



**AUDIENCE RECEPTION STUDY OF KOREAN  
DRAMAS AMONG MALAY WOMEN**

**BY**

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**A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for  
the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication)**

**Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and  
Human Sciences  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This is a reception study of Korean dramas among Malaysian women, the aim of which to answer two research questions: (1) How do Malaysian women read Korean drama media text?; and (2) In what way do women of different age groups hold diverse and parallel readings of Korean drama media text? Informed by Stuart Hall's (1980) Encoding/Decoding method, a qualitative methodology using focus group interviews was taken to garner deeper understanding and to yield richer information on the social phenomenon among informants who are avid viewers of Korean dramas. Four focus-group interview sessions were conducted with each group comprising of six individuals, in which the discourses were guided by semi-structured interview protocols. Two of the four focus groups were made up of working and married adult respondents, while the other two groups represented the student, single adolescent respondents. Prompts in the form of edited clips of selected popular Korean dramas were shown to the participants during the interview as a stimulus to gauge engaging discourse, as well as serving as cues in recalling their Korean drama viewing diet experiences. At the end of the interviews, participants were asked to respond to a short questionnaire, which included questions on demographic information and viewing patterns of Korean dramas. The researcher prepared the verbatim transcriptions of the focus group interviews. Analysis of the interview data yielded eight themes after rigorous coding process. The themes were: male-centric, family-oriented, female-centric, cultural pattern, storyline, cosmopolitan lifestyle, realism, and parasocial relationship. The readings of the themes varied across the focus group clusters (adults and adolescents), based on the three types of readings namely dominant, oppositional and negotiated reading. The respondents were also found to have parallel and divergent reading between the two clusters. The discussion of the findings were presented in light of their demographic differences.

## خلاصة البحث

هذه الدراسة تتعلق بكيفية تقبل المايزيات للدراما الكورية، وتهدف إلى الإجابة عن السؤالين الآتيين: كيف تقرأ المايزيات نص الدراما الكوري عبر وسائل الإعلام؟ وما طريقة النساء من مختلف الفئات العمرية لعقد القراءة المتنوعة والمتوازية لنص الدراما الكوري عبر وسائل الإعلام؟ وباستخدام طريقة الترميز أو ستورت هول (1980)، أُتبعت المنهجية النوعية عبر المقابلات لمجموعة من النسوة المهتمات بالدراما الكورية، لغرض الحصول على فهم أعمق ومعلومات أعم للظاهرة الاجتماعية بين المشاركات اللاتي شاهدن الدراما الكورية. أجريت المقابلات بالتركيز على جلسات خاصة لأربع مجموعات، وكل مجموعة تتكون من ستة أفراد، تمّ تزويد المجموعات بخطابات ارشادية بواسطة بروتوكولات المقابلات شبه المنظمة، هذا وقد كانت هناك مجموعتان من المجموعات الأربع من النساء المتزوجات والعاملات، بينما كانت المجموعتان الباقيتان من الطالبات المراهقات العزباوات، وقد تم عرض مجموعة مختارة من الأعمال الدرامية الكورية الشعبية على شكل مقاطع محررة للمشاركات أثناء المقابلة بوصفها حافظاً لقياس المشاركة في النقاش، وكذلك لاسترجاع الذاكرة حول تجاربهن في مشاهدة الدراما الكورية، وفي نهاية المقابلات تمّ طرح أسئلة على المشاركات لمعرفة مدى استجابتهن للرد على أسئلة الاستبانة القصيرة، والمشملة على معلومات ديموغرافية، وأنماط من مشاهد للدراما الكورية. أعدت الباحثة تدوينة حرفية للمجموعات التي تمت مقابلاتهن، وبعد تحليل بيانات المقابلة، تمّ استخلاص ثمانية موضوعات بعد عملية الترميز، وهذه الموضوعات، تتمثل في: البعد الذكوري، والحياة الأسرية، والبعد الأنسوي، والنمط الثقافي، وأسلوب الحياة العالمي، والعلاقة الاجتماعية. هذا وقد تنوعت الموضوعات وفقاً لمجموعة المهتمات (كبيرات السن، والمراهقات)، وذلك على ثلاثة أنواع من القراءات، وهي: القراءة المهيمنة، والقراءة المعارضة، والقراءة التفاوضية، وقد وجدت الدراسة أيضاً أن لدى المستجيبات قراءة متوازية ومتباينة، وقدمت نتائج النقاشات في ضوء الاختلاف الديموغرافي.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Communication).

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Knowledge and Human Sciences

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Siti Sakinah Binti Abdul Latif

Signature: .....

Date: .....

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**AUDIENCE RECEPTION STUDY OF KOREAN DRAMA  
AMONG MALAY WOMEN**

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*Alhamdulillah, Praise be to Allah for His guidance and blessings.*

*Much love goes to my loving husband, Muhammad Aiman, my daughter Daania Izzah,*

*my parents, Zainidah Ahmad and Abdul Latif Shaikh Mohamed,*

*my wonderful and noisy siblings,*

*Umar Abdul Aziz, Siti Khadijah, Siti Fatimah, Siti Maryam, Mohammad Zayd, Siti*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The first chapter of this research discusses the background of several important themes related to the study as well as the problem statement, research objectives, research questions and the significance of this research topic.

It has been over ten years since the Korean Wave or *Hallyu* first hit the Malaysian shores with the hit-drama, *Winter Sonata*. The immensity of the impact was further heightened with the introduction of other *Hallyu* cultural products such as music and food. The term ‘Korean Wave’ or *Hallyu* was first coined by a Chinese journalist back in 1997 to describe the popularity of a Korean drama, *All About Love*, that was aired in the republic (Jung, 2009; Shim, 2006, 2008). The term is now inclusive of other South Korean cultural exports such as music, films, games and food.

Soon enough, the Korean Wave enjoyed their newfound popularity in the Asian region, which later spread to the United States, Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Europe (Jung, 2009; Lee, 2012; Oliver, 2012). It is argued that the popularity and widespread influence of Korean media products were amplified by the strategic engagement of social networking sites and interactive approaches to lure fans. The emergence of online streaming websites to view Korean drama for free such as *Gooddrama.net*, *Viki* as well as YouTube has also helped fans to satisfy their cravings for Korean dramas.

Although there are sceptical views of how long the popularity of the Korean wave would last, it seems that the wave would continue for a long time especially in

Malaysia due to its ability to expand into other areas and products (Cho, 2010; Yang, 2012).

## **1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

This section discusses the background of the study to set the tone within the context of Malaysian society, particularly the broadcasting industry, cross cultural popular culture, and the consumption of local audiences of foreign media content. Hence, the organization of this section is as follows: (1) History of Malaysian broadcasting; (2) Cross-cultural media content; (3) Globalization and (4) Korean Drama.

### **1.1.1 History of Malaysian Broadcasting**

In the subsequent paragraphs, the discussion is centred on the evolution of Malaysian broadcasting industry in the context of importation of foreign TV programming.

In the heyday of Malaysian broadcasting, most of the programmes came from Western countries notably Britain and the United States (Karthigesu, 1995; Schiller, 1997). It was not surprising to have that kind of dependency as home grown productions then were almost non-existent. The dependency on Western media content was profound in the early days and there were growing concerns over Western values infiltrating the Malaysian mind that could lead to cultural imperialism (Karthigesu, 1995). Furthermore, the domination of Western media was feared to bring about “global harmonization of culture” (Thussu, 2006: 184) through shared media culture. In those days, television was the main source of entertainment for households, conveniently situated in the living room. Its influence in one’s life is argued to be far-fetched.

Today, Malaysia has seven free-to-air television stations (RTM1, RTM2, TV3, NTV7, 8TV, TV9 and Al-Hijrah), one satellite station (ASTRO) that offers more than

200 channels and several Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) stations such as Hypp TV, MiTV and many more, each offering more than 50 channels. These various channels broadcast programmes in several languages, such as Malay, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Korean, Thai, Arabic and Indonesian, to cater to different niche markets. The inability to understand the foreign language used in foreign drama is a non-issue to local viewers (there are subtitles), as it is the themes, plots, storyline and quality of acting and production that appeal more to audiences (Latiffah, 2005).

The policy and law involving broadcasting and multimedia operations in Malaysia are adaptive to the advancement of the media infrastructure and current needs. The previous Broadcasting Act which only catered to the television and radio mediums was later amended to become the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998, which covers multimedia. It was officially enacted on 1 April 1999 (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2015). This is timely as the population of 29 million Malaysians currently enjoy approximately 97.1% access to television, while broadband household penetration reached 66.6% in 2013, which enabled the viewing of television via IPTV (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2013). Therefore, the source of access to foreign media contents such as Korean dramas is in fact abundant and not limited to the traditional media.

### **1.1.2 Cross-Cultural Media Content**

Fascination among scholars towards the effects of foreign television programmes, especially American television programmes, on indigenous cultures around the world has begun since the 1970s and continues until today (see Ang, 1985; Fujioka, 1999; Goonasekera, 1987; Kang & Morgan, 1988; Katz & Liebes, 1984; Norbaiduri, 2007; Pingree & Hawkins, 1981; Tan & Suarchavarat, 1988; Tan, Tan & Tan, 1987; Tsai,

1970; Weimann, 1984; Willnat, He & Xiaoming, 1997; Yang, Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2008). Among classical studies on the effects of exposure to American soap opera that are often cited are the work by Katz and Liebes (1984) and Ang (1985) on *Dallas*. This popular American soap opera enjoyed phenomenal popularity despite the culture that may be different than the cultural patterns of the Americans. Ang (1985: 2) argues that *Dallas*'s presence and profound influence may be, "regarded as yet more evidence of the threat posed by American style commercial culture against 'authentic' national culture and identities". The global dominance of US-made media had academicians concerned that the popular culture may lead to a "collective identity" (Chua, 2008: 84) among its consumers as the widespread of the American capitalistic nature on popular culture such as television soap opera is creeping into "living rooms across the world" (Thussu, 2006: 145).

However, Thussu (2006) also argues that some scholars may have given too much credit to the media's capability to shape a nation's cultural agenda, as in the early days, Western media content was not that easily accessible, "and, even if available, are not easy to relate to" (p. 184). Having said that, we could not dismiss the fact that television viewers may be in the state of "passive learning" (Krugman & Hartley, 1970: 188) while watching television, and this can further be argued with the postulation of cultivation theory that propose the argument that heavy television viewers tend to believe what they see on television as being true (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan & Jackson-Beeck, 1979).

### **1.1.3 Globalization**

As the globalization movement intensifies, it is assumed that the world is becoming a single society and that the globalization of television (with the help of new technology)

is being steered by the West, particularly America, which carries the idea of capitalism (Straubhaar, 1997). Globalization has also been linked to modernity, as argued by Giddens (1990: 19) the state of which would occur when a “place becomes increasingly phantasmagoric: that is to say locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them”.

The fear of widespread American cultural imperialism and capitalism has led the Malaysian industry to seek for models and exemplars that are more in harmony with our values. The ‘Look East Policy’ not only propelled our direction towards Eastern paradigm for better operation in quality and services, but has also brought about media content in which the values may be more parallel to our values. In fact, the policy reframed our focus on other Asian countries which promote the image of modernity from an Asian perspective (Hamisah & Abdul, 2009; Md Azalanshah & Azizah, 2012).

Globalization has also made possible more than just one global-flow of communication at a time due to the support of multichannel forms of communication made available via satellite and the Internet. Such infrastructure has led to the birth of the concept of contraflow in which media content that traditionally dominated and originated from the West is now gradually competing with sources from non-Western countries. The contraflow is a sign of diminishing domination by the Western media (Thussu, 2006). This phenomenon (contraflow) could be illustrated by the presence of Japanese popular cultural exports in the early 1990s such as manga, anime and J-pop products across the Asian region. Even though Japanese media products have longer history in Malaysia, Korean media products, particularly Korean drama, are significantly catching up. The position of popular culture varies across continents and countries as in some places it has the power to disseminate public opinion and influence people and their attitudes; however, the assumption that the consumption of Korean

drama is similar to Western soap opera does not always stand (Cho, 2005; Creighton, 2009). As Lull (2000: 169) argues:

Popular culture means that the cultural themes and styles originate in everyday environment, and are later attended to, interpreted and used by ordinary people – sometimes, but not always, in very resistant ways – after being commodified and circulated by the culture industries and mass media.

Ang (1985) maintains that popular culture in the form of television serials may appeal to audiences perhaps because it is connected to, “our individual life histories, with the social situation we are in, with the aesthetic to cultural preferences we have developed, and so on” (p. 26). Therefore, it is not surprising if viewers may develop persona towards the characters portrayed in the serials or could identify with the narrative. Apart from that, more recently Ang (2007) further explains that imagination and fantasy are always involved in the consumption of TV drama and of popular culture generally. In that notion, it could be argued that the impact of exposure to TV serials such as Korean drama may have a far-reaching impact on audiences.

#### **1.1.4 Korean Drama**

The first Korean drama aired in Malaysia was the classic piece, *Winter Sonata*. It has been aired three times via TV3, NTV7 and 8TV as well as shown in an animation format on Astro’s channel 715 called Animax. Having seen that successful entry, almost every broadcast channel in Malaysia has started to offer Korean programmes with dedicated slots (e.g.: TV9’s *Saranghae*; 8TV’s Best of East, NTV7’s Korean drama slot). Meanwhile Pay-tv service provider offers dedicated Korean channels, such as KBS World and ONE HD on ASTRO, as well as Channel M and RED, which air Asian movies, including Korean movies on Hypp TV.

A study on a week's worth of programming in 2006 found that among foreign language programmes, Korean programmes enjoyed the largest percentage of total airtime totalling up to seven hours on private terrestrial channels, and one hour 13 minutes on RTM, which is less than 1% of airtime on Malaysian terrestrial television (Md Sidin & Amira Sariyati, 2010).

Given the low airtime available for Korean drama on Malaysian terrestrial televisions, the audiences have to resort to other sources. The more technology savvy users now make use of the Internet to watch their dramas on social media video sharing sites such as YouTube, which is one of the top three websites visited globally after Facebook and Google (Alexa, 2015). Other than YouTube, websites such as *Viki* and *gooddrama.net*, *tonton.com* and *maaduu.com* also allow users to watch streaming Korean dramas for free over the Internet and can be viewed over handphones and tablets, not being limited to only laptops and desktop. These services enable viewers to watch past episodes of television programmes of their choice.

Iwabuchi (2010a) cited Raymond Williams's (1990) concept of "mobile privatization," (p. 411) which promotes consumer technologies (such as the Walkman, VCRs, personal computer) by giving people greater choices and mobility in their media consumption activities. The Nielsen's Global Multi-Screen Report ("More Asians view videos online", 2012) highlights that the number of Asian consumers who view online videos is on the increase, boosted by rising technology ownership and demand for delivery of content anywhere and anytime. In fact, already 50% of the global YouTube views come from mobile devices (YouTube, 2015).

The popularity of Korean dramas has also sparked interest among researchers to study their effects on the audiences' clothing purchases, perception of having fewer children in married life, and marrying a Korean man (see Hsu, 2012; Jin & Jeong, 2010;

Rhee & Lee, 2010; Vu & Lee, 2013). However, as media audience research continues to grow, interest towards the study of active audiences (in which audiences are assumed to be aware and alert of their media usage) simultaneously grow as well, in understanding the complex nexus of the role of the media and audience engagement in the whole process. Often the theoretical frameworks underpin this type of research revolve around uses and gratifications and media reception studies (e.g.: Ang, 1985; Espiritu, 2011; Jiang & Leung, 2012; Katz & Liebes, 1984; Lin & Tong, 2007, 2008; Livingstone, 1990, 1991).

## **1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The development of digital communication technology has enabled users to have more empowering experience through customized media content tailored to their needs and preferences and the opportunity to receive content from decentralized sources (Iwabuchi, 2010b). Globalization has led to an increase in world-wide exchanges of national and cultural resources which further support Marshall McLuhan's "global village" phenomenon, first coined in the 1960s. In the early years, cultural globalization referred to the spread of Western culture to non-Western countries, but these days, the spread of culture from Asia, especially South Korea, is finding an unprecedented acceptance globally (Shim, 2005).

However, Jung (2009) argues that the success of the Korean wave has very little to do with the traditional Asian values but rather attributes it to the increasing transnational and hybrid aspects of the popular culture. Thus, it can be said that, what audiences' desire is not "Korean" culture per se, but a symbol of a capitalist-consumerist future (Chua, 2010). Many popular cultures originating from South Korea

such as pop-music, TV series, films, and fashion, are examples of hybridized cultural manufacturing.

It has also been noted that Korean dramas tend to carry the themes of capitalistic values and strong patriarchal values interlaced throughout the series (Espiritu, 2011; Lin & Tong, 2007) which is at odds with the values of Muslims which encourage *sadaqah* and equality among men and women, despite the constant misconceptions by the Western media. It is also argued that Asian soaps and dramas have also been considered as a site to derive ideas of modernity and capitalist development of the economy (Md Azalanshah & Azizah, 2011). Furthermore, a member of the Egyptian Council of Senior *Ulema* (clergy) has criticised the viewing of soap operas among Muslims as they contain many *Shariah* violations and are “a waste of time” (“Scholar denounce watching of soap opera”, 2013).

Previous research on Korean drama reception study has been conducted within countries that have similar cultural Confucian background or are of geographical proximity such as Japan, China, Taiwan, Singapore and the Philippines (e.g.: Chan & Xueli, 2011; Espiritu, 2011; Lin, 2011; Shim, 2007; Yang, 2012) with the sample being mostly ethnic Chinese or with Christian upbringing, thus leaving a gap in understanding the reception of informants from other ethnicities and religious backgrounds.

Meanwhile in Malaysia, previous studies mostly uncover the historical relationship between Malaysia and South Korea as well as the surface of the Korean wave phenomena in Malaysia (e.g.: Cho, 2010; Chua, 2010; Ha, 2010; Hasmah, 2010; Nor & Zaharani, 2011; Zailin, Khalifah, Ridhuan & Wan, 2013) but do not provide readers with a deeper understanding about the reception of the audiences towards Korean media text and how they react to the content shown to them. Thus, it would be

more beneficial for a research to investigate a phenomenon that would give richer data to enhance researchers' understanding.

Researchers have also recognized the value of studying a genre whose audience is marked by devoted viewing over the years (Perse, 1986) and in that respect, Korean dramas seem to have a strong following among their fans from different media sources including television, streaming online video or VCDs and DVDs (Jiang & Leung, 2012; Lin & Kwan, 2005; Shim, 2006). Therefore, this study will not only focus on Korean dramas that are viewed over the small screen (television) but would also include dramas that are viewed on other platforms to better understand the audience's receptions of the dramas they watch. Furthermore, Hisham and Nuraini (2009) mention that it is timely for Malaysian industry to recognize the importance of gathering qualitative data to garner better understanding of the Malaysian audiences' preferences, perspectives, belief systems, attitudes and behaviours towards screen production, as there has been virtually no major study that has sought the voices of the audiences or viewers in Malaysia.

This reception study utilizes Stuart Hall's (1980) work of encoding/decoding to understand how audiences with different background have different interpretation of Korean drama media content that vary from the intended or 'preferred' reading set by the content provider. Hall (1980) proposed three ways of reading media text which are opposition, negotiated and dominant or preferred readings.

### **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

There are two research objectives for this study. They are as follows:

- To identify the readings of Korean drama media text among Malaysian Muslim women.

- To examine how women of different age groups hold diverse and parallel readings of Korean drama media text.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research tries to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Malaysian women read Korean drama media text?

RQ2: In what ways do women of different age groups hold diverse and/or parallel readings of Korean drama media text?

#### **1.5 DEFINITION OF VARIABLES AND CONSTRUCTS**

The constructs mentioned and used throughout the study are defined as follows:

- **Korean Drama:** The Korean drama referred to in this research is drama originating from South Korea that shows off its ‘foreignness’ in visual elements such as costumes and foreign locations as well as the portrayal of Confucian culture. No particular drama is stated unless mentioned by the respondents (Chua, 2010b; Iwabuchi, 2010b; Kim, 2004).
- **Opposition:** The oppositional reading takes place when the viewer understands the message but chooses to read it in a way opposite to the way in which it was intended; in other words, making outright rejection of the message (Hall, 1980).
- **Negotiated:** The negotiated reading happens when the decoding contains adaptive and oppositional elements whereby the reader accepts some of the narrative and rejects the rest according to their values (Hall, 1980).

- Dominant/Preferred: Dominant or hegemonic reading occurs when the viewer decodes and accepts the connoted message fully as intended by the encoder (Hall, 1980).

## 1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Since the researcher herself is an avid fan of Korean dramas, it would be interesting to investigate the reception of Korean drama among other women who are also avid fans. Currently, most research related to the Korean wave tend to conclude that the popularity of the Korean wave is due to the cultural proximity and shared Confucianism values with other Asian countries (Chan & Xueli, 2011; Chua, 2010; Huang, 2009; Jung, 2009; Kim, 2004; Lin & Tong, 2008; Yang, 2008a; Yang, 2012).

However, Malaysia is a country with the majority of the population being Muslims (60%) thus posing a challenge to the assumption that Confucian culture is a leading factor in formulating cultural proximity (Suh, Cho & Kwon, 2006). Cho (2010) points out that the Malaysian market serves as a gate to the Islamic market, as the country has a reputable position in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) that speaks for over 50 Islamic nations. Subsequently, popular dramas such as *Autumn in My Heart* and *Jewel in the Palace* that have been aired several times in Malaysia have made their way to Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Turkey and Iran.

As the widespread of Korean wave is at its height, it is fertile ground to embark on an empirical study of the phenomenon with the focus on public discourse on the penetration and the breadth and depth of Korean wave in Malaysia, which comes in different offerings, including media text, fashion sense, food, lifestyle and language learning. This study will try to understand the readings decoded by Malaysian Muslim women viewers as Kitzinger (2004) stresses that in order to evaluate the media's role,