

## Malaysian Perspective on Korean Dramas

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### Abstract

The rising popularity of Korean entertainment content in Asia has created Korean pop culture in the entertainment industry including Malaysia. There seemed to be a gap in previous research concerning the Malaysian Perspective on Korean Drama. The purpose of this study is to explore the strategies employed by Korean productions in attracting Malaysian audiences. This research uses qualitative methods, and the findings are significant in explaining the global success of Korean dramas which fills the gap in Malaysian research and provides guidelines for local broadcasters in their planning, strategizing to attract international markets to invest and accept Malaysian local programs.

**Keywords:** Korean Drama, Malaysian Audiences, Research, Culture.

### Introduction

The Korean Wave or 'Hallyu' in Korean, started when Korean dramas and music (K-pop) began to spread throughout East and Southeast Asia in the 1990s and eventually went global (Holroyd, 2019). The first Korean Drama that captivated the hearts of other countries audiences was Winter Sonata that released in 2002. According to Noor & Saodah (2020), Korean production always does a great job when making content for their dramas. They have their own style and formula to create a great content even though the content of the storyline is quite similar, however, each of the story has its own identity. Just like the popular drama's My Love from The Star, which makes a higher rating due to its unique storyline as well as the good-looking actors and actresses that captivate audiences globally.

In comparison, looking at Malaysian's dramas, there are a few of Malaysian's dramas become popular and trending in Malaysia. For example, 'Nur' (2018), had once become sensational in Malaysia. The story's success attracts Malaysian audiences, especially Malay people. In 2022, Malaysia drama become more and more supportive of Malay drama. Unfortunately, the popularity was just among Malaysian dramas audiences as it was failed to penetrate the international market. Therefore, it can be said that Malaysian production especially dramas is still lack of the quality of content. Due to this matter, it is crucial to look what's make Korean being acceptable in Malaysian audiences.

K-drama has grown in popularity in recent years just before the glory of K-pop music. K-drama television viewing has practically become a pastime in Asia (Soo & Nurul Izzah, 2022). According to Noor & Saodah (2020), the preferences to Korean dramas had been identified due to the enjoyable storyline and satisfying endings. They suggested that the easy, joyful, and romantic Korean dramas are the main attraction for the fans to follow Korean habits and ways of life (Jang & Paik, 2012). Jang & Paik also claimed that in addition to emphasizing romantic love, Korean dramas also proudly shows their culture in the scene such as national history, patriotism, determination, and hard labour (Noor & Saodah, 2020).

Besides that, Korean drama is also trending on Netflix. According to Madzan & Lau (2018), Korean Drama is widely accepted and demanded by Malaysian viewers and thus encouraged local television channels such as Astro broadcast more Korean dramas to cater to the preference of their subscribers for Korean drama. Due to this, Zailin et al (2013) mentioned that Korean Wave has been undergoing aggressive growth in Malaysia since the first drama Winter Sonata. Simultaneously with that, Asma et.al (2021), said that Netflix appears to be focusing on a selecting favourable foreign films and dramas as preferred entertainment.

The popularity of Korean dramas has fast become an issue and therefore, Noor et al (2020), had suggested that it is crucial to understand this phenomenon and research is important to produce richer data that would help us better understand the comprehensiveness of audience interaction to Korean drama. This study is purposely to understand what makes Korean drama so popular in Malaysia audiences and what can Malaysian production learns from the success of Korean dramas.

### **Literature Review**

Korean Drama has become the most anticipation on the over-the-top (OTT) platform. There are various ways and a reason that makes Korean Drama become the most trended genre in the world. According to Julina (2018) the processes from the development stage until the marketing and distribution stage that has been planned well in order to make their dramas become hot selling. Squid Game is the best example that gone through a certain development process that took ten years and Squid Game become the best Korean Drama that has been created in 2021. According to Kim (2007), Squid Game becoming a top-view drama in 94 countries and attracting more than 142 million members household and amassing 1.65 billion viewing hours during its first four weeks from launch.

The success of Korean Drama was started with the release of Winter Sonata (2002); Boys Over Flowers (2009); Descendant of the Sun (2016); Goblin (2016); Extraordinary You (2019) and aimed the continuous success of Korean drama. The selections of scenery, casts, and drama are the most prevalent elements that can be found in successful Korean drama series (Huang, 2011). Those three elements had made Korean dramas a top list of must-watch dramas in Malaysia and also more than 90 countries. According to Mundus (2012), most Korean dramas often include music artists that recalled "idol" to be included in the drama to create a new face and attractions to glue audiences in front of television.

In addition, Malaysia is not the only country that has been influenced Korean pop culture but this includes others Asian countries as well. As Chua (2010) observed, the increased interest in Korean pop culture developed rapidly in East and Southeast Asia, so that Korean films and Korean television dramas have become the television viewer's or movie goer's staple diet. This is compounded by the airing they receive in television stations and also in the marketing of Korean drama DVDs.

According to Kang (2016), the show with the highest average rating for a single episode is *Descendants of the Sun* (31.9 percent). In 2021, Korean Drama on the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) channel has set a new record for higher rating viewers which is *Royal Secret Agent* that achieves an average of 8.12 percent in viewer ratings and it reaches its peak until 12 percent at one point. *Royal Secret Agent* has a unique storyline that can attract globally audiences to watch it. This drama is a romantic comedy story where captures the victory of the undercover royal inspectors. The chemistry of actress shown in the drama grabs the attention and it fast becomes the highest rating drama on the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) channel.

Kim (2007) observed that the rapid rise of the Korean Wave in Malaysia has left scholars in a state of shock and perplexity, concluding that the Korean culture craze also evident in other Asian countries, has led researchers to seek better understanding of this sudden phenomenon. Hence, she suggested that the increased interest in Korean dramas also developed the younger generation's admiration for Korean culture, language and fashion. What would be very significant to examine is how a multiracial country like Malaysia, rich in its history and cultural heritage, would be easily influenced by the influx of Korean dramas although both countries do not share any significant history.

During the pandemic, Netflix become the most famous online streaming platform, especially among Korean drama fans. In the year of 2019, *Crash Landing on You* was TvN (South Korea TV channel) drama series that has set the highest rating by 24.1 percent during. Following that, *Itaewon Class* (2020) also become a Korean drama that trended on Netflix after the drama was played in Korean television on JoongAng Broadcasting Company (JTBC) channel.

Lee (2004); Cho (2005); Kim and Ryoo (2007); Tunstall (2008); Ju (2010) also highlighted that even in Korea, such drama has become the preferred media genre amongst most television viewers. Having said that, Kim (2009) noted that the popularity of Korean music and dramas has brought heated discussions around East and Southeast Asia since the end of 1990s. In fact, the popularity of Korean entertainment has been perceived as an important catalyst of an East Asian popular culture (Kim, 2015). Previous studies on Korean dramas argued two major areas: the first argument is that the factor that has helped the success of Korean dramas is their less expensive market price. Kim (2007); Yeon (2008); Ryo (2009) mentioned that apart from audiences' acceptance, beauty, good looks and celebrity culture, another main factor that has been able to attract most people to buy Korean products is that they are comparatively cheaper than Japanese and Hong Kong dramas.

The second argument range from various cultural issues. According to Ching (2000); Hayashi and Lee (2007); Lee (2008); Ju (2010); Vu (2011) the similarities between Asian cultures in certain aspects (respect for elders, strong family relationships, love and sexual modesty); has been able to attract Asian audiences to watch Korean dramas. There are also other factors that are discussed as noted by Vu (2011) including cultural proximity, modern consumerism. Concerted efforts involving politics and economics have also contributed to the success of Korean dramas. Reference to the previous research, this study is an attempt to look from the point of view of Malaysian expertise perspective on Korean Drama production in attracting many Malaysian audiences.

## **Method**

In this study, two informants have been chosen based on their background in Malaysian's drama production. The first informer was the content maker of Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (informant 1) and the second informer was an ex-Director of Content Astro (informant

2). A discussion was held in a depth semi-structure interview to answer the research questions presented and achieve the research objectives.

To this end, the researcher uses qualitative methods to address the research problems. This method is best used as it aims to investigate human phenomena and investigate interpretations and meaning that are unknown and needed to be explored.

In addition to that, qualitative research is particularly useful to explore new topics or complex issues. This can benefit the researcher to explain people's beliefs and behaviour (Hennink, 2015). For this particular research, by carrying out qualitative method, the researcher has been able to identify and understand the social or cultural norms of a culture or society.

This study conducted a face-to-face interview with participants and the methodology is designed to be less structured and more open-ended to encourage the participants to freely share their experience and knowledge in detail. The goal of this method is to maximise the depth of information collected. More importantly, the research objectives and problem statements of this studies could be achieved and identified objectively as presented in the following descriptions.

## **Findings**

### **Research**

During the pre-production process and stages. Korean film production does a lot of planning and research for each drama that will be film. Research on each script is very emphasized so that every detail of the word mentioned gives an impact to the audiences. The script must also match the actor's acting and movement. Therefore, the product not only highlighted on the story but also on cinematography, the music, an actor and acting, and its staging. Research also crucial for Korean pre-production to understand the culture and the sensitivity of the foreign audiences.

It is worth saying that Korean drama production practises a lot of work attitude according to the level they have set such as Squid Game which took ten years to develop the storyline. There are three identify main components which are basis in making a drama successful and admired as well as becoming a top list of must-watch dramas. Those three components are the choices of setting, casts, and drama production itself. According to Huang (2011), Korean dramas production including a wide range of plots and subjects, making them appealing to a variety of generations and social classes.

### **Agency**

Furthermore, Korean production are very concerned with perfection in producing the characters played by the actors. There is an agency provide a preparation and training service to groom their talent before becomes an artist. The training is including singing/voice, dancing, speaking and dressing according to character and performance. In fact, the effort of honing this talent takes years just to ensure that a person becomes a truly talented performer. This Korean casting agencies are racing to find a job for an artist. As stated by Ko (2005); Parc & Moon (2013), Korean dramas can be said to be complete with a good and solid storyline, the striking appearance and performance of the Korean actors and actresses, beautiful backdrop, and other themes for the competitiveness variables of Hallyu.

Lee and Lee (2007); Parc & Moon (2013), suggested that the strength of Korean drama is the talented and good supporters behind every production. Those aspect are included a good writer who can animate the storyline, competent and experienced producers, a good-looking

and appearance of actors and actresses and also a consistent investment for factor conditions.

### **Attractive Appearance**

Due to the attractive appearance and performance of the actors and actresses, as well as its nostalgic tale of purest love, *Winter Sonata* as for example, was particularly well enough in Malaysia among middle-aged women. Setting expectations for beauty standards can have a huge impact on viewers' perceptions of their own value, regardless of gender, in Korean dramas (Nurzihan et al., 2019).

Therefore, it can be classified under look and good talent. The strong storyline of unconditional love is the simplest one of Korean dramas' various testimonies (or themes), and the style of the tale may be dealt with as a strategy (Parc & Hwy-Chang, 2013). The *Washington Post* (2006) credited this phenomenon to precise marketing, coupled with good-looking young guys with muscular bodies, and strong storylines of unconditional love. The appeal of Korean celebrities and idols has grown as a result of their attractiveness, which includes fair complexion, minimal makeup, and cutting-edge clothing (Noor & Wok, 2020).

### **Theme**

Themes in Korean dramas also vary, with both mildly violent and extremely violent stories. The research they have conducted at the beginning of the production helps a lot in terms of choosing a theme that suit the foreign target audiences. Depending on local tastes, these varied dramas were admired in various countries. Korean dramas appeal to Malaysian audiences because they meet their emotional demands (Julina. 2018).

### **Co-production**

Korean production is impressively smart in terms of production cooperation with any other country that is interested. One of the main purposes of the collaborations is to attract more interest from the country itself in addition to other advantage factors such as sharing staff, equipment, open-air shooting locations, experts in programming, and production expertise. As for now, Korean drama production become expanded in Asia, including Malaysia.

According to Julina (2020), the co-productions typically concerned establishing partnerships between Asian tv networks and local production corporations, which means they could share local programming corporations, technical infrastructure, and administrative help to be utilized by nearby filming requirements inclusive of the neighbourhood casts (Julina, 2020).

As a result, the Korean co-production strategy is the one factor in the success of the rise of Korean drama in Malaysia. In Malaysia, Korean drama become a trend for the young generations to watch the drama. The literature review shows that many people subscribe to Korean channels just like KBS, SBS, and Oh! TV and TvN in their Astro packages (Julina, 2020) Through the co-production as well, Korean media enterprise has managed to enlarge and become a global marketplace quite without difficulty with the overseas associate. The foreign associate participation has benefited the Korean media industry in an experience of funding, and technology in addition to global appeals (Julina, 2020).

### **Censorship**

As such, the participant believes that the theme that works well with Malaysian audiences is to abide to stricter censorship with lower sexual and lower violence contents. This is because Muslims constitute the dominant Malaysian population and their lives are lived according to

Islamic values. The Korean production believes that to ensure that the audience can enjoy and are comfortable watching Korean drama, it is essential that these productions respect other religions and audiences' beliefs.

### **Age**

According to Julina (2020), as part of the censorship, age is also a focus on fulfilling the needs of the audience. Understanding the needs and spirit in one age is an advantage in producing Korean dramas. The attraction of Korean dramas may also depend on the audiences' age. For instance, if the audiences are over 30 years old, they would most probably be inclined to watch dramas. Meanwhile, audiences between the ages of 20 to 30 years old as well as teenagers, may be more attracted to watch variety shows. Hence, they need to identify the types of drama that are best suited for all age levels and that can be enjoyed by everyone.

### **Culture**

The values of Korean culture have been shown clearly in the dramas. The culture can be shared and accepted by other Asian countries such as Malaysia. This reflects that Korean is sharing their culture with others whilst observing others as reciprocity. The culture can be acceptable in Malaysia due to its modern and new comparing but not too Americanize world. Korean and Malaysia in some way share the same Asian culture (Julina, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study shows that in every Korean drama production has a clear and profitable strategies. Various factors are also taken into account including the content and preparation of the actor. The presence of services agencies that cater a training class is crucial in supporting the industry.

Korean dramas have been realistically able to associate its audiences' needs in terms of culture interests. As a result, all of these factors have contributed to a better chance of Korean dramas to be broadcasted in Malaysia. This research offers valuable insights into the factors driving the popularity of Korean dramas in Malaysia and sheds light on how cultural alignment and relatability can have a profound impact on the acceptance and reception of media content in different regions. It also shows that the interest of audience is closely related to the culture of the country, the sensitivity of the country as well as the trend of age needs. The culture influences the audience even from the point of belief or ages. Understanding the needs of the audiences are a key element in the acceptance of Korean dramas production in Malaysia.

People would be interested to watch dramas that are more closely related to their own cultures even though they communicate with different languages and have to rely on subtitles in order to understand the storyline. The rise of Korean dramas in Malaysia clearly shows that language has not become a barrier for Malaysians or any other countries to watch Korean dramas, but rather its similarity to real people that touches dominantly on human sensitivity such as lifestyle, value and family that has propels Korean dramas success in Malaysia.

Understanding the needs and preferences of the audience is a key element in the successful acceptance of Korean drama productions in Malaysia. Despite the language barrier, the rise of Korean dramas in Malaysia demonstrates that subtitles do not hinder viewership. The success can be attributed to the relatability of Korean dramas to real-life experiences, touching on human sensitivities such as lifestyle, values, and family dynamics. This shared

human experience fosters a strong connection with the audience, transcending linguistic differences.

In essence, the popularity of Korean dramas in Malaysia can be attributed to their focus on Asian cultures and values, as well as their authentic portrayal of Asian lifestyles and beliefs. Family values and cultural elements play a crucial role in resonating with the audience and contributing to the overall success of Korean dramas.

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