

Legitimizing the plastic body: rise of plastic surgery and changing body ideals in contemporary South Korea

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Abstract

South Koreans today take a remarkably liberal attitude towards plastic surgery, as the highest per capita consumers of plastic surgery in the world. This rise in surgery has accompanied dramatic change in the Korean attitude towards the body and advanced a new attitude, one that was rare as recent as in 1990. Moreover, this contradicts the long held Confucian attitude towards the body. Originating from late Choseon, predominant Confucian values held that the body was sacred, and should remain unaltered since it is bequeathed by one's parents. This thesis examines how these dominant attitudes towards the body had changed and led to today's liberal attitudes regarding plastic surgery over the past few decades. It first builds on theories of culture to understand the source of such change and then uses discourse analysis of advertisements and a TV show to examine the prevalent new logic that endorses plastic surgery consumption. The thesis argues that the new market for plastic surgery accompanied a swift value change wherein market actors (i.e., plastic surgery clinics and other media agents) actively used certain status-based notions as "tool-kits" to forge the plastic body as a new ideal for status competition and in the process, displaced old attitudes towards the body. This thesis shows how adoption of new cultural practices in the midst of globalization simultaneously happens on the basis of prior cultural understandings.

Keywords: Cultural Change, Confucianism, Status Competition, Plastic Surgery, South Korea

Acknowledgement

This thesis marks the end of my two years at the Master's program in Asian Studies at Lund University. It has been a journey, sometimes painful and difficult but most of the time worthwhile and full of joyful moments together with my class mates. Now that it has come to an end, I would like to thank all of you who have helped me along the road to finish this thesis. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Solee Shin. Without her guidance, patience, support, inspiration and critical feedback I could not have completed my thesis. Also, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to friends and family for all the love and support you have showed me during times of both enthusiasm and frustration. Thank you for all the thoughtful insights and encouragement, and for believing in me.

Mia Åberg

Lund, May 2015

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The rise of plastic surgery in South Korea

In July 2012, 21-year-old Kim Yu-mi won the title of Miss Korea in the South Korean beauty contest (Kim, 2013). Later that year, the beauty queen, however, was forced to make a public confession while participating in an entertainment show on Korean TV. Rumors that had turned into a scandal surrounded Kim Yu-mi, as an old photograph of a schoolgirl circulated on the internet after the competition. In her schooldays, Kim's looks were remarkably different and there was no doubt that she has gone under the knife since the photo was taken. The beauty queen's response was one of shock, in regards to how the media made it seem like she claimed her beauty to be natural: "I never once said that I was born beautiful" she responded with apparent disbelief that people would make a large scandal out of the fact that she received plastic surgery. She added, that she could understand the people's disappointment, nevertheless, but going under the knife was nothing she planned to hide (Kim, 2013).

Only two decades ago, it would have been considered embarrassing to reveal that one had undertaken surgery for cosmetic needs. People were a lot more stealth about such operations. Plastic surgery patients might have even been questioned their morality for undertaking such decision based on cultural beliefs that are at least a century old (Kim, 2003:98). But Korean views on the body have been changing, and attitudes towards plastic surgery have become remarkably liberal among many South Koreans just over a decade or two. According to the International Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery's (ISAPS) figures from a worldwide survey of cosmetic procedures performed in 2010 (published in the Economist), South Korea topped the list in the number of surgical procedures per capita.¹

Korean's body ideal went from one where any modification was not only undesirable but also immoral to one where modification is remarkably accepted as a means of one's status enhancement. How did such cultural change occur? The goal of this thesis is to explore this transformation of South Korea as the world's plastic surgery capital. In doing this, I intend to go further beyond the question of *what individual motivations* South Koreans today have to go under the knife in such remarkable numbers, and instead trace the development in cultural

¹ See: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2012/04/daily-chart-13> (last accessed 11.05.2015)

change and rise of a new rhetoric that legitimizes plastic surgery consumption as a means of status enhancement.

1.2 Research question

In contemporary South Korean society, plastic surgery is remarkably common. However, this is a recent development that accompanied a dramatic shift in body ideals. For some 500 years, Neo-Confucianism dominated as the official ideology in Korea. There was an society-wide emphasis on strictly following its teachings, and the endeavor was to create a Neo-Confucian state (Kim, 2003:98). This meant not only that the state operations were guided by Confucianism but also that an official ideology promulgating certain attitudes towards the body was in place to guide individual beliefs and actions and their daily life orientations. The body was believed to be sacred, since it was bequeathed by one's parents and therefore, had to remain unaltered (2003:98). The body had to be respected to the extent that during the Kabo Reforms between 1894 – 1896 (modernizing reforms suggested under King Gojong), many people chose to take their lives rather than cut their hair upon the enactment of the 'Short hair act' (Seth, 2011:246).

Of course it would be absurd to suggest that Korean cultural values have not changed since this time as they certainly have. However, Confucianism continued to evolve and become adapted in today's Korea in ways that many analysts of Korea still see the influence of Confucianism in the daily lives of Koreans (Kim, 2003:102-103). Simultaneously, there are cultural changes that are seemingly counterintuitive from this vantage point of a Confucian state, one of which being the dramatic increase in plastic surgery consumption in South Korea, especially since the middle of 1990s.

There are surely several reasons behind the drive of this national trend but some argue for the influence of the modern Korean pop-culture and its celebrities (Davies & Han, 2011; Fedorenco, 2014; Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012; Lee, 2012; Smith, 2014). Chelsea Kim (2013) argues that the Korean celebrities are becoming more conscious about their looks as they appear in close up angles in the constantly advancing media techniques, such as high definition TVs. Plastic surgery is then the key to stay "as flawless and perfect as possible", but at the expense of revealing it to the public. Before-and-after-photos, showing the faces of celebrities before and after the cosmetic procedures, often circulate around the internet. It is almost impossible to

deny that some form of plastic surgery have been done. Instead of trying to deny it, there is the option left to proudly go public about it (Kim, 2013).

However, in order to understand this cultural shift in body ideal, it is crucial to ask how plastic surgery has not only become less stigmatized, as both men and women have become more open and acceptable towards going under the knife, but more importantly ask how its pervasive and rapid acceptance occurred despite the seeming cultural barriers that were in place. Yet, as I have mentioned earlier, the newly relaxed attitudes and values towards the body are very much a recent phenomenon, not the least because the surgical procedures for cosmetic purposes are new. Aesthetical plastic surgery was first introduced to the Korean society in the 1950s by the Americans and the first surgery clinic for cosmetic purposes opened in 1961 (Stone, 2013), however, it was not until the mid-1990s that plastic surgery took off as a popular and common method for enhancing one's status-position in society. This shows that the availability of the technology itself was only a necessary condition for the rise of popularity of plastic surgery but not a sufficient condition on its own.

So my thesis provides a twofold understanding of this cultural change and new reality Koreans live in. I ask the following questions.

- How do we understand the change in attitude towards the Korean body around the mid-1990s?
- What accounts for the change during this specific time period and how do theories of culture help to account for the change in body ideals?
- What new discourses are promoted in the new world where plastic surgery is common and justifiable, and how can we use media sources to understand the new reality that South Koreans live in?

1.3 Defining plastic surgery

Surgery for cosmetic purposes goes by many names such as 'cosmetic surgery', 'aesthetic surgery', 'anaplasty' or 'plastic surgery'. Although there are many synonyms, 'plastic surgery' will be the mainly used within this thesis. Moreover, surgery for cosmetic purposes can either be invasive or non-invasive. In this thesis, the focus will be on the invasive type of surgery procedures as they provide some drastic examples of bodily modifications. It is, however,

important to note the high frequency of non-invasive surgical procedures – no knife cosmetic fixes – such as botox, peels, fillers and dermabrasion performed for smoother skin.

In the recent decade, enhancing one's looks through plastic surgery has been a growing phenomenon in South Korea among both men and women. The Korean 'double-eyelid' surgery is one of the most requested and preferred among all procedures (Marx, 2015). Most patients who go under the knife do so to have their eyelids done, and this happens as early as in their high school years. It is furthermore quite common for mothers to encourage their teenage daughters to get the double eyelid procedure when they are still young. In fact, most people do not even consider the Korean double-eyelid surgery as an actual surgery since the procedure has become so common and routine (Kim, 2013).

Yet, there are more complicated invasive surgical procedures for cosmetic purposes becoming increasingly more common, for example, *rhinoplasty* or "nose job" to improve the appearance of the nose by rising the bridge and making the nose more narrow and the "V-line" surgery, a procedure involving correction of the jawline by breaking and shaving it to achieve a smoother facial line and create a "V-shaped" face are some increasingly popular procedures (The Atlantic, 2013).

1.4 Disposition

In the following two sections, I will provide a review of previous studies on plastic surgery in South Korea as well as a historical overview focusing on the significant cultural changes and changes in values that had accompanied Koreans' increasing acceptance of bodily modification. Next, I provide a theoretical framework to understand cultural change and especially argue that an understanding of culture as a "tool kit" helps our understanding of why Koreans prioritized the status-ideal rooted in Confucianism while selectively modifying their body ideal to embrace plastic surgery as a new mode of status-display in the midst of expanding consumerism and commodification of the body such consumerism newly celebrates. Then I go on to introduce my method of analyzing current discourses in plastic surgery, newly embraced and idealized, before presenting the analysis of ads and a TV program. I present the analyses as a look into the "new world" where legitimizing rhetoric of the new bodily ideals are pervasive and normalized.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

2.1 Literature Review: Confucianism and Changing Body Ideals

This following section provides a historical overview of how Korean body ideals have been changing over the past century. The reason for including this part into the thesis is to provide a basis for understanding how cultural change have emerged throughout Korean modern history, and to seek connections to present day attitudes on the body and plastic surgery.

2.1.1 *Confucian body ideals*

Confucianism was the ruling state philosophy in Korea for almost 500 years. It had become influential in every aspect of Korean life, including politics, culture, the family and society (Lee, 2013:200). Understanding the Confucian ideology is important in two ways for us to understand the acceptance of plastic surgery. First, Confucianism includes a set of behavioral dictates whose basis lies in personal relationships, status positions, and duty and obligations based on those positions, and we can find its influence on the hierarchical status relationships and competition still manifest in contemporary Korea. Second, Confucianism also includes a set of body ideals that look remarkably different from the ideals held by Koreans today. Therefore, to understand the continuity and contradictions in the “Confucian” characteristics of Korean society today, I will first briefly discuss its development, its continuities and changes.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the pinnacle of Korean Confucianism. By the eighteenth century Korea had become a normative Confucian society exhibiting standard criteria such as “patrilineage with its attendant ancestral and mourning rites, the universal acceptance of ethics concerned with the five social relations, the supremacy of the civil bureaucracy, the recruitment of officials through a civil service examination, and the uniform adoption of a Confucian curriculum in educational establishments” (Haboush, 1991:84). However, the influence of Confucianism declined as a result of a number of reforms prior to Japanese colonialism (1910 – 1945) (Lee, 2013:201). This period of late Choseon saw new laws to modernize the country, which included the use of the solar calendar instead of the lunar calendar, the abolition of slavery, the prohibition of child marriage, and the permission of widow remarriage (2013:201). One of the most controversial reforms of the Kabo reforms

(1894-1897) was the 'Short Hair Act.' According to the late Choseon 'Confucian attitudes towards the body,' manipulation of the body, along with cremation and, later, organ and blood donations, equaled violation of Confucian precepts (Choe, 2011). The body was believed to be sacred, since it was bequeathed by one's parents, and therefore had to be treated with respect and remain unaltered (Kim, 2003:98). The unchanging body ideal was a given and was fundamentally tied to one's morality, place in society, and filial obligations. Hence the body remained intact and "unharmful" from the individual status understandings that Confucianism promoted. These Confucian rituals and values practiced by the upper class also spread and became desirable among commoners (Haboush, 1991:110).

The Confucian beliefs and practices of late Choseon started to break down in the late 1800s and especially during the reform movement between 1894 – 1896. Abolition of class relationships during the reforms shifted subsequent class relationships and gave birth to new groups of individuals, especially during the Japanese colonial period (Seth, 2011:285). The newly emerged group of small modern class included professionals such as teachers, doctors, accountants, businessmen, bankers, and civil servants in the colonial bureaucracy. Members of this middle class were urban cosmopolitans. In fact, this group was more open to new ideas than the previous generations and embraced certain "modern" practices with excitement, including wearing Western-style clothes. Furthermore, reading newspapers, magazines, and modern literature either by Korean writers or foreign writers and sending children to modern schools were also part of the new modernity advanced during this period. The rising demand for 'modern-style schooling' reflected the social changes Korea was undergoing, as education became a key in maintaining this new status (2011:286). These changes in totality reflected the beginnings of a modern lifestyle rapidly taking shape in Korea albeit among a small elite class during this time.

The reforms and abolition of traditional class structure during the late 1800s-early to 1900s, accompanied modernization of some aspects of Korean lives including presentation of one's body in manners in a "modern" way. Being able to have Western-style hair and dress signified a certain class identity. But while Western-style clothing signified certain cosmopolitan and modern identities and linkages between presentation of one's body and class identity, this changing linkage between class and style did not mean beauty was explicitly a basis for status competition.

2.1.2 1894-1897: *Kabo Reforms and the fall of Choseon Dynasty*

During late Choseon, the body was not a means for status competition but one which individuals had a moral duty to respect and keep. However, modernizing reforms during the *Kabo Reform movement* in 1894 – 1896 brought the largest challenges to Korean Confucianism in its five hundred years (Seth, 2011:246), including the attitudes held toward the body. The *Kabo Reforms* proclaimed measures to modernize the country and one of the most controversial among these laws was the so-called ‘Short Hair Act,’ a reform which required Koreans to chop off the knot on top of the head (the “topknot”) as part of a modernizing measure. Government officials carried scissors to cut the topknots of the populace first on the streets of the capital but the movement soon spread throughout the country. However, this movement initially met large resistance as the topknot was in fact “the symbol of Confucian society as well as of man’s authority in Korea’s patriarchal society” (Lee, 2013:201), and caused riots and massive political oppositions throughout the country, especially among the Neo-Confucian scholars. Many lives were taken – among them both scholars and government officials (Seth, 2011:249) and some even committed suicide refusing to cut their topknots. While initially met with drastic reaction, short hair for men soon after become normalized and legitimized.

These measures of *Kabo reforms* were a step in the transformation of Korean attitude regarding the body brought on by the new international environment. It is an early example of how Korean attitude towards the body has started to change while moving towards modernization. However, such change, while signifying a new stage of Korean early-“modern” identity and a step away from the long-held Confucian attitudes towards the body, was far from the intentional bodily modification as a means for status competition we see today.

2.1.3 1920s-1930s: *New Women and Colonial Korea*

The 1920s and 30s saw some notable changes in women’s position and status in Korean society. The 1920s was a particularly important time, and social and cultural changes in Korea involved women to a large extent. The modernizing society presented new ideas and opportunities, which were embraced by several Korean women. Due to the *Kabo Reforms*, a number of legal restrictions on women were abolished, as well as child marriages and the prohibition to remarry for widows (Seth, 2011:286). Magazines such as the *Sinyosong* or *The New Woman* encouraged women to become “consumers,” and continuously reproduced images of “modern women” with

demands of sexual freedom (Rhee, 2014:402). The Korean 'New Woman' belonged to a small number of women who demanded liberation and equal rights and leaned towards consumer-oriented life styles, in the 1920s and 30s. Expanding the term even further, female high school students, educators, artists, and writers were included.

The women who had obtained their education abroad were of small scale but received much attention from the public:

Their distinctive appearance, characterized by bobbed hair, shortened skirts, and high heels, was seen as a challenge to the general expectations of femininity. In fact, these women's demands for freedom and equal rights created as much controversy as did their hairstyle and fashion choices, since their bold assertions of gender equality and expressions of sexuality posed a clear threat to existing gender relations. First and foremost, they challenged the idea that women should be "wise mothers and good wives," arguing that it promoted unrealistic expectations that failed to accommodate actual socio-economic conditions.'(Rhee, 2014:408)

With this said, the period from about the fall of the Choseon dynasty until the 1930s provided some early changes – both cultural and social – among the Korean people, although it seems that conservative Confucian ideas, from today's perspective, were still dominating. The modern ideas such as the view upon education, fashion and women emerging in the 20s seem to have shaded the Korean society of today.

We are now starting to see some gradual changes. Western ideals of female-hood, among a certain class of women, started to include beauty as a status ideal but this intersected with class identity and served as a distinction mechanism only for a small group of women who actively took part in such practices. This visible change in lifestyle and appearance through fashion starts the early cultures of consumerism that targeted a small group of affluent women and the legitimization of commercialized beauty as a status ideal. However, it is important to mention that this group constituted a small privileged elite in the Korean society and the way they lived their lives were far removed from the common mass.

2.1.4 1950s: Plastic surgery's arrival to Korea

Until this point in time, we have started to see some gradual changes around attitudes toward appearance, but it was not until the 1950s when plastic surgery arrives to Korea. However, the purpose of plastic surgery was not for beauty and the practice was not as widespread as in today. In November 1953, an American plastic surgeon Dr. Ralph Millard arrived to South Korea. He

was commissioned as part of a plastic surgeon team for the United States Marine Corps to provide humanitarian relief, or, as he characterized it “American goodwill in Asia” (DiMoia, 2013:177). Part of his role was to help treat Korean accident and burn victims from the Korean War (1950 to 1953). However, Dr. Millard’s treatment of the victims took a slightly different track than what was planned from the beginning: he performed what is said to be the first recorded double-eyelid surgery in South Korean history (Thompson, 2012:98).

His reasoning behind the treatment was to help Asians create more of a ‘Western look’ in order to become accepted among Americans and thus, assimilate into the emerging international economy (98). According to one article (The Atlantic, 2013), Dr. Miller later wrote in *The American Journal of Ophthalmology*: “The Asian eyelid produces a passive expression which seems to epitomize the stoical and unemotional manner of the Oriental.” The procedure escalated and surgery for cosmetic purposes penetrated into mainstream culture. In August 1961, the first plastic surgery department was established at Yonsei University Severance Hospital in Korea, according to the *Korean Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons* (KSPRS). However, the arrival of plastic surgery did not necessarily mean that consumers flocked to it right away.

It was not until the middle of 1990s that plastic surgery became a fully commercialized industry for beauty and Koreans embraced it as a means to enhance their looks. This shows that the availability of technology in itself was only a necessary condition for the popularity of plastic surgery we see today and it took effort by a lot of other entities such as the industry, the surgeons, hospitals, and the media etc. to reestablish the role of plastic surgery as something cosmetic and legitimize its usage as such.

Furthermore, while status competition was salient in the largely upwardly mobile Korean society during the post-War era, status was linked with a host of other criteria at the time: for example, occupational status, education, and parental wealth. Plastic surgery obtained its use as a status-enhancing tool only after consumerism fully bloomed in Korea and after the body became a canvas for commercialized and consumption-based status competition.

2.1.5 1990s: Plastic surgery and the Financial Crisis

Up until the mid-1990s, plastic surgery was only a marginal practice in South Korea. However, around this time, a new body ideal emerged, one that stigmatizes modification less and one that

equates the body as a canvas for status competition. Transforming the body became increasingly legitimate as a way to make status-claims and stay successful in a status-driven society. This new ideal effectively displaced the old notion that bodily modification is immoral and disrespectful to one's parents, and became replaced with a new notion that incorporates plastic surgery into the realm of status competition. The partial transformation of Confucianism through the displacement of its body ideal then simultaneously relied on the continuity of the status-driven notion of relationships.

Starting from the 1990s we can see a dramatic transformation and a development in surgery trends. In 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis hit South Korea. This financial crisis has not only led to massive restructuring of the economy but also subsequent liberalization that transformed the domestic economy. Most notably, domestic service sectors, in retail and finance, have liberalized and households have become increasingly financialized as increasing number of Koreans have taken on consumer debt through credit cards and mortgage loans. This period ensuing the crisis also marked Korea's transformation into a mass consumerist society.

Since the crisis, plastic surgery rates have also risen to the highest per capita globally. While the whole industry has transformed during the early-90s, individuals have started to legitimize plastic surgery as a way to survive the severe competition in the job market. This has created a world characterized by a heightened pressure to not only conform to beauty ideals, but since plastic surgery has become easily accessible through the mushrooming of the industry, beauty ideals become something that can be easily purchased and attained.

Sharon Hejiin Lee (2012:71) argues that for women to be capable in today's South Korea, it is not enough to have certain skills; to be considered beautiful is as important. The Korean employment market is not only competitive but one's appearance plays an even bigger role nowadays for successful job-hunting:

The new femininity ideal of a successful, self-fulfilled, and ever-girlish woman also demanded an assiduous regime of body care, whose intensity was evidenced by the spread of plastic surgery. Casual observers often interpreted this trend as narcissism and vanity, but the truth was that perfected appearance was a crucial asset in the tough job market, where good-looking people were openly given an advantage (Fedorenko, 2014:4).

The 1997 economic crisis in South Korea led to a competition for jobs and people started to try to get into the job market by living up to the latest beauty standards (Lee, 2012:71).

According to a sociologist at Ewha Women's University in Seoul, Choi Set-byol, the main group of plastic surgery patients tend to be young women entering the marriage and job markets: "As it gets harder to find jobs, they've come to believe they must look good to survive." (Businessinsider.com, 2013) There is a clear idea in today's Korea that the prettier you are, the more benefits you get. That there is a tendency for people to be more inclined towards attractive people when they make decisions, whether in the marriage or job market. This idea, however, has not only spread among the youths. To ease the competition, parents may even promise their children to pay for their surgery procedures if they study hard and pass their exams. In another interview in an article from The Atlantic.com, 2013, a female student Kang Na-yeon is getting an eyelid surgery as a graduation gift from her parents. She says that companies prefer to hire "pretty people" and therefore it is a reason for parents to let their children undergo plastic surgery in a young age for it to look more natural as they mature.

Another article by the Business Insider in May 2013, provides an interview with Lim In-sook, a professor of sociology at Korea University, on the subject of women undergoing plastic surgery for the sake of their futures in South Korea. She argues how plastic surgery has become just another accepted way of standing out in a "super-competitive society":

This is a highly male-dominated nation where women need both brains and beauty, or often beauty more than brains, to get a job, get married and to survive in all aspects of life (Businessinsider.com, 2013).

Acquired beauty through plastic surgery tends to give the impression of promising social status. The fact that parents encourage their children to go under the knife even feeds the presumption of the importance of plastic surgery for status and success in a competitive South Korean society.

Nevertheless, the competition on the job market is however not necessarily the only reason. Appearance had furthermore become important in the marriage and dating market, as a means to boast the social status of a person, to gain recognition, etc. The importance of appearance is well applicable to Korean stars and celebrities in a similar way. Since the mid-1990s, South Korean popular culture has seen a boom, often referred to as *Hallyu* or the "Korean Wave", and its overall influence in the country has also dramatically increased. Korean celebrity culture is now visible everywhere on the media and the internet. Advertisement for famous brands – cosmetics or else – with fashionable K-pop stars and celebrities are everywhere contributing to set the standards of the beauty ideals. Surgery clinics are booming and their adverts are showing transformed faces of men and women who got surgeries to look like notable Korean celebrities. Thus, a rising consumerism and commodification of the body started to become widespread

throughout the country. By now there is a visible status competition around beauty leading to a modification of the body through surgery. After the mid-1990s cultures of consumerism was rising, and neoliberal globalization was opening up domestic markets. The surgery businesses started looking into the domestic market to develop consumer culture. The business expansion into the domestic market opened up new spheres of commodification of the body.

2.2 Contemporary studies on plastic surgery in South Korea

This section presents a theoretical perspective on culture and cultural change to understand the continuity and changes in Confucianism and how commercial agents could utilize elements of old Confucian understandings to make a new practice of plastic surgery appeal and gain legitimacy as a means of status competition. This also shows that cultural change does not emerge out of nowhere but instead happen through actors utilizing old elements of the prior system that have affinities with the new practices they are trying to promote.

2.2.1 *Theories of Culture and Cultural Change*

In the previous literature review, I have traced the transformation in the Korean body ideals. Notions of bodily respect that was grounded in Confucian dictates of filial piety, hierarchical relationships with parents, have gradually changed through modernizing reforms, appearance of new social classes, diffusion of Western practices and ideas, introduction of technologies and its adaptation and commercialization to suit the Korean context. While the Confucian prohibition of bodily modification has gradually lessened, the importance of status relationships, yet another characteristic of Confucian values, have heightened in the age of capitalist competition and consumerism.

The issue we need to understand is how to explain the cultural shift in how plastic surgery is discussed and accepted. Therefore, this section is aimed at providing a theoretical perspective to understand cultural change. The historical discussion above established that only after the mid-1990s did plastic surgery get combined with status competition. This implies that despite the technical availability of plastic surgery since the 1950s, it was not immediately embraced by Koreans. Instead, an ideational shift had to occur and justify the use of such technology for status competition. Therefore, the level of understanding for change needs to be at the cultural

level and, a cultural theory approach is applied to the following discussion (Chan 2009; Swidler 1986; Wuthnow and Witten 1988).

It is important to keep in mind that the concept of culture is in itself diverse and thus it is necessary to define culture. Here, I will be using anthropological and sociological approaches to understanding culture. This literature on culture is again separated into those that primarily view culture as *implicit* in social life and other studies in which culture is seen as an *explicit* social product (Wuthnow and Witten, 1988:49). Since the focus of our discussion is the implicit value orientations and ideals that lead to plastic surgery consumption, we are talking about the former in this thesis. The implicit view of culture refers to culture being the ground of social relations and this literature primarily characterizes culture in terms of norms and values but also beliefs and attitudes. Therefore, focused here are the underlying meanings, the connotations, and the unstated presuppositions that seem to guide social behavior of special interest.

Culture is usually invoked to explain continuities in action. These old perspectives, since they focus on shared value systems and continuous and inherently coherent action, cannot account for change. However, as we have seen in the Korean case of plastic surgery, cultural change sometimes occurs to dramatic effects. More recently, a number of theorists have outlined a theory of cultural change. In terms of viewing culture as an implicit feature of social life, culture appears to be “built into” all social relations, constituting the underlying assumptions and expectations on which social interaction depends (1988:50). Thus, Wuthnow and Witten (1988:64) understands cultural change as stemming from shifts in the relations between social environments and ideological forms. The idea is that if culture constitutes shared value between every social constituent that are self-contained, there cannot be cultural change since everyone acts in the same ways and buys into the same set of notions.

Within the relation between ideological forms and social environments are three typical processes that are distinguished: production, selection, and institutionalization. Referring back to the late 1890s reform period in the historical section, these three processes of change can be seen in Korea around this time, which were brought by authorities inside the country and from abroad. Hence came new ideas to be institutionalized in Korea through industrialization and modernization leading to cultural change away from old Confucian understandings about the body. Changes in the social environment that add to levels of uncertainty, provide opportunities in which new ideologies are likely to be produced (1988:65).

While these theoretical perspectives have attempted to explain some change that emerges through the interaction between ideas and environments, it is Swidler's theory that has been the most influential in the theorization of culture and structural change. She accounts for structural change through introducing the notion of "tool kit" in her theory that emphasizes how culture can be used as tools for action. Because individuals have agentic choices in selecting and utilizing cultural elements, that chasm between individual agency and culture leaves room for change; The widely accepted metaphor of a "tool-kit" (Wuthnow and Witten 1988, Swidler 1986, Chan 2009) proposes that culture matters as a repertoire from which individual actors construct their strategies of action for various kinds of problem solving (Swidler, 1986:273).

The symbolic experiences, mythic lore, and ritual practices of a group or society create moods and motivations, ways of organizing experience and evaluating reality, modes of regulating conduct, and ways of forming social bonds, which provide resources for constructing strategies of action (1986:284).

The tool-kit concept of culture has made a significant contribution to the theory of culture and action. Often depending on practical urgency and cultural competences, or institutional demands, people who share similar values and beliefs can behave very differently. The tool-kit concept thus explains the reason for people differing in their strategies of action even if one might share the same cultural values and face the same structural constraints (Chan, 2009:275). A culture is therefore not a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction. Rather, it is more like a repertoire from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of action; a "tool-kit" (Swidler, 1986:277).

Culture is moreover defined in Chan (2009:273) as a subjective and coherent meaning system, but simultaneously as a practical but yet fragmented tool-kit for agents of change. Chan applies a cultural model to discuss how culture matters in forging a new market in the global diffusion of capitalism, focusing on the case of China and the adoption of life insurances. Her argument is that culture served as a coherent system of meanings, which shaped the characteristics of the market for life insurances, but simultaneously culture as a repertoire of strategies is what made the market possible (2009:273). Economic actors seeking market emergence mobilize the cultural tool-kit to circumvent shared ideas, beliefs, and values unfavorable to the development of a market (2009:273). In the case of China and the adoption of life insurances, the insurance practitioners' movements inevitably shape the features of the market's development while circumventing the local cultural resistance.

The life insurance market was introduced in China in the early 1990s. In the beginning of forging the insurance market, there was a local resistance to receive life insurance as a form of

risk management due to the cultural taboo on the topic of premature death and misfortune. This cultural resistance is argued to be rooted in the Chinese concepts of life and death. Orientation towards life in this world has been widely recognized as part of the Chinese cultural tradition, while death, viewed as something unknown, is rarely mentioned in the teachings of Confucianism (2009:284).

In the attempt of removing the local resistance, a strategy was to re-define life insurance as a variant of money management:

When we sold this product, we first talked to the prospects about the importance of protection and risk management. When we found that the prospects didn't like to listen to what we said, then we talked about dividends. Very often, when they heard of dividends, they just liked it. They bought it as a kind of investment. (2009:290)

The life insurance agents went door to door to telling stories about families without an insurance and their misfortunes. To sell these insurance policies, it is important to consider what rhetorics to use. Therefore, words like 'love' and 'responsibility' was used rather than 'premature death'.

The one-child policy in China has led parents to focus their energy and emotions into bringing up "one perfect child" (2009:291). In the example of marketing child policy in China, the sales agents presented the idea that "any parents who cared about their child's future would buy this policy" and "saving just one yuan a day for your child's future". What moved the people the most to buy the insurances was "saving one yuan a day for the child", and not that the policy covered benefits after death. Nor did they think of the policy as a savings plan. The parents rather bought it as a trendy gift to show love for their child, or even using it to show off their financial status:

We just intended to sell one [child policy] to each household. But later on many households bought ten policies or more. Why? Some parents asked how many policies the parents who lived next door bought. When they heard that their neighbors bought one, they said they wanted two. When they heard that their neighbors bought two, they wanted three or four.... They all wanted to show that they loved their child even more and to show off (2009:292).

This is the argument I would like to apply to the study of plastic surgery in Korea. The Korean body turned into spheres of status-enhancement embedded in the older cultural notions in Korea. While status aspirations previously were expressed in other spheres of life- occupation, education, wealth, the Korean body has become the new sphere for status competition as seen in the rise of plastic surgery. Like Chan's work on life insurance suggest, I also find that market agents (e.g., plastic surgery clinics) utilize this notion of "status" previously present in the

cultural understanding and rely on a repertoire of strategies to associate and equate plastic surgery as a meaningful avenue for life quality/status-enhancements.

So meanings are conjointly created by actors, i.e., plastic surgery clinics, consumers, TV programs, media celebrities, that participate in actively legitimizing plastic surgery as an avenue for self-improvement and a method of win status competition. The cultural tool-kit model for studying the plastic surgery phenomenon in South Korea thus helps understand how culture matters in forging a new market in a country where individuals need a “renewed self” in order to actively take part and be competitive in the globalizing world.

2.2.2 Forging a new market in South Korea

When forging a new market, demand for that specific product need to be created. In the case of forging a plastic surgery market in South Korea, the primarily agents in making the market have been the industry actors such as the plastic surgery clinics. The clinics hunt for customers through advertisements, and they often expand their advertising reach through endorsing celebrities and the newly rich that embrace those ideas promoted in the adverts. Along with the clinics’ adverts there are reality shows on plastic surgery on TV encouraging its audience to undergo cosmetic procedures as they are sending out the message how beauty brings advantages in both society and life. Through these venues, new meanings to legitimize the continued consumption of plastic surgery become produced, circulated, and delivered. These circulated meanings as well as visible actions of early adopters (the celebrities, the new rich) provide justification for emulation among consumers in South Korea. In this section, I will focus on how media, rising celebrity culture, and the plastic surgery clinics’ advertisements provide reflections of the new meanings that are circulated in the age when plastic surgery is vastly legitimized.

The advertisements send messages of legitimization of plastic surgery and importance of body and appearance as means for status-enhancement. They consistently promise future success in life after having undergone plastic surgery and to use their clinics for enhancement of those life chances. They have dramatized the life problems individual Koreans face, found ways to further problematize the issues which the market for plastic surgery has the solution (Kaur et al, 2013:61). Understanding the actions of these market actors through a cultural tool-kit perspective is thus applicable.

The cultural change in South Korea leading to the new reality based on beauty as a tool in status competition among Koreans, involves an advancement of lookism, a source and a cause of the potential demand for plastic surgery. The emphasis on looks in modern Korea has become pervasive and especially reflected in the business- and materialist cultures. To be clear, plastic surgery has not invented the problem of lookism, for which source lies externally, however market actors have strategically responded to these beauty ideals and importance of looks to expand their market.

To have the “right face” with no “inauspicious features” can be of great advantage when job-hunting in today’s South Korea (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012:73). It implies to have a physical appearance that connotes youth, vitality and upper-class looks. In the 1990s, physical appearance has become one of the requirements for employment in the Korean business world. This can be seen in the candidates’ resumes where the standard form of a Korean resume requires a picture of the applicant. Except from education and work experience, a persons’ appearance can be a determining factor for giving a good first impression of the employer leading to ones’ future career. A common rumor exemplifying the importance of looks in the Korean business society is how the employers go through the numerous amounts of resumes through looking at the pictures of each candidate and pick those with the most appealing faces for the next round during the application process. The pressure on appearance is inevitably greater for women than for men. However, due to the extreme emphasis put on appearance men cannot escape this fact nevertheless. An employee with ‘friendly’ facial features is always preferable since it is important for social bonding in the workplace (2012:73).

The importance of appearance in the Korean business world is represented in the format of the resume and the rumor about the evaluation during businesses’ application process. Hiring good-looking employees increases the possibility of keeping good relations with the business’ customers. Keeping good relations is directly linked to a business’ reputation. Hence, selecting good-looking employees is significant for the business’ success. In this way, looks have been an important criterion to succeed in the Korean business world. The market agents of plastic surgery have relied on this element of Korean status competition as a “tool kit” to promise plastic surgery as an avenue to provide solutions to individual problems in a society where supreme appearance and good looks are highly valued.

According to a psychologist at Yonsei University in Seoul, Whang Sang-min, plastic surgery has become a weapon in what he explains as “Koreans’ efforts to impress others, like buying an expensive handbag.” (NY Times, 2011). While increasing materialism through consumerism

is a worldwide phenomenon and something that people all over the world are adapting to, as a new mechanism for identity building and maintaining (Illouz, 2009:377), for the case of Korea, the new consumerism has specifically linked to purchase of a new “body” through its modification.

A woman’s body itself becomes 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. (Kim, 2003:98)

The industry has, through appealing to needs and desires connect to the production of wants system (2009:79), and referring to emotions such as envy, guilt, and the desire to look good, expanded the plastic surgery market in South Korea. The individual body has thoroughly been incorporated as a site for change and status enhancement.

In relation to this, as a response to the 1997 IMF crisis and as part of its globalization plan the South Korean government began to develop the pop-cultural export industry of Hallyu. As Hallyu grew in popularity inside South Korea, it soon started to spread across the borders to other countries around Asia and the rest of the world. Although coincided with the rise in plastic surgery, the increase of Hallyu did not precede it or create the market for plastic surgery. However, as the industry effort to legitimize of plastic surgery continued, there has been an increase of faces and bodies displayed in the media, of male and female Korean pop-stars who are living up to the modern standards of beauty when Hallyu had its break-through. Through the visible undertaking and endorsement of plastic surgery by celebrities that have an ever-increasing presence in Korean society, the process of legitimization of plastic surgery has been accelerated. This points towards how K-pop stars have been instrumental in the spread of plastic surgery as people started emulating them.

These “good looking” people are expressed through media, such as in TV dramas or movies, as people who easily gain everything they desire due to their favorable appearances: happiness, economic wealth, and success. Thus, plastic surgery becomes a dominant factor for fulfilling these dreams. The constant messages surgery clinics send through advertising lead people to believe that good looking is a strong competitive advantage. These developments show how the South Korean pop wave, through the celebrities and pop stars, contributed to the acceptability of plastic surgery by shaping the ideas about beauty and self-management (Lee, 2012:10).

Beauty products' advertising and fan-goods such as posters and souvenirs with pictures of the Korean stars on them, are a rather likely motivation for peoples consuming since the pictures of their idols and celebrities creates emotions like desire. In excess of souvenirs and beauty products, the consumption of plastic surgery procedures has increased as well. Here has the notion of 'desire' possibly provided the motivational structure, as "...'desire' has been commonly viewed as both the engine and the chief cultural characteristic of consumption" (Illouz, 2009:381).

According to Kaur et al (2013:69), advertising for cosmetic products works by lowering peoples' self-perception and then delivering relief from this negative feeling as an emotional benefit through consumption of that brand, or in this case, consumption of plastic surgery. Creating emotions through advertising language and images is used to control people's minds. The advertisements make people feel the pressure to stay within the 'in-group' and avoiding the 'out-group' by encouraging to go under the knife. By doing so, they will become just like the K-pop celebrities, new rich or famous people who look good. Therefore, it seems to indicate that in order to be successful one needs to consume status goods or services such as plastic surgery like these famous men and women. Thus, this strategic way of advertising could be applicable to the case of how plastic surgeons in South Korea advertise their businesses, sending out messages that aim at creating a need for undergoing plastic surgery among the costumers.

Modern consumption depends upon advertising, and similarly does the consumption of plastic surgery and their emotional appeal. The way commodities in shopping centers and shopping malls are displayed creates and evokes desires, or some form of emotions (Illouz, 2009:381). Fantasy worlds are created through consumption, offering a variety of identities, vicarious experiences and emotions to the modern individual. Through an intense aestheticization of the body, the industries connected to diet, fashion, cosmetics, and health have indeed been created and transformed the consumer. The market encourages evaluation in ways through which we evaluate others and think others evaluate us, such as our body shape, clothing, choice of food, or the way we dance (2009:384).

The plastic surgery market creates its' demand through appealing to emotion, which in turn creates a desire to yet again solve the problem of status competition. The cultural tool-kit works then as industry actors partially rely on old notions of status, while reformulating other aspects such as the body ideal, to make it appealing in the contemporary context of heightened commercialization. Their continued legitimization of the practice of plastic surgery and bodily

transformation, through advancement of rhetorical logics of self-improvement then is how this new market is formed in the globalizing society of South Korea.

3. METHOD AND DATA SOURCE

In my empirical section, I use plastic surgery advertisements and a TV show as sources to analyze the discourses surrounding plastic surgery. I primarily examine how in so many of these sources, plastic surgery is presented and understood as a tool for status competition, and how plastic surgery constitutes a natural avenue for status-competition and enhancement of self-worth. My main data sources come from plastic surgery advertisements from random clinics and a reality TV show. I use discourse analysis and interpretative and constructivist approaches to analyze these materials. The full data sources are to be found in the appendix.

3.1 Research design

Constructivism implies that social phenomena are produced through social interaction and are in a constant state of revision. This process is often influenced by knowledge or discourse (Bryman, 2012:33). In understanding how plastic surgery become legitimated as a valid means for status enhancement, I took an interpretative and constructivist approach to the questions of what accounts for the cultural change and how we can use media sources to understand the new reality that Koreans live in. However, according to constructivism, both the social actors and the researcher construct their own perceptions of the world. This means that since knowledge is always in revision, the interpretation of a researcher cannot be regarded as definite nor absolute (2012:33). In order to understand the world people use ‘categories of ideas’ which are themselves products of social interaction (Bryman, 2012:34).

This thesis adopts a qualitative approach that combines primary sources of advertisements and a TV program with already existing academic literature on the research topic. The first part of the thesis relies mainly on secondary data while also presenting statistics on plastic surgery. In the latter part in examining the new meaning systems, discourse analyses of a TV show and content analysis of plastic surgery adverts are conducted. A critical discourse analysis was performed to analyze the secondary data such as; articles, news articles on the Internet, plastic surgery adverts from random clinics and a reality TV show. As already been clarified, all of the secondary sources used for this research were collected from the Internet. I visited plastic surgery clinic’s homepages, Youtube.com, and news-sites and collected a total of eight advertisements. The total list of advertisements and pictures from the reality show can be seen in the appendix at the end of this thesis for explaining the evaluation of looks and plastic surgery

to such an extent in South Korea. Furthermore, translations have been done through using Korean-English dictionaries and consultation from Korean friends.

This study seeks to investigate how discourse in media and advertisement concerning plastic surgery involve people's construction of meanings. Therefore, a qualitative analysis is more appropriate rather than a quantitative analysis since the analysis involves understanding of contextual meaning systems.

3.1.1 (*Critical*) *Discourse Analysis*

In this study, a critical discourse analysis framework is employed as a method inspired by Kuldip Kaur et al, (2013:62). According to Kaur et al, advertisements belong to media discourse as they involve language and social processes. Therefore, they used this framework to “show the link between the nature of social practice and the properties of language “texts”, in the case of beauty advertisements in local English magazines.² Similarly, I will use this critical discourse analysis perspective to explain how advertising is used to control people's minds, i.e. advertisers, in my case; the surgery clinics, employ strategies to influence their customers through advertisement. Furthermore, this study will also reveal how the ideology of beauty is constructed as synonymous with a better life through the reality TV show ‘Let Me In’. I intend to show how the use of language and illustrations tend to manipulate costumers’ and the audience’s beliefs based on the content of the advertisements and the TV show and promote meanings consistent with the new body ideal that justifies plastic surgery. In this way, I explain how plastic beauty constitutes a new way Koreans understand the world as well as how to evaluate and enhance their self-worth.

3.2 Demarcations

This thesis offers insight to the increasing plastic surgery phenomenon in modern South Korea while examining the newly formed idea of bodily modification and linkage between one's body,

² Their data analysis is based on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework (2001): “His three-dimensional framework includes a conception of discourse as text (micro level), discourse practice (meso level) and sociocultural practice (macro level). Its aim is to explore the relationships among language, ideology and power and to find out how advertisers persuade the women to buy their products.” (Kaur et al, 2013:62)

consumerism, and status competition. While issues such as gender equality, roles and sexuality, fashion, individuality/group culture in South Korea, socio-political or economic issues are briefly touched upon, they are not the main focus of this thesis. I also aimed at mentioning as little as possible about the issue of gender. That is, I have not presented this as a piece in terms of women being the only exposed target group for plastic surgery. The reason for this is that while women has the primary groups of plastic surgery patients in South Korea, plastic surgery is not a phenomenon exclusively targeting women. It is as much of, and increasingly more, a phenomenon among men. Therefore, a specific focus on either sex is not part of the thesis.

Furthermore, I do not emphasize in this study that reasons for undergoing plastic surgery among the Koreans is to look “Western” (Marx, 2015; Kim, 2012; Choe, 2011; Standen, 2013; Stone, 2013; Kim, 2003). In the beginning, this was a topic, which I did not intend to discuss in my thesis. However, along the path of my research I came to realize that it is rather assumed among scholars studying the topics of plastic surgery in Asia that plastic surgery is seen as a way for Asian women to get a “Western” look. In parts where I make comments on the “Western look,” I intend it as a description of the idealized understanding of the West specific to South Korean society rather than the ‘objective West’.

Finally, as the topic of this thesis is quite multifaceted, I realize that the same issue could have been approached by other categories of analysis. Nevertheless, I chose to approach it through tracing the development of the body ideal and the new meaning systems that are promoted. This is not to suggest that one cannot explore the issue of plastic surgery from the angles of gender studies or orientalism.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

This thesis conducts a critical discourse analysis. While conducting discourse analysis, the research is not physically near the population of study. Concerning discourse analysis, usually the data one needs for conducting research is already accessible through texts, visuals, or internet sources and the information used is already publically available. Furthermore, since I did not physically enter an individual’s or group of peoples’ lives while conducting research, I could watch the reality show and the plastic surgery adverts several times for analyzing without considering consuming anyone else’s time but my own. This method therefore only poses minimal ethical risks. Nevertheless, observations on the Internet and social media still ought to

require caution and consideration. After all, it is still a study concerning people, and it is the researcher who is responsible to report secured and verified knowledge (Bryman, 2012:139).

3.4 Validity and reliability

According to Bryman (2012:389-390), validity and reliability are measures to evaluate a qualitative research. Validity refers to the identification of similarities between the research findings and the theoretical concepts in a qualitative research. This thesis is using qualitative methods while taking a constructivist approach. The research observes cultural change since the fall of Choseon dynasty connected to the phenomena of an increasing plastic surgery market in the South Korean society. I have provided a nuanced and thorough evaluation of the historical sources to enhance my interpretation of the developments and such narrative, I believe, is well-informed and internally valid. Similarities between the theoretical concepts and the findings from observations are as well identified.

If this research had been conducted through fieldwork in South Korea, visits to plastic surgery clinics and observation of public plastic surgery adverts in the capital of Seoul would have been performed. In this way, the data collected for this research would have been primary and most likely classified as valid and reliable. Instead, visits to plastic surgery clinics, observing adverts and reality shows were conducted online in Sweden through observation of websites. While collection of online sources does not guarantee representativeness, I am certain that a different method of collecting advertisement would have yielded similar results, subsiding potential issues in reliability. As widespread as they are, the advertisements for plastic surgery in Korea are quite uniform and coherent in their messages and ways of product presentation.

4. ANALYSIS

The aim within this analysis was to show the pervasiveness of rhetoric justifying plastic surgery as a tool for status competition in modern South Korean society. By analyzing adverts selected from a number of plastic surgery clinics and the reality TV show ‘Let Me In’, I aimed at explaining how the plastic beauty constitutes a new way Koreans are understanding the world as well as their self-worth, and one that has dramatically changed from not only the old world where any kind of bodily modification constituted taboo but also the world where the linkage between body and status display has not existed. In addition, these advertisements and TV programs represent active legitimizing work by industry and market agents and their efforts at circulating new meanings in their effort to create and expand the market for plastic surgery.

4.1 Clinics and Adverts

In this section, the study on plastic surgery adverts will be elaborated. The adverts used for research were found on the Internet and collected from several clinics’ homepages. Try, googling ‘Plastic Surgery Korea’ under the section for images, and the result will be a dazzling surprise. Similarly, walking around in certain districts of Seoul, the fancier and richer areas such as for example Gangnam or Apgujeong, one will encounter a non-ending stream of plastic surgery clinics’ adverts in public spaces, on busses and subway stations. The clinics’ name signs can be seen outside by the entrance in rows and rows on the streets, and some buildings occupy as many as sixteen floors of clinics and beauty salons (Marx, 2015). They go by names such as: *Small Face, Magic Nose, Dr. 4 Nose, Her She, Before and After, Reborn, Top Class, Wannabe, 4 Ever, Cinderella, Center for Human Appearance, and April 31 Aesthetic Plastic Surgery*. Eight images of plastic surgery adverts were chosen for analysis, and they are to be found in the Appendix of this thesis. News articles from the Internet, describing the milieu in Seoul are further used to back up my findings.

The walls of subway stations are plastered with adverts for a numerous amount of plastic surgery clinics (Appendix image 4). In the advert to the left in image 4, next to a smiling woman there is a sign above two gift-boxes saying: “The best gift”. Plastic surgery is thus seen as a commodity, and as a desirable gift. Spending money on expensive goods is a sign of economic wealth. Therefore, if one affords it, plastic surgery is instrumental in achieving status recognition. Most of the adverts are picturing ‘before and after’-photos of patients whom have

gone under the knife for a specific clinic (Appendix image 3 and 5). In the photos taken before the surgery, there are unhappy faces with empty glares. Right next to them are photos taken months after the surgery of a drastically different face smiling with confidence while showing of thin straight noses, big round eyes and V-shaped chins. The ‘before’ and ‘after’ in these photos, points toward a new mode of competition for status and the desirable ideal: plastic beauty.

Although, there are several clinics taking a somewhat more creative approach by using images of fairytale figures or else, as well as slogans in their adverts in order to catch peoples’ attention. In an advert by *Jewelry Plastic Surgery Center*, “before and after”-pictures are shown of a man’s and a woman’s confidently smiling faces, with a slogan reading out: “Your visual has now become a jewel” (Appendix image 6). Another advert by the clinic *Namu Plastic Surgery* shows a woman’s naked shoulders with a small potato as her head. The peel – filled with spots, dirt and holes – is coming off the raw potato, and underneath emerges a smooth and bright finish. In the upper right corner of the advert follows a slogan: “Small & Smooth. Smaller, softer... Be born again”, and “Happy Re-birthday to you” written in the bottom right corner (Appendix image 7).

A third advert by *THE Plastic Surgery* clinic also uses “before and after”-photos but moreover, there are horizontal lines drawn across one woman’s face as if to measure the symmetry of the before-face with the after-face. Arrows, lines and notes in Korean are describing the asymmetrical features of the before-face. Above the heads is yet another slogan, and it says: “This is innovation” (Appendix image 3). To consider the use of language is important in advertising as vocabulary convey positive or negative ideological opinions about people and events (Kaur et al, 2013:64). The positive vocabulary relates to a product’s or service’s quality whereas the negative vocabulary are linked to the problems which existed before the product or service was used. The advert of image 3 contains the word meaning “innovation” in English, which applies for the list of positive vocabulary. The message is for people to embrace the fast change of society as a progress and an innovation. Those failing to embrace such change are somehow losing out in a world where certain changes are perceived as “innovations”. Another advert shows a face of a woman as a jigsaw puzzle, and the only two missing pieces is one for her nose and one to put in her chin. There is a text beside her, and it says: “Completion of dignity” (Appendix image 1). Thus the message of the advert to its customers is that plastic surgery becomes a mean to “complete dignity”, a means directly necessary for status.

Another plastic surgery clinic is *Jenith Plastic Surgery*. This clinic has chosen to use a classic fairytale figure for its advertising: The queen in Snow White. As the original story goes Snow White is the most beautiful woman, however, according to the plastic surgery advert, the queen could get her wish with some help from Jenith Plastic Surgery: “In Jenith’s fairytale there is a happy ending” (Appendix image 8). The slogan refers to a painted picture of the queen entering a big gate leading into the clinic, and then there is a picture of her showing how she has become more beautiful than Snow White herself. In the mirror behind the queen, Snow White’s expression is furious with anger and jealousy over the queen’s beauty. Beneath the slogan there is a text in Korean telling a short story of how the queen could have had a happy ending only if she visited the Jenith Plastic Surgery clinic. This advertisement reflects the dominant assumptions about women’s beauty as a source of not only status but also potential happiness. Dissatisfaction of one’s life and jealousy leading to evil behaviors stem from one’s unfulfilled beauty ideals, and such can be easily amenable by going under the knife.

Some adverts also use symbols or pictures rather than before and after-photos. In the case of an advert made by the *Grand Plastic Surgery* clinic, the upper part of the image has pictures of two rings (Appendix image 2). The ring on the left has a small jewel on the top, and the ring to the right, looking exactly the same, has a bigger jewel. Under the rings in the same image, one can see a pair of hands reaching up into the air trying to catch a bridal bouquet. Exactly the same pair of hands to the right is instead throwing away the bouquet. There are different ways to interpret the message of this advert. Instead of wearing that small jewel ring as wedding ring, you will wear the big sized jewel ring (if you get plastic surgery). If you look pretty you can marry someone who will give you financial security. The rings could also be a comparison between your beauty and the size of the jewel-stones in the rings. Before going under the knife you are compared with the smaller jewel ring. After having had surgery you have become that big bright jewel in the other ring. The arms either reaching out for or throwing away the bridal bouquet symbolizes what situation you could be in: trying to catch your friends’ bouquets on their weddings wishing you will marry too one day, or actually getting married yourself. Interpreted either way, this advert suggests that through the help of Grand Plastic Surgery clinic, one will be able to get married (likely someone richer than not).

What these adverts seem to suggest the observer is that by looking beautiful, one can gain advantages in life and therefore, plastic surgery is “an investment” one can go through for better life chances. Thus, this advert is linked with status competition, targeting the Korean marriage

market, and how the surgery clinics are establishing an understanding of their customers' self-worth constituted by plastic beauty.

Furthermore, in the article by Marx from March 2015, one can read about her visit – one out of several – to a Korean plastic surgery clinic. At *ID Hospital* there is a “new-patient questionnaire”. The questionnaire is based on multiple-choice and rather interesting for my study considering the options given to each question. The following questions are included:

Reason you want surgery?

- Preparing for job
- Wedding
- Regaining self-confidence
- Suggestions from people

What kind of a look do you want?

- Natural
- Very different
- Completely different

Which entertainer do you most want to resemble? _____

Do you have other friends who are considering plastic surgery? How many?

- 1
- 2-3
- 3-5
- Many

If you get the results you want from plastic surgery, what is the thing you most want to do?

- Upload a selfie without using Photoshop
- Get a lover
- Find a job
- Enter a competition for face beauty

These questions indicate what the reasons have been for previous patients to undergo plastic surgery, and that the questions demonstrate the importance of looks present in multiple spheres

of South Korean society, in business culture, marriage market, self-worth in social media, and in status competition. The clinics, then, serve as a kind of “cultural brokers” through their active meaning-making and sending potential consumers of plastic surgery messages regarding a new life chance through consumption of plastic surgery. They introduce and reinforce ideas regarding self-worth and beauty through their advertising regarding plastic surgery, which notions become embraced by consumers. However, they are not notions that are completely disconnected from prior notions of Confucianism, but rather notions that tie beauty to status ideals, life enhancement, etc. Along with the clinics’ advertising, the questionnaire above also works as an example to justify plastic surgery as a tool within a competitive society.

As the point of the thesis is to look at change in body ideals, the aim with this analysis is to provide a glimpse of the new logic that is naturalized and legitimized as a result of the market making activities of cultural and market brokers. There are a number of common themes that have arisen from the analysis of these advertisements. As explained in the literature review section about forging a new market, these advertisements all use strategies to reach out to the consumers and appeal to their social needs. A problem is pointed out and created within the advertisements as they commonly are referring to a competitive job or marriage market and thus, the clinics provide the solution to the problem: plastic surgery for increasing one’s chances in a competitive society. Problem solving as well as an investment in the body through plastic surgery for the future is created by the clinics as they commonly point towards beauty as a status ideal and a life enhancement.

4.2 ‘Let Me In’ – the reality show

So far, I have discussed plastic surgery clinics’ advertisements and how they tend to focus on creating a meaning or circulating message to promote their service. In this section, I will continue on this discussion focusing on a popular reality show in South Korea. The idea of having a reality show based on plastic surgery is not originally Korean. Nevertheless, ‘Let Me In’ is a plastic surgery reality show broadcasted on South Korean television, and among the most widely viewed programs on the topic in South Korea. Thus, I chose to apply a critical discourse analysis of one episode of this reality show.

In the previous section, I examined the connection between plastic surgery clinics and messages of status competition. ‘Let Me In’ reflects a microcosm of this status competition, and provides a rich setting to analyze not only what meanings become attached to plastic surgery and become

circulated through media, but also how the participants in the reality TV show understand their situations and justify their “needs” for plastic surgery. The reality show revolves around two contestants who are chosen out of thousands of people applying to the show. However, only one of them gets to have the makeover on the show. It begins with interviews where the applicants meet the hosts of the show, all of them model-like men and women who likely already had some procedures done, and get to tell their story of why they desperately need to take this opportunity to win a plastic surgery transformation.

Each episode has a theme. For example; ‘embarrassed mothers’, ‘men edition’, and ‘unsymmetrical faces’. The episode, which I will be using as an example in my study is the ‘Monster-like women’-episode. In the beginning of every episode the hosts sit together and chat about their own problems and complexes about their appearances in the past after presenting the topic of the day. Next, they present the two contestants of the episode. In the twenty-second episode of season two from February 2014, the two women who are considered to look the most like “monsters” are chosen by a jury of surgeons on the show. Next step is to compare the two contestants and decide which of them is going to get the makeover. One of the women is being referred to as the alien ‘E.T.’ from the movie with the same name. However, the other woman whom they call ‘Frankenstein’ was selected. She did not first apply to the show. Her husband did. Deeply troubled as he was over his wife’s (Sue-Hyeon Kim) extremely low self-confidence, he participated in her place for the interview in the show. He explained to the surgeons and the hosts of the show that Sue-Hyeon’s self-confidence is so low that she does not dare show herself in public. She never walks outside to play with her son since she is afraid of the other parents looking at her. She was teased ever since she was a child and called the monster of ‘Frankenstein’ (appendix image 9).

Sue-Hyeon is convinced to come to the show for an interview in person instead of her husband. Also, she gets filmed to do a short documentary for the show and she explains her situation in front of the camera man as she cries. She reveals how she grew up being bullied by other kids. Sue-Hyeon’s youth is presented through a short screen version – with actors playing her as a kid and the bullies – while she tells about her traumatic experiences. While listening to Sue-Hyeon’s story, melodramatic music plays in the background and some of the hosts burst into tears because they feel sorry for her. To introduce Sue-Hyeon to the viewers behind the camera, action filled audio effects and pictures of her next to a picture of the actual Frankenstein monster is displayed, and it all resembles very much a trailer of a horror movie. A voice describes all of her facial features one by one: “Her whole face is angular and masculine, a hexagon face. A

rectangular forehead, droopy and sleepy eyes, a stubby nose and an “out-sticking clown chin”. This is the woman who has been called ‘Frankenstein’ for 28 years.”

The camera team follows Sue-Hyeon to a playground close to their house where she sometimes dares to go and play with her son, but she always tries to avoid other parents. The camera team is interviewing two other mothers in the park asking about Sue-Hyeon: “I see her sometimes, but I have never seen her face”, one of the mothers answer the camera team. A few meters away in the background sits Sue-Hyeon with her son in her lap. The other mother turns around at her making an effort to have a conversation. She calls Sue-Hyeon and wondering how many months old her son is. Sue-Hyeon answers her back in a low voice that he is ten months old. But then she does not dare to stay for a longer conversation with the others so she stands up and walks back home with her son. Her husband tries to encourage her to go out more often to meet the other parents but Sue-Hyeon says it is too embarrassing. The husband says in the interview how they usually fight over this subject.

During the meeting with the hosts in the TV studio they ask her to tell them why she would like to have the makeover. She tells them that she has spent her 28-year long life in difficulty and tears, and she asks them to give her good opportunities in the future through this makeover. After she leaves the studio, the surgeons start to reflect and discuss over her appearance. Before they finally state Sue-Hyeon to be chosen to undergo their makeover, both girls are called up on stage. From here the show displays E.T. vs. Frankenstein. The studio is dark and two spotlights light up the two contestants next to each other. Suddenly the spotlight next to Sue-Hyeon turns off. She was chosen to have “her life changed to the better”. The other girl, Seojin Choi, cries in despair in the darkness next to the stage. After all the attention and congratulations paid towards Sue-Hyeon, the hosts talk to Seojin backstage. They tell her that there will be another way for her. After consultation with the doctors, the production crew of ‘Let Me In’ are planning to support Seojin financially.

Turning the attention back to Sue-Hyeon, she is now sitting in a chair facing an audience of plastic surgeons. They ask her some further questions about her opinions and what she wishes to change. She asks them to make her chin narrower. However, the only thing she likes with herself is her teeth, which also the surgeons compliment her for, as well as her pupils. Furthermore, the surgeons suggest an eyelid surgery as well. The consultation on stage ends in further congratulations and applause, and the signature voice in the background asks if Sue-Hyeon will be able to realize her dream for a new life. Backstage Sue-Hyeon meets up with her

husband and son. She cries out and laughs with happiness and gives her husband a high-five while cheering: “Now I can change my whole face! Fighting!”

For the following 80 days, one gets to follow the process and procedures of the makeover; from the consultations of the doctors, to the operation and her recovery. She has to go through many painful steps during the healing process and she cannot take care of herself for several days. She is provided a vast amount of lotions and other treatments to help the healing process of her face and “to become beautiful”. She also has a personal coach teaching her how to exercise her body and how to walk classy and in confidence.

80 days after the surgery, Sue-Hyeon comes back to the studio to show her new self. Stylists are dressing her, and doing her makeup and hair. Sue-Hyeon is waiting behind two big sliding doors leading to the stage. The hosts call her name and ask her to come out and show herself. Dramatic music plays, smoke and other stage effects are used from the sides of the stage, and the light turns off leaving only the few spotlights. The hosts look nervous as the doors slowly slides open. A silhouette of a slim woman shows through the smoke and she starts walking towards the hosts as their eyes stare and mouths drop. Sue-Hyeon stops at the middle of the stage and turns her back towards the hosts, the cameras, and the studio’s audience. On each side of her are two big displays showing her full-sized body, and a portrait photo of her face before the makeover. She finally turns around to face the cameras, while the hosts and the audience are all holding their breaths. They inhale dramatically at her new appearance, start shouting, screaming, crying, and clapping their hands in excitement while throwing compliments at her over the look of “new” Sue-Hyeon. The hosts keep telling her how sexy and lovely she looks.

Suddenly a big screen behind Sue-Hyeon displays an old photo of her. She is asked to turn around and answer who that woman on the photo is. She glances at the photo with a choked expression. While laughing together with the others at the sight of her old self, she says: “I don’t know her. I don’t want to think about it”. Sue-Hyeon still has not seen herself in the mirror since she had the surgery. But now is the time. She is excited after hearing all the compliments about her being so beautiful. She turns around again and sees herself on the display walking in on stage. She sees a close up of her face and the hosts ask her what she thinks. She thinks she looks beautiful and that she cannot believe it is her. Then, the stylists start to explain how they transformed her looks through makeup, hair and clothing stating how they gave her a “Gangnam-style”, i.e. an upper class look popular in the fancier areas of Gangnam in Seoul. The surgeons follow with explaining all the surgical procedures done to her face.

Filmed like a catwalk, the “new” Sue-Hyeon is walking next to the “old” Sue-Hyeon, stopping in front of the camera to turn their faces toward each other. The “old” Sue-Hyeon without makeup and styling has a gloomy and unhappy facial expression. She meets the face of the “new” Sue-Hyeon, smiling confidently. The new Sue-Hyeon shakes her head at her old self and then turns back to the camera. At the end of the show, Sue-Hyeon’s husband and son walk in on stage. When they meet she tries to lift her son up into her arms but he looks like he does not recognize her. Her husband stares at her. The hosts ask him if he ever have seen this woman before and he answers that it is the first time, and that she looks so beautiful. He says that she has become more beautiful than any other woman and that he wants to go on dates with her now. One of the hosts is joking and tells Sue-Hyeon’s almost one-year old son that his parents are going to be very busy tonight. Lastly, Sue-Hyeon is promising in front of the camera how she is not going to make complains to her husband anymore and that she is going to treat him so well. She also promises to go out play with her son so he can make friends since she believes it is because of her that he did not have many friends to play with. “I will live a more confident life”, is her finishing line. Everyone applause and the family reunites in a hug.

The analysis of this episode of the reality show ‘Let Me In’ as well as the plastic surgery adverts analyzed above show a dramatically new world that Koreans live in now from the world where the importance of filial piety and respect for parents defined the moral essence. Over the past few decades, beauty has come to determine the worth of individuals and the ideas and messages attesting to a better life are not only freely circulated but even legitimized and normalized to the extent that those who do not conform to these notions are the ones that deviate from society.

As stated above, these messages are not created out of nowhere but actively created by market agents that selectively build on certain notions as tool kits while eschewing other non-compatible notions. As market agents, plastic surgeons in South Korea are advertising their businesses through messages aiming at creating a need for undergoing plastic surgery to stay within the ‘in-group’ for status enhancement (Kaur et al 2013:69). The plastic surgery market creates this demand by providing a solution to the problem of status competition: plastic surgery for beautification of the body. The reality show and the plastic surgery adverts, show the nature of the status competition in today’s South Korean society, one where the body has become incorporated into the sphere of consumption and a basis for status competition.

5. CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the transformation of the Korean body ideal from one where old cultural notions prohibited modification of one's body to a new ideal where bodily modification through plastic surgery is remarkably accepted as a means of one's status enhancement. In doing this, I have traced how such cultural change came about and how such process accompanied the rise of a new rhetoric that legitimizes plastic surgery consumption as a means of status enhancement. Thus, this study provided discourse analysis of plastic surgery clinic's advertising and a popular reality TV show on the same topic in South Korea.

The aim of the analysis was to look for rhetoric that justifies plastic surgery as a tool for status competition in modern South Korean society. By analyzing adverts selected from a number of plastic surgery clinics and the reality TV show 'Let Me In', I showed how the plastic beauty constitutes a new way Koreans are understanding the world as well as their self-worth, and how advertisements employed by the clinics show the attempt to manipulate and influence their customers, hence the active meaning-making by market actors in forging a new market. The analysis is based on cultural theory approach (Chan 2009; Swidler 1986; Wuthnow and Witten 1988). It demonstrates how culture matters as a repertoire from which individual actors construct their strategies of action for various kinds of problem solving, and how market agents rely on certain cultural notions in forging new markets in the midst of global diffusion of capitalism.

A qualitative research was conducted on how dominant Confucian attitudes towards the body had changed and led into today's liberal attitudes regarding plastic surgery over the past few decades. I took an interpretative and constructivist approach to the questions of what accounts for the cultural change and how we can use media sources to understand the new reality that Koreans live in. The findings show that the plastic surgery clinics used various strategies in advertising to manipulate their customers by promoting an idealized lifestyle, provided through consumption of plastic surgery.

Furthermore, this study revealed how the ideology of beauty is constructed and directly linked to status competition through advertisements and the reality TV show by stereotyping how plastic surgery is synonymous with a better life. Therefore, in order to be successful the indication is that one need to afford status things such as plastic beauty that rich or famous men and women has.

In conclusion, the plastic surgery advertisers (surgery clinics) not only promote their procedures but outlines beauty standards of the Korean society, cultural values and lifestyles today. This social practice has shaped the attitudes towards the body of Koreans to a considerable extent. The historical overview revealed the significant cultural change that has accompanied Koreans' values and increasing acceptance of bodily modification yet the historically-formed cultural understandings also inform the actions of market actors legitimizing change. Alford (1997:16) argued that "globalization has created a ragged, running edge dividing tradition and modernity, one that provides new opportunities to experiment with identity, as well as new scope for identity's destruction." (Alford, 1997:16) South Korea has changed and is still changing yet also building on the past. Globalization and diffusion of consumerist ideals have transformed the values and ideals of South Koreans as seen in the vast increase of plastic surgery consumption yet the concrete changes have been brought about by the legitimizing market activities of the cultural and market brokers.

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Appendix

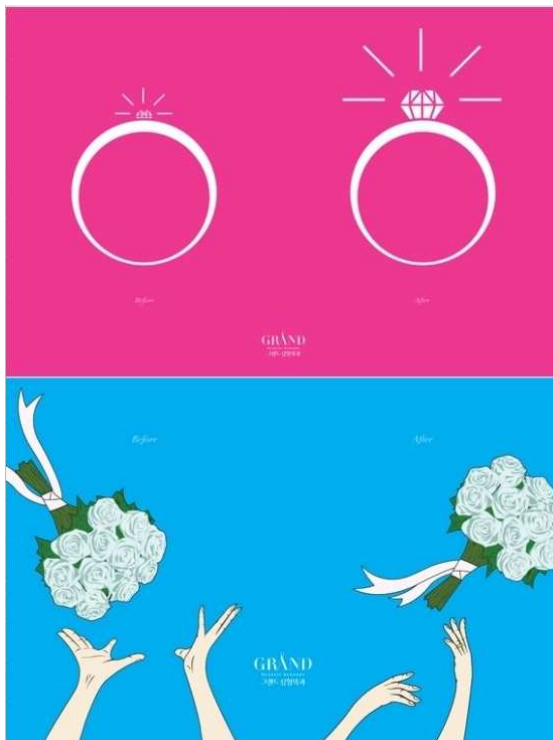
1. Plastic surgery adverts

Image 1. <http://careernote.co.kr/425> (2014-04-18)



"Completion of dignity."

Image 2. <http://m.blog.daum.net/johna8o813/2> (2014-04-18)



The image is an advert for the clinic *Grand Plastic Surgery*

Image 3. http://www.wikitree.co.kr/main/ann_ring.php?id=104789&alid=137458
(2014-04-18)



“This is innovation.” The image is an advert for the clinic *THE Plastic Surgery*

Image 4. <http://hankookilbo.com/v/33e4f77844ce4b5fb2c8f9b83585750b> (2015-04-19)

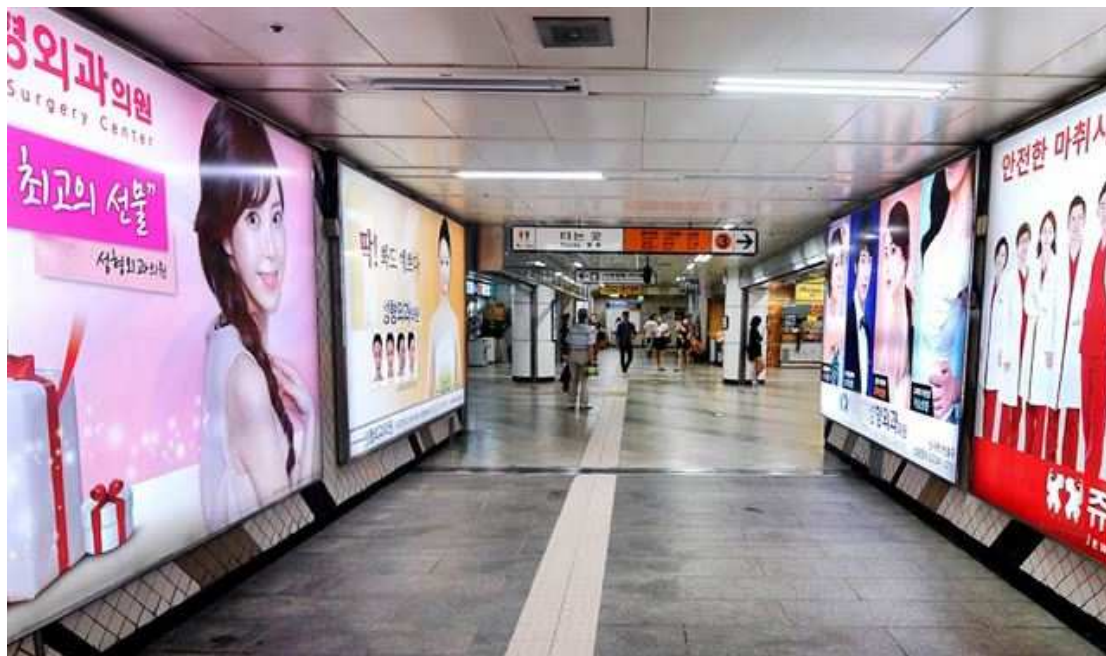


Image of walls plastered with plastic surgery adverts on a subway station in Seoul.

Image 5. <http://matome.naver.jp/odai/2141840007326923201/2141840291728295303>

(2015-04-19)



The image is an advert for the clinic *Mega Plastic Surgery*.

Image 6. <http://www.ilbe.com/3479310184> (2015-04-19)



"Your visual has now become a jewel" The image is an advert for the clinic *Jewelry Plastic Surgery Center*.

Image 7. <http://realtime.wsj.com/korea/2013/06/05/tv> (2015-04-19)



“Smaller, softer... Ladies, Be born again. Happy Re-birthday to you” The image is an advert for the clinic *Namu Plastic Surgery*.

Image 8. <http://kinstar.tistory.com/171> (2015-04-19)



“In Jenith’s fairytale there is a happy ending” The image is an advert for the clinic *Jenith Plastic Surgery*.

2. 'Let Me In'

Image 9. <http://www.instiz.net/pt/723250?id=pt&category=1> (2015-04-21)



A before and after plastic surgery photo of Sue-Hyeon Kim from the reality show *Let Me In*.