

Narco-culture, Narco-aesthetic and the Plastic Surgery Phenomenon in Colombia

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The topic being discussed in this paper is the influence of narco-culture and narco-aesthetics on gender ideologies, emphasized femininity and the plastic surgery phenomenon in Colombia. Narco-culture is a subculture which originated in Colombia and Mexico in the Narco era (1960s-1980s). Narco-culture aims to reorganize relationships to match the ideals of the drug trafficking world. Such ideals are based on misogyny (fear and hatred of women with power) and sexism (the favoring of one sex over the other, both ideologically and in practice) (Wade and Ferree 35). The social construct of narco-culture revolves around the idea of a “macho” (emotionless and powerful) man and his ownership of a voluptuous, objectified woman. Narco-aesthetics is the perception and construction of beauty influenced by narco-culture, which is characterized by women with perky breasts, large behinds, and a curvy toned physique (Salazar et al. 63). Consequently, women in these cultures surgically modify their bodies to match such social construction of beauty: this has been described as the plastic surgery phenomenon.

Narco-culture and Narco-aesthetics are of great significance to the study of sociology of gender. Narco-culture alters gender ideologies (widely shared beliefs about how men and women are and should be) to match those of the drug trafficking world (Wade and Ferree 27). Narco-aesthetics promote emphasized femininity (an exaggerated form of femininity oriented to accommodate the interest and desires of men) and encourages women to surgically alter their

bodies (Wade and Ferree 45). In addition, the plastic surgery phenomenon observed in Colombia is a retrograde movement that promotes the patriarchy and discourages female empowerment (Salazar et al. 82).

Colombia is a country that has been strongly affected by armed conflict, drug trafficking, and corruption. Up until the 1940s, postcolonial Colombian society was based on the Catholic religion and the patriarchal model that accompanies it. The armed conflict that started in 1964 and the further rise of narco-trafficking in the 1980s led Colombian society to change abruptly. In the 1980s, the exponential increase in drug trafficking, drug cartels, and armed conflicts caused the adoption of narco-culture. Although the patriarchal model stayed intact, gender roles and ideals completely changed. Men who were previously expected to act as good family men were now encouraged to act degrading towards women and were praised for their objectification of females. There was a shift in general hegemonic masculinity. Men were now seeking to match the gendered ideals of narco-culture through the use of arms and violence to prove their superiority. Women's gender roles also changed: their new role was to be objectified and shown off for their physical attributes. Previously, Catholic religion encouraged women to cover themselves; however, narco-culture promoted the showing of skin through low cut shirts and mini-skirts. This was the adoption of narco-aesthetics which is formally defined as "a social phenomenon that modifies the system of relationships of subjects in a specific domain of interaction: drug trafficking. In this scenario the female body is subjected to decorative-ornamental surgical changes modifying the representations and mindsets of beauty" (Salazar et al. 63).

Those involved in the drug trafficking world were always seen with a voluptuous woman by their side; consequently, this became the female ideal of narco-aesthetics. There was a shift in what was considered beautiful in a woman; large behinds and perky breasts were now sought by men and desired by women. The reinforcement of emphasized femininity caused by narco-culture led to the plastic surgery phenomenon, in which women surgically alter their bodies to match the unrealistic ideals of narco-aesthetics. It is argued that in the case of Colombian women, the trend to surgically alter their bodies is explained by their desire for social acceptance (Salazar et al. 70). Narco-culture only acknowledges women for their physical

attributes; therefore, surgical alteration to match the narco-aesthetic ideals would bring attention and social acceptance. Salazar, Pena and Giraldo explain that when a woman alters her body, the man she is seen with is viewed as socially powerful as he possesses a female body that has been altered for his needs and satisfaction (71).

The Colombian plastic surgery phenomenon remained even after the end of the narco-era. After drug trafficking decreased around the 1990s, the trends, ideals, and roles imposed by narco-culture persisted. Sociologist Anthony Elliot attempts to explain why the plastic surgery phenomenon has been adopted in contemporary societies. Elliot interviews plastic surgeon David Hargreaves who explains that the exponential increase in aesthetic procedures in the 1990s caused the field to become more lucrative than humanistic. Hargreaves argues that a great portion of individuals get aesthetic procedures as a marketing technique to increase opportunities. Since we live in a society in which we are instantly judged by our appearance, altering the body to match the ideals of society causes an increase in labor opportunities (Elliot 147).

Hargreaves uses the example of one of his patients, Amanda Brown, to clarify the effect of gender roles on the large demand for plastic surgery. Amanda Brown first came in for a breast reduction; however, Brown returned for a second surgery to modify her implants from a size C to a double DD. Brown expressed how she needed to get the second surgery because she was not meeting her husband's expectations of standing out physically as his companion in important social events related to his work. In the case of Brown, she was being required to embrace emphasized femininity and aesthetically alter her body to meet gender ideals for her husband's satisfaction and social acceptance. It is explained in this analysis how the female ideals imposed in places like Colombia are extremely unrealistic. Narco-aesthetics display the desire for perky, round breasts with perfectly proportioned nipples. Elliot explains how such ideals of the perfect breasts are those that would only naturally be seen in an adolescent, making them unattainable for an adult woman to obtain without a surgical procedure (Elliot 148). When young females are surrounded by narco-culture in their upbringing, the reinforcement of unrealistic body expectations leads to body dysmorphia. Elliot explains how plastic surgery has become a social drug that enhances acceptance in societies strongly affected by unrealistic gender ideals, such as those found in Colombia (Elliot 150). This is a vicious cycle; the large rate

of aesthetic surgeries reinforces narco-aesthetic ideals which promotes female oppression which encourages plastic surgery. The sexist and misogynistic views of narco-culture and the gender ideals of narco-aesthetics will keep being engraved into Colombian culture as long as the demand for plastic surgery prevails.

Throughout his analysis, Elliot demonstrates the connection between the plastic surgery phenomenon, globalization, and a need for economic development. Plastic surgery is a million-dollar industry which feeds off insecurities and fear of social isolation (Elliot 160). The cosmetic surgery industry in Colombia has been exponentially growing due to high demand and medical tourism. Consequently, the reinforcement of the narco-aesthetic ideals in Colombia serves an economical purpose. From a capitalistic standpoint, it is beneficial to reinforce unrealistic female ideals. Colombia gained a reputation internationally as one of the best locations for medical tourism; it is currently rated second in most medical tourism patients per surgeon (Campbell et al. 1). The income from medical tourism has become vital for Colombia's economy over the last decade; thus, the government has invested millions in infrastructure and publicity (Campbell et al. 1). In a study measuring patient satisfaction in Colombia conducted by Campbell, Restrepo, and Navas, it was found that there is a satisfaction rate of 97-100% reported by international customers (2). The government itself has invested in publicity that reinforces the stereotype of Colombian women to attract tourism. Brochures with females in bikinis displaying their large attributes encouraging tourists to travel to Colombia for medical purposes are spread internationally (Campbell et al. 2). Although this publicity is effective, it does promote the objectification of Colombian women and takes advantage of the gender roles and ideals imposed by narco-culture.

It is estimated that more than 250,000 plastic surgeries are performed in Colombia every year—this number excludes those which are performed illegally (Salazar et al. 64). In the last 5 years, plastic surgery rates in Colombia have increased by 70% among the female population (Salazar et al. 63). The high demand for plastic surgery caused Colombia's medical system to adapt to the needs of society. Consequently, millions were invested into new plastic surgery methods, plastic surgery ICUs, and plastic surgery residencies. In Cali, Colombia, more than 20 million dollars have been invested in

the past 5 years to build 20 new plastic surgery clinics despite 110 clinics already operating with the same purpose (Salazar et al. 78).

There is a famous and renowned Colombian saying that states “sin tetas no hay paraíso” which translates to: “without tits there is no paradise”. This sums up the ideals of narco-culture, narco-aesthetics and the extent to which these views have been engraved in Colombian society. The narco era greatly harmed Colombian society by influencing gender roles and promoting female objectification and oppression. Narco-aesthetics, narco-culture, and its ideologies regarding female beauty have prevailed in Colombia even after the end of the narco era. The great need to match narco-aesthetics beauty ideals has created an exponential increase in plastic surgery normalizing the act of aesthetically altering the body for means of social acceptance, giving birth to the plastic surgery phenomenon. The great demand for plastic surgery shaped Colombia's economy and constructed an internationally sought industry which reinforces negative stereotypes and female objectification. The adoption and prevalence of narco-culture in Colombia and its effects on society are a phenomenon of great importance to the study of sociology of gender. Narco-culture has created a retrograde social movement that promotes inequality, supports unrealistic female ideals, and places women in an inescapable position of inferiority.

Works Cited

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