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Snatch Me Up: A Critical Feminist Discourse Analysis on Black Women's Motivations  
for Undergoing Brazilian Butt Lift Surgery

by

Alexandria Locke

Under the Direction of Stephanie Y. Evans, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Arts in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University

2024

## ABSTRACT

The present study performed a critical feminist discourse analysis (CFDA) on narrative-style YouTube videos created by Black women while on their Brazilian Butt Lift (BBL) surgery journeys. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the main research question: What are Black women's motivations for undergoing surgery? Additionally, it takes interest in examining the ways undergoing BBL surgery has impacted individual Black women's mental health and wellness. Upon coding for the discursive objects "motivations" and "mental health impacts", the following discourses and counter discourses emerged and were subsequently analyzed using a critical Black feminist theoretical framework: "*doing it for me*" empowerment discourse versus *self-preservation* counterdiscourse, postop satisfaction discourse versus postop regret discourse, *mental obstacle* discourse versus *psychological resilience* counterdiscourse and support system discourse. Conclusively, this study suggests that Black women's decision-making and motivations for choosing BBL surgery is a topic of complexity and intricacies which suggest a need for further academic research and analysis.

INDEX WORDS: Brazilian Butt Lift, Black women, discourse analysis

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2024

Snatch Me Up: A Critical Feminist Discourse Analysis on Black Women's Motivations  
for Undergoing Brazilian Butt Lift Surgery

by

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August 2024

## DEDICATION

First and foremost, I'd like to dedicate this thesis to my loving and devoted parents, whom I am forever indebted. Momma, I largely credit the completion of my thesis and this master's program to your enthusiastic encouragement and unwavering support. Dad, you've always been my rock and a reassuring voice of reason during uncertain times. When I doubted my ability to see this through, you both believed in me and were available for whatever I needed to get me to the finish line. Thank you for being my biggest cheerleaders and lending a listening ear whenever I need to vent or brainstorm. This degree is as much my accomplishment as it is yours. I love you both beyond words!

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Many of the most financially successful Black women in the entertainment industry, especially in the mainstream music and reality television industries flaunt a body type characterized by a petite waist and a full, round buttocks, for example: Beyonce Knowles, Rihanna Fenty, Nicki Minaj, Nene Leakes, and Porsha Williams. In the last decade, cosmetic surgery and aesthetic augmentation across various industries and professions has become increasingly normalized and accepted within the dominant white<sup>1</sup>, Western culture. One of the most recent aesthetic trends to emerge and gain rapid popularity is a curvier, more voluptuous body type described above. For those who do not fit this aesthetic genetically or through other means considered “natural” such as a diet and exercise, the Brazilian Butt Lift<sup>2</sup> (BBL) may seem attractive as it allows for a slimmer waist and fuller buttocks to be achieved surgically. While women of all races are participating in this procedure, there are clear racial undertones associated with how this procedure is helping define a homogenized ideal image of Black womanhood.

This research focuses on gaining a better understanding of the motivations for surgery and the impact undergoing Brazilian Butt Lift surgery has on Black women’s mental health and wellness. The Brazilian Butt Lift is a cosmetic procedure that augments the shape and size of the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I use the phrase mainstream, white, Western beauty standards specifically in reference to dominant American trends characterized by being thin, tall, and having Eurocentric features. However, I acknowledge the varying trends and nuances associated with body types and beauty standard accepted within communities of white women. My intention is not to portray white, western beauty standards as a monolith, but rather underscore how beauty standards differ within groups of Black women.

<sup>2</sup> “Brazilian surgeon Ivo Pitanguy is credited as the pioneer of the [Brazilian Butt Lift] procedure and the first to teach it to other surgeons at the training center he founded in 1960. At that point, “Brazilian” became the operative adjective in the procedure’s name.” Brazil possesses a deeply rooted history in racist eugenics. Overtime, as a means of “diluting” Blackness within the country’s population, many officials, and politicians publicly supported and celebrated miscegenation amongst citizens. “The embodiment of this celebration of racial mixture was a new national symbol for Brazilians to embrace: a hyper-sexualized mixed-race Black woman known as the *mulata*.” Widespread media characterized the *mulata* as “a light-skinned Black woman possessing the body type that is marketed today as desirable throughout the world: an hourglass figure with a thin waist, wide hips and protruding buttocks.” The popularization of this image garnered and maintained a robust plastic surgery industry, and later spread to the United States in the late 1990s and early 2000s through the sexualization of celebrities like Beyonce Knowles and Jennifer Lopez (Silva, 2022).

buttocks by transferring fat removed from the arms, abdomen, lower back, and/or thighs via liposuction and then strategically injecting it into the buttocks (American Board of Cosmetic Surgery). The desired result is a slimmer waist and fuller, rounder buttocks in comparison.

I arrived at this research topic as a young Black womanist and aspiring mental health professional with a long-time fascination in the beauty industry and bodily aesthetics. I periodically struggled with self-esteem and body image from adolescence into young adulthood and briefly considered cosmetic augmentation for myself. As an undergraduate student at Spelman College, a Historically Black Women's College, I was thrust into an environment where an interdisciplinary feminist lens was applied to just about every area of my personal and academic life. Initially, this lens and my desires for cosmetic augmentation often conflicted with each other. As a feminist, how could I justify something as drastic as surgery to become more appealing to the male gaze and society's standard of beauty? However, I simultaneously believe in bodily autonomy and empowering women to make decisions that bring about personal joy, pleasure, and satisfaction. Thus, this inner feminist conflict led me to examine the complex intersections of plastic surgery and feminism.

Ultimately, the questions that motivate my research are: What are Black women's motivations for electing this procedure? And how has undergoing BBL surgery impacted the mental health and wellness of Black women? Do Black women feel that the mental, physical, emotional outcomes are worth all that their BBL journey encompasses?

Shortly after graduating, I began working as a flight attendant for a major commercial airline in the United States, a profession with values rooted in physical appearances. In the 1960s, flight attendants had to meet strict physical requirements such as being "between 5'2" and 5'9" [and weighing] between 105 -135lbs" ("The History", 2015). While the requirements are no

longer as strict, physical appearances remain a priority to US airline marketing and brand development. Cosmetic surgery, aesthetic augmentation and various beauty practices continue to be commonplace and a significant part of the culture for flight attendants worldwide. I am currently a member of Facebook groups where flight attendants share details and reviews about a diverse range of cosmetic procedures obtained in an equally diverse list of cities and countries. Cosmetic surgery and augmentation are recurrent themes throughout my personal, academic, and professional life.

While my self-confidence and views on my personal beauty have changed since undergrad, I still reflect on these experiences and remain interested in exploring how cosmetic surgery intersects with feminism and mental health, specifically relating to Black women. I have my own preconceived, conflicted notions about why Black women undergo plastic surgery, mostly based on personal experiences and associating with handfuls of Black women personally who experienced their own individual cosmetic surgery journeys. One of my assumptions is that Black women feel strongly that the outcome will increase their overall self-confidence about their appearance and acceptance amongst their peers. Another assumption is that Black women believe achieving an hourglass figure will advance their careers and relationships and open more financial and social opportunities, as it arguably has for so many other women in the entertainment industry. Another assumption is that Black women badly want to change what they consider to be bodily flaws to become more comfortable with themselves. There are countless external factors that may motivate Black women to endure incredible pain to become more confident and desirable. As I casually collected narratives from friends, associates, and social media, I noticed a trend: many women seemed to experience negative mental health outcomes following the BBL procedure. Some felt that the results were not drastic enough, and therefore

the surgery was a financial waste and emotional burden. Others experienced scarring, disfigurement, complications, or incredible discomfort during their recovery, which was not worth the results they achieved.

In an interview about BBLs with *The New York Times*, renowned cosmetic surgeon, Dr. Andrew Cuzalina M.D, states “It’s probably one of the biggest increased procedures as far as the last 10 years, really” (Garcia). Between 2020 and 2021, BBL surgeries rose from 44,725 to 61,378 procedures performed in the United States alone (Aesthetic Society). The American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) reports that within the African American community alone, cosmetic procedures have risen from 768,512 in 2005 to 1,782,485 in 2018 (ASPS). That is an increase by over 1 million procedures within a thirteen-year time span. This leads me to ask: if it appears that more and more Black women are sharing their stories of disappointment and dissatisfaction online when it comes to BBL surgery, why are more and more continuing to seek the surgery anyway?

Debates about whether choosing to undergo cosmetic augmentation is a feminist practice vary widely within the academic community as well as popular culture and mainstream media. Essentially, initial perspectives were polarized. For some scholars, cosmetic surgery falls under the umbrella of “agency” feminism which asserts that cosmetic surgery demonstrates agency and bodily autonomy – two inherently feminist practices (Pitts-Taylor, 2007). Opposing feminists assert that motivations for aesthetic augmentation are fundamentally rooted in oppressive, white, Western, patriarchal ideals and beauty standards (Morgan, 2011). Another outlook validates both perspectives, and suggests that the subject requires a more dynamic, nuanced approach to address the complexities of an individual's choice to undergo surgery that consider the combined impact of oppressive external forces. Altogether, academic research that focuses specifically on

Black women's decision making as it relates to cosmetic surgery is limited, and that which specifically considers buttock augmentation even more so. More recently scholars have taken interest in the topic, however, much of the earlier feminist discourse on cosmetic surgery simply excluded Black women's involvement and perspectives with plastic surgery.

Initially, when I began writing this thesis, the question of whether this procedure is an act of feminism was not one of particular interest. However, as my research and analysis unfolded, I found that this exact question became difficult not to address considering I approached the analysis from a Black feminist theoretical framework. Contributing to this debate, while not my intended focus initially with this research, ultimately it became essential to address as my findings emerged. Therefore, the overview of varying feminist perspectives on cosmetic surgery and augmentation included in the review of literature proved essential and especially relevant. However, I do take primary interest in using a Black feminist lens to explore the *why* leading Black women to surgery and the overall expressed mental health outcomes associated with completing this surgery.



## 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 An Overview:

Upon reviewing the literature surrounding my topic, I have identified five themes which contribute to a better understanding of why Black women choose plastic surgery and how it may impact their mental health. First, I provide a brief description of a noticeable shift within pop culture trends related to desirable body aesthetics. I compare these mainstream trends to aesthetic trends within the Black community because the BBL is closely associated with what the ideal Black woman's body "should" be and it's important to look at trends over time for insight into the proliferation of BBL surgery amongst Black women.

I then explore early feminist discourse on plastic surgery, which initially split into two opposing perspectives. One perspective identifies plastic surgery as both a problem and a solution, as well as an act of individual agency (Davis, 1995). The opposing perspective asserts that agency narratives as an explanation for plastic surgery are too tied into rhetoric that is used to manipulate women into believing that they desire a certain body image for themselves (Bordo, 2009). What much of the early feminist discourse on plastic surgery is missing is the motivations and experiences of Black women who seek cosmetic surgery and more specifically how plastic surgery impacts Black women's mental health. For this reason, I provide historical context beginning with the life and legacy of Sara Baartman and lean into Patricia Hill Collins' "Controlling Images" framework to highlight the use of white supremacist heteropatriarchy as a tool used in the objectification and hyper sexualization of Black women's bodies.

Because my data set includes YouTube videos, a social media platform, I also include discourse on how social media is a source of both empowerment and a tool in what Moya Bailey terms *misogynoir* (Bailey, 2021). Social media plays a significant role in how Black women

share information and personal experiences about a range of topics such as cosmetic augmentation and how it influences their overall mental and physical health. Finally, I end my review of literature by discussing literature produced about the mental health of Black women to discuss the stigma and disparities that are prevalent within communities of Black women. I plan to use this insight to help identify and analyze the ways that Black women in YouTube videos recount their experiences and express both positive and negative mental health outcomes.

## **2.2 The Shift Towards Thick**

While cosmetic and reconstructive surgery dates to 2000 BC, the term “plastic” surgery – describing the current modern iteration dates to the late 1800s in the United States. Plastic surgery was mostly driven by the need to heal soldiers injured or maimed in war. Dr. Varaztad H. Kazanjian, an Armenian American soldier and oral surgeon, was recognized as the founding father of modern plastic surgery for using his knowledge of prosthetic dentistry to revolutionize facial cosmetic and reconstructive surgery in the 1920s – 1950s. Cosmetic surgery has since evolved significantly to include elective reconstructive aesthetic procedures such as facial, breast and buttock augmentation (“The Origin”, 2015). In 1937, a group of trailblazing surgeons founded the American Society for Plastic Surgeons dedicated to the development and advancement of the plastic surgery industry, later followed by Brazil and Korea creating similar organizations in 1949 and 1966 respectively. The first FDA approved silicone implant surgery was performed on Texas native, Timmie Jean Lindsey in 1962 (“Timeline”, 2012). Between 2005 and 2019, surgical cosmetic procedures performed in the United States alone have risen from 987,400 to 6,652,591 (ASPS, 2005, 2019).

According to the Aesthetic Society, a professional group of board-certified aesthetic surgeons, buttock augmentation surgery rose 37% between 2020 and 2021 from 44,725 to 61,378 procedures conducted in the United States. The total reported buttock augmentation surgeries reported in 2001, 20 years prior, was a mere 2,813. This statistic includes both butt implants and fat transfers (i.e. BBL surgeries) however, it excludes illegal, black-market silicone injections. As a marginalized group with socioeconomic disadvantages, Black and brown women are often the target audience and make good candidates for cheaper, illegal procedures. Music entertainers K. Michelle and Cardi B. both have made statements warning women of the dangers of receiving black market butt injections. Both women disclosed that the injections led to serious health complications and later needed to be surgically removed. With curvier body types becoming more widely accepted in white, western mainstream pop culture, people of various races are increasingly choosing to undergo Brazilian butt lift surgery. This overall increase in butt augmentation surgery coincides with an increasingly normalized pop culture obsession with Black women's behinds.

We can observe an on-going trend through popular culture references, especially within the hip-hop, funk and rhythm and blue music genres, heavily influenced by Black culture and appropriated by white mainstream audiences. Popular songs that reference Black women's curvaceous figure date as far back to The Commodores' *Brick House* (1977), Experience Unlimited's *Da Butt* (1988), and Sir Mix-a-Lot's *Baby Got Back* (1992). More recent songs continue to carry and celebrate the voluptuous Black female body, for example, Trina's *Pull Over [That A\*\* Too Fat]*, Kelis' *Milkshake* (2008), Big Sean Ft. Nicki Minaj's *Dance (A\$\$)* (2011) and Megan Thee Stallion's *Body* (2020).

While prior literature suggests that historically the ideal image of white femininity describes “a blonde, big boobed, beautiful, thin woman” (Deliovsky, 2008) within the Black community, prior literature suggests “racial standards of thickness are constructed as a marker of Black femininity and attractiveness” (Hughes 2021, Gentles-Peart, 2016 -2018, Hill, 2009). This literature also coincides with what is now known as the body positivity movement, initially created by Black feminist thinkers in the 1960s who found themselves excluded from Fat Activism movements (Griffin et. al., 2022). The most recent iteration of the body positivity movement also helps to explain why curves are becoming more accepted in white, Western standards of beauty.

### **2.3 Feminist Discourse on Plastic Surgery**

Academic feminist discourse specifically analyzing the implications of the increase in BBL surgeries amongst communities of Black women is incredibly limited, and much of the conversations in the media and pop culture focus on the question of whether Black women should or should not obtain this form of aesthetic augmentation. Feminist debates largely consider whether electing cosmetic surgery is indicative of a lack of self-esteem, and self-acceptance and serves white, patriarchal, heteronormative ideas of beauty or if it is an equally feminist act in which Black women exercise agency and negotiate their own bodies “within the cultural and structural constraints of a gendered social order” (Davis 1995). Very little academic discourse acknowledges the impact that the Brazilian Butt Lift procedure is having on the mental health and wellness of Black women. The limited amount of knowledge produced on the topic fuels my desire to fill in the gaps to understand the “why” behind the increase in Black women choosing to undergo the BBL and how undergoing this procedure has impacted Black women’s mental health.

The collection of essays, *Cosmetic Surgery: A Feminist Primer* (2009) edited by Cressida Heyes and Meredith Jones, is the first of its kind and brings together feminist authors and scholars to analyze the complexity of cosmetic surgery. The collection includes key feminist thinkers on the subject such as Susan Bordo, Kathy Davis, Vivian Sobchack and Kathryn Pauly Morgan. In chapter three, “Revisiting Feminist Debates on Cosmetic Surgery: Some Reflections of Suffering, Agency and Embodied Difference”, Kathy Davis revisits her earlier work *Reshaping the Female Body* (1994) in which she argues that “cosmetic surgery should be viewed as a dilemma: disempowering and empowering, problem and solution all in one” (Davis 1995). Davis sought to make sense of why women were progressively choosing to go under the knife.

Much of her argument centered around understanding individual women’s suffering and desires to correct aspects of themselves deemed abnormal by societal standards.

At the time Davis’ book was originally published, many feminist thinkers approached plastic surgery as something women only chose to do because they were “unaware of the risks or had been manipulated by profit hungry surgeons” (Davis 1995). She approached the topic from a standpoint of discomfort which rejected the “just say no” approach to cosmetic surgery widely accepted by the feminist community. Davis responds to critiques of her earlier work by well-known feminist scholar, Susan Bordo, who argues that Davis too heavily relies on the language of “agency feminism” which cultivates a culture and discourse that supports false promises of individual freedom and choice. Bordo argues that the dominating Western culture uses similar language of individual freedom in the media to manipulate and control women and normalize a homogenous bodily aesthetic. Essentially, Bordo contends that most of us are blinded or “tricked” by the workings of contemporary culture which requires that this discussion prioritize a critique of the systematic and institutional implications of beauty culture versus “giving credence

to individual women's experiences and choices" (Davis, 1995, p. 38). In response to Bordo's critique, Davis asserts that while it remains essential to adopt a critical view of the culture that leads more and more women to cosmetic surgery, we must also value the individual choices, experiences, and practices that influence women's motives for acquiring cosmetic surgery.

Davis continues to address issues associated with the concept of "agency" as it relates to women's decisions. She proposes that her use of the term should not be conflated with that of "choice" or "freedom" discourses found in pop culture and media. She defines agency as a "sociological concept [that] refers to the active participation of individuals in the constitution of social life" and is always "situated in relations of power" (Davis, 1995, p. 39). Most importantly, Davis acknowledges the intricacies surrounding long-standing debates of agency, and acknowledges the "complicated mix of intentionality, practical knowledge and unconscious motives" that characterizes the act of agency.

Another of Davis' arguments involves an analysis of embodied differences and what Iris Marion Young refers to as the "aesthetic scaling of bodies" (Young 1990). The term describes the process of how certain marginalized groups are rendered "ugly, fearful or loathsome" for not subscribing to cis, white, Western, middle-class norms and standards. These standards place pressure on those who exist outside of them to appear "normal", so much so that some individuals may go to extreme lengths to do so. Davis also examines the argument that cosmetic surgery exists as a tool to achieve social equality for women, however, she critiques this use of "equality discourse". Her three critiques assert that equality discourse "downplays the significance of cosmetic surgery, trivializes its dangers [and] ... deflects attention from structural inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, nationality, age, or other categories of difference" (Davis, 1995, p. 45). Ultimately, she calls for a much more in-depth feminist examination of plastic

surgery and argues that the complexities of cosmetic surgery transcend the confines of equality discourse. Both approaches to the topic offer valuable feminist perspectives from analyzing discourse surrounding Black women's BBL journeys.

## **2.4 Objectification and Over-sexualization of Black Women's Bodies**

Black women's bodies have long been hypersexualized, objectified, and reduced to mere breasts and buttocks in various instances throughout history. The way BBL surgery ties into the historical commodification of Black women's bodies may be cause for concern. *In Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, Sabrina Strings gives the reader an in-depth account of how the relationship between weight and race has evolved overtime. During the late 1500s to 1600s, being overweight for European men was considered an indication of wealth. Overtime, as a result of the increase of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, the prices of goods such as sugar reduced significantly, overtime making these goods more accessible to people of lower socioeconomic status. Thus, weight gain eventually became more common amongst people outside of wealthy European men. As people of color gained weight, scientific efforts were made to assert racial superiority and support ideas that being overweight was exclusively for lazy Black people. This was just one ideology in a centuries-long, racist effort to scientifically "prove" that Black people were inferior to white people.

When discussing the objectification and hyper sexualization of Black women's bodies, it is essential to acknowledge, the impact of historical figure Sara/Sarah/Saartjie Baartman, also referred to as "the Hottentot Venus." Sarah Baartman was a Khoisan woman sold in the early 1800s to a wealthy merchant in Cape Town, South Africa and shortly after transported to London, England (Tobias, 2002). She was then paraded throughout Europe as the Hottentot

Venus, an attraction for white men and women to observe her large, protruding buttocks and breasts (Qureshi, 2004). Baartman is no exception to the countless African women who were deemed “invisible, disposable and valuable solely in terms of their physical, reproductive or sexual labor” (Edwards & Esposito, 2018). Baartman’s time spent on tour is one of the earlier examples of Black female sexuality being exploited and used in “the construction of deviance” of the Black woman’s body (Qureshi, 2004). Following Baartman’s death, her body was grotesquely disfigured and dismembered by French scientist Georges Cuvier. Her genitalia and brain were placed on display, where she continued to be violated for decades postmortem (Henderson, 2014). It wasn’t until 2002, after decades of negotiations between French and South African governments, and a worldwide initiative to return the remains of colonized people that Sarah Baartman was returned to South Africa, and she was able to rest peacefully.

While the mistreatment of Baartman seems to be a centuries old issue, her legacy resonates with the current objectification, commodification and hyper-sexualization of Black women’s bodies presently. Carol Henderson draws connections between Baartman and Black women in the mainstream entertainment industry like Nicki Minaj and Lil’ Kim, women who assert that the use of their bodies to get paid in the rap industry is a feminist act. Henderson declares that these assertions “fail to consider...the racial narrative of sexual impropriety that ancestral mothers like Baartman lived under during the nineteenth century” and “play right into the racist imaginings of a mass culture intent on reshaping their public image” (Henderson, 2014) To the white, western European masses, Baartman’s Blackness and voluptuous figure justified her dehumanization and commodification. It is impossible to write a paper about a similar body type, now increasingly sought by both Black women and women of other races alike, without acknowledging the racial, political, and socio-economic implications of



Baartman's life and legacy. Black women like Baartman, Nicki Minaj, and Lil' Kim have historically and continue to be dehumanized, abused, sexualized, demeaned, and stereotyped for simply having a protruding buttock. Their objectification further adds to my curiosity about Black women's motivations for undergoing BBL surgery.

## **2.5 Body Image in the Black Community**

In a 2011 study, Karia Kelch-Oliver, and Julie R. Ancis facilitated a focus group to explore the racial differences in body image between Black women and white women and why "body image dissatisfaction, dieting and disordered eating are more common' among white women than Black women (Kelch Oliver and Ancis). Kelch-Oliver and Ancis investigate and analyze several cultural factors that may explain why negative body image is less common amongst Black women. Based on the responses from the focus group, they identified six major themes which they believed "captured the essence of body image expressed by" this particular group of Black women (349). The themes were as follows: 1) Standards of Beauty within Black Culture, 2) Interpersonal Influences on Body Image and Beauty Ideal, 3) External Influences on Body Image and Beauty Ideal, 4) Black Identity and Self-Affirmation, 5) Beauty Reflective of Internal Attributes/Strengths and 6) The Journey Towards Self-Acceptance.

Most of the group agreed that when it came to standards of beauty, being thin was more of a white standard of beauty while "the Black standard had less of an emphasis on weight, and more of an emphasis on being shapely or curvaceous" (Kelch-Oliver & Ancis, 2011). When considering interpersonal influences, most of the women noted that the validation of men and boys as well as familial influence and comparisons to other Black women had the most powerful influence on how they felt about their bodies and overall attractiveness. The most powerful

external influences were named to be the media and television. The majority agreed that while the Black community is more accepting of different body types, “they felt that the media did not reflect this appreciation” and continues to only represent Black women who fit into the white standard of beauty (Kelch-Oliver & Ancis, 2011). In summation, the group agreed that beauty is indicative of virtues such as strength, confidence, self-assurance, and health instead of physical characteristics and they also felt that they were generally satisfied with their bodies.

Kelch-Oliver and Ancis’ findings on Black women’s body image offer an interesting element to the rise of Black women electing cosmetic surgery. It is important to consider that the article was written and published over a decade ago and that the BBL trend has gained popularity within that time frame. However, the following questions remain: Has there been a shift in Black women’s body image? If so, why? One arguably obvious explanation could be the rise in popularity of social media platforms such as Instagram and the adoption of this bodily aesthetic as the norm in the mainstream music entertainment industry.

## **2.6 Social Media and Black Women’s Bodies**

Studies have shown that social media has a direct impact on how individuals feel about themselves. Whether it be Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, or YouTube, a person's social media usually depicts the very best parts of their life. There are hundreds of apps that allow you to edit your photos before posting to ensure not one hair is out of place. Social media in general receives criticism for being a space in which people usually post their best angles, outfits, and experiences – creating the idea that their life is perfect. Each day there’s a new trip, new romantic relationship, or new luxurious opportunity showcased by various influencers and content creators. Even knowing that for most people, life isn’t perfect, and we all have our own unique

experiences and obstacles, it remains difficult for some individuals not to compare themselves and their lives to the people they follow. This idea extends to standards of beauty and what is accepted amongst the masses as attractive and desirable.

While exceptions exist, certain body types, aesthetics, skin colors, hair types, and facial features are thought to consistently receive praise, likes and engagement. Social media users may internalize these images and begin to pick themselves apart for not emulating the images they see get the most attention online. The impact that social media may have on one's self-esteem and image is much like the media pre-internet, however now, its amplified. Nearly everyone has a smart phone with social media apps much more conveniently available at our fingertips. Whether you use social media platforms for leisure and or business, the opportunities for self-comparison are inescapable.

There are several Black women influencers who have immense followings and have created successful careers for themselves as content creators. However, these women aren't exempt from receiving racist and demeaning comments because they don't align with widely accepted standards of beauty. In a recent TikTok video, popular content creator, and entrepreneur Jackie Aina discusses being darker skin with certain features and how despite knowing she's pretty, she doesn't fall into the category of "TikTok pretty". As a result of not falling into the "TikTok pretty" category, she is often subjected to racially demeaning comments from other social media users.

Black women in the entertainment industry such as Megan Thee Stallion, Beyonce, Chloë Bailey, and Rihanna are praised and admired for acquiring the coveted "coke-bottle" aesthetic "naturally" while others, such as artists Nicki Minaj, Saweetie, Big Latto, and Summer Walker are known for having chosen cosmetic surgery to achieve the same aesthetic. The latter are

simultaneously deemed desirable sex symbols, while also scrutinized for taking the “easy” surgical route to achieve the body they desire. This group of entertainers is rumored to have specifically undergone BBL surgery at some point in their careers. Praising Black women with the coke-bottle silhouette adds to the pressure of other women to emulate this aesthetic. However, criticism of women who undergo BBL surgery create a lose-lose situation in the minds of some women. Society tells us we should look a certain way, and when one attempts to do so, they’re scrutinized for not loving themselves enough or trying harder with diet and exercise. The fact also remains that for some women, certain body types or features simply aren’t genetically attainable with a consistently healthy diet and exercise. For example, for some women they may be able to find a workout and meal plan and see significant growth in their glute muscles while others see little improvement in glute growth with the same consistency. Fitness influencers and personal trainers constantly post exercises that target glute growth because the “big butt” trend continues to prevail. Those women who are able to grow their glutes and noticeably improve the appearance of a flat butt, add to the scrutiny that women receive for undergoing BBL surgery.

The obsession with Black women’s butts continues to prevail through social media and mainstream pop culture. Their bodies are topics of awkward discussion on national talk shows, podcasts, online news/blog publications, as well as various social media platforms. As BBLs gain popularity, in many ways, it has led to the establishment of a new homogenized beauty standard. More outlets are discussing whether Black women should continue to follow the trend, but little is being shared about what has led to us adopting this new standard and how those who don’t meet this standard are being impacted mentally and emotionally. Black women’s bodies are simultaneously scrutinized and praised for not fitting a white, western, Eurocentric standard

of beauty and now that the curvaceous body type is trending in popular culture, Black women who do not emulate this aesthetic continue to be criticized for not reflecting this new ideal image of Black femininity. The BBL procedure rapidly gaining popularity, especially amongst Black women, arguably dispels the stereotype that Black women are “naturally” more voluptuous and curvier. If Black women are more curvy or voluptuous in nature, how do we explain Black women are increasingly undergoing BBL surgery to obtain a larger buttocks and slimmer waist? Black women just like any other race of women come in a wide range of shapes and sizes, and the idea that Black women are or should be shapelier is simply a stereotype. This stereotype has taken on a life of its own causing some Black women who don’t fall into this ideal image of Black womanhood to feel less attractive and desirable. This applies to both Black women who have a slimmer figure, as well as those who do undergo the BBL surgery and achieve what some consider an over-exaggerated, unnatural-looking figure.

In a racialized society, it’s evident that some bodies are systemically valued and cared for while others are not. In Moya Bailey’s *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women’s Digital Resistance* she offers an in-depth analysis of “the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience, particularly in US visual and digital culture” (Bailey, 1). She explains and unpacks instances of misogynoir on various media outlets, focusing often on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, and Instagram. In the introduction, she gives a brief nod to the images of Sara Baartman and offers her own analysis of the stereotypes developed in Patricia Hill Collins’ “Controlling Images and Black Women’s Oppression” to divulge the ways that the historical dehumanization and harmful stereotyping of Black women has contributed to the rampant misogynoir still occurring today in the media. “Controlling Images” outlines how “Black women emerged from slavery firmly enshrined in the consciousness of white America”

(Gilkes in Collins 266). She identifies four prevailing stereotypes that have been placed upon Black women that exist to serve “the dominant groups interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination”: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare queen, and the jezebel (Collins, 2005). Together these stereotypes work to “shape Black women’s behavior as mothers” or social deviants to best fit a cis, white, patriarchal agenda.

Specifically, Bailey focused on the Mammy stereotype and how fat Black women are demonized for their bodies while simultaneously rendered asexual, non-threatening and perceived as servants. She also ties this trope into pseudo-health concerns associated with Black women having the highest rates of obesity in the United States. This is alternatively blamed on Black women’s poor choices and laziness rather than aligned with issues that systematically plague communities of Black and brown people such as “food deserts, brownfield lands and limited access to healthcare” (Bailey 4). I intend to engage with this conversation by relating fat-shaming and demonizing Black women’s bodies on social media sites may provide syntax for why Black women decide to undergo BBL surgery and how they conceptualize the surgeries impact on their mental health

## **2.7 Black Women’s Mental Health and Wellness**

Prioritizing mental health and wellness within the Black community has historically been and continues to be heavily stigmatized. The book *Black Women’s Mental Health: Balancing Strength and Vulnerability* edited by Dr. Stephanie Evans, Dr. Kanika Bell, and Dr. Nsenga Burton is the first of its kind that directly addresses the “challenges of Black women’s struggle for inner peace” (Blout, 2017). This body of work gathers voices of well-educated Black women from various disciplines to discuss a wide range of topics, including self-love, sexual assault, community building, violence etc., that elucidate the complexities of Black women’s

relationships with mental health and wellness. Together, Dr. Evans, Dr. Bell and Dr. Burton address various topics from a womanist standpoint and offer legitimate solutions for overcoming obstacles that stand between Black women and mental health.

Studies have shown that Black people are “significantly less likely to seek, engage and stay committed to professional mental health services than their white counterparts” (Conner et al., 2010 in Bell, 2017). Despite the significant push towards encouraging Black women to prioritize their mental health and wellness in recent years, “mental health stigma, stereotypes and self-secrecy” continue to impact Black women’s attitudes towards seeking mental health intervention (Masuda, Anderson & Edmonds, 2012 in Bell 2017). One of the prevailing narratives and stereotypes of Black women’s mental health that contributes to cultural mental health stigma is that which describes Black women as “a Superwoman, or as a strong, independent woman” (Burton, 63). Author Dr. Nsenga K. Burton does a deep dive into televisual representations of Black women in popular television shows such as ABC’s *How to Get Away with Murder (HTGAWM)* and BET’s *Being Mary Jane*. The main characters in both shows, Annalise Keating and Mary Jane Pope are wealthy, successful, independent Black women who constantly endure psychological and physical abuse from family and romantic partners. Despite this abuse, Olivia and Annalise continue as if they are unscathed and invincible. Burton argues that several scenes harmfully reinforce the myth of the Black superwoman. While this example dissects two fictional characters, I believe that the Black superwoman trope impacts Black women in real life. This narrative is also used where body image is concerned. Despite years of Afrocentric features being dehumanized and deemed undesirable by white, Western society, society simultaneously expects Black women to maintain strength, confidence, and high self-esteem when it comes to embracing their natural features.

In the previous section, I discussed the intersections of Black women's bodies and social media – specifically how Black women's bodies are scrutinized and objectified on various social media platforms. Bradford exemplifies the harm and benefits that social media may present where mental health is concerned. While social media has been a source of comparison and may contribute to Black women's overall negative self-esteem, there are also instances where social media has bolstered a community that aims to destigmatize mental health by sharing “information about mental health diagnoses and symptoms, and also resources about lower-cost treatments and services” (Bradford 82). This was the case seen largely on Twitter in response to the suicides of author Erica Kennedy in 2012, blogger Karyn Washington in 2014, and Miss Jessie's haircare co-creator, Titi Branch in 2014. Black women often bear the burden associated with the stereotype of having to appear strong, confident, and unphased by adversity. This stereotype does more harm than good because Black women are expected to endure hardship, insecurity, “broken hearts, and troubled minds masked by fabulosity, ‘got-it-togetherness’ and Mammyism” (Bradford 83).

### ***2.7.1 Body Dysmorphia, Anxiety, and Depression***

While my aim is not to pathologize or diagnose Black women throughout their surgery journey's, I would be remiss not to include information about relevant mental health disorders such as body dysmorphia, anxiety, and depression. Some of the women in my data set directly or indirectly mention experiencing symptoms of these three mental health disorders. The intersection of race, mental health, and cosmetic surgery has been explored from various aspects. For example, scholars have examined the increase in eyelid surgeries in Korea and the racial implications. Additionally, extensive research has also been done examining the legacy of eugenics in Brazil and its impact on the cosmetic surgery trends. It's equally important to



examine the possible ways that Black women's choice to undergo surgery may be linked to the presence of body dysmorphia, anxiety, and depression.

The American Psychiatric Association defines body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) as someone who is preoccupied with one or more perceived flaws in physical appearance that are not noticeable or appear very minor to others. BDD also involves repetitive thinking, and repetitive behaviors that are intrusive, unwanted, and time-consuming and cause significant distress in daily life and social situations (American Psychiatric Association). It is also reported that as it relates to BDD, the "gender ratio is reportedly equal, although some studies found a slight preponderance in women, highlighting the need for larger epidemiological studies in BDD prevalence" (Pereira, Chattopadhyay, Fitzpatrick, Nguyen, & Hassan, H., 2023).

Several types of anxiety disorders exist that range from mild to severe, but the most relevant to this study would be Social Anxiety Disorder and Generalized Anxiety disorder. Social Anxiety Disorder is characterized by experiencing "significant anxiety and discomfort about being embarrassed, humiliated, rejected or looked down on in social interactions". Generalized Anxiety Disorder is described as "persistent and excessive worry that interferes with daily activities... accompanied by physical symptoms such as restlessness, feeling on edge or easily fatigued, difficulty concentrating, muscle tension, or problems sleeping" (American Psychiatric Association).

Depression is another mental health disorder with varying types and severities. Depression "causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed [and] can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems ... that can decrease your ability to function at work and at home". Depending on severity, symptoms of depression can include:

Feeling sad, or having a depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed, changes in appetite/weight loss or gain unrelated to dieting, trouble sleeping or sleeping too much, loss of energy or increased fatigue, slowed movements or speech, feeling worthless or guilty, difficulty thinking, concentrating, or making decisions, thoughts of death or suicide” (American Psychiatric Association).

It is also noteworthy that women are nearly twice as likely to suffer from major depression than men (The Johns Hopkins University). Likewise, a study done in the United Kingdom in 2017 found that women are “more than three times as likely to experience eating disorders than men (Mental Health Foundation). There could be a myriad of factors to explain this phenomenon, however as it relates to body image and mental health – it’s clear that women are placed under a very different type and level of scrutiny and beauty standards are concerned.

Cleary, Raeburn, and Hungerford (2021), identify a body of international research which establishes a growing connection between people who seek cosmetic surgery and mental ill-health. They provide a list of explanations for the rise of cosmetic surgery including social media, ‘celebrity worship’, lack of fulfillment in relationships and affordability (Cleary, Raeburn, and Hungerford, 2020). This article gives valuable insight into explaining the increase of plastic surgery; however the field lacks the specific nuance and approach to BBL surgery, mental health, and Black women. The fields of psychology and psychiatry, like most academic fields, are white, Western, male dominated environments. There is a lack of an intersectional approach to mental health and psychology that prioritizes complex identities and experiences, and especially relationships with power dynamics and systems of oppression.

### 3 METHODOLOGY:

This study undertakes a critical feminist discourse analysis (CFDA), which is “concerned with how power is created and maintained through discourse” (Hindman & Walker, 2022).

CFDA is heavily concerned with the state of gender relations and advocates issues that impact marginalized groups such as women, people of color, the LGBTQ community, disabled people, poor people as well as the intersections of these identities. As a qualitative approach to research, a variety of methodological approaches are used alongside critical discourse analysis, however, they all share an interest in uncovering underlying power structures and ideologies (Hindman & Walker, 2022). This study aims to uncover information regarding a phenomenon that directly impacts the lives of Black women uniquely.

The bulk of Brazilian Butt Lift discourse unfolds within online spaces such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok and online blogs. Black women are increasingly contributing content about their experiences and their physical and emotional state at every step of the process.

Conversations about cosmetic procedures are no longer scandalous, and a wealth of information and personal experiences are being shared online with less inhibition. Despite more information being contributed by Black women on the topic in the digital sphere, there remains a significant gap in academic research on such a niche topic – however, “a dynamic critique of power still applies to communication in these digitally mediated spaces” (Wodak, 2015). My research aims to bridge this gap by focusing primarily on YouTube as my digital platform.

#### 3.1 YouTube Rationale:

I considered Instagram, TikTok and Twitter as possible sites for data collection. However, as I reviewed the type of content published about BBL surgery on each platform, it was revealed that different platforms produce different types of content and information.

Instagram, and TikTok mostly focus on the before and after visuals of the BBL journey. For example, you can easily find endless preop and postop of images and videos of women who underwent BBL surgery. You can also easily obtain brief advice about how to prepare for the surgery and the best ways to maintain positive results postop. Black women have taken to these platforms and created an online community to help guide other women through the process. However, YouTube is most useful for providing insight into what the women were experiencing real time as their experience unfolded. For example, several videos include scenes where the women are post-op, lying in bed and discussing their physical and mental state while they are actively going through the feelings that they describe. Considering part of my research question focuses on mental health outcomes, YouTube is best suited to speak to these outcomes, because of the access it provides to long-format narratives – albeit edited– of individual women’s journey’s where they reflect on their feelings, attitudes, and motivations throughout their surgery process.

While other social media platforms could successfully be used for this study, YouTube is the most suitable platform for my analysis as it gives the most accessible, detailed, varying, and thorough accounts of these experiences. Verified YouTube users can upload videos that are up to twelve hours in length and becoming verified only requires that you can access the email used to create your YouTube account (“How to”, 2023). Other platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Twitter have more strict limitations for uploading longer videos and lengthy blocks of text. Instagram for example, while it has evolved, was originally created with the purpose of solely being a photo sharing platform (Evans, 2018). Currently, Instagram only allows its users to upload individual videos that are up to one minute in length to their feed. Other features include Instagram reels, which allows users to post longer, 90 second videos, and Instagram TV which

allows users to upload 15-minute videos, or 60-minute videos for verified users. However, verified users are required to “represent a well-known, highly searched for person, brand or entity,” essentially meaning that unless you are a person of relative fame or status, you won’t be allowed to post videos of this length (“Requirements”, 2023).

Additionally, YouTube content is generally easier to access and filter. YouTube has a filter feature in which you can select the date, type, and length of the videos along with any relevant keywords, hashtags and phrases users would like to view in their search. Instagram and TikTok allow users to search individual words, tags, and phrases, however Instagram has no filter option and TikTok’s filter feature is limited. While Twitter has a detailed filter option, the maximum characters allowed in any twitter post is 280, thus making it a platform ideal for sharing small lengths of text, not lengthy videos which is more appropriate for my research as it allows for a more detailed narrative of Black women’s experiences with BBL surgery.

### **3.2 Data Collection:**

My strategy for data collection begins with identifying a sample of recent vlogs in which Black women narrate their experiences before and after undergoing surgery, specifically looking for narratives that directly or indirectly contribute to discourse surrounding motivations for surgery and expressions of mental health. Only videos that published within the last 7 years (2016-2023) were considered to establish what Jager describes as “a certain [societal] place at a certain time” (Jäger, 2001). Bearing this in mind and considering this is a relatively new procedure that has more recently gained popularity, it was appropriate to limit my data set to videos within a relevant timeframe.

In a similar fashion, scholars Almanssori and Stanley perform a feminist discourse analysis (FDA) on YouTube vlogs following the #MeToo movement in which they examine their data set as a form of public pedagogy. Ultimately, they uncover “how women and girls participate in producing, reproducing, and negotiating discursive understandings of sexual violence in a post #MeToo world” (Almanssori & Stanley, 2021). While “CDS [critical discourse studies] does not constitute a well-defined empirical... way of gathering data” and generally, does not “explain or recommend data sampling procedures,” Almanssori and Stanley provide a relevant framework for data collection for my study (Wodak, 2015). My research is not specifically concerned with sexual violence however, I similarly use CFDA of YouTube videos to uncover the ways Black women produce and negotiate public understandings of their motivations for BBL surgery and its impact on their mental health.

To avoid YouTube’s algorithm potentially manipulating my search results, I used the computers at my local library to collect my data and ensured to remain signed out and clear the browser history before each use. I searched each of the following terms individually: *bbl journey*, *bbl experience*, *bbl recovery*. These search terms yielded results that included significant results from Black woman creators without having to indicate the word “Black” in the search terms. The number of videos that initially appears to have been created by Black women was overwhelming and much more than I expected, thus these search terms were sufficient in populating data that applied to the first part of my research questions regarding motivations for surgery. In addition, I searched for the phrase *bbl surgery and mental health*, because this phrase yielded more specific, relevant results relating to expressed mental health impacts. Because “YouTube’s default search algorithm yields results based on relevance and popularity,” and the goal was to study common ideologies and discourse that emerge, I did not change these parameters (Almanssori & Stanley,

2021). Additionally, I did not find it necessary to exclude videos that were above or under any particular length of time. There was no apparent correlation between the length of the videos and their relevance to my research questions. Both videos that were shorter and longer in length were ultimately determined to be useful in my analysis.

With each individual search on the library computer, and before watching each video, I combined the results of the first 5 YouTube pages of women who appeared that they could be of African descent into a YouTube playlist titled *Preliminary Data* by simultaneously searching the title of each video on my personal computer. Using the library computers ensured that the initial search results wouldn't be manipulated by any of my previous searches on my personal computer. While realizing the limitations of this process due to the fragility and the social construction of race, I considered that this may have excluded some women who did self-identify as Black from my study. However, I did not find it necessary to watch women's videos who likely would not be perceived as Black to the average American citizen. Additionally, choosing women solely based on their appearances to determine their race is not sufficient, therefore each creator's racial identity was later confirmed through personal biographical information on their YouTube channel and/or any available external social media or posts in which they self-identified as Black women. Videos for which I could not confirm the creator's identity as a Black woman through biographical information on their profile or other external social media were removed from the playlist and excluded from my data set to ensure accuracy and consistency. However, the videos which were removed from the *Preliminary Data* playlist were moved into a *Supplementary Data 1* playlist for possible later reference. Of the 54 videos initially added to the *Preliminary Data* playlist 19 videos were moved to the *Supplementary Data 1* playlist leaving 35 videos. After confirming the identity of each vlogger and before

watching each video, I visited each vlogger's page to ensure that any other videos that were created about their BBL experience were included. Following this step, I ended up having 80 videos total from 21 different vloggers.

I first watched each video once, in 2x playback speed, closely listening/watching to determine if the vlogger directly or indirectly mentioned their motivations for surgery and/or how surgery impacted them mentally or emotionally. Each time the vlogger mentioned a possible response to either topic, I recorded each instance under the video's title, creator's name, and the timestamp that the instance occurred. I then added the video to a new *Final Data Set* playlist for later analysis. Videos whose content could not initially be interpreted to answer my research questions directly or indirectly were excluded and kept in the *Preliminary Data* playlist. For example, several videos provided information or lists solely about prices of surgery or the details of their surgeon or surgery center. In this case, if there was no clear or relevant interpretation of their personal motivations or mental state, these videos were not considered. Of the 80 videos left in the *Preliminary Data* playlist after this step, 20 videos from 9 different creators were added to the *Final Data Set* playlist for analysis.



Creator Pseudonym	Number of videos used	Year posted	Total channel views as of Feb. 2024	Channel Subscribers as of Feb. 2024
Lilly	1	2023	10,104	211
Amy	4	2023	119,648	2.49K
Danielle	1	2021	98,824,670	1.77M
Alexis	1	2022	23,112	212
Karen	4	2023	188,698	974
Sarah	2	2023	43,456,999	586K
Rachelle	1	2022	7,392,275	145K
Nicole	3	2020	1,395,295,977	5.16M
Taylor	3	2022	393,907	2.63K

*Table 1. Creator Information*

### **3.3 Critical Feminist Discourse Analysis:**

For feminist scholar Nicola Gavey, discourse is defined as a “broad concept referring to a way of constituting meaning which is specific to particular groups, cultures, and historical periods and is always changing” (Almassori & Stanley 2021, Gavey 1989). CFDA is further described as prioritizing “gender as a categorical lens, relies on the procedures of feminist methodology, and intentionally aligns with the goals of feminist research” (Almassori & Stanley, 2021). As a Black, feminist, researcher, my intention is always to produce knowledge ethically, and with the purpose of advancing and advocating for people who occupy oppressed identities. Black women exist in a unique intersection of oppressed identities, and to better understand their

relationship with mental health and wellness one must consider the historical, social, and cultural circumstances that shape their lived experiences.

Critical feminist discourse analysis is especially useful for dissecting Black women's motivations for surgery considering cosmetic surgery is generally a topic which produces various discourses that maintain heteropatriarchal norms (Almassori & Stanley, 2021, Gavey, 1989). CFDA specifically aims "to show the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities" (Lazar, 2009). The topic of Black women's bodies is deeply saturated in a complex, racialized, overt-sexualization and objectification. From being the legal property of white slave owners during the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, rendered mere objects for breeding to being perceived as "Jezebels" or the more modern video vixen – Black women's bodies have long been scrutinized and policed. It's undeniable that the topic of cosmetic surgery for Black women would be a complicated phenomenon with multiple "truths" – a characteristic of discourse regarding arguably most topics. CFDA acknowledges that research may divulge multiple, "competing, potentially contradictory ways of giving meaning to the world" (Gavey, 1989). Similar to Almansori, Stanley and Gavey, to perform my analysis, I look for the multitude of meanings behind individual and collective Black women's experiences and the discourses that shape their understandings of their experiences with cosmetic surgery.

Upon identifying the final set of videos, I watched each video a second time, and used YouTube's transcription feature to transcribe each video accounting for pauses, glances such as looking down, and minor utterances (Almansori & Stanley, 2022). In this stage of my analysis, I closely listened and engaged in *in vivo* coding for instances in which motivations, and mental

health impacts – my discursive objects – are mentioned or referenced directly or indirectly.

Simultaneously, while transcribing each video, I referred to my preliminary notes and used them to begin coding the transcripts to identify possible mentions of discursive objects related to my research questions. I manually coded each transcript for the following discursive objects which I later used to generate various discursive themes: (1) motivations for surgery, (2) negative references to mental health, (3) positive references to mental health and (4) other discursive objects potentially relevant to my research questions. While coding, notes and comments were added in the margins for later reference and analysis.

Following the initial transcription and coding of each video, I watched each video again closely listening/watching to correct any inconsistencies in my transcripts and continuing to code for the various discursive objects previously mentioned. In this stage, I focused on identifying discursive objects related to mental health outcomes and motivations – especially keeping in mind how each discursive object interacts with and functions within greater systems and structures of power such as sexism, racism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy. Additionally, in this stage I gave significant attention to the following “linguistic markers: implicit implications, and insinuations, symbolism and figurative language, idioms, sayings, vocabulary and style, stress and intonation, local semantic moves such as disclaimers, repairs/adjustments, and hesitations” (Meyer, 2001). I reviewed each transcript several times until I was unable to identify any other relevant examples of the four discursive objects, I was coding for. I then pasted each identified instance – grouped by their respective category – and any relevant notes and comments into a separate document to identify possible discursive themes. Instances that spoke to more than one of the categories were added under each relevant category as necessary.

To generate discursive themes, I paid special attention to any patterns and connections that emerged from the data that implicated how Black women understand and create understandings of their motivations for BBL surgery and how it impacts them mentally. Once no further connections or patterns could be found, I stopped generating discursive themes. Additionally, throughout this process I negotiated how to define and name each theme and locate it within various power structures (Almassori & Stanley, 2021).

As mentioned previously, I am not a mental health specialist, and do not aim to diagnose, or pathologize Black women's experiences with surgery. Rather, I wish to document trends in language, tone and other nonverbal signals that attribute to Black women's self-expression of mental health outcomes, both positive, negative, and neutral. The field of psychology and psychiatry have a history of maintaining "white supremacy with significant and impactful consequences" (Buchanan, Perez, Prinstein, & Thurston), and I aim to approach mental health with the intent to decolonize what may be considered a valuable contribution to the realms of mental health/wellness, and psychology. Performing a critical feminist discourse analysis on a digital platform also requires a close look at "the embedded nature of misogynoir in social media," and how it acts as a catalyst for negative mental health outcomes and initiates sites for resistance and online community building (Bailey, 2021).

### **3.4 Limitations**

As far as limitations in my research are concerned, I acknowledge that a qualitative method for data collection such as interviews or field data may have produced significantly different results. Interviewing Black women directly and through an IRB approval process may have yielded more holistic, relevant, and specific data that could more clearly be interpreted to answer my research questions. However, largely due to time constraints within my two-year

master's degree program, I did not find it feasible to successfully complete IRB and obtain the necessary approval needed to conduct my own independent interviews.

Additionally, the impact of Brazilian Butt Lift surgery on Black women's mental health is a topic that is virtually unstudied within academia. While this study aims to identify and analyze key trends, patterns, and elements to lend a more comprehensive interpretation, the specific nature of this topic and its newness presents a limitation that doesn't apply to other, more widely studied topics.

Another possible limitation lies in the highly theoretical, and subjective nature of performing a discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is more subjective, unlike other, more quantitative methodologies. The interpretation and understanding of the data heavily relies on the perspective of the researcher, which can often lead to there being multiple interpretations and understandings of the same text. It is paramount to ensure that steps are taken to consider one's own biases and present the topic from an angle that addresses other possible views.

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

Black women have taken to YouTube to outline their experiences from the preparation phases to as far as several years post-op, and then going back to receive another round of the surgery. Narrative YouTube videos outline both the positive and negative outcomes and have provided a sufficient data set for analysis. The data in this study is collected with effort made to uphold the ethics of feminist social media research and analysis. According to Emily Freeman, "feminist research requires one to discuss ethics... but as a reflexive move that shows the researchers understand that no matter how much they wish it didn't, power always plays a role in the process" (Freeman, 2019). Choosing to discuss the ethics of my research and acknowledging

how my role and privilege as a researcher could possibly further marginalize Black women, inherently indicates ethical feminist research.

While social media analysis is not yet a clearly defined discipline, many researchers have been discussing the complex ethical concerns surrounding using data that is publicly available on social media platforms (Caron et al., 2017; Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Patterson, 2018). Marrow (2015) and Patterson (2018) agree that YouTube is simultaneously a public and private platform – the duality of which requires us to consider how our participants envision the space when they post their videos. Considering the rapid increase in the popularity of BBL procedures and the recent development of a culture cultivated online by women enthusiastically sharing experiences to help other women, I felt that the vloggers in my data set perceive the space as public. However, in agreement with Patterson, I acknowledge that despite how the vlogger may view it, researchers must still interact with their content in ethical and trustworthy ways (Almassori & Stanley, 2021). Doing so avoids the ethical dilemma that social media users have regarding researchers using content “[creators] had not meant to be public in the first place or was posted for a different purpose,” which is far from the intent of my research (Sloan and Quan-Haase 13). Additionally, to avoid this issue, I made efforts to select vloggers who explicitly mention that their purpose for creating their videos was to help inform others of their experiences. Similarly, I aim to uphold the “feminist tenet of research that is on, with, and for women” (Doucet & Mauther, 2005, Almassori & Stanley, 2021).

Who I am as a person impacts how I approach and produce knowledge as well as my theoretical understandings of my topic. I am not someone who views myself as entirely separate from my topic, in that I have considered cosmetic augmentation for myself, and also have close relationships with Black women who have undergone BBL surgery. As a Black, feminist

researcher and avid social media user, my intent is to “...engage in [a] project... reflecting particular political commitment...or develop [a] research agenda...that highlight[s] gender dynamics/issues and intentionally employ[s] methods in feminist ways” (Davis & Craven 2022, 95). Being committed to ethical feminist research requires that I consider the ways that Black women, especially the women whose videos have been chosen for this study, have historically and continue to be exploited, hypersexualized, discriminated against, and made a spectacle of in service of racist, white supremacist heteropatriarchy. Many of the videos in my data set also include clips of Black women sharing incredibly vulnerable and arguably traumatic experiences, which I have a responsibility to approach with the utmost care and sensitivity. With this in mind, each vlogger was given an alias in this study out of consideration for their privacy. Additionally, I understand that I am required not only to consider my own biases and privilege, but also actively take steps toward mitigating how my biases and privilege present in my writing. Ultimately, I aim to produce a paper that the women mentioned throughout my paper would approve of if they ever happen to read it.

#### **4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:**

My research yielded various discourses and counterdiscourses that collectively speak to my initial research questions directly. Together, these themes demonstrate the complexities and multidimensionality of Black women's decision making about surgery and their interpretation of how surgery has impacted them mentally at various stages. None of the women in my study took their decision to undergo surgery lightly by any means. Each woman took months to prepare for their surgeries and did what they felt was sufficient research on the procedure, surgeon, aftercare and various facilities. Each woman paid several thousands of dollars – some saving towards the surgery over an extended period of time – to be able to feel more comfortable with themselves. Some women gained weight, lost weight, bought and consumed supplements, booked flights, hotels, massages, bought special garments, equipment etc. leading up to and well after their surgery date. The lengths that each woman went to for a completely elective surgery is nothing short of incredible. The discursive themes that emerged throughout my research indicate the complex and multifaceted nature of Black women's motivations for undergoing BBL surgery. Black women use both dominant and counterdiscourses to situate and make sense of their experiences with BBL surgery. By positioning my analysis within a Black feminist theoretical framework, I prioritize the social, cultural, and political contexts of Black women's involvement in cosmetic surgery. Simultaneously, it remains pertinent to validate and give weight to what was said via dialogue by the vloggers as well as to what discourses are present in their narrative (Almansori & Stanley).



#### 4.1 “Doing it for me” Empowerment Discourse Versus Self-Preservation Counterdiscourse”

The first discursive theme that emerged throughout several vlogs is “*doing it for me*” *empowerment* accompanied by *self-preservation* counterdiscourse. The general assumption that women undergo surgery to become more desirable to others, specifically men, is being challenged through the retelling of each creator's mention of undergoing surgery for themselves. Vloggers express a sense of empowerment in being able to obtain surgery to look and feel how they want to. Simultaneously, there is a recurring awareness of the potential backlash that may be received following surgery and the need to convince their audience that their desires for surgery are reasonable which significantly helps develop the *self-preservation* counterdiscourse. Vloggers directly and/or indirectly expressed wanting to undergo surgery to “correct” areas of their body which they considered flawed simply for self-improvement. Undergoing surgery, to them, was a means to achieve self-actualization, being the best version of themselves, and treating themselves to the body that they “deserved”. Surgery was often interpreted as a form of and put into comparison with self-care which is defined as 1) “the practice of taking action to preserve or improve one's own health”, 2) “and the practice of taking an active role in protecting one's own well-being and happiness, in particular during periods of stress” (Philpot & Winkeler, 2018, pp. 3).

Amy: I want to put on anything and just feel so confident. I-.. My body is not for people to say I look good, *I* want to look at myself and say “Yeah, gal. You look good!” Yeah. It’s not, -- it’s not no insecurity shit. I mean, I know that I look good regardless. But um, I feel like especially when people get their body done, like they love them - love themselves too much. And just a little bit obsessed with perfection of your body. Just like

people in the gym. They go because they're obsessed with looking their best and it's just the same thing with surgery. You continue because you want to look your best, you want your body snatched!

Amy's perspective is unique in this sample because this is her second time going into BBL surgery and breast augmentation surgery. Amy explains to her viewers her desires to "be snatched" upon completing her second round of BBL surgery. The word "snatched" in this instance is being used as slang terminology originating from New York City's 1960's Black drag culture. Snatched is used with a positive connotation to describe someone or something that is fierce, or "on point". The phrase has now made its way into mainstream pop culture and social media and while it has kept its original meaning, it is also commonly used to describe women with a cinched waist and overall tight, attractive body.

At the beginning of one of her vlogs, she discloses how she feels that many people think her body is perfect but proceeds to highlight the parts of her body that she is unsatisfied with and aims to fix with her second round of surgeries. Her main area of concern is painful keloids that were left under both of her breasts following the previous breast enhancement, which she hopes will be corrected in addition to adding more volume to her breasts and more projection in certain areas of her butt. There is also an awareness that she may receive negative feedback for choosing surgery a second time, however she is continuing with surgery despite knowing various individuals may not be supportive of her choices.

Amy: Also, with my butt, now, it's just so funny, like, people be seeing my butt, but um, I don't know. I feel like somehow, I just need a little bit of projection right here [points to middle of her butt cheek]. Don't curse me out, don't come for me! Don't come for me! That's just what I want. That's just what I want and it's whatever it is, so.

It is evident that Amy is aware of the negative ways people may view her choice to undergo surgery considering she already has a prominent butt by most standards. As a means of self-preservation, she tells her audience not to “come for her” and emphasizes that she’s doing what she’s doing simply because she wants to achieve being an even better version of herself. The idea that surgery is a way to become the “best version” of oneself is consistent with other influencers as well. Throughout my research there was an interesting absence of the explicit mention of external factors in Black women’s decision-making process. I assumed that some women would mention being criticized by others or self-comparison with others as motivations for undergoing surgery. None of the vloggers directly mention wanting to change their bodies because of some societal expectation or because someone in their lives, social media, or popular culture influenced their decision. There were, however, some mentions of external factors in ways I didn’t expect. For example, Amy mentions that her body is often considered to be the “dream body” for other women, and yet continued to undergo a second round of BBL surgery to perfect certain aspects of her body she was unsatisfied with. When I initially thought about how the opinions of others may motive Black women to undergo BBL surgery, I was expecting these opinions to mostly be negative. I expected the vloggers to mentioned being teased for their bodies or internalizing negative comments from other women or men, but that wasn’t the case. On the contrary, Amy received praise and positive reinforcement from other women which ultimately was not a factor in her decision to undergo a second round of BBL surgery.

Amy and women who have a similar relationship with plastic surgery, or as she describes “being a little obsessed with perfection of your body” can be further understood in tandem with Lauren Berlant’s “cruel optimism”. Cruel optimism as a theory which describes the “relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (Berlant, 2006, p.21). In short, Berlant

describes a phenomenon in which something that you desire also inhibits you from flourishing. Examples such as love, overeating, patriotism, and pursuing various careers are given for initial context. Berlant goes into detail about the “American dream” as a key example of cruel optimism because many people immigrate to the United States in pursuit of the American dream, believing that if they just pull themselves up by their bootstraps and work hard, they will acquire wealth and success. However, this isn’t the reality for many immigrants, especially immigrants of color. Instead, they become stuck in a relentless cycle of American capitalism which renders the working class invisible, constantly exhausted and oppressed. There are remnants of Berlant’s theory within Amy’s narrative and continued search for perfection via cosmetic surgery. Amy desires a certain appearance enough to undergo immense pain and months of recovery for a second time, without the guarantee that she will be completely satisfied with the results postop. She clings to the possibility that this surgery will be the one to fix all her imperfections, and to her, the possibility of perfection is worth the guaranteed pain and discomfort.

Several vloggers in my data set mentioned previously having children as a motivation for undergoing surgery – directly and indirectly commenting that for them, surgery is a way to reclaim or improve their bodies, which changed in undesirable ways during and after pregnancy. Following pregnancy and childbirth most women report experiencing a wide range of physical symptoms such as swelling, soreness, weight gain, diastasis recti, stretch marks, loose skin, skin discoloration etc. While these symptoms and changes are incredibly common and normal experiences, women still disapprove of them and feel that surgery is a reasonable solution for correcting unwanted changes in their bodies.

Alexis: (Upon walking out of the doctor’s office) He [her doctor] asked me, he was like, why does such a decent, beautiful, young lady like you want to get this type of surgery? And I was just like... I had a baby, okay? And I know you're gonna get me right, so we’re finna do this process.

Karen: (While doing her makeup) If y'all have been knowing me for years, and stuff, y'all know that I've always wanted a butt, okay. I was usually, like, pretty skinny. Um, and having babies... if y'all don't know, I have, um, four kids ... like, I've gained weight and coming from like my pre-pregnancy body, which, I don't necessarily want to get all the way back to that. I just kind of want certain areas back, and to gain a little bit of booty doop, ain't gonna hurt okay? If y'all know me, y'all know that like, I've always wanted a little butt and this is just something that I want to do for me.

Danielle: (Hours after surgery in response to a comment from her nurse)  
 ...Mothers deserve it! Y'all hear this? All the mothers out there..., I know a lot of people talk bad about surgery, but you deserve to have the body you want. You *bear* children, no matter how many children you have – you bear children, you deserve to pop back and treat yourself. And I know people want to normalize natural bodies. I agree, love natural bodies, but don't shame people for getting surgery, okay? Do what you want to do and what makes you feel beautiful...-er, cause you're already beautiful, but what makes you feel beautifuler.

Alexis, Karen, and Danielle all give accounts that one of their motivations for obtaining surgery is to improve their bodies after giving birth. Alexis explains a brief conversation with her doctor to her viewers in which she similarly expresses her desires to “get right,” or improve the appearance of her body via surgery following childbirth. Although the interaction is brief, Skye Elexus describes feelings of empowerment with her decision and, indirectly a need to defend her decision to her doctor. On one hand, she feels excited about this move towards surgery, on the other hand she interprets and internalizes his question as criticism that she feels she must protect herself from.

Similarly, Karen described the changes in her body after having children accompanied with a long-time desire to acquire a more pronounced butt as motivations for undergoing surgery. Karen mentions previously being skinny and gaining weight after pregnancy; however, neither vlogger goes into incredible detail about the physical changes they’ve experienced. This demonstrates that post pregnancy changes are widely understood and therefore a reasonable

explanation for obtaining surgery. Pregnancy and childbirth are understood as a sacrifice that renders mother's physically less desirable according to societal beauty standards. Mothers are put under ridiculous pressure to "bounce back" to their previous weight following childbirth considering how incredibly traumatic even an uncomplicated childbirth can be on a person's body. It is evident that while Karen feels empowered by the idea of surgery and the potential confidence she may gain; she also feels the need to defend the decision stating that gaining a bigger butt "ain't gonna hurt, okay?". She also mentions wanting a certain body type for an extended period of time, suggesting that the duration of time she's wanted this should imply a reasonable decision. Additionally, Danielle goes further into passionately affirming that mothers deserve to have the body they want following pregnancy. She also expresses the contradiction that we should love our natural bodies while she defends her choice to exercise individual agency and undergo surgery as a personal choice to feel "beautiful-er" or become the best version of herself.

The struggles that mothers endure physically, and mentally following childbirth often doesn't receive enough attention or care, especially for Black women within the United States healthcare system. Presently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that as of 2021 the maternal mortality rate for Black women in the United States was almost 3 times the rate for white women (Hoyert, 2023). The increased mortality rate amongst Black women can be attributed to several factors which fall under the umbrella of medical racism. The idea that Black people have a higher pain tolerance, stereotypes that paint Black people as dishonest or drug users and general ignorance surrounding medical conditions that are more common within the Black community leads to medical neglect by some health care providers. Stories of Black women not being taken seriously or being misdiagnosed and not getting the care that they need

and suffering because of it are entirely too common. While I do not have any children and have never been pregnant, I can rationalize going through such a traumatic experience, no longer looking, or feeling like myself and wanting to take steps to look and feel better. However, it is concerning that discourse is emerging which encourages mothers that something as drastic and potentially traumatic as surgery is the answer. As a society, we praise mothers for giving birth and simultaneously shame them for how their body changes afterwards – so much so, that surgery for mothers is progressively being viewed as acceptable.

The overlap of *empowerment* discourse versus *self-preservation* counterdiscourse represents a pattern of meaning wherein socioeconomic power relations are evident in Black women's decision making to undergo BBL surgery. While I do believe Black women as they express that their motivation for undergoing surgery is indicative of their own desires to correct imperfections, it remains critical to examine the possible power dynamics that may indirectly or subconsciously impact women's motivations. It is hard to imagine any individual who participates in social media, as all the women in my data set, being exempt from external social influences. Every popular social media platform possesses an algorithm that works to populate and target content towards specific users who show interest. A simple google search may populate several different lists of celebrity mothers who have “confessed” to having cosmetic surgery done to their bodies after giving birth. And although outdated, gossip magazines in the check-out lines at grocery stores commonly headline celebrities rumored to have had work done. If a woman gets BBL surgery because she has “always wanted a booty”, it still requires an examination of the questions: What life experiences and social systems may have shaped those desires enough to undergo surgery? What has ultimately shaped Black women's attachments to these notions of beauty enough to initiate permanently changing their body – risking immense

pain and possible harm in the process? Overall, what is missing in my data set is an explicit and deeper acknowledgement and conversation into *why* or *what* each woman believes contributes to their feelings of being less desirable following childbirth.

It remains unclear if the vloggers understand that while they may be undergoing surgery for themselves, the desired BBL body type is arguably thought to be ideal within hegemonic, patriarchal beauty standards. Therefore, it also remains unclear whether they understand that obtaining this body type even as a personal preference, doesn't negate their complicit participation in upholding said beauty standards. Gavey states "dominant discourses appear 'natural', denying their own partiality and gaining their authority by appealing to common sense. These discourses, which support and perpetuate existing power relations, tend to constitute the subjectivity of most people most of the time" (Gavey, 464). BBL surgery has become more widely accepted, accessible and normalized, in part because it allows the capitalist beauty industry and its standards to proliferate. I acknowledge that there may be a lack of access amongst my chosen demographic of vloggers where feminist theories and ideologies about capitalism and beauty standards are concerned. However, despite none of the vloggers in my data set explicitly identifying as a feminist or mentioning feminism in general, many of the sentiments divulged mirror inherently feminist perspectives on the topic. How these narratives, discourses and counter discourses align with prior feminist research are critical to my understanding of why Black women increasingly seek this surgery.

Danielle's statement regarding mothers being deserving of plastic surgery demonstrates the current contradictory and overlapping feminist arguments surrounding plastic surgery. One aspect of feminism encourages body positivity and learning to accept oneself as-is despite not aligning with the dominant beauty standards. Another aspect asserts that choosing cosmetic



augmentation for one's own satisfaction indicates the feminist pillar of agency. The *doing it for me* discourse is also characterized by a pattern of meaning in which women understand their motivations for surgery as a means of self-care or becoming the best version of themselves. The overwhelming consensus for the women in my data set assert that each woman was simply undergoing surgery for themselves and to improve what they felt was an insecurity or imperfection. This would seemingly disrupt the notion that Black women are motivated by external social factors. However, things often are not as simple as we would like to portray them to be. The theme that undergoing surgery is simply motivated by one's own desires to achieve a particular aesthetic for self-enhancement is consistent with and simultaneously contradictory to feminist scholarship regarding plastic surgery. In particular, it affirms ideas that women seek plastic surgery as a feminist act that exercises their bodily autonomy, and also complicates ideas that women augment their bodies because they've been manipulated into doing so or to become more appealing to patriarchal beauty standards.

The *doing it for myself* discourse is also consistent with ideas that scholar Sharon Lee aligns with "how neoliberal self-management of the body is coded as necessity yet signified as choice" (Lee, 2016). Lee uses beauty ads in Korea, an area which is notorious for its beauty industry and homogenized beauty standards, to support her assertion that the body has become a site for "raising one's self- value and has become a symbol of one's position or lifestyle". Korean "beauty ads for cosmetic surgery, dieting, skin and body care literally use the neoliberal language of "self- management" (자기 관리), "self- development" (자기 개발) and "self- investment" (자기 투자) to describe their products, goods, and services" (Lee, 2016). The language of "self-investment" and "self-development is also used by several Black women in my

data set during their BBL journeys. Some vloggers (Amy, Danielle, Karen, Skye Elexus), interpret surgery as something they are deserving of because they are investing into their appearance. They are convinced that in comparison to diet, exercise or any other less drastic means, surgery is the most effective means of achieving their individual version of their best self.

In another study that focuses on the implications of neoliberalism within plastic surgery, neoliberalism is defined as “a political-economic ideology and practice that promotes individualism, consumerism and transferring state power and responsibility to the individual” (Galvin, 2002; McGregor, 2001; Newman et al., 2007). Additionally, characteristics of neoliberalism include “decreased government funding and power over social services, through deregulation and privatization, in the pursuit of a free market” (Kelly, 2001). Thus, neoliberalism places significance on the individual, self-governing and self-regulating their “unruly bodies”, often through the means of consumption. With emphasis placed on the individual to constantly self-reflect and seek self-improvement, the nation “empowers” its citizens to take control over their lives. Neoliberal ideals are mirrored in the fact that for some women, obtaining the stereotypical BBL body type is a means of improving their social and financial status. All the vloggers in my study have a presence online, and simply posting about their experiences before and after surgery may lead to financial opportunities. More views, likes and subscribers increase a YouTuber’s ability to be compensated for posting videos and being sponsored by various brands. Additionally, following surgery women may be given opportunities that rely on having this particular body type that they were excluded from previously, such as modeling and partnerships with clothing lines.

Associating personal appearance with self-worth can be generally problematic, but especially for an individual’s mental health. However, it may be difficult to distinguish between

the two when a change in appearance can directly be tied to an increase in financial and social success. We live in a society which deems people “more valuable” than others based upon their race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and physical abilities, despite knowing that differences in any of these categories truly don’t dictate an individual's worth as a person.

Some of the women directly address the idea that undergoing surgery indicates a lack of self-love. There has recently been an uptick in pop culture and mainstream media conversations on self-love and self-care that corresponds with the recent emphasis placed on prioritizing one’s mental health. Many social media influencers are demonstrating self-care as elaborate skin care routines, bubble baths and shopping sprees at Target. In a lot of ways, the self-care wave has been commodified to great lengths, pushing inherently capitalist ideals to “treat yourself” which ultimately encourages people to spend money on themselves as a means of self-love and self-care. BBL surgery – or any cosmetic surgery – is no exception, surgery is another “thing” that you can buy in order to feel good about yourself. While there isn’t anything wrong with treating yourself and running a bubble bath to relax, the issue is that the media tends to only highlight the superficial aspects of self-care/love while neglecting other aspects that require individuals to work on themselves in ways that may be uncomfortable such as in-depth self-reflection, educating oneself and therapy.

Dr. Cortnie Baity for *Psychology Today* defines self-love/care as “intentionally and actively offer[ing] kindness, support, enhancement, thoughtfulness, patience, restoration, grace, appreciation, and respect toward yourself. 2. To intentionally devote attention and efforts to enhancing and protecting your personal wellbeing” (Baity, 2022). She continues with the article to highlight key components in self-love/care including making good decisions, establishing clear boundaries, and being kind to yourself. For women undergoing BBL surgery, I can see this

definition both supporting and contradicting claims that undergoing surgery is motivated as a means of self-care/love. Undergoing BBL surgery can be easily interpreted as offering enhancement and restoration towards oneself considering the goal is to improve on an imperfection or insecurity. However, if we understand self-love/care as protecting your personal wellbeing it complicates the interpretation of BBL surgery being a form of self-care/love. Wellbeing is defined as “not just the absence of disease or illness. It’s a complex combination of a person’s physical, mental, emotional, and social health factors” (“Department of Health”, 2006).

Considering the immense pain and discomfort that each vlogger endured following surgery, I would argue that putting oneself through that unnecessarily wouldn’t indicate self-love/care. However, as mentioned previously, self-care often entails doing work that may feel uncomfortable or not enjoyable such as improving one’s diet and exercise, and unpacking trauma in therapy. An obvious difference between surgery and uncomfortable forms of self-care such as exercise could be that there is a significantly higher risk of health complications and death where surgery is concerned. I wholeheartedly agree with vloggers Danielle and Rachelle who assert that it is possible to love oneself and still want to improve things about yourself. I also believe it possible to love yourself overall, but not love every single aspect. However, due to the drastic and potentially life-threatening nature of BBL surgery, I struggle to truly conceptualize how most vloggers interpret BBL surgery as self-love.

#### **4.2 Postop Regret Discourse Versus Postop Satisfaction Counterdiscourse**

Another discourse that remains consistent throughout the vlogs is the *postop regret* discourse versus the *postop satisfaction* counterdiscourse. The *postop regret* discourse is

developed by narratives of dissatisfaction with results and the significant physical pain and discomfort that content creators endured following surgery. While each woman had a different experience and varying levels of pain and discomfort at varying points following surgery, many women expressed feelings of significant pressure, swelling, feeling like dead weight, skin sensitivity, burning sensations, feeling cold, feeling stiff, feeling tightness, and remarkable soreness in the areas of the abdomen, back, arms and/or buttocks following surgery. Many of these symptoms were expected by the creators and are commonly experienced following surgery, however there was a significant emphasis on just how painful it was immediately following surgery which decreased at varying rates for each woman as days went by. The *postop satisfaction* counterdiscourse is contrastingly developed by women communicating their satisfaction with their results and stating that they would not have changed their experiences despite any pain endured.

Lilly: 10 out of 10— recommend! No, no, no, no, I don't recommend! This sh\*t — this sh\*t f\*cking hurt. Like, oh, my f\*cking gosh, this sh\*t hurt. Do not do this sh\*t! Do not do this sh\*t. Y'all, I've been crying. This shit fucking hurt. I'm cold as fuck...I'm so cold. I'm so cold. My stomach hurt the worst. My a\*s hurt too. My stomach hurt—... This sh- cold. Oh, it's cold as — the cold makes it worse. Alright, I got to, bye (begins crying).

Sarah: So swollen — my whole face is swollen... um, girl, suffering, suffering, suffering, suffering. My mom's been here taking good care of me. I'm so uncomfortable. I'm about to go lay back down and probably take a nap before my massage therapist comes. These massages are brutal.

Alexis: I'm very much snatched. I'm real swollen right now, though [turns to show camera her body]... Yas, I'm up and moving around. I feel good. It's just this part right here [gestures to her right side], he lipo'd me real good or something right here because it's real tender and sensitive like when I moved and stuff. It's the only thing that really hurts, my butt just feels super tight, um... Um like my abdomen area it feels pretty tight, it's just sore. I feel alright. I have a full appetite!... My pain from a one to a ten, is, I would say, it's a seven only because – I don't know what the f\*ck – but he lipo'd the f\*ck out of my back and that sh\*t hurt. That's the only thing that hurt and my butt just felt real, real, real, real tight. I'm still swole, I'm very swollen, um.

These vloggers and several others express their physical pain immediately following surgery and well into being weeks postop. Lilly indicates with very colorful language that the pain immediately following surgery brought her to tears. Sarah also mentions the required lymphatic massages which she describes as “brutal”. The lymphatic massages were a major source of discomfort for all the creators who mentioned them in their videos. Skye Elexus comparatively seemed to experience less pain and was happy to report having a robust appetite however, she rates her pain as a 7 which to some is still relatively high. While everyone’s pain tolerance differs, each creator describes an intense level of pain and discomfort, especially in the first days after surgery. Statements indicating their immense pain and describing their individual complications collectively contribute the development of *postop regret* discourse and prompt the question why anyone would willingly and unnecessarily undergo BBL surgery. However, the vloggers simultaneously complicate *postop regret* discourse by later, often in update-style vlogs, disclosing that the initial recovery process was indeed bearable in retrospect and that they would

do it all again to achieve their results – thus, contributing to the *postop satisfaction* counterdiscourse.

Rachelle: It's so crazy because my mom had came to see me, and I f\*cking passed out. Like, I literally passed out in the middle of my kitchen, and I blanked out, and I didn't even know what was going on. Like, I don't remember nothing... And that was scary, because I'm not going to lie, like, having my family yelling my name over me and being in and out of consciousness... I literally thought like, "oh no, I hope I'm not dyin'"... It's very traumatizin', for me, I got over it... I don't regret getting the surgery because I passed out but, you know, I can definitely see, you know, people, feeling like what did I get myself into, like "I regret doing this sh\*t!".

\*Later after mentioning how nice the people at her surgery center were\* ...I don't regret a thing! Um, I loved every minute of it. It's definitely painful – I'm still in pain, but the pain has got so much better.

Nicole: I'm just - I'm just, really, really, really happy. Like, I feel more confident you know with my body and stuff like that, being a mom of two kids and having two c-sections, and all of this stuff going on with myself. Like I'm really, you know, I'm happy.

In a one-week postop video of her first round of liposuction, vlogger Rachelle gives a detailed account of the complications she experienced following one day postop, including having a traumatic fainting episode. While she mentioned consulting her doctor and confirming that fainting can be a normal side effect, she expressed how the situation was traumatizing for her. Following her second round of liposuction, Rachelle addressed rumors that she was becoming addicted to surgery, stating that she, in fact, did not want to undergo another round of liposuction however, she needed to because she wasn't given the proper lymphatic massages during her recovery which resulted in scar tissue build up. She also goes into depth about how uncomfortable recovery still was several weeks following her surgery. Despite going into detail about the negative complications and challenges of her BBL surgery and recovery experience, she states that she doesn't regret going through with it and she is ultimately happy with her overall experience and results.

Nicole is a now double platinum R&B singer who began her career as a YouTube vlogger and American Idol contestant. In her videos she gives examples of women expressing their postop satisfaction despite enduring postop pain and discomfort. Nicole did not vlog during the first few days after surgery, however she does reveal how uncomfortable she was initially in a one-week postop video. Her narrative also contributes to the *doing it for me* discourse as she indirectly mentions motherhood as a motivation for BBL surgery – implying that giving birth resulted in undesirable changes in her body that she aimed to correct through surgery. As a rising star, already somewhat in the public eye, sharing her candid and vulnerable surgery experiences with her viewers and fans in this way wasn't common. Nicole's narrative and contribution to the BBL surgery conversation as a person of status adds another layer to the topic of possible outside influences impacting Black women's motivations for undergoing surgery.

Countless celebrities have admitted to or have been accused of undergoing butt enhancement surgery, for example: Nicki Minaj, Cardi B., Black Chyna, Kim and Khloe Kardashian, Kendall and Kylie Jenner, K. Michelle, Summer Walker, SZA, Tiny Harris, Nene Leakes, Iggy Azalea, Shenseea, Saweetie, Queen Naija, Azealia Banks, Lala Anthony, Madonna... and the list goes on. However, a few celebrities listed such as Kim and Khloe Kardashian, K. Michelle, and Black Chyna have recently received praise for opening up about having their BBLs (or injections/implants removed). Upon facing near death health complications because of her silicone butt injections spreading to other parts of her body, singer and TV personality, K. Michelle underwent 13 total surgeries over the course of one year to eventually remove all the silicone. She later released a Lifetime reality television series titled *My Killer Body with K. Michelle* in which she candidly discusses her experiences with plastic surgery and helps other people reverse their unwanted plastic surgeries. The purpose of her TV



series was to inform others about the possible effects of plastic surgery and prevent others from having to go through what she went through (Uwumarogie, 2022).

While K. Michelle received a much more dangerous surgery involving injecting a foreign substance into her body, and BBL fat transfer surgeries are comparatively safer, any type of butt enhancement or cosmetic surgery comes with significant health risks. Women in the public eye like K. Michelle and Black Chyna opening up about their negative experiences with plastic surgery, essentially warning other women, was significant to the development of this study and my overall research question. It appeared that many women were experiencing such adverse effects following surgery, so why would Black women continue going through with BBL surgery despite this information? Through my examination of Black women's recent YouTube videos, it appears that even despite initial pain or suffering, overall, the women in my data set are satisfied with their BBL surgery results.

It's understandable that emotions and thoughts about recovery and results would ebb and flow for each woman, however, the overwhelming majority of vloggers feel that the pain they endured during their recovery process was worth their results, even if they mentioned regretting it initially. When considering the main research question regarding Black women's motivations for undergoing BBL surgery, as Black women interested in the procedure search for information about other women's experiences, they may come across similar videos and conclude that for other women, the satisfaction of the results of surgery usually outweighs any pain or regret experienced. The *Postop satisfaction* counterdiscourse contributes to the increased normalization of BBL surgery and helps further explain Black women's increasing motivations for electing surgery. Considering that most women are satisfied with their results and recovery and considering that many women undergo multiple rounds of surgery, it wouldn't be unreasonable

to gather that BBL surgery isn't too painful, and indeed worth the risks. Several of the women in my data set mention watching other women's BBL videos and commenting on how significant the pain was or wasn't in comparison to what other women appeared to experience in their vlogs. Vloggers discussing watching other vlogger's videos ultimately describes how Black women are simultaneously being influenced/motivated and also acting as the influencers/motivators in other women's BBL surgery decision-making processes.

### 4.3 Mental Obstacle Discourse Versus Psychological Resilience Counterdiscourse

One of the interests in this study inquires into how BBL surgery impacts Black women's mental health. Throughout my research, discourse and an opposing counterdiscourse emerged regarding how Black women expressed their overall mental health and wellness throughout their individual journeys. Several vloggers spoke openly about experiencing a significant decline in their overall mood and mental state leading up to surgery and during various stages of recovery. Narratives highlighting various mental and emotional struggles along their BBL surgery journeys emerged to develop *mental obstacle* discourse. Despite consistently emphasizing the mental and emotional stress caused by various elements of their surgery journeys, several creators simultaneously demonstrated psychological resilience by making consistent efforts to approach their trying situation from a positive perspective – thus collectively forming *psychological resilience* counterdiscourse.

Mental health broadly “encompasses social, psychological, and emotional strength and wellbeing” (Beck, 2020). General indications of being mentally healthy include “relating to others, handling stress in healthy ways, and making good choices” (Beck, 2020). This definition of being mental health is straight forward, however it lacks nuance and does not describe how

being mentally healthy can look different for different people. Prioritizing mental health within the Black community remains a stigmatized. Throughout my analysis, I found it difficult to truly assess individual or collective mental health states of the vloggers in my data set considering I lack a formal education in the field however, what I mostly aim to convey with this chapter is how Black women are expressing their mental state throughout their journeys from a Black feminist perspective.

The women in my sample collectively reported experiencing varying levels of anxiety and fear going into surgery. Even though BBL surgery has become more common, the risk of complications and death and the possibility of not being satisfied with the results are still cause for concern. The creators also collectively discussed the fact that following surgery, due to increased swelling and fluid retention, the body will not look exactly how it should once completely healed. This is repeatedly acknowledged by vloggers as a contributing factor to initial feelings of low self-esteem, disappointment, and dissatisfaction. Additionally, experiencing significant levels of constant physical pain for extended periods of time is specifically mentioned as a contributing factor as well. Several vloggers reported feeling down, depressed, or generally struggling mentally following surgery due to the pain they were experiencing and being dependent on others for simple tasks because of the pain. Many women traveled far from their home for surgery, thus being in a strange, less familiar place also contributed to their initial feelings of sadness and overwhelm.

Danielle: My nerves are bad. Like, literally I went to sleep around midnight – maybe 1 a.m – and then I woke up at 3 a.m, because I had to go to the bathroom and I have not went to sleep since... My nerves, um fear. Um, what am I fearing? The pain afterwards, something going wrong... but we're not going to speak that into existence.

Amy: My anxiety level is right here (points to top of head)... so, sky high. I'm very much nervous. I'm very much anxious, and I'm just trying to calm myself down. And just know everything will look good, but you can't help but still feel very much anxious.

Taylor: So, your mental health, right? Like, especially if you've ever had, like eating disorders – which I have – stuff like that, you need to really like, be... I wouldn't say “be extra careful,” but just be very observant about, like, where you're at. Maybe have somebody you trust kind of observe you to make sure that you know you're okay basically. Um, just because, the way this surgery can mess with you, is like, it's messed up. Yeah, it can mess with your head especially in the healing process because you don't look how you're gonna look. Um even now, at three months. I'm probably gonna look extremely different in six months because there's still some swelling. So, I just say, make sure you're prepared. Like, make sure you're prepared. Especially, if you're like me – you have body dysmorphia – make sure you're prepared because your brain will try to play all sorts of [ \_\_ ] tricks on you.

Leading up to surgery, Danielle describes feelings of nervousness and anxiety which prevent her from sleeping well the night before her surgery. Amy also expresses feeling a very high level of anxiety before going into surgery. While occasional anxiety is a normal part of life and living, for some people with anxiety disorders, the symptoms can be crippling and interfere with daily activities.

While each woman discusses their anxiety, pain, and other challenges during recovery, I found it interesting the ways that they complicate the discourse of surgery recovery being a significant mental obstacle. Often, vloggers would counter their negative experiences or thoughts with a positive, for example, after expressing how nervous she because of the possibility of pain, she intentionally shifts her mindset and makes a conscious effort to stop her negative thinking. Both Amy and Taylor mirror similar behavior by consciously replacing negative possibilities with a more positive outlook.

Sarah: Ughh, you don't know how much I've been suffering every day like this selfcare stuff, don't – it's not underrated. Like, it's not underrated at all. Like, I'm already feeling like a person that matters. This surgery recovery process has brought me down to a low I cannot even describe. So, these little things I'm doing, to like, take care of myself, they remind me that I'm a queen, and I'm a child of God, and I matter. I'm confident. I'm capable. I can take on the world. I am worthy of everything – everything good – and that's how you're supposed to start your day. I could have woke up and been complaining about my pain and being ugly and dry and ashy, but instead my skin is glistening, my throat will soon stop doing this, and you know, I'm taking care of myself. I'm anti-aging [and] I'm preventing acne.

Other vloggers also mention their mental health in other ways. Glam with Trika posted a video in which she discusses the struggles of getting cosmetic surgery in your twenties. While she says that she fortunately doesn't struggle with body dysmorphic disorder, she does mention the disorder in an effort to bring awareness to it. She offers suggestions like speaking to a therapist or removing yourself from social media to minimize comparisons with other people.

Similarly, vlogger Rachelle gives an account where she discusses the importance of doing sufficient research prior to surgery to mitigate the possibility of postop depression.

Chanel Richie: It's happy healing over here. Um, pretty much I've been in a pretty good mood every day. I really haven't cried. I haven't felt down. I haven't went through postop depression which a lot of people do go through... I think that people go through postop depression ... because they're not educated enough on the healing, you know? Because, to be honest, if I hadn't done my research I'm not going to lie, maybe the first night I did look at myself in the faja, I probably would have cried, like what the hell? I am swollen as f\*ck. What is this? Like, that's not what he showed me in the picture. But, I've done my research. I understand the body. I understand the anatomy, and I understand that these results are not gonna happen overnight. Like, life is just not that easy.

#### 4.4 Support System Discourse

When analyzing why Black women are getting surgery and how their mental health is impacted it's important to consider what types of support systems each woman had to help them through their surgery and recovery. This discourse presented as an extension of the previously mentioned *psychological resilience* discourse. Several YouTubers had family, friends, significant others, or hired help during the weeks following their surgery. Apart from one creator who booked a hotel room and hired professional help, the majority of women had family, friends and/or their significant other present to take care of their needs during recovery.

Karen: The way I'm laying, my arms are really weak. They like, kind of lose circulation. My hands are kind of fat, um my mom's been massaging my arms and stuff which is helpful she's been super sweet.

Sarah: So swollen– my whole face is swollen. Um, girl, suffering, suffering, suffering, suffering... My mom's been here taking good care of me. I'm so uncomfortable. I'm about to go lay back down probably take a nap...

Lilly: Hey y'all, so, I'm going to get ready and eat my breakfast. What you making, Bae? A little brown maple sugar oatmeal. Mhm, couple of strawberries, couple grapes. Thank you, it looks delicious. Let me see, put it right here. Looks delicious, thank you, thank you, thank you. So yeah, y'all this my breakfast for this morning. He fixed this for me yesterday too and I wanted to eat it again today 'cuz it was literally so good. So, so, good.

Amy: (While sitting in the waiting room before surgery) ... Everyone is there with the same intention to, you know, become the best version of themselves. Everybody is coming to be snatched, so, I always, I – I prefer to be in a room with people.

Sarah, and Karen both mention being taken care of by their mothers while Lilly mentions her significant other making her breakfast. Karen and Sarah also mention feeling some level of discomfort that has been mitigated by the presence of their support systems. Viewers can also sense the deep gratitude that each woman feels towards their loved one who is taking time from their own lives to support them during their surgery recovery.

While it may not have been directly implied as a motivation for surgery, it can indirectly be inferred that part of their decision to go through with surgery lies in their knowledge that there would be someone there helping them during their recovery. I didn't observe any vlogger who didn't have some kind of support postop. Considering the mental toll that it can be to need someone to handle everyday tasks that we often take for granted, I have to imagine how much more of a toll it would be *not* having someone there to handle tasks in one's time of need. And although it isn't always directly implied, the assumption could be made that these supportive loved ones are also supportive of each vlogger's decision to undergo surgery also. Regardless of how they may feel about it, if they agree or disagree, etc., they choose to show up out of love and care for their daughter/girlfriend/friend's physical and mental needs. When researching the correlation between support systems, mental health, and plastic surgery, I

found that many surgeons may refuse to perform surgery on patients who have no support system. The physical and emotional toll of surgery on someone can be traumatic, especially if there are complications.



## 5 CONCLUSION

Cosmetic surgery trends are constantly changing to coincide with the pop culture trends and current beauty standards. Women continue to endure tremendous amounts of pain and spend thousands of dollars to have the fat in their abdomen, back, and arms removed and surgically transferred into their hips and buttocks to achieve the coveted body shape. However, BBL surgery and the body type associated with the desired results have led to conversations specifically regarding the dangers of plastic surgery, its racial implications, and its impact on beauty standards for Black women. I personally observed and took interest in the trend as it took on a life and culture of its own and cause several women significant regret and dissatisfaction. As a young Black feminist with an interest in bodily aesthetic, I was drawn to this topic to gain insight into the intersections of feminism and Black women's motivations for choosing to undergo BBL surgery.

Through a Black feminist theoretical framework, this study revealed six discourses grouped together as pairs of dominant and counterdiscursive themes: *doing it for me* discourse and *self-preservation* counterdiscourse, *postop regret* discourse and *postop satisfaction* counterdiscourse, and *mental obstacle* discourse and *psychological resilience* counterdiscourse. The vloggers complicated dominant discourses by revealing their inherent contradictions and allowing for alternate discursive understandings. The *doing it for me* discourse emerged from repetitive statements made indicating that Black women's main motivation for surgery was simply them considering themselves deserving of looking their best. The *doing it for me* discourse was complicated by the contradicting *self-preservation* counterdiscourse which exposed how Black women internalized possible outside criticism for their decisions. The *postop regret* discourse is characterized by a pattern of meaning created by the vloggers that

indicates noteworthy regret following surgery. The *postop regret* discourse is further perplexed by the *postop satisfaction* discourse which reveals that vloggers contradict their feelings of regret with later feeling overwhelming satisfaction. Finally, the *mental obstacle* discourse emerged through patterns of dialog which indicated the extensive mental stress vloggers endured and was contravened by the psychological resilience counterdiscourse which encompasses the positive efforts made to maintain their mental health. Each of these discourses and their respective counterdiscourses contribute valuable insight into an understudied aspect of Black womanhood.

While feminist debates on plastic surgery vary, perspectives are largely polarized, arguing that plastic surgery is either a tool of white supremacist patriarchy or a source of empowerment and demonstrates bodily autonomy. Black women are indeed exercising their bodily autonomy in choosing to undergo any type of surgery; however, it isn't clear that Black women vloggers truly understand how their motivations encourage and uphold patriarchal beauty standards. It is evident that it can both be true that women may be influenced by society's beauty standards and also exercise their bodily autonomy. One component of my findings that I struggled to conceptualize the most, would be a discourse being created which aligns BBL surgery with self-love and self-care. However, I observed that this discourse seemed to permeate throughout several of Black women's narratives and their individual understanding of their own motivations. While I don't believe that plastic surgery, BBL surgery specifically is inherently anti-feminist, it's not completely clear to me under what conditions or circumstances plastic surgery may be deemed feminist or antifeminist altogether.

This study aimed to bridge gaps in academic research by focusing on subject matter relevant to Black women specifically. Black women's bodies have been sites subjected to hostile objectification, sexualization and constant policing. Curves on a Black woman's body have been

stereotyped and judged as indicators of sexual deviance often to be discarded, deemed invisible or only valued for their ability to reproduce. Black women's participation in plastic surgery and cosmetic augmentation has been understudied despite the significant increase in Black women choosing cosmetic. Beauty standards of Black women have differed than that of white women, especially within the Black community where having a thicker body type is more appreciated. An accumulation of historical degradation, and a shift towards a homogenized idea of Black femininity has brought us to a point in time where Black women are going to arguably extreme lengths to achieve what is understood in popular culture as the BBL body type.

Additionally, the influence of social media cannot be overlooked in its role in shaping perceptions of beauty and influencing the decision-making process of younger Black women. Platforms such as Instagram, and TikTok often perpetuate narrow standards of beauty that prioritize certain features and an exaggerated idealization of the female form, including the “coke-bottle” silhouette. For younger Black women, these digital spaces can serve as both a source of inspiration and pressure, as they are inundated with images and narratives that glorify certain body types while marginalizing others. The relentless exposure to curated and often unrealistic representations of beauty can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and fuel a desire for surgical interventions to conform to these ideals.

Addressing the mental health implications of Brazilian butt lift surgery among Black women must involve a critical examination of the role played by social media in shaping body image perceptions and influencing self-esteem. Empowering individuals with the tools to critically analyze and resist these external pressures is crucial in promoting mental well-being and fostering a culture of body positivity and self-acceptance. This study underlines the need for a multi-faceted approach that acknowledges the intersectionality of factors influencing Black

women's decisions regarding cosmetic surgery, including socio-cultural norms, mental health disparities, and the pervasive influence of social media. By addressing these complex dynamics, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive environment where all individuals feel valued and empowered to embrace their bodies authentically.

Conclusively, this research has highlighted the need for a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural factors that contribute to varying impact of beauty standards on Black women. By interrogating the intersecting influences of race, gender, and body image, valuable insights into the unique perspectives of Black women at varying stages of their BBL journeys. As a Black woman and aspiring mental health professional the rate at which BBL surgery continues to increase amongst groups of younger Black women is incredibly concerning. It is imperative that healthcare professionals, and society at large recognize and address the mental health implications of cosmetic procedures, particularly within marginalized communities.

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