The Influence of Western Fashion in South Korea from 2000-2017.

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Abstract

This paper examines the influences westernization has had on South Korea during 2000 to 2017 as well as some historical origins that contributed to these adoptions of influences and ideals. These western influences have impacted the South Korean fashion and entertainment industry and have been evolving throughout the years. Americanization and Westernization has been greatly explored in South Korea which makes people wonder what the future has in store for South Korea. South Korea seems to have one dominant vision and it is America and Europe. The fashion and entertainment industry such as K-Pop will be explored and information backing up the influences the West has had on South Korea will be discovered. The influences of the West is contributing to South Korea’s sense of individualism and having a voice. Designers are resonating with the young voices in Korea creating power messages through dress and street culture, which has been becoming increasingly popular throughout the 2000s. Throughout this paper, one can see the contribution the West has on South Korea as well as the mixing of cultures that has resulted in success of the South Korean markets.

Keywords: Influences, South Korea, western, westernization, ideals, industry, Americanization, individualism

**Introduction:**

The South Korean fashion that we see today started in the 1800s. In the Joseon period, (1392-1897) the Korean *Hanbok* was the popular fashion choice. The *Hanbok* consisted of blouse and loose-fitting pants or skirts (Samuels, 2018). Women wore jeongi (blouse or jacket) and chima (skirt). The men wore jeongi and baji (pants). The *Hanbok* style was an everyday style but people also had fancy or lavish versions for special occasions (Samuels, 2018). Makeup was made from natural materials and was very minimal. After the arrival of the Japanese occupation and the westerners, South Koreans started to be influenced by the ideas and culture they brought with them. Korean fashion started to lose its traditional value and was starting to adapt to their trends and ideals.

In 1910 to 1940s japan occupied Korea where the Japanese promoted a new form of style called modernization (Samuels, 2018). These styles were mostly taken from America or Europe. The style consisted of men wearing suits, women wearing hairstyles such as the Gibson girl and also influences from the flapper girls in the 1920s (Samuels, 2018). Social changes were causing the change in fashion and style, as more women were working in factories. During World War 2, fashion had a more militaristic style that reflected the hard times and devastation that was happening in the world. This style lasted until the end of the war. According to the article *Evolution of South Korean and Makeup Culture* by Gabriella Samuels, poverty and shortages in fabrics required clothing to be simpler and often-in dark colors. The makeup, if worn, was also very simple and light (2018).

Contemporary movements in fashion started to have some momentum in the 1950s. the 1950s was a big decade in South Korea especially for the fashion industry. Markets dedicated to fashion were growing such as the Seoul’s Namdaemun Market and Dongdaemun Market, which produced their own clothing (Samuels, 2018). In 1954 the first fashion education was introduced in South Korea which contributed to upcoming designer’s knowledge of the fashion industry this school was called the International Western Clothing Company (Samuels, 2018). Journalism was also in all time high and many fashion magazines and columns were created such as the *Yeowon* magazine, Fashion Mode column and then later in 1964 *Uisang* magazine (Samuels,2018). The First Fashion show displayed a collection by the first Korean designer Nora Noh in 1957 and made many Koreans inspired to obtain a career in design (Samuels, 2018).

Similar to a lot of countries in the 1960s South Korea has experienced political turmoil and social and economic difficulties which caused drastic transformation over the years (Armstrong, 2003). Many of these events occurred after the Korean War in 1953 where approximately two million people lives were ended (Armstrong, 2003). After president Syngman Ree steps down after a student protest. A new constitution is formed, Second Republic which still limits the freedom of South Koreans (Armstrong, 2003). Throughout the years, this has been a prominent problem in South Korean; the limitations of freedom and power they want to obtain. Even though the country was going through many changes and challenges, South Korea in the 1960s continued with an upward movement and “marked a new wave of fashion” (Samuels, 2018). Introducing miniskirts and make up which was moderately bowered from the United States and Europe. The use of natural materials such as wool was greatly focused during this time and was focused on being economical and refusing to buy products from other countries due to a stricter government (Samuels, 2018). Korean makeup was also launched and created buzz around South Korea and the United States.

A shift of fashion trends was developing by the 1970s when the consumer became the trendsetter for fashion instead of the designer. Street wear or Urban Modernization push the development of off the rack brands, brand-focused stores, and department stores who offered new and more accessible distribution channels (Samuel, 2018). Korea was soon going to be led by president Park Chung Hee, which set a conservative environment that many Koreans considered harsh. This harsh environment created rebellion towards the youth, fashion started to become a symbol of protest and resistance (Samuels, 2018). This rebellion caused hemlines for women to become shorter and punk clothing to become more prominent (Samuel, 2018).

It wasn’t until the 1980’s where Korea started to return into a democracy and industries started to slowly boom especially in the high-tech and computer industry (Armstrong, 2003). The 1980s also witnessed a youth-led fashion movement and introduced a more casual wear which could resemble the some of the street wear clothing that we see today. More of this youth led fashion movement was starting to be seen when Korean Pop industry entered the scene in the 1990s and put a noticeable stamp on K-fashion and the K-beauty culture. Korean beauty industry was growing and new products such as skin lightening creams and skin tightening creams were very popular in and outside of Asia (Samuel, 2018). Not far behind, South Korea was gaining more international recognition because of the Korean fashion designer Lee Cinu first showcase in Paris (Samuel, 2018).

In the 2000’s “K-fashion and K-beauty products and culture continued to have an impact on the global market (Samuel, 2018). These products had more accessibility because of the internet and Smartphone’s. According to Samuels (2018), The domestic and global consumer was more accessible to new trends that K-fashion and K-beauty were introducing to the public and this stated a frenzy in Korean culture. Especially in Europe where many French people love Korean culture and music because it resembles elements of Euro pop according to Quartz (2012). The United States is also a huge fan of Korean culture and is one of the biggest consumers of K-beauty which is now found in many beauty supply stores all over the country. South Korea is now competing with a lot of majored fashion cities all over the world. Seoul is now competing with western fashion cities such as New York and Paris (Samuels, 2018). As a reader we got to see over the years how much South Korea has evolved in the fashion industry and how they are possibly are still going to be progressing. Throughout this essay, we will see how South Korea adopted the process of westernization, how western fashion influenced the South Korean entertainment and fashion industry and finally get to see how South Korea is taking the fashion world by storm.

**Literature Review**:

Westernization is a term used to define the adoption of western culture within an area that is not commonly associated with the western world. Westernization in countries can cover elements such as industry, technology, lifestyle, values and politics (Thong, 2012). Westernization can lead to countries and cultural groups developing a new way of thinking and acting, which can cause sub-groups or even change hoe more than half of the countries behaves. In this case, western fashion has caused South Korea to develop these ideas into their culture and even created their own styles and adoptions around the western fashion.

Westernization is suggested to being brought about through colonization of a country, for example the British Empire colonizing the majority of Asia in the “Imperial Century” from 1815-1914 (Norton,2014). This contributed to Britain forcing their own trade into their culture, which then caused parts of Asia to adopt British culture these events cause them to force trade into their economic and culture and started the adoption process of taking in British culture (Norton, 2014). This can be considered an act of globalization.

Westernization is huge in South Korea more than ever, not only for their fashion and for music industry that is very much influenced by American trends such as street not only wear or rap/trap music. The food industry is becoming diversified especially in supermarkets. There are entire sections of ‘super foods’ like quinoa and oatmeal which was impossible to find before (Sul, 2015), as well as entire isles of cereal and exotic foods (Sul, 2015). Popular retail chains like Starbucks weren’t even found 10 years ago but now are found everywhere, not only in Seoul (Sul, 2015). Diversification of distribution channels has been also increasing which is attributed to the rise of online and mobile shopping (Rhee, 2017).

 Many international consumers are interested in K- beauty and K-fashion and are researching and informing themselves with this information. Zaneta Cheng in *Korean Fashion Takes on the West* and *Evolution of South Korean Fashion and Makeup Culture* by Gabriella Samuels are articles that show evidence of this. These two articles talk about the evolution of the fashion and K-beauty industry throughout the years, how westernization has contributed to their idea and designs. The articles also discuss why these products fascinate many westerners, which is due to the familiarity of the products in their country or region and the uniqueness of their niche market.

The secret to K-fashions success may lie in what German critical theorist Theodor Adorno dubbed as “pseudo- individualism” which the ability to appear different yet familiar at the same time (Cheng, 2018). This can certainly explain why K-Fashion has been very popular in America and European countries because it a mix of international styles with their own culture and values. Korean designers are starting to add social issues or politics in their clothing in order to make a political statement through dress. Many South Korea and feel like their voices are not being heard. An example of this is in the article *Korean street wear takes the global fashion scene by storm* by Jeena Sharma in where she talks about how upcoming designers are using sense of humor to send out subversive messages or salty remarks to show personality and to mock pop culture.

The adoption process of westernization:

The adoption process in South Korea started with the occupation of Japan, which the Japanese government promoted the term modernization (Samuels, 2018). The Japanese incorporated a lot of their culture to the Korean culture and many Koreans felt like they did not have a sense of individuality or freedom. During the Korean War, the United States protected the country and this image still lives on. South Korea sees the United States as a protector and powerful country due to their military presence in which the United States still maintains (Quartz, 2012). From there on South Korea became westernized or even americanized. An example of this is in the 1950s when South Korea was influenced by Americans to do new hairstyles such as crimped hair and to incorporate brighter makeup to their routine. The swimsuit industry was also growing due to the popularity that was also influenced by the US (Samuels, 2018).

In the 1960s, the Beatles were the biggest western musicians in the world. The Beatles influenced people all over the world to dress in a unique way paving the way for the hippy culture and dress. The miniskirt was very big in South Korea and incorporated in the new hippy culture (Samuels, 2018).

There is no denying that the youth has been leading the fashion movement since the 1960’s. In the 1980s, casual wear was the popular trend in South Korea that was mostly worn by the youth. With the start of hip-hop culture in the late 80s, we saw street wear gaining popularity in the United States. South Korea was highly influenced by this culture and is still being influenced today. Garments like T-shirts, jumpers and blue jeans became the typical fashion, along with western brand Reebok (Samuels, 2018). The 1980s is also know for very big hair and bright makeup which emphasized on blush and eye shadow, this was also seen in Korea due to the 80s movies and TV shows that were popular in America (Samuels,2018).

The adaptation process started to grow fondly on South Korea with the developments of the Entertainment industry such as Korean Pop (Kpop). K-pop was highly influenced by the music seen in the West such as hip-hop, rap, pop and R&B. The first K-pop group Seo Tae-ji and Boys introduced a new style that was heavily influenced in hip-hop and rap culture and led the Korean fashion world we see today (Samuels, 2018). This style of fashion is increasing in South Korea. Street wear is causing a massive cultural shift (Sharma, 2017). London based independent exhibition curator and creative lead at the Hyman Active, Tory Turk says, “I think it’s about youth cultures obsession with desiring to be unique and ubiquitous” (Sharma, 2017). This statement can be contradicting but it is true many people especially in the youth culture want to dress relevant but in a unique way where it does not seem basic or like everyone else. This is why street wear has become so popular in western countries and in Korea, it allows mixing and matching and it does not have many rules.



*Figure 1*: Picture of First K-pop group Seo Tae-ji and Boys. Reprinted from gonggam.korea.kr, 2008. Retrieved from http://gonggam.korea.kr/newsView.do?newsId=01IbpG5wcDGJM000

Other western music such as grunge music also influenced fashion in South Korea. This style mostly adopted by the youth and was highly inspired by the band Nirvana that was very popular in Korea. The style consisted of oversized sweaters, flannel plaid shirts, and destroyed jeans. This style was a symbol of rebellion named the “resistance fashion” (Samuels, 2018).

Koreans beauty brands were also being influenced by western beauty brands and created a beauty standard among Koreans. These beauty standards influenced Koreans to do plastic surgery in order to look more “western”. Most women doing these surgeries lusted for double eyelids and wider eyes and V-shaped chins (Zinn, 2013). The huge selection of makeup in the western world influenced South Korea to develop new and large selections of products such as BB creams, facemask, skin tightening and lightening creams (Samuels, 2018). K-pop celebrities became the influencers of fashion trends and beauty trends that also influenced the Korean culture to have a new perspective of body image and skin/appearance of the people (Samuels, 2018).

Individualism and freedoms has always been the way of thinking and rights that Koreans want to obtain from the west. Since the popularity of street wear, culture has been growing; Korean designers have been incorporating political messages into their clothing. For example Korean designer and founder Chung Kwan- Young created a collection called Exposure for spring 2017 where the designer used the color khaki (commonly used as camouflage) to symbolize how the military “camouflages” its strict culture and weapons of destruction in order to attain peace (Sharma, 2017). Many Koreans want to have the rights to freedom of speech and want to protest just as many westerns do. Instead of starting a march or protest that can end horribly wrong; they incorporate it into their clothing to create a subtle but powerful message. This can have some resemblance to political western beliefs such as Black Lives Matter, which is printed, into T-shirt and hats.

**Western Fashion and the South Korean entertainment industry:**

Korean street wear today is far from what the traditional styles of the 1900s. The introduction of street wear has to do a lot with the music of K-pop and American hip-hop music which was been dominating both in the west and in South Korea. The main principles in western civilization are individualism, freedom and equality (Korea Herald, 2012). This breakthrough of street culture and style in South Korea is causing a massive culture shift and is changing the mindset of young South Koreans. In South Korea, it is all about free expression and individualism now (Sharma, 2017), which many Korean fashion designers and musicians are incorporating in their arts today. This is greatly being seen in the Korean entertainment industry, such as K-pop or K hip-hop.

In the 1990s K-pop entered the industry and created an indelible stamp on the K-Fashion and B-beauty culture (Samuels, 2018). K-pop is inspired by the sound that was popular in the U.S and Europe during the time. Immediately it became a success and many South Koreans were following their favorite artist or groups for whom they called “idols”. With introduction of many K-pop celebrities, these new icons set the standard of beauty like one never seen before. K-pop celebrities’ introduced the culture of body and skin/appearance consciousness (Samuels, 2018). These artists became influencers and marketed clothing from fashion designers to beauty products. Since the 2000’s with the popularity of these k-pop icons, the culture of beauty and fashion continued to have a huge market impact on the global market (Samuels, 2018). With the inventions of Smartphone’s and the internet westerners were becoming aware of these beauty and fashion products and soon had access to purchase them.

Fashion designers Seoul’s Fashion Week have made head way with their unique designs and they incorporation of international k-pop sensations such as G-Dragon, Taeyang (who are both from the legendary pop music band Big Bang) and the female artist CL (Cheng, 2018). These artists are very important in the K-pop industry and millions of people not only in South Korea but globally listen to these artists. These artists are also heavily inspired by American artist such as Michael Jackson, Miguel, The Black Eyed Peas, etc. Artist like the one Jay Park who is an American born K-pop artist, who is incorporated in designers fashion lines and Korean fashion magazines, such as designers Tom Ford and magazines Bazaar, Cosmo Men, Men’s Health and Vogue. Jay Park has been paving the way for rappers and pop artist in South Korea and has been paving the way for Asian American by being the first Asian American signed to Jay-Z’s label Roc Nation in 2017. Since Jay Park is American born, he can introduce and influence western culture to South Korea and this can cause a huge wave of more rappers in Korea and in the U.S. Another K-pop artist who made a huge breakthrough in the U.S is Psy who had the hit track “Gangnam Style” (Cheng, 2018).



Figure 2 & 3: Picture of G-Dragon (left) and Jay Park (right).

Fashion Korean designers have been greatly inspired and influenced by America and European cultures. It is very common for local designers to rely on copies of high-end international brands to sell their designs (Cheng, 2018). There is an downside to this is that South Korea is trying to chase this sense of individuality by looking at global countries like the ones in the west and this can sometimes cost them to lose their authenticity or traditional values as a country (Cheng, 2018). South Korea is trying to meet standards that can be very life threatening for people.

Beauty standards are a big issue in Korea and many people are being influence to get plastic surgery done. These beauty standards do come from what they see when they look at western countries, especially the U.S. One in five Korean women between the ages of 19 to 49 has had some kind of procedure according to a survey by Trend Monitor (Zinn, 2013). Some mothers even encourage daughter to go under the knife in order to meet theses beauty standards, because they believe it will make them more successful in finding a husband or finding a career (Zinn, 2013). The Korean cultures have widely accepted these practices and are even targeting young women through ads (Zinn, 2013). The New York Times reported that 4,000 clinics provide plastic surgery and 1,500 doctors are trained as plastic surgeons (Zinn, 2013). Most of these women and men are lusting for wider eyes with double lids and V-shaped chins (Zinn, 2013). Koreans believe that a “western” look can be achievable through basic plastic surgery. The idealization of the “western” look causes much insecurity in young women in Korea and can also cause harm or even lead to death. The influences that the west has on Korea are reflected through the extreme measures that have been very popular throughout the years within the K-pop industry as well.

In the Fashion industry, certain western designs are very popular in South Korea. For example the graphic and photogenic logo or text, this is an international phenmon (Sharma, 2017). Through these graphics, logos and text, South Korea has created an exceptional street wear culture. One of the aspects that they incorporate is a sense of humor to their clothes or accessories. Subversive messages or salty remarks on bags and shirts printed to mock pop culture (Sharma, 2017). There is no denying that South Korea is fusing western culture with their culture. This is benefiting South Korea in a huge way because the fashion and music industries are making large amounts of profit due to the success they have been having in their country and globally.

**Is South Korea taking the fashion world by storm?**

K- Fashion has been making a lot of buzz all around the world especially in the United States and Paris. When Paris based Vetements and MatchesFasion.com announced that they will have a garage sale at the beginning of Seoul Fashion Week many people lined up outside for this event. Many young Koreans are into street wear fashion and are creating street wear clothing. Over the past 2 years, Korea has been making a buzz with their take a street and hip-hop culture (Sharma, 2017). The style has found a number of fans among K-pop as well international celebrities such as Wiz Khalifa, Rita Ora, and Rihanna (Sharma, 2017). The style includes high-impact logos and statements that have a hint of irony. These styles are being seen internationally and her influencing European and American designers to implement these ideas in their design. London-based independent exhibition curator and creative lead at the Hyman Archive, Tory Turk says that Koreans designers are using an “explosion of colors, modern techniques, craft and use experimental fabrics, their collections can be seen as a reconstruction of fresh millennial ideals” (Sharma, 2017). This statement also shadows what is being seen in the fashion industry in the west, where the styles of millennial or the youth are influencing many designers.

When it comes to the Seoul Fashion scene, street wear is king (Sharma, 2017). Labels like Cres E Dim, Kye, Rocket X Lunch and Charm’s are shaping the modern Koreans style sensibilities by incorporating “rebellious messages monogrammed in white block letters and jackets with curling varsity scripts” (Sharma, 2017). Korean designers are definitely influenced by the west to create these styles but the creative director for Rocket X Lunch, Woo Jin-win admits that he gets his inspiration from anywhere (Sharma, 2017). Street wear can come anywhere and can be influenced by different cultures or social/ political events. Koreans use of rebellious messages are incorporated due to many young Koreans believing that their voices are not being heard or do not matter by the government.



*Figure 4*: Rocket X Lunch T-shirt from Spring/Summer 2018 collection. Reprinted from F.Y.com

They say it always the quiet ones that you have to look out for and that is true statement when it comes to South Korea (Cheng, 2018). The South Korean fashion industry is beginning to blossom and soon dominate. This tiny Asian peninsula is creating a large-scale phenomenon. The western consumers are definitely getting hungry for authentic referencing, learning, and experiencing about different cultures (Sharma, 2017). The west is particularly fascinated by South Korea because it has a blend of western ideals and culture with Korean culture that goes together pretty well. Koreans fashion and designers are leading the fashion industry because they have awareness of these international or western brands such as Dior, YSL, and Alexander McQueen, they are immersed in these brands and they understand the international mix, so that is why they can create something unique but still recognizable and familiar (Cheng, 2018).

Designers and fashion insiders are taking notes in the west and are making trips to Seoul Fashion Week in order to get insight of what the people of Korea are waiting or what new styles will be trending since South Korea fashion industry has become ahead of the west. Beauty insiders are noticing significant Asian references to women’s wear, especially in prints (Cheng, 2018). Another noticeable adopted trend is the styling of fishnets under destroyed denim, which is derived from Seoul representation of street culture (Cheng, 2018). An example of this was on the Philip Lim’s Autumn/Winter 2017 catwalk, which had many styles of fishnet peeping out from underneath leather vest tops (Cheng, 2018). The west such the U.S is also heavily into K- Beauty products that are more widely seen in stores like Sephora and Ulta-Beauty. The U.S in 2018 is known to be the biggest international consumer of K-beauty products (Samuels, 2018). Seoul is competing with western fashion cities such as Paris and New York. With the popularity in South Korean culture, art, music and fashion, I wonder where it will go from here. In addition, if it will still have a huge impact 10 years from now?

**Results and Discussion**:

Throughout my research of how western civilization as influenced the culture and fashion industry in South Korea, I began to see articles and journals on how South Korea is influencing the fashion industry in the west especially the United States and some parts of Europe. Throughout the years, I have been noticing a grand phenomenon with the K-pop industry in the United States. Many men and women are watching k-dramas, listening to k-pop or k- hip hop music, and even learning the language. In Paris, the region has been noticing a great amount of Korean Fashion designers who are creating beautiful garments and have fantastic ideas. South Korea is bringing their culture, which many people are taking in because it is a combination of their culture with the western culture, which is very fascinating.

In this thesis, I also discovered how much South Korea has been influenced by Western countries when it comes to the fashion industry and culture. South Korea has always seen the U.S a protector and somebody they can look up to. This why South Korea throughout the years as borrowed or copied many of the styles that are seen in the U.S. in the 2000s one is starting to see a fusion of the two cultures American and South Korean culture incorporated in their designs and styles. Many westerners like the idea of the mixing of the two cultures because it still has a familiarity but also has a uniqueness about it that can appeal to their need of something new and fresh. I also discovered there is a downside to the influence that the west has on South Korea. Some of these downsides can lead to harm or death such as plastic surgery to look “western” and risking authenticity and traditional values. These extreme measures are causing many older South Korean to look down on the youth culture and the trendy street wear couture in Seoul.

**Limitations of Research:**

Limitation in this research included difficulties in finding enough information on why and how the West influenced South Korea. There was many findings, articles and journals on the vice versa, which is the influence that the South Korean fashion industry has on the West. Many of the information on influences that I could find were mostly from the 1990’s rather than the 2000’s. There was more information on how the K-pop industry was influenced by the West than how the K-Fashion industry was influenced by the West. I learned that K-Fashion does take inspiration from the west but includes their culture in it too. The outcomes of this thesis resulted in the understanding of how K-Fashion incorporated some of their traditional styles with Westernized styles and questions of what will be next for the K- Fashion and K-Beauty industry.

**Conclusion:**

Today we live in a global world, where international trends sometimes appear to eliminate boarders and try to bring together cultures and create solidarity (Sharma, 2017). Even though sometimes many people feel like division among races, culture and religions are taking place now more than ever, we are noticing that dress and fashion is bringing the world closer together. Throughout this research for this thesis one got to see the influences that western countries has had on South Korea but also how South Korea a small and still developing country has been inspiring many Western countries in different type of way.

The introduction of their culture to the west is cause a phenomenon and creating super fans for internationally famous K-pop groups like BTS or EXO and creating big buzz in Paris Fashion Week with upcoming fashion designers who are creating powerful messages of bravery and hope. Seoul Fashion Week is also a unique experience that many Westerners want to partake. These shows are visual confirmations of why Koreans have their own indelible stamp and on their way to be an international powerhouse player (Cheng, 2018). With the influences of Western brands like L’Oreal, creating inspiration in K-beauty products that can be seen as surpassing the products that Americans and Europeans see in their country. As a reader, we get to see that western influences have had a great affect on South Korea and are inspiring them to do and be better. Thought this is a theory that was conducted through research there is no argument that all states of culture are interlinked somehow and in a sense, we are one culture; the human race (Norton, 2014).

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