

Cosmetic Surgery in Women's Magazines: the 1960s to the 1980s

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If plastic surgeons are the sculptors of the medical world, then the female breast is very special clay, capable of being transformed into a more beautiful expression of itself.¹

Cosmetic surgery has become a new wave both in our society and media. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgery, 9.4 billion dollars is spent on cosmetic surgery, and 10.2 million cosmetic surgery procedures performed in 2005. There has been a 38% increase since 2000.² Meanwhile, more and more media coverage deals with cosmetic surgery.³ In 2002, the first cosmetic surgery reality television program, *Extreme Makeover*, not only brought the operating room into the audience's living room, but also rewarded their participants with cosmetic surgery.⁴ A cosmetic surgery procedure has become a prize to make people's dreams come true, making the process of cosmetic surgery no longer a mystery. This cultural phenomenon did not emerge overnight; it has been on going over time. Women's magazines have long targeted women with beauty, fashion, and life. The topic of cosmetic surgery, of course, is associated with women's beauty and definitely is contained in women's magazines. What cosmetic surgery messages have been conveyed in women's magazines over the past two decades? What cultural phenomenon and discourses of cosmetic surgery are represented in women's magazines over time? In this study, a historical approach and narrative analysis will be utilized to explore the social values and culture of cosmetic surgery represented by three influential, yet diverse women's magazines: *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Ladies Home Journal*.

Cosmetic surgery and social culture



The Debut of Barbie
Source: Barbie Collector Website

An ideal female body icon, the Barbie doll, was first introduced at New York's annual Toy Fair in 1959.⁵ Beginning with her trademark black and white striped swimsuit and swirled ponytail, Barbie has long legs and arms, a small waist, and high round breasts. She represented every little girl's dream of the perfect mature body.⁶ As a result, she has reflected the social standards for women's beauty since the 1960s –blonde, smooth skin, thin, and sharply. Body image researchers have defined the concept of body image as “solely a physical appearance-related construct”.⁷ Blood explains that this

reproduces the common-sense view of women's bodies as an object of the gaze and reinforces of the idea of women as observers of their bodies.⁸ In the relationship of man and women, Berger emphasizes that men act and women appear. “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relations between women to themselves.”⁹ Women view themselves ‘from the outside’.¹⁰ And, women criticize their body in the same way men do. Bordo argues that women's bodies are a socially shaped and historically colonized territory, not a site of individual self-determination.¹¹ Apparently, women are socialized to conform to a particular body shape in order to be sexually attractive to, and compete for, a man.¹²

Plastic surgery was introduced in our society from the original reconstructive purpose to today's beautification emphasis. In *Venus Envy*, Haiken examines that

cosmetic surgery can be traced as early as A.D. 1000 in India; however, it received people's attention and its use and technology rapidly accelerated during World War I because of the needs of reconstructive surgery for face-wounded soldiers.¹³ The original purpose of plastic surgery- helping wounded soldiers to gain back their normal appearance to obtain employment opportunities- seems to imply the development of cosmetic surgery: the endless improvements for beautifying patients' appearance to meet social demands. Haiken argues that the affluent, rich and leisure post-war era generate today's cosmetic surgery culture. She says,

For the first time, at the age of fifty, a generation of Americans were healthy, affluent, largely finished with the tasks of day-to-day family life, and ready to enjoy themselves....Beauty, in America, meant youth....The post-World War II medical and popular discussions of cosmetic surgery, in fact, suggest that thousands of middle-class women began thinking about aging at about the same time that hundreds of plastic surgeons began looking for new clients and realizing they would have to compete for those clients with the thousands of other doctors who were eyeing this growing market.¹⁴

The post World War II Baby Boom did not only create a dominated youth culture in 1960s, but also generated senior people's (over forty) anxiety to lose youth and attractiveness. Seniors might mean nothing and to be neglected in society. Thus, in the society which emphasizes youth and sexual attractiveness, it is not surprised to find that the most popular cosmetic surgery articles in women's magazines after 1960s are face-lift and breast augmentation.¹⁵

Media, Body Image and Cosmetic Surgery

Media has long been criticized for presenting unrealistic body images which affect people's view of an ideal body. In Botta's study, she explored the impact of television images on adolescent girls' body image and thin ideal endorsement. This study found that people compared themselves and believed they come up short in those comparisons with television ideal body images. The more they compared themselves, the more they strived to be thin, the more they disliked their bodies, and the more they engaged in unhealthy behaviors, such as bulimia.¹⁶ This study suggested women do make comparisons between themselves and media images. In Goodman & Walsh-Childers's study for how college women negotiated the media's ideal breast image, the results showed that media images directly and indirectly influenced women's breast satisfaction. The media likely shaped these women's self images because "their frame of reference for viewing themselves closely aligned with the mediated ideal breast."¹⁷ A participant in this study expressed her frustrations when she and her friends looked at Victoria's Secret catalogs. "All these models just look gorgeous... We wish we could wear stuff like that, and our bodies would look as perfect as theirs do."¹⁸ Moreover, this study indicated that many women felt they had the potential to attain the mediated ideal breast size if they had the money and time were all it took to look like the ideal. A participant said that her friends marked, "I could be that hot if I had a boob job and a million dollars."¹⁹ In contemporary society, women saw their body as a project, separating from their souls, which could be worked on or improved by external procedures.

Women's magazines have long claimed to devote themselves to women's beauty, health and lifestyle, in particular fashion magazines. Blood argues that women's

magazines contribute to what counts as common sense about women's bodies. She said that it seems 'normal' that women should have hairless legs and flat stomachs – although all women have naturally hairy legs and most have not-flat stomachs.²⁰ Women's magazines constantly convey the message that every woman can be more beautiful through taking care of each part of their body, which means wearing fashion clothing, using cosmetic products and being aware of the "flaws" of their body and to "correct" them instantly. "From head to toe, every feature of a women's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification and alternation."²¹ Blum criticized that in the media, one lie is that, if you have money and the right surgeon, you too can go under the knife and come out looking like Elizabeth Taylor.²²

Method

The media forms and reflects social values. As mentioned the above, the cosmetic surgery phenomenon has wildly spread in both western and eastern societies. This article looks at the meanings of cosmetic surgery and societal values presented in women's fashion magazines, by tracking back to the rising era of cosmetic surgery from 1960s to 1980s. This study takes the cultural perspectives to represent how women's magazines portray the cosmetic surgery and what dominant meanings are contained in the text. Narrative analysis is utilized to analyze to determine the themes and dominant meanings of cosmetic surgery articles in *Vogues*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Ladies Home Journal* from the past 30 years.

Vogue, published in 1892, focuses on women's fashion and lifestyle. In the 1960s, the magazine rose to the occasion of the youth-oriented decade of sexual revolution by

focusing more on the exciting fashions through daringly playful, theatrical, and straightforwardly sexual editorial features.²³ *Harper's Bazaar*, the America's first fashion magazine, launched in 1867, which has been one of the most informative guide for the fashion conscious and it considers itself to be the style resource for "the well-dressed woman and the well-dressed mind"²⁴. *Ladies Home Journal* was first published in 1883. Ladies' Home Journal focuses on women's inner-self, style, family, and home. It provides advice in its articles to help women to improve their body, mind, and soul.²⁵ For this study, a total of 57 plastic surgery-related articles appeared in these periodicals between 1960 and 1989.

The Personal Endorsement of Cosmetic Surgery in 1960s

Face-lift is a well-studied decision

The most convincing arguments for plastic surgery are no more than patients' detailed descriptions of the whole procedure of surgery and their happy results. The majority of cosmetic surgery articles in 1960s focused on the topic of the face-lift. They provided patients' individual experiences and stories to reveal the mystery and endorse the effects of face-lifts. Women stated their anxiety of aging and how they were unsatisfied about themselves through the mirror. One woman featured in a *Vogue* article claimed, "I had two undeniable furrows at either side of my mouth – those lines the French call the lines of bitterness."²⁶ They even felt terrible and unhappy about themselves. A 1962 *Ladies Home Journal* article quoted a women as saying, "I was so heartsick at the sight of my sagging jawline, drooping mouth and flabby throat that I'd take the odds and go for broke."²⁷ Yet, this does not make them become fatuous to take the

risk of plastic surgery without any serious considerations and preparations for the surgery. In *Vogue's* "The Imaged Image" in 1961, the author explained that women who have face-lifts done were neither narcissists nor hedonists. Contrarily, the majority was serious, thoughtful women- often with good jobs or small businesses- whose working years would be lengthened by ten or even more; attractive women who intend to keep up with their busy lives attractively.²⁸ In these articles, women emphasized that their decisions for the surgery were made after much thought and research. In her *Diary of a Face Lift*, one woman recounted:

For three years, I gathered information- with my husband's good-humor approval- writing letters, asking for interviews, dragging information from reluctant doctors, noncommittal medical societies and people I knew living near medical centers. The fact I was such an ordinal person startled bits of information out of most contacts – all meant to be discouraging. But they added to my knowledge of the subjects, its procedures, risks, and benefits.²⁹

As this article illustrates, plastic surgery was is not merely a medical procedure; it is an art work. "Plastic surgery requires a remarkable combination of technical skill and aesthetic feeling. It's an art."³⁰ In the stories, women believed that by acquiring an experienced surgeon, the end-result will be not only surgically fine but also artistically balanced.³¹ In these articles, therefore, after deep considerations and research to get a skilled surgeon, women's plastic surgery will be a guarantee of miracle.

No pain, no gain

A dominant message in these patients' diaries of plastic surgery is "no pain, no gain." Plastic surgery is a rather painful but worthwhile experience. In *Diary of Face Lift*, the author stated "my face is very swollen and there is a dull pain in my cheekbones....Nothing as bad as the usual pounding tension headaches of our dizzy civilization....My eyes are turning black and my face is so swollen it looks as if I have gained 80 pounds."³² After overcoming this painful period, however, everything is worthwhile because the stories eventually ended up with happiness and pleasure. "For years I guess I hadn't thought of myself as attractive -- not since I was young. But here it was -- that 'you're attractive' feeling back after how long!"³³ Youth and attractiveness are the rewards after this painful process. This means another new, active, and independent life could be expected. "I'm just about halfway through life. The children are grown, I have time for new activities. I'd like to join a tennis club. Go to more dances at clubs. Maybe find a part-time job."³⁴ In the magazines, by undergoing plastic surgery to control the appearance, women can control their destiny again.

Be Realistic about Face-Lift in the 1970s

Instead of focusing on the magical results of face-lift in 1960s, the face-lift articles in 1970s offered more balanced and practical information. In the article, "Cosmetic Surgery Myth", Cohen and Levinson told their readers that a plastic surgeon's scalpel is not the new magic wand. "It cannot turn back the clock; it can't give you the bloom of an 18-year-old. At best, all it can do is make you look a *little* better."³⁵ These articles notice their readers should know what they are getting into and be realistic about

their expectations. “A face-lift does not get rid of every line and wrinkle.”³⁶ However, it is not necessary to say that the texts of plastic surgery in 1970s represented a reactionary sign to think critically about plastic surgery. The tone of these texts still was positive for face-lifts. *Harper’s* columnist, Shay McConnell found that “For the women over 40, facial plastic surgery, a now routine cosmetic procedure, is an ideal way to regain youthful looks and literally slow down the aging clock”³⁷ The expected results of plastic surgery were rather optimistically. The explicit meaning here is that plastic surgery is a safe, efficient, and effective method to acquire youth and attractiveness. Still, the women’s magazines told their readers that this would not go wrong if the women have skilled surgeons.

The Emphasis of Sexual Attractiveness in the 1970s

Work on your breasts to be attractive

More than just having a face-lift to acquire youth in 1960s, women were subjected to doing more aggressive body work to maintain their femininity after the 1970s.

Women’s breasts are the most visible sexual symbol, which define women’s femininity and attractiveness. A major coverage of plastic surgery related to breast reshaping, including breast augmentation and reduction. In the 1970s, “the high bosom is free and unshy of sun and air.”³⁸ For women after mastectomy, breast reconstructive technique gives women “the miracle of a new breast.”³⁹ For the women who feel their breasts too small or too large, breast reshaping techniques, including breast augmentation and reduction, can do a great deal to improve the shape of their breasts.⁴⁰ The question is how small is too small? How large is too large? The women’s magazines told women that they

should not make the decision for their husbands or boyfriends but for themselves. This should be the women's own choice to go under the knife.⁴¹ Are women able to make the decision by themselves and for themselves? An ideal body shape, however, is socially constructed rather than self-determined.⁴²

The tone of the articles for breast reconstruction surgery is rather positive and encouraging. Women with mastectomy were not necessary to "spend the rest of their lives less than whole."⁴³ "Suddenly you have new hope. All is not lost. And even if the nipple can't be salvaged, there are ways of giving you the chance to look and feel like yourself again – a complete women."⁴⁴ Rarely were the risks of surgery or the side effects mentioned. A false message provided here for the breast reconstruction is everything would be earned back after breast reconstruction. This is a God's hand to help women who had breast cancer to gain their appearance and be healthy again, physically and psychologically.

Besides breast reconstruction, a major amount of breast surgery articles dealt with breast reshaping issues for health women. These magazines in the 1970s treated themselves not only as an information provider but also a consultant. They worked as a bridge between prospect patients and surgeons. The Q & A types of articles and the trends of new surgery techniques attempted to solve women's confusion and made them more informed about breast cosmetic surgery. The effects, procedures, risks and costs are detailed and vividly demonstrated, such as,

...always using an aseptic green marker and a ruler- a vertical line from each nipple to the mid point of each collarbone...the doctor makes a superficial circular incision in the skin around the areola. Then he cuts along the green lines

and, leaving the areola intact, removes the skin delimited by the lines, taking care not to touch the deepest layer of derma that protects the mammary gland....⁴⁵

It is fair to argue that the primary rhetoric for breast reshaping surgery in texts is positive, even though they offered more balanced texts than face-lift in 1960. For example, one *Harper's Bazaar* breast surgery article advised its readers not to expect miracles and an augmented breast never has a completely natural feel, and unless the surgery is done meticulously, there can be problems with bleeding or infection.⁴⁶ However, the dominant meaning in this article is positive and encouraging. This article told its readers that the procedure essentially is a fairly painless and well-tolerated technique. The size can be done variable and the age is not the problem: "no woman is too old or too young to have plastic surgery on breasts....it's not that unusual to see sexy-looking breasts on women in their 60s and we know that women's sex lives continue long past what we used to believe."⁴⁷ In *Vogue*, Phyllis Lehman stated, "like any surgery, a breast operation should not be taken lightly. But it is a relatively safe and painless choice for the women who feel that changing the size of her breasts is crucial to her psychological or physical being."⁴⁸ Another article, "Plastic Surgery: the Unplain Facts," the only warning text is "all surgery is serious, carries some risks."⁴⁹ With such trivial warnings but encouraging messages, women are more vulnerable to have surgeons to sculpt their breasts. *Vogue's* Cynthia Pearson stated, "molding the female shape into a socially constructed image is not the best of twentieth-century science but more like the Chinese custom of foot-binding."⁵⁰ Here, it might be too arbitrary to conclude that women's magazines promoted breast reshaping. Yet, when women's magazines

celebrated that plastic surgery is a both science and art, a lack of criticism certainly existed.

Dedicatedly Searching for Youth Fountain and Perfect Body in 1980s

Jump into the youth fountain the earlier the better

In the 1980s, with the development of new medical techniques and more and more women having surgery or considering surgery, plastic surgery articles in women's magazines demonstrated the new trends and techniques routinely.⁵¹ "What's new in plastic surgery? Plenty. It's becoming much more personalized, tailored to a woman's individual needs and desires, more accepted by the public at large, and available to the average woman in her 40s who wants to recapture a youthful look."⁵² It was the time that the magazines told women to keep their youth sophisticatedly through the surgery. You could do the self-evaluation – looking for the lines, wrinkles, droopy or sagging area from your forehead, eyebrows, upper eyelids, lower eyelids, nose, lips, and lower face to decide what area of your face should be correct.⁵³ The youth fountain was available through plastic surgery. Indeed, a rather positive tone for the techniques of plastic surgery existed since 1960s. *Harper's Bazaar* told its readers that the "relatively simple" eyelid job could improve women's looks dramatically, and it generally heals quickly and relatively painlessly.⁵⁴ This procedure can freshen up a face marred by the early signs of aging, and result is reasonably permanent.⁵⁵ It is not necessary to stay with an aging face; they are able to freeze the clock. "Have a face-lift before you need it!"⁵⁶

Additionally, the personal stories of face-lift continued to receive some coverage. Rather than detailing the whole procedure of plastic surgery as in the 1960s and 1970s,

the personal stories in 1980s were more briefly about the procedures since the face-lift was no longer a mystery for women. After 30 years, they knew how it operated. More importantly, women in the 1980s were more open to speak publicly for their surgery. They did not need to make an excuse, such as going on a vacation, to cover their leave for the surgery. In the magazines, they no longer shared their stories anonymously. They had strong reasons to pursue looking forever young – because senior people are not only unattractive but also would be discriminated against. “If I want to get rid of some men, I tell him how old I am and he always seems to vanish immediately....Women who are older not supposed to be worth anything.”⁵⁷ In women’s magazines, the plastic surgery, truly, was a quick fix and worked well. “We look great...we will look greater. And gentlemen give us the eye, again!”⁵⁸ Over 30 years, the make-over stories in women’s magazines never vanish. Why are the personal plastic surgery stories so popular? We not only like makeover stories; we also believe them!⁵⁹

A major difference in 1980s magazines is that they started demonstrating the horrible stories of plastic surgery without positive descriptions. For instance, a woman vividly described her frightening experience with face-lift in *Harper’s Bazaar*.

I was bandaged and couldn’t distinguish even a speck of light. Oh, my God, I’m blind!...What was worse, I was bleeding. Bleeding from my eyes!...By the third week, when I still hadn’t improved. For God’s sake, what’s going on? I look lousy and feel lousy....A year after that- nearly 14 months after the operation- the lump was still there.⁶⁰

Women’s magazines in the 1980s occasionally offered detailed and neutral information for the risks and side-effects of plastic surgery than 1960s and 1970s.⁶¹ Compared with

the rest of the articles, this type of articles accounted for trivial amount. Here, I argue that the constantly positive and encouraging tone for the face-lift magic has never gone away.

Sculpt Your Body Inch by Inch

As modern liposuction (also called suction lipectomy) evolved in 1980s,⁶² women's magazines also started discussing the exciting effects of liposuction. Under the title of Fat Vacuum or Fat Suction,⁶³ these articles had created a universal fantasy for women- they are able to have their bodies sculpted piece by piece, inch by inch.

...there are certain areas of the body – the buttocks, abdomen, inner or outer thighs – in which many women find bulges virtually impossible to eliminate. In the past ten years, plastic surgeons have developed an operation that some experts feel may turn out to be the ultimate solution to this problem. Called suction lipectomy, it basically consists of “vacuuming” out fat, using a high pressure miniature vacuum-like device.⁶⁴

Just as the face-lift was still new in 1960s, liposuction was a new plastic surgery technique in 1980s. Women's magazines detailed the procedure and risks for their readers. A hypocritical effort from the magazines deceived the partial information as a complete knowledge for this controversial technique.

As with any type of surgery, suction lipectomy is not without possible complications....The two most common complications- each occurring in approximately two percent of the patients- were permanent/ partial numbness or loss of sensation in the area operated on and post-operative fluid collection or swelling in the area surrounding the suction lipectomy site. Other reported but

rare complications include bleeding, infection, and skin discoloration or unsatisfactory skin healing.⁶⁵

The most serious complications were missing in these texts. First, the number of “two percent of the patients” seemed small enough to ignore, even though it might be accurate. Second, the fact is liposuction could cause death, even though this is not common. According to the Washington University, School of Medicine, the fat or blood clots formed during the procedure that migrate to the lungs can cause death, and the excessive fluid loss can lead to shock.⁶⁶ Will you take the risks of permanent or partial numbness in the area operated to sculpture your body into a Barbie? While weighing good looks, youthful feelings and attractiveness against the incomplete warnings by magazines, these periodicals tend to make the notion of going under the knife a relatively easy decision to make.

Conclusion

Women’s fashion magazines, a mix of fantasy and knowledge, successfully have constructed their reputation as gurus for a graceful, beautiful and stylish life. As Naomi Wolf argues, a women’s magazine is not just a magazine; they are windows on their own mass sensibility. For 30 years, the women’s magazines constantly told their readers that as long as they have expertly performed plastic surgery, it can work “miracles” on women’s face and body. Good plastic surgery always emphasizes “natural”, a delicate improvement on face or body without a dramatic change to cause others’ suspension. Plastic surgeons are artists and the plastic surgery is an art. If you can have an artist to work on you to make you a graceful and beautiful artwork, the question remained here

would be merely “why not”? Wolf argues that plastic surgeons provide not only a service which meet women’s demand, they establish it. In the 1960s, face-lift surgery not only gave women an opportunity to maintain their youth, but also represented and generated the culture toward materialism and artificialism. Up to the 1970s, breast reshaping surgery indicated that women did not necessarily to have live with their “natural” body; they can create a new body which they are comfortable with (precisely speaking, males would be happy with). Come to the 1980s, liposuction allows women to have their body sculptured inch by inch. A woman’s body has become a plastic material to be constantly worked on. A question here is: are women so foolish to risk their own body or even life to undergo a sculptor? The answer might be not. When this society favors beautiful women both in working and marriage markets, their decision to have a surgery done is not vanity but sanity.

Endnote

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<http://www.cosmeticsurgery.org/public_education/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=17848 >

³ For example, six cosmetic surgery articles in *Vogue*, 2005, but only one cosmetic surgery article in *Vogue*, 1980.

⁴ "Extreme Makeover" on ABC offers cosmetic surgery procedures and style consultants to its applicants.

⁵ See Barbie Collector Website, available at
<<http://www.barbiecollector.com/collecting/story.asp>.>

⁶ Erica Wolf (2000), *Barbie: The Early History*, available at: <
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⁸ Sylvia K. Blood, *Body Work: The Social Construction of Women's Body Image* (New York: Routledge, 2005) : 37

⁹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (MA, Penguin Books Limited): 47

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- ²² Virginia L. Blum, *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* (LA: University of California Press, 2003): 214
- ²³ See the History of Vogue in Wikipedia, available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vogue_magazine>
- ²⁴ See the introduction of Harper's Bazaar in Wikipedia, available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harper%27s_Bazaar
- ²⁵ See the introduction for Ladies Home Journal in Magazine. Com, available at: <http://www.magazines.com/ncom/mag?id=3540394363617&mid=0000002473#additional_content>
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- ³¹ The Diary of a Face Lift, *Ladies Home Journal*, 79 May 1962, p.28.
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- ⁶⁰ The Lift That Left Me Low, *Harper's Bazaar*, 114 Sep. 1981, p.168, 184.
- ⁶¹ See, for instance, Mary Carprntr, Can A Face-Lift Make You Look Worse? *Happer's Bazaar*, 114 Sep. 1981, p.112, 140, 152.
- ⁶² See Liposuction in Wikipedia website, available at:<
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liposuction#History>>

⁶³ Shari Miller, *Cosmetic Surgery: New Trends*, *Vogue*, 174 August 1984, p.398; Shari Miller, *Fat Vacuum: Suction Lipectomy*, *Vogue*, 175 August 1985, p.144.

⁶⁴ Shari Miller, *Fat Vacuum: Suction Lipectomy*, *Vogue*, 175 August 1985, p.144.

⁶⁵ Shari Miller, *Fat Vacuum: Suction Lipectomy*, *Vogue*, 175 August 1985, p.146.

⁶⁶ See Watching University, School of Medicine, Cosmetic Surgery Institute Website, available at: < <http://www.cosmeticsurgery.wustl.edu/Treatments/Liposuction.asp>>