

FROM SKINCARE TO SURGERY – SOUTH KOREA’S INFLUENCE IN BEAUTY AND HEALTH TOURISM

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Summary: South Korea’s beauty ideals are not only culturally significant; they are also the driving force behind the nation’s thriving K-Beauty industry and medical tourism sector. Historically, beauty in Korea has been associated with Confucian values of inner strength and duty. Over time, there has been an increasing emphasis on appearance, leading to the development of specific beauty standards such as the “three whites” (skin, teeth and eyes) and the “three blacks” (hair, eyebrows and pupils). Nowadays, these ideals are amplified by the influence of K-pop and K-dramas, promoting features such as pale skin, V-shaped faces and heart-shaped lips. The global popularity of K-Beauty products and skincare routines has made South Korea a leading destination for beauty tourism. Tourists are flocking to Korea for skincare treatments and beauty workshops, supported by social media and beauty industry influencers. In addition, South Korea has become a top destination for medical tourism, particularly plastic surgery. In 2023, a record 606,000 foreign patients sought medical treatment, with more than half of them seeking dermatological or cosmetic procedures. The South Korean government aims to further promote medical tourism and expects 700,000 foreign patients per year by 2027. The financial impact is significant, with medical tourists spending 10 times more than the average tourist.

Keywords: *K-beauty, South Korea, Health Tourism, Medical Tourism*

INTRODUCTION

South Korean beauty standards have deep cultural roots and have developed into a significant part of the nation’s social fabric. Today, South Korean beauty ideals, often embodied by K-pop idols and actors, emphasise flawless skin, slender physiques and symmetrical facial features. The obsession with achieving these standards has led to South Korea becoming a global centre for cosmetic procedures and beauty tourism. This article examines the evolution of South Korean beauty ideals and the powerful role of K-Beauty and medical tourism in promoting inbound tourism.

THE KOREAN IDEAL OF BEAUTY

South Korea is not the only country in South East Asia that takes beauty seriously. However this country has the strongest industry supporting the achievement of beauty. They have built an entire industry around the concept. Moreover, it’s not necessarily treated as a subjective concept. Boyé Lafayette, in his book *The Korean Mind*, mentions the thinking behind the worship of beauty. “Institutionalized norms

of aesthetics have been an important element of Korean culture from the very beginning of the country's recorded history. Like other Asian cultures, Korean beliefs and practices of an aesthetic nature drew from and were nourished by animism, and then by Buddhism and Taoism, which were adopted from China between the fourth and sixth centuries." [1] The Korean ideal of beauty first emphasized inner beauty and strength based on Confucian teachings. In the male-dominated Neo-Confucian society of the time, ideals of the wise mother and the good wife were created. According to Elise Hu's *Flawless: Lessons in Looks and Culture from the K-Beauty Capital*, "For women, beauty equated to being dutiful to their elders, serving their husbands, and spending time with their children" [27].

Later, chroniclers of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) also wrote down the outward traits of the idealised female ideal of beauty. This was the famous rule of three. The *sambaek*, 'the three whites', emphasised the whiteness of the skin, teeth and eyes. *Samheuk*, 'the three blacks', emphasised the charcoal black pupils, eyebrows and hair. Finally, *samhong*, 'the three reds', emphasised the redness of the face and lips and the peach-coloured nails [3].

The current South Korean beauty ideal is represented mainly by actors and K-pop idols. Therefore, they are expected to look as perfect and clean as possible. The contemporary beauty ideal in Korea reflects ideals such as flawless, pale skin, large eyes and a slender, V-shaped face, often achieved through elaborate skincare routines and increasingly plastic surgery [3]. Currently, a small, heart-shaped face, heart or strawberry-shaped lips, a slim physique and white skin are trendy [3]. At press events and official appearances, a so-called "white wash" technique is used, retouching the images to make the idol or actor's skin look as white as possible. White skin represents a sense of superiority and value. "The skin of wealthier, upper-class ladies used to be white because they could spend their time indoors until late at night, without having to toil in the fields in the blazing sun. Traditionally, pale skin was not only a sign of beauty but also of higher social status. White skin is also more popular among Korean women because the harmful effects of sun exposure are now well known." [12. p. 204] The high expectations of beauty are so ingrained in Korean society today that it is not uncommon to be bullied at school or not be offered a job because you don't measure up. In fact, Koreans openly tell each other that if they don't like something about the other person, they should lose some weight, for example. In Western cultures, this is considered rude or inconsiderate, but in South Korea it is part of everyday life. Hyemin and colleagues conducted primary research on the perception of beauty in South Korea in 2017. Among other things, they wanted to know whether the survey subjects had been negatively discriminated against because of their appearance. 95% of the respondents stated that they had experienced some negative discrimination about their appearance or appearance in their lifetime [6]. In South Korea, beauty is not only an individual aspiration, but also a social and economic concern. The rise of 'lookism', or discrimination based on appearance, is a notable social phenomenon, with physical attractiveness often correlating with better job prospects, social mobility and overall success [16]. The emphasis on beauty is so strong that Korea has one of the highest

rates of cosmetic surgery per capita in the world, with procedures such as double blepharoplasty, rhinoplasty and facial contouring in high demand.

K-BEAUTY

K-Beauty, as a term, encompasses all beauty products and skincare routines originating in South Korea, which have become a global phenomenon. Thanks to the global spread of Hallyu, or Korean culture, the world has become familiar with K-pop, Korean pop music and K-dramas, Korean TV series. It is through the latter that the concept of K-Beauty, i.e. Korean beauty care and beauty products in particular, became known. The series became potential advertising content for K-Beauty products. The rapid rise of the Korean beauty industry is closely linked both to the innovative product range and to the sophisticated cultural narrative that holds flawless, youthful skin as the standard of beauty. The industry's global market presence has grown significantly, with exports increasing by 61.6% in 2016 alone [15].

Skincare rituals associated with K-Beauty are often defined by meticulous, multi-step routines that include products designed to address specific skin concerns such as acne, hydration and anti-aging. The '10-step skincare regimen', for example, has become a popular export product that emphasises a complex series of double cleansing, exfoliation, sheet masks and multi-layered moisturisation [15]. This level of attention to skin health is a tradition in Korean culture, where skin has historically been deeply valued as a symbol of beauty and health.

The rise of K-Beauty is not just about cosmetics, but about the creation of a lifestyle brand that suggests a disciplined, ritualized approach to personal beauty, which has found a loyal following among consumers worldwide. Products such as snail slime, bee venom and fermented ingredients have become popular in Korean skincare, combining traditional practices with modern cosmetic science. A holistic approach to beauty has contributed significantly to the attractiveness and expansion of K-Beauty in markets such as the US and China, resulting in an export value of around USD 6.69 billion in 2022 [23].

HEALTH TOURISM AND PLASTIC SURGERY IN KOREA

South Korea's dominance in plastic surgery is well documented. The country is globally recognised for its advanced medical technologies and expertise in cosmetic procedures, which have made it a top destination for health tourism. Plastic surgery in Korea is deeply rooted in social beauty norms, where procedures such as double blepharoplasty, jaw reduction and skin whitening are considered routine surgery [17].

The popularity of plastic surgery in Korea is partly fuelled by the same media (idols, actors) and cultural forces that promote K-Beauty products. The influence of Korean celebrities, who often undergo plastic surgery to achieve their iconic looks, further reinforces these beauty standards both domestically and internationally. In addition, Korean health tourism is supported by government initiatives such as special medical visas that make it easier for international tourists to access treatments [13]. The number

of foreign tourists visiting Korea for medical treatment increased by 30.5% between 2009 and 2015, and demand for plastic surgery continues to grow [23].

CRITIQUE OF KOREAN BEAUTY STANDARDS AND PLASTIC SURGERY

The South Korean beauty industry, although influential worldwide, has come under considerable criticism for promoting rigid and often unrealistic beauty standards. The pervasive influence of the media, especially K-pop and K-dramas, reinforces ideals such as flawless skin, V-shaped faces and big eyes. This social phenomenon, known as “lookism”, has a strong influence on social mobility and job opportunities, which has led to the normalisation of plastic surgery. South Korea has one of the highest rates of plastic surgery per capita in the world, with procedures such as double eyelid surgery and rhinoplasty being particularly common [14].

SOCIAL IMPACT

The emphasis on appearance in society creates both individual and collective insecurity, especially among young people, who are under enormous pressure to conform. Research highlights that these beauty norms contribute to lower self-esteem and body image issues, with many resorting to extreme means, including surgery, to conform to societal expectations [11]. Furthermore, this culture exacerbates gender inequality by placing disproportionate emphasis on women’s physical appearance as a measure of their social and professional worth [4]. More broadly, the culture raises ethical concerns as it commodifies beauty and perpetuates a cycle in which physical perfection becomes normalised and, in some cases, expected. Although initiatives have emerged to challenge these norms, deeply ingrained social values about beauty remain a major obstacle to change [5].

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The literature review revealed that the Korean ideal of beauty has shaped Korean society for centuries, significantly influencing everyday life. This research aims to answer the following questions:

Q1: How does the Korean beauty industry influence inbound tourism to Korea?

Q2: Is plastic surgery popular not only among Koreans but also among international visitors, particularly in the context of medical tourism?

For this research, the author chose desk research method or conducted secondary research and searched statistical data on Statista, korea.net, KOFICE, and other official Korean platforms.

RESULTS

In 2022, K-Beauty products were particularly popular in European countries such as the UK (42.3%), Germany (36.7%) and France (34.1%), creating a significant global market that encourages tourism to South Korea (Statista, 2022). The impact of K-

Beauty goes beyond mere product sales, encouraging international consumers to visit Korea to experience beauty treatments on their own skin.

Beauty tourism has become a special form of travel, with many tourists visiting South Korea for skincare treatments, consultations and beauty workshops. This trend is particularly evident in the proliferation of beauty travel packages and experiences that combine sightseeing with beauty services, further increasing the economic impact of K-Beauty on tourism [17]. Social media influencers and K-Beauty advocates also play a critical role in driving tourism as consumers increasingly seek to replicate beauty routines and standards advertised online [26].

According to data from the South Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, beauty-related medical services such as dermatology are among the most popular services sought by foreign tourists. Dermatology accounted for 12.3% of all medical tourists in 2022, indicating that cosmetic treatments, especially skin care, are a major attraction for inbound travellers [10]. The Korean beauty industry's influence on inbound tourism is further enhanced by government initiatives to promote South Korea as a global beauty hub, with various beauty events and festivals being organised to attract international visitors [28].

South Korea is renowned for its expertise in plastic surgery and attracts thousands of medical tourists every year. In 2022, 15.8% of foreign medical tourists visiting South Korea were visiting plastic surgery, making it the second most popular medical specialty after internal medicine [10]. Plastic surgery is popular not only among Koreans but also among international visitors, especially from the United States, China, Japan and Southeast Asia. These regions account for the largest share of plastic surgery patients visiting Korea, with US tourists accounting for around 18% of the total medical tourist population in 2022 [24].



Figure 1. Foreign Patient's Place of Origin visiting South Korea
(Source: medicalkorea.or.kr)

Foreign patients are attracted to South Korea because of its advanced medical technology, skilled surgeons and competitive pricing compared to Western countries [7]. Seoul's Gangnam district in particular is famous for its concentration of cosmetic surgery clinics, where international tourists undergo procedures ranging from double eyelid surgery to rhinoplasty and facial contouring [17]. Between 2009 and 2022, the number of foreign patients seeking plastic surgery in Korea increased steadily, peaking at more than 46,000 patients in 2022, despite a temporary decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic [10].

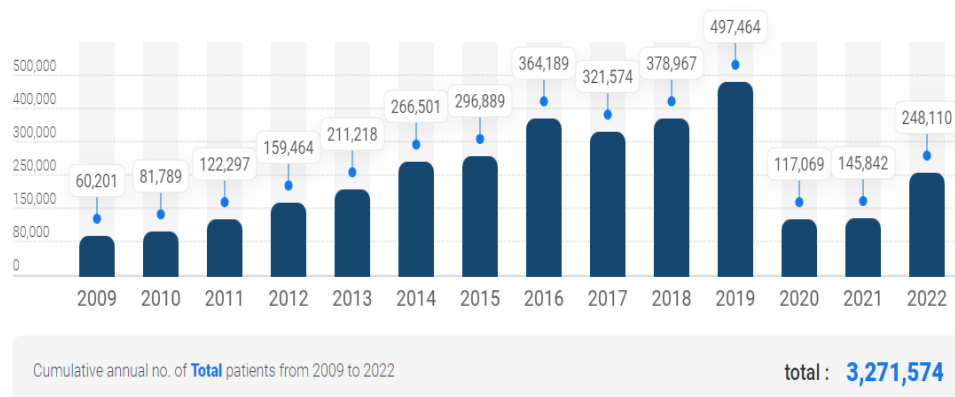


Figure 2. Foreign patient's numbers from 2009 to 2022 visiting Korea
(Source: medicalkorea.or.kr)

Tourists often combine their medical procedures with leisure activities, further boosting South Korea's economy. The average expenditure per medical tourist is substantial, with Southeast Asian patients paying an average of \$ 12,500 per person for services, highlighting the significant economic contribution of medical tourism [10]. In addition, Korea has a special website for medical tourism, which not only lists the medical institutions that welcome foreigners, but also includes a special brochure indicating, for example, whether they can provide interpreters to accompany medical services [18].

In 2023, South Korea attracted a record number of 606,000 foreign patients, according to the Ministry of Health and Welfare. This represents a 2.4-fold increase from 2022, when 248,000 international patients were recorded. The previous record was set in 2019 with 497,000 patients, but numbers dropped significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching a low of 117,000 in 2020. Over half of these foreign patients in 2023 sought dermatological and plastic surgery treatments. Dermatology patients increased from 12.3% in 2022 to 35.2% in 2023, and those seeking plastic surgery rose slightly from 15.8% to 16.8%. Japanese nationals constituted the largest group of foreign patients, comprising 31% of the total, followed by individuals from China, the U.S., Thailand, and Mongolia. The South Korean government aims to further boost the medical tourism sector, targeting 700,000 foreign patients annually by 2027. The global medical tourism market is expected to grow substantially, from

\$115.6 billion in 2022 to \$346.1 billion by 2032, making this a strategic economic focus. Medical tourists reportedly spend 10 times more than general tourists, highlighting the financial significance of this industry [8].

CONCLUSIONS

The author concluded that the market presence, marketing and media coverage of K-Beauty products and the spread of Korean culture and thus beauty culture have a significant impact on inbound tourist traffic to South Korea. (Q1) Furthermore, according to official information on Medical Korea and a recent Korea Herald summary, it is a dynamic industry that is attracting a significant number of foreign tourists to the country. (Q2)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Monitoring the statistical data, it would be worthwhile to examine the travel motivation of travellers from Hungary to South Korea and to create a K-Beauty themed programme package that could be in demand. Assuming that K-Beauty services are a demand for the Hungarian travelling public when travelling to Korea. I suggest further research in this regard.

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