

Korea 367 Essay

How do Canadian Koreans feel about Korean dating conventions? Can the depiction of dating and love relationships in Korean dramas provide a barrier to non-East Asian audiences enjoyment?

What kind of dating conventions are considered normal to Koreans or K-dramas and why are they so strange to Canadians? If you are watching a Korean drama, and there is a big emphasis when the guy grabs the girl's hand to "hold hands" why is this? What kind of expectations are these setting among Korean drama watchers and what impact is it having in the real life dating world. When viewing scenes like this unfold on TV it may be tempting to want this in reality, for young teens who watch and aspire to this kind of romance. Real world is a different story, and through our research and in field interviews we can see how Koreans really feel about these norms. These K-drama expectations vs reality are very different and what kind of impact does this have on people's expectations? We shall explore these expectations and norms while showing real world interviews with Koreans and what they really think. If you are active in the dating scene would any of these Korean dramas ideals, make sense in real life or is it all just fantasies that can not be replicated in the modern world. The dating etiquette, touching, and manners portrayed in Korean dramas will be analyzed and thoroughly questioned. The reasoning behind these simple yet vastly different styles of dating conventions are explored through various research and real world feedback below. Throughout the paper multiple anonymous interviews with Korean students will be present such as follows. When Lisa a student at UBC was asked about the emphasis on holding hands in K-drama's and if it was realistic she had this to respond. "Before the relationship has been determined, it is not easy to pull the other person's hand, so pulling the wrist will appear not so direct but very ambiguous,

the general pull wrist is also the story of the turning point. From the back hug is a kind of trust that I accompany you, let a person into your heart of a very warm feeling” (Lisa 19, Chinese Canadian). It appears as though this is something that many who watch K-dramas would appear to feel similar with. While it seems a few of the norms around touching and flirting may be true, the dating and romantic norms are rare to say the least. Lisa states “I think Korean drama’s romance is more like an ideal relationship that most of the girls wonder. But from my perspective, in most times this kind of romance is not possible to be in real life, but in few cases it can be real, can’t say its fake but it’s just so rare” (Lisa 19, Chinese Canadian). It seems although K-drama’s dating ideals can happen in real life, it is considered so rare that if you have an experience like this it is not normal.

A Korean drama called *Reply 1997* (2012, tvN, directed by Shin Won-ho) about young teens who develop romantic relationships in high school has many emphasized moments. When main characters Shi-won and Yun-je who are “friends,” share their first kiss in episode two it is overemphasized, with special effects and slow motions. This is an example of how Korean men and not just women are sexualized in K-dramas, prompting the Korean drama guy fantasies that are looked for in real world dating by women. The other point that’s made is how common it is for a Korean girl to have a guy who she is friends with show romantic feelings for her. “Romantic relationships evolve within social networks that include partners’ family and friends”(Jin & Oh 2010). These themes are yet another common stereotype of how Korean girls are meeting their lovers.

Later on the men go to an underage club in episode ten of *Reply 1997*, and are seen infatuated watching some of the girls dancing. One of the girls catches Seong-Jaes attention, he goes up to her after her dance performance and hands her his pager number. This is something you would not only see in Korea, although it is a much different approach than the other characters

in the film. The other characters are meeting their crushes through friends or developing feelings for their childhood friends while this is meeting someone in the club. The indirect approach of his friends who hide their feelings or make very small calculated moves over their crush, is a far cry from Seong-Jae's confident and direct style in the drama. The K-drama ideals are seen over and over again, and they also pit men against each other to compete over women. In episode eight of *Reply 1997* character Tae Woong, who is a teacher at the high school and is considered tall, handsome, confident, and successful. Then we have Yoon-jae later found out to be Tae-woongs brother. A smart young man first in his highschool class, he grows up spending time with the main character girl Si-won, growing romantic feelings in his teenage years for her. Then he is challenged by Tae-woong for the same girl putting him in a love triangle. Although Yoon-je ends up with Si-won in the end the idea of men competing for a girl's love is heavily portrayed in these K dramas.

In the Korean Drama *Reply 1997* Episode two main characters Shi-won and Yun-je are "just friends" in high school until a kiss is shared by them in episode two. Before this Shi-won is chasing Yun-je with a frog, until he is backed up against a wall, he ends up head to the side putting his hands out and touching her breasts which is emphasized heavily. Following up to the ending of the episode where Yun-je is shirtless and washing himself in a fountain before slowly walking up to Si-won and kissing her. The camera gets at least 5 different angles and slow motions of this kiss heavily emphasizing it along with capturing Yun-je's shirtless body. This is the classic K-drama formula wherein a young handsome man, is aggressively kissing the perceived innocent Korean girl in a high school uniform. Jisoo a University of British Columbia student and avid K-drama watcher had the following to say. "I have a big problem with how some Korean dramas like to show how the guy is very forceful onto the girl in order for the girl to be attracted to him. Such as forcing a kiss on them. I obviously wouldn't appreciate that if I just

met the guy” (Jisoo 19, Korean). Clearly while entertaining this is not exactly a real world occurrence, however the dramatization of this scene marks a trend in K-dramas. If you are viewing this you could be turned off as Jisoo was, yet this type of sex-sells formula is what keeps many girls coming to K-dramas to live out the fantasy of a hot idealistic Korean guy. Yun-je will later find out that another man named Tae-woong, who is considered a wealthy, and successful tutor has romantic feelings for Si-won. Falling into traditional K-drama’s storylines the viewers watch until the end when they find out who is the father of Si-won’s pregnant child. Is it Yun-je the shy boy who has been there for Si-won throughout her childhood? Or is it the older, successful, and confident Tae-woong who swooped in later in the film. “Only about 2 percent of all births occurred to never-married women in Korea, and this implies both that the rate of premarital pregnancy is likely to be substantial and that most of these pregnancies end in induced abortions. Nevertheless, the increasing rate of premarital pregnancy suggests that social tolerance towards unmarried women’s pregnancy has risen remarkably in a short period of time.” (Keuntae 2017: 35). The dramas portray that most women wait till marriage for a baby yet the reality is quite different according to this quote. Indeed, social tolerance in Korea has become more accepting of pregnancies, and has a different view of them than the previous generation. The fact is many Korean women are marrying outside their race and previously this was not too common. While watching Korean dramas we can see the stereotypes they put on Korean girls and Korean guys, yet how do Korean girls feel about international guys is a different story. A Korean International student studying in the US stated “When asked if she would marry a Japanese or Chinese person, Himel explained that she would be open to it because historical animosities and Japanese colonization was a thing of the past. She explained that “nowadays, maybe Korea will become wealthier than Japan. Why should I hate Japanese people?” (Ritter 2015: 412) This marks a change from the Korean’s hostility towards

these countries due to historical feuds or family. Although Korean dramas feature mainly Koreans dating other Koreans it ignores the fact that many Koreans date outside of their race or are more attracted to other races. It would get a lot of attention to have a Korean drama that featured Korean women dating other races. Or a K-drama with Korean men dating outside of Korean women would make things different from current norms. These changes if put into production widely would surely cause some controversy in the K-drama scene.

One of the dating norms that can be seen in K-dramas, is idolizing a hot younger male with an older Korean girl. In some cultures, it's more common for there to be an older male with a younger girl yet those who are used to that will be surprised when watching K-dramas' portrayal of age and relationships. "Widely diffused K-dramas in general, and Noona Romances in particular can be said to play a role in defining women's sexual desires worldwide-and they do this especially by displaying a specific form of heterosexual desire: a relationship between an older woman and younger (cute) manly man" (Schulze 2016: 315). "It appears as though the older more experienced girl with the young hot male is the one of the main stereotypes of K-dramas relationships. "Media depictions of such ideal body shapes increase the distance between our actual self-perception and our ideal self" (Sohn 2009: 20). Interestingly watching these men on the K-dramas will make women desensitized to age differences.

The impact that this would have on women's dating norms, who grow up watching and believing K-dramas, would be that they should consider dating a younger guy. "K-dramas can be understood as visual representations of a desire for younger men. Viewers who might not be used to pop cultural media representing couples in which the woman is a lot older, or representing them as rare exceptions to gendered norm sets, get used to *seeing* older women with a younger male partner on a regular basis" (Schulze 2016: 315). In K-dramas like *Reply 1997* there are older men going after younger Korean women, which makes age seem like no

big deal in Korean culture. While other cultures may make age differences in dating seem socially unacceptable K-dramas portray it as no big deal and normal. This will affect viewer's perceptions of dating older women or younger men since it is seen as the norm in these films. For Korean men, the whole fantasy of girls who want a Korean guy, for the K-drama romance experience can be a massive turn off. How do some University of British Columbia Korean guys feel about this same topic? Upset to say the least. As seen from an anonymous Korean student who stated that "If you are a girl, don't go after me or any other Korean guys for that matter if you're expecting it to play out like a k-drama. It's unrealistic and unhealthy. We're just normal dudes."(UBC Confessions post #6104 April 10,th 5:30pm). These extreme expectations from K-dramas have now made Korean guys feel turned off by the whole experience. Those girls who grow up watching K-dramas, and feel like they can get a relationship that is similar or have men behave like they do in the dramas are in for a surprise. In addition, these men feel that Korean Dramas are responsible for them becoming "fetishized" objects of Korean culture. Another anonymous confession reads "Never date a girl who watches Korean dramas, they expect too much" (UBC confessions post #6104 April 10th 5:30PM). Which leads us to believe these ridiculous expectations that are being put on men are having some impact in the real Korean dating world. After all, if you are a Korean guy and you date a girl who is expecting you to treat her just like these dramas you will probably be unable to meet her expectations. Now we have two differing perspectives as girls who want the K-drama guys in real life, while men can oppose this and feel scared if a girl brings K-drama expectations up. When asked what kind of real world expectations would be

had from a guy on a date when compared to K-dramas, Interviewee Jisoo a University of British Columbia student offers this. “They like to emphasize that the guy always has to pay for the date. I don’t see that as an expectation and am always happy to split the bill. I think the self-serving aspect in dramas are an ideal. Like how the guy/girl is willing to do anything for their lover. Although it can get quite dramatic in the drama, you do see it in real life and it’s nice to know when you find someone who can care for you like that” (Jisoo from Blackpink). This statement is a parallel to reality in the dating world as those who are only dating someone for a fantasy and not the way they make them feel will most likely not have a stable long term future with them. Splitting the bill in this day and age means that you both care about each other and is not seen as something rude as previous generations may have judged.

Another interviewee *Julie* (20 Canadian born Korean) says “It used to be portrayed in dramas and expected that the boyfriend pays for a lot of the girlfriend's food and presents, but nowadays it's shifting so everything is pretty much equal!” The real world expectations are much different from the K-drama stereotype of men always taking care of the women. If you go on a date it is more common to split the bill, or each person pays for their individual bill, and women in Korea are more likely to do this in current times. The ideal of a man paying for everything does not have the same feeling in modern times for many. Allot of women will pay for themselves and the idea of splitting the bill has each person caring about the other and not setting the tone for one dependent on the other financially. *Julie* (20, Korean-Canadian born) also stated “I think

dating in Korean dramas are over exaggerated, so I haven't had any dating experiences similar to that. Although one guy took me to a hotel restaurant and bought me a \$250 course meal lol and I thought that was pretty extreme but in Korean dramas they go as far as buying them nice handbags, jewelry, etc.” The wealthy guy who can afford to buy a girl everything, and showers her with gifts is an ideal that can be true, yet it does stand out in a dating environment since most guys are not paying for everything on a date. While some women may seek this out many guys could be turned off by being asked to pay for everything. After all it definitely makes one person seem financially dependent if they are not paying for everything.

The K-Drama norms seen in dramas such as *Reply 1997*, are not necessarily representative or stereotypical of modern day Koreans. If you are on a date or in a relationship more and more women are splitting the bill or sometimes paying for the guy. The stereotype of the Korean man taking care of everything for the Korean woman, as portrayed in K-dramas is not reality in the modern day and age. When it comes to K-dramas stereotypes of love triangles and two men competing for a girl's love is portrayed in many of them. “There is always a love triangle, usually involving two men and one woman. One of the men is perfect, a close family friend or someone she has always had a great relationship with, while the other man is a wild card; he's someone she has petty fights with until the fateful day she realizes he's “the one” (Suh 2011). This portrayal may sell well yet it characterizes the joker in the deck or bad boy as the better guy. Meanwhile the guy who has been there since the beginning is solid and caring yet tossed aside in favor of this more exciting guy. What kind of message does this send young viewers when they go into adulthood? Perhaps dating in Korea during modern times is made

more difficult due to this barrage of expectations and false realities. “The Korean Wave focused on a succession of dramas and films and select stars; however, a sense of decline has become apparent in past years. Recently, girl idol groups have become considered to be the revival of the Korean Wave and are expected to bring a renaissance of Korean cultural power on a global scale.” (Yeran 201: 34) In comparison K-dramas have emphasized the commercialization of Korean men and women on a global scale. Korean men are expected to act like they do in the dramas, and Korean women are fantasized and expected to look like the typical Korean drama girl. “Who are the audiences of Korean television dramas? Cultural theories suggest that demographic variables are usually related to cultural tastes. In the case of Hallyu, women, more than men, in general are more likely drawn to Korean dramas, according to previous studies. On the other hand, ages of audiences vary, depending on the characteristics of a particular drama; they also vary among countries.” (Jonghoe 2012) Women who watch Korean dramas keep the industry booming and yet the idealistic properties of these dramas affects these womens real life dating experiences. “In a world obsessed with dreams of eternal youth, adolescent and post-adolescent feminine cuteness largely relies on pretended child-like innocence that triggers deeply-rooted universal affective attach-ments” (Puzar 2011: 105).

In conclusion Korean dramas can provide barriers or stereotypes about dating and love onto those who watch them, yet they could be surprised by the realities of real world dating which are far different. From the interviews conducted we can see many Korean and Korean Canadian girls feel like Korean dramas paint the roles between men and women as unrealistic and not necessarily a good view of them. Ashley (20 Korean Canadian) stated “I think the ideals in K-dramas are pretty fantasized and in the end, Korean guys are just regular guys.” For those

growing up watching K-dramas, the fantasy of finding a Korean guy who acts similar to dating conventions in these films may be alluring to those who grow up watching them. If you grow up watching these men in K-dramas and have a date where a man makes a move that is not in line with what is seen in Korean dramas is it that big of a deal? Are these ideals best viewed as fantasies for minds to wander off into instead of some feeling they are ways to realistically measure a guy up. Ashley (20, Korean Canadian) states "I dated 2 guys and the experience was not similar to the ones portrayed in dramas. I don't think I've seen any similar to ones portrayed in Korean dramas." Therefore, any girl who is expecting to date a guy and find these K-drama expectations or any woman viewing a Korean guy through this narrow lens will probably miss out on a lot of potential dates. K-dramas like *Reply 1997* serve up certain expectations that are very difficult to meet or experience in real life.

Anonymous Personal Interview Questions and Facebook Post:

Four interviews from students who watch K-dramas and have experience dating.

What kind of dating experiences have you had or seen in real life that are similar to Korean dramas portrayal?

What about Korean dramas emphasizing touch is true? If you are on a date would you feel this is a big dramatic feeling if a guy gives you a back hug?

After watching K-dramas do you appreciate their portrayal of romance and courtship/touching? Would you look for this in a guy/girl?

What are some expectations you have when on a date and are any of these from Korean dramas?

What part of Korean dramas dating ideals are real? Or is it all fake?

Interviewees Anonymously named along with a anonymous UBC confessions Facebook post
UBC Confessions post #6104 April 10,th 5:30pm

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