

Research Proposal:

The Prevalence of Plastic Surgery Among South Korean Women and its Relation to Pop Culture

Popular media constantly bombards women with images of popular female role models, which ostensibly pressure women to fit into a specific model of beauty and desirability. This is generally thought of as a Western phenomenon, where in some U.S. cities, plastic surgery has become as commonplace as a dental checkup. How has this quest for the perfection of one's physique and its subsequent creation of a profitable market for plastic surgery affected non-Western countries? I turn my attention to Asia, more specifically South Korea, which currently has one of the highest rates of plastic surgery in any Asian country and has a particularly ubiquitous popular culture. Korea has had incredible rates of economic growth in the last years and has had more resources to put into their pop culture, which serves to present to Korean women a standard of appearance to aspire to. The images of women in Korean pop culture negatively affect Korean women and their self-image and effectively popularize the cosmetic trend of plastic surgery. This has negative effects on Korean culture because Korean women's sense of well-being becomes dependent on appearance and beauty. Korean women will depend on superficial goals such as the perfect nose, bigger eyes or larger breasts to affirm their value in society. This mentality will undermine any social advancement made by women in a male-dominated Korean society because it will reinforce an oppressive system where women are marginalized and focus their energies on superficial values such as beauty.

The part of research that concerns me is that I have a limited knowledge of Korea's history and its social expectations of women. I know Korea's general historical background, but I am not familiar with women's place in it. I am more familiar with trends women's societal oppression, including the growing trend of plastic surgery in developing countries. I will need to research Korean culture to better understand its expectations of women.

One area of research I will explore is Korean pop culture images of women. Are women in Korean pop culture particularly Western looking? Are they obviously altered surgically? How much has Western culture influenced this popular image of women or can it be argued that Korean pop culture is derivative of Western pop culture? Also, I must address the prevalence of plastic surgery and what procedures are most common (rhinoplasty, eyelid expansion, etc.) Are these procedures particularly Westernizing? And what type of South Korean woman is more likely to receive plastic surgery?

To explore these issues more thoroughly, I will research fundamental feminist theory which outlines the dangers of having high expectations on women's beauty. Naomi Wolf's "The Beauty Myth" will be a good resource. Another early feminist thinker, Simone de Beauvoir, will also be helpful in discussing the social implications of a society where women are pressured to be beautiful. Gayatri Spivak's work on female subjectivity will also contribute to the discussion. I will also consult experts on media studies to affirm the Western influence that Asian media have.

I will primarily consult popular images of Korean images through web searches and websites of popular Korean music groups. Also, Korean magazines are another primary source of pop images. I will consult academic journals to examine the impact of

these images on Korean women's self-image. Journals such as Gender Watch, Cultural Diversity and Mental Health, Gender and Society, Asian Journal of Women's Studies, Journal of Women and Aging are all journals that have relevant themes. I will also use the internet to search plastic surgery sites in Korea or websites specifically targeted at Koreans. I could conduct an interview with Dr. Hee Sun Kim, who teaches Korean language and culture at Stanford. There are also two student groups (Stanford Korean Student's Association and Korean Student's Association at Stanford), which are potential resources for interviews.

My timeline is as follows:

- Week of 1/23: gather research, contact possible interviewees
- Week of 1/30: read material gathered for research, conduct interviews
- Week of 2/6: Start outline of paper, finish by end of the week
- Week of 2/13: begin draft on Monday, finish by end of the week
- Week of 2/20: finalize draft by Monday; go to Writing Center by the end of the week
- Week of 2/27: finalize paper, turn in on March 1!

The purpose/goal of this paper is to address the effects popularized images of women have on the audience who views those images. In this case, Korean pop images consist largely of women who have been surgically altered to look more Westernized; this negatively affects women within Korean culture because it not only denies the possibility of finding inherently Asian characteristics beautiful, it also encourages a surgical process oftentimes referred to as "self-mutilating." I am researching this because

I am interested in the phenomenon of plastic surgery on women and how societies that popularize images of surgically altered women can be conducive to self-hatred among women and an over-emphasis on appearance. The significance of this work is that it highlights the dangers of a consumer society obsessed with beauty and demonstrates that in the long-run, women are at a psychological disadvantage when surrounded by images of surgically altered women.

Bio:

Laura Hendrickson is a sophomore at Stanford University, majoring in International Relations with a minor in Feminist Studies. She has traveled a fair amount and is particularly interested in issues that face women in developing countries, specifically issues pertaining to human rights.

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