

The Ethics of Seeing: Contextual Moderation of Altered Image Acceptability

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What is this study about?

- Photographs have been historically regarded as a representation of reality.
- However, this fact has shifted with the existence of image alteration (IA) tools such as **Photoshop** and **AI-generation**.
- This study explores how people's attitudes to IA is affected by the domain of its use.



Why this matters

- Ethical concerns and truth perceptions determine if people find an image acceptable, credible, shareable or worth engaging in¹.
- These judgements shape trust in media, advertising effectiveness and confidence in institutions².
- There exists unexplored effects of IA on ethical and truth perceptions on acceptability, and whether domain of use influences these effects.



How was this study done?



N = 709



H0
H1
3 x 3 Online Experimental Study

- Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: **Unedited (UE)**, **Photoshopped (PS)**, **AI-generated (AI)**.
- Each viewed 3 **unedited** images below along with a description **based on its domain**.
- Rated on **Perceived Authenticity (PA)**, **Deviation from Truth (DFT)**, **Ethical Violation (EV)** and **Acceptability (AC)**.

Primary Analysis

- ANOVAs conducted to probe main and interaction effects.
- Structural Equation Model (SEM) conducted to test hypothesized model of image alteration on acceptance.

The 3 images used



Social Media



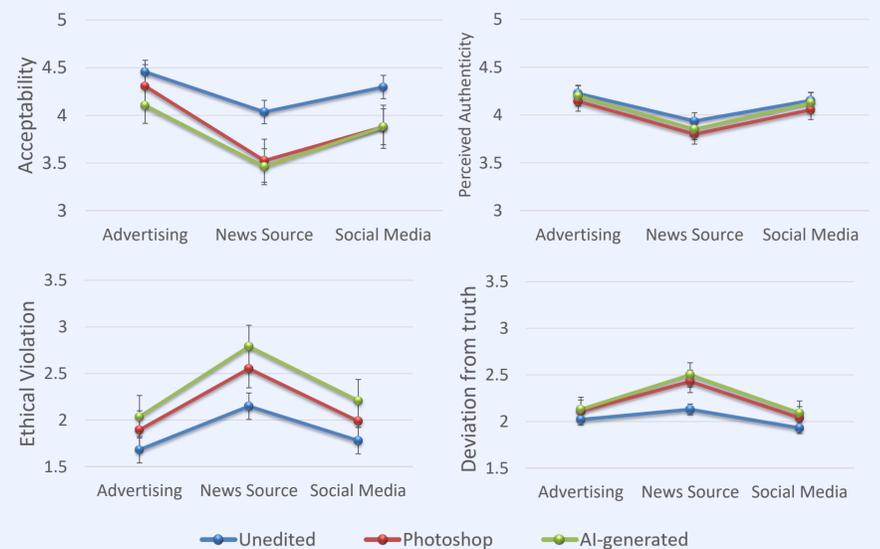
Advertising



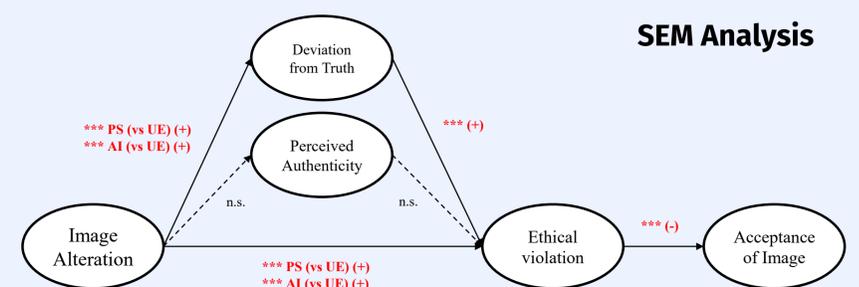
News Source



What was found?



- ANOVAs indicate significant effects of IA on Acceptability, Ethical Violation and Deviation from Truth ($ps < .05$), **AI** and **PS** increasing EV and DFT but having a **reverse effect** on AC.
- **News source** seem to strongly modulate the effect of IA on ethical and truth perceptions (interaction $ps < .05$).



- IA mainly reduces acceptance because people see it as an ethical violation, driven by a sense of deviation from truth.
- Both AI and PS disclosures are judged as more ethically wrong than UE, which lowers image acceptability.



What can we conclude?

- IA affects acceptability, sense of ethical violation and deviation from truth.
- The strength of these effects differs depending on the context that the images are presented in, particularly enhanced in news contexts.
- Results suggest that acceptability of an image is reduced because IA disclosures suggest that the viewed image no longer represents truth as fully.

References:

- ¹ Wellman, M. L., Stoldt, R., Tully, M., & Ekdale, B. (2020). Ethics of Authenticity: Social Media Influencers and the Production of Sponsored Content. *Journal of Media Ethics*, 35(2), 68–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2020.1736078>
- ² Jia, H., Appelman, A., Wu, M., & Bien-Aimé, S. (2024). News bylines and perceived AI authorship: Effects on source and message credibility. *Computers in Human Behavior: Artificial Humans*, 2(2), 100093. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbah.2024.100093>