

The Role of Capitalism, Society, and Media in the Rise of Plastic Surgeries in Egypt

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the introduction and rise of plastic surgery in Egypt, tracing its historical roots and examining its growing prevalence in modern society. Through a qualitative review of existing literature, the research investigates how media, capitalism, and patriarchal societal structures contribute to the normalization of cosmetic surgeries, particularly among women. It delves into the consumer culture created by capitalism and the sexualization of women's bodies, emphasizing how these factors influence women's perceptions of beauty and their decisions to undergo surgery. The paper also highlights the role of patriarchy in shaping these choices within Egypt's collectivist society.

1. Introduction

Plastic surgery is a big umbrella covering both cosmetic and reconstructive operations. The term is derived from the Greek *plastikē*, which is the action of molding or sculpting (1). The origins of these surgeries date back to ancient Egypt, where doctors were investigating various methods to repair soldiers' wounds (2). The modern medical techniques started to appear after World War I, aiding the injured in regaining their normal appearance and returning to their daily life (2). Prior to the twentieth century, the majority of patients were men, particularly war soldiers, seeking reconstructive surgeries. However, over time, the focus of surgeries shifted, taking a gendered perspective, with women becoming the dominant clients, and men performing the role of surgeons (3). Cosmetic surgeries are currently growing in response to women's needs to be desirable and admirable (4, 5). Feminists propose that beauty standards are a product of patriarchy, which tends to foster a culture objectifying women's bodies and promoting idealistic and difficult-to-attain standards (6, 7). Womanhood has become a collection of replaceable body parts to the extent that women themselves have become replaceable (8). Women's faces and bodies should be 'fixed' to appear in a certain desirable way; 'her lips must be made more kissable; her complexion dewier; her eyes more mysterious' (9).

Egypt has been influenced by globalization waves, particularly becoming more accepting of them with the Infitah policies in the 1970s. The flourishing Egyptian market led to the proliferation of foreign products, resulting in significant exposure to European and American consumerism and lifestyles. Western ideologies, with their sense of fashion and imagery, permeated the country (10). The Egyptian stars of the twentieth century reflected the Western fashion of actresses from Europe and America (11). Western beauty standards became the global norms of beauty, leading to the normalization of cosmetic surgeries in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt (12, 13). In 2016, Egypt was one of the top countries in aesthetic plastic surgeries, occupying the 14th place (14). According to Elbishbishy (15), Egypt is renowned for surgeries aiming to achieve a thinner body stature akin to that of Western women, such as "liposuction" and "tummy tucks." Such surgeries are not limited to the affluent; they are actually affordable for individuals of various socioeconomic classes and incomes due to the spread of unlicensed cosmetic clinics in Egypt. Neither economic hardships nor Islamic teachings and values hinder Egyptian women from undergoing cosmetic surgeries to follow Western beauty standards. In fact, women would risk their lives, exposing themselves to harm, in their pursuit of beauty (15).

This research paper delves into the reasons behind the spread of plastic surgeries in Egypt. It attempts to answer the question of why Egyptian women are willing to undergo cosmetic surgeries, even at the risk of their lives. Is it the impact of patriarchy, media, globalization, social comparison, or a combination of all these and other factors? The paper employs a qualitative approach by conducting a

scoping review of existing literature on the topic and utilizes previously conducted interviews and surveys with women and surgeons for a better understanding of this industry in Egypt.

2. Literature Review

Women's bodies have always been monitored as if they are mere sexual objects, constantly being judged based on their appearance (11). Managing the body is not confined to specific criteria; it encompasses various options such as changing attire, applying makeup, and even resorting to cosmetic surgery (16). "The disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere, and it is nowhere: the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular" (9). Pretty women are usually more valued and rewarded despite the fact that beauty standards have never been constant but are always changing with culture and history (17). Many women compare themselves to celebrities, seeking to attain the same physical features with the help of beauty surgeons (18). Beauty surgeries, defined as procedures enabling individuals to achieve more favorable features or physiques through alterations performed by a surgeon, have witnessed a surge in their prevalence across several countries (19). Women are the main consumers of plastic surgery amid the growing global tendency to attain beauty by changing physical features (20). Since consumption is an integral part of capitalism, which cannot be separated from it, capitalism depends on creating a culture of consumerism to preserve the system by maintaining gains (9). This demonstrates that cosmetic surgery is merely an industry, exploiting people's frailties and vulnerabilities, neglecting the psychological well-being and physical health of its consumers (15).

Western beauty standards and fashion have spread globally from the West to the entire world, resulting in a universal consumer culture centered on Hollywood celebrities, thereby diminishing country-specific beauty ideals (21). During colonization, British and French influences on local beauty standards were significant, and currently, American style is more prominent and visible (22). There has been an increase in the number of people undergoing plastic surgeries in the Middle East (23). Egypt is part of the collectivistic culture in the Middle East, where citizens tend to rely on others' opinions and perceptions to accept themselves (24). Considering that appearance plays a significant role in self-evaluation, particularly for women in Arab countries, individuals growing up in this cultural context are more likely to engage in plastic surgeries to conform to societal beauty norms and please their community (25). According to Elkhoreiby's (26) study, Egyptian women who undergo plastic surgeries are not satisfied with their body image and are unwilling to accept their appearance. Additionally, they are aware of the prevalence of these surgeries in their country and have been highly exposed to advertisements promoting them.

3. Discussions

Social Media, Market, and the Commodification of Beauty

Social media plays an immense role in shaping people's lives. Almost everyone is on social media, and whether they like it or not, it influences their choices in life (26). Elkhoreiby's (26) study in Egypt shows that cosmetic surgeries result not only from direct exposure to advertisements from centers of plastic surgery in the media but mainly from psychological issues related to accepting one's body and comparing it with that of models and celebrities. According to Elbishbishy's (15) survey of Egyptian women aged 18 to 30, the more women are exposed to social media, the more likely they will engage in appearance comparison, either internalized or externalized. Egyptian women are overwhelmed with Instagram photos of others, resulting in more comparison and self-monitoring. Eventually, women realize the gap between their own appearance and the ideal one. Di Gesto et al. (27) argue that because of social media apps, particularly Instagram, young girls are becoming more accepting of undergoing plastic surgeries.

In the nineties, feminist scholars believed that women were seeking plastic surgeries because of the pervasive beauty images and ideals presented by media (19). They claimed that women are willing to do anything to reach the optimal standards shared on these platforms. Egypt, as a capitalist society,

promotes a culture of materialism where one can buy anything, even unattainable aesthetic ideals (15). Based on the interviews conducted by Muñoz (11) for her thesis with beauty surgeons in Cairo, Egyptian women would come to beauty clinics with unrealistic expectations, aiming to undergo surgery to look like certain celebrities. Doctors noted that women would arrive with pictures of Lebanese actresses like Nancy Ajram and ask to have the same nose. Doherty (8) illustrates that women go to beauty surgeons assuming that they are a sort of magician who will give them the flawless body they desire, one that resembles that of the fabulous celebrities they regularly see in the media.

Many patients have reported the commodification of beauty and how it is commercialized everywhere. According to Sarah (32), "We live in a culture that compares women to unrealistic standards of beauty. Certainly, I am a product of this environment. We are taught to consume, and one of the ways to do that is to get plastic surgery" (11). Literature argues that media is responsible for the spread of beauty standards, leading to poor body image in multiple individuals (28). Elbishbishy's (15) study emphasizes that the internalization of beauty norms can lead to increased self-monitoring and engagement in comparisons. Fashion trends are one of the factors leading patients to seek body modification surgeries; they want to fit into society and find clothes suitable for them. Media and the market establish the standards for what is acceptable and impose them on individuals within society. Body shapes are categorized, which may lead women to despise their bodies and reject them (11). "Within consumer culture, the inner and the outer body become conjoined: the prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body becomes the enhancement of the appearance of the outer body" (29).

Women interviewed for Muñoz's thesis on cosmetic surgeries in Egypt mentioned how beauty standards have an unconscious impact on many women. However, they didn't believe that consumer culture and the beauty industry shaped their decision. Malak (29) confesses, "I was not directly exposed to media surrounding plastic surgery, but one can recognize the plastic surgeries of some singers or actors. Also, some programs discuss it as if to make a complete makeover is something positive. Plastic surgery is a casual topic here and is accepted" (11). As per Amina (23), "The media hasn't introduced me to plastic surgery; however, it plays an upper hand in presenting the 'international standard' of what is beautiful, what is trendy, and so on. Body fashions, such as 'thinner is better' or 'thinner is gross,' your skin tone to be bronze or pale according to outfits... your hair color where chestnut color is summer color. Even eyebrow shape is somehow dictated! Even if I am not conscious of it, I guess all this has impacted my decision" (11).

Bordo (30) affirms that women cannot be undergoing plastic surgeries based on their own agency. Muñoz (11) illustrates that women are merely following what the media demands from them in order to be accepted and avoid ridicule. Plastic surgery "is being used to enhance people's chances of participation in the public sphere, especially through enacting social mobility" (31). Beauty is considered a commodity that can help women upgrade their lives and enhance their social status by acquiring more power (32). Muñoz (11) adds that this is what consumer culture is all about; it gives the impression that one is acting out of one's own free will and that there are no limits to one's options. Beauty ideals and perfect bodies are no longer seen as divine gifts one is born with, but as purchasable items in the capitalist market.

Patriarchy and Objectification of Women's Bodies in Egypt

According to Bordo (30), women's bodies are sexualized and objectified. There is immense focus on women's appearance and clothing, significantly more than on men, utilizing various techniques to enhance their femininity and attractiveness through hairstyles, makeup, or fashion choices. In the Egyptian context, women and girls are treated as sexual objects, constantly facing harassment and the male gaze (15). According to Koval et al. (33), an objectifying environment makes inhabitants more conscious of their bodies. Women are affected by men's views of their bodies. The figure of manhood could be a father, a husband, any family relative, or a male gaze in the street. Men play a powerful role in women's awareness of their appearance (34). Muñoz (11) concluded through interviews that the

element of patriarchy is present in women's decisions to undergo surgeries, whether they realize it or not. For instance, one interviewee pursued surgery to please her prospective male partner, while another did so to remain sexually desirable to her husband in order to maintain their marriage.

A group of feminists argue that women resort to cosmetic surgeries due to the patriarchal and sexist nature of society. They seek to meet standards to find employment and secure marriage (35). Arranged marriages—a practice that often relies on women's appearance and physical appeal—are prevalent in Egypt; thus, to find an appropriate suitor, women must conform to beauty norms set by the patriarchal system, primarily represented by male suitors (15). They are further influenced by societal beauty ideals and their definitions of aesthetics, resulting in ongoing surveillance of their bodies to comply with norms and appear as attractive and desirable as societal expectations dictate. This implies that they form their perceptions about themselves based on others. Such pressure may subsequently lead them to opt for cosmetic surgery (15). When Muñoz asked patients about their reasons for undergoing surgery, some reported feelings of low self-esteem and lack of confidence due to dissatisfaction with their bodies, or more specifically, certain parts of them. Some women resort to surgeries to feel more feminine by undergoing breast augmentation. Self-esteem, as Muñoz explains, is a result of social interactions within the environment and perceptions of others. This demonstrates that despite most rejecting the notion that they act out of pressure rather than their agency and free will, societal pressure still plays a hidden role (11).

Growing up in a collectivist society, young Egyptians, especially girls, are significantly impacted by comments from relatives regarding their appearance (15). The influence of family members is evident in Muñoz's (11) interviews; some patients revealed they received hurtful comments about their looks from family during adolescence, prompting them to decide to have surgery as they grew older. One patient underwent rhinoplasty due to negative comments about her nose from her father, who represents the main patriarchal figure in her life. Egyptian girls pay special attention to their facial features, often willing to undergo plastic surgery to enhance their facial beauty (36). Women who have undergone cosmetic surgeries assert that procedures empower them to gain more control over their bodies, enabling them to mold their bodies according to their desires. They feel empowered and confident post-surgery, rendering any pain experienced insignificant and bearable (11).

4. Conclusion

Plastic surgeries, which started mainly as reconstructive procedures for men warriors, are currently popular as quick solutions to attain the ideal beauty promoted by media. This trend has spread with waves of globalization everywhere, including the Middle East, and Egypt was no exception. The capitalist structure of the Egyptian society has helped in promoting beauty as a commodity to be bought by consumers in the market. The ubiquity of celebrities' images as well as CPS advertisements on social media certainly played a role in women's decision. Young girls care about how others perceive them, particularly their family, thus reflecting the role of society and patriarchy. Egyptian women are scrutinized in their patriarchal society; their bodies are sexualized and judged based on ideal beauty standards.

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