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THE MAKING OF A PRINCE CHARMING: PERSPECTIVES ON THE VIGOR AND RIGORS OF BECOMING A “PRINCE CHARMING” IN KOREAN DRAMAS

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Abstract

With the phenomenal success of Korean dramas, it is interesting and important to investigate how they have influenced the global market and identify the possible reasons why they have reached such a level of popularity. Hence, this paper aims to present a review of the relevant literature in relation to what makes the leading man in Korean dramas “Prince Charming” that most viewers swoon over them. It seeks to discuss the vigor and rigors of what makes a leading man an “ideal man” based on the existing literature and insights gained based on the authors’ observations as viewers of Korean dramas. Along with the previous findings that have been surveyed in this paper, physical changes or transformation can be added as a factor in creating a “Prince Charming”, at least in the Korean drama context. This is observed when the Prince Charming adapts his status to that of the leading woman, creating the “attainability” image as reflected in more casual wardrobes and informal (i.e. gel-free) hairstyles sported by the leading men. In such cases, the Prince Charming becomes more attainable and more human, rather than an unattainable, ideal being. Another aspect to consider is that the female lead is not generally presented as a damsel in distress anymore that is in need of being rescued in the traditional fairy tales, but that the leading women have their own careers, have strong personalities and have their own convictions, despite having a (still) unequal status with that of the leading men.

Keywords: Prince Charming, Korean Dramas, Global Market

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Introduction

Korean dramas have been a phenomenal success in the Philippines particularly during the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, where people were required to stay at home. During this time, people who were already into Korean Dramas and those who were just starting to get curious about them became more interested in these programs, especially with the presence and popularity of online streaming platforms. There are several other factors that contribute to the popularity of K-dramas. For instance, Serrano et al.'s (2022) study identified such factors as antidote to boredom, influence of family and friends, quality production, romanticized life, practicing Korean culture, time management and sleep schedule effects, and frustration with one's country.

A factor that can be related to a romanticized life and why a Korean drama becomes a hit is because of the presence of its main characters, particularly the leading man who often showcases a "magic charm", providing an enthralling presence. "The women were fascinated with Korean men who were portrayed on TV as being in touch with their emotions and willing to embrace their "effeminate sides" (Lee, 2020a; Kwon, 2022). The lead actor always touches on the different portrayals of emotions as the story moves, rather than focusing on the physical intimacy. The physical intimacy is considered only secondary to the emotional journey, which is the primary point of excitement in K-dramas (Jeelani, 2021).

In connection with the reasons mentioned, this paper aims to present a review of what makes a leading man a "Prince Charming" that most viewers swoon over them. It seeks to discuss the vigor and rigors of what makes a leading man an "ideal man" based on the existing literature and insights on the concept of "Prince Charming" based on the authors' observations as viewers of Korean dramas.

Literature Review

The Prince Charming

The term "Prince Charming" refers to the idealistic and unrealistic expectations that women have about their male partners, which are seen in fairy tales, books, and movies (Steinzeig, 2012; Render, 2017), and the term is deemed to refer to a "stereotypical perfect male" (Steinzeig, 2012). In fairy tales, Prince Charming seems to possess the ideal characteristics of men. In their imagination, girls seek out their Prince Charming by living in magical forests, and as they mature and face reality, the yearning to meet "Prince Charming" continues (Micallef, 2006). Moreover, it is possible that young women's preconceptions about relationships, for example, their perceptions of their ideal man, their future romance, and their boyfriend's behavior can be influenced by fairy tales (Micallef, 2006). After all, as Mutmainna (2015) asserted, the female lead (or damsel in distress who is a beautiful woman and is in need of help) and the male lead (or Prince Charming who seems to appear out of nowhere suddenly and rescues the damsel), are the two key elements that make a "perfect fairy tale". Furthermore, Render (2017) proposed the term "Prince Charming Effect" to mean that "unrealistic and idealistic representations of men in romantic media lead to similar unrealistic and idealistic beliefs in women that lead to lessened relationship satisfaction". In this sense, the romanticization of romance and marriage in romantic media creates unrealistic expectations (Render, 2017).

It is this presence in fairy tales that the Prince Charming can be characterized and idealized; hence, previous studies investigated this ideal man construct in fairy tales. For example, Steinzeig (2012) found differences in the idea of what Prince Charming represents for men and women participants in the said study. For the men, they perceived Prince Charming as the conventional 'good guy', and they did not wish to emulate him. For both men and women in the study, Prince Charming was described in terms of his physical aspects first then personality

traits with regard to the term masculine. For the women participants, they viewed Prince Charming as having a “comforting male presence”.

In Micallef's (2006) study involving 31 young women, with ages ranging from 16 to 24 years old, it was found that the participants identified with the characters to a certain level, despite recognizing some element of fantasy in fairy tales. Because they aspired to experience the same result as the characters—namely, to realize their happily-ever-afters with their Prince Charming—these women may relate with the characters. However, in comparison with the other groups of the participants, the ones belonging to the Relationship group tended to relate with the female characters the least, which may be attributed to them having a more "realistic" view of relationships. It was also found that their expectations from their boyfriend included being protective and providing them with emotional support. Another finding that emerged from the study was the idea of "anti-perfectionism", whereby the participants would likely doubt their relationship and its quality if their boyfriend were perfect. Moreover, the participants believed in the existence of Prince Charming, though he may be different in form from the one depicted in fairy tales. These were some of the findings from Micallef's qualitative study.

The Prince Charming Found in Korean Dramas

One big factor that can make a character be considered as a prince charming is when the audience can relate to his acting and emotions in each scene. According to Baym (2000 cited in Gongora, 2013), being able to engage oneself in the situations and dispositions of the characters is a relevant experience to the audience. They can immerse themselves into the story and give their own interpretations, as well.

Korean dramas provide avenues for women's situations and predicaments to be tackled. Part of this, the softness and kindness of male characters are showcased, too- the perfect, ideal man (Gongora, 2013). It is reminiscent of a damsel-in-distress meets a knight-in-shining armor-fairy tale. From here, the Prince Charming is fully-realized. Usually, it is represented in a poor-girl-meets-rich-boy plot, where the rich boy is very affectionate and will provide everything to the “poor girl”. The “rich boy” can also be the defender of the unfortunate girl, which was showcased in the Korean dramas, *Moon Lovers* and *Goblin*. Since the men in these dramas are powerful, they give viewers the perfect idea of "women being saved by men" (Hassim et al., 2019). Therefore, there is the fancy notion of the audience that the lead actors can bring stability and happiness to the distraught life of their female partners (Agency, 2017; Doo, 2017; Kay, 2017 cited in Hassim et al., 2019). This is where “parasocial relations” are very evident. It is the special bond that the viewers hold toward the characters in the drama (Horton & Wohl, 1956 cited in Hassim et al., 2019). Therefore, while the romantic angle of Korean dramas is being patronized by the viewers, there is also an assumed intimacy and dependency where the audience believe they get some form of courage from these programs (Hassim et al., 2019).

In order to become an ideal Prince Charming, one has to be physically attractive. Therefore, physical attributes of the main characters, particularly the male protagonists, are very much considered. In the study of Gongora (2013), for instance, “most respondents perceived that the male characters were too fashionable, with fancy hair and modern clothes”. The beauty and attractiveness of the characters seem to be the ingredients that make Korean dramas appealing. Aside from the attributes mentioned above, many people, women in particular, believe that since Korean drama actors are wholesome, they are nonsexual in a sense that they provide their romantic partners different ways to show affection other than having sexual intercourse. In the study made by Lee (2020a), it was found that there were female Hallyu tourists who went to Korea to find Korean men who could be their romantic partners or boyfriends. They were inspired by the nonsexual image of Korean men portrayed in the dramas. These women travelled to Korea to break away from the sexsociety and the sexually oriented dating culture in their home countries. According to Vares (2018 cited in Lee, 2020a), sexsociety is a dating

culture where people meet for sexual activity without having to form a romantic relationship afterwards.

Another factor that makes Korean drama actors seem like a Prince Charming is through their effeminate characteristic, which makes them look nonsexual, but desirable (Lee, 2020a). This kind of effeminate looks is called as kkonminam. According to Jung (2006 cited in Lee, 2020a) Kkonminam are men who have beautiful faces, skin, and hair and have androgynous looks. There are also instances that they act feminine. Kkonminam means flower boys. Elfving-Hwang (2011 cited in Lee, 2020a) stated that there are Korean drama fans who think that kkonminam portrays men who are safe and will not take advantage of women. Based on Dutta (2023), if in the 1990s, having the macho appeal makes a man cool, in the 2000's, it is the softness and effeminate appeal that makes a man popular.

Moreover, even if there are language, cultural, and geographical barriers, international fans, particularly those non-Asians, keep on watching Korean dramas, then visit Korea to experience also the romance depicted in those programs. In other words, Korean men became the golden standard for love and relationships because of how Korean actors portrayed their characters in Korean dramas (Lee, 2020b).

The popularity of Korean dramas and how men/actors are depicted via the characters they portray became an interest, not only for single women who are searching for intimacy, but even for married women who find themselves lonely in the present situation they are in. In the study of Gammon (2022), it was said that because Vietnam observes patriarchal tradition, therefore women have to get married at their prime age (21-28 years old) and be associated immediately with domestic roles, such as looking after the house and taking care of the husband and children. In this regard, there are many married women who believe that they still have needs yet to be fulfilled, thus resulting in the romantic ideals presented in Korean dramas.

One final factor that makes a Prince Charming is the way an actor gazes at his woman. This is true in the Korean drama, *Goblin: The Great and Lonely God*, which was mentioned in the study of Lee (2020a). In the wedding night scene, Kim Shin sweetly gazes at his bride just before she gets to sleep and romantically stares at her while sleeping. According to the interviewees of Lee, that scene is nonsexual, yet very romantic. There are also scenes where the Goblin misses

Eun-tak, and instead of physically approaching her, he would just lovingly gaze at her from afar. These scenes are highlighted via the various camera angles used.

Research Results

Review of What Makes a Leading Man a “Prince Charming” that Most Viewers Swoon Over Them

The studies related to Korean dramas, specifically the effectiveness of the male protagonists, extend ways beyond the story presentation and the characters' portrayal of their roles. Viewers can relate very much; thus, they are affected, which is a key ingredient in making a drama or a program very successful. This perceived relatability and attainability could possibly enhance the appeal of Korean dramas, making them popular as the viewers may be inclined to believe that the romantic narratives depicted in such dramas may potentially be manifested in reality. First, is that the audience is moved emotionally (characters are in-touch with their emotions, for example, they are caring, loyal, and romantic). Next is that they are moved physically (i.e., they go to Korea to find love from Korean men, believing that they are similar with the ones they encounter in Korean dramas).

In this regard, this paper attempts to plot out the vigor and rigors of the prince charming effects on Korean dramas. Vigor, which means the capability of the Korean dramas and actors to provide compelling story and characters that are relatable to their target audience. Part of the vigor is their acting prowess, especially the way they sweetly gaze at their partners/leading

women. How in tune they are with their emotions is what they would like to provide their viewers. Another vigor is perhaps the way they are seen by their audience as flower boys or beautiful men. Women viewers are falling in love with them, not only emotionally, but physically.

The rigors on the other hand, which are the rigidity in their image and portrayal are that they are seen as nonsexual and that they have to always look beautiful-to wear make-up all the time, sport a hairstyle, and be extra fashionable, which are all to some extent difficult to maintain.

However, apart from the observations presented in the different studies mentioned in this study, another consideration was observed by the authors of this paper. This is the transformation in physical looks of the male protagonists once they fall in love with their female counterparts. The aura of “attainability” by showcasing more casual wardrobes and sporting informal (i.e. gel-free) hairstyles is what is usually seen in most romantic and romantic-comedy Korean dramas once they get involved with their screen partners. Since the male protagonists usually play rich and powerful characters compared to their female leads, they normally appear in suits with luxury cars, watches, and formal hairstyles. They usually look very stiff and serious, sometimes even stern. The male protagonists’ physical appearance gradually changes since they are seen in more common places such as malls, supermarkets, and parks, and not only in their companies or offices. They will often spend more time with their female partners whose characters are more ordinary compared to them; therefore, they are seen together in more common places that show the casual looks of the male characters.

Another possible factor is the personality of the male protagonists tends to “loosen-up”, that they also appear more casual and relaxed in their physical appearance. Therefore, this is an indication of their dynamic character when they evolve in their overall physical looks. The development of the character when it comes to emotions are very common in literature, where a woman can “change” the man when it comes to their feelings or emotions. However, the physical aspects are not given much emphasis, unlike what is shown in Korean dramas.

Korean Dramas that Illustrate “Prince Charming”

Informed by the relevant literature and the researchers' observations on Korean drama series, examples were chosen where the male protagonists adopted a more relatable, “attainable”, ordinary appearance following their romantic involvement with the female characters. All the Korean dramas considered as examples in this paper may be categorized as romance-comedy (rom-com) in terms of series genre, spanning from 2010 to 2023. The primary criterion for selecting these instances, regardless of the year the Korean dramas were released, was the portrayal of characteristics relevant to the archetypal "Prince Charming" as evident in existing literature. The following Korean dramas can illustrate such Prince Charming attributes: 1) King the Land (2023), 2) See You in My 19th Life (2023), 3) Destined With You (2023), 4) My Lovely Liar (2023), 5) Crash Course in Romance (2023), 6) Business Proposal (2022), 7) True Beauty (2020), 8) What’s Wrong with Secretary Kim (2018), 9) Strong Girl Do Bong Soon (2017), 10) Love in the Moonlight (2016), 11) She Was Pretty (2015), and 12) Secret Garden (2010). As mentioned, these Korean dramas, demonstrated the “Prince Charming” characteristics which were consistently observed, making it a relatively common and staple of Korean dramas over the years.

This physical aspect changes involved the environment in which the Prince Charming interacts with the world of the woman. For example, in one scene in *Business Proposal*, the Prince Charming adjusts himself by tying the shoelace of the woman. Such a gesture can possibly work on both the literal and figurative sense of the leading man lowering himself, making him more attainable and more human, rather than an unattainable, ideal being. Because of this “attainability” image, this can also be considered as Prince Charming in such a way that viewers can relate more to them as the story unfolds; that they can also be in love with ordinary human beings, just like them, the audience.

Finally, in the traditional fairy tale, it is generally the woman who waits to be rescued and be elevated in status once the prince appears. The damsels in distress in the traditional fairy tales become, in Korean dramas, independent women who have their own careers, have strong personalities, and have their own convictions, despite (still) having a relatively unequal status with that of the leading men. In Korean dramas, it is this personality of the leading women that attracts the Prince Charming all the more. In the Korean dramas mentioned, it can be observed that the leading man adjusts and adapts to the world of the leading woman. This is in contrast with the traditional damsel who is usually prized for her physical beauty and submissiveness, and as Mutmainna (2015) noted, the brave Prince Charming rescues the damsel who is in a state of distress.

Conclusion

Based on the surveyed literature, the making of a prince charming focuses on four categories: 1) Emotions, 2) Gazing, 3) Nonsexuality, and 4) Flower Boys/Effeminate Image. To these, Physical Changes can be added as a factor in creating a prince charming, at least in the Korean drama context. This is observed when the Prince Charming adapts his status to that of the leading woman. Another aspect of this is that the female lead is not a damsel in distress anymore that is in need of being rescued in the traditional sense. Somehow, in such a case, the Prince Charming complements the female character. These are possibly some of the reasons why Korean dramas have reached phenomenal success globally as the role of Prince Charming is marketed or represented to the audience in such an ideal, albeit more attainable status.

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