

Mémoire
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The Korean Beauty Industry: How does it affect its Society?



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Declaration

We hereby confirm that we are the sole authors of the written work here enclosed and that we have compiled it in our own words. Furthermore, we confirm that we have clearly referenced in both the text and the bibliography or references, all sources used in the work.”

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Blurb

South Korea, the country of beauty and makeup, quickly rose from being a developing country to a developed one. Sounds good right? However, this rapid evolution could have unexpected consequences. Surgery, Cosmetic and Skincare, how much pressure is put on Koreans? How far can this need for beauty go? How is life in a country where everyone needs to fit a certain standard?

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1. Introduction

“Koreans all look the same.”, this sentence has been around for a long time and is marked off as a racist comment. Yet, a lot of people are continuing to approve this comment in saying that it is the truth. So, we asked ourselves, how much truth is there actually behind this statement?

The Korean cosmetic industry has gained a lot of popularity over the years. The cosmetic industry is next to the music industry one of the biggest sources of income and influential forces in South Korea. The cosmetic industry even came to the western side of the world as a part of the 한류 (Hallyu), also known as the “Korean Wave”. The “Korean Wave” is defined as the movement of modern Korean culture to the western world, thus including music, fashion, movies and cosmetic trends. However, why should we care about the Asian beauty industry? The Korean beauty ideal is speculated to be inspired by the Western standards, meaning fair skin and large eyes. Those standards are achieved with skincare products and cosmetic surgery. Yet, at the same time, we use those products too; we also get surgery done and use skincare products from Korea. Hence, we are consuming products that are apparently based on us.

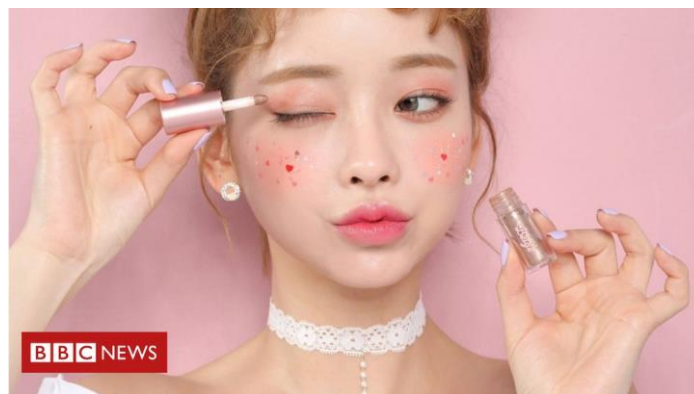


Figure 1: BBC News: The Rise of Korean Makeup in the West

Culture wise in Korea, a lot of pressure is put on appearance and thus a lot of people have undergone plastic surgery and utilised skincare and cosmetics to match the standard appearance of their country. There are some people in South Korea who reject the typical beauty standards, but their life isn't as easy as it seems because this trend isn't widely supported by South Koreans.

Our Mémoire team got interested in the subject after we thought about how important beauty is in our country. Even though in Europe there isn't as much pressure to look beautiful as in South Korea, most girls feel forced or want to make themselves as pretty as possible. Most girls pressure themselves through social media and other kinds of networks because that is where they see “beautiful girls”.

For boys, the beauty standards aren't as high in Europe and the western world in general, yet now it is slowly changing and boys also want to be called handsome or want to get other kinds of compliments, so they dress up, go to the gym to get fitter, change their hair and try to impress the people around them.

So, we wondered, how is it in other countries? Which are the most extreme? So we researched and found out that South Korean people are facing extreme standards of beauty. One of our members is already interested in Korea's culture, way of thinking and history; she also visited South Korea before the *Mémoire* so she could already gather some information about it. The other member is interested in sexism in society and environmental impacts of the beauty industry.



Figure 2: example picture of plastic surgery

Our *Mémoire* team asked themselves the following questions regarding beauty South Korea: Where does this longing for beauty come from? How does the constant beauty impact their society? Which pressure does the industry put on women and men? Is their beauty ideal really based on western standards? And; what impact has the cosmetic industry on younger children? These questions will be answered and reflected on in the following *Mémoire*.

2. History, Cosmetics and Surgery

The Korean Cosmetics Industry is a part of the Korean culture.

The Korean cosmetics industry, which is known for its skincare and cosmetic products, is one of the top 10 markets around the globe and has an estimated worth of 13 billion dollars in the year 2019. Their biggest market is probably the skincare market with an estimated worth of 7.2 billion dollars by the year 2020.

Nevertheless, the Korean cosmetics and skincare hype only started recently with the Korean wave. In the past, Japan and France were symbols of beauty, fashion and cosmetics. Those two countries concentrated on simple beauty products like foundation, concealer and eyeshadow to achieve a more beautiful and youthful appearance.

Although, when Korean products entered the market, they gained their fast popularity through “functional cosmetics”, like anti-wrinkle products and products with elasticity-boosting-, pigment fading- and sun protection properties. The Korean cosmetics and skincare Industry has specialised in altering someone’s appearance through their serums, masks and creams or even plastic surgery.

However, why did the desire start to alter one own’s appearance?



2.1. The desire of changing one's appearance

This desire is partly based on pre-modern Korean culture, which was partly influenced by Confucian philosophy. This philosophy is called 身體髮膚 (or in Korean: 신체 팔보) (“sinch’e palbu”), which approximately means “the integrity of the whole”. 신체 (“sinch’e”) (Chinese lettering: 身體 “Shēntǐ”) is the Korean word for body 髮 pal (hair)- 膚 pu (Skin).

“In Confucianism, one should keep his/her body, skin and hair intact, as they are given to one by one's parents (sinch’e palbu su chi pumo). Thus, shaving one's hair is a disgraceful and unfilial act.”¹

Another part of this desire could be from the transition period; from a poor agrarian country that suffered under a dictatorship and under Japanese colonialism, to a more luxurious and well developed one. After the transition, there was an increased infatuation with aesthetics, mostly in the middle classes because they wanted to differentiate themselves from the working class. Those middle-class people were therefore dressing up in a lavish way with the help of jewellery and gorgeous clothing, thus expressing their social status and well-being. Through this usage of luxury goods, the people started to get competitive. Luxury goods weren't enough anymore, therefore men and women started working on their bodies. Thus, a belief was formed, that said that altering a person's appearance could change their destiny into a better one.



Through such beliefs and parts of history, it is nowadays believed that there is a gap between the body and the mind. Thus, cosmetic products and surgery help them to fit their appearance to their spirit's beauty. This belief concerns both men and women and leads to a pursuit of beauty and a desire to be seen as beautiful, which is a necessity to function in this new society.

Appearance is in Korean society a part of the etiquette and plastic surgery is also a way to advertise one's social well-being. So, changing one's body is a simple act of initiation into society.

¹ The Tale of Cho Ung: A classic of Vengeance, Loyalty, and Romance, 2018

2.2. The beauty ideal of today



Figure 3: Park Hyung-sik

The beauty ideal of today's society is highly influenced by actors, singers and models. This is no exception in the Korean society. Many idols and actors either have to fit to the beauty standard or instead they set a new beauty standard.



Figure 4: Wendy (Red Velvet)



Figure 5: JoeE (Momoland)

Most female idols have a rather symmetric face and soft features, like Wendy (Shon Seung-wan) from the idol-group Red Velvet and male idols have harder features, like the actor and singer Park Hyung-sik. The idols who don't fit the standards of beauty are also helped out, they undergo surgery and wear heavy stage makeup, as an example for this is the female idol JoeE (Lee Joo-won) from Momoland.

Yet, there are also idols who set new standards of beauty and go against all the classic beauty standards. One of the most classic examples of an idol being against the common beauty standards is HwaSa (Ahn Hye-jin) from the group Mamamoo. HwaSa told at a concert the story how she became an idol and fought against the beauty standards:

“Hello, I'm HwaSa [...] So when I was in middle school [...] I really liked...meat. So yes, I really liked it. So naturally, I gained a lot of weight, but music was my life. One day I went to an audition and one of the teachers there said to me, “You're unique and a really good singer too, but you're also.... fat and not pretty.” Those bastards. However, it was a big turning point in my life. After running home that day and slumping over my computer crying my eyes out, I suddenly got the urge to watch this concert video I had. As I spent the night crying and watching that video, I found myself reaching this decision... *If I do not fit the standards of beauty this society has set, I will become a different standard...* [...]”²

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<https://www.google.lu/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=video&cd=1&ved=0ahUKEwiy8aeitdPoAhUP0aYKHd4jAOoQtWIIJzAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Ftwitter.com%2Fjungesfrollein%2Fstatus%2F1142494762274045953%3Flang%3Den&usg=AOvVaw0HLM1g3hdmu3LnCcHyxYnA>



Figure 6: Hwasa (Mamamoo)

This statement and her attitude brought HwaSa many supporters but also a lot of controversy. In the idol world, she's a rarity, her looks aren't very common, meaning that she has very strong features, she doesn't care much about her weight and HwaSa is also very tan, which is very uncommon because one of the beauty standards is to stay pale.

2.3. The plastic surgery industry



The South Korean culture first introduced things like K-Pop and K-Dramas to the western world. And progressively countless cosmetic surgery clinics have been introduced, which has been hugely beneficial for the country's economy. South Korea has quickly become the capital of plastic surgery.

But behind this “happy” image, the plastic surgery industry promotes lies an ugly truth. South Korea's patriarchal society is one of the most important reasons for the country's almost unachievable beauty standards:

- Having a round shaped forehead
- Double eyelids
- 애교 사 (애교살 (Aegyo sal”)) (puffy, smiling eyebags)
- A modest to medium sized nose bridge
- “V-line face”
- Extremely pale almost white skin.

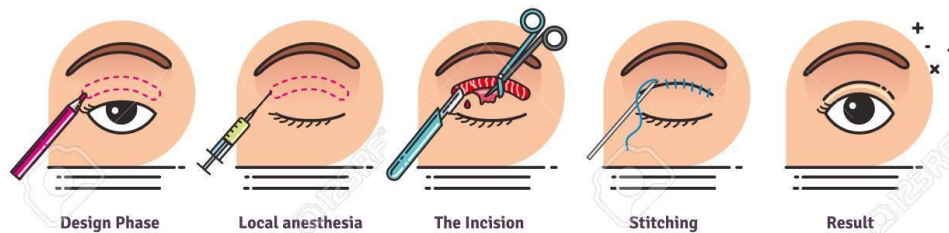
With countless advertisement posters for cosmetic surgery clinics in the cities of South Korea, for every pedestrian to see, one could understand the immense pressure that is placed on women to achieve these stated beauty standards. So, in hopes of achieving them, many turn to the option of having a plastic surgery done.

“Before and After” pictures of patients that undertook a plastic surgery show a truth that is almost hard to believe, these pictures could almost represent two different people. The most demanded and marketed procedures are:

- The double eyelid surgery
- The v-line jaw reduction
- The epicathoplasty (eye widening)
- The rhinoplasty (to modify the nose structure)
- The forehead augmentation

Of these procedures, **the double eyelid surgery** is by far the most performed. It is believed that this type of surgery has first been introduced in the late 19th century in Japan but has been developed and performed by Dr. D. Ralph Millard, an American military plastic surgeon during the Korean war (1950-53). The first to have received this procedure were Korean women who married American soldiers.

Interracial marriages were illegal until early 1960 in America, as Korean women were considered a racial and cultural threat to the U.S., which encouraged them to change the shape of their eyes through double eyelid surgery in the 1950s, to look “less Asian”. Since then, this

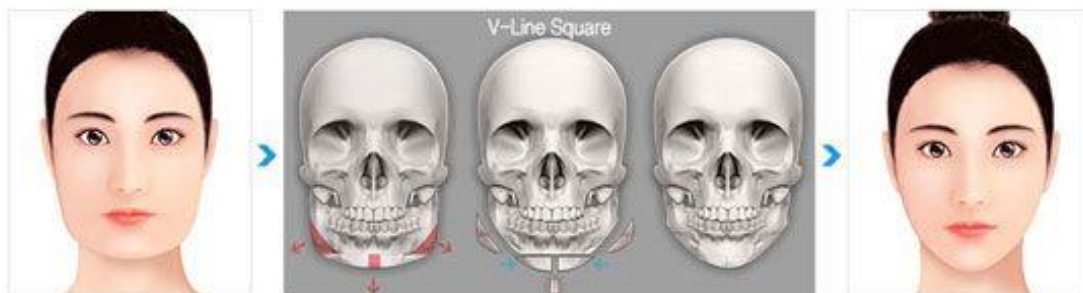


procedure has become increasingly popular in East Asia.

The East Asian blepharoplasty, also known as “the double eyelid surgery”, is a procedure that adds a crease to the eyelid. Its average cost lies at 3,160 dollars, which translates to 2,860 euros. During this procedure the eyelid skin is cut open, a thin strip of skin and muscle tissue is removed, and the skin is closed using stitches. It is an effective and safe operation, but like any operation, there are risks, which include worsened or/and temporarily, blurred eyesight, infection and difficulty of closing the eyes. The scar is hidden in the eyelid skin and can take a year to heal.

The double eyelid surgery and eye widening surgery both have the same goal: to widen the eye, to make it look bigger to basically look like a real-life manga character.

The **V-line jaw surgery** is very popular in South Korea and throughout East Asia. It is mostly women who seek out a V-line surgery, because of a very wide chin or overly “masculine” jaw shape. For women in particular, a very pronounced jaw causes the lower face to appear too wide and according to the Korean beauty standards, women should have a softer and more feminine profile. These are reasons why women often choose these types of beauty surgeries.



Any surgery that falls in the face reconstruction area is dangerous, but jaw surgeries are believed to be the most dangerous of them all. The area of the upper and lower jaw holds many sensitive nerves and blood vessels so any surgery that deals with the jaw can lead to severe complications if not done properly. Excessive bleeding, infection, nerve damage and difficulties to chew are some of the risks of this surgery because of the sawing off of the jawbone structure.



The **rhinoplasty** is a beauty surgery to modify the nose structure. The goal of this surgery is to build a natural appearing structure that blends well with the patient's face. The nose is viewed as one of the most important features of the face to determine the attractiveness or unattractiveness of a person. A tall and high nose bridge can improve someone's overall expression. Koreans though, have flatter, less defined nose bridges than Caucasians. This is one of the reasons why the rhinoplasty has increased in popularity throughout East Asia.

One of the many Korean beauty standards is to have a round shaped forehead; this is achieved through the **forehead augmentation** surgery. An uneven, flat or "sunken" forehead is pretty common to have but may cause some self-consciousness. The Korean forehead augmentation is performed to add volume to the forehead, through two kinds of surgery:

- fat grafting: when a small amount of fat is extracted from the butt or abdomen and inserted to the forehead (no scar)
- implant insertion: when an implant is modeled in advance and inserted behind the hair line to prevent scarring.



While talking about plastic surgeries, it is important to address the **skin bleaching** “trend” that has increased in popularity over the years, particularly in South Korea. Although skin bleaching is not exactly a surgery, it is still a product to modify one’s appearance that many Koreans use. Skin bleaching products come in many forms, for example whitening pills, creams or soaps. The skin is bleached by using chemical substances to reduce the melanin content in the skin, which is responsible for its pigmentation. In many cases, this process has proven to be very harmful and toxic for the consumers. Mercury would be an example of an inexpensive but dangerous ingredient in skin lightening products, that causes skin rashes and discoloration, kidney damage and scarring. Excessive skin bleaching and high levels of chemical ingredients can lead long term damages such as mercury poisoning, dermatitis (a skin inflammation) and a skin disorder called exogenous ochronosis, characterized by blue and black pigmentation.



3. The social pressure of Koreans

3.1. The appearance obsession of Korean women

How do women feel about the constant pressure of beauty? According to the liberal feminist author Naomi Wolf, the beauty concepts “motherhood” and “chastity” got replaced by “good looks”. The appearance evolved to the index measure point for a woman’s personality. Thus, they go with the mindset “One who isn’t pretty, has no skill “. The concept of beauty has changed to a metaphor for youth, virtue, power, innocence and experience. Women are bombarded with beauty standards and are thus judged by their appearance and they have an image to keep up. Therefore, they long for good looks and pay with their mental health. Anxiety and depression are the main consequences.

In the past, there were other traditions, namely, elder women had power and high positions, but nowadays, women have to look young and attractive to have power and to fit in the norms of today’s society.

In 2019, South Korea scored place 118 out of 144 countries in the “World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Survey”, a survey that classifies countries and regions of the world, from the most gender equal to unequal in the world. The assumption that women must be attractive



to have power is an example of the still existing inequality between man and women in the “vertical” hierarchy, so women have no other choice then to align themselves to this system. Those who don’t comply with the system and are not pretty have tremendous difficulty to achieve social and professional success. Even though there are a lot of feminists and feminist groups that try to eliminate this mindset, the request for plastic surgery increases day by day.

The patriarchal norms of beauty aren’t only affecting women’s daily life but also their social awareness. The patriarchal norms associate women with their appearance and make them more concerned about their looks, if they can’t fit the norms of society. Thus, the mindset that you need to be beautiful to obtain a good workplace or have success in life continues. As an example, in Korea, workers must send a picture with their resume and these pictures also have an impact whether you get employed or not and which position you achieve. If the person on the picture isn’t pretty enough, they struggle more to get a good position, despite their skill, compared to a person who is less skilled, but pretty.

The problem of beauty pressure is also a problem for already employed women when newer, younger and prettier employees join the workspace, the older women are treated differently than the young ones because of their looks, thus making them more self-conscious.

So, it is no surprise that a lot of women in their late twenties and their thirties undergo plastic surgery.

Once, a 27-year old employee had surgery on her chin and nose, followed by liposuction on her cheeks a year later. She realised that a beautiful appearance would benefit her work experience by a lot, and what power she gained with this new beauty. She explained that after her surgery her life completely changed, and that she met a man and got a job. She said that she believed that if she hadn't undergone plastic surgery, neither of those things would've happened.

This is the exact feeling of empowerment women feel when they undergo plastic surgery. Those plastic surgeries not only give them the feeling of control over their appearance but also over their daily life. Their reasoning is that the satisfaction with their appearance is followed by self-respect which leads to a change of relationship with the world.

From this perspective, it's understandable why so many women undergo plastic surgery. Women are psychologically encouraged to compete over their appearances with both men and women. Women's appearance became a module for power that isn't only ruling over the job or marriage market but also over other domains in society. This new gained power brings the joy back into the life of the self-conscious person.



The following testimony is from a female company worker who talks about her own experiences with getting plastic surgery done.

“This addiction... seems to happen to those of us that are well off... once you fix one part successfully, you want to hurry up and fix another, and then another. And it's all up to you. That's the way it is for me; once I fix my waist,

I'm thinking of getting work done on other parts of my body. But, if it doesn't work out, I won't even think of setting a foot ((In another clinic)) again. – company worker, 23).”³

By changing women's appearance, you show them the enjoyment of consumption, meaning, they get interested in the cultivating, decorating and transforming of their appearance.

If the plastic surgery a woman received is successful, the woman not only starts to think positively about plastic surgery, but they also gain more interest in their appearance. They spend more time putting makeup on and looking in the mirror. They start to observe their body, meaning that they try to control their body language and mimic. Another thing that happens is that the women start to discover more and more flaws on their body and by now, they know the perfect solution for it.

³ The Beauty complex and the cosmetic surgery industry, Woo Keong Ja (2014)

Motivators for plastic surgery are no longer parents, friends, the partner or colleagues but the woman itself. They start to think they can control their very own appearance but instead they start to get a strong “plastic surgery obsession“.

Women who think and achieve to change their bodies with the help of plastic surgery are getting a feeling of power and ease but not only that, they experience pleasure.



Figure 7: Example of extreme plastic surgery (before and after)

“I spend a lot of time in front of the mirror these days. I hated doing that before I had surgery... It’s so exciting! People I meet that haven’t seen me in a while all say to me, “Wow, you look great! What’s changed?” Applying makeup is much more fun, too. I try on all the latest colours. Even when I’m not being looked at, I feel great. I love shopping for makeup, even though it costs so much. – (university student, 21).”⁴

This feeling described on the example above, is the key to the monopolising power the plastic surgery industry wants and get. Women tell themselves if the plastic surgery would be successful, the fear, pain and harshness they felt during the surgical procedure would be worth it. For this exact reason, women are craving for a beautiful body and become completely dependent on plastic surgery. Thus, becoming a strong supporter of the industry.

Yet, all of this raises the question if women are truly happy with their appearance that is only build up on societies gaze?

The process of socialising one’s own appearance starts with the feeling of inferiority that people receive from the constant surrounding of idols and actors with unrealistic beauty standards. Women then turn to plastic surgery to fix their “problems“. Some women even regard their bodies as unbearable pain with a huge dissatisfaction that it even affects their social life. Those women start to doubt their own personality, and this turns into a pessimistic life view that affects family and friends. To raise their confidence again, women discriminate each other for the lack of “aesthetic” or “femininity”.

⁴ The Beauty complex and the cosmetic surgery industry, Woo Keong Ja (2014)

They want to become “normal” by fixing their body, fitting the norms of society. Cosmetic surgery is therefore the easiest method to correct and shape their body to an aesthetic so they can live a “normal life”.

“Flat chested women get laughed at, treated like they’re handicapped. ... If I stay this way, I was sure that I’d never find a husband. It wasn’t about being pretty—I just wanted to become a woman. (University student, 23)”⁵

Women get discriminated for the lack of femininity in their body, as in the example seen above. A woman outside the fitting norms is seen as an outcast and needs to be “repaired”.

However, who sets the norms of “normal” and “abnormal” in this society? Which standards are there to be achieved to pass this judgement? Society created those standards that women want to achieve so desperately; they associate their bodies with inferiority and negativity. This state of mind drives the appearance obsession and dependence on technology further into the logic of gender homogeneity to have only “Pure female” appearances and “pure male” appearances.

⁵ The Beauty complex and the cosmetic surgery industry, Woo Keong Ja (2014)

3.2. Social pressure of Men in South Korea

In most of the western countries, a man on the street wearing make-up may evoke judging looks or unwelcome glares, questions about his masculinity and even question his sexuality or sexual preferences. But in South Korea, ideas about how to look good as a man are changing and influencing the rest of the world!

As we have mentioned in the previous chapters, South Korea is believed to be by far the capital of plastic surgeries. A study from Gallup Korea in 2015 shows that approximately one third of Korean women between the ages of 19 – 29 have claimed to have had plastic surgeries done and one in five Korean men claimed to have had a plastic surgery. These numbers are shockingly high, compared to the western world. A lot of men also have started to openly wear light make-up, spend their time on beauty or grooming treatments or pay attention to their skincare. These are routines that mostly Generation Z's and late Millennials undertake, so young men born between 1990- 2000. Nowhere in the world do men do men spend more on skincare, which makes South Korean men lead the world's male beauty market.



Figure 8: advertisement for male makeup

Conservative norms still dominate the South Korean society when it comes to appearances, but there are clear signs today that these standard norms are changing. However why is it, that an increasing amount of young men in South Korea have started to care more about their appearance and looks?

This can be explained in part by the influence of Korean Pop culture, for example K-Pop that many Korean teenagers listen to on a daily basis. This offers many examples of entertainers who wear make-up and young celebrities who present an almost androgynous image, meaning showing both signs of feminine and masculine traits, as an acceptable form of self-expression. These trends have started to spread and be copied by the fans of K-Pop stars and K-Dramas. Most men who choose to wear make-up often go for a natural look using only basic products like toners, a lotion to cleanse the face, products to moisten their lips and others; use products to darken their eyebrows or even light mascara.

According to the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) labor data, a Korean worker works 487 hours more than a Luxembourgish worker per year, which is about 60 days of normal 8-hour shifts more than here in Luxembourg. Hereby we can understand that stress due to work is a much bigger problem in South Korea.

The younger generation of Korean men is in general more conscious about their wellness and are less likely to start smoking cigarettes, drink excessive amounts of alcohol or spend all night working at the office, compared to the previous generations. If a man shows up for work looking like he's been up all night whether at a bar or at the office is something to be judged upon. This shows that, even if most women feel the social pressure at work to be beautiful there is a certain kind of pressure on young men to be "handsome" or at least look presentable at work.



Figure 9: Jeonghan (Seventeen); an idol with a more androgynous image

3.3. How is the younger generation affected?

The Korean Beauty industry has become without a doubt increasingly popular, but especially in the region of East Asia. One of the beauty industry's trends is the “aegyo” face. It is a “no-make-up” look but of course by using make up products, to look like one has glowing skin, pink cheeks and pink lips. This trend focuses on appearing youthful and baby-like and women are encouraged to look and even act childlike. This image has become a real trend thanks to of social media. But lately, the beauty industry has started targeting children.



Figure 10: Commercial of the Korean makeup brand "Baby & Child"

Nowadays, one can find countless YouTube videos of very young children doing their back to school make-up tutorials or getting their nails done or hair coloured. As an example, a video of a 7-year-old putting on lipstick on camera titled “I want to wear makeup like my mom”⁶ has already attracted 4.5 million viewers. Another example would be the slogan of an advertisement billboard, selling makeup kits for 6 year olds saying: “I watch my mom and I follow her. I am growing up today” with a picture of a young girl in a school uniform applying lipstick.

But how young is too young to wear makeup?

In South Korea, brands like Shu Shu sell “healthier” products like non-toxic lip crayons and blush. These products are aimed at young boys and girls who can hardly read and attract them with fun packaging and bright colours.

Many Korean mothers don't want their children to wear makeup, the reason is because they think if their child starts to wear makeup, he/she won't do their homework or care about school anymore.



Figure 11: Advertisement for ShuShu's "Fancygril Cosmetic bag set"

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wlff4D1Gjv0>

It is widely known that the East Asian countries value education and academic success. If a schoolgirl gets plastic surgery done, which is pretty uncommon but does exist, she will seem more confident and therefore happier. This will trigger a domino effect of jealousy schoolmates that will want to look as pretty as this girl. So, with the stress of their long school hours plus homework, children and teenagers also have to put up with the pressure of Korean beauty standards and therefore being physically attractive.

Even if the parents are not particularly accepting of the idea of buying make-up for their child, the marketing of children's cosmetics will encourage the parents to buy their products, by claiming they are safe for small children to use or made with natural ingredients. A child begging their parent to buy the new eyeshadow that every girl in school wears, will also influence the parents' decision.

3.3.1. Which consequences will the beauty industry bring for the future?

By now in this memoir, we have a fairly good understanding of what the beauty industry is, how it affects the younger generations and how much of an impact it has on the social norms and beauty standards, which then automatically leads to a general social pressure for young Koreans to look beautiful.



Now with this understanding, there are still some unanswered questions. One of which would be, what consequences will the beauty industry bring for the future?

Will this obsession with beauty worsen or will the society finally be able to free itself from these strict beauty norms? And what about the environmental impact this industry will and is entailing?

3.4. Expectations and social movements

Upon graduation, many high school students receive plastic surgery as a reward from their parents. The most popular surgeries for those are double-eyelid, nose and v-line. For most people this is normal in Korea.

Those surgeries are important for the students so that they have more possibilities when searching for a job. Most jobs in Korea, even though it is about to be changed, require headshots. So, if they don't fit the beauty standards or are really pretty, they won't get the job or a lower one with less payment.

A Coventry University lecturer called Dr. Jongmi Kim traces South Korea's intense beauty standards back to the 1950's when the country began to develop socially and economically after the Korean War. The phenomenon, which happened back then, is nowadays referred to



Figure 12: Escape the corset protest.

as the “Miracle of the Han River. This “miracle” transformed South Korea from a developing country into a developed country. The rapid reconstruction and development of the country during the later half of the 20th century lead to the fact that Korea became one of the world's 11th largest economies in just a few decades. The Journalist Crystal Tai connects this with the “specs culture”. “Specs” stands for specification and it is the way you

look, where you live, what school or university you go to and what your family members' jobs are. Goods specs are very important, they are like a social currency, the better specs you have a better life you can get.

However, people start to reject those standards with a movement called “Escape the Corset”. The corset is the representation of femininity a woman must perform in society. The women involved in the radical movement cut their hair short, stop wearing makeup and stop wearing sexy and feminine clothes.

Summer Lee is a part of this movement; she got inspired by social media posts about this movement. She keeps her name secret because feminism can still be dangerous in Korea because it is still a partly conservative country. Misogyny is still common in the society, culture and the system, so some people will still be shocked when a woman talks back to a man. So, it's no wonder that comments like “Why do you dress like a man? Why did you cut your hair like a man? You used to be so pretty, why did you ruin yourself by making yourself less pretty?” appear in that time and age.



Figure 13: Summer Lee before and after joining the movement

Currently, Summer Lee is going to a lot of feminist protests which want to break the corset, but also to raise awareness about other harmful things like cameras in public women toilets, the legalisation of abortion and against the importation of realistic sex dolls.

A study from 2015 showed that 1 out of 3 women between the ages of 19-29 (20-30 Korean age, Koreans are born a year old, because they count the months lived in the womb) had plastic surgery.

Summer Lee stated in an interview: “More than half of the girls in my class in high school got plastic surgery as a graduation gift. That is mind blowing. My mind is still blown back then, and it still now blows my mind now”

Araya, a 25 year old woman got a blepharoplasty to let her eyes appear more even. This double eyelid surgery lets the eyes appear bigger by burning with a hot needle a crease into the eye.

“Bigger eyes would be nice for me...it will make my life a bit easier. When I wake up in the morning, I won't have to spend time putting on double eyelid tape to make my eyes appear more even. It will be easier to put makeup on. And besides that, of course when you meet people, eyes are the first thing you see. And sometimes I feel really not confident.”

Araya admits that she feels the pressure of looking beautiful, but she says that she decided on her own to have plastic surgery. She herself doesn't protest against the standards but she still respects the women that do. She thinks that it is a personal matter if someone wants to enhance their looks or not.



Figure 14: 3D Image of the ideal beauty, created by scientists

Most people accuse Koreans and other Asians that their plastic surgery would westernise them. A doctor at a Korean plastic surgery clinic called Dr. Man Koon-Su states that this opinion would be wrong.

“We do not follow western beauty standards. Small eyes make us look tired or somehow unfriendly. Therefore, double-eyelid surgery is considered to be a beauty standard. A smaller, v-line shaped face is considered to be beautiful. It gives a smooth and pleasant look.”

He states that it doesn't matter if people like it or not, humans will always judge a person based on their appearance, it's the human nature to judge. Pretty people will have an easier life.

The reddit user “Ramyunthrowaway” talked about her experience being a dark skinned Korean American.

She talked about the bullying from adults and children she received when she was going to school in Korea. In school, she had no friends and got mistreated equally by students and teachers. They called her ugly, dirty and retarded and even hit her. Boys hunted her with BB guns and she often came home with bruises. In Korea the white skin tone is represented as beautiful, pure, innocent and desirable, this skin type is seen everywhere, in magazines, television or even children’s toys. The dolls girls play with are often pale skinned with blonde hair and blue eyes, an example is the classic Barbie. While dark skin is represented as disgusting, tainted, dirty and immoral. This comes from the hierarchy of the dynasty days: a pale skin meant that the person was rich because they could spend their time indoors, as opposed to poor people who had to work outside to survive, so their skin was much darker. The exact same idea could be found in the West until the late 20th century; wealthy people were pale because they worked inside (or not at all) and poor people worked difficult jobs outside. The West has now switched to an opposite ideal, where rich people get tans because they can afford holidays (but they still fit the Caucasian ideal or are “white-passing”). So the desire of white skin doesn’t come from westernisation but from but more from the high class difference in Korea.



“Ramyunthrowaway” told that it was terrible growing up in South Korea and that she was happy that she moved to America. She told that after a few years, when she headed back to Korea, tan skin got more accepted but not fully yet. More people got tans and sometimes asked her to which tan bar she was going. However, the dark skin suppression is still an issue that shouldn’t be ignored and should finally be fixed.

4. The environmental consequences and impacts

By now, we have analysed multiple facets of the beauty industry in South Korea. However, what about the environmental impacts the beauty and cosmetics industry have on our ecosystem?

If one thinks about climate change and pictures it in one's head it would probably look like a trash filled landscape, dried-up lakes or chemical smoke emitted from crowded roads and cars. But a YouTube video of a make-up artist doing a haul would probably not even enter the picture.

According to the Zero Waste Week, an annual awareness campaign, each year 120 billion units of packaging are produced every year by the global cosmetics industry, most of which are not recyclable. The consumers have been more and more informed about the health dangers posed by some of these cosmetic and personal care products. But the environmental consequences of these products have been less well documented because most of the big cosmetic brands keep the making of their products in the dark.



Over the last few years, the term ‘Natural’ has been on cosmetic packaging and used by countless brands for marketing purposes. The thing about this is, that most brands will add only few natural sourced ingredients to their products but will still use the same chemicals. This leads the customers into thinking they are buying a natural based product, which increases the demand for the company. Therefore, these big beauty companies without an eco-conscious mind want these natural ingredients as quickly and as cheaply as possible, which results in an unsustainable production with many negative impacts on the environment. This mindless use of natural ingredients on such a large scale causes a disruption of our ecosystem and causes the draining of non-renewable natural resources. It also leads to more human right issues. An example for this method of production would be the Mica scandal. Mica is a mineral dust used in many make-up products such as foundations, mascara and eyeshadows. Today the main source of this material is India, but the lack of regulation in the country's mica mining business, has increased concerns about the safety of the workers. From 2010 to 2011, 86 percent of the country's mica export was unregulated, and evidence of child labour was found.

The non-natural ingredients are also to be considered, since chemical components are used by most large beauty brands in their products. These chemicals are used in products to make them last as long as possible and to create the various textures in the traditional cosmetics.

The problem with these chemicals is that they can take hundreds of years until they break down, according to *Harper's Bazaar*, an American magazine, the average moisturiser can take up to 1000 years to decompose.

Another way the beauty industry has an impact on the environment is when the toxins and chemicals in the traditional cosmetics and toiletries are being washed down our sinks and end up in lakes, rivers and even water supplies. However, they don't just damage wildlife, and flora and fauna of the sea life. Water from our lakes and seas vaporises, forming clouds and returns to our soil in the form of rain, contaminating the soils with toxic chemicals. Chemicals related to cosmetics have been found in agricultural land and household dust particles.



So, the consumer should think twice about emptying the last bit of product down the sink.

A popular example of toxic substances going down our sinks would be the microbeads. Microbeads are a type of microplastic, meaning they are very small and solid particles of plastic measuring 1mm or less, that are added in many cleaning and skincare products. They give the products a granular substance to remove

dead skin cells. Most of these products containing microbeads, are designed to be washed down the drain of our sinks. However, their small size doesn't allow for water treatments to capture them, and so they end up in lakes and in our seas. These microbeads pose a big threat to wildlife. Fish will eat these small plastic particles, these fish will get eaten by bigger fish and finally, will be eaten by us humans, who are the last consumers of the food chain.

When talking about the environmental consequences of the beauty industry, it is important to consider the package element of the products we buy. Concerns about plastic pollution in our oceans have drastically risen in the last few years. The plastic bottles that hold shampoo, moisturiser etc, have to be designed in a way that they are not degraded by the products they hold. This also explains why they are not easily degradable or recyclable after use, leading to the plastic we hear about that pollutes our oceans. Of course, all packaging has its negative impact on the environment, glass takes more energy to produce and even a paper bag can produce higher CO₂ emissions than a plastic bag, if it's not produced sustainably.



However, they also have many pros that make them a preferable option. Overall, glass, aluminium and paper have a much higher recycling rate than plastic and can be recycled indefinitely, unlike plastic since it degrades with each recycling round.

Now what can we, as cosmetics users and consumers do to cause minimal damage to our environment?

First, one must admit that as individual human beings, it is impossible to live a completely ethical and sustainable lifestyle. Nevertheless, what we can, when choosing our cosmetics, is do our best to make good decisions to reduce our carbon footprint. We can for example:

- Look for brands that put in action sustainability initiatives where they can, to protect the planet.
- Reduce, reuse and recycle: Lush for example is a brand that accepts the returning of empty containers. We can reuse empty cosmetic containers for other purposes to avoid them ending up in nature or on landfills.
- We can consider choosing products made from 100% natural ingredients, from small brands with a true eco consciousness. These products won't harm the sea life or other life on Earth and are more likely sourced sustainably.
- Look for brands that have certifications to back their claims.



Today, mostly smaller brands are doing the best they can regarding sustainable products and packaging. Bigger companies, who are willing to follow this example, would allow for a small step towards a sustainable and low-carbon footprint economy.

5. My personal experiences with the beauty ideals and industry of South Korea

During the summer holidays, I went for five weeks to South Korea with a scholar Program called “Education First”. I went there to study the language and get to know the country from an inland’s perspective. During the time I spent there with a friend, I got a lot of information about the beauty industry and their beauty norms of society. In the following paragraphs, I will focus on the region of Seoul and the different aspects I noticed.

In cafes, in subways and on the streets, I saw a wide variety of different looking people. Some were chubby, some were skinny, and some were athletic. Most of the people I saw on the streets were although pretty skinny and very light skinned or had pale makeup on.

Many women had the same kind of hairstyle and their hair colour was mostly natural light to dark brown, sometimes even blonde. Most women had a full face of makeup with the classic makeup type, meaning shiny eye makeup and a gradient lip. The women also wore very feminine clothing, yet not very tight fitting.

Men had a more visual variety of body types. Most were still skinny or athletic, but I’ve seen much more chubby men than women on the streets. Boys mostly had bowl haircuts styled upwards or just loose and most had dark brown or medium brown hair, some even had colourful hair like red, blue or white. Most men had no makeup, but some had very soft and decent one. The clothes they wore were mostly in a street or casual style, this varied from the city and the region of



Figure 15: Shopping Street in Myeong-dong

the city. As an example, in the region of 홍대 (Hongdae) a lot of boys and even girls had tattoos or piercings and wore more street style and dancer clothing. As in the region of 신사동, 강남구 (Sinsa-dong, Gangnam) boys and girls had much more casual and even elegant clothing with soft colours and had earrings but very rarely tattoos.

Living in different parts of Seoul, mostly Gangnam, I noticed that a lot of women and several men had undergone one or several cosmetic surgeries. Most women had natural looking procedures, yet some also had very unnatural and doll like ones. Men had natural looking surgeries and visually it seemed that fewer men had undergone surgery.

Living for two weeks in the Gangnam district or also called “The region for plastic surgery” I saw a lot of commercials all around town and in subways. The commercials are bright, and loud and draw attention to them, so it makes it nearly impossible to not look at them. I can imagine that people immediately feel drawn by the pretty and perfect faces the female and male models possess.



Figure 16: A plastic surgery commercial in the Sinsa underground

When I went to stores like “Etude House”, “VT Cosmetics” or “Olive Young” I noticed that they had a broad variety of skincare products, as well as lipsticks, blush and eyeshadow, yet the foundation had only 2 maximal 4 shades. All of those shades were very light, even though most people were rather tan because of the sun. I am a pale Caucasian, but I could see how it is an issue for many Koreans because the industries only focus on light skin tones, which is not representative for the Korean population’s natural shade.

Another cultural difference I observed was that Koreans often point out another’s imperfections. It may seem rude at first, but they just want to make you conscious about several features of yours. Often, they complement you too like “You have a great body shape” or “What pretty and big eyes you have”.

Out of my experience and observation, one could say that women need to fit into a lot more expectations and must look more appealing to other people, mostly men. This thought is correct, lots of women are pressured to fit the mostly uniform expectations, yet it started for men too, they have to look nice and appealing to get a partner and be accepted by society.

However, women start to rebel against the expectation’s society has put on them and started several movements. Personally, I have seen the pressure, for example when I looked at how the people were dressed and how much effort they put in their appearance. Yet some of the people I’ve talked to, considered themselves ugly. They couldn’t see their true beauty.

6. Will the obsession with beauty worsen?

To answer this question, one must understand that the obsession with beauty isn't a recent phenomenon, quite oppositely, historians discovered that already hundreds of years ago, women would alter their bodies to fit in the beauty norms of their time.

During the Renaissance, for example, women in Italy thought that having large pupils was very attractive, so they placed a toxic plant extract in their eye to dilate the pupils. This plant still bears the name *belladonna*, which is Italian for "beautiful lady". Another example would be, in the Chinese culture, women with small feet used to be considered beautiful. The foot binding of young girls in China was practiced from the 10th up until the 20th century. This would restrict the normal growth of the feet to make them as small as possible. In Africa, many tribes have certain beauty standards and beauty practices that would be unthinkable here in Europe, for example Scarification, which is the process of marking the skin with a knife to create symbolic marks and patterns. This practice has been performed since the 16th century and is still currently performed in the Karo tribe from Ethiopia and the Dinka tribe in South Sudan. The Maasai people in Kenya use heavy objects, like stones or wood to stretch their earlobe as much as possible. They believe the bigger the woman's earlobe is, the prettier she is.



Figure 17: A Maasai

All these examples of the different cultures and their beauty standards and practices show that this idea of beauty obsession goes back centuries. Even if the modern beauty culture may seem less extreme than using poison and breaking bones for beauty, skin whitening and plastic surgeries like rhinoplasties and jaw reductions have the same effect.

When we picture a beautiful woman in our heads, may it be a celebrity, a friend or a loved one, and we observe her body, her face and her attitude, she will probably look very different from a beautiful woman from the 15th century, who would not be considered as beautiful in our times. This comparison shows that there is no such thing as pure beauty. These beauty standards change from time to time and culture to culture. But these days, most people have unrealistic ideas of a beautiful woman, because our standards are modelled by the society and culture, we live in. Particularly, all the advertising of the fashion and cosmetic industries comes to mind.

Will we, as a society ever free ourselves from these unrealistic ideas of beauty?

As explained before, the standards of beauty have and will always be changing over time. What we consider an attractive woman today, might not be the case in a hundred years.

On an evolutionary basis, animals have always had the need to find a partner for reproduction and the surviving of the species. Peacock spiders for example, have beautiful rainbow-coloured abdomens which they show off by performing a sort of dance to win the approval of the female. Charles Darwin first introduced this idea, that animals have “beautiful” traits to attract mates and to compete for the others’ attention. This whole concept of looking attractive to find a partner is still very present in the human way of living.



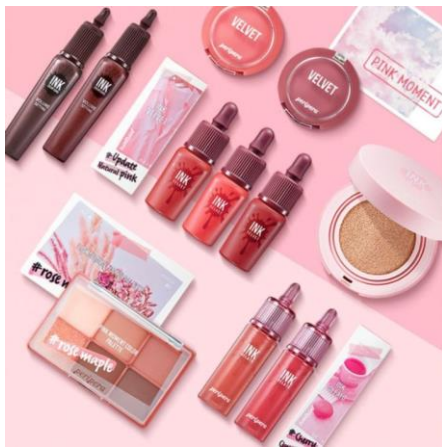
Figure 18: A peacock spider

People will always want to look their best when meeting new people, which is perfectly normal. What’s more problematic is, when how we look becomes the most important thing in our lives, because we are so absorbed in what other people will think about us. So maybe our society’s beauty standards will change over time, but our self-confidence probably never will.

7. Conclusion

At the very beginning of our memoir, we raised quite a few questions and issues concerning the South Korean Beauty Industry and after these few months of intensive research on this specific topic, it's time to look back on our main points and answer the questions raised in our introduction.

South Korea is a country that places extreme importance on beauty. These strict beauty standards and norms push people as far as to discriminate others who don't necessarily fit into these unrealistic standards, for example double eyelids, v-lined face, pale skin etc. As we have mentioned before, this country even has a district in their capital referred to as "the region of plastic surgery", so the country's Beauty Industry is a major factor of contribution to its economy.



One of our main points was the different ways the South Korean Beauty Industry has an impact on its society. On one hand, we studied and researched the impact it has on the environment. This industry has been and still is a major pollution factor, therefore contributing directly to climate change, to cite a few examples, the over packaging or the unsustainable production of cosmetic products.

On the other hand, maybe the most important point of this memoir, is how the beauty industry affects the South Korean society. The social impacts can be observed in many ways, and on many different levels. Since these

strict beauty norms have been around for many years and throughout generations, it is to be expected that this internalized obsession to alter your appearance to fit a standardized norm will prevail for more years. Women in South Korea are more likely to feel self-conscious and insecure about their bodies than in the western countries because of the omnipresence of advertisement for cosmetic surgeries and products that send the message of "you're not pretty enough". This sadly is also the reason why a woman may not get the job she applied for; some employers in South Korea still traditionally search for good looks rather than good qualifications in their employees.

"Where does the longing for beauty come from?"

The longing for beauty came from a long cultural history. The concept of "your clean soul is represented by a beautiful appearance" evolved to "you only have a clean soul, when your body is pretty" to finally "you must be pretty to have a future."

This leads immediately to the following questions, namely: "How does the constant beauty impact their society?" and "Which pressure does the industry put on men and women?". The beauty standards influence the society in rather negative ways. People become self-conscious about their looks and chase unachievable standards in society to live happily and get compliments. They want to be perfect and look their best all the time, which is impossible to do, therefore they reach to plastic surgery to come this goal as close as possible.

Additionally, people want to have such naturally unachievable beauty standards in their job spaces, so they hire people who are pretty, yet sometimes less skilled. However, there are a few examples where the desire of beauty created a force going against it, let it be the singer HwaSa who wants to create a own beauty standard, a standard where people are accepted the way they are, or normal citizens like Summer Lee, who go on protests and go on a daily basis also against the pressure, shave their hair and wear male clothing.



Another question was “What impact does the cosmetic industry have on younger children?”. To answer this question, it is important to say that children are the most influential people, because their opinions aren’t fully formed yet. Children are therefore more vulnerable to being manipulated by the beauty and cosmetic industry. This is a reason why many brands in South Korea target this age group by introducing them to cosmetics coated in bright and flashy colours that a child would be attracted to. If even adults in South Korea are being influenced by the constant advertising in the street, basically telling them “you’re not pretty enough”, imagine the impact it would have on the children, if they are exposed to this type of



mentality imposed by the industry. These children will likely grow up to be self-conscious or be insecure about their looks. Another linked example would be the controversial use of filters and photoshop in social media. The primary users of apps such as TikTok and Instagram are (pre)teens even children. These filters used by many, shape our minds how “pretty” should look (thin, pale and flawless skin, big eyes) and

have proven to cause serious body dysmorphia and insecurities in the younger and impressionable generations.

Coming to the last question: “Is their beauty really based on western standards?” This question was the hardest to find out and give an answer to. Most sources of Korea said that they don’t like the cliché of westernisation.

Also, the sources we looked up, mostly said that Koreans and other Asian countries didn't inspire themselves fully or barely on westerns but mostly on society standards. A rich person didn't need to go outside to work, so they were pale. This evolved later on in their society as "really pretty", the thought of being rich was set aside but only the thought of it being pretty remained in the mindset of the people.

Although today's motivation for women to alter their body may be to fit into the norms of society, but the women's desire to alter the shape of their eyes began in the 50's during the Korean war to please their American husbands. At that time the beauty ideal was indeed the white body. One could therefore say that today's beauty ideal is partly built on generations of internalized racism, coming from western standards.



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Selftaken picture in a sinsa-dong subway

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