

OUT OF HOME

Luxury beauty concept goes beyond product for Asian consumers

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Promotional image for ID Hospital

By JEN KING

SEOUL, South Korea In Asia, undergoing plastic surgery to alter one's appearance is a symbol of status and class, just as much as owning a Chanel handbag is in the West.

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The opening keynote "Changing Faces" on day two of the Conde Nast International Conference April 21 sought to dissect the Asian consumers' acceptance and embrace of plastic surgery to achieve self-fulfilling goals. South Korean beauty has exploded on the global cosmetic and skincare scene recently, but beyond the average female consumer's reliance on seven to 10 products, before cosmetics, for a daily personal care routine, plastic surgery challenges what many associate with luxury.

"What would you do with \$5,000?" asked Sanghoon Park, plastic surgeon and president of [ID Hospital](#).

"Would you buy a new luxury handbag or would you undergo a rhinoplasty instead? Designer watches or facial reconstruction procedure?" he said.

"It's the same thing. Potential luxury buyers are my potential patients."

The many faces of beauty

In Seoul's Gangnam district there is a whole stretch of buildings dedicated to plastic surgery, many of which have been designed to blend in with the luxury flagship stores that populate the neighborhood.

Dr. Park's ID Hospital is counted among these boutique plastic surgery centers, seeing more than 1,000 patients from more than 30 countries in an average year.

Plastic surgery is part of every day life in South Korea, with many post-op patients walking the streets with bandaged faces. While it may be an abnormal practice in the West, South Koreans do not associate plastic surgeries with the same stigmas.



ID Hospital in Seoul, South Korea

The desire to be beautiful has always been part of the human experience, but when not naturally obtained, magic often came into play in literature before science and medicine evolved into the modern beauty industry.

For Asian consumers, beauty standards are firmly based on culture. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs for the Eastern consumer, status ranks the highest, followed by admiration and affiliation, whereas in the West individuals place emphasis on self-actualization, prestige and belonging.

Dr. Park summarized this thinking by explaining that in the West consumers may ask why someone is getting a nose job, but in Asia the question posed is, "Why is [she] not getting a nose job?"

Patients that come to Dr. Park's surgical center cite self-improvement 27 percent of the time as the reason for undergoing the knife. Other reasons include a physical-psychological complex (34 percent), better employment opportunities (22 percent) and peer pressure (7 percent).



Dr. Sanghoon Park meeting with a patient at ID Hospital in Seoul, South Korea

The majority of patients are in their 20s and 30s, and procedures are often paid for by parents who feel it is their responsibility to be supportive and increase the likelihood of their children's acceptance. Common procedures include rhinoplasty, eyelid surgeries to create a more Western eye shape, facial contouring to give the face a slimmer, softer look and cheekbone reductions to recall youth.

Treatment threats

In some ways, plastic surgery is competing with the luxury industry for shares in the competitive beauty market. This is a result of marketing practices that position cosmetics and plastic surgery in the same ways, as well as the strategic positioning of surgical centers.

Industrialization and globalization is also propelling the plastic surgery industry. Increasingly, consumers in the

region have begun to travel for procedures, marrying vacations with surgeries, often staying for a longer time frame, rather than visiting a destination only to have work done.

In the United States, for example, The Peninsula Hotels is going the extra mile to keep its guests comfortable and relaxed with an ambitious new healthcare offer.

As of fall 2015, The Peninsula Hotel Beverly Hills, CA, began working with the Beverly Hills Medical Concierge (BHMC) to provide guests with a world-class healthcare experience during their stay. The partnership is an innovative way for the brand to display its care for patrons and could attract potential consumers who need access to the area's array of renowned surgeons ([see story](#)).

To this point, the South Korean government recently began offering tax-free plastic surgery program available for foreigners to attract visitors interested in procedures.

This has also worked to alter the role of plastic surgery, with the practice becoming a sort of all-in-one, total beauty consultant, providing solutions in one-stop with results lasting a lifetime.

But, there is also evidence that plastic surgery is not pitted against the luxury beauty industry, as the reasons for undergoing a procedure differ based on the core expectations for results.

Since many Asian consumers turn to plastic surgery for reasons of bullying and discrimination, the motives are based in survival. To this, Dr. Park feels that this is not a threat to luxury beauty, but that narcissism-based plastic surgery is a competitor to the sector.

"Sometimes [patients] want to take a photo with me," Dr. Park said.

"I think it's because of two reasons," he said. "One, because it became such an enjoyable process, and two the surgery is a life changing experience, they want to keep me in their memory forever.

"I'm very happy to be part of it. Changing a life is more than just purchasing goods."