Exploring viewer experiences with *sageuk* K-dramas from a parasocial relations perspective

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ABSTRACT

The formulaic content of Korean dramas or *K-dramas* has become more salient with viewers who find agency and opportunities for shared voices, particularly from the *sageuk* genre that integrates elements of history with modern twists of romance. This paper explored the significance of characters presented in sageuk K-dramas in shaping societal roles that resonate with viewer expectations. In doing so, the emergence of parasocial relations from their viewing experiences were examined and the role of peer engagement among viewers that influence the extent of their parasocial relations were analysed. Data were collected from viewer discussions on *KissAsian*, an online streaming website and centred on two formidable sageuk K-drama series; the first being *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo,* and second, *Goblin: The Great and Lonely God* to ascertain viewer reactions and perceptions that correlate with the performances of fictional characters presented to them. Findings revealed that viewers sought gratification from inclusive and familiar settings whilst the prominence of actors in the selected sageuk series as well as communication with other like-minded viewers online were observed to have heightened the extent of viewer engagement and affinity for K-dramas.

Keywords: **K-drama, parasocial relations, audience studies, new media, sageuk**

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INTRODUCTION

The South Korean drama genre is one of the most prominent and proliferating among global television viewers today. *K-dramas* had first penetrated China and Taiwan and continued to perform strongly in the Middle East, European, African and Southeast Asian markets such as Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand (Kwon & Kim, 2013). As discussed by Jung (2009), K-dramas mostly present contemporary fashion trends and emphasise on casting actors that are attractive or multi-talented as seen in the 2009 teenage saga, *Boys over Flowers*. Even so, the richness of authentic Korean culture, landscape and history are not absent from K-dramas. While the international success of modern love story *Winter Sonata* kicked off the global K-drama fever followed by *Autumn in My Heart, All About Eve, My Love Patzzi* and *Full House*, a historical period K-drama or *sageuk* entitled *Jewel in the Palace* also received exceptional reviews (Ruslan & Abu Latif, 2016). In the past, sageuk K-dramas presented elaborate storylines of historical backgrounds that are somewhat related to actual events involving political conflicts and royals of past Korean dynasties. Consequently, sageuk was perceived as masculine and rough, henceforth more appealing to the older generation of viewers due to the excessive glorification of powerful men and kings.

It was not until 2003 that sageuk included a fusion of modernistic romance, action and fantasy plots through the series *Damo*, thus gathering positive feedback from younger audiences ("Korea's fusion sageuk", 2012). Lee (2012) in an analysis of K-dramas confirmed that the offerings of 'fantasy' romance that is pure, loyal and immutable; ideal human relationships particularly among family members that are portrayed as the foundation of true happiness of the protagonist; and ideal characters that symbolised the epitome of masculinity and femininity were widely accepted by viewers. Ho (2010) further argued that viewers can relate with the familiar spins of romanticism in melodramas through expositions of 1) puppy love; 2) first love; 3) possessive love; 4) lost love; 5) parental love; and 6) true love.

The evolving sageuk K-drama: time travelling and superhuman abilities

An illustration of the sageuk evolution can be seen from K-drama series, *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo* (Moon Lovers) that was considered one of the most popular and most expensive productions in Korean television history. It was reported to have sold its broadcast rights to television stations in China despite a Hallyu (Chinese term which refers to Korean wave) ban in the country at USD 400,000 per episode (Omega, 2016a). Subsequently, the producers at Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS) earned approximately USD 8 million in profit. Adapted from a Chinese novel entitled *Bu Bu Jing Xin*, the story unfolds around Ha Jin, an average but troubled young woman who is magically transported from present time to the ancient Goryeo dynasty where she finds herself trapped in the body of another woman, Hae Soo who belongs to a noble family. The new 'Hae Soo' then unintentionally becomes embroiled in a love triangle with two princes, Wook and So who seek for her affection. She eventually chooses So and suffers an ill-fated romance with the prince who has to choose between his responsibilities as King or the love of his life. The cast was led by Korean pop idols such as Lee Joon Gi and IU, as well as Baekhyun from the boyband EXO in a supporting role as Prince Eun—all of whom are popular singers and entertainers (Linaja, 2016; "Moon Lovers", 2018). After a two-month run, the K-drama series ended with one of highest ratings with international viewership in China and the Americas (Omega, 2016b).

Figure 1. The main cast, Lee Joon Gi as *Prince So* and IU *as Hae Soo*

Just a few months after the conclusion of Moon Lovers, tvN of Korea released another successful sageuk series that earned high ratings. Its lead actor, Gong Yoo had just celebrated the success of his action film, *Train to Busan* before he was cast in the series *Goblin – The Great and Lonely God* (Goblin). While the concept of time travel through a solar eclipse was presented in Moon Lovers and had sustained most of its timeline in the historical era, Goblin differed as a deity that lived through the ages and most of its scenes were filmed in the modern times. As a god-like creature, the immortal Goblin (Gong Yoo) is able to conjure magic spells and dwell in paranormal activities. Like the Goblin that is part of actual Korean folklore, Gong Yoo's character is blessed with superhuman abilities to protect others. He seeks a human bride to end his seemingly depressing life in the world, only to fall in love with Eun Tak, played by actress Kim Go Eun.

The Goblin plot spanned several centuries with stunning visuals of both Korea and Canada and topped viewer ratings in just three episodes into the airing of the drama, making it an all-time and most-viewed tvN product (Binahearts, 2017; Jeeelim, 2016).

Figure 2. Kim Go Eun (left) as *Eun Tak* and Gong Yoo (right) as the title character *Goblin*

At the same time, Goblin portrayed several similarities with Moon Lovers where there were flashbacks of historical Goryeo and intertwining of parallel universes with characters that complicated the storylines. The timelines were also similarly extended to show the exponential growth of the romantic relationships featured in both series.

Developing parasocial relations with K-drama characters

It should be noted that the heavy fantasy concepts of both Moon Lovers and Goblin comprise of elaborate secrets and mythologies that took viewers away from the normalcy of romance K-dramas as greater degrees of plot unveiling were experienced. Even though the standard perspective on love demonstrated by both series were predictable and conventional, reviews suggested that the surge of growing interest towards such sageuk can be attributed to the yearning of viewers for male characters that could bring instantaneous stability to their stressful lives and that the love interests presented complement each other in a relationship despite being total opposites (Agency, 2017; Doo, 2017; Kay, 2017). For instance, the Moon Lovers plot portrayed the swashbuckling Prince So as the constant saviour to the distressed female protagonist Hae Soo, similar to the sword-wielding Goblin character to the anguished Eun Tak. However, the heightened female struggle highlighted in both series brings a decline to the overall social status of women and reinforces the Cinderella (damsel in distress) stereotype. Further to this, the fantasy of having powerful men of great stature; one being a prince (So of Moon Lovers) and the latter, a God nonetheless (Goblin) allowed viewers to be wholly gratified by the idea of women being saved. Nevertheless, evidence from preliminary findings and viewer ratings show that audiences are accepting of the outcomes for both instances. Moreover, growth of digital technology allowed viewers of various nationalities access to multilingual subtitles to appreciate these unique storylines and captivating cinematography through streaming websites and online apps, amplifying the impact of both sageuk K-dramas worldwide.

With regard to the intangible connections between viewers and the fictional K-drama characters discussed earlier, Horton and Wohl (1956) argued that this relationship or 'parasocial relations' is known to take place between viewers and characters on television. This illusionary experience refers to the viewer who 'interacts' with the character mentally and supports or shares the same cause pursued by the character. Nevertheless, the viewer also understands that the parasocial relations is limited to a non-existent, one-way relationship and often conceptualises it more as a long-term identification with the plot, storyline, ethics or principles that are relatable to the personal life of the viewer (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). This concept is very much related to the use of new media today, where discussions with like-minded viewers via online media platforms could increase the likelihood of parasocial relations that involves compensatory interaction and relationship between implicated participants (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Therefore, the consecutive sageuk successes of Moon Lovers and Goblin are significant and cannot be ignored as the current studies on parasocial relations affecting viewers of K-dramas is relatively limited.

For the purpose of this paper, the influence of sageuk K-drama characters in shaping social roles and managing expectations of viewers is explored. The paper will also examine the elements of parasocial relations that emerge during viewing experiences of sageuk. Finally, the study analysed the extent of parasocial relations among viewers in their peer engagement. In doing so, the paper identified and located discussions of viewers concerning sageuk K-dramas Moon Lovers and Goblin on the online streaming portal, *KissAsian*. KissAsian is a website and app that provides free access to Asian TV drama series and films with English subtitles where pertinent data was collected from the comments section for analyses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previously, scholars have determined that *parasocial relations* are one-sided communications and /or interactions that occur between viewers and performers, but are still considered a form of relationship (Giles, 2002; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). In their earliest work on parasocial relations, Horton and Wohl (1956) proposed that the ability of the viewer to interpret and 'mindread' the social encounter or emotions experienced in the performance allows them to be 'one' or very close to the performer. In addition, Theran, Newberg, & Gleason (2010) maintained that celebrities provide positive ideals to young media consumers despite not having physical contact. Identifying with this paradigm means that they may face lesser risk of rejection as compared to a role model who is encountered on a face-to-face basis even when there is limited information about the media figure. This connection is further magnified when the performer possesses qualities that are admirable, which include values that respect the familial tie, common to the Asian roots of traditions which are frequently discussed in terms of K-drama content. Another common denominator regardless of gender in K-dramas is setting expectations on beauty standards that would somewhat affect viewer perception on their own personal worth.

  Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973) contended that parasociability is an extension of the Uses & Gratifications (U&G) model where viewers are selective in their use of media to fulfil certain needs and social functions. Present U&G studies highlighted that the growth of new media had enabled multiple access to information and media content for viewers to attain greater recall and enhanced identification with constructs presented to them (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). In the same way, relevancy of the K-drama spectrum is closely related to the frequency of media use among viewers that further enforces the 'parasocial relationship' posited by Horton & Wohl. Additionally, when viewers invest access time immersing themselves in a drama series, tragedies such as the deaths of main characters would cause genuine shock and grief among its loyal viewers as can be seen in the example of long-running American production of *Grey's Anatomy* (Madison, Porter, & Greule, 2016). However, the empathy of viewers is not limited to despair, as they find themselves as part of the story that celebrates joyous occasions when it is present during the viewing experience. Although studies on parasocial relations in K-dramas *per se* is still in its infancy, there is some agreement that the indirect outcomes of viewing them have had a similar effect. Lee (2015) proposed that viewer empathy for the characters presented in K-dramas would shape their own social identity and behaviour towards others, as presented in the sageuk entitled *Arang and the Magistrate.* Aside from unrequited love, the attainment of justice is often demanded and evokes the desire for fair play among viewers. Hence, diligent following of K-dramas can be attributed to the desire to achieve this prevailed justice. While the views presented in K-drama series that are often disjointed with impunities and corruption of social power, the narratives actively entice the viewer to sustain the parasocial relations they have with their favourite fictitious characters and re-centre around love.

  Other works have discussed how parasocial relations could combat loneliness, increase feelings of inclusion and identification with specific issues that cause both joy and distress for the viewer (Wang, Fink, & Cai, 2008; Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Sundar and Limperos (2013) further deliberated that viewers are able to exchange information with others with the advent of internet technology and online interactivity. The practice is apparent among viewers with the desire to belong to imagined communities and shared voices; resulting in selective media use habits in order to 'escape' their mundane existence. Another contributing factor to the widespread acceptance of K-dramas is the forms of cultural hybridity that are globally relevant. Scholars have observed the concept of cultural proximity among viewers in

their parasocial relationship with Asian dramas that do away with unidirectional flows from the West and recognise distinct regional patterns based on shared heritage of 'Asian sentiments', ultimately denouncing media imperialism (Straubhaar, 1991; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). Struggles on personal relationships and romance presented in K-dramas are more believable and realistic to Asian viewers due to the relatability of regional ties and this helps viewers build coping mechanisms to deal with these issues more efficiently (Schulze, 2013; Iwabuchi, 2008; Kim, 2008). The commonalities among viewers lead to homogeneity and spans across other nationalities. This 'Third Space' as discussed by Appadurai (1996) anticipates and exercises moral imagination which is the epitome of Asian-ness and viewer unification.

In summary, the importance of exploring K-dramas particularly in the sageuk genre is in highlighting the role of content creators in building relationships with viewers through impactful fictional characters. From this perspective, the study assumed that K-drama viewers have significant dependency on their media use to fulfil and validate their own identity gaps but does not undermine the fluidity of the viewers to create conversational currency when establishing communal experience with others.

METHODOLOGY

This paper examined the influence of K-dramas and the development of parasocial relations of viewers with characters presented, hence the evidence gathered was compared to the dimensions of parasocial relations and forms of parasociability that emerged. While television is the main channel that introduced global viewers to K-dramas as positioned in the introduction of the paper, the high ratings achieved do not provide organic feedback from viewers. This paper recognises that viewers today use the internet as a platform to consume entertainment content, therefore they are able to access K-drama content on the online drama streaming website, KissAsian. For the purpose of this qualitative study, viewer feedback and interactivity and discussions of the dramas were observed.

The criteria of South Korean dramas, *fantasy, historical* and *romance* were identified and the search bar on KissAsian on the website allowed data collection to be made on the intended sageuk series. The first unit of analysis is the K-drama entitled M*oon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo* (Moon Lovers*)* that received an overwhelming 12.2% ratings overseas (Omega, 2016b). It was aired on television from 29 August 2016 to 31 October 2016. As at the time of data collection, on KissAsian alone, this sageuk has had 22.5 million views.

The second unit of analysis is the sageuk K-drama entitled *Goblin: The Great and Lonely God (Goblin)* released on 2 December 2016 and concluded on 21 January 2017. It had surpassed favourites such as *Legend of The Blue Sea* and *Descendants of the Sun* with debut ratings of 12.5% (Jeeelim, 2016). Goblin has had 27.3 million views on KissAsian at the time of data collection.

Conversations of viewers on the final episodes for each K-drama series were accumulated and this method was considered unobtrusive as it focused on the responses that can be located in the respective Moon Lovers and Goblin 'comments' section. Data had already existed on the topic during the period of data collection, therefore the scope of the coding was centred on extracting all comments by viewers on the final episodes of both K-dramas. The Atlas.ti data analysis software was utilised to organise the data retrieved to code significant and emergent quotations. Upon the completion of coding, the study arranged the quotations into themes until the responses collected from KissAsian reached a saturation point in terms of categories that can be generated (Lee, Woo & Mackenzie, 2002).

The paper then proceeded to deploy a thematic analysis where a systematic and sophisticated examination of the empirical materials would be able to offer a holistic picture of the issue at hand, thus unveiling multiple problems and display it in all of its complexity as discussed by Creswell (1998, p.17). The data included participants' text posts in the selected comments sections, individually or in reply to comments by other participants. The coding does not select specific or individual participants but deployed inductive coding as recommended by Schreier (2012) where emergent themes should be included as sub-codings. This method is also known as a qualitative content analysis as highlighted by Cho & Lee (2014), where the data analysis and summary rely on examining the practices of immersivity by viewers and their affectedness towards the characters, plots and storylines that enhance the reflexivity of cultural awareness and heightened expectations in the practice of relationships and socialization.

Subsequently, the reporting is based on the flow of issues observed within the collected data and is focused on attitudes and behaviours of viewers and their networking and interconnectedness with others on the KissAsian platform. Additionally, several quotations were selected verbatim or paraphrased accordingly to illustrate the significance of the themes that are highlighted in this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of analysis identified 22 themes. Due to the limitations and scope of the paper, only three omnipresent themes from the coding process were prioritised to achieve the research objectives. The study found that the data skewed more towards the main categories of *Attachment* at 16.5%, followed by *Ideals* at 10.4% and inclinations towards *Romance* at 7.8%. Sub-codings and emergent themes are also identified and these are organised and summarised accordingly in the following sections.

K-drama characters in shaping social roles and managing expectations of viewers

<u>Charismatic Characters</u>
The positive reinforcement of romance in the sageuk genre is a consistent theme in both K-drama series that were examined. While there were earlier concerns about glorifying the Cinderella stereotype and clichéd damsel-in-distress storylines, it was found that the viewers lauded the poignant idea of undying love presented by the strong-willed male K-drama character, Prince So in Moon Lovers. His character is relatable to the viewers and can be personified as strengthening the human spirit. While there was a great deal of disappointment in the tragic finale, viewers on KissAsian complemented the lead character, Prince So in fighting to keep the memory of love alive despite not having a chance to be together with his love, Hae Soo due to the differences between them.

> *"He is such a good example and lesson (At least for me) you never ever have to give up on your love, even when you encounter hardships..because time heals. You have to love unconditionally, to give your love fully and to live every moment to the fullest, so that you can never regret anything."* - Vivi.E

Participant *G5* expressed similar sentiments about the K-drama Goblin that presented the amazing chemistry between the lead actor and actress, who are known to have had good track records in other past romantic K-dramas. G5 further believed that the integrity of the character,

the Goblin as a guardian to be always protective of the female protagonist, Eun Tak, should be exemplified by other men, instead of belittling women.

Exposition of Love

The idea of eternal love mainly centred on the extended timeline and various obstacles and challenges encountered in the Moon Lovers K-drama. Outcomes in real life may fall short of the construct presented as viewers may not have the luxury of time nor distresses of ancient eras as illustrated in the series but viewer *Jeyempee* is receptive towards the idea of true love presented that mainly illustrates unrelenting trust and loyalty even in modern times.

> *"The finale shows how strong their love for each other is, because no matter what time it is, their hearts still belong to each other. Whether past or present it is only Wang So and Hae Soo. Both of them love each other despite of the era or dimension. They are still connected, their hearts beat for each other, no matter what happens"* – Jeyempee

Further to this, viewers agreed that the progression from puppy love to lost love as proposed earlier by Ho (2010) is the benchmark of true romance. The Goblin series featured two couples, Wang Yeo and Kim Sun (Sunny) as well as their guardians, the Goblin himself and his bride Eun Tak whose eternal loved lasted several centuries, from the historic Goryeo era until both couples were reunited in modern life as reincarnated souls who re-discover their original identities then part again due to inevitable circumstances. Viewer *HIGHLIGHT05*, observed that the feeling of love despite being apart for thousands of years and put through various hardships is expected of the characters. In addition, another viewer, *green bunny* believed that such a detailed storyline of their undying love gave a more satisfying ending to the series, despite being a sorrowful one.

> *"Oh and I just looooooooove how Sunny and Wang Yeo left together for their next life, it was truly a gift! And when they come back and had absolutely no more painful complications holding them back, what a truly happy ending! I'm still reeling from that kiss!! Otteoke!!"* - green bunny

Storytelling

The viewers found Goblin, in particular, to be well-produced and had set a high standard in storytelling compared to its K-drama predecessors. Despite being adapted from Korean history and folktales for entertainment and infused with modern romantic relationships, viewers agreed that the K-drama was innovative in combining history and modernity as well as in integrating Eastern and Western culture as the forefront of the show which should be a benchmark for other television productions.

> *"Words cannot describe how much I've enjoyed this drama from start to end without skipping an episode, a scene no not nothing. This drama just set the bar so high on what I want in a Korean drama! No white van of doom or classic amnesia no this is just PURE RAW ORIGINALITY!"*- Haleemah Eesah

> *"This drama was so beautiful. The story was so amazing and different, the cinematography was beautiful, the characters were well written and had a good development, the lines, the dialogue were poetic, the OST was on point, the cast was perfect. I have no words. Goblin was an ambitious show and set up really high standards and expectations for upcoming dramas."* - Ponferrada

While the viewers found themselves not only amused with the authenticity of Korean history and folktales discussed, they also acknowledged that the value of life is also an important element in human relations as presented in the series. Despite the magical beings and mythical creatures that were featured in sageuk, nothing compares to a reality check as pointed out by *littlefoot83,* as demonstrated by this credible viewpoint.

> *"Despite being set in a modern, fantasy setting, many of the problems of the characters are very..HUMAN..thus incredibly relatable. A twenty something year old wants his credit card, a woman is trying to keep her small business going, a man needs a house, another needs companions, and a girl needs to figure out a way to go to college and bear with a family who resents."* - littlefoot83

Additionally, a viewer named *Conan Odegawa* believed that the characters had brought enjoyment to the entire watching experience. There are important moral values and ethics that were demonstrated by the characters in Goblin that attempted to do more goodness and these can be passed down to future generations, which *Conan Odegawa* admits to likely do.

Empowerment

While not as common as desired, aside from the male characters, the female characters were seen as revered and respected as decision makers. This was highlighted by a viewer of Moon Lovers who observed that female empowerment was visible despite having a majority of male characters in the series. Even though Hae Soo always faces challenges and derailment in her intimate relationship with Prince So, her distinguished role as a beauty advisor and lady-in-waiting in the Royal Palace demonstrated that her opinions matter to the royals whom she counselled or encountered regardless of gender.

> *"WRITERS, I APPLAUD YOU FOR CREATING A SHOW THAT"S SUPPOSEDLY CENTERED AROUND A KINGDOM RULED BY MEN BUT HAVING A WOMEN RUN THE SHOW."* - JOONGKIxJIHYO

This is also apparent in Goblin, where Eun Tak is the only one with the power to summon the almighty Goblin and change his fate on Earth, therefore his availability to her is dependent on her.

Emergent parasocial relations during viewing experience

Emotional attachment

As explained by participant *LeightonXRose*, it is clear that a drama series is considered successful and relatable when viewers become attached to the characters, particularly in the case of Moon Lovers that spent a great deal of episodes unveiling the strengths and weaknesses of the characters played by the lead actor and actress. The emotional attachments are salient to the familiar feelings of acceptance and rejection that are also experienced by the viewers on a personal level. LeightonXRose was unable to move on, similar to her own personal relationships.

> *"You know you have found an incredible show when you get so attached to the characters that when the show ends, you feel like a piece of your heart is ripped away. I give this series an 11/10".* – LeightonXRose

Moon Lovers also presented an ideal outlook on relationships that resonated with its viewers. While the central idea was about romance, a viewer found that the emotions nurtured in following the show presented how romance series or stories should be unveiled to audiences.

> *"For me the ending is so so perfect and emotionally charged..a respectful ending for such an amazing and emotional drama, that portraits such strong and sorrowful love.. Many people commented that they would love to see another season. i would too, but IF is at least good as this one."* - ZenaByunnie

In the case of Goblin, it was observed that viewers found that the storyline was relevant to them on a personal basis and affected them tremendously, so much so that it was compared to being physically in love with a person because participant *cookie chan* was engulfed in heavy emotional turmoil as an ardent fan of the series.

> *"Yes, I fell in love. I fell in love with this drama and I can't believe it ended (with a beautiful ending) and oh my God I couldn't stop my tears for so long. It has been a memorable and emotional rollercoaster filled with happiness, sadness, laughter, tears and suspense. I think most of us can agree that this drama was a great finish for 2016 and it will be forever in our hearts."* - cookie chan

This was concurred by participant *EunkieKoala* who believed that during the three months spent following the Moon Lovers series, the tragedy that befell the ill-fated lovers in the series had put *EunkieKoala* through pain and suffering especially during its final episode. *EunkieKoala* further mused that viewers were further tested and tormented at the ending when the two lovers parted ways.

Immersive Viewing

Another Goblin viewer, *Nora Sheffield* felt transported into the small screen experience of the series, having regarded the main characters of the lead actor and actress as himself or herself. The attachment and intimacy experienced had risen to another level, where the beautiful cinematography of the series had embedded its random and trademark visuals of the Korean love story as part of the viewer's life.

> *"I cried bittersweet tears, my heart lurched and faltered, and crashed in despair. It soared from the depth, striving for love in the bright blue sky. I'll never see a maple leaf the same again. I'll never forget when I stand in a library and smell the ancient scrolls of eons past. "*- Nora Sheffield

As cited by Madison et al. (2016), frequent viewing of such addictive series could give a sense of over-attachment that would incite negative emotions such as anger and dissatisfaction when their expected gratification is not achieved. According to participant *Snehal Phalav*, the Moon Lovers K-drama had set such high standards for the viewers on love and life that it had relegated other future K-dramas as less favourable. What *Snehal Phalav* had not realised is that in the process of immersive viewing of the series, the plot that unfolded had become too personal and relatable to the point that it left a major gap in feelings that was never felt before due to the unfavourable tragic ending. This undoubtedly implies that while romance concepts are common, there is feigned intimacy in K-dramas that create forms of dependency towards characters that viewers rely on for strength.

Icon

The viewers' decision in media use with regard to K-dramas can be attributed to the reviews and volume of media coverage. Additionally, some viewers highlighted that K-dramas rely on the casting of celebrities as argued by viewer *YongGrey*. Understandably, renowned K-pop idols are needed to pique the interest of young viewers in order to make a connection to sageuks. Not only would these idols amass a large number of viewers due to their existing large pool of fans, their followers would also be anticipating more airtime. Aside from having Byun Baekhyun from the male pop band EXO to play the part of Prince Eun, Princess Woo Hee, another supporting character in the series, was played by a member of the female group called Girls Generation, SeohHyeun or better known as Yoona.

> "Nah, *I don't think the story is boring. It's a unique drama with action, thriller, and romance. It's really great and the cast are spectacular! And you are not a fan of Yoona, perhaps you will become a fan of Song Yoona (if I'm right), she's a gem, man! She's magnificient! "*– YongGrey

Similarly, Moon Lovers received much spotlight and attention from viewers even before its official launch. Although the discourse in KissAsian centred on the characters and plots of the Moon Lovers drama series, casting renowned Korean stars with massive fan bases was imperative in enhancing viewer attitudes towards love and relationships due to their established popularity and good looks. As highlighted by participant M5, this pre-established parasocial relations between viewers and the stars of the drama further amplified its effect as highlighted, who found that casting of *Lee Joon-Gi,* one of the earliest K-pop idols who is also currently venturing into Hollywood, very fitting for the drama. Lee was paired up with young K-pop singer, IU (formerly known as Lee Ji-Eun).

> *"This show changed my perspective of love many times recklessly, recreating the feeling of love I never felt before. Casting was excellent, screenplay was excellent, definitely a permanent one in my library"* - M5

> *"Oh god where do I start? First this drama was purely amazing, I had read reviews about it before starting (and you already know what the Korean public were saying) but I still had my mind up on watching it because I love Lee Jun Ki and I am a fan of IU's music!* -momo

Another of facet of parasocial relations with K-dramas is that the viewers feel the need to measure the success of a series based on the overall casting of famous Korean idols. This was apparent in a majority of responses from viewers of Goblin where the general opinion was that the selected Korean celebrities with proven and impressive track records were significant to the K-drama success, such as Gong Yoo, Lee Dong Wook and Kim Go Eun.

> *"Now it will be hard for me to be entertain by other upcoming dramas because of my newly found expectations in kdrama and I wish some drama can achieve it. THIS PROVEN THAT THERE ARE FAMOUS ACTORS, YOU CANT MAKE A GREAT DRAMA WITHOUT EXPLORING IDEAS AND ACTORS"* - Rose Anne Lirio.

Extent of parasocial relations among viewers through peer engagement

There are significant and concrete evidences of K-dramas playing a major role in the viewers' receptiveness and adaptation of the transnational culture due to its close proximity with real-life situations. Subsequently, viewers who choose to participate in the positive environment of KissAsian with other viewers who shared mutual feelings about romance and the characters portrayed filled their void with positive and mutual feelings about life. This in turn affected their personal feelings, social ties as well as their outlook on relationships. Congruent to this,

are the discussions by Caughey (1984) and Madison et al. (2016) on the function of 'rehearsal' in parasocial interactions where compensation of sociability through K-dramas and online streaming strengthen their relationship with the characters in the imaginary world.

A viewer, *Marie Chris* found that streaming the series online for international viewers helped boost their feelings of attachment buoyed by the subtitling efforts by KissAsian and participation in the online fan community of Goblin.

> *"This is one of the most wonderful Korean dramas that was ever made.*
> *Thank you Kissasian for providing us the subs :). Thank you for all the people who have been working hard so that we, the international fans can understand their language through the subs, you are the best! This drama made me go crazy, laugh, scream, cry and and fell in love. Even though this is a fiction, thank you for making me happy by just watching this awesome drama. Yes, i FANGIRLED alot. Who would not be? The characters had a great acting skill and with their unique charm, we the viewers got hooked on this drama"* - Marie Chris

Several viewers found that engaging with other fans is important to stay updated with K-dramas. It is a positive yet virtual companionship in which they found that the discussions provided them a sense of inclusion and belonging with each other. They had even used significant elements of the show to share their feedback with one another, such as the metaphor of tea-drinking with the Grim Reaper on Goblin that symbolises death, where they transition between the world and their afterlife and have paradise or purgatory decided for them.

> *"For everyone else that was along on the ride with this show... I hope we all find out happy endings and when it's time to drink our final tea with our Reapers, may we be ready to go after living our best lives"* -Tracy Rodell

While the Hallyu Wave is making a significant presence worldwide, not everyone from the viewer's social circle is receptive of K-dramas. This is an aspect that is experienced especially by viewers from non-Korean speaking countries. Therefore it is assumed that the peer connection that emerged from the online viewing of Moon Lovers as a form of active media use can be attributed to loneliness but can also be remedied with the support of other unseen yet virtually present viewers.

> *"and to all of you guys in EVERY comment section of EVERY episode <33. Thank you all. LOL SERIOUSLY! You guys made me feel like I'm not alone watching the damn thing. I couldn't spazz to anyone else but yall!!* - ikimchi

DISCUSSION

Jung (2009) and Iwabuchi (2002, p.17) had earlier concurred that while the elements of the Korean wave are vastly distributed, they are embraced in varied ways by international communities especially its ability to mobilise viewers into a more urban sociocultural position through the meanings presented, particularly in K-dramas. It can be summarised that the viewer experiences of K-dramas is prevalent in shaping their principles and beliefs on their relationships and personal lives. The innovation and infusion of the fantasy and sageuk genres breaks free from the stereotypes of Asian romance dramas but then again upholds traditional views of romance; thus fulfils the social roles of media and manages viewers' expectations, such in the case of Moon Lovers and Goblin.

The strength of character development was given much attention by the viewers, and while there is a dominance of male chivalry in both K-dramas, Moon Lovers had also taken into account the importance of women's social roles, hence reversing female stereotypes in media content. Moreover, there were significant empathy and one-sided communication among viewers who have devoted heavy emotional investments in the series considering the persistent turmoil and despair that ensued (Horton & Wohl 1956; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Madison et al., 2016). Parallel to the parasocial relationship built in the minds of viewers, the characters are seen as people that they are familiar with, hence increased empathy towards the characters and aggravations are observed when their gratifications are not met. As a result, this greatly affects their reactions towards the tragic and sad endings that were featured in Moon Lovers.

Similarly, the innovative storyline and the beautiful cinematography of Goblin had also set new heights for future television productions and increased the level of parasociability among viewers, particularly its relatability to everyday life and average people who desire to immerse themselves in magical and majestic storylines. In addition to their personal loyalty to the celebrities themselves, viewers also place great care and emphasis on the talent and originality of the production in their evaluation of K-dramas. The findings are consistent with a study by the University of Michigan and the University of Calgary on young adults that revealed while 90% of viewers felt a strong attraction to a celebrity, 65% felt strong attachments to multiple celebrities, and 30% even wished to be the celebrity they admired (Young, 2016).

The viewing experience of sageuk K-dramas enhances the camaraderie and sense of belonging between like-minded viewers. This however also highlights the element of loneliness which requires social inclusion. The cognition of K-drama representation in media is further enhanced when a character in the series provides a positive and central role to the placement of the 'product' or in this case, the construct of idealistic characters that exist in parallel universes (Ruggiero, 2000; Knoll et al., 2015). Further to this, the study can be correlated to a study by Kim (2016) who argued that feigned interest in Korean dramas arises despite having similar local content because there is affinity among most viewers who are likely to share their thoughts online. This online engagement is missing in their local media due to mockery and ridicule for elements of the Hallyu wave that is frequently related to weakness, empathy and unrealistic stories. In the case of Moon Lovers and Goblin, viewers tend to share the feelings or feedback with others, rather than just remain in a one-sided relationship with the characters they look up to in the K-dramas.

CONCLUSION

Kim and Omerbasic (2017) found that the imagined virtual communities of K-drama viewers are built around mediascapes that reflect real lives even though viewers are not necessarily from Korea or have ever been to Korea, but is able to reproduce and comment on Korean texts. This was agreed by Walsh (2014) whose argument centred on developing societies that are willing to share cultural properties and assumptions of Korean productions due to 'psychic distance' that conceptualises the marketing of products (such as K-dramas) to distant markets through consistent and attractive information flows and its assimilation into local cultures.

The theory on parasocial relations by Horton and Wohl (1956) has offered viewers of media content a substitute for the lack of sociability. In many cases, the 'parasocial' reflects the normal social milieu that is illustrated and validated by characters in the media content viewed. While most viewers who experience parasocial relations are challenged by physical aversion and loneliness, the discussions on online platforms provide an amplified opportunity for sociability. This connectedness through diverse spaces is invested in promoting and encouraging streaming and affinity networking over dramas such as those shown by KissAsian (Oh, 2013). The findings from this present study recommend future research on new media and social networking and their influence on the strong K-drama following through the dimensions of parasocial relations and parasocial interactions with Korean idols to ascertain the extent of media use by viewers.

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