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South Korea's Culture of Plastic Surgery

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Introduction

If K-pop is South Korea's gift to global music, then K-beauty is its equivalent in the world of cosmetics. What was once a local trend has transformed into an international phenomenon, with K-beauty propelled by the Hallyu Wave that brought Korean films, television, fashion, and beauty to audiences worldwide. This cultural export has steadily cemented South Korea's reputation as a powerhouse in the global cosmetics industry. Even markets with strong local beauty industries, such as India and the U.S., have felt the influence of K-beauty, as demand for Korean products continues to surge. In 2024, the country's cosmetics exports and domestic production reached record highs, reflecting sustained international demand for Korean beauty products. South Korea exported USD 10.28 billion worth of cosmetics, marking a 20.3% increase from 2023 (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2025). Riding on this upward trajectory, the global fascination with advanced skincare, nutritional supplements for beauty and weight management, and cutting-edge aesthetic procedures continues to grow.

Beyond skincare and makeup, South Korea's beauty influence extends deeply into cosmetic surgery, another defining pillar of its global reputation. According to Expert Market Research, South Korea has the highest rate of plastic surgery procedures per capita in the world, with a market worth $1.7 billion in 2023. The sector is also expected to grow to be worth $5.19 billion by 2032 (Rashid, 2024) and they account for nearly 25% of the global aesthetic surgery market (David Lee D, 2025).

This surge is largely driven by the global popularity of Korean pop culture, or Hallyu, which has popularised Korean beauty standards and inspired worldwide interest in Korean cosmetic procedures.

Cosmetic procedures, also known as plastic surgery, refer to a medical procedure aimed at correcting and enhancing bodily imperfections by repairing or reconstructing specific parts of the face or body through the transfer of tissues. Traditionally, plastic surgery has been performed for medical reasons, such as treating injuries, severe burns, extensive skin tears, or cancer-related tissue damage.

In contemporary contexts, plastic surgery has become widely recognised for its role in aesthetic enhancement, helping individuals refine or alter their physical appearance. Common procedures include blepharoplasty, brow lifts, rhinoplasty, abdominoplasty, liposuction, and facelifts (Michelle M et al, 2018).



In South Korea's capital, Seoul, the affluent district of Gangnam is synonymous with this culture of beauty. The streets are lined with clinics and hospitals specialising in cosmetic procedures and surgery, offering everything from double eyelid surgery to breast augmentation. While they cater to local preferences, international customers remain a highly lucrative business. According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, in 2023 South Korea attracted 605,768 foreigners for medical services, with the highest numbers coming from Japan, China, the United States and Thailand (Rashid, 2024).

The growing desire to improve one's physical appearance has also transformed plastic surgery into a multi-billion-dollar global industry, driving significant investment in research, technological innovation, and advanced surgical techniques. This trend has earned South Korea the title of the beauty cosmetic surgery capital: a distinction both celebrated and debated for its cultural, social, and ethical implications.

Discussing plastic surgery in the context of contemporary Korea is crucial, as it reveals much about the nation's evolving identity, values, and socio-economic dynamics. Beauty in Korea is not merely a matter of personal choice but a reflection of deeper and darker societal problems to be discussed in this report.

Historical Context

Origins of Cosmetic Enhancements in South Korea

Long before modern plastic surgery, premodern South Korea linked outward appearances to fate and character through gwansang, also known as physiognomy (Shin, 2023). Within this tradition, "reading the face" was thought to reveal a person's prospects in work, marriage, and health. The upheavals of the twentieth century—Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), the Korean War (1950-1953), and the subsequent U.S. military presence—introduced new biomedical techniques that merged with traditional beliefs about improving one's appearance as a path to a better life.



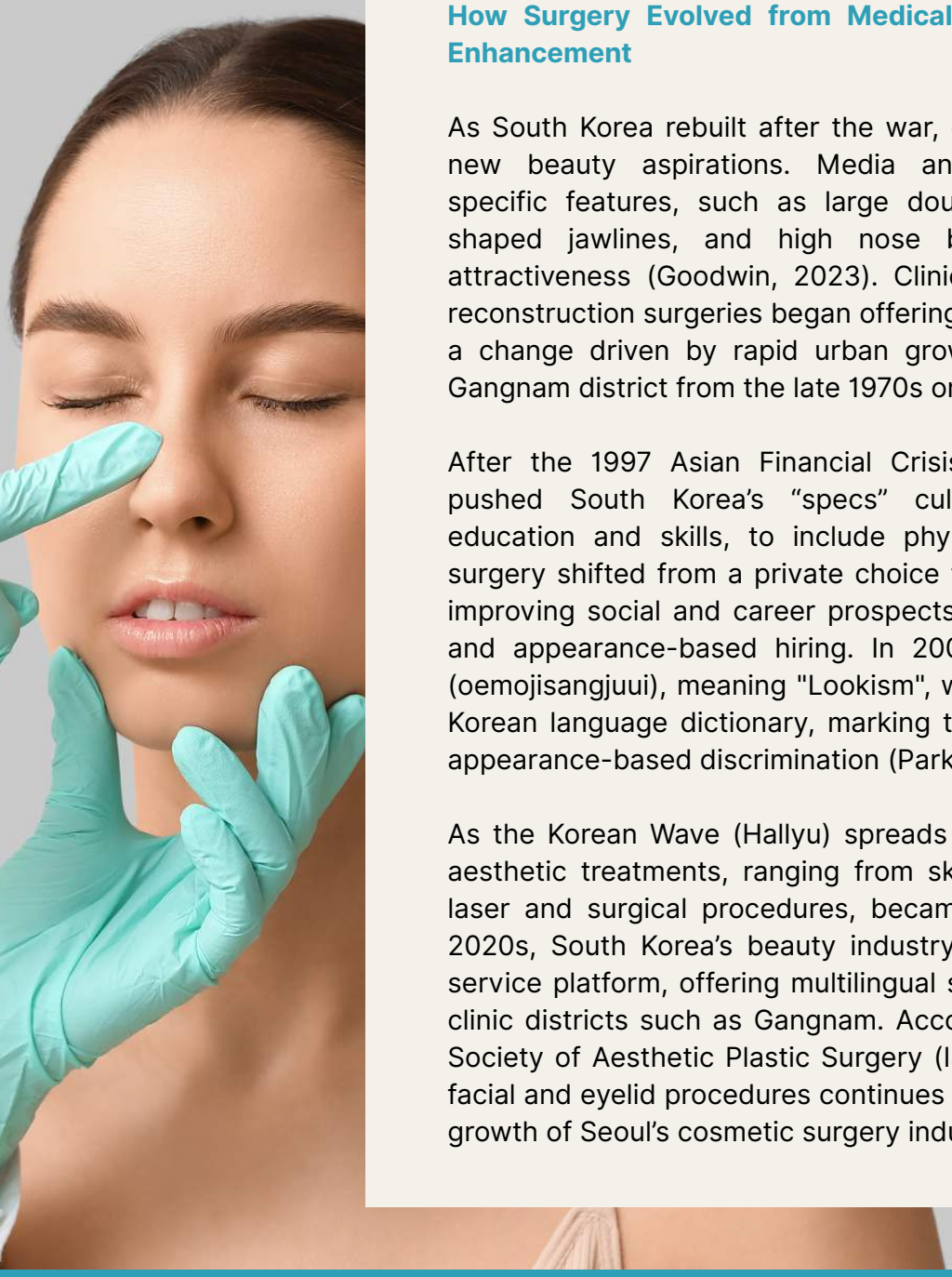
GWANSANG (PHYSIOGNOMY)

Specifically, blepharoplasty (double-eyelid surgery) was an early, widely recognised procedure in Korea. The origins of this procedure date back to the Japanese colonial era, identifying the first recorded case of the surgery performed on a Korean woman and what is believed to be the country's earliest example of the operation (Jung et al., 2024).

By 1935, double eyelids were already seen as a sign of modern beauty, with newspapers and magazines promoting both non-surgical and surgical methods (Jung et al., 2024). The technique was first introduced from Japan and later shared through medical journals.

During the Korean War, reconstructive surgery, especially for cleft lip and trauma cases, became closely linked with emerging aesthetic practices. U.S. Marine Corps surgeon D. Ralph Millard played a key role in this shift. His time in Korea was described as “legendary,” as he established a major reconstructive service for injured soldiers and, while operating on children with cleft lips, developed the rotation-advancement technique that became a cornerstone of modern plastic surgery (Wolfe, 2011). Through his publications, he also helped to establish surgical knowledge and training that later supported the country’s growing interest in aesthetic procedures (Butts & Tatum, 2012).

Together, these developments show that Korea’s cosmetic surgery roots combine prewar experimentation, postwar medical advances, and global influence.



How Surgery Evolved from Medical Necessity to Aesthetic Enhancement

As South Korea rebuilt after the war, growing prosperity fueled new beauty aspirations. Media and advertising promoted specific features, such as large double-lidded eyes, slim V-shaped jawlines, and high nose bridges, as symbols of attractiveness (Goodwin, 2023). Clinics that once focused on reconstruction surgeries began offering cosmetic enhancements, a change driven by rapid urban growth, especially in Seoul’s Gangnam district from the late 1970s onward.

After the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, fierce job competition pushed South Korea’s “specs” culture, once focused on education and skills, to include physical appearance. Plastic surgery shifted from a private choice to a common strategy for improving social and career prospects, reinforced by photo IDs and appearance-based hiring. In 2003, the term 외모지상주의 (oemojisangjuui), meaning "Lookism", was officially added to the Korean language dictionary, marking the growing awareness of appearance-based discrimination (Park et al., 2019).

As the Korean Wave (Hallyu) spreads worldwide, K-beauty and aesthetic treatments, ranging from skincare and injectables to laser and surgical procedures, became global exports. By the 2020s, South Korea’s beauty industry had evolved into a full-service platform, offering multilingual support and concentrated clinic districts such as Gangnam. According to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS), global demand for facial and eyelid procedures continues to rise, mirroring the rapid growth of Seoul’s cosmetic surgery industry (ISAPS, 2025).

From Early Perceptions to Modern Normalisation

Early discussions of cosmetic surgery in Korea were often divided. Some saw cosmetic procedures as a form of Westernisation or a surrender to foreign beauty ideals, while others viewed operations like double-eyelid surgery as a practical means of adapting to post-war life shaped by U.S.-Korean interactions. For many women, especially those working in the camptowns around U.S. military bases, such procedures offered a way to improve social mobility and navigate relationships with American soldiers (Pyo, 2024).



FIG. 15A. This is one of the "Candlelight Club" girls. Note the heavy padding of her upper lids.
FIG. 15B. 3 weeks post-operative—her reason for desiring the change was economic.

"Several Oriental girls requested to be occidentalized in order to be more attractive to the American troops."

By the 2000s, South Korea's focus on appearance had become deeply ingrained in daily life. Cosmetic surgery was no longer unusual. It was given as graduation gifts and openly discussed at work or in social settings. By the 2020s, mainstream media regularly used the term "Lookism" to describe this phenomenon, and conversations about looks, diets, and skin tone had become routine in cafes, offices, and classrooms (Min, 2023).

In South Korea today, cosmetic surgery is often viewed as a strategic investment, much like education, language training, or professional certification. In a society where appearance is closely tied to opportunity, the idea of "Lookism" explains this mindset—when looks are openly evaluated in schools, workplaces, and social settings, both surgical and non-surgical enhancements become visible, acceptable, and even expected parts of self-improvement.

Beauty Standards in South Korea

Confucianism Influencing Conformity in Korea

The concept of establishing distinct beauty standards in Korea can be traced back to the teachings of Confucianism. As Confucianism was woven into Korea's history back in the Joseon dynasty, the principle of order and society standards have been ingrained in the fundamental upbringing of Koreans even until today. As mentioned in her book, "Flawless: Lessons in Looks and Culture from the K-Beauty Capital", author Elsie Hu (2023) highlights how the strict gender norms and focus on self-improvement embedded in Korean Neo-Confucianism have contributed to the development of its demanding beauty standards. Collectivism is considered a core component of Confucianism, and it emphasises the importance of family and social harmony over individual interests. This mindset pushes Koreans, both in the past and present, to prioritise the idea of belonging and avoiding behaviour or appearances that would cause one to stand out.



As such, the push for uniformity results in certain beauty norms becoming widely accepted benchmarks rather than personal preferences, and individuals feel strong pressure to meet widely shared aesthetic ideals.

Korean society places strong importance on the concept of Chemyeon, or maintaining one's social reputation (Han, 2024). Chemyeon refers to one's social face, and is also understood as the image they present to others that shows good character and earns respect. From the teachings of social harmony under Confucianism, individuals are taught to take what others think of them into consideration, and their Chemyeon is heavily attributed to morality and ability. This also aligns with the 'growth mindset' common among Koreans, where they believe that improvement for anything can be done with effort and time.

With respect to beauty standards, the idea of Chemyeon positions appearance as a key element, and how enhancing one's looks becomes a way to strengthen social reputation. When individuals choose to partake in cosmetic surgery or engage in other efforts to modify their appearance, their change in appearance is not seen as a criticism of their former self, but rather a betterment of their status and the community as well.

Cultural Ideas of Beauty Standards in Korea

Korean beauty standards are adapted by a blend of traditional and modern beauty trends. In an article by AB Plastic Surgery (2024), it highlights the seven main Korean Beauty Standards that are widely recognised across Korean females today. The first Korean beauty standard is to have flawless skin. Koreans put utmost importance on achieving a blemish-free and smooth complexion, kickstarting the trend of "glass-skin" that has been widely popularised in the last decade of Korean beauty. With some Korean skincare routines involving more than ten different products and steps, facial products like serums and face masks have been adopted into many Koreans' skincare routines in efforts to attain bperfect, flawless skin.

Korean females also strive to achieve a coveted V-shaped face. They believe that achieving a slim oval face with a sharp chin symbolises elegance and femininity. In order to achieve this ideal face shape, individuals often receive facial massages or even undergo cosmetic surgery. Another facial feature that often has individuals undergoing surgery for is double eyelids. Big, doe-like eyes with visible double eyelids are one of the most sought-after features of Korean beauty standards. Although make-up techniques can help present the appearance of double eyelids, many individuals have gone under the knife to achieve the look permanently. For noses, Korean females idolise the perfect nose as one that is straight and defined. As such, many individuals utilise contouring make-up techniques and even rhinoplasty to achieve the look.



In Korea, maintaining a youthful appearance is seen as a blessing. To achieve such an appearance, many individuals partake in advanced skincare techniques as well as minimally invasive cosmetic procedures such as botox and dermal fillers. These cosmetic procedures can also sometimes be used in helping them achieve a socially-recognised ideal body shape and weight—a body that is slim and toned. This keeps Korean females motivated to engage in fitness activities such as pilates and partaking in diets that can help them achieve this physique. Lastly, a straight shoulder line, or 90-degree shoulder line, is also a feature many Koreans believe to be a marker of beauty for both men and women. This feature refers to shoulders that form a right-angle with the neck which creates an elegant line.

Comparison to Western Beauty Norms

Western standards of beauty differ largely from the established norms of Korean beauty standards mentioned earlier. In an article by AB Plastic Surgery (2024), they highlight how unlike the slim, V-shaped face often idolised by Asian females, Western cultures identify high cheekbones and strong jawlines to be attractive and strong. Although wide eyes are admired in the West as well, Western beauty norms place stronger importance on looking naturally attractive, making makeup a more common approach than undergoing cosmetic surgical procedures.

Furthermore, Korea's beauty standards differ from those of Westerners with regard to skin tone and body preferences. While Koreans and many East Asians often strive for fair, porcelain-like skin associated with purity, Western beauty ideals tend to favour a sun-kissed tan that conveys health and vitality. In terms of body shape, Korean beauty standards typically favour a petite and slender figure, whereas Western ideals often highlight an hourglass figure, often accompanied by well-defined waists and fuller hips and bust.

Economic Industry of Cosmetic Surgery

Market Size for Plastic Surgery in South Korea

According to statistics from Towards Healthcare (2024), the market size for plastic surgery in South Korea is projected to grow exponentially over the next decade—from USD 2.9 billion in 2024 to an estimated USD 12.14 billion by 2034.

The report further noted that non-invasive treatments dominated the market in 2024 and are expected to continue as the fastest-growing segment. This trend aligns with the increasing popularity and efficiency of non-invasive procedures, also known as "skin booster treatments," which originated from Korea. Examples include Potenza, Rejuran, and Pico Laser.

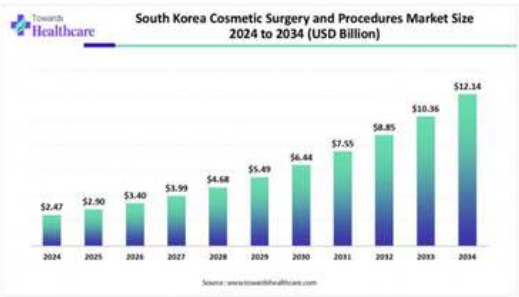


Figure 1. S.Korea Cosmetic Surgery Market Size Projection

In 2024, 80% of new clinics opened by general practitioners in South Korea were dermatology-focused, with one-third of these clinics located in Seoul. Furthermore, the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS, 2024) reported that South Korea ranked first globally, with 13.5 cosmetic procedures performed per 1,000 individuals.

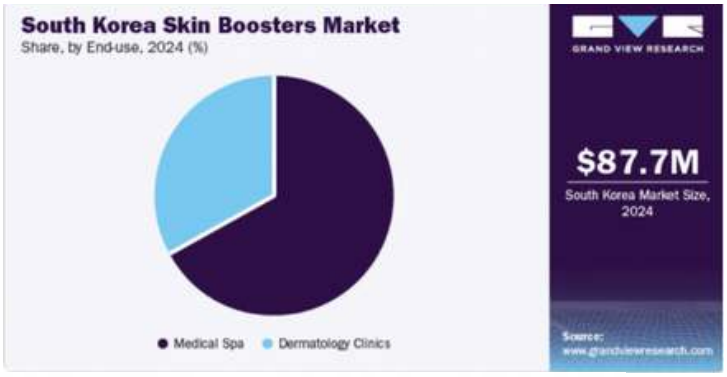


Figure 2. South Korea Skin Boosters Market Size in 2024

Cultural Ideas of Beauty Standards in Korea

While plastic surgery remains immensely popular, non-invasive treatments are also in high demand. Among invasive (surgical) procedures, the most common in South Korea include double eyelid surgery, rhinoplasty, and facial contouring. These procedures are particularly sought after due to their affordability, consistent results, and the large number of successful patient outcomes documented over time.



Figure 3. TXT(boy group) Yeonjun who underwent rhinoplasty

Rhinoplasty and facial contouring are especially popular among individuals aspiring to resemble their favorite K-pop idols. Many Korean clinics have gained global recognition for their ability to replicate specific aesthetic styles. For instance, the "K-pop nose surgery" focuses on creating a slim, high, and refined nasal bridge and tip. Another well-known procedure, the V-line surgery, aims to achieve a delicate and youthful facial structure.



Figure 4.V-line surgery (before and after)

Double eyelid surgery is also highly popular, as double eyelids are often considered more attractive in East Asian beauty standards. Consequently, these surgeries have become integral to achieving the "ideal" Korean aesthetic.

Key Players: Hospitals, Clinics, and Medical Tourism

Seoul has become synonymous with plastic surgery, hosting over 600 cosmetic surgery clinics as of 2025. Approximately 55% of these are located in the Gangnam district (Lee, 2025). Prominent hospitals and clinics include JK Plastic Surgery Centre, Braun Plastic Surgery, and Banobagi Plastic Surgery.

Many clinics leverage influencer marketing—both local and international—by sponsoring cosmetic procedures in exchange for social media exposure. For example, Indonesian content creator Erna Limdaugh documented her rhinoplasty journey with Braun Plastic Surgery on YouTube. She shared her experience candidly, detailing the painful recovery but expressing satisfaction with the results.

In Korea, maintaining a youthful appearance is seen as a blessing. To achieve such an appearance, many individuals partake in advanced skincare techniques as well as minimally invasive cosmetic procedures such as botox and dermal fillers. These cosmetic procedures can also sometimes be used in helping them achieve a socially-recognised ideal body shape and weight—a body that is slim and toned. This keeps Korean females motivated to engage in fitness activities such as pilates and partaking in diets that can help them achieve this physique. Lastly, a straight shoulder line, or 90-degree shoulder line, is also a feature many Koreans believe to be a marker of beauty for both men and women. This feature refers to shoulders that form a right-angle with the neck which creates an elegant line.

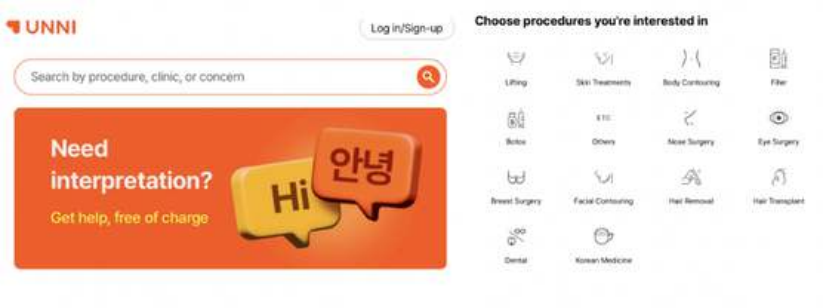


Figure 5. Unni - Application for cosmetic treatments and procedures in Koea

Medical tourism plays a critical role in expanding South Korea's cosmetic industry. In 2024, the country welcomed approximately 1.17 million foreign medical tourists (Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2024). According to Seoul Cosmetic Surgery (2024), the city attracts over 320,000 international patients annually and maintains a 95% satisfaction rate. Western patients, in particular, save up to 60% compared to the cost of equivalent procedures in their home countries.

South Korea's hospitality infrastructure complements its medical industry, offering patients five-star accommodations, chauffeur services, and personal translators. Shin Medical, Korea's largest licensed medical tourism agency, manages every aspect of the process—from pre-surgery consultations to post-operative care.

According to IMARC Group market research, the medical tourism sector in South Korea was valued at approximately USD 1.9 billion in 2024 and is expected to reach USD 3 billion by 2033, growing at an annual rate of 5.13% (Ung, 2025). Dr. Choi Soon-woo, chief surgeon at View Plastic Surgery in Gangnam, also noted a 20-30% annual increase in foreign clientele.

Government Role in Promoting Medical Tourism

According to a BMC Public Health review (Xu et al., 2021), the South Korean government has actively promoted the medical tourism industry through a series of legislative measures.

In 2016, the government enacted the Act on Support for Overseas Expansion of Healthcare System and Attraction of International Patients. This law aimed to enhance the country's medical tourism infrastructure by expanding domestic healthcare services for international patients, improving accessibility, and ensuring safe, high-quality treatments. The legislation also positioned medical tourism as a key contributor to national economic growth.

In May 2018, the government introduced the Enforcement Plan to Support Overseas Expansion of Healthcare System and Attraction of International Patients, which refined the earlier act's goals by including additional economic and policy assessments. These initiatives collectively underscore the South Korean government's commitment to positioning the nation as a global leader in medical tourism.

Contributions of Plastic and Cosmetic Surgery to South Korea's GDP

In 2023, South Korea's top four conglomerates—Samsung, SK, Hyundai Motor, and LG—collectively generated over 980 trillion won (USD 729 billion), accounting for 40.8% of the country's nominal GDP. Although the cosmetic surgery sector contributes a smaller share in comparison, its growth trajectory is significant.

The medical tourism industry alone was valued at over USD 1.9 billion in 2024. Additionally, South Korea's cosmetic exports, including skincare and beauty products, reached a record USD 8.52 billion in 2023, reflecting strong global demand for K-beauty products. These exports complement the plastic surgery industry, as both sectors are driven by similar beauty ideals and technological innovations.

Korean skincare products have also gained international acclaim for their effectiveness and affordability, particularly among Asian consumers. As such, the combined growth of cosmetic surgery, skincare, and beauty exports continues to play a meaningful role in South Korea's economic development.

The Hallyu Wave and Media's Influence on K-Beauty

The Influence of Korean Celebrities & Celebrity Endorsements

Korean pop and drama celebrities have highly influenced beauty standards in Korea. As individuals who are constantly under the spotlight, many Kpop idols and K-drama actors have gone under the knife to achieve the ideal look loved and admired by their local supporters.

According to Hsu (2019), the Korean Wave has brought a shift in women's beauty standards in Korea—from "old pretty", which valued slanted eyes and a natural, slender look, to "new pretty," characterised by a smaller face, larger eyes, a higher nose bridge, fuller lips, prominent cheeks, and a refined chin. As for male aesthetics, K-pop boy bands have also helped to create beauty trends and standards, such as the Jimsung-dol or "monster idol" look, as well as the "beautiful flower boy" look. The former placed emphasis on the individual's muscular body, while the latter is defined by elfin faces, popularised by celebrities such as actor Song Joong-ki.



With Korean dramas, music videos, and films constantly portraying these beauty ideals, it has undoubtedly influenced the beauty preferences of individuals beyond just South Korea, but globally.

Fans and viewers who are drawn to these celebrities would thus engage in efforts to reflect these standards and trends, using the products and following the skincare regimens of their favourite celebrities (Skin Seoul Shop, 2024). Collaboration between K-pop influencers and beauty brands has reshaped the marketing and consumption of beauty products. A key example of this would be how fans of Seventeen's Mingyu and IVE's Wonyoung are very familiar with the products of Innisfree, which these celebrities endorse. Beyond the influence of celebrity endorsements, Innisfree further boosts sales by offering exclusive merchandise featuring its brand ambassadors, motivating fans to purchase its products. This reiterates the influence K-pop celebrities have on the K-Beauty brand, both on the local and global scale.

The Power of Social Media

Social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become key channels for promoting and popularising Korean beauty trends. Through tutorials, product reviews, and skincare
content, influencers make K-beauty trends widely accessible to global audiences. Brands will collaborate with individuals on social media who have a strong following, often through sending them products in public relations (PR) packages for them to promote. By showcasing these items to their large follower base, they help generate buzz and credibility for the brands, effectively shaping consumer preferences and driving the popularity of K-beauty trends.

Because K-beauty has now evolved into a global scale, Korean beauty brands have begun adapting their products to appeal to a more diverse audience. Many companies are now moving beyond the fair skin tones they had traditionally prioritised in their formulations, back when their products mainly targeted East Asians. A popular example of this is the company TirTir, which expanded its foundation shade range from just 3 to 40.



Figure 6. Side-By-Side Comparison of TirTir's old shade range and current shade range

According to Delgado (2024), one of the key contributors to the expansion in the shade range was African-American TikToker Darcei (@missdarcei on TikTok), who initially criticised the brand for its lack of inclusivity. However, after TirTir expanded their shade range, she received a PR package from the company and was shocked to see how inclusive their new shades were. Her TikTok video highly advocated for the brand, boosting the popularity of the product and the brand tremendously. This example highlights the influence social media and influencers have on Korean beauty and its core role in pushing Korean beauty brands into the competitive global market.

The "Before & After" Culture

In the era of social media, seeing is believing. This is the essence of the 'before and after' culture in K-beauty and has worked well for Korean beauty products and cosmetic procedures. These products and procedures leverage the visible transformations observed in people's appearance after undergoing a certain procedure or using a certain product.

The 'before-and-after' technique is most commonly used in plastic surgery advertisements, highlighting the significant change one can achieve, should they wish to fit the beauty standards in Korea. According to Yoon (2023), many plastic surgery clinics blast their commercials and posters all over the streets of Gangnam and on public transportation, making these "before-and-after" transformations difficult to miss.



Figure 7. "Before-and-after" advertisements for plastic surgery in Korea

But beyond these advertisements that are plastered locally, the 'before-and-after' culture is also something that can be observed on social media, and is a technique that is being utilised by global influencers in relation to K-beauty as a way of creating authentic content. According to Asiance (2025), influencers often use the "before-and-after" method to demonstrate the effectiveness of beauty products, helping to 'demystify' items that their followers may not have been familiar with before. For example, American influencers such as @MichelleChoi have helped position Korean beauty as a leading choice for skincare products known for their clean and gentle formulations, while other global influencers like @laujung have guided their followers in France on how to adapt K-beauty products to local skin types and climates. Together, this shows how social media has helped foster a web of trust that has accelerated the global adoption of K-beauty.

Global Influence of Korea's Cosmetic Enhancements

Drivers of South Korea's Beauty Industry Success

Several interrelated factors explain South Korea's exceptional position in global beauty. The first is technical specialisation. Korean surgeons and dermatologists have perfected facial procedures—particularly eyelid surgery, rhinoplasty, jawline contouring, and non-invasive skin treatments—areas that have seen rapid international growth.

Second, Korea's beauty industry is technologically advanced and hyper-concentrated. Districts such as Gangnam in Seoul host hundreds of clinics within a few blocks, allowing for intense competition, innovation, and specialisation. In fact, South Korea now records the highest rate of plastic surgery per capita globally, with approximately 8.90 procedures per 1,000 people (Madison Plastic Surgery, 2025).



Third, South Korea benefits from its powerful cultural halo—Hallyu. The global success of K-pop, K-dramas, and K-fashion has elevated Korean beauty ideals to aspirational status worldwide. The concept of the "K-face"—characterised by luminous skin, double-lidded eyes, a delicate nose bridge, and a V-shaped jawline—has become an international beauty archetype, increasingly replacing Western norms like the "Instagram face" (Chung, 2025).

Finally, Korea's medical expertise is closely linked with its booming cosmetics and skincare industry, which reinforces the reputation of Korean aesthetic science through globally popular brands. Korean beauty startups are expanding aggressively into Western retail chains such as Sephora, Ulta Beauty, Target, and Costco, reflecting the growing integration between consumer culture and clinical aesthetics (Reuters, 2025). Even multinational conglomerates like L'Oréal have entered the Korean market, acquiring local brands such as Dr.G to capitalise on the global appeal of K-beauty (L'Oréal, 2024).

Ultimately, South Korea's success in the beauty industry lies in its ability to fuse technological mastery with cultural soft power, turning beauty into both an industry and an identity.

Comparing South Korea with Other Cosmetic Hubs

South Korea's reputation as the "plastic surgery capital of the world" has been cemented through a sustained cultural influence that extends far beyond Asia. To understand the magnitude of this phenomenon, it is essential to compare South Korea's model with other key players such as China, Japan, Thailand, Singapore, the United States, Brazil, Mexico, Türkiye, and Colombia.

Among its regional neighbors, China and Japan are South Korea's closest competitors, though their markets function very differently. China holds Asia's largest domestic consumer base, yet many Chinese patients continue to travel to Seoul for high-end facial procedures. However, this dependence has created friction: in early 2024, the Chinese embassy in Seoul issued a cautionary statement about "plastic surgery risks in South Korea," warning of malpractice and unregulated brokers (Reuters, 2024). Despite such warnings, China's steady flow of patients to South Korea shows South Korea's enduring prestige as a cosmetic hub. Japan, meanwhile, maintains a more self-contained industry. Their clinics prioritise subtlety and domestic clientele, whereas South Korea actively markets to international patients—a key distinction that gives Korea its regional dominance.

Beyond Northeast Asia, Thailand and Singapore represent the heart of Southeast Asia's medical tourism network. Thailand's market, valued at USD 2.57 billion in 2023, has long attracted foreign patients with low-cost cosmetic procedures and "surgery vacation" packages (Grand View Research, 2024). Clinics in Bangkok and Phuket emphasise on affordability and hospitality, but their focus remains on body procedures such as liposuction and breast augmentation. In contrast, South Korea commands a higher price point and emphasises facial specialisation, precision, and technology-driven outcomes that position it as a luxury brand in the global beauty industry. Singapore, on the other hand, has a medically rigorous, tightly regulated environment, with the popularity of non-invasive treatments and safety. Singapore's aesthetic sector is much smaller in scale, and it lacks Korea's synergy between clinical innovation, product development, and pop-cultural branding.

Outside Asia, the United States and Brazil dominate the global aesthetic market in sheer size. The United States performed the highest total number of cosmetic procedures worldwide at over 6.1 million, while Brazil followed with 3.1 million (ISAPS, 2024). The American industry is shaped by celebrity culture and individual expression, prioritising anti-aging treatments, injectables, and body contouring. Brazil, in contrast, embraces bolder body modifications aligned with cultural ideals of confidence and physicality. South Korea differentiates distinctly from both: its aesthetic philosophy values harmony, proportion, and subtle refinement over overt change. This approach is rooted in cultural values shaped by Confucian modesty and collective identity, in which beauty is tied to social capital and personal discipline.

Meanwhile, emerging markets like Mexico, Türkiye, and Colombia have gained global traction by capitalising on value-driven medical tourism. Türkiye has built a global reputation for hair transplants and rhinoplasty, while Colombia and Mexico are popular for body sculpting and implants. Yet these destinations often depend on price competitiveness and high procedural turnover, whereas South Korea maintains its leadership through premium quality, strict clinical standards, and ongoing innovation. Korean procedures are rarely discounted; instead, they are marketed as technologically superior, safer, and aligned with aspirational global beauty ideals. Patients from the United States, China, and Southeast Asia increasingly see Korea not as a cheaper alternative, but as the gold standard.

Social Practices & Cultural Nuances

"Lookism" in South Korea, Cultural Nuances and Social Practices

According to ISAPS, it is estimated that 1 in 3 South Korean women between the ages of 19 to 29 have had plastic surgery. In the land of K-pop, such cosmetic procedures are considered the norm in the appearance-obsessed society. In 2003, the term “외모지상주의 (oemojisangjuui)” first appeared in neologism dictionary of the National Institute of Korean Language, also known as "Lookism" in English.

The term is defined as the discrimination of a person based on their physical appearance. With the rise of "Lookism" in South Korea, physical appearance and attractiveness has become an integral part of their society, where many would go for plastic surgery to enhance features that they are unsatisfied with to fit the current beauty standards. It is also worth noting that South Koreans attribute physical appearance to the ability to find jobs.



According to The Korea Herald, 66% of Gen Zs have undergone surgery to land a job. According to the article, South Korean women had to list down their height, weight, and body size just to apply for a regular office job—not even for a model’s role. The "Lookism" culture in South Korea can be considered as one of the top few, due to a combination of factors such as South Korea’s traditional Confucian culture which values appearances and social status, and the recent influx of K-pop and the entertainment industry (Min, 2023).



"Lookism" is also prevalent in high schools where students would receive double eyelid surgery as a graduation gift from their parents, a phenomenon that is oddly interesting to others outside of South Korea. The most common procedure is blepharoplasty: a procedure in which surgeons will create an extra fold of skin above the eye that is visible when the eyes are open. (Stone, 2013).

The rapid rise of K-pop culture also greatly influenced South Koreans' perception on beauty standards. They are often mesmerised by the Korean media's portrayal of beauty standards, and would show photographs of K-pop idols to surgeons to look like them. Evidently, "Lookism" has permeated the daily lives of those living in South Korea and has been aggravated in recent years, largely facilitated by the nation's rapid socio-economic development. Proceeding from the Miracle on the Han, the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation has also led to heightened competition in academics and job employments (H.Lee et al., 2017, p.1).

In such a highly competitive society, physical attributes have emerged as another "stratifying factor;" where having an appearance that meets the Korean beauty ideals would give individuals an advantage over those who are considered unattractive by Korean standards, a serious detriment in the society driven by "Lookism" (H.Lee et al., 2017, p.1). The maxim "your looks are your ability" is now deeply ingrained in Korea's image-based culture, as evinced by how job applicants must attach a profile photo to their resumes as a formal qualification for employment. Such unrealistic and stressful beauty standards have recently been criticised by foreigners living in South Korea. Unlike western countries like the USA, body positivity is almost non-existent in South Korea (Dunbar, 2023). Even casual snacking while working in the office could render other colleagues' reminders to not eat so much. There have also been worrying cases where some would develop eating disorders like bulimia in an attempt to fit into the crazy, ideal body weight and type in South Korea.

Aside from '"Lookism"' proliferating the beauty industry with clinics offering plastic surgery, it has also propelled quick and easy to use beauty products that 'promise' to fulfil what consumers lack or wish to enhance in terms of their appearances—such products include weight loss pills.

Though seemingly harmless, these products may be the very reason why many people living in South Korea feel pressured to conform to the beauty standards, affecting their self-esteem and a breeding ground for negative body image issues. The issue of "Lookism" faced in South Korea boils down to questions on whether there needs to be an intervention and more conversations to address the situation, and to prevent the deterioration of mental health amongst people due to the constant pressures of conforming to the society's beauty standards.

Comparing South Korean's "Lookism" with The United States

It is not just South Korea that has negative body image and the pressure to look good. In the USA, there have been articles reporting on negative self-image among people living there as well. Americans think negatively about their bodies several times a day, and it has taken a toll on their daily lives. (Broussard, 2025).

From cancelling social gatherings due to negative body image, to not feeling happy with the clothes that they are wearing, these issues all stem from the need to conform to certain levels of beauty standards seen in the country, further aggravated by social media. According to a new survey conducted by Talker Research on behalf of Eden Health, 69% of respondents notice the flaws that they have first when looking into the mirror.

Resistance & Criticism

Resistance: Escape the corset movement in South Korea

Especially for women living in South Korea, the increasing tremendous pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards has warranted some to speak up and go against the notion, with women starting movements such as "Escape the Corset" movement. In a study done by beauty brand, Dove,back in 2007, one in four Korean mothers advised daughters between the ages of 12 and 16 to go for plastic surgery.



The unrealistic beauty standards in South Korea have called for women to spend a few hours on their makeup regime, and to have a skincare routine that has at least 10 steps or more to achieve flawless skin suited for the unrealistic beauty standards. As part of the "Escape the Corset" movement, women would throw out all of their makeup and cut their hair short in protest against strict beauty standards. (Haas, 2018).

Women who have grown weary of these laborious routines have started to post their sentiments and criticisms online, with videos of destroyed cosmetic products accompanied by the "Escape the Corset" text on the video. This movement also addresses a wider issue faced in South Korea—a larger push against the country's patriarchal society where women are faced with inequality, sexual assaults, and illegal filming in changing rooms or toilets.



Psychological Pressures and Mental Health Concerns

Faced with constant psychological pressures on looking “perfect” in a "Lookism"-driven society, the most prevalent concern would be the impact such negative environments can cause on one’s mental wellbeing. In South Korea, where social media is ubiquitous, body distortion faced by adolescents in South Korea is relatively prevalent, which puts them at risk for eating disorders (Jung et al., 2014). Aside from developing body dysmorphia, "Lookism" has also contributed to rising anxiety rates and depression. According to a report by the World Economic Forum (WEF), concerns with body image have been increasingly recognised as a global mental health challenge, affecting individuals of all ages and genders across diverse cultural backgrounds.

K-pop idols are definitely not spared, with idols like Hwasa from Mama Moo getting heavily criticised online by netizens purely for her looks. The constant criticisms and judgement, accompanied with social media, is a combination that creates mental health issues that would be detrimental to an individual’s health.

Interventions in South Korea

To combat "Lookism" in the country, the South Korean government has imposed a total ban on all sorts of plastic surgery advertisements on Seoul’s metros and subways. (Straits Times, 2017).

According to the Seoul Metro, the government has decided to take action after a series of complaints from the public has been made. The advertisements have been accused of promoting "Lookism" in South Korea, encouraging a distorted view of a woman’s body image.

Ethical and Social Dimensions

Misinformation and Deceptive practices

With the success of South Korea’s cosmetic surgery industry and the growing demand for procedures, the country has become a global hub for medical tourism and particularly in aesthetics. In 2024, the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Korea Health Industry Development Institute (KHIDI) reported 1,170,467 foreign patients who travelled to Korea for medical treatment. This figure not only doubled that of 2023 but also marked the highest record since 2009 (Gwiyoung, 2025). Driven by glossy marketing campaigns and viral social media videos, more foreigners are chasing after Korea’s “next best” cosmetic trend. Yet behind the allure lies a troubling reality: many encounter misinformation and deceptive practices that put their safety at risk (Rashid, 2024).



The darker side of the industry came under scrutiny after Bonnie Evita Law, heiress to a Hong Kong fashion empire, died during a liposuction procedure at a Seoul clinic. She was reportedly referred to the hospital through an illegal broker, unsurprisingly a practice that has become common. Often hindered by language barriers, foreigners turn to online communities for information on clinics, doctors, and translators, as anonymous users exchange insights on beauty tips and procedure recommendations (Rashid, 2024). These platforms, however, have become hunting grounds for illegal brokers, who exploit unsuspecting patients for hefty commissions by referring them to unlicensed or even unsafe clinics.

Here lies the core of the problem: while only certified specialists can legally label their facilities as “plastic surgery clinics,” any licensed medical doctor in South Korea is allowed to perform cosmetic surgeries, regardless of specialisation (Rashid, 2024). In Law’s case, her surgeon was revealed to be an orthopaedic specialist and not a plastic surgeon. Such practices, though rampant, remain loosely regulated. The issue has become so widespread that the Chinese embassy in Seoul issued a public warning urging citizens to “be wary of advertising and risks” and to “carefully choose intermediary agencies” (Straits Times, 2024).

Ghost Surgeries

Ultimately, the problem runs deep: as long as illegal brokers continue to feed a highly profitable market, and regulations remain weak, unethical practices will persist. This loophole, rooted in Korea’s lenient medical laws, has also enabled even unqualified doctors to perform complex procedures. Such phenomena are called “Ghost doctors” These unqualified individuals are known as “ghost doctors,” a term used to describe surgeons who secretly perform operations in place of the doctor the patient was promised, often while the patient is under general anesthesia (CNN, 2021). Unaware of the hidden dangers, many patients fall victim to these ghost surgeries, believing they are in the hands of top cosmetic surgeons. In reality, once they lose consciousness, a substitute surgeon takes over the procedure (Hong, S. E at el, 2018).



High-profile surgeons and popular clinics often use flashy marketing strategies, featuring K-pop idols or celebrities to promote their brand and attract customers. However, during peak periods, these “star doctors” struggle to handle the sheer number of patients and especially since they must also be available for new consultations to maintain their image and draw in business (CNN, 2021). To cope with demand, clinics often turn to ghost doctors to operate on behalf of these celebrity practitioners, despite the practice being illegal.



Figure 8. Employee monitoring the inside of an operating room (The Korea Times, 2021).

The incentives are clear: for young, inexperienced doctors, ghost surgery offers a shortcut to gain hands-on experience and for clinics, it allows them to cut costs and increase throughput, effectively turning their operations into a factory-like system capable of taking in more patients and conducting more surgeries each day (CNN,2021). The true tragedy, however, is that patients almost never know if they were operated on by a ghost doctor. Under anesthesia, they are completely unaware of who performed the surgery. Previously, proving such crimes is also extremely difficult as ghost doctors leave no records of their involvement, and many clinics do not install CCTVs in operating rooms. However, in 2023, it was made mandatory to install CCTVs in operating rooms as a measure to counter a series of medical malpractice cases, and clinics are required to record surgical procedures upon request (The Korea Times, 2021).

Activists also argue once again that these unethical practices thrive because of weak regulations in South Korea's booming US$10.7 billion plastic surgery industry (Reuters, 2021). In many clinics, unqualified staff are allowed to substitute for licensed surgeons, with little fear of punishment. While ghost doctors can technically be charged with causing harm or fraud, penalties are often light, emboldening clinics to continue these exploitative practices (CNN,2021). Although not every ghost surgery results in physical injury, the issue is compounded by victims' reluctance to come forward , often due to embarrassment, shame, or fear of exposure. Even when victims pursue legal action, cases could be settled out of court, with confidentiality clauses that prevent them from speaking publicly. This makes it even harder to track or prosecute those responsible (CNN,2021).

According to the Korea Consumer Agency, between 2016 and 2020, a total of 226 people were reported to have suffered injuries, side effects, and died during cosmetic procedures in Korea (CNN, 2021). However, these figures remain vague and likely underreported, as the data does not specify how many deaths occurred or under what circumstances. This reflects the broader lack of transparency in the industry.

Early exposure to cosmetic procedures

It is debatable that, despite the risks of unethical surgical practices, cosmetic procedures ultimately remain a personal choice. Individuals who choose to undergo them are expected to accept the potential risks of side effects, unsatisfactory results, or even fraud, particularly if they have not done sufficient research beforehand. Statistics show that one in five Korean women have undergone plastic surgery, compared to one in twenty American women (ABC News, 2014). With such a high frequency of procedures, cases of malpractice may appear to represent only a small fraction of the vast cosmetic surgery market.

However, a deeper ethical question remains: can consent truly be considered "informed" when minors undergo cosmetic surgery in a society dominated by "Lookism," where beauty standards constantly suggest they are never good enough? In South Korea, individuals must be at least 19 years old to undergo cosmetic surgery without parental consent. Yet, those under 19 can still have procedures done with a parent's approval (Medictel, 2024).



Medictel, a Korean company that brands itself as a “trusted name” in medical tourism and has connected over 1,000 international patients to Korean clinics, makes certain claims on their website that raise serious concerns. The company lists double eyelid surgery as one of the most common procedures among teenagers, describing it as a way to “correct” the eyelid crease, performed on patients as young as 14 years old (Medictel, 2024). They also highlight rhinoplasty as a trendy option among teenagers, recommending it for girls at 16 and boys at 18, claiming these ages are when facial growth is typically complete (Medictel, 2024).

These examples reveal how teenagers are being socialised to view cosmetic surgery as a normal or even necessary step toward self-improvement. In Korea, statistics show the average age of 21.8 years old for the first plastic surgery procedure, clearly displaying perceptions of enhancements as essential steps toward confidence and more importantly, societal acceptance (AB Plastic Surgery, 2024). This normalisation is concerning in an industry still plagued by malpractice, fraud, and misleading advertising. As adolescents’ identities and self-perceptions are still developing, encouraging them to make irreversible, life-altering decisions under the pressure of societal beauty ideals raises urgent ethical and psychological concerns. The cosmetic surgery boom, once seen as a symbol of Korea’s medical excellence, will continue to face pressing questions about ethics, accountability, and patient safety.

Comparative Perspective

How South Korea Medical Procedures Differs from Other Countries

When compared with Western nations such as the United States and Brazil—both renowned for their cosmetic industries—two primary factors distinguish South Korea: advanced technology and cost efficiency.

Technologically, South Korea has developed innovative surgical techniques that enhance precision and reduce recovery time. For instance, the “three-point subcutaneous tunneling” method in blepharoplasty reduces swelling by 60% and produces results that last three times longer than traditional methods. Another procedure, septoaponeurosis junctional thickening, has been shown to create a more natural and dynamic double eyelid fold. A study involving over 900 patients reported that 95% were satisfied two to eight years post-surgery (Jin & Whittall, 2022).



In V-line surgery, Korean surgeons employ a minimally invasive technique involving a single 5mm intraoral incision on each side. This reduces complications such as facial nerve injury, malunion, and excessive swelling. Patients can often resume normal activities within three days—a stark contrast to traditional bone-shaving methods.

Cost-wise, Korean cosmetic procedures are considerably more affordable. For example, rhinoplasty in one of Seoul's top clinics costs between USD 2,000-3,520, while a facelift ranges from USD 7,000-11,500, and upper blepharoplasty starts at USD 2,000. In contrast, the same procedures in Beverly Hills average USD 7,475, USD 12,125, and USD 4,000-6,000 respectively (Jin & Whittall, 2022).

Why Korea's Cosmetic Culture Is Unique

A recurring observation among netizens is that many Koreans appear increasingly similar due to widespread plastic surgery—a phenomenon often described as the pursuit of the "ideal Korean look." A Yahoo News (2022) article highlighted public criticism of the Miss Korea finalists, with many netizens noting that the contestants appeared "AI-like" and scaringly identical.



Figure 9: Miss Korea 2022 Top 3 Finalists



Figure 10: Top Female KPOP Idols In Terms Of Visuals Based On KBS Score

This homogenisation of beauty can be attributed to the influence of K-pop idols and the concept of the "Korean Beauty Score" (KBS), which defines ideal features such as plump lips, a high nasal bridge, pale skin, and a V-shaped jawline. These traits are embodied by top idols like Karina (Aespa), Sullyoon (NMIXX), Yuna (ITZY), and Wonyoung (IVE).

Influence of Korean Beauty Culture in Southeast Asia

According to The Straits Times (2024), 239,060 international patients underwent dermatological treatments in South Korea in 2024, while 114,074 received plastic surgery. The number of dermatological patients tripled from 85,194 to 239,060 over a few years.

K-beauty products have also gained immense traction across Southeast Asia (SEA), particularly in countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. Supermom Business (2024) reported that K-beauty accounts for 12% of the region's total beauty market, with Vietnam holding a 22% market share and a 22% annual growth rate. Similarly, Thailand's K-beauty market constitutes one-third of total cosmetics sales, driven largely by e-commerce platforms like Shopee, where Korean skincare imports surged by 191% in 2024 (Lim, 2024). In Indonesia, 62% of young consumers aged 15-25 use Korean beauty products, particularly sheet masks.

When compared on a global scale, Thailand is slowly becoming the next beauty hub in Asia with popular clinics like Aura Bangkok Clinic and Demis Clinic Bangkok. They offer very similar services to Korea like Botox, Juvelook, and Ulthera treatments. However, their most popular treatment is their skin brightening IV drip. Thai beauty has also received praise from celebrities endorsements like Kim Kardashian, Jackson Wang, and many more.

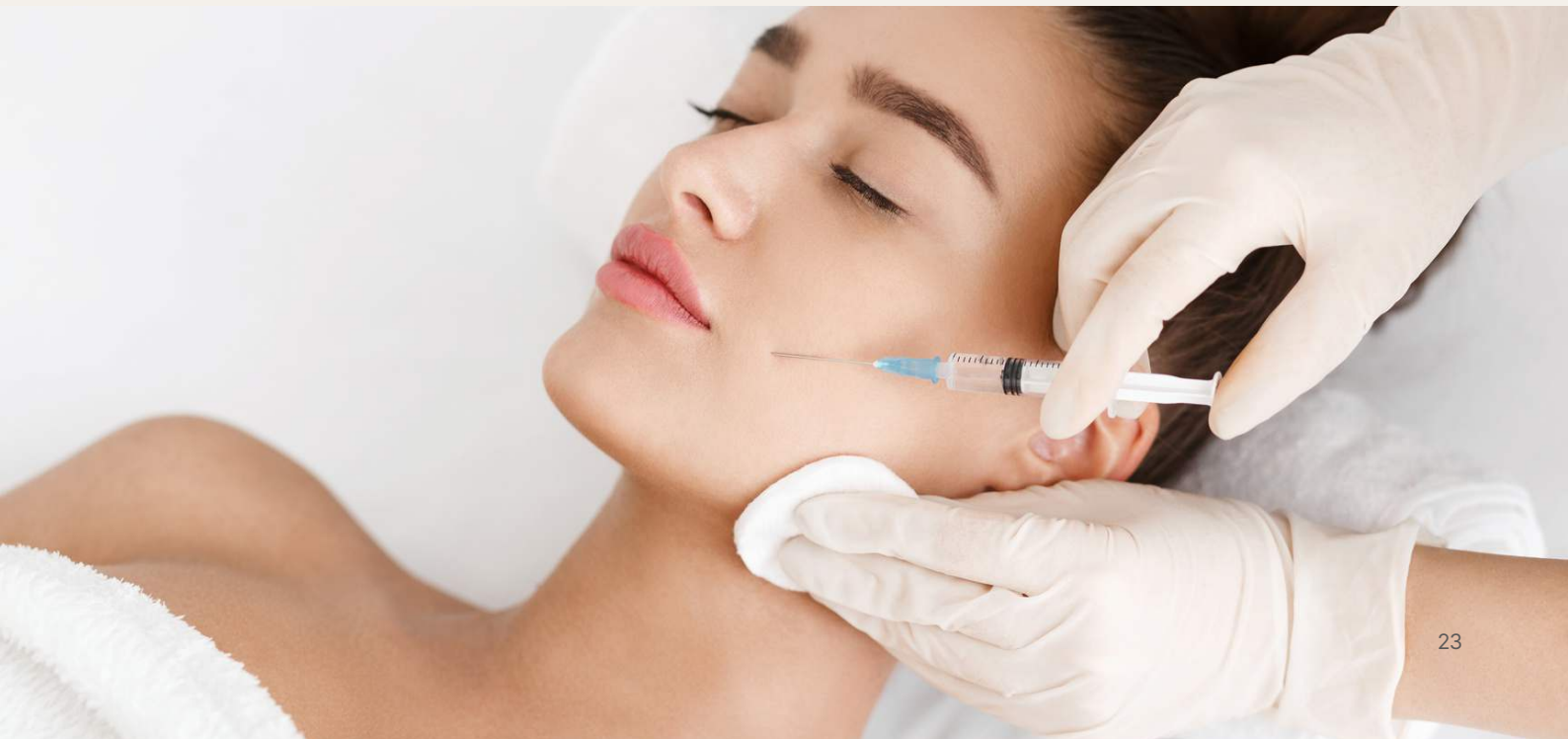
A major contributing factor to the success of K-Beauty, especially skincare products, is the technology and research behind successful brands with affordable pricing. An example will be the viral Goodal Vitamin C serum, which won the 2024 Olive Young award, selling 1 bottle every 30 seconds. The serum costs around $19.95 on Watsons, but Singaporeans can get it cheaper on e-commerce platforms like Shopee and Lazada, or Tiktok Live. Instead of using vitamin C derivatives which oxidise very quickly upon opening the bottle (liquid tuning from transparent to dark orange) and reducing the product efficacy to close to none, Goodal's vitamin C serum contains 70% green tangerine extract which is more gentle on skin whilst delivering brightening benefits.

Conclusion

Plastic surgery in South Korea is not merely a cosmetic procedure, it is a manifestation of a deeper cultural and societal construct that dictates and confines people within rigid standards of beauty, with roots traceable to Japanese colonial influence. What began as a means of self-enhancement has evolved into a deeply entrenched cultural practice, woven into the fabric of everyday life, from rites of passage and gestures of gift-giving to unspoken standards of social acceptance.

This normalisation has fueled a multi-billion-dollar industry, driving relentless research and innovation in pursuit of "perfection." Each year, new procedures promise to be more advanced, more effective, and increasingly non-invasive, signaling a future where aesthetic transformation becomes both effortless and possibly algorithmically optimised through AI-driven customisation. Yet beneath this progress lies a tension between the booming industry and the growing resistance movements that challenge its ethical and psychological implications.

In a system where insecurity sustains profit, unrealistic beauty ideals flourish, perpetuating "Lookism" and reinforcing a culture where self-worth is often measured by appearance. This environment not only amplifies societal pressure but also enables exploitative practices, from misinformation to malpractice, endangering vulnerable individuals. As beauty becomes a commodity to "flaunt" and "prove," celebrities are idolised as living embodiments of aesthetic success, blurring the line between aspiration and obsession. The question remains: as technology refines the face, will society ever refine its perception of beauty?



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Misogyny in South Korea

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2



Introduction

In recent decades, South Korea has been lauded globally as a model of technological innovation, rapid economic growth, and expanding cultural influence. Yet beneath this image of modernity lies a society still grappling with entrenched gender inequality and pervasive misogyny. Despite women's increasing participation in higher education, professional fields, and civic life, they continue to face systemic discrimination, objectification, and hostility in both public and private spheres. The tension between modern progress and traditional gender norms means that gains in women's empowerment coexist with restrictive cultural expectations surrounding femininity, marriage, and motherhood. Such a paradox makes the country a compelling site for examining how misogyny adapts and persists within a society negotiating the boundaries between tradition and modernity.

Misogyny is broadly defined as the hatred of, contempt for, or prejudice against women. This can manifest in conduct likely to cause fear, humiliation and distress to them, and happen at both individual or social, agentic and organization levels (McCarthy &Taylor, 2023). At its core, misogyny positions men as superior and women as subordinate (Arsawati & Bunga, 2022). It can take multiple forms, including patriarchy, gender discrimination, sexual harassment, belittling of women, violence against women, and sexual objectification (Chaudhury et al., 2017).

To understand how misogyny operates in contemporary South Korea, this paper traces its historical origins, examines its present-day forms, explores the responses of South Korean women, and concludes with a comparative discussion of Singapore.

Historical and Cultural Roots of Misogyny

Misogyny in South Korean society was not simply a byproduct of modernity but rather the continuation of hierarchical structures rooted in Confucianism and later intensified under Japanese colonial rule. Together, this history institutionalized the subordination of women.

Confucianism



Confucianism, which became the state ideology during the Joseon dynasty, laid the ideological foundation to South Korea's patriarchal order. It promoted a rigid hierarchy that placed men in positions of authority and expected women to remain obedient and subordinate, where Confucius' assertion suggested that "women are to be forgotten, ignored" (Gao, 2003). Rooted in ideas of morality, order, and filial duty, Neo-Confucian thought prescribed strict gender roles, encapsulated in the principle of namjon yubi (Pyong, 2008) — "men are honored, women are lowly." Samjong, also known as the "Three Obediences" doctrine (Park & Cho, 1995) further reinforced this subordination: before marriage, a woman was expected to obey her father, and after, her husband. Even in widowhood, she was expected to obey her son. In Williams (2012), Poet Hyesoon Kim poignantly notes, "any woman who violates or lives outside of these roles is called a changnyo (prostitute)." In effect, this left no stage of life where a woman could exercise independent agency, reinforcing a social structure in which female autonomy was viewed not merely as undesirable, but as morally deviant.

Within this framework, chastity emerged as the highest virtue for women, alongside fidelity to one's husband and devotion to the family lineage (Manek, 2023). Such moral expectations reduced women to instruments of familial honor and reproduction. Their value was not inherent but derived from how well they preserved purity and upheld patriarchal morality. The Confucian emphasis on family loyalty further reinforced this system (Deuchler, 1992), embedding women's subservience within the cultural fabric of everyday life. From an early age, Korean girls were raised to embody these ideals—to become dutiful wives, devoted mothers, and caretakers of the home (Kim, 2024). While their labor within the household was celebrated as virtuous, it was rarely recognized as socially or economically valuable. This dynamic essentially confined women to the private sphere, establishing the ideological basis for their exclusion from the public domain, including politics, intellectual pursuits and governance. Through these teachings, Confucianism transformed gender hierarchy into moral duty, where women were expected to uphold a male-centered social order.

Japanese Colonial Rule

During the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), oppression of women intensified. Korean men, feeling powerless under colonial rule, reasserted control over women as a way to reclaim masculinity and national pride (Kim, 2024). Women were expected to work outside the home to support the colonial economy while still embodying traditional "Korean virtues." This meant they had to obey their husbands, their in-laws, and now the colonial authorities — leaving them with little to no autonomy.



Moreover, the exploitation of Korean "comfort women" during World War II epitomized the intersection of gendered and colonial violence, where women's bodies became sites of both national humiliation and male domination.

Comfort Women

"Comfort women" is a term used to describe the thousands of young Korean women forcibly conscripted into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. It is estimated that between 139,000 and 200,000 women were subjected to this system, not including the undocumented cases of thousands of girls and women who were sexually assaulted by Japanese soldiers (Turner, 2011). Up to 180,000 of them were Korean women (Lee & Song, 2012). Forced into military brothels, these women endured extreme physical and psychological abuse. Survivors have recounted being raped by between five to thirty soldiers per day, regardless of their physical condition, including during menstruation or illness (Stories That Make History, 2020).

These women believed that they were signing up for hospital and factory work. Collaborators of both genders appealed to their sense of duty and filial piety, promoted by Confucian ideologies, warning that their mothers would have to go in their stead if they had refused. As such, many of these women and their families were deceived, believing that they were going to a better job with better salary. One comfort woman recounted being scolded by her father when she hesitated to go, as he had believed that she was going to a silk factory; she was only sixteen at that time. (Stories That Make History, 2020).



The women had faced daily sexual abuse and physical abuse at the hands of the Japanese soldiers. Many were unable to give birth after the war due to the multiple venereal diseases contracted and the 'medical treatments' administered to them, such as ointments concocted from arsenic (Turner, 2011) and cotton pads in place of tampons during menstruation (Stories That Make History, 2020). As said by victim Kim Hak Sun, they were mere "tool[s] to fulfill Japanese soldiers' sexual desire during the war" (Choi, 2021). Helpful doctors, compassionate officers and soldiers often demanded sex in return; there was no support in place for these women apart from their fellow comfort women in the comfort stations (Hicks, 1995).

Yet the trauma of these women did not end with Japan's surrender in 1945. Instead of being recognised as victims of war crimes, many returning survivors were rejected by their families and shunned by their communities. Most never married, and those who did tended to end up in unhappy marriages to poor men, older widowers, or drunkards who were physically abusive (Hicks, 1995). Deeply ingrained Confucian ideals of female chastity and purity meant that women who had been sexually violated were often viewed as "tainted" or "unclean." (Manek, 2023). In traditional Confucian moral frameworks, a woman's virtue, particularly her virginity, was seen as a marker of familial honour and national integrity. Thus, the violation of Korean women by Japanese soldiers was framed not as an assault committed against them, but as a symbolic humiliation inflicted on the Korean nation. This perception led many survivors to live in isolation and silence for decades, as they were rendered socially invisible and morally suspect. The inferior status of women within the Confucian hierarchy further justified misogynistic attitudes in post-war Korean society, where male authority remained largely unquestioned (Manek, 2023). Consequently , the surviving comfort women often became alcoholics or drug addicts suffering from mental derangement. Most were either living alone or with relatives, depending on some form of public assistance for their livelihood (Hicks, 1995).

Despite this, for over forty years, both Japan and South Korea avoided publicly addressing the issue of comfort women. The survivors' testimonies were marginalised or ignored, partly due to geopolitical concerns and partly because discussing sexual violence clashed with cultural taboos surrounding female purity (Manek, 2023). Japanese and Koreans were also embarrassed about the existence of comfort women, choosing to hide this shameful chapter of their history rather than address it (Sojeong, 2017). It was not until the early 1990s, when survivors began speaking out, that their stories were taken seriously in public discourse. Kim Hak Sun had come forward as a victim, using her own name in a lawsuit, and demanding compensation for victims. The lawsuit had been lodged in December 1991, creating a shock in Japan and spurring movements promoted by women (Asian Women's Fund, 2007). The prolonged silence had underscored the extent to which misogyny was embedded in both state structures and societal norms. This shaped the handling of historical injustice and the treatment of women who had already suffered profound violations of their humanity.

The first official Statue of Peace was installed in December 2011 to commemorate the 1000th demonstration by protestors in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, demanding the Japanese government formally apologise for the comfort women system in World War II (Choi, 2021) when they had only tried to offer monetary compensation for the past 20 years. Now, there are Statues of Peace all around South Korea, as well as in other countries such as Japan, the United States of America and Germany. These statues are a reminder of the atrocities that happened in World War II, as well as the oppression and silencing of women all over the world.



Figure 1. Depiction of a Statue of Peace. Project Sonyeo. 2025

These Statues of Peace contain elements paying tribute to the comfort women of the past and present (Project Sonyeo, 2025). The short, uneven hair represents the abrupt end to the young girls' childhoods due to the Japanese invasion, with resolute facial expressions and tightly clenched fists showing the comfort women's determination to continue speaking up to receive an official apology. The statue's bare feet mirror the comfort women who were forced to be barefoot to prevent them escaping from comfort stations. Her feet do not touch the ground, representing the majority of comfort women who were unable to return home even after the war ended. The empty chair symbolises the many comfort women who had passed away and were unable to fight for justice or tell their stories. It is also an invitation for future generations to join the movement and the struggle against sexual violence. Lastly, the small bird perched on the statue's shoulder represents peace and freedom, something the comfort women were denied but are now fighting for (Project Sonyeo, 2025). The symbolism of the Statue of Peace extends past the topic of comfort women; it reflects the fight against sexual assault, war, militarism, and by extension, misogyny.

South Korea's Industrial Expansion

Factory Girls (Gongsuni)

As South Korea transitioned from a war-torn nation to a rapidly industrialising economy during the 1960s and 1980s, the state and private corporations relied heavily on a labour force of young, unmarried rural women (known as factory girls or gongsuni) whose exploitation became normalised within South Korea (Paik, n.d.). Despite their vital role in sustaining economic development, they continued to face poorer employment conditions and substantially lower wages compared to men. Their treatment reveals how patriarchal norms, rooted in Confucian thought and reinforced by modern capitalist demands, shaped labour relations and gender hierarchies throughout the era.

These factory girls were usually recruited from poor rural families who depended on their daughters' wages to supplement household income. Because the girls were young and unmarried, they were perceived as docile, compliant, and easily controlled. This was a belief that both reflected and reproduced patriarchal assumptions about women's 'natural' subservience. Upon entering the factories, these women endured inhumane working conditions. Many worked an average of 10.2 hours a day, exceeding the 8-hour-working-day regulation, often under hazardous and poorly regulated environments (Park, 1993).

Wage discrimination was also not only pervasive but institutionalised. In 1978, a labour report comparing 1000 female and 300 male workers found that women earned only 56 percent of what their male counterparts made, despite holding equivalent ranks and responsibilities (Kim, 1984). Moreover, while male workers were typically assigned two shifts, female workers were frequently given three. This disparity was closely related to the patriarchal society's norm of treating women as secondary bread winners for their families. Women's labour was also seen as inherently less valuable and more expendable due to longstanding cultural beliefs about women's subordinate place in society.

In addition to wage inequality, female factory workers faced constant verbal and sexual harassment. Supervisors and male colleagues often subjected them to inappropriate remarks, unwanted advances, and other forms of gendered aggression. The factories' predominantly male management structures offered little protection, and women who reported harassment were frequently dismissed or pressured into silence (Han, 2012).

The suppression of women's voices extended into attempts at labour organisation. During the 1970s and 1980s, women were systematically excluded from participating in or leading trade unions. Male-dominated labour unions frequently employed violent and coercive tactics to ensure that women remained politically marginalised. Rather than viewing their female colleagues as fellow workers entitled to fair representation, many male labourers perceived women as threats to the existing hierarchy of authority (Han, 2012).



YH factory workers staging a sit in (1979)



Dongil factory workers splashed by sewage water by police (1978)

Female workers who attempted to vote or participate in union activities were targeted with physical assaults, including being pelted with excrement by male anti-union protestors. Accounts describe attackers smearing excrement onto women's bodies, including their mouths and breasts. When the assaulted women sought assistance from on-site police, they were met with misogynistic verbal abuse. Statements such as "Shut up you b*tches, we will watch you get messed up with sh*t for a while longer!" show how deeply misogyny permeated institutional structures at the time (Han, 2012). Instead of serving as protectors of public safety, police officers became complicit in sustaining gendered violence, demonstrating that the inequality of women was woven into both the industrial labour system and the state systems that upheld it.

The treatment of factory girls was deeply influenced by Confucian ideology, which expected women to embody virtues such as purity, obedience, and modesty, while men were accorded authority both within the household and in public life. These ideals persisted into the 20th century and significantly shaped attitudes toward women's labour. Women were seen not as independent economic agents but as temporary workers whose primary identities were tied to their future roles as wives and mothers. As a result, any woman who deviated from the prescribed norms risked being labelled as improper, impure, or 'tainted'. Company managers even ensured harsh punishments for women protestors, firing 126 of them and circulating a blacklist of the fired employees to other companies. The expelled women were thus unable to find jobs elsewhere in South Korea in the 1970s (Han, 2012).

The misogynistic treatment these women endured hence reflects a broader historical continuity in which Confucian ideals of purity, obedience, and female subordination carried into modern industrial society.

Modern Misogyny

The legacy of Confucian patriarchy, colonial violence, and gendered exploitation did not disappear with South Korea's democratisation or rapid economic development. Instead, these historical structures shaped the forms of misogyny that continue to permeate contemporary society. As South Korea entered the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, these longstanding hierarchies resurfaced in new arenas, including the workplace, politics, popular culture, and online spaces.

Misogyny in politics and workplace

In South Korea's 2022 presidential elections, Yoon Suk Yeol, conservative People Power Party candidate and President-elect, argued that South Korea did not have any structural gender discrimination and blamed the country's low birth rate on feminism (Kuhn, 2022). Yoon also pledged to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family if elected. As young men felt threatened by the change in balance of powers between men and women, these promises increased his support from young male voters. President Yoon was viewed as exploiting gender divisions to swing the presidential election in his favour, subsequently winning the presidency. Politics in South Korea remains a deeply male-dominanted space, with women only holding 20% of the seats in the legislature (World Bank Open Data, 2024). This structural underrepresentation limits women's influence over policymaking, especially on issues regarding gender equality and misogyny.

Next, despite considerable improvements in women's education and labor force participation through democratisation and capitalism, misogyny continues to persist in the workplace. A 2024 study on workplace gender discrimination in South Korea measured respondents' perception of workplace gender discrimination across six dimensions: hiring, promotion, wage, work assignments, training opportunities, and termination (Baek & Yoon, 2024). The study highlighted that 32.2% of the survey participants reported experiencing at least one aspect of gender-based discrimination at their workplace. Furthermore, the same study reported an overall incidence rate of depressive symptoms of 9.6%, suggesting the psychological effects of workplace misogyny. Another study on sex discrimination in the workplace showed that women experience inappropriate comments or remarks 3 to 4 times more frequently than their male counterparts (Moon, 2023). Significantly, low-wage female employees were shown to be more vulnerable to such gendered discrimination. Furthermore, 45.1% of women reported receiving sexist remarks from their colleagues and 44.8% felt unfairly tasked with menial duties such as preparing coffee, highlighting the prevalence of workplace gender discrimination.

Misogyny is also keenly evident in South Korea's gender wage gap. South Korea has the worst gender pay gap among the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2022. The data showed that on average, South Korea's female employees were paid 31.2% less than their male counterparts, more than double the OECD's average of 12.1%. Notably, 54.7% of the female respondents attributed the gender pay gap to "hiring, promotion, and placement" in the organisations (Lee, 2024). On the other hand, male respondents ascribed the disparity to reasons such as career breaks that women took for childbirth and child-rearing. The contrast in male and female explanations for the wage gap reveals a deeper societal divide in perceiving gender inequality. The gendered pay gap underscores how misogyny in South Korea is not only cultural but institutional and structural, where workplace systems and norms perpetuate gender inequality through economic means.



Persistent cultural norms also perpetuate misogyny by pressuring South Korean women to choose between their career and family, reflecting how traditional gender expectations continue to influence the trajectories of female careers. At the workplace, only 21% of managerial and 5% of executive positions in South Korean companies are held by women (Ahn, 2022). The stark underrepresentation of women in leadership roles reflects invisible structural barriers, limiting women's upward mobility.

Online Misogyny as Social Discourse

The Internet's widespread adoption in South Korea is well-known, with a household internet access rate at 99.97% in 2024 (MSIT, 2025). However, rapid digitalisation has been accompanied by the rise of digital crimes and online misogyny. A 2018 survey conducted on women's experiences of online misogyny found that 97% of respondents reported being exposed to misogynistic expressions online (Moon, 2024).

These social discourses first began when a series of derogatory terms for women were coined based on the word -nyeo, meaning girl or woman in Korean. The first term was gaddeong-nyeo, meaning 'dog poop girl' (Hwang and Kang 2014). In 2005, online users accused a young Korean woman, who allegedly refused to clean her dog's excrement, of irrational and anti-social behaviour. However, the comments were notably not directed against the individual, but against a woman. Kim (2018) argues that adding -nyeo has a misogynistic implication that generalises Korean women as irresponsible and selfish. Since then, many -nyeo terms have surfaced online such as loser-nyeo, doenjang-nyeo, and kimchi-nyeo. The extensive use of these terms highlights the development of a social discourse, which expanded from individual targets to targeting young Korean women as a group. For example, loser-nyeo surfaced after a woman claimed publicly during a television program that short men were losers and that 180 cm tall was the minimum height for men. Furthermore, doenjang-nyeo (soybean paste girl) has been widely used since 2005 to stereotype young women as vain and materialistic (Kim, 2018). Beyond targeting young Korean women as a group, these terms have also unsurprisingly caused women to partake in self-censorship so as to mitigate and reduce such stigmas. Misogyny is normalised through the daily and casual use of these terms, causing online users to also become accustomed to casual online misogyny. These terms have even slipped into mainstream discourse, with media outlets adopting the -nyeo suffixes to critique women that were perceived to behave negatively in public, justifying and normalising hostility against Korean women.

Although Ilbe's popularity has waned, its impact is still reflected in different online communities known as namcho, short for namseong chogwa. In English, this translates as an "excess of men". The rapid proliferation of these online communities across online forums and messaging apps encourage young men to openly discuss and share their gripes about feminism and their perceptions of 'reverse discrimination' against men.

Molka and deepfake pornography in South Korea

More recently, South Korea is facing an epidemic of digital sex crimes, specifically regarding molka and the widespread sharing of deepfake pornographic images. Molka refers to the use of hidden spycams to film or distribute intimate videos of women without their consent. Spycams can be hidden in everyday objects, from a Starbucks cup, a shampoo bottle, or even a painting (see Figure 1). The illegal footage retrieved from these hidden cameras depict women in everyday situations, including vulnerable situations such as showering or undressing (Dobberstein, 2021). The perpetrators exploit the images and footage either for "self-gratification or financial profit" (Dobberstein, 2021).



Figure 2. A painting that has a hidden spycam installed. Humans Right Watch. 2021.

The issue of hidden spycams was so serious that a law was passed in 2004 for South Korean phones to produce a mandatory camera shutter sound whenever a picture was taken, intended to prevent misuse. According to a 2021 report by the Human Rights Watch, survivors of digital sex crimes struggle with trauma, at times even resulting in suicidal thoughts and attempts (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Women avoided using public toilets and felt anxious about hidden cameras, even within the privacy of their own homes. In 2008, less than 4% of prosecutions involved molka, but the number of cases had risen to 20% by 2017. In these spycam cases, the “overwhelming majority of perpetrators are male”, with men making up 98% of perpetrators. These numbers clearly show how women are overwhelmingly the victims of such digital sex crimes. Female victims of molka continue to encounter significant barriers in seeking justice.

While government records indicate that reported cases typically result in investigations and potential prosecution, 46.8% of sex crimes cases are dropped, a rate far above that of robbery (19%) or homicide (27.7%) cases. Even when such sex crime cases proceed to court, judicial sentences are relatively lenient. For example, in 2017, although 5437 individuals were arrested for digital sex crimes, merely 2% (119 individuals) were ultimately imprisoned (Human Rights Watch, 2021). These figures demonstrate how severe penalties are rarely meted out, which in turn fosters a culture of impunity surrounding sexual crimes directed towards women.

While molka is reliant on physical surveillance spycams, advances in artificial intelligence enables digital image and video manipulation to create deepfake pornography. According to a 2023 report, South Korea accounts for over half (53%) of the world’s deepfake pornography, with women comprising 99% of victims, underscoring the gendered nature of such crimes (Ji, 2025). The severity of South Korea’s deepfake pornography crisis is evident: a Telegram room with over 220,000 members has been reported to generate and distribute illegal deepfake pornography on demand (Park, 2024). In South Korea, the number of online sex crimes targeting children and teenagers has nearly doubled from 2023 to 2024 where nearly all the victims were girls (97%), most of them still studying in middle school (Moon, 2025). This calls attention to the "misogynistic power structure” embedded within certain deepfake technologies, where the data of sole female bodies has been used extensively to train the new application (Bartolozzi et al., 2025). Gockel (2024) highlights that female celebrities have a higher risk of being depicted in deepfake pornography, which can be explained by algorithms' need for immense amounts of data to generate realistic deepfakes. However, not every victim is equally impacted by advancements in deepfake technology. It is comparatively easy for a female celebrity to debunk a deepfake video compared to a private individual. As such, private individuals may be less vulnerable to deepfake pornography than public figures, but when they are, “they are likely to be more vulnerable to the consequences” (Gockel, 2024). This keenly highlights how the rampant effects of online misogyny are felt across society, regardless of the influence or positions that women hold within society.



The Nth Room Case in South Korea

The Nth Room Case was an online sex trafficking and exploitation ring in South Korea. From 2018 to 2020, hundreds of women and girls, many of which were minors, were tricked and coerced into producing illegal explicit content. They relied on encrypted apps such as Telegram and used the victims' personal data to blackmail them into sending photos and videos. The videos were sold to a private chat room on Telegram, where at least 260,000 users accessed these chatrooms. This case of sexual abuse and slavery involved at least 74 confirmed victims, including many minors (De Souza, 2020).

While the 'Nth room' was operating, a similar chat room started to evolve, known as the 'Baksa room'. Perpetrators similarly targeted women and young girls, blackmailing victims into creating new images and videos of abuse. Users could request for their own 'exclusive' content, with members ranked and divided based on the amount of payment made (ECPAT, 2024). Members who had paid higher fees were deemed VIPs, and were given access to horrifying material depicting children getting sexually abused (ECPAT, 2024). The 'Nth Room' case caused national outrage in South Korea. A petition on the presidential website that called for all the chatroom users to be named, was signed almost 2 million times.

Research analysis has revealed that media coverage often sensationalised the news surrounding the case. Seng (2024) highlights that instead of confronting systemic issues and institutional failures, the media often focused on graphic details. This sensationalised coverage exposed gaps in the institutional responses to digital sex crimes and warped narratives about gender-based violence in South Korea. Such narratives in the media have been shown to increase victims' isolation and underrepresentation, affecting the implementation of public laws (Layman, 2020). The prevalence of digital sex crimes against women and the lack of institutional change and awareness highlights the dire situation of modern misogyny present in South Korea.

Women's Response to Misogyny

In response to the misogyny that marks contemporary South Korea, Korean women have in retaliation developed a wide range of strategies that span digital activism, mass protest, bodily resistance, and everyday survival. These responses did not emerge in a vacuum, but rather took shape within the broader crisis of Hell Joseon, where post-1997 neoliberal reforms contributed to deep-seated inequality, intense pressure and a lack of upward mobility. The term was popularised in 2015 by the younger generation to criticise the socioeconomic situation in South Korea. As misogynistic discourse proliferated through digital platforms and young women became scapegoats for wider social anxieties, women began mobilising in new ways that challenged not only individual incidents of discrimination but also the structural forces sustaining inequality. This section highlights these responses across three key phases, each marking a shift in how Korean women shared their grievances, constructed feminist identities, and enacted forms of resistance.

The first phase, beginning in 2015, centers on the digital mobilisation that ignited what scholars have termed a feminist 'reboot' (Sohn, 2020). During this period, online misogyny fostered counter-movements such as the #iamafeminist hashtag and the emergence of feminist communities like Megalia and Womad, which used 'mirroring' to expose gendered double standards.

This foundation paved the way for the second phase, where online outrage transformed into mass, corporeal resistance. Events like the 2016 Gangnam Station murder kickstarted new forms of feminist activism that foregrounded emotion, embodiment, and collective vulnerability. At the same time, movements like 'Escape the Corset' used the body itself as a site of protest, rejecting oppressive beauty norms and channeling rage into creative political expression.





The third and ongoing phase reflects both a backlash against feminist gains and the emergence of new strategies for endurance. While digital sex crimes and rising political conservatism intensified structural threats to women, feminists responded through long-term refusals such as the 4B Movement, and also through quieter, more private forms of activism practised within offline spaces. Together, these phases illustrate how Korean women have continually reimagined resistance in the face of evolving misogyny, transforming personal experiences into collective political action while adapting to an increasingly hostile environment.

Phase 1 — Digital Confrontation and the Claiming of Identity (2015)

This phase of the feminist reboot focused heavily on establishing a public identity and combating the pervasive misogynistic discourse that had been amplified across digital spaces (Kim, 2021; Moon, 2024).

Resisting Stigma through Hashtag Activism

The first major collective response was the emergence of the hashtag #iamafeminist (#나는페미니스트입니다) on Twitter in February 2015. This action directly countered the prevailing anti-feminist sentiment which had become so intense that identifying as a feminist was widely stigmatised, being equated with extremism like ISIS or treated as a social taboo (Moon, 2024). The hashtag lowered the barriers to participation, providing an open space for diverse people, be it workers, students or minorities, to voluntarily articulate their view and redefine feminism as a way of life. The power of #iamafeminist lay in its ability to realise the slogan 'the personal is political' (Kim, 2017). By sharing personal stories of gender discrimination, unequal pay, sexual harassment, and issues related to reproductive rights, individuals connected their private experiences to structural gender inequality. According to Kim (2017), this resilience allowed the hashtag to function as the 'mother tag' for over three months, reviving in response to real-time events, such as misogynistic comments made by famous comedians, and promoting continued discussion and awareness.

Mirroring Misogyny: The Aggressive Counter-Offensive

Following the identity claim, feminist activism intensified with the advent of groups like Megalia and its splinter group, Womad, who directly confronted the far-right misogynistic community, Ilbe . Situated within the context of Hell Joseon—where young men, frustrated by job precarity and the crisis of the traditional male breadwinner status, directed their resentment towards young women—these young female digital natives responded to the misogyny disseminated by Ilbe with aggressive tactics. The central tactic employed was the mirroring strategy (Kim, 2018). This tactic involved taking derogatory terms used by Ilbe against Korean women, such as Kimchi-nyeo (Kimchi-girl/b*tch), and reflecting them back onto men, for instance, by inventing terms like Kimchi-nam (Kimchi-man) (Kim, 2021). This parodic and subversive language, which included using the term 'insect' to denote contempt (Ilbe-chung vs Hannamchung), aimed to expose the absurdity and violence of the prevailing sexism (Yun, 2022). This counter-activism proved effective, successfully advocating for the shutdown of Soranet in 2016, Korea's largest illegal pornographic website and a major distribution platform for illegally filmed content. This success demonstrated the capacity of digital feminist groups to organise collective action and generate public discourse that countered dominant patriarchal cultures (Moon, 2024). However, the strategy, characterised by strong antagonistic and vulgar language, was deemed divisive and shared characteristics of digital populism by reinforcing 'us versus them' dichotomies along gender lines (Kim, 2021).

Furthermore, this period saw the emergence of internal conflicts, particularly concerning the exclusionary politics of groups like Womad. These self-identified radical feminists, raetpaem (랟펨), embraced essentialist, separatist, and trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF) based on biological sex. These politics often derived from strong identities of victimhood, which when combined with neoliberal notions of survival, focused narrowly on female rights and excluded solidarity with other social minority groups, such as transgender people or refugees. Critics argued that this mirroring merely 'culturally appropriates' the affective grammar of hate rather than radically deconstructing it (Kim, 2021).



Phase 2 — Affective Mobilisation and Corporeal Resistance (2016-2018)

This phase saw the digital conflict laying the groundwork for large-scale physical resistance, where women transformed private experiences of fear and oppression into highly visible political acts.

Affective Counterpublics: The Gangnam Station Murder

The 2016 Gangnam Station murder became the key watershed moment (Moon, 2024). A man killed a 23-year-old woman specifically because he felt ignored by women. Despite his misogynistic motive, media and police initially characterised the murder as a 'random killing' (묻지마 살인) motivated by the perpetrator's mental illness, obscuring its gendered nature. In response, women mobilised online and offline through 'sticky note activism', posting thousands of handwritten messages at Gangnam Station Exit No. 10. This unique hybrid action, combining the 'aura of analog in the digital age' with digital dissemination, successfully challenged the dominant narrative, redefining the murder as 'femicide'. The activism mobilised affective counterpublics by generating shared emotions of grief, rage, fear and guilt among women recognising collective vulnerability. The hashtag #isurvived (#살아남았다) became a powerful rallying cry, emphasising that women survived such crimes 'only by luck'. The personal stories shared via the notes and the hashtag, such as accounts of experiencing violence 'for being a women', were collected as a massive digital and material archive of misogyny, creating what Kim (2021) terms a 'field of learning' about gendered injustice.

The Power of Indignant Rage: Escaping the Corset

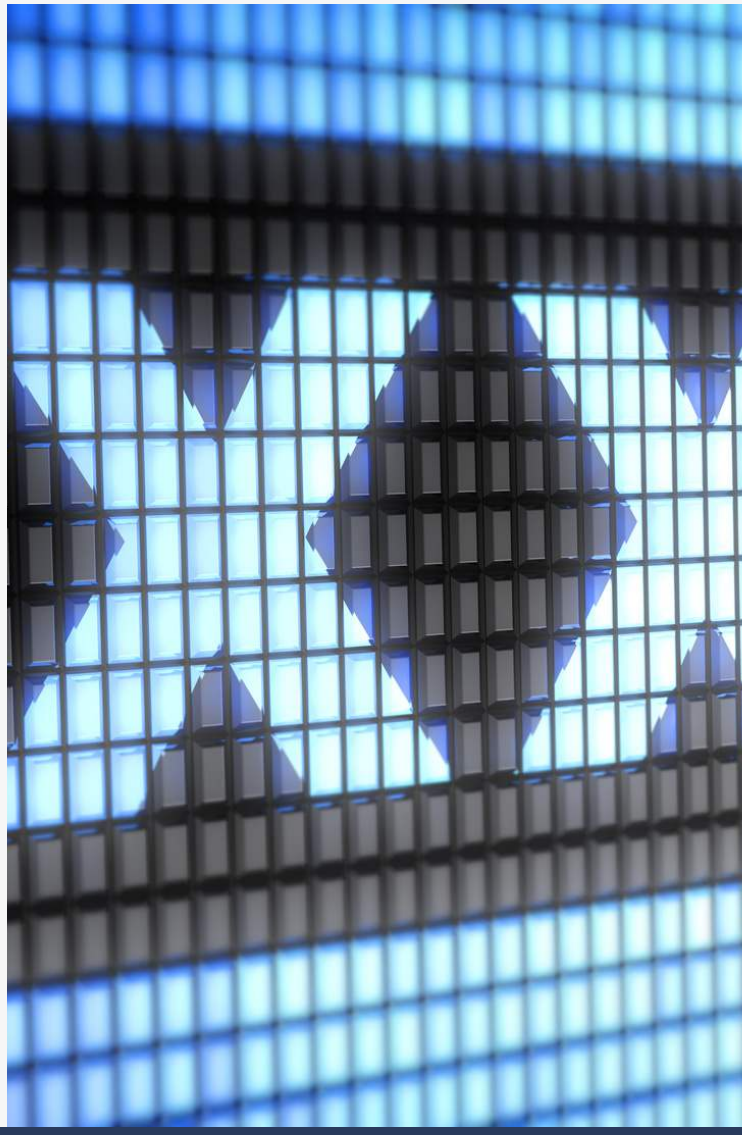
Following the focus on violence, feminist responses expanded to confront internalised oppression and mandated femininity. The Escape the Corset (탈코르셋) movement, gaining momentum around 2018, aimed to emancipate women from oppressive beauty norms and traditional femininity (Lee & Jeong, 2021). The metaphorical 'corset' is viewed as an oppressive device that restricts the mind and body, reinforcing male-centered desire and women's subordination. This movement was driven by indignant rage, a revolutionary effect that combines intense anger with indignation against social injustice. This rage led to creative and defiant acts of feminist sabotage, like destroying makeup and cutting hair, which were highly publicised on social media platforms. By breaking the dictum of beauty and dissecting the absurdity of the ideology of beauty (Wolf, 2009), the movement asserted women's agency and redefined their bodies as non-docile and resistant. For the younger generation, often calling themselves 'hellfeminists', manifesting this rage was a necessary means of survival against an absurd world, contrasting with older generations who emphasised ethical-moral discourse (Yun, 2022).



Mass Mobilisation Against Digital Sex Crime

The proliferation of online misogyny and digital sex crimes, such as the hidden camera (몰카) epidemic and the organised exploitation of the Nth room incident, posed systemic threats that demanded sustained collective action (Moon, 2024). Feminists successfully achieved the shutdown of illegal sites like Soranet through public campaigns and political collaboration. The deep-rooted anger over these issues culminated in the 2018 Women's March (Moon, 2022).

Rapid mobilisation was triggered by the deep-seated grievance that police responded inadequately and slowly to crimes against female victims, exemplified by the swift arrest of a female molka perpetrator contrasted with the lack of action against male perpetrators. The marches, organised largely through online communities like Uncomfortable Courage, involved an estimated 110,000 women by the sixth rally, demonstrating deep-rooted grievances. The participants frequently concealed their identities due to the pervasive fear of becoming victims of digital harassment (Moon, 2022).



Phase 3 — Crisis, Political Backlash, and Strategic Survival (Late 2010s - 2020s)

This phase highlights the heightened visibility of feminist activism, while achieving social breakthroughs, generated profound political and social backlash, forcing women to adopt long-term, structural strategies focused on survival and self-preservation.

Escalating Political Obstacles and Reverse Discrimination

The political landscape intensified the challenges facing feminists. Political conservatism, reinforced by escalating anti-feminist sentiment among young men, became a major barrier (Moon, 2024). This anti-feminism is often framed around arguments of 'reverse discrimination', linked to the male-only conscription system and the existence of entities like the Ministry of Gender Equality, which many young men perceive as promoting female supremacy (Kim, 2018). This sentiment was exploited during the 2022 presidential election by Yoon Suk Yeol, who used misogyny as a campaign strategy and pledged to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality (Choi, 2022). This political shift resulted in a discernible shift away from previous countermeasures, including proposed reductions in the budget allocated to organisations supporting survivors of sexual violence (Han, 2023).

Structural Refusal: The 4B Movement

In response to persistent economic precarity, discrimination in the labor market, and the patriarchal state's reliance on women's reproductive capacity, young feminists launched the 4B (4 非) movement. The movement advocates the active refusal of four heterosexual institutions: Bihon 비혼 (marriage), Bichulsan 비출산 (childbirth), Biyeonae 비연애 (romance) and Bisekseu 비섹스 (sexual relationships with men) (Lee & Jeong, 2021). This radical stance is an active refusal to be incorporated into the patriarchal and pro-natalist state's reproductive future, distinguishing it from the passive 'giving up' of previous generations (Lee & Jeong, 2021; Yun, 2022). The movement was incited by explicit state actions, such as the launching of online 'National Birth-Maps' in 2016, which visualised the number of 'women of reproductive age' residing in each municipality using pink dots. Women protested this, declaring 'we refuse to be fertile, we refuse to be livestock'. The 4B decision requires focusing on long-term survival and economic independence. Feminists prioritise self-help and economic discourses, aiming to become the head of one's own household (세대주) to secure independence and reject 'heterosexual bribery' (Kim, 2019). They criticise the alliance of consumer capitalism and patriarchy, which promotes immediate happiness through phrases like YOLO and Sohwakhaeng 소확행 (Little but Certain Happiness) that enforce a presentist way of living and keep women economically vulnerable (Heavytalker, 2019). By refusing the normative path, women remove the 'wall called marriage' that had previously limited their desires and vision to the age of 30, opening up a future of potentialities.

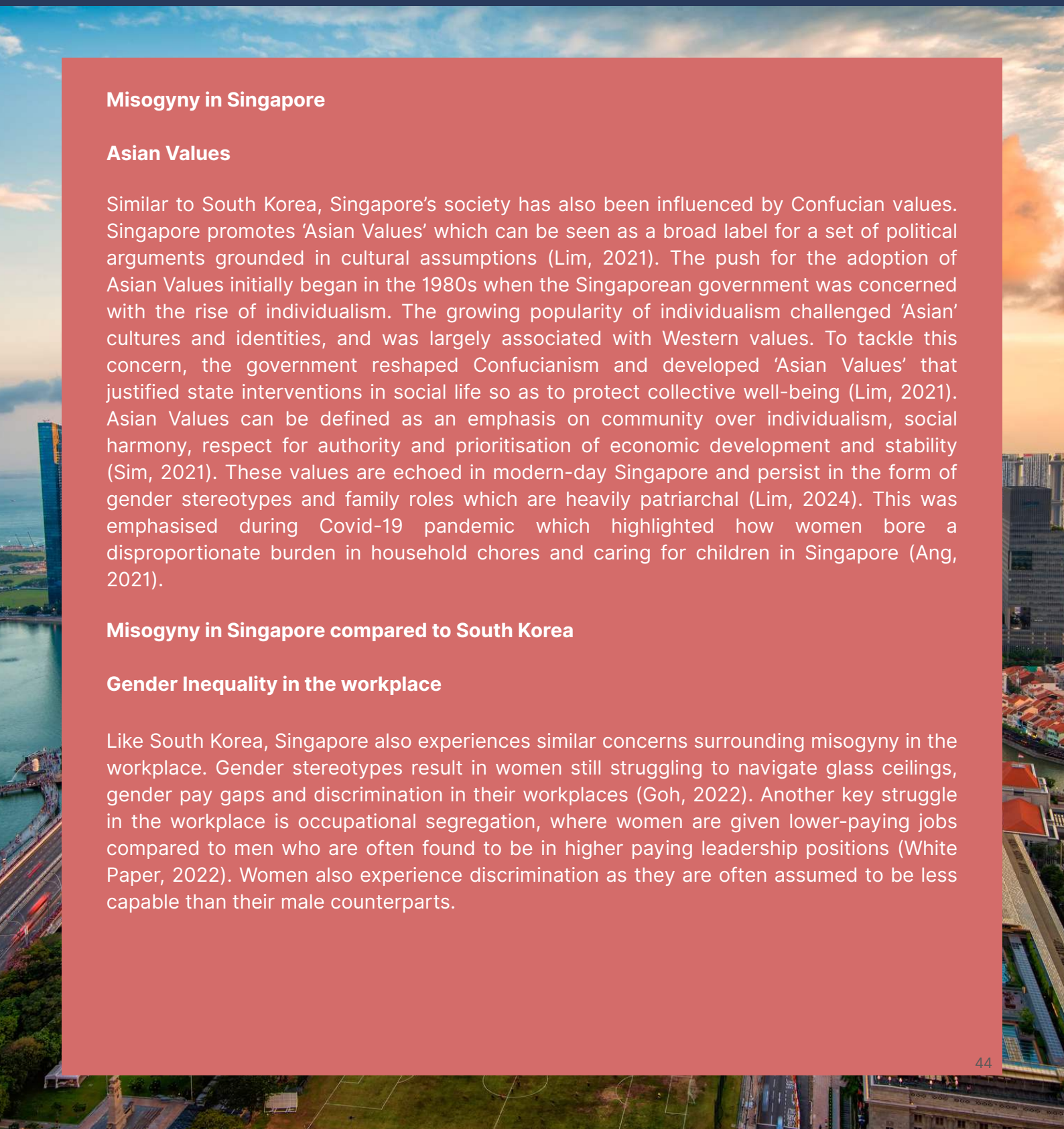


Quiet Feminism: Identity Consolidation in the Face of Everyday Backlash

In the current environment, marked by pervasive anti-feminist hostility, a distinct practice known as 'quiet feminism' has emerged among young women, particularly college students (Jung & Moon, 2024). 'Quiet feminism' is defined as an agentic, everyday feminist practice where self-identified feminists choose to maintain a low profile in sheltered environments due to a hostile social context. This response is directly linked to 'everyday backlash', the ubiquitous presence of antifeminist sentiments in both online and offline routines. This backlash has evolved from online misogyny predominantly circulating in the manosphere to pervasive infiltration into major online portals like Naver, where 71% of respondents reported encountering hate speech in 2021, and college student platforms like Everytime (Choi, 2022). Due to this hostile environment, young women hesitate to publicly disclose their feminist identity, especially in digital spaces. Many who previously engaged in fervent digital battles stopped because they felt emotionally depleted and drained by the verbal attacks. Instead, their practice shifts to private offline settings, such as feminist study groups or communal gatherings on campus, which serve as 'safe havens' or 'shelters' (Kim & Yuk, 2022).

These activities focus on 'studying feminism', reading books, taking gender-related classes, and discussing issues with like-minded friends. This practice is understood as the crucial process of constructing and solidifying a steadfast feminist identity in a time of social opposition, signifying a state of abeyance that prepares them for a future rebound of the movement (Taylor, 1989).

These diversified and strategic responses demonstrate that Korean women are not merely victims of persistent misogyny, but highly agentic subjects who continuously adapt their tactics to ensure their collective survival, self-sufficiency, and the preservation of a steadfast feminist consciousness for the future political landscape.



Misogyny in Singapore

Asian Values

Similar to South Korea, Singapore's society has also been influenced by Confucian values. Singapore promotes 'Asian Values' which can be seen as a broad label for a set of political arguments grounded in cultural assumptions (Lim, 2021). The push for the adoption of Asian Values initially began in the 1980s when the Singaporean government was concerned with the rise of individualism. The growing popularity of individualism challenged 'Asian' cultures and identities, and was largely associated with Western values. To tackle this concern, the government reshaped Confucianism and developed 'Asian Values' that justified state interventions in social life so as to protect collective well-being (Lim, 2021). Asian Values can be defined as an emphasis on community over individualism, social harmony, respect for authority and prioritisation of economic development and stability (Sim, 2021). These values are echoed in modern-day Singapore and persist in the form of gender stereotypes and family roles which are heavily patriarchal (Lim, 2024). This was emphasised during Covid-19 pandemic which highlighted how women bore a disproportionate burden in household chores and caring for children in Singapore (Ang, 2021).

Misogyny in Singapore compared to South Korea

Gender Inequality in the workplace

Like South Korea, Singapore also experiences similar concerns surrounding misogyny in the workplace. Gender stereotypes result in women still struggling to navigate glass ceilings, gender pay gaps and discrimination in their workplaces (Goh, 2022). Another key struggle in the workplace is occupational segregation, where women are given lower-paying jobs compared to men who are often found to be in higher paying leadership positions (White Paper, 2022). Women also experience discrimination as they are often assumed to be less capable than their male counterparts.



Online Misogyny in Singapore

Other than the workplace, misogyny in Singapore has also manifested on online platforms. According to a study by the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), misogynistic posts that objectify and belittle women remain prevalent in online spaces (AWARE Singapore, 2021). This can be seen during the 2025 General Elections, where female political candidates were subjected to derogatory and sexual comments surrounding their appearances. Workers' Party candidate Alexis Dang was subject to several comments on her appearance, with many calling her "chio bu" or "chio pro max" both online and in-person during political rallies (Teo, 2025). Online fanclubs on platforms like HardwareZone were also created for several candidates, and many included sexual comments. Such comments placed an emphasis on their appearances and reduced female candidates' capabilities. Discussions that objectified female political candidates were widespread on platforms like Reddit and Facebook, where users dissected their physical appearances, marital status, and even questioned their political competence (Thio, 2025).

Furthermore, the issue of Telegram channels containing explicit sexual content of Singaporean women also raises similar concerns. In 2019, an illegal Telegram group chat which circulated obscene and sexually explicit photos and videos of Singaporean girls and women was taken down by the government. The group chat, 'SG Nasi Lemak', had more than 44,000 members and charged a one-time fee of $30 for entry. On top of the fee, members were also required to upload pornographic content to remain in the chat. Recently, similar Telegram channels have also emerged and have been advertised on the platform itself. These channels also contain sexually explicit content as well as upskirt photos of Singaporean girls, including girls in secondary schools and universities. The majority of the videos were identified as revenge pornography or footage from hidden cameras in public spaces (Hamzah, 2023).

Policies to tackle Gender Inequality

While both countries face similar struggles surrounding gender inequality in the workplace, the policies and measures taken by the two countries have varying results.

To address greater gender inequality, South Korea established the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in 2001, with hopes to tackle discrimination in employment, promote work-life balance, take action against gender-based violence, and overall increase women's representation. The ministry has implemented legal frameworks including the Framework Act on Gender Equality which has policies that aim to target significant gender pay gaps, protect women's legal rights, and eliminate gender discrimination in the workplace.

However, despite legislative effort, the implementation of such policies has been relatively limited. The enforcement of gender discrimination laws continues to be a challenge as numerous cases go undetected. Moreover, exemptions granted to specific jobs allow discriminatory practices to persist (Mu, 2024). On top of weak institutional support, the push for such policies has garnered significant backlash from society. This could be attributed to growing anti-feminist sentiments from young men and emphasis on traditional gender roles (Mo & You, 2025). The shifting social attitudes and political polarisation as seen in the 2022 presidential elections in South Korea has thus made it difficult for policies to make any significant strides in gender equality.

In contrast, Singapore has taken a more incremental yet visible approach in recent years. In 2022, the White Paper on Singapore Women's Development outlined 25 action plans to promote women's development in the workplace and society. The paper highlighted plans to encourage equal opportunities in the workplace, support for caregivers, protection against violence and other support measures for women (White Paper, 2022). Along with the publication of the 2022 White Paper, the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) also pushed for principles of workplace fairness.

Following the implementation of these policies, the gender pay-gap in Singapore has improved and narrowed, from 16.3% in 2018 to 14.3% in 2023 (Lim, 2024). Other targets such as having 30% of women in leadership positions have also seen meaningful progress, with the percentage of women on boards increasing from 7.5% in 2013 to 22.7% in 2023 (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2024). Moreover, community action in the form of advocacy groups like AWARE Singapore and SG Her Empowerment (SHE) complement state efforts and help to champion systemic change and provide opportunities for dialogue on gender issues.

Challenges faced

While both countries differ in their policy outcomes, Singapore and South Korea both share a worrying trend of misconceptions about gender equality. In South Korea, strong resistance towards gender equality among young men could be traced to a lack of awareness surrounding gender disparities. Many young men often dismiss issues regarding gender inequality and remain sceptical or disregard the issue entirely (Mo & You 2025). Online male-dominated forums like Ilbe not only intensified gender stereotypes and discrimination, but also spread misinformation. This has led to greater hostility and sexism as well as reduced support for policies regarding gender equality (You, 2024).



Similarly, Singapore also exhibits this trend. A survey by Ipsos found that nearly one in four Singaporeans deny the existence of gender inequality, and some argue that feminism does greater harm than good (Ipsos, 2022). Misconceptions surrounding feminism and gender equality also resulted in feminism being viewed as undesirable for society (AWARE Singapore, 2021). Moreover, strong resentment surrounding National Service often resurged during discussions about gender equality (AWARE Singapore, 2021). Thus showing how both countries share a similar concern regarding awareness and poor understanding of gender inequality.

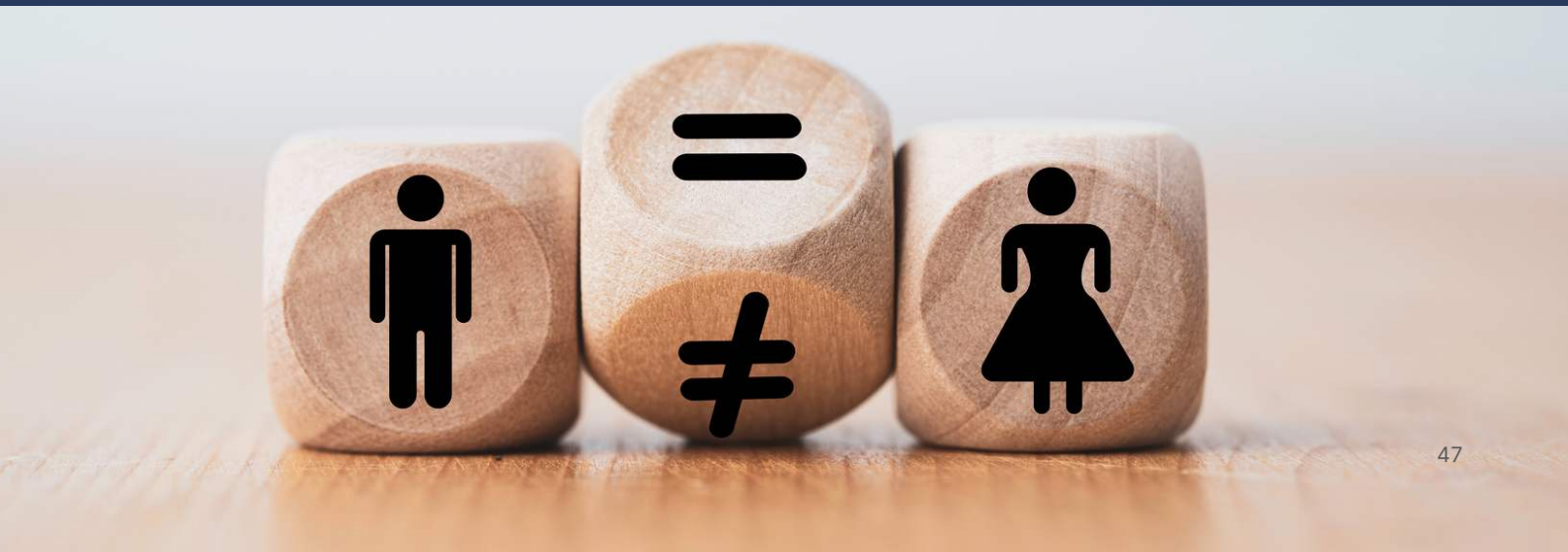
These attitudes reflect deeper forms of everyday misogyny that manifest through denial, defensiveness, and misinformation—demonstrating that both South Korea and Singapore face significant challenges in cultivating a shared understanding of gender justice.

Conclusion

Misogyny and gender inequality still persist both in Singapore and South Korea, but also all around the world. Women today still face discrimination, objectification, and systemic barriers in both the workplace and at home. In South Korea, longstanding Confucian legacies, colonial violence, and exploitative labor regimes have shaped a contemporary landscape where misogyny manifests in politics, workplaces, digital cultures, and sexual violence. At the same time, Korean women have mounted multifaceted forms of resistance—from digital activism and street protests to structural refusals and quiet feminism—demonstrating remarkable agency in the face of entrenched patriarchy.

In Singapore, Confucian-inflected Asian Values and patriarchal norms underpin workplace and politics inequality, as well as online misogyny, even as the state and civil society have taken steps to address gender gaps. Policy initiatives have produced measurable gains in areas such as pay equity and women's leadership representation, yet persistent misconceptions about feminism and gender equality limit further progress.

Today, worrying trends like extreme anti-feminist sentiments are not just limited to South Korea but can also be seen in the rise of incel culture worldwide (Townsend, 2023). This trend of an emphasis on traditional gender norms and misogynistic beliefs have worrying consequences on society. Ultimately, the fight against misogyny and for gender equality remains a global issue. While efforts have been made towards building a more inclusive society, reducing misogyny and gender inequality will still require greater effort from individuals, governments, and societies.



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The Dark Side of K-Pop

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3

Introduction

K-pop, short for Korean pop, is a genre of music that originated in South Korea and has grown in a massive popularity over the past two decades. Evolving from a localised genre to a global phenomenon, K-pop music encompasses a wide range of youth culture and musical genres such as pop, hip-hop, R&B, EDM, Korean trot, and traditional Korean music. Not only known for its music style, K-pop is also globally recognised for its polished and hard choreography and visual striking idols. It started as a local entertainment in South Korea, now becoming one of Korea's biggest cultural exports that is influencing fashion, language, and youth culture around the world. (BBC Bitesize, 2023)

K-pop itself originally emerged in the 1950s, but started to become popular in the 1990s when it shifted into a more modern genre, through the formation of boy bands such as Seo Taiji and Boys that was very popular during that time. Seo Taiji and Boys fusion of hip-hop sounds with dance, was the one behind the new dynamic and formation of K-pop that we are familiar with nowadays. Then, K-pop started to boom for the first time thanks to one PSY's "Gangnam Style", which dominated music charts and became the first video on YouTube to hit 2 billion views in 2014. (BBC Bitesize, 2023)



Figure 1: PSY performs "Gangnam Style" onstage at the MTV EMA's in 2012 (BBC Bitesize, 2023)

However, behind all of that, there is a behind the scenes that we all need to know: The Dark Side of K-pop. Beneath the smiles and stage performance, there are deep-rooted issues such as exploitation, excessive control over artists , toxic fan culture, and serious mental health challenges.

To become K-pop stars, they need to present a perfect image of supremely talented and gorgeous, single, heterosexual stars that can be attractive to fans of the opposite sex. To prevent fans from being jealous of their bias, most companies or agencies prohibit their artists from dating when they are still under contract. In 2018, Cube Entertainment kicked out two famous artists: Hyuna and E'Dawn as they had started dating each other even though it was written in the contract that it was prohibited. (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019)

Due to South Korea's beauty standard, which has the highest per capita ratio of plastic surgeries in the world, all artists are judged based on it. Since since appearance is considered as a very important thing for agencies when they are hiring an artist for them to debut in a group or as solo artist, plastic surgery is becoming increasingly common among female and male performers. (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019).

Not only that, most companies also control their artist's private lives, disregarding their working hours, and restricting them on many things in order for them to appear perfect. These factors are the reason why many artists suffer a lot of stress and mental health problems like anxiety and depression. Studies also show that South Korea is one of the countries that has the highest suicide rate in the world. This happens due to the confucian social mentality that prioritizes family honour over the individual. This is why many artists fear admitting their mental health issues in order for them to preserve their family's reputation. (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019)

That is why we wanted to look deeper into what really happens behind this billion-dollar industry.

Background

Start of the Hallyu Wave

The Korean Wave or Hallyu Wave is the symbol of the rapid growth of Korean culture industries from year to year. The term "Hallyu" (한류) itself was originated from Chinese language that translates as "Korean Wave" (90DayKorean, 2025). It first started in 1997 because of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis that hit South Korea really hard, leading to economic instability. In response to this, the South Korean government started to actively invest in cultural industries as a way to help boost the country's economy and create new sources of revenue streams (Toth, 2020).

The stage of Korean Wave began with a few Korean TV dramas: What Is Love All About? (1997), Winter Sonata (2002), and Dae Jang Geum (2003). Winter Sonata (2002) was the first Korean drama that gained the first major international hit and recognized as the first bona fide K-drama overseas success, generated an estimated US $2.7 billion for the Korean economy through tourism, and sparked "Drama Tourism" with fans from China and Japan visiting the filming locations (Tudor, 2014).



Figure 2: *Namiseom* (Nami Island), the picturesque location that featured in Winter Sonata and has now become a major tourist attraction. (Viator, n.d.)

Dae Jang Geum (2003), also known as Jewel in The Palace, has become a global breakthrough by becoming the most successful Korean drama ever internationally. It also became a top-rated show in diverse markets, from Hong Kong and Iran to Zimbabwe, Hungary, and Venezuela. The star from the drama also was reportedly invited to the palace by the President of Iraq itself (Tudor, 2014).

In the early 2000s, Hallyu started to spread with the success of Korean films and a few K-pop musicians, such as H.O.T., Shinhwa, and BoA. Before the PSY's "Gangnam Style" became a huge hit in global music markets, K-pop was not popular in North America. This popularity continues to grow, with several idol groups such as Girls' Generation, Twice, EXO, and BTS, successfully increasing their activities in several parts of the world. (Jin, 2018)

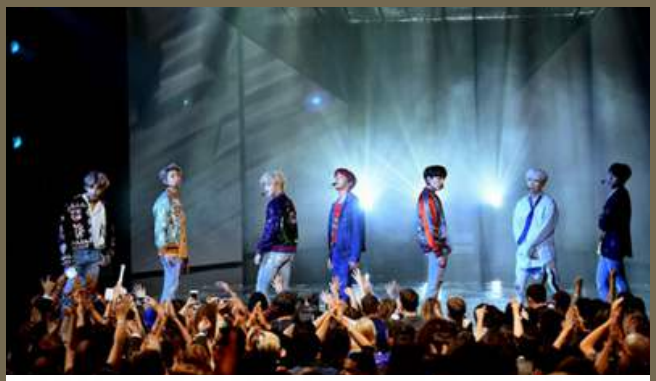


Figure 3: BTS being the first K-pop group to perform at the American Music Awards (Howler, 2025)

The popularity of the Korean Wave was also because of the help of social media. It has played a very important role in circulating the local culture into global markets. Global fans enjoy watching their idols on various social media platforms, including YouTube and FaceBook, instead of purchasing CDs and DVDs (Jin & Yoon, 2016).

The Evolution of Sasaeng Fans

During the early 2000s, fans met their idol or bias through online fan cafés that were mainly hosted on platforms like Daum and Naver. Through these cafés, fans were able to connect, update, and interact with their favourite idols through official messages. Fan cafés are the core of fandom culture, offering everything from fan art to giving fans the platform to discuss with each other regarding the official announcement from entertainment companies. Also, K-pop fans often paid more in order for them to access premium content which demonstrates their dedication to the artist that they loved (Fanwork, 2024).

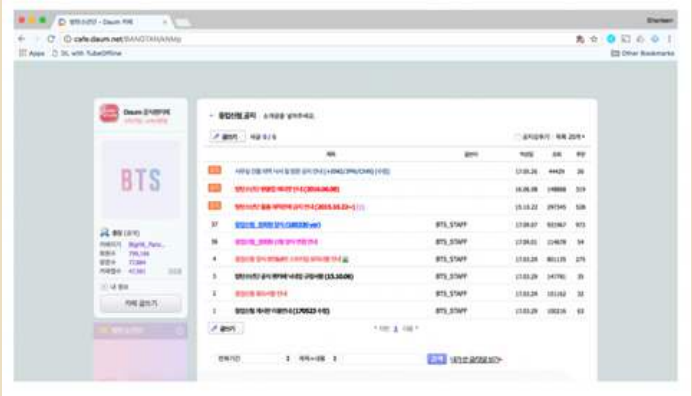


Figure 4: BTS's Daum Fan Cafés (Radiantwings, 2017)



However, starting from the late 2000s, fans started to go overboard by tracking idol's lives and schedules. These extreme fans are called Sasaengs, where obsessive fans invade the privacy of K-pop by stalking and following idols closely. Sasaeng fans are able to access the most private information of the idols, like dorm address, very detailed schedule, and even airline ticket information. Recently, a former Sasaeng fan revealed how they got all of that information.



Figure 5: Fans closely following their idols at the Airport (Allkpop, 2022)

They mentioned "hearing airline employees sell the information, and real Sasaengs already know the resident registration number for the idols so they look up the idol's seat number". They continued by explaining that they did that just to only fly, sit, and take photos of their favourite idol as well as watch their idols sleep (Allkpop, 2022).

Nowadays, there is one media outlet called Dispatch. Dispatch is a South Korean media outlet well-known for their investigative report on celebrities, especially K-pop idols. Every year, it publishes a detailed summary and proof about artist's personal lives, often including photos, videos, or messages of evidence, making it a key source for fans and the public to learn about their favourite idols. While these reports satisfy fans' curiosity about their idols, they also highlight how intensely how idols' private lives are often treated as public property. Even though some idols spoke up and new laws were made, Sasaeng behaviour still continues today. It shows how admiration can turn into obsession when people don't respect personal boundaries.



Figure 6: Dispatch revealing EXO's Kai and BLACKPINK's Jennie are dating (Koreaboo, 2019)

Crimes Start to Surface

Early 2010s

It began after three former members of TVXQ, one of Korea's famous boy groups, filed a lawsuit against their agency which was SM Entertainment at that time. Kim Junsu, Kim Jae Joong, and Park Yoo Chun sued SM Entertainment over what they called a slave contract. The reason behind it is because of their excessively long contract and unfair profit distribution with the management company. SM Entertainment gave them a 13-year contract period, even extending up to 15 years considering the artist's mandatory military service. This suggested that the contract itself was essentially a lifetime commitment for TVXQ, only ending when the members retire. This can lead to growing awareness of mental and physical exhaustion among artists or even trainees. (KbizoOm, 2023)

Mid 2010s

The issue about "AOA's Mina accusing their group leader Jimin of years of bullying" became a big deal recently, after AOA's former member, Mina, revealed the secret of those 10 years of bullying through her instagram account in 2021 (SCMP, 2024). On Mina's now deleted Instagram post, she mentioned "Around the time of my dad's passing, I cried once in the waiting room and one of the unnies told me that I was ruining everyone's mood and told me not to cry, dragging me to the wardrobe of the waiting room. I told her I was so scared at the thought of my dad dying. I still can't forget those words." (Soompi, 2020)

2018 – Now

The major scandals and crimes that shook South Korea was The Burning Sun Scandal (2018). This began with allegations that some of South Korea's biggest male K-pop stars, including BIGBANG's Seungri, had drugged and raped woman (The Interpreter, 2019). Following the death of Korea's singer and artist, Goo Hara and Sulli, due to cyber bullying in 8 2019 (The Korea Times, 2019), fans demand for fairer contracts and mental health support, urging government action for artists.





Fame and Crime

Case Study: Burning Sun

Club Burning Sun is a club co-founded by Lee Seungri, an ex-member of the famous K-pop group, BigBang (BBC, 2024). The club was located in Gangnam, known as Seoul's premier clubbing district, popular for its upscale and luxurious nightlife culture, which caters to a more affluent clientele (BBC, 2024). The club operated from 23rd February 2018 to 17th February 2019, and it generated large sums of revenue from wealthy businessmen, K-pop idols and even Seungri's fans themselves (Storms, 2021). However, its downfall began in December 2018, when CCTV footage was anonymously leaked online showing a woman being dragged by her hair out of the club by a staff member (BBC, 2024). Though she was flailing her arms to grab the attention of other staff for help, she was ignored, and she later revealed that she filed a police report but was dismissed by the police and accused of defamation by the club (BBC, 2024). Suspicions from the public regarding the club worsened with the leak of a second CCTV footage, showcasing a male customer, Kim Sang-kyo, who was assaulted by the club's security guards, claiming to be trying to help another female customer who was being sexually harassed (BBC, 2024). Later on, Kim revealed on his social media accounts that during his detainment in the police station after the incident, he was further assaulted by the police officers for the following eight hours (BBC, 2024). Having sustained severe injuries like multiple fractured ribs, this incident quickly became viral online internationally, pressuring the Korean government to order for investigation into Club Burning Sun and the Gangnam police station to officially begin (The Korea Herald, 2019)

After several investigations, a sinister truth was revealed, where the legal club front hid an illegal business model. The servers and bartenders were instructed to drug female patrons' drinks with Gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB), a potent central nervous system depressant drug, more commonly known as a "date-rape" drug (Soo, 2024). After consuming the spiked drinks, the staff would then bring them into a VIP room, where they are subjected to non-consensual sexual assault by those on the VIP list (Soo, 2024). Between the club staff and the VIP was also a private chatroom that functioned like a catalogue where the VIPs could "order" which girl they wanted to be drugged for a high price (Soo, 2024). It was also revealed later that K-pop idols, soloist Jung Joon-young, Choi Jong-hoon from F.T. Island and Lee Jong-hyun from CNBLUE were also partaking in such exploitations of women both within and outside of the Club Burning Sun (BBC, 2024). Therefore, the Burning Sun scandal aptly illustrates the intersection between fame, misogyny, and state failure.

Enablers of Sexual Crimes

The Patriarchal Society

Firstly, the persistence of patriarchal values in South Korea allows for the persistent sexual violence and exploitation against women. In a Confucian-based society, the role of women in Korean culture has long been set, especially during the Chosŏn Dynasty (Han, 2004). During that time, the primary goal of education for women was to teach them how to "preserve their chastity before marriage [and] be good daughters-in-law and wives", thereby making the chastity ideology a crucial means of controlling women (Han, 2004, p. 117). As a result, women were socially disadvantaged and overtly discriminated against. For example, in the case of adultery, women usually received harsher punishment than the men involved. Male adulterers who are royals or from the yangban class often only had to pay a minor fine, while female adulterers were "beaten with a changyong" or forced to do "hard labour" (Han, 2004, p. 123). Furthermore, rape was not considered a crime then, where "raping the wife for 10 sex" was seen as the " husband's right and the wife's moral obligation" (Han, 2024, p. 123). As such, these laws emphasised male superiority over women, and these ideas have been deeply ingrained in South Korea's patriarchal society.

Today, gender inequality no longer exists in such obvious legal discrimination; instead, it manifests more subtly in "moral" forms with attempts to justify gender inequality. This is visible in the attitudes of victim-blaming by the public, especially if the victim is a woman involved in sexual crimes. Occurring post-sexual assault, victim-blaming is considered secondary victimisation where victims suffer more as institutions and the media assign responsibility to the victim for failing to prevent the sexual assault (Choi, 2022). For instance, the public assigns blame based on the victim's behaviour and clothing, leading to a society where men's actions are frequently excused while women's are always scrutinised. As such, it is the patriarchal society that has emboldened males, especially, to commit sexual crimes against women.

Idol System Fuelling Suppression and Power

Beyond the patriarchal context that normalises male dominance, the highly competitive nature of the K-pop industry further heightens the pressures that drive some male idols to engage in sexual crimes. In the case of Lee Seungri from BigBang, he was the least popular member in the five-member group and was constantly overshadowed by the rest of his members in terms of singing and dancing (Soo, 2024). He thus felt the need to counter this imbalance in popularity by learning multiple languages and launching numerous entrepreneurial ventures to prove his worth beyond the entertainment scene (Soo, 2024). As four of the members went on hiatus to complete their military service, Seungri's popularity peaked. To sustain this popularity, he ventured into more controversial businesses, like the nightlife industry, co-founding Club Burning Sun, which later became an illegal business.



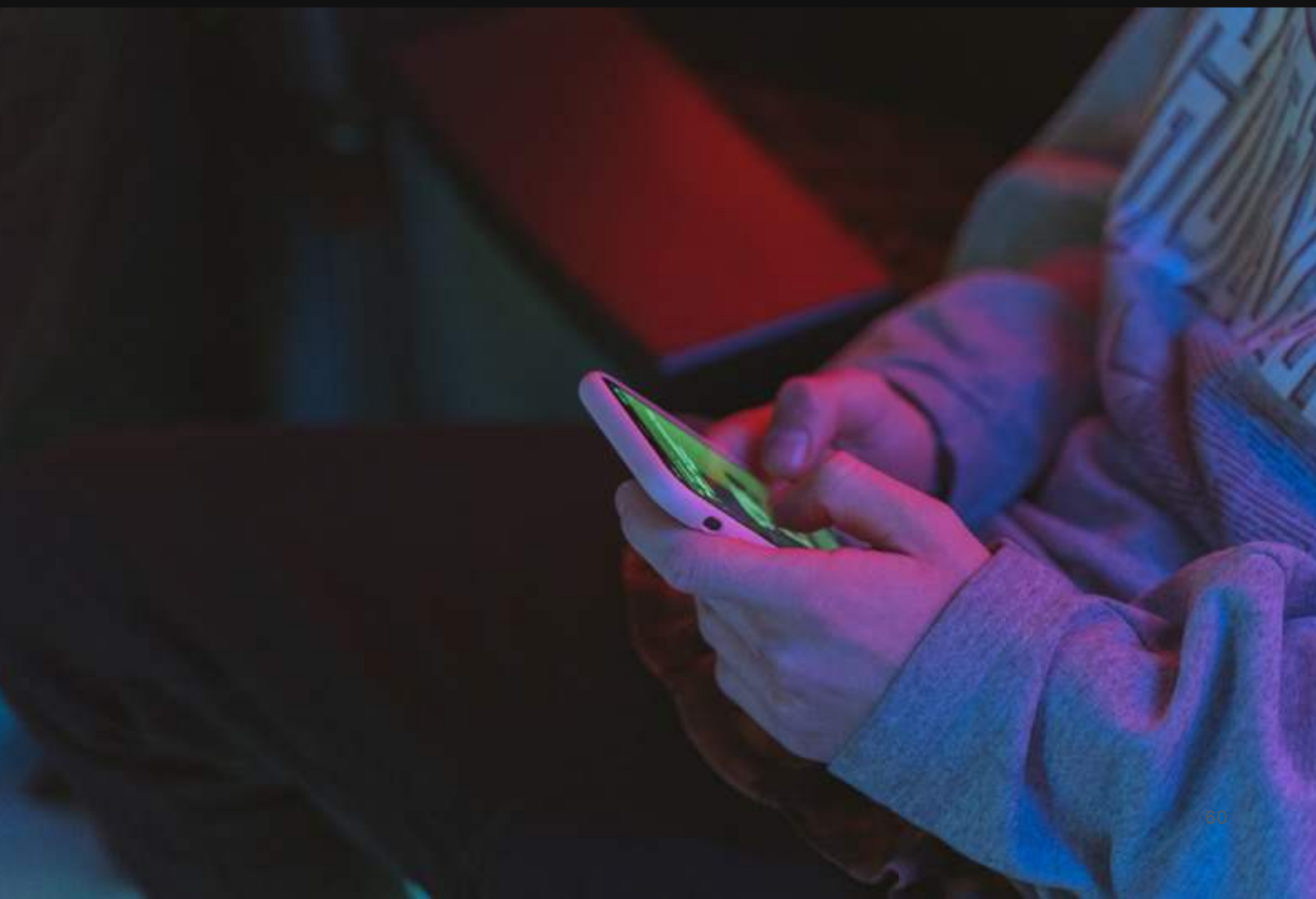
However, this pursuit of success needs to be situated within the structural constraints of highly restrictive contracts that idols sign. Under this strict surveillance, to maintain an “idol’s image” breeds repression that pushes some to lead double lives as a way to reclaim autonomy over their bodies and choices (Choi, 2023). Additionally, idols like Seungri are often treated like economic assets of the Hallyu industry, giving them a sense of invincibility where they are immune to scrutiny (Kim, 2023). Combined with how the industry tends to conceal these crimes to protect its profits, the silence allows crimes to fester behind fame.

Corruption within Authorities

For the longest time, the public has associated the Korean government and authorities with corruption, given South Korea's governing history (OECD/KDI, 2018). This was evident in the case of the Burning Sun scandal, where patrolling police were heavily bribed to allow sexual crime to occur within the club and Senior Superintendent, Yoo Gyu-Geun, was also heavily bribed to conceal evidence related to the scandal (BBC, 2024). Additionally, the Interior Minister and Justice Minister were suspected of being involved as well (BBC, 2024). This proves that corruption remains rampant within the country, and the systemic collusion allowed for such crimes to occur.

Advancement of Technology

Lastly, the advancement of technology is one of the biggest contributing factors to South Korea’s rising sexual crimes (Jang & Suh, 2024). With users prioritising privacy and security features, messaging app companies have been creating chatrooms with end-to-end encryption to attract users (Van-Daalen, 2023). It is precisely such privacy features that allow for sexual crimes to fester in online chat rooms where users can purchase explicit media anonymously (Jang & Suh, 2024).



One prominent example apart from the VIP catalogue in the Burning Sun Scandal is the new nth room case involving more than 212,000 participants and a speculation of over 200 male K-pop idols participants (Lee, 2024). In 2024, a new Nth Room has emerged as a “copycat” version of the original Nth Room in 2020. In this new version, men circulated non-consensual explicit pictures of their female family members and friends, and explicit AI deepfake images were also circulated within (Lee, 2024). Thus, this illustrates how the technologically advanced privacy features of messaging applications can, in turn, allow for sexual exploitation to occur.

The Aftermath

After the Burning Sun Scandal, there were a series of rallies by women to call for an end to the culture where women are treated as sexual objects. Some prominent examples include the 7th Hyehwa Station Rally and the 2019 Gangnam protest held on International Women’s Day (Cheon, 2019). These rallies then gained traction, pressuring the government officials to act. As a result, corrupt officials were prosecuted, and the president at that time, Moon Jae-in, had also ordered investigations into other clubs, specifically in Gangnam and Hongdae, with similar allegations (Wilder, 2019). Moon had also created a special unit by the Korean National Police Agency to investigate crimes against women, and as an effort to restore public trust in the police force (Wilder, 2019).

However, sexual crime rates in South Korea continue to rise (Figure 7). Even after the exposure of large-scale sexual crimes like the Burning Sun Scandal and the Nth Room, there seems to be minimal improvement. This proves that current measures in place are inefficient to act as a deterrent. Instead, we currently see greater frequencies of sexual crimes being linked with male K-pop idols as well.

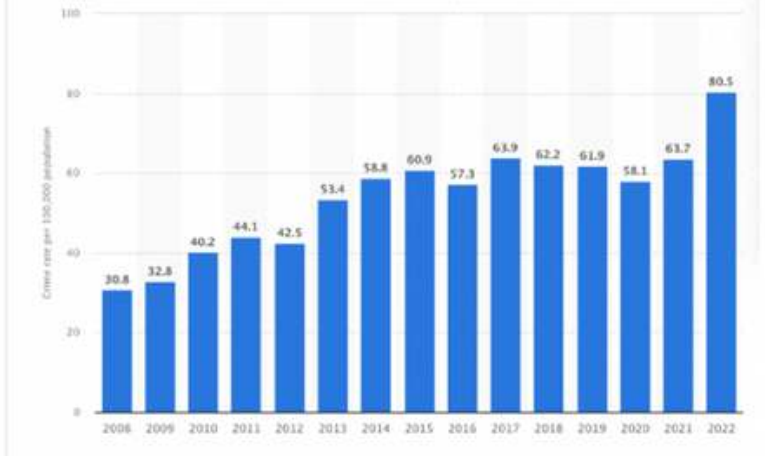


Figure 7: Rate of sexual assaults in South Korea from 2008 to 2022 (Statista, 2025)

For example, Moon Tae-il, ex-member of K-pop boyband NCT, was sentenced to prison in June 2025 for raping an unconscious female victim (BBC, 2025).

In conclusion, fame and crime in the K-pop industry are not just about idols making poor decisions, but about the system that gives them power while also trapping them. The same system that protects idols from punishment also limits their freedom, showing how the dark side of fame is connected to the way idols are trained and exploited, which will be explored in the next section.



Structural Exploitation

In this section, we will be discussing how the nature of the entertainment industry exploits idols for their own benefit through various structural systems such as image control, unfair contracts, and extreme working hours.

Expectations of K-pop Idols



In the world of K-pop, idols are not just performers who provide entertainment to fans. Idols are seen as the standard of perfection, be it dancing and singing skills or their physical appearance. Even before their debut, many K-pop idols are expected to condition their bodies to the “perfect image”, be it their body size or their appearance. The inability to do so may even cost their long awaited chance to debut, hence many idols have no other choice but to adhere to absurd standards set in the K-pop industry. Female idols are held against standards 14 like a pure looking visual, slim waist and thin legs, while male idols are expected to appear muscular yet lean at the same time. (Baleria De La Cruz, 2023) Idols are all expected to live up to these high standards, otherwise scrutiny and criticism online await them.

Examples of K-pop Idols affected by K-pop Standards

Netizens do not hold back when it comes to criticizing an idol. Comments can be extremely malicious, which may affect K-pop idols negatively.

An example is ITZY’s Chaeryeong, who faced several hate comments from netizens who negatively commented on her looks. (Koreaboo, 2020) The comments she received took a huge toll on her confidence and she would stand at the sides of groups photos in order to avoid attention.

A more recent case is soloist Hyuna, who has been receiving constant backlash for putting on weight. Netizens often pointed out her slightly fuller cheeks and plump body, and even speculated if the idol was pregnant. (The Korea Times, 2025) In response to these comments, Hyuna posted a photo of her weight on social media, revealing she has lost 10kg but is still not done with her diet. Shortly after that post, she fainted on stage during a performance, allegedly due to extreme weight loss. (Daily Mail, 2025)



Figure 8: Hyuna collapsing on stage in Macau shortly after posting about her weight loss (Daily Mail, 2025)

This shows how comments of netizens can affect an idol so much that they are willing to sacrifice their health to deliver a perfect image of themselves to fans.

On the other hand, due to the high expectations of fans and entertainment companies, many idols struggle to meet such expectations and have to go to great heights in order to fulfil the toxic beauty standards of K-pop.

Hwasa from MAMAMOO opened up about her struggles to maintain a perfect body image. (The Korea Times, 2025) Once driven by extreme cravings, she ate a black sesame rice cake. However after the incident, the weight of guilt dawned upon her and she forced herself to vomit after that. This incident marked the start of her struggles with anorexia, an eating disorder, as well as depression.

Another idol who undergoes extreme stress in order to showcase a perfect body is Jimin from BTS. Jimin was known for his flawless image as well as perfect execution of choreographies, hence he felt intense pressure to be able to maintain a perfect body image as well. As a result, he survived on only 1 meal in 10 days before a comeback. (Koreaboo, 2025)



Figure 9: Jimin's change of appearance due to his extreme dieting (Koreaboo, 2025)

Invisible Competition and Stress among Idols

To take such extreme beauty standards to further heights, a specific member of a K-pop group will be crowned as the “visual” of the group, essentially indicating which idol fits into the Korean beauty standards best. The allocation of such positions undoubtedly forms invisible competition between K-pop idols, and comparisons between members belonging to the same group. The amount of stress that K-pop idols face due to such extreme expectations of them are unimaginable. Apart from being able to excel in both dancing and singing skills, they have to face criticism regarding their appearances and looks, despite such factors being out of their control most of the time. Evidently, the stress and comparison that idols have to undergo takes a huge toll on their mental and physical well-being, due to the extreme methods (such as extreme dieting like Jimin from BTS) that idols undergo to maintain the perfect K-pop idol image.

Packaging of Idols

From the examples discussed, it is evident that the K-pop industry fantasizes over perfect images, and fans are overly obsessed with idols having to always appear perfect and live up to the high beauty standards. Essentially, K-pop idols are being packaged and branded in order to appear as the image fans wish to see. Idols in the industry are viewed more as products that are meticulously created, instead of their true organic selves that encompasses the struggles and flaws that all humans portray. (Daily Bruin, 2020) The unrealistic expectations that idols have to live up to is still an existing struggle for many, and it seems such expectations will only continue to escalate as the K-pop industry grows its influence globally.



Sexual Exploitation

Not only do idols not have to maintain perfect physical images, their behaviours and actions are also expected to follow certain expectations. The most common rule in K-pop is the “no dating” rule. Regardless of genders, K-pop idols are not allowed to date or even come into close proximity with opposite genders unless required. Dating among idols in the K-pop scene is often viewed as sin or a betrayal. This is due to the overly romanticised relationship that fans imagine with their idols. Many fans view their idols in a romantic or even sexual way, creating an image that these idols are their partners, which explains why fans get extremely upset when idols date.

Idols being harassed

By implementing the “no dating” rule, agencies are encouraging fans to feel deeply connected to idols, and eventually developing “pseudo relationships”, essentially referring to fans feeling deeply connected to these idols who don't even know them. Such a mindset of fans has escalated to dangerous situations.

As seen in Figure 10, YOUNITE’s member Eunho was seen in close proximity with a fan who attempted to kiss him forcefully during the group’s fan meeting. (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2025) Another similar incident occurred during BTS member Jin’s fan hugging event which eventually led to a fan’s successful attempt to kiss him on the cheek. (BBC News, 2025) Both incidents are clear cases of sexual harassment of K-pop idols. Due to the overly fantasized relationship of fans with idols, boundaries are easily crossed, and K-pop idols are deprived of their own personal space and even safety.



Figure 10: A fan in Sao Paulo appears to attempt kissing YOUNITE’s Eunho (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2025)

Examples of Idols facing backlash due to dating

Not only is their safety compromised, personal freedom does not exist in the K-pop world. By breaking the “no dating rule”, harsh consequences await. Karina from aespa is the leader of the group, and is adored by fans due to her outstanding appearance as well as her abilities to perform on stage. However, when fans found out Karina was dating actor Lee Jae Wook, Karina’s reputation hit an all-time low. Fans went crazy over the news, and displayed absurd behaviour. Fans drove an electric billboard to the idols' agency, demanding why the love that fans have displayed for her was insufficient such that she had to date. (The Week, 2024) After receiving an overwhelming amount of hate and criticism online, Karina posted a handwritten apology to express how apologetic she is towards her fans. (Kwon, 2024) This incident reflects the highly restrictive lives that idols have to live, to the point that natural occurrences such as dating could cost them their reputation that they spent years of training and performing to build.



Karina is not the only idol that faced heavy consequences for dating. Hyuna and Dawn are 2 K-pop idols under the same entertainment company, Cube Entertainment. In 2018, Hyuna revealed on social media that she has been dating her fellow colleague for 2 years. This news caused absolute chaos online, and all both idols' promotions were placed on 19 pause. Not long later, their entertainment company released a statement stating that the company values trust, and since the pair has broken the company's trust, their contracts with the agency will be terminated. (Rolling Stone, 2018) Despite the pair later having the opportunity to rebrand as a couple in a new agency, this incident reflected how merciless the K-pop industry is. Even despite Hyuna's history with Cube entertainment for over a decade, the company showed no compassion to the idol, and expelled her and her partner as they disobeyed the "dating rule".

These examples show that K-pop idols are highly controlled by not only fans, but also agencies. A single mistake in behaviour may cost them their career regardless of the rapport they have previously built up.

Sexualised Performances

As though strict rules on K-pop idols are insufficient, agencies do their utmost best to fit into the imagination of fans by having idols display explicit concepts in songs and performances.

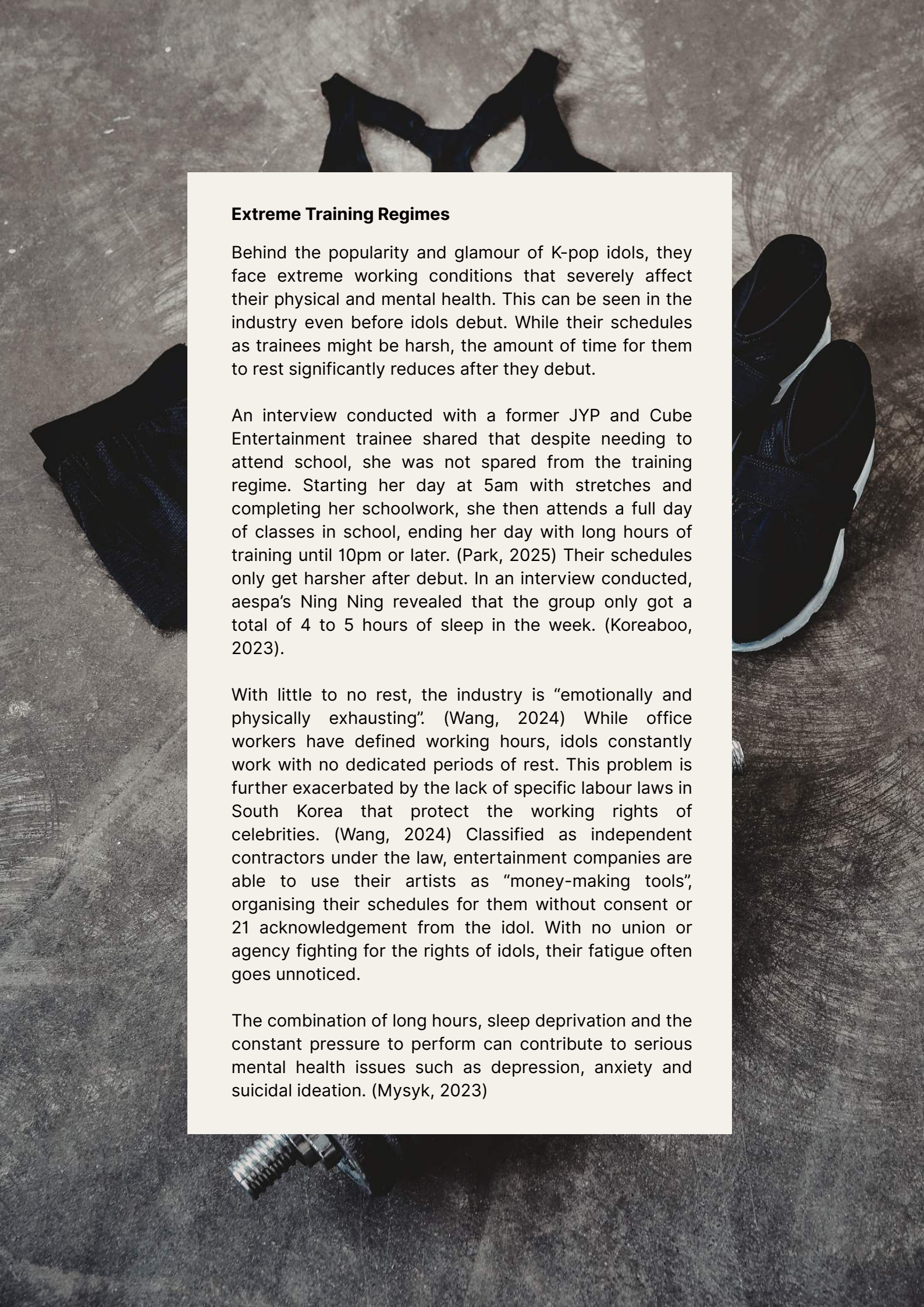
In AOA's single "Miniskirt", members can be seen performing indecent dance moves such as unzipping their skirts during the choreography (Figure 11). This dance move was later deemed inappropriate and hence modified. (Koreaboo, 2020)



Figure 11: AOA members unzipping their skirts during the choreography (Koreaboo, 2020)

Additionally, NewJeans faced concerns over their single "Cookie", as the lyrics contained "many sexual double meanings and metaphors." (Fortuin & Knobel, 2024) To make matters worse, the members were only aged 14 to 18 at the time of release.

The extent to which companies go to in order to promote their idols is evidently getting out of hand. Even if it means having members dance to inappropriate dance moves or making minors sing sexualised lyrics, agencies are willing to do anything in order to appeal to fans.



Extreme Training Regimes

Behind the popularity and glamour of K-pop idols, they face extreme working conditions that severely affect their physical and mental health. This can be seen in the industry even before idols debut. While their schedules as trainees might be harsh, the amount of time for them to rest significantly reduces after they debut.

An interview conducted with a former JYP and Cube Entertainment trainee shared that despite needing to attend school, she was not spared from the training regime. Starting her day at 5am with stretches and completing her schoolwork, she then attends a full day of classes in school, ending her day with long hours of training until 10pm or later. (Park, 2025) Their schedules only get harsher after debut. In an interview conducted, aespa's Ning Ning revealed that the group only got a total of 4 to 5 hours of sleep in the week. (Koreaboo, 2023).

With little to no rest, the industry is "emotionally and physically exhausting". (Wang, 2024) While office workers have defined working hours, idols constantly work with no dedicated periods of rest. This problem is further exacerbated by the lack of specific labour laws in South Korea that protect the working rights of celebrities. (Wang, 2024) Classified as independent contractors under the law, entertainment companies are able to use their artists as "money-making tools", organising their schedules for them without consent or 21 acknowledgement from the idol. With no union or agency fighting for the rights of idols, their fatigue often goes unnoticed.

The combination of long hours, sleep deprivation and the constant pressure to perform can contribute to serious mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. (Mysyk, 2023)

“Slave” Contracts

When joining an entertainment company, trainees and idols are required to sign contracts that bind them to the company. While some contracts might be fair and beneficial for both the parties, others might involve the exploitation of idols. Such contracts are coined as “slave” contracts, where companies trap popular and successful stars to earn money for them. (Han, 2009)

Characteristics of such contracts include little pay and heavy restrictions. A popular case study would be TVXQ, who sued their management company in 2009 due to their 13 year contract being too long and restrictive. (BBC News, 2011) By claiming the group’s name and activities as intellectual property of the company, members of the group were forced to attend schedules and performances as instructed by the company. Their freedom was heavily limited. Imbalance between their efforts and rewards were also present, as despite their huge success in the industry, TVXQ group members did not receive a salary that was proportionate to their profit.

Using the group’s name to keep members under the control of the company is common in the industry. When an idol group debuts, their management company holds the trademark to their group name, fan club name, lightstick and other merchandise. This makes it harder for the group to leave the company. Even if idols are unsatisfied, members of the group have to continue promoting under the same company they signed with. Failure to extend the contract would result in the group disbanding. Chungha, a soloist under MoreVision company, fell victim to this strategy. After leaving her former entertainment company MNH, she lost access to her social media accounts and fan club name, “Byulharang (별하랑)”, meaning “stars that shine with Chungha”. (Allkpop, 2023) Despite many memories and emotional attachment to the former fan club’s name, she was forced to change it to “HAART (하트)”, symbolising “a new start and forever love for Chungha”. Through this example, it is evident that the more popular the artist is, the harder the company tries to keep the artist by their side, resorting to extreme methods such as controlling their social media accounts, and as a result, their public image.



Given that producing idols is expensive, many companies claim that idols must repay their "training debt". (Chase, 2023) This includes fees from their singing lessons, dance training, accommodation, food expenses, stylists and more. Profits gained from early success go directly back to the entertainment agency to recoup the losses gained from taking care of the idols when they were trainees. While the rationale behind it might be logical, many companies often use these debts to exploit their talents. By refusing to disclose the exact amount idols are supposed to repay the agency, idols continue to work with the company. Under the impression that they have yet to repay the training debt, many idols do not receive their first pay check despite working for long periods of time. With a salary sometimes lower than minimum wage, this leaves artists financially reliant on the company. In extreme cases, talents resort to working part-time jobs to pay their debts off instead.

An example of financial exploitation would involve BlockBerry Creative's (BBC) girl group LOONA. In 2023, LOONA members sued BBC over their unfair contract. Despite hitting large milestones such as being the 3rd fastest K-pop girl group to hit #1 on the Billboard's World Digital Song Sales chart (Koreaboo, 2019), they did not receive much salary from their company from their achievements and hard work. In fact, members were financially exploited for their success. Terms of their contract stated that "the artist and 23 company split the income 3 to 7, but the company splits expenses with the artist equally". (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2023) This blatant act of pocketing the members' hard earned profit was later deemed unfair by the court.

Impact on Mental Health

Due to the nature of the industry, the psychological toll is extremely high. The constant demand to maintain a flawless image and meet impossible standards set by fans and companies fosters self-doubt, low self-esteem, depression and chronic anxiety. (Mysyk, 2023) Yet, due to the stigma surrounding mental health in South Korea, many idols hesitate to seek help. When such mental health issues remain untreated, the consequences can be devastating.

In a documentary, SEVENTEEN's leader S.Coups revealed that he was suffering from panic disorder in 2019. (Koreaboo, 2020) While he was always able to replace it with happiness from performing, he realised the severity of his anxiety during one of their world tours. During the interview, he mentioned the pressure he felt from fans to perform his best on stage. Gesturing that he "felt like he was dying" on stage, he eventually took a hiatus to recover and treat his panic disorder before returning to the stage.



In this case, it is evident how the intense expectations placed on idols can turn into a source of pressure and fear. The internalised expectation to appear flawless and perfect on stage can also increase their hesitation to reveal their mental health issues and take breaks. Instead of acknowledging his panic attack on stage as a sign to rest, he “hated himself” for needing to take a break.

In more severe cases, untreated mental health conditions can lead to suicides. In the same year, Sulli took her own life after openly discussing her struggles with mental health. (BBC News, 2019) Known for her realness and relatability, she was outspoken with her battle against mental health issues, cyberbullying, hate comments and more. Eventually, Sulli lost her battle with depression.

Going beyond the emotional impact these suicides have on the artist’s friends, fans, and family members, this can also lead to a more dangerous phenomenon of copycat suicides.

Copycat suicides, as suggested in the name, can be defined as the phenomenon of “a person’s actions influencing the behaviour of others, leading to imitations of behaviours, events or ideas”. (Gualtieri et al., 2024) A study conducted revealed that “celebrity suicides significantly influenced the number of suicides immediately post-event”. (Jang et al., 2016) This can be seen in Figure 12. With red arrows representing years celebrity suicides occur, the number of suicides increased significantly when the red arrows where present. This shows the high level of negative influence idols could possibly have on their fans.

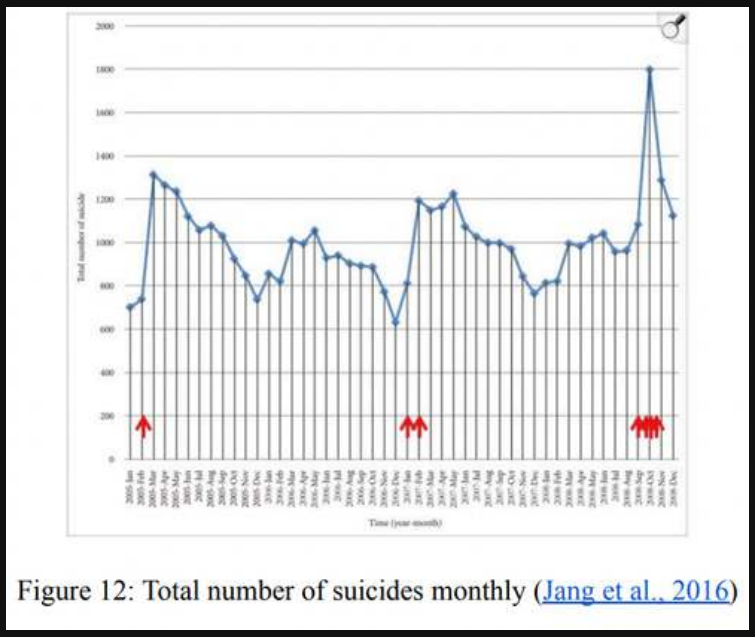


Figure 12: Total number of suicides monthly (Jang et al., 2016)



Fan Culture

While fans are a primary catalyst for the success of K-pop by streaming music, buying albums, attending concerts, and promoting idols online—this deep devotion can sometimes cross the line into a dangerous obsession, manifesting as sasaeng fans, parasocial relationships, and toxic fandoms.

Sasaeng Fans (사생팬)

The term "sasaeng" is a compound derived from two Korean linguistic components: "sa 사," signifying "private," and "saeng 생," meaning "life" (Megarani & Dinni, 2021). A sasaeng fan (사생팬) is an obsessive type of fan in the Korean entertainment industry who intrudes into the private lives of idols, instead of supporting from afar. Sasaeng fans' behaviours often cross the line between fandom and illegal or harmful stalking such as: gathering personal information, following idols everywhere, breaking into idol's homes or their dorms, and placing hidden cameras (Jesslyn & Pruitt, 2025). A recent case involving BTS's Jungkook, a member of BTS (방탄소년단), exemplifies how serious sasaeng fans' behaviours have become.

On 11th June 2025, a Chinese woman in her 30s was caught trying to break into Jungkook's Seoul residence just hours after discharging from his military service (BBC News, 2025). According to the police, the woman was seen punching random numbers on a combination lock outside Jungkook's apartment in Seoul at about 23:20 local time (15:20 BST) on a Wednesday. She later confessed to flying into the country solely to see the Jungkook up close but was ultimately arrested for trespassing (BBC News, 2025).



Figure 13: BTS Jungkook's stern warning to trespassers during birthday livestream

Following this incident, on the night of August 30th, 2025, another woman in her 40s was arrested by Yongsan police in Seoul for trespassing in the underground parking space of Jungkook's residence. According to the police, the woman reportedly followed a vehicle through the entrance, loitered around the building, and attempted to flee when the police arrived. The woman unintelligibly told officers that she had entered because it was "a friend's house" (South China Morning Post, 2025).

Two days later, on the night of September 1st, 2025, Jungkook held a Weverse livestream to mark his birthday and used this chance to communicate with ARMYs — BTS fandom. Jungkook spoke about the recent intrusions during the livestream, detailing that he had watched the events unfold via CCTV footage and conveyed his distress over the intrusions (South China Morning Post, 2025). Jungkook firmly warned potential trespassers, saying "If you come here, I will lock you in… Everything is recorded, so the evidence will be secured and you will be taken away. If you step into my car park, you will not get out unless I open the door. So if you don't want to end up at the police station, never come" (South China Morning Post, 2025). The intrusions not just highlights the immediate physical risk but also, the repeated erosion of personal boundaries and the emotional toll that harassment and constant surveillance place on idols.

Similarly, Kim Jae-joong of JYJ, a former member of TVXQ (동방신기) experienced 12 years of struggle with sasaeng fans. During one of “Late Night Studio” broadcasts that Kim Jae-joong hosted, he unfolded his 12-year ordeal of dealing with terrifying and intrusive encounters with sasaeng fans.

Kim Jae-joong remembered that when he was actively part of TVXQ (동방신기), sasaeng fans frequently invaded their privacy, “I received photos of my living room, 27 bedroom, and kitchen sent directly to my phone — and I was in those photos. That means they secretly entered the house, took pictures, and left. I have no idea how they even got my number” (KpopPost Editor, 2021).



Figure 14: Kim Jae-joong opening up about his 12-year ordeal with sasaeng fans on “Late Night Studio” broadcast (Allkpop, 2021)

Even after relocating to his own apartment, Kim Jae-joong continued to struggle with finding peace. A sasaeng fan had rented the unit across from him, constantly surveilling him to the point where he avoided stepping onto his own balcony. “I moved there because I liked the balcony, but I couldn’t even use it because they would just keep staring at me,” he shared (KpopPost Editor, 2021).

Kim Jae-joong has also endured frequent doorbell pranks. The first time, he caught a sasaeng fan standing outside his door and reported the incident, however the police dismissed his complaint. The second time, someone rummaged his doorknob aggressively late at night, which subsequently drove him to move homes every two years for his own safety. “One night, my doorbell kept ringing, but when I checked the intercom, no one was there. I opened the door slightly and saw a person’s leg. I was terrified. When I finally caught the intruder and called the police, the officer just said, ‘It’s your fan — why are you reporting them?’ and left. That’s how it was back then” Kim Jae-joong recounted (KpopPost, 2021).

Besides moving frequently, he also had to replace his car regularly, as sasaeng fans always managed to track his vehicle and follow him around. Additionally, Kim Jae-joong also recounted a chilling yet absurd incident when someone knocked on his apartment window late at night. Living on the ground floor next to the apartment’s garden, where only residents are able to enter, he assumed that it might be a deliveryman only to only discover it was another sasaeng fan from overseas (KpopPost, 2021). After reflecting on his struggle, Kim Jae-joong shared with relief that the harassment finally ended after more than a decade, “It lasted for 12 years, but not anymore. I don’t move houses or change cars now. I’m finally free. These days, I can walk on the streets like a normal person — and I’m so happy” (KpopPost, 2021).

Jungkook’s and Kim Jae Joong’s encounters with sasaeng fans vividly demonstrate how extreme fandom blurs the line between admiration and invasion, resulting in psychological trauma for idols. This negative aspect of fan culture highlights an immediate need for awareness, regulation, and respect for personal boundaries within the K-pop community.



Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships are one-sided emotional bonds where an individual feels a deep connection or closeness with someone they have never met—typically a celebrity or media figure. This perceived relationship exists in the individual's mind, as the connection is not mutual (Psychology Today, n.d.). In the context of fan culture, these one-sided emotional bonds enhance fans' devotion. K-pop related products and services have increased tremendously from 2019 to 2023. The combined revenue tripled to nearly 4 trillion Korean won ($3 billion) while operating profit reached 600 billion won ($450 million) (Morgan Stanley, 2023) reflecting fans' investment of time, money, and emotional energy through streaming, buying albums, attending concerts, and promoting their favourite idols online.

These relationships are perceived rather than reciprocated, they can blur boundaries, contributing to obsessive behaviors seen in toxic fandoms or with sasaeng fans (Vellichor 29 Literary, 2024). Modern platforms like Bubble and virtual fan signs further intensify these parasocial relationships by creating a sense of personal interaction.

Bubble, a subscription-based app where fans pay a monthly fee to communicate, receive messages, photos, videos from their beloved idols. This application enables fans to feel as though they are receiving specifically dedicated private messages to them from their idol. In fact, idols do not reply individually to each fan message, instead the messages were sent as a mass reply. The main goal was to let fans feel that they have direct access to their idols, thereby increasing their emotional attachment and usage of this application, resulting in an increase in subscription profits (Yang, 2022).

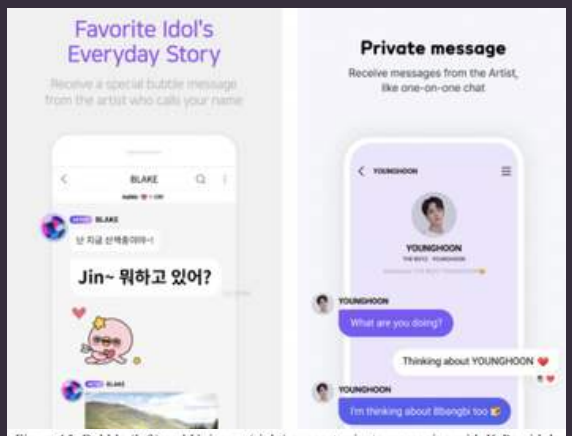


Figure 15: Bubble (left) and Universe (right) support private messaging with K-Pop idols (Yang, 2022)

After fans have paid to chat with their specific idol, they will be led to a new private chat room where they start receiving the idol's messages. The frequency of text varies, depending on idols' availability. Some artists text several times a day, while some, just once a month (Yang, 2022). As seen in Figure 4, idols often send updates on what they ate, selfies, song recommendations, what they've done for the day or even share private stories that have not been shared anywhere on social media. Though the content may seem monotonous, it actually creates an illusion of private conversation, where fans feel as if they know the idol personally (Marshable, 2022).

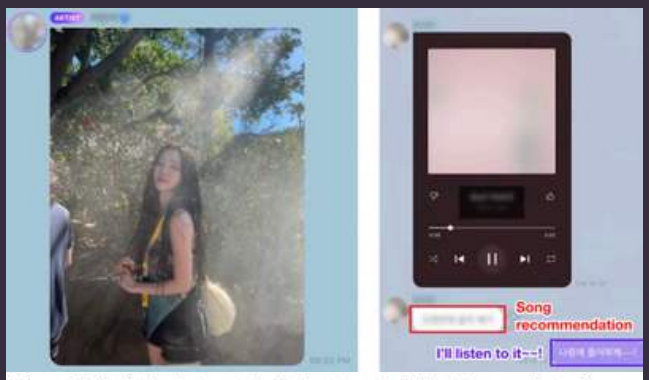


Figure 16: (Left) A photo sent by Karina (aespa), (Right) A screenshot of a song recommendation sent by Karina, followed by a reply from the fan (Yang, 2022)



Figure 17: Both Bubble (left) and Kakao Talk (right), the number 1 appeared to the left of each message, marking it as unread until it was "seen" by the receiver (Yang, 2022)

Additionally, once a fan's message is being sent out in Bubble, a number 1 would appear in a small grey font next to the text bubble. When the idol checks the message, the number automatically disappears. This small visual indicator enables fans to believe that their message was "read" by their beloved idol, even though it's highly likely that the idol did not read each message meticulously. This is an approach Bubble had mirrored from Kakao Talk by using the number 1 to indicate that the message has not been read, which further amplified fans' commitment and love towards utilizing Bubble, "Whenever I see the number 1 disappear, I can sense that there is really a human being behind the screen reading my 31 messages. Visually seeing that my messages did reach the idol makes me think that my payment is worth it" (Yang, 2022).



Figure 18: The idol's messages in Bubble (left) and Universe (right) containing fan's name (Yang, 2022)

As seen in Figure 18, idols send messages that contain the fan's exact profile name. Though it seems mundane, the heavy utilization of username variables actually further enhance fans' illusion of private chat, enabling them to feel as if they were spoken to on a personal level (Yang, 2022). These small visual details allow fans to feel that their efforts in sending messages to their idol has been recognized, thereby intensifying parasocial relationships.

Virtual fansigns, in which an idol is able to interact directly with a fan through a video call, significantly contributes to parasocial relationships. Despite the video call being brief—often only 90 seconds—it is often perceived as highly personal as the fan can directly communicate and visually engage with their beloved idol, thereby reinforcing the sense of proximity and mutual recognition.



Figure 19: Examples of virtual fansigns (Business Insider, 2023)

Studies on parasocial relationships emphasises that repeated exposure and mediated communication often lead fans to experience feelings of intimacy, affinity or friendship with public figures—even when the relationship is one-sided (Gucci, 2024). In order to enter a virtual fansign, fans would have to buy an album, which serves as a "lottery ticket" that gives them a chance to win the video call experience. Fans typically shell out thousands of dollars buying albums to increase their chances of winning the fansign, just to have a 90 second video call with their beloved idols as seen in Figure 7 (Koh, 2023). Research has found out that having stronger parasocial bonds can drive higher purchasing intentions and spending behaviours, particularly when tied to exclusive access events like virtual fansigns (Park, 2024). For instance, the lottery-based purchase mechanism, where fans purchase a dozen of albums to stand a chance for a virtual fansign call, not only amplifies both emotional and financial investment but also demonstrates how fandom and consumerism intersect through parasocial desire.

In K-pop fandom, parasocial relationships are cultivated and profited via platforms like Bubble and virtual fansigns, fostering the perception of direct communication and personal engagement, prompting fans to invest both emotionally and financially (Yang, 2022). Short exchanges, like private direct messages or brief video calls, allow fans to feel a stronger emotional connection to their idols, enhancing one-sided parasocial relationships and encouraging greater financial investment from fans (Yang, 2022). This dynamic highlights how parasocial relationships deepens fan devotion and drive consumer behaviour in contemporary idol culture.

Toxic Fandom

Toxic fandom culture is another contributing factor to the darker aspects of Hallyu, where intense fan loyalty can lead to significant harassment and hostility. Although fans frequently stand up for their idols, this devotion can occasionally result in online harassment, doxxing, and cyberbullying (Anwar et al., 2020). For example, in 2016 when BLACKPINK debuted, Jennie faced severe criticism as her then label — YG Entertainment, favoured her with more expensive outfits, screen time, and being the first member out of the four to have a solo release. With her stage outfits often overshadowing other members, it made other members look like "back up" dancers to Jennie, as seen in Figure 20 (left), thereby leading to public resentment, despite it being a company decision (Allkpop, 2018).

BLINKs (블링크)—BLACKPINK's fandom, often argue with each other over such issues particularly on platforms like "X", Tiktok, and even YouTube as seen in Figure 21. These arguments often stem from disagreements over the treatment and popularity of individual members, contradicting the fandom culture — where being under the same fan club shows a unified support for the group.



Figure 20: BLACKPINK's Jennie's outfit overshadowing members (Allkpop, 2018)

In late 2018, Jennie's "lazy dancing" scandal started to surface as fancams of her being inconsistent during stage performance were filmed, including skipping of moves and appearing low-energy. This clips went viral quickly, sparking harsh criticism online and leading to the widespread of hate and trended hashtags like #JennieLazy, which fuelled intense online bullying towards Jennie (The Express Tribune, 2025).

BLINKs often steps in to defend Jennie, citing reasons such as Jennie having low stamina by nature, an ankle injury or even technical issues. However, the public remains unconvinced, criticising Jennie's professionalism, sharing examples of how other idols handled similar problems more professionally. The extent of the hate became so severe that YG entertainment began to block fancams showing Jennie's "lazy" performances on YouTube (Allkpop, 2018). The fandom? To no surprise, they turned their backs on Jennie—particularly solo stans as seen in Figure 22. These solo stans often engage in online arguments, attacking Jennie and also each other's favourite members, leading to ongoing toxic fan wars within the BLACKPINK community.

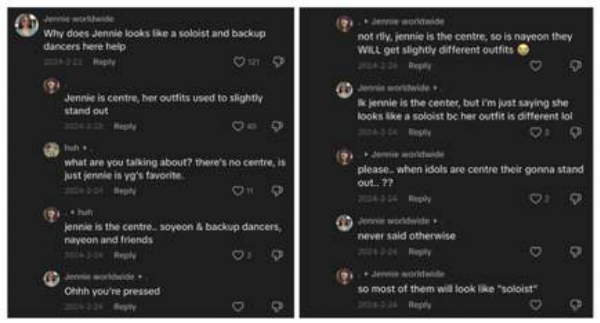


Figure 21: BLINKs arguing in the comment section on Tiktok



Figure 22: (Left) Compilation of Jennie's lazy dance on TikTok, (Right) Criticisms towards Jennie

In January 2019, news of Jennie dating Kai from EXO broke out, leading to significant backlash as many fans accused her of violating the industry's unofficial dating ban. The relationship reportedly ended shortly after due to overwhelming public pressure and hate (Koreaboo, 2025). Later in May 2022, rumours of Jennie dating BTS's V surfaced along with allegedly leaked photos, further intensifying fan wars between BLINKs and ARMYs, leading to widespread cyberbullying, doxxing, and even death threats. Jennie's social media was subsequently flooded with hate comments related to the dating rumour, as BLINKs and ARMYs—BTS's fandom, expressed outrage and disappointment (Koreaboo, 2024).

These incidents highlight the dark side of Hallyu, where idols' personal lives are consistently under surveillance and are intensely scrutinized, normative human behaviours such as dating, can evoke extreme fan hostility. The imperative to uphold a flawless public image and adhere to restrictive, unofficial rules imposes significant emotional and psychological burdens on idols, while fans' obsessive policing of celebrity behaviour underscores how global fandom culture can perpetuate toxicity and psychological harm.



Conclusion

In conclusion, the negative aspects of this billion-dollar industry are not caused by a single issue, but rather an entire system built on extreme expectations, profit-driven companies, and obsessive fan culture. The industry's problems are deeply rooted, ranging from labour exploitation and sexualisation of idols to financial and image control. Greed for fame, money, and power has also led to more serious crimes, such as the Burning Sun scandal discussed in the report. Even fans, who are often regarded as idols' source of motivation, can become part of the harm through parasocial relationships, toxic online wars, and boundary crossing actions.

These issues also reflect larger societal problems such as gender inequality, corruption, extreme emphasis on beauty standards and the stigma surrounding mental health. The deaths of Sulli and many others serve as painful reminders of the cost of fame. With the global rise of K-pop, a significant number of young adults continue to chase their dreams of being idols in the industry. As such, it is important for companies, fans and government institutions to recognise the importance of creating a safer environment.

With the industry dominated by teenagers from as young as 13 years old, fairer labour policies and healthier fan practices must be established. A collaborative effort among all stakeholders can help shape a future where idols are not just cultural products, but human beings who deserve to live with dignity and without the crushing weight of unrealistic expectations.

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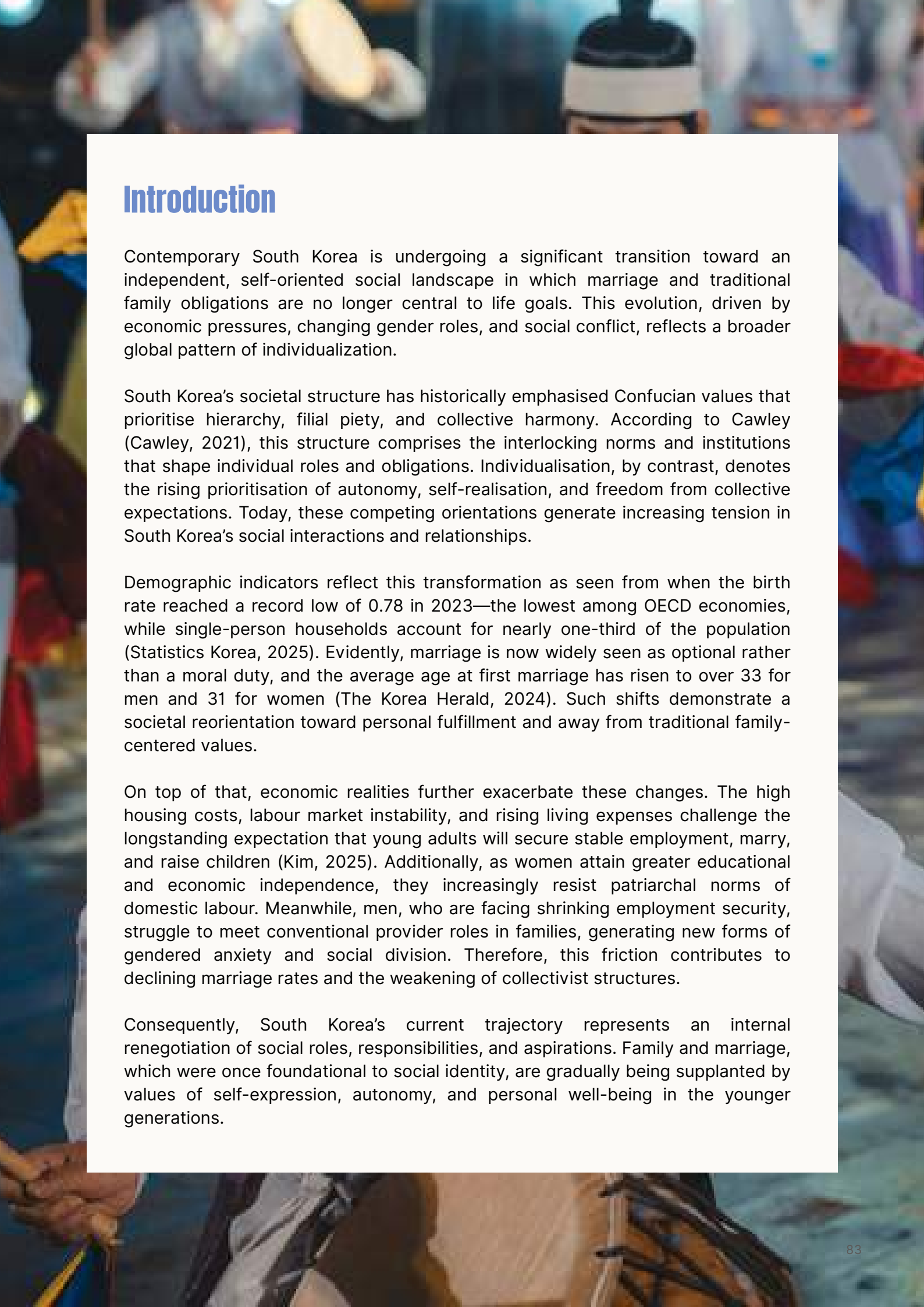
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The Rise of Individualism in Korea

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4



Introduction

Contemporary South Korea is undergoing a significant transition toward an independent, self-oriented social landscape in which marriage and traditional family obligations are no longer central to life goals. This evolution, driven by economic pressures, changing gender roles, and social conflict, reflects a broader global pattern of individualization.

South Korea's societal structure has historically emphasised Confucian values that prioritise hierarchy, filial piety, and collective harmony. According to Cawley (Cawley, 2021), this structure comprises the interlocking norms and institutions that shape individual roles and obligations. Individualisation, by contrast, denotes the rising prioritisation of autonomy, self-realisation, and freedom from collective expectations. Today, these competing orientations generate increasing tension in South Korea's social interactions and relationships.

Demographic indicators reflect this transformation as seen from when the birth rate reached a record low of 0.78 in 2023—the lowest among OECD economies, while single-person households account for nearly one-third of the population (Statistics Korea, 2025). Evidently, marriage is now widely seen as optional rather than a moral duty, and the average age at first marriage has risen to over 33 for men and 31 for women (The Korea Herald, 2024). Such shifts demonstrate a societal reorientation toward personal fulfillment and away from traditional family-centered values.

On top of that, economic realities further exacerbate these changes. The high housing costs, labour market instability, and rising living expenses challenge the longstanding expectation that young adults will secure stable employment, marry, and raise children (Kim, 2025). Additionally, as women attain greater educational and economic independence, they increasingly resist patriarchal norms of domestic labour. Meanwhile, men, who are facing shrinking employment security, struggle to meet conventional provider roles in families, generating new forms of gendered anxiety and social division. Therefore, this friction contributes to declining marriage rates and the weakening of collectivist structures.

Consequently, South Korea's current trajectory represents an internal renegotiation of social roles, responsibilities, and aspirations. Family and marriage, which were once foundational to social identity, are gradually being supplanted by values of self-expression, autonomy, and personal well-being in the younger generations.

A comparative perspective highlights both parallels and divergences. Singapore, for example, shares a Confucian heritage and faces similarly low fertility (around 1.0–1.1 in 2023). However, the Singaporean government actively intervenes to bolster family formation through housing and family-oriented incentives (Population SG, 2024). While South Korea's individualisation has emerged organically from cultural strain and gender conflict, Singapore's transition remains tightly regulated and managed by the government. As a result, while both societies exhibit comparable demographic outcomes, the social and emotional implications in Korea are far more pronounced due to the lack of policies put in place to tackle the issue of declining marriage rates and fertility rates.

Historical Context of Korea That Shaped Individualism

Confucian Foundations of Korean Social Structure

Korean collectivism is deeply rooted in Confucian ideology, which historically governed relationships through hierarchical obligations and filial respect (Cawley, 2021). The family served as the moral and economic nucleus of society, with marriage functioning as an institution for lineage preservation, resource organisation, and social order (Cho, 2010). Rural communities operated through extended kinship structures, such as the jongga (clan-head families), where multigenerational households cooperated in labour and resource sharing. Within this framework, individual autonomy remained secondary to fulfilling interdependent familial duties.

Post-War Industrialisation and the Shift to the Nuclear Family

The aftermath of the Korean War (1950–1953) prompted a rapid state-led industrialisation drive under President Park Chung-hee. As urbanisation expanded, factory labour replaced agrarian production, contributing to the decline of extended households and the rise of nuclear family arrangements (Chang, 1993). Despite this structural shift, collectivist logics persisted: families continued to pool resources for upward mobility, particularly through intensive investment in children's education. Thus, marriage still retained its function as a social contract that maintained family status and economic security.

Furthermore, gender roles during this period remained rigid. Men were positioned as breadwinners, while women were primarily responsible for domestic and caregiving tasks (Cultural Atlas, 2016). The increasing access to higher education for women, however, gradually laid the groundwork for future demands for personal autonomy and change in gender expectations.



Neoliberal Reforms and the IMF Crisis

Finally, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis marked a pivotal turning point. Neoliberal restructuring introduced flexible labour markets that significantly weakened job stability and the traditional breadwinner model (Shin, 2012). As labour insecurity spread, the economic burden of marriage and child-rearing intensified. Concurrently, women's continued advancement in education and employment expanded legitimate alternatives to marriage and motherhood.

Chang (2010) describes this transition as part of Korea's "compressed modernity," where accelerated development overloaded families with economic and emotional responsibilities. The family's role shifted from a production unit rooted in collective survival to an arena focused on consumption, personal development, and negotiation of individual desires. This evolution represents the emergence of contemporary individualisation in South Korea, characterised by the pursuit of self-defined fulfillment rather than obligations to lineage and tradition.

Singapore faced similar transformations after it gained independence, but once again, with distinct government interventions, making its outcome different from that of Korea's society. Government control over housing allocation and targeted incentives such as baby bonuses, tax relief, and parental leave helped maintain the family as the core social unit (Chua, 1995). Despite the increasing individual aspirations in Singapore, the state's proactive governance has mitigated social conflict and preserved a balance between collectivism and individual autonomy.

Taken together, these historical developments illustrate diverging pathways within similar cultural contexts. South Korea's rapid economic change in the past had generated abrupt shifts in identity and expectations, whereas Singapore's managed modernisation allowed for a more gradual adjustment.





The Rise of Individualisation

The rise of individualisation in South Korea needs to be understood within the unique conditions of compressed modernity. Compressed modernity describes how South Korea experienced social and economic transformations that took centuries in Western societies in just a few decades. These conditions redefined the relationship between individuals and traditional social structures such as family, community, and nation.

Historically, the people of Korea's past were part of a mass movement before they were individuals. Upon asking them who they were, the automatic response would have been, “I am a Korean.” Their identity was dominated by the idea of the collective. Any sense of purpose, destiny, and worth was controlled by the group rather than the individual (Tizzard, 2023).

However, with the dawn of late modernity being influenced by globalisation and education expansion, the axis of identity has shifted. The modern individual does not necessarily find their sense of worth in the collective of the nation. If you ask them who they are, they might respond with their name, their major, their interests, and so on. They will tell you who they are rather than what they are part of (Tizzard, 2023).

One aspect central to the Korean experience of individualisation is the transformation of the family. Historically, the family was the core social and moral institution supporting Korean life. However, under the pressures of rapid modernisation, the family has become functionally overloaded and socially risk-ridden (NIH, 2010). South Korean families served as engines of educational and economic mobility, yet have also become sites of emotional strain and intergenerational conflict.

As younger generations pursue autonomy, the traditional family's authority has weakened, giving rise to "dual individualisation." This concept shows that people in East Asia are very individualised in society in terms of urban transformation, but are also very family-oriented at the same time (Shim, 2018). This duality distinguishes Korean individualisation from Western models, as it is not about complete detachment from family relationships, but rather a negotiation between personal freedom and filial responsibility. The family remains symbolically important, even as its structural centrality declines.

Industrialisation in the 1960s and 1970s drew millions from rural villages into urban centres, where elementary families replaced extended family networks. The rise of higher education, especially among women, has transformed ambitions and delayed traditional life milestones. Marriage, which was once a social obligation, has become a personal choice, increasingly postponed or even rejected. According to a national survey in 1991, arranged marriages completely determined by parents, which represented 48% of the marriage cohort before 1964, almost disappeared for the marriage cohort after 1990 (1.2 %) (Sam, 2016).

One of the clearest showcases of South Korea's individualisation is the unmatched growth of one-person households. Single-person households accounted for 33.6 percent of all households last year, up 3.2 percentage points from three years ago. Those who responded positively about living alone without marriage also jumped from 34 percent in 2020 to 47.4 percent last year, according to a survey conducted by the gender ministry on 12,044 households nationwide from June 1 to July 31 (The Korea Times, 2024). These individuals are not necessarily lonely or isolated. Instead, they actively choose to live alone as an assertion of self-direction and independence.

Although Korea has a strong dining-together culture, more people are starting to accept the idea of dining alone. Korean people call this dining alone behavior 'honbap'. Korean media commonly attribute the increase in the 'honbap' trend to changes in the Korean society, including the fact that society is becoming more competitive as well as the growth of individualism and an increasing number of single-person households. Now, not only do Korean people dine alone, but also they drink, watch movies, and sing karaoke alone. The dining alone phenomenon means that Korean society is gradually shifting away from a group-based society. Many Koreans are realizing that they do not need to spend their time and money to blindly maintain groups, and instead can focus on their individual lives if they choose to (Kim, 2017).





Economic and Consumer Dimensions of Individualization

The rise of individualisation in South Korea is not only a cultural and social transformation, but also an economic one. As individuals continue to define themselves apart from their collective institutions, consumer markets and industries have also progressed to accommodate and capitalize on this new way of living. The growth of one-person households, the normalisation of solo consumption, and the expansion of self-investment industries all reveal how economic structures have adapted to and reinforced the social shift toward individualisation.

Households

The most apparent indicator of this transformation is the rapid growth of one-person households, which have become a defining feature of South Korea's demographic landscape. Single-person households made up only 9 percent of all households in 1990 but are projected to rise to 37.3 percent by 2047. Kim Jin, director of population census at Statistics Korea, stated that "Starting this year, single-person households will become the most dominant type of household" (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2019). This trend marks a foundational restructuring of the traditional family model and has profound implications for consumption, housing, and urban planning.

Consumer Products

In lockstep with this trend, industries are taking swift action. Food companies are offering items in small portions and pre-cooked and meal kit products that can be enjoyed conveniently at home. The popularity of small-sized electronics is also pronounced. Sales of an electronic device targeting single or two-person households introduced by Emart in November last year grew 230 percent on year.

Ramen pots, sandwich makers, multi grills, and toasters with a one-slice option are all examples of the so-called “single electronics.” Small electronics are gaining enormous popularity in properties below 40 square meters (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2019). As the average household size shrinks, the amount of food ingredients needed decreases, leading to a preference for small packaging. Additionally, small-package products are more affordable, which has increased consumer interest in purchasing only essential items amid high inflation (Im, 2024). This economic adaptation indicates more than just a shift in supply and demand, it represents the commodification of independence. The market has learned to monetise solitude, selling products that allow individuals to live comfortably and efficiently on their own.



Self-investment Culture

Similar to this industry adaptation is the rise of self-investment culture, which is a form of consumer individualism that focuses on personal growth and wellness. Travel, in particular, functions as both an act of liberation and self-discovery. For a generation navigating a high-pressure education system, societal expectations, and a competitive job market, travel has become a vital antidote. It offers a powerful escape from conformity, transforming loneliness into spontaneous encounters and discovery. Growing up with a new sense of cultural confidence, young Koreans are more boldly exploring the region. The convenience of short-haul travel to emergent markets is accelerating a two-way cultural exchange, as the global appeal of K-culture simultaneously breaks down language and logistical barriers for inbound tourism (Staff, 2025).

Self-development Sector

The wellness and self-development sectors also reflect similar trends. The South Korea personal development market generated a revenue of USD 2,263.3 million in 2024 and is expected to reach USD 3,661.4 million by 2030. The South Korea market is expected to grow at a CAGR of 8.4% from 2025 to 2030. In terms of segment, personal coaching/training was the largest revenue generating instrument in 2024. Books is the most lucrative instrument segment registering the fastest growth during the forecast period (Grand View Horizon, 2025). These industries reflect a broader trend: the pursuit of self-optimization as a moral and economic project. Individuals invest in themselves not only to gain skills but also to work on their mental health, aesthetic presentation, and a sense of purpose.

Cultural Shift

The cultural dimension of this shift is equally visible in public discourse. It has been highlighted how online narratives about solo living frame it as an aspirational choice associated with freedom, self-care, and lifestyle optimization. YouTube topic modeling revealed that many Koreans now perceive living alone as part of a broader identity project; a means of exercising control over one's life and environment, rather than as an indicator of isolation. Yet this "freedom" is still mediated by economic capacity: the ability to live alone, decorate a small apartment, or afford individual experiences depends heavily on disposable income, reinforcing class stratification even within autonomy (International Journal of Public Health, 2025).



Singapore Comparison

In Singapore, individualisation in economic terms is similarly apparent though remains shaped by strong government policies and family-oriented norms. One-person households have grown significantly. In 2000, there were 75,400 one-person resident households comprising 8.2 per cent of all resident households. That figure rose to 116,400, or 10.8 per cent, in 2007. This increased further to 167,900 in 2017, or 13 per cent of all resident households (The Straits Times, 2018). Singapore's public housing policies still strongly influence the housing market, and from 2025 singles will gain priority access to public-housing units near their family under the "Singles Near Parents" scheme (Hieu, 2024). Additionally, new public rental housing for singles is being developed, such as the "Single Room Shared Facilities" for low-income singles (The Straits Times, 2025). These developments suggest that while solo living is becoming more economically feasible, it is still structured within family-proximate, state-mediated frameworks rather than pure market-driven consumerism. This culture is similar to the "dual individualisation" culture in South Korea, where citizens are becoming more independent while still being family-oriented.



Shifting Attitudes Toward Marriage and Personal Fulfillment

South Korea is a highly urbanized city, known for its global cultural dominance, advanced technology and rich cultural heritage. Despite the strides the nation has made since gaining its independence, South Korea has been plagued by a falling Total Fertility Rate (TFR) since the 1980s. While a falling TFR is common as countries become more socioeconomically developed, South Korea has experienced one of the world's fastest drop in birth rates than almost anywhere else after the Korean War. In 2002, South Korea's TFR fell below the 1.3 threshold for the lowest-low fertility, with a record of 1.17 (Deng, 2024). Today, Korea holds one of the lowest fertility rates among its neighbours. The country recorded a TFR of 1.63 births per woman in 1995, but only 0.75 in 2024, which is about half the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 1.5. Over the same period, Korea saw a 67% drop in births, from a high of 715,000 to only 238,000 in 2024.

Unsurprisingly, the marriage rate has also fallen by nearly half over the past three decades. In 1996, Korea recorded a rate of 8.7, which has fallen to 4.4 presently. Also, marriages are happening at a later age. Men used to marry at the average age of 28.4 in 1995, compared with 33.9 in 2024. This pattern is consistent with women, who rose from 25.3 to 31.6 years old. These statistics all point to a common phenomenon, that South Koreans today are reluctant to marry and discouraged from forming their own families ("South Korea Sees Marriages Fall by Half, Births Down Two-thirds, More Foreign Spouses," 2025). To gain an understanding into why Koreans nowadays are delaying marriage and putting starting a family on the back-burner, we have to look into the wider social, economic and cultural systems that have redefined what marriage and family means in modern-day Korea.

Economic Pressures

We first revisit the 1997 Financial Crisis that left its mark on South Korea's economy. At the time, the labour market experienced extreme volatility which raised unemployment rates exponentially, and poverty was on the rise. The culmination of uncertainty and lack of resources made the prospects of marriage and childbearing daunting, which forced many South Koreans to postpone plans of family formation. However, even post-crisis, the postponement of childbearing still remained a clear trend in South Korea. In 2009, the mean age at first birth rose from 26.9 in 1997 to 29.8 in 2009. Similarly for second births, the mean age also rose concurrently from 29.1 to 31.8. The TFR post-crisis also saw a 50.1% drop. Statistics aside, the 1997 Financial Crisis also reshaped the importance of education and financial status in starting a family. Prior to the crises, a woman's education was disproportionate to their desire to reproduce. This is a traditional relationship between education and fertility, because Confucian values placed heavy emphasis on traditional family roles, where women were expected to prioritize family-making over their education and careers. The trend somewhat reversed after the crises, because more educated couples were suddenly recorded with a relatively higher fertility, which indicated that the lower-educated and lower-income group were more vulnerable to the economic hardships which resulted in the postponement of family formation. Today, Korea's fertility statistics form an inverted U-shape, with both the least and most educated women contributing the least to birth rates (Kim et al., 2014). This ordeal brought up the importance of having sufficient opportunities and resources before raising kids, and those who lacked were largely disincentivised.

However, the younger generation in South Korea continue to echo the sentiments that the economic pressure within the country is too great, and starting a family is still a huge ask. The rapid economic growth of the 1960s led to a huge rise in higher education, with 51% of the population representing four-year college graduates in 1985 compared to the 13% in 1960. With a highly educated population also comes a rise in labour participation. This was an especially revolutionary time for the women of South Korea, as the number of women in professional roles saw an increase of 20% from the period of 1960 to 1985. This meant that women had higher earning potential and career ambitions than the earlier generations.



Securing a spot in top Korean Universities and a stable job also became more competitive as a result. To gain an advantage, parents are more willing to spend heavily on private education, or Hagwon. 75% of elementary to high school students in Korea received private tutoring in 2021, and parents are spending a monthly average of $292, which makes up 14.1% of household expenditures (Hwang, 2023). Raising children therefore seems like a long-term investment that many younger Koreans are not prepared for.

High housing costs have also made marriage and family formation financially daunting. The prices of houses in Korea are rising exponentially, and at a faster rate than the pay raises that most Koreans earn (Hwang, 2023). Additional barriers like the Jeonse System, which requires tenants to pay a one-time deposit of 50%-80% of the market value of the property, has also made it harder for young people to secure housing (Li, 2024). WIth these challenges, younger couples choose to delay or turn away from marriage because they do not believe they can afford to start a family.

Changing Attitudes Towards Marriage

Economic pressures aside, the changing attitudes of young Koreans towards marriage has also contributed to the declining rates. These deteriorating numbers do not necessarily indicate a complete rejection of marriage, but could potentially reflect the changing conditions of Korean society that may make marriage a less appealing option.

Even with the modernization of Korea, the 'Marriage Package' continues to exist. It holds women to a bundle of traditional expectations like childbearing, caregiving, housework and caring for their elderly parents. The societal norms surrounding this marriage package is evident in the 'M' shape participation rate, where many women leave the workforce in their 30s to raise kids, and only return when the household is stable (Yoon & Park, 2025). It was found that Korean mothers in dual-income households spend 3.6 hours more than their partners on childcare and housework. Surveys conducted even revealed that more than half of Koreans agree that men should have more right to work than women, and most feel mothers should be more present for their preschool children (Hwang, 2023). However, with the Korean population becoming a more highly educated bunch, women are bound to carry higher earning potential and career ambitions than before. It would be short-sighted to expect mothers to take time off work and bear the costs of career stagnation and income loss. Simultaneously, increased exposure to diverse perspectives and contemporary feminist thought also help women gain more egalitarian ideals that challenge traditional gender roles.



Tension inevitably arises when traditional expectations that come with the Marriage Package are incompatible with their personal goals, and marriage altogether becomes a less appealing prospect. This is also the social tension between tradition and modernity on full display (Yoon & Park, 2025).

Men, on the contrary, display a more uneven shift of attitudes towards gender roles, and are generally more accepting of the cultural concept or marriage. This could be because the traditional concept of marriage upholds patriarchal norms which preserves the men's power and social status, like being the providers and decision-makers, so they have less incentive to challenge these systems. The disparity in attitudes towards the cultural concept of marriage contributes to a gender gap in marriage attitudes, which are one of the contributing social factors driving Korea's declining marriage rate (Yoon & Park, 2025).

Living Alternatives

As marriage and childbearing takes a backseat for young Koreans, it has allowed new lifestyle alternatives to enter the scene, like couples living together without being married. This is known as Cohabitation, which has become a rising trend among younger couples, but still remains vulnerable to stigma within society. Elderly Koreans frown at the concept because it is perceived as a violation of social norms and has remained illegitimised. As a result, cohabiters reported feeling more comfortable disclosing their lifestyle to friends rather than family members. Again, women cohabiters remain the most vulnerable group to discrimination and stigma, with more than half saying they were labelled as sexually promiscuous or immoral. Although cohabiting lifestyles can stem from various reasons, it was most distinctively recognised as an alternative to marriage, or a temporary measure for some couples who had intentions to marry, but had to delay for financial reasons. Among the handful of couples who saw cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, more than half expressed their dissatisfaction with Korea's family culture and felt they should be abolished, while the remaining argued that the system should still be maintained. Those who generally rejected marriage also tended to reject parenthood. Couples were reportedly disincentivised from childrearing due to the costs that came with it, both financially and opportunistically. The gender disparity in the attitudes towards Korea's family culture shows itself again, as female cohabiters were more adamant on abolishing the system than their male counterparts, insinuating at the women's great frustration with the patriarchal family norms in Korea (Byoun et al., 2021).

Singapore Comparison

South Korea sadly is not alone when it comes to declining birth rates. In fact, the Four Asian Tigers are suffering the same demise. In 2024, Singapore's TFR remained at the historic low rate of 0.97 (Ng, 2025). Although not exactly as severe a TFR decline as South Korea, both societies have fallen below the TFR replacement rate of 2.1, and have been consistently experiencing a decline. This shared demographic challenge can be attributed to similar structural factors like the rising economic pressures, changing social attitudes toward marriage and parenthood, as well as the escalating financial and emotional costs that come with childbearing.

Singapore, while known for its food and iconic landmarks, is also notorious for being ranked among the world's most expensive cities. Despite Singaporeans expressing desires for more than one child, they argue that the economic barriers they face disincentivises that. Even with pronatalist policies like baby bonuses and childcare subsidies provided in Singapore, they are insufficient to offset education and costs and encourage reproduction (Robinson, 2013). While the cost of living remains a significant factor influencing a young couple's decision to start a family, Singapore's social and cultural factors are also worth delving into. Similar to Korea, Pereira (2007) suggested that family values in Singapore have shifted, as a result of a higher educated population and changing priorities. Younger couples now challenge the idea of a "traditional family" unit by keeping a small family size, or generally viewing the cost of having children more critically. He also posited that in a highly competitive and meritocratic Singapore, couples now prioritise "child quality" rather than "child quantity", preferring to invest more in each child's education path and success.

Gender Conflict and Social Tension

Contemporary South Korea stands at the crossroads of rapid modernization and deeply embedded patriarchal tradition. The past several decades have witnessed dramatic transformations in women's educational levels, workforce participation, and social consciousness. These changes however, are seemingly at odds with longstanding expectations that women's primary roles in society are that of dutiful daughters, wives, mothers, and caregivers. Such differences are better known as "Gender conflicts", an increasingly definitive issue within the South Korean society that arguably influences political debate, shapes social movements, and alters the very structure of dating, marriage, and family life. Specifically, this clash between modern empowerment and traditional gender norms has created pronounced social tensions across three dimensions — Education, Career, and Personal Autonomy. Hence, culminating in undesirable social consequences of declining marriage rates, historically low fertility, and the rise of individualistic lifestyles.





Education

In 2021, the university enrollment rate by gender among 1,814 general high schools was 76.8 percent for males and 81.6 percent for females, with females outperforming males by 4.8 percentage points (Choi, 2024). South Korean women today are significantly more educated, competent, and empowered than ever before to take on societal roles beyond that of a traditional obedient wife or household caregiver. In fact, one could argue that South Korea has largely achieved formal gender equality in educational access.

Beyond mere access to educational opportunities, South Korean women still struggle with systemic discrimination within the broader education ecosystem. A key area is under-representation in STEM education. Traditionally, women have been encouraged towards “feminine” careers like education and nursing or what some may perceive as ‘low-value, humanities’, reserving more higher-value majors in STEM for males. According to the latest WISET annual report on the representation of women and men in STEM published in October 2022, women accounted for only 21.17 percent of total students majoring in science and engineering in higher education (Lee, 2023). However, a 2023 OECD report found that closing gender gaps in STEM could boost Korea’s gross domestic product by up to 2 percent annually (Kwon, 2025), highlighting women’s untapped and under-recognised potential, which may further translate to more limited career choices, in comparison to males. Such disparities underscores the need for a more gender-equal education system.

Education empowers women to acquire the same knowledge, belief in themselves, and opportunities they need to stand at par with men in any field - workplace, political life, or in the household, highlighting the necessity of female education for achieving equality (AVANSE, 2025). Through education, South Korean women gain awareness of the inherently patriarchal society they reside in, breeding greater aspirations for equality, independence, personal autonomy. Furthermore, it empowers women to embrace career pathways and opportunities that go beyond simply being a housewife, offering them alternative pathways instead of forced conformity to societal gender roles. Therefore, educated women are more likely to push for equal pay, anti-discrimination policies & maternity protection laws. Similarly, they also tend to have greater involvement in gender equality activism, advocating and protecting their rights, challenging social norms and pushing for a more gender-equal society in South Korea.

Career

As established earlier, most South Korean women are increasingly able to attain education or even higher education such as university degrees. However, this does not correspond with the rates with the career progressions and wages of women beyond education. The data showed South Korea's female workers were paid on average 31.2 per cent less than their male counterparts in 2022, or 68.8 per cent. The disparity is higher than that in any other OECD country and is more than double the OECD average of 12.1 per cent (The Straits Times, 2024). Women actively enter the workforce, however it is obvious that large gender wage gaps and limited promotion opportunities still persist. Women account for only 3.2 percent of all inside directors at the biggest companies in South Korea (Yoon, 2024). The male-centered corporate culture in the South Korean workforce, creates barriers to promotions, especially for women who take time off for family. This is despite some government efforts and the increasing number of women entering the workforce. Traditional gender roles and a lack of robust support systems contribute to the persistent and significant gender gap in professional advancement.

A common phenomenon faced by South Korean women would be the "Glass-ceiling effect". This is particularly for women in lower-paying, irregular positions in smaller companies, who also have less job security compared tpo their male counterparts. This is evident as in 2018, the country ranked 30 out of 36 OECD nations for women's employment, even though it has the highest tertiary education rate of the group for women aged 25 to 34 (Jeong, 2019). The corporate and public sectors still value men for leadership roles, resulting in underrepresentation in senior leadership positions despite high rates of educational attainment.

Maternity and childcare penalties further exacerbate gender inequality. Women who take time off to raise their children, or for child-bearing, frequently experience stalled promotions, reduced responsibilities, or reallocation to lower ranking positions. Many women also recognise the hard reality that career stability and progression is near impossible to achieve whilst building a family. This led to many women choosing to deprioritse marriage, or opt out entirely. According to the survey conducted on 1,000 office workers nationwide, 27.1 percent of female respondents reported being coerced into signing labor contracts stipulating marriage, pregnancy, or childbirth as grounds for resignation. This contrasts with the 19 percent of males who reported similar experiences (Seo, 2024). Deeply rooted stereotypes that women should always prioritise family life over work makes it extremely difficult for women to balance both, where some may cave in to societal pressure and conform to being homemakers. Furthermore, fixed perceptions of gender roles, where men are key family breadwinners, may also influences employers' decisions of offering career advancement and opportunities to men over women, despite similar qualifications. This further hinders women's careers and fuels frustration.

Traditionally, women often find themselves in situations where they have to give one up in order to attain the other, but looking at the severely decreasing fertility and marriage rates amongst South Korean women, it is evident that there is a cultural shift as to which South Korean women are choosing to prioritise now – work.



Autonomy

A major response to the forms of discrimination and inequalities that women in South Korea face up to today has been the rise of feminist activism and the pursuit of individual autonomy, especially amongst young women.

One prominent example would be the “Escape the Corset” movement, a feminist movement in South Korea that pushes back against the country’s stringent beauty standards and societal pressures on women. It makes use of the “corset” as a metaphor for the various societal expectations. This is inclusive of those related to physical appearances, submissiveness and sexual objectification, especially by men, all of which represses women. Actions such as cutting their hair extremely short, publicly destroying make-up products and posting social media posts online to document rebellions in hope of inspiring others were often seen during the movement. These actions symbolises more than just aesthetic rejection; it represents empowerment and push for autonomy over an individual’s body, challenging the “male gaze”, giving freedom away from being consistently judged and objectified by the male perpective.

The pursuit of autonomy also extends to the major life decisions such as relationships, marriage and family. According to a survey, 52.9 percent of the female respondents saying they have no intention of having kids.Only 28.3 per cent were willing to have children (The Straits Times, 2024). As mentioned earlier, many women increasingly value financial independence brought about by career advancement and prioritise personal freedom by staying single and rejecting traditional beauty standards for women.

In fact, a higher-than-average proportion of women out of work within the South Korean workforce, as compared to men, further highlights how families may pose a burden, where women may lose or have to quit their jobs to support their families. This alongside the large gender wage gap, plays a huge role in deterring women from marrying and having children of their own.



Men's Response

It is a common phenomenon that South Korean men often feel excluded from gender equality discourse. They believe that feminism gives females special treatment, fuelling the growth of anti-feminist sentiments. Communities such as "Ilbe" served as breeding grounds for misogynistic rhetoric. Constantly involved in scandals across political, educational, and even entertainment industries, the Ilbe community has been identified by Koreans as "far-right, anti-feminist, anti-immigrant, and anti-LGBT." (Kang, 2021). Such communities frame feminism as anti-male, portraying gender equality movements as giving females unfair advantages. This builds resentment on both sides which can then deepen mistrusts, turning gender equality into what seemingly seems to be a cultural war.

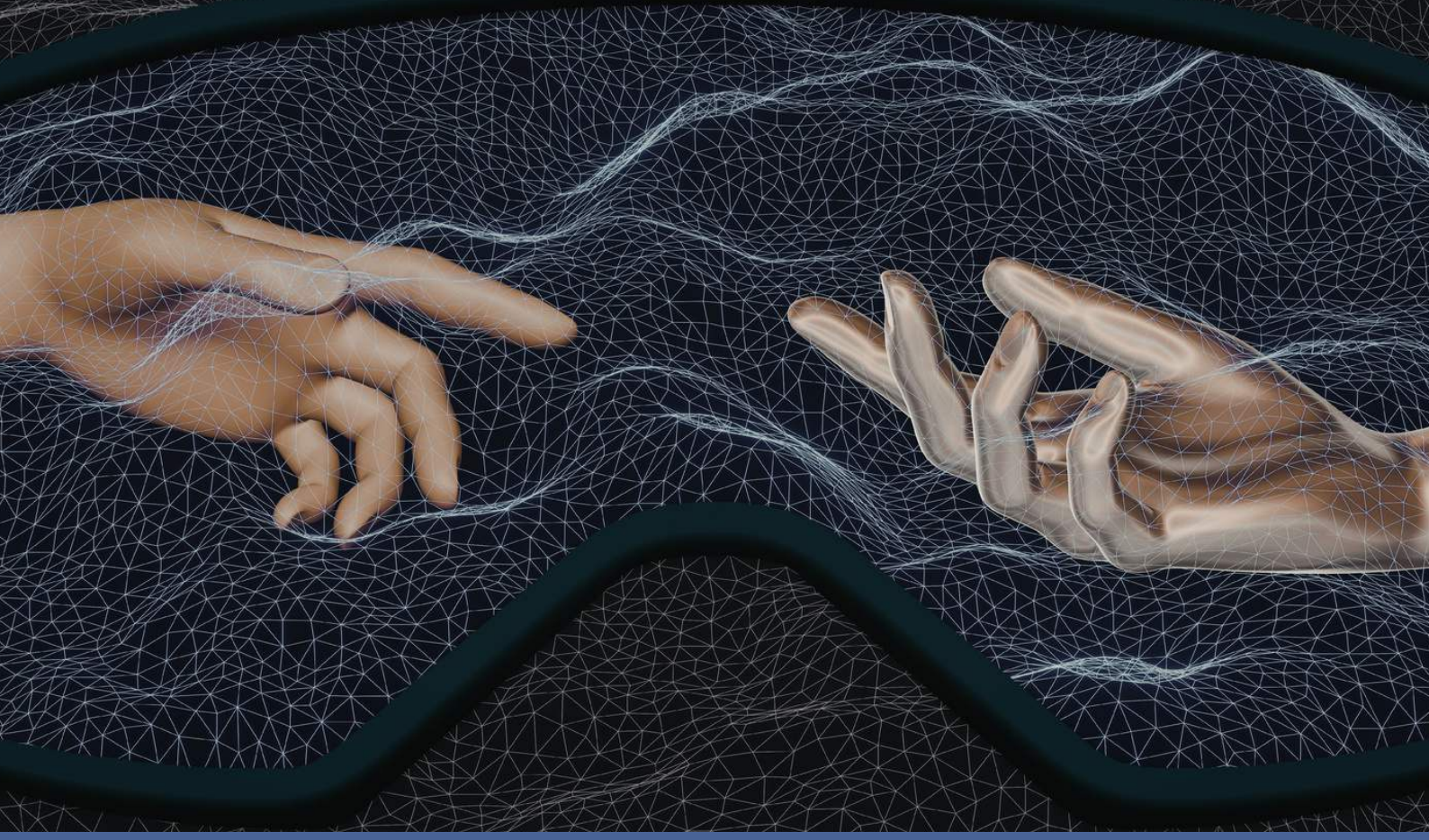
Political rhetoric has also amplified these tensions. Former president, Yoon Suk-Yeol, fuelled the country's gender divide in order to garner support from young male voters. Yoon has blamed the country's low birthrate on feminism. He has called for the abolishment of the gender equality ministry, which he says focuses too much on women's rights and is no longer necessary. He has promised to enhance punishments for false accusations of sexual violence, a step campaigners say will deter even more women from coming forward (The Guardian, 2022). Such behaviours deepen division and can foster an "us versus them" mentality, leading to a shutdown in empathy between genders, further diminishing social cohesion and any commitment towards actual progress towards gender equality.

Singapore Comparison

Similar to South Korea, Singaporean women has high educational attainment rates. Women have sustained high literacy and equality in education, where female literacy rate (for 15-year-olds and above) is stable and above 95% since 2015. The gap between male and female literacy rate has also narrowed, from 3.8 percentage points in 2013 to 2.5 percentage points in 2021 (Ministry of Social and Family development, 2024).

However, unlike South Korea's rigid labor market, Singapore's education-to-career pathways are less gender divisive. While gender inequalities still persist, Singaporean women face fewer barriers when it comes to career advancement or attaining employment. Career interruptions due to motherhood are also less stigmatised due to policy support that can alleviate parental burdens. Hence, despite Singapore also facing declining birth and marriage rates, they are not as extreme as South Korea's.

Additionally, Singapore has a strong state involvement in gender policy. K. Shanmugam, the Law and Home Affairs Minister of Singapore, announced in 2020 that the government would conduct a review of women's issues and gender equality. In October, it started to engage the public and private sectors as well as non-government organizations, to identify issues pertaining to gender equality in Singapore (Chan, 2020). This heavily reduces the need for confrontational and adversarial activism. It eases tensions among genders, decreasing levels of gender resentment in Singapore. Therefore, Singaporeans choosing to increasingly delay marriage and pursue individualistic lifestyles is more pragmatic, due to the high cost of living and possible delays in career advancements, rather than oppositional. It stems from lifestyle preferences and less from gender conflicts.



Representation and Media Discourse

Media Discourse as a Social Engine

Media discourse functions as a cultural engine that actively shapes and circulates ideals of autonomy, love, and labor, reinforcing a uniquely Korean form of individualism (Ho et al., 2023). Korean dramas portray characters who prioritize personal fulfillment over traditional obligations as aspirational, normalizing self-determination in both romantic and professional spheres. In Crash Landing on You, a wealthy heiress abandons an expected marriage to follow love across national borders, framing her agency as heroic and socially legitimate (Choi, 2012). Likewise, Misaeng depicts young professionals confronting rigid corporate hierarchies, emphasizing emotional authenticity and personal choice over collective conformity (Ho et al., 2023).

These narratives extend beyond romance and work, engaging with social isolation, precarious employment, and non-traditional relationships, reflecting broader structural pressures in South Korea (Lee, 2017). For instance, My Liberation Notes portrays ordinary workers navigating monotonous jobs, social expectations, and emotional exhaustion, highlighting the pursuit of personal freedom and self-fulfillment amid societal constraints. By foregrounding solo living, flexible careers, and alternative partnerships, media encourages audiences to reimagine lifestyle choices as individual rather than collectively mandated (Ho et al., 2023).

Moreover, Korean media blends Western notions of selfhood with Confucian relational ethics, producing a distinct cultural model: autonomy is both a personal right and a socially intelligible response to systemic constraints (Ahn, 2011). Scholars argue that these narratives foster “unity through autonomy and belonging,” accelerating a shift from horizontal collectivism toward horizontal individualism and cementing media’s central role in the nation’s evolving social values (Rinsdorf et al., 2023; Lee, 2017).

Portrayal of Single Life

In particular, South Korean media often portray singlehood as a personal choice and a social anomaly. This perhaps reflects the broader economic and demographic shifts. Television dramas such as “My Love from the Star” (2013-14) and “Itaewon Class” (2020) present protagonists who, despite professional success, remain unattached to traditional responsibilities. Protagonists highlight the tension between career ambition and societal pressure to marry (Kim, 2023). In addition, reality-show formats such as “Single’s Inferno” (2021) exaggerate loneliness as a competitive obstacle. In the show, a participants’ solitary status physically keeps them in an isolated and less fortunate state, while subtly reinforcing the notion that partnership is the ultimate resolution (Lee, 2021). As implied from these two examples, the media portrays singlehood as an obstacle or a choice only made by a unique and ‘different’ protagonist who challenges social pressures. Print media reinforces this narrative through recurring “solo-life” columns that celebrate consumerism (“Solo-luxury” shopping, travel, and housing) yet frequently conclude with cautionary remarks about “future regret” (Park, 2020). Advertising campaigns for cosmetics and housing also capitalize on the solitary consumer, positioning products as tools for self-enhancement while embedding the subtext that these efforts are interim until marriage (Choi, 2021). Despite demographic shifts, these subtle subtexts and nuance reinforce the idea that singlehood is the ultimate endgoal; Although they encourage individualized consumerism, they also encourage the viewers to accept marriage as the last resolution.

Collectively, these media portrayals construct a paradox: they idealize the freedoms of single life while simultaneously casting it as a temporary, socially deficient phase. The result is a cultural climate where individuals negotiate identity between self-actualization and lingering expectations of future partnership.



Digital Culture as Support for Alternative Lifestyles

South Korea’s hyper-connected digital sphere has turned what were once marginal, privately held choices into publicly visible, socially networked ways of living. The “bihon” (비혼) communities that have blossomed on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Youtube illustrate this transformation. Rather than framing singlehood as a personal deficit, these online groups explicitly trade the traditional nuclear family for networks of friends, ambitions, and shared experiences. Their posts regularly celebrate “solo travel,” “personal finance independence,” and “self-care routines,” while simultaneously offering practical support: from advice on renting a one-room apartment to crowd-sourced recommendations for hobby clubs. By broadcasting these alternatives, bihon communities normalize a lifestyle that was previously stigmatized and create a sense of belonging that mitigates the loneliness often associated with being unattached (The Dial, 2024).

Collectively, these media portrayals construct a paradox: they idealize the freedoms of single life while simultaneously casting it as a temporary, socially deficient phase. The result is a cultural climate where individuals negotiate identity between self-actualization and lingering expectations of future partnership.

The 4B movement (not married, not dating, not having sex, not having children) has followed a similar trajectory, moving from isolated forum threads to mainstream hashtags such as '#4B' and #bihon on TikTok and YouTube. The viral spread of these tags has turned personal resistance into a collective identity marker. Influencers who identify with 4B routinely post vlogs that juxtapose their daily routines with reflections on how they reject patriarchal expectations. The comment sections of these videos become de-facto support groups where viewers exchange tips on navigating family pressure, legal obstacles, and workplace discrimination. In doing so, the digital platform functions as both a stage for performance and a safety net of peer counsel, allowing participants to experience "collective individualism": the freedom to define one's life path while remaining enmeshed in a supportive, digitally mediated community (The Dial 2024).



Digital platforms at the heart of K-pop fandom has become a driver of South Korea's growing individualism as well, offering young generations to pursue emotional fulfillment outside traditional romantic or familial structures. Within K-pop fandoms, digitally mediated pseudo-romantic relationships ('유사연애') is intentionally cultivated through private messaging apps, paid video-call fan signs, and hyper-personalized idol content. It is also proved to be especially lucrative, as it provides controlled and low-risk form of intimacy that contrasts sharply with the uncertainties of offline relationships (Kim 2022; Lee 2023). As idols present a managed yet seemingly accessible persona, fans receive forms of emotional affirmation that are predictable, commodified, and insulated from the financial and social burdens associated with dating or marriage. This environment aligns with the current generational tendencies to prioritize autonomy, self-development, and emotional safety over conforming to conventional relational expectations. In this way, K-pop's digital intimacy economy not only reshapes patterns of affective investment but also supports alternative lifestyles in which long-term partnership is optional rather than obligatory, positioning individualized digital belonging as a legitimate source of meaning.

Demographics traditionally overlooked by digital-culture scholarship are also leveraging online platforms to renegotiate their identities. A recent study of Korean women in their 40s and 50s found that YouTube channels and blog communities serve as "platform practices" where these women share narratives of career change, health management, and late-life self-exploration (Kim 2026). By posting tutorial videos, product reviews, and personal essays, they not only construct a curated self-presentation but also receive comments, collaborations, and sponsorships that embed their singular stories within a broader network of peer support. This support in turn further encourage other viewers to also start their own journey of renegotiating their identities regardless of age and life stage. The resulting "participatory culture" turns solitary media consumption into a socially mediated process of self-actualization, reinforcing the notion that digital media can scaffold both individual agency and collective solidarity.

Taken together, these digital phenomena demonstrate that South Korea's online environment does more than reflect alternative lifestyles, it actively constructs them. By providing spaces where personal deviation can be publicly displayed, socially endorsed, and materially supported, digital culture cultivates a form of "collective individualism" that reframes autonomy not as isolation but as participation in a networked community of like-minded individuals. This dynamic reshapes the nation's cultural imagination of what it means to live a fulfilled life, offering a powerful counter-narrative to the traditional, marriage-centric model that has long defined South Korean social policy.

Consumer Culture and Media Branding of Individuality

South Korea's consumer market has become a sprawling stage on which media-driven branding supplies the vocabulary of personal identity. In contrast to the functional advertising of the 1990s, contemporary campaigns are less concerned with the intrinsic qualities of a product and more preoccupied with the story it allows a buyer to tell about themselves. The cosmetics sector particularly illustrates this shift. Major players such as Amorepacific and Etude have moved beyond simple skin-care promises to curate entire aesthetic ecosystems. Limited-edition collaborations with fashion designers, QR-coded packaging that unlocks exclusive digital filters, and AI-powered skin-analysis apps all promise a regimen that is uniquely "you," turning an everyday routine into a performative act of self-definition (Huang, Wang, and Young). These marketing strategies are especially effective in Korea, where a highly competitive and comparison-driven social culture places extraordinary weight on external perception. This inevitably intensifies desires to curate a personal image that differentiates themselves from the crowd. The act of purchasing therefore doubles as a badge of individuality: the product becomes a visual cue that can be displayed on Instagram, incorporated into a TikTok "get-ready-with-me" video, or an accessory to align with the story the user wants to tell. Consumption is no longer a private transaction but a public performance that can be verified, liked, and amplified by a network of followers.

Luxury collaborations further illustrate how media branding converts exclusivity into a form of personal expression. The "OREO × BLACKPINK" campaign, for example, paired a globally recognized snack with the iconic girl group. The campaign's success rested not merely on the novelty of the partnership but on the way the product acted as a visual signifier of belonging to a fandom. Consumers who displayed the OREO × BLACKPINK package were not only eating a cookie; they were broadcasting an affiliation with a global pop-culture moment, thereby differentiating themselves from peers who had not yet joined the "trend." Such collaborations demonstrate how media narratives can transform ordinary commodities into markers of personal identity, reinforcing the broader societal shift toward a consumption-driven self (Kim and Hong).



The proliferation of transmedia storytelling amplifies this process by extending brand narratives across multiple platforms and formats. The experience of "being part of the story" becomes a proxy for personal significance, especially for young adults navigating an increasingly atomized social landscape (Yoon). Together, these dynamics reveal a paradox at the heart of contemporary South Korean society: individuality is celebrated as a core value, yet the tools for expressing that individuality are heavily mediated, commodified, and often standardized by powerful media conglomerates. The act of buying a skincare set, a limited-edition album, or a designer collaboration is no longer a simple economic transaction; it is a ritualized performance of selfhood that is continuously validated, recorded, and broadcast by digital media. In doing so, consumer culture not only reflects the desire for personal distinction but actively constructs the very categories by which South Koreans understand and present themselves. This feedback loop, where media branding creates the language of individuality, and consumption reinforces that language, forms a central pillar of the "society of individuals" described throughout this essay.

Reality Dating Shows as a Media Form Influencing Individualism

Korean reality dating shows have become a cultural laboratory where the ideal of romantic individualism is both performed and reproduced. In recent years, there has been an explosive increase in the reality dating shows, each with different themes and target audiences. Notably, programs such as "Single's Inferno," "Heart Signal," and "I'm SOLO" stage participants in tightly edited environments that foreground personal choice, emotional authenticity, and the pursuit of a singular "perfect match." By foregrounding the individual's agency to select a partner, these formats echo neoliberal narratives of self-optimization while subtly reshaping expectations about love and courtship (Arbieto et al., 2024). The shows' editing practices highlight dramatic "first-impressions," confession-style monologues. This together with the strategic use of anonymous confession texts encourage viewers to internalize the notion that love is a personal project rather than a communal or familial enterprise.

Beyond individual storylines, the shows' massive domestic and international viewership amplifies their normative power. Social media discourse surrounding episode recaps extend the televised narrative into everyday conversation, turning personal preferences into communal benchmarks for desirability. As viewers compare their own dating experiences with the dramatized choices on screen, the boundary between entertainment and lived practice blurs, cementing the idea that authentic love is attainable only through the strategic self-presentation modeled by the programs. Consequently, Korean reality dating shows act as both mirrors and molders of the society, reshaping social norms around partnership, gender, and personal fulfillment.





Singapore Comparison

Singapore offers an intriguing point of comparison when thinking about how media shapes ideas of romance, single life, and individuality. On the surface, some themes feel familiar if you've watched Korean dramas, but the way they are framed is quite different. Here, the weight of family, social expectation, and practical concerns often colors the stories, giving them a distinct sense of communal responsibility alongside individual ambition. Looking at the dramas themselves, state-sponsored channels like Mediacorp and commercial broadcasters such as Channel 8 or Viu also focus on romance, yet the moral framework leans toward the collective. Shows like Desire Catcher repeatedly stress filial duty and balancing personal goals with family expectations. Even when characters chase independent careers or personal dreams, the storylines consistently pull them back toward family or communal approval before any romantic resolution can happen. In contrast to Korean media, where individual desire often drives the plot, Singaporean narratives make it clear that love exists within a network of obligations and social ties.

Singlehood is treated a bit differently too. Singaporean media—and even government campaigns like "Singled Out"—portray it as a legitimate, even desirable, life stage. Magazines and lifestyle coverage tend to celebrate financial independence, travel, and personal growth, framing these not as mere stepping stones to marriage but as worthy achievements in their own right. That said, there is still a subtle pressure around "marry by 30," so singlehood is recognized as valuable but never entirely divorced from societal norms.

Online spaces echo this pragmatic view. Communities on Reddit's r/sgsingles or Facebook groups like "Singapore Solo Living" provide practical tips on finances and housing while also offering emotional support. Yet even here, discussions often revolve around preparing for the future, particularly eventual marriage. Members share advice on how to navigate independence alongside long-term expectations, so the digital culture supports alternative lifestyles but still nudges toward socially approved endpoints.

This functional approach extends into consumer culture and reality media as well. Local brands and influencers market personalized experiences, but they usually connect these choices to professional success, social mobility, or financial security rather than purely aesthetic enjoyment. Even reality dating shows frame romantic decisions within these broader social expectations. In short, while Korean media might celebrate individuality for its own sake, Singaporean media tends to tie it back to tangible life outcomes, blending personal expression with pragmatic, socially aware decision-making.

Conclusion

Individualism in Korea seems to have quietly crept in over the years, building a series of layered changes that built on one another. The post-war industrial boom and the move toward nuclear families quietly reoriented what people expected from home life, and later, the shocks of neoliberal reforms and the IMF crisis forced individuals to make choices about work, housing, and money in ways that were simply unavoidable. These pressures made self-reliance not only an ideal but a practical necessity. At the same time, people started imagining personal fulfillment as something you actively pursue rather than passively inherit from family or tradition.

Economic and consumer practices then took this impulse and gave it a visible form. Including skincare routines, limited-edition fashion items, fitness regimens, these small acts became statements about who you are or want to be. Industries around self-investment and self-development grew up around the idea that life could be curated, optimized, or performed, but this curation came with its own contradictions. In trying to assert independence and uniqueness, people often find themselves navigating the subtle pressures of social norms and market forces.

Attitudes toward marriage and relationships shifted alongside these economic and cultural changes. Rising costs, career demands, and evolving gender expectations make traditional marriage less appealing or sometimes impractical. Meanwhile, singlehood, co-living, and other alternatives are becoming visible and socially legible ways of life. Gender tensions complicate the picture further. Women pursue education and careers with increasing autonomy, yet men are figuring out how to adjust to new social scripts, which sometimes produces resistance or discomfort.

Media and digital culture amplify all of this. K-pop fandoms, reality dating shows, and targeted marketing campaigns do more than entertain—they provide spaces for self-expression and the pursuit of emotional satisfaction. But these arenas are curated and commodified, so the freedom they promise is never absolute. Comparing this to Singapore shows an interesting contrast. There, individuality is encouraged, but often framed within pragmatic or socially approved outcomes, whereas in Korea, public experimentation and personal exploration take center stage, even when they unsettle traditional norms.

Ultimately, Korean individualism is intricate, layered, and not easily explicable. The rise of individualism seems to have stemmed and orbit around navigating choices that feel personal while still being inevitably shaped by social, economic, and cultural pressures. Freedom and constraint still exist side by side, and personal expression often comes with its own invisible rules. It is a society in it's own realm of figuring out how to celebrate autonomy without letting go entirely of the collective deep-rooted confuscian ethics, and in that tension lies the real story of contemporary Korean life.

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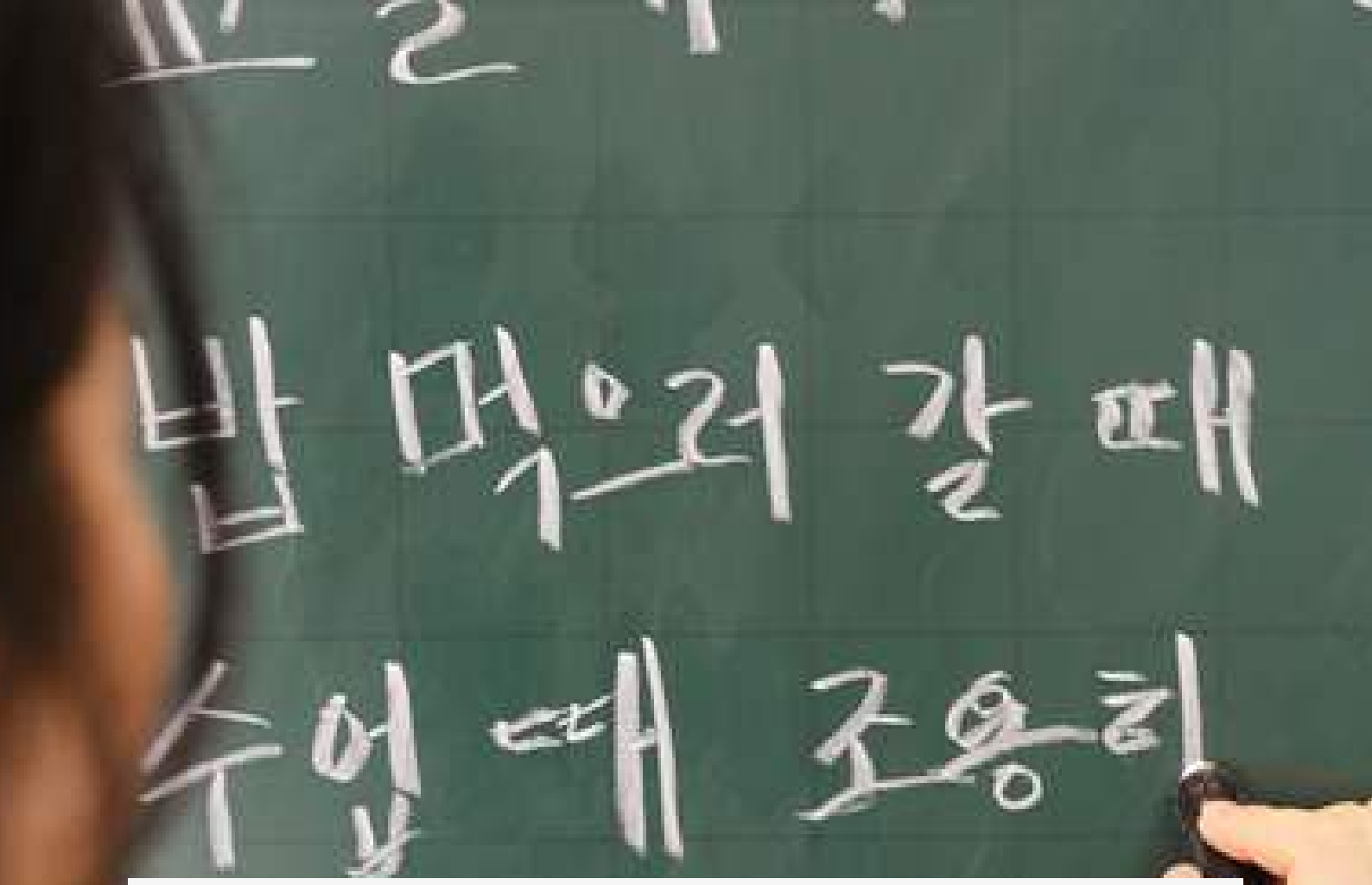
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South Korean Education System

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Danielle Pek Li Wei
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5



Introduction

South Korea's education system is regarded as one of the most influential and high-performing models in the world. Its reputation can be traced back to the nation's Confucian roots which emphasizes strong cultural beliefs about the value of learning. Over time, this foundation developed into a highly structured and competitive system, contributing to South Korea's exceptional literacy rates and high academic achievement among students of the country.

However, the same system that has driven South Korea's educational success has also produced significant controversies. Its competitive nature has created serious challenges related to one's health, wellbeing and social status, raising growing concerns across society. This paper aims to provide a concise understanding of how South Korea's education came about, how it operates today and how it continues to shape or challenge South Korea's society.

History of the Education System

Gojoseon

The records of the history of Korea span back to Gojoseon in 2333 BCE (Jeong & Lee, 2018) but there is no concrete evidence regarding the education system employed during that time.

The Three Kingdoms

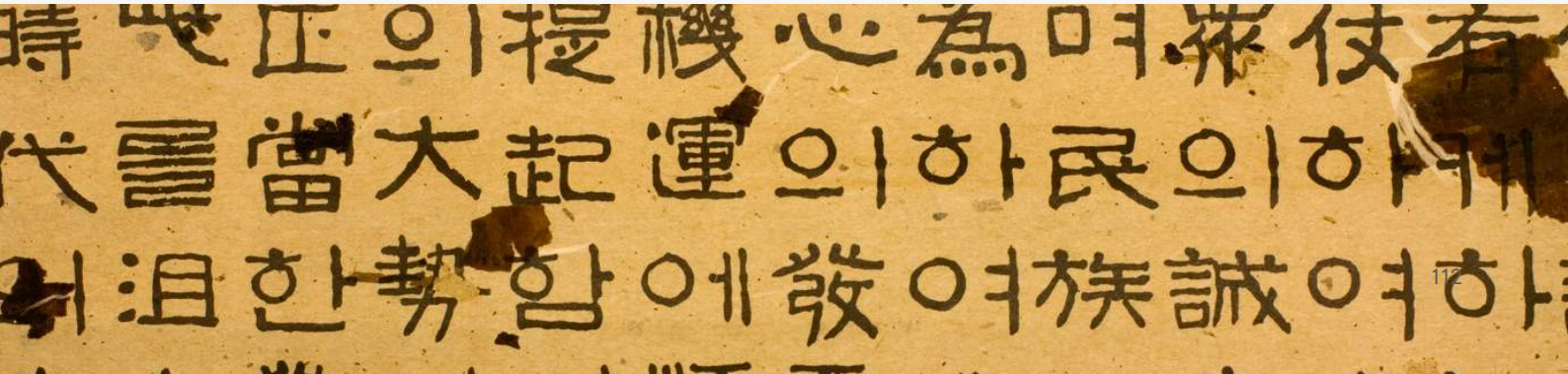
During the Three Kingdoms, Goguryeo was the first to establish an educational institution that was centred around Confucian teachings (Lee, 2001). This was followed by Baekje and then Silla, where it was common for the children of aristocrats or government officials to attend these educational institutions to maintain their social hierarchy and prepare them for future positions in government.

Unified Silla

After the unification of the Three Kingdoms, Unified Silla made changes in their education system to cater to the larger population, which still maintained its teaching in Confucian texts which included knowledge in the Analects of Confucius and the Classics of Filial Piety (Choi & Hwang, 2021). The introduction of an examination similar to that of the civil service examination required students to be proficient in literacy of Chinese texts and they were given grades ranked from lower, middle, upper and special grade. At the same time, students were also being sent to China to study and they initially came from royal families to high ranked officials but gradually allowed lower ranking officials as generations passed. The vast number of students who went to China imported many teachings and Chinese culture such as the Yin and Yang studies, astronomy and Confucianism (Jeong & Lee, 2018).

Goryeo

The period of Goryeo brought about major changes regarding the structure of education within the country. This included a “variety of state-run institutions including the National University (Gukjagam)” (Jeong & Lee, 2018) where the civil service examination was still essential in identifying key individuals who were knowledgeable in Confucian education. The major educational institutions ran a dual system where buildings were split into two sectors, with one being a Confucian shrine while the other sector focused on Confucian and technological studies. The National University served as the top state-run educational institution up until the Mongol Invasion where parts of the campus were destroyed, but later revived and renamed to Seonggyungwan, which focused mainly on Neo-Confucianism (Jeong & Lee, 2018). There were other institutions such as the Learning Hall and County schools which served similar purposes but the Learning Hall did not adopt the dual system as the National University already included a shrine, thus the Learning Hall focused on Confucianism. County schools were similar to the National University and two scholars, a savant in Confucian classics and a savant in medical science, were sent to each of them.



Joseon Dynasty

During the Joseon Dynasty, after Buddhism was recognised as the state religion, the ruling ideology was Neo-Confucianism as Buddhism became oppressed. This resulted in the education of Confucianism being a prerequisite for becoming a government official and grades from unsatisfactory to excellent were given to students who showed different aptitudes in understanding Confucian classics as well as in literary composition. The Four Schools (Sahak) that were state-funded replaced the Learning Halls and the county schools improved greatly in education compared to during the Goryeo Dynasty. Students of these schools had privileges such as free education, exemption for certain examinations provided they had specific qualifications and exemption from military service. The Private School was also created during the Joseon Dynasty and had a different function from the Seonggyungwan, in which its main focus was to produce future classical scholars and successful applicants for the civil service examinations was secondary (Jeong & Lee, 2018). The village study hall (Seodang), was a private institution that included a school for Chinese classics, a library or a reading room and was situated in many provincial villages. It was financed by private funds collected from the community instead of being funded by the government and in the seventeenth century, influential families colluded with the government while using the study halls as a base. The civil service examination was composed of three sections; the civil examination for selecting civil servants (mungwa); the military examinations for selecting military officials (mugwa); and the miscellaneous examination for selecting technical specialists (japgwa) (Jeong & Lee, 2018). Due to the rigorous curriculum and examinations, most students who passed the civil service examinations came from upper class aristocrats which allowed them to study in educational institutions. Commoners were allowed to take the examinations but few could pass due to their oppressive lifestyle.



From 1876, there was a change in the focus of schools from Confucianism to technological and practical knowledge and it was meant for the general public instead of nurturing future government officials. During the 1880s, the Gabo reform was a result of the change in the education system which part of the reform was to remove the civil service examination and traditional social status system. King Gojong, declared that modern education would allow people from different social classes to enroll in any educational institutes and being a highly ranked aristocrat was not needed (Suh, 2015). Many other types of schools were formed which catered to different aspects of society such as military schools, medical schools and commerce schools. Following this, the academic curriculum focused on subjects that are commonly taught today such as languages, mathematics, science, social studies and art (Lee, 2015) and a large number of textbooks that used a mix of Korean and Chinese characters were published by the government until 1905. During this period, there was a rise in civilian schools that were supported by leaders who saw the need for change in the old system, made clear through the government's policies and open trade with other countries. Many Christian schools were established by missionaries even though they were not allowed to spread Christianity and were told to only focus on education and providing medical services (Wong & Lee, 2018). Inevitably, Korean women studied Christianity and realised the oppression of the current government and the discrimination of women in society, this pushed missionaries to create Girls' schools to change their influence on society.

From 1905 to 1910, Korea signed the Protectorate Treaty with Japan (Kim-Rivera, 2002). Japan took control of education in Korea and censored many school administrations and textbooks. After Japan colonised Korea, Japan tried to control the education system by publishing textbooks through the Ministry of Education and allowed more Japanese teachers in Korean schools. They also shortened the number of years spent in school compared to that in Japan, while increasing the number of Japanese language and history courses compared to that of Korean courses, all to reshape the identity of Koreans and influenced their loyalty to Japan (Neuhaus, 2023). The Koreans were still distrusting of the Japanese and private schools were set up to protect the interests of the Korean people and promoted resistance against the government. This caused Japan to fight back against these schools by approving a law that only allowed textbooks published by the Ministry of Education.



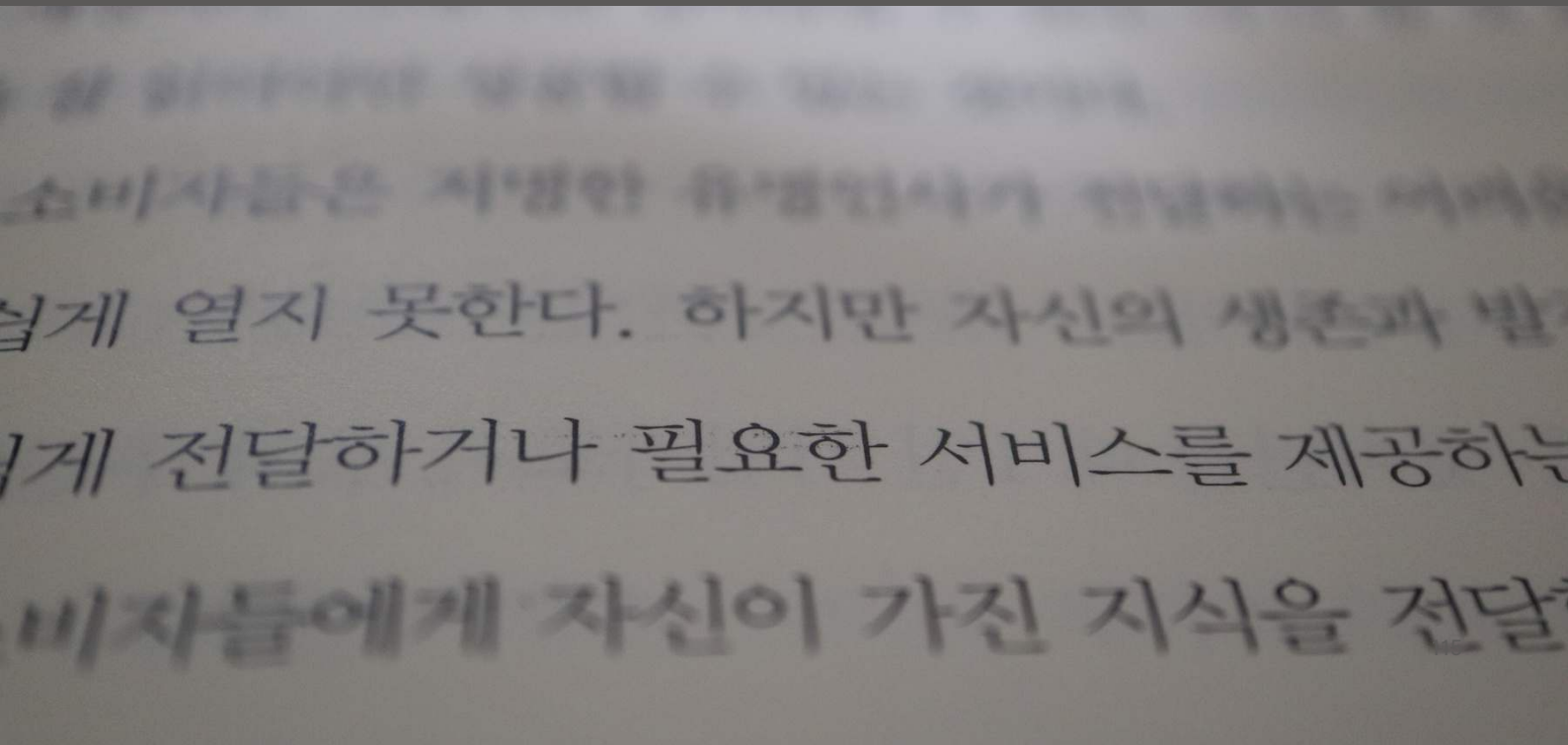
Colonial Korea

During the Japanese occupation, the First Educational Ordinance forced Japanese language as the native language of Koreans and restricted higher education from the Koreans. Japan increased its control on education further by converting private schools into primary schools and only allowed the history and geography of Japan instead of Korea. The Second Educational Ordinance, which came after the March First Movement in 1919 (Wells, 1989), made Japan realise their failures of forced ruling, thus easing their control over the education system. Japan allowed schools in Korea to have a structure that was closer to that of Japanese schools, which meant increasing the number of years and allowing Koreans to enter higher education (Lee, 2002). Korean was made into a required subject and Japan increased the number of elementary schools. Even though Japan eased their control, there were still many laws that were discriminatory against the Koreans and private lessons required approval by the Japanese authorities. The Third Educational Ordinance and Fourth Educational Ordinance came during the Sino-Japanese War and Pacific War, and education saw yet another change, one that was closer to policies created due to the war. Students were forced into doing manual labour (Lim, 2019) and some were even sent to war (Izumi & Park, 2025). The Japanese occupation undoubtedly caused disruptions in Korea's cultivation of their own culture and many Koreans only received basic elementary education, which led to social disruption among the Korean population.

Transition to Contemporary Korea

After liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel due to the agreement of the United States and Soviet Union (Stueck, 1995). President Syngman Rhee prioritised primary education after the Korean war which led to an increase in literacy rate from 20% in 1950s to nearly 100% in current times (Lim & Alsford, 2021). In the following years after the Military coup, South Korea managed to expand education and increase its capabilities, with the help of parents prioritising education for their children and financing schools (Seth, 2013).

Schools evolved as South Korea sought democracy and eventually led to the current system that is observed and will be discussed in the following chapters.





Modern Education System

Overview

As of 2025, only 1% of 25-34 year-olds in South Korea lack an upper secondary education, the lowest percentage among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries and far below the OECD average of 13% (OECD,2025) South Korea is widely known to have among the most rigorous modern education systems, with high scores in international standardised tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and a near perfect literacy rate of 98.8% (Ramillon,2025). This fine-tuned system with confucian influences contributed greatly to the nation's rapid economic upturn and highly-skilled workforce, with the highest global percentage of tertiary educated 24-35 year olds at 70% (Ramillon,2025). Although South Korea's education system has largely benefitted the country, it also puts many South Koreans in highly stressful day-to-day lives, trying to keep up with the high demands.

Elementary Education

The typical education system in South Korea spans a total of 12 years. Starting with 6 years of elementary education, followed by 3 years of junior secondary and another 3 years of senior secondary education which obtains a middle school diploma and General High School Certificate of Completion respectively (인문계 고등학교 졸업장) (Alberta). The 9 formative years consisting of primary education and junior secondary education are mandated and parents who do not ensure their children receive a middle school diploma minimally will be punishable by law, which contributes to its success in creating high literacy rates. This creates numbers as high as 99.9% of enrollment into primary schools nationally (Korean Education Centre in UK). Primary school education is also government funded in South Korea, and with the sudden influx of new students coming in from rural areas, in 1982 the government created an education tax to finance the growth and modernization of learning amenities and to improve the socio-economic status of educators (Korean Education Centre in UK). To better prepare the population for globalisation and better opportunities, the government made the English language part of the standard curriculum as of 1997 at one hour per week for third and fourth graders, and two hours per week for fifth and sixth grade students (Korean Education Centre in UK).

Secondary Education

Education at secondary level includes 3 years of Junior and 3 years of senior education. The criteria for admission into non-compulsory high schools are graduating from middle school or passing a qualification exam or assessment that offers equivalent credits. To cater to different purposes, there are 4 main types of high schools in South Korea: General High Schools, Special-Purposed High Schools, Vocational High Schools, and Autonomous High Schools (Korean Education Centre in UK). General High schools are the most common kind which provides broad academic education for the masses. Conversely, Specialised schools aim to nurture talents in specific fields like science, foreign language, arts, or sports (Bada Global) These schools also tend to be highly competitive to get admitted to. Vocational high schools provide students with hands-on professional education to prepare students for the job market, like schools for agriculture, industry, commercial or business. More recent applications of emerging fields in vocational high schools also include Meister high schools that focus on specific industrial needs, such as AI and digital technology (Kim, 2024). Lastly, autonomous high schools in South Korea are generally private schools with more autonomy on how their curriculum is run.



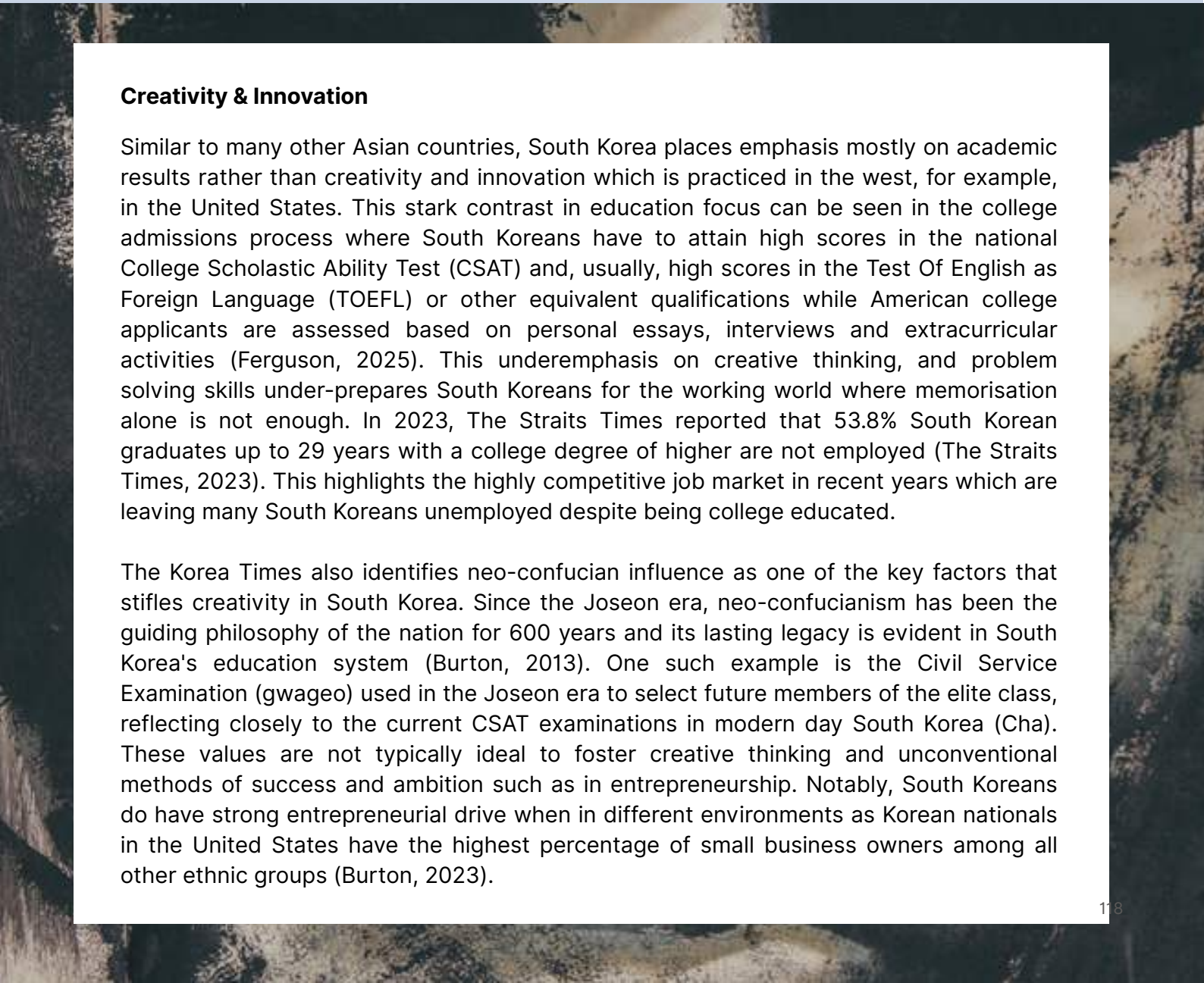
Hagwon Culture (extra classes)

Hagwons are private educational institutions in South Korea that are widely attended by students who already attend regular school classes. According to The TEFL Academy, there are about 80,000 hagwons in South Korea and approximately 3 of 4 primary, middle and high school students attend one such hagwon minimally (Colquhoun, 2024).

Hagwon classes take place after school, with public schools running from 8.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. and hagwon taking place anywhere from 2pm to 10pm usually. This means that it is common for students of below tertiary education age to learn up to 14 hours a day in a classroom setting, leaving little to no time for hobbies and rest.

The prevalence of hagwon culture in South Korea is evidence of the high education expectations that are placed on youths, and the results of such rigorous education does not stop at just emotional and mental costs. The popularity of having extra tuition classes also places immense financial burden on families. On average, this type of private tutoring costs a household approximately a tenth of their income, and in the first quarter of 2024, spending on tuition classes in South Korea were more than food and housing combined (Ferguson, 2025). This problem goes deeper than tightened household financial budgets as it increasingly exacerbates socio-economic inequality. Poorer families in South Korea will struggle to afford to send their children to hagwons, reducing equal opportunities as compared to their more affluent peers.

Adding another layer to this challenge, high costs, contributed greatly by private tutoring, have an adverse relationship with the birth rate in South Korea, which is the lowest in the world. Partially attributed to the rising costs of living, birth rates in South Korea fell by 8% in 2023 to 0.72 births per woman (Ferguson, 2025). It is no wonder that South Korea is considered to be the most expensive country to raise a child in 2024, with a whopping 98% of South Korean parents paying for private tuition alone (Ferguson, 2025). Overall, hagwon culture in South Korea is not only a problem for the mental stress it puts students under but it also reveals deeper issues in the country as it is riddled with rising high costs of living, income and educational inequality as well as rapidly declining birth rates.



Creativity & Innovation

Similar to many other Asian countries, South Korea places emphasis mostly on academic results rather than creativity and innovation which is practiced in the west, for example, in the United States. This stark contrast in education focus can be seen in the college admissions process where South Koreans have to attain high scores in the national College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) and, usually, high scores in the Test Of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) or other equivalent qualifications while American college applicants are assessed based on personal essays, interviews and extracurricular activities (Ferguson, 2025). This underemphasis on creative thinking, and problem solving skills under-prepares South Koreans for the working world where memorisation alone is not enough. In 2023, The Straits Times reported that 53.8% South Korean graduates up to 29 years with a college degree of higher are not employed (The Straits Times, 2023). This highlights the highly competitive job market in recent years which are leaving many South Koreans unemployed despite being college educated.

The Korea Times also identifies neo-confucian influence as one of the key factors that stifles creativity in South Korea. Since the Joseon era, neo-confucianism has been the guiding philosophy of the nation for 600 years and its lasting legacy is evident in South Korea's education system (Burton, 2013). One such example is the Civil Service Examination (gwageo) used in the Joseon era to select future members of the elite class, reflecting closely to the current CSAT examinations in modern day South Korea (Cha). These values are not typically ideal to foster creative thinking and unconventional methods of success and ambition such as in entrepreneurship. Notably, South Koreans do have strong entrepreneurial drive when in different environments as Korean nationals in the United States have the highest percentage of small business owners among all other ethnic groups (Burton, 2023).

Government Policies & Reforms on Education

Staying on top of the challenges faced in South Korea's education system, the government has implemented a series of policies to promote education equality, exploration in non-typical areas of education and creating digital solutions for new generation students.

1995 5:31 Education Reform Plan

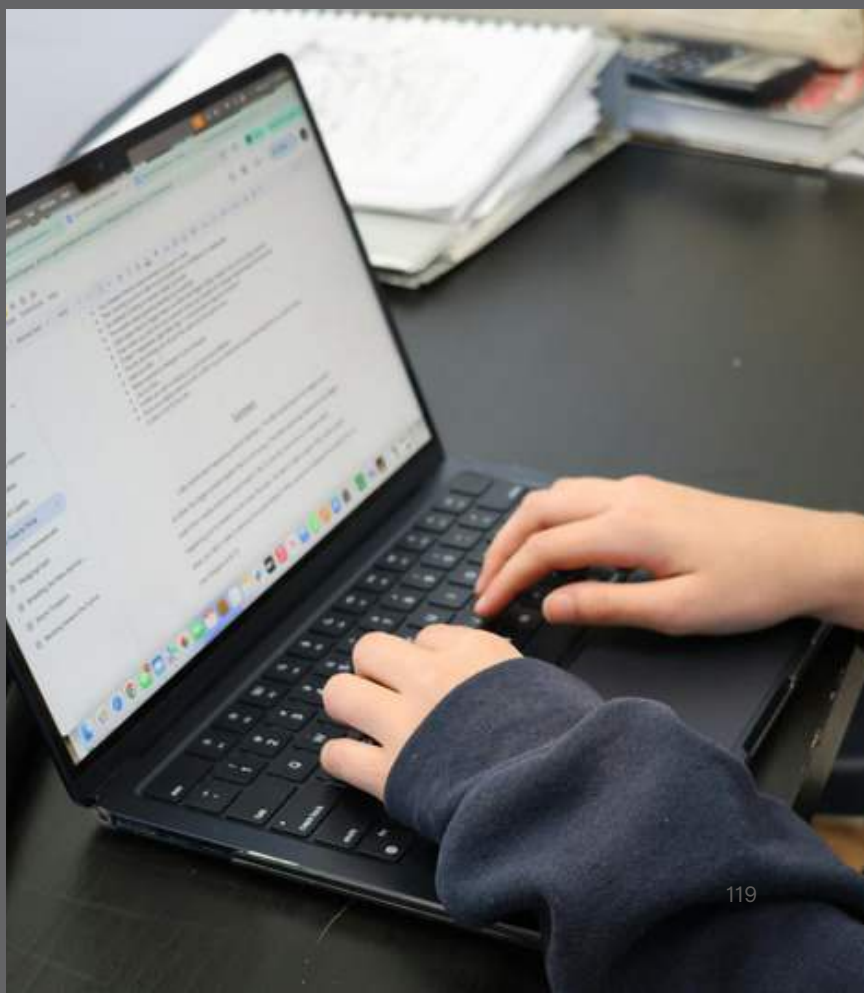
In the late 1970's, college admission competition was at an all time high in South Korea with many engaging private tutors and spending years after high school to prepare for the admission examinations. In response, the government outlawed private tutoring and also implemented a standardised national examination for college admissions instead of individual admission tests (SaKong et al. 2010). 48 different objectives were outlined in this reform plan, such as administrative deregulation, decentralization of the school system, curriculum reformation, and government education spending increase to 5 percent of GDP (SaKong et al. 2010). Autonomous Schools were also proposed to provide schools more choices in student selection and in curriculum. Reforms in school curriculum mainly aims to promote the talent and creativity of students to prime them for a globalised work-force (SaKong et al. 2010).

Free Semester System

In 2016, South Korea's Ministry of Education implemented a free semester system which aims to educate students in areas outside of academia with an ungraded curriculum on outdoors education, discussions and team projects (Park,2013). As the South Korean President in 2013, Park Geun Hye says "We need to build an environment where well-rounded, creative, talented people can develop their potential as early as possible. This is why I tried to adopt the new semester system" (Park,2013). Ultimately, the system wants to steer away from the 'education fever' and persists to improve holistic education for South Korean students.

Digitalisation of Education

To stay on top of digital and Artificial Intelligence (AI) trends, this year the South Korean government implemented new digital textbooks equipped with Artificial Intelligence to be used across various subjects. This year, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education, Lee Ju-ho unveiled the 'AI Digital Textbook Promotion Plan' which utilises technology like extended virtual worlds and conversational AI to make learning easier. Staying abreast of digital trends such as the current AI boom helps secure South Korea's position as a global leader in competitiveness, technological education and innovation (Sung, 2023).



Higher Education & College Admissions

Universities in Korea are categorised into national and private institutions, with several national universities established in the central city of each province, whereas private universities were founded based on their own education objectives. Since the 1990s, the number of private institutions rose which led to a similar increase of the percentage of students entering universities. Consequently, Korea now has the highest university entrance rate among OECD countries (Higher Education, n.d.).

South Korea has many internationally recognised universities such as Seoul National University (SNU), Korea Advanced Institute of Science & Technology (KAIST), Yonsei University and Korea University. Many of these universities consistently rank among the top. SNU is ranked 31st globally in QS World University Rankings 2025. (Seoul National University, 2024) Approximately 70% of high school graduates pursue higher education, but only 2% secure spots in the prestigious SKY universities (Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University).

The Korean College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), a highly competitive, standardised college entrance exam in South Korea, is crucial for university admissions and holds immense importance for ones' future career prospects. Research indicates that CSAT scores correlate with labour market outcomes (An, 2025). This means that doing well on the test can positively impact one's career trajectory. It is an eight hour examination held annually, covering multiple subjects like Korean, Mathematics, English and Korean History. The CSAT is especially important in determining the university that the student ends up in, particularly for SKY universities.



Globalisation and Higher Education

There are also multiple specialised institutions like Hanyang University, which focuses on engineering, and Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, a leader in foreign language education.

Many South Korean universities offer English-taught programs, increasingly internationalising to attract overseas students in hopes to increase global competitiveness. Foreign nationals now constitute over 5% of the population and the number of international students surpassed 200,000 in 2024 (Kim, 2025a). The pursuit of English-medium instruction (EMI) strongly motivates international students to study in South Korea since English proficiency is often deemed essential for career advancement. South Korea hopes to enroll 300,000 international students by 2027 (Kim, 2025b), striving to elevate its academic prestige. And according to a 2022 Korea Educational Development Institute report, 882 out of 9,843 university departments (about 9 per cent) already offered EMI. Under the Study Korea 300K Project, many universities aim to teach more than half of their courses in English by 2030. Institutions benefit from more diverse student bodies, higher global rankings and increased revenues from a broader and more secure range of sources. While some local students appreciate the EMI's potential for advancing language skills and academic performance, others face challenges which include anxiety about English language abilities and a division on campus due to disparities in Korean students' English proficiency.

These efforts were not rendered futile -– the number of international students in all higher education institutions has been gradually increasing. In particular, the number of international students for a Bachelor's degree has been increasing after 2015, with it reaching 75,000 in 2020. While the demographic of students vary across majors, Chinese and Vietnamese students account for a larger percentage overall. The medical field, however, has a higher proportion of students from Canada, United States and Taiwan (Higher Education, n.d.).

Arts in South Korea's Education

South Korea has a strong art culture, especially with the prominence in Korean culture, more emphasis has been given to grow and reach global recognition of its contemporary scene. The Hallyu wave, driven by popular culture like K-pop and dramas, demonstrated the global reach of South Korean art. The education system supports this prominent art culture through the specialised high schools for art. Approximately 33% of South Korean university students are enrolled in arts and humanities programs (Eser, 2025). Some prominent art specialised high schools include School of Performing Arts Seoul (SOPA), Hanlim Multi Art High School and Korea National University of Arts (K-arts).



SOPA and Hanlim Multi Art High School are prominent private high schools focused on performing arts. They are especially known for training future entertainment industry talents. Many renowned K-pop stars, such as BTS' Jeon Jungkook or IVE's Jang Wonyoung, are alumni of SOPA. Also known as the 'Idol Academy', SOPA is highly competitive for aspiring Korean stars. Hanlim Multi Art High School is dedicated to the arts and boasts six departments: entertainment, musical theater, dance, music, fashion modelling and filmmaking (Sukri, 2024) A typical school day would look like this: taking specialised classes in specialised fields which focus on both theory and practical skills. After school, they will either attend additional lessons or prepare for their professional activities.

Meanwhile, K-arts is the only higher education institution in SK that covers all aspects of the arts. It comprises six schools - School of Music; School of Drama; School of Film, TV & Multimedia; School of Dance; School of Visual Arts; and School of Korean Traditional Arts. It was established in 1993 by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Korea as the only national university of arts with an aim to serve as a leading institution which cultivates artists. They offer bachelor's and master's degree programs while providing a pre-s

chool training program for promising young students (Korea National University of Arts, n.d.). On a national level, the government, alongside cultural institutions and organisations, have been organising a range of content as educational programs since 2000. The Culture and Arts Promotion Act was enacted in 2005, and the Korea Arts & Culture Education Service was established to implement government policy projects and manage subsidies. These initiatives have supported art and cultural education offered in the national curriculum. Moreover, the extension of subsidies for educational programs led by local cultural establishments and civic organisations is encouraging informal education, adding onto the rise of cultural diversity and richness in Korean society (Acc, n.d.).



Reforms and Modernisation Trends

Since the 1980s, kindergarten enrollment has been increasing with it being more widely available, and since the mid 1990s, the high school entrance rate has been close to 100%. The number of schools has been consistently increasing, but many elementary and middle schools were closed in areas of population decrease after the 1990s. The total number of students differs by age group, with the number of elementary students decreasing steadily due to shrinking fertility rates. A declining fertility rate has also resulted in a decrease in the middle and high school populations since the late 1980s.

The shrinking school-age population resulted in a decrease in the number of college enrollment. As such, a wave of college consolidation began in the mid-2000s and a reduction of student admissions to regulate the intake. Nevertheless, student enrollment rates across all higher education institutions are experiencing a consistent decline, a pattern that is particularly observed in the case of two-year colleges compared to four-year universities. (Higher Education, n.d.). Changes in the school-age population vary greatly by region; while most regions show a large decline from 2000 to 2020, Gyeonggi-do has experienced an increase in its school-age population (Overview of and Changes in Education, n.d.).

Given the substantial growth of the Korea economy, more emphasis has been placed on higher education. Since the 2000s, South Korea has received a significantly high rate of return from investing in education, approximately around 10 percent. There is a positive correlation between obtaining a higher education and large and increasing salaries. Taking for example, in 2007, college graduates earned up to 2.5 times more than their colleagues with a junior high school degree. With the accelerated industrial growth of the country, Korea's labour market is highly segmented along educational backgrounds. Hence, obtaining higher education is perceived to be necessary to enter the primary labour market. Together with the traditional Confucianism values, education is correlated with high authority and leadership positions, as seen as graduates from ten major universities have almost three-fourths of the high-ranking government positions (Asia Society, n.d.).

Digital Integration in Education

The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 paved the way for the education system to digitalise. Technology was integrated into all areas of education, including the expansion of digital platforms for teaching and learning, the development of interactive digital textbooks, the enhancement of digital competencies for teachers, and the strengthening of partnerships led by innovative policies.





e-Hakseupteo:

A notable education platform, e-Hakseupteo, was instrumental in enabling seamless educational continuity throughout the change to remote, online learning. This system supported roughly 5.5 million students and over 430,000 teachers across elementary, middle and high schools (Seo, 2023). With a wide variety of functions available on the platform, users are able to access them according to their needs. The promotion of independent learning can be supported by the supplementary features like content lists, progress rates and evaluation statuses that can be used to track personal learning history and progress. Moreover, teachers can tap on multiple functions available in e-Hakseupteo to facilitate discussions and surveys, disseminate notices, and manage student attendance during remote learning. The video class linkage service offers both students and teachers a platform for consultations, an alternative for in person meetings.

Wedorang:

Wedorang is an integrated user account authentication system built to support the use of Digital Textbooks. Immersive content based on AR and VR in digital textbooks enhances student motivation and pedagogy innovation, but continuous upgrades in learning devices, wireless networks, and technical assistance are necessary.

In February 2023, the South Korean Ministry of Education announced a vision for the digital transformation of education, focusing on ‘Realising Personalised Education for All’. (Seo, 2023) This plan aims to create an educational system optimised for each student’s abilities, preferences, and learning environment. The core task of this policy is the AI-embedded Digital Textbook, which aids in personalised education where learning stages vary according to each student’s level. The government plans to gradually expand to other subjects and grades, collaborating with publishers for textbook development expertise and the EdTech industry for new technologies. With the rapid rise of technology in this century, it is with no doubt that the digital culture will be a key factor in education policies and initiatives. Students and teachers, especially, will have to familiarise with such systems and integrate it in their educational lifestyle.

Controversies and Criticsm

The culprits in South Korea's toxic education system

Education Fever (교육열)

As one might know, South Korea is one of the most highly educated countries in the world, with 71% of 25 - 34 year-olds to have completed tertiary education, South Korea is ranked first in tertiary attainment among young adults across OECD countries. It is no wonder that the South Korea government has given strong reinforcement in its country's education but that is not the only reason as to why South Korea does significantly well in this sector. (OECD 2025)

The "Education Fever" also known as a "passion for education" has been an inhibited mindset and spirit among South Koreans since the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement. According to Confucian principles, they treat education as a way to attain positions of power and influence. With the idea of "Education Fever" being a product of Confucianism, this phenomenon can be described as South Korea's parents' obsession and high involvement in their children's education, resulting in society's extremely high expectations on students to perform well academically. (Kim, J., Lee, J., & Lee, S. 2005)

South Korean parents believe that the only way to ensure a bright future is to enter one of the elite SKY universities (Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University). Therefore, parents view their children's education as a form of investment, a way to maintain their family reputation and pride. This mindset has resulted in students thinking that they are carrying their families' name and expectations on their back. This invisible yet intense burden has created a high pressure and stressful study environment for all students across South Korea.

With South Korea being such an academically demanding country thanks to the "Education Fever" engraved into the minds of the people, you might think the government would take action by reducing the level of competitiveness among students and parents. Instead, they came up with a system that not only normalised this mindset but also reinforced it among students, pushing them to be even higher achievers.

The Problems with Hagwon Culture

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Hagwon Culture has become a necessity among South Korean students. Because of the competitive and high-intensity study culture, public education is no longer enough to support the preparations required for students to score well in exams like the CSAT, therefore enforcing Hagwon culture as the norm in South Korea's education system. While Hagwon Culture is highly beneficial to a student's grades and performance academically, the system itself reinforces unhealthy thought processes among the people.



Elitism and Financial Burden

As access to education is broadened, the competition for spots in prestigious schools became more fierce. That is why parents with the “Education Fever” would do anything to provide the best education for their children by signing them up for more hagwons, which also meant spending more money aside from already existing school fees.

Although hagwon is just a private after school academy, Korean households spend an average of 442,000 won to 520,000 won ($393 to $463) per month on hagwon fees alone. That is around 3 to 4 times more than the amount of tuition fees paid by Singaporeans, who pay an average of $104.80 each month. (Tushara, E. 2025)

It was reported that over 78% of high schoolers are enrolled in hagwon. What started as a portal for struggling students to further understand concepts that they couldn’t grasp in class became a necessity for all students, even for the high scorers.

This phenomenon has become a huge challenge for families from middle to low income brackets as it was reported that 36% of middle-income families reported experiencing financial strain due to hagwon expenses, while 14% of low-income families incurred debt to cover private education costs. On the other hand, families that are in the higher socio-economic bracket will enroll their children in better and more prestigious hagwons, indicating access to better education resources. (Lim, H.-S. 2025)

As time goes by, hagwon enrollment has become an underlying indicator of a family’s status and economic power, showing prominent inequality and classism not only among students but between Korean families as well.

Academic Stress and Health Consequences

Hagwon culture has caused significant damage to the physical health of Korean students with sleep deprivation being the most common health issue. As mentioned earlier in the paper, students study 4 to 6 extra hours daily, often until midnight. On average, a Korean teenager sleeps around 7 hours a night, which is 1 hour less than the OECD average. Studies show that this condition of insufficient sleep can significantly affect a student’s wellbeing which may lead to mental exhaustion or even mental illnesses. (Kim, Y., Yi, S., Jung, S., & Son, H. 2024)

While sleep deprivation is the health concern that is easily seen among students, there are other impacts affecting them as well. Due to hectic study schedules, middle to high school students spend an average of 11 hours sitting per day. That is significantly more than the global average of 4.7 hours per day. As one may know, sitting for long durations can cause serious health consequences such as poor posture, musculoskeletal problems and even obesity. With this being the norm, it is no wonder why the average Korean student is seen to have one of the listed physical health issues. (Kim, H. 2025)

In addition to sleep deprivation, the social pressures combined with intense competition among peers experienced by students has negatively impacted their mental health. In fact, it was reported that 9 to 14.4% of middle and high-school students experienced severe anxiety likely due to the social stigma and expectations others have regarding their academic performance.



Unfortunately, depression rates were reported high across all grades, ranging from 19.9% to 30.6%. Other than that, suicide attempts among South Korean middle to high school students ranged from 1.9% to 3.9% which are speculated to be rooted from the previously mentioned mental conditions. (Xu, J. 2023)

Clearly, hagwon culture has brought irreversible damage to not only Korean students' physical health but also their mental wellbeing. If there aren't any changes or improvements to the system, it may also be the culprit to the decline of health among Koreans in general.

Social Stigmatization & Psychological Pressure

On top of carrying the weight of peer pressure and the academic stress from the education system itself, students of Korea are faced with social stigmatization and external psychological pressure.

Deeply infused by the concept of "Education Fever" mentioned earlier, society views SKY universities as the ultimate goal for their children, indicating that having a child in one of the 3 universities is also an accomplishment of their own. That is why the CSAT is such a big deal for every single person in South Korea as it is said to be the key or the best way to gain a spot in these elite and prestigious universities.

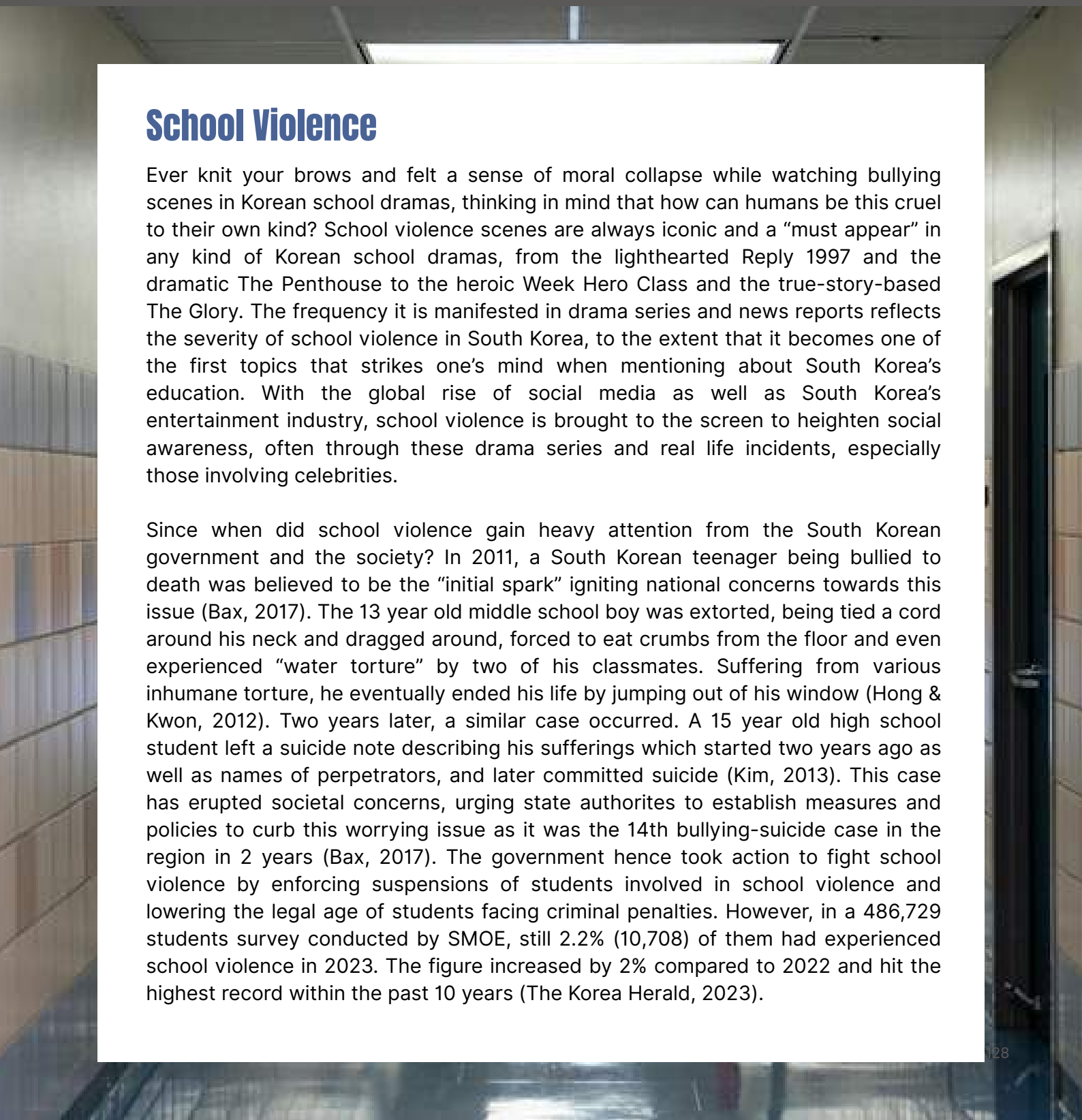
With hagwon being the main protagonist in preparing students for the CSAT, Koreans are quick to judge and determine a person's status and values. For parents, it is expected that they provide the best possible education for their children as if it were some obligation. Families that fail to show that are often looked down upon and receive judgement from relatives, friends or even neighbours. (Lim, H.-S. 2025)

Under the social pressure, many parents have enrolled their child in hagwon despite the financial struggle just so that they aren't judged by peers not only for the sake of their own image but also their own children. In Korea, students that don't attend hagwon are viewed as lazy or incapable, these people are often left out of communities or even bullied.



Among students that don't attend hagwon, 64% of them have reported social isolation and anxiety, all due to the fact that they aren't going to these after school cramming sessions like everybody else. (Lim, H.-S. 2025)

While some might argue that this social pressure could act as a type of motivation or a "push" for families that are less competitive to keep up with the highly demanding education culture, but they might have overlooked the fact that some individuals are content with what they currently have and aren't passionate about having high status and salaries. This culture has resulted in individuals being forced to be involved in such a competitive environment when they have no problem with living a casual life due to the fear of being left out or judged.



School Violence

Ever knit your brows and felt a sense of moral collapse while watching bullying scenes in Korean school dramas, thinking in mind that how can humans be this cruel to their own kind? School violence scenes are always iconic and a "must appear" in any kind of Korean school dramas, from the lighthearted Reply 1997 and the dramatic The Penthouse to the heroic Week Hero Class and the true-story-based The Glory. The frequency it is manifested in drama series and news reports reflects the severity of school violence in South Korea, to the extent that it becomes one of the first topics that strikes one's mind when mentioning about South Korea's education. With the global rise of social media as well as South Korea's entertainment industry, school violence is brought to the screen to heighten social awareness, often through these drama series and real life incidents, especially those involving celebrities.

Since when did school violence gain heavy attention from the South Korean government and the society? In 2011, a South Korean teenager being bullied to death was believed to be the "initial spark" igniting national concerns towards this issue (Bax, 2017). The 13 year old middle school boy was extorted, being tied a cord around his neck and dragged around, forced to eat crumbs from the floor and even experienced "water torture" by two of his classmates. Suffering from various inhumane torture, he eventually ended his life by jumping out of his window (Hong & Kwon, 2012). Two years later, a similar case occurred. A 15 year old high school student left a suicide note describing his sufferings which started two years ago as well as names of perpetrators, and later committed suicide (Kim, 2013). This case has erupted societal concerns, urging state authorites to establish measures and policies to curb this worrying issue as it was the 14th bullying-suicide case in the region in 2 years (Bax, 2017). The government hence took action to fight school violence by enforcing suspensions of students involved in school violence and lowering the legal age of students facing criminal penalties. However, in a 486,729 students survey conducted by SMOE, still 2.2% (10,708) of them had experienced school violence in 2023. The figure increased by 2% compared to 2022 and hit the highest record within the past 10 years (The Korea Herald, 2023).

Etymology

Before digging into what affects the increment of school violence in South Korea, we must first understand how the country defines this action. According to the 2004 South Korea Act on the Prevention of and Countermeasures Against Violence in Schools, school violence is defined as violent actions such as threat, defamation, coercion, cyber-bullying, sexual violence and more, that is against students within or beyond school boundaries, that results in physical or mental injury. In Korea, the common word to describe bullying is “wangtta (왕따)”, which literally means “exclusion” (Han, 2021).

In the context of school violence in South Korea, an interesting phenomenon was observed. Students from elementary school are eight to nine times more vulnerable to school violence than those of middle school and high school (Han, 2021). It is reflected in a 2024 survey that 4.2% of primary school students had experienced school violence, while the data was 1.6% and 0.5% for secondary school and high school students respectively (Cho, 2024). Among a wide range of school violence types, verbal abuse, physical violence and bullying was ranked top 3 (NYPI, 2024). South Korea school violences had also saw a rise in cyber-bullying and physical or cyber sexual violence alongside with the development in Artificial Intelligence (AI) usage and an augmentation in youths’ digital usage (Cho, 2024).



Factors Behind School Violence

Many studies had stated that a wide range of factors, beyond the individual facet, contribute to violent behaviours among adolescents. Therefore, this paper will examine influences ranging from the more immediate familial context, to the broader systemic and societal factors that shape school violence. Family is seen as the first stage of socialization for most children. They learn how to communicate, which moral values to follow as well as what kind of cultural beliefs to engage from the family institution. The environment and atmosphere of a family is also believed to have a strong impact on a child’s personality. Data has proved that students that have a more intimate relationship with their parents will be less likely to be involved in violent and illegal activities (Han, 2021). In addition to that, the average Korean parents are typically extra concerned about their child’s education and in fact intervene in it actively. “Helicopter Parenting” is a common sight in South Korea where parents are over-involved in their child’s education, from sending them to cram schools or “Hagwons” as early as the age of five, to micromanaging their daily life, down to controlling the nutrients they consume. Some parents even chose to give up their career in order to fully support their child for Sunenung. These had undoubtedly exerted much pressure on students, considering the expectations and sacrifice made by parents.

Factors Behind School Violence

Moreover, certain parents even expect their children to excel academically in order to fulfill their own unrealized ambitions or to bring honor to the family. Disharmonies within households as well as excessive academic pressure placed upon students undoubtedly devastate the parent-children relationship, causing the child to perform violence in school, either to gain attention or to release emotional tensions.

The intense education system that South Korea possesses also accounts for the high rate of school violence. This one particular exam, the Sunenung, is said to be the most crucial or even the pivoting point in one's life. It is believed that how well you did in Suneung will determine your future, in terms of which university you enter, what job you obtain and even who you marry. Therefore, in order to outdo all their peers in this exam, students spend long hours of studying, even attending 7.3 hours of cram school per week on average (Yonhap, 2024). Additionally, the amount of physical activities students take part in is also an extremely worrying aspect. Research has found that only 17.3% of South Korea's teenagers meet the standard of the World Health Organization (WHO), which is to participate in at least one hour of physical activities for five or more days per week. It is believed that exercising is just a "waste of time" and Physical Education (PE) classes are seen as resting classes (Lee, 2025). Thus, these drive students to perform violence, bullying and verbal attacks against their peers as means to relieve stress as well as a source of amusement for their monotonous dull life.

Lastly, looking from the broader point of view, the societal value that most of the Asian countries carry may affect how students react to bullying in school, indirectly resulting in an increase of school violence. In general, South Korean society is structured around the idea of collectivism (Koo, Kwak & Smith, 2008). People usually prioritize being a member of a particular group and see themselves as interdependent with the group rather than focusing on oneself. Prior to that, one would not do something that contradicts with the group's decision, even though the group's stance may harm others. This practice is highly manifested among students in South Korea, where there are usually more bullies than victims in school violence cases (Koo, Kwak & Smith, 2008). This reflects that bullying is more of a collectivist behaviour, and students without the intention may join into the action to fit the "group's norms" so that they do not become a target of the perpetrators. Owing to the accentuation of societal harmony, collectivism and hierarchical relationship in a Confucian culture background, students sometimes might be involved in school violence due to peer pressure to avoid deviating from the norms.

Possible Solutions

All in all, school violence is never only the student's and the parent's problem. It indeed is a "social evil" that requires immediate actions from the government to every single member of the society. Though the Korean government had enacted the Act on the Prevention of and Countermeasures against Violence in Schools in 2004 and the Comprehensive Measure to Eradicate School Violence (CMESV) in 2012 to address this increasingly concerning issue, however more has to be done due to the escalation of severity in the modern days. It is suggested that an increment in counseling programs, either for the victims or bullying is crucial in order to guide or educate both. Besides from that, although 93% of victimized students reported their cases to a third party, adults like teachers and parents as well as official authorities like police should form a better support and protective mechanism to ensure all victims who reach out to them feel safe and confident in voicing out (The Korea Herald, 2023).

Lastly, a more holistic education curriculum should be introduced, involving leisure yet meaningful activities, compulsory physical classes and systematic sex education, rather than solely focusing on academic core subjects. Changes have to be made as soon as possible so that students are able to gain knowledge and unleash their full potential in a safe environment.

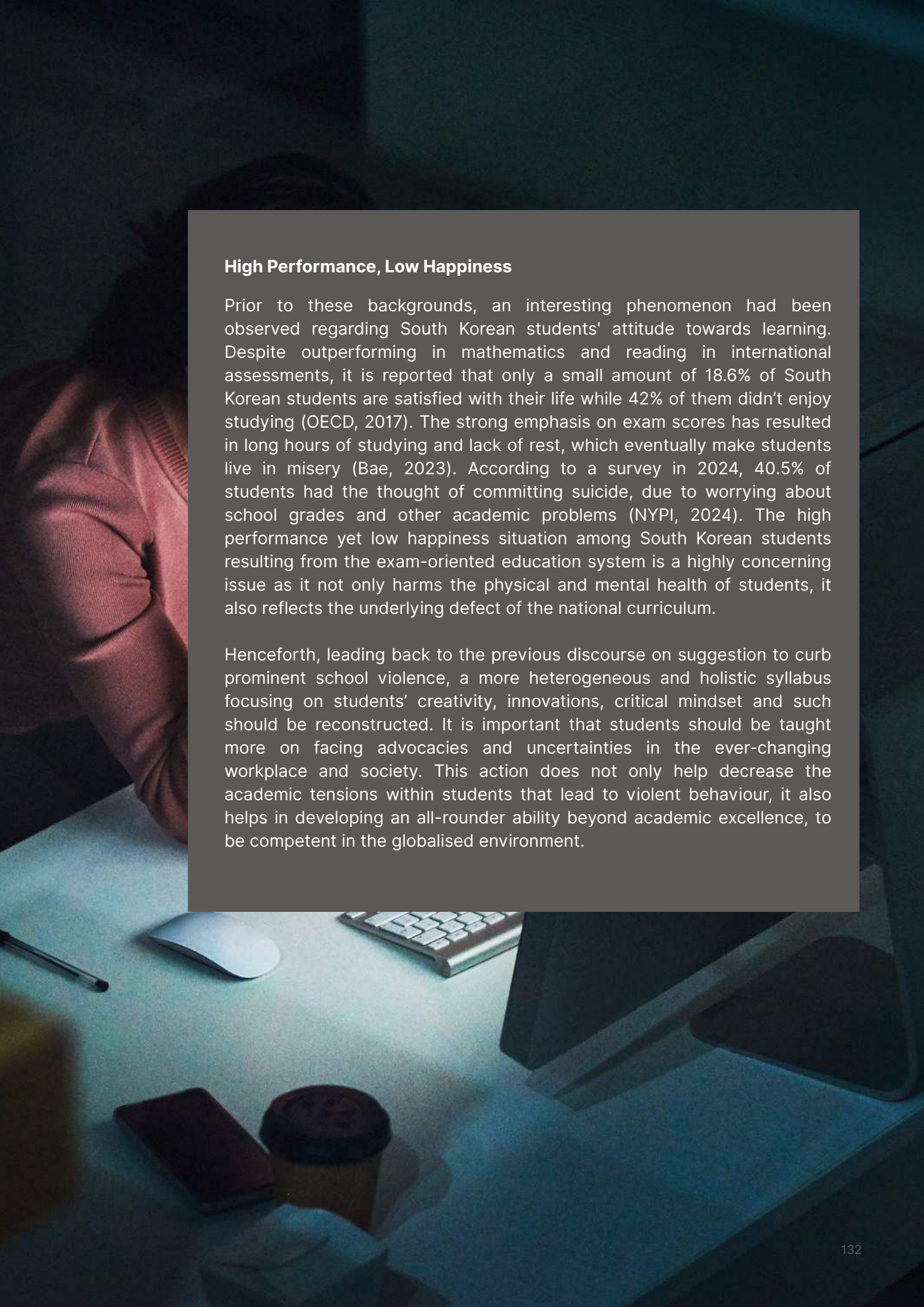
Knowledge and Power

Another controversial aspect of South Korea's education is the diverging beliefs about the values and purpose of attaining education. In South Korea, the purpose of learning, which is to always gain new knowledge and understandings in life, might have lost its original meaning. Back in the agrarian society, the knowledgeable were highly respected and they were the only group of people that had the ability to take high governmental positions and gain power through passing public examinations. Since then, knowledge is always associated with power (So & Kang, 2014). It is the only feasible pathway for ordinary or low status people to achieve upward mobility. Therefore, obtaining good, high grades has long been emphasised by parents, teachers and students, in order to be "successful" in the future.

Problems of the National Curriculum

In addition to that, the tedious and homogenous curricular as well as teachers' way of teaching aiming to turn students into perfect examination machines are seen to be beyond helpful for students when they enter the workforce. All means such as rote memorization and standardized testing is encouraged by the system just so that students are familiar with the exam format and can immediately answer questions (Lee, 2021). Not to admit that the restrictions faced by school teachers such as the detailed prescriptive curriculum they must follow as well as the heavy subject content to be taught had, to a large extent, restricted teachers' authority to develop their individual unique teaching method (So & Kang, 2014). It is also criticised that the South Korea education curricula lack the emphasis on critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills. The homogeneity of curriculum content and lack of interesting classroom experience might impact students' performance in the workforce, causing them to be outperformed by those from more diverse educational backgrounds.





High Performance, Low Happiness

Prior to these backgrounds, an interesting phenomenon had been observed regarding South Korean students' attitude towards learning. Despite outperforming in mathematics and reading in international assessments, it is reported that only a small amount of 18.6% of South Korean students are satisfied with their life while 42% of them didn't enjoy studying (OECD, 2017). The strong emphasis on exam scores has resulted in long hours of studying and lack of rest, which eventually make students live in misery (Bae, 2023). According to a survey in 2024, 40.5% of students had the thought of committing suicide, due to worrying about school grades and other academic problems (NYPI, 2024). The high performance yet low happiness situation among South Korean students resulting from the exam-oriented education system is a highly concerning issue as it not only harms the physical and mental health of students, it also reflects the underlying defect of the national curriculum.

Henceforth, leading back to the previous discourse on suggestion to curb prominent school violence, a more heterogeneous and holistic syllabus focusing on students' creativity, innovations, critical mindset and such should be reconstructed. It is important that students should be taught more on facing advocacies and uncertainties in the ever-changing workplace and society. This action does not only help decrease the academic tensions within students that lead to violent behaviour, it also helps in developing an all-rounder ability beyond academic excellence, to be competent in the globalised environment.

Conclusion

South Korea education has a long recorded history dating back to the Three Kingdoms period with a greatly diverse curriculum spanning from Confucious teachings, Chinese cultural studies to ancient technologies and Neo-Confucianism. The well-established education system manifested by the dual system in the Goryeo era and the civil service examinations during the Joseon era further reflected Koreans' deep emphasis on education. Modern South Korean education has always been seen as a huge success, known for its high literacy rate and strong performance in global assessments. The wide range of educational institutions, hagwon cultures and renowned Sunenung test are unique traits and systems exclusive to South Korean students. Despite the bright side of it, the system remains controversial in terms of the frequent school violence, concerning students' health and significant financial burden on families. Hence, several challenges await to be addressed as the South Korea's education system continues its path to strive for advancements.



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Examining South Korea's Foreign Policy Relations and Strategies

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6



Korea's Diplomatic relations in the beginning

Korean foreign relations began with the formation of centralized governance and authority in Korea. With rising globalization and connectedness throughout history, it meant that foreign relations had to be established to ensure the government's interests were maintained in the global theatre (Bojang, 2018). This paper will examine the history of Korean foreign relations and its present-day issues, alongside comparisons of its current foreign relations with those of Singapore.

Three Kingdoms era

During the Three Kingdoms era, the different states had their own foreign policy that culminated in military security and trade between the different Kingdoms and their military allies. Goguryeo was an exception, as it was born from taking territory from the Han and developed a military that constantly raided territories in the Han, with King Taejo and his successors attempting to invade the Liaodong peninsula multiple times (Yi,1984).

This militancy of Goguryeo meant that the other kingdoms secured foreign relations with foreign powers for their own security. Baekje's alliance with the Kingdom of Wa (Japan). This was a mutually beneficial relationship where the Kingdom of Wa gained trade with the Baekje, with goods such as Gold, monks, and specialists in Buddhism and governance (Park, 2007). This was reciprocated by the deployment of archers, soldiers, horses, and workers that would help counter the ongoing Sillan incursions into Baekje territory.

Silla's alliance with Tang China was also a driving factor in ending the Three Kingdoms era to form the unified Silla period. Through the alliance with Tang China and Silla, the Sillans pleaded for military assistance in subduing Baekje and Goguryeo. Citing the behavior of a noble of the Goguryeo court who had usurped the throne, coupled with strategic concerns of their dominance over the Peninsula, meant that the Tang allied with Silla to remove Goguryeo and Baekje as potential threats (Graff, 2002). This would give rise to the Kingdom of Unified Silla.

Unified Silla would then benefit from foreign relations through trade. The burgeoning Silk Road and connections with Tang China allowed foreign goods to flow into Korea. Goods from the Roman Empire and the Sassanids entered Korea, with items such as glassware from the Roman Empire having entered Silla in the Early Silla era (Szmoniewski, 2018). However, direct contact with Rome was less so compared to the Sassanid states. These states benefited from the overland Silk Road and used it for trade and diplomatic contact with China, and then establishing relations with Korea. One such group where the Sogdians were an Iranian people whose presence was common enough that grave guardians were made in their likeness during the Unified Silla era (Min, 2013). Trade goods and influence in art from both sides have been found in the countries of Iran and Korea (Yu, 2008), indicating a large degree of cultural outreach and combination.

This outreach was in turn, supplemented by the Arab movement to Korea. Arab scholars had begun to report on Korea as early as the 9th century, where the scholar Ibn Khordadbeh had mentioned Korea in his writings (Bird, 2012), where he mentioned that Korea was a wealthy place that was beautiful which meant Arabs who went there rarely returned from (Lee, 2014). There was movement of Arabs into Korea as some of those who stayed wanted to capitalize on trade for items such as gold, hawks and gemstones (UNESCO, ND). This not only gave Unified Silla capital through trade, but the influx of ideas from the Silk Road would influence the culture of Unified Silla in their art, architecture and even their political process. Thus, during the Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla era, even up to the successor state of Goryeo, foreign relations were very much present as Korea benefited from an early form of globalization and the resulting flow of ideas that would shape the political process and foreign ideology to come.

Joseon Era

However, the fall of Goryeo gave rise to the formation of the Joseon Dynasty, changing the way foreign relations were carried out. Confucianism slowly entered Korea from China, and the Kingdom of Joseon would adopt neo-Confucianism as its state beliefs (Yang et.al, 1958). The idea of a self-sufficient Agrarian state run by Confucian scholars (Armstrong, 2014) became increasingly popular, which also meant a re-orientation of foreign policy. This gave rise to the twin ideas of Sadae-Kyorin, which would be Joseon's foreign policy until it was forcibly opened by Japan in 1875 (Armstrong, 2014).

Sadae was a combination of both realpolitik and Confucianist thought. Defined as "Serving the great", it was a Confucianist ideal that meant a tributary relation between Joseon and China, where Joseon would be the model example of said tributary relations (Chun, 1968).



However, it was also motivated by realpolitik, to hold subservient relations to protect itself from other powers, as well as from China itself. China's power and size meant it could easily invade Joseon, which it did so twice, with an invasion by the later Jin dynasty due to their military support for the declining Ming dynasty (Kim, 2014), and by the Qing dynasty which forced them to fully break their loyalty to the Ming altogether even if they disliked the Qing due to the perception of their barbarism (Seo, 2021). This power disparity between both meant that Joseon needed to adopt a Sino-friendly foreign policy, leading to Sadae becoming more important to protect their sovereignty better, as opposed to losing their sovereignty to the larger power.

Then there is Kyorin, or "Friendly Relations". It would hold cordial but distant relations with its neighbors, especially with Japan, its other regional neighbor. This form of Kyorin was primarily designed to keep the coasts of Korea safe from Wako pirates, many of whom operated from the island of Tsushima. By adopting a conciliatory stance towards the Wako pirates, who would gain titles, land and be able to settle down in Korea if they surrendered (Kang, 1997), would convince them to stop raiding and have a stable life in Korea. This also meant an increase in subsidies to Tsushima, given the poor living conditions there, and accepting trade with Japan to prevent the Wako pirates from returning to piracy (Kang, 1997). This system would be generally successful piracy would begin to decline, showing the containment foreign policies succeeded.

As part of the hierarchical order that Confucianism professed (Ziliotti, 2022), there was also the reception system that depended on the diplomat sent and would then decide on matters such as trade, with the highest being reserved for Ming China, followed by the Shogunate then regional officials. This system was eventually abused by the Japanese engineering fake identities through the Ryukyu kingdoms, leading to trade relations cooling as a penalty (Robinson, 2000). However, with the declining threats of piracy and the increasing perception the Japanese were barbaric for not adopting Confucianist ideals, relations would grow friendly but distant. Whilst Joseon would consistently send diplomatic missions to send condolences and congratulations on the death and ascension of the shogun (Kang, 2003) there was a feeling of slight when the Japanese returned it with a merchant. However, despite the devastating Imjin war, the missions would continue to restore relations between both countries and ask for the repatriation of Korean prisoners of war. Thus, whilst the relations were friendly, they would be distant due to fears and preconceived notions.



This state of affairs would continue up until the 19th century, with a state of regional isolationism, maintaining relations with neighbors and keeping all but China at arm's length. This was also extended to the west, despite Western presence in the region having started due to Portuguese trade in Japan having begun by as early as 1543 to proselytize (Castel-Branco et.al, 2020). However, the ruling classes thought of Christianity as a subversive influence that could uproot the entire Confucian order of society that Korea subscribed to, leading to their eventual persecution. Thus, Western presence was heard of through shipwrecked sailors washed up on Joseon's shores. One such example was a Dutch sailor, Henrik Hamel, who washed up on Joseon's shores in 1653, having been caught up in a typhoon. He was kept around in Korea before he escaped to Japan (Griffis, 1885). Some missionaries attempted to sneak into Korea, where they attempted to spread their religion (Gützlaff, 1834). However, due to the ruling class's opinion of Christianity and, by extension, the West, there was no contact with the West. In turn, as the West remained preoccupied with trade with China and Japan, there were not as many concerted attempts to open up Korea.

This changed in 1866, when an American trade ship, the SS General Sherman, sailed up the Taedong River and attempted to convince the Koreans to open to Western trade. It resulted in the Koreans burning down the ship and the crew being massacred as they tried to escape, likely due to how the crew had kidnapped a Korean official (Niderost, 2002). Due to prior executions of French Catholic missionaries and their converts which were spurred by fears of foreign, especially Russian encroachment, and coupled with the need to defend French honor, a military expedition was launched in August 1866, which culminated in parts of Ganghwa being looted and destroyed (Anthony, 2024). Then in 1871, there was an American expedition to Ganghwa Island seeking to find out what happened to the General Sherman. However, due to prevailing fears that the Americans were seeking vengeance for the crew, the Joseon government stalled by not negotiating. Thus, the Americans landed on Ganhwa Island and stormed the fortresses there (Howell, 1935). However, as the first was not officially sanctioned by the French government, and the latter did not have the manpower to invade and conquer Joseon, meant that there was little damage that was done, aside from the French looting a library annex containing much of the Royal records (Kim, 2010). This only cemented the isolationist stance in Korea, which would be sustained until the Japanese expedition to Ganghwa Island in 1875. With the Koreans having kept the Japanese further away due to the Japanese misstep of using the wrong character that implied they were on the same level as the Emperor of China, which they held closer relations to (Duus, 1995), the expedition was an attempt to force them to open up, leading to the 1876 Japanese-Korean treaty of Amity and Commerce, thus ending a period of regional isolationism and opening up Joseon to the west (Chung, 2006).



The recently opened Joseon benefited from a reform-minded king, and having signed treaties with other nations to begin foreign relations, would send scholars out on fact-finding missions. This included the Pobingsa, which went to the United States (US) (Noble, 1929), and others to other countries to learn more about the world and how it could modernize. However, even though the missions had gathered plenty of information, and even resulted in minor reforms such as the creation of a postal system (Walter, 1969). Their participation in the Gapsin coup had removed the know-how and willpower to modernize, thus stalling Korea's ability to compete on a global stage.

Korea also happened to be caught in a power struggle between an ascendant Japan and a waning China. The formation of foreign relations was a bid to ensure sovereignty with guarantees from the neutral US. But with the US return to isolationism (Park, 2025), and Japan ensuring the US would not interfere with Japan's actions in Korea under the Taft-Katsura agreement of 1905, the US would not interfere with the Japanese sphere of influence in Korea (Larsen, 2014). This meant that there had been a failure in convincing the Western powers that they were a sovereign country to be respected, and thus Japan would colonize Korea in 1910, cementing a process that had begun in 1905 where Korea became a protectorate in 1905 where it lost its national sovereignty under the Eulsa treaty (Choi, 2008).

South Korean foreign relations in the Cold War and beyond

Eventually, with the surrender of Japan, Korea would be freed from Japanese Colonial rule. However, rising tensions between the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) would mean that Korea would be divided. This was both for practical and geopolitical reasons. The first was to ensure an easier disarmament of Japanese troops still in Korea, and the latter was due to US fears of the USSR compromising their position in East Asia. Thus, without consulting Koreans, in 1945, 2 officers, Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel, would take a National Geographic map and divide Korea neatly at the 38th parallel (Oberdorfer, 2014). With the division came the formation of both North and South Korea in 1948, South Korea would form the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) to settle South Korea's foreign relations with the world (MOFA, N.D) and in 1949, Korea would be recognized by the USA (US State Department, 2020), followed by other countries in the non-communist bloc such as the UK a few days later (Embassy of the Republic of Korea in the United Kingdom, 2008).





Relations with the communist bloc would be harder to form, especially with the outbreak of the Korean War from 1950 to 1953 (Matray, 2012). With the non-communist bloc, Korea would hold close relations, especially out of security, with the Americans, having signed the 1953 US-ROK mutual defense treaty after the Armistice was signed (Longo et al., 2025), providing security for the Koreans with a permanent US military presence in Korea. In turn, Korea would broaden its relations with the rest of the non-communist bloc, sending missions to set up foreign relations with other countries.

Relations with the Communist countries, particularly North Korea, would be harder to form as it was perceived to be a zero-sum game of mutual antagonism with North Korea (Armstrong, 2014) and the communist countries of the USSR and China that supported it financially. This would change after the 1972 joint communique that resulted in the official formation of relations between both countries, work to reduce tensions between both countries and to work for reunification (Jong, 2012, p. 1). Whilst relations would remain tense, through the use of Nordpolitik, which was the establishment of relations with the Communist bloc, with the hopes that it would help work towards reunification (Chung, 1991). This was also around the time Korea would begin to join international organizations such as the UN (MOFA, N.D) in 1991 jointly with North Korea, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989 (APEC, 2024) and also establishing dialogues and partnerships with regional organizations such as Association of South East Asian Nations in 1989 (Chang, 2022) and the Group of 20 nations (G20), which Korea hosted the 2010 meeting, becoming the first Asian nation to do so (G20, N.D).

Conclusion

Korea's Foreign relations have been constantly evolving based on context and always in their interests to defend their sovereignty. From benefitting from rising globalisation during the unified Silla era, to the regional isolationism during the Joseon era to compromise between the ideal Confucianist state and defending their sovereignty, to the modern globalist state that joins multilateral organizations to work for the common good, Korea's foreign relations are ever evolving, and are likely to remain doing so as long as it protects their own interests.

Current Foreign Relations Issues that South Korea is Facing

In this segment, the paper will analyze the three critical challenges confronting South Korea: North Korea's nuclear threat, the US-China tech rivalry, and remaining historical grievances undermining ROK-Japan alliances.

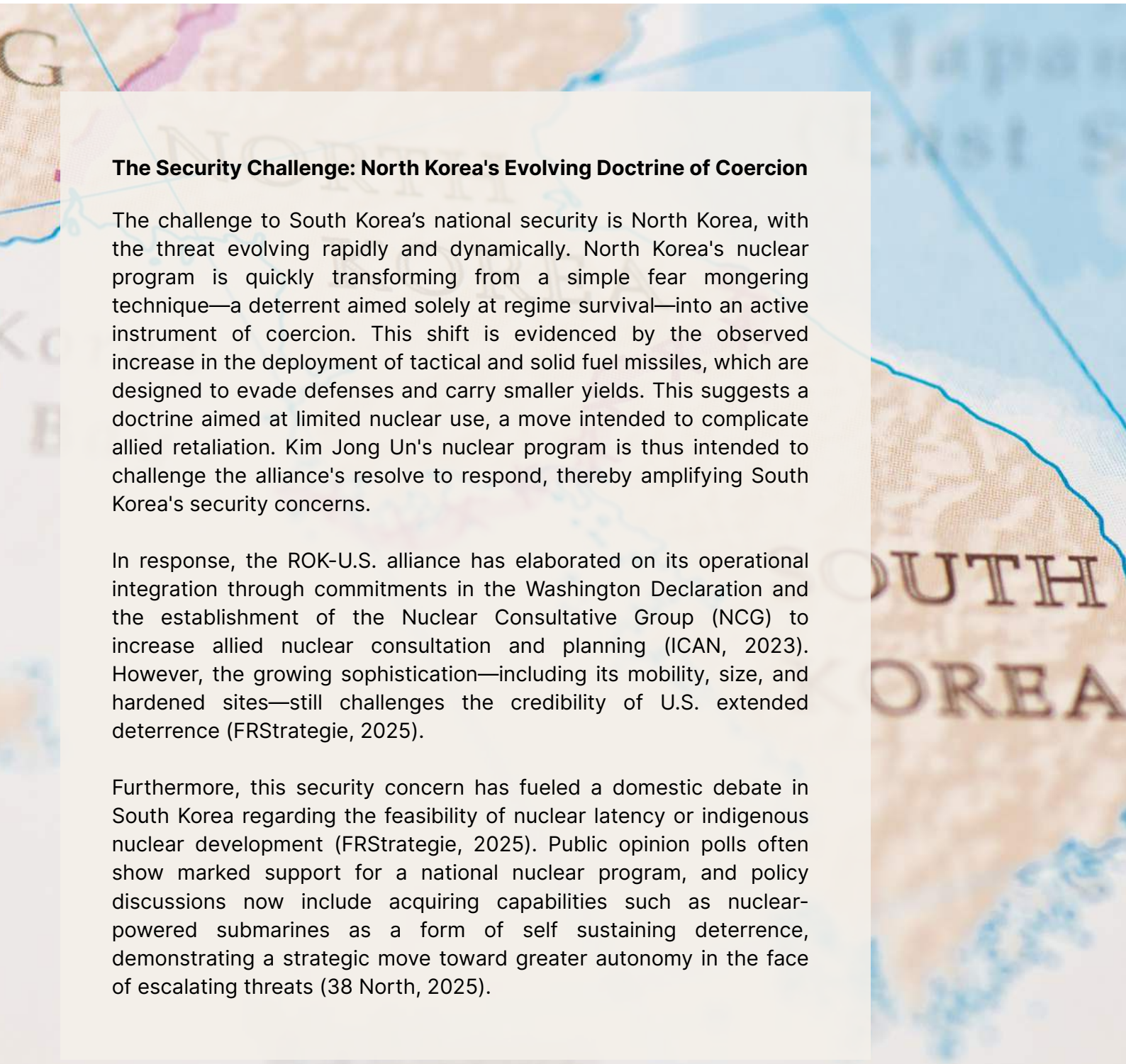
The Geopolitical Squeeze and Triple Binds

The Republic of Korea, positioned as a middle power in Northeast Asia, is currently facing a foreign relations challenge termed the "Geopolitical Squeeze". This dilemma refers to a middle power caught between three immense, conflicting geopolitical pressures. It insists South Korea to balance three conflicting realities: the security threat driven by North Korea, maintaining alliance with its essential security partner, the United States, and negotiation with tis prominent economic connection, China.



The security of South Korea relies entirely on the U.S alliance and defense commitment, yet its financial stability and tech supply chains depend heavily on the ROK China trade. The continuous threat of missile and nuclear programs from North Korea is another crucial issue to deal with.

The policy question for South Korea is therefore not what to do, but rather how to balance these immense pressures simultaneously in a geopolitical environment that demands a firm choice (Jo, W, 2025). Consequently, South Korea's foreign relations strategies are best defined by a strategic effort held to maximize its autonomy while remaining firmly anchored in the U.S. alliance. In overall, these strategies concentrate on redefining the alliance to manage the rising nuclear, economic, and regional risks (KEIA, 2025).



The Security Challenge: North Korea's Evolving Doctrine of Coercion

The challenge to South Korea's national security is North Korea, with the threat evolving rapidly and dynamically. North Korea's nuclear program is quickly transforming from a simple fear mongering technique—a deterrent aimed solely at regime survival—into an active instrument of coercion. This shift is evidenced by the observed increase in the deployment of tactical and solid fuel missiles, which are designed to evade defenses and carry smaller yields. This suggests a doctrine aimed at limited nuclear use, a move intended to complicate allied retaliation. Kim Jong Un's nuclear program is thus intended to challenge the alliance's resolve to respond, thereby amplifying South Korea's security concerns.

In response, the ROK-U.S. alliance has elaborated on its operational integration through commitments in the Washington Declaration and the establishment of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) to increase allied nuclear consultation and planning (ICAN, 2023). However, the growing sophistication—including its mobility, size, and hardened sites—still challenges the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence (FRStrategie, 2025).

Furthermore, this security concern has fueled a domestic debate in South Korea regarding the feasibility of nuclear latency or indigenous nuclear development (FRStrategie, 2025). Public opinion polls often show marked support for a national nuclear program, and policy discussions now include acquiring capabilities such as nuclear-powered submarines as a form of self sustaining deterrence, demonstrating a strategic move toward greater autonomy in the face of escalating threats (38 North, 2025).

The Economic Challenge: The US-China Tech Rivalry Dilemma

The economic domain of South Korea has emerged as a financial challenge, intensifying the concept of "Geopolitical Squeeze" on Seoul. The traditional South Korean strategy of relying on the "U.S. for security, China for economy" is now obsolete, as the two domains have merged into an economic-security nexus (The Korea Times, 2025). Now, South Korea is fundamentally caught in a tug-of-war between its security partner and its largest economic partner.

The core dilemma, or the 'triple binds', stems from the reliance of major South Korean companies on China for manufacturing bases and vital supply chains while the nation relies on the U.S. for security. As the U.S. intensifies its technology rivalry with China—particularly in semiconductors and supply chain realignment—Korea is under explicit pressure to choose a side. This challenge is viewed as a "zero-sum calculation" that carries a potential cost of billions for the ROK economy.

This pressure is intensified by China's history of utilizing economic coercion in the past. One prominent case is the 2016-2017 dispute over the deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system in South Korea. China responded with unofficial sanctions that specifically targeted South Korean industries and companies, causing significant damage to the retail, tourism, and cultural sectors, which could lead to economic losses estimated to be in the billions of dollars (The Asan Forum, 2019; PISM, 2018). While bilateral trade remained resilient because China did not target key intermediate goods, the THAAD incident established a clear precedent that South Korea's compliance with the U.S risks direct economic retaliation from China.

To maintain strategic autonomy within these two immense forces, the South Korean government has shifted its focus to economic diversification (The Korea Times, 2025). This tactic involves strengthening economic and strategic alignment with the U.S.—including massive investment pledges in the American economy—while simultaneously working to stabilize ties with China and expanding engagement with other markets such as ASEAN (The Business Times, 2025). This approach ultimately seeks to create a strategic-economic bloc with the U.S. while building domestic resilience against external coercion (KDI, n.d.).



The ROK-Japan Relations Challenge: The Past Historical Grievances

From a geopolitical viewpoint, effective ROK-US-Japan trilateral security cooperation is necessary to successfully counter North Korea and manage the competition with China. The current security environment, marked by North Korea's escalation in the threat of nuclear programs, provides the driving force for fostering ROK-Japan cooperation (IFANS, 2024).

However, the central problem remaining is the constant friction between historical grievances and geopolitical needs. Decades of history stemming from colonial rule and World War II continue to undermine political efforts toward cooperation. The most sensitive issues include the Japanese military's system of wartime sexual slavery, referred to as the "comfort women", and the issue of forced labor throughout the colonial rule. These historical disputes repeatedly become leveraged in domestic politics in both countries, leading to the derailment of diplomatic efforts (East Asia Forum, 2024).

Despite this historical friction, the current ROK administration, with Lee Jae-myung as president, has made a conscious push to isolate the security needs from history, thus prioritizing trilateral security over the resolution of historical issues. This approach has resulted in key agreements on missile defense and intelligence sharing (IFANS, 2024). While this move is politically difficult domestically, it is recognized as a necessary diplomatic step for regional stability, allowing the trilateral framework to function as a regional deterrence against shared threats (IFANS, 2024).

Conclusion: Maintaining Strategic Autonomy within the Alliance

In conclusion, South Korea's foreign policy in the 2020s is defined as a sustained effort to maximize its strategic autonomy with the U.S. alliance. This strategy is a necessary response to the "Geopolitical Squeeze," acknowledging that South Korea can no longer sustain the separation between economic prosperity and security reliance. The nation's future role is determined by its success in managing three interdependent challenges with a sovereignty-driven foreign policy. To achieve strategic autonomy of the country, South Korea's diplomatic strategies now rely on three essential pillars:

1. **Managing North Korea's Evolving Nuclear Threats:** This requires deepening deterrence through actions such as the Washington Declaration, while simultaneously fulfilling the domestic political needs for greater defensive self-reliance against North Korea's nuclear programs.
2. **Managing the US-China Economic Squeeze:** This involves moving beyond the zero-sum calculation by aligning strategically with U.S.-led economic security frameworks, actively seeking supply chain diversification, and protecting its vital trade interests from Chinese economic coercion.
3. **Sustaining the Political Will to Maintain Cooperation with Japan:** Despite the constant friction between historical grievances and geopolitical needs with Japan, South Korea has to continue the diplomatic push to isolate security from history. This will help to preserve the trilateral security cooperation for regional stability.

Ultimately, South Korea is moving toward a more competitive and sovereignty-driven alliance structure (KEIA, 2025). This necessary evolution defines its emerging global role as a responsible middle power in a geopolitical landscape, where its choices carry increasing weight for global orders



General Diplomatic Stance and Strategies

In this segment, the paper will examine Singapore's and South Korea's foreign policy stances and strategies. At the end, both countries will have their strategies compared and discussed.

Korea: Liberals and Conservative Approaches to Foreign Policy

Korea's diplomatic stances and strategies have been largely guided by ideology till recent times. This means that South Korea takes a values-approach, meaning it aligns itself with countries and pursues policies that it thinks is like its own (Kim, 2025). This approach to foreign policy stems from a long tradition infighting between the Conservatives and Liberals. Not only do the two parties share differing views on domestic policies, but they also share differing views on foreign ones. The Conservatives tend to pursue friendlier relations with the United States and Japan, while the Liberals do the same but with China and North Korea (Lee, 2025). This has been observed in recent years. During the 2022 election campaign, then presidential candidate Yoon Suk Yeol and his conservative party promised to take aggressive action against North Korea (Shin, 2022). This was a complete reversal of his predecessor's approach to North Korea. Under President Moon Jae-In, a Liberal, South Korea attempted to restart friendlier ties with North Korea. This was a return to the era of Sunshine policy as pursued by Liberal Presidents Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo-Hyun. This resulted in the 2018 declaration at Panmunjom which sought to ease tensions between North and South Korea (Straits Times, 2018). However, with Yoon's election victory, North Korea declared the 2018 Panmunjom null and void (Mackenzie and Chatterjee, 2023). Thereby signaling an end to South Korea's Sunshine policy with North Korea. With the recent election of the Liberal candidate Lee Jae Myung, South Korea has again signaled its intentions to restart dialogue with North Korea. Hence, South Korea's diplomatic stances and strategies have largely been guided by ideology up till recent times.

Korea: Factionalism within Parties

Within the Conservative and Liberal parties, there is also factionalism. There are two different camps within the parties. The Alliance and the Independence factions. The Alliance faction wants South Korea to maintain close ties with the United States and align the country's policies with it (Kim, 2025).

The Independence faction wants South Korea to develop the means to pursue foreign affairs more independently of the United States while still maintaining good ties with the country (Kim, 2025). Faction infighting occasionally spews into the public spotlight. In 2004 Cho Hyun-Dong, a diplomat within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, made a comment suggesting that the then President Roh Moon-Hyun would not have able to conduct diplomacy well with the United States (Park, 2004). This led to the sacking of Cho Hyun-Dong and Yoon Young-Kwan. Both men were considered to have been part of the Alliance faction, while the then President Roh and his National Security Council Secretary General Lee Jong-Suk were part of the "Independence" faction. The Alliance used this as an opportunity to attack their rivals within the government. As a result, the Independence faction was able to outmaneuver and oust the Alliance faction members and reduce their influence on South Korea foreign policy during President Roh Moon-Hyun's administration. Hence, this illustrates an example of the Alliance and Independence factionalism within South Korean political parties. Hence also highlighting how foreign policy in South Korea is driven by ideologies.

Korea: Political Structure and Impact on Foreign Policy

Foreign Policy has largely been dominated by the Presidential office. While South Korea has a strong legislative branch of government, the Presidential office plays a major role in shaping South Korea's diplomatic approach and strategies (Lee, 2019). The President gets to choose his most inner cabinet, also known as the State Council (Jochheim and Chahri, 2022). This allows the President to choose who gets to hold vital positions such as heads of ministries. This includes foreign policy related offices such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Not only can the President set the tone and agenda for South Korea, but the President can also dismiss those in the State Council. As a result, the Presidential office holds strong sway and influence over how South Korea conducts foreign policy. However, the President still must rely on the National Assembly to rectify and confirm foreign policy items such as treaties and trade deals (Lee, 2019). Even so, the President usually can rely on a supportive legislature if it is being controlled by the same political party as the President. However, should the legislative branch be captured by the opposition, it can result in the two branches of government having differing views and therefore conflict. Hence, even though foreign policy has largely been dominated by the Presidential Office, it can be blocked and checked by an opposition controlled legislature.



Korea: Current Diplomatic Stances and Strategies

Recent developments in the international arena have forced South Korea politicians to reconsider solely staying in one faction. According to Draudt-Véjares (2025), politicians in South Korea are starting to take up a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy making. Instead of viewing foreign policy through the lens of ideology, politicians are starting to take a more pragmatic approach and weighing which options benefit South Korea more. After President Lee Jae-Myung took office, he appointed figures from both the Alliance and Independence factions. Most notably, he appointed prominent Alliance faction members Cho Hyun and Wi Sung-Lac to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Security Office respectively. He also appointed prominent Independence faction members Lee Jong-Seok and Chung Dong-Young to the National Intelligence Service and Ministry of Unification respectively. This action is being hailed by some as a signal that South Korea is starting to take a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy (Nam, 2025). By appointing members from both factions, President Lee Jae-Myung demonstrates he is approaching foreign policy with a more pragmatic tone rather than one based on ideology. Even though it might lead to infighting within the factions, at the very least it means Lee Jae-Myung is considering options from both the Alliance and Independence factions.

Besides these notable appointments, President Lee Jae-Myung has also demonstrated a pragmatic approach to foreign policy as well. While coming from the Liberal party which has traditionally been in favor of closer ties with China and North Korea, Lee Jae-Myung has demonstrated that he is receptive to the United States as well. Just recently, South Korea was able to ink a deal with the United States that saw American tariffs against South Korea be reduced from 25 percent to 15 percent (Reuters, 2025). At the same time, he is also strengthening ties with China. Right after his election, Lee Jae-Myung sent an envoy to China with hopes to improve relations and increase their trade ties (Reuters, 2025). Even though Lee Jae-Myung has in the past demonstrated views that are anti-Japanese, his first visit after inauguration as President was to Japan (France 24, 2025). This demonstrates that South Korea under President Lee Jae-Myung is starting to take up a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy. The country is weighing which options are most beneficial rather than being constrained by values and ideology.

South Korea is also actively looking abroad and beyond its region for partnership as well. Just recently, South Korea upgraded its relationship with Singapore to one of “Strategic Partnership” (Ng, 2025). This means that both countries will deepen not just their economic ties but also increase their cultural exchanges and more. South Korea is also looking beyond Asia as well. Just recently South Korea hosted a forum for delegates from various African nations. The forum aimed to discuss further trade collaborations and improvement of ties between South Korea and the various African nations (Ji, 2025). Hence, this showcases South Korea’s increasingly pragmatic approach to foreign policy.





Singapore: Consistent Pragmatist Foreign Policy

Singapore's foreign policies stances and strategies are consistent and does not flip flop. This is because the country is a one-party dominant state, with the People's Action Party being in power since the country's independence in 1965 (Singh et al, 2020). This has resulted in Singapore pursuing a consistent and predictable foreign policy as the elites in-charge come from the same party. As a result of Singapore being a one-party dominant state, there is a lack of alternative voices offering differing approaches to foreign policies. Therefore, the People's Action Party looks to domestic politics in order strategize and come up with foreign policies that appeal to their domestic base (Lee, 2024). This has resulted in Singapore pursuing foreign policies that many consider to be pragmatic. Singapore's foreign policy is one of consistent pragmatism (Phua, 2022). This means that the country is not constrained by ideology and prefers to take up strategies and actions it thinks will best benefit it. As a result, Singapore pursues a pragmatic approach to foreign policy making. This has been seen throughout Singapore's history. Just before the end of the cold war, Singapore hosted China's premier Deng Xiaoping even though Singapore had not formally established relations with the People's Republic of China (Lee, 2000). Singapore has also been a consistent ally of the United States, with both countries hosting joint military exercises (Mindef, 2025). This showcases that Singapore's foreign policy approach is one that is pragmatic and not constrained by ideology. By pursuing friendly ties with both China and the United States, the country is able to benefit from having relations with both.

Another factor that contributes to Singapore's consistent pragmatic approach to foreign policy making is the idea that the country is "under siege". This means that the country's leaders view the country as being surrounded by hostile powers, and as a result develops a "siege mentality" (Singh, 2022). As a result of this mentality, the country's leaders pursue pragmatic policies in order to ensure the country's survival. For example, even though relations with its immediate neighbours have been rocky at times, Singapore nevertheless still pursued policies that improved ties with them. For example, only 8 years after Indonesian terrorist bombed Singapore's MacDonald House, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew scattered flowers on the graves of the two terrorists in act of overture to Indonesia (Soeriaatmadja, 2015). Even though Malaysia and Singapore has had disputes over issues such as water rights in Johor in the past, the two countries now enjoy strong bilateral ties with each other (CNA, 2024). Singapore also actively engages with its neighbours through its involvement in the Association of Southeast Asian states. Singapore also looks beyond Southeast Asia for partnership and collaboration, with the country successfully inking various free trade agreements such as one with the European Union in 2019 (Enterprise SG, 2025). All this have been done as a result of Singapore's leaders having a siege mentality, and having the need to ensure Singapore's survival. By proactively engaging with countries in its immediate neighbourhood and outside the region, the country ensures its survivability in the face of adversary or crisis. Hence, Singapore's foreign policy can be described as one of consistent pragmatism.

Singapore: Political Structure and Impact of Foreign Policy Making

Singapore's foreign policy is a result of its domestic political structure. Singapore adopts a hybrid Westminster parliamentary system. This means that Singapore has both a strong executive and legislative branch of government as the Prime Minister and their cabinet is drawn from the largest party within the legislature (Singh, 2022). Foreign policy is usually left to the Prime Minister and his cabinet, especially the Foreign Minister. The Prime Minister can appoint anyone to the various cabinet positions, but they usually appoint someone from the People's Action Party who is sitting in parliament. As a result of the People's Action Party being the dominant power since 1965, Singapore's Prime Ministers have all been from the People's Action Party. Thus, resulting in a consistent tone in foreign policy making. Additionally, since the Prime Minister is from the largest party in parliament, that means any treaty or agreement signed by the Prime Minister of Foreign Minister will likely be rectified by parliament. Hence, showcasing how Singapore's foreign policy is a result of its domestic political structure.

Singapore: Current Diplomatic Strategies and Stances

Singapore currently pursues a pragmatic approach to foreign policy making. It actively "hedges", meaning the country avoids only siding with China or the United States (Lee, 2024). Instead, the country actively engages with both countries and have called for both superpowers to engage in diplomacy more. As a result of this "hedging" policy, Singapore has maintained close ties with both China and the United States. While close to both countries, Singapore is closer to the United States. This can be observed from the fact that Singapore was upgraded to "Major Security Cooperation Partner" in 2005, and that Singapore actively procures American made military hardware for its own use (MFA, 2025). Nevertheless, Singapore also conducts joint military exercises with China (MINDEF, 2025). Besides relations with major powers, Singapore is also proactive in the region. Singapore is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN). Singapore uses ASEAN as a platform to engage with its neighbours. Just recently, Singapore and Vietnam inked a deal whereby Vietnam supply Singapore with more rice while Singapore would help expand Vietnam's rice supply chains (The Nation, 2025). As part of "hedging", Singapore actively looks for other countries to partner and collaborate with. Besides doing so within its immediate region, Singapore also actively looks abroad to countries elsewhere for partnership as well. In 2022, the country signed a free trade agreement with the countries of Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru (Subhani, 2025). Magcamit (2015) argues that Singapore takes an active approach to seeking out free trade agreements is key to ensuring the country's continued survival. By actively seeking new partners, Singapore actively hedges between countries and does not put all its eggs in merely one basket. Thus, allowing the country to remain resilient in times of crisis.



Comparison between Singapore and South Korea's Foreign Policy

Singapore and South Korea had differing approaches to foreign policy making. Singapore has consistently taken a pragmatic approach to foreign policy, while South Korea historically has taken a more values-based approach. However, under President Lee Jae Myung's administration, South Korea is starting to take a more pragmatic approach like Singapore. Singapore and South Korea are both attempting to balance their relationship with the superpowers of China and the United States. Both countries are also closer to the United States than they are to China, but South Korea is more blatant about it. Both countries are also actively looking abroad for partnerships and collaborations. This could explain why just recently, both countries upgraded their relationship to one of "Strategic Partnership" (Ng, 2025). Both countries are reliant on trade for their survival. Thus, it makes sense that both countries decided to improve bilateral ties with each other. Both countries share a strong executive office, but South Korea's political structure means that its executive and legislative branches of government may sometimes disagree over foreign policy. Whereas in Singapore, since the executive is drawn from the legislative branch, both are likely to share similar views on foreign policy.

South Korea's Relationships with Its Neighbors and Major Powers

Circa 1948, the founding of the Republic of Korea (ROK), which is also known as South Korea, has played a complicated role in regional and global affairs. Geography, historical divisions, and the power of important countries around the Korean Peninsula play a major role in determining its foreign policy. Over the years, South Korea has gone from being relatively weak to being stronger in terms of diplomacy and trade - the ROK's ties to its neighbours and major world powers displays how it strikes a balance between security, trade, and strategic goals in a world that is always changing.

South Korea's Relationships with U.S.

The United States and its ties with Seoul's foreign policy is still mostly based on its alliance with the United States and South Korea. The 1953 Mutual Defence Treaty, which was signed after the Korean War, created a long-term security alliance that is still in place today (Yale Law School 2008). The United States provides long-term deterrence and military support, stationing approximately 28,000 troops on the peninsula to guard against potential aggression from North Korea (Snyder, 2018). The alliance has grown into a broad partnership that includes military cooperation as well as trade, technology, and coordination of global security. The KORUS Free Trade Agreement (2012) made the economies of the two countries even more dependent on each other. Recent collaborations in the semiconductor and defence sectors have further fortified their strategic connections (Sohn and Koo, 2011). Still, there is tension in this union. People in South Korea often talk about how much the country depends on the United States, especially when things change in the area and Washington's policies towards China and North Korea change (Snyder 2018, 202).



South Korea’s Relationships with China

South Korea and China rely on one another although there is some uncertainty in their relationship. China quickly became South Korea's biggest trading partner after diplomatic ties were restored in 1992, where a large part of South Korea's electronics and intermediate goods exports went to China (Yong, 2015). China has played a big role in South Korea's economic growth, but the two countries are still being careful with their political ties. China makes it hard for Seoul to work with other countries. In 2017, China was very against the THAAD missile defense system being put in place, which included informal economic sanctions and boycotts of businesses (Snyder, 2018). However, despite the existence of these problems, South Korea still collaborates with China in a practical way to maintain the positive effects on its economy and regional security, in having good relations with Beijing.

South Korea’s Relationships with Japan

The relationship between South Korea and Japan is still one of South Korea's most difficult foreign policy issues. The historical context of Japan's colonial rule from 1910 to 1945 still affects how the two countries get along, especially when it comes to issues like forced labour, sexual slavery during wartime, and the Dokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute (Dudden, 2008). Nonetheless, both nations share significant economic and security interests. They are both U.S. allies, liberal democracies, and industrial economies that have issues with North Korea and China. Although there were times when people have tried to improve relations, like the 2015 "comfort women" agreement and recent trilateral summits with the U.S. These demonstrate that cooperation is essential, even in contexts of low public trust (Armstrong, 2013). Thus, the relationship is based on strategic necessity instead of that of emotional woes.

South Korea’s Relationships with North Korea

The most important thing in South Korea's foreign relations is still North Korea. The two countries have been at war since 1953 with an erratic relationship, going back and forth between fighting and being careful. Liberal governments, especially those of Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-Hyun, pushed for the Sunshine Policy from 1998 to 2008. It strived to bring people together and make the economy better (Jonsson, 2017). On the other hand, conservative governments have always prioritized punishment and deterrence. The inter-Korean summits in 2018 gave people hope for peace in the short term, but North Korea's persistence in nuclear production has exacerbated things (Snyder, 2018). South Korea still wants peace and the Korean Peninsula to be free of nuclear weapons, but it is completely reliant on if North Korea and other countries, like the US, China, and Russia, work together



South Korea's Relationships with Russia

The relationship between South Korea and Russia is useful but not very strong. Since diplomatic relations were restored in 1990, the main areas of cooperation have been trade, logistics, and security in the region. Russia has some power over the Korean Peninsula because it is a member of the UN Security Council and was involved in the former Six-Party Talks (Yong, 2021). However, the connection hasn't been very strong. South Korea is friends with the United States while Russia is closer to North Korea. Things took a turn during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. South Korea's joined sanctions against Russia, but it has not sent weapons directly to Ukraine (Lee and Wiegand, 2024). South Korea still works with Russia, but only in a few areas, notably in energy and transportation. Overall, Russia's relations with Korea are still not nearly as important as with the U.S. or China.

South Korea as a Middle Power

South Korea has become a middle power in the last few decades. The country uses its diplomatic reach by working with other countries and utilizes its soft power to shape events around the world. South Korea is a member of groups like the G20, OECD, and United Nations, where it helps with climate policy, peacekeeping, and development aid (Mo, 2016). K-pop, films, and technology are some of the cultural exports that have propelled its reputation around the world. These have turned into tools of "K-diplomacy" (Sohn and Koo, 2011). South Korea's biggest problem as a middle power is staying independent while balancing the United States and China's conflicting interests. Yoon Suk Yeol's governance has focused on working more closely with Washington and building stronger ties with Japan. While the new Lee Jae-Myung administration is seemingly trying to court closer relations with China, North Korea while maintaining good ties with Japan and the United States. Therefore, South Korea as a Middle Power must balance its own interests against the interests of neighboring states and superpowers.



Evaluation

South Korea is cautious about how much it depends on and how much it is independent from its neighbors and major powers. The U.S. alliance is still important for its safety, and trade with China is still important for its growth. Historical issues with Japan still make it hard for diplomats in the area to do their jobs, as the peninsula is still divided, and North Korea will always be at the top of Seoul's strategic list. Because of its growing economic and diplomatic strength, South Korea is now seen as a respectable middle power. Its success relies on keeping this balance. It needs to balance and work with these powerful countries while still having enough freedom to choose its own path. As the United States and China rivalry intensifies, South Korea's foreign policy will be an example for how a medium-power democracy walks a tight line between the US-China rivalry.

Participation in International Organizations or Efforts

South Korea's worldwide journey is a unique and interesting scenario in modern global politics. It is the only country that successfully moved from being a large beneficiary of official development assistance (ODA) to joining the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in 2010 (OECD, 2024). This amazing turnaround, termed the "Miracle on the Han River," serves as the foundation for the country's present foreign policy, which is motivated by its aim to be a responsible and successful "middle power."

For decades after the Korean War, Seoul's diplomatic efforts were naturally centered on peninsular security and economic survival. However, as its economic might grew, ROK diplomacy broadened, with a strategic emphasis on multilateralism to win a stronger role in global governance. This cooperation is more than just symbolic; it is a deliberate effort to utilize its unique development experience as a diplomatic advantage.

The core argument of this paper is that the Republic of Korea's modern diplomacy is characterized by its strategic and increasing engagement within key multilateral institutions (UN, G20, OECD DAC) to leverage its successful development experience, secure a voice in global governance, and project its commitment as a responsible middle power, particularly in economic stability, international security, and climate action. This paper will first examine ROK's leadership in economic and ODA spheres, followed by its contributions to peace and security, and finally, its pivotal role in addressing transnational issues.

Economic Development and Global Financial Governance

South Korea's economic presence in global affairs is organized through its strategic participation in the world's most influential financial and development organizations. This engagement is primarily made by its ability to share a proven "development template"—a model built on rapid industrialization and successful post-war reconstruction.

The 2010 entrance to the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) was a diplomatic milestone, formalizing South Korea's transition from recipient to donor status. Having received approximately $13 billion in aid between 1945 and 1995 (OECD, 2021), ROK's ability to host the 4th High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan (2011) was symbolic, demonstrating its unique authority to "bridge the gap between being recipients and providers of development co operation" (OECD, 2021). Its ODA, coordinated primarily by the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), is guided by the philosophy of providing lessons in fiscal discipline and capacity building, often utilizing concessional loans alongside grants, a practice rooted in its own historical experience (Donor Tracker).

South Korea's involvement in the G20 further shows its middle power diplomacy. Hosting the 2010 G20 Summit in Seoul—the first non-G7 country to do so—allowed ROK to broaden the agenda beyond crisis recovery and financial reform to include development and global financial safety nets (MOFA ROK). ROK leveraged its position to act as a "bridge state" between advanced and emerging economies, using its own successful management of financial crises to propose attainable outcomes, such as reforms to the IMF's financial facilities (ResearchGate). This diplomatic approach aims to strengthen the G20's credibility by demonstrating that it can address issues affecting the entire developing globe, not just the traditional economic heavyweights.

While South Korea's ODA commitment is growing, reaching 0.21% of GNI in 2024 (preliminary statistics) and aiming for 0.3% by 2030 (Donor Tracker), it continues to receive criticism for the quality of its aid. The ODA/GNI ratio remains below the established DAC average, ranking 26th among DAC donors in relative terms (OECD, 2024).

More significantly, ROK maintains a high proportion of concessional loans (~30% of gross ODA in 2023) and has historically struggled with "tied aid"—aid conditioned on procuring goods or services from the donor country (OECD, 2024). Although South Korea has pledged to increase the share of untied grants to 95% by 2025, scholars argue that the country's ODA is still influenced by national and strategic economic interests rather than purely humanitarian or development goals (East Asia Forum, 2022). Nonetheless, the Republic of Korea's strategy of allocating a significant portion of its aid to Lower Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) and Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations (FCAS) demonstrates a clear, strategic effort to engage where positive impact is most needed, particularly in areas such as healthcare infrastructure and humanitarian assistance (Donor Tracker; EJIDC, 2023).

Contributions to International Peace and Security

South Korea's security stance has undergone a comparable change. The Republic of Korea, which was once the principal receiver of UN collective security, is now positioning itself as a contributor. Its three non-permanent terms on the UN Security Council (including 2024-2025) have been applied to highlight North Korean threats while also combating non-traditional concerns such as counter-terrorism finance, cybersecurity, and the Women, Peace, and Security agenda (MOFA ROK). This broader perspective is intentional: it boosts worldwide legitimacy while exhibiting expert understanding on complex topics.

On the field, South Korea has contributed to UN Peacekeeping Operations since the 1990s, deploying specialized, non-combat units that marry security with development expertise (Roehrig, 2013). The Hanbit Engineering Unit in South Sudan (UNMISS) rebuilds roads and delivers humanitarian aid; the Cheonghae Unit in the Gulf of Aden guards maritime trade routes against piracy (KEIA). Both embody a peacebuilding-through-assistance model that feels distinctly Korean.

As a state living under a nuclear shadow, Seoul remains a main defender of the non-proliferation regime. It stays compliant with the NPT and CTBT, hosted the 2012 Seoul Nuclear Security Summit, and pushes disarmament education resolutions at the UN General Assembly (MOFA ROK; NTI). These moves serve dual purposes: they reinforce global norms while shielding national interests.



Transnational Issues and Global Governance

South Korea's most forward-thinking diplomacy focuses on the planet's two shared crises: sustainable development and climate change. The 2008 "Low Carbon, Green Growth" approach went beyond domestic policy and became an exportable model (GGGI). Hosting the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) in Seoul and the UN Green Climate Fund (GCF) in Incheon provides the Republic of Korea significant influence over climate financing and green policy frameworks. Climate objectives increasingly pervade its ODA portfolio, with an increasing proportion targeted for mitigation and adaptation initiatives (OECD DAC). The 2021 P4G Summit demonstrated Seoul's convening skills. By linking aid to green results, South Korea demonstrates that its development expertise may help countries accelerate their transition to sustainability.



Conclusion

Having watched South Korea’s journey from aid recipient to OECD-DAC donor, there is a coherent diplomatic identity taking shape. The ROK leverages its history across three pillars: economic leadership via the G20 and targeted ODA; security provision through UNSC terms and niche PKO contributions; and transnational influence by anchoring the GCF and GGGI. The road ahead hinges on quality, not just quantity. Raising the ODA/GNI ratio, fully untying aid, and translating institutional investments into political clout will determine how far this middle power story travels. If Seoul can balance regional tensions with global partnership, it may yet prove that a nation once written off can become indispensable in tackling the world’s toughest challenges.

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The Rise of Esports in South Korea

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7



Introduction

Esports, which stands for electronic sports, are online gaming competitions where amateur and professional gamers participate in organised leagues, either in teams or as an individual, to win a monetary prize. (Comstock, 2025) Esports functions similarly to traditional sports, in terms of having professional players, leagues and tournaments, brand sponsorships and large-scale live and online viewership through streaming platforms. (Zuritsky, 2025)

Esports in South Korea

South Korea is widely known as one of the world's biggest esports markets, attributed to its avid gaming culture. The rapid expansion of esports in South Korea is driven by South Korean's love for technology and its high-speed internet that is widely available. This rapid expansion has also resulted in the video game industry revenue in South Korea to increase by more than doubled. South Korea's gamer penetration is high with 71% of its population being video game players in 2021. (Intenta Digital, n.d.)

The most popular esports games in Korea include League of Legends, PUBG, Overwatch and StarCraft. (Anyaa, 2022)

Firstly, League of Legends (LoL) is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game that is also Korea's most popular esports game, with high stakes of millions of dollars in the prize pool. The game contains champions with special abilities and the goal of players is to destroy their opponent's main base. (Anyaa, 2022)

Secondly, Player Unknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG) is a battle royale game where the player's objective is to kill each other in order to become the last person standing. PUBG is also one of the world's biggest battle royale esports games. (Karunakar, 2025)

Thirdly, Overwatch is a first-person shooter (FPS) game where players are split into two teams of six to compete in various missions depending on the map of the game. (Anyaa, 2022)

Fourthly, Starcraft: Brood War is a real-time strategy game that gained its popularity in Korea in the 1900s and it is one of the earliest esports games being played. (Anyaa, 2022)

Historical Background of esports

In the early 1990s, the South Korean government started planning for Korea to be an advanced information society with the plan to implement policies known as "jeongbohwa", also known as "informisation". This is part of their future plan for Korea to be the global center for information and communication technologies, which will allow Korea to compete with other nations. The first step to achieve this goal was to build a national broadband network that delivers high-speed broadband internet across South Korea. With the introduction of the national broadband network, it gave rise to online gaming in Korea. (Rea, 2016)

In order to mitigate the high cost of broadband subscriptions, the government also built community access centers, which are public spaces for Koreans to access the Internet for free. However, these centers were not well managed and due to the lack of funding, broadband subscriptions were still low. Furthermore, due to the financial crisis in late 1997, the government had to shut down the community access centers. (Rea, 2016)

The crisis also caused many workers to lose their jobs. However, this gave rise to private entrepreneurial projects that includes PC bang, which is an internet cafe in Korea. Not only did these PC bangs provide Koreans with a space to access the internet at an affordable cost, it helped build a social gaming culture among youths. From 1997 to 1999, the number of PC bangs in Korea grew rapidly as Koreans valued it for its cheap and reliable access to online games, as well as high-speed connections that were required to play the online games. (Rea, 2016)

In 1999, StarCraft: Brood War was introduced to Korea and this was the main driving factor for the rise of esports in Korea. StarCraft became the most popular game played among the male population at that time. Moreover, as cable television channels started broadcasting StarCraft matches regularly, esports started to gain even more attention from Koreans. received a significant amount of attention. (ESI, 2023) PC bangs were no longer just used to play games but Koreans started going to PC bangs to watch others play. (Rea, 2016)



The combination of high-speed connection, affordable access points like PC bangs, and the introduction and media broadcast of StarCraft, laid the foundation for esports league and global esports culture and gave rise to the popularity of esports.

Cultural Significance of esports - Recognition & Social Acceptance

Increase in Recognition of Gaming From Pastime to Legitimate Sport

Esports has seen an increase in recognition and legitimisation in South Korea. What started out initially as a "National Pastime" - as coined by The NewYork Times - has been steadily gaining ground as a recognised sport and career pathway in recent years since the early 2000s (Mozur, 2014). In 2000, the South Korean government established the Korea Esports Association (KeSPA) to commercialise and grow competitive online gaming into a real sport (Haps Korea Magazine, 2025). This was in response to the flourishing gaming scene at that point in time, where a year earlier in 1999, the popular game StarCraft by American company Blizzard Entertainment was introduced to the South Korean market. PC bangs started gaining traction for providing high-speed internet access to the game, making it a popular hangout among locals. To capitalise on this culture and commercialise it for the good of the economy, the government ramped up its efforts to promote esports. KeSPA began broadcasting esports tournaments, started the KeSPA Cup, and also notably lobbied for providing professional gamers with a minimum salary. The government also funded a $3 billion project, comprising an esports training centre built in Seoul and an esports arena in Busan (Haps Korea Magazine, 2025).

It was not long before Korean esports started gaining a global following, with pro Korean StarCraft gamers dominating international competitions. Their successes also played a big part in strengthening and solidifying the popularity of esports and StarCraft domestically. These successes also led to the formation of the first World Cyber Games (WCG), jointly established by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, the Ministry of Information and Communication, as well as Samsung. This Olympics-style esports tournament was first held in 2000 in Seoul, with President Kim Dae-jung recorded in a video segment saying that he hoped that the WCG would help boost South Korea's reputation as a leader in gaming, the knowledge industry and in IT infrastructure. He also hoped that WCG would help foster friendships among young people with a love for gaming internationally. (Rea, 2016)



In addition to government-led initiatives to legitimise and recognise gaming as an actual sport, academia also played and continues to play a key role in developing young esports talents. Schools began launching esports training programmes, supported by bills passed in 2011 by the Korean National Assembly (Haps Korea Magazine, 2025). For example in 2014, Chung-Ang University extended its admission criteria to allow talented esports professionals a chance to apply for a spot in the university's Department of Sport Science. Another example is that in 2019, Gen.G, a Korean esports organisation, collaborated with Elite Open School, a global education company, to launch the Gen.G Elite Esports Academy in Seoul. The school's offerings included US-recognised education and students are awarded with an American high school diploma upon graduation. Furthermore, Gen.G also partnered with the University of Kentucky and International Studies Abroad to run a global esports exchange programme in 2021. This initiative allowed international students to study esports at Hanyang or Korea University over a four-week period. (Esports Insider, 2023) This demonstrated to the South Korean public that esports could be carved out as a legitimate life path, complete with educational qualifications, and respected as any other job role. Moreover, competitive gaming rose to become the fifth most popular career choice among youths in the country (Haps Korea Magazine, 2025).

Esports players have not only seen an increase in acceptance for their career paths, but are also becoming more esteemed and celebrated by the public. Esports players, such as the legendary former player Lim Yo-hwan famed for his incredible skill and successes in StarCraft, are considered as cultural icons, on par with musicians and other celebrities (Haps Korea Magazine, 2025). In fact in recent years, esports players have been hosting fan meet and greet events domestically and abroad. This year in 2025, Faker, whose real name is Lee Sang-Hyeok, held a fan meeting in Razer's Singapore headquarters. Around 1,000 fans showed up for the event for a chance to meet the League of Legends Hall of Famer (Teoh, 2025).

Moreover, there is a possibility that professional South Korean esports athletes can earn themselves exemption from compulsory military service. In 2023, esports was officially introduced as a full medal event in the 2023 Asian Games (Seo, 2023). For South Korean athletes, winning a gold medal in the Asian Games or the Olympic Games bestows on them not just honour and fame, but also exemption from the mandated three years of service to the country. By including esports as a recognised sport in the games, esports hopefuls stand a chance to be fully waived of this obligation if they clinch gold. Previously, the likes of Son Heung-min, professional footballer and captain of Tottenham Hotspur soccer team, as well as Oh Sang-uk, a sabre fencer and multi-time Olympic and Asian Games medallist, was awarded the exemption for winning gold for South Korea (Seo, 2023). This marks a big milestone for the gaming industry in South Korea, as esports athletes can now enjoy the same privileges once reserved only for athletes of traditionally-recognised sports.



Challenges and Criticism - Balancing Gaming Culture with Concerns of Addiction

With the rise of the growing influence of esports, public discourse and concerns about gaming addictions and its harmful consequences have also surfaced over the years, especially its impact on young teens. There were a number of deaths linked to digital gaming that were widely publicised across the country, sparking concerns among politicians, child advocacy groups and medical professionals about the wider social repercussions that problem gaming had in South Korean society. It was reported that while statistics on the rate of internet addiction - which was a broader category comprising gaming addiction - showed that the percentage of South Koreans addicted to the Internet had dropped from 8.8% in 2008 to 6.9% in 2014, the number of South Koreans at risk of developing an addiction had jumped from below 2 million in 2008 to over 2.6 million in 2014 (Rea, 2016). This number was not just significant but alarming, as it was estimated to make up 5% of South Korea's total population. To compound matters, the addiction rate among young teens also sharply increased to 12.5% and has been increasing at a steady rate since 2011 (Rea, 2016).

Apart from gaming addictions, the public also began to view PC bangs - which were once celebrated icons of innovation in the early 2000s - as shady places that provide rebellious youths with a place to engage in "improper or even dangerous" digital games away from their parents' watch. A director of a centre for treating game addictions in Seoul was quoted to have said that he viewed "unhealthy individualization" as the biggest threat that excessive gaming posed to society. He elaborated that game addicts are immersed in their own world and are not focused on the real world, and he feared that it could lead to a fragmented society in the future (Rea, 2016).





In 2011, the Shutdown Law was introduced by the South Korean government as a measure to combat the social impact of gaming addictions among adolescents. The law stipulated that children under the age of 16 were banned from playing online computer games from 12am to 6am (Bahk, 2021). This mandated curfew was implemented to ensure that children could get enough sleep and to safeguard their health. Though well-intentioned from a social perspective as a way to reduce the growing national rate of gaming addiction and to protect youths, it became a point of great contention and debate. The law had a negative impact on esports, as it meant that pro-esports players under 16 were unable to compete in matches that required them to be present online after 12am. One such case was that of Lee Seung-hyeon, who was competing in a qualifying match in a StarCraft II tournament in 2012 (Rea, 2016). When he realised that it was soon approaching midnight and that he would be disconnected from the game, he made the decision to pull off a risky attack even though it was not an ideal strategy. This unfortunately led to him losing the match. While the event organisers still decided to award him a place in the finals as they recognised that the Shutdown Law had affected his performance, this incident still reflects the detrimental impact on the esports scene. It also showed that there was a clear distinction between gaming addiction and esports, and that the latter had unintentionally been tarnished and affected due to the Shutdown Law that totally banned youths from gaming after hours, whether casual or professional.

Fortunately, things started turning around for the esports scene when The Shutdown Law was abolished in 2021, 10 years after the ban was introduced. Ministries were quoted by The Korea Times to have said that the law was “outdated”, did not have “any positive effect, and did “not reflect changes in the gaming environment”. The government also said that “Contrary to the initial goal of protecting children, the state unilaterally limited game use and this could infringe on children's right to self-determination”. (Bahk, 2021) Moreover in November 2023, a bill was introduced by the Gyeonggi Provincial Assembly to help young esports players balance competition and educational demands and become more well-rounded (Haps Korea Magazine, 2025).

Economic Impact of Esports

From a financial point of view, esports in South Korea has been aiding the economy. In South Korea, revenue in the esports market is projected to reach US$321.3m in 2025, and this revenue is expected to show an annual growth rate (CAGR 2025-2029) of 6.33%, resulting in a projected market volume of US$410.6m by 2029. (Statista, 2024) Moreover, the number of users is expected to reach 12.2m users by 2029, with user penetration hitting 23.8%. These figures demonstrate how esports has evolved from a niche subculture into a key digital industry with both economic and cultural significance.

However, to understand the structure behind this rapid growth, it is important to recognise that Korean professional sports were never originally designed to be commercially viable. Most domestic leagues — including the oldest and most popular one, baseball — were established during the 1980s military regime not as entrepreneurial ventures, but as a way to divert public attention from politics. (Won-Chul Bing, 2021) While the political environment has since changed, the non-profit ownership model has persisted. Teams traditionally operated at a financial loss, relying on their parent chaebol to foot the bills and frame the enterprise as a form of community service or national branding, rather than as a profit-making enterprise.

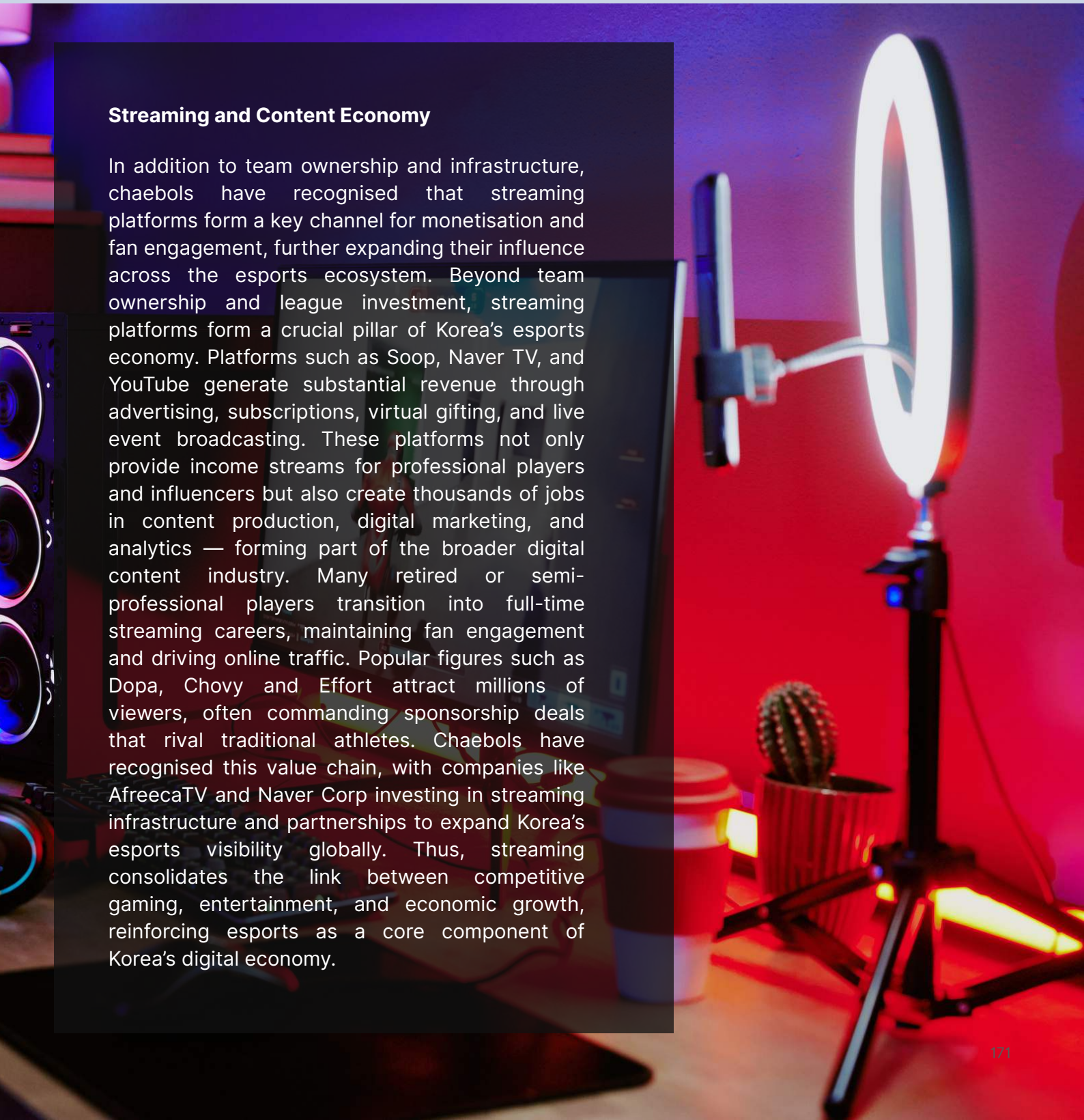
Ownership and Investment by Chaebols

Building on this legacy, the boom of Korea's modern esports industry is heavily driven by investments from large conglomerates, or chaebols, that view esports as both a cultural and commercial opportunity. Their involvement has evolved from simple sponsorship to full-scale ownership, infrastructure investment and even global brand expansion.

A prominent example is Nongshim Co Ltd, a food and beverage giant known for its instant noodle brand "Shin Ramyun". In 2020, Nongshim acquired 88% of the esports team formerly known as Team Dynamics, rebranding as Nongshim RedForce and entering Korea's top-tier League of Legends Champions Korea (LCK). (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2021) This move exemplifies how Korean conglomerates are treating esports as part of their corporate growth and branding strategy. The company itself noted that "Shin Ramyun dreams to become a global superstar" in its 2020 annual report, positioning esports as a channel to engage younger audiences and expand international visibility.



Other major chaebols have followed similar paths. SK Telecom, a leading telecom company, established a joint-venture with U.S. media company Comcast Spectacor in 2019 to expand globally in the esports market. Other conglomerates such as Hyundai Motor Co, Hanwha Group's Hanwha Life Insurance and KT Corp have also launched or invested in professional esports teams, digital content platforms, and related technologies to strengthen their foothold in this rapidly growing industry. In addition, companies like T1 Entertainment & Sports, which is backed by SK Telecom, have invested heavily in training facilities, content studios, and streaming platforms, reflecting a broader ecosystem approach. By taking ownership and investing in teams and leagues, chaebols are not merely sponsoring but actively embedding themselves in the esports ecosystem, giving them leverage over talent, infrastructure, branding and global expansion.



Streaming and Content Economy

In addition to team ownership and infrastructure, chaebols have recognised that streaming platforms form a key channel for monetisation and fan engagement, further expanding their influence across the esports ecosystem. Beyond team ownership and league investment, streaming platforms form a crucial pillar of Korea's esports economy. Platforms such as Soop, Naver TV, and YouTube generate substantial revenue through advertising, subscriptions, virtual gifting, and live event broadcasting. These platforms not only provide income streams for professional players and influencers but also create thousands of jobs in content production, digital marketing, and analytics — forming part of the broader digital content industry. Many retired or semi-professional players transition into full-time streaming careers, maintaining fan engagement and driving online traffic. Popular figures such as Dopa, Chovy and Effort attract millions of viewers, often commanding sponsorship deals that rival traditional athletes. Chaebols have recognised this value chain, with companies like AfreecaTV and Naver Corp investing in streaming infrastructure and partnerships to expand Korea's esports visibility globally. Thus, streaming consolidates the link between competitive gaming, entertainment, and economic growth, reinforcing esports as a core component of Korea's digital economy.



Advertising and Marketing

Alongside content creation and streaming, sponsorships and advertising represent another critical avenue through which chaebols and teams monetise esports and reach broader audiences. The advertising and sponsorship landscape within Korean esports content includes both endemic and non-endemic brands, where endemic sponsors are brands whose products or services are directly related to esports; whereas non-endemic sponsors come from outside the gaming ecosystem, yet want to tap the esports audience.

In the context of LCK, non-endemic sponsors have become increasingly important. An analysis of LCK sponsorship found that non-endemic sponsors, such as Woori Bank, feature prominently, and that food chain brands such as McDonald's or BBQ Chicken have formed partnerships. (ESports Charts, 2024) For example, in 2021 the LCK partnered with McDonald's, and in 2022-23 with the BBQ Chicken chain. From a chaebol perspective, this creates multiple advertising and marketing opportunities. A chaebol-owned team can serve both as a brand ambassador and a marketing platform, integrating company branding directly into broadcasts, jerseys, and events. Meanwhile, the league itself provides advertising inventory for non-endemic consumer brands from food and finance to automotive and telecommunications, seeking youth and digital audiences. Thus, chaebols leverage the dual role of "team owner" and "marketing platform". They benefit from endemic-relevant branding (tech, gaming lifestyle) while also opening up to non-endemic sponsorships (food, banks, auto, F&B) to amplify broader consumer reach.

Soft power influence

Beyond its economic dimension, esports plays a growing role in Korea's soft power strategy. The global visibility of Korean teams and players has elevated the country's cultural influence and brand associations significantly. Korean success at international events — such as the gold medal in global League of Legends at the 2022 Asian Games — highlights how esports has become a source of national prestige and a soft-power tool. These victories draw huge attention and are favourably covered by global media, raising Korea's profile and raising Korea's profile and reinforcing its reputation as a global leader in technology, digital culture, and competitive entertainment.



Beyond competition, esports also intersects with the broader Hallyu (Korean Wave) phenomenon, where K-pop, digital media, and gaming reinforce each other. An example would be LE SSERAFIM's partnership with Blizzard Entertainment's Overwatch 2 that brought stylish new skins — and Bouncer BOB from the "Perfect Night" video — to the game in March 2025. In July 2025, another K-pop girl group AESPA teamed up with PUBG: Battlegrounds for a global collaboration that included a new single titled "Dark Arts" released alongside themed in-game content such as AESPA-inspired character skins, weapon cosmetics and map updates. The event also features a launch film blending PUBG's battle-royale visuals with AESPA's futuristic aesthetic, and a live performance of "Dark Arts" at the PUBG Nations Cup 2025.



PUBG x aespa Dome styled after an aespa concert venue : PUBG Battlegrounds



PUBG x aespa Dome styled after an aespa concert venue : PUBG Battlegrounds

These collaborations illustrate how Korean pop culture and gaming converge to reach global audiences, blurring the boundaries between entertainment and esports. They extend Korea's cultural exports beyond music and television into gaming, amplifying its image as a hub of digital innovation and creativity. In this way, esports functions not only as a commercial industry but as a strategic vehicle of Korean soft power — promoting national culture, technology, and lifestyle worldwide.

Tourism

Hosting major international esports competitions does not only create hype, but also fuels tourism and broader economic activity. The 2023 League of Legends World Championship showed the industry's tourism effect, with 15% of the Gocheok Sky Dome in Seoul filled with foreign nationals, and over 15,000 global and domestic fans gathered for live street event at Gwanghuamun Square. The tournament pulled in visitors who spent on hotels, food, transport and entertainment well beyond the venues themselves. Building on this momentum, the Korea Tourism Organisation (KTO) has launched esports-themed programs, featuring mega fan meetups with Korean professional gamers and LoL coaching sessions, visits to the national LoL club and experiences related to the local PC-bang culture. Together, these events and programs show how esports act as a cultural magnet, drawing global travellers while injecting new spending, visibility and long-tail economic value into Korea's tourism ecosystem.



Overall, South Korea's esports sector has evolved into a significant engine of economic activity, driven by a combination of chaebol investment, a rapidly expanding consumer base, and a diverse revenue ecosystem that spans teams, streaming platforms, sponsorships, and live events. The industry's projected revenue growth and rising user penetration show how esports has matured into a stable digital market with substantial commercial potential. Major conglomerates now treat esports as a strategic investment, building infrastructure, acquiring teams, and leveraging the industry for branding and global expansion, while streaming and advertising create additional layers of monetisation and employment. Tourism generated by international competitions further amplifies these economic benefits by pulling in foreign visitors and stimulating local spending. Altogether, these factors demonstrate that esports contributes meaningfully to South Korea's economy, functioning as a modern, multifaceted industry whose financial impact extends well beyond the competitive arena.

Government Support in esports

Since the early 2000s, the South Korean government has played a key role in the development of esports. In this section, I will cover its provision of institutional, financial and education support over the past 25 years.

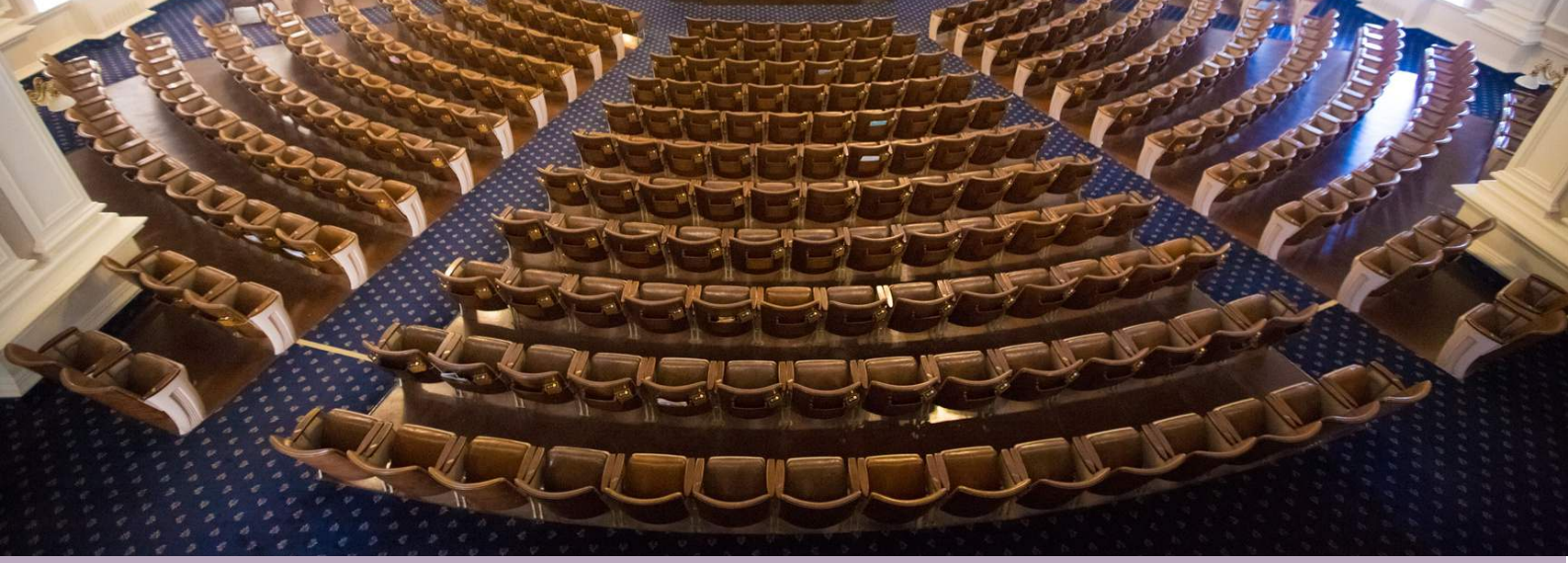
Main institution: KeSPA

Mentioned in an earlier section is the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA), established by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (CST) on February 29, 2000. According to the organisation's Linkedin page and official website, it functions as the sole "governing body accredited by the government" and is an associate member of the Korean Olympics Committee. At KeSPA's inaugural meeting in 2000, then Minister of CST Park Jie-won coined the term "esports" (Jin, 2020; Min, 2006).

KeSPA aims to foster a "healthy leisure culture" for esports through the management of athletes, teams, and competitions. It also works toward the recognition of esports as a legitimate sport in South Korea (KeSPA, n.d.). For example, it contributed significantly to the construction of the Yongsan Esports Stadium in 2005 under a business partnership with Hyundai Station. Although it was relocated to Sangam-dong in 2016 by the government, the arena operated as one of the world's first esports stadiums for approximately 11 years (Park, 2016; The Electronic Times, 2005).

Legislature

Legally, esports was recognised by the government through the 2012 "Act on Promotion of e-Sports", the first dedicated framework for the specific field. It was passed "to establish infrastructure for the culture and industry of e-sports, enhance competitiveness in e-sports, and contribute to increasing people's opportunities to enjoy leisure time with e-sports and the robust development of the national economy by providing for matters necessary to promote e-sports".



The Act defined the key terms of esports, allocated resources nationally and internationally, and provided the legal basis for the industry (Korea Legislation Research Institute, 2012). Previously, the Act on the Promotion of the Game Industry (Korea Law Information Center, 2006) primarily focused on regulation policies for the gaming sector as a whole, rather than on esports.

In August 2021, the National Assembly voted in favour of abolishing its "Shutdown Law", a decade after its enactment. Also known as the "Cinderella Law", the curfew had banned children under 16 from playing online computer games between midnight and 6 a.m, and was pushed by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. However, it was met with criticism from the gaming industry, scholars, and members of the public (The Korea Herald, 2021).

News outlet Reuters compared South Korea with China, the world's largest esports commercial market. The latter had "drastically limited the amount of time under-18s can spend on video games to a mere three hours a week". It was also reported that Mr Park Se-woon, vice-president at Seoul Game Academy, said: "China's game regulation could be a rather good opportunity for us to build strength and regain the e-sports initiative" (Roh, 2021).

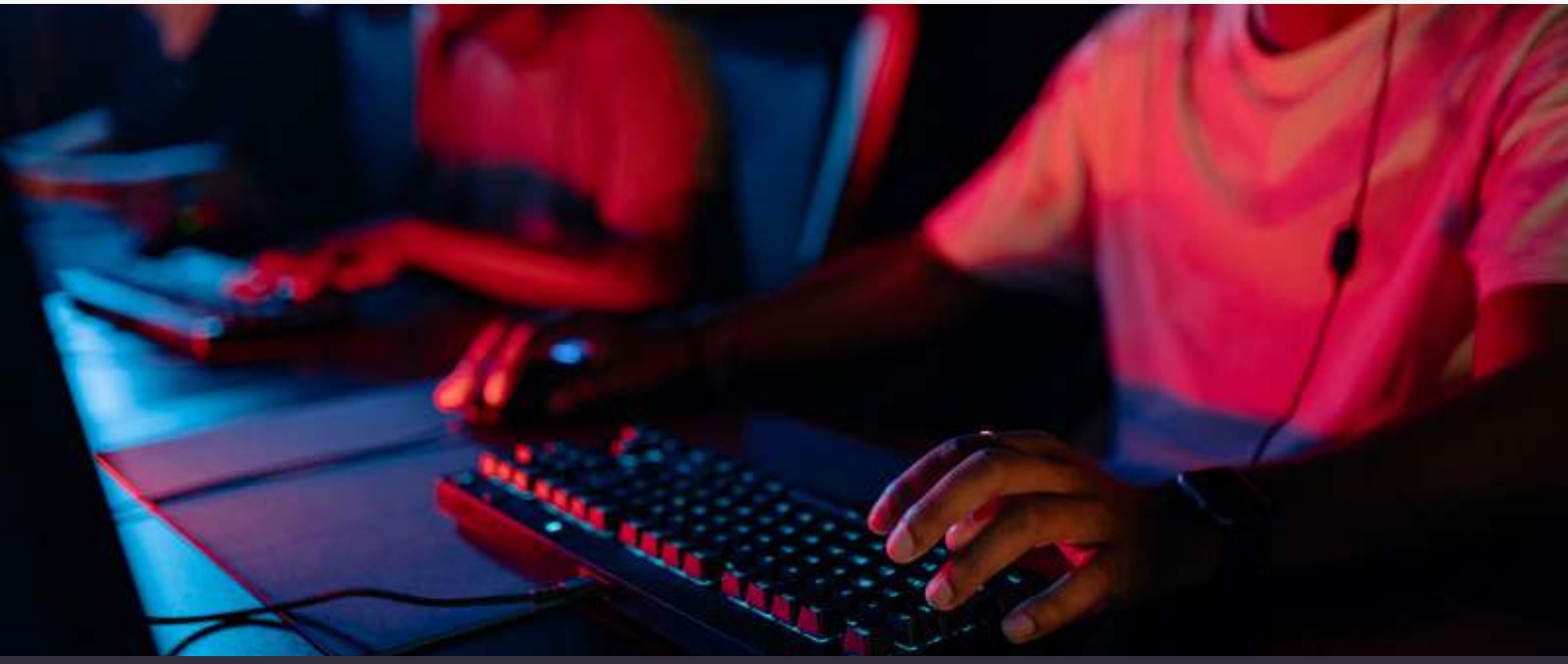
Education

The nation's recognition of esports also extends to its legitimacy as a career path. Intenta Digital (n.d.) said: "It [South Korea] has a grassroots ecosystem that enables more young people to follow their dreams to become professional gamers."

Supported by the above legislative changes, numerous schools in South Korea have incorporated esports in their school curricula. One such example is Eunpyeong Meditech High School, where students can major in esports. "The curriculum is divided into different tracks: the player track focuses on honing practical skills and teaching data analysis techniques for improving gameplay, while the other track covers basics like computer graphics and video production" (Lee, 2024). The high school even created an official "High School E-Sports Practice" textbook – the first in Korea – which teaches popular games as practice subjects. Since the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education authorised the textbook, it has been used in formal classes (Park, 2021).

At the university level, Dongyang University has a four-year esports programme, the first in the metropolitan area, that "trains students to become professionals in areas such as planning and organising esports tournaments, as well as game programming for gaming companies" (Lee, 2025). At South Korea's first graduate school of interdisciplinary convergence for esports set up by Hanshin University in 2021, students are awarded a Master of Science degree (Kan, 2021; Im, 2022).

Besides the aforementioned contributions made by the South Korean government, the most recent form includes “Game e-Sports Seoul”. Organised by the Seoul Metropolitan Government and the Seoul Business Agency, it is a 3-day annual festival that began in 2024 that holds conferences, competitions, as well as exhibitions for both gamers and fans (Lee, 2025). Therefore, owing to the government’s early acknowledgement of esports, the industry has been able to expand and flourish since the early 2000s.



Key esports Teams, Players and Competitions

Key esports Teams and Players

This section highlights three seminal figures in South Korea’s League LoL esports scene— Faker, Chovy, and Keria. Together, they illustrate the evolution of the League of Legends Champions Korea (LCK) from its domestic dominance to international prominence, through individual mastery, team-building, and global branding.

Faker from T1

One cannot discuss the Korean esports landscape, and specifically LoL esports, without mentioning legendary player Lee ‘Faker’ Sang-hyeok. Faker is one of the most recognisable names in South Korea, and he came in sixth in the Forbes Korea Power Celebrity 40 list in 2025 (Namuwiki, 2025).

Born on 7 May 1996, Faker started playing LoL in 2011 in high school when the game arrived in South Korea. He was scouted by T1 (then known as SK Telecom T1) in 2013 and dropped out of school to pursue a professional career (Christine, 2024). In the year of his debut, he won his first World Championship. Known for his electric mechanics, decision-making and champion pool, he earned the moniker “The Unkillable Demon King” (Meownk, 2025). He has been inducted into LoL’s “Hall of Legends”, created to celebrate players who have made a lasting impact on the game, as the first ever inductee (Contributors to Leaguepedia | League of Legends Esports Wiki, n.d.).

In 2024, T1 won their fifth LoL World Championship crown— the other years being 2023, 2016, 2015 and 2013 (The Straits Times, 2024). In the latest World Championship 2025, T1 emerged victorious again, beating KT Rolster 3-2 (Maas, 2025).

Today, Faker's estimated annual income is US$5 million. Apart from his salary, his income is boosted by side ventures such as investments in real estate, notably the Faker Tower located in his hometown Gangseo District, Seoul, which is rented to businesses (Griffin, 2025). Beyond competition, Faker also became co-owner of T1, demonstrating his influence extends into the esports business.

Chovy from Gen.G

Jeong "Chovy" Ji-hoon is a LoL player, 24 years old and currently mid-laner for Gen.G. Born on 3 March 2001, Chovy emerged as one of the most technically gifted mid-laners of his era. Unlike many early-era stars, his rapid ascent in the LCK was marked by high individual performance metrics and team mobility: from KeG Gwangju (2017) to Griffin (2018–2019) to DRX (2020) and Hanwha Life (2021) before landing at Gen.G from 2022 onwards.

Chovy is known for his impressive metrics, including win-rates above 78% among mid-laners in Korea, highest CS/min, and rapid kills milestones (Banerjee, 2025). He also holds the highest rank in Overwatch 2, a tier reserved for players with a Skill Rating (SR) of 4000 or higher (Eloboss, 2025).

Younger than Faker, with hyper-refined mechanics and statistical dominance, Chovy represents the "next-gen" mid-lane super-player.

His mobility among teams early on also reflects evolving team-structures in the LCK. As a figure, his drive toward a World Championship title is evident through his track record of excellence. His career in the making, seen as "unfinished business", is a contrast to Faker's patina of legacy.



Keria from T1

Ryu “Keria” Min-seok, born 14 October 2002 in Busan, is an emerging South Korean support-player for T1. Since his professional debut in 2020 with DRX Challengers and subsequent signing with T1, Keria has quickly ascended the ranks in both domestic and international competition. He is a two-time Worlds Champion (2023, 2024) with T1, with multiple LCK titles and All-Pro team honours as a support role. Known as “The Genius Monster,” his strategic vision, roaming support play style, and synergy with star-players, like his teammates Faker and Gumayusi, have been highly regarded.

Key competitions

League of Legends Champions Korea (LCK)

The LCK functions as Korea’s premier domestic league for LoL, featuring a franchise-based structure where teams compete through two split seasons, namely spring and summer, to qualify for international events. Its outcomes determine seedings for global tournaments and serve as the main talent pool for the region.

LCK serves as a direct route to qualification for the annual League of Legends World Championship (commonly abbreviated as Worlds). Success in the LCK is the first step in a team’s journey toward regional and global prestige. It provides a platform for player branding and organisational growth, influencing sponsorship, media rights, and fan engagement within Korea’s highly competitive market.

The LCK is jointly administered by Riot Games and the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA). It is co-hosted by Seoul and other cities. For example, in 2023, Seoul’s city government partnered with the league to host matches in Jamsil Gymnasium (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2023).

LCK 2025 is the fifth year of Korea's professional League of Legends league under partnership, and the fourteenth year of the league overall. LCK’s main sponsor is Woori Bank, a non-endemic brand — meaning it operates outside the esports industry and does not produce goods or services directly related to gaming.



LCK 2024’s broadcast overlay with several non-endemic sponsors named at the bottom of the screen. Source: Esports Charts

League of Legends World Championship (Worlds)

Worlds is the annual professional League of Legends world championship tournament hosted by Riot Games since 2011. It is the apex of LoL esports globally.

Worlds is the most watched esports event. In 2024, the final match between T1 and BiliBili Gaming peaked at 6.94 million peak viewers (Esports Charts, 2024). It was an intense tournament, keeping fans on the edge of their seats. South Korea's win was hard-fought, with Faker ultimately preventing the Chinese side from clinching its first world title.

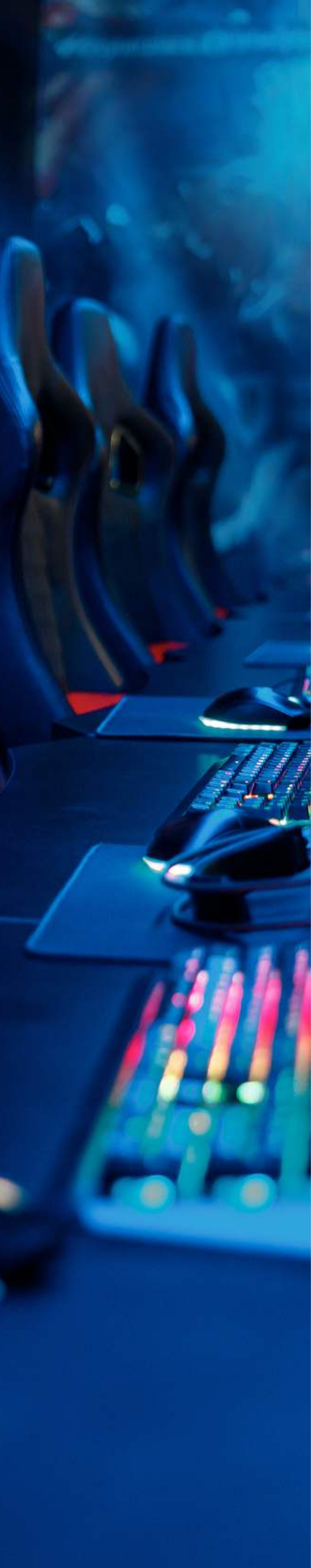
For Korean teams, success at Worlds cements legacy and national prestige. The performance of Korean teams in this event influences domestic funding, media coverage and enhances the visibility of individual players.

Korea Esports League (KEL)

Launched in 2025, the Korea Esports League (KEL) marks South Korea's first nationally structured, region-based multi-title esports league. Co-organised by KeSPA, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and major developers including Krafton, Nexon Korea and Nimble Neuron, KEL underscores Korea's government and industry commitment to esports as a national agenda.

The inaugural season features three competing titles: Battleground Mobile, Eternal Return and FC Mobile, representing shooter/battle-royale, MOBA/hybrid and sports simulation genres respectively (Ranjan, 2025). The league emphasises regional representation, with city- and province-based teams from Busan, Gwangju, Daejeon, Sejong and other districts. This reflects the government's intent to stimulate local esports infrastructure and fanbases (SportsChosun, 2025).





Comparison of Korea and Singapore's Esports Industry

Cultural Environment

Various factors as detailed above have led to a strong esports culture deeply ingrained in the fabric of South Korea. The confluence of support structures like high-speed internet infrastructure, dedicated gaming cafes (PC bangs), government support, and widespread societal acceptance have shaped South Korean esports culture into its present-day form. Pro gamers are revered as celebrities and national icons, and this respect extends to tangible benefits; South Korean gold medal winners in esports at the 2022 Asian Games were granted military service exemptions. In Singapore, persistent social stigma and structural challenges remain. The pro gaming career path is seen as risky and unstable compared to traditional jobs. Tier 2 players can struggle to earn a sustainable income, and even top players often rely on supplementary income streams like streaming or coaching.

Hence, while the traditional view in Singapore has been one of skepticism, the culture is shifting slowly, especially in the younger generations; Singapore still has a ways to go to establish a more supportive ecosystem for professional esports.

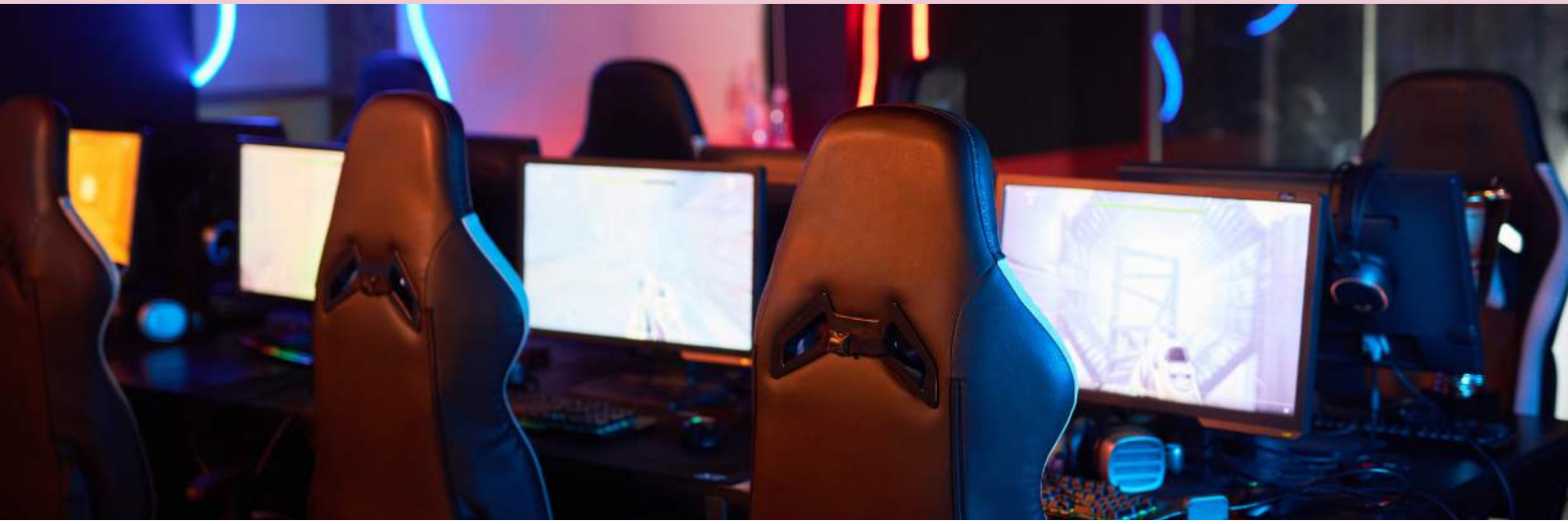
Economic

A significant difference between both countries is the presence of chaebol support in Korea. South Korea's esports economy is well-established and deeply integrated with the country's large conglomerates (chaebols) and mainstream media ecosystem. Major corporate groups have long sponsored and partly owned top teams (e.g. SK Telecom's long association with T1 and Samsung's partnerships). This supplies sustained corporate funding, large broadcast deals, and strong merchandising and franchise economics that help make Korea one of the world's largest professional esports markets (The Korea Times, 2023).

By contrast, Singapore's esports economy is smaller and more deliberately shaped by public policy and regional positioning. The government and national bodies have emphasised capability-building, training pipelines, and event facilitation. Rather than focusing solely on mass participation, Singapore positions itself as a regional hub for esports tournaments, corporate HQs, and esports business services. Building on this strategy, a new centralised training centre for esports athletes is set to launch next month, aimed at identifying and developing local talent and strengthening pathways toward professional competition. (CNA, 2025) This creates an economic model that, while generating fewer large home-grown consumer revenues than Korea, gives Singapore strong pull for international organisers, sponsors, and tech companies to use the country as their Asia-Pacific base.

Government Support

Another key difference between esports in Singapore and Korea is the government support provided for esports. Esports is recognised as a legitimate sport in Korea and there are well-developed education programmes, supported by the Korea government, for Korean youths to pursue a professional career in esports, as mentioned in the previous sections. While there are legislative changes proposed to formally recognise esports as a legitimate sport in Singapore (Liam, 2025), esports is currently still not formally recognised as a legitimate sport by the Singapore government (ESI, 2025). Having said that, Singapore is still working towards providing more support in nurturing local professional esports players, though these programmes are still considered relatively new and are not as developed as Korea.



Future of esports

Politicians paying more attention to esports

South Korean political leadership is signalling a marked shift toward treating esports not just as leisure or youth culture, but as a strategic industrial and cultural pillar. President Lee Jae-Myung has publicly declared that gaming is a "defining force" for Korea's future, pledging to reposition the game industry as part of the nation's broader export-oriented cultural economy. His administration emphasises regulatory reform, which moves away from past policies that treated games as simply an "addiction" or social problem. Instead, he proposes support for innovation, global competitiveness, job creation, and flexible working hours in the game sector. Looking ahead, the trajectory suggests several key trends: increased policy financing, tax incentives, and support for game developers; a stronger integration of gaming into Korea's cultural export strategy (as part of K-content); and deeper efforts to leverage esports and gaming as part of national branding and soft-power.

Esports betting

Highly regulated sports betting in Korea is done through the government-run pool betting system, Sports Toto. However, esports is excluded from the system and esports betting remains illegal in Korea. While there have been efforts to introduce esports betting, the Korean government is still very wary of legalising esports betting and has since rejected the plan to introduce esports betting in 2024.

The main reason behind this is that Korea is currently battling a youth gambling epidemic and the government is wary of the social impact of esports betting. (Kerman, 2025) Having said that, the lack of legal esports betting systems has caused Koreans to turn to offshore platforms or international sites instead. While the possible introduction of Esports Toto, a legalised esports betting system that is suggested by the Korean eSports Association (KeSPA) could bring about more funding for the domestic esports industry and curb illegal gambling (Taskin, 2025), the cost of it increasing youth gambling addiction has to be carefully considered.

Uncertain future of PC bangs

PC bangs, a key pillar in the foundation of esports, face an uncertain future. The sustainability of these spaces are threatened mainly due to reasons such rising operational costs and low profit, the lack of new PC games, and the increasing dominance of mobile gaming. The Covid-19 pandemic also played a big role in such a drastic drop in the figures, and an example of this was the fact that half of the PC bangs located in affluent districts like Gangnam and Songpa had to shutter (Korea Bizwire, 2025). It was reported that the total number of PC bangs in South Korea declined sharply by 7.6% from 2023 to 2024, as well as 23% from 2019 to 2024 (Korea Bizwire, 2025).

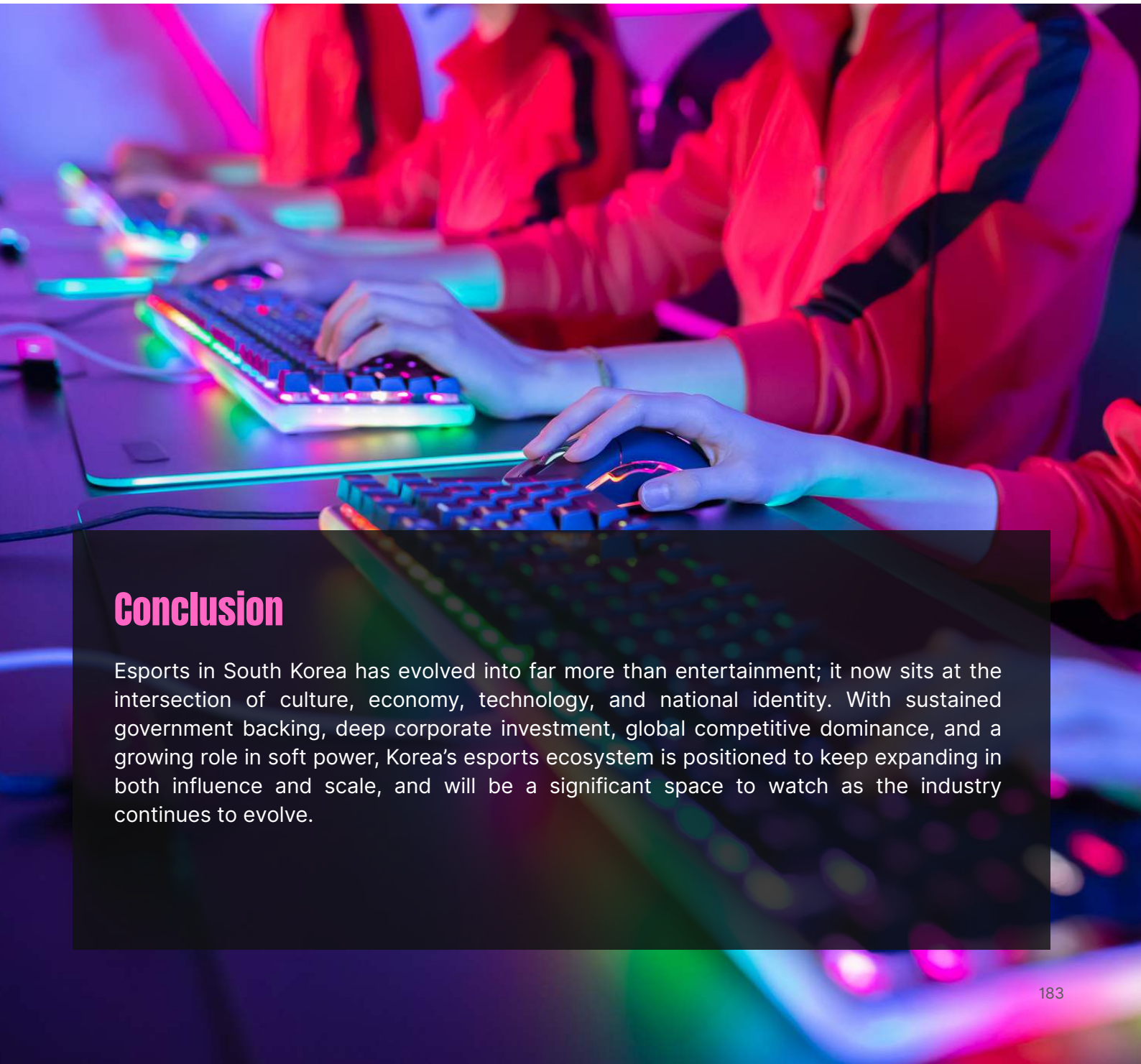


Rapidly increasing operational costs is the key factor for the decline of PC bangs. As most PC bangs operate 24 hours a day for every day of the week, rising costs of labour and utility bills have severely affected the profitability of these establishments. A 2022 survey found that 80% of PC bangs operators had reported an increase in their operational expenses in the past year (Korea Bizwire, 2025). Moreover, in spite of these financial strains coupled with increasing inflation and higher costs of living, the majority of PC bangs have maintained their low prices since the late 2000s.

Another significant reason for the decline of PC bangs is the lack of new blockbuster PC games. It was reported in 2025 that League of Legends still maintained its position as the most popular choice of game in PC bangs, securing a 37% market share (Korea Bizwire, 2025). The game has held on to this rank for more than six years, and other games such as Maple Story, FIFA Online and Sudden Attack have also remained as staples for many years (Korea Bizwire, 2025). Due to lack of fresh and novel games being released, it poses a challenge for PC bangs to attract new customers.

In addition, the shift in consumer behaviour from gaming on PCs to mobile phones have contributed greatly to PC bangs' decreasing popularity. Mobile games have superseded PC games in the South Korean game market, acquiring double the shares that PC games possess. Trends such as opting for mobile gaming due to convenience and watching gaming streams on YouTube and other platforms have been observed in the younger generation of gamers. Consequently, footfall of PC bangs are seeing a great reduction.

However, PC bangs have been adapting to these changes in the market and diversifying their products and services. For example, food and beverage options are now available for ordering at most PC bangs. The change in PC bangs' business model has proven successful, with 24.4% of these establishments' revenue being attributed to the sale of food and beverages in 2022 (Korea Bizwire, 2025). PC bangs have also started to introduce private rooms for booking, so as to attract groups to game together in a comfortable setting. However, it is uncertain how long these measures can keep PC bangs afloat in the ever-changing gaming landscape.



Conclusion

Esports in South Korea has evolved into far more than entertainment; it now sits at the intersection of culture, economy, technology, and national identity. With sustained government backing, deep corporate investment, global competitive dominance, and a growing role in soft power, Korea's esports ecosystem is positioned to keep expanding in both influence and scale, and will be a significant space to watch as the industry continues to evolve.

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Healthcare in South Korea

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8

Introduction

Medical pluralism characterises medicine and healthcare in South Korea. In its medical landscape, from Traditional Korean medicine (TKM) clinics and national health insurance to cosmetic surgery, the diversity within its system mirrors the broader advancements and developments of a nation that modernised at a breathtaking speed while negotiating between influences of the tradition and the global (Chang, 2022). The system in South Korea and the conditions that have defined its developments, founding, growth and transformation towards ideas about bodily intervention and maintenance of health has gone through an emergent and growing process through the centuries of making access to healthcare increasingly accessible and necessary.

As with many changes in society, such progress and developments in founding towards an increasingly medicalised Western form of health is not without its resistances, skepticism, missteps and challenges. In building a 'South Korean' biomedicine and its history in South Korea after the Korean War to make it their own, there was a consolidation of growth for both traditional Korean medicine (TKM) and western inspired 'South Korean' biomedicine. Korean healthcare became a patchwork of multiple systems and beliefs that was catalysed to make it uniquely its own. As biomedicine became a prominent part of promoting public health through democratisation and the introduction of a national health insurance scheme, its citizens have embraced the totality of the medicine system like a buffet selection. They now negotiate the power of individuals to engage as a form of ordinary shopping, a process to which this choice was fraught with developmental bumps and ambivalence in its history. The reflection of choice, aspirations and identity-making in this modern model of the South Korean healthcare system through 'shopping' for the best healthcare service is a distinct form of cultural practices and agency.

In this paper, based on DiMoia's book, we delineate the various important historical epochs of the story of Korean medicine, analyse the current status quo of Korean healthcare system - its achievements and challenges and engage in a comparative analysis between Singapore and South Korea's biomedicine industry to provide some recommendations about the future of healthcare for both countries. Understanding Korea's medical pluralism and comparatively analysing it with Singapore matters for us to synthesise and manage the ways in which the compressed and rapid process of modernisation has affected both countries - resulting in extreme social changes, complexities and imbalances in its society that are reflected in its demographical and developmental challenges ahead (Chang, 2022).

Fragments of Medicine in South Korea & Mobilising New Models of Public Health, 1945-1948

The early post-war years, from 1945 to 1948, are what we can think of as the humble beginnings of the modern South Korean healthcare system. After the end of Japanese colonial rule, South Korea's healthcare system was split and fragmented as a result of the war. Medical infrastructure and personnel also suffered a blow, further contributing to the problems South Korea's healthcare was faced with. Fortunately, there were skilled medical personnel that remained in South Korea, the problem was that they were trained under vastly different systems. South Korea's post-liberation had a new set of problems to deal with, a healthcare system made up of a fragmented mix of Japanese, Western (mainly American), and Korean influences.

Firstly, there was the Japanese influence. DiMoia (2013) notes how the liberation of Korea from Japan resulted in a symbolic break, but elements such as the institutions, personnel and medical culture remained relatively unchanged, still deeply shaped by the colonial era. For instance, after colonial rule, South Korea inherited a highly structured but uneven medical system, which was established based on the needs and priorities of the Japanese. The primary purpose of this colonial medical system was to protect Japanese forces and populations that came into Korea, not to serve the Korean population. This is why hospitals, medical schools, and laboratories such as the Keijo Imperial University (which was later changed to the Seoul National University) focused more heavily on research rather than widespread public healthcare. Furthermore, a majority of the physicians and medical personnel in Korea during the colonial rule were Japanese, hence, after Korea's liberation, most of these personnel had gone back to Japan. There was a generation of Korean physicians trained under Japanese education that remained in South Korea after the liberation. This group became a key part of postwar healthcare in Korea. However, the exodus of the Japanese healthcare personnel undoubtedly contributed to healthcare personnel shortages that plagued post-colonial South Korea. In addition, Japanese medical training had placed emphasis on hierarchical and academic prestige, hardly focusing on community-oriented or preventative healthcare measures.

Secondly, there was Western influence through American missionary clinics and Western medical aid. Post-liberation, the US Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) took charge of the rebuilding of healthcare infrastructure. The Americans introduced a newer model of public health and administrative rationalization, focusing on public healthcare and preventative measures (DiMoia, 2013). This was carried out through public healthcare campaigns, vaccination drives and sanitation initiatives that were modelled after the US's own public healthcare system. This emphasis on population-level interventions was heralded by the establishment of a new department of public health, along with the restructuring of hospital administration, record-keeping, and personnel training. This was a major ideological shift from the Japanese healthcare model. It is also important to note that there was a heavy reliance on American medical aid, in the form of pharmaceutical provisions, medical equipment, and training personnel.





Lastly, traditional Korean medicine, also referred to as Hanbang, along with traditional Korean healthcare and medical practitioners remained significant and widespread in the post-liberation years, despite the dominance of Western and Japanese influences. During the Japanese colonial era, the colonial government sought to suppress and regulate traditional Korean medical practices, but it was not eradicated fully. Hence, after liberation, the South Korean public turned to these traditional Korean practices and practitioners because they were culturally familiar and accessible. This was especially true in more rural areas, where Western medicine and practices were more limited. Traditional practices also reflected the cultural identity of South Koreans, and the determination of South Koreans, providing a symbolic counter to the Japanese and American influences.

These three distinctly different factions of healthcare were all operating in parallel with one another, but with little cohesion. This diversity laid the groundwork for a hybrid form of medical modernity, but it was not without significant challenges. Many South Koreans held public distrust toward institutions that seemed to carry remnants of colonial authority. At the same time, Korean medical professionals struggled between a desire for national medical sovereignty and the practical need to rely on US aid for resources and technology. Unfortunately, due to the severe shortages of its own medical resources, South Korea found it hard to not depend heavily on American medical and technological assistance.

Transformations of Surgery, Clinical Practices and Professional Identities in South Korea, 1954-1968

The next significant era of South Korean healthcare was the 1954-1968 period. This era brought about a transformation and modernization of South Korean healthcare, namely in the areas of surgery and clinical practice. This transformation was driven primarily by the Minnesota Project, Cold War developmental aid, and a shift towards a more professional identity. DiMoia (2013) states that these changes were caused by a complex process of cultural, institutional, and ideological negotiations between the South Korean and American influences, rather than just purely technological advancements. This culminated into the profound technical and institutional transformation of South Korean biomedical practice (1954-1968) from a fragmented, post-war state into a site of sophisticated surgical specialization. This was heralded by localisation, which was a process carried out in a four-fold shift:

1. Setting foundations.
2. Knowledge transfer between American physicians to Korean ones.
3. Localisation crises of the early 1960s.
4. Korean physicians and transnational validation for their expertise.





Seoul National University Hospital (SNUH)



1954 marked the start of the laying foundations of the project's scope and determination of ambitious South Korean specialists carried the medical legacy forward. A knowledge transfer between American and South Korean physicians mainly took place from 1954 to 1959, with a particular focus on core technologies and introduction of radical new practices (surgeries and professional categories) were overseen by visiting American physicians. There was a mass reform of the existing medical environment (previously Japanese influenced), that shifted towards more pedagogical and professional roles (Western/US influenced). Patients became objects of biomedical research. There were challenges in the technological transfer and needs for transnational networks. Furthermore, medicine and advanced tech required materials and exposed local infrastructural flaws. The shifts from endemic disease management to advanced specialisation was also notable, with prevalent public health threats like tuberculosis requiring medicinal focus, the nation requiring routine procedures and skilled doctors.

The Minnesota Project, (1954–1961) emerged during this era as a response to this need for technological and institutional advancements. Funded by the University of Minnesota and the US government, it facilitated the training of Korean physicians abroad and the reconstruction and upgrading of Seoul National University Hospital (SNUH). Notably, DiMoia (2013) emphasised that this was not a simple transfer of technology. Rather, it was a process that required and involved the South Korean physicians to adapt, learn, and adopt more Western/American practices. These practices had to be modified to accommodate Korean resource limitations, which ranged from surgical instruments to staffing levels and patient access. Korean physicians had to actively filter what was relevant and feasible, shaping a hybrid form of surgical modernity rather than passively adopting American models. This program embodied the Cold War logic of development, which established medicine as both humanitarian aid and ideological influence. The Minnesota Project accelerated Korea's healthcare and public health management.

However, in the early 1960s, crises in localisation had started appearing. During the return to Seoul, South Korean physicians faced numerous challenges and failures, stemming from a disconnect of the material realities to Western technological transfers. Additionally, there was a generational divide that emerged between the South Korean physicians. The senior physicians which had trained under the Japanese colonial rule, and the younger US trained physicians that were returning under the Minnesota Project. This divide reflected the broader struggles South Koreans held over the tug-of-war between their national identity, scientific advancements, and institutional control. The younger US-trained physicians would often challenge the senior Japanese-trained physicians' views of hierarchical culture by promoting more systemised standards and evidence-based practices.

Lastly, during the mid and late 1960s, South Korea had successfully created a modern medical and surgical culture which integrated science, specialisation, and standardised clinical practices. The Minnesota Project and related reforms helped to shift the South Korean medical identity from one of colonial inheritance into one of internationally recognised expertise. Yet DiMoia demonstrates that this process was neither smooth nor unidirectional, it involved negotiation, generational conflict, institutional restructuring, and selective adaptation rather than wholesale imitation. However, the persistence and resilience of Korean physicians led to the formation of supply chains and networks. This led to transnational validation of their expertise and this finally formally opened specialised medical programs in 1968, setting an important precedent for the future of South Korea's healthcare.

Family Planning and Nation Building through Biomedicine, 1961 - mid 1970s

Family planning, also known as kajok kyehoek - 가족계획, campaigns (FP) were one of the most salient forms of biomedicine conjoining with the South Korean state to intervene into the domestic sphere. It was an aggressive mobilisation of reproductive technologies through Lippes loop, vasectomy, and birth control pills to transform societal attitudes towards the body and medical intervention. Yet, simultaneously, the state leveraged this emerging public health network and its campaigns to simultaneously influence and achieve ambitious economic growth and cultural modernisation (DiMoia, 2013).

As a growing nation with still developing resources in the 1960s to 1970s, the goal of the state was to utilise these technologies to encourage a reduced population and improve the economic fortunes of the country. In essence, the strategy called Demographic Dividends aimed to meet statistical and economic goals for South Korea. Through a focus on increasing the Gross National product, family planning was encouraged in families to focus on smaller population cohorts that would lead to healthier children and imagine a collective welfare of social and economic improvements for the nation and South Korean families. Through saving on education and healthcare with a reduced growing population, this would ensure capital would be free to focus on essential industrial and economic infrastructure necessary for national growth (DiMoia, 2013).

These campaigns mobilised new infrastructure funded by foreign aid for public health delivery, including mobile vans from the US Army to reach out to rural areas as there was a lack of a viable public health network beyond major cities.

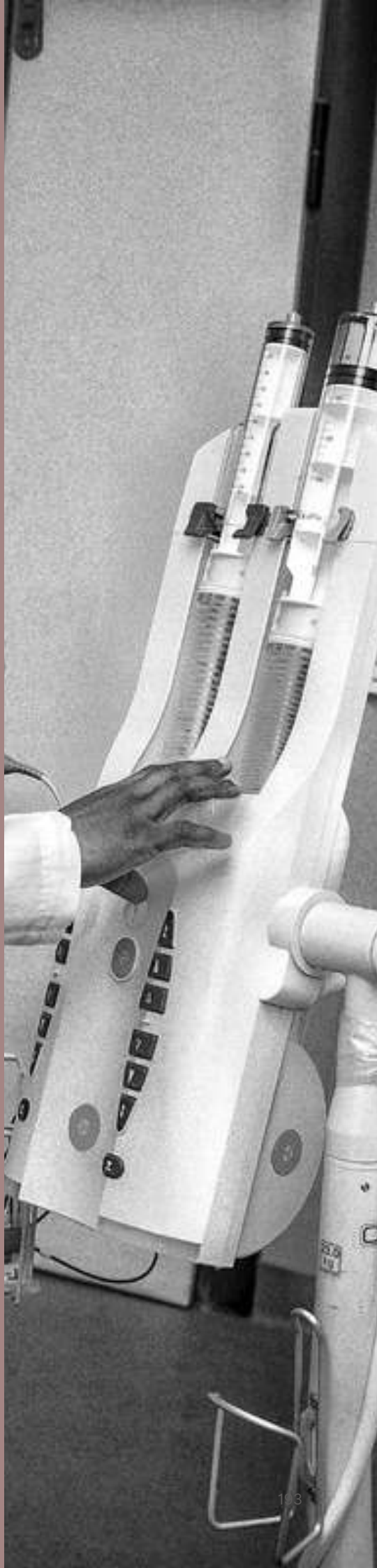




Strategically utilising various media such as mass communications (television, radio, print) and word of mouth, the FP campaigns could be considered successful for their ability to raise awareness, combining both education and technology to be conveyed to a large population of the country. Conveying reproductive education with messages of nation building, these FP promoted an alternative family conception and encouraged changing reproductive behaviours. With a highly centralised bureaucratic structure that reached every administrative level, down to the smallest village, the state offered material incentives for participation such as early release from military reserve training or higher placement in new apartment lottery systems like the Chamsil apartments. Thus, the campaign was able to propagate and reify the long-term benefits of the program and implicitly challenge the traditional preferences for sons (DiMoia, 2013).

However, despite the top-down, state-directed approach of FP campaigns, the long-term success of the program was rooted in the participation and agency of South Korean citizens, particularly women of reproductive ages as mothers in the 1960s-1980s. Whilst the initial strategy focused on distributing Lippes loops (intrauterine devices), there was a high rate of discontinuation due to discomfort and numerous side effects. As the state's program shifted emphasis to birth control pills in 1968 and adopted new methods based on social science to connect with the citizens such as the network of Mother's Clubs, reproductive technologies and education became more widespread (DiMoia, 2013)

Through their autonomy, South Korean women were able to pursue their own goals as they eagerly participated in FP, creating new forms of nationalism. The FP's message as a means of exerting agency over one's life and family was perceived less as a state interference. These social institutions called mutual exchange clubs, or kye, in which groups of Koreans formed meeting groups for economic exchanges as a form of informal banking was used to promote birth control pills as they met regularly. Thus, these clubs served as local distribution channels for the birth control pills, forums for family planning discussions and making the campaign become embedded in the brochure community activities of daily life. Thus, FP campaigns grew in importance towards life and economic empowerment that redefined family structures where women became decision makers, openly talking with their partners and deciding on having smaller families. This campaign, going beyond President Park Chung-Hee's hold over the state, was actively promoted until the early or mid-1980s.



Family planning in its various forms became a major part of South Korean social and cultural practice for more than two and a half decades: the emerging public health network and the state was brought into family and married life, changing the way the people thought of children's gender and family happiness (DiMoia, 2013).

Chronologically, these campaigns happened in three phases: 1. Mobilisation and introduction of the intrauterine devices (IUD), 2. Introduction of the birth control pill and community interventions, 3. Direct intervention and material incentives. The first phase happened from 1961 to 1966 wherein it conceded with the strengthening of the Park Chung Hee presidency. The Planned Parenthood Federation of Korea (PPFK) was formed in April 1961 to link local efforts with international partners of foreign aid to create an organisational foundation within that year. Consequentially, 1962 marked the start of Koyang study research in preparation - it was also the start of using various multidisciplinary studies such as the social sciences like demography to identify target populations and establish the necessary baselines to lead into intervention of reproductive technologies into society. The national launch of the family planning campaigns and initial intervention began in 1964, with the use and roping initial acceptors from the populace on the adoption of Lippes Loop.



As an IUD, the distribution and insertion was mostly performed by trainees or field workers due to a shortage of doctors and nurses. Men were encouraged to undergo vasectomies after having a sufficiently large family size. In 1966, there was an expansion and some early problems in outreaching towards the rural population and there was bodily resistance from some women as ‘rejectors’ due to bleeding and discomfort. This led to high termination rates from questioning about the durability and the technology’s side effects (DiMoia, 2013).

In the second phase where there was a strategic shift and domestic penetration from 1968 to Early 1970s, growing failures and rejection rates due to the backlash of the loop technologies forced the program to pivot towards oral contraceptives and more intimate methods of dissemination. In 1968, birth control pills became the primary reproductive 12 technology of intervention into family life. Here, this was the period in which the network of Mother’s clubs were mobilised to permeate and insert FP education into villages. This had three-fold implications, it effectively located the campaigns into villages, accelerated new bodily practices and normalised ‘western’ drug use, integrating its adherence into their daily life rhythms. In the third phase from the early 1970s onwards, there was a more deliberate intervention and material incentives that were targeted at men. Particularly, in military training at the decommissioning stages, men were subject to vasectomy counselling and lectures to expose almost all South Korean males to messages of voluntary sterilisation. In addition, as mentioned earlier, housing became a further economic incentive to encourage sterilisation. Consenting to a vasectomy could lead to early release from reserve military treatment and families could gain preferential placement in apartment lotteries for demonstrating compliance with the FP program’s objectives (DiMoia, 2013).

Thus, the FP campaigns were able to permeate and actualise bodily intervention to ensure compliance and normalisation of western medicine intervention. However, as seen from current fertility rates, as effective as these campaigns have been, its vast repercussions on contemporary Korea as a difficult demographic problem to tackle now is questionable with long-term consequences for nation-building.

Family Planning and Nation Building through Biomedicine, 1961 - mid 1970s

Tackled as war to wage against parasites in a nation still developing from its agricultural roots, the focus from 1969 was a prioritisation on the eradication of parasites from the population. The campaign can be traced into four phases: 1. Pre-campaign contexts and foundations, 2. Official campaign launch and institutional penetration, 3. Normalisation through mass intervention, 4. Cultural legacy post eradication. Also known as kisaengch'ung pangmyŏl, this campaign utilised biomedical penetration aimed nationwide through public schools. This involved the passing of a Parasitic Disease Prevention Act in 1966. As an agricultural nation post-independence still in the midst of transformation, South Korea lacked access to chemical fertiliser which meant that food supply, apart from foreign aid, was produced with human excrement as fertiliser. Produce, despite washing, contained a diversity of parasites. Thus, in a cyclical fashion, South Koreans consumed and reintroduced parasites into their bodies from eating.



As a common issue to developing countries, after the Korean war and its aftermath until the early 1960s, this was a struggle due to lack of fertiliser during the post-war recovery process. In conjunction with joining the Vietnam war at the same time, this was targeted towards school-aged children and formed an integral historical memory for the people. Twice a year, children would bring their stool samples to school in small paper bags to hand over to their teachers. Once collected, all these biological samples became state property where they were analysed with microscopes to look for any eggs of parasites such as roundworms (DiMoia, 2013).

This routine ritual from the campaign became an extensive experience with biomedicine, shifting attitudes of cultural discomfort or lack of clinical culture in South Korea about medicine. It also instilled familiarity and confidence in regular use of these deworming drugs that were facilitated in public schools. During the first phase, before the formal launch of the program from post 1945 to 1968, infrastructure, professional expertise and cultural awareness of western hygiene was developed and necessary (DiMoia, 2013).

Due to the precedence of pest control in the early 1960s against rats through elimination days, parasites were co-joinly linked to nation-building instincts and served as a demonstration of President Park Chung-hee's effective presidency. Catching and collecting rat tails was a proof of participation and at times, required of school children. Thus, parasites were given an endemic status due to its high prevalence - exceeding 50% of the population - through the use of 'night soil' (human waste) as fertiliser (DiMoia, 2013).

From 1964, effectively using the distribution infrastructure built from the FP campaigns earlier, this continued to allow for the antiparasitic campaign to rely on these networks, mobile transportation and training for local health care workers. Moreover in 1959, the Korean Society of Parasitology was founded and the Korean Association for the Eradication of Pests (KAPE) was organized in 1964. Most of its leading figures had studied abroad benefiting from projects similar to the Minnesota project where they had exposure to American models of parasitology. Moreover, whilst simultaneously deploying troops to the Vietnam war, the health of the state's soldiers was a priority and created links from military medicine to public health concerns. Therefore, tagging onto America's commitment into Vietnam, the concerns of the United State's discourse and concerns about disease established a need for baseline parasitic surveys prior to their departure (DiMoia, 2013).

In the second phase (1969 - Early 1970s), the antiparasitic campaigns began using the national education system to ensure mandatory participation with a formal launch in 1969 through baseline surveys of school children. Public schools, as the umbrella of institutional mechanisms, became the primary collection network. Reaching out to all children under the age of eighteen twice a year for nearly two decades, schools became an effective access to the target demographic due the messages of mandatory nation-building and mobilisation. Thus, the ritual of sample collection and donation of stools became a regular, uncomfortable ritual wherein children complied and interacted with the state. Initial samples were wrapped in newspapers to be given to schoolteachers, later, dedicated specimen bags were provisioned through schools. Due to the high labour demands and logistical challenges in sampling - from the sheer volumes of stools to analyse, this created a new demand for medical technicians to analyse samples in bulk. The establishment of expertise and infrastructure was supported through imported Japanese technology and field techniques. However, not all participants were comfortable and numerous accounts of students skipping school or submitting pet samples to resist such practices reflected a reluctance towards bodily state intervention (DiMoia, 2013).

In the third phase, the campaign shifted from collection to mandatory treatment from the 1970s to mid 1980s. This was embedding pharmaceuticals and clinical interventions into daily life. Due to high infection rates of over 80% prevalence from early studies of the state's forces for the Vietnam war, the state created a national implementation of mass chemotherapy in 1969 to 1978. All students received parasite-killing drugs (anthelminthics) to be ingested. However, this led to uncomfortable physical side effects - from gastrointestinal distresses and worm expulsion from the body. As an unpleasant yet common cycle among school aged children, it was presented as a voluntary act of consent (DiMoia, 2013).



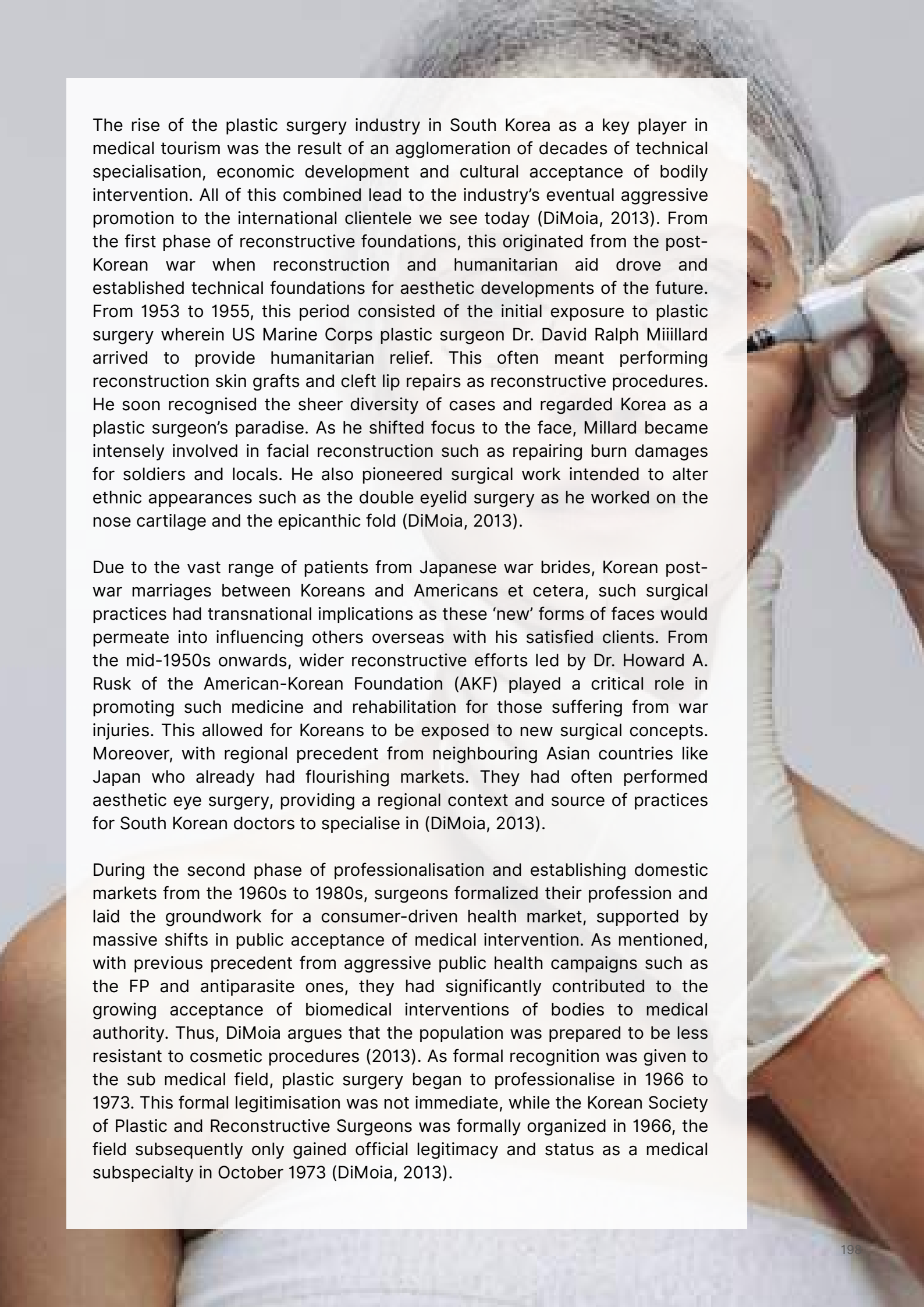


In addition, the campaign also functioned as a large-scale, nationwide clinical trial to experiment with different medical compounds to find the most cost-effective and efficacious drug. As a misstep, the state sometimes violated international intellectual property laws to domestically synthesize and mass-distribute necessary medications at low cost as there were pharmaceutical shortages and a high demand for these medicines. Moreover, the campaign used propaganda and publications such as Kŏn'gang (Health) and Kŏn'gang sosik (Health News) - started in 1973 and 1977 respectively to promote the idea of parasite eradication as a necessity for national strength and as an individual responsibility with slogans such as "My Health, My Responsibility" (DiMoia, 2013).

As infection rates decreased, the chemotherapy programs shifted into targeting only those positively identified with parasites reinforced social stratification. Social divisions were visually marked to children from poorer or rural areas where such parasitic infestations persisted, this unfortunately reified regional and class differences through medicinal intervention. In the fourth phase from late 1980s to 1995, as the parasite eradication became complete, the organisational efforts within the state transitioned whilst leaving significant changes in the South Korean medical industry. KAPE eventually changed its name in 1986 to the Korean Association for Health Promotion (KAHP), indicating a shift from eradication to broader health initiatives after mandatory sample collection ended. The campaigns formed a critical and dramatic reshaping of practices and attitudes towards the body and contributed to the growing acceptance of biomedical interventions by health professionals for even minor tasks. In the state's effort to eradicate parasites, this push for a disciplined and healthier citizenry through schools and military exposed the population to expectations and norms of Western influences of modern medicine (DiMoia, 2013).

Developing a Korean Plastic Surgery Market Dominance, 1954 to present

Despite being a world renowned force of medical tourism for South Korea, the process of evolution as a specialised and sophisticated commercial industry underwent 71 years of development. Driven by postwar trauma, this three phase journey for the industry was supported by other medical epochs such as family planning and antiparasite campaigns, the delayed provision of health insurance and a growing culture of relative freedom and weaker forms of clinical regulation as seen through the Minnesota project. Its history can be classified into these three parts: 1. Reconstructive foundation (1953-Early 1960s), 2. Professionalisation and institutionalisation through establishing a domestic market (1960s-1980s), 3. Market emergence and aesthetic dominance (Mid 1980s till present) (DiMoia, 2013).



The rise of the plastic surgery industry in South Korea as a key player in medical tourism was the result of an agglomeration of decades of technical specialisation, economic development and cultural acceptance of bodily intervention. All of this combined lead to the industry's eventual aggressive promotion to the international clientele we see today (DiMoia, 2013). From the first phase of reconstructive foundations, this originated from the post-Korean war when reconstruction and humanitarian aid drove and established technical foundations for aesthetic developments of the future. From 1953 to 1955, this period consisted of the initial exposure to plastic surgery wherein US Marine Corps plastic surgeon Dr. David Ralph Miiillard arrived to provide humanitarian relief. This often meant performing reconstruction skin grafts and cleft lip repairs as reconstructive procedures. He soon recognised the sheer diversity of cases and regarded Korea as a plastic surgeon's paradise. As he shifted focus to the face, Millard became intensely involved in facial reconstruction such as repairing burn damages for soldiers and locals. He also pioneered surgical work intended to alter ethnic appearances such as the double eyelid surgery as he worked on the nose cartilage and the epicanthic fold (DiMoia, 2013).

Due to the vast range of patients from Japanese war brides, Korean post-war marriages between Koreans and Americans et cetera, such surgical practices had transnational implications as these 'new' forms of faces would permeate into influencing others overseas with his satisfied clients. From the mid-1950s onwards, wider reconstructive efforts led by Dr. Howard A. Rusk of the American-Korean Foundation (AKF) played a critical role in promoting such medicine and rehabilitation for those suffering from war injuries. This allowed for Koreans to be exposed to new surgical concepts. Moreover, with regional precedent from neighbouring Asian countries like Japan who already had flourishing markets. They had often performed aesthetic eye surgery, providing a regional context and source of practices for South Korean doctors to specialise in (DiMoia, 2013).

During the second phase of professionalisation and establishing domestic markets from the 1960s to 1980s, surgeons formalized their profession and laid the groundwork for a consumer-driven health market, supported by massive shifts in public acceptance of medical intervention. As mentioned, with previous precedent from aggressive public health campaigns such as the FP and antiparasite ones, they had significantly contributed to the growing acceptance of biomedical interventions of bodies to medical authority. Thus, DiMoia argues that the population was prepared to be less resistant to cosmetic procedures (2013). As formal recognition was given to the sub medical field, plastic surgery began to professionalise in 1966 to 1973. This formal legitimisation was not immediate, while the Korean Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons was formally organized in 1966, the field subsequently only gained official legitimacy and status as a medical subspecialty in October 1973 (DiMoia, 2013).

During this period where cosmetic surgery grew into a domestic market, the health insurance system was created. Started in 1977 with the National Health Insurance Act for industrial workers in large corporations, it progressively rolled out to other workers, and finally, the general public in 1989 as a universal coverage. After various medical healthcare financing reforms, particularly in 2004, all medical health insurance societies were merged under one national health insurance service. The current system allows insured individuals to freely select medical facilities without restrictions on location and type: this policy continues to allow for a 'window-shopping practice' for patients who tend to favour larger and well-known hospitals. This incremental provision of the national health insurance system was considered ‘late’ by its critics. With political deferral about the national health insurance scheme, in combination with weak clinical regulation, this created a system where ambitious doctors preferred lucrative private practice and specialization over relying on slow payments from the public system. It failed to provide full coverage and adequate compensation for doctors, meaning less than ideal working conditions and less support from national health insurance. Moreover, the growth of the aesthetic surgery market corresponded to the rapid growth of a newer style of private practice in which the primary focus shifted from repairing congenital deformities or injuries) to the aesthetic desires and aspirations to realise a client’s self-image (DiMoia, 2013).

In the last stage, where consolidation, market emergence and aesthetic dominance happened from the late 1980s to the present. Economic growth and fierce competition within South Korea led to a consolidation of clinics and aggressive marketing towards international consumers as South Korea expanded on medical tourism. In the early 1990s, many private cosmetic surgery clinics began to cluster intensely in the Gangnam district of Seoul. As this area became associated with affluence and self-transformation, this density was driven by commercial visibility and a guild mentality among practitioners. In addition, post 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, there was market pressures and necessity following this crisis. South Koreans had the power to CHOOSE to seek and embrace possibilities of personal change and self-fashioning through plastic surgery to look more attractive rather than transform. Plastic surgery became framed as a need for self-realisation and gaining a decisive advantage in the competitive job market and not just a luxury of affluence. Therefore, the high density and specialisation of all these clinics in the Gangnam district were poised to reach a wider international market (DiMoia, 2013).



Consequently, the success, export and growth of South Korea's cosmetic industry and popular culture (Hallyu) helped to generate regional and global influence of Korean plastic surgery. Thus, practitioners become aware of attracting potential international clientele. As the South Korean government has actively promoted medical tourism, these clinics have already anticipated to accommodate the needs of their foreign visitors. Korean surgeons developed specialized techniques (like the "modified Uchida procedure") focused on minimizing scarring, often combining blepharoplasty with epicanthoplasty to achieve a desired "big eyes" or "softer" look. This skilled work performed by specialized Korean practitioners for international clients cemented South Korea's identity as "the Republic of Plastic Surgery". Whilst the sub-field continued to be a private market with a lack of clinical regulation: SK doctors and TKM practitioners resisted stringent national oversight. The healthcare system became light and encouraged growth in many areas such as growth in fields of specialisation, diagnostic tests, and pharmaceuticals. Thus, South Korea continues to have its plastic surgery market as a flagship product for medical tourism across the world (DiMoia, 2013).

Current Landscape of South Korea's Healthcare

South Korea's healthcare system has undergone major transformation over the years and is shaped by technological innovation, shifting demographics and an increasingly globalised health services market. The following section focuses on several significant trends, systemic issues and commendable aspects of South Korea's healthcare system.

Recent Trends

Medical Tourism

One of the most prominent developments in South Korea's healthcare landscape is the rapid expansion of its medical tourism, particularly in the cosmetic and aesthetic surgery area as mentioned previously. The nation has established itself as a global destination for cosmetic procedures, drawing patients from around the world who seek highly specialised expertise and advanced procedures at a relatively lower cost compared to Western countries. According to existing analyses, South Korea's medical technology in plastic surgery is reported to have achieved an expansion of over 94% compared to other countries (Eom et al, 2011).

The institutionalization of medical tourism has also contributed to its rapid growth. Many exclusive cosmetic surgery clinics are located in South Korea Seoul's renowned medical districts such as Apgujeong and Gangnam. These facilities offer services tailored specifically for foreign visitors and cater to their experiences such as giving multilingual consultations and post-operative accommodations. Additionally, South Korea provides medical visas that facilitate longer stays and easy clearance for repeat procedures.



At the national level, the Korea Health Industry Development Institute (KHIDI) plays a vital role in expanding the country's global health industry footprint. This can be seen through marketing campaigns and information platforms designed to promote the reliability and efficiency of Korean healthcare services to international visitors. Recent data shows that the number of foreign patients increased from 606,000 in 2023 to approximately 1.17 million in 2024 (Asiae News, 2025), demonstrating the rising demand for cosmetic surgeries and increased interest in South Korea's healthcare services.

Growing Awareness on Mental Health Care

Another major development is the growing recognition of mental health. Within Korean society, mental health issues carried a strong social stigma, often causing individuals to conceal their symptoms and avoid seeking treatment. To address this problem, then President Yoon Suk-yeol introduced the National Mind Investment Project for 2025 on June 26, 2024 (Straits Times, 2024). The policy initiative was estimated to cost roughly 300 billion won (S$292 million) and prioritises on expanding access to counselling services for approximately one million citizens, providing each individual eight subsidised counselling sessions.

The National Mind Investment Project explicitly aims to reshape the public's attitude and impression towards mental illness. Through school-based interventions, public campaigns and training mental health workers, the government strives to build a more compassionate and empathetic environment in which individuals feel encouraged to open up and seek help. As such, improving an individual's mental health requires not only accessible services but also normalising mental health care as a normal and necessary aspect of people's overall well-being.

Emergence of Telemedicine

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea's telemedicine has experienced remarkable growth. Telemedicine presents various benefits, especially in enhancing access for citizens living in rural regions. It removes the need for travelling and reduces healthcare costs through fewer emergency department visits.

By 2024, about 23,000 medical institutions across the nation had adopted telemedicine services, enabling around 4.92 million patients to receive such services (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2025). Furthermore, the South Korean telehealth market continues to expand exponentially, with projections estimating a growth from USD 2.86 billion in 2024 to USD 9.8 billion in 2035 (Spherical Insights, 2025). These underscore South Korea's advanced telecommunications infrastructure, as well as, evolving patients' expectations for convenient, digitally enabled medical services.



Contemporary Issues

Physician Shortage

Despite these prominent developments in South Korea's healthcare sector, several critical challenges persist. At the moment, South Korea has only 2.6 doctors for every 1,000 people (Asia Dispatches, 2024). This makes the country having one of the lowest rates among OECD countries. The key factors that drove the shortage of physicians are low pay and long working hours, which eventually lead to burnout.

In some specialty areas, such as emergency medicine, pediatrics and gynecology report extreme working conditions. Physicians often work 100 hours or more per week (CNA, 2024). These hectic schedules deter new medical graduates from entering high-demand fields, which creates a cycle of workforce shortages and further intensifies the remaining physicians' workload.

The consequences of physician shortages extend beyond burnout. Emergency departments frequently experience long waiting times and clinics in rural regions struggle to recruit medical professionals. Urban hospitals become congested due to population concentration while patients in smaller provinces face long travelling times just to seek essential services. This issue of shortage thus creates substantial regional disparities in access to healthcare.

Controversy over Medical School Admission Quota

To tackle these workforce shortages, the South Korean government proposed to increase the annual medical school admission quota from the current level of 3,058 students (The Peninsula, 2024). However, this reform sparked widespread opposition from the medical community including interns, residents and the Korea Medical Association (KMA)

Medical professionals argue that merely increasing the number of medical students does not resolve deeper structural issues such as the persistent workload, low compensation and the lack of support for emergency and trauma care. Moreover, teaching hospitals and medical schools express concerns that the rapid expansion of intake could possibly compromise the quality of medical education if training resources, residency slots and faculty numbers do not increase proportionately. Such tensions escalated to the point of organized strikes and significant political discourse.

Hence, in order for this reform to work, it needs a more multifaceted approach where work-life balance is enhanced, critical specialties are compensated appropriately and regional disparities are addressed.





Strengths within the System

High Quality of Care

South Korea consistently achieves strong health outcomes as compared to other advanced nations. According to 2023 OECD statistics, the country's life expectancy reached 83.6 years, exceeding the OECD average of 81.1 years. South Korea's high survival rates for chronic conditions such as gastric cancer and stroke are often attributed to advanced screening programs and early detection infrastructure. Additionally, public health campaigns, vaccinations and emphasis on community prevention contribute to better health indicators.

Medical Technology and Digital Infrastructure

South Korea's healthcare institutions are among the most technologically advanced in the world. A notable example is the Samsung Medical Center, which became the first hospital globally to achieve the Stage 7 of the HIMSS Infrastructure Adoption Model (INFRAM), the highest possible certification for digital healthcare infrastructure. This recognition indicates South Korea's excellence in areas such as cybersecurity and data integration (Healthcare IT News, n.d.).

In leading Korean medical institutions, smart hospital initiatives are becoming more common. Many hospitals utilize robotic systems to assist with medicine delivery, therefore minimizing errors. Similarly, IoT-enabled smart beds track patient vitals continuously, facilitating early detection of changes in patients' conditions. Wearable devices and remote monitoring tools are increasingly used to manage chronic diseases including diabetes and hypertension, highlighting the focus on a more preventive and data-driven care. These investments not only improves operational efficiency but also strengthens the country's global competitiveness in healthcare technology.

Universal Health Coverage (National Health Insurance Service)

The National Health Insurance Service (NHIS) remains a foundation of South Korea's health system. The NHIS covers 97% of South Korea's population, with the remaining 3% receiving assistance under the Medical Aid program (Institute for Basic Science, 2015). This coverage ensures that essential medical services remain accessible and affordable to most citizens, promoting equity and minimizing financial barriers. Under the NHIS model, contributions are based on income and benefits include a wide range of services such as inpatient care, prescription medications, preventive screenings and rehabilitation.

The universal coverage system provides a high degree of protection for citizens and also contributes to overall system stability. By consolidating the finance aspect into a single national insurer, South Korea can negotiate effectively with providers, manage expenditures and ensure consistent service standards.



Healthcare System as a Comparison: Singapore

Healthcare systems across East Asia are facing common growing challenges from ageing populations, rising chronic disease prevalence, and the financial strain of sustaining universal coverage. Among them, South Korea stands out as one with a high-performing structure tailored to cover most needs of its population. However, Singapore also does an exceptional job with its system, though having a structurally different system.

Similar to South Korea, Singapore too faces pressures from ageing and sustainability, in which both nations would be able to adapt lessons from each other to lessen or eliminate completely these issues to better serve their population.

Recent Trends in Singapore's Healthcare System

Rising burden of chronic disease

Singapore faces a growing rate of chronic diseases, including diabetes and hypertension (Ministry of Health, 2023). The 'War on Diabetes' launched back in 2016 reflects the government's shift toward preventive healthcare and early detection (Khalik, 2016). With an ageing population, the chronic disease burden is increasing pressure on long-term care and primary care networks.

Rapidly ageing population

By 2030, one in four Singaporeans will be aged 65 or older. This massive demographic shift has led to the government introducing the 'Action Plan for Successful Ageing' which expands care networks for the elderly, promoting healthy living and independence (Ministry of Health, 2025).

Increasing healthcare costs and need for sustainability

Spending on healthcare has been increasing due to ageing, advancements in technology and greater utilisation of services. This comes in the form of increasing withdrawal limits from certain schemes and raising subsidies. The government emphasises the importance of cost-sharing, compulsory savings and risk pooling, all of which are reinforced by schemes like MediShield Life and subsidies under MediSave to maintain affordability of the services (Ministry of Health, 2025).

Singapore's Healthcare Financing Structure

Singapore's healthcare financing system is designed around the "3M" framework: MediSave, MediShield Life, and MediFund — complemented by public subsidies and optional private insurance. This model balances individual responsibility with social protection through a mix of compulsory savings, risk pooling, and safety nets.

MediSave

MediSave is a national medical savings scheme that helps individuals set aside part of their income to pay for their personal or approved dependants' hospitalisation, day surgery and certain outpatient expenses, as well as their healthcare needs in old age. Limits as to how much one would be able to withdraw from this fund have been set to ensure that citizens have sufficient savings in their MediSave account for their basic healthcare needs in old age. The withdrawal limits are generally adequate to cover most charges incurred at subsidised inpatient wards and outpatient treatments (Ministry of Health, 2025). However, the reliance on personal savings also creates disparities for lower-income groups.

MediShield Life

MediShield Life is a universal basic health insurance scheme, which covers large hospitalisation bills and selected outpatient treatments such as dialysis or cancer therapy which can be very costly. Premiums are deducted automatically from MediSave, and government subsidies ensure affordability across income levels. MediShield Life provides lifelong protection, and is made available to all citizens and permanent residents. The scheme is tightly integrated with the public hospital system, with higher reimbursement rates for subsidised ward classes. This promotes cost efficiency and discourages the overuse of private services (Ministry of Health, 2025).

MediFund

To complement the two services previously mentioned, MediFund acts as a safety net for those unable to pay their remaining bills even after the coverage from MediSave and MediShield. This serves as an endowment fund that assists the needy citizens through means-adjusted support. Additionally, direct subsidies are also provided by the government in public hospitals and clinics, which are scaled by income level (Ministry of Health, 2025).

This tiered structure, from assisted personal savings to safety nets, forms a hybrid model of public and private financing. This allows Singapore to maintain a low national healthcare expenditure of about 5% of its GDP as of 2022 (HealthHub, 2025).





Access, Quality, and Ageing Policies

Singapore's healthcare philosophy emphasises accessible and quality care at a sustainable cost. It operates in a dual-sector system with public hospitals providing the majority of inpatient care, while the more costly private services offer shorter waiting times and generally better equipment (Jacobs, 2023). This system maintains affordability with the subsidies involved while also allowing consumer choice. Ultimately, these healthcare options do maintain high efficiency and clinical outcomes, which are supported by cost control and transparent pricing.

Primary care and affordability

Singapore promotes primary care through its Community Health Assist Scheme (CHAS) and Healthier SG programme, which subsidises chronic disease management and connects residents to family doctors (Ministry of Health, 2025). However, some outpatient expenses, especially those not covered by CHAS or MediSave, remain out-of-pocket. This contrasts with South Korea's National Health Insurance system, which offers broader reimbursements but with higher copayments.

Integrated, high-quality public healthcare services

Singapore's healthcare clusters, namely SingHealth, National Healthcare Group and National University Health System, ensure coordinated care across hospitals, polyclinics, specialist centres and community care partners (Ministry of Education, 2025). This integration ensures seamless patient transitions between locations, reduces the need for duplicative tests and improves patient outcomes.

Action Plan for Successful Ageing

Singapore's Action Plan for Successful Ageing addresses the demographic shift toward an ageing population, attempting to cater to the large elderly population. The plan emphasises 4 main points:

- Preventive health and ageing through screenings and lifestyle programmes
- Ageing-in-place through integrated community and home care
- Healthcare workforce development, especially for geriatric and long-term care staff
- Adoption of technology to improve home-based monitoring and eldercare (Ministry of Health, 2024)

These initiatives show Singapore's proactive policy orientation, aiming to reduce healthcare demand by encouraging older adults to take care of their health and grow more independent. Nonetheless, the system still needs to overcome the challenges in scaling community-based care and sustainably financing long-term care.

Challenges and Issues in Singapore's Healthcare System

Growing strain from ageing and chronic diseases

The elderly require more complex and long-term care, increasing demand for the following services:

- Geriartric specialists
- Long-term community nursing
- Caregiver support
- Nursing home capacity

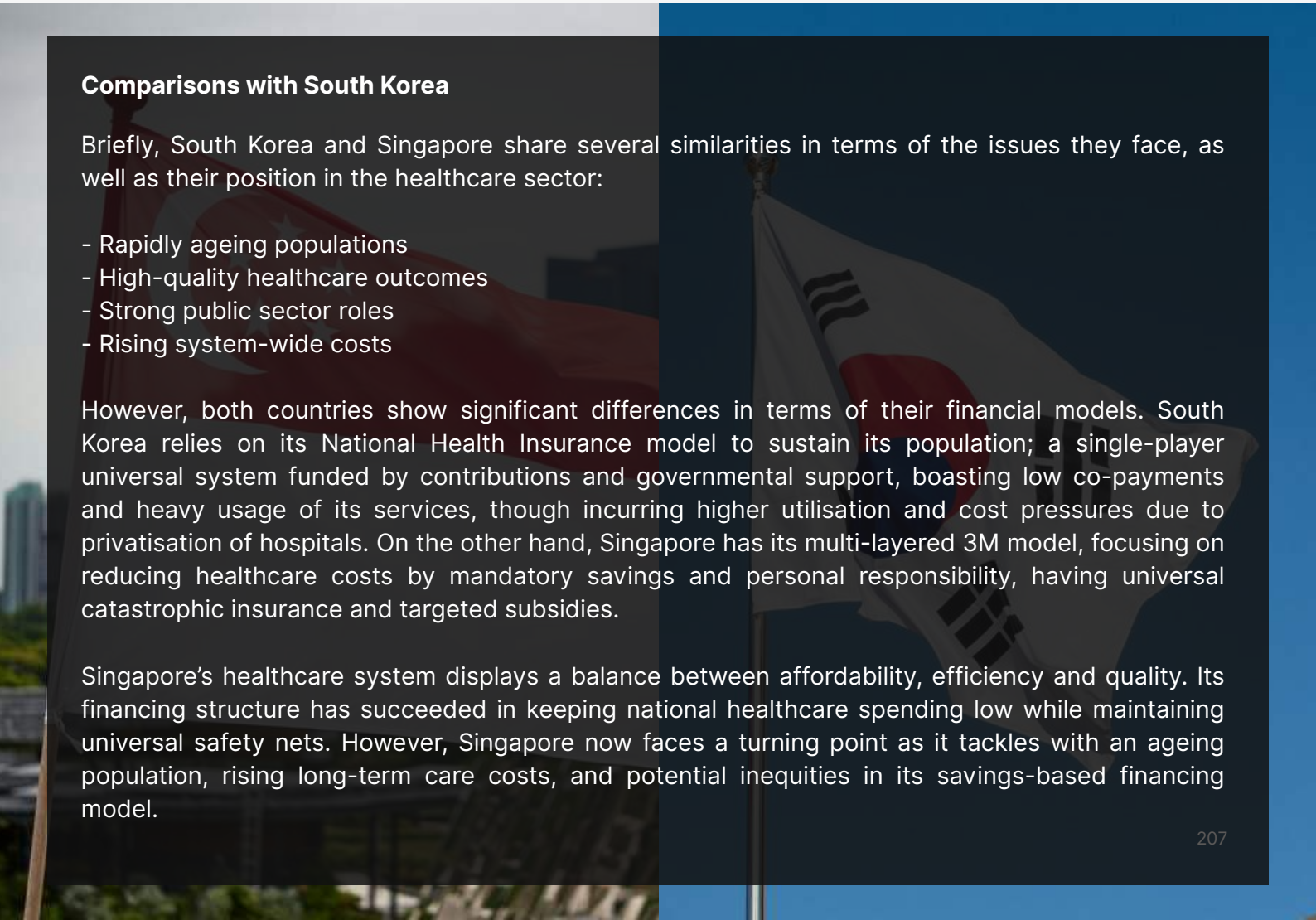
This presents challenges in both the workforce and financial costs.

Unequal access to private health services before subsidies

Initially, polyclinics were more affordable while private general practitioners were more accessible, albeit more costly. CHAS helped to bridge the gap, but the coverage between public and private healthcare remains uneven, and the lower-income groups still receive delayed care. The polyclinic system is also often overwhelmed, leading to bottlenecks in healthcare services to those needing it.

Rising long-term care costs

With a significant ageing population and chronic diseases becoming more prevalent, long-term care costs are expected to increase significantly. While some government schemes are able to address some situations, out-of-pocket costs remain a major issue.



Comparisons with South Korea

Briefly, South Korea and Singapore share several similarities in terms of the issues they face, as well as their position in the healthcare sector:

- Rapidly ageing populations
- High-quality healthcare outcomes
- Strong public sector roles
- Rising system-wide costs

However, both countries show significant differences in terms of their financial models. South Korea relies on its National Health Insurance model to sustain its population; a single-player universal system funded by contributions and governmental support, boasting low co-payments and heavy usage of its services, though incurring higher utilisation and cost pressures due to privatisation of hospitals. On the other hand, Singapore has its multi-layered 3M model, focusing on reducing healthcare costs by mandatory savings and personal responsibility, having universal catastrophic insurance and targeted subsidies.

Singapore's healthcare system displays a balance between affordability, efficiency and quality. Its financing structure has succeeded in keeping national healthcare spending low while maintaining universal safety nets. However, Singapore now faces a turning point as it tackles with an ageing population, rising long-term care costs, and potential inequities in its savings-based financing model.

Improvements on South Korea Healthcare

Aging Population

1. Expand community based and home-based care models

South Korea could significantly benefit from expanding community-anchored and home-based care in the way Singapore has under its Age Well SG initiative. Singapore's strategy includes scaling up Active Ageing Centres, which are neighbourhood hubs that offer both social engagement and health screening in seniors' own communities. This can also be alleviated by enhancing Home Personal Care services for more vulnerable seniors who need more assistance with daily living tasks (Ministry of Health, 2024). By investing in community care, South Korea could reduce its reliance on institutional long-term care, ease the load on hospitals, and offer more person-centred support. This model would also align with Korea's growing need for integrated care: despite its Long-Term Care Insurance, coverage of home-based services remains limited, and many elderly still lack access to regular, coordinated community care (Chon et. al., 2024).

2. Strengthen geriatric specialization

South Korea could also draw lessons from Singapore in developing geriatric medicine as a formal clinical specialisation. In Singapore's Action Plan for Successful Ageing, there is a clear commitment to improving the capacity for geriatric care, including training professionals in specialised elderly care and increasing long-term care infrastructure (Ministry of Health, 2015). In contrast, Korea currently faces a severe shortage, there being very few formally trained geriatricians, with geriatric care often fragmented across different specialties (Won et. al., 2018). By establishing a coordinated geriatric fellowship program, incentivising specialisation and certification, and embedding geriatric training in their medical curriculum, Korea could better meet the needs of its rapidly ageing population, improve continuity of care for elderly patients, and reduce the risks associated with polypharmacy and functional decline.





Disparity of Services

1. Increase Emergency and Transport Infrastructure

Enhancing the emergency medical service infrastructure and transport is crucial to ensure timely care, especially in remote parts of South Korea where response time and resources are currently inadequate. As such, the Ministry of Health could look into designating more trauma or critical-care hospitals and increasing air ambulance capacity to seize the “golden hour” and better treat patients (Jung et. al., 2024). This would greatly reduce transport time for critical emergencies particularly where road access is limited.

2. Incentivize Physicians to Practice in Rural Regions

To encourage more doctors to work in medically underserved areas, South Korea could improve the living conditions for rural physicians by offering better housing and long-term contracts tied to hospitals located in provinces. By making rural practice more stable and professionally rewarding, this helps to offset the disadvantages of working outside of large leading hospitals in the cities.

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Hallyu and its effects on Korea

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9



Introduction

South Korea has one of the largest economic transformations, following the Korean War in the 1960s. Its rapid industrialisation through the country's focus on technology development and innovation has helped with growth, shifting its nation into an urban industrialised country (Santander Trade, 2025). Its economic success in the export sector was further enhanced through the Korean Wave in the early 90s, with the government's strategic policies and heavy investments as a result of its increased popularity.

Hallyu, is a Chinese term that means 'Korean Wave'. It is a collective term used to refer to the phenomenal growth of Korean culture and popular culture, which includes music, movies, drama, online games and Korean cuisines etc. Hallyu had spread within Asia in the early 1990s, and had gone global in the mid 2000s. According to the Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange, Hallyu contributed USD 9.5 billion, and Hallyu-related tourism made up 55.3% of all inbound tourism (Martinroll 2021). Hallyu also had an estimated US$12.3 billion boost on the Korean economy. There is no doubt that Hallyu has enhanced South Korea's exports (Table 1). This report explores the impact of Hallyu on South Korea's economic rise, how South Korea has manufactured the Korean Wave and its significance (Parc, 2021)

Table 1 Export of Cultural Contents ($, millions)

	Industries	2016	2017	2018	2019	Growth rate (2019)
Export of cultural content	Broadcasting	411	362	400	426	6.6%
	Music	443	513	564	578	2.5%
	Film	44	41	42	64	54.3%
	Animation	136	145	173	179	3.6%
	Character	613	664	733	919	25.3%
	Game	3,277	5,923	6,392	7,860	23.0%
	Publishing	187	221	249	234	-6.2%
	Manhwa	32	35	40	46	13.9%
	Total	**5,143**	**7,904**	**8,593**	**10,306**	**19.9%**
Export value of cultural content helped by *Hallyu*	Broadcasting	366	323	345	368	6.6%
	Music	401	465	520	533	2.5%
	Film	31	29	30	46	54.3%
	Animation	59	63	86	89	3.6%
	Character	266	288	385	482	25.3%
	Game	1,917	3,465	3,835	4,716	23.0%
	Publishing	66	78	133	125	-6.2%
	Manhwa	11	12	22	25	13.9%
	Total	**3,119**	**4,724**	**5,356**	**6,384**	**19.2%**

Notes: 1. The data for 2019 is based on estimation; 2. The data for 2020 is not utilized as it is largely distorted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
Source: Jun and Kim, (2020): 45.

Table 1: Hallyu's influence in South Korea's export value from 2016 to 2019 (Parc, 2021)

The rise of Hallyu

The spread of Korean Wave since the 1990s has varied across the periods, differing in types of genres being popular during the period, in which countries, and how Korean media was being consumed (Table 2)

Characteristics of the Korean Wave by Period

Classification	Korean Wave 1.0	Korean Wave 2.0	Korean Wave 3.0
Duration	From 1997 to the mid-2000s	From the mid-2000s to the early 2010s	Since the early 2010s
Characteristics	Advent of the Korean Wave Focused on visual contents	Diffusion of the Korean Wave Focused on idols	Diversity of the Korean Wave
Main Genre	Drama	K-pop	K-Culture
Genres	Drama, movie, Korean pop song	Public culture, some parts of art and culture	Traditional culture, art and culture, popular culture
Countries	Asia	Asia, some parts of Europe, Africa, Middle East, Middle and South America and the US	Whole world
Major Consumers	Manias	Teens and twenties	World citizens
Major Media	Cable TV, satellite TV, internet	Popular video website, social networking services	All media types

Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism (MCST) (2013)

Table 2, Characteristics of the Korean Wave by Period (National Atlas, 2019)

Hallyu 1.0: 1990s to mid 2000s

The Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998 had left the Korean government in a loan debt of USD 97 billion from the International Monetary Fund. It resulted in lost foreign direct investments, low export revenue and a lack in tourism (Martinroll, 2021). Despite these adversities, many young talented Koreans still had liberty to explore many forms of art. Many made films and dramas with refreshing and controversial takes, gaining traction across the region. Its rising popularity in Asia was also attributed to many local singers who adapted their music to US rap. In 1997, when the TV drama entitled What is Love aired in the Chinese major state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), it ranked second in China's all time imported video content. Hallyu's emergence during this period was seen through Cable TV and the internet, with visual content being prioritised.

Hallyu 2.0: mid 2000s to early 2010s

Boy and girl groups like Big Bang, Girl's Generation and Kara helped Hallyu extend its popularity beyond Asia. Other characteristics of Korean Wave 2.0 are its diffusion through popular video websites and social networking services like Facebook, the global interest in drama dealing with Korean cultural traditions, and the overall broadening of content (National Atals, 2019).

Hallyu 3.0: early 2010s to present

The Korean Wave became more diversified. Beyond music and drama, other aspects of Korean culture have made their influence worldwide. Korean fashion, beauty products, video games and other Korean lifestyles had an increasing appeal. For instance, AmorePacific is South Korea's largest beauty company, ranking 7th on the Women Wear's Daily (WWD) list of top 10 global beauty companies.

Korean brands grew; Samsung and LG advanced technology became forerunners in creating world-class brands as a result of increased R&D in design (Martinroll 2011).

As of 2020, the total number of members who have joined Hallyu-related organisations are nearly 100 million, increasing by 36 percent every year. These organisations refer to Korean culture communities, such as Kpop fanclubs like ARMY, BTS's global official fan club and BLINK, BLACKPINK's official fan club.

The Korean Wave's Influence

The Korean Wave is one of the cultural phenomena that foreigners follow and consume Korean pop culture contents (Chen, 2016). It was widely shared among fans of Asian countries in the late 1990s (Park et al., 2017; Truong, 2018). Initially, dramas and K-pops were recognised as the representative Korean wave, but recently, the popularity of Korean wave has spread to various areas such as games, characters, knowledge information, cartoons, Korean foods, and even Hangeul (Ko, 2009). South Korea has a history of achieving democratisation and economic development within a relatively short time after the Korean War (1950–1953). South Korean hard power is also emphasised. Hard power was a way to force others to act in ways contrary to what they want. In the case of South Korea, in the 1950-1953, the country used hard power to achieve democratic and economic development. 1 The Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index ranked South Korean military capability and defense spending fifth out of 26 countries analysed and Global Fire Power ranked South Korea sixth out of 142 countries for 2022 military strength (Lowy Institute, 2024 & South Korea Military Strength 2025).

The government viewed the first Korean Wave as a new source of income via enhanced exports and tourism. The Lee administration operated the Presidential Council on National Branding for public diplomacy and shifted its focus of cultural policy into an approach based on the concept of soft power. Many considered this approach a useful way to engage in economic development and diplomacy. The government viewed the Korean wave as a new source of income via enhanced exports and tourism.



This became increasingly relevant as the Korean wave expanded to include other exports such as online games, beauty products, and fashion. The Korean wave became an important component of soft power (Kim, 2022).

This approach is referred to as Soft Power, which is persuading others without force. Hallyu serves as a soft power for South Korea, encouraging foreigners to consume Korean media and products, ultimately giving expansion to its export economy.



I: Hallyu's Economic Influence

A. Initial Phase (1990s - early 2000s)

South Korea was more export centered in terms of economic growth. The popularity of leading Korean brands across the world including the US has highlighted certain key dimensions of success for Koreans – superior quality, cutting edge designs and a contemporary feel for the products and services. This lesson has been absorbed by almost all business sectors. This new emphasis has seen an increased investment in research and development in creating products of superior quality (Martiroll, 2021). Films and music generated in South Korea matched the western's production value and quality, hence driving the Korean Wave. Government policies such as the Basic Law for Culture Industry (1999) and Culture & Content Agency (2001) supported domestic production and exports.

Following the IMF crisis in 1997 , many chaebols pulled their investments from Korea's film industry. South Korea shifted its investments from a service industry to a manufacturing industry. This made it significantly easier for production companies to secure bank loans and attract venture capitalist investment. This measure equated intangible cultural content production with the tangible output of firms like Hyundai in state importance and access to structured capital. The Korean government transformed its focus, earmarking 1% of the national budget to spending on subsidies and low-interest loans to cultural industries, launching agencies to promote and expand K-pop exports, and setting up more cultural departments at universities.

Domestic conglomerates or "chaebols," including Samsung and Daewoo, started increasing their stakes in film financing and video production; Samsung recently sponsored the pop group Big Bang's 2012 global tour. This success was likened to the export revenue of Jurassic Park released in 1993, which matched that of the foreign sales of 1.5 million Hyundai (Leong, 2014)

B. Later Phase (2000s onward)

The shift toward national branding and soft power made culture a diplomatic asset. Hallyu created a positive image of Korea globally, increasing its global competitiveness in the arts and in tech. Under the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998–2003), the administration formalised a new approach by viewing cultural industries as "chimney-less key industry". This emphasised content creation as a generator of immense added value, requiring far less capital investment than traditional heavy industry. A vital step that illustrated the strategic significance of Hallyu was the restructuring of institutions and funding to give the creative sector the same national status as traditional export staples, such as electronics and automobiles. This support was legally formalised through the enactment in 1999 of the Basic Law for the Promotion of Cultural Industries, which identified such industries and established that their promotion was a `state responsibility', guaranteeing the legal environment for public financial investment and as a basis for planning (Ścibiorska-Kowalczyk & Cichoń, 2021, p. 13805).

The strategic importance of culture was further accentuated in the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–2013), in which he revived the inherent value of culture as an essential pillar of national competitiveness and diplomacy in a larger context termed “Global Korea.” The government formed the Presidential Council on National Branding to help steer the nation’s soft power and culture diplomacy drive, actively promoting Korea as "future-oriented, multicultural, and visionary." (Kim, 2022). With this fresh direction, it became firmly entrenched that cultural influence was betoken of and directly linked with the political and economic status of the nation at the world level.

This institutionalised commitment continued and was strengthened through the successive administrations. The Park Geun-hye administration (2013-2017) sought to take advantage of the success of cultural exports internationally (such as the world-wide success of Gangnam Style) to promote cultural diplomacy, often constructing international auditoriums and cultural centres through which to propagate Korean culture internationally. Finally, the Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022) sought to institutionalise the management of Hallyu through the construction of a Hallyu Department (2020). This administration declared a “New Hallyu Era” (known as Hallyu 4.0), indicating that the administration was intent on making further sustainable expansions and diversifying cultural content (Song, 2020).





II: The K-Pop Factory

The unprecedented global success of K-Pop, especially during Hallyu 2.0, was not random but the direct result of a carefully calculated system, like a “K-Pop factory”, as said by Lee Jong-im, a pop culture expert (A Rare Glimpse of the ‘Factorylike’ K-pop Idol Training System, 2019). This star system was formulated by Lee Soo-Man, the founder of SM Entertainment, drawing inspiration from the Japanese idol model, before it was then adopted by agencies like SM, JYP, and YG to create controlled environments for talent development, where artists are cultivated not just for musical proficiency but also for commercial palatability (Manufacturing Stardom: The K-Pop Business Model and Its Unmatched Success in Asia | Nicole Chen – MUSBA, n.d.). This ensured that the output of this methodical process aligned with the government’s mandates, which made the production of Hallyu, especially K-Pop, nationalistic and commercial, rather than artistic and creative expression. Right from the get-go, K-Pop groups are treated like consumer products – producers design the group and concept they want, down to the precise look, sound, and marketing campaign, before they even audition members (Hong, 2014).

A. The Trainee Debt

In this K-Pop trainee system, the stakes are higher than ever. According to Goswami (2025), the price to take a K-Pop group from the training rooms to the stage costs agencies US$7.5 million or more. This massive initial investment covers every expense for the trainees over several years, including housing, food, top-notch lessons in vocals, dance, and foreign languages, as well as the high production costs for music videos, which can easily range from US$300,000 to over US$800,000 for a single track.

ccording to Goswami (2025), to make that money back, the “Trainee Debt” system is employed, functioning as a venture capital model for human talent. Under this system, this large amount of money spent on the trainee’s development to become the star they’re trained to be is treated as a large loan. The idol, individually, must repay the entire sum to the company from their earnings upon debut, before they can personally earn their own profit. This does not include the trainees who do not ultimately debut. It is estimated that for every 1,000 trainees entering the system, only 20 to 30 make it to debut. In this venture capital model of the trainee system, the agencies invest smaller amounts in dozens of trainees, fully aware that most will not generate a return (Goswami, 2025). Hence, the whole business plan hinges on the hope that some of those trainees will achieve massive success, generating enough profit to cover the losses from all the others (Goswami, 2025). This system ensures that the agencies get back their initial investments, however, this shifts the financial risk and responsibility from a large corporation to a young artist.

For example, a former Momoland member, Daisy, publicly disputed being charged nearly US$60,000 for the production costs of the audition show she appeared on, even before she was officially in the group. This illustrates the rabbit hole of costs that begins right from the idol's contracts. This high-risk nature of the system places huge burdens and stresses upon the idols, which then pushes them to their limits to achieve success.

B. The Trainee System

The execution of this model requires rigorous discipline culturally reinforced by South Korea's social norms. The industry almost exclusively recruits minors, often children aged eight to sixteen, prioritising their moldability, youthful appearance, and career longevity (Manufacturing Stardom: The K-Pop Business Model and Its Unmatched Success in Asia | Nicole Chen – MUSBA, n.d.).

The training path is characterised by a "militaristic approach," involving years of intense, high-pressure regimens enforced by restrictive contracts. In this curriculum, trainees are trained for endless hours to master synchronised dancing and vocal performance. Moreover, as the objective of this system is to produce trans-national performers to scale global markets, the training process also trains them in foreign languages to prepare them for international export. If not, the K-Pop auditions held internationally in Australia, Thailand, Canada, and Singapore in 2024 stand testimony to the fact that local Koreans are not a requirement when looking for their next K-Pop star ("K-pop Label Source Music to Hold Auditions in 15 Cities Worldwide, Including Singapore," 2024).

There is a cultural foundation that enables this exploitation – Confucian ethics. The hierarchical culture seeped in this system is deeply rooted in the Confucian concept of obedience and respecting authority. Many entertainment labels then justify and legitimise this power imbalance and force obedience in the younger trainees to make them fundamentally hesitant to challenge authority, even if it comes at a price they have to pay. This framework is crucial in sustaining the level of labour required, before and after debut, as the East Asian cultural emphasis on "collective interests" subtly constrains idols, leading to compliance with corporate practices that prioritise company profitability over individual welfare (Unveiling Ethical Issues in the K-Pop Industry (22.9.2025), n.d.). By also creating a family-like environment (i.e., SM family, YG family, joint concerts), a sense of filial piety could also be enforced in the trainees and idols to prevent them from questioning and defying the system.



C. The Paradox

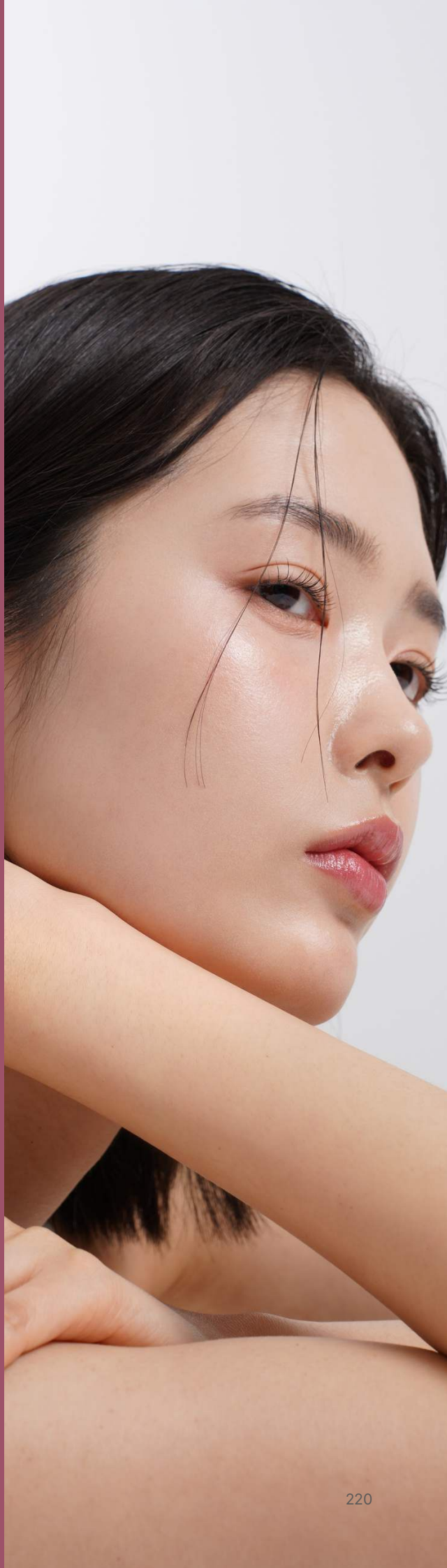
The methodical and strategic approach to manufacturing stars is celebrated for its unmatched efficiency (Kim & Kwon, 2022). However, this rigorous process has also received criticism for its mechanical nature, often described as an "assembly line" system (Liu, 2025). This pressure for consistency and high output is reported to inhibit genuine creative innovation and artistic expression, revealing a tension between hyper-efficiency and creative sustainability (Liu, 2025).

However, this creates a disparity between K-Pop's reception internationally and domestically. Data shows that K-Pop's overseas revenue is significantly higher than domestic sales, with countries like Japan, the U.S., and Indonesia often ranking as larger consumers than Korea itself, which is fourth (Heon, 2025). This suggests that this model is very much built for international export, mostly prioritising international appeal over focused domestic growth.

D. Lookism

With the pressure to financially succeed upon debut comes greater expectations of appealing to the fans, going as far as altering physical appearance to be commercialiseable for the consumer market. Idols are constantly pressured to alter their appearances, through extreme dieting, intense gym routines, or cosmetic procedures, to conform to unrealistic beauty standards for the sake of advancement in life and career.

The pressure exerted on K-Pop idols regarding physical appearance stems from Lookism, a very prevalent social phenomenon in South Korea, where physical appearance holds real consequences for individuals – everything from employment to social status. Within the K-Pop Factory, the idol's body and emotional state are treated as constantly managed corporate assets (Rivera, 2025). Plastic surgery is often viewed not as an act of vanity but as a mandatory investment in one's future and career viability, a necessity emphasised by the market – some Korean clinics openly advertise discounted "graduation packages" to teenagers finishing high school (Rivera, 2025).



The psychological toll of Lookism and the pressures of conforming to unrealistic beauty standards is highlighted by industry figures:

1. Jessi and Forced Procedures: According to Koreaboo (2024), Korean-American solo artist Jessi shared that she was forced by her agency to get her first plastic surgery procedure. She explained that this triggered insecurities she had not had previously, leading her to start "seeing all the flaws in my face," resulting in further procedures and feeling "out of control." This example reinforces how the agency's power to manage the artist's physical image can directly damage the artist's mental health and body image.
2. BABYMONSTER's Ahyeon: This pressure to upkeep physical appearance is highly prevalent even amongst minors in South Korea. BABYMONSTER member Ahyeon, who debuted as a minor, sparked significant buzz for her extremely slim waist and toned abs. According to Koreaboo (2025), she was allegedly captured visibly sucking in her tummy to the paparazzi at the airport. This scrutiny demonstrates how the industry demands perfection down to the aesthetics, literally requiring a specific physique, which is enforced and maintained even in public moments for young performers. Whether they are minors or not, does not seem to matter.

The training regimen further enforces this through strict dieting and extreme physical demands, contributing to potential health issues such as depression and eating disorders. According to Insider (2019), one famous K-pop diet, known as the "Paper Cup Diet," involves eating nine paper cups' worth of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables every day. Former member of K-pop band Crayon Pop, Way, said "We weren't allowed to eat midnight snacks. Other snacks like chips and candy weren't allowed, so we would sneak out and eat it." (Insider, 2019). He also said, "We used to dance with 4 kg (8.8 lbs) of sandbags on our feet for several days. Our teacher wanted us to get used to the sandbags, so without it our dances would look lighter [in the performance]." (Insider, 2019).

E. Contractual Exploitation – Slave Contracts

This trainee model has always been maintained through extreme power imbalances, documented and sealed even in "slave contracts" – long-term, one-sided agreements that bound idols to agencies for up to thirteen years or more (Yip, 2025). The FTC introduced a standard contract for entertainment trainees in 2009, with major revisions in 2017, including a rule limiting exclusive entertainment contracts to a maximum duration of seven years, and also reduced punitive financial penalties for entertainers seeking early termination (Yip, 2025). While this reform in contract terms, and therefore, power imbalance, has mitigated labour terms, the fundamental power imbalance of this "K-Pop Factory" continues to exist, now instead shifting the focus of disputes from about basic labour terms (contract length) to complex battles over Intellectual Property (IP) and revenue control.



Below are two recent case studies:

1. EXO-CBX vs. SM Entertainment: The 2023 dispute between EXO members Chen, Baekhyun, and Xiumin (CBX) and SM Entertainment demonstrates how contractual terms and leveraging on financial clauses are being used to maintain residual control over the artists.

The conflict began when the EXO members notified SM of their intention to terminate their exclusive contracts, citing SM's alleged failure to properly provide transparent accounting and revenue settlement data, saying that "during the 12-13 years they had been signed to SM, the agency has never provided these documents"(Koreaboo, 2023). CBX formally lodged a complaint with the KFTC regarding the contract terms (Koreaboo, 2023).

According to GMA Integrated News (2024), the parties eventually reached a settlement that allowed the trio to maintain their contracts under the EXO group name while pursuing independent solo activities through their new agency, INB100. The key detail of this settlement was a specific financial clause: in exchange for permission to use the "EXO-CBX" name and related intellectual property (IP), the members agreed to pay SM 10% of their individual activity revenue with SM promising 5.5% distribution fee (Kyung-Min, 2025). CBX claimed SM had broken the "verbal agreement", and withheld payments as a result. The trio then filed multiple lawsuits, injunctions and complaints, but all were dismissed or ruled in SM's favour (Kyung-Min, 2025). SM later claimed "trust" issues to justify excluding CBX from planned full-group EXO activities (SM Entertainment Refutes EXO-CBX's Distorted Claims on Full-Group Activities, 2025). This dispute powerfully illustrates how the conflict has shifted from labour protection to IP and financial leverage. By imposing such restrictions on independent success by forcing significant revenue shares, agencies establish yet another means as a powerful, residual economic control over artists who have otherwise fulfilled their initial contracts.

2. HYBE/ADOR vs. NewJeans: The 2024 conflict between HYBE and its sub-label ADOR, with their global girl group NewJeans, highlights the issue of individual control versus corporate dominance within the K-Pop system.

According to Delgado (2025), after the dismissal of ADOR's creative, Min Hee-jin, the group's members sought to terminate their contracts with ADOR "due to their breach of contractual obligations and failure to rectify the issues within the rectification period". They mentioned "ADOR does not have the will or ability to protect NewJeans. If we remain here, it will be a waste of our time, and our mental distress will continue," and that the breakdown of trust rendered the exclusive contract void.

However, the Seoul Central District Court ruled that the group's exclusive contract with ADOR remains valid until 2029, rejecting the members' attempt to gain independence. The court ruled that ADOR had not breached the exclusive contract just from dismissing the former CEO. Although the members expressed concern and disappointment, the court's verdict retained ADOR's authority over the group. Reinforced by its victory in the legal battle, this case proves the struggle of the individual artists having to fight against the corporate giants for their rights.

As of November 2025, their contracts with ADOR remain valid and two of the five members have confirmed their return to ADOR.

This K-Pop Factory delivered what the nation ordered – global success, economic power, and cultural influence. It is a flawlessly efficient machine for producing transnational stars. However, the success of K-Pop is directly built upon this inherent tension – the crippling trainee debt, the aesthetic pressures, and the complex, enduring contract battles like the one with EXO-CBX and NewJeans. This proves that the ethical foundations of this billion-dollar machine are fundamentally unstable. Such is the paradox of the K-Pop factory – despite being a crucial cultural asset to its economy and society, it continues to demand a staggering human price.



III: The Critical Edge: Hallyu's Visual Culture's Content, Significance, and Critical Resonance

Hallyu's success can be attributed to their transformation of the South Korean experience, which transforms from traditionalism to more relatable stories of instability, inequality, and hope. Korean culture goes beyond simple escapism of entertainment, and instead connects them to their socio-political issues, a potent, non-Western conversation about modernity and global capitalism today.

In this section (III), we will explore the ideas and phenomenon that ties Hallyu back to it;s roots and meaning, while also presenting a critique of it.

How the Korean Wave, or Hallyu is portrayed is a striking dichotomy. On the one hand, there is the highly capitalised, well-planned K-Pop industry, and on the other, there are the critically acclaimed, thematically dense television dramas and films.

A. The Tension Between Product and Critique

The K-pop industry is a high-capital field designed to mass-produce globally appealing stars for profit and brand consistency (Kim, 2022)., with success being measured through sales, streams, and brand value.

In contrast, the K-Drama industry acts as a narrative complement to the industrial machine. Moreover, The intense national pressure for perfection in K-Pop training (Hong, 2014) leads to significant social stratification and deep human conflict—the "societal winners and losers".

Product vs. Problem: K-Drama touches on the emotional, social, and ethical concerns associated with South Korean modernity, whereas K-Pop presents a refined and hopeful picture of it.

B. Compressed Modernity

The consistency and global impact of Korean visual content are not random; they stem from the shared experience captured by the concept of Compressed Modernity.



Compressed Modernity (Ścibiorska-Kowalczyk & Cichoń, 2021) describes South Korea's unique situation of achieving rapid economic development in a short time. The country's transformation from a post-war, low-income nation in the 1960s to a global economic powerhouse successfully compartmentalised centuries of Western industrialisation and cultural change into a few generations which is significantly impressive.

The low income and high income narratives highlight the stark disparity between the ultra-rich and the rest, which resulted from the creation of wealth, which is frequently concentrated in Chaebol. This narrative is also prevalent in much of K-media today.

- Social Anxiety and Debt: Crippling debt and economic insecurity, leading to the widespread cultural term known as "Hell Joseon." (Jorsin, G., 2017)
- Hyper-Competition: The drive to do well in school and the workplace because an elite position depends on standing out from others.

The effects of this rushed development are transformed into the core of globally successful dramas and films.

C. Duality of Success and Failure

The idealized image of "Global Korea" brings about many harsh economic realities created by Korea's highly competitive society. Korean Dramas, Films and K-pop media consistently explore the tension between them. This contrast is expressed through storytelling and visual elements.

D. Soft Power

K-Dramas like Crash Landing on You and Business Proposal showcase protagonists who are extremely wealthy, tech-savvy, and attractive; they are structured and made to support the national images that South Korea wants to portray. Houses, Buildings and the landscape which ranges from penthouses to upscale corporate headquarters, tell a story of national prosperity that is consistent with South Korea's Soft Power.

Parasite (Film, 2019)

Parasite serves as a key reference point for Hallyu's class critique. The film uses stark physical space to symbolize class difference.

The film's main movement is vertical. The damp, subterranean flat of the Kim family demonstrates their lack of resources. They move up the social scale when they move into the Park family's light-filled, luxurious home. The systemic difficulty of escaping their class is revealed through the symbolism of a flood, which forces the Kim family back into their underground home (Sims., 2019). The Kims' "labour" is based on deceit and taking advantage of another struggling family rather than skill, underscoring the fact that surviving in this system frequently means hurting their own class.

The movie exposes the "Korean Dream," saying that the conflict is caused by the enormous gap between two classes that have to coexist rather than by personal moral failings.



Image: Parasite Film, 2019



Image: Squid Game, 2021

Squid Game (Series, 2021)

Squid Game gained popularity by reducing the economic struggle to its most desperate depiction: a life-or-death competition fueled by debt.

Despite their diverse backgrounds, the protagonists are all bound together by crippling financial burdens. Because of this common struggle, the game's extreme violence appears to be a logical decision for freedom, illustrating the desperation of the fiercely competitive Korean economy and the universal truth that poverty and greed can drive people to despair Cosslett., 2021).

The show portrays the plight of the impoverished as a perverse kind of amusement for the rich and powerful. This critique tackles the commodification of desperation by arguing that the way that the world's audience consumes content such as Squid Game reflects how the elite perceives the financial difficulties that many people face (Mc Curry., 2024) By juxtaposing innocence with the harsh realities of adult economic failure, the use of kid-friendly games heightens the horror.

E. Tradition and Social Change

Hallyu content engages between traditional Confucian values, focused on corporate and family hierarchies, and modern ideals that promote gender and social inclusion.

The Patriarchy

The images of strength — female strength is often reshaped by modern films and K-pop, they go against the conventional behavioural standards that are recognised by the patriarchal society. Movies like My Name and Weightlifting Fairy Kim Bok-joo are just some examples of this hypothesis. My Name's main character is a strong, independent female who disregards the conventional romantic route in favour of strength and retaliation.

Similarly, the main character of Weightlifting Fairy is a student-athlete who is centred on her physical prowess instead of meeting conventional ideals of beauty and lookism. The focus on independence signals a departure and stray from the traditional, submissive female roles in the narrative. This is also seen in the success of K-Pop groups like BLACKPINK and NewJeans, which set global trends (Park et al., 2024).



Image: Weightlifting Fairy

F. Inclusivity

One example— Extraordinary Attorney Woo's worldwide success. Woo Young-woo, a neurodivergent woman and an accomplished lawyer, is a character in the drama (Choi J., 2022). Despite her social and emotional battles, her success in the legal industry serves as a critique and power of a culture that places a big value on conformity.

a. Strategic Hybridity and Affective Attachment The Case of BTS

K-Pop uses a skilfully constructed hybridisation technique, fusing distinctive Korean elements with internationally well-known genres like R&B, EDM, and hip-hop. These western elements allow for greater accessibility for globalization. Their earlier songs also spoke to young people all over Asia, which criticised the extreme pressures of Compressed Modernity. They later shifted to more universal subjects, examining identity, mental health, and self-love (Jang, 2025). Social critique has evolved into the global message of self-acceptance, whose “Love Myself” campaigns resonate with international audiences by touching on Korea’s anxieties born from the modern, and hyper-competitive living.

Their intricate music videos and signature highly coordinated, intricate choreography combine to form a potent visual symbol. This quest for technical and artistic excellence demonstrates Korean production quality and discipline, winning praise from all over the world (Glasby., 2020).

This perfectionism — using synchronised group choreography— is symbolic of the visual representation of teamwork and discipline that idols have to go through. Huge budgets and exceptional quality of Music Videos often go up against Hollywood productions, where Korea is a big player in setting this standard.

A key component of South Korea's Soft Power strategy, Hallyu fosters a deep emotional bond by emphasising universal emotional journeys. K-Dramas, which are distinguished by the "found family" cliché and high-stakes romance, are excellent at telling gripping, emotionally compelling stories.



Image: BTS K-pop group

This emphasis on the universal feelings of loss, sacrifice, love, and loyalty. Fans' emotional commitment, such as ARMY for BTS, translates into cultural affinity and advances national Soft Power objectives. Audiences are more likely to have a positive perception of Korea on several levels if they are able to relate to the emotional lives of Korean characters.

The flawless visuals and seeming perfection of K-Pop idols disregard and hide the intense labor and mental pressure those in Korea may face. Dazzling performances seen on stage and screen result from an intense and harsh industrial process.



b. The Effects and Meaning

Strict South Korean beauty standards are frequently propagated by Hallyu content. Both fans and performers are under pressure from the emphasis on many skincare regimens, cosmetic procedures, and high fashion that is portrayed in dramas and personified by K-Pop idols.

The tension between Hallyu's three main points—its strategic national brand, its production process, and its social critique—makes it a complex phenomenon with much global relevance. This complexity highlights the critique of inequality in a hierarchical society, which is fundamentally demanding. While Hallyu is presented as successful, the societal flaws are also very prevalent issues in Korean' society, which contradicts the idea and image of a successful nation.

What else is portrayed is the harsh realities of South Korea's Compressed Modernity—debt, inequality, and hyper-competition—through universal, emotionally stirring stories that resonate with the challenges of the modern world. The Korean Wave continues to be a powerful and significant reminder — of how cultural norms are reshaped around the world.



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