

A Study on Tourist Motivation for Doing Plastic Surgery in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the motivations of international tourists to undergo plastic surgery in South Korea, known for its advanced medical services and strong reputation in cosmetic surgery. Using a quantitative approach through an on-site survey conducted in the Gangnam area on May 2-3, 2024, data were collected from 40 respondents. Most participants were female tourists aged 21-30, mainly from China. Findings show that service quality is the primary factor influencing destination choice, followed by accessibility, and 82% underwent surgery to improve appearance rather than for medical reasons. Despite awareness of potential side effects, 90% remained willing to proceed. Overall satisfaction was high, indicating that Korea's medical excellence and destination appeal strengthen its position in global medical tourism.

INTRODUCTION

South Korea has long captured global attention not only for its popular culture and distinctive culinary heritage but also as a highly sought-after international tourism destination. The rise of Korean popular culture, widely known as the Korean Wave, has attracted millions of foreign visitors each year, positioning Korea as one of the most frequently visited countries by international tourists. In addition to mainstream tourism, Korea is also widely recognized as a global center for aesthetics and plastic surgery. The field of plastic and cosmetic surgery in Korea has grown rapidly over the past few decades. For instance, the proportion of women in Korea who have undergone cosmetic procedures increased from approximately 5% in 1994 to 31% in 2015 (Statista, 2020). This trend indicates that cosmetic procedures are no longer considered taboo but rather have become part of lifestyle practices and aesthetic aspirations for many individuals.

This development intersects with the phenomenon of medical tourism, defined as the practice of traveling abroad to obtain medical services. In Korea, medical tourism has become a significant sector; since the late 2000s, the number of inbound medical tourists has steadily increased (Kim et al., 2013). This reflects the international reputation of Korean medical services, including plastic and cosmetic surgery in terms of quality, reliability, and professionalism.

Furthermore, academic research on medical tourism in Korea highlights that factors such as medical service quality, physician expertise, technology, and customer-perceived value are critical elements in attracting foreign medical tourists (Sung, 2017). Perceived benefits, such as expert surgeons and high-quality services, relative to costs or other sacrifices, serve as the primary drivers of medical tourists' decision-making. Within this context, Korea has emerged as a global destination for medical tourism, particularly for aesthetic and cosmetic procedures reinforced by the cultural appeal of K-pop, Korean beauty standards, media influence, and lifestyle trends, alongside a strong medical reputation. The synergy between cultural tourism and medical services makes the medical tourism phenomenon in Korea both unique and compelling to examine.

In light of these issues, this article discusses the concept of urban tourism, plastic surgery as a form of medical tourism, the influence of medical reliability and destination image on tourist interest, and destination marketing strategies. The primary focus of the study is to identify the factors that attract tourists to undergo plastic surgery in Korea, their level of awareness regarding these procedures, and their satisfaction with both surgical outcomes and tourism experiences while in Korea.

These findings align with previous studies suggesting that the medical tourism industry faces significant challenges related to perceived value, defined as the combination of expected benefits and the monetary or non-monetary costs borne by tourists. In the context of South Korea, perceived value extends beyond the quality of medical procedures to include supporting services and the overall medical tourism experience. Empirical research indicates that tourists' decisions to undergo cosmetic surgery in Korea are strongly influenced by perceptions of high-quality medical services, including surgeon reputation, modern facilities

and technology, and the strength of clinic or national branding as a medical tourism destination (Kim et al., 2019). Additionally, convenience-related factors, such as companion support services, accommodation, language assistance, administrative simplicity, and integrated tourism-medical experiences have proven crucial to shaping customer value among international tourists.

From a practical perspective, the development of medical tourism in Korea has also been driven by government policies and aggressive promotional strategies; national branding initiatives such as Medical Korea have been launched to reinforce Korea's position within the global medical tourism market (Bintang, 2025). By understanding how popular culture, medical reputation, and marketing strategies work synergistically to shape this industry, the present study contributes to tourism and marketing literature on medical tourism as a multidimensional phenomenon (culture + medicine + tourism), and offers managerial implications for medical service providers and tourism destinations aiming to attract international tourists. Moreover, the findings provide meaningful insights for tourist-sending countries, including Indonesia, in identifying competitive opportunities and strategies for developing their domestic healthcare services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban Tourism

Urban tourism has been a consistent theme in tourism research since 1980's (Ashworth, 2003). Law (2002) defined urban tourism simply as tourism in urban areas, but the explanation of this definition still needs clarification. According to Jansen-Verbeke (1986), urban tourism is the activity of tourists who come from outside the area of the town and visit the inner city dominantly for leisure. Edward et al. (2008) state tourism is an industry that manages and markets varieties of product and experience to people with motivation and culture perspective, and touring activity has become a factor of economic recovery, with 924 million international tourists in 2008 (Serrano, 2009). Urban tourism is an aspect of the relation between internal and external demands, and Reutsche (2006) mentions primary and secondary elements. The primary elements attract visitors, such as places for activities (culture and sport facilities) and leisure time, while secondary elements (adaptation and accessibility) support success but are not the main attraction. Proper planning may bring advantages (Iordache & Cebuc, 2009), encouraging improvement of cultural and facilities for residents and tourists. Stanciulescu (2009) notes benefits such as job opportunities, new perspectives, investment possibilities, increased income and improved life standards, and infrastructure improvement.

Plastic Surgery as Medical Tourism

Medical tourism can be defined as when consumers travel across international edge with the purpose of receiving medical treatments (OECD, 2010). Medical Tourism Association (2013) mentioned people who live in one country and travel to another country for medical care because of higher level of quality, affordability, and for the greater care than they would received in their own country. The treatments are including dental care, elective surgery, cosmetic

surgery, and fertility surgery. Some medical tourism destination are being made to promote the heritage, cultural, and recreational opportunities, and the reputations of the places are usually one of the focus points for customers (Turner, 2007). Booster of medical tourism inclusive of globalization which are cultural, technological, social and economic. Medical tourism has attracted many tourists to visit a country, especially by the cosmetic surgery which is also as known as plastic surgery, and the visitors of the plastic surgery are not necessary ill (Hall, 2003). They were more than 266,000 medical tourists visited South Korea in year 2015, meanwhile more than 50% of them were there for the plastic surgery. Cosmetic surgery has experience a price driven phenomenon and keep increasing over the past decade, and in medical tourism, cosmetic surgery even being included in a vacation packages by numerous companies. Although plastic surgery purpose is for medical treatment, moreover it is also marketed as vacation (Downy, 2014).

Reliability

Reliability could be a concept which refers to an equipment maintaining the performances in time from the production field (Stanciu & Hapenciuc, 2009), and reliable means trustworthy and dependable. To measure the reliability of a product as well as the lifetime, analysis must be held regarding the general impression, tourists options, administration, image of touristic product, planning, as well as employees behavior. Reliability is implies with the permanent correlation of touristic product with the expectation as well as the demands of tourists, and it is also requires the implication of marketing department (Stanciu & Hapenciuc, 2009). It is usually implies on product for raising the standard of competence and planning on maintaining the tourism infrastructure. According to Ching et al. (2002), reliability gives the index of whether a scale rating giving the same result when subject area repeated measurements under the other conditions. The consumer satisfaction shows the higher degree when service provider shows the integrity, and reputation of service provider being created and considered as the most reliable fact of the ability of the service provider.

Tourist Destination Image

The image of the destination given the image that tourists have as the element which influencing the behavioral intention and final choice. According to Lawson and Baud Bovy (1977), destination image could be defined as the expression of knowledge, imagination and emotional thoughts of people about a destination, and Haider and Rein (1993) defined image as the overall ideas, belief, and impression that people had interact with a destination. Image is more important than the other tangible resources in tourism research because it is the perception that motivates consumer acts rather than reality (Gallarza et al., 2002), and decisions making process is depend on the perceptions of people and the impressions on the other. According to Price (1987), products are comprehended in terms of the holistic impressions and individual attributes. Echtner and Ritchie (1991) has suggested the components of destination image based on the people's perception in decisions making process, including the attributes, holistic,

functional and psychological. According to Echtner and Ritchie (1991), when uniting the components, the components will be a functional holistic image, a functional attribute image, psychological holistic image, and psychological attribute image. Moreover, as can be seen in figure 1, it is also included additional dimension which is common and unique, and the tourist destination image could be defined into three dimensions: attributes-holistic, functional-psychological, and common-unique.

Tourism Destination Marketing

Marketing is defined as the process of social and managerial, by individuals or groups in obtain what they need through exchanging and creating products and values with others (Kotler et al. 1999). A destination margin is ultimately decided by the market, influencing with the cultural limits, physical as well as the marketing. Marketing of tourism destination is considered as tourism marketing in particular and marketing in general (Middelton, 2000). According to UNWTO (2011), destination marketing has acknowledged as the sustainability and future growth of tourism destination in increasing the competitiveness of the market for tourists. Piercy and Morgan (1990) suggested a broad overview on the role of marketing for an organization. Differentiation of marketing is made through three elements: marketing strategy, marketing information and marketing programs. Marketing strategy being concerned with defining the market position, segmentation, and the competitive strategic position. Marketing programs concerned the integration of market targets which related to the pricing of product, policy and communication. Marketing information concerned with the evaluation of the programs for the aim of planning and controlling.

METHODOLOGY

The data which being used is primary data, and primary data contains high accuracy because it is the original data and related to the research topic. However, for this study the method which being used is quantitative data, therefore on site survey will be used for this study. According to Veal (1992), on site survey is the most used type of survey in tourism, and by using on site questionnaire, it is low cost and it has high response rate. The on-site survey will be conducted at South Korea, the exact location is Gangnam area, and the survey will be conducted on 2nd and 3rd of May 2024. Sampling is a process of selecting participants for doing a research, and the sampling size for the survey will be 40 people. For this study, author has decided to use excel data analyst as the analysis method, and the result of the survey could be discuss in a form of table and graph. In doing the survey they are some limitations which made the researcher a little bit hard in doing the research, inclusive of limitation of time and limitation of language.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Demographic of Respondents

	Number of Respondents	Percentages
Gender		
Female	34	85%
Male	6	15%
Age		
<20	2	5%
21-30	20	50%
31-40	10	25%
41-50	6	15%
>50	2	5%
Nationality		
China	25	62.5%
India	1	2.5%
Indonesia	8	20%
Thailand	2	5%
United State	1	2.5%
Japan	1	2.5%
Other	2	5%
Income (USD)		
<\$ 1500	2	5%
\$1501-2500	3	7.5%
\$2501-3500	15	37.5%
>\$3500	20	50%
Employment Status		
Student	8	20%
Self Employed	11	27.5%
Employed	19	47.5%
Unemployed	0	0
Retired	2	5%

From the on site survey which has been done, it results as can be seen in table 1. It shows most of the respondents of the survey were female and it reached 85% which is 34 people, meanwhile the rest were male whereby it reached 15% which is 6 people. Most of the respondents were at the age between 21 to 30 years old, and the respondents of the survey were mostly came from China whereby it reached 62,5% which is 25 people. In related with the income, most of the respondents have the income of more than USD \$3500, whereby it reached 50% of the total respondents, and most of the respondents which reached 47,5% who did the plastic surgery were employed and have the stable income. As in this era, medical treatment is quite expensive however they are still quite a lot of people seeking for treatment.

What Attracts Visitor to do Plastic Surgery in Korea

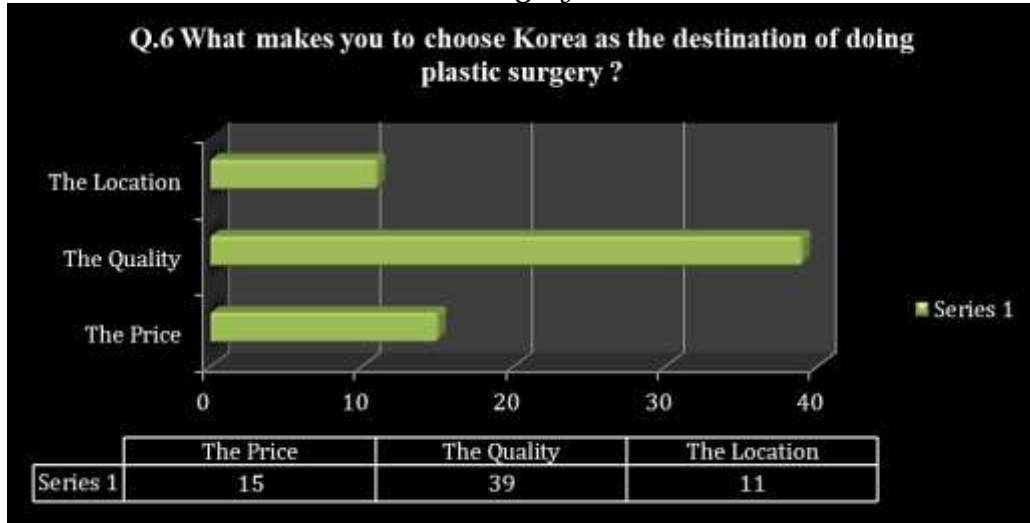


Figure 1. What Attracts Visitors

As a tourism destination and seek for medical destination, the reputation or the image of a destination is a big consideration for visitors to visit, and plastic surgery is a major point in medical tourism. From the graph above, it can be seen the question of the survey contained the factors of why respondents choose Korea as the destination of doing plastic surgery, and the factors included the location, the price, and the quality. From the graph above it shows the result that most of the respondents which is 39 of the respondents choose Korea as the destination of doing plastic surgery is because of the quality that it could offer. Furthermore, most of the respondents were from China and it also makes the location as one of the factor that attract tourists to Korea.

The Purpose of Doing Plastic Surgery

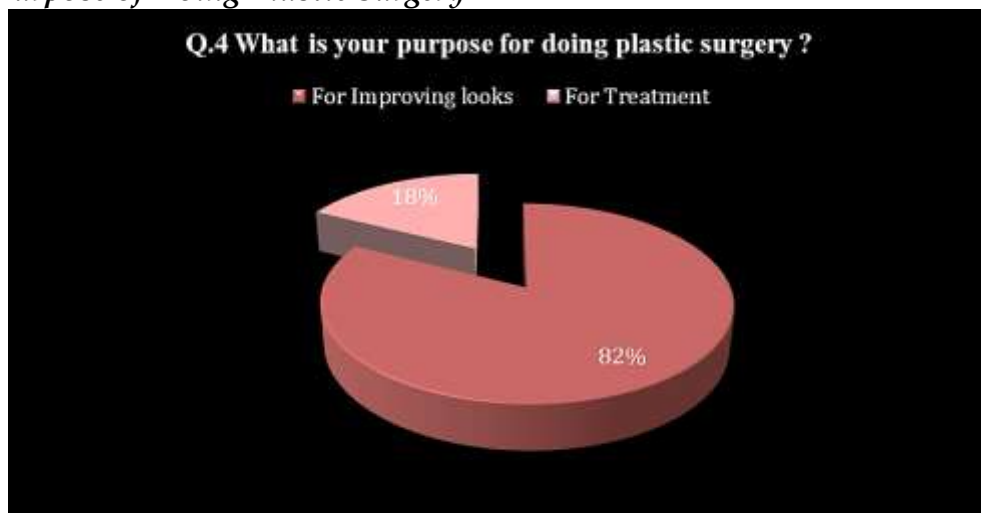


Figure 2. What is The Purpose

Hall (2003) mentioned the visitors of the plastic surgery are not necessary ill, and the people who did the plastic surgery may have the other reason for doing it. As can be seen from the graph above, they are 82% of the respondents were doing plastic surgery for improving looks, meanwhile they are only 18% of

the respondents did the plastic surgery due to ill or damage of the look. From the further analysis, author found out from 34 female respondents, 32 of the female respondents did the plastic surgery due to improving looks, and the 6 male respondents who participate in doing the survey did the plastic surgery for improving looks. Furthermore, by the survey most of the participants giving response face is the part that they did the plastic surgery.

Awareness of Side Effects by Doing Plastic Surgery



Figure 3. Awareness of Side Effects

Plastic surgery could be done for the treatment and improve looks, however they are several side effects from doing plastic surgery. The side effects from doing plastic surgery could be painful bruise, nerve damage, infection, as well as blood loss. From the survey which has been done, the question on the graph above is about whether the respondents aware towards the side effects from doing plastic surgery. The survey results 90% of the respondents aware toward the side effects from doing plastic surgery as mentioned above. However they are 10% of the respondents are not aware toward the side effects. The survey also results although some of the respondents are not aware about any side effects, they are still desire in doing plastic surgery.

Overall Satisfaction

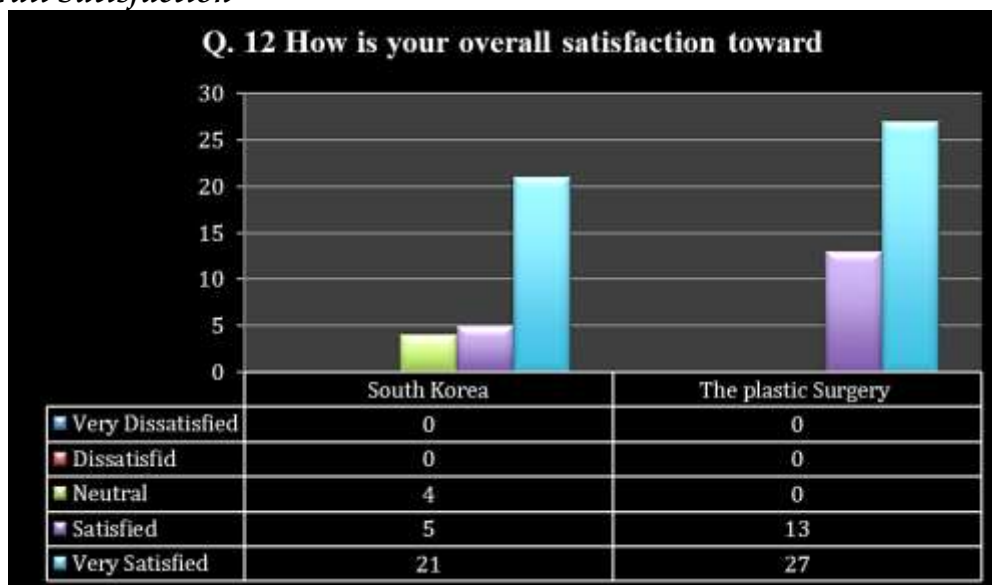


Figure 4. Overall Satisfaction

Satisfaction is one of the factors which made consumers will re visit or re purchase certain products or services. Satisfaction could also leads to several positive impacts such as positive word of mouth communication and advertisement. In the graph above, it shows the respondents overall satisfaction toward South Korea and the plastic surgery. South Korea is a four seasons country where it is rich of the culture and varieties of food and it is also the factor why they are a lot of tourists choose the country as the destination to visit. From the survey, it shows more than 50% of respondents are very satisfied with the country. Moreover they are 67,5% of the respondents which is 27 people are very satisfied with the plastic surgery of South Korea. By the responses from the survey, it can be analyze medical treatment of the country has attracts many of foreign tourists and it will bring more positive impacts to the country if it is keep growing.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be proposed. First, medical service providers and plastic surgery clinics in South Korea should continue to improve service quality, particularly in medical expertise, safety standards, and patient care, as these are key determinants of tourist decisions. Enhancing multilingual support services including consultation assistance, translation, and post-surgery support – may further strengthen accessibility for international patients, especially those from China and other Asian countries. Second, collaboration between government, tourism agencies, and medical institutions is recommended to develop integrated medical-tourism packages combining surgery, recovery facilities, and leisure activities. Third, promotional strategies should emphasize patient satisfaction, successful outcomes, and transparent information regarding risks and procedures. Finally, future research should involve larger sample sizes and diverse nationalities to increase result

generalizability and explore additional factors influencing medical tourism behavior.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study opens opportunities for advanced research that examine how cultural influence, destination image, and medical service quality interact to shape long-term behavioral intentions among international medical tourists seeking plastic surgery in South Korea. Future studies could employ mixed-method or longitudinal designs to assess not only pre-visit motivations but also post-surgery psychological outcomes, trust formation, and repeat-visit intentions across diverse nationalities. Expanding the sample size and integrating variables such as digital marketing exposure, risk perception, surgeon-patient communication quality, and recovery-tourism integration may provide deeper insights into how Korea's medical tourism ecosystem constructs perceived value. Additionally, comparative studies between South Korea and emerging medical tourism hubs could identify competitive advantages and strategic policy innovations for sustaining global leadership in aesthetic medical tourism.

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