

## CHAPTER 7

### **The Reflexive Project of Girly Self: *Pretty*, Model, Beauty Queen, and Plastic Surgery**

To understand female youth's sexual selves in modern society, Giddens (1991 p 100) states that “Neither appearance nor demeanor can be organized as given; the body participates in a very direct way in the principle that the self has to be contested.” The female body becomes a means of ‘the reflexive project of self.’ The construction of the self depends more and more upon a variety of choices that are able to be extensively accessed through modernization, urbanization, and consumerism throughout the society of Chiang Mai City.

The first part investigates the everyday life practices of research participants who became a *pretty* (product presenter or brand ambassador), model, and beauty queen; each of which was considered an ideal career among female youth in Thai society. I followed these research participants since they first entered various local modeling and beauty queen competitions during their last year in high school. I continued following them for three years while they became a *pretty*, model and beauty queen. This part shows that ‘the reflexive project of self’ was intensively practiced among these research participants—which led to the ways they ‘made do’ (Fiske, 1989) their female sexuality and popular culture consumption in everyday life—in order to reach the ideal types of *pretty*, model, and beauty queen. The second part pays special attention to the research participants who were undergone plastic surgeries, which were widely done among young women in northern Thai society. Meanings and experiences of plastic surgery among research participants are elaborated and understood as a product of the reflexive project of self and a part of their popular culture consumption in everyday life.

## 7.1 Becoming a *Pretty*, Model, and Beauty Queen: The Making Do of Popular Culture and Female Sexuality

Apart from the hegemonic controls of families, schools, and universities on research participants' sexual self formation and expression mentioned in Chapter 4, the research participants managed to find ways to tactically achieve a certain level of sexual freedom and benefits from it. As stated in the life stories presented in Chapter 2, most of the research participants applied for the selection round of the national Miss Teen Thailand beauty contest when they were in grade eleven. However, the organizing committee did not select any of them. The next year, some of them, especially Nancy and Rose, competed in a local young model contest held by a local fashion magazine. Nancy won the first runner-up award and was consequently hired as a part-time model for the magazine. Apart from the amount of money she gained from the competition, she had a chance to establish networks among those who worked as *pretties*. Nancy was the first girl group member who worked as a part-time *pretty* and gained extra money from it. She actively searched for jobs and invited other members, especially Rose, to work with her.

Nancy began working as a part-time *pretty* for a Thai whiskey brand. According to Nancy, the general qualifications of a *pretty* were as follows: “168 cm. or higher, being in good shape, good personality, being skillful with make-up to be more attractive than ordinary women, and being skillful to ‘cheer’ (encourage) customers, especially males, to order a big ‘pro’ (promotion) as often as possible.” The scope of the work consisted of dressing in a sexy uniform especially designed for a *pretty*, welcoming arriving customers, and ‘cheering’ those arriving customers to order the whiskey she worked for (which she would receive extra money for that). During events, a *pretty* was the one who ‘phoned’ (being a master of ceremony), presented tokens for customers, and took pictures with customers when asked. In the beginning, Nancy worked only on Saturday nights every week. She was paid one thousand baht per night plus some extra money depended on how many bottles of whiskey she could *cheer* customers to order that night. Then she moved to work for a European beer brand that paid her two times higher. Nancy described about her duty that: “I’m not a waitress. Because my work is

*not to serve, mix whiskey, or give any service to customers; my duties are to promote the product and create lively environments.”*

Meanwhile, after competing in a local young model contest and not winning, Rose continued entering other model competitions. The latest one was a model contest organized by a famous fashion magazine. Rose saw promotional posters in school and shopping malls. She finally decided to apply since one of the girl group members looked down upon her saying: “*You will never win this contest*”. It turned out that she won the competitions at the provincial level, regional level, and became one of the final twenty national contestants in Bangkok. This competition was widely known to produce many superstars and supermodels, especially among those twenty contestants who could pass to the final national contest.

One day during my fieldwork in school in 2010, Vicki was contacted by a gay man who introduced himself a ‘beauty queen coach’ (*pui lieng nang ngam*). He said that he saw Vicki when she competed in the selection round of Miss Teen Thailand beauty contest. He said he saw some kind of ‘glitter’ (*waeo*) out of her. He came to speak with Vicki at the school and asked for her parent’s number. The next day, he called Vicki’s mother and they finally met. He introduced himself and said he worked for a beauty queen coach network which aimed to search for potential young women around the country. He said he wanted to coach Vicki for future beauty contests.

To understand the ‘art of making do’ (Fiske, 1989) of female sexuality among beauty queens in Thai society, Van Fleet states that Thai state saw no contradiction in portraying women as objects of male sexual desire and portraying female sexuality as being primarily a means for bearing children to ensure the strength of the nation. In fact, both things were seen as promoting the image of Thailand as a modern and civilized nation-state, where the improvement of women’s rights and status was important. Since that time, in addition to promoting national identity, constitutionalism, and national prestige, beauty contests have served as a host for other endeavors and national projects: promoting multinational-produced products, seasonal fruit, and for celebrating Buddhist holidays (Van Fleet, 1998). The study also found that Thailand had more beauty contest than any other countries in the world. Every major as well as minor holiday or local event indeed seem to be highlighted with a beauty contest (Reynolds, 1994).

After became a *pretty*, model, and beauty queen, ‘the reflexive project of self’ was significantly practiced among research participants to reach the ideal type for each career. According to Nancy, the main duty of a *pretty* was to draw consumer’s attention to her beauty, and then link that beauty to the product she promoted. In other words, according to Nancy, a *pretty* was the one who spoke for the product because the product could not speak for itself. Nancy explained further that the personality of each *pretty* should have matched the product she was working for. Certain products promoted sexy images, especially products targeting male customers. A *pretty* working for these products needed to have a sex appeal, especially big breasts, in accordance with the product’s image. For example, the product Nancy was working for was one of the biggest international communication companies targeting a wide range of customers, not only males. Nancy was required to be friendly, approachable, cheerful, and speak skillfully to promote the product information. While working for other products which targeted male customers that required a sexy image such as whisky, beer, and automobile, Nancy said that: “*My selling points (jude kai) are that I’m tall and have a nice body shape so that any styles of dress designed for pretty look nice on me. My tan skin is unique. Just change the way I dress and my make-up, I can be as sexy as the employers want me to.*” Nancy elaborated further that there were two kinds of *pretties*: freelance *pretties* and those belonging to modeling agencies. Nancy chose to be a freelance *pretty* because she preferred working part-time due to her busy school schedule during weekdays. Being freelance, Nancy could manage her own schedule and was paid in cash at the end of the event. Meanwhile, those *pretties* working for modeling agencies had advantages in that they were well-trained and their managers ensured that they had consistent employment. However, they had less freedom and the agencies charged a commission of 20-30% of their wages.

Active participation in social media was very important for a freelance *pretty* like Nancy. Every freelance *pretty* was required to have a smart phone to search for jobs, keeping in touch with the *pretty* social groups, and communicate with their future employers. Nancy was a member of various social media groups organized for *pretties*, especially on Line and Facebook. Through these online groups Nancy could search for job announcements posted by other *pretty* members or potential employers. The advantages of being a member in these social media groups were that Nancy could

search and select jobs by herself; she could also contact and negotiate rates directly with her potential employers. The ‘*com card*’ (composite card)—a collection of pictures in different angles and dresses with basic information such as age, weight, height, shape, etc—was one of the most important things every freelance *pretty* was required to have. The ‘*com card*’ had to be well-done and constantly posted in social groups or job applications of her potential employers.



Figure 7.1 Examples of com card made by freelance *pretties* and posted in online social groups

However, while searching for jobs on social media, *pretties* had to be careful. Nancy distinguished two types of job announcements between ‘entertaining *pretty*’ and ‘MC *pretty*.’

Job announcements for an ‘entertaining *pretty*’ sought out *pretties* for ‘entertaining jobs’ such as going out, dining, drinking, and possibly engaging sexually with the employers. Generally, an entertaining *pretty* was paid higher rates than a MC *pretty*; some of them could earn a huge amount of income if they were attractive and good at their ‘entertaining jobs.’ One of Nancy’s friends worked as an entertaining *pretty*. One night, she accepted a job entertaining male employers at a nightclub. She was encouraged to drink a pure whisky shot and they would pay her 1,000 baht per shot.

That night, she drank seventeen shots of whisky and she was paid extra 17,000 baht in addition to her regular hire rate of 5,000 baht.

Nancy showed me few entertaining job announcements posted in *pretty* groups in social media where she was being a member. There were some keywords indicating the entertaining jobs, such as ‘*ent job*’ (ngan ent) and ‘*tips*’ [because most MC *pretty* works did not receive tips since MC *pretty* was not required to provide services]. Moreover, big breasts and white skin were requirements for an entertaining *pretty*. The figures below show examples of job announcements for entertaining *pretties*. It states that: “Urgent!!!! Entertaining job today from 9.30 p.m. to 2 a.m. White and fair skinned, breasts with no implants, and pretty face are needed. 2,000 baht rate, tips not included. Well-paid tips in case of good ent (entertain). Apply a clear com card if interested.”

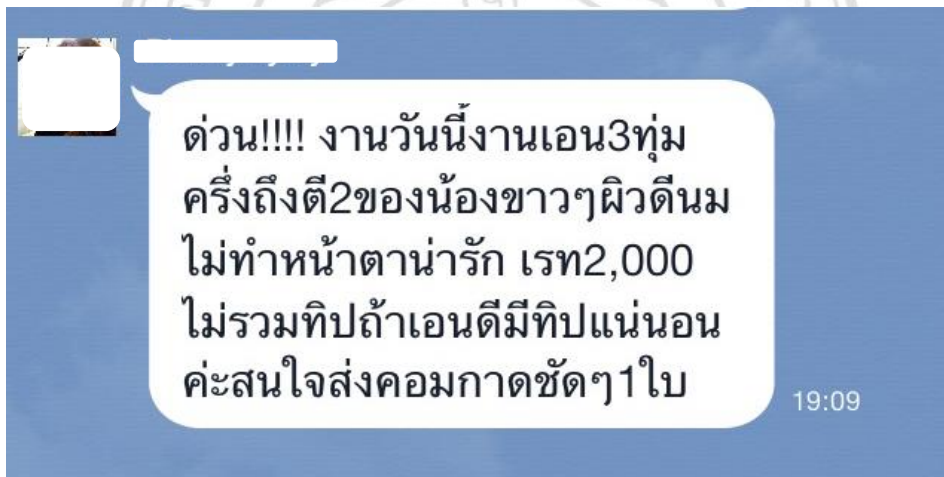


Figure 7.2 Job announcement for an entertaining *pretty*

Another keyword was ‘*looking after job*’ (ngan lieng do). Apart from regular entertaining jobs such as going out at night, dining, drinking or any additional requirements which came in an agreement between a *pretty* and her employer, a *pretty* who accepted this *looking after job* was likely to have a long-term sexual relationship which was paid monthly. There were some stories of *pretties* who found rich employers. They were provided other things in addition to monthly payments such as tuition fees, nice apartments, or cars. Nancy showed me a second job announcement for an entertaining *pretty* stating that: “*Looking after job, 30,000 baht monthly. Young*



looking, not older than 23, and soft personality are required. Apply with resume and photos if interested.”

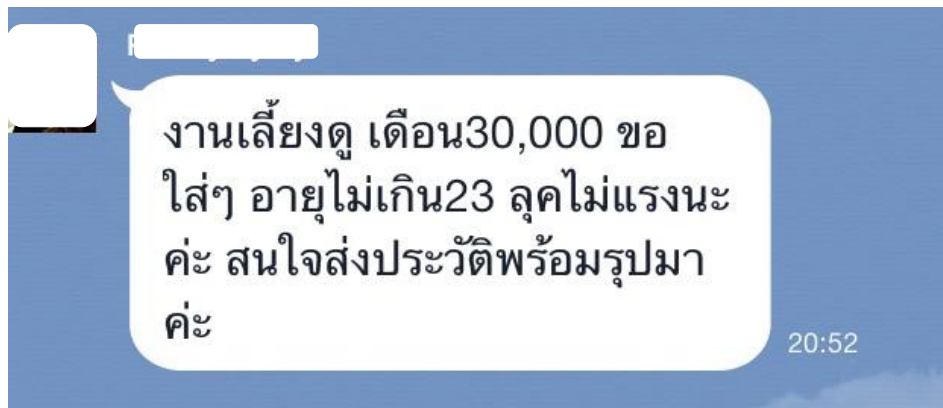


Figure 7.3 Job announcement for ‘looking after job’

Another keyword widely used in job announcements for entertaining *pretty* was “*VIP job*” (ngan VIP), indicating that employers would be wealthy, significant persons, or foreigners. Any announcement indicating *VIP job* was likely to be well-paid, but was also likely to include some form of sexual contact. The job announcement below explains that: “*VIP job, stay overnight in Bangkok for two nights and three days; will be finished on Tuesday. Foreign customers, PS. Asians. White skin, beautiful face, good shape, slim arms and legs, and skillful in (English) language are required. 30,000 lump sum payment. Apply five photos, name, weight, height, and shape to ID: .....*”

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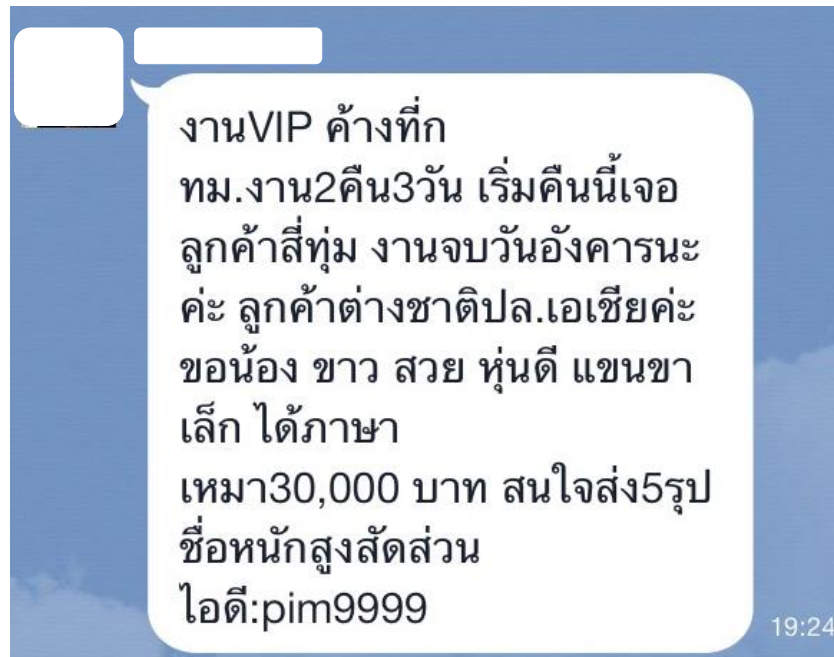


Figure 7.4 Job announcement for entertaining *pretty*

According to Nancy, she said: “I’ve never accepted any entertaining job so far, and never will. In the future when I graduated and work in a professional career, it could negatively affected my progress if my future employer knew that I used to be an entertaining *pretty* before” Nancy also told me that the word ‘*pretty*’ was with a negative connotation in Thai society. Even masseuse prostitutes were called ‘*pretty*’ to upgrade themselves. Nancy preferred to be called a ‘product presenter’ or ‘brand ambassador’ to distinguish herself from the negative connotation of the less respected ‘*pretty*.’

The second type of *pretty*—considered to be ‘higher class’—was the ‘MC *pretty*.’ The MC *pretty* was well-trained to work as master of ceremony for events and product exhibitions. The MC *pretty* was required to be knowledgeable of the product information she was working for and be skillful in speaking to ‘*phone*’ for the event to communicate the product’s key information to customers and persuade them to buy as much as possible. Regarding job announcements for MC *pretty*, ‘*admins*’ (administrators) of the MC *pretty* social media groups would post information about rules and regulations to ensure mutual understandings among members that job announcements for MC *pretty* were only allowed to be posted in those particular



groups. Nancy showed me an example that said: *“Hi members, since this group belongs to everyone. I’d like all of us to take care of this group and maintain our standard by: 1) no ent job, mixing whisky job, Singapore job (it was understood that a pretty who accepted Singapore job was likely to sexually engage employers), and ‘strong’ jobs (ngan rang: inappropriate or sexually related jobs) are posted. 2) I ask for your cooperation not to take off the top. We share job announcements between sisters. All of us work hard. Please be considerate and help each other. 3) I ask for your cooperation to only post job announcements which pay more than 1,000 baht (please consider work load; if you cut the price against others, we would have difficult times). 3) Please consider anyone you will drag into this group. Only ones who accept MC pretty are needed. Those who pretend to be MC pretties while mostly accepting ent jobs aren’t welcome. 4) In case any job was accepted but the substitution is to be sent instead, please do it urgently (in advance). Don’t do it right before the event; and the substitution must be informed (about the event or product information) before hand....Regarding manners, timing, and (appropriate) dressing. I believe everyone knows about these issues....Feel free to inform me if anyone wants to add anything... (a salute icon)”*

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สวัสดีเพื่อนๆ พี่ๆ น้องๆ เนื่องจากห้องนี้เป็นของทุกคน จึงอยากให้กันช่วยดูแล อยากรักษามาตราฐาน

1. ไม่โพสเรื่องงานเอน งานชงเหล้า งานสิงคโปร์ งานแรง
2. ขอความร่วมมือ ไม่ห้กบัทเจก มีงานมาแชร์ แบบพี่น้องกัน เหนื่อยเหมือนกัน ใจเขาใจเรา ช่วยเหลือกันดีกว่า
2. ขอความร่วมมือ โพสทำงาน ฟรีตีไม่ต่ำกว่า 1000 (ดูเนื้องานด้วย อย่าตัดเรทกันแบบนี้ เราจะอยู่กันยาก)
3. เวลาลากใครมากรุณาดูด้วย ขอคนที่รับงาน pretty mc จิงๆ ไม่เอบแอบไก่อกา รับงานเอนเปนหลัก
4. เวลารับงานใคร แล้วเกิดหาคนแทน กรุณาหาแทน รวๆ ไม่เอาหน้างาน และบอกคนที่เอาจานให้ด้วย

.....ส่วนเรื่อง มารยาท เวลา การแต่งตัว ทุกคนคงรู้แล้ว .....

ใครอยากให้เพิ่มเติมอะไรบอกนะคะ 🙏

Figure 7.5 A post of social media MC *pretty* group administrator to announce rules and regulations among members of the group

Nancy showed me an example of job announcement for MC *pretty* which was totally different to job announcements for entertaining *pretty*. There was no keyword such as ‘ent job’, ‘tips’, ‘supporting job’, or “VIP job”. Instead, the keywords ‘MC’ and ‘phone’ were used as the job announcement below stated that: “MC (*pretty*) working in Chiang Mai is urgently needed (local person is required). Being skillful in MC phone, professional working, white skin, cute looking, and high responsibility are required. Work between 11 a.m. and 7 p.m., 4 rounds of phone. Working days are between 20-21 Sept, this Sat-Sun at Mall A [anonymous] in Chiang Mai. Rate 20 (2,000 baht), 3 percent (tax) charged. Payment will be transferred by the company on Monday. A local

person is required. Could anybody suggest? One more (pretty) is needed. Contact me right away via Line ID:.....”

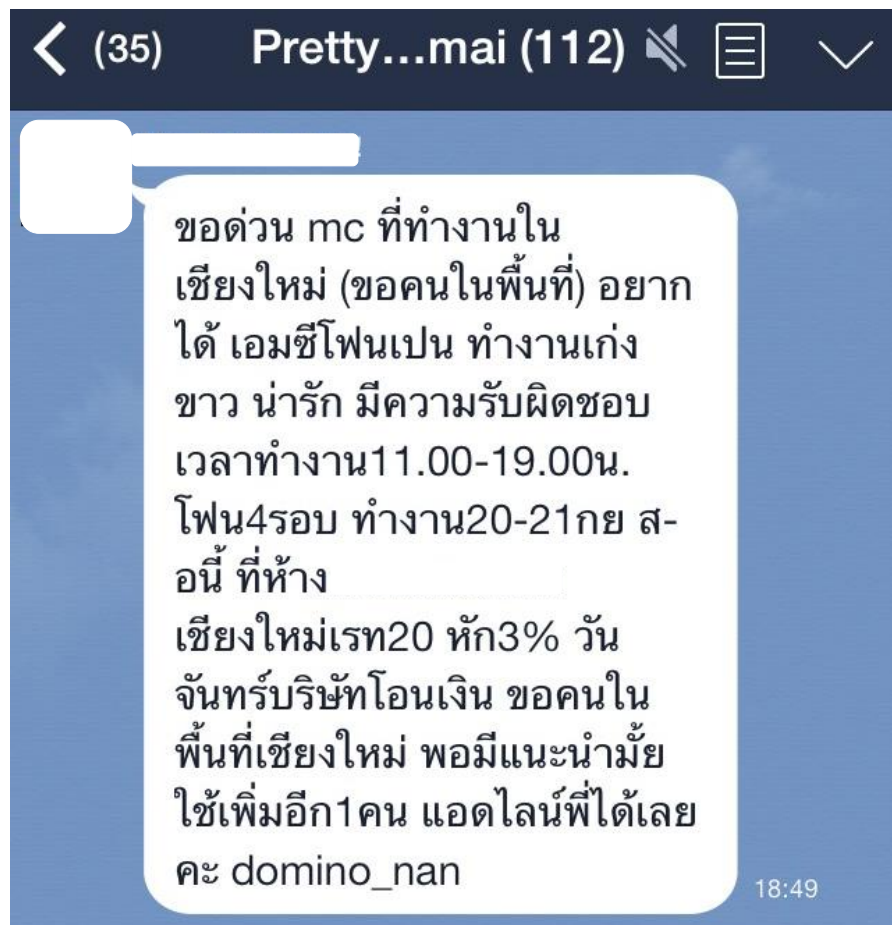


Figure 7.6 Job announcement for MC *pretty*

Since Nancy was a member of these groups of *pretty* in social media, sometimes she screened and selected job announcements for MC *pretty* and re-posted in the research participants' secret groups in case other group members were interested.

Posting pictures and clips on her Facebook was very important to Nancy. She revealed that Facebook was an essential means to express her 'selling points' (*jude kai*) to her networks and it allowed her to communicate with future employers. Sometimes, Nancy posted her short video clips reviewing cosmetic products and supplementary foods she purchased to show that she had a good personality and could skillfully convey the product information. Nancy told me about advantages of social media that: “*Many times I got MC pretty jobs because my clients had seen my pictures and video clips on*

*my Facebook.*” Nancy explained further about the *pretty*’s ‘selling points’: “*Each pretty has her own selling points. Some have beautiful eyes or white skin. Some use their breast implants as their selling points. I saw their pictures posted on Facebook; their breasts were more obvious than their faces! Indeed!*”

To be employed as MC *pretty*, each employer had different processes for applying and selecting MC *pretties* to work for them. When applying and working for small and low-budgeted employers, there was no audition since only few *pretties* applied and payment rates were low. For some of the very low budget products, MC *pretties* had to dress and apply make-up themselves. In contrast, applying for big companies led to higher levels of competition. Nancy said that when she applied for an MC *pretty* job for one of the biggest telecommunication companies, she was first required to apply via online application form. Apart from basic demographic data such as age, weight, height, additional information about special abilities or experience, and educational qualifications was needed. Nancy believed that her profile of serving as MC *pretty* for various products and events, especially her education background at a top-rank public university of the northern region would be an advantage during the initial selection round. During the audition, she was invited to show up in front of the hiring officials. Nancy chose to dress up in formal attire that she considered being in accordance with the company image. After the final round, Nancy was selected to be one of forty young women out of 1,600 applicants around the country— only five of them were selected from the north—to be the permanent brand ambassadors. Nancy was intensively trained in make-up, dressing, manners, company information, product information, selling strategies, and the details of promotions that she was required communicate with customers. She was also trained to post in social networks to support the company image. Nancy was very proud to become one of the brand ambassadors for this company; apart from having a permanent job and being paid monthly, it would be boost her resume that she had experiences working for a ‘high class’ company which differentiated her from those working as ‘entertaining *pretty*’.

To become a beauty queen, Vicki was intensively trained by her coaches. Before the contests, Vicki was well-prepared in every aspect to be ‘beautiful in the Thai way’ (*ngam yang Thai*). This included ‘*wai*’ (lifting hands to pay respect) gently and

beautifully; walking straightly and slowly on stage, especially while wearing traditional Thai costumes and nightgowns; sitting properly by keeping her feet pointed away from judges and the audiences (feet were believed to be the lowest parts of the body and pointing feet towards other people would be disrespectful); how to smile properly and beautifully as a well-behaved Thai women; and how to keep looking at the judges as a proper young lady who deserved to be crowned a beauty queen since she met the qualification of “*ngam yang Thai.*” Since the highlight of beauty contest was the final round, each contestant who moved on to the final round was required to answer a random question from judges that would demonstrate the intelligence required for a beauty queen. Therefore, Vicki was intensively coached how to speak in a gentle manner and answer the question in accordance with mainstream Thai beliefs and ethics. Her coaches prepared her to answer a wide range of questions that they predicted that she would be asked on stage. They also trained her how she could win the hearts of judges and audiences by answering questions properly. She was also ordered to memorize every detail of local tourist attractions, as well as diverse maxims or mottos that would show she was knowledgeable of conventional Thai and local culture and traditions. I observed one of the beauty queen contests that Vicki entered, she was asked about the political crisis in Thai society. Her answer was that she wished every Thais would listen and understand each other so that Thai society would be united and no more conflict would happen. Listening and understanding would lead to the peacefulness of the country. Her answer was ‘conventional’ enough to win the hearts of the judges and audiences, which finally led her to win the competition. After the contest, I talked to one of the judges who happened to be my old friend from my Masters program. He gave Vicki a high praise saying that: “*She deserves to be crowned a beauty queen since she is really beautiful in the Thai way (ngam yang Thai)*”

Rose’s experience competing in the latest modeling contest was different from other competitions she had joined before. At the selection round, all contestants were required to wipe off their make-ups; even contact lenses, and artificial eyelashes were asked to be taken off. For this round, each contestant showed up in a room in front of ten judges. She was asked several questions by judges regarding her basic information such as her educational background, her expectation in attending the competition, and other questions to demonstrate her intelligence and personality. Then she had close-up

photographs taken at different angles. Rose said that: “*I wasn’t frightened of the selection round at all. I was very confident of my youthful face, my healthy skin. I was in a very good shape and good personality. I was so ‘mun nar’ (confident) at that time.*” Rose won the selection round and continued on to the regional competition. The highlight of the regional competition was the ‘special talent’ session. Each contestant was required to show her unique talent, especially activities which could pave ways for them into entertainment industry such as modeling, singing, or acting. Rose chose to perform a ‘B-Girl dance’ (break-dance), a creative and risky dance routine to western hip-hop music. She won the regional competition and advanced to the national contest in Bangkok. Rose told me after the regional competition that she asked a contest organizer why the judges chose her to advance to the final national round. The organizer told that apart from her beauty and personality, her performance in the talent session encouraged the judges to give her higher scores compared to other contestants. Performing the B-Girl dance in this competition allowed Rose to utilize ‘social hierarchies’ (Thornton, 1996) established between different youth subcultures. For young Thais, one’s status within the Thai youth social hierarchy is determined by a combination of style, leisure activities, and class. B-Girl dancing is one of the most conspicuous globally influenced youth subcultures in Thailand. This youth subculture belongs to urban middle-class youth or ‘*dek inter*’ (modern youth) who are considered ‘*hi-so*’ (high class). B-Girls are *hi-so* because this subcultural style in Thailand requires a certain level of taste and money to afford the commodities that signify ‘B-Girl’ subcultural identity (A. Cohen, 2009). Performing B-Girl dance showed the judges that Rose could display her distinctive modern self by appropriating global youth culture to demonstrate that she was qualified to win the competition. The final competition was held at one of the biggest convention centers in Bangkok. Contestants from regional contests throughout the country competed in this final event. Prior to the contest, all contestants’ pictures and profiles were broadcasted on television channels, were posted in the contest official website, and were widely shared on social media for the audience to vote. Although Rose did not win the national contest, she advanced to the final twenty contestants. Since then, Rose has been invited to work as a model or MC *pretty* in various events. One of the most exciting results she received after the contest was an offer from a talent manager who was worked for various celebrities. This manager



would serve as her personal manager and coach to provide her opportunities to enter the entertainment industry.

According to Giddens (1992), the female body in modern society becomes a focus of administrative power; it becomes a visible carrier of self-identity and is increasingly integrated into life-style decisions that an individual makes. Indeed, after research participants became a *pretty*, model, or beauty queen, they took care their bodies and beauty in accordance with the ideal types of a *pretty*, model, and beauty queen as they perceived. To maintain her body to reach the beauty queen specifications, Vicki strictly controlled her diet since she did not like to do exercise. After the contest, she did not keep in contact with her coaches and had to find ways to maintain her body by herself. Vicki tried many ways to control her diet. Finally, she found an independent Internet program led by a Thai celebrity. He shared his experience and his unique diet without doing any exercise. Vicki followed his instruction by avoiding carbohydrates, fat, and sugar, but ate more low-sugar fruits and vegetables. The main idea was ‘limiting calorie intake’ which Vicki appropriated from her favorite Internet program. Vicki carefully catalogued her eating and calculated her calorie intake. Calorie counting software applications were installed on her smart phone to calculate her daily caloric intake per day. At a noodle shop, she ordered ‘*kawlao*’ (a clear soup with meat and vegetable); sometimes she ordered extra vegetable instead of noodles. While seasoning her *kawlao* before eating, she did not put any sugar and fish sauce in it. She explained that she learned from the program that sugar was the main factor of gaining weight; and sodium in fish sauce could cause the body to retain water and swell. At a coffee shop, Vicki always ordered her coffee with ‘*no sweet*’ (no sugar).

In contrast to Vicki, Nancy said that:

*“I work so hard. After working, I just can’t help eating a lot. I just can’t be disciplined in eating like Vicki does. When I feel like I gain weight especially when my belly becomes bigger, I will order detox (detoxify) powder (a brand which is owned and promoted by a Thai supermodel) from the Internet. I take it before going to bed. In the next morning, I go to the bathroom a lot and my belly becomes flat again.”*

From the advertisement of this detox power in the Internet, the product brand was promoted along with the supermodel's name who was also the company's owner. The advertisement also stated that this detox power was a fiber that absorbed unwanted chemical substances left over in the body. After absorption, the chemicals were released through defecation. There were pictures of various celebrities advocated their use of the product. Nancy also exercised sometimes since she had exercise machines at home. Meanwhile, Rose prioritized going to the gym since a healthy appearance was very important for working as a model. Rose's boyfriend encouraged her to go to the same gym where he went. Rose purchased a gym membership and she learned to like exercising. Apart from spending quality time with her boyfriend and gaining a healthy look, Rose had a chance to get to network with people who belonged to high-class society.

To take care of their skin, Nancy went to have facial treatments at a spa and sometimes did it by herself. She also applied skin cream daily since, as a *pretty*, her clothing often showed a lot of skin. Working mostly at daytime and being in close proximity to others meant *pretties* needed a healthy looking skin. Nancy avoided applying whitening cream and lotion since she realized that her tan skin was one of her 'selling points' that made her look unique and different from other *pretties*. Meanwhile, I was amazed when Vicki revealed her skin care secret that:

*"If you want the truth, I tell you the truth...I haven't taken care of my skin much. When I'm working or being on stage, my skin is covered throughout by a foundation exclusively used for a beauty queen (poke peew) so that my skin looks bright and beautiful under spotlight. I don't have to do any special care as people mistakenly believe."*

While tan skin was Nancy's selling point, Rose preferred having white skin since a white skin was recognized as a mainstream beauty in Thai society. Rose said that: *"Thai people are crazy about white skin."* Apart from daily skin care, Rose tried to whiten her skin as much as possible by injecting glutathione and concentrated vitamin C into her veins as suggested by friends in the *pretty* and model social networks. Rose searched for information from the Internet and found a seller in Chiang Mai who sold a package consisting of six doses of glutathione and concentrated vitamin C for 3,000

baht. After ordering online, she went to get the product at an apartment in downtown. The seller instructed her to inject a dose every three to seven days until she finished all six doses in the package. The seller also introduced Rose to a freelance nurse who could give her injections for 200 baht per shot. After the sixth shot, Rose's skin became lighter and looked 'bright' (*kra chang sai*) as she wished. Most of her *pretty* and model colleagues continued injecting more doses and became much whiter; but Rose decided to stop due to the expense of the drug. Rose also researched on the side effects of glutathione. She found that glutathione prevented the production of dark-colored skin pigment. Naturally, the human liver creates this substance to detoxify chemicals, but less glutathione is produced when older. However, taking glutathione long-term or overdosing would lead to lower zinc levels and lead to asthma attacks. Rose also said that: "*Some of my friends overdosed on glutathione. Their pupils turned pale!*" After Rose stopped injecting glutathione and concentrated vitamin C, Nancy suggested her to apply 'BB cream', which became widely used among *pretties* and models. Nancy ordered a sample of BB cream for Rose from one of her *pretty* networks who was a seller. This cream had different shades of color according to a wide range of skin colors as Nancy explained in the figure below that: "*For light yellow skin, apply a green label; for light red skin, apply a violet label; for very white skin, apply a pink label; and for much tan skin like mine, apply a beige label.*" Cindy, who was staying in the same area of Nancy's and had the same skin color as Rose's, went to get the cream at Nancy's house. Cindy tried applying the cream for Rose and shared with other girl group members the results in a secret group. Cindy showed a picture comparing one of her arms with BB cream applied and the other unapplied. She gave praise that: "*I applied a violet label. My skin becomes very white and bright naturally. I applied just a little of it.*" Rose was satisfied with the cream's results and continued applying BB cream instead of injecting glutathione and concentrated vitamin C.

I followed these three research participants for three more years after they became a *pretty*, model, and beauty queen. It turned out that Nancy, the MC *pretty*, earned money for a longer period than Vicki, a beauty queen, and Rose, a model. Both Rose and Vicki had less jobs after a one-year period of their beauty queen and model positions. For Nancy, during the beginning period of being a *pretty*, she could earn around 4,000 baht per month, while Rose could earn almost 40,000 baht. Vicki could earn the highest

income of the three (I did not know the exact amount of money since Vicki said that her mother collected the money for her). Three years later, Nancy earned more than 40,000 baht a month with 20,000 baht from her permanent telecommunication company MC *pretty* work and the rest from other extra MC *pretty* jobs. Nancy said that: *“It depends on each month. Sometimes I work for a car brand for two days and get paid 6,000 baht. The more I work, the more extra money I get.”*

Another way Nancy could earn extra money was selling skin creams on the Internet and social media since she was associated with other *pretties* who ran online businesses. Nancy told me that being a *pretty* contributed to a positive image for any businesses related to cosmetic or beauty products. People had the perception that a *pretty* was knowledgeable and experienced with these products; they would likely believe and comply with suggestions provided by a *pretty*. Nancy ran her own online skin cream business through Facebook. Sometimes she posted pictures and video clips promoting or reviewing her products. When she received positive feedbacks from customers, she re-posted the feedback on her Facebook as a way to advertise. Nancy’s friend introduced her to a skin cream wholesaler in Bangkok where she ordered skin creams at a wholesale price. When she received online orders from clients, she sold the cream at a profit of 100 baht per unit sold.

For a year after Vicki was crowned a beauty queen, her working schedule was busy. She had to work almost every day all year long. Working details and payments varied depending on the type of event such as showing up with high-ranking government officials to welcome visitors, showing up in governmental organization events to promote a wide range of social issues—from mosquito eradication to rabies awareness campaigns. She was paid at least 1,000 baht to participate in each event. In certain events Vicki received high rates of income, especially those held by private organizations. For example, Vicki was invited to show up and walk around the stage for five minutes at a high-class nightclub for 5,000 baht. When Vicki accepted a job, she was expected to show up one or two hours prior to the event time for make-up and getting dressed. Sometimes, she was told to arrive three hours early if there was a big event or when there were celebrities or invited persons who needed to do make-up and get dressed. The most important part of each event was the orientation of the event

when Vicki was informed about event information and her assigned duties. Sometimes, she was given an answer guideline in case the press interviewed her. After Vicki transferred her beauty queen position to the new winner the next year, she had less job offers.

During the year after Rose passed the final twenty contestants of the modeling competition, she earned a large income since she was required to participate in various events organized and sponsored by the contest organizer throughout the year. Rose explained that:

*“All girls finished in the top twenty contestants have job offers. Some of them have very busy schedules while some have less; depends on whether ‘puu yai’ (those in charge such as event organizers, television program producers, etc.) can see them or not. The girl who won the same year I competed is still unknown even though it’s been for three years now. One of the girls who advanced to the top ten was discovered by A (one of the most powerful celebrity private managers). She resigned from the contest right away. Now, she changed her name and has become a famous actress. Some of them I saw few times in TV series and then disappeared. Some of them were offered contracts (with television channels or media companies) and they became famous. Some girls continued competing in other contests to gain more opportunities in entertainment industry.”*

As mentioned earlier, Rose was approached by a celebrity private manager to coach and provide jobs in the entertainment industry claiming that she saw a potential in Rose. She suggested Rose to undergo plastic surgeries on her nose and chin (more details on plastic surgeries in the next part). These ideal types of beauty—having high nose and long face shape—would pave ways for Rose into entertainment industry. Since Rose also sought to undergo a nose plastic surgery, she immediately decided to get her nose operation done at a private clinic in Chiang Mai. Rose shared her experience that:

*“I spent a very short time before deciding to get my nose job. I really wanted to do it. I searched for a doctor on the Internet. I visited websites where people who underwent surgeries reviewed and commented on their doctors. I finally found one where most of his clients gave him positive reviews and I immediately contacted him. Actually the doctor gave me an appointment in another month, but I asked him to do it as soon as possible. I really wanted to do it. I just couldn’t wait!...I was charged 9,000 baht and I really satisfied with my new nose shape.”*

Rose only underwent nose surgery at that time since the chin surgery was more expensive. After the nose surgery, Rose was told she should move to Bangkok to live and study since her future private manager claimed it would be better for her after the contract was signed. Her future employers would prefer to hire ones who lived in Bangkok rather than those who had to travel back and forth between Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Unfortunately, Rose’s mother did not agree with this suggestion from her manager. Her mother’s main reasons for disagreeing was the complicated process of transferring Rose from the university she was studying to another university in Bangkok and she expected Rose to focus on her studies. Moving to Bangkok for a career in the entertainment industry was risky because Rose was not guaranteed employment. There were many unsuccessful cases of young men and women who dropped out of university but could not enter the entertainment industry as they wished. Despite being terribly disappointed with her mother decision, Rose decided to refuse her future private manager’s offer. Since then, she accepted certain freelance modeling and MC *pretty* jobs in Chiang Mai, especially with Nancy.

I interviewed these three research participants during the last phase of my fieldwork. I asked them how they viewed their experiences of being a *pretty*, a beauty queen, or a model. Nancy revealed that:

*“At least I’m glad that I can gain benefits from my beauty. I know that the youthful face I have now will be gone someday. But right now I have to make it worth and grab it (kob koy) as much as possible. I can use my beauty to gain more opportunities than*



*others. Because of my beauty, I was selected to work for a big company that is famous for its service. I know I will have a good resume, experiences, networking with good people, English skill, and a nice working environment at this company. This profile will positively contribute to my application for a flight attendant job that I've dreamed of in the future."*

Meanwhile, Vicki also shared her view that her beauty provided her many great opportunities. She became well-known after being crowned a beauty queen when she was in high school. She used to be recognized as the F student among teachers and was on the school black list for constantly breaking school regulations. After she won beauty queen contests, she was frequently acknowledged and invited to show up and represent the school in various school-organized events. She was also presented with a certification for being the 'outstanding student' who preserved the school's reputation. Vicki was invited to participate in various events with high-class people than other ordinary young women could. When she studied at a private university, she was invited to appear in university promotional media and billboards displayed around the province. She was invited to be a university representative at various events around the country. Vicki finally concluded her view regarding her beauty that: *"My beauty helps me gain more opportunities than others."*

For Rose, she told me that utilizing her youthful beauty by attending various beauty and model competitions was a great experience for her as well. Even though her mother did not consent to her moving to Bangkok to work in the entertainment industry as she dreamed, Rose said that at least she took this opportunity to undergo a nose plastic surgery that her parents would never had consented to otherwise. Initially when her mother did not allow her to 'follow her dream' (*tam fun*) by moving to Bangkok and work in entertainment industry, she was totally upset with her mother's decision. Rose claimed that it was her time to earn a huge amount of money, but her mother was not very supportive of her. As three years passed, Rose said that: *"My mother was probably right not to allow me to move to Bangkok. So far, very few of the twenty final contestants are famous and successful in the entertainment industry. If I still insisted to*

*move to Bangkok, I'm not sure how far I could have gone. Focusing on studying is probably the right choice."*

## **7.2 Plastic Surgeries: “*Making Merits Make Me Become Beautiful in the Next Life but Plastic Surgeries Make Me Become Beautiful in this Life*”**

Historically, feminine beauty in Thailand has been linked with and subordinated to the institution of Buddhism. Prior to the global reach of the beauty industry and the increasing commodification of female beauty and sexuality, physical beauty in Thailand was perceived as an attribute of an individual's store of Buddhist merit. The beauty was a direct reflection of the good or bad deeds carried out in the past and present lives. In the past, Buddhist temple contests involved women in the community who were chosen to wear their finest clothes, perform songs, and recite poetry. Women were judged on their grace of movement, the tone of their voice, their skill in reciting poetry, and their possession of five physical attributes: beautiful hair, eyes, teeth, nails, and complexion. All these things were seen as a reflection of their inherent store of merit (Mills, 1993). In modern Thai society, Mills further states that “Feminine beauty has become one of the most powerful symbols for representing Thai progress and modernity” (1993 p.159).

The resurgence of beauty contests in the 1980s coincided with the growth of the beauty industry in Thailand and with the increasingly global circulation of beauty products and standards of feminine beauty (Reynolds, 1994). As notions of feminine beauty and the body were re-configured by the forces of modernity, plastic surgery has been an increasingly popular practice. This has occurred during changing notions of the individual self (as “made” and not given) and plastic surgery has become a rapidly growing commercial enterprise in Thailand as the modern beauty industry been increasingly available for ordinary Thai woman (Kepner, 1996; Van Fleet, 1998).

During fieldwork, three of my research participants underwent plastic surgeries and most of the girl group members wished or had plans for surgeries. I was told by one of them that: “*Making merits make me become beautiful in the next life, but plastic surgeries make me become beautiful in this life*” (thum boon suay chat na, thum na suay chat nee). Another research participant called plastic surgery: “*The beauty that could be chosen*” (suay luek dai). These common expressions made me realized that plastic

surgery was no longer reserved merely for wealthy women or considered unorthodox as it had in the past. The self in modern society is for everyone a reflexive project— which Giddens calls ‘the reflexive project of self’ (1992). The self becomes heavily infused with reflexivity. The body has always been modified and adorned. The reflexive project of self has carried on among numerous reflexive resources. While modern technology and science allow women to physically re-align their bodies to fit standard beauty ideals, modern medical technology has become one of the main resources that literally made Giddens’s reflexive project of self possible. This part therefore explores various meanings and experiences of plastic surgery among research participants as products of their reflexive projects of self and part of their popular culture consumption in everyday life.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, Cindy came to school on the first school day and proudly showed me and the rest of the group members her new nose shape from undergoing plastic surgery during school vacation. Since Thai people preferred a high nose, Cindy was willing to pay 12,000 baht to enhance her beauty. She said that: *“It makes me look more beautiful. You see that a lot of young people my age are getting nose jobs. It’s very common.”* Cindy further revealed her view on plastic surgery that:

*“I want to improve myself to be more beautiful and look better. My parents don’t agree with my desire to have surgeries. They don’t give me any money. I paid my own money I’ve collected by myself. I’ve gone so far. I’ve associated with many people. Most of them had plastic surgeries and they look good. Why can’t I make myself look good like them?”*

Rose was the next girl group member who decided to undergo plastic surgery on her nose. Rose, however, insisted that plastic surgery should be done for a reason. She wanted it to make her look more attractive to enter the entertainment industry. Having a high nose contributed to higher self-confidence. Rose expressed her view that:

*“Most Thai women have a low nose shape. Having a higher nose will make their faces more attractive. Some of them have small eyes; having bigger eyes from surgery can make them look better. They will gain more self-confidence and more chances in their careers. But some of them are too extreme on surgery. That’s too much!”*

Rose stated further: *“I feel bad for those who have done excessive surgeries. Many of my friends who are models and pretties have too many surgeries like they never get enough. They really look like different people. Actually, they are beautiful but I think they look weird.”* Rose believed that plastic surgery put chemical substances into the body that could possibly bring negative side effects in the future. Undergoing too many surgeries would be dangerous.

Being *tom*, the main reason Kim determined to undergo plastic surgery on her nose was to look more masculine. She had been dreaming of having a high nose believing that it would make her look more ‘handsome.’ Prior to the operation, she told a doctor that she wished to have a masculine nose shape. After the operation, Kim was satisfied with the results. She looked at the mirror all the time to appreciate her new ‘masculine’ nose shape.

In the process of searching for information about plastic surgery and service providers, Cindy and Rose began by searching Google using the keyword ‘plastic surgery in Chiang Mai.’ Cindy said that after using this keyword, she chose the first clinic website suggested on the first line. Then she continued reading reviews and comments posted by the clients. Most of them gave positive feedbacks. She decided to call the number on the website to make an appointment with clinic staff to discuss cost and other details. She went to the clinic for her surgery a week later. Within three years, Cindy had multiple plastic surgeries on her nose and eyelids at the same clinic.

In addition to searching the Internet, Rose also consulted her friends who had undergone plastic surgeries before. Then, she had a long list of doctors and clinics. She finally made her decision by comparing information suggested from her friends and her research among comments and reviews on various private clinics on the Internet. She eventually went to a clinic where both her friends and clients on the Internet gave

mostly positive feedbacks. Rose also told me her technique of searching for information on the Internet. She said she did not believe in comments and reviews posted on any clinic's official website since those comments and reviews were carefully scanned and selected; so that almost all comments or reviews were positive. Rose chose to read reviews on independent websites or web-boards not organized by any particular clinic. They were more reliable and less biased because certain negative feedbacks were found for almost every clinic.

For Kim, she did not search for any information on the Internet at all. She said: *"I don't believe in what they say on the Internet. They can say whatever they want. I trust my close friends [who were undergone plastic surgeries before]. Their suggestions make me feel more confident."* Kim strongly believed in suggestions provided by her female classmate who was a part-time model. She had multiple plastic surgeries and always turned out very satisfied. She suggested that Kim go to the same private clinic as her. Aside from very high rates, Kim had a good first impression with the service and hygiene of the clinic. She finally decided to undergo her nose surgery at that clinic.

Among three research participants, each of them had a unique experience while undergoing plastic surgery to reach their ideal type of beauty. Cindy was the first girl group member who underwent plastic surgery on her nose during high school. While studying in university, she had more two operations to reshape her nose as well as eyelid surgery. The first time Cindy underwent a nose surgery, she showed up at a clinic at 4 p.m. as stated in an appointment card. There was a long queue of patients before her at that day and Cindy had to wait. It turned out that a doctor was available for her at 9 p.m. Cindy was given an anesthetic injections numbing her during the operation. Cindy explained that:

*"I knew what the doctor was doing on my nose, but I didn't feel pain at all. It took only ten minutes and it was done. The doctor told me to close my eyes and count from one to hundred. While he was doing my nose job, he also turned his eyes to a TV news report and chatted with his assistant. After he was done, he told me to get out off the room while the next patient was walking in. After that I gave myself a cold press, got antibiotic pills and left. It was really quick."*

After the operation, Cindy was told not to wash her face for three days and avoid fermented food, chicken, eggs, and alcohol. Her wound healed within two weeks and she was satisfied with her nose's new shape. When Cindy returned to the clinic for follow-up check, the staff suggested that she massaged her nose.

After two years, Cindy underwent another round of surgery to reshape her nose with a new silicone implant since the clinic offered a 50% discount for reshape operations. Together with the nose surgery, Cindy decided to pay 10,000 baht more for eyelid surgery to level her upper eyelids. She said that: *"It hurts anyway, so I do multiple operations so that I it will hurt only one time."* Undergoing upper eyelid surgery was much more painful. Cindy told me after the surgery that: *"I suffered a lot. A doctor gave me two shots of anesthetic, but I screamed out while he was stitching up wounds. He did it very roughly. I told him that it was hurtful. After that my eyes were swollen. I couldn't even open my eyes wide for weeks."* After a long period of recovery, Cindy was satisfied with multiple layers of her upper eyelids. However, she did not like her second nose shape believing that it was too long and not suitable for her face. The following year Cindy decided to undergo reshape operation on her nose and take the silicone out. For this third surgery, she preferred not to put in any silicone saying that: *"I want my nose to take some rest for awhile. Although my nose shape becomes very basic with a little scar at the tip, I still have my fabulous upper eyelids"*

Cindy preferred going to private clinics like most young people did because the cheaper rates offered by private clinics and clients spent less time than going to hospitals. Cindy said that: *"I just went to meet clinic staffs and tell them what surgery I wanted and discussed details and price. Then, I can have an appointment with a doctor and do it very soon"*. Moreover, private clinics offered various promotions and discounts. At the clinic she went, Cindy was charged merely 50 percent of the original price for subsequent rounds to re-shape or fix surgeries (in case a previous surgery went wrong). When Cindy referred her friends to this clinic, she was paid a 10 percent commission. Cindy revealed that: *"I brought two friends to have nose jobs at this clinic. Each one paid 12,000 baht. I got 2,400 baht for bringing them to the clinic. A staff who gave me money told that it was for my snack (pen kha ka nom)"*



After her first operation, Cindy's passion for plastic surgery led her to become one of the clinic staffs. She was assigned to take care of patients after their operations by providing medication, instructions, and suggestions on how to take care of themselves during recovery periods. Cindy said that: *"I visited the clinic very often at that time and there were not enough staffs at the clinic so they asked me if I could work part-time. I was paid 300 baht per day and worked from 7 pm. to 11 pm. because the clinic was packed with patients at night time, especially Friday and Saturday nights."*

This clinic became very popular in Chiang Mai since it offered low rates for procedures compared to others. For example, a nose surgery cost around 9,000-12,000 baht while other clinics were charging up to 30,000 baht. Breast implants were 55,000 baht while other clinics charged 70,000 to 100,000 baht. However, Cindy revealed that:

*"While working there, I saw around half of patents returned for problem-solving operations. They were still willing to come to this clinic since it was cheap and charged merely 50 percent for subsequent surgeries. One day, a patient who had a boob job returned to the clinic because of problems with her breasts; they became harder and harder. The clinic staff squeezed her breasts very hard until they turned red, but she said that she didn't feel anything. She ended up needing a surgery to take silicones out...Some patients returned (for problem-solving surgeries) 4-5 times and they got discounts down to 2,000-3,000 baht (for a nose surgery). The more they returned the more discounts they got..."*

Signs in front of the clinic advertised opening hours from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., but in practice it operated until 11 p.m. or until the last patient received medical services. In the evening, one of the clinic's main iron shutters was closed but it was still very packed with waiting patients. The services advertised in front of the clinic mostly related primarily to hair care, and skin care such as pimples, freckles, or blemish treatments. According to Cindy, most of young female clients—around 80 percent—came for nose surgeries and breast implants. Botox injections and liposuctions came in at the third and fourth respectively. She told me that:

*“If you didn’t know this place before, you won’t think that this is a clinic (for plastic surgery). It’s right in downtown and has no place to park. You have to park your car somewhere else and walk to the clinic. When you go inside, you will see patients from recent operations walking down lamely from the upper floor. Some of them are wrapped like mummies.”*

Cindy revealed further that: *“Someday, I had to take care of almost ten patients who just had breast implants done by only one doctor. They laid down in a row in a recovery room with IV tubes...”*

One day while Cindy was working at the clinic, she shared a photo taken in front of a clinic and posted it on the online secret group to show how busy the clinic was as indicated by the numbers of clients’ shoes. Cindy explained that: *“I’m working at the clinic I did my nose job for taking care of its patients. Lots of people in and out... Crowded like a temple fair. So many people come for breast implants”*

For Rose, after contacting a clinic staff, she showed up with her mother according to the appointment. In contrast to Cindy’s doctor, Rose’s doctor asked her what kind of nose shape she liked, but he suggested a different shape that he believed would be more suitable for her face and personality. Rose said that:

*“He told me that my face outline was short. If I had too long or too high nose shape, it would not go along well with my face since it would look unnatural. I was OK with his suggestion. He gave me anesthetic shots. After putting a silicone in my nose, he told me to get up and checked the mirror to see if I was OK with the new nose shape. Then he sewed up the wound.”*

Rose was charged the cheapest price at 9,000 baht for her nose operation—compared to Cindy at 12,000 baht and Kim at 30,000 baht. Rose expressed her view that:

*“Sometimes we have to take a risk (on a surgery). It depends on if you meet the right doctor for you or not. If you go to the right one, you pay cheap but it turns out very good. Some people have expensive*

*operations, but unfortunately they are allergic to the particular type of silicone used. And for anyone who doesn't have good physical appearance, plastic surgery will never help... It depends on different factors."*

When I asked Kim about her new nose shape, she initially acknowledged her father for being supportive: *"I have to thank my dad for being a sponsor of my new nose shape."* Her father provided her 30,000 baht to undergo plastic surgery on her nose as her reward for managing a coffee shop for him. Kim was different from Cindy and Rose because she had tried Filler injections on her nose prior to undergoing her nose operation with silicone. Kim found disadvantages of getting Filler because it was impermanent and moveable, especially in a high temperature. Moreover, the Filler injected area was unnaturally soft. After being injected with Filler for around six months, it degenerated and her nose shape became low as usual. Kim was charged between 6,000 to 10,000 baht for each time depending on the Filler quality. Kim decided to stop getting Filler to undergo plastic surgery with silicone since it looked more natural and stayed for a longer period of time.

After Kim decided to get her nose surgery at a private clinic, she had an appointment with a doctor. Prior to the operation, a clinic staff offered her options with diverse prices ranging from 9,000 baht, 12,000 baht, 15,000 baht, 20,000 baht, 25,000 baht, and the most expensive at 30,000. Kim told me that:

*"The staff encouraged me to choose the 30,000 baht option claiming that a doctor would use the best quality of imported silicone. A nose job is done once and for all; it will stay with me not only few years, but much longer than that. The silicone of a 30,000 baht option will make my nose look very natural and flexible, unlike other cheaper materials. I agreed to do the most expensive option.... When I got back to the clinic for follow-up check after surgery, the same staff tried to move my nose slightly and it was really moveable!"*

Kim explained her experience of undergoing her first nose plastic surgery that:

*“Before surgery, a clinic staff gave me a lot of medication. They made me feel bit dazed. Then, they gave me a sweet drink with ‘ya hom’ (a power to mix with a drink for reviving) to prevent me from passing out. In the operation room, a doctor gave me anesthetic shots before he did my nose job. It took around one hour since the doctor had to scrape the left over Filler under my skin and reshape my nose bone to be compatible with the silicone shape. After that, the doctor told me to wake up to check at a mirror if I liked the shape. He asked me ‘Do you like it?’ I said yes and it was done.”*

After the operation, Kim was very satisfied with her new nose shape. Apart from the good quality of the imported silicone, she told me that: *“My nose is very flexible compared to those cheaper ones. When I was drunk and my friend accidentally hit my nose, it was still back in the same position.”*

As mentioned, online secret groups were the main channels for research participants to share confidential stories with each other, including personal stories regarding plastic surgeries. While any group member was in the process of undergoing plastic surgery, she always shared her daily story and pictures with other group members to keep up with everyone, as well as give their comments and suggestions. When Cindy was in the process of her second plastic surgery on her nose and upper eyelids at the same time, she shared several of her daily selfie pictures on the secret groups from the moment that after she left the operation room, during her recovery period, and until the wounds were well-healed. Cindy also gave explanations for each picture regarding symptoms and the ways she took care of herself in that particular phase. Meanwhile, other group members actively commented and gave support for Cindy to get through her recovery period.

Kim was the third group member who underwent plastic surgery. She also shared her daily selfie pictures on the online secret groups after her nose surgery and during recovery period. While Kim was updating her daily pictures, Rose and Cindy—who had more experiences—constantly gave her comments and suggestions. During the beginning of the recovery period, Kim was very worried about post-surgical symptoms after her nose continued to be swollen for more than a week. Rose and Cindy then posted messages explaining that it was normal to be swollen after a surgical procedure

for a certain period of time. Since Kim's nose was penetrated by medical instruments and was replaced by silicone, it would take time to heal; some cases spent more than a month for recovery. Moreover, Rose warned Kim to follow doctor's instruction strictly. She should avoid unwholesome food, alcohol drinks, and being hit on her nose, especially while enjoying the nightlife.

While plastic surgery became an increasingly popular practice, it was very common among research participants to express their wishes to undergo various operations on their online secret groups. Some of them compared their faces to idols or celebrities and explained which part of their faces and bodies should have been changed in order to meet those beauty ideals. For example, Nancy posted her selfie picture compared with one of her favorite Thai celebrity who she considered her ideal type of beauty. Apart from applying the same style of make-up, Nancy expressed her determination to undergo nose surgery in the future so she would look more resemble to her idol.

Meanwhile, girl group members constantly shared pictures of their friends or persons they knew who had undergone several kinds of plastic surgeries, especially on their breasts and noses, in the online secret groups. The rest of the group members also actively gave their comments as well as expressed their wishes and plans for surgeries in the future such as breast implants, Botox injections, chin surgeries, upper eyelid surgeries, and reshaping their noses.

Moreover, girl group members enthusiastically shared updated information or opportunities for plastic surgeries in online secret groups in case other members were interested and sought ways to receive those medical services they were looking for. The most active member in the group was Cindy, who was named among the group member '*tua mae san ya kam*' (plastic surgery guru/expert) due to her multiple-surgical experiences. Cindy was passionate and constantly searched for updated information about plastic surgery, especially while working part-time at the private clinic. When Cindy found any special promotions or discounts, she often shared in online secret groups for other group members. For example, Cindy shared the news of free plastic surgeries offered by a newly-opened private clinic. Applicants who were selected would be provided free operations on both their nose and eyelids and would be also hired as clinic presenters. Since Nancy was a member in the *pretty* networks, she shared a

special discount of Botox injections offered by a private clinic exclusively for *pretties* or clients who were accompanied with *pretties*. Meanwhile, Rose expressed her interest in facial Botox injections while Lisa wished to inject Botox in her legs to make them thinner.

*“You know that I’ve never had a high nose all of my life. Once I have it and it makes me look much better than before. I paid a lot for it so I appreciate it in a mirror all day and night”*

Giddens (1992) argues that we should recognize that self-identity become particularly problematic in modern social life, particularly in the very recent era. Fundamental features of a society of high reflexivity are ‘open’ character of self-identity and the reflexive nature of the body. The quote above was considered as Kim’s reflexivity through her view about nose surgery she just had done. Despite her satisfaction of her new nose shape, Kim told me that: *“Many people told me that my nose is high but it’s not high enough for me. I will make it higher.”* Kim revealed further that she was also searching for other parts of her face that could be modified in the near future to make her look ‘handsome’ as she wished and told me that: *“The next project will be a 3-D eyebrow tattoo (sak keew sarm mee tee) because when I look at my pictures, my eyebrows look every mild like I don’t have them.”* At the last phase of my fieldwork, Kim found and contacted with a 3-D eyebrow tattoo shop already.

Although Rose told me after she did her nose plastic surgery that she was satisfied with her new nose shape, during the last phase of my fieldwork she gave me a different answer; she had a plan to reshape her nose in the near future to make it look more natural. Rose talked about her nose shape that: *“My nose shape looked natural from the side view, but it looks too high and bit unnatural from the front.”* Since Rose’s potential private manager had suggested her to undergo chin surgery to make her face outline looked longer, Rose was still considering that operation. Rose told me: *“I wish I would have a longer chin. My face outline is short. If I had a longer chin, my face outline would be perfect. But I heard that undergoing a chin surgery is very painful because the doctor will cut skin inside my mouth to put silicone through in the chin area.”* Rose then had her alternative choices of injecting Filler instead of plastic surgery using



silicone. She was still conducting research regarding the pros and cons of plastic surgery and Filler injections.

While Cindy decided to let her nose to ‘have some rest’ by not putting new silicone in the third operation, she was planning for the bigger project of breast implant surgery. Cindy expressed her need that: *“I see many people that had breast implants and their breasts look so good. I’m jealous!”* I asked her about whether she was aware of negative side effects like the patient who faced negative results of her breast implant while Cindy was working at a private clinic. Cindy replied that she was also aware of that. However, she insisted that if she could search for ‘the right doctor’ and know how to take care of herself appropriately during the recovery period, Cindy believed that her breast implants would be successful.

Apart from the three research participants who had done plastic surgeries, other group members who did not have any surgical experience also expressed their plans or prepared themselves by searching for information about various plastic surgeries from diverse sources for the best clinic and doctor. Lisa was one of the research participants who felt inferior about her big-boned legs. She had been trying to exercise, but it did not help much. Lisa wanted to have Botox injections on her legs since she learned that getting Botox could make her legs thinner. Vicki and Nancy expressed their needs for nose plastic surgeries. Both of them told me that they were fortunate that their noses were naturally high compared to other Thai women. For Nancy, as a *pretty*, she believed that if she had a higher nose she would look more attractive especially while taking picture from the side view. For Vicki, she told me that her nose was too wide in the nostril area. Having nose surgery to narrow her nose by cutting out a wedge-shaped piece from the outer base of each nostril would make her look much better. At the last phase of my fieldwork, both of them were trying to search for information by discussing and consulting with friends who had related nose surgery experiences as well as visiting websites and web-boards regarding plastic surgeries.

## Conclusion

In the first part regarding becoming a *pretty*, model, and beauty queen, the experiences of Nancy, Vicki, and Rose illustrates how they ‘make do’ popular culture and their female sexuality into their own interpretations and meanings under the hegemonic control powers of the conventional *kunlasatree* (good, proper woman) discourse. This part demonstrated the ways research participants tactically appropriate, negotiate, or contest the conventional sexual discourse for their own benefits and gained certain level of sexual autonomy. In Vicki’s context, she chose to comply with the conventional norm of being well-behaved and being ‘beautiful in Thai way’ (*ngam yang Thai*) for her advantage while serving as a beauty queen. Meanwhile, Rose and Nancy chose to appropriate sexy and modern images to become a *pretty* and model. Despite different reactions—complying or challenging—to social controls of their sexuality, the three young women exhibited their active agencies under conditions of urbanization and modernization in Chiang Mai city where popular culture consumption was significantly active.

Van Fleets (1998 p 56) states that since Thailand has become a modern nation-state, representations of feminine beauty have become increasingly enmeshed with translocal and transnational forces, especially those of market capitalism and global consumerism. Standards of beauty, always changing, have become less an intrinsic quality emanating from a person’s store of Buddhist merit than something that can be bought or acquired. For many women who had no control over their beauty in earlier times, the availability of plastic surgery procedures can offer them a sense of control over their appearance and a sense of personal empowerment. Female beauty in modern Thai society has significantly evolved into an object of commodity exchange, reflecting and promoting certain kinds of middle-class products and consumption patterns. The second part thus shows that how ‘the reflexive project of self’ (Giddens, 1992) is intensively practiced among research participants and the various ways they actively interpreted and made do (Fiske, 1989) different kinds of plastic surgery to sustain their interests in everyday life in the context of contemporary northern Thai society.