

Beneath the Skin: A Cultural Comparison of Cosmetic Surgery and Body Image among Korean and American Females

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine differences in body image and attitudes and behaviors regarding cosmetic surgery between Korean and Americans. Forty females in the U.S. and 40 in Korea participated in the study by being interviewed. As a result, while Koreans had positive attitudes toward cosmetic surgery, Americans had negative attitudes. Higher incidences of cosmetic surgery were found among Koreans than among Americans. Koreans with lower body image tended to have more tolerance toward cosmetic surgery. These results suggest that cosmetic surgery might be one of many ways to improve their self-esteem, Korean women with lower body image showed higher attitudes or behaviors toward cosmetic surgery than Americans.

Key words : cosmetic surgery, body image, cross-cultural study, Korean and American females.

I. Introduction

There is little doubt that physical appearance influences one's psychological development, self-esteem, and body image¹⁾. Body image is defined as one's perception and attitudes about one's own body²⁾. Body image plays an important role in an individual's life because it affects one's self-esteem¹⁾. Individuals evaluate their bodies differently in their environment through comparisons with others³⁾. Those individuals who put importance

on their bodies often perceive a discrepancy between their actual image and their ideal image^{2,3)}. Females tend to evaluate their bodies more negatively than males. They engage in a variety of behaviors related to their appearance^{1,2)} including those that are healthy as well as those that are hazardous. This is supported clearly by the fact that the several multi-billion-dollar industries have an obvious appearance focus, such as cosmetic products, diet programs, fitness equipment and services, and cosmetic surgeries⁴⁾.

Sociocultural values are thought to repre-

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¹ T. Cash and C. Horton, "Aesthetic surgery: Effects of rhinoplasty on the social perception of patients by others", *Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery* Vol. 72 (1983), 543-548.

² L. Sullivan and R. Harnish, "Body image: Differences between high and low self-monitoring males and females", *Journal of Research in Personality* 24 (1990): 291-302.

³ Lennon, S., & Rudd, N. Linkages between gender roles, body satisfaction, self-esteem and appearance management behaviors in women, *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal* 23 (1994): 94-117.

⁴ C. Thompson and E. Hirschman, "Understanding the socialized body: A poststructuralist analysis of consumers' self-conception, body images, and self-care practices", *Journal of Consumer Research* 22 (1995), 139-153.

sent important influences on the development of body image⁵. Traditionally, Asian cultures through the centuries have developed their own unique ideal of beauty based on a combination of physical and inner virtue⁶. However, Asian criteria for beauty have shifted recently to "Western standards of beauty which surmount ethnic and temporal fashion"⁶ (p.43). Research^{6,7} suggests that Asian females tend to perceive Caucasian-American females as more physically attractive than Asians. This may be the result of influence from Western standards of beauty adopted in many Asian cultures⁷. According to The American Society of Plastic Surgery and Reconstructive Surgery, in 1994, Asian Americans, including Koreans, were more likely than any other ethnic group to pursue cosmetic surgery based on Western ideals of beauty⁷. Females who seek cosmetic surgery show significantly lower physical self-esteem⁸. With cosmetic surgery, an individual's psychological well-being, particularly self-esteem, is increased by altering the physical appearance^{8,9}.

An investigation of Americans' and Koreans' attitudes toward cosmetic surgery appears to be worthwhile to further understand the influence of sociocultural background on body image. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to compare Korean and American fe-

male college students' attitudes and behaviors regarding cosmetic surgery. Research Questions are 1) Will there be differences in satisfaction with appearance between Korean and American women? 2) Will there be differences in attitudes toward cosmetic surgery among Korean and American women? 3) Will those with lower body image tend to have more tolerant attitudes toward cosmetic surgery?

II. Review of the Literature

1. Social Comparison Theory & Body Image

Festinger's social comparison theory is based on the individual's comparison of self with other people¹⁰. Social comparison theory hypothesized that individuals have a basic drive to evaluate their own opinions and abilities. People tend to evaluate themselves in comparison to others and judge of their own personal worth¹¹. Many researchers^{3, 11, 12} have applied this theory to the evaluation of physical appearance. The ways in which comparison of one's appearance¹³ might occur are through family, friends, or media. Mintz and Betz¹² suggested how cultural standards of beauty are formed and how they affect individuals' perceptions about themselves and others' appearance. People tend to compare their

⁵ J. Hueston, L. Dennerstein, and G. Gotts, "Psychological aspects of cosmetic surgery", *Journal of Psychometric Obstetrics Gynecology* Vol. 4 (1985), 335-346.

⁶ T. Lin, "From moth eyebrows to pink bikinis", *Free China Review* Vol. 38 (1988), 34-43.

⁷ N. Patel, "Body image satisfaction among Asian American college student: The role racial identity attitudes and gender", Unpublished Master's Thesis (The Ohio State University, 1994).

⁸ Burk, J., Zelen, S. & Terino, E. More than skin deep. *Psychology of Cosmetic Surgery* 76 (1985): 270-280.

⁹ J. Reich, "Factor influencing patient satisfaction with the results of esthetic plastic surgery", *Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery* 55 (1975), 5-13.

¹⁰ L. Festinger, "A theory of social comparison processes", *Human Relations* 7 (1954), 117-140.

¹¹ S. Morse, S. and K. Gergen, "Social comparison, self-consistency, and the concept of self", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 16 (1970), 148-156.

¹² L. Mintz, and N. Betz, "Sex differences in the nature, realism, and correlates of body image", *Sex Roles* 15 (1986), 185-195.

¹³ M. Richins, "Social comparison as the idealized images of advertising", *Journal of Consumer Research* 18 (1991), 71-83.

appearance to highly attractive media images (e.g., magazines) automatically^{3, 13}.

Body image, the mental concept we hold of our bodies and our affective response to it, has received much attention in the research literature because body dissatisfaction among women is so prevalent¹⁴ and recognized as playing a major role in eating disorders and other disorders. Today, thinness is the primary characteristic of the idealized female beauty standard¹⁵. As a result, many women experience their own body size and weight as excessive and unacceptable, having negative feelings about their own failure to meet the standard¹⁵. Researchers^{3, 15} believe that idealized media images of beauty strongly influence "thin" standard of beauty among women.

2. Cosmetic Surgery

Cosmetic surgery is defined as "surgery which is designed to correct defects which the average prudent observer would consider to be within the range of normal"¹⁶. Cosmetic surgery can be classified into 'restorative' and 'type changing'¹⁶. Restorative surgery is designed to¹⁸ restore a person's physical appearance to what it already was (e.g., face-lift). Type changing surgery is designed to create an appearance which the individual never previously possessed (e.g., breast implants)^{16, 17}. The motivation for cosmetic surgery differs from other types of surgery¹⁸. The decision process itself also differs from others. In non-cosmetic operations, the pa-

tient is often unwilling to agree to surgery, whereas in cosmetic operations the person actually asks the surgeon to perform surgery voluntarily¹⁸.

Cash and Pruzinsky¹⁹ proposed a model of body image in cosmetic surgery, based on changes in perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of body image.

1) Perceptual changes

This is the first step in the process of body image which is the patient's perception of change in appearance resulting from surgery.

2) Cognitive changes

This is changes in the way that the patient thinks about his/her appearance and body experience.

3) Emotional changes

Cosmetic surgery patients often experience low self-esteem, general feelings of inferiority, and depression. Central to their motivation for surgery is the elimination of these adverse experiences. The most important emotional reactions are boosted self-esteem and reductions in depression and anxiety associated with self-consciousness.

4) Behavioral changes

Cosmetic surgery has been posited to have potential impact on a range of behaviors. An important behavioral change after successful cosmetic surgery is a reduction in the use of

¹⁴ A. Fallon, "Culture in the mirror: Sociocultural determinants of body image", In T. Cash & T. Pruzinsky (Eds.), *Body images: Development, deviance and change* (New York: Guilford Press, 1990).

¹⁵ L. Irving, "Mirror images: Effects of the standard of beauty on the self- and body esteem of women exhibiting varying levels of bulimic symptoms", *Journal of Social Clinical Psychology* 2 (1990), 230-242.

¹⁶ M. Goin, and J. Goin, "Psychological responses to specific surgical procedure in adults", *Psychological Effects of Aesthetic Facial Surgery*, 15 (1986), 84-108.

¹⁷ T. Pruzinsky and M. Edgerton, "Body-image change in cosmetic plastic surgery", In T. Cash & T. Pruzinsky (Eds.), *Body images: Development, deviance, and change* (New York: Guilford Press, 1990).

¹⁸ M. Belfer, and A. Harrison, "Appearance and the influence of reconstructive surgery", *Clinics in Plastic Surgery* 9 (1982), 307-315.

¹⁹ T. Cash and T. Pruzinsky, "*Body images: Development, deviance, and change*" (New York: Guilford Press, 1990).

camouflage techniques. There are many reasons why cosmetic surgery has become a popular and acceptable way for individuals to alter their appearance in an attempt to improve their psychological well-being²⁰. These may include the self-improvement obsession, old age, and the increasing advances and refinements in cosmetic surgery¹⁹. Cultural influences, fashion, mass media, and other social factors such as social activities also lead people to have such surgery, creating 'the beautiful woman'^{9,16}.

According to Belfer and Harrison¹⁸, relative to more physically attractive people, those who are less attractive are perceived to have less desirable personalities, to be less sociable, more likely to be unmarried, and to have less occupational potential. They note that "although we may wish idealistically for our culture to be less judgmental about physical appearances, we cannot ignore that the judgments of others do affect people in essential ways" (p. 543). These social perceptions and expectations often might lead to cosmetic surgery. They also support that following surgery, patients were viewed as having much greater potential for 'life success and happiness', and being more self-confident, more attractive, and more personally likable than before surgery. After surgery, patients showed 85 to 97 percent higher rates of satisfaction with the results of the cosmetic surgery and experienced psychological improvement such as self-esteem^{8,17}. Goin and Goin¹⁶ indicates that patients with breast augmentation had lower self-confidence, lower self-esteem and more feelings of guilt before surgery. After

surgery, they felt more feminine and womanly and better able to mother their children.

In summary, cosmetic surgery produces improvements in physical attractiveness that foster higher self-esteem as well as more favorable personality attributions by others. Thus, cosmetic surgery might be a valuable aid in one's successful new body image, as a process essential for achieving improved psychological results.

3. Korean Women & Cosmetic Surgery

As mentioned earlier, Asians are more likely than any other ethnic group to pursue cosmetic surgery. Double eyelid surgery is the most common cosmetic surgery performed on Asians⁷. It is indicated that 50% of Asians worldwide are naturally born without double eyelid folds²¹. Likewise in Korea, there is a tendency for teenagers as well as young or middle age women to have cosmetic surgery^{21, 22}. Several studies²¹⁻²³ noted unmarried, college female students in their 20s were the highest percentage of cosmetic surgery patients. This finding is supported by Kim²⁴ in that Korean college women are highly interested in appearance and in fashion.

One Korean study²⁵ studied 53 post cosmetic surgery patients for one year to understand their socio-psychologic background. Results suggest that patients were mostly unmarried, educated (college level, 60%) females in their twenties (60%). The average period of time they took in deciding whether or not to have the surgery was usually one year and 7 months. Their decision to opt for the cosmetic surgery was solely their own (96%),

²⁰ C. Marcus, "Psychological aspects of cosmetic rhinoplasty", *British Journal of Plastic Surgery*, 37 (1984), 313-318.

²¹ I. Eshima, "What you should know about eyelid surgery", *Face* Vol. Nov/Dec (1993), 70-73.

²² J. Choi, "Cosmetic surgery among middle age women", *Feel* Apr1995: 534-541.

²³ Y. Lee, "A three year experience with face lift of Korean (319 procedures)", *The Journal of Korean Society of Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery* Vol. 19 (1992), 1015-1022.

²⁴ M. Kim, "Fashion opinion leadership as related to information seeking, and clothing/fashion interest among Korean college women", Unpublished Master's Thesis The Ohio State University, 1984.

²⁵ J. Lee, and Y. Kim, Y. Bang, and J. Park, "Psychological aspect of aesthetic plastic surgery patient", *The Journal of Korean Society of Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery* 10 (1983), 279-284.

not others. After surgery, almost all of the patients tended to be satisfied with the results of surgery. Han, Ahn, Baik, Kim, and Min's study²⁶⁾ revealed that surgery to facial area (72.6%) was most prevalent. Eyelid surgery was the highest, followed by nose and face-lift. Compared to other surgery patients, cosmetic surgery patients had lower self-esteem before surgery, but after surgery, their self-esteem was increased. Therefore, the researcher concluded that cosmetic surgery not only creates beauty but improves self-esteem and self-acceptance of their body image. This is consistent with work on cosmetic surgery conducted by U.S researchers.

III. Method

1. Sample and Instrument

Forty American females in the U.S. and forty Korean females in Korea participated in this study. Two groups were all college students. The interview schedule for both groups were given by a personal contact. The body image items were adapted from Lennon and Rudd³⁾. The other questions were created by the researchers. The questions were written in English, then translated into Korean. For interview of Korean females, the Korean translated instrument was reviewed and discussed by two Korean graduate students to ensure that the translation was clear and understandable. Tapes were recorded with Korean, then translated back into English. Again, two other Korean graduate students reviewed and discussed to establish equivalence of the translation. The interviews for both groups were made at a same time in each country. For data analysis, thematic categories were used for qualitative analysis.

IV. Results

1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample

A summary of demographic characteristics of this sample are as follows: Participants were all female undergraduate students. The average age of students was 22.5 years (Korean) and 24 years (American) ranging from 20 to 32 years of age. The average weight was 114 lbs (Korean) and 130 lbs (American) ranging from 90 to 165. Participants' major was only Textiles and Clothing.

2. Findings

1) How do you define "Beauty"?

Koreans tended to think about "internal quality" such as inner beauty and "Western beauty" such as tallness and thinness, while Americans tended to focus on "external quality" such as physical attractiveness.

<Table 1> Definition of beauty

Koreans (number and frequency)	Americans (number and frequency)
Inner beauty = 16 (25%)	Physical attractiveness = 36 (62%)
Attractiveness (Western features) = 16 (25%)	Inner beauty = 4 (7%)
Harmony with inner and attractiveness = 8 (13%)	Harmony with inner and attractiveness = 8 (14%)
Good image = 12 (19%)	Self-confidence = 4 (7%)
Individuality = 6 (9%)	Others (e.g., self-satisfaction/natural look) = 4 (10%)
Others (e.g., health/natural look) = 6 (9%)	

²⁶ S. Han, J. Ahn, M. Haik, S. Kim, and D. Min, "The psychological aspect in plastic surgery patient", *The Journal of Korean Society of Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery* 18 (1991), 1015-1024.

2) Who would you be your ideal model of your beauty?

For Koreans, an actress (30%), an intelligent person (20%) were their ideal models. On the other hand, for Americans, super models (e.g., Cindy Crawford) was the ideal model (2%) as well as actors/actresses (15%). The interesting answer was 'myself'.

<Table 2> Ideal model

Koreans	Americans
Actress = 12 (29%)	super model = 20 (50%)
intelligent /individual = 8 (20%)	actor /actress = 10 (25%)
model = 6 (15%)	attractive /individual = 6 (15%)
myself = 5 (13%)	others
friend = 4 (10%)	(Asian-American woman, Greek woman, statuary, mother) = 4 (10%)
others (e.g., professional women, mother, cousin) = 5 (13%)	

3) Are you satisfied with your appearance (body)?

Both groups tended to be dissatisfied with their weight and lower body parts. This is consistent with past research in that women are dissatisfied with body parts such as thigh, hips, weight, abdomen, compared to the rest of their features^{7,14)}. However, there were distinct differences in overall appearance, sexuality, face, height, hair, and health between the two groups. Americans showed much higher satisfaction with them than Koreans. (see *Appendix)

4) How do you think about cosmetic surgery for aesthetic purposes?

Generally Koreans showed more positive at-

titudes (50%) toward women's cosmetic surgery than Americans (20%).

<Table 3> Cosmetic surgery for aesthetic purposes

Koreans	Americans
very positive / positive = 20 (50%)	very positive / positive = 8 (20%)
neutral = 12 (30%)	neutral = 14 (35%)
very negative / negative = 8 (20%)	very negative / negative = 18 (45%)

5) Do you sometimes feel a desire to have cosmetic surgery?

Koreans (65%) showed more desire to have cosmetic surgery than Americans (50%).

<Table 4> Desire for cosmetic surgery

Koreans	Americans
Yes = 26 (65%)	Yes = 20 (50%)
No = 14 (35%)	No = 20 (50%)

6) Have you ever had any kind of cosmetic surgery before?

Koreans showed a higher rate than Americans. Among Korean respondents with cosmetic surgery, 75% had double eyelid surgery.

<Table 5> Experience of cosmetic surgery

Koreans	Americans
Yes = 16(40%)	Yes = 6(15%)
*eyes=10, nose=4,	*nose=2,
eyes and nose = 2	breast implant=3,
No = 24 (60%)	liposuction=1
	No = 14 (85%)

7) Even if you have a desire to have cosmetic surgery, why haven't you gone through with it?

Both groups responded because of 'cost' or 'fear'.

<Table 6> The reason not having cosmetic surgery

Koreans	Americans
cost = 14 (35%)	cost = 14 (35%)
fear = 10 (25%)	fear = 12 (30%)
for natural look = 10 (25%)	moral = 4 (10%)
conscious of others = 4 (10%)	educational reason = 4 (10%)
Others (e.g., parent, self-satisfaction) = 2(5%)	exercise = 4 (10%)
	Others(e.g., self-satisfaction, natural) = 2 (5%)

8) Do you know any person with cosmetic surgery?

It was surprising that all Koreans (100%) knew a person who had cosmetic surgery, specifically on their eyes (100%), nose, or skin or who had had liposuction. As shown in <Table 7>, Americans showed high incidence of breast surgery.

<Table 7> Knowledge a person with cosmetic surgery

Koreans	Americans
Yes = 40 (100%)	Yes = 24 (60%)
*eyes = 40, nose =16, skin, liposuction	*breast implant = 16, nose=10, face-lift=4, Others (e.g., lips, eyes, chin implant, removal wrinkle)
No = 0 (0%)	No = 16 (40%)

9) If, so, did his/her appearance improve after cosmetic surgery? In what way?

80% of Korean respondents and 75% of Americans found his /her appearance to have improved.

<Table 8> Improvement after cosmetic surgery

Koreans	Americans
No = 8 (20%)	No = 6 (25%)
Yes = 32 (80%)	Yes = 18 (75%)
look better = 22, different image = 6	look better = 10, 'self' image = 2
natural look = 4, look strange = 8	look happier=1, look sexy=1

10) Have you noticed differences in behavior or attitudes following cosmetic surgery?

Both groups (75%) answered "yes", indicating improvement of 'self' image such as self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-satisfaction.

<Table 9> Differences after cosmetic surgery

Koreans	Americans
Yes = 30 (75%)	Yes = 18 (75%)
look 'self-confidence' = 26, fashionable = 3, inferior=1,	look self-confidence = 12, look happier = 4, look better=2
No = 10 (25%)	No = 6 (25%)

V. Conclusion and Implication

This study has examined the comparison between Korean and American female college students' attitudes and behaviors regarding cosmetic surgery. The results are as follows: Both groups tended to be dissatisfied with

lower body parts and weight. On the other hand, Americans were more satisfied with overall appearance, sexuality, face, height, and health than Koreans. In other words, Koreans had lower body image than Americans. While Koreans had positive²⁷⁾ attitudes toward cosmetic Surgery, Americans had negative attitudes. Koreans were often more likely to desire having cosmetic surgery than Americans. Higher incidence of Cosmetic surgery were found among Koreans than Americans, specifically on eyelids. Thus, Koreans with lower body images tended to have more tolerance toward cosmetic surgery.

Cosmetic surgery has been very popular in Korea²⁸⁾. This suggests that Korean women have an increased desire to have a more Western look. For instance, traditionally "almond-shaped eyes" were the standard of beauty for Asian women but, now, "large eyes" have been universally admired⁶⁾. Evidence suggests that double eyelid surgery is the most common cosmetic surgery on Asian faces worldwide^{21, 27)}. Furthermore, as Patel²⁷⁾ indicates, there is no evidence of "any White Americans seeking single eyelid surgery" (p.6). As much research reports, mass media, such as White American models in magazines, television or music videos might lead Korean women to pursue "Western beauty". Korean women's self-esteem and body image may be influenced by comparing their bodies to this Western beauty. Because cosmetic surgery might be just one of many ways to improve their self-esteem, Korean women with lower body images showed higher attitudes or behaviors toward cosmetic surgery than Americans. It is very apparent that the perception of ideal beauty and body image appear to be highly influenced by social and cultural factors⁵⁾. These data may be useful in producing strategies to strengthen aspects of self-concept such as self-esteem, and in enabling young women to better withstand the risks of

developing body image disturbances and engaging in hazardous behaviors in different cultures. To thoroughly investigate appearance and body image, based on social and cultural constructs, additional research on cross cultures and populations is needed. In this way, a more diverse body of research can allow researchers to further examine these areas and to understand cross cultural views and behaviors regarding appearance, and body image and the manner in which they contribute to one's self-worth.

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²⁷ N. Patel, "Perspective body image", *Asian American Voice Magazine* 6 (1995), 32-37.

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***Appendix 1.**

Question #3) How are you satisfied with your body parts? (based on 100%)

Body area	Koran	American
Eyes	75%	86%
Nose	66%	75%
Lips	68%	84%
Face shape	61%	73%
Skin	59%	73%
Hair	60%	81%
Breast	60%	75%
Abdomen	50%	46%
Hip	45%	55%
Waist	65%	62%
Thigh	43%	45%
Leg	55%	63%
Height	69%	76%
Weight	54%	54%
Sexuality	62%	92%
Health	67%	81%
Overall-appearance	55%	76%