

# The Female Beauty Myth Fostered by the Mass Media

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**Abstract**—This paper starts with a critical view of beautiful female images in the mass media being frequently generated by a stereotypical Korean concept of beauty. Several female beauty myths have evolved in Korea during the present decade. Nearly all of them have formed due to a deeply-ingrained androcentric ideology which objectifies women. Mass media causes the public to hold a distorted concept about female beauty. There is a huge gap between women in reality and representative women in the mass media. It is essential to have an unbiased perception of female images presented in the mass media.

Due to cosmetic advertisements projecting contemporary images of female beauty to promote products, cosmetics images will be examined in regard to female beauty myths portrayed by the mass media. This paper will analyze features of female beauty myths in Korea and their intrinsic characteristics.

**Keywords**—Cosmetics Advertisements, Female Beauty Myth, Korean ideologies, Roland Barthes' Mythology Theory

## I. INTRODUCTION

**K**OREAN society has forced preconceived ideas about beauty and aesthetics on women. These concepts seem to be foisted on women but not men. There seem to be preconceived uniform ideas about female beauty, which all appeared to be draped in myth.

The mass media have played a dominant role in producing and popularizing this egregious myth. The media are constantly conveying numerous mythologies and ideologies which reflect the current era via powerful images, sounds and language. The images represented by several media produce hyper-image which look far more real than they actually are.

*Jean Baudrillard* explains the differences between actual and represented images via his Simulation Theory. According to him, Simulating the present involves a process utilizing a hyper-reality model a reality which is neither original nor factual. The representational and/or imaginary world disappears in simulation. Hence, reality can easily be manipulated.

Reality becomes hyper-reality: a synthetic product which radiate out from a combination of hyper-space without atmosphere. Reality becomes hyper-reality: a synthetic product which radiate out from a combination of hyper-space without atmosphere. [1] He also explains the gap between reality and a reproduced image when he believes that 'Exercising a force effectively is only simulation, not reality.' [2]

By utilizing this Simulation Theory, one can conclude that there is a considerable gap between reproduced media images and actual women. Furthermore, representational beauty appears more realistic (hyper-realistic) than actual beauty.

## II. RESEARCH OBJECTS

Cosmetics advertisements tend to portray a uniform standard of female beauty of the current era. Very often, they intentionally deliver programed concepts about beauty to the general Korean public, thereby, forcing Korean women to fit stereotypical images, which conform to prevailing aesthetic principles dictated by Korean media. In this respect, cosmetics advertising images become a suitable text with which to analyze female beauty myths fostered by the mass media during the 2010 decade.

First of all, advertising images of the five best selling companies will be selected from mass media such as the world-wide-web, magazines and billboards.

Then a few carefully selected images will be classified into two basic kinds of signs: imaginary sign and lingual sign.

Based on the preselected criteria, a few representational images will be chosen to reflect frequently used cosmetics advertisements, which are typical of average cosmetics advertising images from the 2010 era.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*Roland Barthes' Mythology Theory* will be chosen as a research method due to its suitability for examining myths and ideologies via photographic analysis.

According to Roland Barthes, we can find again the tri-dimensional pattern which I have just described: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semio-logical chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semio-logical system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. [3]

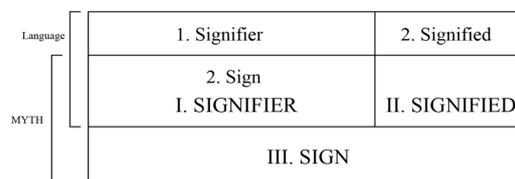


Fig. 1 Two semio-logical system by Roland Barthes: language and myth [4]

It can be seen that in myth there are two semio-logical systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language (or the modes of representation which are assimilated to it), which I shall call the

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language-object, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call the meta language, because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first. When he reflects on a meta language, the semio-logist no longer needs to ask himself question about the composition of the language-object, he no longer has to take into account the detail of the linguistic schema; he will only need to know its total term, or global sign, and only inasmuch as this term lends itself to myth. [5]

According to Roland Barthes, A myth is the most appropriate means to deliver the ideological inversion so called in our nature of society. It is a reality that a myth provided to the world. The myth gives back inartificial images of reality to the world. And the myth with the historical proper is accomplished by gradually disappeared. A reality is reversed by the magic trick of the myth, history disappears and the natures come and sit down. As a result, the function of a myth is to make a reality disappears. This is a literally outflow, hemorrhage and evaporation. In short, it is a detectable absence. [6]

A myth is the one and only prerogative place where the ideology of the ruling party could survive. Consequentially, in order to justify and absolutize the ideology of the ruling party, the myth leads the whole society to 'the world of self-pride' by cleverly manipulated political program. [7]

This research will provide a critique of projected female images in conjunction with a better understanding of myths in regard to female beauty myth by examining answers to research questions. The answers to these research questions are derived from mass media portrayals of Korean female beauty myths. To analyze certain advertising messages via a semiotic analysis of a few preselected female images, two research questions will be posed. They are as follows:

1. What will be the archetypal beautiful women from 2010, according to Korean cosmetics advertisements?
2. What is the female beauty myth and how is its hidden ideology by reflected in Korean cosmetics advertisements?

#### IV. SELECTING IMAGES

The 5 best selling cosmetics companies are *AMORE-PACIFIC*, *LG Household & Health Care*, *Able C&C*, *Skin Food* and *Coreana*. [8]

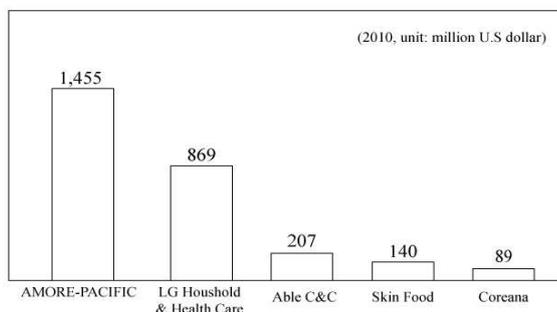


Fig. 2 The total sales of the 5 best selling cosmetics companies, Financial Supervisory Service, 2010

Among them, excluding several male and unisex products, which do not use female models and human figures in their advertisements, are 10 brands of *AMORE-PACIFIC*, 8 brands of *LG Household & Health Care*, 1 brand of *Able C&C*, 1 brand of *Skin Food* and 3 brands of *Coreana*, totaling 23 brands from 5 companies.

TABLE I  
NUMBER OF BRANDS & ADVERTISING IMAGES FROM 5 BEST SELLING COSMETICS COMPANIES

Company	Number of brands	Number of advertising images
<i>AMORE-PACIFIC</i>	10	35
<i>LG Household &amp; Health Care</i>	8	54
<i>Able C&amp;C</i>	1	14
<i>Skin Food</i>	1	1
<i>Coreana</i>	3	12
Total Number	23	116

In analyzing female beauty myths fostered by the mass media during the 2010 decade, 116 images are selected, which are then posted on web sites readily accessible to the general public. Even today, each of these brands has been posted on homepages and one can easily find them on the web – in other words, advertisements which are pervasive and easily visible will be utilized for image analysis. Some images from the same time period and which have similar features will be omitted due to unnecessary duplication. Only images from different time periods will be used.

Based on these criteria, 116 advertisements in the same period and 23 brands from five cosmetics companies will be collated in the 1st step of the analysis.

Cosmetics advertising concepts vary greatly depending upon the type of cosmetics. Cosmetics can be classified into three basic types: skin care, facial makeup and color-makeup products. Among the 116 selected images, the number of images matching each type is as follows.

TABLE II  
PRODUCT NUMBER

Skin Care	Facial Makeup	Color Makeup	TOTAL
92	13	11	116

The primary objective of all skin care products is to produce healthy and beautiful skin. The primary objective of all facial makeup products is to make skin look healthy and beautiful. Because both are skin products, advertising concepts are very similar - a moist, radiant and clear skin

In contrast, color makeup products emphasize fancy colors and concentrate on highlighting specific areas of the face, such as eyes and lips.



Fig. 3 Facial makeup product advertisement, AMORE-PACIFIC cosmetics brand, Espoir, 2012



Fig. 6 Color makeup product advertisement, Able C&C cosmetics brand, MISHA, 2012



Fig. 4 Skin care product advertisement, LG Household & Health Care cosmetics brand, OHUI, 2012



Fig. 5 Color makeup product advertisement, Coreana cosmetics brand, Tenseconds, 2012

Because of those different functions of products, advertising concepts of both skin care and face makeup products become similar compare to advertising concepts of color makeup products.

Thus, only 100 advertising images of both skin care and face makeup products will be targeted for this analysis which have similar concepts and much more manufacture than color makeup products.

V. IMAGES CLASSIFICATIONS

A. Color Classifications

In analyzing the final 100 selected images, they will be classified according to two different kinds of signs: imaginary and lingual signs.

An imaginary sign involves color (primary color, secondary color and clothing color) as well as a model's pose (face, body and gaze direction, and hair style). A lingual sign involves advertising copy analysis. When classifying every color (except white, black, gold and silver), they will be grouped according to color similarity.

TABLE III  
THE NUMBER OF PRIMARY COLOR

Color	Number of images	%
white	40	40%
blue	14	14%
gold	10	10%
yellow	8	8%
grey	7	7%
pink	7	7%
violet	6	6%
green	4	4%
black	2	2%
red	1	1%
silver	1	1%
brown	0	0%
total	100	100%

When using more than two colors, if one specific color is used for more than 50% of an area, it is generally classified as the primary color.

A primary character of classifying color is that white is the most often used color. Numbers of images which use white as a

primary color are 40 of 100. The second most often used primary color is 14% of blue, such as Sky Blue, Cerulean Blue and Blue Gray.

90 degrees	20	20%
front	19	19%
15 degrees	6	6%
Total	100	100%



Fig. 7 40 images, using white as the primary color

Direction of gaze	Number of images	%
front	74	74%
45 degrees	23	23%
90 degrees	2	2%
15 degrees	1	1%
Total	100	100%

A posture the most commonly used is that turning a face and body in the direction of 45 degrees (53%, 54%) and staring at camera (front) (73%). Representative images are as follows.

TABLE IV  
IN TOTAL THE NUMBER OF COLORS; PRIMARY COLOR, SECONDARY COLOR AND CLOTHING COLOR

Color	Number of images	%
white	109	42.5%
black	23	8.91%
gold	22	8.53%
blue	21	8.14%
yellow	19	7.36%
grey	19	7.36%
pink	18	6.98%
violet	10	3.88%
green	8	3.10%
red	5	1.94%
silver	3	1.16%
brown	1	0.39%
total	258	100%

In total the number of colors; primary color, secondary color and clothing color, the most often used color is white, 109 of 258, 42.5%. Considering the second commonly used color is 8.91% of black.

B. Posture Classifications

TABLE V  
POSTURE CLASSIFICATIONS

Direction of face	Number of images	%
45 degrees	53	53%
front	18	18%
15 degrees	7	7%
90 degrees	3	3%
Total	100	100%

Direction of body	Number of images	%
45 degrees	54	54%



Fig. 8 The most frequently used posture, AMORE-PACIFIC cosmetics brand, ISA KNOX advertisement, 2011



Fig. 9 The most frequently used modeling posture, AMORE-PACIFIC cosmetics brand, Hannule advertisement, 2011

C. Hair Style Classifications

TABLE VI  
HAIR STYLE CLASSIFICATIONS

Hair style	Number of images	%
hair in a bun	50	50%
long hair	20	20%
ponytail	14	14%
short hair	11	11%
shoulder-length hair	5	5%
total	100	100%

The most frequently used hair style is a hair in a bun, shows the percentage of 50%, similar to Korean traditional female hair style. Each of hair style is as following.



Fig. 10 A woman wearing her hair in a bun, AMORE-PACIFIC cosmetics brand, OHUI advertisement, 2012



Fig. 11 A woman wearing her hair in a bun, AMORE-PACIFIC cosmetics brand, Hannule advertisement, 2011



Fig. 12 A woman with long hair, AMORE-PACIFIC cosmetics brand, Laneige advertisement, 2010



Fig. 13 A woman with a pony tail, AMORE-PACIFIC cosmetics brand, Mamonde, 2010



Fig. 14 a woman with short hair, Coreana cosmetic brand, Senite advertisement., 2011



Fig. 15 a woman with shoulder-length hair, LG Household & Health Care cosmetics brand, OHUI advertisement, 2012

D. Advertising Copies Classifications

TABLE VII  
ADVERTISING COPIES CLASSIFICATIONS

Meaning	Words	Number of Used
light	light, shine, bright, sun, morning, skin-lightening, brilliant, radiant	46
white	white, snow, skin-lightening, whitening	41
water	moisture, water, mist, aqua, wash, fog	41
time	age, youthfulness	18
texture	elasticity, fine, smooth, sleek	15
energy	energy, power, vitality, liveliness, confidence	12
purity	pure, pellucid, clear	6

Looking at the lingual signs, number of the most frequent used words conveying meaning of light, such as light, shine, bright, sun, morning, skin-lightening, brilliant, radiant, are 46. The second most used words contain meaning of white, such as white, snow, skin-lightening, whitening, these words are used 41 times.

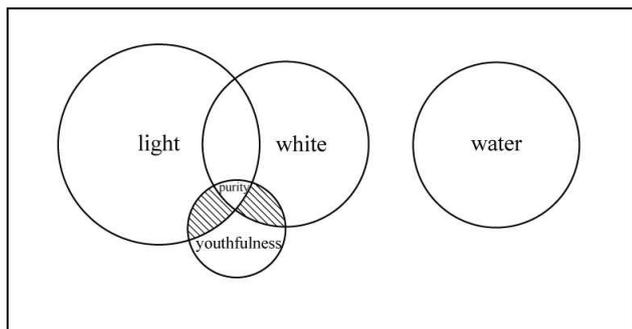


Fig. 16 Venn Diagram of advertising copies

Analyzing both groups according to the meaning of light and white, sharing 16 commonalities; skin-lightening or whitening refers to making one’s skin lighter and brighter, similar to the color white.

The overlapping of three words groups; light, white and youthfulness results in purity. These three groups share a common understanding of purity, such as pure, pellucid and clear.

By classifying both imagery and lingual signs, it is possible to conclude that most cosmetics advertisings aim to deliver messages such as becoming brighter and lighter by using white in conjunction with the words light, white and purity. A few images which are closely associated with these classifications are carefully selected in analyzing female beauty myths.

VI. MYTHOLOGY ANALYSIS

A. A chaste maiden is beautiful.

After classifying female images, the closest image to an average cosmetics advertisement during the 2010 decade is the following image.



Fig. 17 AMORE-PACIFIC cosmetics brand, Laneige advertisement, 2010

TABLE VIII  
IMAGINARY SIGN OF AN AMORE-PACIFIC COSMETICS BRAND, LANEIGE  
ADVERTISEMENT IN 2010

SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
the white clothing of the woman	bride, nun

around her head	chastity, purity
white color background	chastity, purity
SIGNIFICATION	
A chaste maiden is beautiful.	
If one uses the product, she will be a beautiful and pure woman like a bride or nun.	

The above image is AMORE-PACIFIC’s cosmetics brand, Laneige advertising in 2010. The model turned aside her face and stares at the screen. Text on the right: ‘whitening’ and ‘lightening up’ delivers a clear message about ‘white’, amongst other information.

Due to the background color of this image and the model’s clothing color being white, the entire image is dominated by the color white. The white clothing of the woman around her head is reminiscent of a bridal veil or nun’s clothing. The white image above can be viewed as the symbol of a nun and/or a bride’s chastity. Both imagery and language reinforce the myth that a woman’s beauty is enhanced by her chastity.

The long standing Korean notion of female chastity became a prerequisite of female beauty that evolved from Confucianist beliefs into a single patriarchal race mythology.

Patriarchy is a family system with a family unit consisting of a male who is the head of a household. Emphasis is placed on. This paternal family system invariably leads to discriminatory sexual repression which requires every female to be chaste.

Historically, Korea was frequently invaded by China and Japan. These invasions resulted in many Korean women being raped. Due to the large number of women who were raped by foreign invaders, Korean men felt that their patriarchal racial origin myth was being seriously undermined. The perceived threat caused even more severe female oppression. Women who lost their virginity to invaders were forced to either commit suicide or they were expelled from their communities.

In other words, traditional Korean society to a very large extent valued female chastity in order to preserve patriarchal concepts. While the rapid influx of modern Western values has weakened traditional oppressive thinking, notions involving placing a high value on women's chastity persists.

B. An naive woman is perceived as being beautiful.



Fig. 18 LG Household & Health Care cosmetics brand, Sureohan, advertisement, 2012

TABLE IX  
IMAGINARY SIGN OF A LG HOUSEHOLD & HEALTH CARE COSMETICS BRAND, SUREOHAN, ADVERTISEMENT IN 2012

SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
a woman who stares far-away	dreaming, far from reality
a woman with her hands on her chin	day-dreaming, being caught up in a fantasy
white color light	purity, a dream world, naivety
SIGNIFICATION	
A woman who is far from reality, dreaming and naively perceived as being beautiful.	
If one uses the product, one will be a naive and in a dream world where everything is pure, much like this female image.	

The image above is a LG Household & Health Care's cosmetics brand, Sureohan, advertisement in 2012. A bright white light radiates from the product illuminating the woman's face brightly. The woman in a white light, touches her face while staring beyond the frame of the screen, as though it were paradise.

In the direction of her gaze is text which reads:

' Remove the color of age and convey the purity of white.'

This image conveys a message that the product enables one to overcome the natural aging process and attain a paradise beyond reality. So that the woman is beautiful and a maiden pure in heart who are far from reality.

C. Young women are viewed as being beautiful.



Fig. 19 LG Household & Health Care cosmetics brand, OHUI, advertisement, 2011.

TABLE X  
IMAGINARY SIGN OF A LG HOUSEHOLD & HEALTH CARE COSMETICS BRAND, OHUI, ADVERTISEMENT IN 2011

SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
a woman who is covered in snow snow	childish, naïve white, pure, clean, pellucid
SIGNIFICATION	
A Young and naive woman is beautiful.	
White, pure, clean and pellucid are conditions of female beauty.	
If one uses the product, one will be a naive, and pure woman like the woman in an image.	

The next image is an LG Household & Health Care cosmetics brand, OHUI, advertisement in 2011. The woman's shoulder divides the screen diagonally. This division conveys a more dynamic impression compared to either a horizontal or vertical split. By means of such a split, the woman appears to be active and dynamic in regard to health.

Via the text on the right, 'young light' imparts a message that women can be younger and more active by applying the product.

The actual age of the model is the early 30s. She tied her hair up and looks up like a child contact. Such a pose makes her look younger.

The white light pouring from behind the woman's body, the light above her head and shoulders are represented as snow covered her body. It is reminiscent of a pure child who enjoys snow.

The color of white which is used above image symbolizes purity like kids. Normally, it often uses a simile a children often do not ask the world to be likened children to a white canvas.

These two advertising images produce a myth that "A younger and ingenuous woman is beautiful."

This myth exposes prevailing male chauvinism and male-dominated ideology. Patriarchal Korean society values immature concepts of female beauty which do not threaten male hegemony.

Even though a woman is an adult, she may not be interested in reality, therefore, she would not interfere in a male dominated society, which makes it possible for men to maintain their domination.

D. Western women are perceived as being beautiful.



Fig. 20 LG Household & Health Care’s cosmetics brand, the history of Whoo, advertisement, 2012

These images deliver a potent message to a would be customer: If the customer uses this product, she will become as beautiful as any Greek goddess.

The text on right portrays: ‘an empress who is as delicate as a snowflake with a radiant and glowing skin’. The snow metaphor is reminiscent of the color white, a heavenly symbol which is detached from a soiled and complex reality, where the beautiful western goddess (white woman) resides.

This image fortifies the myth that “Western women are more beautiful.”

This mythical belief results from cultural toadyism. In contemporary Korean society, cultural preferences in favor of Western superiority are rampant.

Due to cultural toadyism, western women’s appearances become a benchmark for female beauty. Most Koreans are Mongol descent. Because a Mongoloid typically has a flat nose and slender eyes compare to Westerners, Western female appearances became the standard for female beauty in Korea. However, in the process it raises a social dilemma resulting in many Korean women having plastic surgery in order to look more Western.

VII. CONCLUSION

The female beauty myth produced by cosmetics advertisements from analysis of myth is about “pure women, young and naïve women, and women having white skin of white race are beautiful.”

There are mainly two reasons how the myth has produced. Imitating long standing ideologies of Korea and purposely produced by capitalists (advertisers).

First, ‘Pure women are beautiful.’ and ‘Young and naïve women are beautiful.’ are simply imitating the old ideologies of Korea. In 2010s decade, still the myth for pure women and young and naïve women is used in cosmetic advertisements. That shows Korean long standing ideologies still exist. The myth of pure women are beautiful is derived from patriarchy. Giving sexual freedom for women can cause serious problems for maintaining patriarchal system. To maintain patriarchy, Korean society has sexually suppressed women and produced the myth, pure women are beautiful.

The myth of Young and naïve women are beautiful is derived from phallocracy, male-dominated ideology. Naïve women having no interest in complexity of the world, despite they are adults. Naïve women are the best for maintaining hegemony of men. So that, to maintain phallocracy, the myth of young and naïve women has produced.

Deliberately produced myths by capitalists (advertisers) are including young women and women having white skins of white race are beautiful. These are designed for pursuing profit of capitalists. The ruling class (capitalists) of capitalism is seducing consumers by making them be exposed to image processed by mass media to maintain the class and pursue more profit. Especially the image of women in commercial advertisements are processed under financial principles of capitalists.

TABLE XI

IMAGINARY SIGN OF A LG HOUSEHOLD & HEALTH CARE’S COSMETIC BRAND, THE HISTORY OF WHOO, ADVERTISEMENT IN 2012

SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
an ancient Greek temple	mythic, Greek myths
a woman wearing Greek clothing	a Greek goddess (Western myth)
the color white	mythic, heavenly
SIGNIFICATION	
Western women are perceived as being beautiful. If one uses the product, one will be like a Greek goddess with of a clear, white and bright skin.	

The image above is a LG Household & Health Care’s cosmetics brand, the history of Whoo, advertisement in 2012 targeting 30s to 40s women with concept of luxury and elegance.

To stimulate 30s~40s married women’s fantasy and desire, the history of Whoo has been using a text: empress. The text delivers a message a woman who uses this cosmetics could be a bright and beautiful empress.

The image of a woman occupies the whole left area of a screen when it is divided in a half vertically by a screen.

When the female image exceeds 50% of the screen, her persona becomes enhanced. Unlike the cosmetics case which is accompanied by traditional Korean calligraphy and pottery designs, the female image in this advertising is deliberately connected with Western concepts of female beauty.

A Greek temple is shown in the background. The dominant color is white. The woman is dressed in ancient Greek clothing. Her skin is bleached even lighter than the white temple building in the background.

They produce unrealizable and unachievable myths to get more profit, and the myths are turning into fantastical image in advertisements, seducing public. To boost more and continuous consumption, unrealizable and unachievable myths are better. So, capitalists have designed unrealistic myths.

In 2012, the myth of beauty chosen by Korean capitalists is 'women with white skin of white race and young women are beautiful.' These two myths are unachievable from the beginning. Korean women with Mongolian genes cannot be Western women, and it is impossible to become young backward through the time. But by producing stimulating image for the myths, it is possible to incite continuous consumption of consumers.

As it is mentioned above, the myth of female beauty produced by mass media in 2010 decade is designed to dilute the main reason of suppressing women for maintaining patriarchy and male-dominated ideology. Also it is for inducing public consumption by capitalists.

It is unreasonable to accept female beauty myth produced by mass media without any critical thinking. The myth is not unconditional and changing under ideologies of the era. The myth will be changed too when ideologies of the time changes. Compare to Korean, Countries with different cultures and histories might have different myth of beauty. Comparing and analyzing myths of women's beauty of other countries with Korean can be a meaningful study.

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