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Tackling Unrealistic Beauty Standards in Japan and South Korea

Public Health and the Natural Environment



Foreword and Acknowledgements

2020 was a year like no other as the pandemic changed many aspects of our lives. In a sense, that made early 2021 an ideal time to ask the question: how would you address some of the biggest challenges in Asia in the coming decade? In January 2021, the Asia Business Council joined hands with Nikkei Asia and the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford to launch the Asia's Challenge 2030 Global Essay Competition, open to students aged 18-22 anywhere in the world.

Given the many obstacles facing young people pursuing their studies during a global pandemic, we did not know how many essays we would receive. Yet we were impressed by thoughtful submissions from universities across Asia and as far afield as California and London. We pored over essays on topics ranging from artificial intelligence and aquaculture to smart cities and virus sequencing and learned a lot in the process.

The essays reflect a generation that is asking hard questions about the challenges facing Asian societies and optimistic about the prospects for creating a better world through new modes of doing business and innovative approaches to policymaking.

Young people from Asia are increasingly globally aware. They want policymakers to adopt international best practices in public health and environmental protection, especially in areas like sustainable finance and mental health awareness. But they reject the uncritical adoption of Western models, from urban design to economic development. Many call for a celebration of their unique national and regional identities, whether through locally inspired architectural designs or the increased representation of indigenous perspectives.

Participants in the Economy, Trade, and Finance category want to improve existing economic models so that a balance is struck between economic growth and a fairer, more sustainable, and more stable world.

In the Public Health and the Natural Environment category, respondents called for holistic approaches to health. Concerns about mental wellness reflect the pressures brought about by increasingly competitive academic and professional environments, while essays about communications and interpersonal relationships demonstrate the desire for a more intentional focus on modeling healthy relationships. Still other submissions addressed the existential crisis posed by climate change and the complicated web of interrelated challenges, from plastic waste to fossil fuel use. Proposed solutions range from changes in consumer behavior to an entirely new model of development.

In the Cities and Urban Development category, the essays we received reflected a desire for smarter, more walkable, climate resilient cities, and urban environments that reflect their unique local character. Whether as consumers, as employees, or as entrepreneurs themselves, this younger generation will demand that businesses and governments adopt sustainable practices and modes of operation that benefit their communities.

This global essay competition would not have been possible without the support of the former and current Chairmen of the Asia Business Council, Lim Boon Heng of Temasek and Daniel Tsai of Fubon Group. We are also indebted to Vice-chairman Tak Niinami of Suntory Group and Council Trustee Nazir Razak of Ikhlas Capital, who made key introductions to Nikkei Asia and the Blavatnik School.

Special thanks must also go to Shigasaburo Okumura and Daisuke Akazawa, Editor-in-chief and Chief Producer of Nikkei Asia, and Ngaire Woods and Luna Sidhu, Founding Dean and Director of Development of the Blavatnik School, for making this competition possible.

We would also like to thank our judges who generously volunteered their time and energy.

Economy, Trade, and Finance category:

- Nobuyoshi John Ehara, Co-founder, Unison Capital
- Emily Jones, Associate Professor, Blavatnik School of Government
- Katsuhiko Hara, Chief Desk Editor, Nikkei Asia

Public Health and the Natural Environment category:

- George Tahija, Principal, PT Austindo Nusantara Jaya Tbk
- Maya Tudor, Associate Professor, Blavatnik School of Government
- Futoshi Kuwamoto, Business & Market News Editor, Nikkei Asia

Cities and Urban Development category:

- Zhang Xin, Founder and CEO, SOHO China
- Sir Paul Collier, Professor, Blavatnik School of Government
- Shin Nakayama, News Editor, Nikkei Asia

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the assistance of Ashleigh Au of SOHO China Scholarships and Ruth Collier of Oxford University in publicizing the contest.

There is no doubt that this generation will be profoundly shaped by the experience of living through the world-altering events of 2020 during their formative years. But most essays took the longer view instead of focusing solely on the pandemic, looking ahead to the challenges of the next decade and beyond. Policymakers and business leaders around the world should take note of their ideas as this young generation comes of age and begins to lead local and international development in multiple fields.



Pauline Yeung
Program Director
Asia Business Council



Colleen Howe
Program Associate
Asia Business Council

Award-winning Essays

Economy, Trade, and Finance

Krati Gupta (India)

Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law

The Three Pillar Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Responsible Financing:
Addressing Asia's Challenges in the "Decade of Action"

Chloris Jiaqi Kang (Singapore)

National University of Singapore

Private Money for the Public Good –
Unlocking Private Equity for Asia's Sustainable Finance

Henry Michael Mayhew (United Kingdom)

University College London

Asian Central Bank Mandates: What about Equality?

Public Health and the Natural Environment

Hanun Thalia (Indonesia)

Universitas Indonesia

KomU as a Strategy to Improve Family Communications

Yao Yuanchen (China)

Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

Meeting the Challenge of Plastic Waste Recycling in Japan and China

Suzu Yokoyama (Japan)

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Tackling Unrealistic Beauty Standards in Japan and South Korea

Cities and Urban Development

Matthew Flores (Philippines)

Ateneo de Manila University

Indigenous Cities: Reframing Modernity and Our Cities

Rya Jetha (United States)

Pomona College

Reinventing the Asian Megacity: Absorbing Climate Change with Sponge Design

Ranita Ma Tsz Yu (Hong Kong SAR)

Chinese University of Hong Kong

From a City-scale Beauty Pageant to a Continent-wide Diversified Gallery

Ashley Faith Santoso (Indonesia)

Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia

The Neglected Effects of Gender-based Violence towards Jakarta's Urban Walkability

Suzu Yokoyama (Japan)

Tsuda University

Tackling Unrealistic Beauty Standards in Japan and South Korea

Unrealistic beauty standards are a well-being problem in Japan and South Korea. Today, in 2021, there are many women who are affected by these standards both physically and mentally, influenced by models like female idols or the “underweight-is-beautiful” values propagated by mass media. The World Health Organization defines “health” as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Thus, an underweight individual, who may no longer have periods or may have an eating disorder, does not correspond to this definition. Some women make efforts to be thin through severe dietary restrictions and excessive exercise, which may lead to serious eating disorders. To decrease the number of women who suffer from the physical burden and “underweight-is-beautiful” values, by 2025, we should make the decision to create a novel standard for female health on a global scale. Finally, by 2030, all women who dislike their own body shapes should be empowered to find their own definition of beauty based on that global standard, with efforts at both the local and global levels.



Diagram: 3 Steps for 2030

What is the best way to be beautiful? You buy new clothes or cosmetics or have your hair cut, right? In fact, there are many Japanese women who immediately think of losing weight to meet their ideal beauty standards for various reasons. In this essay, I warn that this recent habit has dangerous aspects because excessive thinness can lead to infertility, serious eating disorders, and mental disabilities. I chose South Korea to serve as a comparison, because I believe Korean women also face similar social problems. After all, Japanese women tend to be influenced by Korean culture, customs, and lifestyles. How do we protect women’s physical and mental health and fix their biased images of beauty? What concrete measures should we take to solve the present situation and increase the number of healthy women by 2030?

First, let us look at the commonalities and differences in Japan and South Korea in terms of awareness among young women of how being underweight is a health and mental issue. This section identifies three elements--BMI, the experience of diet, and anorexia--and analyzes why there are common and different features.

The first point is BMI. Understanding the average BMI of each region is the clearest way to understand how different the weight standards are. Body mass index (BMI) is a simple index of weight-for-height that is commonly used to diagnose obesity in adults. Worldwide, 2.8 million people die each year because of obesity, which is another serious health problem. The world average BMI of women is 26. But while North America and Africa have a higher BMI, relatively poorer African areas and some Asian countries including Japan and South Korea tend to have lower BMIs. More specifically, about 21% of Japanese and Korean women corresponded to underweight following the BMI standard in 2017.

Nutritional status based on the WHO and “Asian criteria” values		
Nutritional Status	WHO criteria BMI cut-off	“Asian criteria” BMI cut-off
Underweight	<18.5	<18.5
Normal	18.5 - 24.9	18.5 - 22.9
Overweight	25 - 29.9	23 - 24.9
Pre-Obese	-	25 - 29.9
Obese	≥ 30	≥ 30
Obese Type 1 (obese)	30 - 40	30 - 40
Obese Type 2 (morbidly obese)	40.1 - 50	40.1 - 50
Obese Type 3 (super obese)	> 50	> 50

A BMI chart depicting BMI ranges recommended by WHO and Asian criteria values (Possible, India BMI Calculator for Men & Women | BMI Chart | Truweight (possible.in))

The second point is the experience of losing weight. Here I draw on questionnaires about the awareness of losing weight and whether women have made efforts to do so or not. According to one study in Japan, about 70% of female college pupils want to be slim, and 58.7% of them have actually tried to lose weight. More or less, their ideals for weight or body shape are different from their actual body shape, and this desire drives them to take action to lose weight regardless of their age. In South Korea, 70% of young women have dieted. Not only that, while people in developed countries get fatter gradually, Koreans remain thin overall.

Third, the proportion of women who suffer from eating disorders such as anorexia is an important dimension. According to the investigation by Ministry of Health in Japan in 2014 to 2015, there were around 25,000 eating disorder patients, and most of them were young women who had trouble with anorexia, rather than hyperphagia. On the other hand, in South Korea, there were more aged patients compared to Japan. The common feature in both countries is the high rate of women, who account for about 80% of all patients. Recently, elderly patients in South Korea increased because of unique concerns related to their age such as stress or high-caloric food, a phenomenon that is not seen in Japan.

But what are the specific challenges and causes for unrealistic beauty standards in Japan and South Korea?

The biggest factor for wanting to be underweight in Japan is traditional and novel values, which needs an additional explanation. First, traditional values mean that we have been imprinted with the stereotype of what typical beauty is ever since we can remember. Japanese media such as magazines or TV programs have told us “slimness is beautiful” for a long time and people unconsciously adopt this way of thinking. This thinking is represented even in today’s variety shows, for example, talents who are overweight compared to others are relegated to the role of comic buffoons.

Second, novel values refer to the recent trend especially among young women to idolize K-pop idols or cultures. Their slender arms and legs or slim waist exposed from costumes appear in music videos, music programs, or concerts for many fans, and this becomes the symbol and standard of “beauty” for certain women. Many women are unanimous in saying, “I want to be slim!” or “My figure is awful, I need a diet.” Here we can see a serious problem which must be solved to secure a healthy and bright future.

Excessive and dangerous beauty standards also exist in South Korea. There is social pressure for women to be beautiful. Huffpost reported a specific example in 2017, when one Korean woman criticized the unrealistic, overly thin figure of mannequins in fashion brands, and claimed that the social trend admiring mannequin-like slimness encourages women to lose weight and hate their bodies. This incident shows that even ordinary routines in daily life gives them the impression that they need to look a certain way. In addition, appearance is one of the most crucial factors in job hunting or marriage in South Korea, which is a more deep-rooted issue than in Japan.



Mannequin Demonstration
(Huffpost, 마네킨의体型は「やせすぎ」韓国で女性団体がデモ(画像集) | ハフポスト(huffingtonpost.jp))

The desire to be underweight has been the chain binding women to unrealistic beauty standards, especially in Asia. Observing the global figures, the weight of Asian women is lower than the healthy standard. However, women in Japan and South Korea are strongly influenced by the modern media or traditional values in their country, and controlled by the thinking that, “The more weight we lose, the more beautiful we become.” The values attaching body shape to beauty might deprive them not only of physical and mental health but also their future.

Let us consider innovative measures to solve this life-threatening health challenge. These tough problems demand thorough social reforms to change the old-fashioned standards created by the media. Mass media and government should spread the importance of diversity and teach that it is wrong to judge people by their appearance and that thinness is not necessarily equal to being beautiful.

It is difficult to solve in the short term because this problem is related to a very deep-rooted mentality. There is a need to fix that little by little. What I want to insist is that this issue should be taken on not as a national or regional issue but as a global issue. Looking at the world, some countries or regions do not have “slimness is beauty” values. Some countries idealize BMI levels that correspond to a healthy standard. We should learn how they have transitioned, adopt the good points from their approach, and occasionally ask for advice. Breaking down old-fashioned or novel values can change individual thinking gradually, and it is most important for all women to accept their body shapes without comparison to others’ beauty standards.



Japanese plus-size model (La farfa, la farfa (ラファファ)2019, July la farfa編集部 | HMV&BOOKS online - 191090719)



Korean plus-size model : VIVIAN GEEYANG KIM (plusmodelkorea.com)

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