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“Flower boys”, another masculinity made in Korea

Wearing a little make-up and very muscular, these men nicknamed “flower boys” embody a gentle masculinity, sometimes a guarantee of social success.

By Léa BARON

A little foundation, a stroke of pencil under the eyes, a brush stroke on the eyebrows and a touch of gloss. It was by filming himself in the Paris metro while putting on makeup that the French content creator Bach Buquen became widely known to the public last year.

Behind the buzz, it was a way for him to normalize this gesture in front of the curious or wandering glances of passers-by. Result: tens of millions of views on his videos, appearances in the media and then collaborations with Sephora or even Charlotte Tilbury, the British high priestess of makeup.

Online, he is not the only one to pamper himself in public. However, the “makeup for men” or “boy makeup” movement remains much more timid in the West than on the other side of the world, in South Korea.

of brushes, powders, creams and lipsticks, she perfects the complexion of an 18-year-old student who is starting out as a model. Her makeup salon OKIDS, then under renovation, is nestled on the second floor of a modest building in the very glitzy Gangnam district of Seoul. It is there that business buildings and cosmetic surgery clinics rub shoulders.

When she opened her studio in 2020, this 37-year-old makeup artist only employed one employee. She now has five. A sign that business is going well for this professional who has 12 years of experience. Her clients? Models like today's but mostly “men who come before a date or a night out at the club on the weekend. I also have some who are on leave [18 months of military service is mandatory for all men in South Korea, editor's note] and who want to look good for their girlfriends.” Many men also get their makeup done for big occasions like their wedding.

Makeup for a date or for your wedding

“Since Covid, my clients are mostly men,” says Park Jin Mi, energetically tapping the face of her model of the day. Surrounded by a myriad

LEFT A young man gets his makeup done at Park Jin Mi's salon in Seoul. © Dianne and ak ee ourday Korea, Instagram .yourday

RIGHT On ik ok, ach uqen made the bu while putting on makeup in the subway. © iki ok account of ach uqsen



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LEFT Makeup

artist Ark in Mi receives a group of men in her salon

© Dianne and ak ee ourday Korea

Kpop singers or Kdrama actors sometimes serve as models for customers. © Dianne and ak ee ourday Korea

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM

A dozen men's makeup brands share the Korean market. © Dianne and ak ee ourday Korea

Kim Ung Won, 18, offers makeup tutorials for men. © Dianne and Ak Ee Ourday Korea

The influencer Kim ung Won even launched his brand Doing hat. © Dianne and ak ee ourday Korea



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Some come to the salon with a photo of K-pop or K-drama stars as a model. *"But in general, they ask me for a discreet and very natural makeup,* explains Park Jin Mi. *I then work on the complexion, eyebrows, lips and hair. Just enough to beautify them while hiding imperfections.*

Take care of your appearance

In South Korea, everyone is subject to the same aesthetic requirements. *"It is very important in our society to look good and take care of yourself. This makes men even more masculine in the eyes of women because they, like women, make a real effort to take care of their appearance. It is work on oneself, like bodybuilding, which is valued and appreciated,"* emphasizes the makeup artist.

On the streets of Seoul, it is common to see advertisements for cosmetics by popular actors or singers. There are also many young men.

sporting light makeup and a muscular body holding their girlfriend's hand. In some public-facing jobs, it is sometimes even required for both women and men.

Makeup tutorials

In the country that is the king of cosmetic surgery and the cult of beauty, Kim Jung Won, 27, is also looking to perfect his physique. With his neat hair, impeccable complexion and well-defined eyebrows, he welcomes us into a Seoul studio where he usually shoots videos.

When Jung Won started wearing makeup in 2019 to hide his acne, he decided to make *"understandable and accessible"* tutorials for men. Bingo! Today, he shares his beauty tips but also shows off his bodybuilder body in front of more than 410,000 followers on YouTube and Instagram (@jung_won.k). *"When I wear makeup, it significantly boosts my confidence and strengthens*

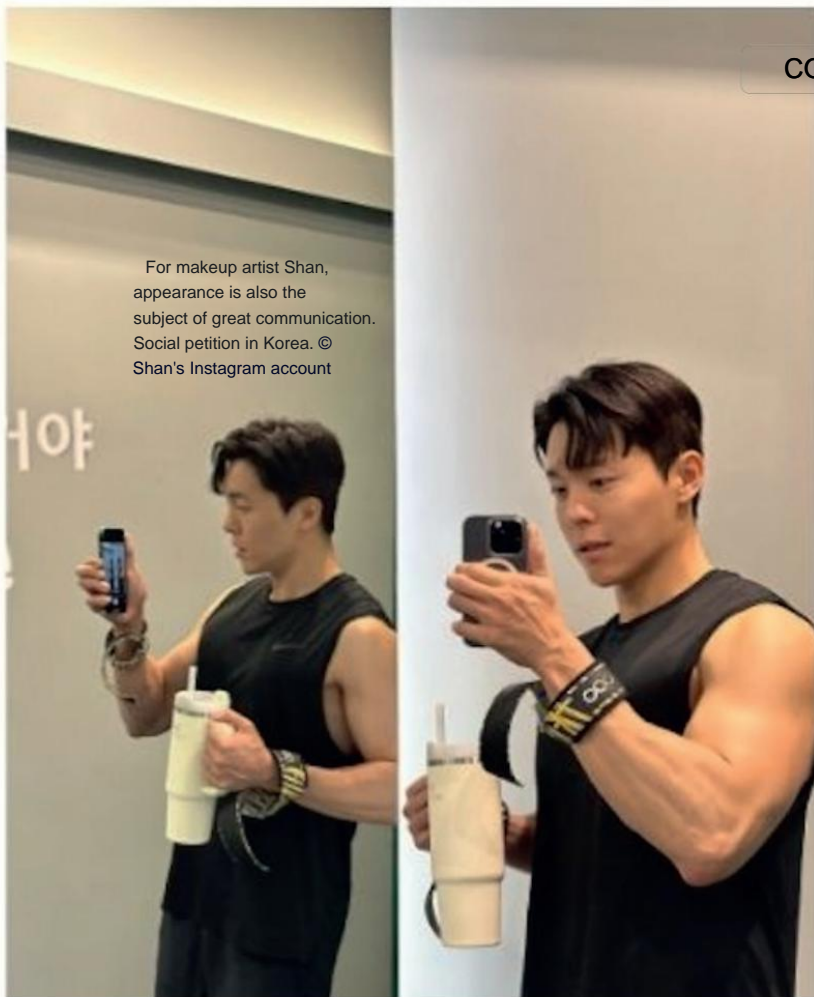


LEFT Kpop singers or Kdrama actors sometimes serve as models for customers.

© Dianne and ak ee our day korea

RIGHT

For makeup artist Shan, appearance is also a big social competition in Core. © Shan's Instagram account



For makeup artist Shan, appearance is also the subject of great communication. Social petition in Korea. © Shan's Instagram account



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shawn_issure
Valley · Like 1999

my self-esteem," assures the influencer who also has a business sense.

Men's Makeup Boom

With his audience on social networks, he launched his brand Doing what in 2023, well highlighted in the aisles of Olive Young - a sort of Korean super Sephora - which offers around ten brands of makeup for men. Among his competitors: B.READY from the national cosmetics giant Amore Pacific and OBgE launched in 2020. Their clientele: 20-30 year olds and 40-50 year olds who are starting to join in too. OBgE's foundation sales alone have increased more than 7-fold in four years.

Jung Won, who has already converted his brothers and friends, is right. to see a promising market and dream of international development. According to a Statista study, only 20% of Koreans say they wear makeup regularly or occasionally in 2021, but they are the ones who spend the most on cosmetics in the world.

Yet, just five years ago, these men were "often criticized and stigmatized as being effeminate or even gay," Jung Won acknowledges. Through his content, he also wanted to help change mentalities in a country that is still very patriarchal and where homosexuality remains taboo. For him, makeup is for all men without distinction.

"Today, they can take care of their appearance without compromising their masculinity," he insists.

Social pressure

Shawn, a 33-year-old professional makeup artist, teacher, and influencer, also succumbed to it as a teenager by covering his acne. "At the time, I didn't know anything about it and I had no role models. I would use a shade of BB cream that was way too light, which I would actually choose from the women's section." When we meet him at the bottom of his apartment building in central Seoul, dressed in a casual black tracksuit, he sports light, very natural makeup. He also works out a few floors up and can't go out without his five daily steps: sunscreen, foundation, powder, eyebrow pencil, and lip balm.

On his Instagram profile (@shawn_issure) with 200,000 followers, he is often seen getting ready quickly behind the wheel of his car. Among his friends, all use cosmetics and only half wear makeup. "Korea is a small, very competitive country with one of the lowest happiness indexes in the world and one of the highest suicide rates." They are all pushed to study hard, work very long hours and take care of their bodies. "Taking care of your appearance is part of this competitive spirit to be the best and succeed," Shawn admits. Just like people compare their cars,

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their apartments or their jobs, they also compare their physiques. It's a form of social pressure."

To be the most beautiful, the best and to succeed

This care given to their beauty is often seen as an investment in their future. It would increase their chances of finding a job and a partner. A promise of professional and personal success *"which is a huge marker of masculinity in Korea,"* assures Lawrence Monocello. This postdoctoral researcher at the School of Medicine at the University of Washington studied the image of the Korean body in 2017. *"It is valued almost solely for its ornamental value, to be looked at. While American masculinity consists of appearing strong to show that one is capable of prowess."*

A non-effeminate masculinity

The masculine ideal and the way men value their bodies differ greatly between South Korea and the West. *"Considering them as effeminate or even gay is a very Western view,"* says Joanne Elfving, an associate professor of Korean society and culture at Curtin University in Australia.

"And again, I would say quite modern Western, because if we go back to French royal history, for example, men wore attributes that are today considered feminine."

The origins of the "Flower boy"

Masculinity embodied by influencers Shawn and Jung

Won has a name in Korea: *kkonminam*. This invented word is a combination of *kkon* ы (flower) and *minam* ыы (handsome man) also translated into English as "flower boys".

While the origin of the term remains uncertain, it emerged in the late 1990s and is said to come from these "pretty boys" or *bishonen* from Japanese *manga* (*shōjo manga*) and Korean manga (*sunjeong manhwa*) widely read by girls. When these characters appear, the background is often flowery... hence the term used. These fantasy handsome guys mix so-called feminine and masculine identities.

Masculinity in perfect balance

At first, the "flower boys" displayed an androgynous appearance. But it evolved in the 2000s with the advent of cult of the sculpted, maintained body. This new aesthetic is then widely supported by a cosmetic industry in full expansion and praised by the media.

"They're kind of the perfect balance," Australian professor Joanna Elfving-Hwang tells us. *"He's a lovely boy with a perfect physique, beautiful skin, beautiful hair, a muscular body, and a bad boy streak."*

According to her, the ideal example is Jungkook, the youngest star of the famous K-pop group BTS.

By embodying a kind of metrosexual who is both benevolent, Romantic, sensitive and virile, these male models announce the rise of what is today called "soft masculinity". The kind that we always see represented and widely promoted by the characters of



For men, taking care of one's appearance is a promise of social success. © Dianne and ak ee ourday Korea

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K-drama or K-pop idols.

Before influencing young Koreans, "it was an aesthetic *"designed for the screen and for the stage,"*" underlines the academic Joanna Elfving-Hwang. Indeed, webtoons (*Korean manga* online), K-dramas like *Winter Sonata* in 2002 or *Boys over flower* in 2009 will develop this new seductive masculine image for the female gender and the gay community.

Men in Breakup

This new masculine ideal is a complete break with the models that had been imposed until then in the country: patriarchal, authoritarian, violent and intellectual. This is what Sun Jung analyzes in his reference work *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption* published in 2011. The growing financial independence of women

LEFT These fantasy hunks are often depicted against flowery backgrounds.

Wikipedia

ON THE RIGHT are the *Winter Sonata* and *Boys over flowers* series.
© KS posters

who are looking for partners - not heads of families - and the surrounding Asian cultural influences will shape this other masculinity in vogue.

For author Sun Jung, K-pop idols today embody a mix of masculinities. They are at once "bad boy, *kawaii* [cute, editor's note] and sweet ." Depending on the events or shows they participate in, they play on the versatility of their personality. A masculinity that is "culturally mixed, simultaneously contradictory and, above all, strategically manufactured ," according to Sun Jung.

A marketing of seduction to please the greatest number. And it works! Embodied in the West by Timothée Chalamet, this hybrid masculinity has spread outside Korea at the same time as K-culture in the world. In recent years, luxury brands have also sniffed out the vein by choosing Korean stars as muses.

Influencer and young entrepreneur Kim Jung Won He also plans to make his makeup business prosper. He also hopes to see Korean masculinity evolve towards ever more "diversity and inclusion ." For him, this is just the beginning. ❀

