

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

According to its definition, beauty refers to a quality that makes something pleasing to look at or good and attractive (Cambridge English Dictionary 2020). In other words, it is not only the outer appearance, but a person's quality such as characters and traits contributed to determining one's attractiveness. These traits are known as inner beauty, which is related to positive traits possessed by a person that makes her virtuous. According to studies, the term inner beauty was influenced by Plato and Socrates, in which they contrasted the beauty of the soul and the beauty of the body. Plato precisely makes virtue a matter of a person's private or 'inner' life rather than what is publicly manifest. In conclusion, Plato described the virtuous person as "better-looking" (Horky 2019; Boys-Stones 2019).

The beauty myth is the use of images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement. The more social power they have in society, the stricter the ideal image of beauty that women had to follow (Wolf 2002). Through several ways such as plastic surgery and cosmetic use, women transform themselves following the ideals such as having round eyes, narrow faces, and pronounced noses (Yan and Bissell 2014). Furthermore, women's behaviors—how they act towards other women and men—were also prescribed by the beauty myth (Wolf 2002). However, these standards

and the ways in achieving them could be harmful to women both physically and mentally, besides its expensiveness and painfulness, it can cause dissatisfaction, unhappiness, stress, decreasing self-esteem, and even eating disorders (Bissell and Chung 2009; Polivy and Herman 2004).

Beauty defined in the media is often associated only with physical beauty since the beauty myth drives the beauty industry and media in constructing what is considered beautiful. For instance, the fashion magazine, Vogue and Elle, which published world widely, spread the thin ideals in form of the models they used and the content they narrated (Polivy and Herman 2004). Compared to the Western media and beauty industry, South Korea's too deserves attention because of its huge beauty market which worlds widely known. Their beauty market had become a profitable industry since the 2000s. K-beauty—the term describing Korean beauty products from make-up, fashion, to skin-related medical treatment—exported more than US \$3.7 billion in 2016 (Y. W. Lee 2019). The increased popularity of Korean cultural products such as drama, movies, and entertainers, known as *Hallyu* or the Korean Wave, had supported the beauty industry to become globally recognized (Sue Jin Lee 2011). Other than that, in 2015, the most well-known K-beauty vlogger named Park Hye Rim or *PONY!* started to spread K-beauty through her videos on YouTube. In 2017, with more than 5 million subscribers, she was listed on *Forbes 30 before 30* and featured on *Harpers Bazaar*, as a K-beauty superstar and helped the spread of K-beauty (*“Forbes 30 before 30”* 2017, *“Meet Park Hye Rim”* 2017). In other words, K-beauty

has its global fandom because of Hallyu and the help of the media (Y. W. Lee 2019).

The concept of beauty in Korea tends to emphasize more on physical appearance. Moreover, this country is obsessed with appearance (Bissell and Chung 2009) and considers it as a prominent factor in determining one's success (H. Lee et al. 2017). Moreover, in its male-dominated society, the importance of appearance was emphasized towards women and young girls (Un 2007). They are expected to have a thin body and certain facial features such as "V-line" jaws, large and double-lidded eyes, and small noses (Chung 2012; Voinea 2017). As a result, women are focusing more on the pursuit of physical beauty through diets, plastic surgery, or the use of adornments, rather than the notion of true beauty which focuses more on one's characters and traits.

The rapidly developing beauty industry and the competitive society have made the Koreans rely heavily on outer beauty. Especially for Korean women who live in a male-dominant society, outer beauty becomes the easiest and most instant aspect to win the competition (H. Lee et al. 2017). Rather than the inner beauty which took time for people to recognize, outer beauty is easier to be shown and used. This was coherent with the study in which Koreans use physical appearance as an indicator in employment (H. Lee et al. 2017). As a result of the emphasis on physical appearance, Korean media subconsciously show and emphasize the importance of physical

transformation and outer beauty especially towards women (Choi 2019; Un 2007).

This study intended to analyze the concept of beauty represented in a *Webtoon* entitled “*True Beauty*”. *Webtoon* is one of the cultural products of South Korea. The term “webtoon” referred to mobile cartoons, digital comics, or web *manhwa* in Korea. *Manhwa* was initially influenced by the styles of foreign comics. Then, the Korean *Webtoons*, using the digital platform and portals emerged in the context of the socio-cultural characteristics of South Korea. It raises issues such as social issues from everyday life, such as poverty, cyberbullying, suicide, youth unemployment, and domestic violence, and revolves around the setting in South Korean society (Jang and Song 2017). In other words, *webtoon* conveyed the South Korean Culture through its stories, thus made its one of the cultural product which can be enjoyed by the readers all over the world.

True Beauty is series written by Yaongyi is one of the most popular works on the platform and it is always placed on the big three among the drama genre which accessible in more than four languages. In addition, its popularity has made the *webtoon* adapted into a Korean Drama with the same title and released in 2021. *True Beauty* *Webtoon* tells a story about an ugly Korean middle-school girl named Jugyeong Lim who transformed herself using makeup to fit in the society. This story is interesting to be used as an object because of the media used to narrate the story and the issue that is

raised. The issue in comics usually taken from everyday concerns (McCloud 1994). Thus, *True Beauty* Webtoon represents the happening issue among the youth, not only in Korea but also in the global readers (Jin 2015). In search of identity, young girls tend to use adornments or even went through plastic surgery. Throughout the process, it could be harmful to them because of the pressure to look perfect (Voinea 2017; Herring and Kapidzic 2015). Furthermore, the webtoon highlighted makeup rather than plastic surgery as a tool to transform a girl's appearance, which raised a new perspective regarding the Korean beauty industry that identical to plastic surgery. Lastly, throughout the story, the webtoon is assumed to deliver the notion of the true beauty that is rarely depicted by the media, in which it is assumed as how a woman negotiates the outer and inner beauty as she lives in a lookist society.

Appearance transformation-themed works were many, especially in Korean Pop Culture (Streng 2018). Korean Webtoon has similarities with movies because it focuses on images than the texts (Jang and Song 2017) and these works were also parts of the Korean Wave, knowing its differences and similarities in portraying women and beauty were useful to create deeper comprehension towards Korean Culture. For instance, a universally recognized Korean movie entitled *200 Pounds of Beauty* tells a story about a ghost singer for a pop star who chose to undergo some plastic surgery procedures to get the man that she likes; a Korean drama entitled *Birth of a Beauty* which tells a story about a wife who wanted to get her husband back and decided to do plastic surgery; and a Korean television show, *Let Me In*,

which helps transforms ugly people through plastic surgery because they previously went through misfortunes.

Despite the similarity of the theme, these works have fundamental differences with *True Beauty* Webtoon. First, *True Beauty* is narrated through digital comics as its media, but the others through television. Moreover, it is correlated with the subject and the target of the works. *True Beauty* is a digital comic that can be accessed through a smartphone, in which the readers have easier and faster access to it. Thus, the youth is the target of this platform, because they are categorized as tech-savvy (Jang and Song 2017). Other than that, comics are media to deliver messages (McCloud, 1993), especially digital comic, which has unique narrative rhythm in it. By reading digital comics, the readers are engaged in “feeling the momentum” by the separation of the panels and the finger-swiping motion that they do when reading it. In other words, the readers can adjust their pace of reading thus engage more in the process of meaning-making (Aggleton 2019). In conclusion, compared to other media, *True Beauty* Webtoon is distinct and has its significance.

The Beauty Myth theory by Naomi Wolf is used in this study to reveal how beauty is framed in *True Beauty* Webtoon. This theory proposed the idea that the existence of beauty myths disadvantage women. The beauty myth produced the beauty ideals that were shown by the media as a benchmark for women to fulfill. Women feared other women, and they felt obliged to satisfy

men with beauty. Moreover, the theory stated that how “beauty” was defined was bound to be shifting. Therefore, this theory is suitable in supporting this study which aimed to analyze how beauty is framed by the author through the webtoon.

Previous studies have been conducted regarding beauty and media, specifically in South Korea. The first study which conducted in 2018 entitled *Representasi Kecantikan Wanita dalam Drama Seri Korea Oh My Venus*, by Luckytasari and Citra. This study aims to investigate the representation of beauty in Korean drama using Barthes’ semiotics, and it finds that beauty is associated with a slim body and facial features. The second study was conducted by Bissell and Chung in 2009 entitled “*Americanized beauty? Predictors of perceived attractiveness from US and South Korean participants based on media exposure, ethnicity, and socio-cultural attitudes toward ideal beauty*” which aims to compare the perspective of South Korean and USA about attractiveness and beauty along with the influence of US media on South Koreans’ attractiveness ideals. Using Cultivation theory and online survey, they found that South Koreans were unsatisfied with their overall appearance and their standards of beauty are influenced by Western standards. Lastly, a study conducted by Maryann McCabe in 2017, entitled “*Women, makeup, and authenticity: Negotiating embodiment and discourses of beauty*”, aims to examine women’s makeup practices in the United States. By interviewing 28 women with different

backgrounds, they found that the makeup rituals women did were for their satisfaction and they produce authenticity by doing it.

The previous studies helped this study in understanding the correlation between Korean Beauty, youth, and makeup's role for women. Moreover, the beauty myth theory helped this study in achieving a better understanding of women's beauty and its relation with society. By combining the previous studies, the theory, and analyzing the webtoon's narrative and non-narrative elements, this study aims to find how beauty is portrayed by the author.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Based on the background above, the statement of the problem can be formulated into:

1. How is beauty portrayed by True Beauty Webtoon?

1.3 Objective of the Study

This study's objective is to find out the way beauty is portrayed by *True Beauty* Webtoon.

1.4 Significance of the study

This study focused on the study of feminism and digital comic, to be precise, Wolf's beauty myth concept and Korean digital comic, Webtoon. Thus, the writer hopes that it will be useful for those who wanted to conduct

research using these materials, as the beauty myth concept is dynamic and the definition of beauty keeps changing throughout time. Moreover, digital comics nowadays have become one of the cultural products that rich in meaning. This makes them deserve to be used as objects, especially in Cultural Studies major.

1.5 Definitions of Key Terms

Beauty Myth: The use of images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement

Outer Beauty: The beauty of the body; related to physical features

Inner Beauty: The beauty of the soul; related to personality traits

True Beauty Webtoon: A series by Yaongyi released in 2018 on a platform for digital comics owned by Naver Corp