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Snips, tucks fashionable for Korean men

Males turn to plastic surgery to enhance their appearance

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SEOUL, South Korea -- It started with doctors sculpting his nose, then an operation to cut his eyelids to create folds and make his eyes appear bigger. Next came Botox injections in his forehead, followed by the fat being sucked out of his abdomen.

Before he was done, Park Hyo-jung had 24 procedures on his body in a little more than three years to improve his appearance. He had repeat surgeries after an injury, added dimples to his cheeks, removed blemishes and chest hair, and transformed a droopy face into a studly visage.

"Before, I didn't have a girlfriend. I didn't want to even try because I didn't have confidence," said the 24-year-old, a technician at a medical supply company and a part-time student.

Plastic surgery was once mainly a female domain, but men have increasingly been going under the knife around the world to improve appearances as a way to boost self-esteem and compete for jobs.

South Korean men have begun to join in, so much so that local media write of men being gripped in a "plastic surgery craze."

In other hip cities, the stylish "metrosexual" look is being overtaken by the "ubersexual," a more macho breed whose straight sexual orientation is unambiguous. But in Seoul, the trend veers the other way, toward the "cross-sexual" -- an androgynous form of beauty.

That type of pretty boy allure has gained renewed attention from the hit movie *King and the Clown*, which became South Korea's all-time top-grossing movie in March with its story of an effeminate male jester at the centre of a gay love triangle during Korea's Chosun empire.

While cases like Park are an extreme example, the trend of men seeking a nip and tuck reaches all the way to the president's office: Roh Moo-hyun had his eyelids done last year. The official reason his office gave was to correct a condition that could affect his sight.

With the president having the procedure done -- even though it was for medical reasons -- the already-fading taboo on even older men having plastic surgery was thrown out the window.

"They don't hesitate any more since President Roh got plastic surgery," said Dr. Lee Sang-eun, director of the Real Clinic Group.

Lee's company in November opened a male-only clinic, Real for Men, which it says is the first in the country to capitalize on the newfound willingness of male South Koreans to seek beauty in the operating room.

Statistics on the trend are hard to come by due to the sheer number of clinics performing



CREDIT: Lee Jin-Man, Associated Press

Park Hyo-jung shows his picture, taken after his first nose operation in 2002, during an interview. Park had 24 procedures on his body over more than three years to improve his appearance.

cosmetic procedures. It seems nearly every building in Seoul's trendy Apgujeong and Kangnam districts has a "beauty" or "esthetic" clinic, often located together with hair stylists or dentists for one-stop total makeover shopping.

Dr. Wee Sung-yun, who performed the last six surgeries on Park, said he saw female patients almost exclusively until several years ago, but now about a third of his patients are men.

Men usually seek eye or nose alterations, saying they hope to do better at job interviews, Wee said.

Kim Jun-hyun, editor in chief of the recently launched South Korean version of the U.S.-based Men's Health magazine, said the market for men's grooming, cosmetics and athletic equipment has risen 20 per cent to 40 per cent in the last five years.

According to a survey by AGB Nielsen Media Research and Men's Health, 86 per cent of South Korean men between age 25 and 37 believe their competitiveness for jobs would be increased by having a good appearance and healthy body. More than 56 per cent said they weren't satisfied with their appearance. The survey of 500 men had a margin of error above four percentage points.

Park, who had the 24 procedures at a cost of \$8,150 US, said he won't have any more surgery for now, under doctor's advice.

His story has gained national attention and earned him 10 appearances on TV talk shows -- and even an offer to be in an adult film.

He turned it down.

Friends who were earlier critical are now pondering their own surgery after seeing the positive changes in Park's appearance and self-confidence.

And there's been another benefit, too: Park has a girlfriend.

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