

LIFE IN A LOOKIST SOCIETY

Beauty and self-care in South Korea

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With the rise of single-person households and the adoption of a 52-hour work week, consumers are increasingly investing in personal hobbies and self-development.

The idea of “living well” is expanding as more emphasis is placed on leisure, rest, and relaxation. Investment in health is rising and the personal care market is experiencing a consequent increase.

In particular, the domestic massage chair market grew 30 times over the past 10 years, reaching a size of 600 billion KRW (approx. 500 million USD) just last year. With a

penetration rate of 7%, massage chairs are highly expected to experience further growth as both older and younger generations are buying into the market. Young consumers are also leading the development of at-home beauty care by shifting the personal care trend to do-it-yourself routines and methods. The market for at-home beauty care is rapidly increasing by more than 10% every year, and various at-home beauty devices are continuously being launched.

Here are six trends within beauty and self-care in South Korea.

TREND ONE: THE NEED FOR MULTI-LEVEL SELF-CARE AND MANAGEMENT

Once labelled as goal-oriented workaholics and sacrificial nationalists who would easily give themselves up for the greater good of society, Koreans have now changed. More and more people are seeking out their sense of self and are choosing to pursue life patterns according to their own personalities and tastes. 'Private' takes priority over 'public' and 'me' trumps 'we' in what is currently considered an idealistic environment. This trend certainly explains how millennials have been able to take the helm as the central force in societal change. But are we truly living in a world of cultural relativism where individual values and diversity are being recognized?

Trying to achieve work-life balance may actually impose a newfound burden on an individual's pursuit to happiness. Those who do not have particular hobbies or those who place little importance on self-development often struggle to find their own place within the collective society. Assa, an abbreviation of the Korean pronunciation of "outsider," has become a widely used slang word to refer to such people who are generally oblivious to current trends and thus fail to join mainstream culture.

On the other side of the spectrum, inssa, or "insiders," indicate people who are outgoing and popular, and who tend to quickly adapt to cultural shifts.

Ironically, one has to be unique and stand out from the masses in order to be considered an inssa within a particular group. The larger irony is that generation-X displayed a completely different pattern. 20 years ago, Korea discovered modern individualism for the first time after decades of suppression and authoritarianism. Those who went against the grain and pursued a nonmainstream way of life were the very ones who were seen as hip trendsetters at that time.

Being an inssa in Korean society means access to more valuable information, easier pathways to success, and higher respect from others. The measuring standards for inssa have encompassed health, beauty, figure, education, language proficiency, personality, tastes, and now incorporate the overall quality of life itself. Perhaps all the self-care and management methods mentioned here are mere glimpses of society's efforts to become a true inssa.



TREND TWO: BEAUTY STANDARDS BECOME STRICTER AND MORE FRAGMENTED

In a “lookist” society, an individual who is overweight or has bad skin is immediately labelled as a person who failed to take care of himself or herself. According to a recent marketing research survey conducted on 1,000 women aged 15 to 59 years old, it was revealed that most females recognized the need for skincare and were interested in at-home beauty care methods.

As many as 96.4% of respondents considered skincare to be a necessity, with 54.3% choosing “strongly feel the need” and 42.1% choosing “somewhat feel the need.” Only 2.9% answered that they did not believe it was that important to take care of their skin.

Furthermore, respondents displayed high more than half of the women who chose “strongly feel the need” for skincare also indicated that they have high interest in methods for managing their skin. 70.6% answered that skincare must be done constantly and consistently, and 52.6% stated that beauty routines should start from a young age.

“I recently signed up for personal training to lose weight. I’ve always exercised, but this time I really wanted to drop some weight because I’m constantly being told to be a little slimmer. I have this one co-worker who really dresses up for work. People compare the two of us and say “You’re so good at your job, but you’re not that great with taking care of

your appearance.” It’s so frustrating; my weight falls in the standard range, you know? I don’t understand why people judge my self-management skills based on what I wear, if I put on makeup, if I have a good figure. Sure, I might not be the prettiest person out there, but I have no problem with how I look and I don’t have any health issues. But with everyone telling me to improve myself, I’m starting to think that maybe I do have a problem. I’m genuinely curious to see if those people even take the time to sit down and read a book. If they don’t see the problem with talking to others like that, I can only wonder what they’re doing to cultivate themselves. Isn’t that what self-management and improvement is all about?” These are the words of a single working woman in her 30s.

Personal care is rapidly becoming a trend as people try not to be on the receiving end of such treatment. Additional conditions such as technological advancements, the increase of single-person households, and the implementation of a 52-hour work week have collectively contributed to the desire for self-management and personal care. As more people are finding it important to “live well,” the personal care market has also been expanding accordingly to accommodate the needs for at-home workouts, DIY beauty routines, home care, and so on. The at-home beauty device market is increasing by 10% each year with a constant stream of newly released products. 2019 is forecasted to be no different.



TREND THREE: INFLUENCERS AND MOBILE APPLICATIONS PROVIDE A WIDER RANGE OF CHOICES

The Korean cosmetics market is displaying consistent growth, both domestically and overseas. With the myriad of products that are released to keep up with the demand, it is becoming even more difficult to choose one that is exactly right. Additionally, there has been growing concern over the safety and reliability of the materials used in cosmetic products. Hwahae is a mobile app that lists all the ingredients that are included in products on the market and also details the benefits and risks of each substance. The app also provides a customized service that evaluates the compatibility of the products with the user's skin type. Dermatology professionals such as professors and researchers actively provide feedback to enhance the credibility of the app, and consumers input their insight through detailed reviews and ratings.

Pi Hyun Jung, a former fashion magazine director, runs a cosmetics analysis channel called 'Director Pi' on YouTube. With more than 300,000 subscribers, she wields the

influence to degrade a luxury brand as 'garbage' or launch an unknown brand into popularity. Major companies have even taken swift measures in accordance with comments made in her videos to switch out or remove harmful ingredients in their products.

At the young age of 22, Kim So Hee opened a small online shopping mall and named it Style Nanda. Since then, the brand has grown to become recognized as a top Korean brand for fashion and beauty with over 85 million USD in sales. After Style Nanda was acquired by L'Oréal for approximately 371 million USD in 2018, Kim quickly became an iconic success story for the many startup businesses in the beauty industry.

Figure 1 Director Pi,' beauty product analysis channel on YouTube



TREND FOUR: PLASTIC SURGERY FROM BIRTH TO DEATH

Korea has 2,150 plastic surgeons, the 5th largest number in the world (no.1 in terms of surgeons per capita)

Korea performed 311,571 cases of facial plastic surgery, the 3rd largest number in the world (no.1 in terms of cases per capita)

11.3% of plastic surgery recipients in Korea are foreigners, and 57.7% of them are Chinese

Korea is infamous for its cutting-edge plastic surgery technology, and many tourists from China, Southeast Asia, and Europe flock to the country to visit one of its many clinics. Gangnam, which has been coined the mecca of Korea's plastic surgery industry, is predicted to host approximately 100,000 foreign plastic surgery patients in 2019 alone. With 38,546 Chinese (40.5%), 14,624 Japanese (15.4%), and 10,125 (10.6%) American recipients, this is a 31.6% total increase from the previous year.

While the Korean Wave indisputably has some degree of influence on the popularity of Korean cosmetic surgery technology, the primary reason for its fame can be attributed to the immense domestic demand. Cosmetic procedures in Korea literally begin from the moment a baby is born. One postpartum care centre in Gangnam offers a new born massage service that claims to mould pointier noses and smaller faces, which are features that are widely considered to be beautiful in Korea. Every December, plastic surgery clinics are packed with high school seniors who have just finished their college entrance exams. It has become somewhat of a rite of passage for young students to receive such aesthetic makeovers before starting a new chapter of life.

The pattern does not stop here. From job seekers looking to put their best face forward when applying for companies, to engaged couples who wish to look perfect on their wedding day, to middle-aged people who want to look younger, people in all stages of life have their own reasons for going under the knife.

The elderly are no exception from this cycle, as most desire to take care of their skin and get rid of wrinkles. For a woman in her 60s, cosmetic procedures are bringing small but certain happiness to her life.

"When I see my drooping wrinkles in the mirror, I can't help but sigh. I do visit clinics in Seoul occasionally, but they cost a significant amount of money. At my age, these are little joys in life, but it takes a lot of convincing until my husband gives in and lets me get procedures." – **Lee (60s, female)**

Of course, men are also highly interested in improving their appearance.

"In recent years, there have been quite a lot of middle-aged or elderly men visiting plastic surgery clinics. They would go to remove moles and diminish wrinkles as a way to gain confidence or improve their image in terms of business. It is not rare for older married couples in their 70s or 80s to visit either. Smaller cosmetic procedures such as fillers, Botox, or thread lifts are relatively less burdensome on the body as they only require partial anesthesia. Also, medical technology is constantly developing, and consumers are provided with a wider range of choices. For instance, stem-cell surgeries are becoming more and more affordable, and is growing as a popular option due to the easy recovery process."

– **Kim (medical device company employee)**

"We have a lot of working couples coming in on the weekends. Previously, the men would be dragged here by their wives, but now the husbands are the ones coming forward and purchasing facials worth hundreds of dollars."

– **Choi (aesthetic beauty clinic employee)**

"It's inevitable for men to care about how they appear to others, especially if their field of work requires them to form and keep business relationships. A lot of people around me have gotten their eyebrows tattooed and some people wear light makeup on a daily basis. Even though I'm fairly lazy when it comes to taking care of myself, I try to put on BB

cream that has a whitening function. It quite easy to make a difference with just a few products.” – Jin (40s, male)

“In Korean society, looks are directly connected to having a competitive edge. Korean men use more makeup than any other country in the world, and plastic surgery has become a popular gift choice for parents. The makeup consumer spectrum ranges from elementary school students all the way to people in their 70s or older, and functional cosmetics are now an essential part of the skincare routine of the typical 20-something-year-old.” – Kim (Professor of Beauty Industry Studies)

However, such cosmetic procedures are accompanied by a high risk of side effects.

“Compared to 20 years ago, many more people now have sensitive skin. This is likely due to the indiscriminate use of various different products, which lowers skin immunity and heightens irritation. Environmental influences such as fine dust and stress also play a large role. Cosmetics should not be overused, and consumers must consider the compatibility and balance between products. Don’t fall for makeup bundles or sets since those are nothing more than a marketing ploy. There is no need to apply anti-aging products at every level of the skincare routine either. It does nothing to improve the effect.” – Pi (Beauty columnist)

“Botox injections have been proven to be effective for minimizing wrinkles around the eyes and the forehead, but not for the neck. Patients must seriously consider their options and choose procedures according to each body part only after thorough consultation with a professional doctor. Take the garlic injection incident, for instance. Those types of health supplement injections are not licensed beauty procedures, but simply claim to be effective for relieving fatigue when applied for vitamin deficiency. There is no verified proof that they have anti-aging effects or skin whitening tendencies, and an uninformed choice to receive the procedure can easily lead to death.”

– Kim (Professor of Dermatology)

“The filler I received clotted up and appeared as a white spot on my cheek, but I didn’t get revision surgery because it felt like a waste of money. Despite this side effect, I’m still

satisfied with the procedure since it filled up my gauntness pretty well. I’m even thinking about getting it on my chin and forehead too, but perhaps this is what addiction is like. Occasionally, my cheek throbs and I’m reminded that there are foreign substances under my skin. If I take it further, I feel that I may really get hurt.” – Lee (40s, female)

In 2018, a TV drama called My ID is Gangnam Beauty gained popularity for its story about a college student who underwent extensive plastic surgery in pursuit of a normal life. Since a young age, the heroine was bullied and made fun of for being overweight and unattractive. Her originally bright and outgoing personality gave way to low confidence and depression due to all the discrimination and hate that she received for her looks. After getting accepted into a prestigious university, she decided to get plastic surgery to completely change her appearance, but soon found out that it did not mean her life would be easier. Not only did she fall into debt from the exorbitant surgery costs, she was also faced with a new wave of social criticism that condemned her choice to go under the knife.

Advertisements for plastic surgery clinics make it seem as if physical flaws are crippling problems in life. They claim that imperfections only serve to hold people back in life and insist that cosmetic procedures are the key to escape such hindrances. Furthermore, they also suggest that ‘western’ features are the standard for physical attractiveness. It is no secret that beauty is indeed a pleasing thing that brings some degree of joy to our life. However, the problem lies in the fact that society uses a single framework to measure attractiveness and consequently rules out anything or anything that doesn’t meet those standards.



TREND FIVE: NOT SLIM, BUT STILL BEAUTIFUL

People have started to speak up against lookism, or discrimination against outward appearances. Lee Young Ja, a popular female comedian, recently made headlines by revealing her swimsuit-clad body. When asked why she chose to make such a move on national TV, she said “many see me as a confident person, but in fact I am no different from anyone else in that I am self-conscious of myself and my body. However, societal pressure may push me down time and time again, but I choose to wield my pride and stand up to those perceptions.”

Ailee (a famous singer) also shared her thoughts on Korea’s obsession with looks. She stated that she was saddened by the reality that as a singer, she felt the need to lose weight in order to go on stage. She confessed, “When I was skinny, I found myself failing to perform 100%. I may have looked good, but I was mentally at my lowest low during that time.”

Young females in Korea have launched the “escape the corset” movement as a stand against society’s strict beauty standards on women. On Instagram, hashtags such as #escapethecorset, #corsetfree, and #studentcorsets have been spreading amongst teenage girls. They post pictures with cropped haircuts, baggy clothes, and crushed makeup products along with heartfelt accounts of their personal experiences. One student participating in the movement mentioned that her teacher told her to put some makeup on and look presentable, while another student explained that

girls who forgo lip tints or whitening creams are considered to be losers. A high school sophomore recalled a particular incident when a fellow student was struggling to put in contact lenses because she had pink eye. “I told her to just go without the contacts,” she said, “but she answered that people wouldn’t recognize her because she’d look uglier than if she were to wear them.” Yet another student posted a tweet saying that “There is a silent mutual agreement among girls to wear makeup and dress up if there are events at school. School is just one massive corset institution.”

The government has been putting in some degree of effort to alleviate these social issues. In early 2019, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family distributed “Gender Equality Guidelines for TV Show Production” to various TV stations and broadcasting companies which included restrictions against having too many cast members that look similar to one another. Particularly, music programs were called out for the extreme visual uniformity of its performers and were requested to refrain from excessive makeup, tight clothing, and revealing outfits. Although the guidelines were offered as a potential solution to proliferation of standardized beauty standards via TV, they instead caused social outrage. The public likened this measure to a military dictatorship policy and questioned the boundaries of the government’s authority. Debate is still ongoing regarding this matter, and no concrete answers have been found. Meanwhile, cookie-cutter celebrities continue to be paraded around on the TV screen.

Figure 2 Lee Young Ja in swimsuit during a TV program



TREND SIX: AT-HOME SKINCARE ROUTINES

According to a recent marketing research survey that collected responses regarding self-beauty devices, LED masks were revealed to be most considered for potential purchases (75.5%, multiple answer possible). Respondents also considered purchasing electric callus removers (36.5%), ultrasonic massagers (32.5%), IPL skincare devices (32.5%), and high frequency massagers (30.1%).

As a response to the high anticipation for LED masks, a multitude of mask products are being developed and released. With medical device manufacturers, plastic surgery clinics, and electronics companies all jumping into the market, LED masks have become must-haves for those who take care of their own skin at home. The quality of LED masks is divided by price; 150 USD or under are lower priced models, 150~350 USD are standard, and 350 USD or higher are considered to be high priced.

In 2017, LG Electronics released four types of Pra.L LED masks and gained widespread attention due to its established reliability as an electronic device company. From January to October of 2018, sales of Pra.L increased more than sevenfold, compared to when it was first released. Since June, Pra.L extended its reach into China by establishing a place on JD.com, China's second largest e-commerce company.

Laser hair removal devices, which incorporate low power laser beams to burn down hair at the root, are becoming popular among millennials for its cost-effectiveness. These portable devices claim to offer a function that is comparable to 1,300-dollar services that are offered at dermatology clinics.

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