

Increasing Consumption of Korean Dramas during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Cases of Indonesian Viewers

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study focuses on Indonesian transnational fans' consumption of Korean dramas (hereafter K-dramas) during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study highlights the fans' lived experiences, thoughts, and interpretation of Korean culture in watching K-dramas as well as how they construct identities through their consumption in their everyday lives. This study used qualitative questionnaire as the instrument to collect the data for the study. Using thematic analysis, the study reveals that there were four emerging motivating factors to watch K-Dramas among Indonesian viewers: fresh substitutive choice, easy access, interesting stories and visuals, and cultural factors. Additionally, the study also shows four outcomes of their consumptive behavior: language acquisition and motivation to learn Korean, cultural understanding and new perceptions of Korea, pursuit of education, and pure entertainment and stress-reliever. Hence, this study contributes to the body of literature on K-Dramas consumption, especially in the era of COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Korean dramas; COVID-19; consumption; lived experiences; motivation.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic has indeed influenced the way people enjoy entertainment. One form of entertainment that keeps getting attention is K-dramas. With the rising fame of Korean culture across the globe and increasing digital diasporas (Henthorn, 2019), people from different sides of the world consume K-dramas for multifarious purposes. Viewers not only consume those dramas for entertainment but also – through continuous consumption – might participate, engage, construct and negotiate their identity, and live the experience of enjoying what they watch.

Such an increasing consumption of K-Dramas is also bolstered by the amplification of streaming services in recent years (Ju, 2018; Y. Kim, 2021; Park et al., 2019). Ju (2019) argues that the recent popularity of internet-based television consumption corroborates the “synergy in media convergence” (p. 1). As Korean culture perpetually retains popularity among international fans, streaming platforms keep eyeing Korean market and attempting to capitalize on the popularity by distributing Korean popular culture products to the international arenas. Since their first entrance into the Korean market in 2016 – despite the initial underwhelming outturn due to fierce competition with the neighboring countries – streaming platforms gradually

became more significant in strengthening transnational mobility and dispersion of Korean media (Y. Kim, 2021). Consequently, the domination of streaming platforms is substantial as it facilitates the needs of viewers across national and cultural borders and increases their access to K-Dramas.

This is particularly true during the COVID-19 epoch. During this period – in which radical changes in all walks of life are forced to transpire – many people resort to television to find comfort and to feel a sense of escapism. As a result, television consumption through streaming platforms has increased multifold during this era (Gupta & Singharia, 2021; Vlassis, 2021). As reported by NIELSEN Television Audience Measurement (Tupani, 2020), television consumption has increased more than before COVID-19 emerged. Increasing online media engagement is prompted by the national mandates to stay at home and enforce isolation as an attempt to slow down the viral escalation (Gupta & Singharia, 2021). Similarly, Indonesia, one of the countries affected by COVID-19, experiences surges in television viewership due to the pandemic (Lukman, 2020).

As the consumption of K-Dramas during the COVID-19 pandemic seems to manifest the global effects of Korean culture, it behooves this study to posit the

following questions: 1) what motivates Indonesian viewers to watch K-Dramas as a choice of transnational media during the COVID-19 pandemic? And 2) what are the effects of watching K-Dramas for Indonesian viewers during the pandemic? Little research has been carried out to evaluate the K-Drama consumption in Indonesia, especially in light of the rise of streaming services. Moreover, to my best knowledge, no research has been done to address the K-Drama consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affects the viewers in Indonesia. Hence, the answers to the aforementioned research questions may yield a unique perspective of how K-Drama consumption has affected Indonesian viewers during the pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transnational Consumption of K-Dramas in Hallyu 2.0

Although television was a powerful means that catapulted K-Dramas to prominence back in the late 1990's, television as the traditional and sole means to enjoy telecast programs has been shrinking due to the emergence of new forms of media (Ju, 2019). In the recent years, with the swift widespread of internet usage across the globe, television content can be dispersed through streaming services – for example, Netflix, Viu, Viki, YouTube, and many others which include websites that distribute pirated contents. This is in line with the report from Chalaby (2016) which states that the Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video have been rapidly gaining audience in the United States. The advent of OTT platforms pervades Asian countries in similar manner. For that reason, the contemporary television ecosystem seems to corroborate the convergence of television and internet (Ju, 2019). Such a convergence has been theoretically explained as the mark of *Hallyu 2.0*, as it is in this era of *Hallyu* that digital or internet-based content as a new genre characterizes and nourishes the advancement of the Korean popular culture (Jin & Yoon, 2016) or notably known as the framework of Korea's soft power – a term introduced by Joseph Nye (J. Nye, 2011; J. S. Nye, 2004).

In the era of *Hallyu 2.0*, the transnational flow or distribution of K-Dramas is also changing. Viewers no longer need to consume what is provided but they can participate in selecting the content that they want to watch (Ju, 2019; Lobato, 2018). This implies that the television content distribution has experienced a structural change. Lotz (2021) identifies this structural change as the shift from linear to nonlinear access to television content; meaning that, subscribers of streaming platforms are not bound by the broadcast schedule anymore. Instead, they are able to

interactively select from the gamut of genres they are most interested in for their binge-watch list. In short, the proliferation of streaming services in *Hallyu 2.0* effectuates the participatory side of the viewers, as they “orchestrate their own viewing in terms of time, content, location, and devices used” (Castro et al., 2021, p. 2). Consequently, such changing in the current televised content consumption reshapes the viewing patterns and engagement of the viewers (Ju, 2019).

Reception of K-Dramas across National and Cultural Borders

When *Hallyu* first emerged as Korea's soft power in the mid-aught, its popularity was more vivid and substantial in the Asian regions (Chandra, 2021). It is especially true because K-Dramas' outflow to multifarious Asian countries was massive (Ju, 2017). Its massive transnational flow is informed by the government's effort to utilize the television industry to thrive and the effort results in significant rise of popular culture content exports (Ju, 2017; Shim, 2006). Nevertheless, during the same period of time, the popularity could also be felt in the Western countries albeit not as significant as in their Asian counterparts. Wind of change has transpired within this streaming era – notably known as *Hallyu 2.0*. The emergence of streaming services – which not only diversifies the audience but also helps boost the popularity of Korea's soft power – seems to portend its global dominance. Ju (2019) explains that K-Dramas as one product of *Hallyu* have seen rapid growth in consumption among western audience. This proves that K-Dramas can serve as a field of inquiry as they have been a part of people's everyday lives.

Given the unprecedented augmentation and diversification of K-Drama audience across the globe, investigating the reception of K-Dramas in different parts of the world might be important to yield understanding on how K-Dramas have affected the lives of people. Several studies have been carried out to investigate the reception of K-Dramas (Ainslie, 2016; Hübinette, 2012; Jeong et al., 2017; Ju, 2019; S. Jung & Shim, 2014; H. Lee, 2018; S. Lee, 2015; Prasopsorn & Panmanee, 2019; Tambunan, 2013). Although the body of literature investigating the reception of Korean culture has been extensive, very little has been done in relation to that which focuses on Indonesian audience. Thus, the scanty literature on the aforementioned subject matter necessitates this research.

Previous Studies of the Effects of K-Dramas on Viewers

Previous studies have been carried out to explore the effects of K-dramas or Korean Wave in general for viewers (Chandra, 2021; Halim & Kiatkawsin, 2021;

Jeong et al., 2017; Ju, 2019; H. Jung, 2019; H. Lee, 2018; Seo et al., 2020; Tambunan, 2013). Halim and Kiatkawsin (2021) discovered that female Indonesian viewers found escapism and developed certain perceptions towards beauty standard. In other studies, viewers' investment in K-dramas was most often reported to result in cultural understanding (Ju, 2019; H. Lee, 2018) and language learning (Chandra, 2021; H. Lee, 2018). Both cultural understanding and language are intertwined to create a space for the viewers to negotiate their identities which are framed within their consumptive behavior towards K-dramas. Lee (2018), for example, found that western viewers developed hybrid identities due their investment in watching K-dramas. On the other hand, Tambunan (2013) discovered how Indonesian viewers amassed ample cultural knowledge in terms of gender issues as depicted in K-dramas. In her study, the Indonesian viewers made sense of what they watched and articulated it in their everyday lives, especially in relation to their reflexivity towards masculinity and femininity. Ju (2019) who studied the reception of K-dramas fans in the United States also found that the consumption of romantic narratives presented in K-dramas, the viewers experienced affective engagement or emotional involvement.

While the studies discussed above have provided ample elaboration of the effects of K-dramas on viewers, none of them included Indonesian male viewers' lived experiences in the consumption. Studies from Halim and Kiatkawsin (2021) for example is limited to female viewers' perception. Besides, the studies that are framed in Indonesian context do not include ample discussion of cultural and linguistic dimensions. Tambunan's (2013) study does not encompass in-depth discussion of other aspects besides the gender issues and the attributed values of K-drama. Hence, by using the findings on the effects of K-dramas from the previous studies, I intend to describe such effects on both male and female viewers in Indonesia.

METHODS

To elaborate the research questions, this research conducted a qualitative inquiry through qualitative semi-structured questionnaires. The questionnaires included questions pertaining to their demographic profile, when they started watching K-Dramas, the appeal of K-Dramas, the reasons of choosing K-Dramas during the pandemic, and the effects of watching K-Dramas.

There were 55 respondents of the questionnaires. These 55 respondents were classified into three categories; 1) viewers who started watching K-Dramas

during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2) viewers whose K-Dramas watching frequency increased during the pandemic, and 3) viewers whose K-Dramas watching frequency has been consistent. Based on their perceptive evaluation of themselves, 19 were classified as the first category, 18 were the second category, and the rest 18 of them were the third category. All of the respondents were varied in age, sex, profession, and residency to ensure that the sample of the study could provide comprehensive views into the subject matter from various perspectives – although I would not claim that the sample in this study was representative of all Indonesian viewers. The respondents were selected based on their interest in K-Dramas. To find the respondents, I employed snow ball techniques. First, the questionnaires were distributed to close people and relatives who were frequent viewers of K-Dramas and defined themselves as fans of Korean culture. With their consents, I asked them to distribute the questionnaires to their colleagues and relatives who shared the same interest in K-Dramas.

Analysis of the data was done through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). As the responses from the respondents were all in Indonesian, they were translated into English. Then, the data were coded and classified based on the highlighted themes such as fresh substitutive choice, easy access, interesting stories and visuals, and cultural factors to answer the first research question, and language acquisition and motivation to learn Korean, cultural understanding and new perceptions of Korea, pursuit of education, and pure entertainment to answer the second research question. The coding helped to see which theme that some responses were categorized into. Code A was used for the first category; B for the second; and C for the third. It is worth noting, however, that the themes selected to be presented in this study included all of the appearing themes; meaning that themes that were expressed only by a small number of the respondents were also selected. The rationale behind the decision is that such themes were still deemed relevant and could succinctly valorize the current research. The responses were tabulated in Microsoft Excel so that the layout could be more organized. This process was applied to answer both research questions.

FINDINGS

The study's qualitative analyses of the Indonesian viewers of K-Dramas demonstrate that they both critically and constrictively expressed their experiences in engaging with K-Dramas. For the purpose of anonymity, pseudonyms will be used throughout the discussion in this section.

Research Question 1: What motivates Indonesian viewers to watch K-Dramas as a choice of transnational media during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Based on the data collected from the respondents and analyzed, the Indonesian viewers of K-Dramas have certain motivations in watching K-Dramas as a choice of transnational media during the COVID-19. There were several salient and recurring themes appearing in the data: 1) fresh substitutive choice, 2) easy access, 3) interesting stories and visuals, and 4) cultural factors.

With the increased use of social media and internationalization of K-Dramas prompted by the burgeoning number of streaming services in the era of *Hallyu 2.0*, many viewers have moved away from their usual local, popular western or other Asian shows to K-Dramas. They demonstrate proclivity towards watching K-Dramas as a substitutive choice of transnational media. Here, K-Dramas have replaced other TV shows usually consumed by the viewers. Harto (A6), for example, stated that

“The popularity of K-Dramas makes me interested in it. Strangely, I have been feeling tired of watching western shows. Since the beginning of COVID-19, I tried to find something other than western shows to fill my free time. That was when I started to watch K-Dramas... Beyond imagination, the story was so interesting. That is why I have been following K-Dramas.”

Putri (A4) discussed the variations that K-Dramas offer and are distinctive from other TV shows as the reason she replaced her transnational media choice. She explained

“I was looking for something new to watch when Indonesia enforced ‘stay at home’ policy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I couldn’t go to the cinemas either. So, I subscribed to some streaming platforms and some of my colleagues at work suggested a few Korean dramas - which I had never watched before. I found the dramas they suggested to be interesting and have variations that western shows do not have”

Almost half of the respondents belonging to the first and second categories opined that the longer free time they had due to national mandate of ‘stay at home’ and ‘work from home’ to slow down the spread of the pandemic engendered their decisions to watch K-Dramas. Niko (A16) shared that *“K-Dramas helped me to spend my free time excitingly. I had just subscribed to Netflix at that time and there were a lot*

of available K-Dramas. So, I naturally watched them a lot”. Hence, Niko’s and other respondents’ similar experiences lead to the second theme of easy access of K-Dramas, brought about by the cultural globalization. Linda (A19) shared

“K-Dramas can be accessed easily on streaming services like Netflix and Vuu, which I am a subscriber of. Western TV shows and films are hard to access unless they are pirated. I also have no interest in watching Indonesian shows as they are not interesting.”

The outbound flow of K-Dramas to many parts of the world can be described with the idea of cultural globalization (Ju, 2017). In most parts of the world, this transnational flow of K-Dramas across national and cultural borders is aligned with the growing preference in using streaming services rather than terrestrial TV (Ju, 2019). Most viewers account for the reduced spatial and temporal restrictions of accessing K-Dramas in their increased use of online platforms. Isty (B4) concurred with this statement by saying *“(The content is) comfortable to watch and I also use Netflix a lot. So there is no problem with time and place. I can watch it whenever (and wherever) it is.”*

Referring to Isty’s comment about the ‘comfortable’ aspect of K-Dramas content-wise, the third recurring theme was more of the stories and visual presentations of K-Dramas. Old and new viewers of K-Dramas alike are parallel about their views towards K-Dramas’ stories, cinematography, and actors’ appearances. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, attraction to K-Dramas has been associated to those visual elements. Therefore, Maya (A12) particularly praised the attractive phenotype of the actors, *“(I started watching K-Dramas) because the looks of the actors and actresses are so pleasing to the eyes.”* Similarly, Sandra (B5) voiced that *“K-Dramas have interesting stories and not exaggerated.”* In terms of the cinematography, Renaldi (B12) shared that *“the cinematography is really good. For example, Vincenzo. It looks like the setting is in Italy but it turns out that it is CGI. There are many others that are cinematographically interesting.”*

However, viewers are not only attracted to K-Dramas because of the content and visuals; the viewers’ engagement in K-Dramas is also motivated by the cultural factors. The inclusion of Korean values – which are based on the Confucian values (H. Jung, 2019) – serves as a point of attraction for the viewers. Indonesian viewers especially appreciate the cultural values advocated through K-Dramas due to cultural proximity. For example, Hexa (B15) remarked that

“I watch almost everything and I started watching more frequently after the COVID-19 pandemic. Mostly, I watch K-Dramas because I like serial shows. However, I like shows that don't have many episodes. Besides, K-Dramas also present East Asian culture very well and appropriately and the sexual depiction is also not too overtly done compared to the western shows.”

Viewers' inclination towards the cultural presentation in K-Dramas is sound given the cultural proximity between Korean and Indonesian culture. However, debates on how cultural proximity intersects with transnational media also problematize the outbound flow of K-Dramas to non-Asian regions. However, so far, due to the shared Asian identity, Indonesian viewers' take on the cultural elements and cultural proximity are necessary to frame their active engagement and negotiation of identity, which is addressed further in the discussion part.

Research Question 2: What are the effects of watching K-Dramas for Indonesian viewers during the pandemic?

The second research question revolves around the effects of such consumption towards Indonesian viewers. Based on the analyzed data, it was found that the following are the effects: 1) language acquisition and motivation to learn Korean, 2) cultural understanding and new perceptions of Korea, 3) pursuit of education, and 4) pure entertainment and stress-reliever.

Among the three aforementioned themes, the most recurring theme was language acquisition and motivation to learn Korean. Repetitive and continuous consumption of K-Dramas led the respondents of this study to acquire the language, albeit basic and word- or phrase-level Korean. Laura (A1) stated how she *“began to learn Hangeul (Korean orthography) after I started watching K-Dramas during the pandemic.”* Intan (B17) also said that

“Although I have watched K-Dramas before the pandemic, the increased frequency of watching them during the pandemic made me have the desire to learn the language and I started attending a Korean course since 2021. I think I can learn it in a formal setting because I have more time due to the pandemic.”

Such experiences with K-Drama consumption as shared by Laura and Intan support the idea that TV consumption does not merely result in escapism but also create a linguistic effect among the viewers.

Viewers who develop interest in the culture portrayed through TV content they watch are inclined to develop motivation to learn the language spoken in the TV shows. This is aligned with the findings of Chandra (2021) who found that watching K-Dramas is the most prevalent reason and means of learning Korean. Ryan (A15) also connected Korean language and culture by mentioning that

“I started to know more words in Korean. Sometimes, I don't have to see the subtitles to know what is said. After knowing a few words, I think I need to learn the language more because it is quite easy to understand and it will be so useful for me to understand K-Dramas without being reliant on subtitles and to understand the culture.”

Another effect of watching K-Dramas is the understanding of Korean culture. Most Indonesian viewers in my study had salient opinion towards the improved cultural understanding after watching K-Dramas. Filial piety, seniority, tolerance and appreciation towards another culture, fashion, beauty standard, and food were among the mostly mentioned aspects. For instance, Ratu (A3) mentioned that *“I became more familiar with Korean culture and food.”* Celia (B10) similarly shared *“my fashion taste became more Korean-like. I also started to wish that I could go to Korea to live and study there because the culture seems so good and the people too.”* Rio (A14) also agreed that watching K-Dramas made him *“appreciate Korean culture more. The people are polite and uphold the ancestral rituals while still maintaining the modern life they are living. My perception of Korea has changed until I became immersed in K-Dramas.”* Additionally, the respondents included language as part of their cultural understand, as in the case of Ryan (A15). One cultural aspect mentioned in relation to language was the use of honorifics. Lutfi (B13) in particular explained that *“the honorifics used in K-Dramas are various. As an Indonesian, it's hard to follow but interesting to learn.”*

Consumption of K-Dramas does not merely elicit efforts to learn the language; instead, it leads to the idealization of the viewers' future selves as students in Korea. Several respondents of this study expressed their desire to embark on a journey to study in Korea. This aspiration was mainly expressed by those who were in their 10's and 20's. Therefore, their effort to learn the language after consuming K-Drams is linked with their aspiration to study in Korea. Cindy (A11) said *“I want to live in Korea and study there. It seems that the education Korea is very good.”* Tina (A18) critically explained

“Korea seems to take education very seriously. It is reflected in K-Dramas that I have watched such as ‘SKY Castle’, ‘Melancholia’, and ‘The Queen’s Classroom’. So, I think I want to try studying in Korea to have a direct experience. I also heard that Korea has one of the best education systems. Perhaps, it will be worthwhile to study there.”

Lastly, apart from the previous aforementioned effects of K-Dramas consumption, entertainment and stress-reliever also emerged as the effect of K-Dramas. This effect was particularly mentioned by the respondents who watched K-Dramas merely for its stories and visuals and not for its embedded values. Fitriani (A8) for example said that *“I feel entertained whenever I watch K-dramas. I wasn’t interested in it but I started watching it because my friends kept saying nice things about it, so I watched it only to join the fun.”*

Some other respondents also mentioned the issues presented in K-Dramas as a ways to escape from ‘reality’. For example, Mulan (B1) mentioned that

“My viewing of K-Dramas has increased a lot during the pandemic because it has been my way to cope with boredom and stress because of staying at home. The stories especially help me to enjoy my free time. For example, recently, I have been watching ‘Penthouse’ and although some people say that it’s stressing to watch, I feel it’s a good show to reduce stress and very informative of the struggle of Korean people, especially those from the upper echelons”

Anggrek (A7) shared that *“I found comfort in the romances shown in K-Dramas because they make me able to fantasize about romantic moments”*. These mentions of the stress-relieving content of K-Dramas are necessary to locate the viewers’ engagement and the extent to which they formulate their fantasies and thoughts in their day-to-day lives.

DISCUSSIONS

COVID-19 curbs have unequivocally either brought new Indonesian viewers of K-dramas or increased the frequency of the K-dramas consumption. Hence, it not only demonstrates the engagement of the Indonesian viewers with K-dramas but also the expanding growth of Korea’s transnational media – which serves as its soft power (J. Nye, 2011; J. S. Nye, 2004). *Hallyu*, serving as the framework of Korea’s soft power, is imbued with social, political, cultural, and economic efforts to enhance national image (Jeong et al., 2017; Jin & Yoon, 2016, 2017; J. Kim et al., 2017). This effort is further reinforced by the burgeoning use of

streaming services, which characterize the *Hallyu* 2.0. Hence, the viewers’ experiences in watching K-dramas further substantiate the expansion of Korea’s soft power outside the Asian borders.

The findings indicate that the Indonesian viewers’ consumption of K-dramas is motivated by four aspects. These aspects include fresh substitutive choice, easy access, interesting stories and visuals, and cultural factors. Nevertheless, it must be noted that all the factors are correlated with each other. The influx of K-dramas in Indonesia, disseminated through streaming services, provides Indonesian viewers with an alternative transnational media choice other than local or western television programs. Most Indonesian viewers in my study were drawn to stories of the shows, the portrayals of cultural specificity, and the phenotype of the actors. Ju (2019) names this phenomenon as transcultural affection. Their affective engagement with K-dramas translates into the acquisition of cultural knowledge. This can be seen in Hana’s (A2) statement that

“I started watching K-dramas during the pandemic because of my free time. One time, one of my closes friends sent me a clip of Crash Landing on You. The clip made me want to watch the whole drama. So, I did and found the drama so good. I like the romance between the two main actors and I think the romance and unique story were what captivated me. I also think that because I was attracted to the romance and story, I was so engaged and unconsciously learned the difference between South and North Korean language.”

Besides substitutive choice and interesting stories and visuals, easy access was also frequently mentioned in the findings. The current television ecosystem supports and is dominated by the convergence between television and internet (Gupta & Singharia, 2021; Ju, 2019; Sanson & Steirer, 2019). For that reason, K-dramas viewers have easy access to navigate their own viewing behavior. Panda and Pandey (2017) also found that easy accessibility was among the motivating factors to binge-watch – a term that is related to the viewing behavior of viewers using streaming platforms. Indonesian viewers’ narratives in my study matched this aspect.

Lastly, the cultural factors also motivated the respondents to watch K-dramas. Adriaens and Biltereyst (2012) foreground that viewers of transnational media manifest predilection for something that is culturally and linguistically proximate. However, in the case of my respondents, the cultural proximity tears down the linguistic barrier. Based on their preference towards K-

dramas, Indonesian viewers' reception in turn diversifies their cultural perspectives. This is in line with the findings of Lee (2018) who found that consumption of K-dramas among western fans lead to acquisition of cultural knowledge.

Their consumption of K-dramas consequently led to language acquisition and motivation to learn Korean, cultural understanding and new perceptions of Korea, pursuit of education, and pure entertainment and stress-reliever. Chandra's (2021) phenomenological study of motivation to learn Korean among six Indonesian Korean as a foreign language (KFL) learners revealed that five of them started learning Korean due to their interest in K-dramas. His findings also indicated that Indonesian audience of K-dramas idealize their future education due to K-dramas. Hence, it can be inferred that linguistic acquisition is the outcome of K-dramas consumption. Similarly, Lee (2018) also discovered linguistic acquisition of western fans to be the result of K-drama consumption. Hernández (2018) also noted that while K-dramas often appear to be one of the motivations to learn Korean, they might not be the primary reason. Even so, it is worth noting that language often mediates cultural understanding (Le, 2007, as cited in Lee, 2018) because viewers construct and negotiate their identities.

Cultural proximity often comes into the conversation of viewers of transnational media flow. However, Ju (2019) believes that foregrounding cultural proximity is devoid of insights considering western audience's unfamiliarity with Korean or any of the Asian cultures. Lee (2018) on the other hand opines that the acquisition of cultural understanding is not only about familiarity but also unfamiliarity. Both familiarity and unfamiliarity have the causal effects for audience's broadened cultural horizon. It is especially true considering that despite the shared Asian identity, Korean culture might not be entirely the same as other cultures. Furthermore, cultural proximity does not sufficiently explain how transnational viewers embrace the portrayed Korean culture which has been repackaged and positioned within modernized era (H. Jung, 2019) – where western cultures have influenced much of K-dramas production. Netflix-produces dramas, for example, showcase the merging between Asian and Western values. In the present study, the Indonesian viewers seemed to build connection between what they watched and their day-to-day experience. For example, Hexa (B15), in the previous excerpt, addressed the sexual depiction in K-Dramas which she believed closer to the beliefs of Asian people. This is an instance of how the Indonesian viewers experience cultural familiarity, while at the same time recognize that what is depicted in the K-Dramas might not be totally

familiar to them as in the Indonesian context – in which the Islam values are dominant – the sexual depiction is very rarely seen both in media and public. However, through their engagement, their reflexivity is shaped through the depiction in K-Dramas.

The last effect of K-dramas consumption is that viewers experienced escapism and stress reliever. This finding aligns with several findings from other studies which show how viewers who are engaged in transnational media or binge-watching through streaming services find a sense of escapism (Castro et al., 2021; Halim & Kiatkawsin, 2021; H. Lee, 2018). The sense of escapism is key to TV consumption as viewers can synchronize the content they enjoy through K-Dramas with their real-life issues. Romance has especially been in the vanguard of K-Dramas' upswing. Illouz (1997) foregrounds that romance oftentimes carries pragmatic value in the media world as it offers viewers an "an excursion into another realm of individual experience in which settings, feelings, and interactions are heightened and out of the ordinary" (p.119). Due this offer, K-Dramas have often employed popular or generic formula and romance trope to attract viewers. However, recently K-Dramas also expand its scope to include genres in which romance is not dominant to attract viewers. Despite limited presentation of romance, viewers still find such shows as a way to escape from their reality, like *Mulan*.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study explored the lived experiences of 55 Indonesian respondents of K-dramas. Using thematic analysis, the study reveals that there were four emerging motivating factors: fresh substitutive choice, easy access, interesting stories and visuals, and cultural factors. Additionally, the study also showed four outcomes of their consumptive behavior: language acquisition and motivation to learn Korean, cultural understanding and new perceptions of Korea, pursuit of education, and pure entertainment and stress-reliever. I argue that, instead of treating each of the theme as isolated and single-standing factor, all of them must be viewed from holistic perspective as they are interconnected.

The study, however, has some limitations in terms of the methods. To gather a large data for the study, qualitative questionnaires were distributed to the respondents. This methodological approach restricted this study from gaining deeper understanding as the respondents gave their responses but I was not able to follow up with more in-depth questions to enrich the discussion. Some respondents also did not provide enough explanation for their answers. Hence, further

study might want to employ qualitative interviews or focus group discussion to gather more data. Secondly, this study is more of an exploratory into the voices of the viewers in their experiences of consuming K-dramas. This study has not yet explored the cultural aspects deeper. Therefore, our data suggest that there be further studies examining the cultural aspects of K-dramas and how the Indonesian viewers internalize the cultural values such as those of harmony and hierarchy as presented in K-dramas.

Overall, this study has contributed to the existing body of literature on the reception and effects of K-dramas for transnational audience, especially Indonesia and during the pandemic. This study shows that COVID-19 curbs have indeed affected the viewing behavior of many Indonesian viewers. The effects have much to do with culture, language and education, and personal enjoyment.

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