

SELLING SUCCESSFUL BODIES:

*the construction of female beauty ideals on the Websites of Korean
cosmetic surgery clinics*

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Introduction

In February 2017, Six Bomb, a relatively unknown South Korean girl group, released two songs called “예뻐지는중” (*I am becoming pretty*) “Before” and “After”. The “Before” music video follows the members – 100% *au naturel* prior to surgeries and without makeup – on their consultations and visit to beauty shops, talking to doctors and beauticians. The girls are seen playfully laughing and joking as they sing the lyrics, “Don’t be surprised, don’t make fun of me. I will become prettier”. Just like the before and after photos commonly seen on ads of cosmetic surgery clinics, the “After” video shows the big reveal post-surgery. The final outcome is presented, and the members are shown dancing and singing post-surgery, fully made up and wearing matching outfits. As the girls confidently flaunt their new look, they sing different lyrics:

(Korean)

“Hey baby so what 괜찮아 나니까
내가 난 좋아 당당한 나니까
Beautiful my life 멋대로 사니까
예뻐지는 중이야
더 예뻐지는 중이야 alright”

(English)

“*Hey baby so what*, it’s okay because it’s me.
I like myself because I’m confident.
Beautiful my life, I am living the way I like
I am becoming pretty
I am now becoming prettier *alright*”

This gimmicky strategy of showing the members before and after surgery did not warrant any success, as the controversial music videos gained them international attention but no new fans or record sales. What is most disconcerting about these videos is that it eulogizes the cosmetically enhanced female beauty ideals and promotes cosmetic surgery as a solution to women to “become

pretty". This problematic narrative of beauty transformation with the implication of success is all too common for South Korean women. It may not be surprising that South Korea (henceforth Korea) scores highest per capita on cosmetic surgery procedures (Raitt 2014). In 2016, the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons revealed that 20 in 1000 people have undergone a form of cosmetic surgery procedure, far outranking other countries (ISAPS 2016 Report). Not only that, Seoul is widely known as the cosmetic surgery capital in the world, attracting droves of international medical tourists who wish to enhance their appearance. The cosmetic surgery industry has become one of the major economic forces in Korea, growing into a \$5 billion US dollar industry. Its prominence can be traced back to the 2000s, where it gained momentum as a by-product of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) in the 90s. The Korean Wave rose from a surge of interest in Korean pop music, media and celebrity culture. Its influences spread globally yet found its most fertile ground in Asia. Korea's soft power grew internationally with the dissemination of Korean products which simultaneously meant that Korean beauty ideals were also spread globally. This can be seen in the immense popularity of Korean beauty products, growing into a US\$ 4.8 billion export industry in 2016 (Yonhap News 2017). Especially in Asia, Korea holds a leading position in cultural products and defining beauty standards.

Why is Korea an outlier when it comes to cosmetic surgery? One of the reasons I will explore in this thesis is that it was one of Korea's answers to a fast changing and competitive society. Going hand in hand with the growing interest in celebrity culture, the increasingly competitive job markets have raised the bar for physical attractiveness. Today, cosmetic surgery has become a socially acceptable form of enhancement and investment for the future for many young, mostly female, adults. Studies have estimated that one-fifth to one-third of women in Seoul have undergone some form of cosmetic surgery, whilst other sources estimate this figure might be over fifty per cent for women in their twenties (Marx 2013; BBC 2016). This because having the "correct" or "appropriate" face can be a determining factor for the highly competitive job and marriage market in South Korea (Holiday and

Elfvig-Hwang 2012). Recent female high school graduates commonly receive a rhinoplasty (nose surgery) or blepharoplasty (double eyelid surgery) as their high school graduation gift, akin to a rite of initiation into adulthood (Marx 2015). In Seoul's many underground metro stations, advertisements of cosmetic surgery clinics are very common, especially in *Gangnam*, the area that is often referred as the "beauty belt" due to its many cosmetic surgery clinics. Big rotating posters of contrasting before and after photos demonstrate to daily commuters how average Korean women and men can enhance themselves to become beautiful and to look more "correct". Such advertisements of cosmetic surgery clinics are not limited to public spaces but are mimicked and thriving online. Maintaining easy and accessible websites are indispensable for modern cosmetic surgery hospitals to introduce, attract and persuade potential new customers to undergo costly and risky procedures.

Infatuation with cosmetic surgery can be found in the use of vernacular language, buzzwords express one must be a *momjjang* ("best body") or a *öljjang* ("best face") to succeed in life. The opposite is true for being a *momkkwang* ("bad body") or *ölkkwang* ("bad face"), which can ruin your job or marriage prospects (Gelezeau 2015). Although aesthetics is a concern for both sexes, 70% of the total amount of cosmetic surgeries are performed on women (Gelezeau 2015, 3; ISAPS report 2016). It is due to this predominance of women in cosmetic surgery, I choose to focus on the representations of the female beauty and explore how aestheticization of the female body is part of modern national identity making and how it relates to female success and social class.

This thesis aims to answer the following research question:

1. *"How does the Korean cosmetic surgery industry construct beauty ideals of contemporary Korean women in the promotion of their products and services?"*

To provide greater depth and contextual analysis one sub-question follows:

2. “What are the implications of the consumption of cosmetic surgery by contemporary Korean women in the light of gender and class, in the backdrop of Korea’s globalization and interaction with global markets (such as the Korean Wave)?”

This sub-question will be tackled in the first chapter discussing the public and governmental discourses on the role of women and the notion of success with the backdrop of the evolution and interaction of localized beauty ideals (“Koreanness”) with global cultures. Korean Wave is explored within the context of national efforts of branding and constructing a cultural and national identity as Korea entered an era of modernization and globalization. In the second chapter I will expound upon the development of Korea’s cosmetic surgery industry and examine how the feminist critique on the beauty system applies for the Korean case. The concept of “naturalness” will be examined within the context of cosmetic surgery and beauty industry.

In my third chapter I perform a textual and critical discourse analysis of the websites of three well-known cosmetic surgery clinics in Seoul to examine the construction of female beauty ideals and what implications it brings regarding gender, class and the notion of “success” for Korean women.

In this chapter the following sub-questions will be explored:

1. How are female beauty ideals represented by the cosmetic surgery industry and how are they constructed?
2. What kind of language and words are used to describe these ideals?
3. What do these images and languages imply and how does this relate to notion of female success and social class?

This thesis lends itself for theoretical concepts of Bourdieu (1990; 1991) on social class and cultural capital. Expanding on Bourdieu’s theories, I integrate Lovell’s (2000) concept of *feminine* capital and Anderson and Grunert (2010) concept of *aesthetic* capital which are supported by Skeggs’ (2004)

argument that cultural capital is inherently gendered. Similarly, I will trace the evolution of the concept of “success” for South Korean women from 1945 to today and examine how national discourses have shaped the role and bodies of women - and most importantly, how they shape the understanding of female bodies today. In the post-industrialized society of Korea, women’s bodies take on new meaning as “consumer bodies” (Kim 2009, 2). Additionally, I have found that aesthetics as cultural capital and class symbolism is pertinent to understand the normalization and popularity of cosmetic surgery among women (and to lesser extent but increasingly so for men as well) in South Korea’s society today. As part of giving a socio-economic context for the South Korean class distinction, I will elaborate on the contemporary public discourses on class and social mobility such as the “Spoon Theory” and the “Hell Joseon” narrative. Both are vernacular narratives championed by a large segment of the younger population in Korea who argue that the socio-economic inequality is widening, social mobility limited, and class structures have become rigid due to economic capital being transferred from generation to generation via hereditary assets (Lee and Tan 2016; Kim 2015).

For visual and textual analysis of the websites of three prominent cosmetic surgery clinics will be examined: ID Hospital, Banobagi and DA Clinic. These three clinics all three can be considered prominent and famous clinics according to a South Korean ranking website (www.rankey.co.kr). Due to time and physical constraint, I have chosen to study Internet texts. This is also because Internet texts have become a dominant form of cultural text (Fiske 1990). Amongst cultural studies scholar, the emphasis is placed on the close examination of cultural artifacts to investigate popular culture. In the case of cosmetic surgery clinics, the website is where many potential customers would first gather their information and assess the clinic. Through semiotic analysis I bring to light the hidden and implied meanings within the Texts in relation to female beauty ideals and the notion of “success”.

In the first level of analysis, the denotation, one looks at the ‘literal’ or the ‘obvious’ meaning of the sign. It consists of a basic and descriptive level of a sign which holds wide consensus as most people

would agree on its meaning (Hall 1997, 38). Art historian Panofsky defines the denotation of a visual image as something what all people universally, transcending culture and time, would recognize as the image is depicting (1970, 51-53). Chandler (1994) argues that this definition is problematic, as it excludes the very young or the insane. The definition implies that the viewer is culturally well-adjusted which is already culture-specific and touches upon the realm of connotation.

The second level of analysis, the connotation, goes deeper beyond the descriptive or easily recognizable level of the sign. For analytical purposes it is useful to distinguish denotation and connotation from one another, yet according to Chandler, in practice, meanings cannot be easily separated. This is because “connotation, produces the illusion of denotation” and if denotations are seen as the obvious and the “natural” meaning, then denotation can also be considered a process of ‘naturalization’. This leads to the illusion that denotation is universal, literal and not ideological, that language is transparent and that the signifier and signified are identical (ibid, 90). However, if we understand denotation simply as a broader consensus among members of the same culture, then connotation can be understood as interpreting the denotation within its cultural and symbolic context. Such interpretations are connected to social ideology and therefore connotative meanings can produce, reflect or reinforce ideological myths (Berger 1989, 48).

If semiotic analysis serves to decode the ideological message behind texts and critical discourse analysis (CDA) has the means to examine how language creates and maintains differences in relations of power. This is because CDA acknowledges that language is a form of social practice embedded in cultural, social and psychological frameworks. “CDA accepts this social context and studies the connections between textual structures and takes this social context into account and explores the links between textual structures and their function in interaction within the society” (Horváth 2009). Through a semiotic and critical discourse analysis I hope to shed light on how female beauty ideals are constructed by Korea’s cosmetic surgery industry and how this relates to gender and class distinction.

This is relevant especially because cosmetic surgery is predominantly consumed by women and efforts to convince women to undergo cosmetically “enhance” their bodies through media and advertisements are pervasive and perennial. In the first chapter I will expound on theoretical concepts of class, gender and cultural capital and expound on traditional and public discourses on “successful” or “good” women and the female body. Subsequently, I trace discourses of social mobility and class in Korea from the 70s onwards to serve as a backdrop for my analysis and illustrate this with contemporary narratives of “Hell Joseon” and the “Spoon Theory”. Lastly, I expound on how the public discourse on femininity and aesthetics are politicized and are have become part of the discourse on creating a national identity based on modernity, which is promoted through strategies of nation-branding.

The significance of this study is to bridge the gap in scholarship from a critical and feminist perspective. Although research on cosmetic surgery from scientific and medical perspectives is abundant, there critical research concerning discourses of beauty and the body incorporating and intersecting gender, class and cosmetic surgery that take into account feminist scholarship is lacking. Furthermore, I hope this thesis will serve women or gender studies to better understand the Korean culture and context.

1. Modern Korea: a beautiful nation

In this chapter Korea’s class structures, class identity and the social and historical developments will be examined, as such structures have influenced public discourse on female bodies and Korea’s efforts in national branding. The relationship between South Korean women and their bodies have been

continuously changing throughout history to answer pressures of globalization and modernization.

Following the rapid changes within Korea society, the discourse surrounding women and their bodies adapted to respond to new (global) trends and attitudes.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, *habitus* and feminist expansions such as aesthetic capital (Anderson and Grunert 2010), feminine capital (Keggs 2004; Lovell 2005) are applied to the Korean context. I believe these concepts are key to better understand the contemporary Korean infatuation and normalization of cosmetic surgery and artificial beauty ideals. "Korean looks", as shown in popular media, are a part of South Korea's national branding and are propagated as such by cosmetic surgery clinics. Historically and traditionally speaking, women's physical appearances were deemed as less important than her reproductive capabilities. The Neo-Confucian dogma would place women's bodies in the interior, within the family and out of the public eye. Furthermore, the body was considered as sacred and cardinal. This idea of physical essentialism continued well into the 20th Century yet changed with globalization and modernization of Korea. Concerning oneself with beauty and one's appearance was not only considered a feminine domain, it was also a socially acceptable and desirable investment for women. Yet it was the 90s that truly marked the explosive interest and popularity of cosmetic surgery in Korea. The interest in cosmetic surgery and beauty in the 90s coincides with the Korean Wave and the great interest in media and celebrity culture. Through the Korean Wave, the Korean media did not only popularize and normalize specific beauty ideals within Korea, but also extended globally. Beyond the 90s, the "Korean look" became a beauty ideal for men and women disseminated by Korean pop idols and actors. The globalization of Korean culture has become part of a national branding strategy, where the Korean government finds a purpose in articulating and presenting and constructing its own national identity through media images.

Class identity in Korea

Bourdieu: class and cultural capital

Success for Korean women and increasingly men, both for work and for marriage prospects, is contingent upon looks. Appearances are so important that Gelezeau (2015) even speaks of an underclass of people who do not conform to such beauty ideals (“cosmetic underclass”). Earlier I mentioned how beauty is a form of cultural capital that one requires and acquires to build and/or maintain social status – beauty and appearances are seemingly definitive for female success. Utilizing Bourdieu’s concept of class and cultural capital allows for further analysis of the Korean context. His theory on class built upon a reflexive system that integrates both class and culture. Bourdieu’s approach to class theory is a coalescence of theories on existing class theories. He was heavily influenced by Marxist scholarship and this influence is evident in his works on class, power and capital. Furthermore, feminist scholarship has expounded upon Bourdieu’s theories of cultural capital, adding the concept of “feminine capital” and how gender intersect with cultural capital and therefore also class.

Bourdieu’s analysis on class features an approach that highlights symbolic power and questions the boundaries between classes. Bourdieu borrows Weber’s distinction on “class” and “status groups”, and instead of considering them as “two *real* unities which would come together more or less frequently according to the type of society ... To see them instead as *nominal* unities . . . Which are always the result of a choice to accent the economic aspect or the symbolic aspect - aspects which always coexist in the same reality” (1966).

Bourdieu interprets Weber’s distinction between class and status groups as tools for analytical convenience. Thus, class analysis does not solely entail the analysis of economic relations, but symbolic relations as well. Bourdieu’s approach to class thus encompasses the two dimensions of economic and symbolic relations. He furthermore challenges the imperative of demarcated class boundaries prior to

analysis, stating that rather than treating the classes as “self-subsistent entities” which are subjected to theoretical conjectures, they should be understood as social practices.

When considering class structure, Bourdieu’s understanding of class encompasses the whole occupational division of labour. This division of labour forms a system, and such divisions are related to various factors which in turn are derived from the distribution of capital. According to him capital is “the set of actually usable resources and powers” (1984). Bourdieu appropriated his class theory of Marx on (economic) capital yet expands the concept to encompass multiple forms of capital, namely social and cultural capital. Social capital is capital, potential or actual, that is acquired through the possession of a durable network that is established through the relationships of mutual recognition and acquaintance. This most often means the membership to an institutions or group. Cultural capital refers to a collection of symbolic elements that one acquires when belonging to a certain class or group. It is the result of socialization and cultivation and is specific to culture and tradition.

Cultural capital

Embodied capital is inherently linked to the body and mind, it is capital that is consciously acquired and passively inherited through culture, socialization or assimilation (1986). A posh British accent or a healthy lifestyle are all forms of embodied capital that are part of the socialization process of culture and tradition and required over time through assimilation or conscious effort. Objectified capital is capital that can be accumulated as property through material objects and media (e.g. writing, paintings, instruments) that is transmissible. This type of capital is often defined by its relationship with embodied capital. Cultural goods can be appropriate materially, by means of economic capital, and symbolically, by means of cultural capital. Institutionalized cultural capital encompasses a recognition of one’s personal cultural capital, such as academic degrees and professional qualifications.

When cultural capital is sufficiently legitimated it can be converted into what Bourdieu calls symbolic capital. This is the prestige or recognition accumulated by various types of capital by virtue of being recognized, valued and “known” as legitimate (Lawler 1999, 6). According to Bourdieu, only the cultural capital of the middle classes is legitimized this way. Only the tastes and dispositions of the middle classes are coded as inherently “right” and “tasteful”. Lawler (1999) that it is therefore “not the matter of inequality in legitimized forms of knowledge and aesthetics, but, precisely, knowledge and aesthetics themselves” (6). Therefore, not possessing cultural capital or symbolic capital means to fail in aesthetic judgement, knowledge and cultural competence (ibid).

Feminine capital and aesthetic capital

Bourdieu famously quoted: “sexual properties are as inseparable from class properties as the yellowness of a lemon is from its acidity” (2000). With this statement he acknowledges that gender and class are inseparable, and class is always gendered. Despite acknowledging the intertwining of gender, class and capital, Huppatz argues that Bourdieu failed to examine the relationships between gender and capital (2009). Originally, he did not consider gender to be a form of capital as he viewed capital as gender-neutral. For this reason, Bourdieu used the concept of capital exclusively to examine class stratification and advantage.

Feminist bourdieusian scholars however have aimed to fill the gap left by Bourdieu on the relationship between gender and class. Feminist sociologist Leslie McCall (1992) studied the relationships between gender and capital in the early 90s. Huppatz argues that gender capital is a useful tool for understanding contemporary gender practices. Feminists have expanded Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital by asserting that there are forms of capitals possessed by women, feminine forms of capital. The argument is that femininity is culturally learned and can serve as a form of cultural capital, especially the more

stereotypically feminine (Huppatz 2004). Skeggs (2004) posits that femininity is as a form of cultural capital is:

“... the discursive position available through gender relations that women are encouraged to inhabit and use. Its use by the network of social positions and class, gender, sexuality, region, age and race which ensure that it will be taken up (and resisted) in different ways” ().

Furthermore, Skeggs proposes a reworking of the concept of cultural capital to incorporate other forms of femininities other than upper-middle class femininity. This will be made possible if culture in its entirety is considered as a resource, rather than only high-culture. If such a reworking is made possible, then capital would extend beyond “high cultural practices and classifications”.

Another form of cultural capital that is applicable to this research is aesthetic capital. Aesthetic capital is like other forms of cultural capital, is symbolic capital and possession of such capital is often considered as natural and self-evident. As such Anderson and Grunert (2010) argue that aesthetic capital is “a type of symbolic cultural capital since beauty is perceived to have intrinsic worth” (565). In their research Anderson and Grunert examine the advantages and disadvantages of being considered beautiful. In their review of 196 studies on aesthetics, they found that possessing aesthetic capital gives certain perks as well as penalties. On a whole they conclude that there is more psychological and sociological evidence for penalties that are tied to being judged unattractive or having less aesthetic capital, whilst being attractive yields more advantages on personal and societal levels. “Beauty and highly valued aesthetic traits yielded individuals a wide array of social cultural, physical and economic privileges and wealth.” (ibid 2010). And although these traits also provided individuals with penalties, the perks associated with beauty traits outnumbered the disadvantages. On the contrary, being deemed unattractive or ordinary resulted in more costs and far fewer rewards.

The Successful Woman: Then and Now

For over 500 years, Korea's official ideology has been Neo-Confucianism. The body was considered as sacred, essential and unchanging whilst *selflessness* was at the center of social values. During the *Joseon* dynasty (1400-1900) it was taken for granted that women were "essentially feminine" and "a 'virtuous' woman was ... a chaste mother able to bear sons, who segregated herself from concerns outside her immediate family" (Elfvig-Hwang 2012,18). A good woman was a good wife, mother and daughter and her value was in her ability to support the family through physical and reproductive labor. The virtuous woman stayed within the domestic spheres and the interior, kept separate from the public eye and sphere. It was also until recently that women were referred to *an'saram* (literally "inside person") and men as *pakkat'saram* (literally, "outside person"). In practice this meant that life ambition was to give birth to and ensure the success of the male heir of the family. Failing to fulfill the feminine duties, such as producing a male heir, could lead to divorce and public shame. Female bodies were subject to control, either concealing or protecting them, making them interior and invisible (Kim 2009, 5; Deuchler 1992, 260). In contrast to men, Taeyeon Kim (2009) highlights that women were *subjectless*. For men, the mind and virtue were the most important assets and one was able to transcend their corporeal bodies through the study of Confucian text and cultivation. Women, however, were considered subjectless and embedded in the physical body and the family body. It was not deemed for women to become educated, to learn to read and write and otherwise become cultivated like men. "Because women were traditionally considered subjectless ... the idea of self as an individual whose physical limits are defined by the corporeal body was an unfamiliar concept" (Kim 2009, 106). In her study of feminine representations in contemporary Korean literature, Elfvig-Hwang (2010) traces representations of femininity within traditional Korean discourses in which it was solely represented through roles, ideals and served as the binary opposite of the masculine. She argues that femininity is continuously *produced* within traditional discourse and patriarchal culture to serve as a negative point of reference to the

masculine. “Neo-Confucian philosophical thought ... still underpins even contemporary Korean representations of femininity” (Ibid, 13-16).

In Confucianist ideology the cardinal laws prescribing one’s relationship with the body was called *sin’che palbu*, meaning “absolute integrity of the whole”, the body (*sin’che*), hair (*pal*), skin (*bu*) (Gelezeau 2015, 3). The body had to be kept intact and not even hair was allowed to be cut, which is why many if not most men during the Joseon era kept their long hair. This is in stark contrast to the casual ease with which South Koreans undergo cosmetic procedures today. In contemporary Korea the female body has become a “site of global culture, signifying her elite status as a member of the cosmopolitan – and overwhelmingly western – global community by participating in the main activity of global culture: consumption of global products” (T.Y. Kim 2009). The modern Korean woman is said to have exchanged the “virtuous femininity” for a slim, toned body with a beautiful face that gives her benefits regarding work and marriage (Ibid; Park 2007). The body has become a fundamental in today’s global economic market, driving many consumer and lifestyle discourses. It articulates values and discourses, embodies signifiers for class and national culture. According to Laura Nelson (2000) public discourse saw women as primary consuming subjects. She argues that consumption was a means to gain prestige and status, this was true for women and especially middle-class-housewives, as housewives were considered the “managers” of the family home and responsible for consuming in a manner that benefited the modern family (144). Health foods, diet trends, exercise regimes, cosmetics and cosmetic surgery are all measures to control and enhance the body and part of the consumption pattern of a modern woman embodying upper middle-class signifiers.

For contemporary Korean women, adapting the body and face to fit the image of modernity and success has become normalized. And within the fiercely competitive society of South Korea, aesthetic enhancement has become key for the “success” in the labour and marriage market according to Gelezeau (2015). She argues that regardless of sex, if you are not beautiful you will belong to a

“cosmetic underclass” (*miyong’hawui’gyegeup*). According to her women are more concerned with cosmetic surgery that will ensure a good marriage match (*gyeolhon’seonghyeong*) and men are more concerned with attaining looks that will ensure a good job (*chigŏp sŏnggyŏng*) (3). However, the majority of surgeries are still performed on women, whereas for men it is estimated that around 15 percent have undergone surgery (Korean Association of Plastic Surgeons, 2010). Nancy Rosenberger (1995) who examined Japanese women’s magazines noted that:

A young woman can literally embody signs of global status by buying brand name international goods that affect her ‘atmosphere’: her appearance, her smell, the feel of her skin. Communication occurs through the adorned body embedded in the international circuit of commodity signs. (151)

Women can embody status through their body and appearances, therefore they can also heighten their status through their body and appearances. In a survey in 2001, nearly 80 percent of women in their 20s argued that they would undergo cosmetic surgery if finances were not an obstacle (Park 2001).

Consequently, South Korean women show little inhibitions to alter their appearance through surgical interventions as a form of “self-improvement” and self-management” (Kim 2009; Davies and Han 2011). According to official reported numbers in 2008, 20 percent of women had undergone cosmetic surgery. However, it is likely this number is much higher as many procedures are reported and recorded. Surveys in 1989 already showed that 20 to 30 percent of unmarried women in their 20s underwent some form of cosmetic surgery (*Chugan Chungang*, as cited in Hart 1990, 25) Other surveys have shown that the rates lie higher, showing that 30 percent for women between 20 and 50s have undergone some form of invasive cosmetic procedure (Fackler 2009). Another study by the Korea Institute of Health and Society found out that 40 percent of women from their late teens to early 20s had gone on a diet (Kim 1997).

According to Zygmunt Bauman (2007), this type of investing in appearances to enhance one’s “social value” and self-esteem is a form of consumption (57). In his book “Consuming Life” (2007) he

writes how the advent of “liquid” modernity - the dissolving of solid institutions, lifestyles and relationships - and consumerism have changed the way we relate to ourselves and the society. These consumer values are universally applied and affect all layers of social life, meaning that to achieve success one must follow consumerist principles or undergo social exclusion. In context of his research Bauman refers to failure in the term of “flawed consumers”, meaning people who refrain or fail to participate in the consumer society, which is then considered an individual choice or ineptitude. To define success in the consumerist society, Bauman argues that the commodification of oneself is essential. Individuals must become commodities, saleable and movable with market value. One becomes the promotor of the commodity as well as the commodity itself. “To consume is to invest in one’s own social membership” (Bauman 2007, 57).

Media is the biggest source of emulation and inspiration when one seeks to determine what is considered beautiful. According to Hart (2000) the media shows proper body management and presentation, and these are followed with a high degree of conformity. This is reflected in the streets of Seoul where women’s bodies are nearly identical with the ones represented in the media. Hart argues that the goal lies within conformity and following the standards set for beauty ideals as opposed to finding individual expression. He argues that such a compulsory element of the Korean beauty industry has converted beauty ideals into a “requirement of decorum”, rather than outlets of vanity. Emphasis on appearances over abilities mean that for many Korean women, conforming to beauty ideals grants higher chances of success in work and marriage (Kendall 1996, 94, 110-111; Pyon 2000). “Korea, in particular, has rewarded beautiful people with well-paying jobs, improved marriage prospects and respect” (Pyon, 2000).

Social mobility and Class: 70s to 90s

To understand how the modern-day discourse on beauty and the body has shaped the understanding of class in Korea, I will look at how discourse on class and social mobility has developed over the past decades. Korea underwent what Hae-Joang calls a “compressed period of modernization”, having experienced colonial rule, war and rapid economic growth within the same century (2005, 148). As Korea has seen tremendous economic growth and socio-economic changes, so too changed the public discourse on class and class representation. In her book *Melodrama of Mobility* (2002), Nancy Abelmann identifies two discourses: the “open” and “closed” societies. The earlier talks about a period in the 60s and 70s when social mobility was higher, living standards improved and there was a general notion that people had more equal opportunities at climbing the social ladder. This was due to the division between North and South Korea, followed by the Korean War in ‘52-’53 which levelled the (social) playing field as not only people but also assets became dislocated. Additionally, large scale land reforms were put into place and the abolition of the caste system from the *Joseon* era brought forth a more egalitarian society (Koo 2007).

The military regime in the 70s enforced strict economic restrictions within the national financial market as well as global trade. President Park sought introduced nation-wide campaigns citizens were encouraged to quotidian frugality, which was “ideologically transformed into an act of popular patriotism” while personal indulgence was deemed improper (Nelson 2000, 113). With the fall of military regime of Chun Doo Hwan strict trade regulations were eased in the 80s and completely abandoned in the 90s under the newly established democratic order. Accelerated economic growth driven by industrialization meant that by the mid-80s two thirds of the South Korean population were considered belonging to the middle class (Hong 2005). The consumption patterns were changing together with lifestyles of the middle-high class population (Koo 2007). Similarly, prosperity and liberalization of trade meant an influx of foreign goods, especially western luxury goods. Such novel

luxury goods (*myungpum*) were highly desirable and consuming them quickly became a symbol of prestige. The nouveau riche were not only concerned with owning Western luxury goods but also started consuming other symbols of high class culture, such as expensive housing in wealthy urban areas (i.e. *Gangnam* district in Seoul), being more health conscious¹ and attending prestigious schools and universities². Similarly, in the 80s a visual culture emerged of the nouveau riche lifestyle of lavish apartment complexes with well-equipped gyms and convenience stores, exclusive shopping and leisure centers. This type of portrayal of a high class luxurious lifestyle spread through popular media and became a source of emulation and admiration for the middle class. “It was a decade of prosperity that saw the emergence of a full-blown consumer culture, at once celebrated, mocked and criticized. It was a time of intense national pride, but also of uneasy wondering whether, in pursuit of economic stability and a comfortable standard of living, too much of Korea’s own heritage had been surrendered or corrupted by Western influences” (Kendall 1996, 15). There was a growing sense that increased wealth increased extravagance (*sachi*) and overconsumption (*kwasobi*) that would lead to moral deterioration and posed a threat to the wellbeing of the nation.

This is what Laura Nelson (2000) identified as the *kwasobi ch’ubang* (elimination of overconsumption) discourse, which was a discursive reaction to Korea’s social and economic changes. Wanton excess and consumerism were presented as social and nation-wide problems that needed to be eliminated as citizens were called upon virtuous and patriotic frugality. In her analysis Nelson notes that consumption is gendered and used differently by group and how it is a source for prestige for especially middle-class-housewives. For these housewives, consumption was also a form of “moral distinction between responsible consumption and personal indulgence”. Consumption can be understood as moral

¹ Middle-class families wished to cook with healthy, organic and local grown produce, as well as purchasing modern domestic appliances that were imported from Europe, the US or Japan. Joining well-equipped gyms and doing sports like golfing and yoga were markers of affluence and high social status that Koo identifies as *Welbeing* culture (Koo 2007).

² Lee and Brinton (1996) write about how the generation who grew up in the 50s tried to give their children the best possible education. The school or university one attended was also a symbol of status and class, as such parents would invest financially in the education of their children.

distinction because housewives fulfilled the role of “managers” in their homes to ensure consumption as a modern family. Yet at the same time the public discourse promoted “imaged inability of women, as a class, to restrain their desire” leading to social disharmonies. (Nelson 2000, 144). T

Social and economic calamity struck with the IMF crisis in 1997 and unemployment numbers tripled from 658.000 by 1997 to 1.7 million in 1998. Most small business owners and white-collar workers were laid off, yet a small number of businesses survived and came out of the crisis stronger financially than before, many of which continued to grow into *chaebols* (family owned conglomerates). The two-tiered development of neo-liberal globalization and democratization resulted in a widening economic gap and increased rates of poverty (Koo 2007; Shin 2008). The widening income gap and the glamorized image of the cosmopolitan lifestyle of the Seoulite was becoming increasingly the pinnacle of social achievement, the narrative of Korea as a “closed” society became prevalent, as increasingly higher monetary investments were required to achieve upward social mobility. Apart from accumulating goods that signified status and class, such as western luxury goods, good education and going to the gym, it was instrumental to possess political connections for upward mobility and financial gains. One can attain goods, positions and services through social networks and the right political backing. Education became a “mechanism for class reproduction” rather than means for social mobility as only the high-income families could afford to send their children to private school (Koo 2007, 11). Similarly, the residential area of *Gangnam* has superior education opportunities opposed to other areas of Seoul. This is reflected in the significantly higher percentage of students from *Gangnam* that enter elite universities (Shin 2008, 64).

Hell Joseon and “the Spoon Theory “

Today, there exists a sharp public awareness of South Korea’s class division and rising inequality. Many people feel that social mobility is very limited and the gap between the rich and poor is only growing. According to many economic and social analysts, three major factors have contributed to South Korea’s rising inequality: a rapidly aging population, large wage gaps between regular and non-regular workers and occupational gender inequality (Ahn 2016). In 2016 the youth unemployment peaked at 12.5 percent. As a result of the ever-increasing income disparities and high youth unemployment many young Koreans came to resent the established institutions and political elite. Out of this resentment came the colloquial and pejorative term “hell Joseon” to describe the Korean society. The term refers to the previous stratified society of the Joseon era where a strict class system was in place and social mobility was nigh impossible. Likewise, a lot of young people today in South Korea feel that there is no matter how hard they work there is no way to go up the social ladder and that only the privileged few are benefiting from the status-quo (Ahn 2016).

Emerging from the shared feelings of frustration and resentment was what is called “the spoon class theory”, a similarly pejorative view on current class stratifications. Like the term “hell Joseon” this narrative first surfaced in online communities and gained traction among the younger generations. “The spoon theory” refers to the practice where individuals are classified according to their assets inherited from their parents. It is speculated it was inspired by the English idiom, “born with a silver spoon in one’s mouth”. Contrary to the English silver spoon, according to this narrative Koreans are born with various kinds of spoons: golden, silver, bronze and dirt spoons. Together with “Hell Joseon” this narrative became increasingly salient, driven by the frustration, anger and even despair of the younger generation due to compromised futures. Studies have shown that inherited assets have become more important in the latter two decades with South Korea’s rapidly aging population and sluggish economic growth playing a role in this development (Lee and Tan 2016; Kim 2015). Although the share of assets

accumulated by the South Korean people are comparatively lower than other industrialized countries, the importance of these inherited shares are on the rise with little prospects of decline. In 1980s the share of assets accumulated through inheritance was at 27 percent and grew to 29 percent in 1990, up to 42 percent in 2000s (Kim 2015).

Nowadays women hold an interesting position in Korea. It has been widely observed by scholars and the media, that women in Korean society are the primary managers and bearer of their family's class and social mobility (Nelson, 2000: 146; Abelmann, 2002: 31–3; Kendall, 2002: 8). Today with greater class polarization and an increased flexibility in job opportunities for women, many women choose to invest in themselves and body management and forego or delay traditional institutions of marriage and motherhood (E.S. Kim 2009, 11).

Constructing National Identities

In this section I explore the way women's bodies have been continuously appropriated by nationalistic discourses and imbued with social, political meaning. It is nothing new that women's bodies have been used to signify the nation and national cultures, however socio-political developments in the 20th and 21st century have exacerbated the nature of such exploitation. First, I will expound on the historical development of the appropriation of bodies after colonial era after which I further elucidate the changing discourse of bodies with the rise of consumer nationalism and the onset of the Korean Wave. The Korean Wave has been pivotal for the dissemination of Korean beauty ideals and Korean cultural products. Cultural products not only include drama series and pop music, commonly referred to as K-drama and K-pop, but also the idols and celebrities that are featured in them. Especially with the recent rise of the "New Korean Wave" and the young, sleek and styled celebrities have in many ways become Korea's face and pride as a brand and nation (Y. Kim 2012). I would like to highlight the development of consumer nationalism and the Korean Wave to better understand the rising consumption of Korean cosmetic surgery and medical tourism not only as a trend but also as a public discourse aimed to brand Korea as a prosperous and modern nation to a national and global audience.

Women, the Nation and Body Politics

The female body has been appropriated to signify the nation in many cultures for centuries. Prasjenit Duara (1998) traces it back to the Meiji era Japan in which samurai women upheld virtues of frugality and self-sacrifice which later became the historical model for feminine virtues in Japan. Feminine virtues such as the "good wife, wise mother" later supported familial and national patriarchies. In Korea a "virtuous" woman was a chaste woman who is limited to the domain of the family and the interior, ensuring the success of her family and its male heirs. A virtuous woman was therefore one who was not seen by the public and remained within domestic spheres. It was notably after Korea's colonial

occupation that women's bodies were appropriated for the nationalist discourse. The colonial subjugation left a feeling helplessness, shame and emasculation. The search for a new, re-invented sense of national self became essential to Korea's postcolonial and post-war project for national reconstruction (T.Y. Kim 2009). According to Choi (1998) Korea's efforts for a capitalistic model of modernization required the sacrifice of Korean laborers in the name of the nation. These efforts were legitimized by an anti-colonial discourse "which paradoxically claimed spiritual superiority and masculine integrity, while imposing chastity upon its women" (12). Korean men used the bodies of women as metaphors for a "pure, uncontaminated and uninterrupted homonational identity" while women were prescribed to an ideology of chastity and self-censorship (ibid). The ideology of chastity was a form of safeguarding masculine authority at the expense of women's bodies and lives. Choi's analysis of the construction of gender through nationalist discourse highlights how Korean women were historically appropriated to personify national identity and cultural traditions. The stories and voices of comfort women, for example, were silenced for over five decades before the first here comfort women decided to publicly speak out in 1991. They were reminders of a shameful colonial past that Korea was trying to forget. Ironically, ever since then the comfort women have become the emblem of the nationalist discourse under the trope of the colonized victim.

Previously it was taken for granted that the body was natural and unchanging, however with modernization the body started becoming "a site of contestation of meanings and an object of political control" (E.S. Kim 2009, 8). The public discourse of female chastity and interiority has seen great change with women attaining higher education, joining the work force and achieving financial independence. In 2012, 67.2% of women have graduated university versus 60.6% of men. This does not make Korea unique due to an overall global trend of women outperforming men academically, with higher enrolment and completion rates for university (ICEF Monitor 2014). Increased financial independence and job opportunities have fuelled a misogynist discourse of anger and anxiety from men of women

“taking over” their jobs and accused for their love of western luxury goods and excessive personal spending. KOSIS (Korea Statistical Information Services) has reported in 2016 however that women are far from taking over men’s jobs as Korea has the highest gender wage gap within the OECD and women’s stunted career trajectories. On average, women earn 36.6% less than men. In 2015, the World Economic Forum ranked Korea at 115 out of 145 countries in terms of economic participation and opportunity, resulted by the low numbers of female legislators, senior officials and managers. Regardless of such statistics derogatory terms have surfaced from the Internet, calling women *doenjang’nyeo* (literally, “bean paste girl”) or *kimchi’neyo* (literally, “kimchi girl”). These terms refer to women who seek to live or admire the “New Yorker lifestyle” and the culture codes it holds, according to Yewon Lee (2012) whose analysis of the *doenjang’nyeo* discourse uncovered “the anxiety of Korean men” and their desire to pin point Korean women within boundaries of tradition and nationhood (3). By referring to women as *doenjang’nyeo* they imply that no matter how hard they try to emulate western lifestyles, they will still smell like bean paste. It is also a reference to *doenjan’jjigae* (“bean paste soup”) which is a staple dish in Korean cuisine and one of the cheapest options at an eatery or restaurant. This is to criticize the hypocrisy and superficiality of women who demand expensive, western luxuries such as brand name coffee and designer fashion items but would eat bean paste soup for dinner. Lee adds the use of the word *doenjang*, a traditional symbol, was aimed to criticize the obsession with the western lifestyle and to defend tradition. Yet this negative connotation also serves to devalue it. *Kimchi’nyeo* is a similar derogatory term and it used to criticize women who set high expectations for men. Many Korean women deem these expectations as unrealistic and by not meeting these expectations, feel ridiculed and shamed. Lee traces the *doenjang’nyeo* discourse back to the *sin’yeoseong* (“New Woman”) discourse that was seen during the Japanese colonial occupation when women sought sexual freedom, higher education and greater social equality. Lee draws parallels between hostilities faced by women in the “New Woman” discourse and “Bean Paste Girl” as both arose during a period women sought to

break away from traditional roles and there was a strong presence of foreign powers in external; and internal matters of Korea. A parallel can be drawn to Nelson's (2012) *kwasobi'chubang* discourse where women took on the role of "managers of the family" and held accountable for responsible consumption yet were also criticized for debauchery and wanton excess.

The (New) Korean Wave

Looking at the images of hypersexualized female idols today we can wonder how they fit within the discourse of the virtuous and chaste woman. Ironically this is exactly the case, as Korea has developed what Yeran Kim (2011) describes as "Lolita nationalism", where "the bodies of girls are defined as national property in celebratory tones for the conquering of the global cultural market and exhibition of national power" (343). It is nationalism arising from anticipation of the transnational popularity gained by Korean female idol groups. Kim argues that transnational success of girl idols has been associated with the anticipation of the revival of national culture in what is called the New Korean Wave. Yeran Kim further argues in her article, that such images of apparently free and empowered girls are engineered and operate within the discourses of neoliberal nationalism and global commercialism (ibid). The Korean Wave or *hallyu* refers to the boom in Korean popular culture since the 2000s which "which brought a significant change in the trans-border practice of stardom and fandom in the politico-cultural terrains of Asia" (Kim 2011; Tsai 2007). A consequence Korea's successful export of cultural products is the globalization of Korean beauty ideals and consumption patterns. Some Korean celebrities have successfully become household names within Asia and the audience of these products are expanding well beyond Asian borders. Korean beauty ideals, represented in Korean actors and pop-idols, offers the global audience a view of "Korean looks". It is partially due to this success that Korea saw a rise in medical tourism and people seeking to achieve similar looks as the Korean celebrities they admire.

The engineering of the images of girl idols can be interpreted within a wider context of nation-branding for Korea to manoeuvre within the global hierarchy and international competition for prestige and soft power. Korea has branded itself as a modern, industrialized nation the past few decades and this is exemplified by the images of the sleek, well-groomed and fashionable idols and celebrities that have gained international fame and following. If these figureheads of Korean popular cultures are the brand ambassadors of Korea, then we can understand the Korean Wave as one of its most successful nation-branding campaigns as it is estimated that the K-pop industry alone has over US\$ 4.7 billion in global sale (S.H. Kim 2017).

Nation branding as a concept is not entirely new but it has gained a lot of political and academic leverage over the past decade. Simon Anholt popularized the term by drawing a parallel between nations and companies: “the reputations of countries (and, by extension, of cities and regions too) behave rather like the brand images of companies and products, and they are equally critical to the progress, prosperity, and good management of those places.” (2013, 6). The nation brand can be understood as “a clear and simple measure of a country’s ‘license to trade’ in the global marketplace and the acceptability of its people, hospitality, culture, policies, products and services to the rest of the world” (Anholt 2010, 7). Fougner (2006) contends that nation-branding emerged as a reaction to the neoliberal discourse of global market competitiveness, which encouraged governments to advocate market relations within the society and economy. Similarly, it is a reaction to the changing environments of the nation-state where the normalization of competitiveness has driven nation-states to redefine national identity in marketing terms in order to adapt, which has become a matter of evolution and survival (Kaneva 2012, 115).

The great success of the Korean Wave lay the foundation for the exponential growth of the Korean beauty industry as well as the dissemination of Korean beauty ideals. Moreover the state, the media industry and tourism industry were instrumental in the process of building a national identity that

fit with a modern and global Korea (Huang 2011). In her research Huang (2011) compares the parallel paths of popular interest in all things Korean and Japan within Asia and posits how these “two phenomena underscore how popular culture helps polish the image of a nation and thus strengthens its economic competitiveness in the global market” (3). Although the state guided and governed the processes of nation-branding as an international marketing strategy, the receiving countries embraced it as a “pattern of consumption” (3). Cultural products that have successfully managed to access global markets are rarely bound to one specific culture, as this allows global audiences to “project indigenous values, beliefs, rites, and rituals” (Olson 1999, 5-6). Such global products, a term coined by Morley and Robin (1995), appeal to the shared tastes and habits of people. Global products can be made under the conditions of *hybridization* a process of appropriating and emulation western cultures to foster localized, national innovation. According to Huang it is the process of hybridization that makes Korean products transferable and accessible to a global audience. This is what Huang calls a “hybrid modernity”, but due to terms such as “Japan-mania” or “the Korean wave” these hybrid modernities are associated with national identities that become brands on their own.

2. The Cosmetic Surgery Industry and The Beauty System

In this chapter I will give an overview of the development of the cosmetic surgery industry in Korea and the dissemination of female beauty ideals as by-product of the success of the Korean Wave. In the second part I discuss the study of the beauty system by feminist scholarship, in which the central debate concerns women's agency and institutional oppression of women due to the systemic nature of the beauty industry. An extension of this debate concerns "naturalness" within the context of cosmetic surgery. This is relevant because "naturalness" is considered as something desirable by consumers and surgeons. The discourse on the body and the naturalness

The Korean beauty & cosmetic surgery industry

Today, Korea is known as the world capital of cosmetic surgery, having surpassed the US and Brazil in the number of procedures performed per capita (ISAPS 2015). The total revenue of the cosmetic surgery industry was \$US 39 million in 2014 and it is projected to reach \$US 2 billion in 2022 (Research and Markets, February 2017). In 2008, around 30 % of women aged 20 to 50 underwent some form of invasive treatment (Fackler 2009). Some studies have shown that this number is likely higher than 50 percent for women living in Seoul who are in their twenties (Marx 2013; BBC 2016). For many young female high school students, receiving a double eyelid surgery as a graduation gift is considered as a rite of passage (Kim 2009; Kaw 1994; Zane 1998). In 2001, it was estimated that up to 70% of the cosmetic surgery patients were high school students, showing that there was a high level of parental consent and support (Sohn 2001). Winter breaks are long in Korea usually starting in mid-December up to the end of

January. It is during these long winter holidays that many students decide to undergo cosmetic surgery.

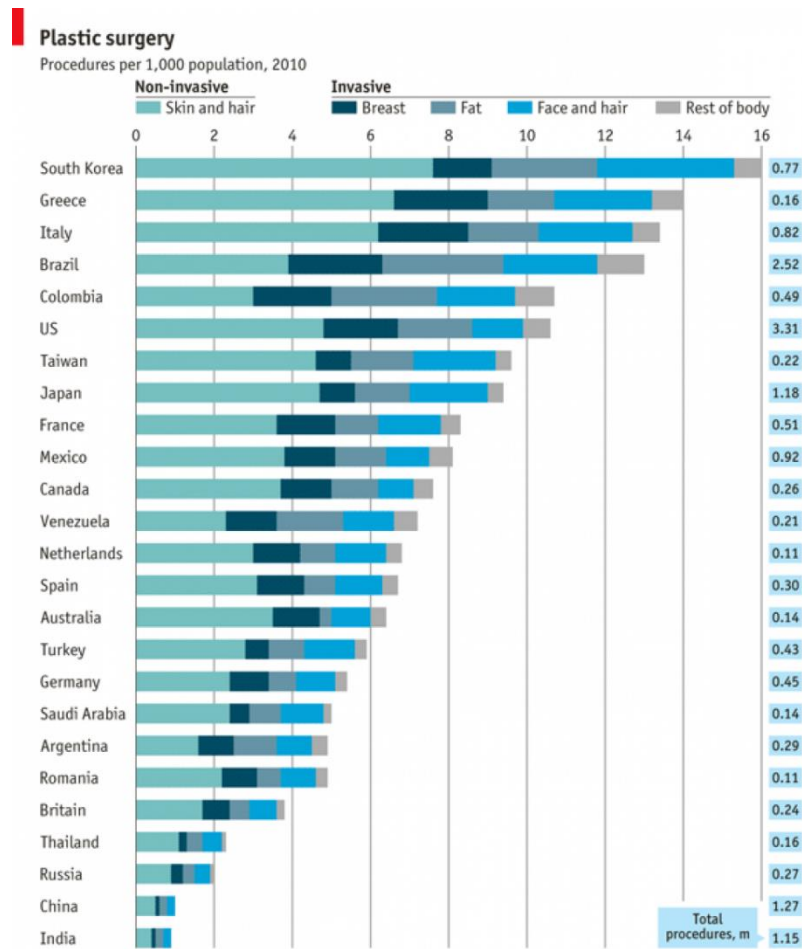


Figure 1. Country statistics of Plastic Surgery per capita (ISAPS 2010; UN)

However, not only the cosmetic surgery industry has seen a rise since the Korean wave, the Korean beauty industry overall has seen an exponential growth. Global market research provider Mintel’s research has shown that Korea is one of the global top 10 beauty markets, with a revenue of US\$13 billion in 2017. Export of Korean beauty products have been on the rise as well, thanks to the success of Korean Wave. As popularity of Korean celebrities have risen over the years so have Korean beauty products become increasingly in demand. In recent years an umbrella term has been adopted to widely denote Korean products that enhance beauty: K-Beauty. This term is used to discuss cosmetics, skin care, cosmetic surgery and lifestyle. The term K-beauty points towards nationality and is similarly part of Korean nation branding.

Due to the immense popularity of Korean TV productions, pop idols and celebrities, the “Korean look” has become an export product of itself as can be seen by the sharp increase in medical tourism the past decade. The number of foreign medical tourists to Korea almost quadrupled from 2009 to 2014, starting from 62 100 in 2009 to 218 111 tourists in 2011 (Korea’s Ministry of Health and Welfare). Many tourists sought Korean cosmetic surgery clinics to undergo surgical procedures to look more like the glamorous K-drama stars. The Korean government has been actively supporting the medical tourism industry - which is dominated by cosmetic surgeons - ever since the beginning of the 2000s and has designated medical tourism as one of its top priorities for their national tourism strategy. In 2005, it established a task force with the objective of attracting foreign patients. In 2006, “The Committee for an Advanced Medical Industry” was set up while in 2007 The Korean International Medical Association (KIMA) was founded which composed of 34 private medical institutions and governmental organizations such as the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Korean Tourism Organization, the Korean Health Industry Development Institute (Yu, Lee & Noh 2011).

However, cosmetic surgery was introduced from the West. According to many scholars (Woo 2004; Gelezeau 2014; Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012) Western beauty ideals were imported and adopted, which came to replace the existing Korean beauty ideals (Woo, 60). As such, Korea became dependent on western medical techniques that had western bodies in mind instead of Korean bodies. With the flood of American and Western media, especially since the 80s the Korean body was increasingly portrayed as inferior and flawed (ibid, 61-62). As the societal roles of women were expanding from motherly roles to a more individualistic and empowered role, especially in the 60s and the 70s, women saw an opportunity in the rising medical techniques of cosmetic surgery to transform their bodies to increase their “competitiveness”.

Feminist Critique: The Beauty System and Cosmetic Surgery

Western feminist scholarship has extensively studied the politics surrounding the female body and the pursuit of beauty involving body modifications. Relevant to this thesis are the feminist critical works, firstly on the beauty system, cosmetic surgery and secondly, on the embodiment of the female body in international politics and the construction of national identities. I will incorporate such feminist critiques in order to highlight the feminist discussions that are relevant in my analysis of Korean discourses on the female body, beauty and how these helped shape the notions of success and national identity.

Western feminist debates on cosmetic surgery flourished in the 90s and were largely centered around two issues; agency and normalization. I will briefly discuss Susan Bordo and Kathy Davis, who represent two dialectical feminist approaches, interrogating women's motivations and choices for undergoing cosmetic surgery. Bordo likens cosmetic surgery to a coercive cultural and social system that subjects women to subtle mechanisms of "normative cultural practice" (2009, 25). Women are coerced into cosmetic surgery as popular culture is permeated by images of ideal female bodies, generating a feeling of inadequacy of women's bodies. This feeling of inadequacy leads women to believe that their bodies are "defective and lacking". Cosmetic surgery is marketed as a remedy and a necessity as it offers the illusion that the ideal body can be attained through surgical procedures. Bordo asserts that women choose cosmetic surgery in order to conform to these cultural ideals (Bordo 2009). Women's agency to undergo cosmetic surgery is then a "free choice made under pressure", a term Bordo borrowed from psychiatrist Peter Kramer. Bordo acknowledges the free choice of an individual to undergo cosmetic surgery, however it is one made under social and cultural constraints. She posits that it is important to recognize these subtle coercive mechanisms that underly this "normative cultural practice". Likewise, she calls to attention the irony of how cosmetic surgery advertisements empower us through our deficiencies within the marketing discourse by drawing attention to the imperfections of our own

bodies, whilst encouraging the erasure of such imperfections by the simple consumption of procedures. Thus, Bordo contends that despite that the rhetoric of free choice and self-determination, cosmetic surgery is a normative cultural practice that is aimed at standardizing women's bodies and normalizing the process thereof.

Davis, on the other hand, emphasizes the empowering agency of women in undergoing cosmetic surgery, whilst also acknowledging the disempowerment identified by Bordo. She argues that instead of approaching cosmetic surgery from a cultural critical perspective, feminist research should try to incorporate and understand "how cosmetic surgery might be the best course of action for a particular woman at a particular moment in her life" (36). Davis therefore proposes that when it comes to the debate of agency, that feminist scholars consider their relations to their research subjects. Although Davis does not disagree with Bordo on her cultural critique, she regards her perception towards women who see cosmetic surgery as self-improvement and who are aware of their own agency, as condescending. She therefore directs her critique towards the feminine beauty system and views "women as agents who negotiate their bodies and their lives within cultural and structural constraints of a gendered social order" (42).

Eugenia Kaw (1993) takes yet another approach, namely an ethnographic perspective, by analyzing how cultural and institutional forces drive Asian-Americans to adjust their facial features. Kaw argues that cosmetic surgery is process of normalization of women in a racial group. She describes this as a "double encounter", stating that these practices enforce "patriarchal definition of femininity and Caucasian standards of beauty" (78). She further asserts that cosmetic surgeons utilize their expertise and knowledge set the definition of a "commonsense reality", something she argues is a more subtle and pervasive form of domination in the everyday life (Ibid). Like Bordo, Brush (1998) investigates the freedom of choice and argues that cosmetic surgery is not only the "refining the 'natural' body" but also incorporates the "re-defining standards of beauty and inscribing those standards onto the defective 'natural' bodies of women who failed to resemble, closely enough, the norm" (30).

This is but a small part of the ongoing dialogue on cosmetic surgery and female bodies by Western feminist scholarship. South Korean research on cosmetic surgery dates to the 90s when the phenomenon was first gaining popularity in South Korea. A large bulk of the studies on cosmetic surgery take place within an economic discourse and view cosmetic surgery as an extension of medical research and industry. Research is also done on the influences of mass media on body and body image and such studies have a psychoanalytical element to them, documenting women's anxieties of their bodies and psychological distress. A third dominant perspective is centered around the experiences of the recipients of cosmetic surgery and inquires after their motivations and desires (Park 2011).

The Natural Body

The implicit message that the cosmetic surgery industry is trying to convey, is that the body is malleable, and that science and technology provides us with the means to improve and control nature and biology. This aligns with feminist theory that highlights the body as an artefact constructed by culture: "No longer are we beholden to a given nature once we recognize that nature itself is a cultural construction, now to be remade through the powers of science and technology" (Weiss & Kukla 2009, 119). Bordo (1985) similarly pointed out in an essay on *anorexia nervosa*: "... the body, far from being some fundamentally stable, acultural constant to which we must *contrast* all culturally relative and institutional forms, is constantly "in the grip", as Foucault puts it, of cultural practices. ... there is no "natural" body. ... Our bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture." (Bordo 1993, 142).

The dominant discourse within cosmetic surgery is that the body is not a fixed natural entity but can be reconstructed. Shows such as "Let Me In" pertain to liberate the contestants, pertaining a sense of voluntarism whilst this remains unfulfilled as the female bodies represented in the shows as well as the images on the websites of the clinic present and reinforce conventional beauty ideals.

Critics of human enhancement such as Leon Kass (2002), draw upon the concept of human nature to argue for limited human self-fashioning, as human nature alone provides ground to judge the acceptable limits of human transformation. "If we can no longer look to our previously unalterable human nature for a standard or norm of what is good or better, how will anyone know what constitutes as an improvement?" (Kass 2002, 132). Yet customers of cosmetic surgery clinics are represented as voluntary and willing participants. Customers gladly write reviews and share post-surgery photographs of themselves to make ready a public evaluation of their new, improved bodies. The question remains how to interpret the "natural" in the context of cosmetic surgery where artificial enhancements are widely accepted and even encouraged.

The concept of the "natural" has been discussed and analyzed by feminists and disability theorists by using Foucauldian concepts of normalization and discipline, challenging the notion of a natural given body. Yet given the context of cosmetic surgery in Korea, the notion of natural has been applied as normative standards to discuss what constitutes a natural body. In everyday discourse, the word "natural" has multiple meanings and layers of understanding depending on the context. According to Weiss and Kukla (2009) it can be divided into three contrasting understandings: Firstly, one calls something natural when something is unchanged or untouched by human hands. It is the absence of human intervention that something is deemed as natural. Secondly, they put a contrast between the natural and the *supernatural*. Something that is not natural is then classified as an entity or occurrence outside of the natural system of causal laws. Thirdly, the natural serves to denote that which is considered as proper and orderly, whereas the unnatural is the disfigured, deformed or monstrous (ibid, 125).

Naturalness according to the third categorization is contingent upon aesthetic criteria of harmony, symmetry and overall fit. It is also the categorization most compatible with artificial intervention, as bodily deformities are altered through surgical interventions to erase abnormalities. The natural is then

understood as a set of norms that guide appropriate transformations. It is not adverse to intervene on the unnatural, on the contrary, it makes it acceptable to modify the disfigured and to make orderly that what was previously disorderly and aberrant. Weiss and Kukla present that our aesthetic sense of order is “a sedimentation of strongly entrenched social norms that vary dramatically by region, era, ethnicity, and more”. As customs and culture often guides us to what is natural and what is not, they warn for the dangers of “slippage” between moral and aesthetic norms (ibid, 127).

Taking into account the discussion of the natural I will use the definition given by Weiss and Kukla (2009) who argue that women undergo surgery to enhance their *given* body to achieve an improved and perfected naturalness rather than believing that their natural body is altered into an *unnatural* body. It is the “unnatural” monstrosities of the bulges of fat, crooked teeth and noses, square jawlines and small single-lidded eyelids that need correction to achieve a natural and orderly body. However one must not go too far in excising the unnatural as having too many surgeries the “natural” becomes “unnatural”. Women whose surgeries are deemed as excessive and unnatural looking are considered “failures” and are ironically called *seonghyeong’goemul* (“cosmetic surgery monster”). This term is similar to *doenjang’nyeo* and *kimchi’nyeo* as they seek to criticize excessive consumption by women for their own pleasure. The term “monster” highlights that these women are deemed unnatural and monstrous, the complete opposite of what cosmetic surgery is supposed to achieve which is “naturalness”.

3. Reading the websites of the Clinics

For the reading of the three clinics I have identified four themes and narratives that have been present in all websites. These themes and narratives have become the basis of my analysis on how the cosmetic surgery industry constructs female beauty ideals and highlight the insidious and pervasive discourse that compels women to continuously “improve” their *given* bodies to attain “natural” looking, socially acceptable bodies.

Firstly, I will discuss the *banjeon* narrative. *Banjeon* is the Korean word for “plot twist” or “sudden change” which is widely used word in the discourse of the beauty and cosmetic surgery industry. The implied meaning is that the individual has undergone a sudden, unexpected change in fate, meaning that not only their appearance but also their quality of life will greatly improve. The best example of the *banjeon* narrative can be found in makeover shows such as “Let Me In”, “Beautiful You” and “White Swan” where contestants are invited and chosen to undergo a makeover with the help of cosmetic surgery.

Secondly, I will discuss the “Natural Beauty” (*jayeonseureoun areumdaum*) narrative. Many slogans and texts on the website of cosmetic surgery clinics use the word “natural” (*jayeonsureum*) or “naturally” (*jayeonsureopgae*) to describe their products. The use of natural is paradoxical as it implies that women’s *given* bodies are naturally flawed and need surgical intervention to become “naturally” beautiful. Many slogans incorporate words and phrases that hint that procedures will enable women to transform into “natural-looking beauties”.

The third narrative is “Youthfulness”. Cosmetic surgery, in the West as in Korea are geared towards enhancing appearances and preserve youthfulness. Youthfulness can be understood as a form of cultural capital, an intersection between aesthetic and feminine capital, that one loses over time with aging. Cosmetic surgery clinics however portray youthfulness as something that can be regained,

maintained and even improved upon. However, it is only the wealthy who can afford cosmetic surgery are able to attain youthfulness long after their prime.

The Clinics

The three clinics I have selected are based on website ranking system, Rankey (www.rankey.co.kr) which reflects overall reputation and size of the clinic. All three clinics are situated in the affluent Gangnam district³ and are considered sizable clinics as each employ more than 10 cosmetic surgeons. Bigger clinics allocate bigger sums of money to marketing and branding efforts both on and off the internet which leads to higher levels of exposure and an increase of customers. The nationality of their target audience have expanded significantly over the years. Were it only Koreans 20 years ago, today bigger clinics such as these selected three have their websites in four to ten languages: English, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Mongolian, Russian, Arabic and Spanish. Moreover, websites are put through localization efforts to reflect the customers they wish to reach. Non-Korean models are used for advertisements on the non-Korean language websites to reflect the physique of foreign customers. This indicates that the clinics are actively seeking to attract customers outside Korea. Regardless of the language of the website, the main target group of these websites remain women aged between 20 to 60s though there has been an increase in procedures and advertisements targeting men.

Banobagi clinic was established in 2000 and is considered as one of the top clinics in Seoul. This is reflected on its staff and affiliation with Seoul National University which has long been considered as one of the most prestigious universities in Korea. Affiliations with established and prestigious universities give clinics more credibility and prestige. All of the plastic surgeons are Seoul National

³ Of the 12,578 “cash rich” people, who have over one billion won in their bank accounts, one out of three live in Gangnam district in Seoul.

University graduates except for a few medical experts. Overall, the medical experts team consists of 25 people: 14 plastic surgeons, 4 anesthesiologists, 1 dietitian, 1 radiation oncologist, 5 dermatologists. Nineteen of the medical experts are male while the remaining 6 are female.

ID hospital, established in 1995, advertises on its website that it is a national certified hospital by the ministry of health and welfare. In other words, the hospital's surgical procedures and safety measures are certified by the government. This certificate can only be granted by the Korea Institute for Healthcare Accreditation and serves as a source of credibility for the clinic. The medical experts of ID hospital consist of 25 people: 17 plastic surgeons, 1 dentist, 1 internist, 1 general surgeons and 5 anesthesiologists. Of the 25 people, 20 are male and 5 are female. While the medical staff has graduates from various universities, the two leading plastic surgeons Seoul National University graduates.

DA clinic is the youngest of the clinics, established in 2013 with 12 medical staff members: 10 plastic surgeons, 2 dermatologists and 3 anesthesiologists. Of the whole staff 4 were female and 11 are male. The top surgeons of DA clinic are all graduates from top universities located in Seoul.

Conventional Beauty Ideals

Before I define what "conventional beauty ideals" entails, I would like to highlight how morality is implied in appearances (of the face) and the importance of the practice and belief of physiognomy where one can "read" a person's character on the face (Gezeleau 2015; Elfving-Hwang 2013; Choi and Kim 2004). The historical practice of divination through the interpretation of physiognomy is a belief held by over 50% of the people and it implies that the appearance of the face can affect one's destiny, career and social "success". Based on this it is felt that there are "auspicious" and "inauspicious" faces (Gezeleau 2015; Cho 2004). In her article "The body, cosmetics and aesthetics in South Korea" (2015), Gezeleau elaborates on the fact that the face is only physically important, but it is also relevant because there is an inherent connection between the body and the face called *chaemyeon* ("social face") which

she argues has been an integral part of society. *Chae* (體) meaning the body, and *myeon* (面) meaning the face. This connection goes deeper than the physical body and the face but can be interpreted as “honour” and “prestige”. The face and the body, she posits is an expression of the moral and spiritual state. As can be seen in her study on Korean makeover TV culture by Elfving-Hwang (2013), the transformation of the body is almost always paired with a sense of moral transformation and what Elfving-Hwang calls a moral and psychological “rebirth” (*dasi tae’eo’nagi*).

Neo-Confucian ethics emphasized conformity as a virtue and social success was measured in the likeness of an elite class image and this reflects the limited range of beauty ideals promoted in the media (Deuchler 1992; Elfving-Hwang 2012). This is reflected in the representation of women and female beauty ideals on the websites of the clinics which are limited and comparable across all three clinics. The female models collectively have fair skin, egg-shaped faces with noticeable sharp chins, double eye-lids, a prominent and curved nose, thick horizontally shaped eyebrows and often with puffy eyebags called *aegyo-sal*. Most of the models exhibit physical traits that have long been understood as stereotypically feminine, these include long natural coloured hair, slender bodies, friendly facial expressions and feminine body language and clothing. Additionally, models are cut at the head or the torso, drawing attention only to the face. Considering that most cosmetic surgery procedures are performed on the face this is not very surprising⁴. Such depiction of women is pervasive and commodifies the women, reducing them to mere “talking heads” that serve to advertise and promote the clinic. Occasionally the whole body of the model is shown, especially when it concerns procedures body and not the face such as breast augmentation, liposuction or muscle reduction (through Botox and injections) and dietary programs. By depicting women only as “talking heads” or separate body parts has

⁴ The most popular procedures are eyelid surgeries (blepharoplasties) and ‘nose jobs’ (rhinoplasties) (J.G. Lee 2007). However jaw reshaping surgeries or “jaw contouring” is becoming increasingly popular and affordable.

an implicit meaning of commodifying and dehumanizing women and transforming them into consumer objects.

What is notable is that the Korean cosmetic surgery industry has developed its own set of jargon to indicate desirable bodily features. More than in the west, Koreans emphasize the face, its shape, size and features that are often described as “lines” or “shapes”. For example, ideal-type female face shape is a “V-shape”, noses and foreheads are best when they have an “S-line” or “S-shape”, eyes are “doll-like” while the skin should be fair, elastic and flawless. The ideal curves of a woman are also “S-shaped” while a man should strive to attain a “V-shape” body. Depictions and descriptions of the ideal body shape and features can become very prescriptive as illustrated in Figure 1 and 2, which show the ideal shape, size and proportions of women’s breasts and eyes. The features are measured in a detailed fashion, with rules and numbers to measure the “perfect” yet “natural” features.

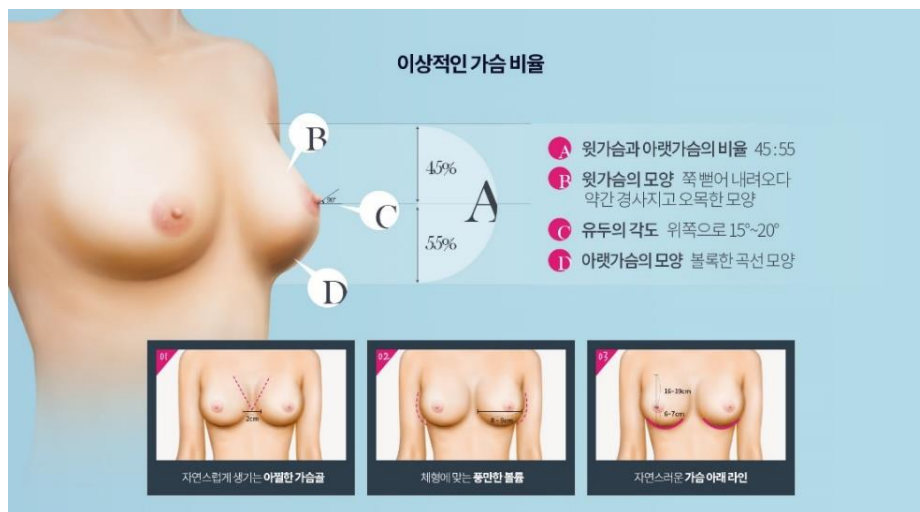


Figure 2. DA Clinic's ideal-type breasts

“ 눈의 이상적인 비율 고려 ”

개인마다 다른 얼굴의 특징과 비율에 부합하도록 수술 진행!

확실적인 눈 성형을 시행해 수술한 모든 이들이 부자연스런 동일한 눈매를 갖게 하지 않습니다.

개개인에 맞는 적절한 수술법을 선택해 수술하는 것은 물론, 개인마다 다른 얼굴의 특징과 비율에 부합할 수 있도록 전체적인 조화를 고려해 수술을 시행합니다.

그리하여 환자들이 자연미를 얻을 수 있는 것은 물론, 만족스러운 수술결과도 동시에 얻을 수 있습니다.

이상적인 눈의 비율

- 1 눈과 눈 사이의 길이와 양쪽 콧망울 사이의 길이가 같다.
- 2 눈의 가장 안쪽과 콧망울이 수직으로 연결된다.
- 3 눈의 가장 바깥쪽 꼬리와 콧망울이 일직선으로 연결된다.

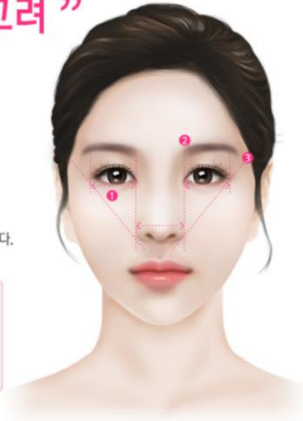


Figure 3. ID Hospital's description of the ideal eye shape and proportions

Conforming to these conventional beauty ideals is then the embodied act of normalization and reproduction. Furthermore, it is a process of the commodification of the body and raising one's value and improving one's chances in marriage and economy (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang 2012; Kim 2003; Park 2007). As Bauman states in his book "Consuming Life" (2007):

"Consumption is an investment in everything that matters for individual 'social value' and self-esteem, thus the crucial, perhaps the decisive purpose of consumption is the society of consumers is not the satisfaction of needs, desires and wants, but the commoditization or recommoditization of the consumer: *raising the status of consumers themselves to that of sellable commodities.*" (pp. 57).

The Expert Surgeon and the Female Consumer

The Expert Surgeon

Cosmetic surgery is a trade dominated by men and in the three clinics a subtle but clear gender hierarchy existed within the medical staff. This is apparent when looking at the total numbers of female surgeons as the three clinics employ a total of 48 cosmetic surgeons, of which only 4 are women. This means that 8.3% of the total cosmetic surgeons are female while the other 91.7% are male. When further examining the medical staff members of the clinics, a gender hierarchy can be noted when it comes to the division of tasks of medical doctors. The male surgeons are responsible for major operative procedures that involve the use of surgical tools to cut away skin, bones and muscles of the eyes, nose, jaws, breasts, calves and other areas of the body. Female doctors are often responsible for non-operative tasks and are employed as anesthesiologists, dermatologists or internists. Hierarchy is also subtly expressed in the way surgeons are presented on the websites. The top surgeons shown at the top of the introductory page and are repeatedly visible on marketing images throughout the website. It is notable that the top surgeons of each clinics are graduates from Seoul National University.



Figure 4. ID Hospital's team of top surgeons

The websites of the clinics are replete with images of women (and the occasional male model), models or previous customers. Besides the images of women, surgeons take a central position in the

advertisement and narratives of the clinics. The surgeons take upon the role of miracle workers who can transform women's bodies and even their lives through their handiwork, all the while ensuring safe and professional conduct and most important of all, "natural" results.



Figure 5. ID Hospital is a hospital certified by the government

Fierce competition means that many clinics wish to distinguish themselves through excellence in reputation, medical credentials. This is done by presenting the surgeons as highly qualified medical experts and care-givers. Surgeons are shown in conference halls, giving medical presentations, having meetings with customers and checking up on customers after their surgeries. Words such as "trust", "safe", "hope", "care", "research" all point towards safeguarding the image of the clinic. While the three clinics each have different approaches to highlight their qualifications and merits, the general message they wish to convey is comparable: customers will receive "natural" results and are ensured of their safety and integrity while being in the care of the most skilled and highly qualified professionals. The surgeons take on a performative role of miracle workers, transforming women's bodies to more "natural" and improved versions of themselves. The female customer on the other hand is the passive receiver of the surgeons' handiwork and are encouraged to seek advice and guidance on what parts of their bodies are "unnatural" and require excision.

Surgeons take center stage in many marketing and endorsement materials of the clinic. For example, the three clinics have a celebrity endorsement photo gallery where surgeons take photographs with the celebrity customer that has visited their clinic for procedures. Figure 15 shows how DA clinic

portrays its surgeons and medical staff. It is easy to see the difference in the way the medical staff and particularly the surgeons are portrayed compared to the female models. The body language, facial expressions and attire all imply that these are professional and competent people. The male medical staff members themselves do not fit the recently popularized male beauty ideals of *kkot'minam* or “flower boys” in comparison to the female staff, all five of them wear makeup, none of them wear glasses, four of them wear high heels and have facial features that are identified earlier as conventional beauty ideals.



Figure 6. DA Clinic's Doctor TV

The Female Consumer

The websites depict feminine models to appeal to its female audience and serve as an example of how one will look like with successful “natural” results. The advertisements promise improvements and stunning transformations that will change your life for the better by attaining features that are described as: beautiful, ideal, desirable, youthful, natural, elegant, modern, luxurious and doll-like. In the slogans women are prompted to evaluate their flaws that are “unnatural”: mono-lids, a square chin,

a crooked nose, dark skin, wrinkles, fat bulges and so forth. Many procedures describe enhanced the “lines” of the body, face and facial features.



Figure 7. DA Clinic's advertisement for free counselling session

Figure 16 shows an advertisement of DA clinic's “face shape counselling service”. The bold text in white reads: “Are my bones the problem? VS Is my flesh the problem?”. The image is divided in two sections with on the left “shaping facial contouring” and on the right “soft facial contouring”. According to DA clinic the “shaping facial contouring” is a procedure for women who have bone structures that are “too big”, while the “soft facial contouring” is targeted at women who have excess flesh or fat on their faces which prevents them from having an ideal face shape. This image suggests that women are inherently flawed, it is just a matter of figuring out what the source is of the “unnaturalness” so it can be either corrected or excised from the body.

Beyond the plethora of smiling torso's and heads, the clinics represent the female consumer in two different lights. One are the before and after” photo galleries where customers are professionally photographed to highlight to drastic changes before and after the procedures. The other are the “selfie galleries” where satisfied consumers can share their experiences and results with their peers or other potential customers. These images are described as “stories” in which the consumer has found her *banjeon*, a shocking plot-twist and promises to change the course of her life. Gone are the days of the

“tired, droopy eyes” or “insecurity”. Most clinics have “selfie” galleries that enable happy and satisfied consumers to share photos of their new and improved self after their surgery. These types of photos are often very explicit, showing scar tissue, bruises and other painful surgical aftermaths. Incentives for these consumer “reviews” is that they can get selected to become a “brand ambassador” for a specific clinic, meaning they will enjoy benefits such as discounts and free treatments and procedures.

Themes and Narratives in the Websites

Transforming your Life: The *Banjeon* Narrative

Two of the three clinics have actively participated in Korean makeover shows such as “Let Me In” (Let美人) and “Beautiful You” (아름다운 당신). These shows have taken the format of US TV programs such as “The Swan” and “Extreme makeover” where unhappy and unattractive women are given second chances to “transform” their lives for the better through cosmetic surgery and aesthetic enhancement. Elfving-Hwang (2013) similarly identified a narrative of transformation in her study on makeover TV shows where the transformation of the body was also a moral transformation. The main theme of these shows is transformation, which is similarly a recurring theme in the three clinics that were analysed. The word transformation means a big change, a metamorphosis that includes a surprise factor. The Korean word used for such transformation is *banjeon* (반전) which can be translated as “a sudden change in events”, “twist” or “plot twist”. Not only does this mean that the contestants themselves will undergo change, it is their *life story* itself that will undergo change thanks to this sudden plot twist. A commonly used metaphor for this type of change is that of the ugly duckling: the ugly and unloved duckling transforms into a beautiful swan and finds happiness. Just like the ugly duckling, contestants for the shows are chosen based on how much sympathy a contestant can arouse. A panel of doctors, surgeons, dentists, psychiatrists and beauticians choose amongst themselves which applicant “deserves” to undergo a transformation. Unsurprisingly, the affiliated clinics are the biggest sponsors for such makeovers.

Both makeover shows which have aired for multiple seasons and have enjoyed high viewership with the highest rating peaking at ratings of 3.6%, a significant number for a cable network program. “Let Me In” was the more successful show of the two and it has been at the center of much controversy as many complaints were filed against the airing shows that glorify cosmetic surgery and further

encourages women to undergo cosmetic surgery. Despite complaints and protests, the show aired for five seasons, the last being in 2015 after facing an injunction order for cancellation filed by various women's advocate groups. Advertising of medical businesses, including cosmetic surgery clinics, is banned for television broadcasting. Doctors and clinics work around these measures by indirectly advertising through such makeover shows. According to Noh, head of Department of Psychiatry of Ajou University Medical Center such shows can be considered as long commercials for cosmetic surgery clinics in the format of reality TV as "Plastic surgeons need publicity and the show needs high ratings." (Yun 2012). "Beautiful You", a program is considered a copycat of "Let Me In" quietly continued airing even after its counterpart was cancelled, up until 2017.



Figure 8. ID Hospital marketing through the contestants of "Let Me In"

The shows and their contestants are still actively promoted on the websites of Banobagi and ID Hospital as can be seen in the two images below taken from the Banobagi clinic and ID hospital websites. Both clinics prominently advertise their affiliation and participation of the show for multiple seasons, encouraging the viewer to actively

The cosmetic surgery industry makes use of the *banjeon* or transformation narrative. This implies that cosmetic surgery can buy beauty and happiness. Many contestants who partake in the shows are considered "ugly" and the show attempts to candidly reveal their unhappy lives rife with mental health

problems that are often related to past trauma of bullying and ostracization due to their appearance. The narrative created on these shows is that contestants are given new chance to transform themselves and their lives both in a physical and symbolic manner. It shows that bodies, especially female bodies, are malleable and subject to constant evaluation, normalizing the painful surgical processes with the trade-off: a beautiful body that could possibly increase your job and marriage chances. The caveat is however that such extensive makeovers are costly and only ever affordable for the wealthy. The covert message is that anybody can become beautiful and improve their stakes at life, but only if one can afford it.

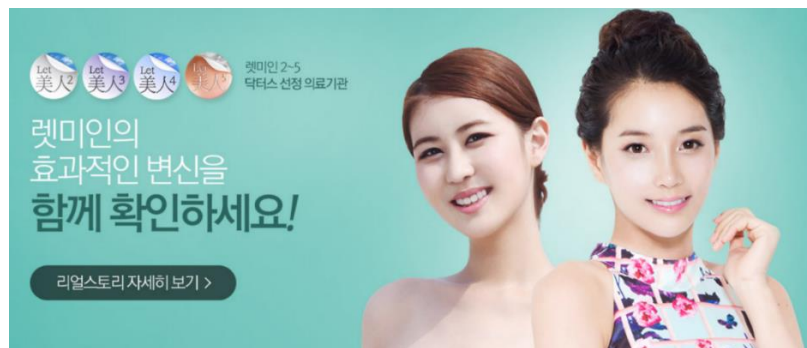


Figure 9. Banobagi clinic advertising their media exposure on "Let Me In"

Even 2 years after the airing of the show, clinics still actively utilize the contestants of "Let Me In" in their marketing materials as can be seen in Figure 2. The female models on the right are two former contestants of the show while the top left corner shows the seasons in which Banobagi has participated (Seasons 2, 3, 4 and 5). The text reads "Find out Let Me In's effective transformations!"

결과는 안전, 얼굴은 반전

- ☑메이크오버소 [Let 美시] 전 시즈 의료지원 참여병원
- ☑중년여성 청춘2막 [아름다운 당신] 의료지원 참여병원



Figure 10. ID Hospital "Safe results, transformed face"

Beauty as if you were born with it: Natural Beauty

Cosmetic surgeons often take great pride in the flawless, “naturalness” of their products. Their matter of expertise is measured in the way insofar the products are free from abnormalities such as the bulges of fat, crooked facial features and other undesirable and aberrant features.



Figure 11. Banobagi's advertisement for chin surgery

In the websites of the clinics naturalness is a central theme that is advertised as a product. Figure 3 shows an image of a banner on the website of Banobagi. Depicted is the head of a model with bold dark letters stating: “Chin surgery that enhances your facial expressions” with the smaller text reading: “A natural smile that looks as it was always beautiful~ You know right? A woman is charming when she smiles~”. This image advertises a chin surgery that sharpens the chin, thereby enhancing the facial shape. The implication is that a woman smiles more beautifully after undergoing this surgery to look like the depicted model who has a pointed chin. This image can be read in two ways: Firstly, it could imply that women do not smile if they are not beautiful due to feelings of insecurity and therefore require surgery to enhance their looks to feel beautiful and confident enough to smile. Secondly, it could imply that the woman’s smile was not beautiful because of her appearance, meaning that a smile is only beautiful when performed by a beautiful woman.



Figure 12. Banobagi clinic advertisement for double eyelid surgery

Figure 4. present another advertisement by Banobagi clinic which is framed in a similar way, the head of a female model on the right while the left reads texts: *“Beauty that draws out naturalness”*. This text implies that only beautiful people, people who adhere to the conventional beauty ideals as propagated by the beauty industry, are truly “natural”. The white text below reads: *“Presenting a luxurious impression!”*. This message links an “natural” appearance to a “luxurious” impression, in other words, a “natural” look is associated with high class. This link between “naturalness” and luxury and the upper-class is made throughout all three websites.

Figure 5. shows an advertisement for a nose surgery from the website of ID Hospital. Here the image shows three young women on the right who all share facial features that are in accordance with conventional beauty ideals. The women wear white clothing and the woman in the middle pouts her lips while looking into the camera and grabbing one finger with the other hand. This overall infantile gesture and facial expression give the impression of “eroticized innocence” (Bray 2009, 177). All three women wear white clothing and have long hair which are conventionally feminine characteristics that evoke the image of young, chaste girls. The black highlighted text at the top reads: *“Naturally as if you can’t tell [you had surgery]? Defined like a doll?”*, followed by the main slogan underneath, *“The 4 STEP nose surgery that I need”* with the smaller text underneath, *“Naturally as if it was always my nose, a [nose] line that is in balance with my face”*. Like Banobagi’s advertisements the models embody the

beauty ideals as well as the products that the clinic wishes to sell: a natural face that embodies conventional beauty ideals that exude “luxuriousness” and class distinction. The implied meaning is that a natural beautiful face is a sign of wealth and it can be attained at the best clinics in Seoul that are run by highly skilled surgeons.



Figure 13. ID Hospital's advertisement for a nose surgery

Freezing time: Youthfulness

Although the main target demographic appears to be young women in their 20s to 30s, cosmetic surgery clinics have been increasing their focus on women in the age bracket of 40s and higher. It is expected that most of these women are already married and established their families and it would appear as if there would be less pressure for these women to uphold conventional beauty ideals. However, many advertisements are targeted at the older age bracket especially when it comes to smaller cosmetic interventions such as Botox injections and fillers, categorized as *ppeutti'seonghyeong* or “petit cosmetic surgery”. This type of cosmetic surgery is often not defined as a surgery but as a *sisul*, a “procedure” as it does not involve operative surgeries and is relatively less pain and less health risks.



Figure 14. ID Hospital targeting "older" women

Figure 6. shows an advertisement on the ID Hospital website. On this image are four mature looking women over or in their 30s whom all have double eyelids, white teeth and fair skin with minimal wrinkles. Apart from their maturity these women look different from the other, younger female models shown on the website, these women all wear darker, expensive looking clothing and are adorned in jewellery. The title and text reads “OVER CLASS”, “Back to that time when I was shining the brightest”. The words “over class” and the slogan imply that this is a superior or luxurious procedure for women past their prime who can look young again with the advertised procedures.



Figure 15. Banobagi's advertisement for anti-aging procedures

Banobagi similarly advertises its anti-aging procedures utilizing older female models in Figure 7, with the text that reads “easy and quick V lifting” (facelift procedure). The white text reads: “*With hardly any pain or scarring! Effective! Returning to my blooming youth 20 years ago!*”. This text calls attention to the fact that the anti-aging procedures are not painful, and it is one of the few procedures where this is explicitly mentioned, aside from the Botox and filler injection procedures. A facelift procedure is generally understood as less painful than other operative procedures such as jawline corrections where bone is cut. However, the advertisement makes light of the pain and discomfort of facelifts, even though the procedure and recovery process itself is painful, requiring incisions and excisions of excess skin and fat. Individuals are left with swollen and painful faces for weeks and require bandaging and stitches on their faces for at least two to three weeks. As Daily Mail columnist Liz Jones (2011) recalls her experience after her facelift surgery:

“I’m nauseous, with a terrible headache, which no amount of drugs seems to alleviate. In the middle of the night I throw up all down my gown. I’m changed, like a baby. This is the worst night of my life. My face hurts. I can’t move, sit up or sleep.”

Jones continues to feel miserable, having to throw up several times in the following days. She is bored due to her face being nearly immobile, leaving her unable to talk and eat properly while the bruises and swelling on her face limit her eyesight. A month later, Jones was finally able to love her new face, but

she did not think she looked particularly younger “... just less exhausted” (Jones 2011). Jones’ account and many others’ have attested that a facelift is a painful procedure and downplaying the pain and discomforts of such procedures are pervasive throughout the Korean cosmetic surgery industry. As the advertisement in Figure 7 illustrates, the pains and discomforts are dismissed for the sake of regaining youth and attaining beauty through cosmetic surgery.



Figure 16. DA clinic's anti-aging advertisement

DA clinic chooses to feature younger looking models, in contrast to ID Hospital and Banobagi for their a. In Figure 8 we can see the anti-aging advertisement of DA clinic featuring two women who look somewhere between their 20 to 40s. Instead of exuding an image of maturity and luxury, DA clinic has opted for youthful looking models to highlight the age-defying effects of their procedures. The text reads: “*DESIGN AGE. Re-design your facial age. DA Anti-aging*”. This statement implies that not only your facial features but also your age becomes seemingly malleable thanks to procedures. Thanks to what Kathryn Paul Morgan (2009) calls the surgeon’s “magic knives” women can now “design” their faces and ages. “Biotechnology” she states, “is now making beauty, fertility, the appearance of heterosexuality through surgery, and the appearance of youthfulness accessible to virtually all women who can afford that technology ...” (54).

In the reading of the clinics, youthfulness is approached as a “natural” state, a physical appearance devoid of the signs of aging, and a form of cultural capital. Youthfulness lies in the intersection between feminine and aesthetic capital. It is a form of embodied capital that, if left to its own devices, one loses with aging while at the same time it is represented as the “natural” state of the body. The image of mature women adorned in luxurious clothing and jewellery is constructed with a purpose, that is to send the message that youth and beauty is attainable, but only for the ones who can afford it – the wealthy.



Figure 17. Advertisement for DA clinic's “petit cosmetic surgery”

4. Conclusion

The cosmetic surgery industry is based on market logic and capitalist consumption and actively appeals to transformative nature of the body. The aim of this thesis was to elucidate how the cosmetic surgery industry constructs the beauty ideals of contemporary Korean women through in the promotion of their products and services and to illuminate covert meanings that are implied within the Texts. The underlying notion is that women's *given* bodies are inherently flawed as "natural" bodies are absent of "unnaturalness" such as fat bulges, wrinkles, crooked noses and teeth, square jaws and receding hairlines. *Jayeonsureum* ("naturalness") represents the state where all unnaturalness is absent. As it is implied that women's bodies are malleable, the cosmetic surgery industry presents women's bodies as a site for transformation – where one can build cultural capital, feminine and aesthetic capital, and increase one's chances in the job and marriage market. It promises transformations not only of the physical body but also of one's moral-self (Elfvig-Hwang 2013).

This transformation is what I have identified as the *banjeon* narrative. The alteration and beautification of one's appearance represents a major plot-twist in one's life where one can finally find happiness and fulfilment. The second narrative is that of the "Natural Beauty" narrative, that seeks to represent the constructed beauty ideals as "natural". The advertisements aim to convince the consumer to undergo surgery as they are prompted to consider their own *given* features as unnatural and faulty. The third narrative is "Youthfulness", where consumers are convinced to return to a more "natural" appearance, which is devoid of signs of aging such as wrinkles and sagging skin. Youthfulness, as a form of capital can be gained through cosmetic surgery but only when one has the financial means for it. A youthful appearance is a sign of wealth and affluence, especially at an older age. The cosmetic surgery industry constructs beauty ideals presented within narratives of transformation, naturalness and youthfulness with promises happiness and fulfilment. However, hidden within these narratives is the

pervasive notion that cosmetic surgery is for the wealthy and that by embodying these beauty ideals one embodies middle-high class symbolism.

With the onset of modernization and globalization the neoliberal capitalist discourse has found new meanings in consumption and its relation to women's bodies. Consumption became the new signifier of status and class and women's bodies were became sites of global culture, signifying her status as a member of a cosmopolitan, global community through the participation of global culture by consuming global products (T.Y. Kim 2009). Women as "managers of the family" were responsible for proper household consumption yet were also, as a class, blamed for the inability to restrain themselves from conspicuous consumption which would lead to financial ruin, moral corruption and social disharmony (Nelson 2000, 144). This kind of pigeonholing of women is reflected on the discursive field of *doenjang'nyeo* and *kimchi'nyeo*, two terms that criticize contemporary women for excessive consumption of, especially western, luxury goods and circumscribes them within national boundaries as represented by the national symbols of *doenjang* ("bean paste") and *kimchi* ("fermented cabbage"). A similar pattern appears when it comes to cosmetic surgery when procedures are deemed too excessive or unnatural and women are classified as "failures" and labeled as *seonghyeong'goemul* ("cosmetic surgery monsters"). The categorizations of "failures" and "successes" highlight the normative aspects of Korean beauty ideals and the limited space in which allows women choose for herself her desired appearance before she is deemed as inadequate, deviant or even monstrous. Therefore, the notion of success and prestige are not only closely tied to the appearance of women, but also to whether they are accepted as whether they are sufficiently "natural" to be accepted as an able-bodied individual.

Riding on the curtails of the #MeToo movement, the #CorsetFree feminist movement in Korea is questioning why beauty is only demanded of women and are protesting the stifling social pressures Korean women face every day to embody feminine beauty. Makeup, fashion and diets are likened to corsets oppress women for the sake of beauty and they wish to liberate themselves from these beauty

standards. This movement seems to hint that Korea is starting to have much-needed society-wide discussions on issues of beauty ideals and body politics. It is still too early to say to what changes these movements might bring, but one thing certain to have an impact: the seemingly omnipresent cosmetic surgery advertisements in the Seoul's metro stations will disappear by 2020 due to the high amount of complains received from commuters (out of 1182 complaints, 1080 involved cosmetic surgery). A definite victory for those who wish to curb the proliferation of artificial beauty ideals of cosmetic surgery clinics.

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