

How the duty to be beautiful is making young girls feel like failures

June 23 2017, by Heather Widdows



Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

From the daily application of [high-tech lotions](#) and potions to non-

surgical procedures such as botox, fillers and peels, the beauty industry is booming like never before.

With more products and treatments available there is also a growing pressure around how people feel they "should" or "shouldn't" look. So whether it's fake eyelashes, tattooed eyebrows, manicured nails, [body waxing](#) or lip fillers, the chances are we all know someone who has these – and often we view these types of treatments as "normal".

The sociologist Dana Berkowitz, has pointed out the increasing normalisation of botox. In her book [Botox Nation](#) she says:

"The fact that Botox injections are temporary, repetitive, addictive, and marketed as preventative has made it such that these injections are fast becoming regular body upkeep, just like teeth cleaning and haircuts."

Sociologist Meredith Jones has also argued that cosmetic surgery is already normalised. [She claims](#) it will be "the absolute norm" for [women](#) by the middle of the 21st century.

While it is still the case that only a small percentage of women – and an even smaller percentage of men go under the knife – many [more would like to](#). And the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons has reported a rise in what has been termed the "daddy makeover" in a [recent report](#): "There has been an epic rise of 20% in male liposuction and a 13% jump in 'man boob' reductions."

Growing old grey

Growing old gracefully is increasingly seen as a failure to make the best of yourself – and even shows a lack of respect for the self and or for others. It is to "let yourself go".

In my book [Perfect Me!](#), I track the increase in what is demanded to meet minimal standards of presentation. And I look at routine practices such as hair colouring. I argue that while women in their 60s and 70s may be grey, very few in their 30s, 40s, and 50s consider grey hair an option. In fact only the young can be grey – which is more of a fashion statement – and grey for young women is high maintenance because it requires near constant colouring.

Body hair is another particularly illustrative example – what once considered the norm has changed dramatically over just a few generations. To show visible [body hair](#) is now more of a political statement than a fashion choice – shown by the [Armpits for August](#) and other campaigns. Body hair is also seen by many people [as being unclean](#), disgusting and something to be ashamed of – and these are judgements with a distinctly moral flavour. And it is now the case that both women and men remove all or some of their pubic hair – and [shame is often attached to non-removal](#).

Shame is also often cited by doctors as part of the [reason why](#) women are wanting a labiaplasty – surgery to reduce the size of the flaps of skin either side of the vaginal opening. According to statistics from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, labiaplasty procedures spiked 39% in 2016, with more than [12,000 procedures in the US](#) alone.

Never enough

This shift in the way beauty is increasingly defining people means it is functioning as an ethical ideal – in that it is the standard we use to judge ourselves and others, whether good and bad. And all of this has a significant impact on how people feel about themselves.

[Recent studies](#), have revealed how much this is affecting people – particularly girls of a young age. The [Girls' Attitudes survey](#) has shown

how body image worries affect many aspects of young girls lives – stopping them wearing the clothes they like, having their pictures taken, taking part in sport and speaking up in class.

The survey reports that 47% of girls aged 11 to 21 say the way they look "holds them back", while 69% of girls age seven to 11 feel like they are not good enough. It is with this in mind that the Youth Select Committee's [recent consultation](#) focused on this topic.

This culture of beauty obsession is making [young girls](#) feel they are failures and that they don't measure up. To many of these girls, this feels like a "moral failure" – they have "let themselves go" and are ashamed of their very selves.

This is very different from past beauty ideals and recognising the depth and intensity of body shame – and understanding its moral nature – is vital. Because while the demands of what we have to do to be "normal" or "just good enough" continue to rise, there has also been a marked increase in anxiety and body shame in [young women](#) – which surely isn't just a coincidence.

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