to achieve the impossible, warns Dr Silvan Emil Stanciu, resident plastic surgeon at Biolite Aesthetic Clinic in Dubai. "Airbrushing gives women unrealistic expectations about their own appearance. The celebrity culture in the UAE and constant images in glossy magazines are pushing women to look unrealistically flawless," he says. "Sometimes, the quest to alter one's looks turns almost cartoonish, when they no longer know when to stop."

When Teens Are Targeted

More worrying is the fact that it's not just grown women who are manipulated with digital imagery: a recent *Vogue* shoot featuring Kate Moss' nine-year-old daughter Lila Grace revealed the pre-teen was subject to some heavy-handed airbrushing, given that she was missing two fingers in the published photographs. Jill Z. Rutledge, a psychotherapist specialising in body image issues, and the author of *Picture Perfect: What You Need To Feel Better About Your Body*, says young girls are particularly susceptible to negative body image as a result of seeing digitally altered images of models and celebrities.

"There have been studies that show that when teen girls look at pictures of models and celebrities, the majority of them compare themselves with the pictures and feel unattractive," says Rutledge. "When pre-



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putting women against the airbrushed images of perfection we see in advertisements and magazines: women are quick to judge each other by unrealistic beauty standards, too, says Rutledge. "When we see unrealistic images of perfectly thin, sculpted women in the media, we tend to value these images as attractive and devalue other body types."

Even models and celebrities are not immune to feelings of inadequacy when confronted with flawless, airbrushed images. Hollywood trainer Harley Pasternak – who trains Megan Fox, Katy Perry and Halle Berry – says his clients often have unattainable body goals as a result. "Digitally altered images set unrealistic expectations of how people can and should look," says Pasternak. "My female clients feel a lot of pressure to look a certain way in order to live up to airbrushed 'perfect' images in the media. They have a tendency to over-exercise or push themselves too far as a result of that pressure, and we have to re-educate them about eating and moving efficiently."

So who's to blame for the prevalence of inauthentic images in the media? Andrea S. Hartmann, PhD, a research fellow in psychology at the Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School would argue that the media is simply catering to the demands of society as a whole. "In my opinion, it is not magazines or the fashion industry that creates ideals of individuals; they are a reflection of society's ideals."

Pioneers for change

Duncan Stephenson, Head of External Affairs at Central YMCA, a UK-based health and education charity launching a campaign to tackle body image anxiety (bodyimage.org.uk) claims that public opinion is turning.

"Our research suggests that 90 per cent of the public think that the media is too reliant on airbrushing," he says. "Some art

pubescent and pubescent girls see images of unrealistically thin models and celebrities that have been computer generated, they often become anxious about their normal weight gain. This is unhealthy for normal development and puts these girls at risk of developing eating disorders."

Joe Kelly, co-author of *The Body Myth: Adult Women And The Pressure To Be Perfect*, is also concerned about the message these digitally altered images are giving young girls. "Those kinds of images reinforce a deeply embedded cultural platitude that a woman's value is based on how she looks: the size of a woman's cleavage is more important than the size of her heart."

Interestingly, young women appear to be taking a stand against a culture that is saturated with digitally enhanced images. American teen publication *Seventeen* recently released a Body Peace Treaty, vowing to reduce the use of digital retouching in their photos, after a 14-year-old reader started a petition – containing 84,000 signatures – against airbrushing.

Our Own Worst Critics

Young men can be equally as negatively impacted by airbrushed images of women, warns Kelly. "Boys and men are bombarded with these toxic messages at an astounding rate, so they grow up believing that how a woman looks is more important than who she is. A boy who grows up believing that is on the road to disaster in relationships."

And while the majority of women understand that certain images in the media may be manipulated, men are not as clued up, claims Maine, which can lead to their rejection of 'normal' body types. "There is research that shows that men are more judgmental and rejecting of women's bodies after looking at magazines. Most men do not understand the degree to which the images we see are crafted and unreal. Thus, they are often harsher than they might be if they understood this. We need to educate men," she urges.

But men are not the only ones guilty of



Whitening: There was controversy when Beyonce and Aishwarya Rai had their skin lightened.



Far left: Kate Winslet and Demi Moore are stretched out to look skinny on magazine covers. Left and below: Victoria Beckham and Keira Knightley both get a major touch up.

directors and photographers say that they are just trying to make the images look appealing, but when you are hacking off pieces of someone's body, or elongating them, you have to ask the question, why are you doing that?"

Stephenson adds: "There is a backlash against this inauthenticity. From a consumer perspective, we think it makes complete sense for the media to embrace greater body diversity and be less reliant on retouching." And it seems change is afoot. The British Fashion Council has called for a voluntary ban on 'dishonest' images in the fashion industry, and several fashion retailers are following suit. International lingerie company Curvy Kate use real women rather than models in their advertising campaigns. Company spokesperson Cheryl Warner says: "We believe wholeheartedly in presenting a realistic image of women in all our advertising, catalogues and marketing. We never, ever Photoshop our girls smaller... We shouldn't be afraid to show what women really look like in the media!"

Michel Sedaga, director of UAE-based modelling agency Emodels, says fashion photographers are also changing their attitude to airbrushing. "The trend is changing towards natural lighting, where we can see the true, natural face of the subject. Where once magazine images were heavily altered, it looks like the trend is going less and less towards airbrushing." While Alex Jeffries, a photographer and Photoshop trainer based in Dubai, says: "More advertising agencies and responsible magazines are toning down the Photoshop work to a minimum as, these days, the public have become educated and demand a more honest range of advertising. And I think advertisers and magazines have a responsibility to keep editing to a minimum.

"But while these small steps are being taken, there is a long way to go, says Rutledge. "I think the industry has made some attempts, but time will tell if the changes will be meaningful. I like to imagine that the next generation of girls will be presented with un-retouched, healthy images. I sincerely hope this is the case." ■



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Celebrities Talk Airbrushing

"The media create this wonderful illusion, but the amount of airbrushing that goes into those beauty magazines, the hours of hair and make-up! It's impossible to live up to, because it's not real." **Jennifer Aniston**

"Advertising is so manipulative. There's not one picture in magazines today that's not airbrushed. When women see pictures of models in fashion magazines and say: 'I can never look like that,' what they don't realise is that no one can look that good without the help of a computer." **Christy Turlington**

"I think women see me on the cover of magazines and think that I never have a pimple or bags under my eyes. You have to realise that's after two hours of hair and make-up, plus retouching. Even I don't wake up looking like Cindy Crawford." **Cindy Crawford**