

Experiencing K-beauty: Understanding the Impact of K-beauty Tourism

Mai Ly Elisabeth Gorbach

581000

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Tourism, Culture & Society

Nicky van Es

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Abstract

This master's thesis examines the experiences and meaning-making processes of international K-beauty tourists to South Korea, and explores the influence of Korean popular culture on their travel decisions and experience. The thesis applied in-depth interviews as a qualitative research method to gather insights from eleven K-beauty enthusiasts from across the world that have visited Korea. Through thematic analysis, the findings reveal a complex interplay between Korean popular culture, lifestyle and tourism. The results demonstrate that Korean popular culture, particularly celebrities of K-pop and K-drama, plays a significant role in motivating individuals to travel to South Korea for K-beauty experiences. Moreover, the paper uncovers the concept of beauty hyperreality in South Korea, characterised by seemingly infinite beauty options, and an association with Korean popular culture. K-beauty tourism in South Korea provides unique opportunities for tourists to engage in an encounter with beauty that extends beyond the practical experience of K-beauty, encompassing elements of lifestyle, cultural exploration and popular culture tourism. Aside from that, valuable findings were furthermore gathered regarding the impact of K-beauty tourism on tourists' perception on self care and personal expression through beauty practices. The findings, therefore, shed light on the ways in which K-beauty tourism combines elements of popular culture, lifestyle, and tourism. Understanding the influence of Hallyu and aspirational experience associated with K-beauty is a testimony to the country's soft power.

Keywords: K-beauty tourism, Korean popular culture, Hallyu tourism, celebrity culture, lifestyle tourism

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1. Introduction

With the Korean Wave expanding its popularity across the world and the booming success of Korean pop music (K-pop) and Korean TV dramas (K-drama) in recent years, Hallyu tourism is a phenomenon that continues to grow (Kim & Nam, 2016). Simultaneously, Korean Beauty (K-beauty) is becoming increasingly popular across the world as it becomes widely accessible to a wide range of audiences. Because of the popularity of K-beauty, many Hallyu tourists also engage in beauty tourism such as purchasing Korean beauty products and seeking both surgical and non-surgical treatments. K-beauty ranges from certain beauty standards fitting into the Hallyu culture which comes with a huge variety of Korean skincare and cosmetic products and related beauty practices such as extensive skincare routines which many swear upon (Bae, Chang, Park & Kim, 2017). As Hallyu has established its image and beauty ideals on a global scale, plastic surgery tourism has become quite common in South Korea. In fact, the district Gangnam in South Korea's capital, Seoul, is coined as the "Capital of Plastic Surgery" as they welcome cosmetic tourists from across the world (Lim & Giouvriss, 2020). Until now, it is relatively well known that cosmetic surgery tourism to South Korea has gained more popularity in the last decade due to Korea's advanced sophistication in the medical sector and affordable costs. South Korea, therefore, receives cosmetic surgery tourists not only from China, Japan or Southeast Asia (Holliday, Cheung, Cho & Bell, 2017) but also from outside of Asia as well (Liang, Choi, Joppe & Lee, 2019).

At the same time, South Korea has been actively promoting beauty tourism in general to cater to K-beauty fans who seek a beauty experience that does not necessarily involve plastic surgery. A good example of that was the establishment of the K-beauty Road in Seoul, planned by Seoul city in collaboration with a K-beauty blogger in order to increase K-beauty tourism (Jeong, 2021). While there is relatively much known about cosmetic surgery tourism to South Korea, the insights become more scarce when looking at K-beauty tourism in a broader scope. Such beauty tourism activities include non-surgical K-beauty activities which may involve shopping, visiting beauty salons and receiving non-surgical treatments. Therefore, it becomes important to look at the ways in which K-beauty and Korean popular culture intertwine and reinforce each other in the context of tourism. How are such activities experienced by K-beauty tourists and why are they eager to participate in these activities when they visit South Korea? Shopping behaviour and attached meanings, or practices that involve non-surgical treatments, have scarcely been explored so far. The thesis aims to

contribute to the gaps missing in the existing research on K-beauty and other tourism trends. Many questions arise when taking a look at K-beauty tourism in general. How are K-beauty fans motivated to go to South Korea? How do they experience K-beauty related activities? Why is it special? What is the role of Korean popular culture in that? It is important to note that K-beauty is widely accessible in many parts of the world with a variety of online shops emerging. Yet, K-beauty enthusiasts from around the world are still eager to engage in K-beauty tourism when they visit South Korea. In order to dive deeper into this issue, the thesis will aim to answer the main research question: In what way(s) does Korean popular culture influence the motivations of international K-beauty tourists to travel to South Korea, and how do they ascribe meaning to their experience? By particularly building a bridge between K-beauty tourism, Hallyu (Korean popular culture) tourism and other tourism trends, and exploring how they may influence each other, a nuanced understanding of K-beauty tourism and the meaning behind its practices is gained.

In terms of academic relevance, the paper seeks to contribute to the existing literature from previously separated and isolated fields of tourism, beauty and popular culture studies. K-beauty tourism is a relatively new phenomenon, and there is limited research that specifically focuses on the motivations and experiences of K-beauty tourists. Although some research has already been conducted on K-beauty tourism, the focus has largely remained on plastic surgery tourism and is limited to exploring arrivals from primarily China and Japan (Yu, Kim & Kim, 2012; Park, Amendah, Kim & Tchounwou, 2021). By exploring this topic in-depth, the thesis is able to provide valuable insights into the factors that drive K-beauty tourism and the impact that it has on individuals. Moreover, the thesis can contribute to the broader fields of tourism and cultural studies by offering a unique perspective on the role of beauty and self-care practices in K-beauty tourism that heavily intertwines with, but also reaches beyond the influences of Korean popular culture.

In order to explore this, semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Bryman, 2012) with eleven individuals were conducted. Through the interviews, valuable insights were gained on the basis of rich, detailed and in-depth descriptions of those actors most directly involved in the phenomenon of K-beauty tourism. Those insights touched upon varying aspects that made their K-beauty experience a significant aspect of their overall tourist experience in South Korea, and the meanings they attached to their experience built a connection not only to Korean popular culture, but also aspects of personal well-being and self care, cultural differences and lifestyle in the scope of beauty.

The thesis is organised in several sections, each of which addresses a different aspect of the topic. The theoretical framework, first of all, introduces Korean popular culture (aka Hallyu and the Korean Wave) by presenting the definitions that several scholars and researchers have proposed. Further looking at the rise and spread of Hallyu, and the role of social media, important insights and understanding for the growing popularity of K-beauty is provided. Next, the concept of celebrity culture in connection to the K-beauty industry is touched upon. Then diving into tourism, the theoretical framework touches upon existing knowledge regarding Hallyu tourism and popular culture tourism in general, and then later tying into K-beauty tourism. Finally, before moving to the methodology section, the theoretical framework also discusses K-beauty as place branding while looking at the concept of lifestyle tourism and hyperreality in connection to beauty. The next section of the paper presents the methodology part explaining the chosen research method and decisions made in order to explore the topic. The analysis and findings sections present the results that emerged from the interviews, laying out common patterns among the interviewees, but also differences among the participants that contributed to a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. In this section, common and differing patterns regarding the introduction of the participants to K-beauty and their primary motivation to travel to South Korea were explored. Afterwards, the different K-beauty related activities are explained, followed by evaluating the experience and impressions that the interviewees shared. Finally, reflecting thoughts are presented that provide valuable insights in the K-beauty tourism phenomenon. The paper finishes with concluding remarks and a discussion.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the following part of this section a better understanding of Hallyu, based on existing literature and research, will be provided which will narrow down on Hallyu's beauty standards and the resulting tourism practices related to K-beauty. Comprehension of Hallyu's roots and its eventual spread on an international scale, partly driven by digitization and social media, are crucial in the manifestation of the popularity of Hallyu products and culture, and the huge fandoms outside of South Korea (Jin & Yoon, 2016). Afterwards, the theoretical framework will dive into Korean Beauty and its ideals and standards, the resulting beauty practices, the connected celebrity and idol culture, and controversies surrounding Korean Beauty. Plastic surgery which emerged as a common but also contested practice in South Korea will also be touched upon. With Hallyu becoming more popular internationally, Hallyu tourism has become more in demand among K-pop and K-drama fans, as well as among enthusiasts of Korean beauty. In this sense, existing research regarding cosmetic surgery tourism in connection to Korean popular culture will be reviewed, while also providing an overview regarding South Korea's aim to market the country as a destination for K-beauty fans. Lastly, moving beyond cosmetic surgery tourism, discussing beauty tourists' interest in product shopping and non-surgical treatments as part of Hallyu related beauty tourism will be touched upon while negotiating the motivations and experiences in that context.

2.1. What is Hallyu? - Defining the Korean Wave

Tourism itself has gone through several stages before it took the shape of what it is today, with so many different types of tourism available. With technological advancement, globalisation and the resulting digitization, humanity has been given the ability to be connected to nearly all parts of the world with endless content, places and cultures to be discovered within just a few seconds (Sharpley, 2018). It is this digitization which set the stage for South Korea to spread the glory of their emerging popular culture. Nowadays, Korean popular culture is usually referred to as "Hallyu" or the "Korean Wave". What is interesting about these two terms is that they originally refer to the transnational spread of Korean popular culture in particular, rather than just the popular culture itself. Berg (2018) defines Hallyu as "increased popularity of South Korean cultural goods outside of Korea" (p. 33). Kim (2007) takes it further and makes a strong remark related to the latter statement that

the term Hallyu could only be applied to Korean popular culture products if they reached an international stage. In other words, a Korean song or show is only regarded as a Hallyu product if they gain international recognition, regardless of their success on a national scale. Speaking of Hallyu related products, they entail several aspects and cultural practices which complement each other. Korean pop music (K-pop) and Korean television drama series (K-drama) are considered the most dominant elements that appear in the Hallyu phenomenon (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021). At the same time, Hallyu expands its branches also to Korean celebrities and idols, Korean food, fashion, beauty ideals, skincare and cosmetics and their related practices (Kim & Nam, 2016; Yu, Kim & Kim, 2012). Thus, looking at all these elements that come with Hallyu, Korean lifestyle and its cultural practices have also become part of the Korean Wave (Kim, 2007).

The elements of Korean popular culture are enjoyed by a huge international audience by now, with many enthusiasts enjoying Hallyu content and practices in all branches. This can be attributed to what Tzanelli (2018) suggests regarding “popular culture”, which has become a widely used term in many parts of the world, especially in places where TV and digital media are used to create and share images on a large scale. The term “popular” technically means something that is liked by many people, and “culture”, in this context, refers to aspects like movies, TV shows, music, and other forms of art that people enjoy (Tzanelli, 2018). In this way, popular culture is a big part of many people's lives and how they connect with the world around them. In the same way, Korean popular culture products are enjoyed by enthusiasts all over the world (Kim & Nam, 2016). As a result, Korean popular culture has become a significant part of contemporary social life, with many individuals engaging with it in various forms. Likewise, considering K-beauty being an integral part of most branches of Hallyu, it has become a part of many people's lives who have developed a strong affinity with it.

2.2. The spread of Hallyu

As addressed above in the definition of Hallyu, Hallyu and the Korean Wave are both terms that emerged only with the spread of Korean popular culture abroad (Kim, 2007; Berg, 2018). The growing popularity of Korean popular culture outside of South Korea gave fruit to what the Korean Wave is known as today. In the next subsections, the early stages of Hallyu's spread are presented along with the importance of digitization and social media in the spread

of Hallyu which eventually reached the world outside of Asia. The role of social media and digitization are particularly important for the understanding of Hallyu's popularity and spread, which also has heavily played into celebrities, as well as idols, being mediators and transmitters of Korean beauty.

2.2.1. *The Early Stages of Hallyu*

While Hallyu is a “product” which refers to the spread of elements from Korean popular culture, the early stages are traced back to the 1990s when the Korean government took actions by planning an emancipation of the nation from its colonial past by setting up a pop culture industry (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021). Production of music, series and films were rusty at first, but South Korea quickly climbed up the ladder and started to keep up with Japanese (pop) media productions. Because South Korea, besides improving the quality, also was able to produce content for a lower cost than Japanese ones, they could export K-dramas and films to neighbouring countries such as Japan and China, as argued by Cicchelli and Octobre (2021). In fact, the authors argue that it was South Korea's intention to find a niche in the Japanese market. The K-drama series *Winter Sonata* especially hit big in Japan, and has induced Japanese fans of the show to travel to South Korea. K-pop also found a favourable audience in Japan with a few renowned K-pop groups (e.g. *Girls Generation*, *SHINee*, *Kara*, etc.) becoming popular there. However, it was in China where Hallyu truly began to take its shape according to Sun and Liew (2019). Based on Sun and Liew's insights, K-pop specifically was very successful in establishing a niche genre in the Chinese pop music market which was favoured by a surprising number of young people. To be more precise, huge fandoms started to form that were rooting for various K-Pop groups that were popular in China, and touring and performing in major cities. Sun and Liew compare it to fandoms of *BTS* or *Blackpink* who are very much integrated into the global music industry by now: fandoms put in a lot of effort in setting up billboards around the world to honour their favourite artists and their support is strong and visible. This was already the case for early K-pop groups, like *H.O.T.* or *NRG*, who were famous in China two decades ago. Sun and Liew (2019) argue that this kind of fandom behaviour that can be observed in contemporary fandoms was already “a thing” back then in China, therefore setting the blueprint for Hallyu as the way it is today.

2.2.2. Digitization and Social Media

When speaking about the spread of Korean popular culture content, digitization and social media played a strong influencing force, and they continue to do so in the contemporary spread of Hallyu related content. With denser connected networks and the high spread of social media content generally, content from Korean popular culture as well as participatory and fandom culture have become ever more present and visible on an international (digitised) stage (Cicchelli & Ocotobre, 2021). This can be observed through the various media communities that have developed in relation to the Korean Wave as they showcase all kinds of activities around the world on social media, such as flash mobs and cover videos of famous K-pop music videos. In this regard, Kim (2016), highlights the huge phenomenon when *Gangnam Style* by *Psy* was released as it gained huge international recognition, with many cover videos and imitations of the dance emerging all across social media and other online platforms. While the comical style of the dance and *Psy's* music video certainly have contributed to its spread, the way discourse and content regarding *Gangnam Style* circulated on media platforms demonstrate the way Hallyu and its participants or fans behave. In a research conducted by Jung and Shim (2014) on online circulation of K-pop content, it was pointed out that K-pop artists and idols are often found in the top rankings of trending topics or videos. K-pop music videos consistently reach high numbers of views, shares and likes. By questioning young Indonesians, Jung and Shim also found that social media provided them with much convenience regarding the consumption of Hallyu content due to social media's easy access, frequent and fast updates, simplicity of sharing content, and low cost. Turning to Korean drama series and films, digitization also made K-dramas and films more accessible (Oh, 2018). While access to some K-dramas is more restricted as they may only be watchable through a paid streaming service, other online platforms also offer free options to watch K-dramas, although on a lower, sometimes rusty, quality and with advertisements. This ease of access through digitisation and social media also becomes very relevant when turning to K-beauty and K-beauty tourism in particular. Through digital platforms, K-beauty enthusiasts around the world now have easy access to information about all kinds of K-beauty products, trends, and even destinations for K-beauty hotspots in South Korea.

2.2.3. *Reaching the World beyond Asia*

With the introduction and power of mass digitization and social media in the next decade, Hallyu became more accessible and its content spreadable, eventually reaching an audience outside of Asia (Jin & Yoon, 2016). Especially when the song *Gangnam Style* by Psy was released in 2012, the song became one of the most successful hits around the globe, opening a gate to the world of K-pop to potential new audiences. In recognition of that, Kim (2016) credits the mass digitization and rising popularity of social media for the international spread of the music video and song. Following *Gangnam Style's* success, many other K-pop artists and groups followed, such as *BTS* or *Blackpink*, making giant hits worldwide (BBC Music, no publication date). Not only the K-pop industry benefited from this boom, but also K-dramas found much popularity with certain titles exploding in international favour. The movie *Parasite* released in 2019, was the first non-English movie to claim the top prize during the Oscars (BBC News, 2020). Not long after in 2021, the series *Squid Game* on Netflix became one of the most successful shows with 1.65 billion hours of watching time (Netflix Top 10, no publication date). These are just some of the major contents that have been extremely successful worldwide. K-pop and K-drama, aside from these huge hits mentioned, have found a stable and big international audience which has shown on Netflix for instance, as the streaming service offers a large selection of K-dramas to watch, which keeps expanding (Bentz, 2023).

But how did Hallyu products such as K-pop and K-drama find such a large international audience? Cultural hybridity emerges as a concept that might be worth considering in the case of Korean popular culture. The concept of cultural hybridity refers to the blending of different cultural elements from local and global sources. Kim (2016) explains that this blending can occur in various ways, such as through the adoption of Western popular culture trends by non-Western societies. Kim further refers back to scholars like Kraidy (2002 & 2005) and Iwabuchi (2002 & 2010) who argue that hybridity is a complex process that involves negotiations of power and cultural meaning. They also suggest that hybridity can be seen as a positive force that leads to cultural diversity and creativity, rather than as a sign of cultural dominance. Overall, the concept of cultural hybridity helps to better understand the dynamic and complex interactions between different cultures and how they shape our global cultural view. At the same time, hybridization can also serve as a tool to improve one's cultural production (Kim, 2016). In non-western countries, this may lead to a decline of Western domination within global cultural markets according to Kim.

Taking a look at Hallyu and related elements, they may indeed be hybrid in nature which could be responsible for Hallyu's international appeal as it combines Korean and foreign elements in many aspects, according to Ravina (2009). This hybrid nature in the scope of Hallyu creates something that is unique, but may also contain familiar features at the same time. Cicchelli and Octobre (2021), on the other hand, argue that Hallyu created its own styles and aesthetics, which they like to call "Korean Style" that can be found in Korean popular culture on all levels. Jin and Yoon (2016) go as far as terming Hallyu as a countering phenomenon to Western popular culture, and as a force that could stand against the Western-dominated media market. They also characterise Hallyu as an influential cultural mediator with its own niche. Cicchelli and Octobre (2021) argue that Hallyu provides a door to a dimension of a "better" world and society, giving an opportunity for belonging to those who find it difficult to fit in with other mainstream (popular) culture. Given that Hallyu has created its own style, but also maintains hybrid elements by adopting existing (international) features, it is easier to dive into the world of Hallyu as it provides something unique that is, at the same time, not too detached from familiar popular culture which, in that case, is the international Western-dominated popular culture. The concept of hybridity in Korean popular culture also provides significant insights when attempting to dive deeper into K-Beauty, its practices and standards, which is addressed in closer detail below.

2.3. Korean Beauty

This chapter explores Korean Beauty (K-beauty) as a result and as a part of the Hallyu phenomenon, taking a look at the beauty ideals and standards of K-beauty. Along with K-beauty, skincare, cosmetics and certain practices (such as extensive skincare routines) have become part of the K-beauty culture where celebrities and idols also have played a big role in the influence and marketing of K-beauty standards, products and its practices. However, at the same time, K-beauty and its ideals also have been heavily criticised for its unattainable or unrealistic standards, with controversies surrounding idols being pressured into looking perfect and a rising demand in plastic surgery procedures.

2.3.1. *K-Beauty Ideals and Standards*

The media and beauty technology advancements in South Korea have made Korean stars' skin look brighter and more flawless than ever, making the “porcelain skin” or “glass skin” a highly popular beauty ideal and trend in Korean entertainment (Park & Hong, 2020). Looking back at the history of beauty standards in Korea, these have always emphasised fair skin, but the specific characteristics and meanings attached to fair skin have changed over time as in recent years. With the booming beauty industry, Koreans have become more conscious of their skin beauty and health, and regularly engage in various skin beautification techniques, such as skin whitening, blemish removal, and rigorous skincare routines in order to achieve light and smooth skin (Park & Hong, 2020; Bae, Chang, Park & Kim, 2017). At the same time, a definition of a so-called “Korean Look” also has emerged from it which overall entails narrowed cheek bones, a jawline in the shape of a V and double eyelids beside white skin (Jho, 2017; Holliday, et al., 2017).

An article by Seo, Cruz and Fifita (2020) addresses the cultural dynamics of K-beauty ideals and how K-beauty behaves when looking at it as an exported global cultural product. They argue that beauty in Korea is managed and reconciled in a way that creates a new dominant regime of beauty that combines Western and Korean cultural influences. Specifically, Western beauty standards are connected with neo-Confucian cultural ideology in Korea. This means that the traditional Confucian values of duty, self-cultivation, and social order are being applied to modern beauty practices in Korea, creating a new hybridised standard of beauty. This also falls in line with the concept of cultural hybridization and the hybrid nature of Hallyu overall as addressed before (Kim, 2016). Cultural elements from local and (in part) traditional Korean culture are blended with foreign elements. At the same time, Seo, Cruz and Fifita (2020) also take a critical stance towards K-beauty as being ambivalent and paradoxical. For one, K-beauty emanates a “manufactured naturalness” which refers to the idea that K-beauty products and techniques are designed to create a natural-looking appearance, but they require a lot of work and manipulation to achieve this look. At the same time, “hyper-sexualized cuteness”, which is the use of cute and youthful aesthetics that come across as overly sexualized, is also very prevalent in K-Beauty (Seo, Cruz & Fifita, 2020).

2.3.2. *Celebrity Culture and the K-Beauty Industry*

Having looked at K-beauty and its ideals, celebrity culture plays an important role in the spread and embrace, as well as the legitimization, of K-beauty standards and its practices. According to Elliott and Boyd (2018) on the topic of celebrity culture, the obsession with celebrities is a product of the mass media and digital age, where the hype and novelty of celebrity culture offers an escape from the monotonous routines of everyday life. They suggest that media culture, including social media, plays a significant role in constructing and shaping people's understanding of the world, and that it is very powerful in shaping people's perceptions and behaviours. They therefore argue that media culture reduces and packages the world into easily consumable pieces and distribution of information about celebrities.

In the context of Hallyu and its relation to mass digitization, Korean celebrities and idols are very effective in shaping the public's perception. For example, Lee and How (2022) find a strong influence coming from K-dramas and celebrities in particular, as they play a strong role in depicting a positive destination image. Actors and actresses that gain much affection from an international audience have an incredible impact on drawing an attractive image for a destination. This argument specifically builds a connection to film tourism induced by celebrity influence. Likewise, celebrities from the K-pop industry (or idols as they are commonly referred to) have played a major influencing role as well since location becomes an outstanding element for some of the music videos (Lee & How, 2022). Additionally, again thanks to digitization and celebrities and idols being active on social media, fans are eager to follow their favourite celebrity by visiting the same places. Thus, celebrities and idols are very strong in the endorsement for locality and shaping the image of South Korea and Hallyu itself. This becomes evident as Korean products such as fashion, skincare and cosmetics are increasingly promoted and purchased on a global scale (Bae et al., 2017), while Korean celebrities have played a powerful role in product endorsement as well (Lee & How, 2022). Lim and Giouvrin (2020) quote that South Korea's export of fashion and beauty products had increased by 20.9% in 2013, indicating a growing international demand for Korean products, especially skincare and cosmetics. Bae et al (2017) trace the increased export of beauty products back to the importance of celebrity endorsement which is used as a marketing strategy in all domains of Hallyu at multiple levels.

Turning to K-beauty standards in particular, the way Korean celebrities and idols are presented on screen and in person, as well as how they behave, follow strict guidelines (Park & Hong, 2020). They are required to emanate a fantasy-like, romantic ideal that is desirable

to fans and their audiences. Park and Hong (2020) emphasise this by connecting these traits as typical features of Korean stardom. Elfving-Hwang's (2018) argument shows similar insights by describing Korean celebrities and idols as influential figures who shape the values and aspirations of their fans. The celebrities' lives are presented as something to aspire to, even if fans may not achieve the same level of success. In this sense, fans see the idols as an opportunity to mirror their lives and strive towards a similar lifestyle.

2.4. Hallyu Tourism

With Hallyu finding an increasingly foreign audience, Hallyu-related tourism also started to emerge. The first traces of Hallyu-related tourism are found from Japanese fans. The TV series *Winter Sonata* is credited with finding popularity among Japanese which attracted many admirers from Japan to its shooting sites (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021). With the following growing global recognition of Korean popular culture, South Korea has become a destination for Hallyu fans of all kinds (Kim & Nam, 2016). In fact, the popularity of Korean popular culture has led to a rise in interest in Korea, resulting in an increase in the number of tourists visiting the country. Specifically, the number of international arrivals coming to Korea has grown significantly, rising from 300,000 in 1998 to 11.8 million in 2014, nearly four times the previous amount (Bae et al, 2017). The effect of Hallyu on Korea's inbound tourism, therefore, has largely transformed the tourism sector and integrated Hallyu tourism as an essential part (Lim & Giouvriss, 2017). At the same time, there is no clear definition of what Hallyu tourism exactly is, as it entails many different kinds of activities with Hallyu tourists visiting due to differing motivations (Lee & How, 2022). Hallyu tourism thus ranges from film tourism, food tourism, K-pop related tourism, fashion and beauty tourism, other cultural kinds of tourism, up to medical (cosmetic surgery) tourism (Kim & Nam, 2016; Eom, Yu & Han, 2019).

Nevertheless, Hallyu tourism fits into the scope of popular culture tourism. Tzanelli (2018) elaborates that popular culture tourism is about engaging in experiences that allow visitors to connect with the cultural products that have become popular, such as movies, music, and television shows. In this way, popular culture tourism is not just about visiting physical locations, but also about participating in activities that allow visitors to immerse themselves in the culture. Tzanelli also notes that popular culture tourism can be seen as a way of constructing personal identity, as visitors often use their experiences in popular

culture tourism to reinforce their sense of self and their connection to certain cultural products. Hallyu tourism, then, certainly finds its place in the domain of popular culture tourism, as Hallyu tourists engage in activities that involve popular cultural products such as from the K-pop or K-drama industry. K-beauty as a product resulting from those, and as a related tourism practice, may give K-beauty tourists the opportunity to construct one's own personal identity, and to establish a closer relationship to these cultural phenomena within Hallyu.

2.4.1. Cosmetic Surgery Tourism

The conscious use of celebrity endorsement has also set certain “Hallyu beauty standards” which is also responsible for an increased demand for plastic surgery and related tourism practices. Aside from the rising popularity of Hallyu tourism and Hallyu products, medical tourism, or cosmetic surgery tourism to be precise, has become a huge phenomenon for South Korea as well (Bae et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2020). In fact, in 2007 the South Korean government intentionally decided to strategically market the medical tourism industry, and eventually in 2009 it was recognised that medical tourism benefited the country quite enormously on an economic scale (Holliday et al., 2017). In this sense, caution is recommended as medical tourism also reaches beyond the scope of plastic surgery, including surgery necessary for health related concerns. Nevertheless, there is no doubt cosmetic surgery in South Korea is one of the leading forces in the country’s medical sector. For example, the district Gangnam in South Korea’s capital city, Seoul, especially has come to be known as the capital of plastic surgery (Eom, Yu & Han, 2019). For instance, a study by Park, Le, Amendah, Kim and Tchounwou (2021) shows that (surgical) cosmetic tourism to South Korea has been gaining popularity among Chinese tourists, as in 2014 an approximate of one million Chinese participated in cosmetic tourism in South Korea. According to the study, this high number of cosmetic tourists from China is due to the huge success of Hallyu in China, with the Korean Look becoming a hot topic: “So the export of Korean cosmetic surgery is connected to the Korean Wave as a powerful contributor to the national economy, and a key market for such exports is China.” (Holliday et al., 2017, p. 195). Korean popular culture and the K-beauty ideals, therefore, played an influencing role for these cosmetic tourists, which can also be traced back to the overall success of Hallyu (e.g. K-pop) in China initially.

However, these kinds of studies remain unexplored when looking at cosmetic tourists coming to South Korea from outside the Asian region, even though Seoul welcomes many

cosmetic tourists from the US, as well as from Europe, for instance. What is generally known about cosmetic tourists from the US is that they seek treatment abroad due to expensive domestic costs and unrealistic long waiting lists (Liang, Choi, Joppe & Lee, 2019). It is no surprise, thus, that some may seek treatment abroad if the service is faster, cheaper, and the quality is just as good, if not even better. At the same time, more underlying motivations to make such a decision should be considered as seeking plastic surgery abroad is a far more complex phenomenon that involves more than purely rational cost-benefit considerations. Coming from a country to South Korea which is dominated by different beauty standards in order to enhance one's appearance is one factor to consider. Holliday et al (2017) point out that Korean plastic surgery techniques had to be modified in order to work on Asian features, discarding some of the knowledge obtained from Western cosmetic surgery training. Thus, the different beauty standards, which are also connected to Asian features in appearance, are one of the major reasons to consider that go beyond cost-benefit objectives. Aside from that, planning a cosmetic trip takes a lot of time into account to research reliable surgeons and facilities, besides the surgery accommodation and journey have to be financed, language barriers pose a difficulty and researching one's own rights and other legal matters can be a hassle.

The studies on cosmetic tourism to South Korea fail to address social and cultural aspects underlying and tied to cosmetic tourism to South Korea. There is also a lack of insights on a more individual scale as experiences by tourists are scarcely explored from a bottom-up perspective implying that more in-depth views are needed in order to better understand cosmetic surgery tourism and underlying issues from a tourist's perspective.

2.4.2. *K-beauty as Place Branding*

K-beauty as an integral part of Hallyu has also become a tool for South Korea as a means of place branding and “soft power”. Soft power distinguishes itself from “hard power” (a direct excision of political and/or economic power of one nation upon another) and refers to a country's influence and attraction to others through their culture, values and ideology (Grix, Brannagan & Lee, 2019). Soft power is an important aspect of international relations, and many countries use their cultural aspects to enhance their global influence and reputation.

In the case of South Korea, K-beauty has become an important soft power tool to attract tourists (Li, Min & Lee, 2020). The international popularity of K-beauty has also helped to increase South Korea's visibility and influence in the world, as more people are

exposed to Korean culture and products (Kim, 2016; Cicchelli & Ocotobre, 2021). The promotion of K-beauty tourism has helped to enhance South Korea's soft power by providing a positive and attractive image of the country to international audiences through the popularity of K-pop and K-drama (Lee & How, 2022). In fact, Korea has taken up many initiatives to promote K-beauty tourism. South Korea has been actively promoting beauty tourism in general to cater to K-beauty fans who seek beauty activities that do not involve invasive treatments, so to say, tourists who look for experiences more in line with their perceptions of and lifestyles surrounding K-beauty. As already addressed before, the South Korean government actively marketed the medical tourism industry, especially the cosmetic surgery sector (Holliday et al, 2017). Coming to a more lifestyle based beauty experience that does not involve surgery, a good example was the establishment of the K-Beauty road in Seoul, planned by Seoul city in collaboration with a K-Beauty blogger in order to increase K-beauty tourism (Jeong, 2021). Besides, the [Korean Tourism Organization \(KTO\)](#) (retrieved April 13, 2023) has been actively promoting K-beauty tourism with the help of various marketing campaigns. The KTO has been participating in international beauty exhibitions and collaborating with travel agents to provide tours, while also promoting K-beauty tourism through social media channels and travel websites.

In this sense, South Korea is promoting certain cities, like Seoul, as a destination that showcases popular culture products, services and experiences in line with specific lifestyle(s) (Gross, 2018), revolving around K-beauty in this context. Gross (2018), in connection to lifestyle tourism, emphasises “living the brand”, which means that visitors should be able to embody the values of the destination while they are there. By promoting a certain lifestyle, the destination can create an opportunity for visitors to truly experience and connect with the brand. In the case of South Korea and K-beauty, tourists are encouraged to live the K-beauty brand and immerse in it. This creates a more immersive and authentic experience for visitors (Gross, 2018). Speaking of authentic and immersive tourist experiences, the concept of hyperreality in the context of beauty tourism may also be applied. According to Lovell and Bull (2017), themed environments, with Disneyland and Las Vegas being prime examples, are created to build a place where fantasy and reality come together in order to provide immersive experiences to visitors, allowing them to dive into a hyperreal world. However, they also point out that hyperreal spaces are not limited to theme parks, but also include shopping malls or museums for instance. Considering that South Korea has put efforts in establishing the soft power influence through Korean popular culture, as well as K-beauty, Korea as a beauty hub aims to create a sense of hyperreality, where visitors can engage with

beauty ideals and experiences that allow tourists to immerse themselves in a world of K-beauty coupled with the romanticised idea of K-culture glamour and starhood. Although such places may be artificially created, visitors to hyperreal spaces speak of an authentic experience regardless (Lovell & Bull, 2017). The authenticity in these experiences lies in the opportunity for tourists to not only be passive admirers from another country, but also to be able to actually travel to South Korea and to actively participate and engage with the K-beauty culture they desire. Visitors can partake in beauty activities, explore trendy skincare and cosmetic products, and even undergo beauty treatments that are popularised by the K-culture. This engagement allows tourists to feel a deeper connection with the lifestyle they aspire to emulate, ultimately contributing to a sense of authenticity despite the constructed nature of the hyperreal spaces (Lovell & Bull, 2017).

2.4.3. *K-Beauty Tourism: Experiences and Motivations*

K-beauty as part of Hallyu culture has become widely popular with many K-beauty products being exported around the world (InvestKorea, retrieved April 10, 2023). Thus, it is not surprising that several K-beauty enthusiasts are eager to engage in K-beauty shopping, receiving K-beauty consultations and beauty treatments while travelling in South Korea. Such phenomenon of K-beauty tourism, which excludes cosmetic surgery tourism, has been scarcely researched so far. A wide range of beauty or cosmetic tourism in South Korea has largely laid its focus on tourism in connection to plastic surgery. There is little known about tourists' experiences and perceptions regarding K-beauty tourism that involve experiences based on shopping for products, participating in K-beauty related consultations or K-beauty treatments that are non-invasive. What do such tourists seek during their K-beauty trip and what motivates them in the first place? What meaning do these experiences bear?

Referring briefly back to popular culture tourism, Tzanelli (2018) noted that popular culture tourism is an experience for visitors to connect with popular media, while also allowing tourists interested in it to construct their personal identity and reinforce their relationship to said popular cultural product. K-beauty as part of Korean popular culture creates something like an intersection to many aspects of Hallyu. K-beauty intersects with Hallyu culture on all levels, such as in K-pop, K-drama and celebrity culture. Being part and parcel of the Korean Wave, practising K-beauty activities while being in South Korea may give the tourist the opportunity to connect with Korean popular culture and its products, and to construct their own personality around it. Furthermore, visiting Korea provides a unique

opportunity for enthusiasts to immerse themselves in the cultural context that nurtures and influences K-beauty trends. By physically being in Korea, they can witness firsthand the cultural and social practices that shape the essence of K-beauty. This experience and understanding allows enthusiasts to deepen their connection and appreciation for K-beauty beyond just using the products or following trends online. Looking back again to lifestyle tourism, engaging in K-beauty experiences may also be part of a form of lifestyle which refers to a particular lifestyle or way of living that can be experienced during a trip. Lifestyle tourism, as argued by Gross (2018) is not considered a specific type of niche or special interest tourism. Instead, it is viewed as a broader concept that could include a wide range of different niche tourism experiences. Within lifestyle tourism the experiences are important, as lifestyle tourism explores the tourists' overall lifestyles, and how the places where they have these experiences (i.e. the destinations they visit) play a role in that importance. Looking at K-beauty products, they are very accessible in many parts of the world. Yet, K-beauty fans are still eager to engage in K-beauty activities while in Korea. Thus, lifestyle tourism is an interesting aspect to explore in the scope of K-beauty tourism, as location may also play a big role. In this case, the location, South Korea, as the “birthplace” of K-beauty and Hallyu.

3. Methodology

K-beauty with its products and practices as a result emerging from Korean popular culture is becoming increasingly popular around the world. With its rising popularity many K-beauty enthusiasts are eager to travel to South Korea in order to engage in K-beauty related experiences. These can involve a wide range of activities such as shopping for beauty products, visiting beauty salons, receiving K-beauty related consultations, receiving non-surgical beauty treatments, and cosmetic surgery. Existing research by Lee and How (2022) has elaborated on the influence of Hallyu, especially K-pop and K-drama, on destination image and Hallyu as a tourism enhancer for South Korea, as well as the role of celebrities in that.

At the same time, research on K-beauty tourism overall falls short when it comes to the motivations and experiences of international K-beauty tourists from a more bottom-up perspective. While there has been research on the growth of K-beauty tourism and the promotion strategies used by South Korea (Jeong, 2021; Lee & How, 2022), research is lacking rich, detailed and in-depth descriptions of those actors most directly involved in the phenomenon of K-beauty tourism. This paper seeks to fill in this gap by providing insights from individual experiences and perceptions in order to gain a better understanding of the meaning-making process by the central actors involved. In order to do so, the central question is explored: In what way does Korean popular culture influence the motivations of international K-Beauty tourists to travel to South Korea, and how do they ascribe meaning to their experience?

In order to explore the phenomenon of K-beauty tourism and its connection to Korean popular culture, a qualitative research design was applied, using semi-structured in-depth interviews as the data collection method (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Bryman, 2012). By diving into tourist experiences, in-depth insights on interactions with Korean culture, their thoughts on K-beauty activities, and the impact of K-beauty activities in South Korea on their lives after they return home will provide a more nuanced understanding of the motivations and experiences of international K-beauty tourists. Through examining the perspectives and meaning-making of individual actors central to the phenomenon under study, this thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which Korean popular culture influences the phenomenon of K-beauty tourism, and how tourists ascribe meaning to their experiences in South Korea. This section provides a detailed description of the research

method, sampling, data collection procedures, and data analysis for the thesis. By choosing interviews as a research method, the results aimed to capture the perspectives and experiences of K-beauty enthusiasts who have visited South Korea, shedding light on the motivations and meaning-making processes of the K-beauty related activities.

3.1. Research Method

In order to tackle underlying issues related to K-Beauty tourism to South Korea, and what the role of the Korean Wave is, semi-structured in-depth interviews were identified as the optimal research method. A series of questions were prepared before the interviews which touch upon several aspects (Bryman, 2012) of the K-beauty experiences. The interviewees were asked to share their overall affinity to the Hallyu phenomenon in general, and then diving further into their personal perception regarding K-Beauty while allowing them to share their experience and thoughts during their beauty trips to South Korea (see Appendix A for interview questions). Choosing semi-structured interviews as a research method also allowed for shuffling of the questions and follow up questions in case new interesting concepts or topics emerged during the conversation (Bryman, 2012). After all, engaging in a conversation on a certain topic allows one to understand an individual's perspective on their understanding of the world (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Exploring the tourist motivations and experiences and understanding how they ascribe meaning to the experience and perceive the world of K-beauty and Hallyu is crucial to the understanding of K-beauty tourism. It is important to acknowledge that the interviews for this paper may have had certain risks and limitations that may affect the findings. For instance, participant bias and subjectivity could have influenced their responses, potentially impacting the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the sample size and selection process might limit the representativeness of the findings. However, despite these limitations, in-depth interviews offer a valuable opportunity to delve deeper into the participants' lived world and experiences, allowing them to provide detailed insights and perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). By acknowledging these risks and limitations, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the motivations and meaning-making process within the context of K-beauty tourism.

3.2. Sample

Who were the people that have been interviewed for the thesis? Based on the research question, the sampling was relatively clear. Since the thesis deals with the motivations and experiences of K-Beauty tourists to South Korea while looking at Korean popular culture, it was necessary for the interviewees to have travelled to South Korea at least once, while also engaging in K-beauty related practices. In order to explore this, the interviews aimed to go for a wider range of beauty related practices, ranging from relatively superficial and fleeting purchasing cosmetics, to more severe and extensive beauty-related treatment and cosmetic surgery. As the thesis used Korean popular culture as an influential phenomenon, it was also necessary for the participants to be, at least, somewhat familiar with the Korean Wave and its aspects, although it should be emphasised that being a fan was not a required criteria in order to find possible differences or new insights. Additionally, requesting the participants to also be fans of either K-pop or K-drama would have led to biased results regarding the role and importance of Korean popular culture on K-beauty tourism. Therefore, in order to explore a wider range of possibilities and ways in which K-pop and K-beauty intertwine, criteria was loosened to only being familiar with Korean popular culture. Furthermore, opening the door for a group of mixed participants additionally gave the opportunity to find relevant differences and a diverse spectrum of insights.

In order to find volunteering interview participants for the thesis, I have joined several Facebook groups and Reddit communities that were created as a platform to exchange information regarding K-beauty, Asian beauty and travelling in South Korea to find potential participants. Recruiting participants from these platforms has certain advantages and considerations. On the positive side, these platforms provide the opportunity to reach a large range of K-beauty enthusiasts and individuals from across the world, with different backgrounds, who travelled to South Korea. However, it is important to acknowledge that recruiting from these platforms may introduce certain biases, as the participants may represent a particular community with specific interests and perspectives. In order to minimise such biases, I refrained from joining groups and communities that were catered to K-pop or K-drama fans in particular. Instead, these online groups were strictly regarding K-beauty products and routines, and the travel groups were targeted at all kinds of individuals that took an interest in travel to Korea. By considering both the advantages and limitations of recruiting from online platforms, this thesis aims to capture a meaningful and nuanced

understanding of the motivations and experiences of individuals involved in K-beauty tourism.

In order to reach out to potential interviewees, posts by myself were created with a brief introduction to the topic of the thesis and what would be explored during the interviews. The criteria were also stated on the posts. For all Facebook groups and Reddit communities, before publishing the posts, permission was requested from group moderators and admins. Fortunately, all groups and communities with the exception of one had granted permission for the post to be made. The posts were published on five Reddit communities and three Facebook groups.

In the end, a total of eleven female participants were interviewed, ages ranging from 22 to 39 years. Based on the personal information the interviewees shared, at least six of them study or have studied in higher education, whereas the remainder pursued a certain profession. Two participants have shared that they ended up working in South Korea (temporarily). The length of the interviews varied between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 30 minutes, with one of them lasting even longer. The interviewees were from across the world with four of them coming from the United States of which one ended up moving to South Korea. One interviewee, who was originally from Brazil, switches her place of residence between Korea and the United States on a regular basis. The remaining participants were individuals from the Netherlands, Austria, France, Germany, Croatia and Malaysia. Three additional individuals reached out in order to volunteer in the interview, however, they became unresponsive. An attempt was made to reconnect with these three potential interviewees, but they did not return with a response.

3.3. Data Collection Method

The mode of interviewing was conducted via online platforms like Microsoft Teams and Zoom due to the fact that participants were distributed across the world. Being open to online interviews allowed both the interviewer and interviewee to engage in the conversation in the comfort of their own environment while cutting down on travel costs and time (Bryman, 2012). Additionally, it allowed for a wider range to find potential interviewees from across the world. Some issues regarding online interviews that should be acknowledged were occasionally bad connections which, fortunately, were minimal, as well as unintelligible bits in the recordings. After receiving private (chat) messages of the individuals who wished to

participate in the interview, the participants were free to choose between the two online platforms, while also clarifying time zones and preferred dates and times for the interview. Following the agreement on a time and date, the interviewees were provided with a scheduled invitation link for the online meeting, as well as with a consent form, and some general information regarding the proceedings for the interview.

Before the start of the interview, permission for recording the conversation was requested which none of the participants objected to. The interview was designed and structured to follow a certain pattern, while also leaving a lot of space for the participants to share their thoughts and impressions in-between (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) in order to gain deeper insights in the phenomenon of K-beauty tourism. The interview roughly followed the structure by requesting the participants to elaborate on their own perception regarding K-beauty and Korean popular culture, by then diving into their experiences and impressions when they visited South Korea, followed by a series of questions regarding their reflection. This structure was a crucial element for identifying pre-travel perspectives on K-beauty and the kind of influence Korean popular played in this stage, and then to find common, as well as differing, patterns when it came to the actual experience. The last series of questions concerning the reflections were important in identifying concepts regarding the meaning-making process of K-beauty tourism.

After each interview was completed, the recordings were safely stored on a USB drive and the transcribing process was started as soon as possible after each conversation. In order to facilitate the transcribing process, the online platform oTranscribe was utilised which allowed users to upload a recording, change the play speed of the audio, and to transcribe simultaneously. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, indicating pauses, repetitions, moments where the interviewee laughed, and so on (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

3.4. Data Analysis

After the interviews were conducted and transcribed, thematic analysis was applied. According to Bryman (2012) thematic analysis is widely used to gain a theoretical understanding of one's data. The insights obtained, then, contribute to existing literature. This was also the goal of the thesis to explore missing gaps in the theoretical framework surrounding beauty tourism and Hallyu related aspects to South Korea. As already addressed before, much of the research done on beauty tourism either focused on plastic surgery

tourism itself, was rather limited to a more intra-regional level, and lacks insights on beauty tourism which is based on non-surgical experiences. Although Hallyu tourism in itself has become a research topic with growing popularity, it has rather remained on an overarching theme, with little emphasis on Korean beauty itself as a central topic in tourism. The thesis, thus, aims to contribute an understanding of the missing gaps in the already existing research which is why thematic data analysis is chosen (Bryman, 2012).

In order to identify themes on a deeper and organised level, coding with the help of ATLAS.ti was applied as a process. ATLAS.ti is a tool designed for qualitative research that facilitates tasks like coding and analysing transcripts and field notes. For this paper, ATLAS.ti was used in order to gain a better and more organised overview of the codes applied to the interview transcripts. During a coding procedure, the data can be split up to smaller parts which are tagged with a name or a concept (Bryman, 2012; Flick 2009). After the data was split up into themes and sub-themes, they were organised and relations between them were determined in order to identify recurring phenomena. For this thesis, the aim was to identify the role and importance of the intertwined nature of Korean popular culture and K-beauty in shaping tourist motivations, experiences and overall meanings ascribed to their travel to South Korea. Each statement by the interview participant was labelled with one or more tag(s). As a result, the labels indicate a prominence of Korean popular culture as a window into K-beauty, regardless of the level of affinity. At the same time, major concepts emerged that dive into K-beauty tourism as a way to experience a world of (K-)beauty, beauty hyperreality and personal impact, which all create a network with K-culture. Several common patterns were identified in the interviews, as well as a few differing patterns which are elaborated upon in the analysis and findings section. For detailed information regarding the major concepts and themes that emerged for the findings of the paper, see Appendix B.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The protection and comfort of the interview participants were placed as the highest priority during the data collection process. Prior to the interviews, the interviewees were provided with a consent form for the interview which they were asked to sign. The consent form contained important information regarding the confidentiality and privacy of their responses, and that the information they shared will be handled with utmost care (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The consent form contained information regarding the interview topics

along with a few sample questions which provided the participants with a better idea of the interview. Although all information was included in the consent form, it still felt necessary to inform the participants about their rights when discussing the interview procedure while also encouraging them to get in touch with me at any time if any questions or concerns arose. They were also verbally asked if they agreed to the conversation to be recorded as a means to double check. In order to make the interviewees more comfortable, they were also informed that the interview questions were designed to allow them to speak freely about their own experience, impressions and perception, as well as that pseudonyms will be used in the actual paper in order to ensure the participants' anonymity and confidentiality. The use of pseudonyms was adopted by default, a decision undertaken by myself. This information was relayed to the participants before the actual interview when communication about the interview proceedings still took place via private messaging, and the use of their real name in the paper was offered as an option if they had the desire for that, however, none expressed such a wish. Furthermore, the interviewees were free to withdraw from the interview if they wished to, as well as refusing to answer certain questions if they did not wish to speak about a certain topic. Prior to the interview, the participants were also made aware that their participation was fully voluntary and that any withdrawal or objection to answer a certain question would not affect them in any way. The interviews also did not expose the participants to any risks as the conversations were held online. The recordings and transcripts are saved and stored as files on a USB drive which is only accessible to the interviewer.

4. Analysis & Findings

Having delved into the rich and diverse perspectives shared by the interview participants, this section presents the findings that emerged from the in-depth exploration of their experiences, perceptions, and reflections on K-beauty tourism. The findings provide valuable insights into the complex nature of engaging with K-beauty during trips to South Korea, shedding light on the role of Korean popular culture, the significance of immersive and hyperreal beauty environments, and the deeper meanings associated with participants' encounters with K-beauty while in South Korea.

4.1. Opening Up the Door to K-beauty

During the first part of the interview, all interviewees were asked to elaborate on their personal familiarity with Korean popular culture and K-beauty, while determining what initially sparked their interest in Korean beauty products in the first place. The latter provided valuable insights as it also played into the way K-beauty tourists make meaning of their trip to South Korea. While interviewing all eleven participants, the results from the conversations demonstrate that each participant was at least familiar with either K-pop or K-drama before getting into the K-beauty sphere. In fact, all interviewees with the exception of one person had already developed interest in Korean music and drama series before discovering K-beauty. For all participants, K-pop and/or K-drama have become part of their daily lives at one point or another. Five participants put special emphasis on K-pop and K-drama that made them dive head into K-beauty due to the “perfect” looks the idols and celebrities presented as Diana (29, USA, short-term visit) emphasises: “I think it definitely came along with, you know, getting into watching Korean dramas and you just see like how beautiful their skin is and, you know [laughs], like how, how nice they look.” In her case, celebrities in K-dramas have sparked her interest in K-beauty due to the appeal of the beautiful and healthy looking skin. Park and Hong (2020) have pointed out the importance of Korean celebrities' looks and porcelain-like skin in the entertainment industry. Similarly to Lisa (25, Germany, short-term visit), she was impressed by the beautiful skin celebrities always had and how the promotions have affected her:

When I started listening to the music back then, I also started to watch the videos and stuff, not just the music videos, also the variety shows... it also began that I also looked more into K-drama because of the singer, like, BtoB Sungjae... he was like in some of these dramas and so I watched it and through the variety show and other stuff you also see the, um, commercials that these idols are in or promote for. And therefore I would say like 'Oh my God... they have also beautiful skin.' And yeah... I knew that commercials are there for a specific reason, but like, I was influenced. Yeah, the marketing got me [laughs].

In this way, Korean popular culture and the way it presents itself to an audience has left a huge impact for some of the interviewees as it has become part of their lives while also encouraging them to expand their scope into other aspects of it (Tzanelli, 2018), such as K-beauty. Additionally, the participants' perception fall in agreement with the suggestion that K-dramas play a strong role depicting a positive destination image which also ties into the successful product endorsement by K-celebrities (Lee & How, 2022).

For three participants, however, the interest in K-beauty was initiated by the influence of their social networks, such as friends or relatives, although they were already familiar with Korean popular culture. Vanessa (27) from the United States shared that she has been travelling to South Korea every year since 2016 until finally deciding to live there. She admitted that she was not too interested in K-beauty until friends that she had made in Korea during her trips encouraged her to pick up some skincare:

Skincare I think my friends talked me into needing to take better care of my skin... cause I mean, we're American. We don't take care of ourselves [laugh]... I mean, now a lot more people are big on skincare but like couple years ago before K-beauty became a big thing, I mean no one did skincare and didn't wear sunscreen half the time. So I'd say probably like 2019ish, maybe 2020, my friends talked me into actually having a skincare routine and dragged me to Olive Young, is a drugstore in Korea, and made me buy a whole bunch of stuff [laugh]. And yeah... the make up I kind of just figured out slowly. Like up until this year, my make up was very, like very basic. And I've been going like more and more further down the make up slope in the past year or two.

Besides emphasising the fact that Vanessa developed an interest in K-beauty after her friends talked her into it, she also seems to point out a cultural difference when it comes to skincare and beauty. According to her perception, skincare is a lot more important in Korea than in the West. The latter is also an aspect that has been touched upon by almost all interviewees especially during their trip reflection, which will be elaborated on later in the paper. Another participant, Nadine (39, France, short-term visit), got in touch with K-beauty due to the social environment she grew up in, which is the Chinese diaspora. For her, consuming Korean popular culture content and familiarity of K-beauty was part of their daily life, although, she emphasises this on a casual level detaching herself from the fan aspect. What eventually attracted her to K-beauty was the fact that the products were affordable while also delivering good results. Similarly, Michelle (27, USA, short-term visit), who was born and grew up in an area in the United States with a large Korean diaspora, was always exposed to Korean popular culture and K-beauty. Just like Nadine, Michelle also ended up sticking to K-beauty for the same reasons. These are very reminiscent of Liang's et al (2019) findings on plastic surgery tourists who seek more affordable with good quality procedures. It shows that this is also the case for K-beauty products and cosmetics as they become attractive due to their relatively low costs and yet effective results.

For another participant, K-beauty was the driving factor that got her more interested in other aspects of Korean popular culture such as K-pop or K-drama, although she was already familiar with it before. For her, social media was the way to learn her way around K-beauty, skincare and make up, and it was also the source for inspiration. According to her, after having done so much research on K-beauty on social media, she finally decided to pick up K-pop and K-drama as well. She also emphasised the fact that social media made K-beauty and other K-culture related content so easily accessible and consumable, pointing out how aggressive the algorithms seem to work in the online K-culture sphere. Popular Korean content on social media, according to Jung and Shim (2014), has shown to be very powerful due to the rapid distribution and easily accessible content. Another participant, on the other hand, got interested in K-beauty due to K-beauty brands establishing local shops in her hometown. Being from Malaysia with a good amount of K-culture influence, having access to K-beauty shops definitely contributed to her love for K-beauty. But she also admits that K-drama celebrities with the product endorsement have fed into her love for K-beauty.

Finally, another interviewee, Sabine (37, Brazil, started working in Korea during certain periods), emphasised the fact that she really started getting into K-beauty after she had visited Korea. Sabine would occasionally use sheet masks, but the way she took care of her

skin drastically changed after coming to Korea. Likewise, Nadine's mother who was not an interviewee, was someone that has always avoided skincare or make up until she saw the world of K-beauty in South Korea, as Nadine shared.

While all participants were already familiar with either K-pop or K-drama first, the influencing factors that actually got them to be fascinated by K-beauty differed. This result implies that Korean popular culture, based on the insights of the eleven interviewees, usually is the door to get individuals to know about K-beauty initially. However, the participants showed different angles regarding how the interest in K-beauty was sparked in the first place and provided some valuable insights in the scope of K-beauty tourism as the results will demonstrate the motivations for K-beauty tourism, the experiences and the reflection of the trips. While there were different causes for the participants to dive into the K-beauty realm, the majority of interviewees were influenced by Korean celebrities from either K-pop or K-dramas, followed by the ones who were influenced by their social network, and then some individuals who were inspired by social media, localisation of certain brands, or finding love for K-beauty after having visited Korea.

4.2. From Aspiration to Destination: Why K-beauty Tourism?

When it comes to the travel motivations of K-beauty enthusiasts, the drivers for choosing to go to South Korea differ based on the results of the interviews conducted for this paper. The interviewees who travelled to South Korea for K-beauty had a variety of motivating factors, although all of them shared a love for Korean beauty products, and to some extent treatments which were non-surgical. About half of the respondents clearly indicated there to be an important role of both Hallyu and K-beauty underlying their decision to travel to Korea, whereas for the other part it played a more minor or subordinate role in their motivations to travel. When asked about the primary motivations, Elena (22, USA, multiple visits, including one temporary work-related visit) who had mixed motives about travelling to South Korea shared her enthusiasm:

I definitely wanted to shop skincare and... probably was a little too obsessed with K-Pop and the K-culture that I consumed online [laughs]... I think I went to so many different, uh, K-beauty stores and shopping experiences... the host family I was staying with were like they looked at me strange, but I was so excited to do it all. Um,

so yeah, that was probably the biggest reason was to buy these things in person or to like experience the feel in person.

Elena was clearly inspired by both K-beauty, K-pop and K-drama. As she admits having been obsessed over these aspects, there also seems to be the need to satisfy the fan side of herself by travelling to South Korea and to engage in a fan experience by actually being there.

Similarly, Lisa (25, Germany, short-term visit) shared a sentiment like Elena as well:

I was about to graduate and, um, I was a huge fan of K-Pop at that time from, from music, um, and also dramas. And I also started to get interested in all the foods... And then for specially Seoul, I wanted to go because I wanted to visit, uh [laughs], I wanted to visit, um, the Cube Cafe back then. I wanted to visit the SM, um, um, I don't know how it's called the gallery stuff. On the, on the, on the first floor where you can see all the, the, the, the popular costumes from Red Velvet, for example, and like take photos with um, the... cardboard [unintelligible] back then [laughs] and stuff like that and... where you have those, um, figures, um, from all these different bands like BTS, Girl Generations, et cetera... I also took photos with that and I wanted to buy a lot of, a lot of clothes and K-beauty and makeup and also eat a lot of food. I think that these three are like the main reasons because they're, the, these are the top three reasons why I wanted to visit Korea. Really, the food, the... fan experience, if you want to say it that way [laughs].

In Lisa's case it becomes even more clear that she wanted to satisfy the fan side of herself by going to South Korea and visiting the big and well known K-pop studios or companies, coupled with the experience of shopping K-beauty products and fashion, and also engaging in food tourism. K-beauty, with its association with Korean celebrities known for their flawless skin and stylish looks, has gained significant popularity worldwide (Park & Hong, 2020).

Lisa's desire to purchase K-beauty products and clothing reflects her aspiration to emulate the beauty and fashion standards represented by these celebrities (Elfving-Hwang, 2018).

The remaining 5 participants had other reasons besides Hallyu and K-beauty tourism to travel there. For the latter group of participants, food tourism was one of the most prominent motivators that drew them to South Korea as Nadine put it into words:

My number one motivator for going to South Korea was actually not K- like K-popular culture. So like K-Pop, K-drama or K-beauty... I just want to like add that in there that like I say, all of this, but really like the main motivation for going in the first place was to eat.

As the conversation with Nadine revolved around her impressions regarding K-beauty in South Korea, she thought it was necessary to emphasise that her motivation for the South Korea trip was primarily food. Nevertheless, while the motivation factors differed, everyone shared enthusiasm regarding seeking out K-beauty experiences and to see what Korea has to offer in terms of beauty. Even for those who had other motives that made them travel to South Korea, K-beauty experiences have also become a big part of their overall experience. At the same time, while looking at the differing travel motivations, moving back to the earlier results regarding what sparked the participants' interest in K-beauty in the first place, K-pop and K-drama have played important roles with influencing their love for K-beauty or other aspects of Korean culture. Based on the results regarding the inspiration for K-beauty, and the motivators for travelling to South Korea, K-beauty tourism is driven by a variety of forces. Some participants have shown that K-beauty tourism is strongly intertwined with Hallyu tourism, whereas for others K-beauty tourism is an activity "on the side" which complements the whole experience in South Korea on a significant note. By acknowledging the importance of K-beauty tourism as more than just a supplementary activity, K-beauty tourism, based on the results of these interviews, with its range of motivators and diverse activities, adds layers of depth and richness to the overall experience. It serves as a crucial component that enhances the participants' immersion in the world of Hallyu and South Korean culture in general. This shows that K-beauty tourism in itself is a complex phenomenon as it tends to come with a combination of different motivators and activities, just like Hallyu tourism is not something that could be truly defined (Lee & How, 2022).

Diving briefly into the activities of all interview participants who have been to South Korea, all 11 interviewees shared that they had participated in intensive K-beauty shopping, whereas surprisingly few from the interviewed participants engaged in other K-beauty activities that reached beyond shopping. From the 11 interviewees, only 3 were eager to try out facial spa treatments, receiving skin analysis and consultation, or undergoing extensive hair treatments. One participant was very enthusiastic about getting her nails done in South Korea. However, aside from that, the number of K-beauty tourists who took up other activities than K-beauty shopping turned out to be surprisingly low. At the same time, when

confronting those seven participants who did not engage in beauty treatments, for instance, at least five of them expressed their interest in either facials, spas or hair salons and that they were planning to take up one of those activities if they were to visit South Korea again.

4.3. K-beauty Tourism: Experience & Impressions

K-beauty shopping, facial and hair treatments, and nail art were the K-beauty related activities taken up by the interviewees, with K-beauty shopping outweighing it as the most popular beauty activity. Regrettably, it should be pointed out that no potential interviewee could be found that engaged in cosmetic surgery tourism. In the following part, the experiences and impressions of these activities were evaluated by presenting some insights how (K-)beauty tourism in South Korea gave the K-beauty enthusiasts a special tourist experience. This section touches upon valuable findings that emerged from the interview participants's impressions shared from their K-beauty trip. The findings dive into common patterns identified among the interviewees regarding their impression on South Korea as center of beauty, their experience in Korea as a hyperreality of beauty, and connections of the K-beauty experience to Korean popular culture and celebrities.

4.3.1. South Korea: the World's Center of Beauty?

Looking at K-beauty tourism as a branch of popular culture tourism (Tzanelli, 2018), or in this case also Hallyu tourism, South Korea has been eagerly working in combining these two in order to cater to K-beauty tourists who seek a more lifestyle based beauty experience that expand beyond plastic surgery tourism (Jeong, 2021). As Lee and How (2022) indicate, South Korea has been very successful in using K-beauty as a tool to promote and enhance the country's destination image, while also branding certain cities, such as Seoul, as popular destinations for beauty tourism. One of the interviewees, Lisa, shared her enthusiasm regarding K-beauty's success in the image-making of South Korea:

Um, I'd like to also swear because I like that a country has, um, is able to have such a good reputation about something... But like, um, yeah, it's just so beautiful to see that, because it's not, um, mmm [short pause]. They earned it, um, because their

products are really good. So they earned it to be known for good, yeah, K-beauty or known for good cosmetics or, yeah, I would say cosmetics in general.

Lisa's comment radiates appreciation for K-beauty and South Korea's place in the beauty industry. She believes that South Korea should be credited for their success regarding K-beauty and building a strong reputation around it, while also praising Korea for making good cosmetic products available to the world. All other participants from the interviews shared similar impressions as they were fascinated by the vast and endless choices regarding K-beauty in South Korea, giving the impression that South Korea could be considered the center of beauty in their world. Many interviewees emphasised the fact how easy and convenient K-beauty shopping, or beauty shopping in general, is in South Korea. What they experienced could not have been compared to beauty experiences in their home countries, even when only talking about beauty shopping which may not seem as something so special at first sight. All interview participants shared how surprised they were by the accessibility regarding beauty in South Korea and how beauty is so normalised in Korea as compared to where they were from. Sabine who was absolutely convinced that South Korea is the beauty hub of the world commented on the accessibility regarding K-beauty:

There's like beauty stores everywhere. So you can see a lipstick on someone in the subway. Ask them what it was, get off at your stop and find it very quickly. So it's like that instant gratification of like 'Oh, it was literally ten minutes ago I saw this lipstick on a girl and now I'm buying it.' So it's just like the accessibility of it after you're exposed to it is really quick.

Sabine's statement, thus, highlights the accessibility and convenience of the beauty industry in South Korea. She also suggests that the high availability of beauty stores make it easy for tourists to explore and purchase beauty products. Because of the widespread access to K-beauty and beauty in general, the interviewee also emphasises the experience of being able to participate in K-beauty experiences regardless of where the tourist is at the moment, such as being on public transportation. The statement by Sabine may therefore suggest that the ease of access to K-beauty is important for the popularity of beauty tourism in South Korea which contributes to a positive K-beauty experience for visitors.

Korea's perception as a hub of beauty is not only restricted to endless cosmetic shopping options, but also when looking at beauty treatments both surgical and non-surgical,

South Korea has unique experiences to offer. Diana, who travelled to South Korea with her partner, was one of the participants who engaged in more beauty activities than just K-beauty shopping. During their trip, they also decided to get facial beauty treatments and hair treatments done. Diana shared her experience for these treatments with great excitement and detail, as she was so fascinated by the unique, but also highly professional, experience. What is surprising about her enthusiasm is that such treatments, such as for the hair, may come across as something quite common, however, Diana was quite taken aback when she and her partner went to get their hair treated:

They washed his hair, um, but then they did this treatment that he wasn't expecting. They, like, handed him something. He didn't know what it was going to be. They handed it to him and they were like 'Don't let go of this, okay?' [laughs] Like, you have to hold this the whole time. And then they started like doing something to his scalp. And he was like, I didn't realize till later that, like, they were shocking his scalp. And like, what they made him hold was like, the ground, like, so if they were gonna... if he let go of it, like he might have been like, shocked [laughs]. Um, so that was interesting. And he did look up like what that treatment was after the fact and think it's called like scalp galvanization or something. Um, I don't know exactly what it does [laughs], but he was like kind of like scared. He was like, I didn't know they were gonna do that to me. But I will say his hair has never looked better since that haircut. So, um, they did a really good job.

The interviewee describes an unexpected and unique treatment that they received while getting their hair treated in South Korea. She mentions that her partner was given something to hold onto tightly, which in this case was the floor, and was warned not to let go of it. They later discovered that this treatment is called "scalp galvanization" after looking into it. Diana also expressed a sense of concern as they were not aware of what was happening to their scalp. However, she emphasises that her partner's hair has never looked better since that treatment and that the service they received was excellent.

This statement highlights the unique and innovative treatments that are offered in South Korea, even for something as simple as a hair treatment. This aligns with the concepts of lifestyle tourism (Gross, 2018) and South Korea's soft power (Grix, Brannagan & Lee, 2019, as discussed in the theoretical framework. The interviewee's initial fear and surprise during the treatment indicate that such treatments may not be commonly found in their home

country or other destinations, making South Korea an attractive choice for those seeking novel and unique beauty experiences. This highlights the role of South Korea's soft power, as it becomes a desirable destination for individuals seeking beauty treatments that offer something distinctive and exclusive. Moreover, the fact that the participant's partner's hair showed incredible results, underscores the high quality of service and attention to detail in South Korean beauty treatments. This emphasises South Korea's commitment to providing excellent customer experiences and aligns also with the concept of lifestyle tourism, where individuals actively seek out experiences that enhance and contribute to their desired lifestyle (Gross, 2018).

4.3.2. *Beauty Hyperreality*

Besides experiencing South Korea as the world's center of beauty, some of the interviewees's experiences dive into a hyperreality of beauty. Many of the interviewees were drawn to South Korea for different reasons and had varying motivations. Nevertheless, as all of them were K-beauty enthusiasts they were aware of South Korea's reputation as a beauty destination, and the high availability of beauty stores and treatments available. However, it was not until they experienced it firsthand that they fully understood the extent of the surreal beauty experiences offered in South Korea, as Nadine stated:

Um, but I would say that I genuinely, like completely lost my mind when I went to South Korea and like I experienced walking into a South Korean beauty shop, but also just how many of them there were and how much choice there was. Um, I think I was like completely unprepared for that. So yes, like social media has influenced me to some extent, but I really think that the, the full experience is like nothing compared to what I experienced in person.

Here, Nadine described her experience of visiting South Korea and being overwhelmed by the abundance of beauty shops and products available there. She mentioned that social media played a role in influencing interest and perception in Korean beauty, but the actual experience of being in a beauty shop in South Korea surpassed her expectations by far. This experience shared by Nadine can also be understood in the context of hyperreality in beauty tourism. Within the concept of hyperreality, the boundaries between reality and fantasy become blurred, and visitors are immersed in an experience that feels real even though it may

be created (Lovell & Bull, 2017). In the case of beauty tourism in South Korea, the sheer number of beauty shops and the variety of products available can create a sense of surreality for visitors, as they are presented with a seemingly infinite number of choices and possibilities. This can be amplified by the influence of social media and the idealised images of Korean beauty that are often portrayed online. However, Nadine's statement also highlights the limitations of social media. While social media may provide a glimpse into the world of Korean beauty in South Korea, actually being there in person allows for a more immersive and complete experience.

At the same time, the success of creating such immersive and hyperreal beauty experiences are not only traced back to providing endless beauty options, but also by creating the right settings and atmosphere which was largely emphasised by most interview participants. One of them elaborated:

It just feels so special and so nice and like... I think I'm not gonna get the chance to do this for, I don't know, however long. So I think that makes it seem even more special and even better. And just all the shiny lights and the bright colors makes it just feel so, I don't know, attractive, um, and like the environment, listening to all the music they play and the shopkeepers are really good at selling you stuff. Um, and even like, like the K-Pop idol cutouts. I took pictures with them my first time. I think that's definitely a romantic experience in a sense [laughs].

This statement by the interviewee suggests that the experience of shopping for K-beauty products in South Korea is not just about the products themselves, but also about the overall atmosphere and environment of the stores. She mentions the shiny lights, bright colors, and music (K-pop songs most of the time as shared by the interviewees), which all contribute to creating a hyperreal experience that is highly attractive and desirable. At the same time, the participant also highlights the effectiveness of the shopkeepers in selling products, which adds to the experience. Furthermore, she describes the experience as "special" and "romantic" indicating that it goes beyond the practical purpose of buying beauty products and that it has become a part of their personal and emotional experience. This further reinforces the idea of beauty hyperreality, where the experience of beauty tourism becomes a highly desirable experience that is as much about the aesthetics and atmosphere as it is about the products themselves. By further coupling the atmosphere with Korean popular music, Hallyu is being incorporated into the hyperreality of beauty. Taking a glimpse back at Lovell's and Bull's

(2017) account on hyperreality and themed places in tourism, it is clear that the K-beauty spaces, which in this case are shops, malls or shopping streets, are created to let the visitors get pulled into a certain atmosphere. At the same time, considering the emotional experience the interview participants shared, the hyperreal beauty space also gave them a sense of authenticity. Additionally, in this case, the interview participant mentioned the K-Pop idol cutouts and taking photos with them which also highlights the influence of Korean popular culture on the beauty hyperreality in South Korea and romanticising the experience. The popularity of K-pop and K-dramas have contributed to the rise of Korean beauty products and the desire to emulate the flawless skin of idols and celebrities (Park & Hong, 2020; Lee & How, 2022). Thus, the hyperreal K-beauty experience additionally aims to add elements of Korean popular culture and celebrities as a theme that complements the experience.

4.3.3. *K-beauty Tourism & K-celebrities*

Korean popular culture with a focus on K-pop and K-drama has played a crucial role in introducing the world to Korean culture and other popular culture branches such as Korean food, fashion and also K-beauty obviously (Cicchelli & Ocotobre, 2021). With Hallyu tourism growing in popularity it has become an integral part of South Korea's tourism sector (Kim & Nam, 2016; Lim & Giouvriss, 2017). Considering the association of Korean idols and celebrities with glowing skin and perfect looks, while being active in either the K-pop or K-drama industry, there is no doubt that K-beauty tourism may also be influenced by Hallyu (Lim & Giouvriss, 2017) and also affecting the way K-beauty tourists experience their trip. For some of the interview participants, visiting South Korea as K-beauty enthusiasts and associating certain beauty products with their favourite idols can be seen as an example of popular culture tourism. Some interviewees were not only interested in experiencing the K-beauty environments in itself, but they also were eager to participate in the beauty culture associated with K-culture. For Elena, participating in K-beauty shopping in Korea was more than just being in the physical space:

I don't know if the idol advertising got to me too much... I talked about girls generation, but it was Yuna. I think she was with Innisfree. And then there was Taeyeon with Banila Co. Those two got me. Um, the first time I was in Korea I went to Banila Co just to get the Taeyeon palette. And even nowadays, the makeup remover, part of the reason I use it is just because I associate it with Taeyeon. So I

wouldn't say it was like every idol advertisement affected me, but there was a couple if it was my favorite idol, it like had that association in my head.

Later on in the interview, Elena also proceeded to say: "I don't know if it's like you feel closer to them or connected. Maybe it is, but it's... there's something there that it's like when it's an idol you really, really, really like you want to to mimic that." In this case, K-beauty tourism is not only about the desire to experience the products and services but also about associating their experience with Korean popular culture and idols. She mentions being influenced by advertisements featuring her favourite idols and even going to a store just to purchase a product associated with Taeyeon for example. This highlights the influence of K-pop and K-drama culture on K-beauty tourism and how it drives consumer behaviour which is very reminiscent of Elliott's and Boyd's (2018) account on celebrity culture and how they shape people's perception and behaviour. It further boils down to the influential role of celebrities and idols who hold the power to shape values and aspirations of their fans by becoming a personality for them to mirror (Elfvig-Hwang, 2018). At the same time, the interviewees that were influenced by Korean popular culture during their K-beauty activities also showed traces of lifestyle tourism (Gross, 2018). Lifestyle tourism which refers to travel that is motivated by the desire to experience a particular lifestyle or way of living may also be relevant in the context of K-beauty tourism. It involves seeking out beauty products and treatments that are popular in South Korea in order to emulate the Korean beauty standard. Referring back to Elena's comment, she emphasised wanting to mimic her favourite idols and to join the "club" which can be seen as an example of lifestyle tourism coupled with popular culture tourism as well as celebrity culture.

On the other hand, what was surprising from the interviews was that a good portion of the participants shared that the idol and celebrity influence did not affect them too much. Although for all participants, K-pop or K-drama played an important role at some point in their lives and that is what introduced most of them to K-beauty, some of these participants explained that they were aware of K-celebrities promoting certain brands but it did not heavily influence their behaviour or experience while engaging in K-beauty activities in South Korea. Instead, their familiarity with certain idols and the brand they endorse simply increased their awareness and interest in the brand. This shows that Korean popular culture and celebrities do not always play a strong role in impacting K-beauty tourists' behaviour and experience, even though they admire either K-pop or K-drama. Therefore, even though the direct impact of celebrity endorsements on some of the participants' experience patterns may

have been limited, it is essential to acknowledge that the presence of Korean celebrities as brand ambassadors or endorsers contributes to the overall visibility and reputation of K-beauty products. The association between beloved idols and certain beauty brands serves to create awareness and intrigue among K-beauty enthusiasts. Therefore, while the influence may not be as pronounced on an individual level in some cases, the overarching presence of Korean popular culture and celebrities plays a vital role in shaping the perception and allure of K-beauty tourism.

Some K-beauty tourists feel they come closer to their favourite K-celebrities by participating in K-beauty related activities during their trip, whereas others did not share the same experience. These different experiences on the influence of Korean popular culture on K-beauty tourism suggests that there are other factors besides the K-culture that affect the tourist experience of K-beauty enthusiasts, and that K-beauty tourism reaches beyond to more complex ways of meaning-making. In the following part, the reflections of the participants' K-beauty experience in South Korea are evaluated hinting at important meaning-making processes that go beyond just the Korean popular culture dynamics.

4.4. Reflections

Diving into the reflections of the participants' K-beauty activities during their trip in South Korea, the findings reveal that beside the power of K-culture and associated celebrities, their exposure to K-beauty culture in situ has opened up new perspectives on self care and skin health, and how that ties into personal well-being. Aside from that, the findings also demonstrate that for the majority participants, the stay in Korea helped them to establish a sense of belonging, whereas for the remaining interviewees they emphasised a sense of personal fulfilment.

4.4.1. New Perspectives on Self Care

One way the majority of interviewees reflected on their K-beauty trip to South Korea was the emphasis on self care and taking care of your skin, while pointing out cultural differences that they noticed in the context of skincare and skin health. Korean beauty products have become increasingly popular in recent years, with many people around the world adopting K-beauty routines and incorporating Korean skincare and makeup products

into their daily regimens (Park & Hong, 2020; Bae et al, 2017). This trend has been driven in part by the influence of Korean popular culture, particularly K-pop idols who often serve as brand ambassadors for K-beauty brands, as well as social media (Bae et al, 2017; Lee & How, 2022). At the same time, Korean beauty has also faced a lot of criticism due the unrealistic beauty standards that it sets which can be unhealthy for some audiences (Cruz & Fifita, 2020). The interview participants were also confronted with Korean beauty standards and ideals and each of them expressed their concern regarding the unrealistic expectations. A few of them openly admitted to having developed insecurities at some point in their lives due to the “perfect” presentation of K-idols and celebrities. Such insecurities included some of the interviewees to become self conscious about their diet, and self criticism that their skin is not good enough. However, all of them expressed a positive reflection regarding the emphasis on self-care and self-expression during their K-beauty visit in Korea. Diana, who also chose to go for facial and hair treatments besides K-beauty shopping, revealed some valuable insights and reflections regarding that:

I think like learning more about K-beauty and like actually experiencing it like has made me realize like, you know, taking better care of myself, having a better skincare routine. Like not just that, but like, you know, I should take care of myself by exercising more and just like, feeling and like, liking the way I feel and liking the way I look will just overall make me feel more confident and like better about myself generally.

She acknowledges that taking care of herself involves more than just skincare, but also includes exercise and feeling good about herself both in a physical and mental way. This demonstrates the influence of K-beauty on the interviewee's perception of beauty and self-care, which is not only focused on the outer appearance, but also on the overall well-being. Her statement also suggests that she has learned the importance of investing in herself, which can lead to increased confidence and a positive outlook on life. Looking back at the concept of hyperreality (Lovell & Bull, 2017) in connection to beauty tourism, the immersion in the world of K-beauty also has the ability to make K-beauty tourists dive into and experience the feeling of beauty, rather than just improving one's outer appearance. In this context, it is interesting to explore the ways in which K-beauty has influenced the self-perception and beauty routines of individuals who have been exposed to it in-situ.

Furthermore, K-beauty tourism not only offers enthusiasts the opportunity to experience and purchase beauty products but also provides a gateway to explore and learn about Korean culture and lifestyle. As already touched upon, the participants shared that learning about K-beauty and experiencing it has led some of them to realise the importance of self-care and feeling confident in one's appearance. This suggests that K-beauty tourism can have a transformative effect on visitors beyond just the consumption of K-beauty products and services. By visiting South Korea and immersing oneself in K-beauty culture, tourists can gain a deeper understanding of the values and practices that contribute to Korean beauty standards, such as a focus on personal well-being and skin health. Ultimately, K-beauty tourism can be a meaningful way for visitors to engage with a foreign culture and expand their perspectives while also improving their own well-being. This was the case for many of the interviewees as they shared their fascination with the different approach to beauty in South Korea. However, what is most important when engaging in K-beauty tourism is to retain a realistic outlook on the beauty standards.

4.4.2. Beauty Perspectives and Cultural Variations

As the interviewees embraced a heightened sense of self care, they were also prompted to point out cultural differences between South Korea and their home country regarding beauty standards and practices. All interview participants shared the same opinion about beauty being embraced very differently in South Korea than in their country of origin. Since the majority of participants were from Western countries, they indicated very strict contrasts when it came to beauty standards and practices, both positive as well as negative differences. Some interviewees were very critical towards South Korea's high beauty standards and the diet culture it involved, which is also very directly linked to the Korean entertainment industry and its celebrities (Park & Hong, 2020). The critical stance of the participants indicates Korean beauty standards to be very ambivalent in a way, as these beauty ideals emulate a natural-looking beauty, but in fact achieving that type of look requires a lot more work and even manipulation (Bae, Chang, Park & Kim, 2017; Seo, Cruz & Fifita 2020). Therefore, as pointed out by most participants, it is important to keep a realistic outlook and goal when it comes to those standards in order to avoid falling into a pit of insecurities that the celebrity influence especially can create.

That being said, and having found a balance between the polished looks and realistic goals, all participants emphasised the fact that engaging in beauty practices in Korea is a very

normal thing to do, with a high significance on skin health in particular. Elena from the US pointed out such a difference:

Um, but I think like the general feeling of K-beauty feels like more natural and kind of clean than Western beauty brands, I think, like, it always has a nice smell and it comes in these really nice pretty packages, um, and all of the like all the advertisements show like very natural or I guess... it's not natural, but clean, like the glass skin look and it looks so just clean. So I think that's why I was drawn to it.

The participant's description of K-beauty aligning with a natural and clean aesthetic reflects the influence of Korean popular culture on beauty standards. Korean popular culture, especially in the sphere of K-pop and K-drama, often promotes a particular image of beauty that emphasises flawless skin, also known as “glass skin”, and a youthful appearance (Park & Hong, 2020). This ideal is reinforced through advertisements and media representations, which create a strong association between K-beauty and the desired look. Furthermore, the interview participants also indicated that in South Korea, skin problems are always targeted from the root rather than covering up blemishes with makeup as done in the West. This is also possible due to the high variety and also affordability of beauty products and services in Korea, where skincare is targeted at everyone regardless of gender and age according to the interviewees. When it comes to makeup standards, the findings also demonstrate very distinct contrasts. Most participants felt that Western makeup trends were on the quite heavy side as compared to South Korean makeup styles which come with a natural finish, as Michelle put it into words: “Um, and I feel Western beauty is... there's nothing wrong with it, but it's very, it's a totally different type of thing. It's very dramatic.” This, once again, falls in line with Korean celebrities and idols being highly influential in transmitting desired beauty standards and aesthetics. These differences show that the allure of K-beauty lies not only in the products themselves but also in the cultural context and associations surrounding them. Visitors to South Korea are drawn to the opportunity to immerse themselves in the world and lifestyle (Gross, 2018) of K-beauty, experiencing firsthand the beauty ideals and practices they have been exposed to through Korean popular culture.

4.4.3. *Collective Empowerment vs. Personal Fulfilment*

Having visited South Korea, where beauty and beauty practices are approached in such a different way and being in an environment that embraces and normalises beauty, the participants shared a sense of self reaffirmation and validation, as one of them elaborates:

Yeah, I think it kind of comes back a little bit to like, um, the validation of the fact that there's this like, you know, this whole like, whole industry of, of like a different approach to beauty, right? A different, a different approach to taking care of your skin, um, a different approach to makeup and that, it's like it's so entrenched and it's so kind of globally powerful and like, as we said, on the ascendancy. Um, but I think that, like, kind of being at the epicenter of it and really experiencing how people like go about their day to day with it, integrate it into their lives. Um, it was really validating that like 'Yo, like it's okay for me to spend like half an hour every morning packing toner into my skin. Like, it's fine.' [laughs].

This statement as shared by one of the interviewees, which many of the other participants have also expressed similar feelings of, reflects on the cultural differences that can be experienced when engaging with K-beauty tourism. In her statement, she highlighted the fact that beauty is embraced so differently in Korea than in her home country, and also emphasised her fascination with this “new” approach to beauty being on the rise around the world. However, when she visited South Korea which is the center of that all, she realised that beauty is simply a normal part of life and not something that is seen as particularly special or unique, giving her a sense of validation. Furthermore, this K-beauty experience reinforces the concept of lifestyle tourism where individuals seek out touristic experiences that match a certain way of living (Gross, 2018). Being in South Korea where K-beauty, or beauty practices in general, is a normal part of everyday life, the interviewees were enabled to partake in the K-beauty lifestyle where it was highly accessible to them. They “lived” (Gross, 2018) the K-beauty brand.

Many interviewees have expressed similar thoughts as for them, being K-beauty enthusiasts who are passionate about skincare and beauty, visiting South Korea and immersing themselves in the K-beauty culture was a validating experience. It was a way to connect with other like-minded individuals and feel a sense of belonging. Having been in a place where beauty is highly valued also contributed to the reinforcement of their passion for

skincare and beauty, and made them feel more confident in their own beauty routines as all of the participants agreed that they were even more enthusiastic about K-beauty after their visit and it that it has become an even more significant part of their lifestyle: “Um, yeah, I think it's definitely more, more a part of my life since going to South Korea... [laughs].” (Nadine).

Although not the majority, there were a few individuals from the interview participants who had distinctively different feelings regarding the discussion about the sense of belonging and validation through K-beauty tourism. When asked if the K-beauty trip made them feel part of something bigger, Veronica shared: “...eventually what you do with it is very personal and I feel like beauty is a personal experience that can be influenced of course, but I don't think it sort of, especially using K-beauty made me feel like a part of something bigger.” For a few interviewees, like Veronica, the K-beauty experience in Korea stayed on a personal level, rather than giving them a sense of belonging. They view beauty as a personal experience and do not feel like using K-beauty products made them feel like part of something bigger. As Veronica’s comment shows, they acknowledge that external factors can influence personal choices, but ultimately they view beauty as a highly individual and personal experience. Therefore, based on the experiences shared by the interview participants, it is important to note that not all individuals who engage with K-beauty may have the same sense of belonging or shared identity as others who find validation and a sense of community through their engagement with K-beauty culture in South Korea.

The way participants experienced, perceived and reflected on their K-beauty related activities have provided valuable insights that contribute to the understanding of K-beauty tourism. Although the power of Korean popular culture varied among certain participants, there is no doubt that it has played an important role as a gateway to discovering K-beauty and the Korean beauty culture. K-beauty experiences were shaped by immersive environments which are designed in combination with Korean popular culture that unlocked a door to a world of K-beauty with endless and unique beauty experiences which come with a network bridging Hallyu culture, personal fulfilment as well as collective belonging.

5. Conclusion & Discussion

By gathering insights and experiences through in-depth and semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with eleven K-beauty enthusiasts that have visited South Korea at least once, the thesis contributes to a better and nuanced understanding of K-beauty tourism in connection to Korean popular culture and other dynamics at hand. The aim of the paper was to find answers on the way Korean popular culture motivates international K-beauty enthusiasts to travel to South Korea, and what meaning these tourists ascribe to their K-beauty related experiences. The results based on the interviews conducted are complex and diverse in nature as the findings have shown. Overall, the interview results indicate the importance of Korean popular culture, especially K-pop and K-drama, as the window to step into and get to know the world of K-beauty. Korean popular culture therefore has shown to be the first contact zone. Although for the most part Korean celebrities were the key driver for sparking interest in K-beauty, there were a few exceptions where the influencing dynamics started to differ when it came to actually diving into the world of Korean beauty. The results reveal that K-beauty tourism in South Korea offers unique opportunities for tourists to engage in a beauty experience that emulates a certain lifestyle (Gross, 2018) that is largely informed by K-culture influence. The accessibility and convenience of K-beauty shopping, the wide availability of beauty stores and salons, along with the normalisation of beauty in South Korean society were highlighted by the interviewees as one of the key factors that contribute to the appeal of K-beauty tourism that makes their trip worthwhile. Furthermore, the findings illustrated that South Korea's reputation as a center of beauty extends beyond cosmetic shopping, also including a range of unique beauty treatments that appeared unfamiliar for the interview participants. Those participants who chose to also engage in beauty treatments, which were non-surgical in this case, emphasised their fascination with South Korea's effort for beauty innovation and high-quality service. These experiences not only created lasting memories for tourists but also showcased South Korea's position as a frontrunner in the beauty industry.

Within the broader context of popular culture tourism (Tzanelli, 2018) and Hallyu tourism (Kim & Nam, 2016), some interview participants expressed a strong connection between their favourite idols and their K-beauty experiences, pointing to the impact of Korean popular culture on their behaviour, as well as on the impact it had on their experience and perception. The results based on the insights of these interviewees showed that they were

influenced by idol endorsements and sought to emulate their favourite idols (Elfving-Hwang, 2018) by purchasing products associated with them. This highlights the role of celebrity culture and the power of idols in shaping their values and aspirations, acting as a mirror (Elfving-Hwang, 2018; Elliott & Boyd, 2018). The influence of Korean popular culture on K-beauty tourism (Kim & Nam, 2016) can be considered as a combination of (Korean) popular culture tourism and lifestyle tourism (Gross, 2018), as tourists seek to experience the world of K-beauty in South Korea where it is popularised by Korean celebrities. At the same time, the immersion in the world of K-beauty allowed most participants to experience beauty as more than just improving their outer appearance but also as a means of affirmation and self-expression. Moreover, K-beauty tourism provided an opportunity for visitors to learn about Korean culture and lifestyle, expanding their perspectives beyond beauty products and services. The experiences shared by the interviewees also illustrated the impact of K-beauty on their self-perception, beauty routines, and overall well-being. However, it is important to note that not all individuals may feel a sense of belonging or shared identity through their engagement with K-beauty culture in South Korea, as beauty remains a highly personal and individual experience for some.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that all participants were fascinated by South Korea for its reputation as a beauty destination and the abundance of beauty shops and treatments available. However, it is the actual experience of being able to engage in K-beauty activities in South Korea itself that surpassed the interviewees expectations and allowed them to immerse themselves in a hyperreal world of beauty coupled with elements from Korean popular culture. This hyperreality of beauty, based on the interviews, is characterised by an overwhelming number of choices, an atmosphere created by shiny lights and K-pop music, and the top-notch service by K-beauty staff and other K-beauty services. The influence of social media and Korean popular culture further contribute to this hyperreal experience by presenting idealised images of beauty and creating a sense of romance and (emotional) attraction. The beauty hyperreality in South Korea extends beyond practical beauty options that can be pursued, and becomes a special and emotional experience for tourists. It is a combination of the products, the atmosphere, and the association with Korean popular culture that creates a unique and immersive beauty experience. Understanding and leveraging this beauty hyperreality can contribute to the success of beauty tourism in South Korea, contributing to the country's soft power.

Discussion

The findings of the interviews have not only provided a better understanding of K-beauty tourism, the results also contribute to both societal and academic perspectives. By exploring several aspects of K-beauty tourism from a bottom-up perspective, the influence of Korean popular culture, particularly K-pop and K-drama, have shown to be motivating factors for international K-beauty enthusiasts to visit South Korea. It highlights the role of celebrities in shaping beauty preferences and aspirations, as well as the normalisation and accessibility of beauty in South Korean society. This underscores also the role of celebrity culture (Elliott & Boyd, 2018) and the aspirational experience associated with it, as individuals seek to emulate their favourite idols (Elfvig-Hwang, 2018) through the purchase of beauty products and treatments endorsed by them.

Moreover, the emotional and experiential dimensions of K-beauty tourism, the immersive environments of beauty shops and salons in South Korea, coupled with the association with Korean popular culture, create a hyperreal experience for tourists. The sensory aspects, including the enticing fragrances, visually appealing packaging, and K-pop music, contribute to a heightened emotional connection to the K-beauty experience.

Understanding the cultural influence and impact within the context of K-beauty tourism provides valuable insights for marketers, policymakers, and destination managers. It highlights the importance of leveraging Korean popular culture and celebrity endorsements to attract and engage K-beauty tourists. Furthermore, it emphasises the need for destinations to create unique, immersive and emotionally appealing experiences that capture the essence of K-beauty and its association with Korean popular culture. Additionally to that, the results also indicate the effects of K-beauty tourism on individuals' self-care practices, perceptions and overall well-being. Although the K-beauty industry is pestered with unrealistic beauty standards, these insights may be interesting for opening up a door to promoting healthier and more inclusive beauty standards and raising awareness among those who engage with K-beauty.

From an academic standpoint, this thesis contributes to the fields of popular culture tourism and lifestyle tourism. It offers insights into the ways in which K-beauty tourism combines elements of popular culture and lifestyle experiences, providing tourists with opportunities to immerse themselves in the world of K-beauty. By exploring the influence of Korean popular culture on K-beauty tourists' behaviour, experiences and impressions, the findings contribute to a better understanding of the interplay between popular culture, aspects

of lifestyle and tourism. Furthermore, the hyperreality of beauty in South Korea has also demonstrated how K-beauty tourists are immersed in an environment of beauty. For instance, it puts emphasis on the sensory aspects, endless beauty options, and association with Korean popular culture which contribute to the hyperreal beauty experience in South Korea.

The findings on K-beauty tourism offer valuable insights into the motivations, experiences, and implications of K-beauty tourism in South Korea. The way K-beauty tourists experience and ascribe meaning to their experience shows a dynamic network that connects Korean popular culture tourism, lifestyle tourism and beauty tourism, while also demonstrating the soft power influences of South Korea in the scope of K-beauty tourism in connection to Hallyu tourism.

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Appendix A: List of Interview Topics & Questions

Pre-Visit Affinity & Perception of Hallyu & K-Beauty

1. What does Korean popular culture mean to you?
2. How would you yourself define K-Beauty? What is it to you?
3. How and when did you get to know K-Beauty? Were you introduced to K-Beauty through K-Pop or K-Drama? Can you explain what came first?
4. What made K-Beauty appealing to you?
 - a. Quality of products?
 - b. Aesthetic features of products (e.g. cute/feminine packaging and design)?
 - c. Wide range of products?
 - d. Association with Hallyu stars (e.g. K-Pop idols, celebrities, K-Drama actors/actresses, etc.)?
 - e. Association with pure/clear skin as how idols/celebrities are presented?
5. In your opinion, what makes K-Beauty stand out? What makes it unique compared to skincare and cosmetics available in your country or region?
6. According to you, why is k-beauty gaining more recognition internationally?
7. In your opinion, how is K-Beauty interconnected with different elements of Hallyu (e.g K-Pop, K-Drama, etc.) ?
8. According to your own perception, what is the role of Korean celebrities and idols when it comes to K-Beauty? Can K-Beauty exist without their role?
9. In what way has social media (or other online platforms) influenced your affection for K-Beauty?
10. In what way has the K-Pop and K-Drama industry influenced your affection for K-Beauty?
11. Which of the two (question 7 & 8) play a stronger role and why?
12. Do you frequently notice trends regarding k-beauty on social media? If yes, what kind of trends? How do you feel or react to them?
13. Do you feel that using K-beauty products or engaging in K-beauty routines have a positive impact on your mental health and overall well-being?
14. How do you feel about Korean beauty standards (overall, not just products)?
 - a. What kind of elements do korean beauty ideals radiate (artificial? natural?)

- b. Seoul is also known as the capital of plastic surgery, how do you feel about that?
 - c. Cosmetic surgery tourism to SK is growing in popularity. Why would you say do people go to SK in particular for that?
15. Why, would you say, are so many people attracted to Korean beauty standards? What makes it different from other ideals, for instance western ones?
- a. Are the beauty standards unique? Why or why not?
 - b. Could it also be a mix of different beauty ideals? (attempt to address hybridity if not addressed by the interviewee already)
 - c. Do you see korean popular culture and k-beauty a countering force to western standards?

Experience during the Visit

16. Now let's dive into your experience as a tourist. Can you tell me when you went to South Korea and what you did?
17. What were your primary motivations to go to South Korea?
- a. Hallyu related?
 - b. K-Beauty related?
 - c. Other?
18. If any, what Hallyu related activities, other than K-Beauty, did you engage in?
19. How was your experience of these activities?
20. What activities did you do that were not related to Hallyu or K-Beauty?
21. Turning to K-Beauty now, what K-Beauty related activities did you do?
- a. Shopping?
 - b. (spa) treatments (non-surgical)?
 - c. Both?
22. How did you like the experience of being able to shop K-Beauty products in Korea itself? Why did it feel special?
23. K-Beauty is widely available and accessible in different parts of the world. It is easy to order them to your home. Why does shopping K-Beauty in Korea itself feel so special or different? Could it be something related to authenticity?
24. While shopping for products in Korea, did you look for more exclusive items that were not accessible to you in your home country?

25. During your K-Beauty trip/experience, how did elements from K-Pop or K-Drama come into play?
26. How are celebrities used while engaging in K-beauty activities? Do they use a lot of advertisements in the shops?
 - a. Did these influence you? Why or why not?
 - b. Do you think it's true that the use of celebrities and idols can shape a tourists perception and consumption while on a k-beauty trip?
27. Can you describe any cultural differences that you noticed while engaging in K-beauty activities in South Korea? How did these differences shape your experience?
28. Is it true that there is a lot of advertisement for plastic surgery in south korea? If not, did you hear about that tho?
29. Can you describe some of the challenges or barriers that international tourists may face when trying to engage in K-beauty activities in South Korea?

Reflections on the Visit

30. Did the experience as a K-Beauty tourist, and the activities you engaged in, make you feel part of something bigger? If not, is it rather something personal?
31. How does engaging in K-Beauty activities make you become part of Hallyu culture?
 - a. Feeling of connectedness to celebrities/idols?
 - b. Feeling of connectedness to other Hallyu fans?
32. Did your experience make you feel connected to Korean culture in a way? If yes, how and in what way? Otherwise why not?
33. Did you learn anything new about Korean culture or society during your K-beauty tourism experience? What were some of the things that stood out to you?
34. during your K-beauty trip, was there anything that challenged your preconceptions you had regarding K-beauty or K-beauty standards.
35. How did your experience in South Korea change your perspective on K-beauty, if at all? Did it meet your expectations or were there any surprises (both positive and negative)?
36. How would you describe the significance or meaning of your K-beauty experience in South Korea, both in terms of your personal identity and your overall travel experiences?

37. How do you think K-beauty and Korean popular culture will continue to influence your future travel plans and experiences, if at all?
38. What can other beauty industries (for example here in Europe) learn from South Korea?
39. How do you think K-beauty tourism can contribute to promoting and enhancing personal self-care and well-being among tourists?
40. Lastly, how would you recommend K-beauty tourism to others who may be interested in it? What advice would you give to someone who is considering a K-beauty trip to South Korea?

Appendix B: Themes

After the interviews were transcribed, thematic analysis was applied in order to find a common, as well as differing, pattern. Below a list of the major themes and sub-themes that were vital for the findings is presented:

Pre-Visit Affinity & Perception of Hallyu & K-Beauty:

- Introduction Kbeauty
 - Through KPC (Korean popular culture)
 - Through social media
 - Through social environment

This theme and subthemes was to identify and organise how interview participants were introduced to K-beauty.

- Kbeauty attractive
 - natural/clean
 - Aesthetics
 - Affordability
 - Quality

This theme and subthemes indicated the factors that made Kbeauty attractive to the interview participants.

- Using Kbeauty
 - Celebrity/KPC influence
 - Social media influence
 - Social environment influence

This theme and subthemes emerged as the reason why interview participants started using K-beauty.

- Kbeauty standards
 - unrealistic/strict
 - Foster insecurities
 - natural/pure

- Glass-skin

This theme and subthemes concern the interviewee's perception of the beauty standards that come with K-beauty on a rather general level. As a result, there was some criticism regarding unrealistic expectations, as well as appreciation of the natural look.

Experience during the Visit

- Travel motivation
 - Induced by KPC & Kbeauty
 - Induced by KPC
 - Induced by Kbeauty
 - Induced by other

Identifying patterns regarding the travel motivation was important to determine the role of Korean popular culture in the decision making process.

- Kbeauty activity
 - Unique
 - Surreal
 - Endless choices
 - Romanticised
 - KPC influenced
 - lifestyle

=> Korea as the world's center of beauty & beauty hyperreality

This theme along with the subthemes was used to describe the way how the participants felt about and experienced their K-beauty related activities in South Korea. This was one of the most important themes in the finding as they resulted into Korea being perceived as the world's center of beauty, as well as beauty hyperreality.

- Celebrity mirror
 - Romanticised
 - Emulation
 - lifestyle

This theme and subthemes reflect the K-beauty experience in South Korea as a way or opportunity for the participants to mirror themselves with their favourite idol or celebrity. For them, Korean popular culture influence has been on the heavy side.

Reflections on the Visit

- Reflection selfcare
 - Lifestyle
 - Cultural difference

During the reflections, certain common patterns were found such as the emphasis on self care which also collides with lifestyle and cultural differences when it comes to beauty and its practices.

- Reflection cultural differences

This theme concerns more general findings on the cultural differences between beauty and its practices.

- Collective validation

This theme emerged among a group of participants that described their K-beauty experience in South Korea as something validating as a collective.

- Personal fulfilment

This theme emerged among a few participants as a counter argument to the previous one. For them the K-beauty experience stayed on a strictly personal level, with no sense of belonging.