



The Personal Color Makeover: An Alternative Means to a Better Life in Neoliberal South Korea

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Abstract

Personal color, known as a set of colors that harmonize with a person's natural physical coloring, rose rapidly as a trend among young Korean women in the 2010s. Based on anthropological fieldwork at personal color consultation studios, this study analyzes personal color as an alternative aesthetic makeover practice to plastic surgery in which the body is deemed the source of originality instead of change. Instead of altering the body, improvement through personal color is supposed to be achieved through a change in color consumption, about which the consultant provides guidance as a choice connoisseur. Through the journey of personal color makeover, the customer is encouraged to transform into a better-looking, efficient color consumer and an estimable authentic self with a strong sense of individuality and self-esteem. Deeply related to producing each individual as an attractive and marketable personal brand, the practice erects itself as an alternative means to increase one's value and chances in life—an option that is seemingly more body-positive than plastic surgery but entails a more ceaseless endeavor of self-government in all aspects of everyday life for the production of a better self.

Keywords: personal color, makeover, beauty, self-improvement, neoliberalism, South Korea

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Introduction

Personal color—known as a set of colors that harmonize with a person's natural body coloring—is a concept based on the belief that everyone has unique physical elements that entail different sets of well-suited colors. According to Im et al. (2017), personal color is defined as a set of colors that “harmonize with the body color and makes the skin color beautiful and healthy,” especially when it comes to “selecting the color of makeup and costume for one's image improvement” (369). Known as the personal color system (PCS), the personal color theory and its practices incorporate specific ideas about color, beauty, and self-improvement so as to provide a means for a better life.

In South Korea, public interest in finding one's personal color was sparked in 2011 when the concept was introduced on a popular television program titled *Get It Beauty*.¹ The concept rose rapidly as a trend in the following years, resulting in the growth of local personal color businesses and the proliferation of consultation services that have maintained their appeal some ten years after its introduction. Currently, personal color consultation companies not only attract hundreds of customers a month, but also collaborate with fashion and beauty industries for product development. Conglomerates such as Samsung and Lotte as well as hotels and universities invite consultants for special lectures, where they speak on the importance of personalized image development to employees. The expression “personal color” itself has expanded in meaning, with the term often being used as a symbol of individuality for the promotion of customized services that are completely irrelevant to the actual color theory.

Due to its being a fairly recent phenomenon, however, the rise of personal color has been comparatively overlooked while other makeover practices such as plastic surgery have been much researched. Past research into personal color has been limited to quantitative data analyses that tend to treat the concept as a scientific fact or a useful marketing tool. Thus, I find it important to shed light on the topic from a different angle that focuses

1. A TV show about cosmetics broadcast on CJ E&M ONSTYLE (2006–present).

more on actual practices taking place in local contexts, especially for understanding the cluster of promises embedded in the practice and how they reflect broader social ideals that prevail in contemporary South Korea.

This paper focuses specifically on the personal color consultation business where trained image consultants provide makeover services based on the personal color theory. Based on anthropological fieldwork, I position my analysis within neoliberal makeover culture to explore what *becoming better* entails and how it is supposed to be achieved in this specific practice. With a special focus on its local status as an alternative to plastic surgery, I will examine the unique characteristics of personal color makeover and argue that this seemingly more body-positive option entails a more ceaseless endeavor of self-government in all aspects of everyday life for the production of a better self.

Methods²

Prior studies on personal color have mostly been quantitative, usually carried out statistically on topics such as the distribution of body coloring among South Koreans according to age and sex or utilization rates of personal color knowledge (Lee 2008; Choi and Suk 2017; Park et al. 2018). This paper takes a different approach from these studies, aiming to contextualize personal color as a cultural phenomenon through qualitative analysis based on anthropological fieldwork. Intensive offline fieldwork involving participant-observation and in-depth interviews was carried out from December 2019 to May 2020. Since observing the diagnosis of customers other than myself was not feasible due to the private nature of the service, I limited my research participants to “consultants”—a category in which I include those who run consultation businesses related to personal color. Consultants are skilled professionals who have been professionally trained and certified at private color companies to evaluate and advise others based on the personal color theory. They are paid for their service of

2. This study was approved by the SNUIRB (IRB No. 2004/002-019).

diagnosing what looks best for the customer, with which they give expert advice on how to improve oneself through appropriate color choice. In other words, they are makeover gurus.

The Korean personal color industry has a family tree of some sort with pioneer chromatists at the top, students of theirs who run color companies in the middle, and those who have been trained and certified in those companies to disperse into independent business as smaller branches.³ Since the pioneers are aged over sixty and are rather color theorists than consultants, my focus is on the next two generations who have been leading the recent personal color trend. I sought out research participants by searching personal color consultation services on the Internet and contacting each company or studio via email. Explaining my research objective, I asked whether I could book a consultation session for research purposes and/or schedule an interview with any of the affiliated staff. Out of a dozen services I contacted, five replied positively to the interview, among which two allowed participant-observation in my own consultation session.

The interview was conducted with seven consultants in total: one each from three famous color companies in Korea and four independent consultants in the style of a one-to-one interview or focus group interview. Each interview was carried out for a minimum of one hour to a maximum of three hours, some including a tour of the company or a diagnosis session. General information about the interviewees is as follows:

3. Personal color consultation does not have a relevant national license yet, which makes it hard to track the exact number of services. There only exist private certificates issued by color companies or related associations, which can be obtained by anyone as long as they pay for the training course. As of January 2022, there were more than ninety private certificates registered under the name "personal color" in the Private Qualification Information Service established by KRIVET (Korea Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training). The total size of the personal color industry is estimated to be much larger than this number, as there are many companies that provide consultation without issuing their own certificate and also those that use various names for their certificates, such as "color consultant," "personal image consultant," "color image consultant," etc.

Table 1. List of Interviewees

| Name | Gender | Age group | Years at work | Affiliation |
|--------------|--------|-----------|---------------|----------------------|
| Consultant P | Female | 30s | 10+ | Company A |
| Consultant Q | Female | 30s | 9 | Company B |
| Consultant R | Female | 40s | 10+ | Company C |
| Consultant W | Female | 20s | 5 | Independent Studio D |
| Consultant X | Female | 30s | 2 | Independent Studio E |
| Consultant Y | Female | 20s | 2 | Independent Studio E |
| Consultant Z | Female | 30s | 1 | Independent Studio E |

Notes: Some of the interviewees are no longer active as consultants, but they are still core members of the personal color industry as the CEO or some other position. In this paper, I address all of them as “consultants” for the sake of anonymity. Since there are very few consultants who have over 10 years of personal color consulting experience, I have reduced their accurate number of years at work to 10+ in order to prevent identification.

Consultants P, Q, and R are some of the earlier consultants—those positioned at the upper-middle part of the personal color family tree. They either hold a CEO or head consultant position at each of the company, investing much of their time in running the business and educating younger consultants. In addition to personal color consultation service, their companies make money through certification courses, corporation lectures, and collaboration with cosmetic companies.⁴ The other four consultants—Consultants W, X, Y, and Z—have been trained and certified at such companies and constitute the lower branches of the family tree. After working as company-affiliated consultants for a while, they left their job to run their own business in small studios.

Participant-observation took place in my own sessions that I booked and paid for as a customer-cum-researcher. I was allowed one diagnosis from Company B (one-to-one consultation), and one diagnosis from Independent Studio E (three-to-one focus group consultation). Each of these cost 120,000 KRW (approximately 98 USD) and lasted for a minimum

4. During my fieldwork in early 2020, most certification courses and corporation lectures were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

of one hour.⁵ Though the consultants knew I was a researcher, they treated me like any other customer during the consultation session—a conclusion I reached and verified by comparing my experience with online customer reviews. In addition to offline fieldwork, some of my data collection was carried out online from official websites, blogs, or social media accounts of color consulting companies or studios; popular posts and comments about personal color from online blogs or discussion boards; and media content from public platforms like Taling.⁶ All data collected online were already made public.

Personal Color as Makeover in South Korea

“Why Look Good When You Can Look Great?”⁷

Throughout its history, there has been a marked emphasis in the personal color industry on personal color as a way to *become better*. While the theory has its roots in Europe and was popularized in the United States decades before it reached South Korea, the overarching rationale for the necessity of knowing one’s personal color has been similar across time and space. What drives the demand for personal color services as well as what the industry sells is the possibility of change—not just any change, but a transformation for the better. The desire—or obligation—to improve oneself drives customers to the consulting room, hoping that the consultant can provide them with the means to achieve this through appropriate color styling.

5. Consultation fees range from 40,000 to 200,000 KRW (approximately 40 to 180 USD) depending on the skill level of the consultant, the number of participating customers, and the richness of the styling advice.

6. Taling(<https://www.taling.me>) is a popular talent-sharing platform in South Korea.

7. Quoted from Carole Jackson Colors homepage, accessed June 29, 2019, <https://carolejacksoncolors.com>. Carole Jackson is an American color theorist who developed the four-season personal color system that most Korean personal color theories are based on.

The obligation to improvement that prevails is in keeping with the spirit of “makeover culture” (Jones 2008). In her book *Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery*, Jones (2008) uses the term “makeover culture” to describe the set of cultural logics in which cosmetic surgery is embedded. According to Jones, makeover culture is a cultural ethos that privileges processes of becoming better over being. Her argument is built on Foucault’s “technologies of the self,” defined as that which permit individuals to effect a certain number of operations on their way of being so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness (Foucault et al. 1988, 18). In this framework, the self is deemed an object of knowledge, calculation, evaluation, and correction—a construct to be worked upon instead of a fixed entity. Developing her argument on this idea of the self, Jones (2011) asserts that good citizens of “makeover culture” are obligated to perform a performative transformation of the self, and that greater emphasis is put on the process of development than on the idea of completion. As “becoming” increasingly becomes the desirable ways in which “being” is done, self-improvement is not only “something that in makeover culture everyone needs” but also a “continuing enterprise” (Jones 2011, 5).

While Jones uses the concept primarily to account for the topic of cosmetic surgery, she argues that “makeover culture” does not just apply to cosmetic surgery but can be used to describe a broad set of cultural, social, and aesthetic changes. Further research into makeover culture has been carried out by numerous other scholars, who have applied the concept to analyze an array of practices ranging from cosmetic surgery to makeover television shows. These led to some interesting findings about the irony of contemporary makeover narratives, one of which being Weber (2010) and Raisborough (2011)’s argument that these practices work on the premise that they *reveal* the self instead of constructing it. According to Raisborough (2011), contemporary makeover is presided over by ubiquitous experts who use their specialist knowledge and experience to steer participants through the journey of the makeover to the successful point of “reveal” (4). The point of reveal is when the participants emerge transformed and empowered, with a celebrated selfhood that rejoices in a better and more validated form of me-ness. This connects to Weber (2010)’s argument that one of the critical

premises of makeover is that it does not create selfhood, but rather locates and salvages that which is already present but weak. Makeover narratives suggest that though a “you” may exist, a “better you” can only be achieved through the makeover (Weber 2010, 7). This *better* self is a version that is improved both internally and externally, as the makeover works on the belief that it can help the participant transform into a more efficient, happier self, not only outside but inside.

This characteristic is shared in personal color makeover narratives as well, as the practice relies on the belief that knowing oneself and using the right colors accordingly can maximize one’s *me-ness* (*nadaum*) both inside and out. The personal color theory is basically about how to present the *best* version of oneself with a set of colors that can best bring out one’s authenticity. The slogans of “Find My Color,” “My Own Beauty,” and achieving *me-ness* (*nadaum*), have to do with producing each individual as an authentic personal brand through specific color knowledge. The self is deemed a knowable, measurable, and evaluable construct to be worked upon, which is obligated to become better—or *me-er*—through meticulous color styling. The PCS aesthetic ideal itself relies heavily on the sensibility of *eoullida*, defined by local consultants as the feeling of suiting well achieved by the repetition of one’s natural physical elements in color choice. To help customers achieve this ideal, consultants suggest ways to subordinate material color to physical features, helping the customers take control of color and use it as a tool for personal branding—a performance genre which assumes that everyone should be able to present oneself to others with the impression of a coherent, natural, and authentic self (Gershon 2016, 224). Overall, the makeover narrative is built on an ironic premise that the self is a work-in-progress which needs to improve into a more self-like self.

The strong emphasis on improving one’s *me-ness* is inseparable from the need to create a marketable self, which can be analyzed in relation to broader regimes of value privileged in contemporary South Korea, namely that of neoliberal ideals. While neoliberalism itself is a contested concept that can be conceptualized variously, my own definition is informed by the Foucauldian approach that understands neoliberalism as more than a set of

free market principles but a particular art of governing human beings—something that extends to the organization of subjectivity. This specific governable form of subjectivity constituted through neoliberalism is often referred to as “neoliberal subjectivity.” Neoliberal subjects are ideal citizens of a neoliberal society who can “withstand the tidal forces of the market-economy through flexibility and enterprise” (Raisborough 2011, 12). They are encouraged to maximize their own capital as entrepreneurial subjects who “effectively manage their natural talents and acquired skills within a space of freedom which seems unlimited” (Lorenzini 2018, 161), expected to lead responsabilized and self-managed lives through self-application and self-transformation (Scharff 2016).

As for South Korea, the country is said to have taken a neoliberal turn during the IMF era. According to Abelmann et al. (2009), the IMF crisis (1997–2001) was a period of economic uncertainty leading to an array of social and policy reforms that were broadly speaking neoliberal in character (231). South Korea’s neoliberal turn involved a critique of crony capitalism and led to the call for venture capitalism in a deregulated market. Intensified privatization, individuation, and globalization was followed by the demise of job security, which resulted in a highly competitive environment that called for a new mode of being among its citizens—especially the younger generation—which scholars refer to as neoliberal subjectivity. It is argued that this new mode of being is more than a matter of style but “a requirement for leading a productive life in [a] rapidly transforming and globalizing world” (Abelmann et al. 2009, 230).

Makeover practices in contemporary South Korea have thus been analyzed within this neoliberal context, with plastic surgery being the most relevant topic from which similarities and differences can be drawn. Scholars who have conducted research on plastic surgery in South Korea argue that the practice is based on the idea that beauty is a commodity—a resource—that can help to make oneself more desirable in society. Stensen (2015), for instance, attributes the increasing number of people undergoing cosmetic surgery to “the need to create a marketable-self” as one’s value and chances in life increasingly depend on the way others perceive one as beautiful or not (56, 58). Albrecht (2016) links the experience of aesthetic

surgery to the rapid economic transformations of South Korean society, arguing that it embodies an ideology of progress where everything can be made better, more useful, more practical, and where productivity is valued above other aspects (30). While he does not specifically use the term “makeover” in his article, Albrecht’s analysis reveals that aesthetic surgery in Korea demonstrates key characteristics of makeover culture in relation to neoliberal market ideals as he argues that “constant maintenance and amelioration not only are possible but are actually required by the competitive nature of the opportunities provided” (33). He also emphasizes that the practice involves the reveal of an “authentic and genuine self, liberated through the agency of surgery—just as genuine, if not more so, than the original” (41).

This former literature on plastic surgery informs my approach to personal color consultation in Korea as an alternative form of aesthetic makeover practice. Positioned within neoliberal makeover culture, personal color consultation and cosmetic surgery share much in common in the rationales they mobilize. They both deem beauty a commodity, provide a means to realize one’s obligation to self-improvement, promise the reveal of an *authentic self* that is considered more marketable, and attempt to achieve external beautification which is believed to entail an internal makeover as well. A cluster of promises pertaining to a better life is embedded in a person—a consultant or a plastic surgeon—as well as a time—a consulting session or an operation time—and a space—a consulting room or an OR. As a result, personal color is frequently referred to as “color cosmetic surgery” (*keoleo seonghyeong*) or “cosmetic surgery that doesn’t involve going under the knife” (*kal an daeneun seonghyeong*), implying that one can enjoy similar effects through different means. What I want to focus on, however, is the differences between the two practices rather than the similarities.

First, personal color consultation resonates better with the ideals and desires of the younger generation of 21st-century South Korea. The rapid growth of the personal color industry in the 2010s was fueled by Generation MZ, which began to form a major consumer group around this time. Generation MZ is a demographic cohort that refers to those born from the early 1980s to early 2000s, which consists of the Millennials (born 1980–

1994) and Generation Z (born 1995–2004).⁸ Born a decade before or after the IMF crisis, this age group is precisely the generation that has been subject to the demands of a society in which they are encouraged to manage and produce themselves as desirable in a competitive environment. Abelman et al. (2009) found that, in relation to the country's neoliberal turn, this new generation articulates a discourse of individuality, style, and self-fashioning while earlier generations are imagined as collectivist subjects. The generational shift away from the traditionally group-oriented tendency of Korean society and towards individuation is especially evident in the *honjok* trend. *Honjok*, which refers to people who willingly undertake solitary activities like eating, drinking, or traveling alone, is a term that was popularized in Korea around 2017.⁹ Accompanied by the steady increase in single-person households, the *honjok* lifestyle and the growing emphasis on individuation has been answered with an increase in personalized products and services. With its emphasis on “individuated beauty” rather than the “standardized beauty” that cosmetic surgery has frequently been criticized for, the personal color industry found a niche within this trend, appealing to the younger generation as a makeover option that supposedly brings about a better life in a more Me-centric, personalized fashion.

Another and the biggest difference between the two practices lies in the way beautification is supposed to be achieved. While cosmetic surgery focuses on the body as the source of change, personal color deems it the source of authenticity. As for cosmetic surgery, “fixing flaws and erasing evidence of aging” is achieved by directly operating on the body and modifying one's physical features (Elfvig-Hwang 2013, 4). In personal color practices, however, one's natural physical features are considered the source of authenticity that one should aim to bring out instead of modify. Leaving

8. While the Millennials and Generation Z are often viewed as separate demographic cohorts in other countries, “Generation MZ” has been a popular term in South Korea to refer to the younger generation as a whole who share such common characteristics as digital fluency, experiences of uncertainty due to economic crises at the time they entered adulthood (the IMF Crisis, 2008 financial crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic), and the demand for products and services that cater to personal values and preferences.

9. *Honjok* is a neologism derived from the word *honja* (alone).

physical features as they are, consultants claim that individuals can hide flaws and look younger through appropriate color styling. In other words, color choice modification, instead of body modification, becomes the key to aesthetic improvement. Thus, the personal color industry promises improvement without making the customer feel bad about their body, seemingly taking a more body-positive stance.

I find it meaningful that this body-positive characteristic coincides with the recently renewed attention on feminism in South Korea, frequently referred to as “feminism reboot” (Sohn 2015). “Feminism reboot” refers to the SNS-centric resurgence of feminism that has been occurring since 2015, just around the time personal color started to gain rapid popularity. This timely popularization should not be disregarded as mere coincidence, because the majority of personal color participants are female.¹⁰ Issues such as female aesthetic labor were and still are heavily discussed in this “reboot” era, with a variety of body-positive movements spreading both online and offline. These movements affected the consumption patterns of young Korean women in the late 2010s, one of the most noticeable being the decrease in the amount of money spent on plastic surgery. According to the Hyundai Card sales record provided by Korean Statistics Data Center in September 2019, there was more than 64 billion KRW decrease in spending on plastic surgery among women in their twenties between 2015/2016 and 2017/2018.¹¹ As general spending on dermatological treatments, cosmetics, and fashion also dropped, beauty industries tried to survive the trend by

10. While it was impossible to find official statistics on the demographics of customers, my interviewees unanimously stated that male customers make up 20 percent or less of their clients. A majority of these male customers, in turn, were boyfriends of female customers who signed up for “couple consultations.” The consultants also pointed out that after personal color’s popularization in the mid-2010s, there was a significant increase in the number of younger female customers in their teens or twenties. The consultants themselves and their co-workers were also all female.

11. Analysis of the statistics can be found in Daum News. Yeongbin Seo, “‘Talko sedae’ 20-dae yeoseong, hwajang, seonghyeong an hago jadongcha sattda” (The ‘Escape-the-Corset’ Generation: Women in their Twenties Invested in Cars instead of Plastic Surgery or Cosmetics), last modified September 16, 2019, <https://news.v.daum.net/v/20190916060505440>.

promoting slogans of “personal beauty” and female empowerment. It was exactly during these years that the personal color business experienced rapid growth.

Since color consumption is a practice that takes place in almost every moment of everyday life, personal color takes up an ironic position as an aesthetic makeover option that embraces female empowerment discourses based on body-positivity, yet encourages more ceaseless self-discipline and aesthetic labor. The operation continues outside the consulting room without the consultant as the customer herself becomes responsible for realizing the better-life fantasy through meticulous color consumption. Therefore, as opposed to cosmetic surgery that works on the belief that the practice will entail twofold changes—outer and inner—personal color makeover aims for three. The consultants refer to the additional change as the “economic” one, as does Consultant X in the following quote where she explains how an overall “lifestyle makeover” can be achieved through the interrelated changes.

We usually divide the purpose of personal color consulting into three. First is external change. Second is internal change through that external change. It is the change related to self-esteem. Third is economic change. The consultation helps customers change their consumption patterns. If you change everything from the external, internal to the economic, that is what we call a lifestyle makeover.¹²

While the belief that a better-looking exterior can affect your inner character and your life as a whole is a continuing theme of plastic surgery, an economic aspect is thrown in for personal color consultation. Because the makeover guru does not operate directly on the body, an additional performance that translates self-knowledge—the newfound identity as a Spring, Summer, Autumn, or Winter person as diagnosed by the consultant—into self-management is required on the customer’s part. Since what one wears is pretty much what one buys, the consultant attempts to improve the

12. Consultant X, interview by author, Seoul, April 2020.

customer's consumption pattern so that she can make *better* choices—choices that are more cost-effective and in keeping with the PCS beauty standard. As this economic aspect of the makeover is a major characteristic that differentiates personal color consultation from other makeover practices, the next section will be devoted to further illustrating this point.

Choice Modification

Personal color became a hot issue because it is directly connected to purchase. Some people liken personal color to *saju*¹³ or horoscope or tarot, but those don't affect your daily life. Personal color does.¹⁴

The personal color theory is sometimes likened to popular self-categorization practices like the horoscope or blood-type personality theory because it involves categorizing people based on certain elements of the self. However, as Consultant Q states in the quote above, there is a significant difference in that personal color is directly connected to purchase while others are not. Being a Pisces or blood type AB does not make one buy a certain color of lipstick, but being a Summer Mute type does. After all, color choice is about what to wear. Altering one's choices is an important process for self-improvement, since being diagnosed with a personal color type cannot affect anything if it does not affect one's consumption pattern first. Beautification through PCS-appropriate color styling is possible only when it is reflected in one's everyday color consumption.

Consequently, one of the consultant's most important roles becomes that of choice connoisseur who advises customers on what colors they can best utilize and what colors they should stay away from—i.e. what colors they should buy and not buy. The consultant's role as a choice connoisseur could best be observed in the Pouch Check & Styling Advice stage of my own consultation session. In the Pouch Check stage, the consultant

13. *Saju* is a popular genre of fortune-telling in Korea.

14. Consultant Q, interview by author, Seoul, April 2020.

rummages through the customers' make-up pouch for two reasons. First is to help the customers better utilize what they have already purchased. The consultant sorts the existing items into PCS seasonal categories, picking out products that correspond to the customer's best tone. The consultant also takes this chance to grasp the customer's taste and assess how well-matched it is to the diagnosed tone. She determines whether the customer is a low-end road shop person or a high-end brand one, and whether the customer already has an eye for well-suited products. The latter is an evaluation of the customer's senses and choices: a judgment on whether the customer's vision already falls in line with that for PCS-informed consumption.

Based on what she has deduced from the customer's past choices, the consultant proceeds to the Styling Advice stage in which she provides guidance on future choices. In this stage, the customer is provided with a detailed analysis sheet about how to style oneself optimally according to one's personal color: what range of lipstick colors one should use, what kind of skin foundation one should use, what color one should go for when dyeing one's hair, and what specific products best match one's diagnosis. In my own case, I was given a number of cards called the Lip Color Card and Beauty Card in the final stage of the consultation, on which not only colors but also the exact name and item number of products that might suit me well were listed. Provided along with these cosmetic cards was a hair color recommendation sheet, on which the consultant marked the wrong choices with a cross and the utilizable range with an arrow.

The consultant encourages translating this advice to actual consumption by letting the customers test the products on the spot. In every consulting room, there is a large drawer or a dressing mirror full of cosmetic products. Consultants purchase a variety of items from different brands regularly, sometimes *raiding* a certain brand when a new line is launched, then test the products one by one to see which type they can best recommend them to. When product recommendation begins, the consultant goes to the collection and brings the products that match the diagnostic result. She allows the customer test them, or provides the service herself if she is skillful in applying makeup. Meanwhile, the customers are advised to take pictures of the products they like so that they can buy them

in the future. Because a consultant can only possess a limited number of products physically, product recommendation is accompanied by online image samples as well. With her phone, the consultant will show the customer the exact name and brand of additional products that might suit him/her well, and include them in the final list.

The reason consultants provide such detailed product information instead of merely providing a color chart is because the former makes it easier for the customer to translate the diagnosis into actual consumption. After several years of running the service, the consultants found that customers are “most content” when specific products are listed on their advice sheet because it saves the time and energy of finding the right product on their own. Some customers would demand that the consultant provide specific product numbers, even if the consultant is wary to do so lest she looks like an advocate of a certain brand or due to market availability. That is why consultants cannot help but become *curators* in this last stage which is often referred to as “styling curation”—they constantly need to select, organize, and present actual products like museum curators do instead of merely giving verbal advice.

Giving advice on future consumption plays an especially important role in helping threshold customers. In customer reviews as well as consultant interviews, I found that many customers seek consultation when they are going through some kind of transition period. These customers are usually detached—or planning to detach—from their original social position and standing in the face of a new one. This transition period can be referred to as the “liminal” phase during rites of passage (Van Gennep 1909), which refers to when the subject is neither part of the past state nor the coming state. Scholars such as Gilman (1999) and Albrecht (2016) have already argued that aesthetic makeover helps individuals through rites of passage. Drawing on the case of aesthetic surgery, they have illustrated that the practice helps individuals pass from one group in society to another they would much rather be identified with, in which the productive dimensions of the altered body are emphasized.

When it comes to personal color practices, however, one does not alter the body but instead alters fashion choice. How personal color makeover

helps liminal subjects through rites of passage has more to do with finding the most cost-effective way of conforming to *dressing norms* appropriate for the group the customer would like to be—or required to be—identified with. That is why choice modification is especially important for those who pay a visit in the liminal stages of their life. The main purpose of a visit when it comes to these threshold customers is to get shopping advice for an economical yet effective purchase to style oneself more appropriately for the upcoming state or event.

For example, in the case of Company A where Consultant P works, the few male customers who are brave enough to visit the company alone are mostly those who have just been discharged from the army. They have to return to “normal society”—demonstrating the passage from soldier status to civilian status—and seek the consultant’s help because they don’t know what to wear. Female customers who experience a similar status change include those who are reaching the end of their maternity leave and soon returning to their jobs. Some of them have stayed away from working society for too long, and they *feel lost*. Disorientation is a common attribute of threshold subjects, as their former self-understanding and ways of behavior come undone in the transition from one identity to another. The consultant helps them orient themselves during this phase by advising them on efficient shopping choices so that they can blend into the working society better.

In addition to threshold customers, there are also those who have already crossed the threshold and come for consultation after encountering a new set of dressing norms that place them in a crisis. One such case is narrated in the following quote, in which a place-to-place transition from outside Korea into Korea entailed different workplace dressing norms for female office workers.

You know, people who work outside Korea don’t apply as much makeup as we do in the [Korean] workplace. There was this female customer who worked for a multinational corporation and had recently been relocated to the Korean branch. She had confidence in her abilities and believed she would be able to demonstrate her ability as well in Korea as she used to in

her former branch. But the first criticism she got after her first presentation here was, “Why are you not wearing make-up?”¹⁵

The customer, who did not know that being bare-faced in the workplace could compromise her competence as a worker in Korea, had come for consultation because she needed cosmetics shopping but “didn’t know where to begin.” The customer’s physical transition from a foreign branch to a Korean one involved becoming assimilated to a different way of presenting oneself as a competent working woman in the local context. In this new group, she was judged by her appearance as much as—or more than—her job performance. As the demonstration of her abilities was influenced by whether or not she was wearing make-up, the assimilation to the *competent working woman* category was to be achieved by consuming cosmetics products. In such situations, personal color consultation appeals to threshold customers as a means of helping them pass from one group to another through altered consumption choice. By sharing a set of skilled color knowledge and accordingly curated product data, the consultant helps these customers make better choices that are more cost-effective and better suited to presenting themselves in a way that is desired—or required—for their social position.

Another improvement that personal color consultation aims to bring about in the customer’s color consumption is individuation. The consultants provide the customer with a way to transform from a “consumer that fails” to a “consumer that succeeds” by privileging individuated consumption. Blindly following the trend or being seduced by the image of celebrities put forward by brands are considered undesirable consumption habits that need correction. The customers are instead advised to “find their own color,” which encourages individuated consumption based on personal features and qualities of one’s own—not that of some other person. Learning to make choices based on one’s personal color type is how they can become the master of their own color choice—a “sovereign consumer in pursuit of individual wants” who can fully enjoy the “aesthetic pleasures of choice-

15. Consultant P, interview by author, Seoul, April 2020.

making” (Raisborough 2011, 56).

What is interesting about the individuated consumption discourse is that taking control of color through the PCS is believed to bring about one’s transformation into a freer consumer. That the customer can enjoy more freedom through the makeover is a recurring argument on the consultants’ part, which is ironic in that customers are advised to stay away from certain colors and encouraged to utilize others. However, consultants claim that this process “lifts restrictions” instead of limiting color choice. They argue that, through consultation, the inhibitions customers used to have about certain hues—e.g. “I don’t look good in red”—can be extinguished as the consultant explains that there are different tones within each hue—e.g. different tones of red—among which there is at least one tone that the customer can utilize. Also, personal color consultants do not necessarily designate a certain range as the *only* colors one must consume, but rather suggest a range of colors one can *better* utilize for a more harmonious look. In other words, they set bounds and label each territory as better, best within better, worse, and worst within worse. According to Consultant W, this process endows the customer with a “power of making their own color choices,” which she elaborated with a pizza analogy.

Consultant W believes that color in the world is much like a whole pizza, and the consultant’s role is to section it into slices so that it becomes easier to consume. The consultant advises the customers on the range of slices they can better digest, and shows them the worst slice—the “deadline,” according to the Consultant W—so that they know what colors to avoid if they do not want an “upset stomach.” An upset stomach refers to a poorly managed social impression caused by inappropriate or incoherent color styling. “Once you know the deadlines,” she said, “color becomes much easier to consume.” Freer consumption, in this context, is an ironic performance that involves setting bounds to one’s color choice which supposedly helps one choose from more diverse hues, sets one free from blindly following the market trend, and endows one with the power to make one’s own color choice more efficiently.

Whether or not this change is actually brought about, of course, is entirely up to the customer’s own self-regulation. Though the consultant

gives tips to modify the customer's consumption choices into what is better suited to the PCS ideal, neither the consultant nor the consultation itself holds power over the customer's actual choices once the service is over. Raisborough (2011) writes that becoming better is a "ceaseless endeavor that lasts a lifetime" to the citizens of makeover culture (59), and it is very literally so for personal color practices. Whereas the effects of an altered body are quite permanent in the case of plastic surgery, one can only enjoy the effects of altered color choice if the personal color system infiltrates everyday life—from choosing what to wear in the morning to buying products at a cosmetics store. Thus, the customer is fully responsible for reaping the fruits of the makeover in this particular practice, rendering self-improvement through choice modification a ceaseless endeavor indeed.

Better as *Me-er*

Personal color consultation is not only a means to accomplish external beautification through a change in consumption, but also informed by certain ideals of selfhood that privilege a strong sense of me-ness overall. Training one's vision to a particular set of color and beauty perception and modifying one's consumption choice accordingly is how *becoming better* is supposed to be accomplished in this particular practice, and *better* means *me-er* in this context. The emphasis on *me-ness* as a prerequisite for a better life can be found in every online and offline discourse about personal color, including the following excerpt from the homepage of a consultation company.

In the modern world, a person called "me" is much like a product. If "success" means strategically improving "me" into a "brand," "personal color" is the most effective marketing strategy to increase the value of the product called "me"...It is safe to say that modern society is a "visual era." But nowadays, when differentiated "personality" matters more than mere visuals, personal color will be "my own visual identity." Also, I am certain that "personal color" will positively transform not only your appearance

but also your inner side. Experience the world of “personal color” as soon as possible—it is a major step to upgrading your life.¹⁶

As the consultant passionately writes above, personal color makeover is ultimately about developing “me” into a “brand” and effectively marketing it in society. Local slogans like, “Find Your Color,” “Be Your Color,” or “Catch Your Color” carry dual meanings because color is a common metaphor for originality and individuality in Korea. Literally, they encourage one to find well-suiting colored items that can bring out one’s features. As a figure of speech, they assert that one should find an authentic selfhood on which one can build a personal brand. When consultants assert that in this era a differentiated “personality” matters more than mere “visuals,” it can be inferred that developing an image that best reflects an original *me-ness* nobody else can substitute is believed to lead to a better chance of increasing one’s marketability than merely looking pretty. The *personality* versus *visual* contrast is sometimes replaced by the “charm” (*maeryeok*) versus “pretty” contrast. The difference between the two is clearer when the terms are placed in opposition in their usage. For example, it can be inferred from popular expressions like “she is pretty but unattractive” or “cosmetic surgery makes one lose one’s charm” that charm is used to refer to an appealing individuated characteristic that is original to oneself. While what is *pretty* is merely what is easy on the eye in general, what is *attractive* should involve a certain me-ness.

Instead of aiming to achieve specific morphological ideals, the personal color makeover works on the premise that true beauty can only be achieved if one’s individuated charm is brought out. That charm, in turn, is considered to lie within the elements of one’s natural physical features. As beauty ideals are personalized, individuals are encouraged—and required—to seek “my own beauty” instead of someone else’s. During the interview, consultants aligned this pursuit of personalized beauty with a broader tendency toward individuation that has become dominant in contemporary South Korea.

16. Quoted from WNC homepage, accessed June 6, 2019, <https://warmncool.modoo.at/>. Translated by author. The quotation marks within the quote appear in the original.

Consultant R: When you seek beauty nowadays, it's not like the old times when copying a celebrity or donning a specific brand counted as a beauty trend. Now it's about finding what suits *me*. The kind of beauty that suits *me*. *My* beauty. The cosmetic products that suit *me*. The make-up styling that suits *me*. The color that suits *me*.¹⁷

Consultant X: The culture itself, nowadays, is what I would call the “individuality era” (*gaeseong sidae*).

Consultant Z: That's true.

Consultant X: It is oriented towards personalization rather than doing something together as a mass. I think personal color goes along well with that trend.

Consultant Y: Personal color has been listed in the annual trend analyses for quite some time now. The demand for personalized service is very high nowadays. It's still growing actually.¹⁸

As was described earlier, increased emphasis on personalization is a salient trend among the younger generation in contemporary South Korea. This so called “individuality era” is characterized by the privileging of individuated self-fashioning on the individual's part and personalized service provision on the industry's part, to which the growth of the personal color business is attributed. The personal color industry, built on the premise that everyone has their own authentic image by nature, has a strong connection to this personalized selfhood ideal as well as its commodification.

The appreciation of individuated me-ness not only informs the practice but is also internalized by the consultants, who I found to be strong advocates of personal branding. While all of them stressed the importance of leading individuated lives, Consultant R—one of the pioneers in the industry—held a particularly interesting view. She was the strongest advocate of a me-centric life, the virtue and importance of which she repeatedly stressed during the interview. In the following conversation, she associates a strong sense of self to a society's level of development and an

17. Consultant R, interview by author, Seoul, May 2020.

18. Consultant X, Y & Z, interview by author, Seoul, April 2020.

individual's "proper life," endowing it with a highly desirable virtue.

Consultant R: The reason personal color became so trendy in Korea is because we are underdeveloped.

Researcher: Underdeveloped?

Consultant R: In more developed countries like the United States or in Europe, people are already good at presenting themselves in their own style. Individualism and enjoying their own style is their original lifestyle. So there is no reason for personal color to intrigue that much public interest there. It is the way life already is. They already know and pay attention to what I like, what suits me, and what kind of lifestyle goes well with me. Koreans don't know those things that well because just following the trend used to be the trend. When I ask someone, "What do you like?" they answer with "I don't know." When I ask my students what they'd like to have for lunch, they say "What should I eat, teacher?" This kind of tendency is way too dominant here. That's why we can never surpass those advanced countries. Our "self" (*ja-a*) is too weak. Because we are not used to paying attention to ourselves, personal color cannot but feel like a new trend that is a breath of fresh air. That is why I anticipate a positive change in Korea now that personal color became trendy. I sometimes feel the positive change, when clever young kids come to get consultation. I see adolescent customers and I ask them what brings them here. They answer with, "I would like to know what suits me because I have a long life ahead." I go, "Oh, wow, you are such a smart girl. You are going to live a proper life."¹⁹

Consultant R attributes the popularity of personal color to the "underdevelopment" of South Korea, whose citizens' sense of self is "too weak" in her opinion. She associates a "clear sense of self" to individual, social, and even national development, drawing a power relation between collectivism and individualism then positioning individuated self-managing subjects as superior. Whether or not her argument about other "advanced" countries is true, it is important to note that she describes the lack of

19. Consultant R, interview by author, Seoul, May 2020.

individuation and lack of self-knowledge as “underdeveloped” as it illustrates how neoliberal subjectivity is formed through processes of abjection (Scharff 2016). Scharff combines Tyler (2013)’s concept of social abjection and Brown (2003)’s analysis of neoliberalism to argue that neoliberal subjectivity is formed through processes of abjection which position empowered and self-managing subjects as morally superior. How Consultant R contrasts South Korea with “more developed countries” and those who don’t pay attention to themselves with “smart” young girls demonstrates this characteristic well. Her exemplification of people who don’t know what they like and students who are passive and dependent even when it comes to choosing a lunch menu constitutes the “other” of a desirable self-managing subject. As opposed to the “other,” what she calls a “positive” change entails a clear sense of authentic self that is reflected in one’s self-presentation and overall lifestyle. When she refers to her younger customers as “clever” or “smart,” it can be inferred that she deems them ideal citizens of a neoliberal society where self-knowledge is a prerequisite for self-management to take control of one’s life (or ‘live a proper life’).

As a concluding remark after the conversation above, Consultant R added that “self relates to PR” and personal color is an effective means to achieve that.²⁰ She articulated a direct discourse of self-commodification in which she deemed personal color a means of transforming each individual into the “best” version of “me” so as to promote—and ultimately, sell—oneself in society. With its aesthetic ideal centered on bringing out one’s natural features as brand uniqueness, personal color consultation provides a set of prescriptive techniques for managing the impression of a *me-er* me by helping each individual express their authenticity via strategic color styling. Through this process, the consultant supposedly salvages the customer’s weakened sense of self and finds ways to strengthen it into an attractive personal brand.

20. In this context, “PR” is short for “self-PR,” which means self-promotion.

Self-esteem as Self-respect?

What counts as a *weakened self* in the personal color makeover is not limited to the lack of individuation but also has to do with low self-esteem, which is considered a problem on the customer's part that requires correction. In most aesthetic makeover practices, a change in one's appearance is believed to bring about changes in how one thinks about oneself, as is supported by Albrecht (2016)'s research on plastic surgery in which participants spoke of an increase in self-confidence as the biggest after-effect (40). Personal color is no exception to this external-change-leads-to-inner-change belief, which the industry actively exploits. Among the three changes personal color makeover aims to bring about in the customer, the consultants unanimously stress the internal makeover into a more confident self as the most important. They argue that no matter how visible external beauty is, what is most important is *inner beauty*. During the interviews, this inner beauty was expressed in one word: self-esteem.

While both plastic surgery and the personal color industry exploit discourses of self-esteem, personal color does so in a different way in that it blames unsatisfactory appearance on material colors instead of physical features. A cosmetic surgeon and a personal color consultant are both makeover gurus with skilled visions for improvement, but while the former sees and evaluates the body in a way that seeks to alter physical elements, the latter sees the body in a way that seeks to alter one's color choice so that it can harmonize with the physical elements. The personal color makeover thus promises improvement without making the customers feel bad about their bodies, seemingly taking a more body-positive stance. The practice itself becomes a literal manifestation of the body-positive slogan "be comfortable in your own skin"—or more precisely, "be comfortable and better in your own skin." Using this characteristic as its strength, "Find Your Color" in the industry's promotions is somehow always connected to feeling more confident and *loving who you are*. An overall transformation narrative prevails in which knowing the right colors leads to better shopping choices, which leads to becoming more beautiful with accentuated me-ness, which in turn results in better social relations, greater confidence, higher self-

esteem, and ultimately, a better life overall.

As empowering as it sounds, however, self-esteem is another technology of self-government which produces certain kinds of selves that evaluate, discipline, and judge themselves. When consultants take up the role of a self-esteem therapist, they do so in the obligation to productivity and the ideal impression of a coherent authentic self. Wanting to become like someone else is a waste of time and energy in their opinion, because “it can never happen anyways.” In the following conversation, Consultants X, Y, and Z stress how one should rather take that energy to find one’s “true self,” blaming the customer’s wrongly positioned beauty standard for the lack of self-esteem.

Consultant X: [I define beauty as] the attitude of not comparing yourself with others. Some people go, “Wow, that person...I want to be like her.” But in reality, no matter what you do, you can never be that person. Instead of constantly comparing oneself with another, one should rather...

Consultant Z: Find one’s true self.

Consultant X: Yes.

Consultant Z: You can become more beautiful within yourself. So not comparing yourself with others is important.

Consultant X: If the customer’s beauty standard was exterior to herself before the consultation, we help her bring it back to herself.²¹

According to the consultants, individuals with low self-esteem had better spend more of their time caring for themselves rather than wasting it on comparing themselves with others. One must think of ways to “become more beautiful within oneself” instead of considering somebody else as one’s beauty standard. What counts as a desirable aesthetic attitude in the PCS is simple—one should aim to become a “better me.” In order to achieve that, one needs to bring the beauty standard “back to oneself” for individuated self-improvement.

Self-esteem in this context has more to do with self-assessment than with self-respect in that one should keep constant watch over the way one

21. Consultant X, Y & Z, interview by author, Seoul, April 2020.

feels about oneself and one's beauty standards lest one's inner beauty be compromised. This corresponds to Elias et al. (2017)'s analysis of aesthetic entrepreneurship in which contemporary injunctions to look good require not only physical labor and transformations but also the makeover of the psychic life to embrace qualities such as confidence, happiness, and authenticity (5). Presenting oneself as a confident individual who does not feel insecure about oneself is another means of increasing one's brand value in society, because it is considered a sign of a well-managed selfhood and a *healthy* state of mind.

The self-esteem discourse also contributes to rendering the makeover a responsibility—a way of being “polite” (*yeyi*) to yourself, who supposedly deserves more than what has been given. In the following quote, Consultant W mobilizes this rationale to stress how personal color is “more than color itself.”

I think that, in Korean society, we lack the time to think about what we really like and want. Even in our teenage years, we would choose a career path because everyone else heads that way. I've had that experience too. So I think of personal color as a gift to myself—a means to express my true self in the way that I want. Because Koreans lack the time to do that, many people consider personal color consultation as a journey in search of their true selves. They gain confidence and self-esteem from the consultation, and also heal past scars. Some customers will tell me that through the consultation they could let go of the times they didn't cherish themselves. Saying sorry to the old me, that is. I heard that psychological healing comes from letting go. That's why I think personal color is more than color itself.²²

Consultant W refers to personal color as a means to express one's “true self,” “a journey in search of one's true self,” and most importantly, “a gift to oneself.” She thinks personal color consultation is therapeutic in that it is a way of “saying sorry to the old me”—one that has been scarred by the lack of attention it was given. What one needs to apologize for is not having

22. Consultant W, interview by author, Seoul, May 2020.

cherished oneself the way one should have, in which she insinuates that attending to oneself properly and developing an individuated style is a responsibility. Personal color consultation is thus described as “letting go” of the times one had failed to keep up with that responsibility, saying sorry and goodbye to the old self, and transforming into a self who knows how to love, cherish, and reward oneself better. The journey of personal color makeover is justified with this ultimate happy ending of psychological healing: a point of reveal where the individual emerges as an ideal neoliberal subject who knows how to respect and take care of one’s true self, inside and out.

It is ironic that, through the self-esteem discourse, the customers are driven towards a more ceaseless endeavor of self-improvement instead of feeling content about their current state. When consultants tell customers that they are already “beautiful enough,” it is implied that they need professional guidance and appropriate styling to bring out that beauty to its utmost capacity. While personal color makeover may seem body-positive in that it does not seek to alter the morphological features of the body, it instead requires one to constantly assess one’s choices and adorn the self through meticulous calculation to present oneself as desirable. Messages of freedom, choice, and empowerment are ultimately linked to the need for individuated self-fashioning through individuated consumption as customers emerge out of the consulting room armed with prescriptive techniques to shape themselves into an attractive personal brand that is marketable in society.

Conclusion

Overall, personal color consultation is more than an aesthetic service based on a color theory but a cultural practice in which a cluster of promises pertaining to a *better life* is embedded. The aspiration for improvement that prevails goes much deeper than the skin, as it has the capacity to take a person out of her old way of being and make her assume a *better way* of being that is more suitable or desirable in local contexts. Personal color makeover in South Korea is ultimately about the production of an estimable

authentic self that is deemed attractive and marketable in contemporary society, relying on the belief that knowing oneself and using the right colors accordingly can maximize one's *me-ness*. That the body is deemed the source of authenticity instead of change is what differentiates the practice from more popular aesthetic practices like plastic surgery, which seems empowering and more fitted to recent trends in local discourses about gender and the younger generation. However, a closer look at the industry through anthropological fieldwork reveals that this specific characteristic ultimately drives customers towards a more ceaseless and multidimensional endeavor of self-improvement. With added emphasis on meticulous color consumption and a strong sense of selfhood, the time and space of operation stretch out and go beyond the limits of the consulting room. Reaping the fruits of the makeover falls into the hands of the customers, as they themselves become responsible for realizing the better-life fantasy after the consultation. In other words, what personal color consultation results in is not exactly a better life per se but a ceaseless endeavor towards it. The makeover ultimately has to do with the production of an attitude—one that is characteristic of an ideal neoliberal subject—as it encourages a way of being that entails constant self-government in all aspects of daily life ranging from one's appearance, shopping choices, to how one feels about oneself.

As the first attempt at a qualitative analysis of personal color, this study holds significance in that it provides sociocultural context for a topic that has so far been dealt with in a quantitative manner. What happens when one chooses to consider other elements of the self as the source of change instead of the body could be illustrated in relation to broader social values that inform the practice, which helps us understand how a new practice of self-improvement is positioned as an alternative to existing practices in specific sociocultural contexts. Hoping that this study leads to deeper insights about aesthetic entrepreneurship in contemporary South Korea, I look forward to further research that could enrich our understanding about the diverse aesthetic choices contemporary citizens make as self-entrepreneurs—whether it be a change in attitude towards existing makeover practices or a whole new option that may emerge as a trend.

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