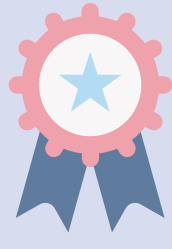


Primary Motives of Korean Cosmetic Surgery: Neoliberal Consumerism, Biomedical Advancement, Digital Publicity

By Wong Hei Tung Noel - Korean Studies, School of Modern Languages and Culture, Faculty of Arts, The University of Hong Kong

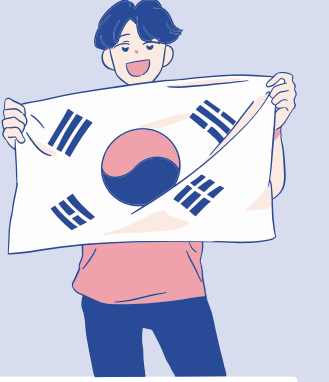
Introduction



Cosmetic Surgery reshapes and enhances specific body structures to a set form of beauty norms.

South Korea is the global plastic surgery capital with the highest per capita rate of cosmetic surgery in the world.[1] A popular "Korean Look" comprises wide eyes and double eyelids, a prominent nose, sleek cheekbones and a sharp jawline.[2]

The Korean Look represents the 21st-century Korean beauty ideal – "Gangnam-style beauty", a hybrid of the new science of beauty and sociocultural conceptions of beauty that combines globalized and local cultural values.[3]



Main Thesis

The primary motives of Korean cosmetic surgery lie in the contexts of:

1) Neoliberal consumerism, 2) Biomedical advancements, 3) Digital publicity

Argument 1: Neoliberal Consumerism (1990s)

Cosmetic surgery first gained popularity in Korean youth as neoliberal consumerism emerged in the late 1990s. Neoliberal consumerism fosters the pursuit of individualism, subjectivity of self and self-improvement through the consumption of products.[4]

From Neo-Confucianism to Neoliberal Consumerism:

Neo-Confucianism

- Values collectivism, culture of conformity, and filial piety
- Views body as a sacred gift from parents that any body manipulation violates filial piety [5]

Neoliberal Consumerism

- Values individualism, subjectivity, and self-improvement
- View body practices as an opportunity for personal fulfilment and self-investment [4]

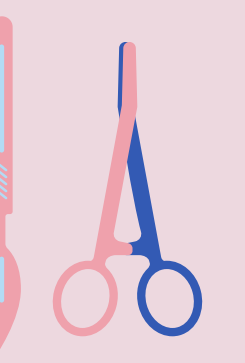
Gendered Lookism in Korean Society:

- Lookism formulates an attractive face as a sign of desired class or social identity, esp. for women
- Women who have a less desirable appearance are subject to discrimination
- Cosmetic surgery helps women secure higher income and lead a better life [6]



Argument 2: Biomedical Advancement (2000s)

Korean cosmetic surgery industry underwent industrialization with biomedical advancements in the 2000s, which normalized cosmetic surgery as a common biomedical practice for modern consumers.



Gangnam-style Beauty

New Science of Beauty

- Defines a beautiful face by numeric proportions
- Utilizes scientific analysis and technology
- Compares a patient's face with an ideal face of Golden Ratio [3]

Sociocultural Conceptions

- Western: Wide eyes and a prominent nose
- Japanese: Manga face with big eyes, button nose, narrow jawline
- Korean: Natural beauty and balance of the whole face [4]

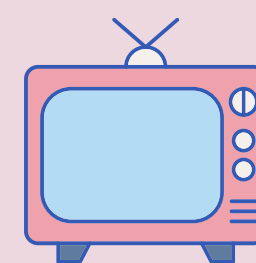
Argument 3: Digital Publicity (2010s)

Cosmetic surgery has become normalized into a form of physiological enhancement in Korea since the 2010s with digital publicity – the extensive use of digital communications and the integration of digital technology into everyday life.

Advertising Campaigns



- Embellish cosmetic surgery as "medicalised beauty therapy"
- Publicize before-and-after photos, exaggerate desirable outcomes and understate potential risks [4]

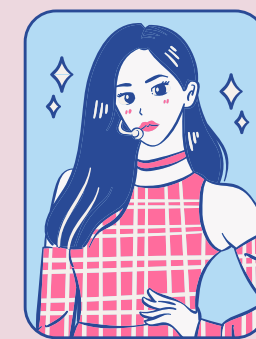


- E.g., Korean TV show "Let Me In" (2011)
- Shapes public attitudes and increases social acceptance of cosmetic surgery as a self-empowerment tool [7]

Social Media



- Facilitates interactive communication
- Intensifies self-monitoring, body dissatisfaction, self-esteem disaster, media internalization [1]



K-pop Culture

- Spurs pursuit of perfection and artificial naturalness
- K-pop idols serve as exemplars of beauty and provide trust and reassurance to potential patients [8]

Conclusion

The primary motives for Korean cosmetic surgery are neoliberal consumerism, biomedical advancements, and digital publicity. However, it eventually counts on individuals' judgement regarding what defines beauty and their internalization of the sociocultural conceptions.

Selected References

1. Wong, Ka Yee Janice. 2018. "No More Taboo: Discursive Tactics for Navigating the Taboo of Cosmetic Surgery." *Global Media and China* 3, no. 4: 271-296.
2. Holliday, Ruth, Olive Cheung, Ji Hyun Cho, and David Bell. 2017. "Trading Faces: The 'Korean Look' and Medical Nationalism in South Korean Cosmetic Surgery Tourism." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 58, no. 2: 190-202.
3. Leem, So Yeon. 2017. "Gangnam-Style Plastic Surgery: The Science of Westernized Beauty in South Korea." *Medical Anthropology* 36, no. 7: 657-71.
4. Elfving-Hwang, Joanna. 2021. "The Body, Cosmetic Surgery and The Discourse of "Westernization of Korean Bodies"." In *The Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics*. New York: Routledge, pp. 273-283.
5. Kim, Taeyon. 2003. "Neo-Confucian Body Techniques: Women's Bodies in Korea's Consumer Society." *Body & Society* 9, no. 2: 97-113.
6. Elfving-Hwang, Joanna. 2013. "Cosmetic Surgery and Embodying the Moral Self in South Korean Popular Makeover Culture." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 11, no. 2: 1-17.
7. Kim, Ju oak. 2020. "The Locality of Plastic Bodies: Korean Reality TV, Celebrity, and Bimaxillary Surgery." *Continuum* 34, no. 5: 720-732.
8. Wang, Yuqing. 2015. "Behind South Korean Cosmetic Surgery : Its Historical Causes and Its Intertwined Relationship with Korean Pop Culture." MA thesis. University of Delaware.