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Korean Beauty Surgery as Capitalized Soft Power: From Aesthetic Practice to Global Cultural Authority

Korakoj Tongboriboon [a, *], Penphitcha Khumtong [b]

[a] *School of Humanities, University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce*

[b] *College of Interdisciplinary and Integrative Studies, Chulalongkorn University*

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Abstract

South Korea's cosmetic surgery industry has emerged as an influential sector that transcends medical services and functions as a form of soft power. This study reconceptualizes Korean cosmetic surgery as capitalized soft power, emphasizing its dual role in generating economic value while shaping global aesthetic norms. Rather than framing cosmetic surgery solely in terms of gendered beauty norms, medical tourism, or individual consumer choice, this paper situates the industry within broader processes of national branding, transnational service management, and cultural political economy. Drawing on qualitative thematic analysis of policy documents, digital platforms, and scholarly literature, the study analyzes the role of state policy, urban spatial concentration, notably Gangnam, and medical tourism initiatives in institutionalizing cosmetic surgery as part of South Korea's branding strategy. Clinics emerge as transnational cultural sites where foreign patients encounter Korean service culture, affective labor, and aesthetic ideology, transforming surgical procedures into immersive cultural experiences rather than purely clinical transactions. From an international management perspective, the paper demonstrates how Korean cosmetic surgery clinics operate as transnational service firms that strategically manage trust, risk, and uncertainty across borders. Their global success derives not only from surgical expertise but also from organizational capabilities such as standardized consultation systems, digital visualization technologies, and post-operative care infrastructures. Ultimately, the study argues that Korean beauty surgery operates through mechanisms of persuasion, normalization, and aspiration, thereby extending Korea's cultural authority beyond traditional media industries. This contributes to Korean Studies by reframing aesthetic medicine as a significant site of geopolitical influence and economic power.

Keywords

Soft power, cosmetic surgery, Hallyu, cultural capital, global aesthetic

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Introduction

Over the past three decades, South Korea has become internationally recognized as a leading destination for cosmetic surgery. Clinics in Seoul particularly in the Gangnam district attract patients from across East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North America. While existing scholarship has primarily interpreted cosmetic surgery through the lenses of beauty standards, gender norms, and medical tourism, such approaches remain insufficient to explain the industry's sustained global influence and institutional expansion.

This paper demonstrates that Korean beauty surgery constitutes a form of capitalized soft power: an industry that monetizes cultural attraction and actively shapes global aesthetic preferences. Rather than viewing cosmetic surgery merely as a domestic social phenomenon or medical phenomenon, this study positions it as a strategic cultural export embedded within South Korea's global branding and Hallyu-driven influence.



Figure 1. Medical Tourism Cluster: Cosmetic Surgery Clinics in Gangnam

The central research question guiding this study is: How has Korean cosmetic surgery evolved from a localized medical practice into a globally institutionalized system of aesthetic authority? Addressing this question contributes to ongoing debates in Korean Studies, international management, and cultural political economy by foregrounding the body as a site of geopolitical and economic power.

To answer this question, the study adopts a qualitative research design based on thematic analysis of secondary data sources, including policy documents, digital platforms, and scholarly literature. This approach enables a systematic examination of how state policy, market mechanisms, and cultural narratives converge to transform aesthetic surgery into a globalized form of influence.

Literature Review

Cosmetic Surgery and Gendered Beauty Norms

Early feminist scholarship conceptualizes the body as a socially regulated and disciplined site rather than an expression of purely individual autonomy (Bordo, 1993). This foundational perspective reframes beauty practices, including cosmetic surgery, as embedded within broader systems of power, surveillance, and normalization.

Building on this foundation, subsequent scholars argue that in neoliberal societies, bodily modification is increasingly framed as a form of self-responsibility and personal investment. Rather than being imposed externally, individuals are encouraged to internalize beauty standards and actively work toward achieving them. This shift reflects a broader transformation in governance, where control is exercised through self-discipline rather than direct coercion.

In the South Korean context, Holliday and Elfving-Hwang (2012) demonstrate that cosmetic surgery is not stigmatized but normalized and morally legitimized, particularly within competitive social environments such as education and employment. Surgical enhancement is often framed as a rational and necessary strategy for self-improvement, aligning physical appearance with expectations of professionalism and competence.

Elfving-Hwang (2013) further emphasizes that cosmetic surgery in Korea is embedded in moral discourses of effort, sincerity, and continuous self-improvement, transforming it into an ethical practice rather than a purely aesthetic or superficial choice. In this sense, the body becomes a project that reflects one's discipline, ambition, and social responsibility.

However, despite these valuable insights, existing scholarship remains largely focused on domestic sociocultural dynamics and gendered interpretations. There is limited attention to how these normalized practices scale beyond national boundaries and become embedded within global systems of production, consumption, and influence. This gap is particularly significant given the increasing internationalization of Korean cosmetic surgery and its role in shaping transnational aesthetic standards.

Medical Tourism and Global Healthcare Markets

Korean cosmetic surgery has expanded alongside the growth of global medical tourism and cross-border healthcare markets. South Korea is consistently identified as a strategically successful medical tourism destination due to the convergence of state policy, advanced medical capacity, cost competitiveness, and service-oriented organizational systems.

According to Kim & Lee (2023), the Korean government regards medical tourism as a key economic sector and has deployed a range of legal, institutional, and promotional strategies (e.g., simplified visa issuance, hospital certification systems, and medical tourism clusters) to attract foreign

patients across diverse specialties, including surgery, dermatology, and other elective procedures. These efforts reflect an intentional policy-driven positioning of healthcare as a high-value export industry rather than a purely domestic service sector.

Kim et al. (2025) report that foreign patient visits from North America and Europe coming after the pandemic in Korea surged to over 1.17 million in 2024, nearly doubling from 2022 and surpassing the pre-pandemic era. Although this specific study focuses on Korean medicine clinics rather than aesthetic surgery, the wider trend underscores Korea's broader strategy of leveraging cultural appeal, service quality, and medical reputation to capture global healthcare demand.

A significant development is the rise of the digital platform called UNNI, which focuses specifically on aesthetic services (UNNI, n.d.). This platform provides foreign patients with centralized access to procedure information, clinic profiles, approximate pricing, promotional discounts, and user reviews in multiple languages, effectively lowering informational and linguistic barriers to participation. These apps are designed to be foreigner-friendly by offering tools such as in-app comparisons, doctor ratings, and pre-booking options that align with modern demands for transparent and efficient service discovery.

From a tourism and international management perspective, digital intermediaries function as market infrastructures that reorganize how trust, choice, and legitimacy are produced prior to travel. By standardizing clinic information, increasing price visibility, and normalizing discount practices, these platforms reduce perceived risk for foreign patients and integrate elective cosmetic surgery into global healthcare decision-making. More than marketing tools, they actively shape patient expectations and position Korean cosmetic surgery as credible and accessible within international medical tourism flows.

Despite their central role, digital platforms remain under-theorized in medical tourism scholarship. This paper argues that platforms such as UNNI should be understood as infrastructural actors through which Korean cosmetic surgery is transformed into capitalized soft power, linking national strategy, digital governance, service management, and cultural authority. Importantly, Korean cosmetic surgery does not merely compete on price but also leverages a sophisticated digital ecosystem and a reputation for medical excellence that transform clinical procedures into a lifestyle-oriented and trustworthy consumer experience for global patients.



Figure 2. UNNI Application Interface as a Digital Intermediary Enabling Multilingual Access, Price Transparency, and Clinic Comparison for International Patients Seeking Korean Cosmetic Surgery

Hallyu, Visual Culture and Aesthetic Influence

The Korean Wave has played a central role in amplifying South Korea's global cultural presence and shaping transnational aesthetic preferences. Through the widespread circulation of K-pop, television dramas, film, and social media content, Hallyu generates highly curated visual representations that construct and disseminate specific ideals of beauty (Sunyogita, 2024).

Unlike traditional cultural exports, which rely on narrative or linguistic engagement, Hallyu operates primarily through visual and affective mechanisms. Repeated exposure to stylized images of celebrities and influencers creates aspirational standards that are internalized by global audiences.

These visual representations function as implicit templates for aesthetic enhancement, linking media consumption to bodily modification. Audiences do not simply admire these images; they seek to emulate them, thereby generating demand for cosmetic procedures that align with Korean beauty norms.

Kim (2025) argues that South Korea's emergence as a cultural powerhouse is driven by the integration of cultural production, digital platforms, and state-supported governance. This integration enables cultural influence to extend beyond entertainment into broader domains of consumption, identity formation, and embodiment.

However, while existing studies highlight the global impact of Hallyu, they rarely examine its direct connection to aesthetic medicine. This paper addresses this gap by linking visual culture to the material transformation of the body, demonstrating how media-driven aspiration translates into medical consumption.

Soft Power, Cultural Capital, and Embodied Authority

Soft power, as defined by Nye (2004, 2008), refers to the ability to shape preferences through attraction, legitimacy, and persuasion rather than coercion. While traditionally associated with cultural diplomacy and media influence, soft power is increasingly embedded within economic systems and commercial industries.

This study extends the concept by introducing the notion of capitalized soft power, in which cultural attraction is systematically converted into economic value and institutional authority.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital provides a crucial framework for understanding this process. In contemporary service economies, the body itself becomes a form of capital that can be invested in, enhanced, and leveraged for social and economic gain.

Aesthetic capital manifested through appearance plays an increasingly important role in determining opportunities for employment, social mobility, and recognition. Cosmetic surgery represents an intensified form of this process, where technological intervention is used to align the body with dominant global standards of attractiveness.

Importantly, surgically modified bodies function as mobile carriers of cultural influence. As individuals circulate across borders through tourism, media, and social interaction, they embody and reproduce Korean aesthetic norms, thereby extending Korea's cultural authority.

This form of influence is particularly powerful because it operates at an intimate and personal level, embedding soft power directly within the body rather than external cultural products.

International Management and Transnational Service Firms

From an international management perspective, Korean cosmetic surgery clinics can be conceptualized as transnational service firms operating in complex and high-risk environments. Service industries differ from manufacturing because they are characterized by intangibility, simultaneous production and consumption, and high dependence on trust (Lovelock, 1999). These challenges are amplified in cross-border contexts, where firms must navigate cultural differences, regulatory variation, and consumer uncertainty. This is consistent with international service-sector research, which shows that service firms face distinct challenges when expanding across national markets (Contractor et al., 2002).

Korean cosmetic surgery clinics address these challenges through the development of sophisticated organizational capabilities. These include standardized consultation protocols, multilingual communication systems, digital visualization technologies, and comprehensive post-operative care services. Such practices enable clinics to build trust with international patients while maintaining consistency in service quality.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on thematic analysis and theoretical interpretation. It examines how South Korean cosmetic surgery has developed into a monetized form of soft power through medical services, digital platforms, cultural imagery, and state-supported medical tourism. The analysis follows thematic analysis, which is used to identify, code, group, and interpret recurring patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data Sources

The study uses secondary data from four main sources. First, policy documents and national statistics from the South Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Korea Health Industry Development Institute, and the Korea Tourism Organization are used to examine medical tourism policy, foreign

patient attraction, and healthcare export strategies (Ministry of Health and Welfare, n.d.; Korea Health Industry Development Institute, n.d.; Korea Tourism Organization, n.d.). Second, digital platforms and clinic materials, including cosmetic surgery websites, online consultation services, and the UNNI application, are analyzed to understand how Korean surgery is marketed to domestic and international consumers (UNNI, n.d.). Third, selected Hallyu related media materials, including K-pop, K-dramas, beauty content, and influencer images, are examined to analyze how Korean beauty ideals circulate globally. Fourth, scholarly literature on soft power, cultural capital, medical tourism, Korean beauty culture, and cosmetic surgery is used to support the theoretical interpretation.

Data Selection Criteria

The study focuses on materials published between 2010 and 2024. This period was selected because it covers the global expansion of Hallyu, the growth of Korean medical tourism, and the digitalization of cosmetic surgery services. The data were selected based on three criteria. First, the material must be directly related to Korean cosmetic surgery, K-beauty, medical tourism, beauty standards, or foreign patient demand. Second, the source must be credible, such as official institutions, peer-reviewed studies, or widely used commercial platforms. Third, the material must show analytical value by linking cosmetic surgery to cultural attraction, economic value, or national branding.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is not individual patients. Instead, this study analyzes institutions, platforms, media images, and narratives. These include government policies, clinic branding, digital platform functions, Hallyu-based beauty representations, and academic discussions of Korean aesthetic culture. This approach allows cosmetic surgery to be studied as a wider cultural and economic system rather than only as a medical practice.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed through thematic coding. First, the materials were read and categorized according to recurring keywords, including medical tourism, K-beauty, foreign patients, Korean aesthetics, clinic branding, digital consultation, Hallyu, and beauty standards. Second, these initial codes were grouped into broader themes. Third, the themes were interpreted through the concepts of soft power and cultural capital.

The final analysis is organized around three themes. Economic mechanisms examine how medical services are transformed into cultural commodities and profitable export services. Transnational management examines how clinics and platforms manage language barriers, cultural distance, consumer trust, and international reputation. Symbolic power examines how K-beauty aesthetics become internalized as desirable global beauty norms.

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Analytical Framework

This study uses Joseph Nye's concept of soft power to explain how Korean cosmetic surgery attracts foreign consumers through desire, credibility, and cultural appeal rather than coercion (Nye, 2004, 2008). It also uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to explain how Korean beauty knowledge, surgical expertise, and aesthetic taste become symbolic resources that can be converted into economic value (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Together, these concepts support the idea of Korean beauty surgery as capitalized soft power, meaning cultural attraction that is transformed into market demand, service exports, and national economic value.

Analysis Korean Beauty Surgery as Capitalized Soft Power

From Aesthetic Practice to Cultural Authority

Korean beauty surgery did not emerge as soft power through a single state-led strategy. Rather, it gradually developed through the normalization of cosmetic procedures in everyday life, the standardization of surgical techniques, and the global circulation of Korean beauty ideals. Over time, Korea shifted from being a receiver of external beauty standards to becoming a producer of globally recognized aesthetic norms. Korean surgeons, clinics, and techniques are valued not only for medical expertise, but also for the belief that Korea possesses advanced and culturally legitimate knowledge of beauty.

Capitalization Mechanisms of Aesthetic Soft Power

The capitalization of Korean beauty surgery operates through three interrelated mechanisms.

Marketization: The cosmetic surgery industry is organized as a competitive and export-oriented service market. Clinics operate as branded institutions, surgeons are promoted through reputation and expertise, and procedures are packaged as specialized services. In this process, the body becomes a site of investment through which consumers seek social, professional, and personal value.

Mediatization: K-pop idols, actors, and influencers function as indirect references for surgical outcomes. While explicit endorsements are rare, visual culture continuously reinforces Korean aesthetic norms. Digital platforms amplify before-and-after narratives, normalize surgical transformation, and enhance Korea's aesthetic authority.

Institutional support: Government policies promoting medical tourism, international accreditation, and healthcare exports legitimize the industry (Ministry of Health and Welfare, n.d.; Korea Health Industry Development Institute, n.d.; Korea Tourism Organization, n.d.). This institutional support

embeds beauty surgery within national development and global competitiveness strategies, transforming private medical practices into national soft power assets.

The Strategy of Persuasion and Aspiration

Korean beauty surgery operates through persuasion rather than coercion. Foreign consumers voluntarily travel to Korea, seek Korean surgeons, and adopt Korean aesthetic ideals. This dynamic reflects soft power because it reshapes preferences and aspirations through attraction rather than direct political messaging. Patients do not merely purchase surgery. They also buy into Korean expertise, lifestyle, and cultural legitimacy.

Integration into the Hallyu Ecosystem

Korean beauty surgery does not function in isolation. It is embedded within the broader Hallyu ecosystem, alongside K-pop, K-dramas, cosmetics, and fashion. This ecosystem creates a self-reinforcing loop. Media visibility increases aesthetic aspiration, which drives demand for surgery, which then reinforces Korea's image as a beauty authority. This integration distinguishes Korea from other cosmetic surgery hubs. The industry's success lies not only in medical competence, but also in cultural storytelling and symbolic coherence.

Implications for Korean Studies and International Management

Conceptualizing Korean beauty surgery as capitalized soft power expands the analytical scope of Korean Studies beyond traditional cultural products. Rather than limiting Korean cultural influence to entertainment industries such as K-pop or television drama, this study shows that aesthetic medicine is also an institutionalized domain of cultural authority embedded in economic and regulatory structures.

For Korean Studies, this case highlights the role of embodied practices in shaping transnational influence. It shows that the body can become a geopolitical site where beauty, modernity, nationalism, and global competitiveness intersect. It also challenges the separation between cultural production and service industries by positioning cosmetic surgery as part of Korea's broader cultural economy.

For international management, the case demonstrates how service industries can function as cultural exporters. Korean clinics show how private firms manage cross-border consumers, reputational risk, language barriers, and cultural distance while also contributing to national symbolic capital. This means that soft power can be monetized not only through media or diplomacy, but also through institutionalized market systems.

Taken together, these implications reposition aesthetic medicine as both an economic strategy and a mechanism of cultural governance. Korean beauty surgery demonstrates how contemporary soft power increasingly operates through markets, platforms, services, and consumer desire.

Conclusion

This study has argued that Korean cosmetic surgery constitutes a distinctive and increasingly influential form of capitalized soft power, operating at the intersection of culture, economy, and embodied practice. By moving beyond conventional interpretations that frame cosmetic surgery primarily in terms of gender norms or medical tourism, the paper has demonstrated how aesthetic medicine functions as a strategic cultural industry embedded within national branding and global service systems.

Through the integration of state policy, digital platforms, transnational service management, and the broader Hallyu ecosystem, Korean cosmetic surgery has evolved from a localized medical practice into a globally institutionalized system of aesthetic authority. This transformation illustrates how influence in the contemporary era is no longer confined to traditional cultural exports such as film or music, but increasingly operates through market-driven, service-oriented, and technologically mediated industries.

A key contribution of this study is the conceptualization of the body as a site of geopolitical and economic power. Unlike conventional forms of soft power that rely on symbolic representation, Korean aesthetic surgery embeds influence directly within the materiality of the body, producing visible and durable forms of cultural authority. Surgically modified bodies circulate transnationally through tourism, media, and everyday interaction, functioning as embodied carriers of Korean aesthetic norms and professional legitimacy.

From an international management perspective, the study highlights how Korean cosmetic surgery clinics operate as transnational service firms that successfully manage trust, uncertainty, and cultural distance. Their competitive advantage lies not only in technical expertise but also in organizational capabilities that integrate standardized procedures with culturally adaptive service delivery. This demonstrates how service industries can simultaneously generate economic value and extend national cultural influence.

At the same time, the institutionalization of aesthetic authority raises critical questions regarding commodification, bodily governance, and the sustainability of globally circulating beauty standards. The increasing normalization of cosmetic surgery as a form of self-investment may reinforce unequal access to aesthetic capital and intensify pressures for bodily modification across different social contexts.

Therefore, while Korean cosmetic surgery represents a powerful and innovative form of soft power, it also necessitates critical reflection on its broader social and ethical implications. Future research should explore the long-term sustainability of aesthetic soft power, potential cultural resistance, and the evolving relationship between digital platforms, identity formation, and bodily transformation.

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In conclusion, this study demonstrates that contemporary soft power is increasingly embedded within institutionalized market systems and embodied practices, challenging conventional boundaries between medicine, culture, and geopolitics. By reframing cosmetic surgery as both an economic strategy and a mechanism of cultural governance, the paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how influence operates in the globalized, service-driven economy.

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