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The Cosmetic Industry in the Republic of South Korea:
The Beauty Standards Flowing with the Economy

MA Thesis

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I have written this Master's Thesis independently. Any ideas or data from other authors or sources have been fully referenced.

A handwritten signature in grey ink, appearing to read 'Melissa Felipe'.

Melissa Felipe
16.01.2025

List of Abbreviations

ISAPS- International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery

K-Culture- Korean Culture

K-Pop- Korean-pop

K-idols- Korean idols

K.W- Korean wave

KRW- South Korean Won

M.D- Medical Doctor

R.O.K- Republic of Korea

S.Korea- South Korea

USD- United States Dollar

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	6-9
1. From Hermit to Global	10
2. Literature Review.....	11-16
3. Methodology	17-18
3.1.1 Challenges.....	18
3.1.2 Ethical Consideration.....	18
3.1.3 Interviews.....	19-20
3.1.4 Questionnaires.....	20
3.1.5 Collected Data.....	20-23
4. Results and Discussions.....	24
4.1.1 The Wave of Economy, Wages, and Education.....	24
4.1.2 President Park Dictatorship and the “Miracle on the Han River”.....	24-26
4.1.3 President Chun Doo-hwan and the Economic Boom	27-29
4.1.4 Charts: Wages and Education Level.....	29-31
5. Confucianism Emergence in South Korea	32
5.1.1 Korean women's roles in a Confucianism society.....	33-34
5.1.2 Confucianism and the Modern Korean Women.....	35-36
5.1.3 The Importance of Jip.....	37
5.1.4 외모지지상상주의:Lookism.....	38-40
6. The Republic of Korea’s Economy Constructed, here comes the Hallyu Wave!.....	40-41
6.1.1 The Hallyu Wave in the 2010s.....	41-42
6.1.2 Conglomerate Number One: Commercial K-Pop.....	42-45
6.1.3 Conglomerate Number Two: K-Beauty.....	45-46
6.1.4 Cosmetic Surgery Sector.....	46-48
6.1.5 Results and Tables Responses to Cosmetic Surgery	49-51
7. Conclusion.....	52-53

8. Reference lists.....	54-57
9. Resüme.....	58

Introduction

Did you know cosmetic surgery has become a social norm in South Korea? In a moment during my youth, I was an avid listener of K-Pop music; watching their music videos, I quickly glanced at their faces and noticed changes in the newer groups. I questioned it: why is it happening? Over time, the Koreans chose to alter their looks, too. Then I asked again: Does the K-Pop industry have an ounce of influence among the Korean population to change their image? Questions were forming to investigate this change that was rapidly happening in a developing country during the early 2010s. During my undergraduate years, specifically in 2012, I conducted a small research to comprehend the spectrum of cosmetic surgery and whether South Koreans partook in cosmetic surgery to look like well-known Korean idols (K-idols); this was the same timeline when Psy's infamous song "Gangnam Style". By the 2010s, K-pop was a prevailing sector that was gaining popularity with young listeners worldwide --"Gangnam Style" was placed at number two on the Billboard charts for five weeks, and music listeners mimicked Psy's "Gangnam Style" dance (Letkman, 2012), a spectacle for S. Korea for a Korean language song playing on Western radio for the very first time. Even with minimal sources presented in the 2012 analysis, the following findings gave an engaging perspective of the cosmetic industry paradox in the following.

Conducted interviews with Korean citizens at my university and in South Korea, and it revealed many of the interviewees objected to participating in cosmetic surgery and, especially be, a very picture of a K-idol. In summary, the gathered information offered insights into the foundations of cosmetic surgery within the context of the Korean wave, including the history of K-Pop, globalization, and Confucianism. However, Western media, including news outlets and talk shows, continued to highlight excessively that all Koreans undergo cosmetic surgery and tend to look similar or want to have "Western features". Additionally, it addresses the stereotype that all Koreans resemble one another, a notion rooted in the Western viewpoint, particularly highlighted by the viral Miss Korea gif. This incident sparked many Western commenters to assert that all beauty contestants appear similar.

Regardless, the Western narrative lacked comprehension of the Korean mindset and knowledge of the rooted history that created today's modern The Republic of South Korea (R.O.K). Let it array the setting of the evolution of the South Korean nation; first, it was liberated from an oppressive thirty-five-year colonial occupation rule from Japan (1910-1945);

next, a tumultuous battle, the Korean War (1950-1953) among Koreans residing in the South and North, led to the creation of the 38th parallel. Plus, not to mention another occupier, the American military took occupation during the Korean War—currently today, adding on dictatorship rulers like the infamous dictator Park (Leem, 2015,p57).

Migrating to S. Korea as a teacher, I was immersed in the *Bali, Bali*¹ culture and acclimated to the Korean lifestyle. Living in the southern part of the peninsula, each road, building, or crevice displayed beauty advertisements or sponsors showcasing impressive beauty features to promote a company's products. Appealing appearances play a significant role in contemporary Korean society, reflecting one's status or standing in the country. A high volume of Korean beauty (K-Beauty) products is displayed immensely, with plenty of Korean consumers purchasing the products. Being beautiful and appealing is like a non-spoken rule that everyone is aware of, and it even seeps into societal areas like work. Occasionally, my mind reminisced about the analytical research (2012); of course, there was a plethora of cosmetic surgery ads on subway cars, hallways, or billboards; nonetheless, with Korean female co-workers or friends, there wasn't much discussion of sharing getting cosmetic surgery.

Conversely, they frequently discussed K-Beauty products and expressed a strong desire to purchase them. However, I was unable to find out the actual number of Koreans undergoing cosmetic surgery, more specifically, women in Korea. That was something that I could not obtain from my prior research. Focusing on the dynamics of Korean women within a society that prioritizes a flawless appearance amidst modern socioeconomic and sociocultural changes in Korea.

Again, in the year 2022-2023, I returned to my second home, South Korea, as an exchange student; to emphasize from my previous paragraph, there is still a high flux to present appearance, looks, or beauty in the country. Occasionally, I fumbled about how to continue the 2012 analytical research. Living in South Korea for the third time, something clicked: income. It felt more expensive to live in S.Korea that even purchasing a typical snack, bungeo-ppang, was seen as an opulent product. How is it affecting Korean women?

Over the last ten years, the employment rate for women in South Korea has grown consistently. However, the gender pay gap remains a significant issue. In 2022, on average,

¹ Bali,Bali,: A translation fast, quickly.

women earned only around 65 percent of what their male counterparts made. That year, the typical monthly salary was approximately 4.13 million KRW (appx. \$2,844.43 USD) for men, while women earned about 2.68 million KRW (appx. \$1,844.89 USD). (Statista, 2024) Cosmetic surgery was only necessary for medical and health reasons, not for reconstructing the self-image. Over the years, cosmetic surgery has improved and become more socially acceptable, and the mindset of viewing it in a taboo way compared to 2012 has significantly changed positively. Unfortunately, there is insufficient data to show who has gotten the surgery based on other researchers claiming an estimate due to not being recorded by the Korean Health Organization.

As per *medicaltourismco.com* and data collected on income from Korean site *KOSIS*, rhinoplasty prices in 2012 ranged from \$2,000 to \$5,000². Although there has been a minor increase in rhinoplasty surgery prices in 2024, the cost of a rhinoplasty (including bridge, tip, and septal repairs) costs 8,391,300 KRW (about \$6,000 USD). Recent data suggests that many Korean women are interested in cosmetic surgery, yet their salaries significantly hinder their ability to afford these procedures. Since the post-Korean War, women's wages have not increased as consistently as men's. The figures reveal that the cost of nose surgery was 7,265,050 KRW (appx. \$4,997.87 USD) in 2012, with an average annual income of 500,000 KRW (appx. \$343.95 USD). By 2024, the cost for the same procedure is now roughly 10,317,897 KRW (appx. \$7,096.02 USD) with a yearly average income of 750,000 KRW (appx. \$515.80 USD), reflecting only a 1.5% growth in purchasing power, 15% wage increase an approximately 1% of wage per year against a staggering 20% rise in costs. This data illustrates that while rhinoplasty remains accessible to many tourists, the annual salary of women in Korea falls far short of covering such expenses, rendering these surgeries unaffordable for most.

A survey by Seo et al. found that 65% of participants seek cosmetic surgery for reasons related to employment, marriage, or personal choice (Seo et al.2018). The ISAPS International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reports that Korea holds the top rank for cosmetic procedures performed per capita, averaging 13.5 procedures. However, this figure may underestimate the actual number of surgeries. Notably, the percentage of individuals considering cosmetic surgery rose from 14% in 1994 to 15% in 2004, reaching 18% by 2015. In a similar vein, the percentage of individuals who underwent surgery rose from 2% in 1994 to 5% in 2004,

² All value prices presented in this paragraph are an approximation due to the currency rating fluctuating and not obtaining the proper rate currency of 2012 and 2024.

then to 7% in 2015 (Yoon, Kim, 2019,p.230). While this source and others indicate a steady increase in cosmetic procedures over the years, they fail to account for factors such as age, sexual orientation, economic status, and the distinction between citizens and foreigners, leading to inconclusive data. How can we address this? We require additional time and funding for comprehensive analysis to reach a definitive conclusion.

In 2024, South Korea has experienced remarkable growth, emerging as a leader in both the cosmetic and music sectors. The period from 2012 to 2024 has revealed a bit more diversity of information.

In this current research, I aim to tackle:-

1. How the cosmetic surgery industry developed after the Korean War by examining its economic development and dynamics of the socioeconomic status of Korean women statuses. And when did cosmetic surgery reach its “boom” in South Korea?
2. What was the leeway for Korean women to obtain cosmetic surgery? Therefore, was it the K-idols?
3. How are expectations for Korean women still influenced by Confucian ideals?
4. Connections with neo-liberalism?

Let’s outline the analysis layout. The research examines the chronological episodes surrounding the introduction of cosmetic surgery in the R.O.K. and how governmental policies and economic decisions have influenced the status of women. Next, we will discuss Confucianism, an ideology viewed as outdated by many, yet the patriarchal philosophical ideals remain prevalent in modern South Korea. Additionally, there will be a section on how K-Beauty and K-Pop are synonymous with South Korea's socioeconomic and sociocultural landscape. Each segment will be illustrated using graphs or charts from January to December 2024, along with data from 2012 and interviews, highlighting the correlation to contemporary Korean women. It’s important to note that definitive results are not provided; instead, there is a slight confirmation that income does not directly reflect women's pursuit of cosmetic surgery.

Keywords: Republic of South Korea, Hallyu Wave, Cosmetic Surgery, K-Pop, Confucianism, globalization, Economy

CERCS:H270 Social Economic History , S196 Social Economics,

1. From Hermit to Global

As you stroll through the vibrant streets of Seoul, South Korea, filled with commercial shops and illuminated by the glow of smartphones carried by locals, it's hard to imagine that this once-popular travel destination was once considered a hermit kingdom. To grasp how the Republic of Korea (R.O.K) elevated women's status from confinement to achieving the highest university enrollment and significant workplace participation, we explore their journey. One should examine its historical chapters, turned into a modern global nation widely recognized for the Korean Wave or Hallyu, specifically the pillars of K-Pop and K-Beauty.

Henceforth, South Korea was viewed as a “third-world” country during the post-Korean War. The GDP per capita was \$64, lower and lesser than Somalia’s GDP (Swanson, 2015). Many of the population did not have sufficient food, clothing, or shelter, especially in urban areas (Heo and Roehrig, 2010, p13). In other words, a higher volume of Korean adults worked in agriculture than any other work sector available at the time (Eichengreen et al., 2015, p177). The rise of automation in industry, especially within the rapidly growing electronics sector, led to a surge in demand for female workers. Indeed, much of South Korea's economic success can be attributed to the contributions of Korean women. Despite laws ensuring workplace equality, women in Korea earn less than their male counterparts and lack many, if any, opportunities for management or executive roles (DeMente, 2018, p356).

A succession of dictators, beginning with Rhee and continuing through the current blend of neoliberal governance, capitalism, and globalization, has influenced women's participation in the K-Beauty industry, intertwined with Confucian ideals. These ideals continue to shape the expectations placed on contemporary Korean women. The South Korean government has undertaken initiatives to enhance the nation's economy by emphasizing soft power in areas such as culture, music, food, and media. This focus has led to significant increases in consumerism, competition, and heightened expectations in demand, the effects that were slowly observed upon Korean women. The main objective is to understand the cosmetic industry's impact and acknowledge the intensely consumer-driven culture in South Korea.

2. Literature Review

The Hallyu Wave: Cosmetic Surgery & Commercial K-Pop

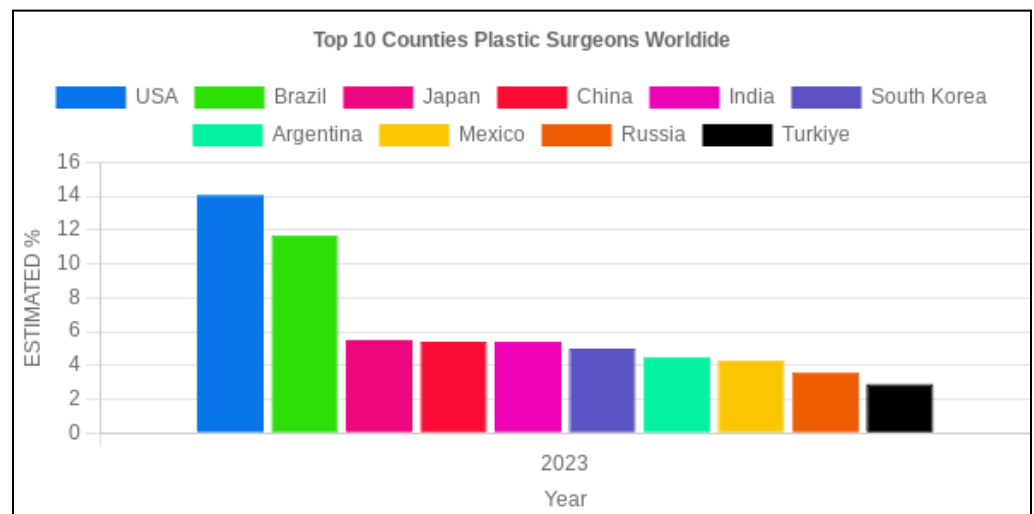
While some research has explored the role of appearance in cosmetic surgery choices among Korean women, limited attention has been given to how neoliberal governance, globalization, and economic factors. Seo, Yun Am, et al.'s analysis titled *“Experience and Acceptance of Cosmetic Procedures among South Korean Women in their 20s”* indicates that South Korea has the highest global rate of cosmetic procedures relative to its population. Notably, the percentage of women considering surgery rose from 45% in 1994 to 61% in 2014, based on their cited survey. However, my research presents a different perspective; several interviewees mentioned they don't pursue surgery mainly due to income restrictions. Indeed, interest in cosmetic surgery has been gradually rising. However, many Korean women still do not visit cosmetic clinics for enhancements. This indicates just a portion of the population. Since numerous respondents in globalization was the beckoning of the rise of K-culture.

As noted earlier, during the IMF crisis in 1997, South Korea borrowed substantial loans, but they successfully repaid them. In response to the crisis, the government devised a strategy that prioritized promoting and financing the film and TV industries for capital gains in music. From the beginning it began by manufacturing goods to the entertainment culture (Hu,2023,p 51). Starting with the 2000s, there was a plethora of market interest in the pop cultural genre. K-Culture kept expanding its reach after it gained a foothold, due in part to continuous support receiving subsidies from the Korean government. Allotted 50 million dollars of bailout money to create the Korean culture and content agency. President Park Geun-hye put a 1 billion dollar profit investment fund into making high returns on S. Korean culture exports (Hu,2023,p53). Culture and content agency focuses on fashion, film, T.V., comic books, animation, and, most importantly, Korean music to boost economic growth by exposing culture (Hu,2023,p54). Youjeang notes Pop City: Korean popular culture and the selling of places. “They represent and lead trends in fashion and lifestyle. K-Pop is recognized more for its visual appeal than musical offerings (Hu,2023,p65, as cited from Yujeong,Oh,Pop City,2018).

In contrast, author Leem, in *“The Dubious Enhancement: Making South Korea a Plastic Surgery Nation,”* investigates the modern perspective on plastic surgery through three main stages: legitimization, popularization, and industrialization. They highlight how various entities,

including marketing firms, advertising agencies, economists, dating services, psychiatrists, cosmetic brands, and newspapers, have skewed statistics. Numerous charts demonstrate that a considerable portion of Korean women are either undergoing cosmetic surgery or showing a “soft yes,” suggesting openness to these procedures. Among all the journal articles accessible, this one focused on the evolution of cosmetic surgery and being vocal about how the numbers do not reflect the population opting for cosmetic surgery, which is the only one that plays a crucial role in the thesis, indicating that not many Korean women seek cosmetic procedures. There could be reasons for this, primarily their income or perhaps a self-acceptance of their appearance. One of the examples from the text stated, “In 2004, a team of psychiatrists at Seoul National University concluded not that Koreans were collectively suffering from BDD³ but that half of female Korean college students had already had plastic surgery, and 95.7 percent of those who had already had surgery wanted more in the future” (Chosun Ilbo, 2005). In other words, the statistics indicate that a striking 95.7% are considering cosmetic surgery soon, although they don't specify who these individuals are. However, Leem's analysis, which questions these figures, provides a fresh viewpoint and raises doubts about their interpretation. S. South Korea is often dubbed a cosmetic surgery nation, a label the author questions. Nevertheless, it boasts a multitude of cosmetic surgery clinics, particularly in the famed Gangnam district. This upscale area is renowned not only for its luxury brand products but also for attracting medical tourists from other countries. In

the graph “*Top 10 Countries Plastic Surgeons Worldwide*” Shows that South S.Korea placed 6th in for the estimated number of surgeons (ISAPS.org).



Edited by author—Data gathered from ISAPS.ORG

³ BDD: Body Deformity Disorder

The Social and Economic Collaboration that Metamorphosize Women's Statuses

The remarkable nation of the R.O.K. has seen significant advancements, especially in its economy, which ranks #14 worldwide for GDP (Statista,2024). It's recognized as the fastest-growing country in East Asia. To comprehend this transformation, we need to look back at the post-Korean War period and analyze important presidencies, focusing on economic development and the notable increase in cosmetic surgery. This analysis is essential to understanding how South Korean women have navigated and thrived in this evolving environment.

Clarifying the statistical figures has proven challenging due to varying interpretations of how many females undergo cosmetic surgery by different stakeholders. A better understanding of the narrative surrounding Korean women's perspectives on cosmetic surgery can be achieved by examining the chapter titled "Population, Employment, Education, and Welfare" in the textbook *"The Korean Economy From a Miraculous Past to a Sustainable Future"* by Eichengreen, B. Lim, W., Park Y. C., and Perkins, D. H. This chapter illustrates that despite Korea's rapid transition and economic growth, educated urban women participated in the workforce for only a brief period. Nevertheless, women accounted for 42% of the employed labor force, according to 2012 *KOSIS* data (Eichengreen et al.,2015, p179). Many Korean women transitioned from roles in agriculture to positions in the service industry, which one might expect to correlate with increased income. Nonetheless, Table 6.2 indicates a slow increase of roughly as much as 1%.

The previous paragraph went over the evolution of women's statuses in terms of their working occupations. Seeing more Korean females are participating in higher education and in the workforce. *KOSIS.kr* has an extended database from population to energy, utilizing the Korean government's own source. Closely looking at the *wages and salaries* sector and clicking on the following titles: household→whole country (nominal) → Average monthly income & expenditures (whole household), it presented the 2019–2023 income. Although their income is steadily increasing, their spending is also rising due to the increasing prices of goods. The second graph illustrates that despite salary increases, individuals are still averaging about 500,000 KRW

per year, which is approximately \$300 USD annually. This figure represents the average for the entire household; however, the *KOSIS.kr* website provides data categorized by gender, age, and occupation, showing the average value of median income. Growing income inequality and a widening gap between the rich and the poor experienced a rapid increase in income inequality in the mid-1990s. An endangered status of the middle class (Koo,ed.Kim,2016, p.107). Even after the financial crisis was over, neoliberal restructuring of the Korean labor market continued and made the economic lives of the Korean middle class (Hong, 2005). Analyzing the previous decades of the Republic of Korea's evolution towards modernization and economic growth reveals a persistent challenge for individuals seeking to afford cosmetic procedures for

themselves.

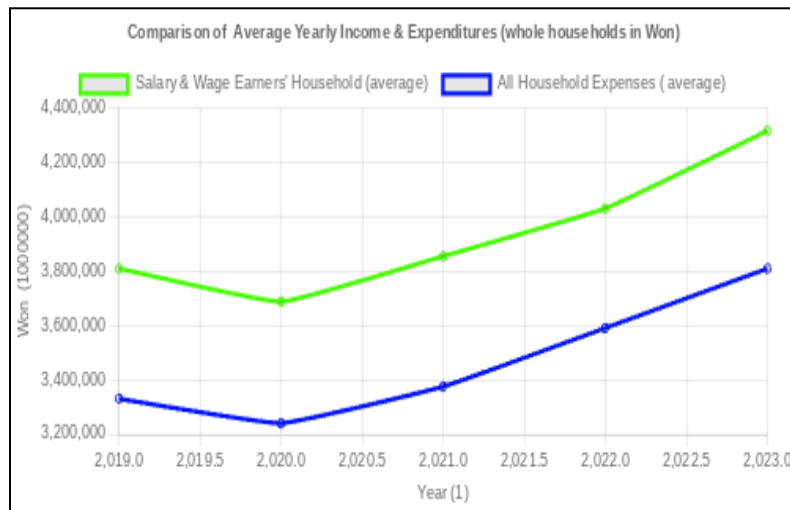


Table 1

Comparison of Average Yearly Income and Expenditures (whole households in Won)

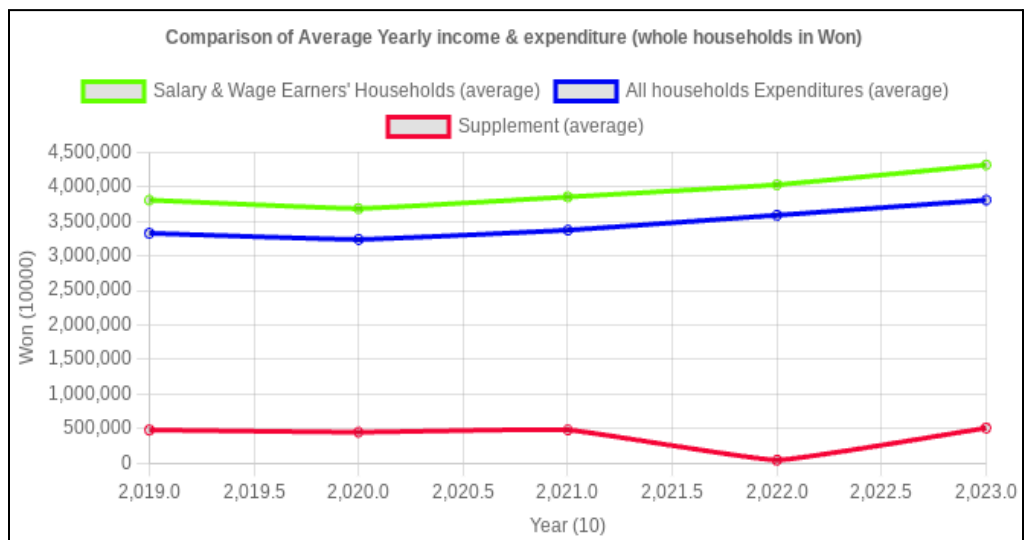
Figure 1: The chart from a Comparison of Average Yearly Income and Expenditures (whole households in Won). The Green line is the salary wage, and the blue line is the expenses; they both steadily increase or decrease.

Edited by author-data taken from KOSIS.KR

Table 2

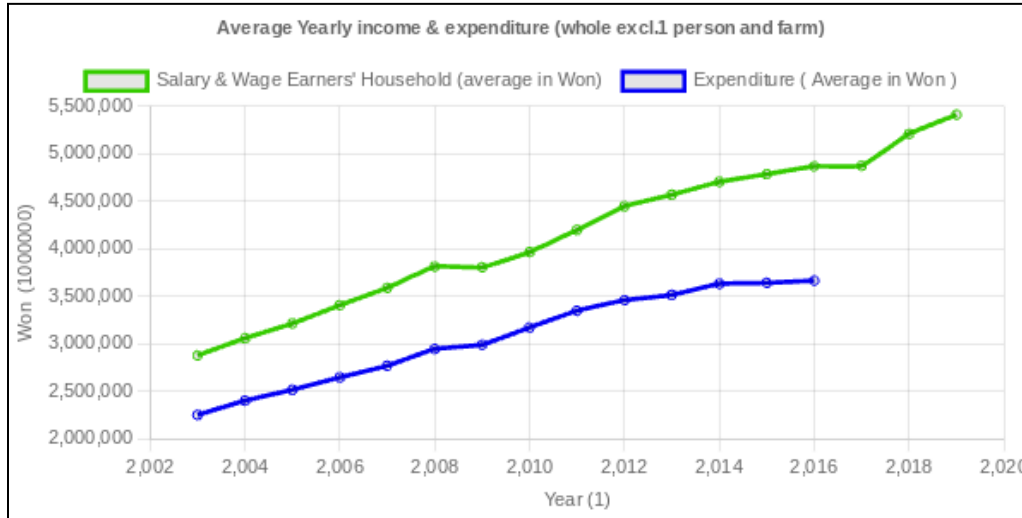
Graph of Comparison of Average Yearly Income and Expenditure (Whole Households in Won)

Figure 2: The chart compares average yearly income and expenditures using data taken from the Kosis.kr website. The



steady salary and wage increase, and rising expenditures still show an average annual savings of roughly 500,000 KRW.

Table 3: Average Yearly Income & Expenditure Year 2002-2020



Edited by author-Statistics were taken by KOSIS.KR

Figure 3: Table 3 The green line outlines the salary & wage Earners' Household (Avg. KRW) with the blue line being the expenditures. You can see the blue and green line are correlating as the wages increase. However, the Kosis.kr website lacked additional data from 2016 to 2020. Moreover, expenditures have been rising sharply.

Confucianism a Key Role in the R.O.K

In the 2012 analysis, I elaborated on how Confucianism ideology conforms to Korean citizens. Confucianism is a vital part of the research; it would have been irresponsible not to include this category in the MA thesis because it sets the blueprint for the Korean mindset. As the author Bianca Mitu of “*Confucianism and the Contemporary Korean Society*” emphasized in the report, understanding the role of Confucianism's ideology functions in a modern capitalistic society still shows Confucian values in the nation.

The R.O.K. has shown a significant evolution in the economic sector to become a mega player in a globalized world; however, it obtained modernization in 50 years. Although the R.O.K. had a series of dictatorships, starting with Rhee, it secured a traditional, cultural mindset regardless of society's involvement: Confucianism. Confucianism is still meaningful in Korea;

many are actively pursuing Confucianism resolutions to the social and cultural issues of postmodern and a late-capitalist society (Chang,Kalmanson,2010,p.51). Previously, it expressed the economic development among the R.O.K. and how it affected the dynamic roles of Korean women. Adding Confucianism is a significant enhancement to the research to comprehend the Korean mindset and role not just within filial piety but also as societal norms have changed due to its respected decade. Confucianism is still a hidden factor in this modern nation. “Koreans tend to conform to social norms” (Gonzales, Lee, 2019,p33). Confucianism or Neo-Confucianism have shaped beauty ideals for Korean women. These standards extend beyond reverence for elders and duties to husbands and children, emphasizing a woman’s obligation to bear sons, a tradition that dates back to the Joseon period (Hu,2023,p. 39). “...some Korean societal values today have their roots in Confucianism, particularly as it was practiced during the Joseon Era (ca. 1392-1910)” (Gonzales, Lee,2019,p353). “Korean Confucianism espoused values and ethical practices including benevolence, politeness, diligence, obedience to superiors, wisdom, and goodness, which includes trustworthiness and honesty. Someone who adheres to these values and ethical practices would not alter their looks for practical reasons” (Gonzales, Lee,2019,p353). Understanding the virtues that are part of Confucianism is crucial to understanding how it is rolled for Korean women in the modern-day.

The spectrum of neoliberalism—encompassing capitalism, globalization, and Confucianism—has significantly enhanced women's status, facilitating their active engagement in both the workforce and education. This progress has undoubtedly contributed to South Korea's modernization and success. However, while leveraging the neoliberalism Hallyu wave to boost national recognition has also led to increased consumerism—particularly within the K-Beauty industry—it has simultaneously created a competitive environment emphasizing appearance as the new standard for work, family, and dating. The insights drawn from interviews conducted in 2012 and 2024 aim not to dissuade women from their choices but rather to underscore the critical developments that occurred behind the scenes of the Miracle Nation in the Republic of Korea. This serves as a platform for women to express their voices and share their stories.

3. Methodology

I opted for a qualitative approach using semi-structured narrative interviews. A combination of theoretical approaches and tools are used to analyze data, including: the content, contextual and comparative analysis, and the framework and concepts of multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin, Mayr, 2012).

The study targeted Korean women aged 20 and above who are citizens of Korea, including both those who have undergone cosmetic surgery and those who have not. This research is based on a 2012 and 2024 study that employed a similar narrative approach and examined related themes. To qualify as interviewees, participants must be 1) women or identify as women⁴, 2) possess Korean⁵ citizenship, and 3) be 20 or older. Consequently, the questions from the 2012 study do not include salary and education. However, responses regarding cosmetic surgery will be incorporated to compare them with the 2024 findings. Participants took part in video interviews lasting between 30 minutes to an hour or completed online Google Surveys. Participants shared their personal experiences and reflected on the societal changes that led to more stringent beauty standards. Additionally, several follow-up narrative questions were included to gather deeper insights.

Data were gathered from January to December 2024 through either personal in-depth interviews or online surveys with select participants. Video interviews were conducted on Google Meet or WhatsApp in a comfortable setting for the participants. Those who preferred privacy could complete the online survey on Google Surveys, responding to the same questionnaire as in the video interviews. The online surveys were offered in English and Korean to accommodate their preferences. Most interviewees already had a connection from living prior in South Korea or were referenced by a friend. We started with everyday talk expressing our day and transition to the questionnaire and sometimes expanding on “How does that make you feel?”, “Are you OK with this new norm?” “Elaborate your experience at that moment.” Each video interview lasted from 30-60 minutes. Ended with the endnote of the interviewee, “I think, that’s all I can say.” Notes were taken during the video interviews, and the investigator transcribed the recorded interview statements. All interviewees signed the consent documents before processing the interview. The Google Survey consisted of the same 24 questions,

⁴ Women or identifying as a women: It doesn’t restrain to women biologically .

⁵ Korean women participants are either multiracial Korean, or Joseonjok (Chinese/Korean)

answered privately on their computers and submitted once completed. The data was collected by reading or listening to the descriptions of the statements to comprehend their narrative. Next, the transcriptions were examined and reviewed for any significant themes. Then, charts were created on some of the data collected and aligned with their answers. The narrative responses and charts aligned with the extended themes discussed in the 2024 analysis. All participants were informed of the study objective and procedures and given a consent document clarifying they could withdraw from the study or have their answers revoked promptly.

3.1.1 Challenges

Finding candidates for the 2024 interviews has been difficult. There's clearly a shift from 2012, primarily due to the fast-paced cultural changes in recent years. Many candidates needed to reschedule, or the interviews conflicted with their personal commitments. Despite several efforts to conduct interviews for the 2024 research, applicants have responded with a more reserved attitude this time. Approaching South Korean women in English-speaking professions often resulted in interview refusals due to their lack of fluency or fear of making mistakes. To address this, it's essential to schedule interviews or surveys ahead of time considering the time limitations. In the United States, at a specific institution in Los Angeles hosting a large number of South Korean exchange students, there has been a lack of responses. There were no existing connections to facilitate progress, prompting a shift to downloading an app called "HelloTalk." This app allows users from diverse countries to interact and practice a particular language. By taking the initiative to download the app and reach out to South Korean women, the goal was to establish rapport through a snowball effect, despite the lack of responses or interrupted communication during the interactions.

3.1.2 Ethical Consideration

All participants were informed about the analysis objective and received a copy of the consent form regarding their rights. This study received approval from the affiliated institution regarding the ethical considerations of the participants. As reviewed, such as the 2020 "*Ethical Guidelines for Online Interviews*." It was conducted with authorization regarding the research purpose, methods, explanations, agreements, and confidentiality.

3.1.3 Interviews

Similar to the 2012 questionnaire, I have expanded on particular questions that provide more precise insights into the individuals. The participants in the interviews primarily included employees and students. While some Korean men have also undergone cosmetic procedures, this initiative specifically targets women to broaden the understanding of their experiences. The 2012 study included some men and primarily women. However, it provided minimal insights into the increase of plastic surgery in Korea. By focusing on the female demographic, we aim to compare the 2012 findings to those from 2024 to determine if perspectives have shifted. A total of 24 questions were prepared ahead of time, some taken from the 2012 survey, with extra follow-up questions included to better understand responses. Even for answers like “I don’t know,” I would say, “No worries, take your time,” or I would rephrase it with an example. All interviewees, except for one who specifically requested the use of her real name in my work, were assigned pseudonyms. Before starting the interviews, everyone signed consent forms and received a briefing on the research's goals and objectives. Those who agreed to participate in the in-person interviews were aware that the sessions would be recorded and transcribed, and I assured them that all information collected would be stored securely.

Before starting with questions, some small talk was conducted to make the atmosphere more pleasant. To enhance our insight into the cosmetic field, the research was organized into various categories, as detailed below. Who are inclined to undergo cosmetic surgery, along with their expectations regarding roles and beauty ideals, wages, jobs, area of residence, sex, lookism, and personal insight about the cosmetic surgery industry. When it came time for me to ask questions, the interviewees were candid and discussed the topic freely. Our objective was not to identify which Korean women underwent surgery but rather to comprehend the landscape of plastic surgery and beauty standards in their home country. Many in Western nations misinterpret the plastic surgery scene as one where all Korean women are undergoing procedures. This study aims to share the experiences and observations these women have encountered in their homes, workplaces, schools, and everyday lives.

This research builds on the findings from a 2012 survey. It will analyze the results from interviews conducted in 2012 and 2024 to identify similarities or shifts in mindsets over time.

Participants in 2012 consisted of Humboldt State University exchange students and white-collar women who completed surveys. Many participants showed genuine interest and were eager to share their perspectives on the evolution of the beauty industry in their country. Nonetheless, many participants expressed they had not pursued any procedures, providing responses like, "I am satisfied with my appearance" and "I feel good as I am." The in-person interviews allowed them to share their personal stories and experiences within their close circles. This approach highlighted the connection between the cosmetic surgery industry and beauty standards in many diligent, dynamic women's everyday lives in an evolving socio-economic, socio-cultural aspect.

3.1.4 Questionnaires

For interviewees wishing to respond in privacy, a Google Survey was offered in both English and Korean. Participants were required to provide 3-4 sentence answers to specific questions, as I, the researcher, could not conduct in-depth inquiries. The questionnaire included the same 24 questions as the video interviews. It all aligned the same themes as the face-to-face interviews. All questionnaires were evaluated and analyzed, and the interview responses were used to find similar themes. Yet, the Google Survey questionnaire obtained a limitation that could have affected eligibility. Still, on the other hand, it's quick, not costly, and could be answered at their own pace. Even though filling out the questionnaire, some participants messaged me to ask if I had any more inquiries I could contact them about again. Most notably, I collected the necessary data with the same themes as the interview. Face-to-face interviews were more semi-structured, and questionnaires were constructed questions.

3.1.5 Collected Data

The following data was collected from January to December 2024

- 5 semi-structured interviews
- 7 questionnaire respondents

Table I: Participants of 2012

PARTICIPANT (PSEUDO)	AGE	REGION
B.M.	16	SEOUL
J.C.	27	SEOUL
J.Y.	34	GYEONGG-DO
K.M.	30	SEOUL
I.M.	33	SEOUL
S.K.	33	DAEJEON
B.J.	18	SEOUL
A	28	SEOUL
C.E.	26	SEOUL
W.S.	43	SEOUL

6

Table I Cont: Participants of 2012

Edited by author: All data collected from participants 2012

PARTICIPANT (PSEUDO)	AGE	REGION
Y.Y.	53	DAEJEON
S.K.	47	DAEJEON
K.J.	53	DAEJEON
J.S.	38	DAEJEON
Y.J.	38	DAEJEON
Y.K.	38	DAEJEON
K.T.	40	DAEJEON
C.Y.	45	DAEJEON
J.K.	36	DAEJEON
J.A.	31	DAEJEON

⁶ Table I showcase the participants from 2012, my previous research was focused on a different object which included the following age and residency.

Table II: Participants of 2024

PARTICIPANT (PSEUDO)	LEVEL OF EDUCATION	AGE	OCCUPATION	SALARY (KRWON)	REGION
ROSY	BACHELORS DEGREE	27	SALES REPRESENTATIVE	36.1 MIL	YONGIN
SUE KIM	BACHELORS DEGREE	29	ENGLISH TEACHER	27 MIL	SEOUL
ZEBRA	BACHELORS DEGREE	32	ACADEMIC CORDINATOR	32.3 MIL	YONGIN
PARK JAY	BACHELORS DEGREE	33	ENGLISH TEACHER	25.2 MIL	DONGTAN
KNAPI	BACHELORS	36	EFL TEACHER	91 MIL	YONGIN
LUISE	BACHELORS	54	KOREAN LANGUAGE TUTOR (PT)	35 MIL	HWASUNG CITY

7

8

Edited by author-all data collected from participants 2024

PARTICIPANT (PSEUDO)	LEVEL OF EDUCATION	AGE	OCCUPATION	SALARY (KRWON)	REGION
Q	SOME GRADUATE EDUCATION	26	STUDENT	19.8 MIL	SEOUL
YEONG	MASTERS DEGREE	45	ENGLISH TEACHER (PT)	19.4 MIL	GYEONGG-DO
BEK	SOME DOCTORAL EDUCATION	50	STUDENT/OFFICE WORKER	38 MIL	SEOUL
Maria	PHD	37	RESEARCHER	38.9 MIL	SEOUL
PRO. CHANG	PHD	52	PROFESSOR	103.1 MIL	SEOUL
YANG	SOME COLLEGE EDUCATION (2ND YR)	22	STUDENT/ INTERN	25 MIL	CHEONAN

⁷ Table II the 2024 analysis for my interviews I also asked them for their level of education and a monthly salary which later, I converted to yearly. So, salaries are shown an estimate since the currency rate changes constantly. All these conversions used the rate from December 28, 2024.

⁸ PT: Part Time

Edited by author-all data collected from participants 2024

For the 2024 age group, 33% range from the 20-30 age group, 33% range from the 31-40 age group, 17% range from the 41-50 age group, and 17% range group from 50+. 8% in Cheonan, 50% in Gyeonggi-do (province), including Dongtan, Yongin, and Hwasung, and 42% in Seoul. 2012 participants age group, 10% age between 16-20, 20% age between 21-30, 45% age between 31-40, 15% age between 41-50, 10% age between 51+40% in Seoul, 5% in Gyeonggi-do, 55% in Daejeon. The yellow dot marks Seoul, the green dot indicates Gyeonggi-do (which includes Dongtan, Yongin, and Hwasung), the purple dot represents Cheonan, and the red dot represents Daejeon.



Edited by author-map from Wikitravel.com

4. Results and Discussion

The earlier sections will explore themes critical to this analysis: the Hallyu wave, Confucianism, and the economy. The discussion will follow the responses from research participants. The first chapter will focus on salaries and wages, emphasizing the connections between the economy and wage structures. Next, Confucianism will outline the foundational elements of the ideology and its conforming framework. Finally, the Hallyu wave will examine K-beauty and K-Pop, highlighting how they have become integral to Korea's culture. This section will reveal how participants feel about these two conglomerate industries and whether they have engaged with them. To show how all three themes evolved as well

After collecting all the data, the responses will be displayed in each section, along with additional analysis. Evaluating the cultural and societal changes that are consequential to include the economy is a crucial factor to recognize. Analyzing the figures will help us gain a broader understanding of the underlying dynamics.

4.1.1 The Wave of Economy, Wages, and Education

By analyzing specific periods, we can better understand the initial developments of the R.O.K. economy, particularly the rise in university enrollment among Korean women. This will highlight how the economy has empowered women in their economic positions. Furthermore, we will examine how Park and Doo-Hwan contributed to elevating the nation—Park focusing primarily on domestic issues while Doo-Hwan looked toward international opportunities.

At the end of this section, it will display two charts based on the interview participants. One chart will illustrate their *age in relation to their wages*, while the second will show their *age alongside their level of education*.

4.1.2 President Park Dictatorship and the “Miracle on the Han River”

The infamous dictatorship, President Park, took over the presidency of the Republic of Korea and seized power in a military coup in 1961; he settled himself as the president (Choi Il-sung, 2012, p.129). President Park (1961-1979) had a different plan for S.K., focusing on the economic agenda than his prior successors, President Rhee and President Chang Myon. The Five-Year Economic Plan was the blueprint to aid the development of the R.O.K. economy, and

the results of the idea increased the GNP by an average of 9% per year. (Choi,2012, p.129) Thus, the phrase “Miracle on the Han River” was coined for this generation to “improve the quality of life. Korea reached self-sufficiency in the mid-1970s; however, with the increased economic development, the gap between the rich and poor was wide, plus the freedom of the press and freedom of expression were highly limited (Choi,2012, p.129). In the meantime, college enrollment was slowly increasing by 1960; a table presented in “*South Korea since 1980*” by Heo and Roehrig on page 86 *figure* shows that in the 1960s, the number of students claimed 81,519 and in 1970 was 201,436, respectively. This generation was a turn showing an increase in the number of women electing to a more advanced education.

In the year of 1969, the Korean Medical Association admitted the Korean Society of Plastic Surgery and Reconstructive Surgeons (Leem, 2015,p.59-60), acknowledging that the entire Korean society objected to cosmetic surgery as not a legitimate medical field. Alternative terms were utilized, such as cosmetic orthopedic surgery or cosmetic surgery (Dong,1960). Seeing that cosmetic surgery was observed by a negative mindset by the majority of the Korean population, it took five years -1979 for the Supreme Court to approve plastic surgery for aesthetic purposes as a medical practice (Leem, 2015,p.58). Even though Park’s administration ruled the R.O.K. with a dictatorship, the economy was the main priority. Park banned foreign products from being sold in the R.O.K. to counter the fact that he had poured state investments into the industries (Hu,2023p.45). Women were slowly gaining cosmetic surgery when improving their status, such as education or economic class; compared to the period of post-Korean War, it was only performed to reconstruct the wounded victims, and it served as a medical procedure.

On the other hand, Park’s government implemented a legal order– 간소복(gansobok) translates to the simple clothing movement. The simple clothing movement was designated as a regulation for young women, who were forced to labor in factories to strive for S. Korea's industrialization. To enumerate, during Park’s era, appearances were dictated; fashion looks were confined to not wearing short skirts below 17 centimeters (6.7 inches) or restricting women to make-up themselves alluring in public. The main reason for this exaggerated appeal is because Park’s limelight focuses on national development, in other words, not spending on frugalicious self-appearance (Hu, 2023, p.45-46). Under those circumstances, Korean surgeons could medically assist their community with this new knowledge extracted from Western countries.

President Park stole his position and addressed economic development; the results showcased that S.K. was generating a thriving economy in which the economic growth rates exceeded 10 percent (Heo and Roehrig,2010, p.24). The government made it a priority to focus on a pro-business, political, and economic stabilization formula (Park,2012, p.213). On the other hand, South Koreans endured long work hours and low wages; adding to this, critical information will be presented further in later sections. In the 1960s, S. Korea's per-capita gross national income (GNI) was around \$76 (Heo and Roehrig,2010, p.78). Most women working outside the home in the 1960s were in agriculture or low-productivity service occupations. "As the economy's rapid growth proceeded, the increase in women in the labor force was mainly in manufacturing (for young low-skilled women) and service jobs (including increasing numbers of high-income jobs in recent jobs)" (Eichengreen et al.,2015,p.182). On the contrary, the author Leem expressing high-class women and college-educated girls searched for a cosmetic surgeon there is not a definite percentage or data suggested, they pointed out how a small survey from a corporate company express a high percentage reflecting an entire nation. At this point, I must express to say the number was predominantly small because looking at the chart of *Gender Shares in Employment* looking at the Park years (1961-1979), the chart starts from 1963- roughly 35% and 1979-roughly barely not touching 40% just an estimation what can be seen on the chart. A rough estimate from 1963-1979 is a 2%-5% increase in women working during this period.

Respectively, there was an economic oomph for the society of S.Korea. Korean women's roles were changing; for example—leaving home and participating in the workforce or attending a university to obtain a higher education. On the other hand, the cosmetic surgery sector stabilized itself in a medical department, and some Korean women partook in getting surgery, so here, respectively, was some sort of revision. Knowing high-class women proceeded to search for a cosmetic surgeon regardless, it was observed as a mental illness by Korean society. With the upcoming new president, a more extraordinary advancement in economic development will affect Korean women's social status and lives in the forthcoming decades.

4.1.3 President Chun Doo-hwan and the Economic Boom

Another series of dictators took over, known as Major General Chun Doo, with a military movement suppressing another pro-democracy movement; however, his ambition was the S. Korean economy. On the other side, the 1980s was the economic boom that launched Korea's economy; a significant prime for Korean society went through a high turbulence of change. Chun-doo Hwan, a military dictator, his ruling affected the country's economy, culture, and politics. Between the 1960s and 1981, the Korean government's five-year economic development plans achieved remarkable success, with average annual growth rates reaching 8 percent (Leem 2015, p.58).

Korea established a middle class with its economic development, and with Koreans' social life increasing for the better, Koreans had more accessible access to cosmetic surgery—which could add to their potential for consumer purchase. The 1980s was the primary factor of the R.O.K economic development, and the mindset shifted to the point that cosmetic surgery practices were part of middle-class women who brought the status of a high-quality life and material wealth to the growing nation. However, Doo-hwan's cardinal aligned a lot with Park's rule; during Doo-hwan's period, civilians revolted against the government to strive for democracy. To set up a distraction to his constituents, Hwan set up the three S: Sex, Sports, and Screen policy to embolden the Korean media, including the entertainment sector, to allude to a distraction, basically by having the three S to stop the constituents from their focal point of achieving a democratic government. Also, in 1983, Doo-hwan made the executive decision to listen to his economic advisors to open up S. Korea to foreign companies (Hu,2023, p.47).

By the early 1990s, Korean society was free from a military dictatorship, and a high interest in cultural products rose the beneficial aspect, bringing a halt to strict restrictions and guidelines for how Korean women should look and focus on growing new sectors of its economy and upping its international image (Hu,2023, p.48). The negative connotation of mental illness sickness was slowly cast away from the societal minds of Koreans. Stated only 6% of women obtained cosmetic surgery, not an excessive amount; however, this decade gave Korean women a sort of liberty or options compared to the prior Korean women who were raised during the prior dictators (Leem, 2016,p61).

Meanwhile, in the 1990s, S. Korea's economy brought forth the medical practice of the cosmetic surgery industry was attracting the younger generation, who had a more suitable life than the previous generations; they found the moment to enrich their aspirations, and cosmetic surgery was part of the commodity bubble. "Who (Koreans) pursue enjoyable lives, stand firm in their views, and value physical appearances and who have changed consumption patterns as well as popular culture...in the 1990s" (Leem 2015,p.61 as cited in Chosun Ilbo,1995)—recalling from previous decades from the 1940s-1980s a majority of Korea's population could not obtain or had access to luxury merchandise due to the economic situation and restraints of expressionism, options when dictators micromanaged the individuality of their civilians. The 90s was filled with flourishing advertisements corresponding to this new youth generation's participation in the capitalist market. However, in an article, Leem expressed that Samsung company surveyed if cosmetic surgery was acceptable to them and questioned twelve hundred people aged nineteen to twenty-nine; the response was 54.1 percent of women, who responded positively. Despite this finding, the author expressed sentiment that the data does not concur, which is a unison visionary because most of the data could be skewed to be in favor of the advert company to push cosmetic surgery in a more positive light. It didn't inform the details of which class of women favored cosmetic surgery, e.g., salary, occupation, marital status, second knowing Confucianism ideals held a strong position in Korean society despite the fact cosmetic surgery was a taboo procedure not being accepted by the majority of the population. Yes, the "cosmetic surgery" realm was slowly, moderately settled into the S. Korean nation.

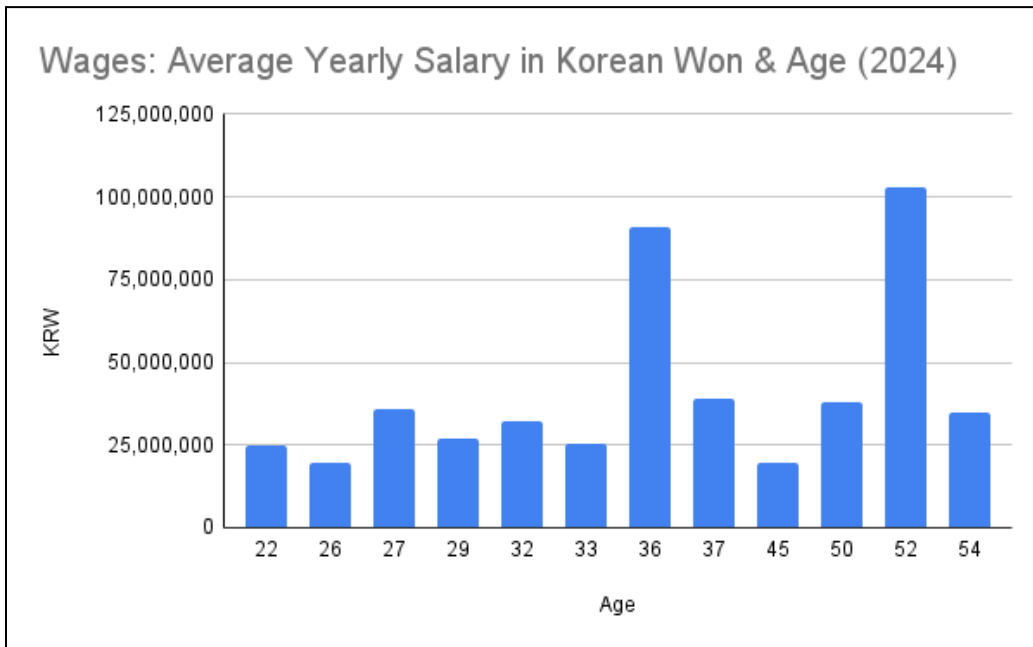
With this economic improvement, the cosmetic surgery industry had a new lens as a commodity. Korea established a middle class with its economic development, and with Koreans' social life improving, they had more accessible access to cosmetic surgery. They could add it to their potential as a consumer purchase. Furthermore, Korea's economic path was like a roller coaster by 1997; S. Korea was hit hard with economic hardship, which led it to reach out for financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Leem, 2015,p.59). In exchange for a \$55 billion bailout—the largest IMF rescue at that time—Korea reluctantly agreed to make significant cuts to public spending, liberalize its markets to foreign goods and investors, and limit the expansion of conglomerates (Gonzales, Lee,2019 p.50).

Nonetheless, to combat the financial hardship from the 1997 financial crisis, the Korean government formed a soft power approach to aid the nation in investing in culture, music, etc. By

the early 2000s, cosmetic surgery industries flooded, and there was a high demand for cosmetic surgery clinics, and competition rose for cosmetic surgery surgeons. More cosmetic surgery started to pop up in the district of Gangnam. The reason is the overwhelming number of cosmetic surgeon offices; even though the Korean economy recovered in 2001, the Korean government did not establish social welfare, and the social climate was experiencing a highly competitive mindset while adding unstable employment and unregulated markets or companies (Leem, 2015,p.59). “Until 1985, the average wage income of all income groups, including the bottom 90%, increased at similar rates. In contrast, the average wage incomes diverged after 1997 between the top 10% and the bottom 90%. In particular, the growth rate of the average wage income of the top 0.1% is distinguished from those of other income groups (Koo,ed.Kim,2016,p. 110). President Kim Young-san’s administration (1993-1998) focused mainly on globalization-related policies and issues (Gonzales, Lee,2019, p 221). A sociopolitical shift was altering the country in the upcoming decades of the R.O.K.

4.1.4 Charts: Wages and Education Level

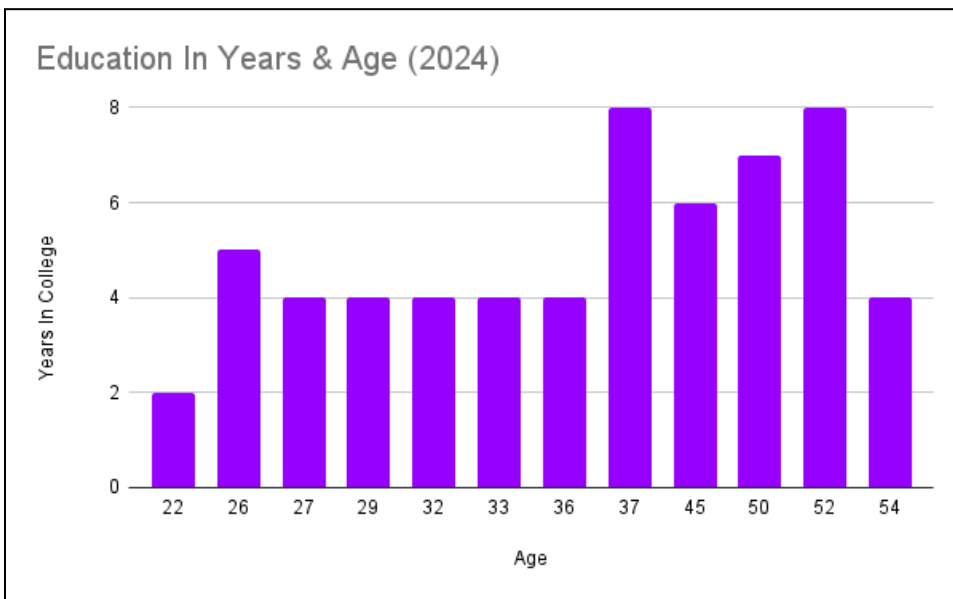
Table III: Wages: Average Yearly Salary in Korean Won & Age (2024)



Cited by author- Table III: Wages (KRW) Yearly Salary & Age data was collected 2024.

Table III, Wages (KRW) Yearly Salary & Age, illustrates how wages vary by age. Notably, some participants in that category had jobs in international sectors with higher pay (age 36). In the exhibition, some private establishment occupations paid more than the governmental run establishments.

Table IV: Education in Years 2024



Cited by author- Table IV: Education in Years was collected from the participants 2024.

Table IV displays the educational levels of participants: four years correspond to a Bachelor’s degree, five to six years equate to a Master’s degree, and seven or more years signify a Doctoral degree. The three preceding tables relate to the graph *depicting Average Yearly Income and Expenditure from 2002 to 2020*. Participants pursue higher education to increase their income potential, allowing them to live more comfortably

Looking at the canon presidency of Park and Doo-hwan, there has been a notable increase in women's college enrollment, as reflected in the table above. Additionally, the national average income is about 4 million KRW, while those in the lowest income bracket (19.4 million KRW) earn approximately five times this average. Conversely, the highest earners in the data (103.1 million KRW) generate about 25 times more than the national average. Overall, most respondents reported no cosmetic surgery, and personal expenditures were not included. The

table comparing Average Yearly Income & Expenditure from 2002 to 2020 shows a significant rise in expenditures, which may correlate with reduced participation in the cosmetic surgery industry. The wage gap in Korea has been drastically increasing, and the middle-income deciles have not changed in the shares of total income in the past three decades. Inequality has been rising since the 1970s (Eichengreen et al. 2015,p.195,201).

Additionally, their income and level of education standing look satisfactory the prior decades have led to high volumes of competition, especially with the wide pay gap between men and women, meaning in second behind men, which led to competition with other women. Again, the early 90s developed way too instantaneously that decent job attendance and education roles seemed moderate at this point. Discussed the Asian market crash of '97, which led to hiring easily and firing easily a job; security was not guaranteed, which raised the competition. Adding more, high inflation has been hitting the R.O.K. in recent years. For future research, we plan to ask participants about their expenditures to relate this to the line graphs (*see lit. review*). Consider the fact that women in the same field and with the same level of education often earn less than their male counterparts. The collected data indicates that not everyone is undergoing cosmetic surgery (*see 6.1.5 Results and Tables Responses to Cosmetic Surgery*). A key highlight was raised by the author Leem, who also challenged the accuracy of the data regarding participants receiving cosmetic procedures.

5. Confucianism Emergence in South Korea

This section will gloss slightly on the Chinese philosophy, Confucianism, how it took root in S. Korea's society, and the expectations among its Korean women. The philosophical term can be defined in different variations; yes, paired with the term philosophical, it comes to mind a sect to aid the teachings of a balanced life or morals among yourself, kindness to transmit among the community (Mitu,2015,p 32-33). For newcomers, the Confucianism philosophy originated in China; there's not one specific definition for this honored term. The fact is that Confucianism has been modified and shifted to fit its respective periods; one can conquer Confucianism, which is not the same practice as five hundred years ago. This philosophical term carries these characteristics: moral, social, philosophical, and religious ideas, values, and practices (Mitu,2015,p 32-33). Now, Confucian culture absorbed the idea of profit-seeking, competition, and rationalization of economic activity, but it retained its emphasis on collectiveness, family, and harmony (Mitu, 2015, p34-35). The high-modern country S. Korea adopted a newly coined term for its economic growth, "Confucian capitalism," to reflect on the industrial society. Three scholarly authors, Stowell (2003), Palley (1992), and Rozmanm (2002), have expressed in their research that South Korea holds the strongest hold on Confucianism ideology in East Asia.

Representing readings, texts, and speaking with Korean locals expressing Confucianism still holds a factor within the sociocultural aspect –with high volumes of cosmetic surgery procedures in South Korea, many civilians, especially Westerners, have expressed that Koreans have an obsession with a "Western look." We will dive into this concept. There is a degree of Western influence; however, Korean society has its standards of look—a more "Korean" image than Western ones. Respectively, Koreans tend to achieve a "natural" look where no one can identify someone who went under the knife. In S.Korea, the phrase cosmetic surgery refers to invasive procedures practices (Holliday and Hwang, 2012,p.67) However, Confucianism played a role in how Korean offspring should not alternate their features, implying dishonor to their parents. The upcoming sections will discuss how Confucian ideals were applied to Korean women, their roles, and their expectations. In 2012, an interviewee who went by the name "J" noted to me, " It's important to accept your body; it's Korean culture. A few traditional parents carry Korean traditions, such as resistance to change and trying to keep their original identity of having a more "natural" look."

5.1.1 Korean women's roles in a Confucianism society

Henceforth, this is not to say the negatives or the positives of Confucianism but to bring to light the ideals and expectations that have been modified among Korean women. The Korean society pursuing economic growth will affect the society—like, for example, individual rights or pleasure. Observing cosmetic surgery's roots in the small peninsula, one cannot forget that Confucian ideology is part of the puzzle. Confucianism ideology was borrowed from its neighboring country, China (Stowell,2003,p.110). This composition will gloss over the periods from the 60s-70s and how it took a reduction in female roles. Confucianism thus far has its ideology still rooted in Korea's institutions. Korean women have accelerated their roles or duties throughout the past six decades. Imagine that during the Choson Dynasty period, Korean women had to cover themselves with a cloak when leaving their house premises.

No skin was left to bear to be witnessed by onlookers; a Korean woman's body is only to be exposed inside the household. Moreover, surveying South Korea has come to an age where people can reveal their body image to a certain extent. Starting from the 1960s, Confucianism influenced, not limited to, governing, family structure, social interactions, and culture. Korean women believe with cosmetic surgery, they are in control of their bodies. Control. An interesting key term for some Korean women is cosmetic surgery, which is one product they independently decide upon themselves, not having institutions, for example, family or schools. Schools have implemented strict regulations on Korean students in the past decades, from hairstyles to undergarments. (Schwekendiek et.al,2013.p.142)

Moreover, having cosmetic surgery has historically been viewed as shameful, as it implies that individuals are attempting to change the body inherited from their ancestors or parents, a sign of insincerity (Gonzales, Lee,2019,p353). Changing, altering, or even making any minor slight modification is considered ignominious, simply as having blemishes on the woman's face is unappealing (Hu,2023,p39). Individuals who underwent cosmetic surgery were thought to be deceiving others. This deception into believing that their looks were better than they actually were. In the past, Western medicine procedures were seen as taboo. Generally speaking, individuals who underwent cosmetic surgery did not want it to become public knowledge. It was deemed to be shameful to admit that they had undergone this procedure because it showed that they were pretentious and highly concerned about their physical

appearance (Gonzales, Lee,2019,p354). Of course, now the opposite with cosmetic surgery having a different lens is seen as a prideful cultural aspect for S. Korea yet, standards of beauty have been a conventional form since the Joseon period—dynamic changes of societal norms, economic development, modernization, highly-consumeristic occurring in the fast-paced nation of the hustle culture. Cosmetic surgery is the alternative to upping themselves to the highest level of beauty.

A tremendous number of married women experience significant stress as more educated, middle-class women strive to juggle child-rearing responsibilities alongside their professional careers, compounded by additional tasks. Korean women encounter conflicting and demanding challenges and obligations. Adding on consumerism as well to obtain well-recognized brand names alongside economic development (Pally, 1992). Scholarly Palley described it best in her 1992 article, *Social Policy and the Elderly in South Korea: Confucianism, Modernization, and Development*, Modernization has cultivated the idea that moral and spiritual strength is intertwined with material and physical strength. Indeed, the scholarly article emphasized the lack of support for the elderly population in S. Korea; at the same time, this important sentence represents how Korean society was exposed to countless advertising from the West and, with economic growth, shifted its ideology and the growth of consumerism obtaining physical or high-class materialistic items. The imperative of the R.O.K economic growth cannot be overlooked; yes, the Yi dynasty adopted this Chinese ideology; modern-day South Korean travel observes the capital of Seoul, a highly developed capitalistic nation. However, Confucianism is still deeply embedded in many sectors, from family to government ruling.

The country of S. Korea developed and modified from the start of the change to this day. Confucianism had to adopt modifications to fit the social and economic sectors (Stowell, 2003). In the 1990s, the period of advertisements, media, and consumerism, Westernization values found ways to assimilate heavily, especially in the television sets of Korean families, which was becoming more accepting; hence, it helped S. Korea achieve modernization and Westernization. Furthermore, Confucianism did not disperse from the Korean civilians' minds; it still lingers among them, even passed down to the next generation. Among the East Asian countries to this day, S. Korea retains Confucian ideals more than China and Japan (Mitu, 2015, p35). Ideally, Confucianism would withstand Korea's evolution, and the philosophy had to reform its ideals to survive in New S. Korea.

5.1.2 Confucianism and the Modern Korean Women

The Confucian focus on education, merit, dedication, discipline, and a strong drive for achievement is a robust foundation for economic growth (Mitu,2015,p38). The economy's growth increased in the 1990s, creating better lifestyles in Korean society. The title positions of Korean women have re-formed and presented themselves with new duties and responsibilities, such as access to better status opportunities such as education and high-paying careers. Consumerism made a huge leap in the 1990s, and an abundance of options flowed in for Korean women to elaborate on women enrolled in universities; many opted to join the workforce instead of being homemakers or stuck with childcare duties. The period blossomed for Korean women to feel more control of their finances, being a high clientele of the consumerist world. Indeed, the growth of the middle class was fueled by the economic boom, which ushered in a consumption culture. However, it is evident that the middle class is gradually declining amid significant economic challenges. Neoliberal globalization has contributed to the consequences of these economic shifts (Koo,ed.Kim,2016,p113,116). With a plethora of advertisements of beautiful Western women, high fashion, and looks, high-established to middle-class Korean women wanted to participate in this field. Specifically, in the 1990s, cosmetic surgery was established in high couture districts; however, it was still not socially accepted in the Korean nation. It still clashed with Confucian ideals and expectations for women. Automatically, this research does not side with the sexism from Confucianism ideals against women, except to demonstrate the roles and duties are still rooted in the nation, and the philosophy has been molded and shaped to its current respective period. Korean women have taken the liberty of Korea's economic evolution to be productive members of society by having access to independent choices like clothing, make-up, and hairstyles; raising their economic standards added an extra option of receiving cosmetic surgery. The only aspect to accept one getting cosmetic surgery was if it was a dire medical procedure. Prominent, many Koreans have strong motivations for pursuing cosmetic surgery, viewing it as an opportunity to enhance themselves and gain a competitive advantage in a challenging landscape (Gonzales, Lee,2019,p354.) In the following segment, a table shows all the participants, stating their roles and duties.

“Upper-class women who walked in the nighttime streets were required to cover their heads and wear a veil that prevented anyone from seeing their faces. The type of veil was designated by law

to distinguish upper-class women from lower-class women. Only female slaves, female entertainers, prostitutes, and the like appeared in public without veils” (DeMente,2018, p 354)

Table VI

Roles and Responsibilities	
Rosy	“First is family. Second, work is important. I have contact with all family members because greeting me gives me energy. Co-workers, too, give me energy and motivation. After work to practice oral English, read a book related to work, and participate in IT. It makes me grow and encourages me to be the best woman in the work. Makes me grow up”
Luise	“Working and being a mom”
Yang	“I don’t have any.”
Prof. Chang	“Daughter and a worker. To Be a good sister, diligent. I’m the firstborn child, I have the eldest duties. Also, responsibilities, domestic chores, cleaning.”
Knapi	“To be a mom”.
Q	“Get a high-paying job”
Yeong	“Right now, as a mother, my role is to help my daughter grow up as a woman”.
Bek	“Being true to their respective roles.”
Maria	“Female”
Park Jay	“Gender role expectations equal having a baby, marriage, being thin, and maintaining appearance. For example, I had a friend who was infertile and under a lot of pressure from her family.”
Sue Kim	“Being a housewife: cooking, household chores. The family wants a baby, be a good daughter-in-law. I have a kind mother-in-law, much love not many expectations from her.”
Zebra	“I am a sister and daughter. I am expected to be a good, obedient daughter...a daughter who has a job. Society expects me to follow trends and be hip, but I prefer to do my own thing.”

Cited by author–Roles and Responsibilities chart collected from participants 2024.

5.1.3 The Importance of Jip

The above *roles and responsibilities* have a common theme: jip (jeep), or “household,” a harmonious household that maintains balance among the members. In his chapter from *The Korean Mind*, Demonte shared that younger members and females could not make decisions or act independently (DeMente,2018,p142). Women's roles throughout the century were to be caregivers and caretakers, with limiting roles tied to the household. During the Choson dynasty, Korean women had to fully cover themselves up from head to toe by wearing long overcoats that disguised their features not to be observed by onlookers. A woman's round, hourglass figure showed the woman's high-income status. The fall of the dictators' era, the 1990s, was a decade that took a shift in women's roles and duties. It gave Korean women leverage to participate in the workforce and make independent choices like altering their bodies.

“The practice of Korean-style filial piety required individual family members to suppress their individuality and give the family the group precedence in all things” (DeMente,2018, p141-142). Rather than identifying themselves as individuals, people identify themselves with their families or work units in a totally collective sense, and females cannot make decisions or act on their own. Parents constantly admonished their children to behave “like family,” not as individuals. When Koreans evaluate others as possible marriage mates, as employees, and in other capacities, they look at the family and the individual, and the more critical the matter at hand, the more weight the status and overall character of the jip has in their judgment. The biggest challenge today is maintaining the character's positive aspects and role of the jip while taking advantage of many Western attitudes and customs that contribute to the quality and ambiance of life (DeMente,2018,p142). Children raised in households that emphasize respect for authority—such as parents and elders—are likely to honor their social and economic responsibilities to their families. As a result, they are also expected to be obedient, hardworking, and loyal employees citizens (DeMente,2018,p141).

5.1.4 외모지상주의:Lookism

It’s common in any location or interaction to be judged by your appearance; nevertheless, in S. Korea, there’s a specific term to judge your appearance 외모지상주의 “lookism”-it's open to discrimination of appearance for those who falter to obtained the niche of the beauty standards set by society (Hu,2023,p 96, as cited in Safire, 2002) noted this term has been floating around since the 1970s; a journalist by the name of William Safire wrote this term in a column in the *New York Times* in the 2000s. When meeting someone for the first time, interacting with co-workers, friends, classmates, etc, the first comment is the looks. They might comment on an article of clothing or a feature on your face. Even when applying for jobs in S. Korea, a photo must be placed in the upper right-hand corner of the resume even though there are laws that were formed in 1995 about discrimination for sex, marital status, family status, or even appearance-based discrimination, which is a cultural norm (Hu,2023,p97).

Adding a photograph to the resume is crucial, or it will be withdrawn from the candidate process. A post from the Ministry of Employment and Labor tweeted a message to encourage or was “more of a suggestion” to job seekers to consider cosmetic surgery a credential when applying for employment. To present the face of the company preference(TheKoreaTimes,2015). An anonymous interviewee from 2012 expressed, “ You must look the best, or you won’t be chosen. Why do you think when you go to cafes in South Korea, all employees look flawless? This is a method to lure in customers, and many businesses rely on it. You go in and say, “Oh, wow! What beautiful people. It is Korea now.” When applying for employment, they express some keywords about the appearance such as neat, not-dark skinned, etc. Looks have become a consequential norm in job institutions. Those who do pursue cosmetic surgery carry a large consumption of cosmetic products that have become an instrument to model in the work environment (Hu,2023,p100).

Table VII

Definitions of Lookism from Participants	
Participants	Definition
Rosy	“So sad. The reason I want to go to another country is lookism. Many people think small eyes, big heads are the most beautiful people. Most people want to look like that.Girl who doesn’t have small eyes or big head is not considered beautiful like my cousin really wants to be like K-Pop

Definitions of Lookism from Participants

Participants	Definition
	stars. I was very shocked when I went to Australia. Everyone looks different, they have their own confidence. (Cont. Rosy)
Luise	“It refers to social trend that people are overly stick to appearance, believing it influences one's superiority and inferiority between individuals.”
Yang	“In my opinion, appearance could solve everything in every way.”
Prof. Chang	“Everything is at face value. Just to see the surface. A negative impact”
Knapi	“It's a concept that refers to the societal tendency to place priority or value on individuals' physical appearance.”
Q	“First, I think in Asian countries, people agree that beauty means being thin with a pretty face. This leads to lookism, where people judge your identity and personality based on your appearance at first glance, and treat you differently because of how you look”.
Yeong	“I think that having a good appearance is an advantage in everything.”
Bek	“Judging people based on their appearance and liking handsome or pretty people”
Maria	“Appearance takes priority over other values “
Park Jay	“Lookism, if you're ugly or pretty, is a fact; there is no opinion about it. They own it. A child has said, “I'm ugly, my dad is ugly.” Ugly people are not getting surgery. Not ugly but might get surgery. K-beauty interacts differently with people. Pretty kids feel they have the privilege to be mean, rude. Pretty equals a good, moral person.”
Sue Kim	“As a child, I didn't know about it, but I learned about it in high school. Lookism means judging others on their first physical appearance.”
Zebra	“People are looking for people who are better looking, it's good for business. It covers the whole aspect like it's your value. Your value goes deep as your appearance, that's why people fall for plastic surgery to obtain a good job, self-esteem, or prettier.

Cited by author- Definitions of Lookism from Participants were collected from 2024

Table VII: Participants' Definitions of Lookism presents the different interpretations and uses of the term. Many discuss concepts like appearance, judgment, value, face value, society, and trends, highlighting how the evolving term 'lookism' often emphasizes physical traits over a person's character. Expectations and duties are requirements for a young modern woman to attend a prestigious university, hold a high-income job, or give birth to the next generation.

However, even with the prosperity of the economy and the plethora of options to purchase from high-advertised commercialized shops, income does not match the prices of cosmetic surgery. Lookism has been equated with social and professional behavior in society. The gathered terms from the participants are more crucial for women than men (Park et.al,2019,p.612). Through decades of development, starting in the 1990s, Confucianism found its way to root itself and survive in a highly advanced modern-esque country. Even over time, the ideology is still rooted in the institutions and foundations. It aids researchers in comprehending the motivations and influences of society. Next, alongside relic ideology, we witness a surge of high-volume neoliberal globalization.

6. The Republic of Korea's Economy Constructed, here comes the Hallyu Wave!

The R.O.K impact on neoliberalism globalization when the creation of the Hanyru Wave, which translates to the Korean Wave, which has increasingly impacted civilians outside the region outside the East Asian borders, illuminated S.K on the map, and people recognized it more. It was sprouted in the 1990s when it gained fame in Southeast Asia, China, and India (De Mente,2018, p59). The Hanyru Wave or Hallyu Wave—both terms interchangeably, consists of music, beauty, food, and entertainment; in the following paragraphs, the subjects of music—Korean Pop, known as K-Pop, and the beauty industry, the K- Beauty: Korean Beauty will be referred to understand its capacity for Korean women to be molded by the two-mega conglomerate industries. As mentioned earlier, during the IMF crisis in 1997, South Korea's government borrowed significant funds but managed to repay them. In response to the crisis, the government devised a strategy aimed at capital gains, concentrating its efforts on promoting and funding film, television, and music. It initially started by producing goods for the entertainment industry culture (Hu,2023,p51). From its inception from the Korean government the soft power to emphasize the pop cultural market how the Hallyu Wave took into effect. K-Culture kept expanding its reach after it gained a foothold, due in part to continuous support receiving subsidies from the Korean government. Allotted 50 million dollars of bailout money to create the Korean culture and content agency.

President Park Geun-hye put a 1 billion dollar profit investment fund into making high returns on S. Korean culture exports (Hu,2023, p53). Culture and content agency focuses on fashion, film, T.V., comic books, animation, and, most importantly, Korean music to boost

economic growth by exposing culture. They represent and lead trends in fashion and lifestyle. K-Pop is recognized more for its visual appeal than musical offerings (Hu, 2023,p54- 65). The achievement of K-Pop establishing domestically and obviously internationally exploding in the Western market sector, with the mega-supporter of social media. Presently, you can find K-Pop groups performing at well-known music events, such as Coachella (Pathe.et al, 2023,p170).

6.1.1 The Hallyu Wave in the 2010s

By the 2010s, K-Pop was a prevailing sector that was gaining popularity with young listeners worldwide. The K-Pop industry has been rapidly evolving, seeing the K-Pop industry taking hype in the 2010s. Nevertheless, the music industry has been developing, but another subtle among the K-idol-cosmetic surgery. Idol groups utilize cosmetic surgery to enhance their looks—however, it’s hard to pinpoint when exactly this impulsion began, probably before the 2010s or mid-2010s. Before it was frowned upon in Korean society, tabloids and Koreans pondered assumptions about which idols had cosmetic surgery done on their face. To elaborate further, cosmetic surgery was scrutinized in the nation, knowing cosmetic surgery is a widespread practice in countless countries.

On the other hand, cosmetic surgery is a laborious procedure that alters an utterly different portrait. It is the norm for Koreans to obtain cosmetic surgery without receiving any backlash. It’s a standard measure, like purchasing a house, clothes, or a car. Impacts of neoliberalism globalization: notable values, customs, or traditional concepts are still intact in modernity, but with the seeping of neoliberalism globalization, these are slowly changing the mindset and cultural values. The impact of Western values on Eastern societies may appear more pronounced and potentially more drastic, owing to the cultural transformation that this change signifies. Some of the changing values in Korea reflect a growing materialistic mindset, influenced by both the competitive nature of society and Western ideals. This shift includes a strong emphasis on physical appearance and the widespread acceptance of efficiency, which has become deeply embedded in Korean culture society (Gonzales, Lee,2019, p343). K-Pop idols have significantly boosted the overall use of cosmetics. Korea is the eighth-largest cosmetics market globally (Gonzalez, Lee, 2019 pg 351). Estimates indicate that the market size reached around \$7.2 billion in 2016.

Additionally, it grew at an annual rate of 8.2% over the previous five years. The competitive nature of society, along with the job market specifically, has driven the increased use of cosmetics. Computing, many believe that the appearance of one's skin provides an advantage when applying for jobs. In S. Korea, cosmetic surgery, including Botox, is widely practiced alongside regular cosmetics, particularly focusing on the eyes and nose. The most frequently performed procedures target these two areas (Gonzalez, Lee, 2019,p 352-353).

6.1.2 Conglomerate Number One: Commercial K-Pop

Knowingly the increase, fashionable K-Pop groups have been created synthetically instead of organically in the commercial industry (Epstein, Turnbull, ed. Choe, Kim, 2014, p. 315). Koreans and the media began noticing various physical changes in appearance among K-Pop idols. Eventually, some admitted to the public they used cosmetic surgery. Instead, news entertainment would decipher the images by comparing before and after pictures. Of course, the Korean population would hop onto the investigation train in wonder if their favorite K-idols went under the knife. After fans and media began questioning modifications, it was discovered that K-Pop artists were using cosmetic surgery to enhance their features. 2012, commencing some information of the entertainment market marking its spot in the globalization spectrum. With the material founded in 2012 about the K-Pop industry, one must trace the origins of this phenomenon's headway in music to comprehend its mecca industry. As mentioned above, we have established the R.O.K economy sector expressed advertisement, consumerism, economic growth, and modernization made an impact in the 1990s. The K-Pop industry sprouted during this high consumption period. The music industry borrowed and transnational the music, dance, and styles from African/black American groups a Xerox to apply to their K-Pop groups (Maliangkay,ed.Choe,Kim,2014,p297).

Hence, time took to thrive not only within the limits of Korea but also in other Asian neighboring countries. Idol groups come from different music corporations, and these corporations have flexibility in how the groups perform. The music industry in S. Korea, like SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and YG Entertainment, is the largest music industry and produces famous K-Pop artists (Dana,2012). In the mid to late 90s, boys' and girls' group bands

began to appear: S.E.S, Fin.K.L, and g.o.d, are some examples of the first music groups in S. Korea.. S. Korea's music industries are in control of deciding the bands' dances, fashions, and lyrics. Overall, these groups became popular in S. Korea by embracing the music trends of hip-hop and R&B. Most of these groups gained fame across S. Korea. For example, the girl group S.E.S consists of three members who achieved success and even translated their songs into Japanese because one member, Shu, spoke Japanese. S.E.S belonged to SM Entertainment and decided to translate some of their music into Japanese to gain popularity in Japan and become "globalized." However, the idol group outside of Asia Korea did not attain success.

Continuing in the 90s, the different groups were not highly competitive and received nearly equal fame in South Korea. As mentioned, the girl group S.E.S. was very successful in Korean territory. They were at the top of the charts and well-known in their nation. In the mid-90s, the DSP music industry formed a new girl idol group called Fin.K.L to compete against the group idols S.E.S. S.E.S. had three members compared to Fin.K.L, which had four members in their group. The music industry came up with the idea that if they created a new idol group with an extra member, there would be a greater chance of beating its opponent. S.E.S. and Fin.K.L were not the only groups competing; there were also boy bands. The outcome of this strategy was that they received the same amount of fame as S.E.S., but it was not as competitive as the music industry had predicted. In the 90s, Korean music was still a slow-growing industry that was only famous in S. Korea. Nonetheless, the girl group Girls Generation received 67 million views from their song "Gee" in March 2012 on the Korean YouTube channel. Changing the next decade of music (Epstein,Turnbull,ed.Cho, Kim,2014,p316).

"K-Pop in the 2020s claims far more agency than the early days of the K-pop idols. During the 2000s, management "factories" for manufactured performers captured attention. BLACKPINK, the most renowned K-pop group, embodies ideals perfected through plastic surgery, showcasing firmness, thinness, smoothness, and an overall youthful appearance that exudes an empowered vibe" (Hu, 2023,p214-215). As time passed and the world entered a new century, Korea's music industry shifted. Music industries would overspend and strategize to produce the top K-Pop idols in the nation; apprenticeship is the universal strategy for nurturing girl groups, boy bands, and solo artists in the K-Pop industry. To guarantee new talent's high probability of success, talent agencies fully subsidize and oversee the professional lives (K-Pop

History, 2012). During those years of training, they are educated by the music industry; trainees hone their voices, learn professional choreography, sculpt and shape their bodies through exercise, and study multiple languages, all while attending school. Not only are Koreans qualified to join K-Pop groups, but members from different nations have also joined. These music industries would spend up to \$400,000*⁹ that we know of currently, or more to produce the top quality music entertainment (K-Pop History, 2012).

Now, there is more competition between music companies, creating drastic changes among their K-pop idols. As the K-Pop industries grew, K-pop groups also changed. Larger idol groups were formed with at least 5-10 members, and each had assigned parts in their groups. Numbers no longer matter in the K-pop industry; there is still a new form of competition: performance. To make a profit, music companies need idols to meet these criteria: 1) bigger groups, 2) good looks, and 3) sex appeal. It has been brought to the attention of SM Entertainment founder Lee Soo Man that the concept of music equals money and industry; in any case, the more members in a group, the greater the chance for attention and fame. From 2007 to 2008, K-Pop music leaked out of Korea, reached out to neighboring countries, and went even further to the West. K-Pop music has become globalized. Compared to the '90s, K-Pop groups had about 6* idol groups, and now the numbers have grown to over 50* idol groups and keep increasing yearly (Dana, 2012). Because there is more competition among idol groups, keeping up the looks to catch the public eye became necessary. Each year, there are changing trends, and the music industry demands the idols what image to keep to compete with other competitors. Idol members appeared in TV dramas and radio stations, and hostesses appeared in shows and different media types. Depending on the level of the idol, with the popularity of K-Pop idols, Chaebol companies employ them to promote their products domestically and internationally, e.g., Samsung and BLACKPINK (Pathe. et al, 2023,p 186).

Nowadays, the K. wave is a global phenomenon, and more countries recognize the small East Asian peninsula country. The K. Wave is created by these four powerhouse pillars: music, food, entertainment, and, most importantly– beauty. This research continues to determine when and what caused the “boom” in the K-Pop industry to become a strong pillar of K-Wave; nonetheless, one cannot forget how K-Pop became such a big pop culture worldwide in the 21st century. When K-Pop was created in the early 90s, it started with Western music influences such

⁹ (*) Numbers may have changed or are greater or less than what is represented in this essay.

as hip-hop, techno, rap, etc., because it was popular in South Korea; Seo Tai-ji & Boys in 1992 was a turning point for popular music, incorporating elements of popular musical genres in the United States (K-Pop History, 2012). Diffusion, or cultural borrowing, is also a source of change in culture (Edwin, et al, p4-18). A primary aim of K-pop management is to create an almost “perfect” experience. This involves meticulously selecting and timing music, dance, visuals, and effects. In Korean media, terms like “level of perfection” frequently commend a specific group’s style (De Mente,2018,p 59).

6.1.3 Conglomerate Number Two: K-Beauty

Many research articles have expressed a source of figures; nevertheless, with various figures, there are no concrete numbers since cosmetic surgery is not covered by the National Health Insurance and procedures take place in private clinics (Holliday, Hwang, 2012,p 59). There was an estimated 20 percent in 2008, just an estimation since the number of procedures is not recorded. Fackler expressed a projection that in 2008, around 30 percent of women between the ages of 20 and 50 partook in cosmetic surgery. A plethora of K-idols submitted to enhance their features for their debut, while some Koreans are still spectacle about the medical procedures in the years between 2011-2012 or so a televised program by the title “Let 美人“ or “Let Me In,” which translates to "beautiful person." However, they used it as a pun because the character 美 sounds like “me,” and 人 sounds similar to "in," as in “ in me.” The program—broadcasted by CJ Entertainment, promoted an educational approach that explains cosmetic surgery procedures through the insights of medical professionals.

The concept is to take someone perceived as an 'ugly duckling' and transform them into an elegant, swan-like beauty. The upcoming episode aired on December 2, 2011 (Seoul Guide Medical, 2019). In the episode preview, two contestants are featured: a Thai woman embarrassed by her “masculine” face. She shares her feelings with the four hosts—1 man and 3 women. The show explores her journey, highlighting her struggle: “My face is long, and without cheek fat, it looks even longer.” The narrator states, “A major surgery begins to erase her past hurt.” After the transformation, the medical doctors expressed they did their best to find her “natural” look and give her a cute “Barbie” nose (Seoul Guide Medical, 2019). The contestant on the show with severe medical conditions promotes plastic surgery as a tool for courage and self-esteem. Since

2011 or 2012, cosmetic surgery has become widely accepted in Korean society, aided by high volumes of advertisements in public spaces, even on food.

Furthermore, S.Korea is the third-largest cosmetics exporter, highlighting the new trends, especially with skincare routines such as facemasks. There is a plethora of skincare shops with cosmetic surgery ads in the public sector (Pathe. et al., 2023, pg 60,204). In the past, women relied less on their appearance to attract partners since marriages were often arranged. Men rarely praised women's looks, partly because laws and customs dictated that women dress according to class, style their hair uniformly, and present themselves similarly (DeMente, 2018,p 367). Rapid globalization of the Korean economy has significantly expanded its market, introducing a wide range of material and symbolic goods used by the wealthy to set themselves apart from the average middle-class. Consequently, this globalization transforms the Korean middle class into a global entity, leading to fierce status competition among its members who either vie for class privileges or strive to remain within the middle class (Koo,ed.Kim,2016, p.115).

6.1.4 Cosmetic Surgery Sector

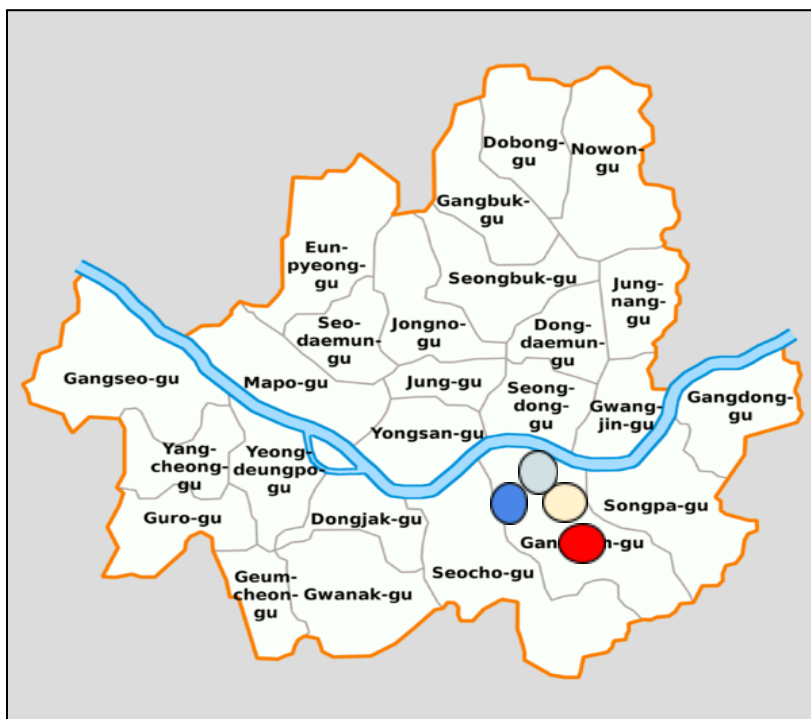
However, cosmetic surgery was embedded in the 1950s as a foreign medical concept from Western countries; in contemporary Korea, the popularization of cosmetic surgery socially joined South Korea's cultural society to some extent—fact-finding when the popularization of cosmetic surgery expanded culturally. What are the figures of K. women receiving cosmetic surgery? At the start of 2012, Monolids described the creaseless “single “ eyelids that get maligned as squinty, slanty, or droopy. It can all be fixed with upper eye blepharoplasty to rejuvenate the eye folds. Double eyelid is the top cosmetic procedure. It's considered a graduation special for parents to buy for their children (Hu,2023, p152). The second most popular procedure is rhinoplasty. In the pre-2000s, researchers had the notion that receiving these cosmetic procedures was to obtain Western beauty standards; however, in the 21st century, it was led by S. Korean M.D. dismissing their patients wanted the “white-looking face” (Hu, 2023,p152). There's an abundance of surgeons and services driving prices. Botox treatment is offered at as low as \$30 (Hu,2023,p 145). The most sought-after cosmetic procedures in South Korea include eyelid surgeries (blepharoplasties) and nasal surgeries (rhinoplasties) (Holiday, Hwang, pg 61). Over the years, cosmetic surgery has become more affordable with doctors with

high-quality training skills and education. (Kwak,2021,p.1)

Thanks to the publicity from the Hallyu Wave, the cosmetic surgery sector increased cosmetic clinics combined with the advancement of medical technology, adding another key component, social media (Kim,Yoon,2019,p.229). The K. Wave has attracted many foreign clientele to South Korea to receive plastic surgery procedures. Korean-style plastic surgery aims more for a natural look rather than enhancing body parts that look unrealistic. The goal of cosmetic surgery is to obtain a natural beauty that enhances the looks of a Korean woman. Allegations from researchers that Koreans want to obtain a “Western” look are counterfactual; yes, plastic surgery is a Western medical branch introduced to South Korea; however, Koreans took this Western medicine branch and adapted and shaped it to their own identity. Cosmetic surgery is viewed as a valuable and justifiable investment in one's body rather than merely a symbol of vanity, as is frequently believed in the West (Holliday,Hwang, 2012,p.66-67). In a way, it carries both Western and Korean concepts.

The Korean government jumped on the Korean Wave and included cosmetic surgery, creating a global economic business. Cosmetic surgery was undeniably central to the neoliberal transformation of the Korean medical sector, which sought to enhance the economy (Leem,2015,p64). A successful surgical procedure, conducted without financial limitations, should ideally present a "natural" appearance, with the term "natural" critically defined as an enhancement of Korean features. It is noteworthy that unsuccessful surgical outcomes are frequently characterized by the emergence of an unnaturally "Western" appearance. Furthermore, it appears that only individuals of substantial financial means can access the services offered by the most prestigious clinics; consequently, the “natural (Korean) look” has begun to signify a marker of affluence and middle-class status (Holliday and Hwang, 2012,p73).

On the bottom side, a map of Seoul displays different regions. Participants from 2012 and 2024 unanimously answer the famous and well-known Gangnam district. Some other cities mentioned were Cheongdam, Sinsa-dong, and Apgujeong cities. High-class cities in the Gangnam-gu are located a bit below the Han River. The aesthetic surgery industry in Seoul has experienced significant growth since the 1980s, with the Apgujeong-dong district now regarded as the “Mecca” of cosmetic surgery in South Korea (Wang, 2007). The MCST¹⁰ and the KTO¹¹ have obliged the Korean government's request to promote and advertise theme tourism. The two industries have collaborated in manufacturing, but not limited to creating a website with information, visa processing, or multilingual staff (Wong,2018,p.278). The premier clinics in the beauty industry are primarily found in Gangnam-gu, home to upper-middle-class families who lead distinct lifestyles. This area experiences considerable spatial segregation, rendering attempts to bridge class divides ineffective mobility (Koo,ed.Kim,2016,p.113).



Map of Seoul: Cosmetic Surgery Districts in Gangnam-gu

Apgujeong-dong: Light Green

Gangnam:Red

Sinsa-dong:Blue

Cheongdam:Yellow

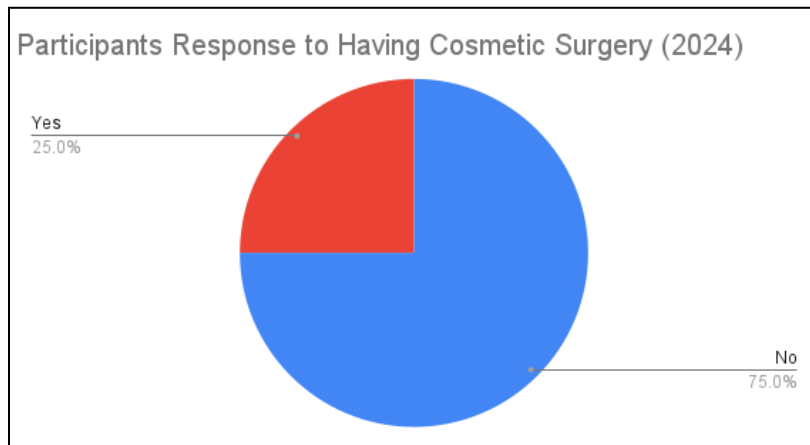
Edited by author-map from Wikitravels.com

¹⁰ MCST: The Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism

¹¹ KTO: Korea Tourism Organization

6.1.5 Results and Tables Responses to Cosmetic Surgery

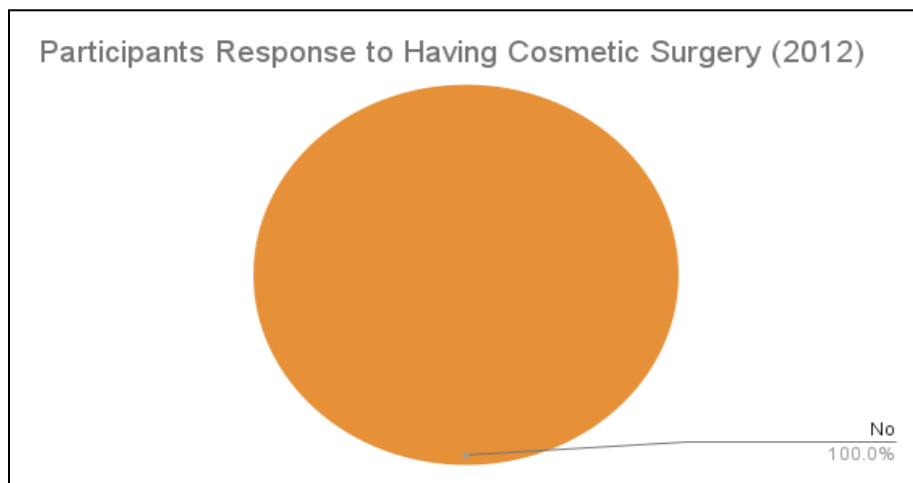
Table VIII: Participants Response to Having Cosmetic Surgery (2024)



Edited by author-All data collected from the participants 2024

The responses from the table participants regarding cosmetic surgery indicate that only one individual, named Rosy, has undergone such a procedure. She revealed that her mother funded the treatment as a gift, believing that double-eyelid surgery would enhance her beauty. Representing just 10% of the participants, Rosy stands out as the sole recipient of cosmetic surgery. In contrast, the remaining 90% of respondents expressed their rejection of the procedure. This low percentage suggests that many individuals do not feel the need for cosmetic surgery, even in a population characterized by decent salaries and high education levels. Here is another table from 2012 comparing responses regarding whether any participants underwent cosmetic surgery.

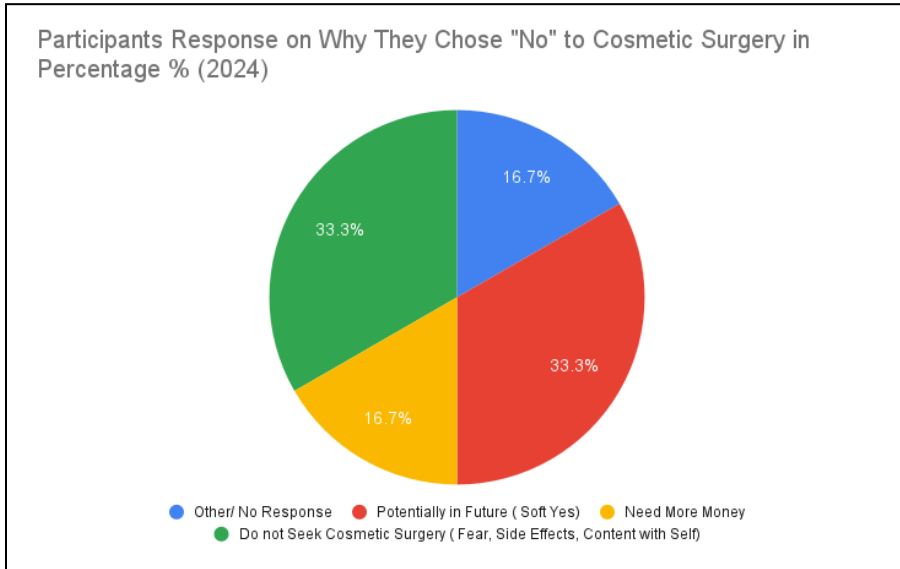
Table XIX: Participants Response to Having Cosmetic Surgery (2012)



Edited by author- data was collected from participants 2012

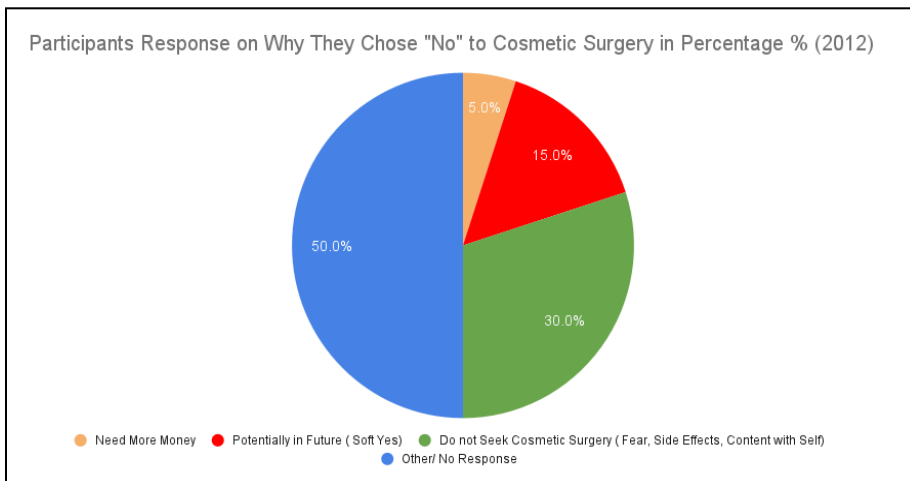
Glancing at Table VIX from 2012, 100% of respondents opposed cosmetic surgery. This was when cosmetic surgery was becoming mainstream in the country. Table XI shows the responses from the participants below.

Table X: Participants Response on Why They Chose “No” to Cosmetic Surgery in Percentage% (2024)



Edited by author-all data collected from participants 2024

Table XI: Participants on Why They Chose “No” to Cosmetic Surgery in Percentage % (2012)



Edited by author-all data was collected by participants 2012

Comparing Table X and Table XI reflects the thoughts of not obtaining cosmetic surgery. These are how the responses were divided into blue: Other/no response, red: potentially in the future (soft “yes), yellow: need more money, and green: Do not seek cosmetic surgery (fear, side effects, content with self). Table XI 2012 shows that only 5% claimed they wanted cosmetic surgery but needed more money. Next, fifteen percent potentially expressed a “soft yes,” but this response is uncertain as their mindset may shift over time. Table X shows that 40% indicated a “soft yes.” Although this marks a notable increase, the participant count was lower than in 2012, with only 10 contributors, which explains the higher percentage. The green sector illustrates factors such as fear, side effects, and self-contentment, with Table X showing 20% and Table XI showing 30%. While cosmetic surgery has become more accessible and less stigmatized, thanks partly to K-Pop idols showcasing their ideal appearances, several factors still need consideration. These include personal spending habits and potential shifts in South Korea’s economy that could affect K-Beauty product consumption. It's clear that other elements contribute to the high tension of socio-economic and socio-cultural factors that require careful examination, as many data statistics do not provide a complete picture. In addition, beauty has become a necessity in the labor market, although the mindset of the 2012 participants majority rejected the idea, while in 2024, only one participant went through cosmetic surgery.

A participant J. A from 2012 shared this, “Like you know, people do plastic surgery to strengthen the strength and make up for the weakness, I have no one around me who does it to look like some Korean idol. Idols do much surgery to make themselves look better and for occupational reasons. They do have an influence on the general public. However, people don’t just go see a doctor and say,” Please make me look like “Gina” (A Korean singer).” They want their appearance to look natural and harmonious, bringing out the best in each of them.” The participants of 2012 and 2024 shared the same consensus idols are commercialized by corporations. The data I collected indicates that the perception of all Koreans undergoing cosmetic surgery is incorrect. This aligns with Leem, who argues that this data is questionable;. In contrast, the claims made by others may be valid; it is possible that those figures were manipulated to support their arguments. My findings reveal a perspective others overlook, showing that most of my participants are not interested in cosmetic surgery.

7. Conclusion:

It is widely recognized that every nation experiences changes during significant modernization and development. For the Hermit Kingdom, the path through the chaotic era of Japanese colonization included a war that split their cherished homeland and a phase of U.S. occupation, combined with Confucian values and instances of dictatorial governance that limited women's rights to shape their own identities. The research conducted in 2012 began with a desire to understand, explore, and reveal new data, valuable reports, and experiences to establish a framework illustrating how K-Beauty and cosmetic surgery impact contemporary society in Korea. Over recent decades, the evolution of the economy has transformed Korean women from agricultural roles to office jobs, supported by greater access to education. This shift has established a strong foundation for women's high performance in Korea's rapid development. Notably, Confucian ideals have adapted to modern times, allowing women to embrace their societal duties. Ideals that are considered a taboo regarding disrespect toward body image still dictate how women should present themselves in their roles, adhering to specific standards of appearance.

Additionally, the Korean government has harnessed the immense soft power of the Hallyu Wave, propelling the nation towards more competitive and consumer-driven habits. Since 2012, there has been a lack of data. Still, initial efforts to broaden the analytical framework through 2024 have provided a clearer view of the global phenomenon that portrays South Korea as a cosmetic surgery capital. This analysis has laid a deeper foundation for ongoing research. However, questions remain unanswered, and further investigation is necessary to grasp this significant transformation fully. The embodiment of K-Pop idols is a form of visualization that many international K-Pop stans emulate, following trends, adopting styles, or even traveling to South Korea to resemble their favorite idols. How long will the Hallyu Wave last? S. Korea's neoliberalism globalization has produced a shrinking middle-class consumption culture; overall, only a tiny fraction of the minority benefit from the globalized economy, translating cultural globalization into social and cultural forms of inequality. (Koo,ed.Kim,2016,p.115-115)

South Korea is still evolving. For instance, in December 2024, former President Yoon Suk Yeol attempted a military coup that lasted several days and has since been impeached. These drastic changes indicate that South Korea is shifting under neoliberal governance, which may or may not endure in the years ahead. Engaging with South Korean citizens has offered personal

narratives highlighting the situation's significance, revealing one undeniable truth: Korean women possess strength in their choices.

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Resüme

Lõuna-Korea kosmeetikatööstus: ilustandardid ja majandus

Uuring viidi läbi 2012. aastal, et teha kindlaks, kas kõik lõunakorealased osalevad iluoperatsioonides, et saada K-idolidega sama pilt. K-idolidel seda mõju ei ole, kuid nad mõjutavad mingil moel teisi aspekte. Praegu arvatakse, et Lõuna-Korea on ilukirurgia meka; majanduse, konfutsianismi ideaalide ja neoliberaalse sfääri globaliseerumise analüüsimine on aga näidanud, et teatud protsent naistest on takistanud ilukirurgiast osa võtmast. Laenates samu teemasid, globaliseerumine ja konfutsianism; 2012. aasta analüüs laiendab edasisi uuringuid, hõlmates samal ajal Lõuna-Korea majandust, et mõista kiiresti kuju muutvat majandusarengu imet, mille rahvas on lühikese ajaga korda saatnud. Majanduse edenedes on arenguriik Lõuna-Korea naiste seas kujundanud või säilitanud ootusi või ilustandardeid. See on täiendav analüüs kontseptsiooni laiendamiseks ja veatu pildi mõistmiseks.

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