

Sample Researched Position Paper

The website Jezebel is bookmarked on my computer for a reason. There are few other websites that I can regularly rely on for coverage that is meaningful to me, delivered in the form of entertaining and intelligent commentary on everything from women's health issues to current events. As the website manifesto states, "we wanted to make the sort of women's magazine we'd want to read," and I would assert that while accomplishing that goal, the creators have also created a web-magazine that I, and many others like me, love to read. It is precisely my admiration for Jezebel that makes me concerned about the role it, along with the rest of mass media, may play in influencing young women.

Like many *Jezebel* readers, I have followed the site's coverage of the extensive use of photo manipulation in the regular series, "Photoshop of Horrors." The series' targets—popular women's magazines' celebrity covers and clothing retailers' fashion advertisements—are harrowing to say the least. In addition to following the disturbing examples of image manipulation, I also read contributors' commentary on the media's employment of photo manipulation, specifically Jenna Sauers' "Regulating Photoshop: A Hazy Proposition, Not a Solution" and Dodai Stewart's "Photoshop Legislation Won't Fix the Real Problem." I find their opinions to be well-considered, balanced, and enlightening. However, after carefully weighing the positions on whether Photoshop should be banned, permitted with restrictions, or unconditionally allowed, I must say I do not find the "real" problem to lie with the practice of image manipulation at all. Instead, I center the blame on a misplaced acceptance, not of the super-skinny body ideals that *Jezebel* writers claim are the source of the problem, but with young women's misplaced trust in mass media outlets, specifically women's magazines, that, knowingly or not, set these unattainable beauty standards while continually reinforcing a reliance on the opinions and standards that they create for wide consumption. As a loyal reader of Jezebel, I include it in this category. Rather than merely altering the media's content to either exclude Photoshopped images or include a wider variety of models, I

posit that women's magazines should shift their content away from promotion of celebrity-obsession, product coveting, and belief in useless affirmations. These lady-mag staples promote low self-esteem in readers and are the true problem in the Photoshop debate.

Stewart writes in her article that "although extensive Photoshop is detrimental . . . the real issue is that what we consider 'attractive' has also become, for the most part, unattainable." Stewart's position, while effectively identifying what many would agree is the root of the problem behind the Photoshop controversy, does not plumb the subject deeply enough to expose the overarching role of media outlets in establishing body-image ideals. The "ideal woman" stereotype is not only promoted visually in magazines, but established again and again in articles such as "Your Breasts: An Intimate Q&A on What's Normal and What's Not" (Glamour July 2010), "Curb Your Cravings! Without Feeding Your Face" (Cosmopolitan March 2010), and "Forget the Face Lift! Remove Wrinkles Without the Knife" (Elle March 2010). Articles such as these encourage insecurities in readers, which are then merely reinforced with digitally enhanced images of women with no apparent excess body fat, wrinkles, and perfect proportions. If women's magazines shifted away from such inane content as this, the images, which are intended to support the articles' impact, are sure to follow.

It is easy to understand why an individual who is employed by a women's media outlet would not want to identify themselves as a possible culprit of the very practice that they are condemning. Jezebel attempts to distance itself from competing media outlets, such as Glamour, Cosmopolitan, or Elle, by stated in its mission statement that its goal is to "reverse the cycle . . . perpetuated by the women's media." By including frank discussions on topics such as eating disorders, gay rights issues, and racial concerns, I would agree that *Jezebel* has broken the mold. However, for every step forward that *Jezebel* makes in releasing such progressive articles, two backward steps are made when regular features such as "Fashion GoodBadandUgly," "Celebrity DirtBag," "Celebrity SnapJudgement," and "This Week In Tabloids" are published. Famously

decrying photo retouching may be in keeping with Jezebel's overall mission, but I fail to see how the site's own articles do not reinforce many of the same image ideals and celebrity worship that leads to the demand for Photoshop in the first place. Writer Amanda Fortini clearly agrees when she notes what she believes is the reason Jezebel has made Photoshop demonization its signature platform against women's media in her article, "In Defense of Photoshop: Why Retouching Isn't As Evil As Everyone Thinks":

Retouched images . . . spike page views, and not because of an attentive desire on the part of readers to protect vulnerable teens. The endless cavalcade of before-and-after shots is an outgrowth of the voyeurism, gossipmongering, and schadenfreude that fuel our celebrity industrial complex.

Observations such as these support the idea that rather than "revers[ing] the cycle" *Jezebel* is perpetuating the cycle. The site's writers like Sauers and Stewart are correct that Photoshop should not be the scapegoat for a clear lack of appropriate body image ideals, but women's magazines should not overlook the negative role that they play in all of this by exercising the power to declare what an appropriate body image ideal is in the first place.

In fact, studies have proven that mass media plays a much larger role in perpetuating negative body images than the images themselves. Recently, the University of Missouri-Columbia released the results of a study that found viewing pictures in women's magazines for only three minutes affected all women negatively regardless of their "size, shape, height or age" (Bortz). Based on this data, it is logical to assume, then, that adverse affects were recorded in even the thinnest of the experimental group. Therefore, can simply demanding diversity in magazines when it comes to different shapes and sizes be considered a viable option to alleviate the underlying problem *Jezebel* claims is at the roots of the Photoshop debate? It is logical to assume that no matter the size or shape of the women in the magazine, they will still have professionally executed hair, makeup, wardrobe, lighting, and, yes, perhaps even Photoshop to improve their appearance; this will only

result in a similar negative effect on viewers. Rather than undertaking the mammoth task of reversing every bit of conditioning that the mass media has pushed upon us by, as Stewart says, “train[ing] ourselves not to believe that thinner is better,” it is more feasible to simply close the magazine and refuse to support an industry whose very survival depends on establishing viewer dependence on its hype. The University of Missouri-Columbia study came to a similar conclusion: “the majority of women would benefit from interventions aimed at decreasing the effects of the media, regardless of weight . . . reducing the acceptance of mass media images of women and trying to stop the social comparison process is important for helping all women.” As we can see, it is not the images themselves that are negatively affecting the women of the world, but the fact that they rely on magazines to tell them what to think.

Recently, Jessica Coen argued in the article “Why You Must See Untouched Images, and Why You Must See Them Repeatedly” that *Jezebel’s* continuing coverage of digitally manipulated photos is motivated by the need to defend impressionable minds: “[E]very day a young woman somewhere sees one of these overly polished pictures for the first time . . . and has no idea that they’re not real . . . And maybe she doesn’t have someone in her life to point out that this is complete and utter bullshit.” Coen is absolutely right—in fact, we as Americans are bombarded by up to 40,000 images a day, and without the proper education about “how our Jen Aniston sausage gets made,” the public will continue to blindly absorb these images as photo reality (Bortz). However, I question how practical it is to assume that there remains a significant portion of the American population that has absolutely no inkling that images are retouched before put in magazines. In our tech-savvy culture, where children have access to the copious amounts of information that the internet brings into our households daily, I would be very interested in some actual studies being done on the effectiveness of *Jezebel’s* anti-Photoshop campaign. Logically, one would look to the website’s own readers for evidence. The comment that I find the most interesting is from reader *lostinalunchbox*: “I stopped hating on myself in my mid-twenties, when I stopped reading the ladies mags and I stopped

watching TV. Coincidence? I think not.” This commentator cites a link between a higher self-esteem and simply lowering the number of images she is exposed to daily, rather than obtaining any sort of knowledge about the widespread use of image manipulation. Granted, shutting oneself off from much of media’s influence, as this reader has done, is an unreal expectation for the majority of women, but her post is evidence that avoidance of the female ideals perpetuated in magazine pages actually results in a higher self-esteem. Just imagine if these magazines used their widespread influence to promote healthy body image and self-acceptance as well as replacing the “Must-Haves” with more attainable and productive goals for women to aspire to than owning this season’s Manolos.

In response to the pressure placed upon them by individuals and others who are of the same mindset as Jezebel, women’s magazines have attempted to include a wider variety of body types and races. Anna Wintour, the editor-in-chief of American Vogue, has made statements assuring the public that her magazine does not make use of Photoshop to make their models look thinner, only to erase small imperfections, and that Vogue’s editors have “made a commitment to feature a wider variety of body types” (Baldwin). To follow through, American Vogue released a “Shape Issue” featuring plus-size models, and Vogue Italia now features a website devoted to plus-size fashion and black models, Vogue Curvy and Vogue Black (Sulmers). Sure, this is a step in the direction that Photoshop detractors call for, but they seem to have been merely intended to quiet the critics rather than to address a real need for a variety of body image ideals. As plus-size model Whitney Thompson said, “I applaud *Vogue* for having a shape issue, but screw Vogue for not having shapes in every issue” (Sulmers). By not including these women in the mainstream editions of the magazines, but reserving space for them sandwiched between ads featuring the typical skinny, white models, *Vogue* practically acknowledges its own guilt. To make matters worse, these “special edition” magazines are used to attract publicity, an observation supported by *Jezebel*’s Dodai Stewart in her article “Italian Vogue’s All Black Issue: A Guided Tour,” when she comments that

efforts like these are “gimmick[s]” and “stunt[s].” Stewart’s claim harks back to Fortini’s own opinion that when Jezebel draws attention to the “Photoshop of Horrors” it is little more than a stunt itself. *Jezebel* got upwards of 10 million monthly views in 2007; now, three years later, imagine how many individuals have been introduced to the site based on the hype that its Photoshop coverage has received. To reiterate my earlier point, this cycle is seemingly perpetuating itself. It is in mass media’s best interest to keep this debate raging in order to ensure the clicks on the laptop and the turning of the magazine pages. I suggest that to stop the madness, the public should demand that the media alter their message to promote readership and articles that encourage high self-esteem.

As I stated earlier, I am a fan of *Jezebel*. I am critical of it only because I am critical of every message I ingest. I do not doubt that this is precisely the sort of vigilance that the site would advocate. I care about this matter because I, as a young woman, am not excluded from the impact of this debate. However, it troubles me that with all of the knowledge that I have on the widespread use of image manipulation as well as the lack of diversity in magazines I am still negatively affected by the plethora of images that I see every day. I still do not think that I match up to the ideal that our culture advocates. I, like lostinalunchbox, gave up years ago on magazines that made me feel less-than every time I turned a page. However, I am more disappointed that *Jezebel*, which claims to be essentially the anti-women’s magazine, resembles its foes more and more every day.

I hope that Jezebel will consider its original manifesto and whether it has steadfastly stuck to the original goals set forth. The site has a unique readership, one that could in fact influence the way this debate pans out, but in order for this to occur the finger-pointing needs to turn away from Photoshop or the lack of diversity in magazines and be aimed at the mirror.

Works Cited

Bortz, Fred. ScienceBlog. "Sexy Women Make Everyone Feel Bad." 6 Nov. 2008. Web. 29 Nov.

2010

Coen, Jessica. Jezebel. Gawker Media, 21 May 2007. Web. 30 Nov. 2010.

Fortini, Amanda. "In Defense of Photoshop: Why Retouching Isn't As Evil As Everyone Thinks." The Cut: New York Fashion, 29 Aug. 2010. Web. 2 Nov. 2010.

Moss, Hilary. "Anna Wintour: Vogue Doesn't Photoshop Girls To Make Them Look Thinner." Huffington Post. 25 Mar. 2010. Web. 30 Nov. 2010.

Sauers, Jenna. "Italian Vogue's 'All Black' Issue: A Guided Tour." Jezebel. 14 July 2008. Web. 15 Nov. 2010

Sauers, Jenna. "Regulating Photoshop: A Hazy Proposition, Not a Solution." Jezebel. 26 July 2010. Web. 2 Nov. 2010.

Stewart, Dodai. "Photoshop Legislation Won't Fix the Real Problem." Jezebel, 21 Sept. 2010. Web. 2 Nov. 2010.

Sulmers, Claire. "Vogue Italia launches Black and Plus-Size Sites." Black Voices. 25 February 2010. Web. 30 November 2010.

University of Missouri-Columbia. "Women Of All Sizes Feel Badly About Their Bodies After Seeing Models." ScienceDaily 27 March 2007. 30 November 2010. Web.