

The Perpetuation of Negative Stereotypes about Women: A Thematic Analysis of Three selected Korean Dramas

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Received: 02 July 2024

Accepted: 06 September 2024

Date Published Online: 31 October 2024

Abstract: K-dramas, or South Korean television dramas, have achieved widespread global popularity. Their appeal lies in captivating visuals, high-quality cinematography, talented casts, and diverse storylines, making it clear why audiences are hooked. Though they might appear simplistic, a deeper examination shows layers of meaning, including the prominent influence of the female gaze in many of them. Women in Korean television dramas are portrayed as modern, multifaceted, feminine, and feminist. However, despite their seemingly rich, varied, and complex personas, these female characters still adhere to traditional concepts of femininity, even when presented as feminist. By analysing a range of popular K-dramas, this study aimed to highlight the stereotypical representations and examined the impacts of these portrayals of women on viewers through selected Korean dramas.

Keywords: Feminism, k-drama, representation, stereotypes, women

Introduction

Korea's culture has quickly spread across Asia, gaining popularity. Its influence has reached Europe and other parts of the world. Interest in Korean TV dramas, music, and movies grows rapidly, especially in countries like Japan, China, Mongolia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Thailand. Kim and Ryoo (2007) pointed out that the Korean Wave (Hallyu) and other Asian cultural trends have become popular in the region because they feel more relatable and do not carry the racial or ethnic biases often found in Western media. People in Asia are drawn to Hallyu because it offers a sense of belonging. Although Hallyu dramas and movies may show suffering and exploitation, they differ from what are usually portrayed by Hollywood movies, where racial and ethnic discrimination in the US are often reflected. Korean dramas, known for their engaging narratives and high production values, have captured the hearts of viewers worldwide. However, alongside their global success, K-dramas have faced criticism for perpetuating negative stereotypes about women. One of the studies by Siswanti (2013) who focused on 2011 Korean drama *My Princess*, which tells the story of Lee Seol, a college student who discovers she is the great-granddaughter of the last emperor of the Joseon Dynasty. As she adjusts to her new role as a princess, Lee Seol faces numerous personal challenges, ultimately choosing to abandon her royal title to be with the man she loves. Through a feminist lens, the analysis explored the portrayal of women in the drama, particularly highlighting how traditional gender roles are depicted as subordinate to patriarchal norms, with women often portrayed as victims or passive figures meant to comfort men. The findings suggested that women in the drama are represented as naive, less sophisticated, and ultimately weaker or less important compared to men indirectly reinforcing traditional gender norms and contributing to the persistence of gender inequality in society.

Amid its growing dominance and influence in the global market, Korean TV is seen as a tool of soft power, playing a key role in creating, sharing, and consuming popular culture across borders. Research on K-drama usually centred around its influence on students' motivation and academic performance and language of international fans. It is evident that there are numerous studies on gender representation, but relatively only few focuses specifically on stereotypes and the representation of women. Although feminist portrayals in K-dramas have evolved over time, the question remains whether their modern dramas are becoming more progressive in their depiction of feminist themes or if they continue to significantly adhere to traditional values. Thus, this paper seeks to examine the portrayal of women in three selected Korean dramas and will answer the following objectives:

1. To identify the portrayal of women in the three selected Korean dramas.
2. To examine the impacts of women's portrayal in the three selected Korean dramas.

Literature Review

Historical Context of Women in Korean Media

Over the last 100 years, South Korea has gone through many changes. It moved from the old Chosŏn dynasty to Japanese rule, the Korean War, military control, fast industrial growth and becoming a modern democracy. Even though Yung-Chung (1979) in his analysis stated that during pre-Chosŏn era (57 BC – 935 AD), there were developments of women's history during the Kingdom of Silla, where women were not confined to their homes. They played a significant role in the workforce, contributing to both taxes and labour. Lower and middle-class women, whether married or not, often worked in agriculture and helped their male relatives to learn trades. Men and women were both important to the workforce and were required to pay taxes until the age of sixty. They shared the responsibility of supporting their families financially. While men could be drafted into the military, their wives took charge of the household during their absence. These women had a lot of control over family finances and daily household decisions. Despite this progress, women's status did not improve much. They were still seen as second-class citizens in the Chosŏn era because of patriarchal beliefs. In the late 1800s, women started joining social movements to fight for their rights, and by the late 1900s, they achieved many successes (Vida, 2023). Today, women are legally equal to men, but they are still facing discrimination, violence, and unfair treatment. The portrayal of women in Korean media has been heavily influenced by historical and cultural factors. Women historically were depicted as passive, submissive, and confined to domestic roles, reflecting broader societal expectations. Moreover, the existence of traditional Confucian values has emphasized more patriarchal structures and gender roles and significantly shaped the representation of women in Korean entertainment.

Women in TV and Films

Since cable and satellite TV are common, it has become a part of daily life across all social classes. It is a popular and widely accepted medium, especially in developing countries. The introduction of satellite TV in 1991 transformed both the content and role of television. According to Kaul & Sahni (2010), sex stereotypes are clearly seen in how men and women are shown on television. Men are usually portrayed with strong, masculine traits, while women are often shown as homemakers, wives, or mothers, focusing on family and being submissive. Men are depicted as employed and competitive, while women in similar roles are rare and seen as exceptions. Even when women hold powerful positions, the influence of a male-dominated society is still obvious.

Films cover many topics like family drama, romance, religion, and social issues. They can strongly influence viewers, and any negative messages can have harmful effects on society. While films have helped change some social views, there is still a lack of awareness about the true status of women in a society. Many studies show that women are underrepresented in movies. Johnston (2010) studied a sample of 20 films featuring government roles and found that only two professionals were women, making up just 10% of the sample. This is surprising because about half of these movies were

made in the 1990s, a time when women were better represented in the workforce than in earlier decades. This imbalance suggests that the career is still viewed as male-dominated and that women face a glass ceiling in the profession. It is important to note that showing women in fewer or subordinate roles compared to men is consistent with how women are generally portrayed in film and television (Lee, 2001, as cited in Johnston, 2010).

Yu (2006), in her chapter titled *Images of Women in Korean Movies*, emphasized the divided portrayal of women in Korean cinema, particularly in the melodrama and horror genres. On one hand, there is the “good wife and wise mother,” who adheres to traditional Confucian values and is confined by the ideology of chastity. On the other hand, there is the wicked woman, often depicted as either a femme fatale or a seductress. In the first type of portrayal, women are portrayed as victims or symbols of endurance in the face of a harsh history. Many films featuring this tragic and restrained image of women were screened at international film festivals in the 1980s, reinforcing the idea that such depictions were emblematic of Korean cinema.

Kumari & Joshi (2015) stated that media has helped bringing social change in Indian society, but its portrayal of women has become problematic. Often, women are shown as sexual objects with little worth. This sends harmful messages about how women should be treated and lowers their status in a society.

Lastly, Roy (2016) provided an analysis at how gender is portrayed on Arabic television. His finding revealed that out of 743 characters, women were noticeably underrepresented, less likely to have noticeable jobs, and more often shown in traditional gender roles. However, programs written by women were less stereotypical in their portrayals. There were differences among the Arab countries producing the shows, with conservative countries showing more traditional portrayals of women, while Turkish programs were similar to those from more liberal Arab countries. The findings were compared to U.S. shows and discussed in relation to how viewers might be influenced by these portrayals.

Other studies on Korean Drama and Feminism

Safira (2024) provided a thoughtful examination of the evolving representation of women in Korean dramas and how it reflects broader societal issues in South Korea. The study highlighted the persistent struggles against misogyny and patriarchy, while acknowledging the strides made in challenging gender stereotypes. Employing Neuman's framework (2003), the research delves into the mechanisms behind this phenomenon, offering a nuanced view of the role Korean dramas play in shaping gender discourse. The findings suggested that while progress has been made, Korean dramas still reflect the complexities of female experiences, and their relatable themes, combined with an engaged audience, enable them to act as subtle but powerful agents of social change. Overall, this study has shed light on the important intersection of pop culture and gender roles, particularly within the globalized context of South Korea.

Next, Andjani & Annisa (2024) focused on the portrayal of women in the Korean drama “Search: WWW”. By using a constructivist paradigm and Barthes' semiotic analysis method (1968), the study has shed light on how patriarchal values are subtly embedded within the drama, even as it showcases strong, independent female characters. The research revealed that while these women are depicted as successful, intelligent, and self-reliant, there are cautionary undertones advising against independence, solitude, and challenging power structures. The findings highlighted the complex roles of media in both advancing and reinforcing traditional gender norms in Korean society.

Furthermore, a review made by Wall (2024) on the analysis of another popular South Korean drama titled “When the Camellia Blooms” emphasized how the series captures attention across demographics by addressing relevant social issues like the #MeToo movement and misogynistic violence. The key focus is the portrayal of the single mother Tongbaek, whom the author argued has broken away from traditional depictions found in Korean literature and film. By contrasting Tongbaek's character with previous portrayals of single mothers, the series presents a more progressive, self-sufficient image of motherhood. While the idealization of motherhood may conflict with feminist principles, the drama ultimately encourages a nuanced conversation about breaking free from patriarchal norms and embracing feminist mothering. This thought-provoking analysis positions the drama as a vehicle for broader social discourse on gender roles and parenting.

Lee (2024) in addition, offered an insightful exploration of the representation of Southeast Asian women in South Korean media, using the popular show *My Neighbour Charles* as a case study. By applying the VVVA (Visual-verbal video analysis) method, by Fazeli et al. (2023), the research focused on four episodes featuring women from Indonesia, Cambodia, and the Philippines. The findings highlighted how these women are portrayed in stereotypical and often sexist roles, such as traditional housewives or immigrant labourers, with additional emphasis on ethnic stereotypes. The study has made a valuable contribution to the field of media representation, shedding light on the intersection of gender and ethnicity in Korean television. It has also deepened our understanding of how Southeast Asian women are perceived and depicted in Korean media, offering important insights into on-going discussions of racial and gender stereotyping in global media contexts.

Using framing theory and cultivation theory, Msufu & Britto (2024) explored how gender frames in television series impact societal perceptions of women. They analyzed one popular TV series and gathered insights from focus group discussions. Through content analysis of 20 episodes, it is found that men are depicted as educated, wealthy, and powerful, while women are often shown in narrow, dependent roles such as homemakers. Male respondents view women as weak and dependent, which aligns with the portrayal in the series. The study concluded that such representations harm women's self-esteem and perpetuate societal inequalities. It calls for more positive and empowering portrayals of women in TV series to help change public perception and improve gender equality.

Conclusively, Shamim, & Rafek (2024) presented a critical analysis of gender stereotypes in contemporary television shows, focusing on their role in shaping societal perceptions. It highlights the on-going challenges in media representations despite growing awareness of gender equality. The study employs a comprehensive framework to analyse character traits, occupational roles, and relational dynamics within TV narratives. By reviewing a wide range of television programs, the research has identified both the reinforcement of traditional stereotypes and the emergence of more progressive portrayals. The findings emphasize the media's responsibility in promoting gender inclusivity and offer strategies for fostering a more equitable media landscape. This study has contributed toward valuable discussions on the media's role in societal change.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative content analysis to collect data pertaining to the themes that show reflections of women's portrayal in the selected popular Korean dramas. A total of three popular Korean television dramas were selected for this study namely *True Beauty*, *Dr Slump* and *Crash Course in Romance*. All these TV drama series were aired on different television stations in the year 2020, 2023, 2024 and one of it was an adaptation from a best seller novel. Feminist theory and gender studies provide a robust framework for understanding the construction, perpetuation, and potential subversion of gender roles. By engaging with the work of prominent feminist and gender theorists, this framework allows us to deconstruct how gender stereotypes are being portrayed, shape societal perceptions and influence women's roles both in media and real life. Here are some key literary theories applied:

Feminist Theory: The Social Construction of Gender

In its various forms, serves as the foundation for analysing the cultural and societal mechanisms that uphold gender stereotypes. At its core, feminist theory examines power relations and social inequalities rooted in patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender differences. De Beauvoir's work in *The Second Sex* (1949) underscored the idea that women are socially conditioned into roles that serve the patriarchal order, a concept that remains central to feminist analyses of media portrayals of women. De Beauvoir's assertion, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman," highlights the constructed nature of gender, and media representations often reinforces these constructions by repeatedly depicting women in traditional roles. Building on Beauvoir, Butler (1990) introduced the concept of gender performativity. Butler challenged the binary view of gender, suggesting that gender is not a fixed identity, but a set of behaviours performed according to societal expectations. Gender is produced through repeated actions, and media plays a critical role in the repetition and reinforcement

of these gender performances. Television shows, for instance, often depict women in ways that naturalize gender roles, presenting stereotypical performances of femininity (e.g., the nurturing mother, the seductive woman) as inherent rather than constructed.

Post-Feminism and Media

Angela McRobbie, a leading scholar of post-feminism, explored the relationship between feminist gains and contemporary media. In her work, *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), McRobbie critiqued how postfeminist media discourses often co-opt feminist language to present the illusion of equality while reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes. Post-feminism emphasizes individualism, choice, and empowerment, but this is often depicted in media as women's ability to "choose" stereotypical roles (e.g., being both a career woman and a mother without critiquing the societal structures that make this balance difficult). Television shows that present women as empowered, independent, and successful may simultaneously promote the idea that these women can only find fulfilment through heteronormative relationships, motherhood, or beauty standards. Thus, the postfeminist media landscape often appears to celebrate women's progress while subtly reinforcing the very stereotypes it claims to challenge.

Media Studies and Gender Representation

Feminist scholars such as Mulvey has explored how women are objectified in media through the "male gaze". Mulvey's theory of the male gaze (1975) argued that mainstream media is designed to cater to the heterosexual male viewer where women are depicted as objects of male desire rather than as autonomous individuals. This objectification reinforces stereotypes that value women primarily for their physical appearance, rather than their capabilities or intellect. This theory aligns with the portrayal of women as passive, decorative figures, reinforcing the stereotype that women's primary value lies in their attractiveness to men, depicting women as objects of male desire rather than as fully realized individuals.

Power and Patriarchy in Gender Stereotypes

Foucault's theories on power and discourse (1979) are also relevant. He argued that power operates through discourse by the way things are talked about and represented. Television, as a medium of mass communication, plays a key role in shaping discourses around gender and reinforcing gender power relations. By consistently depicting women in stereotypical roles, television contributes to the production and maintenance of societal expectations on how women should behave, look, and live. By drawing on these feminist and gender theories, this research framework provides a comprehensive lens to analyse gender stereotypes of women in television. Theories of power, particularly those advanced by Foucault (1979), further elucidate how gender stereotypes operate as a form of social control. His concept of disciplinary power suggests that societal norms regulate individuals' behaviours, often without overt force (Miller, 1990). Gender stereotypes function in a similar way by dictating what is considered appropriate behaviour for men and women. The media plays a significant role in disciplining women to conform to these expectations, shaping their desires, ambitions, and self-perceptions.

Analysis and Discussion

Korean dramas (K-dramas) are globally recognized for their unique storytelling, compelling characters, and cultural significance. However, despite their popularity, some K-dramas have been criticized for perpetuating negative stereotypes about women. This analysis examines three selected K-dramas: *True Beauty*, *Doctor Slump* and *Crash Course in Romance*. Although there are countless Korean dramas available out there, these three K-dramas are chosen specifically because they portray women at different stages of life: from a young girl in high school, to adulthood, and finally, to a

mature phase. This study wishes to explore how these dramas may reinforce problematic gender stereotypes and the potential impact of such representations.

Case Study 1: *True Beauty*

The drama tells the story of Lim Ju-kyung, the protagonist of the *True Beauty*, initially conforms to societal beauty standards by using makeup to transform her appearance as she is bullied for her natural looks. The narrative focuses heavily on her external appearance, with multiple scenes dedicated to how she “fixes” herself to become more acceptable and desirable to others.

Stereotype Analysis

Beauty Equals Worth

Beauvoir (1949) argued that femininity is not an inherent quality, but rather a socially constructed identity shaped by external forces, including patriarchal ideals. In the context of Ju-kyung’s transformation through makeup, we see a reflection of Beauvoir’s concept that women are often conditioned to view their worth through the lens of male-dominated societal expectations. The drama’s emphasis on beauty as a key to social acceptance which echoes the ways how women’s identities are shaped around the idea that their value is tied to their physical appearance, a form of objectification that Beauvoir critiqued. She suggested that women are taught to be “the Other,” defined by how they appear to men, rather than their own intrinsic qualities. Thus, this portrayal perpetuates the idea that a woman’s worth is externally constructed, not self-determined.

Insecurity and Validation

Beauvoir’s work (1949) also spoke on the insecurity that women often feel due to societal pressures to conform to prescribed standards of beauty. In Ju-kyung’s case, her insecurities are deeply tied to how others, particularly men, perceive her, which aligns with Beauvoir’s critique that women are conditioned to seek validation externally. This need for validation is not a natural state of being but rather a reflection of the gendered expectations imposed by the society. Women, as Beauvoir argued, are socialized to view themselves through the eyes of others, particularly men, leading to insecurity when they fall short of idealized beauty standards. Ju-kyung’s reliance on makeup to gain confidence suggests that her self-worth is constructed around meeting these external criteria, reinforcing the stereotype that women are inherently insecure about their appearance unless they receive approval from society.

In both points, Beauvoir’s philosophy (1949) helps reveal how the drama mirrors patriarchal structures that confine women to a role where beauty and validation from others define their identity, rather than their autonomous self.

Competition among Women

The drama also depicts competition among women based on appearance, reinforcing the stereotype that women are often in rivalry with each other over superficial attributes. This undermines the potential for positive female relationships and collaboration, instead promoting a narrative of jealousy and competition.

In the context of Mulvey’s theory (1975), this can be seen as aligning with the *Male Gaze* where her worth and identity are visually tied to how attractive she appears to the male characters in the story. Mulvey’s concept of “to-be-looked-at-ness” is evident in the drama. Ju-kyung’s transformation is framed as an object of spectacle, where the audience is invited to assess her appearance, reinforcing the idea that her beauty is the central aspect of her character. Even the male characters’ initial reactions to her are based largely on her physical beauty.

Visual Pleasure and Spectatorship

According to Mulvey (1975), the *Male Gaze* also creates pleasure for the viewer through "scopophilia" (pleasure in looking). *True Beauty* includes numerous moments where Ju-kyung is filmed in a way that emphasizes her beauty, particularly after her transformation. This framing, often from the perspective of the male characters or the audience itself, places the viewer in a voyeuristic position, enjoying the transformation and perfection of her looks. This can be reflected in the *Male Gaze* where it positions the female body as a site of visual pleasure and reinforces traditional gender dynamics where women are validated primarily through their physical appearance.

Romantic Relationships and Power Dynamics

The love triangle between Ju-kyung, Lee Su-ho, and Han Seo-jun in *True Beauty* also aligns with Mulvey's theory (1975). Both male characters are attracted to Ju-kyung's outward appearance, and much of the narrative centres on how she navigates their attention. Ju-kyung's internal struggles, such as her self-esteem issues and emotional growth, are often overshadowed by how the male characters react to her appearance and their romantic interest in her.

In many ways, the male characters in the *True Beauty* hold more narrative agency. They are active, complex, and drive much of the plot, while Ju-kyung often remains passive, shaped by their gaze. This imbalance in agency reflects the broader issue Mulvey had raised as to how male characters tend to be the agents of action, while female characters are subjected to being watched and objectified. Even the drama seeks to empower Ju-kyung by highlighting her personal growth, the overwhelming emphasis on her appearance and the male characters' perception of her somewhat limits this subversion. *The Male Gaze* remains dominant throughout much of the narrative.

Case Study 2: Doctor Slump

This drama depicts the story of Nam Ha-Neul, a brilliant anaesthesiologist who always focused on work and studying, leaving no room for excitement in her life. Realizing she is not happy; she crosses paths with Yeo Jeong-Woo during a difficult time in her life. As they support each other, a romantic relationship develops between them.

Stereotype Analysis

Women as Nurturers

Beauvoir's concept of the constructed nature of gender (1949) can help critique the portrayal of women as nurturers in *Dr. Slump*. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argued that women are not born with inherently nurturing qualities, but rather, these roles are imposed on them by societal expectations. The portrayal of female characters as primary caregivers or emotional supporters in *Dr. Slump* aligns with this constructed stereotype, reinforcing the idea that women are "naturally" responsible for the emotional well-being of others.

This characterization limits women's roles to being mothers, wives, or emotional caretakers, much like Beauvoir's (1949) critique on how patriarchal societies have moulded women into these roles. By confining women to nurturing roles, the story often ignores their personal growth and independence. It keeps them in a position where they live mainly for others instead of themselves, reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Romantic Dependency

Foucault's theories of power and discourse (1979) can offer a critical lens through which we can understand the concept of "romantic dependency" in the character of Yeo Jung-woo. Foucault argued that power is exercised through discourse such as language, norms, and societal expectations that shape our understanding of identity, relationships and roles. In this context, the romantic dependency of Yeo Jung-woo is not just a character flaw or a simple narrative device; it is part of a broader

discourse that reinforces the idea that women derive their value from their romantic relationships. According to Foucault, discourse shapes reality by dictating what is seen as normal, acceptable, and desirable. Here, the narrative perpetuates a discourse that confines women to roles where emotional fulfilment and personal worth are tied to their attachment to men, effectively marginalizing alternative sources of identity, such as career success or personal autonomy.

This discourse operates as a form of power, subtly constraining women's choices and reinforcing patriarchal norms. Yeo Jung-woo's emotional dependency reflects the pervasive societal expectation that women's primary goal should be romantic fulfilment, thereby side-lining their potential for self-realization in other areas. This discourse also serves to normalize gender inequality by suggesting that a woman's success, happiness, and even completion is only achievable through romantic involvement, often at the expense of her own ambitions. Foucault's lens of power and discourse highlights how these narratives do more than reflect reality; they actively shape it, contributing to the internalization of gender norms that limit women's agency.

Emotional Vulnerability

In the context of emotional vulnerability, Beauvoir (1949) argued that the portrayal of women as emotionally fragile is not an innate truth, but a reflection of how a society moulds women into roles that emphasize their dependency and the need for male support. This emotional vulnerability serves to maintain a power imbalance where men are portrayed as strong, rational, and independent, while women are seen as passive and reliant on male guidance. The portrayal of women in media often reinforces these gendered stereotypes, with male character like Jung-woo being shown as emotionally vulnerable. When Nam Ha-Neul is depicted as needing a male counterpart to help her navigate both her personal and professional life, it echoes traditional gender roles where men are the protectors and women are the protected. These media narratives perpetuate the belief that emotional strength is a male characteristic, while emotional fragility is an essential quality of femininity.

In this sense, the media does not only mirror existing gender stereotypes but also plays a role in reproducing and reinforcing them. Women are often depicted in situations where they face emotional turmoil, reinforcing the notion that their emotions are something to be managed or controlled by male figures. These portrayals contribute to a broader societal understanding of women as inherently more vulnerable or dependent, while men are framed as the solution to their emotional crises.

Career vs. Personal Life Conflict

Foucault (1979) argued that power is most effective when it is internalized by individuals. This means that societal expectations such as the belief that women must choose between professional success and personal fulfilment which are deeply embedded in women's subjectivity. These norms serve to regulate their behaviour and choices, creating a conflict between what society deems to be "appropriate" for women and their personal ambitions. In *Dr. Slump*, this conflict shows how rules and expectations are used to control and shape women's lives by subtly pressuring them to conform to societal norms around gender roles. In this instance, Foucault's theories (1979) highlight how power and discourse shape the subjectivity of female characters, reinforcing stereotypes about emotional vulnerability and the career vs. personal life dilemma.

Submissive or Docile Behaviour

In some instances, women are portrayed as submissive to male authority, reflecting the traditional Confucian gender roles in Korean society. If *Dr. Slump* shows female characters accepting or tolerating unfair treatment or downplaying their opinions in the presence of male characters, it may reinforce the stereotype that women should be docile and compliant.

Moreover, in this drama McRobbie's illusion of equality between the male and female characters can be seen. The drama ostensibly portrays men and women as equals, particularly through the main characters, Dr. Yeo Jung-woo and Dr. Nam Ha-neul who are both highly skilled, independent doctors facing personal and professional setbacks. However, closer analysis revealed how traditional

gender stereotypes are subtly reinforced, especially in how the female character is framed compared to her male counterpart.

Professional Competence and Emotionality

In many stories, women are often confined to nurturing roles, which limit their personal growth and independence. This keeps them in a state of "immanence," where they exist mainly to care for others rather than focus on their own development. Angela McRobbie's idea of "the illusion of equality" (2009) suggests that while women may seem to have equal opportunities, they are still expected to fit into traditional gender roles.

In the case of Dr. Jung-woo and Dr. Ha-neul, both are presented as competent doctors. However, the male lead, Dr. Jung-woo, is portrayed with a focus on his professional pride and challenges, while the female lead, Dr. Ha-neul, is often shown as more emotionally vulnerable and nurturing. Despite being a highly skilled doctor, her emotional sensitivity and caring nature tend to overshadow her professional abilities. This reinforces stereotypes that women are more emotional and empathetic, while men are more rational and stoic, perpetuating traditional gender expectations. Even though it may appear that both characters are treated equally, Ha-neul's portrayal aligns more with typical ideas of femininity, which subtly upholds gendered norms.

Case Study 3: *Crash Course in Romance*

This drama delves into a story of Nam Haeng-Seon as the primary female protagonist of the drama. She is a former national athlete who has shifted to running a *banchan* (side dish) shop to take care of her niece, Nam Hae-E, after the disappearance of her sister.

Stereotype Analysis

The Idealization of the Self-Sacrificing Woman

Nam Haeng-seon is portrayed as a selfless woman who always puts others first, especially her family, and the male lead. While her dedication is admirable, the show glorifies her sacrifice to the point where she neglects her own desires and well-being. This reflects a stereotype that a "good" woman is one who sacrifices her own needs for others. Beauvoir's theory of gender construction (1949) explains this as part of a broader social expectation that women exist for others, not for their own growth or independence, keeping them in a state of "immanence."

Role as a Caregiver

Nam Haeng-seon's role as a caregiver echoes the traditional gender roles in Korean society, where women are expected to handle domestic tasks and raise children. Despite her previous success as an athlete, her focus has shifted to running a family-oriented business. This change illustrates how women are often expected to prioritize family over personal or professional ambitions. Beauvoir (1949) argues that society constructs these roles, limiting women's potential by positioning them primarily as caregivers, reinforcing traditional gender expectations.

Mother Figure without Being a Biological Mother

Nam Haeng-seon assumes a motherly role for Nam Hae-e, even though she's not her biological mother. This highlights societal expectations that women are naturally suited for caregiving roles, whether or not they are biological mothers. Beauvoir's analysis helps to explain how femininity is socially constructed to equate womanhood with motherhood, further reinforcing traditional roles that limit women's independence.

Professional Identity vs. Personal Life

To integrate McRobbie's concept of post-feminism (2009), particularly the emphasis on individualism, we can highlight how both Haeng-Seon and Nam Hae-E navigate societal pressures and expectations within a framework that celebrates individual achievement while subtly reinforcing traditional gender roles. McRobbie's post-feminism (2009) suggests that women today are encouraged to pursue professional success and personal fulfilment, but within a framework that often places individual choice at the forefront. However, this "choice" can mask how deeply societal norms still shape these decisions, particularly in balancing professional and personal life.

For Haeng-Seon, her struggle to manage both her career and family duties could be seen through the lens of post-feminist individualism, where her success or failure is framed as a personal decision rather than a societal issue. Despite her professional ambitions, societal expectations push her more towards her caregiving role, reflecting a subtle pressure to prioritize family, even though she is expected to "have it all." Nam Hae-E, on the other hand, faces pressures rooted in academic success and societal expectations from a young age, which speaks to the broader post-feminist notion that young women are encouraged to be successful in all areas. Yet, it must be under the guise of individual responsibility. In both cases, McRobbie's post-feminism (2009) highlights the tension between individual autonomy and the underlying societal expectations that continue to govern women's choices.

Pressure of Academic Success

In Korea's highly competitive education system, students, especially girls, face intense pressure to succeed academically. Hae-E's character exemplifies how young women are expected to not only excel in academics but also maintain the grace, composure, and traditional femininity. According to Beauvoir's theory of the social construction of gender (1949), this reflects the way society imposes specific gender roles on women, confining them to idealize images of obedience and propriety. The drama reveals how Hae-E is pressured to fulfil the dual expectation of being both intelligent and embodying these gendered virtues, perpetuating the idea that a woman's worth lies in how well she conforms to these roles.

Struggles with Identity

As a teenager, Hae-E grapples with her sense of identity and self-worth in a society that defines her by her academic achievements and adherence to gender norms. The societal emphasis on perfection, composure, and quietness reflects Beauvoir's argument (1949) that women are often seen not as individuals but as embodiments of ideals dictated by a patriarchal society. Hae-E's struggle with identity mirrors the way women are constructed through the lens of femininity, where their value is measured by their ability to meet the rigid expectations of being studious, obedient, and restrained, rather than being allowed to define themselves on their own terms.

Impact of Stereotypes in K-Dramas on Societal Perceptions

K-dramas, while offering entertainment and cultural insights, also shape societal norms and attitudes. Butler (1990) concept of gender performativity sheds light on how these shows reinforce traditional gender roles by repeatedly portraying female characters in ways that align with socially constructed expectations. In *Doctor Slump*, *Crash Course in Romance* and *True Beauty*, women are often depicted in dependent, self-sacrificing, or appearance-obsessed roles, reinforcing limiting gender norms. According to Butler (1990), gender is not a fixed identity, but something performed based on societal scripts. These recurring portrayals encourage viewers, especially young women, to internalize these "performances," potentially shaping their own behaviour and self-perception in line with stereotypical roles. The global popularity of K-dramas means these stereotypes are not only perpetuated locally but are also exported to other cultures, reinforcing narrow views of femininity worldwide. For K-dramas to promote more empowering portrayals, writers and producers need to diversify female roles by

depicting women in positions that showcase their intelligence, strength, and independence. This also means challenging traditional beauty standards and emphasizing that women's worth isn't tied to their appearance. Positive female relationships that focus on solidarity rather than competition could further shift these narratives, allowing K-dramas to evolve toward more nuanced, empowering portrayals of women.

Conclusion

Korean dramas have a major influence on shaping societal perceptions of women, with their popularity spanning across different regions worldwide. Beyond providing entertainment, they can leave a lasting impact on viewers, both positive and negative. The persistent negative stereotypes about women in K-dramas reflect broader cultural and historical influences but also highlight the need for more progressive and diverse portrayals. By promoting positive and varied representations of women, K-dramas can contribute to greater gender equality and empowerment.

In analysing *True Beauty* through feminist and Mulvey's (1975) lens of the *Male Gaze*, the series reinforces and complicates the dynamics of objectification and visual pleasure. While the drama centres on a female protagonist, her portrayal as an object of beauty, both for the audience and the male characters, reflects the traditional male gaze. While *Doctor Slump* attempts to portray a more equal footing between male and female leads, it subtly reinforces traditional gender roles by focusing on emotionality, beauty standards, and relational identity for the female character. The illusion of equality is maintained through the professional parity of the characters, but the underlying narrative and character development lean into familiar, gendered tropes aligned with McRobbie's illusion of equality (2009). Lastly, in *Crash Course in Romance*, Beauvoir's social construction of gender (1949) is evident in the way female characters are portrayed within the confines of traditional expectations. The drama showcases the complexity of modern Korean femininity, blending traditional roles of caregiving and emotional labour with independence, professional ambition, and self-assertion. These three selected K-dramas effectively demonstrate that their female characters, regardless of their life stage, whether as a young high school student, an adult, or in a later stage of life, continue to face stereotypes and discrimination.

Recommendations for Future Research

In general, to improve gender representation in media, writers and producers should be encouraged to create more complex and diverse female characters that move beyond traditional stereotypes and ensure that a broader range of perspectives is brought to storytelling. For future research, it is recommended to expand the scope beyond the selected Korean dramas and explore a more diverse range of genres and regional media. While the current study focuses on stereotypical portrayals of women in K-dramas, future research could analyse how significant these stereotyping is compared to those in Western, Southeast Asian, or other non-Korean dramas to provide a cross-cultural perspective. Moreover, long-term studies on how women are portrayed in Korean media could show changes in society's views over time. Including audience research on how different groups understand these portrayals would help explain the wider social effects of these stereotypes. Finally, a deeper exploration into how media reforms and how feminist movements influence content creation in Korean television could offer practical insights into improving gender representation in media.

Co-Authors Contribution

Author 1 conceived the original idea for the study, including identifying the topic of negative stereotypes of women in Korean dramas. She was responsible for framing the research questions, objectives, and selecting the three dramas for thematic analysis. She also conducted an extensive review of literature to be used for this study. Author 2 assisted the review of literature and was

responsible for gathering and relevant points from the selected Korean dramas for analysis. She is heavily involved in conducting the thematic analysis and interpreting the data, working closely with the lead author to organize the findings. Author 3 and Author 4 contributed in gathering the review of literature, reviewed the final manuscript, ensuring that all sections were cohesive and aligned with all ethical guidelines particularly in terms of proper citation and the use of copyrighted material in the paper.

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