

# The New Norms of Cosmetic Surgery among Youth in Malaysia

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**Abstracts:** Aesthetics is a complex concept that makes it hard for humans to define beauty. Beauty is a relative term and varies from person to person. The desire to be beautiful is natural among most human beings nowadays. The main objective to conduct this research was to study the views of cosmetic surgery among youth in Malaysia. The specific objectives were to explore the causes that drive youth to undergo cosmetic surgery, to find out the physical and psychological effects on youth who underwent cosmetic surgery and to analyze the acceptance of cosmetic surgery as a common norm and an accepted form of self-improvement. This research focused on youth who underwent cosmetic surgery, between the ages of 15 to 40 years olds in Malaysia. The qualitative method chosen for this research was face-to-face interviews on four respondents using open-ended questions to obtain real data. This study informed about diverse perspectives of beauty which were held by different people from various backgrounds. The factors that influence youth were to enhance their appearance encountering the criticisms from public and to boost their confidence. However, the effects of doing so could be devastating as the risks are unpredictable. It is recommended that future research on this topic may include more respondents of diverse ages especially older men and women to find the extent of the factors.

**Keywords:** Cosmetic Surgery, Youth, Norm, Malaysia, Beauty.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Beauty” is a word that is hard to define. The definition of beauty is varied among peoples in this world, everyone has his or her own preference in defining beauty. The desire to chase “beauty” has become natural among most human beings nowadays. The appearance of an individual is an indicator for people to define the beauty applied to a particular person. It is not only difficult to measure the beauty of one-self but also how a person judges people's appearance. According to Sartwell (2016), different people have different measurements on how a person looks like and it eventually comes to judgments on a particular person. It is possible to disagree or argue about whether something is beautiful, but it is still a subjective noun that can be defined, which everyone agrees on. To reach their own expectation or even other people's expectation, people nowadays are willing to make a drastic change in themselves.

When it comes to one's appearance, it is undeniable that people cannot blame anyone else for their appearance and they have no power to make their faces look how they want. In this era of modern technologies, the service of surgery has saved people whoever want to change or improve their appearance. It cannot be refuted that having surgery is the only way to make a person change his/her appearance (Nainan, 2017).

There are two categories of surgeries that improve appearance: cosmetic surgery and plastic surgery. Both the surgeries deal with improving one's body, but the focus for these two types of surgeries is different. Cosmetic surgery focuses on enhancing appearance of an individual while the procedures, techniques and principles of cosmetic surgery are entirely focused on improving the aesthetic appeal, symmetry and proportions of an individual's appearance (Walker, et.al 2022). Cosmetic surgery can be performed on all areas of the head, neck and body. The treated areas generally function properly, and cosmetic surgery is an elective practiced by doctors from various medical fields, including plastic surgeons. For plastic surgery, it is focused on repairing defects to reconstruct a normal function of the part of body and appearance (Walker, et.al 2022). Plastic surgery is a surgical

specialty dedicated to reconstruction of facial and body defects such as birth disorders, trauma, burns and diseases. The service of plastic surgery helps to correct dysfunctional areas of the body and reconstruct it into natural disposition. Many surgeons choose to have additional training and perform cosmetic surgery, but the basis of their surgical training remains reconstructive plastic surgery (Chelly, 2022). It shows that the need for cosmetic surgery to enhance appearance is becoming a norm in society. Moreover, Morrison and Colin (2008) had mentioned that the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons changed its name to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons in 1999 to strongly implement the message that “plastic and reconstructive surgeons are one and the same.” There is a clear example to distinguish the difference between cosmetic surgery and plastic surgery. The surgery on breast in cosmetic surgery can be breast enhancement, augmentation and reduction; but it is called breast reconstruction as the procedures of these both surgeries are different (Nainan, 2017).

By saying having cosmetic surgery as well as plastic surgery is becoming a norm in the society, this phenomenon has triggered this research to study the views of youths in Malaysia towards these surgeries. This study looked at 15 years old to 40 years old Malaysian youth focusing on the effects of cosmetic surgery in enhancing beauty. It is questioned, why the major focus is not on plastic surgery because the purpose to enhance the beauty of one-self is different and not the whole society has the same views.

The purpose of this study is two folds:

1. To investigate the effects of cosmetic surgery on youth who underwent it.
2. To explore the intentions of youth to opt for cosmetic surgery.

Therefore, this research focuses on the following research questions:

1. What are the factors that push youth to go through cosmetic surgery?
2. Does peer pressure or personal desire affect youth on making decision to go for the enhancement of the appearance?
3. What are the major changes in a youth's life after undergoing surgery?
4. Does this surgery boost the youth's self-esteem?

### **1.1 Objectives**

The main objective to conduct this research was to study the views of cosmetic surgery among youth in Malaysia. The primary objectives were:

1. To explore the causes that drive the youth to undergo cosmetic surgery.
2. To find out the physical and psychological effects on the youth who underwent cosmetic surgery.
3. To analyze the acceptance of cosmetic surgery as a common norm and an accepted form of self-improvement.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this era of science and technology, it is not surprising to know that people surrounding us have gone through some form of cosmetic surgery. Cosmetic surgery is becoming a new trend in this era where beauty is the standard threshold for everyone especially among the youth (Chelly, 2022). Based on the statistics given by American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) (2016), the data shows a slight increase in cosmetic procedures from the year 2014 which was 15.6 million cases to 15.9 million cases in **2015**. In other words, cosmetic surgery is booming up due to the demand of people which has escalated drastically.

### **2.1 Definitions of Cosmetic Surgery, Plastic Surgery and Reconstructive Surgery**

It is believed that many people may misunderstand cosmetic surgery, plastic surgery, and reconstructive surgery. However, there are various understandings from different people. Based on the understandings by Losee et. al. (2015), plastic surgery and reconstructive surgery are the fields of surgery which help a patient to restore form and function from both congenital and acquired defects. According to Hassan and Zachary (2013) and Naing

(2008), they believed that cosmetic surgery is a field that provides advice and treatment for patients who have a desired cosmetic goal to achieve. In the other terms, cosmetic surgery is for personal enhancement. However, to differentiate between cosmetic surgery and plastic surgery, United States allows, and it is legal for any doctor to carry out cosmetic surgery while contrary with cosmetic surgery, plastic surgery is the sub-speciality that is only recognized by American Board of Medical Specialists to surgically fix form and function from defects (Naing, 2008). Granzow (2018) had given another explanation where reconstructive surgery is done on an abnormal structure of a body while cosmetic surgery is aimed to reshape normal structure of a body and are both under plastic surgery.

## **2.2 Acceptance of Cosmetic Surgery**

In this diversified world, acceptance and attitude toward cosmetic surgery seem to be different on each individual as it is depending on the degree of one who cares about their physical appearance and their own opinion which is based on social construction. In fact, there are many factors that influence people's thoughts towards cosmetic surgery. For example, factors based on social opinion towards gender, influence from media and religious perspective (Chelly, 2022).

The factors that influence the acceptance of cosmetic surgery, for example, social opinion towards gender plays an important role since women tend to be more likely to be involved in cosmetic surgery than men. (Brown, Furnham, Glanville, & Swami, 2007). According to the statistics provided by American Society for Aesthetic Surgery (ASAPS) (2017), there are 92.3% women who underwent surgical procedures followed by 90.8% of non-surgical procedure on cosmetic surgery. While only 7.7% of men who underwent surgical procedure and 9.2% experienced non-surgical procedures on cosmetic surgery. Barber (2016) stated that the reason for women being more concerned about their appearance compared with men is because of the social promotion and marketing of feminine images.

Besides, media is also one of the factors that affects the acceptance of cosmetic surgery. Media is very powerful as presumptions is always formed by an individual with the influence of media whenever one's exposed to it (Gunther & Storey, 2003). As what we can see, every media tends to employ people who have better physical appearance to attract audience or customer. Hence, this incident affects people's idea on appearance causing them to decide to undergo cosmetic surgery for a better physical appearance.

Furthermore, religion can also influence people's opinion about their acceptance toward cosmetic surgery. People are not free to make their own choices no matter what is their gender, age, ethnicity, and lifestyle. Religions can somehow affect the thinking and behaviour of a person. For example, there is an Islamic rule where each person should be satisfied for things that is given and created by Allah s.w.t. However, Bishara, et.al, (2008) explained that "changing the creation of Allah s.w.t." states that the practise of plastic surgery is not an act which goes against Islamic rule when it is done to bring advantage to an individual.

## **2.3 Factors in Seeking Cosmetic Surgery**

Everything happens for a reason. The reasons that cause an individual to seek cosmetic surgery are similar in much research. The most common reason that was obtained from various research is a lower self-rating of physical attractiveness. Thereby, they seek for cosmetic surgery to help them boost their own self-esteem (Chelly, 2022). Based on research done by Kee (2017), she stated that the top five reasons for an individual to undergo cosmetic surgery are to boost self-esteem, to have a better attractiveness, to have an improvement in appearance and to gain conformity by others. Higher percentage of people who have cosmetic surgery have a lower self-rating of physical attractiveness, they fail to attain ideal body shape that is acceptable by society and have experienced cosmetic surgery before (Brown et al., 2007). Additionally, Markey and Markey (2009), discovered that body dissatisfaction, low self- rating on physical appearance, teasing from others and media influence on the ideal physical appearance are the reasons that caused people to look forward for cosmetic surgery.

## **2.4 Effects of Cosmetic Surgery**

What are the positive and negative effects of cosmetic surgery? For good effects, Menezes (2016) pointed out that cosmetic surgery can help to boost one's self-esteem, provide professional advantage to those who work in industries like dancer, waiter, and receptionist, provide support for individuals to overcome their social stigma and more. On the other hand, the bad effects are individuals must spend weeks to months for recovery, get addicted to cosmetic surgery until it destroys their natural look as well as to face the risks of surgery such as scars, loss of blood, and the worst is death (Menezes, 2016). Besides, the cost that is needed for cosmetic surgery is also relatively high as it creates more burden to patients who are not rich (Eblin, 2017).

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

This section discusses the research methods used, data collection, research population and research sampling. The methodology includes tools and instruments, area of the study, the scope of parameter and code of ethics.

Qualitative research methods were applied to achieve an idealistically solid and holistic data. According to Flick (2009), qualitative research is understood as "a naturalistic, interpretative approach, concerned with exploring phenomena 'from the interior' and taking the perspectives and accounts of research participants as a starting point." To attain a substantial outcome in this research, the correlation between the factors of youth undergoing cosmetic surgery and the aftermath of the surgery, the researcher applied an objective view in pursuance of observing the effects of cosmetic surgery in the global standpoint to portray a full characterization on the concerns of cosmetic surgery. Consequently, the researchers perceived and focalized the judgement and point of view from the global standpoint into the local perspective to uncover the surrounding reality.

### **3.1 Data Collection**

Primary data is given emphasis in this research to gather relevant information. According to Henn, Weintein and Foard (2006, p.189), this approach enabled the researchers to measure the variables and to retrieve data in a more precise form. Data collected on the viewpoints and assumptions of the respondents towards the correlation between the factors of youth that underwent cosmetic surgery, and the aftermath of the surgery was obtained using in-depth interviews.

Moreover, fresh, and detailed understanding and perception of the exclusive knowledge was achieved through primary data. Whereas contextual information of the research background was acquired through document review, but the researchers opted for the subjective views of the informants. Henn, Weintein and Foard (2006, p.19) additionally assert that a qualitative researcher adopts "interaction with the respondents instead of utilizing the existing information and data".

### **3.2 Research Population**

This research focused on youth who underwent cosmetic surgery, between the ages of 15 to 40 years old. For the research, the respondents were chosen to undergo the interviewing process. This method enabled the researchers to extract a wider viewpoint of data from the respondents' narratives on the experiences they underwent before and after the cosmetic surgery. It included factors that drove them to undergo the surgery, the approval from their social institution and the aftermath they faced.

A sample which is applied for a precise objective is a purposive sample, which is utilized in this research. Babbie (1995, p.285) noted that the information, experiences, and extensive feedback given by the respondents benefit the interpretation and contemplation in the research. The selection of the respondents of this study was based on their first-hand experience and long-term effect of the cosmetic surgery, that provided insight on how Malaysian society reacts to the newfound abnormality, cosmetic surgery, and how they treat these situations.

### 3.3 Research Sampling

Non-probability sampling was put in use in this research in which to “obtain insights into a phenomenon, individuals or events and setting for this phase that maximizes understanding of the underlying phenomenon” (Onwuebuze & Collins, 2007). The respondents were chosen on purpose instead of random sampling who could provide relevant data for the researchers. This method of sampling was suitable for narrative analysis that required thorough unravelling.

Within the perimeter of non-probability sampling, judgmental sampling was chosen for this research. This sampling method required the researcher to select the respondents based on their analogous knowledge and the research objectives. Flick (2009) stated that “additionally, cases may be selected according to the intensity with which the interesting features, processes, experiences, and so on are given or assumed in them.”

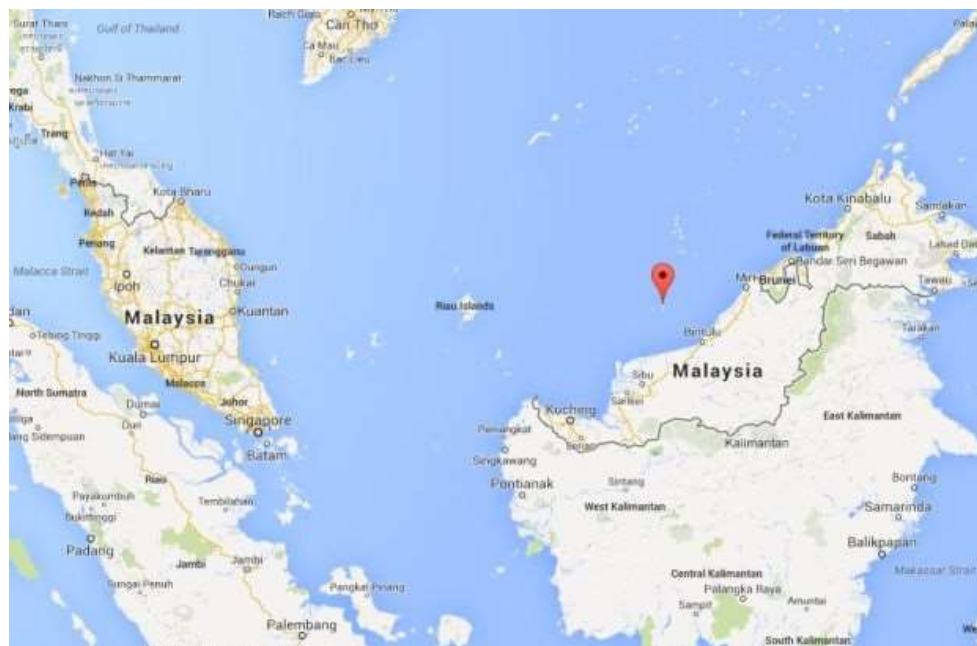
### 3.4 Study Instruments

The qualitative method chosen for this research was face-to-face interviews. The interview design utilized open-ended questions to obtain real data. Interviews with the respondents took start by making appointments.

### 3.5 Study Area

The research was carried in different locations of Malaysia as the respondents came from different states of the country. Malaysia is in Southeast Asia, in between Thailand and Singapore. The country contains 13 states and 3 federal territories and is distinct with two islands: Peninsular Malaysia and Malaysian Borneo that contain a total of over 30 million populations.

The map below shows distant locations of Malaysia.



**Figure 1.** Map of Malaysia

Source: Google Map

### 3.6 Code of Ethics

The respondents gave their consent to participate in the research. The dignity and privacy of the respondents

were taken into consideration. According to Flick (2009), "beyond these researchers need to guarantee participants' confidentiality, which means that the information about them is only used in a way which makes it impossible for other person to identify the participants or for any institution to use it against the interest of the participant."

#### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

There are many reasons causing a person to undergo cosmetic surgery. In this study, based upon the objectives the researcher focused on, first, to identify the causes that drove youth to go for cosmetic surgery. Second, it was about how post cosmetic surgery affected their life. Lastly it was on analysing the level of acceptance on cosmetic surgery and how common it is among the youth nowadays. The amount of cosmetic surgery clinics and hospitals are growing so rapidly to the extent that it is so easy to be accessed by just anyone. Four respondents were interviewed, and they were Steve (23 years old), Kinock (20 years old), Yen Yen (25 years old) and the last respondent who chose to keep her identity confidential (24 years old).

##### **4.1 Causes for Undergoing Cosmetic Surgery**

According to Steve, he underwent nose bridge surgery two years ago. That cost him RM 2000, and he paid the cost using his own money as he had already started working. The reason he underwent cosmetic surgery was to make himself look better, and by doing so, it boosted his confidence as well. Besides just doing his nose, he also said that he would go for another surgery on his eyes.

The next respondent was Kinock, he underwent double eyelid surgery once two months ago, which cost him RM 2000, too. He paid the surgery fee by using his saving from part time work. The reason he went for cosmetic surgery was because he thought that having double eyelid would make his eyes looks larger, and that would make him look more handsome. The other cause that made him undergo surgery was because of people saying his eyes were small and that kind of comments made him feel very uncomfortable. He also said that after this surgery, he is not planning for another surgery for the time being.

Moving on to Yen Yen, she has undergone nose enhancement surgery. Her reason of undergoing cosmetic surgery was quite surprising as she did it out of interest, which is a lot different than the other respondents. Her nose surgery cost her approximately RM 2300. For the time being, she would not be going for any other surgeries as she must maintain her nose for a year. The last respondent underwent several surgeries on her eyes, nose, lips, chin and forehead. This respondent had cosmetic surgery due to her friends' influence. All her friends underwent cosmetic surgery which caused her to be very curious on what cosmetic surgery really was about. When she started to understand what cosmetic surgery was, she started to invest more in it. During the interview, she said that "no one will reject a chance to become more attractive". All these surgeries cost her RM 50,000 in total, and she was not regretting in doing so. She paid the cost by using her salary through a freelancing job. She has stated that she would go for more surgeries in the future to make herself even prettier. According to Kinnunen (2010), cosmetic surgery is said to give a new phase of life, helping people to have a better look and better life.

##### **4.2 Effects of Cosmetic Surgery**

Moving on to the second part of the discussion, this section covers how post cosmetic surgery affected the lives of the four respondents. Before asking how cosmetic surgery had changed their life, the interviewer started by asking the respondents whether they knew about the existing risk. According to Steve, he shared that he was aware of the risk, and he still accepted it as he trusted the service. He chose surgery to look better as he was willing to take the risk. He was also asked how he felt after the surgery. According to Steve, he said that after his surgery, he felt more confident than before. He said that cosmetic surgery really helped him in making himself look better. The interviewer asked Kinock whether he knew about the risk as well, and he said that he was aware of it and was willing to withstand the consequences as he trusted the service provided by the clinic of his choice. After the surgery, Kinock was satisfied with his appearance, and he could portray great confidence.

As for Yen Yen, she thinks that cosmetic surgery was very safe and the risk of doing it was not very high, so the

risk did not stop her from going for surgery. The reason why Yen Yen went for the surgery was because of her interest, so even after she underwent the surgery, she did not really feel any difference. Lastly, the respondent that remained anonymous said that she knew about the risk for undergoing cosmetic surgery as well, but she pointed out that there was a price to pay for wanting to be prettier. Even if there was risk, the respondent still chose to go for the surgery. The surgeries that she underwent really changed her life. She started to get more job opportunities from modeling companies for her attractiveness, and that really helped her to be more confident than she was before. According to Klassen et al. (2009), their studies on satisfaction of women who underwent breast surgery, showed that people who underwent surgery tended to be more satisfied of themselves and became more confident.

### **4.3 Acceptance of Cosmetic Surgery in Society**

Sperry et. al (2009) reported that the acceptance of cosmetic surgery is very much depended on the viewership of reality cosmetic surgery television shows. There are a lot of Korean and China reality shows airing on the television portraying the feminine image of women. The emergence of such reality shows has depicted how important having a good physical appearance to the women in this era as they are willing to trade their own health and money to have a flawless and ideal face in return. The exposure to media has shown the greater acceptance of cosmetic surgery among the population of young women. Other than that, Henderson-King et. al. (2005) showed that the acceptance of cosmetic surgery is associated with the women's body image experiences, whereby they are dissatisfied with their appearance and experiencing body image disturbance. As such, they view cosmetic surgery more positively. Specifically, the concept of "celebrity worship", or the adoration of celebrities as role models has been planted in the minds of younger generation as a normal part of identity-development. They often imitate the style of fashion, and even their physical appearance as the celebrities may be known as the exemplars of social or physical ideals in the concept of "celebrity worship" (Giles & Maltby, 2004). Likewise, the greater willingness to alter one's physical appearance to conform to the societal standards of beauty as the celebrities portrayed.

According to the respondents, they have common consensus that cosmetic surgery is a normal phenomenon in this era of technology. All our respondents went through facial cosmetic surgery as face is the most significant part of the body to categorise a person is good-looking or not. Yen Yen who went through a nose job, stated that she decided to undergo surgery due to her personal interest. Steven, underwent Rhinoplasty, which is also known as nose bridge. Kinock, a 20-year-old, requested a surgery on double-fold eyelid. Three out of four respondents only went through surgery once, but the anonymous respondent underwent facial cosmetic surgery for more than 5 times for eyes, nose, chin, lips, as well as forehead. According to her, she stated that she did return to the clinic just for touch-up as dermal fillers need to be touched up after a few months since it will be absorbed by the skin. Compared to other respondents, she has more experience on the cosmetic surgery as she started her journey in this realm for one year ago, and she would definitely go for more surgeries in the future if necessary.

The acceptance of these respondents for cosmetic surgery is higher as they would consider going for another surgery in the future. This is because they view cosmetic surgery as an opportunity to enhance their appearance, to boost their self-esteem, and to gain more job opportunities. After gaining better physical attractiveness, they are living their life better than it used to be as the changes on their appearance have brought them some beneficial alterations in their lives. The respondents' opinions in defining beauty are by having regular and clear facial features. For the anonymous respondent, her opinion was that women should possess both inner and outer beauty. However, the societal acceptance of cosmetic surgery is still an issue to be overcome as some of the people around the respondents discriminate or criticise them for changing their own original features that were born with. It is a disrespectful act towards their parents. Nevertheless, in the opinions of the respondents, their family members, especially their parents have been supportive of their decisions in going through the cosmetic surgery.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The definition of beauty is diverse for everyone. Some reckon that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, while some do not think it in that way. Some people have the views that beauty should come from one's inside, instead of

judging one by the physical appearance, whereas some people may object this statement by suggesting people should possess both inner and outer beauty.

This research has broadened our views by looking at diverse perspectives of beauty which are held by different people from various backgrounds. The acceptance of Malaysian society in changing one's natural looks to a better one is still not greater than other countries even though the society acknowledged that cosmetic surgery is a common phenomenon among Malaysians now. The factors that have driven the people to take up the surgery are mainly because they want to enhance their appearance, as well as to boost their own level of confidence. The conformity is important for youth as it gives them an identity to fit well in the peer group. Most of them are hoping to change themselves to be accepted and impress others with higher status in the society, altering one's physical appearance to gain more physical attractiveness is one of the methods. However, the effects of doing so could be devastating as the risks are unpredictable. Every action has its own consequences. Some surgeries could leave permanent side effects to the body of the clients, and there are some side effects which are just too negligible to the clients.

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