

What do skinny models and McDonald's have in common?



By [Kelly Thompson](#)

17 Jul 2012

Most advertisements stretch the truth somewhat and the average consumer generally knows not to take ads too literally. It has been reported that the average urban dweller is bombarded with around 5000 advertisements a day across all mediums including television, radio, print, outdoor, internet and social media.



(Image: Evan-Amos, via Wikimedia Commons)

Most of these advertisements fall somewhere in the grey area between truthful presentation and outright fibbing. But where is the line and just how many of the images making their way into our subconscious are total lies?

We all know that models are often photo shopped for advertisements, but is this not deceptive? Some feel that the image being portrayed is entirely false and unrealistic. In fact, there has been much public outcry about this as many view it as setting an unattainable standard which contributes to poor self image and conditions like anorexia, especially among young girls. After all, how can they ever hope to live up to a digitally enhanced image?

To this end, the Israeli legislature, the Knesset, recently enacted a law that governs the use of models in the advertising industry. The new law, titled, *Weight Limitation in the Modelling Industry Act - 2012*, is also colloquially referred to as the *Model Act* or the *Photoshop Act*.

According to David Wolberg of Kuperschmit, Goldstein and Co, the Israeli member of the Global Advertising Lawyers Alliance: "The law prohibits advertisements which display models (both male and female) who are underweight in accordance to measuring formulas prescribed in the law (namely, the Body Mass Index (BMI)). Models will be obliged to produce a doctor's certificate prior to taking part in the production of an advertisement".

Additionally, if an advertiser alters the appearance of the model by digital means, the advertisement must contain a notice which clarifies that the model's body features were graphically altered.

Wide-ranging across all media, all advert types

The law, which will take effect in the near future, governs all types of advertisements, including television, printed and all electronic media. It should be noted that the law only applies to advertisements targeted at the Israeli public/audience.

Meanwhile, across the globe in North America, a video created by fast food giant McDonald's marketing department was recently flighted on the website of the *Huffington Post*.

The title of the video? *Why do the burgers in McDonald's advertisements look different than the ones you buy in a store?* McDonald's Canada's director of marketing Hope Bagozzi answers that question in the video.

"To find out, Bagozzi visits a local McDonald's eatery, buys a Quarter Pounder with Cheese and brings it to Watt Photostudios, the agency responsible for McDonald's creative merchandising for the last seven years. There, the burger is photographed alongside another Quarter Pounder with Cheese that had been prepped by Watt. Same type of burger, two totally different looks - the result of physical posturing, food styling tricks and computer-assisted digital touchups" - *The Huffington Post*.

Baring it all

What MacDonal'd's has done is to 'bare all' - as it were - about what they do to make the food look more appealing in advertisements. They are at pains to stress that it is always their basic ingredients, just put together (and, of course, digitally enhanced) in a way that makes the burgers look better in the ads.

It's quite ironic that, on the one hand, fast food (generally the unhealthy option) is being digitally enhanced to look as appealing as possible while, on the other hand, the bodies to which advertisers would have us aspire are being digitally enhanced to an unrealistically perfect level. But maybe we, as consumers, are also wising up and are becoming more critical and cynical about the images we see in advertisements? The fact that so many people had questioned McDonald's would seem to indicate so.

And here is SA?

Insofar as the South African position is concerned, the Advertising Standards Authority (as well as legislation such as the Consumer Protection Act) specifically prohibits false and misleading advertisements. Again, however, the question will be what can be considered false and misleading. The ASA Code says that advertisements should not contain any statement or visual presentation which directly or by implication, omission, ambiguity, inaccuracy, exaggerated claim or otherwise, is likely to mislead the consumer. So, while some degree of digital enhancement for advertising purposes must surely be allowed, if the image appearing in the advertisement actually misleads the consumer, that may create difficulties.

From time to time, the ASA has had to deal with complaints dealing with the manner in which fast food is portrayed in advertisements. Its position appears to be that the product should not differ significantly from how it is portrayed in advertisements - but they also opine that consumers do not expect the product to look exactly the same as in the advertisement.

As pretty as a picture... not

In 2008, a consumer complained to the ASA that the illustration of the McDonald's Quarter Pounder with Cheese on the menu was misleading because the actual burger received was smaller than the one shown and the garnish was not as fresh as it looked. The ASA accepted, however, that the hypothetical "reasonable person" would understand that the depiction on the menu board would be a "best case scenario" and that an advertiser would inevitably select the most flattering image to use. The complaint was dismissed.

As a matter of interest, the ASA has also previously held that an advertisement for a yoghurt product showing a model choosing a fat free product upon seeing a thinner model choosing the product was contrary to the ASA Code in that it reinforced the artificial desire for women to want to look like the second, skinnier model. The ASA found the advertisement

to be irresponsible and ordered that it be withdrawn. Interestingly, the advertisement had been flighted in several countries around the world without complaints but over eight complaints were received here.

It is clear that there is a fine line between clever advertising and downright deception. The moral of the story is probably simply this: that all advertisements should be taken with a generous pinch of salt and that things are not always as flawless, smooth and cellulite-free as they may seem.

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