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### How culture affects Asia's pursuit of beauty

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# WARC

## How culture affects Asia's pursuit of beauty

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5 min read

Shilpa Madan and Shankha Basu

### WARC

WARC Exclusive, December 2018

#### Summary

**New research indicates that Asian countries have different attitudes toward beauty than Western markets.**

- Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong have long been the top spenders (per capita) for skincare worldwide.
- For percentage of beauty spend vs GDP, four of the top five countries were in Asia: Japan (0.63%), South Korea (0.53%), Hong Kong (0.45%), and Thailand (0.40%) lead the top five, with UK (0.42%), the sole Western country, coming in at number four.
- Asian people are more likely to feel obligated to conform to socially defined beauty ideals.
- The pursuit of beauty can be harmful when taken to extreme – this can be reduced by creating organisational cultures and environments that are diverse, with a more inclusive definition of beauty.



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The quest for beauty is universal, but are some cultures more motivated than others?

The beautiful princess, a handsome prince and an ugly villain. While the villain is left to rot (often in jail or in hell), the prince and princess live happily ever after. But this is just folklore, right? Surprisingly, when it comes to beauty, such success is not limited to fairy tales.

Studies (<http://psycnet.apa.org/record/1973-09160-001>) have shown that “beautiful people” are more likely to get better grades, earn more, and are luckier in love. In the job market, attractive candidates are more likely to get hired, be considered more talented, command higher salaries, and gain greater co-operation. So, it's not really difficult to see why the allure of beauty is not just strong, but compelling.

### Asia's dominance of the beauty market

Although at “face-value” it seems the pursuit of beauty is universal, industry evidence suggests that this pursuit of beauty is even stronger in Asia. Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong have long been the top spenders (per capita) for skincare worldwide. Asia also has the highest concentration of plastic surgeons (<https://www.isaps.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/2016-ISAPS-Results-1.pdf>), with one in every three women aged between 19 – 29 having admitted to undergoing plastic surgery in South Korea. In China, ‘plastic surgeries’ are being gifted to teenagers (<https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2016/07/plastic-surgery-for-high-school-grads/>) as they enter competitive job market. Asia is not only driving massive growth for beauty multinationals but is also the innovation powerhouse – with blockbusters such as BB creams and sheet masks originating here.

In our [research](https://doi.org.libproxy.smu.edu.sg/10.1509/jim.17.0064) (https://doi.org.libproxy.smu.edu.sg/10.1509/jim.17.0064), forthcoming in the Journal of International Marketing, we aimed to understand how culture (East vs. West) affects the pursuit of beauty. Using both industry data and laboratory and online studies across five countries, we found that Easterners (vs. Westerners) are more likely to use appearance-enhancing products.

## **The Beauty Hierarchy**

We obtained country-level spending on beauty categories (in USD million) from the Passport Database for 2016. We then ranked the countries on their beauty spends as a percentage of their Gross Domestic Product for the same year. This allowed us to accurately capture the pursuit of beauty by the citizens in each country, irrespective of the state of economic development or overall size of the market, which could be driven by the sheer size of population. Ranking countries on this basis revealed the Asian preference for beauty, with four out of the top five countries being in Asia. Japan (0.63%), South Korea (0.53%), Hong Kong (0.45%), and Thailand (0.40%) lead the top five tally with UK (0.42%), the sole Western country, coming in at number four.

Having established the phenomenon using industry data, we then proceeded to conduct laboratory and online studies to develop a more detailed understanding of the underlying mechanism that drives Easterners' pursuit of beauty.

## **Conformity to beauty norms**

In our first study, conducted with female participants in China and Canada, we presented both sets of participants with a hypothetical beauty product – a skin tone perfecting cream with benefits that were sought after in both countries. We found that Chinese participants had a more positive attitude towards the hypothetical beauty product, they were more likely to buy it, and were willing to pay more for it than the Canadian participants.

With the advent of smartphones, appearance enhancing tools have broadened in scope from skincare and cosmetics to selfie and image enhancing apps. The functionality of these apps includes creating a flawless complexion, creating bigger, brighter eyes, sharper nose, angular jawline, removing dark circles, whitening teeth and even putting on make up. Given the pervasive presence of internet and smartphones in consumers' lives today, it is to be expected that these technologies are being used in the pursuit of beauty. Hence, to make our research more inclusive to the changing digital and beauty landscape, we decided to explore the impact of culture on the adoption and usage of such image-enhancing apps.

We conducted this study with participants from India and the US. Replicating the results of our first study, we again found that female participants from India were more likely to use these image enhancing apps than female participants from the US. We also found that this is driven by Easterners' tendency to 'fit in' and conform to societal norms. In other words, Easterners are more likely to feel obligated to conform to socially defined beauty ideals.

This motivation to fit in leads women to compare themselves to the ideal beauty standards revered by the society, resulting in self-discrepancy, i.e. the feeling of falling short on the ideal. Easterners use appearance-enhancing products and tools to reduce this gap between the ideal standard of beauty and how they see themselves.

## The darker side of the pursuit to beauty

Though mostly harmless and even a source of pleasure and camaraderie, this pursuit of beauty also has a dark side. The relentless pursuit of 'ideal' beauty as portrayed by the media has led to a worldwide surge in objectification, face and body shaming, body related disorders, and an obsession with plastic surgery. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the East (<https://mic.com/articles/111228/how-western-beauty-ideals-are-hurting-women-across-the-globe#.wvLhV6L.Dhl>), and has come at an individual and societal cost. Our final study was designed to find ways to mitigate this extreme pursuit of beauty. To accomplish this, we needed to reduce the motivation to conform to the ideal standards of beauty.

To that end, we asked participants to imagine they were going to interview for a job with one of two companies – one with very strong emphasis on appearance and the other with little concern about employees' appearance. We found that when undergraduate female participants in Singapore felt that the norms in a company they were interviewing with were loose with regards to appearance, they were less likely to use appearance-enhancing tools before the interview. These findings, hence, have important policy implications.

## Informing business and policy makers

Beauty plays diverse roles in women's lives – a conversation about just the harmful effects of beauty is unbalanced. It is also a source of pleasure, joy, confidence, and companionship.

Insights from this research can therefore inform both beauty businesses and policy makers. As firms look towards Asia for expansion, an understanding on the cultural influences on beauty can aid decision making about, but not limited to:

- product launches and assortment selection
- product attributes and benefits
- communications campaigns
- frontline sales training

However, the pursuit of beauty can indeed be harmful when taken to extreme. Policymakers can reduce this extreme focus on appearance by creating organisational cultures and environments that are diverse, with a more inclusive definition of beauty. Ensuring the focus is on skills and competencies instead of looks could be a simple but effective intervention.

## About the authors

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### Shilpa Madan

Adjunct Research Scholar, Graduate School of Business, Columbia University

Shilpa's research aspires to leverage cultural differences and lay beliefs for the greater good.

Before her PhD, Shilpa was a Global Marketing Manager at Unilever, having worked in Singapore and India, across home and personal care brands.

### Shankha Basu

Lecturer (Assistant Professor) of Marketing, Leeds University Business School

Shankha's research interests lie mainly in the area of consumer decision making.

Prior to the PhD, Shankha worked on retail banking strategy for one of the largest banks in India.

## Topics

**Cosmetics, beauty aids** ([http://www.warc.com.libproxy.smu.edu.sg//search/Toiletries\\_cosmetics/Cosmetics,%20beauty%20aids](http://www.warc.com.libproxy.smu.edu.sg//search/Toiletries_cosmetics/Cosmetics,%20beauty%20aids)) |

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