

## pretty complicated

COSMETIC PROCEDURES ARE BECOMING AS MUNDANE AS YOUR MORNING TOAST, THANKS TO A NEW WAVE OF INFLUENCERS PREACHING EMPOWERMENT VIA A VIAL OF BOTOX, SAYS GEORGIA CASEY.

**Before we get started, I just want to make one thing clear: I am not immune.**

Over the years, I have indulged in several beauty treatments that cost more money than I care to think about. I've lasered hair off my body and capillaries off my face, lifted my lashes and microneedled my skin. Common sense tells me that a 27-year-old doesn't have much to laser, lift or needle in the first place. My phone, on the other hand, tells a different story. TikTok is an insecurity goldmine: five minutes on the app often has me obsessing over body parts I've previously never thought twice about (I wish I could go back in time to before I knew what 'hip dips' were).

Australia's cosmetic surgery industry is huge. With more than \$1 billion spent each year on more than 500,000 procedures, plastic surgery is more popular here than in the United States. Women account for approximately 92 per cent of cosmetic surgery clientele and millennials are more likely to undergo a procedure than any other age group. Keep in mind that these statistics don't account for Australia's booming injectables market (valued at \$3.5 billion in 2023), which has skyrocketed since the pandemic and is showing no signs of slowing. These numbers paint a very clear picture: Australian women are having more work done than ever before.

It doesn't take a genius to connect the dots between the growing popularity of cosmetic procedures and the time we spend looking at filtered versions of influencers and ourselves on social media. Experts tell us that social media and the beauty industry work in tandem to make regular human features seem abnormal or flawed, which then encourages people to seek out plastic surgery to "fix" a problem that doesn't exist. This twisted little mind game may also be seeping into the medical industry, with reports of doctors trying to push unsolicited treatments on patients in clinical settings (a friend of mine recently went to a dermatologist for a skin cancer screening and was told she should "start thinking about Botox").

These messages are not only hurtful but can also create fresh insecurities in already vulnerable people. A 2023 study revealed more than 90 per cent of Australian teenagers experienced some level of body image concern, and more than 42 per cent of girls reported that they feel very to extremely concerned about their appearance. Looking at the numbers, it seems obvious that poor body image and a lack of confidence in young women are responsible for the plastic surgery boom. But those who have had work done might tell you otherwise.

In recent years, skincare and cosmetic procedures have fallen under the umbrella of self-care, as influencers and celebrities repackage plastic surgery and injectables as "empowering" or an act of "bodily autonomy". It's a message distilled from choice feminism – the idea that any choice a woman makes independently is inherently feminist and empowering because she has made the decision herself. While appealing, it also neatly sidesteps the systemic issues inherent in the cosmetic and beauty industries. We can believe that we're undergoing these procedures for ourselves, but can we really call it empowering if we're doing it to meet patriarchal, Eurocentric beauty ideals?

It's complicated, says Naima Brown, co-author of *How to Age Against the Machine: An Empowering Guide for Women Ageing on Their Own Terms*. "The patriarchy has always asked that women augment, modify and present their bodies in ways that please the male gaze," she says. "Yes, I understand that many could argue that cosmetic surgery is still bowing to the male gaze – and in some cases this is true. However, agency over our bodies isn't limited to issues like reproductive health – it includes agency over how we care for, present and inhabit our bodies, too."

Naima's thoughts align with those of many who embrace a little nipping and tucking. A 2022 study of Australian women's motivations for, and experiences of, plastic surgery revealed that almost all "emphasised that they were having cosmetic surgery for themselves. Broadly, surgery was described as an accessible and easy means



through which to take action against poor body image and reclaim femininity.”

While it’s important to acknowledge the experiences of these women, we can’t deny the trickle-down effect of an increasingly homogenised beauty standard. As the popularity of plastic surgery broadens, the definition of attractiveness narrows. If you don’t have big lips, smooth skin, high cheekbones and large breasts – sorry, you’re not hot.

Writer and beauty critic Jessica DeFino reckons this is sending a damaging message that our worth is inextricably tied to our appearance. “Beauty culture systematically breaks down self-esteem and installs shame, so that it can sell ‘confidence’ back to you in the form of products, procedures and practices,” she writes in her Substack newsletter *The Review of Beauty*.

Unfortunately, there isn’t a neat answer to the question of whether or not cosmetic surgery can be truly empowering. Mostly, it seems unfair that this discussion is yet another way we disproportionately scrutinise women’s choices – I’m yet to hear any robust debates about the validity of men’s increasing fascination with mewing, a technique that supposedly creates a stronger jawline. Naima makes an excellent point about where

to focus our energies in this space: “I strongly believe we should be interrogating the beauty standards and ageism that women are up against,” she says. “I think we’re far better served by pushing back against the billion-dollar beauty industry, against portrayals of women on our screens and in our media, than putting the onus on women themselves.”

At this stage in my life, I like to think that I’ll never indulge in surgeries or injectables, but then again, I’m only 27 – there are probably many older women rolling their eyes at me right now. I’m getting married next year, so my calendar will be chock-full of appointments that uphold conventional beauty standards but are also lots of fun. As I said, I’m not immune – I’m just trying to think more critically about this stuff.

Do I think that getting work done empowers women? Not really. Do I think it’s any of my business if someone else chooses to undergo cosmetic procedures? Absolutely not. Ultimately, I’d love it if women felt comfortable enough to do something they enjoy without having to offer a feminist justification for their actions. I would also love it if the beauty industry stopped looking at our insecurities with dollar signs in their eyes.

I think we have a long way to go, but a girl can dream. ✨