

THE MODERN MIRROR: THE AGE OF MANUFACTURED APPEARANCE

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Abstract

This article explores the rapid evolution of beauty standards and cosmetic enhancement in contemporary society. Beauty has shifted from subtle self-expression to a highly visible social currency shaped by media, influencers, commercial interests, and digital culture. The discussion traces the expansion of aesthetic practices, including permanent make-up, eyelash and hair enhancements, nail modifications, body art, fillers, botulinum toxin, thread lifts, fat transfer, and other cosmetic procedures. While marketed as empowerment, self-improvement, and youth preservation, many interventions carry physical, psychological, and ethical concerns. The article also examines the influence of colourism, skin-lightening practices, pharmaceutical marketing, and the pursuit of idealised appearances that often reflect social conformity rather than individuality. Alongside these trends, a counter-movement promoting natural appearance has emerged. Ultimately, the paper questions how beauty ideals affect identity, self-worth, and mental well-being. It argues for ethical, patient-centred practice that prioritises safety, authenticity, and informed decision-making over relentless aesthetic modification and enhancement.

Keywords: cosmetic enhancement, body modification, mental well-being, safety, self-esteem, influencers, contemporary society

Synopsis/ point of view

The definition of “beautiful” has shifted from a uniform, synthetic look to embracing a natural, unique identity and individualistic features. In the last two decades, the concept has skyrocketed, potentially driven by social media with fancy, appealing words, like skin reset, summer skin, a quick fix, influencers, and the propagation of unrealistic standards, mostly among the youngest, promising enhanced attractiveness, appearances, and self-esteem in contemporary society, creating an image-conscious society.

Perceptions of beauty are deeply rooted in societal norms and ominously impact self-esteem, self-concept, and mental well-being.

Beauty has never been static; it has always evolved and changed. What once began as a simple enhancement has expanded into a vast industry that reshapes not only faces and bodies, but identity itself. It moves with culture, society, media, commerce, and identity. Traditionally centred on women, it has long been a powerful force, sometimes expressive, sometimes oppressive. What began as a subtle enhancement has gradually evolved into an expansive global industry reshaping overcorrected, expressionless faces and bodies in increasingly dramatic ways. More recently, men too have joined in and stepped into this feminine space, competing and adopting cosmetic routines to feminise their appearance, including chiselled defining jaws, plumped cheeks, pursing and puckering their lips by having them injected and moulded, and, in some cases, pursuing physical transformation to align with different gender identities, and are breaking the old misconception that fillers are “for women only”.

Beauty is no longer a quiet practice; it has become a public domain and a dynamic for performance to conform to a certain ideology. The boundaries of beauty have widened, but so have the pressures surrounding it.

The modern wave began years back with permanent make-up: tattooed eyeliner, lip definition, and implanted pigment designed to fix features in place, day and night, with the same tidy facial look. From there came eyebrow dyeing, tattooing, microblading, and microcrafting brows hair by hair. Eyelashes have taken their own evolutions and developments. They have grown much thicker and longer through glue-based extensions in dramatic shapes, like in certain instances, grossly thick brooms, or those solo long lashes (like a spider stretched and lashed out their slender protracted legs, rhythmically playing a rare symphony of life to allure), where the wearers are barely able to open their eyes, or glance. Later on, and very recently, it was replaced or supplemented by magnetic eyelash systems to match the advanced technology and the modern, fast-paced life, to match their fashionable, alluring outlook.

Hair power, has taken many various tolls, like hair extensions, clipped, bonded, long untidy plaits (some white men are using long tangled plaits which can be a risk for acute hair matting), bleached various colours, or various in partition, ironing, or woven, entangled, braids, waved, which promised instant volume, though sometimes at the cost of traction damage, destruction, and imminent hair loss from weight and tension, leading to traction alopecia and also tricholellomania.

For the nail industry, it has always been on the lookout; however, it has bloomed like everything else around us. The nail world expanded into their sculpted acrylics endlessly, hardened gel systems cured under ultraviolet lamps with their risks (UV lamps), layers cemented into exaggerated forms with standout spiky ornaments on the surface, and ignoring the risks of UV lamps and the synthetic glue, to the surface of nails and nail beds.

Of course the body joined in, and it took its big toll as well to complete the whole package craft. For instance, body decoration followed a similar path: like multiple piercings, extensive tattooing, sometimes covering the whole face, entire neck, and even the scalp, until natural features blurred beneath ink and became unrecognizable and unfounded.

Then came the era, of so-called and marketed “non-invasive procedures” to polish the endless look: with all sorts of dermal fillers to inflate the deflate and to protrude and maximise lips where you hardly and rarely see a woman or a man with their natural lips apart from the popped out lips in all ages which look like a fish lip or hugely made sausages, along with plumped up cheeks, chins, nose and eyebrows, along with botulinum toxin to freeze facial expression and abolish lines, like a masked up face, expressionless and frozen. Nowadays you can glimpse the same look like moving plastic flowers of all sorts of ages on the streets. Then followed shortly by the various threads lifts to pull skin tight in the saggy areas, and also somewhere like sewing the underneath skin on the claim to trigger and boost the natural elastin and collagen.

Additionally, in the filler world, a permanent calcium-based volumiser was invented, introduced, and injected permanently. Then the industry thought of a self-body filler-like substance and started promoting fat suction and transfer to sculpt the body in different places, along with removing the last free ribs to align with the tiny alluring waist. It didn't stop there; it started experimenting in different places, like butt lifts and augmented breasts into many forms, shapes and cups, and some have gone extreme, besides the butt work, lift, popped and dramatically lifted sculptured buttocks with all those fancy names. Not only that, some wanted to have cheek and chin dimples created to achieve beauty, either one-sided or both.

Another promoted substance is called the growth factor injection, which causes, after a year or so, it morphs and mutates, leading to what is called a bubble face, due to triggering cellular growths. Upon removal, it turns out lipomas which are fat promoting growths. Growth factors are short chains of proteins called peptides, and their applicability can be utilised only in promoting wound healing to regenerate.

Several shady clinics inject cheap counterfeit products in transient public spaces, including toilets, on the street sides, in residential properties, local nail bars, beauty parlours, or via mobile pop-up space services, renting cheap hotel rooms (to inject multiple clients on one day before switching to another space, in another place), as I once read on the local bus news in the UK.

Botox can be injected at so-called “Botox parties” and social gathering events. Black market injection like the one promoted on social media, TikTok, and Instagram, with booking direct through those channels, including WhatsApp and Snapchat who demand cash or bank transfer beforehand, along with masking their physical address or true identity to be untraceable. And all of these are mostly conducted by non-medical professionals or untrained hairdressers who buy unapproved cheap products online (only Botox needs a prescription from licensed professionals to buy), and the loophole keeps ongoing, unregulated.

Beauty extended to some risky procedures, like the permanent eye dyeing to have the alien look. These procedures spread rapidly through advertising and various social media platforms, influencers, and bloggers, and are often presented as routine maintenance or a quick lunch-break fix, and are often followed without deep reflection on long-term consequences.

Of course, all that is marketed under different names, like the yearning youthful look, restore your youth, reverse your age, better looking skin, look your best, whitening and brightening your skin, glowing up, and the list can go on forever. Pharmaceuticals are always on the lookout to keep clients hopeful, watchful, and in the thrill of running, hitting, and trying. I recall years back when I started practicing, some psoriatic medications have privileged side effects like increasing eyelash growth and colouring the iris, which, of course, some consider as an advantage, but at what cost?

Correspondingly, pigmentation issues and darkness are something where the blackness and bloneness and the distress around it, along with the intense psychic damage it does, lead someone to lighten their skin with a bleaching cream to conform and affirm some social identity, and the deep cultural hatred of blackness and darkness, which feels as if ruled under the thumb

of whiteness supremacy. I recall many patients of the skin of colour, or dark skin, were coming and asking for glutathione when it became the ultimate desire to become a lighter and whiter version of oneself, at some shots given under different fancy names, such as boosting your energy with vitamin cocktails. Also, some used various bleaching creams at a stronger concentration and ended up with various depigmentary conditions that can't be fixed later on.

Conversely pale skinned women burn themselves in sunbeds, risking skin cancers to attain a darker look, like a porcelain doll baked in an oven.

At the same time, a contrasting movement emerged: radical naturalism. This has called for preserving the visible body hair, rejection of cosmetic alteration, deliberate rebelliousness of beauty standards, and deliberate return to an unaltered state. Two extremes growing side by side.

And as always, the pharmaceutical companies like to keep us watchful and busy. Now, the pharmaceutical companies promote self-injected medications for weight loss, many originally manufactured and developed for diabetes, offered at high cost and framed as a quick fix and the best solution. However, now many compete on social media, with price matching and affordability. The conversation rarely centres on lifestyle, balance, or long-term consequences. All are on the lookout for a quick fix without thinking of the long-term consequences, which no one ever knows, as they are still in their infancy.

The evolution of beauty has become a social currency, a social identity, a mass signature, when it feels polarised, radicalised, mentally brainwashed, less like gradual change and more like acceleration without pause, unstoppable, just enhancement chasing enhancement, on one side, intentional rawness on the other (Figure 1). It is a vicious cycle that raises an uneasy question about self-image, influence, and social pressure, and how individuals truly perceive themselves when they stand before the mirror, or something in between?

After all, we are living in the digital age with its potential and convoluted challenges. Doctors should uphold core values of safety, ethics, and patient satisfaction, and should harness the power of technology with its digital tools in providing meticulous care to empower patients in deciding their cosmetic journey with ultimate responsibility and foresight of empowerment, and not distortion in creating aliens. Doctors should deliver skilful, artistic, exceptional, tailored, and authentic masterpieces of art according to each client's anatomy that suit them the most, beautify them in a subtle way and enhance their mental well-being. It's about feeling good and satisfied with the yield of the piece of work.

The problem is once the aesthetic journey starts, it can't stop or end, and the first shift begins when a person loses reference to their original identity, where there is the constant feeling of inadequacy and striving for more. Often, aesthetic distortion is not born out of vanity. It is actually a silent escape of someone's own image, from pain, difficulty of belonging or fitting, self-rejection, or hyperexposure, and how the world perceives you. Additionally, for the medical professional, a serious question arises: why does the professional keep agreeing to continue when it seems not to, and how do ethics work in these kinds of situations with their complexity. Sometimes it can be considered an unlimited aesthetic crime to continue and lose identity.

It seems the aesthetic work is always obsessed with being seen as youthful, beautiful, attractive, and pleasantness, within the connotation of being blonde (Blonded life), and with a brighter outlook of bleached skin or hair (Black blondes) (Peroxide nation) to meet and untangle social conformity.

Also, other somewhat extreme surgical aesthetics like upper lip cut and under philtrum cut to lift the upper lip, and evidence shows that the scar doesn't heal well and can thicken with time.

The worst four procedures are the butt implant, as they are thick, feel hard, and can move around, with increased risk of infection, as it's not a cleaned area of the body. Also, thread lift, which was abandoned for some years, seems to have come back, though it doesn't last long. Permanent fillers can cause problems in a few years' time, along with infections, and they need to be removed surgically. So it is best to revert to hyaluronic acid filler rather than those permanent cemented ones. And lastly, breast implants carry the risk of some sort of carcinoma.

To come to a close, it seems the idea that white life and blondness counteract and are the standard for normal life, to meet male gaze approval and validation, besides self-expression and self-affirmation, which reflects the pressure for women to conform to a certain social look, and thus all that leads to lost identity and individuality. For instance, if we observe male painters and how they paint women in a certain era in history, we would notice sensual and nude women's bodies in various difficult poses to imply and describe explicitly how art is often in the mind of a male viewer, and how it objectifies women.

All in all, it seems that there is societal pressure which has pushed some women and men to undertake unacceptable, risky procedures, and additionally there is the element of underlying self-hatred for one's own

nature and wanting a change, always, to attract the opposite gender, confront and challenge oneself, self-worthiness, and because people always judge based on the external outlook.

It's, after all, about the mirror illusion "see me": I am here, and I am still youthful and attractive, and to be embraceable, and to become someone else (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Mirror illusions

by E. Elghblawi ©.



Poetry

Plastic

An artificial world to tempt
 Fresh-blown faces drifted here and there
 Distorted beyond sensible eyes

Like blown-up, feverish giant rose petals
 Moving heads sharply here and there
 Adapting itself to the restless eyes

As thrown dust in your eyes
 Redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful
 orchestra snobbery of life rhythm

Tangled among some dying orchids
 Inciting the power of overcorrection
 Suggestive of life in new tunes

She extracts words
 Through her plastic, puffy lips
 She pursed her lips with artificial laughter

They hardly dangle
 The light shines on her lips
 Forked the tongue like a flag

She might feel something other than unmade
 She doesn't feel awkward
 Waved the triumph with a sigh around

Hooves paddling through
 Walk off to nowhere
 Illuminating like flashes of solar
 Anticipating compliments
 Awaiting
 Unutterable fact

Plastic fantastic

Of distorted reflections
Some cosmo-aesthetically tempting
All overdone and big just gone
In a too-blonde mother
Lips gone massive sipping
She parted her lips in an aborted laughter
Cheeks gone dangling
Eyelets sunken and lost
Bush Brows heavily tinted
Decorating heavily boomer eyes
Hair's dangling in various lengthy extensions
Fingertips holing in its spiky
Just artificial flowers walking around

Flatten signatures

On the story of worn, flaky faces

Sprayed by freckles like galaxies

Botox writes its subtle signature

Silence in the wrinkles

Inscribing a poetry tale

Whispers a soft embrace

Of a fady face

With a needle, it dances with each line

Of subtle lines of ageism

Leaving face in the flat stillness of bloom