

**Beneath the Surface:**  
*The Struggles of Dismantling Lookism in Looks-Obsessed South Korea*  
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**Abstract:** Lookism—discrimination based on physical appearance—permeates daily life in South Korea. While researchers and critics have extensively discussed the roots of lookism and plastic surgery in Korea, little has been said on how to dismantle such an institutionalized beauty obsession—and how to adjust these goals in the wake of the Tal Corset (탈코르셋) or “Escape the Corset” movement. This article first provides a localized, critical analysis of lookism and its detrimental effects, demonstrating the potential for and necessity of resistance, especially when concerning lookism’s alarming impact on youth. Drawing on this exploration of lookism’s pervasiveness in Korean Society, the article observes the positive intentions and successes of Tal Corset’s approach. Next it details the movement’s failures to illuminate the powerful structures that wield lookism as a mechanism of control over women. Finally, it attempts to draw on these analyses to show that effective social change can only be realized with the acknowledgement and involvement of the various stakeholders and institutional barriers linked to lookism.

“Your bare face is terror to my eyes.”

“Makeup is manners.”

“Your skin is disgusting for a woman.”

“Your eyes are so small—can you even open them?”

“I would kill myself if I were you.”

A deluge of derogatory insults floods the screen as South Korean YouTuber Lina Bae presents the laborious process of putting on contact lenses, foundation, eyeshadow, false eyelashes, blush, lipstick — the list goes on. Yet, her efforts to escape the negative comments hurled towards her appearance prove futile as she continues to face derision even with a full-makeup face. Further criticisms appear on screen: “You think makeup is enough?” “Men don’t like heavy makeup.” “I want to beat you up.” A former online beauty content creator herself, Bae proceeds to undermine the conventional makeup tutorial structure by removing her makeup and returning to her bare face, ending the video with a visibly more gleeful and refreshed expression. Although Bae may not fit her country’s limited standard of beauty, the white Hangeul characters on the screen write, “그러나 예쁘지 않아도 괜찮습니다” — “It is fine even if I am not pretty.”

This is Lina Bae’s message to both South Korea (hereafter Korea) and the world in her three-minute-long testimony. Upon its release in June 2018, the video was covered in various international media outlets and amassed more than eight million views, demonstrating the sheer magnitude of its reach. The ironic reality that Bae is a victim of verbal abuse with and without makeup spurs viewers to think critically about how much value we attach to appearances and the consequences of expecting women to reach for some unachievable ideal. Bae is one of many young women in Korea who are rebelling against the strict, unrealistic beauty standards enforced by society. This Tal Corset (탈코르셋) or “Escape the Corset” movement has involved multiple posts of women destroying their makeup and shaving their hair across social media platforms, serving as both a literal and figurative expression of their liberation from a cosmetic corset. Reminiscent of the 1968 Miss America feminist protest<sup>1</sup> and largely inspired by the global #MeToo phenomenon, Tal Corset has risen in conjunction with other feminist initiatives in Korea combatting not only the country’s stark gender inequality, but also the alarming prevalence of sexual harassment. By outwardly displaying their defiance of Korea’s lookist and misogynistic society, members of “Tal-co” (the abbreviated form of Tal Corset) hope that this radical method will spark the larger Korean population to empathize with the stress women experience — living in a society where they are treated more as objects of admiration than as unique, individual beings.

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<sup>1</sup> See Gay (2018) for more background information on the protests and how it struggled to rebel against the Miss America pageant’s “antiquated, misogynistic attitudes toward women and beauty.”

While researchers and critics have extensively discussed the roots of lookism and plastic surgery in Korea<sup>2</sup>, little has been said on how to dismantle such an institutionalized beauty obsession — and how to adjust these goals in the wake of the Tal-co movement. Through a localized, critical analysis of lookism and its detrimental effects, I will argue that resistance not only has potential to succeed but is also necessary for the health of future generations, especially when concerning lookism’s alarming impact on youth. Drawing on this exploration of lookism’s pervasiveness in Korean society, I will describe the positive intentions and successes of Tal-co’s approach. Then I will detail the weaknesses of the movement, analyzing a set of other conflicting powers that complicate Korea’s beauty obsession. Even the movement’s failures to build solidarity hold lessons illuminating the manifold complexity of lookism. Such lessons to be learned include that lookism is a deeply entrenched issue tied to historical, capitalist, and misogynist factors. Finally, I will draw on these analyses to emphasize that effective social change can only be realized with the acknowledgement and involvement of the various stakeholders and institutional barriers linked to lookism.

### **Lookism: A visible problem**

When I first moved to the cosmopolitan city of Seoul in 2010, I experienced intense cultural shock in reaction to Korean society’s consuming emphasis on looks. Strolling down the bustling streets of Gangnam, one is bombarded with glossy “before and after” cosmetic surgery advertisements on the walls of public buses and soaring skyscrapers — a constant reminder of the distinct features required to achieve Korea’s definition of beauty: round doe-like eyes, flawless porcelain skin, a slim sub-110-pound body, and a small V-shaped face. Coupled with interpersonal pressures to strive for a more beautiful appearance, the homogeneous images of Korean celebrities in commercials, music videos, TV shows, and my friends’ camera rolls demonstrate the inescapable omnipresence of Korean beauty expectations. From as early as middle school, many of my Korean peers pursued dramatic aesthetic transformations, received subtler procedures such as blepharoplasty (also referred to as double eyelid surgery) and eye enlargement. Others had riskier operations like cheekbone reduction and jaw reduction surgery. According to some estimates, between one-fifth and one-third of Korean women have gone under the knife and many more wear full makeup daily (Marx, 2019; Gallup Korea, 2015, p. 5).

As evident, lookism — or discrimination based on physical appearance — permeates daily life in Korea and has only been exacerbated in recent years, largely facilitated by the nation’s rapid socio-economic development. Proceeding from the Miracle on the Han,<sup>3</sup> “compressed industrialization and urbanization” has led to heightened competition in academics, employment, and general social interactions (H. Lee et al., 2017, p. 1). In such a hyper-competitive world, one’s physical attributes have emerged as another “stratifying factor;” an appearance that meets Korean beauty ideals serves as a substantial advantage, whereas one that is unattractive by Korean standards can be a serious detriment (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.

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<sup>2</sup> See the following sources for further information: Aquino and Steinkamp (2016), Bissell and Chung (2009), Davies and Han (2011), Holliday and Elfving-Hwang (2005), Kim (2003), Lee (2016), Masako and Kramer (2003), and Woo (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Refers to South Korea’s period of accelerated economic growth from 1961 to 1996, “during which it was transformed into a prosperous, industrial society” (Seth, 2017).

Korea's lookist society reflects the culture's fixation on physical appearances. Academic writing tends to frame Korea's beauty obsession as a problem for feminist to debate, questioning whether aesthetic ideals are empowering or oppressive (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p. 75; T. Kim, 2003, p. 109; S. Lee, 2019, p. 16-17; K.J. Woo, 2004, p. 78-79). When examining the topic of plastic surgery, for instance, Keong Ja Woo, a sociologist from Yonsei University, eloquently describes the paradox of how women willingly yet helplessly go under the knife; what is intended as a source of "empowerment" is, in reality, a "trap" (2004, p. 68; Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p. 75). Despite the elevated socio-economic status and self-esteem that may come with a surgically enhanced appearance, aesthetic surgery is not an individual issue but one that stems from "patriarchal consumer capitalism... promot[ing] an inferiority complex in women," causing them to view their bodies in a pathological light (K.K. Woo, 2004, p. 79). Korean women voluntarily receive cosmetic surgery with the belief that a more attractive appearance will liberate them from repressive ideology, allowing for greater competitive standing in labor and marriage markets. A 2020 survey conducted by Gallup Korea revealed that 31% of Korean women in their 30s have had plastic surgery compared to just 4% of their male counterparts. However, the irony lies in the reality that these women are active consumers in an industry that is fueled by and re-institutionalizes a normative system of beauty.

While the paradox of women's agency is a familiar one in feminist discourse around the world, Korea's lookist culture furthers this paradox with the ideologies of Neo-Confucian and neoliberal governmentalities. Scholar Taeyon Kim links beauty expectations for women to Neo-Confucianism, the nation's dominant philosophy which ruled its "politics, religion, social system and private relations for over 500 years" (2003, p. 110). Under the ideology of Neo-Confucianism, "Women were regarded as subjectless bodies" whose identities were intrinsically embedded in the corporeal (T. Kim, 2003, p. 101). Analogous to how Korean women in the past were expected to manage their bodies for the sake of their kin, Neo-Confucianism today dictates that women cultivate their corporeal bodies to meet a "requirement of decorum:" a form of propriety that persists in Korea's post-industrial consumer society (T. Kim, 2003, p. 107). Compared with the West's employment of beauty and fashion as a display of individuality, Korea's culture of conformity requires that women improve and transform their bodies with strict adherence to the new codes of capitalism — where one's looks represents one's value in a competitive society (T. Kim, 2003, p. 106-108). Korean women are thus compelled to reach for their society's impossible standard of aesthetic perfection, in turn feeling obligated to wear makeup and often resorting to aesthetic surgery in the hopes of improving marriage and employment prospects.

This repressive standard intersects the Confucianism of the past and the capitalism of the present as individuals are increasingly bound by both social expectations of beauty and market structures that feed into appearance-related insecurities. Sharon Lee — whose research explores the imperial routes of culture and media — holds that women are governed by "neoliberal mandates for self-management" based on the rationale that "one's body is 'an avenue to attaining social success'" in Korea's highly competitive world (2019, p. 16). Referencing Sang-Hui Kim, executive director of the Korean feminist nonprofit organization Womenlink, Lee further calls attention to how lookism acts as a "mechanism of control that, like chaste ideologies in centuries prior, discipline women's behaviors and relationships to their own bodies" (2019, p. 17). The predicament that arises with neoliberal body management is that it is "coded as necessity yet signified as choice." Women feel required to alter their appearance due to the threat of "lookism discrimination" since "unbeautiful women are seen as lazy and as incapable" (S. Lee, 2019, p.

17). The negative consequences of refusing to follow Korea's expectations of beauty illustrate the fundamentally oppressive nature of lookism. Upon careful examination of scholarly literature, there appears to be a consensus that lookism is repressive, regardless of the supposed socio-economic benefits that may be gained by conforming to Korea's narrow aesthetic standards.

Lookism and its deleterious consequences have been proven to manifest in tangible ways. Besides the unusually high rates of aesthetic surgery in Korea (the largest ratio of cosmetic procedures per capita), empirical studies have probed the relationship between appearance discrimination and its health effects in Korea (H. Lee et al., 2017, p. 1; *ISAPS*). One Korean study reports that 24 percent of adolescents experience discrimination based on appearance and that lookism is associated with greater suicidal ideation (H. Lee et al., 2017, p. 1-2; I. Song et al.). A 2017 poll conducted by job search portal Albamon found that 81.1 percent of part-time students believed that appearance influenced their employment search and around 40 percent responded that they had been victims of lookism when job hunting (Kuhn, 2019; H. Cho, 2017). One paper further concluded that those who experience higher rates of looks-based prejudice generally plan to receive or have already undergone cosmetic procedures (Lim, 2015).

Young Korean women are especially vulnerable targets of lookism; in 2013, Kyungwook Shin, a professor of food and nutrition at Samyook University, found that 93.5 percent of 154 female university students surveyed in the normal weight range were dissatisfied with their current bodies (S.Y. Lee, 2015). The study also showed that 71.2 percent of underweight female college students and 100 percent of overweight students were unhappy with their bodies, resulting in extreme dieting habits with side effects ranging from anemia to binge-eating (S.Y. Lee, 2015). Supporting these conclusions, research organized by the Gangnam Severance Hospital in Seoul revealed that among 717 young female participants with a normal body mass index (BMI), 40 percent of them erroneously perceived themselves as overweight and "67.7 percent said they were on a diet solely to look more 'attractive'" (C. Lee, 2016). In fact, Kim Yul-li — a psychiatrist who specializes in the treatment of eating disorders — stated that an estimated one in four young Korean women suffer from eating disorders and that there is likely a greater number of people who do not seek professional assistance (Kim & Denyer, 2018). On top of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia<sup>4</sup>, data from the aforementioned report by Severance Hospital demonstrated how women with negative body image were 1.82 times more at risk of developing depression and 1.65 times more susceptible to mental stress than those with positive body perception (C. Lee, 2016). Lookism and, by extension, poor self-perception undoubtedly have damaging physical and mental health effects on Korean individuals.

Another troubling sign of severe lookism is the increasing popularity and normalization of makeup used by and catered to elementary school children (Heavytalker, 2018). Having lived in Seoul until recently, I can corroborate this reality; walking down the streets of Gangnam, one can see many young girls under the age of twelve wearing bright red lipstick and white foundation, carrying around elaborate makeup pouches in their backpacks. In a 2016 survey conducted by Kim Joo-duk, a professor of beauty studies at Sungshin Women's University, 42.4

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<sup>4</sup> Such eating disorders and poor dieting are common among Korean female celebrities, in turn influencing young girls who strive to emulate the unrealistically thin bodies that are glamorized by the media. See JTBC Entertainment (2018), Benjamin (2017), Matsumoto (2014), and Doo (2016) for further context.

percent of elementary school girls responded that they used color cosmetics<sup>5</sup>—the proportion has only risen since (Kim & Denyer, 2018; I. Cho, 2017). As Koreans turn towards makeup at even younger ages, the demand for children's cosmetics has drastically increased. Data disclosed by SK Planet's 11<sup>th</sup> Street online shopping web shows prodigious surges in the sales of such beauty products, reporting 29 percent, 251 percent, and 94 percent growth in 2017, 2016, and 2015, respectively ("Sales of Cosmetics," 2018). The rapid growth of the children's cosmetics market reflects the emerging culture of "adult kids" ("어덜키즈"), where kids as young as five years old wear makeup and mature clothes due to peer pressure and the inescapable influence of online media featuring young idol singers.

In addition to marketing cosmetic products for juvenile demographics, a uniform company called "Skoolooks" (for context, most Korean students are required to wear uniforms until university) has incorporated small pockets inside blazers and skirts for girls to insert their lipstick, referred to as "lip tint pockets" (C. Lee, 2018b). Wearing this jacket serves as a constant reminder to reapply lipstick and could potentially distract students from concentrating on both their intellectual and social development. Moreover, while it is no secret that women have been and continue to be expected to wear tight-fitting clothing in the workplace, the uniforms worn by young female students also typically consist of short skirts and tight blouses. According to Choi Yun Jeong, a senior researcher at the Korean Women's Development Institute, the intentional production of form-fitting school uniforms for young girls serves as an inappropriate vehicle of sexualization (C. Lee, 2018b). The fact that Korean girls are expected to wear makeup and observe stringent beauty standards from an early age substantiates further evidence for how lookist culture affects people in concrete ways.

As stated by Mi Sun Shim (communications professor at Soon Chun Hyang University), the underlying quandary, however, is that "Body shaming and lookism in the media are so normalized in Korea that a lot of people don't even realize that it's a problem" (C. Lee, 2016). I have seen my friends subconsciously fall into the false notion that obsessing over their appearance is normal, that extreme dieting is normal, and that plastic surgery as a middle school graduation gift is normal. Published in the National Human Rights Commission of Korea's 2017 report, Shim's "Monitoring of the Media's Gender Discrimination" closely surveilled the country's public broadcasters for six months and observed widespread body shaming as well as lookism on Korean television. For example, the media assessment noted the inappropriate, frequent way in which Korean female comedians are subject to disparaging appearance-related remarks, underlining the rampant promotion of lookism and gender discrimination in the media (Shim et. al, 2017, p. 162). The KIGIPE (Korean Institute for Gender Equality Promotion and Education) criticized "Large Love," a sketch from the Korean comedy program called Gag Concert, for "portray[ing] fat people as being unconditionally happy in front of food" and mocking them for their uncontrollable appetite (Kang, 2017; KBS World, 2016). While being overweight may serve as a "marketable selling point" for female comedians in Korea, the predicament lies in that they are often reduced to simplistic characters, "becom[ing] tools in a larger comedic machine that uses stereotypes about fat people and unfeminine women to score cheap laughs" (Kang, 2017). This systematic institutionalization of lookism is dangerous

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<sup>5</sup> Directly translated from the Korean phrase "색조화장품" where saek-jo means "color" and hwa-jang means "makeup." This serves as an umbrella term for cosmetics including eyeliner, cushion compact, and foundation—essentially everything besides basic skincare items such as lotion and sunscreen.

precisely due to Koreans' lack of awareness and understanding of its adverse repercussions. Submerged in a lookist ocean, it is harder to see the problems that lie beneath the surface.

The many discernible corollaries of lookism expose the gravity of the issue and point to its ultimately oppressive nature. From unjust employment discrimination to body shaming to eating disorders, lookism is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed — especially when mindful of its harmful impact on impressionable young children. When considering how the indoctrination of beauty standards can lead to destructive outcomes, Korean society should be concerned that makeup is now becoming normalized for girls at earlier and earlier ages. In this landscape of unbridled lookism, the Tal Corset movement is aiming to defy Korea's image-based culture.

### **Escaping the corset: the path to freedom?**

Even before the era of face masks ushered in by COVID-19, Korean female students would often wear face masks to school to hide their physical imperfections. This trend began among K-pop stars who would wear “fashion masks” to the airport, not only to remain incognito but also so that they could conceal their bare faces. There was this constant obligation to look “presentable” at all times; when not wearing a cosmetic mask, apart from staying at home, wearing an actual mask was the next best alternative. In February 2019, Meji Jung released a YouTube video on her decision to free herself from the corset imposed by Korean society, noting that in the 28 years that she has conformed to the culture's beauty ideals, no one has ever questioned the lengths she has taken to appear “beautiful,” which include not only the daily labor of makeup, but also rhinoplasty, facial surgery, liposuction, and breast augmentation surgery. However, ever since she joined the Tal-co movement, those around her have bombarded her with questions as to why she does not kku-myeo (꾸미) herself, which directly translates to adorning oneself, i.e. dress up and wear makeup. According to Jung, “If there is the freedom to kku-myeo oneself, shouldn't there also exist the freedom to not kku-myeo oneself?” The movement not only highlights the importance of granting women a choice, but also strives to proselytize against the toxic culture of lookism.

Jung's video essay, along with a host of other YouTube videos, Instagram posts, etc., has incited greater conversation and awareness on Korea's beauty obsession through the effective mobilization of modern digital platforms. Considering Korea's status as one of the most wired nations in the world, Tal-co has been successful in spreading its message to a large audience (Sohn, 2018; Strickland, 2009). In contrast to most social media posts that intend to attract admiration and envy, the Escape the Corset movement employs such digital communication technology to stir both emotional and cognitive empathy among viewers, boldly promoting their defiance of Korea's lookist society. Videos and images serve as compelling mediums for this social media empathy phenomenon, conveying the cathartic experiences of women unshackling themselves from Korea's rigid beauty expectations. This visual campaign quite literally urges individuals to confront aesthetics head on—face to face with someone who struggles from the oppressive chains of lookism.

The widespread success of Lina Bae's video for instance, can be attributed to her smart choice of medium and use of a mainstream social media platform, thereby connecting with viewers in a more emotive, intimate fashion. Through the skillful synthesis of film components, Bae captures the feelings and motivations behind the Tal Corset movement in a short yet impactful manner—one that cannot be emulated through a written op-ed alone. As white texts of criticism enter the screen, for example, Bae stares into the camera with glum eyes that shift

downwards in shame, inducing sympathy among viewers for we can perceptibly see her inner pain. The clear changes in her evocative expressions drive the video's carefully crafted storyline in a vivid, moving manner. Moreover, despite the deliberate staging of the narrative arc, the modality of a YouTube video engenders a level of authenticity due to the platform's brand as one that shares user-generated content. We instantly recognize the raw realism of Bae's independently produced piece and that her video is a creative representation of her true life. A YouTube video enables Bae to artfully deliver her personal story unfolding through time, crafting a relatable and credible character viewers can empathize with. Owing to the video's viral success, Bae has since become a global spokesperson for the Tal Corset movement, speaking at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) forum and publishing a biography of the same title, "I Am Not Pretty." Her persona and video have collectively become an empathy sensation, a synecdoche for young Korean women suffering under constant pressure to conform to the narrow societal definition of beauty.

Younger audiences have been especially receptive to the movement's deployment of social media. Aside from Tal-co's vast coverage in both domestic and international media outlets as well as the growing visibility of #escapethecorset posts online, the movement has resulted in concrete market effects. According to Hyundai Card sales records provided by the National Statistical Office's Big Data Center, sales of women in their twenties have steadily decreased in industries related to cosmetics such as makeup products, hair shops, and plastic surgery (Seo, 2019; Edraki, 2019). Whereas clothing and beauty-related items previously dominated young women's main expenditures, these former "women's industries" have seen sharp declines in the years between 2015 and 2018: cosmetic and plastic surgery sales dropped by 53.5 and 64.4 billion won, respectively (Seo, 2019). Analysts credit the Tal Corset movement's influence on changes in female consumption patterns, highlighting the potential for lasting, monumental change.

### **Limitations: Gender wars and conflicting players**

Yet, despite the perceivable expansion of the movement and Korea's heightened recognition of its restrictive beauty ideals, the public's response has been divided. Although Tal-co's social media strategy is a powerful mechanism of resistance when appealing to younger female demographics, it has failed to reach both male and older audiences who remain in positions of power. Part of this may be due to technological restraints as social media algorithms enable individuals to see and click on content tailored to consumer interests, thereby preventing broader public access to the movement. Notwithstanding, several men have lashed out against the movement in response to its overtly feminist framing. The polarizing nature of Tal-co is reflected in the reaction to "I Am Not Pretty:" while many young Korean women have showered Bae with messages of support, countless men and women have reacted in such a scathing manner that she has ironically had to disable the YouTube comments function. And when I tried searching for Bae's video again this year, I realized she had taken it down. Even though she had expected some backlash, she did not foresee that she would be inundated with death threats, with some commenters declaring that they would go find Bae and kill her (Bicker, 2018). For such content, these death threats seem too extreme — the reaction does not fit the provocation.

Such an extreme response can be attributed to the negative way in which others perceive feminism and how it is politicized in Korea. Over the past few years, extreme feminist communities such as Megalia and Womad have emerged online, gaining notoriety for their zealous "female patriotism and misandry" (A. Kim, 2019). Users of both sites have been labeled



“feminazis” and “man-haters” due to their utilization of belligerent and degrading tactics against men (Jay.h, 2016). Megalia was inspired by Norwegian writer Gerd Brantenberg’s satirical feminist oeuvre “Egalia’s Daughters: A Satire of the Sexes,” in which she “narrates a world where gender roles are entirely reversed” (Singh, 2016). Megalia’s provocative logo mocks the size of Korean men’s penises, parodying the male fixation with women’s physical appearance and sexuality (A. Kim, 2019; Singh, 2016). Nevertheless, as opposed to empathizing with its intentions, most men reacted to the design with discomfort, perceiving the emblem as masculine aversion instead of gender equality (“Megalia,” 2021). Following the controversial “Isu Station assault” case,<sup>6</sup> over 350,000 Koreans signed a petition demanding the presidential office to counter extremist feminist groups, causing Megalia to shut down their website in October 2018 (C. Lee, 2018a). Branching off Megalia while maintaining similarly hostile methods, Womad (a portmanteau of “woman” and “nomad”) quickly developed an infamous reputation resulting from their antagonistic attacks against both men and sexual minorities. Frequently pronouncing violent and murderous threats towards other gender identities, the site justified their resentment based on previous and ongoing discrimination against women (A. Kim, 2019).

While triumphant in terms of raising attention on disturbing women’s issues including Korea’s prevalence of spy cams<sup>7</sup> as well as other forms of sexual harassment and discrimination, such radical platforms have exacerbated tensions among genders (VERVE Team, 2019; Steger, 2016). As expected, many men in Korea’s deeply misogynistic society exhibit intense animosity against feminism. Statistics published by the Korean Women’s Development Institute revealed that over half of Korea’s men in their twenties “displayed both ‘hostile gender discrimination’ and anti-feminism” — even more so than their older counterparts, alluding to growing discontent among young men in response to extreme feminism (Choi, 2019). In late 2018, Dang Dang We (당당위) was formed in an effort to promote justice for men in the investigation and trial of sex crimes (“Dang Dang We,” 2021). Along with enmity against women fueled by internet conflicts, many young men are disgruntled about Korea’s long-standing tradition of male-only mandatory conscription: 72 percent of men regard this as gender discrimination and 65 percent want women to be drafted into the military, further irked by the belief that women hold an advantage over men in terms of employment (Kwon; C. Lee, 2018a). Through a comprehensive look into Korea’s gender wars and the wider zeitgeist of anti-feminism, one can understand men’s overwhelmingly adverse reaction to *Escape the Corset*. Similar to how men are ostracized from feminist conversations on Megalia and Womad, members of Tal-co have consistently shut out men from their discourse; for example, Jung explicitly states that she only wishes women to watch her video for she believes that men have no right to an opinion with concern to the movement. The movement’s simplistic blaming of Korea’s patriarchy for the country’s lookism and outright estrangement of men have unsurprisingly failed to capture male empathy and support.

The feminist framing of the movement also alienates women who feel burdened by new pressures to join *Escape the Corset* to call themselves feminists. Ironically, some feel that the Tal Corset movement has become a corset in itself — a classic catch-22 (Bicker, 2018). The movement’s messages suggest that those who choose to wear makeup and feminine clothing remain corseted products of Korea’s unjust patriarchy, and hence cannot be considered true

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<sup>6</sup> Involved a physical fight between three men and two women at a bar near the Isu subway station. See C. Lee (2018a) and Chung (2018) for more details regarding the Isu Station assault and its provocation of gender wars.

<sup>7</sup> Short for spy cameras or “molka” (몰카) in Korean. The term refers to hidden cameras in public bathrooms, trains, buses, and other public areas that capture voyeuristic footage (typically of women) without knowledge or consent. Such videos and images are often illegally sold online to porn sites. See Gibson (2019) for more information.

feminists. One YouTuber even created a parody of Lina Bae's "I Am Not Pretty" called "I am pretty" featuring a conventionally attractive girl who is swamped with praise for her looks (YouTube Snout, 2019). When evaluating Womad's means, an article published in the Berkeley Political Review relates the radical feminist group's "resentful outlook" to Audre Lorde's famous quote: "The master's tool will never dismantle the master's house" (A. Kim, 2019). The same can be applied to Escape the Corset. The movement's difficulties in consolidating support owing to Korea's pejorative view on feminism illustrate the limitations of using "established strategies of categorization and exclusion" to challenge oppressive structures (A. Kim, 2019).

On top of the glaring obstacles of entrenched misogyny and divisive feminism, it is further important to note the pivotal role of capitalism and media in propagating lookism. Ji-Young Yoon-Kim, a professor at Konkuk University's Institute of Body and Culture, states that Korean "women are up against a multibillion-dollar industrial complex, including cosmetics, plastic surgery and entertainment, which sends women mutually reinforcing messages" (Kuhn, 2019). In light of the 1997 International Monetary Fund (IMF) Crisis, Korean President Dae Jung Kim earmarked 50 million USD to establish the "Cultural Content Office," launching initiatives that would spread the influence of *Hallyu* (the Korean entertainment wave) and medical tourism (S. Lee, 2019, p. 20). This soft power approach has proven effective as evinced by the ever-expanding popularity of Korea's modern cultural products composed of television dramas, movies, music, and cosmetics. From 2010 to 2014, total cultural content exports increased by an annual average of 13.4 percent and reportedly boosted the Korean economy by approximately 11.6 billion USD in 2014 (Roll, 2018; Bae et al., p. 1). K-beauty,<sup>8</sup> in particular, has risen to the forefront of the international cosmetics scene; in 2017, the industry was estimated to be worth over 13 billion USD (Tai, 2017). Largely driven by the plastic surgery and dermatology industries, medical tourism has also been a lucrative investment for the government, generating 348 million USD in 2014 (S. Lee, 2019, p. 20).

These intertwined industries of *Hallyu* and medical tourism have not only played a critical role in elevating the nation's global socio-economic dominance, but also in the defining of restrictive Korean beauty standards. According to Davies and Han, "Korean plastic surgery rose as a by-product of the massive cultural phenomenon known as *Hallyu*," further facilitated by the vigorous deployment of "media reports, advertisements, and commercials" (2011, p. 146). Drawing from cultivation theory, Davies and Han's paper corroborates that incessant digital publicity of cosmetic surgery has shaped public perception to adopt a normalized perspective of aesthetic alterations. The population's widespread usage of digital communication technology has served as a "catalyst for Koreans to view cosmetic surgery positively as a form of human physiological enhancement" (Davies & Han, 2011, p. 146). Coupled with the enormous impact of celebrities who act as walking advertisements for plastic surgery, the internet has spawned online blogs, clinic websites, videos, and communal "cafes" easing access to striking images of aestheticized appearances and extensive information on cosmetic surgery (Davies & Han, 2011, p. 148-151). Living in Korea, I recall how my female friends and I would often surf the internet commenting on before and after images of Korean actresses and K-pop idols, fixated by their miraculous transformations. As evident, the Korean government and digital media have been and continue to be instrumental purveyors of lookism, presenting complex challenges to rebellion (S. Lee 1-6, 17-22; Davies & Han, 2011, p. 146-154; Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p. 62).

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<sup>8</sup> Korea's local beauty industry that has become especially popular across the globe due to its extensive skincare products. Read Hwang (2016), Wood (2016), Ramoran-Malasiq (2016), and Elle Beauty Team (2017) for further insight into the ballooning industry.

An additional institutional barrier that is important to revisit is Korea's hyper-competitive job market: lookist employment operations undermine resistance efforts as an attractive appearance is essentially synonymous with success (Steger & Jung, 2017). According to a survey conducted by job portal Saramin, 93.4 percent of 760 firms required a profile photo for resumés and 66.6 percent said they would penalize those who failed to submit ("67% of Companies," 2016). These companies cited reasons including that they could "judge personality or disposition" based on applicants' images as well as that "appearance is competitive" and "important" for employment ("67% of Companies," 2016). Six out of ten corporate human resources managers polled were apparently influenced by applicants' looks when considering recruitment: 33.7 percent admitted that they had employed attractive candidates even if their qualifications were lacking while 48 percent of respondents said they had deducted points and eliminated applicants solely based on looks (Steger & Jung, 2017; "63% of Human Resources Managers," 2016).

With increasingly fierce competition among youth, it comes as no surprise that many job applicants undergo cosmetic surgery in the hopes of improving their chances for employment. Prior to interviews, applicants will often invest more time and energy into putting on makeup, choosing clothes, and receiving cosmetic procedures as opposed to preparing responses to interview questions. A poll conducted in 2018 found that 95.5 percent of job seekers believe that their appearance influenced their employment search and around 43.8 percent responded that they had been victims of lookism when job hunting (Joo, 2018). And since boardrooms<sup>9</sup> remain under the control of men, members of the Escape the Corset movement are at a definite disadvantage when it comes to the workplace—some women have been fired from their jobs and even assaulted (Bicker, 2018; Kuhn, 2019; C. Lee, 2018a). To successfully fight Korea's lookist culture, one must address the nation's discriminatory hiring practices.

### **Conclusion: Lessons learned and the future of lookism**

Through a close examination of Korea's lookist society and the recent Tal Corset movement, this essay has sought to explain that resistance against lookism is necessary and possible but has faced challenges due to the great magnitude and intricacy of the issue. Underlying this argument is the assumption that unjust, categorical appearance discrimination should be regarded as a violation of intrinsic human rights and that it ultimately inflicts greater harm to society, particularly when concerned with younger generations. The case of Tal-co illuminates the larger socio-economic and cultural context of lookism, not to mention the divided state of the Korean population with regard to feminism. Conversations around lookist culture require a greater macroscopic view that not only accounts for the concerns of those who consider themselves feminists but also incorporates a broader coalition of all pertinent stakeholders.

This argument raises several questions about the feasibility of tackling lookism and the multiple steps that must be taken to combat appearance-based discrimination. How do we foster a more empathetic society where we no longer interact and judge people solely according to their looks? We must remember that lookism is not an issue present in contemporary Korean society

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<sup>9</sup> According to *The Economist's* 2020 glass ceiling index, South Korea came last among 29 OECD nations for the eight year in a row: "women hold just one in seven management positions and one in 30 board seats." The index also divulged that Korean women earn an average of 35 percent less than their male counterparts. A survey conducted by the gender ministry found that women account for only 3.6 percent of executives at South Korea's top 500 companies" in 2018 (Nam; J. Park, 2018). See Jeong (2019), G. Song (2019), as well as Youm and Yamaguchi (2016) for more information.

alone, but one that spans centuries and across different cultures around the world. In fact, lookism is more relevant than ever in this digital age of concentrated media consumption where individuals are constantly exposed to picture-perfect and often heavily edited posts on social media platforms. At stake here is the need for us, as humans, to become more empathetic beings and work towards looking beyond the surface. As we have learned from the shortcomings of Talco, any future measures will need to address and include the numerous entities tied to the issue. Although undeniably difficult, we must foster cooperation among both genders, government agencies, corporations, and all other salient institutions to subvert the multifaceted problem of lookism. Referring to Audre Lord's words of wisdom, a concerted effort is imperative for, "in the end, activism based on division reiterates and justifies the status quo" (A. Kim, 2019).

Reflecting on my time in Korea, many of my recollections involve how my female peers and I would spend excessive amounts of time fussing over our looks and worshipping the seemingly flawless celebrities portrayed in the media. While our collective adoration of K-pop idols may have served as a bonding experience, I vividly remember the frustration I felt seeing the low numbers under the perfect profile photos of Korean female stars, dejected that my body mass was higher than theirs. I painfully recall feeling mortified whenever I woke up with another pimple on my face, too ashamed of showing up to school. And when I discovered that my male classmates had fashioned a list ranking the girls based on appearance, I remember forcefully hiding my simmering anger beneath a calm façade for fear of seeming spiteful. Though I remain disillusioned with regard to lookism in Korea, the growing resistance gives me hope for a more equal, empathetic future. A world where women can invest more time in other areas of self-improvement beyond body management. A world where individuals of all genders, ages, and backgrounds unite collectively against lookism. A world where we are no longer objectified and discriminated against on the basis of our looks.

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