

# Reality TV, cosmetic surgery linked, researcher says

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Teenage years have long been linked with a heightened concern with appearance. Some reality TV shows take full advantage and tout happiness as just a nip/tuck away. A Rutgers-Camden psychologist has found that teens fond of these kinds of programs are more likely to join the millions who go under the knife each year. For bodies - and minds - still in development, these drastic decisions could have implications way after prom.

Charlotte Markey, an associate professor of psychology at Rutgers-Camden, with husband Patrick Markey of Villanova University, recently published research on this topic in the academic journal [Body Image](#).

"When we think of [cosmetic surgery](#), we don't think of it as a lifetime issue. There is lots of pressure to look a certain way and I don't blame them for succumbing; we're all guilty of feeling vulnerable. But what young men and women think of their bodies now will culminate over time and contribute to their overall health," notes the Rutgers-Camden psychologist. "What troubles me is that there's no conclusive data that cosmetic surgery even makes people happier, what has been documented is that it makes repeat customers."

The wife-and-husband team surveyed nearly 200 participants with an average age of 20 on their immediate responses to an 'extreme makeover' program or a show on home improvement - incorporated specifically to mask the intent of the study. Both men and women were included in the study and the procedures examined were ones either

gender could pursue.

As the Rutgers-Camden researcher suspected, women were more likely to want cosmetic surgery than men and viewers of the cosmetic surgery show were more inclined to consider the procedure for themselves than those who didn't tune in. What still shocks Markey are the handwritten responses to the cosmetic surgery show, including comments like "inspirational" and "I saw an unhappy girl get her dreams."

This saddens Markey because outward appearance seems to be the sole avenue to self satisfaction and this road, she believes, is circular. "If plastic surgery makes you feel better about yourself, then why do you keep getting it done?" she asks. "This mindset is very similar to that of an anorexic wanting to lose just five more pounds."

While ABC's Extreme Makeover, which led to the Extreme Makeover-Home Edition, was cancelled in 2007, it sparked the development of several other similarly themed shows like Fox's The Swan, the drama Nip/Tuck, MTV's I Want a Famous Face, E's Dr. 90210 and Oxygen's recent Addicted to Beauty. The impact of reality television as a new media influence - regardless of topic - also raises many questions about what is being portrayed to viewers as real and indicative of everyday life.

"There is a cultural context to never be satisfied with our physical selves. It's the rare person who is either completely oblivious or has developed such a strong counter message to not be affected," notes Markey, the mother of a four-year-old boy and a three-year-old girl. "We need to teach children to be critical of the messages we're receiving and tell them positive things now to foster self-esteem."

Markey brings these cultural dialogues into her own home by explaining to her young children why Barbie is banned. "I tell them 'no one you will ever meet in real life will ever look like her'" she says. "There are so

many messages out there telling us that we need to fix ourselves, but at an early age we need to tell our kids: 'I love you just the way you are.'"

She teaches the courses Psychology of Eating; Health Psychology; Psychology of Health and Happiness; Psychology of Adolescence; and Research Methods at Rutgers-Camden.

Provided by Rutgers University

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