

The Causes and Effects of Cosmetic Surgery on Kang Hanna as Seen in *200 Pounds Beauty* (2006)

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ABSTRACT

200 Pounds Beauty (2006) is one of the popular Korean Romantic comedy films. It tells the story of Kang Hanna, a woman who faces societal discrimination due to her weight. This film explores her significant decision to undergo cosmetic surgery and the irony that her change does not make her completely happy. This study examines the causes and effects of Kang Hanna's cosmetic surgery. The main theory for this study is the theory of body image. The findings show that Kang Hanna's negative body image and societal discrimination drive her decision to undergo cosmetic surgery. Additionally, it turns out that cosmetic surgery not only gives an initial effect on Kang Hanna but also further effects.

Keywords: appearance, body image, cosmetic surgery, discrimination, society

INTRODUCTION

Romantic comedy is one of the subgenres in Korean films. It can be understood as a combination of the romance and comedy genre. It centers on the development of a relationship in a humorous way and typically always leading to a happy ending (Mortimer, 2010, pp. 4). I am interested in analyzing Korean romantic comedy films for two main reasons. First, these films often portray relatable life situations and challenges, such as dating complexities and communication problems in relationships. Second, these films address deeper social issues like class inequality, family dynamics, gender inequality, cultural pressure, and toxic beauty standards. By blending these serious themes with humor, Korean romantic comedies make these topics more engaging and interesting to watch.

200 Pounds Beauty (2006) is one of the popular Korean romantic comedy films adapted from the Japanese manga titled *Kanna's Big Success!* by Suzuki Yumiko (Hwang, 2018). This film is directed by Kim Young-Hwa. I am interested in analyzing this film for several reasons. First, the film highlights the significant impact of physical appearance on a person's life, illustrating how those who conform to beauty standards receive better treatment and opportunities. Second, the issue of cosmetic surgery depicted in the film intrigues me due to its popularity, especially in South Korea, which is known as the "plastic surgery capital of the world" (Smith, 2023). This trend raises questions about the societal pressures and motivations behind such decisions. Third, the film shows that despite her successful cosmetic surgery, Kang Hanna does not find complete happiness, which is contrary to expectations. This unexpected outcome triggers me to explore the deeper effects of cosmetic surgery on her life.

200 Pounds Beauty (2006) tells Kang Hanna's life as an overweight woman who faces societal discrimination due to her appearance. Overwhelmed by rejection and pressure, Kang Hanna attempts suicide. However, fortunately she survives from that tragedy. Determined to fit societal beauty standards, she undergoes extensive cosmetic surgery and changes her identity to Jenny. However, despite her success, she remains unhappy. It seems that cosmetic surgery could not bring the happiness she has expected.

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In analyzing the internal cause of why Kang Hanna decides to have cosmetic surgery, I use the theory of body image. Body image can be described as a complex psychological construct related to one's body. It includes thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors (Cash, 2004). Positive body image involves loving, appreciating, and accepting one's body. Individuals with a positive body image are less affected by others' criticisms and do not judge themselves based on their physical appearance (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). On the other hand, negative body image can be defined as discontentment of some aspects of one's physical appearance (Cash, 2002, p. 269). There are three subscales that people often use to cope with their distressing body image. First, "avoidance" means efforts to prevent the threat from affecting one's body image-related thoughts and feelings. Second, "appearance fixing" means efforts to modify one's look by covering, hiding, or "fixing" a physical trait that is considered to be disturbing. Third, "rational positive acceptance" means activities or methods that center on acceptance and rational self-talk or through positive self-care. Compared to "rational positive acceptance", "avoidance" and "appearance fixing" are more highly related to negative body image (Cash, 2002, p. 43-44).

Body image is deeply connected with lookism. The relationship between the two lies in how societal standards of beauty often influence body image. Lookism is discrimination based on physical attractiveness (Spiegel, 2022). Due to the rise of lookism, cosmetic surgery has become a popular culture that is rooted in society (Park et al., 2018).

In the workplace, dress is also related to lookism. As a form of nonverbal communication, cloth conveys information about the wearer to the viewer. Therefore, individuals may manage their appearance to deliver specific messages. For women, dressing for success is important to conveying competence, power, and status. The importance of professional attire for women surged in the 1980s, when coordinated suits and separates became the norm in corporate culture (Adomaitis et al., 2017).

Besides analyzing the causes of why Kang Hanna decides to undergo cosmetic surgery, I am also interested in analyzing the effects of cosmetic surgery on Kang Hanna. Cosmetic surgery can help people to enhance their self-confidence and reduce body dissatisfaction (Ip & Ho, 2019). However, Ip and Ho (2019), discovered that cosmetic surgery can also heighten distress due to the fear of others discovering the fact of the procedure. Participants mostly agreed that it is difficult to disclose their cosmetic surgery experiences. One participant mentioned she would never inform her family or boyfriend about her surgery for fear of negative judgments. Furthermore, people who undergo cosmetic surgery could also receive negative attitudes from society. According to the research conducted by Tam et al. (2012), they find that cosmetic surgery is considered unacceptable. It can be understood that cosmetic surgery is perceived negatively in society.

ANALYSIS

The Causes and Effects of Undergoing Cosmetic Surgery

In this chapter, I will analyze the causes behind Kang Hanna's decision to undergo cosmetic surgery and its effects on her. The first section shows the internal and external causes of her decision. I explore Kang Hanna's negative body image through her thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors for the internal cause. This section covers three aspects which are Kang Hanna's thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about her body. Her behaviors are reflected in these aspects, as they are interconnected with her thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. I also analyse the societal discrimination she faces due to her appearance for the external cause. The second section explains the effects of the cosmetic surgery on Kang Hanna, focusing on both the initial and further effects.

The Causes of Kang Hanna's Decision to Undergo Cosmetic Surgery

The internal cause of Kang Hanna's decision to undergo cosmetic surgery is her negative body image. She is depicted as a woman who does not fit societal beauty standards due to her fat body and less attractive appearance. Therefore, Kang Hanna often perceives herself negatively. This negative body image can be seen from her thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors related to her body.

The first aspect that portrays Kang Hanna's negative body image is her thoughts about her body. She thinks that her body is unattractive because her body does not conform to the ideal body shape. One ideal body shape is the hourglass body. Women with an hourglass shape have shoulders and hips of balanced width with a clearly defined waistline. This body type is regarded as desirable, proportionate, and feminine. Kang Hanna once does self-criticism toward her body (Lookiero, 2022). It implies that a woman with an hourglass body is considered attractive. However, Kang Hanna's body contrasts to that ideal measurement. Therefore, she thinks that her body is unattractive, which is shown when she lies about her body measurements to her phone sex client to create an illusion of having an ideal body. Furthermore, her negative thoughts about her body are also shown when she does self-criticism toward her pre-surgery body. She says that her fat body is "ugly". This criticism comment is an explicit way to express her negative thoughts about her fat body. By using negative words to describe her own body, it is clear that she thinks her body is unattractive.

The second aspect that portrays Kang Hanna's negative body image is her feelings about her body. Kang Hanna's negative feelings stem from not fitting the ideal beauty standard. Kang Hanna's negative body image is reflected in her lack of confidence, which can be seen from her interactions with others. Unlike confident individuals who maintain good posture and eye contact, she often slouches and avoids eye contact, particularly around more attractive women. Besides lacking confidence, Kang Hanna feels ashamed of her body. She tends to avoid situations when her fat body becomes the center of attention. She feels uncomfortable when other people see her fat body.

The third aspect indicating Kang Hanna's negative body image is her belief about her body. She views her body as a barrier to her professional success. This belief stems from her perception that an attractive appearance is important in the workplace, where individuals with good-looking face and ideal body shape have better job opportunities. Consequently, she sees her body as unsuitable for jobs that require a good appearance. Because of that, she chooses occupations that do not emphasize looks, such as a phone sex operator and a backstage singer.

Therefore, Kang Hanna's decision to undergo cosmetic surgery stems from her negative body image, reflected in her thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors. Her dissatisfaction and psychological distress with her appearance lead her to seek cosmetic surgery as a coping mechanism. According to Cash (2002), "appearance fixing" is a coping mechanism that is closely related to negative body image, involving efforts to modify one's looks. In Kang Hanna's case, cosmetic surgery is her method of "appearance fixing." This proves that her negative body image is a primary reason for her decision.

Kang Hanna's decision to undergo cosmetic surgery is driven not only by the internal cause, which is her negative body image but also by the external cause, which is societal discrimination. She faces discrimination because her appearance does not conform to beauty standards. Society treats her differently due to her fat body and unattractive looks. She often receives different treatments in her professional life and her personal relationship. This external pressure contributes significantly to her decision to undergo cosmetic surgery.

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Kang Hanna experiences discrimination in her professional life when she works in the Korean music industry. Despite her skill and talent, Kang Hanna faces barriers to success solely because of her appearance. First, Kang Hanna encounters discrimination from her music producer, Sang Jun, due to her physical appearance, which is far from the Korean beauty standard favored in the entertainment industry. Despite Kang Hanna's exceptional singing ability, Sang Jun favors Ammy, a woman with a more attractive appearance. He gives her better job opportunities as a main idol. On the other hand, he lets Kang Hanna to work as a backstage singer. This disparity highlights societal biases that prioritize physical attractiveness over talent or skill in the entertainment industry.

Second, Kang Hanna experiences discrimination in her professional life due to her clothing choices. Her preference for wearing ordinary clothes receives prejudice from her colleagues. One of her colleagues, Ammy, criticizes Kang Hanna for wearing a baggy shirt. Ammy is portrayed as a woman who maintains her appearance including her clothing style. She wears a glamorous performance dress which contrasts with Kang Hanna's ordinary clothes. Ammy believes that her clothing style is more suitable with her occupations as a person who works in the entertainment industry. Based on this fact, Ammy insults Kang Hanna and suggests that she is unsuitable for dancing because of her clothing. According to Adomaitis et al. (2017), dress is also related to lookism. Dressing conveys information about the individual. People can control their appearance to project certain messages. Furthermore, dressing for success is important for women to express messages of competence, power, and status. In the context of the Korean pop industry, Ammy's clothing aligns with her occupations as an idol, whereas Kang Hanna's does not. Ammy uses this reality to give discriminatory comments to Kang Hanna. Thus, Kang Hanna faces discrimination from Ammy due to her failure to meet these appearance-based expectations in their professional environment.

Kang Hanna not only receives discrimination in her professional life but also in her personal relationships. Besides receiving unfair treatment at work, Kang Hanna faces discrimination from her best friend, Jeong Min, due to not fitting societal beauty standards. Jeong Min categorizes women into three types for men which are treasure, present, and reject. She puts Kang Hanna in the last category due to her fat body and unattractive looks. Jeong Min bluntly tells Hanna that she is a "reject" and unlikely to attract men like Sang Jun. Jeong Min's discriminatory treatment reflects a bitter reality where physical appearance determines a woman's worth. Jeong Min's treatments portray societal prejudice against those who do not conform to beauty standards. This discrimination puts pressure on Kang Hanna as an overweight woman.

The discrimination that Kang Hanna receives highlights the appearance-based biases in both professional and personal relationships. Kang Hanna's decision to undergo cosmetic surgery is influenced by society's discriminatory treatments towards her appearance. This further proves the societal pressure on physical beauty and its impact on individuals' self-worth.

The Effects of Undergoing Cosmetic Surgery on Kang Hanna

Kang Hanna experiences two kinds of effects of the cosmetic surgery, which are the initial effects and the further effects. The initial effect appears positive. However, it turns out that the cosmetic surgery also gives further effects on Kang Hanna. This is interesting because these further effects are the reason why Kang Hanna is still not completely happy even though she has succeeded in enhancing her appearance.

The initial effect is that Kang Hanna experiences a significant boost in self-confidence after her cosmetic surgery. According to Ip and Ho (2019), cosmetic surgery can help people to boost their self-confidence and reduce body dissatisfaction. Her increased confidence is evident

through various behaviors and actions. Firstly, comparing her gestures before and after surgery illustrates a huge difference. Before the surgery, she appears timid and self-conscious. She often avoids eye contact and lowers her head when she is in the middle of conversations. On the other hand, after the surgery, she shows a more confident posture by walking with her head held high and smiling. Additionally, Kang Hanna also does self-compliments due to her appearance. This behavior indicates improved self-esteem and satisfaction with her physical transformation. Lastly, her newfound courage to perform in front of large audiences demonstrates a significant increase in self-confidence. She confidently shows her talent without fear of judgment. These transformations highlight the positive effect of cosmetic surgery on Kang Hanna's confidence.

Despite gaining confidence from achieving her ideal beauty through cosmetic surgery, Kang Hanna does not find complete happiness. This is because she lives in a society that values natural beauty over artificially made looks. Therefore, Kang Hanna also experiences further effects of the cosmetic surgery. Two further effects she faces are anxiety about revealing her surgery and receiving negative comments from her surroundings.

First, Kang Hanna is anxious about revealing that she has undergone cosmetic surgery. She is concerned about the possibility of others discovering her secret and giving negative judgments. This is related with findings by Ip and Ho (2019), which explains that cosmetic surgery can increase distress related to the fear of being found out. To avoid this, Kang Hanna changes her identity to Jenny. She presents herself as a Korean-American to hide her true identity. This change is an attempt to protect herself from criticism and maintain a sense of authenticity. Kang Hanna's fear of exposure is further portrayed when she denies recognizing her father in public. Her pretense of not knowing him serves as a preventive effort to avoid any interactions that might reveal her cosmetic surgery. By distancing herself from her father, she minimizes the risk of exposing her cosmetic surgery secret. This proves her anxiety about disclosure.

Second, Kang Hanna also faces negative comments from those around her even though her new appearance meets the beauty standards. Before the surgery, she received negative judgements because of her appearance. Unfortunately, even after becoming slim and attractive, she continues to face criticism because her beauty is perceived as unnatural. This can be seen from Jeong Min's opinion. She states that women who undergo cosmetic surgery are "monsters" and suggests that such women are not truly beautiful or acceptable to men. This harsh judgment implies that Kang Hanna's beauty after surgery is viewed as inauthentic.

Furthermore, Sang Jun's opinion also represents bias toward cosmetic surgery. In a conversation, he expresses his strong dislike for cosmetic surgery. He prefers a woman with natural beauty compared to a woman who has undergone cosmetic procedures to improve her appearance. Sang Jun's opinion indirectly criticizes Kang Hanna as a woman who undergoes cosmetic surgery and suggests that cosmetic surgery is something negative that deserves disdain.

Moreover, Kang Hanna receives an anonymous terror, with derogatory words like "phony" written on her car. This unpleasant moment highlights the societal judgment and stigma surrounding cosmetic surgery. The word "phony" suggests that she is inauthentic. Kang Hanna's worth as a person is diminished by her decision to enhance her appearance through artificial procedure.

Kang Hanna faces both the initial and further effects of her decision to undergo cosmetic surgery. Initially, she gains confidence from her new body that fits beauty standards. However, her confidence is soon challenged by anxiety about revealing her surgery and receiving negative comments from others. Consequently, despite achieving her ideal body, she is

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not completely happy. Therefore, these further effects overshadow her newfound self-confidence.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing the cosmetic surgery issue in *200 Pounds Beauty* (2006), this article finds the causes and effects of Kang Hanna's decision to undergo cosmetic surgery. Kang Hanna's negative body image and societal discrimination are the causes of why Kang Hanna decided to undergo cosmetic surgery. Firstly, Hanna's negative body image is evident through her thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors. Her decision to undergo cosmetic surgery reflects her desire to enhance her physical shortcomings. Secondly, societal discrimination also plays a significant role. Despite her skills and talent, Kang Hanna experiences unfair treatment in her professional life and personal relationships due to her unattractive appearance. This external pressure from society further motivates Kang Hanna to enhance her appearance in order to be accepted by society. Kang Hanna's cosmetic surgery has both initial and further effects. Initially, the surgery boosts her confidence because she gains her ideal beauty. This newfound self-confidence can be seen from her gestures, self-compliments, and willingness to perform in front of the public. However, Hanna also experiences further effects. Firstly, she feels anxious about revealing her cosmetic surgery due to fear of judgment and rejection. This anxiety stems from societal stigma that values natural beauty and authenticity. Secondly, despite her improved appearance, Kang Hanna faces negative comments from people who view cosmetic surgery as unnatural. These further effects are the reasons why Kang Hanna is still not completely happy even though she has enhanced her physical appearance. Through analyzing this film, it becomes clear that appearance plays a significant role in one's life. This fact leads people to undergo cosmetic surgery to improve their looks. However, society ironically demands that women not only must fit ideal beauty standards but also achieve them naturally. This reveals that cosmetic surgery is not an ideal solution for enhancing appearance. While surgery can boost confidence, this newfound self-confidence is often overshadowed by stigma and negative treatment from those who value natural beauty over artificial beauty. Therefore, women who undergo cosmetic surgery may still face anxiety and unhappiness despite their efforts. This film ultimately suggests that women should accept their natural beauty.

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