

## **Black Women, BBLs, and Body Image: An Inquiry into the Role Social Media Plays in Promoting the Thick Ideal**

Lauryn Grubbs, Parsons School of Design, USA, and Casey R Stannard, Louisiana State University, USA

Keywords: Black Women, Brazilian Butt Lift, Thick Ideal, TikTok, Stereotypes, Body Image

Cosmetic surgery focuses on enhancing the appearance, aesthetic appeal, symmetry, and proportion of patients' bodies (American Board of Cosmetic Surgery, n.d.a, para. 1). Cosmetic surgery and plastic surgery are terms that are often used interchangeably; however, cosmetic surgery differs in its purpose. Cosmetic surgery is performed on properly functioning body parts, while surgeons perform plastic surgery to reconstruct defects of the face and body (American Board of Cosmetic Surgery, n.d.).

One cosmetic surgery that has become popular in recent years is the Brazilian Butt lift (BBL). BBL is defined by the American Board of Cosmetic Surgery (n.d.b) as "a specialized fat transfer procedure that augments the size and shape of the buttocks without implants" (para. 2). During a BBL surgery, surgeons extract fat via liposuction from the hips, abdomen, back, or thighs, and inject the fat into the buttocks (American Board of Cosmetic Surgery, n.d.b). This surgery is dangerous as the buttocks contain multiple blood vessels which lead directly to the heart (Ellin, 2021). Furthermore, if a surgeon mistakenly injects fat into the gluteal muscle, fat can travel directly to the heart and lungs causing instant death (Ellin, 2021). Due to this, the BBL surgery has a very high mortality rate of 1:3000 (American Society of Plastic Surgery, 2018).

While all ethnic and racial groups elect to get cosmetic surgery, BBL can pose a particular threat to Black women. Unlike the Eurocentric beauty standard (i.e. to be thin), Black women strive for an in-between weight, otherwise known as the thick ideal (Hughes, 2021). The thick ideal is characterized by having a voluptuous hourglass shape featuring thick thighs, a full butt, and bust, yet a tiny waist (Cheney, 2011). While the cultural celebration of thickness can be seen as a form of resistance against White beauty standards, it expects all Black women to embody thickness. This body ideal can cause women with excess or too little curves to feel a sense of inferiority or a lack of racial acceptance (Hughes, 2021). In addition, many prominent Black celebrities and influencers have either had, encouraged, or drawn attention to BBLs through various mass media channels, including social media. Thus, this research aimed to understand the trend towards BBLs and body concerns among Black women and examine if social media plays a role in sharing information and opinions regarding the procedure within the Black community.

### **Methods and Procedures**

To explore the purpose, the researcher examined videos on TikTok. TikTok, a video-focused social networking platform, was chosen due to its rising popularity, focus on appearance-based content, and its emphasis on collaboration and conversation. The researcher analyzed posts and comments made on TikTok under the hashtags #bbl and #blackwomen to

discover the conversations that Black women were having with one another about BBLs. TikTok posts eligible for inclusion in the study had to be created by a Black woman and tagged with either #bbl and #blackwomen. Purposive, critical case sampling (Palinkas et. al, 2015) was employed to narrow down the TikToks that related to BBLs and black women.

### Results and Discussion

A total of 18 TikTok posts and comments created by Black women regarding BBLs were analyzed. TikTok was used to share opinions and information about BBLs and cosmetic surgery by using posts and comments to form a discussion space about the procedure. General comments included the planning and pre-operation process, the procedure itself, the cost, which surgeon performed the procedure, and the aftercare and healing process. Users also employed the platform to share their own experiences with getting a BBL, their body image concerns, and more. There was much interpersonal feedback in the comments section. The results fell under two themes: (1) Motivations for a BBL, (2) Resistance against a BBL.

Motivations for having a BBL were often due to body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction resulting from not embodying the thick ideal, from body surveillance, as well as from negative feedback from peers were the strongest motivating factors prompting users to consider or have a BBL. In a post made by @itransia (2021) documenting her processes of getting a BBL at age 19, @itgirllauren (2021) posted, “I wanna do it I’m 17 and I tun 18 in sept. My body so built wrong I’m in ballet, I play basketball, and I’m always busy exercising just not working.” Consistent with this finding, previous researchers found that Black women who did not embody thickness felt pressure to “modify their bodies through cosmetic procedures, including butt and breast implants” (Watson et al., 2019, p. 282). The finding is also consistent with studies in which women engage in a variety of beauty practices such as diet, exercise, makeup, and dress to embody a cultural standard of beauty (Brady, et al., 2017; Cheney, 2011).

Resistance against the BBL mostly came in the form of women’s appreciation of their natural bodies, advising alternative methods to embody the thick ideal, and concern regarding the dangers of the procedure. One user, @realmiyahchanel, flaunted their naturally thick body and made downwards comparisons with those who were looking to or have already had BBLs (Miyah Chanel [fairy emoji], 2021). Posts made by users who embodied the thick ideal often promoted the thick ideal as superior to other body forms. Other resistance came in the form of posts featuring extreme workout plans, other medical procedures, and extreme dieting practices as healthier alternatives to getting a BBL. Users posted comments themed around exercise often criticized users who got a BBL for not taking the time to work on their bodies. These comments represent “fitspiration” which uses images and messaging to inspire people to attain fitness goals (Cohen et al., 2019, p. 47). These messages and images often promote exercise routines or encourage dietary practices to modify the body for appearance related, rather than health related reasons. Interestingly, even when women resisted the BBL surgery, they still adhered to the thick ideal through social comparisons and by suggesting alternative methods of embodiment such as diet and exercise.

### Conclusion

These results are consistent with previous research in which the correlation between general Internet use and body surveillance and body image concerns is positive (Rodgers & Melioi, 2016). Upwards social comparisons often resulted in body dissatisfaction (Rodgers & Melioli, 2016). Finally, this data is consistent with past research studying the impact of the thick ideal on Black women's body image. Some researchers have found that not embodying the thick ideal caused a sense of body dissatisfaction that had to be mediated through body change behaviors and negotiations of body image (Hughes, 2021). Further, studies have found that although women seemed to believe that the thick ideal is obtainable only through cosmetic surgery or photo-editing software, women still attempted to embody the thick ideal through dieting, exercise, and the use of waist trainers or other garments that enhanced the appearance of their hips and butt (McComb & Mills, 2022). Mass media's emphasis on women's appearance and the resulting social rewards that attractiveness brings, only furthers the feverish desire for women to assimilate to dominant cultural standards of beauty (Morison, Kalin, & Morrison, 2004). Limitations to the research can be attributed to the use of secondary data such as posts and comments. Future research could use primary sources, for example interviews of Black women who were considering or had gotten a BBL.

### References

- American Board of Cosmetic Surgery. (n.d.a). Cosmetic surgery vs. plastic surgery. *American Board of Cosmetic Surgery*. <https://www.americanboardcosmeticsurgery.org/patient-resources/cosmetic-surgery-vs-plastic-surgery/>
- American Board of Cosmetic Surgery. (n.d.b). Brazilian Butt Lift. *American Board of Cosmetic Surgery*. <https://www.americanboardcosmeticsurgery.org/procedure-learning-center/body-procedures/brazilian-butt-lift/>
- American Society of Plastic Surgery. (2018, August 6). Plastic surgery societies issue urgent warning about the risks associated with Brazilian Butt Lifts. *American Society of Plastic Surgery*. <https://www.plasticsurgery.org/news/press-releases/plastic-surgery-societies-issue-urgent-warning-about-the-risks-associated-with-brazilian-butt-lifts>
- Brady, J. L., Kaya, A., Iwamoto, D., Park, A., Fox, L., & Moorhead, M. (2017). Asian American women's body image experiences: A qualitative intersectionality study. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 41(4), 479-496.
- Cheney, A. M. (2011). "Most girls want to be skinny": Body (dis)satisfaction among ethnically diverse women. *Qualitative Health Research*, 21(10), 1347-1359.
- Citybarbnae, @itransia. (2021, May 19). This is your sign to get that BBL[weary face emoji][rasing hands emoji] tiktok deleted it [face with rolling eyes emoji] #bbl #bbljourney #beammeupscotty #fyp #plasticsurgery #viral. TikTok. <https://www.tiktok.com/@citybarbnae/video/6964209187870035206>.
- Cohen, R., Irwin, L., Newton-John, T., & Slater, A. (2019). #bodypositivity: A content analysis of body positive accounts on Instagram. *Body Image*, 29, 47-57.

- Ellin, A. (2021, August 19). Brazilian Butt Lifts surge, despite risks. *The New York Times*.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/19/style/brazilian-butt-lift-bbl-how-much-risks.html>
- Hughes, E. (2021). "I'm supposed to be thick": Managing body image anxieties among Black American women. *Journal of Black Studies*, 52, 310-330.
- Itgirllauren [sparkles emoji]. [@itgirllauren]. (n.d.). Chicago [sparkles emoji]. [TikTok profile]. TikTok. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from  
<https://www.tiktok.com/@citybarbnae/video/6964209187870035206>.
- McComb, S. E., & Mills, J. S. (2022). Eating and body image characteristics of those who aspire to the slim- thick, thin, or fit ideal and their impact on state body image. *Body Image*, 42, 375-384.
- Miyah Chanel [fairy emoji], @realmiyahchanel. (2021, August 11). im getting a butt reduction #foryou #bbl. TikTok.  
<https://www.tiktok.com/@realmiyahchanel/video/6995227848973815046>
- Morison, T. G., Kalin, R., & Morrison, M. A. (2004). Body-image evaluation and body-image investment among adolescents: A test of sociocultural and social comparison theories. *Adolescence*, 39(155), 571-584.
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, 42(5), 533–544.
- Rodgers, R. F., & Melioli, T. (2016). The relationship between body image concerns, eating disorders and internet use, Part I: A review of empirical support. *Adolescent Research Review*, 1, 95-119.
- Watson, L. B., Lewis, J. A., & Moody, A. T. (2019). A sociocultural examination of body image among Black women. *Body Image*, 31, 280-287.