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**Lookism and its depiction in Korean dramas**

Lookismus a jeho zobrazení v korejských dramatech

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Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla veškeré použité  
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Podpis

## **Abstract**

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This thesis explores the portrayal of lookism—prejudice based on physical appearance—in contemporary South Korean television dramas, with a focus on how it affects young women. It examines two recent and widely viewed series, *True Beauty* (2020) and *Shadow Beauty* (2021), both of which focus on female characters who face social judgment and discrimination because of their looks. The research adopts a qualitative, scene-based approach to analyze how beauty standards are portrayed, reinforced, and occasionally challenged through narrative and character development. It also reflects on the cultural context of South Korea, including media influence, family expectations, and societal norms. The thesis goal is to understand how these dramas reflect attitudes toward beauty, and what emotional and social responses they represent in relation to lookism.

## **Abstrakt**

<b>Název práce:</b>	Lookismus a jeho zobrazení v korejských dramatech
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Tato diplomová práce se zabývá tématem lookismu neboli předsudků založených na fyzickém vzhledu, a jeho zobrazení v současných jihokorejských televizních dramatech, se zaměřením na jeho dopad na mladé ženy. Práce analyzuje dva nedávné a velmi populární seriály *True Beauty* (2020) a *Shadow Beauty* (2021), v nichž hlavní postavy čelí společenské kritice a diskriminaci kvůli svému vzhledu. K analýze je přistupováno kvalitativně a s důrazem na vybrané klíčové scény. Je sledováno, jak jsou v rámci děje a vývoje postav zobrazovány, posilovány a občas také zpochybňovány standardy krásy. Práce přitom zohledňuje kulturní kontext Jižní Koreje, zejména vliv médií, očekávání ze strany rodiny a společenské normy. Práce si klade za cíl porozumět tomu, jak rozebíraná dramata odrážejí širší postoje ke krásě a identitě, a jaké emocionální a sociální reakce vyvolává tlak na vzhled.

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Andreas Schirmer, for his valuable advice and time spent patiently supervising this thesis. Also, I would like to express a big thank you to my family and friends who have been supportive throughout the process. Without them, completing this thesis would not have been possible.

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## **Transcription**

In this thesis, except for lexicalized terms or terms already established by the original sources, Korean words are transcribed into the Latin script using the McCune–Reischauer romanization system.

# 1 Introduction

Lookism, or prejudice based on physical appearance, is a persistent and complex issue in South Korean society. It influences individuals across multiple aspects of life, including education, relationships, and work environments. South Korean media, particularly television dramas, often reflect and shape public attitudes toward beauty, due to their popularity among all ages. While the originally this thesis aimed to examine lookism more broadly, during the process of analysis it became clear that representations of men's experiences with lookism are underrepresented in recent dramas. As a result, the thesis narrowed its focus to specifically explore women's experiences with lookism. This thesis explores how lookism is portrayed in two recent (released within the last five years) and widely viewed dramas, *True Beauty* (2020) and *Shadow Beauty* (2021), both of which were adapted from popular webtoons. These series focus on the experiences of young women who face discrimination and judgment because of their appearance. Through analysis of these stories, the goal of the thesis is to understand how lookism is depicted in the media, how beauty standards are reinforced, and how characters respond to and possibly resist aesthetic expectations.

This first part of the thesis follows a descriptive approach. It aims to describe what lookism is, explore its possible roots, including a brief history of beauty standards in South Korea, and examine the potential consequences of lookism, especially for women. These focal points emerged through the process of watching and analyzing the two dramas.

The analysis unfolds in three phases. The first phase focuses on identifying the core conflicts and challenges related to appearance. These can include peer bullying, public shaming, online harassment, parental pressure, and internalized self-hatred. The second phase considers how beauty standards are presented and maintained in the story. This includes looking at moments of transformation, expressions of desire and admiration from peers or romantic interests, and the portrayal of beauty as a requirement for self-worth and social success. The third phase shifts to the strategies characters use to cope with lookist environments. These include concealing one's appearance, creating curated identities through social media, confiding in trusted friends, and, occasionally, taking steps toward self-acceptance.

Methodologically, this thesis uses qualitative approach to examine how lookism is conveyed through narrative and character development. The episodes and scenes were selected based on their relevance to the themes of beauty, appearance-based conflict, and personal

identity. Each selected scene is analyzed in terms of dialogue and emotional tone. The analysis is guided by three questions:

1. How is lookism portrayed in the dramas?
2. What cultural elements contribute to its portrayal?
3. What emotional and social impacts does lookism have on the female characters featured in these series?

The decision to analyze *True Beauty* and *Shadow Beauty* is based on several factors. First, both dramas deal explicitly with lookism as a central theme, making them especially suited for this kind of focused analysis. Second, their origin as webtoons means they already had engaged audiences before their adaptation to television, giving the stories cultural relevance and widespread reach. Third, their appeal to younger viewers makes them important for understanding how lookism is communicated to and internalized by youth. The shows also differ in their narrative tone; *True Beauty* leans more towards romantic comedy, while *Shadow Beauty* explores darker psychological themes.

## 2 Lookism

According to John Ayto's (1999) *Twentieth Century Words*, lookism is prejudice or discrimination based on physical appearance. The term was first used in the United States in the 1970s and has since become widespread worldwide. This can be seen in societies like South Korea, where beauty standards play an important role in both personal and professional spheres. The similar word was also coined in Korea as “외모지상주의” (oemo jisangchuŭi) in the neologism dictionary of the National Institute of Korean Language. The Korean term refers to the social tendency to become fixated on physical appearance, believing that it determines the success or failure of an individual (Yu and Chŏng 2024). Lookism is ingrained in everyday life of Korean people, and it has grown in intensity as a result of the country's rapid economic and social transformation during the last decades. This period of growth created a very competitive environment in all sectors, including education, employment, and even interpersonal relationships, in which appearance has become an additional, and often determinant, factor of success (Park, Myers, and Langstein 2019, 612).

In modern South Korea, physical appearance that fits the societal beauty standards offers certain benefits; on the other hand, deviation from these standards can lead to prejudice and discrimination (Seung 2025). This concept is reflected even in some Korean expressions, such as “예쁘면 다야” (yepŭmyŏn taya), which translates to “being pretty is everything.” Though they have some similarities to the English phrase “looks aren't everything,” these expressions suggest the opposite: that beauty might make up for other flaws, reinforcing the idea that one's worth is mostly defined by their appearance.

South Korea's beauty standards are usually quite consistent. For example, having features such as big eyes, a tall, thin nose, full lips, a V-shaped jawline, and a slim-fit body is recognized as a widely accepted beauty standard. Those who do not have these features frequently experience a feeling of social exclusion, discrimination, and a loss of self-esteem. Motivated by a strong desire to conform and fit in, many Koreans consider cosmetic procedures to meet these standards, seeking to avoid discrimination and improve their chances in relationships and careers (AB Plastic Surgery 2024).

## **2.1 The possible root of lookism in South Korea**

Researchers associate the prevalence of lookism in South Korea with a number of interlinked historical and social factors. One significant influence is patriarchal consumer capitalism, which fosters a culture of beauty obsession while sending deeply opposing messages about empowerment and oppression. Many South Korean women could be seeking beauty enhancements nowadays as a form of empowerment; however, this pursuit is usually a “trap.” The beauty industry encourages women to criticize their bodies, which leads to the development of the inferiority complex, and that further fuels consumerism while also supporting the very standards that trap them in a cycle of aesthetic self-improvement (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012, 76).

Another factor is the influence of Neo-Confucianism, which has historically shaped Korean attitudes towards women’s roles and appearance. In traditional Confucian ideology, women’s identities were closely connected to their exterior, as they were expected to take care of their bodies for the sake of the family. This principle still exists in modern South Korea as a “requirement of decorum,” where women feel culturally pressured to conform to beauty standards that are in line with contemporary capitalist values. This combination of Confucian and neoliberal ideals puts a great deal of pressure on women to physically conform, effectively tying their personal worth to appearance rather than individuality, which is more prevalent in Western societies (Kim 2003, 107).

Although changing one’s appearance is typically presented as a choice, it feels almost mandatory to avoid discrimination and achieve social success. According to Sharon Lee (2016, 17), in contemporary society, lookism has replaced traditional ideologies, such as the emphasis on female chastity, as a dominant mechanism for regulating women’s bodies. Like past moral codes, lookism punishes women by presenting beauty as a form of self-discipline and moral worth. Women who do not meet the beauty criteria are seen as lazy or incompetent, facing discrimination in areas like employment or marriage. This pressure is reinforced by the neoliberal language of “self-management,” “self-development,” and “self-investment,” which promotes beauty practices as personal responsibility rather than social pressure.

### 2.1.1 Beauty standards

Before diving into the history of beauty standards, I think it is important to define what beauty is. A Cambridge dictionary form defines beauty as “the quality of being pleasing and attractive, especially to look at” (Cambridge Dictionary 2019). Although this explanation suggests that beauty is derived from visual senses, it does not define what qualities constitute such aesthetic appeal. The subjective viewpoint on beauty is advocated by proponents who assert that beauty lies in the eyes of the observer. The English philosopher David Hume (1898) asserted that "Beauty is not an inherent quality of objects; it exists solely in the mind that observes them, and each mind perceives beauty differently." Conversely, the opposites of the subjective perspective adopt a more "scientific" stance. The English philosopher David Hume (1898) stated that “Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.” In contrast, the counterparts of the subjective point of view take a more “scientific” position. Objectivists contend that evolutionary research can reveal the proportions of a beautiful person and universally attractive features. This thought pattern is exemplified by the Renaissance’s concept of perfect proportions, which is also referred to as the classical conception of beauty. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2022), Renaissance objectivists held the belief that beauty was characterized by the “arrangement of integral parts into a coherent whole, according to proportion, harmony, symmetry, and similar notions.”

Throughout its history, South Korea has incorporated both subjective and objective concepts. The sociocultural ambiance of the nation has been significantly influenced by the definition of beauty, which is rooted in polarity. The examination and recognition of beauty as more than mere superficiality offers a valuable perspective that enables us to gain insight into the representative aspirations, needs, and afflictions of South Koreans throughout different eras in history (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2022).

Beauty standards in South Korea are not just mindless constructs; they are the result of centuries of cultural history, social stratification, and shifting ideologies. The following section explores the possible historical roots of these standards, from ancient dynasties that linked physical appearance with inner beauty to the modern fixation on a narrowly defined ideal and examines how such trends have contributed to a pervasive culture of lookism.

During the Silla Dynasty (57 BCE–935 CE), beauty was viewed as an extension of one’s moral and spiritual core. The widespread belief that “within a beautiful body rests a beautiful soul” inspired practices of beautification, from the use of natural pigments to the elegant styling of hair and jewelry. Gold accessories, vibrant makeup, and carefully crafted hairstyles were not only cosmetic choices but symbols of both personal virtue and social standing. In this period, beauty was holistic: it was as much about nurturing the inner self as it was about refining the outer appearance (Asia Society 2025).

As Korean society transitioned into the Goryeo period (918–1392), cosmetic practices became more refined and systematic. Although this era witnessed the gradual adoption of new techniques and materials, some influenced by neighboring cultures, the basic idea persisted: that a person’s physical appearance was connected to their moral character and social worth. Such practices established the foundation for later beauty rituals, ingraining the idea that one’s external appearance could act as a currency in social and economic exchange (Asia Society 2025b).



Figure 1 – Sin Yun-bok - “A beautiful woman”

<sup>1</sup>The evolution of these ideals took a turn during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), when Neo-Confucian ethics reshaped societal norms. During this time, vibrant makeup and extravagant accessories became less important, as beauty was characterized more by natural appearance and inner purity. In the male-dominated Neo-Confucian society of that time, the image of a wise mother and good wife was idealized. Beauty was associated with the virtues of being obedient to the elders, serving the spouse, and spending time with the children for

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<sup>1</sup> Sin Yun—bok better known by his art name Hyewon, was a famous Korean painter of the Joseon period.

women. (Hu 2023, 37). This, of course, does not negate ideals for physical attributes. In this period there was an emphasis on “purity,” where the fair complexion free of any blemishes and imperfections was preferred. The “three whites” (삼백, sam-baek), “three blacks” (삼흑, sam-hŭk), and “three reds” (삼홍, sam-hong) are further details in this criterion. The most beautiful women exhibited fair skin, teeth, and sclera; dark pupils, eyebrows, and hair; and crimson cheeks, lips, and fingernails. This emphasis on a natural appearance prompted middle and upper-class women to adopt minimal makeup and maintain long hair. Conversely, heavier makeup was only worn by lower-class *kisaeng*<sup>2</sup> (Lee 2023).

The growth of the Korean entertainment industry, particularly the global explosion of K-pop, has significantly boosted these beauty standards in modern Korea and spread them worldwide through the big popularity of idols and their carefully curated images. K-pop stars are often held up as models of perfect appearance, reflecting the very core of South Korean aesthetics. This phenomenon is not only a reflection of cultural preferences but is deeply ingrained in practices within industry. As highlighted in De La Cruz’s article (2023), idols are subjected to extreme diets, such as the IU diet, consisting of one apple, two sweet potatoes, and a protein shake per day, to achieve the ideal slim figure. Some, like Momo from the K-pop group Twice, have reportedly survived on an ice cube daily to lose significant weight fast. Moreover, plastic surgery is common, with companies encouraging procedures like V-Line surgery to get a heart-shaped jawline, aligning with the industry’s strict beauty ideals. These practices have far-reaching consequences, affecting idols’ physical and mental well-being and pushing unrealistic beauty standards among global audiences. The combination of historical past trends and modern industry pressures has resulted in what is now widely known as “K-beauty,” characterized by features like a V-shaped face, plump lips, large eyes, pale skin, a small head, pointed chin, double eyelids, and a high nose bridge—traits popularized by K-pop idols and reinforced by media portrayals, resonating both old ideals and modern innovations influenced by Western standards.

Nowadays lookism is still prevalent, but it might be evolving towards a more natural look. A lot of celebrities that embrace their natural look are starting to appear, and trends involving “ethnic traits” are emerging on social media. An increasing number of people are starting to prefer non-invasive methods such as skin tightening and lifting to prevent aging, not completely

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<sup>2</sup> *Kisaeng* – “one of three classes of professional entertainers, comparable to Chinese *chi-nü*, Japanese *geisha*, Indian *deva dasi*, and Arabic *quina*” (Lee 1979, 75).

changing their appearance. This still points toward lookism due to ageism, but it could still be seen as an improvement (AB Plastic Surgery 2024).

### **2.1.2 Face culture**

Unlike the Western idea of face, which focuses on an individual's self-image, *ch'emyŏn* (체면), literally translated as “face” in Korean, describes the social image one presents to family, coworkers, and the larger community. It refers to one's reputation in the group and is influenced by norms rather than personal beliefs.

Based on Confucian ideas of harmony and hierarchy dating back to the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), *ch'emyŏn* channels through a strong mechanism of shame. Proverbs such as “양반은 물에 빠져도 개헤엄은 안 한다” (*yangban-ŭn mure ppajyŏdo kaeheŏm-ŭn an handa*) translated as “even if a yangban falls into water, he does not doggy-paddle,” shows the aristocratic need to avoid undignified acts, emphasizing formality and appearance over practicality. Today, fear of collective shame leads Koreans to make decisions, about who they marry and which neighborhood they live in depending on how others will see and judge them (Shin 2024).

Korean families are usually deeply concerned with how they compare to others, and shame plays a role in enforcing conformity, and any deviation from beauty standards may be seen as a failure. This shame is related to face-saving in Korea. Shame usually occurs because one looks bad in comparison to other Koreans. Koreans pay close attention to how they compare to other Koreans. In order to avoid shame, Korean families spend time, money, and effort on things they may not value except for their function to help avoid shame. This could include spending on beauty treatments, plastic surgery, or makeup even if it means that they will have to change their children. The usual scenario where children are shamed, is when parents compare them with other children or people (Yang and Rosenblatt 2001).

According to studies on communication, there are six core aspects of *ch'emyŏn*: ethics (moral conduct), competence (skills and achievements), demeanor (manners), social performance (networks and visible successes), social personality (others' opinions), and social pride (status comparisons). These are divided into two categories: personal *ch'emyŏn* (ethics, competence, demeanor) and social *ch'emyŏn* (performance, personality, pride), reflecting the dual importance of individual ethics and group recognition (Kim and Jang 2018, 107).

Individuals high in social ch'emyön, who are worried about how they are perceived in comparison to others, may feel more pressure to meet societal beauty standards, using appearance as a way to preserve social harmony and status. In contrast, those who follow personal ch'emyön might focus on maintaining inner dignity and self-worth, resisting judgments, and confronting lookism more directly. This dynamic helps explain why some people conform to beauty ideals to preserve social acceptance, while others reject these norms in favor of self-authenticity.

Ch'emyön has also become a commodity since the post-war economic boom. South Koreans spend more per capita on luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Chanel, etc., than any other country, using designer logos as visible proof of status and an artificial shield against shame. Only 5 percent of Koreans regard such spending as wasteful, compared to 38 percent of Chinese and 45 percent of Japanese, highlighting the unique link between prestige goods and face in Korea (Han 2024). The great lengths to which Koreans will go to maintain a perfect ch'emyön in front of peers and family members is reflected in the fact that, in addition to goods and surgery, couples occasionally even hire “fake friends” or wedding guests to strengthen their perceived social networks, and services that provide actors for any occasion have become common (Han 2024).

As luxury goods and aesthetic enhancements become stand-ins for moral integrity and social worth, people are under tremendous pressure to conform to strict beauty standards. In education, employment, and interpersonal relationships, appearance increasingly determines opportunities, reinforcing discriminatory practices based solely on appearance. This commercialisation of ch'emyön reinforces lookism, a tendency that favors appearance above character (Han 2024).

### **2.1.3 Media influence and K-beauty**

South Korean media constantly promote a narrow beauty ideal, ingraining lookism into daily life. In popular K-dramas and films, “makeovers” and transformations are common plot tropes, portraying beauty as the key to achieve success in both work and love life. Cultivation theory from media studies predicts that repeated exposure to these stories leads viewers to equate beauty with happiness (Gerbner and Gross 1976). In Korea's case the Hallyu Wave's “transformation” theme suggests that ordinary people must attain the same ideal looks, through

skincare or surgery, to succeed (Streng 2018, 3). In this way, idealized media content normalizes extreme standards. For example, mainstream dramas like *She Was Pretty*, explicitly contrast an “unattractive” character with a slim, V-shaped-faced, flawless heroine, reinforcing the message that slim figure and clear skin are social norms. (Streng 2018, 40).

These beauty ideals; pale, slim, tiny-faced, youthful, are pervasive. Korean popular culture even has slang terms for them: *öl-ttchang* (얼짱, “face king,” i.e. perfect face), *mom-ttchang* (몸짱, “body king,” or ideal figure), *saeng-öl* (생얼, pretty face without makeup), *tong-an* (동안, baby-faced youth), *rong-tari* (롱다리, long legs), *tchuk-tchuk-ppang-ppang* (쭉쭉빵빵, long, slim, supple), S-line (S 라인, hourglass curve) and V-line (V 라인, slender jaw). These expressions highlight exactly what the media idealizes: a youthful face, high nose bridge and pointed chin, slim figure and “supple” body (Park 2007, 55). One of the researches that focused on the influence of K-pop beauty standards on body image among adolescents notes that famous idols like Blackpink’s Jisoo or actresses like Jun Ji-hyun are admired “solely because of their looks,” they embody Korean standards of a small V-shaped face, fair skin, big eyes and double eyelids (Buhphang 2024, 2495). In short, media images in South Korea consistently present clear pale skin, endless youth and slim “V-line” beauty as normal and desirable. Cosmetics ads and K-pop videos routinely airbrush these traits, so viewers internalize an ideal that is virtually unattainable.

K-beauty (Korean beauty) itself, the skincare and cosmetic industry, both reflect and amplify these media standards. South Korea’s famous multi-step skincare routines and innovations are driven by the belief that flawless glass-like skin is essential to beauty (Buhphang 2024, 2495). Media coverage of beauty routines and “famous” skincare regimens suggests that a strict regimen of toners, serums and masks can provide the perfect pale complexion. Advertisements for whitening creams and sunscreens directly link fair skin to success or happiness, reinforcing a hierarchy of beauty that favors light complexion. Treviños-Rodríguez and Díaz-Soloaga (2022, 441) show how Korean cosmetic brands on Instagram routinely display “unattainable female beauty ideals,” often using filters to push the message that only the slim, clear-skinned ideal is desirable. Thus, K-beauty marketing and influencer content promote the message that constant skincare and even cosmetic procedures are necessary. When celebrities and influencers post flawless selfies or skincare tutorials, ordinary people are drawn into comparing themselves to these perfect images.

Social comparison theory (American Psychological Association 2018) helps explain the pressure this creates. According to this theory, people judge themselves against others; repeated exposure to idealized images causes upward comparisons and dissatisfaction<sup>3</sup>. The constant stream of perfect images—of pale skin, tiny V-shaped jaws, slim silhouettes—triggers anxiety and the sense that their own bodies are flawed.



Figure 2 – Jisoo from Blackpink (Kpopping 2023)

Media theories also show how cosmetic surgery and aesthetic practices become normalized. Streng (2018, 3) notes that Korean TV repeatedly links physical transformation to life success. When characters who undergo cosmetic surgery then find love and career success, viewers learn to see surgery as an ordinary step toward happiness. Indeed, plastic surgery is treated in ads and dramas as a “form of ordinary shopping” because media portray it as accessible and desirable. Likewise, beauty influencers often present cosmetic procedures or intensive skincare as routine solutions (Streng 2018, 13). Even routine 10-step skin regimens or trendy “V-line” makeup contouring are shown as normal parts of daily life. These media messages cultivate the idea that everyone should constantly refine their appearance.

Cultural studies points of view highlight that these media images are not neutral. They reflect and reinforce a social order: in Korea they align with patriarchal and neoliberal values. According to academic articles, scholars argue that the glorification of Western features (high nose, fair skin) in Korean media ties into a lingering sense that “whiteness” equals success

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<sup>3</sup> “Upward social comparison” involves comparing oneself with someone who is perceived to be better in some way—for example, someone who has more wealth or material possessions, a higher social status, or greater physical attractiveness.

“Downward social comparison” refers to comparing oneself with someone who is judged to be not as good as oneself.

“Lateral social comparison” is the act of comparing oneself with another person who is considered to be roughly equal in status or ability. (American Psychological Association 2018)

(Aquino and Steinkamp 2016, 437). The global beauty market positions “K-beauty” as a modern ideal, further entangling individual identity with consumer culture. Thus, the idealized images in ads and pop culture become ideological: they suggest that not only is beauty necessary for personal success, but also that women in particular must self-discipline through appearance.

All of this creates intense pressure to conform. For many Koreans, pursuing pale skin and a slim V-line face is more than vanity, it’s seen as practically required. Surveys show a high proportion of young people favor cosmetic surgery, often citing media examples as motivation. Women face social comment if they deviate: even a moderate suntan or a few extra pounds can draw criticism. The “beauty myth” in Korean media effectively teaches women that if they follow the marketed routines – skincare regimes, dieting, plastic surgery – they will be rewarded with social capital. Diet and cosmetic ads, for example, explicitly promise happiness or success once one attains the slim, fair ideal (Park 2007, 55).

In summary, media in South Korea, from glossy magazines and TV dramas to YouTube and Instagram, constantly circulate a narrow beauty ideal: pale, slim, youthful and flawless. K-pop idols, K-drama stars, beauty influencers and advertisements all echo the same standards. By repeatedly portraying these traits as linked to success and desirability, media cultivate unrealistic norms (cultivation theory) and trigger stressful comparisons (social comparison theory). Viewers learn to see elite beauty as normal, while their own bodies feel inadequate unless corrected. This image-based pressure fuels Korea’s lookist culture: it drives people into demanding skincare routines, cosmetic surgeries and aesthetic fixes to chase the media-crafted ideal.

## **2.2 Consequences of lookism**

Lookism has wide-reaching effects in South Korea, affecting people’s mental health, economic opportunities, and social experiences. The country’s high rates of cosmetic surgery reflect the pressure people feel to meet culturally idealized beauty standards. As a result, even physically healthy people frequently experience body dissatisfaction, and many, particularly young people, suffer from low self-esteem. These effects are visible in everyday life, including work, school, and social settings. For example, people who don’t fit conventional beauty norms often face discrimination in the job market, with hiring decisions sometimes influenced more by

appearance than qualifications. Young people, including teenagers and even younger adolescents, may turn to makeup and skincare products not out of personal interest, but because they feel pressured to fit in or avoid bullying based on their looks (Tang 2020).

This chapter is an introductory overview that sets the stage for the analysis that follows. Before I start the analysis, I would like to draw attention to the negative effects of lookism as they are portrayed in the chosen dramas. To identify these effects, I carefully watched the scenes and the episodes, paying close attention to recurring themes that were consistently emphasized throughout the dramas.

### **2.2.1 Plastic surgery**

In South Korea, plastic surgery is more than just a medical procedure; it is a cultural phenomenon that is ingrained in the society. Cosmetic procedures have become so common that they are incorporated into daily life; for example, many parents give their children cosmetic surgery, such as rhinoplasty or double eyelid procedures, as a graduation gift, reflecting the belief in the country that improving one's appearance is an investment in one's future success (Wei 2016).

South Korea, sometimes referred to as the "Cosmetic Surgery Capital of the World," conducts 24 percent of all cosmetic procedures worldwide. Traditional facial physiognomy, the idea that subtle facial changes can change one's fortune, is still acknowledged by older Koreans, and nearly 20 percent of patients cite parental influence when seeking procedures. During the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, which drove unemployment from 2.6 to 6.8 percent, the competition was increased for jobs in which 80 percent of recruiters admitted that they were choosing applicants by appearance. Today, private clinics cluster in Seoul's Gangnam district, nicknamed the "Beauty Belt," where 400–500 cosmetic facilities drive down prices through intense competition. More than half of South Korea's 671 plastic surgery clinics are in Seoul, and 74.8 percent of these are in Gangnam. Plastic surgeons make up 2.6 percent of all doctors in South Korea compared to 0.7 percent in the United States, reflecting a workforce geared towards high procedural volume.

Demographically, most patients are aged 20–40, with the average age for a first procedure at 21.8 years (Jin and Whittall 2022). In another survey of 103 South Koreans aged 18–29 it was found that 22.4 percent of women and 14.8 percent of men had past procedures, while 28.8 percent of women and 39.1 percent of men plan future surgeries. Personal dissatisfaction (60 percent) and parental influence (20 percent) top the list of motivations. Though just 6 percent cite employment as their primary reason, nearly all believe surgery has a “very positive” or “positive” effect on hiring (Park, Myers, and Langstein 2019, 612).



Figure 3 – Example of plastic surgery advertisement (ID Hospital 2017)

Procedurally, non-invasive treatments like botulinum toxin injections and chemical peels dominate overall, while invasive surgeries in Korea favor blepharoplasty and rhinoplasty<sup>4</sup> over breast augmentation, in comparison to common plastic surgeries in the West, reflecting local beauty ideals (Jin and Whittall 2022).

In a short documentary made by Tech Insider, the interviewed plastic surgeon Man Koon Suh, claims that it is common for parents to gift their children an eyelid surgery to congratulate their graduation from high school or university. He explained that most Koreans don't naturally have double eyelids, but it is a desirable beauty standard, because they believe that double eyelids make them look more friendly and approachable. As stated in the documentary, many Koreans believe that first impression is very important, and beautiful people are always chosen first, and many parents believe that by gifting plastic surgeries to their children, they are gifting them a brighter future (Wei 2016).

From the old belief that facial features determine one's destiny to modern hiring practices in which employers judge candidates by their photos, appearance plays a powerful role in South

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<sup>4</sup> Double eyelid surgery and nose surgery.

Korea. When altering one's appearance can increase confidence and even job opportunities, it is clear that the country's plastic surgery culture is deeply influenced by lookism. This makes lookism more than a buzzword, it's a social force that shapes decisions, career paths, and personal identity. By linking attractiveness with worth, it turns cosmetic surgery into both a personal choice and an almost unavoidable response to everyday pressures.

### **2.2.2 Bullying in school**

School bullying in South Korea has become a serious social concern. By law, "school violence" includes any harmful actions against students inside or outside school, from physical or mental injury to threats, extortion, defamation, and bullying (whether online or in person). Recent surveys show that bullying cases have risen sharply. For example, a 2023 Seoul study found 2.2 percent of students reported victimization at school, the highest rate in a decade (Baek 2023).

Studies of school bullying in Korea consistently find that younger children are most often targeted. In recent surveys, elementary students reported the highest victimization rates (around 4–5 percent), far above the rates for middle- and high-school pupils (Baek 2023). One report noted that roughly 70 percent of bullied students were in elementary school. About two-thirds of bullying incidents occur on school grounds and often take place during informal times like recess or lunch breaks. The typical forms of bullying include verbal harassment and social exclusion. For instance, the Seoul education office found that about 35 percent of school violence incidents were verbal abuse, with another 17.6 percent involving social isolation or exclusion. Stalking or rumor-spreading was at 12.2 percent, and physical assault at 10.3 percent also occurred, and roughly one in ten cases involves online or cyberbullying. Cyberbullying, while a smaller share overall, is especially common among older students. Despite the prevalence, many cases go unreported: one survey found over 30 percent of student witnesses never told teachers even when they saw classmates being beaten (Kim 2018).

In the survey about cyber violence done by the Korea Communications Commission (방송통신위원회; pangsongt'ongsin wiwŏnhoe) in 2024, it was determined that at least 37.1 percent of teenagers experienced cyberbullying. One of the routes for cyberbullying was text and instant messaging and social media. The main motivation for cyber violence was "revenge" or "fun and pranks" (Kim 2024). Also, even in cyber contexts, appearance could be a prime target. The Korea Communications Commission's 2024 cyber-violence survey found that

among teenagers who reported online hate or harassment, looks were one of the most frequently cited causes. Specifically, 6 percent of participants identified “appearance” as the reason for a digital hate incident. By contrast, issues like ethnicity or gender were cited less often among participants (Kim 2024). In practice, lookism in schools may overlap with other forms of bullying; for example, classmates may socially isolate or taunt a student for being deemed “ugly” or “fat” (which falls under the category of verbal or social bullying noted above). Teachers and researchers emphasize that the hurt from look-based teasing is real: it can compound the victim’s sense of inferiority and social rejection, much like other forms of harassment (Rashid 2023).

The impact of school bullying on victims can be severe. It is an ongoing pattern of harm, often psychological or emotional, that undermines a child’s well-being. Korean educators note that bullied children frequently experience low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and increased anxiety or depression. Victims “often believe they cannot resolve the problem,” with studies showing that relentless bullying can lead to academic decline, chronic school avoidance, or dropout. In short, school bullying in South Korea carries serious risks for mental health and educational outcomes, underscoring the need for prevention and support (Rashid 2023).

Keumjoo Kwak, a psychology professor at Seoul National University, says in her interview for *The Guardian* (Rashid 2023), that “cases of school violence and bullying reflect the dynamics of the collectivist society, where peer pressure plays a significant role in shaping behaviour. We form a group and torment others. The victims may be ostracized by an entire class or even by the whole school.” The competitiveness and high-pressure environment could play a big role in why bullying is so intense in South Korea. Frequently, victims are under the impression that they are unable to address the issue of bullying at school, which has a detrimental impact on their mental and physical well-being. It can result in academic decline and a long-term unwillingness to attend school, or even a complete dropout.

In a recent study done by Aely Park of Suncheon National University and Yuna Kim of Yonsei University, published in latest issue of Korean Youth Studies Association Journal, conducted among 1030 college students between ages 19 and 27, students who had experienced school bullying found that more than half (54.4 percent) had considered suicide and 13 percent attempted suicide. In comparison to students who were not victims of bullying, the victims were 2.55 times more likely to attempt suicide and 1.92 times more likely to consider it. (Park 2023)

Researchers and commentators link Korea's bullying problem to social and cultural pressures. South Korea's highly competitive, exam-focused school system creates intense stress for students. It is also possible that relentless studying and lack of outlets can drive some teens to bullying as a "source of amusement" (Kim 2023). Korean classrooms usually operate on collective logic: once a group decides to target a victim, that child can be ostracized by an entire class or even school. In this way, peer pressure and group dynamics amplify individual bullying incidents. The recent controversies, from legal scandals to K-pop stars accused of past bullying, have drawn public attention to how ingrained and long-lasting these patterns can be. Authorities have begun responding, for example, by requiring schools to keep more detailed records of bullying or by promising to include bullying history in university admissions, but educators warn that preventive measures (like student counseling and anti-bullying education) are also needed (Rashid 2023).

Lookism, or appearance-based bullying, is also a serious issue in South Korea. In Korean society, where looks are highly valued, this bias is pervasive. Studies of societal trends find that people who are judged unattractive often face disadvantages in school, work, and marriage prospects. Lee et al. (2017, 1) note that Korea's competitive education and labor markets use "individual look as additional stratifying factors". This social emphasis on looks filters down to schools, where students can be mocked or excluded for their appearance. Although systematic school data on lookism is limited, surveys of youth confirm it is common: for example, in a national study, about 24 percent of adolescents reported experiencing discrimination because of their appearance (Lee et al. 2017, 2).

Even though South Korea introduced "The Special Act on School Violence Prevention" in 2004 and the committees which monitored bullying were created, the problem stayed rampant. Typically, the objective of those committees is to prolong the debate long enough to prevent their history of bullying from being added to their school records, so not interfering with their college admission process. Nowadays, it is not difficult to locate online ads for lawyers that back bullies in court problems and help them receive the least amount of punishment possible, if not avoid penalty altogether (Ko 2023). From the survey done in 2022, the measurements that were taken against bullies were as follows: Contacting victim banned 79 percent, Written Apology 63 percent, School volunteer works: 49 percent, Transfer to different school 5 percent, Expulsion 0.2 percent. Also, Ko (2023) notes that "while a legal dispute is in

progress, victims and aggressors, who are often classmates, remain together in the same classroom without getting separated, which adds to the torment of the victims.”

In summary, school bullying in South Korea is on the rise and manifests in many forms, from verbal insults and physical attacks to digital abuse. Appearance-based bullying, rooted in the country’s intense focus on looks, is a pronounced part of this problem. Addressing the bullying epidemic thus requires both systemic measures and cultural change: authorities are increasing monitoring and support for victims, while experts urge educational interventions that teach empathy and counter the stigma of nonconformity. Only by acknowledging issues like lookism alongside general bullying can Korean schools hope to protect all students from harassment (Rashid 2023).

### **2.2.3 Body image issues**

South Korea’s low obesity rate is consistent with the country’s strong societal pressure to keep a slim figure. OECD data show that only 4 percent of Korean adults are clinically obese (OECD 2024), which is much lower than the OECD average of around 18 percent. This reflects a culture that promotes a very slim ideal, where even medium or thin bodies are often seen as “too fat.” The internalization of these beauty ideals, influenced by lookism, promotes widespread dieting and dangerous behaviors, particularly among women and young people.

In recent years, Korean teenagers have become increasingly interested in extreme weight-control trends. According to a Korea Times report from June 2024, a viral “water fasting” diet, where a person is consuming only water, with minimal salt and vitamins, became popular among teenage girls ahead of summer. One 18-year-old girl hoped to reach the “height minus weight” with the perfect score of 120 (160 cm – 40 kg = 120 score), by losing 7 more kilograms. Social media helped spread the trend: by early June, over 1,000 Instagram posts used the hashtag #waterfasting, and YouTube featured many vloggers promoting rapid weight loss (Lee 2024).

The pressure to be thin leads to high levels of body dissatisfaction, especially among young women. Studies show that many Korean women who are underweight or of normal weight still think they are overweight. According to a Korea Herald article (Park 2024), it was reported that 15.1 percent of Korean women aged 19–29 are underweight (BMI <18.5), and nearly half of those with low or average weight still try to lose more. Park explains that Korean

beauty standards strongly idealize thinness, which causes even slim women to diet obsessively (Park 2024). Academic studies support these findings. Jung et al. (2015, 1043) surveyed people aged 10–24 and found distorted body image in about half of them (49.7 percent of males, 51.2 percent of females). This issue was most common in adolescents, especially girls aged 10–12, where it reached 55.3 percent, and was linked to disordered eating behaviors. These results show how deeply lookism shapes self-image, leading many young Koreans to see themselves as overweight even when they are not (Jung et al. 2015, 1045).

One notable cultural norm is the “50 kg rule.” In South Korea, many people compare themselves to K-pop idols and fashion models who weigh under 50 kilograms. An Australian woman living in Korea stated that she was often called “fat” because she did not look like a K-pop star weighing less than 50 kg. The media refer to this as the “50kg myth,” a belief that any woman over 50 kg (about 110 lbs), regardless of height, is considered “chubby.” This idea is widely spread through television and magazines, where most contestants and celebrities have very slim figures, with narrow waists and limbs (Choi 2022). Such messages are reinforced in daily life. For example, a foreign intern in Seoul was criticized for “snacking at work” and told to stop eating because she was “eating too much.” These examples show how lookism influences social behavior, making it so common for people to openly comment on others’ weight and eating habits (Dunbar 2023).

Social media and peer pressure greatly amplify these ideals. Lim and An (2018, 2058) show that Korean teens’ heavy exposure to body-image content online worsens anti-fat stigma among peers (i.e. seeing overweight as a personal failing). In practice, girls on Instagram constantly compare themselves to ultra-thin influencers and K-pop stars, triggering negative self-evaluation. Jung et al. (2015, 1046) likewise note that vulnerability to social pressure about body shape raises the risk of eating disorders and helps explain the high rates of distorted image in this group. Even casual remarks in class or at work often carry the subtext that gaining any weight is unacceptable. Over time these messages create a situation where being underweight feels normal and healthy, and even minor weight gain is viewed as embarrassing.

To summarize, South Korea’s weight and body image issues go beyond obesity statistics. Although the national obesity rate is quite low, this reveals a deep social obsession with thinness linked to lookism. The cultural beauty ideal created by K-pop and media, spreads among family, friends, and social media, reinforcing the standards. As a result, many Koreans feel unhappy

with their bodies and turn to extreme diets to meet social expectations. This could lead to serious public health concerns. Distorted body image and unhealthy weight management can harm both mental and physical health. To address this issue, society must confront narrow beauty ideals. Public campaigns, education, and diverse media images can help young Koreans prioritise health over thinness.

#### **2.2.4 Tal Corset Movement**

The Tal-Corset movement (often called “escape the corset” in English) is a South Korean feminist backlash against the country’s rigid beauty norms. The term combines tal (탈, “to escape” or “take off”) with “corset” as a metaphor for constricting feminine appearance rule. (Shin and Lee 2022, 1). Park (2020) notes that this coined phrase came to refer to young women “casting off feminized clothing, beauty practices, and conventions.” In practice it began on internet forums and social-media groups around 2015–2016, and by 2018 it “swept South Korea’s feminist scene” as a national phenomenon. Journalists describe participants as deliberately cutting their hair very short or even shaving it, abandoning makeup, and wearing baggier, more androgynous clothing as public statements. As one photo caption reports: “Having short hair and no makeup is a common symbol of the “escape the corset” movement, which aims to reject South Korea’s standards of beauty and social pressure to conform” (Kuhn 2019). In other words, the Tal-Corset movement marks a sharp turn away from conventional “girlish” or “pretty” styles in Korean society.

At its core, the movement stands for a rejection of beauty standards as a form of patriarchal control. Participants view conventional beauty practices – elaborate hairstyles, makeup, form-fitting dresses, high heels, etc. – not as harmless fashion choices but as social oppression imposed on women. Park (2020) summarizes her interviews by noting that women in the movement “see beauty practice as social oppression imposed on women’s bodies and appearances and the marker of women’s low social status.” In online discussions (e.g. in women-only communities like Megalia and Womad), women stressed that practices of looking “feminine” arise from a patriarchal system that objectifies women. In this frame, feminism means actively undoing imposed femininity. Park contends that the Tal-Corset campaign is a feminist political movement that is explicitly designed to eliminate femininity as a form of social oppression. Adherents assert that “total rejection of femininity” in appearance is their

distinctive goal, setting Tal-Corset apart from mere body-positivity (Park 2020, 7). Shin and Lee (2022) likewise note that ETC (“escape the corset”) activists consider all styles of conventional “womanliness” to be inherently antifeminist, referring to these collectively as an oppressive “corset.” In short, participants see the movement as a collective “take off” of the corset of objectifying beauty norms – a gesture of female solidarity against lookism.

The movement has developed its own informal “rules” or practices of appearance. As Park reports, most participants begin by dramatically changing their grooming: they cut their hair very short (often pixie-style or buzz cuts), stop wearing makeup, and give up traditionally feminine clothing like dresses. Shin and Lee’s (2022) study of “Escape the Corset Fashion” (ETC-F) shows how far this goes: tops are chosen to be unisex or loose-fitting, never emphasizing the waist or bust. ETC women often prefer men’s jackets or boxy shirts and avoid skirts or any slinky or tight garments. Form-fitting pants or clothes that highlight hips and thighs are shunned in favor of straight or relaxed cuts (high-rise slacks, cargo pants, men’s sweatpants, etc.). Accessories are likewise pared down: for example, high heels are almost entirely rejected in favor of sneakers, loafers, and other flat, practical shoes. Likewise, frills, lace, floral prints and other decorative “cute” elements, dubbed “candy-wrapper clothes,” are explicitly avoided as empty trappings of romanticized femininity. In short, participants usually eliminate anything that feels explicitly girlish or body-revealing. Many even throw away the cosmetic tools: social media pictures of broken makeup palettes or sheared-off hair are common symbols of tal-corset “injŭng” (proof) posts. Park (2020) notes that although degrees vary, the signature transformation, such as short hair, no makeup, plain unisex clothing, has become a widely recognized “uniform” of the movement.

Support for the movement has come mostly from women themselves, especially on social media. Surveys suggest that well over half of young Korean women find it sympathetic: for example, one 2018 poll found 56.3 percent of women in their twenties approved of the Tal-Corset campaign. Grassroots online forums (many women-only feminist communities) have been key venues for sharing experiences of body-image pressure. Women post selfies, before-and-after photos and injŭng posts, under hashtags such as #탈코르셋 (t’alk’orŭset) on Instagram and Twitter. Park describes how this “injŭng culture,” sharing images of one’s new short hairstyle or discarded cosmetics, serves as a tactic of outreach, intended to inspire ordinary women. One photographer observed that women would sometimes bring in photos of their own

makeup or hair before-and-after, or even torn-up makeup tools, to post online and encourage others to join the movement. Offline, small women-only rallies have also occurred (for example in late 2018), where participants could meet one another and share ideas in person. This community support has been important: Park notes that meeting other women who had “taken off the corset” in real life gave newcomers courage and confidence to try it themselves (Park 2020, 4-5). The photographer Jeon Bora’s Seoul art exhibition also visually amplified the movement: her portraits of young women with cropped hair and no makeup, accompanied by their written messages, were meant “to destroy the socially defined idea of a woman” in Korean society (Kuhn 2019).

### **3 Analysis**

In this thesis I used a qualitative, scene-based approach to explore how lookism shapes characters' experiences in two recent Korean dramas, *True Beauty* (2020) and *Shadow Beauty* (2021). I began by watching every episode in full, creating my own transcripts to capture key dialogues and scenes. From this viewing, I pinpointed scenes where characters confront appearance-based judgments, moments of teasing, exclusion, admiration, or private self-reflection. I focused on the interactions between characters and the ways individuals perceive and talk about their own looks. For each selected moment, I examined how characters address or internalize lookism through dialogue and behavior, how they challenge or accept appearance norms, how they talk to themselves and to others about beauty, and how these exchanges reveal broader cultural attitudes.

This method allowed me to analyse how lookism is both reinforced and questioned across different contexts: in friendships, family dynamics, school life, and romantic relationships. The analysis was guided by three central questions: How is lookism portrayed in these stories? What cultural expectations underline those portrayals? And what emotional and social impacts do appearance norms have on the female characters?

#### **3.1 True Beauty**

##### **3.1.1 Introduction**

*True Beauty* is a Korean drama that aired from December 2020 to February 2021, based on a popular webtoon by an author known by the nickname Yaongyi. The story follows Im Chu-gyŏng (from now on Chu-gyŏng), a high school girl who is bullied relentlessly for her appearance. After a traumatic incident in which classmates post a humiliating video of her online, she tries to attempt suicide but is saved by Yi Su-ho, a quiet and handsome classmate who has his own painful past. When her family moves to a new town due to financial difficulties, Chu-gyŏng uses makeup to transform herself into a beautiful "goddess" at her new school, concealing her insecurities behind a perfect exterior. However, her cover is blown when Su-ho transfers to the same school and recognizes her without makeup. Meanwhile, Han Sŏ-jun, a rebellious transfer student with a connection to Su-ho's past, develops feelings for Chu-gyŏng, creating a complicated love triangle.

The story begins with Chu-gyǒng's struggle to fit in. In her previous school, she is mocked for her appearance, is called names, and is treated as an outcast. Her family adds to her pain, when her mother is often comparing her daughter to her more "pretty" siblings, and offers her to get plastic surgery, while her siblings, who inherited their father's "good looks," tease her. After moving to a new school, Chu-gyǒng masters makeup through YouTube tutorials, becoming beautiful overnight. She is immediately greeted with compliments on how gorgeous she looks, resulting in a completely different reaction than when she went to her previous school without makeup. Her new identity as the school's "pretty girl" gives her confidence, but she lives in constant fear of being exposed. This fear grows when she learns that Su-ho, who saved her life on the rooftop, is her classmate, and he is the only one who has seen her without makeup. At first, Su-ho doesn't recognize her, but after a series of accidents, he discovers her secret.

As the story progresses, the drama introduces Han Sǒ-jun, who is a troublemaker at school, but still popular for his looks. Sǒ-jun is Su-ho's former best friend, but their friendship ended after the death of their mutual friend, Chǒng Se-yǒn, a K-pop idol who took his own life due to cyber-bullying. Sǒ-jun blames Su-ho for not protecting Se-yǒn, and their rivalry intensifies even more when both realize they developed feelings for the main heroine Chu-gyǒng. Seo-jun's character adds depth to the love triangle, where unlike Su-ho's cold exterior, Sǒ-jun is openly emotional, protective, and loyal.

The middle episodes focus on Chu-gyǒng's growing relationships with both boys. She dates Su-ho secretly, but their relationship is strained by misunderstandings. Situations involving jealousy arise, such as when Su-ho pretends not to care about Chu-gyǒng to protect her from jealous classmates, but she misinterprets his actions. Meanwhile, Sǒ-jun's feelings for her become obvious, he helps her find part-time jobs, stands up to bullies, and even serenades her at a karaoke bar. However, the drama sidelines Sǒ-jun's romantic potential compared to the webtoon, where he briefly dates Chu-gyǒng. Instead, the drama prioritizes Su-ho's storyline, focusing on his guilt over Se-yeon's death and his strained relationship with his father.

A major turning point occurs when Chu-gyǒng's secret is finally exposed. Su-jin, Chu-gyǒng admired and thought of her as a best friend, leaks photos of her without makeup online, causing a school-wide scandal. She did that because she was jealous of Chu-gyǒng's relationship with Su-ho and wanted to make him hate her. The classmates corner her in a bathroom, wiping off her makeup, and she is forced to confront her deepest insecurities. This

crisis becomes a moment of growth for everyone. After this incident her mother learnt about bullying, and although she offered Chu-gyöng to undergo plastic surgery to fix the problem, she finally understands her pain and supports her decision to reject plastic surgery. Chu-gyöng tries to confront Su-jin, but she refuses to apologize. Ju Gyong then decides that she wants to pursue a career in make-up and tries to apply to makeup school.

The final episodes jump forward in time. Su-ho moves to the U.S. to care for his sick father, leaving Chu-gyöng heartbroken. Seo-jun, now training to become a K-pop idol, confesses his feelings but respects her choice to wait for Su-ho. The drama ends on a hopeful note—Su-ho returns to Korea, and they reunite at the comic bookstore where they first met as children. Seo-jun debuts as a singer, dedicating his performance to Se-yön, and Chu-gyöng's sister marries her quirky teacher in a chaotic but heartfelt wedding.

Throughout the series, *True Beauty* tackles heavy themes like bullying, suicide, and family dysfunction, but balances them with humor and romance. For example, Chu-gyöng's clumsy attempts to hide her bare face led to slapstick comedy, like the time she dances wildly in front of teachers, mistaking them for a talent show audience. The drama also tries to criticize societal beauty standards. Even though Chu-gyöng's makeup skills win her admiration, the show argues that true beauty comes from confidence and kindness. This however can be contradicted by Chu-gyöng decision to continue wearing make-up despite all the life lessons she learnt throughout the story. In the following section I will examine the presence of lookism in the drama.

### 3.1.2 Lookism Analysis

[Chu-gyöng:]  
I knew from a very young age...  
that I was not beautiful.

아주 어렸을 때부터 눈치로는 알고 있었다 ...  
난 예쁘지 않다는 걸.

The drama opens with a reminiscence of main heroine's early childhood, where heartbreaking scene is shown, of how Chu-gyöng family is discussing her appearance when she is a little baby. Almost all the members seem to be surprised by the looks of the baby and assume that our main heroine must be male. In the next scene, Chu-gyöng appears to be a little

bit older, but still too young to even care about looks, she is ridiculed by her own family for her looks.

[Relative 1:]

Chu-gyǒng, how come you take after your mother so much?

근데 주경이는 어쩔 그래 외탁만 했대?

[Relative 2:]

She should've taken after her father.

재필이 너를 닮았어야지.

[Relative 1:]

She'll need surgery.

성형수술 시켜줘.

[Relative 2:]

Honey, she must've been born to a different father.

여보, 재는 밖에서 낳아온 자식이야.

The family's comments not only imply that Chu-gyǒng is ugly, but that so is her mother. She learns early on that their looks are not considered desirable in South Korean society. The suggestion of surgery shows how cosmetic procedures are normalized as a solution for not fitting beauty norms. This reflects South Korea's consumer capitalist logic, where appearance is tied to future opportunity. Their comments also reinforce gendered expectations, where a girl's value is linked to her physical appearance. The joke about her not being her father's child echoes a deep discomfort with deviation from accepted standards, and hints at how beauty is often wrongly equated with legitimacy and worth. These early scenes expose how lookism is first internalized within the family, long before it is reinforced by peers or media.

The story jumps ahead to Chu-gyǒng's school life, where she faces bullying and name-calling. She is referred to as "Beast," "Dumpling," "Top Bomb," and is repeatedly mocked for her looks. In one scene, she dresses up in a pink wig and dress, inspired by the glamorous idols on TV. As soon as she steps outside, she is ridiculed by her peers. This moment highlights how media images, especially idol culture, set unrealistic beauty standards that young people internalize. According to the cultivation theory, such repetitive exposure shapes audience perceptions of what is normal or desirable. Chu-gyǒng's attempt to imitate idols reflects her desire for social approval, yet her failure to fully meet the standard leads to harsh

ridicule. This shows how media-driven ideals not only inspire transformation but also trigger rejection when those ideals are only partially met.

[Children:]  
She must think she's some kind of fairy.  
지가 요정인 줄 아나 봐.

[Children:]  
She's so full of herself. She transformed into an ugly beast! Die, you monster!  
공주병 찢어. 못생긴 괴물로 변신! 괴물아 물러가라!

In another scene, where it fast forwarded again, but this time to her being in high school, there is a scene where Chu-gyōng is waiting in line in a cafeteria, and students from the line gossip looking at her:

[Classmate 1:]  
Hey, if I give you ten million won, will you date her?.  
대박. 야, 내가 천만원 줄게, 너 재랑 사귄 수 있냐?

[Classmate 2:]  
I wouldn't do it for one hundred million won.  
일억 줘도 싫어.

These scenes reflect how no matter the age, lookism is present during all life stages. It undermines how she cannot be truly herself if she is not pretty enough in society's eyes. She is being bullied for only existing with the body she was born in, which reflects how cruel people can be if a person doesn't meet the set beauty standards.

In this episode she also develops a crush on a boy, who is the only person in school who is nice to her, and he shares her musical taste. Later on, she decides to confess to him, but she is being noticed by other students who start making comments such as:

[Student 1:]  
Look at a girl like her making moves on him.  
주제에 꼬리 제대로 치네.

After she confessed her feelings, she is met with a harsh reaction, in which the boy says:

[Student 2:]  
Hey, if your face is lacking, you should at least have some sense to make up for it.  
Can you not even see where you stand? Instead of doing something useless like this, look in the mirror.

야, 얼굴이 딸리면 눈치라도 있어야지. 주제 파악도 못 하니? 이딴 거 할 시간에 거울이나 좀 봐.

Chu-gyǒng's crush's rejection is another clear example of lookism. He criticizes her appearance and implies that her lack of conventional beauty justifies his disinterest. This moment shows how romantic interest is often based not just on personality, but on how well someone fits a beauty ideal. In Korean society, shaped by ch'emyǒn culture, a person's face is tied to social respectability. Being with an unattractive partner may be seen as a loss of face. His comments also reflect social comparison theory, he sees her as "beneath" him and believes her interest is inappropriate. This reinforces the belief that only beautiful people are worthy of love and admiration.

After that, other students who were watching from afar come out and take a video of her being bullied and ridiculed for her looks.

[Student 1:]

That was the confession from our school's Top Bomb!  
지금까지 우리 학교 대표 폭탄의 고백 현장이었습니다!

[Student 2 takes a photo of her and says:]

Wow, awesome! You came out so ugly!  
와 대박! 너 진짜 못생기게 나온다!

[Chu-gyǒng:]

Why do you guys hate me so much? Why do you hate me? I haven't done a single thing wrong to you. So why do you hate me so much?  
니들은 내가 왜 그렇게 싫은데? 내가 왜 싫어? 난 니들한테 잘못된 게 하나도 없는데. 내가 왜 이렇게 크게 싫어하는거야?

[Student 1:] Because. You're. Ugly.

못. 생.겨.서.

When Lim Chu-gyǒng is met with this traumatic experience, she decides that she cannot live like this any longer and decides to go up the rooftop of a tall building and decides to jump off from the rooftop.

Fortunately, her future classmate Soo Ho was there and saved her from attempting suicide. Having lost a close friend, who was a K-pop idol, to suicide caused by cyberbullying, Soo Ho could not stand by and let the same tragedy happen again. This marked the beginning of their story, with Soo Ho becoming the first person at her school to treat her with genuine kindness, regardless of her appearance.

Later on, after Chu-gyöng’s father falls into a financial scam and loses a lot of money, their family decides to move the family back to their hometown. This gives Chu-gyöng an opportunity to start a new life, so she decides to learn how to apply make-up expertly. She then proceeds to attend the first day at her school and is met with a completely different reaction than what she is used to.

[Students:]

Wow, so pretty! I’m jealous. So pretty! She’s so pretty! She’s a goddess!

와, 예뻐! 부럽다. 예뻐! 완전 예뻐! 헐, 여신이다!

The dramatic shift in how Ju Geyong is perceived after her makeover illustrates the power of lookism in shaping social interactions and self-perception. The main heroine experiences the “best” of both worlds, one where she is bullied, and one where she is considered a beauty goddess. These instances of lookism identified above demonstrate the challenges faced by individuals who do not conform to conventional beauty standards and the societal pressure to conform through means such as makeup and surgery.



Figure 4 – Lee Chu-gyöng’s transformation. Screenshot from episode 2. (Netflix 2020)

The drama proceeds to reinforce the idea, that beauty is all that matters and confirming the double standards. In the following episodes the main character Im Chu-gyöng is portrayed as living the “double” life in a constant fear that anyone will realize her secret. For example, in the next scene, a classmate throws a cake at her face during a celebration of their classmates 100 days anniversary, and she immediately freezes in fear, thinking that her secret will be revealed. Her fear of being revealed immediately made Chu-gyöng spiral into overthinking and imagine a scene, where she comes back without any make-up after washing her face and

everyone starts bullying her again. Because of the overthinking she does not allow anyone to help her wipe the cake.

[Classmate:]

Was it all makeup? Do you not have any shame? You're freaking ugly.  
너 완전 화장발이었나? 너 양심 없니 혹시? 완전 개 못 생겼잖아.

[Su-jin, her best friend:]

If I knew your face looked like this, I wouldn't have befriended you.  
얼굴 이 지경인 줄 알았으면 친구 안 했지.

This moment reflects the concept of *ch'emyōn*, which emphasizes maintaining social image and honor in front of others. Chu-gyōng's anxiety over losing her made-up appearance underscores how maintaining "face" through beauty becomes a survival strategy, especially in highly appearance-conscious environments like high school. The imagined bullying is not just fear of rejection but fear of social shame and loss of reputation, which in Korean culture can have far-reaching consequences beyond peer ridicule. Chu-gyōng's fear reflects societal conditioning that equates beauty with worth. Her belief that her natural face is "monstrous," due to the experiencing bullying in the past underscores how society devalues those who do not conform to narrow beauty norms.

The story repeats the patterns where the idea of beauty being everything is reinforced. Constant anxiety about her "real" face being revealed pushes main heroine to lead a double life, one where she is constantly ridiculed, mistreated and called a loser, and one where she is a goddess, that can achieve anything just because she is beautiful.

In episode 5, Chu-gyōng meets another girl, Ko-un, who is bullied for her appearance—just as Chu-gyōng once was. After overhearing Ko-un sing and get selected for an upcoming concert, the bullies become angry and hostile toward her. Wanting to support her, Chu-gyōng offers to do her makeup so she will be taken seriously for the performance. On the school rooftop, Ko-un opens to Chu-gyōng about her insecurities:

[Ko-un:]

I thought being talented would be enough, but if the audience laughs at my face, just as they did. I'm scared that my face will turn my voice into a joke.  
실력만 있으면 된다고 생각했는데 관객들도 채네들처럼 비웃을까봐 얼굴 때문에 목소리까지 웃음거리 될까봐 겁나서요.

This moment illustrates how Chu-gyǒng sees her past self in Ko-un, highlighting the cyclical and systemic nature of appearance-based bullying. Ko-un’s talent is not enough to protect her from ridicule, reinforcing the harsh reality that, in their environment, beauty often trumps skill. By giving Ko-un a makeover, Chu-gyǒng unintentionally perpetuates the idea that conforming to beauty standards is the only way to be treated with respect. However, in the next episode, when Ko-un chooses to stop wearing makeup despite ongoing mockery, it challenges this notion. Her resistance underlines a deeper critique of lookism—that true confidence must come from rejecting imposed standards rather than conforming to them.

[Chu-gyǒng:]

Didn’t they bully you since that day?

근데 걔네들 그 이후로도 괴롭히고 그러지 않았어?

[Ko-un:]

They say things behind my back. They say I painted my face to sing on stage.

They say I’ve got the nerve showing up without makeup.

뒤에서는 욕하죠. 무대 설라고 화장 떡칠하고 발악했다 하지 않나. 무슨 자신감으로 다시 생얼로 다니냐 질 않나.

[Chu-gyǒng:]

Are you okay hearing that?

너 그런 말 듣고 괜찮아?

[Ko-un:]

If I hate my face just because they say that, I’d be agreeing that I’m ugly. So, I’m going to ignore them and live with the face I’m given.

걔네들이 그런다고 내가 내 얼굴을 미워하면, 그거 결국 내 얼굴 못 났다고 인정해버리는 거잖아요. 그래서 그냥 애들 말 무시하고 나 생긴 대로 살려고요.

This exchange prompted Chu-gyǒng to deeply reflect on her own values and the choices she’s made to fit in. Seeing Ko-un confront lookism head-on—by choosing to embrace her natural face despite judgment—forced Chu-gyǒng to question why she continues to hide behind makeup. It made her realize how deeply internalized the fear of not being accepted for her natural appearance has become. The moment contrasts Ko-un’s defiance with Chu-gyǒng’s ongoing insecurity, highlighting the emotional toll of societal beauty standards and raising questions about authenticity, self-worth, and resistance in a culture obsessed with looks.

Why am I so scared to live with the face... that I’ve been given?

난 나 생긴 데로 사는 게 왜 이렇게 무섭지?

In episode 13, Chu-gyǒng’s former bullies discover her identity through a “goddess” popularity contest, in which she ranks second—just below her old bully, who claims the top spot. This moment underscores that Chu-gyǒng’s popularity is largely perceived to stem from her altered appearance, rather than her character or talents. The bully’s win further reinforces how society rewards those who conform to conventional beauty standards with influence and admiration. Once the bullies uncover Chu-gyǒng’s current school and social standing through online images, they retaliate by posting photos of her without makeup. Her bare face becomes a weapon used against her, instantly threatening her reputation and highlighting how conditional her social acceptance is.

This act of digital humiliation is not only revenge for her escape from past torment but a deliberate attempt to strip her of the status she earned through her appearance. It starkly illustrates how lookism operates—implying that if someone is labeled “ugly,” they are unworthy of popularity or respect.

The tension escalates when Chu-gyǒng, devastated, runs through the hallway only to be caught by jealous classmates who resent her connection to Su-ho, her love interest. In a deeply symbolic and disturbing scene, they drag her into the bathroom and forcibly wipe off her makeup.

[Bullies:]

How did you seduce Lee Su-ho with this face? Wow, this is no joke. Does Lee Su-ho know your real face?

이 얼굴로 어떻게 이수호까지 꼬신 거야? 와, 진짜. 이수호는 너 본판 알아?

Their words emphasize the toxic idea that romantic desirability must be justified by appearance. This scene powerfully conveys how beauty norms are not just internalized but violently policed by peers, especially among women. The act of physically erasing her makeup suggests that Chu-gyǒng has no right to conceal her real face, and by doing so, she is seen as deceptive. Her instinct to flee once exposed shows how makeup has become more than a form of self-expression—it is a shield for survival in a culture where being considered unattractive invites relentless bullying. Also, the immediate impact of the posted pictures shows how online bullying spreads quickly and could intensify real-life bullying.

In episode 13 Chu-gyǒng’s mother also finds out about the bullying that Chu-gyǒng has had to endure. Blaming herself for all that Chu-gyǒng has had to go through in her life because

of her looks, the only idea that came to her mind is to offer her a plastic surgery. This is a conversation between mother and surgeon, that she took Chu-gyǒng to:

[Surgeon:]

Since you already have double eyelids as a base, we can make your eyes more prominent with a non-incisional procedure. For your nose, we can enhance your nose with some silicone.

일단 기본 쌍꺼풀은 돼 있으니, 비절개교정술로 더 또렷하게 만드는 걸로 하죠. 그리고 코는 실리콘으로 전체 콧대를 살려주고.

[Mother:]

A lot of people have told her that her nose is pretty.

코는 예쁘단 얘기 많이 들었어요.

[Surgeon:]

From a medical perspective, this is definitely... not a pretty nose. Now, we can make an incision at the hairline and do a face lift. After lifting the skin as much as we can, we'll transfer some fat from your buttocks, And insert it into the forehead, chin, and cheekbones. Your full face will be voluminous, and your flat face will become more contoured. We can shave down her jawline, and reduce her cheekbones from the side. That's how we can make the jawline slimmer. A V-Line. A person's face needs to have some structure to it in order for them to live a prosperous life! Honestly, if you want this face to be prettier, you need to change everything.

의학적인 관점으로 봤을 때는 절대 ...예쁜 코가 아닙니다. 자 그리고 헤어라인을 짜서 안면 거상술로. 피부를 최대한 끌어올려서 고정된 다음에 엉덩이 살을 끌어와서, 이마 턱 그리고 광대. 풀 페이스로 지방 이식을 하면, 납작한 얼굴에 비로소 입체감이 생기겠죠. 양악은 한 바퀴 돌려 깎아 주면서, 옆 광대 쳐내고. 그래야 턱선이 가름해지죠. 브이라인. 하관이 좀 발달해야 말년 복이 좋죠! 사실 이 얼굴이 예뻐지려면, 다 갈아엎어야 돼요.

[Mother:]

You have to cut, shave, and sew in order for a person to be pretty? Beauty and ugliness, who defines those standards?! My daughter is beautiful in my eyes. This is what she looks like when she has makeup on. Wow, my daughter's makeup skills are way better than any surgery.

짜고 깎고 그러면 예뻐진다고요? 예쁘고 못 생기고 그 기준은 누가 정한 건데?! 우리 딸 내 눈엔 예쁘기만 하구만. 아니 애가 화장하면 이 얼굴 되던데. 뭐야, 성형술이 우리 딸 화장술만 못 하네.

The mother's response shows how deeply rooted lookism can be and not only socially, but within the family structure. Instead of resolving the root cause of Chu-gyǒng's pain, which is bullying, she instinctively suggests plastic surgery as the only solution to her problems. This moment highlights how normalized it is in South Korea for parents to see cosmetic alteration

as a sensible, even responsible, way to secure a better future for their children. It also shows how common it is for adults to internalize societal prejudices, thinking that their children must meet the standards rather than expecting those standards to change. The surgeon's description of every little part of Chu-gyǒng's face that needs changing, highlights the extreme expectations of how beauty is supposed to look, that society places, by suggesting that natural features are usually fundamentally flawed. However, the unexpectedly, the mother rejects the surgeon's approach and even expressed pride in her daughter's natural beauty and makeup skills. Her unexpected change in attitude might be interpreted as a moment of resistance, a realization that beauty should not come at the expense of sacrificing her daughter's identity and uniqueness. However, even this realization is ironic, because her praise is still based on Chu-gyǒng's ability to replicate societal beauty ideals using cosmetics. The scene captures the complexity of parental responsibilities in supporting and even potentially resisting lookism.

In the following episodes, it is revealed that Chu-gyǒng's best friend, Su-jin, was the one who posted the video where the main heroine is bullied. Her betrayal is motivated by jealousy, because she has feelings for Su-ho, Chu-gyǒng's love interest. She hates that he likes Chu-gyǒng regardless of whether she wears makeup. Motivated by envy and her hurt pride, Su-jin tries to destroy Chu-gyǒng's reputation, hoping to isolate her through bullying and force her to transfer schools once more. This particular scene might be underlining how even people who seem supportive can still contribute in reinforcing society's beauty standards. It reveals the insidious spread of lookism, showing that the gap between "beauty" and "ugliness" is maintained not just by enemies but also by those, who are closest to us.

However, unexpectedly for Su-jin, her other friends and Su-ho stand up to the bullies, showing their support for Chu-gyǒng even when her bare face is exposed. This moment shows the drama's attempt to dismantle lookism, by showing the message that genuine friendship goes beyond physical appearance. It tries to emphasize that true loyalty is not determined by beauty standards, and those who really care will accept and protect someone no matter how they look.

By portraying positive affirmations such as "beauty is not everything" and "what matters only is what is inside," the drama ends the story on a positive note, potentially attempting to challenge lookism. However, this conclusion feels somewhat shallow when compared to the intense pressures depicted earlier in the show. The story still sustains the attitude towards conventional beauty standards by rewarding Chu-gyǒng with social acceptance only after she

masters makeup, which helps her sustain a typically attractive appearance. Rather than challenging South Korea's oppressive beauty standards, the drama reinforces the idea that self-worth and success are still closely linked to appearance, just wrapped in the means of self-expression.

The show misses an opportunity to indirectly engage with anti-lookism movements like the "Corset Movement," which rejects beauty practices and questions the notion that femininity must be maintained via makeup and fashion. Instead of depicting Chu-gyōng accepting her flaws and resisting the beauty standards, the drama ties her identity and future goals to makeup art. This underlines the commercialization of beauty, where even self-acceptance must be filtered through aesthetic labor and beauty capitalism. Although Chu-gyōng's decision could be seen as empowerment, the broader context of patriarchal consumer culture implies that it is more of a coping mechanism than a form of resistance.

There was an attempt to challenge lookism through the subplot of Goo Won, a side character, whom Chu-gyōng helps. Goo Won initially accepts makeup to participate in the concert but eventually rejects it and presents herself as she truly is. Her choice to forgo makeup and embrace her inner worth aligns with feminist criticism, including the praise of authenticity over appearance. However, the fact that this story arc is about a side character rather than the protagonist weakens its potential impact. Had this change belonged to Chu-gyōng, it could have more powerfully challenged the toxic beauty ideals. Still, the inclusion of this subplot increases the drama's complexity and confirms that various paths to self-worth and acceptance do exist.

## **3.2 Shadow Beauty**

### **3.2.1 Introduction**

*Shadow Beauty*, South Korean drama that was aired in 2021. This drama is based on the webtoon *Kūrimja minyō* (그림자 미녀) created by author A-Heum. The story is about Ku Ae-chin, a timid, insecure high school student secretly living a double life. At school, she is always bullied and excluded by her classmates, especially by one girl named Ha-nūl. Ae-chin is portrayed as plain, socially awkward, and appearance-wise not really fitting the Korean beauty standards. However, after school, Ae-chin secretly transforms herself into "Genie," a popular and beautiful influencer on Instagram. Using makeup, clothing, and heavy photo editing, Ae-

chin creates a fake identity that brings her many followers, sponsorships, and admiration online. Nobody in her real life knows that she is the person behind this successful online account.

The only person at school who treats Ae-chin with kindness is Chin-sǒng, who is a trainee for an entertainment company. Like Ae-chin, Chin-sǒng also often feels lonely and disconnected. The two form a friendship on a school rooftop, where they are able to be themselves, away from everyone's eyes. Chin-sǒng compliments Ae-chin and makes her feel seen, which is something she usually does not get in real life. Their friendship gives Ae-chin comfort, but she still fears being discovered as the real person behind "Genie." Ae-chin worries that his kindness stems from pity rather than genuine friendship. Because she believes she is not beautiful and therefore unworthy of being liked, Ae-chin denies her feelings for him, convincing herself that she does not deserve to be treated well. Additionally, it is later revealed that Chin-sǒng had suspected all along that Ae-chin was Genie. By observing personality traits, mannerisms, and certain belongings she had, he quietly connected the dots, choosing not to confront her until she was ready to reveal herself.

As Ae-chin becomes more popular online, people begin to question whether Genie is real. A fan suggests that Genie never posts outdoor photos, and her identity might be fake. To stop rumors, Ae-chin secretly goes to a distant cafe, bringing her wig and makeup, and changes in the bathroom to avoid recognition. She takes a photo, goes home, and edits it to look like Genie, then posts it to reassure her followers. However, this backfires when an anonymous user nicknamed "The Cool Guy" starts sending her threatening messages. He includes an unedited photo of Ae-chin at the cafe, proving he saw her and knows her secret. He begins to blackmail her, and Ae-chin becomes increasingly paranoid, suspecting that the blackmailer must be someone she knows personally, even fearing it might be her best friend Chin-sǒng.

Eventually, the blackmailer is revealed to be Ho-in, the class president. He uncovered Ae-chin's secret by carefully observing her behavior and piecing together some clues. He noticed her phone beeping when he collected students' phones before a test and recognized a flower-patterned band-aid she wore, the same one that appeared on Genie in a photo posted that day. Following these hints, Ho-in realized that Ae-chin was indeed Genie. Instead of exposing her immediately, he chose to keep this knowledge to himself, enjoying the control it gave him over her. He never asked for money or favors but used the secret to keep Ae-chin emotionally dependent on him.

Meanwhile, a twist is revealed: Ha-nŭl, Ae-chin's main bully, is also Genie's biggest fan. Under the online nickname "Lambsky," Ha-nŭl has been following and privately messaging Genie for a long time, believing that she has formed a deep, personal bond with the influencer. She shares with Genie about her own traumas and hardships, thinking of her as a best friend and emotional support. What Ha-nŭl does not realize is that the person she idolizes and opens up to is in fact Ae-chin, the same girl that she bullies at school. This ironic and sad dynamic highlights the gap between Ha-nŭl's online admiration and real-life resentment. Ha-nŭl's aggressive behavior actually comes from deep insecurity and a fear of social rejection. Coming from a poor background, she hides her financial struggles from her classmates and maintains a confident facade, but internally she feels ashamed and vulnerable.

The tension grows even more when a new student named Mi-jin transfers into Ae-chin's class. Mi-jin looks very similar to the edited version of Ae-chin as Genie. She allows others to believe that she is the real Genie and enjoys the attention it brings. When Ae-chin tries to withdraw from social media to protect herself, Mi-jin takes advantage of the situation and begins to impersonate Genie. She even steals Ae-chin's phone and posts photos on the Genie account to claim ownership.

Things become more heated during the school festival. Mi-jin, unable to access the Genie account after Ae-chin changes the password, is exposed as a fraud. In a desperate attempt to save face, Mi-jin publicly screams at Ae-chin and tries to reveal the secret that she is the real Genie, but no one believes her because Ae-chin looks nothing like her highly edited online persona. Despite the chaos, Ae-chin finds the courage to take control after that incident. With the support of Ho-in and Chin-sŏng, she posts a real, unedited photo of herself on the Genie account, revealing her true face. She admits that she had been hiding behind filters and editing and deletes all of the account's content. Though she loses many followers, she finally gains something far more meaningful, authenticity, self-acceptance, and the support of true friends.

As the story unfolds, Ae-chin also confronts a heavy emotional trauma from her childhood. It is revealed that her older sister, Hŭi-chin, died in a tragic accident while saving Ae-chin, pushing her out of the path of an oncoming car. Ae-chin has secretly carried the burden of guilt, believing she was responsible for her sister's death. Her mother, deeply traumatized by the loss and a past miscarriage, developed amnesia as a psychological defense mechanism. Ae-chin had misunderstood her mother's condition, thinking she was intentionally erasing Hŭi-

chin's memory, when in fact, the trauma had overwhelmed her. Realizing this, Ae-chin is filled with regret for how she treated her mother. This revelation not only explains Ae-chin's deep emotional struggles and her desire to become someone else but also becomes a turning point in healing her relationship with her mother and herself.

By the end of the story, the characters all experience significant growth. Ae-chin learns to accept herself without filters or edits. Chin-sōng shows that his feelings for Ae-chin were always real, not just for her online persona. Ho-in opens up about his difficult family history and reveals the reason behind his emotional distance. Even Ha-nŭl, once the main bully, realizes her own pain and begins to change. These developments show that beneath the surface, everyone is dealing with their own fears and insecurities.

This drama explores themes of beauty, identity, social media pressure, and personal growth. It presents a powerful message about the effects of lookism, online validation, and the emotional cost of hiding one's true self. Through Ae-chin's journey, the story highlights how important it is to be honest, not only with others but also with oneself.

### **3.2.2 Lookism Analysis**

The South Korean drama *Shadow Beauty* offers a different representation of lookism, particularly in the digital era, where social media reinforces harmful beauty standards. Through its characters and story, the drama critically reflects on how physical appearance can define one's worth in society and how individuals might internalize these expectations. This analysis is somewhat shorter than the one for *True Beauty*, mainly due to the difference in episode length and number. *True Beauty* consists of 16 episodes, each around one hour long, allowing for a more extended and detailed story. In contrast, *Shadow Beauty* comprises only 13 episodes, each approximately 20 minutes in duration. This shorter format naturally results in a more condensed story, which is also reflected in the length of the analysis.

One of the earliest and most striking scenes occurs in the first episode, where Ae-chin acts obsessively, sitting in her room, editing her photos. Alone in her room, she transforms herself into a perfect girl named "Genie" using makeup and digital editing software. She carefully builds a flawless image with smooth skin, large eyes, and conventionally perfect features. The moment she uploads these edited photos online, praise and compliments flood in. Netizens comment on her "natural beauty," completely unaware that her appearance has been

digitally modified. The dramatic contrast between the cruel treatment Ae-chin receives in her everyday life and the love she earns online as Genie, highlights the shallowness of societal approval. These early scenes highlight and criticize how beauty, real or not, is rewarded, while authenticity is overlooked or punished.



Figure 5 – Ae-chin and “Genie” comparison. (AsianWiki 2021)

Immediately after showing the viewers this transformation, in the next scene, viewers are confronted with the bullying Ae-chin endures. In the first episode, the classroom scene is shown, where she is humiliated by her classmates:

[Ha-nŭl:]  
Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?  
거울아 거울아, 그들 중 누가 가장 아름답습니까?

[Student:]  
The mirror is throwing up right now.  
거울 토 나옴.

These comments are harsh and dehumanizing, reducing Ae-chin to a joke because she does not fit conventional standards of beauty. This verbal abuse reinforces the toxic environment where a person’s value is directly tied to their looks. The acceptance of such behavior among peers illustrates how deeply ingrained lookism is in South Korea, not just in adults or media but within youth culture itself.

While Ae-chin represents the victim of lookism, the drama also gives insight into its more subtle effects through the character of Yang Ha-nŭl. Ha-nŭl, who is portrayed as conventionally attractive and is one of Ae-chin’s bullies, also struggles with self-image issues. In episode five, she expresses a desperate desire to become prettier so that her boyfriend will notice and love her more:

[Ha-nül:]

Even if I skip dinner and work out for 4 hours, it won't stay below 45... I want to get prettier. I want to become a better me. I want to be loved by Ho-in more so that I don't feel lonely.

존나 굵고 운동해서 4시간 안 내려가. 난 더 더 예뻐지고 싶어 더 나은 내가 되고 싶어. 호인이에게 더 사랑받고 싶고 그래서. 난 내가 외롭지 않았으면 좋겠어.

Ha-nül's words reflect an internalization of the belief that physical beauty is a requirement for love and acceptance. Her comment about staying under 45 kilograms underscores the unrealistic body standards often idealized in South Korean society, where extreme thinness is frequently equated with attractiveness and worth. Despite being seen as beautiful by others, Ha-nül's anxiety over not meeting these expectations illustrates the prevalent nature of lookism, which affects even those who could seemingly benefit from it.

Moreover, Ha-nül's struggle is revealed to be further intensified by her socioeconomic background. She comes from a poor family, a fact she hides from her classmates out of fear of being rejected. This fear, along with past trauma, deepens her obsession with preserving a perfect image, or in other words che'myeon. In episode eight, viewers are shown her childhood, where she recalls the pain of her father abandoning her sick mother:

[Ha-nül:]

The woman next to my dad was stunning. Women are loved only when they are pretty. If not, they'll get discarded. It was the first lesson I learned at the age of eight.

아빠 곁에 여자랑 눈부시게 예뻐다. 여전히 예뻐야 사랑받는구나. 아니면 버려지는 거구나. 내 나이 8살 처음으로 직접 얻은 교훈이었다.

This backstory provides a psychological explanation for Ha-nül's fixation with beauty. Her childhood experience taught her that a woman's value is determined by appearance, and if that is lost, so is her worth. The drama uses Ha-nül's story to expose how lookism is not just externally enforced but adopted from a young age, shaping identity, relationships, and behavior toward others, including her bullying of Ae-chin. This shows the pervasive nature of lookism, where bullying often stems from the fact that children often internalize their parents' traumas and insecurities, and proceed to project them onto others, causing never ending cycle of appearance-based discrimination.

The toxicity of this obsession with beauty also manifests in the character of Mi-jin, a classmate who pretends to be Genie in real life. Mi-jin is introduced as a new student who bears

a striking resemblance to Genie, which she uses to her advantage, using the fact that Genie has never revealed her real face online. Obsessed with beauty and with Genie herself, Mi-jin even decorates her room with photos of Genie and begins impersonating her. She manipulates her peers to make herself appear more beautiful by comparison and subtly undermines others to elevate her status. In one scene, she encourages her friend Sae-hŭi to get a pixie haircut:

[Mi-jin:]

You give off a similar vibe as Emma Watson... Just look at your small head, long neck, and alluring eyes. I envy you.

너랑 엠마왓슨이랑 느낌적인 느낌으로 되게 닮았거든. 얼굴 자꾸 뭐 긴 것 봐. 눈도 되게 고풍적이고. 완전 부러워.

In South Korea, a small head is often considered a desirable trait associated with delicateness and youthfulness, while a long neck is linked to elegance and femininity. These features are part of an often unrealistic and narrowly defined standard of beauty that pressures individuals to conform, sometimes even leading to cosmetic surgery or self-esteem issues. Mi-jin's comment reflects how these ideals are casually inserted in everyday conversation and how appearance-based validation is deeply ingrained in Korean society.

Her manipulation is mixed with false compliments, designed to lower Sae-hŭi's self-esteem while boosting her own. When Sae-hŭi is mocked by classmates for the haircut, Mi-jin pretends to defend her:

[Mi-jin:]

She went for the Emma Watson style. Stop making fun of her and say she's pretty if you think she is.

엠마왓슨 스타일로 한 거라고. 예쁘면 예쁘다고 말을 해 예쁜데 놀리지 말고.

Despite her words, her hidden smile reveals her pleasure in Sae-hŭi's humiliation. As the series progresses, Mi-jin becomes increasingly obsessed with stealing Genie's identity. When she discovers that Ae-chin is the real Genie, she steals her phone, attempts to blackmail her, and demands that she hand over the account. Ae-chin resists, resets the password, and refuses to submit. In revenge, Mi-jin threatens to expose a private video of Ae-chin's best friend, Sŏ-jung, which she thinks contains explicit content with him. She plays the video at school, but it turns out to be harmless, just a clip of Sŏ-jung dancing. Her plan backfires, and her classmates turn against her, realizing she is a fraud. In a final act of desperation, Mi-jin snaps, screaming and lashing out at everyone. Her downfall underscores how obsession with beauty and fame

can lead to self-destruction. Mi-jin's character reveals a different facet of lookism—the way it fosters competition, jealousy, cruelty, and even psychological instability in those who chase impossible ideals.

The climax of Ae-chin's journey arrives in the final episode when she decides to reveal her true face on social media. After deleting her Genie account, she posts a photo of her unedited self. The backlash is immediate and mean:

[Netizens:]

What a scammer! Fraud is one thing, but this is beyond repair.

완전 사기꾼이네. 사기도 정도껏 쳐야지 이걸 회복 불가능임.

This reaction exposes how quickly online validation can turn into rejection. The same people who praised Genie now attack Ae-chin for revealing her real face. It shows how easily admiration can disappear when someone no longer fits into the expected beauty ideal. What they loved was not Ae-chin herself, but the perfect image she had created. Once that illusion disappeared, so did their support. This moment underlines the unstable and shallow nature of online approval, where appearance often matters more than authenticity.

[Ae-chin reflects on her identity:]

In reality, Koo Ae-chin, the person who was called an ugly loser hiding behind Genie, was me. Until now, I've been comparing myself to unrealistic beauty standards and got rid of the real Koo Ae-chin.

사실은요 지니 뒤에 숨은 본체 구해지는 못생기고 찌따라 불리는 나였어요.

이제껏 나는 비현실적인 미의 기준에 내 자신을 비교하며 구해진이라는 실체를 갈아 버렸어요.

This moment of self-realization is crucial. Ae-chin acknowledges that she has been chasing an impossible ideal, one that ultimately alienated her from her authentic self. Her decision to embrace her real appearance, despite losing followers, symbolizes a rejection of societal pressures and an act of reclaiming self-worth. This turning point marks a rare moment of defiance in a narrative world where beauty is usually rewarded, and deviation is punished. Instead of retreating or creating a new false identity, Ae-chin confronts the judgment head-on. Her action challenges not only the audience within the drama, but also viewers outside of it, inviting reflection on how much value we place on appearance and how we respond when that illusion is broken. In this way, her choice becomes both personal healing and a subtle form of resistance.

Her journey to self-acceptance is also connected to her late sister, Hŭi-chin, whose beauty and popularity Ae-chin always envied. In the final episode, Ae-chin confesses that she modeled Genie's face after her sister:

[Ae-chin:]

I wanted to have my sisters' face. Genie was born using both my sister's and my face.

언니의 얼굴을 갖고 싶어 했었다. 어릴 적었니 얼굴과 나의 얼굴을 재료 삼아 태어난 진이.

This discovery adds an emotional layer to her transformation. Ae-chin's desire to be loved, seen, and accepted was connected with grief, guilt, and sibling comparison. Her sister's death, which happened while saving Ae-chin, left a wound that she tried to heal by becoming someone she perceived as lovable, someone who looked like her sister, Hŭi-chin. This connection makes her transformation more than just a reaction to societal beauty standards. It becomes a coping mechanism, a way of clinging onto her sister's presence. By crafting an identity that resembled Hŭi-chin, Ae-chin was not only seeking validation from others but also trying to live up to an image of perfection that her sister represented. Her final decision to let go of Genie is thus also a step toward realizing that she does not need to become someone else to be deserving of love.

*Shadow Beauty* ultimately presents lookism as a pervasive and destructive force. It shows how it operates through external mockery, and peer-to-peer cruelty. Internalized self-hatred is also one of the direct consequences of these external pressures. Ae-chin's obsessive photo editing and her creation of an alternate online persona reflect the internalization of lookist ideals, where the pursuit of social media perfection becomes a survival mechanism. This also reflects the social comparison theory and the role of social media in encouraging appearance-based anxieties, especially through the curated, filtered perfection of K-beauty influencers. Ae-chin's double life is a moving depiction of how teenagers are pushed to extremes just to feel recognized or worthy. Still, this drama also offers a message of resilience as well. Through Ae-chin's journey, from dishonesty to self-acceptance, the drama inspires viewers to question society's definitions of beauty and to appreciate authenticity over shallow perfection.

In conclusion, *Shadow Beauty* uses the experiences of its characters to offer a criticism of lookism. Specific scenes, from Ae-chin's photo editing, the classroom bullying, Ha-nŭl's body image struggles, Mi-jin's manipulations, to Ae-chin's final act of self-acceptance, show

how beauty standards can shape identity, relationships, and mental health. The drama criticizes not only digital beauty standards but also the unrealistic physical ideals propagated in South Korean society, such as the fixation with being under 50 kilograms or having a tiny head and long neck, traits that are deemed as symbols of youth, elegance, and femininity. These ideals are so normalized that they quietly support the characters' insecurities and competitive behaviors.

This story also reflects the values of the Tal Corset movement, a feminist movement in South Korea that challenges rigid beauty standards and inspires women to reject societal expectations around makeup, fashion, and body image. Ae-chin's decision to reveal her true face online can be seen as an act of rebelliousness against these imposed ideals, similar to removing a societal "corset" and reclaiming her autonomy. Rather than preserving the illusion of perfection, *Shadow Beauty* shows the psychological cost of conformity and celebrates the power of authenticity. It calls attention to the need to dismantle harmful beauty norms and foster a culture where people are valued not for how they look, but for who they are.

### **3.3 Parallels between True Beauty and Shadow Beauty**

Both *True Beauty* and *Shadow Beauty* explore the experiences of young women who build dual identities centered on appearance. In *True Beauty*, Lim Chu-gyŏng uses makeup to transform into a confident "goddess," while remaining deeply insecure about her natural face. In *Shadow Beauty*, Koo Ae-chin digitally edits her photos to become Genie, an idealized influencer persona. Offline, she lives in fear that her unfiltered appearance will be exposed and rejected. In both narratives, modifying one's appearance serves as a form of agency. Chu-gyŏng's cosmetic transformation earns her peer admiration, while Ae-chin's edited images attract followers, sponsorships, and financial gain. These moments of success suggest that beauty practices can give social power, but only the power that rests on deception. Once that illusion fades, each protagonist faces an emotional crisis.

The driving force behind these transformations is shame. Chu-gyŏng internalizes her family's belief that cosmetic surgery is a legitimate investment and accepts her role as the "less attractive" sibling. A leaked video of her bare face nearly leads her to suicide. Similarly, Ae-chin dreads exposure of her unfiltered self, to the extent that a classmate is able to blackmail her. In both cases, secrecy becomes a survival strategy.

Each drama shows a decisive moment of public unmasking. In *True Beauty*, the exposure of Chu-gyōng's natural face threatens her sense of safety and belonging. In *Shadow Beauty*, Ae-chin's confrontation with blackmail reveals the fragility of her curated persona. These turning points highlight the instability of beauty-based empowerment. Rather than offering protection, beauty becomes a source of vulnerability. Both series also criticize the broader beauty industry. In *True Beauty*, cosmetic surgery is normalized as a practical investment by Chu-gyōng's parents, introducing body modification as a cultural norm from a young age. In *Shadow Beauty*, Ae-chin sells her own image to appeal to advertisers, turning her body into a product. In both situations, market logic propels a never-ending search for self-optimization.

The pressures to conform are supported through media imagery and social comparison. *True Beauty* features makeover montages that equate beauty with admiration and success, while *Shadow Beauty* depicts fans idolizing Genie's flawless online persona. Characters routinely compare themselves to unattainable ideals, intensifying their insecurities. These portrayals dramatize how idealized visual culture generates chronic dissatisfaction.

Underpinning both stories is the concept of ch'emyōn, social shame and the fear of losing face. Chu-gyōng dreads her classmates seeing her true appearance, while Ae-chin fears disappointing her followers. Strict self-monitoring is enforced by this collective gaze, and the psychological cost is high. Yet both dramas offer glimpses of resistance. In *True Beauty*, Goo Won's refusal to wear makeup after Chu-gyōng offers her help, gestures toward the Tal-Corset movement, which challenges entrenched beauty norms. In *Shadow Beauty*, Ae-chin ultimately chooses to reveal her unedited face, embracing self-acceptance despite potential backlash. These acts, though modest, suggest the possibility of reclaiming authenticity.

Structurally, both series follow a similar narrative: initial insecurity, followed by transformation, crisis, and a tentative return to authenticity. Supporting characters further reinforce these themes. In *True Beauty*, peers alternate between envy and admiration, reflecting the dynamics of social comparison. In *Shadow Beauty*, trolls and blackmailers illustrate the power of lookism. These scenes demonstrate how family, school, and media collectively sustain appearance-based hierarchies.

Together, *True Beauty* and *Shadow Beauty* offer a layered criticism of lookism. They reveal that the empowerment promised by beauty is often conditional, sustained by shame and market pressures. Yet they also gesture toward the freeing potential of authenticity. In doing so,

these dramas invite viewers to reflect on whether beauty should ever serve as a currency for self-worth.

## 4 Conclusion

This thesis has examined how lookism is depicted in two recent and widely viewed South Korean television dramas, *True Beauty* (2020) and *Shadow Beauty* (2021). Through qualitative analysis of key scenes, this study explored how these narratives portray, reinforce, and occasionally challenge dominant beauty standards within South Korean society. The dramas reveal lookism as a prevalent and deeply emotional struggle, especially for young women navigating adolescence in appearance-focused environments shaped by media, peer pressure, and family expectations.

Three central findings emerged. First, lookism is presented not as an abstract social issue, but as a lived, daily experience for the female protagonists. These characters endure bullying, internalized shame, and isolation as a result of not conforming to narrow ideals of beauty. Second, the dramas frame beauty as a powerful social currency, those who achieve it gain romantic attention, peer admiration, and confidence, while those who fall outside of these standards face exclusion and ridicule. Third, although both series introduce moments of personal resistance, such as removing makeup or confronting bullies, these acts remain largely individual, with limited impact on the larger social norms, which perpetuate appearance-based discrimination.

The theme of transformation plays a particularly big role in both dramas. In *True Beauty*, the protagonist uses makeup as a means of social reinvention, gaining acceptance and popularity that she was previously denied because of her looks. In *Shadow Beauty*, the main character creates an idealized digital self, shaping her image for an online audience. These transformations reflect the psychological weight of lookism, where maintaining a "perfect" appearance becomes both a method of survival and a source of deep anxiety. The fear of being revealed or publicly exposed illustrates how lookism creates not just social but emotional and mental vulnerability.

Additionally, the dramas portray how families and peers contribute to lookist pressures. In *True Beauty*, family members casually suggest surgery or compare the protagonist to her siblings, reinforcing the idea that appearance determines value. In *Shadow Beauty*, emotional neglect by parents indirectly fosters a dependence on external validation through online image crafting. Peer groups, classmates, and even strangers in public settings all serve to enforce beauty norms through mockery, exclusion, or unsolicited judgment, highlighting the high-

stakes environment of Korean society where appearance influences social standing from a young age.

However, while the dramas expose these harsh realities, they stop short of offering impactful alternatives. The few acts of rebelliousness are personal rather than structural; characters may find self-acceptance, but societal systems remain unchanged. The endings of both series underscore this tension. In *Shadow Beauty*, revealing one's true face results in social rejection, suggesting that authenticity is punished in performative, image-driven spaces. In *True Beauty*, the protagonist's choice to become a makeup artist hints at empowerment but ultimately aligns her with the very system that caused her problems, indicating an adaptation rather than a rejection of lookist culture.

One of the important limitations of this thesis is its focus on school-age experiences. Although workplace lookism is a well-documented phenomenon in South Korea, affecting hiring, promotions, and interpersonal dynamics, it was not explored in these particular dramas. Despite efforts to identify other dramas addressing this theme, such representations remain rare. Future research may benefit from examining how lookism manifests in adult contexts or professional environments.

Another limitation is the scope of media analyzed. Focusing on two dramas offers depth but limits the ability to generalize. The absence of primary audience data also means that conclusions about viewer reception remain speculative. Still, this analysis may provide insight into how contemporary South Korean media dramatize beauty standards and the emotional burdens they create.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that *True Beauty* and *Shadow Beauty* do more than entertain, they mirror the societal fixation on appearance and the struggles it manifests, particularly on young women. These dramas depict the psychological and social costs of lookism, while offering hints of resistance, however limited.

## Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá zobrazením lookismu, předsudků založených na fyzickém vzhledu, ve dvou jihokorejských televizních dramatech, *True Beauty* (2020) a *Shadow Beauty* (2021). Analýza odhalila, že lookismus je prezentován jako každodenní a intenzivní zkušenost hlavních hrdinek, které kvůli neschopnosti splnit přísné standardy krásy čelí šikaně, vnitřnímu studu a sociální izolaci. Krása je zde vykreslena jako mocná společenská měna: postavy, jež jí dosáhnou prostřednictvím make-upu nebo digitální sebe prezentace, získávají obdiv, romantickou pozornost a sebevědomí, zatímco ti, kteří zůstanou mimo tento ideál, jsou vystaveni posměchu a vyloučení. Oba seriály přitom obsahují prvek osobního vzdoru, ať už formou odmítnutí make-upu či konfrontace šikany, avšak tyto akty zůstávají izolovanými činy bez reálného dopadu na širší společenské normy. V obou dramatech hraje klíčovou roli motiv proměny: v *True Beauty* slouží make-up jako cesta k sociálnímu přijetí, zatímco v *Shadow Beauty* vytváří hlavní postava idealizované online já, přičemž vždy vzniká psychická zátěž spojená s nutností udržovat „dokonalý“ vzhled.

Seriály zároveň ukazují, jak rodinní příslušníci a vrstevníci přispívají k posilování lookistických tlaků – rodiny často lehkovážně navrhuje plastické operace nebo srovnávají hrdinky s okolím a vrstevníci upevňují normy posměchem a verbálními útoky. Přestože obě dramata odhalují tvrdou realitu vzhledově motivované diskriminace, nenabízejí účinné systémové alternativy: snahy o autentické sebevyjádření jsou často potrestány a pokusy zbavit se vnějších tlaků zůstávají na úrovni individuálních pocitů a rozhodnutí. Limitacemi tohoto výzkumu jsou úzké zaměření na školní prostředí a analýza pouhých dvou seriálů, což sice umožňuje detailní vzhled, ale nedovoluje zobecnění. Přesto práce ukazuje, že *True Beauty* a *Shadow Beauty* nejen odrážejí společenskou posedlost vzhledem, ale zároveň dokumentují emocionální a sociální následky lookismu a náznaky osobního odporu mladých žen.

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