THESIS REPORT

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I, Michelle Kwon, am creating an **online platform** for **young South Korean women** to share concerns about appearance in a supportive environment, to learn about different standards of beauty and eventually **to accept their appearance.**

Beginning of this academic year, it was my goal to study, analyze and better understand a global phenomenon of women getting plastic surgeries to feel valued and appreciated. I was particularly interested in young Korean women who are exposed to lookism[1] from a very young age and contemplate on getting plastic surgeries or "treatments," which are easily accessible and available without any regulations. While getting plastic surgeries for cosmetic reasons is prevalent in the country, I learned that a great number of women get plastic surgeries in the process of getting a job since a typical Korean resume often requires a picture of the candidate. This became a starting point of my research. While individual has a complete freedom to alter her appearance, the society and companies should not foster a culture in which beauty becomes a necessity.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR PROCESS?

My thesis process has included the following steps:

A. Research: Resume as a tool of intervention

B. Pivot Point: Realizing why resume is not a great tool of intervention

C. Do Prototypes Anyway

D. Where Prototype Led Me: Interesting Intersection of Beauty and Cyber Bullying

E. New Prototype: What's Not to Love?

A. Research: Resume as A Tool of Intervention

In a typical job hunting process in Korea, a candidate's face is important. Both quantitative and qualitative research I have done indicate the same; 8 out of 10 typical resume templates available on Internet have a designated space for picture in the top section along with other identifications. According to 2 interviews with HR employee and an owner of a medical clinic, a resume with the candidate's picture is critical in several ways.

I INTERVIEWED 2 PEOPLE AND ASKED

"IF A CANDIDATE SUBMITTED A RESUME WITHOUT HER PICTURE, WHAT WOULD BE YOUR REACTION? WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO HAVE THE PERSON COME IN FOR AN INTERVIEW? AND WHY DO YOU THINK PICTURES ARE NECESSARY?"

A	B
OWNER	**MANAGER**
↓	↓
"I WOULD BE INTRIGUED.	"I WOULDN'T HIRE.
I WOULD INVITE HER IN FOR INTERVIEW.	I NEED PICTURES BECAUSE I WANT TO KNOW IF THE PERSON IS NOT A MANIAC.
IF THERE'S NO PHILOSOPHY/ THOUGHTS BEHIND HER "DIFFERENT" STYLE, **I'D BE MORE DISAPPOINTED.**"	COMPANIES HAVE THEIR OWN "STYLE" OF PEOPLE THAT THEY LOOK FOR."

1. Lookism: Prejudice or discrimination based on physical appearance and especially physical appearance believed to fall short of societal notions of beauty. Merriam-Webster.

Without a reliable source to check a candidate's identity, one of interviewees that I contacted said that her picture becomes a way to learn about the candidate's characteristics, if s/he can conform to the society's standard (resume format,) and if she is similar to a type of employees that the company is looking for. It was clear that one's appearance takes a critical role in a recruiting process one way or another.

After the research and interviews, one of my initial ideas, which is to discourage candidates from putting their pictures in resumes, seemed not to work well in the particular social context. **South Korea has a very structured society, and people do not welcome those who do not respect or conform with existing rules, regardless of its legality.**

B. Pivot Point:
Realizing why resume is not a great tool of intervention

Besides, getting plastic surgeries has a deeper root cause that relies on each individual's perception and validation of who she is. Prohibiting companies from accepting resumes with pictures will not stop people from discriminating others and verbally abuse others' appearance. My initial idea was a bandage solution rather than changing the root cause of the prevalent problem of lookism and verbal abuse against women.

Women need to change first in order to change the society and a deeply engrained problem.

I wanted to know exactly where problems lie in order to begin to think about possible solutions.

C. Do Prototypes Anyway

My first prototype was to invite a group of young South Korean women (mid-to-late twenties) write down on a piece of paper about their least favorite parts of appearance, openly discuss about it, and take a picture with the paper. Through this prototype, I wanted to learn what had influenced them to perceive certain part of her body as undesirable and how such perception changes her behavior in her life, and how she feels while sharing with the group of friends and being in front of the camera.

The prototype took place in Seoul, South Korea in December 2014. 4 women who knew each other fairly well got together in a comfortable and safe setting after having dinner together. This prepared participants to transition into the prototype session and be able to talk with ease. The group spent about 10 minutes drawing, 5 mins to explain her sketches individually, and eventually took a picture with the sketches.
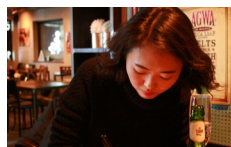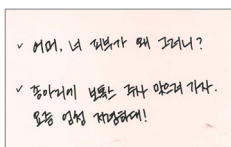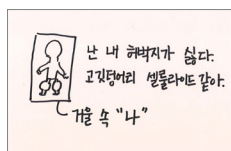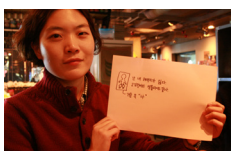
During the prototype, something interesting happened:
As individuals finished sketching own papers, they took a peak at others' sketches and what they were writing. And then there were a lot of sighing and gasps. Even before I got to "sharing" phase of the prototype, natural sharing process happened. All girls started commenting on each others' sketches and pointed out how ridiculous her friends' self criticisms were.

" WOW, IN 15 YEARS HAD I KNOWN YOU, I NEVER EVER THOUGHT THAT PART OF YOUR BODY WAS FAT."

" (LOOKING AT SOMEONE ELSE'S PAPER,) THIS MUST BE HOW RIDICULOUS MINE SOUNDS LIKE. YOUR CRITICISM IS RIDICULOUS. IT'S SO NOT TRUE."

" IT'S JUST SAD THAT YOU THINK SO CRITICALLY OF YOURSELF LIKE THAT…"

After the group took a turn to explain about her own sketch, I wrapped up with a group conversation. The prototype reveals many of my previous fundamental assumptions accurate.

Assumptions about South Korean young women's perception of beauty:

• Many women develop ideas of standard of beauty in relation to her social context. i.e.) South Korean society's typical standard of beauty for women often depicts and represents docility and fragility more than western societies, therefore, South Korean women want to become close to their society's standard of beauty.

• Criticisms and negative feedback women got from early stages of her lives (childhood, adolescence) have more impact on their perception of beauty.

• Many women think that it's more objective and unbiased when someone who doesn't know her or see her often gives a feedback about her appearance.

• Women tend to think about flaws in her body more severe and exaggerated than it appears to be in others' eyes.

Through the first prototype, I have gained interesting and critical insights. **One is that many women do not have an outlet to test assumptions about her appearance.**
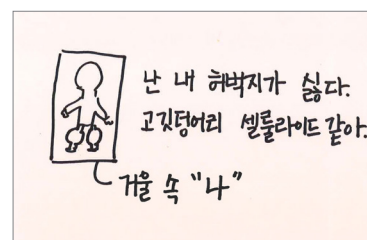
This participant's exaggerated drawing of her "fat" thighs was humorous and made people laugh. They had laughter as well as heartbreaking moments when participants saw their loved ones' harsh criticisms towards themselves.

In a woman's head, she has an exaggerated, or often distorted, image of herself, **but there is no platform that encourages women to look at herself in a more objective perspective and share these concerns in a supportive environment.**

While it is universal that women from all ages share concerns regarding their appearance, it still remains mostly within the individual's circles of friends. It is an interesting dichotomy of one's mind; according to my previous hypothesis, women think that it's more unbiased when someone she doesn't know gives her feedback, yet her process of sharing concerns only remains within her trusted source of relationships.

Figure 2: Fox's Chatroom

TRUST MAP OF A WOMAN IN RELATION TO
SOMEONE WHO KNOWS HER WELL VS. OUTSIDER

PERSON WHO KNOWS YOU
AND LOVES YOU DEEPLY

OUTSIDER

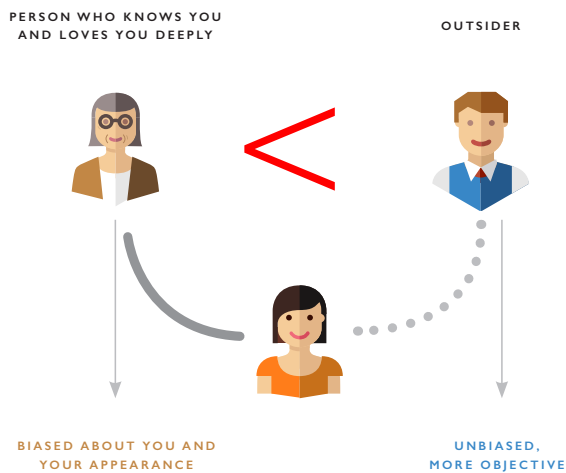BIASED ABOUT YOU AND
YOUR APPEARANCE

UNBIASED,
MORE OBJECTIVE

Figure 1

D. Where the Prototype Led Me: Interesting Intersection of Beauty and Cyber Bullying

Interestingly, I knew one online platform that numerous women come and share their concerns about appearance to complete strangers.

This online community or "internet cafe" called *Fox's Chatroom* is widely known as a hub of sharing plastic surgery informations and post-surgery pictures and processes, in which women post their own pre and post plastic surgeries pictures and share with other anonymous users. In these posts, women often degrade and humiliate their own body and face in detail by posting pre-plastic surgery pictures, and show the difference through another set of selfies after surgery.

Under another menu of the internet cafe, **women (and few men) are posting their selfies and ask others where they should fix.** To these posts, anonymous people comment by depicting certain parts of the poster's body or face, criticizing why they need more "work" done, and encouraging her after ripping her apart with criticisms.
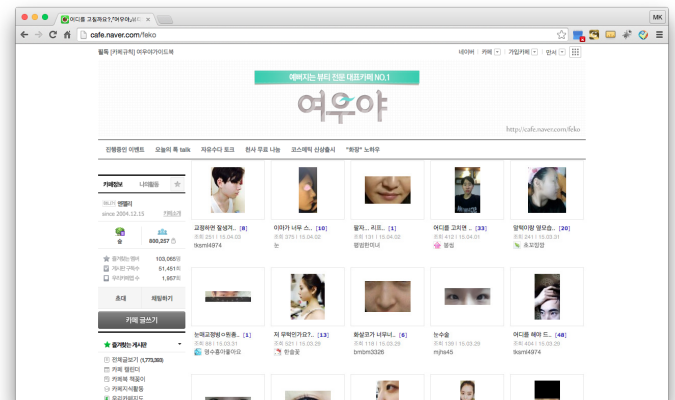

Figure 3-A: A typical post

My forehead looks sunken and I have a mediocre nose,
every part looks strange. How do you think I'd look if I get
nose and forehead implant?
Please tell me what's wrong with my nose.
(For example, low bridge or weird looking tip of the nose...)
Please tell me a lot of opinions.

Figure 3-B: Typical commenters' reactions

Callouts:

Nothing looks too bad...
If you must, get dermal fat transfer.

If you get fat transfer, you'd look more gloomy because you have a bump in your nose. Accentuation is good, but having a balanced face is better.
If I were you, I'd get rid of nose bump, erect tip of the nose, and forehead & cheek fat transfer for more volume.

You have small forehead, so if you get fat transfer it'd look smaller. Just get the nose job and chin implant.

Get rid of the nose bump; that would make you pretty.

You have a feminine vibe, I hope you don't touch anywhere.

Nose bump and tip of the nose?

After getting the nose job, do some fat transfer...under your cheek bones and side of your cheek.

I recommend forehead fat transfer.

You are pretty enough.. Clean up your eyebrows and get smile lift around your lips.

You'd look pretty if you get fat transfer (or implant,) nose job, and face lift.

This chain of interactions is critical. If anonymity and virtuality provided shields for online bullies and trolls, victims come online to the cafe looking for these behaviors. This is problematic in many ways:

First, posters are soliciting more criticisms by posting the photos when they are already insecure to come to the internet cafe in the first place. In return, this encourages, if not creates, internet trolls. Without revealing one's identity and disclosing their background of any kind of knowledge, trolls criticize a woman's face according to his/her personal judgment and leave the cyber space.

Second, in the process of sharing their sincere concerns, posters of such posts become victims of lookism and internet trolling **voluntarily.** After having been brutally beaten with such criticisms, these women move further and further away from acknowledging their flaws as well as strength, understanding the imperfection, and accepting their least favorite part of body as a part of her precious self.

But most importantly, there is not enough people with positive opinions.

The writer of the post in figure 3-A is testing her own assumptions about her appearance by writing in details what she doesn't love about her face. Asking others' opinions proves that, to her, others' approval matters more than what she thinks of herself, and therefore, connects to and reinforces figure 1 (trust map).

If it is given that women seeking for others' approval weigh other people's opinion more, how can I engage this behavior towards creating a positive change? I was interested in answering these questions:

What will happen if there were more positive opinions?
How can I encourage and emulate the environment of my first prototype, in which women felt connected, touched and moved by others while revealing the most vulnerable part of herself?

I felt very strongly that this is the audience that my work needs to focus on and that the mental model can be taken further to be developed towards creating a positive change that I sought for.

And here is why.

Users who come to Fox's Chatroom are conscious of how they look and are interested in learning more about plastic surgeries. They are not happy about their appearance as they could be. The below explains my target audience in detail.

Young Korean woman
who have concerns about
her appearance

Bragging
in disguise

Sign of Depression,
eating disorder,
suicide attempts

My target audience is young South Korean women from age of 20 or more, who have concerns about her appearance and uses online platforms to seek information, opinions and trends. Why?

1) Their action of asking other people's opinion encourages internet trolls to act upon her insecurity, and this leads to online bullying.

2) They have not done plastic surgeries, yet considering getting one very seriously before they take an action.

3) If there's a way for her to look at herself and her problem in a different angle, she will revert the decision of getting plastic surgery.

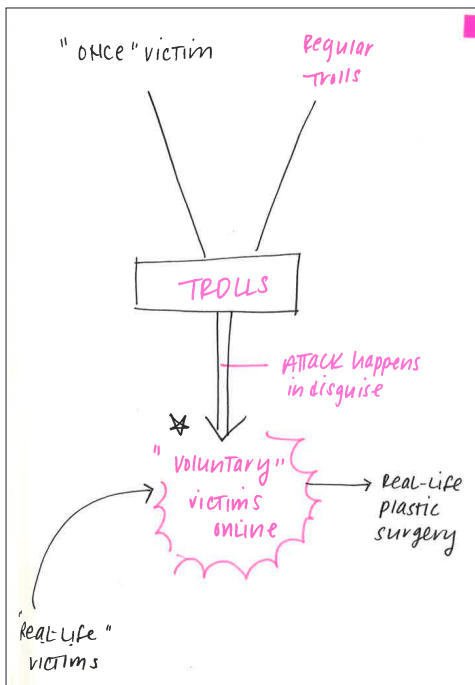Figure 4

Online interaction results in offline actions of getting plastic surgeries.

E. New Prototype: What's Not to Love?

My next step evolved around the question 'how do I create a virtual space without making users vulnerable and exposed to trolls, so that users can get diverse feedback about her appearance?'

It is not my goal to tell women that they should not change their body. It is to see more women simply accepting themselves, their natural figure and feel appreciated and valued without feeling the need to change their bodies through extreme measures.
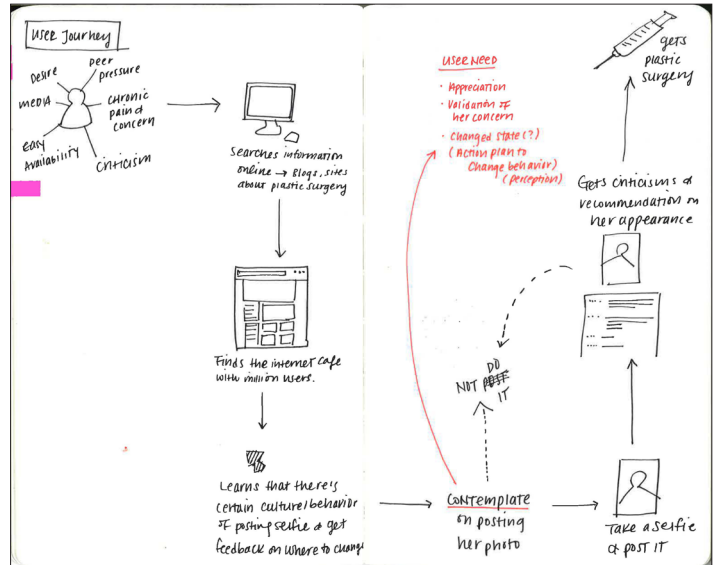
My hypothesis is that, if there is an online platform, in which women are exposed to different perspective and standards of beauty, it will encourage women to feel more comfortable with their imperfection.

There are diverse standards of beauty, and when presented with different aspects to compare with, only by then will women understand her own perception of beauty was inclined towards very few. Furthermore, this hopefully leads them to understand that the most important opinion that truly matters is her own.

So here's WHAT'S NOT TO LOVE?.

what's not to love?
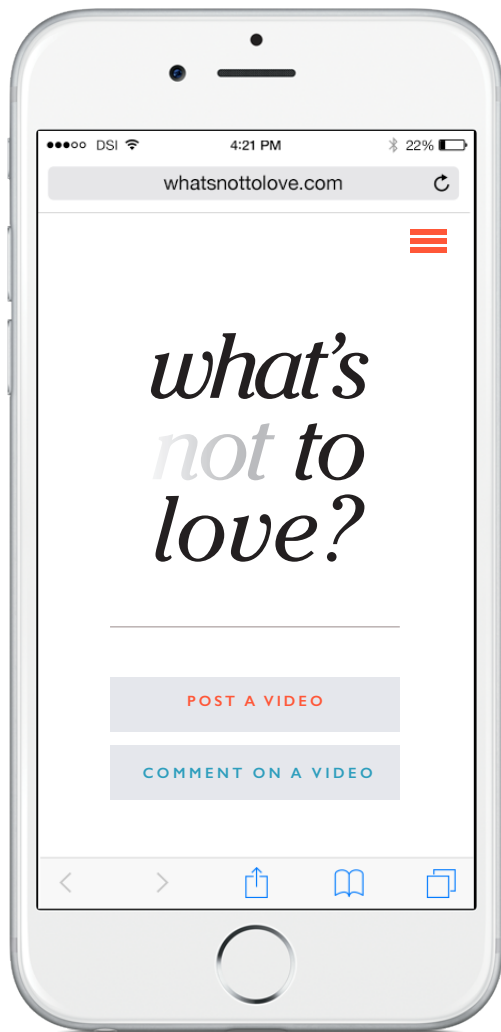
I have asked one young Korean female participant, who has been contemplating getting eyelid plastic surgery, to record a short video of concern, which I have rerouted to 5 different potential users.

Within the video of 50 seconds, the participant does not reveal her identity, but speak candidly about her "flaws" and why she thought the particular parts of her face were undesirable. 5 potential users will also reply back to her through short video in the same manner, giving honest feedback upon the participant's concern.

Original Video: **51sec**

Commenters' Videos

121 sec   **61 sec**   **31 sec**   **64 sec**   **103 sec**
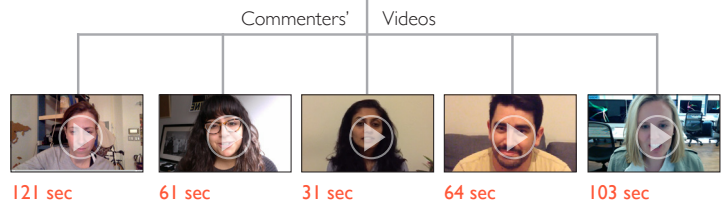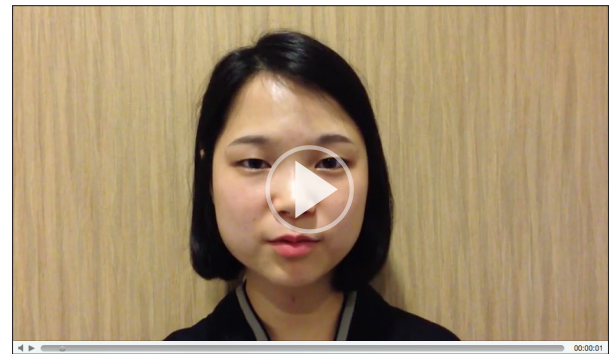
All these 5 prototype participants are from different part of the world, and therefore, have different perspective of beauty.
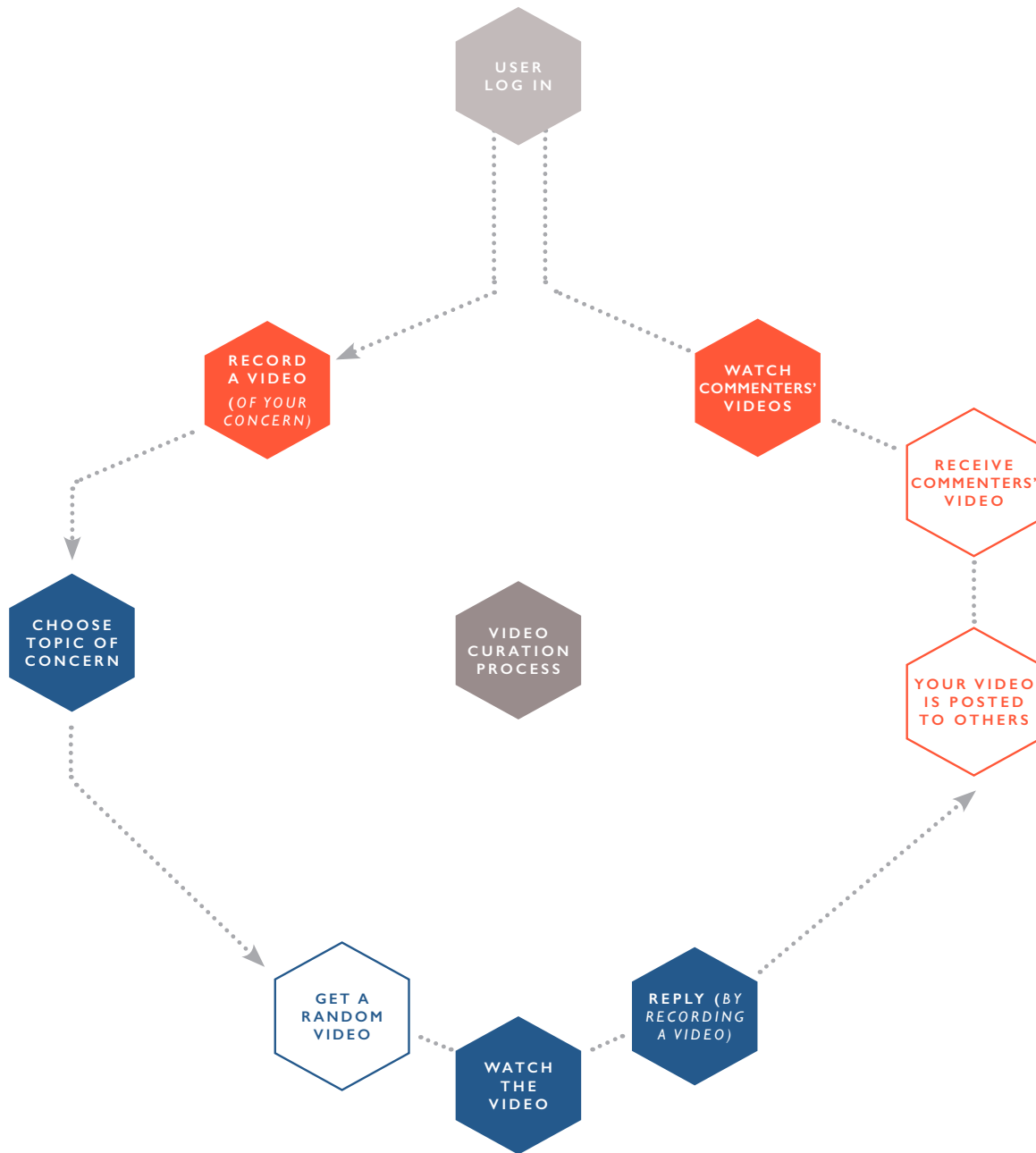
They were told not to specify which part of the world they are from, who they are, what they do for living or their age. What I desired to see through the prototype was whether these 6 participants (including the original female poster) can interact without knowing much about the other. If so, how are their interactions? What kinds of emotion and behavior does this service induce from interacting so intimately with a random stranger online?

After having done the prototype and post-survey, here are few things that I found fascinating and successful:

1) Having been told to watch the original video and reply back through a video of 30 seconds, 4 out of 5 participants spent more than 60 seconds to record their videos. One participants went over 2 minutes to reply to the original video.

2) Most of feedback videos' were not only genuine, but also very evident that the participants were connecting and reacting on a deeper level by sharing the concern, empathizing and reacting emotionally to the original video.

3) The female participant from the original video reverted her decision of getting plastic surgery. She is no longer considering any kinds of plastic surgery.

• What's Not to Love is an online platform where users come and share concerns about appearance only through short videos.

• Users can only interact through videos that have their faces. There is no space to type in words or comments. This encourages and fosters virtual face-to-face interaction.

• Therefore, users interact with more integrity and respect.

• While it is targeting young South Korean women, it invites people from all around the globe to comment on videos.

• The service encourages and provides a safe environment for sharing diverse opinion, different perspective, and contrasting aspects in looking at appearance, beauty and perception.

• Ultimately, the service aims to become a pivot point in users' lives to appreciate different opinions and genuine interaction of sharing the opinions, and accept who they are as is.

USER LOG IN

RECORD A VIDEO (*OF YOUR CONCERN*)

WATCH COMMENTERS' VIDEOS

RECEIVE COMMENTERS' VIDEO

CHOOSE TOPIC OF CONCERN

VIDEO CURATION PROCESS

YOUR VIDEO IS POSTED TO OTHERS

GET A RANDOM VIDEO

WATCH THE VIDEO

REPLY (*BY RECORDING A VIDEO*)

ORIENTATION OF ACTION

"Taking" action

"Giving" action

CATEGORIES OF ACTION

Done by you

Done to you

The prototype result signifies that virtuality and anonymity don't hinder users from creating meaningful and intimate relationships. The user flow and UX design allow users to give before they receive messages from others. If a conventional way of having a virtual communication was vulnerable to online bullying and trolling, What's Not to Love? is a starting point of a healthy, responsible, and positive virtual interaction.

As figure 5 suggests, the user experience is intermixed with both "giving" and "receiving." This is what we expect from a real-life experience. In order for a user to get feedback from others, she must give first. Two people are involved and equally responsible for a single interaction. The way What's Not To Love was designed emphasizes this; regardless of how many videos were received, the poster will retain a unique and individual relationship with each and everyone of her commenters. One by one, a community of give & take relationships is created. No one gets away with irresponsible behavior and disrespectful expression of language because it will leave a significant trace: the bully's face and voice.

But most importantly, in the environment where users can speak their opinions without being attacked and bullied, a genuine and meaningful conversation starts. A target audience will learn diverse opinion and different perspectives about beauty and how it differentiates from one person to another, and therefore, she can take a different angle at looking at the same problem she had.

I believe that is what makes our interaction with other beings beautiful and rich; we interact and encounter something that we didn't expect, something that is unnatural to us or something that we are not used to, because we are all made differently and to think differently. Therefore we collide, figure out how to deal with it, and eventually learn and thrive as a human being. What's Not to Love shows that a virtual interaction can take the same aspects from our conventional (offline) interaction that ultimately benefit users and enrich the interaction.

PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS & INSIGHTS

The process of conducting research, interviews and prototype for last 2 years has taught me tremendously in terms of professional and personal perspective. Few key takeaways are listed below:

• Assumptions need to be tested before furthering one's hypothesis; my interview process proved that my assumptions about Korean society's structure were incorrect and that changing resume's format will cause more disparity, not acceptance.

• Ask "Why?" 5 or more times to get to the root cause. This will prevent creating a bandage solution.

• Qualitative data tells a story and quantitative data proves it.

• Design with people, not for them: A personal belief and philosophy will compromise one's professional pursuit of study, especially in the sphere of social innovation. Therefore, I learned to let go of wanting to preach everyone that plastic surgery is terrible in terms of self love because I don't know the kinds of pain and situations people go through.

• Ability to zoom in and focus and zoom out to a macro scale, and how to tell a story according to the lens of a choice.

• Prototypes leave breadcrumbs: I thought that prototype will go as I planned and I will gain what I expected to gain. But I realize doing prototype leaves breadcrumbs of ideas to chase after and will lead me to a next stage. This was a personal learning as well; when in doubt, just do it!

• I have worked on creating a solution for a serious social issue, and I have succeeded in creating a difference in someone's life, the way she looks at herself and how she deals with her concerns. If I can reach one person with my design and see the change in a positive way, it means I can scale the design and influence more people in a larger scale. This is a very exciting and successful starting point.