

Paradoxical Failure of Korean Dramas in Cultivating Family-Building Emotions Among Koreans

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Abstract

This paper explores the contradictions of Korean dramas (K-Dramas) in evoking romantic and family-building feelings among their citizens and Korean consumers. The K-Dramas are viewed worldwide post-Hallyu Wave in Asia and other nations for popularising romantic tropes and ideals; however, domestic viewers often express a sense of disconnection from the genre's romantic narratives. This paper examines key factors contributing to this phenomenon, including cultural shifts, the commercialisation of the industry, and the repetitive, formulaic nature of romantic plotlines. The study explores how evolving societal attitudes towards relationships and gender roles may influence viewer responses. The research is based on the qualitative analysis of audience feedback, industry practices, and a comparison between domestic and international reception. The core of the paper argues that while K-Dramas continue to thrive abroad, their inability to resonate with the romantic expectations of Korean viewers points to deeper cultural and generational divides and a potential oversaturation of romantic tropes in the domestic market.

Keywords: South Korea, Korean Dramas, Emotions, Family Building, Society, Hallyu

Introduction

Korean drama, or K-Drama, is a type of entertainment for television that comes from South Korea and spans various genres, such as comedy, historical fiction, melodrama, romance, and so forth. These plays are distinguished by their excellent production quality, gripping stories, and well-developed characters. The narrative's poignant portrayal of delicate subjects, including love, family dynamics, social issues, personal development, and psychological challenges, adds to its broad appeal nationally and worldwide. The strength of Korean drama resides in its portrayal of nuanced interpersonal connections and complicated human emotions, which are depicted with great depth and delicacy. This allows viewers to empathise with the character's journey and experience a spectrum of emotions. Within the larger field of media psychology, which studies the relationship between media consumption and psychological processes, it is important to comprehend how the media affects a person's emotions. (Fatima, 2024)

According to studies, seeing particular kinds of media content can cause viewers to feel a specific way and change their thoughts and habits. Furthermore, studies conducted over the years have shown that a person's emotional expressivity may be impacted by their exposure to emotionally charged media content. In light of this, the purpose of this research study is to determine how Korean dramas affect viewers' and non-viewers' emotional expressiveness.

The ability to communicate feelings externally, whether they are favourable or bad, and using any kind of medium—such as the face, voice, gesture, etc.—is known as emotional expressivity. People cannot frequently vocally explain or communicate some things, which are better expressed through emotionally charged expressions in a very special way. Emotional expressiveness, according to Kring et al. (1994), is the degree to which a person expresses their emotions through their body, independent of the valence (positive or negative) or channel (facial, verbal, or gestural). According to the aforementioned definition, emotional expressiveness does not include preconceived notions regarding the particular emotions conveyed (such as happiness or sadness) or how those feelings are portrayed. According to a different approach, emotional expressivity primarily refers to behavioural changes like smiling, sobbing, laughing, or other emotional experiences. To qualify as emotionally expressive, a person must exhibit certain behavioural and visible characteristics of their reaction. Additionally, emotional expressiveness was considered a quality. Korean dramas can arouse a variety of emotions.

Viewers get engrossed in the characters and their travels, whether they are laughing heartily, crying bitterly, feeling enraged, or experiencing exhilarating anticipation. Surprisingly, this emotional interaction can be helpful since it provides a safe, fictitious space for people to explore and process their feelings. K-dramas provide a kind of escapism beyond emotional investigation, enabling viewers to momentarily escape from their realities and immerse themselves in engrossing stories. (Gross, 1995)

When considering the past of K-drama, it can be seen that since 1950, the popularity of K-drama series has been steadily rising in Japan. South Korean cultural items gained a lot of popularity in Indonesia, especially after the drama series *Mother's Sea*, *Endless Love* debuted on Indonesian television stations in 2002. It was believed that both dramas paved the stage for the success of later Korean drama series. Tarigan (2019) provided statistics indicating that during filming K-drama, tourists flocked to South Korea because of the allure of the shooting locations and videos. Actors and actresses from South Korea have made a name for themselves as important spokespersons and trustworthy information providers.

K-drama had an impact on the following factors: beauty, credibility, connectivity, participation, commitment, drama satisfaction, intention to return to South Korea, and repeat viewing. The audience in K-dramas would be committed to their beliefs.

The paper takes into the hypothesis that there is a paradoxical representation of South Korean society in Korean dramas. This means that the contemporary challenges to South Korean society vis a vis declining fertility rate, poor interpersonal relationships, gender discrimination, anti-feminism ideology and movements like 4B are not part of the K-dramas which are popular internationally. The representation of South Korean society in K-drama is contradictory to the image of the society shown in the famous K-dramas. Further, the romanticism shown in Korean dramas does not generate the same feelings among Korean youths and upcoming generations.

Methods of Study

Objective

The objective of the is to analyse the social reality shown in Korean dramas about South Korean contemporary society. Also, to find the connection between the romanticism shown in the K-drama and its effects on the South Korean population.

Research Problem

1. In what ways does South Korea's dropping birth rate correspond with the popular romance storyline in K-dramas?
2. What cultural and socioeconomic elements play a role in this dissonance?

Research Questions

- To what extent do K-Dramas shape perceptions of relationships in South Korea?
- How do South Koreans reconcile the romantic ideals portrayed in media with the economic and social pressures they face in real life?
- What implications does this have for understanding South Korea's fertility crisis?

Hypothesis:

Despite the romantic ideals promoted in K-dramas, socio-economic factors like housing prices, job security, gender inequality and work-life balance heavily influence South Korea's declining fertility rate.

Literature Review

1.0.K-Dramas and Romantic Idealism and the Role of Media and Social Influence

In recent years, Korean dramas, or K-dramas as they are lovingly referred to, have become incredibly popular worldwide. Initially a specialised type of entertainment, this industry has now spread worldwide, enthraling viewers everywhere. With their unique blend of romance, drama, and compelling storylines, K-dramas have managed to transcend cultural barriers and capture the hearts of viewers worldwide.

Mutual solid love and desire between two people often clash with prevailing sociocultural values in Korean dramas. The *kkonminam* (Flower Boy) genre, which primarily focuses on the romantic lives of young adults and appeals to young women between the ages of 14 and 30, is a prime genre to examine Korean representations of contemporary love and romance.

Sternberg (1998) applies Jung's theory of universal archetypes to give a summary of the development of romantic love. According to this theory, ideas and beliefs about romance, love, and sex appear universal. For example, the Cinderella folktale has variations worldwide. We can take the example of the French version of Cinderella, *Vassilissa* of Russian, and *Kongjwi* of Korea have the basic underlying romantic conclusion: that love is predestined. The idea of Jung's collective unconsciousness suggested that an individual's beliefs are based on conceptual patterns. These patterns, though conceived individually, are universal. Thus, people's conceptions of myths and religions are all similar.

Though Galician's love myths are used to analyse United States ("American") media, a highly individualistic culture, research conducted by Kim and Hatfield (2004) suggests that the cultivation of love types in Korean culture, which is highly collectivistic, is similar to the cultivation of love typologies in Westernized countries. Scholars like Kim and Hatfield suggest that Westernization influences modern Korean culture.

Antonio Gramsci, the Italian philosopher was interested in the study of the relationship between culture and power during Italian capitalism. Gramsci analysed that the cultural industries reinforced the capitalist ideas among the subaltern subcultures via the subaltern's implicit consent of these ideas within existing society creating a socio-psychological basis for social integration. Gramsci argued that capitalist societies sustained their domination and power not only through the coercive abilities of the state but also through the cultural and ideological processes that engage and secure popular consent.

Hegemony is the result of the direct impact of the thought or action from the dominant group's domain. The existing power structure has the authority to set the limits of what is considered to be valuable. Because of this, hegemony embodies the idea of a generalised common sense, which in turn shapes how people define their world. Because of this, hegemony embodies the idea of a generalised common sense, shaping how people define their world. To ensure the dominance of a set group of beliefs among citizens, it is in a constant process of renewal and reassertion. Hegemony is nonstate, and what was the dominant ideology fifty years ago has evolved and adapted to the socio-historical contexts of today.

The culture industry endorses and sustains hegemonic ideals and makes a profit by what Adorno (1977/1991) labelled as wish fulfilment. Here, images within the media fulfil the people's wishes. This may sound like a pleasant action carried out by the culture industry, but one problem remains: people need to learn how to wish or what they should wish for. Thus, the wishes that the media fulfil are colonised and corrupted. The media evoke the possibility of happiness through consumerism, yet this is all the happiness allowed—a spark of pseudo-liberation.

Social control is impacted by the culture industry, which causes people to accept and conform to the ideas of the existing society. The power of the culture industry lies in the products they sell, which encourage conformity and consensus.

The idea of courtly love began around the 12th century, and remnants of it are preserved through the media today. A popular understanding of courtly love is the idea of a knight's love for a noble but inaccessible lady. Courtly love eventually led to a movement labelled Romanticism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In many ways, Romanticism was an extension of courtly love. Here, romantic love further developed the concept of sexual love as an ideal for which all men and women were to strive. These ambiguous ideas of love and romance give relationships false beliefs of what a healthy relationship should be like. The mass media are regarded as an agent of primary socialisation alongside family, peers, and education.

Galician (2004) offers twelve hegemonic love myths prevalent in the mass media portrayals of romantic relationships.

1. Perfect Partner is Cosmically predestined
2. There is no such thing as "Love at First Sight."
3. To attract and keep a man, a woman should look like a model or a centrefold.
4. The man should not be shorter, weaker, younger, poorer, or less successful than the woman.
5. The love of a good and faithful true woman can change a man from a "beast" into a "prince."
6. Bickering and fighting a lot means that a man and a woman love each other passionately.
7. All you need is love, so it does not matter if you and your lover have very different values.
8. The suitable mate "completes you," filling your gaps and making your dreams come true.
9. Since mass media portrayals of romance are not real. "They do not affect you."
10. The love you feel in a romantic relationship is different from the love you feel in other relationships.
11. Great sex equals a great relationship.
12. The media should not be held responsible for promoting unrealistic expectations of love.

Illouz (1997) suggested that people's standards of romance appear within class struggles over the meanings of consumption, intimacy, and leisure technologies. She further asserted that this intersection between the romantic standard and consumption is produced by two processes: the romanticisation of commodities and the commodification of romance. The romanticisation of commodities refers to how commodities obtained a romantic characteristic in 21st-century media. The commodification of romance concerns how

romantic practices became defined as the consumption of leisure through images created by the culture industry.

First, the product purchased is consumed for what it is—an advertised product. This is termed candid consumption. The activity in which a couple is engaged, often within leisure consumption, is never made explicit as a function of the culture industry. This is termed oblique consumption. Images shown in the “romantic media” illusions of well-dressed couples engaged in leisure activities, showing them as perfect couples falling in love. According to critical scholars, acts of oblique consumption fetishise romance, concealing that consumption of the product is economical while promoting that it is necessary for social relations.

Because the products have characteristics that characterise romance as consumed, people are interested in consuming goods that express a romantic idea. Thus, what is referred to as a romantic utopia is portrayed in the media. Images of couples driving through the countryside, dining on a yacht, or even hiking on a far-flung island are shown to the audience. This fits in nicely with the first characteristic of the romantic utopia, which is that money must be spent to experience the thrill of nature.

1.1 South Korea's crisis on love and marriages

The traditional family in Korea reacts to the pressures of industrialisation differently from Western countries in that the family remains the core of a person's life. Under the patriarch's leadership, individuals are protected from the weaknesses of national policy as long as they stay loyal to the family. The Sam-Kang-Oh Ryun (the three Fundamental Laws and Five Moral Laws) has influenced Korean sociopolitical society as the dominant ideology for most of the country's history.

The Three Fundamental Laws and Five Moral Laws are as follows:

The king is the mainstay of the state

The father is the bulwark, and the son

The husband is the pillar of the wife

Between father and son, chin (friendship)

Between king and courtier, Rui (righteousness)

Between husband and wife, Paul (deference)

Between old and young, saw (degree)

Between friends, shin (faith)

The Sam-Kang-Oh-Ryun represents a vertical relationship between men and women, creating gender discrimination. The relationship between husband and wife is based on strict prejudice against women, resulting in their lowered status. According to Confucian teachings, a woman is required to obey her father, husband, and even son. Also, she is regarded as an outcast from her husband's family unless she delivers a son to retain the bloodline. This creates a never-ending cycle of oppression for her because by producing a son, she is then considered subordinate to that child.

In South Korea under the influence of Confucianism, the roles of men and women are clearly defined. Confucian patriarchy later transformed into modern industrialised patriarchy, which adopted the normative Western dichotomy of gender roles into its dominant gender ideology. Men were expected to work outside of the home and be the household's sole breadwinner, while women were expected to be domestic homemakers. The decline of arranged marriages favouring marriage for love is a growing value for Korea's younger generation. The proportion of what she calls "love marriages" has increased from 36% to 55% in the late 20th century (Hahm, 2003)

In the case of Korea, changes in the economic system and open access to employment and education are

seen as more critical to status than traditional Confucian ideals of familial ties. Thus, individual choice, free from familial constraint, enables the formation of marriages based on love rather than tradition. (Kim, 1998)

For Korea, the dominant narrative within Korean modernisation is the slow decline of patriarchal inequalities of the traditional family and the traditional Confucian practices that enforced them. Women's participation in the public sphere is seen as replicating that of Western countries within a briefer time frame. For example, in large firms with over 500 employees, the layoff rate for women was almost 1.5 times higher than for men (Presidential Commission on Women's Affairs, 1999).

There also has been a notable weakening of biases against divorce, remarriage, and living together. Korean society traditionally took a negative view of premarital cohabitation. Also, during that survey, 5% of the college students reported that they lived with a member of the opposite sex.

Double-income families are gradually becoming the new norm. All these indications of change in the way Korean society views sex, family roles, and gender norms created a cultural moment ripe for a new contemporary view of love and romance.

1.2 The Korean Drama and its Popularity

A type of episodic television, Korean dramas often air during primetime. Popular romantic comedies, mystery thrillers, and historical epics are all genres of Korean dramas. A bulk of the current dramas are in metropolitan locations near or close to Seoul. In contrast to American soap operas, Korean dramas air every two weeks for 30 to 60 minutes each, across several months before coming to a decisive conclusion. The International Monetary Fund economic crisis contributed to the late 1990s entry of Korean TV dramas into East Asian markets. Although the crisis had a significant impact on Korea, it also significantly impacted the finances of other East Asian nations, leading those nations to search for less costly programming rather than the more costly Japanese dramas.

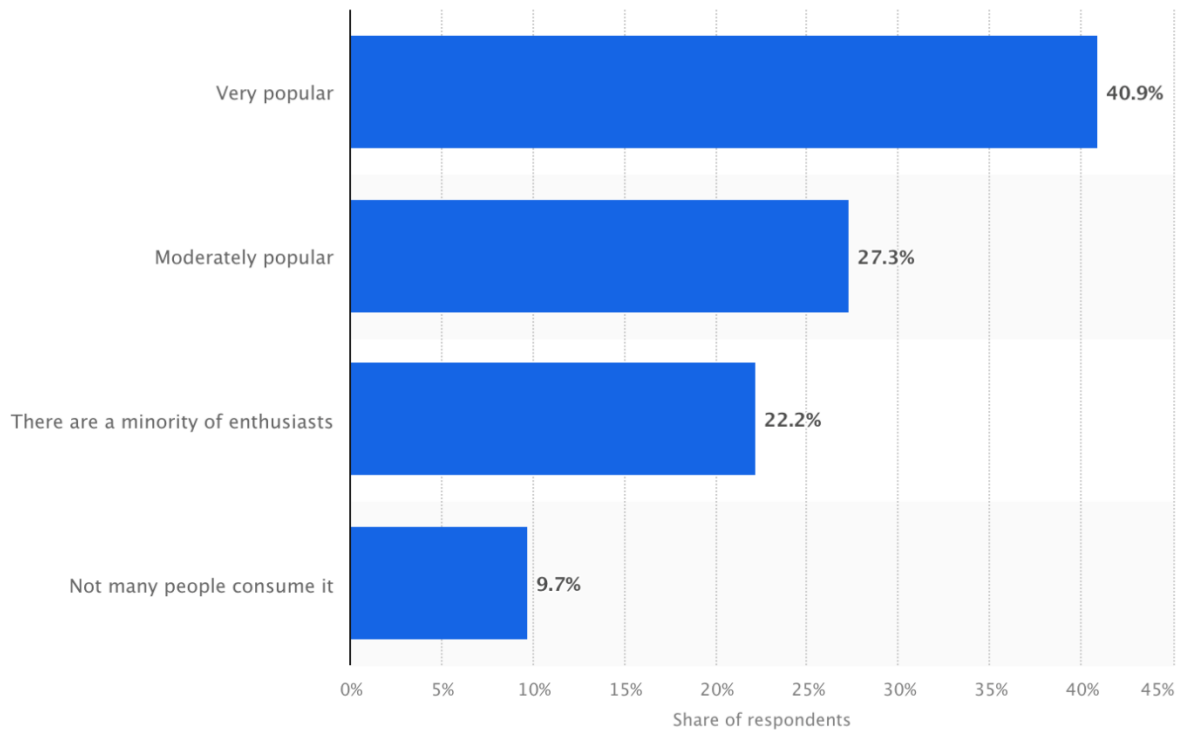
This caused Korea's entertainment sector to proliferate so that more dramas could be exported to neighbouring countries—aside from Japan—creating the so-called Hallyu, or "Korean Wave." Korean dramas were reasonably priced, well-made, and easily recognisable by other East Asian nations like China, Japan, and Thailand. Television companies felt comfortable enough to continuously purchase dramas from Korea's culture industry in other East Asian countries because of the Confucian values of close family ties and modest sexuality, such as hugs and gentle cheek kisses.

The Korean government regarded the Hallyu as a phenomenal success amid an economic crisis. Motivated by the film industry's ability to export its products, the government designated "cultural technology," or technologies that produce TV dramas, films, and pop music, as one of the six key technologies that should drive the Korean economy into the 21st century. The Korean wave peaked in 2004 with *Winter Sonata* (2002), a popular Korean melodrama.

During the FIFA 2002 World Cup, the relationship between Japan and South Korea peaked due to the cultural exchange. Japan first broadcast *Winter Sonata* in 2003, which aired four times due to its popularity. Television drama has been the focal point of television for Korean audiences. For example, on the annual lists of top-ten television programs with the highest audience ratings, five or six have usually been television dramas. Many Korean television dramas record ratings of more than a 30% share of the market, where the big three networks (SBS, MBC, & KBS) air as many as 30 television dramas per week.

[Media](#) > [TV, Video & Film](#)

Popularity of South Korean dramas worldwide as of November 2023



Source- Statista

1.3 South Korea's Low Fertility Rate

While the fertility rate started to decline before the 1990s in many OECD countries, this issue started in the mid-2000s in South Korea, and the fertility rate has declined rapidly. There are several reasons for the low fertility rate in South Korea. The labour market trend changed, and more females started to work, but gender inequality has not yet improved. South Korea's fertility rate is the lowest among OECD member countries, and the rate of decline is the fastest. South Korea is the only country in the OECD countries with a total fertility rate of less than one child. The main factors leading to low fertility in South Korea and the background causes are discussed as follows. The first factor is socioeconomic.

The more women are educated, the more it is observed that the marriage period is delayed, resulting in the postponement of childbirth. The second reason for the low fertility rate is the increase in housing prices. As the housing prices rise, the couple gets demotivated to marry and the married couple cannot own the house; therefore, they give up having children. The reason for the low fertility rate is the change in cultural values. Due to traditionally Confucian society, a low rate of marriages results in a low birth rate.



Source- <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=KR>

The fourth factor is demographics. As the population of women in the childbearing age group decreased, the marriage rate decreased. The above factors are considered the result of a low demographic transition. There is a disconnect between the traditional society of South Korea and the modern society of South Korea. The latter faces the issues of low fertility rate and low mortality rate.

Research Design

The study is a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. The study took two shows as the case study Boys Over Flowers and Flower Boy and Ramen Shop. The Flower Boy genre was chosen because its target audience is young adults between the ages of 15-30, with a majority of its audience girls between the ages of 15-25. Another reason why this particular genre was chosen to be the focus of this study is that the Flower Boy genre focuses on romantic relationships of young adults who are exploring and discovering themselves in the process. The study analyses the researched materials available on the concerned topic and puts forward its findings in the conclusion section.

Findings of the Study

Case Studies

An effort is made to challenge Korean hegemonic masculinity through the Flower Boy image. Three components of Korean hegemonic masculinity are compressed industrialisation, military, and Confucian traditionalism. Using Confucian ideas, which claim that the husband is the mainstay of the household, South Korean society is an extension of the family. Therefore, a patriarchy governs Korean society. This concept permeates mainstream Korean culture since there are clear gender roles (domestic status for women and high status for men).

Finally, the segregation of gender roles, or compressed industrialisation, is a factor in the enforcement and influence of South Korean hegemonic masculinity. Women are supposed to take care of the household duties, while men are supposed to work in the economy.

This notion of compressed industrialisation creates a larger mandate that society should be strictly dichotomised between masculine and feminine tasks, such as active and physical activities as masculine, and domestic activities like cooking or cleaning as feminine. Directly opposed to the Korean “tough guy” look, the Flower Boy image deconstructs the male/female dichotomy.

The Flower Boy persona offers a nuanced cultural analysis of gender roles. A desire to depart from more traditional hyperfeminine and hypermasculine roles appears to be reflected in the Flower Boy syndrome's rising appeal in popular culture. Though the Flower Boy genre may seem to be counterhegemonic in terms of gender, within the framework of all the love myths and characteristics of the romantic utopia, found, the current study indicates the Flower Boy genre is nonetheless hegemonic. Heteronormative is the genre of Flower Boy. Men and women are positioned in a hierarchical relationship that depicts masculinity as active and powerful and femininity as subservient to male sexuality due to heteronormative standards for what is considered normal (Jackson, 2006).

According to what I've read of these two Flower Boy texts, the audience is given three main ideas: First, money can buy anything, including love. Money was the main theme in the dating script for both texts and romantic activities involved spending money, like going to the movies or dining out. The standard norm is that the man pays for everything, which reinforces the idea that men are supposed to be superior to women in romantic relationships. The idea that love is a cure-all or panacea is the second major theme. Ten per cent adore myths. The love that each individual in a romantic relationship had for his/her partner proved to cure all woes. In *Boys Over Flowers*, Jun Pyo and Jan Di faced seemingly unbeatable odds, from parental disapproval, violent fights with gangsters, physical illness, and long distance, but their love overcame it all. The same can be seen in *Flower Boy*, *Ramen Shop's Eun Bi and Chi Soo*. Though they are completely different, face almost unbearable odds, and have constant conflicts, their love for each other is stronger.

The last main idea garnered from this textual analysis is that the Flower Boy genre supports patriarchy. Though the meaning of *Boys Over Flowers* follows a traditional Asian mantra stating that people should enjoy the Flower Boy for who he is and not what he looks like or his status, the dramas analysed here suggest that people should care about men over women. The Flower Boy genre is all about the boy. The girl's role is just to showcase the abilities of the Flower Boy.

The Paradoxical Relationship between K-Drama and Fertility Crisis

The fertility decline in Korea is largely driven by the trend toward delaying and even foregoing marriage, as childbearing occurs almost exclusively within marital unions. The level of non-marital fertility rate is low in South Korea. In 2014, the percentage of nonmarital births was 1.9, the lowest among OECD countries, followed by Japan (2.3%) and Turkey (2.8%) (OECD 2014). The average of OECD countries in terms of non-marital births was around forty per cent, which is also related to the less practice of co-livings. The South Koreans are not positively motivated towards to the concept of cohabitation.

Reflecting the trend toward fewer and later marriages in Korea, the percentage of ever-married women aged 25–29 decreased from 83% in 1985 to 41% in 2005. In addition, in 2018, the mean age of women at first birth was 31.9, and the mean age at second birth was 33.6.

Observing a divergence in family structure and behaviours according to socioeconomic status, scholars

argue that marriage has become a symbol of achievement and social status and that individuals of low socioeconomic status may not be able to meet the economic standards for marriage and raising children within a marital union. In the context of labour market uncertainty and polarisation, increasing economic inequality has been hypothesised to be the primary underlying cause of these changes. On studying the literature, it was noticed that the relationship between gender plays a significant role in the interconnection between socioeconomic status and fertility rate.

The Paradox: Idealized Love vs Real Life Decisions

This creates a paradox: while K-dramas continue to promote narratives of perfect relationships and traditional romantic values, South Koreans face real-world conditions that disincentivise marriage and childbearing. Romantic media depictions are out of sync with the daily struggles people face when it comes to making life choices about marriage, family, and children. K-dramas fuel the desire for perfect, emotionally fulfilling relationships, yet those very depictions may contribute to heightened expectations that are difficult to meet in reality. People may seek the idealised relationships portrayed in media, but the pressures of modern South Korean life—economic instability, gender inequality, and work-life imbalance—make achieving these ideals increasingly difficult.

The implications for South Korea's Fertility Rate

The K-dramas may put forward the emotions of love that should meet certain lofty standards, leading people to postpone marriage and childbearing until they find a “perfect” partner or ideal circumstances. This causes a decline in the fertility rate as later marriages often result in fewer children. Further, the romantic myths created through K-dramas can create unrealistic expectations of relationships. Also, some of the K-dramas reinforce the idea of patriarchy by representing women as household wives or partners. This creates tensions among both genders, and women reject these roles, opting to delay or forgo motherhood altogether, which further depresses fertility rates.

Conclusion

The challenges of low fertility rates are real in South Korea. To counter the declining fertility rate, South Korea needs to address these issues in political policy framing and at the socio and economic level. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive approach to tackle this problem. Korean dramas represent South Korean culture and emotions to attract the young generations not only in South Korea but worldwide. The K-dramas can also create a cultural channel for South Korea to the rest of the world, where it is less explored. There need to be more connection needs to be more connection between the social reality of South Korea and K-Drama. They need to reinforce the relations, love, emotions, and family-building behaviour among the Koreans. Koreans are more influenced by market mechanisms rather than social and emotional connections. The paper, although limited to case studies, was limited to findings based on them.

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