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## **The Normalization of Cosmetic Surgery in Women's Magazines from 1960 to 1989**

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### **Abstract**

This study uses discourse analysis of three popular women's magazines to determine how these publications contributed to the normalization of cosmetic surgery in the pivotal years of the 1960s to the 1980s. The dominant way of thinking over these three decades is that cosmetic surgery is effective and safe for every woman (regardless of age) who wants to achieve personal, financial, or romantic success. The dangers of these procedures, however, are not explicitly articulated but simply implied. Moreover, opposing messages, including risk alerts and "be realistic" caveats, ironically contribute to the normalization of cosmetic surgery by offering the reader a glimpse into another world that may become a reality for them. The findings indicate that the history of magazine coverage likely reinforces the norm that natural and artificial body parts can be blended to overcome the biologically inherited limitations of one's physical self.

**Keywords:** cosmetic surgery, discourse analysis, feminist perspectives, normalization, women's magazines

### **Introduction**

Women's magazines have long been criticized for contributing not only to the construction of an ideal body but also to the promotion of the idea that the ideal body can be bought via the consumption of beauty products (Blum, 2003, Morgan, 1991; Wolf, 1991). In addition, women's magazines constantly convey the message that every woman can be more beautiful by taking care of each part of her body, which means wearing fashionable clothing, using cosmetic products, being aware of body "flaws" and correcting them instantly (Blood, 2005). The proliferation of cosmetic surgery in our consciousness did not emerge overnight. The shift from medical operation to cosmetic product required several social forces to work together. The objective of this study is to examine how women's magazines

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contributed to the normalization of cosmetic surgery over time. To achieve this goal, it is important to look back to the time when the modern idea of cosmetic surgery began incubating. This study examines cosmetic surgery articles in women's magazines from the 1960s through the 1980s to understand how they construct and convey the meanings of cosmetic surgery over time.

Studying women's magazines during these decades is particularly important for four reasons. First, the most popular plastic surgery procedures and several vital marketing techniques were introduced between the 1960s and 1980s. Silicone implants were introduced in 1962, which significantly helped the establishment of modern plastic surgery (ASPS, 2013b). Another evolutionary but controversial technique—liposuction—was introduced in 1982 (News-Medical.Net, 2013). In the 1980s, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons made efforts to increase public awareness and to make the information about plastic surgery more accessible to the public (ASPS, 2013b). As a result, in 1982, The United States Supreme Court granted physicians the legal right to advertise the procedure (Hennink-Kaminski & Reichert, 2011). Even though it is not clear how many breast augmentation and liposuction procedures had been performed before the 1980s, the demand for these two surgeries has been ranked among the top procedures since ASPS started gathering these data in 1992.<sup>1</sup> Second, these years reflect the influences of the women's liberation movement on women's expectations of their bodies and their lives (Hatton & Trautner, 2013). Women's liberation movement not only encouraged the pursuit of women's rights and careers, but it also increased the interest in pursuing beauty (Saltzberg & Chrisler, 1995). And, the women's movement in 1970s encouraged control of one's own body, which, figuratively speaking, helped to bring cosmetic surgery out of the closet (Rothman & Rothman, 2004). Finally, this time period helped establish the current norms of beauty for these procedures. Indeed, the 1960s to the 1980s are the era in which the cosmetic surgery phenomenon began incubating and diffusing.

## **Literature Review**

### **Cosmetic Surgery, Women's Bodies, and Feminist Perspectives**

To understand cosmetic surgery culture, Gilman (1998) looked at the relationship between the aesthetic body and the happy psyche, arguing that in American culture, beauty and health are interchangeable; thus, with the improvement of physical appearance, mental distress can be cured. However, attempts at curing the psyche justified the choices of undergoing aesthetic surgical procedures, but they are not sufficient enough to explain the rapid growth of cosmetic surgery (Haiken, 1997). Rather, it is the culture of self-

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<sup>1</sup> These statistics were obtained from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. The top five surgeries since 1992 are breast augmentation, liposuction, eyelid lift, nose job, and facelift. From 1998 to 2012, breast augmentation and liposuction were the most frequently performed procedures.

improvement that most likely explains the phenomenon of cosmetic surgery in recent years (Haiken, 1997; Holliday & Taylor, 2006). As such, today's cosmetic surgery is framed in terms of self-improvement rather than a cure for depression and other mental illness. This shift extends the realm of cosmetic surgery from helping distressed people to working on anyone who pursues improvements.

Critical studies have advocated that women's bodies are objectified and pathologized in patriarchal society (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991). Feminist scholars also have debated the role cosmetic surgery plays in oppressing women. Several scholars have looked at the psychological pleasure and economic achievement women obtained after undergoing cosmetic surgery and suggested that women's agency to make decisions about their bodies and happy psyches also should be considered. Cosmetic surgery may empower women in terms of self-improvement and the expression of agency (Davis, 1995; Gimlin, 2002; Kuczynski, 2006).

Many feminist scholars have argued that cosmetic surgery contributes to the oppression of women in a patriarchal society (e.g., Blum, 2003; Blood, 2005; Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Gilman, 1998; Heinricy, 2006; Holliday & Taylor, 2006; Jeffreys, 2005; Morgan, 1991; Tait, 2007; Wolf 1991). For Morgan (1991), appearance is the primary way through which society evaluates women's achievement of femininity. Women are under pressure to purchase femininity through their submission to cosmetic surgeons. Thus, for Morgan (1991), cosmetic surgeon's scalpels are the knives that contribute to a patriarchal, Eurocentric, and white supremacist society. Wolf (1991) criticized cosmetic surgery as one of the violent backlashes against women, turning women's natural bodies into "man-made" bodies (p. 247). Women who exercise their freedom to opt to undergo cosmetic surgery are actually trapped in the "beauty backlash" (Wolf, 1991, p. 247), in which a woman must be a beauty to be seen. By using surgeries to achieve so-called self-improvement, women themselves reinforce the beauty myth culture, in which an attractive body is a prerequisite for romantic relationships and successful careers.

### **The Normalization of Cosmetic Surgery and Media**

Research has suggested that the media contribute to the popularity and normalization of cosmetic surgery by presenting perfection in promotional messages of cosmetic surgery. It is certain that the media have consistently and repeatedly presented unrealistic body images that affect people's view of what constitutes an ideal body (Botta, 1999; Goodman & Walsh-Childers, 2004; Sarwer, Magee, & Crerand, 2004; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999; White, Ginsburg, & Brown, 1999). The ideal bodies of Hollywood stars presented in the media not only construct the contemporary norms of beauty, but they also result in comparisons through which 'non-celebrity' women come up short (Botta, 1999). Such comparisons may lead to negative consequences, such as body dissatisfaction, anxiety, or eating disorders (Botta, 1999; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). Goodman and Walsh-Childers (2004) also found that media images of the ideal body directly and indirectly

influence women's breast satisfaction. Many women felt that they had the potential to attain the ideal breast size if they had the money and time. The findings of these study corresponded to Gimlin's *Body Work*. In contemporary society, women see their bodies as projects to be worked on or improved by external procedures, such as exercise, dieting, make-up, hair styling, and cosmetic surgery (Gimlin, 2002).

The increasing media coverage of cosmetic surgery has played an important role in the normalization of cosmetic surgery (Brooks, 2004; Davis, 1995; Tait, 2006; Gallagher and Pecot-Hebert, 2007). For Davis (1995), the media have glamorized and normalized cosmetic surgery via their coverage of celebrities' body work and ordinary women's cosmetic surgery experiences. The coverage of celebrities' procedures presents the message that, in order to obtain an ideal body, women need the help of cosmetic surgery. The coverage of ordinary women's positive surgery experiences in women's magazines has further legitimated and promoted the use of cosmetic surgery. Tait (2006) and Gallagher and Pecot-Hebert (2007) also found that the presentations of cosmetic surgery in reality shows normalized and justified cosmetic surgery by literally presenting the operational procedures and, at the same time, emphasizing the benefits while neglecting to inform viewers about the risks of the surgeries.

Several studies have focused on magazines' coverage of cosmetic surgery. Brooks (2004) identified several dominant themes among cosmetic surgery messages in popular women's magazines. Cosmetic surgery in women's magazines was framed as a scientific and innovative technology that provided a solution for enhancing patients' mental and physical health. The emphasis on patients' positive experiences in women's magazines further endorsed the use of cosmetic surgery. She argues that these dominant themes function as normalizing forces for cosmetic surgery. Wolf (1991) found that women's magazines use individualistic appeals to justify the choice of cosmetic surgery. In these depictions in women's magazines, cosmetic surgery is portrayed as appropriate not only for the women who want to please others (i.e., their men), but also for successful and responsible women who are consistently seeking self-improvements and want to please themselves.

Woodstock (2001) utilized the historical approach to examine cosmetic surgery coverage in magazines by charting the changing rhetoric about cosmetic surgery over time. Her work examined the women's magazines *Harper's Bazaar* and *Ladies' Home Journal* as well as the news magazine *Newsweek*. She found that, to explain away the negative image of cosmetic surgery in the late 1960s and early 1970s, magazines often emphasized the patients' physical deficits. In the 1980s and 1990s, the rhetoric shifted from the use of surgery as a cure for physical deficits to a means of female empowerment. However, the unanswered question in Woodstock's study is what discursive themes were conveyed in women's magazines to construct and shape women's understanding of cosmetic surgery. Additionally, the rhetorical strategies used to correspond to and reinforce these discursive themes in women's magazines remain unclear. In the present study, we discursively examined women's magazines. Examining women's magazines in different ways is significant because, as Wolf

(1991) emphasized, women's magazines are not only an entertaining or informational medium, but they also act as a window through which women obtain the mass sensibility.

In short, the above research has demonstrated that the role of the media in the cosmetic surgery phenomenon is threefold. One element is the construction of the ideal body image. Another is promotional cosmetic surgery rhetoric, emphasizing the effectiveness of surgical transformation. The third role links women's physical appearance with self-improvement. Even though research has consistently demonstrated that media coverage is a factor contributing to the growth of cosmetic surgery, few studies focus on how women's magazines present and normalize cosmetic surgery over time, especially during the era in which modern cosmetic surgery was established and diffused. By examining cosmetic surgery messages in women's magazines from the 1960s through the 1980s, we aim to understand what dominant meanings of cosmetic surgery were constructed and conveyed to readers, and how these messages contributed to the normalization of cosmetic surgery over time.

Audiences have differing perceptions of these themes. As Hall (1980) emphasizes, audience members do not always reproduce the so-called "preferred reading" through which they can fully accept and share the inherent ideology of a text. Audiences can partially accept or reject the dominant meaning to produce a negotiated reading or even have oppositional reading, which rejects the intended dominant meaning of a text. However, we argue that the combined media portrayals of perfect bodies and the message that cosmetic surgery is necessary seem to provide few possible oppositional readings for women uninterested in cosmetic surgery. Thus, the overarching questions in this study were the following: How has cosmetic surgery been presented in women's magazines? What dominant meanings were conveyed consistently and consecutively across different magazines and periods of time? And, how have the presentations of cosmetic surgery over time represented the construction of cosmetic surgery culture and reflected how women's identities have shaped the discourse of cosmetic surgery? The following section focuses on the methodological approach used to achieve the objectives of this study.

## **Method**

### **Analytical Strategy**

Discourse analysis was utilized to analyze the themes and dominant meanings of cosmetic surgery articles in women's magazines over 30 years. Discourse analysis emphasizes how language is used to form the knowledge and further construct, shape, and maintain our identities and social reality (Stark & Trinidad, 2007; Talija, 1999). Discourse analysis focuses not only on what is said, but also on how it is said (Budd, 2006). To this end, discourse analysis also takes omission and ignorance into account (Huckin, 2002).

This study had the following goals: (1) to understand what dominant meanings of cosmetic surgery were presented; (2) to assess how the dominant meanings of cosmetic surgery were constructed; and (3) to determine what messages had been neglected. Thus,

discourse analysis allowed us to achieve the goal of understanding how magazines, patients, and plastic surgeons used language to constitute and shape the public's understanding of cosmetic surgery. In particular, we were interested in how cosmetic surgery articles described women's bodies and how they defined the relationship between women and cosmetic surgery.

Our analytical strategies involved two stages: we read the texts as casual readers and then re-read them with an eye to critically examine them (Huckin, 2002). In the first stage, we assumed the role of a target reader, who read, interpreted, and enjoyed the content and information the magazines provided. We primarily engaged in a preferred reading stage, through which we were educated and guided by the texts. At this stage, we found that first, throughout three decades and across the three different magazines, a variety of cosmetic surgery procedures had been invented and introduced to the market, such as facelifts, eyelid lifts, nose jobs, breast augmentations, and liposuction. Second, cosmetic surgery appeared to be more and more popular and available to average women. As a result, cosmetic surgery seemed to be effective and desirable.

After the first stage, the oppositional reading approach was adopted to examine what and how the dominant ideologies or meanings regarding cosmetic surgery were constructed, represented, and maintained throughout the content of cosmetic surgery articles. In this stage, we first engaged in reading the articles and deriving categories and thematic patterns. These categories placed cosmetic surgery in terms of delivering positive, neutral, and negative messages about the motivations and/or effects of the procedures, which provided us with a broad understanding about the stance of women's magazines on cosmetic surgery. Not surprisingly, the rhetoric tones of cosmetic surgery messages were overwhelmingly positive and even promoted. We also categorized the articles based on how surgery was discussed. Facelifts, general information about cosmetic surgery, and breast augmentations were the most featured topics. Next, we compiled the articles and conducted a close textual analysis to identify and trace the repeated rhetoric through which we obtained what accounts seemed to be important in cosmetic surgery discourse (Huckin, Andrus, & Clary-Lemon, 2012). We paid particular attention to the sentences, words, and phrases used to describe women's bodies and articulate the use of cosmetic surgery. We also examined how women, writers, and surgeons make sense of the use of cosmetic surgery to identify the normalization process of cosmetic surgery. Tactically, we grouped and differentiated the language used in the articles, and derived the thematic units of meanings. Five discursive themes were derived from the articles we obtained. Finally, we returned to the texts again to look at the narrating strategies to understand how magazines constructed and facilitated the dominant meanings in cosmetic surgery discourse. These were discussed in the findings.

## Sample

Three popular women's magazines targeting different demographics of female readers were examined in this study: *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*. By including

these three women's magazines, we aimed to collect a broad range of articles that might feature different topics of cosmetic surgery and contain different prominent themes and meanings. The first two offer fashion information, while the third is geared more toward women interested in homemaking. Each has maintained a consistent female fan base across the decades analyzed in this study. *Vogue*, founded in 1892, is one of the most popular women's fashion magazines worldwide and has had a profound influence on its readers in terms of fashion and lifestyle (McCracken, 1993). *Vogue* targets women interested in style and new trends, and especially career women who have purchasing power (Monk, 2009; Serenity Stitchworks, 2013). *Harper's Bazaar*, launched in 1867, also targets upscale readers with purchasing power (McCracken, 1993). *Harper's Bazaar* is significant because it is considered the first modern fashion magazine in America and plays a vital role in introducing New York fashion to the world (McCracken, 1993; Miller & Taylor, 2010). *Ladies' Home Journal* targets white, American middle-class women. It primarily serves as a guide for these women's roles at home, promoting traditional values and femininity (Scanlon, 1995). It was the first magazine that reached one million readers in the genre of popular women's titles such as *Good Housekeeping* and *McCall's* (Zuckerman, 1998).

*The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* was used to collect the cosmetic surgery articles in the aforementioned women's magazines. The keywords searched used to gather relevant articles were "cosmetic," "aesthetic," "plastic," "surgery," "facial," and "breast." We also used combinations of these terms. Only the articles that addressed invasive surgical procedures were selected for analysis. From the 1960s to the 1980s, a total of 59 articles focusing on cosmetic surgical procedures were included (Table 1).

<p><i>Table 1</i> <i>Number of Cosmetic Surgery Articles</i></p>			
Decade	<i>Harper's Bazaar</i>	<i>Vogue</i>	<i>Ladies' Home Journal</i>
1960-1969	2	6	2
1970-1979	7	8	5
1980-1989	8	14	5

## Findings

This study identified five discursive themes in women's magazines: (1) objectify, de-humanize, and pathologize the body; (2) surgery is accessible and effective for every woman at any age; (3) liberal and independent patients; (4) be realistic but expect a miracle; and (5) surgery without blood and the trivialization of risks. These dominant themes, we argue, not



only contribute to the evolution of modern cosmetic surgery from a medical treatment to a means of self-improvement, but they also normalize it.

### **Objectify, De-humanize, and Pathologize the Body**

In this aspect of the cosmetic surgery discourse, women's bodies are seen as subject to manipulation or transformation. Women themselves adapt this discursive theme, and harshly evaluate and criticize their own bodies. In *Vogue's* February 1968 issue, one woman said: "I have two undeniable furrows at either side of my mouth—these lines the French call the lines of bitterness" ("Face-lifting," p. 93). Other derogatory labels, such as crow's feet, baggy eyes, sagging jaw, sagging breasts, sagging cheeks, flabby stomach, deformed thighs, the ski nose, the saddle nose, the coarse nose, the button nose, and the crooked nose, have been used to describe parts of women's faces and bodies. Such terms or derogatory labels were used throughout the analyzed content. According to a *Vogue's* 1975 article, "[y]our skin loses its elasticity, its ability to spring back and it sags, giving you that ugly 'old-bag' look" (Morant, 1975, p. 84). Other examples of derogatory labels, such as saddlebag hips, jodhpur thighs, apron flap of skin on the belly, and hanging folds on upper arms, appeared in a *Vogue* article from 1981 (Gross, 1981). The phrase "turkey gobbler neck" appeared in a *Vogue* article five years later (Sims, 1986).

The magazines also literally described women's bodies as just objects. For instance, a female breast is as elastic as "clay" that is "capable of being transformed" by plastic surgeons "into a more beautiful expression of itself" (Lichtendorf, 1976, p. 145) and "[b]igger, better breasts are a hot commodity these days" (Henig, 1989, p. 108). When women's bodies are objectified, pathologized, and even de-humanized, cosmetic surgery is portrayed as a tool that can shift the normal aging process, presenting the natural body's characteristics as an abnormal illness. Thus, cosmetic surgery is legitimated to "correct" the deficits, "remove" what is loose, and "eliminate" or "cut off" the excess flesh. As Blum (2003) stated, women immersed in this culture of cosmetic surgery see being cut, augmented, and reshaped as a path to becoming whole.

### **Surgery is Accessible and Effective for Every Woman at Any Age**

The notion of the accessibility and popularity of cosmetic surgery appears throughout the analyzed content. As early as the 1960s, patients' first-person stories suggested that not only celebrities but also ordinary women can undergo cosmetic surgery, as indicated, for instance, in 1962 story "The Diary of a Face Lift" in *Ladies' Home Journal* and "Face-Lifting: would you go through it again?" in a 1968 issue of *Vogue*. Over time, the emphasis on accessibility became repeatedly addressed, which is exemplified by the following *Vogue* article:

Cosmetic or esthetic surgery, once the privilege of celebrities and the very rich, has truly come of age. No more a mere exercise in vanity and indulgence, surgery to improve and correct the appearance is sought by

business and professional people of both sexes; by doctors, lawyers, clergymen and advertising executives; by persons in the arts, the recently divorced or widowed, job-seekers, and women who want correction of breasts that are too large, too small, or mismatched (Weber, 1981, p. 521).

Another article stated that, with medical developments, “plenty” of new procedures made cosmetic surgery “much more personalized, tailored to a woman’s individual needs and desires, more accepted to the average woman” (Benzaia, 1980, p. 54).

Additionally, in the 1980s, the dominant rhetoric gradually shifted from “average women do it” to “any age can do it.” A 1984 *Vogue* article suggested that cosmetic surgery is “now aimed not so much at restoring lost youth but at giving a woman of any age a more healthful, vital look” (Weber, 1984, p. 674). Cosmetic surgery is presented as having become a routine needed to maintain one’s beauty, and thus should be done as a “periodic renewal” (Weber, 1983, p. 388). Also, “[n]o woman is too old or too young to have plastic surgery on the breast” (Lichtendorf, 1976, p. 178).

The effectiveness of cosmetic surgery was also discussed copiously throughout the analyzed magazine content over three decades. The following is an example from *Vogue*’s 1961 September issue:

Today’s extraordinary surgery is almost impossible to identify. It reveals nothing that isn’t pleasant, never announces itself in the smallest way. The new change – though, for some women, it makes over a life – is not a dramatic make-over of the face, does not mean long hospitalization, nor long periods of post-operative black-and-blueness. In fact, some women have disappeared for a long weekend, turned up looking as if they had had a rest which did them a world of good. (“The Imaged Image,” p. 173)

When we are aging, cosmetic surgery can effectively “subtract” the years of age (La Barre, 1981, p. 32). A simple eyelid surgery can make a woman 10 years younger (Laughridge, 1983). No matter whether a woman’s breasts are too small, too sagging, too large, irregular, or of uneven sizes, cosmetic surgery can correct these “irregularities and imperfections” (La Barre, 1972, p. 32). Using such consistent and repeatedly positive narratives to explicitly state the effectiveness and popularity of cosmetic surgery, women’s magazines articulated that “cosmetic surgery is becoming as common as a visit to the skin salon” (Orenstein, 1989, p. 192). Thus, for women, the question of cosmetic surgery is not “why choose it?” but “why not me?”

### **Liberated and Independent Patients**

Another prevailing message about cosmetic surgery in the analyzed women’s magazines was “do it for yourself.” In the personal cosmetic surgery stories found in the magazines, women repeatedly said they decided to modify their bodies for their own

happiness. For example, a woman stated: “I am so heartsick at the sight of my sagging jawline, drooping mouth and flabby throat that I’d take the odds and go for broke” (“Diary of a Face Lift,” 1962, p. 28). The writers and sources in cosmetic surgery coverage also constantly emphasized that women should choose cosmetic surgery not because of their husbands or boyfriends. Instead, cosmetic surgery should be used for self-improvement rather than for someone else’s pleasure. For instance, for breast surgery, it was emphasized that the “right” motivation is because “she wants it, because thinks she will feel more comfortable or look better in clothes, not because her husband or boyfriend thinks she will look and feel better” (Lehmann, 1979, p. 179). A good candidate for cosmetic surgery is the person who comes up with a “healthy reason” (McConnell, 1987, p. 185)—not for family, not for romance, not for career, but simply for her own improvement or happiness.

However, the advocacy of self-improvement does not reflect the full story of cosmetic surgery messages. The message about being more attractive to men or more competitive in the job market is actually implied or even explicitly stated in some of the articles. In an article found in a 1980s issue of *Vogue*, a woman rejoiced: “We look great ... we will look greater. And gentlemen give us the eye, again!” (Smith, 1980, p. 309). In a *Ladies’ Home Journal* article from 1980, another woman said confidently after surgery: “I feel attractive again—and that’s important to me. And coping with the operation and the aftermath has given me quite a feeling of accomplishment. Even if my face were to fall tomorrow, I’d do it again” (Christopher, 1980, p. 18). Another article in *Ladies’ Home Journal* clearly stated the social or economic benefits of cosmetic surgery:

If a woman plans a life of keeping up, whether for social reasons or for a career in which looks are important, some surgeons may advise a facelift while she is still in her 30s. She should have it done at the first signs of age in her face.... The little pouch under the lower eyelid, the little droop at the jowls should be corrected then, and the face should be constantly maintained (La Barre, 1970, p. 128).

Ironically, the real reason for undergoing cosmetic surgery is not simply for the sake of self-happiness or improvement but rather because of the promise of social and economic benefits after the surgery. Wolf (1991) has articulated that when women believed that they had surgery merely for themselves rather than for someone else, they were trapped in the beauty backlash, in which women could never be complete without the perpetual pursuit of beauty.

### **Be Realistic, But Expect A Miracle**

The discourse of cosmetic surgery does not exclusively promote a magical transformation. Women’s magazines often tell their readers not to expect miracles from cosmetic surgery. In patients’ first-person stories, women elaborated that they had realistic expectations for the surgery results. They understood cosmetic surgery could only improve

their current appearance and could not create a new face or change their lives. A woman interviewed for a *Vogue* article stated:

A face-lift is a repair job, not a trade-in on a new model; search for self-improvement, not a manhunt for the fountain of youth. I reached my decision to undergo cosmetic surgery after a long, realistic assessment of my motivation (self-esteem triumphed over vanity) and my expectations (a refreshed face, not a new one). (Morant, 1975, p. 84)

In the articles that provided surgical advice, cosmetic surgeons repeatedly alerted women not to assume that they will see a magical transformation after surgery. “The purpose of cosmetic surgery is to make you look as good as it is possible for you to look ... It cannot do more than that ... If you are expecting a transforming miracle ... you will be disappointed” (Allen, 1981, p. 144). Cosmetic surgery is “no quick fix” (McConnell, 1986, p. 155). Women should have healthy mental attitudes because cosmetic surgery can only “enhance one’s already sound self-image, but don’t think it will solve deep-seated problems” (McConnell, 1986, p. 155).

On the other hand, possible magical transformations of one’s body and life after surgery are also explicitly articulated through promises that plastic surgeons can take years off and that the aging clock can be turned back. For example, an “[e]xpertly performed, plastic surgery can work miracles on your face and body” (Benzaia, 1982, p. 120). Additionally, an exciting and healthier life is assumed after surgery. A woman interviewed after her surgery stated: “I’m just about halfway through life. The children are grown, I have time for new activities ... having my face lifted was part of gearing up for the second half of my life” (“Why I Had,” 1969, p. 152).

At first glance, it seems illogical that these two contrasting narratives—realistic versus magical—coexist in the cosmetic surgery discourse. However, discourse is not a static phase but a process in which multiple ideologies emerge, coexist, and compete (Jones, 2008; Jóhannesson, 2010). By incorporating resistant standpoints, the opposite narratives actually enhance and strengthen each rather without undermining the dominant discourse (Jones, 2008). By asking patients to be realistic, the cosmetic surgery discourse is arguably able to define what constitutes a “magical” transformation and verify the effectiveness of cosmetic surgery.

### **Surgery without Blood and the Trivialization of Risks**

Since the rise of cosmetic surgery, women’s magazines have constantly described and explained the surgical procedures to readers. However, these descriptions did not entirely and truly portray the reality of the process. A lightened tone or a simplified version of surgical procedures, in which the bloody scenes from the operating table were intentionally omitted, can easily be misinterpreted by readers. Using simplified versions of invasive procedures contributes to the promotion of cosmetic surgery and simultaneously misrepresents the

reality of such surgery. For example, in one article from 1969, *Vogue* described a “quick youth” surgery:

What is the surgical procedure? The incisions are delicate lines made by the surgeon just below the lower lashes, and or in the hollow where the eyeball curves inward to meet the outward curve of bone in the occipital cavity. In the case of the younger patient with smooth skin, he [surgeon] simply removes the pocket of fat and sews the skin back in place; with an older patient whose skin is sagging, he ‘takes a tuck’ by removing a section of skin, so the puffiness and looseness are eliminated at the same time. (“The eye job,” 1969, p. 105)

For a breast augmentation surgery, “the surgeon makes an incision at a spot what would be just below the curve of a normal breast. He then forms a ‘pocket’ between the muscle and the breast wall and inserts an implant.... He sews up the incision, which is concealed by the curve of the new breast” (La Barre, 1972, p. 127). Breast augmentation “is a fairly painless and well-tolerated technique” (Lichtendorf, 1976, p. 145). Even for the controversial liposuction procedure in 1980s, a very promotional rhetoric described the suction lipectomy as a “fat vacuum.” The article described the procedure in the following fashion: “... basically consists of ‘vacuuming’ out fat, using a high pressure, miniature, vacuum-like device. The fat is removed using a thin plastic or metal tube inserted into the body through an incision less than an inch length” (Sims, 1985, p. 144). In all of the above cases, the actual procedures are quite bloody and, in the case of liposuction, somewhat violent, leaving the patients scarred and bruised for some time after the surgery (Effective Plastic Surgery, 2012).

Along with the simplification of operational procedures, women’s magazines consistently trivialized the risks of cosmetic surgery by infrequent reports on that topic. First, few articles addressed side effects or risks. We found only two articles that exclusively focused on the risks of cosmetic surgery. One is “Can a face-lift make you look worse (Carpenter, 1981)?” and the other is “The lift that left me low” (*Harper’s Bazaar*, 1981). Second, the notion that risks were rare and correctable or even avoidable was overly articulated. For example, a 1980 *Harper’s Bazaar* piece contained the following warning: “Remember, despite its popularity and relative convenience, cosmetic surgery is serious business and, like any other operation, it should be considered carefully because it entails possible risks, however minimal” (Benzaia, 1980, p. 55). A similar caveat was extended in *Vogue*’s October 1984 issue: “First, any surgical operation involves potential risks such as infection or hematoma (a collection of blood around the implant). Risks are low, perhaps about 2 percent, and are highly correctable” (Weber, 1984, p. 678). Moreover, for more invasive procedures, such as breast argumentation, when articles addressed the risks, the dominant narrative—effective and safe—would immediately follow to trivialize the fact of risks:

Breast enlarging is a major operation, and as in any operation, complications can occur. There may be a blood clot that must be removed. Infection, though rare, can set in. Immediately after the operation there is sometimes a painful accumulation of fluid that must be drained. But the implant method of breast enlargement is considered a safe, standard procedure, and esthetically satisfying. It also can provide astonishing psychological relief for the woman who undergoes it. (La Barre, 1972, p. 128)

Critical studies have found cosmetic surgery messages in the media tend to neglect the risks by either emphasizing the benefits or addressing the risks in an overly optimistic tone (Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007; Lee, 2009; Tait, 2007). Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that women's magazines have normalized the discourse of cosmetic surgery by not only trivializing the risks, but also by mitigating the seriousness of the surgeries and simplifying the procedures in which the surgery becomes blood- and hazard-free.

In addition to the discursive themes addressed above, which dealt with readers' understanding of cosmetic surgery, it is also important to note the narrative strategies that were utilized to facilitate and support the dominant meanings in the cosmetic surgery discourse. There were three common narrative strategies. First, an easy-to-understand and intriguing title was adopted to attract readers' attention. The articles' titles simultaneously established readers' first understanding of cosmetic surgery, such as in the following examples: "Making More (or Less) of Your Bosom" (*Ladies' Home Journal*, 1972, p. 87); "Body Sculpturing – New Techniques in Cosmetic Surgery for Every Part of the Body" (*Vogue*, 1969, p. 80); "The Eye Job—Quick Youth" (*Vogue*, 1969, p. 104); "Are Your Breasts Too Small, Too Large?—Plastic Surgeons Can Do a Great Deal to Improve the Shape of Your Breasts" (Lichtendorf, 1976, p. 145); "Q. & A. with a Medical Expert: Modern Ways to Change Your Body" (*Vogue*, 1981, p. 202); and "Your Choice: Breast Reshaping" (Lehmann, 1979, p. 178).

Instead of using medical jargon, such as liposuction, blepharoplasty, and rhinoplasty, the articles' use of common language and verbs such as "sculpture," "change," "fix," or "contour" directly stressed the magical effects of cosmetic surgery. Furthermore, the use of the pronouns "you" or "your" not only corresponded to the dominant cosmetic surgery discourse in which the use of cosmetic surgery was the choice of independent women, but it also provided readers with a fantasy, in which they could create the ideal body of their dreams.

Another powerful narrative strategy was starting the reports with an emphasis on the symbolic meanings of women's body parts. A *Vogue* article regarding facelift stated: "... [y]our face: better known than your signature (or certainly your fingerprints). It's the central organ of communication" (Lord, 1988, p. 203). A *Ladies' Home Journal* article in 1972 argued: "For better or for worse, the bosom is a major sex symbol in our culture. Breasts have many unconscious meanings relating to fertility, womanhood and sex appeal" (La Barre,

1972, p. 83). Another article, about eyelift, began with the following statement: “Eyes are the tablebearers of the face—complete giveaways when it comes to showing how a person really feels. Instinctively, we look into a stranger’s eyes to see who live inside” (“The Eye Job,” 1969, p. 104). A *Harper’s Bazaar* article said that when a woman’s face looks old, she is likely to be “treated differently,” and might limit her activities to what people expect of her as a result (“Does Your Face,” 1986, p. 155). This narrative strategy not only advocates the necessity of perfecting a specific body part, but also supports the dominant cosmetic surgery discourse in which an unattractive body part has been pathologized. Beauty and health are presented as interchangeable.

Third, the normalization was also evident in the articles’ emphasis on the popularity of cosmetic surgery. Various cosmetic surgery statistics and terms such “common” and “popular” were used by the magazines across the different time periods. This narrative strategy supported the dominant cosmetic surgery discourse, according to which cosmetic surgery is appropriate for any woman and at any age. For women, the choice of having a cosmetic surgery was presented as no longer a taboo but as something that is commonplace.

### **Discussion**

The discursive themes outlined in this study represent readers’ understanding and knowledge of cosmetic surgery. The rhetorical strategies used in the analyzed stories provide powerful devices to draw and trap readers into the dominant meanings of the cosmetic surgery discourse. Even though the three women’s magazines included in this study targeted different demographics of female readers and devoted varying amount of coverage to cosmetic surgery, their messages were surprising similar in terms of their discursive themes, rhetorical tone, and the covered aspects of cosmetic surgery.

We found several discursive themes of cosmetic surgery that corresponded to the previous literature on the topic and especially to feminist critiques of the media’s portrayals of cosmetic surgery. The narratives articulated the effectiveness of cosmetic surgery, problematized women’s bodies, and stressed that independent women have to make choices for their own good. Additionally, we found other dominant meanings that normalized the use of cosmetic surgery. Surprisingly, cosmetic surgery was depicted as appropriate not only for aging women but for all women of any age. No woman would be considered too young or too old to have a cosmetic surgery done, according to the stories we analyzed. The optimistic and simplified nature of the narratives about the surgical procedures turned the bloody and violent operational procedures into deceptively hazard-free surgery. Even though the narratives sometimes included warnings that could have given the readers a moment of pause when negotiating the dominant meanings, these warnings were buried beneath the overwhelmingly positive rhetoric of cosmetic surgery. More importantly, the warnings were usually followed by the suggestion that choosing a board-certified surgeon would be the best way to avoid risks. This, we argue, ironically constructed the authenticity of plastic surgeons,

and persuaded women to choose the “right” surgeon rather than abandon the notion of cosmetic surgery.

It is also worth mentioning that beauty norms—young, fit, tight skin, full breasts—appeared undeniable and unchallengeable in the stories we analyzed. Throughout three decades and across three magazines, the discourse of cosmetic surgery was established under the notion that achieving mainstream beauty norms was necessary in order to be attractive and happy. Worse, with the rise of career women after 1970s, the discourse of cosmetic surgery implied a connection between women’s appearance and their likely success and competitiveness in the job market. The establishment of narrative links among women’s appearance, success, happiness, and cosmetic surgery contributed to the normalization of cosmetic surgery, as suggested by previous feminist scholars’ critiques (e.g., Morgan, 1991; Wolf, 1991). As a result, these magazines’ portrayals of cosmetic surgery had the potential to affect not only women’s decisions to alter their appearances, but also the ways in which their female readers would perceive their place in society.

Women’s identities and social positions appear twisted and conflicted in the discourse of cosmetic surgery. On the one hand, women are portrayed as empowered when they use cosmetic surgery to change their bodies. At the same time, it is clear that women are trapped in a society that evaluates them on the basis of their appearance. When a woman adopts the ideology that she must be beautiful to be seen, continuing to work on her imperfect body parts is no longer a choice. It is a must.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Several limitations should be addressed. First, even though this study examined three decades of invasive cosmetic surgery articles, the number of articles included in this study was relatively small. The findings would be more complete if the scope of the study included articles about non-invasive procedures as well as stories from different genres of magazines. This would have allowed us to observe the similarities and dissimilarities of cosmetic surgery discourse work in magazines targeting different audiences. The second limitation has to do with the methodology used in this study. We acknowledge that the analyses and interpretations of the texts are subjective and reflect our views on the relationship between cosmetic surgery and women’s roles in society. We look at cosmetic surgery as one of the practices that reinforce femininity in terms of seeing women as sexual objects. Further, Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model articulates readers’ ability to resist dominant meanings, and this study did not take readers’ interpretations into account.

Future studies should address the ways in which readers decode these messages and the ways in which they internalize or reject them. Also, because of the growing media interest in celebrity cosmetic surgery, it would be valuable to assess how cosmetic surgery procedures are depicted in current celebrity-based publications. It stands to reason that readers who place a value on notoriety and fame may interpret these messages differently than those who do not. It would also be informative to conduct an analysis of cosmetic surgery blogs to



determine whether first-hand, personal accounts of the procedures mirror what is found in magazines packaged for mass audiences.

### Conclusion

Women's fashion magazines, a mix of fantasy and knowledge, have successfully built up their reputations as viable sources for creating a graceful, beautiful, and stylish life and as arbiters of social trends. However, as this study finds, these magazines, while helping to normalize cosmetic procedures, do so in a way that may mislead their readers. This examination of cosmetic surgery messages in women's magazines from the 1960s to the 1980s identifies a dominant ideology that portrays cosmetic surgery as effective and safe for every woman (of any age) who wants to achieve personal, financial, or romantic success. Yet, the dangers of these procedures are usually not explicitly articulated but only implied. Moreover, occasional contradictory messages, such as "be realistic" caveats and risk alerts, ironically contribute to the normalization of cosmetic surgery by offering the reader a glimpse into another world that may become a reality for them. If magazine coverage of cosmetic surgery continues on this path by embracing ever-newer medical technologies, it will likely reinforce the norm that natural and artificial body parts can be blended to overcome the biological, inherited limitations of one's physical self.

As the existing literature indicates (Gilman, 1998), these magazines frequently established that a happy American life was tied closely to the aesthetic beauty that could be offered through cosmetic surgery. Articles in all three of the analyzed publications indicated that women were not only pleased with the physical results of their procedures, but were also happy with the improved life they could now access. Narratives of needing breast augmentation to look great in clothes and post-op self-actualization appeared frequently in these articles. The pervasive retelling of the story that self-esteem through surgery is possible provides women with a false notion that inner conflict, turmoil, or even chemical imbalances are relatively easy to fix. This well-established narrative is even more problematic considering that the unrealistic and digitally altered images of models in women's magazines have been found to play a role in women's low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Sheldon, 2010; Wolf, 1991).

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