

# Malaysians' Acceptance towards Korean Beauty Standards Embedded In Korean Popular Culture

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## Abstract

*The Korean wave or Hallyu which was first coined in the 1990s by a Chinese journalist to describe the wave of Korean pop culture has spread to many Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Taiwan over the years. The Korean wave has been dubbed South Korea's greatest export as exported cultural products such as Korean dramas, KPOP music and fashion in Asia which have gained a wide acceptance around the world. As media content pervades communities and cultures throughout the world, the globalisation of beauty and appearance ideals is becoming more popular within Asian cultures and continues to increase in influence. South Korean celebrities and idols with perfect visuals and bodies are set as the ideal beauty standard by both local and international audiences. Previous studies have mainly focused on the perceptions of South Korean beauty standards in which research in the Malaysian context has been scarce. Thus, the purpose of this research paper is to understand the acceptance of Malaysians towards the Korean beauty standards embedded in Korean popular culture. The study employs the qualitative method in which content analysis based on library research was conducted to collect data. Malaysians were chosen for this study as they are considered one of the major consumers of Korean popular culture and may be influenced by such mediated content. This concept paper will provide a deep understanding regarding the media-generated behaviour of a population exposed to Korean beauty standards and how they respond to them.*

**Key Words:** media, Korean popular culture, beauty standards, cosmetic surgery

# **Penerimaan Rakyat Malaysia Terhadap Tahap Kecantikan Korea Selatan Di Dalam Budaya Pop Korea**

## **Abstrak**

*Gelombang Korea atau Hallyu yang pertama kali diperkenalkan pada tahun 1990-an oleh seorang wartawan China untuk menggambarkan gelombang budaya pop Korea telah merebak ke banyak negara Asia Tenggara seperti Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, dan Taiwan selama bertahun-tahun. Gelombang Korea telah digelar sebagai eksport terbesar Korea Selatan kerana produk budaya yang dieksport seperti drama Korea, muzik KPOP dan fesyen di Asia mendapat sambutan luas di seluruh dunia. Oleh kerana kandungan media menembusi masyarakat dan budaya di seluruh dunia, globalisasi kecantikan dan penampilan semakin popular dalam budaya Asia dan terus meningkat dalam pengaruh. Selebriti dan penyanyi idola Korea Selatan dengan visual dan badan yang sempurna dijadikan sebagai tahap kecantikan yang unggul oleh penonton tempatan dan antarabangsa. Kajian terdahulu kebanyakannya berfokuskan persepsi terhadap tahap kecantikan Korea Selatan di mana penyelidikan dalam konteks Malaysia adalah terhad. Oleh itu, tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk memahami penerimaan rakyat Malaysia terhadap tahap kecantikan Korea Selatan yang terkandung dalam budaya popular Korea. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kualitatif di mana analisis kandungan berdasarkan kajian perpustakaan dilakukan untuk pengumpulan data. Rakyat Malaysia dipilih untuk kajian ini kerana mereka kebanyakan menerima budaya popular Korea dengan baik dan mungkin dipengaruhi oleh kandungan media tersebut. Kertas konsep ini akan memberikan pemahaman yang mendalam mengenai tingkah laku populasi yang terdedah kepada tahap kecantikan Korea Selatan melalui media dan bagaimana mereka bertindak balas terhadapnya.*

**Kata Kunci:** *media, budaya pop Korea, tahap kecantikan, pembedahan kecantikan*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the era of cultural globalisation, the Korean Wave has emerged as a global phenomenon which has spread to countries all around the globe. The Korean wave or Hallyu was first coined in the 1990s by a Chinese journalist to describe the wave of Korean pop culture which caused a heightened visibility of Korean culture in East Asia and was further extended to the United States, Latin America, parts of Europe and the Middle East (Lee, 2015). Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Taiwan have also been recipients of the Korean Wave over the years. According to Mahr (2012), the Korean Wave or Hallyu has been dubbed as South Korea's greatest export. This can be seen through the wide acceptance of cultural products which have been exported by Korean entertainment companies such as Korean dramas, KPOP music and fashion in Asia and countries around the world since the early 1990s (Seo et al., 2020). Approximately 95 percent of the exports of Korean culture products were for Asian and Southeast countries such as Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia and the Indo-Chinas (Lee, 2015).

Globalisation, which has been accelerated by the fast adoption of digital technologies, intensified a shift in cultural elements in recent years (Lee et al., 2020). In this era of modernity and technological advancement, information, cultural values and products are able to be spread easily and quickly to a large number of people worldwide (Chan, 2018). As media content pervades communities and cultures throughout the world, the globalisation of beauty and appearance ideals is becoming more popular within Asian cultures and continues to increase in influence (Isa & Kramer, 2003). The looks, visuals and bodies of South Korean celebrities and idols showcase the ideal beauty standards which are made appealing to both the local and global audiences. Previous studies examining the effects of Korean popular culture consumption have mainly been centred on the perceptions of South Koreans themselves regarding the Korean beauty standards. For instance, Seo et al. (2020) study how young Korean women interpret K-beauty which represents the beauty standards practised and realised by celebrities of Korean popular culture. Additionally, Cervantes and

Springwood (2016) explore the effects of South Korean popular culture on the standards of beauty and success within the country. However, there has been little research done on the acceptance of Korean beauty standards among Malaysians who are considered big consumers of Korean popular culture. Thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the acceptance of Malaysians towards the Korean beauty standards embedded in Korean popular culture. Specifically, this research has two research questions as follows:

Research question 1. How are Korean beauty standards embedded in Korean popular culture?

Research Question 2. How do Malaysians respond to Korean beauty standards embedded in Korean popular culture they consume?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Korean Popular Culture in Malaysia**

There has been a growing popularity of Korean drama in Malaysia over the years. When the Korean Wave finally reached Malaysia, Korean dramas could be seen airing on local television networks such as TV2, TV3, NTV 7 and Channel 8. Local Satellite television *Astro* which initially had one dedicated Korean channel for viewing also grew to add four more Korean channels to its channel list. These channels aired a variety of Korean entertainment content ranging from dramas, movies, K-pop and variety shows for the consumption of Malaysians. There is also a large number of websites which provide viewers with free access to Korean dramas such as Dramafever, Dramacool, KissAsian and many more. The South Korean drama *Winter Sonata* also received an overwhelming response from Malaysians with a record breaking 1.5 million viewers per aired episode on local broadcasting TV (Hariati, 2012). During the early days of Hallyu in Malaysia, the drama *Winter Sonata*, *A Jewel in the Palace* and *Lovers in Paris* have aired repeatedly for a total of 3 times in the country (Nor Hashimah & Zaharani, 2011). The popularity of these dramas was immense and could also be seen through the remakes of the drama's original sound track. A local

Malaysian singer named Hazami also managed to sell 100, 000 copies of his album which introduced the song '*Sonata Musim Salju*' which is the Malay version of the hit Korean song Winter Sonata (Cho, 2010). In 2005, a survey conducted by the Korean Foundation for Asian cultural Exchange indicated that 4.7% of Malaysians listen to K-pop, 44 % of them watched Korean dramas and 19.2% have watched Korean films (Cho, 2010). In the following year, it was found that Korean dramas were watched by 60% of Malaysians in the past month and that 70% of them were pleased with what they watched (Ha, 2006; Cho, 2010). Nevertheless, the exposure of K-pop in Malaysia has also increased over the years.

K-pop music is not only consumed through television but also through local radio stations and the internet. Local radio station Era FM has also experienced the 'Korean Fever'. According to the radio station's manager at the time, Nazri Noran, ERA placed great importance on its listener's preferred music and acknowledged that within a week of observation, most of their listeners had chosen Korean songs on their radio station's website (Nor Hashimah & Zaharani, 2011). K-pop concerts have also become a common scene in Malaysia where Korean idol groups such as TVXQ, Super Junior, Blackpink and many more would perform live in front of a Malaysian audience. In 2013, *Digi Live Kpop Party* - a joint concert featuring two K-pop groups *Beast* and *4minute* alongside Korean soloist *G.Na* was held in Malaysia. The concert gained much traction as it was the first ever trio concert held in the country and was hosted by DiGi Telecommunications Sdn Bhd (DiGi) in collaboration with Universal Music Malaysia (Nor Hashimah & Zaharani, 2011). Even during the Covid 19 pandemic, these Korean idols would hold online concerts which can be viewed by their fans all around the world including Malaysia.

### **Korean Beauty Standards**

According to Seo et al. (2020), popular culture's representations of beauty standards and portrayals, such as K-beauty, provide a window into the underpinning gender regimes. The standards of femininity and its connection to masculinity are visually embedded in popular

media, beauty consumption practices and fashion (Seo et al., 2020). As Hallyu's popularity grew, so did the demand for idols and actresses to look visually attractive in front of the camera. The female bodies seen on the streets of Korea are almost comparable to the bodies represented in media portrayals. This is because looks play such an important role in their popularity and success as celebrities who are visually pleasing are preferred more than singers who have rather basic singing ability (Leung, 2012). As such, the entertainment media in South Korea has exploited these superstars and their clout to establish a new beauty standard.

South Korean entertainment media exploit these artists and their power to influence others by setting new beauty standards and spreading the notion that good visuals may affect one's success (Cervantes & Springwood, 2016). Korean movies and dramas gain much attention due to their interesting storylines as well as their leading actor and actress. These leading roles are usually played by actors or actresses who are visually good looking or beautiful and fit into the category of K-beauty. Furthermore, the Korean beauty standards are further reinforced in the content of Korean dramas themselves. Characters in Korean drama who are seen as obese or having dark and blemished skin have always been depicted as people who are unhappy and unable to attain love. However, it is only after the character has undergone a complete visual transformation that he or she is finally accepted by the society and eventually acquires love and happiness.

In relation, Shim (2006) perceives K-beauty which is a part of K-pop's culture as a hybridised Asian alternative to Western globalisation of popular culture, in which the Korean Wave presents a more appealing "image of Asian modernisation." K-beauty has led to the liking of a slimmer physique with more Western-style facial characteristics, representing both Western and Asian modernism. For example, K-pop idols have promoted a particular facial shape of which the jawline is shaped like a 'V,' alongside wide set eyes, high nasal bridge, and white skin. These Korean idols also have very fit physiques and those with abs are given even more attention by their fans. Specific terms have also been adapted by Koreans to describe good looking people which have also been applied to Korean celebrities and idols.

The words consist of *saegol* (pretty even though bare-faced), *momjjang* ("body king" or someone with a great body), *eolijang* ('face king' or someone who is pretty or handsome), *longdari* (someone with long legs) and *dongan* (someone who looks younger than his or her actual age) (Bissell & Chung, 2009). The 'alphabetisation' of body shapes has also been utilised by female Koreans (Chang & Thompson, 2014) whereby an 'S' line body is used to describe a curvy body. The term 'bagel' which is derived from the combination of two words which are 'baby' and 'bagel' has also been used to represent Korean idols who are baby-faced with a voluptuous body. This clearly shows how physical appearance plays a significant role in the everyday life of Koreans and these terms represent K-beauty.

### **Cosmetic Surgery**

The cosmetic surgery industry continues to grow as K-pop becomes more popular. K-Pop is a global phenomenon in which pop singers are renowned not just for their catchy melodies and synchronised dancing, but also for their perfect looks, which is frequently enhanced by cosmetic surgery (Jho, 2017). K-pop singers embody ideal beauty standards, and promoting them in media sources may have a detrimental influence on South Korean women's body image while also encouraging the use of plastic surgery to achieve characteristics comparable to K-pop stars (Jho, 2017). Cosmetic surgery procedures are often promoted through digital publicity where celebrities from Korean television, cinema, and music are frequently utilised to advertise cosmetic surgery procedures (Davies & Han, 2011). Furthermore, South Korea is listed in the top ten nations with the most plastic surgeons and operations performed (Jho, 2017). At least one in five South Koreans undergo cosmetic surgery and the country has surgery procedures as the highest number of plastic surgery (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012).

However, in contrast to the American culture where people is encouraged to be happy and grateful for the way they are, South Koreans welcome the idea of having their children undergo plastic surgery and even consider it as a rite of passage (Lee, 2012). Many parents are willing to save money to pay for their child's treatment or procedure as a

preparation for their working life as adults. Koreans rationalise these procedures as necessary, believing that it will improve their lives, not just in terms of success but also in terms of personal pleasure. “Double-eyelid surgery,” or blepharoplasty is the most common procedure among South Koreans where typical Asian’s eyes are transformed from mono lids to double lids. Although cosmetic surgery was popular in South Korea before the emergence of K-beauty, K-pop idols’ “commercial homogeneity” has led to the limiting and uniformity of young women’s beauty standards (Seo et al., 2020). As a result, a number of South Korean celebrities have become “pioneers” in undergoing plastic surgery in the country (Cervantes & Springwood, 2016). The findings of a study conducted by Nabi (2009) reveals that watching cosmetic surgery makeover shows is linked to a desire for cosmetic treatments or procedures. In the event that the depictions deliver mostly positive messages regarding cosmetic procedures, heavy viewers have a tendency to undergo such procedures.

### **The Role of Media in Enforcing Beauty Standards**

The Korean Wave fosters visual consumption, particularly in the K-pop business, which employs strong visual marketing strategies that include rich visual material rather than simply music (Leung, 2012; Loke & Bahiyah, 2020). According to Gerbner (1970), mass production and fast spreading of messages produces new symbolic environments that represent the functions and structure of the institutions that distribute them. These messages promote “a common culture in which societies foster shared and public beliefs about facts, morals, and the inevitabilities of human life (Gerbner, 1969). Bissell and Chung (2009) perform a quantitative study on the correlation between American and Korean media as well as the consumer’s socio-cultural views surrounding self and beauty. The findings show that media not only portray the attitudes, values and beliefs regarding female beauty but also how the same media can influence changes in cultures when people are exposed to depictions of attractiveness and ideal beauty (Streng, 2018).



Bissell and Chung (2009) state that long-term exposure to images of exclusively attractive individuals might lead women and men to accept and embrace the media's portrayal of beauty as a common norm. If television only shows characters that conform to society's ideals of attractiveness, those same criteria become the worldview of individuals who watch the television shows. The meanings of feminine ideals are reinforced, reproduced, and become not only visible, but also natural, through popular cultural texts and the discourses that they elicit (Törrönen and Rolando, 2017). In regards to body image, researches have claimed that those who watch media and consume these artificial beauty ideals, internalise them, and may enable them to be influenced, who subsequently attempt to follow or meet such standards (Nabi, 2009). The exposure of thin-ideal media increases body image dissatisfaction among women (Du, 2015). Although Gerbner's research focuses on television, the same principles may be extended to other types of media, such as the internet, which also contributes to the perpetuation of beauty standards because it provides Malaysians with quick access to Korean media. Audiences are more likely to consume Korean wave through visual content in the digital platforms. The dual role of internet users as consumers and producers have sparked fetishised liking towards the cosmetically enhanced bodies of Koreans, prompting a digital sphere where the commodification of body takes place which is ready for mass consumption (Streng, 2018)

### **Celebrity Obsession and Idolisation**

Kim et al. (2007) state that people's opinions of what is intriguing, fashionable, and attention-grabbing are influenced by visual media (as cited in Loke & Bahiyah, 2020). With regards to global media networks, the media may be liable for persuading people to compromise their own cultural values in order to embrace what is seen more popular or acceptable (Bissele & Chung, 2009). Due to the role of cultural products such as K-pop and Korean drama which also include K-beauty acting as the mediator between cultures, the response towards cultural products includes accepting the cultural elements from the country of origin. Celebrities' imitable appearances are believed to be one of the most important elements in influencing viewers to follow their trends (Park,

2011). Audiences are influenced to imitate or follow these celebrities' trends due to their accessible visuals. The standardised and unique beauty standards of Korean artists are acquiring cult-like following among the younger generation in South Korea, Asia and other countries around the world (Seo et al., 2020).

Beauty standards and celebrity obsessions have largely been examined from a psychological standpoint, as well as their effects on people's attitudes and daily actions (Halim & Kiatkawsin, 2021). The attractive appearance of Korean celebrities has largely influenced the actions of 'idolising' among fans globally. The act of celebrity worshipping also influences the rate at which elective cosmetic surgery is done during a specific duration (Maltby & Day, 2011). When the celebrity is idolised, the celebrity is seen as a physical example in which the individual desires to resemble. While subject to subjective reinterpretation, popular cultural articulations and reiterations of feminine beauty have regulatory consequences and are effective performatives that give forms of self-presentation against or within which every female must place herself." (Cook & Kaiser, 2004). Malaysian teenagers would often showcase their admiration for Korean idols by imitating and replicating their idols' makeup, hairstyle and fashion style including their outfits (Zailin et al., 2016). Even when women actively reject, resist, negotiate, oppose, reject, and even undermine the shifting definitions of gendered beauty, beauty standards remain dominant referents that cannot be ignored (Seo et al., 2020)

### **Acceptance of Korean Beauty Standards**

Past studies have also shown that Malaysians are open to watching Korean dramas on the basis of the great visuals and beauty of Korean celebrities as well as celebrity's culture (Ryoo, 2009; Kaisii, 2017; Agustina & Lukman, 2017). The study by Noor Khairin and Wok (2020) explores the effects of the Korean wave on Malay Muslim women. It is found that Malay women acknowledge that Korean celebrities place particular attention to the way they dress and look and that these women are influenced to wear makeup similar to their Korean idols in order to obtain a similar complexion as these celebrities. Besides

that, a socio-cultural study on Hallyu in Malaysia finds that Malaysians are attracted to K-pop because of the visuals of both male and female idols alongside the catchy songs and attractive dance moves portrayed on stage (Nor Hashimah & Zaharani, 2011). In a study conducted by Nathan et al. (2020), the impact of the consumption of Korean products among Malaysians towards South Korea's image as well as their product image is investigated, and it is identified that 'plastic surgery' is negatively discussed by the respondents.

There is scarce information regarding the acceptance of cosmetic surgery among Malaysians. However, a survey was conducted among Malaysian medical practitioners as to whether they would undergo cosmetic surgery which received very low agreement among the respondents. It is reported that only 6.11% of the respondents are willing to undergo cosmetic surgery in the future (Nathan et al., 2020). This indicates a low level of acceptability of cosmetic surgery among Malaysian customers, which may explain Malaysians' unfavourable attitudes towards cosmetic surgery among Korean celebrities. Furthermore, plastic surgery is not allowed in Islam as any modification towards the body for reasons besides health issues are prohibited. The National Fatwa Council has also banned the Botox treatment for Muslims as it is claimed to contain harmful and prohibited substances. Although the ruling is not legally binding, it would be considered a sin for Muslims to disobey the ruling. In contrast, according to Menon (2019), a number of plastic surgeons in Malaysia have developed a Korean look for their patients which was prompted by an influx of desired appearance requests from patients who have been influenced by K-drama, K films as well as K-pop. One of the plastic surgeons from the study also claims that it is a trend for Malaysians to look like a K-pop Star.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This research uses qualitative methodology. The qualitative research methodology is selected due to its practicality in describing behaviour or when understanding certain issues or problems (Hennick et al., 2011). As such, the qualitative approach is suitable in understanding

the consumption of Korean wave among Malaysians and how it affects their actions and behaviour regarding Korean beauty standards. Additionally, there are a variety of approaches that can be taken by a researcher in qualitative methodology such as interviews, observations and document analyses (Berg & Lune, 2012). For this concept paper specifically, the researcher used content analysis based on library research. Additionally, a total of 60 sources have been utilised by the researcher and analysed in this research. Due to the limited research being done in the area of study, the sources acquired were those published between the years 2003 and 2021.

However, the researcher has ensured that the majority of sources for this study are within the recent 10-year time frame in order to obtain current information for the study. Library research was conducted to acquire detailed information as a means of answering the research questions presented. The library research consisted of collecting data from journals, theses, books, reviews, and conference papers. The library research was done based on studies and readings of Korean popular culture and Korean beauty standards. The research also focused within the context of Malaysia in order to obtain data regarding consumption of Korean popular culture in Malaysia as well as the acceptance of Korean beauty standards among Malaysians. Malaysians were chosen as the subject of the study as they are considered to be high consumers of Korean popular culture.

Besides the evidently increasing Korean entertainment channels on *Astro* implying a great demand of Korean popular culture from the locals, Tan (2020) has also reported that Malaysia takes seventh place among nations with the highest number of tweets related to K-pop on Twitter. Lastly, thematic analysis was also used to analyse the data collected from the library research. According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), thematic analysis is a method used to describe data, and requires interpretation in the selection of codes as well as the construction of themes. The researcher has also adopted the six-step method analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006) which consists of the following: i) being familiar with the data ii) produce initial codes iii) identify themes iv) define themes v) generate report.

For this study, the coding was done manually without the assistance of a software programme. The data set was reviewed carefully to identify similar patterns which was divided into specific themes.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Korean beauty standards are embedded in Korean popular culture through the visuals of Korean celebrities and idols, characters portrayed in dramas and movies and the promotion of cosmetic surgery by celebrities.

##### **Appearance of Korean Celebrities and Idols**

The consumption of Korean popular culture is steadily increasing in Malaysia. Malaysians have a variety of platforms to choose from in consuming Korean popular culture such as local television channels, social media and the internet. The emergence of the internet has made the consumption of Korean popular culture to be much easier. Malaysians can easily access the internet and search for their favourite Korean drama or K-pop idol group. Popular online streaming platform Netflix is also home to a variety of Korean dramas, Korean movies as well as Korean variety shows which are enjoyed by online viewers even in Malaysia. According to Netflix (2020), the viewing of Korean content on the platform has increased fourfold from the year 2019 to 2020 in Asian countries with *The King: Eternal Monarch* being the most popular title in Malaysia for the year 2020.

In addition, the drama *It's Okay to Not be Okay* has stayed in Malaysia's top 10 list for a period of 100 days implying its immense popularity among Malaysians. The male protagonists in the dramas *The King: Eternal Monarch* and *It's Okay to Not be Okay* are both Lee Min Ho and Kim Soo Hyun respectively. Both actors have one thing in common which is their good looks that are often seen as ideal beauty standards for men. Lee Min Ho has a tall and fit physique, big eyes and a high nasal bridge whereas Kim Soo Hun is known for his small face and 'V' jawline. The dramas that both actors act in usually do well in ratings and the same could be seen on Netflix Malaysia. In addition to the

drama's storyline, the actor's good looks are definitely a major factor of why Malaysians watch such dramas. Past studies have also shown that Malaysians are open to watching Korean dramas on the basis of the great visuals and beauty of Korean celebrities as well as celebrity's culture (Ryoo, 2009; Kaisii, 2017; Agustina & Lukman, 2017).

Besides that, people can easily view the music performances or guest show appearances of their favourite K-pop idols on YouTube. The K-pop idols seen on music shows always have flawless and fair skin which is especially evident when the camera focuses on them. When performing on stage, K-pop idols are known to have the complete look from their bold makeup that enhances their visuals, contemporary hair style, fancy outfit, and well-proportioned figures. Even within each idol group, there would be a member who is considered the 'face' of the group or is in charge of the 'visuals' of the group. This implies that they are the best looking or prettiest member in the group. In others words, the term *eolijang* ('face king' or someone who is pretty or handsome) is also used to describe them. In addition, these idols have great body proportions and quite a number of these idols even have abs. The term *momijang* ("body king" or someone with a great body) would be best to describe these idols. During special music performances, there would be instances where these male idols would rip off their clothes and reveal their abs during a certain segment of their dance choreography.

Every time these male idols perform such actions, the audience especially the female fans would show big reactions emphasising their desire for such actions. Nevertheless, the same reaction by male fans could also be seen when female K-pop idols reveal their slim waist and thin legs especially through the outfits they use while performing. Similarly, Nor Hasimah and Zaharani (2011) conduct a socio-cultural study on Hallyu in Malaysia and find that Malaysians are attracted to K-pop because of the visuals of both male and female idols alongside the catchy songs and appealing dance moves portrayed on stage. In addition, during interviews, K-pop idols are often asked how they maintain their fit bodies and clear skin. They would reveal their beauty regime, rigorous workouts in achieving their ideal body type and the intense diets they had to undergo to lose weight.

## **Characters Portrayed in Korean Dramas and Movies**

These Korean beauty standards are further emphasised in the characters of Korean dramas. One of the common plots in Korean dramas is the fateful meeting between an ugly woman and a good-looking man in which the former has to undergo a transformation to finally be noticed and liked by the male lead. The female lead would usually be overweight or have blemished and dark skin, who is an outcast and in order to be accepted by the society especially by the male lead, she would have to undergo a total transformation. She would have to transform into someone with wide eyes, a high nose bridge and fair skin to be considered beautiful. Furthermore, the idea of plastic surgery is also included in plots of Korean movies. In the Korean movie *200 Pounds Beauty*, the female lead character is overweight and far from beautiful and in order to pursue the man she likes, she decides to undergo plastic surgery to transform into a beautiful lady.

## **Promotion of Cosmetic Surgery by Korean Celebrity and Idols**

There are also Korean actors and actresses as well as K-pop idols who have openly admitted to undergoing plastic surgery on Korean television shows. According to Davies and Han (2011), a rise in digital publicity for cosmetic procedures can be observed when Korean celebrities go under the knife. Most of the time, these Korean celebrities would get double-eyelid surgery and a nose job whereas some would completely re-do their entire face. Korean celebrities such as Hwang Kwanghee is known for undergoing plastic surgery and has publicised the matter on many Korean television shows before. Nevertheless, getting plastic surgery is not something frowned upon in South Korea and is seen as a necessity in life. According to Reid and Malone (2008), plastic surgery has always been depicted in a positive light by the Korean media. This is particularly evident in Korea because one's appearance could influence their success in life whether in getting a job or finding love. Those who appear to be more beautiful have higher chances of employment or landing a role on a Korean drama or movie.

The response of Malaysians regarding the acceptance of Korean beauty standards embedded in Korean popular culture is generally positive due to celebrity obsession and idolisation. However, due to religious obligation, they have rejected beauty standards related to cosmetic surgery.

### **Acceptance due to Celebrity Obsession and Idolisation**

The attractiveness and physical characteristics of an individual are important elements in determining beauty impressions, and they have significant effects for how the person sees him or herself, how people are seen by others and how they act towards other people (Lennon et al., 2017). In addition, the study conducted by Jung and Lee (2006) shows that for women in collectivistic societies, one's beauty is significant in the assessment of the self and others. The authors also state that in comparison to individualistic societies, women in collectivistic societies are more likely to be confined to gender-roles in which they are expected to be beautiful. As such, Malaysians who are identified as collectivists pay a great amount of attention to how they look as compared to others in which they are also expected to look presentable.

For instance, in a study conducted by Swami and Tovée (2005) regarding the perceived physical attractiveness of Malaysian and British women, it is concluded that both nationalities are inclined towards a low Body Mass Index (BMI). The authors state that Malaysian women prefer a lower BMI due to media influence that depicts images of thin physique. McDowell and Bond (2006) also find similar results when studying about negative body image and report that Malay women are influenced by Western messages of thinness which are largely circulated via media. This shows that Malaysians are easily influenced by what they consume in the media. As they consume a great amount of Korean popular culture over the years, Malaysians are most likely to accept Korean beauty standards. For instance, the study by Loke and Bahiyah (2020) shows that the consumption of Korean cultural products such as Korean celebrities and dramas affects the metrosexual grooming attitudes and behaviours of Malaysians. Khai and Wahab (2017) also state that beautiful men appearing in Korean dramas have prompted



Malaysians to consume a greater number of Korean dramas. It can also be seen that Malaysians are changing their behaviours and attitudes due to the Korean celebrity idolisation and would try to imitate and resemble their favourite idols.

As stated by Zailin et al. (2016), Malaysian teenagers would often showcase their admiration for Korean idols by imitating and replicating their idol's makeup, hairstyle and fashion style including their outfits. They also acknowledge the visuals and beauty of these Korean celebrities and have set characteristics such as wide set of eyes, high nasal bridge, and fair skin, slim body as the ideal beauty standard. For instance, according to market research conducted by Fact.MR (2021), it is reported that there has been a significant increase in sales of skin lightening products over the past 10 years due to high demand from countries such as Malaysia, Bangladesh, India, Thailand and China. For instance, Malaysian women are using whitening products in order to appear fair similar to Korean celebrities while also applying make-up to acquire the same look as the celebrities.

### **Rejection due to Religious Obligations**

However, with regards to undergoing cosmetic surgery, it can be said that most Malaysians do not accept such Korean beauty standards. In a study investigating the impact of the consumption of Korean products among Malaysians towards South Korea's image as well as their product image, it is identified that 'plastic surgery' is negatively discussed by the respondents (Nathan et al., 2020). The majority of Malaysians are Malay Muslims and this rejection of cosmetic surgery is influenced by the teachings in Islam whereby it is forbidden to modify or alter any parts of their body for aesthetic purposes. The only circumstances where plastic surgery is allowed for Muslims is when it involves health issues which could be detrimental to the individual. Nevertheless, it is still important to address that the percentage of Malaysians who might accept the idea of plastic surgery might be those who are non-Muslims such as the Chinese and Indians. This is because there have been findings that indicate that plastic surgeons in Malaysia have received requests from visitors to make them look 'Korean' (Menon, 2019).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Korean beauty standards are largely embedded in Korean Popular Culture which is exported to countries worldwide including Malaysia. These beauty standards can be seen through the visuals of Korean celebrities and idols, characters portrayed in dramas and movies and the promotion of cosmetic surgery by celebrities. Malaysians have consumed a great number of Korean dramas and movies over the years through their local television channels and the emergence of the internet has made the access to Korean popular culture much easier. The visuals, beauty, and perfect body proportions of Korean celebrities and idols that are present in dramas and music shows have become the main source of attraction for Malaysians to consume Korean cultural products. Even the characters portrayed in Korean dramas and movies have emphasised the need to appear beautiful according to Korean beauty standards. The idea of becoming beautiful through plastic surgery is also widely accepted in the Korean society and reflected in their media.

Many Korean celebrities have openly admitted to undergoing plastic surgery in the media and even plastic surgery transformations have become a common plot in many Korean movies and dramas. In response to this, Malaysians are seen to be accepting of these Korean beauty standards to a certain extent which is also influenced by celebrity obsession and idolisation among Malaysians. As Malaysians live in a collective society, their personal appearance is of great importance and Korean celebrities and idols are often seen as people they would want to resemble. Thus, Malaysians are changing their behaviours and attitudes due to Korean celebrity idolisation and would try to imitate the makeup, hairstyle and outfits of their favourite idols. This also demonstrates the important role that media plays in influencing the way a population behaves or acts as viewers supposedly act on a media-generated desire to be physically attractive as the characters or celebrities seen in Korean popular culture.

However, due to religious obligations, Malaysians who are mostly Muslim Malays have mostly rejected beauty standards related to cosmetic surgery. Although the standardised and unique beauty standards of Korean artists are acquiring cult-like following among Malaysians, individuals who are Muslim would not undergo plastic surgery as it is prohibited and considered haram in their religion. This study has limitations in terms of past research being done in the area of study. Specifically, research regarding Korean popular culture and Korean beauty standards within the context of Malaysia is still scarce and mostly outdated. As such, further research could look into expanding qualitative research in this area of study or quantitative research with aims to study the effects of Korean beauty standards among Malaysians.

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