

Why have the plastic surgery and diet industries become so lucrative in the 21st century?

And why do they mainly target women? While seventy-three percent of men in the United States are overweight compared to only sixty-three percent of women, major weight loss corporations cater to their dominant demographic of women. Though more men in the United States are overweight than women, they also hold a much smaller amount of weight loss program memberships, an estimated ninety percent of Weight Watchers members are women. (Franchisee Resource Center *Weight Loss Industry Analysis 2020 - Cost & Trends*) This reflects a larger societal issue in America; as women move into male dominated fields and push back against patriarchal structures, impossible beauty standards are created to minimize the threat of the feminine. In, “The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women”, author Naomi Wolf analyzes the suppression of women by the idea that their identity must be found in their beauty, and how this perpetuates institutional male power.

Growing up as a female in 21st century America, I have seen impossible beauty standards be created and perpetuated in an endless loop. Through television shows that promote cosmetic procedures to enhance one’s curves to magazines that push dietary supplements and anorexia, everywhere you turn there is a new expectation for women to meet. In 2014, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons revealed that a staggering ninety-two percent of all cosmetic procedures were performed on women, with only eight percent having been performed on men. (Center *Men vs. women: Plastic surgery statistics*) This gender divide illustrates the mounting pressure women face to change their appearances and determine their value by their beauty. Social media has only furthered this problem, I first remember noticing the issue in middle school when I began accessing technology along with my peers. The ‘thigh gap’ trend initially

called for women and girls to have a prominent gap between their upper thighs. The trend was problematic and difficult to achieve as fat naturally accumulates in this area, without genetics or plastic surgery it became an impossible ideal for most women. Celebrities with large followings, like the Kardashian family, promoted these beauty standards by posting images of their bodies to social media. As beauty standards change and evolve in the United States, these celebrities conform to them, morphing to fit the new conventions through plastic surgery, dieting, and photo editing, and imposing them upon other women.

As of late, social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok have begun undermining the self worth of women in a new way- through image altering filters. Filters initially began as a way to change the color tones of an image to create a more aesthetically pleasing visual. However, in recent years these apps have begun generating filters that drastically alter womens' bodies. From simply smoothing the skin, to completely changing the shape of one's facial and bodily structures, these filters not only present harmful notions of eurocentric beauty, but also leave women comparing their natural features to what society deems acceptable. The "fox eye" trend illustrates one such example of this effect. Following a rise in popularity of filters that lifted the corners of the eyes to create an almond eye shape, women began using makeup and shaving off the ends of their eyebrows to mimic the upturned effect. Perhaps even more startling, plastic surgery saw a rise in popularity of blepharoplasties, a removal of skin or fat to correct the shape of the eye, and injectable fillers to elevate the brow. (*Docherty The 'fox eye' cosmetic surgery trend has officially exploded*) These tweaks to one's appearance are growing more and more pervasive and subtle, leading to difficulties separating fiction from reality when scrolling through social media.

Wolf describes how new limits of beauty are placed on each individual woman to check her power in response to second wave feminism. As 21st century women have overcome patriarchal hurdles and gained momentum in society and the workplace, their freedom has become restricted in a new way through the weaponization of female beauty. Feminism gave rise to legislation surrounding gender discrimination and deconstructed traditional gender roles but these toxic principles were replaced with notions of beauty that control the way powerful women feel about themselves. Wolf labels this backlash against female advancement “the beauty myth”. According to the beauty myth, “beauty” is an objective and universal quality that women must want to embody. Beauty is correlated to a woman’s fertility and is necessary according to biological, sexual, and evolutionary processes. Ultimately, women should be beautiful and men should have access to beautiful women. Wolf deconstructs this myth, reasoning that the idea of beauty is a product of the political climate. In actuality, the beauty myth is not about women at all, but male power and institutions. A recent invention, the beauty myth is used to divide women so they may not find a community amongst themselves and create vulnerability to restrict female growth. As women find material success, the beauty myth creates a psychological undercurrent that reduces them to feelings of worthlessness. (*Wolf The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*)

The reason for the growth of plastic surgery and diet industries, as well as their reliance on women as primary consumers can be clearly seen when modern society is viewed through the lens of the beauty myth. The success of these fields depend on the psychological control of women through anxiety surrounding their physical appearances. Deliberate market manipulation is responsible for the promotion of products and services designed to reduce women’s value to

reinforced, trapping women in a cycle where they cannot achieve impossible standards. One can now understand the push women feel to go to enormous lengths to alter their physical characteristics to fit societal standards of beauty, otherwise they are made to feel valueless. Women purchase subscriptions from diet companies, plastic surgery procedures, and products hawked by social media celebrities that promise them unrealistic results because of the societal pressure to feed this economic system. The reason these developments are taking place in the 21st century lies in our political structure. Because second wave feminism made female advancement possible, and our economic structure relies on women making less money than men, society had to find a new way to reinforce gender boundaries. The beauty myth provides this an avenue, undoing obvious female success through imaginary constructs of beauty purported as necessary and unchanging.

21st century America has seen a boom in industries and technologies that alter one's physical appearance, with their main consumers being women. Naomi Wolf's, "The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women", explains this phenomenon as a backlash against second wave feminism through the weaponization of female beauty. The beauty myth breeds competition among women and denigrates each one individually in her daily life. While women achieve material success in the modern era, their self worth is undermined by psychological fears surrounding their appearances. These fears are perpetuated by control of the market, mass media, and celebrities. Ultimately, the desire to alter one's appearance is pushed onto women to minimize the threat of their success and retain our current economic system and patriarchal power structures.

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