

The Emergence of K-beauty: Rituals and Myths of Korean Skin Care Practice

Yoo Jin Kwon, Korea National Open University, Republic of Korea

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Following K-pop and K-drama, a trend of Korean style skin care and makeup emerged as a sub-category of Korean consumer culture. K-beauty is a generic term for all the skin care, makeup, and bath-and-body products imported from South Korea (Wood, 2016). Korean beauty industry has grown in exports to the global market. The total exports of cosmetics in 2016 was approximately USD 4.2 billion, which indicates 61.6% increase from the previous year according to Korea Pharmaceutical Traders Association (International Trade Administration, 2017). Google Trends illustrate that the search of both *Korean makeup* and *Korean skin care* has been on the steady increase since 2010 and *Korean skin care* particularly overtook the search of *Korean makeup* in 2017 as search words (Google Trends, n.d.). It can be interpreted that Korean skin care product or skin care practice claims great attention in the global market.

The purpose of the study is to analyze and understand how consumer zeal for the Korean skin care routine and products emerged. The theoretical framework to analyze Korean skincare trend is consumption ritual (Rook, 1985) and myths in consumer marketing (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007). This study conducted a content-analysis of the webpages and blogs in regard to K-beauty focusing on Korean skin care. Webpages were retrieved by entering search words including K-beauty, Korean skincare, and Korean makeup. The search results include three types of web pages: articles on K-beauty written by various writers including an independent writer, a well-known beauty guru, and a reporter of the established press. The second type is a beauty blog post, covering reviews on trends, product reviews, and tutorials for skincare or/and makeup. Most blogs are run by independent self-claimed experts. The third type is a retailer's shopping site. The present study analyzed 61 articles from 31 websites. Reflecting the current trends of social media, many of the webpages analyzed contain YouTube videos. The videos inserted were analyzed together. Through open-coding and selective coding on what constitutes *the trend of Korean skin care*. The followings are findings from the analysis.

The first theme emerged is ritualization of skin care practice. A ritual in consumer research is constructed of multiple behaviors in a sequence and tends to be repeated over time (Rook, 1985). Those web pages or beauty experts' suggestions provide scripts of skin care rituals. The most frequent phrases that describe the goal and the result of Korean skin care were *glass*, *flawless*, or *dewy* skin, which means hydrated, smooth, and acne-free skin. To obtain the skin condition, most articles recommend practicing a skin care routine that consists of using a series of Korean skin care products. The skin care routine is often called *10-step Korean skin-care regimen*. The ten steps consist of two types of cleansing, exfoliating, sheet mask, and applying liquid or creamy products including toner, essence, serum, eye cream, and moisturizer, ending with applying sunscreen for day and sleep pack for night. Although the contents of the routine may be slightly different by writers, the basic concept is to propose a ritual of skin care, separating from a makeup routine. The scripts of the rituals offer not only the behavioral sequence and artifacts to

be used (Rook, 1985), but also the significance of and reasons for practicing each step: for example, why they need double cleansing or sheet mask.

Several characteristics of the skin care ritual were found. For K-beauty beginners, the rituals organize various skincare products and provide the instructions. The wave of K-beauty is not led by a few powerful brands. Instead the ritual involves multiple products from all different brands. Web articles, blog posts, and vlog posts on K-beauty are, thus, full of reviews of numerous products. Therefore, the testimonial of experts (e.g., Chalotte Cho) play a significant role in verifying the effect of skin care routine and the quality of the products. Most K-beauty products are mid- to low-priced. The affordability of the products enables consumers to try the whole new routine easily. Lastly, as reflected in the term regimen, skin care is framed as a matter of health. The data suggest that the Korean skin care ritual would be accepted as appearance management behaviors of health-conscious lifestyle rather than the preparation process for makeup.

The second theme emerged is mythologizing *the Korean skin care*. Some articles suggest that Koreans have traditionally cared deeply about skin, suggesting that the tradition has been transformed into developing the skin care routine and innovative products. The innovative products feature special natural ingredients. The new ingredients that give the competitive edge include snail slime, pig collagen, EGF (epidermal growth factor), fruits, or plants. Associating with nature is a way of mythologizing origin in consumer marketing (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007). Some attribute usage of such ingredients to home-based skin care practice handed down from mother and grandmother such as mung bean face-pack. These ingredients are framed as *the Korean*. Neither consumers nor experts are loyal to brands. Instead the integral image of Korean beauty products forms a myth of tradition of nature and products originated from nature.

Findings of the study illustrate that the Korean skin care ritual consists of individual self-care performances and is structured with using various artifacts, that is, skin care products. The skin care routine and the innovative product development is mythologized with a close affinity with nature. The present study contributes to an understanding of emerging process of the K-beauty in skin care with the notion of ritual in consumer behavior and an analysis of style.

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