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Plastic Surgery and Bodily Disconnect

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ABSTRACT

This paper tackles the connectedness of plastic surgery and gender norms. Gender norms are a set of rules or ideas that describe the way men and woman are thought correctly to look. They are not based in biology, but rather determined by a feeling that society then defines. This paper tackles the gender norm of the ideal female body image: firm, attractive, young, etc. In this paper, I argue that gender norms have corrupted the notion of our bodies and leave us feeling disconnected from them. Through an intuitive argument, I make that claim that, we, as a society, are becoming less and less connected to our bodies, due to plastic surgery. My paper pertains solely to women going under the knife, as they are more inclined to do so in order to live up the ideal beauty standards they are so often critiqued and scrutinized. In this paper, I highlight an extreme example of plastic surgery featuring young model Pixee Fox in order to discuss the concept of women choosing plastic surgery that could jeopardize their internal health in exchange for outward beauty, exemplifying the disconnect from their body's basic functioning as well as plant the question of whether Pixee and others will ever be able to stop getting work done.

KEYWORDS

Gender Norms, Plastic Surgery, Pixee Fox, Bodily Disconnect, Body Functionality, Rib Removal, Cosmetic Surgery, Ideal Body Image, Rhinoplasty, Augmentation

Plastic surgery and the notion of the ideal female body have coincided quite nicely for a while now. When society tells you that your forehead is looking wrinkled and your mouth is starting to sag and shouldn't be there's something you can do about it. Gender norms have only emphasized this notion. Women nowadays are under much scrutiny when it comes to their appearance, to keep everything tight and firm rather than loose and wrinkled. Plastic surgery is the answer for many women who feel uncomfortable in their skin, with many regarding it as something they do for themselves. However, in a society where gender norms are constantly rehashed and emphasized, this claim needs to be revised. In this paper, I would like to highlight an extreme case of plastic surgery in response to gender norms and affirm that, while women going under the knife may feel better about themselves afterwards, what they don't fully comprehend is the fact that they are willing to jeopardize their internal health in exchange for outward beauty, thus depicting a disconnect from their body's basic functioning.

When we think of gender norms in regards to women, we think of them under the male gaze. Therefore, it's not what a woman is per se but what makes her attractive that gets acknowledgement from the opposite sex. Even President Trump believes that women who are fat and those with flat chests are unattractive, and he is not alone in this assessment. Many woman can feel insecure about their bodies because of the male gaze that objectifies it and demands it to change to what they deem beautiful. This can be evidenced by the male artists who draw women with small waists, large breasts, and a big backside.

Take, for example, model Pixee Fox, aged twenty-five. She has just spent a total of \$120,000 on fifteen surgeries and has had six ribs removed in order to achieve a fourteen-inch-waist because she wants to look like a cartoon character (Brennan 2016). In fact, Pixee stated she was inspired to go under the knife because she wants to look like Jessica Rabbit, Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty*, and Holli Would from *Cool World*. Pixie claims, "Cartoon characters represent the idealization of the female body" (ibid). However, now that so many of her ribs have been removed, Pixee's internal organs, including her liver, have lost some of their natural protection. Pixee, though, isn't worried about the risk to her health if she's in an accident. She states, "Before if I was in a car crash I would have broken my ribs. If that happened now I'm probably going to break my spleen instead" (ibid). However, this also isn't a concern to Pixie as she wears a corset as her artificial ribcage twenty-four/seven.

Pixee's primary reason for going under the knife in the first place was because she felt like she didn't fit in, so after leaving school, she trained as an electrician and saved up for a nose job. Her boyfriend at the time then encouraged her to have two boob jobs that took her from an A-cup to a C-cup. However, it wasn't until after splitting from him that her obsession to become a real-life cartoon really picked up. In total, Pixee has had four rhinoplasties to sculpt the perfect nose and four breast augmentations to inflate her cleavage to a J-cup. Also, her upper eyelids have been operated on and she's had two rounds of liposuction. Pixee has also taken part in injectable fillers to plump her cheeks and lips, and a Brazilian butt lift to give her a more rounded backside. The aspiring model has even had a labiaplasty—a so called "designer vagina" operation that reduces the excess tissue from the labia, as well as CoolSculpting, a non-invasive treatment to freeze fat. She has paid for eleven of the procedures out of her own earnings and savings. The rest, including her fourth breast augmentation, were paid for by fans who have been following her transformation on social media and praising her for being an "inspiration" (ibid).

It is important to note that the inspiration that Pixee has become was almost not achieved, as it took her a while to find a surgeon willing to remove her ribs for cosmetic purposes. She states, "Getting my ribs removed has always been a dream of mine. But it was really hard, almost impossible, to find a surgeon to do it" (ibid). This is because rib removal surgery is not normally done for cosmetic purposes. In fact, the surgery is only recommended for extreme medical cases, such as to stop cancer spreading to the bone, or as a means to stop excess pressure in the thoracic cavity. The reason this is so is because there are heightened complications in the removal of ribs, such as collapsed lung, pneumonia, nerve damage, fracture to one of the other ribs, tearing of the diaphragm, and heaving scarring (ibid).

It is also important to note that Pixee is not immune to shaming. Many people have questioned her motives and deemed them "unhealthy" and "gross." However, as a response, Pixee states, "I see myself as a body-modification artist. This is my job. This is what I do and I'm going to keep on sculpting. It's your life and as long as you're happy and don't hurt anyone, it shouldn't be a problem" (ibid). Is Pixee correct in this assessment? Should she be able to modify her body to such extremes? I pulled up her picture at work to show some coworkers what I'd be writing about and they unanimously agreed that there was something mentally wrong with her for doing this to her body. But is there? After all, all she's doing is

taking gender norms and the notion of the ideal female body to the extreme. Are we allowed to think of her as capturing that concept or disconnecting from her body as a functioning entity?

As a means to answer this question I turn to two articles that deal with cosmetic surgery in different ways. The first article by Kathryn Pauly Morgan argues that cosmetic surgery leads to bodily disconnect, while the second article by Sander Gilman concludes with aesthetic surgery as a means to improve mental health. I would like to argue that through the use of gender norms, there is a disconnect from the body due to plastic surgery, regardless of improved mental health or not.

In her article titled "Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women's Bodies" Kathryn Pauly Morgan depicts the general unhappiness about bodies, specifically women's bodies, and the general cultural influences of the ideal body. She states, "There is no area of the body that is not accessible to the interventions and metamorphoses performed by cosmetic surgeons intent on creating twentieth century versions of 'femina perfecta'" (Pauly Morgan 1998, 329). What this indicates is that there is no part of the body that is safe from the scrutinizing lens of society and the gender norms they strive to fit into and represent.

Another important note that Pauly Morgan makes in her article is the idea of the creation of robo woman. Indeed the beauty culture is suddenly teeming with experts, which consumers of youth and beauty must address in order to ensure that their idealization of the ideal body is the correct one. Not only are there cosmetic surgeons to perform the initial surgery, but now nail technicians, dietitians, hairstylists, cosmetologists, and dermatologists may also be depended on by women who go under the knife as a means of keeping the look longer and on trend. It is important to acknowledge that all of these beauty experts provide services that can be bought. In other words, as Pauly Morgan states, "All these experts are perceived as administering and transforming the human body into an increasingly artificial and ever more perfect object" (Pauly Morgan 1998, 330). From here, we see the transition of the body from a functioning entity to an object that we can change and alter at will. What this indicates is that plastic surgery has caused us to be disconnected from our bodies and destroys our relationship between our bodies. As in the case of Pixee and her removal of six ribs, she never questioned whether or not it was good for her body. Instead, because removing her ribs had always been a dream of hers, she adjusted her lifestyle by mainly

eating vegetables, fruits, and nuts blended into a smoothie with extra vitamins in order to more comfortably wear her corset, which acts as her artificial ribs, and achieve the outcome of having the record-smallest waist (Brennan 2016).

In regards to the shaming that Pixee has received for the extreme alterations of her body, Pauly Morgan includes a paradox of choice in her article on the subject, which implies that after undergoing plastic surgery, one becomes more under the gaze of the male concept of beauty. This proves that gender norms are still a high contributing factor in regards to the notion of the idealization of the female body as well as a means for tempting a woman toward cosmetic surgery. It was mentioned above that Pixee's nose really bothered her, and so that was the first thing she altered when she got the chance. However, after that her boyfriend was able to encourage her to get a boob job from an A-cup to a C-cup, and to which Pixee complied. From there, we can assume that Pixee caught the plastic surgery bug. This is not something that is unheard of in regards to cosmetic surgery. People can form addictions to fixing what they and others deem are wrong with them, which highlights the fact that people nowadays no longer view themselves from the inside out, but from the outside in, contributing to this notion of feeling disconnected from our bodies.

In Sander Gilman's article "The Medicalization of Aesthetic Surgery" the disconnect from functioning body to merely a vessel is highlighted even further. In the Enlightenment, for example, "the desire to efface individual difference came to be part of the creation of a 'public' face, and it slowly became the task of the physician and surgeon to address this need to efface difference" (Gilman 2004, 222). This indicates that one of the main concerns of plastic surgery is to eliminate difference between the members of a society. If we think back to Pixee and her beginning to plastic surgery, she states that she didn't feel like she fit in. However, despite now looking like a cartoon, she feels more comfortable and confident because she believes she is the idealization of beauty. While her differences didn't necessarily get eliminated (instead they just became exaggerated), because Pixee resorted to something that encases the ideal body image, the overall effect is the same. She didn't feel confident but plastic surgery made her feel so.

While this can seem like a good thing, it is also dubious. If we consider Pixee's first rhinoplasty—her very first session of plastic surgery—we can understand how this highlights a form of bodily disconnect. Pixee stated that her nose always bothered her, which we can assume was because it was different than

the stigmatized “beautiful” nose. She goes under the knife in order to achieve a nose that is “just like everyone else’s” in order for it not to bother her anymore. However, functionally speaking, her nose was just fine, perfect even. The only thing that was “wrong” with it was that it didn’t look like how she wanted it to look—what society deemed “beautiful.” This proves the effect that gender norms have on Pixee and others when it comes to body appearance, and thus portrays how the relationship with our bodies has become something we nitpick and change instead of simply take care of.

It is also important to acknowledge that Gilman addresses the relationship between mental health and aesthetic surgery as well. He states, “Beauty surgery is understood as surgery to restore mental health. [...] Making the body beautiful through aesthetic surgery is a means of restoring (mental) health,” (ibid). While mental health does indeed have a strong relationship with one’s overall feeling about oneself, it is important that the body is not compromised in regards to this issue. If we consider Pixee again and her removal of six ribs, we can understand this notion further. In her removal of her ribs, Pixee jeopardizes her lower organs due to the fact that they are no longer naturally protected. While she may feel better about herself having only a sixteen-inch waist, she puts her body at more risk for internal damage if she were ever in a car accident. Therefore, once again, the notion of the body as a functioning thing is lost to a body that can now be changed and altered for aesthetic purposes without anything actually being wrong with it.

Let me be clear that I am not advocating that plastic surgery is a bad thing, or that women do not have the right to their bodies. On the contrary, plastic surgery in conjunction with gender norms, seems to have highlighted a disconnection from our bodies, which we change and alter at will in order to be perceived as beautiful and accepted by society. Plastic surgery, however, I believe, can be good in some cases; for example, reconstructive purposes as a result of an accident. In most circumstances, physical appearance provides some type of self-identity and as a means of how others identify each other. Cosmetic surgery can be viewed as a good thing in regards to an identity standpoint because it allows for facial reconstruction, among other things, that may help recapture the characteristics that someone lost due to a burn accident, for example. However, I do believe that plastic surgery has correlated to the objectification of the body, and therefore, led women specifically to feel disconnected from their bodies. Since a majority of the

time, women are not using plastic surgery for reconstructive purposes but rather as a means of improving their mental health, this skews the relationship between the person and the body. Instead of person and body being a unified thing, the body is seen instead as separate, something that can be accessorized, a mere fashion statement.

If we turn again to Pixee as an example, we can comprehend this sentiment a little better. Pixee has based all her surgeries on the concept of a cartoon, which she believes is the idealization of female beauty. However, we live in a society where these norms constantly change, so it may not be farfetched to assume that she will not always be the idealization of female beauty. We have to wonder, then, if she's willing to modify herself yet again in order to comply with everyone else's standards.

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