

**BREAKING THE MOLD: EXPLORING FEMALE FANS' ONLINE
REACTIONS TO THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN K- DRAMAS**

by
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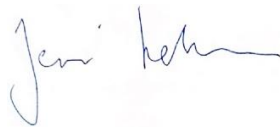
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Abstract

Korean dramas have gained enormous popularity throughout the world, particularly among female viewers, thanks to their compelling stories and cinematography. However, the number of research papers exclusively focusing on “Korean drama studies” remains limited, which is perhaps partly due to the relative youth of this field in English. The present thesis investigates gender dynamics, specifically the representation of women in three internationally recognized Korean dramas set in different years: *Boys Over Flowers* (2009), *The Heirs* (2013), and *Business Proposal* (2022). The paper aims to analyze the evolution in the portrayal of female characters, also touching on feminist activism on the Internet, known as cyberfeminism. Using the three K-dramas as the research object, the paper also explores female fan reactions to the heroines by examining fan comments on social media pages and movie websites.

As a research methodology, the study employs an interpretive, contextualized, and descriptive approaches. Based on the content analysis of the comments the thesis argues that older K-dramas uphold patriarchal values and reinforce traditional gender roles which portray female characters as dependent and resilient in the face of abuse. The study highlights a contrast in contemporary K-dramas, which demonstrate progress in the representation of women and consider the fans’ opinions. The analysis of audience reception of female characters in K-dramas is conducted through the lens of Cultivation Theory, questioning susceptibility to transmitted media messages. Lastly, the paper also applies the concept of “cyborg” to address the new transformed images of female characters in contemporary K-dramas, which notably diverge from previous representations.

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Introduction

“The female lead has no self-respect whatsoever and becomes a ping pong ball tossed over by the male lead character. In addition to the extreme romanticization of violence and has a female leader who had everything to be strong, but they put a character to act always stupid and submissive.” Such a sharp criticism of Korean dramas, commonly known as K-dramas, regarding the portrayal of women has resonated on various online platforms and social media pages. While these K-dramas gain widespread popularity due to their engaging plots and appealing characters, they also generate heated debates, especially from female viewers, regarding the representation of women in these shows. Behind this criticism may lie the underlying values and expectations of modern society. As people become increasingly immersed in the digital realms of entertainment and cultural consumption, the dynamics of fandom take on new dimensions, offering compelling potential for academic research and analysis. This thesis seeks to investigate the portrayal of women in three Korean dramas produced in different years: *Boys Over Flowers* (2009), *The Heirs* (2013), and *Business Proposal* (2022), to identify any potential evolution in the representation of female characters. Additionally, the study explores the responses of female viewers to these female images through analysis of fan comments from different websites, focusing particularly on contemporary reactions.

In order to select an object of study I analyzed various fandom pages and movie websites (MyDramaList, IMDB.com, etc.) to identify the most popular K-dramas based on high ratings. Consequently, the most popular genre of Korean TV series on social media (Instagram and especially TikTok) are romantic comedies (rom-com genre). According to the results from analysis of social media as well as the fandom pages, I have revealed the three most common K-dramas in

the rom-com genre as a case study for my research, which are as follows: *Boys Over Flowers* (2009), *The Heirs* (2013), and *Business Proposal* (2022). These three K-dramas have been widely acclaimed for their gripping plots, but increasingly viewers have begun to voice their concerns about the representation of female characters in them. All of them are single-season miniseries consisting of 16-25 one-hour episodes, which in turn is quite short compared to popular Western TV series. In this research, the choice of these three specific K-dramas allows for an exploration of a significant but often overlooked aspect of women's representation in the media. within the newly emerging popular genre of K-drama.

The study examines fan comments and reviews collected from diverse websites including social media platforms such as Twitter, official and unofficial Korean media fan pages such as MyDramaList and Doramyclub, and movie websites such as IMDb, HDRezka, and Kinopoisk. It is specifically focused on examining the responses of the current audience, particularly those who have recently offered reviews of K-dramas. This analysis particularly highlights contemporary audience responses starting from 2017, considering the variations in release dates. As a methodology, the study adopted an interpretive approach to understand how fans perceive the scenes depicted in the K-dramas. Particularly, Byerly and Ross (2006) have shown an effective application of this methodology in their article *Women and Media: A Critical Introduction*, which provides a thorough examination of how viewers contextualize narratives in different “frames”, thereby shaping their perceptions. Moreover, investigating the evolution of female characters in K-dramas over time requires the adoption of the contextual approach to understand the broader context surrounding this subject. Building on Clifford Geertz's (1973) application of this approach in his work *The Interpretation of Cultures*, the methodology enables a deeper understanding of various cultural phenomena by placing them within a specific contextual framework. Finally,

studying the portrayal of female characters in K-dramas requires an in-depth analysis of their personalities, behaviours, and other related factors, thereby advocating for a descriptive methodology.

However, searching for comments, especially from female audiences, caused minor challenges as not all users may reveal their identities on social media platforms. In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the data, I mainly focused on comments from female fans who can be identified by their personal profiles, names or photos. Additionally, it is worth noting that many websites have a policy that only verified users are allowed to leave comments, which requires them to provide valid personal information. Moreover, as I analyze comments on international websites, the majority of reviews are in English. However, on some movie websites, such as Kinopoisk and HDRezka, the comment section is predominantly composed in Russian. It is relatively easier to identify the gender of the viewer in Russian comments due to language peculiarities, particularly in word endings that reveal the gender. Thus, the analysis primarily reflects the attitudes of female fans towards the portrayal of women in K-dramas.

While analyzing social media posts raises sensitive ethical concerns, Reid (1996, 169–174) argues that posting on public pages can be interpreted as indicative of 'implied consent'. Furthermore, the comments collected from Twitter, fandom pages, and movie websites for my research are available without requiring access to private accounts. Although I quote fan comments directly from online sources for the analysis of viewers' reception, for privacy reasons I do not reveal the usernames linked to these quotes. Additionally, fan comments are provided in their original form, without any modifications for typos, grammatical errors, or obscenities. Since the study also involved the use of Russian-language websites, I made every effort to accurately convey the tone and feelings of the fan comments when translating the reviews into English.

Stereotypical Tropes in Romantic K-Dramas

There are several factors that contribute to the widespread popularity of romantic comedy K-dramas. According to Chan and Xueli (2011), one key factor is their inclusion of unrealistic romantic tropes, often described as “fairytale-like romance”. This romantic appeal may attract viewers seeking escapism and emotional engagement and audiences around the world can relate to this. In addition, K-dramas are known for their concise yet engaging narratives. With easily digestible plots and a minimum of conflicts, they offer a simple option for entertainment in response to the complexities of everyday life. Moreover, K-dramas are known for their relatively high production quality. Unlike those with lower production values which are rarely made available to international audiences, K-dramas are usually characterized by good acting, scripting, and direction. Such commitment to quality ensures a satisfying viewing experience for fans around the world. The overall appeal of K-dramas is also enhanced by stunning foreign sets, exciting action scenes, and iconic soundtracks featuring songs by K-pop artists. These elements not only enhance the viewing experience but also contribute to the global popularity of K-dramas by attracting viewers outside of South Korea (Chan & Xueli, 2011). Thus, as Lin (2008) points out, K-dramas provide viewers with a valuable mode of identification and escapism, enabling them to escape from the harsh reality of everyday life into the fantastical realm that Korean dramas create.

The common elements in the analyzed K-dramas are the main cause for concern. The two main characters, a man and a woman, act as protagonists. The heroine is usually depicted as possessing a moral compass that aligns with societal norms, albeit concurrently presenting as financially disadvantaged, socially inept, disorganized, and predominantly characterized as passive. She has no prestigious profession or school achievements and is frequently bullied by other characters. For the most part, the female character tolerates insults directed at her and refrains

from fighting back when it comes to her rights and interests. Traditionally, the female lead character's position in society is inferior to that of the male protagonist, who usually embodies wealth, charisma, attractiveness, and style, but also has a brooding and easily irritable personality, often stemming from a troubled family dynamic. Circumstances often cause the two protagonists to cross paths regularly, such as when a woman is employed in the same workplace as a man, as in the K-drama *Business Proposal*. Over time, their interactions lead to mutual attraction, which is often emphasized by the male protagonist saving the heroine from physical danger, which serves as a symbolic revelation of their growing affection.

However, their relationship encounters numerous obstacles, including the disapproval of the male lead character's relatives, who suspect the female lead's motives, fearing she may be solely interested in his wealth and advocating for a match within their social circle, as exemplified in *Boys Over Flowers* and *The Heirs*. The heroine struggles with severe social pressures and occupies a low position that serves as a perpetual reminder of social constraints and what they impose on her life. These K-dramas essentially follow the plot of “Cinderella”, where typically such stories tell the fate of one unfortunate poor woman who endures unfair treatment until one day she is rescued by a rich handsome man, which leads to them falling in love with each other. Such recurrent use of stereotypical tropes, like the “Cinderella” theme, in K-dramas is commonly referred to as “K-Dramaland”. It is a widely used term among international fans to describe an imaginary world formed through the collaborative efforts of writers, directors, actors, and viewers of K-Dramas (Schulze, 2013). Within “K-Dramaland,” viewers frequently interpret and explain occurrences using clichés or conventions unique to these dramas. Despite adhering to a common framework, these series vary significantly in pacing, tone, and character development, while also delving into nuanced discussions surrounding women's roles and societal expectations.

The Evolution of the Korean Wave: From Hallyu 1.0 to 4.0

The widespread interest in Korean pop culture that emerged at the turn of the 21st century is commonly referred to as the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, a term recognized in academic circles as representing the “flow of Korea,” as highlighted by Prado (2017). The growing popularity of K-pop music and Korean dramas has helped this cultural trend capture audiences around the world, especially among teenagers and young adults. Remarkably, the Korean entertainment industry has become one of the major players in exporting popular culture, in competition with its Western counterparts such as the US and the UK. The Korean government is strategically employing Hallyu to strengthen its soft power by distributing funding to promote the export of a range of cultural products such as food, traditional culture, travel, fashion, and beauty trends (Prado, 2017). According to Kim (2022), the Korean Wave must be understood as a multidirectional flow and interactive collaborative process driven by digitally empowered fan collaborations rather than just a planned export strategy. As Cho-Han (2003) emphasizes, Hallyu should not be regarded as a manifestation of cultural imperialism. Instead, it should be understood as part of the dynamic process of cultural globalization, characterized by reciprocal exchanges and mutual influence.

Kim (2015) identifies four main phases in the formation of the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, each distinguished by its own content and coverage in a specific region. Between 1995 and 2005, a phenomenon known as Hallyu 1.0 developed, which was defined by the export of K-dramas and K-pop, mostly to East Asia. This initial phase set the stage for later waves that resulted in Hallyu 2.0, which took place between 2006 and 2014 and brought K-dramas and K-pop greater popularity. Youna Kim (2022, 3) argues that the global expansion and economic significance of the Korean Wave stem from the active engagement of digital fans, as their participatory culture in creating, remixing, and sharing content, influenced the (re)production, circulation, and reception of the

Korean Wave among broader audiences. Based on this dynamic, Hallyu 3.0 emerged between 2013 and 2015, incorporating not only K-dramas and K-pop but also elements of K-fashion and other cultural exports on a global scale. Hallyu 4.0, the most recent phase, began in 2016 and represents a global fusion of multiple aspects of Korean culture, such as K-drama, K-pop, K-beauty, and K-food (Kim, 2015). The emergence of Korean Wave 4.0 has markedly increased the popularity of K-dramas, fueled by active collaborations with Western productions, particularly on platforms like Netflix. According to M. Kim (2021), the largest over-the-top platform, with over 200 million subscribers in 190 countries, provides an unprecedented level of access for its “members around the world to fall in love with these Korean dramas.” Notably, the inclusion of a K-drama fully funded by Netflix, exemplified by shows such as *Business Proposal* in 2022, illustrates the platform's increasing investment in this genre and its global appeal.

As Kim (2022) notes, the Korean Wave has had a profound impact internationally, especially on female viewers, shaping their perceptions of Korean cultural values, beliefs, and lifestyles through the representation of women in K-dramas. Yet, the portrayal of women in K-dramas has sparked considerable debate and discourse among female viewers. K-dramas have had a significant impact on women's self-image by shaping their perceptions of societal roles and behaviours, and have contributed to the global dissemination of beauty standards through the portrayal of female characters. The significant impact of K-dramas on social norms and body image perceptions is evidenced by trends on social media, especially on platforms such as TikTok or Instagram, where numerous female fans seek to emulate the characters portrayed in these dramas, where actors and actresses have supposedly flawless looks and physiques. This phenomenon potentially promotes unrealistic and unattainable body ideals among female viewers.

Confucian Influence and Gender Representation in K-Dramas

Following an analysis of comments on various platforms for viewing K-dramas, including fandom pages and social media, I have identified contrasting viewpoints among female viewers. While some female viewers on the internet argue that these dramas offer a diverse range of female characters and advocate for women's empowerment, others contend that they reinforce gender stereotypes and promote unrealistic beauty ideals. The reason lies in the fact that some K-dramas uphold patriarchal values and reinforce traditional gender roles by depicting women as voiceless, vulnerable, and submissive. Furthermore, according to the analysed comments, many fans are concerned about the predominance of abusive and destructive relationships in certain K-dramas. These dramas tend to idealize toxic relationships, which could normalize negative actions and beliefs toward women. Particularly among susceptible audiences, these depictions have the potential to reinforce harmful ideas about relationships and love.

According to Park (2008), such patterns in the representation of women are attributed to a cultural phenomenon rooted in Korea's historical framework, particularly with the emergence of Neo-Confucianism during the Joseon Dynasty¹, which laid the foundation for social norms and gender dynamics. K-dramas, especially the earliest ones, exhibit the influence of Confucianism, as the narratives often feature traditional Confucian ethics and values. Neo-Confucianism supported the idea that women were primarily physical bodies and promoted the value of relationships based on hierarchy (Tait, Holledge, and Mitchell, 1995). These principles are evident in the portrayal of female characters in K-dramas, where they frequently embody the Confucian ideal of the “virtuous

¹ A significant period in Korean history during the period 1392-1897

woman” characterized by chastity, submission to authority, and obedience to men (Tait, Holledge, and Mitchell, 1995).

While K-dramas are based on Confucian family values and gender dynamics, they also incorporate contemporary elements, creating narratives that resonate with a wide audience internationally. This intertwining of cultures not only provides interest but also influences society's perception of gender roles, especially among female viewers. K-dramas' depictions of women represent the conflict between modernity and tradition, which helps to articulate feminist discourse and subvert long-standing gender stereotypes (Shim, 2001). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the portrayal of feminism in popular culture, particularly in K-dramas, may only offer a partial representation of the broader sociocultural landscape in South Korea. While these shows may incorporate feminist themes as part of Hallyu 4.0, they may not fully capture the complexities of feminist discourse or accurately reflect societal tendencies (Lee & Park, 2015; Boman, 2022). Therefore, the echoes of Confucianism persist in Korean culture and influence attitudes and behaviours in society, especially persistent among older generations (Chang, 2010; Jang & Kim, 2013). As a result, although Korean dramas actively employ contemporary themes to appeal to audiences around the world, they often retain a respect for traditional values, indicating the continuing influence of Confucianism (Sechiyama, 2013, p. 149).

The Impact of Cyberfeminism on Gender Representation in Korean Society and K-Dramas

The advancement of technology and the widespread adoption of social media have empowered female users to actively engage with the internet. These factors contributed to the spread of feminist discourse and provided an opportunity to challenge the Confucian restrictions

imposed on women in Korean society. Particularly, with the emergence of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, feminist discourse has found a powerful digital space to challenge patriarchal structures and advocate for gender equality. The phenomenon, which is referred to as cyberfeminism, has sparked discussions and movements within Korean society and internationally (Koo, 2020). Cyberfeminism has opened the door for women to oppose gender stereotypes and misogynistic behaviour online, and actively participate in discussions about social issues affecting women.

Specifically, South Korea has experienced a resurgence of feminist activism since 2015 in terms of its scope, reach, and range of agendas. Sohn (2017) employs the term “reboot”, originating from film literature, to convey not only the ongoing nature of feminist activism that emerged since 2015, but also to emphasize both the continuity and distinctions from earlier feminist movements in South Korea. One such example is the cyberfeminism organized by “young feminists” during the 1990s to 2000s. A turning point in the recent feminist reboot occurred in February 2015, marked by the widespread use of the hashtag #iamafeminist on Twitter. This collective campaign aimed to reclaim feminist identity in response to prevailing anti-feminist trends in Korea (J. Kim 2017). The battle between feminism and deep-rooted misogyny has since unfolded in South Korea, leading to a significant expansion of feminist activism against misogyny across the country (Steger 2016). For instance, one prominent front in this ongoing struggle emerged in August 2015 during the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak.

A notable manifestation of such feminist digital activism is the rise of the South Korean feminist movement known as “Megalia”. This phenomenon was prompted by digital practices of “man-hating trolling” in May-June 2015, marking a clear shift in digital feminism and significantly impacting South Korean cyberfeminism. However, the movement disbanded in 2016 following a

split in opinions among internet users regarding collaboration with the LGBTQ+ community. This resulted in the emergence of alternative movements such as Womad to uphold and promote the previous ideals (Jeong, 2020). Womad, for their part, persisted in utilizing trolling culture and embraced the “man-hating flow” by employing various methods to address Korean men through “mirroring” tactics.

As Björn Boman asserts, this feminist activism began to emerge in K-dramas during the Korean Wave or Hallyu 4.0, which has been airing since 2016, marking a contrast with the preceding waves. This is due to the fact that the subject has just recently gained traction in South Korean society. The Korean Wave 4.0 and previous waves lack major thematic differences (Boman, 2022). As a result, while the subjects in contemporary K-dramas may share certain similarities with those of past K-dramas, feminist themes are more prevalent in recent dramas. As Boman (2022, 424) notes, there may be “cumulative” or slow changes between the fourth Korean wave and prior ones in terms of some ideological issues, such as feminism. According to Lee and Park (2015), popular culture unquestionably reflects only a subset of such sociocultural characteristics and ideological currents and may even somewhat distort actual societal tendencies. Even if certain Korean pop (K-pop) and Korean dramas (K-dramas) depict an aggressive feminist tendency in contemporary South Korea, as Lie (2014) argues, this has more to do with Westernized modernity than it does with traditional Confucianism.

The portrayal of women in the media is particularly one of feminist concerns, as the position of women as oppressed under patriarchal capitalism is reproduced and maintained through ideological practices in the media (Kim 2008). Despite these concerns, the emergence of digital feminism has sparked a notable evolution in the representation of female characters in K-dramas. Contemporary feminists increasingly recognize the presence of feminist elements in various

popular media forms, expressing optimism about the potential for feminist reformulation within media discourses and images. In particular, there has been a steady rise in the production of feminist scripts in K-dramas which are beyond the rom-com genre, exemplified by series such as *My Name* (2021) and *Glory* (2022). Consequently, an increasing number of contemporary K-dramas portray female characters in progressively empowering roles, moving away from traditional and patriarchal stereotypes. These dramas showcase more determined and self-sufficient heroines, providing characteristic examples of women who are not confined by gender expectations. This suggests that online feminist activism has influenced the narratives within K-dramas, prompting filmmakers to recognize the importance of the female audience, which in turn forms the main consumer base.

Analyzing Media Influence: Cultivation Theory and Cyborg Concept in Gender Representation

As Hallyu continues to influence the global entertainment industry, it becomes increasingly important for viewers to approach media consumption with a critical perspective, and the application of Cultivation theory is highly beneficial. Cultivation theory, first suggested by Gerbner and Gross (1976), argues that watching television changes our perceptions of reality and increases our susceptibility to media messages that we accept as authentic. As Shrum (2017) notes, the central hypothesis of the cultivation theory is that the more people watch television, the more they internalize its main ideas. Therefore, by taking a critical approach, viewers can distinguish authentic images from exaggerated stereotypes in the content. Particularly, as Gavin Davie (2011) explains, viewers who engage with media content regularly are more susceptible to its messages, and such instances in K-dramas may greatly impact their conception and experience of everyday life, leading them to believe that they are real and valid. As a result, the recurring representation of women with negative character traits as submissive or inferior to men who conform to established

gender norms can lead to the normalisation of such images, thereby shaping public perceptions of acceptable female behaviour.

However, viewers are not merely passive recipients of information, contrary to the implications of cultivation theory. Despite the considerable body of evidence supporting this theory, its initial publications and subsequent research have faced several critiques. The case is that cultivation theory was formed during a time when television dominated as the primary means of storytelling. Accordingly, the majority of the theory's development and testing was focused on understanding the influence and impact of television on viewers' perceptions of social reality, attributing significant power to the storytelling function of television. A crucial assumption of cultivation theory posits that viewers are relatively nonselective in their viewing habits. As Gerbner and colleagues argue “television provides a relatively restricted set of choices for a virtually unrestricted variety of interests and publics. Most of its programs are by commercial necessity designed to be watched by nearly everyone in a relatively nonselective fashion” (Gerbner et al., 1986, p. 19). While these assumptions may have been valid in the early years of cultivation work, they may no longer be applicable today. The improvement of cable television, additional networks, and superstations has diversified TV programming. Simultaneously, technological advancements like online streaming have simplified the process of selecting and accessing programs, further enhancing viewer options. Consequently, these developments and innovations have contributed collectively to an increase in selective viewing habits. In this evolving landscape, different viewers may respond differently to media content such as K-dramas which in turn challenges the notion of non-selective viewership.

In addressing the potential impacts of the Cultivation theory on media consumption, employing Donna Haraway's (1985) concept of Cyborg may prove useful in confronting the

challenges posed by social media's portrayal of women. The origin of the cyborg lacks the divine and biological constraints associated with traditional gender roles, opening up space for the exploration of identity beyond the binary constructs of masculine and feminine. Haraway's cyborg theory represents a departure from traditional notions of identity, challenging established categories of gender, race and class. At its core, the cyborg embodies the fusion of man and machine, transcending the boundaries imposed by biological determinism. However, it is important to note that Haraway's concept does not advocate for a genderless society, but rather challenges the need for a rigid categorization of gender. Instead, Haraway advocates for the idea of "multigenderism," which allows people to selectively construct their gender identity without being constrained by society (Haraway, 1985). This flexibility allows people to express themselves authentically while resisting patriarchal systems that seek to impose and perpetuate gender norms.

Even though Korean dramas are trying to challenge gender bias, it is important to note that these changes signify gradual improvement rather than a complete transformation, thus underscoring the scope for continued evolution. In this way, the cyborg symbol can be a useful model for future reference. As certain K-dramas tend to present stereotyped images of women defined by qualities such as unreasonableness, helplessness, and willing obedience to men, the symbol of a cyborg is intended to question the need for gender classification. For instance, Kamna Singh (2020) in her article "Women in Popular Korean Drama: In Need of Embracing 'Cyborg' Feminism" introduced the concept of Cyborg in the study of K-dramas applying qualitative textual analysis. The author particularly focused on the depiction of women in K-dramas which are bound by traditional notions of what it means to be female. According to Singh, the way women are portrayed in Korean dramas enforces patriarchal standards which maintain gender roles and female characters need to embrace the cyborg identity, as it might offer an alternative picture of female

identity by emancipating women from preconceived stereotypes existing in society. Despite Korean dramas' efforts to challenge gender stereotypes and make them obsolete, substantial progress is still required. The cyborg character serves as a valuable archetype for future academic research in this direction.

The focus of this study is to examine the representations of women in internationally recognized Korean dramas, while also analyzing the responses of female viewers to these portrayals. The K-dramas under the analysis share common thematic elements, notably revolving around the conventional Cinderella narrative archetype. Moreover, they integrate themes of violence, encompassing instances of wrist-grabbing, forced kisses, abductions, surveillance, and exertion of control. Through close investigation and critical analysis, the study seeks to explore whether female viewers have a positive perception of the constructed female images in Korean dramas, identify any potential criticisms, and clarify the broader sentiments surrounding this topic. By delving into the complexities of fan discourse and engagement, the study seeks to uncover the major themes, patterns, and tensions associated with the portrayal of women in K-dramas. Examining how women are portrayed in K-dramas and the corresponding reactions of female fans reveal how the media shapes attitudes towards gender and femininity, considering the widespread popularity and influence of K-dramas.

In conclusion, the literature review indicates that while there are scholarly works on K-drama, the majority of them are too broad and concentrate on the genre as a product of the Hallyu phenomenon, and papers dedicated solely to “K-drama studies” are still few in number. Thus, analyzing this new emerging scholarly field is relevant and necessary, with the portrayal of women in K-dramas representing an important aspect that requires attention. Despite the considerable amount of research devoted to the topic of fandom studies, there remains a notable gap in

understanding female audience perceptions and reactions to the images of women in television programs. Through analyzing the representation of women in K-dramas and exploring the reactions of female fans, this paper also makes a significant contribution to the decolonization of fandom studies, shifting the focus of academic work from a Western-centric perspective to a more inclusive and diverse understanding of fan culture.

Through an examination of viewer responses, this study provides a unique chance to illuminate how viewers understand and interact with the representation of women in Korean dramas. Thus, this study examined fan reactions to the portrayal of women in three popular romantic K-dramas that follow the Cinderella trope, alongside an analysis of the female characters in the shows. Results show that early K-dramas such as *Boys Over Flowers* (2009) and *The Heirs* (2012) depicted women in passive, voiceless roles, which has drawn criticism from contemporary female viewers. Increasingly, female audiences are demanding more realistic portrayals of heroines, expressing dissatisfaction that male characters usually mistreat female protagonists, who in turn silently endorse violence. The portrayal of female leads has undergone significant evolution over time, exemplified in *Business Proposal* (2022), which showcases progress by depicting the female lead as an assertive decision-maker and ambitious professional. The thesis consists of three chapters, starting with *Boys Over Flowers* and then proceeding chronologically to *The Heirs* and *Business Proposal*. Each chapter offers an in-depth analysis of the female characters, utilizing evidence from specific examples in the series, alongside a comprehensive examination of viewers' comments to uncover their opinions. In the first chapter, along with a thorough study of the heroine, this paper highlights the prevailing gender paradox in Korean television production. It elaborates on instances of toxic relationship dynamics and both negative and positive reactions from female fans. The next chapter focuses on the prevalence of double standards in female audiences' reactions

to the female protagonist of K-drama, highlighting instances of abusive behaviour by male protagonists in treating female protagonists harshly. Finally, the last chapter explores the topic of cyberfeminism in South Korea, examining the images of cyborgs and the evolution of the main female characters in contemporary K-drama. It also discusses the progress in the portrayal of love relationships and the predominance of positive responses that K-dramas have received.

Chapter 1: Reimagining Cinderella - Exploring Jandi's Role in *Boys Over Flowers* (2009)

During the *First Korean Wave*, also known as *Hallyu 1.0* (1995-2005), K-dramas were broadcast predominantly in East Asia. They began to attract increasing interest, leading to a significant surge in popularity that went from regional to global coverage. This phenomenon marked the advent of a new era, commonly referred to as *Hallyu 2.0*, which began in 2006. Older K-dramas predominantly favoured crafting narratives within the romantic comedy (rom-com) genre, with a particular emphasis on the Cinderella storyline. However, this portrayal reveals a disturbing imbalance in the development of the female character's image, in which her autonomy and assertiveness are undermined, reinforcing traditional gender roles and perpetuating the discourse of male dominance. A notable example of a narrative that embraces the Cinderella trope and is widely acknowledged as a classic in K-dramas is *Boys Over Flowers*, which also serves as a prototype for subsequent K-dramas in this genre.

Chapter 1.1. The plot of the K-drama *Boys Over Flowers* (2009)

Boys Over Flowers is a South Korean television series, that serves as the third cinematic adaptation derived from the original manga *Hana Yori Dango* (1992) by the Japanese manga artist Yoko Kamio. The show's premiere date was 5 January 2009 and was broadcast on KBS2TV. It consists of twenty-five episodes which are each one hour long. The series was directed by a prominent male director and producer from South Korea Jeon Ki-sang; the script was written by a female Korean screenwriter, Yoon Ji Ryun. According to Jin Dal Young (2010), the K-drama achieved widespread cultural significance across Asia, garnering widespread popularity and high viewership ratings, thanks to its international broadcast in 13 countries and widespread availability

on television networks worldwide. Boman (2022) asserts that the series is considered the spawn of a line of Korean high school television series and played an important role in spreading the second *Korean Wave*.

The plot of the K-drama revolves around the female protagonist Geum Jandi, an ordinary seventeen-year-old girl. The series presents her as an unremarkable, funny but sincere, conscientious young woman who is surrounded by loving parents and a supportive best friend. She is from an economically disadvantaged family that owns a small dry cleaning business and lives in a modest house. Jandi appears to be carefree despite her family's lack of wealth, so she works part-time as a waitress in a café as well as helping her parents in the laundry business by delivering clothes. The plot unfolds when the female protagonist is suddenly given the opportunity to enrol in an exceptionally elite school, accessible only to the wealthiest families in Korea, High School Shinhwa.

From the first episode, the series illustrates the social structure of an elite school where a student from an economically disadvantaged family is bullied by schoolmates from the upper class. Under the pressure of severe bullying by the whole school, a student decides to commit suicide on the roof in front of other pupils who are watching him blankly. Suddenly, the female protagonist intervenes in the situation and delivers his school uniform from the laundry. From her first appearance in the series, the main character Kim Jandi gives the impression of a very brave and vivacious woman, and her facial expression seems cheerful and friendly (See Figure 1). She approaches him confidently and even offers a discount, but when she realises the situation, the expression on her face instantly changes and she becomes alarmed. She attempts to talk him out of it, encouraging him with positive messages and harshly condemning the bullies, but when the student does decide to jump off the roof, she deftly picks him up by his clothes and saves his life.

Her heroic act attracted public attention on the Internet, and Jandi's picture appeared in newspapers, prompting a negative consumer reaction to the Shinwha Group that owned the school. In light of this event, Chairwoman Kang arranges for commoner Jandi to receive a scholarship to attend the school as a way to appease the outraged consumers.



Figure 1: Kim Jandi prevents the suicide of a student who tries to jump off a roof.

However, due to her strong-headed nature, at her new school, she captures the attention of the school's most popular boy group named F4 (Flower 4), especially its leader Gu Jun-pyo. He specifically singles out Jandi for bullying, but she, in turn, does not give in to his taunts and confronts him, ultimately kicking him in the face. As she is the first woman to resist and dislike him, he becomes very interested in her. As a consequence, their frequent interaction with each other leads Gu Jun-pyo to develop romantic feelings for Jandi.

The storyline takes a more complicated turn as Jandi initially develops romantic feelings for the main character's best friend, Yoon Ji Hoo. The second male lead character, also a member of F4, exhibits less interest in their bullying tendencies and appears to be the complete opposite of Jun Pyo, treating Jandi more in a considerate and friendly way. Yet Jandi disregards Ji Hoo's kind

intentions and instead opts for a troubled romantic relationship with Jun Pyo, transitioning from adversaries to love partners. The narrative is also complicated by the rejection of the heroine by the male lead's wealthy family, following the traditional Cinderella narrative that is typical to K-dramas.

1.2. Gender Paradox in Korean TV and the representation of women

Moreover, the production of Korean television media exhibits an unusual paradox within the industry. According to the latest statistics, 83% of Korean drama screenwriters, totalling 34 out of 41, are women (Prado 2017, 154). As Prado (2017, 154) asserts, even though women make up a large proportion of the screenwriters of romantic comedies and melodramas, Korean dramas still often contain anti-feminist plots and poorly characterized female protagonists. Besides, all three K-dramas examined in this study, namely, *Boys Over Flowers*, *The Heirs* and *Business Proposal*, were scripted by female screenwriters. On this basis, it could be assumed that it is the women themselves who perpetuate and support abuse against their own gender. However, as societal dynamics have evolved, exemplified by the portrayal of women in the K-drama *Business Proposal*, female screenwriters increasingly began incorporating feminist themes into their work, marking a notable shift in narrative representation. As a result, the emergence of feminist discourse in contemporary works shows promising progress towards a more inclusive and empowering representation of women in Korean television media, despite the frequent presence of anti-feminist narratives in the past.

On the other hand, such female representation is also attributed to the fact that this type of clichéd story is in high demand among viewers around the world, thus providing television producers with higher ratings. This is exemplified by the initial international popularity of romantic

comedies in the realm of K-dramas, which have consistently attracted a larger number of viewers compared to other genres. During the release of *Boys Over Flowers* in 2009, South Korea had strongly patriarchal values and traditional Confucian ethics in society, which were also visibly reflected in the series. According to Tait, Holledge, and Mitchell (1995), such a belief system reinforces the concept of the “virtuous woman”, whose behaviour is characterised by chastity, submissiveness, proper speech and appearance. Upon the initial release of K-dramas, the public received the series with great interest and approval and completely disregarded its problematic features, as such phenomena seemed quite commonplace at that time. The popularity of cliched stories, despite their potentially detrimental effects due to negative portrayals of women being passive and vulnerable, demonstrates the intricate interplay between the entertainment industry's commercial considerations and societal values.

However, since 2016, when the feminist movement in South Korea began to actively spread in the digital space, more and more female fans have become aware of such trends and have begun to openly express their opinions about the disturbing patterns that exist in Korean television shows. This phenomenon has also impacted the audience's reception of the K-drama, prompting increased attention to the problematic portrayal of female characters. Social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and other types of websites have played an important role for female users in challenging dominant gender ideologies and resisting misogynist abuse in the film industry (Kim, 2020). Although not all K-dramas conform to feminist discourse, the fact that women constitute the main consumer base of K-dramas has prompted filmmakers to be more attentive to their preferences and viewpoints.

1.3. Audiences' reactions to *Boys Over Flowers* and its rating on online platforms

Generally, the K-drama in question achieved high viewership ratings even during its broadcast and continues to be internationally acclaimed. In concrete numerical terms, the K-drama received a noteworthy rating of 7.5 out of 10 from an impressive user base of 86,499 people on MyDramalist.com, a website for fans of Korean media productions (*Boys Over Flowers*, 2009 - MyDramalist.com.). On IMDb, a widely recognized online platform dedicated to content about movies, the K-drama garnered a rating of 7.8 from a viewership base of more than 14,000 users. Additionally, it has been highly recognised by internationally renowned magazines such as *Elle Magazine*. In fact, on the October 2020 “10 Best K-Dramas To Binge-Watch On Netflix” list, *Boys Over Flowers* was ranked #6 out of 10 (Yaptangco, 2020). However, despite its widespread popularity, the K-drama faced criticism from the Seoul chapter of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA is a nonprofit organisation focusing on empowerment, leadership, and rights of women, young women, and girls). They recognised it as a failed K-drama that exhibits the epitome of materialism and a Cinderella complex (“YWCA calls Boys over Flowers failure” *The Korea Herald April 15, 2009*). According to the report of YWCA, K-drama is limited to an exhaustive plot conveying only incidents of school violence, the indulgence of teenagers in hedonistic pursuits and discrimination based on appearance and social class. The main concern relates to the portrayal of the female protagonist who is constantly bullied at school as a result of discrimination due to her low social status. Despite such hardships, the heroine eventually decides to still develop romantic feelings for her wealthy abuser, despite his involvement in her harsh mistreatment. Consequently, they concluded that *Boys Over Flowers* may have a negative impact on viewers and other Korean dramas by setting an adverse example.

The perception of *Boys Over Flowers* by female viewers turns out to be quite varied depending on the time frame. Analysing specific reactions regarding female characters in K-drama was a challenging task, primarily since the K-drama was produced almost 15 years ago. Since K-drama was discussed less frequently on current popular social platforms (such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, etc.), this research primarily relied on movie websites (HDrezka, Kinopoisk) and certain Korean media fandom webpages (MyDramaList, etc.) for more insightful reviews. The MyDramaList website features reviews from 334 users, primarily in the English language. In contrast, HDrezka, Kinopoisk and Doramy.club operate predominantly as Russian-language movie platforms. In an extensive analysis of websites, the comments section revealed a predominance of comments left before 2015. However, in this study, I focus more on the contemporary audience of those who have reviewed K-drama in relatively recent times, commencing particularly from 2016 onwards. Considering the diversity of social media pages from which I chose to collect data, the content comprised reviews in Russian and English languages. It is plausible that the majority of these comments were contributed by an international audience, while others originated presumably from Central Asia or post-Soviet countries due to the usage of the Russian language.

1.4. The positive reactions to *Boys Over Flowers*

There is a minority of fans who believe such plots to be truly romantic. Moreover, this group of fans overlooks the troubling absence of consent from female characters since they actively run a blog on which they classify and rate typical instances of kissing and wrist grabbing, which are regularly shown in Korean dramas (“The 11 most dramatic Wrist Grabs,” 2015). The following comments indicate such a positive attitude towards the show from various dates:

Ok..let me start by saying I have watched this kdrama for the nth time and still it makes me shiver/tremble every time I watch it. It will make you laugh, cry and fall in love over and over again. This drama just made me head-over-heels in love with Lee Min Ho. Go Jun Pyo and Gong Jan Di were just perfect for each other.

MyDramaList, Dec 29, 2016

But with Jun Pyo, it's like a whole new level of excitement. I have concluded that it's the childish sincerity. Jun Pyo is a bully but when he's sincere, he just moves you, you know. He has his childish and bully ways but his heart is at the right place. And yes, Lee Min Ho is freaking hot and works those curls charmingly ;)

MyDramaList, Jan 14, 2016

Thus this show was amazing not from the story itself alone, but from the flawless portrayal from the main characters and the amazing chemistry between Geum Jan Di and Goo

Joon Pyo

MyDramaList, Apr 12, 2017

Such comments were relatively few in number, particularly among contemporary discussions, but collectively they indicate a favourable reception of the series. In particular, one can notice that in addition to mentioning the series' compelling plot, the praise for the main male character Jun Pyo stands out especially strongly. The audience justifies Jun Pyo's toxic behaviour with childish sincerity and as it was explained in the comments: "Jun Pyo is a bully but when he's sincere, he just moves you". According to viewers, their relationship with Jandi presents an amazing chemistry and they are perfect for each other. From these instances, it becomes evident how female viewers

idealize Jun Pyo, seemingly overlooking any overt signs of abusive patterns in his character. While actively participating in the deliberate romanticization of this love relationship, they construct a narrative that selectively focuses on the positive elements while downplaying or justifying the toxic aspects. However, as it is known audiovisual content, such as mass media, plays a pivotal role in shaping and mirroring social dynamics (Galician, 2004). Hence, the portrayal of abusive behaviour as a romantic element in the K-drama *Boys Over Flowers* thoroughly distorts the reality wherein intimate partner violence is justified, and such actions are romanticized. These media portrayals have the potential to deter victims from acknowledging or escaping violence and leaving abusive relationships (Zgodinski, 2017; Béres, 1999).

1.5. The negative reactions to *Boys Over Flowers* and the misrepresentation of the heroine

Following an in-depth analysis of the various reviews on websites, I found a noticeable trend in the comment section, namely the conflicting perceptions of K-drama that evolved over time. After its release in 2009, *Boys Over Flowers* received widespread acclaim, with a significant majority of viewers praising the show and leaving positive reviews. However, there has already been a noticeable shift in the comments section since 2016-17, with a significant number of female fans pointing out the problematic nature of the plot, particularly the portrayal of the female characters. As a result, the once-acclaimed K-drama has lost its initial appeal, overshadowed by newer releases and modern counterparts. Notably, since 2016 new comments have predominantly consisted of negative reviews, further contributing to its declining popularity.

Based on an analysis of social media comments, this trend has become particularly noticeable among female fans who have been watching the series since its release and initially rated it highly. However, after rewatching the show a while later, they admitted that they did not notice

some negative aspects at the beginning, such as the portrayal of submissive and dependent female characters and an unhealthy love relationship. Likewise, female viewers who watched this K-drama for the first time in relatively recent times (noticeably from 2016-17) due to its past popularity and status as an all-time favourite among K-drama watchers, also expressed dissatisfaction. For instance, the comment below can serve as a good reflection of the debate on the websites:

This is the first kdrama I ever watched, so it had (and still has) a special place in my heart for a long time. However, after recently rewatching it I came to realize how much it lacks and that it's not the great drama I once thought it was. I think I used to think of it as a great drama because I was young and it was the first kdrama I ever watched, so I didn't know have anything to compare it to. But now that I'm older and have watched a lot of dramas, I can definitely say boys over flowers is not a good drama.

MyDramaList, Aug 7, 2020

The comment's sentiment captures a common feeling for viewers who are exposed to a certain cultural phenomenon for the first time, like K-dramas. The commenter recalls how *Boys Over Flowers* was their first K-drama experience and how special it was to them, which is probably true for many others who were also introduced to the genre by this beloved show, a view echoed in the frequent comments about similar experiences across various platforms. Yet eventually, after seeing the show again, the reviewer admits a change of viewpoint, recognizing its flaws and concluding that it does not hold up to their initial perception of greatness. The statement “This is the first kdrama I ever watched, so it had (and still has) a special place in my heart for a long time” highlights how popular *Boys Over Flowers* remained even years after it was initially released. Its enduring popularity is partly due to its status as a pioneering work that brought many people to the

realm of K-dramas, fueled by the nostalgia associated with their first exposure to the genre. However, the viewer's subsequent rewatching of the drama and recognition of its shortcomings demonstrates an evolution in their critical evaluation skills and taste. This is a development that viewers would naturally experience as they get more exposed to a wider variety of dramas and hone their critical eye for excellent narrative. As the commenter correctly points out, their early enthusiasm for *Boys Over Flowers* might have been impacted by their relative inexperience and lack of industry standards.

Many female fans on the internet have also recognised these troubling patterns of K-drama, and have directly expressed their dissatisfaction with the series, which was once considered legendary. Female fans frequently posted comments concerning such criticism on MyDramaList.com, gaining substantial support across a range of online platforms. Upon analyzing 334 reviews on the MyDramalist website, it becomes evident that a substantial number of viewers strongly disagree with the assertion that the K-drama under consideration qualifies as an all-time classic. Instead, these reviews reveal widespread perceptions of the series as full of clichés and problematic depictions of women:

It is absolutely not timeless even less than 20 years later. It has the most sexist plotline I've ever seen post 1990 and the most horrendous acting performance done by a FL.

MyDramaList, Jun 24, 2023

I can't understand why is this a 'cult classic'? When I started watching KDramas, I was told this is a must watch, rite of passage for a Kdrama fan... I'm honestly baffled because this drama is super problematic. The romance is toxic, the second lead was used by the female lead,

the female lead has no self respect whatsoever and becomes a ping pong ball tossed over by the male lead, the male lead character... And we are supposed to root for these characters?

MyDramaList, Jun 7, 2022

Evil mother, amnesia, car accident, bad guy turn good, this show HAS ALL THE POSSIBLE CLICHES. Literally, Im sure this show is the epitome of cliché and is what shaped the kdrama stereotypes lol. It kinda reminds me how mexican telenovelas are: over the top and dramatic. The relationship between Jun Pyo and Jan Di is toxic to say the least; Jun Pyo orders her around, is controlling and violent. Jan Di is annoying , thick headed and the actress acting is not good or convincing at all.

MyDramaList, Mar 3, 2021

The comments above from female fans express concern about the representation of the female protagonist and how she is treated throughout the series. Through a storyline that viewers consider to be sexist, the female protagonist is portrayed as timid and submissive towards the male characters. Moreover, the way K-drama builds the love relationship between the characters is presented in an unhealthy way since the heroine is subjected to abusive and controlling behaviour from the male protagonist. What is even more problematic, according to fans, is that Jandi is completely devoid of self-respect and dignity, as she has never been able to acknowledge such rude treatment from Jun Pyo towards herself, continuing to put up with his toxic attitude.

Nevertheless, *Boys Over Flowers* is an interesting case, since initially, the K-drama portrays the female protagonist as a strong-willed and determined character who will not buckle under the social system of the school in favour of the popular boys. Specifically, she openly disregards their

authority in the first episode when the F4 (group of popular boys *Flower Four*) enters the school building, showing complete indifference at the sight of the crowd gathered at the entrance. When she sees the scene going on around the boys, her face immediately reflects confusion and disappointment. Moreover, Jandi is not at all afraid to be brave and boldly expresses her opinions at school.

For instance, the popular women in the first episode teach Jandi about the power of F4, the school hierarchy, and how the male protagonist can simply control the school by picking a victim to torment. Jandi's facial expression conveys her shock and confusion at such harsh actions. She surprises those women with an honest reaction, “bluntly denouncing such behaviour in response”. In this way, Jandi demonstrates strong moral principles by fearlessly criticizing the bullying culture that prevails at Shinhwa School. A slight portion of 334 commentators on MyDramalist recognize her firm disposition at the beginning of the series and resent the way her image as an independent and strong female character dissipates throughout the series:

And with the lack of consistency, at first, Jandi is shown as a strong girl who is ready to stand up for herself and her friend to whomever dared to mess with her, but then she just lets Joon Pyo toy with her and drag her around, when they “started” being a couple she tried to explain that they weren’t but like, just saying it like twice as much and in a tone that no one would pay attention to, girl, you were throwing ice cream to that guy and yelling at him and now you can’t defend yourself?? And let’s not talk how Joon Pyo’s mother made her do whatever she wanted, I understand you can’t talk back to elder people in Korea but then she actually did what the woman asked for?

MyDramaList, Dec 30, 2020

She was not independent or fierce as shown in the first episode by crumpling too soon rather than progressively over Gun Pyo's influence, or even the seemingly 'kind- hearted' girl suggested earlier on in the show (whilst I appreciate she may have been in a state of shock, note the scene in Episode 5 when Gun- Pyo fires a normal and everyday working sales assistant in front of her, she doesn't even bat an eyelid).

MyDramaList, Nov 2, 2020

Following this set of quotes on websites (MyDramaList,.com, hd.rezka), Jandi upon meeting F4, especially under Jun Pyo's influence, was too quick to lose her strong, independent and fierce character. While at the beginning of the series, she could stand up for herself in response to rough treatment, such as throwing ice cream at Jun Pyo, later on, after the relationship between them becomes more intimate, she ends up allowing Jun Pyo to "toy with her and drag her around". In addition, according to many viewers, Jandi's "kind-hearted" image also quickly fades when she starts ignoring the display of his ruthless nature not only towards her but also towards others, such as when Jun Pyo indifferently and unreasonably fires the sales assistant and Jandi "doesn't even bat an eyelid".

Furthermore, Geum Jandi also constantly demonstrates a pattern of giving up her autonomy and relying on male characters to rescue her whenever she encounters difficulties. For example, in the second episode, during the school ball, the female protagonist faces the bullying of three female students. Despite her typically brave character, she suddenly freezes and takes no retaliatory action, practically expecting someone to come to her rescue. True to the storyline, one of the boys, the so-called Prince Charming, intervenes and saves the heroine (See Figure 2). Moreover, her rare

displays of bravery in the series are mostly used to win the admiration of the male protagonists, instead of coming from an authentic feeling of empowerment or autonomy.



Figure 2: Yoon Ji-hoo rushes to rescue Jandi after seeing her being bullied by the popular women.

Such instances, in turn, contribute to the devaluation of her individuality and the perpetuation of negative portrayal of women. The female viewers claim that such representation reinforces negative stereotypes and fails to accurately demonstrate the complexity and strength of female characters. These viewers strongly criticise the portrayal of the female lead character from the very beginning of the series. They advocate for more varied and strong portrayals that question established gender norms and highlight complex female leads. In particular, a considerable number of female viewers express their disapproval of the actress's acting or the way the filmmakers presented her image, portraying it as silly, clumsy and excessively naïve:

She is unbearably air-headed, overreactive, dramatic, impulsive, and the way she eats...

MY GOD this woman is not smart at all because she tries to act tough in the wrong situations, she gets stupider and stupider as he episodes go by because her prince

charming, one of a kind, showstopping, never seen before Gu Jun Pyo comes to always
save the day!!

MyDramaList, Feb 11, 2022

In addition to the extreme romanticization of violence, and has a female leader who had
everything to be strong, but they put a character to act always stupid and submissive.

MyDramaList, May 15, 2017

The comments above represent a prevalent debate on social media, with numerous female fans sharing a common sentiment regarding Jandi's character development arc in the K-drama. Primarily, viewers express disappointment with how filmmakers opted to portray the main character, often in an unfavourable light. The general dissatisfaction in particular relates to her certain character flaws, which often make her appear negatively, as the comments note “unbearably air-headed” and “acts stupid and submissive”.

Furthermore, there is a noticeable pattern in the criticisms of Jandi's character traits that compares her to male protagonist characters or actors. Some female fans believe that this is how the heroine's character arc was intentionally shaped by the filmmakers, yet a significant proportion of female viewers have a strong distaste for the actress, which contributes to the misogynistic culture in digital spaces. The idea that female characters should live up to specific expectations while male characters are free from the same scrutiny is perpetuated by these comparisons, which frequently reinforce gender stereotypes and traditional gender norms. Gender representation and cultivation theory, in particular, are prevalent ideas in media studies that align with this tendency to cast the female protagonist in an unfavourable light when compared to the male protagonist. The

following comments reveal a prevailing trend on the film website *HDrezka*, where viewers actively express their dissatisfaction with the female character or, more specifically, the actress herself, but at the same time praise the male lead actors:

Начала смотреть только из-за Ли Мин Хо,НО!!!!Невозможно смотреть на эту актрису. Раздражает настолько сильно, что перестала смотреть этот сериал. Эти нелепые , какие-то "скрюченные" позы, разговор,ухмылка....начала бесить полностью.²

HDrezka, Jun 20, 2018

Согласна со многими предыдущими комментариями,что гг подобрана крайне неудачно, несколько первых серий она кривляется безбожно, играет неважно , совершенно неженственная и непривлекательная. Парни- Господибожемой!.... - глаз не оторвать!)))
Особенно Джун Пе и Джи Ху)))... Но и устоять против обаяния и харизмы Ли Мин Хо
тоже абсолютно невозможно)).³

HDrezka, Feb 9, 2018

These comments express strong disapproval of the actress, primarily criticising her for her lack of acting skills, also emphasizing how she overplays or portrays the heroine with exaggerated emotions. Like previous reviews criticizing the portrayal of the female protagonist, this set of comments, while agreeing with the criticisms, also demonstrates a tendency to laud male actors for

² All the translation is made by the author: "Started watching only because of Lee Min Ho,BUT!!!!It is impossible to look at this actress. It annoys me so much that I stopped watching the show. These ridiculous, some "twisted" poses, conversation, smirk.... begin to piss me off completely"

³ "Agreeing with many previous comments, the female lead is extremely poorly chosen, in the first few episodes she acts horribly, her performance is mediocre, completely ungraceful and unattractive. The guys - Oh my God!... - can't take my eyes off them!))) Especially Jun Pyo and Ji Hu)))... But it's also absolutely impossible to resist the charm and charisma of Lee Min Ho".

their commendable portrayal and skillful performance of the characters, while simultaneously condemning the actress, thereby downplaying her contribution to the narrative. As the first comment notes “Started watching only because of Lee Min Ho,BUT!!!!It is impossible to look at this actress”, which clearly indicates the elevated position of male actors in the eyes of the audience.

1.6. The instance of the “male gaze”

Boys Over Flowers not only perpetuates the misrepresentation of female characters but also provides ‘visual pleasure’ to audiences, particularly showcases instances of the male gaze. According to the film critic Laura Mulvey (1975) term “male gaze”, which emerged from feminist film theory, refers to the portrayal of women from a heterosexual male perspective, objectifying them for the pleasure and consumption of male viewers. Laura Mulvey examines this objectification in connection to on-screen depictions of women in her seminal work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. She argues that:

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 1975, 14-15).

Such an instance of deliberate display of a female character's physical appearance coded for strong visual impact occurs in the sixth episode of the K-drama. When all the characters take a holiday together on the island, the female protagonist's best friend, Chu Ga-eul, takes pictures by the sea, often making funny facial expressions in the pictures (See Figures 10 and 11). Nevertheless, the focus of the camera does not limit itself to capturing her facial expression, but deliberately centres

on her body, closely capturing from her feet and gradually reaching her face. These instances of the male gaze reinforce objectification by treating female characters primarily as visually appealing objects rather than complex characters with free will.



Figure 10: Ga-eul takes pictures by the sea.



Figure 11: The camera angle shifts to show Ga-eul's body.

The objectification of female characters, as shown in episode six, not only perpetuates the male gaze but also contributes to the normalisation of certain behaviours. Such normalisation, according to the Cultivation theory (Gerbner and Gross, 1976), leads viewers to believe that such types of violent practices on the part of the partner (wrist grabbing, forceful actions, etc.) can be

considered acceptable as a result of constant exposure to Korean drama series. According to Prado (2017), this can also cause risks such as not being able to identify sexual assault when it occurs, justifying their partner's terrible actions, and thinking they can change.

1.7. The depiction of unhealthy forms of romantic relationships

Many female viewers, as evidenced by the analysis of 334 reviews on the K-drama website, have recently voiced concerns regarding the portrayal of unhealthy romantic relationships in the show, particularly focusing on the mistreatment and neglect experienced by the female protagonist. Once Jun Pyo realises his feelings for Jandi, he immediately changes his attitude towards her and switches from constant bullying to persistently expressing his feelings. For example, in the second episode, Jun Pyo orders his guards to bring Jandi to his residence for cosmetic procedures without her consent. However, when she resists and attempts to run away, they physically restrain her from all sides and forcibly place her in the car. As she struggles to free herself, they sedate her with a cloth, probably treated with a special substance (See Figure 4). Upon awakening, she finds herself in a massage room, wrapped in a single towel, where several women engage in discussions while performing various treatments on her. Nevertheless, in K-drama, this scene is presented in a light-hearted manner, using cheerful music and the actress's playful acting to portray the situation as funny and harmless.



Figure 4: Jun Pyo instructs his guards to kidnap Jandi and bring her to his home.

Jun Pyo's persistent attempts to win over Jandi lead to a series of actions that unfold and develop throughout the series. As for Jandi, this sudden change in his behaviour is puzzling, but she tolerates this treatment as he subsequently stops bullying her, through which she develops a positive attitude towards him. The situation faced by the heroine Jandi, according to the comments, can be seen as a manifestation of Stockholm syndrome. Stockholm Syndrome is the term used to describe the irrational affection a victim, such as Jandi, may develop towards their abuser, typically a male lead character. This phenomenon involves the formation of a bond between the victim and the abuser as a means of ensuring the victim's survival (Jameson, 2013). Generally, in interpersonal relationships where violence is present, this experience often manifests itself when the bond with the abuser emerges as a defence mechanism.

Beginning in 2016, a significant portion of the audience recognizes the romanticized toxic dynamic and even some of them assume that the female protagonist suffers from Stockholm Syndrome. Moreover, they explicitly state that such representation of the heroine and romantic relationship can have negative consequences and promote the normalization of such type of behaviour in real life. They stress the significance of establishing better relationship models in the

media, especially in K-dramas, as they have the potential to cultivate healthier relationship expectations among viewers. Such comments by female viewers were also supported by others as well:

F4's leader, Jun Pyo -- a rich, arrogant asshole with mommy issues and at no time did I root for him to be with Jandi. If I were her parents I wouldn't want my daughter anywhere near an unstable prick subject to violent outbursts. I mean, if this show is a reflection in any way of South Korea's culture at large than the entire country is filled with a bunch of romantic bullies! Jun Pyo's infantilizing treatment (a paternalistic father knows what's best for the child) of Jandi was difficult to watch but what was even more difficult to watch was her suffer from a kind of Stockholm Syndrome where the victim identifies with her attacker.

MyDramaList, Jun 10, 2017

это унижение и физическое насилие над героиней. Причём не только до, но и вовремя романтических отношений. Девочки, кто читает мой пост, это НЕ нормально. Любящий человек не имеет никакого права поднимать руку на своего партнёра. Иначе это болезненная созависимость, но не любовь. Дорама о незрелых отношениях для подростков. Любовь на полной скорости, по максимуму, до разрыва в сердце. Очень токсичные отношения у главных героев. Для стабильных семейных отношений она выбрала не того партнёра. Любовь - не то, что ярко блестит, а то, что греет на протяжении многих лет.⁴

⁴ "This is humiliation and physical violence against the heroine. And not only before, but also during romantic relationships. Girls, who are reading my post, this is NOT normal. A loving person has no right to raise a hand to their partner. Otherwise, it's painful codependency, not love. The drama is about immature relationships for teenagers. Love at full speed, to the maximum, until it breaks your heart. Very toxic

Doramy.club, Nov 18, 2020

Но когда ляжет все эмоции по поводу романтики, приходит понимание что отношения между гг какие то нездоровые. Он все время принижает ее (когда как бы все хорошо), она как будто страдает Стокгольмовским синдромом. Нужно быть или особо тупой или с такой внутренней силой что бы быть рядом с таким человеком. Начиналось все с ее симпатии к Джиху... и по мне непонятным причинам она переключилась на другого (все таки подкупил хорошим отношением и роскошью?). Не лучший пример здоровых отношений даже не смотря на все проблемы из за разницы в социальных слоях.⁵

Doramy.club, May 2, 2023

The exemplified contemporary comments from female viewers indicate a noticeable tendency to acknowledge the toxic behaviours of the male protagonist and his “infantilizing treatment” of Jandi. This character is in fact a manipulator who uses both physical and emotional violence, whereas in K-drama such an image is presented through a positivistic lens. As for the fact that Jandi tolerates such abuse, fans attribute this quality as a manifestation of masochism. Female fans gradually realise the harmful dynamics of this relationship, which prompts them to draw the attention of other female viewers (particularly younger generations), especially those who are new to the series, to the abnormality of such attitudes. One of the comments specifically pointed out that this K-drama is not a good example of a healthy relationship as “a loving person has no right to raise his hand

relationships for the main characters. She chose the wrong partner for stable family relationships. Love is not what sparkles brightly, but what warms you for many years”.

⁵ “But when all the emotions about romance settle down, the understanding comes that the relationship between the main characters is somewhat unhealthy. He constantly belittles her (when everything seems fine), and she seems to suffer from Stockholm syndrome. You need to be either exceptionally foolish or have such inner strength to be near such a person. It all started with her liking Ji Hu... and for reasons unclear to me, she switched to another (perhaps swayed by good treatment and luxury?). Not the best example of healthy relationships, even despite all the problems due to differences in social classes”.

on his partner, otherwise, it is a painful co-dependency, but not love” thereby recognising the toxic relationships between the characters. This collective awareness emphasises that the show depicts an unhealthy relationship dynamic.

1.8. A problematic male protagonist

Boys Over Flowers often demonstrates Jun Pyo’s problematic attitudes towards female characters that later translate into further K-dramas, subsequently forming a series of recurring clichéd scenes and the eventual recognition of these patterns as enduring classics. Gu Jun Pyo, the main male character, is generally described in the comments as an arrogant, self-centred man who possesses physical attractiveness, charm, and an affluent family. Although he acts disrespectfully toward women in the majority of the episodes, Jun Pyo never faces any consequences for his aggressive behaviour, as the female characters fail to confront him for violating their physical boundaries. As a result, the show tolerates the violent and creepy behaviour of the male protagonist while disguising it as romantic and humorous.

From the opening episode, Jun Pyo's mistreatment of women becomes evident. Upon his arrival at the school, he is greeted by a group of students admiring his looks. Then one courageous woman expresses her affection by giving him a cake as a gift. However, Jun Pyo responds with cold indifference, rudely throwing the cake at her face in front of other students, who gasp in shock as they see the scene (See Figure 5). Despite this, the young woman decides to remain silent and let the situation pass. Thus, she endures such rude behaviour without thinking to stand up for herself. Thus, Gu Jun Pyo's mistreatment of women without facing consequences highlights how society silences victims by perpetuating harmful stereotypes and reinforcing gender inequality.



Figure 5: Jun Pyo throws a cake at the woman's face who just confessed her feelings to him.

Another disturbing moment includes the overused wrist-grabbing scenes which may be found in almost every well-known K-drama, including *The Heirs* and *Boys Over Flowers* (See Figure 6). According to a blog post on Soompi, one of the largest international K-pop online communities covering Korean pop culture, the male characters resort to wrist-grabbing for three main reasons: 1) to prevent a woman from leaving, 2) to forcefully drag her away, or 3) to fight for a woman in a tug-of-war between two men (Luckymic 2015, "Opinion: Why I Hate the K-Drama Wrist Grab" & Prado 2017). The very nature of the "wrist grabbing" should be addressed first, as the process itself is an expression of unilateral domination and has a lower degree of intimacy. It most likely implies an assertion of power that is physically difficult to escape. Wrist grabbing, in addition to being rude, violent, aggressive, and conceited, represents a helpless woman unable to resist an oppressive man. According to Prado (2017, 148), it reinforces the idea that men demonstrate their masculinity by controlling women, who are perceived as objects, similar to rag dolls. This pattern in K-Drama has also caught the attention of viewers, who strongly view these

actions as a representation of toxic relationships and a manifestation of the heroine's masochistic inclinations.



Figure 6: Jun Pyo roughly drags Ha Jae-gyeong (his arranged fiancé) by her wrist.

Aside from the wrist grab, the male lead character also exhibits extreme dominating behaviour by committing stalking, harassment, physical confinement, and assault against the female lead (See Figure 7). For example, in episode 8, Jun Pyo calmly drives up to Jandi's house and roughly grabs her by the scruff of the neck to take her away with him (See Figure 8). Meanwhile, her parents are not at all against such behaviour and, on the contrary, strongly encourage their daughter to keep in touch with him, as he is very influential. However, even though she shows no interest in him, he is still so determined to win her over that he ignores all her protests. It should be noted that the resistance scene was well played, featuring a romantic song that fostered a positive atmosphere. Additionally, attention was given to highlighting the male lead actor's handsome face, emphasising his unwavering masculinity. For instance, the camera angle after capturing the incident focuses entirely on the actor's face in close-up or shows his side profile while the actor “unintentionally” poses. Additionally, once Jun Pyo realizes his true feelings for Jandi,

despite facing rejection, he secretly stalks her from his car to ensure she does not interact with other boys.



Figure 7: Jun Pyo forcibly takes Jandi into the car without her consent.



Figure 8: Jun Pyo stalks Jandi from his car.

Geum Jandi's tendency to ignore and suppress unpleasant events further complicates the romantic plotline of the series, even after enduring insults and constant bullying initiated by Jun Pyo. For example, when Jandi bravely defends her friend who inadvertently becomes involved in a conflict with Jun Pyo, he eventually uses his position and influence to give Jandi a red card, a symbolic marker designating her as the next target for widespread bullying by the entire school

(See Figure 3). For some reason later, Geum Jandi decides to ignore his involvement as the instigator of the bullying until Jun Pyo finally steps in and saves her from the severe abuse, wherein she is cornered, pelted with eggs and flour, and subjected to ridicule by the entire school.



Figure 3: Jandi is brutally bullied after Jun Pyo issues her a red card.

This behaviour can be described as selective amnesia, where the sufferer loses only certain parts of their memory. Through selective amnesia, she can remove the hero's guilt as the source of her suffering from her mind and clear him of all responsibility for his actions. As a result, this behaviour calls into severe question Geum Jandi's capacity for self-advocacy and emotional resilience. Despite being repeatedly abused by the whole school because of the male protagonist, she does not fight back and, as noted in the comments, "let Joon Pyo toy with her and drag her around". Through her unwillingness to acknowledge and confront the cause of her suffering, she unconsciously maintains a power dynamic that discharges the offender while the victim deals with the consequences of trauma.

1.9. The better choice for the heroine

Another concerning point in the narrative of the K-drama is that many female fans, noting Jun Pyo's aforementioned toxic character, were puzzled by Jandi's decision to still stick with him while completely disregarding Ji Hoo's (the second male lead character) respectful treatment. From the very first episode, the second male lead actor is introduced to the audience as a calm and mysterious individual who stands out noticeably from the rest of F4. Whenever Jun Pyo initiates any offensive actions, he often distances himself from them and shows almost no particular interest. For instance, his first altruistic act towards Jandi already occurs in the first episode when Jun Pyo decisively targets Jandi for his bullying games. Jun Pyo intentionally sends three individuals to wait for Jandi after her time at the swimming pool to scare her with attempts of sexual harassment.

As the tension escalates, Ji Hoo steps in at the pivotal moment and nonchalantly strikes up a conversation with her, thus saving her from the predicament (See Figure 9). Realizing that this could ruin their friendship with Jun Pyo, he nonetheless firmly orders these men to release her. This noble act not only portrays Ji Hoo as a considerate individual with well-intentioned motives but also underscores his resilience against the negative influence of his bully friends, as he steadfastly adheres to his own principles. However, this is not a single case, but a series of events in which Ji Hoo regularly supports Jandi both emotionally and in terms of practical help throughout the narrative. A lot of comments on various resources highlight the view that Ji Hoo is a more suitable partner for the heroine. The viewers present many arguments expressing their disappointment regarding her final choice in favour of Jun Pyo. The following comment reflects the general sentiment of such discourse:



Figure 9: Ji Hoo steps in to save Jandi from a group of men trying to sexually assault her.

Ji-hoo spends **THREE YEARS** by her side as they pursue their common interest in medicine while Jun-pyo is MIA, he still loves her completely, but Jun-pyo makes a flashy entrance and gets the girl? UGH!\ He was SO good to her.

MyDramaList, Nov 3, 2020

I ship her with Ji Hoo, I think their friendship and chemistry is sweet and natural until the end, him being her 'soulmate' as she acknowledged. Actor Kim Hyun Joong did a great job portraying Ji Hoo that viewers get a severe case of Secondary Lead Syndrome.

MyDramaList, Oct 13, 2019

The comments clearly illustrate a prevailing trend within the commentary sections, notably among actively engaged fans critical of K-drama. The statement, “he still loves her completely, but Jun-pyo makes a flashy entrance and gets the girl?” elucidates the protagonist's seemingly irrational decision to favour Jun Pyo over Ji Hoo, despite Ji Hoo's distinctly respectful and tender treatment. Furthermore, many viewers attribute the characterization of Ji Hoo to a common trope in K-dramas

known as the “Secondary Lead Syndrome”. This archetype typically depicts a male protagonist who, despite his sincere affection for the heroine, plays a secondary role in her romantic journey and frequently finds his romantic aspirations unrequited.

In general, analysis of fan comments reveals that while the K-drama maintains its status as an iconic and classic production, the majority of viewers from MyDramalist, IMDb, and HDRezka criticize it for its misrepresentation of women and portrayal of abusive love dynamics. After analyzing fan comments, it became evident that Russian-language comments on websites tend to be more critical of the female character or the actress herself, often passing judgment on her character and acting skills. Conversely, English-language comments on platforms like MyDramaList recognize the abusive patterns in the relationship of the characters and criticize the male protagonist for mistreating the heroine.

Moreover, based on the analysis of comments on various websites, a considerable proportion of female viewers show a tendency to re-watch this K-drama after a significant interval. The reason for this phenomenon lies in viewers' desire to revive fond memories and experience a wave of nostalgia, thereby ensuring that the show retains its enduring appeal. According to the analysed set of comments many female fans attribute the K-drama's appeal to its application of the Cinderella trope, where four affluent and attractive men turn their attention to an unassuming young woman from a modest background, thereby giving the narrative an element of imaginative storytelling. In addition, while immersed in the world of K-drama, a minority of female fans in the analyzed comment section genuinely appreciate the production, attributing this enjoyment to the performance of the male actors who played the roles of the characters of F4. However, it is worth noting that there is a noticeable discontent towards the actress of the main female role (as well as the heroine herself), caused primarily by dissatisfaction with her performance in the series.

A significant rise of negative criticism towards *Boys Over Flowers* on social media (IMDb, MyDramaList.com, HDrezka etc.) become particularly noticeable since 2016 due to the emergence of active feminism in the digital space, and finding a truly positive review has proven to be quite difficult since that period. Although at first viewers seemed to appreciate the show, being superficially engaged with its content, it was after a considerable amount of time that they realised how problematic it was. Despite the incorporation of various clichés into the narrative, including the Cinderella complex and the “hard to get” trope, the portrayal of female characters leans predominantly towards negative aspects. Upon examining the K-drama and reviewing fan comments, it becomes apparent that the representation of women tends to evolve from a picture of bravery and independence at the beginning to a submissive stance later in the narrative. The female character is presented as tolerating mistreatment and abusive behaviour from the male lead character but still decides to date him despite the abuse she has been subjected to, completely oblivious to the violent aspects of their relationship.

Overall, the division among female fans regarding the portrayal of Jandi's character signifies differing perspectives on female agency and representation in K-dramas. This discussion highlights the necessity for a nuanced understanding of gender depictions in media and their implications for public perceptions of gender roles, in addition to revealing the complexities of audience reception. Hence, the examination of the K-drama *Boys Over Flowers* reveals a prevalent discourse characterized by the portrayal of female characters in a predominantly negative light. Even though the narrative is fictional, it demonstrates the oppressive attitude of the male protagonist towards the female character, thereby reinforcing existing harmful stereotypes and upholding traditional values that are rooted in patriarchy. The increasing awareness among female viewers of violence against women in early K-dramas indicates the initial stages of Korean film

production's turn towards feminist ideals. Ultimately, the digital activism of female fans advocating for self-determination and gender equality in K-dramas can play a role in promoting a new feminist discourse, which may be reflected in upcoming Korean dramas.

Chapter 2: “Remember that forced kiss?” - Female Representation and Abusive Dynamics in *The Heirs* (2013)

In the period of the following five years after the release of *Boys Over Flowers*, South Korea experienced significant changes in the media space and society, giving new shades and directions to the development. During this period, scriptwriting and directing for Korean dramas witnessed not only technical advancements but also notable changes in the expansion of the Korean Wave, an emphasis on high-quality production, evolution in streaming platforms (in addition to traditional broadcasting, online platforms like DramaFever, Viki, etc., emerged), genre diversification, and increased international fan participation. A notable phenomenon has been the increased attention to Hallyu actively penetrating global mainstream culture through K-beauty and K-fashion, reflected in the media, which have become important elements of this progression.

As a result of these dynamic changes, the world has witnessed the global phenomenon of a new Korean Wave, Hallyu 3.0, which originated between 2013 and 2015, captivating many people, especially teenagers and young adults, not only in Asia but also in the West. In this way, the Korean entertainment industry has become a major player in popular culture exports, competing with Western countries such as the US and the UK. According to Boman (2022), Western influence has also manifested itself in Korean dramas, where Western cultural elements have become prominent and explicit in the representation of global trends. However, despite these changes, there are still some aspects that need attention in K-dramas, especially in the context of the representation of women.

2.1. The plot of the K-drama *The Heirs*

The second K-drama for the analysis, *The Heirs* (2013), showcases the characteristic features of the third Korean wave and reflects the contemporary trends of that period by spreading the new Korean fashion and beauty trends that gained widespread popularity. Additionally, the incorporation of scenes shot in America and the use of English words and slang in K-drama underscore the influence of Western culture that was emerging during the Hallyu 3.0 era. The renowned female scriptwriter Kim Eun-sook crafted a screenplay for *The Heirs*. The series also featured prominent Hallyu stars such as Lee Min-ho, Park Shin-hye, and Kim Woo-bin. Its selection for this study is primarily based on its significant popularity both in South Korea and abroad during its airing period (IBTimes, 2017). The K-drama consists of twenty episodes each with a duration of one hour. Currently, it is the first K-Drama co-produced by US digital distribution platform DramaFever and Korean production company Hwa&Dam Pictures (“Dramafever Set to Premiere First Original Co-production ‘*The Heirs*’” 2013). The K-Drama became the subject of numerous comparisons to the iconic *Boys Over Flowers*, particularly because the male lead character was played by the same actor, Lee Min Ho, and the narrative itself was quite similar, echoing the timeless Cinderella trope.

The plot of this show bears a marked resemblance to the aforementioned K-drama, *Boys Over Flowers*, as both are set within the walls of an elite school for the rich and privileged. The series also touches on the social problems inherent in the high school environment, such as bullying and the entrenched rigid system of hierarchy that draws a clear line between the affluent and the socio-economically disadvantaged. The K-drama revolves around the heroine Cha Eun-sang, a young woman from a single-parent, working-class household. Her family consists solely of her mother, who is nonverbal due to a past accident, and her sister who resides in America. In light of

these circumstances, Cha Eun-sang feels compelled to engage in three part-time jobs to maintain her livelihood while concurrently pursuing her high school education.

Low-income households led by single mothers, like Eun-sang's, find it increasingly difficult to satisfy their basic necessities as wealth disparity rises and social mobility falls (Yi, 2018). Considering her social status, she strategically invests in her future, particularly in education. In addition to her work commitments, she conscientiously dedicates all her free time to diligent studying, aiming to elevate herself from her financially challenging situation and enhance the quality of her life. In a plot similar to *Boys Over Flowers*, Cha Eun-sang, like Jandi, seizes the opportunity to study at a prestigious elite school, where she becomes entangled in a complex love triangle with two wealthy young men.

The male protagonist Kim Tan appears as the illegitimate son of the owner of the prosperous Empire Group company, struggling with internal conflicts and experiencing a troubled family dynamic. He becomes deeply attracted to Cha Eun-sang, persistently seeking her favour despite the disparity in their backgrounds and her initial rejection. His commitment reaches a point where he defies his societal standing and authoritative father, Chairman Kim, in order to be with her. Meanwhile, Choi Young-do, the second male character also hailing from a wealthy background, harbours a strong aversion towards Kim Tan. Young-do resorts to bullying the female protagonist in an attempt to capture her attention. This dynamic adds tension and complexity to *The Heirs*, interweaving the traditional elements of Cinderella with the timeless components of a love triangle. In this way, *The Heirs* intertwines the elements of the typical Cinderella story within a contemporary romantic framework.

Depicting the harsh reality of Eun-sang's daily life, the first episode vividly highlights her palpable frustration with life. Balancing multiple part-time jobs, Eun-sang returns to her modest living space, resembling an attic, comprising only a bed and wardrobe, situated within a grand luxurious residence. Her mother, having expended all her savings to support her elder daughter's marriage in America, forfeits her rented apartment and takes a job as a housekeeper for an affluent family, being provided with a confined living space as accommodation. Eun-sang, already burdened with stress and frustration due to these circumstances, experiences a breaking point when her mother serves her leftovers. In response to the reproaches, the mother exclaims with silent gestures: "What could be more important than food? Do you think we can afford this kind of food?". Eun-sang abruptly argues back, "Is it my fault that we can't afford it?" (Choi, 2013, 17:50). This situation exemplifies the complex dynamics within a mother-daughter relationship, marked by prevalent miscommunication and neglect, largely influenced by economic constraints. The mother's choice to offer her daughter leftovers symbolizes her own sense of helplessness, revealing the challenges she encounters in fulfilling her maternal responsibilities.

This incident serves as the catalyst for her emotional breakdown, leading her to vehemently refuse the meal and strongly reproach her nonverbal mother. The episode effectively conveys the emotional intensity of her struggle, emphasising the stark inequality of her socio-economic status. This scene vividly conveys to the audience the difficulties of pure survival faced by the underprivileged and also highlights the unjust social structure that is passed down from generation to generation. Consequently, in an attempt to escape the difficult life in Seoul, Eun-sang decides to take a radical step and head to Los Angeles. Upon her arrival, she discovers that her sister's life is more dangerous than promising, as she is compelled to work as a waitress and endures violence at the hands of her boyfriend. Another unfortunate accident pushes Eun-sang to the breaking point

and she falls to the ground, flooded with tears, left behind by her sister and with nowhere to go. This emotional moment is one of the turning points for the heroine, as after experiencing betrayal by her sister, who has been lying to her and her mother all this time, and the bitter disappointment of seeing her dreams of a better life in a new country shattered, she is overcome by a sense of powerlessness in the face of such a hopeless situation.

2.2. The representation of the female character: the gender double standard

The depiction of the female lead character in the series generally showcases a vulnerable and dependent nature, characterized by a lack of agency and a reliance on the male protagonist to navigate and resolve the challenges she encounters. Throughout the narrative, she consistently experiences neglect and disrespect from the male leads, enduring instances of abusive treatment. Eun-sang's deep-seated sense of helplessness and dependence on external intervention further underscores the recurring narrative trope of a prince charming rescuing the damsel in distress, drawing parallels to a storyline similar to Jandi's in *Boys Over Flowers* (Prado 2017, 147). Despite the heroine's consistent refusals, the male character persistently proposes a relationship, creating the illusion of a pursuit that eventually compels her to agree, seemingly providing him with the "thrill of the chase" (Kenasri 2021, 204). This fact vividly demonstrates the neglect for the importance of consent in the series.

In addition to minimizing her portrayal as dependent and underserved, the female lead character is consistently presented as pure and virtuous. This recurring theme aligns with a prevalent pattern in the Korean drama industry during the second and third Korean Waves, as described by Prado, where numerous dramas focus on innocent, childhood romances. Alternatively, the female lead often embodies someone who has never experienced a kiss, romantic

love, or been involved in a relationship. The emphasis on virginity leads to the desexualization of female lead characters, undermining their sexual agency (Prado 2017, 147). The conservative nature of Korean dramas, marked by the absence of explicit kissing scenes and sexual encounters, distinguishes them from their Western counterparts, attracting a specific audience to the Hallyu phenomenon. Eun-sang and Jandi exemplify this recurring pattern, prioritizing their relationships over personal agency and independence, despite initial mistreatment by male characters. Furthermore, female characters are frequently objectified, reduced to mere bodies rather than subjects, as seen in both *Boys Over Flowers* and *The Heirs*. These dramas illustrate a noticeable gender double standard, with female characters seldom experiencing romantic gestures, in contrast to the exceptionally affluent and popular male characters.

As in most cases, the sexuality of female characters is ignored or presented as passive, women are often imposed with the idea that sexual passivity is a virtue, and popular culture reinforces this belief by giving chastity a positive value, especially in the context of female characters as in these K-dramas (Kim 2008, 400). This dynamic can be attributed to the prevailing Neo-Confucian belief system in South Korea, which emphasizes traditional gender roles and hierarchical relationships. In this context, the intense focus on a female character or actress may be due to societal expectations regarding the behaviour and representation of women in the media. Thus, the conservative nature of K-dramas has faced criticism from female audiences who perceive such patterns as potentially detrimental to women. In contrast, another segment of female fans, who are more inclined to or even align with these representations of femininity in K-dramas, regard such images as positive influences for the younger generation.

2.3. Analysis of the comments

The release of *The Heirs* in 2013 parallels the increasing prominence of the internet as a platform not only for watching K-Dramas but also for actively engaging in discussions and constructing interpretations around them. This convergence facilitated the exploration of contemporary commentary and reviews on the series. Many viewers were actively engaging in the discussion of K-drama on the various social media and movie websites related to K-drama fans. Numerous viewers actively participated in discussions about K-drama on various social media and movie websites dedicated to K-drama enthusiasts. Additionally, the noticeable similarities in plot and the casting of the same actor as the male lead in both *The Heirs* and *Boys Over Flowers* led to constant comparisons in the comment section.

The main data for analysing female viewers' reception were comments collected from social media platforms such as Twitter through the use of relevant hashtags related to K-dramas and the cast. In addition, the reviews were also obtained from official and unofficial K-drama fandom pages such as MyDramalist.com which is one of the most common platforms for discussing Korean media among fans. Notably, on the MyDramalist.com website, dedicated to Korean media fans, *The Heirs* earned a significant rating of 7.6 out of 10 from 82,454 users, accompanied by a total of 265 reviews (*The Heirs, 2013 - MyDramalist.com*). This rating slightly surpasses that of *Boys Over Flowers* by half a point. Generally, since it is an international platform, the comments section is predominantly filled with English-language reviews with users actively participating in discussions about the show. Furthermore, the international online movie database IMDb, which has garnered 74 reviews and boasts a total rating of 7.5 from 13,449 users was also analyzed for data collection. The popular Russian-language movie website HD Rezka was also involved in the data collection process, although it does not provide statistical information. The focus was on acquiring relatively

recent reviews, starting from 2016 onwards, to capture contemporary reactions of female fans to the portrayal of women in *The Heirs*.

2.4. Negative comments towards the heroine

The audience is actively involved in discussing the plot and portrayal of female characters in K-drama. *The Heirs* still follows a recurring pattern of disapproval directed at female characters combined with the simultaneous elevation of male characters, mirroring a phenomenon observed in *Boys Over Flowers*. The comments below serve as illustrative examples that highlight a disturbing trend among viewers in which female characters face criticism while their male counterparts receive praise. A specific group of viewers on the HDRezka website appears particularly dissatisfied with the portrayal of heroines, who are often depicted as passive and voiceless objects, lacking agency in their commitment to the relationship with the main lead. In stark contrast, the main male lead is presented as charismatic, sympathetic, and always willing to make sacrifices, effortlessly capturing the heroine's attention throughout the narrative. Moreover, when fans continuously witness heroines reduced to weak and submissive roles due to the choices made by filmmakers and scriptwriters, they may inadvertently develop negative perceptions of the actresses behind these characters. Unfortunately, this dynamic further solidifies the image of the heroine as insecure, pure, and dependent, perpetuating the notion that she is helpless and can only rely on the man to rescue her from difficult situations:

эту дораму я смотрю уже раз 5-й из-за игры Минхо и Убина. и каждый раз меня раздражает отсутствие отдачи со стороны Ынсан, в первых сериях в Америке она была куда лучше, хоть как-то проявлялся характер, а потом начало становиться все хуже и хуже. видны мучения и борьбу тана (особенно в 17 серии) и ендю, а Ынсан будто все

равно: то ли героиня такая и должна быть, то ли актриса так себе. даже вон эмоциональнее. на месте тана и ендю я б уже давно забила на ынсан. но все равно столько раз пересматриваю ее (в надежде, что что-то изменится) - запала в сердечко.⁶

HD Rezka, Aug 16, 2018

Отличная дорама, если бы не бесая ГГ. Как то не прочувствовалась ее любовь к ГГ - сухо, непонятно, мало. Вот Ли Мин Хо, как всегда, на высоте - на него без слов смотришь - и все ясно - и любовь и ревность и боль. А ГГ полено бесчувственное.⁷

HD Rezka, Jul 6, 2018

Сериал отпад,я в восторге,оочень понравился! В основном благодаря, конечно, невероятно харизматичному и обаятельному Ли Мин-хо)) Главная героиня не понравилась,ни внешне,ни созданный ею образ вечно страдающей несчастной скромницы... Ее не жаль,она сама принимала глупые трусливые решения и не доверяла ему...⁸

HD Rezka, Feb 3, 2018

⁶ "I'm watching this drama for the 5th time because of Minho and Woo-bin's performances. And every time, I'm irritated by the lack of response from Eun-sang. In the early episodes in America, she was much better, at least she showed some character, but then it started getting worse and worse. You can see the struggles and efforts of Tan (especially in episode 17) and Young-do, but Eun-sang seems indifferent: either the heroine should be like that, or the actress is mediocre. Even the emotions seem more genuine. If I were Tan or Young-do, I would have given up on Eun-sang long ago. But still, I rewatch it so many times (hoping that something will change) - it's got me hooked".

⁷ "Great drama, if it weren't for the annoying female lead. Somehow, her love for the male lead didn't come across - dry, unclear, insufficient. But Lee Min Ho, as always, is top-notch - you look at him without words - and everything is clear - love, jealousy, and pain. And the female lead is like a lifeless log".

⁸ "The series is fantastic, I'm thrilled, I really liked it! Mostly thanks to the incredibly charismatic and charming Lee Min-ho)) The main heroine didn't appeal to me, neither externally, nor the image she created of a perpetually suffering unhappy modest woman... I don't feel sorry for her, she herself made foolish cowardly decisions and didn't trust him...".

These comments encapsulate the prevailing discourse within the comment section on the online movie website HD Rezka, where the audience articulates their discontent with the heroine, Eun-sang. Specifically, they express dissatisfaction with the portrayal of the character by the actress and the filmmakers, criticizing the depiction of the female lead as “emotionless and lacking commitment”. From their perspective, the actress failed to convey the character's affectionate side, giving the impression of a dry, unfortunate, and modest individual who made imprudent and timid decisions. According to these viewpoints, the K-drama's high ratings are attributed solely to the presence of popular Hallyu actors Lee Min Ho and Kim Woo-bin, who significantly enhance the overall quality of the show. As the comments assert, the charismatic performance of the male lead actors overshadows the heroine, contributing to the show's appeal through a sincere and compelling portrayal and delivery of the character. Notably, the emotions of love, jealousy and pain are conveyed effortlessly through the actors' non-verbal expressions, further emphasizing their ability to add emotional depth to the narrative.

2.5. The negative comments towards the depiction of a toxic romantic relationship

In contrast, another set of comments express concern not merely about the representation of the female character but rather the depiction of a toxic romantic relationship and the unsettling behaviour exhibited by male characters in their pursuit of the heroine. Such comments reveal the audience's conscious recognition of negative patterns, not necessarily directed at the female character or the actress, but rather within the narrative itself, particularly concerning the development of romantic relationships and the behaviour of male characters. The primary reasons stem from the show being deemed to contain scenes and behaviour consistent with the definition of intimate partner violence. This form of violence occurs within the context of a personal

relationship, causing physical, psychological, or sexual harm, as one partner exerts power or control over the other (NCJRS, 2018 & WHO, 2012).

Their concerns stem from the fact that the heroine appears as someone who tolerates a man's disrespectful and emotionally damaging attitude, each time enduring such treatment, which eventually leads to the grounding of their romantic relationship. Despite male leads' own struggles, they are afforded more agency than women, whose primary function seems to be projecting an image of suffering and neglect, devoid of agency in making personal choices and navigating their own emotions. By depicting the male protagonist, Kim Tan, as someone who forces a relationship without taking rejection, *The Heirs* creates romantic images to cover up abusive features. In other words, the series promotes a romanticized portrayal of the media by depicting events within romantic relationships, potentially distorting them by presenting types of intimate partner violence in a romantic light. In this manner, the prevailing response from the majority of female fans regarding the portrayal of women expresses disapproval of the heroine's perceived weak and tolerant actions to abuse throughout the show. Consequently, the audience resists embracing the K-drama's proposed romantic relationship model, wherein a woman undergoes mistreatment.

“Romanticized media”, according to Kenasri and Lidwina (2021), refers to an idealized or exaggerated portrayal of a romantic connection that arises from media influences and is meant to look more appealing than reality (Segrin & Nabi, 2002, p.260). However, as previously discussed in the chapter on *Boys Over Flowers*, the media, as outlined in the Cultivation theory, plays a pivotal role in both shaping and mirroring social life. Such a dynamic contributes to the audience's consumption of romanticized abusive behaviour. This type of content can reinforce the notion that certain forms of violence are considered normal or even romantic in some cases. Thus, Korean dramas have the potential to become a means of encouraging romantic idealism. As Zgodinski

(2017) and Béres (1999) argue, because of these media portrayals, people may be prevented from identifying, avoiding, or quitting an abusive relationship rather than raising concerns about it. Consequently, female fans' tendency to victim-blaming in the series may inadvertently reflect back on themselves.

2.6. Male protagonist's abusive behaviour and the mistreatment of the heroine

In a similar way to *Boys Over Flowers*, viewers commenting on *The Heirs* also emphasize the dominant and controlling behaviour of the male lead, Kim Tan, particularly in decision-making situations involving Eun-sang. Consequently, the romantic dynamic between the main characters lacks progression, as the female lead remains subjected to instances of mistreatment without substantial evolution. Such an occurrence is notable in episode 2, where Kim Tan isolates Eun-sang from her best friend and prevents any communication between them. Specifically, when Eun-sang is left alone in Los Angeles by her sister without her phone, she encounters a challenging situation. However, Kim Tan steps in with a seemingly altruistic gesture by offering his phone to help Eun-sang contact her best friend through social media. This act may seem quite noble at first glance, but it reveals a more disturbing trait in Kim Tan's behaviour. Taking advantage of the situation, he secretly reads Eun Sang's posts and messages, blatantly invading her privacy (see Figure 1). Adding to the complexity of the situation, when her friend attempts to reach out by sending a message to her account, Kim Tan intentionally delays sharing this information with her, aiming to prolong the heroine's stay. Such instances highlight the hidden but insidious manifestations of Kim Tan's dominance and manipulation, causing increasing alarm among viewers. The following comment illustrates this discourse, which appears quite common in the comment section of 265 reviews on the MyDramalist website:

First off, the writer makes Kim Tan seem like a selfish guy who is obsessed with Cha Eun Sang. He keeps swearing to protect her but everyone knows all it does is just make matters worse. His vow to protect her seems to be just a sort of obsessive control he wants to have over her.

MyDramaList, Apr 8, 2014

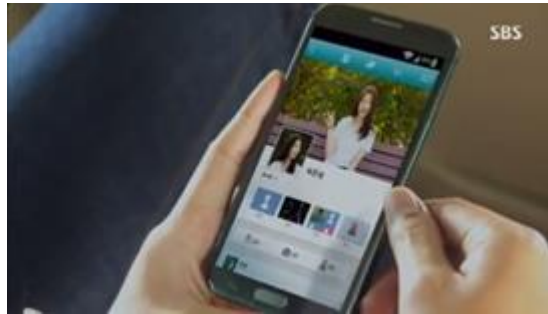


Figure 1: Kim Tan checking out Eun-sang's social media account without her consent.

The comment's note towards Kim Tan's behaviour indicated "obsessive control" over the heroine. Kim Tan's "selfish" behaviour always extends to the act of manipulation. As the comments highlight his continuous action of "swearing to protect her", it all eventually comes in vain throughout the series.

Another disconcerting theme, which is also evident in many Korean dramas, is the portrayal and normalization of forced kisses in *The Heirs*. As was previously mentioned, this tendency not only downplays the significance of consent but also deprives female characters of their agency and autonomy. An illustrative instance occurs in episode 8 when Kim Tan kisses Eun-sang for the first time (see Figure 2). During the conversation on the rooftop, Eun-sang, visibly stressed and already in tears, receives a phone call. Despite her willingness to answer, Kim Tan, exerting control, commands her not to respond. Unexpectedly, he forcefully kisses her, pushing the phone aside.

The discomfort on Eun-sang's face during this intimacy is palpable, revealing distress and shock. Significantly, the scene itself is carefully crafted and strategically utilises cheerful music that creates a more light-hearted and romantic tone. Moreover, the visual representation enhances the romantic aspect by depicting Kim Tan and Eun-sang standing together amidst a beautiful setting. In this way, such narrative choice further contributes to the problematic normalization of forced kisses in Korean dramas.



Figure 2: Kim Tan forcefully kisses Eun-sang.

The comments below reflect the reactions of the female audience to the kiss scenes in *The Heirs*, which raise notable concerns. These comments are mostly directed at the female protagonist, or more specifically at the actress herself. According to these viewers, during the kissing scenes, she appears to be unresponsive, resembling a “wall or statue”. They suggest that the actress “does not know how to kiss” while the male lead is highlighted as the one who “does all the work”. Criticism extends to the actress's portrayal of emotions, as some viewers express dissatisfaction with her often misrepresenting feelings, stating that her expressions make it seem as though the male lead has “cooties”. These observations from the female audience point to a broader dissatisfaction with the actress's performance in intimate scenes and her ability to convey authentic emotions:

Remember that forced kiss? It made my jaw drop 'cause I was like "Looks like LMH took my comment seriously." And I guess it did kind of work because Park Shin Hye did look a little more in love in the last few episodes. Before that it seemed like a joke every time Eun Sang declared her love for Tan.

MyDramaList, Dec 27, 2013

Park Shin Hye has gotten better, but I really wish she wouldn't look like the guy has cooties every time she gets kissed on screen. I'm sorry I don't who you are, but if your crush/ bf kiss you, you don't make a ew face.

MyDramaList, Dec 30, 2013

there wasn't any sparks flying with the male lead and female lead so the kiss scenes (just like typical k dramas) the man did all the work while the woman stood there as if shes a wall or statue.

MyDramaList, Jul 6, 2020

These comments reflect the prevailing sentiment in the MyDramalist, which expresses reproach for the female character. From the viewers' perspective, the heroine fails to adequately reciprocate the affection of the male protagonist who appears affable and affectionate. However, the heroine's reaction during the kissing scene such as stepping away, squeezing her eyes shut and making an unpleasant facial expression shows a clear reluctance to be kissed. This behavior indicates a disregard for the lack of her consent and turns what initially appeared to be a romantic moment into one characterized by coercion.

Another concerning aspect is the prevalence of physical violence specifically wrist-grab scenes, as observed in the previous chapter of *Boys Over Flowers*. This form of physical violence is excessively employed across various romantic comedy K-dramas. Often in these scenes, the woman desperately resists and demands that the man release her. However, the man remains persistent, ignoring her requests and still dragging her. The harmful nature of wrist grabs, discussed in the previous chapter, stems from their role as a display of power that is physically challenging to resist. Such action perpetuates stereotypes of a weak woman incapable of resisting a dominant man and reinforces the notion that men assert their masculinity by subjugating women (Prado 2017).

In addition to wrist-grabbing, several episodes of the show also feature instances of physical violence, such as the forcefully taking, pulling, or pushing female characters by the male leads, Kim Tan and Young-do. Specifically, the female lead, Eun-sang, becomes a victim amid the rivalry scenes between Kim Tan and Young-do, both of whom have feelings for her. The complex relationships between the male leads further complicate Eun-sang's life, and their conflicts often result in her suffering. For instance in episode 11, Eun-sang finds herself caught between the two male leads, each fighting for her attention by forcefully dragging her to their respective sides or rather can be identified as a double wrist grab (See Figure 3). As Young-do starts to cross the road with Eun-sang, he notices Kim Tan on the opposite side and abruptly grabs the heroine's hand. When all three of them reach the middle of the road, Kim Tan also grabs Eun Sang's hand in an attempt to pull her away from Young-do. In these cases, Eun-sang is portrayed as being stiff and unable to release herself, expressing complete frustration. Unfortunately, none of the male characters take into account the heroine's emotions and desires amid their conflicts.



Figure 3: Eun-sang is caught amid a conflict, being pulled by two male characters.

Their mistreatment reaches an extreme in episode 11 when Young-do encounters Eun-sang near the pool and initiates a conversation with her. However, amidst their discussion, Young-do becomes aware of Kim Tan's intense gaze fixed upon them through the glass window of the building. Given the complex rivalry between Young-do and Kim Tan, coupled with Kim Tan's growing feelings for Eun-sang, Young-do impulsively decides to provoke Kim Tan by throwing Eun-sang into the pool (See Figure 4). This unexpected action leaves Eun-sang in shock, especially given the cold weather. Surprisingly, instead of reacting with anger, Eun-sang remains subdued, possibly influenced by Young-do's upper-class status and considerable influence. Young-do, realizing his powerful status within the school hierarchy, often abuses her impunity to pursue his own desires. The heroine's response exposes the negative power dynamics that exist within the social hierarchy of the show as well as how people like Young-do take advantage of their position to exert control and dominance over others.



Figure 4: Choi Young-do unexpectedly throws Eun-sang into the pool.

In this manner, the male characters employ a combination of physically violent and psychologically manipulative tactics. Tan, in particular, manipulates Eun-sang's emotions by presenting himself as a victim, coercing her compliance and asserting power domination. Scenes featuring Tan and Young-do reveal their active pursuit of Eun-sang as a romantic object of desire, portrayed as a competition for the affection of the "princess" character. The portrayal of these scenes, packaged as romantic contests, not only justifies Tan's and Young-do's affections for Eun-sang but also underscores the glorification of the male ego in *The Heirs*. Ultimately, this dynamic positions Eun-sang as a victim, even though both men are actually supposed to love her. Eun-sang's character is notably devoid of empowerment to express her own perspective in the depicted settings, rendering her a passive object. This dynamic reflects how *The Heirs'* narrative structure allows the "hero" and "villain" characters, Tan and Young-do, to exhibit aggressive and proactive behaviours within the storyline.

This K-drama not only contradicts the anti-sexual violence slogan "No Means No" but also advocates for an inappropriate and violent love relationship. For example, in episode 12, Kim Tan forcefully compels Eun-sang to be in a relationship with him, tightly holding her, yet disregarding

her rejection (see Figure 5). According to Kenasri and Lidwina (2021), there are two potential scenarios if *The Heirs* were reworked to depict a healthier portrayal of an intimate partner relationship: a) Tan appreciating Eun-sang's refusal, or b) Eun-sang actively participating in initiating and developing a consensual relationship with Tan. In these alternatives, both characters willingly express mutual interest, respect each other's decisions, and provide support without resorting to coercion. Such a narrative would encourage and promote healthy relationships between partners, avoiding the fetishisation of rejection and abstaining from perpetuating a storyline in which the female character explicitly rejects and the male character forces his will (Kenasri & Lidwina 2021, 209).



Figure 5: Kim Tan forces Eun-sang to be in a relationship with him without accepting her refusal.

2.7. The reactions of female viewers towards the toxic love relationship dynamic

Some of the female audiences are visibly aware of the toxic traits displayed by the male characters and openly express disapproval of their behaviour, a trend notably prevalent in contemporary reviews. Frustration and dissatisfaction stem from the male characters' blatant disregard for the female protagonist's boundaries, creating a narrative environment that contradicts

modern expectations of healthy and respectful relationships. Specifically, they critique the toxic dynamics depicted in the drama, pointing out concerns like the main female character's limited decision-making ability, instances of abusive behaviour directed at her, and dissatisfaction with the script's portrayal of her, particularly regarding her perceived lack of agency. Collectively, these comments reflect the general view of the audience that *The Heirs* fails to portray relationships in line with contemporary norms and emphasises the need for more respectful, engaging and empowering female character dynamics in the series. The comments below on the MyDramaList website exemplify this trend of opinions:

The Kdrama The Heirs is SO FRUSTRATING OMG

Both of the guys are so toxic and don't respect her boundaries whatsoever but the second lead is just much more interesting of a character and the male lead is just so annoying gosh

MyDramaList, Aug 28, 2021

Honestly, if I was cha eunsang (with new standard of fl character writing), I will definitely cancel both of them and finding better man whether they are rich or poor and found happiness with them. For 2013 drama honestly this drama was fun, but for 2020s this drama is hard to watch especially with jerky male leads and crybaby female lead like this

MyDramaList, Feb 2, 2022

Such reviews reflect a prevalent sentiment seen among 265 comments on the MyDramaList, especially among contemporary audiences in the 2020s. The comment states “both of the guys are so toxic and don't respect her boundaries”, highlighting the mistreatment of the heroine by the male leads. They even imagine themselves in the heroine’s position, stating, "if I was Cha Eunsang... I

will definitely cancel both of them and finding better man whether they are rich or poor and found happiness with them." This viewpoint emphasizes the need for stronger, more self-reliant female characters who put their own happiness and well-being over society norms or the affluence of potential partners. It is interesting to see how audience standards and expectations for character development change over time, especially in the portrayal of the female lead roles.

2.8. The “resisting viewers” to media messages

Thus, a close analysis of the comments raises doubts about the principles of Cultivation theory and reveals the changing nature of contemporary media consumption. As previously discussed, the fundamentals of Cultivation Theory posit that prolonged media exposure affects viewers' perceptions and beliefs (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), especially in the context of television or, in the context of this study, K-drama. In contrast to the theory's idea of non-selective viewing habits, the contemporary media landscape, characterized by the spread of streaming platforms and a variety of content choices, allows viewers, including female fans of K-dramas, to actively make independent choices. Consequently, this fosters a new category of viewers who possess the capability to resist media messages, akin to resistant viewers. This deviation from traditional viewing patterns undermines the assertion of the theory that viewers with high viewing frequency are universally susceptible to media messages (Shrum, 2017).

Moreover, the active involvement of female viewers in discussions on social media platforms serves as a counter-narrative to the theory's portrayal of passive audiences. Rather than blindly accepting the representation of women in K-drama, there is still a group of female fans who engage in an ongoing dialogue, both criticizing and analyzing the portrayal of female characters.

This engagement suggests that viewers are not passive recipients of media messages, but active participants who critically interpret and debate the meaning embedded in the content.

The assumption of the theory that television programs convey a consistent message encounters challenges when applied to the diverse world of Korean dramas. In particular, female fans express dissatisfaction with the way women are portrayed, actively resisting the image of passivity and toxic relationships projected in *The Heirs*. Their dissatisfaction provides strong evidence that not all viewers perceive what is presented in the same way. The diverse opinions among female fans highlight the limitations of generalizing cultivation effects, emphasizing that viewers' reactions are closely tied to their individual interpretations, experiences, and values (Shrum, 2017).

2.9. The positive reception of the audience on the other websites

A comprehensive review analysis still reveals a tendency toward a positive reception of the K-drama. In comparison to the group of fans criticizing the series, there are still some female viewers who express their admiration for *The Heirs*, leaving positive comments. On the international website IMDb, *The Heirs* garnered predominantly positive reviews, with 47 out of 74 comments being positive and receiving more than 7 stars. Similarly, on *Kinopisk.ru*, a Russian-speaking dominated movie platform known for detailed comments from verified users, the series also gathered a high number of positive remarks, with a total of 30 out of 38, with substantial support. Collectively, these comments paint a picture of an enthusiastic and appreciative reception, emphasizing Lee Min Ho's image as the male lead performer. The audience applauds the character for embodying the idealized traits including handsomeness, cuteness, truthfulness, and courage, making him a model of desirable qualities in a man. A notable majority of the comments do not

avoid emphasizing the visible flaws in the characterization of the female lead performer, particularly her lack of faith in the male lead's intentions. The comments below exemplify instances of positive reception discourse surrounding the K-drama:

I was looking for series that can b refreshing and this was exactly that...I would say Kim tan can be, will be and is any girls dream boy... a person who would go lengths for the girl without caring about anything else and being soooo rich equally expressive.....I liked the girl holding back for sometime she had her logical reasons...but the from that first sight of the girls encounter with her sister the way kim tan falls for her is unbelievably beautiful...

IMDb, Jul 30, 2023

A show where the ML played by Lee Min ho embodies the ultimate characteristics a girl looks for in a man. He is handsome, cute, truthful, gutsy and chivalrous. Needless to say, very easy for any girl to fall in love with his character instantly.

IMDb, Jan 28, 2023

Most of all, her lack of faith in Kim Tan is exasperating. Doesn't she realize he is trying his best to protect her, albeit in his clueless way? That scene where Kim Tan reveals his identity and she turns her back on him before crying just because her pride is hurt - is that supposed to make viewers cry? '

IMDb, Oct 27, 2021

Positive comments of this nature are relatively common among viewers, based on the analysis of 74 reviews on the IMDb website. Critiques highlighting the toxic dynamics of the series are rare in comparison. The comments particularly focus on the male lead's role as a perfect boyfriend,

stating, “Kim Tan can be, will be and is any girl's dream boy,” and “Lee Min ho embodies the ultimate characteristics a girl looks for in a man.” Moreover, this group of viewers is reluctant to acknowledge the negative implications of the male lead's act of lying about his identity to the heroine. They even judge her for being too resilient, as stated in the comment, “her lack of faith in Kim Tan is exasperating.” Additionally, they downplay moments of emotional conflict that the female protagonist experiences, stating, “she turns her back on him before crying just because her pride is hurt - is that supposed to make viewers cry?”. Thus, this group of viewers validates the Cultivation theory by easily following the media messages displayed in the series, and being “non-resistant viewers” compared to other parts of the audiences who may resist or criticize these media representations.

This investigation delves into the analysis of comments sourced from various online spaces, including international movie websites and unofficial Korean culture fan pages. Certain platforms allowed access to viewership statistics, offering detailed data on both positive and negative ratings, as well as the prevalent language used in the comments. Upon analysis, it became evident that despite the unsettling patterns uncovered in *The Heirs*, the show remains appealing to the audience, as indicated by ratings and reviews. Interestingly, the other half of the active viewers, predominantly women, perceive the series as a timeless classic romantic comedy, supporting the validity of the Cultivation theory. Despite the movie being considered outdated and full of clichés, the audience finds enduring charm in its portrayal of innocent young love. Notably, similar to the sentiments expressed in *Boys Over Flowers*, much praise is directed towards the male lead's outstanding performance. Analysis of the comments reveals a noticeable similarity between the perception of the films *Boys Over Flowers* and *The Heirs*. It is noteworthy that Russian-language comments on *The Heirs* tend to be more critical of either the female character or the actress

portraying her, echoing the discourse surrounding *Boys Over Flowers*. In contrast, English-language comments show a tendency towards greater consideration, recognizing the presence of negative patterns of violence within K-drama and openly criticizing them.

Yet, the critique directed at Eun-sang, despite recognizing acting shortcomings or a potentially biased portrayal of her character, is milder compared to Jan-di's case. Some female fans show understanding and compassion towards Eun-sang's circumstances, often disregarding perceived troubling patterns in the male lead's behaviour by interpreting them as romantic rather than rude or disrespectful. This manifestation of double standards in the comments section reflects the audience's tendency to be more susceptible to media messages, which is consistent with Cultivation Theory. Despite recognizing the series' existing shortcomings, viewers maintain a positive attitude, considering the portrayal of female characters and romantic relationships as normal or even desirable.

However, a small yet vocal group of discerning viewers' feedback gathered from social media platforms and movie websites, including 265 reviews from MyDramaList and 74 reviews from IMDb, highlights a clear tendency to openly criticize the K-drama, particularly focusing on the mistreatment of the heroine by the male leads. Their concern revolves around instances where the female character's feelings are disregarded, and her boundaries are violated. Through their comments, it becomes evident that their critique is directed at the portrayal of the female character, viewing it as a necessary construct for the narrative rather than a criticism of the actress herself. The audience explicitly refrains from justifying the male leads' actions and openly admits to putting themselves in the heroine's position, considering the possibility of rejecting both male leads. This group of fans show a genuine understanding of the heroine's circumstances, acknowledging the difficulties she faces with financial challenges and a nonverbal mother. Their disapproval is rooted

in the rejection of toxic masculinity, abusive behaviour, and the disrespectful treatment of the female protagonist by Kim Tan, his friends and family. They firmly reject the notion of such romantic relationships being healthy, opposing the ideas portrayed in the K-drama. This stance contradicts the Cultivation Theory, highlighting that not all viewers passively accept television messages, some consciously resist their influence.

In conclusion, the examination of female fans' reactions to the portrayal of the female character in *The Heirs* reveals a complex interplay of audience reception. Upon analyzing the second K-drama, it becomes apparent that the portrayal of the heroine lacks discernible advancement when juxtaposed with the preceding heroine, exhibiting a notable degree of similarity. Following a comprehensive exploration of the series and a thorough analysis of reviews from various sources, it becomes evident that the portrayal of the heroine signifies a woman who is neglected and lacks agency over her choices and emotions. This depiction may contribute to a distorted representation of women, presenting an undesirable model for the young audience to follow, despite the limited acknowledgement by viewers of its detrimental aspects. The existence of such patterns in the series prompts crucial questions about how relationships and gender dynamics are represented in popular media and the potential impact on viewers' perceptions and attitudes. This emphasizes the necessity of careful analysis of the messages conveyed by the media. A thorough analysis is essential to encourage more fitting and realistic portrayals of women, recognizing the significant role that popular media plays in shaping public opinion. In addition, raising viewers' awareness of how to recognize and question media messages can contribute to a more conscious and independent audience.

Chapter 3: Breaking Boundaries - Embracing Female Empowerment in *Business*

Proposal (2022)

In the fourteen years since the release of the K-drama *Boys Over Flowers*, society has experienced new social trends, changes in established perceptions and attitudes, and the outbreak of a pandemic that has subsequently influenced the media. K-dramas have also undergone modification by filmmakers and are influenced by the active participation of digital fans who produce effective labour and openly express themselves online. Such transformation of K-dramas is due to two main factors, one of which accounts for the formation of the current fourth Korean wave or Hallyu that has emerged since 2016 (Boman, 2022). Due to its widespread distribution in Asian countries, it has also attracted the interest of the West, in particular the American TV and film streaming service Netflix. Consequently, Netflix has established direct partnerships with Korean production companies and has been involved in the release of K-dramas, such as the new K-drama *Business Proposal*, which is examined in this chapter.

3.1. The release of the *Business Proposal* and its rating

Business Proposal became popular in 2022 and accumulated substantial attention on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. This webtoon-based series was broadcast in the year 2022 and was helmed by the male filmmaker Park Seon-ho, with the creative contributions of female writers Han Seol-hee and Hong Bo-hee. Given that the K-drama was co-produced in partnership with Netflix and subsequently distributed via their streaming service, it received substantial promotion across various social media channels. The K-drama in question has gained immense popularity and success in Asia and the West, ranking as the number-one television series in several countries.

Since the K-drama was released relatively recently, it was quite possible to find more female fans' reviews on various social media platforms and websites. Specifically, I collected data from Twitter, focusing on comments from foreign fans in English, and from online movie websites like HDrezka and Kinopoisk, which are predominantly frequented by Russian-speaking audiences. Moreover, on IMDb (Internet Movie Database), an internationally recognized online platform renowned for its extensive film database, *Business Proposal* boasts the highest rating among the compared K-dramas, standing at 8.1 out of 10 based on feedback from over 24,000 users and a total of 155 reviews (*Business Proposal (TV Series 2022) - IMDb*, n.d.). On the MyDramaList website, the K-drama garnered a notable rating of 8.7, reflecting highly positive feedback from 103,589 users and 423 reviews (*Business Proposal, 2022 - MyDramalist.com*). This rating surpasses those of other K-dramas discussed in the research, indicating its exceptional reception among viewers.

The recent K-dramas' partnership with Netflix, such as in the case of *Business Proposal*, provided an opportunity to effectively promote the series through social media such as YouTube, TikTok, etc. on the world stage. The platform makes all the K-dramas accessible to Western audiences and allows them to see a completely different approach to filmmaking with an atypical script and shooting method, noticeably different from domestic TV series. As a result of this cooperation, K-drama consumption has increased significantly in recent times, which in turn is a confirmation of the growing global interest in both K-dramas and the Korean Wave (Hyejung, 2021). In this regard, Netflix and Studio Dragon, which is a Korean production firm that receives financial support from CJ E&M Group and JTBC Content Hub, recently signed an extension of their production cooperation agreement (B. Kim 2019; Lee 2020).

However, the Korean manner and style of making TV series has been transformed rather quickly under the influence of the new model of cooperation with Netflix, which previously produced media predominantly for Western viewers. It started producing a new hybrid genre that involves a mix of different genres such as romance, comedy, and adventure as well as implementing new features that are typical to Netflix television series. It is noticeable that *Business Proposal* has fallen under the influence of Netflix, particularly in its portrayal of characters exhibiting more free-spirited behaviour and the inclusion of explicit scenes rather than depicting modest and pure love relationships to conform to Korean norms of Confucianism. For instance, in episode 11, the main characters engage in sexual intercourse, which in turn is not typical of traditional K-dramas.

3.2. The plot of the *Business Proposal*

The plot of the K-drama, *Business Proposal*, centres around Shin Ha-ri, a diligent and determined woman, who strives to achieve success and alleviate her parents' financial burdens, despite hailing from a low-income family who earns a living by running a small chicken restaurant. Her tenacious and ambitious nature sets her apart in her workplace, earning her recognition and respect. The narrative undergoes a pivotal shift when Ha-ri's wealthy confidante, Jin Young-seo, asks Ha-ri to impersonate her during a date. Reluctantly agreeing to the proposition after much persuasion, Ha-ri undergoes a drastic transformation, altering her personality and appearance to effectively play the role. Her objective is to discourage her date's interest and end the evening swiftly. To her astonishment, fate intervenes, and her date turns out to be none other than her own company's boss, Kang Tae-moo. However, when he discovers that Ha-ri has been deceiving him and only pretending to be her friend, Young-Seo, he makes no rush to part with her. As he is tired of the many blind dates arranged by his grandfather, he turns the situation around and offers Ha-ri

a business proposal - where they have to pretend to be a couple in front of his grandfather. Nevertheless, when Tae-moo asks Ha-ri for her real name, she, again for fear of losing her job, lies and introduces herself as “Geum-hui”, the protagonist of her family's beloved TV show *Be Strong, Geum-hui*. This unexpected encounter sparks a chain of subsequent meetings, setting the stage for a budding love story to unfold.

The narrative as a whole draws on the archetypal Cinderella story, containing some cliched and predictable elements combined with a modern corporate-worker theme. As the storyline unfolds, it delves into intricate interconnections between characters, societal attitudes, and pertinent themes related to the position of women. *Business Proposal* employs a similar narrative framework, delineating a romantic narrative portraying the dynamic between a woman from a modest background and an affluent man who assumes the role of a Prince while managing the circumstances in which she becomes entangled. This exploration entails scrutiny of the intricate dynamics within relationships involving individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, thereby elucidating the manifold challenges they encounter within their personal and vocational domains.

Compared to the preceding K-Dramas, *Boys Over Flowers* (2009) and *The Heirs* (2013), the show exhibits notable progress and evolution in its portrayal of women in contemporary society. It dares to challenge conventional clichés while still acknowledging and incorporating predictable scenes within the broader narrative. The filmmaker openly acknowledges the presence of stereotypes within the plot, purposefully including visible scenes that allude to these traditional archetypes. For instance, in the second episode, a chase scene unfolds when the female lead unexpectedly encounters the male lead in an elevator. Upon realizing his presence, she hastily flees, unintentionally leaving behind one of her slippers. The male character, having picked up her lost

slipper, chases her around the building for quite a while, only to return it to the heroine. This scene can be interpreted as a clear allusion to the iconic motif of Cinderella, where the prince runs in search of the owner of the lost slipper (See Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1: Kang Tae-moo picks up Shin Ha-ri's slipper, which she accidentally loses while running out of the elevator at the sight of him.



Figure 2: He catches up with her after a long chase to give her back the lost slipper.

3.3. The parallels of *Business Proposal* with the fictional television show *Be Strong, Geum-hui*

Furthermore, a compelling and conspicuous example of the Cinderella theme within the analyzed K-Drama is the fictional television show *Be Strong, Geum-hui* that is featured within the series. The presence of this popular fictional show becomes an integral part of the main storyline, and the families of both main characters consistently watch it throughout the series, especially notably Tae-moo's grandfather, who maintains an unbroken streak of viewership (See Figure 3). The show portrays the plot of a young woman hailing from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background who engages in a romantic relationship with her affluent boss of the company. The intricacies of their relationship undergo significant complexity when the male lead's mother disapproves of their relationship, leading to the condemnation of the woman and her enforced separation from her son, thus contributing to the establishment of a cliched narrative.

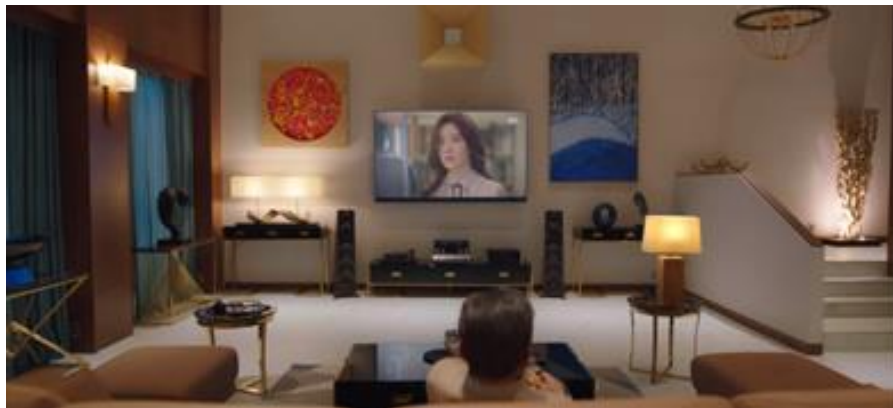


Figure 3: Kang Tae-moo's grandfather attentively watches *Be Strong, Geum-hui* and actively comments on the show.

This show humorously exaggerates and mocks the classic plotline of a “rich man and poor woman” with the complexities of the affluent man’s family disapproving of the relationship.

Particularly, the actors in the fictitious show dramatically overplay and lampoon the clichéd narrative, offering a refreshing and comical take on a well-worn storyline. The series exposes the farcical nature of the Cinderella narrative trope by contrasting the main characters' actions as well as reactions in both the fictitious show and the real K-drama itself. In other words, the inclusion of *Be Strong, Geum-hui* serves to highlight the show's referencing of its own clichéd plot. For instance, in episode four, Ha-ri and Tae-moo stage a meeting to celebrate the made-up anniversary of their relationship, with the primary objective of persuading Tae-moo's grandfather about the authenticity of their bond. During this staged encounter, Tae-moo takes the initiative to go with Ha-ri to a high-end store to buy her an expensive outfit. Simultaneously, the viewer is presented with a parallel scene from the fictitious series *Be Strong, Geum-hui*, in which the main character undertakes a strikingly similar act of taking the female lead on a shopping spree, effectively highlighting the comedic mirroring of these classic romantic tropes (See Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4: The male lead of the show *Be Strong, Geum-hui*, aggressively brings Geum-hui to a clothing store and buys her an entire rack of clothes



Figure 5: In the same way in *Business Proposal* Kang Tae-moo accompanies Ha-ri to an upscale boutique and purchases a dress that aligns with his personal preferences.

Another example of the fictitious show drawing parallels to relationship dynamics between its protagonists occurs in episode five. After Tae-moo reveals Ha-ri's true identity and finds out that she is a food developer at his company, he starts making inappropriate comments toward her at the workplace the following day. He takes the specific action of entering her office, where she works with her colleagues, and starts strictly reprimanding her in front of her peers, causing her to become flustered. However, as he reflects on his emotional reactions to her, the scene transitions to his grandfather, who is concurrently watching another episode of *Be Strong, Geum-hui* in a different room. In the fictional K-drama, the main character similarly reprimands Geum-hui for her work and tosses a stack of papers at her, emphasizing the thematic mirroring in these two separate storylines (See Figures 6 and 7). Consequently, this parallel serves as an exaggerated satire, more likely created for comedic effect.



Figure 6: The male protagonist calls Geum-hui over to reprimand her work, expressing his displeasure by angrily tossing a stack of papers in her direction.



Figure 7: Kang Tae-moo abruptly enters Ha-ri's office and proceeds to reprimand her in the presence of her colleagues.

The characters, particularly the protagonists' families, display similar responses upon watching the fictional K-drama. Their collective reactions predominantly lean toward a critical stance, especially regarding the stereotypical portrayal of the relationship dynamics between an

affluent man and a poor woman. They express such opinions in their open condemnation of the characters' attitude towards the heroine Geum-hui. In episode five, Kang Tae-moo's grandfather while watching the scene where Geum-hui is being reprimanded for her work, comments on the behaviour of the male lead: "He's so petty. Messing with Geum-hui for no reason." This remark not only demonstrates the grandfather's critical assessment of the protagonist's actions but also points to a deeper layer of judgment in the family dynamic that extends to Tae-moo's interactions with Ha-ri.

Moreover, in episode two, a tense scene from the fictional show is aired on television in Ha-ri's family cafe. In this particular scene, a woman rudely berates Geum-hui for allegedly intruding on her daughter's romantic relationship with the male protagonist. The situation escalates to the point where the woman brutally slaps Geum-hui with a chicken leg. This moment in the series has symbolic significance subtly alluding to the Ha-ri family's socioeconomic status as they are the owners of a chicken restaurant. Ha-ri's mother and the café customers watching this dramatic scene react with shock and disapproval in response to the aggressive behaviour.

The two female customers engage in a frank dialogue criticizing the dynamic between the affluent man and the economically disadvantaged woman depicted in the K-drama: "How could she do that to such a nice girl? Do you think a rich family would accept a girl like Geum-hui? Her family just keeps a local fried chicken shop." In this conversation, they subtly reflect Ha-ri's family situation, emphasizing the economic disparity shown both in the fictitious K-drama and in Ha-ri's real life. At the same time, Ha-ri's mother also intervenes angrily, decrying the prevalence of such television programs: "All these rubbish TV shows need to go off the air, you hear? The love story where a poor girl falls in love with a super-rich guy is not realistic at all." In addition to being a direct response to the situation unfolding in Ha-ri's life, these character reactions emphasize the

central theme of the Cinderella trope, which is evident in both the fictional and the very real K-dramas. In the fictional show *Be Strong, Geum-hui* is significant in portraying and satirizing this trope, thereby mirroring the events and challenges the main characters encounter along the way. The incorporation of intertextuality, notably through the fictional television show *Be Strong, Geum-hui*, within the narrative of *Business Proposal* provides an opportunity to employ these characters and dialogues as a method to offer insightful commentary on the prevalent theme found in television series – romantic relationships between couples with differing socio-economic backgrounds.

3.4. The positive reception of the *Business Proposal*

A considerable number of fans among the 423 reviews analyzed on MyDramaList expressed admiration for the series, despite its use of clichés, stating that it was a modern adaptation of Cinderella. The following comments by female fans left on MyDramaList.com (a special website with a detailed database of Korean dramas, films, TV shows and variety shows, specialising in exploring and reviewing K-dramas) indicate a positive attitude towards the series and consider the application of such typical “Cinderella” plot well adapted to modern times:

Cliches done right! This is how you incorporate all the cliches without making them annoying. This is how you incorporate humour without making it loud and cringy. THIS is how you do the perfect rom-com. Business Proposal felt like a throwback to early 2010 k-dramas and the golden age of romantic comedies, but it modernized it and fixed all the frustrating misunderstandings and miscommunications that made me tear my hair out back then.

MyDramaList, Apr 5, 2022

The story is something we have seen countless times - a fake relationship leads to a real one. Rich guy falls for a poor girl, yet few twists made it much more compelling and interesting. The female lead was not a damsel in distress - she is competent, friendly, strong. The male lead was not a cold lead - he is a cute and soft potato. The father was not evil, rather funny and a bit childish. The best friend second lead deal is dealt with in a realistic manner.

MyDramaList, Apr 5, 2022

Most fans in the website comment section echoed the aforementioned common fan sentiments, showing their support for them. They indicate that the K-drama adheres to the traditional plot structure, albeit in a notably modernized way, thus evoking a nostalgic ambience reminiscent of older K-dramas. The comments emphasize the contemporary portrayal of the characters, departing from the traditional tropes typical of romantic comedy K-dramas. In particular, the female lead is distinguished by her strength and independence, the male protagonist is presented as emotional and considerate, and the erstwhile clichéd portrayal of a toxic male lead's family is reimagined to be comical and realistic. Furthermore, the audience expressed admiration for the unexpected narrative twists within the K-drama. For instance, when faced with the male lead's imperative to travel to the USA due to his grandfather's illness, the male lead offers the female protagonist to go with him. Contrary to the expected storyline, the heroine refuses this proposal, opting to stay and pursue her individual career aspirations. This in turn exemplifies her independence, demonstrating her capacity to make decisions pivotal to her own goals, irrespective of the desires of the male lead.

By incorporating a fictional show that humorously portrays the “rich guy and poor girl” trope, the series playfully critiques and acknowledges the recurring themes that are often present in K-Dramas. In this sense, the K-Drama engages in a metatextual discourse, prompting viewers

to reflect on the broader cultural significance and impact of such storytelling conventions. It encourages a deeper analysis of the underlying messages conveyed by these tropes, inviting audiences to question and challenge traditional gender and societal roles.

3.5. Audiences' negative responses to the use of clichés

However, a small but vocal group of female fans vehemently expressed dissatisfaction, considering the series rather banal and outdated due to the clichéd nature of the storyline. Such a series of comments is not widespread and garners support from only a limited number of individuals on the same website, MyDramalist.com:

Throughout this entire series, it was filled with cringeworthy moments as well as odd and questionable decisions made by the characters in this drama. The story was very bland and uninteresting, nothing really excited comes about in terms of the progress of the story. The two leads spend the entire series hiding their love from one another and the people around them.

MyDramaList, Apr 10, 2022

By the time I was on episode 7, I was barely tolerating this drama and was watching it just to finish it. I've been an avid K-drama consumer since the early 2000s, so when I see so many comments about people saying this drama is all the "cliches done right", I couldn't disagree more.

MyDramaList, Apr 25, 2022

the cold ML archetype is overdone and horrifying, and in 2022 i didnt think id have to watch this arrogant, spoiled man literally blackmailing a poor girl into fake dating him and then harassing her about it even at work. imagine if the ML was unattractive or sixty years old, it

wouldnt seem so romantic then. but media romanticizes stalking, borderline harassment, pushy men, and this affects how we see relationships and set standards.

MyDramaList, Apr 5, 2022

These comments appeared inconsistently and received relatively less support than previous reviews. In particular, they express disapproval for certain segments of the K-drama, deeming them questionable. Despite the characterization of the female lead as embodying a “hardworking” archetype, the audience acknowledged instances where her responses and actions exhibited passivity in the unfolding events of the series. Specifically, objections were raised concerning Tae-Moo's endeavours to persuade Ha-Ri through financial incentives and overly assertive pursuit, ultimately resulting in the establishment of their romantic relationship, which in turn was perceived as controversial.

3.6. The positive representation of the female characters

One noteworthy aspect that prominently emerges in the discourse surrounding K-Drama is the filmmaker's skilful incorporation of a more classical approach to the romance genre without undermining the significance of the female protagonist, Shin Ha-ri. Rather than succumbing to traditional gender roles, the show portrays her as an “independent”, talented, and hardworking woman, adding depth and substance to her character. To begin with, the introduction of Shin Ha-ri as a food researcher stands out as a distinctive choice in media representation. This profession is seldom highlighted in mainstream media, and its inclusion in the show challenges conventional portrayals of female characters limited to certain professions. In episode 8, as a team-building competition at work, Shin Ha Ri and her department colleagues play dodgeball against other teams in the company. She is desperate to win, and even hurts her arm during the game, as the winner

will get a meeting with the company president, who is the male lead Kang Tae Mo (See Figure 8). This behaviour shows the heroine's strong dedication to the love of a man, and she is willing to take risks to prove her love, which is atypical compared to previous 2009 and 2013 K-dramas.



Figure 8: Ha-ri actively participates in a competition to win and prevent the other contestants from getting a chance to go on a date with company president Kang Tae-moo as a prize.

In contrast to the previous two K-dramas, where female fans expressed misogynistic sentiments towards the female protagonists, especially criticizing the lack of emotional depth and passive demeanour in their acting, *Business Proposal* received considerable approval from a significant portion of female viewers. This sentiment was evident in the analysis of 243 reviews on MyDramalist and discussions on Twitter. It is this category of viewers who note the heroine's eagerness to show her unwavering determination and ambitious pursuit of professional excellence.

Kim Se Jeong does a great job portraying Ha Ri! She is so funny and she really matched well with her character. Her expressions are on point and she is doing justice to Ha Ri's character! I also love Ha Ri as a character! She is sweet and genuine, but didn't let anyone step all over her (ex. in episode 5 when she stood up to Tae Mu over the ravioli).

MyDramaList, Mar 15, 2022

We need more female characters like Shin Hari and Jin Youngseo in kdramas. Smart, strong, independent and driven women who don't let anyone walk over them. One of the reasons why I love Business Proposal so much.

Twitter, Jun 16, 2023

Such a positive change in viewers' response not only indicates a deviation from traditional models of female characters in the previously analysed K-dramas but also reflects a broader evolution in viewers' expectations and preferences. The positive response from female audiences indicates a growing demand for series that go beyond conventional gender stereotypes and emphasize the importance of portraying more authentic and relevant images of women in the media that demonstrate courage, intelligence and determination.

Furthermore, the K-Drama thoughtfully delves into the emotional growth of the female lead. Shin Ha-ri lets go of her unrequited love for seven years, Lee Min-woo, who all along deliberately rejected and preferred another woman over her, without any concern for her feelings. In the eighth episode, she first realises her romantic feelings for the male protagonist, Kang Tae-moo, when they are on holiday together with Lee Min-woo and his girlfriend. Despite Min-woo showing some concern for Tae-moo and Ha-ri's relationship, the heroine still prefers Tae-moo, realising the correlation between the two men's attitudes towards her. This narrative development exhibits her resilience and ability to overcome past heartaches, reflecting her maturity and emotional strength. The show breaks away from the stereotype of women being solely defined by their romantic relationships and instead emphasizes the significance of personal growth and self-discovery. The portrayal of Shin Ha-ri's character as an independent and self-driven woman

contributes to a more nuanced representation of femininity in the romance genre. By steering away from traditional depictions of passive heroines solely dependent on their male counterparts, the series empowers female viewers and challenges societal expectations of women in romantic narratives.

Additionally, the K-Drama skilfully portrays a sincere female friendship between the main character, Shin Ha-ri, and the second female lead, Young-seo. This portrayal of female friendship stands as a powerful representation of female emancipation from gender stereotypes. Despite coming from a wealthy background, Young-seo displays remarkable courage and determination by choosing to leave her father's house in pursuit of independence (See Figure 9). She vehemently resists yielding to her father's insistence on an arranged marriage to a wealthy suitor through blind dates. Instead, she endeavours to carve her path and build a successful career, demonstrating her capability to achieve success without relying on her father's affluence. During Young-seo's challenging period of seeking independence, Shin Ha-ri provides unwavering support, opening her home to her friend until Young-seo finds her place to live. This image vividly conveys the warmth and strength of their bond, emphasizing the importance of female friendship and mutual support. The occasion has sparked admiration among a notable section of female fans on social media, who have actively supported such depiction:

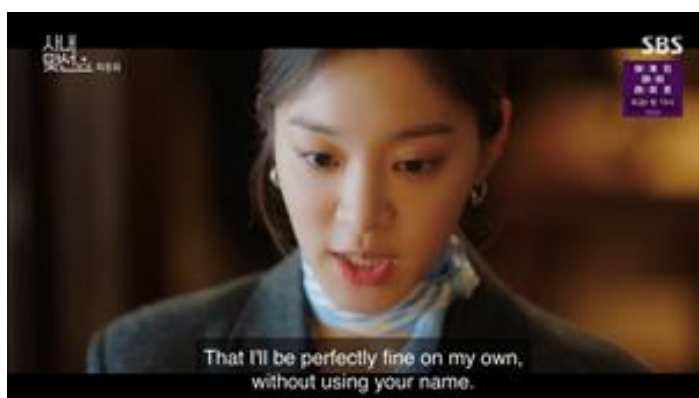


Figure 9: Yeon-seo makes the important decision to give up her father's financial support and build her professional career on her own.

Ha Ri and Jin Young: I freaking love their friendship! I missed seeing these kinds of friendships in K-Dramas where it's all love, no jealousy! They were such a comedic duo who were perfect for the serious duo that Tae Mu and Sung Hoon are.

MyDramaList, Mar 15, 2022

Young Seo & Hari Are the best best-friends ever. A perfect example of a friend in need is a friend indeed (throughout the series they are seen cheering and helping out each other)

MyDramaList, Mar 30, 2022

Comments praising the female friendship between the two heroines are not uncommon and still stand out quite prominently from other reviews. The comment stating, "I missed seeing these kinds of friendships in K-dramas where it's all love, no jealousy!" emphasizes the rarity of healthy female friendships in K-dramas. The viewer highlights the sincere bond between Ha-ri and Young-seo, contrasting it with the more typical portrayal of jealousy and rivalry between female characters in the series. Similarly, the second commentary praises Young-seo and Ha-ri's friendship as the "best best-friends ever," pointing out their constant support and help for each other throughout the series.

Moreover, Young-seo's character exudes determination and self-assuredness. She fearlessly expresses her feelings and does not hesitate to take the initiative in pursuing her romantic interests (See Figure 10). This portrayal defies conventional gender norms, presenting a female character who confidently embraces her emotions and actively pursues her desires. The representation of Ha-ri and Young-seo's friendship showcases the positive impact of supportive and empowering

relationships among women. This aspect of K-Drama breaks away from the prevalent trope of female rivalry and competition often seen in media portrayals. Instead, it celebrates the strength and resilience that female friendships can foster, highlighting the importance of solidarity and encouragement among women in their pursuits:



Figure 10: Young-seo demonstrates assertiveness by openly expressing her affection and her willingness to take the lead in romantic relationships.

the respect for her parent remain and the way she's reassuring sunghoon even when she's the one hurting, my youngseo

Twitter, Apr 5, 2022

A handful of fans mentioned such comments regarding the secondary female character, specifically expressing their admiration for Young-seo's character. In contrast to the portrayal of previous female characters in *Boys Over Flowers* (2009) and *The Heirs* (2013), both female characters in this particular K-Drama exhibit a strong and assertive demeanour. They are depicted as individuals who are willing to fight for their boyfriends and stand up for them in the face of adversity. An exemplary instance of this is seen in the eleventh episode when Young-seo's father disapproves of

her boyfriend. Despite facing opposition from her father, Young-seo refuses to give up on their relationship, emphasizing the depth of her love and commitment to him. This display of unwavering determination showcases her agency and independence in pursuing a relationship that is meaningful to her

3.7. The viewers' comparison of *Business Proposal* to other K-dramas

Moreover, certain fans on Twitter actively compared K-drama with other genres of romantic comedies, in favour of *Business Proposal*. Twitter users particularly emphasize that the filmmaker has not succumbed to the typical plot lines found in older K-dramas, but instead keeps up with the times and even gives important messages for younger audiences, such as the harm of smoking, the problem of using hidden surveillance cameras and other important issues. Moreover, the series also received praise for addressing social issues concerning women. In particular, the audience on Twitter actively supported how the K-drama addressed issues of gender expectations and societal norms for women:

even tho business proposal is a romcom there are still inserts of manners and lessons that the drama is showcasing like hari stopping the high school kids of smoking and giving awareness of spy cams not only for women but for everyone.

Twitter, Mar 17, 2022

unlike that other ass of a show there was no: - misogynistic male lead - female lead who FALLS for misogynistic male lead - 2nd male lead who is also a very subtle bitch - THE WHOLE ML SAYING WOMEN ONLY WORK TO APPEAL TO MEN WAS NEVER ADDRESSED – MISOGYNY

Twitter, Feb 28, 2022

when hari was wearing fitting clothes she said that clothes for women are problematic these days because they really make the size smaller where in fact there are a lot of body types and every single one of it is beautiful

+ i also love the way she said that it's not her body's problem but the problem is the size of the clothes which is a reminder that we don't need to hate our body but instead, we need to change the size of the clothes because it's not our fault to have a body type like this

Twitter, Mar 18, 2022

These comments highlight how K-drama, despite belonging to the rom-com genre, raises important societal issues. The first comment notes, “even tho *Business Proposal* is a rom-com, there are still inserts of manners and lessons that the drama is showcasing.” It particularly notes instances where the drama addresses significant issues, such as Ha-ri intervening to stop high school kids from smoking and raising awareness about spy cams. This remark underscores the K-drama's attempt to integrate social problems and moral lessons into the romantic plot. Likewise, a second comment notes that the series avoids the negative clichés often found in earlier K-dramas. Specifically, the viewer lists negative elements that are not inherent in the plot of *Business Proposal*, such as a misogynistic male lead and a female lead who falls for such behaviour. The third comment also expresses appreciation that K-drama addresses a serious topic regarding the issue of body image expectations in society. It praises the heroine for recognizing this problem: “I also love the way she (Ha-ri) said that it's not her body's problem but the problem is the size of the clothes”. Thus, these comments suggest that the series contributes to presenting a more progressive and socially oriented picture.

3.8. The issue of “molka” in *Business Proposal*

Additionally, the show also received positive feedback for showcasing the issue of “molka” in South Korea. “Molka” is a Korean term for hidden cameras or miniature spy cameras that are illicitly installed, often to capture voyeuristic images or videos and provide the observer with “visual pleasure”, using Laura Mulvey's term. The camera's focus in *Business Proposal*, interestingly, deviates from the usual male gaze connected to “molka” events. In contrast to traditional depictions, the episode features a quick succession of projected moments rather than a strong emphasis on the neighbour's or observer's camera perspective. The filmmakers' deliberate decision to move away from the traditional use of the male gaze camera perspective is a thoughtful choice that subtly challenges and reframes the series. As a rule, in many typical K-Dramas, when a female character becomes a victim of “molka”, she tends to react passively and relies on others to handle the situation for her. However, in this particular series, the character Young-seo exhibits a starkly different response. When Young-seo discovers that her neighbour has been secretly watching her through a hidden camera in the 5th episode, she takes immediate action and reports the crime to the police (See Figure 11). Notably, she gathers evidence to support her case, demonstrating a proactive and assertive approach to addressing the issue. This portrayal challenges the prevalent depiction of passive victims in similar situations and showcases a character who refuses to remain silent in the face of violation.



Figure 11: Young-seo accidentally drops a lamp that was given to her by a neighbour, revealing a hidden camera within it.

Thus, considering all the above-mentioned problems related to the representation of women and their role in society, important to make the necessary changes to pave the way for a more favourable and equitable future for females. Therefore, Donna Haraway's (1985) concept of the cyborg gains relevance in addressing this matter. Specifically, since the image of the cyborg symbolizes the destruction of boundaries and stereotypes, including those of gender, it can play a pivotal role in disrupting established societal norms and expectations. In the *Business Proposal*, the heroines, both Ha-ri and Young-seo, embody the idea of a cyborg as they overcome traditional limitations by showing determination and strength in pursuing their goals. Their autonomy and independence with no need for external assistance, especially from men, challenge conventional assumptions about women's capabilities within the cultural framework. Consequently, cyborg theory can contribute to the narrative of strong and self-reliant female characters, thereby also inspiring real changes in perceptions and attitudes towards women.

Despite Young-seo's proactive response, the series also sheds light on the traumatic impact of such incidents on victims. After the incident, Young-seo experiences significant trauma, resulting in an aversion to using public bathrooms due to fear of being filmed again. This portrayal

highlights the emotional and psychological toll that such violations can inflict on victims, illustrating the challenging journey towards healing and recovery. By addressing the issue of molka more realistically and sensitively, K-Drama contributes to raising awareness about the prevalence of such crimes in South Korea. It serves as a platform to initiate conversations about the need for stronger measures to combat hidden camera crimes and provide support for victims in their journey towards healing.

However, despite the show receiving overall positive feedback, some aspects were perceived as “disappointing” by viewers and critics. One such element pertains to the resolution of the “molka” issue involving the male main character, Kang Tae-moo. Being influential and affluent, Tae-moo takes charge of gathering testimonies from other victims of Young-seo's neighbour and initiates legal action against the perpetrator. Additionally, he uses his power to buy out the company where the culprit works and has him dismissed from his position. This resolution has been subject to criticism, as it seemingly reinforces the idea that even when a woman takes initiative in addressing a problem, she ultimately requires the assistance of a man to achieve a satisfactory outcome (Woo, 2022). This portrayal perpetuates gender stereotypes and raises questions about the extent of female agency and empowerment within the storyline. Some viewers feel that the plot would have been more inspiring and satisfying if Young-seo had found a way to avenge herself without the intervention of male characters. In this case, the importance of female empowerment and independence in the face of hardship would have been emphasized.

3.9. Unexplained conflicting moments in the *Business Proposal*

The reception of the K-drama was predominantly favourable, with a limited number of comments expressing disapproval. Notably, these criticisms were not directed towards the female

character or actress, but rather, in surprising contrast to the preceding two K-dramas, they pertained to the perceived conventional nature of the storyline, specifically its utilization of the Cinderella trope. In particular, this set of comments relates to dissatisfaction with some concerning scenes and unexplained plot moments. The secondary male character, Cha Sung-hoon, who later becomes Young-seo's boyfriend, engages in a morally ambiguous act by having sexual intercourse with her while she is heavily under the influence of alcohol. As a result, she had no recollection of the event the following day, indicating a lack of clear consent:

The second couple had chemistry, which was more than the main couple. They kept me watching the show, I won't lie. But then they slept together - while she was super drunk. Drunk enough to not remember anything. While he wasn't drunk. How come that's okay?

Twitter, May 15, 2022

Most viewers did not share this viewpoint, as the analysis of 423 comments on MyDramaList, 155 reviews on IMDb, and discussions on Twitter revealed that the majority admired the second male protagonist. The quoted comment recognizes the noticeable “chemistry” between the secondary characters even more than between the main couple, stating, “They kept me watching the show, I won't lie.” However, the viewer realizes the circumstances of their first sexual intercourse during which Young-seo is not conscious, and notes, “she was super drunk. Drunk enough to not remember anything.” The tone of the commentary noticeably shifts and brings up the critical question, “he wasn't drunk. How come that's okay?”. This comment emphasizes the importance of consent and ethics in shows depicting intimate relationships while also avoiding romanticizing such scenes.

Yet, just like previous K-dramas (*Boys Over Flowers*, *The Heirs*), *Business Proposal* does not shy away from that clichéd moment when both main characters confess their love affairs to their families and face disapproval in return, especially from the man's family side. This scene in the final episodes was received very controversially by viewers, as the main character's only grandfather initially forced him to go on blind dates and marry any woman to start a family, but after meeting Shin Ha-Ri, he suddenly changed his mind drastically, referring to her lower social status. At the same time, Ha-Ri's family also has concerns about their loving relationship, particularly fearing judgement and misunderstanding from society, as the man's affluence is not comparable to their position, which could arouse suspicion. As a consequence, Ha-Ri herself begins to have doubts about their relationship, feeling insecure and unsuitable for him, and especially anxious about what her colleagues will think of her. There is a sense of indecision and low self-esteem in her character as she considers rejecting him. The comment below reflects a minority of female fans' discontent over a clichéd moment, particularly the illogical behaviour of the male protagonist's grandfather:

Особенно бесит нелогично поведение старпёра: то он тащится женить внука, то он уже против этого – ну это же бред.⁹

HDRzka, July 14, 2022

The episodes felt like fillers all the time... A lot that served as a foundation for the plot didn't get explained. Tae-mu's grandfather who wanted him to marry any woman to have kids but when it was Ha-ri he didn't support the relationship

⁹ "Especially annoying is the illogical behaviour of the grandfather: one moment he's all for marrying off his grandson, the next he's against it - it's just nonsense".

MyDramaList, May 15, 2022

The quoted comments highlight the inconsistencies in the plot of the K-drama, particularly concerning the behaviour of the male lead character's grandfather. The first comment noted the illogical nature of the grandfather's actions, stating, “one moment he's all for marrying off his grandson, the next he's against it - it's just nonsense.” Similarly, the second commentary also emphasizes the contradictory nature of the grandfather's actions. Specifically, despite his desire for his grandson to marry and have children, he does not yet support his grandson's relationship with Ha-ri.

Overall, a large portion of the female audience has expressed and continues to express their admiration for the actors' performances highlighting the show's incorporation of comedic elements. Unlike the reaction of the female fans to the previous two K-dramas, where they mostly expressed their displeasure with the performer of the main female role, revealing some kind of misogynistic nature, now the example of the recently released K-drama, it can be seen that the situation has changed dramatically. Female viewers praised the actress' performance, complimenting her on how skillfully she portrayed the character and noting her seamless immersion into the role. This phenomenon can be attributed both to the active participation of fans in expressing their opinions on the Internet, through which they influence the production of the show, as well as to the filmmakers' awareness of recent trends in the media related to women, who in turn are the main consumers of the product. Moreover, the acting feels real and relatable to the female audience, making them connect to the story and character with authenticity and emotional depth. Despite some dissatisfaction with the show's stereotypical plot and initial reservations regarding the adaptation of a webtoon into a drama format, *Business Proposal* managed to garner favourable

feedback for its approach in embracing romantic comedy clichés and reimagining them through a “slapstick comedy” lens, as well as evoking a sense of nostalgia for the old days of K-dramas.

Thus, over the fourteen years since the release of *Boys Over Flowers* (the first K-drama under research), there has been an evolution in the representation of female characters in K-dramas. One can notice that the old conventional image of a passive, silent and aloof woman develops a new picture of an independent heroine who is not afraid to actively follow her interests, pursue her own career goals and help her family, yet also has a strong character and is ready to fight for her love. In contemporary K-dramas that are not centred on the Cinderella storyline, images of women already go beyond conventional gender roles. Now a woman in the show can have a fully developed character and be the centre of the story, with the whole plot revolving around her, and no longer be a pretty addition for the rich hero of the show.

On the whole, the evolution of female characters in Korean television series over the years has been quite noticeable. Active feminism in South Korea as well as the active participation of digital fans in media production has provoked a transformation in the representation of women. The outdated image of women being confined by gender restrictions and relying on male influence has been surpassed by the portrayal of a new, liberated woman free from gender bias, capable of asserting her own desires and reshaping her life. The K-drama *Business Proposal* may at first glance seem like a typical Cinderella story, but its plot contains significant insights into the experiences and roles of women. Notably, the storyline delves into important issues such as the societal expectations regarding small-sized clothing for women and addresses the pervasive problem of molka, among other pertinent concerns.

Moreover, the main and secondary female characters in this series distinguish themselves through their extraordinary willpower and determination, setting them apart as heroines distinct from the traditional female portrayals analyzed in the previously reviewed K-dramas. These thematic elements contribute to a more inclusive and socially aware representation of women in the media landscape and demonstrate K-drama's commitment to transcending the boundaries of a conventional Cinderella story, addressing contemporary societal issues surrounding women's experiences. The contemporary Korean television series industry is gradually moving towards creating images of women who are liberated from traditional gender stereotypes. This reflects a shift in public perception, as well as female fans, and the understanding of women's roles in the modern world. Thus, the K-drama *Business Proposal* raises important questions about women's empowerment, and their ability to shape their destiny and achieve success, regardless of outdated gender expectations and stereotypes. This message opens the door to freer and more diverse gender portrayals and encourages reconsidering women's roles and opportunities in today's society.

Conclusion

The examination of female audiences' reactions to the portrayal of women in Korean dramas, based on three popular K-dramas set in different years, revealed some intriguing aspects of the evolution of female characters within this genre. *Boys Over Flowers* (2009), *The Heirs* (2013), and *Business Proposal* (2022) exhibit distinct patterns that emerged in the depiction and treatment of female characters, reflecting shifts in societal norms and audience expectations over time. Initially, the portrayal of female characters leaned toward traditional Confucian beliefs and values, with early K-dramas presenting heroines as submissive and tolerating mistreatment from male leads.

However, according to audience reviews and comments, contemporary viewers are increasingly critical of such representations, especially in light of the rise of active feminism and increased attention to gender dynamics in the media. Active feminism in Korea since 2016 has significantly reinforced this criticism, with the comment sections on social media platforms such as IMDb, MyDramaList.com, and HDrezka being notably dominated by negative reviews of *Boys Over Flowers* and *The Heirs*. The portrayal of female characters in both *Boys Over Flowers* and *The Heirs* fails to demonstrate significant evolution or advancement in the representation of women. These two Korean dramas display analogous patterns in their depiction of female roles. At the time of the release of shows, viewers were initially superficial about their content and were even fascinated by watching them. However, over time after re-watching the K-dramas, they became aware of problematic aspects in the narratives. This shift in perception is indicative of changing societal attitudes towards gender roles and relations.

On the other hand, some female viewers still continue to express their appreciation for *The Heirs*. The analyzed set of comments indicates that many female fans attribute the appeal of these K-dramas to the skillful use of the Cinderella trope, infusing the plot with elements of imaginative storytelling. Despite recognizing the implausibility of such plots, female fans continue to watch the series as a form of escapism from everyday life. It is also important that a specific portion of female fans show a particular fascination with these K-dramas solely due to the performance of male actors while expressing dissatisfaction with the female leads or the actresses. This dissatisfaction is primarily due to the flaws in their acting, indicating an underlying misogynistic tendency among viewers.

Nevertheless, there has been a clear advancement in the representation of female characters in K-dramas from 2009 to the present day, with more contemporary K-dramas starting to consider fan interests and the relevance of social issues. This transformation is characterized by the inclusion of feminist discourse and a commitment to addressing the social problems that women face on a daily basis. Unlike the previous two K-dramas, the narrative of *Business Proposal* highlights a departure from traditional tropes towards more nuanced and empowering portrayals of female characters. Audience appreciation for authentic performances and narratives that confront societal issues demonstrates a growing demand for representation that resonates with contemporary values.

In conclusion, the evolution of female characters in Korean television series reflects broader societal changes and the influence of digital media and fan engagement. Over time, as digital fans engaged in active participatory culture by discussing K-dramas across various media platforms, producers began to implement changes based on audience feedback and comments, drawing from the experiences of older K-dramas. While earlier dramas may have perpetuated traditional gender stereotypes, contemporary K-dramas like *Business Proposal* are more reflective of women's

empowerment and agency, challenging outdated gender expectations and stereotypes. The rising global popularity and expanding diversity in themes, narratives, and production quality of K-dramas are fueling the emergence of a new area of research, facilitated by the growing accessibility of streaming platforms.

Filmography

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Kang Shin-hyo, dir. *The Heirs*. Written by Kim Eun-sook. SBS, 2013.

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