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# (Un)saving face, or the designer face as a new consumer commodity

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## ABSTRACT

The designer face as a new consumer commodity is a focus of this work. By venturing into the global marketplace of elective plastic surgery, the authors aim to develop a concept of the face in the consumer behavior discipline. “What is the face?” – is the fundamental research question. What makes the face the site of voluntary alteration? How do marketing forces drive the mainstream embrace of surgical correction of facial features as a commercial commodity, similar to shoes? This study takes place in South Korea, a nation that places a strong metaphorical value on the face and has historically developed the honor-centered concept of “saving face” as a guiding principle of life. Specifically study examines the normative function of advertising as presented in street billboards. Results show a transition occurring for the face’s major functions and highlight emerging newer functions – the face as a mask and the face as fashion.

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## 1. Introduction: are you proud of your nose?

The girl’s eyes are softly closed, her gently tightened lips are stretched in a light smile, and the overall look of her face profile hints at the sweet bliss the young female is experiencing at this very moment. The billboard copy reads: “Be proud of your nose. Have it done at Wannabe Plastic Surgery clinic.” Another model on the same poster shows off what is described as a “natural eye line,” also crafted at the same clinic. Both females appear to be mature, though their faces look like those of teenagers. The billboard resides on the wall of a subway station in Seoul, next to others promising bigger eyes and v-line shaped chins. These advertisements are close to kiosks and stands selling shoes, bottled water, and rice cakes.

The designer face as a new consumer commodity is a focus of this work. Starting with futuristic fiction, the “designer body” idea is moving fast from the exclusive domain of celebrity personalities to the mainstream marketplace (Kim, 2015) and is embraced by consumers working on their identity formation (Shrum et al., 2013). As a result, cosmetic surgery to alter facial features is becoming more commonplace as a means to achieve a satisfactory self-concept (Liu, Keeling, & Hogg, 2016). The female face in particular is the topic of this research, because women reportedly make up about 90% of plastic surgery patients (Chang, 2015).

On the basic physiological level, the face is the most distinctive human body element that sets a person apart from others. “More than any other part of the body, we identify the face as *me* or *you*”

(Synnott, 1993, p.73). Unless veiled, the face is always on display, revealing clues about one’s age and racial distinctions, such as the shape of cheekbones, noses, lips, and eyes. In this sense, the face is a powerful communication medium that establishes initial relational ties. Unsurprisingly, consumer behavior studies give due attention to the face, primarily addressing the management of aging faces (Jacoby, 2011; Noble, Schewe, & Kuhr, 2004; Yoon & Cole, 2008) and examining the meaning of wrinkles (Schouten, 1991; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). This study aims to bring stronger focus to the face by exploring more feature elements yet to be conceptualized in prior consumer studies.

The research objective is to develop a concept of the face in the consumer behavior discipline. “What is the face?” – is the fundamental research question. Why is the face an object of voluntary alteration? How do marketing forces drive the mainstream embrace of surgical correction of facial features as a commercial good, similar to shoes? To address these questions, this study examines “idealized” facial features in Asia. This geographic location is meaningful because many Asian countries place a strong metaphorical value on the face and have historically developed the honor-centered concept of “saving face” as a guiding principle of life (Lee, 1999). Scholars suggest that women in Asia give much more attention to their facial features than women in Western societies who generally are more concerned with the body (Kim, Seo, & Baek, 2013).

South Korea is a justifiable study country because an estimated 20% of women have something surgically altered on their faces, arguably the highest known proportion in the world (Willett, 2013). Academic research asserts that the traditional Korean conceptualization of ideal female beauty emphasizes the face rather than the body (Jung & Lee, 2009). Face size and shape are the most important factors for judging overall facial beauty in the culture (Cho, 2002). Reportedly, one in ten

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South Koreans who have plastic surgery done is in his or her teens (Kang, 2015). Double eyelid surgery and nose surgery are considered to be the best high school graduation presents in the nation. Moreover, South Korea has one of the highest numbers of plastic surgeons per capita of any country, followed by Brazil, the U.S., Japan and Russia, according to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (Swanson, 2015).

## 2. The face as a construct

Scholars in various disciplines collectively identify the multifaceted nature of the face and define an evolution starting from merely a physical body part to a carrier of deep symbolic, cultural, and social meanings. Sociologist Synnott (1993) summarizes the findings of face research by function. As “the prime symbol of the self,” the face is physical, unique, personal, private, and intimate. As a source of verbal and non-verbal communication, the face is public, malleable, and subject to fashion. Semiotically, the face links to God, love, the self and the soul. Synnott shows how the birth of physiognomy establishes the face as a marker of character. Aristotle, the first scientist to view the face as a particularly suitable part of the body to signify mental character, wrote: “The face, when fleshy, indicates laziness, as in cattle... A small face marks a small soul, as in the cat and the ape... So the face must be neither large nor little: an intermediate size is therefore best” (Aristotle & Barnes, 1984, p.1246). Aristotle offers an early attempt to normalize facial standards, without influence from marketers. Instead, the message originates from a Greek philosopher who is fascinated by the natural human form and “facism” in particular.

The face's function as a marker of fate was developed during the Renaissance with the rise of astrology. This time period attached cosmic significance to the face and transformed face-reading techniques from the descriptive to the predictive mode. From an astrological perspective, a face is viewed holistically, including moles, warts, and wrinkles. The specialized discipline of metoposcopy engaged in the reading of facial lines and spots. The belief was that past, present, and future were written in the face. Paintings of the 16–17th centuries document the “divine” significance of facial imperfections that were often plotted in detail in the portraits.

The concept of the face as a marker of fate advanced further with the suggestion that certain physical features signal a potentially criminal character. The clues to the criminal self, according to the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, include outstanding ears, abundant hair, a sparse beard, enormous frontal sinuses, broad cheekbones, a low forehead, oblique eyes, a small skull and, in women, a masculine face (Lombroso, 1968, pp. 369–72). Detective writer Agatha Christie (1987, pp. 51–3) highlights “the criminal jaw” to describe the “villainous looking man” in one of her popular novels.

Over time, the construct of the face converged with the concept of beauty (Synnott, 1993). The notion that bodily beauty is located primarily in the face, was widely shared in the past, and the historically praised aesthetic value of facial features is reflected in the images of the Egyptian royal beauty of Nefertiti and mysteriously smiling face of Mona Lisa. The Bible warns about the seductive power of facial beauty: “... nor let her allure you with her eyelids” (Proverbs 6:24–26).

While historically the facial beauty was objectively defined by the symmetry of facial features, academic studies also find cross-cultural relativism and subjectivity of perceptual beauty. Thus, the first scientist to offer an early anthropology of beauty, Michel de Montaigne (1965, pp. 355–6) describes the Indies who painted their faces “black and dusky, with large swollen lips and a wide flat nose” and locals in Peru who considered big ears to be a symbol of beauty.

Originated respectively by Aristotle and Plato, the themes of the face and beauty now constitute two intertwined elements of the symbolic self in contemporary thought that provides analysis of the facial beauty ideals, identifies earlier religion and modern day media as forces normalizing beauty standards, and gives attention to the consumer

behavior resulting from the notions of facial beauty. Beautification as face management is a focal point of the latter studies that demonstrate the current societal acceptance of things like make-up and tattoos. This view differs from the distant past when up until the Renaissance, Christian tradition declared the face as a mirror of the soul and regarded beautification as sinful. “Enlarging eyes with paint” was condemned as vain, “smearing faces with the ensnaring devices of worldly cunning” was seen as only appropriate for courtesans, the use of cosmetics signaled “the deeply diseased soul,” and having “rouge and white on a Christian woman's face” was “an evidence of unchaste mind” (Synnott, 1993, p.85).

## 3. Methods

Driven by the fundamental question “What is the face?” within the face-saving culture of South Korea, this study developed a working research question to guide our inquiry: what makes a culture rooted in conservative beliefs so openly question and surgically correct the “quality” of the body received from one's parents? Given the collectivist character of Korean culture, the primary interest is identifying the guidance coming from societal forces such as outdoor advertising (Fedorenko, 2014) to legitimize the embrace of a novel pattern—facial plastic surgery—in consumer behavior.

The exploratory nature of the research questions shapes the qualitative methodological approach and focuses on “what” and “why” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and the respective design of the study. Following norms and values dictated by the prevailing Neo-Confucian beliefs against those manifested through marketing channels, the study aims to theorize the concept of the face. Specifically, this study aims to uncover the normative messages and consumer directions coming from marketers. Researchers performed a close reading of advertising billboards and street signs promoting plastic surgery and located in Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Employing this methodological direction, results extend the studies that view “facism and the beauty mystique” to be primarily visual phenomenon, most apparent in films, television programs, and advertising (Synnott, 1993). Ad images tend to have “an extremely normalizing influence on women” in Korea who are drawn to them in search of bodily templates (Kim, 2003, p. 109). The Korea Consumer Agency claims that ads influence one-third of local patients choice of plastic surgery hospital (Kang, 2015). Moreover, scholars report that the number of advertisements in fashion and beauty magazines in South Korea that focus on female models' faces is greater compared to the United States (Jung & Lee, 2009). This latter finding suggests similar results in outdoor advertising.

Subway billboards and street signs exemplify the intrusive and impersonal nature of street marketing (Lee & Callcott, 1994; Rosewarne, 2005; Wilson & Till, 2011). Contrary to print, TV or social media advertising, billboard advertising hardly requires any action from consumers, such as browsing a webpage, turning on the TV, or opening the newspaper or a magazine (Taylor & Franke, 2003). A billboard's impersonal nature defines the commercial language of the street—indiscreet, bold and loud, pursuing anyone and everyone (Lopez-Pumarejo & Bassell, 2009).

Fifty subway billboards and street signs encouraging facial plastic surgery form the data set. Employing ethnographic research tools, photos of the outdoor signs were taken by the authors between late 2014 and early 2015 while purposely visiting subway stations in the Gangnam district of Seoul. This district, made famous by Psy's worldwide hit song, “Gangnam Style,” has a reputation as a “beauty belt” and boasts 362 plastic surgery clinics (Tal, 2015). One of the authors, who speaks Korean as a second language and currently resides in Seoul, translated the textual information in the billboards into English. To verify translation accuracy, the other author sent the original photos and translated text to a female native Korean speaker living in the United States. This step validates the translated content and added some cross-cultural interpretation to the data. For example, the native

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