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Cosmetic Surgery and Body Image Among Utah Women

Setting the Stage

National media and scholars have puzzled over the high levels of plastic surgery among Utah women,¹ and a national magazine even called Salt Lake City the “Vainest City in America.”² Many wonder why Salt Lake City, capital of one of the most religious states in the nation,³ would employ more plastic surgeons per capita than Los Angeles.⁴ In fact, two-thirds of Utah Mormon women know someone who has undergone cosmetic plastic surgery.⁵ In a state known for its conservative and wholesome values, visitors are surprised at the large quantity of billboards lining Utah’s interstate freeway advertising plastic surgery and other body-manipulating procedures.⁶ Pinning down causes for this phenomenon is difficult, but this report will attempt to shed light on the cultural and personal factors contributing to the high numbers of elective plastic surgeries (specifically for aesthetic purposes) in Utah.

Salt Lake City has the second-highest number of plastic surgeons per capita in the United States, second only to Miami and ahead of Los Angeles.

This research snapshot focuses on four key areas:

- 1) Defining body image and exploring the pressure to conform to societal standards of beauty,
- 2) Data on cosmetic surgery nationally and in Utah,
- 3) Possible explanations for the high levels of plastic surgery in the state, and
- 4) A discussion of ongoing efforts, both nationally and in Utah, to improve body image among women.

Body Image and Societal Standards of Beauty

Approximately 80% of U.S. women do not like how they look;⁷ furthermore, research shows that poor body image affects girls and women worldwide.⁸ Body image is “the perception that a person has of their physical self and the thoughts and feelings that result from that perception. These feelings can be positive, negative, or both and are influenced by individual and environmental factors.”⁹ Researchers have found that many factors (e.g., media, family, peers) cause women to internalize societal beauty ideals that can lead to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their bodies.¹⁰ A mother’s body image usually serves as the primary model for how daughters think about their own bodies.¹¹ These pressures can begin at an early age

and intensify through adolescence, a time when experts say “girls are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that their appearances are a barometer of their self-worth in our media-intense culture.”¹² Societal ideals of beauty can influence some girls and women to focus significant time, energy, and money on their appearance.

Utah women’s close attention to personal appearance manifests in various ways. *Forbes* magazine reported that in 2006 Salt Lake City residents spent \$2.2 million on hair coloring and \$6.9 million on cosmetics and skin-care products—more than ten times the amount residents of similarly sized cities spent.¹³ In addition, minimally invasive cosmetic procedures are becoming increasingly common for those who want to improve their appearance. Nationally, dermatologists report that Botox injections have become almost as great a part of their business as skin cancer treatments.¹⁴

Elective cosmetic surgery is another option for those wishing to improve their appearance. Research shows that body image plays a part in the decision to undergo elective plastic surgery and other body enhancements. Kathy Davis, a leading scholar in this field, says, “Cosmetic surgery belongs to a broad regime of technologies, practices and discourses which define the female body as deficient and in need of constant transformation.”¹⁵ Indeed, research has shown that women who received high scores on a scale of body shame and self-surveillance were more likely to express positive feelings about plastic surgery and to report a likelihood that they would modify their own bodies in the future.¹⁶

Yet, despite the demonstrable connection between poor body image and severe societal pressures on girls and women to conform to unattainable standards of physical beauty, some see no problem with plastic surgery and even encourage it.¹⁷ Furthermore, a Yale University meta-analysis of “experimental literature found that physically attractive people were perceived as more sociable, dominant, sexually warm, mentally healthy, intelligent, and socially skilled than physically unattractive people.”¹⁸ Hence, some may feel that efforts to improve their physical appearance (no matter how extreme) are justified.

Cosmetic Surgery Data

According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS), in 2016, Americans spent a record-setting 13.5 billion dollars on aesthetic procedures (surgical and nonsurgical combined).¹⁹ Between the years of 2000 and 2015, the total number of cosmetic procedures performed in the United States increased by 115%. Although the rate of surgical procedures actually decreased slightly (by 10%) during those years, the large increase in procedures deemed “minimally invasive” was so high (158%) that it led to the overall dramatic increase in total procedures.²⁰ A spokesperson for the industry explained some of this increase by stating that “youth is a commodity,” and that in a healthy economy, many people choose to “invest in themselves,” both personally and professionally, by electing to undergo such procedures.²¹

On a local level, Dr. Renato Saltz, a Salt Lake City plastic surgeon, said, “Utah is home to a sophisticated, well-educated population concerned about health and appearance, so it’s not surprising that Salt Lake has become a destination for patients who want safe, cutting-edge aesthetic surgery.” He also suggests that plastic surgery is a way to “reverse the wear and tear of pregnancy” on women’s bodies.²² With such attitudes pervading the national and local culture, it is not surprising so many women (who undergo 92% of all cosmetic procedures)²³ feel intense pressure and take significant steps to change their bodies.

Utah has the nation’s sixth-highest number of plastic surgeons per capita.²⁴ Some suggest that many graduates of the University of Utah’s top-ranked plastic surgery residency program stay in Utah because of the market.²⁵ Statistics are collected by region, so there are no Utah-specific plastic surgery data. In fact, one recent survey that seems to contradict other studies and indicators found that Mormon women in Utah self-reported having cosmetic surgery at rates slightly lower than the national average.²⁶ However, other data suggest cosmetic surgery is indeed a major consideration for many Utah women. For example, Utah is in the Mountain/Pacific region, which has the nation’s highest rates of cosmetic procedures, and the most popular procedure in the region is breast augmentation.²⁷ RealSelf.com reported that Utah topped its list on searches for breast augmentation (53% above the national average),²⁸ and the most common Google search for plastic surgery in Utah was “breast implants.”²⁹ A qualitative research study on Mormon women in Utah showed that breast augmentations are sometimes given to young women at high school graduation.³⁰ National research shows that “Mommy Makeovers” (breast augmentation, tummy tuck, and liposuction) and other procedures are given to women as holiday presents.³¹

Cosmetic surgery can be expensive. Breast augmentation costs approximately \$5,000–7,000, while Mommy Makeovers

cost approximately \$10,000–15,000.³² Some Utah doctors specialize in these procedures and offer financing to appeal to patients who might not otherwise be able to afford surgery.³³ Utah has also become a destination for out-of-state patients, perhaps because of lower prices and special accommodations such as post-operative nurses who care for patients in their hotel rooms.³⁴

Cosmetic surgery is not without risks, and experts worry that some patients do not fully understand potential dangers.³⁵ Procedures are not permanent and sometimes fail. Doctors advertise repair procedures among their regular offerings.³⁶ There is even a reality television show, *Botched*, that highlights cases of plastic surgery gone wrong.³⁷ Moreover, psychologists have called for additional research to study some of the mental-health considerations (including depression, anxiety, body dysmorphic disorder and even suicide) linked to cosmetic surgery, both before and after procedures take place.³⁸ For example, several studies have shown that women who have had breast augmentation have higher rates of suicide, although a causal link has not been demonstrated.³⁹ Experts agree there is much about the connection between poor mental health and elective cosmetic surgery that is not well understood.

Possible Contributing Factors

Though it is difficult to pinpoint why cosmetic surgery levels are high in Utah, demographic information gives some clues. Researchers have found that homogenous societies, such as Utah, can have a contagion effect that pressures individuals into cosmetic surgery.⁴⁰ In Utah, 87.6% of the population identifies as white,⁴¹ and Utah tops all the states in having the highest population of one religion: 57% are Mormon.⁴² These factors may be linked to high plastic surgery rates. The American Society for Plastic Surgeons reports that 69% of people who undergo plastic surgery are white.⁴³ The Mormon Church strongly emphasizes marriage and motherhood, and Utah leads the nation in several categories relating to marriage and maternity: the highest percentage of its population being married⁴⁴ and the earliest median age for marriage (24.0 for women and 26.2 for men).⁴⁵ Utah has the highest fertility rate⁴⁶ and stands among the highest in breastfeeding rates.⁴⁷ Perhaps it is no surprise that, according to one researcher,⁴⁸ many Utah mothers respond to cultural pressure to undergo the Mommy Makeover, which local doctors advertise as a solution to young mothers’ bodies “trashed” by motherhood. Additionally, despite having the largest average household size in the nation,⁴⁹ Utah has some of the fastest-growing incomes in the country,⁵⁰ leaving families with more discretionary income than ever before.

There are many possible explanations for the plastic surgery boom in Utah. Some attribute social media, the increase in pornography consumption, or the influx of southern Californian body-obsessed culture. Others blame competition for a desirable spouse in a state that puts a high priority on marriage,⁵¹ a key concern for Mormon women specifically since self-identified Mormon women outnumber Mormon men in Utah by a ratio of 3:2.⁵² An in-depth research study on cosmetic surgery among Mormon women explored this possibility and found a common belief among many participants (the vast majority of whom live in Utah) that physical beauty was a key means of securing status as a Mormon woman, particularly as marriage and motherhood are often prioritized above educational or career achievement. Study participants saw elective cosmetic surgery as an acceptable means of achieving and maintaining that standard of beauty.⁵³

The pressure on women who see so many others getting surgery can also be significant; a recent *Time* article began by telling the reader, “You’re going to have to [undergo a cosmetic procedure] . . . because every other woman is.”⁵⁴ Some even assert that in certain circumstances, the choice not to have surgery could actually be a disadvantage.⁵⁵ Whether these pressures are real or merely perceived, they seem to be having an impact on Utah women’s decisions to undergo cosmetic surgery.

Efforts to Support Positive Body Image

Various groups are working both nationally and locally to help girls and women combat poor body image and self-objectification, which can, in turn, contribute to such outcomes as disordered eating, depression, and plans for elective cosmetic surgery.⁵⁶ In 2004, the Dove brand initiated a self-esteem project to improve women’s body image. This project includes videos and other media, as well as the pledge to showcase a diverse group of real women (not models) in all their marketing campaigns.⁵⁷

Locally, Drs. Lexie Kite and Lindsay Kite, body image researchers, founded the nonprofit Beauty Redefined to promote positive body image via a website, presentations to girls and women across the United States, and online body-image resilience programs.⁵⁸ Lexie Kite has said, “We know women are capable of much more than being looked at, and once they believe that message, they can move on to accomplishing so many happy and worthwhile pursuits.”⁵⁹ Though the LDS Church (a prominent voice in Utah culture) has no official opinion on cosmetic surgery, leaders of the Church have spoken out against it.⁶⁰ Additionally, as one study showed that women with lower levels of education are more likely to consider plastic surgery,⁶¹ continued efforts to encourage women to attend college and complete their degrees⁶² are needed.

Finally, the *Utah Women & Leadership Project* (UWLP) (in partnership with YESCO and Justin Hackworth Photography) recently started a “Women Shaping Utah” campaign with billboards along I-15 showing strong women leaders who are making a difference in their communities. This is an effort to counteract the messages of the numerous cosmetic surgery billboards that imply a woman’s worth lies in her physical appearance.

Conclusion

Clearly, elective cosmetic surgery is a complicated issue upon which many disagree. Furthermore, Utah is among the top states in the nation for these procedures, yet with only a handful of studies addressing this topic, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact numbers, influences, and outcomes of cosmetic surgery among Utah women. Yet much can be done to encourage women’s educational efforts, confidence, and overall health and well-being, which can consequently help girls and women combat negative body image and focus on traits beyond physical appearance. Doing so will strengthen the positive impact of women in communities and the state as a whole.

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