

## THE EXPERIENCES OF MALAYSIAN YOUTH WITH KOREAN COSMETIC PRODUCT

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### ABSTRACT

*This study describes the experiences of using South Korean cosmetic products among Malaysian youth from the consumer preference point of view. The Korean culture has become a wave via dramas and Korean Pop music (K-Pop), which has influenced teenagers' lifestyles in several Asian countries including Malaysia. Hence, Korean cosmetic products have successfully entered the Malaysian market and it continues to gain an increased market share as the trade volume appreciates. Thus, exploring the phenomenon of the proliferation of using Korean cosmetic products may help to inform the market regarding potential business trends. The personal lived experience of five college students was qualitatively examined to investigate their experiences with the usage of Korean cosmetic products. The emergent themes include Sources of Introduction to Korean Cosmetic Product, Different Approaches to Select Korean Cosmetic Products, Types of Information Sources and Purchasing Channel, Reasons for Product Satisfaction and Loyalty to Korean Cosmetic Products and the Foreseen Future.*

**Keywords:** *Malaysian consumer preferences, Korean cosmetic products.*

### INTRODUCTION

In this modern era, people are basically living in a global village due to advanced communication technology and international trading. Products, information, and cultural values can be spread quickly and easily worldwide (Chen, 2014). South Korea took advantage of this trend and successfully spread the Korean popular culture to the world via dramas and Korean Pop music (K-Pop). Today, Korean cultures are not only becoming a wave, but it has also influenced teenagers' lifestyle, especially in Asian countries (Zailin et al., 2013). Similar to other Asian countries such as Thailand, Indonesia and Taiwan, the Korean wave is getting more popular and becoming more influential in Malaysians' lifestyle (Cho, 2010). Besides the socio and cultural changes brought about by the Korean wave, its influence on the Malaysian market is obvious. Korean products have started to enter the Malaysian market with the presence of Korean restaurants, instant noodles, clothing and cosmetic products in the local market.

Malaysia's total trade volume in cosmetics and toiletries hit USD407million in 2013 and part of the trade volume; Malaysia imported USD 295million of skin and beauty products. United States is the biggest supplier of cosmetics products to Malaysia followed by Japan. However, statistics showed that South Korean products are gaining more market

share and eventually has become one of the top five suppliers to Malaysia (U.S. Commercial Service Hong Kong, 2015). Moreover, South Korean export of cosmetic products to Malaysia had increased drastically from USD 4,783 thousand in 2005 to USD 41,459 thousand in 2013 (around 7.7 times increase). This shows that South Korean cosmetic products had successfully entered the Malaysian market.

The Malaysian market is favourable for cosmetics and toiletries producers due to the growing median-aged group population in Malaysia and increasing women participation in the labour market. According to Department of Statistics Malaysia (DoS) (2016), the Malaysian total population in 2016 is approximately 31.7 million. Among the total population, 69.5% of the population (22 million people) is the median age population between 15-69 years. This group of population is the working population who have high purchasing and consuming power and a high demand for consumer goods. Besides, the increased of female participation rate in Malaysian labour market also contributes to the growth of cosmetics and toiletries industry. In 2015, the female workforce participation rate in the labour market is 54.1% (DoS, 2015). Increased women participation in the workforce may lead to greater demand for cosmetic products as they may use cosmetics to increase their self-confidence and physical appearance (Kaur et al., 2014). Since the whole industry is growing, it is interesting to study why Korean cosmetic products are continuing to gain market share in Malaysia.

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of using Korean cosmetic products among Malaysian youth, especially from a consumer preference point of view. For this research, the Korean cosmetic products will be generally defined as the Korean made skin care products and coloured cosmetics product.

The study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What is the Malaysian youth's experience with Korean cosmetic products?
2. What are the favourable aspects of Korean cosmetic products among Malaysian youth?
3. How can Korean cosmetic products continue to be the preferred choice among Malaysian youth?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Malaysian consumer behaviour in general is reviewed in this section in order to have a better understanding on the factors that will influence the consumer decision making process. Besides, studies related to the Korean wave in Malaysia are also reviewed to provide a clearer picture about its influences on Malaysian lifestyles and economy. Lastly, literature on Korean cosmetic products in Malaysian market is discussed.

### **Malaysian consumer behaviour**

Consumer behaviour is a process that involves psychology, sociology, anthropology and economic elements (Muniady et al., 2014). The Malaysian consumption pattern might alter

due to the unfavourable outlook of the economy such as financial crisis and inflation. People will tend to spend less especially on the premium product and have a more rational view on promotion (Muniady et al., 2014). Chan and Mansori (2016) found that Malaysian general consumers are price sensitive whereby price is the most important element when they buy a product. Product quality will have a great influence on Malaysian consumer decision making process (Chan and Mansori, 2016). Lifestyle and personality traits will also influence consumer behaviour. Consumers will tend to associate their choice of brand with their favourite celebrity (Muniady et al., 2014). Thus, promotions such as advertising by star-marketing and sales promotion will affect consumers' purchasing behaviour (Chan and Mansori, 2016). Benjamin et al. (2011) stated that Malaysian consumer decision making of buying perfume are influenced by external factor which is advertisement and internal factors such as tendency to spend, perceived social status and material needs of consumers.

### **Korean wave in Malaysia**

According to Zailin et al. (2013), the Korean Wave is popular in Malaysia and had been successfully absorbed into the life of Malaysians. Evidences such as K-Pop music programs in local radio channels, Korean dramas in local satellite television channels and a high import of Korean products into Malaysia proved the existence of the Korean Wave in Malaysia. Zailin et al. (2016) also found that Malaysian youth will tend to express their idolization of Korean celebrities by adoring and imitating their idols by using and having similar fashion included clothes, hair styles and make-up.

Besides entertainments and fashion, the Korean wave also influenced Malaysian's market choices such as a higher preference of Korean food by Malaysians, more Malaysian wanting to visit South Korea and purchasing South Korean products (Chu, 2010). This is parallel with the South Korean government's strategy which is to adopt trade in cultural goods (Park, 2015). According to Cho (2010), the Korean wave is expanding via four stages, which include the pervasiveness of the pop culture, the interest in the culture, country and cosmetic products, the purchase of South Korean goods and the preference for South Korean goods. Probably this is one of the major factors that contributed to the increased import of Korean cosmetic products.

### **Korean cosmetic products in Malaysian market**

According to Park (2015), trade diffusion effects of the popularity of the Korean culture such as Korean Pop music and dramas has led to an increased in Korean exports. The Korean cosmetic industry is the main beneficiary due to the attractive and positive images of the Korean entertainers or also known as star marketing method. As a result, the export of Korean cosmetics increased more than 10 times from 123 million dollars in 2002 to 1,289 million dollars in 2013. The major export destination is Asian countries and Malaysia is one of the top 10 export destination.

In addition, Korean cosmetic products are gaining a bigger market share, especially in the Asian market including Malaysia because Asian women share the similar concept of beauty and skin colour (Park, 2015). Asian women stress on whitening as "jade white skin" as it is the common expression of beauty. Korean cosmetic products, which focus on clean and fair skin effects, suit the taste of Asian women.

Azmi et al. (2015) carried out a study that focused on current and future prospects of the Malaysian cosmetic market. Attitudes towards using cosmetics are changing and working women especially, showed great interest in the need of premium personal grooming and personal care products. Malaysian consumers are now more ready to demand more for higher quality cosmetic products.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using the qualitative methodology as it is an approach that allows researchers to explore individual or group meaning to a single phenomenon with the aim to bring personal value into the study and to establish the meaning of the phenomenon from the views of participants. One of the characteristics of qualitative research is the researcher as the data collection instrument and hence it facilitates face-to-face interaction with participants to gain information. Hence, the researcher acts as the key instrument to collect and interpret the meaning of the data collected via interviews.

### Research Design

This study applied the phenomenological approach to describe the experiences of using Korean cosmetic products among Malaysian youth, especially from a consumer preference point of view. This approach focuses on the personal lived experiences of five youths to identify the common characteristics about the phenomenon.

### Demographic Information

Five bachelor degree students studying in a private collage located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia were chosen as the participants. The students are between 20-25 years old. The participants in this study were selected via purposive sampling. The participants had personal lived experiences of buying and using Korean cosmetic products. With the employment of purposeful sampling, it allows these students to contribute to the study, both in terms of relevancy and depth by sharing their opinions and insights based on their personal lived experience with Korean cosmetic products.

**Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants**

Participants	Gender	Background
P1	Female	1 <sup>st</sup> year student who is a fan of Korean Pop Music
P2	Female	1 <sup>st</sup> year student who is a fan of Korean Food
P3	Female	2 <sup>nd</sup> year student who is a fan of Korean Dramas
P4	Female	3 <sup>rd</sup> year student who is a fan of Korean Fashion and Entertainment Shows
P5	Female	1 <sup>st</sup> year student who is a fan of Korean Pop Music and Fashion

There is a common element among the five students who took part in this study. They are familiar with the Korean cultural elements such as music, food, dramas, entertainment shows and fashion. They will constantly update themselves with the latest trends and news in Korea.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

All five students volunteered to participate in the interview. An invitation email was sent to the participants in order to arrange the time and date for the interview. Before the interview started, a written informed consent was distributed to the participants. They were informed that they were allowed to withdraw from the study any time and for any reason without negative effects. Permission to audio-tape the interview was given by the participants before starting the interview. The researcher also acknowledged that the data collected will be kept confidential and no personal identification will be revealed.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

All the recorded interviews were transcribed into word text by the researcher. After the transcription of the interviews, member checking were carried out whereby the transcribed data were sent back to the participants to ensure accuracy of the information. The constant comparative approach was used throughout the data analysis process in order to find the similarities and differences between different sets of data. Data reduction occurred to generate coding via labelling the relevant words, phrases and sentences. Next, important codes were chosen and categories were created. The researcher then further connected the categories to find themes or patterns. Lastly, the researcher re-organized and summarized the data by displaying it in a table to present the students' experiences with Korean cosmetic products.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study resulted in five themes with several sub-themes. They are Sources of Introduction to Korean Cosmetic Products, Different approaches to Select Korean Cosmetic Products, Types of Information Sources and Purchasing Channel, Reasons for Product Satisfaction and Loyalty and the Foreseen Future for Korean Cosmetic Products.

**Table 2: Themes and Sub-themes**

Themes	Sub-Themes
1. Sources of Introduction to Korean Cosmetic Products	a) Friend Referral b) Samples Given c) Korean Wave Influences
2. Different Approaches to Select Korean Cosmetic Products	a) Recommendation b) Content of the Product c) Favourite Brands
3. Types of Information Sources and Purchasing Channel	a) Online Searching b) Online Pop-out Advertisements c) Retail Shops d) Online Purchase e) Direct from South Korea
4. Reasons for Product Satisfaction	a) Immediate Effect b) Good and Consistent Quality c) Affordable and Worthwhile
5. Loyalty to Korean Cosmetic Products and the Foreseen Future	a) Frequency of Using b) Foreseen Future

**Theme 1: Sources of introduction to Korean cosmetic products**

Theme one emphasizes the different sources of introduction to Korean cosmetic products by the participants. This theme is supported by three sub-themes, Friend Referral, Sample Given and Korean Wave Influences.

***Friend Referral***

Friends and family referral played an important role in introducing Korean cosmetic products. Out of five participants, two of them (P1 and P2) had the same source, which is from friends. P1 was exposed to Korean cosmetic products when she got sunburnt while travelling with her friends and P2 was introduced to Korean cosmetic products when she received souvenirs from her friends' South Korean trip:

She said:

*It is introduced by my friends. I get samples and souvenirs from them when they are back from their Korea trip (P2).*

Besides, P1 first got in touch with Korean colour cosmetics when she was requested to put on make-up for a university performance. Those Korean colour cosmetics were introduced by her friends as well:

*My friend recommended me the BB cream, mascara and lipsticks from Korea. And my friend also recommended me the makeup remover from Korea (P1).*

### ***Samples Given***

Korean cosmetics retail shops usually encourage customers to try on their products before purchasing it in order to let the customers to experience the effects. They are also gave free samples for the customers because they are confident with the quality of their own products. This seems to be a good way to introduce new products as the majority of the customers will buy after trying the samples. All the participants except P3 got to know and tried new Korean cosmetic products by receiving samples given by the retail shops or the souvenirs received from others:

*After I tried the samples given by my friends and also masks as a souvenir from relatives who came back from travelling in Korea, I can feel that the products actually really suits my sensitive skin (P1).*

*They (staffs in retail shops) quite encourage you to try on their products (P2).*

*The biggest advantage is I get the sample so I can try the product before I buy it (P4).*

### ***Korean Wave Influences***

The Korean wave actually helped to introduce and influence people to buy and use Korean cosmetic products. This finding is similar with the findings from the previous studies by Zailin et al. (2013), Zailin et al. (2016) and Cho (2010). Participants who were deeply influenced by the Korean wave (P1, P3 and P5) are more likely to try the Korean cosmetic products before understanding about the product itself.

The Korean wave is in many forms. One of it is the Korean Pop (K-Pop) music. P1 and P5 are fans of K-Pop idols, so they will show their support by buying the products that those idols became spokesperson and pay special attention to their makeup as they feel that it is stylish and fashionable to imitate their idols. Both P1 and P5 mentioned that they will find out online what products they are using and they will buy and try it. Besides, Korean dramas and the actresses will also influence the consumers as their skin is always smooth and white with no aging. P1 said:

*I am also amazed by the skin from those Korean famous actress especially female artists in the Korean drama. For example, Song Hye Kyo, although she is already 36/37 year-old, but her skin look like perfectly good. She is definitely looked like a 20 plus young girl. So this makes me feel that this is the magic of all those Korean cosmetic products.*

## **Theme 2: Different approaches to select Korean cosmetic brand**

All the participants have different approaches to decide which brand to use. These approaches included Recommendation, Content of the Product and Favourite Brands.

### ***Recommendation***

Participants are usually unsure which product to choose as there are too many choices available. Thus, they will tend to follow recommendations from friends and online bloggers review. Both P1 and P3 mentioned they will just follow their friends' recommendation for the first time while P2 said:

*Basically it is decided based on recommendation and bloggers review.*

### ***Content of the Product***

Additionally, the participants will pay great attention to the content of the products for safety purpose, especially the products chemical substances. P4 mentioned that she will look at the content and pay special attention on the function as she knows how to read Korean words and understand briefly about the product contents. P1 now no longer follows friends but started choosing based on the contents of the products. She said:

*After sometime, I learn how to look at the contents of the product and mostly I will choose those organic products because it quite suits my sensitive skin, especially for masks, normally I will only choose for moisturising masks.*

### ***Favourite Brands***

All the participants have their favourite Korean cosmetic products brand. However, the reasons of these brands becoming the most favourite are different. Participants one and five are influenced by Korean artists whereby they will choose to buy from the brands that their favourite artists are spokesperson. While participants two, three and four prefer well established and famous brand:

*This is because these brands are very established, famous and their products are quite good (P2).*

*I am only using Innisfree for both cosmetics and skincare products because there are famous for natural contents (P4).*

### **Theme 3: Types of information sources and purchasing channel**

Similar with other consumers nowadays, these participants also searched for information by themselves before purchasing new products. There are two types of information sources, which is Online Searching and Online Pop-out Advertisements while three different purchasing channels were discovered, including Retail Shops, Online Purchase and Direct from South Korea. The main differences between online searching and online pop-out advertisements are the participants' initiatives to search for information (online search) while another is the information automatically pop-out without searching (online pop-out advertisements). Since Korean cosmetic products are getting more popular and easier to access in Malaysia, the purchasing channels also diversified.

#### ***Online Searching***

Due to advanced technology, it is now easier and more convenient to search information via online. Participants not only searched for the updated information about Korean cosmetic products, they also searched for ways to make-up. P3 said, *"I will follow the updates about the techniques of make-up via Youtube and Korean dramas"* while P5 mentioned that *"I will go online and search for those Korean fashion and skincare shows. Then when I go to Korea for trips, I will actually go and try each product and see which one suits me the most."*

#### ***Online Pop-out Advertisements***

Korean cosmetics producers invest heavily on advertising and brand positioning. They will hire top and famous Korean artists and K-Pop singers to be their spokesperson (Park, 2015). This is to attract their fans to consume the products. Besides, they also invested in online advertisements, especially social media such as Facebook and Instagram. P1 and P2 stated that they didn't search for the advertisements, but it appeared when they were using their social media.

*I am mad about K-Pop and I am following their fan page, so this will actually attract me to see the advertisement. From there also I know more about those products (P1).*

*I will not purposely search for the Korean cosmetic products advertisements and videos, but I will look at it when it pops out in my social media or other channels of advertisement (P2).*

#### ***Retail Shops***

The traditional purchasing channel included retail and pharmaceutical shops. More and more Korean cosmetic products retail shops are available in Malaysia. There are a number of favourable aspects of shopping Korean cosmetic products. The majority of the participants opined that the staffs are friendly with good customer service. Furthermore, they will also give samples and have promotions to attract more customers. P1 said, *"They (the staffs) are very friendly and also the service is good. Other favourable aspect is like promotion and sample given that given to us to try."* P4 also agreed that the service provided by the staffs is

good and friendly whereby she can always seek help and opinion from the staffs. While P2 was attracted by the visual display besides the service provided. P2 said:

*They quite encourage you to try on their products. I am also attracted by promotions, sometimes buy 1 free 1, 50% or special promotion. I often get attracted.*

### ***Online Purchase***

Besides the traditional channel, online purchase and direct purchase from South Korea are getting more popular. Online purchase provides convenience to the consumers. P1, P3 and P5 mentioned that online websites provide the latest and a wider range of products and often offer promotions. Thus, they choose to shop online. For example, P1 shifted from shopping in retail shops to online purchase due to convenience and promotions. In addition, both P1 and P5 also stated that the shipping fee / delivery charge is usually waived when they shared their orders with their friends or family, thus the shopping fee becomes cheaper via online purchase.

### ***Direct from South Korea***

Since now more people will travel to South Korea, more consumers are now doing their shopping in South Korea directly. This is because the price in South Korea is cheaper, duty free and there are latest products and more choices available. P2 chooses to buy directly from South Korea via her friends and family South Korean trip. P5 also shared that sometimes she will buy directly from South Korea due to latest products and endless samples given due to fierce competition in South Korea.

*Normally I will ask my friends or family to get directly from Korea, especially from those who visit Korea (P2).*

*They will give a lot of free gifts when I buy in Korea retail shops. Maybe is because of the fierce competition in Korea. The Korea cosmetic retail shops are too many. You can find at least 2 same brand shops in the same road. Furthermore, I can have tax refund and tax exemption when I buy directly from Korea (P5).*

## **Theme 4: Reasons for product satisfaction**

Korean cosmetic products are gaining more market share not only in Malaysia, but globally as its export increased from USD 171million in 2009 to USD 226million in 2010. The Korean cosmetic products local production is estimated to continue growing and achieved a total export of USD249 million by 2011 (U.S. Commercial Service Hong Kong, 2015). This shows that consumers are satisfied with Korean cosmetic products. Thus, the reasons behind were discovered under three sub-themes, Immediate Effect, Good and Consistent Quality and Affordable and Worthwhile.

### ***Immediate Effect***

The majority of the participants (P1, P2 and P5) agreed that the quality of the products showed immediate effects. P1 said, *“I can see immediate effect after I use the sample. The product itself is quite friendly to my sensitive skin. This is really one of the aspect that is encouraging me. And also because of their effect is really good and quite immediate.”* P2 also agreed that Korean cosmetic products show immediate effects and are long lasting. In addition, P5 also said, *“I can see immediate effects after I used Korean skincare. It actually suits my skin. My skin is quite sensitive and it can become oily easily. But after I use Korean product, I can control my oily skin.”*

### ***Good and Consistent Quality***

In addition, consumers are amazed and confident with the good quality and the consistency of the product quality too. Korean cosmetic products also focused on producing organic products that suits sensitive skins. All the participants trust and believed that Korean cosmetic products are actually good in terms of quality and long lasting effects. All the participants used the word “consistent” to describe the quality of the Korean cosmetic products, thus they are satisfied with and feel safe when using it. P3 and P4 also stressed on the “organic made”, “100% natural” Korean cosmetic products whereby they feel safe as it contained less chemical substances and didn’t cause any allergy after using.

### ***Affordable and Worthwhile***

The majority of the Korean cosmetic products are selling at an average price which is affordable, especially for the students compared to products from western countries such as Europe and the United States. Furthermore, the quality is far above better with the price they paid. Thus they feel that it is satisfied and worthwhile to use Korean cosmetic products. These findings are similar with the findings from Muniady et al. (2014) and Chan and Mansori (2016) whereby they also found that Malaysian consumers are sensitive to price. P1 as a student with no income and depends on pocket money finds it affordable and worthwhile for her to use Korean cosmetic products. P4 opined that although the Korean cosmetic products are slightly expensive as compared to non-branded or local made products, however the effect after using it makes her feels that it is worthwhile. P2, P3 and P5 find it really worthwhile and are satisfied with the quality of the products and the price she paid.

*In terms of quality, with the same price you definitely cannot get the products from Western brand such as Mac or Bobbi Brown. It is affordable especially in the Asian market. Maybe it is due to the exchange rate of our currency to Korean Won that make it even more affordable (P2).*

*Overall, I think it is affordable for a student like me because somehow it is still cheaper from those branded cosmetic such as Lancome. I find it worthwhile with the price that I paid and quality of the products (P3).*

*Compared to those high-end brands such as SK II or Lancome, Korean cosmetics provide the similar effects but with a much lower price. I think anyone afford to buy and use the Korean products for long term (P5).*

### **Theme 5: Loyalty to Korean cosmetic products and future foreseen**

The loyalty to Korean cosmetic products is measured by the frequency of usage in this study while participants' foreseen future about using Korean cosmetic products in Malaysian market also is being summarized.

#### ***Frequency of Using***

All the participants also mentioned that Korean cosmetic products will still be their preferred choice and they will continue to use it. P1, P2 and P5 chose to use Korean colour cosmetics such as BB cream and lipsticks whenever they are going out or as needed and Korean masks at least once a week. In addition, P5 also said, *“Of course I will continue to use. I will also introduce to my friends and relatives too. My sisters and mum are using Korean cosmetic because of me too. My mum is amazed and satisfied by their aging and anti-UV protection products.”*

#### ***The Foreseen Future***

Korean cosmetic products have a bright future as the quality is good and it successfully created brand awareness and brand loyalty, especially in the Asian market. Also, the Korean Wave is still influencing the world and this will definitely contribute to the sales of Korean cosmetic products. The majority of the participants shared the same thoughts. P2 and P3 foresee that the local demand for Korean cosmetic products will keep increasing due to the Korean Wave getting stronger and more influential. P1, P4 and P5 opined that Korean cosmetic products are having a bright future because the products suit Asian skins.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In conclusion, Malaysian youth's experiences with Korean cosmetic products from the first attempt to repurchase were good and satisfying. Recommendations by friends and bloggers review are the common sources of introducing Korean cosmetic products. Consumers also preferred to try the samples given by the retail shops before they buy the products.

Additionally, the Korean Wave may continue to influence the public's impression towards the products and brand position. Malaysian youth tend to follow the updates of their favourite idols via social media. When the Korean artists become the spokesperson for Korean cosmetic products, it will introduce and encourage the consumers to try the products.

There are different purchasing channels available in Malaysia. Besides purchasing in the retail shops in Malaysia, online purchase and buying directly from South Korea during trips are getting more common due to its convenience as wider range of choices are available. There are positive linkages from immediate effect, good and consistent quality,

and affordability and worthwhile pricing for consumer satisfaction and repurchasing. Thus, it is foreseen that Korean cosmetic products will continue to be the preferred choice among Malaysian youth.

The findings of the study may provide some insights to help the retailers to refine their marketing strategy in order to meet the preferences of Malaysian youth. Marketers should focus on the factors mentioned above to achieve market competitiveness. The promotional strategy via popular Korean K-Pop stars and artists should be continued as it is effective. Besides, Korean cosmetic producers should continue to emphasize on the good quality control and innovate more chemical-free cosmetic products as consumers are attracted due to consistent quality and natural ingredients.

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