

Aesthetic Pressure in Audiovisual Narratives: A Semiotic Content Analysis of South Korean and Luso-Brazilian TV Series

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Abstract

Across Eastern and Western cultures, aesthetic norms continue to oppress women, with certain aspects transcending socio-historical differences. To visualize symbolic violence in media, we selected three series from diverse but related cultural and social contexts: South Korea's *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, Portugal's *The Good Girls Club*, and Brazil's *Hidden Truths*. Utilizing a qualitative and interpretive semiotic content analysis method and an intersectional decolonial feminist lens, we observe how these audiovisual media explore aesthetic norms semantically. Findings indicate that neoliberal and postfeminist discourses frame beauty practices as forms of empowerment in the three series. However, they often hide the structural forces pushing women toward unrealistic standards, with physical, financial, and psychological costs. The South Korean series explores bullying for not having hegemonic identities and bodies, and how women need to have a 'feminine' body to be accepted in their society. In the Portuguese series, the characters must prove themselves 'sexy' and capable of being valued by others. In Brazil's series, the focus was to show how sensuality and hegemonic beauty standards continue to reinforce a collective imagination associated with success. The study raises awareness of how the media can use semiotics to promote inclusive and responsible representations of female beauty.

Keywords: cross-cultural comparison, beauty pressure, intersectionality, semiotic content analysis, symbolic violence, SDG 5: Gender Equality, SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

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How to Cite This Article in APA

Oliveira, H. G. & Biana, H. T. (2026). Aesthetic pressure in audiovisual narratives: A semiotic content analysis of South Korean and Luso-Brazilian TV series. *Plaridel*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.52518/2026-20olvrana>

Introduction

In an era of intensified media globalization, the dissemination of beauty standards has become crucial in shaping cultural perceptions across societies, transcending traditional geographical and cultural boundaries (Hall, 2014; Jenkins, 2008; Yi, 2017). This phenomenon is not neutral, as beauty standards are deeply intertwined with structures of power and domination (Barthes, 2014), as shown by Davis (2016), Foucault (1983) and hooks (1982). Moreover, consumer capitalism and patriarchal dynamics (Gonzalez, 2020; Ribeiro, 2016; Vêrges, 2019;) reinforce a hierarchical perception of femininity. This assertion is supported by the works of Banet-Weiser et al. (2020), Butler (1990, 1993), Giddens (2002), and Gill (2007). Thus, global media operates as a critical site where these ideals are perpetuated and normalized (Chocano, 2020; Han, 2019), shaping individual and collective understandings of “beauty” in ways that often commodify and objectify women’s bodies (Bourdieu, 1989; Giddens, 2002).

The series *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*¹ from South Korea (Bum, 2018), *The Good Girls Club*² from Portugal (Matos, 2020), and *Hidden Truths*³ from Brazil (Carrasco, 2021) serve as a compelling case study for critically examining the dynamics of aesthetic pressure. In South Korea, where the beauty industry wields enormous cultural influence, the series underscores the intense societal pressure to conform to narrow beauty standards (Tanca, 2024), a theme that resonates with beauty ideals and pressures in other cultural contexts, such as Brazil and Portugal (Oliveira & Lapa, 2022; Ribeiro, 2016). In Portugal, the respective series resonate with the youth and youthful beauty of the characters in the story, reflecting how this aspect is considered necessary for social relations. In the series from Brazil, the story shows how being sensual and “thin” could “open doors for a future of success.” Despite differences in historical and cultural contexts, these countries share common experiences of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1989), where beauty standards are imposed on women’s bodies through media representations, creating social expectations that perpetuate inequality (Crenshaw, 1991; Gonzalez, 2020; Ribeiro, 2016; Vêrges, 2019).

Employing a Semiotic Content Analysis as utilized by Barthes (2006), which focuses on understanding how meaning is constructed through signs, symbols, and cultural codes within a text or media, this study critically engages with how social semiotic media discourses on beauty intersect with issues of race, class, and gender (Davis, 2016;

Madrid-Morales & Lovric, 2015). Using an “Intersectional Decolonial Feminist approach,” we look at how these perspectives are essential and necessary “to understand how racism and sexism function as mechanisms of oppression, exclusion, and silencing of racialized women” (Alcantara & Valentim, 2023, p. 137). This view is essential for understanding the perspectives of various women with non-hegemonic bodies. We consider race, gender, and socioeconomic class to observe the symbolic violence that the three series explore in their narratives about beauty pressure. Alongside popular media representations in these three countries, we can see how globalized beauty norms not only reproduce existing power relations (Goffman, 1987; Han, 2019) but also exacerbate the psychological pressures associated with conforming to unattainable aesthetic ideals (Giddens, 2002; Tanca, 2024).

The study also draws on feminist postcolonial theory to analyze the intersectional nature of beauty pressure, exploring how different layers of identity, particularly race and socioeconomic status, expose marginalized groups to heightened aesthetic demands (Alcantara & Valentim, 2023; Crenshaw, 1991; Goffman, 1987). These demands are further amplified by the global influence of K-dramas and popular Western series, whose portrayals of beauty have shaped not only South Korean culture but also global beauty trends, contributing to a homogenized yet exclusionary view of femininity (Bum, 2018; Rane, 2022).

In this context, applying an interpretative, non-exhaustive, and qualitative social and communicational research approach (Foucault, 1983), we selected Barthes’s (2006, 2014) didactics method of Semiotic Content Analysis by using his six steps: 1) identify the denotation, 2) uncover the connotation, 3) identify the myth, 4) examine the codes, 5) consider the role of reader, and, 6) study intertextuality. In this regard, the focus is on identifying and observing how the series explores the presence of beauty pressure in the context of the main female characters. The methodological framework (Barthes, 2006, 2014) will present three diagnostic hypotheses, based on the concepts outlined in the next section. In this regard, some reflections on concepts are necessary to comprehend global beauty standards, intersectionality, and symbolic violence.

An intersectional-decolonial feminist approach to global beauty ideals

The study of beauty standards, particularly in the context of global media, requires a nuanced understanding of how these ideals are shaped and perpetuated across cultures. Jenkins (2008) demonstrates, for instance, how the media, particularly audiovisual narratives, address and reflect social phenomena. With Hall's (2014) theory of cultural "identity in postmodernity," the fluidity of beauty norms is explored, suggesting that identities, including aesthetic ideals, are constructed and reconstructed within a shifting global framework. Identity is thus never fixed but continuously formed through engagement with cultural forces (Hall, 2014). This also aligns with Goffman's (1987) studies, in which "gender advertisements" and "gender representations" are investigated in the media, demonstrating how they perpetuate specific gendered behaviors and appearances that reinforce narrow societal expectations, particularly those of women. This view is in line with Butler's (1990, 1993) studies on gender performativity, showing that much of what patriarchal societies expect from women, as we can see in both Western (Luso-Brazilian) and Eastern (South Korea) contexts (each having their social, historical, political, cultural, economic, and religious particularities). This demand is primarily driven by the desire for femininity, thinness, youth, and beauty (Barthes, 2014; Chocano, 2020; Han, 2019; Machado-Borges, 2008). In this regard, beauty standards operate as a form of "symbolic violence," a concept theorized by Bourdieu (1989). In the context of beauty norms, symbolic violence manifests when the media subtly but persistently imposes certain aesthetic ideals, pushing women to conform to standards that may be unattainable or harmful.

According to Banet-Weiser et al. (2020), from different social-cultural contexts of the Global North perspectives, postfeminism operates under the notion that feminism has already "achieved" its goals, and thus, women are free to pursue beauty as a personal choice without recognizing how deeply patriarchal and capitalist frameworks influence these choices. This discourse tends to obscure the societal pressures that lead women to engage in these practices, often framing them as "self-care" or a symbol of success and liberation. However, Banet-Weiser et al. (2020) argue that the symbolic violence of beauty standards and constant pressure to maintain or achieve an idealized

appearance is associated with a personal responsibility rather than a socially constructed burden.

Neoliberal feminism and postfeminism contribute to normalizing aesthetic pressure by reframing beauty work as a form of empowerment, particularly perpetuated by the media in several countries worldwide (Chocano, 2020; Han, 2019). However, Tanca (2024) comments on this portrayal by drawing attention to how the media reflects more profound societal anxieties about female appearance and status, particularly in South Korean beauty culture, where cosmetic surgery and intense beauty regimens are encouraged and expected. In this context, the illusion of “choice” is undermined by the social consequences of non-conformity to beauty norms, where women are judged personally and professionally based on their adherence to aesthetic ideals.

Portugal and Brazil, where Western hegemonic beauty standards prevail, share a history of colonialism, reflected in common elements such as language and religion, which also reinforces the dominance of European beauty ideals. For instance, Sant’anna (2014) demonstrates how the Portuguese presence in Brazil during colonial times influenced the beauty ideal in Brazil today. Historically, beauty standards in Portugal were constructed by direct influences from other European countries, such as France, Italy, and Spain (Duarte, 2017). Throughout the historical and cultural process of these two countries (Sant’anna, 2014) (whether due to influences from other European countries), North American influences have also emerged in what we can now refer to as the Luso-Brazilian beauty standard (Duarte, 2017; Oliveira & Lapa, 2022). For example, Luso-Brazilian women strive to achieve thin and fit bodies, white teeth, full breasts and hips, narrow waists, straight and shiny hair, manicured nails, and a hairless and youthful appearance. As a result, many women go into debt or encounter mental and physical health problems to conform to this ideal of beauty (Machado-Borges, 2008; Meneses et al. 2023). In an interesting turn, many women in Brazil and Portugal are now consumers of Korean Wave cultural texts and beauty products. South Korea’s most significant investment in Latin America is in Brazil. Thus, Luso-Brazilian women may also be influenced by South Korean beauty standards, which are, in a sense, also Western hegemonic standards. As Elfving-Hwang (2020) argues, aesthetic preferences in Korean society are said to be “driven by a desire to radically alter or to ‘Westernize’ Korean bodies (p. 238).” Arum (2022)

claims that the beauty standard in South Korea is centered on a slim body shape, fair skin, a V-shaped jawline, and a tall nose.

However, Gonzalez (2020), Ribeiro (2016), and Vèrges (2019), critical feminists from the Global South, bring an important perspective on beauty ideals through the lens of Global South Feminism. They highlight how non-white and non-hegemonic bodies are excluded and marginalized, primarily by mainstream media outlets such as television. They provide us with an understanding of intersectionality as a tool for promoting inclusive and diverse representation in the media. Thus, seeking to observe how postfeminism and neoliberal feminism offer narratives of empowerment through beauty, they often obscure the collective nature of these pressures, presenting them as individual challenges rather than societal issues. Both frameworks, based on Banet-Weiser et al. (2020) and Vèrges (2019), contribute to a culture where women are continually subjected to beauty pressure under the guise of personal liberation, thereby reinforcing the beauty industry's hold on female identity. These two perspectives of feminism (Hall, 2014) are usually adopted by audiovisual media, leaving aside essential aspects such as ethnic-racial identity, gender, socioeconomic class, cultural points, body biotype, etc. (Gonzalez, 2020; hooks, 1982; Ribeiro, 2016).

Considering this, the “intersectionality” concept is a critical social perspective for understanding how these beauty pressures disproportionately affect different groups of women (Crenshaw, 1991). Ideals of beauty intersect with “race, class, and gender,” creating multiple layers of marginalization for women who do not fit into the dominant beauty narrative, no matter which cultural and social context the women are in, as hooks (1982), Butler (1990, 1993), and Davis (2016) show us. In this context, Giddens (2002) introduces the concept of “modernity and identity” in his studies. We can understand how this supports the idea that the media's portrayal of beauty is not only a reflection of societal values but also an active force shaping women's identities within a modern, globalized society. This connects to Goffman's (1987) analysis of the media's role in perpetuating gendered expectations, suggesting that beauty is both a personal choice and a social imperative dictated by media representation.

Beauty standards are both “global and intersectional,” deeply embedded in systems of capitalism and patriarchy (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). The pressure to conform to such ideals can lead to significant mental and physical health issues, as women internalize these societal

expectations and, in some cases, go to extreme lengths to meet them (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill, 2007). In the following sections, we discuss how the beauty pressure is present in the three series.

Methodological Framework and Semiotic Content Analysis

According to Barthes's (2014), semiotic theory of fashion analyzes fashion magazine images and texts to uncover how fashion is represented as a system of signs that function to communicate social identities, desires, and ideologies. The author explains how clothes, colors, and body language are not neutral but deeply embedded with cultural significance. Furthermore, his semiotic approach is a viable method for deconstructing texts, images, and media, revealing the layers of meaning beneath the surface and providing a critical analysis of how cultural products convey ideologies, values, and societal norms, particularly in audiovisual media series (Barthes 2006, 2014). Such content analysis provides a way to understand how meaning is created and conveyed through signs.

When we consider Barthes's (2006, 2014) semiotic content analysis, we consider six steps of analysis: 1) *Identify the Denotation*: this refers to the literal, surface meaning of a text or image, describing what is explicitly presented. For instance, when analyzing audiovisual series, elements such as clothing, colors, and characters are identified through visual or linguistic cues. In the series *My ID Is Gangnam Beauty*, for example, Gangnam is a district in Seoul known for its concentration of plastic surgery clinics. 2) *Uncover the Connotation*: this goes beyond the literal, surface meaning and instead refers to cultural, emotional, or ideological associations. It involves examining the symbolic meanings that signs in a text carry within a specific cultural context. Using the same series, *My ID Is Gangnam Beauty*, the term "Gangnam Beauty" connotes artificiality and carries derogatory, prejudicial implications toward individuals who undergo cosmetic surgery. 3) *Identify the Myth*: this refers to the idea that myths are not merely traditional stories, as conventionally understood, but rather forms of communication that naturalize ideologies or universal sets of values. Such systems of communication embed power structures and convey underlying, often implicit meanings. 4) *Examine the Codes*: this highlights how cultural texts contain multiple codes, or layers of meaning, that are shared within specific groups or cultures. These codes must be unpacked to reveal deeper levels of interpretation. 5) *Consider the Role of the Reader*: this

emphasizes that the reader plays an active role in constructing meaning from a text. Accordingly, content analysis should take into account how different readers may interpret a text or image in diverse ways, depending on their backgrounds, knowledge, and cultural contexts. 6) *Study of Intertextuality*: this emphasizes that no text or image exists in isolation; it is always in dialogue with other content. Intertextuality refers to the ways in which a text references, echoes, or contrasts with other works or cultural products.

Regarding the methodological framework, we establish three hypotheses of diagnostics (Barthes, 2006, 2014; Foucault, 1983). These hypotheses were created to better understand how the three selected series, *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* (Bum, 2018), *The Good Girls Club* (Matos, 2020), and *Hidden Truths Part I* (Carrasco, 2021), relate to each other. What are the similarities and differences in the approach to aesthetic pressure in the series? Which subjectivities can be compared, considering the cultures and societies associated with each series?

Hypothesis 1: The three series examine how global beauty standards and beauty pressure contribute to body shaming and bullying, highlighting the connection between beauty as a means of empowerment for women. The aspects are present in the three series.

Hypothesis 2: The three series explore the beauty pressure for the main characters as a struggle for belonging and recognition within their communities. However, while some narratives emphasize the importance of authenticity, it does not promote intersectionality, diversity, and inclusion of marginalized and racialized individuals.

Hypothesis 3: Symbolic violence is strong and present in all three series. The three narratives explore the social constructions of beauty that pressure the main characters. Each country has its own unique social, economic, cultural, political, historical, and religious contexts, and some aspects transcend these cultures, such as the dominance of the beauty standard as a hegemonic norm that shapes social relations and self-identity construction.

Analysis

To better understand the subjectivities present in audiovisual media, it is necessary to explore the selected narratives in consideration of cross-cultural beauty standards, identity formation, and media influences related to beauty in South Korea, Brazil, and Portugal.

In this regard, when we look forward to “Identifying the Denotation” (Barthes, 2006, 2014) in the South Korean series *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* (2018) (see Fig. 1), we seek explicit and direct content regarding its narrative and characters. Directed by Choi Sung Bum and produced by Netflix, the series critically reflects the pressures surrounding aesthetic beauty standards within South Korean society. The protagonist, Kang Mi Rae, faces immense social pressure and criticism regarding her appearance, particularly her round face and boyish style, as a result of which she is called an “orc” by her classmates and often teased about her heavier body size. This underscores the prevalence of body shaming

Figure 1.

My ID is Gangnam Beauty (2018)



Note. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8585954/mediaviewer/rm4183168001/?ref=ttmi_mi_all_25

and intimidation as mechanisms for reinforcing unattainable beauty standards.

To “Uncover the Connotation” (Barthes, 2006, 2014) in this series, we can see how the narrative effectively demonstrates the concept of symbolic violence as theorized by Bourdieu (1989), where women are subject to subtle yet all-encompassing societal forces that shape their perceptions of self-worth through physical appearance. This segment underscores how the desire for external validation and acceptance influences social interactions and self-esteem, particularly within established beauty standards. Kang Mi-Rae, who undergoes plastic surgery to escape bullying, becomes emblematic of the broader societal obsession with beauty, a theme deeply embedded in both consumer capitalism and gender expectations (Bum, 2018). Undergoing plastic surgery signifies the unrealistic expectations put upon women by society, wherein artificial reconstruction is the only means to achieve it. “Natural” beauty, therefore, is unacceptable.

Here, when we *Identify the Myth*, Kang Mi-Rae seeks to be accepted as “desirable.” The series illustrates how those perceived as “beautiful” are afforded greater happiness and more opportunities in employment, romantic relationships, and community interactions. This dynamic is reinforced by the comments of her university peers, parents, and fellow student Hyun Soo Ah, who repeatedly tells Kang Mi-Rae that she is not “naturally beautiful” and needs plastic surgery to “look pretty.” When she undergoes cosmetic surgery, Kang Mi-Rae is admired by her classmates, asked out by many guys, welcomed into various peer groups, and becomes the center of attention at their university.

Beauty is a form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1989), a means of gaining social acceptance and recognition. Before her surgery, Kang Mi-Rae experiences devaluation, neglect, and mistreatment, which changes post-surgery as she gains societal approval. Kang Mi-Rae herself develops a point system to rate the beauty score of people based on their supposed cosmetic modifications, thereby revealing her societal discomfort with aesthetic surgery. In Kang Mi-Rae’s conversation with another woman, Hyun Soo’s belief emerges that beauty, or lack thereof, affects one’s worth and social success. Barthes (2014) and Chocano (2020) review how pervasive beauty standards influence perceptions from a young age, affecting self-image and consumer behavior. In the series, it is evident how Kang Mi-Rae, who was still in high school, was subjected to ostracism by her peers due to South Korea’s aesthetic

norms. The commercialization of beauty and its role in shaping personal identity are deeply intertwined with how advertising strategies and representation mold these societal expectations (Goffman, 1987; Oliveira, 2023a, Oliveira & Lapa, 2022;).

We can see cultural meanings in the Korean context about Kang Mi-Rae's transformation into the so-called "Gangnam plastic surgery monster." As discussed by Gill (2007) and Banet-Weiser et al. (2020), this subjectivity reflects a broader neoliberal and postfeminist cultural phenomenon, where the pursuit of beauty is framed as a personal choice and empowerment, while masking the underlying systemic capitalist and societal pressures that dictate such decisions. In one scene, Kang Mi-Rae's choice to go under the knife is even supported by her mother, in which her decision appears to be carefully thought out. While there are strong opposing views presented on plastic surgery in the series, Rane (2022) argues that the series' focus is on challenging traditional beauty norms by ultimately promoting the value of kindness and inner beauty over mere physical appearance. Such is evident in Kang Mi-Rae's friendship with Hyun-jung, for instance, who has stuck with her through thick and thin. This shift mirrors Barthes's (2014) concept of fashion as a "system of signs," where aesthetic choices become symbolic of broader cultural narratives or, in this sense, Korea's beauty norms. Thus, while Kang Mi-Rae makes the "empowered" choice of undergoing plastic surgery, she is actually a victim of beauty pressure and is considered a marginalized woman (Davis, 2016).

However, when we "Examine the Codes" (Barthes, 2006, 2014), the show demonstrates specific groups' cultural norms and ideals in two moments of the drama: the pre- and post-surgery depictions. Before the main character's surgery, being excluded from the standard of beauty established in Korea is related to social exclusion, body-shaming, and bullying. After the surgery, however, one is integrated into the group, and a body is considered beautiful according to Korean beauty standards; thus, the connection between success and beauty is established. The show also exposes the contradictions inherent in South Korea's rigid beauty culture, where, despite the superficial acceptance of inner beauty, physical appearance remains a crucial determinant of social capital (Bourdieu, 1989).

To "Consider the Role of the Reader" (Barthes, 2006, 2014), it is essential to consider how viewers in South Korea and other countries, such as Portugal and Brazil, perceive this series. Korean and

international audiences have two key takeaways: first, that inner beauty somehow trumps outer beauty, and second, that specific beauty norms in South Korea are inescapable (Arum, 2022). This duality aligns with Giddens' (2002) view of identity in modernity, where self-identity is negotiated through external societal expectations, primarily mediated by digital and visual culture. Tanca (2024, p.123) illustrates how Asian advertisements perpetuate "stereotypes of women's beauty standards," such as white skin without sunspots, big eyes, very slim bodies, straight hair, femininity, naivety, joviality, sweetness, and other beauty stereotypes. In Brazil, the audience even claims that South Korean women are expected to be beautiful, intelligent, and submissive (dos Santos, 2020).

This South Korean series does not stand alone; it is part of a larger "Study of Intertextuality" (Barthes, 2006, 2014), with possible parallels in other series, as seen in the Western context. Discussing global beauty standards, intersectionality, and symbolic violence within these narratives, we can identify the influence of neoliberal feminism and postfeminism in this series. In particular, we see the pressure of beauty placed on Kang Mi-Rae so that she can gain a sense of belonging, recognition, or social success. She reconfigures her beliefs on beauty to focus on personal empowerment through aesthetic procedures. As mentioned earlier, this approach, as explored by Banet-Weiser et al. (2020), Goffman (1987), and Hall (2014), suggests that women are encouraged to view their participation in beauty practices as a form of self-expression and autonomy. In the case of Kang Mi-Rae's aesthetic transformation and supposed authentic choice, she still succumbed to impossible beauty standards. Beneath the apparent empowerment lies a deeper issue: women are still pressured to conform to societal beauty ideals, with the burden of upholding these standards falling squarely on them, masked as freedom of choice and individualism (Gill, 2007).

Meanwhile, when it comes to the Portuguese context, Duarte (2017), Oliveira (2023a), Oliveira and Lapa (2022), state that the beauty standards for women are usually characterized by features such as fair or white, radiant skin; white teeth; a slender physique; fitness; hairlessness on the legs, bikini area, and upper lip; modest to medium breasts; fuller hips and buttocks; a thin waist; straight hair in shades of blonde, brown, or black; medium to long hair; smooth skin free of blemishes, stretch marks, scars, cellulite, acne, or any other marks; an oval face; small nose; prominent eyes; full lips; well-groomed nails; long but subtle

Figure 2

The Good Girls Club (2020)



Note. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13304884/mediaviewer/rm1478585089/>

eyelashes; soft eyebrows; and a “sweet and modern” appearance. This encompasses a “natural,” “soft,” “delicate,” and “discreet” beauty.

We can “Identify the Denotation” (Barthes, 2006, 2014) in *The Good Girls Club* by looking at most of the female characters’ aspects, particularly why they need to be fit to be “more attractive” to the men in the nightclub (see Fig. 2). When we “Uncover the Connotation” (Barthes, 2006, 2014), it is possible to offer a striking reflection on how beauty standards and gender roles are intricately tied to power and social structures, particularly within the glamorous yet exploitative world of nightclubs in this fictional narrative from Lisbon, Portugal. Drawing from Barthes’s (2014) theory of fashion in *The Fashion System* as a system of signs, the series portrays the club and its women as aesthetic symbols, carefully curated to project an image of sophistication, exclusivity, and sensuality. In this context, women’s “standard bodies” or Western hegemonic bodies are commodified, becoming products for consumption by powerful male figures such

as politicians and businessmen, as explained by Weiser et al. (2020). The show's portrayal of women aligns with Barthes's (2014) idea that fashion, and by extension beauty, is not neutral but deeply encoded with cultural meanings. However, their identities are constructed around the demands of a patriarchal society that prizes beauty as a form of social capital, reinforcing rigid and traditional aesthetic norms in Portugal.

Observing how to "Identify the Myth" (Barthes, 2006, 2014), the women's lingerie, thin and curved bodies, white or fair skin, blond hair, etc., are the most important characteristics that the men in the club desired. This reflects the hegemonic, patriarchal, and dominant approach of the narrative (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Butler, 1990, 1993; Chocano, 2020; Duarte, 2017). When we "Examine the Codes" (Barthes, 2006, 2014), specifically the symbolic codes in the series such as luxury, secrecy, and power dynamics, we reveal the workings of Bourdieu's (1989) concept of symbolic power. For instance, we can unpack luxury through the fashion codes, lavish club interiors, and expensive cars and liquor, or the way the male "clients" are addressed. Secrecy, on the other hand, would be the body language and whispers. Power dynamics, however, are evident in the way women are dressed and presented as commodities. The women's cultural codes of beauty and sophistication in *The Good Girls Club* do not merely serve as superficial traits but function as tools of domination within the social hierarchies portrayed in the series (Foucault, 1983; Gill, 2007). This is also particularly evident in the scene where the character Irina is punished, signifying that her beauty and body may be powerful, but must be controlled.

To "Consider the Role of the Reader" (Barthes, 2006, 2014), since the series is from Europe, it responds to cultural, social, and globalized aspects of hegemonic Western beauty. In this case, the spectator usually waits to see standard bodies and reproductions of dominant beauty, as the media in Portugal typically reproduces and reinforces, according to Duarte (2017) and Oliveira and Lapa (2022). Emphasizing exclusivity and secrecy, the series contributes to reinforcing hegemonic beauty ideals, where women's value is tied to their physical appearance and availability for elite male consumption. Duarte (2017) further supports this view by highlighting how beauty standards in Portugal, deeply influenced by colonial and patriarchal legacies, operate as a "corset" that restricts women's roles and reinforces traditional gender expectations.

Finally, to engage in the "Study of Intertextuality" (Barthes, 2006, 2014) of *The Good Girls Club*, does more than tell a story of girls who

work in a nightclub; it mirrors the pressures placed on women to conform to beauty standards that limit their agency while reinforcing a gendered system where beauty is both a commodity and a symbol of power (Gill, 2007; Han, 2019). This series can be associated with neoliberal feminism and postfeminism, as exposed by Banet-Weiser et al. (2020), which explores the capitalization of beauty pressure as a struggle for belonging and recognition, as well as the sexualization of women's bodies, connecting with notions of empowerment and financial success. In addition, even the hyper-evaluated Portuguese beauty standards portrayed by the series' characters do not showcase diverse and inclusive bodies and beauty. The majority of the women workers in the nightclub are white, thin, and young. The drama does not exhibit diverse body types, ethnicities, and beauty standards (Butler, 1993; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2016; Gonzalez, 2020).

This tension between resisting and reinforcing beauty standards is further complicated when comparing cross-cultural representations in Portugal and Brazil (Machado-Borges, 2008; Oliveira & Lapa, 2022), where, as Crenshaw (1991), Davis (2016), Gonzalez (2020), hooks (1982), Vêrges (2019) argue, colonial histories have left a lasting imprint on beauty ideals, further entrenching the intersection of race, class, and gender in aesthetic expectations.

In the case of *Hidden Truths*, it is essential to expose the conventional contexts of Brazilian beauty standards that the media presents to better understand the series. Studies by Oliveira (2023a) and Oliveira and Lapa (2022), highlight physical attributes as: fair or white skin; white teeth; straight, long, and often blonde or highlighted hair; ample breasts and hips/buttocks; thick, shapely legs; tall stature; fit or a curvy, thin physical build; hourglass or rectangular body shape (with a thin waist); hairless armpits, bikini area, upper lip, and legs, or light/colored hair; symmetrical face; small, thin nose; large, clear eyes; full lips; smooth skin without blemishes, stretch marks, scars, cellulite, acne, or other marks; light or almond-shaped eyes; defined abdomen; well-groomed and painted nails; long eyelashes; shaped eyebrows; youthful appearance; tanned skin with bikini lines; and a beauty often associated with sensuality or "sex appeal."

In the Brazilian series *Hidden Truths*, we "Identify the Denotation" (Barthes, 2006, 2014) when it reflects and reinforces Brazilian beauty standards by exploring the fashion industry (see Fig. 3). Since the fashion industry reflects beauty ideals and trends, physical appearance is

Figure 3.

Hidden Truths (2021).



Note: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4773278/mediaviewer/rm1863229185/?ref=ttmi_mi_all_208

commodified in this space, and aesthetic ideals are rigidly enforced. The main character, Arlete (also known as Angel), is a thin, young, sensual, and fair-skinned girl whose life is changed forever when a modeling agency asks her to engage in illicit activities, thereafter including her in their “Pink Book,” which lists models who are as escorts or call girls (see Endnote 2). To “Uncover the Connotation”, drawing from Barthes’s (2006, 2014) concept of fashion as a “system of signs,” the series uses the visual language of fashion to convey deeper cultural messages about beauty, power, and desirability. Angel is thrust into a world where her value is closely tied to their physical appearance, aligning with the concept of “symbolic violence” described by Bourdieu (1989). For instance, Angel undergoes a “makeover” and a photoshoot to be marketed to clients. The violence is subtle yet pervasive, as it compels individuals, especially women, to conform to beauty standards that uphold patriarchal and

capitalist values. To “Identify the Myth” (Barthes, 2006, 2014), the drama portrays how these women, including the protagonist, strive to meet these standards, often at significant personal cost, reinforcing the notion that beauty is a form of social capital in Brazilian society (Oliveira, 2023a; Oliveira & Lapa, 2022).

Delving deeper to “Examine the Codes” (Barthes, 2006, 2014), *Hidden Truths* attempts to incorporate intersectionality by including a few diverse body types and characters, yet these efforts are limited and superficial. For instance, we can see a range of body types featured in Seasons 1 and 2, including curvy or plus-size models, Asian models, male and female models of African descent, a female transgender model, and more mature characters. While this is the case, according to Gonzalez (2020) and Ribeiro (2016), true intersectional feminism in Brazilian media necessitates centering on Afro-Latino and marginalized voices, which are largely absent in the series. The predominant focus remains on thin, white, conventionally attractive bodies that conform to Western beauty ideals (Chocano, 2020), reflecting Brazil’s “colonial legacies” (Gonzalez, 2020; Oliveira & Lapa, 2022; Ribeiro, 2016; Vèrges, 2019). These characteristics reflect Portuguese and European influences (Gonzalez, 2020; Oliveira & Lapa, 2022; Vèrges, 2019), wherein acceptable beauty is not “exotic” or different from the hegemonic standard. In *Hidden Truths*, we see that the main characters of the series, such as Angel and Giovanna, are the “mirrors” and visual reinforcements of this standard. The few cases in which diverse characters appear are often symbolic, failing to address the structural inequalities that underpin beauty norms. For example, only a curvy, plus-sized model or a transgender woman is included in Season 2. Symbolically, bringing the semiotic perspective to bear, we realize that more than providing visual representation, there is also a specific issue with these inclusions that raises doubts about the realism of these characters’ presence. Are they there because Brazilian society is truly undergoing a transformation, or is it because they need to follow market trends? This aligns with Vergès’ (2019) critique of how colonial histories continue to shape racial and gender hierarchies in postcolonial societies, where Black and Indigenous bodies are systematically excluded from mainstream representations of beauty.

In this context, to “Consider the Role of Reader” (Barthes, 2006, 2014), the pressure to conform to beauty standards is not just about personal choice but about the reproduction of a social hierarchy where

beauty, as a form of “symbolic power” (Bourdieu, 1989), determines access to success, wealth, and status. *Hidden Truths* underscores this by showing how the protagonist and other characters internalize and perpetuate these standards, even as they struggle for autonomy within a patriarchal and exploitative system (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Biana, 2022). A few examples of audience reception are enumerated by Lotti and Hergesel (2024). In Season 1 of *Hidden Truths*, the character Larissa becomes a drug addict after being constantly encouraged to lose weight quickly. Another example is the character Laila, who, in Season 2, takes weight-loss medication without medical supervision and goes on a hunger strike. The requirement for these two characters to lose weight and to conform to beauty standards is part of a neoliberal, patriarchal and oppressive system that imposes unattainable beauty as the most crucial thing in the lives of these women.

In the “Study of Intertextuality” (Barthes, 2006, 2014), we see the series attempting to reveal the darker aspects of the fashion world; it simultaneously reinforces the very standards it seeks to challenge by displaying characters that overwhelmingly conform to narrow beauty ideals. Thus, the series serves as both a mirror and a perpetrator of the “aesthetic pressures” that dominate Brazilian society, highlighting the complex relationship between media, beauty, and identity formation. An example of this can be seen in the characters Angel and Lara, who dream of becoming fashion models. They are influenced by the world of fashionista catwalks and the aesthetic pressure in modeling agencies as they build their identities, whether personal or professional. Both characters are faced with the difficult decision to participate in the Pink Book, which, according to Lotti and Hergesel (2024, p. 52), is “a luxury prostitution service that was offered by the agency, as a source of income in addition to the fashion shows.” Consequently, we observe the objectification of these models’ beautiful bodies and how they need to be within the patriarchal system in order to stand out.

Results and Discussion

Taking into account the cultural, social, historical, political, economic, and religious differences between South Korean and Luso-Brazilian contexts, the three series show a parallel: the existence of the symbolic power of the beauty pressure on the main characters. A few similarities were identified, among them the goal to attain thin bodies, white teeth, straight and shiny hair, manicured nails, hairlessness, femininity, and

a youthful appearance. More than this, all the protagonists want their lives changed by taking on a beautiful appearance.

In all three narratives, we can observe similar connotations, myths, codes, roles, and intertextualities, particularly in the portrayal of body shaming and beauty pressure, which highlights the connection between beauty and success. This pursuit often involves eliminating wrinkles, blemishes, stretch marks, cellulite, and acne through various means. Achieving this ideal is frequently unattainable for those lacking the financial resources to afford aesthetic services, plastic surgery, cosmetics, gym memberships, personal trainers, and other related expenses, as outlined by Duarte (2017), Machado-Borges (2008), and Oliveira and Lapa (2022).

The three series, with different cultural and social contexts, reveal a shared influence from Global North perspectives on beauty (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), where postfeminism and neoliberal feminism operate under the assumption that women have achieved equality and now have the freedom to pursue beauty as a form of personal empowerment (Gill, 2007). However, these frameworks fail to acknowledge how these choices are shaped by patriarchal and capitalist structures that commodify female bodies (Gonzalez, 2020; Vêrges, 2019). As seen by Chocano (2020) and Han (2019), media representations perpetuate these ideals globally, reframing the pursuit of beauty not as societal pressure but as an expression of individuality and success. This leads to the normalization of aesthetic pressure in various cultural contexts, where beauty work is increasingly seen as an empowering act rather than a response to systemic expectations (Barthes, 2014; Giddens, 2002; Goffman, 1987).

Also, in this context, many “feminist” perceptions in the three series still appear to be patriarchal. There is a noticeable absence of in-depth knowledge and a lack of desire to portray intersectionality to represent women of different ethnicities, body types, and beauty standards (Biana, 2022; Butler, 1993; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2016; Vêrges, 2019). The kind of feminism depicted on these shows is associated with neoliberalism and postfeminism, where there is an overemphasis on the consumption of aesthetic procedures, beauty products, and the pursuit of the ideal body (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill, 2007). The “patriarchal and sexist view,” with its local and culturally specific nuances in each series’ context, reproduces “symbolic violence” through aesthetic pressure as a deep semiotic element within the narratives (Barthes, 2014; Bourdieu, 1989;

Giddens, 2002; Jenkins, 2008). In other words, this symbolic violence reinforces, within the three narratives, different forms of objectification of the female body and how feminine beauty becomes a currency of exchange and success for the main characters. The desire to be valued and recognized as individuals, to be attractively/sexually desired, and to achieve success and empowerment transcends the three narratives, affecting both the protagonists and female characters (Chocano, 2020). When comparing them, we observe how these narratives depict a “systemic problem” within capitalist and patriarchal societies in both the East and the West, each with its own subjectivities and singularities, where women, even those who claim to be empowered and feminist, still seek men’s social approval (Bourdieu, 1989; Butler, 1990, 1993).

The convergence of these perspectives highlights how beauty pressure and symbolic violence function globally as both embedded in capitalist and patriarchal systems, as evidenced by Banet-Weiser et al. (2020), Butler (1990), Gill (2007), Gonzalez (2020), and Ribeiro (2016). The relentless pressure to conform to these ideals often results in significant mental and physical health issues across women in South Korea, Portugal, and Brazil, as many women internalize these expectations and take extreme measures to fulfill them (Gill, 2007; Goffman, 1987). This not only perpetuates aesthetic violence but also emphasizes the far-reaching impacts of media representations on women and their lived experiences (Hall, 2014).

As Oliveira (2023a, 2023b) explores, the representations of female beauty in these countries are not merely aesthetic but also function as powerful social tools that influence identity formation and social mobility. In Brazil, as shown by Vêrges (2019) and Gonzalez (2020), beauty has historically been tied to racial hierarchies, where lighter skin and European features have long been idealized as markers of beauty, creating systemic pressure that reflects broader social inequalities. Both cultures influence each other through soap operas, advertising, and digital influencers. Historically, Portuguese colonization shaped beauty ideals in Brazil, with European standards prevailing, as documented by Oliveira (2023a), Oliveira and Lapa (2022), and Duarte (2017). European countries, such as France, Italy, and Spain, initially influenced Portugal’s beauty standards. Later, North American influences contributed to the contemporary Luso-Brazilian beauty standard (Duarte, 2017; Gonzalez, 2020; and Ribeiro, 2016).

We can see those beauty influences in *The Good Girls Club* and *Hidden Truths*, where the women considered “most” beautiful and “more” attractive by the male characters are the white, thin, tall, and young women. These ideals are reinforced through advertising, cinema, TV series, and popular culture (Chocano, 2020; Oliveira & Lapa, 2022). The comparative analysis of fashion brand or retailer C&A’s Spring/Summer 2018 campaigns in Brazil and Portugal emphasizes how media in both contexts promote a narrow, white, and hegemonic Eurocentric vision of beauty. In other words, it perpetuates the same symbolic violence, excluding diverse beauties and non-hegemonic bodies (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2016; hooks, 1982; Vêrges, 2019). This perpetuation has significant implications on collective mentalities, identity formation, and the power dynamics that shape life perspectives (Bourdieu, 1989; Hall, 2014).

Similarly, Duarte (2017) argues that in Portugal, beauty standards continue to be shaped by colonial legacies, where the idealized female form is closely aligned with European beauty. However, contemporary pressures have shifted to include fitness and cosmetic enhancements, creating an aspirational model that many women feel compelled to pursue, often at high financial and emotional cost. Machado-Borges (2008) underscores this point by examining the growing trend of cosmetic surgery in Brazil, which is often portrayed as a means of self-improvement but remains deeply entrenched in class and racial dynamics.

In South Korea, the same Western beauty standards are also the norm, including having large eyes with double eyelids, white, flawless skin, and a tall, straight nose bridge, V-shaped face, and plump lips. While the Silla and Goryeo dynasties in Korea emphasized virtue and simplicity, and the Joseon dynasty highlighted dark features and rosy hues, South Korean women’s exposure to Western hegemonic beauty standards influenced their preference for defined creases in the upper eyelids, which created the appearance of larger eyes (Melendres n.d.). Most Koreans are born with monolids or single eyelids, which compels them to undergo plastic surgery for double eyelids to achieve a more Westernized look. Melendres (n.d.) refers to this as a deep-rooted desire to attain such hegemonic beauty ideals.

Taking all this into account, observing the existence of cross-cultural beauty pressures in Eastern and Western contexts (Yi, 2017), this study reveals the series *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, *The Good*

Girls Club, and *Hidden Truths* serve not only as a critique of South Korean, Luso-Brazilian beauty cultures and broader implications of global beauty standards in audiovisual media, but also as a platform and a mirror for examining narratives of symbolic violence in these societies. The series exemplifies the symbolic violence that women face in their pursuit of social legitimacy, mirroring the pressures they face in struggling for belonging, recognition, and self-acceptance as individuals in society. In this light, these three series present an interesting case study to exemplify critical cultural aesthetic discourse on beauty in a global context, inviting comparative reflection on how beauty norms are constructed, reinforced, and potentially subverted across different communities.

Conclusion

The proposed semiotic content analyses were verified in six steps, involving comparisons and reflections on the pressure on female beauty standards across South Korean, Brazilian, and Portuguese series. The series *My ID is Gangnam Beauty*, *The Good Girls Club*, and *Hidden Truths* vividly portray the oppressive beauty norms prevalent in South Korea, Portugal, and Brazil in varying and at the same time similar ways. The societies expressed in the three series had unique cultural norms that shaped their beauty ideals and perceptions of success.

In this regard, we can confirm Hypothesis 1: “The three series explore how global beauty standards and beauty pressure stimulate body shaming and bullying, associating the connection between beauty and success to be an empowered woman. Those aspects are present in the three series,” illustrating how characters are pressured to conform to idealized beauty standards to achieve personal and professional success. These standards, which prioritize physical appearance over intrinsic qualities, are also evident in the societal expectations of South Korea, Portugal, and Brazil.

More or less, we also confirm Hypothesis 2: “The three series explore the beauty pressure for the main characters as a struggle for belonging and recognition in their communities.” However, while some parts of the narrative emphasize the importance of authenticity, they do not promote intersectionality, diversity, and inclusion of marginalized and racialized individuals and communities. The lack of intersectionality for the expressive representation of women of race, ethnicity, fat and curvy bodies, beauties and diverse bodies (hooks, 1982; Crenshaw, 1991;

Davis, 2016; Ribeiro, 2016; Vèrges, 2019; Gonzalez, 2020; Alcantara & Valentim, 2023), points to the reinforcement of beauty stereotypes as an example of successful and empowered women (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Barthes, 2014; Giddens, 2022; Gill, 2007). These analyses reveal the vital importance of intersectional decolonial feminism in the three contexts, while also highlighting the necessity of narratives that celebrate the beauty of marginalized and racialized women (Crenshaw, 1991; Vèrges, 2019).

Lastly, Hypothesis 3 has also been confirmed: “The presence of symbolic violence is strong and is present in all three series. These three stories explore the beauty pressure of semiotics discourse in the lives of the main characters. Each country has its own social, economic, cultural, political, historical, and religious context, where some aspects transcend those cultures, such as the dominance of the beauty standard as a hegemonic norm that establishes social relations and self-identity construction.” Despite progress in feminist discourse, conventional beauty ideals continue to dominate, perpetuating unrealistic standards (Oliveira & Lapa, 2022). The protagonist’s journey of self-acceptance reflects the deep-rooted societal norms surrounding beauty (Barthes, 2014; Bourdieu, 1989).

The analysis emphasizes the widespread impact of beauty ideals on individuals, highlighting the challenges characters face as they navigate these standards and strive for self-acceptance amid societal pressures (Chocano, 2020). While the focus on beauty and appearance is a common theme across these cultural contexts, notable differences exist in the perception and acceptance of diverse beauty norms in Brazilian and Portuguese societies compared to South Korea. This critical examination reveals the complexities of beauty ideals and their influence on individuals’ lives across various cultural landscapes, shedding light on the challenges posed by oppressive beauty norms and their global resonance.

Ultimately, this research calls for a reevaluation of the media’s role in promoting awareness, so that they create more diverse and inclusive narratives, thereby prompting a shift in social perceptions of beauty (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill, 2007). By exposing the exclusionary practices embedded in media representations (Rane, 2022), the study advocates for decolonizing beauty standards and dismantling symbolic violence that continues to oppress women across cultures (Crenshaw, 1991; Tanca, 2024). This critique aims to contribute to a

broader understanding of how globalized media can both perpetuate and transform beauty ideals in a world increasingly connected through shared cultural products (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Ribeiro, 2016).

Future discussions and studies are crucial for challenging these prevailing standards and promoting more inclusive and empowering narratives about beauty. To foster more respectful societies that prioritize the well-being of women in both Eastern and Western sociocultural contexts, it is essential to critically examine and deconstruct existing beauty ideals.

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Notes

¹ My ID is Gangnam Beauty (내 아이디는 강남미인). Synopsis, Season 1: The drama features Kang Mi-Rae, a South Korean young woman who decides to undergo plastic surgery due to her “so-called ugly appearance” (Bum, 2018, IMDB). She is bullied in her university, and referred to as a “Gangnam plastic monster.” She meets Do Kyung-Seok, a fellow university student who doesn’t judge people based on their appearance.

² The Good Girls Club (O Clube, in European Portuguese). Synopsis, Season 1: The Good Girls Club is a drama series that portrays nights at Lisbon. It follows the story of three characters: the bouncer, the owner, and a young girl in a luxurious club. Since the club is visited by politicians, businessmen, artists, and football players, it invests in exclusivity and secrecy. The family-run business provides its customers with beautiful, sophisticated, and expensive women (Matos, 2020, IMDB).

³ Hidden Truths (Verdades Secretas, in Brazilian Portuguese). Synopsis, Part I: The series is about a teenager who dreams of a career as a top model. She becomes part of a prostitution scheme and meets a powerful, obsessive businessman. As a last resort, he marries the girl’s mother just to be near her. Hidden Truths explores the limits of obsession, wealth, and pleasure, using the fashion world as backdrop (Carrasco, 2021, IMDB).

Grant Support Details

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Hadassa Guimarães Oliveira (HGO), and Hazel T. Biana (HTB); methodology, HGO and HTB. ; investigation, HGO; data curation, HGO and HTB; writing—original draft preparation, HGO; writing—review and editing, HGO and HTB; project administration, HGO. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work is funded by national funds through the FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, I.P., within the scope of project UID/06303/2025 (Financial aid granted to the Research Center: LIACOM - Laboratory for Applied Research in Communication and Media, IPL - Polytechnic Institute of Lisbon, Portugal, <https://liacom.escs.ipl.pt/>).

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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