



Predicting interest in cosmetic surgery: Interactive effects of appearance-based rejection sensitivity and negative appearance comments

Lora E. Park^{a,*}, Rachel M. Calogero^b, Melissa J. Harwin^a, Ann Marie DiRaddo^a

^aUniversity at Buffalo, The State University of New York, Buffalo, NY, United States

^bUniversity of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated effects of appearance-based rejection sensitivity (Appearance-RS) – the dispositional tendency to anxiously expect rejection based on one's appearance – in a sample of 133 American college students. Participants were randomly assigned to write an essay about either a negative or positive appearance comment they had received in the past. Compared to participants with lower Appearance-RS, those with higher Appearance-RS felt more rejected and expressed greater interest in cosmetic surgery after recalling a negative versus positive appearance comment. Content analysis of the essays revealed that negative appearance comments were most often made in reference to one's body weight/shape/size; positive appearance comments were most often made in reference to one's overall appearance. Peers/friends/romantic partners were the most frequently cited source of both positive and negative appearance comments. Overall, this research suggests that the interaction between the person and the situation is important to consider when predicting cosmetic surgery interest.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the rate of cosmetic surgery procedures has skyrocketed in the United States. Since 1997, there has been a 457% increase in all cosmetic procedures, with nearly 11.7 million procedures performed nationally in 2007 (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, ASAPS, 2008). Approximately 10.6 million surgical cosmetic procedures in 2007 were performed on women, whereas 1.1 million procedures were performed on men. Moreover, 21% of these procedures were performed on individuals between 19 and 34 years of age, and 27% of 18–24 year olds reported that they would consider undergoing cosmetic surgery now or in the future (ASAPS, 2008).

With the rise in cosmetic surgery interest, researchers have begun to explore a number of variables that may lead some individuals, but not others, to consider cosmetic surgery. There is accumulating evidence that certain intrapersonal factors, such as body image dissatisfaction (Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 2005; Sarwer, Wadden, Pertschuk, & Whitaker, 1998), low self-rated attractiveness (Brown, Furnham, Glanville, & Swami, 2007), psychological investment in appearance (Delinsky, 2005; Sarwer, LaRossa, Bartlett, Low, Bucky, & Whitaker, 2003; Sarwer et al.,

2005), attachment anxiety (Davis & Vernon, 2002), body dysmorphic disorder (Crerand, Franklin, & Sarwer, 2006; Sarwer & Crerand, 2008) and previous experience with cosmetic surgery (Swami et al., 2008) predict acceptance of, and interest in, cosmetic surgery. Social and interpersonal factors, such as appearance-related teasing (Sarwer et al., 2003), vicarious experiences of cosmetic surgery via family and friends (Brown et al., 2007; Delinsky, 2005; Swami et al., 2008), and internalization of sociocultural appearance messages and ideals from the media and entertainment industries (Delinsky, 2005; Henderson-King & Brooks, 2009; Sarwer et al., 2005; Sperry, Thompson, Sarwer, & Cash, 2009; Swami et al., 2008) have also been implicated in the desire for cosmetic surgery.

The present study adds to this growing body of literature by examining the role of a new personality construct in predicting cosmetic surgery interest: appearance-based rejection sensitivity (Appearance-RS, Park, 2007). Appearance-RS refers to the dispositional tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and over-react to signs of rejection based on one's physical appearance. Whereas previous studies have typically reported main effects of demographic, personality, or sociocultural variables in predicting cosmetic surgery interest (Brown et al., 2007; Davis & Vernon, 2002; Delinsky, 2005; Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 2005; Sarwer et al., 2003; Sperry et al., 2009), the present study is the first to examine empirically whether aspects of the person (Appearance-RS) interact with aspects of the situation (appearance-related teasing) to influence current interest in cosmetic surgery.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University at Buffalo, SUNY, Buffalo, NY 14260, United States. Tel.: +1 716 645 0228; fax: +1 716 645 3801.

E-mail address: lorapark@buffalo.edu (L.E. Park).

Although cosmetic surgery reflects a drastic form of controlling and changing one's appearance, considering such procedures may help to alleviate anxious expectations of rejection based on appearance for those with high Appearance-RS.¹ Because people's goals and decisions are often shaped by both internal and external forces, it seems important to investigate factors underlying cosmetic surgery interest, and to understand how individuals respond to situational influences when predicting their interest in cosmetic surgery.

Predictors of interest in cosmetic surgery

The increasing acceptance of cosmetic surgery in Western cultures has been attributed to a variety of factors, ranging from advances in surgical procedures, to increased availability and affordability of cosmetic procedures, to media exposure and influence (see Sarwer, Magee, & Crerand, 2004, for a review). In addition to these factors, researchers have identified several intrapsychic and interpersonal variables that contribute to people's interest in cosmetic surgery.

First, self-perceptions of attractiveness and satisfaction with appearance have been shown to be significant predictors of interest in cosmetic surgery. Not surprisingly, individuals who perceive themselves (or some aspect of their appearance) to be unattractive are more likely to consider cosmetic surgery than those who perceive themselves to be attractive or are satisfied with their appearance (Brown et al., 2007; Didie & Sarwer, 2003; Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 2005; Sarwer et al., 1998, 2003). Indeed, individuals with body dysmorphic disorder – a psychiatric condition characterized by extreme dissatisfaction and preoccupation with a slight or imagined defect in their appearance – are especially likely to consider cosmetic surgery as a way to improve their perceived physical flaws (Crerand et al., 2006; Crerand, Phillips, Menard, & Fay, 2005; Sarwer & Crerand, 2008).

People who desire cosmetic surgery are also likely to derive self-esteem from their appearance and may use cosmetic surgery as a way to repair a damaged self-concept (Delinsky, 2005). Along these lines, Henderson-King and Henderson-King (2005) found that the fear of becoming unattractive, rather than the desire to appear attractive, predicted endorsement and consideration of cosmetic surgery. The desire to avoid negative appearance-related outcomes has also been documented among individuals with an anxious attachment style, who may use cosmetic surgery as a way to attract or retain a significant other, or to avoid potential rejection or interpersonal loss (Davis & Vernon, 2002).

In addition to these intrapsychic variables, several interpersonal and social factors have been linked to cosmetic surgery (Brown et al., 2007; Delinsky, 2005; Swami et al., 2008). Of particular relevance to the present research is a history of appearance-related teasing, which has been shown to predict interest in cosmetic surgery (Sarwer et al., 1998, 2003). Similar to links that have been made between receiving appearance criticism (e.g., “You look like you've gained weight”) and body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Annis, Cash, & Hrabosky, 2004; Fabian & Thompson, 1989; van den Berg, Wertheim, Thompson, & Paxton, 2002; Wertheim, Paxton, & Blaney, 2004), we posit a link between negative appearance commentary and interest in cosmetic surgery, particularly for those who are sensitive to appearance-based rejection. Given that Appearance-RS is rooted in interpersonal processes, individuals with high Appearance-RS may look to cosmetic surgery as a means to reducing anxieties about being rejected by others based on their perceived physical flaws.

In sum, prior research has linked the desire for cosmetic surgery with dissatisfaction with one's appearance, basing self-esteem on appearance, wanting to avoid appearing unattractive, and a history of being teased based on one's looks. The samples used in these previous studies ranged from community samples (Brown et al., 2007; Swami et al., 2008) to cosmetic surgery candidates (Didie & Sarwer, 2003; Sarwer et al., 2003) to college undergraduates (Delinsky, 2005; Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 2005; Sarwer et al., 2005).

Given that the typical cosmetic surgery patient is much younger than the stereotypical “older female” (ASAPS, 2008; Sarwer et al., 2005), college-aged students may be a particularly relevant sample to study when examining interest in cosmetic surgery. Indeed, several studies to date examining cosmetic surgery interest have involved college students. In one study involving 559 female college students at six universities in the United States, 40% of participants reported that they would consider cosmetic surgery in the near future, and 48% would consider it in middle age (Sarwer et al., 2005). Another study involving over 2000 college women found that viewership of cosmetic surgery reality TV shows was significantly related to greater body dissatisfaction and more favorable cosmetic surgery attitudes (Sperry et al., 2009). Finally, Henderson-King and Brooks (2009) found that the more female college students endorsed materialistic values and internalized sociocultural appearance messages, the more interested they were in cosmetic surgery. Together, these studies suggest that college students may be a particularly relevant population to study when examining personal and situational factors affecting interest in cosmetic surgery. Importantly, whereas previous studies have typically focused on female college students' interest in cosmetic surgery, the present research examined both men and women's Appearance-RS and interest in cosmetic surgery.

Appearance-RS and cosmetic surgery

Appearance-RS is a relatively stable personality construct that consists of both an affective and a cognitive component. Anxious concerns of appearance rejection represent the affective component, whereas expectations of appearance rejection represent the cognitive component. These components are thought to interact with one another in a multiplicative fashion, such that anxieties about rejection amplify cognitions, or expectations, of appearance-based rejection (Park, 2007). The construct of Appearance-RS was modeled after Downey and Feldman's (1996) general construct of personal rejection sensitivity (Personal-RS), which reflects anxious expectations of rejection in general, rather than based on a specific attribute. Whereas Personal-RS has been associated with childhood experiences of parental abuse, neglect, and exposure to family violence (Feldman & Downey, 1994), Appearance-RS has been linked to conditional acceptance from peers based on one's appearance, internalization of media appearance ideals, and feeling pressured by the media to look attractive, rather than to parental influence (Park, DiRaddo, & Calogero, 2009).

The link between feeling unattractive and feeling rejected is especially strong for individuals with high Appearance-RS. For example, when asked to list dissatisfying aspects of their appearance, high Appearance-RS participants reported feeling more rejected than those with low Appearance-RS, or those who were reminded of neutral stimuli (Park, 2007). The consequences of feeling unattractive extend to behavioral preferences and tendencies, as well. For example, Park and Pinkus (in press) found that high Appearance-RS participants wanted to avoid both close others and social interaction more generally after receiving negative feedback about their appearance. Furthermore, on days when high Appearance-RS participants felt sensitive to appearance rejection, the more likely they were to actually avoid other people.

¹ Appearance-RS was assessed as a continuous variable and should therefore be viewed in relative versus absolute terms. For brevity's sake, however, we refer to individuals as having high versus low Appearance-RS.

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