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JOURNAL TITLE: Journal of youth studies  
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ARTICLE TITLE: Modification of the body: a comparative analysis of views of youths in Penang, Malaysia and Seoul, South Korea  
ARTICLE AUTHOR: Premalatha Karupiah  
VOLUME: 16  
ISSUE: 1  
MONTH:  
YEAR: 2013  
PAGES: 1-16  
ISSN: 1367-6261  
OCLC #:  
CROSS REFERENCE ID: [TN:1444395][ODYSSEY:129.237.24.105/KKU]  
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10/29/2013 7:47:15 AM

## Modification of the body: a comparative analysis of views of youths in Penang, Malaysia and Seoul, South Korea

Premalatha Karupiah\*

*School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia*

*(Received 10 August 2011; final version received 10 May 2012)*

Body modification can be done through various procedures or ornamentation. This study discusses and compares views on body modification techniques among youths from Penang and Seoul. Data were collected by conducting face-to-face interviews and focus group interviews with 30 youths in Penang and 30 face-to-face interviews in Seoul. The findings of this study shows that most participants wish to change their bodies. Most participants in Penang and Seoul are keen on reducing their body weight. Participants in Seoul are keen on the idea of using cosmetic surgery to change their bodies (specifically their eyelids) while no participants in Penang identified cosmetic surgery as an option to change their bodies. This study shows that the choice of body modification procedures is influenced by cultural and societal values even though it may not be strictly prescribed by the society. Knowledge and understanding of one's society may influence choice of body modification techniques. The concept of agency is important in understanding choice of body modification techniques.

**Keywords:** body modification; plastic surgery; cosmetic surgery; agency; culture

### Introduction

Body modification is not a new phenomenon. There is a vast literature discussing various body modification procedures, for example, scarification, body piercing, body inscription and controlling weight (Myres 1992, Pitts 2003). In traditional societies, there are accepted procedures or rituals to modify one's body. Today, the advancement in technology and availability of various procedures to modify the body such as plastic surgery,<sup>1</sup> liposuction and Botox injection have given us more opportunities to modify our bodies (Sarwer 2002, Varga 2005). Today, body modification can be performed as a ritual or an individual choice by people. Therefore, body modification can be seen both as an act of conforming to social norms or challenging accepted norms. For women, body modification may be a manifestation of patriarchal values or a method of self-expression. The latter view is more common in contemporary body modification movement (Pitts 2003).

This article compares the views on body modification techniques among youths from Malaysia and South Korea. It explores their views on body modification procedures; the purpose of modifying their bodies and compares the differences or similarities between their views. It is important to note that this article is inductive in nature. This article tries to explore and explain the choices related to body

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\*Email: [prema@usm.my](mailto:prema@usm.my)

modification that were made or may be made and the reasons for their preferences or choices from the individual's point of view and the subjective meaning he/she attaches to it.

#### **Methods of body modification and factors influencing body modification**

One of the ways used to modify one's body is by changing his/her body weight. Body weight is often associated with a person's body image, that is, a person's evaluation on his/her appearance (Rosen 1995 cited Foster and Matz 2002, p. 405). Weight loss is expected to improve one's body image (Foster and Matz 2002). Some methods of weight loss are dieting, exercise or surgery (Serdula *et al.* 1999, Cash and Purzinsky 2002). The desire to be thin may be influenced by family, peers or media. Studies show that the size of women appearing in mass media has reduced significantly since the 1960s and exposure to beauty and fashion magazine increased the desire to be thin among female college students (Park 2005). Media has successfully transmitted the idea that with effort and technology one can control his/her appearance. It provides a benchmark for a layperson on what beauty is and what he/she should strive to achieve. Beauty like other things in life can be achieved by anyone who invests money and effort in its pursuit (Featherstone 2010).

Cosmetic surgery is one of the most drastic ways to modify one's body. Cosmetic surgery is often seen as an oppressive procedure by radical feminists (Negrin 2002). Contrary to this, Davis (1995) explained that women are exercising their control over their lives by choosing cosmetic surgery. In her study, she explained that women underwent plastic surgery to look normal and were not merely the victims of the values in a patriarchal society (Davis 1995). Various researches have been focused on the factors which influence intention of undergoing cosmetic surgery. Park and Cho (2010) in their study on college students concluded that, intention to receive cosmetic surgery is influenced by their exposure to cosmetic surgery, interpersonal experiences, predicted sociocultural attitudes towards appearance and perceived physical and psychological risks of undergoing cosmetic surgery. Swami (2009) concluded that greater media influence, lower body mass index (BMI) and less body appreciation were predictors of consideration of cosmetic surgery among female undergraduates. Swami *et al.* (2009) showed that celebrity worship influenced the acceptance of cosmetic surgery among British female undergraduates.

Other methods of body modification include body piercing, earlobe stretching, tattoos and scarification (Pitts 2003). For women, some of these methods are associated with a negative image and challenges the perception of how a woman should look. These techniques are used as a method of self-expression and to challenge the traditional power structure in society (Pitts 2003).

#### **Feminists' views on body modification**

In the 1970s and early 1980s, radical feminists such as Dworkin (1974 cited Jeffrys 2005) and Bartky (1990 cited Jeffrys 2005) identified beauty practices (which include body modification) as a form of oppression on women (Negrin 2002, Jeffrys 2005, Davis 2009). Women's perception of beauty is often influenced by social forces. These forces may not be physical but they make women feel that their bodies need to be

modified in order to fit into certain beauty standards. They are seen as the victims of a patriarchal society (Negrin 2002, Davis 2003, Jeffrys 2005).

Liberal feminists in the 1990s such as Wolf (1991) rejected the idea that women were passive victims of beauty culture. By then, women had achieved great advancements in their personal and professional spheres. Women were empowered, well-informed and able to make their choices related to beauty practices. They, therefore, were not forced to choose beauty practices by societal rules but were able to choose practices which appealed to them. These views, however, have been criticized by contemporary radical feminists such as Jeffrys (2005). Global media, the cosmetic and the fashion industry have been bombarding women with stereotyped images of a perfect body and are seen to have a great influence on women's perception on beauty and choice of beauty practices. Women are not forced to change their bodies yet the constant exposure to narrow beauty ideals in society and media makes them feel that they need to change some aspects of their body to become more beautiful. Even though women are able to make choices related to beauty practices, it is hard to conclude that these choices are truly free of societal influence or pressure (Jeffrys 2005). In modern society the control one has over his/her body may seem to have increased but regulation often happens in more subtle form, for example, through media images, trends and public opinion (Varga 2005). Therefore, in modern life, people may seem to have control over the choice of beauty practices but media and fashion trends have strong influence on what is seen as the beauty standard in a society.

Another view different from radical feminism is called 'agency feminism' by Bordo (cited Davis 2009). Davis' (2009) work on cosmetic surgery focuses on women's agency. She uses the sociological concept of agency to explain how women make choices related to cosmetic surgery. She explained that women do not make choices totally free of societal influence but show great understanding and knowledge about the society which they live in and their choices are based on this knowledge and understanding. It is to this brand of feminism this study contributes.

#### Data and methods

The data for this study were collected as part of a comparative study on social construction of beauty among youths in South Korea and Malaysia. The data collection was done in Penang, Malaysia and Seoul, South Korea. These two countries were chosen because both societies are rather different demographically. Malaysia has a multi-religious and multi-ethnic population while South Korea has a relatively homogenous population. The population of South Korea and Malaysia in 2010 is 48 million (The World Bank 2010) and 28 million (Department of Statistics 2010), respectively. Based on ethnicity, 67.4% of Malaysians are Bumiputera,<sup>2</sup> while 24.6% are Chinese<sup>3</sup> and 7.3% are Indians. In terms of religion, 61.3% of Malaysians are Muslims, while 19.8% are Buddhists, 9.2% are Christians and 6.3% are Hindus (Department of Statistics 2010). Majority of Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus are Malays, Chinese and Indians, respectively.

In this study, the participants were selected using a purposive sampling method. Participants were between the ages of 20 and 30 years. In Penang, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 15 students while focus group interviews involved another 15 students. There were 10 male and 20 female participants interviewed in Penang. The participants came from three ethnic groups, that is, Malay, Chinese and

Indian and four different religious backgrounds, that is, Islam, Buddhism, Hindu and Christianity. There were 10 participants from each ethnic group. Most participants were bilingual; therefore, the interviews were conducted in either English or Malay.

The second stage of data collection was conducted at three universities (two public and one private university) in Seoul. There were 25 female and 5 male participants. Only a few participants explained that they were either Buddhists or Christians. Most participants explained that they do not strictly practise any religion but celebrate major holidays with their families. These interviews were conducted in English or Korean (with the help of student assistants). All interviews were transcribed and analysed by the researcher using qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. BMI was calculated based on height and weight reported by the participants. A person with a BMI above 18.5 and less than 25 is in a normal weight category (Weisell 2002).

The analysis focused mostly on manifest and latent content analysis. Manifest content analysis is shown in this article by presenting reality in verbatim quotations or translation of parts of speech as expressed by the participants. Latent content analysis involves interpretation of subjective and underlying meanings expressed by the participants (Babbie 2005). The analysis involved the process of identifying common and different themes which emerged from the interviews. All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

### Findings

Five major themes were identified in this study and are discussed in the following sections.

#### *Desire to change*

Almost all the participants explained that they wished to change some parts of their bodies. However, what each person wanted to change was different and their desire to change varied from 'wishful thinking' to 'something they really want or will do'. 'Wishful thinking' refers to hopes and dreams of changing parts of their bodies to look more beautiful where as 'something they really want or will do' refers to their intention or choice of taking an action to change their bodies. Ani (female, Penang), for example, explained how she wished to have smooth skin:

I really wish I have smoother skin. I always had problems with acne and pimples. I spent most part of [my] teenage years trying to do something about it but does not really work. Now, there is nothing much I can do about it. Even though I really think my skin looks better now.

She explained that she likes smooth skin because she felt that people with smooth skin look more beautiful. Her views show that smooth skin is part of how she constructs the notion of beauty. Another participant, Lee (female, Seoul) felt that her appearance can be improved by reconstructing her nose and she wanted to undergo another surgery when she starts working:

When I start working, I will save money for another procedure [cosmetic surgery]. I want to do something to my nose. Make it look better.

As for the male participants, some mentioned that they wish they were taller but admitted that they were unable to change that or unwilling to go through medical procedures to become taller. Other than that, some participants wanted to change their lips, nose, thighs and tummy. Both male and female participants felt that there is something 'wrong' about themselves and needs to be improved. There seem to be a mismatch between their perceptions on how they look and how they want to look hence they wished to 'rectify' this mismatch by changing themselves. This mismatch may be influenced by their family, peers or images portrayed in the media. Their actions to rectify this mismatch depended on the degree of their desire in wanting the change.

### *Losing weight*

Participants from both places said that they wanted to lose weight. Most participants from Penang were very keen on going on a diet or exercising in order to lose weight. They were also willing to try herbal drinks or 'diet formulas' in order to lose weight. Most female participants in Penang admitted that they often reduced food intake or skipped meals to lose weight. Mega (female, Penang), for example, explained that she has tried slimming tea and reduced food intake to lose weight:

I have tried some kind tea to reduce weight. It did work for a while but after that there was no difference. I also skip lunch most of the time so that I can reduce weight.

Taking slimming tea or herbal drink to lose weight was not only practised by women. Another participant, Roy (Penang), shared his bad experience in taking herbal drink to lose weight:

I have taken a type of herbal drink to reduce food intake. It was introduced to me by a colleague. He lost 15 kg after taking the drink. After seeing that I tried it [herbal drink]. After about a month I became very weak and was admitted [hospitalised]. After that experience I really believe the only way to lose weight is to exercise. I don't dare try other methods. Now, I exercise everyday and lose weight slowly.

Other participants like Noor (female, Penang) expressed their desire to maintain a particular weight by exercising:

I exercise to maintain my weight. I don't want to put on weight. I recently joined a gym and go there three times a week.

During the interviews in Seoul, most participants admitted that they wish they were thinner. Similar to participants in Penang, Korean participants (both male and female) admitted they often controlled their food intake and exercised in order to lose weight. Shim (male, Seoul), for example, explained that:

I often skip meals and go to the gym in order to maintain my weight. Girls don't like guys who are fat too. Furthermore, my clothes fit better when I am thin.

It is important to note that all the participants in Seoul had a BMI which was normal. In Penang, only five participants had BMI higher than normal and were

overweight. All other participants in Penang had a BMI which was normal. Even though most participants had a normal BMI they felt they needed to lose weight in order to look good. It is clear among Korean participants that being thin is seen as synonymous with being beautiful while in Penang being thin is important to be beautiful. Being slightly 'chubby' is acceptable but being obese is not perceived as being beautiful.

### *Cosmetic surgery*

Most female participants in Seoul expressed the desire to change their eyelids to 'double-eyelids'. Some female participants in Seoul have undergone double-eyelid surgery (blepharoplasty). Blepharoplasty is one of the most common procedures done by East Asian women who do not have supratarsal folds (Kang *et al.* 2001).

Korean participants admitted that they have many friends who had undergone such surgeries either in early adulthood or after high school. However, most participants identified that the most common procedure is reconstruction of eyes and nose. Other procedures such as breast implant and liposuction were perceived as uncommon in South Korea except among celebrities.

Jane (female, Seoul), described her experience of undergoing blepharoplasty:

As a teenager I wanted to do that [double-eyelid surgery]. My parents gave me that as a gift after going through a stressful period in high school. I felt better after the procedure. Makes me feel more confident. I spent almost one million Won on this procedure.

Three participants in Seoul explained that they were influenced by their peers to undergo blepharoplasty. They got some advice regarding the procedure from their friends. Audrey (female, Seoul) explained that:

I did double-eyelid surgery because many of my friends have done it. It looked good on them. They didn't suffer so I thought I will do it too. I talked to my friends about it... I think I look better now than before the surgery.

Three male Korean participants felt that Korean women look better after undergoing double-eyelid surgery. They felt that if a woman felt good about herself after undergoing double-eyelid surgery, she should be encouraged to do it. Other than double-eyelid surgery, participants identified reconstruction of nose as another common procedure in Korea especially among men. Kevin (male, Seoul), shared the experience of his brother who underwent a nose reconstruction:

My brother did a surgery to make his nose 'sharper'. He was 18 years old then. He wants to become a movie star so he feels he has to do that.

Another participant Jane, (female, Seoul) described the preference for 'boyish' look among Korean male celebrities:

Some men get a 'nose job' to look like the celebrities. In Korea, high nose and 'boyish' look is common among male celebrities.

More than half of the participants agreed that they expected to look better after the double-eyelid surgery and it would make them feel more confident about themselves. They felt inferior about their looks and such procedures help them to get the look they want which is important 'in the real world', especially after their graduation. They believed that looking good is very important for employment and to succeed in life. Misty (female, Seoul) explained the importance of first impression in getting a job after graduation:

When I look for a job, how I look is important. It gives the first impression. Other than that I need to feel confident about myself. Only when I feel confident I will perform better in the interview and the work place . . . When you go to an office you will notice that everyone there are well-groomed and look nice.

On the other hand, all the participants in Malaysia said that they will not consider undergoing plastic surgery as a means of changing their bodies. Even though participants in Penang often 'wish' to change their bodies, using plastic surgery was unappealing to both female and male participants. Some participants in Penang associated plastic surgery to reconstructive surgery, for example, surgery related to traumatic injuries or birth marks. One participant, Zura (female, Penang) explained that using plastic surgery to improve a person's appearance after an accident or due to birth deformities is acceptable:

If it is because of some accident or you were born with it, and you want to change something, then it is ok to go for surgery but I don't think I want to do it just to look better. I may not be perfect but I am not that bad [giggles] . . . I know someone who did plastic surgery for her daughter because she was born with lips which doesn't look normal [cleft lip].

One participant from Penang, Siti (female), explained that even if she underwent a plastic surgery, she would not reveal it to anyone:

*Mahu* [Shy]. I don't think I want anyone to know that. What would people think? I don't think my parents will allow me to do that. This is what God has given me; I don't think I want to change it by using surgery.

This is very different from what was expressed by Lee. Lee (female, Seoul) explained that her parents gave her the opportunity to undergo a plastic surgery as a gift for her 18th birthday and she was very happy to undergo a double-eyelid surgery as that was what she wanted at the time. She felt the surgery was very important for her and changed how she felt about herself.

Mages (female, Penang) explained that she will use other methods to change her body but not plastic surgery. Her explanation regarding her body strongly implies that she believed that her body is sacred:

I will not go for plastic surgery. My body is from God . . . I don't think it is right to change it by using such procedures. I will try some [cosmetic] products or wear different types of clothes or bra . . . I have thought of using those tight fitting clothes which are suppose to change your figure [corset].



Another participant, Chong (female, Penang) expressed similar views about her body:

My body is sacred. God has made me this way. How can I change it like that? Of course I can diet or exercise but that is different. I am not altering what God has given me . . . I don't know if we have the right to do that.

A male participant in Penang, Hamid (male) thought that cosmetic surgery is sinful:

I think it is sinful to do that. I don't think I would like if someone I know go for plastic surgery. It is crazy . . . I won't allow my girlfriend to do it.

In one of the focus group interviews in Penang, the influence of media on participants' perception of plastic surgery is evident. Tan (male), explained:

It is like in *Nip and Tuck* [television series], they do so many things. They can practically change everything. May be that is an exaggeration but it is like you can change your whole body. Should we do that?

Another participant in the same focus group interview, Terry (female, Penang), expressed her fear and views on 'surgery junkies'. Her views also suggested the outcome of plastic surgery is seen as something unnatural. This view was agreed by other members of the focus group interview:

I remember watching Oprah Winfrey [Show]. She interviewed a lady addicted to plastic surgery. She has had so many surgeries and she still wants to do more. Her face looks artificial. I don't want to become like that.

Three more participants explained that they will not undergo a plastic surgery to change themselves because they see their bodies as something that has been given by God. Participants in Penang felt that plastic surgery is very invasive and it totally changes their bodies unlike other methods of body modification. It is seen as a procedure which produces an 'unnatural' body and involves attaching fake body parts. Other methods which they prefer such as dieting and exercise help them to change their bodies while maintaining their natural bodies.

Chong (female, Penang), further explained that using cosmetic surgery to change the structure of one's body is not acceptable:

Somehow the idea of going under the knife to change your body seems too much. When I diet or exercise I lose weight but my face, or eyes or nose are the same. I don't change them. Wishful thinking is one thing. I wish I can have bigger eyes or sharper nose but to change the structure of my face, I feel that is too much.

One participant, Ana (female, Penang) explained that she was apprehensive about the pain and complications that one may suffer when undergoing plastic surgery. Her desire to have 'Julia Roberts' lips' shows the influence of beauty ideals in Western media and celebrity idealisation:

I wish I can change my lips. Wish I had lips like Julia Roberts... But, I am scared of pain. I am scared even of syringes. I cannot imagine going through so much pain to change my lips. But I do wish... What if something goes wrong? I have read some horrible stories when the surgery doesn't work as planned. That is scary.

When asked about her experience undergoing plastic surgery, Jane (female, Seoul) explained:

It is not bad. There is some pain but after a week it was ok... I was so happy after the surgery... I am planning to go for another surgery once I start working.

This is an interesting difference between the two groups of participants. In Seoul, participants were open to the idea of undergoing plastic surgery and felt that plastic surgery gives them confidence and edge to compete in the real world. The pain and healing process is something the participants were willing to undergo in order to look and feel better. In Penang, even though participants admitted that they would like to change themselves, they do not see plastic surgery as an option. Some considered it as unethical, unnatural, immoral or sinful. Some felt that it is against God's will and identify their bodies as something sacred. Participants felt that the procedure is invasive and painful. Some felt embarrassed with the idea of undergoing plastic surgery.

Unlike radical feminists, participants in this study do not view cosmetic surgery as an oppressive procedure. Those who were willing to choose or chose plastic surgery, perceived it as a way to improve themselves, their self-confidence and empower them to be successful in their everyday lives. Those who were against undergoing cosmetic surgery were influenced by the value they attach to their bodies. They perceived their bodies as a sacred entity; as something that is natural and should not be modified using a method as intrusive as cosmetic surgery. I draw from Davis' (2009) discussion on agency to conclude that, both groups of participants in this study show deep understanding about the society they are in to choose body modification techniques which are acceptable. They are aware of the expectation of the society and also their ability to make choices in the society they live in. This knowledge and understanding guides their choices or preferences.

#### *Physical attractiveness and career*

When asked if they felt that their physical attractiveness is important in being successful in their career, most Korean participants agreed that good looks are important for their career and they believe that a good looking individual will enjoy some advantages at work. Women participants believed that undergoing double-eyelid surgery is a way of improving their looks. It seems to help boost their confidence in themselves and gives them hope of future success in career. When asked if they can share some experiences related to this, John (male, Seoul) explained how good looking people get attention easily:

This is normal. If I see a beautiful girl asking for help, I think I will help her immediately... It does not mean I won't help anyone who I don't think is beautiful but I

think beautiful people get more attention. They get attention fast. The same way, in the office you get better attention therefore your suggestion or ideas may be accepted easily.

Similarly, participants in Penang admitted that physical attractiveness is important to be successful in their careers. They were aware that they have to look presentable in the work place. To them, looking presentable involves appropriate use of cosmetic products, attire and reducing/maintaining their weight. However, they did not agree that physical attractiveness gives a person some advantages at work. They do not feel that physical attractiveness will help them to excel in their career or get more attention at work. One participant, Amy (female, Penang) felt that too much attention to her appearance will influence co-workers' perception on her ability at the work place. She said:

I have to look good otherwise nobody will give me a job. At work I need to look professional but that does not mean I will get benefits just because I look nice. I need to do my job well. If I pay too much attention to my looks people will think I am not a capable person so I spend so much time and money on looks.

Participants in this study are aware of the importance of appearance in the world of work. They show awareness that for women, appearance is important not only in the personal sphere but also in the professional sphere. The importance is higher for women as compared to men in the professional sphere. They see beauty as another qualification needed to get a good job. Men, while acknowledging that they need to look professional for work, do not see good looks as a requirement to get a good job.

#### *Other methods of body modification*

Other methods of body modification discussed in the interviews included tattooing and body piercing. Most female participants in Penang have pierced ears. One participant has pierced her ears in three places. Meena (female, Penang) explained that ear piercing is just part of the process of growing up among most Hindu communities in Malaysia. Often families have special prayers to mark the ear piercing ceremony:

The first was done by my parents when I was a baby. It is part of Indian<sup>4</sup> culture to pierce our ears, both boys and girls get their ears pierced. As we grow up, wearing earring[s] is important for women. My mom often scolds me if I don't wear any earring[s]. She says it is inauspicious . . . the other two I got it when I was a teenager. I want to pierce my nose too.

Another participant Thana (female, Penang) added:

But wearing three earrings is not something new. I have seen my great grandmother wearing three earrings. They are all not called earring, they have different names for each earring. I don't remember the names . . . In India, I have seen women with long ears. In Tamil it is called '*kaathu valakirathu*' [ear stretching]. I have never seen it in Malaysia.

Like, Meena and Thana, all Hindu participants explained that their parents had an ear-piercing ceremony for them when they were just children even though most of them were too young to remember it. Some Muslim, Buddhist and Christian

participants have pierced ears; it is not part of any ritual but was a choice to wear earrings. Some participants in Seoul admitted that they have pierced their ears because they wanted to wear earrings. No participants (other than Meena) in Seoul or Penang were interested in other types of body piercing. None were involved in non-mainstream body piercing. They find them unappealing and thought that some types of body piercing are perceived negatively by the society. Some participants found tattoos attractive and explained that they may get one in future. A few participants felt that tattoos would give others the wrong impression about them. Man, a Muslim participant from Penang, thought that tattoos are prohibited in Islam:

A person with a lot of tattoo will be seen as a gangster. But now it is a trend especially when we see many celebrities have tattoos. I am not sure if this is allowed [in Islam].

Here, it is clear that even though some participants are keen on body piercing or tattoos, they are aware of what is acceptable in their society. They prefer to choose a body modification technique that conforms to societal norms or does not deviate too far from these norms. Even though they are not forced to choose a particular method of body modification by the society their choices may reflect societal norms because these norms have been internalised by these participants.

#### **Discussion: desire to change one's body**

The analysis clearly shows that the desire to change one's body is common among all participants. Participants either hope/wish/want to change at least one part of their bodies, for example, eyes, lips, nose, skin, etc. The degree of their desire varies from being wishful to wanting to change. Participants constantly compare themselves with 'others' and this process of comparison influence their perception of which part of their bodies needs to be changed. 'Others' here may refer to people they encounter in their daily lives or in the media. There is evidence that this process of constant comparison 'helps' them to identify aspects or body parts which needs to be changed in order to look and feel better. They felt that some natural aspects of their bodies are not good enough to look beautiful.

Desire to lose weight was common among participants from both countries. Many studies have consistently shown that people, especially women, are very keen on losing weight to become thin since, in most modern societies, being thin is seen as synonymous with being beautiful (Jeffrys 2005, Park 2005). Such standards may pressure women to lose weight even when they are in the normal weight category.

#### **Discussion: views on cosmetic surgery**

The most interesting difference between the two groups of participants was their views on plastic surgery. Participants from Korea were very much keener on undergoing plastic surgery. Female participants in Seoul were keen on undergoing double-eyelid surgery (blespharoplasty) while participants in Penang were against cosmetic surgery.

Blespharoplasty has often been used as an example of contemporary ethnic cosmetic surgery. Such plastic surgery has been criticised for being chosen by a

particular ethnic group to change body parts that are associated with their ethnic identity (Heyes 2009). Kaw (1993), in her study among Asian American women, highlighted that blepharoplasty is used to change parts of their bodies that are associated with negative traits to avoid prejudice. Zane (1998), while accepting that ethnocentrism is the driving force behind Asian blepharoplasty, suggested that this surgery does not only help Asian women escape racial identity but also gender biased relationships. These arguments may explain choices made by diasporic Asian communities but does not explain why women in Korea are keen on undergoing blepharoplasty. All participants who were keen on undergoing a double-eyelid surgery appeared to be unhappy with their eyelids and desired to change them. None mentioned that they desired to look more Caucasian or different from other Koreans. The data in this study are insufficient to explain the dissatisfaction Korean women feel about their eyelids. However, it can be hypothesised that it may be due to socialisation, social acceptance and values. In South Korea, where blepharoplasty is very common, undergoing blepharoplasty is a norm and is accepted by teenagers, young adults and their parents as part of the process of growing up. Participants reported that their parents encouraged them to undergo blepharoplasty and some parents gave it as a gift to their children.

The interesting question here would be why South Koreans accept plastic surgery as a means of changing their bodies and Malaysians do not. On the surface, westernisation can be seen as one of the factors that influence Korean women's choice of accepting and choosing surgery but factors that influence women to choose cosmetic surgery to change their bodies may be more complex than that. Socio-cultural and historical elements of the Korean society may play an important role in women's choices of cosmetic surgery.

Neo-Confucianism had been Korea's official ideology for about 500 years (Ahn 2003, Hahm 2003, Kim 2003). Under the neo-Confucian ideology, there were many constraints on a woman's body. Her body was constantly controlled in order to ensure that she is able to play the important role of having children and taking care of her family (Kim 2003). Since the 1960s, Korea has gone through an extremely fast process of modernisation. Together with major changes in the economy of the country, major political and social changes happened during this time (Kendall 2002). The process of modernisation brought along a major process of westernisation. Western ideals became important and were looked up to in Korea. These changes were so huge and fast that the definition of a Korean identity became blurred in the newly developed nation (Kim 2003, Park 2007). In this scenario, body modification has taken on a new meaning. The role of the family in determining choices related to a woman's body has decreased in modern South Korea (Kim 2009). Women were able to make more independent choices related to modifying their bodies. Women's choice to change their bodies may be seen as a result of empowerment and as a method of self-expression (Kim 2009) but it may also be a manifestation of patriarchal values (Park 2007). Women's choice to change their bodies is caused by the interplay of patriarchal elements in Korean society and consumer culture (Park 2007). Traditionally, women were seen as passive followers of standards set by the society and their main role was taking care of their home and family. The choices related to their bodies were controlled by the family (Park 2007). With the rapid development in Korea, more women are highly educated, employed and independent but they are still bound by deeply rooted neo-Confucian values

(Park 2007). The expectation that women need to conform to societal values remains the same in modern Korea. The values to which they are expected to conform to have changed. In modern South Korea, where Western beauty ideals are seen as the norm and as standards of beauty for women, women are expected to conform to these ideals. Hence, Korean women choose dieting and cosmetic surgery to achieve those ideals (Park 2007).

In this study, South Korean women chose or wanted to undergo blepharoplasty because they felt that it would make them look better, improve their self-confidence, help them in their daily lives and in pursuing a good career. They did not seem to be passive followers of the standards set by the society but were actively choosing cosmetic surgery to enable them to pursue their dreams. Their views showed that they were conscious individuals who were engaging in deliberate calculative strategies to achieve certain goals, for example, to improve their confidence or obtain a good job. They were aware that physical appearance is important in marriage and the labour market. Their choice to undergo plastic surgery to achieve these goals was based on their perception of the expectation of the society in which they live in. Being in a 'man's world'; in a society that holds many patriarchal values, they perceived that this action is important to excel in their career and life. They seem to have moved from the grip of private patriarchy to public patriarchy. Private patriarchy refers to the control of women's lives by immediate family members while in public patriarchy the control of women's lives operate through the world of work and politics (Walby 1997). In this study, the participants' perception and understanding regarding the expectation of the world of work is influencing their choice of undergoing blepharoplasty.

Malaysia, on the other hand, is a melting pot of people of various ethnic and religious groups. The Malaysian Constitution states that Islam is the official religion of Malaysia but other religions may be practised in Malaysia (Fernando 2006). Therefore, various religions are practised in Malaysia which allows some religious and cultural values to be shared among Malaysians regardless of their religious background.

In this study, Malaysian participants were against the idea of undergoing plastic surgery to change their bodies. They viewed their bodies as something that is sacred. Other ways of changing their bodies, such as dieting, use of cosmetic products and exercise, were acceptable to them. They feared that they will be judged negatively by their family and friends if they choose to undergo plastic surgery. Today's globalised economic marketplace provides various options to consumers on products and services (e.g. slimming drinks, diet regimes, exercise regimes, cosmetic products and cosmetic surgery) that are related to the body and help self-improvement of the body. Participants in this study are aware of these options and choose options which do not contradict with the values they have.

This study shows that, even though in modern society the method of changing one's body is not as rigid or 'prescribed' as in a traditional society, the influence of cultural values in the choice of modification is still evident. This brings us back to the age old struggle between agency and structure. Wijsbek (2000) questioned whether the pursuit of beauty can ever be a free choice? He presented two contrasting views of Davis (1995) and Morgan (1991) in trying to answer this question. Davis (1995) concluded in her study that, women underwent cosmetic surgery based on their own desire and not to fulfil the desire of others. They underwent cosmetic surgery not to

become more beautiful but to become normal. It is important to note that, agency is the main focus in Davis' (1995) explanation on choices to undergo cosmetic surgery. According to her, the sociological concept of agency is often mistaken for free choice. She clearly explained that absolute freedom of choice is never possible. Agency according to Davis (2009) is always related to social structure but should not be understood as total determinism by the structure:

Individual agency is always situated in relations of power, which provide the conditions of enablement and constraint under which all social actions takes place. (Davis 2009, p. 39)

Morgan (1991, 2009) discussed three paradoxes of choice to show that women's choice to modify her body is not a free choice. The first paradox is on conformity (Morgan 1991, p. 35, 2009, p. 57). Women use cosmetic surgery not to look unique but to conform to common beauty standards. The second paradox is that women choose to liberate themselves from societal constraints, but their very action of undergoing cosmetic surgery is constrained by the ideals that are set by others (Morgan 1991, p. 36, 2009, p. 58). The third paradox is that women face immense pressure to undergo plastic surgery and those who do not choose to do this may be stigmatised (Morgan 1991, p. 38, 2009, p. 59).

Similarly, this study highlights the problem of focusing on only the structure or free choice in looking at women's views on modification of their bodies. Women are neither passive individuals following the 'prescriptions' of society nor are they totally free in making their choices. This brings us to another question, that is, if an agent is ever capable of making any choice which is totally independent of the structure. According to Davis (2009), choices are often taken based on the interaction of intention, practical knowledge and unconscious motives. Individuals often draw upon their knowledge about themselves and the society when they negotiate various actions in their everyday life. They, however, should not be seen as being 'cultural dopes'. In this study, participants were actively choosing body modification techniques as a means of changing their bodies and their knowledge and understanding of the society influence their individual choices.

The notion that body is a sacred entity is clear among Malaysian participants but similar views were not expressed by the Korean participants. Comparing these two societies, this study shows that sacredness of an entity may be very different from one society to another and is something that is socially constructed. Participants in Penang, who are from different religious backgrounds, share the idea of the sacredness of the body. This implies that sacredness is not something that is merely influenced by religious beliefs of a person. The definition of what is sacred is socially constructed and shared by a society even when they do not belong to the same faith. Shared values in a society may influence their definition of sacredness and this may be expressed in the boundaries of their own faith.

### **Conclusion**

Body modification has been done since time immemorial. In traditional societies, cultural values and rituals influenced the choices related to body modification. In modern society, people have more freedom and options when considering body modification. Education and empowerment has allowed women to move away from

culturally prescribed body modification techniques and to choose how they would like to change their bodies. This study shows youths from different societies have different preferences when considering changing their bodies. Cultural values are still important in the choice of body modification procedure. This study shows the importance of agency in the choice of body modification techniques. This article is not a generalisation of views of youths in both countries but it gives an important insight into how knowledge and understanding of the society influences choices related to body modification in modern societies. One limitation of this study is that it did not take into account the socio-economic status of its participants. Further research is needed to look into the influence of socio-economic status on choice of body modification techniques.

### Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Norman Blaikie and two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. This study has been financially supported by the POSCO TJ Park Foundation's Research Grant for Asian Studies.

### Notes

1. In this article, terms plastic surgery and cosmetic surgery are used interchangeably.
2. Bumiputera refers mainly to Malays, indigenous natives of Sabah and Sarawak. Sabah and Sarawak are states in East Malaysia.
3. Chinese and Indians in this article refer to Malaysian nationals of Chinese and Indian origins, respectively.
4. In Malaysia, in conversations the phrase Indian culture may refer to Hindu rituals since the majority of Malaysian Indians are Hindus.

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