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## Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis on Sri Lankan Female Audiences Regarding Psychological Impact of Korean Dramas

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### Abstract

Korean Dramas (K-Dramas) have emerged as a prominent form of entertainment, with various storylines featured in nearly all productions. However, exposure to these narratives can cultivate unrealistic expectations, potentially inducing emotional distress when viewers' anticipations are unmet. This study aimed to explore the psychological experiences of Sri Lankan female viewers, focusing on the emotional responses elicited by general K-Drama consumption. A purposive sample of ten females aged 20-25, with at least six months of K-Drama viewing experience, participated in individual interviews lasting 20-40 minutes. Informed consent was obtained, and interviews were audio-recorded and followed by a debriefing. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis facilitated an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. Findings indicate that viewers engage with K-Dramas for excitement, appealing genres, and emotional processes such as catharsis. Participants also reflected on cultural differences in gender roles and romantic norms between South Korea and Sri Lanka. Overall, the study shows that K-Dramas influence emotional regulation, and personal aspirations, while highlighting the importance of critically engaging with media, knowing its psychological benefits and potential drawbacks

**Keywords:** K-Dramas, female audiences, catharsis, modelling, Sri Lanka

### Introduction

With the rising global success of Korean Dramas (K-Dramas), questions arise regarding the reasons for their popularity, particularly among female audiences. While cultural similarities contribute to their appeal in neighbouring countries such as Thailand, technological advancements have increased accessibility in other regions. Their success is often attributed to both cultural proximity and content availability, especially through streaming platforms, which have facilitated international distribution (Khan et al., 2021). Existing literature has examined the broader psychological effects of K-Dramas. While research remains limited in the Sri Lankan context, Fernando (2022) highlights how K-Dramas have gained traction in Sri Lanka despite limited historical or cultural ties in South Korea. The study notes that their popularity is reshaping local media consumption patterns, and challenging the dominance of other Indian and Western cultural

products. Structural challenges such as cultural resistance are also noted, suggesting that the Korean Wave (Hallyu) functions as a catalyst for cultural change.

The primary theoretical framework guiding this study is Social Learning Theory (SLT), which posits that individuals acquire behaviours through observation, imitation, and modelling, particularly from media figures. Supporting this, Fortunata and Utami (2021) found that even non-addicted K-Drama viewers engaged in modelling behaviours, although 'addiction', being a multifaceted concept in general, in this study lacked operationalisation and was not investigated according to its full dimensions. Yakubovsky (2021) further suggested that female viewers often regard television characters as role models and imitate them, although this study was conducted on the effects of Disney princesses and how viewers perceive themselves based on their exposure to Disney content, rather than K-Dramas.

Additional evidence highlights the role of media in shaping interpersonal relationships. Echols (2022), for example, found that heterosexual couples who watched over seven hours of dramas weekly showed links between media consumption and relationship satisfaction. However, the focus of the study on participants aged 25-34 limits its applicability to younger adults, which is focused on in the current study.

A complementary framework, Cultivation Theory (CT), suggests that consistent and repetitive exposure to television content shapes viewers' perceptions of reality, aligning them more closely with media portrayals than actual social conditions (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). A 20-year meta-analysis by Shanahan and Morgan (1999) confirmed such effects, while also considering whether new media environments weaken or sustain cultivation processes. Critics, however, argue that selective viewing enabled by modern technology complicates these effects, and that methodological limitations may have influenced results.

Altogether, literature suggests that K-Dramas exert a measurable influence on viewers. Yet, as Fernando (2022) demonstrates, Hallyu also intersects with cultural identity and social change. With the research question "what is the psychological impact of Korean dramas on their viewers?", this study aims to explore how K-Dramas have affected Sri Lankan female viewers' emotions, behaviours, and cultural beliefs.

## **Materials and methods**

### *Study design*

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of individuals who watch K-Dramas. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, focusing on the general line of questioning.

### *Study sample*

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy, chosen to ensure the recruitment of participants with specific knowledge of K-Dramas, thereby facilitating the collection of in-depth experiential data. Participants were recruited through personal contacts and an online questionnaire. Inclusion criteria required participants to be Sri Lankan female undergraduates, or recent graduates (within one year of completing their degree), aged 20-25, who had been consistent K-Drama viewers for at least six months. Exclusion criteria comprised individuals who did not fit inclusion criteria. Ten participants were recruited.

### *Study materials*

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method, consisting of five core questions designed to examine the influence of K-Drama consumption on participant attitudes towards romance and their broader life experiences. Questions were rephrased when necessary to ensure clarity, and follow-up prompts were used throughout. Participant recruitment was conducted via a Google Form.

### *Procedure*

The interview design followed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), combining narrative and semi-structured approaches. Participants provided biographical accounts of K-Drama experiences, guided by targeted questions. Interviews lasted 20-40 minutes, were audio-recorded, and accompanied by written informed consent and participant information sheets. Participants recruited online received these documents alongside the questionnaire, and all participants were debriefed afterwards.

### *Data analysis*

This qualitative study adhered to the principles of IPA. Each transcript was fully coded before proceeding to the next, employing a double hermeneutic approach allowing the researcher to interpret participant interpretations while providing phenomenological descriptions of their experiences. Initial analyses were followed by multiple readings to identify and refine global themes for each interview, then consolidated into common themes. Reflexivity was maintained by consistently self-monitoring to ensure interpretations accurately reflected participant perspectives.

### *Ethics*

The study received ethical approval by the Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology Board of Ethics, on behalf of the Liverpool John Moores University, after conduction of a thorough risk assessment.

### **Results**

Excerpts from the interview transcripts are presented to illustrate participant narratives, providing insight into how themes were developed and conclusions drawn. The study identifies two superordinate themes: the emotional rollercoaster of watching K-Dramas, and exploration of cultural differences established by K-Dramas. Each superordinate theme encompasses two distinct subthemes (Table 1, Figure 1).

**Table 1:** Summary of themes

<b>Superordinate theme</b>	<b>Subordinate themes</b>
Emotional rollercoaster of watching K-Dramas	Unlocking emotional release Inspiration to become independent
Exploring cultural differences	Cultural differences in romantic relationships Gender-role-related cultural differences

### ***The emotional rollercoaster of watching K-Dramas***

This theme examines the emotions and desires participants experienced while watching K-Dramas, particularly catharsis and a yearning for independence. All participants reported encountering these responses at least once, highlighting the immersive power of K-Dramas.

#### ***Unlocking emotional release: "If there is a sad scene then I'm going to cry ... according to the scene"***

Catharsis refers to the release and regulation of emotions through engagement with art. Participants reported experiencing affective resonance with K-Drama characters, mirroring their struggles and triumphs, which facilitated emotional relief. This vicarious processing enabled participants to externalise and regulate personal feelings within the safe, structured context provided by the K-Drama narrative. For example: *"If there is a sad scene then I'm going to cry or that according to the scene. So basically... I feel very happy, and my stress is almost released"* (Aue, 65-67), and *"It makes me feel like I'm watching my own romantic journey. ... I feel like, okay, I can do this someday or someone will do this to me someday"* (CJ, 33-35).

#### ***Inspiration to become independent: "It just sort of ... motivated me to stand on my own."***

Several participants reported that exposure to K-Dramas featuring independent female protagonists fostered a desire for greater autonomy in their own lives. Media portrayals, alongside personal experiences, were described as catalysts for developing independence. Behavioural changes were often attributed to identification with strong female role models, with moments of personal transition reinforced by observational learning and vicarious motivation. These discoveries suggest that representations of strength and self-sufficiency in K-Dramas can shape viewers' cognitions and behaviours, influencing both mindset and action. A participant stated this: *"So, I was right out of school ... it just sort of gave me the courage ... but like sort of motivated me to stand on my own. Like you need to go on your own sort of feeling"* (Jandy, 45-48).

### ***Exploring cultural differences***

When reflecting on perceived cultural differences between Korea and Sri Lanka, most participants highlighted distinctions in romantic relationships and gender-role expectations. Their subjective accounts frequently conveyed more favourable attitudes toward Korean cultural representations compared to Sri Lankan norms. These cross-cultural perceptions will be examined in detail within the subthemes.

#### ***Cultural differences in relationships: "In Korean culture, public display of affection is very normal"***

Participants frequently identified public displays of affection (PDA) as a salient cultural distinction between Korea and Sri Lanka. They perceived PDA as normative and socially accepted in Korea, even among adolescents, whereas in Sri Lanka it is constructed as socially inappropriate. Harley (174-178) states: *"in Korean culture, public display of affection is very normal ... even the school children who are in relationships ... in Sri Lankan culture, people sometimes see it as a crime when young people are dating."*

#### ***Gender-role related cultural differences: "this is what a girlfriend should be ... what a boy should be"***

Participants observed that K-Dramas depict romantic relationships with a more egalitarian division of gender-role responsibilities, where both partners contribute to traditionally gendered tasks. In contrast, Sri Lankan cultural expectations were described as rigid and patriarchal, often constraining women to

traditional roles with limited autonomy, restricted opportunities, and minimal agency in decision-making: *“here there’s a lot of this is what a girlfriend should be like ... and this is what a boy should be like whereas I feel like the Korean culture is a bit more open-minded”* (Watson, 175-178)

## **Discussion**

This study examined the psychological impact of K-Dramas on participants, examining their emotional responses, behavioural patterns, and cultural perspectives. Results indicate that K-Dramas function beyond entertainment, influencing the psychosocial development of viewers in significant ways.

The results suggest that K-Dramas elicit both emotional gratification and occasional distress, underscoring their profound psychological impact on audiences. Participants reported a range of affective responses, reflecting the immersive and emotionally charged nature of the narratives, as supported by Ju (2019). However, Ju (2019) relied on US-based Netflix user reviews, limiting cultural comparability and demographic verification. Despite this, the data can still be used to show the existence of similarity between the K-Drama effects on American viewers and Sri Lankan viewers. Through observational learning, viewers empathised with characters and achieved cathartic release, similar to Fathima & Kewalramani (2024), although it should be noted that the study was based on quantitative self-report data, restricting the opportunity for emotional depth and experiential data. Consistent with SLT, repeated observation of emotionally salient behaviours strengthens identification with characters, thereby amplifying positive affective outcomes, which participants emphasised as outweighing negative experiences.

Participants’ perceptions of cultural differences led them to favour Korean societal norms over Sri Lankan ones, particularly regarding romantic relationships and gender roles. Through observational learning, K-Dramas provided models of egalitarian household responsibilities and socially accepted public displays of affection, which participants internalised as progressive behaviours. However, the reality of Korean societal norms often diverges from these portrayals. Hicks et al. (2025), notes that despite formal reforms such as legal bans on sex discrimination, many gender norms remain rooted in their culture. Similarly, Sri Lankan culture reflects these conventional gender expectations. The perspective of CT is highly applicable here, as some viewers’ perceptions of South Korea was more closely aligned with its portrayal in K-Dramas, rather than the actual social conditions. Various participants acknowledged this disparity, but chose to adopt the progressive depictions in K-Dramas as a standard and a framework to guide their own behaviours. As compared with Fernando (2022), K-Dramas may have moderately shaped viewers’ cultural beliefs and use of products, highlighting their role as agents of social learning and attitudinal change.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights that K-Drama significantly influence viewers’ emotions, behaviours, and cultural perspectives, functioning beyond entertainment to shape psychosocial development. Emotional engagement arises from immersive narratives, cathartic experiences, and identification with characters, as suggested by SLT. Supported by CT, participants’ exposure to equal gender roles and socially progressive behaviours further influenced attitudes and relational expectations, indicating that K-Dramas act as agents of cultural transmission, despite differences between television depictions and societal realities.

Future research should examine these effects in larger and more diverse samples, and consider longitudinal designs to assess the persistence of media-induced attitudinal and behavioural changes. Comparative cross-cultural studies could further elucidate how media interacts with local societal norms.

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