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Impact Of Korean Dramas Among Youth: A Pakistani Case Study

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*This research examines the socio-psychological impact of South Korean television dramas on Pakistani university-aged youth within the context of the global Hallyu wave. Utilizing a quantitative, cross-sectional design, the study collected data from **161 participants** to explore the intersection of active media selection and long-term cognitive impact. The methodology employed a purposive sampling technique to target active consumers of Korean content, utilizing a structured online instrument to measure variables related to viewership motivations, behavioral imitation, and social perception. The theoretical framework integrates Cultivation Theory and the Uses and Gratifications Theory to analyze how Pakistani youth navigate the dual nature of emotional regulation and the unintentional molding of social expectationsThe findings indicate that while creative excellence—specifically unique storylines and relatable characters—serves as the primary driver for viewership, a significant majority of respondents utilize these narratives as a psychological reprieve for escapism. The data reveals a distinct gender gap, with female viewers exhibiting more frequent engagement and a higher susceptibility to the visual appeal of the cast compared to male participants. Critically, the study identifies a widespread recognition among the audience that the genre often promotes unrealistic or unhealthy expectations regarding lifestyle and interpersonal relationships. The research concludes that while K-dramas provide necessary mental relief, they also cultivate a distorted reality that may lead to long-term dissatisfaction. These insights highlight the need for media literacy frameworks to help audiences navigate foreign beauty standards and social norms without eroding local cultural identity.*

Keywords: *K-dramas, Pakistani Youth, Cultivation Theory, Escapism, Media Literacy, Socio-psychological Impact, Unrealistic Expectations, Gender Dynamics*

Introduction

The global proliferation of South Korean cultural products, known as Hallyu (the Korean Wave), represents a significant shift in "de-centered globalization," where non-Western media hubs challenge the long-standing hegemony of Western cultural centers like Hollywood (Jin, 2016). Research from the United Kingdom posits that K-dramas' success is rooted in "cultural hybridity"—a strategic blending of global production standards with local traditional values (Kim, 2013). Scholars in the USA have further identified that K-dramas serve as a "wholesome alternative" to hyper-sexualized Western content, emphasizing themes of family, respect for elders, and slow-burn romance that resonate across diverse cultural backgrounds (Ju, 2020).

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The impact of K-drama consumption reveals distinct patterns across gender lines. While female viewers are statistically more likely to watch these dramas and report higher levels of emotional investment, male audiences are increasingly drawn to "quality" television genres such as thrillers and historical dramas (Thinley, 2021). However, scholars warn of the "cultivation effect," where heavy exposure to the idealized romantic tropes of K-dramas can lead to unrealistic relationship expectations and dissatisfaction with real-life partners (Nguyen, 2017). Additionally, the promotion of specific Korean beauty standards in these dramas has been linked to shifts in body perception and self-esteem among youth worldwide (Fardouly, 2020).

The appeal of the South Korean actor or actress was undeniable, as it showed a good and unforgettable physical appearance, personality, actions, and words. Hogarth (2013) backed this claim, stating that an attractive and elegant young actor or actress attracted K-drama viewers. The emotional effect felt by Indonesian people K-drama fans induced their curiosity in recognizing the cultural values, way of life, looks, and love connections of K-drama actors and actresses. Similarly, audience participation refers to para-social interactions or exchanges occurring on social media between fans and K-drama actors or actresses. Viewers would actively find out K-drama contents in order to fulfil specific expectations and requirements (Giles, 2002).

Background / Context

The entry of Korean content into South Asia began in the early 2000s, gaining initial traction in Northeast India and Nepal due to linguistic and cultural affinities (Ryoo, 2009). In Pakistan, the official arrival is often traced back to 2016, when the state-owned channel PTV Home aired the historical epic *Dae Jang Geum* (locally titled *Nageen*). This was a pivotal moment that introduced K-dramas to the domestic audience, capitalizing on a "transcultural proximity" where viewers found the depiction of family dynamics and social hierarchies more relatable than those found in Western media (Park & Jo, 2024). The popularity of the genre exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic, facilitated by the rapid expansion of digital streaming platforms like Netflix and YouTube, which bypassed traditional broadcasting limitations (Saeed et al., 2024).

International audience research, particularly studies conducted in the USA, highlights "affective consumption" as a primary driver of viewership. American viewers often engage with K-dramas through a high degree of emotional involvement, relating the characters' struggles and romantic feelings to their own personal lives (Ju, 2020). This emotional depth is often supported by "affective interludes" stylized, emotional moments in the narrative designed to elicit sympathy and intense viewer connection (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2024). Furthermore, Western fans often perceive K-dramas as a form of "serious leisure," where consumption leads to community-building, stress reduction, and an increased sense of belonging within global fandom networks (Jin, 2016).

Importance

The importance of this research lies in its critical examination of how transnational media serves as a "soft power" mechanism that reshapes the socio-cultural fabric of the younger generation. As South Korean cultural exports continue to dominate global streaming platforms, understanding their influence is vital for identifying shifts in youth identity and social cognition. From a psychological perspective, this study

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addresses the "escapism" and "emotional regulation" needs of youth, providing empirical data on how K-dramas function as a primary psychological outlet for stress management and identity exploration (Shaji & Gupta, 2024). Furthermore, by applying **Cultivation Theory**, this research offers a significant sociological contribution by highlighting the potential for a "distorted reality," where heavy media consumption fosters unrealistic expectations regarding romantic intimacy and interpersonal commitment (Nguyen, 2017). Such insights are crucial for developing media literacy frameworks that help audiences navigate the "unfiltered" adoption of foreign values and beauty standards, which may otherwise lead to the gradual erosion of local cultural identity (Alia et al., 2015).

Scope

The scope of this research is intentionally defined to investigate the intersection of active media selection and long-term cognitive impact among university-aged youth. Geographically situated within the contemporary digital landscape, the study focuses on how Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms have enabled K-dramas to bypass traditional broadcasting barriers to reach a globalized audience (Park & Jo, 2024). Thematic boundaries of this study are limited to three core dimensions: the **motivational drivers** of viewership, the **imitation of behavioral patterns** (such as linguistic and fashion choices), and the **cultivation of social perceptions** regarding relationship satisfaction.

Research Problem

The global expansion of the South Korean “Hallyu” wave has established a significant cultural presence in South Asia, yet the socio-psychological implications of this consumption in the Pakistani context remain under-researched. Despite the “wholesome alternative” and family-oriented appeal that K-dramas offer compared to Western media (Ju, 2020), a critical tension exists regarding the long-term cognitive impact on youth. According to Cultivation Theory, heavy exposure to idealized romantic tropes and specific aesthetic standards can foster a “distorted reality,” leading to heightened and often unrealistic expectations regarding interpersonal relationships and partner selection (Nguyen, 2017).

In Pakistan, the rapid proliferation of digital streaming platforms has accelerated viewership among university-aged youth (Saeed et al., 2024). However, this “affective consumption” often occurs without sufficient media literacy, potentially leading to dissatisfaction with real-life partners and the gradual erosion of local cultural identity (Alia et al., 2015). While research in other regions has linked K-drama consumption to shifts in body perception and self-esteem (Fardouly, 2020), there is a localized knowledge gap in Pakistan concerning how these foreign media products influence social cognition and emotional regulation. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the extent to which K-drama consumption cultivates unrealistic relationship expectations and psychological escapism among Pakistani youth, addressing the need for empirical data on transnational media influence in a conservative South Asian setting.

Literature Review

The Globalization of Hallyu and Cultural Resonance

The international expansion of South Korean cultural products, known as the "Korean Wave" or *Hallyu*, is driven by a unique blend of high production standards and relatable traditional values. Liu (2024) identifies four primary factors contributing to this popularity among university students: cultural curiosity, drama attractiveness (storylines and production), cultural similarity, and personal preferences. This cultural resonance is particularly strong in Asian societies where Confucian values—such as family loyalty and filial piety—create a sense of "cultural proximity" that Western media often lacks (Liu, 2024).

Psychological Impact: Escapism and Emotional Well-Being

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For many younger viewers, K-dramas serve as more than mere entertainment; they function as a significant psychological outlet. Shaji and Gupta (2024) found that K-drama consumption is intricately linked to adolescent self-concept and emotional regulation. Their research highlights "escapism" as a dominant theme, where viewers use the immersive narratives to cope with real-life stressors and anxiety. While these dramas can enhance social connectedness by providing shared interests among peers, excessive consumption may lead to social isolation if the "television reality" begins to replace real-world interactions (Shaji & Gupta, 2024).

Cultivation Theory and Romantic Idealization The long-term effects of K-drama exposure are often explained through Cultivation Theory, which posits that heavy viewers begin to perceive the real world through the lens of media portrayals. Nguyen (2017) applied this framework to study single women, finding a statistically significant relationship between drama exposure and romantic expectations. Viewers who perceive K-dramas as realistic are more likely to develop idealized standards for relationship satisfaction and commitment. This "cultivation" of unrealistic expectations suggests that the genre heavily influences how young adults conceptualize intimacy and partner selection (Nguyen, 2017).

Involvement, Fanaticism, and Behavioral Intentions The transition from a passive viewer to an active "fan" is moderated by the level of audience involvement. Sukendi et al. (2021) identified that factors such as the attractiveness and credibility of actors significantly drive drama satisfaction. High satisfaction often leads to "fanaticism," a state of intense engagement that dictates behavioral intentions. These intentions include the desire to visit South Korea or purchase Korean-branded products, effectively turning media consumption into a driver for international tourism and consumerism (Sukendi et al., 2021).

Imitation Behavior and Gender Disparities Gender plays a critical role in the intensity and nature of K-drama influence. Thinley (2021) conducted a comparative analysis of university students, revealing that female students spend significantly more time watching K-dramas per week (averaging 4.11 hours) compared to males (1.78 hours). This increased intensity correlates with a higher tendency toward "imitation behavior," where viewers adopt the language, fashion, and lifestyle habits seen on screen. Such behavioral shifts indicate that K-dramas act as a powerful tool for "soft power," shaping the daily habits and aesthetic preferences of the younger generation (Thinley, 2021).

Socio-Moral Implications and Cultural Identity As K-dramas disseminate foreign values and habits, there are growing concerns regarding their impact on local cultural identity. Alia et al. (2015) argue that the "unfiltered" adoption of Korean lifestyle and moral values can lead to a degradation of local cultural love. Because these media products often hypnotize the audience with high-quality visuals and emotional intensity, they can shift the perspectives of youth toward foreign norms, necessitating a balance between global media consumption and local cultural literacy (Alia et al., 2015).

OBJECTTIVES

- To investigate the impact of Korean dramas on Pakistani males and females.
- To compare the intensity and frequency of K-drama viewership between male and female youth.
- To assess the emotional impact and sense of social belonging derived from watching K-dramas.
- To identify the specific elements (storyline, characters, visual style, cultural interest, etc.) that attract Pakistani youth to Korean dramas.

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Hypothesis

H1: K-dramas significantly increase unhealthy and unrealistic relationship expectations among viewers.
H2: It is more likely that females watch Korean dramas than males because of their good looking actors
H3: Females are more likely than males to spend a greater amount of time watching K-dramas.
H4: Pakistani males and females use K-dramas as a significant escape from their everyday reality.

Questionnaire

1. What draws you to K-dramas?
2. How often do you watch K-dramas?
3. Good looking actors have influenced your decision to watch K-dramas.
4. You use K-dramas as an escape from reality.
5. K-dramas promote unrealistic/unhealthy expectations in relationships.

Theoretical Framework

- **Cultivation Theory:** Suggests that long-term exposure to media "cultivates" a viewer's perception of reality (Nguyen, 2017).
- **Uses and Gratifications Theory:** Explains how viewers actively seek out K-drama content to fulfill specific emotional needs (Giles, 2002).

These theories identifies why Pakistani youth actively seek out K-dramas for specific needs. While Cultivation Theory explains the unintentional "molding" of social expectations, Uses and Gratifications focuses on the audience's agency in using content for escapism, entertainment, or personal identity. Together, they provide a dual perspective on both the active motivations and the subsequent cognitive impacts of media consumption.

Research Philosophy

The philosophical foundation of this study is grounded in the **Positivist** tradition, which posits that social reality can be objectively observed and measured. From an **ontological** perspective, this research adopts a stance of **Realism**, assuming that the "Cultivation Effect" of media is an objective phenomenon that exists independently of the observer's perception. By viewing social behaviors and psychological impacts as measurable entities, this study seeks to identify consistent patterns of K-drama influence among Pakistani youth. **Epistemologically**, the researcher maintains an objective distance from the subjects, prioritizing empirical evidence and the quantification of data. This ensures that the findings regarding relationship expectations and escapism are derived from systematic observation and statistical verification rather than subjective interpretation, thereby adhering to the standards of scientific rigor in media studies.

Research Paradigm

This study operates within a **Quantitative Paradigm**, utilizing a structured and deductive framework to examine the variables under investigation. This paradigm is selected for its capacity to provide a macro-level overview of media consumption habits and to determine the strength of relationships between specific drivers (such as actor attractiveness) and their psychological outcomes (such as romantic idealization). By

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employing standardized instrumentation, the research focuses on the collection of numerical data to test the validity of the Cultivation and Uses and Gratifications theories in a local context. The primary objective within this paradigm is to achieve generalizability, allowing the findings from the sampled Pakistani university students to reflect broader trends within the domestic youth population.

Research Approach

Consistent with the positivist paradigm, this study employs a **Deductive Research Approach**. This top-down methodology begins with the application of established theoretical frameworks specifically Cultivation Theory to formulate testable hypotheses regarding the socio-psychological impact of Hallyu in Pakistan. The research process involves the transition from the abstract (theory) to the concrete (data collection and statistical analysis) to confirm or refute the proposed hypotheses. This approach is particularly suited for this case study as it allows for the structured testing of whether global media trends observed in Western or East Asian contexts hold true within the unique socio-cultural landscape of South Asia.

Justification and Feasibility

The necessity of this research is underscored by the rapid digital transformation of the Pakistani media landscape between 2020 and 2026. As Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms have bypassed traditional censorship and broadcasting barriers, the "unfiltered" consumption of foreign values has reached an unprecedented scale, making the investigation of "soft power" and cultural erosion a timely academic priority. Furthermore, the study addresses a critical gap in literature concerning the emotional regulation and mental health of youth in developing nations. In terms of feasibility, the research leverages the high digital connectivity of the target demographic. Utilizing university networks and social media platforms for data dissemination ensures a high response rate and cost-effective data collection. The use of standardized quantitative tools further ensures that the project can be completed within the required academic timeframe while maintaining high levels of reliability and validity.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the escalating popularity of South Korean television dramas within the Pakistani socio-cultural landscape. Recognizing the pervasive influence of the global 'Hallyu' wave, the research investigates the extent to which Korean cultural exports have reshaped the attitudes and behaviors of Pakistani youth. Data collection is facilitated through a structured survey questionnaire, designed to empirically measure the socio-psychological impact of these media products on the Pakistani youth.

Research Design and Approach

The present study adopts a **quantitative, cross-sectional research design** to investigate the escalating popularity and subsequent socio-cultural impact of the South Korean "Hallyu" wave within the Pakistani context. By employing a cross-sectional approach, this research captures a contemporary "snapshot" of the attitudes and behaviors of Pakistani youth during a period of peak cultural transition.

Sampling Method

This study employs a Purposive Sampling technique, a non-probability strategy essential for investigations focusing on specific media effects. Unlike a generic survey of the public, this inquiry requires respondents who possess firsthand experience with the "Hallyu" wave. By deliberately selecting participants who are active consumers of South Korean dramas, the study ensures that the data gathered is directly relevant to

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the variables of cultural imitation and romantic idealization. This targeted approach enhances internal validity by ensuring that the observed "cultivation effects" are linked to actual media exposure rather than external variables or non-viewer bias.

Target Population

The target population is geographically and demographically localized to Pakistani youth, primarily students within the age bracket of 18 to 25. This group represents the "digital native" cohort in Pakistan, characterized by high levels of engagement with Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms and social media. To refine the dataset, specific inclusion criteria were applied: respondents were required to be residents of Pakistan and must have a history of K-drama viewership. These criteria were established to filter out non-consumers, thereby providing a concentrated focus on the socio-psychological shifts occurring within the active viewing community.

Sample Size

A total sample of ***N=161*** participants was recruited for this research.

Sample Justification

The justification for employing a sample of 160 through purposive means lies in the study's objective to measure affective consumption. Given the logistical constraints of accessing a national sampling frame in Pakistan, purposive sampling through academic and digital networks provided the most feasible route to high-quality data.

Data Collection

Primary data is acquired through the administration of a Structured Online Questionnaire developed and hosted via the Google Forms platform. This digital medium was selected to facilitate efficient reaching of the target demographic across diverse geographical locations within Pakistan, ensuring a streamlined and standardized data entry process. The instrument is designed to be accessible via multiple devices, including smartphones and computers, to maximize the response rate among the tech-savvy youth population.

The secondary data consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and institutional reports sourced from digital repositories such as Google Scholar and ResearchGate.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the data collection phase, the raw responses are exported into IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for systematic processing. The analytical framework focuses on Descriptive Statistics (frequencies and percentages) and Bivariate Cross-tabulations. This cross-sectional analysis allows for the observation of patterns between variables such as gender-based differences in viewership duration without the application of inferential testing. The precision of SPSS ensures that the findings are presented with a high degree of mathematical accuracy.

Ethical Considerations and Participant Protection

Strict ethical protocols are observed to ensure the protection of participant rights. Informed consent is obtained from all respondents at the outset of the survey, with explicit disclosure regarding the study's academic purpose. Participation remains entirely voluntary, and respondents are informed of their right to withdraw at any time. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, no personally identifiable information (PII) is collected. All data is managed through encrypted digital files, ensuring robust data protection in accordance with institutional research guidelines.

Research Limitations and Constraints

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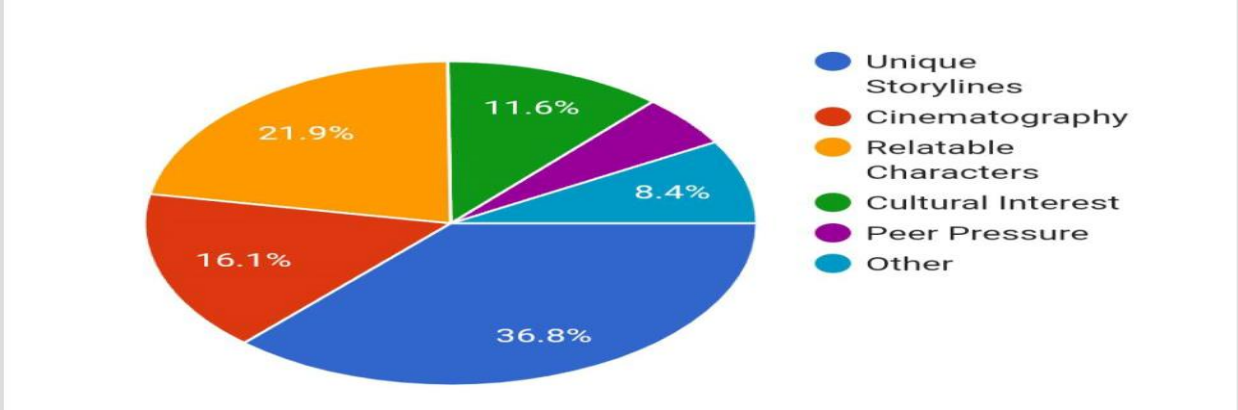
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It is acknowledged that the study is subject to certain inherent limitations. The use of purposive sampling and a sample size of ***N=160*** restricts the generalizability of the findings to the broader Pakistani population, as the results are reflective of a specific digital-native sub-group. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported

data introduces the potential for social desirability bias.[4] Finally, as a cross-sectional study, the results offer a temporal snapshot rather than a longitudinal view of cultural evolution. These constraints are recognized as boundary conditions within which the data should be interpreted.

Findings

1. What draws you to Kdramas?

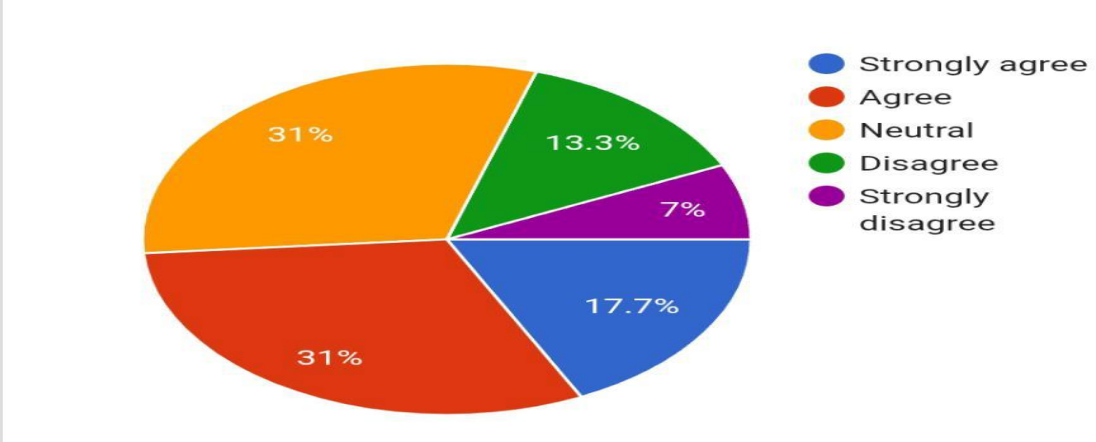


The survey results indicate that Unique Storylines are the primary driver for K-drama viewership, cited by 36.8% of respondents. When combined with Relatable Characters (21.9%) and Cinematography (16.1%), these three creative elements account for over three-quarters of the audience's interest. Other factors like cultural curiosity, peer influence, and miscellaneous reasons play a much smaller role in attracting viewers to the genre.

2. Kdramas promote unrealistic/unhealthy expectations in relationships.

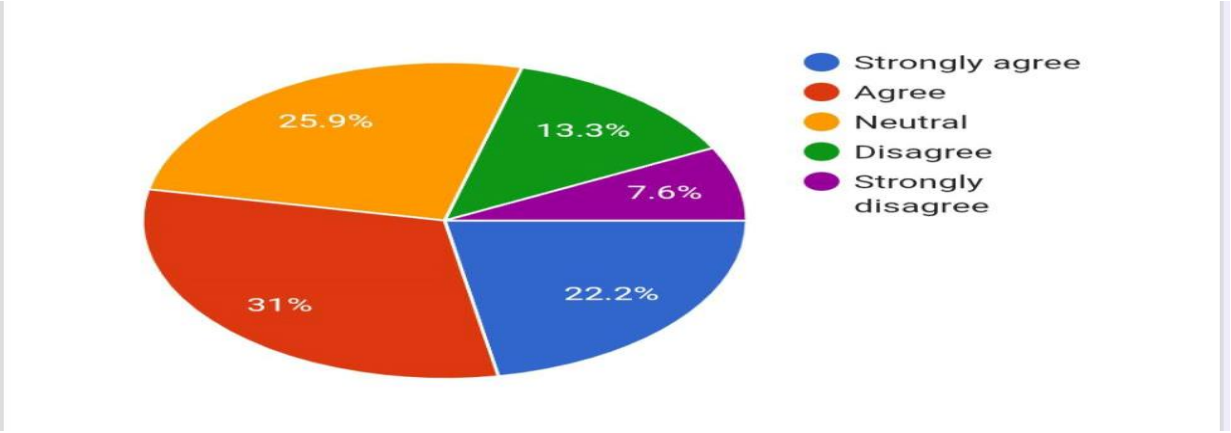
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The Survey results indicates a significant perception among viewers that K-dramas promote unrealistic standards, with nearly half of the participants (44.3%) expressing agreement or strong agreement with this sentiment. While a substantial 31% of respondents maintained a neutral stance, only a minority of 24.7% disagreed, suggesting that the portrayal of idealized lifestyles or relationships is a recognized concern within the audience.

You use K-dramas as an escape from reality.



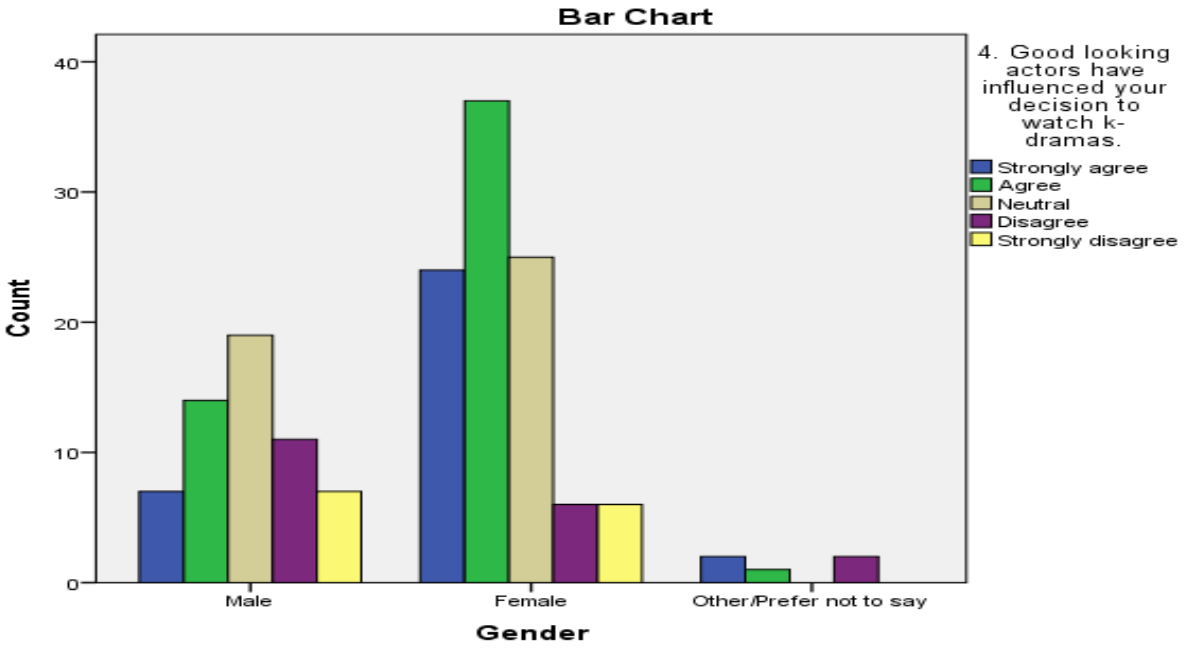
The survey results indicate that a majority of viewers utilize K-dramas as a psychological reprieve, with 53.2% of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing that they use the medium to escape from reality. While 25.9% of the participants maintained a neutral position, only a small fraction (20.9%) disagreed with the statement.

3. Good looking actors have influenced your decision to watch K-dramas.

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	4. Good looking actors have influenced your decision to watch k-dramas.					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Male	7	14	19	11	7	58
Female	24	37	25	6	6	98
Other/Prefer not to say	2	1	0	2	0	5
Total	33	52	44	19	13	161



The survey findings indicate that physical attractiveness significantly influences viewing habits, particularly among female respondents who predominantly agree or strongly agree that good-looking actors impacted their decision to watch K-dramas. While male respondents show a more neutral or divided stance on this factor, the overall trend suggests that visual appeal is a key recruitment tool for the genre. When considered alongside previous data, it appears that while unique storytelling draws viewers in, the presence of attractive leads serves as a powerful initial catalyst for engagement.

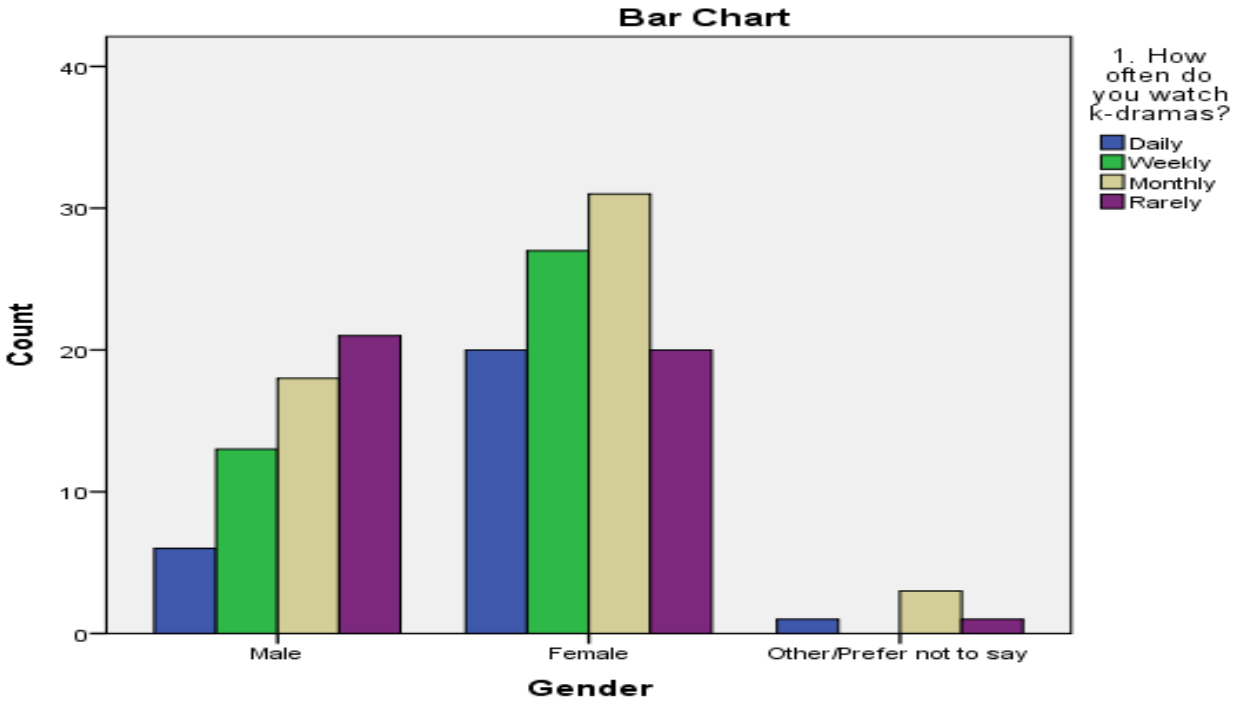
4. How often do you watch K-dramas?

		1. How often do you watch k-dramas?				
		Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Rarely	Total
Gender	Male	6	13	18	21	58
	Female	20	27	31	20	98

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	Other/Prefer not to say	1	0	3	1	5
Total		27	40	52	42	161



The analysis of viewing frequency across genders reveals that female respondents exhibit significantly higher and more consistent engagement with K-dramas compared to male participants. While the largest portion of the male demographic (36.2%) reported watching "Rarely," female viewers demonstrated a more frequent consumption pattern, with nearly half (47.9%) engaging with content on a "Daily" or "Weekly" basis. Although "Monthly" viewing represents the most common frequency across the total sample (32.3%), the data suggests a clear gender divide, where the core audience is characterized by a high-frequency female majority and a more occasional, low-frequency male viewership

RESULTS SUMMARY

The collective data demonstrates that K-drama viewership is primarily fueled by a desire for escapism and an appreciation for innovative storytelling. While the aesthetic appeal of the cast serves as a significant draw—particularly among female audiences—the frequent consumption of this content is accompanied by a widespread recognition that the genre often portrays unrealistic or unhealthy expectations. Ultimately, the results suggest that the genre's success lies in its ability to balance high production values and

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relatable character arcs with a fantasy-driven narrative that offers viewers a temporary reprieve from reality.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest a complex relationship between K-drama consumption and viewer perception. While the primary motivations for watching are rooted in creative excellence, specifically unique storylines and relatable characters, there is a clear trend of using these narratives as a psychological escape from reality. This form of escapism provides a necessary temporary relief from daily stressors The data also highlights a distinct gender gap, where female viewers engage with content more frequently and are more susceptible to the influence of visual appeal and attractive casting than male viewers. This suggests that while the Hallyu wave is driven by narrative innovation, its sustainability relies heavily on aesthetic production and the emotional reprieve it offers its core demographic.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that K-dramas have established a strong foothold among viewers by offering high-quality storytelling and a reliable means of escapism. The study confirms that while the audience appreciates the genre's artistic merits, such as cinematography and character development, they remain wary of the idealized standards these shows portray. The disparity in viewing habits and motivations between genders indicates that marketing and content creation are particularly effective when targeting female audiences through visual and emotional engagement. Ultimately, K-dramas function as a "double-edged sword" for the viewer providing and serves as a healthy coping mechanism for emotional regulation.

However, detrimental psychological effects may arise when the line between fiction and reality blurs. Nearly half of viewers acknowledge that these dramas promote unhealthy or unrealistic expectations regarding lifestyle and relationships. This can lead to decreased life satisfaction, as individuals may compare their own lives to the idealized, high-aesthetic perfection shown on screen. Despite this, the audience maintains a degree of critical awareness regarding these unrealistic portrayals

necessary mental relief while simultaneously framing life through a lens of perfection that most respondents acknowledge is unattainable.

Recommendation

To address the impact of K-drama consumption, It is recommended that media literacy initiatives should be encouraged to help viewers navigate the gap between dramatized entertainment and reality. Producers should aim for a balance between aesthetic appeal and authentic representation to reduce the influence of unrealistic expectations on life satisfaction. Furthermore, content strategies could evolve to incorporate themes that engage broader demographics beyond the current core audience. Ongoing research is also necessary to evaluate whether high levels of escapism serve as a healthy coping tool or a detrimental form of avoidance. Future studies should focus on longitudinal assessments to determine how prolonged exposure to these idealized narratives affects the long-term psychological well-being and relationship satisfaction of diverse viewers.

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