

# No More Taboo: Discursive tactics for navigating the taboo of cosmetic surgery

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## Abstract

Traditionally, in many places around the world, cosmetic surgery is framed as artificial, man-made, and socially unacceptable. The Korean Wave produces K-pop, K-beauty, and K-fashion, the Korean Wave “Hallyu” has spread rapidly across the globe bringing with it new values about the acceptability of cosmetic surgery and what is considered beautiful and desirable. As a result, cosmetic surgery is now a major export for Korea. This study examines how the Korean aesthetic medical industry and how medical tourists from Hong Kong and Mainland China consume Korean culture and promotional material related to aesthetic medical procedures and in some cases overcome deeply held taboos about cosmetic surgery prevalent in Chinese culture. We find that while Hallyu and the prevalence of social media has indeed influenced consumers standards of beauty, both promoters and consumers of Korean aesthetic medicine must actively work to build the discursive resources to overcome both taboos and perceived risks of undertaking such procedures. Some of the risks and taboos that users actively address include the potential medical risk of cosmetic surgery itself, the social acceptance risk (being judged by friends, family, and the community), and existential risk - admitting that one is ugly or unworthy or that one’s identity may change or completely cease to exist after such a procedure.

## Keywords

Aesthetic medicine, cosmetic surgery, cultural industries, Korea, K-pop, risk, self-identity

## Aesthetic medicine and its development in South Korea

Aesthetic medicine is a term that has been used to describe both cosmetic surgical procedures such as breast augmentation or eyelid surgeries and non-surgical treatments such as Botox injections or mesotherapy, which aim to improve one’s appearance. Aesthetic surgery should be distinguished from health and reconstructive surgery which is required to cure a disease or restores normal function. The motives for people to go under the scalpel for cosmetic surgery or other non-surgical treatments are diverse and includes job seeking in Korea (Y. Wang, 2015) or to traverse racial and



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Total Procedures			
Rank *	Country:		% of World-Wide Total
1	USA	4,042,610	18.6%
2	Brazil	2,324,245	10.7%
3	South Korea	1,156,234	5.3%
4	India	935,487	4.3%
5	Mexico	907,913	4.2%
6	Germany	617,408	2.8%
7	Colombia	548,635	2.5%
8	France	488,718	2.3%
9	Italy	418,760	1.9%

\* Rankings are based solely on those countries from which a sufficient survey response was received and data were considered to be representative.

**Figure 1.** Statistics from International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS), in 2015.

socioeconomic barriers in Brazil (Edmonds, 2009), for health reasons, for beauty, or for psychological reasons such as self-esteem (Zadehmohammad & Maleki, 2015).

Aesthetic medicine has become a part of the Korean Wave, now famous for producing K-pop, K-beauty, and K-fashion. K-pop culture is spreading rapidly across the globe and “K” increasingly represents trendiness. South Korea, especially Seoul, is now the center for cosmetic surgery in Asia. According to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS), in 2015, there were more than 21 million surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures performed worldwide, an increase of over 1 million reported cosmetic procedures from 2014. The United States remains the largest market, but it mainly serves the domestic market, while Brazil and Korea are active export markets and are the second and third largest markets, respectively, for aesthetic procedures (Figure 1). More than 500,000 Chinese went to South Korea for cosmetic surgery or treatments (Buckley, 2017).

Seoul’s aesthetic surgery industry has grown rapidly since the 1980s and the Apgujeong-dong district is now considered the “Mecca” of cosmetic surgery in Korea (L. Wang, 2007); By 2007, out of a national database of 627 registered cosmetic surgery clinics, more than half reside in this district (Curley, 2007). In 2018, this “plastic surgery street” now has about 500 plastic surgery clinics (Swan, 2018) and the area has become the regional center in Asia for aesthetic medical tourism (Marx, 2015). The Samsung Line Plastic Surgery Clinic leads Seoul’s medical tourism and has some of the most highly trained medical and consulting staff and the most modern medical facilities. Facilities include a five-floor building with countless consulting rooms, operating rooms, and recovery rooms. Patients from other Asian countries, often undergo procedures that give them larger eyes, higher noses, and slender cheekbones. Because many Asians are born with a “single eyelid” (epicanthic fold), they undergo the “double eyelid procedure”, a surgical procedure that requires cutting the outer end of the eyes to make them wider and rounder.

**Aesthetic medicine, self, and identity**

Plastic surgery that drastically changes a person’s appearance can affect the patient’s sense of identity (Lorenc & Hall, 2004). In fact, more prudent patients will voice identity issue as a concern, prescribing that they do not want dramatic changes and want to look the same after the surgery.

Pitts-Taylor (2007) points out that while cosmetic surgery has become “fairly normalized,” it is still a taboo to have a dramatic transformation. Parents and partners always feel that the operations have taken away the person they knew. In her book, she mentioned American singer, Heidi Montag,

a millennial, an American television celebrity, singer, fashion designer, and author, who underwent extreme transformation through various plastic surgery procedures in a single day. There are over 20 interviews and YouTube videos about her experiences. Montag recalls that her mother was shocked and looked at her in a strange way. “She was looking at me almost like a zoo animal. It wasn’t like I was her daughter anymore” (Pitts-Taylor, 2007). Her mother was heartbroken over her alteration on her face and body and viewed her as a “circus freak” and commented that “the cover looked beautiful” (*People’s Daily Online*, 2010).

Clearly, part of the taboo of cosmetic surgery is related to this phenomenon of “existential fear” of losing one’s core identity, but how do the media and prospective patients overcome such taboos?

## **Aesthetic medicine taboo and media**

Normally, aesthetic medicine is a social taboo and people seldom openly admit that they have had cosmetic surgery. Generally, cosmetic surgery is traditionally framed as artificial, man-made, and socially unacceptable. A casual online search for “plastic surgery” will uncover negative connotations around plastic surgery in most of the results. However, the trend is changing and positive news and comments about cosmetic surgery can increasingly be found online.

Pitts-Taylor (2007) examined why people consider some cosmetic surgeries to be acceptable or even beneficial and others to be harmful and even unacceptable. Where should people draw the line between acceptable or not? Whether it is because it is a non-surgical procedure or because it will not have dramatic transformation on one’s appearance? Does everyone accept that Botox injection is just a minor treatment even though it also changes your face from U-shaped to V-shaped? Pitts-Taylor argued that the meanings, experiences, and motivations for cosmetic surgery are highly social.

Social taboos related to cosmetic surgery are both reproduced and questioned through the media. The main theme from promotional websites or advertisements linked to cosmetic surgery is “medicalised beauty therapy” (Tan, 2007). Treatments are packaged as medical science and also as a part of conventional health services and are associated with modernity, science, technology, and innovation. In Korea, the advanced technology of cosmetic surgery is not the only attraction; the consumers are told to associate cosmetic surgery with “natural beauty,” “natural look,” and “reform” (Y. Wang, 2015).

Various studies of South Korean cosmetic surgery have looked at the effect of media on social norms (Arias, 2016; S. S. Wang, 2011). Notes the case of the popular reality television show “Extreme Makeover” which started from 2002 which portrayed people who had cosmetic surgery with healthy images and the 2011 Korean plastic surgery television program “Let Me In or Let 美人 [Mi-in]” which openly discussed cosmetic surgery and portrayed people who had cosmetic surgery with positive psychological effects (Elfvig-Hwang, 2013). Moreover, people who admit their cosmetic surgeries in these programs also have the chance to become celebrities. Over time, Korean society started accepting aesthetic medicine and in present-day South Korea, “the culture of cosmetic surgery is far less tucked away than in other countries, with a nose job or a blepharoplasty commonly given as high school graduation gifts.” (Shim, 2015, p. 2).

Despite the recent changes in social attitude, there remain strong taboos regarding cosmetic surgery. Nevertheless, millions of people still decide to undertake cosmetic procedures even though many people do not admit to it afterward.

The Korean approach to “selling” cosmetic surgery has been very successful and has drawn a lot of attention among Asian countries and many aesthetic medical tourists now go to South Korea to undergo both surgical and non-surgical treatments. Given Korea’s success at selling cosmetic medical tourism to Asian consumers, we try to examine the “sales pitch” of the Korean medical

tourism industry and speak to audiences to understand how customers deal with the taboos associated with aesthetic medical treatments.

## Data and methodology

This study, through in-depth interviews, discourse analysis of websites (both public hospital and private clinics), promotion materials and secondary data, and discourse analysis of media messages, investigates (1) how both the Korean medical industry and the cultural industry promote cosmetic surgery and media and (2) how audiences deal with or justify their decision to undergo or not to undergo cosmetic surgery.

Purposive sampling is used because it is difficult to find large amount of interviewees and this study focusses on those women in Hong Kong and China who have experienced surgical or non-surgical cosmetic procedures. Purposive sampling also can help this study to find interviewees with more diverse academic and working backgrounds.

There were 21 interviewees in total with 15 women and 6 men from Hong Kong and mainland China. (Table 1). None of the male interviewees undergone major cosmetic surgery, but all have plans to undergo surgical or non-surgical treatments. Their data were be useful for understanding

**Table 1.** Interviewee profiles: 10 of them who underwent surgical procedures.

	Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Undergo plastic surgery	Undergo non-surgical procedure	Plan to undergo surgical procedures	Plan to undergo non-surgical procedure
1	Blair	22	F	Student	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Leo	22	M	Student	No	No	No	Yes
3	Yan	23	F	Student	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	Amy	25	F	Marketing officer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
5	Iris	25	F	Office lady	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	Victor	25	M	Student (want to be a performer)	No	No	Yes	Yes
7	Sylvia	26	F	Programmer	No	Yes	No	Yes
8	Chole	27	F	Teacher	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
9	Fanny	27	F	Clerk	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
10	Gary	28	M	Hair stylist	No	Yes	No	Yes
11	Tina	28	F	Saleslady	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
12	Judy	29	F	Saleslady	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
13	Molly	29	F	Accountant	No	Yes	No	Yes
14	Wan	30	F	Self-employed in FinTech Co.	No	Yes	No	Yes
15	Cindy	31	F	Journalist	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
16	Neil	31	M	Property sale	No	No	No	Yes
17	Rick	31	M	Data scientist	No	No	No	No
18	Wen	31	F	Chinese translator in a Korea clinic	No	Yes	No	Yes
19	Mandy	32	F	Housewife	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
20	Pauline	32	F	Lawyer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
21	John	33	M	Banker	No	No	Yes	Yes

mens' ideas about aesthetic medicine. Of 21 interviewees, 5 of them are Hong Kongers and 5 are mainland Chinese who have been to Seoul to undertake non-surgical medical treatments such as HIFU (high-intensity focused ultrasound) for face lifting, Botox injection, laser to erase scar, Restylane for nose uplifting, and vital injector. In all, 10 of them underwent surgical procedures. The youngest interviewee, Blair, has undergone about 30 surgical treatments. Her first treatment was started when she was 21. Another interviewee, Wen, a 31-year-old Chinese translator, works for a private clinic called Koh Iksoo Plastic Surgery. She has been working there for over 7 years. Her job is to sell and help overseas patients to navigate their experience in South Korea. While it is very difficult to find people who have had plastic surgery to discuss, one of my interviewees, Amy, a 25-year-old Hong Kong woman, who works in a marketing company, has undergone rhinoplasty (nose job) and eyelid surgery. Amy only agreed to discuss with me via email but would not meet in person. One male interviewee, Gary, a 28-year-old hair stylist, has undergone minor cosmetic dental procedures in Hong Kong and has a family member working in the aesthetic medical industry. Another male interviewee, John, a banker at age 33, has not done any treatment at all but plans to have cosmetic surgery in the near future. All the interviewees mentioned above are millennials, aged between 22 to 33 years old.

Most of the interviews last for about 1.5 to 2 hours. The core questions were asked in the interviews were:

1. "Why do you choose to go to South Korea for aesthetic medicine?"
2. "What kind of services during the aesthetic medicine tourism impressed you most?"
3. "Which kinds of procedures or treatments have you experienced?"
4. "Why do you trust a clinic? Because of their website? Advertisement? Or other reasons?"
5. "Do you like Korean Drama or Korean reality shows? What are they?"
6. "Which part of your body or face do you want to make a change and why?"

Discourse analysis was used to better understand the types of materials interviewees would face when researching and making choices around the aesthetic medical tourism industry. In total, 15 websites were used in the analysis. For the websites and promotional materials, the link in *Imagine your Korea* (official website) offers a new platform for medical tourism: "Visit Medical Korea" was chosen (<http://english.visitkorea.or.kr>). Two cosmetic surgery hospital websites were suggested by the website under "Medical Provider." They are Gyalumhan Plastic Surgery (<http://gyalumhan.com/>) and RIZ Laser Center (<http://womanlaser.com/en/page/sub0101.asp>). Under "Medical Korea Reservation" tab suggested by the website, there were seven cosmetic surgery clinics in Seoul recommended to tourists. There are many private clinics other than the nine websites suggested by the official website and this study has chosen the top 3 hospitals (Grand Plastic Surgery, ID Hospital, and BK Plastic Surgery) in addition to a few randomly chosen private clinics' websites for content analysis.

Finally, secondary data were drawn from the literature, business reports, news, and articles about aesthetic medical tourism.

## **The political economy of Korean medical tourism**

Modern Korea's relationship with cosmetic surgery began with David Ralph Millard, who was the chief plastic surgeon for the US occupational forces. He employed cosmetic surgery to help war victims remove scars in the aftermath of the Korean War (Marx, 2015, p. 5).


			이 력 서		
성 명		조지 블라운		국 격	
				호 주	
생년월일		1985년 2월 15일생 (만 27세)			
주 소		서울시 종로구 종로2가 84-6 고려빌딩 7층			
연 락 처		집	02-732-1128	전 자 우 편	greenkds@naver.com
		핸드폰	010-32XX-15XX		
기 간		학 력			발 령 청
2004	2	멜버른 고등학교 졸업			
2004	2	멜버른 국립 대학교 입학			
2008	2	멜버른 국립 대학교 졸업			
기 간		경 력 사 항			발 령 청
2005	5	OO 회사 아르바이트			
2006	4	OO 회사 인턴			
기 간		자 격 증 및 면 허			
2009	2	그린한국어학원 한국어과정 수료			
2007	9	운전면허			

Figure 2. Example resume template for Korean resumes.

South Korea is now ranked No. 1 in the world for the most plastic surgery procedures per capita (Marx, 2015) and there are political, economic, and cultural factors that have contributed to this. Since the IMF crisis in 1997, Korea suffered from an economic downturn leading to financial crisis and bankruptcy of many large companies, which then led to massive layoffs (Corsetti, Pesenti, & Roubini, 1998). Korean workers faced tough competition in the domestic job market. Korean job applications require candidates to attach a headshot photo in their application form (e.g. Figure 2), a practice which is illegal in many European countries and the United States. It is not surprising then, that plastic surgery has been cited as one of the most popular gifts for high school and university graduates (J. Lee, 2009). The first impression for job interview is so important that Korean society put much emphasize on their appearance:



**Figure 3.** The slogan-unveiling ceremony took place on 22 July 2014 in the Floating Island convention hall at the Hangang River Park.

Source: Photos: Jeon So-hyang, MCST.

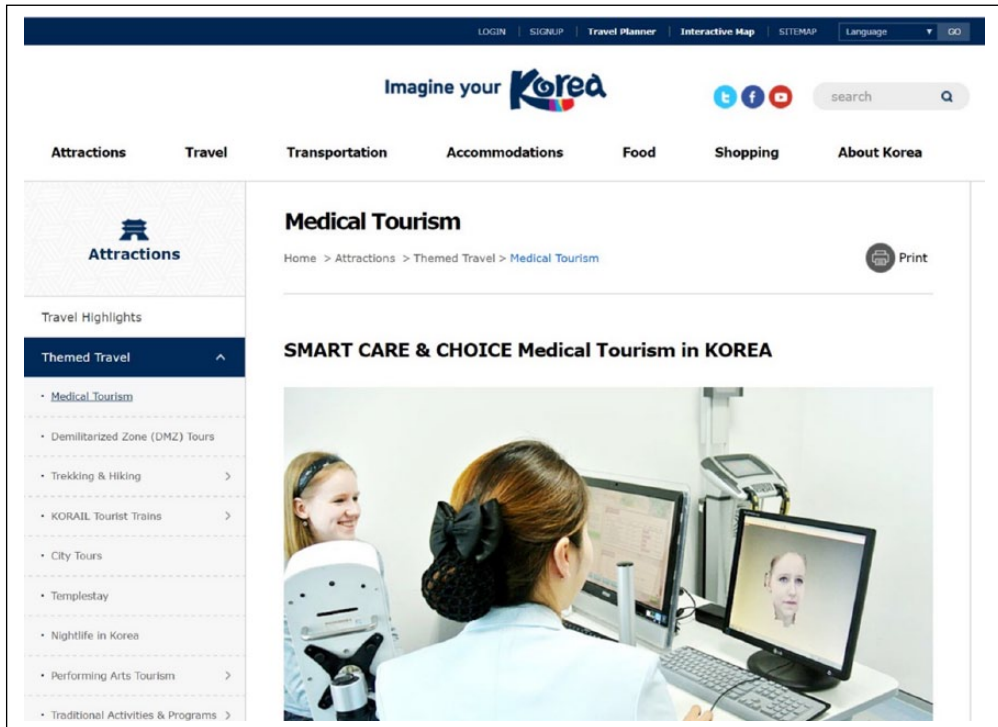
“During school holidays, half the class would come in and get surgery done and when they go back to school, their friends would see that they’ve become prettier so in the next break you would have the other half of the class coming in.” (McMah, 2015)

Due to large demand in the domestic market, over time, Seoul has developed very advanced aesthetic medical technologies. In addition, the 2008 economic crisis also led to the depreciation of the Korean won allowing South Korea to compete regionally in the aesthetic medical market with lower prices and better technology.

In modern capitalist Korea, women cultivate themselves to alter their bodies according to the social standards to increase their chances of getting because they will be getting highly paid jobs or they can marry a better man (Pyron, 2000). However, in addition to the modern pressures upon women’s “capitalist bodies”, South Korea remains a country deeply influenced by Confucianism. According to Kim (2003), in the traditional neo-Confucian view, women were incapable of achieving sagehood and they do not need to and did not have the ability to modify their body and self. A woman’s body was mainly for reproduction. Kim (2003) points out that, “the Neo-Confucian women’s subjectlessness, the perception of Korean bodies as imperfect, and fashion’s function to re-order the disordered Korean bodies, make Korean women’s bodies particularly prone to alterations, rearrangements, and re-creations of the body” (p. 104). Kim (2003) concludes that women undergo cosmetic surgery because they are affected by the concept of harmony, uniformity, and emphasize on propriety.

Beauty becomes not a tool for self-empowerment, but rather another kind of conformity and women are told that “their bodies are fluid and plastic objects that can be transformed and recreated to adhere with appearances and shapes that are culturally recognized as desirable” (Kim, 2003, p. 109).

From the policy perspective, the Korean government encouraged the development of Korea’s cultural industry and tourism by exporting Korean drama and movies to other Asian



**Figure 4.** First category of the themed travel in the official website.

countries and to encourage theme tourism. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST), along with the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO), announced the new tagline, “Imagine Your Korea,” on 22 July 2014 (Figure 3) followed by Facebook page and Instagram. “The tourism organization stressed that Korea has a lot to offer and to put on display: natural beauty, arts, music, movies, traditional handicrafts, other aspects of culture, industry and more” (S. A. Lee, 2014, p. 2).

As part of the promotion of Korean culture, medical tourism is advertised in 11 different languages as one of the top reasons for visiting Korea on their official website (<http://english.visit-korea.or.kr>) (Figure 4).

The Korean government has made many concessions to help develop the industry and in April 2016 the government also allowed tourists to receive tax refunds on cosmetic surgery and treatments (Harjani, 2015).

In 2009, after 23 Chinese tourists faced problems returning to China because they no longer looked like their travel documents, some hospitals now offer certificates of identity to foreign patients (“Too Much Surgery Confuses Immigration Officials,” 2015). The KTO helps to smooth the medical tourism logistics by setting up welcome counters with concierge services (Figure 5) at Incheon International Airport.

The three Medical Tourism Information Centers (KTO) at Seoul, Incheon, and Busan assist tourists from visa processing to making appointments at the necessary clinics. Multilingual staff, in English, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian, are available and they also accept online booking and





**Figure 5.** The Medical Tourism Information Center at Incheon International Airport.

provide online consultations. They Information Centers also provide precise information on hospitals through a network consisting of 200 domestic hospitals, medical facilities, and agencies with various brochures and pamphlets. Tourists can also obtain medical tourism-related information, undergo various medical tests (body fat mass test, skin analysis, and stress-level test), and experience oriental tea therapy and aromatherapy at the center.

One interviewee, Fanny, a 27-year-old clerk, mentioned,

“it is very convenient that at the medical tourism information center, they have translators so we do not need to worry about what we are going to do; we just go there and tell us our needs.”

Wan, a 30-year-old self-employed middle-class woman, mentioned,

“You can search online and book through email in advance.”; “they have social media sites which included lots of information.”; “Korea has tax refund for most of the treatments, it is not much, but it just makes you feel very happy to be a tourist there.”

Judy, a 29-year-old salesperson, also agreed that

“I can get information regarding the details of the treatments online before I go to the clinic by contacting the airport counter.”; “Tax refund is very attractive.”

Mandy, a 32-year-old housewife from a high-household-income family, said:

“The service is very comprehensive starting from email communication, then airport counter and then go to clinic. There is a certificate for people to go through the immigration so that people don’t need to suffer from being a ‘suspect’”.

Such government policies and conveniences encourage medical tourists to consider Seoul as a medical tourism destination. This along with media promotion helps to reinforce the soft power created by “Hallyu” (Korean Wave).

## Association with the Korean Cultural Wave

The South Korea Government actively promotes cosmetic medical tourism as part of their promotion of tourism and the cultural industry.

On the website “Visit Medical Korea,” there is a column called “Why Korea?.” Besides promoting Korea as having the world’s best medical technology, practitioners, and facilities, they frame Korea as “easily reached from major cities in Asia, North America and Europe, patients can enjoy a more comfortable journey to Korea.” The Korean government “has the certification policy for hospitals receiving foreign patients to guarantee a high level of medical services for them.”, and “various support systems are available to foreign patients such as medical visa, medical translator or coordinator services, etc.”

Apart from directly promoting services, social media sites also linked medical tourism with the media and Korean Wave. The website also states, “thanks to Korean TV series, movies and beauty products, the number of international medical tourists visiting Korea for beauty and traditional medicine treatment or experience has been on steady rise.” The ideology in the website and social media explicitly links Korean Wave to tourism, including aesthetic medical tourism.

Korean popular culture and South Korean plastic surgery reality TV shows such as “Let Me In or Let Miin” and “Extreme Makeover” have a significant influence on the acceptance of cosmetic surgery. These reality TV shows and dramas educate their audience that undergoing cosmetic surgery is nothing to be ashamed of. Women can become more respectful and powerful after undergoing aesthetic medicine. One of the three top hospitals we examined directly uses such popular culture content as a discursive resource (Figures 6 and 7), and the other two hospitals use well-known celebrities to attract clients (Figures 8 and 9).

This speaks to the open relationship between Korean pop culture icons and the aesthetic medical industry and many young K-pop stars and celebrities have openly admitted to their cosmetic procedures. There has even been a Korean drama called “Before and After: Plastic Surgery Clinic” (2008) that openly celebrates cosmetic enhancement. Korean celebrities also endorse and appear in advertisements for Korean plastic surgery clinics through websites and social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, WeChat, and YouTube.

In this study, over half of the interviewees claimed that they are regular viewers of Korean drama and watch Korean drama 3 to 8 hours daily. Some of them also like K-pop music and Korean fashion.

Chole, a 27-year-old teacher, mentioned,

“I watch Korea drama during my travel to work by mobile phone.”, “I spend about 3 to 5 hours on watching Korean drama daily.”, “I saw those celebrities in the TV drama can be very beautiful by having cosmetic surgeries.”, “Many celebrities undergo cosmetic surgery and it is very common in Korea that even students will have cosmetic surgery.”

Cindy, a 31-year-old journalist, said,

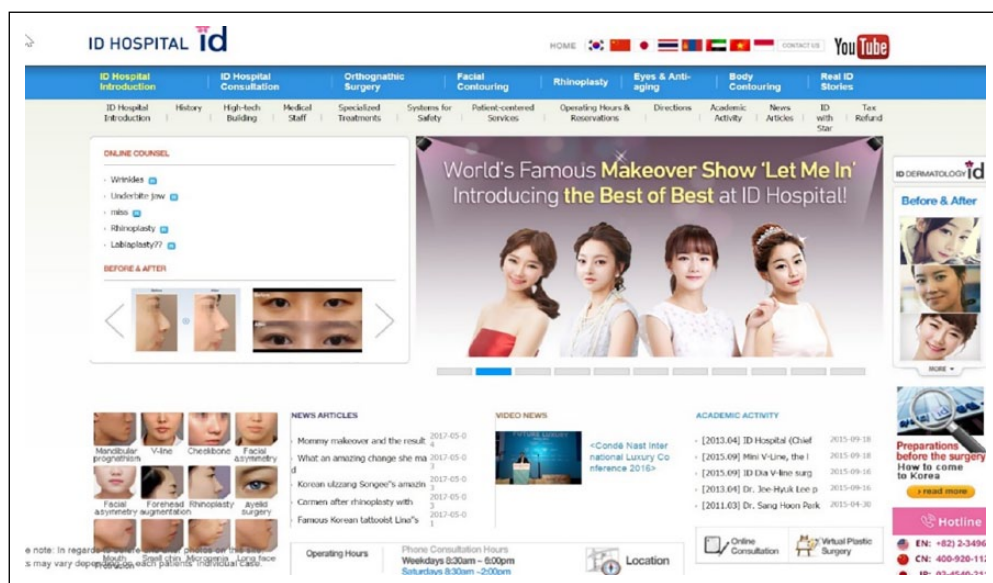


Figure 6. ID Hospital and “Let Me In” program.

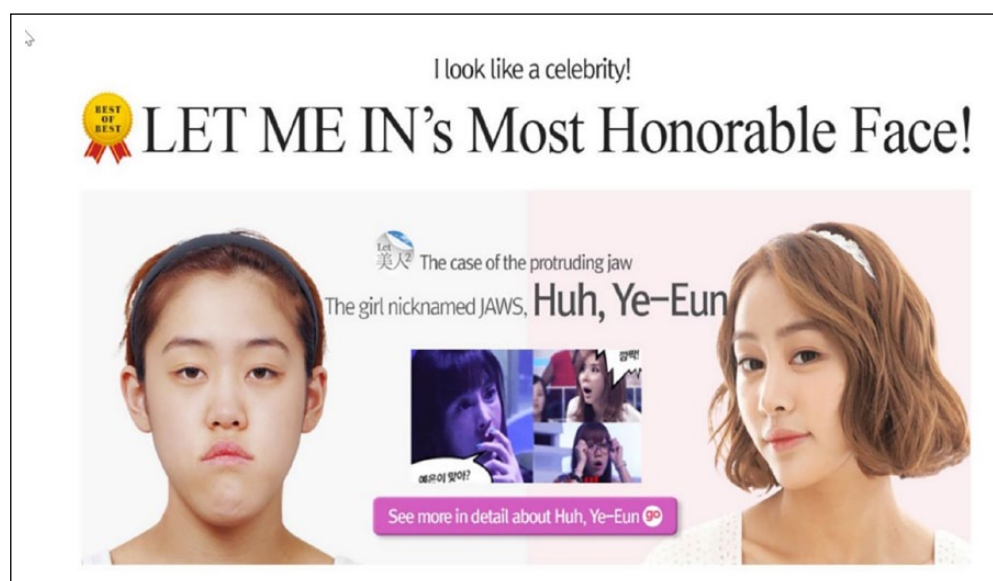


Figure 7. ID Hospital and “Let Me In” program with slogan “I look like a celebrity.”

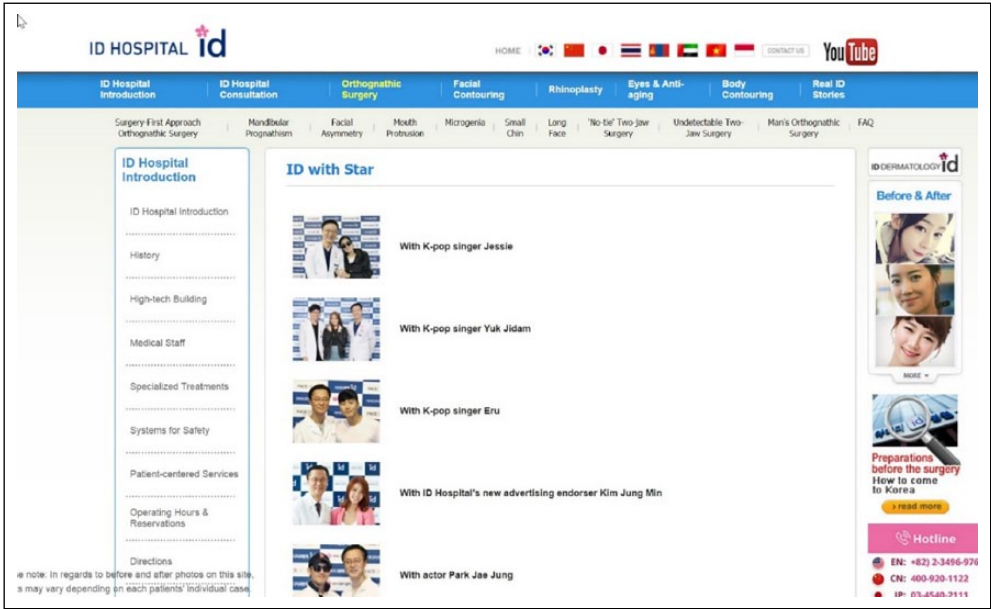


Figure 8. ID Hospital and sharing by “star.”

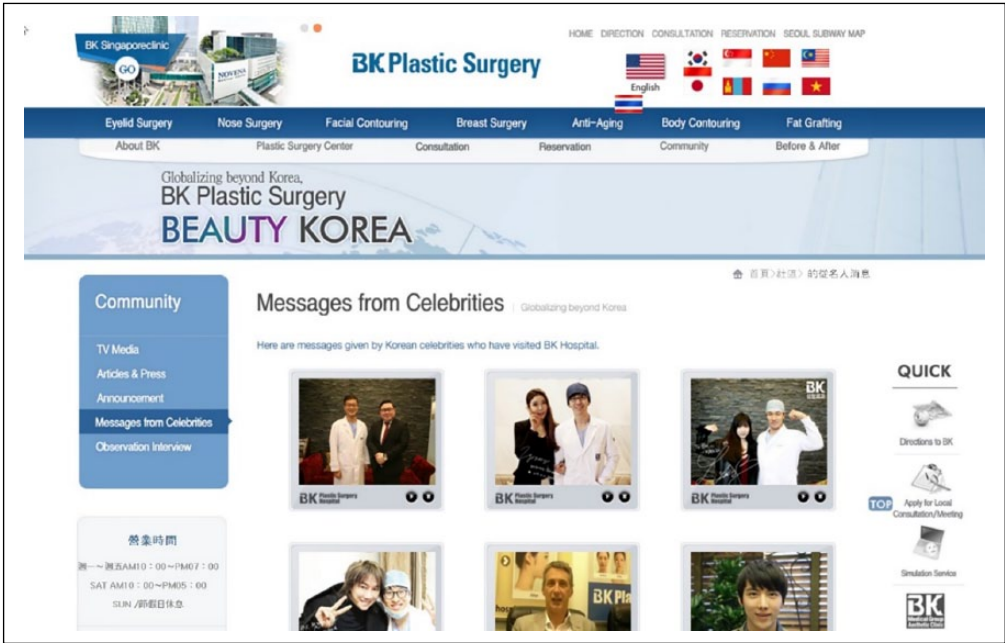


Figure 9. BK Plastic Surgery also has “messages from celebrities” to attract clients.



**Figure 10.** Candidates of Miss Korea 2016 demonstrated the Ulzzang (얼짱) look.

“I view a lot of reality shows, especially related to cosmetic surgery because it is really amazing to see the before and after changes of the same person.”, “When I watch more and more TV shows, I found that I am more accepting cosmetic surgery”, “I believed that cosmetic procedures can change me to become a prettier woman.”

Amy, a 35 year-old marketer, said,

“I cannot stop comparing myself with those I can see in TV program and advertisements”, “Watching more (TV dramas) make me feel that I am not beautiful enough.” and “Cosmetic surgery can change my appearance and upgrade my social status”

The above interviewees’ comments, suggests that the media, especially reality TV shows and dramas, have significant influences on the perceptions that patients have about cosmetic surgery and beauty tourism. When they watch more shows or drama, or they see more beautiful celebrities who have undergone substantial changes from cosmetic treatments, they begin to become more accepting of themselves or others to have cosmetic surgery.

The Korean media and the cultural industry create an ideal and even unrealistic standard of beauty for people to try to attain. For example, Korean girl and boy bands with the popular Ulzzang (얼짱) look is believed to propel the younger generation in their early 20s to seek this image and youth are under pressure to have a prominent nose tip, less angular jaw, and double eyelids (Figure 10).

According to Victoria (2013), “the K-pop industry and the idols themselves have been blamed for causing the boom of surgical procedures to alter the face in South Korea” (p. 2). The boys and girls in the band and drama influence the youth in Korea to “aspire for and to attain an unrealistic standard of beauty” (p. 2). Yu and Ko (2012) also mentioned that Korean Wave influences certain

Chinese market segments which increase the demand for cosmetic surgery and tourism. Other studies suggested that media exposure to cosmetic surgery reality show was significantly connected to “more favorable cosmetic surgery attitudes, perceived pressure to have cosmetic surgery, past attainment of a cosmetic procedure, a decreased fear of surgery, as well as overall body dissatisfaction, media internalization, and disordered eating” (Sperry, Thompson, Sarwer, & Cash, 2009). Cosmetic surgery advertising also led to increased dissatisfaction with weight and appearance, greater media influence, and less body appreciation (Ashikali, Dittmar, & Ayers, 2015). Interviewees in this study were also explicit in pointing to advertising and online media in the cultivation of their views around cosmetic surgery:

Yan, a 23-year-old student, said,

“Those Korean girls are so beautiful that I would like to look like them.” “I will go for the surgery because nowadays many YouTube videos show the details procedures of the surgeries that I can understand more and feel safe (to have surgery).” “I also want my face looks slimmer when I take selfies.”

Mandy and Cindy both stated,

“Korean have perfect faces and body shape.” “Cosmetic surgery can help people to improve their face and body problems.” “Most of the celebrities also go for surgeries.” “I think it is safe and the doctors are trustworthy because they will show you the expected results by 3D animation before the surgery.”

Amy mentioned,

“There are lots of attractive cosmetic surgery advertisements which teach you how to improve yourself.” “I never think of any negative results before I have the surgeries.”

Social media has dramatically increased self-monitoring translating into more people seeking to improve their appearance. According to Seyfi and Arpacı (2016), it is found that students who share selfies on social media have higher appearance orientation and evaluation scores compared to the students who do not share. Overexposure to social media has arguably contributed to millennials’ sense of entitlement (Stein, 2013) and commentators regularly claim that this generation is the “me me me” generation. Young people cannot stop using smartphones, and any concern over a flat nose or small breasts can easily turn into self-esteem disaster after a couple hours of Internet browsing. According to Stein (2013), “the incidence of narcissistic personality disorder is nearly three times as high for people in their 20s as for the generation that’s now 65 or older, according to the National Institutes of Health” (p. 1).

## **Diffusing Perceived Risks**

The advertising and social media discourses around Korean Wave and aesthetic medical tourism does not only increase the demand for and perceived need to undergo cosmetic procedures. A deeper reading into the texts and interviewee responses suggests that in order to be successful in changing behaviour, certain discursive strategies were employed to remove or reduce the perceived risks and taboos related to such procedures.

### *“Holidays with your friends” – reducing risk of social rejection*

The association with tourism has helped audiences to soften the taboo of going to Korea for plastic surgery by allowing customers to frame the treatment as holiday with friends as the fear of being rejected by friends or family is one of the major risks of undertaking cosmetic surgery and having other friends recommending or going together on holiday in Seoul and doing treatment together helps to minimize the risk of social rejection within the friendship group. At the same time, they can justify, rationalize, and cover up their actions to others with tourism.

Wan stated,

“I go to the Smart Plastic Surgery is because I have a friend’s referral.” “She is a buyer in Korea and she has a shop in Hong Kong.” “She knows Korean and she tried the treatments before she introduces to us.” “I am my friends can do treatments, eat and go shopping for a whole week.”

Fanny said,

“because I have friend’s referral, I also refer a lot of my friends to the same clinic.” “I think they should give me some commission, haha ...” “We always go together as a girl’s trip.”

Iris, a 25-year-old office lady, mentioned,

“it is fun to go traveling with friends and shared our happy time on Facebook.” “I also took before and after selfies to show my friends how work the treatments are.”

Tina, a 28-year-old saleslady, said,

“I will invite more friends to go to Korea with me.” “Traveling with friends is my purpose, to do treatment is an additional activity.”

Wan told that she likes to go to Seoul for HIFU treatment because the price there is cheaper than that in Hong Kong:

“In Hong Kong if you need to do a HIFU treatment, it will cost about HKD 16,000, however, if you do it in Seoul, it is about HKD 6000 and you can go traveling and have local Korean food such as soy crab or deep-fried chicken and beer with that HKD 10,000.” “You can also go with a group of friends rather than by yourself.”

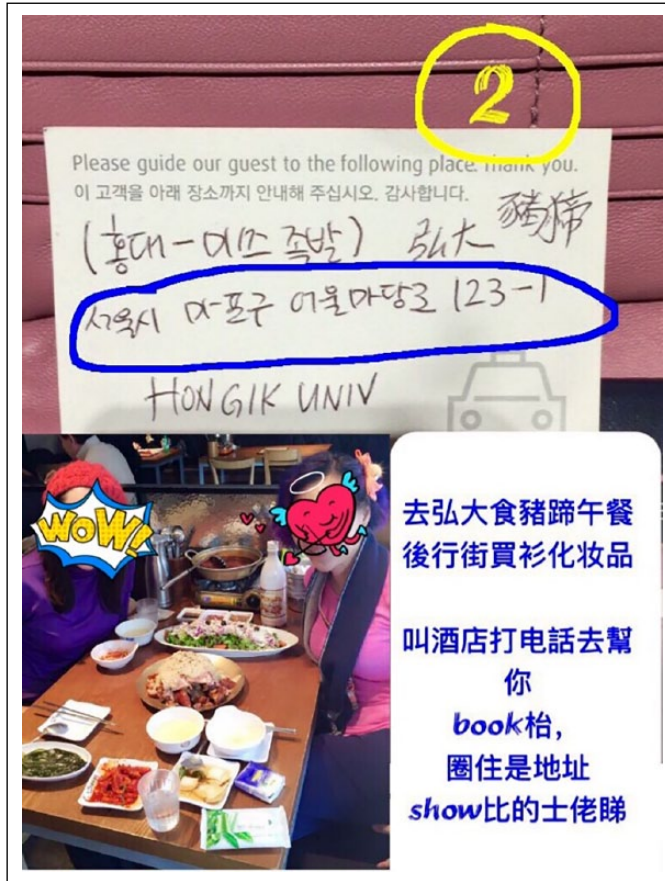
The cheaper cost of treatment in Korea also helps to justify the treatment itself.

“Referred by friends” and to have treatments “together” show the importance of peer acceptance. They can get together with those who will not criticize their actions or even criticize their appearance after having aesthetic medical treatments. This can also help to tear down social taboo of changing one’s facial features.

Molly, a 29-year-old accountant, said,

“I go to Seoul with my girl friends. We all will go to the clinic to have some treatments.” “I will go with different groups every time when I go to Seoul.” “We will wait for each other in the clinic and go to have good food after the treatments.” (Figure 11)





**Figure 11.** Tourism is associated with aesthetic medicine.

We noted that the above explanations are only used by non-surgical interviewees. For people, who do decide to undergo surgery, they avoid telling people about their aesthetic procedures and many cosmetic surgery tourists prefer to go to Korea secretly.

Unlike the non-surgery interviewees, Amy told me that rather than going with friends, she went to Seoul unaccompanied:

“Not many of my friend wants to have plastic surgery.” “I better go by myself because I don’t need to share the procedures with my friends or family.” “I will not post the before and after photos in my Facebook or Instagram.”

From the email interview, Amy did not want to talk too much about the reason why she wanted to have plastic surgeries. Rather, she was more willing to share the positive parts of having plastic surgery in Seoul:

“The clinic gave us high privacy level.” “The doctors are very professional and gave me very useful information about what is golden ratio and advised me what is beautiful.” “They emphasize look natural and harmless to my face.”



For Amy, an “innocent” holiday was not convincing enough for her to justify to her social group a significant and permanent change to one’s facial features.

### *“Natural” beauty*

Korean advertising of cosmetic surgery is paradoxical. On one hand, customers are given the idea of looking like K-pop celebrities, but on the other hand, promotions for cosmetic surgery emphasize terms such as “look natural,” “natural beauty,” and “reform surgery.” The Korean word for “cosmetic surgery” is Seonghyeong, or 성형, the meaning of which can only be translated as “reform” surgery (Y. Wang, 2015, p. 6). In Korea, the meaning of “reform” is emphasized, no matter it brings positive or negative effects, rather than in the West where cosmetic surgery is often associated with “man-made” or artificiality, which is often seen in a negative light.

While factors such as price and quality were a motive for Hong Kong interviewees to go to South Korea for cosmetic treatment, the need to look natural was another important point and the top 3 private-owned hospitals prominently used terms such as “golden ratio,” “harmony,” “beautiful,” “re-contouring,” “look natural,” “natural beauty” (Figures 12 to 14), “reform rather than change?,” “new life,” and “harmless.”

The interviewees also mentioned similar concerns and justifications, and Amy, who had plastic surgery, said,

“price is one of my consideration. However, the more important thing is I want to have natural look and don’t want to have dramatic changes. Korean celebrities are all look very natural and beautiful.”

Wen, the translator working in Koh Iksoo Plastic Surgery, also stated,

“Korean’s natural beauty standard is very suitable for me.” “It also associated with my own value so I choose to have treatments in Seoul with Dr. Koh.” “They lead the trend in Asia.”

To “look natural” and “beautiful” is as important as price or other economic reasons.

### *Facial features and identity*

Amy was also not satisfied with her nose:

“My nose is flat and my eyelids are so droopy that they look very sleepy” “My nose is from my mom’s family.” “My mom does not know that I had undergone surgery.” “She just said I look different.” “However, the effects are very natural. No one asked me about my feature changes.”

Amy wanted a new “face” with golden ratio, but she does not want people to ask about her changes. So, despite wanting to appear different, perhaps dramatically, Amy really wanted to “look natural” or even “look the same.” In fact, Tina also implied that she wanted to “look the same.”

Tina said,

“I could pass though the immigration counter smoothly.” “Is that mean I do not have much change? Or I successfully get a ‘natural look’?”

In fact, it is well known that cosmetic surgery tourists are given “plastic surgery certificates” after having operations, and Tina’s comment is tacit admission that cosmetic surgery leads to

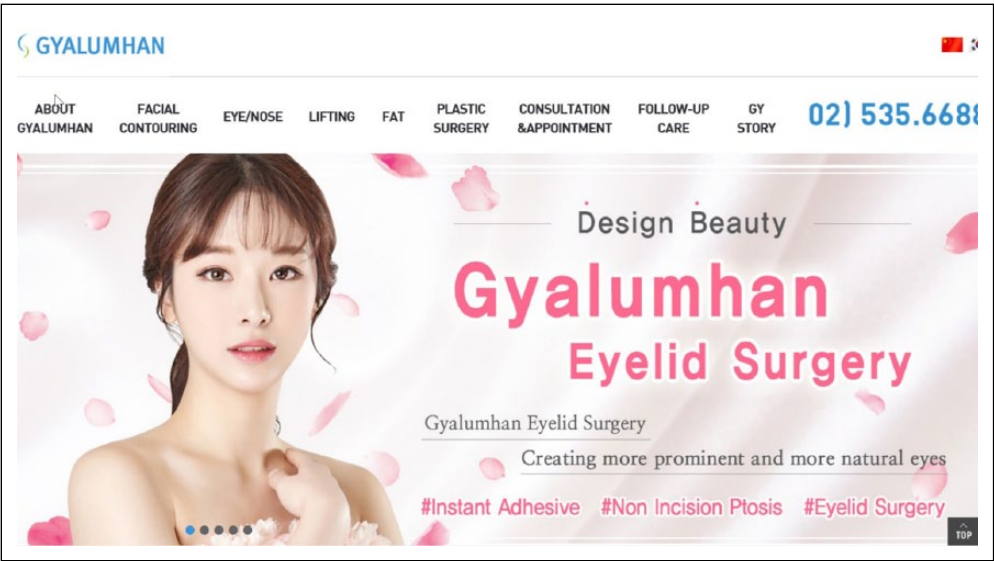


Figure 12. Gyalumhan is a hospital suggested by the official website with messages like “beauty” and “natural.”

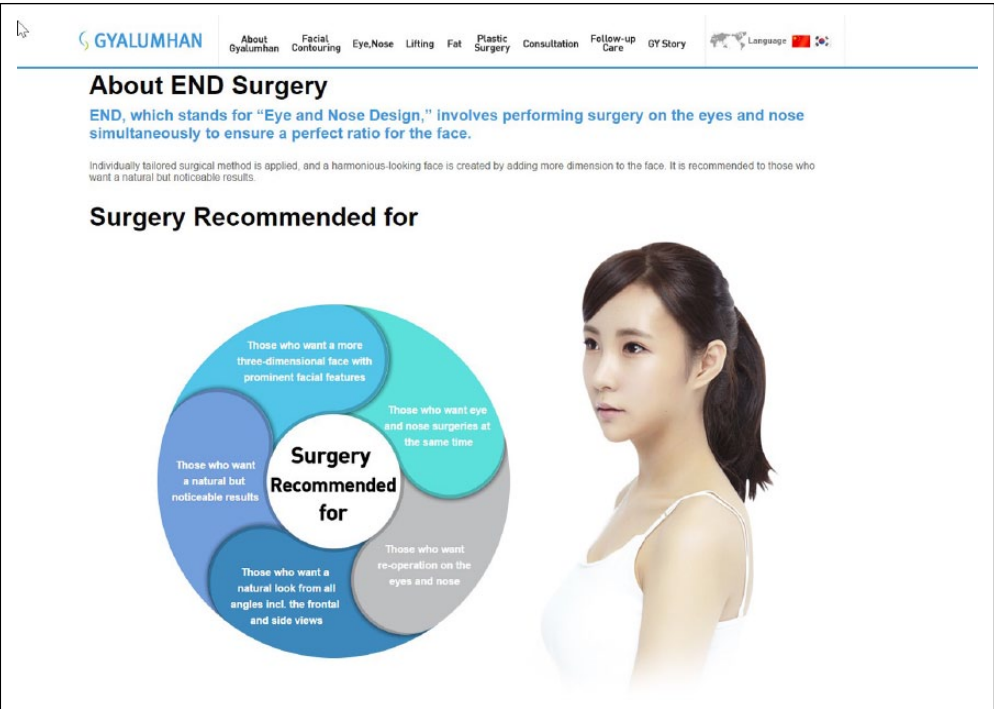
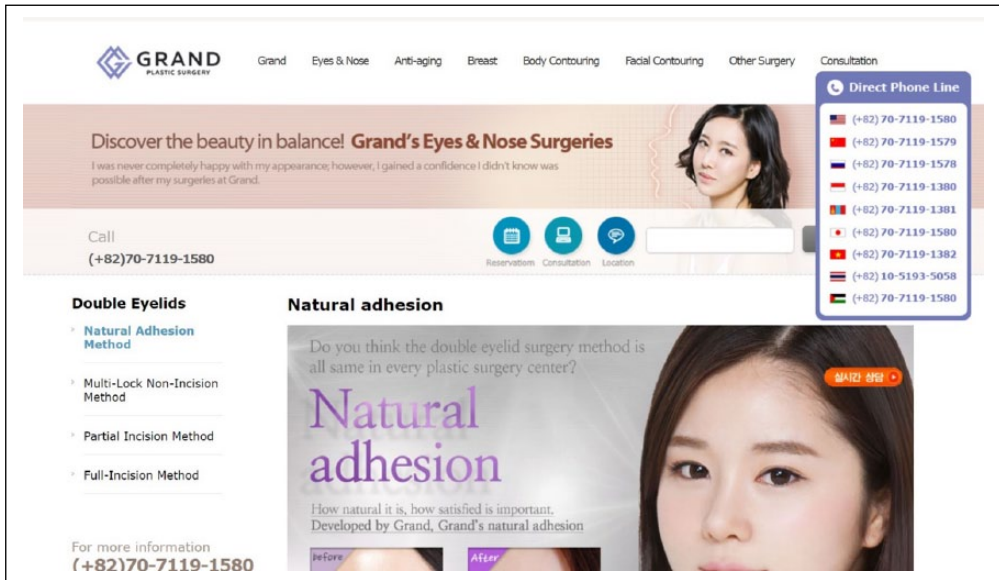


Figure 13. Gyalumhan’s promotion messages with “perfect ratio” and “natural, but noticeable results.”



**Figure 14.** Grand, one of the top 3 hospitals in South Korea with advertisement emphasizing “natural,” “beauty in balance,” and “gain a confidence.”

changed facial features requiring people who had gone through surgeries to change their passport and ID card photos.

The effects of cosmetic procedures, especially drastic ones, on someone’s sense of self may be hard to ascertain beforehand and plastic surgery that drastically changes a person’s appearance can affect the patient’s sense of identity (Lorenc & Hall, 2004). Pitts-Taylor (2007) said that “the transformation of one’s appearance through surgery can be radical, and the psychological effects of getting a different face or a drastically different body shape are really hard to predict.”

Blair commented on her 30-times surgeries:

“People said my appearance worth 80 out of 100 marks before the surgery and the comments are the same after my surgeries.” “Sometimes I do not know which ‘me’ should I happy with?” “Some of my bad features gone, but I do feel strange when I touch my face.”

According to Diller, Muir-Sukenick, and Willens (2011), people tend to pay no attention to their facial characteristics and only after a major appearance-changing surgery, they sometimes realize “that imperfection is actually part of their identity.” A “hooked nose” or “round face” might be part of someone’s identity and without realization how someone defines himself or herself. When the “defect” is gone, that self-definition can suffer. Diller et al. (2011) notes that patients after surgery can feel disconnected from their new faces. They no longer feel like themselves and have problem in their identity. “That image that people see in the mirror and take for granted, actually runs deeper” (Diller et al., 2011).

*Self-rejection and existential fear.* The face is a core part of one’s identity and we associate our identities with our appearance. Most of our important personal documents such as our ID card or

passport have a photo of our face on it. The advertisers and interviewees' insistence on being "natural" and "being able to pass through immigration" reflects a deeper fear.

The core taboo in the fear of cosmetic surgery is one of "Existential Fear," a term inspired from Sigmund Freud's (1915/1952) concept of "Death Anxiety," which refers to the morbid, abnormal, or persistent fear of one's own death and based on Becker's (1973) existential view of death. He suggested that death anxiety is a real and basic fear that underlies many forms of anxiety and phobia. Becker's (1973) view was that much of people's energy is focused on the denial of death as a strategy to keep death anxiety under control. After cosmetic surgery, your old friends may not be able to recognize you on the street. People who had cosmetic surgery may have the feeling that they have changed into another person, and after cosmetic surgery, people will fear that their core self no longer exists.

Cosmetic surgery may also be seen as a rejection of the value of oneself. To undertake drastic cosmetic surgery is an admission of one's own ugliness and a rejection of their inborn features and what their parents gave them. In East Asian societies, the shame runs deeper; it is not only a rejection of self, but it is also a rejection of one's parents.

A "natural" operation allows the patient to maintain their core identity and say that they are just making "small improvements," while a more "unnatural" operation or more drastic change implies a greater rejection of self.

*Temporary—like makeup.* Victoria (2013) notes that "almost every woman in both western and eastern culture has, at some point, altered their natural appearance, be it by wearing make-up, having a manicure or dying/cutting their hair. Some women will wear make-up every day." Victoria (2013) argues that cosmetic surgery is just a more permanent version of makeup: "being perceived as beautiful by society improves self-confidence and the quality of life for most people, and cosmetic surgery offers this feeling permanently."

But why is makeup socially acceptable (or even required) and cosmetic surgery a taboo even though both bring the same positive psychological benefits of looking good? Like Victoria (2013), some commentators (e.g. "Why is Plastic Surgery Still a Taboo," 2015) have tried to tear down the taboo by reframing cosmetic surgery as being equivalent to wearing makeup.

Indeed, during the process of finding interviewees, it was much easier to find interviewees who have undergone "temporary" non-surgical cosmetic treatments (such as HIFU, Botox injection) than those who have done surgery. They are more willing to admit that they have non-surgical treatments, but not cosmetic surgery.

Referring to her HIFU treatments in Korea, Cindy, Iris, Judy, and Wan all mentioned that

"those treatments are natural and temporary." "You need to have the treatments regularly because the effects will disappear few months later."

Molly stated that

"treatments like Hifu, Botox and Restylane are all temporary that you need to go back to Seoul at least two or three times a year."

So, apart from pretending that changes are "natural" or minor, another way to justify cosmetic treatments is whether one's procedure is temporary rather than a permanent change in appearance. There is less "death anxiety" as one's real self is still here, it is merely hiding behind a temporary cover and you will revert to your natural self again soon.

*Disassociating self with body.* Although we did not see this in the Korean advertising or with our interviewees, it is worth noting that there are other ways in which people can justify drastic cosmetic surgery without damaging their sense of self.

People from the “body modification” and “biohacker” subcultures deliberately change not only their appearance but also their bodies. Their actions can be related to aesthetic reasons or for sexual enhancement. It can also be related to rite of passage, religious beliefs, to display group membership or affiliation. Some body modification practitioners see their actions as a type of art or self-expression and some enjoy the shock value. Biohackers in particular believe that they should improve their physical form with new technology. These groups are proud of their body alterations. Unlike most people who undertake cosmetic surgery, these people are willing to come out and tell others about their different kinds of surgeries. Rather than threatening their core identity and self-esteem, body modification itself becomes part of their core self and identity.

Even in mainstream culture, some users of cosmetic surgery are open about not really wanting to be “natural,” but rather they want to look like a certain actor or model, someone who are different from themselves with problematic reasons. Lorenc and Hall (2004) mentioned “that’s a red flag,” because it indicates a desire to become somebody else, a famous person who, in the patient’s mind, faced no worries or problems. Those who want to change to a totally different person have “this glorified picture of this perfect identity” (Lorenc & Hall, 2004). With this “wrong reason,” a patient actually wants to discard her sense of self by changing his or her remarkable features in his or her face, but that’s usually going rebound that they cannot reach the “perfect identities” that they think the celebrities have (Lorenc & Hall, 2004). While the psychology literature sees such thinking as a disease “body dysmorphic disorder” that needs to be treated (e.g. Lorenc & Hall, 2004), it seems that some people can separate their appearance from their core identity.

*Health benefits and health risks.* The aesthetic medical industry also tries to sell the “health benefits” of cosmetic surgery and non-surgical treatments and some countries like Brazil have justified government-funded cosmetic surgery through an appeal to public health (Edmonds, 2009). Korean clinics also employ this strategy (Figure 15).

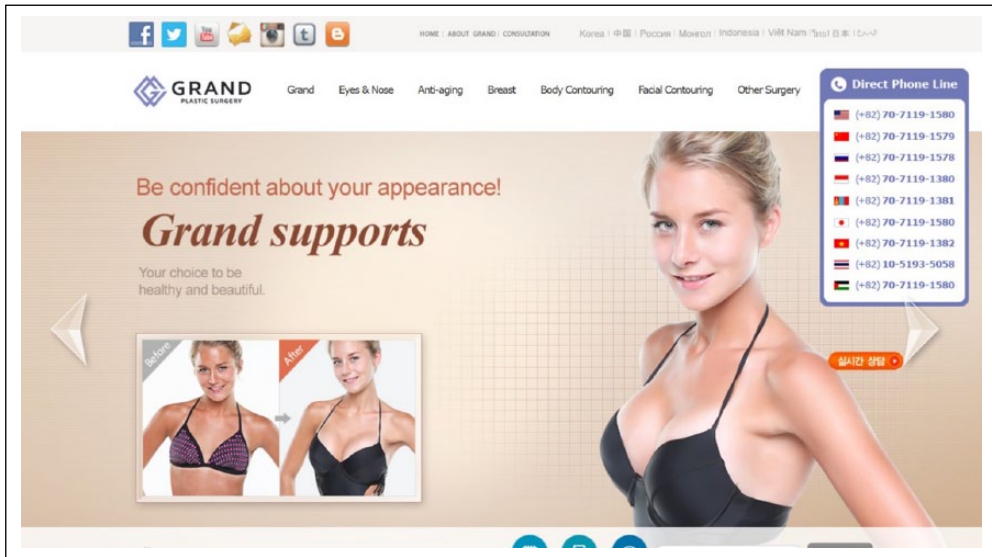
This is especially important for men, for whom “looking good” is not a socially acceptable justification for cosmetic surgery. Even Michael Jackson who underwent obvious skin bleaching and radical rhinoplasty, repeatedly told the media that he had health problems and needed medical treatment. He even explained his surgeries with medical reason like vitiligo.

Michael Jackson self-proclaimed himself as a perfectionist who was never happy with his music or his appearance and said he hated to look in the mirror and tried not to. This is a rejection of self, the core self. Even then, health reasons gave him and others who had cosmetic surgery a way to explain or justify their actions.

Gary, a male who had braces in Hong Kong because his wife, who works in the aesthetic medical industry, “forced him” to get braces, justifies his actions this way:

“Even though I am too old for braces, but my wife says that having straight teeth is important to my health”

John, a male interviewee who is considering minor cosmetic surgical procedures, admitted that it is not socially acceptable to do even minor procedures such as mole peeling or braces:



**Figure 15.** Advertising banner from Grand to emphasize “healthy and beautiful” and “be confident about your appearance!”

“No one will admit that (the treatment) is related to appearance because it is socially unacceptable for males to be care too much about their appearance.” “I will not post the news on my Facebook, never! Even if someone offered free treatment in return for me promoting on my Facebook, I wouldn’t do this”

Men, even more than women, cannot be publicly seen to use cosmetic surgery.

This association of cosmetic surgery with “health” and “harmlessness” is ironic because surgery in fact is quite risky and despite the advertising, interviewees are aware of these risks.

Wan, Molly, and Fanny who had only non-surgical treatments stated that they will not have plastic surgery in South Korea because it is not covered by insurance and if there is any emergency, they cannot communicate well with the medical team in the hospital due to language differences. Wan mentions,

“I will not suggest my friends to have surgery because I do not think that the clinic has enough facilities to handle serious cases.” “I am not confident that I can communicate with them even they have translator for us.”

However, Amy, who did undergo surgery, was not concerned about the risk of a medical emergency. She believed that the hospital would have translators to help her. Also, she said she have never heard of any case that someone suffered from serious problems in Seoul:

“Seoul is very advanced in cosmetic surgery with professionals over there.” “I think I am not the only person who concern about the potential risks about the surgery, but I think I can trust the doctor.”

Media and the advertising messages do not clearly portray the danger and harm of cosmetic surgery such as a traumatic injury, breast cancer, or even death. There will be incisions and movement of tissue and all these still cause blood loss and pain and it is rare for patients to share the

failed cases with the media or publicly (Morgan, 1991). Such risks become even more pronounced in a world where we can now find a plastic surgeon on Instagram. According to Howard (2017), only about 18% of the surgeons on Instagram are board-certified.

## Conclusion

This study looked at how the Korean aesthetic medical industry and cosmetic medical tourists from Hong Kong and mainland China who have visited Korea consume, cultivate, and in some cases overcome deeply held taboos of cosmetic surgery.

At a structural level the economic flows of aesthetic medical tourism reflect the power of the Korean entertainment industry and shows perhaps a de-westernization (Spark, 2013; Iwabuchi, 2013) of regional beauty standards. Korean Dramas may have contributed to the success of the export of regional beauty standards and aesthetic medical tourism in a way that is not driven by crude notions of neo-liberal economic utility and we see that the well explored cultural flows of Hallyu with its regionalized and ethnic logics can in turn influence more “concrete” economic flows. Clearly, with the help of the government and cultural industries, South Korea has been able to position itself as a nexus for cultural standards of beauty as well as a center for medical expertise.

However, while the neo-liberal considerations of quality and price play some part, millennials borrow the discursive resources offered to them by the websites, social media sites and salespeople. For people who aspire to look as beautiful as the K-pop stars in the TV dramas, medical tourists will try to reduce peer and social risks by going through friends’ referrals and going to Korea with friends for “tourism.”

While this is enough justification for people who undertake non-permanent cosmetic procedures, those who have undergone more drastic cosmetic surgery will not use the above reasons to justify their actions because they are not convincing enough. Their “existential fear” and fear of both social and self-rejection mean that they will try to reduce the risk of other people knowing or admit their cosmetic surgery.

It was found that medical tourists who underwent non-surgical treatments were more willing to share their procedures and medical tourism experience, while those who had cosmetic surgery hesitated to share their experience or justified their surgeries with varied reasons.

From the interviews, we found that medical tourists were worried about three types of risks that people who have cosmetic surgery experience: the potential medical risk of doing cosmetic surgery, the social acceptance risk (being judged by friends, family, and the community), and existential risk—the risk of admitting that one is ugly or that one’s identity may change completely (the original self no longer exists).

This study was able to bring to light some of the taboos and how medical tourists view and overcome the taboos with the help of online resources, advertising and reality shows. While the media is sometimes seen as having a strong and direct influence, the audience is active and does not simply believe everything it hears or sees. While the media plays a heavy role in influencing our standards of beauty, and increase our need to look beautiful, the audience is ultimately able to adopt media messages for their own advantage in order to overcome taboos to achieve their personal goals of looking more beautiful.

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