

2015

Plastic Paradise: The Trends & Effects of Cosmetic Surgery Tourism in Economically Growing Countries

Amanda Livingston
alivingston@maine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/tcj>



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Livingston, Amanda (2015) "Plastic Paradise: The Trends & Effects of Cosmetic Surgery Tourism in Economically Growing Countries," *The Cohen Journal*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/tcj/vol2/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Cohen Journal by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

Medical tourism, the category in which cosmetic surgery tourism falls under, is a new concept in the world of international affairs and many people are uninformed about its benefits, risks, and controversies. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines medical tourism as “the act of traveling to another country for medical care.” (CDC 2015) Medical tourism has grown significantly in recent years, especially in the developing world. In 2013, it is estimated that “eleven million people were medical tourists, creating a market worth of over \$50 billion,” and it is expected to expand even further. (Howard 2015) “High costs, long waiting lists at home, new technology and skills in destination countries, alongside reduced transport costs and internet marketing, have all played a role.” (Connell 2006: 1093) Since its rise to popularity, medical tourism has also already seen a reversal in its most significant trend. Initially, medical tourism entailed people from so-called underdeveloped countries traveling to wealthier nations for treatments not available in their home countries. (Erdoğan et al 2012: 1045) However, we now see the opposite. People in economically strong areas are traveling to developing countries because procedures are a bargain when compared to the cost in their home country. “This new trend has a driving effect on the economies of countries thanks to improvement in technology and transportation.” (Horowitz et al 2007: 2) This tendency is particularly applicable to the sub-category of cosmetic surgery

tourism, which refers specifically to medical tourism associated with surgical procedures for cosmetic reasons. Cosmetic surgery tourism is a controversial topic as it provides many economic benefits to the host country but is also seen alongside many alarming trends.

Safe and successful surgeries are one of the great accomplishments of modern medicine. A large number of people are able to have life-saving procedures with long lasting results. However, this achievement has also come with its downfalls. Hefty price tags and an obsession to meet societal standards of beauty drive surgical tourism's most lucrative practice: cosmetic surgery. It is important at this point to establish the difference between cosmetic and reconstructive surgeries as they both include altering one's appearance but exist to serve different purposes. "Reconstructive surgeries are done to correct defects from disease, congenital problems, or injuries, such as burn care, whereas cosmetic surgeries are done to enhance natural appearance, such as breast augmentations." (Lake 2015) Cosmetic surgeries are costly and essentially unnecessary, so why is it surgical tourism's most popular asset? Enhancing one's appearance has a long history so its popularity stems deep in human roots. The first breast augmentation is recorded as having been performed in 1895 and by the time World War I broke out, plastic surgery trainings had made a prominent mark in medicine (American Society of Plastic Surgeons 2015) This mark has, to say the least, turned into a rising phenomenon not only in terms of domestic success

here in the United States but worldwide as a tourist attraction.

When we think of tourism, what typically comes to mind is warm weather, lounge chairs, and relaxation. Why not add in a scalpel to the mix? Countries such as Brazil, South Korea, and Turkey are doing just that. Shorter waiting times and cheaper costs are the main reasons tourists go to these countries for cosmetic surgery. In countries where universal healthcare exists, it can take years to undergo elective surgeries, whereas in countries such as the U.S., where many lack health insurance at all, going abroad is the cheaper option. Of course, there are other reasons; many tourists also travel across borders for higher quality healthcare services or because they feel other surgeons better understand their wishes. But there are two things that all surgical tourism trends have in common besides money: social pressure and risk. Despite the economic benefits for the destination country, society suffers culturally. Many people opt for cosmetic surgery because of social pressures to conform to physical ideals. This pressure stems largely from the media, the work place, and peers. Succumbing to this pressure by going under the knife results in permanent changes in appearance and encourages unattainable ideals of “beauty”. More and more, people are turning to this option as a way to feel better about themselves and with this addiction, demand is increasing, leading to a number of unqualified surgeons, unregistered clinics, and many botched surgeries. Are these downfalls worth the economic benefit the destination countries receive? Brazil, South Korea, and Turkey all

present suitable examples of the linkage between economics and social pressures as well as the subsequent results when the two find themselves in the midst of cosmetic surgery tourism.

Lots of eyes have been looking at Brazil in recent years. As a part of the “BRIC” countries, Brazil proves itself to be “an economic powerhouse, contributing to a 15 percent share of the world's GDP.” (Smallman & Brown 2011: 90-91) Therefore, it is no surprise that its tourism industry, specifically the sector dealing with medical and cosmetic surgery, is steadily on the rise. “Brazil has recently surpassed the U.S. as the place with the most cosmetic surgeries performed in the world, even though it has fewer people and collectively less disposable income than the U.S.” (Garcia-Navarro 2014) Although this includes all surgeries performed and not simply those rooted in tourism, it still is an impressive feat. Brazil also has another number to be proud of: “4,500, representing the number of licensed cosmetic surgeons in the country, making it the highest per capita in the world.” (Grout 2013) Clearly, this country gives tourists every reason to come here if their desire is to surgically alter their appearance. Part of the attraction lies in Brazil's domestic obsession with cosmetic surgery. With the growing economy, women in particular have more financial power and are placing their money in looks. Brazilian women view cosmetic surgery “as a right, not simply a privilege, and use it as an investment in increasing their chances at landing a better job or attracting a man for a better

marriage.” (Garcia-Navarro 2014) With thousands of licensed surgeons and cosmetic surgeries performed each year, Brazil certainly seems like a safe bet for medical tourists. But what else makes Brazil so much better that people are willing to fly there for a surgery that could easily and safely be performed in their home country? Brazil has offered low-cost cosmetic surgery for years and “prices are, on average, two-thirds the typical price in the United States.” (Grout 2013) Cosmetic surgery is almost never covered under any sort of insurance plan, as it is unnecessary, making the cheaper costs highly appealing. This is particularly applicable for the “11.3 percent of Americans who still remain uninsured” and seek out treatment bargains whenever they can. (Miller 2014) It is clear that Brazil's reputation for quality care at lower prices, as well as its beautiful scenery, is the main appeal for tourists. Brazil's economy is certainly enjoying the benefits. The post-operation period is not particularly short, meaning tourists who come to have cosmetic procedures done have to stay longer and in return, spend more money on hotels and food. Of course, all of these benefits and positive aspects have to be met with disadvantages and risks. Surgery is always a risk and going under the knife cannot be taken lightly. A well-known example of cosmetic procedures gone wrong in Brazil is that of a “Miss Bumbum” contestant. Brazilian model, Andressa Urach, landed in the hospital after her body rejected the hydrogel fillers doctors injected into her leg. Body tissue began rotting away and her leg became infected, the infection then spreading throughout her body.

(Landau 2015) This cosmetic procedure nearly cost Urach her life and her story does not stand alone. Urach is a Brazilian native but cosmetic surgery tourists hold an even higher risk of running into post-operation problems due to a number of specific risks associated with traveling as a foreigner for medical reasons. These risks are not limited to Brazil and explicit examples can be highlighted in cases seen among Chinese tourists traveling to South Korea for cosmetic surgery.

Alongside Brazil, South Korea is seen as an up and coming figure in the international realm. As a part of the N-11 countries, “it is considered an emerging global economy and has the potential to rival the BRIC countries.” (Smallman & Brown 2011: 91) South Korea's growing economic strength shows in its ability to have created a platform more than capable of attracting thousands of medical tourists annually. “In 2008, \$947 million was invested into advertising South Korea as a leading destination for cosmetic surgery tourism.” (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang 2012: 61) So next to the advertisements seen on the street for food and shops are the names of cosmetic surgery clinics. The country's advertising has certainly paid off as they have attracted a steady flow of medical tourists, especially from China, creating an industry “listed as being worth nearly \$369 million in 2013. (The Straits Times 2015) According the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, South Korea even has the “highest rate of cosmetic surgeries per capita in the world.” (Stevenson 2014) This is not to be confused with Brazil's boasting figure of having highest number of most cosmetic

surgeries performed overall, but not per capita. The success of medical tourism in South Korea, and subsequently cosmetic surgery tourism, is in part thanks to advertising and economic growth, but also from the media. As with Brazil, upward trends in cosmetic surgery are largely driven by societal pressures to look a certain way. For the Chinese traveling to South Korea, the influence of Korean television shows and movies drives them to feel pressured to look like the beauty ideal portrayed in the media. The two most popular surgeries performed on Chinese women in South Korea are blepharoplasties (eyelid surgery) and facial restructuring. (Stevenson 2014) Although these surgeries are certainly available at Chinese clinics, South Korean hospitals are known for being safer and cleaner, however, more expensive. It appears that unlike the majority of medical tourists in Brazil, those visiting South Korea are looking for quality over cheap prices. However, medical tourists in both countries do share the common opinion that receiving surgical cosmetic alterations will help with not only their self confidence but their professional prospects as well. In conforming to the standard of beauty put in place by society and the media, undergoing cosmetic surgery means for many Chinese (and Korean) women that will be able to land better jobs and make more money. As Eunkook Suh, a Korean psychology professor points out, “in Korea, people don’t care what you think about yourself. Other people’s evaluations of you matter more.” (Bovy 2015) Clearly this mentality has proven its power over women as the medical tourism industry in South Korea grows and

more Chinese citizens cross its borders searching for the best cosmetic surgery clinic. Unfortunately, not all patients leave with the best results.

Similarly to Brazil, cosmetic surgery tourists in South Korea can run into post-operation complications. Many Chinese women went into South Korea thinking they would leave with everything they had hoped they could ever look like, but tragically left with quite the opposite. In an effort to meet the increasing demand, a growing number of unregistered clinics and unlicensed surgeons are opening up shop. As a foreigner, it can be hard to decipher which clinics are safest and yield the best results. Many Chinese tourists simply come because of safety concerns within their own country's clinics and feel Korean surgeons better understand what they want. It turns out that this is not always so. Numerous Chinese women have returned home experiencing consistent nasal infections after rhinoplasty (nose reshaping) as well as visibly misaligned jaws following double-jaw surgeries, among other horror stories. In retaliation to these complaints, many surgeons are coming up with excuses as to how it is not their fault the outcomes were not the intended results. Perhaps most concerning is that these mishaps lead not only to unintended results but have in some cases ultimately led to impaired functionality of the patients' noses and/or jaws. In a more severe case reported in January 2015, "a 50-year-old Chinese woman was left in a coma by a clinic in Seoul's up-market Gangnam district after her procedure went awry." (The Straits Times 2015) Fortunately, the Korean government is recognizing this massive and

unacceptable flaw in the industry, looking to punish owners of unregistered facilities with jail sentences. Whether this potential future action will be enough to prevent more horror stories from happening will be left for time to tell. It is evident that many countries share this struggle and are looking for ways to shut illegal clinics down. However, there exist countries that are new to the medical tourism industry who have the capability to prevent such clinics from even opening. Turkey is one of these countries.

Like South Korea, Turkey is considered an N-11 country, proving to be an emerging global economic player and its tourism industry certainly supports this. Last year, Turkey welcomed overall 40 million tourists into its borders. Of these, nearly half a million came for surgical procedures, “from mustache implants and liposuction to operations for serious ailments, generating \$1 billion in revenues and representing a small but growing fraction of tourism receipts.” (Reuters 2013) Unlike Brazil and South Korea, Turkey's geographic location plays a large role in its success in medical tourism. It is conveniently located in between countries whose citizens don't want to wait for cosmetic procedures and those who live in countries where high-quality care is rare. Turkey offers comparatively low-cost healthcare for European and American visitors, “while also appealing to affluent citizens of troubled neighboring Middle Eastern countries by offering relatively high-quality healthcare that they lack access to domestically.” (Howard 2015) For perspective, the cost of rhinoplasty in Turkey is about \$1500 compared to \$4500

in the United States. (Herrick 2007: 8) Turkey has found its niche in appealing to a wide range of medical tourists, using its geographical advantage, its well-educated workforce, and accredited organizations to draw even more tourists in. What is additionally appealing to tourists is that Turkey “does not require a visa for more than 70 countries,” (Anadolu Agency 2015) something Brazil does not offer. With cost-effective procedures, no visa requirements, and qualified surgeons, it's no wonder cosmetic surgery tourism is on the rise in Turkey. However, the newest cosmetic trend comes as somewhat of a surprise. It appears that nowadays hair transplants have become more popular than in previous years, particularly among male patients from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Greece. Celik Nuri, a plastic surgeon and the International Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery's national secretary for Turkey, says “you can now see a lot of men at historic sites around Istanbul who clearly have just had hair-transplant surgery.” (Sullivan 2015) What is particularly interesting about this sector of cosmetic surgery tourism is that it is dominated by men, a stark difference when compared to Brazil and South Korea, whose cosmetic surgery industries are dominated by women. It is unmistakable that medical tourists going under the knife for cosmetic purposes are all doing so as a result of societal pressures, beauty ideals portrayed in the media, and economic growth and development. But what exactly do these connections and the growing trend of cosmetic surgery tourism imply for the future of international affairs?

It is evident that the movement of tourist-patients across international borders can be both beneficial and risky. Brazil, South Korea, and Turkey are all economically rising countries and are using their new found power to their advantage. “In sensing further opportunities for economic growth, these destinations are expanding their ambitions, pursuing aggressive strategies to attract patients in an increasingly competitive marketplace.” (Howard 2015) But these countries are playing a considerably dangerous game in the process of expanding their economies. Besides the opening of illegal clinics with unlicensed surgeons to meet high demand, as seen in South Korea, there are a number of other problems the CDC has put forward as general concerns associated with medical tourism. Linguistic barriers are near the top of the list as miscommunication is often a leading cause in procedural mishaps. Hygiene is another concern since other countries may not place as strong of an emphasis on this as the United States does. Additionally, counterfeit medications, the increased risk of blood clots upon flying, and exposure to bacteria that is resistant to antibiotics are all among some of the CDC's warnings. The latter is perhaps the most problematic as it sheds light on a developing challenge faced by public health. Patients who have recently undergone surgery are particularly susceptible to infection and disease thus posing a threat to other travelers, especially during a time when contagious diseases are responsible for millions of preventable deaths each year. “As the borders become more porous and the world more integrated,

our understanding of public health needs to be re-explored to find new ways of managing national health systems.” (Helble 2011: 68) Alongside this major concern, the two significant roots of the growing cosmetic surgery tourism industry, the media and social pressure, need to be sincerely addressed.

A large portion of the patients traveling abroad for cosmetic surgery, particularly women, are heavily influenced by media representation and pressure from society to look a certain way. A recent study by the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery even revealed that one in three facial plastic surgeons surveyed saw an increase in requests for procedures due to patients being more self aware of their looks in social media.” (American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery 2014) Perhaps most alarming is that many of these people feel they need a youthful and “beautiful” appearance to be able to compete in the job market. The fact that many women are turning to cosmetic surgery as a way to advance their career should be a red flag. Of course, there is a thin line here. People should be able to do what they want with their own bodies but the reasons shouldn't be because they want to conform to society's beauty standards or because they feel no one will hire them otherwise. The fact that people desire cosmetic surgery strongly enough to be traveling to places like Brazil and South Korea is a reality that shouldn't be shrugged away. As the economies of BRIC and N-11 countries grow, it's clear that millions of people and governments are choosing to use the investment

opportunities and extra disposable income on cosmetic surgery. With its advantages and risks, the medical tourism industry is following an increasing trend all over the world. “While the required improvements to benefit the advantages of medical tourism are performed, taking the necessary measures against the side effects of medical tourism shouldn’t be neglected. Regulatory and technologic infrastructure should be prepared to preserve the safety of patients from the disadvantages of medical tourism.” (Erdoğan et al 2012: 1056) Clearly, cosmetic surgery tourism isn't going anywhere soon but as the industry strengthens and gains even more popularity, things should be done to make it safe and successful. The post-op tragedies seen in South Korea and Brazil are a harsh reality that need to be addressed as they pose a threat not only to patient safety, but to the health of the global community.

Sources:

- 1) American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. "Selfie Trend Increases Demand of Facial Plastic Surgery." *Aafprs*. March 11, 2014. Accessed April 14, 2015.
http://www.aafprs.org/media/press_release/20140311.html.
- 2) American Society of Plastic Surgeons. "History of Plastic Surgery." *History of Plastic Surgery*. Accessed April 14, 2015. <http://www.plasticsurgery.org/articles-and-galleries/history-of-plastic-surgery.html>.
- 3) Anadolu Agency. "Turkey Sees Surge in Medical Tourism." *Anadolu Agency*. April 1, 2015. Accessed April 14, 2015. <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/health/486969--turkey-sees-surge-in-medical-tourism>.
- 4) Bovy, Phoebe Maltz. "South Koreans Are Obsessed With Plastic Surgery, But Are Americans Any Better?" *New Republic*. March 24, 2015. Accessed April 14, 2015. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/121362/south-koreas-beauty-obsession-isnt-so-different-americas>.
- 5) CDC. "Medical Tourism." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. February 23, 2015. Accessed April 10, 2015.
<http://www.cdc.gov/features/medicaltourism>.
- 6) Erdoğan, Seyfettin, and Emine Yilmaz. "Medical Tourism: An Assessment on Turkey." April 12, 2013. Accessed April 13, 2015.
http://www.medeniyet.edu.tr/content/userfiles/Medical_Tourism_An_Assessment_On_Turkey.pdf
- 7) Garcia-Navarro, Lourdes. "In Brazil, Nips And Tucks Don't Raise An Eyebrow." *NPR*. October 7, 2014. Accessed April 14, 2015.
<http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/10/07/353270270/an-uplifting-story-brazils-obsession-with-plastic-surgery>.
- 8) Grout, Pam. "Medical Tourism: A Global Stampede for Affordable Care." *CNN*. March 22, 2013. Accessed April 14, 2015.
<http://travel.cnn.com/cheapest-facelifts-world-786941>.

9) Helble, Matthias. "The Movement of Patients across Borders: Challenges and Opportunities for Public Health." *Bulletin of the World Health Organization Bull. World Health Organ.* 89, no. 1 (November 26, 2010): 68-72. Accessed April 18, 2015.

<http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/89/1/10-076612/en/>.

10) Herrick, Devon. "Medical Tourism: Global Competition in Health Care." *National Center for Policy Analysis* 304 (November 2007): 1-35. Accessed April 17, 2015. <http://www.ncpa.org/pdfs/st304.pdf>.

11) Holliday, Ruth, and Joanna Elfving-Hwang. "Gender, Globalization and Aesthetic Surgery in South Korea." *Body & Society* 18, no. 2 (2012): 58-81. Accessed April 15, 2015.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238043267_Gender_Globalization_and_Aesthetic_Surgery_in_South_Korea.

12) Horowitz, Michael D., Jeffrey A. Rosensweig, and Christopher A. Jones. "Medical Tourism: Globalization of the Healthcare Marketplace." *Medscape General Medicine*. November 13, 2007. Accessed April 11, 2015.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2234298/>.

13) Howard, Rachel. "The Patient Abroad: An Exploration of the Motivations and Impact of Medical Tourism." *MM&M*. March 19, 2015. Accessed April 11, 2015. <http://www.mmm-online.com/the-patient-abroad-an-exploration-of-the-motivations-and-impact-of-medical-tourism/article/404476/>.

14) Lake, Shawn. "Family Health: Plastic Surgery Can Repair or Enhance." *Missoulian*. March 16, 2015. Accessed April 14, 2015. http://missoulian.com/lifestyles/health-med-fit/family-health-plastic-surgery-can-repair-or-enhance/article_8adee81e-832c-52a8-a60f-05a25f2def84.html.

15) Landau, Joel. "Miss BumBum Contestant Reveals Damage from Botched Surgery." *NY Daily News*. January 5, 2015. Accessed April 14, 2015. <http://www.nydailynews.com/lifestyle/health/brazil-bumbum-contestant-reveals-damage-botched-article-1.2066536>.

- 16) Miller, Zeke. "Number of Uninsured Americans Near Record Low." Time. December 18, 2014. Accessed April 15, 2015. <http://time.com/3639785/uninsured-obamacare-record/>.
- 17) Reuters. "Medical Tourism on the Rise in Turkey." VOA. April 3, 2013. Accessed April 14, 2015. <http://www.voanews.com/content/medical-tourism-turkey/1634291.html>.
- 18) Smallman, Shawn. "Economic Globalization." In *Introduction to International and Global Studies*, edited by Kimberley Brown, 90-91. Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2011.
- 19) Stevenson, Alexandra. "Plastic Surgery Tourism Brings Chinese to South Korea." The New York Times. December 23, 2014. Accessed April 15, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/24/business/international/plastic-surgery-tourism-brings-chinese-to-south-korea.html>.
- 20) The Straits Times. "China's 'plastic Surgery Tourists' Reap Regret in South Korea after Surgeries Leave Them Scarred." The Straits Times. February 18, 2015. Accessed April 14, 2015. <http://www.straitstimes.com/news/asia/east-asia/story/chinas-plastic-surgery-tourists-reap-regret-south-korea-after-surgeries-le>.
- 21) Sullivan, Kate. "Tourists Are Getting Hair-Transplant Surgeries in Turkey Right Now: Daily Beauty Reporter." Allure. March 10, 2015. Accessed April 17, 2015. <http://www.allure.com/beauty-trends/blogs/daily-beauty-reporter/2015/03/hair-transplants-turkey.html>.