

# Pretty Unreal

By Julie Mehta

**Ever wish you could look as hot as celebrities do? Well, they don't look as good as you think.**



How do you make a 13-year-old girl taller, thinner, and less real? Have a photo retoucher digitally lengthen her legs and narrow her waist—common tricks of the trade for many magazines.

A sultry blond stares back from a magazine ad, her miniskirt revealing long, slender legs. An underwear model looms large on a billboard, flaunting his six-pack abs. A rock star sprawls across a CD cover, a belly-button ring decorating her toned stomach.

And then there's you. You pass a mirror and glance at your image. What do you see? Maybe there's a zit on your forehead. Maybe the jeans that fit great last week now feel snug. You've heard it before: Nobody's perfect.

What's a person to think? Perfect images of perfect celebrities are everywhere. It's enough to make anyone feel insecure or envious. "The media sets up impossible comparisons. Whether you're watching sitcoms or music videos or looking through magazines, the images you're seeing are airbrushed and enhanced," said Shari Graydon, author of *In Your Face: The Culture of Beauty and You*. "And research shows that the more time kids spend with image-based media, the worse they feel about themselves."

### Falling Short

Seeing all those artificially perfected images can hurt your *body image*—the way you see and feel about your body and the way you think others see you. From cartoon characters to movie stars, you have probably been exposed to messages about what is considered attractive as far back as you can remember. Those messages can seriously mess with your body image.

"I think the media has a big impact," 16-year-old Erika, of Scottsdale, Ariz., told *Current Health*. "It sets the standard—says thin is in. If the media wasn't saying skinny is appropriate, people wouldn't feel like they need to be so thin." According to Graydon, wanting to be thinner is a huge issue for many girls, while boys feel increasing pressure to be more buff. Boys look at singers such as Usher and realize they'll never have those abs—or the screaming female fans that go with them. In extreme cases, girls develop eating disorders and boys turn to steroids in an effort to achieve an ideal that isn't real.

### 'It's All Fake'

Celebrities and models are in the business of looking good, and they get a lot of help. Many follow special diets, and others have personal trainers who work with them for several hours a day. Just because they look fit doesn't mean they're healthy, though. Extreme diets can cause health problems, and compulsive workouts can lead to injury.

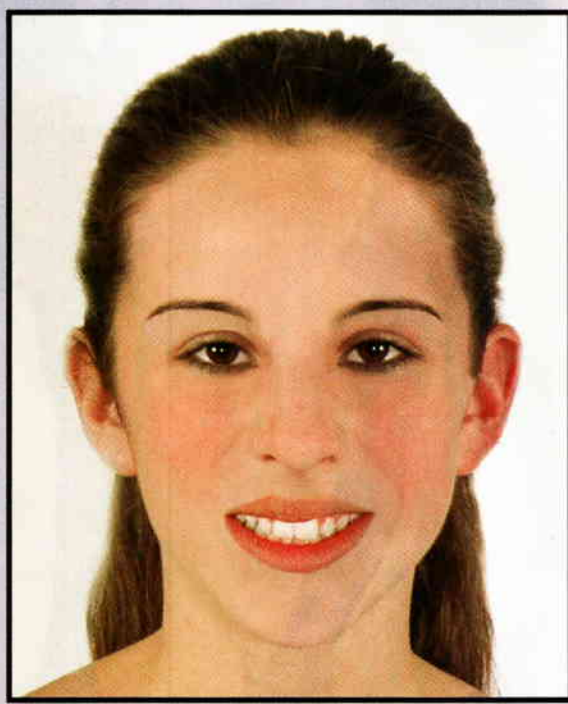
Despite models' best efforts, many still don't look "good enough" for the industry. "One hundred percent of fashion photos are retouched," said Brad Adams, a New York City photographer whose retouching service works with advertising agencies. "Usually the eyes and teeth are whitened, makeup and

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skin problems corrected, and hair cleaned up. Models are already thin, but I've done jobs where even skinny models are made to look skinnier."

Movie stars also receive the "digital diet" treatment, says a woman at another New York retouching service. "Even celebrity snapshots like those in *People*—the paparazzi shots—are retouched." She explains that

—DON HEINY/WEEKLY READER



Alicia Garcia, a Connecticut teen, appears at left in all her natural glory. The photo of Alicia at right has been digitally altered by the *CH* art team. See those rosy cheeks, that lineless face, the sleek hair, whitened teeth, and arched eyebrows? That's all digital trickery.

Photoshop, a widely used software program, can digitally narrow hips or add to cleavage and make almost any change look realistic. "It's all fake," she added. "Nobody really has skin like that. All human beings have pores and get zits, and once they get rid of those, they have wrinkles."

## Pursuit of Perfection

Why is everything touched up these days? "Magazines are supported by ads, and ads are about selling you a product," said author Jessica Weiner, who travels the country speaking to middle school and high school students about body image. "If you feel good about yourself, how many products will you buy? So [advertisers] have to make you feel like you need what they're selling by using unrealistic images." On a more basic level, the woman from the New York retouching company points out, "people like flawless and perfect images."

What, exactly, is perfection? "Different cultures and times define beauty differently," said Graydon. "In North America, large breasts are popular. But in Brazil, [women] get plastic surgery to have smaller breasts and bigger butts. And in Uganda and Peru, heavier women are seen as beautiful." Even in this country, ideals of beauty have shifted widely from generation to generation, from the voluptuous Marilyn Monroe in the 1950s to the waif-thin Kate Moss in the 1990s.

## Ripple Effect

Perhaps you don't care what the media say you should look like. Still, you may be indirectly influenced by it through friends and family. "A lot of girls that I know always complain about their bodies," said Ashley, 14, of Wallingford, Conn. "It drives me crazy when they compare themselves to other people that they see in school or on TV."

Family members can also be culprits. If they constantly diet or pump up, you may follow their example—especially if they are



For this 2002 issue of *MORE* magazine, actress Jamie Lee Curtis approved pictures that weren't retouched—exposing the illusion behind fashion photos.

concerned about your weight. "A lot of parents have gone through being teased and don't want their kids to go through that," said Kimber Bishop-Yanke, who runs self-esteem camps for girls in Detroit. "I see parents who are concerned their kids are getting fat, but it's normal to eat more and gain weight during puberty. It's just part of growing up."

## Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

Of course, no one said growing up is easy. "I'm not fat, but I'm not skinny either," said 13-year-old Jordan, a seventh grader from Baton Rouge, La. "I think I have big thighs, and when I wear shorts they stick out. A lot of kids tease me, but I try not to care so much."

Girls seem particularly prone to body-image issues. "When I was younger, it was harder because I wanted to fit in so much,"

—PHOTOGRAPHER SHOWCASE/NEWSCOM

admitted Natalie, 17, of Humphrey, Neb. Erika from Scottsdale added, "I'm in cheer, and most of my friends want to lose weight." She says she has dieted before and goes to the gym several times a week. Meanwhile, her classmate, Aliraza, 15, says he has never really worried about his looks. "I'm pretty sure girls have a lot more pressure when it comes to appearance."

Tim, a 14-year-old from New York City, agrees there is less pressure on boys than girls but says, "There is still some pressure—to be more buff." Experts, such as Roberto Olivardia, are starting to pay more attention to the effects of media pressure on boys. Olivardia, an instructor at Harvard University, cowrote the book *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession*, which details a disorder among men that the authors call "bigorexia." Considered the reverse of anorexia, bigorexia occurs when a guy sees himself as puny no matter how muscular he is. Symptoms may include excessive time spent working out, constant grooming and mirror checking, and anabolic steroid use.

Bigorexia is one type of *body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)*, a medical condition that equally affects males and females. BDD is an

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ongoing obsession with some small or imaginary problem with one's body. About one of every 50 people suffers from the condition.

## **Nip and Tuck: Teen Plastic Surgery**

Last year in the United States, more than 300,000 teens age 18 or younger had some sort of cosmetic work done. The most common procedures among teens were *rhinoplasty* (nose job), *otoplasty* (ear pinning), and skin enhancements such as *chemical peels* and *microdermabrasion*, usually to minimize acne scars.

Were teens following the example of so-called reality TV shows, including *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*, and *I Want a Famous Face*? The shows don't tell the whole story. "They emphasize results but don't show much of the cost, recovery, and potential risks," said Joseph Serota, a Colorado plastic surgeon.

## **Being True to You**

Ultimately, body image has a lot more to do with your mind than your body. Self-esteem plays a huge role in body image, so the better you feel about yourself, the more likely it is you'll like what you see in the mirror. Whether you're slim or curvy, lanky or big, the keys to looking your best are eating right, exercising regularly, and feeling good inside.

"You're not your nose or butt or hair on a good or bad day," said Graydon. As a practical matter, "most people are way too distracted by their own imperfections to focus on yours," she added. What it all comes down to is that your body is your home for life. Given enough time, you may look back and laugh at the way you once fixated on your body's "flaws."

Natalie couldn't agree more. "As you get older, you get to be more comfortable with who you are, and you learn to be happy with yourself." Why not start by loving your body—and yourself—now? **CH2**