



More Americans are spending money to surgically alter their appearance. But what are the real costs of meeting a narrow beauty standard?

Loren Rutherford

Make Me PERFECT

The front door flew open. Standing, silhouetted by the late afternoon sun, was my mother and her friend Estelle. Behind them, carrying two suitcases, was Estelle's grown daughter Meredith.

Estelle was unsteady on her feet, as a street drunk might be, and would have toppled forward had it not been for the support of my mother's sturdy arms. As the ailing Estelle was led through the door, my eyebrows jumped clear to the top of my head.

She looked as though she had flown through a windshield or been mauled by a Rottweiler. Although partially hidden by enormous black sunglasses and a floppy hat, her face was black, blue, red and green, and looking to burst along the seams of stitches that wound through her face like train tracks. Her head was as knotted and distorted as an Osage orange. As she was ushered quickly by, I could see from a side view that the whites of her bugged-out eyes had changed to the color of garnets.

Estelle had undergone a facelift, as mother had explained to me in advance, and she would be "staying with us" until she got well. That took two weeks, during which time Estelle rarely came out of my bedroom, now her convalescent suite.

One night after dinner, I asked my mother why Estelle had done this. "She thinks it will make her look younger," she said, scrubbing away at the sudsy pot in the sink.

"Why does she want to look younger?" I asked with 10-year-old curiosity.

"So she can get a man," Mother said, her voice hardening.

"Oh," I said, not quite understanding. "You wouldn't get one

cause you're married, right?"

"No," she said rinsing the pot and slapping it down on the top of the stove. "I wouldn't get one because no man on Earth is worth that. And if your father ever asked me to, I'd shoot him."

That was 1970, when a facelift, uncommon outside of celebrity circles, was the cosmetic surgery ultimate, considerably more exotic and drastic than a rhinoplasty. Today, however, it's a whole new paradigm. Cosmetic surgery has exploded in American society, buoyed in part by an influx of new technology and treatments. Now everything and anything seems to be a valid target for "enhancement," as industry professionals like to say.

In 2004 alone, the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery (AAFPRS) reports a 22 percent increase in facial procedures over 2003. The American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS) says that, overall, surgical and nonsurgical cosmetic procedures jumped 44 percent over 2003 to a total of 11.9 million. According to ASAPS, Botox topped the nonsurgical procedure list, with liposuction (2,837,346) and breast augmentations (1,411,899) leading the list for surgical procedures.

The market segment experiencing the largest growth appeared to be Hispanic Americans with 553,000 cosmetic procedures, or a 49 percent increase for 2004. Those numbers are reported by another association, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS).

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Media blitz

However precise the numbers may be, it's clear that cosmetic surgery has attained a foothold of acceptance in our society well beyond that of Estelle's time. To no small degree this can be explained by the intense media coverage the industry receives. In a larger media context, this has occurred during a decided programming shift away from news to tabloidism, producing an expectant bi-product of celebrity obsession. Star gossip has always been part of the mix of American media, but it was once relegated to the celebrity gossip page or the scandal sheets.

That is true no longer. Whether print, television, radio or Web, media channels devote unprecedented emphasis and placement to infotainment. Even nightly newscasts, like those on KCAL 9 in Los Angeles, can easily move from product promotion to commercial and back again without viewer notice. And Fox News has given up on journalism altogether. Under the far-reaching hand of Rupert Murdoch, even the look of its reporting has a cartoonish, graphics-dependent presentation that is intended to enthrall, not inform.

The result is a media culture dependent upon hype, where voting for the next American idol generates more visceral urgency than voting for an American president, at least for younger generations. None of this is driven by the cosmetic surgery industry, of course; far from it. But celebrityitis has, undoubtedly, been a boon to the business. At least, that's what some industry leaders think.

"I believe at least some of this upward trend may be attributable to increased media coverage of plastic surgery in 2004," says ASAPS President Peter Fodor, MD. "That can be a strong incentive for [people] to seek the same benefits by having cosmetic procedures themselves."

"By looking at the statistics," says Steven Pearlman, MD, president of AAFPRS, "it is evident that facial plastic surgery has become a norm."

Pearlman's statement, which passed as standard public relations fare, might be cause for alarm to the careful listener. The doctor suggests that something that is inherently artificial has been accepted as normal, and that it is being adopted on a broad social scale to emulate a media standard that is decidedly abnormal.

"It sets up issues and gives women a very warped sense of reality," says Taysha Urquhart, a 26-year-old Southern California marketing professional. "It's not reality at all. What you see on TV are size-2 women, yet the average size is about 12."

According to a recent article in the *New York Post*, the distortion is even greater than Urquhart claims: The average 40-year-old

American woman wears a size 14 dress and a size 9 shoe. That's a far cry from size-0 Sarah Jessica Parker, or the top heavy, slim-hipped glamour queens of *Desperate Housewives*, characters that make even perky, perfect Jane Wyatt of *Father Knows Best*-fame look average.

"The media doesn't create the desire to be beautiful," says Hugo Schwyzer, PhD, professor of history and gender studies at Pasadena Community College. "But the media does tell us what is beautiful and it offers a remarkably narrow definition for women."



Looking younger is still given as the main reason people elect to pay for cosmetic procedures, according to the AAFPRS. But capitalizing on the "normalization" of celebrity overexposure, programming trends in recent years have taken the issue of cosmetic enhancement into a whole new, and potentially sinister, arena—the concept of designer bodies, showcased by the infamous "extreme makeover" phenomenon and its various knock-offs.

Even *The Swan*, which vies for the most demented and cruel invention in network television history, recently found itself replicated of all places in China, where a Miss Artificial Beauty pageant was held. (Not to be outdone, cable has taken the extreme makeover formula even further: There is now a version for children.)

"These are people I would normally perceive as reasonably attractive," Schwyzer says, speaking about *The Swan*'s contestants. "It's really important for people to be able to project themselves into the positions of the people on the program. It's vital that the person be fairly average or normal so the viewer

can connect to her.”

But what effects, if any, is this trend having on the psychology of women—who remain the overwhelming targets of the enhancement industry—their self-image and -esteem? Can the extreme makeover craze, which has entered the vernacular in American speech, simply be laughed off as the new millennium version of the pressed, dressed and ready-to-go housewife of the 1950s?

Possibly. But some disturbing evidence suggests the opposite. The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) estimates that in the U.S. 10 million females and 1 million males suffer from anorexia or bulimia, both of which can be life-threatening conditions (made most recently clear by the Terri Schiavo case, whose bulimia led to her eventual brain damage). NEDA claims that another 25 million Americans struggle with binge eating disorder.

Although the nation’s population is aging, the audience for cosmetic surgery is getting younger. The ASAPS reports that 45 percent of all procedures in 2004 were performed on people under age 50. More patients in their 20s are electing to pay for invasive and noninvasive procedures. And even teenagers, still in the physical process of maturing, are going under the knife.

“The traditional area was rhinoplasty,” says Kenneth Steinsapir, MD, a private practice cosmetic surgeon in Los Angeles. “I think that’s generally accepted and seems to be psychologically okay. For me, though, the larger issues are that young adults are getting breast surgery, when their personalities are not fully formed.”

Steinsapir notes that breast augmentation is inherently sexualizing in nature, and this raises concerns for him, given the young age of some of the patients. “It’s troubling,” he says.

2003 ASAPS statistics cite 11,326 breast enlargement procedures for females under the age of 18. Total cosmetic procedures for this same group totaled 223,594.

“There’s a big gap between saying ‘I’m different from all the other girls in the locker room’ and saying ‘I want to look more like what I see on television and in the magazines,’” Schwyzer observes. “Those images are usually the result of surgery and air-brushing and post-image enhancement.”

Marie Teller (not her real name) is a 25-year-old Southern California native who works for a local university. “I think I was 12 when I first considered plastic surgery,” she says. “I wasn’t the prettiest girl. I had glasses, a big nose, big ears. I was just a big nerd. I would always daydream that one day I could have surgery.”

Teller remembers being tormented for her looks in school, but excuses such treatment as “warranted.” “I think being in Southern California had a lot to do with it,” she says of the ridicule. “Looks were huge at all the schools I went to.”

She says she had a mole on her face removed when she was a child. “My mother informed me that it was very ugly and it needed to go.” She adds that, if she had the money, she would “definitely” do more cosmetic surgery, including breast augmentation.

Linking into the type of experience Teller describes, Schwyzer notes, “Our culture undermines women’s sense of

their selves. Our culture works overtime—and makes a fortune—off the tremendous self-doubt and anxiety that millions and millions of otherwise successful women experience.”

Dangers and risks

For all Americans, liposuction and Botox top the lists for the most surgical and nonsurgical procedures, respectively. A number of botched facial surgeries and some well-publicized deaths following liposuction and other treatments have made some consumers more wary.

The American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery (AACS) issued a warning in February that a proliferation of copycat injectables was flooding the market. The AACS suggested consumers question their cosmetic practitioners about the substance to be injected, where it was obtained and if it is approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Silicone breast implants were banned by government officials in 1992 after a reported failure rate of more than 90 percent and testimony from hundreds of women claiming to have suffered autoimmune illness and disease as a result of implant ruptures. Recently, however, the plastic surgery lobby and implant manufacturers have convinced the FDA to reconsider the safety of these materials.

Beyond safety, there is the issue of medical certification. As noted, there are several associations and organizations representing medical professionals in the cosmetic surgery industry: the American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery, the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons and others, all with names and abbreviations that are difficult to distinguish for the typical consumer.

However, according to spokespersons of the American Board of Plastic Surgery Inc. (ABPS), it is the only organization in the United States whose members are board certified to practice the full complement of plastic, reconstructive and cosmetic procedures, or as they put it, “head to toe.” Only some associations, such as the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, require that their members be ABPS-certified.

The total number of professionals certified by the ABPS? Approximately 5,300 in the U.S., a fraction of the number of active practitioners in the country today.

Steinsapir, who is not certified by the ABPS but is a fellow of the American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery and the American Society of Ophthalmic Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, claims the ABPS certification issue can be misleading. “A person can be board-certified in plastic surgery but not be qualified to do a facelift or a rhinoplasty based on their actual experience,” he says. “The eyelid surgery I did in my fellowship training was 10 times what a general plastic surgeon could be exposed to.”

Still, Steinsapir concedes that, with the number of practitioners in the market, the issue of certification is a tricky one. “For a consumer it can be confusing, because some may not go with somebody well trained to do what they need [and instead go]

to someone who isn't really appropriate for them. It's very challenging to find an appropriate specialist," he says.

Beyond the potential risks of procedures and the challenges of locating a qualified professional, Americans seem increasingly obsessed with appearance and outpace all other nations in taking this obsession to a medical level.

For Schwyzer, this is partially explained by intense efforts by the cosmetic surgery industry to alter Americans' sense of wellness. "Nurses and doctors are in the wellness business," he says. "If you have a large tumor in your belly or are bleeding from the head, then you are unwell. Everyone realizes this. But if you have small breasts, or fat deposits on your thighs, that is not unwell. It does not need to be medically addressed. But the cosmetic surgery industry needs to shift the sense of what wellness really is, and to make



wellness about beauty."

And the numbers suggest that the strategy is working. As for Urquhart, who both recognizes and decries the distorted view of women in the media, she says that she herself would consider plastic surgery. "People say I look fine the way I am. But I'm not satisfied with the way I look. I think it's something I would do."

When reminded that Mae West and Marilyn Monroe would be consid-

ered fat by today's standards, and Audrey Hepburn unacceptably small-chested, Urquhart sighs. "I guess in the entertainment industry, it just comes down to the opinion about what looks good."

If Urquhart is right, opinions easily change, especially when it comes to fashion and beauty. Current cosmetic surgery trends may suggest that diversity is out today, but it could be back in tomorrow. Then what? NWM

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