



The Making of a Male Makeover: Exploring the “Deglamorization” of Male Protagonists in Korean Dramas

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Abstract

The phenomenal success of Korean dramas has been attributed to various factors, one of which may be considered the male protagonist's image of being a Prince Charming. As was pointed out by researchers' previous study, the noticeable shift in the male characters' image is characterized by a more approachable vibe, usually portrayed through the adoption of casual clothing and hairstyles without styling gel. Hence, the present paper aims to: 1) identify such specific physical transformations in light of specific Korean dramas, and 2) to analyze the modes through which the attainability of the male protagonists in Korean dramas is manifested in their physical transformation. Moreover, the present paper aims to propose the term “deglamorization makeover”, which is defined as the change or transformation in the a) physical appearance, b) physical environment, and c) physical movement of the male lead characters, resulting in the perceived attainability and simplicity of such characters in the context of Korean dramas. The paper considered six Korean dramas that demonstrate this “deglamorization”. Hence, the attainability via deglamorization is reflected in the change of their appearance through various modes such as hairstyle, outfit, demeanor, and settings to showcase their willingness to adapt and adopt to the personality and style of the female characters. Moreover, the male character's decision to transform (whether consciously or unconsciously) springs from his own volition, rather than him being influenced by external agencies or other characters, as opposed to the conventional makeover trope in female characters often observed in movies that include makeovers. Finally, it may be concluded that this willingness to adapt and adopt on the part of the male characters has been shown in the way they tone down, soften, even deglamorize or simplify their appearance as a form of adjustment and sacrifice so that the gap between the male and female protagonists becomes narrow.

Keywords: Korean dramas, makeover, deglamorization, physical transformation

1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenal success of Korean dramas has been attributed to various factors in several studies such as in the Philippine context, a. *remedies for boredom*, b. *the impact of*

family and friends, c. the quality of production, d. the romanticization of life, e. engagement in Korean culture practices, f. the effects of time management and sleep schedules, and g. frustration with one's own country (Serrano, et al. 2022). Another factor contributing to the success of Korean dramas is the male characters' portrayal of "being in touch with their emotions" (Lee, 2020, as cited in Kwon, 2022, para. 7). Moreover, the special connection that the audience forms with the characters is referred to as "parasocial relations". In this case, a sense of intimacy and reliance is assumed in which the viewers perceive that such programs provide a source of courage as they support the romantic elements in Korean dramas (Hassim et.al, 2019). Finally, several other reasons may help explain the appeal of the male protagonists to the viewers, including their gentleness and kindness indicating their being an ideal man (Lin & Tong, 2008, as cited in Gongora, n.d.), the physical attractiveness of the male characters (Gongora, n.d.), their wholesome and nonsexual image (Lee, 2020), and their being "flower boys", whose characteristics include having androgynous appearance, and having attractive faces, hair and skin (Jung, 2006, as cited in Lee, 2020), among others.

Apart from the characteristics of the male protagonists that contribute to their image of being "Prince Charming", Sioson and Sioson (2023) also pointed out the noticeable shift in the male characters' image, characterized by a more approachable vibe. This is often portrayed through the adoption of casual clothing and hairstyles without styling gel. The current endeavor further explores this idea. Hence, the present paper aims to: 1) identify such specific physical transformations in light of specific Korean dramas, and 2) to analyze the modes through which the attainability of the male protagonists in Korean dramas is manifested in their physical transformation.

Moreover, there seems to be dearth in the literature in terms of the makeover trope, especially when considering the kind of "makeover" referred to in the present article. While studies that relate to makeover explored cosmetic surgery (e.g., Jones, 2006; Sperry, 2007), cosmetics (e.g., Aguinaldo & Peissig, 2021; Arai & Nittono, 2022), and other sources focused on **female** characters (e.g., Flint, 2020; Marston, 2010), none of the studies explored makeovers that focused on **male characters** and in the manner that we define it here, to the best of our knowledge.

Finally, in light of the makeover concept, the present paper aims to propose the term "deglamorization makeover". Conventionally, the word "deglamorization" is defined as "the act or process of making less" (Collins, n.d.). In this paper, we define "deglamorization makeover" as the change or transformation in the physical appearance of the male lead characters which results in the perceived attainability and simplicity of such characters in the context of Korean dramas. These physical changes may be manifested through softening of their looks, for instance, dressing more casually or non-application of styling gel in their hair.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Makeover

In the realm of popular culture, a variety of ways of living and activities is where 'makeover' is growing to an increasing extent (Jones, 2006). For instance, a narrative device that has long been employed by Hollywood, particularly prevalent in the genre of romantic

comedies is the makeover trope (Flint, 2020). The use of aesthetic transformation of the character enhances that character's desirability and drives the storyline, which often result in improved romantic outcomes (Flint, 2020).

A makeover refers to a transformation or change in appearance, often involving alterations to one's hairstyle or use of cosmetics (Merriam- Webster, n.d.). It is a term used to describe a comprehensive set of changes or improvements made to enhance the appearance or image of a person, place, or thing to achieve a more appealing or improved result (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

This makeover as seen in popular culture may possibly stem from people's perceptions of attractiveness or pleasantness. For instance, in terms of using cosmetics to enhance one's appearance, a study by Aguinaldo and Peissig (2021) compared the perceived facial attractiveness, competence, and socio-sexuality of faces without makeup, with light makeup and with heavy makeup. It was found that the faces that had heavy makeup received significantly higher ratings from the participants in terms of socio-sexuality and attractiveness compared to the ones that had light makeup. Moreover, with regard to competence, it was faces without makeup that were deemed less competent than those with either light or heavy makeup. Another study that explored the role of makeup is that of Arai and Nittono (2022), who concluded that faces with makeup are naturally focused on visually by people, which implies that the perceived attractiveness of one's face can be enhanced through makeup and that based on neural evidence, such advantages of makeup extend to one's own perception of his or her face, and not only limited to the way other people perceive a person's face.

In terms of makeovers that investigated female characters, Marston's (2010) study analyzed teen movies concerning makeovers. The teen movie as a fairytale refers to the chance to transform the person's life as the lead character is elevated within the social hierarchy. For instance, this is seen in the film, *The Princess Diaries*, where the female protagonist was taught how to walk, talk and eat similar to the way the princess in fairytales does. By the end of the makeover stories concerning female protagonists, the characters have been at the receiving end of romantic interest; however, it is essential that the demonstration of a form of an idealized femininity is perceived as aligned with their real self as this idealized concept has become part of their nature (Marston, 2010).

2.2 Physical Transformations in Korean Dramas

The concept of "makeover" may then be situated in the context of Korean dramas. Sioson and Sioson (2023) observed that the male protagonists initially present themselves as affluent and powerful individuals, frequently wearing suits and formal hairstyles whose demeanor is often serious and stern. However, as the plot continues, the male protagonists undergo a gradual transformation in their physical appearance. This shift is evident as they are portrayed in more ordinary settings such as malls, supermarkets, and parks, moving away from their corporate or office environments. Spending more time with their female partners, who typically embody more ordinary characters, contributes to this change, resulting in the male characters adopting a more relaxed and casual vibe.

Another point that Sioson and Sioson (2023) raised is the apparent loosening up of the male protagonists' personalities, leading to a more laid-back and relaxed physical demeanor. This reflects the dynamic development of their characters. While the literature commonly explores character development in terms of *emotions*, Korean dramas uniquely emphasize the significance of *physical changes*, highlighting the impact of women on transforming the men not only emotionally but also in their outward appearance.

3. DISCUSSION

The impression of attainability, which appears in the physical transformation of the male protagonists, becomes very evident once they give much attention and affection to their female partners. They slowly change in their physical appearance particularly in their a.) physical appearance such as facial expressions, hairstyles and outfits, b.) physical environment, and c.) physical movement.

One example of this is the Korean drama, *Business Proposal* (produced by Kim, 2022). In this drama, the male character, the CEO of their own company who would always wear a suit and sport a gelled-hair, went to an amusement park with the woman he liked. This woman happened to be an employee of their company and came from a middle-class family. In this particular scene, the male protagonist looked less formal by wearing casual attire and did not put on hair gel anymore. He even allowed the girl to put a headband on him, the ones usually sold in amusement parks. Although the environment was casual, the amusement park explicitly showed the significant transformation made in the looks of the male character. Another scene that showcases attainability, even explicit deglamorization, via physical movement is when the male protagonist tied the shoelace of the female character while they were out for a stroll in a typical seashore. The place where they decided to have a date was also a form of deglamorization since it was not a fancy location at all, thus presenting deglamorization through physical location.

Another example of this is the Korean Drama, *Destined With You* (produced by Park et al., 2023). Here, the male character portrays a serious and sad lawyer. He would often talk about cases and businesses, until he met the female protagonist, who happened to be a caring, friendly, and jolly individual who works in the City Hall. During the course of their courtship, the physical transformation of the male character could be obviously seen in his facial expressions and demeanor. From being stiff and serious, he would always smile with twinkling eyes and would often be seen in the ordinary neighborhood where the girl lived. This change in demeanor made him seem attainable as opposed to an idealized version of a person put on a pedestal since a smile softens a person's looks and exudes a more approachable vibe.

The same situation can also be witnessed in the Korean drama, *Crash Course in Romance* (produced by Cho et al., 2023). The male protagonist was a popular Math tutor because of how excellent and serious he was when it came to teaching. He was also stiff and most of his colleagues did not want to be with him because he was stern and strict most of the time. However, when he met the female character and started to like her, he became cheerful, approachable, and understanding. He can also be seen wearing more casual attire and hairstyle, while spending more time in the small neighborhood where the female resided and where her small-dish business was also located.

In *My Lovely Liar* (produced by Lee & So, 2023) Korean drama, a “loosened-up” personality of the male character after he met the female protagonist was greatly emphasized. Although the male protagonist’s character here was the one in hiding due to his past, where he would often wear face mask, sunglasses, and plain clothes in order not to catch attention, he was able to slowly change and remove his fear of people because of the support given to him by the female character whom he was beginning to like as well. The male character here was a rich and talented composer, while the female character came from a poor and broken family. From being always afraid to be recognized by people, he slowly became more confident in removing his face masks and not wearing sunglasses anymore (physical appearance). He decided as well to perform in an unsophisticated occasion where it was held in their ordinary neighborhood (physical location) where many people might recognize his face and his past. He was able to do all these transformations due to his trust and love for the female protagonist.

Another Korean Drama that showcases deglamorization of the male protagonist is *Love in the Moonlight* (produced by Kang & Lee, 2016). The Crown Prince, while walking in the palace garden, was assisted with an umbrella by his eunuch (male assistant). During this time, he already knew that his eunuch was a female in disguise; he was beginning to like her, romantically. Since the umbrella was very heavy for her, the Crown Prince carried the umbrella instead. However, he got too worried that other assistants might see him carrying his own umbrella that he decided he would no longer stroll in the garden, and would rather stay and sit in the grass to read books. In this scene as well, he invited his eunuch to sit beside him because he (she) seemed tired from the scorching heat of the sun. The Crown Prince went out of his way to show his affection for the woman he liked.

Finally, in the Korean drama, *She Was Pretty* (produced by Han, 2015), the male protagonist, who happened to be an international head editor of a magazine company, tended to be strict and bossy. He would often wear formal attire as well and because of his aura, most of his subordinates were afraid of him. However, when he fell in love with the female character, he slowly changed his facial expressions and became more welcoming and pleasant. He also changed his outfit and hairstyle into a more casual look.

These are the male makeovers that are direct, distinct, and definite in Korean dramas that showcase that apart from the personality, it is the consistency in the physical transformation of the male characters once they fall in love that possibly contributed to their global, phenomenal success. Because of this phenomenon, viewers, particularly the females, may become so attracted to the male protagonists, thus the para-social relations. They can relate to these physical changes that were manifested because of how they love their female partners in the story. The willingness to adapt and adopt has been shown in the way they tone down, soften, even de-glamorize or simplify their appearance as a form of adjustment and sacrifice so that the gap between the male and female lead characters becomes narrow. In this sense, it would somehow counter Wagner’s (n.d., as cited in Flint, 2020, para. 14) remark that “the powerless are physically manipulated by the powerful characters” in numerous movies that feature makeover tropes, indicating power imbalance. This is because, in Korean dramas, at least considered in the present article, the male character’s decision to transform (whether

consciously or unconsciously) springs from his own volition, rather than him being influenced by the pressure from external agencies or other characters.

4. CONCLUSION

The deglamorization of the Korean dramas' male protagonists consistently happens in the time that they get attracted or have fallen in love with their female counterparts. This is to show attainability via deglamorization where they change their looks through various modes such as a) physical appearance (e.g., hairstyle, outfit), b) physical environment, and c) physical movements (i.e. demeanor) to showcase their willingness to adapt and adopt to the personality and style of the female characters.

Hence, this paper demonstrated how the proposed “deglamorization” kind of makeover is manifested, a concept that is quite different from the conventional idea of a makeover. This deglamorization is reflected in the change of their appearance in a variety of ways. Moreover, the male character's decision to transform springs from his own volition, rather than him being influenced by external agencies or other characters, as opposed to the conventional makeover trope in female characters often observed in movies that involve makeovers. Finally, it may be concluded that this willingness to adapt and adopt on the part of the male characters has been shown in the way they tone down, soften, even deglamorize or simplify their appearance as a form of adjustment and sacrifice so that the gap between the male and female protagonists becomes narrow.

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