

**'GANGNAM BEAUTY' DRAMA: THE REPRESENTATION  
OF LOOKISM IN SOUTH KOREA**

**Miss Nindya Puteri Arum**



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for the Degree of Master of Arts in Korean Studies  
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ดงผ่านละครซีรีส์เรื่อง Gangnam Beauty



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ลิขสิทธิ์ของจุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

Thesis Title 'GANGNAM BEAUTY' DRAMA: THE REPRESENTATION OF LOOKISM IN SOUTH KOREA  
By Miss Nindya Puteri Arum  
Field of Study Korean Studies  
Thesis Advisor Assistant Professor JIRAYUDH SINTHUPHAN, Ph.D.

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Accepted by the GRADUATE SCHOOL, Chulalongkorn University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Master of Arts

..... Dean of the GRADUATE SCHOOL  
(Associate Professor YOOTTHANA CHUPPUNNARAT, Ph.D.)

THESIS COMMITTEE

..... Chairman  
(Waraporn Chatratichart, Ph.D.)  
..... Thesis Advisor  
(Assistant Professor JIRAYUDH SINTHUPHAN, Ph.D.)  
..... External Examiner  
(Associate Professor Ha Yong HWANG, Ph.D.)



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CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

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ลายมือชื่อนิสิต

ปีการศึกษา 2565

ลายมือชื่อ อ.ที่ปรึกษาหลัก

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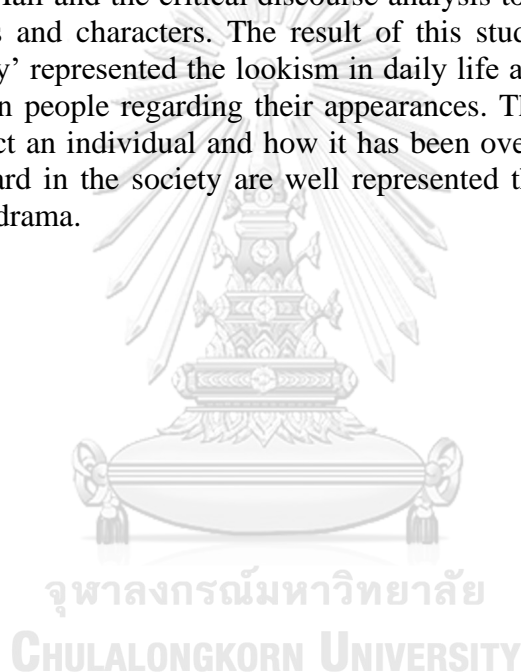
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Prof. JIRAYUDH SINTHUPHAN, Ph.D.

Lookism is a new concept related to the discrimination. It is often described as a physical attractiveness discrimination, where as individual that is up to the beauty standard and considered as attractive are being treated differently than those who is considered 'unattractive'. The purpose of this study is to analyze the lookism in the daily life in 'Gangnam Beauty' drama and how the beauty standard reflected in the daily life can be toxic to certain points using the representation theory of Stuart Hall and the critical discourse analysis to analyze the data through scenes, dialogues and characters. The result of this study shows how the drama 'Gangnam Beauty' represented the lookism in daily life and how lookism manages to put pressure on people regarding their appearances. The message of how badly lookism can affect an individual and how it has been overlooked by people due to the beauty standard in the society are well represented through the dialogues and the scenes in the drama.



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# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Lookism is a term of a discrimination against one's physical appearance based on the beauty standard, this including discrimination against one's body condition, one's facial features and one's way of dressing. There are some tendencies that people with good appearance (such as fair and well-treated skin, expensive clothes and even the health of someone's hair) are getting all the attention, compliments and even up to some extent of them getting special treatment. In South Korea, this kind of thing is no longer something taboo and has become a social problem and it also can be an obstacle for someone to land for a job.

In one of the NCBI's article written by Rachel Park (2019), she mentioned that in South Korea, an aesthetic plastic surgery is quite popular due to the common belief that attractiveness from the outside increases the chance to land for a job or a higher position. "Attractiveness is associated with positive stereotypes while unattractiveness is linked to negative stereotypes", Park said as someone who can't take care of their appearances are often being stereotyped as someone who is lazy or incompetent. Thus, making outer beauty doing more the job than the inner beauty when it comes to thrive for a better. However, it cannot be denied that Lookism does supports the economy of South Korea.

As we already know, there are many cosmetics brands from South Korea and some of them even became worldwide-known thanks to the Hallyu. The companies made a lot of money from selling the cosmetics, especially to foreign tourist, thus this also benefit the economy in South Korea whether in terms of local-product selling or tourism. This also include the popularity of plastic surgery.

What could possibly make the plastic surgery popular? An article in Korea Times written by Hong Dam Young, showed how a survey was done to find out what is the motive that makes women in South Korea got the procedure done to their face. The survey revealed that more than 59 percent respondents answered that they are not satisfied with their appearances. Moreover, the survey also revealed that 90 percent of the respondents are working in the service industries, means that appearance does play big role in the job recruitment and promotions. This is lookism impacting the

part of our life that we did not even realize. It makes an individual losing their self-worth and ended up living their life on self-resentment. While being unique can be really attractive in the western countries, in South Korea it is a different case. Being unique will not get you anywhere but never-ending insecurities of how people judge you.

Lookism theme has been adapted to few media such as webtoon and drama. One of the popular media that pick up the tragic lookism in Korea is a drama with the title ‘My ID is Gangnam Beauty’ or known as ‘Gangnam Beauty’ for short. ‘Gangnam Beauty’ is a Korean drama that was released in late 2018, telling a story of a girl named Kang Mi Rae who got bullied for not being beautiful and decided to change her appearance through plastic surgery. After getting her face done and she went to college, even though she is now getting praised for her beauty yet many also talk behind her about how her face is like plastic and she still struggled to be accepted in the society. Besides telling a story of Kang Mi Rae, the drama also highlighted the story of Hyun Soo Ah, a girl who is considered lucky as she was born with beautiful face and perfect figure as she is admired by everyone in the college. Apparently, the beautiful Hyeon Soo Ah is not what she seems to be. This drama is not only showing the favouritism on woman based on appearances but also showing the favouritism on a man based on appearances

‘Gangnam Beauty’ drama is actually an adaptation from a very popular webtoon with the title ‘My ID is Gangnam Beauty’ (내 아이디는 강남미인/*Nae Aidineun Gangnammiin*) by Gi Maeng-gi that was first published in 2016. The meaning of 강남미인 (*Gangnammiin*) itself, is someone who looks beautiful (미인 = *miin* = A beautiful person) but has negative connotation as it means that person is beautiful after underwent plastic surgeries. Since people who can afford surgeries are considered ‘well-off’, thus they used the word Gangnam in front of the *miin* as the Gangnam district is associated with the rich and the sophisticated.

In the case of drama ‘Gangnam Beauty’, the drama showed how one’s desire to fix her appearance just because she thought she was not pretty and that people would continuously bully her. The drama also showed how one person who has all the beauty that the other person would want, turned out to struggle to maintain her beauty just for desire to be admired and praised by other people and to be outstanding among

the common people in the society. The lookism is also boldly represented by this drama through dialogues and gestures of a few scenes in the drama.

Through the drama ‘Gangnam Beauty’, I will analyse and prove the media representation of beauty concept and lookism in drama ‘Gangnam Beauty’ and how the drama relays the message of lookism in South Korean society. This thesis will also study the aspects that heavily affected the idea of beauty in South Korea. This thesis uses the literature review to collect the data as well as critical discourse analysis to analyse the data.

## **1.2 Research Question**

- 1.2.1. How Lookism is represented in the drama ‘Gangnam Beauty’?
- 1.2.2 How the drama deliver the message and moral story in ‘Gangnam Beauty’?
- 1.2.3. How the concept of Korean Beauty changes throughout the contemporary times?

## **1.3 Hypothesis**

1.3.1. Lookism has become a social problem in modern society and it is represented very well

in the drama ‘Gangnam Beauty’.

1.3.2 Characters, plot and also the drama review showed how the drama successfully deliver the message and moral story of lookism.

1.3.3. Modernization happened and causes social and cultural changes that not only improve

the Korean mindset but also affect the concept of beauty in South Korea. The concept of beauty

in South Korea changes from time to time with certain details added throughout its changes

along with the encouragement of plastic surgery in the country.

#### **1.4 Objective of the Study**

1.4.1. To study the representation concept of beauty in modern society in South Korea through elements such as dialogue and scenes in drama ‘Gangnam Beauty’

1.4.2. To find the connection between globalization and the changes of Korean beauty concept in contemporary days.

#### **1.5 Scope of the study**

This study focuses on media representation of the concept of beauty and lookism through drama ‘Gangnam Beauty’ that aired on JTBC TV station from July 27<sup>th</sup> to September 15<sup>th</sup> 2018. The theory of representation by Stuart Hall and the concept of lookism is used in this study the both visual and textual signs that showed the daily lookism and the underlying message behind those scenes.

#### **1.6 Definitions**

Lookism is a physical appearance discrimination to an individual on the ground of beauty standard in the society. People who are not considered met with the beauty criteria often go through this kind of discrimination and this kind of thing has existed in the past yet tend to be overlooked by the society. Representation is a way of using language to represent something meaningfully to other people and representation in media is how a media depicted or portrayed some object or phenomenon. Gangnam Beauty is a nickname created in the South Korean society of someone who went through many plastic surgery procedures

## **CHAPTER II: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

The analysis of this study is done with the intention of understanding the lookism or known as a physical appearance discrimination through the drama 'Gangnam Beauty' and to reveal the social discrimination as the cause of lookism. The analysis will be done with ground of Stuart Hall's theory, Representation, as it will be used to analyze the textual and the visual that represented the lookism in this drama. The literatures that are already reviewed will be use as a tool of analysis to find the better understanding of lookism in order to answer my research questions which is how the lookism is represented in the drama and how the beauty standard changes in contemporary times. This analysis will also be using Critical Discourse Analysis which is a method to analyse language including written and oral language to understand one's context.

### **2.1 Theory and Conceptual Framework**

#### **2.1.1 Representation Theory**

Representation is a way or a process of something such as words, gestures or a thing to be decipher in order represent something. In this research, using Stuart Hall's representation theory, I will analyse visual and textual signs in some scenes of the drama and find the representation of lookism and the concept of beauty that is portrayed in drama 'Gangnam Beauty' to answer the research question number one. The analysis will be focusing on both verbal and non-verbal action in the drama and how the lookism is represented in the drama whether as in a negative or positive portrayal.

##### **2.1.1.1 Defining Representation**

The word Representation in Oxford English Dictionary means the action of speaking or acting on behalf of someone or the state of being so represented. The secondary meaning of Representation is the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way. Meanwhile according to the Cambridge English Dictionary, Representation means a way that someone or something is shown or described. Thus, we can conclude from these two dictionaries that Representation



means a state of an object or subject being portrayed and represented. The representation of an object are being digested by the human brain as they proceed to the interpretation of that object, which end up giving them an idea of what a meaning of that particular object or thing (it could be word, phenomenon or anything).

### **2.1.1.2 Representation by Stuart Hall**

Unlike the simple meaning of Representation by the dictionaries, Stuart Hall seemed to interpret the word 'Representation' slightly different with further detail explaining. According to Hall (1997) a common meaning of Representation means using language to represent something meaningfully to other people. He mentioned that Representation is an essential part of process where meaning is produced in order to be exchanged between members of culture and it does involve the use of language, signs and images that represent things. There are two systems of representation, the first is where all sorts of objects, people and events are correlated with mental representations while the other one is correlated with reality.

Representation in Media is defined by Stuart Hall as how a media depicted or portrayed some object or phenomenon and often the result of this portrayal accuracy is being debated along with the factuality and the reality. This is due to the fact that representation in each media can be different and may have negative or positive portrayal, thus created the debate among its consumers. The object or phenomenon were witnessed and observed and then the brain proceeded the portrayal which resulted as an idea or a concept that represented that object or phenomenon. Therefore, Media has a full control on the meaning of something that has happened and easily created the reality for people based on their own thoughts, ideology or each of their own necessities.

Linguistic theory often employs the differentiation between 'denotation' and 'connotation'. These two terms are merely useful analytic tools to distinguish particular context where level of connotation of the visual sign is the point where already coded sign intersect with deep semantic codes of culture, meanwhile denotative level of sign is fixed by certain, very complex codes. In terms of representation of media, it is not that media blatantly expose the meaning of something through text or visual images but the audiences who indulges themselves in

the work can interpret the idea or the message that are trying to be delivered subtly. Hence, the outcome of the idea that the work give to the audiences may vary and can be either negative or positive depends on the audience.

Hall also divides Representation into three different kind of approaches. The first one is reflective approach, which the thought is life in the object, person, idea or event in the real world meanwhile the language reflects the true meaning as it already exists. The second one is intentional approach, which the speaker or the author who conveys the meaning of world or something through their unique point of view. The third approach is constructionist approach, is to construct the meaning of something through language to be able to communicate well with other people.

## **2.1.2 Concept of Lookism**

### **2.1.2.1 Understanding Lookism**

Lookism is indeed a new concept that was born from a new form of discrimination. Previously it was overlooked and most of people think that it is just a common thing in the society where people are being judge by the way they look. It was never been a problem until recently as the society went through modernity and changes therefore people started to notice this form of discrimination that surges, especially online, lately. Lookism is also often described as a physical attractiveness discrimination, where as individual that is up to the beauty standard and considered as attractive are being treated differently than those who is considered 'unattractive'. Most of the time, those who are considered 'unattractive' would be judged or bullied which resulted in them feeling inferior to those who are considered attractive.

Lookism in the Oxford dictionary means a construction of standard for beauty and attractiveness, and judgements made about how people meet the standard. (Ayto, 1999) mentioned that lookism is indeed a new word that appeared in the dictionaries in the editions publish on 2000. According to Hammer (2017) Lookism is a physical attractiveness discrimination which is a discrimination toward an individual based on the attractiveness of their physical characteristics. Lookism implemented the idea that someone can experience discrimination based on their physical appearances or their physical attractiveness. Meanwhile Ayto (1999:485) refers Lookism as a prejudice or a discrimination on the grounds of appearances.

In South Korea, Lookism is known as 외모지상주의 this term comes from 외모 which means ‘Appearance’ and 지상주의 means ‘Supremacy’. In one of the famous Korean Blog called ‘Brunch’, the writer under name the 일간투데이 wrote an article about how Lookism is still a thing in South Korea. Lookism in South Korea is not only about employment but also in marriage and dating. Dating management-like companies make ratings based on Women and Men’s appearance and weight. Both men and women are suffering from the lookism and this leads to the increasing numbers of plastic surgery. Not only for adults, some of TV programs also encourage the lookism featuring children and teenagers, thus encouraging the school violence due to appearance for both to boys and girls. In 2017, the ratio of overweight boys in South Korea is 25.4% meanwhile the girl is 14.1%, so the gap is quite big due to the girls having more social pressure about their looks. From the survey held in 2016, it is showed that students tried to lose weight using method that could harm their health such as starving, taking laxatives and taking weight-loss pills without doctor’s prescription.

Lookism is a new concept of discrimination that has become a social problem in society nowadays. It cannot be denied that physical appearances still play an important role in terms of employment and daily life. Ghodrati (2015) mentioned that lookism has become a concern due to globalization such as media and global visual advertisement. Nowadays in the society, there is even this thing called “beauty privilege” which refers to people who are beautiful, get some sort of extra ‘treatment’ than the average one. The most common example is how people with good looking appearances often get praises and bootlicked meanwhile the unattractive ones often got bullied. So, which rule that set whether someone is good looking or not? It is none other than the concept of beauty that is shaped by the media.

In South Korea, Lookism is a theme that has been quite popular in few medias such as movie, drama and even the recent popular media called webtoon. One of the most old and classic work that ruthlessly showed the lookism in South Korea is the movie released in 2006 with the title ‘200 pounds beauty’ where an obese woman underwent an extreme plastic surgery to be accepted in the society. The other popular works and was released in 2014 is the webtoon called *Lookism* by Park. Tae Joon,

where an overweight man who got bullied at school magically got the power to transformed into a good-looking man which he finally received a very different treatment from his schoolmates. With these works taken as an example, it shows how concerning this issue is in South Korea that even 10 years has passed yet many works are still adopting this theme and relaying the message of love yourself.

In brutal reality, appearance, most of the time, matters when searching for a job or even a life partner. Therefore, lookism bound to exist in the society alongside with the changing of culture and trends that affects one's mindset.

#### **2.1.2.2 The Beauty Standard**

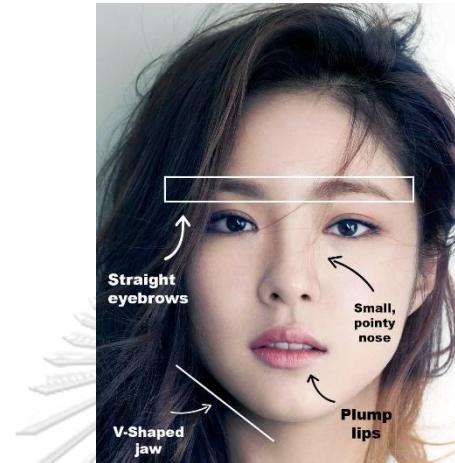
In general, beauty standard in each of countries might have different preferences as globalization happens and the advancing developments of research related to the beauty standard itself. According to Fallon (1990), what define the idea of 'being beautiful' may be various depends on the culture and the changes over time. In the past, the idea of women putting cosmetics might seems like an inappropriate behaviour as it made them give off the impression of being seductive and immoral. However nowadays, cosmetics is well-accepted in the society and that women are having freedom to put on make-up however they want.

For example, Body fats is one of the beauty standards that people often associate with being attractive or unattractive. The more body fats, the chunkier one's look which is definitely far from the defined idea of what the society called a good body shape. The popular media also projected the idea of how slim woman is most commonly represent as an attractive woman.

The sets of beauty standard in South Korea are mostly influenced by the media as the hot trends of fashion and make-up invention keeps developing. So, what exactly is the beauty standard in South Korea? The beauty standard in South Korea intertwined with the idea that slim body shape and fair skin are desirable. Double eyelids, V-shaped jaw line and tall nose are considered as 'beauty' that many products and procedures exist to make these criteria possible. Liposuction, nose and eyelids surgery exists to give people the slim body and the facial feature that they want. The whitening and brightening cosmetic products can be found easily in the shelves of local beauty store, and even the face contouring product such as V-Jawline beauty mask or a device that can give massage while tightening the skin around the jawline

can be bought easily. Through the existence of these products and surgery procedure alone, we can see what kind of beauty standard that sets in the South Korean society.

**Figure 1. Criteria of modern Korean Beauty Standard**



(Source: The VOU)

The Korean beauty standard is well-known for its slim or thin figure with jawlines resembles the word V and also the fair skin with natural double eyelids, making the look of a person like a porcelain doll. People who are meeting these criteria are often being admired the society that it came up to the point of having “Ulzzang” (얼짱) as the nickname. 얼짱 came from the combination of word 얼굴 means “face” and 짱 means “the best”. It is a popular term for people in South Korea who is considered as good looking or meeting the beauty criteria. Most of them became viral through the social media and some of them even establish their own fanbases and community. These people who are hyped by the fans just because of the appearance showed just how much appearance-biased the society in South Korea can be.

## **2.2 Literature Review**

The media in South Korea has been showing various contents, especially related in the entertainment industry. As the popularity of Hallyu became worldwide, the media represented various image and visual to the viewers worldwide and the newspapers or magazines has been introducing many alternates of beauty to its reader. Korean celebrities on the screen somehow have set the beauty standard that the audience look up to. Some are negative and some are positive. Although there are some media that does not represent the concept of beauty or lookism in South Korea in a negative way, and some even give a positive moral of story that you don't have to change your appearance just to fit in the society, the viewer might have their own idea of how the media portrayed it and how the representation itself might resulted in different perspective than what it was aimed to be by the media production. This led to the creation of concept of beauty in society.

### **2.2.1 Inner Beauty and Outer Beauty**

In terms of beauty, there are two main kind of beauty that probably should be considered. Inner beauty means a beauty from the inside, which does not include the physical attractiveness. Personality, etiquette, moral and beliefs are considered as inner beauty which is a beauty that comes from the mind and heart. On the other hand, outer beauty is a beauty from the outside, which means that a beauty that people can judge just by the first glance. Inner beauty is also important however, the outer beauty play more significant role on the lookism in the society.

Inner beauty includes how the person act, behave and understanding the moral line in their life. Inner beauty is often associated with a true beauty, means your own attitude that you projected to the world despite your physical appearance. Beauty is what the eyes caught during the first meeting, but the true beauty is what the personal value or traits that left a deep impression. Intelligence, open-minded, compassion and also soft skills are also a part of the inner beauty which actually shows that someone can be describe as a beautiful person even without having a perfect appearance.

On the other hand, outer beauty is a beauty based on the physical appearance such as height, weight, body shape and even facial contour. It cannot be denied that outer beauty comes first when it comes to judgement during the first meeting.

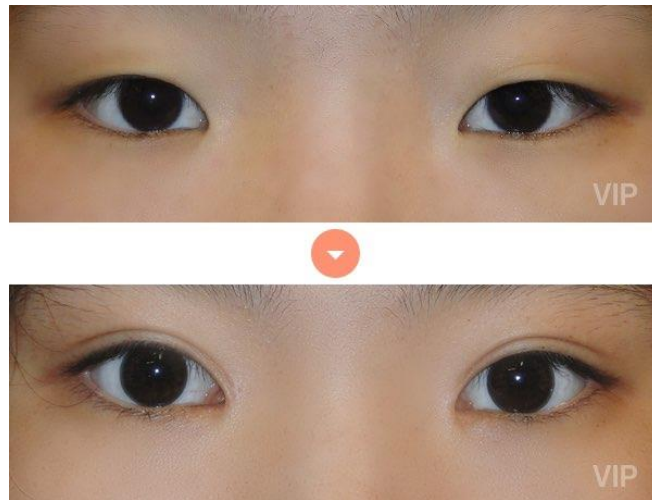
According to Cash (1990), physical appearance is an outer aesthetic and attribute that equals social stigma in the society. A slim woman with healthy skin and gentle make-up will give off a prestigious vibe or a good impression on how well that person take care of themselves, on the other hand, if a woman has a dull skin and a slightly over body weight, the stigma is that she can't take care of herself whether due to psychological matter or economic situation. Although outer beauty seems to benefit more than the inner beauty since it is the first judgement that comes regarding of a person, the balance between inner beauty and outer beauty is also important.

We can take a look at the case in China where a fair skin is considered as desirable and that many cosmetics promoting their whitening products, however this later was frowned upon by the feminist movement that consisted powerful women with intelligent and better understanding on what woman is as a human (Yeung, 2015). If a woman has a balance between their inner beauty and outer beauty, they would not be so obsessed with having fair skin, especially if they have better understanding on how the chemical works on their skin. Beauty advertisement exists only to promote their product, not actually promoting the real beauty.

### **2.2.2 Ideal Beauty and Reality**

Ideally as a human being, we want to look good in front of other people. Some are just enough with giving a good impression while dressing neatly, and some are wanting more than that such as attention and they would do anything to achieve what they have set in mind. According to Bissell (2010), Asian ideal beauty images has adopted some of the western standard such as high noses, round and big eyes and narrow face which resembles the word V, however Asian beauty is independent from western due to the development of the fashion and beauty markets in Asia and the fact that cultural difference and race shapes different kind of figure such as hair, body and even skin colour. One of the popular procedures after liposuction is the double eyelid surgery which is aimed to make the eyes look bigger.

**Figure 2. Double Eyelid Surgery Before and After**



(Source: vippskorea.co.id)

So how the ideal beauty exists in the society? According to Yan Yan and Bissel Kim (2014), people are continuing to be feed by the media of how fashion and beauty ideal is through celebrities and models on screen. Slender legs and slim body, small waist, double eyelids and even the hairstyle affected the criteria of beauty in the society. Model or celebrities that represented the ideal beauty implies that they should be aspiring to everyone who saw them and encouraging them to do things to be the next “her/him”. The advertisement on the screen or magazine, promoting beauty product to achieve a certain standard of beauty is having a great impact on human’s psychological. For example, an Asian woman who lives in America would like to do double eyelids surgery to make their eyes bigger, an African-American woman who is originally born with slightly curly hair would straighten their hair and make it wavy to give the visual of a long wavy hair.

In South Korea, fair skin, perfect ratio of facial features and well-dressed is still become one of the desired things that the people would want,. The skin-color privileging exist in South Korea and skin colour is still considered as a sign of beauty. One thing also needed to be noted is that the fact that whitening and brightening beauty product in South Korea are rapidly increasing. Since the concept of ideal beauty of white skin was also created by the assumption that those who has white skin has never done any labor work, people would want to have even more lighter skin than they already have. Most of the skin care product will have either brightening or



whitening formulas in it which shows how bright skin is very important for people nowadays.

Another work that I have reviewed that is strongly related to lookism concept is a work by Nadya Natalia '*She Was Pretty, A portrayal of South Koreans' Perspectives on Beauty Standard and Lookism*'. In the paper the author mentioned that Lookism occurs in South Korea extremely that it triggers its people to adapting plastic surgery as part of their culture. Natalia explained that the beauty standard in South Korea might also boosted by the idol culture whereas the spread of Korean Wave (Hallyu) causing many idol groups to appear to serve not only talent but also visual to the viewers. Through the visual of the member of the group that the fans see on television, this can trigger the fans to want to have slim body, fair skin, fashionable clothes and even certain face feature of that idol. In the end, some of them desperately going through expensive skin care treatment and plastic surgery to change their appearance or even to the extreme where they want to look exactly like their idol.

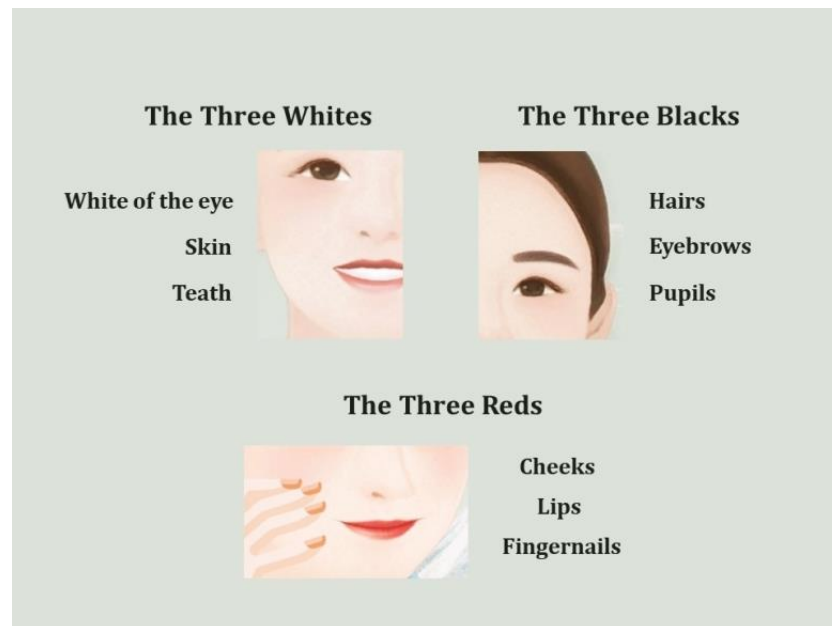
Making an idol or celebrities as a role model is not a wrong thing to do, but obsessing over them until you feel like you lost your self-worth and wanting to be at least similar to them is where the lookism takes turn to worst. It is true that as an individual, one has a complete control of their own choice in life whether or not they want to keep up with the beauty standard or that they want to do plastic surgery to fix the part they are not satisfied with, in the end, the normalization of this kind of lookism can be harmful due to the harsh reality that achieving the ideal beauty is possible but not in a long term. Human constantly aging and body parts will change at some point, for example after giving birth.

### **2.2.3 The shifting of Beauty Standard**

A few previous researches have highlighted the beauty standard in South Korea and how it has grown into a social problem that often leads to discrimination. Kwon (2019) in her dissertation, refers to K-Beauty as a multifaceted concept that has been shaped through geopolitical dynamics and particular transnational historical moments. She implied that even after Japanese colonialism ended and the economic growth started under Park Chung Hee's era, the state's regulations and cultural policies regarding one's appearances such as clothes and haircut (especially woman)

keep changing. As people experienced modernity, sociocultural changes and political transition, the concept of beauty also shifted and created various new term of beauty such as Modern Girl and Gangnam Beauty.

**Figure 3. The Three (whites, blacks, and reds) Criteria of Korean Beauty Standard**



(Source: [asiasociety.org](http://asiasociety.org))

In one of the researches done by Ghodrati (2015) shows how the globalization cause an increase in the level of lookism as the mass media play a role on the transmission of beauty standards. The globalization does happen around the world and the increase level of lookism is no difference among all regions. The study explains how the transitions to modernization is also affect the social conditions and culture of a country, thus causing the measurement of attractiveness based on human preference. As the world keeps changing, the globalization is inescapable and so does the role of media influencing and introducing people to various sorts of things that might end up being a new beauty standard. This not only happen in one specific part of the world or country but it is bound to happen fairly in all regions.

Jones (2008) also mentioned that western society has a heavy impact on the image and beauty industry, especially during the process of globalization. Since the western society has an impact on image and beauty industry, South Korea who was

once occupied and assisted by the United States might also once heavily influenced by western society. As the image of beauty of one's appearance were heavily influenced by the western fashion and celebrities. Lie (2015) mentioned that beauty was never irrelevant in Korea as the first Korean popular singer were stage actresses and beauty was certainly an element of their appeal. Since one's visual appearance become important, people would do anything to achieve the ideal look. And In the late 1990s, the boy group in entertainment industry were heavily influenced by an American-style muscled male model.

The changes of beauty concept in South Korea is also due to the fact that Asian modernity happened. Korea has emerged as a new cultural mecca of Asian modernity (Seo & Friends 2020). With the explosion of K-Pop and Hallyu, the cultural influence has been extended to many consumption practices, especially the standardized beauty ideal of K-Pop celebrities. It gains followers not only in Korea but also Asia. The cultural shift that happened during the compressed modernity in South Korea causing the existence of certain standard of beauty, especially along with the fast development of technology where surgeries can be done even more comfortably. In one of the points of the journal, Seo and Friends emphasized how harmonious kaleidoscope became the paradox of K=beauty. K-Beauty has shifted from a preference of thin body to more western-type, for example the 'V' jawline shape has been popularized by K-Pop idol, along with wide-set eyes, high nose bridge and white skin. The plastic surgery ends up being an operation of the so-called doppelganger look.

If we take a closer look on the changes of fashion in South Korea and how the society hypes it, it is a quite similar behaviour to the changes of beauty standard in South Korea. For instance, a trend of a caterpillar-shaped coats during winter in South Korea and a trend of ombre hair-dye that happened a while ago, since it has become a trend and everyone follows the trend, it is no longer strange to see the streets packed with people wearing that coat or having their hair dyed ombre.

**Figure 4. Caterpillar-winter coat trend in South Korea**



(Source: The Herald KAIST)

This also happens to the changes of beauty such as cosmetic products and cosmetic surgery. For example, once the lip-fillers became a trend, almost everyone has their eyes on the procedure because of the trend and how the society adores the outcome of it. The superficial heterogeneity in the South Korean society masks an underlying homogeneity that emphasizes a collective norm. This heterogeneity is not only implemented on the bodies of a female but also became the practices of everyday beauty to both genders.

#### **2.2.4 Lookism as a social problem**

The most recent work strongly related to lookism is a paper by Andrew Mason (2021), which explains how lookism happens and is inescapable and also how everyday lookism can be harmful to an individual. In his work, he mentioned that lookism might happen based on the influence of two norms, the first one is gender-differentiated norm and the second is racially-biased norm, he also mentioned that lookism can also happen because of a bias against those with certain categories such as religious minority. Someone who is from the religious minority might experience lookism due to the fact that they (a woman to be specifically) can't wear certain clothes due to their religious norm. Another case is how some women would seek for beauty procedures to maintain their appearance to avoid being judged against appearance norms. Therefore, lookism can be harmful, especially if it happens on a daily basis.

The other two literatures that I found quite related to the research of this paper are works by Lee Hye-min and Kim Su-hyun. In the journal, Lee (2017) mentioned that discrimination based on physical attractiveness has become a crucial form of discrimination in South Korea due to the compressed industrialization and urbanization, education and labor markets as well as social interactions have become highly competitive. These have caused individual looks along with gender or age are often use as additional stratifying factors in some institutions. Meanwhile Kim Su Hyun (2012) in her thesis 'Lookism in The Korean Business World and The Role of Business Management ' stated that judging based on physical appearance is a human nature, not Korean custom, however the problem of lookism in Korea is extreme and it has come from many factors such as fast economic growth in the 1990s, face culture, kin competition in its job market, social media and collectivism. Thus, removing lookism in Korea is challenging because it is impossible to eliminate the one's culture, history and reality.

These two works mentioned above are criticizing the factors that turn the lookism in Korea overgrown into social problem in job-seeking term. Both authors mentioned how the changing of economic growth and competition between people in society has greatly impacted the opinion regarding one's physical characteristics as one of the important aspects on landing job or getting to fit in the society. Attractiveness become one of the major points to get a job as the company use an excuse such as 'the employee's appearance is the company's image. Although it cannot be denied that it is partially true, if someone is competent enough in their job but not attractive enough, they will be accepted. However, there is still consequences that the person should deal with during his or her work. That person will most likely to experience lookism whether in a form of social prejudices or in a form of direct discrimination.

A survey was done back in 2017 by Albamon which is a job-seeking portal in South Korea. The survey was done by a total of 1229 people both women and men on the topic of correlation between work and appearance. The result of survey showed 81.1% respondents think that appearance affect the job employment. 39.5% of the respondents shared their story of being discriminated or rejected due to their appearance. While 35.6% of the respondent mentioned that they have been criticized

during their previous job because of their appearance. 92% of the respondent complaining on how stressful the discrimination against appearance can be and about 83.2% of the respondents said that appearances have become a competition in the job-seeking world. The result of this survey is indeed concerning as many companies asked for photos and information on height and weight, so appearance is one of the criteria to get the offer for work.

However, nowadays many young generations are different than the old generations. The old generations are still living beyond the harsh reality of patriarchal system that they can't really voice out their opinion. Meanwhile now, the young generation have more freedom of speech that they can voice out their opinion and opposition although it will still causing a great commotion in the society. Young generation aware of this kind of lookism and trying to fight back the beauty standard stereotyping, some of them started to make a movement of embracing their own body. For example, one of the most famous exhibitions was held in an art gallery around Gangnam district back on 2019 by Jeon Bora. This exhibition is called '*Escape the Corset*' which encourage women to destroy the defined idea of a woman in society.

Jeon Bora's exhibition pointed out photos of women without make up, bare naked and also showing the natural parts of the body to aim for the understanding that the results of the photo is what women should embrace, not the kind of beauty that those advertisement pictures promoted. Her exhibition went viral in social media and received tons of positive responds, especially in twitter as many people started to posting pictures of cosmetics that they throw away along with #탈코르셋\_인증 which means *offcorsets\_approved* as their way to express their agreement to this movement. The exhibition by photographer Jeon Bora definitely not the first movement yet it successfully went viral. The #MeToo movement that was started as a movement to fight for the women's right since misogyny is extreme in South Korea due to the patriarchal culture, is now advancing the campaign of getting the beauty pressure off woman, demanding for changes which causing a quite turbulence in South Korea's society and politics.

From all of the previous studies mentioned above, it shows how the lookism especially skin and beauty has gone to the extreme level in South Korea. With the advance technologies and vast development, people are bound to be set in a standard

that one should fulfil no matter how unfair it gets. Apparently, these previous studies did not show the representation of the concept of beauty and lookism in daily life. The two authors work mentioned above also did not explain the representation of the concept of beauty through media that is strongly related to lookism, which will be looked thoroughly for this paper by the writer through ‘Gangnam Beauty’ drama.



### CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*“Gangnam Beauty” drama: Reflection of Lookism in South Korea* is a qualitative study that relies on textual and images data, which will analyze the lookism or also known as physical appearance discrimination in the contemporary South Korean society. This analysis is focusing on social discrimination as a subsequence of lookism through the characterization, plot and visual signs. The unit of analysis for this first question will be in the form of images and script of a dialogue both taken from the selected scenes. I will be using Stuart Hall’s theory, Representation, to analyze the drama’s visual and verbal representation that relays a meaning of a lookism and a moral story of lookism in the society which will reveal a further understanding of the daily lookism is and how it affects an individual. The characters and the plot will also be analyzed descriptively to answer research question number two and further reading on literature review will be used to answer the question number 3. I will also be using Critical Discourse Analysis by Fairclough approaches and the main topics in this research is lookism in the South Korean society.

The first step of research will be to analyse the corpus by watching the drama ‘Gangnam Beauty’. The next step is to determine the parts in the drama that represented the concept of beauty and lookism. After gathering specific parts of the drama, they will be analysed and criticized using critical discourse analysis. The analysis will be done through dialogues and gestures of each scenes. In addition, the theory of representation by Stuart Hall and the data such as survey done by the research organization will be used as tools in analysing and criticizing the corpus. Data that has been obtained through literature review through books, news, articles and research journals related to lookism will be use as supporting data to analyse the main data.



### 3.1 Study Source

“Gangnam Beauty” drama is available in online streaming platforms such as Netflix, WeTV, AppleTV, and Viki. Bisa masukin reviews. This study is also using few sources from online websites to gather reviews of the drama as listed below,

1. OhMyNews

[http://star.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/OhmyStar/at\\_pg.aspx?CNTN\\_CD=A0002472495\)](http://star.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/OhmyStar/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002472495)

2. The JoongAng

<https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/22916896>

3. IMDb

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8912344/>

4. MyDramaList

<https://mydramalist.com/29185-my-id-is-gangnam-beauty>

IMDb is a website that provide database of information related to movies, drama, TV series, video games and online streaming with the details of release date, cast, producer and etc. It is owned by Amazon and is one of the most popular and largest entertainment-related online databases. MyDramalist.com or also known as MDL website is one of the most popular websites of Drama and Movie reviews for international audiences. Many international Hallyu fans gather at the specific drama page on this website and leave a review related to the drama that might help other people to find their preferences, and some of them contain spoilers

### 3.2 Information of Gathering Tools

I will use the representation theory by Stuart Hall and a concept of Lookism as a tool to analyze the lookism problem in South Korean society, the beauty standard, the beauty pressure and also the moral story that the drama “Gangnam Beauty” relays to the audiences. I will also input reviews of the drama to analyze whether or not the drama successfully deciphers the lookism problem to its audience.

### **3.3 Information Analysis**

I will first select the scenes from the drama “Gangnam Beauty” that contain visual and verbal representation of daily lookism and use the representation theory to analyze it. These selected scenes will be examined more detail in order to find the lookism problem in the South Korean society.

### **3.4 Research Design**

This thesis is a qualitative study done in order to understand the lookism and how it is represented by the drama ‘Gangnam Beauty’. The research design of this study is mostly leaning towards the case studies, which taking the cases of lookism in the drama to understand more about the meaning of the lookism and the subsequence of it which is a social discrimination. In the research done by Albamon in 2017, a total of 39.5% respondents were being discriminated during the job application and a total of 35.6% mentioned that their appearance had been discriminated during their employment in the past, thus showing how lookism have a certain or particular role in our life process.

### **3.5 Data Collection**

The aim of this research to understand the lookism phenomenon in South Korea and to get further understanding on the beauty standard in South Korea, therefore the data that I will collect to support the analysis are some literature reviews related to the topic. I will use the methods of collecting the data through websites that collects journals and works such as Sage and Jstore. After collecting the supporting data that are needed, I will note down the topic-related content and then processed the data before corelated it with my analysis.

### **3.6 Sample Group**

‘Gangnam Beauty’ Drama is an adaptation from a popular webtoon by Gi Maeng Gi that was first published in 2016. This work gains a lot of attention from the fans as it addresses the problem of physical appearance discrimination. This drama according to the Nielsen Media Research has the average of 1.2 million audiences from South Korea due to its popularity. The criteria for the sampling group is the scenes or dialogue that related to the act of lookism and its subsequences.

## **CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS**

In this chapter, I will be analyzing 4 points in the drama, the first point is the complete structure of the drama including the characters, plot, and the drama's reception. The second and third points of the analysis in this chapter will be done through visual and verbal signs of representations of daily lookism. The last point will be analyzing the beauty standard and how it has changed in the South Korean Society.

### **4.1 Plot summary, characters detail and drama reviews**

#### **4.1.1 Character Details**

#### **4.1.2 Plot**

#### **4.1.3 Drama Review**

### **4.2 Lookism that is represented in “Gangnam Beauty” Movie**

#### **4.2.1 Judgement on People's Face.**

#### **4.2.2 The Beauty Pressure and Privilege in the society.**

#### **4.2.3 The Bullying due to Lookism**

### **4.3 Encouragement and bad connotation on plastic surgery in South Korea**

#### **4.3.1 Plastic surgery encouragement in South Korea**

#### **4.3.2 Bad connotation of plastic surgery and the trend of ‘Gangnam Beauty’**

### **4.4 The effect of cultural changes towards the Beauty standard in South Korea**

## 4.1 Characters Detail and Plot Summary

### 4.1.1 Character Details

Cast	Role	Details
Im Soo Hyang (임수향)	Kang Mi Rae (강미래)	A girl who did plastic surgery because she was bullied in her past for being “ugly”
Cha Eun Woo (차은우)	Do Kyung Seok (도경석)	Kang Mi Rae’s classmate who is born rich and handsome. (skin complexion what does it mean to be handsome and rich and how cha eun woo fit into this role)
Jo Woo Ri (조우리)	Hyun Soo Ah (현수아)	The most popular girl in the university due to her “natural beauty”. Explain more

#### 4.1.1.1 Kang Mi Rae character

**Figure 5. Kang Mi Rae Character's Appearance**



(Source: JTBC)

Kang Mi Rae is the main female lead in the drama 'Gangnam Beauty'. She was portrayed as an individual who used to get bullied due to her appearance during her childhood and adolescence. When she entered the university, she wanted to change her life as her mom took her to the plastic surgery clinic and changed her appearance completely. Kang Mi Rae comes from the middle-class family as her father is a taxi driver and her mother works as a customer service in a small company. Her family is not that well-off that she couldn't afford plastic surgery when she was young, therefore she had to bear with the bullying that she received during her adolescent. She saved up money and with the help of her mother, she is able to do plastic surgery. However, due to the bullying, she has grown into a very shy young woman with the pressure of her own anxiety and she always try to please people in order to be accepted.

Kang Mi Rae's childhood characters (child and teenage phase) were played by two different actors. The kid Kang Mi Rae is portrayed as an obese elementary kid who has a very short bob-hair and the face is not really clear to see, meanwhile the teenage version of Kang Mi Rae is portrayed as a slim figure with long hair yet the face is blurred by the production team to protect the actress from cyber-bullying. The elementary student Kang Mi Rae was bullied not because that her face is ugly, but because she was overweight that they called her a 'pig'. Meanwhile the teenage

version of Kang Mi Rae was bullied verbally due to her facial feature. The drama did not show the young Kang Mi Rae's face which is implied to be ugly, because the drama production team does not want to give an idea or a measurement of what and how 'ugly' look like.

In one of the scenes where the university welcoming party was held, Kang Mi Rae danced the song 'New Face' by PSY and got many praises and adorations from the freshmen and the seniors for her lively dance which made her feel happy that for the first time she is accepted by the people around her. She excused herself and called her mom while crying, "Mom, they like me" as she said to her mother. This show that the feeling insecurities and afraid that people won't like her for her face, has pressured Kang Mi Rae for many years and for the first time the pressure was lifted, she felt relieved and happiest. This particular scene might seem as if relaying the message that 'if you are good looking, you will have it easy', however it also slightly gives a hint of how the society works. They were hyping the rumor about Kang Mi Rae's plastic surgery but once they seen Kang Mi Rae's true self as a lively person, they complimented her. In another words, judgement of outer beauty comes first before the inner beauty.

Through the character Kang Mi Rae, the drama showed that no matter how a person struggle to meet the standard that the society sets, they will never be satisfied nor find salvation unless they started to embrace themselves for what they are. The production team of the drama also casted Im Soo Hyang to play the role of Kang Mi Rae. Im Soo Hyang is an actress that was born in 1990 and she had made her debut in 2009 through a came role in movie '4<sup>th</sup> Period Mystery'. Im Soo Hyang has a slim figure, oval face and overall fit into the beauty standard. Although some people had speculated that she had undergo plastic surgery procedure and the rumors spread, it is still unclear whether or not she did it. In one of the drama interviews, she mentioned that she felt a close relation to the character Kang Mi Rae. She said,

"My job comes with hearing a lot of comments about my appearance and I get hurt by it. I try to ignore it but I am a human, there are times when I can't do that. There was a time when I'm at my lowest self-esteem. I'm still overcoming those kinds of obstacles" – Im Soo Hyang (OhMyNews-Naver).

Im Soo Hyang, as both an actress and a human are struggling with the lookism and the cyber-bullying that she received related to her appearance. This is just show how lookism exist daily and sometimes it is just hard to ignore it. For a celebrity whose job is appearing on the screen, they should be meeting the beauty standard as visual is what the entertainment industry sells from an entertainer besides the talent. Does this happen only to celebrities? Surely not. Lookism can happen even to a normal citizen and it can come from the people around us, just like the character Kang Mi Rae, Do Kyung Suk and Hyun Soo Ah.

#### 4.1.1.2 Do Kyung Suk character

**Figure 6. Do Kyung Suk Character's Appearance**



(Source: JTBC)

Unlike Kang Mi Rae and Hyun Soo Ah, Do Kyung Suk is portrayed as someone who is handsome and a silver-spoon since he is the son of a successful businessman in South Korea. He is portrayed as a tall man with pale skin, big eyes and stern gaze, and also a stern jawline. He is always looking casual with either shirt or sweatshirt.

Do Kyung Suk is getting all the attention as soon as he stepped into the university orientation due to his appearance, however, Do Kyung Suk is cold and

distant yet many people adore him for his good look. In reality, someone who is good looking and popular but is cold and distant often being labelled as a stuck-up person, means that they are seen as being too proud of themselves. However, the truth is, Do Kyung Suk dislikes people who compliments him for his look and boot-licked him for his status as a son of a wealthy businessman. His character developed a hatred towards ‘good looking’ people due to his childhood trauma where his mother left him and divorced his father. He thinks that appearance doesn’t matter and what matters is someone’s personality.

Do Kyung Suk fell in love with Kang Mi Rae, not because she became beautiful after the plastic surgery but purely because of Kang Mi Rae’s kindness. At first, he didn’t like Kang Mi Rae because he thought that Kang Mi Rae got plastic surgery to be pretty in order to fish compliments and attention from people. However, after knowing the truth about Kang Mi Rae’s struggle, he finally opened his heart and change his perspective on Kang Mi Rae. Through the character Do Kyung Suk, the drama showed how a good-looking individual is still a human and has flaws. Do Kyung Suk might seem to have everything that people desired but what he wants is just to be happy.

The production team of the drama casted Cha Eun Woo to play the role of Do Kyung Suk. Cha Eun Woo is one of the members of popular boy group called ASTRO and made his actor debut with a minor role in a drama ‘My Brilliant Life’ in 2014. He is tall with broad shoulder with a beautiful appearance. He has fair skin with U shaped jawline yet looking stern and manly. He has a natural double eyelid and was already acknowledged for his good look even before he made his debut. He was a class president and was famous because he is not only good looking but also smart. Although he is praised for his looks, audience still find his acting is kind of plain, stiff and awkward yet it is still unclear whether it is because he is still learning how to act professionally or that the production team likes his cold and plain expression that fits perfectly with the character Do Kyung Suk.



#### 4.1.1.3 Hyun Soo Ah character

**Figure 7. Hyun Soo Ah Character's Appearance**



(Source: JTBC)

Another interesting character in the drama that represent the lookism and how toxic the outcome can be. Hyun Soo Ah is a freshman along with Kang Mi Rae and Do Kyung Suk. From the very first day she entered the university, she was already popular for her beauty as people called her the ‘natural beauty’. Hyun Soo Ah gives off the vibe of a daughter from a rich family through her gentle and soft gestures when she talks, the way she dressed, and the way she takes care of her outer appearances including her skin and face. She has a natural-looking eyelids and does not put too much make up, her skin is pale but healthy and her she has slim body that fits her into the beauty criteria. Hyun Soo Ah had no problem blending in the new circle of friends because of how confident she is and everyone around her could not stop complimenting her beauty.

Although she might seem nice, upon hearing how people around her match-making her with Do Kyung Suk, who is also handsome and popular, she became greedy and tried to get close to Do Kyung Suk. People called the two of them as perfect match-made from heaven as both of them are popular and good looking. When

she found out that Do Kyung Suk likes Kang Mi Rae and dislikes her, she became more aggressive trying to get Do Kyung Suk as her boyfriend and making-up a story as if she is close with Do Kyung Suk and Do Kyung Suk has feelings for her.

In later episodes of the drama, Hyun Soo Ah's background were revealed and it turned out that the Hyun Soo Ah that everybody knows is not the real Hyun Soo Ah. She was just pretending to live in an expensive high-end apartment complex and that she actually struggling to keep her outer appearances by taking diet pills and throwing up the food she just ate. The purpose of Hyun Soo Ah doing this is due to her childhood trauma when she was bullied because her messy appearance when she was a kid. After fixing her appearance, only then people started to compliments her and wanting to befriend her. Thus, this made the young adult Hyun Soo Ah feel the need to look pretty so that she will have friends and many people would like her, which later she ended up realizing that she doesn't need to fake herself in front of other in order to have friends.

Through Hyun Soo Ah character, we can understand the message of lookism that the drama relayed to its audience. Being pretty will not make you happy if you have anger or jealousy, or if you fail to love yourself for who you are and love your body for how it is. The director casted Joo Woo Ri to play the role of Hyun Soo Ah. Joo Woo Ri is an actress that was born in 1992 and made her debut in 2011. She has small body figure, oval-shaped face with V jawline and a slightly chubby cheek. Her skin is pale, giving her an innocent kind of beauty vibe to the audience. After playing the role of Hyun Soo Ah, she avoided the internet and people due to the bullying she got. In one of the interviews, she mentioned that she does not share the same personality with Hyun Soo Ah yet some people are still misunderstood her and bully her for her appearance.

In conclusion, from these three characters, the drama showed how each of the characters represented a very different case of lookism from the society and the different outcomes for each character. Each of the characters also give a different moral story. Kang Mi Rae showed us how we should love ourself despite our appearance and stop trying to please people just to fit in some circle of friends. Do Kyung Suk showed us how we should never judge people by their appearance without trying to get to know their personality better. Hyun Soo Ah showed us how

appearance means nothing if you are sacrificing your own happiness just to look ideal in front of other people.

#### 4.1.2 Plot

“Gangnam Beauty” drama tells a story of a girl named Kang Mi Rae who was born with unattractive appearance. During her childhood, she got bullied by her friends because of her appearances and this impacted her psychology. She became unconfident of herself and hate herself. After saving enough money, she went to get plastic surgery to change her appearances, even though her dad was against it. Kang Mi Rae finally entered the college with her new appearances. On the first day of college, she started to meet a lot of new people and she started to rate others appearances. In the college she met Do Kyung Suk, who is the most popular guy in their department that are born with handsome face, smart and wealthy. However, she is still facing problems despite of her new appearance now as Hyun Soo Ah, the natural beauty that hides ugly truths in her life.

The three of ‘best looking’ freshmen have just entered the college and at the very beginning of this drama showed how Hyun Soo Ah was trying to be close with Do Kyung Suk, who gets many praises and admiration from the seniors because of his good look. Upon noticing that Kang Mi Rae had done plastic surgery to her face, Hyun Soo Ah tried to befriend her, only to fake it just to be stand out whenever she is next to Kang Mi Rae. On the other hand, Kang Mi Rae who were still insecure of her appearance, thought of nothing but befriend everyone and trying to blend in. If we take a closer look at this particular plot in the first few episodes, through the characters of Hyun Soo Ah and Kang Mi represented how lookism can exist in an individual. For Hyun Soo Ah who become pretty without plastic surgery, praises on her appearance from people made her selfish to the point that she would do anything to be stand out even though what she did is harmful to the people around her. In the case of Kang Mi Rae, lookism made her insecure of herself that eventhough she had done a successful plastic surgery, she is still haunted by how people might think of her look and whether or not she will be accepted as a human being in their circle.

Although it seems like a normal plot where the female lead is being a pushover type of character and the second female lead is just doing many

misbehaviors because of jealousy for the male lead, there is a twist to the plot. In later episode, Hyun Soo Ah was revealed to not even having any feelings towards Do Kyung Suk and that she hated Kang Mi Rae due to the fact that Kang Mi Rae's beauty is not natural yet Do Kyung Suk, who is the most famous student, liked her. She wanted to date Do Kyung Suk just because she thought that someone who is naturally handsome should be with someone who is naturally beauty, therefore she wasn't really into Do Kyung Suk, she was just after the popularity and admirations from other people.

From the plot twist, the drama showed the toxic outcome of lookism that has been done daily for many years can be harmful as it has an effect to one's mentality. Hyun Soo Ah case is perhaps one of the many types of negative outcome. She sacrificed her feelings (she does not even like Do Kyung Suk) and happiness just to get the attention she wants from other people and to be standout. She also sacrificed her health by doing unhealthy diet behavior just to maintain her weight and body shape, also craving for compliments from other people.

At the end of the plot, Kang Mi Rae finally gained her confidence and started to live her life happily without worrying about what people think of her appearance. She started to embrace her beauty and realized that inner beauty is more important than the outer beauty. On the other hand, Hyun Soo Ah who struggled through series of unhealthy diet behavior, finally realized that she needed help. She went to a psychologist and slowly gained her composure as she learned that she could still be loved and adored by people although she wasn't what she used to appear in front of people. Thus, making the ending of both characters leads us to a moral story that inner beauty and loving yourself is more important than what the beauty looks from the outside. Lookism does happen but it doesn't mean we have to hurt ourself just to please other people.

#### **4.1.3 Drama Review**

In order to answer the research question number two on how the drama deliver the message of lookism and its moral story to the audience, we can take a look at the receptions and reviews from the audiences. This drama was popular in the late of 2018 and has received a lot of reviews in a few websites such as IMDb, MDL and

even among the Korean article critique, therefore specific reviews has been taken from the largest movie and drama review databases website users, a perspective of the Korean journal website, and a popular drama fans community website user. Most of the reviews taken into the data are criticizing the lookism in the Korea and how the drama portrayal of it.

#### 4.1.3.1 Reviews from International Audience

As this drama has been reviewed in many websites, I take the example of two most popular websites where the drama fans often input the data or reviews which is none other than IMDb and MyDramaList. There are various mixed reviews of the drama 'My ID is Gangnam Beauty' in MDL as this drama got the 8.0 out of 10 rating from a total 45,741 users and the total of the audiences is 86,141 watchers. Below are the reviews on the lookism from the point of view of international audience.

The audience understood the message of lookism relayed by the drama as they questioning whether if people think that being good looking is easy. As the user *leahcube* criticized on the characters Kang Mi Rae and Do Kyung Suk as they thought it was interesting that pretty and handsome people when being too nice, everyone is approaching them for relationships. When being too cold and they are seen as stuck-up. Kang Mi Rae who is always try to please people and Do Kyung Suk who is the opposite of her, showed how even being good looking comes with risk of people having opinions about them. Another user commented,

“The moral story of this show is that it does not matter how beautiful you look on the outside, it is what is inside those counts”. - *Misswritercreates*

Similar to this comment, user another user of this website also highlighted that,

“This drama shows that life is not a bed of roses for pretty people either. It also shows that when it comes to lasting relationships like love, inner beauty trumps external beauty”. - *Magnoliacream*

The review mentioned how the inner beauty wins over the outer beauty which is the message that this drama relayed perfectly to its audience. This drama might seem the same as the previous works of the same theme, however it turns out the drama delivers a different message. It is not emphasizing that a person needs to look pretty in order to be accepted in the society, instead the plot focusing on how embracing yourself for who you are is the most important thing to live a happy life. Two users named *Kangminjae* and *Mademoiselle Noir* had the same opinion on the drama as they mentioned how the drama is very well executed on criticizing the beauty standard.

“There is nothing wrong with wanting to be skinnier or getting plastic surgery, just like there is nothing wrong with not wanting to lose weight or not getting plastic surgery. But understand that it won't make life perfect” - *Mademoiselle Noir*

“I was really reluctant to watch it because often stories about makeovers or plastic surgery have very negative messages which suggest either that your life will be better when you are "prettier," or else they emphasize the fat shaming and fall into the very tropes they're trying to fight against. But Gangnam Beauty did an excellent job of questioning beauty standards and showcasing the hypocrisy of a society that only values women for their appearance” - *Kangminjae*

As the discrimination and the judgement on appearance in the drama are mostly done by the male students to female students, this gives an idea of how much of a beauty pressure that women have to deal with every day, which led us to another comment by user *limjunkyung* that said “Although the show has been critiqued for its extremely toxic male side characters, it's the brutal reality of how men treat women and criticize them for their lack of physical beauty”. It is a brutal reality appearance does matter and that women, especially, struggling to meet this so-called beauty standard. The beauty standard is oppressive especially towards a woman, and sometime in some case, it makes us questioning our worth and value and whether or not we are satisfied with how we look in other people's eyes.

The reviews from the IMDb and MDL shows the impression that the international audiences get when watching the drama. The drama, according to them, gives them the idea of how beauty is both a pressure and a challenge in South Korea, also how it is not always. Thus, giving the slight hint of how well this drama represented the daily lookism in South Korea. Most of the international audiences did agree on how brutal this drama represented the lookism in daily life in South Korea and how people struggle to live with it. They agree that lookism is a problem due to the mindset and the pressure that the people around us put us in and how the drama subtly convey the message to love yourself, no matter who you are and how you look. The mockery that the main character received for underwent the surgery to ‘fix’ her face is not the blame that should be put on the main character, it is the true portrayal of people in the society, being the perpetrator to make other feels bad about their appearance. The drama represents that no matter how much the effort one’s put the meet the standard that is set by the society, it will never be enough. Being considered unattractive is bad enough to get an unfair treatment in daily life, but undergo surgery to fix one’s appearance is also bad enough as they get the mockery for being ‘plastic’.

#### **4.1.3.2 Reviews from Korean Native Articles**

Some of the Korean popular websites such as The JoongAng and OhMyNews also wrote a review regarding the lookism issue in this drama. The writers, which is a native Korean, shared their point of view regarding the lookism theme in this drama which will be explain in details below and how it is actually concerning in their society. In one of the articles by The JoongAng posted on August 27<sup>th</sup> 2018, the journalist No Jin Ho expressed his opinion regarding the drama.

“This drama is making headlines throughout the ideology of ‘Lookism’. More than our reality, or maybe even it is just like our reality, the characters in the drama, without knowing precisely, cannot be free from the shackles of Lookism.” – No Jin Ho.

The review above showed just how much the drama delivers the message of lookism in the society and the fact that it is inescapable is quiet concerning. No Jin Ho also talked about how this drama seems light but in fact had quite heavy topic related to a human as a social being. The needs to blend in and to be accepted by the society exist in every single human being but by being discriminated surely does affected one's self esteem and hope to socialize as a human.

As the people around Kang Mi Rae seems to talk bad behind her back for underwent through many plastic surgery procedure, Yang Jung Mo in OhMyNews article that was published on September 16<sup>th</sup> 2018 mentioned that they felt sympathized by the character Kang Mi Rae.

“she has to endure what people say behind her back saying that she is a ‘성괴 Song Gwe’ (Short term from 성형 *SeongHyeong* (Plastic Surgery) 괴물 GweMul which means Monster). After a movie released in 2006 with the theme ‘Lookism’ called <200 Pounds Beauty>, a drama with similar theme is still being produced after 12 years. I hope that after 12 years, there will be no more drama or movie about this similar topic.”- Yang Jung Mo

Based on the reviews written by both the native Koreans, it shows how the Lookism grows in Korean society, subtly but definitely still concerning. Both reviews mentioned about how Lookism is something that cannot be taken lightly and that it is still need to gain more attention. The economy and education pressure that the society puts to people are already hard enough for us to survive yet another pressure of ‘Importance of Attractiveness’ seems to be inescapable in our life.

Just as Yang Jung Mo mentioned, it is indeed not the first work that pick up the theme ‘Lookism’ and showed how problematic it is in Korean society. The other popular works that has existed since a long time ago like ‘200 POUNDS BEAUTY’ movie in 2006, ‘LOOKISM’ webtoon by Park Tae Joon, and also ‘SHE WAS PRETTY’ drama which is released in 2016, were all talking about the issue of lookism in the society. Those works were and perhaps are still popular when it comes to representing the lookism problem that tend to be disregard in the society. People are constantly reminded that beauty is not everything meanwhile in reality,



appearance comes first before personality, even for necessary things such as landing for a job.

In 2017, the lookism problem in South Korea was once written by the LA Times as it told a story of a job advertisement that specifically have ‘look’ criteria of their employee. They put the ‘pretty eyes’ and ‘high noses’ as one of the requirements to get the job which causing the outrage and critics from the public. Also, photography studio that offer not only photography but styling and make-up services are getting pretty popular as people would want the picture on their resumes look attractive enough in order to be hired or at least passed for an interview. The article was also mentioning a few cases of the South Korean who struggled to take care of their appearance in order to land for a job such as going to the dermatologist since early age. Another article by CNN in 2019 also mentioned about the college student named Kim So Jung who went for a job interview and was criticized about her appearances by the manager. Along with these cases of lookism being exposed by the international media, it shows how concerning it was and perhaps still is even up to these days.

So, what kind of representation of lookism that the ‘Gangnam Beauty’ drama showed to its audiences that they could leave a review mentioning this special theme? What kind of daily lookism that the drama showed? And how could it possible lead the audience to have the idea of lookism in South Korea? This will be analysed in the few sub-chapters below.

## **4.2 Lookism that is represented in “Gangnam Beauty” Drama**

### **Data and Analysis**

In this section, I will use the Critical Discourse Analysis methodology to find the representation of Lookism in drama ‘Gangnam Beauty’. The drama seems to be a light romance drama at one glance but if we look deeper, it has deep messages about the concerning lookism problem in the society and how in reality it has started to become a social problem that has been overlooked. The lookism problem itself comes from the beauty standard that the society puts the people under the pressure. This paper will try to interpret scenes and dialogues that represents the lookism as a harsh reality of daily problem the South Korean facing.

I will analyze the daily lookism that the actors acted out through their characters and how it impacted each of the characters that have completely different backstory. Through the selected scenes that represent the lookism, I will analyze both the visual and verbal signs that implies the act of lookism. The analysis will start from how the main character rates people’s face with numbers and how people—and in this drama’s case, women, are being pressured with how they are supposed to look in order to be aesthetic in the eye of the other people. Then I will examine thoroughly on how the lookism does exists in daily life through the bullying that happened to the characters during their childhood.

After analyzing the act of lookism, through the subway advertisement scene in the drama, i will explain the encouragement of plastic surgery that is really popular in South Korea and then moving on to how some people think of someone who had the plastic surgery done to their face. Last but not least, I will analyze how the cultural changes affect the standard of Korean beauty.

#### **4.2.1 Judgement on People’s Face.**

Judging people’s appearance might sound rude and something that should not be done,

however, the harsh reality of a human having their own thoughts while blending in the society is inescapable. As a human, our unconscious mind might have accidentally or intentionally judge people by their appearance but to go as far as rating the people’s appearance has taken the whole Lookism to another level. It might sound impossible

for people to constantly rating other's face but it doesn't mean that it never happens. The drama 'Gangnam Beauty' tried to show the possibility of this act can happen due to pressure of beauty standard that the society puts on someone. From the beginning of the first episode of the drama, 'Gangnam Beauty' showed the narration of the main character, Kang Mi Rae, who was riding the train on her way to get plastic surgery and then a girl walked in and stand next to her. From that point, she started to analyze other women's face and rate their face with points from 70 to 100, as 100 indicates the perfect beauty while the 70 is the average score.

**Figure 8. Kang Mi Rae rating people's face in the subway.**



(source: JTBC, Episode 1)

The narration by Kang Mi Rae

- 미래 : 절개 쌍꺼풀, 앞트임, 뒤트임, 밀트임, 코성형, 윤곽성형, 지방이식, 입술필러. 75 점.
- Mi Rae : Double eyelids surgery, Front Epicanthic Folds, Back Epicanthic Folds, Nose job, Face Contouring surgery, Fat injections, Lip Fillers. 75 points
- 미래 : 절개 쌍꺼풀, 앞트임, 코성형, 안면윤곽 라인. 70 점.
- Mi Rae : Double eyelid surgery, Front Epicanthic Folds, nose job, Face line contouring surgery. 70 Points.

The selected scenes above showed how rating people's appearance, especially their face has somehow become the habit of Kang Mi Rae. This of course giving most of its audience the main idea of what this drama is going to be about in the very first episode and that the audiences have to be prepared of whatever this drama is going to offer whether it's a subtle or bold form of discrimination. The drama depicted how she made a list on what 'makes' the person pretty through the surgery done to their faces. The daily lookism is represented subtly in the visual of these scenes as an individual judge someone's appearance in public places. While it might be true that this case is not happen to just everyone, but we can assume that there is no exception that some people in the society will have these kinds of thoughts in their head, especially when it comes to something, they feel lacking of (in Mi Rae's case, it's beauty). While insecurity might happen due to the childhood trauma, it could also happen due to the societal expectations of the existing standard. As the society (family, friends) expect an individual to be in a certain standard, an individual will develop some kind of anxiety of how the people perceive them and starting to compare themselves to others.

During adolescences, girls have particular concerns about weight, body shape and self-image (Pop, 2016). According to POP, socio-cultural patterns that associate fatness with laziness and overweight person existed yet subtly, thus explaining the correlation of body-image dissatisfaction to one's self esteem. People who struggled with their overweight tend to aware of their body size that makes them feel insecure to blend in the society as their self-confidence slowly decreasing. Body is no longer seen as a biological entity but also have a social entity that represents more than just a mere existence of a person. Body is also representing one's social status and personality, and also a requirement to be accepted in the society with certain sets of standard.

In this scene, the drama showed how Kang Mi Rae who went through adolescences with the body shape and appearances that were considered unattractive by the society, surrender to her own anxiety and insecurity. Her confidence before she got the plastic surgery done to her face was low that she dressed up in a hoodie jacket and wore mask to hide her face. The low self-esteem causing her to keep looking at

other people's appearances and giving scores to convince herself that plastic surgery can make her pretty. In another scene, this act of judging seems to continue.

**Figure 9. Kang Mi Rae rating her new friends in college based on their appearance.**



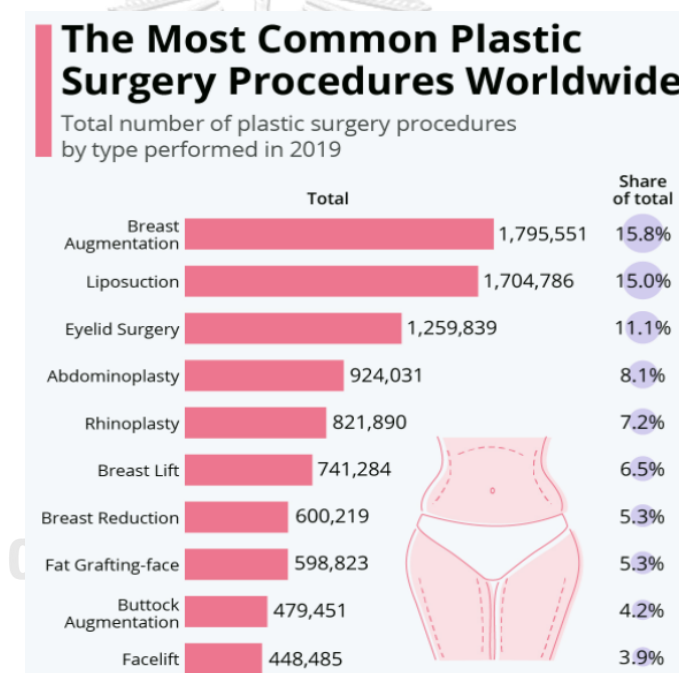
(source: JTBC, Episode 1)

Yet another scene in the very first episode that shows the habitual of Kang Mi Rae judging the people around her from their appearances. She mentioned all the detail on her friends' faces such as eyes (눈), nose (코) and face shape (얼굴형) and then proceed on giving them a total score of their face or for lack of a better words, their attractiveness. The unconscious act of lookism that most people might have not realized that they did were well-represented in this scene through the visual representation and the narration of Kang Mi Rae describing her new friends' appearances in detail. As Stuart Hall mentioned, language and images can give people an idea of what the meaning of something. In this context, through both language and visual sign, the subtle message of lookism was conveyed and it is not as simple as a mere judgment of a human. The scenes depicted the ugly truth of how the society set the standard of beauty that makes people constantly anxious of meeting new people. The lookism in the society causes an individual to judge others appearance and, in the end, raising a question to ourself whether "am I as pretty as them?". It is not that this apply to everyone but in general, as a human being, we cannot escape our own anxiety. Those who had gone through lookism at one point in their life, would feel

anxious of their own appearance and tend to overthink which lead them to compare themselves to the others. Perhaps one would contend that it is not happen in reality and that the drama overdid it, but it is indeed the ugly truth in our reality. It is indeed in human's nature to judge people whether they are conscious of their act or not, however the fact that judging one's appearance with

According to the statistic that was taken in the year of 2019 (which is the year when this drama aired), Breast Augmentation, Liposuction and Eyelid surgery is the top three most done surgeries in the chart. The survey was conducted by The International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery and it shows that many women are under the pressure of the beauty standard in 2019.

**Table 1. Most Common Plastic Surgery Worldwide in 2019**



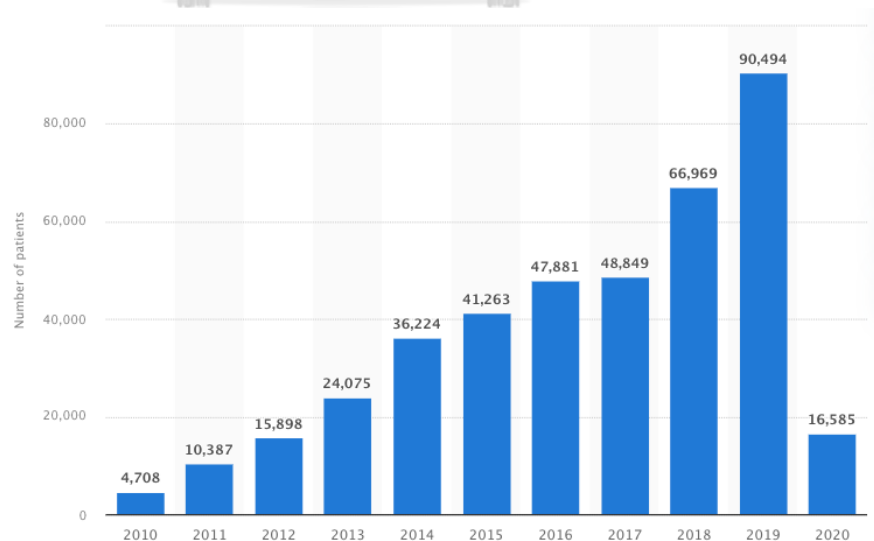
(Source: <https://www.statista.com/chart/25322/plastic-surgery-procedures-by-type/>)

The chart shows how the plastic surgery commonly done due to the reason of wanting to look attractive. Plastic Surgery on Breast part with the total of 1, 795,551 women in the world underwent this procedure, shows how many women are insecure with the way their upper body look and some would prefer to change it. Liposuction comes the second with only 90,000 lowers in numbers, as the fat removal around the hips, arms and other body parts are considered the fastest way to lose a little bit of weight. The eyelid surgery, however, mostly done by the Asian due to the lack of

crease on their eyelids or the American medical text would refer it as ‘Superior Palpebral Fold’. Of all the surgeries options, double eyelids surgery is indeed the most famous one in South Korea plastic surgery demand. According to The Korea Herald, the double eyelid surgery was first introduced in late 19<sup>th</sup> by Japan but the surgery became popular in Asia during the Korean war. The interracial marriages between American soldiers stationed and Korean women were so often which influenced many of the Korean Women to alter their eyes. So, in this case, plastic surgery has become attraction to the locals due to the influence from outside of Korea during the colonialism.

Another data published by the Statista Research Department in November 24<sup>th</sup> 2021 showed the survey of a foreign plastic surgery patient in South Korea that they did from 2009 to 2020. The data was taken until 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic that hits in the early of 2020, causing the country to closed its border for tourists. Unfortunately, the data showed the highest numbers of plastic surgery patient between 2009 and 2020 is in 2019, which is only a year after the Gangnam Beauty drama was broadcasted both in television and online streaming platform (July 27<sup>th</sup> 2018 – September 15<sup>th</sup> 2018).

**Table 2. South Korea Foreign Plastic Surgery Patient 2009-2020**



(Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/804273/south-korea-foreign-plastic-surgery-patient-number/>)

The chart showed that the numbers of people who went to South Korea for plastic surgery had increased over time, only dropping down in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hits and all access of travelling was banned all over the world. The highest number of plastic surgeries done to the foreigner is in 2019 with a total of 90,494 procedures done, showing how popular South Korea when it comes to plastic surgery that it attracts foreign medical patients. Although 2019 is not the breakthrough of Korean Wave known as Hallyu, however the Korean Wave remains strong worldwide and South Korea remains strong in the matter of attracting tourist to visit the country. In fact, according to Statista Research Development, the total inbound of foreign tourist is 967,000 people in 2019 with 4.4% of the total numbers had “medical treatment and beauty services” as their motives due to the popularity of Korean plastic surgery.

#### **4.2.2 The Beauty Pressure and Privilege in the society**

Looking attractive is undeniably easy to get the attention of people. Usually, an attractive person tends to be more confident on their look so people would find them adorable and favored. Being pretty surely has some advantages most of the time yet this thing causes the pressure appear on each individual. How to become pretty so that people would talk to me? How to become pretty so that the employers would hire me? These questions are haunting inside the head of an individual who is not considered themselves as attractive. The desire of wanting to look attractive in order to be accepted by the society mixed with their insecurities causing them to live with more pressure in life. Apparently, this kind of pressure is not only coming from an individual but from the outside. Some people are not bold enough to voice out their opinion but some who does, surely helps the beauty ideal pressure growing in one's person.

There are few scenes in the ‘Gangnam Beauty’ drama that explicitly tells how someone, especially a woman, receive many pressures of having to fit the ideal beauty from the other people. However, there are also a few scenes that shows how people who is considered ‘attractive’ gets many privileges in their life. The message of lookism was shown in a satire yet not very boldly through the visual signs and the dialogues between each characters in the drama. There are four exact examples of



how this drama represent the lookism in South Korean society very well. The first one will be analyses below.

**Figure 10. Criticism on how women should look like.**



(Source: JTBC, Episode 6)

In this scene, Mi Rae and Kyung Suk's faculty was having a donation event where they had to sell foods for donation. The senior in their faculty however picked four of the prettiest girls in Mi Rae's batch to attract the customers. While this shows another example of how the lookism works, there is a part where the seniors complain about the other girls that works behind the scene (as props and helpers).

선배 : 애들아. 여자면 다 여자가 아니잖아. 유니폼은 못 입는다 쳐도 얼굴은 돼야 되는데. 일단 윤별이 너는 여자처럼 보이려면 이 머리부터 기르고. 태희 난 살 좀 빼라니까. 은이 넌 좀 웃고 다녀라. 여자가 좀 사근사근 웃고 다니는 맛이 있어야지.

Senior : Guys, not all women are a woman. Even if you can't wear uniform, at least you still have the face. Yoon Byul, if you want to look like a woman, grow your hair long. Tae Hwi, I told you to lose weight. Eun, you should smile more. Women smile gently more to look good.

From the dialogue above it represents how the lookism puts an actual pressure on people, especially women and how they should look. The senior mentioned about someone who don't dress nicely at least should have taken care of their face, and then the criticism continued. The senior started to tell the other girls what they should have

do in order to be accepted as ‘attractive’, especially as a woman. The girls were criticized on their appearances and being set to the certain standard of what he considered as attractive. Yoon Byul who has short hair were told to grow her hair long to make her look more feminine which what he refers to as the beauty of a woman. Tae Hwi was told to lose weight because she is bigger in size than the average women and thus considered off the beauty standard of how someone supposed to look. Even Eun who has both long hair and lean body, which fit to the beauty standard, still were told on how to look even more pleasant in the eye of the society. This creating the pressure on people, especially on women.

The lookism did not stop there. It still continue to the next part where it represents the lookism as something that has somehow been neutralized. After that scene, the other senior came and asked what happened, the senior who commented about the girls’ appearances added,

선배 : 갑자기 예민해져 가지고 농담 갖고 막 화를 냈잖아요. 야 우리가 언제 너네 한테 못생겼다고 했어? 이렇게 하면 예쁘겠다는 게 왜?

Senior : They suddenly become sensitive and got angry over a joke. Hey, when did we say that you guys are ugly? I’m just saying you are pretty if you are like this, why?”

The dialogue above tells how this kind of lookism behavior has been seen as nothing but a joke in the society that us people, especially women should not have taken it too seriously. However, lookism is still lookism, setting someone to a certain standard of beauty and forcing them to do follow the standard are still included in the act of discrimination. The senior tried to justify his reason for saying that he never literally said that the girls were ugly and he just said that the girls will look pretty if they do this and that, but what is the point of telling them to do this and that to look in a certain way? It surely is the way his mind thinks of how someone is supposed to look in certain way to be pleasant to look at in the eye of the society, especially the opposite gender. We can tell that the message of this kind of lookism is issue is being

delivered to the audience by the drama. Also, it shows how this act of subtle verbal discrimination put the pressure on people, especially on one of the characters named Tae Hwi who has the slightly large body than average.

태희 : 예쁘다는 것도 싫다고 누가 예쁘다고 해 달라? 우리가 무슨 매장에 진열된 물건이야? 어떤 건 예쁘고, 어떤 건 안 예쁘고.  
Senior : I don't want to be told pretty and who asked to be called pretty? Are we some display item in store? Some of us are pretty some of us are not.

Tae Hwi apparently got tired of being told on what to do to her body just to look pretty in the eyes of other. She also mentioned about how she felt women are seen merely as objects displayed in the store for people to look and judge whether they are pretty or not. Tae Hwi is probably how the drama depicted the struggle of people (both gender man and woman) who are bigger in size than the average beauty standard might be feeling. The society kept pressuring her to lose some weight, although some of them were being told for a certain health issue, but forcing it down the throat of someone who is not completely obese to lose some weight just to look pretty is just how petty the lookism can get. People who are bigger in size than the average face so many struggles to build up their confidence in public, but if the pressure on how they are supposed to look keep building, they would struggle with it and they can no longer live happily with the way their body look.

This matter has been adapted in many works in Korea, especially the popular movie called 200 pounds of beauty where it tells a story of an obese woman who decided to underwent plastic surgery to completely change her body and the way she look, only to end up not having the happiness that she thought she would get. The pressure of having to change or maintain the body to be able to feel like being accepted by the society lead to an individual to do various things, some are going to the extent of hurting themselves by over-dieting or, obsessing over plastic surgery and developing bulimia behavior. Some went to a certain extent of depression and suicide as people have limit and the unimaginable can also happen when one's not in the right mind after being pushed to their capability to bear with certain pressure.

Another example of beauty pressure in this drama that represent the issue of lookism is the scene where Hyun Soo Ah, the natural beauty in the university, were actually going through a bulimia behavior in order to stay in shape. She did this behavior behind the closed door due to the image of natural beauty that she wants to show everyone. She always claimed that she cannot gain weight no matter how much she eats and that it's just her natural body system. However, the fact behind the closed door, she was struggling to throw up every time after she eats.

**Figure 11. Hyun Soo Ah's Secret Bulimia Behavior**



(Source: JTBC, Episode 13)

Hyun Soo Ah always get praise by people around her that adores her because she eats a lot but seems to never gain any weight at all. She told the reason why is because her body is naturally like that, making people adores her and called her the real natural beauty. There are some people with this kind of genetical condition but Hyun Soo Ah is certainly not the one. She gained weight normally, just like other people, what keeps her from gaining weight is that she keeps trying to vomit everything that she eats so that her stomach will be empty without having her to worry about gaining some fat.

Bulimia Nervosa is an eating disorder where someone would forcefully vomit the food that they just consume, and already known to be caused by anxiety due to poor body self-image (low self-esteem) and dieting. The concern for one's body weight is commonly found as the bullet that trigger this disorder. (Kourkouta &

Friends, 2019). In the case of Hyun Soo Ah, the urge of avoiding weight gain and the craving for compliments of her beauty from other people led her to this wrong eating behavior. She hates plastic surgery because she likes her ‘natural beauty’ image but she keeps forcing her body to struggle with her unhealthy behaviors. The drama also shows how she always consumes diet pills with her empty stomach, which can cause many health problems if it keeps going for years. Through the depiction of Hyun Soo Ah, this drama represents how lookism at certain points can be harmful to an individual whether emotionally or physically. Even without the narration, this scene will give the audiences an idea of what lookism is and how it can be harmful to someone.

Another lookism issue that is represented in this drama is the privilege and favoritism that those who are considered to meet the beauty standard receive from the society. There are many scenes in the drama that deliver this issue but the very prominent example shown in the drama is through the scene where it is very easy for Do Kyung Suk to get the part-time job because of his appearances.

**Figure 12. Do Kyung Suk getting hired easily due to his good looks.**



(Source: JTBC, Episode 10)

At first, when Do Kyung Suk told Mi Rae that he needs money because he ran away from home, Mi Rae told him that she just got hired as a part-timer in a high-end retail department store. Do Kyung Suk then asked Mi Rae if there is any position available, Mi Rae then went to call the employer and asked if Do Kyung Suk can apply for the job. The employer refused at first because it was a conversation through a phone call, but after coming to the department store together with Mi Rae to meet the employer, he immediately got hired despite not meeting the working hour requirements and the experience requirements.

It cannot be denied that getting a job nowadays is not as easy as it used to be. The growing populations could not keep up with the replacements of tasks with machinery and technology. The competition in business world has also become more competitive and the company has to carefully choose their employees. Good look is definitely one of the biased criteria that most companies would prefer, especially on the retail work where the employees would have to face the customers. Thus, selecting good-looking employees is significant to business organizations and South Korea has an extreme competitiveness for gaining jobs that led to the importance of the physical appearance during the hiring process (Kim Su Hyun, 2012).

The lookism is represented very well during this hiring process scenes. Do Kyung Suk who does not have any working experiences before and cannot work on some days that the company expected him to due to his personal reason are being accepted easily without any condition. Although the employer was quite not pleased that Do Kyung Suk did not meet few working requirements, he immediately accepted him and gave him the contract for him to sign right away because of his good looks. This reflects how easily someone get the privilege just by being handsome or pretty which could lead to a serious trouble in the employment. People who have the talent, skills and fulfil the requirements for the job are getting eliminated just because they are not considered 'attractive'.

#### **4.2.3 The bullying due to lookism**

Bullying does happen everywhere, especially in school where the adults are not completely in control on monitoring the students. The students, however, some will argue that in most cases, cannot be fully blamed due to the reason that most of them still cannot differentiate between the right and the wrong. According to the Anti-Bullying Alliance of UK, the bullying solely based on someone's appearance is called an Appearance-targeted bullying, which targets an aspect of a person's appearance from their size, height and disfigurements and it is the most common reason for children in young age experiencing bullying. From the survey result that the YMCA England and Wales held, 60% of young people admitting that they tried to change their appearance after being bullied, some, however, having a suicidal thoughts and self-harm as the result to cope with the pressure of being bullied.

From the very first episode, this drama showed two particular scenes of bullying in childhood that causes trauma to the main female lead, Kang Mi Rae and the second female lead, Hyun Soo Ah. Figure 3 is when Kang Mi Rae was bullied due to her weight and body shape while figure 4 is when Hyun Soo Ah was mocked by her classmate due to her unappealing appearances.

**Figure 13. Kang Mi Rae was bullied in her childhood due to her appearance.**



(source: JTBC, Episode 1)

After the surgery scene in the first episode, the drama showed the scene of a chubby little girl who was eating in a street food stall. The girl was considered unattractive and then there are three boys who came to her and started to bully her verbally with words such as: “강돼지” which in literal translation means “Kang Pig”. This is the form of nickname that used in South Korea, using the family name and then added with the words addressing the person such as 김 (surname) + 사장 (position) or 김 (surname) + 비소 (position). However the context of this nickname in the scene is to mock Kang Mi Rae by using the word “Pig / 돼지”. And then they continuously calling Kang Mi Rae with “강미래! 돼지다!” which in literal translation means “Kang Mi Rae is a Pig!”.

Kang Mi Rae who was a chubby girl back in her childhood was considered as unattractive due to her overweight condition. She went through the bullying and then in later scenes, it showed Mi Rae in her middle school, already lost weight and think that she became normal. She confessed to her crush but she got rejected and called ugly. She was also badmouthed by her classmate. This shows how not only body appearance that matter but the face is also matter. In the end, she narrated about her feelings.

미래 : 난 결국 평범해질 수 없었다. 평범하게 사랑할 수도 없네...  
나는 오크다.

Mi Rae : In the end I cannot become normal. I cannot even love normally...  
I am an Orc.

*Orc* is a fictional humanoid monster, often described as a creature with ugly and scary physical appearances. Calling someone with ‘Orc’ can be considered as degrading manner where it means that so-called Orc-looking person is having an appearance that makes other people uncomfortable or scared. In the narration, Mi Rae completely lost her confidence and even called herself an Orc. Due to the rejection and bullying, Mi Rae was struggling with herself and learned of not to accept her appearance the way it is because she felt as if she is a monster. According to the study done by Pop, the correlation between the changes of image during the childhood to the adulthood affect the self-esteem of a person. As they grow up, the image of themselves also develops and poor opinions of their bodies can cause low self-esteem and self-confidence.

The representation of lookism is slight vague in figure number 3 because people would argue that the bullying was done by kids and that kids do use funny nicknames with each other. However, later after this scene, the three kids returned and threw a popsicle to the ground in front of Kang Mi Rae and said that she would eat it because she is a pig. The bullying continues in school as they locked her in the bathroom. While it is true that bullying does happen anywhere in the world, this particular scene of bullying and for the reason behind it to happen is because of the appearance are ironically a proof to the existence of lookism in South Korea. The drama tried to show how lookism can happen even during the childhood and the adolescence without us aware of it.

The drama gave another clue to the existence of lookism and how it affects people and the society in the next figure. In figure 4, the representation of lookism was strongly, if not, boldly through the childhood story of Hyun Soo Ah, the second female lead who is the prettiest girl and the most popular girl in the university.



**Figure 14. Hyun Soo Ah was bullied in her childhood due to her appearance.**



(source: JTBC, Episode )

The second bullying scene that this drama shows is the childhood of the ‘natural beauty’ Hyun Soo Ah. When she was a young girl, her mother abandoned her and she refused to clean herself. She was mocked by her classmate and no one wanted to be her friend. One day when her mom came home to bathe her and cut her hair, the next day she became pretty and her classmate started to praise and admire her for her appearance. She became popular and easily got many friends, also a lot of boys showed how they have crush on her because she is very pretty in their eyes. Soo Ah developed the mindset that if she became pretty, everyone would love her and would want to be with her whether as a friend or as a boyfriend. As she grew up, she tried to maintain her outer appearance just to get people’s attention even though she herself knows that her effort hurts the people around her. Being admired because of her appearance seems to be her coping mechanism dealing with the society.

The school bullying case in South Korea is quite concerning that there are a lot of cases of student trying to self-harm or did suicide based on this solid reason. According to The Korea Times article on 2020, from the 700,343 students invited to the survey, there is a result of 11,426 students experience school bullying which is increasing from last year (2019) with the number of 9,105 students. The rate of school violence among the elementary school students also increased by 0,8 percentage points to 4 percent. According to the SMOE (Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education),

verbal abuse was the most common kind of bullying with the number of 35,1 percent and then followed by social isolation at 17,6 percent, the rest of the percentages left rooms for physical and cyber bullying.

The Bullying in modern context is not always mean that the one who is physically strong will bully the weaker ones. In modern era, an act of threat or verbal that can affect one's psychological state is also included as a form of bullying. According to Rigby and Slee (1993), bullying takes different forms in school and the result can be manifested whether emotionally, physically or behavioral difficulties. As we can see, Kang Mi Rae was bullied because of her appearance and it affected her psychological state where she lost the self-confidence to grow up as a what she considered to be 'normal'. She changed her appearances because she wanted to be accepted by the society and she had this mindset that as long as she can be pretty, everyone will stop bad-mouthing her appearance. On the other case, Hyun Soo Ah who was lack of acceptance and love from her mother, seek the pleasure of getting praises by people around her calling her beautiful when she 'fixed' her appearance. She enjoyed being popular and be the demi-god with perfect natural beauty in people's eyes that she would do anything to maintain her beauty, even if it hurts her mentally or physically.

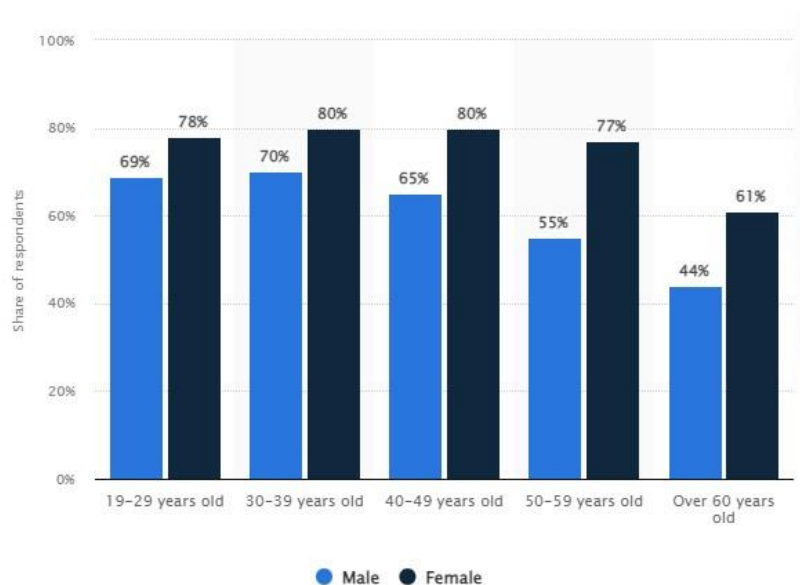
These scene shows that the childhood bullying that happened to someone in regards of their appearances strongly affected their hate on their own appearance and the decision on wanting to change their appearance, or in Soo Ah case, to maintain her appearance. The drama yet again represented lookism as a problem in the society as appearance has become even more important than one's feeling and mental health.

### **4.3 Encouragement and bad connotation on plastic surgery in South Korea**

It cannot be denied that South Korea is the most popular, if not number one, destination for plastic surgery. A lot of foreigner or tourist from all over the world came to South Korea to get surgery done to their face or body. South Korea who emerged to the world's economy as one of the countries who had successfully counter the economy crisis and rise from 1990s through the 2000s, is also developing really fast in terms of technology, thus encouraging the growth in medical field, specifically the cosmetic surgery. Although the surgery was already popular since the old days, the number keep increasing significantly as the Korean Wave known as Hallyu spread worldwide, it cannot be denied that Hallyu also play an important role in supporting the growing number of Korean Plastic surgery as the Korean Idol not only selling their talent but also the visual. The Korean Entertainment company also demanded a certain level of 'beauty' to be able to make debut in the entertainment industry.

#### **4.3.1 Plastic surgery encouragement in South Korea**

While insecurity plays the big role in the development of self-esteem, another factor that should be taken into account is the plastic surgery. Many studies have researched about the development of plastic surgery in South Korea as it got more popular from the 1990s up until now before the COVID-19 pandemic happen which banned most of the tourist in 2020. Although it seems like the plastic surgery has attracted many foreigners to come to Korea to do the procedure, the plastic surgery itself is a thing in South Korea and many Koreans especially women are encouraged and supported the idea of 'fix' their looks just to fit in some qualifications. It is hard to deny that looks has become an important role in daily life, including on landing for a job and marriage. Resent research was done in the year of 2020 by Won So from 1500 respondents of age 19 up to over 60 years old. The survey is about the respondent's opinion regarding the plastic surgery and how many of them accepted the idea of the importance of plastic surgery on landing for a job or a successful marriage. Below is the result of the survey.

**Table 3. South Korea acceptance of plastic surgery for job or marriage**

(Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1111242/south-korea-acceptance-of-plastic-surgery-for-job-or-marriage-by-age-and-gender/>)

As we can see in the chart, most of the respondents who agreed that plastic surgery is needed for job or marriage qualification are those who are in age of late 20s up to late 40s and the gender of the respondents that agree regarding the terms ‘look for job or marriage’ is female. Female respondents in the age between 30 to 49 has the highest number in percentages and the graph slightly went down by 3 percent for the female in the age of 50 to 59. It shows how female are being under pressure of how important the society think of their beauty standard, especially in the young adulthood where females are either pursuing their career, their success in marriage or even both. However, it interesting to see the result of the male respondents. Unlike the female respondents, male respondents are slightly lower in numbers and as the age got older the decreasing number of percentages is a lot than the female’s.

In the first episode of this drama, the scene depicted after she got off the train, that she walked out of the train station while on her way, the advertising on the station walls is all about plastic surgery. The message behind these advertisements is the fact that plastic surgery is “encouraged” in the society and that woman might constantly feel insecure and feel the need to change their appearances.

**Figure 15. Plastic Surgery Advertisements in the Subway Station**



(source: JTBC, Episode 1)

The advertisement was showing various kind of persuasion to do surgery for women to make themselves feel ‘beautiful’. One of the ads said “당신이 꿈꾸는 아름다운 모습을” which means “*the beautiful look that you are dreaming of*”, and then the “PLASTIC SURGERY” words written below combined with a beautiful-looking model on the screen show how much beauty standard is promoted in the place where so many people passed by in order to gain the attention. So how do the government support and promote the plastic surgery in South Korea?

According to Parhan and friends, the South Korean governments are supportive towards cosmetic surgery and to prove this statement, they mentioned that various collaboration with institutions related to plastic surgery has been done with the goal of increasing the number of cosmetic surgery tourism industry by the end of 2006. KTO (Korean Tourism Organization) also targeted a total goal of 300,000 tourist in 2015. The government has a positive respond towards the cosmetic surgery which raising many questions and criticism. With the number of tourists attracted to the cosmetic surgery in South Korea increasing, it is true that the number of profit that they could reap, profiting the country’s national income, but on the side note, it does impact the changes of the so-called beauty standard in the society.

Pop culture has been part of Korea's newfound hegemony and soft power. Korean entertainment companies leverage their Korean Pop music on social media sites as their main platform for launching and sustaining popularity of their global pop stars. Besides this, tendency towards emphasizing on pop stars' aesthetic appearance has become key factor in K-Pop's global production and distribution. And on the other hand, the netizen manipulates and mash, post and collect visual images, creates a synergy between the two. (Lee, 2016)

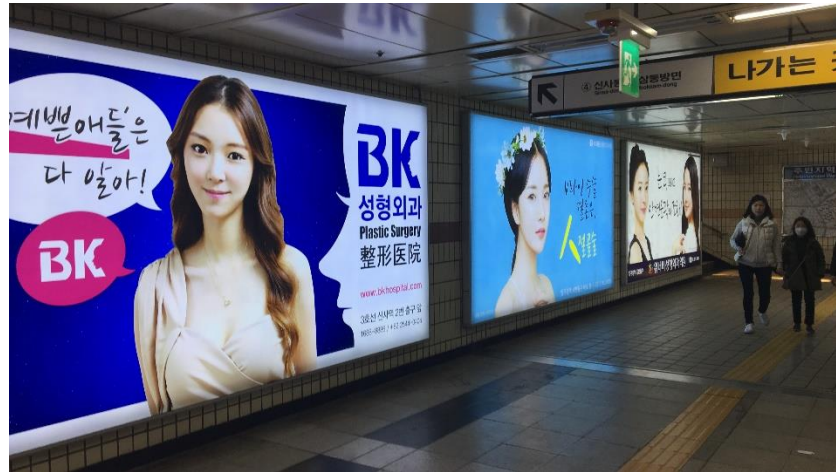
So why the drama showed a scene where there are many plastic surgery advertisements in public spaces? It is because advertisement holds a strong power on persuading the people's mind. The advertisement not only be the crutch to get the people's attention but also a persuasive communication mechanism which can influence people's emotions (Heath 2007). In another word, an advertisement is made not only to promote but also to touch one's emotion and in the cosmetic surgery case, it is aim to persuade people with insecurities and low self-esteem to change how they look. This indeed happen not only in South Korea but also worldwide.

**Figure 16. Example of Plastic Surgery Advertisements in the Subway Station**



(Another example of plastic surgery advertisement in one of the subway stations where many people pass by everyday. Source: koreatimes.co.kr)

**Figure 17. Example of Plastic Surgery Advertisements in the Subway Station**



(Another example of plastic surgery advertisement in one of the subway stations. Source: npr.org)

Although it was supported and boosted by the government, recently, there are many cases where people are against this kind of advertisement in public places in South Korea, especially in the subway transportation where a lot of people pass by every day. In one of the articles written by The Korea Times, it is reported that Seoul Metro, one of the biggest Seoul Transportation corporations decided to ban the plastic surgery ads and focusing more on the art and culture-related advertisements by 2022. It is said that the advertisement has become more disturbing to people as it shows the image of how women should look and how it emotionally causing harm to people with insecurities especially women.

#### **4.3.2 Bad connotation of plastic surgery and the lookism trend of ‘Gangnam Beauty’**

Although plastic surgery is something common in South Korea, it also has its downside regarding what the society perceive someone who underwent the plastic surgery. Perhaps a simple or minor job done to their eyelids or their nose are considered good but those who underwent various of procedures here and there would cast attention of others in the society. An overly done plastic surgery in South Korea apparently have the bad connotation as the society would prefer a natural-look surgery more than the complete fix of one’s face.

In this drama, the bad connotation on plastic surgery were represented through many scenes, but one particularly that really interesting to look at is the one where Mi Rae's parents misunderstood the terms of 'Gangnam Beauty'. When Kang Mi Rae found a part-time job during her summer vacation in a high-end retail department store, her parents went to visit her workplace to see how their daughter is doing. When they were about to leave, they overheard people talking about Kang Mi Rae and called her 'Gangnam Beauty'. His parents misunderstood the term, thinking that it must be compliments because according to them, Gangnam, a district in Seoul, is always associated with good and high-class things.

Ever since that day, both Mi Rae parents were so happy that people compliment Mi Rae and that they thought 'Gangnam Beauty' is some sort of modern term to describe someone's beautiful appearances. One day they met Do Kyung Suk's mother and sister and Mi Rae's mother compliments Kyung Suk's mother's beauty by saying that she looks totally like 'Gangnam Beauty'. Kyung Suk's mother was flabbergasted and his sister who disliked her mom being called that immediately explaining the truth behind the meaning of 'Gangnam Beauty'.

**Figure 18. Kang Mi Rae's parents found out about the meaning of 'Gangnam Beauty'**



(source: JTBC, Episode 12)



도경희 : 저희 엄마 성형 안 하셨는데요. 강남미인.. 그거 성형 많이 한 사람들한테 말이잖아요.

Do Kyung Hee : My mother did not get any plastic surgery. Gangnam Beauty. It's what you say to people who do a lot of plastic surgery.

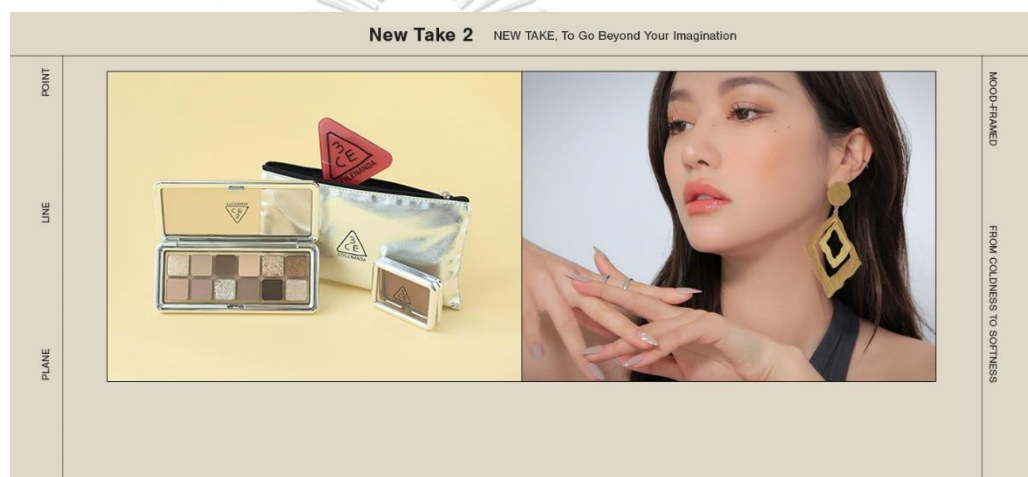
Upon finding out the truth about what the real meaning behind ‘Gangnam Beauty’ is, it is obvious how the parents were disappointed and that they were worried about Kang Mi Rae’s mental health for being called ‘Gangnam Beauty’ by the people. The drama represents how lookism still happens, even after someone try to fix their appearances. In contrary of her expectation after became beautiful through surgery, the society will still have the set of standards that is hard for her to keep up. Looking natural but not beauty enough to match the beauty standard, they will get judged and, in some cases, bullied. Meanwhile, by looking ‘overly did’ surgeries on their appearances, they still get nicknamed and get talked behind their back. This case might not only happen in South Korea but also everywhere in the world as people who overdid surgeries in order to fix their appearances, is judged as unnatural by the people because there is certain standard of beauty that just don’t fit for people who overly did the plastic surgeries.

The term Gangnam beauty itself is a derogatory term for people who went through many plastic surgery procedures and looking off from the natural beauty standard that the society looks up to. It cannot be denied that Gangnam is one of the proofs of how successful the fast economy development and modernization of South Korea. Gangnam, as we know, is a high-end district in Seoul with many skyscrapers, luxurious housing and fancy hot spots. People tend to associates Gangnam with the riches, meaning that people who live in Gangnam are the well-offs. So why the term ‘Gangnam Beauty’ is a derogatory term instead of associated with how glamorous Gangnam district is? It is because people assumed that those who did many plastic surgeries must have had spent a lot of money, and those who can afford that many plastic surgeries are the ones who probably lives in Gangnam.

In recent years, the beauty standard in South Korea bends towards the more natural looking one and we can tell this through the beauty products and cosmetics that they sell in store. According and interview with Kim Bo Gyung, a senior make-up

artis done by The Jakarta Post, natural and idol-like make up makes people look youthful and cheerful which makes the look ‘desirable’ and that is why many cosmetic brand start to produce more natural-looking shades. The makeup style in South Korea has been leaning more towards natural looking with a hint of slight red-coral shade or any other shades that are not too bold on the face, one of the prominent examples be the famous brand from South Korea called ‘Style Nanda’ or known as 3CE, This make-up brand is also one of the trending brands that came up with the natural make-up shades to point out the natural feature of people’s face.

**Figure 19. Example of natural-looking shades of make-up by 3CE**



(Source: stylenandaen.com)

While the natural-beauty seems to be the criteria that people nowadays would look up to, the technology of science in the plastic surgery industry is also developing to improve the result of their procedure. Although leaning into a more ‘natural looking result’, the fact that it is a surgery after all will not be able to hide the unnatural procedure done to the face or the body. Thus, those who had underwent plastic surgery are still struggling with this kind of bad image of their looks just because they are not natural enough to fit in the beauty standard requirements.

#### 4.4 The effect of cultural changes towards the Beauty standard in South Korea

Finally, we can mention about how lookism is growing in South Korea due to the effect of the cultural changes in South Korea, especially in regards of the beauty standard. As the country developed way too fast, some people were not prepared but some did and many influences came from the outside, changing some of aspects and point of view of the young generation whether lifestyles, habits or even culture and beliefs. The cultural changes itself means the shifting or a modification of point of view in regards of culture caused by an invention, innovation and even contact with the other culture outside of Korea. Each generation sure do have a different perspective and values on something, including the beauty standard. Hot trends whether it is a fashion or a make-up, will be favored and sometimes look upon to by the young people, especially with the effect of American pop culture and the spread of Hallyu or known as Korean Wave worldwide.

In one of their articles, Asian Media Center wrote about how the Korean beauty standard changed the beauty standard in Asia through the interview with Chye Ling Huang and Annie Evans. In the articles they mentioned that for Huang, she was once offered a double eyelids plastic surgery by her own family due to her small eyes and she regarded the beauty standard are heavily influenced by the western. Thus, implying that the ideal beauty eyes for women is the one with big / double eyelid eyes. On the other hand, Annie Evans commented about how beauty standard is all about “doll-like” look which means it is heavily related on skin color and body weight. This implication on beauty standard is apparently represented in the drama through a character Kang Mi Rae, who was overweight and considered-ugly, was dealing with a lot of pressure from the society trying to fit in and changed her look to a doll-like features. It is also represented through the character Hyun Soo Ah, who was not considered attractive with slightly darker skin tone as she dealt with the pressure psychologically which ended up with self-harming behavior. These terms of beauty can be seen especially in the entertainment industry that has big impact on its audiences and fans.

Hallyu brought a new qualification on the beauty standard as K-Pop is booming all over the Asia continent, even to the western. It cannot be denied that

entertainment industry is a part of Korean culture. Most of South Korean looks up to celebrity in terms of beauty, therefore to become a celebrity, one must accomplish both looks and talent qualification. Besides looking up to their favorite celebrities, South Korean has developed the idol culture such as they would want to look like the idol that they idolized, especially the adolescents. The K-Pop industry in fact has a strong influence on the young generations, therefore the entertainment companies would do anything when it comes to promoting their groups. According to Genovese, K-Pop industry can be ruthless for its monetary capitalization and culture dominance purpose. The music video of K-Pop is designed to attract the youth, showing the ideal body shape, skin color, hairstyle and even the fashion. Thus, the adolescent who are in the phase of growing up and patching their way to their future self are influenced by the power of the media.

Despite knowing how harsh and extreme the pressure in the entertainment industry, many teenagers in South Korea actively indulged themselves in dancing and singing then auditioning as trainee in many companies. They work hard to chase their dream to become K-Pop idol that they see on television which is why they are also putting a lot of effort on their appearances. Most K-Pop idol that perform on tv are usually have a slim/thin body with porcelain-like skin color and also they are dressing very stylishly. They are made to shows the young and cheerful vibe to the audiences through their appearances. There are many examples of idols who turned into an actors or actresses and many audiences attracted to some dramas or movie starred by the idols due to their looks as their other motives of watching.

Korean Wave or Hallyu brought a new type of beauty standard in the society as for example the hair color and also a certain body type. One of the prime examples of how the K-Pop changes the concept of beauty is that in the past, the standard of a weight of a woman are not set to the point of them to be skinny resembling the skeleton. Back then black hair is considered beautiful as the silkier black a woman's hair is, the prettier she is. However, with the trend of dyeing hair with various bright colors that obviously being popularized by the K-Pop idols, many people nowadays dye their hair to follow the trend and to feel like they are beautiful and stylish just like their idols. Next is related to the body weight, there

is this certain sets of body weight/figure standard that the fans targeted on the idols and those who can't fit the certain criteria of what they called 'a good body posture', that member of the idol group would get body shaming and various discrimination.

This is exactly the case that happened to one of the members of girl group called PRISTIN under Pledis entertainment. The girl named Kyla who is a Korean-American, was slightly curvier than the usual girl group member body so she was being criticized by the fans to lose weight up to the point where the fans really sabotage her during the group performances by not singing or cheering during her lines in the song (AMFG, 2022). Despite her talents both in dancing and singing, the fans couldn't care less as they kept demanding her to lose some weight. Thus, this shows that in the past woman who are considered curvy is good because it will be easy for her to give birth and to take care of the children, however nowadays, being slightly curvy is not considered beautiful and that in the case of Kyla, she was demanded to lose weight in order to be able to resembles her group mates.

The importance of a girl group to fit a certain weight and body standard is just so strict nowadays that many celebrities went through toxic diet and many diet pills or slimming products are being produce and developed every year. This is not only happened to a celebrity but even among the ordinary citizens. Celebrities became their inspiration and ideal beauty people are obsessing over looking skinny instead of just fit.

In this drama particularly, instead of casting another actor, the PD decided to casted Cha Eun Woo, who is a member of a K-Pop boy group called ASTRO as Do Kyung Suk, a character who is known for his visual. Despite his popularity, Cha Eun Woo who often received critics on his performance for the lack of emotions and acting skill at that time, was casted in the drama as the main lead. The production team of this drama surely aiming for the adolescents and the K-Pop international fans as Hallyu has been really popular worldwide. It is good as it left room for Cha Eun Woo to improve his acting skill, but on the other hand, it gives the audience especially an international audience an idea of what the beauty standard for a man in South Korea is.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

Beauty standard does exist everywhere and it cannot be denied that the qualifications of beauty sets by the society are putting pressure on almost every individual, especially women. The industrialization and the fast modernization in South Korea exposed the South Korean to various new things and cultures, which one of them is the changes of the term that they called 'beauty'. Many people try to fit themselves into the qualifications by dieting, keeping themselves update with the trend and taking care of their physique, yet some people found it hard to be satisfied with their effort that they have to gone through plastic surgery. Other than that, with many research done by the researchers regarding the plastic surgery in South Korea, it shown that looks have become an important part in daily life either for seeking a qualified marriage candidates or for landing a job. This also led to the existence of lookism in daily life.

I did this research with the intention of analysing and understanding how the drama 'Gangnam Beauty' represent the lookism in South Korean society through its characters, plot, scenes and subtle messages and how lookism is corelated with the beauty standard. How Lookism is represented in the drama 'Gangnam Beauty'? The drama 'Gangnam Beauty' represented the daily life lookism in a negative way and tends to be destructive. How the drama delivers the message and moral story in 'Gangnam Beauty'? Not only giving the idea of what is lookism to the audience, the drama also included the factors that triggers the lookism which delivers the moral story of how lookism is a social problem in the society. How the concept of Korean Beauty changes throughout the contemporary times? The concept of beauty changes throughout the time including in South Korea especially with the idol culture and the spread of Hallyu. Idol who appears on television are often serves visual which creating a certain sets of beauty standard that leads to a plastic surgery option. Plastic surgery was not really popular in the old days but nowadays people can get it done easily, even it is being given as a gift for graduating from high school. The increasing number of plastic surgeries for marriage rates in South Korea shows how appearance matters in life and how the criteria of beauty in South Korea changes throughout the contemporary times.

The result of this study also shows lookism and beauty standard correlated with each other and impacting an individual in the society. Details as follows:

### **5.1 Representation of Lookism**

When representing the lookism, the drama ‘Gangnam Beauty’ uses many cases such as bullying and beauty pressure and privilege. The scenes that show how Kang Mi Rae liked to give numbers to other’s appearance is reflecting how an individual can do the act of lookism without their awareness. Kang Mi Rae who liked to judge people’s appearance seems to reflect how appearance matters over anything. This judgmental behaviour from Kang Mi Rae was later revealed to be the effect of her being bullied during her childhood and adolescents because of how ‘ugly’ she looked. The scene where the female students including Kang Mi Rae got criticized for how they supposed to look shows how lookism can even happen around us from the people that we even close such as senior or friends. The beauty pressure from the people around us can be destructive, which later the drama. Hyun Soo Ah who was struggling with unhealthy diet and eating behaviour just to keep her natural beauty image reflecting how the beauty pressure exist in daily life and it is affecting our mental health which we end up not knowing what is right and wrong. Ironically the drama shows how the outer beauty seems to be more important than the inner beauty in the society. Moreover, the scene of Do Kyung Suk who got rejected for job-interview at first, got immediately accepted after the employer met him in person shows how lookism is affecting parts of our life process and that appearance matters to achieve some goals in life.

### **5.2 Plastic surgery in South Korea**

South Korea is known for its plastic surgery phenomenal as many people even foreigners come to visit the country to undergo plastic surgery procedures. The drama ‘Gangnam Beauty’ shows how plastic surgery is ironically encouraged by the government and supported by many companies. The very opening of the drama that shows Kang Mi Rae walking out of the subway full with plastic surgery advertisement on the walls reflects how plastic surgery is even being promoted. It shows that instead of supporting a person on loving themselves for what they are, the

government or society encouraging a person to fix their appearance. The advertisement influenced people who are questioning their value of beauty to aim for the beauty that what the beauty product company think fits the beauty standard. However, it is worth to mention that although plastic surgery advertisement was encouraged back in the day this drama aired, the plastic surgery itself has a negative connotation. The scene where Kang Mi Rae's parents found out the real meaning of 'Gangnam Beauty' shows how cruel the society can be towards the people who underwent plastic surgery that they even got nicknamed. The drama seems to show how despite a person changed their appearance to fit the beauty standard, they will never find salvation as they can never please people to be happy

### 5.3 Discussion

The analysis of 'Gangnam Beauty' drama reveals the representation or the meaning of lookism in South Korea tends to be in a negative perspective as we can see from the three main characters who struggles with their own problem which I find really interesting. Hyun Soo Ah who hurt herself just to appear 'Beautiful' in front of other represented how lookism can be destructive to one's self, Kang Mi Rae's character represented how lookism grows through the bullying and the insecurities that piling up during her adolescent. Meanwhile Do Kyung Suk who seems to have everything, is actually lacks in so many things including working appearance and connections with another human being. Although the drama delivered the message of 'Love Yourself' perfectly, the examples of lookism in daily life in South Korea are shown to be very destructive to one's self or even to other people.

The beauty standard in South Korea both men and women that are represented in this drama is typically slender body figure, V-shaped facial contour with small face, high nose and a fair skin. Body fats and facial feature are most prominent over all the outer beauty. Natalia (2016) mentioned how the K-Pop idol serving visuals to the audience with the similar criteria which mentioned previously. Although the drama might show lookism as a social problem in South Korean society, we cannot fully blame the Korean society because it is the beauty standard that has been shaped by the Asian society in the past especially the East Asia. Even in term of beauty in South



East Asia, for example Indonesia, those who have fair skin colour are more favoured than those who has darker skin colour despite the diverse ethnicity.

In China and Japan, fair skin is considered beautiful even in the past, the beauty criteria are all about having a small feature in the specific part of the body and a white healthy skin. In South Korea there is even a thing called *sambaek* (삼백) which means three whites, *samheuk* (삼흑) means three blacks, and *samhong* (삼홍) which means three reds that sets the beauty criteria for a woman. This stereotype of beauty causes lookism to easily grown into a problem as it creates significant differences between the importance of outer and inner beauty. Although Fallon (1990) mentioned that what define 'beauty' may be various, the beauty standard is ground on the appearance and how someone's exterior looks in the eyes of the other people, which implying more on the outer beauty while overlooking what people called the true beauty which is inner beauty. Outer beauty serves aesthetic to the eyes and creates a stigma in society. For example, in the job-seeking part, intelligent or talented candidates might get eliminated during the first document screening as the employer would pick the candidates that has more of an attractive appearance over them.

Just as what John Lie (2015) mentioned, beauty was never irrelevant in Korean society which means appearance was always a thing in their society, although Kim Su Hyun (2012) in her thesis mentioned that judging others is human nature, not only Koreans . However, with the beauty standard and compressed industrialization in South Korea, things have become highly competitive especially when it comes to land for a job. Lookism appears to be a problem as 'look' become an obstacle for someone to actually get the job they deserve that match perfectly with their skills and experiences. The drama shows this case through the scene where Do Kyung Suk easily got the job despite not meeting the criteria due to his look. It might be true that sometimes, the way the employee looks represent the company that they are working at but that does not mean those who did not meet the criteria for the job can get an easy pass just because they look attractive.

It is really interesting to observe how the beauty standard sometimes or most of the times just don't fit the reality. Trends keep changing and human aging, so does the body. Outer beauty is not eternal as in reality, people grow old and would slowly realize that appearance is not always the most important thing in life and that looking

good just to please other people will get you to nowhere. It is also interesting to note down that the lookism in South Korea were shapes by many factors such as beauty pressure and bullying from the society which sometimes end in a very negative impact to one's self in the future. Besides receiving the pressure from the society on how someone supposed to look like, the plastic surgery phenomenon in South Korea is also one of the factors that help lookism grows in South Korea, especially in daily life. People who are made insecure by the beauty standard that the society sets, have no choice but to 'fix' their appearance by undergoing plastic surgery.

#### **5.4 Suggestion**

Lookism is a thing and it is existed in daily life but often overlooked. Most research related to the plastic surgery were done focusing on the impact of the plastic surgery, the result mostly are still overlapping between the positive and the negative without digging more details into the psychological impact such as suicidal tendencies and eating disorder. The cases of bullying due to appearance in school that affects the growth of the adolescents and are also needs to be analyse more in future research. This study still lacks in many aspects; therefore, the author hopes that there will be more research or studies related to the reflection of lookism in daily life in South Korea.

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## VITA

**NAME** Nindya Puteri Arum

**DATE OF BIRTH** 09 January 1995

**PLACE OF BIRTH** Jakarta, Indonesia

**INSTITUTIONS  
ATTENDED** University of Indonesia

**HOME ADDRESS** Jl. Jambu Air II No.32 RT03 RW19, Kelurahan Kota Baru,  
West Bekasi, West Java, Indonesia 17139



จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย  
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY