



Harmful Stereotypes in Dating Shows: 'Single's Inferno' - Season 1

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Abstract. The purpose of this research was to gain a detailed understanding of how gender stereotypes are manifested and perpetuated in the dating show, using the south korean dating show 'Single's Inferno' as a case study. The study adopts a qualitative approach using content analysis to evaluate the narrative characteristics, character dynamics, and interactions in the first season of the show, focusing on identifying character traits and social relationships. The analysis of all episodes of the first season of the dating show, airing in 2021 on Netflix, revealed significant patterns and trends in the attitudes and behaviors of contestants, panelists, and production. The show's worldwide popularity supports the idea of its high impact and is consistent with previous studies indicating that elements of dating shows significantly influence the audience's intention to continue watching. A marked gender disparity in representation and expectations within the program was observed, evidenced in the age difference and professions assigned to male and female contestants. In addition, it was highlighted how gender norms perpetuate the submissiveness of women in different romantic contexts. On the other hand, rejection strategies characterized by politeness and the absence of sexual innuendo in the program were observed. The influence of beauty standards on the valuation of romantic relationships was also evident, with specific preferences for certain physical features considered attractive. These findings underscore how dating shows not only reflect, but also contribute to promoting ingrained gender stereotypes and beauty standards in the society.

Keywords: Dating Show, Gender Stereotypes, Beauty Standards.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Dating Shows

Dating shows, combining reality and entertainment, have evolved to captivate audiences by promoting genuine emotional connections. Studies indicate that these programs have shifted from scripted performances to authentic responses, changing the perception of viewers who now value emotional sincerity over staged actions [1].

This type of program has become a mainstay of reality TV, offering consistently engaging content that blends fact and fiction, adding complexity and intrigue [2]. Initially focused on the search for ideal partners, these programs have diversified to include varied perspectives on singleness and relationships [2].

In addition, some studies highlight the effort to balance different cultures, combining elements of global reality shows with traditional local values and norms, reflecting the complexities of appealing to international and local audiences [3]. This balance between provoking emotion and maintaining conservative standards highlights the intricate process of cultural adaptation in the production of multimedia content, and underscores broader debates about cultural assimilation in media [3].

1.2 Harmful stereotypes and beauty standards on Dating Shows

Previous studies indicate that gender representation in the media and advertising perpetuates negative stereotypes, affecting the psychological and social well-being of women, mainly through body objectification, which has adverse effects on their mental, emotional and physical health [4]. In contrast, men are commonly portrayed as heroes and breadwinners, while women are often presented in traditional and subordinate roles, such as mothers and homemakers [5]. This distorted representation of gender roles reinforces outdated sociocultural expectations, influencing societal norms and perceptions and affecting future generations [6].

In the context of dating shows, gender stereotypes and beauty standards are pervasive elements that shape both the narrative and audience perceptions. In the Hispanic sphere, these programs often cling to ingrained cultural stereotypes, portraying men as strong and dominant, and women as emotional and focused on their physical appearance. This portrayal not only reinforces traditional gender roles, such as men taking the initiative and women being passive, but also limits the possibilities for authentic and diverse representation of human relationships. Although some programs attempt to challenge these patterns with a greater variety of personalities, the persistence of these stereotypes remains notable, influencing how audiences perceive the reality of relationships and shaping their expectations about love and dating [2].

In addition, studies in various countries, such as China, Spain and the United Kingdom, highlight how these programs can reinforce negative and limited perceptions about gender and sexuality, perpetuating a double standard where men are praised for behaviors that stigmatize women, while women are judged and stereotyped for their emotional and sexual behavior [7–12].

This dynamic not only affects gender representation in the media, but also influences social attitudes toward relationships and physical attractiveness, promoting narrow norms that can have profound repercussions in contemporary society.

1.3 Impact of dating shows on the audience

Dating shows have a significant and multifaceted impact on the audience. On the one hand, they can also have positive effects, such as providing joy and entertainment, and helping viewers reflect on their love preferences and improve their emotional intelligence [13,14]. Dating shows can encourage viewer participation and emotional connection through interactions such as voting and commenting, strengthening their appeal and popularity [15]. In addition, the perceived authenticity of these programs is key to maintaining audience interest and immersion [16].

However, they convey negative messages that can affect viewers' concepts of love, provoking appearance and body anxiety, especially among young people, and perpetuating gender stereotypes and unrealistic beauty standards [14]. These programs also influence expectations and perceptions about intimacy and relationships, presenting idealized versions that distort the understanding of intimacy and generate unrealistic expectations [17,18].

In other words, dating shows significantly influence the perception of relationships, both positively and negatively.

1.4 South Korean Women in Social, Labor and Media Contexts

In different contexts in South Korea, women face diverse realities that reflect both progress and persistent challenges. In the workplace, women experience marked underrepresentation in leadership roles and face significant barriers in accessing professional development opportunities, compounded by entrenched gender discrimination. This situation perpetuates a disparity in salaries and opportunities, evidencing how stereotypes and prejudices in the work environment continue to limit women's progress [19].

On the other hand, in the media, especially in Korean television, the predominant portrayals of women tend to reinforce traditional gender roles, emphasizing their role as homemakers and mothers, which may influence the social perception that professional success entails sacrifices in personal life [20]. However, in the realm of entertainment, female pop music groups such as Itzy, CLC, and Mamamoo are actively challenging these stereotypes through their lyrics, promoting a narrative of empowerment and liberation that seeks to redefine beauty and gender standards in contemporary Korean society [21]. In addition, fashion magazines targeting Korean teenage girls present gender stereotypes that emphasize cuteness and childishness, reflecting ingrained norms of femininity that influence cultural perceptions of female beauty and identity [22]. These multidimensional dynamics underscore the complexity of South Korean women's experiences in different aspects of public and private life, revealing both challenges and efforts to challenge and transform established gender norms.

1.5 Beauty standards in South Korea

Beauty standards in South Korea reflect a complex interplay between Western influences and Asian traditions, as suggested by the analysis of the significance of skin whitening in Asian aesthetics [23]. Aesthetic hyperreality in Korean dramas, as analyzed in relation to plastic surgery in "True Beauty," underscores how the media perpetuates ideals of beauty attainable through aesthetic procedures [24].

Furthermore, it highlights how viewers of these dramas are influenced by these beauty standards, aspiring to replicate the actors' appearance and purchasing Korean products to achieve this [25]. Exposure to these media and cultural standards of beauty also negatively impacts body image and increases eating disorder symptoms among South Korean women, as illustrated in the study on objectification theory [26].

Finally, one study proposed that the globalization of Korean beauty requires strategies that not only rediscover traditional Korean beauty, but also strengthen Korean cultural identity globally through holistic and emotional approaches [27].

1.6 Single's Inferno

'Single's Inferno' is a South Korean dating show that, until 2024, has aired three seasons, comprising a total of 29 episodes. Each season introduces a fresh roster of contestants known for their distinct personalities. The program's hosts are Hong Jin-kyung, Lee Da-hee, Kyuhyun and Hanhae, all of whom are related to South Korean entertainment. The premise of the show involves twelve singles, equally divided between women and men, who share living together on an island called "Inferno". Those who choose each other's company can leave the island by helicopter to a luxury resort called "Paradise". However, it is only at this resort that they reveal their ages and professions, suggesting that on Inferno Island, only personality and physical attractiveness matter. Contestants who fail to find a partner must remain on the island. The series has garnered international attention owing to its distinctive character portrayals and compelling narrative, securing a position among the top 10 most-viewed television programs on Netflix globally [28].

2 Methodology

The analysis focuses on the eight episodes of the first season of 'Single's Inferno', aired on Netflix, employing Galán's content analysis guide [29]. This methodological approach categorizes physical, psychological, and sociological dimensions to assess character attributes and interactions, detailed in Table 1. The study adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on the description of the narrative characteristics represented in the videos of its first season. Content analysis serves as a methodological tool to evaluate the dynamics and interactions of participants, panelists' comments and production decisions. [30]. This research, as stated by Chaves-Montero et al. [31] and Bardin [32], is interpretive in nature, aiming to identify character traits and social relationships.

Content analysis, as a systematic method, allows the interpretation of various forms of communication, such as texts, images or videos, and is fundamental to identify patterns and recurring themes [33]. This analytical framework explores how messages

are conveyed and their impact on viewers, providing insights through disciplines such as media studies, psychology and sociology. Given the multifaceted nature of messages, their frequency, attribute balance, and associative implications are examined [29].

Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this study interprets and codes textual data from the first season of 'Single's Inferno' guided by the methodologies described by Krippendorff [34] and López-Aranguren [35]. Qualitative content analysis facilitates the identification of patterns, themes, and emergent categories essential to understanding the underlying traits of each character. Hsieh and Shannon [36] advocate tailoring this approach according to study objectives and analytic goals, enhancing understanding of intricate phenomena through participants' perspectives and experiences.

In addition, the study delves deeper into the interrelationships of the characters, examining how interactions, roles, and transformations contribute to the development of the plot and the evolution of the storyline.

Table 1. Character analysis sheet

Category	Data
Physical Dimension	Character Name
	Age
	Physical appearance
	Sex
Psychological Dimension	Nationality
	Personality type
	Temperament
	Goals/objectives
Sociological Dimension	Internal conflicts
	Stability in relationships
	Marital status
	Family environment/no. of children
	Professional/work environment
	Professional rank
Educational field	
Spatial setting	
External conflicts	

Source: Galán [29]

3 Results

An in-depth analysis of all episodes from the first season of the Netflix dating show 'Single's Inferno' unveiled significant patterns in the attitudes and behaviors of its 12 contestants (6 men and 6 women), as well as in the interactions of the 4 panelists (2 men and 2 women) and decisions made by the production team.

Regarding the ages of the contestants, the male participants spanned a range: Kim Hyeon Joong (28 years old), Moon Se Hoon (27 years old), Kim Jun Sik (28 years old), Choi Si Hun (30 years old), Oh Jin Taek (31 years old), and Cha Hyun Seung (31 years old). Conversely, the female participants included: Shin Ji Yeon (25 years old), Kang So Yeon (34 years old), Ahn Yea Won (27 years old), Song Ji A (25 years old), Kim Su Min (24 years old), and Seong Min Ji (24 years old). This age diversity reflects a selection seemingly influenced by entrenched gender stereotypes. The average age of the male contestants aligns with attributes such as professional and personal stability, maturity, and the ability to provide qualities often valued across various cultures. In contrast, the predominantly younger average age of the female contestants underscores associations with youth, beauty, and fertility, traits frequently emphasized in contexts of attraction and romantic engagements. These traditional stereotypes suggest a societal preference for youthful femininity and mature masculinity as desirable traits. Nevertheless, the inclusion of a 34-year-old woman among predominantly younger female participants enriches the representation of diverse female experiences, offering a broader and more nuanced perspective on interpersonal dynamics within the program.

In terms of professions, the male contestants held occupations such as fitness trainer and model, restaurant owner, director of a brand of healthy products, apparel brand representative, suit shop CEO, and dancer. These roles underscored leadership, entrepreneurship, technical expertise, and artistic skills. The female contestants, conversely, were involved in occupations such as university student of neuroscience, gym owner, pilates instructor, model, beauty content creator, and advertising model, predominantly emphasizing youth, beauty, and educational pursuits.

For example, when a female contestant advised a male contestant to stop insisting on another female contestant if she showed no interest, his negative reaction revealed the gender complexities and social expectations present in the program. He took the advice poorly, which led to an argument. In contrast, when a male contestant gave him the same advice earlier, it was valued and well received. In addition, there was evidence of persistence on the part of the men in their attempts at conquest, even when the women showed disinterest, resulting in success or rejection depending on the circumstances. This underscores the influence of social expectations on female submission and resistance to male pressure in romantic relationships. It is notable to note that during all interactions, both men and women remarkably demonstrated kindness and respect, incorporating these qualities into their strategies when rejecting, characterized by minimal physical contact and the absence of sexual advances between participants.

During their introductions, all contestants exhibited high levels of self-esteem and self-confidence. However, distinct differences emerged in romantic priorities. Men tended to prioritize physical appearance and sexual allure, emphasizing attributes such as athletic physique, charming smiles, and perceived sex appeal. They expressed preferences for women possessing specific physical traits such as attractiveness, facial features evoking a feline image, captivating smiles, expressive eyes, and a preference

for fair skin, associating it with purity and beauty ideals within the program's context. Conversely, women also mentioned their physical attributes, such as attractiveness and charming smiles, yet placed greater emphasis on personality and emotional connection as crucial elements in relationships. Despite indicating physical preferences in potential partners, such as attractive noses, well-defined double eyelids, and charming smiles, they underscored sincerity, positive energy, positive influence, and diversity in interests and activities as more pivotal in partner selection. This contrast underscores the profound impact of gender expectations on perceptions and preferences within dating and romantic relationships featured in the program, illustrating the complexity of interpersonal dynamics shaped by traditional social norms.

Moreover, panelists' comments and production decisions contributed significantly to perpetuating gender stereotypes and beauty standards. Panelists frequently reinforced gender stereotypes, as evident when criticizing a female contestant's decision to decline an invitation from a male participant using terms like "scary woman", implying women should respond affirmatively to polite gestures from men. This critique reflects ingrained social expectations regarding female behavior in courtship. Additionally, comments questioning a woman's motives for choosing a male companion for a resort visit minimized female decisions as superficial. Labeling a man as a "naturally flirtatious" after manipulating emotions of two women reflects cultural tolerance for manipulative male behavior. Praise for being perceived as a "one-woman man or one-man woman" highlights values of fidelity and stability in relationships, reflecting cultural norms that may restrict personal freedom. Differing reactions to rejection were also apparent: sympathy for male rejectors contrasted with encouragement for persistence in male pursuits, romanticizing male persistence and perpetuating conquest narratives in romantic relationships, as exemplified by celebrating a male contestant's persistence as the "winner" upon achieving his goal by the program's conclusion.

The program's production actively promoted gender stereotypes and beauty standards in contestant selection. This was evident through the inclusion of older male and younger female contestants, along with preferences for slim, physically fit, and predominantly model-like participants with medium to high socio-economic status. Furthermore, the program frequently employed close-up camera angles to highlight specific body parts, such as female buttocks and male abdomens and muscles, particularly during outdoor activities like beach sunbathing, pool entrances, and physical skill-based games. There was also a marked disparity in game types assigned to male and female contestants, designed by program production, which reflected and reinforced pre-existing gender stereotypes. Male-focused games emphasized physical strength and direct competition, such as wrestling opponents out of pits, accentuating traditionally masculine traits like aggression and physical dominance. Conversely, female games involved challenges demanding agility and manual dexterity, such as removing an opponent's cap by hand, avoiding direct physical confrontation yet perpetuating expectations of "masculine" versus "feminine" behavior in competitive contexts.

4 Discussion

The worldwide success of ‘Single's Inferno’, ranking among the top 10 most watched shows on Netflix globally, underlines its considerable impact and massive reach [28]. This phenomenon highlights how dating shows have emerged as mainstays of reality TV, deftly blending fact and fiction to deliver engaging content that captivates viewers with complexity and intrigue [2]. A previous study of ‘Single's Inferno’ supports this idea, noting its evolution from scripted performances to authentic emotional responses, fostering genuine connections [3]. This approach has captured the attention of both international audiences, by including elements of Western drama, and local audiences, by maintaining a conservative approach [3]. Furthermore, other previous research supports the idea that these programs have a significant impact on the public's perception of relationships, generating positive emotions and entertainment [13], but also setting unrealistic standards that could negatively influence romantic expectations [17]. This possibility is supported by a previous study of the program, which indicates that ‘Single's Inferno’ conveys messages that may have an adverse effect on concepts of love among Chinese college students [14]. However, some viewers use this show to reflect and improve their emotional intelligence, thereby adopting a healthier and more nuanced view of love [14]. In addition to this, studies indicate that identification with the characters and the influence of traditional gender stereotypes also have a profound impact on the audience's experience [15,16,18].

On the other hand, in ‘Single's Inferno’ it was clearly observed how the assigned professions and minimum ages of the contestants reinforced gender stereotypes and predefined social roles. Overall, the professions and ages of the contestants reinforced gender stereotypes and predefined social roles. Female contestants assumed roles focused on image and self-care, while male contestants were primarily associated with roles that emphasized business success and leadership. The portrayal of women in traditional roles on South Korean television reinforces limiting stereotypes, perpetuating the idea that they should prioritize family over career, reflecting structural inequalities and biases in the work environment [19–22]. In the media and advertising in other countries, gender representations also perpetuate female stereotypes that negatively impact women's psychological and social well-being. These stereotypes reinforce outdated sociocultural expectations about gender roles, affecting both current and future generations, and underscore the need for more equitable and diverse representation in the media [4–6].

Moreover, the panelists' belittling and discrediting of women's decisions reflected the view that women are less capable of making autonomous decisions, which exposes them to greater scrutiny and distrust. In addition, the program production reinforced these stereotypes through the games designed for men and women, which perpetuated traditional gender roles in South Korean society: while the men's games emphasize strength, competition, and aggressiveness, the women's games focus on gentleness, cooperation, and interpersonal interaction. All of these aspects contribute to reinforcing expectations about how men and women should behave, aligning with patriarchal values and perpetuating traditional gender roles. Several studies on dating shows from other countries align with the result found. In the Hispanic sphere, dating shows are based on ingrained gender stereotypes that influence perceptions about relationships and expected relationship behavior [2]. In Spain, these programs have been criticized

for perpetuating these stereotypes and for their discriminatory casting, highlighting the need for more inclusive and authentic representations in the media [7]. In China, reality dating shows manipulate gender stereotypes to create engaging narratives, balancing scripted elements with real emotions [8]. In the United Kingdom, some programs have been criticized for maintaining a paternalistic tone and perpetuating stereotypes [9], while others have been criticized for portraying sexist attitudes and reinforcing traditional gender roles [10]. Similar programs in China balance authentic elements with elaborate scripts, reflecting deep cultural influences and perpetuating stereotypes about romance and gender roles [11,12]. Moreover, in 'Single's Inferno', rejection strategies characterised by politeness and the use of indirect phrases by both men and women were observed, with gender dynamics that reflect male persistence and female submissiveness, but with interactions that are always polite and respectful. This dynamic is different with what has been observed in studies of dating programs in China, which highlight how men and women handle rejection differently in media contexts: men tend to be direct in expressing blunt thanks or apologies, while women prefer more indirect strategies such as detailed explanations or thank-you lists to politely decline [37,38]. In addition, minimal physical contact between contestants and the absence of sexual advances were observed in the program, characteristics that could be interpreted as indicative of the prevailing cultural and social norms that dictate interactions within this television environment, prioritising modesty and restraint over physical intimacy.

Furthermore, the influence of the standards of beauty in the evaluation of romantic relationships within the program is highlighted, evidencing the importance attributed to certain physical features as indicators of attractiveness. This phenomenon is noticeable in the contestants' self-presentations, where their physical qualities attractive to the opposite sex are emphasised. It is also reflected in the comments of the panelists, who idealise features such as pale skin and thinness, aligning with the historical preference in South Korea for these aesthetic standards [24,25]. On the other hand, the show's production encourages these beauty standards through the selection of thin or physically fit contestants, and close-ups on specific body parts such as women's buttocks and men's abdomens. This phenomenon is supported by research documenting how the media perpetuate and reinforce sexualised gender roles [4–6]. Previous studies have also pointed out how television programs, including dating shows, help perpetuate beauty ideals and social pressures related to appearance [24–26]. In addition, one study notes that 'Single's Inferno' conveys negative messages that increase "appearance anxiety" and "body anxiety" among Chinese college students [14]. These findings underscore the influence of South Korean cultural and aesthetic values on the globalization of beauty standards, which reinforce South Korea's national identity through its cultural heritage and distinctive beauty ideals [27].

5 Conclusions

'Single's Inferno' has not only achieved significant global success, but also plays a crucial role in perpetuating gender stereotypes and entrenched beauty standards. Through the meticulous selection of participants according to their ages and professions, the show reinforces traditional social roles that are widely recognised and expected in society. Women, mostly young and associated with occupations that

highlight physical beauty and youth, as models or creators of beauty content, are presented as embodiments of aesthetic ideals and youthfulness. Men, on the other hand, are portrayed as more mature and professionally successful, occupying roles such as business owners or brand executives, which underlines the valuing of economic stability and male leadership. This focus on age and career differences not only reflects but also perpetuates entrenched cultural expectations about femininity and masculinity.

The relationship dynamics depicted in the program reflect and reinforce these stereotypes: men are persistent in their efforts to conquer, while women often adopt submissive roles or are the object of attention and judgement from the panelists. This representation not only shapes perceptions of gender and behaviour among viewers, but also normalises and validates unequal dynamics in romantic relationships.

In addition, the production of the program uses visual and narrative strategies to intensify pressures on physical appearance and reinforce standardised ideals of beauty. Close-ups of specific parts of participants' bodies, the valorization of certain facial and physical features, as well as the importance given to superficial beauty in participants' interactions and decisions, contribute to perpetuating restrictive and often unattainable standards of beauty.

In summary, 'Single's Inferno' not only provides entertainment through its narrative intrigue and emotional dynamics but also serves as a pivotal influence in shaping and reinforcing societal and beauty norms. By mirroring and perpetuating gender stereotypes and beauty ideals, the program contributes to the cultivation of unrealistic expectations and societal pressures, potentially impacting the self-esteem and emotional welfare of its audience, particularly those who diverge from the represented standards.

The paucity of literature on negative stereotypes in dating shows highlights the urgent need for broader and more comprehensive research in this area. These widely popular and far-reaching programs exert significant influence on public perceptions of relationships and gender roles. Exposing and analyzing the predefined gender roles that these programs perpetuate underscores the importance of confronting and dismantling these entrenched dynamics to foster more equitable representations and relationships. Future studies could further explore how these stereotypes affect different demographic and cultural groups, as well as investigate effective interventions to counteract the negative effects on romantic expectations and interpersonal relationships.

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