

## From Film to Filter: The Male Gaze and Plastic Surgery.

How 'the male gaze' in cinema has bled from the silver screen and seeped into our phone screens, where it has engulfed social media, perpetuating the increased use of plastic surgery by the female audience.

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Submitted to the Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technologies in candidacy for the  
BA (Hons) Degree in Television DL844

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24<sup>th</sup> February 2025

## Declaration of Originality

This thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) Television. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ana Francis". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A' and a stylized 'F'.

\_\_\_\_\_ [Signature here]

## Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude to Dr Ruth Moran for her guidance and encouragement over the past four years, for without her careful mentoring and deep insights this thesis would not be possible. I would also like to thank the library staff at IADT who could not have been more helpful. A huge thank you to the strong women in my life whose reflections and anecdotes helped to inspire and shape this thesis. Lastly, I would like to thank my boyfriend Andy for putting up with my tears and tantrums over the past year, your support and love is forever cherished.

## Abstract

Over the past decade, the significant rise in social media use has coincided with an increase in young women undergoing plastic surgery. This investigation explores how the increased exposure to online worlds and the perpetuation of the plastic surgery industry are deeply linked. The study applies Laura Mulvey's film concepts around 'the male gaze' and her coined phrase 'to-be-looked-at-ness' from her theoretic essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* to help analyse contemporary social media use. The examination argues that platforms like Instagram and TikTok, shaped by patriarchal structures, fuel the desire for body and face modifications, particularly among young women. The thesis examines the psychological, social, and physical impacts of social media on self-image, drawing on case studies and surveys to explore the links between social media, the plastic surgery industry, and objectification. Personal research is also given through studying visual trends on social media. The observations and findings will be explored through examining imagery obtained from the various social media platforms. The study also looks at marketing strategies used by the plastic surgery industry, such as influencers and 'Instagram dolls' and how they contribute to the 'Instagram face' and 'uncanny valley' phenomena. The thesis will further investigate virtual idealization, body dysmorphia, and the harmful effects of filters on self-perception. Ultimately, the thesis underscores the need for regulation of plastic surgery marketing to address ethical concerns and the growing societal consequences of online beauty standards.

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## Introduction

Over the past decade there has been a consequential increase in social media use, particularly amongst young people. In correlation to this growth, there has been a significant rise in the number of young women undergoing cosmetic and plastic surgery. This investigation aims to highlight how the increased exposure to online worlds and the perpetuation of the plastic surgery industry are linked.

Moreover, the investigation will examine how Laura Mulvey's significant theoretic work on 'the male gaze' from her essay *Visual Pleasure in narrative cinema*<sup>1</sup> can be adapted for contemporary times and applied to social media.

Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze' explores how women are objectified in film as passive objects of male desire, with both the camera and storyline reflecting a male perspective.

This examination applies Mulvey's ideas to social media, switching out the silver screen for the phone screen, and argues that platforms like Instagram and TikTok are shaped by patriarchal structures that fuel the desire for body and face modifications amongst young women. Moreover, this study highlights how social media platforms are viewed through the heterosexual male gaze. The thesis examines the psychological, social, and physical impacts of social media on young women and the pressure to undergo plastic surgery. The examinations draw on case studies in aesthetic surgery journals and before determining the links between social media, the plastic surgery industry, and its patriarchal influences.

Fig. 1 is a graph titled *Number of social media users worldwide from 2017 to 2028*, representing the research findings undergone by a survey from Statista that shows how rapidly social media use has grown since 2017 and will continue to grow in the coming years. The statistic shows that the use of social media over a ten year period has more than doubled. In 2017, 2.73 billion people used social media compared to the monumental growth of 5.17 billion in 2024.<sup>2</sup> (2024)

Number of social media users worldwide from 2017 to 2028  
(in billions)

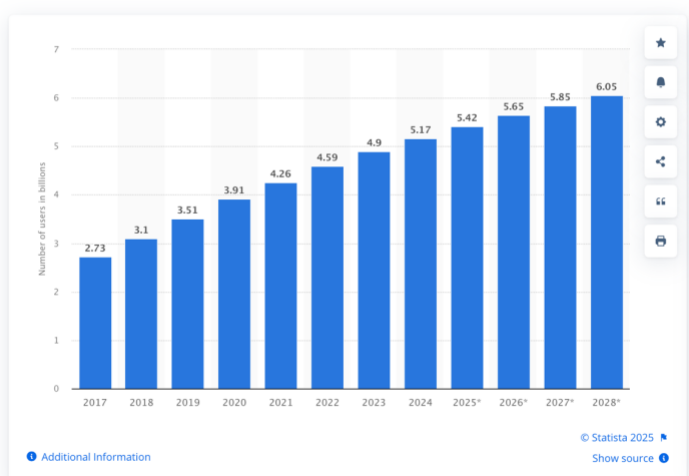


Fig. 1: Number of social media users worldwide from 2017 to 2028 - Statista (2024).

<sup>1</sup> Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Screen, 1975, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Dixon, Stacey Jo. "Number of social media users worldwide from 2017 to 2028". *Statista*, 2024.  
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>

Similarly, rapid growth can be seen in individuals undergoing plastic surgery as shown in a survey undergone by ISAPS in June 2023. “The International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) released the results of its annual Global Survey on Aesthetic/Cosmetic Procedures {...} showing a higher increase of 5.5% in surgical procedures, with more than 15.8 million procedures performed by plastic surgeons and 19.1 non-surgical procedures. Over the last four years, the overall increase is 40%.”<sup>3</sup>(2024) ISAPS is the world’s leading professional body for board-certified aesthetic plastic surgeons. The findings show the immense increase of aesthetic plastic surgery over the last four years. The survey for 2024 is still underway but if growth patterns are to be examined and presumed, we can conclude that the overall increase will have risen again over the past year.

The parallel growth observed in both surveys during the same period is significant and forms the foundation of this study. The correlation between these surveys serves as a key element in developing the thesis, which will explore a range of surveys drawn from diverse demographic groups within aesthetic journal case studies throughout the investigation.

This investigation aims to understand the significant impact of social media on the psyche of women, especially young women. As young women scroll through their feeds, they are exposed to the male gaze, consciously or unconsciously viewing themselves and others through an objectifying lens. The scrutiny of appearances and the exploitation of insecurities by the plastic surgery industry are at the forefront of this study. Mulvey’s concept of “to-be-looked-at-ness”<sup>4</sup>(Mulvey) is more relevant than ever in the context of social media. Chapter one of this thesis will explore how this concept, along with objectification and voyeuristic tendencies, contributes to the rise in aesthetic plastic surgery.

Chapter Two of this investigation will examine marketing strategies employed by the plastic surgery industry, such as the use of influencers and ‘Instagram dolls’ to target women. Research will include both case studies and original investigation, correlating survey findings with visual trends seen on social media platforms. Images from social media will be used to highlight the prevalence of plastic surgery and demonstrate the phenomenon of the ‘uncanny valley’ online world and the ‘Instagram face’. Chapter Two will also underline the influence of social media on facial modifications, before later examining the world of body modifications in Chapter Three.

As well as studying social medias links to body modifications, Chapter Three will examine virtual idealization and its links to body dysmorphia and the decision to undergo plastic surgery. Finally, Chapter Three will explore the detrimental impact of filters and Photoshop on self-perception and a fragmented self.

This study is an important topic for discussion as the strive for ‘perfection’ being perpetuated online is having growing consequences for society.

Undergoing surgery of any kind is significant and for certain people it can be positively life changing, however in the context of aesthetic, plastic surgery,

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<sup>3</sup>ISAPS, “ISAPS International Survey On Aesthetic/Cosmetic Procedures”. ISAPS, New Jersey. 2023.

[https://www.isaps.org/media/rxnfqibn/isaps-global-survey\\_2023.pdf](https://www.isaps.org/media/rxnfqibn/isaps-global-survey_2023.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Mulvey. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Screen, 1975, p. 11.

the influence regarding beauty and body trends online must be underlined and apprehended. Regulations surrounding such practices need to be put in place, particularly regarding the ethical issues which arise when advertising such drastic surgeries towards women online.

## Chapter One: To-be-looked-at-ness and social media

Viewing both film and media through the lens of the heterosexual male has infiltrated, subconsciously or otherwise, the psyche of the audience. Although this objectification of women in media has been around since its inception, it has now transcended towards even more dangerously influential realms, such as social media apps and online platforms.

The pleasure derived from both watching others and being watched is a concept that has always been a part of the human experience, as it taps into fundamental aspects of human curiosity, voyeurism, and desire. The online world and social media has made these impulses extremely accessible. Salacious act's that were once seen as private and often deemed shameful are now being encouraged and amplified.

Both, 'the male gaze theory'<sup>5</sup> and the act of scopophilia<sup>678</sup> 'or taking pleasure in looking at a highly illuminated object – particularly women'(Mulvey)<sup>9</sup> are important concepts to explore to gain a deeper understanding of how social media has had a prolific effect on the increased use of plastic surgery amongst women.

In 1972, art critic and novelist John Berger presented his influential television series *Ways of Seeing*, where he famously stated, "Men dream of women, women dream of themselves being dreamt of. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at."<sup>10</sup> While this statement does not count for all women, it does offer a thought-provoking lens through which we can examine the dynamics of the modern online world, particularly on platforms where the act of being looked at and observed has become central to how individuals, especially young women, present themselves.

This thesis does not seek to overlook marginalised groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, depicting only a heteronormative online world, but its primary objective is to examine the nature of the hetero-male lens within social media and its harmful repercussions. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of how this framework can contribute to toxicity, such as perpetuating the plastic surgery industry amongst young women, within digital platforms.

The male gaze theory was first coined by feminist writer Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." At the time, Mulvey's exploration was influential, provocative and groundbreaking. Mulvey argued that traditional cinema often portrays women from a male perspective, positioning them as objects of visual pleasure for male viewers. This thesis strives to apply Laura Mulvey's theory to modern day social media use.

Professor Rosalind Gill, a sociologist and feminist cultural theorist, interviewed 200 young women aged 18 and 30 while researching for her book *Perfect: Feeling judged on social media*. Her researched showed that young women

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<sup>5</sup> Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Allen, David W., ed. *The fear of looking or scopophilic—Exhibitionistic conflicts*. Butterworth-Heinemann, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Metz, Jonathan. "From scopophilia to Survivor: A brief history of voyeurism." *Textual Practice* 18.3, 2004, p. 415.

<sup>9</sup> Riggs, Larry W. "Trouble in the empire of the gaze: Woman, scopophilia, and power in several seventeenth-century works." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 8.2, 1997, p.123.

<sup>10</sup> Berger, John. "Ways of Seeing". *BBC*, Ep.2, 1972.

felt "being watched" when posting images about their lives. For many young women, the experiences of being "stared at" by strangers were negative. "They felt embarrassed, afraid, and other unpleasant emotions and the unwanted attention and comments even sometimes made them feel being harassment."<sup>11</sup> Gill's research highlights the proliferation of Mulvey's ideas of 'the male gaze' and 'to-be-looked-at-ness' within social media. "women are given this role to be exhibited and be looked at".<sup>12</sup> Mulvey's coined term "to-be-looked-at-ness" captures many of the attributes associated with women posting selfies and images of their bodies on social media. "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be looked-at-ness."<sup>13</sup>

Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 are examples of 'the male gaze' in classic Hollywood cinema. In the first *Transformers* film (2007), Megan Fox's character, Mikaela Banes, is introduced in a suggestive scene where the camera frames her in a sexually charged way. The shot is focused on her bending over a car, highlighting her curves. This framing positions the audience to view Mikaela as an object of male desire.



Fig. 2: Megan Fox in *Transformers* – Film (2007)

Fig. 3 shows Marilyn Monroe's iconic role in the film *The Seven Year Itch*. (1955) Throughout the film Monroe's character, *The Girl*, is portrayed as a sensual object of male desire, defined by her looks. The iconic scene shown in Fig. 4 of her standing over a subway grate, with her dress blowing up, underscores this objectification. The camera focuses on her body while male protagonist, Richard

<sup>11</sup> Gill, Rosalind. *Perfect: Feeling judged on social media*. John Wiley & Sons, 2023, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. *Screen*, 1975, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. *Screen*, 1975, p.11.

Sherman, watches. These moments throughout the film reinforce her role as an object of male fantasy, rather than a fully developed character with her own agency.



Fig. 3: Marilyn Monroe in The Seven Year Itch - Film (1955)



Fig. 4: Marilyn Monroe standing over the subway gate in The Seven Year Itch – Film (1955)

In today's online world, Mulvey's concept of to-be-looked-at-ness is more evident than ever. Social media apps such as Instagram and TikTok are flooded with hypersexualised images of women appealing to the public gaze, or more notably, the gaze of the heterosexual man. Fig. 5 shows a selfie Kylie Jenner posted to her own Instagram page (2024). She is posing sexually in her underwear and the lens is focused on her body, particularly her breasts. However, instead of a film camera

‘watching’ and focusing on her, she is taking the photograph of herself with her own phone. This self-objectification sets out to appeal to the male gaze lens from which social media is viewed. This thesis sets out to examine the proliferation of such hypersexualised imagery of women on social media platforms, where content is often curated to cater to the male gaze. The study explores how Mulvey’s concept of "to-be-looked-at-ness" may contribute to the rising popularity of plastic surgery, particularly among young women.



Fig. 5: Kylie Jenner Selfie - Instagram (2024)

Today, the concept of objectification “The term bundles together issues about appearance, beauty, bodies, sex and social power”<sup>14</sup> is often used in discussions as a way to analyse the way that women are both represented and represent themselves in media, but it also extends across broader societal contexts, shaping how women are perceived and interact with the world.

“Objectification is an issue of media representation and everyday experiences alike, and it cuts through feminist inquiry on an international scale as shorthand for sexist practices of representation and gender-based inequalities.”<sup>15</sup> Susanna Paasonen is a Professor of Media Studies at The University of Turku, Finland. In her book titled *Objectification: On the Difference Between Sex and Sexism* she examines how the issue of objectification and the oppression that it feeds transcends all aspects of society regarding women, both in everyday life in online realms.

<sup>14</sup> Paasonen, Susanna. *Objectification : On the Difference Between Sex and Sexism*. Taylor and Francis Group, 2002, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Paasonen, Susanna. *Objectification : On the Difference Between Sex and Sexism*. Taylor and Francis Group, 2002, p. 3.

Another important topic to discuss when trying to understand objectification is bodily autonomy.<sup>1617</sup> For an equal world, it is essential that women have full bodily autonomy in online spaces, such as social media. “Of all the rights women have won since the 1970s, bodily integrity is still elusive, not just in the United States but around the world.”<sup>18</sup> However, when women's images and photos can be easily manipulated and used to promote plastic surgery, amongst other things, it raises critical concerns about the preservation of true bodily integrity.

Moreover, many women argue that posting images online allows them to take control of their sexuality and exercise agency. However, this idea becomes more complex when viewed through the lens of the patriarchal structures that shape social media. “There is voyeurism at the heart of self-imaging that brings with it a sense of discomfort and awkwardness in viewers. The desire to see oneself; or at least create a type of fictional selfhood, encourages a specific kind of gaze, but it also compels those who consume selfies to look upon the private intimacies of others. That conjunction of desires: the interplay between the observer-photographer and the viewer-consumer is where much of the tension arises. But it is also where forms of resistance and activism can be mobilized. The convergence of desires is what makes the selfie a powerful, if not also fraught, a form of visual communication”.<sup>19</sup> Derek Conrad Murray, a Professor of the History of Art and Visual Culture at the University of California underlines how in conjunction to the tension surrounding the voyeuristic nature of social media, selfies and online personas can also bring about change. This digital selfhood can give voices to marginalised groups and bring about important resistance and activism amongst society. However, the negative aspects of digital selfhood stem from the connection between an online presence and the pressures and emphasis on appearance in visual-centric platforms, such as social media.

In recent years, social media has transformed into a predominantly voyeuristic experience. People are growing increasingly addicted to both watching and being watched. “It is a mode of observation that transgresses an acknowledged boundary. For the voyeur, the pleasure and value of the experience derive in part from its transgressive character. The object of the voyeur’s gaze may or may not be aware of being watched, and the voyeur’s experience will certainly be altered by any such awareness. The voyeuristic experience is by definition paradoxical, in part because it includes both a yearning for intimacy and a desire to remain distant on the part of the voyeur.”<sup>20</sup> Ronald Huebert, a Professor of English Emeritus from Dalhousie University describes voyeurism as a way of observing others that crosses a clear boundary, often watching someone in private without their knowledge. The pleasure comes from the fact that it feels forbidden or secret.

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<sup>16</sup> Mackenzie, Catriona. "On bodily autonomy." *Handbook of phenomenology and medicine*. Dordrecht, Springer Netherlands, 2001, p. 418.

<sup>17</sup> Spain, Daphne. *Constructive Feminism : Women's Spaces and Women's Rights in the American City*. Cornell University Press, 2016, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Spain, Daphne. *Constructive Feminism : Women's Spaces and Women's Rights in the American City*. Cornell University Press, 2016, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Murray, Derek Conrad. "Visual Culture Approaches to the Selfie". Taylor and Francis Group, 2021, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Huebert, Ronald. *Privacy in the Age of Shakespeare*. University of Toronto Press, 2016, p. 111.

On social media, individuals knowingly consent to being observed by sharing personal content with the broader online world. By posting personal images, videos and information they invite a public gaze. Individuals who post on social media platforms expect to be seen or acknowledged. However, this consent is paradoxical because while the individual is aware that they are putting themselves out there, they can never truly know the full extent of who is viewing their content or in what way. The individual may know the number of followers or viewers, but they don't know *who* is truly watching or what their intentions are, maintaining an element of mystery and anonymity for the audience. When individuals know that they are being watched and observed through social media it can cause them to be highly conscious of their appearance and how they present themselves. This constant awareness can lead to a heightened focus on physical appearance, as individuals curate their posts to fit certain beauty standards or to project a specific image of themselves.

Unhealthy parasocial relationships are often formed through screens. “Face-to-face relationships between audiences and mass media performers (like television personalities) are interactions that share similarities with social relationships but are one sided and controlled by the performer”.<sup>21</sup> Although Joleen Bloom, a games scholar with a PhD in game studies, highlights how the power in a parasocial relationship is with the performer or content creator, the power dynamic is more complex when such pressure is put on appearances and beauty standards of said performers or content creators, particularly regarding women. Many women online, with an audience or follower account can become unhealthily concerned and obsessed with their appearance, both online and in real life.

These behaviors grow from the deep-rooted insecurities and objectification that have been cultivated over centuries due to patriarchal structures, both on and off the screen. “Are we to believe that the selfie has produced a society of deviant, ruined, narcissistic women, suffering from a combustible mixture of low self-esteem and self-obsession, who are traumatized by a culture of constant misogynistic degradation? If our teaches young women to see themselves only as sexual objects for the desires of men, then perhaps there is some truth in all of this. {...} so many of the Western world’s social norms have been codified by centuries of gendered hierarchies and phallogocentric values that have actively sought to pathologize womanhood.”<sup>22</sup>

Derek Conrad Murray, a *Professor of History of Art and Visual Culture* at the University of California highlights the concern that women online should not be branded as self-obsessed or vain because they themselves are products of the misogynistic degradation endured throughout history.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to recognize these behaviors of self-objectification as a reflection of a society that still measures women by their appearance. Social media platforms are a cesspit for further misogyny. Insecurities that were created by patriarchal hierarchies can now, more easily and more freely dissect women further. To fully understand the complexities of this issue, it is crucial to emphasize that the problem does not lie in young women expressing agency and ownership over their bodies online. Rather, the negative aspect situates itself with the male-dominated plastic surgery industry exploiting this vulnerability.

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<sup>21</sup> Bloom, Joleen. *Video Game Characters and Transmedia Storytelling : The Dynamic Game Character*. Amsterdam University Press, 2023, p. 126.

<sup>22</sup> Murray, Derek Conrad. *Visual Culture Approaches to the Selfie*. Taylor and Francis Group, 2021, p.

<sup>23</sup> Murray, Derek Conrad. *Visual Culture Approaches to the Selfie*. Taylor and Francis Group, 2021, p.

The billion dollar plastic and cosmetic surgery industry benefits hugely from the insecurities that these online environments birth. “In a recent survey, public respondents were asked what was the most influential of all online methods for selecting a surgeon. Social media platforms ranked highest, beating out practice web sites.”<sup>24</sup> A study done in ‘The Indian Journal of Plastic Surgery titled’ *Why social media is transforming plastic surgery* found huge links between social media use and the perpetuation of the plastic surgery industry.(2020)

Social media companies also profit off the engagement that is grown from sexualised images, self-objectification and online pursuits of perfection.

Capitalism is central to the patriarchal structures that support the plastic and cosmetic surgery industries, as well as social media. These structural systems understand the engagement that beauty trends algorithms and ideals garner. This engagement is capitalised on and creates billions in profits for plastic surgery and cosmetic industries, as well as the social media platforms themselves.

“In the context of makeover culture it signifies the capability to attract and compel the attention of others, to be seen . Because of this, the way that successful self-representation is measured increasingly incorporates elements of sex appeal and sexiness and the erotic is bound up with the way we understand a person’s “ beauty ” , “ charisma ” and “ personality ” {...}sexualization has increasingly become a form of shorthand used to draw together a wide variety of concerns – not only about traditional media and body image, but about body work, celebrity, performance, image-making and self-representation.”<sup>25</sup> Paasonen highlights how in today’s online world, attractiveness is deeply linked with the power to attract attention. On apps like Instagram and TikTok, erotic and sexualised images gain the most attention and engagement. Sexualisation now serves as a lens through which various social issues are viewed. Growing up in an environment where sex and exploitation equals to currency has extremely negative impacts on self-worth, especially in women and young girls.

Social media reinforces these negative ideas by rewarding content that promotes current beauty standards and trends, before converting it into revenue.<sup>26</sup> This structure commodifies how sexualised a person looks, making it more important than other vitally important traits, such as intelligence, creativity, belonging and purpose. The commodifying of such sexualised images reinforces patriarchal values. In terms of plastic and cosmetic surgery, this online presence is often pressuring young women on online platforms to obtain to certain beauty standards and partake in current beauty trends.

The growing link between chronic social media use and the increasing demand for plastic surgery is becoming increasingly evident. In the past, women would encounter hypersexualised and objectified images in films, on television, or in magazines, in short spurts of a time, often as a form of escapism. However, today, these images and videos are a constant presence, continually absorbed into the female psyche throughout the day. The consuming nature of social media means that

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<sup>24</sup> Rohrich, Rod J., et al. "Why social media is transforming plastic surgery." *Indian Journal of Plastic Surgery* 53.01, 2020,

<sup>25</sup> Paasonen, Susanna. *Objectification : On the Difference Between Sex and Sexism*. Taylor and Francis Group, 2002, p. 107.

<sup>26</sup> Mercer, John, and Clarissa Smith. ‘Thirst Trapping’: *Digitised Desire and the Online Sexual Economy*. Sexualised Masculinity. Routledge p. 208.

exposure to such content is no longer limited to occasional moments but has become an ongoing part of everyday life. For certain individuals this influencing and all-consuming comparison can be detrimental to self-esteem and feelings of self-worth.

A study published in *Aesthetic Surgery Journal Open Forum* titled "A Study of Plastic Surgery Trends With the Rise of Instagram" used Google Lens to analyse the correlation between the growth in plastic surgery-related searches and the rise of Instagram since its launch in 2011. "The authors found significant variations in search volume for plastic surgery procedures before and after April 2012. Blepharoplasty, Botox, brachioplasty, breast implant removal, breast reduction, brow lift, butt lift, hair transplantation, lip augmentation, male breast surgery, mastopexy, mentoplasty, otoplasty, platysmaplasty, rhinoplasty, and thighplasty".<sup>27</sup> The conclusion of the study found that the authors observed a significant increase in public interest in both surgical and nonsurgical aesthetic procedures after Instagram gained popularity in the April of 2012. Over the past couple decades, online search tools such as Google Trends have tracked the increased use of plastic surgery. There is no denying this substantial increase being linked to an ever growing social media presence in society, particularly amongst young people. When social engagement is predominantly based off appearance, the pressure to look *perfect* is monumental.

In conclusion, the voyeuristic nature of social media has a more detrimental impact than its capacity in film. While film has long exploited voyeurism to objectify women, social media amplifies this issue, presenting women as hyper-sexualized objects of desire.

Although the male gaze in film appears to have evolved in recent years, patriarchal structures have simply shifted to new platforms. This transformation has worsened how women, especially young women, perceive themselves, as they now not only view celebrities through this objectifying lens but also internalize it, seeing themselves and their peers in the same way.

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<sup>27</sup> "A Study of Plastic Surgery Trends With the Rise of Instagram", *Aesthetic Surgery Journal Open Forum*, Volume 5. Oxford Academic, 2023.  
< <https://academic.oup.com/asjopenforum/article/doi/10.1093/asjof/ojad004/6982941> >



## Chapter Two: Uncanny ‘Instagram face’.

This chapter will explore case studies connecting online marketing to the growing prevalence of plastic surgery among young women. It will also examine how the plastic surgery industry employs various marketing strategies to target and influence young women online. Influencers like Kylie Jenner and Bella Hadid play a key role in promoting cosmetic procedures and plastic surgery to their followers. The phenomenon of ‘Instagram face’<sup>28</sup> is a significant trend that these ‘it girls’ have helped influence.

The chapter will also examine how ‘Instagram dolls’ are used to promote plastic surgery. These women document and share their plastic surgery experiences with their followers online in exchange for discounted or free procedures.

In recent years, the phenomenon of ‘Instagram face’ can be seen as a universally recognised online persona. Jia Tolentino, a writer for ‘The New Yorker’ coined the phrase in 2019 in her article titled, *The age of Instagram face*. She described the face as “a single, cyborgian face. It’s a young face, of course, with pore less skin and plump, high cheekbones. It has catlike eyes and long, cartoonish lashes; it has a small, neat nose and full, lush lips. It looks at you coyly but blankly, {...} The face is distinctly white but ambiguously ethnic. {...} “It’s like a sexy . . . baby . . . tiger,” Cara Craig, a high-end New York colorist, observed to me recently. The celebrity makeup artist Colby Smith told me, “It’s Instagram Face, duh. It’s like an unrealistic sculpture. Volume on volume. A face that looks like it’s made out of clay.”<sup>29</sup>

This ‘Instagram Face’ has influenced millions, leading to a widespread desire to emulate these signature features. This phenomenon has also contributed to the homogenization of beauty standards on social media. When scrolling through social media it is easy for one to feel as if they are drowning in a sea of similar-looking selfies and body types. Today, individuality is often sacrificed for a ‘uncanny valley’, surgically enhanced look. Freud described the uncanny as “something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it”<sup>30</sup> but when used in the context of the ‘digital uncanny’ it awakes even more senses of uncertainty.

“The digital uncanny builds on the uncanny’s relation to uncertainty, automation and repetition {...} Rather than hinging on an individual’s internalization of affect or emotional states of intensity, the digital uncanny amplifies an irresolvable uncertainty as to whether those very affects and intensities amount to reset responses or programmed gestures triggered by media stimulation.”<sup>31</sup> Dr. Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, a Professor of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles identifies how the digital uncanny makes us question whether the feelings we experience online are genuine or just part of a system designed to mimic those feelings.

The pressure for women online to transform their natural appearance has led to a generation of women online that look increasingly similar, often resembling clones of one another. This feeling of bizarre uncertainty while scrolling through

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<sup>28</sup> Tolentino, Jia. "The age of Instagram face." *The New Yorker*, 12, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Tolentino, Jia. "The age of Instagram face." *The New Yorker* 12, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Freud, Sigmund. “Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny) (1919)”. *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. The Hogarth Press, Vol.17, London, 1953, p.

<sup>31</sup> Ravetto-Biagioli, Kriss. *Digital Uncanny*. Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 7.

social media can often give a sense of surrealism, as the repetition of the faces staring back through the screen can resemble closer to AI simulations than real beings.

Fig. 6 shows this unsettling and eerily clone like sea of young women online. These women are from different parts of the world, different nationalities and races but their overall look and features are the same. Fig. 7 is an AI image representing the many clone-like ‘Instagram faces online’. Although this image is computer generated it is scarily similar to many young women’s explore pages which shows endless selfies of similar looking young women.

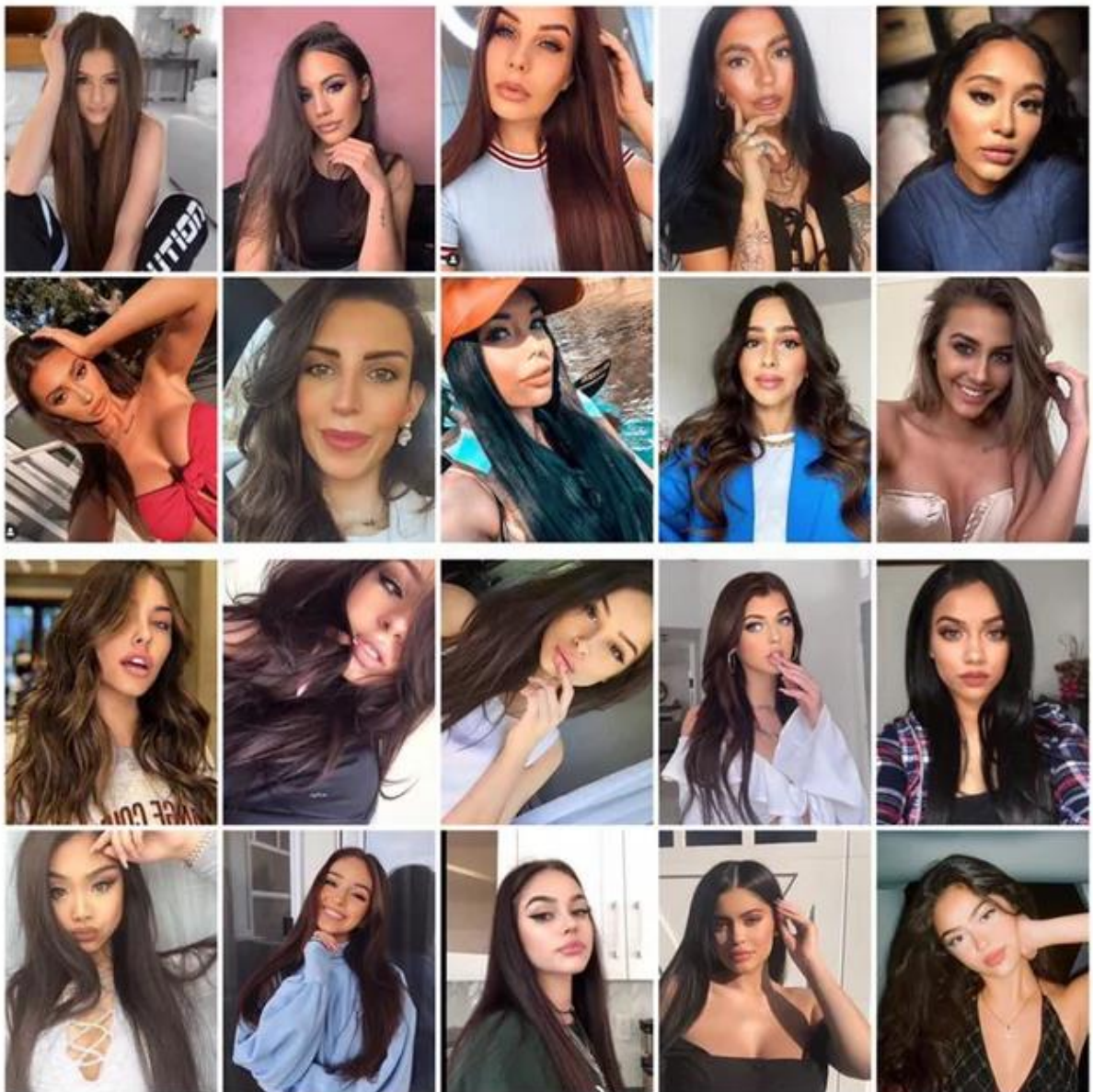


Fig. 6 : Sea of similar Instagram faces online – Reddit (2024)



Fig. 7: AI representation of Instagram face – Instagram (2024)

Millions of women appear as clones with this one specific *look*. However, for many women to achieve this glorified face online, they must undergo many cosmetic enhancements and plastic surgeries. “We hypothesize that the “ideal Instagram face” symbolizes contemporary beauty standards, shaped significantly by the visibility of beauty influencers on platforms such as Instagram. This hypothesis is underpinned by empirical observations from recent research which suggest that social media not only reflects but also establishes beauty trends. Studies have found that social media use can impact the desire for cosmetic surgery and treatments. Moreover, the demand for facial aesthetic treatments has increased over the last 20 years”.<sup>32</sup> This hypothesis is from a study titled *Is There An “Ideal Instagram Face” for Caucasian Female Influencers? A Cross-Sectional Observational Study of Facial Proportions in 100 Top*

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<sup>32</sup> “Is There An “Ideal Instagram Face” for Caucasian Female Influencers? A Cross-Sectional Observational Study of Facial Proportions in 100 Top Beauty Influencers”. *Aesthetic Surgery Journal Open Forum*. Oxford Academic, 2024.

<https://academic.oup.com/asjopenforum/article/doi/10.1093/asjof/ojae085/7816831>



racially ambiguous as possible. It is clear from Fig. 10 that Jenner has successfully manipulated and altered her face to have less typically white features. She looks like an almost completely different person then she did before having these procedures. It is also extremely difficult to determine her ethnicity and racial background.

The aesthetic aims for a hyper-perfect, almost doll-like appearance. “The ideal Instagram face seems symmetrical, matching the golden ratios, with a small and neat nose, full and lush lips, high cheekbones, as also a sharp and chiselled jawline.”<sup>34</sup> The look blends elements of traditional beauty standards with over exaggerated features, focusing on symmetry and unrealistic proportions. These characteristics include full lips - pumped with filler, sculpted, razor sharp cheekbones – often achieved with filler or cheek implants, large, almond shaped eyes – often pulled upwards with threads to create a ‘fox-eye’ look or sometimes, the eyelids are cut and altered with a blepharoplasty. Noses are also made smaller and perfectly symmetrical with rhinoplasty and signs of ethnicity such as bumps, hooks or downturns are often removed.



Fig. 10: Kylie Jenner transformation altering her face with plastic surgery – Instagram (2022)

Fig. 11 shows Bella Hadid, another public figure or online ‘it -girl’ who has had a huge influence social media aesthetics and plastic surgery<sup>35</sup>. While Hadid has denied much of her cosmetic work, she has admitted to having rhinoplasty at age 14, expressing regret in a 2022 Vogue interview, saying, "I wish I had kept the nose of my ancestors."<sup>36</sup> Hadid before plastic surgery can be seen on the left and after plastic surgery is can be seen on the right.

<sup>34</sup> “A Study of Plastic Surgery Trends With the Rise of Instagram”. *Aesthetic Surgery Journal Open Forum*, Oxford Academic, Volume 5, 2003, Vol.5  
<https://academic.oup.com/asjopenforum/article/doi/10.1093/asjof/ojad004/6982941>

<sup>35</sup> Raggio "Global perspectives on beauty." *Facial Plastic Surgery Clinics* 30.4, 2022, pp. 433-448.

<sup>36</sup> Haskell, Rob.Bella. *From the Heart: On Health Struggles, Happiness, and Everything In Between*, Vogue, 2022.



Fig. 11: Bella Hadid before and after cosmetic enhancements and plastic surgery – Instagram (2022)

Both Hadid and Jenner have modified their appearances to align with what is deemed desirable through the male gaze, promoting a version of beauty that is often unattainable. Their images reflect the same beauty standards once seen on the silver screen, now perpetuated across mass media and online platforms.

Today, Influencers like Kylie Jenner and Bella Hadid are seen as ‘it girls’<sup>37</sup> for many young women. These women who embody patriarchal ideals of beauty, play a key role in influencing women on social media. Influencers or online celebrities, such as Jenner and Hadid, act as instruments used by the patriarch to push the unattainable beauty standards to a wide demographic of women.<sup>38</sup> This patriarchal and oppressive pressure is cleverly disguised in these women to appear more female led and female focused.

During 2015, Kylie Jenner’s newly plumped lips became a major beauty trend and were being widely discussed and speculated about online. Jenner denied having any filler or work done to enhance the size or appearance of her lips. She put it all down to makeup techniques, such as overlining with lip liner. From this a viral discourse and beauty trend was birthed named ‘The Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge’. “This involved pursing the lips, pushing them into an empty shot glass, then sucking

<sup>37</sup> Sundvall, Scott. *GENDERED TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF , OR WHY WE REALLY NEED TO “KEEP UP” WITH THE KARDASHIANS. Rhetorical Speculations: The Future of Rhetoric, Writing, and Technology*, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Carrillat, Jasmina Ilicic. "The celebrity capital life cycle: A framework for future research directions on celebrity endorsement." *Journal of Advertising* 48.1, 2019, pp. 61-71.

in; the suction stimulated blood flow to the lips causing a temporary swelling. Not just swelling, but bruising and other unwanted effects.”<sup>39</sup>

This plumping effect can be seen in Fig. 12. The goal was to get exaggerated, pouty lips, an attempt to replicate Kylie Jenner’s then-iconic lip look. Participants, mostly teenagers, would post before-and-after photos or videos on social media platforms like Instagram, Vine, and Twitter, using hashtags like #KylieJennerChallenge and #KylieJennerLips. Some prepubescent girls were even taking part in the ‘challenge’ as shown in Fig. 13. This early exposure to facial altering techniques and the cosmetic surgery industry can have a profound and potentially harmful impact on the development of young girls.



Fig. 12: Kylie Jenner Lip challenge collage – Vine (2015)

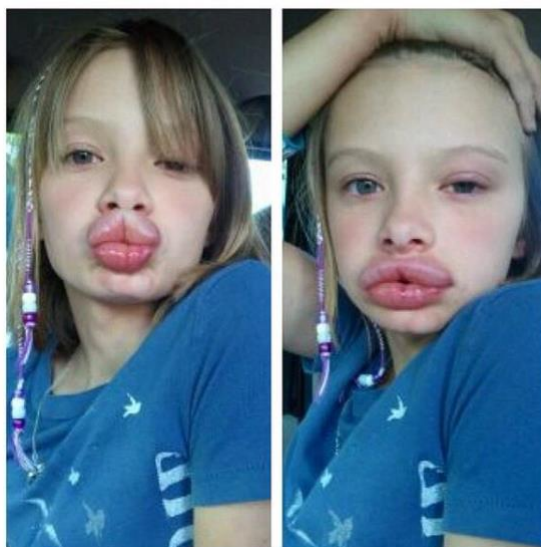


Fig. 13: Kylie Jenner Lip challenge young girl - Instagram (2015)

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<sup>39</sup> Cashmore, Elis. *Kardashian Culture : How Celebrities Changed Life in the 21st Century*. Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019, p.175.

Another way that hashtags on social media are used to promote plastic surgery amongst young women is by the surgeons themselves, see Fig.14 and Fig. 15.

“Instagram dolls are patients undergoing cosmetic surgery who document their experiences with a plastic surgeon on Instagram, providing their results for other patients or prospective clients. These individuals use hashtags to connect their work to the specific provider, creating a stream of potential clients directed toward the surgical practice.”<sup>40</sup>. A 2023 study titled *A Study of Plastic Surgery Trends With the Rise of Instagram*, published in *The Aesthetic Surgery Journal Open Forum*, hypothesised that increased medical marketing on Instagram has led to a surge in public interest in elective plastic surgery procedures. The authors explored how “Instagram dolls”, a term for influencers promoting aesthetic enhancements, represent one of the ways plastic surgeons are leveraging social media to expand their reach and attract a broader patient base. “Instagram in particular has shown to be one of the main tools used for plastic surgeon exposure, feedback, and connection within the plastic surgery realm.”<sup>41</sup>

The study found a significant increase in public interest in both surgical and nonsurgical aesthetic procedures following Instagram's rise in popularity, particularly after April 2012.

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<sup>40</sup> “A Study of Plastic Surgery Trends With the Rise of Instagram”. *Aesthetic Surgery Journal Open Forum*, Oxford Academic, Volume 5, 2003, Vol.5  
<https://academic.oup.com/asjopenforum/article/doi/10.1093/asjof/ojad004/6982941>

<sup>41</sup> “A Study of Plastic Surgery Trends With the Rise of Instagram”. *Aesthetic Surgery Journal Open Forum*, Oxford Academic, Volume 5, 2003, Vol.5  
<https://academic.oup.com/asjopenforum/article/doi/10.1093/asjof/ojad004/6982941>

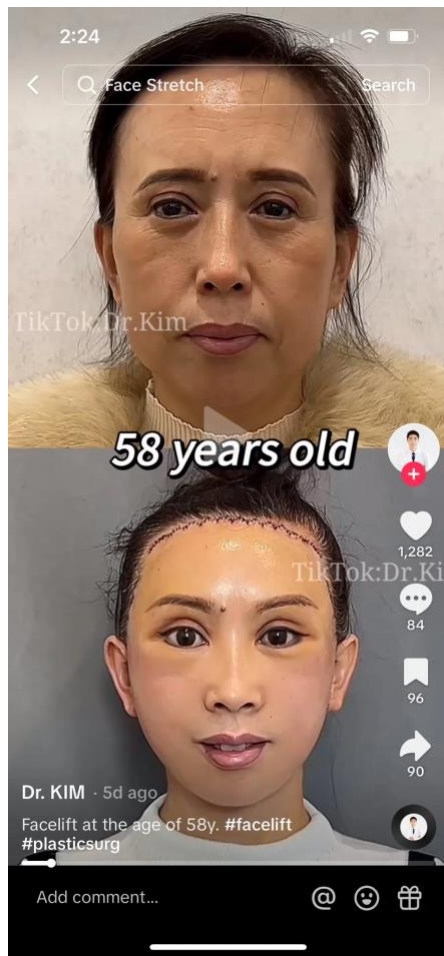


Fig. 14: Instagram doll face lift – TikTok (2024)



Fig. 15: 'Instagram doll', *Curved Dolls Plastic Surgery* – Instagram (2023)

In conclusion, trends like the 'Instagram face' show how social media shapes beauty standards and drives the rise in plastic surgery. Influencers, like the Kardashians, fuel this pressure to conform, exploiting the insecurities of women while profiting from a patriarchal system. They perpetuate internalized misogyny by using their platforms to reinforce beauty ideals. Influencers often act as 'Instagram dolls,' promoting plastic surgery procedures in exchange for discounted or free surgeries. Through the lens of the male gaze, societal pressures and beauty standards remain heavily influenced by male-dominated perspectives, with women serving as tools to reinforce these ideals.

## Chapter Three: Selfless Selfies

Chapter Three of this investigation further examines the influence of social media and the online world in both shaping and perpetuating trends within the plastic surgery industry and society. This examination will be executed through the modern day lens of the male gaze.

This chapter will delve into the complex relationship between ‘trendy’<sup>42</sup> body ideals and their psychological impacts, particularly focusing on body dysmorphia within women. Furthermore, the chapter explores these dynamics through the lens of ‘the fragmented self’<sup>43</sup> concept, offering critical insights into how digital platforms contribute to fragmented self-perception and identity.

This chapter will begin by examining the links between the increasing cultural normalisation and societal acceptance of plastic surgeries and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)<sup>44</sup>. The analysis will examine how these procedures are heavily advertised and promoted online, not only by clinics but also through influencers, who often serve as tools to market specific beauty enhancements and body modifications to their impressionable audience, who are often impressionable young women.

First it is important to understand what exactly body dysmorphia is. “A mental disorder characterised by preoccupation with an imagined defect in one’s appearance. Alternatively, there may be a minor physical abnormality, but the concern is regarded as grossly excessive”.<sup>45</sup> (2004). To understand the implications of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) and why individuals with this condition may be more easily influenced and susceptible to getting plastic surgery, it is crucial to first examine the psychological impact this disorder has on sufferers psyche’s and mental health.

“People with BDD (sometimes called “dysmorphophobia”) worry about how they look. They think, for example, that their skin is blemished or scarred, their hair is thinning, their nose is too big, their breasts are too small— any body part can be disliked. Most people with BDD compare themselves with other people, try to hide or cover up the body parts they hate, and check mirrors a lot”.<sup>46</sup> Dr. Katharine Phillips, a Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, underlines in her book *Understanding*

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<sup>42</sup>Kloskowski, Matt. *Trendy Effects. Illustrator CS Most Wanted: Techniques and Effects*. Berkeley. Apress, 2004. p. 91.

<sup>43</sup> Butt, Trevor, Vivien Burr, and Richard Bell. "Fragmentation and the sense of self." *Constructivism in the Human Sciences* 2.1, 1997. p. 12.

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/204582056?pq>

<sup>44</sup> Veale, David. "Body dysmorphic disorder." *Postgraduate medical journal*. Oxford University Press . 2004. p. 67.

<https://academic.oup.com/pmj/article/80/940/67/7033854>

<sup>45</sup> Veale, David. "Body dysmorphic disorder". *Postgraduate medical journal*. Oxford University Press . 2004. p. 67.

<https://academic.oup.com/pmj/article/80/940/67/7033854>

<sup>46</sup> Phillips, Katharine A. *Understanding body dysmorphic disorder*. Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 116-117.

*body dysmorphic disorder*, how individuals with body dysmorphia often engage in body checking and are constantly comparing themselves to others. Social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, amplify these negative comparisons, creating an environment where appearance is scrutinized and judged.<sup>47</sup> For individuals with BDD, this online exposure can be a significant trigger and even contribute to the development of the disorder. If left unaddressed, BDD can escalate into a serious condition with dangerous and detrimental consequences. “When it’s severe, BDD is devastating. It can completely destroy a person’s life. Some people can’t leave their house or hold down a job because they’re so distressed by their worries about how they look. Many are socially isolated. Some even commit suicide.”<sup>48</sup> Dr. Phillips highlights that BDD can develop into issues much bigger than just concerns about appearance.

The link between bad mental health and chronic social media use cannot be ignored. Parallels can be drawn worldwide, with many validated surveys and medical study’s confirming such links. “An online, cross-sectional survey was conducted among 1,483 Saudi adults (18+) to assess demographic factors, BDD prevalence, and social media usage. The results revealed that 24.4% of participants exhibited BDD. Individuals with BDD spent significantly more time on Instagram and Snapchat, with 29% spending 4–7 hours daily compared to 19% of those who spent less than an hour ( $p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, people with BDD were more likely to consider cosmetic surgery than those without BDD ( $p < 0.001$ ).”<sup>49</sup> (2024) The links between social media and BDD demonstrated in this survey highlight how the significant influence of unattainable beauty standards has spread to many nations across the globe. This survey titled, *The association between use of social media and the development of body dysmorphic disorder and attitudes toward cosmetic surgeries: a national survey*, is just one of many studies which supports this concept. Idealized ‘perfection’ once understood to be solely for an audience to view on the silver screen and unattainable for the general public is now being pushed onto any woman with a social media account.

Individuals with BDD or who have low self-esteem and are active on social media are particularly susceptible to the excessive online pressures of such unattainable beauty.<sup>50</sup> Today, platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat have become leading instruments for advertising cosmetic procedures and enhancements. This modern day lens through which men view women and women view themselves has far more dangerous repercussions than the influence the silver screen once had.

As previously discussed in chapter two of this thesis, influencers are often offered heavily discounted or free surgeries in exchange for promoting these procedures to their followers. This marketing approach, often led by young, ordinary and ‘relatable women’, has significantly contributed to the normalisation of plastic surgery amongst young women. Although it is often women who appear to be

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<sup>47</sup> O’reilly, Michelle. "Social media and adolescent mental health: the good, the bad and the ugly." *Journal of Mental Health* 29.2. 2020, pp. 200-206.

<sup>48</sup> Phillips, Katharine A. *Understanding body dysmorphic disorder*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Ateq, Khadijah, Mohammed Alhajji, and Noara Alhusseini. "The association between use of social media and the development of body dysmorphic disorder and attitudes toward cosmetic surgeries: a national survey." *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12, 2024.

<sup>50</sup> O’reilly, Michelle. "Social media and adolescent mental health: the good, the bad and the ugly." *Journal of Mental Health* 29.2, 2020. pp. 200-206.

promoting the surgery and cosmetic enhancements, they are cleverly disguised tools of a broader patriarchal system. A patriarchal system that is pushing surgery which modifies women's appearance to appeal more to the male gaze.

According to *The American Society of Plastic Surgeons* "most plastic surgeons are men. In 2024, women comprise only 19 percent of membership in the United States for the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS)".<sup>51</sup> Instead of the traditional cinema filmmakers who once perpetuated the male gaze, shaping the audience's perception, it is now the male-dominated plastic surgery industry that serves as the embodiment of these patriarchal structures. However today, they use social media to influence and manipulate their audience. The study titled *Percentage of total surgical cosmetic procedures performed on men and women worldwide from 2018 to 2023*, shown in Fig. 16 helps support the idea that, although the plastic surgery industry is built upon a patriarchal framework, there is significantly more women that undergo plastic surgery, confirming that it is women whose appearances are scrutinized and their insecurities targeted.

"In 2023, the large majority of surgical cosmetic procedures worldwide were undertaken by women, with nearly 86 percent of surgeries".<sup>52</sup> Fig. 17 depicts statistics showing the percentage of the most popular plastic surgeries in the UK in 2023. "The most popular cosmetic procedure for British women in 2023 was breast augmentation at almost five thousand procedures."<sup>53</sup> Breast augmentation takes a significant lead for the most popular surgery undergone. "Breasts are defined primarily as objects of male sexual interest and sexual pleasure. This phallocentric construction depicts breasts as decorative rather than functional, as existing to be looked at, and as a series of body parts to be consumed by male viewers."<sup>54</sup>(2003). It is evident from the research carried out in this study that the most popular plastic surgeries undergone by women are ones which strive to make them more desirable to men.

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<sup>51</sup>Cann, Nicole. "Achieving gender parity: Women's role in plastic surgery". *American Society for of Plastic Surgeons*, 2024.

<https://www.plasticsurgery.org/news/articles/achieving-gender-parity-womens-role-in-plastic-surgery>

<sup>52</sup> Yang, Jenny. "Percentage of total surgical cosmetic procedures performed on men and women worldwide from 2018 to 2023." *Statista*, 2024.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1450230/gender-distribution-of-surgical-procedures-worldwide/>

<sup>53</sup> Stewart, Conor. "The most popular cosmetic procedure for British women in 2023 was breast augmentation at almost five thousand procedures." *Statista*, 2024.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/589870/top-cosmetic-surgery-procedures-for-women-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>

<sup>54</sup>Millsted, Rachel, and Hannah Frith. "Being large-breasted: Women negotiating embodiment." *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 26, no. 5. Pergamon, 2003, p. 455.

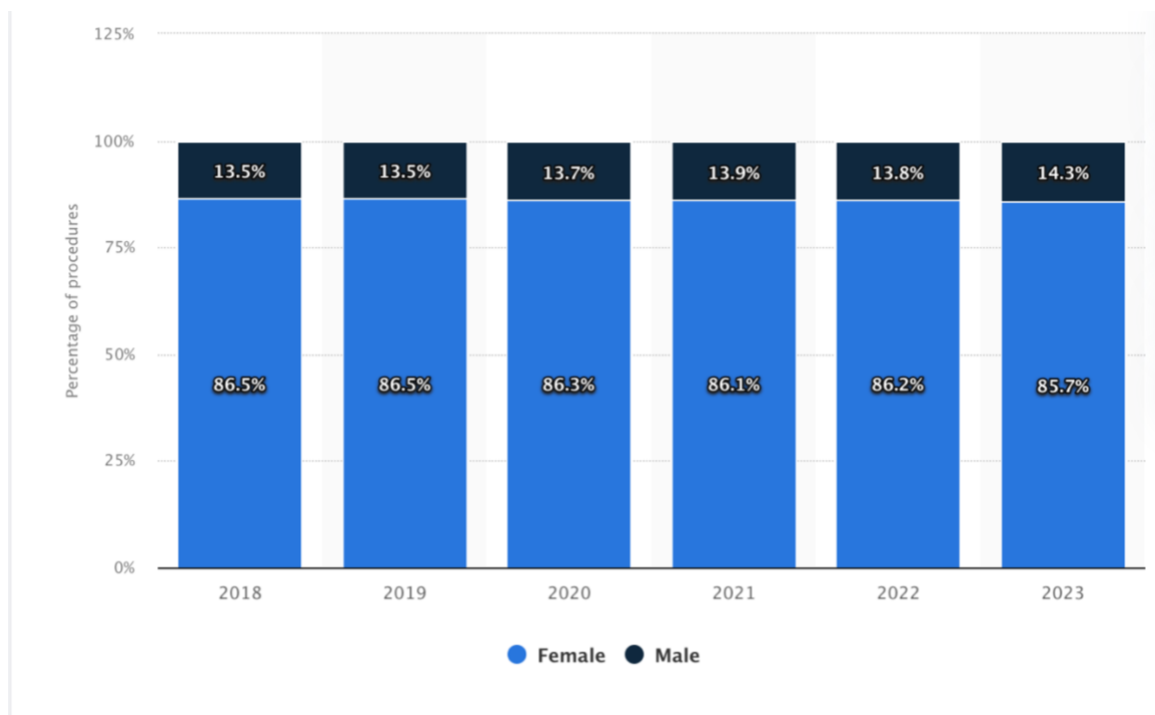


Fig. 16: Percentage of total surgical cosmetic procedures performed on men and women worldwide from 2018 to 2023. " Statista. (2024)

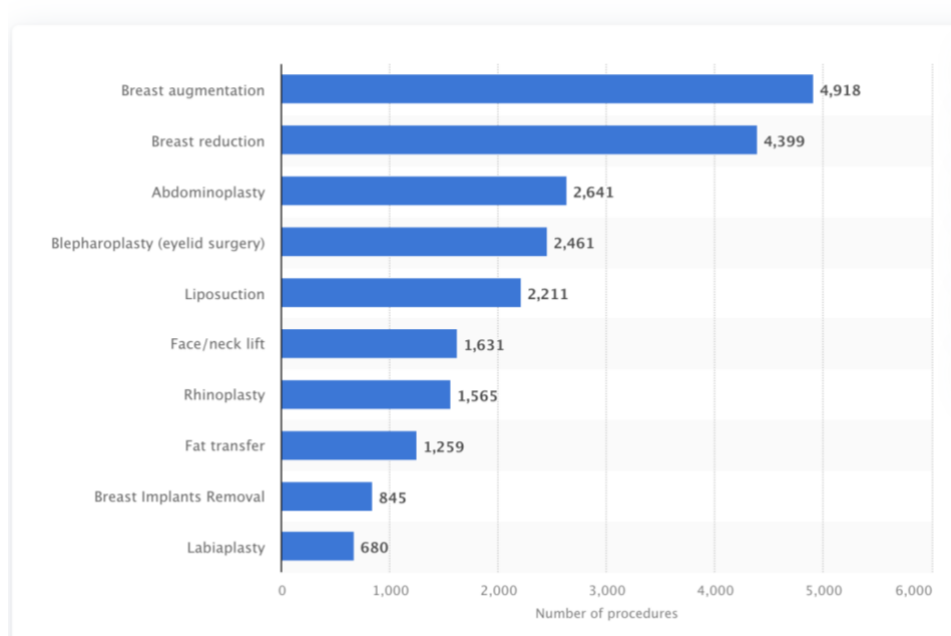


Fig. 17: Number of leading cosmetic surgery procedures for women in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2023. (2024)

Even more disturbing than encouraging women to undergo risky surgeries for the sake of male desire is the growing trend of promoting at-home cosmetic enhancements, such as fillers and Botox. This new, easily accessible, and more

affordable approach to aesthetic procedures is contributing to a growing trend among younger demographics. As these beauty enhancements become more widespread and normalised, the age of individuals engaging in these procedures is getting younger and younger. For individuals with mental health issues like BDD the impacts can be even more devastating. “Some patients attempt their own surgery – for example, attempting to do surgery on their forehead to change its shape or attempting to replace their nose cartilage with chicken cartilage in the desired shape.”<sup>55</sup> (Cash) Dr. Thomas F. Cash, a clinical and research psychologist specialising in the psychology of physical appearance, underlines how individuals struggling with mental health issues often go to drastic efforts to alter their appearance. Doing such dangerous self-modifications is the far end of the spectrum but Cash does recognize how detrimental such pressures based around appearance can be.

Individuals with mental health issues such as BDD who do alter their appearance are rarely satisfied with the outcome and promoting such surgeries and unattainable standards of beauty to the public online can be very triggering and have drastic consequences for many. “In many cases, the appearance preoccupation shifts to another body area following the cosmetic procedure. Poor outcomes are perhaps to be expected, because BDD involves distorted body image and a tendency to obsess about minimal or non-existent flaws. Thus, a ‘surface’ change, such as that accomplished by surgery, is unlikely to treat the underlying disorder. Occasional patients who are dissatisfied with surgical or dermatological treatment commit suicide or are violent toward the treating physician.”<sup>56</sup> Undergoing modifications and surgeries rarely address the underlying psychological issues and can very often heighten symptoms.

However it is not just women with mental health issues such as BDD who are subject to this influence. The growing trends and normalisation of such procedures is reaching a huge demographic of women. Another concern is the rising trend of individuals without any diagnosed mental disorder, particularly young women, performing DIY beauty enhancements on themselves. This growing trend shown in Fig. 18 and Fig. 19 is fueled by the accessibility and influence of at-home cosmetic procedures, creates significant risks and has become increasingly dangerous.<sup>5758</sup> These young women are injecting themselves without any training or medical

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<sup>55</sup> Cash, Thomas. *Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance*. Academic Press, 2012, p. 80.

<sup>56</sup> Cash, Thomas. *Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance*. Academic Press, 2012, p. 114.

<sup>57</sup> Abellsson, Willman. "Ethics and aesthetics in injection treatments with Botox and Filler." *Journal of women & aging* 33.6, 2021, pp. 583-595.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08952841.2020.1730682>

<sup>58</sup> Brennan, Wells, Van Hout. "Saving face": an online study of the injecting use of DIY Botox and dermal filler kits." *Plastic Surgery, Sage Journals*, 2018, pp. 154-159.  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2292550318767432>

supervision.

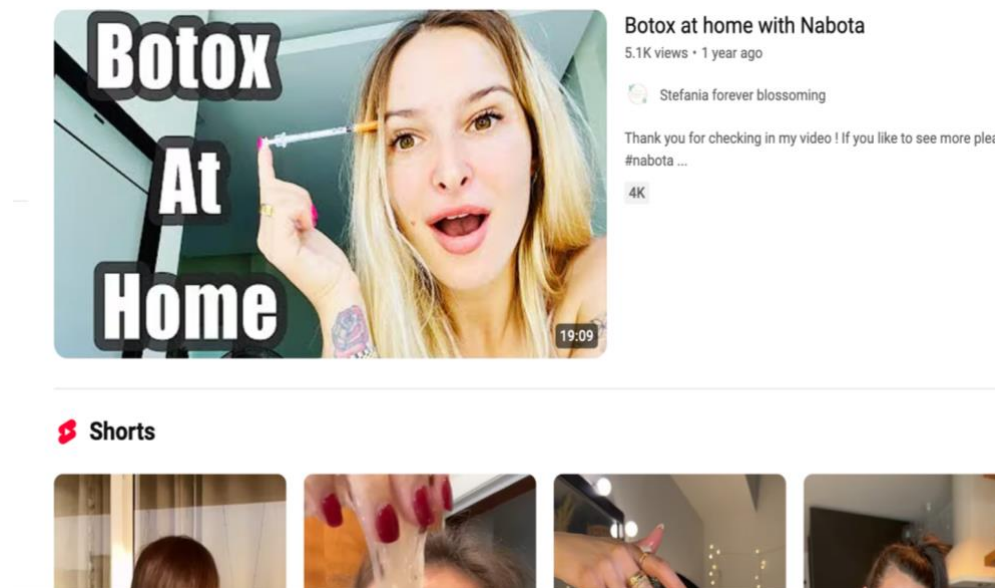


Fig. 18: YouTuber, Stefania forever blossoming, injecting herself with Botox at home – YouTube (2023)

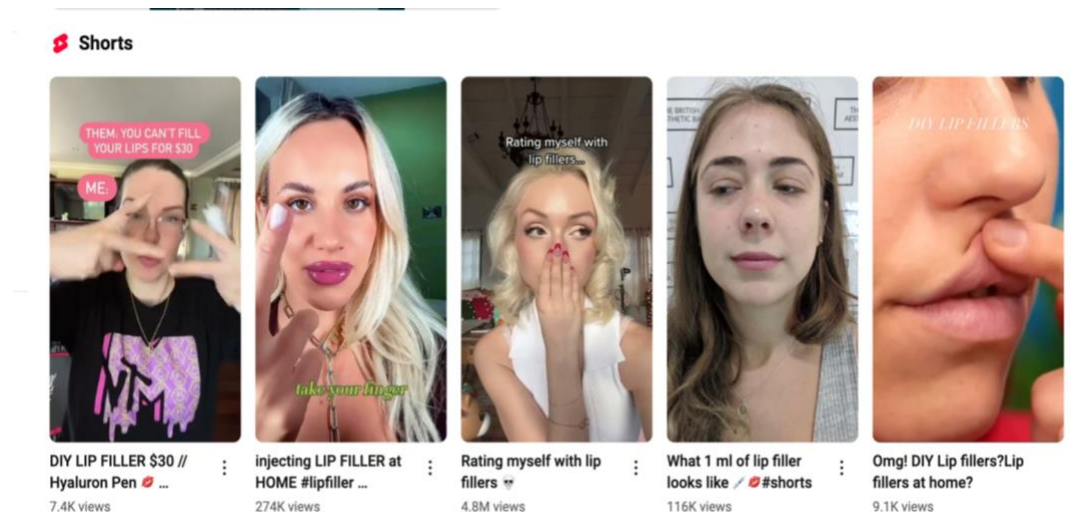


Fig. 19: A YouTube explore page showing videos of young women uploading their experiences doing DIY filler and Botox at home. YouTube (2025)

Beauty trends like ‘preventative Botox’<sup>59</sup> and ‘baby Botox’ “the term baby Botox may be used to attract younger clients who are interested in trying out Botox for the first time or who might be afraid of the frozen face over done Botox”<sup>60</sup> are increasingly being marketed toward young women, sometimes even targeting

<sup>59</sup> Berkowitz, Dana. *Botox nation: Changing the face of America*. Vol. 4. NYU Press, 2017, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> “Baby Botox: What It Is, How It Works, and Why You Should Try It” *Sisu Clinic*, Dublin, 2023.

teenagers. Scrolling through the explore pages of most young women on major social media platforms highlights the prevalence of such content, underlying the aggressive marketing and promoting of these procedures to impressionable audiences. Fig. 20 depicts a view of what YouTube home pages look for many young women today.

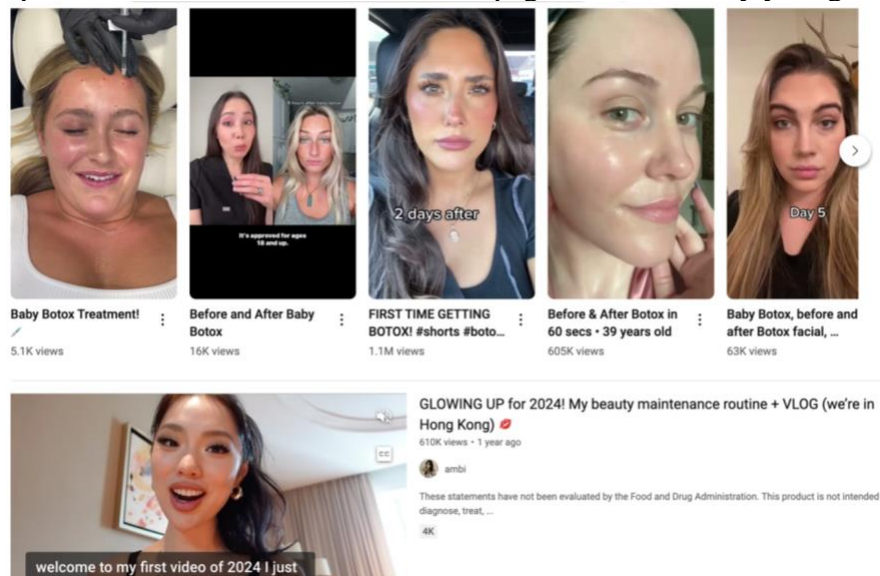


Fig. 20: A YouTube explore page showing young women uploading their experiences getting Botox or ‘baby Botox’ - YouTube (2024)

The social media beauty trends discussed emulate a look desired by men. These examined trends strengthen the case that the male gaze lens in which social media is viewed proliferates the use of plastic surgery amongst women.

Fig. 21 shows ‘Pageant Mom’ Kerry Campbell injecting Botox into her eight-year-old daughter Britney. "It hurts," she explained in an interview with the US network ABC News. (2011) "I just don't think wrinkles are nice on little girls." Campbell continued by saying that injecting her daughter with the treatment made her look "way better, beautiful, pretty - all those nice words"<sup>61</sup>. This deeply disturbing example highlights the extent to which society's obsession with appearance and youth has distorted some individuals' perspectives, underlining the profound negative psychological impact of these pressures stemming from a media and society viewed through the lens of the male gaze.

<sup>61</sup> Cambell, Kerry. "Mom Who Said She Injected Her 8-Year-Old Daughter With Botox Fights to Keep Her Daughter". *ABC News*, 2011. <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/botox-mom-injected-year-entire-story-fake-bid/story?id=13645562>



Fig. 21: Pageant Mom Kerry Campbell injecting Botox into her eight year old daughter Britney – YouTube (2011)

The last topic that Chapter Three will examine is virtual idealization<sup>62</sup>. An article titled *Self-representation through avatars in digital environments* from the Current Psychology Journal explains the concept as “the idealized virtual identity hypothesis states that people portray idealized characteristics of themselves in online networks and thus tend to describe how they would ideally see themselves rather than how they actually are.”<sup>63</sup> (2023) Research suggests that it is often individuals with low self-esteem who fall victim to this confusion in identity. “We found that people with low self-esteem create a more idealised virtual identity rather than a virtual self that is similar to their offline self.”(Gabarne, Feixas, Montesano)<sup>64</sup> Individuals may present an idealised version of themselves within online platforms, such as social media, dating apps, or professional platforms, particularly individuals with low self-esteem. These modified and often highly filtered images can create an uncanny feeling to the viewer, see Fig. 22 and Fig. 23. This young woman has photoshopped and manipulated her body so drastically using editing software that her anatomy no longer resembles a natural human body. The pressure this young woman may have felt to appeal to the male gaze when she posted these pictures of herself online

<sup>62</sup> Altintzoglou, Euripides. "Digital Realities and Virtual Ideals: Portraiture, Idealism and the Clash of Subjectivities in the Post-Digital Era." *Photography and Culture* 12.1, 2019, pp. 69-79.

<sup>63</sup> Zimmermann, D., Wehler, A. & Kaspar, K. “Self-representation through avatars in digital environments.” *Current Psychology* 42, 2023.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03232-6>

<sup>64</sup> Gabarne, Feixas, Montesano. "What is the psychological role of the virtual self in online worlds? A scoping review." *Multimodal Technologies and Interaction* 7.12, 2023, p. 109.

appears significant. Patriarchal structures, including the plastic surgery industry, have established unattainable beauty standards that have profoundly shaped the online sense of identity and self-worth of many young women.



Fig. 22 Young women highly photoshopped on Instagram standing outside – Instagram (2023)



Fig. 23 Young women highly photoshopped on Instagram standing inside -Instagram (2023)

The male gaze lens which classic cinema has historically been viewed through has always favoured actresses with curvaceous figures. Features such as a small waist, full hips, and breasts have always been idolised by the silver screen. The Hollywood starlets have been glorified for having full lips, smooth porcelain skin, long voluminous hair, and large expressive eyes accentuated with makeup. Fig. 24 shows

famous actress Raquel Welch who is a perfect description of the idolised female body in cinema. She epitomised these idealized features, which have become synonymous with Hollywood glamour. Fig. 25 and fig. 26 are examples of women using both plastic surgery and photo editing software to accentuate these classic desirable features of the male audience and our patriarchal society. This evolution of the Hollywood scarlet or bombshell, previously viewed on cinema screens is now echoed through selfies and ‘thirst traps’<sup>65</sup> on social media. This progression reflects long-established ideals of femininity and attractiveness that continue to be reinforced by societal expectations and the patriarch.



Fig. 24 Raquel Welch in One Million Years B.C. – Film Poster (1966)

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<sup>65</sup> Lawn, Fran. "Thirst Trap." *Queering Nutrition and Dietetics*. Routledge, 2022, p. 41.



Fig. 25: woman in black underwear with exaggerated body features on Instagram – Instagram (2022)



Fig. 26: Woman in red bikini with exaggerated body features on Instagram (2023)

To achieve this idealized, desirable version of oneself online, women may manipulate images or ‘selfies’ by exaggerating body parts and changing facial features while downplaying or erasing ‘flaws’, creating a curated and often exaggerated representation of one’s identity. This manipulation or ‘filtering’ is done using apps such as photoshop or face tune, see Fig. 27. The woman on the right has filtered her own face to where she is unrecognisable. We can see by the stark contrast

with the other unfiltered woman in the picture how uncanny and surreal this looks. Fig. 28 is another example of a highly edited and photoshopped woman on Instagram. She looks animated and it gives a significantly unnatural and uncanny look.



Fig. 27: Woman with blue hair who has highly filtered her face – Instagram (2024)



Fig. 28: Blonde woman who has highly filtered her face and photoshopped her body – Instagram (2023)

More recently, filters are being pre-installed on social media apps to be used effortlessly and without second thought, on both pictures and videos.

This online curation of the self can have monumental psychological repercussions. Individuals may have altered perceptions of their identity and struggle when they see reflections of their true self. These true reflections of oneself could lead to depression and mental disorders. “For several decades now, the importance of self-identity has been recognized as an essential factor for psychological maturity and emotional well-being. This vast construct of self-identity encompasses many different psychological functions and processes such as self-clarity, understood as the extent to which an individual’s beliefs about themselves are clearly understood and consistent over time or self-presentation, which is defined as how an individual transmits information about themselves to others, either knowingly or unknowingly”.(2023)<sup>66</sup>A review titled *What is the psychological role of the virtual self in online worlds? A scoping review*, issued by The Department of Clinical Psychology and Psychobiology, Barcelona, found that the ‘users of virtual environments’ targeted in the review ‘tended to have a distorted notion of how idealized or realistic their virtual self was in online environments. Even when people reported creating virtual identities that were similar to them, third-party raters observed that they had represented themselves in a more enhanced way’. The findings of this review help to strengthen the notion that online curations of the self by manipulating one’s appearance can have harmful psychological impacts when it comes to shaping one’s identity.

When individuals excessively edit and manipulate their online appearance, they risk drifting from their true identity, creating fragmented versions of themselves<sup>67</sup>(Butt, Burr, Bell). This curated self-promotion often distances individuals from their authentic self, leaving a misunderstood sense of who they are both online and offline. This fragmentation often has devastating consequences both psychologically and socially. There may be a loss of self-awareness, as individuals begin to define their worth through likes, comments, and validation from others. They may become more focused on their appearance both offline and online than on genuine connections with themselves and those around them.

In conclusion, Chapter Three examines the harmful effects of plastic surgery and editing tools on individuals. Young women are particularly vulnerable to appearance-altering procedures. These practices can damage mental health, contribute to low self-worth, and exacerbate disorders like Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD).

Moreover, the widespread use of apps like Facetune and Photoshop to manipulate selfies and body images for social media further distorts self-perception, normalizing unattainable beauty standards. The normalization of editing images online has had a profound effect on how people view themselves and others.

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<sup>66</sup> Gabarnet, Feixas, Montesano. "What is the psychological role of the virtual self in online worlds? A scoping review." *Multimodal Technologies and Interaction* 7.12, 2023, p.109.

<sup>67</sup> Butt, Burr, Bell. "Fragmentation and the sense of self." *Constructivism in the Human Sciences* 2.1, 1997, p.12.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident from the exploration of this thesis that the rise in social media use has had a drastic impact on the perpetuation of the plastic surgery industry. The parallels between the rise in the two worlds cannot be overlooked. There is conclusive evidence in how the significant surge in social media is influencing women to alter their appearance. This paramount influence has come from the pressure to look desirable to men and encourages women to participate in current beauty trends. This pressure on women has seeped down from the patriarchal structures that have always ran media. The same male lens that classic cinema is viewed thorough has now spread to other media realms, such as social media apps like Instagram and TikTok.

Laura Mulvey's acclaimed theories examining the male gaze in cinema from her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' have been adapted for modern day and successfully applied to social media through the examinations undergone in this thesis. The objectification and limiting manner that cinema narratives have portrayed women of the silver screen throughout history can be today witnessed on our phone screens. The plastic surgery industry is one of many patriarchal structures used to pressure women into conforming to certain beauty standards in order to appeal to the male gaze. However, this pressure from such structures is often cleverly disguised through various tools and mechanisms to appear more female lead and female focused.

Influencers and famous celebrities, often referred to as 'it-girls' are used as pawns by the patriarch to influence women into striving for unrealistic beauty standards. This thesis underlined that when the advertisement and information is coming from women and directed towards women it is sometimes difficult to recognise where the real narrative in beauty is being pushed from. The ever growing plastic surgery industry profits off planting these insecurities in women that use social media by using various marketing strategies. Algorithms push certain idealised versions of beauty to get the most views and attention online, and with the every changing trends it is nearly impossible to keep up with these unrealistic beauty standards perpetuated on social media platforms.

The study also highlighted the use of 'dolls' used by the plastic surgery industry to further market invasive surgeries towards a large demographic of women online. Influencers are given cheap or free surgery in exchange for helping promote surgeries by sharing the process and transformation photographs to their followers. There is no regulations surrounding this method of advertisement and the influence this surge in promotion has had on vulnerable young women online is significant.

It has also been highlighted throughout the examination the detrimental effects that this pressure on appearance has on young women. This thesis has found great links between the male gaze lens used to view social media and the devastating psychological impacts that it can have on young women's development and identity. Drastic concerns surrounding virtual idealisation and developing mental health issues such as BDD where examined and underlined. This virtual idealisation depicted in the many images used throughout the study supports the claim that the male gaze lens which is central to the framework of social media has perpetuated the growth of the plastic surgery industry.

The unattainable beauty and body standards set by this patriarchal structure is also understood to fuel the use of photo editing apps and tools such as facetune and photoshop. The investigation highlighted that when individuals excessively edit and

manipulate their online appearance, they risk drifting from their true identity, creating fragmented versions of themselves.

To finalise, this study has successfully used both imagery and statistics to confirm the links between the growth of the aesthetic plastic and cosmetic surgery industries and the patriarchal framework upon which social media has been built. It is evident from this investigation that the 'the male gaze' in cinema has indeed bled from the silver screen and seeped into our phone screens, where it has engulfed social media, perpetuating the increased use of plastic surgery by the female audience.

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