

The Impact of Generation Z Women Perception
On Korean Skincare Practices:
A Phenomenological Study of Irish Sociocultural Behaviour.

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of Generation Z women's perception on Korean skincare practices within the sociocultural context of Ireland. As Korean skincare continues to expand its global reach, this research investigates how Irish women aged 20 to 28 interpret, adopt, or negotiate these practices through a uniquely local lens. The aim is to uncover how emotional branding, peer influence, and digital culture shape the engagement of Irish Gen Z consumers with Korean skincare, and to generate branding insight relevant to niche European markets.

Using a descriptive phenomenological methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven Irish female participants. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework (2006) was applied to uncover patterns in participant narratives, grounded in lived experience and identity performance.

Key findings reveal that Korean skincare is not adopted uncritically. While many participants had pre-existing exposure to Korean culture, others were influenced purely by product efficacy. Participants associated Korean skincare with prevention, purity, and transparency—qualities that contrasted with Irish norms such as tanning. Consumer trust was co-constructed through emotional resonance, packaging aesthetics, and peer-to-peer validation.

This research contributes to the literature on emotional branding and cross-cultural consumer behaviour. It highlights how global beauty ideals are localised through sociocultural negotiation and personal values. The study also reflects the dual cultural lens of a Korean researcher embedded in Irish society, offering a deeper interpretation of both convergence and resistance in skincare adoption.

Key words: Irish Gen Z women, Korean Skincare, Emotional Branding, Cross-Cultural Consumer Behaviour, Peer Influence.

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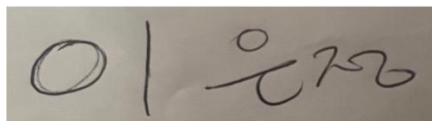
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Carù and Cova (2003) contend that the concept of consumption experience has become a central construct in understanding consumer behaviour, as it encapsulates the symbolic, emotional, and cultural meanings individuals attach to their interactions with products and services. Perception in this field plays an important role in shaping the way consumers interpret product value, respond to brand cues, and make purchase decisions (Kotler and Keller, 2006). Understanding consumer behaviour is not only academically important, but also essential for identifying emotional, social, and cultural processes of product interactions. According to Deliya and Parmar (2012), recognising customers and dynamic market processes, and responding to these variables are fundamental factors for informed participation in the consumer experience. In particular, cultural variables have the most extensive impact on consumer behaviour among all external factors (Kotler et al., 2007), and guide consumers in how they perceive needs and respond to stimuli. These factors are critical when trying to understand how individuals perceive product relevance and value in a broader cultural context.

In particular, skincare has become a space for consumers to negotiate their self-worth, aesthetic ideals, and well-being aspirations. Therefore, the perception of a product no longer depends on its functional performance, but also on how the product aligns with consumers' emotional associations and identity expressions (Binani et al., 2023). Emotional branding and symbolic consumption have become central to understanding consumer-brand relationships in the beauty sector (Hossain et al., 2025). Skincare routines have now functioned not only as an act of self-care but also as a way of self-branding, allowing individuals to convey values, aesthetics, and even a sense of cultural belonging through the process of selecting and executing products (Fournier, 1998).

This evolution has created new opportunities for the globalisation of culturally differentiated beauty brands, particularly those associated with Korean beauty culture (commonly referred to as K-beauty). Within this broader category, Korean skincare represents a distinctive segment that has gained international momentum (Shim, 2006). Korean skincare has emerged as a cultural and commercial force, offering new perspectives on skincare practices and emotional branding (Marques, 2023). With its unique positioning located at the intersection of wellness,

ceremonial, and visual identities, it is particularly attractive to young Irish female consumers who are exploring personal and public identities in the digital space (McEwen et al., 2025).

This study is not simply about the influence of global trends on Irish Gen Z beauty consumers, but it is based on the observation of phenomena that reinterpret them. Living in a culture where traditional elements and openness to diversity are harmonised, Gen Z has a unique perspective on the way they embrace, reconstruct, and resist global beauty standards. Instead of taking a passive attitude, Gen Z negotiate beauty practices in ways that reflect values and identities through their lifestyles (Karanika and Hogg, 2010). Therefore, this study aims to engage with these subtle reactions deeply within global beauty narratives and derive emotion-based participation rather than generalised consumer reactions.

This study is located at the intersection of consumer perception, cultural identity, and global beauty trends, focusing in particular on Irish Gen Z female consumers. These consumers explore an increasingly blended beauty environment shaped by global media and local norms. The study explores how they perceive, interpret, and emotionally relate to K-beauty within everyday skincare practices, and provides insight into how global cultural products are accepted, adapted, or redefined in local settings.

1.2 Background and Context

Korean skincare practices have evolved into a global phenomenon, disrupting traditional Western beauty norms with their skincare routines, gentle formulations, and holistic approach. While Western skincare has often centred on corrective treatments and simplified routines, K-beauty emphasise prevention, daily rituals, and long-term care. Its branding frequently draws from traditional Korean herbal knowledge, modern dermatology, and sleek aesthetic design, creating a cultural product that is simultaneously ancient and cutting-edge (Zaizakrani, 2021). These aspects are framed within a narrative of health, softness, and effort, contrasting starkly with the bold, high-impact aesthetics often associated with Western beauty culture (Zhan et al., 2021).

Irish Gen Z consumers, as part of this globally connected cohort, engage with beauty trends through platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Reddit, where K-beauty tutorials and product

reviews circulate widely. These platforms not only facilitate product discovery but also create a social environment where skincare is discussed as part of lifestyle, identity, and emotional well-being (Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2024). Beauty routines become performative and identity-affirming, especially in online spaces where peer validation and visual representation dominate (Edelman Ireland, 2023).

Irish society has also undergone noticeable shifts in beauty culture. There is growing awareness around ethical consumption, with increasing demand for cruelty-free, vegan, and sustainably packaged products (Statista, 2024). Younger Irish consumers are more open to skincare experimentation than previous generations, adopting international routines such as internationally inspired skincare experiments. However, K-beauty's aesthetic ideals, such as glass-like skin, youthful glow, and the absence of visible flaws, may at times clash with Irish cultural values of naturalness, subtlety, and minimal effort (Sheehan et al., 2017).

These tensions suggest that Irish consumers may not simply adopt K-beauty but reinterpret it to fit local values to a process of cultural hybridisation that merits close investigation (Zaizakrani, 2021). Gen Z consumers who were born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s are particularly receptive to K-beauty due to their immersion in digital media and high brand consciousness. This study explores the growing desire to understand whether beauty narratives are accessible in culturally specific markets such as Ireland and responds to concerns beyond theoretical significance. Rather than analysing the attractiveness of global beauty culture, this study considers how meaning is shaped by consumers' life experiences, social values, and emotional frameworks. This provides a context-sensitive understanding of how beauty care products are interpreted through personal relevance, symbolic representation, and cultural alignment, as well as functionality. These insights can be useful not only for purchasing skincare but also for those who want to communicate with an audience that participates as a form of identity work.

1.3 Research Problem

Despite the increasing popularity of Korean skincare in Western markets, academic research has yet to adequately explore how K-beauty is perceived and experienced in culturally smaller, underrepresented regions like Ireland. Most existing literature focuses on Korean domestic consumers or larger Western markets such as the United States and the United Kingdom, often

relying on quantitative measures that track buying behaviour rather than exploring the subjective interpretation of branding and identity (Marasca, 2020).

Studies such as Wang and Lee (2021) examine how exposure to K-beauty through social media and influencer engagement shapes consumer trust and product acceptance, but these findings cannot be easily generalised to the Irish market, where cultural expectations around beauty, wellness, and authenticity may diverge significantly. The Irish context is unique in that it combines conservative traditions with rising liberal consumerism, where younger consumers value individuality, emotional connection, and social responsibility (Sheehan et al., 2017).

Moreover, perception remains an underdeveloped concept in beauty research, often overshadowed by behavioural metrics such as product preference, frequency of use, or influencer reach (Wang and Lee, 2021). Yet perception is critical for understanding how consumers attach meaning to products and brands, particularly when those products come from culturally unfamiliar origins. From a psychological and branding perspective, perception not only influences affective reactions and symbolic meaning but also serves as the foundation for long-term brand attachment and cultural acceptability (Fournier, 1998).

While industry reports highlight the financial growth of K-beauty, academic discourse has yet to examine how identity, emotional branding, and cultural compatibility shape product perception in smaller Western markets like Ireland. Irish Gen Z consumers, as highly networked and reflective consumers, are ideal for exploring how identity and consumption co-construct meaning through beauty practices (Carroll, 2021). The cultural specificity of Ireland, characterised by values such as naturalness, modesty, and a growing openness to wellness, offers a rich context in which global beauty ideals may be translated, reinterpreted, or resisted. Beyond its theoretical importance, this study responds to a growing need to understand whether beauty narratives are accessible and meaningful within culturally specific markets like Ireland. Rather than assuming a universal appeal of K-beauty, this research considers how meaning is shaped by consumers' lived experiences, social values, and emotional frameworks. In doing so, it offers a context-sensitive understanding of how beauty products are interpreted not only through functionality but also through personal relevance, symbolic expression, and cultural alignment. These insights may prove valuable for those seeking to connect with audiences who are not just buying skincare but engaging with it as a form of identity work.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

This research aims to explore how Irish Generation Z consumers perceive and emotionally engage with Korean skincare practices, focusing on how sociocultural and digital influences shape their interpretations. The study seeks to generate branding insight by uncovering the emotional and cultural meanings associated with K-beauty in a niche European market. This study focuses on Irish Generation Z consumers, who, while not necessarily fully financially independent, represent emerging consumers increasingly making autonomous skincare-related purchasing decisions.

Research Objectives:

- To explore the emotional and cultural perceptions Irish Gen Z consumers hold about Korean skincare products and their everyday skincare practices.
- To explore how peer-to-peer communication and digital word-of-mouth shape consumer trust and engagement with Korean skincare.
- To examine how Irish sociocultural norms, beauty expectations, and generational values shape skincare-related consumption.
- To analyse how Korean beauty ideals are reinterpreted, negotiated, or adapted by Irish Gen Z consumers in the context of their own beauty values.

1.5 Methodology Overview

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in descriptive phenomenology, akin to Giorgi's (2009) study. This approach is well-suited to capturing the emotional and identity-related meanings embedded in skincare practices among Irish Gen Z consumers. Semi-structured interviews are conducted to collect data from Irish Gen Z who regularly use Korean skincare products.

Participants were recruited through cultural communities and personal networks. The analysis focused on identifying meaning units and describing the psychological structures of participants' lived experiences. A reflexive stance was maintained throughout the research

process to ensure that insights were grounded in participants' perspectives rather than researcher assumptions (Carroll, 2021).

Ethical procedures, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw, were strictly observed.

1.6 Contribution of the Study

This study moves beyond examining the influence of global beauty trends by exploring how Irish Generation Z consumers internalise, reinterpret, and emotionally engage with culturally distinct beauty products like K-beauty.

Rather than perceiving these products as culturally distant, participants often integrate them into their identity practices, drawing on values such as authenticity, emotional resonance, and ethical alignment. Their responses suggest a deeper process of meaning-making, in which beauty products become tools of self-expression rather than mere functional commodities.

Accordingly, this research does not merely track consumer trends but investigates how individuals interpret global beauty narratives through their lived experiences and socio-emotional frameworks. The study aims to offer contextually grounded insight into how brands can engage with culturally nuanced audiences by aligning with their values, lifestyles, and emotional expectations.

1.7 Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 introduces the background, problem, rationale, and structure of the research.

Chapter 2 presents a critical review of literature on consumer perception, identity, cultural branding, and digital beauty consumption.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological framework, data collection and analysis processes, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 reports the findings from thematic analysis of participant interviews.

Chapter 5 discusses these findings in relation to theoretical frameworks and previous research.

Chapter 6 concludes the study and offers implications for practice, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the existing literature on consumer perceptions of Korean skincare among Irish Gen Z women. Key topics covered include global beauty trends, comparative beauty norms in Western and Eastern cultures, emotional branding, identity formation, and the influence of digital media. The review explores how skincare practices intersect with sociocultural values, self-expression, and perceptions of authenticity. Interdisciplinary sources, including consumer behaviour, cultural branding, and gender studies, are used to understand how beauty practices function as aesthetic and affective experiences.

The chapter also highlights the lack of qualitative research on how Irish Gen Z women interpret Korean skincare practices in a cultural context. The literature review provides a foundation for the phenomenological approach taken in this study by identifying interpretive and affective dimensions that are currently underexplored.

2.2 Irish Female Consumer Behaviour

Customers typically go through five basic steps in the decision-making cycle when considering a purchase: recognition, information retrieval, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation (Jin et al., 2019; Stankevich, 2017). Recognising one's needs or those of others elicits the same emotional reaction. The process begins with customers identifying a need and then gathering knowledge to satisfy that desire (Jin et al., 2019). Deliya and Parmar (2012) say that recognising customers, dynamic market processes, and making decisions based on those factors are necessary for effective marketing strategies. Human behaviour is shaped by a range of external and internal factors. Kotler et al. (2010) classify these factors into four categories: psychological, personal, social, and cultural. Personal factors include motivations, perceptions, learning ability, attitudes, personality traits, and lifestyle, while group-level factors encompass culture, family background, socioeconomic status, peer influence, and collective belief systems. Gender is also recognised as a key determinant of consumer behaviour, as men and women often differ in how they perceive, interpret, and respond to external stimuli. Building on this, Deliya and Parmar (2012) note that women in particular tend to have different priorities, preferences, and emotional tendencies. These differences also exist in the way they engage with the same advertising content, such as slogans, images, and media

channels. The results show that female consumers often display unique approaches to decision-making compared to male consumers, which highlights the important role that they play in shaping individual responses to the marketing process.

Existing research highlights the persistent underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in Irish media and advertising. Luo and Hao (2007) found that women are frequently portrayed in passive, submissive, and dependent roles across various media platforms. These portrayals often rely on outdated and limiting gender stereotypes. Similarly, Patterson et al. (2009) argue that Irish advertisers continue to draw on inappropriate and degrading characterisations of women, and that a considerable gap remains in understanding how such representations are produced and what implications they hold for consumer identity and behaviour. Linehan (2008) further notes that women are rarely positioned as narrators of their own experiences or presented as authoritative voices, and when women are visibly presented, it is often portrayed through narrowly defined, stereotypical lenses.

According to a study cited by Sheehan et al. (2017), 41% of Irish women across various product categories felt that advertisers did not understand them. This perception was particularly strong in areas such as investment (54%), automotive (44%), and healthcare (43%), whereas food-related advertising showed a lower rate (38%). These statistics highlight a disconnect between marketing narratives and the actual experiences of Irish women, particularly those in higher-income segments. Given women's growing influence in household purchasing decisions, this oversight reflects a broader failure to address evolving consumer dynamics.

Despite these challenges, advertising also holds the potential to positively impact women's lives when utilised with intention and care. Patterson et al. (2009) cite Unilever's 'Campaign for Real Beauty' as a meaningful example of how media can shift public perception. The campaign challenged conventional beauty norms and promoted positive body image, demonstrating that authentic representation can resonate emotionally with consumers while also yielding commercial success. Positive portrayals in advertising may therefore foster stronger relationships between brands and women consumers, reinforcing trust and encouraging engagement. Efforts to address gender representation in Irish media have also been supported at the institutional level. The National Women's Strategy (2007–2016), referenced in Patterson et al. (2009), aimed to promote more equitable depictions of women in advertising. Such initiatives acknowledge the power of media in shaping consumer identities

and seek to ensure that women are represented in ways that reflect their diverse roles and realities. Patterson et al. (2009) further found that emotional resonance is a critical driver of consumer behaviour, particularly when representations align with personal identity and values. Consumer responses to advertising are often emotionally charged, especially during times of uncertainty. Quelch and Jocz (2009) suggest that individuals develop consumption patterns as a means of regaining control during crises. This insight helps explain the growth of the beauty sector, which has become a domain for self-enhancement and empowerment. Among Gen Z Irish women in particular, digital beauty culture offers opportunities for experimentation and identity construction through curated consumption.

2.3 Impact of Cultural Shift on Irish Women Identity

Since the late 20th century, Irish society has experienced a shift from a religious to a consumerist framework. Cavanaugh (2019) and McBennett (2025) note that belief in God, once taken for granted, has become increasingly optional, with pluralism and individual choice reshaping cultural life. McGurk, cited in Ryan (2020), warns that consumerism is overtaking Christianity as the primary organising force in Irish public life. This symbolic shift is evident in Dublin shopping centres being called “cathedrals” and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) holding matches on Sunday mornings, traditionally reserved for Mass. This cultural shift has expanded the personal freedoms of women in particular, but has also raised concerns about the erosion of communal and spiritual values (Ryan, 2020). Pope Francis (2013) criticises the dehumanising tendencies of a consumerist economy that ignores social and ethical issues and promotes alienation and inequality. In this changing environment, consumer identity is increasingly shaped by symbolic products, lifestyle practices, and brand associations. Linehan (2008) argues that identity is shaped by consumption choices, reflecting not just financial priorities but also personal values and social positioning. Material goods serve as communicative tools for expressing self and social solidarity (Elliott, 1997; Holt, 1997; Belk, 1988). This symbolic consumption provides agency and empowerment, but also places new pressures on women in particular by reinforcing fragmented identities, performative femininity, and lifestyle anxieties at important life transitions (The VOICE Group, 2010; Karanika and Hogg, 2010; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). The shift from religion to consumption is therefore not simply a secular movement, but a transformation of the way meaning, community, and self are constructed and experienced in Irish cultural life. Notably, even during periods of economic

hardship, Irish women have demonstrated consistent engagement with beauty culture. Between 2008 and 2011, the number of women visiting beauty salons rose from 760,000 to 830,000, and the average monthly spend on cosmetics reached €14 in 2011 (deBurca Butler, 2012). These figures suggest that financial pressure did not significantly dampen women's investment in beauty-related products. Emotional motivations often underpin this behaviour. Research indicates that women are more likely to associate shopping with emotional gratification and identity-related experiences, whereas men tend to approach purchasing with functional or information-oriented goals (Wang et al., 2022; Dittmar et al., 2004). Studies further indicate that women are more likely than men to make unplanned purchases (Segal and Podoshen, 2013). During the economic downturn, many companies actively targeted female consumers to sustain their business, acknowledging their pivotal role in driving the consumer economy (Stevenson, 2021). As Silverstein and Sayre (2009) suggest, women are increasingly recognised as key drivers of global economic activity.

Ireland's transformation has been both rapid and profound, influenced by modernisation, secularisation, and exposure to global cultures. The rejection of a rigid Catholic social order once central to Irish identity marked a broader cultural transition (Whelan, 2014). Events such as the introduction of television in 1962, the expansion of education in the late 1960s, and the return of emigrants with new worldviews helped reshape societal values. American goods, particularly cosmetics and household appliances, began to feature prominently in the lives of Irish women, often clashing with traditional religious norms.

2.4 Gen Z and Identity

Dobre et al. (2021) define Generation Z as digital consumers with a high preference for luxury goods and online shopping. Interactions with brands on social platforms help to shape symbolic values and self-identities through visual storytelling and emotional immersion. The authors also argue that Generation Z's affinity for hedonistic and iconic brand attributes greatly influenced brand communication strategies. Despite their economic influence, scholarly research into this consumer group remains relatively limited. Members of Generation Z are generally not loyal to specific brands and often prefer to purchase products that are visually accessible and readily available (Veiga-Neto et al., 2018). This demographic follows the Millennial generation and includes individuals born between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s.

As the first generation to grow up in a world shaped by widespread internet access and social media, Gen Z has earned the label of “digital natives” (Fromm and Read, 2018). They are often described as independent, technologically skilled, and entrepreneurial. Their early exposure to digital ecosystems has shaped expectations for seamless, intuitive online experiences. Moreover, growing up in an era defined by selfies and social networking has made them acutely aware of their online image and personal brand. Close friends and family have long been recognised as influential in shaping consumer decision-making, as noted by Brown and Reingen (1987). In recent years, attention has turned to Generation Z, generally defined as those born after 1997, though some sources define them as those born after 2000. This cohort is described as highly globalised, largely due to their immersion in digital environments from an early age, and has been referred to using terms such as “Generation I,” “Versatile Generation,” “Performing Multiple Tasks,” and “Digital Age” (Geck, 2006). With early exposure to digital technologies, Generation Z demonstrates strong capacity for information access and technological engagement, and their daily lives are deeply integrated with social networks and online platforms, facilitating constant idea sharing and collaborative participation (Taş et al., 2017). Dangmei and Singh (2016) define them as individuals born in the 1990s and raised in the 2000s, a period marked by the proliferation of the Internet, smartphones, and digital networks. As active digital consumers, Gen Z regularly engages in behaviours such as sharing, liking, tagging, and commenting on products or services via social media platforms. These actions contribute to what is known as electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), whereby peer-generated content becomes visible to others and influences their attitudes and decisions (Liu et al., 2020). Due to their comfort with online platforms, Gen Z consumers are highly responsive to user-generated content. The integration of e-commerce and social media has encouraged them to critically evaluate product quality, not only through direct experience but also by observing the experiences of others, fostering an environment in which collaboration and co-creation are central to consumption practices (Ali, 2022; Heatherington, 2018). This generation places considerable value on relatability and authenticity when evaluating the credibility of social media influencers. Personal stories or subjective experiences shared by influencers often enhance their perceived trustworthiness (Moodley and Ntobaki, 2024), though concerns persist about the transparency of promotional material, particularly when it appears overly commercial (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Hajli and Sims (2015) found that consumer-generated content such as reviews, ratings, and recommendations significantly influenced purchase intentions in social commerce contexts, underscoring the importance of perceived authenticity in shaping buying behaviour. According to Pairo Veliz (2022), while social media

can facilitate meaningful consumer engagement, the balance between marketing and trust remains a critical factor, particularly among digitally literate, brand-conscious Gen Z consumers. This is especially relevant in Ireland, where beauty and skincare have emerged as emotionally meaningful and identity-driven sectors. The Irish beauty and personal care market is projected to generate approximately €1.26 billion in revenue in 2025, with per capita spending estimated at €246.16 (Statista, 2024). Consumer interest in skincare is evident; a 2024 RTÉ Radio 1 segment noted that many Irish Gen Z women, influenced by social media trends, are adopting sophisticated routines and even early use of anti-ageing products, prompting expert caution over potential long-term skin health risks (RTÉ Radio 1, 2024). These patterns suggest that beauty consumption in Ireland extends beyond aesthetic goals, encompassing ethical values, personal wellbeing, and evolving identity expressions. Furthermore, a survey of 500 Irish women showed that 93% believed their environmentally conscious purchasing positively impacted the planet (Gaffey et al., 2021). These trends indicate that beauty consumption in Ireland goes beyond appearance, encompassing ethical values, emotional wellbeing, and personal identity.

2.5 K-Beauty and Global Branding

K-beauty, as a cultural export, plays a central role in globalising certain beauty ideals rooted in Korean media, celebrity culture, and skincare philosophy. As observed by Zaizakrani (2021), the Korean Wave has facilitated the global diffusion of aesthetic norms, positioning Korean celebrities as symbolic vehicles of beauty ideals that prioritise youthfulness, clarity, and transformation. These ideals are continually reinforced through Korean dramas, idol branding, and visual media, portraying beauty as both a personal asset and a determinant of social and romantic success. The cultural exports function as a form of soft power, carrying values of discipline, emotional control, and perfectionism that are embedded in Korean beauty culture (Leung, 2012; Seo et al., 2020). Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram play a vital role in mediating K-beauty's global image. Irish Gen Z women are increasingly exposed to curated content that promotes a natural glow, hydration layering, and skincare as a form of emotional and aesthetic self-care. Influencers act as translators of these beauty routines, adapting them to local values of simplicity, authenticity, and wellness (McEwen et al., 2025). These digital platforms enable peer validation and community reinforcement, where skincare routines become not only personal rituals but also expressions of identity, social aspiration, and

digital belonging (Ezquerria Fernández and Bonales Daimiel, 2024). However, this seemingly empowering trend also carries the potential to reinforce narrow aesthetic norms and self-surveillance practices, particularly when idealised appearances are internalised through algorithmic repetition (Doh et al., 2025).

While the popularity of K-beauty has grown significantly across Western markets, particularly due to its association with K-pop idols and social media influencers, its reception is not uniform. Research by Zaizakrani (2021) highlights how beauty standards embedded in Korean popular culture can promote hybridised ideals that combine Western facial features with Asian body image ideals, such as the “S-line” or “bagel face.” This underscores how K-beauty simultaneously reflects and reframes global beauty norms, complicating its role as a purely alternative aesthetic. In Ireland, these visual ideals may resonate differently, shaped by local consumer values around naturalness and emotional sincerity. Importantly, Irish consumers often show a strong preference for “clean beauty” and natural skincare practices, driven by broader European concerns about ingredient safety and sustainability (Roso et al, 2023). The appeal of Korean skincare, which emphasizes natural ingredients such as green tea, snail mucus, and red ginseng, lies in its scientifically backed benefits (Juhász et al., 2018) and its emotional resonance and culturally relevant marketing strategies, as evidenced by successful brands such as COSRX (Chabhaiya et al., 2024). This highlights the need to understand not only what Irish Gen Z women consume, but how they emotionally relate to beauty rituals originating in a different cultural paradigm. The emotional power of K-beauty lies in its promise of transformation through consistency and intentionality. Although conducted in the South African skincare market, research by Berman et al., (2023) on sensory branding demonstrates that positive sensory and emotional experiences both in-store and online can significantly enhance consumer confidence, brand attachment, and loyalty. These insights are relevant for understanding Irish Gen Z women’s engagement with K-beauty, where the emotional connection may be intensified by rising anxiety surrounding ageing, online comparison, and wellness pressure in a post-pandemic world (Quelch and Jocz, 2009). At the same time, critical voices caution against the uncritical embrace of idealised beauty narratives, warning that internalised appearance norms can foster unrealistic expectations and bodily insecurity (Alranyes et al., 2019). Although K-beauty products are now widely available through mainstream retailers such as Boots, the specific perceptions and subjective meanings attached to these practices by Irish consumers remain underexplored. Therefore, further qualitative

research is necessary to uncover how Korean skincare is localised, emotionally interpreted, and incorporated into the identity practices of young Irish women.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

2.6.1 TPB

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), refines the earlier theory of reasoned action by introducing perceived behavioural control as a third determinant of behavioural intention, alongside attitude toward the behaviour and subjective norms (Ajzen, 2020). Attitude toward the behaviour refers to the extent to which a person evaluates a particular behaviour positively (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of skincare, such positive attitudes may arise when consumers perceive the product as offering health, environmental, and aesthetic benefits, as shown in TPB-based research on beauty product consumption (Bevan-Dye and Synodinos, 2025). Subjective norms refer to the social pressure to engage in or avoid a behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), shaped by influences from family, peers, and increasingly, digital communities. Mahlakaarto and Suanse (2024) found that social media communities and influencer-generated content significantly shape beauty norms and influence purchase decisions among young women. This aligns with Zhang et al. (2020), who highlight the role of subjective norms in identity-related consumption decisions, including sustainability and beauty. Perceived behavioural control reflects an individual's assessment of their ability to perform a behaviour, encompassing internal factors such as self-efficacy and product knowledge, as well as external factors such as affordability and market availability (Chen and Deng, 2016). Overall, the TPB framework offers a structured model to examine skincare intentions among Irish Gen Z women, integrating internal evaluations, perceived social norms, and behavioural control factors (Ajzen, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020; Ajzen, 1991).

2.6.2 Product Knowledge

Consumers' trust and satisfaction in skincare purchases are often shaped by the level of product knowledge they possess, including awareness of ingredients, usage, and efficacy. Previous research has shown that informed consumers are more likely to make confident and expectation-aligned choices, particularly when they understand what the product offers (Chang and Kukar-Kinney, 2011; Baker et al., 2002). In the context of Korean skincare, Irish Gen Z

consumers rely on product knowledge as a form of cultural filtering. Moslehpour et al. (2017) highlight how country of origin awareness and word of mouth influence repurchase intentions. The "Made in Korea" label evokes trust when it comes to Korea's reputation for innovation and the global Korean Wave, with influencer marketing playing an important role in this knowledge transfer. As Khwela et al. (2024) explained, influencer acts as perceived professionals, creating consumer trust and emotional consensus about the product. Chen and Deng (2016) argue that product knowledge improves autonomous decision-making by reducing sensitivity to social pressure. For Generation Z of Ireland, Product knowledge can function as both a psychological buffer and a cultural filter, enabling consumers to navigate foreign beauty ideals with greater autonomy (Chen and Deng, 2016; Moslehpour et al., 2017). Product knowledge not only mitigates risks and external influences but also enables consumers to explore foreign aesthetic ideals and tailor their choices to their identities and values (Moslehpour et al., 2017; Chen and Deng, 2016).

2.6.3 FoMO

According to Muawiyah and Jurana (2024), the Fear of Missing Out (commonly referred to as FoMO) plays a significant role in driving impulsive and emotionally charged purchasing behaviour, especially in digital environments shaped by social media. Ansaroglu (2022) observed that digital saturation among younger Irish users, particularly those aged 18–25, tends to foster emotional sensitivity and reactive consumer patterns, with phenomena like FoMO playing a significant role. In the Irish context, FoMO manifests through constant smartphone use and heightened emotional vulnerability. Nonetheless, the extent to which FoMO directly influences purchase intention remains contested. Emerging evidence indicates that while it can trigger emotional responses such as anxiety or curiosity, its actual impact is often shaped by mediating factors such as peer influence and the consumer's level of product knowledge (Purbaningrum et al., 2025; Dwisuardinata and Darma, 2023). Among Irish Gen Z women, it appears more as a subtle motivator than a direct trigger. FoMO may shape beauty-related aspirations by reinforcing external validation through digital comparisons, while potentially diminishing internal confidence and decision autonomy (Muawiyah and Jurana, 2024; Ansaroglu, 2022). Thus, the role of FoMO in consumer decisions is ambivalent and contextual.

2.7 Research Gap

Existing literature has extensively examined global beauty trends and generational consumer behaviour, with a focus on how young women shape their identities through consumption (Karanika and Hogg, 2010; Davies et al., 2013). There is also research on how Irish women have shifted from traditional roles to a powerful consumer position with local values and identities shaped by global media. Despite these insights, however, there is a marked lack of attention to specific cultural practices, such as Korean skincare, in the context of Irish Gen Z. Most academic research on K-beauty focuses on Asian or North American markets, and often relies on behavioural or market-based models. This research overlooks how consumers emotionally engage with beauty practices as a reflection of their cultural identity, authenticity and self-worth. Irish Gen Z women, particularly those raised in a digitally saturated, multicultural environment, navigate global beauty narratives in complex and individualised ways. However, little is known about how they interpret and selectively use skin care practices beyond their superficial utility, or how such practices function as tools for emotional foundations, identity expression, or personal consciousness. Furthermore, the symbolic and emotional aspects of skincare practices, particularly emotional branding and authentic perceptions of foreign beauty standards, remain under-researched. This is particularly evident in Ireland's socio-cultural environment, shaped by secularisation (Whelan, 2014), increased multicultural contact (Ryan, 2020, p.228), and post-pandemic wellness trends (Vicol, 2025). Consumer psychology theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and the concept of FoMO (Fear of Missing Out) are increasingly used to explain decision-making and emotional triggers in a digital context, but have rarely been applied to cross-cultural skincare perceptions. Similarly, the role of product knowledge as a filter for globalised beauty codes remains under-researched in this demographic. Therefore, this study fills an important gap by exploring, through a phenomenological approach, how Irish Gen Z women perceive K-beauty as a lived and emotionally resonant ritual rather than simply a beauty trend. This study focuses on lived experiences to capture the interpretive processes through which global beauty codes are localised and concretised, providing new insights into the cultural meaning-making of skincare consumption.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter reviews existing research across a range of areas, including consumer perception, beauty norms, generational identity, and the cultural diffusion of Korean Skincare Practices. The findings demonstrate how Irish Gen Z consumers navigate global beauty norms through deep emotion and cultural localisation. Interest in Korean skincare is shaped not only by exposure to digital beauty content, but also by internalised values of authenticity, self-care and aesthetic balance. Despite the increasing visibility of Korean Skincare Products in the Irish market, current research lacks sufficient exploration of how these women respond to and emotionally interpret these beauty practices. Most research is still based on behaviourist or market-oriented approaches, and lacks consideration of how skincare functions as a symbolic and concrete expression of self in Ireland's multicultural and post-religious society. Emotional branding and identity-driven consumption are briefly mentioned, but are not explored through the lived experiences of Gen Z. By incorporating the Theory of Planned Behaviour and FoMO into the analytical framework, this study adds theoretical depth to our understanding of how attitudes, social norms and perceived behavioural control interact with emotional branding, product knowledge and identity expression. This study seeks to fill this gap by approaching K-beauty not as a simple consumption trend but as an emotional practice embedded in everyday life, self-organization, and socio-cultural flow. This study proposes a phenomenological perspective that focuses on perception as a process formed through embodied experience, emotional response, and cultural interpretation. This provides new insights into how Irish Gen Z women embed global beauty narratives in their local identity activities. In the following chapter, I outline the philosophical underpinnings and methodological design of this study, providing a framework for meaningfully exploring these consumer experiences.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This study investigates how Irish Generation Z women emotionally and culturally engage with Korean skincare practices, moving beyond traditional consumer behaviour models that prioritise rationality and utility (Grundey, 2008). Recent research has reframed consumption as not only a functional act but also a symbolic and emotionally resonant process (Schouten, 1991). Branding, in this context, refers not to corporate messaging or product placement strategies but to the emotionally resonant meanings that consumers co-construct through engagement with beauty practices. For example, concepts such as 'glass skin' or multi-step skincare are not perceived merely as aesthetic goals but as rituals of self-care, discipline, and identity performance. These branding-related meanings emerge in the everyday negotiation between global ideals and local realities (O'Reilly, 2005; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Accordingly, skincare routines are approached not as hygienic obligations but as intimate rituals embedded with personal and collective values (Nurdiyana, 2024; Kwon, 2018), often shaped by sociocultural norms, generational attitudes, and digital beauty narratives.

To explore these emotionally and culturally embedded experiences, the study employs Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology as its core methodological approach. This framework facilitates a deep engagement with participants' lived experiences by encouraging the researcher to bracket presuppositions and focus on the structures of meaning within everyday practices (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2008). Complementing this, Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis is applied to identify and organise recurring experiential patterns across narratives (Braun et al., 2019). While thematic analysis brings interpretive clarity and rigour, it remains grounded in the phenomenological goal of preserving emotional depth and subjectivity. This integrated strategy aligns with the study's broader interest in branding, symbolic consumption, and identity formation, providing a robust yet nuanced lens through which to examine how Korean skincare is internalised, reinterpreted, and emotionally negotiated by Irish Gen Z women.

3.2 Research Aim and Objectives

3.2.1 Research Aim

To investigate how Irish Generation Z women perceive and emotionally engage with Korean skincare products, focusing on how cultural and digital influences shape their understanding of these products. This study aims to identify and interpret perceptual and emotional gaps in the cross-cultural understanding of skincare. It particularly focuses on how Korean beauty is localised and redefined within the Irish context, offering theoretical insight into the emotional and cultural experience of branding.

3.2.2 Research Objectives and Questions

This research seeks to uncover cultural and emotional perception gaps that exist between global beauty narratives and local consumer interpretations. By focusing on Irish Gen Z women, the study attempts to explore how skincare rituals, often viewed as surface-level practices, are emotionally reinterpreted and culturally negotiated. In doing so, this research does not aim to offer practical branding strategies but rather to reveal and narrow the interpretive gap between global beauty ideals and localised meaning-making.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore the emotional and cultural perceptions Irish Gen Z consumers hold about Korean skincare products and their everyday skincare practices.
2. To examine how peer-to-peer communication and digital word-of-mouth shape trust and engagement with Korean skincare.
3. To investigate how Irish sociocultural norms, beauty expectations, and generational values shape skincare-related consumption.
4. To analyse how Korean beauty ideals are reinterpreted, negotiated, or adapted by Irish Gen Z consumers.

Research Questions:

1. What emotional or cultural meanings do Irish Gen Z women associate with Korean skincare products?

2. How do peer influence and digital platforms affect their trust and engagement with K-beauty?
3. In what ways do Irish beauty norms and generational values influence their skincare preferences?
4. How do Irish Gen Z women reinterpret or adapt Korean beauty ideals to fit their identity?

3.3 Research Philosophy

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research strategy grounded in descriptive phenomenology. This approach aligns with the study's objective of exploring how Korean skincare is emotionally and culturally experienced by Irish Generation Z women. Rather than approaching skincare as a rational or functional behaviour, this strategy seeks to uncover the subjective, emotionally embedded meanings that participants construct through their everyday routines.

Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method serves as the core methodological foundation. It enables the researcher to bracket assumptions and attend to participants' lived experiences in their own terms, accessing the pre-reflective layers of meaning that often underpin routine consumer practices (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2008). Giorgi's emphasis on openness and meaning structures makes it especially suitable for exploring how skincare rituals function as sites of self-care, identity expression, and branding-related meaning-making.

At the same time, the study incorporates Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis as a complementary analytic tool (Braun et al., 2019). While phenomenology provides depth and philosophical orientation (Giorgi, 2009), thematic analysis enhances interpretive rigour by allowing for the systematic coding and organisation of patterns across participants. This dual approach is not symmetrical in weight; rather, thematic analysis functions in service of the phenomenological goal, supporting the expression of lived meanings without reducing them to abstract generalisations.

This strategy is conceptually aligned with the study's focus on branding, symbolic consumption, and identity work. By combining methodological depth with analytic clarity, the research is

positioned to generate insights into how global beauty ideals are internalised, negotiated, and embodied by young consumers in a local Irish context. Crucially, the study does not aim to produce strategic recommendations for corporate branding, but instead seeks to illuminate how branding is effectively and culturally experienced in everyday contexts. In line with this philosophical grounding, the following section outlines the research design, including data collection strategies and methodological procedures.

3.4 Research Design and Data Collection

Based on the philosophical stance outlined above, this section details the procedures for data collection, including the interview instrument, participant recruitment, and fieldwork logistics. A semi-structured interview format was employed as the primary research tool, designed to explore the emotional engagement, cultural interpretation, and digital influence associated with Korean skincare. The interview protocol was developed through a two-step process to ensure consistency and theoretical alignment with the study's core themes.

Drawing on prior research in symbolic consumption, identity construction, and mediated self-presentation (Pairo Veliz, 2022; Elliott, 1997; Belk, 1988), the questions were crafted to capture how consumers emotionally and culturally engage with branded beauty rituals in digital contexts. The interview guide targeted four key dimensions:

- Emotional Awareness: Feelings associated with skincare use, such as confidence, self-care, and anxiety
- Sociocultural Context: Influence of local beauty norms, generational values, and peer groups
- Digital Influence: The impact of social media, algorithms, and influencer marketing on product perception
- Critical Engagement: Participant reflections on authenticity, accessibility, and cultural interpretation of Korean skincare

The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in participant responses while maintaining thematic coherence. This design supported the phenomenological goal of uncovering vivid, subjective meanings without over-structuring or guiding participants toward predetermined interpretations.

A non-probabilistic purposive sampling strategy was adopted, considered appropriate for phenomenological qualitative research. The aim was not to generalise but to capture rich, context-sensitive insights into the lived experiences of a specific population. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Women aged 21–28 (Generation Z)
- Irish nationals, born and currently residing in Ireland
- Regular users of Korean skincare in their daily routines

This age group represents a transitional life stage marked by increased autonomy in consumption and identity experimentation. As digital natives, these participants actively engage with algorithmic beauty content, influencer-led branding, and global aesthetic ideals through social media. Their exposure to transnational beauty narratives makes them uniquely positioned to navigate and reinterpret Korean skincare rituals in culturally hybrid ways (Bernardo, 2023; Harahap et al., 2023). Dublin, in particular, provides an ideal urban microcosm for these dynamics, given its dense digital media penetration and access to global retail ecosystems. While all participants were Irish nationals, most resided in Dublin, a metropolitan setting that provides exposure to global beauty cultures and digital media, making it a particularly relevant context for cross-cultural skincare engagement.

A total of seven participants were included, consistent with recommended sample sizes in phenomenological research (Sarfo et al., 2021; Creswell, 2013). Saturation was considered achieved when no new significant themes emerged during the final two interviews, in line with established guidance on thematic redundancy (Glaser and Strauss, 2017; Guest et al., 2006).

Interviews were conducted using a hybrid approach: five via Zoom and two face-to-face. Zoom interviews allowed for flexibility while preserving visual and auditory cues such as facial expressions, vocal tone, and hesitations. In-person interviews were conducted in a quiet, private university library meeting room to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent using Zoom's recording function or the researcher's camera and transcribed verbatim.

Transcriptions were first generated using Naver Clova Note, an AI-powered transcription tool developed in South Korea, and subsequently reviewed and manually edited for accuracy and

fidelity to the participants' original speech. Field notes were taken during and after each interview to capture non-verbal cues, emotional tone, and situational context. These notes were thematically coded alongside the transcripts to identify emotional undercurrents not directly verbalised by participants, thus enhancing the depth of phenomenological interpretation.

This integrated approach to data collection, combining hybrid interviews, AI-assisted transcription, and reflexive observation, ensured both methodological rigour and emotional richness in the dataset. It enabled the researcher to access participants' lived experiences with sufficient depth, resonance, and cultural specificity, in line with the study's phenomenological orientation.

3.5 Pilot Study

A pilot interview was conducted with a 25-year-old Irish woman residing in Dublin who had over ten years of personal skincare experience. The purpose of this pilot was to evaluate the clarity, emotional accessibility, and overall flow of the semi-structured interview guide. This process allowed for refinement of both content and tone in alignment with Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method, ensuring that the prompts elicited authentic, experiential narratives relevant to the study's objectives.

The participant's responses indicated that emotionally reflective insights emerged naturally, particularly in areas related to identity, social perception, and skincare rituals. Contrary to initial concerns regarding the sensitivity of emotional topics or the coherence of thematic transitions, the participant appeared at ease engaging with culturally nuanced questions from the outset. The interview's flow from general skincare habits to deeper cultural and emotional interpretations proved effective and required only minor adjustments.

Rather than relying on rigid sequencing or highly structured probing, the pilot underscored the importance of empathetic listening and adaptive follow-up questions that respected the participant's narrative rhythm. While themes such as ageing and comparisons with Western beauty ideals were addressed with clarity, some transitional prompts were revised post-pilot to support smoother progression without projecting assumptions.

Notably, the participant exhibited hesitation when asked to articulate emotional changes associated with skincare, despite offering detailed descriptions of her routines. This hesitance may not only reflect personal communication preferences but may also point to broader developmental patterns. Research has shown that adolescent and early adult females often face challenges in recognising and verbalising emotional states, which can contribute to internalising symptoms such as anxiety and depression (Eastabrook et al., 2014). Rather than pressing for direct emotional disclosure, this insight informed the rewording of prompts and the softening of tone to allow emotional content to emerge organically.

As a result, minor but meaningful modifications were made to the interview guide. Introductory questions were neutralised, and transitional phrases were added to better support emotional safety and thematic flow. Due to the depth and richness of the participant's experiential insights, the pilot interview was included in the formal dataset. The transcript was fully transcribed, coded, and analysed in accordance with Giorgi's phenomenological procedures.

Ultimately, the pilot served not only to refine the interview instrument but also to validate the study's methodological and conceptual direction. It contributed substantive, emotionally textured data that aligned with the broader aims of phenomenological reduction.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study was designed in accordance with the ethical standards outlined by the National College of Ireland (NCI). Prior to data collection, participants were provided with a plain language information sheet and an informed consent form, which clearly explained the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage without explanation.

As the topic may involve personal reflections on self-image, beauty ideals, and cultural identity, participants were informed that they could pause or terminate the interview at any point if they felt uncomfortable. This was communicated both verbally and in writing prior to the interview, ensuring that participants understood their autonomy throughout the process.

All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit verbal and written consent. Personally identifiable data were anonymised using pseudonyms, and all digital recordings and

transcripts were securely stored in an encrypted Google Drive folder accessible only to the researcher. The research did not involve any vulnerable populations or high-risk procedures, and all efforts were made to ensure emotional and cultural sensitivity throughout the data collection process.

Formal ethics approval was obtained from the NCI Ethics Committee prior to data collection, and all institutional requirements were strictly followed throughout the research process.

3.7 Limitations

While this study employed a robust methodological framework combining Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology with Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, certain limitations must be acknowledged. These do not undermine the validity of the research but rather contextualise the scope of interpretation and offer transparency regarding its boundaries.

Firstly, the sample size, although consistent with phenomenological research standards (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi, 2009), was limited to seven participants, all of whom were Irish Gen Z women residing primarily in Dublin. While this purposive sampling allowed for in-depth exploration of lived experiences, the geographic and demographic concentration may limit the transferability of findings to other populations or regions within Ireland. Rural perspectives or those of ethnically diverse Gen Z women may offer alternative insights not captured in this dataset.

Secondly, as the research relied on self-reported data gathered through semi-structured interviews, it is possible that participants' accounts were shaped by memory constraints, social desirability, or personal comfort levels in discussing emotional or cultural experiences. Some participants hesitated to articulate affective responses directly, which may have resulted in partial or indirect expressions of subjective meaning. Although the researcher employed bracketing and reflexivity to mitigate interpretive bias, the presence of the researcher as a culturally proximate yet professionally distanced insider could still have subtly influenced participants' disclosures.

Thirdly, the integration of thematic analysis within a phenomenological paradigm presents a conceptual balancing act. While efforts were made to ensure that thematic structuring remained

grounded in lived experience rather than abstract categorisation, the analytical duality may risk diluting the phenomenological depth if not critically managed. Thematic clarity, while useful, should not be mistaken for explanatory generalisation, which this study did not aim to achieve.

Finally, the research was conducted within a limited time frame, which influenced the depth of iterative coding and member-checking processes. Although analytic memos and reflective journaling were employed to enhance interpretive rigour, more extended engagement with participants post-analysis could have enriched the validation of emerging insights. In acknowledging these limitations, the study does not seek to generalise but to illuminate the nuanced, emotionally embedded meanings Irish Gen Z women associate with Korean skincare.

3.8 Analytical Framework

This study adopted an integrated analytical framework that combined Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method with Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The core orientation of the analysis remained phenomenological, seeking to capture how participants subjectively experienced Korean skincare within their sociocultural context. Thematic analysis, in this case, was not used as a standalone method but rather as a supportive tool that helped structure and clarify the emerging emotional and cultural patterns while remaining grounded in the participants' lived realities.

The analysis followed Giorgi's four-step phenomenological method (Giorgi, 2009), which guided the interpretive process from initial immersion to the synthesis of essential meanings:

- Holistic Reading – Each interview transcript was read multiple times to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participant's narrative world and experiential tone.
- Meaning Unit Identification – Texts were segmented into meaning units whenever a shift in focus, emotional tone, or cultural reference was identified. These shifts marked points where participants expressed significance in relation to identity, self-care, or cultural perception.
- Psychological Transformation – Each meaning unit was rephrased in psychologically sensitive terms, with attention to how participants framed their experiences emotionally, socially, and culturally.

- Synthesis of Essential Structure – Transformed units were integrated to construct a general structure of meaning that reflected the collective essence of how Korean skincare was experienced by Gen Z Irish women.

To support the organisation and traceability of this interpretive process, NVivo software was used to manage transcripts, codes, and analytic memos. Although some automatic tagging was employed, all final coding and thematic development were conducted manually, guided by the phenomenological intent to preserve the integrity of participants' subjectivity.

Braun and Clarke's six-phase model (2006) was used as an organisational scaffold to help structure the progression of interpretation across the dataset. These steps included:

Familiarisation with the data – Through repeated readings and reflective note-taking, the researcher became immersed in the texture and emotional tone of the narratives. Generating initial codes – Inductive codes were developed, with particular focus on emotionally salient expressions, identity-related reflections, and culturally situated language. Searching for themes – Codes were clustered into preliminary themes, revealing emerging patterns in how participants articulated their skincare experiences. Reviewing themes – Candidate themes were critically reviewed for internal coherence and alignment with the phenomenological structure. Defining and naming themes – Themes were refined to encapsulate their interpretive value while maintaining proximity to participants' language and worldview. Producing the report – The final themes were written into an analytic narrative, illustrated with anonymised participant quotes and interpretive commentary that retained the phenomenological essence.

Throughout the analysis, themes were not treated as abstract categories but as structures of meaning that emerged from the texture of lived experience. This hybrid strategy allowed the study to remain faithful to phenomenological depth while benefiting from the procedural clarity of thematic analysis. In this way, the analysis illuminated how branding-related meanings such as perceptions of self-care, identity, and cultural trust were emotionally and culturally internalised in participants' daily lives.

Although direct excerpts were unavailable at the time of writing, it is anticipated that expressions like "it makes me feel like I'm taking care of myself" or comments on suitability for the Irish climate will offer valuable entry points into understanding how Korean skincare

is interpreted beyond its functional value. These moments will serve as anchors to explore how skincare routines are emotionally invested and symbolically interpreted within the broader context of Gen Z Irish femininity and cultural consumption.

3.9 Reflexivity

As a researcher, my positionality inevitably intersects with the subject of study. As a Korean woman currently residing in Ireland, I have prior knowledge of Korean culture and experience in Korean skincare routines. This unique perspective offers several benefits, such as the ability to access and interpret K-beauty practices with cultural nuances and linguistic sensitivity, which has allowed me to have a deeper understanding of the subject.

During my three-year residency in Ireland, I gained an in-depth understanding of the local cultural and media environment, and during my three years as a graduate student and office worker, I was able to interact with people from various socioeconomic backgrounds. These experiences gave me a more comprehensive understanding of Irish women's perspectives and formed deeper rapport with interviewers. These vivid experiences further improved my ability to interpret responses based on cultural awareness and socioeconomic sensitivity. At the same time, the identity of a Korean woman with a cultural understanding of K-beauty gave me a unique dual role as an empathetic insider and critically distanced outsider. This dual perspective shaped the way I approached interviews and data interpretation, and enabled subtle yet reflective participation in the participants' stories.

However, this insider position poses a risk that epistemological difficulties, especially unconscious biases or prejudices, will affect data collection and interpretation. To overcome this insider-external duality, I adopted a reflective approach throughout the research process. In particular, I employed a regular bracketing method to mitigate the influence of existing assumptions. This involved writing a research journal to record pre-interview reflections, emerging biases, and decisions made during the subject interpretation process.

During the interview protocol design phase, I critically evaluated each question so that participants were not unintentionally caught up in cultural biases about anti-ageing. In early interviews, I also observed that many participants, particularly younger women, tended to struggle with articulating emotional experiences. While their narratives were rich in routine

descriptions, they often hesitated when asked to express how those practices made them feel. This taught me to avoid expecting emotional transparency and instead focus on creating a safe, neutral space where emotions might surface indirectly, through tone, pacing, or metaphor. This adjustment also aligned with the phenomenological emphasis on attending to latent emotional meaning without imposing interpretive bias.

Furthermore, pilot feedback has modified certain questions that risk becoming overly familiar, highlighting the importance of neutrality in semi-structured interviews. It is impossible to secure complete objectivity in qualitative studies, but I have tried to maintain transparency, openness, and critical self-awareness throughout the study. This reflective attitude strengthens the reliability and reliability of the findings and recognises the two roles of empathic investigator and critical analyst.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework supporting the study, based on Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology and complemented by Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The integration of these approaches was not just procedural but fundamentally important, reflecting the study's dedication to capturing the emotionally charged, culturally embedded, and branding-related meanings inherent in Korean skincare use among Irish Gen Z women. Instead of viewing skincare as a utilitarian or habitual task, this research presents it as an emotionally engaged activity, one that intersects with generational values, digital peer culture, and cross-cultural identity work. The chosen methodology allowed the researcher to move beyond superficial behaviours and explore participants' lived experiences, examining how global beauty ideals are not just adopted but felt, resisted, reinterpreted, and symbolically re-authored. Giorgi's phenomenological reduction provided a disciplined route to understanding subjective experience as it is lived, while the thematic framework offers a structure for expressing shared meaning across narratives. As noted by the authors, thematic analysis can be flexibly employed within various theoretical frameworks. In this study, it supported rather than replaced the phenomenological depth of inquiry (Braun et al., 2019; Giorgi, 2009). This dual framework equipped the study with the tools necessary to address its core questions: how branding is experienced, not marketed; how identity is performed, not imposed; and how skincare becomes a culturally meaningful language through which Irish Gen

Z women articulate care, self-recognition, and belonging. The following chapter presents the findings from this integrated analytical approach, offering a detailed exploration of how Korean skincare is emotionally and culturally internalised within the daily lives of Irish Gen Z women.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the key findings derived from semi-structured interviews with Irish Gen Z women regarding their perceptions and experiences with Korean skincare. Aligned with the study's phenomenological framework, the analysis focuses on the lived meanings participants assign to skincare practices and how these are shaped by cultural, emotional, and social contexts. Thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to identify recurring patterns in participant narratives. All findings are organised according to the four research objectives, with each section introducing themes supported by direct participant quotations, followed by interpretive analysis grounded in existing literature.

Research Objectives and Themes:

Research Objective 0 : To outline key participant characteristics to support thematic interpretation.

Themes: 1) Usage Period
2) Frequency of Use
3) Initial Purchase Experience

Research Objective 1 : To explore the emotional and cultural perceptions Irish Gen Z consumers hold about Korean skincare products and their everyday skincare practices.

Themes: 1) Feel of Products
2) Feel Good or Confidence,
3) Feel of "Korean"
4) Personality or the Way

Research Objective 2 : To explore how peer-to-peer communication and digital word-of-mouth shape consumer trust and engagement with Korean skincare.

Themes: 1) Peer-to-Peer Communication
2) Digital Word-of-Mouth

Research Objective 3 : To examine how Irish sociocultural norms, beauty expectations, and generational values shape skincare-related consumption.

Themes: 1) Irish Girls Usually Expect
2) Generation Beauty,

3) Background or Culture Affects

Research Objective 4 : To analyse how Korean beauty ideals are reinterpreted, negotiated, or adapted by Irish Gen Z consumers in the context of their own beauty values.

Themes: 1) Your Own Way

2) Love

3) Don't Agree With

4) Feels Really "You"

5) Doesn't Match You

4.0 Research Objective 0

4.0.1 Participant Characteristics

This section provides contextual background about the participants to support the interpretation of their skincare experiences. While not directly tied to a specific research objective, this overview establishes the foundation for understanding how long and how frequently the participants have used Korean skincare products, and how their initial exposure occurred.

Theme : Usage Period

The duration of Korean skincare use among the participants ranged from one year to twelve years. Three participants had been using such products for over ten years, while the remaining four had less than five years of experience. The average usage period was approximately six years.

Participant 1 *"I've been using them for like a year now."*

Participant 2 *"I've been using them maybe since 2013. That's more 12."*

Participant 3 *"I'd say about five years, maybe four years. Yeah, four years."*

Participant 4 *"I've had it about a year, one year."*

Participant 5 *"I've been using mainly Korean products. So I'd say like four years,"*

Participant 6 *"Generally I'd say about 10."*

Participant 7 *"Maybe 9 years 10 years yeah, 10 years"*

Theme : Frequency of Use

Most participants reported using Korean skincare products on a daily basis, typically in both morning and evening routines. The products had become a consistent part of their skincare habits.

Participant 1 *“I use them every single day, morning and night. It just kind of became part of my routine,”*

Participant 2 *“ I use them daily sometimes I also do like a morning and a night routine but not always but at least daily I do.”*

Participant 4 : *“every single day”*

Participant 6 *“So every day about two to three times a day so maybe morning if I’m working from home, I’ll use it during the day and then I have a skin care routine in the evening as well.”*

Participant 7 *“twice a day, morning and evening time.”*

Theme : Initial Purchase Experience

Initial exposure to Korean skincare was often through peer recommendations or sampling shared by friends. Others were influenced by online reviews and product-related content, indicating a mix of interpersonal and digital entry points.

Participant 1 *“when my friend 000 came home from Korea. She brought back lots of products and gave them to me. I think the first ones were Round Lab’s foam cleanser and sunscreen.”*

Participant 3 *“Some of my friends started using them, and then people that I talked to online started using them and recommended them.”*

Participant 6 *“I love those lip tends but I think I bought them for the first time because I watched maybe someone reviewing it. Skin care not as much because everyone has their own different skin type and what they like for their skin. I always putt like read it like if I searched like let's say Dokdo toner read it and then I might read comments and then decide. and I check the ingredient as well.”*

4.1 Research Objective 1

To explore the emotional and cultural perceptions Irish Gen Z consumers hold about Korean skincare products and their everyday skincare practices.

4.1.0 Emotional and Cultural Perceptions

Theme : Feel of Products

Participants generally described Korean skincare products as being mild, gentle, and composed of safe ingredients. These perceptions reflected a sense of comfort and reliability in product use. The textures were noted as soft and non-irritating, contributing to participants' belief that Korean skincare was suitable for sensitive skin. The emphasis on ingredient safety reinforced their trust in the products, and this was often contrasted with perceptions of Western skincare, which some participants viewed as containing more artificial or harsh chemicals.

Participant 1 *“What I liked about them is that they're not very perfumed, like, they feel like they're made for sensitive skin or something. So that's why I felt comfortable using them. I remember thinking, “Okay, this actually feels gentle enough for me,” and that kind of made me relax, It wasn't like I was taking a risk; it just felt safe, in a way.”*

Participant 2 *“I always tried maybe cleansers that I would find in stores here in Ireland, and they would kind of break me out or maybe give me a rash or make my face red. So I was looking for products that would be more sensitive. And, and that's probably what made me want to try. Maybe I heard that it was kind of more sensitive or fewer ingredients or something like that.”*

Participant 4 *“I used my friend's lip bam from Leneh and then I decided on the lip mask from Lneesh and I decided I really liked it. I thought I wanted a good, good quality lip mask and when I first tried this one, I really liked it so I got it. It actually, I think made a difference It made my lips feel softer and I, I think it's really good. I really like it.”*

Participant 5 *“ I liked it a lot more compared to like other Western products that I had been using. they tend to just work on my skin a lot better. I find that I break out a lot less when using Korean products. A lot of like my skin gets really used to it as well. it absolutely doesn't make me break out when I use Korean products.”*

Theme : Feel Good or Confidence

Participants associated well-matched products with perceptions of quality and emotional satisfaction. Some described a sense of glamour and elegance when using Korean skincare, attributing this feeling in part to the aesthetic appeal of product packaging. Several participants recalled receiving compliments on their appearance after using certain products, which contributed to enhanced self-confidence. Specific benefits such as reduced dark circles or improved skin clarity led them to feel more attractive and socially open, including a greater desire to engage with others.

However, not all participants experienced a significant change in confidence. Some reported that while Korean skincare helped them feel more comfortable in their skin and supported their sense of self-care, it did not substantially affect their self-esteem or social behaviour.

Participant 1 *“I know when I started using that, the Round Lab, the SPF moisturiser, I feel like my skin is glowing a lot more, it looks a lot healthier. And I remember when a few people at work told me, “Oh, wow, your skin looks amazing.”, like “what have you been using?” So definitely it made me feel more confident.”, “when your skin looks really good, you just feel prettier, don’t you? So I guess I wanted to go out more with my friends.”*

Participant 2 *“So when I use them and then maybe they go well or like it suits me or something like that then it kind of reinforces the idea in my head that like, oh yes, they’re made well like there’s a lot of thoughts put behind them.”*

Participant 3 *“I’ve always felt that my confidence doesn’t come from products or makeup, to be honest. I’m pretty comfortable in my own skin without needing a lot of extras, so using Korean skincare is nice for self-care but it doesn’t really change how confident I feel.”*

Participant 6 *“I always get compliments on my skin and they’re like, what do you use? So I said, oh, I use like a Korean moisturiser or I use this toner I’m using like a mask pack that’s why my skin is good or like sun cream.”*

Participant 7 *“Dark circle under my eye. So I tried there was like a Vitamin C cream, and I noticed a difference with brightening of my skin. So that definitely made me feel more confident.”*

Theme : Feel of “Korean”

Participants expressed awareness of the unconscious influence of Korean dramas, often referencing the flawless skin of actors and celebrities. Exposure to K-pop idols also shaped their perception of Korean skincare standards. When participants had friends or family members who were already familiar with Korean culture, they tended to develop a more positive view of not only the culture itself but also of Korean skincare practices. There was a shared perception that Korean people tend to look younger than their age, which participants attributed to their diligent use of skincare. Many believed that Korean beauty standards were far stricter than those in Ireland, often highlighting the emphasis on perfect skin and consistent aesthetic presentation. Advertising in Korea was seen as promoting natural-looking skin, often using fair-skinned models, which reinforced the idea of subtlety and purity as ideal.

Participant 1 *“I think that a lot of Korean people, their skin is flawless and they age so well, like they look so young when they're older.”, “it must be in the skin care that they're using too.”*

Participant 2 *“It's more so kind of a subconscious influence of everyone has such great skin in K-dramas. Maybe that influenced me, But like not kind of anyone specifically I think just in general, as I said, they usually have very good skin in K-dramas. So that might have influenced me subconsciously”*

Participant 3 *“It has definitely had an impact on me, and along with friends that I know as well. I'm really into K-pop, and you always see the idols with such amazing skin. For example, when I watch music videos or scroll through photos of my favourite groups, their skin looks practically flawless, it made me wonder if their skincare products had something to do with that.”, “But it kind of dragged me along with the Korean beauty standards, which were a lot stricter than they would be here. I realised that in Korean beauty culture, there's a big emphasis on having perfect skin and looking a certain way all the time.”*

Participant 5 *“I have a lot of exposure to Korean culture obviously because of my family but because of I genuinely generally really care about Korean culture and I really like K-beauty and K-skin care stuff.*

Participant 6 *“In Korea, like when you see skin care advertisements, they always use like a really white skin Model that you never see someone with like a tan skin or anything or like the makeup is always very plain or minimal. So I felt like, when I lived in Korea, I don't want to be standing out too much. I felt like blending in looking natural is better for me.”*

Theme : Personality or the Way

One participant paid close attention to the sensitivity of her facial skin and was familiar with specific Korean skincare products that were suitable for issues like facial heat. She expressed that many Western skincare products contained too much fragrance or chemical ingredients that did not suit her skin. In contrast, she felt safe and comfortable with Korean products, particularly those that were unscented. Using Korean skincare gave her a sense of purification and made her feel as though she was healing herself through her skincare routine. Another participant, who described herself as less actively interested in beauty, explained that she used Korean products mainly to maintain clear skin through basic care.

Participant 1 *“There’s a skincare brand called SKIN 1004, and they have this ampoule that’s supposed to kind of like calm down like sensitive skin reactions. And I had a reaction on my face, It’s probably from hay fever. So that’s when I bought it, and I tried it, and it actually worked.”*, *“I kind of noticed it myself. Yeah, I think it was one morning I looked in the mirror and thought my skin looked more even and smooth than usual. I felt good. And then other people mentioned it as well..”*

Participant 4 *“I feel I feel good about myself and I feel like I’m, I feel like I’m treating myself and treating myself. think it made me feel good about myself.”*

Participant 3 *“I’m pretty low-key when it comes to beauty. I don’t have a strict routine or anything; most days I just do the basics to keep my skin clean and that’s it. Since I’m not super into makeup or elaborate routines, I end up using the Korean products only when I feel like I need a little extra care. In general,”*

Participant 5 *“I generally feel pretty safe with it because a lot of my specific, a lot of my specific Korean skin care is like fragrance free. I feel very comfortable I’m not ever scared or anything like that.”*

Participant 6 *“I feel like a lot of Western skin care products has too many perfumes or chemicals that aren’t good for my skin. But again, Korean skin care is always natural. It’s always targeting certain things like you might get a serum just for your under eyes or maybe like lines. I always feel like it’s kind of cleaning up my skin or like making me feel healthier.”*

4.2 Research Objective 2

To explore how peer-to-peer communication and digital word-of-mouth shape consumer trust and engagement with Korean skincare.

4.2.0 Peer-to-Peer Communication and Digital Word-of-Mouth

Theme : Peer-to-Peer Communication

Some participants were learning Korean and had Korean friends who introduced them to Korean skincare practices. These participants noted that they often exchanged samples among friends, recommended products to one another, and even purchased products for each other.

Participant 1 *“Yeah so my friend always gives me samples of new stuff to try.”, “Exactly Actually, I’ve started sharing Korean skincare and makeup with another friend. She didn’t know anything about it before, but now she’s really getting into it. She really likes it now, and it feels good to share something I enjoy with someone else. It kind of brings us closer. She’s so happy. So I’m going to keep trying to show her new things and anything to help her, you know.”*

Participant 2 *“I do have some friends that are also using Korean skin care. I have a friend she’s from Indonesia and she also likes to use a kind of Korean skin care the same as me. And whenever she goes back home, she will also buy me some things as well.”*

Participant 3 *“Usually friends are where I hear it from.”, “It’s mostly through casual conversations. For example, when I’m chatting with my friends in person, someone might mention a new cleanser they tried or complain about a product that didn’t work, and we all chime in.”*

Participant 4 *“I used my friend’s lip bam from Leneh and then I decided on the lip mask from Lneesh and I decided I really liked it. Well, the thing is I actually used it myself. I used one of my friends before I bought it myself so that made me think I could tell for myself that it was good but also my friend used it for years so I trust her opinion.”*

Participant 6 *“I kind of was learning Korean and I had some Korean friends but I think without those friends maybe I wouldn’t really know about Korean skin care.”*

Participant 7 *“My friends, and My boyfriend he is Korean, he mentions a lot of products to me. I’m excited to try something new and I, I feel like Because skin care products are very popular in Korea.”*

Theme : Digital Word-of-Mouth

Several participants stated that their exposure to Korean actors and singers sparked their interest and influenced their perceptions of Korean skincare. One participant mentioned that she obtained makeup information from YouTube and purchased products through websites like YesStyle. TikTok was also cited as a key source for reviews of K-beauty products and skincare routines. Participants showed strong interest in online reviews, noting that many others were praising Korean products, which contributed to a perception that they were well-made.

Participant 1 *“Yeah, also because I know there are a lot of Korean actresses and singers, and I know they promote a lot of Korean skin care, and their skin is flawless.” , “I usually see Korean idols on YouTube and their makeup artists’ tips and tricks and products. Usually, I order from YesStyle which takes so long”*

Participant 2 *“I think maybe mostly from what I had seen I definitely got the feeling that Korean products were made well,” , “I can only imagine that it was from all the media that I was watching. on YouTube sometimes you can watch some of the kind of channels as well.” , “Participant 2 : I think even if someone recommends me to try a particular product, I will look it up anyway to see how it looks and maybe some of the reviews I know Huahe kind of does the reviews quite nicely where you can see kind of the bad reviews, the good reviews and I think you can filter by skin type as well.”*

Participant 3 *“Also, on TikTok, I often came across K-beauty product reviews or skincare routines going viral. Seeing so many people rave about Korean products online definitely piqued my interest.”*

Participant 5 *“I think almost everyone knows that Korea has good skin carriage you know, like it's kind of I think Korea is like famous for most beauty kind of things. Yeah but I think they hear it sometimes maybe from reals. I watch this one YouTuber who's actually a Filipino but he reviews all these like hay beauty products, K-beauty SK skin care stuff I have also, I know this is about skin care but I have a lot of Korean beauty products as well.”*

However, a participant expressed scepticism towards influencers, suggesting that because influencers gain financially from promoting products, the information they share might be exaggerated. This led to a general sense of distrust in influencer marketing.

Participant 1 *“You know, most influencers are paid to promote, aren't they? So I feel like I'd rather listen to my friend who's more honest and will tell, you know, like, oh, don't buy it it's not that great or you know, it's not worth your money.”*

Participant 2 *“I guess I don't really trust skin influencers at all.”*

Participant 3 *“With influencers, even if they mean well, I always wonder in the back of my mind if they're being paid to say something or if they're showing only the best-case scenario.”*

Participant 4 *“I don't trust what influence you saying. because I think they're probably being paid to promote us.”*

Participant 6 *“I think nowadays especially influencers are just making money they just want to make money like I think I don't know about Korea but in Ireland if you see like Irish influencers and they want to promote something, they have to have like a tag saying like promotional content on the bottom. Yeah because they're all getting paid from it. So I don't trust anyone but you know, like maybe again, I keep saying 10 years ago but 10 years ago So maybe I trusted it more before but nowadays I really don't trust it anymore because there must be some benefit for them to promote it.”*

4.3 Research Objective 3

To examine how Irish sociocultural norms, beauty expectations, and generational values shape skincare-related consumption.

4.3.0 Irish Norms, Beauty and Values

Theme : Irish Girls Usually Expect

One participant perceived that Irish girls tend to prefer beauty styles involving tanned skin or noticeable eyelashes, which she felt stood in contrast to Korean beauty ideals. She believed that Irish girls desire radiant and healthy-looking skin, with tanned skin being considered the prevailing standard of beauty. Another participant emphasised that practicality and value for money were key factors, adding that many young people in Ireland, particularly those from Gen Z, were reluctant to spend large amounts of money on skincare products.

Participant 3 *“I think it comes down to being practical and getting good value for your money. In Ireland, a lot of us, especially younger people like Gen Z, don’t want to spend a fortune on skincare products if we can help it.”*

Participant 6 *“When you see Irish girls with tan skin or eyelashes, Korean was the total opposite.”*

Participant 7 *“Definitely clear skin as well they, they definitely want clear skin and maybe more glowy skin like healthy. Definitely beauty standard is more tan, tan skin and then ah, with glow there's a lot of like glowy oils on top of that but definitely more tan skin has more of like a healthy appearance here. I think if even younger generation think like this, I think because we don't get a lot of sun here people want to look like they've gone on holiday or more of the sun on their skin.”*

Theme : Generation Beauty

Some participants believed that darker skin tones are more appreciated across Europe. One participant observed that Irish girls have recently shown growing interest in procedures such as Botox and anti-ageing treatments, as well as tanning and fake tanning. There was a shared perception that people begin using anti-ageing products only in their 40s or 50s. Compared to the past, when beauty trends were bolder, it was noted that preferences have shifted towards a more natural appearance.

Participant 1 *“Yeah I think it's very I think they're more into anti-ageing only recently, because I feel like a lot of Irish girls are starting to get like Botox, anti-aging procedures. So probably in skin care, probably anti-ageing.” , “Oh yeah, they’re into like fake tan or, you know, tanning beds. It’s the complete opposite to Korean skincare.”*

Participant 2 *“So I would say that a lot of Europe has this view of kind of darker skin is better or more beautiful.”*

Participant 3 *“Definitely. Especially in Ireland. Right now, the trend would kind of be more natural-looking, whereas it used to be very bold – and they’d flaunt that they’re wearing something new or done their makeup differently. Now it’s more natural, kind of subtle, in a way that makes sense.”*

Participant 4 *“I basically want clear skin and like glowy skin and I think it reflects what a lot of people around me think because of the way social media is now. and I think it's really everyone wants to be tanned and I think like even I, when I, I get excited to go away. So I can get a time and I like to be tanned I like to look tanned. I think pale skin is also really nice and it also is naturally. Most Irish women are probably more pale than tanned. But maybe in the*

last few years pale skin has become more and more of a beauty than it used to be because I know a lot of people who have stopped wearing tan but they actually used to wear tan, fake tan.”

Participant 5 *“Irish girls are like really naturally pale and it's usually like fake tan it's almost never real. So I think that even because of that maybe some girls are actually don't want to wear sunscreen because they don't want to be pale or, you know, or that they don't want to even like cover up and stuff. and I don't know I think that it's like I think I would look weird with tanned skin. I just don't really like fake tan in my opinion I don't think it would look good on me but it's not that I particularly like being pale or not being pale. I think that like I'm like really cool-toned and my hair is light. And if I think if I had tan skin and light hair, I think I would look a bit crazy. But yeah I think for some people they like do care.”*

Participant 6 *“I don't think they cared as much as what went into the products like especially anti aging. They wouldn't think to use anti aging products until maybe they're in their 40s or 50s. But even nowadays I see teenagers looking like how can I look younger? I want some anti aging products.”*

Theme : Background or Culture Affects

Participants acknowledged cultural differences between Korea and Ireland. While white skin is considered beautiful in Korea, Irish people, being naturally pale, tend to use tanning or fake tanning to avoid looking too pale. Some participants noted that skincare was not something they paid much attention to when they were younger, and their skincare routines were often simplified, influenced by their personal and cultural backgrounds. It was also mentioned that the older generation still held onto beauty standards that idealised both tanned skin and youthful appearance. Some participants believed that Irish beauty standards were shaped largely by social media, particularly figures like the Kardashians. Thinking of such celebrities brought associations with fake tanning, lip fillers, and lip injections, and they believed many others followed these trends. Because Irish skin is more vulnerable to sun damage, participants reported being selective with their product choices, prioritising functionality and affordability over loyalty to domestic brands.

Participant 1 *“I think a lot of it comes from social media, especially things like the Kardashians. When you think of them, you automatically think of fake tan, lip fillers, and lip*

injections. A lot of people are getting filler in their faces, cheekbones, jaws... It's all so artificial. It's kind of crazy when you think about it. They all end up looking like Kardashians or trying to. It's just... that kind of look is everywhere. Yeah, like to be like..."

Participant 3 *"So, skincare wasn't really something we talked about or emphasised when I was younger. I only started paying attention to it later, when I went to college and met friends who were into that kind of thing. Even now, that background makes me pretty simple in my approach: I'll wash my face, put on a basic moisturiser, maybe use a nice product here or there, but I'm not doing a 10-step routine. The way I was brought up, you just do what needs to be done, and you don't fuss too much, and that influences how I handle my skincare."*

Participant 2 *"I would say yeah I would say even in the differences between kind of Korea and even let's say here in Ireland obviously in Korea there's a lot of focus on using suncream kind of all the time even if there's no sun outside you still put it on every day because there's so much focus on kind of anti-aging like not getting wrinkles, not getting any lasting effects later on. But I know that there's also like a societal standard for. if your skin is more white, it's seen as more beautiful in Korea. So I would say it's the complete opposite here in Ireland. People are quite pale here in Ireland. They're just born like that, and they tend to put a lot of fake tan on to appear as if they're tanned. So a lot of people here they have the type of skin that can never tan. Yeah so if they go outside their skin will burn instead of tan. So instead they try to put on a lot of fake tan to appear as if they're tan because that's the standard here."*

Participant 6 *"I think my cultural wise it's more than culture. I'd say like Irish DNA I have to be more careful about what I'm putting on my skin for sure because we are so like the sun can damage us more than other countries I heard so I'm always like I need factor 50 in my sun cream you know, that kind of thing other than that culturally I don't think there's really anything to be honest. the Irish products they want to use Irish people prefer Irish products. But they start to know about this product from another country, but we can accept it because it's a reasonable price in the not."*

Participant 7 *"Older generation there is still that beauty standard to have more tan skin and maybe products that are marketed to say like, oh, you look younger when you have this on."*

4.4 Research Objective 4

To analyse how Korean beauty ideals are reinterpreted, negotiated, or adapted by Irish Gen Z consumers in the context of their own beauty values.

4.4.1 Reinterpreting Korean Beauty Ideals

Theme : Your Own Way

Participants who expressed an interest in Korean music and social media trends said they wanted to explore Korean skincare more personally and thus tried using the products themselves. One participant commented that Asian aesthetics seemed to be more aligned with natural beauty, which felt more authentic to her. She appreciated skin that appeared clean and pure, preferred a minimalist style, and maintained herself in such a way. She also had no interest in fake tanning or false eyelashes. She noted that some Korean products could even be applied at night, which made her feel a shift in her makeup habits and evening routine.

Participant 1 *“Yeah, actually just like what kind of what I think that kind of links, like clean fresh, pure kind of looking skin. I'm really into that kind of I'm into that right now. I kind of like, the clean, minimalist kind of girls. So it aligns with how I see myself and the style I like.”*

Participant 3 *“So being a fan of Korean music and social media trends kind of nudged me toward trying out the products myself, because I wanted to experience a bit of what everyone was talking about.”*

Participant 4 *“Well if the Korean lip mask or the Lineage lip mask, I think it made my lips feel softer and I felt like it made a difference to my makeup and my daily routine and my night routine because I'd put it on at night as well. Maybe I think after I used it the first time I felt it, I felt it was, it made a difference especially when I have it on. I feel like it's a good. It's good because it's like it can be a lip gloss and a lip mask and a lip arm all in one.”*

Participant 6 *“So I thought, oh, maybe like Asian things feel more natural like natural beauty is more popular. So I was kind of like more interested in that. it's more like enhancing your feature than trying to make a new feature. I feel it might sound weird but I feel like clean.”, “So I thought it kind of suits me more because I'm not interested in a fake tan or like fake eyelashes or like. always very natural.”*

Theme : Love

A participant shared a highly positive impression of Korean skincare, particularly praising the simplicity of the packaging and the clarity in ingredient labelling. This was seen as connected to a skincare trend that emphasises simplicity, cleanliness, and purity. Product packaging was highlighted as a key factor in communicating these values. Other participants also noticed the design of the bottles and their intended functions. The minimalist and pure design elements were strongly associated with a sense of innocence, which one participant linked to the image of an “angel.”

Participant 1 *“I love how simple the packaging and the design are with Korean skin care. I love it which just has it tells you what exact ingredients are in it. I just love that like it just kind of it's just very simple and clean and I feel like that kind of links in with like, like the clean kind of pure clean exactly the clean pure kind of makeup skin care kind of trend. I like that. It's just very simple and clean, and I feel like that kind of links in with, the clean, pure skincare trend.”*, *“I guess the packaging does make me feel more connected in a way. It's really clean and pure, and that kind of makes it feel more honest. So I trust it more. With Western products, sometimes it's like too flashy, too much perfume, and I kind of feel like maybe they're hiding bad ingredients in it.”*

Participant 2 *“So since I actually work as a designer, the packaging has a huge influence on me and not only kind of the paper packaging on the outside but specifically kind of the bottle what it looks like, what kind of application it has.”*

Participant 3 *“I feel as a whole their design and how they're promoted is very pure, very angelic, like that. I actually do like the look and feel of it , it's really pretty and kind of gentle. A lot of Korean products have this cute or clean design with soft colours, and the marketing comes across as sweet and innocent. It's definitely a different vibe from some Western brands here that can be more bold or edgy. I find the “angelic” style nice and calming, and it catches my eye, so in that sense it appeals to me.”*

Participant 4 *“I think the packaging is really nice. I think it's very discrete.It's not too in your face and it's, it's nice the colors are nice. I really like the packaging.It makes me feel more connected.”*

Participant 6 *“I thought it was really different from skin care I was used to because in Ireland and especially like 10 years ago, the packaging or even the scent or how it felt on my*

skin was very different. So like Korean skin care, I felt was light and maybe the packaging was more minimal I think. But in Ireland it's used like flashy or like sparkly You know,”

Participant 7 “Oh, sometimes there is a Dokdo toner which I feel more of a connection than interest with. I like the packaging and the meaning. I feel like I learned something about Korean culture as well with the Dokdo island. And I also like the products. It looks very minimalistic very, it looks like it's got clean products in it because the packaging is very easy to read.”

Theme : Don't Agree with

A few participants recognised the Korean “glass skin” trend as being present in Ireland, yet believed that the effects of such products would vary depending on skin tone and individual skin type. Some questioned whether skincare should be considered necessary for everyone and raised concerns about the idea that skincare is primarily a responsibility for women.

Participant 1 *“Yeah, definitely. there's the whole “glass skin” trend. That's been really popular, and a lot of it seems to come from Korean skincare. I've tried it, but my skin doesn't really look like glass, to be honest. So I guess it's not just about the products—it also depends on your own skin and genetics.”*

Participant 5 *“Is everybody needs to take care of their skin. You should be constantly even not even as like as a beauty thing. It's important to it's important for your skin to be healthy, to prevent cancers and to prevent like, also anti aging like helping your own skin and stuff like that. It is so important why limit it to just a woman?”*

Theme : Feels Really “You”

One participant described using Korean skincare products every morning and night, noting that it had become part of her daily life. She came to trust the brand she was using due to its affordable pricing and clean ingredients, and no longer felt the need to seek alternatives. Rather than heavy makeup or exaggerated looks, she valued authenticity. She believed minimal makeup and a natural appearance suited her best, giving her a healthier and more comfortable feeling. While she acknowledged that makeup could convey professionalism and that social pressure to wear it exists, she also expressed a preference for skincare alone and a more natural self-presentation. Over time, she came to understand her own makeup

preferences, fragrance choices, and necessary ingredients, and she felt that her personal style had become more clearly defined.

Participant 1 *“I’ve been using them for like a year now, and I use them every single day, morning and night. It just kind of became part of my routine, you know? Not just like a one-time thing. It’s actually really affordable for what you get, the ingredients are clean, and I trust the brands now. I guess once I found something that suited my skin so well, I didn’t really feel the need to change.”*

Participant 2 *“I guess I would say there’s a lot of people wear a lot of makeup maybe a lot of women kind of wit Okay so from the pool of women that wear makeup, I would say they wear a lot. And so sometimes it’s kind there is kind of a pressure to put on makeup or something like this especially at work. If you see like women in Tech or anything like this they tend to have a lot of makeup on like a lot of foundation like a lot of layers and so you kind of, you almost don’t even see the skin because there’s so many layers of, kind of other things on. So sometimes I do feel the pressure of kind of maybe looking a certain way or putting on a certain type of makeup because it looks like those women appear more put together or more professional. Usually I don’t wear a lot of makeup at all. I usually just do skin care and kind of leave it at that. But sometimes I do worry about how professional versus unprofessional I look wither.”*

Participant 3 *“I actually really appreciate the shift to a natural look. It definitely resonates with me because I’ve never been into very heavy makeup or over-the-top looks. Now that being more subtle and real is the trend, it takes a lot of pressure off. I can just be myself without feeling like I need to glam up to be seen as stylish. I think our generation values authenticity. we got a bit tired of the super edited, super polished images and wanted something more genuine. For me, it means I fit right in by keeping my makeup minimal and embracing a more natural vibe. It feels healthier and more comfortable, and I notice that people my age respond positively to that, as if we collectively decided it’s cooler to just look like ourselves.”, “These days I don’t feel any external pressure — my friends and I all have our own styles and we respect that. I’ve also become a lot more confident about not needing to follow the crowd. It’s really liberating to just do what I’m comfortable with and not worry about what peers will say, unlike those school days where it was all about trying not to be “uncool” by their standards.”*

Participant 6 *“Not so much. I think the older I get, I don’t care about it because I have my own personal style, my personal way of doing makeup. Maybe when I was younger I thought*

oh, I have to do my skin care this way like a three step, four, step, five step. I have to buy all the products that people are recommending but now I know my skin I know what I like I know what scent I like, what ingredients I need so I can do it. the packaging as well.”

Theme : Doesn't Match You

One participant expressed that she did not feel the need to change herself to align with Korean beauty standards. She identified herself as Irish and believed in following her own approach. She felt that a specific type of beauty was being promoted, which might align with some people but not others. She emphasized the importance of staying true to what she disliked and avoiding spending money unnecessarily on products.

Participant 3 *“But I never felt like I had to completely change myself to match that. I mean, I didn't suddenly feel Korean or anything, I'm very aware that I'm Irish and I have my own way of doing things.” , “I stuck to what felt right for me, even if I admired some aspects of the Korean approach from afar.”*

Participant 4 *“I like to stick to what I know I don't like I don't like spending money on products that I won't like.”*

Participant 5 *“Oh, maybe it encourages a certain type of beauty but I don't know if it necessarily aligns with how I see myself as obviously I'm not Korean. I remember Mary telling me that oh, she always wears song cream and always tries to cover her skin because she wants to like stay kind of paler. I think you know, like, obviously when a beauty standard is upon you, you think about it more. But yeah so I guess no it doesn't align with how I see myself necessarily but I think it does encourage a certain type of beauty.”*

Participant 6 *“I think it definitely does encourage a certain type of beauty. Again, they love like white skin. I feel like and maybe like like a dull look. I know maybe it's changing nowadays. People do like a glamorous style but the first time I tried skin care stuff or makeup from Korea, it was definitely like you want a glass skin pale skin, pink lips maybe like pale eyebrows or pink eye shadow.”*

Participant 7 *“I think there from what I've seen, there is a certain beauty standard. Maybe with glowy glass skin. Sometimes in the evening time when I put a lot of moisturizer on, I will also feel that way. But not all the time.”*

Chapter 5: Discussion

This research examines the perceptions and behaviours of Irish Generation Z women towards Korean skincare practices and presents potential cultural and consumer behaviour insights. This chapter discusses the research objectives, and key themes emerging from the data are explored in relation to the literature and compared.

5.1 Emotional and Cultural Perceptions

This section deals with Emotional and Cultural Perceptions, with meaning units ‘Korean’, ‘K-Beauty products’, ‘feel good’, ‘Personality’. These meaning units were considered by dividing the theme into Emotional perception and cultural perception.

5.1.1 Emotional Perception

Korean skincare products, in terms of emotional perception, were perceived mainly as low-irritant, gentle, and having safe ingredients. Upon using a product, if they felt it suited them well, they considered the product to be well-made. Using the products made them feel more glamorous, and they particularly paid attention to the packaging, which they found to be good and gave them a sense of luxury. Having received compliments from people around them, they displayed confidence in the Korean products. When their usual skin flaws were covered by the product, they felt their skin looked good and believed they appeared prettier than usual, which made them want to be more sociable and make more friends. Participants who were passive about beauty used Korean products just to perform the basics of keeping their skin clean. Some felt that using Korean skincare was good for self-care because it made their skin feel comfortable, but said it did not bring a big change in their confidence.

Particular attention was given to the sensitivity of facial skin, with many participants demonstrating awareness of specific Korean skincare products tailored to their needs. Many expressed the view that Western skincare products often contain excessive fragrances or harsh chemicals perceived as unsuitable for their skin. Driven by Europe’s widespread concerns about ingredient safety and sustainability (Roso et al, 2023), Irish consumers had a strong tendency to prefer “clean beauty” and natural skincare. Korean products were frequently described as fragrance-free, fostering a sense of safety and comfort, and evoking a perception of skin purification during use. Engaging in skincare was described by some participants as a

form of self-treatment or personal healing. Zaizakrani (2021) pointed out that Korean beauty products derive their branding from traditional herbal knowledge, modern dermatology, and sophisticated aesthetic design. He further stated that they are composed of narratives of health, softness, and effort, which stand in stark contrast to the bold and influential aesthetics associated with Western beauty culture.

5.1.2 Cultural Perception

They were aware of being unconsciously influenced by the portrayal of people having good skin in K-dramas. They also felt influenced by the skin of K-pop idols. Thus, as K-drama and K-pop culture have spread widely, they were very interested in the skin of the actors and idols featured in them. Kotler et al. (2007) stated that cultural factors are the broadest influence among external factors on consumer behaviour, and K-culture elements also affect the consumption behaviour of Irish Gen Z women.

Typically, when considering a purchase, consumers go through five basic stages in the decision-making process: recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation (Jin et al., 2019; Stankevich, 2017). This process begins with the customer identifying a need and then gathering knowledge to satisfy that need (Jin et al., 2019). Particularly, if some of their family or friends had been exposed to Korean culture earlier, they would naturally collect information and form a positive perception of Korean culture. This has had a positive effect not only on their perception of Korean culture but also on K-beauty and K-skincare.

Participants perceived that Koreans look younger than their age, and they attributed this to the heavy use of skincare products. They felt that Korean beauty standards are much stricter than those of Ireland. They thought that Korean beauty culture places great importance on maintaining perfect skin and always looking a certain way. In Korean skincare advertisements, models with white skin are used, and participants felt that an understated naturalness that does not stand out too much is considered good.

5.2 Peer-to-Peer Communication and Digital Word-of-Mouth

This section deals with Peer-to-Peer Communication and Digital Word-of-Mouth, with meaning units 'Peer-to-Peer Communication' and 'Digital Word-of-Mouth'. These meaning units were considered by dividing the theme into Peer-to-Peer Communication and Digital Word-of-Mouth.

5.2.1 Peer-to-Peer Communication

As Brown and Reingen (1987) mentioned, close friends and family have long been perceived as influential in shaping consumer decision-making. Furthermore, in skincare, a positive attitude appears when a product is perceived as beneficial to health and aesthetics (Hochschild et al., 2019). In this study, some of the respondents were learning the Korean language and had Korean friends. With the help of these friends, they learned about Korean skincare. Additionally, they would share samples among their friends as recommendations, and even purchase products for each other.

5.2.2 Digital Word-of-Mouth

They were well acquainted with Korean actors and singers and were inspired and influenced by them when it came to Korean skincare. They obtained makeup information on YouTube and were purchasing products from a specific site (YesStyle). On TikTok, they gathered information on K-beauty product reviews and skincare routines, and paid a lot of attention to reviews online. The information provided on online channels gave them the impression that Korean products were well-made. They showed a high level of interest in the numerous praises that many people gave to Korean products. Alcántara-Pilar et al. (2024) also reported that Irish Gen Z consumers are participating in beauty trends through platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Reddit, where K-beauty tutorials and product reviews are widely disseminated.

Liu et al. (2020) stated that Gen Z, as active digital consumers, regularly engage in actions such as sharing, liking, tagging, and commenting on products or services through social media platforms. According to them, these behaviours contribute to electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) by making peer-generated content visible to others and influencing their attitudes and decisions. Irish Gen Z women felt that influencers who are active online have financial incentives and promote products, which could result in exaggerated product information; consequently, they expressed distrust. Hossain et al. (2025) argued that emotional branding and

symbolic consumption are central to understanding consumer–brand relationships in the beauty sector; however, the Irish Gen Z women in this study expressed a negative view of the role of influencers in consumer–brand relationships. In other words, they thought that influencers might exaggerate products because of financial gain. This perception was the same as the findings of a survey by digital agency ZOO in Ireland, which reported that scepticism toward paid social media sponsorship is growing among Irish Gen Z consumers (Ali, 2022). Irish Gen Z women considered authenticity to be very important when assessing an influencer’s credibility. Personal stories or subjective experiences shared by influencers often boosted their perceived trustworthiness (Moodley and Ntobaki, 2024), but when influencers appeared overly commercial, participants raised concerns about the transparency of promotional content (AlFarraj et al., 2021).

5.3 Irish Norms, Beauty and Values

This section concerns Irish Norms, Beauty and Values, with meaning units ‘Irish Girls Usually Expect’, ‘Generation Beauty’. ‘Background or Culture Affects’. These meaning units were considered by dividing the theme into Irish Generation Beauty and Culture Affects.

5.3.1 Irish Generation Beauty

They believed that many Europeans prefer darker skin tones. Irish Gen Z women perceived the importance of skincare differently across generations. Younger girls have begun to favor not only traditional tanning or fake tanning but also, more recently, Botox and anti-aging treatments. Women in their 40s or 50s are perceived to use anti-aging products. Overall, it was perceived that the way skin is presented has changed from being very bold in the past to appearing more natural now.

Irish girls preferred beauty styles featuring tanned skin or pronounced eyelashes, which they perceived to be the opposite of Korean preferences. They desired skin that is more radiant, clear and healthy-looking, and the current beauty standard was to have a tanned complexion. Many people, including younger generations like Gen Z, did not want to spend a lot of money on skincare products; in choosing products, they based their choices on practicality and cost-effectiveness. Fournier (1998) said that the skincare routine now functions not only as an act of self-care but also as a method of self-branding. He particularly argued that through the

process of selecting and using products, one can convey values, aesthetics, and even cultural belonging. Accordingly, elements of Irish Gen Z women's skin-beauty values, aesthetics, and cultural belonging include a tanned skin tone, as well as practicality and cost-effectiveness.

5.3.2 Culture Affects

They recognised the differences between Korea and Ireland. They realised that seeing people with good skin in K-dramas had an unconscious influence, and that they were also influenced by the skin of K-pop idols. In Korea, having whiter skin is considered more beautiful, whereas Irish people, being quite pale, try things like tanning or fake tanning to avoid looking pale. Regarding the differences between Korea and Ireland, Zaizakrani (2021) contended that Korean celebrities have been established as symbolic instruments of beauty ideals that prioritise youth, clarity, and change, thereby promoting the global diffusion of aesthetic norms. Leung (2012) and Seo et al. (2020) observed that through Korean dramas, idol branding, and visual media, these ideals are continually reinforced, and beauty is regarded as a personal asset and a determinant of social and romantic success.

Rather than during their younger years, they only began taking an interest in skincare later on, and their way of managing skincare, influenced by their background, involved skipping several steps and proceeding in a simplified manner. They simultaneously held the beauty standard that skin should be more tanned and the ideal of pursuing youthfulness, i.e. aiming to “look younger.”

In this study, the participants perceived that Irish Gen Z women's beauty standards stem from social media, especially celebrities like the Kardashians. For example, when they thought of Kim Kardashian, they automatically thought of fake tanning, lip fillers, and lip injections, and they believed that many people were following this. Because the Irish can easily suffer skin damage from the sun, they were cautious in their product selection, and they did not insist on using domestic products, considering both functional and price factors.

5.4 Reinterpreting Korean Beauty Ideals

This section is about Reinterpreting Korean Beauty Ideals, with meaning units ‘Your Own Way’, ‘Love’. ‘Don’t Agree with’, ‘Feels Really You’, ‘Doesn’t Match You’. These meaning units were considered by dividing the theme into ‘feels Really “You”’ and ‘Don’t Agree with’.

5.4.1 Feels Really “You”

Those who enjoyed Korean music and social media trends wanted to experience more, so they tried the products themselves. They had the impression that Asian beauty elements exude a more natural appeal, as if natural beauty is more popular. They expressed a preference for clean, natural-looking skin and minimalistic aesthetics, which they incorporated into their personal style. Additionally, compared to things like fake tanning or fake eyelashes, they found that some Korean products could even be applied at night, which led to noticeable changes in their makeup routines and daily habits, particularly in their evening skincare practices. Beauty routines, especially in online spaces dominated by peer validation and visual expression, play a performative and identity-confirming role (Edelman Ireland, 2023). It was observed that these beauty routines among Irish Gen Z women were shifting away from traditional methods (e.g., tanning) toward a different approach with K-beauty.

They used these products every morning and night, and as it became part of their daily life, they grew to trust the brand for its low price and clean ingredients, and no longer felt the need for change. They regarded authenticity as more important than heavy makeup or an excessive look. In other words, they believed that wearing minimal makeup and creating a natural vibe suited them better. This made them feel healthier and more comfortable, and they saw it as a positive change. They acknowledged that wearing makeup can give a professional impression and comes with social pressure, but they also sometimes only did skincare and pursued their natural appearance. As they get older, they have come to know their own makeup style, fragrance, and necessary ingredients, and feel that their personal style is being established. Karanika and Hogg (2010) argued that Gen Z lives in a culture that harmonises traditional elements with openness to diversity, and that they have a unique perspective on how they accept, reconfigure, and resist global beauty standards. Similarly, the Irish Gen Z women showed the same tendency.

In this study, it was found that an important element of Korean skincare is that the packaging and design are simple and clearly inform exactly what ingredients are included, which creates a very positive perception. An informed consumer is more likely to make a choice that aligns with their confidence and expectations when they understand what a product provides (Chang and Kukar-Kinney, 2011; Baker et al., 2002). Chen and Deng (2016) argued that product knowledge enhances autonomous decision-making by reducing sensitivity to social pressure. Product knowledge not only mitigates risk and external influences but also enables consumers to explore foreign aesthetic ideals and adjust their choices to fit their own identity and values (Moslehpour et al., 2017; Chen and Deng, 2016). Especially for Irish Generation Z, product knowledge can act as a psychological buffer and cultural filter, allowing consumers to explore foreign beauty ideals with greater autonomy (Moslehpour et al., 2017; Chen and Deng, 2016). In this way, providing product information functions as product knowledge for consumers, which serves as a positive factor by facilitating autonomous decision-making in product selection according to one's identity and values and by reducing sensitivity to social pressure. The packaging and design being simple and clean also became linked to the trend of pure skincare. Participants specifically pointed out that the product packaging was an important factor that evoked these feelings, and besides this, they noted aspects such as the shape of the bottle and its use. The design elements strongly conveyed a sense of purity, and this was connected to the image of an "angel."

5.4.2 Don't Agree with

In Ireland, they acknowledged the "glass skin" trend originating from Korean skincare and believed that the effects vary depending not only on the product but also on factors like skin tone. Some of them questioned whether everyone needs to manage their skin, and they also challenged the idea that skincare is limited only to women. Sheehan et al. (2017) pointed out that K-beauty's aesthetic ideals, such as glass-like skin, a youthful glow, and the absence of visible flaws, can sometimes conflict with Irish cultural values of naturalness, subtlety, and minimal effort.

Participants did not believe they needed to change themselves to conform to Korean beauty standards. Instead, they maintained a strong sense of Irish identity and emphasised adherence to their own culturally grounded beauty ideals. A specific type of beauty was perceived to be promoted regardless of whether it aligned with individual perspectives, yet participants consciously avoided practices they personally disliked and expressed strong aversion to

wasting money on products they found unappealing. Linchan (2008) stated that identity is shaped by consumer choices and reflects not only financial priorities but also personal values and social positioning. In this context, the Irish Gen Z women recognised beauty as a socially constructed concept, yet their resistance to spending on undesired products signalled the formation of individualised beauty standards that function as expressions of their identity.

Dittmar et al. (2004) and Wang et al. (2022) found that women often engage in shopping for emotional gratification and identity-related reasons, while men are more likely to view purchasing as a means of achieving functional objectives or acquiring information. Segal and Podoshen (2013) said that women are more likely than men to make unplanned purchases. Ansaroglu (2022) said that the state of digital saturation among young Irish users, especially those between 18 and 25, tends to foster emotional sensitivity and reactive consumer patterns. However, in this study, Irish Gen Z women did not purchase beauty products emotionally or impulsively; instead, they demonstrated an inclination to have their own criteria for product selection and to avoid wasting money.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion: Overview of Research Aims and Key Findings

This research, grounded in a phenomenological approach, aimed to investigate the ways in which Irish Generation Z women perceive and emotionally connect with Korean skincare practices. The study examined how sociocultural norms, peer interactions, and digital media influences collectively shape skincare behaviours, beauty ideals, and the construction of identity. The findings indicate that Korean skincare routines are not simply embraced as a fleeting trend. Instead, they undergo a process of negotiation, translation, and value alignment. Most participants already had some exposure to Korean culture, whether via media, friends, or family. These prior connections shaped how receptive those participants were to Korean skincare. Even for some participants who had no particular interest in Korea or Korean culture, the product's functional performance clearly aroused interest and satisfaction. Although they were not actively involved in Korean culture, a subtle positive image of Korea emerged during the interviews. This pattern suggests that trust can arise from functional performance before any cultural association is established. Participants tended to associate Korean skincare with qualities like purity, transparent ingredients, and long-term care. These characteristics stand in clear contrast to the prevailing Irish beauty ideal of maintaining tanned skin. Nevertheless, many participants indicated that their views on this ideal are beginning to shift. Notably, tanning culture and anti-aging culture coexist in Ireland. Some women begin anti-aging routines in their early teens, as young as 12, while still valuing healthy skin. Historically, due to climate factors, darker skin tones were associated with health and wealth; however, as of 2025, public awareness of the negative effects and health risks of tanning has grown, fostering a shift toward preventive care and a preference for naturally radiant skin. This shift indicates a developing understanding of beauty that is neither fixed nor binary. Instead, beauty is increasingly seen as something that can simultaneously incorporate global ideals and local reinterpretations. For participants, skincare was not viewed as just a routine; rather, it was regarded as a form of self-expression and a source of emotional empowerment. They also exhibited a high level of consumer intelligence, evident in their informed purchasing decisions, their ingredient awareness, and the mutual product recommendations they shared among peers. These consumers were not merely following trends. On the contrary, they were actively curating personalised skincare identities that aligned with their values of authenticity, health, and self-care.

6.2 Contributions of the Study

This research makes several theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of Gen Z consumer behaviour in a cross-cultural context. These contributions range from insights into emotional branding and local reinterpretation of global trends to an appreciation of the role of cultural context in shaping consumer trust and decision-making. First, this study contributes to the conversation about emotional branding by demonstrating that Irish Gen Z consumers develop brand trust through a combination of emotional connection, peer endorsement, and transparent communication about products. While they were aware of Korean beauty standards, these consumers did not adopt them in full. For some, the belief that “white skin can also be attractive” served mainly to reinforce self-confidence, yet their engagement with K-beauty remained selective, shaped by a value-for-money mindset that placed emphasis on ingredient quality and price. Most participants were introduced to K-beauty through English-language content—particularly from American and Irish YouTubers—rather than through direct access to Korean-language media. This approach challenges any assumption that K-beauty is being consumed passively; instead, these young women adapt and localise it to fit their environment. Thirdly, this research adds depth by taking into account Ireland’s distinctive media landscape. In contrast to many other European countries that tend to resist American consumer influences, Ireland appears to be more permeable to cultural imports from the United States. Because a significant portion of K-beauty exposure comes through American influencers and digital platforms, Ireland’s openness could help explain the nation’s growing receptiveness to Korean skincare. A further contribution of this study is the use of a dual cultural lens. The author, a Korean researcher living in Ireland, offered both an insider’s sensitivity to Korean skincare codes and an outsider’s perspective on Irish consumer behaviours. This combination of perspectives enriched the analysis by illuminating elements of both admiration and resistance in the cultural negotiation process. Moreover, this study challenges the stereotype that Gen Z are impulsive digital consumers. In fact, the participants displayed notable financial awareness, ingredient literacy, and a healthy scepticism toward overconsumption. Their extensive consumer knowledge enabled them to act as thoughtful and selective decision-makers, distinguishing them from individuals who simply follow trends. Such sophistication appears to be shaped, at least in part, by Ireland’s well-established academic traditions and the enduring influence of Catholic social values. Furthermore, this study offers important insights into the emotional positioning of Korean skincare brands within the perceptions of Irish Gen

Z consumers. Beyond demonstrating product effectiveness, these brands seem to cultivate success by fostering feelings of trust, calmness, and clarity through distinctive design aesthetics, ingredient transparency, and culturally embedded narratives. Collectively, these attributes form an emotional brand identity that appeals to consumers seeking not only reliable performance but also a strong alignment with their personal beliefs and values. The strong performance of Korean skincare in this setting indicates that emotional branding functions as a central mechanism—rather than a supplementary feature—for maintaining long-term brand engagement in specialised global markets.

6.3 Managerial Implications

This study provides meaningful insights for companies aiming to engage Irish Gen Z women, with particular relevance to the beauty and skincare industry. The results identify key factors influencing consumer perceptions and purchase behaviours, thereby offering strategic guidance for brands seeking to cultivate deeper and more enduring relationships with this target audience.

Emotional Perception: Korean skincare products are often associated by Irish Gen Z women—particularly those with sensitive skin—with a heightened awareness of ingredient safety. To address the growing demand for skin-compatible products, brands should focus on highlighting natural ingredients and adhering to clean beauty principles. Many participants reported gaining benefits from products that were simple yet highly effective, and they also valued the sense of luxury and refinement conveyed by premium-quality packaging. These views highlight the importance of crafting an emotional narrative that emphasises a product's sense of purity and proven effectiveness. At the same time, it is essential to ensure that consumers are not overloaded with strong artificial scents or aggressive chemical ingredients. To that end, brands should align their messaging with themes of self-care and personal healing (Berman et al., 2023; Zaizakrani, 2021).

Cultural Perception: K-dramas and K-pop idols exert a strong influence on Irish Gen Z women's perceptions of Korean beauty. Through these media, many come to regard flawlessly clear skin as a cultural ideal. However, they also perceive the Korean beauty ideals to be more stringent and rigid than their own standards. Irish beauty norms are shaped by Western aesthetics—most notably a preference for tanned skin. This contrast suggests that brands must

be sensitive to local preferences for radiant, healthy-looking skin. Products should be offered that complement and respect established Irish beauty norms. For example, brands might introduce minimalist beauty routines to align with local tastes for subtlety and natural looks. In Ireland, there is generally a preference for a “glow” or simply healthy-looking skin rather than the bolder, more dramatic aesthetics favoured in some other markets (Zaizakrani, 2021; Seo et al., 2020).

Peer-to-Peer Influence and Digital Word-of-Mouth (WOM): Direct peer communication plays a crucial role in shaping purchase decisions. Recommendations from friends and family often serve as key drivers of product awareness. In fact, participants who learned about Korean skincare through personal connections or via online reviews frequently felt more confident in their purchasing decisions. Consistent with these findings, digital word-of-mouth (e-WOM) via social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and YesStyle exerts a powerful influence on consumer perceptions of Korean products. Brands should therefore cultivate positive online discussions and encourage user-generated content, since such engagement helps build trust and authenticity among consumers. At the same time, the prevalent scepticism toward paid influencer promotions suggests that brands must prioritise genuine reviews and sincere recommendations over overly commercialised content. This approach ensures that consumers feel connected to the brand in a meaningful way (Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2020).

Affordability and Practicality: Irish Gen Z women in the study consistently exhibited a high degree of price sensitivity, favouring skincare options that are budget-friendly yet offer substantial value for money. This group tends to prioritise practicality and cost-effectiveness, and they generally avoid spending large sums on skincare products. The findings indicate that Irish consumers, including the younger generation, regard Korean skincare as a cost-effective choice that delivers noticeable results compared to Western products. Consequently, brands looking to enter the Irish market should highlight the value for money provided by their products, all while ensuring that quality is not compromised. Introducing affordable product lines with clearly communicated benefits could significantly boost the brand’s appeal among these price-conscious consumers (Fournier, 1998).

Brand Transparency and Authenticity: Transparency in ingredient labelling and in communicating product efficacy is essential for cultivating trust among Irish Gen Z women. They prefer packaging designs that are simple and easy to understand, with clearly outlined

ingredients and stated benefits. This approach aligns with their broader inclination toward clean beauty and authenticity. Accordingly, brands should emphasise transparent ingredient information and honest communication to foster long-term trust. Since these consumers actively seek brands that reflect their personal values, maintaining clarity and simplicity in messaging will resonate powerfully with them (Chen and Deng, 2016; Baker et al., 2002).

6.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This research is not without limitations. For one, the sample consisted solely of Irish Gen Z women between the ages of 20 and 28. The small sample size of seven participants means that the generalisability of the findings is limited (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Furthermore, because the study was carried out in English, it is possible that certain emotional subtleties within the participants' responses were not fully captured. Future studies should consider collecting data in multiple languages or conducting focus groups in participants' native languages to better capture emotional expressions and cultural perceptions (Peña, 2007). Future research could broaden the scope of this study by conducting cross-country comparisons to examine how K-beauty is perceived and localised in other European or Western markets. For example, such comparative research could investigate cultural differences in the adoption of Korean skincare products and determine how local beauty standards influence consumer engagement. Additionally, focus group methods could be employed to explore emotional connections to K-beauty in greater depth. Focus groups allow for in-depth discussions and real-time reactions, and they can reveal nuanced emotional responses and group dynamics that one-on-one interviews might miss (Juhász et al., 2018). This approach is especially useful for understanding how shared experiences and social influences shape perceptions of K-beauty. It offers a richer understanding of the ways in which Irish Gen Z women emotionally engage with the brand. Employing a combination of focus group interviews and surveys may represent an effective strategy for future research. While surveys can provide a broad, quantitative perspective on consumer behaviour across large populations, focus groups allow for more in-depth exploration of emotional engagement and the dynamics within group interactions. By integrating these methods, researchers could analyse both quantitative data and qualitative insights in tandem, thereby arriving at a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour and emotional engagement with Korean skincare products (Creswell, 2013). Longitudinal studies could also shed light on how emotional branding influences consumer

loyalty and behaviour over time, especially as K-beauty continues to globalise. By tracking changes in consumer perceptions over the course of several years, such research would reveal the long-term impact of emotional branding on consumer habits (Kotler et al., 2010). Finally, a promising avenue for future inquiry is to examine the impact of economic uncertainty on the skincare consumption habits of Irish Gen Z women. As economic pressures (such as post-pandemic inflation) shape consumer spending, researchers should explore how ethical consumption patterns and minimalist skincare trends evolve under these conditions. In particular, studies could investigate how financial pressures are influencing the shift toward sustainable, minimalist beauty practices among Irish consumers (Statista, 2024; Ivaşenco, 2025).

6.5 Personal Reflection

As a Korean researcher living and studying in Ireland, I found that this research experience was more than a simple academic exercise; it became a genuine cultural journey for me. I embarked on the project with a strong sense of familiarity and pride in Korean skincare practices, yet throughout the study, I gained a new appreciation for the ways these practices are reinterpreted abroad. What struck me most was the intelligence and thoughtfulness of the Irish Gen Z women involved. They were far from passive consumers who could be easily swayed by influencers. On the contrary, they proved to be highly educated, financially aware, and firmly grounded in their values. Even the youngest participants displayed a notable capacity for critical judgment, which not only challenged several of my initial assumptions but also strengthened my appreciation for how education, cultural background, and community ties collectively shape consumer identity. Equally noteworthy was the symbolic significance that Korean products appeared to hold in the lives of these women. I felt a sense of personal cultural pride whenever I saw participants express delight upon discovering that a product they already loved was Korean. In those moments, the geographical and cultural distance between Korea and Ireland seemed to diminish, reminding me that beauty practices can act as bridges connecting different worlds. I also noted that Ireland's longstanding tanning culture stood in sharp contrast to the Korean emphasis on skin health and clarity. Nevertheless, I observed a growing openness to natural skincare and a gradual shift in how beauty was defined among the participants. Many of them appeared to be shedding the pressure to conform to the tanned-skin ideal and were instead embracing health-focused, preventative care. This transition felt meaningful not only in terms of changing beauty standards but also in how these young women

were reclaiming their personal agency. Ultimately, I learned that beauty is not a culturally neutral concept; rather, it is negotiated, contextualised, and emotionally embedded. Through the voices of the Irish women and the lens of Korean skincare, I was able to witness identity in motion. I observed that identity is shaped not simply by where one comes from, but also by what one chooses to value, trust, and express. What stood out most was their strong sense of community; from an early age, they seemed adept at distinguishing between people they could and could not trust, showing a level of independence beyond their years. Yet, like many young women, they were still sensitive to external beauty standards. This study also revealed that while Ireland shows openness to learning from other cultures, there is a discernible habit of examining and integrating such influences selectively, ensuring that only those deemed valuable are embraced.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Participant Information Sheet

Date: 8th May 2025

To whom it may concern,

My name is Eunjung Lee, and I am currently undertaking an MSc in Entrepreneurship at the National College of Ireland. As part of the requirements for my dissertation, I am conducting a research project titled:

“The impact of Z generation women customer perception on Korean Skincare Practices: A phenomenological study of Irish sociocultural behaviour.”

I am writing to kindly invite you to participate in this research study. Participation will involve a voice-recorded interview, where you will be asked about your thoughts, experiences, and feelings related to skincare practices, particularly your impressions and engagement with Korean skincare. The interview will take approximately 20 to 30 minutes.

All information shared during the interview will be treated with strict confidentiality. Your name or any identifying details will not appear in the dissertation, and anonymity will be maintained at all times. You are free to withdraw from the study at any point without needing to provide a reason. The data collected will be used solely for academic purposes and may be archived in the National College of Ireland Library.

If you are happy to take part in this research, please confirm your consent by signing the form attached.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

Eunjung Lee

MSc in Entrepreneurship

National College of Ireland

Appendix B – Participant Information Sheet

Interview Consent Form

Research Title: The impact of Generation Z consumer perception on Korean skincare practices: A phenomenological study of Irish sociocultural behaviour

Researcher: Eunjung Lee

Institution: National College of Ireland

I confirm that I have been informed about the purpose of this research and understand that my participation is voluntary. I am aware that I may withdraw from the interview at any time without providing a reason. I understand that the interview will be voice recorded, and that the data collected will be used solely for academic research purposes.

I understand that my identity will remain anonymous in the final report, and no personal identifiers will be disclosed. I also acknowledge that I will not receive any compensation for participating in the study.

By signing this form, I consent to participate in the interview under the terms described above.

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C – Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire

Pre-Interview Background Questions

- How long have you been using Korean skincare products?
- How often do you use Korean skincare products?
- Do you remember what made you want to try a Korean skincare product for the first time? Was it a person, a post, or a feeling?
- Was your interest in Korean skincare ever influenced by your exposure to Korean culture, such as music, TV, or social media?
- When you first got interested in Korean skincare, did it feel connected in any way to how you saw Korean culture or people?

Emotional and cultural perceptions

- How do you feel when using Korean skincare products?
- Have any Korean skincare products made you feel differently about your appearance or self-worth? Have any products made you feel good or confident? Can you give an example?
- When you are using Korean skincare products, anything about the products (like the design, scent, message) do you ever feel a connection or disconnection with the culture it represents?
- Do you think Korean skincare encourages a certain type of beauty? Does that align with how you see yourself?

Peer-to-peer communication and digital word-of-mouth

- Has a friend or someone online ever made you want to try a Korean skincare product?
- Where do you usually hear about new skincare items? friends, TikTok, and YouTube?
- Can you recall a time when a post or review directly made you buy a Korean skincare product?
- Do you trust what influencers say about skincare more than what your friends say? Why or why not?

Irish norms, beauty and values

- What do you think Irish girls usually expect when it comes to skincare?
- Do you think your generation thinks differently about beauty than older generations?
- Do you feel pressure to follow any beauty expectations in Ireland? Where do those expectations come from?
- Do you think your background or culture affects the way you use skincare?
- When choosing skincare, do you prioritise looking natural, trendy, or something else? Why?

Reinterpreting Korean beauty ideals

- Do you use Korean skincare in a way that fits your own values or routine? Have you ever adapted it to suit yourself?
- Do you feel you're adopting or adapting K-beauty ideals? In what way? Are there any aspects that don't match you?

Plus questions

- Do you ever feel like you're missing out if you're not using what others are using?

AI Acknowledgement Supplement

Module Name: Dissertation

Assignment Title: The impact of Z generation women customer perception on Korean Skincare Practices: A phenomenological study of Irish sociocultural behaviour

Your Name/Student Number	Course	Date
Eunjung Lee / X23134461	MSc in Entrepreneurship	15/08/2025

AI Acknowledgment

This section acknowledges the AI tools that were utilized in the process of completing this assignment.

Tool Name	Brief Description	Link to tool
ChatGPT	Assisted with enhancing clarity, improving academic tone, and checking coherence of sentences.	https://chat.openai.com
Grammarly	Used for grammar correction, punctuation checking, and maintaining consistent academic style.	https://www.grammarly.com
Naver Clova Note	Transcribed interview recordings into text for qualitative analysis.	https://clovanote.naver.com
NVivo	Used for coding and thematic analysis of qualitative interview data.	https://lumivero.com/products/nvivo

Description of AI Usage

This section provides a more detailed description of how the AI tools were used in the assignment. It includes information about the prompts given to the AI tool, the responses received, and how these responses were utilized or modified in the assignment.

Evidence of AI Usage

This section includes evidence of significant prompts and responses used or generated through the AI tool. It should provide a clear understanding of the extent to which the AI tool was used in the assignment. Evidence may be attached via screenshots or text.

ChatGPT	
Used to refine sentence structure, enhance academic tone, and ensure clarity in expression. The AI rephrased my original wording into a more formal, academically polished sentence while keeping the meaning unchanged.	
“Rewrite this paragraph in a formal academic tone, keeping meaning unchanged.”	Revised paragraph maintaining original meaning while improving academic tone and conciseness. Ex) My Original Version: ChatGPT Revised Version:

Grammarly
Used for grammar correction, punctuation checking, and maintaining consistent academic style.

Automated grammar and punctuation check.	Corrected “their perception influence” → “their perception influences” and adjusted comma placement for clarity.
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Naver Clova Note

Used to transcribe interview recordings into text for qualitative analysis. As the interview content was extensive, the tool was employed to improve efficiency. All transcriptions were subsequently reviewed and manually edited for accuracy before coding.

Uploaded Participant interview audio	Generated transcript with time stamps; manually reviewed and corrected for accuracy before coding.
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NVivo

Used to manage transcripts, codes, and analytic memos in thematic analysis. Some automatic tagging was employed, but all final coding and thematic development were conducted manually to preserve the phenomenological integrity of participants’ accounts. Braun and Clarke’s six-phase model was applied to structure the analysis process.

Imported verified transcripts into NVivo for coding.	Created thematic nodes such as “Cultural Perception”, “Peer Influence”, and “Emotional Branding” and retrieved coded data segments for analysis.
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