Fashion Narratives in K-Dramas: Exploring Cultural Heritage, Global Trends, and Intercultural Body Image through Semiotics

Bianca Terracciano*

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Abstract: Korean dramas (K-dramas) have emerged as powerful cultural artifacts that not only entertain but also shape societal perceptions of Fashion, body image, and identity. Fashion in K-dramas operates as a semiotic medium of cultural storytelling, weaving together traditional Korean heritage with contemporary global trends. These audiovisual narratives play a crucial role in constructing and circulating culturally specific ideals of beauty and bodily norms. This article investigates how Fashion and body image are represented in K-dramas and how these representations are interpreted across different cultural contexts. Through a semiotic lens, it explores the mechanisms by which K-dramas mediate notions of identity, desirability, and belonging, revealing the tensions and harmonies between local traditions and globalized aesthetics.

Keywords: Semiotics, Fashion, K-Drama, Hallyu, Body, Culture.

1. Introduction

Fashion and semiotics are intrinsically linked through shared structural and relational systems. As a material practice and a communicative code, Fashion becomes a privileged object of semiotic inquiry. An outfit—or total look—comprises a meaningful ensemble of selected elements governed by explicit and implicit rules. These elements must maintain formal harmony (e.g., one cannot wear two coats at once), but also semantic coherence: certain color combinations or garments may be periodically deemed "out of Fashion," reflecting seasonal or cultural shifts. Therefore, the careful selection and combination of clothing and accessories embody bodily and stylistic codifications that express lived experiences and passions. In this sense, an outfit functions as a semiotic text, a coherent configuration of discrete yet interrelated

* **Bianca Terracciano**, Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy, E-mail: bianca.terracciano@uniroma1.it

units, interpretable through scientific analysis. Barthes (1967) conceptualizes Fashion as a semiotic system structured along paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes. Using the Latin conjunctions AUT (exclusive "or"), VEL (inclusive "or"), and ET ("and"), he shows how clothing choices reflect semiotic operations: AUT as exclusive logic (e.g., flannel worn only during the day), VEL as permitted alternatives (e.g., a raincoat suitable for work or evening wear), and ET as syntactic conjunctions: the cardigan is simultaneously bold and discreet (the paradoxical ET); and the skirt is both sober and simple (the doubling ET).

These mechanisms regulate not only what can be worn together, but also how meaning emerges from contrast, substitution, and accumulation.

A balanced relationship among the components of an outfit—for instance, a combination of t-shirt, jeans, sneakers, and a bag—is crucial for negotiating meanings that can be attributed, interpreted, and expressed. In semiotic terms, garments and accessories are classified as meaningful units within a grammatical system of Fashion, organized by oppositions (e.g., formal vs casual) and assimilations (e.g., coordinated fabrics or accessories). These relations produce stylistic effects—such as simplicity, elegance, melancholy, or defiance—that influence the viewer's affective and cognitive perception of a character.

Each outfit, then, participates in a broader narrative structure, functioning as a signifying configuration that contributes to the construction of character identity. Within fictional universes, especially in serial storytelling, clothing becomes a mode of enunciation that enables characters to speak not only through words but also through appearance. The "total look" becomes a marker of personality traits, social roles, aspirations, or transformations. Whether minimal or excessive, classic or experimental, each vestimentary choice is narratively motivated and culturally situated.

This perspective is especially fruitful in analyzing K-dramas, which offer a rich corpus for investigating how Fashion operates not simply as costume but as a discursive practice integrated into the diegesis. The term K-drama refers not simply to Korean TV series but to a broader typology of serialized audiovisual storytelling that traverses multiple genres and thematics—including Fashion. So, my research question is how Korean television dramas deploy Fashion not merely as a stylistic ornament but as a narrative operator: a system of signs through which identity, beauty, emotion, and social status are constructed and circulated.

These dramas mobilize clothing to articulate social hierarchies, emotional states, moral positions, and transitional moments in character arcs. Fashion in K-dramas is inscribed across different bodies (model bodies, mediated bodies, and everyday bodies), spaces (domestic, public, symbolic), and temporalities (leisure and labor, *otium* and *negotium*). In doing so, they transform the outfit from a system of visual codes into a device of narrative expression. The transition from real clothing to those textualized in TV series is possible by Roman Jakobson's notion of shifters, which Barthes creatively appropriates to explore exchanges among different semiotic codes: visual, verbal, and vestimentary. The latter corresponds to the real garment structure, technological by virtue of its production techniques, linked to types of corporeality and temporality within Fashion, and context-dependent use occasions. Barthes (1967, p. 27) refers to a structure constituted at the level of matter and its transformations, not at the level of representations and significations, specifying that the real garment is a tangible, purchasable object, distinct from the garment when worn. Considering semiotic modes of existence—virtual, actual, and realized—it might be more accurate, in light of disciplinary advancements, to define

the real garment as "realized," whereas the garment manufactured but not yet worn should be situated within the regime of the actualization of Fashion's virtuality. According to Barthes, the technological garment transforms into an iconic garment, that is the one represented through tv series, which act as shifters, akin to instructions on "the doing and being of the garment," specifying when, how, and by whom it should be worn. At this point, we may question what occurs when a Fashion object becomes a co-protagonist in structured narratives such as films or television series. Objects, seemingly trivial and superficial like Fashion items, become meaningful within narratives precisely because they are first invested with value and subsequently elaborated—or converted—into discourses as figures and icons within the world.

From a systemic perspective, no object exists in isolation; rather, it is embedded in a network of relationships that shape and amplify its meaning. In Fashion, garments and accessories primarily exist rhetorically; therefore, connections between objects and the meanings they disseminate are arbitrary yet appear natural. This apparent naturalness derives from the narratives we associate with them, such as the iconic Givenchy little black dress worn by Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), the Fendi baguette and Manolo Blahnik pumps in *Sex & The City* (1998-2004), or the red scarf worn by Kim Go-Eun in *Goblin* (2016). Herein lies "the commercial origin of our collective image-system," not in the Fashion object itself but in its storytelling because "it is not the dream, but the meaning that sells" (Barthes, 1967, p. XII). Fashion incorporated into cinematic narratives attains the status of langue—a shared, institutionalized costume, an "abstract garment entrusted to a concrete speech," finding its actualized dimension in garment-words.

The perceptual and affective qualities triggered by garments are also activated by narratives. Consequently, one can assert that K-Dramas and Fashion share a web of intertextual and citational connections. Intertextuality functions as a communicative strategy that creates and institutionalizes a universe of references, transcending Fashion to represent recognizable ways of life with which people can identify. These references draw from diverse media sources, including cinema, painting, travel photography, novels, and television. Given its global scope, contemporary Fashion must anchor itself firmly in cultural references to remain relevant, particularly in an ever-changing market where style transformations can occur easily and affordably based on individual emotional states. Thus, intertextual connections are intrinsic to Fashion—not only as a structured system but also as an ongoing process—that connects every aspect of human experience to culturally scripted frameworks of meaning

1.1 The Relationship Between Fashion and TV Series

Every garment holds within it an implicit narrative, a silent memory that transcends mere appearances. It retains traces of the bodies it has adorned, echoing dreams fulfilled or shattered, and insecurities subtly concealed beneath carefully chosen aesthetics. Hidden within every stitch lies an unspoken manifesto, a fragment of freedom articulated through the universal language of Fashion. Garments, therefore, are not merely objects but active witnesses. They articulate unspoken worlds, silent revolutions, and expressions of freedom resistant to any form of categorization or confinement.

Within this framework, clothes become embodied narratives, tangible emanations of the bodies they dress, serving as echoes of a lived, material world. Such dynamics are particularly evident in the storytelling mechanisms of K-Dramas, where garments and accessories often function as observers, narrators, or even protagonists, actively shaping both individual identities and collective imaginaries. K-Dramas frequently illustrate how Fashion items transcend their material boundaries, extending personal identity outward in a centrifugal movement that encompasses bodies, fabrics, objects, and even interpersonal relationships. Between the corporeal self – called by Fontanille (2013) *me-flesh* – and the textile interface of clothing lies an interstitial space—a conceptual gap where different discourses on Fashion converge, mediating between personal identity and the intentionality of designers. The garment, as a *self-envelope* (Fontanille, 2013) containing the body, modifies the me-flesh (the contained body), perceived as an expressive form by another. The self-envelope, as the external body, is a signifying form because it carries a degree zero configuration, elaborated both internally and externally, as Fontanille would say, determined as a figure (silhouettes, model body, thematic role). Similarly, the flesh is regulated by this garment-envelope, where energy, substance, and structure are entirely coextensive and, moreover, equally contained, regulated, and liberated (Fontanille, 2013).

Contemporary Korean TV series thus operate simultaneously as influential trendsetters and cultural archives, exemplified by their global reach and impact on international Fashion trends. Such series function as mnemonic devices, meticulously curating universes of meaning through scene-specific details, characters' psychological dimensions, and the subtleties of personal style.

Furthermore, the widespread popularity of these shows transforms their actors into style icons, enabling them to embody specific brands or aesthetic ideals. The presence and visibility of these actors accelerate the diffusion of season-specific trends and broader style movements, reflecting the symbiotic relationship between screen visibility and Fashion credibility.

The intricate connection between Fashion and K-Drama narratives hinges on the rhetorical necessity to justify Fashion's very existence through storytelling. Television series, particularly those with global audiences, leverage their captivating and persuasive narratives to embed clothing and accessories with symbolic significance, manifesting transformations, disguises, social status, and personal aspirations. In these narratives, a single garment can denote class affiliations, individuality, conformity, rebellion, or cultural taboos. When a Fashion object from a series captivates viewers, it rapidly migrates from fiction into everyday life. This migration process is typically facilitated by celebrities—individuals possessing extraordinary creative and cultural skills—who act as mediators or “translators” between fictional universes and real-world contexts. These figures, often actors and actresses already established in the entertainment industry, embody not only the characters they portray on screen but also the lifestyle, aesthetic, and values associated with those characters. Their visibility across social media platforms, Fashion editorials, and global marketing campaigns allows them to blur the boundary between character and person, fiction and authenticity.

In this sense, they become vehicles of cultural translation, rendering the symbolic capital of a fictional outfit intelligible and desirable to international audiences. For example, when a K-drama actress is seen wearing a certain designer piece in character, and later photographed in a variation of the same style at a public event or in a commercial, she effectively ratifies the look across both diegetic and extradiegetic contexts. The actor’s own body becomes a site of

continuity—a physical medium through which the garment's meaning is stabilized, authenticated, and transferred from narrative to commerce. This recursive feedback loop reinforces identification, as audiences begin to mimic or desire the aesthetic not only of the character, but of the celebrity themselves, who now represents a hybridized figure of aspirational normalcy and elevated style. Korean Fashion e-tailers have capitalized on the aspirational appeal of K-dramas by selling apparel and accessories modeled on those worn by iconic characters in series such as *Hotel Del Luna* (2019), *Crash Landing on You* (2019-2020), *True Beauty* (2020-2021), *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020), *Our Beloved Summer* (2022), and *Penthouse* (2020-2021), as well as by international K-pop figures like BTS and BLACKPINK. These platforms often promote their merchandise through stylized social media content that functions as tutorials—inviting users to replicate the style of beloved characters. However, this consumer enthusiasm is not without complications. As noted by Hur (2023), many of these items are low-quality fast Fashion imitations of Western luxury brands, produced under ethically and environmentally questionable conditions. In this regard, the popular imaginary surrounding K-Fashion is frequently sustained by simulacra—what might be termed a "fake authenticity" that problematizes the industry's sustainability and originality.

According to Yoo and Ha (2023), while K-Fashion nominally refers to Fashion trends originating in South Korea, it fundamentally serves a broader strategic initiative aimed at globally promoting and vitalizing Korean culture (K-culture). Despite systematic cultural branding efforts, the semantic and conceptual boundaries defining K-Fashion remain ambiguous and contested. From a semiotic perspective, it is initially essential to conceptualize K-Fashion as a collection of garments specifically produced by, or associated with, Korean designers, brands, and manufacturers. Yoo and Ha (2023) further note that international perceptions of K-Fashion largely hinge on an imaginary collectively constructed through non-Koreans' interpretations of clothing, hairstyles, makeup, and the performative attitudes prominently exhibited by Hallyu celebrities. These perceptions are prominently expressed in specific consumption practices, notably in tourism activities focused on iconic filming locations featured in popular K-dramas. Complementing these cinematic pilgrimages, another distinct category of cultural tourism—explicitly oriented toward beauty and physical transformation—has also emerged. Discourses prevalent on platforms such as Instagram reveal an increasing international engagement with specialized "beauty tours," designed explicitly to foster embodied familiarity or enhanced "confidence" associated with Korean aesthetic ideals. Within this commodified Hallyu paradigm, accessible to diverse global audiences, pursuits of bodily modification include hair spa treatments, K-pop-inspired makeup sessions, skincare routines, facials, and even cosmetic surgical procedures. Thus, K-Fashion transcends mere clothing, becoming an intricate cultural text that mediates intersections of identity, authenticity, and aesthetic aspirations globally.

Hallyu's embodiment through K-drama stars further emphasizes their role as cultural ambassadors for renowned Western Fashion brands. A notable case is the global success of *Squid Game* (Netflix, 2021–2025), a series instrumental in reshaping global perceptions of K-dramas beyond simplistic stereotypes of romantic or adolescent themes. The show's lead actor, Lee Jung-Jae (Gi-Hun), became an ambassador for Gucci, while Jung Ho-Yeon (Sae-Byeok), the female lead, represents Louis Vuitton, becoming the first Korean to grace the cover of *American Vogue*.

The internet's abundance of "style files" dedicated to K-drama stars exemplifies their transformation into visual embodiments of abstract semiotic categories, mediated through the rhetoric of "dressing like." These resources meticulously detail how audiences can replicate on-screen Fashion, either by purchasing exact items or opting for accessible alternatives. Platforms such as *Inkistyle* perform exhaustive analyses of protagonists' outfits, both on-screen and off, creating profitable collaborations between Fashion e-tailers and brands.

Thus, through K-Dramas, Fashion enters our private spaces, embedding itself into daily life and cultural consciousness through narratives rich in emotional resonance and aspirational power.

K-Fashion positions itself at the intersection between identity and alterity, operating within an exchange between homogeneity and heterogeneity. This exchange is articulated through particles that join to form complex semiotic units—contemporary Fashion objects—as well as others that remain autonomous, carrying already stabilized meanings, such as the traditional *hanbok*.

K-Fashion exemplifies Lotman's concept of *structural isomorphism* (1985), as it constitutes a system in which elements of Korean and Italian cultures—particularly visible in certain collections or model lines—creolize and engage with other cultural forms. This results in a layering of influences, which preserves the recognizability of the original elements even as they blend.

Fashion objects retain invariant features, defined by the narrative function of the outfit according to a tripartite structure: aesthetic, instrumental, and mythical. Variants, however, emerge in response to the specific events and circumstances of the plot. These are expressed through the *taxic* component—oppositions based on differential traits among similar items—and the *configurative* component—individual parts that vary depending on their thematic role in the story.

On one level, K-Dramas resemantize the texts and *semiospheres* (Lotman, 1984) they incorporate; on another, they express globally recognized traits and amplify them through unexpected channels. In doing so, they function as a metalanguage within the Fashion system, capable of articulating the complexity of its constitutive elements. The networked relationship between these elements generates both meaning and value. The syntactic-semantic organization of K-Dramas underpins their stylistic configuration—one that narratively constructs everyday life scenarios, primarily related to leisure time, by weaving together cultural codes marked by isomorphism and isotopy. In this sense, K-Dramas have developed a specific discursive configuration—a genre or style—that has proven credible and distinctive. Its defining traits, expressed through isomorphisms at the expression plan and isotopies at the content plan, have become central to the authentic meaning of K-Fashion as both an economic and ideological value. Over time, K-Dramas have established a replicable pattern rooted in an encyclopedic paradigm of belonging, forming the basis for extension into other product categories.

Ultimately, identity traits are textualized through the usage of Fashion objects, which function as porous borders where translation between semiospheres occurs—prior to their full integration. This space enables a proactive form of identity self-awareness, where difference is not erased but positively valorized.

1.2 Fashion as Structural element in K-dramas

K-dramas serve as powerful marketing tools, significantly influencing global consumer behaviors and propagating specific beauty and body ideals. Adopting a semiotic analytical framework inspired by Émile Zola (Pezzini, 2020b, p. 55), Fashion within K-dramas can be systematically interpreted as a "fixed syntagm, horizontally articulated from head to foot." This approach categorizes the portrayal of K-Fashion based on the presence or absence of specific vestimentary markers—such as jackets, ties, skirts or trousers, types of footwear (heels, leather shoes, sneakers), and visible brand logos. These signs carry metaphorical associations that reflect distinctive aspects of social status, function, and taste.

Building on Greimas's insights (2000 [1948]), it becomes evident that, within South Korea's rigidly hierarchical society, clothing in K-dramas serves as a visual shorthand to convey both collective social rank and individual aspiration. Examples abound: the Chanel suit worn by career women; the tailored Italian suits favored by young chaebol heirs; the casual shorts and sandals of university students; professorial elegance represented by jackets layered over turtlenecks; the distinctive designer jewelry worn by art gallery owners; and the vibrant floral trousers emblematic of rural ajummas.

How individuals appear to others constitutes an enduring narrative and discursive configuration, whereas one's more authentic identity is sustained by inner motives and desires. Both dimensions operate through figures arranged paradigmatically and syntagmatically. As Pezzini (2020a, p. 69) points out, dressing oneself becomes a potentially poetic activity, particularly when it escapes the automatisms of daily routine and transforms into a practice of bricolage—recomposing motifs and figures into relatively novel configurations. This leads to the concept of attire as a coherent totality, composed of articulated, detailed figures (such as blouse, skirt, stockings, shoes, hairstyle, ribbons, hats, and jewelry), structured according to a logic of progressive *iconization*. This echoes the notion of the "total look", extensively theorized by Jean-Marie Floch in his semiotic reading of Chanel (Floch, 1995).

Greimas (1987, p. 58) himself revisits Fashion from the perspective of everyday life, underscoring that the act of carefully choosing what to wear involves a syntagmatic intelligence capable of constructing a socially and symbolically meaningful object. Dressing, therefore, emerges as an inherently intersubjective activity: regardless of one's apparent nonchalance or confidence, the imagined presence of the Other—and their evaluative gaze—inevitably invokes existing dress codes, norms, and classificatory schemes. Having refined taste in clothing reveals itself as a social and cultural dimension of judgment, alongside qualities such as elegance, grace, simplicity, and originality—each communicating a specific *form of life* (Fontanille, 2015). As a result, every social class portrayed in K-dramas is marked by its distinct taste culture and by elements that directly respond to behavioral expectations—such as walking styles, public comportment, or the desire (or refusal) to be seen—deeply intertwined with the emotional dimension of Fashion objects. The connotations of dress radiate outward from the subject—or rather, from their emotional state—which, constrained by codes and expectations, experiences a continuous asymmetry in relation to other value systems, including epistemic (true/false) and ethical (good/evil) evaluations. Aesthetic values, in contrast, manifest as a surplus of meaning that rises above the threshold of indifference or insignificance—yet remain vulnerable to

repetitive use, or worse, to the deterioration and wear inherent in the daily dimension of signification (Pezzini, 2020a, pp. 72–73).

The representation of Fashion in K-dramas adopts various modalities: it may serve as a contextual backdrop—as in *Queen of Tears* (2024)—or constitute a pivotal element intrinsic to the protagonist's aspirations, as exemplified in *Record of Youth* (2020). These theoretical considerations form the premise for the following two-tiered corpus analysis, which investigates how Fashion functions in K-dramas both as a narrative device and as a cultural discourse.

The first subset of the corpus comprises K-dramas in which Fashion is not incidental but central to the plot, functioning either as a thematic role or a professional milieu. These series explicitly position Fashion within the diegetic framework, allowing for a detailed analysis of its discursive and functional roles across narrative structures.

In such cases, the Fashion industry becomes a narrative engine, embodied by characters who occupy clearly defined professional and thematic roles: designers (*Baby Faced Beauty*, 2011; *Cheongdam-dong Alice*, 2012; *Jang Ok-jung, Living by Love*, 2013; *Now, We Are Breaking Up*, 2021), models (*My Runway*, 2016; *Perfume*, 2019; *Record of Youth*, 2020; *Supermodel*, 2021), stylists (*Gangnam Scandal*, 2018), public relations specialists (*The Fabulous*, 2022), photographers (*Welcome to Samdal-ri*, 2023), and Fashion magazine editors (*She Was Pretty*, 2015). Additional examples include dramas focused on broader Fashion communication and industry contexts: *Style* (2009), *She Was Pretty* (2015), *Fashion King* (2012), *Be Arrogant* (2014), *VIP* (2019), *Celebrity* (2023), and *Queen of Tears* (2024).

In *Jang Ok-jung, Living by Love* (2013), Fashion becomes a central narrative vector through the historical figure of Jang Ok-jeong (장옥정; 張玉貞, 1659–1701), known as Royal Noble Consort Hui-bin Jang (희빈 장씨; 禧嬪 張氏), consort to King Sukjong of Joseon and mother of King Gyeongjong. The drama portrays her life through the lens of her passion for designing elegant hanbok, using Fashion not only to develop her character but also to reflect broader social dynamics and to lend historical depth to the series. In this case, clothing expresses both personal identity and the symbolic tensions of courtly power.

Some K-dramas also critically address the darker aspects of the Fashion world. For example, *Celebrity* (2023) explores the manipulative mechanisms of influencer culture, while *Baby Faced Beauty* (2011) highlights ageism, showing how the Fashion industry's obsession with youth marginalizes experienced talent and reduces individuals to disposable visual commodities.

By combining cultural impact and narrative centrality as criteria, this corpus supports a comprehensive analysis of Fashion in K-dramas as both text and meta-text—that is, both as a narrative operator embedded within the story and as a discursive object that extends beyond the fiction to articulate a broader social commentary.

A second subset of the corpus includes K-dramas whose protagonists have attained iconic status in global Fashion discourse. These characters were selected on the basis of rankings and editorial features from major international Fashion publications such as *Vogue* and *Elle*, as well as platforms dedicated to Korean pop culture. Additional sources include high-engagement discussions from online forums like *Reddit* and *Quora*, as well as traffic data from *Inkistyle*, a site that catalogues and ranks the most-viewed outfits in K-dramas. This attention to cultural

resonance enables an exploration of how specific looks—frequently replicated and circulated online—help construct Fashion imaginaries and aspirational identities across a global audience.

The grammar of clothing in K-dramas reflects the underlying structure of their narrative universe. As such, garments and accessories assume a signifying function that suspends their utilitarian qualities in favor of emphasizing visual appearance (cf. Barthes, 1962, p. 72). In other words, clothing radicalizes the expression of identity, functioning as a mediating term between being and seeming. Following Floch's semiotic perspective, I propose to designate as *semiotic conditions* the motifs and figures that constitute the vestimentary dimension of K-drama characters—understood as recognizable, repeatable visual markers that enable the construction and transmission of identity positions. These elements preserve and communicate specific identity definitions, contributing to the formation of a stable visual dimension—namely, the *total look* (Floch, 1995, p. 132), a syntagmatic ensemble that combines multiple signifying units into a coherent expression of character.

Beyond seasonal trends—what Floch terms the *Fashion fact*, that is, the ephemeral manifestation of stylistic novelty driven by cultural cycles—the silhouettes of K-drama actors and actresses also embody what he defines as the *style fact*. This refers to the more enduring, ethically charged nature of aesthetic expression, rooted in the sensible totality of the *plastic dimension*: the interplay of shapes, volumes, textures, and chromatic contrasts. It is in this plastic register that the invariant traits of the *total look* emerge and become semantically dense over time (Floch, 1995, p. 154). Not only the types and categories of clothing items, but also their colors, fabrics, and construction—cut, fit, layering—are essential to this semiotic framework.

To account for this level of visual organization, Floch categorizes styles into two coherent semiotic visions: the classical and the baroque. By *visions*, I refer to fully formed visual identities articulated on both the expression plan (form, materiality, aesthetics) and the content plan (symbolic values, thematic connotations), echoing Greimasian structural semantics (Floch, 1995, p. 142). This binary is further enriched through the adoption of Heinrich Wölfflin's five stylistic categories, originally conceived to describe shifts in Western art history, but highly productive for describing Fashion aesthetics in K-dramas: linear/painterly, plane/recession, closed form/open, multiplicity/unity, clearness/unclearness.

The *classical vision* of dress is characterized by harmonious, symmetrical lines and clear delineations of form, projecting an image of rationality, composure, and institutional legitimacy. It is typically embodied by characters of high social birth or professional authority—figures who signal discipline, structure, and aesthetic restraint. In contrast, the *baroque vision* privileges mass, intricacy, diffusion, and dynamism, favoring visual unclearness and theatricality over clearness. It is often associated with characters who seek to ostentatiously display wealth, to simulate belonging to an aspirational class, or who occupy liminal or antagonistic narrative positions. These characters tend to favor darker palettes and an overload of accessories—jewelry, bags, stage props—that form dense concatenations of shapes, materials, and chromatic clashes.

Light tones, on the other hand, serve to clarify and fragment visual forms, making each vestimentary element more legible and thus more emotionally resonant in euphoric narrative contexts. White-dominant outfits frequently signify moments of self-realization or the protagonist's attainment of personal goals, framing their journey through visual cues that

emphasize luminosity, purity, and transcendence. Conversely, asymmetry, curvilinearity, and the indivisibility of mass tend to appear in storylines marked by dysphoric emotions, moral ambiguity, or psychological unrest, visually mirroring the affective instability experienced by the characters.

An illustrative example of this expressive excess is found in *Secret Garden* (2010), where Hyun Bin's character, a wealthy and aloof chaebol, becomes the source of both admiration and humor through his iconic and eccentric wardrobe. His sparkly tracksuit—embellished with sequins and shimmering fabrics—became an instant cult object, widely memed and affectionately mocked by fans. The visual emphasis on his tracksuit in close-up shots further amplifies its symbolic weight as both comedic relief and stylistic assertion. This outfit, far from being a mere novelty, exemplifies the baroque tendency to disrupt Fashion conventions through visual spectacle and humorous exaggeration. Hyun Bin's character also experiments with mismatched layers—combining sweaters, scarves, and outerwear in deliberately incongruous ways—that add a note of comic oddity to his otherwise cold and charismatic persona. Despite the visual excess, his frequent use of luxury outerwear and designer suits subtly reinforces his elite social status, suggesting that even eccentricity can operate within, rather than outside, the codes of wealth and class distinction.

Ultimately, if what Floch calls the *Fashion fact* is inextricably linked to temporality—ephemeral trends that evolve with cultural rhythms—the *style fact* guarantees the persistence of a deeper ontological dimension of the self. Through the plastic properties of garments and accessories, certain traits endure beyond seasonal change. Vestimentary choices thus operate on two semiotic levels: figuratively, they manifest character identity; plastically, they enact a life project that, in many K-dramas, merges classical order with baroque exuberance.

The arbitrariness of the Fashion sign becomes even more complex when one considers that garments and accessories may retain structural consistency while their meanings shift according to context and function—for instance, the same pair of shoes may signify citywear, officewear, or rural footwear. When such *functional signs*, as defined by Barthes (1967), are displaced into incongruous settings in K-dramas—such as high heels worn in a rice paddy—they produce comic effects due to the mismatch between sign and context. Barthes also distinguishes two additional types of signs: *analogical signs*, which are motivated by the occasion of use (e.g., wearing a formal coat in Seoul regardless of the weather, or donning a padded jacket in the countryside even on a sunny day); and *affinitive signs*, which align with aesthetic or cultural models—for example, a white-and-blue marinière shirt worn by the sea or in summer (Barthes, 1967).

An emblematic illustration of the affinitive sign can be found in *Healer* (2014–2015), a drama that has become a reference point in K-Fashion for its distinctive outerwear. Ji Chang-Wook's character, a secret agent operating in urban shadows, is consistently styled in sleek and multifunctional garments that blend aesthetics with narrative utility. His all-black hooded trench coat, for instance, functions both as camouflage and as a visual emblem of his undercover persona, eventually becoming synonymous with the character itself. In contrast, his repeated use of long wool coats in subdued tones—grey, navy, and black—introduces a sense of polished mystery and visual continuity that aligns with his emotionally restrained yet principled trajectory. At other narrative junctures, the inclusion of rugged leather biker jackets underscores

his physicality and rebellious independence, marking a shift in tone and reinforcing his tactical versatility.

These Fashion choices have not only contributed to the narrative architecture of *Healer* but have also had a lasting cultural impact, becoming iconic among K-drama fans and inspiring style trends both in South Korea and internationally. In this case, Fashion functions as a richly motivated sign system—simultaneously functional, analogical, and affinitive—that constructs a coherent visual code aligning character, context, and cultural resonance.

The regime of motivation and argumentation governing vestimentary signs transforms appropriate dressing into a foundational narrative program—an act that is not merely habitual, but necessary and obligatory within the story-world. Garments and accessories thus trigger meaningful effects, functioning as signifiers that produce meaning through causal and semiotic chains. Each outfit corresponds to a thematic role because, as Barthes famously notes, transforming the garment transforms the soul (Barthes, 1967, p. 256).

Fashion provides precise spatial and temporal instructions: if one intends to signify a specific *doing*, one must dress accordingly; conversely, it encodes clothing in terms of *being*, as a declaration of identity—if one wishes to *be* a certain way, one must dress in a corresponding manner. This dual semiotic structure is especially apparent in K-dramas, where dress marks the boundary between performance and ontology, between transformation and revelation.

In analyzing the Fashioning of identity, Barthes himself remarks how the socio-professional models promoted by Fashion are often hyperbolic, tending toward exaggerated stereotypes. In the recurrent Cinderella/Prince Charming dynamic—where a woman of humble origins encounters a chaebol heir—no matter how intelligent, sincere, or morally and aesthetically superior the female protagonist may be, her identity is ultimately validated and sanctioned through her male counterpart. This subordination is sublimated within the idealized arc of the romantic happy ending and is aestheticized as a worldly relationship in which *being seen* plays a crucial role. Transformation becomes visible through garments that elevate the protagonist's appearance—clothes she could not previously afford—emphasizing her narrative progression (Barthes, 1967, p. 286).

Like all Fashion discourses, K-dramas operate as semiotic devices that disseminate models of *being* and *doing*. This becomes particularly evident when they take on a pedagogical role, demonstrating how one should act, dress, and present oneself within a given cultural framework. The thematic roles articulated by Fashion encompass not only occupations but also stylized personality types. Barthes had already outlined four archetypes: A) sporty, B) avant-garde, C) classic, and D) "work-first" (Barthes, 1967, p. 287). In today's context—especially in South Korea—these identity types are echoed in popular psychological taxonomies, such as the 16 MBTI personalities. They function as semiotic matrices for individual identification, not unlike the persona models assigned to girl groups like the Spice Girls or BLACKPINK, where each member embodies a distinctive and recognizable personality type.

The appeal lies precisely in this differential encoding—each viewer can find a self-reflective model among the available typologies. Thus, K-dramas do not merely present characters; they curate personality frameworks that are consumable, mimetic, and affectively charged.

2. The Role of Fashion in K-Dramas

Fashion in K-dramas plays a pivotal role in constructing visual imagery and identity, functioning as a medium through which specific ways of life are staged and codified. Iconic outfits worn by protagonists are frequently immortalized online, circulating across fan forums, social media feeds, and platforms of cultural commentary. The aesthetic language of K-dramas aligns with prevailing South Korean social conventions—favoring garments such as miniskirts and shorts while generally avoiding low necklines—thereby encoding implicit norms of decorum and desirability. International viewers, particularly tourists visiting South Korea, often replicate the looks of their favorite celebrities, further demonstrating the global reach and aspirational pull of Hallyu. In this sense, travel itself becomes a performative extension of the K-drama narrative: an immersive practice not limited to the consumption of cultural objects, but oriented toward the experience of atmosphere, mood, and style.

In theoretical terms, fashion is present in every K-drama, insofar as every clothing item contributes to the construction of character, setting, and plot. If a character is meant to be read as a professor, a manager, or a student, every vestimentary detail—from cut and color to fabric and accessories—serves as a message to the viewer. Clothing, in this context, becomes a semiotic system embedded within a broader "form of life" (Fontanille, 2015). Given the breadth of this subject, I propose a semiotic typology of fashion in K-dramas, categorizing its functions across six overlapping and often interdependent domains (Terracciano, 2024):

1. Fashion as a Vector of Subjective Transformation
2. Fashion as a Moral and Social Mark
3. Fashion as an Emotional and Pathemic Mark
4. Fashion as a Spatial and Temporal Mark
5. Fashion as a Intersubjective Operator
6. Fashion as a Cultural Sign.

2.1 *Fashion as a Vector of Subjective Transformation*

Outfits materialize key steps of the character narrative program, signaling the figurative progression from a state of lack to a state of fulfillment.

In many K-dramas, clothing functions as a visible index of character development, symbolizing personal evolution, adventure, or radical life shifts. One dresses not merely to cover the body, but to become—or appear to become—someone new. The logic of vestimentary transformation can range from the fantastic (as in superhero narratives, where a costume change grants access to special powers, as seen in *The Uncanny Counter* [2020]) to the mundane, yet deeply symbolic transitions of everyday life: from sleepwear (often a sweatshirt and tartan lounge pants in Korean homes), to professional attire (e.g., the power blazer and trousers), to athleisure or home loungewear, and finally back to nightclothes. Each transition reflects a shift not only in activity but also in identity performance.

An illustrative example is *Business Proposal* (2022), where the protagonist Shin Ha-ri (played by Kim Se-jeong) navigates two distinct vestimentary registers, each associated with a

specific social identity and narrative function. In her everyday life as a junior office worker, Ha-ri dresses in a casual and playful style. Her wardrobe consists of oversized sweaters, denim jeans, and sneakers—clothing choices that not only prioritize comfort and relatability but also visually reinforce her humble background and unassuming disposition. These garments mark her as a "common person" positioning her clearly within a lower-middle-class frame that contrasts with the world of luxury and privilege she is about to enter.

By contrast, when she assumes the role of a chaebol's potential fiancée, her appearance is transformed entirely. She adopts a more elegant and sophisticated aesthetic, characterized by stylish dresses, tailored blazers, and refined accessories. This shift in attire is not merely decorative but functional: it allows her to convincingly perform a role within the upper echelons of Korean society, visually signifying her entry into a realm of power, wealth, and curated femininity. The clothing thus operates as a semiotic bridge between two identities, enabling her narrative transformation while simultaneously offering viewers aspirational fashion cues.

A similar semiotic operation is at work in *Her Private Life* (2019), where the protagonist Sung Deok-mi (played by Park Min-young) moves between two carefully constructed identities: that of the competent, tastefully dressed art curator in a refined office setting, and that of the passionate K-pop fangirl in her private life. Her wardrobe mediates these two worlds, balancing professional sophistication with expressive casualwear, thereby embodying the coexistence of mainstream respectability and subcultural intensity.

In *Itaewon Class* (2020), Jo Yi-seo (portrayed by Kim Da-mi) presents yet another case in which fashion becomes a key marker of identity, agency, and transformation. Her style—marked by a bold mix of streetwear and high-end designer pieces—projects a rebellious, assertive personality, one that defies conventional gender norms and social hierarchies. This vestimentary eclecticism not only mirrors her psychological complexity but also traces her character's developmental arc across the series. As the narrative progresses, Jo Yi-seo's fashion evolves in tandem with her personal growth and professional achievements. Her look becomes progressively more structured and deliberate, reflecting her increasing influence within the startup restaurant business at the heart of the drama.

Ultimately, Jo Yi-seo's fashion signifies the successful attainment of the narrative *object of value*—namely, upward social mobility and entrepreneurial self-realization. Her stylistic transformation accompanies and supports the completion of a fundamental narrative program: the rise from marginal outsider to influential businesswoman. Fashion, in this context, is both a medium of self-expression and a strategic tool that articulates her transition from potentiality to accomplishment within a highly codified social order.

2.2 Fashion as Moral and Social Mark

In K-dramas, clothing plays a critical role in articulating both moral positioning and social status. The fashion choices made by characters are rarely neutral: they encode shared cultural understandings of professionalism, aspiration, and respectability. For instance, job interview attire and office outfits are employed not merely for realism but to ensure characters visibly conform to the principles of social desirability. Even characters who profess disinterest in fashion—often performing an aesthetic of casual neglect—do so through a carefully curated

ensemble that signals authenticity or rebellion. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the prominence of brand-name clothing serves as a potent symbol of wealth and class. This is frequently parodied or referenced in memes depicting chaebol heirs or wealthy female protagonists adorned in layers of Western luxury brands, dramatizing fashion as a visual shorthand for power, privilege, and exclusivity.

Some of the most iconic examples of fashion styling in K-dramas emerge from series that focus on elite society and its internal dramas, such as *Penthouse* (2020–2021), *Mine* (2021), and *Queen of Tears* (2024). In *Mine* (2021) chaebol women are portrayed in assertive yet luxurious clothing that balances elegance with dominance, and in *Queen of Tears* (2024), Kim Ji-won's portrayal of chaebol heiress Hong Hae-in offers a spectacular showcase of ultra-luxurious fashion, combining both Western and Korean designer labels. Her wardrobe includes pieces from Valentino, Dolce & Gabbana, Prada, Bulgari, and Ferragamo, as well as prominent South Korean brands that reinforce her high-status persona. Among these, Avouavou stands out with its structured coats and elegant midi dresses, emphasizing a poised and graceful power, while SOONIL contributes sleek monochrome ensembles that articulate a modern, corporate-chic sensibility. Through such styling, *Queen of Tears* does not merely depict fashion—it functions as an engine of soft power, promoting Korean designers on an international stage and actively shaping global fashion discourse.

Another frequent dress code linked to moral and social representation is *elegant and chic dressing*, typically reserved for characters from the upper class. These outfits are characterized by designer labels, luxurious fabrics, and refined silhouettes, creating a visual language of cultivated wealth and social distinction. *SKY Castle* (2018) presents a similar aesthetic framework: affluent housewives are consistently dressed in high-end, often pastel-colored or monochromatic clothing that reflects both social conformity and economic superiority. *Penthouse* pushes this visual logic to an even greater extreme, with characters donning glamorous, extravagant outfits that oscillate between fashion editorial and performative excess—making visible the emotional and symbolic labor required to maintain appearances in a high-stakes social milieu.

K-dramas visually dramatize status through key garment contrasts—for example, the symbolic opposition between the long tailored coat and the oversized puffer jacket. While the former is consistently associated with wealth and refinement, the latter connotes modest means or financial struggle. Notably, such visual dichotomies often function not through a single character's transformation, but through comparative figuration between protagonists and secondary characters. In *Itaewon Class* (2020), for instance, protagonist Park Sae-ro-yi's gradual rise is marked by a fashion evolution: he begins in a utilitarian black bomber jacket and eventually dons a long, formal coat at the height of his success. His transformation illustrates the completion of a fundamental narrative program—his social and entrepreneurial ascent—attained through hard work and resilience.

Moral trajectories are frequently encoded in wardrobe choices, as seen in *The Glory* (2022–2023). Here, the protagonist Moon Dong-eun embodies restraint and resolve through minimalist, modest clothing that underscores her pain, dignity, and unwavering sense of justice. In contrast, her antagonist Park Yeon-jin flaunts a wardrobe overflowing with luxury garments and ostentatious accessories—visual markers of affluence that simultaneously betray moral emptiness and social corruption. In a striking metatextual gesture, some of the most ethically

charged moments in the narrative occur in fashion-related spaces: Yeon-jin's walk-in closet, for example, becomes a site of existential exposure, while the clothing boutique owned by Jeon Jae-joon—another morally compromised character—serves as both a status symbol and a façade of virtue.

A particularly significant fashion trope within this representational economy is that of *power dressing*. This style is commonly associated with strong, ambitious female characters, often CEOs, lawyers, or corporate strategists. Power dressing in K-dramas is characterized by structured silhouettes, tailored suits, sharp blazers, and bold accessories—elements that signify authority, confidence, and strategic composure. For example, *Search: WWW* (2019) focuses on powerful women navigating the tech industry wearing business-chic ensembles—blazers, high-waisted trousers, silk blouses—that express both competence and modern femininity. A noteworthy variation on this theme is the case of Seo Dal-mi in *Start-Up* (2020), who adopts "nerd power dressing" to fit a more pragmatic and understated register. Her wardrobe features structured yet functional pieces, often branded (Dior, Loewe, Bottega Veneta), reflecting her status as a driven, innovation-minded entrepreneur. This nerd iteration of power dressing demonstrates how aesthetic authority can be negotiated through the lens of youth, creativity, and resourcefulness, rather than traditional corporate prestige.

This codified fashion extends to male characters as well, as demonstrated by Cha Eun-woo's portrayal of Lee Su-ho in *True Beauty* (2020). His wardrobe reflects a blend of sophistication and youthful elegance, balancing high-end designer items with casual pieces to construct an aspirational yet approachable masculinity. Among the most discussed fashion moments is the now-viral "Gucci Vista Meme" sweater, which became emblematic of his character's charm. His school uniform—featuring a structured Thom Browne blazer—adds Fashion authority to his role as the high-achieving, emotionally reserved love interest. Outside the classroom, Su-ho's fashion remains meticulously curated: a Fear of God x Zegna sweatshirt, a Moncler puffer jacket, and sleek Balmain pieces together communicate premium casualwear and refined nonchalance, reinforcing his position as a style icon within the diegesis and in the wider fandom alike.

2.3 Fashion as an Emotional and Pathemic Mark

As the most visible aspect of a person, clothing is inherently expressive and capable of eliciting a wide spectrum of emotions—ranging from seduction to surprise to rebellion. In literature, this dynamic is memorably illustrated in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2017), where the protagonist's fashion decline—from conventionally acceptable garments to an increasingly disheveled appearance—visually signals her internal estrangement and radical refusal of societal norms. Her rejection of normative dress codes parallels her renunciation of meat consumption, symbolizing a reversion to an imagined natural state.

Fashion in this context acts as a pathemic marker, channeling the character's emotional states and tensions through visual codes. A paradigmatic example is the red scarf worn by Kim Go-eun's character in *Goblin* (2016), which becomes a poignant symbol of strength, maternal memory, and emotional continuity. This affective function is also evident in the eccentric and highly stylized wardrobes of female leads in *Hotel Del Luna* (2019) and *It's Okay to Not Be*

Okay (2020). In the latter, Ko Moon-young (portrayed by Seo Ye-ji) wears extravagant, avant-garde ensembles from designers such as Dolce & Gabbana, Alexander McQueen, and prominent Korean labels. Her wardrobe not only reflects her dramatic and idiosyncratic personality but also amplifies her emotional volatility and theatrical mannerisms.

Likewise, Jang Man-wol (IU) in *Hotel Del Luna* is known for her vintage-inspired, high-fashion aesthetic that cleverly combines hanbok elements with contemporary luxury brands like Miu Miu and Avam Joy. Her garments express both temporal dislocation and emotional complexity, embodying her character's liminal status between the past and the present.

Color also plays a crucial role in emotionally encoding characters. For instance, the *pastel and romantic* palette—characterized by flowing fabrics, floral motifs, and delicate hues—is frequently used to signify youth, gentleness, and romantic idealism. This soft, feminine aesthetic is popular among younger characters and supports narratives of innocence, emotional awakening, or inner transformation. Im Ju-kyung in *True Beauty* (2020), for example, undergoes a visible metamorphosis from an insecure schoolgirl into a self-assured young woman, reflected in her transition to pastel-toned outfits. In *Love Alarm* (2019), romantic and dreamlike clothing choices underscore themes of adolescent vulnerability and emotional longing. Similarly, *Weightlifting Fairy Kim Bok-joo* (2016) features a protagonist whose oversized pastel sweaters and skirts convey her youthful exuberance, inner warmth, and evolving self-esteem.

2.4 Fashion as Spatial and Temporal Mark

In K-dramas, clothing serves as a powerful indicator of spatial and temporal orientation, visually marking cultural geography, historical periodization, and situational specificity. Uniforms in *Crash Landing on You* (2019), for instance, immediately signal North Korean identity, while the hanbok styles in historical dramas such as *Mr. Sunshine* or *The King's Affection* communicate social rank, profession, and dynastic era. Contemporary period dramas such as *Pachinko* (2022), *Lovely Runner* (2024), and *Twenty-Five Twenty-One* (2022) deploy fashion to meticulously reconstruct the aesthetics of specific decades, lending historical texture to personal and national narratives.

A recurrent motif in this category is the contrast between the "Seoulite" aesthetic—refined, cosmopolitan, and trend-conscious—and the "country girl" look, associated with simplicity, modesty, and practicality. This dichotomy is notably dramatized in *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (2021) and *Queen of Tears* (2024), where fashion becomes a semiotic shorthand for urban-rural cultural tensions.

Also embedded in this typology is the *retro-athleisure* trend: a nostalgic blend of vintage sportswear and casual fashion, often inspired by 1980s and 1990s aesthetics. This includes tracksuits, oversized sweatshirts, and sneakers that articulate both temporal specificity and affective memory. In *Squid Game* (2021), the green tracksuits worn by contestants became emblematic of nostalgic simplicity, evoking a shared cultural memory of school sportswear. In *Twenty-Five Twenty-One* (2022), Na Hee-do's wardrobe includes baggy jeans, varsity jackets, and school uniforms that authentically replicate 1990s youth fashion. Similarly, *Reply 1988* (2015) immerses viewers in the vibrant athleisure of the 1980s through colorful windbreakers

and coordinated tracksuits, rendering clothing a time-traveling device that anchors character and narrative in an emotionally resonant past.

2.5 Fashion as Intersubjective Operator

Fashion also mediates social interactions and relational dynamics, functioning as a tool for communication, negotiation, and symbolic alignment. It may either intensify or resolve interpersonal tensions, particularly in contexts marked by cultural or religious codes. In *Possessed* (2019) and other dramas with shamanic or spiritual themes, traditional garments signal adherence to ritualized identities, grounding relationships in shared belief systems.

Clothing also reflects psychological differentiation within intimate networks. In *Little Women* (2022), for instance, the three sisters—Oh In-joo, Oh In-kyung, and Oh In-hye—are distinguished as much by their fashion as by their actions. Oh In-joo, the eldest, wears modest, conservative outfits that express her cautious, financially driven personality. Oh In-kyung opts for pragmatic, professional attire that signals her dedication to truth as a journalist. Meanwhile, the youngest sister, Oh In-hye, embodies youthful idealism and artistic sensitivity through her more experimental, school-inspired style. Through such distinctions, fashion becomes a semiotic matrix for character psychology, intensifying relational contrast and narrative tension.

2.6 Fashion as Cultural Sign

Fashion in K-dramas often functions as a cultural signifier—marking rituals, affirming collective identity, and celebrating everyday life. A prime example appears in *Law School* (2021), where nearly all students wear university-branded sweatshirts and hoodies. These garments reinforce not only institutional affiliation but also a broader sense of belonging and generational identity.

Another noteworthy cultural marker is the *slipper-shoe*, a staple of Korean daily life. Its presence in Seoul street fashion encapsulates a cultural preference for comfort, mobility, and informality. Oversized slippers, often worn by women, are not merely practical: they communicate an ethos of adaptability and a "zero-sign" aesthetic, which implies a liberation from restrictive vestimentary norms. Unlike flip-flops, which constrain movement due to their snug fit, slippers facilitate an easy return to barefoot naturalness—symbolizing a carefree relationship with the body and environment. In this sense, the humble slipper becomes an emblem of the quiet pleasures of Korean everyday life.

When considering K-Fashion more broadly, it is evident that *casual dressing* dominates the visual vocabulary of contemporary K-dramas. This stylistic orientation aligns with the genre's tendency to portray daily life in emotionally engaging ways that encourage audiences to identify with and even emulate what they see. Casual fashion, frequently replicated by viewers through Korean e-tailers, helps define the global imaginary of K-Fashion. This aesthetic is characterized by relaxed garments such as jeans, turtlenecks, oversized sweaters, and sneakers. These pieces are not only versatile and comfortable but also semantically rich, enabling characters to communicate authenticity, relatability, and understated charm.

This is evident in *Because This is My First Life* (2017), where Yoon Ji-ho (Jung So-min) wears minimalist ensembles in neutral tones, reflecting her introspective and pragmatic nature. In *Our Beloved Summer* (2021), Kook Yeon-soo (Kim Da-mi) blends oversized shirts, jeans, and knitted cardigans to create a style that is both effortlessly chic and emotionally accessible. *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (2021) combines coastal casual with practical everyday pieces, reinforcing the narrative's emphasis on community, simplicity, and well-being.

Finally, fashion can also serve as a *cultural sign of narrative pertinence*. A compelling example is Hong Cha-young in *Vincenzo* (2021), a lawyer with impeccable taste whose wardrobe includes Italian brands such as Bottega Veneta, Valextra, Tod's, Gianvito Rossi, and Bulgari. Her fashion choices are deeply interwoven with the show's narrative logic, as they subtly echo the Italian heritage of the male protagonist Vincenzo, who consistently valorizes *Made in Italy*. In this way, clothing not only expresses personal style but also functions as a cross-cultural narrative device.

3. Conclusions

The allure of K-drama fashion lies in its narrative capacity: clothing is not a mere aesthetic accessory but an essential component of character construction and storytelling. Whether portraying a chaebol heiress clad in luxury suits, a rebellious youth styled in urban streetwear, or a career-driven woman in sharply tailored blazers, each outfit is meticulously curated to reinforce the narrative arc and enrich character depth. K-dramas not only reflect contemporary Korean fashion trends but also fuse them with global luxury aesthetics, creating a hybrid visual language that bridges high fashion with accessible, everyday wear.

One particularly influential mechanism within K-drama fashion culture is Product Placement (PPL), which pervades nearly every industrial sector—from high-tech gadgets to helicopters, as seen in *Trauma Code* (2025). Yet it is within the domains of fashion and beauty that PPL achieves its most potent effects, functioning not only as a marketing tool but as a semiotic operator that conveys personality and activates viewer identification. The phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated by the meteoric success of the Kahi Wrinkle Bounce Multi Balm, which attained cult status after its repeated appearances in series such as *Business Proposal* (2022) and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (2022).

What distinguishes PPL in K-dramas is its narrative integration: products are not arbitrarily inserted but take on actantial roles within the plot, functioning much like "Helpers" in Greimasian narrative grammar. For example, the Dyson Supersonic Hair Dryer is more than a beauty device—it appears as a transformative tool, capable of revitalizing one's appearance within seconds, even in liminal public spaces like restrooms. Similarly, the Dyson V11 Cordless Vacuum Cleaner is portrayed as an efficient means of restoring domestic order, symbolizing the value placed on cleanliness, control, and emotional equilibrium. These items resonate with viewers not as abstract commodities but as narrative catalysts embedded within the protagonists' everyday lives, making the commercial almost imperceptible.

The impact of this embedded marketing extends beyond the screen into the global marketplace.

Ultimately, for global audiences in search of fashion inspiration, K-dramas offer a veritable archive of adaptable styles—ranging from minimalist ensembles to ornate hanbok, from commanding power suits to whimsical vintage pieces. Each fashion choice provides insight into the character's emotional landscape, social trajectory, or cultural context.

More than just entertainment, K-dramas function as a global fashion runway, shaping aesthetic preferences and influencing consumer behavior across continents. They exemplify how visual culture, narrative strategy, and material desire intersect—transforming garments into signifying systems that mediate identity, aspiration, and everyday fantasy.

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