

RIDING THE WAVE: HOW THE MEDIA SHAPES SOUTH KOREAN  
CONCEPTS OF BEAUTY

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Thesis Prepared for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2018

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Streng, Catherine Ann. *Riding the Wave: How the Media Shapes South Korean Concepts of Beauty*. Master of Arts (Journalism), May 2018, 60 pp., references, 67 titles.

This thesis features a qualitative analysis of eight Korean media products — both fiction and nonfiction. For many years, South Korea (hereafter also called Korea) has been called the “world’s plastic surgery capital” by many publications, such as *Business Insider* and *The New Yorker*. Although *Business Insider* considers the United States the “vainest country in the world,” the numbers of cosmetic surgeries, percentage wise, per person in Korea still outnumber those in the United States, with 20 procedures per 1,000 persons. In this thesis, I argue by using the cultivation theory that Korean television, such as K-Dramas, talk shows and films, which celebrate transformations and feature makeovers and thus normalize cosmetic surgery, create a fantastic space for viewers where the viewers are compelled to act on a media-generated desire to undergo cosmetic surgery in the belief that doing so will also transform or better their lives in the same way it does for the characters in these Korean television productions.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Tracy Everbach for taking on this giant mess of a project that became something. At many times I felt subpar in my ideas and writing, but your assistance and your kindness helped me push forward.

I'd also like to thank one of my closest friends, Emily P., for introducing me to your culture and opening the door to a passion I would have never found without you. Because of you my life has changed positively and dramatically. My third language ability, this thesis topic, the friends I met in South Korea, and now my move to Korea after graduation would never have been possible without you by my side. Thank you for your patience to my millions of questions. 제 친구가 되어서 감사합니다. 감사의 마음으로 밥 사줄게요. 사랑해요.

Finally, I'd like to thank the person whom without I might not have ever made it to grad school. Thank you, Papi, for your never-ending support of my interests throughout my entire life. No matter how weird or different they are, you have encouraged my passions and let me explore who I am. What seemed like endless piano recitals, softball games, gymnastic practices, band concerts, theatre performances, from one interest to the next you stood by them all and provided everything I needed to participate and explore. Now, my passion for Korean culture stands above them all and you're still here — just as excited for me as you were when I was three at my first piano recital. Te quiero.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

On my third day in Seoul I sat on a sofa in the common room, reading and waiting for my friend to arrive in order to eat lunch together. I tuned out the loud Korean blaring from the TV and the hum of activity from my hostel communal room in Seoul as I focused on the article I was reading. I felt the glances I received from the Koreans in the room; I was a foreigner after all and they were interested in how different I looked with my round face and tall body, but I paid them no mind. I felt the couch dip beside me as one of my hostel mates sat down next to me. I gave her a glance but quickly did a double take while trying to not be too noticeable. My voice caught in my throat.

With swollen cheeks and eyes pushing against the wrapped bandages around her face, it looked like she had been attacked and punched in the face multiple times. Through the bandages I could see pink and purple skin with stitches and cuts and bruises. It looked painful; I felt a pang in my heart. As a Westerner, never before had I seen someone so injured except on television. Was she okay? How is no one else concerned that she's probably in pain?

It wasn't until later in the day that I realize she had just undergone plastic surgery. My hostel had been in Apgujeong, a subdivision of Seoul near Gangnam, which has been dubbed the plastic surgery capital of the world (Baer, 2015). Soyeon Leem in his article *The Dubious Enhancement: Making South Korea a Plastic Surgery Nation* writes, "In 2014 more than half of the nation's 671 plastic surgery clinics were located in Seoul, the capital of South Korea, and 74.8 percent of those were located in Gangnam," (p. 52). I should have realized it sooner, considering I had been walking by dozens to hundreds of advertisements for cosmetic surgery in Seoul every single day.

According to the numbers, Korea had more than 980,000 operations in 2014 alone (Baer, 2015). Since 2009, South Korea has held the title of the nation with the most plastic surgery procedures (Baer, 2015). In 2009, 7.8 million tourists visited Korea — 60,000 of them were medical tourists seeking mostly cosmetic or dental procedures (Koo, 2010). Compare that to the less than 20,000 in 2007 (Koo, 2010).

Unlike the United States culture as a whole, where children are encouraged to love themselves the way they are, South Koreans encourage their teenagers to undergo cosmetic surgery — it's a rite of passage (Lee, 2012). In order to prepare for their children's working lives as adults, many parents save money to pay for a child's procedure or enhancement (Wei, 2016). The most popular procedure is blepharoplasty, or the "double-eyelid surgery," where eyes of an Asian go from a monolid to a double eyelid. This surgery in particular represents the beginning of a child's life outside of the family home and into adulthood (Lee, 2012).

Although some exceptions exist, particularly in life or death situations, in the United States cosmetic surgery enhancements historically have been considered superficial, although it could be argued this mentality is changing. In fact, many Westerners still argue plastic surgery is a symbol of the patriarchal oppression against women and a tool of racism against minorities (Leem, 2017). Koreans, however, justify these procedures as a necessity — believing undergoing these surgeries will better their life if not just for success but for personal happiness (Lee, 2012). On a Korean TV show titled *Abnormal Summit*, Korean host Jun Hyunmoo claimed that for Koreans "success equals happiness," meaning that in order to be happy, Koreans must be successful. In Korea plastic surgery is part of the formula of success.

In this thesis, I only discuss cosmetic surgery used to make oneself more physically attractive. Any other surgery used to save a life or correct defects is another matter. I will also

discuss the beauty standards in South Korea obtainable only through plastic surgery in an attempt to answer the question, “Why are the beauty standards what they are?” But overall my main research question is, “How does the Korean media or the *Hallyu* Wave normalize and encourage these beauty standards that power the plastic surgery culture in South Korea?” These questions are important to answer because ignorance has led many Westerners to believe the beauty and plastic surgery culture in South Korea is anti-feminist or even racially oppressive. Relying on Gerbner’s cultivation theory, which claims the media or television has the power to influence one’s perception of self and one’s life, I argue that when products of the *Hallyu* Wave feature the transformation theme, viewers begin to believe their lives must also be transformed.

The *Hallyu* Wave’s transformation theme revolves around a main character or even a supporting character with an unhappy life — usually someone unsuccessful at work and single. But once this character “transforms” their life — typically through change in their outward appearance — the character becomes successful in work and in love, thus acquiring happiness too. I argue that while this transformation theme accurately reflects Korean ideals and explains the high plastic surgery numbers, it also contributes to the cultural expectations of beauty. As the cultivation theory explains, when a Korean film, drama, or talk show sends the message of beauty equating success, the use of plastic surgery to reach those naturally unattainable beauty standards becomes normalized and encouraged.

### The Standards

According to Bissell and Chung (2009), Koreans have adapted different words in order to describe beautiful people better: “*eolijang* (“face king,” a person with a handsome or pretty face), *momjjang* (“body king,” a person with a toned body), *saengol* (a pretty face without make-

up), *dongan* (a younger-looking face than his or her age), and *longdari* (for those with long legs)” (Bissell & Chung, 2009, p. 228). These new words truly represent how obsessed Korea has become over physical appearances (Bissell & Chung, 2009). The South Korean facial ideal, according to Davies and Han (2011), includes the “double eyelid, high and narrow dorsum with a sharply defined nose-tip, and the well-sculpted and pointed chin,” (Davies & Han, 2011, p. 149). While blepharoplasty remains the most popular procedure in Korea, others such as chin-trimming, nose-jobs, breast enhancements (Davies & Han, 2011), anti-aging surgeries, and body contouring (Baer, 2015) are also common. Surgeons also attempt to form faces to reflect the “Golden ratio” so that “the human face is perceived as being at its most beautiful” (Davies & Han, 2011, p. 150). When the features on both sides of a face “are perfectly symmetrical and when facial measurements accord with the phi ratio of 1:1.618,” (Davies & Han, 2011, p. 150), the face has achieved its maximum beauty. As for the body, Korean culture views the perfect body for both men and women as thin (Bissell & Chun, 2009). During a study analyzing college students in 22 countries, Wardle, Haase, and Steptoe (2006) questioned the student’s perceived self body image, whether or not they wanted to lose weight, and their BMI. The researchers discovered that out of all 22 nationalities represented, Korean students had the lowest BMI and the biggest desire to lose weight (Wardle, Haase, & Steptoe, 2006).

### Westernization

The studies and research investigating the plastic surgery culture in South Korea contribute to a discourse that explores the reason why such beauty standards exist. Many feminist scholars and authors such as Lindridge and Wang (2008) and Munzer (2011) posit that Korean beauty standards reflect the Korean’s desire to become “white” or to appear more

“Western” in an effort to diminish their “Asianess” or to mitigate their Asian identity. In the early 2000s, Oprah Winfrey produced a television segment exploring the phenomenon in which she claimed that Asian women pay to achieve such beauty standards for the same reason that Oprah would pay, to “not look black,” (Lee, 2016). Indeed, the ideal features of beauty, such as the double eye-lids and the small pointy nose, seem on the surface to support Oprah’s argument since the highly desired features are the typical “Western” physical features. Even the golden ratio of the face is based on the Greco-Roman ideals (Aquino, 2016). As a result, these procedures are sometimes viewed, by Oprah and by others, as “corrective” or as trying to “fix” or “repair” the Asian features seen as “abnormal,” (Aquino, 2016). But the issue is not so straightforward.

Davies and Han (2011) argue that the idea that Korean beauty standards signify a desire to appear more “Western” is “grossly reductive,” (p. 149). They argue instead that the golden ratio and the physical characteristics Asians tend to aim for are “universally applicable,” and, indeed, Leem points out that not just Korea adheres to these ideals of beauty. Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, and China are some of the many other nations where “national and neoliberal aspirations as well as gender discrimination, racial differences, and social mobility are jumbled up in the beauty making culture,” (2017, p. 659). These universal features desired by a collection of ethnicities are marketed by media as “consumer” standards of beauty and “symbols of success” rather than just racial features because these nations and others like them associate the features with the kind of economic, political, and media success the West has experienced in the last several decades. As Aquino puts it, the West, or the West’s modernity, has become a symbol of success (2016).

The idea the West equals success is fueled and encouraged by the Western media when it lacks diverse representation of other races. When only Caucasian and Western people are portrayed as prosperous, viewers subconsciously equate success with Caucasians and Westerners. After film entered Korea for the first time in 1906 (Yoo, 2001), the media quickly became so popular, it almost became an obsession to the degree that daily reports of Hollywood movies were printed in Korean newspapers (Yoo, 2001) and called “the only source of pleasure,” (Yoo, 2001, p. 429). Approximately 95% of the movies imported by the 1920s were American, the rest were French and German (Yoo, 2001). In the 1930s, the Japanese and Korean film industry began to improve, but even still 60-70% of the films were American (Yoo, 2001). So for almost one hundred years, the film media has encouraged Korea to equate the United States, the universal lead in film and entertainment production, with modernity and success, and therefore happiness. Also, the fact that at that time the majority of the actors and actresses were white should not go unnoticed. This means characters who represented America with luxurious and successful lives were mostly always Caucasian.

Because the West led the world in modernity and wealth (Yoo, 2001), Korea, and many other Asian countries, came to believe in western modernity as a “ready-made good” that led to hyper-sensitization of the body (Yoo, 2001). The body became an “exhibition space” for Koreans to express their own modernity in an attempt to match the success of the individuals they knew who represented the West. Yoo (2001) argues this body project of modernity happened on three levels:

- (1) “On the first level, this project was to replace traditional aesthetics of the body with modern Western ones. The Western-type body emerged as ‘the absolute state of flesh’” (p. 425).
- (2) “The second level of modernization was to make one’s appearance Western, that is, modern... Because Koreans of the time were bound by long-standing ethics concerning their body, changing bodily appearance meant as much liberation as

denial of, and resistance to, the tradition, history and normal of their parent generation” (p. 426).

- (3) The third level relates to body movements; switching from the quietness of a Confucian society to the loud and fast culture related to the West.

This example of cultural imperialism is partly why many Westerners argue Koreans undergoing plastic surgery to obtain the phenotypic features typically related to Caucasians is Koreans’ attempt to become “white.”

Aquino (2016) suggests “. . . that beauty should be seen as a complex living and changing language that could determine a person’s role in society,” (p. 436). In other words, these physical features sought by Koreans relate more to the success of the West than to the Caucasian race. This does not mean, however, Koreans try to be Western; instead, it means they seek to attain a society that experiences the prosperity and the achievements the Western world has achieved as marketed and advertised through their media for the past 100 years. As such, it can be argued that the physical ideal of beauty in South Korea (and, arguably, the rest of the world) is a result of cultural imperialism. The West portraying itself in a fashion that the East understands to be “better than” subtly communicates to Easterners a need to remake itself in likeness of the West.

Within this larger context of international comparison, Asians “interpret cosmetic surgery as a means of self-improvement,” (Aquino, 2016, p. 437), not specifically determined by physical appearance but by the affluence and the achievement associated with such a physical appearance. Leem (2017) explains that “Receiving plastic surgery can be an effort to live a Westernized life — that is, a modern, affluent life — rather than to have a Caucasian body itself. Beauty is a significant resource of social mobility, and plastic surgery is a technology of self-improvement,” (p. 659). This, in turn, fuels the lookism society in South Korea we see today — which will be discussed more in depth in the literature review.

Leem's (2017) ethnographic study at a plastic surgery clinic in Seoul supports the argument that plastic surgery in Korea is not an attempt to look more Caucasian. Leem discovered that during three years the terms "Western," "white," or "Caucasian" were not used unless speaking to or about foreign Caucasian patients (Leem, 2017). Leem also quotes a Korean plastic surgeon, Dr. Kim (a pseudonym), as saying that "Caucasian faces are not always desirable," (Leem, 2017, p. 665).

Another fact that supports the argument that Asians' love of plastic surgery does not mirror a passion to become "white" is the fact that identity is more complex than outer physical appearance. Let us recall the late Michael Jackson, who, despite undergoing many cosmetic procedures, was never deemed white and was forever an African American. Although phenotypic characteristics can relate to a racial identity — it is not the end all/be all in constructing an identity. Mono-lidded eyes are not what makes Asians Asian — keep in mind 50% of Asians are born with double eye-lids, too (Aquino, 2017). In fact, a study by Luo (2012) shows that some Chinese hospitals consider double eyelids as "Oriental beauty" that highlights the "delicate Oriental facial contour," (p. 86). Koreans who attain their concept of ideal beauty as reflected in double eyelids, a smaller nose with a higher dorsum, and a sculpted chin are not changing race or in fact identifying as less Asian. Erik Erikson writes in the 1950s about identity and claims the core of individual's identity lies in their culture (Erikson, 1959). With that in mind, it could be argued it is even more Korean to undergo plastic surgery than not to do so, considering it is the hegemonic Korean culture who does so. Of course, there is no one single "conscious" reason as to why Koreans or Korean Americans undergo these procedures that can be applied to all cases.

## The Korean Government

There is also no one answer as to why this cosmetic surgery and beauty obsessed phenomenon occurs with such frequency in Korea. I argue, however, one of the biggest perpetrators is the Korean government, which profits from the *Hallyu* Wave. That South Korea became known worldwide as the “plastic surgery nation” was no accident. Standards of beauty, beauty products, cosmetic surgery — all of these are aspects of the *Hallyu* Wave, a term which describes the phenomenal international interest in Korean cultural products like TV and films, food, music, and language. *Hallyu*, also known as the Korean Wave, grossed \$71.4 million in 2005 (Shim, 2014). Because beauty is considered a part of the *Hallyu* Wave, the growing interest in plastic surgery in Korea attracts tourists from all around the globe. In turn, the medical tourism industry profits from the *Hallyu* Wave, which I will discuss more later on. Korea expected 100,000 medical tourists in 2012, but in actuality Korea saw a record 159,000 medical tourists that year (Shim, 2011). The International Medical Travel Journal believes Korea will receive at least 998,000 medical tourists in 2020.

The *Hallyu* Wave technically began in the 1990s when Chinese journalists created the term after Korean dramas and songs became popular in China (Bae, 2017). And although Westerners, specifically Americans, did begin to partake in Korean culture before then, it didn’t become as mainstream in America until 2012 when Psy dominated U.S. airwaves with his hit “Gangnam Style” (Lee, 2016). In 2012, “Gangnam Style” became the first video on YouTube to hit one billion views (Telegraph Reporters, 2017). In 2017, Korean boy band BTS became a major sensation when they became the first Korean band ever to win an American music award — a Billboard Music Award to be exact (Liu, 2017). They later appeared on Ellen and the

Jimmy Kimmel show and even performed in Times Square in New York City New Year's Eve in 2017.

The *Hallyu* Wave affected Korea both economically and culturally in various ways. For the music industry, its content export rose 21% in 2014, compared to the year before that (Bae, 2017). As stated before, the total gross in 2005 was \$71.4 million (Shim, 2011). And the average annual increase from 2010 to 2014 was around \$5273.32 million (Chae, 2014). According to Jin Lee and Claire Lee (2017), Korea reigns in leading the entire global market when it comes to beauty or “body management industry.” “[The body management industry’s] output of beauty products has been increasing; in 2014, the number reached 8.97 billion US dollars with a 12.5% increase from 2013 alone” (Lee & Lee, 2017, p. 250). South Korean-made beauty products’ export value in 2015 also increased by 60% from 2014, with a profit of over \$52 million (Lee, 2017). The government, in fact, knows this and plays a hand at investing in the *Hallyu* Wave and the medical industry (IMTJ, 2012).

As the literature review of my thesis indicates in more depth, beginning in the 2000s, the plastic surgery market expanded both nationally and globally with the boom of the *Hallyu* Wave (Leem, 2016). The Korean government began to market the cosmetic medical industry more than it ever had (Leem, 2016). Journalists even began to urge the government to promote cosmetic surgery. Huh Seongho, a newspaper writer, encouraged the Korean government to “directly advertise Korean plastic surgery,” (Leem, 2016, p. 64), and popular journalist Kim Mincheol, argued that “individual practitioners in the biomedical industry would bring money to Korea if they were allowed to practice freely in the global market,” (Leem, 2016, p. 64). The cosmetic tourism industry certainly played a substantial part in the rebirthing of South Korea during the neoliberal transformation aiming to advance the Korean economy (Leem, 2016).

Because *Hallyu* is so popular, it *is* the medical tourism's advertising (Lee, 2012). These Korean serials I will analyze not only normalize the cosmetic practices in Korea by consistently and positively portraying them to viewers but also by circulating these beauty ideals around the world (Lee, 2012). In her dissertation titled *The Geopolitics of Beauty: Race, Transnationalism, and Neoliberalism in South Korean Beauty Culture*, Sharon Lee argues, "In many cases, *Hallyu's* multiple forms — film, television serials, and music — serve not only as cultural products in their own right but also as international advertisements for South Korea's plastic surgery clinics," (Lee, 2012, p. 92). I argue, through the cultivation theory, that *Hallyu* encourages the public to undergo plastic surgery when it constantly perpetuates the idea through the use of the self-transformation theme that one cannot live a happy or successful life without the kind of plastic surgery candidly used in many of the screen appearances of K-Dramas, talk shows, and films.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### History

Plastic surgery was first introduced to South Korea after the Korean War in 1953 (DiMoia, 2013). Dr. David Ralph Millard was commissioned as part of a U.S. Marine Corps surgical team to remain in South Korea as a member of a team of providing humanitarian relief, or, as he would characterize it, “visible evidence of American goodwill in Asia,” (DiMoia, 2013). With all the damage and aftermath of war, Millard considered that “this [Korea] was indeed a plastic surgeon’s paradise,” (DiMoia, 2013). Millard focused mostly on facial reconstruction, especially for those with severe burn damage. He began experimenting with the creation of eyebrow flaps: “To give eyebrows to this face [a burn victim] helps to relieve the monotony for they serve as twin oasis [sic] in a desert of skin grafts,” (DiMoia, 2013). While Millard was still in South Korea, a Korean translator working for the U.S. forces came to him requesting to be “made into a round-eye,” and Millard, unsure of how to proceed, determined that “the flat nose and the oriental eye were the two features which seemed to lend themselves to the most striking change with the least radical form of intervention,” (DiMoia, 2013, p. 179). This type of experimental practice would eventually lead to the common blepharoplasty, or the double eyelid surgery, which is now the most popular surgery done in South Korea. John DiMoia in his book *Reconstructing Bodies: Biomedicine, Health, and Nation-Building in South Korea Since 1945* argues that Millard’s practice of reconstructing the eyelids gave the Koreans a measure of “self-transformation afforded by the procedure and, perhaps, more important, the added sense of control that accompanied these changes,” (DiMoia, 2013, p. 185). This sense of control still continues and is a factor that perpetuates the lookism society we find in Korea today.

The following years after DiMoia's time in South Korea can be divided roughly into three periods: 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s, and the 2000s (Leem, 2016). The legalization and social acceptance of cosmetic surgery marks the first period (1960 - 79) (Leem, 2016). Because it was just after the Korean War, the Korean government was struggling to recover economically, politically, and socially (Leem, 2016). But while the government attempted to rebuild the country, surgeons attempted to domesticate the field. A Korean surgeon, Dr. Jaeduck Yu, who had studied in the United States, began to teach and practice cosmetic surgery at the Medical College of Yonsei University — also known as the “first department of plastic surgery in South Korea,” (Leem, 2016, p. 58). Despite this, the medical society of South Korea still did not believe cosmetic surgery was a legitimate field until 1974 when the Supreme Court approved plastic surgery for aesthetic purposes as a medical practice (Leem, 2016). After this passing, in 1975, South Korea created a board certification for plastic surgery (Leem, 2016).

After the first period of time when the Korean government was struggling to revive the country after the Korean war, the second period (1980 - 1999) can be characterized by growth. Not only did the plastic surgery industry grow, but South Korea's economy, government, and culture did also (Leem, 2016). During this time plastic surgery popularity flourished as it became a new commodity and a “form of ordinary shopping” (DiMoia, 2013). In 1987, South Korea's government experienced a democratic uprising, and in 1992, after thirty years of ruling, the military regime ended — giving the power to the people (Leem, 2016). Because of this political change and the resultant economic stability, plastic surgery and other beauty treatments that had been reserved until then for only the upper-class and wealthy became available to the middle-class (Nelson, 2002).

The 2000s began the third period of time, when plastic surgery became a “national characteristic of South Korea,” (Leem, 2016, p. 59). In 1997, the economy crashed, and although it started to recover in 2001 (Leem, 2016), this collapse unfortunately left the economic structures unstable, leaving limited amounts of social welfare for the citizens. All of a sudden jobs were few and lacking (Leem, 2016), which placed the Korean people in competition with one another. During this time, plastic surgery became a method to get ahead in life, or a way to gain the upper hand among their fellows — specifically in the job sector. Through plastic surgery, Koreans could now meet the unattainable beauty standards and afterwards acquire competitive jobs. Because South Korea is a lookism society, which will be explained more in depth, those who undergo cosmetic surgery are perceived as more dedicated to becoming successful. These beauty standards represent modernity and success, thanks to the Western media. What the beauty standards represent, combined with the willingness to undergo surgery, tells Korean society that that person is ready to perform in the economic market (Lee, 2016). Soon the plastic surgery industry expanded both domestically and internationally due to the increased demand (Leem, 2016), the digital age, and the *Hallyu* Wave (Lee, 2016).

### Digital Age

In 2017, South Korea became “the most wired nation globally, with the highest number of DSL connections per head worldwide,” (Lee, 2016, p. 4). This phenomenon allows information regarding plastic surgery and clinics to fill the internet. Daum and Naver, the two most popular internet sites in South Korea, contain thousands of blogs, articles, and news information, all dedicated to cosmetic surgery (Davies & Han, 2011). According to Davies and Han (2011), “At Daum, public interest in cosmetic surgery is reflected in some of the 6,793

online communities (known as ‘internet cafes’) hosted on this portal that actively promote cosmetic surgery. In stark contrast, Daum hosts only around 165 ‘cafes’ that address the negative consequences of cosmetic surgery,” (Davies & Han, 2011, p. 148). At Naver, 6,721 of these cafes exist (Davies & Han, 2011). One specific cafe hosted on Naver, Hey Foxy, Beauty Cafe, contains 531,169 members (Davies & Han, 2011). And on Daum, the highest leading blog, titled “Beauty Guide Daum Café,” has 522,234 members (Davies & Han, 2011).

In “Beauty between Empires,” Sharon Lee argues that the internet has allowed South Koreans not only to be consumers of this culture but also producers of it.

Internet users’ dual roles as producers and consumers have renewed fetishized interest in Koreans’ cosmetically enhanced bodies, creating a cyber stage for the spectacle of the commodified body, and at the same time making these bodies — as symbols of an emerging subempire — widely available for mass consumption. Interested manifests both as fans who seek to emulate the Korean aesthetic through fashion, style, and plastic surgery and also as voyeurs who seek to analyze, critique, and display Korean aesthetics. (Lee, 2016, p. 5).

The internet allows Koreans to become exposed easily to these beauty standards, not only because of Korean sites such as Daum and Naver, but also because of the American media available online. Despite South Korea now having its own successful film industry, it could be argued the West still leads in modernity in relation to the internet. Perhaps, however, it’s changing, now that Korea is the most wired nation in the world. But in the past, it was the West who introduced the internet to the world. This could be just another aspect of cultural imperialism that encourages others to view Western features as standard.

### Lookism

I acknowledge many other factors contribute to the lookism society in South Korea, such as the government’s promoting cosmetic surgery by use of the *Hallyu* Wave in order to create

profit, the medical industry's self-interest, the nature of the job and marriage markets and others. I also acknowledge the media, or *Hallyu*, is also very much a reflection of the lookism society as well as a contributor, the cycle of perpetuity performing as it does. But for the purpose of this thesis I am arguing *Hallyu*, in its existence, is a contributor that powers, normalizes, and encourages the lookism society.

One cosmetic surgeon for JW Plastic Surgery Clinic in South Korea, Man Koonsuh, explains in a video for *Business Insider* why the most common plastic surgery procedure in South Korea today is the blepharoplasty (Wei, 2016), which changes an Asian's eyes from mono-lidded to double-lidded: "People who does (sic) not have the double eyelid then their appearance will look angry when they do not smile. Many Asian people believe that the first impression is very important. And the most important part of the face is the eyes. So when they have double eyelid surgery, their eye size becomes bigger. So they believe their appearance will be much prettier than before surgery," (Wei, 2016, 1:05). Baer adds that those with the double eyelid are viewed as less tired, more open, approachable, and friendlier (2015).

Because Koreans justify their need for cosmetic surgery as a necessity for their personal success, this is encouraged by the transformation scenes and plot lines in Korean television. Man Koonsuh explains that "Korea is a hugely competitive society, and in the job market, a beautiful face is kind of a great weapon because beautiful people are always chosen first," said Man Koonsuh (Wei, 2016), a statement which perfectly describes the lookism society in Korea. In South Korea, photos are included in resumes, thus fueling the idea that attractive people have a better advantage on the job market (Baer, 2015). An article for the *Los Angeles Times* quotes Han Jongae, a member of the National Assembly, as explaining that "Attaching photos to resumes instigates look-ism and leads to burdening expenses for job applicants," (Stiles, 2017).

The article also states that when the National Human Rights Commission of Korea studied 3,500 job posts, they found on average each had at least four “discriminatory” questions that covered topics such as age, appearance, gender, marital status, pregnancy status, and more. Even one had a preference for “C” cup females. This bias towards a certain classification of people someone may find preferable or more attractive people has created and fueled a lookism society in South Korea.

A focus on such personal features points to employers’ buying into the subliminal message of Korean’s lookism society, i.e. that a candidate’s willingness to undergo plastic surgery means that person’s willing to work hard in order to succeed and is dedicated to modern ideas about what constitutes the pinnacle of achievement as established by the West. While many argue that such a phenomenon points to cultural imperialism, I argue Koreans do not attempt to become more racially white or less Korean, but simply want to become successful in likeness of Westerners and to experience the success of the West as portrayed by the western media, which has dominated Korea for almost 100 years. For this reason Koreans have fallen prey to a kind of lookism prevalent in western societies. For example, Western feminism decries the tradition of objectifying women, and the modern obsession with gym attendance working out has more to do with sculpting bodies than it does with maintaining health.

The Oxford dictionary describes lookism as “prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person’s appearance.” A lookism society heavily places physical beauty or attraction as the avenue to attaining social success (Lee, 2016). And because South Korea is a lookism society, one’s success in South Korea relies heavily on physical appearance and beauty (Lee, 2016). “Lookism discrimination is pervasive in job hunting and marriage and such discrimination based on ‘looks’ is deemed okay by [a lookism] society,” writes Sanghŭi Kim, executive director of

Womenlink, the largest and most active feminist organization in Korea with more than nine thousand members, in a self-written editorial (Lee, 2016). South Korea is not saying only the few people who are born attractive can be successful but is saying that people not so beautiful are simply not trying to achieve success and to find happiness; everyone can be attractive if they place enough effort into their outward appearance (Lee, 2016). Unattractive people are viewed as lazy and incapable (Lee, 2016). In other words, women and men who choose not to invest in themselves are seen as not fulfilling their potential, or not becoming who they can be — i.e. attractive and successful (Lee, 2016).

In the YouTube BuzzFeed video “Koreans Get Photoshopped With Plastic Surgery,” BuzzFeed staffer and Korean-American Eugene describes his experience of being judged by the South Korean lookism society:

To grow up in a society that’s very frank about the way you look, changes the way you perceive your personal relationship with beauty. The first time I went to Korea, all of my mom’s friends there looked at me right when I got off and said, ‘well, you know, your son can get a nose job and make his face smaller,’ and you know, I had a lot of insecurities about that I thought, ‘oh maybe it’s because I am ugly. Maybe it’s because they do want me to look a certain way.’ Fast forward to now when my mom, to the same friends, shows videos of me and they all say ‘oh your son is so handsome, oh there’s nothing wrong with his face.’ Do you know why the fuck they changed their minds? Because I’m successful now. So, if you think about it, a lot of Koreans don’t necessarily say ‘you will look better because you’re white looking,’ they’re thinking, ‘you can survive and succeed more if you change certain things because that is what’s happening in society. (Buzzfeed, 2016, 2:05)

Plastic surgery is now deemed to be an economic necessity in Korean culture because it is the only way for many people to reach the beauty standards associated with success in their lookism society (Lee, 2016). The belief is that cosmetic surgery not only changes one’s physical appearance but also changes the way one’s character is perceived. Beautiful people in a lookism society are viewed as hard-workers because they invested in their physical appearance. The unattractive are viewed as lazy, since they make no attempt to better themselves or their lives in

their highly competitive society (Lee, 2016). Since their society revolves around the lookism standards, South Koreans believe their appearance portrays their determination for success. Those who are willing to undergo surgery to change their physical appearance in order to reach the beauty standards are viewed as more driven (Lee, 2016.) As a result, the “body work” encapsulates the idea that the altered body is ready to work, or perform better, in the national market economy (Lee, 2016). The Koreans’ willingness to change their physical appearances to meet the South Korean beauty standards, through almost any means available, in order to better their lives shows dedication — a desired trait in the competitive job market in South Korea.

### Feminism

In “Beauty between Empires,” Lee (2016) mentions Westerners tend to misinterpret the plastic surgery culture in South Korea as anti-feministic because Western feminist ideals rely in “accepting yourself” and “loving your body the way it is.” Instead, Lee argues, we Westerners should look at this plastic surgery culture as feministic from a different viewpoint. Because South Korean culture stems from Confucianism, it comes from a long history of misogyny and mistreatment towards women. Before the Korean War, women were deemed useful only at home and as a mother. However, after three shifts in Korean feminism ideals, which I will discuss later, women began to take more control of their careers and their futures. The fact that women now have the power to choose plastic surgery in order to benefit their lives by making themselves more desirable, when before they had no choice over their lives or their appearance, points to their own kind of feminism. Womenlink, the largest and most active feminist organization in Korea with more than nine thousand members, created a “Love Your Body” campaign in an effort to support Korean women’s decisions regarding their appearances (Lee,

2016). Their proposal describes the plastic surgery culture phenomenon as an opportunity for women to participate more fully in Korean society and to experience greater personal agency:

As women's participation in society has increased, women's bodies have increasingly been seen as objects. In the past, women's bodies were focused on a mother's role of having, then raising children. Now, however, the body is a site for raising one's self-value and is a symbol of one's position or lifestyle. As such, a well-maintained appearance is not only a marker of her self-satisfaction but is an avenue to attaining social status. Thus, many women are aggressively managing their bodies. (Lee, 2016, p. 16)

And not just women are “managing their bodies,” for 15% to 20% of JK Plastic Surgery's, one of South Korea's leading cosmetic centers, clients are men (Baer, 2015).

### Media and the *Hallyu* Wave

The *Hallyu* Wave plays a large role in enforcing these beauty ideals — as I will vigorously defend later. The *Hallyu* Wave, though a cultural product in its own right, serves as a working advertisement for the beauty standards of South Korea. Whether the Wave's cultural products portray the plastic surgery positively and in an encouraging light, which I discuss the most in this thesis, or satirically and horrifically, they celebrate and display and, even more importantly, proliferate and propagate mainstream standards of beauty and widely accepted assumptions about character.

In the 2006 horror film *Cinderella*, written and directed by a popular Korean director, Bong Mandae, portrays Hyunsu, whose friends have elected to undergo surgery at the hands of her mother — a plastic surgeon. After these procedures, however, her friends are haunted by a feeling that something is wrong with their face, until eventually they cannot stop themselves from mutilating it. As the film continues, viewers discover that when Hyunsu was a toddler, her face was burned beyond recognition after an explosion of the car in which she was riding —

while her mother and father argue outside the car. The mother, unable to accept her daughter's disfigurement, takes home an orphan girl and proceeds to steal her face to place it on her daughter. The haunting Hyunsu's friends experience is by the orphan girl.

Although the movie is fantastic in the truest sense of the word and, obviously, horrific, Lee argues it represents two things: society's idea that one should receive cosmetic surgery in order to achieve beauty and the third Korean era of feminism in the 20th Century. Feminist scholar Cho Haejoang discusses three major eras of feminist ideals in Korea. The first era was during Japanese colonial rule, when mothers were the head of the household since fathers were out looking for work, emigrated, or joining independent movements (Cho, 2006). Accordingly, these women were expected to be self-sacrificing, focusing solely on the goodwill of their families because their family's successes remained on their shoulders (Lee, 2016).

This thinking shifted beginning in the 1960s - 1980s, when women "experienced the nuclearization of the family and their own 'housewifization' and as such, their main objects were to make their families modern and middle-class," (Lee, 2016, p. 117). In other words, because many of these women grew up in poverty, thanks to colonial rule, their main goal was to give their children a better life and to raise their children in "relative affluence," i.e. a nicer house, prestigious schooling, and high-class jobs (Cho, 2006).

When consumer culture began in the 1980s and '90s, Koreans saw another change in feminist ideals. Mothers during this time had grown up during the second stage of thought while South Korea was in shambles and was attempting to quickly build itself back up, a focus that created competition among the middle-class, a Korean keeping-up-with-the-Joneses phenomenon. During this time mothers stepped up competition among their own and among each others' children, who are being shaped also by the consumer culture. These driven mothers

fueled even more competition between their children and are the ones who, according to Lee (2012), have “become critical to the maintenance of plastic surgery industry,” (Lee, 2012, p. 118). Lee (2012) argues Hyunsu’s mother in *Cinderella* is a perfect representation of this third kind of mother since she is both sacrificial and a plastic surgeon. Lee also says, “Given the film’s Frankensteinian undertones, the mother in *Cinderella*, literally illustrates how Korean mothers, in the desire to secure their children’s futures, make their children into their own creations. Bong points out in *Cinderella*, that mothers also edit and splice their children, literally and figuratively, in order to achieve society’s beauty standards,” (Lee, 2012, p. 119).

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORY

The theoretical framework for my thesis rests largely on George Gerbner's cultivation analysis theory, which explores television's contributions to the viewers' perceptions of reality. Gerbner posited the theory in the 1960s (Morgan, 2010) to investigate the idea that television has the ability to influence or to shape the way one views life or social reality. During the earlier years in the history of this theory, Gerbner focused mostly on the power the television has when it perpetuates the same messages for the viewers. Gerbner said the "mass production and rapid distribution of messages create new symbolic environments that reflect the structure and functions of the institutes that transmit them," (Gerbner, 1970, p. 69). In other words, the "mass produced" messages are created by higher institutions that in turn begin to change the social reality of the viewers. These messages create "a common culture through which communities cultivate shared and public notions about facts, values, and contingencies of human existence," (Gerbner, 1969, p. 123). To simplify: a group of people who view the same television program will receive the same messages and start to view life in a similar manner.

Although Gerbner originally studied the television, the cultivation theory could also be applied to other forms of media such as the internet, which also plays a role in fueling the beauty standards since the internet allows Koreans to have easy access to Western media at the palm of their hands. Today the same message that was originally communicated to Koreans through American films is now repeated by internet advertisements for Western brands using white models.

The most popular example of social thought using the cultivation theory is the idea that those who spend a significant amount of time watching the news or crime shows will in turn

believe the world to be more violent than it actually is. People will begin to perceive their reality in a way that reflects what they watch on television. In other words, those who are “living in a symbolic environment in which certain types of institutions with certain types of objectives create certain types of messages, tends to cultivate (support, sustain, and nourish) certain types of collective consciousness,” (Morgan, 2010, p. 339).

In the decades since Gerbner created the theory, several studies support the idea that television makes a small but consistent contribution to the perception of the viewers (Shanahan, 1999). Specifically regarding body image, the cultivation theory is a way researchers have argued that the people who view media see these unrealistic beauty standards and begin to internalize them and possibly allow them to influence the viewers, who then try to follow or fulfill those standards (Nabi, 2009). Some studies support this idea while other don't, however. Botta (1999) argues the cultivation theory had null effects on beauty standards, while Harrison and Cantor (1997) and Tiggemann (2003) support the idea that TV has a correlation with body dissatisfaction.

One study conducted by Robin Nabi (2009) attempted to answer “whether watching reality-based cosmetic surgery makeover programs... estimated the likelihood of undergoing invasive and minimally invasive cosmetic enhancement procedures” by conducting a quantitative survey (Nabi, 2009, p. 3). This survey contained 170 samples of undergraduate students from the University of Arizona — 56% were women and 72% were Caucasian with an average age of 22 (Nabi, 2009). Nabi (2009) asked the sample whether they had previously seen MTV's *I Want a Famous Face*, ABC's *Extreme Makeover*, and FOX's *The Swan*, and 59% said they had seen at least one.

The survey consisted of questions asking the sample about their television viewing and body perception. For example, one question was “If cost were not an issue, how likely would you be to do each of the following to improve your appearance?” (Nabi, 2009). Responses were taken in the form of a Likert scale of “0 (never) to 5 (I have already done this) to indicate their likelihood or past experience with 15 appearance-enhancing behaviors,” (Nabi, 2009, p. 5). These “appearance-enhancing behaviors” ranged from minimally invasive, such as laser hair removal and hair coloring, to invasive, such as nose jobs or face lifts (Nabi, 2009). The results indicated “evidence that viewing cosmetic surgery makeover programs may associate with a desire for a range of cosmetic enhancement procedures,” (Nabi, 2009, p. 8). Through the use of the cultivation theory, Nabi also stated, “Assuming the portrayals send predominantly positive messages (i.e., cosmetic procedures will enhance your appearances, self-esteem, etc), heavy viewers would be expected to desire such procedures,” (Nabi, 2009, p. 9). The data from this study supports the idea that those who receive encouraging messages regarding cosmetic surgery will in turn have a stronger interest in undergoing these procedures (Nabi, 2009).

Bissell and Chung (2009) conducted a quantitative study regarding the relationship between the Korean and the US media and consumer’s socio-cultural attitudes towards self and beauty employing the cultivation theory. Three hundred and fourteen American and 160 South Korean college students were asked to observe 17 models’ faces — all women from different ethnicities. They then completed a survey determining models’ perceived attractiveness regarding the images. The students were also asked questions about their media exposure. Bissell and Chung (2009) then compared how the media exposure responded to the students’ evaluations of the models’ attractiveness. Bissell and Chung (2009) argue the media “can reflect basic beliefs, attitudes, and values toward female beauty and can even affect changes in cultures when

others are exposed to images of ideal beauty and attractiveness,” (Bissell & Chung, 2009, p. 227). They also argue that although it is “erroneous” to claim the media is entirely at fault for people’s ideas of beauty, the media, combined with other influences, can help shape the culture of beauty we see today.

Like the investigation of Bissell and Chung (2009) reported, it’s not just the plot or the messages the *Hallyu* Wave communicates to viewers that influence them to undergo cosmetic surgery but also frequent exposure to perceived beautiful women and models. If television presents only certain characters that fit society’s preconceptions of what is attractive, those same standards become the worldview of the people watching the presentations. Again, the cultivation theory supports the argument that these beauty standards that seem to reflect Caucasian features exist because Koreans have had access to Western media for almost 100 years. Koreans have received the subconscious message that the West equals success for decades. And the West has typically been represented by Caucasians.

But today the Korean media contributes just as much, if not to a greater extent, as Western media to the same standards of beauty. Actresses and actors in South Korea have been credited with encouraging others to undergo cosmetic surgery. In 2010, when 26-year-old Lin Lin, a Chinese woman, underwent rhinoplasty, she credited the decision to the influence of a Korean actress. “Song Hyegyo is my favorite actress. When I decided to alter my face to look like her, there was no other choice than to visit Korean doctors,” she said in an interview (Lee, 2012, p. 181). Similarly, in 2011, popular Korean actress Shin Eunkyung revealed that she had had her chin trimmed. Unlike in the United States where a scandal could have surrounded the story, South Korean media discussed Shin’s surgery in a largely positive light, encouraging other people to do the same by providing before and after photos and even including information about

her doctor and the clinic she had visited (Davies & Han, 2011). Even more remarkable, the most information about the surgery could be found on her fansite (Davies & Han, 2011). These two situations are also examples of the cultivation theory at work — when viewers see enough of someone on television, they’ll begin to believe that that someone is the personification, or at least a model, of beauty itself, which in turn influences the way the viewers perceive themselves.

Similar to the conclusions of Nabi (2009) and Bissell and Chung (2009) researched, I argue that Korean media, both fictional dramas and nonfictional talk shows, present to viewers positive messages regarding cosmetic surgery. Various forms of the *Hallyu Wave* plot their narratives around a “transformation,” which convinces viewers their lives will be improved once they, too, change their appearances in dramatic ways. Using the cultivation theory, I argue these messages explain the extensive plastic surgery culture in South Korea.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHOD

I believe the *Hallyu* Wave both is both a product of and a contributor to the lookism society in South Korea, but for the purpose of this thesis I will focus and argue primarily how it contributes. For this thesis I will be conducting a qualitative content analysis of eight different productions of the *Hallyu* Wave, including K-Dramas, talk shows, and a film that feature transformations — or its presence as a central theme to the thesis — or makeover scenes that in turn suggest to viewers they should undergo a transformation or a makeover, too. The *Hallyu* Wave contributes to the idea that Koreans are dissatisfied with their lives until they achieve ideal beauty by creating a television fantasy space, where a character undergoes a transformation. This “transformation” theme blatantly gives the viewers the idea that they cannot live a successful life without first reaching the ideal beauty standards, usually by going under the knife or experiencing a makeover.

Content analysis can be used in both qualitative and quantitative research, but for the purpose of this thesis, I have conducted a qualitative analysis. Qualitative content analysis can be used to perform either inductive or deductive reasoning (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). In this thesis, I engage in inductive reasoning since I draw conclusions from the content I analyze, especially regarding the pattern in the content. From this pattern, specifically the communication of the message that plastic surgery improves one’s life, I infer while relying on the cultivation theory that the message becomes a way of life or a belief. Thus, the cultural products I observe or analyze influence the lookism society and plastic surgery phenomenon in South Korea.

About qualitative research, Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas (2013) say, “Qualitative approaches share a similar goal in that they seek to arrive at an understanding of a particular

phenomenon from the perspective of those experience it,” (p. 398). Accordingly, I chose a qualitative research method in the hope of understanding a little bit more about the plastic surgery phenomenon from the perspective of the South Koreans living in their lookism society. In order to succeed with my goal, I decided to perform a content analysis of several different media productions to examine the cultural productions of South Korea and to understand the messages these productions communicate to viewers.

This qualitative analysis will feature an in-depth description of specific scenes and themes in the popular Korean films *200 Pounds Beauty*, the fictional TV shows *Birth of a Beauty*, *My Lovely Smaison*, *Boys Over Flowers*, *Oh My Venus*, *She Was Pretty*, and the non-fictional TV shows *Get it Beauty*, *The Body Show*. I describe scenes that rely on this universal transformation theme. Sometimes, however, the entirety of the show’s plotline revolves around this theme, in which case I will detail the entire show. By specifically describing these scenes or plots, I attempt to show or reveal the ideological messages that viewers receive: One’s life cannot be successful without undergoing plastic surgery to attain culturally defined physical beauty standards. These messages are repeated so often that they are becoming a way of thought or existence for Koreans, which I argue by relying on Gerbner’s cultivation theory.

Similar to the way I employ my method, Sharon Lee in her dissertation, *The (Geo)Politics of Beauty: Race, Transnationalism, and Neoliberalism in South Korean Beauty Culture* (2012), also analyzes media products from South Korea. Unlike I do in this thesis, Lee examines more than just movies and television; she includes also independent documentaries, online video clips, archived material, newspaper and magazine articles, and in-depth interviews. However, her goal is similar to mine in that we both wish to explain how plastic surgery in South Korea has become normalized and even encouraged. Lee says, “Through an examination of the

politics of the every day that make cosmetic surgery a viable form of self-management alone with the concomitant industries productive of, and profiting from, these beauty practices, *The Geo(Politics) of Beauty* theorizes the concealed relations between seemingly unrelated spheres — popular and consumer culture, medicine, tourism, the military, and other governmental institutions,” (p. x).

I analyze the media this way in order to show blatantly the body image messages the *Hallyu* Wave propagates among Koreans. By pointing out specific scenes, dialogues, and plotlines, I am able to describe the message the various productions portraying and to explain, according to the cultivation theory, how the messages integrate into the paradigms Koreans have about themselves and their lives.

#### “Birth of a Beauty”

One of the most patently obvious K-Dramas that uses this transformation theme is *Birth of a Beauty*, one of the cast of which won best actress from the SBS Awards, one of the top broadcasting companies in South Korea. The drama encourages the use of plastic surgery as a mode of transforming one’s life, a clear message even from the first scene. The show begins with a picture of the Seoul skyline, a television billboard perfectly in view. On the billboard appears a news anchor, pretty according to South Korean beauty standards, who asks, “Have you heard of *Hallyu* plastic surgery? It refers to the recent trend of people coming to Korea from other Asian countries to have plastic surgery. In light of that trend, 100 plastic surgeons conducted research and came up with the most beautiful Asian face,” (Son, 2014, Episode 1 0:45). The “perfect woman’s” photo follows the anchor’s story.

The show immediately switches to the inside of a taxi cab with a close up of slender and shapely legs sheathed in a red dress, perfectly manicured hands with long, narrow fingers running through straight, bright brunette hair, and pink luscious lips. Between every cut, viewers see the eyes of the taxi driver constantly flicking from the road to the rearview mirror in an effort to get a glimpse of the perfect woman in his backseat, whom the driver calls an “exotic beauty” in a flirtatious manner (Son, 2014, Episode 1 1:50). As she steps out of the taxi, the camera cuts to a close up of her long legs in sexy high heels.

The next cut features an outside table with four women seated close together. They all sport bandages on their faces — clearly a sign of recent work done, and two are looking in mirrors to examine themselves. “Should I widen my eyes more? Her eyes are so much bigger than mine!” one woman in a hat with a bandage on her forehead asks, comparing herself to the “perfect woman’s” photo (Son, 2014, Episode 1 2:09). As one girl taps the bandage on her nose carefully, she responds, “She’s not real. It’s a computer-generated image. Someone like her doesn’t exist on Earth,” (Son, 2014, Episode 1 2:17). Normally, one might interpret that statement as an encouragement from the show not to seek after false beauty standards, but the show contradicts itself when the woman from the taxi walks by the group of women, while two foreign men exclaim, “She’s beautiful! Really beautiful,” (Son, 2014, Episode 1 2:29). The woman with the chin bandage gasps and takes off her sunglasses, “It’s her!” she cries, “The perfect woman!” And truly does the woman from the taxi look like the computer generated image from before. “Her upper body and lower body, 1:1.618! That’s the golden ratio. She’s a goddess!” one man cries (Son, 2014, Episode 1 3:31).

Perhaps this woman just got lucky and was born with the golden ratio body and a face that reflects the ideal. But if that were the case I wouldn’t be writing about it now. It turns out

this perfect woman is Sa Keumran, who previously was an overweight loser whose husband had cheated on her. Her in-laws despised her and kicked her out of the house after her husband had left her, and everywhere she used to go she was met with hostility; a salesperson in a beauty store once told her nothing could help her. So out of sheer desperation, Keumran had found herself pleading with a plastic surgeon to make her beautiful. She convinces him to do so once he realizes he would be the most talented cosmetic surgeon if he were successful making this overweight ugly duckling into a gracious and breathtaking swan. After months of undergoing grueling plastic surgery and months of painful recovery, Keumran steps out of the taxi and for once is met with appreciative glances from men and kindness from women. In the beginning, Keumran had planned to win her husband back, but in the end she and her plastic surgeon fall in love.

*Birth of a Beauty* perpetuates the plastic surgery culture in South Korea because it convinces viewers the idea that going undergoing the knife is an acceptable, and even laudable, way to better their lives. When the saleslady scorns Keumran and declares she's unable to help her win back her husband, communicates to Keumran — and possibly some viewers — the idea that cosmetic surgery is the only thing that can ensure she lives a happy and fulfilling life. This message is repeated often enough by the *Hallyu* Wave so that, as Gerbner's cultivation theory posits, Korean citizens begin to perceive their lives similar to Keumran's in the sense that they believe a physical transformation is required for a satisfying life.

#### “Boys Over Flowers”

*Boys Over Flowers* was considered to be a “worldwide *Hallyu* hit” when it was released in 2009 and “helped revive *Hallyu*'s waning popularity. [*Boys Over Flowers*] was a turning point

for the Korean Wave,” (Lee, 2012, p. 150). *Boys Over Flowers* uses the rich boy/poor girl cliché to suggest that a physical transformation can ensure lasting happiness. Geum Jandi works for her parents’ dry cleaning company and, on an errand, saves the life of a rich student about to jump off the roof of his school building. Once news travels around the city, she is offered the opportunity to attend on scholarship the elite Shinhwa Academy, the suicidal student’s school. There she meets the untouchable F4, a group of four rich and powerful teen boys. Jandi and the leader of F4, Gu Junpyo, fall in love. This drama is different from *Birth of a Beauty* in the sense that the character who undergoes the transformation is not the main character, Jandi.

At Shinhwa, Jandi is met with hostility as she is merely a poor working class girl. She befriends one person, Oh Minji, who, in episode 5, betrays Jandi in order to sabotage the blossoming love Jandi and Junpyo share, because Minji has been madly in love with Junpyo since they were children. But as a child, Minji was overweight and “unlovable,” as demonstrated when Minji attempts to become friends with Junpyo, who instead pushes her and calls her an “ugly pumpkin.” “Go home. Get lost, you ugly thing,” young Junpyo tells her (Jeon, 2009, Episode 5 7:36). This rejection traumatized Minji, who, feeling pressure to change her appearance as a result, fled to Germany and underwent plastic surgery for two years. During this reveal, Minji claims the pain she received from the knife doesn’t compare to the pain she felt from her love’s words and the disgust she received from everyone regarding her weight.

Once the school discovers Minji underwent plastic surgery, they respond with hostility against her. A group of popular girls viciously attacks her, taunting her with accusations like “Is that even a human face?” as they point at her before and after pictures,. One even declares, “If I looked like that I would’ve killed myself already,” (Jeon, 2009, Episode 5 21:27). Despite Minji’s betrayal, Jandi stands up for her saying:

Your eyes. Your nose. Your teeth. You paid money for all of that, didn't you? If there's something you want, don't you all just pay to get it? But is beauty not allowed? Hey, I know you've all had plastic surgery. So why are you insulting Minji? It's okay if you want to become prettier if you were pretty to begin with, but if an ugly person wants to get something done, it's a terrible thing? She didn't get it for no reason. So what about it? So what? Can anybody say that it's not Minji? If there is, come out here. Come out here! (Jeon, 2009, Episode 5 22:00).

This scene reveals certain aspects of the Korean plastic surgery culture even though Jandi, the main character, isn't the one who undergoes a transformation using plastic surgery. The plot of *Boys Over Flowers* doesn't revolve around the transformation theme, but that theme is still prevalent in the subplot of Minji's story. As a child, Minji was treated poorly — being pushed by Junpyo and having no friends. However, after leaving for Germany and having cosmetic surgery over two years, Minji's life is improved — no longer is she bullied or called ugly.

Jandi's monologue also reveals aspects of the plastic surgery culture. Jandi claims everyone else in the school has also undergone the knife in order to better their lives and to make them more beautiful. She questions them, asking why it's not okay for Minji to be transformed if everyone else is doing it too. According to cultivation theory, this rhetorical question can be understood to be a powerful tool used to normalize the plastic surgery culture; viewers consider the question for themselves in regard to their own lives. Jandi's words claim the bullies are the ones who are abnormal for not accepting Minji's choices. And, perhaps, those words and that idea can be cultivated by viewers to pertain to their own lives as an answer to people who don't support or approve of their choice to undergo cosmetic surgery in an effort to transform their appearances.

## “My Lovely Samssoon”

When the K-Drama *My Lovely Samssoon* first premiered in 2005, it became one of the most popular K-Dramas of all time, with over half of South Korean households viewing it (Lee, 2012). Tack-Whan Wi and Ah-young Chung credit *My Lovely Samssoon* in their book *K-Drama: A New TV Genre with Global Appeal* as being one of the “top ten Korean dramas that has been particularly beloved by foreign fans,” (Wi & Chung, 2011, p. 76). Dooboo Shim claims *My Lovely Samssoon* gained over \$9 million in overseas sales to networks (Shim, 2008), thus creating in *My Lovely Samssoon* another piece of international marketing for the *Hallyu Wave*.

*My Lovely Samssoon*'s main character, Samssoon, is an average looking woman considered overweight according to South Korean standards. She's a pastry chef with an impressive background, having studied at a prestigious culinary school in Paris. But that doesn't matter when she visits a matchmaking service as the manager breezes past that information and asks her the question, “And plastic surgery?” She responds that she's “100% natural” and he explodes, “What were you thinking! How could you not get plastic surgery with that face?” (Kim, 2005, Episode 1 22:17). He then tells her, “It's easier to get hit by an atomic bomb than to find a boyfriend at the age of 30” and “Don't even dream of getting married,” (Kim, 2005, Episode 1 22:25). She's offended, of course, and argues that 30 is the new 20. He scoffs, replying with something along the lines of “women wish,” and specifically says, “Women should be young and pretty,” (Kim, 2005, Episode 1 23:07). Samssoon retaliates saying, “Oh, really? Don't men age? Huh? Don't you think it's pathetic to meet young women when all you've got to show is your fat belly?” (Kim, 2005, Episode 1 23:18). This last invective against the manager highlights the South Korean conviction that men, too, should attempt to look as young and as thin as possible and also face intense scrutiny when it comes to physical appearance.

A few seconds after the argument, Samssoon wakes up in the waiting room of the matchmaking clinic, discovering the previous conversation was merely a dream. In real life, or outside of the dream, the manager suggests Samssoon get a “special membership” costing 9,990,000 won or \$6,000 to help her find a husband. In this way Samssoon, and the viewers, are informed that Samssoon is too unattractive to find a husband on her own merits and that no one will find her desirable unless she spends exorbitant amounts of money to change her physical appearance. And, as the cultivation theory argues, viewers who constantly watch Korean television and films could easily begin to believe the same about their lives.

In spite of the fact the initial conversation between Samssoon and the manager appears in a dream, the dream highlights South Korean plastic surgery norms as reflected in Samssoon’s subconscious, the subconscious of an average Korean woman. The fact that Samssoon, who represents normal, average Koreans, harbors such thoughts about plastic surgery in her subconscious underscores the idea that cosmetic surgical procedures are considered normal and average aspects of everyday Korean culture. Unlike the rest of the shows I’ll discuss in this thesis, the plot of *My Lovely Samssoon* doesn’t revolve around the idea of transformation and plastic surgery, but the fact that this scene contributes to the plot demonstrates the quotidian nature of body modification and cosmetic surgery in South Korean culture.

### “200 Pounds Beauty”

The Korean film *200 Pounds Beauty* is perhaps the most telling representative of the plastic surgery culture in South Korea, in my opinion. Released in 2006, *200 Pounds Beauty* attracted over 6.23 million admissions in the Korean theatre (Lee, 2012). Movie critic D’Sa in 2007 called it a “major sleeper hit,” claiming the film “has become the most successful Korean

comedy of all time, edging past *My Boss, My Teacher*, which sold 6.1 million tickets earlier last year,” (D’Sa, 2007). The film’s entire plot revolves around the idea that none of us can be satisfied in life until we are physically beautiful and in love.

The main character, Hanna, enjoys a perfect life in every aspect except for the fact that she’s not beautiful and she’s not in a relationship. She’s talented, funny, smart, and has a well-paying job as a ghost singer for an international pop star. But she’s obese and alone and, of course, cannot be happy without becoming beautiful first. She’s also madly in love with the international pop star’s manager and music producer. After overhearing a conversation where the manager says he’s only nice to Hanna because he feels bad for her, she decides to change. She saves enough money to undergo full body surgery to change almost every aspect of her appearance in order to attain South Korean beauty standards. Equipped with a new body and a new self-confidence, she becomes the newest international hit singing sensation using the same voice, which no one truly notices or cares about. In the end, keeping her past a secret becomes too much for Hanna, who ends up confessing the truth during a concert to thousands of fans. Shocked at first, her fans eventually accept, support and even encourage her. Her manager love interest falls for her, too, and they end the film together.

Although Hanna was far more talented and hard-working than the international pop star with whom she sang backup in the beginning of the film, she couldn’t experience her true worth until she went under the knife to become beautiful. Ironically, only after her physical transformation is her talent recognized and appreciated. The movie is a romantic fictional comedy, but it is also a sterling example of the constant message communicated to Koreans: Without physical beauty one cannot attain success. This message echoes the higher institution mass-produced message Gerbner first explored when he posited the cultivation theory. The

*Hallyu* Wave contributes to the lookism society and the cosmetic surgery culture in South Korea by propagating this message via several mass produced media products so that Koreans consume the message every day which, according to the cultivation theory, becomes an widespread and normalized view for life.

### “Oh My Venus”

Unlike the previous four media productions presented, *Oh My Venus* doesn't mention plastic surgery at all but instead focuses solely on weight loss and gain, a thin body being yet another variable in Korea's beauty equation. Like the other media productions presented above, the film's plot also revolves around the transformation theme and the same mass-produced message that assures viewers that if they dislike their lives, they should recreate themselves to reach the standard of physical beauty the Korean media promotes.

*Oh My Venus* is fairly recent, a 2016 production, and follows the character Kang Joeun, who, as a teenager, boasted the nickname the “Princess of Daegu,” — Daegu being the South Korean city in which she was born and raised. The show opens with a bus filled with high school teenagers; the girls are staring at themselves in mirrors and the boys are staring at the girls. The first words of the show come from a boy confessing his love for Joeun. A girl groans, “Kang Joeun? Again?” communicating to viewers that all boys fall in love with Joeun. The boy continues to speak, claiming Joeun will be on the bus soon and asking for everyone's cooperation when he confesses to Joeun. In the next shot, viewers see the bus pulling up to what viewers assume is Joeun's bus stop. A few seconds later another boy cries out, “Daegu Venus sighting!” Boys plaster against the windows, attempting to get a good look of the “Princess of Daegu.” The camera zooms in on a close-up of Joeun's perfect legs in the scant

uniform skirt before slowly working its way up to her perfectly straightened hair that moves ever so flatteringly in the wind. The boys scream and sigh. She gets on the bus with enviable grace and a seductive aura, the drama filmed and edited just so. A few scenes later, a different boy confesses his love for Joeun. Unlike the one in the first scene, Joeun deems this one worthy of her love as he is an Olympian swimmer and the most popular guy in school. They promise their love and commitment for each other with matching couple rings and begin to look forward to their life together in Seoul.

Fast forward 10 years and find much has changed. Although Joeun achieved her dream of becoming a lawyer, graduating with honors and landing a job at a successful firm, stress from school and work has caused her to form terrible eating habits so that she is now overweight. While she and her high school sweetheart, Sung Hoon, are still together, he has started another relationship on the side with the beautiful and the oh-so-thin Oh Sojin. Hoon eventually dumps Joeun, preferring instead to invest in his relationship with Sojin. Later viewers discover Sojin was a friend of Joeun's in law school, but back then she wasn't the thin Sojin she is now. During the few years after law school, Sojin underwent her own transformation, losing weight and practically starving herself, as depicted in one scene, when at the movies Sojin grabs popcorn without thinking only to pause and to return it to the bin. Although Sojin is also a successful lawyer, the fact that Hoon leaves Joeun for her after Joeun has gained weight and Sojin has lost weight, communicates to viewers the message that not even financial success, intellectual prowess, or even a long and strong history together means as much as outward beauty.

With the help of a personal trainer, Joeun begins to take control of her life to once again become the "Princess of Daegu." For 15 episodes until the "transformation scene," or when the

actress who plays Jooeun takes off the fat suit, Jooeun is considered a loser. Similar to Keumran's experience in *Birth of a Beauty*, people mistreat Jooeun until she loses weight. Although Jooeun is a lawyer and making good money so that she can afford her spacious apartment in the city, she's deemed a failure by her mother, her ex-boyfriend, and her coworkers until she attains the South Korean beauty standard of thin. And because, of course, no successful beautiful woman should be single, Jooeun and her personal trainer fall in love and marry each other in the end.

Both the messages found in the plots of the other films – that physical appearance trumps all and that love cannot be found without first becoming beautiful – are repeated once again during *Oh My Venus*, which becomes one more media production in a long list that validates Gerbner's cultivation theory: The repetition of these messages supports and encourages the plastic surgery culture and lookism society in Korea.

#### “She Was Pretty”

Similar to *Oh My Venus*, the film *She Was Pretty* tells the story of a transformation that occurs without plastic surgery; nevertheless, the film still communicates the powerful message that a life cannot be successful or happy without physical beauty. Echoing *Oh my Venus*, the film *She Was Pretty* also follows the story of a woman who was once beautiful but became ugly and unattractive over time due to laziness, underscoring the explanation the lookism culture provides as to why unattractive people exist. The main character, Kim Heyjin, struggles with a frizzy hairdo, a horrible fashion sense, a smattering of freckles and a bad wind burn. In contrast, her best friend, Hari, has no struggles; she represents Korea's perfect beauty standard with her thin frame, her v-shaped face, and her flawless skin.

In the first episode, a man romantically interested in Hari throws a birthday party for her in the hope of catching her attention. As the man attempts to make conversation with Hari, another man romantically interested in her approaches, brandishing an ostentatious diamond necklace. “It’s straight from Paris,” he says (Han, 2015, Episode 1 3:30). Hari looks on with a bored look until she catches sight of Hyejin looking for the party. Hari and Hyejin meet each other’s eye and jump up in down in excitement to be with each other. The man with the necklace looks on, “Whoah. Hey, Hari, you have friends like her?” he says superciliously (Han, 2015, Episode 1 4:09). “Like her?” Hari counters. “I mean, they say birds of a feather flock together but this is ridiculous. Look at how she looks,” he replies with a gesture to Hyejin’s appearance (Han, 2015, Episode 1 4:17).

When Hyejin’s old childhood best friend and first love, Sejoon, comes back into town and asks for a reunion, her ecstatic mood quickly evaporates to be replaced with horror when she realizes she is no longer the beautiful girl he once knew. Out of panic and embarrassment for her subpar looks, she quickly asks Hari to meet with him on her behalf. Hari agrees, and Hyejin feels relief until she discovers that her new boss at a fashion magazine is the same childhood friend she avoided. Throughout the show, Hyejin is met with disdain by her coworkers — including her childhood best friend. The editor-in-chief of the publication she works for tells Hyejin, “Oh, your hair. It’s making me woozy. I’m starting to get sick. And is that lint on your blouse? I can’t believe I’m within two meters of a fashion challenged person like you,” (Han, 2015, Episode 1 25:55). Embarrassed, Hyejin attempts to control her tears and throws herself into her job.

It’s not until episode 9 that Hyejin has her transformation scene. She permanently straightens her hair, purchases a new wardrobe, and painstakingly applies makeup before

walking into the office with confidence the next day and causing her coworkers to freeze in an effort to get a better look. Their demeanors all change and Hyejin is met with acceptance and happiness. “You’re much prettier than before. I almost couldn’t recognize you!” a coworker says (Han, 2015, Episode 9 2:27). Even her boss and childhood best friend, who still doesn’t know her true identity, begins to act kinder.

In the end, the truth comes out when Sejoon discovers that the woman he was falling for and believing to be his first love, Hyejin, is really her best friend, Hari, just pretending to be her. And the used-to-be unattractive intern at his magazine was his best friend, Heyjin, all along. Sejoon and Heyjin end up together — happily ever after.

This drama, like the others already explored in this thesis, once again, communicates powerfully the subliminal message that one’s life can be improved and enriched by an attractive appearance. *She Was Pretty*, like *Oh My Venus*, also supports the conviction inherent in lookism that, as explained by Gerbner’s cultivation theory, in Korean society not only is it okay to discriminate against people based on their looks but also that those who are physically unattractive are simply lazy. Hyejin didn’t have to lose weight, but Joeun did. Remember that the entire plot of *Oh My Venus* focuses on how the main character gained weight while in law school because she didn’t take care of herself; she used to be pretty, like Hyejin in *She Was Pretty*, but let herself go. So *Oh My Venus* begins with Joeun’s realization that she’s not happy as a result of being lazy and becoming unattractive, and every subsequent episode features her engaging in workout routines and eating healthier meals as she pushes herself to lose the weight she gained in law school. In a similar manner, Hyejin’s short transformation, which only needed a couple scenes, gives the viewers the idea that Hyejin’s unattractive appearance was simply

laziness. After all, the implication is, she could — and should — have invested in herself all along.

In spite of the fact that the plot revolves around Hyejin's transformation, it is Seojoon, the childhood best friend/new boss at the fashion magazine, who represents in *She Was Pretty* the most revealing aspect of South Korea's lookism society. Before Hyejin's identity is revealed or before she became beautiful, Seojoon mistreats her every day at the office, calling her incompetent and telling her that with her looks she should have "remained hidden," (Dramafever, 2015, episode 2 36:25). But after Hyejin's transformation he's nicer, giving her more positive attention. And then, of course, after Hyejin's identity is revealed, he begins to fall in love with her. Although it is possible to argue that discovering Hyejin's true identity as his childhood best friend is what truly spurred Seojoon into falling for her, the evidence points to the alternative argument that Hyejin's beauty is more important to him than either her character or their shared past.

### Nonfiction Talk Shows

Like the United States, Korea has a variety of genres of shows on TV, not all of which are fiction. Talk shows experience great popularity in South Korea, including those focusing on beauty and physical appearance like America's *Biggest Loser* and *What Not to Wear*. South Korea's talk shows *Get It Beauty* and *The Body Show* discuss different aspects of body maintenance and encourage Korean women to change their appearances for the betterment of their lives – or, as the introduction on *Get It Beauty's* website says, "for your beautiful life." Each entire episode revolves around transforming one's life — the same message that films and fiction series deliver to viewers.

*Get It Beauty*, nominated as “the most influential among the beauty/fashion programs broadcast in 2015,” (Lee & Lee, 2017, p. 252), explores topics surrounding makeup applications, fashion trends, and overall body care strategies. The show features beauty gurus who share tips and tricks for the live audience as well as for at-home viewers. *Get It Beauty* also has one segment on which the gurus perform makeovers on randomly selected females who apply on the show’s website to be transformed and another segment called the “blind test,” which presents other randomly selected women who use products with covered labels covered before attempting to provide information about the product or about how to use it. The beauty professionals guide the women so they and the audience can learn how to beautify themselves properly with such products. While *Get It Beauty* focuses mostly on outer beauty, *The Body Show* explores topics related to inner beauty such as health and fitness and tends to feature fitness experts assigned to help women with weight loss and weight control.

Despite the minor differences of the shows, they both have one main message — that the audience members must improve their physical appearances in order to better their lives. Both shows encourage physical transformations, just like the fictional shows and film already discussed. Jin Lee and Claire Lee summarize both the shows in the following way: “(1) a main topic is introduced along with a show participant’s case; (2) guest experts explain the topic with diagnoses and lectures about body care methods; (3) show participants practice the introduced methods; (4) the ability of the practices to enact bodily transformation is confirmed with closing comments of show hosts,” (Lee & Lee, 2017, p. 253).

Viewers of both shows hear the message that to transform their lives, they must transform their physical appearances, the same message propagated by the *Hallyu Wave* productions, except that instead of the message being packaged in a fictional narrative, with these shows it’s

packaged in real life situations and with real women, a convincing presentation indeed! No wonder Gerbner, who identified the phenomenon 50 years ago in a completely different market, hypothesized that cultural and social norms change under the influence of the messages propagandized by TV media. By watching these shows, the audience begins to scrutinize themselves, “Do *I* need to change that aspect of myself too?” By constantly nit picking at audience members and by performing breathtaking make-overs, the beauty professionals and the health gurus from both shows repeatedly sell their guests on the idea that “You need to change something about yourself” in order to experience a fully actualized life. When viewers hear that message often enough, according to the cultivation theory, they start to believe the message.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

I'd like to start off this discussion by first saying I don't believe plastic surgery is inherently bad or good. I find plastic surgery to be similar to wearing makeup every day or spending thousands of dollars on brand name clothing. To me, it is simply a way to make one feel better and to feel more self-accepting in this neoliberal society. To those who say plastic surgery is not the same as applying makeup or wearing brand name fashions because it can be painful and invasive, I point out that tattoos and piercings, which are arguably fashion statements and works of body art, are also painful and invasive. Many who sport tattoos consider them to be art that adorns placed on the human canvas (Kosut, 2014). And although scarification remains relatively uncommon in this country, it serves among many African tribes as a traditional artistic and cultural expression considered to be beautiful and fashionable (Orie, 2011).

Regardless of the position one takes regarding the acceptability and the wholesomeness of plastic surgery, tattooing and scarification and their status as fashion or art or mutilation, many people whom I have come across in my own life and others who've written articles believe this obsessive lifestyle with physical and outer beauty to be anti-feministic and oppressive. For example, Lee (2016) argues,

Much as the burqa has come to symbolize Middle Eastern women's oppression in both popular and academic discourses, cosmetic surgery — and more specifically the double eyelid surgery, as it is colloquially known — has come to signify Korean (and in many instances, Korean and Asian American) women's acquiescence not only to patriarchal oppression but to racial oppression as well. (Lee, 2016, p. 4)

Although on the surface this might make sense to a Westerner, Lee (2016) also argued that plastic surgery allows Korean women the personal agency celebrated by feminism because it offers those who have had little to no control over their lives in the past to determine the outcome

of their lives today since having plastic surgery can open doors for career advancement, financial independence and the kind of relationships that offer women level playing fields. Perhaps plastic surgery can be argued to be contrary to Western feminism, but in Korea it can be argued that plastic surgery, given the explanation Lee herself provided above, is powerfully feminist.

In person, I have had discussions with others who claim this plastic surgery/lookism culture fuels, on the one hand, narcissism and, on the other hand, poor self-esteem. For sure, South Korea is a lookism society that looks down upon those who are not considered beautiful by arbitrary. Fatphobia runs deeply and subconsciously — or maybe even consciously — if the looks of disgust I saw targeted to overweight, usually foreign, people while I was in Seoul were anything to go by. I do not defend a lookism society or seek to sugar coat the issues it can foster — such as South Korea’s high suicide rates (Kim, 2014). I do not deny that South Korea has the highest suicide rate in the collection of countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, with nearly 30 suicide deaths every 100,000 people (Wang, 2017). Indeed, several Korean popstars, who could be called poster children for the Korean beauty standards, have admitted to grappling with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Allkpop, 2017). Just recently, *Hallyu* star Kim Jonghyun from the internationally popular boy band SHINee committed suicide, right before Christmas, under the pressures South Korea can place on its citizens. In his suicide note, Jonghyun blamed his depression on the unrealistic expectations South Korean culture places on the famous, the beautiful and the talented. Amy Wang of *The Washington Post* wrote, “In his note, Jonghyun spoke of wanting to run away from his pain and told of the pressure of being in the spotlight for nearly a decade.”

Although depression can lead to suicide, very few argue that low self-esteem can also lead to suicide. However, according to much literature, self-esteem and depression do share a

strong correlation. Briñol, Petty, and Wheeler (2006); Creemers, Scholte, Engels, Prinstein and Weird (2013); and Pavlickova, Turnbull, and Bentall (2014) are some of the many researches who have investigated self-esteem as a risk factor for depression. Beever (2005) also predicts that in the future depression will be associated with fragile self-esteem. Phillips and Hine (2014) write in their study, “Consistent with both dual-process perspectives, fragile self-esteem has been linked to cognitive phenomena that indicate a fragility of self that may place individuals at risk for future depression,” (p. 80). Phillips and Hine (2014) also discuss how their findings support the vulnerability model, which suggests that low self-esteem contributes to depression. The correlation between depression and low self-esteem varies across studies, of course. Watson, Suls, and Haig (2002) even argue that self-esteem and depression are the same and should be “conceptualized as opposite poles of a single dimension,” (Sowislo & Oslo, 2013, p. 216). The American Psychiatric Association (2000) believes that “although feelings of worthlessness are a symptom of depressive disorders, they are neither a sufficient nor a necessary criterion,” (Sowislo & Oslo, 2013, p. 216). Despite conflicting reports, most to all literature does acknowledge a correlation between depression and self-esteem so it can be deduced that the lookism society in South Korea does influence in the country’s high suicide rate.

Clearly, this obsession with beauty can be ugly. Similar to the unhappiness expressed by the girls in the opening scene of *Birth of a Beauty*, the unhappiness of an individual with himself or herself can begin with one thing, such as wanting double eyelids, or maybe two things, the eyelids and a thinner nose, but when people meet those goals, doing so doesn’t necessarily bring happiness and so they begin adding other things to their list: maybe it’s weight loss, then jaw surgery, then dental work or tacking down protruding ears. When situations like these arise, unhappiness becomes more of a psychological or an emotional issue rather than a physical issue.

That's not to say my thesis claims it's impossible to feel beautiful in the Korean lookism society. Many do undergo the knife and are fully satisfied with the results. And many others are happy with their physical appearance without any kind of plastic surgery or cosmetic work.

Despite the negatives aspects of a lookism society, I find it admirable that Korean culture engenders in its people a motive to better their lives and their society. I argue that these high plastic surgery numbers are a representation of hard work — such procedures cost money and require goal setting and discipline to reach those goals. After the war, Korea was a small powerless country that had been colonized for most of its history. The nation built its society from the ground up. And the government saw how lucrative the body management industry could be and so recognized plastic surgery as a legitimate medical study to profit off the burgeoning field. Now, Korea flourishes financially and has attained international recognition as a result of the body industry being one of the most profitable sectors of the Korean economy and central to Korean culture. Like their government, Korean citizens, too, utilize plastic surgery to achieve success and recognition. Although South Korea does not have many of the nondiscrimination laws that exist in the United States, Koreans attempting to meet the beauty standards are simply doing it to work hard in order to show their potential of success — and that's not something that should be frowned upon. Let me requote Eugene from BuzzFeed: “So, if you think about it, a lot of Koreans don't necessarily say ‘you will look better because you're white looking,’ they're thinking, ‘you can survive and succeed more if you change certain things because that is what's happening in society,” (Buzzfeed, 2016, 2:05).

Jumping off that point of “whiteness,” I'd like to reiterate that South Koreans are not attempting to become white or Caucasian. Although the features deemed beautiful by Korean standards have stereotypically been those of Caucasians, it is not so much becoming the race that

Koreans wish to accomplish as much as it is to attain the success the Western world has enjoyed. Due to the Western media dominating for the past hundred or so years, white people have been the indisputable face of success. With more diversity in the Western media and Eastern countries creating their own, hopefully that will change.

So, although there are negative aspects to the body image culture in South Korea, it is important for the Western world not to remain ignorant about the positive aspects. It is easy to claim Koreans are being oppressed racially because they are undergoing surgery for “white” features, but in order to make this claim, Westerners should also realize it is done out of dedication for bettering their lives. As Chandra Mohanty, a transnational feminist scholar, argues, “the discursive self-representation of “other” women as unenlightened, ignorant, and victimized helps construct white women as educated, as modern, as having control over their bodies and sexualities and [exercising] the freedom to make their own decisions,” (Lee, 2016, p. 8). In other words, it is easy to believe the white woman’s feminism is the right feminism because it belongs to the white women, who have been educated and are perceived as modern. However, Korean’s lookism society, while it is different, is not anti-feminist or oppressive but creative and generative, for it has discovered and adopted means and methods for exercising personal agency and for dismantling the oppression of the past. Thus, it is important that Westerners not see their way of life or their art forms or their expressions of their unique thinking or their feminism to be superior.

Because South Korea is such a wired society, Koreans are affected by the cultivation theory daily and extensively, working through not just Korean television but also all other forms of media. Although this thesis focuses specifically on TV serials, advertisements for plastic surgery with before and after photos are plastered against the walls of every subway station.

YouTube videos with people discussing plastic surgery, famous people becoming more open about their procedures, Facebook, Naver, Daum, SNS, all these websites with information regarding plastic surgery can be accessed from a cell phone. This technological connectivity only endorses to a greater degree the premise of the cultivation theory because each medium has its own way of propagating the same message, the message that one cannot be happy or successful without first meeting the beauty standards that appear everywhere in pictures and advertisements on every corner in South Korea and in films and fictional televisions series as well as nonfictional talk shows. The cultivation theory explains the degree to which the plastic surgery and lookism cultures woven into Koreans' everyday life in this digital age.

This being the case, South Koreans must become more media literate. The cultivation theory hypothesizes that these messages which Koreans are assimilating on a daily basis through the media, specifically television, are becoming a way of thought and life. I do not believe the *Hallyu* Wave will stop portraying these messages, as it fuels the economy, but when people are media literate, they are also more aware of the information that inundates their society rather than perceiving it subconsciously only. Being media literate can also mitigate the influence of the cultivation theory. When one medium of the media portrays this transformation theme as often as it does in Korea, it more convincingly communicates to viewers the message that they cannot be successful in life without first becoming physically attractive, and, according to the cultivation theory, they begin to believe it and to adapt it as their personal paradigm. Becoming media literate, however, can help Koreans be aware of this message and perhaps even have more control on their self-esteem — and in the long run, help reduce the suicide rate in South Korea, at least a little bit.

In conclusion, that South Korea's lookism society leads to remarkably high plastic surgery numbers is not inherently bad but simply another way to encourage Koreans to improve themselves and their lives. While its lookism society is not perfect for other reasons, it nevertheless is not convincing Koreans they must become white, as many Westerners believe, or objectified in order to be more valued, as many feminists believe. In the face of South Korea's lookism society, however, it is vital that Koreans become more media literate to mitigate the effects of mass media, as the cultivation theory suggests, in order to exercise personal agency in even more ways than just using plastic surgery in order to open doors for experiences and opportunities that enhance and enrich daily life.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Although the *Hallyu* Wave is a product of the lookism society in South Korea, through the cultivation theory, I argued it also contributes to it by encouraging and normalizing the culture, too. The cultivation theory states that television has the power to modify the way someone perceives their life or the society they live in by consistently sending the same, or similar message, to viewers. Because Korean society is so globally connected with their technological society, it can be inferred many — thousands — view the media and intake the several messages they all carry. In which case, thousands are affected by the cultivation theory as it affects everyone who in takes the media and their messages (in this case, that plastic surgery is a necessity for life's success). This is reflected in their normalized plastic surgery culture with the highest percentage of procedures in the world (Baer, 2015).

As mentioned before, the cultivation theory could be at work when it comes to how one perceives beauty, specifically through the use of models or actresses, but in my content analysis I analyze the specific scenes or plots from products of the *Hallyu* Wave that utilize the transformation theme that sends the message of beauty equating success. I argue, through the use of the transformation theme and cultivation theory, the Korean media normalizes cosmetic surgery by frequently showing an unsuccessful or unhappy character undergoing a makeover, generally with plastic surgery, and then having the character become happy or fruitful in their lives. This tells viewers if they are unhappy with their own lives, plastic surgery can better it. Take, for instance, the words of gender studies researcher Brenda Weber:

Makeovers teach a way of being a care of the self (as manifested through the body [...]) that can be visually discerned and popularly celebrated. The transformation, in turn, unblocks barriers that have led to dejection, sadness, and self-ridicule, instead allowing

for the ‘free’ expression of happiness, self-esteem, confidence, and optimism.” (Weber, 2007, p. 29)

This quote claims when one changes their outward appearance to match the standards, one feels better about themselves because they are more socially accepted. This idea is used and repeated in every *Hallyu* production I discussed since they all follow the transformation theme or feature a makeover. This idea is also encouraged when the media is giving the message to viewers that one cannot be happy until they reach success, which in turn can’t be reached until they are physically beautiful — the same message that the cultivation theory uses to fuel the lookism society.

Specifically regarding the lookism society in South Korea during the digital age, it is publicized as “self-improvement” (Davies & Han, 2009). This idea of beauty is “promoted as a symbol of social success — the beauty that the high-achieving individual ‘deserves,’” (Davies & Han, 2009, p. 150). As stated before, the lookism society in Korea believes those who are deemed unattractive are simply lazy — or not reaching their full potential. This message is reflected in the media when that ugly and unhappy character finally achieves happiness after the transformation. This is the message South Koreans see frequently enough that, because of the cultivation theory, they relate it to their own lives. Becoming more media literate, however, could help South Koreans become more in control of the way they view life. In this case, Koreans wouldn’t be passively taking in the messages and in turn, because of the cultivation theory, or adapting it to their own life.

In conclusion, this thesis only discusses 8 Korean TV serials out of the several hundred or thousand different media outlets South Koreans intake during their lifetimes. Some other popular Korean serials that contain makeover scenes in order to better one’s life are: *Dream High* (2011), *Coffee Prince* (2007), *Alice* (2012), *Beautiful Gongshim* (2016), *Shopping King Louis* (2016),

and *Fated to Love You* (2014). The media plays a powerful part in sending messages to the average Korean — proof in that South Korea is the most wired nation globally, with the highest number of DSL connections per head worldwide (Lee, 2016). The cultivation theory is how Koreans are taking these messages and making them the way they view life and society. Because the transformation theme is used often enough on television, through the cultivation theory, and keeping in mind the lookism society that is South Korea, it can easily be believed and argued that Korean television is a major factor and contributor to the plastic surgery culture. South Korea is the “plastic surgery culture of the world,” according to *Business Insider* and *The New Yorker*, and after analyzing certain Korean serials, it’s no wonder.

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