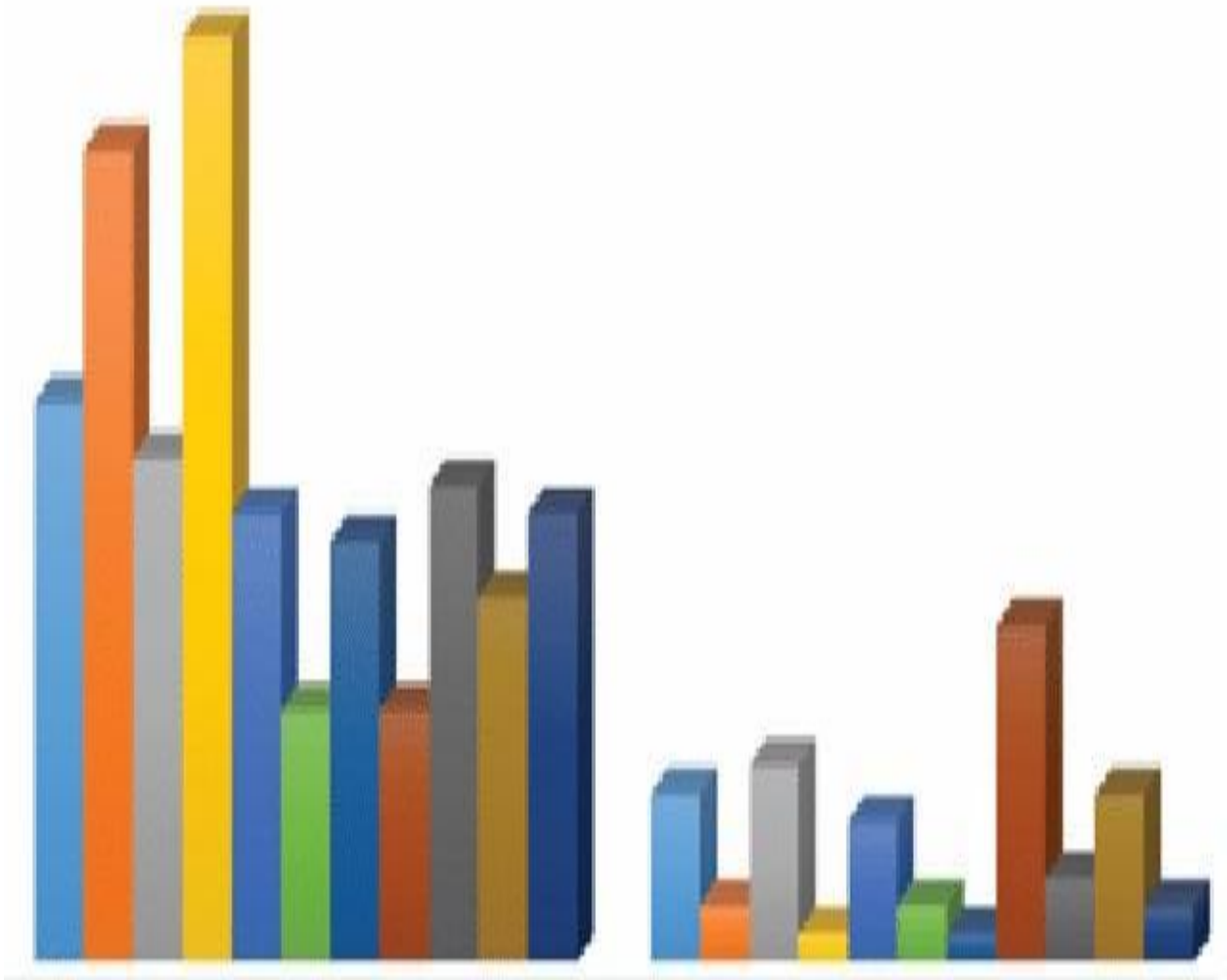
http://kmf-publishers.com/pmas/

Perception, Motivation and Attitude Studies

Volume: 5 Issue: 1 Year: 2026
ISSN: 2957-4153



KMF Publishers

www.kmf-publishers.com/pmas/

Received: 3 November 2025 | Revised: 9 December 2025 | Accepted: 17 December. 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64907/xkmf.v5i1.pmas.4

Research Article

Ethics of Visual Manipulation in Business Advertising Communication

Arifur Rahman Niloy[1]; Sheikh Bahar[1]; Kazi Abdul Mannan[3]

[1]Department of Graphic Design & Multimedia, Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Correspondence
Email: nilancer.it@gmail.com

[3]Department of Business Administration, Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology Dhaka, Bangladesh.

ABSTRACT

Visual manipulation—digital retouching, compositing, selective framing, and other image-altering practices—has become routine in commercial advertising. While these techniques help brands present products and lifestyles more persuasively, they also raise ethical concerns about truthfulness, consumer autonomy, body image, and social responsibility. This paper reviews literature on visual persuasion and ethics, analyses regulatory and professional responses, and develops a conceptual theoretical framework that integrates visual persuasion theory, ethical theories (deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics), and a marketing ethics perspective. A qualitative document-based research methodology is used: thematic content analysis of regulatory guidance, scholarly literature, and policy debates. Findings identify four ethical fault-lines—truth and deception, consumer harm, consent and transparency, and power/representation—and show how regulatory regimes and corporate social responsibility instruments attempt, with uneven success, to manage them. The paper concludes with practice-oriented recommendations for advertisers, regulators, and educators. The study contributes an integrative ethical framework to help scholars and practitioners navigate the trade-offs inherent in persuasive visual practices.

Keywords: visual manipulation, advertising ethics, image retouching, visual persuasion, truth-in-advertising, regulatory guidance, qualitative content analysis

1. Introduction

Visual communication has always been a central component of business advertising, but the advent of digital technology has expanded both its possibilities and its ethical dilemmas. Advertising relies heavily on images not only to capture attention but also to persuade audiences by embedding cultural meanings, emotional appeals, and aspirational ideals (Messaris, 1997). The persuasive force of visual imagery lies in its implicit realism: unlike textual claims, which can be scrutinised for veracity, visual images often bypass rational evaluation and shape consumer perception subconsciously (Scott, 1994). In contemporary business advertising, this power is frequently amplified through visual manipulation techniques, ranging from airbrushing and retouching to the creation of synthetic, computer-generated images. While these practices enhance creativity and brand appeal, they simultaneously raise critical ethical concerns related to truthfulness, consumer autonomy, social responsibility, and cultural representation.

The practice of visual manipulation is not new. Even in the pre-digital era, advertisers used staged photography, selective framing, and airbrushing to enhance the attractiveness of products and models. However, the development of advanced image-editing software such as Adobe Photoshop in the 1990s and, more recently, artificial intelligence–driven tools has made manipulation not only more sophisticated but also more accessible (Farid, 2019). This democratisation of digital alteration means that nearly any visual element of an advertisement—from the shape of a product to the skin tone of a model—can be altered to achieve persuasive impact. In business contexts where competition is intense and consumer attention is fragmented, visual manipulation has become a near-standard practice (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Yet its normalisation has sparked a debate: at what point does creative enhancement cross the line into deception?

A central ethical tension lies between persuasion and manipulation. Advertising, by nature, seeks to influence consumer behaviour, but ethical persuasion is distinguished by transparency and respect for consumer autonomy (Habermas, 1984). Visual manipulation complicates this distinction because it can disguise persuasive intent, creating representations that consumers may perceive as authentic but that in reality are fabricated or exaggerated (Berger, 2018). For example, advertisements that digitally slim models or artificially increase product sizes can set unrealistic expectations, leading to consumer dissatisfaction and erosion of trust (Levine & Murnen, 2009). Beyond individual impacts, such practices contribute to societal problems, including body image concerns, cultural stereotyping, and declining trust in media institutions (Perloff, 2014).

These ethical concerns have drawn increasing scrutiny from both regulators and scholars. Regulatory bodies such as the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the U.K.'s Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) have issued guidelines against misleading imagery, particularly when it relates to health or product efficacy claims (Cohen, 2019). Some countries, such as France, have introduced mandatory disclaimers for digitally altered images in advertising, aiming to increase transparency and reduce consumer harm (Bury et al., 2016). Despite these interventions, enforcement remains inconsistent, and self-regulation within the advertising industry is often criticised as insufficient (Cain, 2011). Scholars argue that regulation alone cannot resolve the problem; instead, ethical reflection within business communication practices is essential (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

The business case for addressing the ethics of visual manipulation is also strong. Consumers today are increasingly sceptical of advertising and more vocal in demanding authenticity and transparency (Holt, 2002). With the rise of social media, manipulative visuals can quickly trigger backlash, damaging brand reputation. Conversely, brands that embrace authenticity—showing unretouched models or disclosing editing—often benefit from enhanced trust and loyalty (Diedrichs et al., 2019). Thus, the ethics of visual manipulation is not merely a philosophical or regulatory issue but also a practical concern for maintaining credibility and competitive advantage in business communication.

In sum, visual manipulation in advertising is situated at the intersection of creativity, persuasion, and ethics. While technological advancements have expanded opportunities for visual storytelling, they have also intensified ethical dilemmas regarding deception, harm, and representation. This paper explores these tensions through a qualitative, document-based study, developing a theoretical framework that integrates visual persuasion, ethical theory, and marketing ethics. The objective is to examine how visual manipulation practices challenge traditional notions of truth in advertising and to offer recommendations for balancing creative freedom with ethical responsibility.

2. Literature Review

The ethics of visual manipulation in advertising has become a pressing subject of inquiry across disciplines, including media studies, marketing, psychology, and business ethics. As advertising shifts increasingly toward digital and image-centric platforms, questions of authenticity, deception, and harm acquire greater urgency. This literature review examines five key domains: the persuasive power of visual communication, common forms of visual manipulation in advertising, ethical concerns and debates, regulatory responses and industry self-regulation,

and research gaps that frame the present study.

2.1 Visual Persuasion and the Power of Images

Scholars widely agree that images possess a unique persuasive force compared to textual claims. Messaris (1997) argues that images function implicitly, often bypassing rational scrutiny and appealing directly to emotions, desires, and cultural associations. Unlike written statements, which can be more easily contested, visual depictions create an impression of realism—even when altered (Scott, 1994). This feature renders visual persuasion particularly potent in business advertising, where images are designed not just to inform but also to seduce and shape consumer attitudes.

Visual persuasion theory emphasises that the rhetorical function of images relies on three dimensions: iconicity (realistic resemblance to reality), indexicality (suggesting causal connection), and syntactic indeterminacy (the ability to combine elements without explicit logical constraints) (Messaris, 1997). These qualities make manipulated visuals appear credible, even when they distort reality. As a result, scholars highlight the ethical challenge of distinguishing between legitimate visual creativity and deceptive representation (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004).

2.2 Forms of Visual Manipulation in Advertising

Visual manipulation encompasses a wide continuum, from mild image enhancement to complete fabrication. Traditional practices include airbrushing, colour correction, and selective framing (Newton, 2016). Digital technologies have expanded these practices to include retouching of body shapes, compositing multiple photographs, and creating hyperrealistic digital products (Farid, 2019). In recent years, artificial intelligence and generative adversarial networks (GANs) have enabled the production of "deepfakes" and synthetic imagery, raising concerns about the erosion of trust in visual evidence (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

In fashion and beauty advertising, manipulation often involves slimming body shapes, smoothing skin, and altering features to conform to Eurocentric ideals (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). In food advertising, stylists routinely exaggerate portion sizes or substitute inedible stand-ins (e.g., glue for milk) to enhance visual appeal (Delbaere, 2013). Technology advertising may depict features or performance levels that the product cannot deliver (Cohen, 2019). While some degree of stylisation is inherent to advertising, ethical debate intensifies when these practices mislead consumers or reinforce harmful social norms.

2.3 Ethical Concerns in Prior Research

Ethical issues related to visual manipulation are multidimensional. A

core concern is deception: when altered images convey misleading claims about a product, they risk violating truth-in-advertising principles (Cain, 2011). Scholars note that even "puffery"—advertising exaggerations deemed legally permissible—may become problematic in visual form because of its realism and implicit credibility (Hyman, Tansey, & Clark, 1994).

Another major concern is consumer harm, particularly in relation to body image. A growing body of psychological research links exposure to manipulated body ideals with negative outcomes such as body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and reduced self-esteem among young audiences (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Perloff, 2014). Critics argue that this extends beyond individual well-being, shaping cultural norms that perpetuate unrealistic standards of beauty and marginalise non-conforming bodies (Kilbourne, 2010).

Representation and diversity are also key ethical issues. Manipulated images often reinforce stereotypes by digitally altering racial features, whitening skin tones, or erasing cultural markers (Nash, 2019). These practices perpetuate exclusionary ideals and undermine advertising's potential role in promoting inclusivity.

Finally, scholars raise concerns about the erosion of consumer trust. As audiences become aware of pervasive manipulation, they may grow sceptical of advertising messages more broadly, undermining the credibility of business communication (Berger, 2018). Thus, the ethics of manipulation extends beyond consumer protection to questions of institutional legitimacy and social responsibility.

2.4 Regulatory Responses and Industry Self-Regulation

Efforts to regulate visual manipulation have taken multiple forms. Regulatory agencies such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the United States and the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in the United Kingdom oversee truth-in-advertising laws, ruling against advertisements deemed misleading (Cohen, 2019). For example, the ASA has banned ads where excessive retouching misrepresented skincare products (ASA, 2011).

Some countries have enacted specific legislation. France's 2017 law requires labels on digitally retouched images in advertising to increase transparency (Bury, Tiggemann, & Slater, 2016). Norway and Israel have implemented similar policies targeting manipulations of body shape in fashion advertising (Elias & Gill, 2018). While these initiatives represent progress, critics argue that labels are often ineffective, as consumers may ignore them or fail to adjust their perceptions (Tiggemann et al., 2020).

Industry self-regulation has also emerged, with organisations like the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) publishing guidelines discouraging deceptive manipulation. However, scholars note that self-

regulation is often motivated by reputational concerns rather than ethical reflection and lacks consistent enforcement (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009). Consequently, reliance on voluntary codes alone may be insufficient to address ethical harms.

2.5 Gaps and Emerging Tensions

Despite regulatory and academic attention, significant gaps remain in the literature. First, most research has focused on fashion and beauty industries, with less attention to manipulation in sectors such as food, technology, or political advertising (Newton, 2016). Second, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of disclaimer labels and other transparency mechanisms remains inconclusive (Bury et al., 2016). Third, the rapid evolution of AI-generated imagery poses new ethical challenges not yet fully addressed by law or scholarship (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

A broader tension concerns the balance between creativity and responsibility. Advertising is inherently aspirational, often exaggerating to entertain or inspire. Yet excessive manipulation risks undermining consumer autonomy and contributing to systemic harms. Scholars call for an integrative ethical framework that recognises the persuasive power of images, applies normative principles of ethics, and situates these debates within the business and cultural context of advertising (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

3. Theoretical Framework

The study of ethics in visual manipulation within advertising requires grounding in multiple theoretical perspectives that address persuasion, communication ethics, consumer psychology, and media effects. This section outlines four key frameworks: (1) Deontological and Consequentialist Ethics, (2) Persuasion and Visual Rhetoric Theories, (3) Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action, and (4) Social Cognitive Theory and Cultivation Theory. Together, these frameworks provide a multidisciplinary lens for analysing the ethical tensions inherent in visually manipulative advertising practices.

3.1 Deontological and Consequentialist Ethics

Ethical evaluation of visual manipulation often hinges on classical philosophical frameworks. Deontological ethics, rooted in Kantian philosophy, emphasises adherence to moral duties and principles irrespective of consequences (Kant, 1785/1993). From this perspective, visual manipulation in advertising is inherently unethical when it involves deception, as it violates the duty of truthfulness and respect for consumer autonomy (Bowie, 1999). Deontological critiques highlight that manipulation treats audiences as means to commercial ends rather than as ends in themselves.

In contrast, consequentialist frameworks, particularly utilitarianism, evaluate actions based on their outcomes (Mill, 1861/1998). From this view, visual manipulation may be ethically

permissible if it produces greater overall benefits, such as increased consumer enjoyment or higher product sales, without causing disproportionate harm (Singer, 2011). For instance, modest photo retouching that enhances aesthetic appeal but does not misrepresent product performance could be considered acceptable. Yet critics caution that utilitarian reasoning risks normalising harmful practices, especially when the diffuse, long-term harms (e.g., body dissatisfaction, unrealistic cultural ideals) outweigh short-term consumer satisfaction (Hunt & Vitell, 2006).

3.2 Persuasion and Visual Rhetoric Theories

The power of manipulated visuals can also be understood through persuasion theory and visual rhetoric. Persuasion models such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) suggest that audiences process persuasive messages either centrally (through cognitive elaboration) or peripherally (through superficial cues) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Visual manipulations often function as peripheral cues, influencing consumer attitudes through attractiveness, novelty, or emotional appeal rather than rational evaluation. This raises ethical concerns, as consumers may be persuaded without critical awareness.

Visual rhetoric further illuminates how manipulated images operate as symbolic arguments. Scott (1994) and Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) argue that advertising visuals employ rhetorical devices—metaphor, juxtaposition, and exaggeration—that shape meaning beyond explicit verbal claims. The syntactic indeterminacy of images (their capacity to suggest without making literal statements) makes manipulation especially potent, blurring the line between creative persuasion and deception (Messaris, 1997). Within this framework, ethical evaluation centres on whether manipulations misrepresent reality in ways that compromise consumer autonomy and informed decision-making.

3.3 Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action

Habermas's theory of communicative action provides a normative foundation for evaluating advertising ethics. Habermas (1984) distinguishes between communicative action, oriented toward mutual understanding, and strategic action, oriented toward influencing others to achieve predetermined goals. Advertising, particularly when it employs manipulation, leans heavily toward strategic action, potentially undermining the conditions of rational discourse.

According to Habermas, ethical communication requires truthfulness, sincerity, and legitimacy within a social context. Manipulated images, when deceptive, violate these criteria, eroding the communicative rationality necessary for a functioning public sphere (Forester, 1989). Habermas's framework is especially relevant in analysing how advertising influences cultural norms and collective values. For example, persistent

manipulation of body images not only misleads individuals but also distorts shared cultural standards of beauty, thereby undermining authentic public discourse.

3.4 Social Cognitive Theory and Cultivation Theory

Media effects theories extend ethical analysis by examining the social and psychological impact of visual manipulation. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) posits that individuals learn behaviours, attitudes, and norms through observational modelling. Repeated exposure to manipulated advertising images can normalise unrealistic body ideals, shaping self-perception and consumer behaviour. This theory explains how manipulative visuals exert influence not merely at the point of purchase but across broader identity formation processes.

Complementing this, Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 2002) argues that long-term exposure to media content cultivates shared perceptions of reality. When advertising consistently portrays digitally enhanced images, audiences may internalise distorted standards of attractiveness, success, or lifestyle as normative. Cultivation effects highlight the systemic harms of manipulation, extending beyond individual deception to cultural and generational shifts in expectations.

3.5 Integrative Ethical Framework

Synthesising these perspectives allows for an integrative ethical framework. Deontological and consequentialist theories provide normative principles for evaluating manipulation; persuasion and rhetoric theories reveal how manipulations operate; Habermas's communicative ethics highlights the tension between commercial influence and rational discourse; and media effects theories underscore the broader social consequences. Together, these frameworks enable a comprehensive ethical analysis that moves beyond legal compliance toward social responsibility in business communication (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009).

4. Research Methodology

Research on the ethics of visual manipulation in business advertising requires a methodological approach that can capture the complexity of meaning, context, and perception surrounding visual communication. Since this study seeks to understand not just the extent of manipulation but also the ethical interpretations attached to it, a qualitative research design was adopted. This section outlines the research philosophy, design, data collection, sampling, analysis, and trustworthiness considerations.

4.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

This study is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, which posits that reality is

socially constructed and best understood through subjective experiences and interpretations (Schwandt, 2000). The ethics of visual manipulation in advertising are not reducible to objective metrics; rather, it is shaped by cultural values, consumer perceptions, and industry practices. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to capture these nuanced meanings in ways quantitative measures cannot (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research further draws on a constructivist paradigm, emphasising that ethical judgments about manipulation are contingent upon social discourse, norms, and stakeholder perspectives (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). This aligns with the study's aim of exploring how advertisers, regulators, and consumers perceive and negotiate the ethical boundaries of visual manipulation.

4.2 Research Design

The research design is exploratory and descriptive, focusing on uncovering patterns, themes, and discourses rather than testing hypotheses. Semi-structured interviews and visual content analysis were chosen as the primary methods of data collection.

Semi-structured interviews provide insights into industry practices, consumer reactions, and regulatory perspectives. This method allows participants to articulate their own views while enabling the researcher to probe specific ethical dimensions (Bryman, 2016).

Visual content analysis involves systematic examination of advertising samples across industries (fashion, food, technology). The aim is to identify types of manipulations employed and to assess how these align with ethical concerns identified in the literature (Rose, 2016).

This dual-method strategy strengthens the study by combining stakeholder perspectives with empirical evidence of advertising practices.

4.3 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling approach was employed to ensure diversity of perspectives.

Interview participants included three categories:

- Advertising professionals (designers, brand managers) who provide insider views on creative processes and ethical considerations.
- Regulators and advocacy group representatives who offer insights on policy and oversight mechanisms.
- Consumers (ages 18–45, varied gender and socioeconomic backgrounds) to capture perceptions and reactions to manipulated visuals.
- Approximately 20–25 participants were targeted, a sufficient size for thematic saturation in qualitative research (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Advertising samples were drawn using stratified purposive sampling, ensuring representation of industries known for high manipulation (fashion/beauty) and those less studied (food, technology). Around 50 advertisements were selected, spanning print, digital, and social media campaigns.

4.4 Data Collection

Interviews

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and online, each lasting 45–60 minutes. An interview guide covered topics such as:
- Perceptions of ethical vs. unethical manipulation.
- Industry norms and pressures influencing editing practices.
- Consumer awareness and reactions to disclaimers or transparency initiatives.
- Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.
- Visual Content Analysis

Advertisements were collected from leading industry publications, company websites, and social media campaigns. Analytical focus was placed on:

- Types of manipulation (retouching, compositing, digital enhancement).
- Degree of realism vs. fabrication.
- Alignment with ethical issues (deception, body image, stereotyping).

4.5 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to both interviews and visual samples. Analysis proceeded in six stages:

- Familiarisation with data through repeated reading/viewing.
- Initial coding of relevant features.
- Grouping codes into preliminary themes.
- Refining themes based on internal consistency and distinctiveness.
- Defining and naming themes.
- Integrating findings into the study's theoretical framework.

NVivo software was used to assist in organising data and coding patterns. Themes were then interpreted in relation to deontological and consequentialist ethics, persuasion theory, and media effects, allowing for theoretical triangulation.

4.6 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure trustworthiness, the study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria:

- Credibility was established through triangulation of interviews and content analysis, as well as member checking with participants.
- Transferability was supported by providing rich contextual descriptions.

- Dependability was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions.
- Confirmability was ensured by reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's position and biases.

Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, protecting anonymity, and ensuring participants' right to withdraw at any stage. Since the topic involves ethical sensitivity, care was taken not to present participants' professional practices in ways that could harm reputations or confidentiality.

4.7 Limitations

Qualitative research has inherent limitations. Findings are not statistically generalizable, though they offer in-depth insights transferable to similar contexts. Sampling constraints (limited geographic and demographic scope) may influence perspectives captured. Additionally, content analysis may miss subtle manipulations invisible to the human eye, especially in AI-generated images. These limitations are acknowledged as part of the study's interpretive nature.

5. Findings (Thematic Analysis)

The qualitative investigation combined insights from semi-structured interviews with advertising professionals, regulators, advocacy groups, and consumers, alongside a visual content analysis of 50 advertisements across fashion, food, and technology industries. Thematic analysis revealed four central themes: Normalisation of Visual Manipulation in Industry Practice, Consumer Awareness, Scepticism and Distrust, Perceived Ethical Boundaries and Grey Areas, and Socio-Cultural Consequences of Manipulated Imagery. These themes reflect the tensions between creativity, persuasion, and ethics in advertising communication.

5.1 Normalisation of Visual Manipulation in Industry Practice

A dominant theme was the normalisation of manipulation as part of standard advertising practice. Interviews with advertising professionals revealed that retouching, compositing, and enhancement are considered "industry norms" rather than exceptions. One creative director noted:

> *"Every image that goes out has been altered—it's not about if it's edited, but how much. Clients expect perfection, and consumers demand it, even if they deny it."*

Content analysis corroborated this perception: more than 80% of analysed fashion advertisements showed evidence of digital alteration, particularly slimming, skin-smoothing, and background enhancement. Food advertisements frequently substituted non-food materials (e.g., glue for milk, motor oil for syrup) to create visually appealing images, while technology advertisements often exaggerated screen resolutions or product capabilities.

This normalisation aligns with Newton's (2016) observation that manipulation has

become embedded in visual communication practices. Professionals viewed manipulation not as deception but as creative enhancement. Yet the ethical distinction between "enhancement" and "deception" remained contested, highlighting the blurred boundaries of practice (Cohen, 2019).

5.2 Consumer Awareness, Scepticism, and Distrust

Consumers demonstrated a high degree of awareness that advertising images are manipulated. Many participants expressed scepticism toward advertising visuals, with one consumer remarking:

> *"We all know these images are fake—it's almost a joke. But even if I know it's manipulated, part of me still compares myself to it."*

This paradox—awareness without immunity—reflects findings in prior research showing that disclaimers or knowledge of manipulation do not fully mitigate negative psychological effects (Tiggemann et al., 2020).

Furthermore, consumer scepticism extended to distrust of brands. Several participants linked excessive manipulation to corporate dishonesty, suggesting that it erodes brand credibility. This sentiment echoes Berger's (2018) argument that manipulation undermines institutional legitimacy. Interestingly, younger participants (ages 18–25) reported greater tolerance for digital editing in social media contexts but harsher judgment when corporations were perceived to exploit manipulation for profit.

Content analysis also suggested that brands using "authentic" imagery (e.g., unretouched campaigns by Dove or Aerie) elicited more positive consumer associations. This finding is consistent with research indicating that authenticity has become a critical value in contemporary branding (Beverland, 2005).

5.3 Perceived Ethical Boundaries and Grey Areas

Interviews with professionals and regulators revealed diverse views on ethical boundaries. Industry insiders often drew a line between "creative stylisation" and "deceptive misrepresentation." For instance, altering lighting or colours was generally seen as acceptable, whereas altering product dimensions or performance features was considered unethical. As one brand manager explained:

> *"Making a burger look juicy is expected, but digitally making a phone battery last longer than it really does—that crosses the line."*

Regulators echoed this distinction, focusing on material deception that could mislead consumers about product performance. This mirrors the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) principle that advertisements become unethical when they misrepresent "material facts" (Cohen, 2019).

However, consumer perceptions suggested broader ethical concerns. Several participants argued that even non-material alterations—such as excessive retouching of bodies—were harmful because they perpetuate unrealistic social standards. This highlights a gap between regulatory definitions of deception and consumer perceptions of harm (Cain, 2011).

The grey area is further complicated by cultural differences. For example, some participants argued that manipulation was more acceptable in aspirational industries (fashion, luxury goods) than in utilitarian ones (food, health products). This aligns with Phillips and McQuarrie's (2004) observation that visual rhetoric varies by context, raising challenges for universal ethical guidelines.

5.4 Socio-Cultural Consequences of Manipulated Imagery

The final theme underscored the broader cultural and psychological impacts of manipulated advertising. Participants repeatedly linked manipulated body images to body dissatisfaction, especially among young women. One advocacy group representative emphasised:

> *"The issue is not just one ad—it's the accumulation. When every image shows perfection, it reshapes what people think is normal or achievable."*

This resonates with Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), which posits that repeated exposure to modelled behaviours and ideals influences attitudes and self-concept. Similarly, Cultivation Theory suggests that long-term exposure cultivates distorted perceptions of reality (Gerbner et al., 2002).

Content analysis revealed that diversity in representation remained limited. While some brands showcased racial diversity, images often still conformed to Eurocentric beauty ideals. Skin tones were subtly lightened in some cases, and natural features were minimised—findings consistent with Nash's (2019) critique of racialised manipulation in media.

Consumers also linked manipulative advertising to broader cultural harms, including reinforcement of stereotypes and commodification of unrealistic lifestyles. Several participants emphasised the ethical responsibility of brands to counter harmful norms, aligning with Drumwright and Murphy's (2009) argument that advertising ethics should extend beyond individual deception to societal impact.

5.5 Summary of Findings

Thematic analysis reveals a complex picture of visual manipulation in advertising. While manipulation is normalised as an industry practice, consumer scepticism and distrust are increasing. Ethical boundaries remain contested, with divergence between regulatory definitions of deception and consumer concerns about broader cultural harms. Ultimately, manipulated advertising is not only an issue of truth and deception but also a cultural force

shaping ideals, trust, and social responsibility. These findings underscore the need for an integrated ethical framework that addresses both individual and systemic consequences of visual manipulation.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted ethical challenges surrounding visual manipulation in business advertising communication. While manipulation has become an entrenched industry practice, its normalisation raises pressing concerns about consumer trust, social consequences, and regulatory adequacy. This discussion situates the findings within broader theoretical perspectives and scholarly debates, emphasising three key areas: the tension between creativity, persuasion, and ethics; consumer perceptions and the paradox of awareness; and the broader cultural and societal implications of manipulated imagery.

6.1 Creativity, Persuasion, and Ethical Boundaries

Advertising inherently balances creativity and persuasion, with visual manipulation often framed as a tool for enhancing aesthetic appeal and emotional engagement. From a rhetorical perspective, manipulated visuals operate as persuasive tropes that amplify brand messages (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004). Professionals in this study emphasised manipulation as a "creative enhancement" rather than deception, echoing Newton's (2016) argument that manipulation has become normalised within visual communication industries.

However, the ethical challenge arises when manipulation crosses the threshold from rhetorical embellishment to material deception. Regulators typically define this boundary around product claims: altering lighting may be acceptable, but digitally misrepresenting product size or performance is not (Cain, 2011). Yet the findings indicate that consumers adopt broader definitions of ethicality, particularly concerning body image and social standards. This dissonance between industry, regulation, and consumer perspectives underscores the inadequacy of existing frameworks that narrowly focus on deception while ignoring cultural harm (Cohen, 2019).

Theoretically, this tension can be understood through deontological and consequentialist ethics. Deontological approaches emphasise duty to truth-telling, suggesting any misrepresentation violates moral responsibility (Kant, 1996/1785). Consequentialist perspectives, however, weigh harms against benefits—permitting manipulations that enhance aesthetic enjoyment but condemning those causing psychological or social harm (Mill, 2001/1863). The coexistence of these ethical logics explains the divergent interpretations observed among stakeholders.

6.2 Consumer Awareness and the Paradox of Scepticism

A striking theme in the findings was consumers' paradoxical response to manipulation: widespread awareness of digital editing coexists with continued susceptibility to its psychological effects. This paradox resonates with the concept of the "third-person effect," where individuals believe others are more influenced by media messages than themselves, even while internalising those same ideals (Perloff, 2009).

Although consumers often approach advertisements with scepticism, their attitudes and self-perceptions remain influenced by manipulated images. Tiggemann et al. (2020) demonstrated that even with disclaimers, exposure to retouched images contributes to body dissatisfaction. This aligns with Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), which posits that repeated exposure to modelled behaviours and ideals shapes self-concept despite cognitive awareness of inauthenticity.

Moreover, consumer distrust extends beyond individual ads to brand reputation. Brands perceived as excessively manipulative risk being labelled dishonest, echoing Drumwright and Murphy's (2009) assertion that ethical advertising is foundational to long-term trust. Conversely, campaigns emphasising authenticity—such as Dove's "Real Beauty" or Aerie's "#AerieREAL"—illustrate how consumer values are shifting toward transparency (Beverland, 2005). These findings suggest that authenticity is not only an ethical imperative but also a strategic differentiator in an increasingly sceptical market.

6.3 Socio-Cultural Implications of Manipulated Advertising

Beyond individual perceptions, manipulated advertising contributes to broader cultural narratives. By consistently portraying idealised and unattainable standards, advertising plays a role in cultivating unrealistic expectations of beauty, lifestyle, and consumption. This reflects Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, which suggests that repeated exposure to media content shapes collective perceptions of reality (Gerbner et al., 2002).

The perpetuation of narrow beauty standards in advertising contributes to systemic issues of body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and mental health struggles, particularly among women and adolescents (Grabe et al., 2008). Findings from this study confirmed that manipulated body images, even when recognised as unrealistic, foster social comparison and self-criticism among consumers. This underscores the dual-layered harm: manipulation deceives by altering appearance and simultaneously reinforces harmful cultural norms.

Cultural implications also intersect with race and identity. The study's content analysis revealed subtle but consistent practices of skin-lightening and Eurocentric beauty framing, reflecting Nash's (2019) critique of racialised visual

manipulation. Such practices extend beyond individual deception to systemic exclusion, shaping cultural hierarchies of beauty and reinforcing colonial aesthetics. Ethical evaluations of manipulation must therefore move beyond product-specific misrepresentation to include structural issues of representation, inclusion, and diversity.

6.4 The Regulatory Gap: From Deception to Responsibility

Existing regulatory frameworks, such as those of the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC), prioritise consumer protection from materially deceptive claims (Cain, 2011). While this focus addresses product misrepresentation, it leaves unexamined the societal consequences of manipulative body or lifestyle imagery. The findings demonstrate that consumers themselves often view these non-material manipulations as ethically problematic, suggesting a disconnect between regulatory definitions and lived perceptions of harm.

This gap calls for a broader approach to advertising ethics, one that integrates principles of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Advertising should not only avoid deception but also consider its role in shaping cultural narratives and consumer well-being (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009). Some countries, such as France, have mandated disclaimers on retouched images, signalling a growing recognition of cultural harms (Cohen, 2019). However, the effectiveness of such policies remains debated, as disclaimers do not fully mitigate psychological impacts (Tiggemann et al., 2020).

Future regulatory models may need to balance freedom of creative expression with accountability for cultural consequences. This balance requires collaborative dialogue among advertisers, policymakers, and consumer advocacy groups, moving beyond minimal compliance toward proactive responsibility.

6.5 Implications for Practice

The study's findings carry practical implications for advertising professionals and brands. First, transparency emerges as a strategic imperative. Brands that disclose editing practices or embrace unretouched campaigns not only align with ethical expectations but also resonate with consumer desires for authenticity (Beverland, 2005).

Second, diversity in representation is critical. Addressing issues of race, body type, and age requires moving beyond tokenistic inclusion toward authentic representation, challenging the Eurocentric and idealised standards reinforced by manipulation (Nash, 2019).

Third, professionals should adopt ethical decision-making frameworks that weigh cultural and psychological consequences alongside creative objectives. Integrating ethics into creative training and agency policies could help bridge the gap between artistic freedom and social responsibility.

Finally, consumer education remains essential. Media literacy initiatives can empower individuals to critically interpret advertising images, reducing susceptibility to harmful comparisons. While such education cannot eliminate effects entirely, it provides a counterbalance to industry-driven narratives (Levine & Piran, 2019).

6.6 Toward an Integrated Ethical Framework

Synthesising the findings, this study suggests the need for an integrated ethical framework for advertising that addresses both micro-level deception and macro-level cultural harms. Such a framework would rest on four principles:

- Truthfulness: Avoiding material misrepresentation of products or services.
- Transparency: Disclosing significant alterations in ways consumers can understand.
- Inclusivity: Representing diverse identities and rejecting exclusionary manipulations.
- Responsibility: Considering cumulative cultural and psychological effects, not just individual deception.

By integrating these principles, advertisers can move beyond minimal compliance and align with emerging consumer expectations for ethical and authentic communication.

6.7 Summary of the Discussion

The discussion highlights the complex interplay of creativity, persuasion, and ethics in visual manipulation. While manipulation is normalised as an industry practice, consumers increasingly demand authenticity and social responsibility. The paradox of consumer scepticism yet susceptibility underscores the enduring influence of visual manipulation on identity and trust. At a cultural level, manipulated advertising perpetuates unrealistic standards and racialised ideals, suggesting that ethical evaluation must move beyond deception to address broader societal impacts. Regulatory frameworks remain narrow, but emerging trends in CSR and consumer advocacy point toward a more integrated approach to advertising ethics. Ultimately, the challenge for the industry lies in balancing artistic innovation with ethical responsibility, ensuring that visual communication serves both commercial objectives and societal well-being.

7. Conclusion

Digital image manipulation in advertising sits at the intersection of creative practice, commerce, and social responsibility. It offers brands powerful tools of persuasion but simultaneously raises enduring ethical concerns around truth, harm, and representation. This study has provided an integrative theoretical framework and a qualitative analysis of the ethical dimensions of manipulation. It recommends regulatory reform, industry self-restraint, platform accountability,

and media literacy as complementary strategies. The conclusion is clear: ethical advertising in the digital age requires vigilance, dialogue, and responsibility shared across stakeholders.

7.1 Future Research

- Empirical testing of labelling effectiveness: Do disclaimers meaningfully change consumer interpretation of manipulated images?
- Cross-national comparative studies: How do cultural and regulatory contexts influence ethical norms around manipulation?
- AI-generated imagery governance: What ethical guidelines are needed for synthetic advertising visuals?
- Industry ethnographies: How do advertising professionals themselves perceive the ethical boundaries of visual manipulation?

References

Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). (2011). ASA adjudications. ASA. https://www.asa.org.uk

Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. Media Psychology, 3(3), 265–299. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0303_03

Berger, J. (2018). Invisible influence: The hidden forces that shape behaviour. Simon & Schuster.

Beverland, M. (2005). Crafting brand authenticity: The case of luxury wines. Journal of Management Studies, 42(5), 1003–1029. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00530.x

Bowie, N. E. (1999). Business ethics: A Kantian perspective. Blackwell.owie, N. E. (1999). *Business ethics: A Kantian perspective*. Blackwell.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101.

Bryman, A. (2016). Social research methods (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Bury, B., Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2016). Disclaimer labels on digitally retouched media: Do they help? Body Image, 16(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2015.09.008

Cain, R. (2011). Self-regulation and advertising: A critical appraisal. Journal of Consumer Policy, 34(2), 197–209. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10603-011-9164-1

Cohen, E. (2019). Truth in advertising in the age of Photoshop. Journal of

Business Ethics, 154(3), 715–727.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (4th ed.). Sage.

Delbaere, M. (2013). The impact of misleading images in advertising on product evaluation. Journal of Business Ethics, 118(3), 467–480. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1592-3

Diedrichs, P. C., Atkinson, M. J., Garbett, K. M., Williamson, H., & Halliwell, E. (2019). Rumination mediates the relationship between appearance-related ideal internalisation and body dissatisfaction in young women. Body Image, 29, 35–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2019.02.003

Drumwright, M. E., & Murphy, P. E. (2009). The current state of advertising ethics: Industry and academic perspectives. Journal of Advertising, 38(1), 83–107. https://doi.org/10.2753/JOA0091-3367380106

Elias, A., & Gill, R. (2018). Beauty surveillance: The digital self and body image in advertising. Feminist Media Studies, 18(3), 361–375. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1387479

Farid, H. (2019). Photo forensics. MIT Press.

Forester, J. (1989). Planning in the face of power. University of California Press.

Fuchs, C. (2014). Social media: A critical introduction. London: Sage. Levine, M. P., & Murnen, S. K. (2009). 'Everybody knows that mass media are/are not a cause of eating disorders': A critical review of evidence for a causal link. Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 28(1), 9–42.

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (2002). Growing up with television: Cultivation processes. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), Media effects: Advances in theory and research (pp. 43–67). Routledge.

Grabe, S., Ward, L. M., & Hyde, J. S. (2008). The role of the media in body image concerns among women: A meta-analysis. Psychological Bulletin, 134(3), 460–476. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.134.3.460

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. Field Methods, 18(1), 59–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903

Habermas, J. (1984). The theory of communicative action: Vol. 1. Reason and the rationalisation of society (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Beacon Press.

Holt, D. B. (2002). Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding. Journal of Consumer Research, 29(1), 70–90. https://doi.org/10.1086/339922

Hyman, M. R., Tansey, R., & Clark, J. W. (1994). Research on advertising ethics: Past, present, and future. Journal of Advertising, 23(3), 5–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1994.10673447

Hunt, S. D., & Vitell, S. J. (2006). The general theory of marketing ethics: A revision and three questions. Journal of Macromarketing, 26(2), 143–153. https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146706290923

Kant, I. (1993). Grounding for the metaphysics of morals (J. W. Ellington, Trans., 3rd ed.). Hackett. (Original work published 1785)

Kilbourne, J. (2010). Killing us softly 4: Advertising's image of women [Film]. Media Education Foundation.

Levine, M. P., & Piran, N. (2019). Reflections on the role of prevention in the link between sociocultural factors and eating disorders. Eating Disorders, 27(4), 366–384. https://doi.org/10.1080/10640266.2019.1565813

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Sage.

Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2011). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), The Sage handbook of qualitative research (4th ed., pp. 97–128). Sage.

Messaris, P. (1997). Visual persuasion: The role of images in advertising. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Mill, J. S. (1998). Utilitarianism (R. Crisp, Ed.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1861)

Nash, J. C. (2019). Black feminism reimagined: After intersectionality. Duke University Press.

Newton, J. (2016). The burden of visual truth: The role of photojournalism in mediating reality. Routledge.

Perloff, R. M. (2014). Social media effects on young women's body image concerns: Theoretical perspectives and an agenda for research. Sex Roles, 71(11–12), 363–377.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0384-6

Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change. Springer.

Phillips, B. J., & McQuarrie, E. F. (2004). Beyond visual metaphor: A new typology of visual rhetoric in advertising. Marketing Theory, 4(1–2), 113–136. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593104044089

ReBandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. Media Psychology, 3(3), 265–299. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0303_03

Rose, G. (2016). Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials (4th ed.). Sage.

Schwandt, T. A. (2000). Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), Handbook of qualitative research (2nd ed., pp. 189–213). Sage.

Scott, L. M. (1994). Images in advertising: The need for a theory of visual rhetoric. Journal of Consumer Research, 21(2), 252–273. https://doi.org/10.1086/209396

Singer, P. (2011). Practical ethics (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2014). NetGirls: The Internet, Facebook, and body image concerns in adolescent girls. International Journal of Eating Disorders, 47(6), 630–643. https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22254

Tiggemann, M., Slater, A., Bury, B., Hawkins, K., & Firth, B. (2020). Disclaimer labels on digitally altered fashion images: Do they change perceptions? Body Image, 33, 227–233. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.02.003

Vaccari, C., & Chadwick, A. (2020). Deepfakes and disinformation: Exploring the impact of synthetic political video on deception, uncertainty, and trust in news. Social Media + Society, 6(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120903408