

**Working For Each Other: Culture Discussing Itself in  
Contemporary South Korean Webtoons and Dramas**

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To my family

For always supporting me in the challenges I face

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## Introduction

South Korean<sup>1</sup> culture has risen to recognition to the point that its international spread has gained its own label: the Hallyu Wave. Behind the sparkle of the medical tourism, Korean idol bands, and quality home, bath, and skincare products—but perhaps much more informative and indicative of *who* South Koreans are rather than *what* they like—are its webtoons and soap dramas.<sup>2</sup>

Webtoons<sup>3</sup> are a relatively recent feature to ‘literature’ in its broadest sense. They bring popular features of the internet, such as readers reading the story vertically rather than horizontally, occasionally being able to listen to optional musical accompaniments while reading, ‘liking’ chapters the day it’s released, and leaving comments. They are serialized by ‘episodes,’ hereafter ‘chapters’ for webtoons,<sup>4</sup> and can run from as short as twenty-six chapters (typically the minimum for one season) to over six-hundred and beyond.

Like its paper comics predecessor, webtoons range from any genre, from slice of life, action, to gore—and it is within this rich range that Korean culture and its criticisms make their way domestically and abroad. Webtoons can have little regard to traditional plot structures—that is, for example, having the main protagonist die<sup>5</sup>—giving them and webtoonists the extra

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<sup>1</sup> “South Korea” and its related labels will also be represented as ‘Korea’ in this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Will also be referred to as ‘TV drama,’ ‘drama,’ ‘k-drama,’ and ‘melodrama.’

<sup>3</sup> Also called ‘webcomics.’ Not to be confused with the number one corporation and producer of these comics, Webtoons, formerly called Line.

<sup>4</sup> This is done to differentiate between webtoons and TV dramas serialization in this thesis.

<sup>5</sup> Jihoon Park, Jeehyun Lee, and Yongsuk Lee, “East Asian Perspective in Transmedia Storytelling | Do Webtoon-Based TV Dramas Represent Transmedia Storytelling? Industrial Factors Leading to Webtoon-Based TV Dramas.” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 2179-2198, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10010/2651>.

freedom to discuss the uncomfortable and shameful truths of culture and society. This isn't to claim that every other medium does not have this freedom; however, for a country undergoing cultural shifts, where viewpoints clash violently and the dissemination of explanations for those viewpoints become crucial, webtoons offer a way to reflect on the most recent of sentiments even if uncomfortable, keep discussions serious yet easy to digest, and spread those explanations quickly. For example, *I Don't Want This Kind Of Hero* describes the morality of sacrifice and the right amount of individual selfishness through comedy and characters in a superpower/hybrid world, and *About Death* narrates some of the ways people die, repent, and kill with a god who flags the said people down for a chat as the only consistent character.<sup>6</sup> Webtoons' speed and wide circulation owe themselves to its accessibility through browser or app, speed of storytelling, and unpredictability in plot, thus making webtoons a booming niche for the South Korean government to promote and the TV drama writers to take and adapt.<sup>7</sup>

While both mediums are affected by popularity, a webtoon is pressured by drawing time/quality, number of chapters, and contract renewals offers;<sup>8</sup> a TV show has more pressures in budget, acting, and locations since the script is already written/approved rather than awaiting continuation/discontinuation. TV companies receive a set timeslot on a channel and decide the number of episodes, which must be filled no less and no more.<sup>9</sup> To fill that space, k-drama writers, especially those from smaller companies who may have "mediocre" writers, often seek out the safe option in webtoons, where a familiar story, approved narrative, and established

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<sup>6</sup> By samchon and Sini and Hyeono respectively. Both of the mentioned webtoons can be found in English on the Webtoons site/app. *About Death* is also known as *Regarding Death*.

<sup>7</sup> Jihoon Park, Jeehyun Lee, and Yongsuk Lee, "East Asian Perspective in Transmedia Storytelling..."

<sup>8</sup> Ji-hyeon Kim and Yu Jun, "Platformizing Webtoons: The Impact on Creative and Digital Labor in South Korea." *SAGE Social Media + Society* 5:4 (2019): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2056305119880174>.

<sup>9</sup> Typically, there are 16 or 20 episodes, each an hour long, but lately there has been more TV dramas that span more episodes (30-50) and have shorter times (30-40 minutes).

audience reduce risk.<sup>10</sup> From a consumer perspective, webtoons-turned-dramas have an increased chance of satisfying two things: the continuing discussions of their culture and society and the cravings for good and fresh stories.

Regarding the first of these desires, cultural products live a dual existence of reinforcing and reprimanding the culture that birthed them. As events happen in real life, the impact causes shifts in viewpoints that eventually translate into its cultural products—and as cultural products gain traction for the commentary they make, culture shifts again.<sup>11</sup> This phenomenon is not limited to only media and societal norms; the popularity of oat related dishes manifesting on TikTok after oat milk took the number two most sold plant-based milk in the U.S. is an example culture working through itself and products in the food sector.

South Korea's webtoon-drama adaptation strand exemplifies this cultural feedback loop, and thus proves its worth in analyzing what media and its creators are trying to change and talk about within their culture. Adaptations hold a direct trace of what culture said and what it wishes to say now, which is why I use two prominent webtoon-drama adaptations as case studies. Soonkki's *Cheese in the Trap* and Gi Maenggi's *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* both exemplify webtoons containing cultural aspects that Koreans resonate with—societal expectations and their effects on the individual and beauty standards, respectively—then continue the discussion through another generation of itself.

Stories create their own universe—here labeled a storyworld—with their own conventions, laws, and plotlines. Creating an adaptation involves a sort of change within that

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<sup>10</sup> Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O' Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2013). | Jihoon Park, Jeehyun Lee, and Yongsuk Lee, "East Asian Perspective in Transmedia Storytelling..."

<sup>11</sup> Inspired from Bolter and Grussin, 1999, pg. 15 quote found in: Ken Gelder, *Adapting Bestsellers: Fantasy, Franchise and the Afterlife of Storyworlds*, (Cambridge UP: Cambridge Core, 2019), 9, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108589604>.



particular storyworld,<sup>12</sup> whether because the adaptor decided to alter the plot, such as adding or deleting scenes, or because the storyworld changes its medium of presentation, such as a book to screenplay or a film to TV show. Roberta Pearson enlists the label of “additionality” to broadly categorize any change that happens between the original work and the adapted work, including adding material, subtracting it, or modifying it.<sup>13</sup> Borrowing her term and reasoning, this thesis argues further that additionalities are used as a tool to sculpt culture and create discussion, even criticism, of both characters, real life events, and viewpoints.

Of the second desire, the craving for good stories, recall the cultural feedback loop—culture products are also influenced by current culture. We will see later how the drama version of *Cheese in the Trap* started off with the ideas of societal expectations and atypical romance but devolved into a skewed love triangle that earned heavy rebuke from authors, viewers, and actors alike. Perhaps devolution does not fit in description because the *Cheese in the Trap* drama was simply following the same plot tropes that had first catapulted k-dramas into renown. However, patterns of consumption change, and they had changed to wanting more than just typical romance. With the rise of webtoons and their unconventional narrative structures came also the fantastical, supernatural, gender/role bending, and other elements that exposed and flavored audience media palates, and TV writers finally started catching on to where popularity spiked in the story production market.<sup>14</sup> This craving I label as Romance+, romance ‘plus’ another element

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<sup>12</sup> Similar words like transfictionality, transmedia storytelling, media convergence speak of relatively the same thing but have their own nuanced definitions from the scholars that made them, so I will be using ‘storyworld’ to make the concept general and less esoteric.

<sup>13</sup> Roberta Pearson, “Additionality and Cohesion in Transfictional Worlds,” *The Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film & Television* 79 (Spring 2017): 113–120, EBSCOhost.

<sup>14</sup> Also to note, webnovels, light novels, Japanese manga, and even Taiwanese films have been used as sources of drama inspiration—webtoons are simply the biggest and most recently popular category of “one source for multi-use” cultural product.

that enriches the story. Using our previously mentioned webtoon as an example, *I Don't Want This Kind Of Hero* suggests that individual selfishness *is* absolutely okay when main character Naga refuses to put a stop to all evil by refusing to train his infant cousin into Youngjeong's pawn for good. For our case studies, *Cheese in the Trap* has a perceptive female lead, a seemingly kind but actually calculating male lead who doesn't necessarily change for the better, and a three-way relationship marked by contention but growth and not a love triangle. *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* brings in the hypocrisies and truths about beauty standards and empowers declarations against it.

This thesis hopes to enlighten readers on the webtoon phenomenon and the effects of webtoon-drama adaptations on the society and culture enraptured with them. We will look at the art of including the resonating aspects and messages of culture in the original webtoons *Cheese in the Trap* and *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* along with background context of these aspects. Then their drama adaptations and the way their additionalities 'update' with real life events and new viewpoints will take precedence. Finally, the thesis will wrap up with explaining the force of Romance+ on media and culture products and suggesting new directions that such rich cultural commentary can start towards.

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Jihoon Park, Jeehyun Lee, and Yongsuk Lee, "East Asian Perspective in Transmedia Storytelling..." | Ji-hyeon Kim and Yu Jun, "Platformizing Webtoons: The Impact on Creative and Digital Labor in South Korea," 5.

## **Part One**

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## **Webtoons**

## We're in the Trap: Sacrifices of the Individual

In this thesis, I divide societal expectations into three categories: social face, seniority hierarchy, and socio-economic class. Social face is how one must maintain the happy efficiency and/or 'flow' of a gathering or institution; seniority hierarchy describes the obligated respect and favors towards those in a higher position or age; and socio-economic class is how certain class (e.g. good grades, luxury backpacks and accessories) must be associated with one's person and how that perceived class can abuse and be abused. All of these work together and intricately compound with the story as we will see in the panels of our first webtoon.

Written by webtoonist Soonkki, *Cheese in the Trap*'s depictions of societal expectations resonates with South Korean readers because of how it shows the individual's struggles and reactions, especially the internal confusion and frustration during and after an event. By focusing on the individual instead of the 'greater good'—or as I like to call it, the greater mood—as is often emphasized and sometimes even prioritized, *Cheese in the Trap*, especially its webtoon version, gives people a place to feel acknowledged for their everyday efforts to maintain societal expectations as well as to discuss the pressures and failings that such expectations can set up.

The main character, Hong Seol, is an acute observer and analyzes the moves, words, and facial reactions of those around her to the extent that even she wonders if she is just "too sensitive".<sup>15</sup> The story establishes right off the bat her suspicions of Yoo Jung, the main male character, and how he is not the rich, generous, and perfect *sunbae*, or upperclassman/senior, that everyone perceives him as. Their relationship displays a fresh and audience-attractive variation

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<sup>15</sup> Soonkki, "Cheese in the Trap," Webtoon, 2014 – 2018, Chapter 4, [https://www.webtoons.com/en/drama/cheese-in-the-trap/list?title\\_no=99&page=1](https://www.webtoons.com/en/drama/cheese-in-the-trap/list?title_no=99&page=1). Chapters from #16 and onwards must be read on the Webtoon app.



Figure 1. Soonkki, Cheese in the Trap S1C3 – Demanded to greet her sunbae, Seol complies with thought bubble insults

of romance plot (Romance+) while imbedded in the context of societal expectations, and it is this context where the webtoon plays on the heavy expectations and punishments that culture ordains. In Seol's first interaction with Jung, we see the narrative and metanarrative commenting on the consequences and frustrations of trying to maintain these societal expectations and the roles people fall into while trying to maintain them.



Figure 2. Soonkki, Cheese in the Trap S1C3 – Jung seems friendly...

Having just returned to college after a leave of absence, Seol attends a college department barbeque dinner and is shouted at to greet a late-arriving Jung. She comically turns cartoony for a panel, indicating her surprise (and possibly dread), and says “S-Sure! Hello!” under the pressure; Jung responds back with “Hi. See you around,” and Seol’s expression changes to pleasant and polite as she starts giving her greetings. However, Jung turns

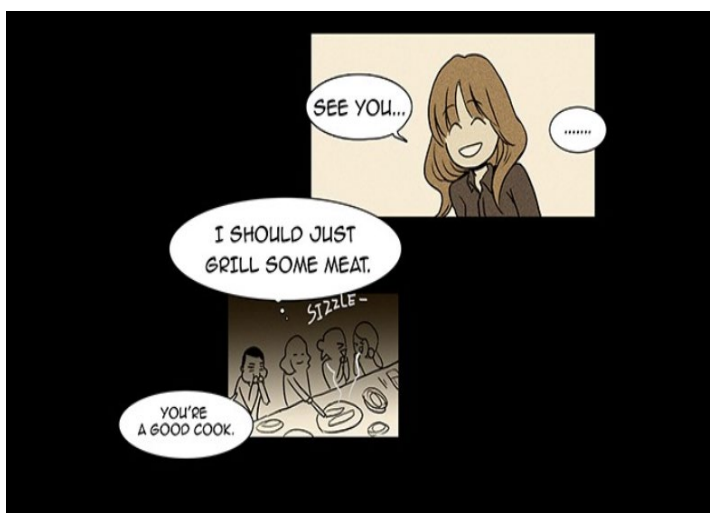


Figure 3. Soonkki, Cheese in the Trap S1C3 – But he ignored the rest of her sentence. Seol is dropped from the spotlight of the event despite Sangcheol's loud demand of her

away to talk to Sangcheol, not letting Seol finish her sentences. Her panels shrink, her character representation simplifies, and she decides to just continue grilling the meat.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from showing viewers the reasons for her suspicions of Jung and driving the plot, their first interaction also narratively and

metanarratively demonstrates the social face and seniority hierarchy that these characters, and by extension, South Korean people must satisfy. First, we look at social face, when Sangcheol yells across the table to tell Seol to say hi to Jung; her face becomes exaggerated into a comedic cartoon style before turning back to more realistic in the next panel with a sweat drop. Even her thought bubble of “He’s a pain in the...” has sweat drops.<sup>17</sup> Her internal and external representation of her surprise (metanarratively, the sweat drops) and irritation (narratively, her dialogue) mimics the surprise and fluster of suddenly being thrust into social interactions, especially with strangers by people one doesn’t like so much. To keep the social flow, Seol and those thrust into interactions must follow and accept it.

This doesn’t seem so unreasonable as it is socially acceptable to introduce yourself and/or be introduced to others, and the little effort of a greeting may not be enough to criticize. We even see how friendly she becomes after the initial shock; however, the discomfort pushes forward

<sup>16</sup> Soonkki, Season 1 Chapter 3.

<sup>17</sup> Soonkki, Season 1 Chapter 3.

when Jung turns to another conversation without letting Seol finish. Seol's words of "See you..." peters out, and she instead thinks, "I should just grill some meat."<sup>18</sup> No one is listening to her, least of all the person she was 'talking' to, and so she retreats into her thoughts, not saying anything more, because it is no longer her place to. The panels mirror this self-quieting by their shrinking, and the style of her character becoming simpler and uncolored until she is just a cute blobby outline. Seol withdraws to herself, and the panels follow to show that she understands her social position once Jung turns away: a background character to the social event, which revolves around Jung.

That sputtering stop when trying to talk but not being heard and the subsequent retreating inward not only acknowledges the embarrassingly relatable situation, but also the trickiness of participating in social flow. These self-quietings happen in real life, and, as awkward it is to talk about them in real life, the webtoon gives people the space to openly *be* with the awkward. South Koreans can relate to Seol's effort in actively interacting—making the best of a situation she was thrust into—and then backing down. Reading the atmosphere and then being able to smoothly integrate oneself is not a taught skill but a learned skill;<sup>19</sup> in real life, people are expected to be able to contribute to the sociality without ever being taught, to simply accept whatever discomfort placed on them. This creates a sense of anxiety that is generally covered up, smothered because the bigger whole is always emphasized. Social face and keeping social flow, AKA the greater mood, are so greatly prized and perceived as necessary that the individual is left with anxiously dealing with sudden interactions, trying to find pockets of interaction, or self-quieting, only contributing to a greater social situation when they can be useful.

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<sup>18</sup> Soonkki, Season 1 Chapter 3.

<sup>19</sup> Koreans call this *nunchi*, or 'wit' or 'sense.' Think dialed-up common sense with emotional intelligence with sensitivity to indirect words/hints. Discussed in a later chapter.

So the questions that next arise are: how do we know that Seol, and in reflection of real life people, is useful and when? And why does she *have to* back down? Why can't she just yell across the table like Sangcheol did? And how do we know that her retreating is a necessitation of the greater mood and not Seol being naturally awkward? *Cheese in the Trap* supplies subtle answers to these questions, just as reality would say, as the scene moves forward.

To begin this new set of questions, we learn how the characters' social positions are established through Seol and Jung's introduction to the barbeque party (and the readers). Sangcheol, the loud upperclassman, had shouted across the tables for everyone to say hi to Seol. Her reception is met with some greetings in the standard aside font (small and in the blank space) but mostly consists of flustered sweat drops and confusion from the background characters. The paneling is also fewer and more economically fit onto the screen, matching her relatively quiet addition to the social party.



Figure 4. Side-by-side comparison of the background characters' receptions

On the flip side, Jung's arrival and reception expands into several more panels from him pushing the door open and asking for leeway for his tardiness since he supposedly ran, he is given a close up and a medium-long shot all to himself, and the buzz from the other students





Figure 5. Soonkki, Cheese in the Trap S1C3 – Cheese in the Trap S1C3 – A generous number of panels for Jung's entrance

Seol had a lukewarm welcome despite Sangcheol's loudness, while Jung didn't need any sort of external extreme for his entrance to make an impact. We see that Jung is well-liked by everyone, and they want to catch his attention, make themselves known by him, and admire him. In the eyes of Seol, she attributes his popularity to his looks and wealth. For her to say, "No wonder he makes this place better" means

pops out in wavy white font and decorative symbols (e.g. hearts and squiggles (~)). Even the similar scenes of the background characters show enthusiastic reactions as Jung settles at his table. Seol catches sight of his luxury brand watch and remarks, "Handsome and rich. No wonder he makes this place better" before noting their vastly different receptions to the party.<sup>20</sup>

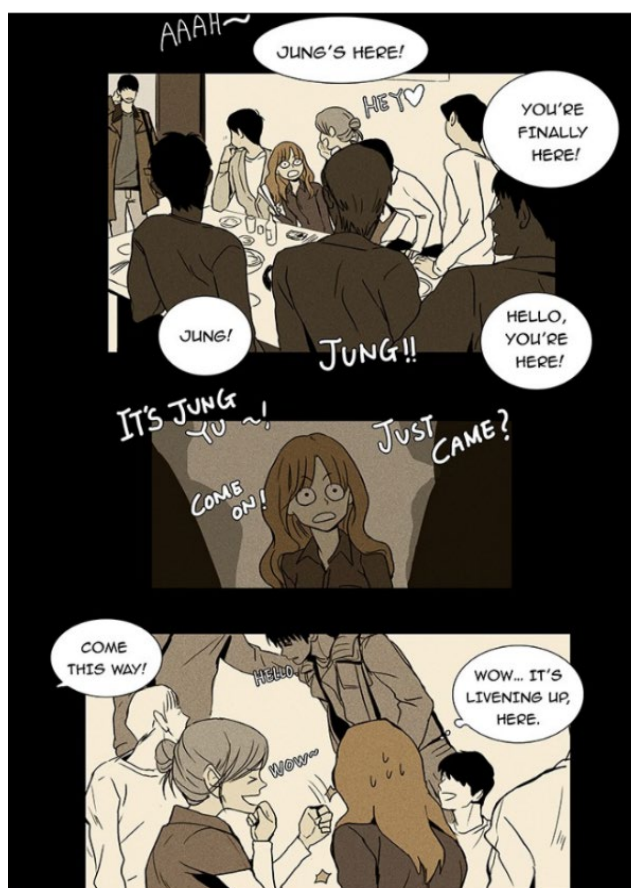


Figure 6. Cheese in the Trap S1C3 – The reception of Jung's arrival

<sup>20</sup> Soonkki, Season 1 Chapter 3.

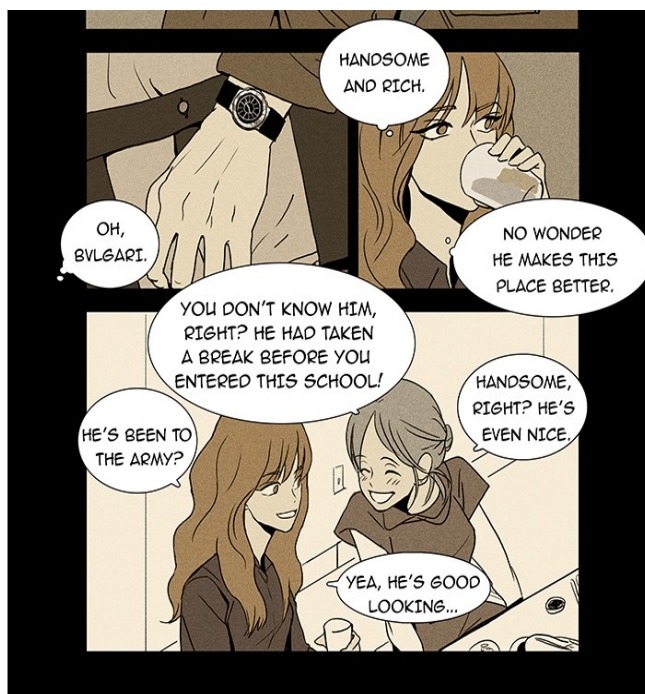


Figure 7. *Cheese in the Trap S1C3* – Seol remarks the reason for how Jung excites the event

that she understands why her reception was not as “livening.”<sup>21</sup> She doesn’t have the looks or wealth that people are attracted to, and so her social position is below that of Jung’s. Even though she may compare herself to him and feel uncomfortable about the reception discrepancy, she doesn’t question nor argue that beauty and money automatically make a person well-liked—it’s just the accepted norm, and she accepts it as well.

Readers, too, see that this *is* the accepted norm. The similarities between real life and the webtoon’s world are deliberately spelled out for acknowledgement. Whether readers like or dislike the fact, they are drawn into the conception of Seol’s world and recognize the materialistic value of their culture. Soonkki does not yet outright show the individual’s problems associated with these values but instead rightly builds the rest of the social expectations to strikingly match real life circumstances and set up the webtoon world for the rest of the plot.

In continuing the idea of social face and positions, Soonkki teaches us that there is another role: the disrupter, those who try to change or manipulate their social position or the greater mood. In this scene, Sangcheol, loud and always acceptedly near Jung, takes on his role as the merriment maker of the event (even if no one wants him to). Because of his hovering presence near Jung, he gets away with being a loud facilitator of the social flow. In addition, he

<sup>21</sup> Soonkki, Season 1 Chapter 3.

is a *sunbae* of their department. In most East Asian cultures, South Korea included, one must respect anyone older than them, even if by as little as a year or if they treat others terribly. Juniors, or *hoobae*, are expected to respect and obey the wishes of their seniors no matter how willing they are to do the task. The task can range from working overtime on the senior's project, being coerced to drink or attend dinners, or to agree and not voice any complaints.<sup>22</sup> Sangcheol can 'disrupt' and thrust people into social situations, because his 'disruptions' are accepted as both orders from his seniority status and as social facilitations.

For Seol, the combination of Sangcheol's senior status, disrupter/facilitator role, and the norm of maintaining social flow explains her flustered and irritated reactions towards Sangcheol's facilitation of welcoming Jung. Sangcheol's calls upon her, making her necessary but only for a moment. The instance when she is necessary—her initial pressured "S-Sure! Hello!" to Jung—is the only part that her major-mates cared to hear from her, because it signaled that she at least had the manners to greet the esteemed Jung. By not calling out to him again, she also established that she is not a threat to the supply of Jung's attention, and so is essentially forgotten. Proving her civility and then her acceptance of being a background/faciliatory character for Jung, Seol demonstrates her ability to maintain social face and flow, all without ever directly mentioning it.

The real-life roles that people play within a social event often mimic Seol's situation. There are those at the center of the event, facilitators of the greater mood, and those who stand as backgrounders to the center. Much of these roles, what they do, and who acts in them are unspoken designations. *Soonkki* shows how much fulfilling a role is crucial to keeping the social

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<sup>22</sup> Gulab Kumar, "A study on the Korean Value System in Korean Dramas: Focusing on "Cheese in the Trap," *Research Review Journals: International Journal of Multidisciplinary* 5, no. 2 (2020): 19.

flow and therefore keeping one's social face. Through Seol, a backgrounder to the party, we see the discomfort in being shuffled around from spotlight to not, the uncertainty of when to speak, and how much to say. Soonkki makes readers recognize the individual's troubles and deemphasizes the necessitation of the greater mood. We feel for Seol as an individual instead of glazing over the awkwardness in favor of the overall merriment.

Soonkki's webtoon deliberately draws out these problems and social expectations, not letting readers forget that all is not rosy in both *Cheese in the Trap* and the reality it so closely reflects. Seol's hyperawareness to people's reactions and society's structure opens up another issue from the perspective of a single individual—socioeconomic class.

Later in season three, when Seol and Jung have been dating for a bit, she and Jung are in his car and talk about their futures after college. Jung reveals to her that the company he's interning at is actually his father's, and she takes one additional panel to process that startling information before her character

style turns comically bulgy in her eyes and mouth from her shock. The information is inconceivable because she can't imagine such a valuable opportunity to come from a family venture and, in extension, the safety net of perceived financial security.



Figure 8. *Cheese in the Trap* S3C7 – Seol hearing just where Jung is doing his internship, comical at first



Figure 10. *Cheese in the Trap S3C7* – Seol contemplating and remembering her classmates' worry for the future



Figure 9. *Cheese in the Trap S3C7* – The black space visualizing the distance between them (metanarrative)

She contrasts his certainty in subsequent panels: the faces of her classmates as they contemplate their futures, and the shaky reasoning for her family to open their restaurant in the first place. The strategic spacing of characters, backgrounds, and flashback pictures reflect the gap she feels between her and Jung, represented with a black background panel and her and Jung on opposite corners in the middle of her train of thought. This black gap is such an equivalent to her feeling “stuck” that it cannot wait until after she finishes her white bubble thought. In fact, the gap acts as a visual version of her worries and a visual continuation of her thoughts as she thinks of her living situation. The black background narration also symbolizes how deeply imbedded and serious these anxieties weigh in her mind. Instead of the casual white thought bubbles, the black narration of her thoughts represents her isolation from both their current conversation and Jung’s socioeconomic certainty.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Soonkki, Season 3 Chapter 7.



In addition to the nonmaterial benefits of social capital from a higher class, Soonkki also breaks down the outward show of socioeconomic class in forms such as Jung's luxury brand watch, an equally important cultural marker. In South Korea, the awareness of wealth is heightened, and material wealth becomes a criterion of how to judge a person. For example, if someone styles in cheaper clothing, judgements of their being unable to afford a certain standard of living are often noted (even if that person perceives themselves as living well). Luxury brands are the easiest shows of wealth and particularly watched for when deciding the status for that



Figure 11. *Cheese in the Trap* S3C7 – The social difference between her and Jung

person. Soonkki had alluded to this fact earlier when Seol discerns that Jung is rich from just his luxury BVLGARI brand watch at the barbeque party.<sup>24</sup>

So when Seol thinks of the precarity of her situation (plus, the whole plot of the webtoon is affected by her socioeconomic struggles), readers can acknowledge the dark side to the rich life and material proof of luxury that society exalts. The author deglamorizes the idealistic dream of the hard-working working class making their way in the world through their own efforts and shows the anxious reality of living such a life. Those who cannot afford high-end

<sup>24</sup> Soonkki, Season 1 Chapter 3. See figure 7.

products or to study abroad and instead worry about their financial future and think of their family—these people are given a representation through Seol. No matter where one falls on the wealth spectrum, they are forced to see and feel the uncertainty, the being “stuck” connected to



Figure 12. Cheese in the Trap S3C7 – The verbal (narrative) explanation for the black space

financial instability or a social status that floats between getting by and struggling.

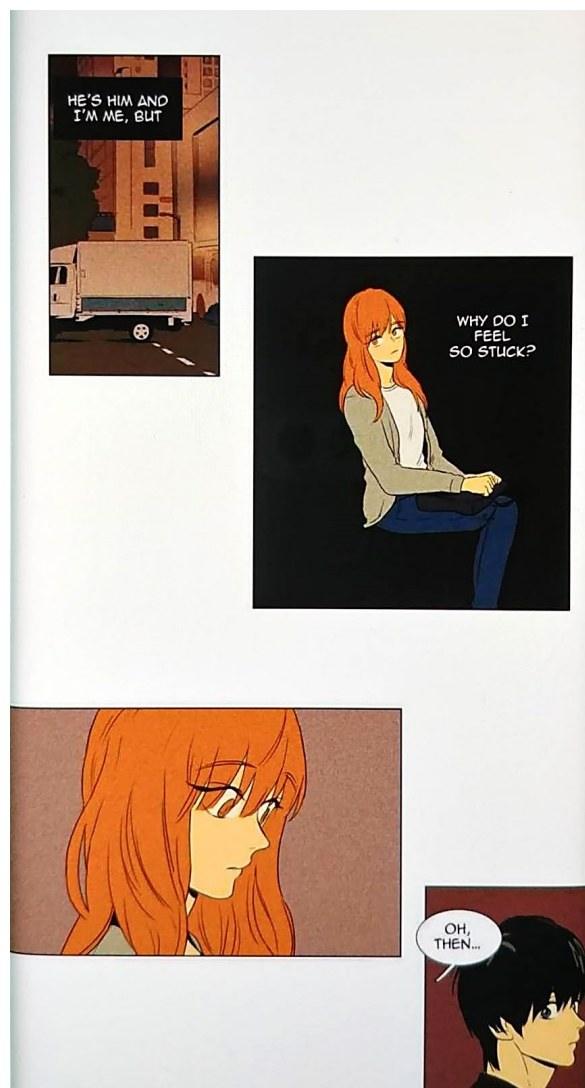


Figure 13. Cheese in the Trap S3C7 – The feeling she prescribes to her socio-economic situation, ‘stuck’

## Beauty is for Self-Satisfaction Only

For this thesis, I will analyze Gi Maenggi's *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*<sup>25</sup>, a story of a college student who had undergone plastic surgery. This story, in both of its forms as a webtoon and TV drama, grew to explosive popularity for its realistic depiction of the pressures on women, particularly ideas of beauty, individual feelings under those expectations, and societal reinforcement. This popularity can attribute its fortune to the chaos of the feminism scene in South Korea, which we must survey to understand the callouts discussed within the story as well as set up the beginning of chained culture self-discussion.

'Feminism' in South Korea has an almost evil overture to its name. In spring-summer 2015, during a MERS outbreak in South Korea, feminism gained a wave across the country in the form of Megalia, a controversial anonymous internet forum where users posted 'extremist' feminist ideas.<sup>26</sup> The website formed as a move to counteract another internet forum, DC Inside, for its misogynistic language policy after the misogynistic censure exploded on one rumor—that two women who were supposed to be quarantined because of MERS disregarded the quarantine and went to Hong Kong to shop<sup>27</sup>. Female users of DC Inside reversed the language used against them. For example, 'kimchi woman,' a woman who only wants to shop or buy expensive

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<sup>25</sup> There is no official English translation, so the pictures referred will be unofficial English versions provided by various scanlation groups as compiled at ManhuaScan.com. The picturing may not be uniform, but the wording is quite accurate as the scanlations were translated either from the Official Korean or the Official Chinese version on Naver and Webtoon, respectively.

<sup>26</sup> This site is no longer active. Many people felt that the ideas were *too* radical or excessive due to how they were presented and perceived.

<sup>27</sup> The two women did not quarantine due to miscommunication with the South Korean government, not because of blatant disregard, for those wondering.



things,<sup>28</sup> flipped to ‘kimchi man,’ a man who only wants to pay for sex or pays too much for sex.<sup>29</sup> DC Inside censored terms such as ‘kimchi man’ but did not do the same for ‘kimchi woman,’<sup>30</sup> sparking Megalia’s birth, where the misandristic comments continued. However, Megalia users made these comments on purpose with the belief that ‘mirroring’ the hate that men give to women will let others understand their sentiments and highlight the discrimination and its common place in society rather than continue it.<sup>31</sup>

Radical organizations and movements like Megalia made news headlines, however, with media zeroing on the misandristic sheen of its content rather than its supposed intent, the broader ‘feminism’ concept thus became associated with the idea that women are superior to men. The stigma has stuck, spurring supporters of gender equality to take on the title of ‘equalist’ instead.<sup>32</sup>

In 2016, feminism gained even more ground when a man stayed for hours in a Gangnam subway station’s women’s bathroom with the single goal of killing a woman because he had felt “belittled and ignored” by women his entire life. Late night after leaving a karaoke bar and entering the bathroom, a woman with no relation to the man was found murdered. Though this man had previous mental health history and the police deemed this as an isolated case, it brought

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<sup>28</sup> Yeji (Jesse) Lee, “Megalia: South Korea’s Radical Feminist Community,” 10 Magazine, 10 Media, 2 Aug 2016, <https://10mag.com/megalia-south-koreas-radical-feminism-community/>.

<sup>29</sup> Yeji (Jesse), “Megalia.”

The terms themselves often have shifting definitions depending on the person. For example, in a less extremist sense, ‘kimchi woman’ has been associated with a woman who expects the man to pay for everything while expecting expensive goods and rights (Asian Boss, *Koreans React To The Rise of Feminism*).

<sup>30</sup> Jaehui Kim, “일베도 서럽게 만든, '메갈리아의 딸들' [Even Ilbe was made to feel contrition by the 'Megalia sisterhood'],” OhmyNews, 23 Jun 2015, [http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/View/at\\_pg.aspx?CNTN\\_CD=A0002120985](http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002120985).

<sup>31</sup> Yeji (Jesse), “Megalia.” Jaehui “일베도 서럽게 만든, '메갈리아의 딸들' [Even Ilbe was made to feel contrition by the 'Megalia sisterhood'].”

<sup>32</sup> Sunny Lee, “Why Korean Women Are Hesitant To Label Themselves Feminists,” Vice Media Group, Vice, 16 Feb 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/v74zd3/korean-women-feminists>.

the attention of women's cultural and social position to the forefront. Women started wondering out loud, "why is nighttime dangerous for Korean women?"<sup>33</sup> and similar questions that brought their cultural position into light.<sup>34</sup> Because this case involved bodies instead of screens and could not be hidden by anonymity, it can be argued that this case forced both online and offline communities to a discussion hall.

In May 2018, bodies and screens once more had an altercation. Spycam, or '*molka*,'<sup>35</sup> porn awareness and protests overtook the news and streets. Spycam porn consists of hidden camera filming without subject consent in places as open as public bathrooms or up escalators, and in places as private as one's own home or neighborhood. This illegal filming and distributing has long been around in South Korea with police-estimated cases of 6,000 every year from 2013 to 2017, where 80% of victims are women.<sup>36</sup> The number of actual videos and cases is likely higher but unreported due to victim shaming and victim blaming,<sup>37</sup> whether through dialogue or the hovering presence of Korea's patriarchal culture. For example, 'Kim' found a man filming up her skirt at a restaurant (among other footage of her) and being discussed about with others in a chatroom, and when she went to the police, her thoughts still couldn't find comfort: "I kept thinking, what would other people think? Will the police officer think that my clothes were too revealing? I was afraid of being blamed. I was afraid my family, friends and people around me

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<sup>33</sup> As quoted from Lee Jehée from source: Steven Borowiec, "A woman's slaying in Seoul's tony Gangnam district stirs emotions in South Korea," Los Angeles Times, 21 May 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-south-korea-woman-killed-20160521-snap-story.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Steven Borowiec, "A woman's slaying..."

<sup>35</sup> "'My life is not your porn': 30,000 South Korean women protest spy cams," RT, June 10, 2018, <https://on.rt.com/978p>.

<sup>36</sup> Laura Bicker, "South Korea's spy cam porn epidemic," BBC News, BBC, 2 August 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45040968>.

<sup>37</sup> Korea Exposé, *What Happens to Women After #MeToo*, Video, 12 April 2018, <https://youtu.be/DigpKNzHK0Q>.

would look at me as these men looked at me.”<sup>38</sup>

Kim’s thoughts are shaming herself into fear and then nonaction. Her thoughts, instead of believing that her community and her own family will support her, defaulted to a traditionally patriarchal view of staying silent and taking blame as the woman despite the perverted actions done to her without her provocation. This kind of mindset stems from male-favored culture values and manifests as an invisible hand of oppression around women, and so, their voices had been silenced out of fear.

The 22,000<sup>39</sup> protesters at the May 2018 demonstration at Hyehwa, Seoul would likely argue that they are silenced out of police negligence and gender bias as well. Ha Yena, another victim of spycam porn, directly saw her assailant in her hotel room and chased him down, asking for police help. Due to motel CCTV, they caught the perpetrator, however the policeman she asked for help from had “repeatedly asked if she had left the door unlocked.”<sup>40</sup> The question and Ha’s response, “Why the hell is that important?,” points to indirect signs of victim blaming and the muddled justice that women are now publicly and loudly calling out from society. The May 2018 protest that Ha attended had gathered because of the police’s suspiciously feverish pursuit of arresting a woman who secretly filmed and distributed a picture of a male nude model from a still-life art class. The woman, surname Ahn, “was made to stand in front of the media, albeit wearing a mask”<sup>41</sup> which was a stark contrast to the thousands of not-arrested men and hidden

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<sup>38</sup> As quoted from ‘Kim’ from source: Laura Bicker, “South Korea’s spy cam porn epidemic.”

<sup>39</sup> There are various approximations, but I use their number for they recorded it from the official website that organized the demonstration.

Haeryun Kang, “My Life Isn’t Your Porn: Why South Korean Women Protest,” Korea Exposé, 9 June 2018, <https://www.koreaexpose.com/south-koreas-biggest-womens-protest-in-history-is-against-spycam-porn/>.

<sup>40</sup> Haeryun Kang, “My Life Isn’t Your Porn: Why South Korean Women Protest.”

<sup>41</sup> Haeryun Kang, “My Life Isn’t Your Porn: Why South Korean Women Protest.”

men who filmed women. Though it is argued that the evidence clearly pointed to Ahn and therefore made the arrest swift, there is less rationalizing for the media field day on Ahn's arrest while none happened for any of the male perpetrators.<sup>42</sup> The reasoning that, because the victims are largely female and the assailants largely male, a case of a male victim and female perpetrator incites crackdown is possible<sup>43</sup>; this, however, only proves the social and cultural value imposed upon women.

The largely female victims of spycam porn marks the objectification of women as commonplace and therefore makes people in power 'less-sensitive'<sup>44</sup> to victimized women, another facet descending from traditional patriarchy. Consistent with prior years' feminism waves was a 'last straw case' that forced media to cover the event and spread word of these victims and the demand for their privacy. There was a catch this time though—the slogans of the demonstration, 'My Life Is Not Your Porn' and 'Wanna Shit With My Guard Down,' rode the waves of earlier feminism without its name. The emphasis of the spycam porn was made from gender inequality, not feminism. The concerns were also made towards a specific governing institution, Korean law enforcement, instead of an indeterminate part of society like internet forum DC Inside. Although one could easily connect the dots or feel its feminist undertones, the word itself made fewer appearances and mentions. The equalist idea and the shift in approach had already established itself as an alternative to the usurping association that feminism has. And with the goal of equality better established, cultural and social movements become easier to view

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<sup>42</sup> “‘My life is not your porn’:...” RT.

Some stats for comparison: 2017 alone—96 percent of caught suspects = 5,437 male, 119 were charged. 283 caught female suspects, 0 were charged. Large scale, 2012-2017: ~540 of 20,900+ male suspects detained; 4 of 523 female suspects detained (Haeryun Kang, “My Life Isn’t Your Porn:...”).

<sup>43</sup> Haeryun Kang, “My Life Isn’t Your Porn: Why South Korean Women Protest.”

<sup>44</sup> As derived from Ha Yena from source: Haeryun Kang, “My Life Isn’t Your Porn: Why South Korean Women Protest.”

as the kinder form of feminism rather than pure or sheen-like misandry.

The difference in stance helped to transition into another major event, this time under the label of women empowerment. Later 2018 produced the ‘Escape the Corset’ Movement:<sup>45</sup> women destroy makeup and beauty products, cut their hair short, post pictures, and encourage others to do the same through social media; some also take part in a nationwide strike, where every first Sunday of a month, they do not do “any acts that contribute to the beauty industry,” such as buying makeup or clothes.<sup>46</sup>

With women destroying or refraining from excessive beauty products, one might wonder about the famous ‘10 Step Korean Skincare Routine’ or one of its variations that promised its users the perfect skin that society lauded.<sup>47</sup> The routine has tarnished somewhat because instead of shining as an achievement of health or a flexible therapeutic relaxation time, it has festered into a tedious, time-consuming, often costly, and stressful pressure for women to get a certain skin appearance, a literal face-shine.<sup>48</sup> Although the skincare routine and products have scientific and health value, societal pressure to have “glass skin”<sup>49</sup> or to “look like a woman” where makeup is the only way<sup>50</sup> became a requirement that South Korean women found oppressing and draining and now have risen to fight against. The skincare routine often involves a

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<sup>45</sup> The name echoes from the 1968 protests against the Miss America pageant with burning and trashing various ‘female’ symbols of oppression, such as heels, hairspray, corsets, girdles, makeup, and bras (Sohpie Jeong, “Escape the corset...”).

<sup>46</sup> Quote from sociology professor, Lee Nayoung from source: Sohpie Jeong, “Escape the corset: How South Koreans are pushing back against beauty standards,” CNN, Warner Media Company, 11 Jan 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/south-korea-escape-the-corset-intl/index.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Sometimes an altered 5, 7, 8, or 12 step routine. Korean skincare products and the women’s famed ‘ridiculously good’ skin and routine blew up over the internet internationally as part of the 2010 decade of the Hallyu Wave.

<sup>48</sup> No, I’m not exaggerating. This look involves the face actually shining under the light like the surface of glass or water: a youthful glowing “dewy” look.

<sup>49</sup> For the skin to look smooth, even, flawless, to glow and glisten ‘like glass.’

<sup>50</sup> As derived from Bae Lina from source: Lina Bae, “예쁘지 않아도 괜찮았다” [Even if I’m not pretty, that’s okay], Video, 19 Oct 2019, <https://youtu.be/JzrRPEBmPBk>.

daytime/morning and a nighttime cycle, taking between 1-2 hours or more to prep the face with massages, peeling gels, and steam towels, and then the washes, toners, serums, and more.<sup>51</sup>

Youtuber Bae Lina, who once posted makeup tutorials, posted a video that went viral; “*I’m Not Pretty*,” in which she applies and takes off makeup while reading out hate comments she had received over the years,<sup>52</sup> epitomizes the insecurities incubated by strict beauty standards but also their breakdown in the current sociocultural climate. The way women dress has also taken turns. Instead of only

dress and skirts, pants and suits for formal wear have also made a statement,<sup>53</sup> an encouragement to women who don’t enjoy wearing dresses or skirts and to men who do want to wear dresses and skirts.

## Korean Skin Care Routine

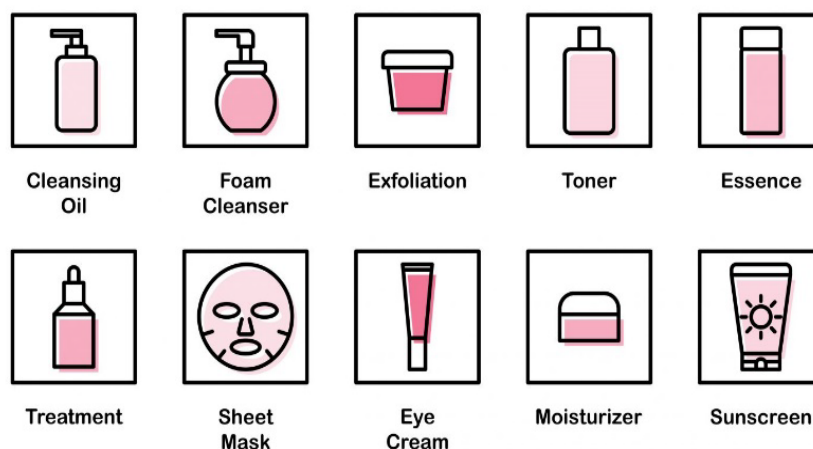


Figure 14. A simplified visual of the main steps of K-skincare; source from: Veruska Anconitano, “The Korean Skin Care Routine Steps by Steps in 2021”

Both routines, skin and makeup, are taken as a form of female labor, expected and for which they are in no way compensated.<sup>54</sup> There lies a third form of beauty standards that has recently received more critical attention, and that is physical body appearance. For South Korea,

<sup>51</sup> Veruska Anconitano, “The Korean Skin Care Routine Steps by Steps in 2021,” Asian Beauty Corner, 1 Nov 2020, <https://asianbeautycorner.com/korean-skincare-products/10-step-korean-skin-care-routine>.

<sup>52</sup> No longer available to watch, however there is a shorter version titled “예쁘지 않아도 괜찮았다” [Even if I’m not pretty, that’s okay] explaining her internal thoughts and how they led to her attempted suicide. The description also links to her book “I’m Not Pretty.”

<sup>53</sup> Sohpie Jeong, “Escape the corset...”

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin Haas, “‘Escape the corset’: South Korean women rebel against strict beauty standards,” The Guardian, 26 Oct 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/26/escape-the-corset-south-korean-women-rebel-against-strict-beauty-standards>.

feminine beauty has been standardized as a certain kind of physical appearance: “pale skin, big eyes, a high nose bridge, skinny legs, cherry-like lips, a small face and a nine-to-one body ratio, where the body is nine times as long as the face”<sup>55</sup> and a small chin.<sup>56</sup> When one cannot achieve this doll look with skincare or makeup, the last resort is plastic surgery.

As the “plastic surgery capital of the world,”<sup>57</sup> South Korea had its domestic boom around 2000 due to their hosting the 1988 Olympics. The country improved infrastructure, particularly around the infamously poor Gangnam district and, through the income influx from the Olympics, subsequently rocketed out of their widespread poverty.<sup>58</sup> The 2000 boom allowed non-rich people to be able to afford the cosmetic plastic surgery, increasing its commonality, its normality, and its status as a sign of wealth.<sup>59</sup> In the 2010’s, the government reached out to international markets in the form of government-backed ‘medical tourism,’ the visiting of a country for medical purposes, including formic and cosmetic surgery.<sup>60</sup> Now there are services and community forums such as “Seoul TouchUp” and “Seoul Guide Medical” dedicated to the easy bookings of hotels and tourist hotspots while offering the best doctor consultations and post-surgery services.

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<sup>55</sup> Benjamin Haas, “‘Escape the corset’...”

<sup>56</sup> “Plastic Surgery in Korea,” Seoul TouchUp, accessed 21 Feb 2021, <https://www.seoultouchup.com/plastic-surgery-in-korea>.

<sup>57</sup> Sohpie Jeong, “Escape the corset...”

<sup>58</sup> “Plastic Surgery in Korea,” Seoul TouchUp. | Jaeho Kang and Jilly Traganou, “The Beijing National Stadium as Media-space,” *Design and Culture* 3, no. 2 (2011): 145-163, [doi: 10.2752/175470811X13002771867761](https://doi.org/10.2752/175470811X13002771867761).

<sup>59</sup> Angela Son, “What ‘My ID Is Gangnam Beauty’ Reveals About Korean Beauty Standards RN,” *Beautytap*, 18 Oct. 2018, <https://beautytap.com/2018/10/gangnam-beauty/>.

<sup>60</sup> “Plastic Surgery in Korea,” Seoul TouchUp. | Parsa Khaknezhad, “Why Medical Tourism in South Korea?,” *MedTourPress*, 29 Jul 2020, <https://medtourpress.ir/en/medical-tourism-south-korea/>.

The surgery that South Korea offered matched its societal fixation with ‘natural-looking beauty’<sup>61</sup> so that both economic and cultural aspects of the country fed off each other: as the country got richer, the more cosmetic plastic surgery could happen, the more money could be put into plastic clinics, the cheaper the surgeries cost. Cosmetic plastic surgery is culturally significant to the point that high school students are often gifted a surgery as a graduation present.<sup>62</sup> This thesis is not here to judge whether or not cosmetic plastic surgery is ‘bad’ or ‘good,’ but instead looks at the pressures behind these cosmetic surgeries and any changes.

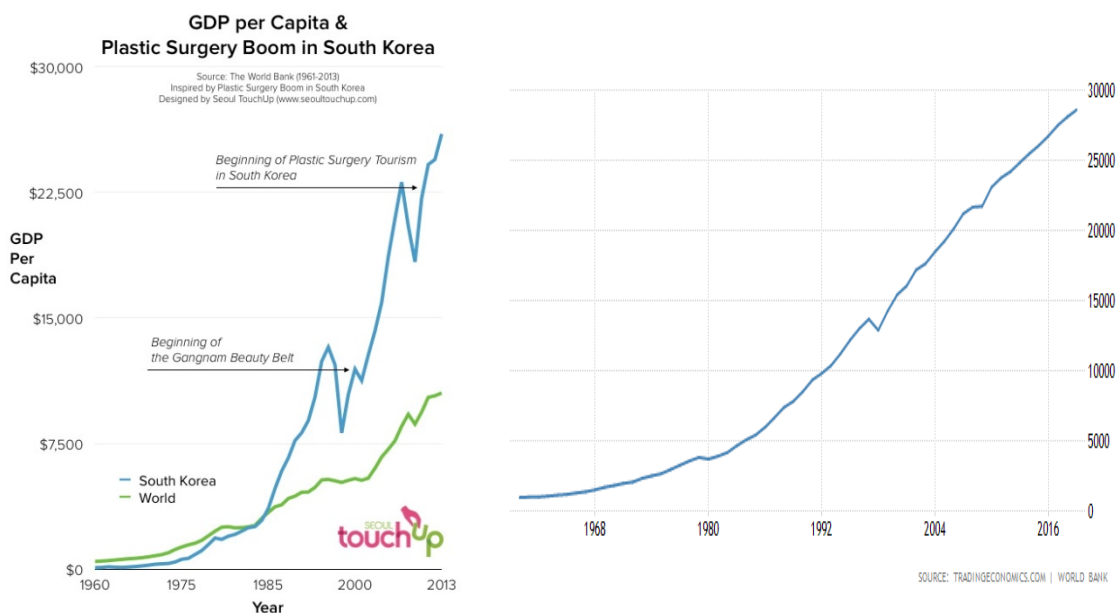


Figure 15. A focused and overall graph of South Korea's GDP per capita by Seoul TouchUp and The World Bank, respectively. As a government-approved medical tourism site, Seoul TouchUp emphasizes the beginnings of the plastic surgery boom and suggests its contribution to the country; “Plastic Surgery in Korea,” Seoul TouchUp. | “South Korea GDP per Capita,” Trading Economics, source: World Bank, accessed 21 Feb 2021, <https://tradingeconomics.com/south-korea/gdp-per-capita>.

<sup>61</sup> Even if not obtained ‘naturally.’ This includes through cosmetic plastic surgery. The trend coincides with South Korea as the “plastic capital of the world” as well as how its medical tourism plans has contributed to their economy.

Angela Son, “What ‘My ID Is Gangnam Beauty’ Reveals About Korean Beauty Standards RN,” Beautytap, 18 Oct. 2018, <https://beautytap.com/2018/10/gangnam-beauty/>.

<sup>62</sup> There is also a plastic surgery reality show, *Let Me In* (美人), where contestants plead their case to get a physiological makeover, so to speak. I am unsure if this show is still ongoing—but Seoul Medical Guide’s YouTube channel continues posting cuts of the show by the time of this thesis (2021).

Angela Son, “What ‘My ID Is Gangnam Beauty’ Reveals...” | “Plastic Surgery in Korea,” Seoul TouchUp.



For example, in a 1994 / 2004 / 2015 Gallup comparison survey of 1,500 respondents across the nation minus Jeju Island, the number of women who got plastic surgery increased from 4% to 9% to 14% in their respective years (men stayed at 1% from 2004 to 2015).<sup>63</sup> In addition, the trend of ‘appearance is important’ did not change much with 86% of the adults (or 9 out of 10) agreeing, women more than men.

However, in a 2017 / 2018 / 2019 comparison survey by KOSIS (Korean Statistical Information Service), the percentage of women who got plastic surgery, though relatively higher, is on a descending trail from 22.3% to 19.1% to 17.8% (men had a raise, fall, and raise again of 2.2% to 2.5% to 1.7%).<sup>64</sup> The percentage of people who agreed that ‘appearance is important in life’ decreased over the years from 2017 to 2019: 48.3% to 39.5% to 18.6%, respectively. Moreover, people are increasingly viewing plastic surgery not as a precursor to appearance but as a means of personal care; the percentage reporting that they got plastic surgery for ‘self-satisfaction’ jumps from 10.2% to 30.3% to 59.9%, respectively.<sup>65</sup> On the surface, people are thinking less of the strict beauty standards and instead turning towards themselves. This may still mean that South Korean society at large find that they are not satisfied with their looks because of their strict beauty expectations, however, this may also be a turn to an individual mindfulness. The switch in perspective places the unhealthy standards of society below that of a person’s

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<sup>63</sup> Gallup notes that they have no control over what a respondent may consider as ‘plastic surgery,’ so there is a possibility of mixed definitions for the term. Such is a flaw of self-report surveys.

“Survey of perceptions of appearance and plastic surgery - compared to 1994/2004/2015,” Gallup Korea, 15 April 2015, <http://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=656>.

<sup>64</sup> From 2017 to 2019, this is about 319, 312, and 326 people of the total surveyed, respectively. The total of number of respondents from each survey year were 2,700, 3,000, and 3,500 people, respectively.

“성형수술 경험 및 목적과 미용목적으로 성형수술을 한 이유 수록기간년 2017~2019” [Plastic surgery experience and purpose and reasons for cosmetic surgery from: 2017-2019], KOSIS, accessed 21 Feb 2021, [https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=402&tblId=DT\\_402004N\\_052&conn\\_path=I2](https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=402&tblId=DT_402004N_052&conn_path=I2).

<sup>65</sup> “성형수술 경험 및 목적과 미용목적으로 성형수술을 한 이유 수록기간년 2017~2019” [Plastic surgery experience and purpose and reasons for cosmetic surgery from: 2017-2019], KOSIS.

mental welfare, a cultural trait that was mostly masked<sup>66</sup> before the waves of feminism.

In parallel with cultural trends, the decreasing percentages reflect the changes in the societal mindset. A delayed ripple effect of feminist ideas has people turning from the pressure of society to a more equalist view of their culture, not only in terms of gender but also in terms of minding society while supporting the individual. As the feminism/equalist voices rise above the crowd, so do the cultural products carrying their themes. Recent years have garnered a support and craving for Romance+ South Korean soap dramas and stories. As mentioned earlier, stories with strong and independent female leads have been particularly popular. Stories with more fantastical or societal topics, such as parallel worlds, beauty standards, and the law system, have also received great reception. To look at the effects of culture onto its products and vice-versa, Gi Maenggi's *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* and director Choi Seungbum's k-drama version of the story serve as companions to the thoughts and reflections on recent feminist ideas, to how people can and are rising to have their voices heard, and to how the system changes.

In addition to the romance, the story revolves around a certain part of feminism that is arguably the least political, and therefore the least messy, of points to push for equality: beauty standards. Later, we will analyze how this added cultural aspect boosts popularity and the recent demand of Romance+ stories. For now, we will analyze the cultural aspect itself and how the story calls out the control that beauty has on both individuals and groups. This thesis breaks down the effects of beauty standards into three concepts in order to understand the depth of this cultural aspect; the kinds of actions that cause the internalization of the standards and their effects, the reward/punishment system for meeting beauty standards, and the conditions of

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<sup>66</sup> By their Confucian religious roots. Patriarchy, strong filial piety (to the possible point of toxicity), strict gender roles, and self-criticism can be traced from these ideas. See Kumar, "A study on the Korean Value System..." and Jeongkyu Lee, "Educational Fever and South Korean Higher Education."

acceptance are laid bare to criticism and discussion.

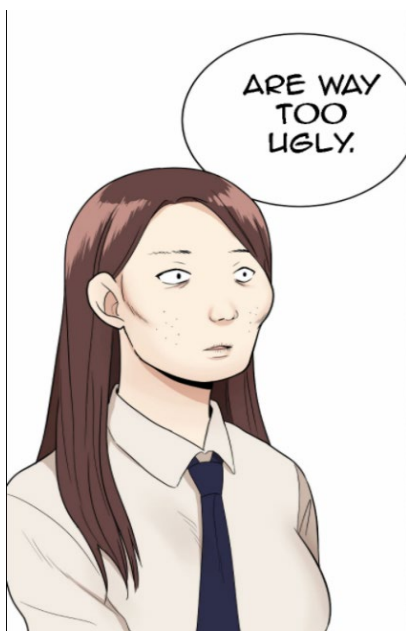


Figure 16. Gi Maenggi, *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* C1.12 – Mirae's Original Face

The main protagonist, Kang Mirae, was bullied for her appearance. Before she got plastic surgery, she was constantly shunned for her face, ridiculed for confessing because she was “way too ugly,” and had even been locked in the boy’s bathroom.<sup>67</sup> She started evaluating and ranking female faces out of habit, constantly comparing herself to other women.<sup>68</sup> Hearing all these demeaning descriptions, Mirae unconsciously adopts the mindset that she is ugly, as well as the belief that fixing her physical appearance will help. After she got plastic surgery and started attending

university, people whisper behind her back for being a “plastic monster,” call her a “Gangnam Beauty,” and make jabs about how ‘natural beauty is best.’<sup>69</sup>

Gangnam district, mentioned earlier as one of the places most drastically changed during South Korea’s Olympics economy boom, grew from its plethora of plastic surgery clinics. As ‘natural looking beauty’ is favored in South Korea and other Asian countries, “Gangnam Beauty” developed as a derogatory term to call people who had a lot of noticeable plastic surgery, shaming them as ‘fake.’<sup>70</sup> This slang quite literally verbalizes the obsession and

<sup>67</sup> Maenggi Gi, “My ID is Gangnam Beauty,” Naver, 2016, trans. by various scanlation groups, Chapter 1/1.1, <https://manhuascan.com/manga-my-id-is-gangnam-beauty.html>.

She couldn’t even jump off a building at a famous suicide spot because of the upped fee of \$50 for ‘uglies,’ a comedic satirical bit that points to the potential exploitation and discrimination against people without a ‘pretty face.’

<sup>68</sup> Maenggi Gi, Chapter 24.

<sup>69</sup> Maenggi Gi, Chapter 3, 6, 2.

<sup>70</sup> The term has been around since the 2010s, a ripple effect from the plastic surgery boom.

strictness of beauty standards: one must look beautiful, but ‘naturally,’ or else face obloquy, a rather hidden ultimatum.

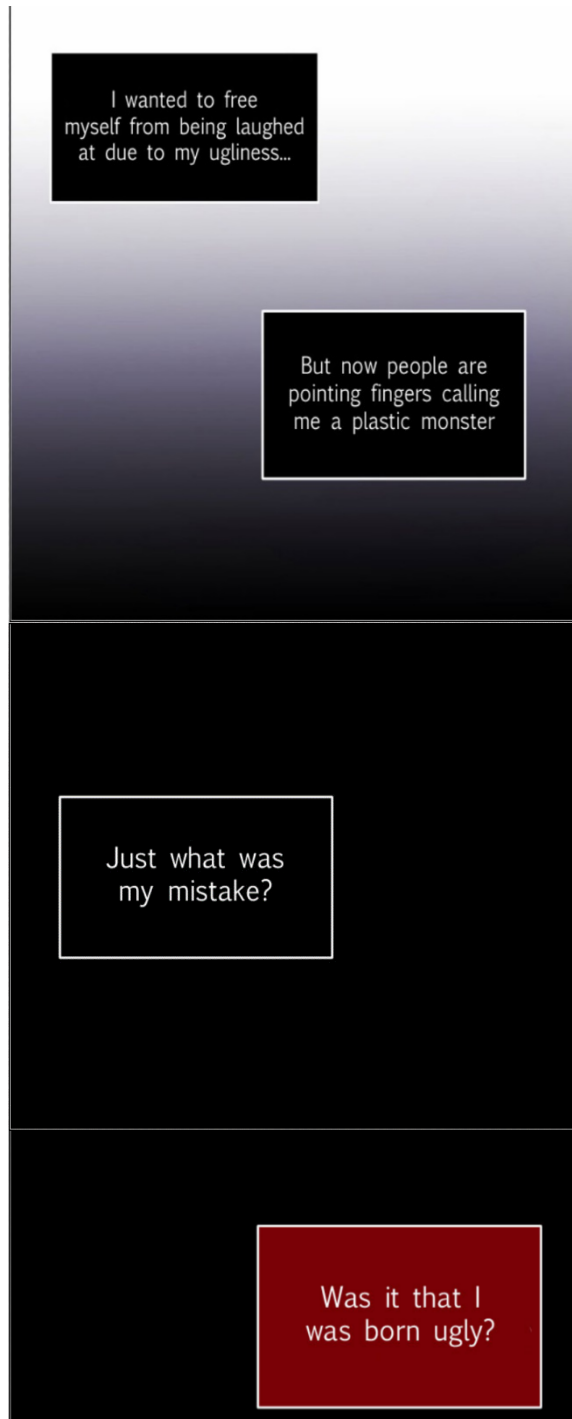


Figure 18. Gi Maenggi, *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* C3 – The question in red highlights her conclusion of beauty being innate because she’s ridiculed no matter how she changes her appearance

Metaphorically, then, Mirae feels as if the rug had been ripped out from under her, and we know this because of the questions she asks herself. What, then, did she do wrong if having the face that she was born with invokes disgust but having the facial features people always croon about through surgery invokes insults? Mirae

Figure 17. Gi Maenggi, *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* C3 – A visual of her dark thoughts



can't find the reason between these stacking standards, and so she falls deeper into the one belief that she has been told all her life, which is that *something* about her is ugly. Hence, she defaults to her very birth as hideous. The strength of these terrible thoughts is shown to readers visually through the blackening background, the black square format that shrouds her narration, and the

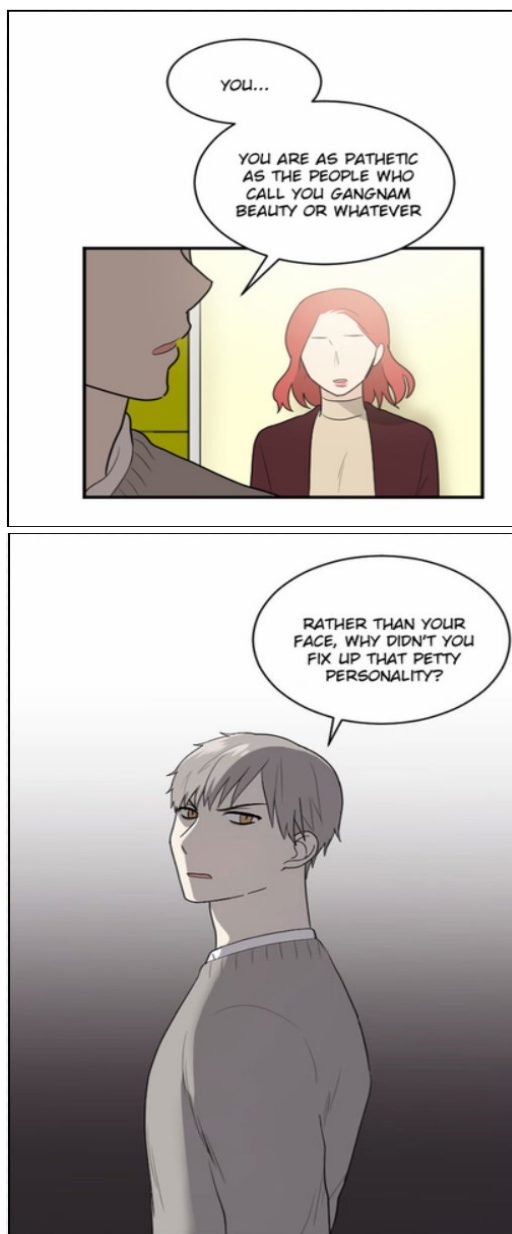


Figure 19. Gi Maenggi, *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*  
C11 – Kyungsuk insensitively equating Mirae to those who spite others because of appearance

prominently colored question, “Was it that I was born ugly?”. The deep darkness of her conclusion encases her in figure 18, letting readers feel and understand that this self-deprecation manifested from those bullies and their remarks on her physical appearance.

Her self-deprecation does not stop there. She requests that Do Kyungsuk, Mirae’s main love interest (eventually), keep her original face a secret,<sup>71</sup> and he asks her why she got plastic surgery and if she really ‘ranked’ faces based on appeal, such as cuteness or prettiness. In response to her own face, she wonders “why...why is this something I need to explain? C-Can you not understand? ...I had a face that would make it hard for me to live normally!” But he finds her as pathetic as those who call her a ‘Gangnam beauty’ because he understood her rationalization of having a below average face

<sup>71</sup> Because they met in middle school, before she had got plastic surgery, and met again at university.

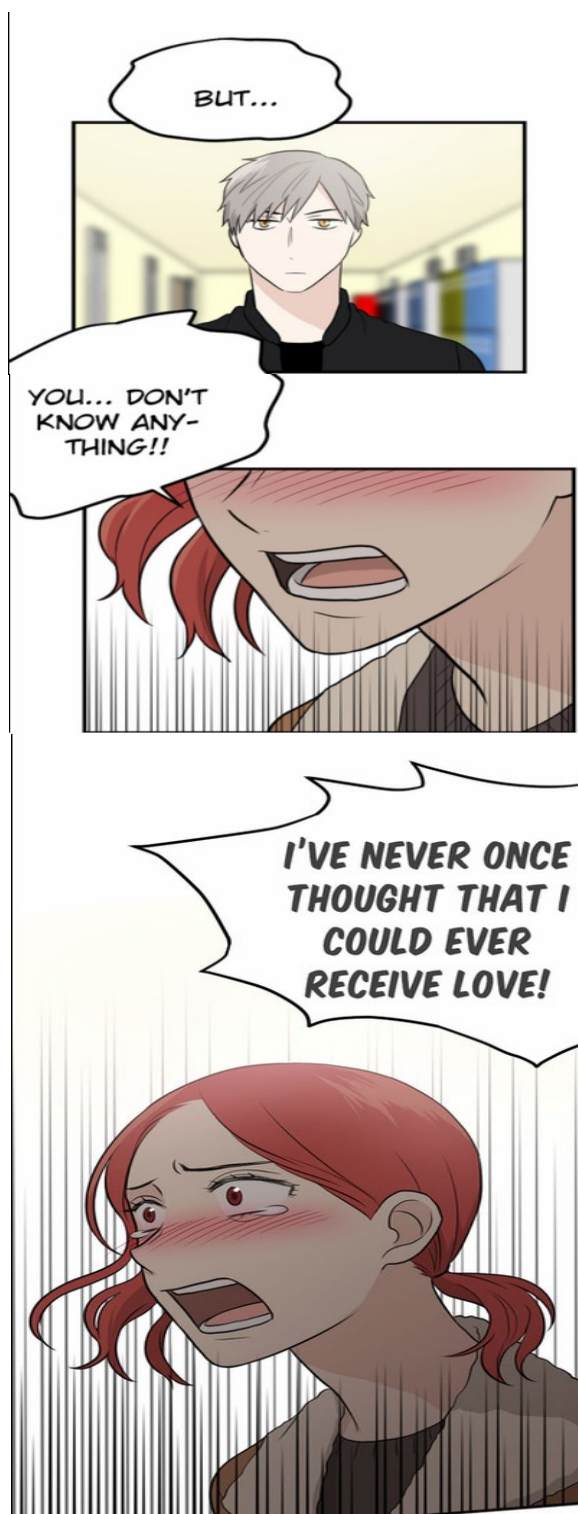
necessitating plastic surgery as a subconscious belief that some people “need” plastic surgery while others don’t.<sup>72</sup>

Later, she confronts him and tells him that he doesn’t know anything—specifically that he doesn’t know the feeling of believing that one could never receive love.<sup>73</sup> Mirae confessing her



Figure 21. Gi Maenggi, My ID is Gangnam Beauty C13 – Mirae admits that her habit of evaluating faces is pathetic...

Figure 20. Gi Maenggi, My ID is Gangnam Beauty C13 – But that habit and the reason for her plastic surgery stems from a deep desperation and sadness



<sup>72</sup> Maenggi Gi, Chapter 11.

<sup>73</sup> Maenggi Gi, Chapter 13.

darkest insecurity proves just how traumatizing and devastating the effects that beauty standards have had on her. It is not that someone told her that no one would love her, but the insults to her appearance had always been the reason for her being rejected by her crushes and love, constructing the impression of receiving love as dependent on beauty and that she was ‘ugly.’ Mirae was driven to the point of losing her hope for any love and underwent plastic surgery to try finding it again. Whether from internalizing the impossible goal of achieving society’s mercurial definition of beautiful or by having the love and confidence figuratively wrung out of her, Mirae was pushed to the only option that seemed to have made sense yet is still punished for it.

Through Mirae, we see the internalization of worthlessness in the form of ugliness and how that stems from people’s actions and words. We see the stacking of standards—that one must be beautiful, and then that one must be ‘naturally’ beautiful—and how she automatically blames herself for not being able to satisfy society’s standards. The circumstances that led to Mirae’s lack of self-esteem and self-compassion makes the concept of beauty more conscious and widens the perspective to readers.

In the first part of their conversation (figure 19), Kyungsuk also shows us the stereotypical, almost hypocritical, personification of the old saying of ‘It’s what’s inside that counts.’ His initial viewpoint represents the critical sentiments surrounding those who gave in to the coercion of beauty expectations, whether because they were ‘weak’ or held hidden prejudices of appearances that were ultimately expressed through vanity. His mocking of Mirae without trying to fully understand the extent of her desperation and self-hatred shows the privilege and ignorance of people who condemn plastic surgery and “Gangnam beauties” or expect certain appearances but do not experience any pressure themselves, blaming the individual instead of

considering the accumulation of interactions between society and individual. Although Kyungsuk did not experience any bullying because of his appearance, and his apathy and disgust towards vanity stems from the belief that his mom, Na Hyesung, abandoned their family and used her beauty to run off with a younger man,<sup>74</sup> he still ends up at the same assumption—beauty is vanity, and vanity is the expression of a rotten person. However, in contrast to his father, whom will be discussed about later in this section, Kyungsuk changes his view of beauty as Mirae passionately explains her feelings from constant and acrid bullying, signaling a point of hope that this kind of biased mindset *can* be realized and then changed.

On the flipside, maybe people believe that they are not mean, or they do not actively shun people,<sup>75</sup> so they are not actually bullies or biased, but their unconscious actions or the flippant words that they meant as a compliment can be just as detrimental.

The main antagonist, Hyeon Sooah, reflects how others' careless treatment can also craft a toxic view of beauty, as opposed to Mirae's forced desperation from the deliberateness of her bullies. Readers learn how Sooah, too, was forced into a dark corner by beauty standards, and how she concocted her solution to escape without realizing any later consequences. For her, words as well as the change in treatment explain why she makes the 'innocent' comparisons of beauty between her and Mirae, natural and plastic beauty, and how she uses the superficiality of beauty standards of those around her to manipulate them.

In a flashback, readers see Sooah's childhood, where her parents neglected her and her paternal grandmother grabs her hair and spits, "Even though my son is handsome...why are you so ugly?! Who do you take after, huh?!... So ugly..." Her own mother called her "disgusting,"

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<sup>74</sup> His father, Do Daesoo, raised Kyungsuk and his sister, Kyunghee, to believe this lie against their mother. Petty.

<sup>75</sup> Or won't own up to the responsibilities of their actions.



and the adults in her life speak about her as if she is an animal. At school, her classmates call her trash, dirty, use her as a game punishment, and gossip about her, calling her pitiful for almost being abandoned by her parents. Sooah is neglected to the point where she doesn't even know how to shower because no one told her what to do, and no one cares when she doesn't go to school.<sup>76</sup> After her mother shows up for one last time in her life, teaching her how to shower and feeding her, she eventually goes back to school, but the treatment is different. Her classmates,

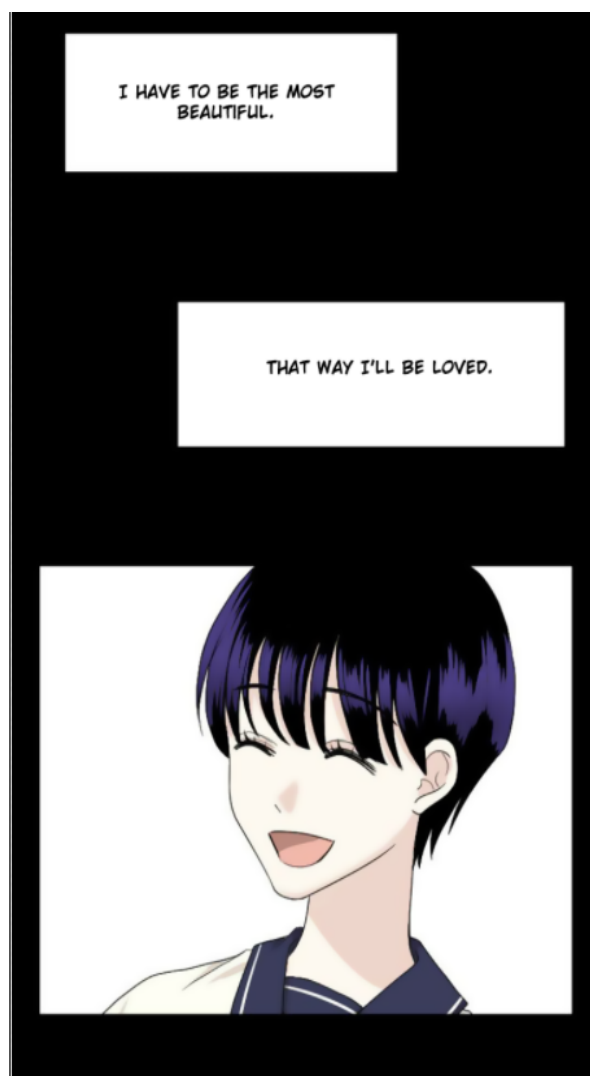


Figure 22. Gi Maenggi, *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* C64 – Sooah's solution to never being abandoned again

who once shoved her into trash bins, now invited her to eat lunch with them, asked her out, and most importantly, now that she was cleaned, complimented her beauty.<sup>77</sup> To the reader, the classmates' flipped behavior might be obvious, but to the classmates themselves, it is not. They don't recognize how much emphasis they place onto physical appearances, how they enforce their beauty standards, and how that translates into the superficiality of their kindness. However, like the readers, Sooah does and painstakingly dissects it. Sooah herself observes and narrates that "After I tidied myself, I was never bullied again. People were kind towards me and called me beautiful." She clearly points

<sup>76</sup> Maenggi Gi, Chapter 63.

<sup>77</sup> Maenggi Gi, Chapter 64.

out the reason behind the classmates' sudden change in behavior, recognizing the exact kind of discrimination made against her. Because of her abandonment, Sooah doesn't care about the superficiality of that kindness as long as she receives it, telling readers, "I have to be the most beautiful. That way I'll be loved." In fact, she observes her classmates further to figure out the perfect combination of superficial traits that equate to beauty. The traits she then lists out in bold blocks of narration couple with shadowed smiling faces of her and her classmates. The

incompleteness of their faces tells of their



Figure 23. Gi Maenggi, My ID is Gangnam Beauty C64 – She lists the requirements to be beautiful that she picked up from people's reactions towards beauty



Figure 24. Gi Maenggi, My ID is Gangnam Beauty C64 – More requirements and classmate superficiality

shallowness—the partiality of their profiles mirrors the lack of depth to their behavior. Through the repetition of Sooah’s face, we see that Sooah will follow anyway. This alternating layering represents Sooah dissecting society’s superficiality and her molding to fit into society’s petty expectations of how one must not only look but also must act to be considered ‘beautiful.’<sup>78</sup>

Gi Maenggi draws out a rarely discussed form of enforcing beauty standards through Sooah’s childhood: the ignorant discrimination. Especially as these students are younger kids, their actions represent the ‘innocently unaware’ comments and treatment towards beauty, such as ‘you’re pretty,’ “you’ll get pretty if you did this or that,”<sup>79</sup> “she wore glasses but still very pretty.”<sup>80</sup> These backhanded compliments



Figure 25. Gi Maenggi, *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* C64 – Sooah appears twice, emphasizing that this superficiality is her chosen solution

<sup>78</sup> Maenggi Gi, Chapter 64.

<sup>79</sup> Maenggi Gi, Chapter 35.

The Chemistry Department Chairperson, Gu Taeyong, referred to physical changes of appearance for three of the female chairpersons (i.e. doing double eye-lid surgery, going on a diet to be slim, dressing ‘like a girl’ (See Chapter 25 for the first time he said this).

<sup>80</sup> Quoted from one of the hosts, Hani, from source: *Weekly Idol*. Episode 267, YouTube video posted by KPop Updates, credits to ReVelUp Subs. Aired September 7, 2016. MBC Every1, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnTdtFw1NmM>.

restrain a person's image of beauty because they imply a certain look as the only version of beautiful. In the case of the first example, 'you're pretty' means that the giver of that comment expects a certain variation of physical appearance and limits the receiver to such.<sup>81</sup>

For the second and third example, they do not respect the receiver's view of their own appearance and instead impose a kind of stereotype (e.g. being beautiful only *after* a condition is satisfied and people with glasses are not pretty, respectively). There are people like Mirae, whose confidence was shaped by physical actions and active bullying, and there are people like Sooah, whose mindset becomes obsessed with people's shifting reactions to beauty. Both characters' pasts demonstrate different kinds of internalization of beauty standards, whether from the receiver or the giver, its different methods, active and ignorant, and its poisonous manifestations. Through these characters, Gi Maenggi artfully raises further awareness to how imbedded beauty standards are to people's actions and words and their caustic effects.

Though perhaps dramatized and made more precise for the sake of the webtoon, Mirae's situation and Sooah's conditioning are not uncommon. The physical and behavioral expectations of women are shaped through something similar to a reward/punishment system. Mirae was 'punished' with insults, and Sooah was 'punished' by her maternals and classmates, then 'rewarded' by her classmates later on, examples that feed into an unspoken system that Gi Maenggi boldly explores. Through the minor characters of *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, we see the system in action, the expectations for women and the rewards and punishments for trying to break the status quo.

Mirae meets the CEO of a perfume magazine, Na Hyesung. Through some intervention

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<sup>81</sup> As paraphrased from Oh Minji from source: Sohpie Jeong, "Escape the corset: How South Koreans are pushing back against beauty standards."

from Mirae, Hyesung gets the chance to explain why she left her family to her estranged son, Do Kyungsuk. Like Sooah, Hyesung had been complimented on her beauty from youth, but unlike Sooah, she is driven by her passion of becoming a perfumer. Rising through ranks, Hyesung is introduced to Do Daesoo, an older and wealthy man, and eventually marries him. On a night that Hyesung works late and Daesoo goes out drinking, she asks him why he can go drinking and not come home to take care of the kids while she has to give up her work. Daesoo says that drinking is also work for men, that she should quit her job, stay home, telling her, “working so hard you forget to take care of yourself. Your weight hasn’t gotten back ever since you gave birth to the kids. Go on a diet. Also, wear make-up at home. It’s not hard is it?”. Baffled, Hyesung asks how these were related, and Daesoo coldly replies, “You married me because you’re young and beautiful, right? You’re not young anymore, do you want to become ugly as well? What will others say? Listen to me, don’t let your value as a woman diminish.”<sup>82</sup> After she is injured by him, damaging her sense of smell and killing her dream, she later overhears him say, “Maybe she can now become a real flower. Beautiful, and still.”<sup>83</sup>

Do Daesoo’s words are a prime example of traditional gender roles rigidly forced upon people and how punishments can be made to women like Na Hyesung. Although she was young, beautiful, and successful, Daesoo only wants the first two aspects, dwindling to only beauty as she got older. The orders he gives her—be slim and light, go on a diet, wear makeup at home—he files these acts under a woman ‘taking care’ of *herself* (not a generic oneself). He implies that all these acts are necessary for a woman but not for a man, similar to his statement of drinking being work for a man. These physical characteristics and acts are actually preferences imposed

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<sup>82</sup> Maenggi Gi, Chapter 31.

<sup>83</sup> Maenggi Gi, Chapter 32.

onto Hyesung by Daesoo and society. In fact, Daesoo even ropes in society to pressure Hyesung when he asks, “What will others say?”. He implies that society is on his side in the matter and that no one would encourage her to have success,<sup>84</sup> a reference to the expectations a beautiful woman like Hyesung is ‘supposed’ to be following.

A youthful appearance is especially emphasized with Hyesung’s story—being an older generation than the main characters—and is therefore a perfect character to explore the confinement and then revival of woman power. Hyesung’s rebellion against the traditional female ideal caused her to lose her dream, her reason for life, and her motivation when Daesoo hits her and damages her ability to smell, a crushing punishment. However, the author does not leave Hyesung to return to such abuse or to waste away in regret. Instead, Hyesung realizes two things: “Beauty is not my ability. It is... Just something that I have because this world wanted beautiful women,” and “I realized it after I tried to kill myself. The thing that I can control, the thing that I can treat as I please. My own body.”<sup>85</sup>

Through Hyesung, Gi Maenggi sends the most powerful message that later echoes in the ‘Escape the Corset’ movement; one does not have to follow society’s expectations of beauty and traditional gender roles, especially when those expectations are only a means to constrain, and that woman have power over their own bodies. Hyesung’s seizes her future again, leaving her abusive husband and starting up a perfume magazine with the help of her junior and work department. By the time of the main characters’ storyline, we see the fruits of her work as well as the shadows of her abusive past and choice to leave her family when she once again meets her son.

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<sup>84</sup> Completely wrong, by the way. Her junior supported her with whatever the decision (stay home or follow her dream) she wanted.

<sup>85</sup> Maenggi Gi, Chapter 32.

These shadows hide in Kyungsuk's initial disgust towards plastic surgery and its conflation with vanity and in the lie Daesoo made his children believe about their mother leaving them. When Hyesung explains her story to Kyungsuk, and he understands her and her reason for leaving their family, this revelation ends Hyesung's chapter in closure and a rekindled connection with her children, a final 'reward.'<sup>86</sup>

It is important to note that even though Kyungsuk basically denounces his father and moves out, any repulsion towards Daesoo should not be generalized into men or older men being evil and getting their comeuppance. The author makes the distinction when Kyungsuk says that moving out was his own decision and when Hyesung says that there must have been a better path she could have chosen.<sup>87</sup> The characters take responsibility for themselves and their past actions without revenge or hate, to instead live for themselves and the present.

Empowerment and truth without the sentiment of revenge parallels the 'equalist' push of gender equality in current South Korean culture. As a cultural product between the 2015 Megalia misandry accusations and the 2018 *molka* porn and 'Escape the Corset' Movement, webtoon *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* uniquely contains elements of the beginnings of the equalist idea while also playing with the 'evils of misandry.'

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<sup>86</sup> She finds Kyunghee on Facebook, social media and they reconnect that way.

<sup>87</sup> Maenggi Gi, Chapter 34.

## **Part Two**

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## **Melodramas**



## Counting Sighs: Showing the Effects of Education Fever

In an adaptation, the original work goes through changes; it is inevitable. This thesis does not argue for the fidelity or quality behind changes to visual orientation, such as shot angle and camera movement, nor will it do so for plot changes (e.g. rearrangements, additions, or subtractions, known here as additionalities) because how a story is experienced surely must inherently morph under the restrictions of the new medium and the personal discretion of the adapter.<sup>88</sup> Instead, this thesis delves into the effects on culture when such a revision is introduced. In this case, the TV drama adaptation will be scrutinized for changes not under the pretense of fidelity but because the adaptation is a direct continuation of the story's cultural aspects and because the TV show medium itself must be deliberate, even if there is no longer a need to 'compress' the text.<sup>89</sup> There may be one or a combination of reasons to add, modify, or subtract parts of an original story, ranging from practicality, improvisation, easter eggs, character nuancing, etc., but here, I will argue that these additionalities are created to flex as culture does.

As a continuing contribution to the media and culture, adaptations take a story and any cultural implications and remixes them with that of the adapter, who may be in a different time, have different viewpoints, or see new directions with character and plot. Whichever combination the adapter may have, the culture of their age must influence their decision and thinking. The rebirth of an old product actually participates in a sort of feedback loop: culture products impact society and creators, who then make or modify the product and release it, which then influences

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<sup>88</sup> Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O' Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 87.

<sup>89</sup> Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O' Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 47.

people again but differently.<sup>90</sup> This loop explains, even if a bit broadly, a reasoning behind these product revisions and how they can simultaneously own the cultural aspects of the past and the present, constructing the perfect space for their particular discussion and perhaps new direction.

To see the extent of and diversity of additionality effects, think of the famous internet example in the film version of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*: Draco Malfoy is seen ripping out a book page, and Hermione Granger's petrified hand has a book page leading to the basilisk. Fans have drawn up, as well as disputed and rejected, the conspiracy theory that Draco put a book page about basilisks into Hermione's petrified hand to help lead Harry to the danger under the school.<sup>91</sup> As one Quora forum comment points out, this conspiracy is only present in the movie, and it does not actually change the plot of the film—whether Draco put the page into Hermione's hand does not change the fact that Harry got the information on the basilisk. What it does change is the possible sympathy towards the Draco character, tinting the lens of his 'evil.' Sympathy and forgiveness are valued in society, or at the very least, often a source of discussion. The drama versions of *Cheese in the Trap* and *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* do a similar job generating the discussions of their respective cultural aspects, though on a different level of certainty. The implications in the drama's additionalities actually teach and discuss certain ideals of the general South Korean culture.

Although *Cheese in the Trap*'s drama version had a rough reception nearing its end due to webtoon fans unsatisfied with its lack of the original's 'spirit,' this adaptation still

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<sup>90</sup> The creation of a product can be an amalgam of culture as well, since people's 'new' ideas often are influenced by what they view and how they view it; however, an adaptation offers an official connection between older story (webtoons, in this case) and newer story (k-dramas). By putting an umbrella context for a specific set of story and implications, the old and new cultural aspects are allowed to combine and evolve in an absolutely related fashion.

<sup>91</sup> "Did Draco Malfoy give Hermione the piece of paper with the Basilisk information on it in the movie?," Quora, accessed: Dec 17, 2020, <https://www.quora.com/Did-Draco-Malfoy-give-Hermione-the-piece-of-paper-with-the-Basilisk-information-on-it-in-the-movie>.

demonstrates added nuances that reflect the real world, especially in the beginning. In episode one, Seol completes the comical but hellish race for registering for classes, nabbing a spot in the easy ‘A’ class. She’s checking her class schedule again in the library when Jung<sup>92</sup> sneaks up to ask her for a lunch date. Distracted in the panic to get away from him, she declines, rushes out, and forgets to log off.<sup>93</sup> Later, she discovers that she was dropped from the class and suspects Jung as the culprit. She confronts him but when he doesn’t show at their meeting time, Seol and friends craft an excuse into the CCTV room and look for themselves, discovering that Jung didn’t touch the library computer with her class schedule on it. The culprit wasn’t Jung, and as Seol and company wonder who it could have been, the viewers are taken to where Jung actually went: to confront Sangcheol, who confesses that he was the one who dropped Seol from her spot to try taking it himself. Back with Seol, she resignedly accepts the outcome of taking the difficult class and thinks in a voice-over that she couldn’t find the culprit “but whoever it was, it must have been someone more desperate than me. That’s what I decided to think.”<sup>94</sup>

The registration scene has no counterpart in the webtoon version, and so, the dialogue and events were crafted solely out of director Lee Yoonjung and the TV writers’ vision for the story. In the webtoon’s beginning, Seol is known to be accommodating, almost to the point of being a pushover, but she often keeps grudges against those who take advantage of her kindness; the majority of the webtoon’s focus is on the actions between Seol and the people who do so, and her evolution to eventually stand up for herself. While still matching the yielding personality of the webtoon’s Seol, the k-drama Seol feels more forgiving and philanthropic. After doing

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<sup>92</sup> Viki’s translating group, “I’m trapped,” romanized his name as ‘Jeong,’ for any who look at the subs and find them different.

<sup>93</sup> She was suspicious of him and painstakingly avoided him in the beginning of the webtoon and drama versions.

<sup>94</sup> *Cheese in the Trap*, Episode 1, directed by Yoonjung Lee, 4 Jan 2016, <https://www.viki.com/videos/1100604v>.

everything she can to get back into the easy ‘A’ class and failing, she doesn’t resent or even silently curse at this person who immorally dropped her place to, presumably, take the class for themselves. Her imagining a reason for the culprit’s actions to ‘forgive’ them modifies the background of her personality and the act of yielding—that Seol is deserving of the ‘kind but unfortunate girl’ trope<sup>95</sup>—and that preemptive forgiveness should be adopted alongside the yielding to life’s misfortunes.<sup>96</sup> K-drama Seol displays preemptive forgiveness from the beginning as a means to teach the viewers sympathy and empathy in their competitive environment.

Especially in terms of education, South Korea stands as a highly competitive if not hellish environment to students. Terms like “Education Fever,” “Examination Hell,” and “Goose



**TEST TAKERS, HWAITING!!**

TN - HWAITING: THE KOREAN EQUIVALENT OF 'FIGHTING'. A PHRASE COMMONLY USED IN KOREA TO CHEER PEOPLE UP OR TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO 'FIGHT' AND DO THEIR BEST. THE WEEK THIS CHAPTER WAS RELEASED WAS THE WEEK FOR THE OFFICIAL KOREAN EXAMINATION. IT'S CONSIDERED A VERY IMPORTANT TEST FOR KOREAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS, JUST LIKE THE AMERICAN SAT/ACT.

Figure 26. Soonkki, *Cheese in the Trap* S1C20. Chapter 20 was released the same week as *suneung*. The hell test is so famously part of their culture that authors often draw notes of encouragement. Not present in the official translation site. Soonkki, “*Cheese in the Trap*,” Line, 2014 – 2018, trans. by various scanlation groups, [https://www2.mangakakalots.com/manga/cheese\\_in\\_the\\_trap](https://www2.mangakakalots.com/manga/cheese_in_the_trap), Chapter 20.

<sup>95</sup> Tropes and plot variances are discussed in depth later.

<sup>96</sup> Preemptive forgiveness differs from giving people ‘the benefit of the doubt.’ I define that benefit as a prospective speculation of reason before the action is made against the person or the intention known, whereas preemptive forgiveness absolves or forgives without knowing the full reason behind the action.

Father” are commonplace because of the intensity of their fixation with education.<sup>97</sup> To give a bit of context—75% of high school students attend private schools and ‘cram’ schools immediately after, parents and students alike hike up temples to pray for good marks on the day-long college entrance exams,<sup>98</sup> and stress levels for 11 to 15 year-olds are empirically reported as the highest among any other industrialized country.<sup>99</sup> South Korean student suicide rates and anecdotes have made international headlines due to the crushing pressure and anxiety on youths to get into elite institutions.<sup>100</sup> Though not exact and in need of updates, data suggests that one in four students contemplate suicide, and South Korea has “the second highest youth suicide rates among OECD members.”<sup>101</sup>

Alongside this education fever, employment and ideas of higher education as key to social mobility stewed to a boiling point in their culture, resulting in the ardent passion for higher

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<sup>97</sup> 교육열 (gyeo-yook-yeol – Education Fever), 입시지옥 (ib-si-ji-ohk – Examination Hell), and 기러기 아빠 (gi-reo-gi ah-ppa – Goose Father) respectively. Goose fathers are fathers who live alone and only work to make tuition money for his wife and children studying abroad.

FlyHighOyster, “Korean Education Fever,” Korean Language Blog, 27 Jan 2021, <https://blogs.transparent.com/korean/korean-education-fever/>. | Gulab Kumar, “A study on the Korean Value System in Korean Dramas...”

<sup>98</sup> 학원 (Hag-won – Cram schools) often run until late evening and takes a sizable amount of income from parents (12% nationwide), and 수능시험 (Su-neung si-ham – Entrance Exam) which literally determines which universities will accept which students, respectively.

“High performance, high pressure in South Korea’s education system,” ICEF Monitor, 23 Jan 2014, accessed 15 March 2021, <https://monitor.icef.com/2014/01/high-performance-high-pressure-in-south-koreas-education-system/>. | Hannah Sistek, “South Korean students wracked with stress,” Aljazeera, 8 Dec 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/12/8/south-korean-students-wracked-with-stress>.

<sup>99</sup> Gulab Kumar, “A study on the Korean Value System in Korean Dramas...”

<sup>100</sup> Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University—famously acronymed as SKY—can be thought of as the South Korean equivalent of Harvard and Oxford in clout but dial up the necessity factor to ‘life-dependent.’ They are as infamous as they are famous—there’s even a drama based on their prestige and the burdens on students to get in and a recent documentary, but here is an article if their infamy and fame must be cited: Claire Lee, “Hit drama reveals SKY-high pressure of South Korean school system,” The Jakarta Post, 3 Feb 2019. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/amp/youth/2019/02/02/hit-drama-reveals-sky-high-pressure-of-skorean-school-system.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Data from 2012. The Korea Health Promotion Foundation reports one and eight students for the same year. Hannah Sistek, “South Korean students wracked with stress.”

learning today. Education was always kept within the elite socioeconomic classes in the past, whether during the old Choson era (1392 – 1910) where the *yangban*, or the ruling elites of the time, reigned, or during the Japanese occupation era (1910 – 1945) where only the Japanese and a small number of pro-Japanese Koreans could receive education. After liberation from Japan occupation, rigid class stratification and restricted education led to fights for greater access.<sup>102</sup> South Korea's political changes and economic boom transformed their society from Confucian elitism to industry and democracy-based systems; the need for academics and white-collared workers multiplied and gained emphasis, leading to a strong belief that good education leads to a good job and status. With the door to education suddenly blown open, people flocked to be part of the institution that they had always seen as a powerful socioeconomic symbol.<sup>103</sup>

In light of this cultural background, the director rebalances the scene focus with both interpersonal interaction and the competition of their education system, combining the two into the 'desperation' that students and the audience are bound to empathize with. Seol's preemptive forgiveness acknowledges and tries to teach the audience a view of the education competition from a peer-to-peer perspective, showing the unfortunate circumstances while modeling the solidarity that students should feel with each other. This scene in the drama version thus demonstrates an example of changing cultural emphasis through adaptation. The director draws attention to different dimensions of a cultural aspect and morphs the adaptation into a new product that reflects the current conversations.

Immediately after, the scene changes to one that proves Seol's kindness as well-placed

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<sup>102</sup> Jeongkyu Lee, "Educational Fever and South Korean Higher Education," *Revista Electrónica de Investigación y Educativa* 8, no. 1 (2006), <http://redie.uabc.mx/vol8no1/contents-lee2.html>.

<sup>103</sup> Remember that the 1988 South Korea-hosted Olympics ushered new infrastructure and income.

Jeongkyu Lee, "Educational Fever and South Korean Higher Education."

and true, furthering the validity of preemptive forgiveness and solidarity. The scene cuts to a medium shot of the culprit, Sangcheol, as discovered by Jung.<sup>104</sup> Although Sangcheol is the pushy senior who socially loafers, an unlikeable and unbelievable person character, the director and writer chose to expand on and provide reason for his immoral action.<sup>105</sup> Earlier, this thesis stated that *Cheese in the Trap* gives focus to the individual struggles of societal expectations. The inserted but continuing threads in the K-drama adaptation extends the idea that the onerous burden from these societal expectations is the true reason for the ‘evil’ actions of people.



Figure 27. Lee Yoonjung, *Cheese in the Trap* Ep. 1 – Medium shot of Sangcheol, his dinner, and crowded table as he lies so that she doesn't worry

In a cramped and dim room, Sangcheol puts together rice, canned tuna, and a scoop of bean paste on a table occupied by stationary and a lamp, the sole diegetic light in the room. The camera occasionally cuts out to a

medium-long display of the messy room but offers no reprieve from the situation. His mother calls, and as he skirts the truth about eating well and job opportunities, the camera cuts back into

<sup>104</sup> He pleads with Jung to not tell anybody, trying to explain and excuse himself with “I was... I was really desperate at that time.” Jung doesn’t tell anyone but is quite a jerk while holding it over Sangcheol.

*Cheese in the Trap*, Episode 1, directed by Yoonjung Lee.

<sup>105</sup> The direct evidence for this in the drama at this point is that he forced Seol to eat food and alcohol at the barbeque party which forced her to spit it out in front of Jung, bullies his juniors to copy answers/notes, and accused Seol of exposing him for embezzling club funds; spoiler alert—it wasn’t her who exposed him. His background is never expanded on in the webtoon version.

*Cheese in the Trap*, directed by Yoonjung Lee.



the ‘dinner’ table with the food that would not match his parent’s definition of ‘eating well.’ The camera then strategically shifts in and out—in to the medium shot whenever he is lying to his mother about having job opportunities, and out to the medium-long whenever he stops. At the end of the call, he heaves a sigh, and the camera resumes the medium shot as he takes a bite of food.

The medium shot with frontality creates the atmosphere of sitting across from Sangcheol, making his lies and situation personal and more real. Viewers can also see the hodgepodge food—lit directly under the lamplight—that he is making on the table ‘between’ them, highlighting the irony of his lies that he tells his mother. The zoom-out to the medium-long shot of the room makes viewers step back and see his physical container as well as how it doubles as his figurative container. The fact that viewers can only step in and out within the uncomfortable phone conversation and the poor conditions of his living accommodations mimics the way Sangcheol feels contained and pressured by the expectation to do well in university and to get a job. The single diegetic light in the room shines down on his food and school supplies muddled together, literally

spotlighting his burdens of needing to study. With the shadows cloaking him and the room, viewers can understand that Sangcheol also feels that his future is dark



Figure 28. Lee Yoonjung, *Cheese in the Trap* Ep. 1 – Medium-long shot showing the whole of Sangcheol’s living quarters: laundry clipped at the top, beer bottles and empty ramen bowls strewn on another table, the “stove” as a portable one, a hotplate next to his bedside



and pressing in on him.

Through this additionality, we feel exactly the kind of “desperate” that Seol could have been imagining for her culprit. The confirmed callback to Sangcheol’s need for education and then employment emphasizes how his life must revolve around passing classes so that he can find a job no matter the cost, a prevalent sentiment in the current culture. Sangcheol’s lying to not worry his mother and heavy sigh are telltale to the education and employment burden that weighs on the shoulders of Korean young people; For the director to include Seol’s preemptive forgiveness and immediately show the saddening reality behind the education craze, the director actively changes the discussion about these concepts. Director Lee creates sympathy and empathy, saying that youth of these days are trying to meet expectations but consequently are trapped.

## Knocking Beauty Standards AND Abusive *Sunbaes* Down

This new perspective on a preexisting cultural discussion also happens in *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* and even takes a step further by offering criticism. Much like Director Lee framing and bringing attention to preemptive forgiveness and education desperation as an individual's burdens, Director Choi of *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*'s drama version expands on the seniority abuse while keeping the highlight of the *sunbaes*' restricting definitions of women. The drama version does this mainly by having the third-year representatives of the department push around first-years. Yoo Eun, the first-year representative and Mirae's friend, is often subject to seniority abuse because of her direct contact with her seniors for department meetings and takes a stand against it in both versions; however, there lies an emphasis in her bringing up the issue that exists only in the drama version, which this thesis will use in understanding the continuing culture discussions of seniority hierarchy as well as *nunchi*, or 'sense.'

Back in Chapter 1, we saw the individual sacrifices Seol makes for the sake of the 'greater mood' and the effects on her but not *how* she knows to make these sacrifices and their connection to seniority hierarchy. If the greater mood is what South Koreans wish to maintain, then *nunchi*—the sensitivity to other's emotions, indirect words, status, and the environment and reacting in a certain way—is the method to do so. Similar to emotional intelligence, *nunchi* takes it a step further and anticipates the sociocultural expectations and has people act in accordance with those majority values. A general example would be to keep public displays of affection to a minimum especially in front of those from an older generation.<sup>106</sup> Combining with South

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<sup>106</sup> Romance and love is huge in East Asia—completely and utterly—but the conservative cultures and generations have a stronger presence and would rather not have couples being too lovey-dovey with each other unless it is late at night and towards the side (like at a park with less people around), a place specifically for couples, or in private.

Korea's strong culture of obligated respect towards elders, *nunchi* explains the silences of criticism, suggestions, or questioning from junior to senior. Other scenarios are that juniors are forced to stay overtime while everyone else goes home, forced to take the blame for a senior's mistake, or coerced into social situations—as we saw with Seol—that make the juniors uncomfortable.<sup>107</sup> In the drama version of *My ID*, Eun becomes the voice against this abuse of senior power backed by *nunchi* and supports the callouts of beauty standards.

When the department student heads discuss preparations of their café booth for the school's festival,<sup>108</sup> the *sunbaes* in charge, third-years Jo Junghyup and Song Jungho, delegate Eun to (only) recruit their department's most attractive first-year students into serving and promoting, which includes Mirae, Sooah, Kyungsuk, and Jihyo, instead of posting a notice or letting willing volunteers sign up as Eun was thinking.<sup>109</sup> When Goo Taeyoung, another department head, says that he doesn't think Kyungsuk would do it, Junghyup's first response is, “Why not? Does he not listen to his seniors?”<sup>110</sup> Junghyup automatically expects a junior to follow and obey a senior's words because they are, in theory, for the greater good of the

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<sup>107</sup> This isn't to say that *nunchi* is bad since *nunchi* is generally exemplified as a tool of success, such as building rapport in the business world, reading social cues and receiving favorable reaction, or picking up on hints that your significant other wants a gift on certain holiday.

Keith Kim, *Will You Be CLUELESS in Korea?* (눈치, *nunchi*). Seolistic. Video. 7 Apr 2013. <https://seoulistic.com/learn-korean/make-sure-youre-not-totally-clueless-in-korea-눈치-nunchi/>. | Gulab Kumar, “A study on the Korean Value System in Korean Dramas...”

<sup>108</sup> A common Asian school event that spans for one to several days, school festivals, cultural festivals, etc. typically are booths and activities set up around campus, such as café hosting, haunted houses, and performances, put up by subject/major departments and clubs for fundraising. For a story, it's a great and common plot device to spice things up.

<sup>109</sup> *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, Episode 5, directed by Choi Seungbum, 10 Aug 2018, <https://www.viki.com/videos/1144405v>.

<sup>110</sup> In the webtoon version, Eun asks him several times, and when she said that he refused and didn't want to force him, the *sunbaes* say “Freshmen refusing although he's told to join in a department event? At any rate, he has to do it. Eun you're the one responsible for him. No matter what, bring him!” Maenggi Gi, Chapter 25.

*My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, Episode 5, directed by Choi Seungbum.

department and out of the wisdom of someone older. Without any consideration of whether Kyungsuk would even want to serve, he hints at his almost authoritarian view of seniority power. Senior Junghyup also does not give Eun any help in trying to recruit Kyungsuk (probably because he didn't think of whether Kyungsuk would want to serve) and expects her to just get the task done, demonstrating a show of abuse through the seniority hierarchy.

Next department meeting, Eun had gathered those requested by the *sunbaes* (minus Kyungsuk), and they do introductions. Physically, the spacing of the room and people does not change, but cinematography reveals the mental confinement of the girls, particularly Eun, as the discussion sidetracks into critiques of the female class representatives' appearances—Kwon Yoonbyul confusing people with her non-female gender performance and Kim Taehee being 'too fat' for her name's sake.<sup>111</sup> The *sunbaes* call the servers, Mirae, Sooah, and Jihyo, "the prettiest girls of '18'" and further compliment Sooah as she feigns innocence of her beauty, but the camera shows Eun growing confined by their words, her *mise en scene* mimicking her emotions with the flanking heads of the *sunbaes*, and therefore suffocating Eun's space. Eun reports that she was unable to persuade Kyungsuk and is left quietly seething at her seniors' responses:

**Jo Junghyup:** "It'd be nice to have a good-looking guy, but serving is for girls."

**Yoo Eun:** Why?

**Jo Junghyup:** Why else? It's just tradition.

**Song Jungho:** Oh, that sounds nice. "Just tradition"?"<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Kim Taehee is also the name of a Korean figure skater famed for her beauty and athletic skill. The contrast the *sunbaes* are trying to make is the figure skater's slim body to Kim Taehee's 'fat' one.

<sup>112</sup> *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, Episode 5, directed by Choi Seungbum, 35:54.



Figure 30. Choi Seungbum, *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* Ep.5 – Eun’s mise en scene matching the way she feels confined by the sunbaes’ beauty standards and “traditions”

While deciding uniforms, Junghyup and Jungho settle on skirts and further compare the girls to “withering” flowers and impose “types” onto the girls based on stereotypical female images, like the cute type for Sooah and the sexy type for Mirae, and only stop when Yoonbyul tells them to end the meeting if they are going to keep talking nonsense. After the meeting, Eun vents her frustration to Mirae, saying “what was that about withered flowers and types? I’m speechless. I would have beat them up if I weren’t a freshman.”<sup>113</sup> This line is the result of Eun’s rage but also how she attributes her inability to speak up to her junior status. As a freshman, she felt that she could not



Figure 29. Choi Seungbum, *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* Ep.6 – The girls get their uniforms and show obvious discomfort, especially the main character, Mirae, on the far left

<sup>113</sup> There is no written rule saying that *hoobaes* can’t (verbally) “beat up” *sunbaes*, but seniority hierarchy culture and Eun’s sense to *not* castigate them hold her back. *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, Episode 5, directed by Choi Seungbum.

directly go against her seniors no matter how irritated their words made her. She can ask why, for clarification, under the pretense that *hoobaes* are supposed to learn from *sunbaes*, but she cannot directly reject them because of *nunchi* towards the seniority hierarchy. Moreover, she and Mirae dislike the idea of skirts as uniforms, and “[they] could have objected as a group, but Soo Ah and Ji Hyo are okay with it.”<sup>114</sup> Through this line, we understand that, in Eun’s head, her voicing her opinion would have created tension in the conversation atmosphere; that is why she doesn’t say anything. Not only does she silence herself due to her *nunchi* towards the seniority hierarchy, she also silenced herself because of her *nunchi* towards the greater mood.

On the night that the school festival starts, the café booth opens, but the ‘attractive’ female servers eventually all leave.<sup>115</sup> When the female department heads, who were on cooking duty, suggest for the guys to also serve or to not worry about more servers because they were about to close, Jungho quips about how “serving is only for girls” and Jo Junghyup starts a tirade about their lack of preparation for the event—telling Yoonbyul, “if you want to look like a girl, grow out your hair,” and “I told you to lose weight” to Taehee; to Eun, he gripes that she “should smile more. Girls should look more pleasant.” She actually replies back first, asking, “[w]ho are you to tell me to smile?” And Jungho immediately tells her to “[s]tay out of this, first year.”<sup>116</sup> He specifically points to her status as a junior as a command of power, to silence her and get her to obey. The seniority hierarchy abuse complements and magnifies the subsequent calls of feminism as Yoonbyul declares that she quits:

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<sup>114</sup> Remember that one of Sooah’s keys to being beautiful is to always be obedient to those around her. She also doesn’t like Mirae, and so she agrees to the skirts uniform. *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, Episode 5, directed by Choi Seungbum.

<sup>115</sup> Mirae encounters her old arrogant middle school crush who rejected her because of her old face and is emotionally exhausted after hearing him talk then telling him off; Sooah had a part-time job; Jiho just said that she had to leave.

<sup>116</sup> *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, Episode 6, directed by Choi Seungbum.

**Goo Taeyoung:** Hey. What's wrong?

**Jo Junghyup:** She got all sensitive and mad over a joke. Hey, when did we call you ugly? I'm just saying that you can be pretty if you do this and that.

**Kim Taehee:** Stop it already! That's what we don't want to hear!

**Jo Junghyup:** Tae Hee, why are you being like that too?

**Kim Taehee:** I'd be pretty if I lost weight? Are you saying I'm a failure when I'm fat? Get plastic surgery, grow out your hair, don't dress like that, lose weight. If I said things like that to you, you'd lose it.

**Song Jungho:** Hey, Kim Tae Hee. Why are you twisting his words like that? We're saying that your features are pretty and cute.

**Kim Taehee:** I don't want to hear that either! Who asked you to say that? Are we some items at a store where some of us are pretty and some of us aren't? Keep your thoughts to yourself. What gives you the right to say that?

**Yoo Eun:** I'm not doing this either.

**Song Jungho:** I said to stay out of this, First Year.

**Yoo Eun:** Do first years have to do whatever you say? Why do you keep telling me what to do?<sup>117</sup>

From the dialogue, viewers see that the two aspects, beauty standards and seniority

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<sup>117</sup> \*Cue women walking out of the situation like bosses.\*

*My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, Episode 6, directed by Choi Seungbum, 22:48.

hierarchy abuse, are given equal chances to display their problems on the small screen. Where in the webtoon the scene and Eun's argument centers around beauty standards, Director Choi adds senior hierarchy abuse through Eun's drama character to also show the thin line between *nunchi* and oppression. Eun had repeatedly shown that her silence is due to *nunchi*, not necessarily respect to or agreeance with her seniors. This same relationship offers itself as a subtle explanation to the reason that women may follow and bear the pressure of beauty standards without speaking up.<sup>118</sup>

When the female department representatives' voices are finally heard, the exposure and breaking of oppressive *nunchi* exemplifies the ability to even attempt the act, empowering women and encouraging them to fight for their voice despite any excuses *nunchi* may make. These sentiments towards performing beauty or traditionally 'female acts' and the confining image that supposed compliments reinforce refreshes the ideas of the original webtoon, Bae Lina's 'I'm not pretty' video/book, and the whole of the 'Escape the Corset' movement that happened earlier in the year of the drama's release. By working alongside the concept of the breaking of oppressive *nunchi*, oppressive beauty standards and poisonous self-images weaken even more.

Choi Seungbum, however, makes his empowerment and lines of *nunchi*-oppression with clear rules and warnings for both the oppressed and the oppressor using an entirely unique scene to the drama version. On the second day of the café booth, the girls cast their revenge. For the new uniform fitting, the female department heads have *sunbaes* Junghyup and Jungho dress in

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<sup>118</sup> Of course, men also have beauty standards as well as asset and role expectations, but the emphasis of the webtoon is how oppressive beauty standards are on women, as outer appearance, youth, and beauty is traditionally stressed more for women than men, and this translates to the base of the drama version. The stories also mention a little of asset and role expectations for women through Na Hyesung's story, but again, it is not the focus of the story and instead supports the discussion of beauty standards.



shirts with realistic muscles and skin on the cloth, the pecs and abs displaying the stereotypical idealized upper body of a male; the sunbaes are appalled and do not want to be seen in public with such shirts on. Kim Taehee snipes them back with their own comment of a lack of preparation, saying “[t]hen you should have started exercising earlier. If you started exercising and building muscle earlier, you wouldn’t have needed this.” Kwon Yoonbyul joins in with “[if] you don’t like that, wear the same thing they [the female servers] did. That’s the only way since you can’t attract people with your good looks”



Figure 31. *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* Ep.6 – The girls make the boys look the part of a ‘pretty server’

when they protest, and Eun gives a big nod.<sup>119</sup>

But when Yeon Wooyoung, the senior to everyone in the room and known for being a kind *sunbae*, interrupts them, any fun the viewers might have had vanishes. Wooyoung asks the third-years why they are wearing the muscle shirts, they point to the girls being immature, and Taehee explains Junghyup and Jungho’s insulting words, how they criticize the girls’ looks.

Wooyoung then demands an explanation for the short uniforms the girls had to wear:

**Yeon Wooyoung:** Did you guys agree to this?

**Kwon Yoonbyul:** No. They [Junghyup and Jungho] pressured them to wear them.

**Yoon Eun:** First years had no say.

<sup>119</sup> *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, Episode 6, directed by Choi Seungbum.

**Kim Taehee:** This is nothing compared to what they did.

**Yeon Wooyoung:** So... was this the only way?

[The camera flashes to each of the department heads as they look down in shame. Wooyoung turns to Junhyup and Jungho.]

**Yeon Wooyoung:** How are you guys exactly the same as last year? If you're going to bring up tradition and do this crap, don't do the booth.<sup>120</sup>

Here, we see the continuing aspects of beauty standards and senior hierarchy abuse used as reasons by the girls, however, neither of these are justifiable to afflict the same treatment back to the boys. The 'tradition' that the boys had leaned on also receives an attack, invalidating both sides' previously established reason behind the insults and hurtful words said. These points are further supported by the fact that it is the established kind *sunbae* that scolds both sides for their foolish ways, strengthening the truth of his words.<sup>121</sup> This additionality reflects on the 2015 Megalia incident and criticizes both misogyny and the retaliating misandry through its own representation of the issue. With this scene exclusive to the drama, Director Choi took the original idea and plot of the 2016 webtoon and included a conversation current in the wake of that misandry, using the adaptation as a vehicle to continue discussion and expand on the problems taken from reality.

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<sup>120</sup> *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, Episode 6, directed by Choi Seungbum, 44:00.

<sup>121</sup> In contrast, the webtoon scene does not have a kind Yeon Wooyoung, and the girls get their revenge by having the boys dress in the girls' uniforms (which are shoulder-exposing black dresses) and leaving the scene with comedy. This is arguably a different way in interpreting the 2015 Megalia forum war; as the webtoon version ended the scene with a comedic feel, the intention could have been a sympathetic view towards the oppressed female users of DC Inside and a distanced parallel of how mirroring was supposed to have worked—a bit like when one wears 'drunken goggles' to simulate being drunk, temporary and supposedly reflective in nature.

## **Part Three**

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### **Reception and Media Shifts**

## Recommended! Rated Romance+

A vital concept must be taken into deeper consideration here: the cycle of influence does not stop at the creation of an adaptation. Popularity and how far a creator or adaptor is willing to step out still affect how a story changes—just as steps can be made towards a revolutionary idea, some can be made towards a conservative one.

In *Cheese in the Trap*, the unique societal exposing and censure that the original webtoon laid bare on the table faded out into a typical love triangle in the k-drama adaptation. The discussion of the constraints and frustrations on the individual and the effects it had on trust had finally been given a voice through Seol, a perceptive female character. Mentioned earlier, webtoon version Seol's characteristic of being "too sensitive" turned the typicality of 'emotional' female characters on its head and gave reason to her feelings, to her cold thoughts to the people who want to take advantage of her, and to her questions about her relationship with Jung.<sup>122</sup> She grows to stand her ground and reject those who have no sincerity or morality when they ask her for favors, and readers/viewers (but mostly readers of the webtoon) have the chance to resonate with a nondomestic, traditionally male domain through a female character. At the same time, these reasons and events do not associate solely out of female hyper-emotionality because of the universality of the imposed social and economic pressures, creating a duality that both expands upon the female 'role' and the hidden cultural aspect.

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<sup>122</sup> Jung on the surface is a nice (and rich) person who usually treats everybody with food or perfect group work, but he actually manipulates people. If there's something he wants or someone who 'acts out of line' towards him or Seol, he goes to another and uses either suggestion or suggested blackmail to get *that* person to cause trouble for the one who acts out of line (e.g. give him what he wants, the third person does his bidding). For example, in the webtoon, Jung forces his T.A to 'lose' his term paper by threatening to expose the T.A for using Jung's credit card so that Seol could stay in university through the department scholarship. The T.A's reputation was tarnished a bit and the stolen credit card is held over his head when Jung encounters him again later (the money is no loss to Jung).

Therefore, the drama version loses this depth to Seol's character. She might have grown, but the journey and impact of her growth is lost to the love triangle insertion. The main male lead, Yoo Jung, was cut from much of the latter half of airing, and the second male lead took over many of the episodes then disappeared. Viewers thus saw more romance rivalry and (pardon the pun) cheese and fluff than Seol's astuteness, her suspicions of Jung's façade, and her individuality within the larger society. This is how the "romance-thriller" lost the thriller part of itself—no suspicions from the main character because no emotionally manipulative male lead to suspect, so no thrill or discussion of the individual.

In addition, the people in charge of the drama, in a scramble to make an ending after setting aside the main male lead, went against the webtoonist's wishes of having a different ending than to her webtoon version.<sup>123</sup> Although the drama version overall did well, one may wonder how the TV drama people in charge could craft a tellingly potent additionality like Sangcheol's scene but then fall into the same and overused tropes of 'love triangle' and 'kind but powerless female lead.' There lies the excuse that the writers were pressured because the webtoon had not yet finished by the time of shooting—so they had run out of material to work with—but fans of the webtoon's main complaint had been that the drama had lost its original "spirit" and "message."<sup>124</sup> However one wishes to interpret the backlash, the drama served as a

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<sup>123</sup> Brian Yecies, Aegyung Shim, Jack (Jie) Yang, and Peter Yong Zhong, "Global transcreators and the extension of the Korean webtoon IP-engine." *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 1 (2020): 40-57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344371986727>.

<sup>124</sup> The "spirit" of a work is a bit of an elusive concept that scholars have a blast trying to vaguely measure but include. The one fact to count on is that it establishes a sort of expectation for consistency between the original and adaptation.

Brian Yecies, Aegyung Shim, Jack (Jie) Yang, and Peter Yong Zhong, "Global transcreators and the extension of the Korean webtoon IP-engine." | Jihoon Park, Jeehyun Lee, and Yongsuk Lee, "East Asian Perspective in Transmedia Storytelling..."

landmark lesson to not deviate too much from the original plot of a webtoon<sup>125</sup> as well as a subtler lesson: people like stories that are romance but not completely typical.

Since the multinational popularization of Korean melodramas through *Boys Over Flowers*,<sup>126</sup> the accepted and safe plotline consisted of common tropes like love triangles, unfortunate but kind female lead, and rich but with-repressed-emotional-turmoil male lead. Though there were exceptions and secondary elements existed, we see the prevalence of the tropes in the majority of dramas released from 2009 through 2015.<sup>127</sup> *Cheese in the Trap* promised something simultaneously new and familiar, a feature of adaptation<sup>128</sup> but also a marker of its transitional exit out of the Trope Heavy Time. The enticing psychological thrill to Seol and Jung's romance helped excite audiences, and its spectacular failure in the melodrama triggered the search for more Romance+ stories.

I call this new fixation Romance+ because I find it an appropriate name towards the Korean drama claim to romance that now wants another element to complement the romance. This other element can be an additional genre or an aspect of culture and humanity either rarely seen until now or a 'flipped' situation (e.g. rich girl, poor boy—but I personally have yet to see this one). Stories with strong female leads, discussions of the uncomfortable side to people and culture, gender switching stereotypes, fantastical worlds or world switching (not just time), science fiction and folklore characters are just a few examples of elements that now frequent the

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<sup>125</sup> Jihoon Park, Jeehyun Lee, and Yongsuk Lee. "East Asian Perspective in Transmedia Storytelling..."

<sup>126</sup> Released in 2009, *Boys Over Flowers* is tremendously famous, based off a Japanese shojo manga, and holds many tropes we know today, such as love triangles, amnesia, mothers/mother in laws as plot obstacles, oppressed but kind female lead, rich and "emotionally constipated" male leads. I quote from a friend because her description is accurate.

<sup>127</sup> A couple exceptions are *A Girl Who Sees Smells* (2015), *Dating Agency: Cyrano* (2013), *Angry Mom* (2015), and *Three Sisters* (2010). A list of all k-dramas is available on Wikipedia if one is inclined to view it.

<sup>128</sup> Ken Gelder, *Adapting Bestsellers...*, 14.

adaptation and drama scene more than before.<sup>129</sup> Of course, tropes still apply and exist, but the important difference shines in the specific blend of other elements and execution that a Romance+ story offers. The combination of reflecting culture, discussing it, and the popularity of webtoons, which often have diverse and fresh plots, snowballed into the production of soap dramas containing these aspects, both adapted from webtoons and not. All this thesis' case studies match the Romance+ category, and each gives its own version of success to the reception of their respective times.

As stories branch out and consumers crave more, stories involving identity and calling out society have a higher chance of appearing on the screen and reaching even more people, reflecting on itself and pushing for change or at least understanding in the culture. Beauty standards in *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* and the 'Escape the Corset' movement are but one example of momentum along the waves of feminism. The significance lies in the continued and extended discussion so that these ideas and their changes stay at the forefront of people's minds.

In the future, perhaps even the darkest or ignored topics for South Korea can have a safe space for conversation, representation, and acceptance. Generally, even the diversifying webtoons center on specific demographics of the South Korean population, such as middle/working class, the wealthy/business world, students, and royalty/peasant. Characters are also usually portrayed with similar physical characteristics across webtoons, such as pale skin, tall men, and beautiful women<sup>130</sup>. The homeless, the mistress/concubine (not the offspring), foreigners, sex workers, the trafficking world—few stories focusing around these people and

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<sup>129</sup> *Weightlifting Fairy Kim Bokjoo* (2016-2017), *Strong Woman Do Bong-soon* (2017), *Guardian: The Lonely and Great God* (2016-2017) AKA *Goblin*, *W* (2016), *Are You Human Too?* (2018), *Tale of the Nine Tailed* (2020)—to name a few examples.

<sup>130</sup> And yes, they will explicitly mention in the webtoon or drama that 'that [female character] is beautiful,' or 'wow, that [male character] is so tall and handsome' or something of the like.

topics rarely show up in webtoon, soap drama, and most media platforms. However, given the position of discovery and boundary-stretching that webtoons have and the next generation of storytellers and artists coming onto the scene, these stories may find their representative sooner rather than later.

Another fantastic thought to entertain would be the intersection of identities and how that intersection affects and is affected by spheres of life. Such a junction owns a higher capacity to speak on an even more complex level of who a culture is and how it feels in individuality as well as in a group. The simultaneity would force the questioning of both society and system and why there are certain system deficiencies, distancing, or discrimination to parts and wholes of identity. In my humble prediction, if this intersection happens, it will likely cross between the more commonly shown identities, such as gender and social class. The character Yoo Eun had both a junior status and was subjected to beauty standards as a female, but the two did not necessarily integrate. These kinds of identity exploration and plays would spark even livelier discussions.



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