



## Representation of Women's Beauty in the Korean Drama "True Beauty": A Peircean Semiotics Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

This study thoroughly examines the representation of female beauty in the Korean drama True Beauty using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach. The widespread phenomenon of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) in Indonesia has significantly impacted the construction of beauty standards, often creating social pressure, especially for teenagers and young women. True Beauty, which tells the story of Lim Ju Kyung's struggle to meet appearance expectations, serves as an interesting object for analysis. Utilizing Peirce's triadic framework (representamen, object, and interpretant), this study identifies how visual and verbal signs within the drama construct meaning. The analysis reveals that representamens, such as Ju Kyung's with her bare face, the act of self-makeup, the rejection of her bare face, and social acceptance, collectively refer to the object patriarchal Korean beauty standards demanding fair skin, a high nose bridge, and a slender physique. The resulting interpretants vary on one hand, viewers may perceive beauty as a condition for social acceptance and a source of anxiety, but on the other hand, the drama also presents alternative interpretants highlighting the importance of self-acceptance and resistance to narrow beauty standards. This study concludes that True Beauty not only reproduces dominant beauty norms but also creates space for critique and encourages critical media literacy regarding more inclusive representations of gender and body.

*Keywords: women's beauty, Korean drama, True Beauty, Peirce's semiotics, beauty representation*

## Representasi Kecantikan Perempuan dalam Drama Korea "True Beauty": Analisis Semiotika Peircean

### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini secara mendalam meneliti representasi kecantikan perempuan dalam drama Korea True Beauty dengan menggunakan pendekatan semiotik Charles Sanders Peirce. Fenomena Gelombang Korea (Hallyu) yang meluas di Indonesia telah berdampak signifikan terhadap konstruksi standar kecantikan, yang seringkali menciptakan tekanan sosial, terutama bagi remaja dan perempuan muda. True Beauty, yang mengisahkan perjuangan Lim Ju Kyung untuk memenuhi ekspektasi penampilan, menjadi objek analisis yang menarik. Dengan memanfaatkan kerangka kerja triadik Peirce (representamen, objek, dan interpretan), penelitian ini mengidentifikasi tanda-tanda visual dan verbal dalam drama yang mengkonstruksi makna. Kegiatan penelitian dilakukan sepanjang semester genap tahun ajaran 2024-2025. Beberapa instrumen yang digunakan dalam penelitian drama Korea 'True Beauty', yaitu proses dokumentasi yang melibatkan perangkat teknologi serta proses perekaman layar dan transkripsi film berbasis kecerdasan buatan. Analisis ini mengungkap bahwa representamen, seperti Ju Kyung dengan wajah polosnya, tindakan merias diri, penolakan terhadap wajah polosnya, dan penerimaan sosial, secara kolektif merujuk pada standar kecantikan Korea yang patriarkal dan menuntut kulit putih, batang hidung mancung, dan tubuh ramping. Interpretan yang dihasilkan bervariasi di satu sisi, penonton mungkin menganggap kecantikan sebagai syarat penerimaan sosial dan sumber kecemasan, tetapi di sisi lain, drama ini juga menghadirkan interpretan alternatif yang menyoroti pentingnya penerimaan diri dan penolakan terhadap standar kecantikan yang sempit. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa True Beauty tidak hanya mereproduksi norma kecantikan yang dominan tetapi juga menciptakan ruang untuk kritik dan mendorong literasi media kritis terkait representasi gender dan tubuh yang lebih inklusif.

*Kata kunci: representasi kecantikan perempuan, drama Korea, True Beauty, analisis semiotika*

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## INTRODUCTION

South Korea is a country that sets trends in beauty products, such as makeup and skincare, which are popular with many people. In linguistic terms, a trend-setter is someone who initiates and popularizes new trends (Jessia & Pribadi, 2023). The phenomenon of globalization has accelerated the spread of culture across countries, one of which is through the flow of South Korean popular culture, known as the Korean Wave (Hallyu). This phenomenon encompasses various aspects such as music (K-pop), food (K-food), fashion, and television dramas (K-dramas). In the Indonesian context, Korean dramas have become one of the most popular foreign cultural products, particularly among teenagers and young women. This phenomenon not only has implications for the entertainment industry but also impacts the formation of perceptions, values, and cultural identity among society, including in terms of the construction of female beauty. One Korean drama that has received significant attention and reflects this issue is *True Beauty*, which addresses the social pressure on women's appearance.

Films have become an integral part of people's lives. Today, watching films is no longer limited to visiting cinemas. Technological advancements have brought significant changes, including in how films are enjoyed, which can now be accessed anywhere through various online cinema platforms (Salma et al., 2025). Recently, films have become one of the most popular forms of entertainment, especially among Generation Z teenagers (Putri et al., 2025).

The drama *True Beauty* (2020), adapted from the popular webtoon by Yaongyi, tells the story of a teenage girl named Lim Ju Kyung who feels insecure about her physical appearance. She then learns to apply makeup to 'transform' her face in order to be accepted by her social environment. This plot addresses the issue of unrealistic beauty standards and how women are pressured to meet such expectations. In this context, media such as Korean dramas act as socialisation agents that shape and reinforce certain aesthetic standards

regarding women's bodies and faces. Such representations, though fictional, are often accepted as reflections of reality or even aspirational models for viewers.

From a media studies perspective, every cultural text, including dramas, is a field of representation that is not neutral. Representation does not merely depict reality but also helps shape it through the selection and framing of signs. The representation of beauty in Korean dramas tends to portray female characters with white skin, slim bodies, symmetrical faces, and delicate features as the ideal standard. This not only creates certain boundaries around the concept of 'beauty' but also implies specific social values attached to physical appearance (Octriviana Wd & Hidayat, 2013). This standard is often exclusive and problematic as it has the potential to marginalize other forms of beauty that do not align with the dominant narrative.

To understand how the meaning of beauty is constructed in media, an approach that can deeply analyze signs and symbols is necessary. Semiotics, particularly Charles Sanders Peirce's approach, is an appropriate method for unpacking the hidden meanings in the visual representations of drama. Peirce's semiotics offers a triadic model of analysis, namely the representamen (the form of the sign), the object (what the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning that is interpreted) (Taufiq, 2016). With this model, we can examine how the visualization of makeup, clothing, facial expressions, or even lighting in certain scenes functions as a sign system that conveys social ideas about beauty (Islamey, 2020).

One approach frequently used in literary research is semiotic analysis (Dika, 2024). Through an examination of the relationship between the signifier, signified, and interpreter, the study employs a qualitative paradigm with a semiotic analysis approach based on Charles Sanders Peirce. Literature review is the method used based on data sources in the form of dialogue excerpts. Semiotics, as the study of signs and meaning, plays an important role in understanding texts and narratives (Hidayat et al., 2024).



Semiotics is a discipline that is able to solve problems through the study of signifiers and signs. The elements in semiotic analysis are expected to be able to solve several phenomena in a literary work (Yasmin et al., 2024). Beautiful in the Big Indonesian Dictionary means beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, and refers to the physical form of humans such as a person's body and face. The word beautiful is always associated with women. Women have long been taught that beauty and physical appearance are important in life (Fakhira et al., 2019; Mufidah et al., 2025; Basi et al., 2022).

Peirce also divided signs into three types: icons (signs that resemble their objects), indices (signs that have a causal or existential relationship with their objects), and symbols (signs whose relationship is arbitrary and determined by convention) (Berger, 2010). For example, a face full of make-up in a drama could serve as an icon of popular beauty, while social commentary in a scene could be an index of the psychological pressure against such standards. The audience as interpretant interprets all these signs contextually according to its experience and background. Therefore, Peirce's semiotic approach allows for a multilayered reading of visual texts such as Korean dramas, especially to uncover the ideologies hidden behind their narratives and aesthetics (Hoed, 2014; Hasrin & Sidik, 2023).

Furthermore, True Beauty presents an interesting narrative complexity, because on the one hand it presents a critique of oppressive beauty standards, but on the other hand it still reproduces the same aesthetic values. Ju Kyung's character who feels inferior without makeup shows how beauty is not only personal, but also socially shaped by external views and environmental pressures. This is in accordance with the concept of the male gaze proposed by Laura Mulvey, where women in the media are often constructed as visual objects to fulfil the desires of the audience, especially men (Oliver, 2017). Thus, although the play carries a message of empowerment, there is still ambiguity in the message conveyed, which makes it interesting to analyze further semiotically.

In the Indonesian context, where the influence of Korean culture is strong, it is important to understand how representations such as those in True Beauty impact teenagers and women. Many young women begin to feel that they are not 'beautiful' enough if they do not conform to the standards presented by the media. They get caught up in what Susan Bordo calls 'anorexic logic' the tendency to manipulate the body in order to achieve an unrealistic idealised form (Kaya, 2023; Choirunnisa, 2023). This shows that representations of beauty in the media are not just entertainment, but also shape social norms that can have an impact on individual psychology and behaviour.

This research is important because it helps to open up insights into how the media shapes perceptions of women's bodies and beauty. By focusing on the drama True Beauty and using Peirce's semiotics as an analytical tool, this research aims to reveal the structure of visual signs used to convey the concept of beauty. In addition, this research also wants to show how these meanings can reinforce or challenge established social norms regarding women's bodies. In the midst of an all-visual digital media era, the ability to read and understand such representations is crucial, both for academics, media practitioners, and the general public (Choirunnisa et al., 2025).

However, this research has limitations on the scope of the data analysed. Researchers only limited the study to episodes 1 to episode 5 of the total 16 episodes available in the drama True Beauty. This limitation is due to considerations of time, availability of sources, and a focus on analysing the initial development of the main character as a reflection of the social reality of beauty. Therefore, the analysis results presented have not covered the entire storyline, including character transformations that may occur in later episodes.

Nevertheless, episodes 1-5 are considered representative enough in describing the main character's inner struggle and social perception of physical appearance. It is hoped that this research

will still be able to contribute to the understanding of the meaning of female beauty in popular media through semiotic analysis. This research is not only theoretical, but also applicable as it can be a contribution in building critical media literacy. This research also highlights the importance of awareness of the ideological impact of visual media on the way we perceive ourselves and others. Especially in the era of social media, where images and visual displays are the main tools in communication, understanding the meaning behind representations is an important part of shaping a healthier and more inclusive cultural awareness and self-identity (Aqillah et al., 2025)

Research on the film 'True Beauty' with Peirce's semiotic approach was carried out based on existing research. Some of the research that has been done before includes the title 'Cultural Values in the Film "Najih" By Pondok Pesantren Dalwa Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Analysis'. The journal article by Putri et al. (2025) reveals the cultural values in the film 'Najih' using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach featuring a triadic analysis consisting of representamen, object, and several theories of cultural values that are used as a form of interpretation of each scene shown in the film. In addition, a study entitled 'The Value of Religiousness and Solidarity in Darin J. Sallam's Film Farha (Charles Sanders Peirce Semiotic Analysis)'. In a journal article written by Ramadhan et al. (2024) presents an analysis of the value of religiosity and solidarity to display the social and cultural conditions in Palestine as the setting of the film 'Farha' through a semiotic triadic analysis that displays the representamen and object, then produces an interpretation in the form of several kinds of religiosity and solidarity values. Both previous studies have inspired this research. This can be proven by the similarity, namely that the discussion of this research discusses social values based on the setting of the story displayed in the film. Uniquely, this research discusses beauty standards in shaping social norms. The interaction between characters shows that there are some differences in viewing female beauty as evidenced

by each character's reaction in the film. This is different from the two previous studies which did not discuss at all about women's beauty standards in the social and cultural order.

Based on this background, there are several key questions that this study seeks to answer regarding the representation of female beauty in the drama True Beauty, including what signs are used to indicate beauty in the drama, and the representation of female beauty in the drama through Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach.

## METHOD

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive method. The descriptive method here is used to describe written or oral data (Rohanda, 2016; Bandur, 2014; Razak, 2017). Meanwhile, the approach or method of study is semiotics. The qualitative approach was chosen because it aims to understand the representation of female beauty contained in the Korean drama True Beauty in a deep and contextual manner, rather than merely measuring the phenomenon quantitatively (Faruk, 2012). The main focus is to examine visual and verbal signs related to the construction of beauty, as well as how these signs produce meaning in the context of South Korean culture (Yudhistira & Yuwono, 2024).

The approach used is Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics, which divides signs into three main elements: representamen (the form of the sign), object (the thing referred to by the sign), and interpretant (the meaning or interpretation of the sign). The data collection process involves taking clips from various scenes that include expressions and scene settings, followed by the transcription of dialogue and visual symbols that represent beauty in dramas, as well as uncovering the implied meanings within them (Choirunisa & Rohanda, 2024). Several tools has been used for collect the data, such as computer with various tools and software inside in order of record the scene by capture a picture or transcript the conversation. Optimization of software in computer was

supported by artificial intelligence companion inside to resulting a capture or conversation transcript clearly (Setyorini et al. 2022). This approach is associated with data analysis techniques by categorizing each scene that emerges, blowing beauty in popular culture, particularly in Korean dramas, constructed and transmitted through various sign systems (Nurhasanah et al., 2025). Thus, this approach and method are considered the most relevant and effective for revealing the symbolic meanings behind the representations of beauty that appear in True Beauty.

## RESULTS

The process of observing the film “True Beauty” continues to an in-depth analysis of each element of representation in it. Several things in the film including theme, setting, dialogue between characters, and several other things can be categorized in each semiotic element. To determine the representamen element in relation to its reference to other things, the object analysis displays a scene by linking it to other events in the movie. The representamen - object relationship can produce interpretations depending on the value that the interpretant wants to bring, in this case, the researcher who plays a role for this (Yunasa & Rohanda, 2025).

To make Peirce’s semiotic analysis realistic, a popular term has been called triadic semiotic. A triangular diagram connects the three main elements in the semiotic analysis process. The representamen element is the starting point in the semiotic process because it can be said to be the physical form of a sign related to the setting with its division into three: synisign, qualisign, and lexisign. To ascertain the sign’s reference, the object element is divided into three: icon, index, and symbol. Some of these references become interpretations, which are elements of thought resulting from thoughts that are generalized through representations and objects. The nature of the interpretant is free, very dependent on how the

subject views the representamen and object. Thus, there is a chance that the triadic semiotic triangle has many branches with various interpretations (Rais & Rohanda, 2025).

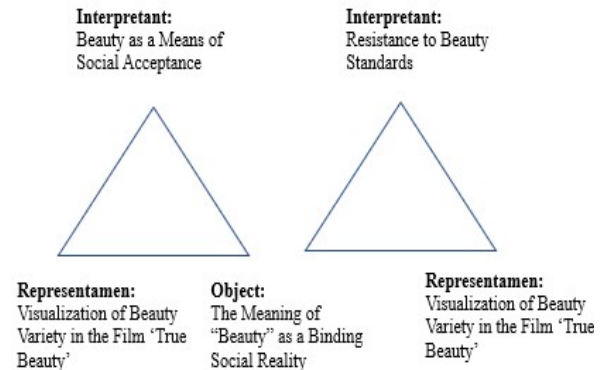








Figure 1  
Visualization of triadic semiotic analysis in “True Beauty”

Visualization of beauty variety is shown in this film by categorizing it as a representamen. With the setting of the story taking place in South Korea, the view of ‘beautiful’ is adjusted to the characteristics of women in the country. The review of the representamen through visualization creates an object element in the semiosis process, namely The Meaning of “Beauty” as a Binding Social Reality. The image of social reality in viewing beauty becomes something binding. The entanglement between beauty and social reality gives rise to two interpretations, namely Beauty as a Means of Social Acceptance and Resistance to Beauty Standards. An in-depth analysis of the elements that form the representamen, object, and interpretant, which include the setting and situation of the scene, is described in the explanation below.

## Representamen

After collecting data taken from images, scenes, dialogues, clothing and other visual symbols, the representations that can be presented in this study can be seen in the table below.



Table 1  
 Data Collection of Representamen in “True Beauty”

No.	Representamen	Data Source	Documentation
1	‘Ju-Kyung was teased by her friends, called “monster” because of her bare face’	Episode 1 – Minute 21:46-22:14 (Scene 1)	
2	‘Ju-Kyung came to school with her make-up on, and was still bullied’	Episode 1 – Minute 43:17-44:14 (Scene 2)	
3	“Ju Kyung came to her new school with a face full of makeup, neatly styled hair, and a confident expression.	Episode 1 – Minute 54:24-55:41 (Scene 3)	
4	‘Ju Kyung covers her face with a full face helmet when she’s not wearing make-up.’	Episode 2 – Minute 01:01:01-01:01:40 (Scene 4)	
5	“When Ju-Kyung entered the classroom and was noticed by many students, then they praised her performance.	Episode 1 – Minute 59:20-01:00:19) (Scene 5)	
6	‘Ju-kyung met Han Seo-jun without makeup, immediately covered her face with a mask’	Episode 4 – Minute 29:01-29:56 (Scene 6)	

### Object

After collecting data taken from images, scenes, dialogues, clothing and other visual symbols, the objects that can be presented in this research can be seen in the table below.








Table 2  
 Data Collection of Object in K-Drama “True Beauty”

No.	Object	Data Source	Documentation
1	‘Boys mock and say they are afraid of Ju-kyung’s real face’	Episode 1 – Minute 21:46-22:14 (Scene 1)	
2	‘Ju-kyung tries new makeup & hair following YouTube tutorials.’	Episode 1 – Minute 43:17-44:14 (Scene 2)	

## Interpretant

After collecting data taken from images, scenes, dialogue, clothing and other visual symbols, the interpretants that can be presented in this study can be seen in the table below.

Table 3  
 Data Collection of Interpretant in “True Beauty”

No.	Interpretant	Data Source	Documentation
1	‘Ju-Kyung went up to the rooftop and tried to jump off the school roof.’	Episode 1 – Minute 22:45-25:36 (Scene 10)	
2	‘Ju-kyung gets on the bus, gets appreciated for being pretty, then flashbacks to being hated’	Episode 2 – Minute 38:49-39:21 (Scene 11)	
3	‘Suho already knew Ju-Kyung’s real face without make-up, but he didn’t mind it.’	Episode 3 – Minute 16.04-16.44 (Scene 12)	
4	‘Ju-kyung started to feel confident about dating because she felt beautiful with makeup.’	Episode 4 – Minute 37:33-41:12 (Scene 13)	
5	‘Ju-kyung met a bully from the old school and panicked if her new friends knew her real face.’	Episode 5 – Minute 11:54-12:48 (Scene 14)	
6	‘Ju-kyung saw another student being bullied & immediately helped because she relates to her experience’	Episode 5 – Minute 30:17-31:47 (Scene 15)	
7	“Suho said: ‘You’re also beautiful without make-up’ to Ju-kyung”	Episode 5 – Minute 32:49-33:08 (Scene 16)	

## DISCUSSION

### Representament: Visualization of Beauty Variety in the Film ‘True Beauty’

The description of the representations in the Korean drama True Beauty by Kim Na Young is as follows:

### Scene 1:

‘Ju-Kyung is teased by her friends, called a “monster” because of her bare face’ (Episode 1 - Minutes 21:46-22:14). The representamen in this scene, the word ‘monster’ is a verbal sign used to represent Ju-Kyung’s face. It is captured directly sensually.

### Scene 2:

'Ju-Kyung comes to school with a lot of makeup on, and still gets bullied' (Episode 1 - Minute 43:17-44:14). The representamen here is the makeup on the face is a visual sign that represents Ju-kyung's effort to meet the beauty standard. It can be captured directly by the senses.

### Scene 3:

"Ju Kyung arrives at her new school with a face full of makeup, neatly styled hair, and a confident expression. Her schoolmates immediately stared in admiration." (Episode 1 - Minutes 54:29-55:41). The representamen in this scene is Ju Kyung's visual appearance after applying makeup. The drastic change from a plain face to a face full of makeup makes her look socially 'beautiful'. The elements of makeup, hairstyle, and facial expression become visual cues that represent the image of the ideal woman.

### Scene 4:

'Ju Kyung covers her face with a full face helmet when she's not wearing makeup.' (Episode 2 - Minute 01:01:01-01:01:40). The representation in this scene is the movement of covering the face. This action semiotically shows that a face without makeup is considered 'unfit' for public viewing.

### Scene 5:

'When Ju-Kyung entered the classroom and was noticed by many students, then they praised her appearance.' (Episode 1 - Minute 59:20-01:00:19). The representation here is mass attention to a beautiful face. The crowds and compliments are a sign that physical appearance is recognized as a symbol of high social status.

### Scene 6:

'Ju-kyung meets Han Seo-jun without makeup, immediately covering her face with a mask' (Episode 4 - Minute 29:01-29:56). The reflex action of covering her face is a sign (representamen) of the fear of looking "real". This sign refers to the object in the form of shame or can be said to be a rejection of the real face.

Representamen in Peirce's semiotics refers to the physical form of the sign, whether in the form of images, colours, expressions, or other symbols

visible to the senses. In *True Beauty*, the dominant representations appear in the visual form of makeup, skincare, clothing, cinematic lighting, and the main character's hair arrangement. The representations in Kim Na Young's Korean drama *True Beauty* are as follows:

In episode 1 (Minutes 54:29-55:40). Ju Kyung is described as entering a new school with full makeup, neat hair, and a very confident expression. The reaction of her schoolmates who immediately stare in awe is like a visual "confirmation" of the "success" of her transformation. Here, the representation is Ju Kyung's overall appearance after makeup. From plain face to full makeup, she is immediately considered socially "beautiful". All these elements, from her makeup, hairstyle, to her facial expression, become visual signs that clearly represent the image of the ideal woman in the drama (Pratiwi, 2023). Not only the end result, but the process behind the transformation itself is also an important representation. In Episode 1 (Minutes 21:46-22:11), we see Ju Kyung being bullied for her bare face and being called a 'monster' by her classmates. The representamen in this scene, the word 'monster' is a verbal sign that is used directly in a sensory manner.

In addition to direct visuals on the face and body, Ju Kyung's actions and the reactions of the people around her are also strong representations. We can see how people's views change drastically once Ju Kyung "has" a face that is considered beautiful. In Episode 1 (Minute 59:24-59:55), there is a scene where Ju Kyung is the centre of attention to a beautiful face.

The representations here of crowds and compliments are a sign that physical appearance is recognized as a symbol of high social status. Ju Kyung's discomfort with her real face is also a strong representation. In Episode 4 (Minutes 29:01-29:56), Ju Kyung covers her face with a mask when she meets Han Soe Jun at his house without makeup. This gesture of covering her face, semiotically, shows that the face without makeup is considered "unfit" for public viewing. This representation emphasises the internal and external pressure Ju



Kyung feels to always look perfect, and her fear of being judged if her true face is revealed.

### **Object : The Meaning of “Beauty” as a Binding Social Reality**

The object in Peirce’s semiotics is the reference or concept referred to by the representamen. In the context of this drama, the dominant object is the concept of ideal beauty in South Korean culture, which includes: Smooth white skin, sharp nose, small face with a ‘V-line’ shape Large eyes, slim body. The description of objects in the Korean drama True Beauty by Kim Na Young is as follows:

#### **Scene 7:**

‘Her classmates mock and say Ju-kyung’s real face is like a monster’ (Episode 1- Minute 21:46-22:11). The object in this scene is that their remarks are signs that refer to social reality: that a face that is not up to standard is considered ‘scary’ or unacceptable. Thus it becomes an object that is being constructed in a social context.

#### **Scene 8:**

‘Ju-kyung tries out new makeup & hair following a YouTube tutorial.’ (Episode 1 - (Minute 42:57-43:12) The object in this scene is referring to the objective concept of beauty propagated by the media, which is identical to white, thin, feminine beauty.

This standard is not only shown through Ju Kyung’s appearance after using make-up, but also reinforced through the social environment’s reaction to her. The objects in Kim Na Young’s True Beauty are as follows: The main object that stands out in this drama is that beauty is not just a matter of personal taste, but has become a social norm that must be fulfilled. This is very evident from the negative treatment and discrimination Ju Kyung received before she “changed”. For example, in Episode 1 (Minute 21:46-22:11), Ju Kyung is insulted with hurtful words: ‘like a monster’. The object in this scene is the concept of beauty that is pegged to smooth skin and a “clean” or flawless appearance. Ju Kyung’s natural face, which does not meet these standards, is immediately labelled a “monster” and

inappropriate. This shows that beauty is not just a choice, but has become a social reality that determines whether someone is accepted or rejected. This object is also seen from Ju Kyung’s fear of having her real face discovered. In Episode 1 (Minute 43:24-44:12), Ju Kyung starts trying make-up and trying new hairstyles following YouTube tutorials. The object in this scene is the construction of beauty that is not only visual, but also must be maintained and maintained. Make-up here is not just a tool to beautify, but has become an identity that “must be defended” so as not to “reveal” its weaknesses. This fear shows how strong the social pressure is to always look perfect. If we dig deeper, this drama also reveals the object of beauty as an “mandatory” whose roots are in the patriarchal system, although almost all men in the neighborhood see women from their physique, but there are two men who do not prioritize physique.

### **Interpretant: Exploring the Meaning and Social Impact of Beauty Representations**

The interpretation in Peirce’s semiotics is the meaning or mental effect that arises from the relationship between the representamen and the object. Interpretants can be direct, implied, or even contradict each other. In True Beauty, the interpretants that arise in the minds of the audience reflect the ambiguity of the drama’s moral message.

#### **1) Beauty as a Means of Social Acceptance**

The audience reads that Ju Kyung’s character only begins to be appreciated and loved when she looks beautiful according to her interpretation standards is an emphasis to the audience, especially teenage girls, that beauty is not just a right, but an obligation. The interpretant that supports the first point in the Korean drama True Beauty is shown in the scene as presented in the analysis table with the following explanation:

#### **Scene 11:**

‘Whenever Ju-kyung rides the bus, she is appreciated for being beautiful, then flashbacks to the time when she was hated’ (Episode 2 - Minutes 38:49-39:21). This scene depicts Ju-kyung’s inner

reflection on the contrast of social treatment. This meaning arises from the relationship between the sign (favourable treatment) and the object (appearance), and is captured psychologically in her mind.

#### **Scene 12:**

‘Suho already knew Ju-Kyung’s real face without make-up, but he didn’t mind it.’ (Episode 3 - Minutes 16.04-16.44). Suho interprets Ju-kyung’s real face as something that does not diminish her value as a person, this shows the process of interpreting deep meaning.

#### **Scene 13:**

‘Ju-kyung started to feel confident to date because she felt beautiful with makeup.’ (Episode 4 - Minutes 37:33-41:12). The interpretation of this scene is that false confidence arises because of appearance according to beauty standards, love is only possible when appearing ‘beautiful’

#### **Scene 14:**

‘Ju-kyung meets a bully from the old school and panics if her new friends know her real face.’ (Episode 5 - Minutes 11:54-12:48). The fear that her old identity will make her rejected and hated forms the meaning that ‘without makeup, she is not socially acceptable’.

## **2) Resistance to Beauty Standards**

There are several scenes that provide opportunities for interpretations that are opposite to what they should be. A scene where Ju Kyung shows her real face to Suho while crying, admitting that she is afraid of being rejected produces an alternative interpretation in the form of True beauty is the courage to be honest and accept oneself. This scene opens a space to criticise a system that only validates women based on their faces and bodies. The audience is invited to reflect on whether we really recognise someone by their appearance, or by their true self. The interpretants supporting the second point in the Korean drama True Beauty are as follows:

#### **Scene 10:**

‘Ju-Kyung went up to the rooftop and tried to jump off the school roof.’ (Episode 1- Minutes 22:45-25:36). The interpretation of this dialogue

is that the act of suicide is an emotional reaction to the relationship between the insult (sign) and the face (object). This is the deepest meaning.

#### **Scene 15:**

‘Ju-kyung saw another student being bullied & immediately helped because she relates to her experience’ (Episode 5 - Minute 30:17-31:47). The meaning that he can feel the suffering of others fosters empathy, solidarity, and reflection on his ‘weak’ past.

#### **Scene 16:**

‘Suho said: ‘You’re beautiful without makeup too’ to Ju-kyung” (Episode 5- Minutes 32:49-33:08). Meaning that true beauty does not have to be through makeup Ju-kyung begins to feel that she deserves to be accepted without a mask.

The various interpretations of this film scene can unconsciously cause psychological pressure, especially for teenage girls. As if being beautiful is not just a right, but an obligation that must be fulfilled in order to interact and be accepted in society. This is clearly seen from Ju Kyung’s scene in Episode 1 (Minute 21:46-22:11). She is climbing to the rooftop and trying to jump off the school roof. The interpretation of this scene is that the act of suicide is an emotional reaction to the relationship between insult (sign) and face (object). This is the deepest meaning. We come to understand that Ju Kyung’s real face is perceived as a serious “threat” to the social relationships and acceptance she has gained from her “beautiful” image. This fear shows how deeply the value of beauty is embedded in social structures, ultimately affecting our self-esteem and interactions.

But the great thing about True Beauty is that it’s not just one-sided. There are several scenes that actually open up space for the opposite interpretation, namely the resistance to these narrow beauty standards (Putri & Kurniawati, 2025). Although Ju Kyung is initially “trapped” in that pressure, her journey also shows her trying hard to accept herself. These scenes invite us as viewers to rethink the deeper and more authentic meaning of beauty. For example, in Episode 5 (Minute 32:49-32:58), Suho said: ‘You’re beautiful



without makeup, too.’ The interpretation of this statement is a new meaning of not all men look at their physique. We can pick up on the message that being honest with oneself, although initially scary due to the risk of social rejection, ultimately provides a much deeper inner comfort and peace than just expecting external validation. It’s like a shift in the view that beauty is not just about looks, but also about self-integrity. Then, it’s how people around you view the social constructs that make a natural face feel “foreign” or “lacking”. In Episode 2 (Minutes 38:51-39:23), there is a dialogue that shows: ‘Ju Kyung got on the bus and was appreciated for being pretty, then flashbaced to a time when she was hated.’ The interpretation here is describing Ju Kyung’s inner reflection on the contrast of social treatment. This is a thought for a society that has formed the perception that natural faces are “bad” or “not enough”. We come to understand that when a face feels “bad” it is not the face itself, but the views of a society that overly glorifies certain standards of beauty. It’s like an invitation for us to question the existing norms. The culmination of this interpretation is seen in Episode 5 (Minutes 12:01-12:33), when Ju Kyung meets a bully from her old school and panics if her new friends find out her real face. The interpretation of this scene is the fear that her old identity will make her rejected and hated. The meaning is that ‘without make-up, she is not worthy of social acceptance’.

Overall, the interpretations in True Beauty show not only how beauty standards affect individuals and society, but also how individuals can find the strength to challenge and define the true meaning of beauty for themselves. This drama, through its various signs and stories, invites us, the audience, to reflect on the true meaning of beauty

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the Korean drama True Beauty using Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic approach, three main categories are

obtained, namely the representamen, object, and interpretant that represent the concept of female beauty. The representamen in this drama is mostly displayed through the visual appearance of the main character, Lim Ju Kyung, such as the use of make-up, facial expressions, and physical appearance that is considered socially ideal.

The referenced object of these representations is the social construction of beauty standards that prevail in South Korean culture. Beauty is presented as something that must be achieved and maintained to gain acceptance from society. The interpretation that emerges from the relationship between the representation and the object shows that the audience captures the message that beauty is the main tool to gain social validation. However, the drama also presents alternative interpretations that emphasise the importance of self-acceptance, the courage to show one’s true face, and criticism of social constructions that limit women’s identity. Thus, True Beauty not only reproduces the standard of beauty, but also opens a space for resistance to it through the development of the main character who chooses to accept herself as she is.

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