Gyasi, C 2026, 'Imago Dei and the 'Perfect' Body: a Theological and Missiological Reflection on Liposuction Trends Among Urban African Christians', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 3 pp. 101-124

Imago Dei and the 'Perfect' Body: a Theological and Missiological Reflection on Liposuction Trends Among Urban African Christians

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of theology and missiology with the contemporary social realities of African life. It focuses on the increasing prevalence of elective liposuction patronised by both men and women despite reported instances of post-operative complications and mortality. The study pairs the *imago Dei* doctrine with Bourdieu's physical capital theory. This framework contrasts the theological baseline of sacred human dignity with secular socioeconomic pressures compelling urban African Christians to modify the body as capital. It postulates that the drive for body modification often signals deeper existential and psychological anxieties. From a theological perspective, purely cosmetic liposuction challenges foundational Christian virtues such as bodily stewardship, the *imago Dei*, and divine sovereignty in creation. It concludes that the prevalence of elective liposuction necessitates a robust missiological response, urging theologians to address how 'body re-creation' impacts the integrity of the Christian witness in a modernised African context.

Introduction

This paper provides a critical analysis of liposuction as a burgeoning medical and cultural phenomenon by applying theological and missiological paradigms

to contemporary societal issues. Drawing on empirical data, the study categorises participant motivations into socioeconomic, psychological, and physiological frameworks. The discussion evaluates the clinical implications of these procedures and engages with the conceptual debate surrounding liposuction as either a form of body enhancement or a more radical body re-creation.

It provides a robust theological and missiological reflection on the phenomenon of cosmetic body modification, culminating in a synthesised evaluation of its broader implications for the contemporary faith community. By examining the practice of liposuction through the lens of Christian stewardship and cultural engagement, the analysis investigates how such physical alterations intersect with the core tenets of the gospel. This examination unpacks the profound impact of these procedures on both the collective Christian witness in a modernising society and the fundamental anthropological integrity of the individual believer. Through this critical synthesis, the study offers a nuanced framework for understanding how the church could constructively respond to the shifting bodily ethics of its adherents while safeguarding the holistic scriptural view of the human person.

Generally, liposuction is a procedure in cosmetic surgery for removing excess fat from under the skin by suction and in some cases depositing it in preferred parts of the body such as the bottom, thighs, abdomen, back, arms, and legs, in which case sculpting is needed (Beidas and Gusenoff 2021:658e–668e). Liposuction as a procedure of local anaesthesia was developed by a dermatologist called Jeffrey Klein and there are many types, namely: suction-assisted liposuction, tumescent liposuction, ultrasound-assisted liposuction, and laser-assisted liposuction. Each of these procedures has its own merits and demerits (Henke and Coleman 1999:899–902).

Through liposuction, the body shape of an individual is no longer a matter of external features peculiar to a particular family or bloodline but an ‘asset’ that could be acquired. The results of liposuction in terms of tremendous body shape transformation challenges the science of acquiring the same through regular exercise and healthy dieting. This is because, while regular exercise may take a longer period for the desired body transformation to occur,

liposuction is able to offer it within three to six months after the procedure, albeit with some considerable risks.

According to the University of Rochester's online 'Health Encyclopedia', plastic surgery is not artificial surgery. The word 'plastic' is derived from the ancient Greek word *plastikos*, which is rendered as 'mould' or 'given form'. Thus, plastic surgery helps those who opt for it to improve their appearance and get their facial and body tissue defects caused by accidents, illness, trauma, or birth disorders reconstructed or repaired (University of Rochester Medicine 2022).

Medicine is not the field of expertise of this researcher. Medical claims and assumptions made in this paper with respect to the issue of liposuction are based on general reading and conversations with a plastic surgeon, general medical practitioners, and research participants. However, the theological and missiological assumptions made in this paper are the author's.

This study adopted a dual-theoretical framework, pairing the substantialist doctrine of the *imago Dei* with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of physical capital. While the former provides the theological baseline regarding the sacred, immutable dignity of human embodiment, the latter illuminates the secular economic and social pressures that compel urban African Christians to treat the body as modifiable capital (Barth 1958:183–194; Bourdieu 1986).

At this juncture, the central inquiry concerns the underlying motivations for elective liposuction among African Christians. This fundamental question provides the conceptual framework for this study. To operationalise the primary research objective, the following subsidiary inquiries were established. (1) What are the clinical and conceptual definitions of liposuction within the current discourse? (2) What is the extent of empirical exposure to the procedure among the target demographic, either through personal experience or secondary observation? (3) Through what theological frameworks can practitioners justify the recourse to liposuction within the Christian faith?

The next section discusses the methods selected by the researcher.

Methods

The primary research question is why some African Christians choose to undergo liposuction. To comprehensively address this question, the study systematically deployed a carefully selected suite of qualitative research methods. Operating within this paradigm allowed for a deep, nuanced exploration of the intersection between religious faith, cultural pressures, and modern body modification choices. The methodological architecture of this investigation was structured into three distinct, interconnected phases: participant sampling, rigorous data collection, and systematic data analysis. By utilising these synchronised phases, the study successfully captured the lived experiences, personal testimonies, and underlying theological and missiological rationales of the participants. This ensured a robust, contextualised interpretation of the phenomenon within contemporary African Christian spaces.

Sampling

To assemble a highly relevant and articulate cohort, this phase of the investigation strategically combined two non-probability techniques: purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The initial stage of recruitment relied on a purposive approach, which deliberately selected information-rich cases that aligned directly with the core objectives of the research. Specifically, the researcher established a strict inclusion criterion targeting individuals within the age demographic of twenty-five to fifty-five years. The methodological literature establishes that this specific lifecycle bracket demonstrates the highest statistical interest in, and psychological inclination toward, undergoing liposuction procedures. Following this initial selection, snowball sampling was integrated to leverage the personal networks of the primary participants, expanding the sample size through a trusted chain-referral mechanism highly effective for sensitive or deeply personal subjects (Bryman 2012:416; Sarantakos 2013:277–279).

Two Christian traditions in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, were selected for the study. One of them was the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition and the other, the historic mission-oriented tradition. The former was selected due to its ability to attract a lot of middle-class women and men. Also, the

Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition was adjudged by scholars as the fastest growing Christian tradition globally. As such, it represents the face of global Christianity in contemporary times (Anderson 2013:1; Lindhardt 2018:1; Ma, Kärkkäinen, and Asamoah-Gyadu 2014:8).

The historic mission-oriented tradition was also selected due to its longevity, its solid theological foundation, and the ability to provide an opportunity for a comparative analysis of the data collected.

Research participants were identified with the assistance of key informants within the selected traditions. The study comprised a total sample size of thirty-three, consisting of one plastic surgeon, ten women, and five men from each tradition, and two individuals who openly discussed their procedures in a video online. Participants were engaged through informal conversations conducted via telephone, WhatsApp voice call, and WhatsApp video call (James and Busher 2016).

Data collection

Data were collected between June and December of 2025. Two primary methods were used to collect data: informal online conversations and the analysis of online video interviews with individuals who had undergone liposuction and a plastic surgeon. The use of informal conversation with a person or group of people has gained recognition as a viable means of data collection in a qualitative study. This is because informal conversations flow out of a natural environment and therefore data collected are reliable (Swain and King 2022:2).

Data analysis

The study used the thematic data analysis approach to analyse the collected data from both the informal conversations and the online video interviews watched by the researcher (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012:3–18; Sarantakos 2013:379–380). The data analysis method was selected due to its flexible nature. In both qualitative and quantitative research, thematic analysis is seen as an option for analysing data. Thematic analysis has various steps. These are understanding the data collected, developing codes, developing

themes, revising themes, defining themes, and then, finally, writing up. The study followed the inductive approach of thematic data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013:175–178; Starcher, Dzubinski, and Sanchez 2018:61).

Results

The focus of this study was to find out why some African Christians choose to undergo liposuction and how that decision reflects on their Christian faith. It is obvious that the motivation for liposuction among some African Christians is real. This is because all the research participants demonstrated adequate knowledge of liposuction.

Twelve research participants, comprising seven from the Pentecostal/ Charismatic tradition and five from the historic mission-oriented denominations, disclosed having undergone elective liposuction of varying degrees between 2022 and 2026. The residual cohort indicated no personal history with the procedure, though they possessed secondary knowledge of individuals who had opted for such surgical interventions.

It was evident that the most common forms of liposuction patronised by the research participants were removal of excess fat in the abdomen and buttock enhancement. A majority of the respondents did not view liposuction as a medical procedure that offended the Christian faith although they were not too sure if they would encourage someone to opt for liposuction.

In the next section, data from both the informal conversations and online video interviews watched by the researcher are thematically presented.

Data from Informal Conversations

The qualitative data gathered from informal conversations regarding why some African Christians chose to undergo liposuction could be comprehensively categorised into four primary thematic dimensions: social, economic, psychological, and physiological drivers. Far from being a superficial or singular decision, the motivations voiced by the participants reveal a highly complex, multidimensional matrix of personal and societal influences. Socially and economically, individuals are often responding to the powerful dictates of

peer dynamics, digitised beauty standards, and the professional currency associated with enhanced physical appearance. As a result, the psychological and physiological dimensions capture deep-seated struggles with body image, self-esteem, and the desire to correct perceived physical imperfections or somatic changes. Categorising the narrative data into these distinct domains enabled a more systematic and nuanced exploration of how modern bodily practices intersected with the lived experiences of contemporary African believers.

Social reasons

Some of the social reasons for the desire for liposuction in contemporary times according to research participants were:

(1) To be able to wear some clothes and measure up

For some individuals, the size of the dress they wear matters to them. Therefore, their inability to wear the dress size they preferred was a serious cause of worry. Opting for liposuction was, therefore, a panacea for the constant bother of struggling to wear a particular dress size.

(2) For social acceptance

Despite demonstrating robust health outcomes and elevated levels of socioeconomic achievement, individuals outside of mainstream somatic ideals often encountered distinct institutional and interpersonal biases. The impact of pejorative comments, particularly the contemporary rise of digital body shaming, often led to diminished self-esteem. In an effort to secure social validation and mitigate the effects of this unfortunate trend, some felt compelled to undergo liposuction to align with the more widely accepted body shape.

Economic reasons

Research participants cited the following economic rationale:

(1) To gain endorsement deals from companies looking to sell new products

It has become fashionable for advertising companies in Africa to use beautiful curvy women and handsome men for their television and billboard

advertisements. Companies who chose to advertise their products online also recruited young attractive men and women as brand ambassadors. The economic implications of these opportunities served as enough encouragement for some individuals to opt for liposuction to acquire a distinct body shape.

The economic reason assigned by research participants fits into Pierre Bourdieu's theory of physical capital where the body is treated as modifiable capital (1986).

Psychological reasons

The two psychological reasons given by the research participants are as follows:

(1) To improve self-confidence

Conversations with research participants suggest that when the shape of the body was transformed, it made them feel more confident. This psychological disposition obviously has implications for how they see themselves and are seen by the outside world.

(2) To feel and look young

Another psychological reason that those who had successfully undergone liposuction gave, according to the research participants, was that the result after the procedure made them feel and look young. This feeling and perception boosted their relationship with others. Eleven of the research participants cited Queen Esther in the Bible to justify their opinion (Esther 2:12).

Physiological reasons

The physiological reasons given by the research participants were as follows:

(1) To remove stubborn fat

Particularly, individuals who felt they had excess fat stored in parts of the body where it was not needed resorted to liposuction after unsuccessful attempts to remove it through regular home and gym exercises.

(2) To improve the ability to exercise and maintain a healthy cardiovascular status

For individuals who felt their body weight was an impediment in their quest to engage in regular exercise and improve the health status of their heart, liposuction, according to them, was a viable option.

(3) To reclaim body size after childbirth

Childbirth is a strenuous process. For some who experienced physical change after childbirth, the suggestion was that the surest way to reclaim their once 'adorable' body shape was to undergo liposuction.

Although these reasons were cited, research participants who had never undergone liposuction mentioned that liposuction, in their view, only held aesthetic value. To them, neither body enhancement nor 're-creation' was necessary, particularly if one was a Christian. They cited Bible verses such as:

> 'I have the right to do anything,' you say, but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything', but I will not be mastered by anything. […]
> Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your bodies. (1 Corinthians 6:12, 19–20, NIV here and throughout)
>
> Therefore, I urge you, brothers, and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing, and perfect will. (Romans 12:1–2)

The aforementioned Bible verses were quoted to support their position. These research participants strongly asserted that

liposuction challenged the divine sovereignty of God and the perfection of the human body he created.

Data from Online Video Interviews Watched

The researcher analysed three online videos, comprising two personal accounts from African individuals who underwent liposuction and an interview with a Ghanaian plastic surgeon.

In video one, Blessing CEO (2022) shared her experience on Facebook. According to her, she underwent a procedure to remove excess belly fat and deposit it inside the buttocks. She went on to describe the precautionary measures taken to reduce pain after going through the procedure. It was mentioned that after the procedure it was forbidden to sit for two to three weeks, lying down on the belly most of the time. After the two-to-three-week period, sitting was done using a liposuction pillow. The reasons for opting for liposuction were to look good, happy, and confident.

In video two, Koko Khloe (2022) a Nigerian discussed her liposuction experience. In her case, she had excess fat removed from the belly and back. These were used to redesign the hips and buttocks. It was disclosed that, six months after liposuction, the process of the pumped fat trying to survive in the new environment caused a lot of discomfort. Koko Khloe stated that if she was offered a hundred million (in whatever currency) to undergo another liposuction, the offer would be declined because the procedure was painful.

In video three, the plastic surgeon consulted for this study had offered an interview to a television station on liposuction. In this interview aired on Joy FM, naval captain Kwesi Nsaful (*The Hard Truth* 2022) explained that 'body re-creation' was not possible through plastic surgery and that all liposuction did was to enhance the body.

Discussion

This section analyses the empirical findings of the study based on the collected data. By evaluating these results, the discussion highlights critical patterns and emerging questions. Ultimately, this analysis contextualises the data to

demonstrate its broader implications for missiological and theological responses to contemporary issues in African society. To explore these findings, the following key observations are made.

First, the desire for liposuction appears to be increasingly prevalent in several African societies, marking a significant cultural shift in body image management. This growing demand occurs despite the fact that orthodox medical infrastructure and specialised aesthetic surgery are still developing within the region. This paradox suggests that the globalised pressure of social media, digital beauty standards, and the normalisation of body contouring procedures heavily outweigh local structural limitations. Consequently, individuals are highly motivated to seek these invasive modifications, even when navigating a healthcare system that lacks the advanced, specialised care found in Western or Asian cosmetic medical hubs.

Additionally, while some Africans compromised their health and, in severe instances, lost their lives to undergo liposuction, the situation diverged significantly in other contexts. For example, European markets favoured slimmer, subtle silhouettes and leaned heavily toward minimally invasive procedures, strictly governed by rigorous safety frameworks and pre-surgical psychological assessments.

Second, the empirical evidence demonstrates that the patronisation of liposuction is not confined to secular spaces but is actively occurring among young demographics within both Pentecostal/Charismatic and historic mission-oriented Christian traditions. This cross-denominational trend reveals a significant generational shift, which suggests that modern aesthetic desires cut across different theological paradigms, ranging from the highly expressive, prosperity-oriented environments of Charismatic churches to the traditionally conservative structures of historic mission institutions. The data indicates that young Christians, regardless of their specific denominational doctrines on modesty or the sanctity of the body, are increasingly navigating the tensions between contemporary secular beauty standards and their religious identities. At some point in their lives, they choose to reconcile these tensions through surgical body modification.

These observations prompt the following questions:

(1) Should missiology and theology concern itself with issues such as liposuction?
(2) Does the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition's emphasis on material prosperity contribute to the desire to have a compelling physical appearance to symbolise prosperity?
(3) What motivates individuals who belong to the historic mission-oriented tradition where material prosperity is not overly emphasised to opt for liposuction?

While certain inquiries necessitate further empirical investigation, a critical question remains regarding the extent to which celebrity culture, the prosperity ethos, and media-centrality historically associated with African Neo-Pentecostalism have incentivised the rise in elective surgeries. Conversely, there is a growing necessity to acknowledge that these sociocultural drivers may no longer be confined to specific theological traditions but rather reflect trans-denominational human inclinations toward self-actualisation.

Moving beyond these initial observations, this section provides an analytical focus on the following thematic areas.

Removal of Excess Fat

From the reasons advanced as noted in the previous section, it is safe to suggest that the issue of excess fat is fundamental to the thought of liposuction. All the listed benefits in terms of social, economic, psychological, and physiological reasons are all tied to the issue of excess fat removal or depositing of fat at preferred parts of the body.

Although the unwantedness of excess body fat is the glaring undercurrent in the popularity of liposuction in contemporary African society, the importance of applying discipline to life's daily choices to reduce excess body fat does not appear a cogent consideration. This consideration is important because, if attention is paid to daily life choices such as eating habits, routines after childbirth, and regular exercise, the amount of fat in the body could be controlled, thereby reducing the need for liposuction in the case of those who were worried about excess fat in their bodies.

Although the reasons advanced by research participants may be tenable, the potential adverse health implications associated with the procedure should not be discounted. These risks, however, appear to be secondary to the anticipated benefits of liposuction. Notably, the participant in online video two underscored the severity of these physiological risks (Khloe 2022).

Health Implications

Some of the possible health hazards associated with the procedure are numbness, kidney and heart challenges, internal injuries such as a puncture of the blood vessel leading to bleeding into tissue, and damaged nerves resulting in muscle dysfunction. There could also be infection or sepsis and fluid collection in some parts of the body (Scarborough and Bisaccia 1991).

Despite these acknowledged health hazards, some people do not seem deterred. The quest to fit in and be socially accepted, make some gains economically, satisfy a psychological deficiency, and feel accomplished seem to override critical engagement with the reality of the side effects of liposuction.

Beyond the issue of health hazards, there is also the thorny debate as to whether liposuction amounts to body enhancement or re-creation. The upcoming section discusses this debate.

Liposuction as Body Enhancement or Body Re-creation

Despite the significant physical transformation resulting from the surgical procedures, a majority of participants resisted the categorisation of their outcomes as body re-creation. Instead, they consistently framed their experiences within the language of body enhancement. This preference suggests a potential cognitive or theological boundary where participants seek to reconcile their elective surgeries with their religious identity. By adopting the terminology of ‘enhancement’ over ‘re-creation’, individuals may be attempting to mitigate the perceived ethical tension between modern medical interventions and the foundational tenets of their Christian faith.

According to the online video interview with the plastic surgeon, the procedure did not amount to 'body re-creation' irrespective of the severity of the procedure (*The Hard Truth* 2022). To him, 'body re-creation' was not possible through plastic surgery in general. His position utterly challenges the assumption that any form of liposuction or plastic surgery in general could amount to 'body re-creation'.

While the perspectives of both medical professionals and surgical recipients are significant, a critical threshold exists between marginal enhancement and comprehensive corporeal re-configuration. When interventions extend beyond localised sculpting to encompass multiple anatomical regions including the facial structure, torso, and extremities, the result constitutes a fundamental transformation of the biological form. In such instances of extensive adipose redistribution, the altered physical identity may significantly diverge from the individual's original appearance, challenging traditional notions of somatic continuity.

Whichever way the argument goes, the question worth addressing at this point is the implications of liposuction for theology and missiology in light of the views expressed by research participants.

The next section reflects on this medical procedure and the experiences of people in light of theological and missiological ideas.

Theological Reflection on Liposuction

The substantialist view suggests that God's image resides in human nature, that is the soul, rationality, or the physical body as a consecrated vessel of the spirit. With respect to this view, liposuction could be said to be an attempt to fix a perceived flaw in this sacred substance (Farris 2017).

The general theological view is that the *imago Dei* transcends physical appearance, and so traditional theology usually separates the physical from the divine image. However, some contemporary scholars such as Joshua Moritz (2011) suggest a hylomorphic view. This view contends that, because humans are integrated beings of body and soul, the physical body is the necessary sacrament or visible sign of the invisible *imago Dei*. However, this

still does not correlate the image with specific looks, as doing so would create a theological hierarchy based on physical looks. The *imago Dei* is understood to be universally and equally present in all humans, regardless of physical characteristics. To correlate it with specific physical looks would contradict the doctrine of universal human dignity (Moritz 2011).

Furthermore, it is debatable to suggest that the Christian faith rejects medical procedures meant to improve the general health condition of a person or correct an anomaly which otherwise could jeopardise the health of an individual. The area of contention is the motive, value, and content of the medical procedure a person subscribes to in light of his/her religious faith.

While some of the reasons advanced by individuals who opt for liposuction, as discussed above in the section 'Results', appear convincing, from the theological standpoint, the situation prompts the question as to whether the desire for liposuction does not rather reveal much deeper unresolved issues such as insecurity, identity crisis, insatiability in the human heart, and humans' broken relationship with the supreme being. These issues are important as they relate to the condition of fallen humanity (Mavropoulos 2024a).

A theological interrogation of elective cosmetic procedures, such as liposuction, necessitates an interdisciplinary analysis of body stewardship, the perfection of the divine essence, and the notion of free will. Additionally, such an inquiry must critically evaluate the virtue of contentment and the importance of motive.

Stewardship of the Body

Within the Christian tradition, the believer's physical existence is defined by the pneumatological indwelling of the Holy Spirit; thus, the body is regarded as a sacred temple belonging to God rather than the individual as noted in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 (Gupta 2010).

Moreover, the Petrine exhortation to prioritise interior virtue over external aesthetics (1 Peter 3:3) establishes a clear framework for body stewardship. This perspective asserts that the physical form is not an object for autonomous

modification but a divine trust to be managed in alignment with spiritual values.

Since Christians do not own their bodies, they are restricted in the extent to which they could 'violate' or 'exploit' their bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). To this end, the decision to undertake moderate body enhancement or 'body re-creation' must be informed by the teachings of the Christian faith.

As noted above in the section 'Psychological Reasons', the story of Esther and other maidens who were groomed before they were introduced to King Xerxes was quoted as a justification for liposuction. The text reads:

> Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. (Esther 2:12)

According to the text, Esther and the other maidens underwent six months of oil of myrrh body treatment and another six months of perfume and cosmetics treatment. It could be suggested that, in their case, things like facial waxing, pedicure, manicure, and other personal grooming lessons were given (Berlin 2001:27–28). There is no indication of any simple or elaborate plastic surgery performed and that is understandable because contemporary medical procedures were not available in those days.

For some individuals, the surgical procedures undertaken function as mere physical enhancements. For others, however, these interventions represent a comprehensive re-creation of the biological form. Regardless of the intent, the principles of the Christian faith offer a critical theological pushback to such results. Central to this perspective is the doctrine that the believer's body is a stewardship belonging to God; consequently, any physical modification must be conducted in a manner that aligns with divine will and glorifies the creator.

God's Attribute as a Perfect Being

Another issue worth exploring is the implications of liposuction as an affront to God's attribute as a perfect being. Great mediaeval philosophers like

Anselm, Aquinas, and Augustine described God as a perfect being. Although contemporary philosophers question this attribute of God, Christianity defends and upholds this description of God (Rogers 2019:1–10).

The ontological premise of divine perfection suggests that the created order, in its original intent, reflects the flawlessness of its creator. Consequently, elective body modification specifically body re-creation via liposuction for non-pathological reasons critically challenges the assertion of biological perfection within the human form. This tension invites a rigorous inquiry into whether such procedures implicitly critique the perfection of the divine essence (Mavropoulos 2024b:195–196).

From a Christian perspective, any defence of extensive corporeal alteration must provide a teleological justification that does not diminish the foundational attribute of divine sovereignty. Therefore, believers who have undergone such body re-creation are tasked with reconciling their elective choices with a theology of creation that affirms the inherent integrity of the *imago Dei*.

The Notion of Free Will

Beyond the ontological challenge to divine perfection, the discourse on elective body modification necessarily intersects with the concept of moral agency. Critiques of body re-creation often confront a reductionist interpretation of free will, one that posits an absolute liberation from external oversight. However, within a theocentric ethical framework, human volition is not absolute; rather, it is a delegated autonomy that must be exercised through the lens of stewardship and accountability to the creator.

While humanity possesses the liberty of self-determination, such agency requires a high degree of moral circumspection to ensure it does not devolve into doctrinal subversion or ethical negligence (Kenny 2011:43–46).

Consequently, the pursuit of body re-creation for purely aesthetic reasons invites a critical inquiry into whether such choices constitute an exploitation of human agency. When the motivations for body modification are divorced from

theological responsibility, the exercise of free will may fundamentally contradict the purposes for which that liberty was originally bestowed.

Contentment

The question that warrants critical examination at this juncture is whether liposuction reflects discontentment. Burroughs describes the virtue of contentment as unique. This is because the virtue of contentment is central to Christian life and life in general (Burroughs 2015:17–19).

Paul emphasises the virtue of contentment as a key ingredient to the Christian life to which believers are called. He notes:

> I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:11–13)

Fundamental to Paul's emphasis on the virtue of contentment in the text is the recognition that no human being will ever have it all and that life has seasons. When a person learns to be happy despite obvious deficiencies, that means the individual is content. So contentment is not resignation but recognition of the positive sides of life over seeming negatives (Hansen 2009:314–315).

To the Christian, this virtue is acquired through Christ who provides strength and grace to overlook deficiencies and stay thankful, particularly for the gift of life which is the ultimate gift, hence the saying: 'Godliness with contentment is a great gain' (1 Timothy 6:6).

The Importance of Motive

The underlying motive driving any action is a crucial determinant of its ethical validity. Intentionality in human conduct serves as a foundational element in

both the individual's relationship with the divine and the practical outworking of Christian faith (Abelard 1995:3–5).

Drawing from sapiential literature, specifically Proverbs 16:2, it is established that while human actions may appear subjectively justified or 'pure' to the actor, the divine prerogative involves an evaluation of the underlying motives.

Consequently, from a theocentric perspective, the moral value of an action is not determined solely by its external manifestation but by the internal disposition that prompted it. For the Christian practitioner, therefore, the teleological motive behind any course of action becomes a critical site of ethical and spiritual scrutiny.

Missiological Reflection on Liposuction

Contemporary Christian missiology faces a multifaceted array of emerging challenges that necessitate a departure from traditional paradigms. Because mission does not occur in a vacuum, its boundaries must expand to address the sociocultural complexities of the modern era, including the increasing prevalence of elective liposuction. This phenomenon raises a critical question: to what degree has the missional church critically engaged with the implications of cosmetic surgery within both ecclesiastical and secular spheres?

Given that the *missio Dei* in which the church is a participant encompasses the holistic restoration of the human person and their environment, the medical, ethical, and moral dimensions of liposuction must be integrated into contemporary mission praxis. Consequently, missiological practitioners are tasked with developing nuanced, multidisciplinary responses to these bodily interventions.

Historically, missiological frameworks have focused heavily on geographical or socioeconomic boundaries, often overlooking how the localised human body serves as the primary site of cultural and spiritual contestation. In an era dominated by a commodified cult of the body, elective medical interventions like liposuction are frequently driven by deeper existential anxieties and a fragmented sense of self-identity. This shift demands that the church pivot

from a posture of passive detachment to one of active pastoral and prophetic engagement. If the church fails to deconstruct the societal idolatry of physical perfectionism, it abdicates its role in offering true, holistic redemption to a generation physically and psychologically altered by consumerist beauty standards (Mavropoulos 2024a:6–9).

Furthermore, a missiology that ignores body modification risks rendering its gospel message abstract, detached from the lived reality of individuals navigating severe body image crises. Integrating these concerns into missional theology requires a careful evaluation of the underlying human motives, ensuring that the quest for self-improvement does not entirely eclipse spiritual formation. Pastoral practitioners must explore how the medicalisation of secular beauty standards operates as a competing salvific narrative, promising bodily regeneration through surgical alteration rather than divine grace. St Paul's theology treats the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit; the contemporary church must explicitly confront the psychological and secular narratives that pathologise natural physical features to sell surgical corrections (Karkkainen 2025).

Therefore, missional communities must position themselves as spaces of countercultural sanctuary, reaffirming the inherent dignity of the *imago Dei* over malleable physical appearance. Ultimately, a modern theology of mission must articulate a robust theology of the body that speaks directly to the bioethical dilemmas of cosmetic enhancement, establishing that true human flourishing cannot be engineered by a scalpel.

To effectively reach a contemporary demography, advocacy should leverage digital ecosystems. Strategic social media campaigns, utilising culturally resonant media such as music, performance art, and concise digital content, can provide a platform for disseminating the health, social, and theological implications of these procedures. Such an approach ensures that the missiological response is communicated through the primary linguistic and cultural channels of the current generation.

Conclusion

This paper explored the motivation for liposuction among some African Christians and its implications for theology and missiology. While it did not seek to be judgmental of the decision of people to opt for liposuction, it suggested that beside health reasons, the many other reasons cited for choosing liposuction by research participants may reveal much deeper human challenges such as insecurity, insatiability, identity crisis, and vainness in the individual.

Drawing upon Pauline ethics, specifically the discourse in 1 Corinthians 6:12, a foundational principle for Christian conduct is established: while personal liberty is acknowledged ('all things are lawful'), it remains secondary to the criteria of constructive utility and self-governance. Within this framework, the believer's autonomy is not an end in itself but must be moderated to ensure that liberty does not devolve into habitual subjection or detrimental behaviour.

Consequently, this shifting landscape demands that the church move beyond superficial moralism and instead cultivate a robust discipleship of the body that addresses these underlying psycho-spiritual anxieties. Rather than remaining silent or purely reactive, contemporary pastoral care and missional outreach must actively engage the sociocultural forces driving believers toward surgical re-creation. By reframing the conversation around holistic stewardship and internal transformation, the Christian community could offer a compelling counter-narrative to secularised bodily perfection, guiding the younger generation toward finding their ultimate security in Christ.

In conclusion, the increasing prevalence of elective liposuction among some Africans necessitates a comprehensive theological and missiological critique. This trend directly challenges contemporary mission praxis, requiring a re-evaluation of how the church engages with bodily autonomy and cultural shifts. Specifically, procedures categorised as potential body re-creation, those performed for aesthetic enhancement rather than medical necessity, present a fundamental tension with Christian anthropology. Such practices may be analysed as the adoption of an exteriorised identity, prioritising a departure from the *imago Dei* in favour of transient cultural ideals.

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