

**BODY MODIFICATION AND BODY IMAGE AMONG
ARGENTINES: THE PREVALENCE OF PLASTIC SURGERY
AND EATING DISORDERS IN BUENOS AIRES**

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Chapter One:

INTRODUCTION

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1. www.abierta.tv/upload/florencia_raggi1_pecran.jpg

2. <http://weblogs.clarin.com/retrovisor/archives/mancini1.jpg>

3. <http://fotosmujereshermosas.blogspot.com/2009/09/fotos-de-maria-vasquez.html>

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Florencia Raggi (left), Raquel Mancini (center), and María Vásquez (right) represent three of Argentina's most famous supermodels. Glamorous, thin, and beautiful, both Argentines and the worldwide fashion industry admire and adore these young women. However, these women share more than just a beautiful appearance and legions of young fans. All three have also modified their bodies to fit into an increasingly unrealistic beauty ideal, the ideal that has become known as Argentina's "beauty cult." Both Raggi and Mancini have had breast augmentation surgery (Majul 289-291), and Vásquez has had collagen injected into her lips. Many have also thought that Mancini suffers from anorexia, as her weight has dropped as low as 101 pounds (292). At the age of thirty-two, Mancini also lay in a coma for two days after the doctor's "hand slipped" while giving her anesthesia during a liposuction procedure that was an effort to lose three to four pounds of "excess weight" (Bunin 1). While recent international fashion trends have begun focusing on more natural beauty, Argentine fashion has not. While an American or European model might be criticized for it, Argentine models are flocking to

plastic surgeons in order to get more and better contracts (286). These are just examples of the trends seen across Argentine society, a society where plastic surgery and eating disorders have become the norm, plastic surgery has been referred to as a “national sport” (Pigg 1), and starvation has been deemed a “national pastime” (Leibovich 1). In a country where people obsess over appearances, more and more are turning to drastic measures to achieve the so-called perfect body. This thesis investigates these trends.

Argentine women are believed to be some of the most beautiful people in the world, and strict adherence to Western beauty ideals is key. Ask anyone, Argentine or not, and he or she will likely agree that this is the case in Buenos Aires. However, in this glamorous city, beauty is not a purely genetic phenomenon. To be the best at something, one must be obsessed, and in Argentina, the women are obsessed with their looks (Carlin 1). They work harder on their looks than just about any other group of women on Earth (2), and creating the perfect appearance does not come easily. Whether women are using workouts, super strict diets, hair dye, makeup, cosmetic procedures such as Botox, or cosmetic surgery such as breast augmentation and liposuction to perfect their look, the process seems to be an ongoing one. The bar is set so high that no one can achieve the coveted beauty ideal, and therefore, many women live with a negative body image and poor self-esteem. They work so hard, yet never feel satisfied with how they look. In fact, only five percent of women in Buenos Aires report being comfortable with their bodies (Días 1). Here, it must also be noted that the notion of beauty is socially constructed and that beauty ideals and the concept of the “perfect body” vary from place to place. Further references to beauty in this paper are directed specifically towards beauty as it is defined

in Buenos Aires. By the Argentine definition, beauty means being tall, thin, and white, the stereotypical notions of Western beauty.

Not being able to achieve an unrealistic version of beauty naturally, many women are taking more drastic measures, and this trend is not going unnoticed. Reporters from around the world have commented on plastic surgery and eating disorders in Buenos Aires, always drawing attention to these trends as a cause for concern and questioning the environment in which these trends are developing. Many show concern for the health of the population. The preoccupation with beauty has gone too far, and it is making people sick. The focus also tends to be on the fact that women and girls are those primarily affected. According to one reporter, Argentina has the world's highest rate of aesthetic surgery (Hearn 2). According to another, eating disorders have reached "epidemic" proportions (Davison 1). In the media, both Argentine and worldwide, trends in plastic surgery and eating disorders in Buenos Aires are perceived as major causes for social concern. In the titles of newspaper articles alone, Buenos Aires is referred to as the "Cosmetic capital" (Carlin 1), "the land of living dolls" (Scheltus 1), and "the world capital of eating disorders" (Faiola 1). Popular press articles also present statistics that demonstrate the severity of the situation. For example, estimates say that one in thirty Argentines has undergone cosmetic surgery (Byrnes 1), with breast augmentation, nose surgery, and liposuction being the operations most highly in demand (Bunin 2). With around 50,000 cosmetic procedures performed every year (Elustondo 1), no other country in the world has a higher ratio of operations to population (Harbor 2). While the most recent data is not yet available, the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) statistics from 2004 rank Argentina as third in terms of numbers, with 49,590

procedures having been performed that year. By comparison, the United States was ranked number one with 76,091 operations performed (ISAPS 1). However, in terms of population, the United States is ranked third in the world with 307,212,123 people, and Argentina is ranked thirty-first with a population of 40,913,584 (IDB 1). Even though the U.S. has more than seven times the population of Argentina, the number of procedures performed by Argentine physicians is still nearly two-thirds the number performed by physicians in America. In other words, in the U.S. approximately 25 operations are performed per every 100,000 people. In Argentina, approximately 121 operations are performed per every 100,000 people. ¹

It is also important to point out that body weight factors heavily into the Argentine beauty ideal. While women flock to plastic surgeons in search of bigger breasts or a straighter nose, there is also an overwhelming pressure to be thin. For many Argentines, “thin” is also synonymous with “beautiful.” Due to this overwhelming pressure, many Argentines, especially women and girls, have developed eating disorders. These statistics are also widely covered by the popular press. One report states that after Japan, Argentina has the second-highest rate of eating disorders in the world (Kelly 1). In a study of secondary schools, twenty-nine percent of girls showed disordered eating patterns (Davison 2), and at least ten percent met the full criteria for anorexia or bulimia (Scheltus 1). Eating disorders are also being diagnosed in younger and younger children. Argentine children as young as four-years-old are battling anorexia (Goering 1). With such a heavy emphasis on physical appearances, it is no wonder that weight is becoming an issue for children and adolescents. Some adolescent girls are so desperate to be thin

¹ These are my calculations.

that they have created websites that guide other girls on how to “become” anorexic (Vittar 1). To these impressionable teenagers, being thin and beautiful has become their first priority. They have placed this ultimate goal above everything else, including their health and well being. This speaks volumes about the extreme attitudes towards beauty in Buenos Aires. Beauty is not written off as a frivolous thing. Viewed as a top priority and even as a necessity, many Argentine women and girls are willing to pay any price to achieve it, even if that price is possible injury or even death. Illness, injury, or death as consequences do not seem to warrant much cause for concern.

While eating disorders among Argentines are clearly a problem and are deemed a problem by Argentine society, official statistics outside the popular press are difficult to come by, meaning it is hard to discern whether there is discrepancy between perception and the actual numbers. A database compiled in 2004 ranks Argentina fifteenth in terms of number of deaths caused by eating disorders (NationMaster.com 1). However, mortality is the only indicator used, leaving out the number of people living with eating disorders in the various countries ranked. According to articles officially quoting ALUBA (Asociación de Lucha contra la Bulimia y la Anorexia), the leading expert on eating disorders and the largest eating disorder clinic in Buenos Aires, one in ten Argentines has an eating disorder, translating to four million people in the country (Hoshaw 1), and one in every twenty-five adolescent girls has an eating disorder due to an obsession with thinness (Valente 1).

Research Question

Based on these trends, this thesis investigates what accounts for the high numbers of cosmetic procedures performed and clinical cases of eating disorders diagnosed in Buenos Aires. These two social phenomena are closely related, and I argue that the quest for the perfect body has become a fixation in the city of Buenos Aires. This thesis investigates the reasons why. Some proposed explanations are rather obvious. For example, people often blame the fashion industry for promoting unrealistic ideas of thinness and beauty. On the other hand, some theories are more deeply rooted in psychology. Body modification could be the result of an underlying identity crisis, as Argentina has long been very Eurocentric, and the standards of beauty promoted are those of light skin, thin frame, blonde hair, etc. Argentines favor those traits deemed to be European. In reality, many Argentines do not want to appear indigenous like the populations of their neighboring countries, as their European ancestry is something that has long set them apart from the rest of South America. Some also blame the culture of a *machista* society, as the majority of people affected are women. Could this beauty obsession be keeping women oppressed in a male-dominated society? Still, others believe that both women and men feel pressured to conform as beauty has been deemed by many to be a social necessity for Argentines. Many argue that beauty is the key to social survival and upward mobility in Buenos Aires. I discuss these explanations and analyze the likelihood of their validity. I ultimately conclude that physical appearance, which can be created or perfected through eating disorders and/or plastic surgery, has become key to the identity project of *porteños*, the people of the port city of Buenos Aires. Argentines have adopted beauty as a primary form of identity.

The Structure of this Thesis

The next chapter introduces in more detail the theoretical perspectives in plastic surgery and eating disorders in Buenos Aires. I also begin discussing separately Argentine identity, the fashion industry, social perspectives, and gender issues, concepts that will be discussed in chapters three, four, five, and six. In chapter three, I discuss the beauty obsession in Buenos Aires as it relates to the development of a social identity, concluding that Argentines have adopted beauty as identity in place of a national or ethnic identity. In chapter four, I discuss the fashion industry in Buenos Aires and its effects, particularly the influence that the fashion industry has over Argentine women and girls. With so much emphasis on physical appearance, chapter five discusses how being beautiful is now perceived as a social necessity, as the discrimination toward those who do not fit the mold tends to be harsh and even damaging to one's career or social life. Chapter six discusses gender differences in Buenos Aires and how these differences influence what sort of physical appearance is expected from a person. Chapter seven offers my conclusions on the development of an identity project in Buenos Aires and how the identity, fashion, social, and gender variables fit together.

Methodology

Both Argentines and outsiders have noticed the preoccupation with appearance in Buenos Aires, and I analyze observations that have been made from both points of view. As for Argentine sources, many articles about both plastic surgery and eating disorders have been written in Argentine newspaper *Clarín* and other popular Argentine popular press sources. These newspaper articles, as non-scholarly sources, reflect public opinion

and give numbers and examples of trends currently affecting the public. Along with reporting stories about the noted plastic surgery and eating disorders trends, these articles express general concern about where these trends are taking people. Argentine author Mempo Giardinelli's book *El país de las Maravillas: Los Argentinos en el fin del Milenio* (*The Country of Wonders: Argentines in the End of the Millennium*- my translation) gives great insight into the Argentine obsession with appearance, including a chapter titled "Los argentinos y su autoimagen" ("The Argentines and their Self-image"- my translation) and a chapter section titled "Los argentinos y la frivolidad: Mi nena quiere ser modelo" ("The Argentines and Frivolity: My daughter wants to be a model"- my translation). From an Argentine point of view, he uncovers what, in his opinion, are the reasons behind this preoccupation with beauty. In his book *Las Máscaras de la Argentina* (*The Masks of Argentina*), Luis Majul, a native of Buenos Aires, discusses the cosmetic changes that many famous faces of Argentina have undergone, including former president Carlos Menem, soccer legend Diego Maradona, and all three models pictured at the beginning of this chapter. As plastic surgery has become the norm for many of Argentina's most famous faces, the idea of undergoing plastic surgery as a "normal" part of life has made its way into virtually all sectors of society. Various primary sources can be found online, including websites for plastic surgery clinics and eating disorder treatment centers, with ALUBA being the foremost expert on eating disorders in Buenos Aires. Plastic surgery clinics advertise what procedures they offer and how they can help a person achieve a beautiful appearance, while eating disorder treatment centers offer recovery to those people who have fallen victim to Argentine society's impossible idea of slenderness. Also, websites run primarily by young girls offer "support" and "advice" for

those who want to become anorexic, defending it as a lifestyle rather than a disease. In the opinions of these girls, being thin is the only thing that matters.

Observations by non-Argentines also offer insight. *Eating Disorders and Cultures in Transition*, a book edited by Mervat Nasser, Melanie A. Katzman, and Richard A. Gordon, includes a chapter titled “Argentina: The social body at risk.” As a scholarly work, the authors discuss the possibility of the “social body” being at risk due to history and current societal pressures. Debra Gimlin’s article “Cosmetic Surgery: Beauty as Commodity” published in the journal *Qualitative Sociology* in the year 2000 offers insight into the purpose plastic surgery serves in society. While written about plastic surgery in general, her article is very applicable to plastic surgery as seen in Buenos Aires. In *Culture Shock!: Argentina*, author Fiona Adams shares her perceptions as an outsider. She includes sections titled “Anorexics” and “Plastic Surgeons and Personal Trainers.” Written as more of a guidebook, this book prepares outsiders for what they are likely to encounter upon entering Argentine society. Outside newspapers and popular press have also covered both issues in recent years. CNN.com, *The Gazette* (Montreal, Quebec), *The Toronto Star*, *The Observer* (England), *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), *The Independent* (London), and *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* (Germany) have all reported on the prevalence of plastic surgery and eating disorders in Buenos Aires, pointing to the general trend and the concerns that go along with it.

All of these sources, both Argentine and non-Argentine, have been collected through library research, online database research, and through the use of online search engines. I use the information gathered from some sources to outline historical context or the current trends seen in Buenos Aires. I take the information gathered in other sources

and apply the relevant theories to my hypothesis. All of the direct quotes are from interviews conducted and published by other reporters. I have not conducted any interviews myself.

Chapter Two:

INTRODUCING PLASTIC SURGERY AND EATING DISORDERS

Plastic surgery and eating disorders are related in that they are both an answer for those seeking to drastically alter their bodies. They are also both related in that they represent extremes. Plastic surgery takes altering the body's shape and proportions to extremes in that it involves an invasive procedure. In a sense, it is also unnatural. People use plastic surgery to achieve an aesthetic that they would not be able to achieve through cardio training, weight training, or dieting. Eating disorders represent the extreme version of dieting. However an eating disorder is not developed through choice. A strict diet coupled with an intense desire to be thin often leads to the development of an eating disorder that is then, by that point, out of the dieter's control. However, even though an eating disorder is a diet gone out of control, many observers still view the eating disordered person as the epitome of control, as the eating disordered individual is often living on less than is needed for survival. In this way, many observers view the eating disordered individual as the ultimate dieter and someone to strive to emulate. As nipping, tucking, and starving are all associated with beauty, the extremes of plastic surgery and eating disorders point to how extreme the obsession with beauty is in Buenos Aires. The desire for beauty is so extreme that an individual will go to any length to achieve it.

Plastic Surgery

For many who analyze it, cosmetic surgery stands for “the ultimate symbol of invasion of the human body for the sake of physical beauty” (Gimlin 78). Due to its

extreme connotation, cosmetic surgery is often viewed as “qualitatively different” from other forms of body modification (78). In other words, the fact that plastic surgery patients are willing to risk their lives for the sake of physical attractiveness takes the practice to a higher level than dieting, exercising, and other efforts at altering the body, especially because the results could not have been achieved naturally and because patients do not enter the operating room without knowing the risks. However, in Buenos Aires, the risks are outweighed by the apparent benefit, which would be leaving the operating room with any conceived flaws having been perfected. The results are easy and quick, and the idealization of the quick fix overshadows any concerns about undesirable consequences. Undesired effects of plastic surgery range from bruising and discoloration to nerve damage, fat embolisms, blood clots, and even death. The chances of developing a complication due to breast augmentation surgery is between thirty and fifty percent (79). However, even with these known risks, people still choose to enter the operating room for reasons associated with identity, societal pressures, and gender issues. Does altering one’s appearance have the ability to shape that person’s identity? Can beauty open doors to money, love, and social success? How much do appearances play into gender roles for women in Buenos Aires?

As a contemporary definition, the body has “come to stand as a primary symbol of identity” (Gimlin 80). Bodies have now become the outer representation of the inner self, and the use of plastic surgery takes this idea one step further. Using plastic surgery, beauty can be consumed as a commodity, given that “alteration and modification is understood to be unlimited”(80). In essence, our identity is no longer limited to what we are born with or what we can attain through non-surgical measures if the body is used to

represent identity. Virginia L. Blum, author of *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery*, asserts that our identities are a combination of what our bodies “have been, should have been, were not, could be, are not” (43); “the body is nothing until it’s jolted into being by the image of something it could become” (54). Using plastic surgery, just about any physical identity can be created under the knife. In this way, plastic surgery becomes a way to “align body with self” (Gimlin 89). Patients can create a physical appearance that they feel matches their identity or inner self. Using the body as the self, identity can be physically created, suggesting that appearance is the most important factor in projected identity. Appearances, or what we are able to see, are, in reality, what matter the most (Giardinelli 58). In Buenos Aires, the correlation between physical appearance and identity is very convenient. With beauty as such an important part of identity, Argentines can reshape their bodies and can, therefore, also reshape their identities. Plastic surgery can be used to fit into the Argentine standard of beauty.

In conjunction with identity, many people choose to change their bodies, hence often altering their identities, under the weight of societal pressures, as culture and society most strongly influence beauty ideals. Not surprisingly, many plastic surgery patients go under the knife “in order to meet current ideals of attractiveness” (Gimlin 78). “Current” being the key word, many patients are achieving a standard of beauty that has been shaped over time. Today’s trends have not arrived out of nowhere. A powerful shaper of beauty ideals is the fashion industry.

By the eighteenth century, in the fashion capitals of Europe and America, it was customary and “easy enough” to shape one’s identity using fashion and cosmetics (Blum 126). However, fashion admirers came to not only desire to emulate the clothing and

cosmetics, but to desire to emulate the bodies modeling the clothing as well; “increasingly, the buyer’s pleasure would be to imagine herself looking like the model when she donned the dress” (250). With the current obsession with fashion in Buenos Aires, Argentine fashion admirers have also experienced this effect. Many not only wish to wear the fashions, they also want to look like the models who sport them on the runway. Moreover, Argentine fashions are highly influenced by European fashions, meaning that, maybe more importantly, Argentine women wish to look like European fashion models. As I will discuss more thoroughly in the next chapter, Argentines wish to differentiate themselves from their South American neighbors by emphasizing a European ancestry. However, Argentine models and fashion designers also seek to differentiate themselves on some level. They wish to take their place among the European and North American fashion industries that are so dominant and representative of Western fashion; these models and designers do not strive to simply be copycats. It could be that Argentine models go overboard in an attempt to compete and be accepted at an international level. However, it is already hard enough to compete with a European fashion model. Achieving the look of a European fashion model has become more and more difficult, as models continue to become increasingly thin and perfectly sculpted. In efforts to compete, Argentine models may feel they need to be even thinner and more perfectly sculpted than their European counterparts. Faced with this nearly impossible task, those attempting to achieve this goal may do so during trips to the plastic surgeon’s office. In turn, desperate fashion admirers may also seek plastic surgery, feeling they have no other option in achieving the look of the models they wish to emulate.

In attempts to emulate certain standards of beauty, plastic surgery also plays a role in the context of ethnicity, as patients tend to operate within the confines of the “Anglo-Saxon ideals of beauty” (Gimlin 81). Massive European immigration to Buenos Aires during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has greatly impacted the ethnic makeup of today’s *porteño* population, a population that is 88.9 percent white (NationMaster.com 1). As the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ class has historically been the privileged class in Buenos Aires, the physical features, especially facial features, associated with this class have set the standards for beauty. Being that there is no other way to alter facial features, cosmetic surgery has often been used to “erase” signs of ethnicity from a patient’s face, offering what is perceived as “upward mobility through bodily transformation” (Blum 196). In other words, the desire to avoid discrimination inspires many cosmetic surgeries (Haiken 194); upward mobility is offered through a more “mainstream” appearance, “mainstream” seemingly defined by the general public in Buenos Aires as white. Those residents of Buenos Aires who have ethnic features may seek to erase them using plastic surgery in order to appear more white. For example, many Argentines do not want the short, flat nose that is associated with the indigenous populations of South America. Plastic surgery to change this trait may offer upward mobility through creating a more white appearance. In essence, the population of Buenos Aires does not want to look indigenous. They wish to differentiate themselves from their neighboring populations who are viewed as “backwards” and “less privileged.” I will also further discuss this idea in the next chapter.

Along with ethnicity, plastic surgery also operates within the context of gender. Within this context, the case for women is often highlighted due to the fact that women

make up the majority of plastic surgery patients in Buenos Aires. Many women who undergo a cosmetic procedure do so “to enhance distinctively female attributes” (Gimlin 80). This is most notable in the case of breast augmentation. Perhaps subconsciously, these women are participating in a culture where appearance is still a measure of a woman’s worth and is taken as an expression of the inner state (81). A woman with enhanced female characteristics is somehow better expressing her gendered identity.

Eating Disorders

In the search for perfection and power, “the eating disordered woman turns to food for solace and relies on her appearance for approval” (Nasser et al. 148). In Buenos Aires, the beautiful woman embodies perfection and power. Similar to the discussion of plastic surgery, the causes for the development of eating disorders, specifically anorexia and bulimia, center around appearance, linking the two together in a very important way. The cause behind the development of an eating disorder and the decision to undergo a cosmetic procedure are often fueled by the same desire to alter one’s appearance, and both plastic surgery and eating disorders are extreme body-altering measures. In the cases of anorexia and bulimia, the desire is to be thin. For many Argentines, thin has become a synonymous with beautiful, and thinness has become the physical trait most desired (Giardinelli 57).

Anorexia and bulimia almost always begin as a diet, and at any given time in Buenos Aires, seventy-one percent of women and fifty-six percent of men are “doing ‘something’ to lose weight” (Nasser et al. 149). Again, like in the case of cosmetic surgery, there is an attempt to align the inner self with the outer self or to achieve a

desired identity defined by an outer appearance. In other words, many Argentines believe that a thin body will best represent their true identities. Here we see how connected the idea of attractiveness is to Argentine identity. However, thinness is not only associated with attractiveness. It seems to also be associated with health. For example, in a survey of male and female adolescents in Buenos Aires, participants were shown the images of nine female bodies and nine male bodies ranging from very thin to very overweight and asked to pick the images that represented an attractive female body, a healthy female body, an attractive male body, and a healthy male body. For all categories, participants chose an image towards the lower-weight end of the spectrum. However, for both the attractive female and the healthy female, participants chose an image “suggestive of undernutrition” (McArthur et al. 812), suggesting not only that the participants found the extremely thin female to be attractive but that they also thought that the image depicted good health (812).

Giardinelli, however, proposes that health is not a motivation for wanting to be thin (57), though the overly emphasized and exaggerated correlation between thinness and health does sell itself well (59). In reality, thinness does not always indicate health. Rather, the goal of “good health” has become the front that covers the underlying attitudes towards fatness. In Buenos Aires, it is as if extra weight were a sin because being fat equals being ugly. Because of this, health really does not matter as much (59). People would rather be thin than healthy. This attitude boldly underlines the extremeness of the beauty obsession in Buenos Aires. Being thin is so important that the consequences of malnutrition are sometimes blatantly ignored. It also shows how important thinness is in the Argentine definition of beauty.

The fashion industry is also to blame for the glamorization of extremely thin females. Models in Buenos Aires appear to be omnipresent. They grace every billboard and the cover of nearly every magazine on the newsstand. However, they rarely project a responsible image. According to ALUBA, forty percent of Argentina's leading models are anorexic, some even signing contracts saying that they will keep their weight at a number well below what is healthy for their size (Valente 1). Unfortunately, these are the models that many women and girls attempt to emulate, and they end up starving themselves down to an unhealthy weight. Low body weight does not come without the risk of serious complications. Fifteen percent of those diagnosed with anorexia or bulimia will eventually die of a heart attack (1). However, this does not stand as a deterrent for those facing unachievable expectations of thinness.

In relation to gender, it is suggested that Argentine women's obsession with thinness is related to the traditionally male-centered culture that still has influence in Argentina today. It is noted that many more women develop eating disorders than men. In this sort of culture, "pressures persist for men to assert their success and strength" (Nasser et al. 158). While women may work to be thinner due to other societal pressures or for the sake of fashion, it is also possible that subconsciously women are "growing" smaller in order to allow men to keep their "largeness", especially in a place where history has not always allowed men to achieve their full potential. It is possible that women's small bodies make women seem less threatening to men and to their apparent largesse (158). It may also be a mechanism to keep women in a narrowly defined gender role and to keep them from gaining societal power. Could the beauty obsession be a sort of invisible prison that is keeping women oppressed? If women have to work so hard to

fit into an impossible image, they are likely never to feel satisfied. With a lack of personal satisfaction, they are less likely to move past that point of preoccupation in order to focus on other things that could lead to their social progression.

Thus far, I have mentioned and briefly explored multiple hypotheses for the prevalence of both plastic surgery and eating disorders in Buenos Aires. These hypotheses center around the themes of identity, fashion, social necessity, and gender roles. The following chapters discuss these hypotheses more thoroughly and add additional information and ideas. Chapter seven discusses how these ideas relate together and offers my concluding arguments. It becomes obvious there is no single hypothesis that can simply explain away the prevalence of plastic surgery and eating disorders in Buenos Aires. A complicated social topic is multi-layered and can be explored from many different perspectives. However, I am able to come to ultimate conclusions about the driving forces behind this Argentine situation.

Chapter Three:

IDENTITY

Argentine trends in plastic surgery and eating disorders can be linked to what has been deemed an identity crisis among Argentines, specifically among the *porteños* of the port city of Buenos Aires who share a separate identity from the rest of the country. Their identity is based on a European ancestry that differentiates them from the indigenous populations of South America. To begin, the importance of the role that identity plays in society must be stressed. Identity is an integral and necessary part of how individuals interact in society and how they relate to one another and to a group identity. Without the recognition of identity, society cannot function. While identity is always multi-layered and complex, it can become even more complicated by external factors, including the migration of people around the globe, sometimes leaving people confused about who they really are, in other words their self-perception, and with whom and with what place they identify. This seems to be the case for many Argentines.

The massive European immigration to the port of Buenos Aires in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries left this area with an ethnic make-up and culture distinct from the rest of Latin America. In this way, *porteños* perceive themselves to be somewhere in between Europe and Latin America. However, they cannot specifically identify with either. Their ancestry has, in fact, left them to have little in common with neighboring communities. However, they are still disconnected from the European continent and become more disconnected with each consecutive generation as the direct lineage becomes more and more dilute. The military dictatorship of the late 1970s and

early 1980s only added to an already confused population. Experiencing a lack of control, Argentines found that their appearances were among the few things over which they had control. In a state of identity crisis, Argentines have constructed a new form of national and cultural identity. This identity is the so-called Argentine “beauty cult,” which seems to have turned to more of an obsession, as many Argentines are turning to drastic measures in order to perfect their appearances.

What is Identity?

The concepts of identity and the self and what exactly these two concepts mean to people and society have been the topics of debate for centuries. By the most modern definition, the self is seen as reflecting the complexity of relationships between the personal and the social, and through the interaction of society and this interactive self, identities are produced. Through the internalization of social and cultural meanings, individuals are able to occupy their identities (Woodward 21). However, with such an abstract definition, it is difficult to say how an individual might identify himself or herself. In reality, identity is our most essential and personal characteristic, and we define it using the most important aspects of who we are or who we consider ourselves to be. These aspects include race, ethnicity, gender, religion, membership in various social groups, traits we show, and the traits others ascribe to us (Newman 134). Using these definable aspects, each individual creates the unique and multi-layered fabric of his or her identity. While the aspects of identity may seem rather simple, the identity they make up is absolutely pertinent to the human condition. Without self-awareness and a recognizable

identity, an individual cannot successfully interact within society. Therefore, each individual must create an identity to occupy and be aware of his or her identity.

While the most basic definitions of identity are usually individualistic, no individual is left uninfluenced by his or her surroundings. In other words, one must consider personal identity amidst a much larger collective or group identity. In this larger context, there is a high degree of impact of the social on the personal and a high degree of conformity (Woodward 22). With the larger social fabric being so influential, group identities often become an important source of personal identity, as the two seem to merge into one. However, with group membership comes the pressure from other members of the social group. Collective identities come with a general set of expectations, and an individual's actions within a group are judged according to a conventional set of ideas about how things ought to be (Newman 27). With the merging of the personal and collective identities, we see the emergence of the pressure to conform and understand how personal identities relate to one another in society. Each personal identity is situated into a larger collective identity, and each individual group member feels the pressure of this collective identity. Due to this pressure, personal identities are adjusted to meet the expectations of the collective identity.

Important to both personal and collective identities and to Argentine identity is the idea of place. Because of the desire to have some notion of a home where we belong, identification with place and territory can be very strong. In this way, identities are often constructed in relation to the place from which we have come (Woodward 72). However, with place identification, individuals and groups feel the effects of mobility and migration, and the scattering of people across the globe has created "diasporic identities."

In a sense, the occupiers of these identities have more than one identity or more than one home, draw from more than one culture, and have learned to negotiate between cultures. These groups also tend to hang on to the desire to “return home.” However, in the literal sense, they will never be able to return from where they came, as the diasporic identity connects the present with the entire family’s lineage and past. In other words, these groups “speak from the in-between of different cultures” (63).

Argentina and European Immigration

The Argentine people have been greatly influenced by migration and immigration, specifically European immigration, and with a large majority of the population being of European descent, many individuals or the group as a whole exhibit a diasporic identity. They are caught somewhere between Europe and Latin America, and their identity cannot be specifically matched to either place. Argentina, specifically Buenos Aires, has a history of being very Eurocentric.

In the nineteenth century, Argentine liberal leaders were among the most European-oriented, and they dedicated themselves to transforming the Argentine people by encouraging massive European immigration and European-style education. Of these liberals, Juan Bautista Alberdi and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento were the most representative of this movement (Chasteen 166). Juan Bautista Alberdi’s slogan “Gobernar es poblar” (“To govern is to populate”) became the liberals’ most popular mantra. According to Alberdi, European immigration was desirable because Europeans were “supposedly superior people, full of moral virtues and marketable skills” (167). Originally, Alberdi hoped to bring Northern Europeans to Argentina. He insisted that by

bringing “living pieces” of Northern Europe to Argentina, he could change the country’s ethnic makeup post-independence (Shumway 147). To make this plan a reality, the Constitution of 1853 contained three articles pertaining to immigration. Article Twenty stated that the European foreigner enjoyed all the civil rights of citizenship in Argentina, and that in order to enjoy these rights, he or she did not have to become a citizen. Article Twenty-Five stated that the federal government would foster European immigration, and Article Twenty-Eight further stated that none of these rights or privileges could be altered by regulatory legislation (Castro 21).

As Alberdi’s ideas began to take shape, Sarmiento further fostered and promoted these measures when he was elected to the presidency in 1868. During his presidency, European immigrants were arriving by the hundreds of thousands, and the arrival of European people and the European culture began to transform Buenos Aires “into a city more reminiscent of Milan or Paris than of Caracas or Lima” (Chasteen 169). Sarmiento also used the English and French styles of education as models for the Argentine educational system and rejected rural culture as “barbaric.” He viewed racial mixing as the “national tragedy”(170). His racist attitudes towards national development shaped the thinking of the Argentine people in regards to the rejection of non-European racial heritage.

Even though the Argentine government took measures to artificially foster Northern European immigration, as Northern Europeans were seen as a desirable white race, the plan did not work exactly as desired. Between 1857 and 1930, Argentina received a net immigration of 3.5 million. However, only ten percent were Northern European. As for the rest, forty-six percent were Italian and thirty-two percent were

Spanish, making these the two largest and most influential groups of immigrants. Due to this massive immigration, Argentina was more greatly influenced by immigration during this period than any other major country of the Western Hemisphere, including the United States. While the United States received immigrants in larger numbers, the originally small population of Argentina led to a greater percentage of foreign-born residents (Skidmore and Smith 72). By 1914, approximately one-third of the population was European-born in Argentina. In Buenos Aires, a much higher proportion, approximately fifty percent, of the population had been born outside the country (Cortés-Conde 104). At the same time in the United States, only thirteen percent of the population was foreign-born. As a result, Argentina has a distinctly European quality, but this has left many Argentines questioning their identities (Skidmore and Smith 72). Specifically, what does it mean to be Argentine? What distinguishes them from their European ancestors?

Even today, several generations later, many people still feel the effects of European immigration. In Buenos Aires, a joke says that “*porteños* think of themselves as Spaniards who dress like the French, talk like the Italians, act like the North Americans, and think they are British” (Keeling 209). Another version says that Argentina is “a nation of Italians who speak Spanish, dress as though they’re French and like to think they’re British.” In other words, “this cultural melting pot means many Argentines are painfully insecure” (Adams 51). Perhaps, this insecurity is the result of the lack of an identity separate from this mix of European cultures. While their forefathers thought that European immigration was the answer to their “national tragedy,” this massive influx has created an identity misunderstanding among modern Argentines. Yes,

they counteracted the presence of indigenous populations that was deemed to be the “national tragedy,” but they created another mixing of cultures is equally confusing. They are not European, at least according to geography. However, looking at cultural and ethnic influence, many Argentines identify more with Europe than they do with the rest of Latin America. In other words, they are too European to be Latin American, and they are too Latin American to be European (Giardinelli 65). They seem to be lost somewhere in the in-between. In other words, Argentines have found it hard to filter out a unique identity separate from that of their ancestors.

Total, Italian born, and Spanish born populations, Buenos Aires 1855-1914

Year	Total Population (#)	Foreign born (%)	Italian born (#)	Italian born (%)	Spanish born (#)	Spanish born (%)
1855	91,395	42	10,279	11	5,792	6.3
1869	177,787	52	44,000	25	14,609	8.2
1887	433,375	53	138,000	32	39,562	9.1
1895	663,854	52	182,000	27	80,352	12.1
1904	950,891	45	228,000	24	105,206	11.1
1909	1,231,698	46	277,000	23	174,291	14.2
1914	1,576,597	50	312,000	20	306,850	19.5

(Baily 59) and (Moya 149)

Racial makeup based on Census Data, Buenos Aires, 2001

Race or Ethnicity	Percentage (%)
White	88.9
Black or of African descent	2
Mestizo	7
Asian	2.1

(NationMaster.com 1)

Argentina and Videla's Military Dictatorship

In March 1976, Argentina experienced a military coup whose goal was to restructure society and end the chaos of the Peronist years. The return of Juan Perón to the presidency in 1974 was shortly followed by his untimely death. When his vice-president and second wife, Isabel Perón, took over his presidency, the Argentine economy was a disaster. In this politically and economically unstable environment, she was overthrown. Under the new authoritarian government, General Jorge Rafael Videla launched his “Dirty War” against the opposition. Under this campaign, the government began arresting “subversives,” (Skidmore and Smith 98-99) with the number of people who “disappeared” somewhere between ten and thirty thousand in all (“Truth Commission” 1). Once these “subversives” had been arrested, most of them were never heard from again (Skidmore and Smith 98-99). While the government carried out its secret, dirty war, the people of Argentina lived in a state of oppression and in constant fear. Even after the fall of the military in 1983, surviving relatives lived still not knowing the whereabouts of their missing loved ones. The mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (*Las*

madres de la Plaza de Mayo), a group of mothers who protest the disappearances of their children, demanded a full accounting of the disappearances and that their children be brought back alive or their deaths be explained (Burns and Charlip 282). While newly elected president Raúl Alfonsín struggled with this issue, his attempts to document the disappearances and to bring the perpetrators to justice ultimately failed. During his first week of office, Alfonsín created the National Commission on the Disappeared, or the CONADEP (*Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*) whose “mandate was to investigate the disappearances of people between 1976 and 1983 and uncover the facts involved in those cases, including the locations of the bodies” (“Truth Commission” 1). However, this commission documented the disappearance of only 8,906 Argentines. Of the nine military commanders-in-chief, only five were sentenced to serve prison sentences, and all lower-ranking officers were exempt from prosecution. The repression of the military dictatorship and the subsequent failed search for justice left a “deep scar” in Argentine society (Skidmore and Smith 102-103).

During such a volatile political period, Argentines experienced a great amount of chaos and fear. However, the national attitude came to be that “Dirty clothes are washed at home” (Giardinelli 71). Moreover, “dirty” is not really “dirty” unless it is seen. As pointed out above, even after the end of the dictatorship, the government was weary to admit to the offenses that had taken place. It is better to “sweep the dirt under the rug” (72). In order to keep up appearances, Argentines are willing to modify or alter evidence in order to conceal dirty secrets, and, in this way, a certain kind of silence is induced (74), a silence that is a manifestation of a culture of fear (75). This sort of attitude has translated over into the culture of beauty that is seen in Buenos Aires. Just like Argentina

covers up imperfections within its own history in order to keep up appearances, Argentines are willing to modify their bodies in order to keep up appearances. Like with historical silence and discretion, physical imperfections are eliminated and a corrected physical appearance is presented to the public.

Moreover, the Dirty War has literally left some Argentines questioning who they are. While the CONADEP had concluded that the “disappeared” people had been systematically killed, it has been discovered that the infants and young toddlers of these “subversives” were often adopted into military families who supported the dictatorship. Due to these findings, the National Commission for Right to Identity was created in 1992 in order to centralize the search for the missing children of those who “disappeared” (“Truth Commission” 1). As of 2004, the National Commission for Right to Identity has “discovered” seventy-seven of the babies who were “stolen” during the Dirty War using DNA testing. However, hundreds of babies are believed to have been “snatched” during that time (Gotkine 1).

Needless to say, this discovery has led some Argentines to question their own identities or the identities of those around them, as the Dirty War touched many Argentine families in some way. Those who know they were adopted during this time may wonder if their biological parents were “disappeared” and if their adoptive parents were in some way involved with the Dirty War. Parents whose children “disappeared” may wonder if they have living grandchildren and who those grandchildren might be. In this way, both the history of immigration and the history of the Dirty War have left many Argentines feeling displaced or without a clear identity. The history of European immigration gave Argentina a separate identity from the rest of South America. However,

they are not European. In addition, a violent era in modern history has left some Argentines wondering if they really know who they are. Taking this into consideration, how do modern Argentines define themselves? Have they developed a clear identity? I argue that Argentines have adopted beauty as identity.

Beauty as Identity

In place of a national, cultural, or ethnic identity, Argentines have adopted beauty as an identity. Indeed, this linkage is often made in popular press accounts. *The Observer* (England) reports that Argentines “are confused about their identity: are they European, Latin American, or what? And their response to this confusion is to look ravishing” (Carlin 9). CNN quotes Dr. Mabel Bello, director of the Argentina Association Against Bulimia and Anorexia (ALUBA), in reference to the history of military violence: “We had a difficult past and we try to forget. And so we try always to be young and always beautiful. It’s difficult for us to understand our past” (Byrnes 2). Like many affluent regions of the Western hemisphere, Buenos Aires has developed the culture of “body projects,” where the body tends to be seen as a “project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual’s self-identity” (Woodward 117-118). Even further, the body has “come to stand as a primary symbol of identity” (Gimlin 80). Using plastic surgery or extreme dieting, just about any physical identity can be created, and many *porteños* have come to identify themselves with physical perfection. Beauty is the tool that Argentines can use to establish a modern identity and to distance themselves from the past. However, if beauty is one’s identity, then one must be able to express this identity to society, leading many to extreme lengths to achieve the perfect aesthetic.

Inability to achieve this aesthetic identity is ultimately construed as social failure. This failure would keep someone from belonging to this created national identity.

Comparative Identity Projects

While I have already discussed that plastic surgery and starving have become tools in creating bodies that Argentines define as “beautiful,” it is also important to note that the nipped, tucked, and starved Argentine and, thus, the “beautiful” Argentine, has been developed in relation to the self-perceptions and identity projects of their neighboring countries. In other words, Argentine beauty has not only been defined in a narrowly Eurocentric manner, but this definition also serves as something that differentiates Argentina from the rest of South America. The populations of neighboring nations have different criteria that they use to define themselves. For example, when Brazil transitioned to independence from Portugal in 1822, roughly half of the population consisted of slaves of African birth or descent (Skidmore and Smith 139). Today, this translates into a Brazilian population with a mixed racial heritage. According to the 2000 Brazilian census, 38.5 percent of the population self-identify as “mulatto,” a person of mixed black and white heritage, 53.7 percent self-identify as white, mostly of Portuguese descent, and 6.2 percent self-identify as black. However, there is very little indigenous presence within Brazil (The World Factbook). As the result of being an obviously bi-racial society, the modern Brazilian population works to define itself as one where race does not matter and where there is a lack of “racial consciousness” (Skidmore and Smith 174). This is what defines the Brazilian identity project.

By contrast, there are other South American nations that have large Mestizo and indigenous influences. The identity projects of these nations are different from that of Brazil. For example, both Bolivia and Peru have large Mestizo and indigenous populations. In Bolivia, Quechua and Aymara indigenous groups make up fifty-five percent of the population, and another thirty percent of the population self-identify as Mestizo (The World Factbook). In Peru, the ethnic makeup is very similar with thirty-seven percent of the population self-identifying as Mestizo and forty-five percent identifying with an indigenous group (The World Factbook). Due to these influences, indigenous rights and Mestizo nationalism define the identity projects of both of these nations (Chasteen 319-320).

The Argentine identity project differs from those of Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru. While Argentines construct identity within the nation, they also construct it in relation to the identities of those populations that they perceive as different from themselves. In other words, Argentines construct their national identity using “white”, European beauty ideals. However, they also construct their identity as not mulatto and not indigenous in comparison to the populations of Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, and other Latin American nations that they perceive as “backwards” and “less privileged,” probably due to the historically present racist attitude fostered by figures like Alberdi and Sarmiento.

Here, it must also be noted that “national” identity project is being used for the identity project of Buenos Aires. Historically, the population of Buenos Aires rejected rural and indigenous cultures, and, thus, the rest of the nation. While European immigrants were arriving by the boatloads to Buenos Aires, indigenous and gaucho populations in the rural parts of Argentina were being exterminated in what was known

as the “Conquest of the Desert” (Shumway 144). This mass extermination accounts for the mostly absent presence of indigenous populations in all of Argentina today. In other words, the Argentine leaders of the 1870s eliminated any group that could have potentially competed for a place in the nation’s identity, and it seems that the “Conquest of the Desert” is still viewed as an important part of the Argentine identity project. In fact, the “Conquest of the Desert” is still commemorated on the back of the Argentine one hundred peso bill. The rejection of rural Argentina is still seen in Argentina’s population distribution. Today, more than one-third of the population of Argentina lives in Buenos Aires, and *porteños* seem to view themselves as representative of the whole nation. In the articles and books that I have cited, reporters and authors use “Argentina” interchangeably with “Buenos Aires” and “Argentine” interchangeably with “*porteño*.” As a result, I have used these terms interchangeably as well, even though this usage may be problematic.

Racial makeup of Argentina, most recent

Race or Ethnicity	Percentage (%)
White	97
Mestizo, Amerindian, or non-white	3

(The World Factbook)

Eurocentric Beauty

As I have previously discussed, Argentines have come to identify themselves as beautiful. However, beauty is narrowly defined, and Argentine women seek a very

specific kind of beauty. In Buenos Aires, there is a strong pressure to adhere to a European look, many times as an attempt to express or retain the European ancestry that they believe set them apart from the majority of Latin America. Those who do not fit the mold are judged more harshly than in many other cultures (Ballve 1), leading to a great deal of racism in the city even though the public is not likely to admit it (Giardinelli 134). While over eighty-eight percent of the population of Buenos Aires is of European heritage, a minority still exists, many of whom are of indigenous or mixed racial heritage. Most are immigrants from neighboring countries who have come to Buenos Aires seeking a better life. However, these people do not encounter equal treatment. Reporter Amaranta Wright quotes Argentine Marta Goldberg: “They are very proud that Argentina is white. After all, it is the distinction which has always made us feel superior to the rest of Latin America” (1). Even people who are of mixed racial heritage often times practice discrimination. Reed Lindsay reports, “Many Argentines have Paraguayan relatives, but they won't admit it, although they'll tell you their grandmother was from Spain or Italy” (1). Fearing that looking different will hurt their chances to succeed, many patients with unique regional physical traits, indigenous traits, for example, seek plastic surgery to change their appearances (Chacon 1). Many attempt to minimize or eradicate physical signs of race or ethnicity that they believe mark them as different (Haiken 175-176). In other words, some of the cosmetic surgery procedures in Buenos Aires are performed with the notion in mind of making the patient appear more “white,” as a being more “white” or “European” in appearance is synonymous with being more beautiful, and as the European standard of beauty is the one that Argentines have used in the formation of their national identity.

Even the city itself is held to this idealized Eurocentric beauty standard.

Statements like the following, taken from one article in particular, appear by the dozens in articles and books written about Buenos Aires:

With its boulevards lined by 19th century Victorian and French-style houses, ornate Spanish villas, sidewalk cafes, striking parks and monuments, Buenos Aires resonates of London, Madrid, Rome and Paris...

Designed by the best European architects, timeless Buenos Aires embodies the wonderful cultural elements of Europe's grand past like no other and echoes like a great European capital that has been marooned in the heart of South America...

Paris beckons when crossing the wide tree-lined Avenida 9 de Julio in the heart of the Microcenter district. At 137m across, this avenue is celebrated as the widest in the world and is reminiscent of the Champs Elysee in Paris. Instead of the Arc de Triomphe, the avenue's centrepiece is the towering 70m-high Obelisco...

South of the Microcenter is San Telmo, the city's oldest neighbourhood, which recognises its diverse European heritage with enchanting narrow cobblestone streets, Italian tenements, French wrought-iron balconies and Spanish colonial features... (Sklifas 1)

Grandiose statements about the city's identity serve as a metaphor for the identity of the city's people, who are often described or describe themselves in the same way.

Both the city and the people hold on to the parts of history that they deem to be positive while leaving out the negative all together. Pieces of the past are used as inspiration to create an identity for today, leaving a solely European heritage glossed over with grace and beauty from which all of the "impurities" have been left out. While this racist attitude is not a complete picture of reality, it seems to be something that many wish to turn into a reality, leaving the creator with a whole new set of issues in terms of presenting this Eurocentric identity to others. The goal now becomes to turn oneself into this representation of beauty, using the body as a canvas that can be modified. Plastic

surgery and eating disorders serve as methods of body modification. However, there is high risk associated with both.

The Risks of Beauty as Identity

Both plastic surgery and eating disorders alter the body, but they are both dangerous behaviors. Still, Argentine women seem to gravitate towards these behaviors in order to achieve a perfected aesthetic. If women feel that they must be a certain size or look a certain way to be happy with themselves, their obsessions often manifest themselves in excessive plastic surgery or plastic surgery addictions, eating disorders, or addictions of another kind (Días 1). With so many women undergoing the knife, plastic surgery has become “normal,” and women tend to not recognize the risks of undergoing an invasive operation. Many treat a visit to the operating room as if it were a trip to the salon. However, an operation is not nearly as simple as a haircut (Elustondo 1). Some discoteques have even given away breast augmentation surgery as a raffle prize. However, this practice was made illegal in 2008, deemed to be a public health risk considering the possible complications. Now, monetary prizes are often the substitution. Reportedly, the winner can decide whether to use the money for surgery or not (“Adiós a las lolas por concurso” 1). With an often times lack of recognition of the risks, it is tragic when a patient experiences the consequences that can occur from any invasive procedure. On November 29, 2009, former Miss Argentina Solange Magnano died from the complications of a cosmetic procedure. She only underwent the operation because she wanted to tone up her backside and thought it was “no big deal” (“Buttocks Augmentation and Argentine Beauty Queen” 1).

This type of attitude differentiates plastic surgery in Buenos Aires from plastic surgery elsewhere. In other places, the risks associated with an operation seem to be taken more seriously. In interviews with women from the United States who had undergone a cosmetic procedure, none admitted to have “embarked casually on plastic surgery” (Gimlin 96). Most reported to have had undergone a cosmetic procedure “only after serious consideration, often accompanied by research into the medical technology involved in the operations” (96). Even with a cautious attitude, things can often go wrong on the operating table. Consequences of plastic surgery can be deadly. However, with these risks downplayed, plastic surgery for Argentine patients does not appear to be such a serious decision. Inversely, with more decisions to operate made spur of the moment, risks are even greater. “Scalpel fever” in Argentina multiplies the chances of suffering a complication (Elustondo 1).

However, the public glorifies the results, not the complications. Moreover, plastic surgery is not a taboo subject. Surgeries and procedures are not kept secret, and Argentines are not critical of plastic surgery and those who undergo it. By contrast, women in the U.S. are often critical of those who have “had some work done.” Argentine models and beauty icons undergo plastic surgery like it is “normal” and “no big deal” all the time. Consequently, this “normality” is only furthered when these fans and admirers follow suit. The next chapter discusses the effects of models and the fashion industry on these fans and admirers and on the prevalence of plastic surgery and eating disorders in Buenos Aires.

Chapter Four:

FASHION

In recent years, many people, Argentines and outsiders alike, have blamed the fashion industry and its enormous influence for the beauty obsession of Buenos Aires. In Argentina, the effects of the ideal beauty image are widespread and the top models are hugely popular. Many young girls aspire to one day be fashion models, distorting the image of what they think their bodies should be. In a metropolitan city like Buenos Aires, advertising constantly bombards people. With fashionable stores, billboards, and advertisements everywhere, women and girls are constantly bombarded with images of what their bodies “should” look like. When women enter these stores, they are even further reminded that they do not live up to these unrealistic standards. With sizes constantly shrinking, anyone who is not a stick figure has trouble finding sizes to fit her body. With this trend seen in designers’ clothing across the city, women who want to be fashionable are adapting their bodies to the clothing instead of the other way around. With these influences impacting the lives of many women, the fashion industry has been blamed for causing eating disorders in women and girls and for furthering an unhealthy obsession with beauty.

The Effects of Fashion Models

In Argentina, the “epidemic” of anorexia and bulimia has often been blamed on what has been referred to as “Fashion Model Syndrome” (Davison 1). Beginning in the 1990s, Argentina began to see young girls obsessed with becoming runway models. For

these girls, modeling became a prestigious aspiration (Giardinelli 75). Still today, all the girls want to be super skinny like the models who have become the role models that dictate beauty ideals (Bunin 2). In an interview, Pablo Chapur, a psychologist with ALUBA, says, “Here, the pressure to be thin like a model has become overwhelming. Look around the streets of Buenos Aires. The women are all sticks” (Faiola 1). This attitude affects even very young girls. Girls as young as seven-years-old have been diagnosed as bulimic, sticking their fingers down their throats and making themselves vomit because “they want to look like the models and stars” (Davison 2). These girls do not dream of anything else. Javier Luquez, a fashion and entertainment industry agent tells reporter Anthony Faiola, “You don’t find many Argentine girls aspiring to be lawyers or doctors these days. They all want to be models” (2). To them, appearances are more important and more valued than intellect. It is also an affirmation that Argentina produces the best examples of beauty (Giardinelli 76), something that has become part of the *porteño* self-image and identity (Carlin 2).

Even though these effects of the fashion industry may seem negative, especially on young girls, fashion industry executives tend to argue that they have done nothing wrong. They do not think that they can be blamed for generating cases of anorexia and bulimia. Even though there has been an international campaign demanding “healthy models,” or models with a healthy BMI, designers world-wide still continue sending super skinny models down the runways. Designers argue that the industry has always been like this. They use tall, skinny girls because they show off the clothes best (Rodríguez 1). With the tall and thin beauty ideal of the international fashion industry unlikely to change, Argentine fashion trends are not likely to change either, as they tend

to mirror the fashion trends of Europe. With such a focus on beauty in Buenos Aires and the strong influence of the unrealistic beauty ideals of both the Argentine and international fashion industries, it is no wonder that women and girls feel extreme pressure to be thin.

Messages in Advertising

Extremely thin models are not only found on Argentina's runways. They are also found in print ads and on billboards. Whether women realize it or not, the messages in advertising are very effective. Women are bombarded by hundreds of images that contain messages of what it means to be beautiful. The majority of advertisements in magazines, newspapers, or on billboards depict models who, as mentioned earlier, represent a distorted image of what all women "should" look like. Even "real" women who are not models photographed for ads are usually made-up, dressed in designer clothes, and "retouched out of all reality" (Steinem 327). Obviously, these depictions of women do not positively affect the viewer's self-esteem. Images of women who are airbrushed, smoothed, and enhanced represent something that does not exist. In life, a woman cannot be airbrushed. However, sometimes not taking the falsity of the images into consideration, women see images of absolute perfection that, after much bombardment, they begin to see as "normal." These women and girls are then striving to reach an ideal of beauty that is impossible to achieve. Competing with the flab-free stomachs, thighs, and butts of the airbrushed models, women force themselves not to eat to even attempt to achieve a similar look for themselves, or they try to create this look using plastic surgery. All across Western society, a size zero has become a status symbol, one which many

women will work all their lives trying to achieve, and it has become normal for popular magazines to publish “diet tips” in articles among the pages filled with emaciated models. In Buenos Aires, “most women merely nibble at the country’s famed steaks or survive on little more than salads and yogurt in an effort to be as rail-thin as the models whose slim bodies grace magazines on the city’s newsstands” (Goering 1). With “the difference between the cosmetically altered and the rest of us growing more and more dramatic” (Bordo 2), many women know that they will never be able to achieve the look of the models in fashion spreads. In turn, this sends women to the operating room seeking nips and tucks to perfect their bodies into what they think they should be. According to Argentine plastic surgeons, women are constantly asking to have various body parts modeled after their favorite stars. Cosmetic surgeon Juan Carlos Pinto Barbiero complains to *Gente* magazine, “I’m sick and tired of constantly modeling the lips of Kim Basinger” (Ramspeck 2). Judging by general attitudes, the idea of a little pain and bruising is worth it to maintain beauty (Wright 3).

The Tyranny of Tiny Sizes

In Buenos Aires, the sizes provided to women by Argentine stores and designers have become increasingly small to the point that even average-sized women sometimes have a hard time finding clothes. In an Argentine store, an extra large is really the equivalent of a small or medium by American or European standards (Hearn 1), and women often complain that they cannot find their sizes in stores (Rodríguez 1). Because of this, Argentines are blaming designers and the stores that sell their clothes for many cases of anorexia and bulimia because women are having to fit into smaller and smaller

sizes. Even though men do not have trouble finding clothes, women who would be considered thin in North America or Europe have begun to feel fat while trying to find clothes in chic shopping malls. Victims of eating disorders in Buenos Aires describe size 00 or extra extra small as “the Holy Grail of slimmers” (Brown 1), and there is fierce competition between women to see who can get into the smallest sizes. Natalia Carloni, a twenty-two year old patient being treated for anorexia and bulimia says, “My aim in life was to get into the smallest size. Now I realize that it’s really sick” (2).

Calling these clothes “starvation-sized” (2), physicians treating eating disorder patients find them to be a real problem. Instead of a person adapting the clothes to her body, she ends up having to adapt her body to the clothes (Días 1). If a woman or girl wants to be fashionable and be able to shop in “normal” stores as opposed to “outsize” or “plus-size” stores, she literally has to starve herself. If she does not, she will not be able to find clothes in her size. However, there have been many reports saying that designers and store owners disagree, saying things like, “Argentine girls are nowhere near as big as American or European girls, so why should our shops sell clothes that are made to their body shapes?” (Kelly 23) and “Argentine girls work hard at looking good. Why shouldn’t we be proud of that?” (23). Laura Codda of the Argentine Fashion Association and other fashion representatives argue that if larger sizes sold, they would make larger sizes (Hearn 3), apparently ignoring all the complaints made by many women saying that stores do not stock their sizes. With women having to starve themselves in order to be able to buy clothes, there is a definite connection between the number of eating disorders among Argentine girls and women and the tiny sizes produced by Argentine designers. There is also an important connection to identity. If Argentines identify themselves as

being the most beautiful, then that would also mean that they must be the thinnest as well, as slenderness is equated with beauty according to the *porteño* beauty ideal.

Manufacturing only tiny sizes could possibly encourage or even force Argentine women and girls to adhere to this standard.

The Law of Sizes

Even with the complaints made by many members of the fashion industry who say that there is not a problem with the sizing of clothing by designers, there has been a law passed in an attempt to regulate sizes in the hopes of reducing the numbers of eating disorders. Passed in December 2005, the “law of sizes” covers the Buenos Aires province and states that retailers “must stock a full range of clothing sizes for women, roughly equivalent to UK sizes 10-20” (Kelly 23). If stores do not comply, they face large fines or even closure. However, the fashion industry did not welcome the law warmly, pulling out all the stops in an attempt to overturn it in the provincial courts (23). Since the passing of the law, it has not been strictly enforced and has therefore not been adhered to very strictly by clothing retailers. A study by a women’s organization in Buenos Aires at the end of 2007 found that many retailers are not following the law, and that many still do not sell larger sizes (Días 1). Dr. Mabel Bello, the founder of ALUBA, says, “The fashion designers have too much money and too much social sway to make this law really successful” (Kelly 23). Unfortunately, even though the supporters of the law took the initiative to attempt to make a change for the better in the fashion industry, the law has had little impact on improving the situation. Until the fashion industry also supports a law that regulates sizes and promises to produce “healthy” sizes, its influence will probably

override any attempts to change it. Apparently, keeping up appearances that all Argentine girls and women are shaped the same, tiny and thin, is more important than producing clothing for its actual customers, who, in reality, come in array of shapes and sizes. Dr. Bello says, “We are a racial melting pot, with Poles and Russians and Arabs and indigenous people- they are all different shapes. But clothes are made for one sector alone and intolerant of others. Girls have to be tall, thin, and glamorous” (Brown 3), traits that correspond to the Northern European stereotype. The next chapter discusses how this sort of intolerant attitude has turned the beauty obsession in Argentina into a perceived social necessity.

Chapter Five:

DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIAL NECESSITY

In Buenos Aires, the predominantly white population is very proud of its European ancestry, and racism and discrimination are visible throughout the city. Those with ethnic or regional looking features find themselves the victims of discrimination. In order to improve their chances in everything from love to work, these people often seek plastic surgery to “erase” the features that make them stand out from the rest of society. Along with this “whitening” process, those people who do not fit the slender body ideal of the city are also being forced to change their appearances. Today in Buenos Aires, being thin is practically a social necessity. Those who are not thin also face social discrimination. While there have been some efforts to question these social trends, this cultural ambience does not seem to be something that will change in the near future. Under these strong societal pressures, men are also beginning to buy into the beauty ideal, and they themselves have begun to develop eating disorders and to seek out plastic surgeons to fix their imperfections. In essence, being thin and beautiful by the Argentine standard has in some ways been deemed a social necessity.

Ethnicity and Upward Mobility

According to Argentine Mempo Giardinelli, author of *El país de las Maravillas: Los Argentinos en el fin del Milenio*, Argentines have a serious unresolved problem with racism, discrimination, and xenophobia (140). However, the massive European immigration to Buenos Aires and the racist ideas of the Argentine liberals during that

time explain Argentine racism. It is always emphasized that Argentine ancestors came from Europe, and this Eurocentrism and supposedly purely European lineage is a mark of prestige and pride for many *porteños*. Inscribed in the descendants of the European immigrants is the antiquated European racism and the rejection of the other (134). Today, racism is still visible throughout Buenos Aires, especially considering creating a white Argentine race had been an important part of the Argentine identity project.

It is estimated that indigenous groups in Argentina form between 0.5 and 2 percent of the population. Even though these percentages are small, the obsession with not being viewed as “indigenous” is still very great. The reason for this goes back to the Argentine identity project. Argentines have developed a “white” identity. However, Argentina is still a South American country, and when many outsiders think “South America” they think “indigenous” or “Mestizo.” Thus, to prove misinformed outsiders wrong, it seems that Argentines focus on the rejection of a population that, in many other places, would be too small to be of concern. In a place where “people go out of their way to point out that they are from ‘good European stock’ and have no ‘Indian blood,’” indigenous people in Buenos Aires find themselves living in poverty on the fringes of Argentine society (Adams 21). They face discrimination within their own country. Immigrants to Buenos Aires from other parts of South America, who are often indigenous or of mixed racial heritage, also face discrimination in the city. In a survey performed by INADI (The National Institute Against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism) in 2006, *porteños* responded that various immigrant groups, including Bolivians and Paraguayans, were the groups most affected by discrimination in Buenos Aires. Ethnic differences mark these groups as different from the rest of the population.

When markedness becomes such a risk factor for discrimination, one has to wonder if fitting into or trying to fit into the European-looking beauty ideal has become a social necessity for many groups. Many believe that it has, and “men and women with unique physical traits fear that looking too different can hurt their chances in everything from employment to love” (Chacon 1). In these sorts of cases, cosmetic surgery can be used to “erase” signs of indigenous or Mestizo ethnicity from a patient’s face, offering what is perceived as “upward mobility through bodily transformation” (Blum 196). In other words, the desire to avoid discrimination inspires many cosmetic surgeries (Haiken 194); upward mobility is offered through a more “mainstream” appearance. Indeed, this seems to be the case for some of the plastic surgery procedures performed in Argentina. Dr. Jose Cortes, an Argentine plastic surgeon, explains, “In Argentina appearances are more important than competence when it comes to getting a job”, and more than twenty percent of the unemployed are so desperate that they have resorted to plastic surgery to improve their chances of getting hired (Broad 1).

Plastic Surgery and the Middle Class

Because of this trend and because the use of plastic surgery is so widespread, it has become very popular and very “normal” among the middle class. It is no longer a luxury reserved purely for the upper class (Román 1). Even with trouble in the Argentine economy, Argentina has seen an “explosion” in the number of plastic surgeons and cosmetic operations (Chacon 1). In 2001, after being tied to the dollar since 1991, the Argentine peso began to devalue tremendously in an economic crisis (Hornbeck 1-3). However, the plastic surgery industry has continued to grow. Within six months of the

crash, when spending in supermarkets was still down by forty percent, plastic surgeons in Buenos Aires were reporting that “business was booming again” (Carlin 3).

Among the middle class, plastic surgeon Jose Juri says that cosmetic operations “have become as common as using computers or mobile telephones” (Ramspeck 1). Dr. Jorge Weinstein says, “It’s complete madness. People come in here describing how they want to look as if it were as natural and simple as going to the hairdresser. And I seem to spend more time listening to people’s fantasies about what surgery will do for their sex life or marriage...” (Wright 2). And, this seems to be the difference in Buenos Aires. People believe that looking better, with everything else in their lives remaining the same, will improve their social, romantic, or professional lives. Dr. Juan Carlos Pinto Barbiero told *Gente* magazine that “many female patients were convinced they would meet the men of their lives once they had undergone surgery” (Ramspeck 2). To these women, plastic surgery has become a perceived necessity.

Thinness as a Synonym of Success

For many women, being thin has also become a personal necessity because thinness has become synonymous with being successful. In other words, social guidelines in Buenos Aires have determined that thinness equals social success. Many young women strive for the perfect body because they believe that “the world belongs to the thin.” “To be thin is to be successful” or “If I were thin, everything would be easier” is something that many women firmly believe. It is this belief that leads women to seek the “magic diet” that is going to change their lives. Because anorexia and bulimia are almost always developed through dieting, it is this attitude that leads many Argentine women to

develop eating disorders. The beauty cult is where these diseases are developed and expanded (ALUBA).

The “thinness is success” attitude also translates into the professional lives of these women, as thinness is often rewarded with better jobs. “Fashion model syndrome” has led to discrimination in the professional realm against women who are not super slim. Noemi Aumeves, head of a government department known as the Women’s Directorate says, “When a job ad says ‘good appearance essential’, it means they want a skinny girl. Skinny first, brains second” (Davison 1). When I looked at online classified ads for jobs available in Buenos Aires, I saw this trend as well. In an ad seeking a cashier, the first qualification listed is “good presence.” An ad seeking a female English teacher requests a CV with a photo. To apply for a job as a beauty consultant (female) in a local mall, one must send in a CV with two photos: a close-up face shot and a full body shot (zonajobs.com.ar). In Buenos Aires, appearances have the power to make or break a woman’s professional life. However, I did not run across similar photo requests for men.

Discrimination Against the Overweight and Obese

While being skinny can help women socially and professionally, overweight and obese women can experience severe discrimination. “Here, strangers will stop you on the street to tell you you look fat,” (Goering 1) reports Manuel Faraco, a psychiatrist with ALUBA; “To put it bluntly, being fat in Argentina is socially unacceptable” (Adams 62). In the same INADI survey mentioned previously, 30.8 percent and 29.1 percent of people respectively reported experiencing or observing discrimination on the basis of “obesity” or a “physical aspect.” This discrimination was reported being experienced or observed in just about every type of location, ranging from nightclubs to businesses to shopping

centers to hospitals. Twenty-four percent of people felt that imposing stereotypical models of beauty on television commercials was also discriminatory. Of the people that reported experiences discrimination, 1.3 percent said that their immediate reaction was to start a diet.

In another study, Argentines reported that they “associate overweight with untidiness, laziness, and illness while slenderness was associated with pleasing traits such as elegance, attractiveness, sensuality, beauty, personal security and youth” (Nasser et al. 149). Forty-five percent of women also agreed to the statement: “You don’t exist if you can’t get people’s attention by having a nice, perfect figure” (149). In other words, Argentines recognize the severity of the discrimination experienced by those who do not have a “nice, perfect figure.” In order to avoid discrimination, they starve themselves. This discrimination is a major contributing factor to the development of eating disorders.

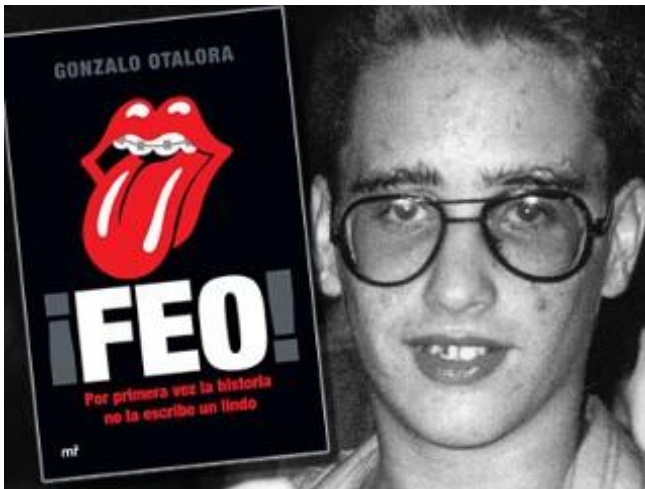
An Ugly Argentine Fights Back

There has been one person who is willing to face the societal expectations in Buenos Aires. According to the BBC, author Gonzalo Otaloro “is downright ugly, and he is not embarrassed to admit it” (Schweimler 1). Otaloro is the author of the book *Feo (Ugly)* and the leader of the movement known by the same name. Marches led by his group through the downtown streets of Buenos Aires demand “equal treatment for those handicapped by not being good-looking” (Goldman 1). Otaloro proposes a new set of laws that, while somewhat extreme, he believes would address the oppressing issue of beauty in Buenos Aires. His ideas include:

- Companies must ensure that at least thirty percent of their employees are ugly, including public relations, receptionists, and executives.

- Thirty percent of the casts of soap operas should be ugly.
- In fashion shows and advertisements, all sizes and physical qualities should be represented.
- Mannequins should represent all sizes and physical qualities.
- Beautiful and ugly persons should receive equal pay.
- Advertising should abstain from using touch-ups, trick lighting, makeup, or whatever other effect that modifies the true body or face of the model (2).

While his ideas may be slow to catch on, Otaloro believes that he is fighting for all the Argentines who do not see themselves as models. When he was younger, he felt very insecure in a place where beauty was so revered (Schweimler 1). His efforts could keep future generations of Argentines from suffering the same sorts of discrimination that many people suffer today. However, while this movement has gotten a bit of publicity in Buenos Aires, as in I was able to find a few newspaper articles about it, there have been no further developments as a result of this movement.



<http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=3857672&page=1>

The Effects of Plastic Surgery and Eating Disorders on Men

While most of this paper has focused on women, men have also begun to cave under the societal pressure that value appearances so much. While the majority of men remain unaffected, one in eight patients being treated for an eating disorder is male,

“pushed into anorexia by the same media images of slim Latin-lover types” (Davison 1). A newspaper article published in 2008 reports that young men are the newest victims of anorexia and bulimia due to the beauty cult of Argentina. Mostly, these men have also begun to feel, like many women have felt for some time, that a pleasing appearance is the key to success. Wanting to change their appearances, they begin to diet and work out. The difference between the men and the women, though, is that the men are more obsessed with also gaining muscle mass. This makes them more likely to begin working out compulsively, in a way that is damaging to the body, along with restricting their eating. However, because many young men still see eating disorders as something that only affects women, they are less likely to realize that they have a problem once they begin developing anorexia or bulimia. They will not say that they think they are fat because that is not considered very masculine. Rather, they will try to write the disorder off to something else, for example a virus that has made them not feel like eating (Román 1).

Men in the public eye have also been known to undergo plastic surgery in order to improve their appearances. Major football star Diego Maradona turned to his plastic surgeon to improve his appearance when he underwent a procedure to make his face slimmer. It has also been reported that former president Raúl Alfonsín underwent surgery to lift his sagging eyelids (Ramspeck 1). However, the most impressive transformation undertaken by a male public figure may be that of former president Carlos Menem, who has undergone numerous hair implants, two face lifts, an eyelid operation, and teeth replacements. Dr. Jorge Weinstein has said that Menem “has shown absolutely no embarrassment regarding his own metamorphosis. In fact, every time he has had a

collagen injection everyone knows about it. He is not ashamed to show his vanity because it's simply part of the flamboyant and charismatic personality that makes him popular" (Wright 2). Given these examples, it is noted that men are also concerned with their appearances. Obviously, they do not live in a bubble where only the women are concerned with the way they look. However, while some men do develop eating disorders or undergo plastic surgery due to societal pressures, women still do remain the majority of sufferers and patients. In Buenos Aires, the expectations for men and women are very different. The next section explores the gender differences in that society.

Chapter Six:

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Machismo in Argentina

The macho, or *machista*, society of Argentina began with the European immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as the first wave of immigrants was overwhelmingly made up of single men. Because of this massively imbalanced male to female ratio, the “commodity” most valued by these men was women, and sex trafficking flourished to meet the desires of these men. Prostitutes, typically from Poland or France, were shipped south to Buenos Aires. Sonia Abadi, an Argentine psychoanalyst says, “If Argentina remains to this day a deeply *machista* country, it is because of the idea entrenched in the male psyche of woman as whore” (Carlin 7). During the major development of Argentine society, women were in a position inferior to that of the men. In essence, they were viewed as sexual objects.

The sexual objectification of women still continues today in Argentina. Women are the objects of male desire. However, there still exists the distinction between woman as saint (the mother, the sister, the wife, the daughter) and woman as whore, the category that would be applied to everyone else (Giardinelli 101). In other words, in a situation where the man lacks personal knowledge of or attachment to a woman, she is simply a sexual object and nothing more. Along with this objectification comes the idea that women are the weaker sex. Women are not meant for certain tasks. In Argentine society, it is more important for women to work towards being beautiful than to work towards being intelligent or useful in any other context (116-119).

Femininity and Power

However, in modern society, it is difficult to say whether traditional *machismo* holds true in all circumstances. In some cases, it seems that women want to hold on to certain aspects of their traditional gender role. In other words, it may not be men who are keeping them in those roles. In Buenos Aires, women are as economically independent as women in Europe or in the United States. However, they continue to remain very coquettish. Their looks are just “one more weapon in the armory of attraction” (Carlin 7). Sonia Abadi insists that Argentine women have blended their traditional identities and their new liberated identities into one, and that there is not a contradiction between women’s liberation and their enslavement to their appearances. She says, “Here you’re never going to see a masculinized woman, dressed in the imitation of a man, with close-cropped hair” because they “don’t want to abandon anything of that old seductress identity” (7). In Argentina, women greatly appreciate the presumed differences between men and women. She continues, “Coquetry is the essence of it all. Coquetry with a clear target. Men are the audience. Argentine women can not conceive of life without men” (8). In a sense, women in Argentina are playing a role. They are acting a part for which the audience is the male population. With this type of mindset, one can see how plastic surgery could also be added to the “armory.” Men cannot tell which things about a woman are false or manufactured. They do not notice these things, and they are not looking for them. At the moment they see an attractive woman, their brains are functioning at a much more primitive level. Argentine women understand this well, which is why they are “recklessly unrepressed about going to the surgeon to have their bodies artificially enhanced” (9). However, one must consider if this perceived feminine

power is “real” power. While Argentine women seem to think that they have a certain degree of power over their male counterparts, it is still the Argentine women who are enslaved to their looks. In the majority of cases, men do not experience this same kind of enslavement.

Girls and Self-Confidence

Whether it is that Argentine women are repressed by a male-dominated society, that women are themselves choosing to retain some of their traditional seductress identity, or a combination of both, young girls in Buenos Aires are still growing up feeling as though they do not live up to an idealized beauty standard. This translates into poor self-esteem, and often leads girls to develop eating disorders or to make the decision to have plastic surgery at a very young age. Dr. Jose Juri admits to performing nose jobs and breast surgery on girls as young as twelve and thirteen years old (Carlin 5). The Ramos Mejia hospital in Buenos Aires, where many cosmetic operations are performed, reports an increase in the number of girls who are fourteen-years-old or younger when they have their first consultation with a plastic surgeon (Bunin 2).

Younger and younger girls are also developing eating disorders. Children as young as four-years-old have been diagnosed. Consider the following example:

The four-year-old with curly blonde hair smooths her dress and tells the psychiatrist what’s bothering her. “My doll is very fat,” she says, describing the dimpled pink cheeks on the baby doll her parents have given her. “I hate her.” Worried about getting fat herself, the child has begun watching television diet shows, refusing to eat bread and vomiting after eating sweets, a trick she apparently learned from her mother, an anorexic (Goering 1).

Children this young are not only developing poor self esteem from women they see on television, on magazine covers, or on the streets. They are also developing their body

issues by watching and emulating their own mothers, who have also very likely been socialized into the beauty cult. In the Buenos Aires Barbie Store, the first and only of its kind on the planet, “daughters are getting the chance to mirror that most iconic of impossibly proportioned role models: Barbie” (Scheltus 1). In all reality, this is a place where Argentine mothers can bring their daughters to expose them to societal expectations at an even younger age. A section of the store designated as “Casa Barbie” is the place where mothers can host their daughters’ birthday parties; “That means dressing up Barbie-style and strutting the catwalk” (2). The director of *Barbie Live*, a Broadway-style musical that has been popular in Buenos Aires for years, says, “Every Argentine woman wants to be Barbie. The Barbie lifestyle is adhered to at the highest level” (2). Children are being exposed to this attitude before they are barely old enough to form opinions. In a sense, very young girls have started to become indoctrinated by the beauty cult during their most formative years.



1. and 2. <http://www.romancingargentina.com/2008/11/girls-just-wanna-be-barbie.html>

The Phenomenon of Internet Dieting

Another phenomenon that seems to be unique to girls is that of internet dieting. Many Argentine girls have formed a sort of online community of those who are willing to do just about anything to lose weight. Together, they share a hatred of their own bodies,

and they are forming a new kind of social group. Like any other group, they have developed their own sort of language, referring to anorexia as “Ana” and to bulimia as “Mia”, giving these diseases a sort of sacred and personalized character. The websites run by these girls say things like “Being Ana is a constant fight for perfection and self-control, it is being perfect, being Ana is a lifestyle” (Vittar 1), and they also offer competitions among themselves to see who can lose the most weight the fastest. However, following their rules is not easy. In one competition, girls receive points for consuming less calories each day. Between 100 and 200 calories is 15 points, between 201 and 400 calories is 10 points, between 401 and 500 calories is only 5 points, and those who cannot control themselves and consume more than 500 calories lose 5 points. The winner after a set amount of time is the girl who has earned the most points. The goal of the community is to be able to lose a large amount of weight in a small amount of time and to be able to give and receive advice on weight loss (1-2). Below are some examples of images displayed on these websites that are used for inspiration and motivation:





2.
1. and 2. <http://anaymiasiempre.blogspot.com/>

It is obvious that gender differences do play a role in the situation seen among Argentines. Argentine women are much more likely than Argentine men to develop disordered eating patterns and seek plastic surgery. A greater number of women are affected than men by the beauty cult because women are seen as living up to a different set of expectations. Women are sometimes still seen as objects of beauty rather than individuals with ideas, opinions, and goals. And, not only men hold women to an unrealistic beauty ideal. Some women still hold both themselves and other women to an unrealistic, often antiquated, idea of what a woman should be. At younger and younger ages, girls are being indoctrinated with the image of the perfect woman, and many spend the rest of their lives trying to attain an impossible goal. Still, when a person has been bombarded with images of perfection all of their lives, it is nearly impossible to ignore this powerful influence.

Chapter Seven:

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has examined multiple possible explanations for the prevalence of plastic surgery and eating disorders in Buenos Aires. These proposed hypotheses have centered around the themes of identity, the fashion industry, discrimination and social necessity, and gender differences. The reasons why patients develop eating disorders and choose elective plastic are multi-layered and multi-dimensional, and they can be examined from different points of view. This thesis has attempted to take multiple perspectives into consideration, including a historical perspective and a feminist perspective. The end goal of both plastic surgery and disordered eating is body modification. However, the desires for a modified body are fueled by the complex influences of society. In my research, I have found that all legitimate proposed explanations for the prevalence of plastic surgery and eating disorders in Buenos Aires are somehow linked back to the concept of identity and how Argentine society has defined its own identity. I ultimately conclude that beauty has become key to Argentina's national identity project. Instead of defining themselves nationally or ethnically, Argentines have come to define themselves as beautiful, and plastic surgery and eating disorders are tools in the creation of the bodies that they deem beautiful. Thus, plastic surgery and eating disorders are useful in the creation of identity.

Argentines draw heavily on their European ancestry in the formation of their beauty ideal. In other words, Argentines glorify those traits stereotypically associated with "white" beauty and seem to unquestionably accept the Western beauty ideal that is predominant in the countries of Europe and North America. Light skin, thin frame, tall,

and blonde are traits that are valued in Buenos Aires and defined as “beautiful.” Thus, in order to identify as “Argentine,” one must necessarily possess these traits. However, these traits seem to be valued to the extreme, and with this extreme acceptance comes extreme rejection. Traits viewed as “non-white” are rejected to the extreme, and the racism that has been historically present in Argentina serves to criticize “backwards” cultures and groups. These groups are often identified by Argentines as the populations of their neighboring nations that have large mulatto, Mestizo, and/or indigenous sectors. Thus, beauty is not only defined in Argentina as “white,” but it is also defined as “not mulatto,” “not Mestizo,” and “not indigenous.” Ultimately, this means that to be “Argentine” and to possess an “Argentine identity,” one must be racially white and not mulatto, Mestizo, or indigenous.

The Argentine fashion industry mirrors this acceptance of “white” and “European” and rejection of “non-white” and “indigenous.” Argentine models tend to look like the super skinny models that walk the runways of European fashion shows, and, as this look has been deemed “beautiful”, it has also become an important part of Argentine identity, especially for women. To be Argentine also means to be “thin” and “not fat.” Thus, Argentine designers tend to manufacture clothes only for the Argentine women who have the same body type as a runway model. In this way, clothes in Buenos Aires seem to have the ability to confirm or discredit a woman’s identity. If you are able to fit into the tiny Argentine clothes, you are a “successful” Argentine. Those who are “fat” are, thus, “unsuccessful” and risk social rejection. Because of this, fat and imperfection are things to be feared in Buenos Aires, leading some to seek dramatic body alteration.

Because those who do not fit into the Argentine body politic and, thus, the Argentine identity, risk social rejection, some Argentines have deemed that plastic surgery or starving for the sake of beauty are “necessary.” This especially seems to be the case for women as well. While both Argentine men and women may face discrimination on the basis of being “non-white” or “fat,” women tend to experience a higher level of discrimination. Some have blamed a historically male-dominated society for this phenomenon. Enslavement to appearances may be a way of keeping women socially repressed. On the other hand, some Argentines argue that Argentine women want to retain the perceived differences between men and women. These women want to hang on to the idea of “woman as seductress,” because this gives them some degree of power over men. However, it is questionable whether or not this sort of power can be construed as “real.” Whichever the case may be, higher rates of plastic surgery and eating disorders among Argentine women signal that there are differences present between the gender roles of women and the gender roles of men in Buenos Aires. While “beauty” seems to be important to the identity of *porteños* as a whole, the obsession with and enslavement to beauty and appearances in Argentina may be more applicable to the feminine gender role than to the masculine.

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