

Creating a New South Korean Style Beyond Hybridity: An Analysis of Why South Korean Dramas Appeal to Americans

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Extending cultural hybridity theory, this study examines how and why Americans are drawn to K-dramas. An analysis of 4,980 comments by Americans on two popular K-drama sites in the United States reveals that K-dramas' global appeal lies in their skillful blend of various subgenres and elements, effective execution, and incorporation of emotional appeal and unique South Korean perspectives and values into the narrative. This study labels this phenomenon *South Korean dramatization*, arguing that it engages American audiences with K-drama narratives and plays a crucial role in increasing K-dramas' appeal and reception.

Keywords: South Korean drama, cultural hybridity, South Korean dramatization, transnational media consumption, genre conventions

The rise of South Korean dramas (hereafter K-drama) has created a notable phenomenon in terms of the transnational circulation and consumption of local media products. For example, in the United States, 18 million people watch K-dramas as of 2021 (Daehan Drama, 2021). The viewership of K-dramas in the United States doubled between 2019 and 2021 (MacDonald, 2022). The recent popularity of K-dramas in the United States may signal a complex and intriguing process of transnational media flow between different cultures.

Despite worldwide recognition of K-dramas, it remains unclear how and why Western audiences are attracted to them, given their limited linguistic, historical, and cultural proximity to the West. Although cultural familiarity plays a role in the consumption of K-dramas among certain global consumers (Azeharie, 2023), local specificity and uniqueness may be an important part of K-dramas' appeal and reception in the West.

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Several studies on K-drama have attended to the theory of *cultural hybridity* (e.g., Hartzell, 2020; Lee, 2018), which posits that hybridization of culture occurs as local cultural producers interact and negotiate with global forms, mixing foreign cultural characteristics with their own cultural traits (Bhabha, 2015). However, prior studies have focused on examining the visible mix between the foreignness of the imported culture and familiarity with an audience's own culture. Research has not paid enough attention to the nuanced and complicated interconnection between foreignness and familiarity. Furthermore, extant research has not examined how blending foreignness and familiarity helps create a new identity for the local culture. This study argues that one of the major reasons for K-dramas' global popularity is their unique South Korean style, which is created by the complex interworking of foreignness and familiarity.

Extending cultural hybridity theory, this study focuses on audience perceptions and examines how and why Americans are drawn to K-dramas and what they think about their hybrid nature. This study posits that the skillful blend of multiple subgenres, strong emotional appeal, and unique South Korean perspectives and values in K-drama narratives creates a "new South Korean style." This study labels this phenomenon *South Korean dramatization*, arguing that it engages American audiences with K-drama narratives and plays a crucial role in increasing K-dramas' appeal and reception despite cultural and linguistic differences. This study analyzed 6,108 comments posted by American fans on two popular K-drama sites in the United States (DramaBeans and MyDramaList) in 2022.

South Korean Drama

Since 1997, the rapid spread of South Korea's cultural products has been termed the "Korean Wave" (Jin & Yoon, 2017). The Korean Wave first gained traction in East Asia but soon spread across the globe, including the United States, Latin America, and Europe, in mid-2011 (Jin & Yoon, 2017). Today, there is little doubt about South Korea's cultural influence across the world. The global clout of South Korean pop culture includes South Korean TV dramas, movies, video games, and K-pop.

Since the last decade, K-dramas have gained huge global traction, creating a new cultural phenomenon in the international media market. A 2022 survey across 26 countries found that 36% of the global audience considered South Korean dramas very popular in their countries (Statista, 2023). Two-thirds (66%) of global audiences felt that K-dramas were generally popular even outside K-drama fan groups (Statista, 2023).

In 2011, streaming provider Hulu introduced K-dramas into the United States; other streaming providers, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, soon followed suit (Ju, 2020). In particular, Netflix has helped K-dramas become a global boom by showcasing various K-drama series (Littleton & Layne, 2022). K-drama is remarkably increasing its territory in the United States by appealing to diverse ethnic and racial groups beyond Asian Americans.

Explaining Transnational Media Consumption

Transnational media consumption has been an important research topic for decades; however, little is known about how global audiences experience foreign media in their everyday lives. Media scholars

exploring transnational media consumption have examined how cultural proximity and differences explain global audiences' reception and understanding of foreign media content (Glynn, 2013; Straubhaar, 2007).

Cultural Proximity

One group of scholars has focused on the claim that global audiences prefer foreign media that "are closest, most proximate or most directly relevant to them in cultural and linguistic terms" (Adriaens & Biltereyst, 2012, p. 554). For instance, when audiences are familiar with foreign media's genres, formats, and content, they are more likely to consume foreign content and appreciate its value. Scholars have tried to explain this phenomenon with the notion of *cultural proximity*, which refers to "the tendency to prefer media products from one's own culture or the most similar culture possible" (Straubhaar, 2003, p. 85). De Sola Pool (1977) first proposed this concept; later, Straubhaar (2003) refined it with more theoretical clarity.

K-drama's popularity in Asia is often attributed to cultural proximity (Yang, 2012). K-dramas tend to emphasize Confucian values—such as family importance, respect for elders, and harmonious relationships with others—and East Asians connect more with K-dramas because they share the same Confucian cultural values (Huang, 2009).

However, cultural proximity is not enough to explain why some Western audiences are attracted to East Asian media content because there is little commonality between the West and the East in terms of language and culture. In particular, South Korea differs significantly in cultural traits compared with the United States. For instance, the United States prioritizes individualistic and practical values, whereas South Korea values collectivistic and relational values (Yoo, Subba Rao, & Hong, 2006). Thus, K-dramas' emphasis on collectivistic values (such as family importance and respect for elders) could hinder some Americans from enjoying K-dramas.

Cultural Hybridity

Although Americans in general do not feel comfortable with K-dramas because of cultural and language differences, several statistics surprise us. K-drama audiences in the United States are largely not of South Korean descent. Audiences from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Caucasians, African Americans, and Hispanics, are becoming dedicated fans of K-dramas. According to a 2019 survey, Caucasians (24%), Latinos (18.9%), and African Americans (9.1%) enjoy K-dramas, although Asian Americans (29%) rank at the top (Daehan Drama, 2021).

These statistics indicate that cultural proximity does not satisfactorily explain K-dramas' popularity in linguistically and culturally different societies. Therefore, this study attends to the theory of *cultural hybridity*. Iwabuchi (2002) asserts that blurring the boundaries between foreign and local makes Japanese manga more attractive and acceptable to Western viewers. Japanese anime/manga mixes universal story themes and unique Japanese cultural aspects. Similarly, many K-dramas blend traditional Asian and modern Western cultures. In short, the combination of familiarity and difference may further increase transnational media's global reach and appeal. As Kraidy (2005) asserts, hybridity plays a crucial role in media transnationalization.

Likewise, the combination of familiarity and difference may further increase K-dramas' global reach and appeal. K-dramas negotiate unique South Korean cultural traits while interacting with global forms and standards (Shim, 2006). For example, K-dramas have learned the typical cinematic conventions and frames of Hollywood, Japan, and Hong Kong (Hartzell, 2019). "The use of familiar genre codes in K-drama gives global audiences multiple places to find familiarity, and the melodrama structure helps viewers follow the story, even with barriers of language and culture" (Hartzell, 2019, p. 93). At the same time, many K-dramas highlight the unique cultural traditions of South Korea. The result of hybridization is the creation of something that is distinct yet familiar enough to be understandable to diverse audiences (Ryoo, 2009).

Expanding Cultural Hybridity Theory

The current literature has some limitations in applying cultural hybridity theory to research. First, prior research has rarely examined how audiences perceive and understand how it works. By examining audience responses to hybrid cultural forms, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the meanings attributed to hybridity and the cultural and social implications of these interpretations (Radway, 1988). Moreover, exploring audience perceptions of cultural hybridity can shed light on the negotiation of cultural identities and affiliations within diverse audience groups. The consumption of cultural products is often intertwined with identity formation and negotiation processes, as individuals draw on cultural resources to construct and express their sense of self (Ang, 1996). Thus, examining how K-dramas are experienced by foreign audiences is important in deepening our understanding of cultural hybridity in transnational media consumption.

Second, cultural hybridity is a complex phenomenon encompassing multiple dimensions of cultural exchange, negotiation, and transformation. Cultural hybridity manifests in the hybridization of cultural forms and genres, as well as the integration of traditional and modern elements within artistic and media practices (Kraidy, 2005). Creators experiment with hybrid forms of expression, blending elements from different cultural traditions, artistic disciplines, and technological mediums to create innovative and eclectic works (Manovich, 2002). This form of hybridity reflects the dynamic nature of cultural production in the digital age, where boundaries between genres, media, and modes of expression are increasingly porous.

In particular, this study aims to contribute to the cultural hybridity literature by examining how cultural hybridity manifests itself in terms of genre. One recent response to this question is *genre-bending*, which expands the definition of a specific genre by mixing it with other genres (Shim, 2011). Genre-bending refers to the blending, mixing, or transcending of traditional genre boundaries within artistic, cultural, and media contexts. Genre-bending defies rigid classifications by merging elements from disparate genres, thereby creating hybrid forms that are beyond easy categorization (Warren, 2020). This process destabilizes conventional boundaries, prompting audiences to reconsider their expectations and perceptions of genre (Stein, 2015). By subverting genre norms, artists and creators engage in acts of cultural transgression, challenging hegemonic structures and fostering diversity in cultural expression (Mittell, 2015). One theoretical framework for understanding genre-bending is Kristeva's (1986) concept of *intertextuality*, which posits that texts are inherently interwoven with other texts, blurring distinctions between genres and facilitating the emergence of hybrid forms. Genre-bending, as a manifestation of cultural hybridity, offers a lens through which to further explore and expand this theory.

Genre-bending may provide audiences with fresh experiences (Paquet, 2010). The notion of genre-bending may explain why K-dramas use mixed genres as their major strategies. This study argues that genre-bending works on various levels, such as drama themes and values embedded in them. For example, a K-drama can rely on multiple subgenres mixed with familiar and foreign themes and values, which may pique global audiences' curiosity and interest.

Lastly, *cultural novelty*, which refers to the new and innovative cultural phenomena that challenge existing norms, conventions, and traditions, can expand the cultural hybridity theory. Cultural novelty embodies cultural innovation and differences, whereby cultural producers strive to break new ground and push the boundaries of cultural expression (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural novelty is also closely connected to the unique cultural traditions of a society. Cultural novelty can contribute to the ongoing evolution of cultural practices and aesthetics. Cultural novelty may increase local viewers' fascination with and enjoyment of foreign media content. Indeed, a study found that Asian audiences enjoy American TV content mainly because it allows them to explore and learn a new culture from American television (Hagiwara et al., 1999). Thus, examining how cultural novelty interacts with genre-bending is a meaningful task.

Taken together, this study intends to offer valuable insights into how American audiences receive, interpret, and make sense of the hybrid nature of K-dramas by focusing mainly on genre-bending and cultural novelty.

RQ1: How do American audiences think about how K-dramas use subgenres to provide a new experience to foreign audiences?

RQ2: How do American audiences perceive K-dramas' use of multiple subgenres interacts with South Korean-unique perspectives and values?

Methods

Data Collection

American viewer comments on selected dramas were gathered from two popular sites: DramaBeans and MyDramaList. DramaBeans (DramaBeans.com). Dedicated to K-dramas since its launch in 2007, both sites cover industry trends and provide episode-by-episode recaps, overviews, and reviews of K-dramas. MyDramaList (MyDramaList.com), launched in 2011, is a community-driven website where fans of Asian mass media can discover news and stories about Asian dramas, movies, actors, and actresses and engage in discussions.

Viewer comments were collected between August 26 and August 29, 2022. This period was selected for two reasons. First, the volume of user comments did not vary significantly throughout the year, so August was chosen. Second, because of the large volume of responses from users of the two sites, one week was considered sufficient. We limited our collection to first-level comments and excluded replies. This resulted in a total of 2,926 comments from DramaBeans and 2,054 comments from MyDramaList for analyses. Table 1 presents the number of comments per drama and related statistics.

Table 1. List of K-Dramas.

Title	Genre	First episode date	Final episode date	Total # of comments	# of Responses. Mean (SD)	Total # of comments	# of Responses. Mean (SD)
				DramaBeans		MyDramaList	
<i>Squid Game</i> (Hwang, 2021)	Action, Mystery, Thriller	9/17/2021	9/17/2021	48	2.50 (4.65)	169	0.52 (2.44)
<i>Dali and the Cocky Prince</i> (Ki, 2021)	Comedy, Romance	9/22/2021	11/11/2021	213	1.73 (3.00)	93	0.60 (1.74)
<i>The King's Affection</i> (Yoon, Han, Song, & Park, 2021)	Historical, Romance	10/11/2021	12/14/2021	208	2.22 (3.69)	92	0.47 (2.24)
<i>My Name</i> (Yoo, 2021)	Action, Crime, Mystery, Thriller	10/15/2021	10/15/2021	27	1.11 (2.34)	147	0.49 (2.46)
<i>Hellbound</i> (Byun & Kim, 2021)	Fantasy, Thriller	11/19/2021	11/19/2021	18	2.18 (0.78)	70	0.74 (2.20)
<i>Our Beloved Summer</i> (Park, 2021–2022)	Romance	12/6/2021	1/25/2022	189	1.56 (3.46)	155	0.29 (1.32)
<i>Bad and Crazy</i> (Kim & Lee, 2021–2022)	Action, Comedy, Thriller, Mystery	12/17/2021	1/28/2022	82	0.37 (0.98)	60	0.17 (1.78)
<i>Bulgasal: Immortal Souls</i> (Joo & Kang, 2021–2022)	Fantasy, Thriller, Mystery	12/18/2021	2/6/2022	179	1.68 (2.65)	67	0.84 (2.73)
<i>All of Us Are Dead</i> (Lee J, 2022)	Thriller, Action, Zombie apocalypse	1/28/2022	1/28/2022	29	1.55 (3.12)	151	0.99 (8.98)
<i>Twenty-Five Twenty-One</i> (Kim, 2022)	Romance	2/12/2022	4/3/2022	262	1.79 (3.11)	261	0.48 (1.80)
<i>Thirty-Nine</i> (Choi, Jeong, & Kim, 2022)	Romance	2/16/2022	3/31/2022	66	0.94 (1.38)	49	0.37 (1.17)
<i>Business Proposal</i> (Park, 2022)	Comedy, Romance	2/28/2022	4/5/2022	283	1.55 (2.79)	256	0.27 (1.24)
<i>Tomorrow</i> (Lee T, 2022)	Fantasy, Action	4/1/2022	5/21/2022	162	1.28 (2.65)	127	0.20 (0.99)

<i>My Liberation Notes</i> (Kim, 2022a)	Romance	4/9/2022	5/29/2022	261	2.19 (5.13)	82	0.61 (2.82)
<i>Sh**ting Stars</i> (Lee S, 2022)	Comedy, Romance	4/22/2022	6/11/2022	184	1.49 (2.40)	90	0.41 (1.78)
<i>Alchemy of Souls</i> (Jang, Lee, & Lee, 2022)	Fantasy, Action, Romance	6/18/2022	8/28/2022	409	4.26 (6.86)	58	0.48 (1.50)
<i>Extraordinary Attorney Woo</i> (Lee & Lee, 2022)	Law	6/29/2022	8/18/2022	306	2.41 (3.62)	127	0.52 (1.74)
Total				2,926	2.12 (4.12)	2,054	0.48 (3.05)

Note. # of Responses = Number of responses that comments received.

Analysis

Viewer comments were analyzed using the qualitative content analysis method. First, the two authors familiarized themselves with the content to gain a broad understanding. During this initial phase of data exploration, comments primarily focusing on simple episode summaries, future story anticipation, or questions about plots, characters, or South Korean culture, including food, were excluded. Second, while concentrating on comments that actively engaged in the evaluation of the dramas, the authors developed a preliminary thematic classification based on their content. Third, the chosen categories were further refined through discussions between the two authors. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached. Three broad theme categories were determined: genre, emotional expression, and portrayal of societal issues.

Findings

Ever since I've been watching k-dramas and k-film, I've been asking myself the same questions, "What is it about this that keeps me coming back?" [. . .] Every time someone says, 'that's been done before,' I say to myself, 'yes, but not quite like this.'" (personal communication, October 7, 2021)

A close analysis of American viewers' opinions reveals that the appeal of the reviewed K-dramas lies in its skillful mix of familiarity and foreignness. On the surface, each K-drama may be classified into one specific genre, but it does not simply follow the typical conventions of the genre. Instead, each K-drama incorporates multiple subgenres and takes advantage of various elements of drama. K-dramas also introduce American audiences to the unique cultural values of South Korea.

The mix of various subgenres and elements in K-drama may be understood to some extent with the notion of cultural hybridity. However, what makes K-drama popular among American audiences is something more than hybridity. Through various strategies and tactics, K-dramas create a new South Korean style, which is not just a result of the physical blending of familiarity and foreignness as posited by the theory of *cultural hybridity*. Beyond simply blending various elements, K-drama creates its own style (K-drama as a distinct genre) by mobilizing unique strategies. American fans have stated that K-dramas' hybridity is demonstrated through skillful execution, strong emotions, compelling storylines, well-crafted characters, quality acting, and diverse directing and filming techniques. Many American fans see the exquisite creation of a South Korean style that describes the essence of today's K-drama.

Beyond Genre Conventions

Action/Thriller

K-dramas often employ genres already familiar to American audiences, such as action/thriller, fantasy, romance, and romantic comedy. Using familiar genre codes, K-dramas offer American viewers multiple points of reference, enabling them to navigate the story effectively despite language and cultural differences.

For example, the highly acclaimed drama *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) triumphs with its incorporation of originality into a familiar genre. Some American viewers acknowledge that it neither breaks new ground nor offers a fresh plot, citing similar death game shows *Alice in Borderland* (Kaata, 2020), *Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012), and *Battle Royal* (Fukasaku, 2000); some further argue that the show's success stems from being a Westernized product. However, American audiences pointed out that what truly captivated them was not just the familiarity of the genre but the show's novelty. Setting aside its visual and sound effects and the use of seemingly innocent childhood games, *Squid Game* masterfully combines multiple subgenres, such as suspense, mystery, and action, while delivering robust social criticism of human nature and the destructive impacts of the capitalist system on the underprivileged.

The series *My Name* (Yoo, 2021) and *Bad and Crazy* (Kim & Lee, 2021–2022) live up to the expectations of action thriller enthusiasts. American viewers praised the breathtaking and intense action sequences expertly performed by the talented cast, keeping them on the edge of their seats throughout. However, what sets these dramas apart from other action thrillers is their strong character development and seamless integration of multiple subgenres. *My Name*, as it follows the female lead character Ji-woo's quest for revenge against her father's killer, weaves together several subgenres such as crime, mystery, and investigation, with a touch of romance. Following her journey, viewers are fully immersed in the storyline, experiencing a range of emotions and actively rooting for her. Similarly, *Bad and Crazy* combines romance, bromance, investigations, psychological issues (such as split personality disorder), and comedy.

K-dramas push the boundaries of the zombie genre by including political, social, and emotional themes. *All of Us Are Dead* (J. Lee, 2022) sets an exemplary standard with its innovative approach through emotionally charged storytelling and unique narratives in each episode, character, and scene. It distinguishes itself from most zombie films and TV series by skillfully combining elements of action scenes, heart-fluttering sweet romantic moments, comedic relief, and genuine human emotions with grotesque zombie imagery. While the main storyline unfolds around a core group of students trapped in high school, it adeptly intertwines subplots featuring a politician desperately trying to escape her office, social media influencers capitalizing on the crisis for personal popularity, police officers racing to procure antidotes, and parents striving to safeguard their children. With the overall assessment of it outperforming popular shows like *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010–2022), one viewer said, "It gave new substances to the Zombie genre whilst remaining the gore we normally see in them" (personal communication, February 6, 2022). Many other fans echoed the show's fresh perspective on the creative twist between humans and zombies and its genre-redefining storytelling through a compelling mix of elements, such as character development, real-life drama, and survival lessons.

Fantasy

Our analysis shows that the appeal of the fantasy genre to American viewers lies in its effective combination with other familiar subgenres. Furthermore, this appeal is enhanced by unique background and plot settings, powerful character development, and thought-provoking philosophical, social, and human messages.

Viewers of *Alchemy of Souls* (Jang et al., 2022) stated that its success lies not just in the harmonious blend of fantasy, romance, thriller, action, and comedy, but also in its outstanding cinematography, vibrant color display, and the playful interactions, deep bonds, and mutual respect among its characters. While incorporating the fantastical concepts of reincarnation, immortality, and lost souls inspired by the legend of Bulgasari, the drama *Bulgasal: Immortal Souls* (Joo & Kang, 2021–2022) seamlessly blends supernatural elements with mystery and romance. With visually captivating cinematography, it invites viewers to deeply empathize with the fundamental human emotions portrayed by characters—love, hate, and regret.

Other examples include *Hellbound* (Byun & Kim, 2021), which intertwines fantasy and thriller genres to deliver a profound message about the dark aspects of human nature. Each episode of *Tomorrow* (T. Lee, 2022) introduces unique stories of individuals overcoming emotional distress within the broader narrative framework where grim reapers intervene to save those contemplating suicide. The meaning of life and healthy human relationships is effectively expressed through a combination of subgenres, including fantasy, action, and romance.

Romance

The romance genre is similarly characterized by the combination of various subgenres and elements. Specifically, the combination of multiple subgenres, along with the unique background setting, enhances the development of captivating storylines and characters, enriching viewers' experiences.

King's Affection (Yoon et al., 2021) impressed American viewers with its masterful blend of romance and action and its ability to evoke powerful emotions while maintaining minimal violence and adult content. One thing that makes this drama unique is its background context. The royal palace of the Joseon Dynasty serves as a compelling backdrop, unveiling the harsh realities and entrenched ideologies of the era. Not only does this setting aid viewers in grasping the sorrows of a king compelled to conceal her love and female identity, but it also prompts reflection on societal inequality and the desire for power as elements that may induce despair in others' lives.

Blending romance, sports, and comedy, *Twenty-Five Twenty-One* (Kim, 2022b) stands out as a remarkable slice-of-life drama. Set in the late 1990s during the IMF financial crisis in South Korea, the show revolves around characters conquering challenges and experiencing personal growth through the power of love. With its central focus on the selfless and pure love between the male character Yi-jin and the female character Hee-do, *Twenty-Five Twenty-One* portrays the characters of various ages navigating difficulties, fears, moments of happiness, hope, and disappointment.

Our Beloved Summer (Park, 2021–2022) is a heartwarming mix of romance, comedy, and coming-of-age elements that beautifully capture the essence of love. The storyline, smoothly transitioning between present events and flashbacks, profoundly resonates with viewers as it showcases the characters' journey of growth and struggles in life, love, and relationships. The realistic portrayal of emotions and relatable situations makes this drama a truly captivating and relatable experience for viewers of all ages.

My Liberation Note (Kim, 2022a) delivers a heartfelt love story between Mr. Gu and Mi-jeong while also delving into the relationships and mundane lives of three siblings residing in a fictional rural village of Sanpo. The narrative effectively captures the dynamics of an ordinary family, their daily challenges, work-life struggles, relationships, friendships, and the strong bond shared by siblings. With a skillful blend of romance, humor, and suspense, the plot and performances in the show strike a perfect balance. Viewers captivated by characters yearning to break free from stagnant lives in modern society become fully absorbed in each character's unfolding stories and find complete fulfillment in witnessing their personal growth and eventual self-discovery.

Romantic Comedy

Romantic comedy is a distinctive genre across the world. K-drama romantic comedies appeal to American viewers because of their slower pace and absence of explicit scenes compared with Western content. One viewer explained the reasons for turning to K-drama, stating, "kdrama's rom-coms are amazing to give strong feeling that makes my heart flutter, cry, feel strong, jealousy that ache my heart or in so much excitement; all of these WITHOUT having to 19+ the content (or western show rate 16+)" (personal communication, November 15, 2021).

Our observation further indicates that American viewers are drawn to K-drama romantic comedies for their skillful fusion of comedy with romance, devoid of unnecessary complications. The genre's humorous and lighthearted nature uplifts viewers' moods and provides respite from depressing and heartbreaking shows. A prevalent theme in these dramas is the transformation of the male-female characters' relationship from adversaries to lovers, evolving from causing each other physical and emotional pain to understanding and supporting one another. Many credited the success of *Sh**ting Stars* (S. Lee, 2022) to the delightful chemistry and witty banter between them, expressing enjoyment in watching the constant bickering between the main characters and noting that the humor felt natural and unforced.

Even in the face of problems or conflicts, viewers tend to perceive them as less serious, either because of the presence of comedic elements or because the issues are typically swiftly resolved. In *Business Proposal* (Park, 2022), despite familiar tropes and clichés, its fans admire the remarkable chemistry between the lead couple, as well as the drama's ability to resolve conflicts and misunderstandings. One viewer (personal communication, April 6, 2022) acknowledged that the show is likable because it "did not pretend to be anything deeper," and there were "no sinister subplots, no political backstabbing, no social issues to address." Similarly, viewers perceive the plotline of *Dali and the Cocky Prince* (Ki, 2021), which involves elements of crime, mystery, and clichéd tropes, as being presented in a nontoxic and rejuvenating manner, preventing them from taking the show too seriously. The unexpected comedic moments enhance viewers' enjoyment of the show.

Emotional Appeal

Our analysis shows that the integration of multiple subgenres allows for a diverse array of strong emotions within a show. Numerous viewer comments highlight the ability of K-dramas to evoke a wide range of emotions, a trait less common in other foreign dramas. The emotional resonance stemming from a blend

of different subgenres is reinforced by subplots or background narratives that interconnect all leading and supporting characters and strengthen the central storyline.

Emotional appeal is crucial for viewers to connect with the portrayed characters. For instance, in *Bad and Crazy* (Kim & Lee, 2021–2022, viewers experience a gamut of emotions—excitement, tension, fun, hope, and sadness—as they follow the lead character, Soo-yeol, a corrupt anti-corruption police officer, grappling with his alter ego K and discovering his true self. These intense emotional connections are vividly expressed by one viewer who remarked:

Seeing Suyeol and K's bickering, their teamwork, seeing their cool fight scenes, their touching, sad backstory made me go through such a roller coaster. And I loved every single moment of it. [. . .] though a lot of scenes were pretty funny, I didn't expect the drama to be so . . . much darker, deeper, and sadder. [. . .] Throughout the episode whenever Suyeol thought of K, he didn't cry but I did. When K came back to save him, he didn't cry but I definitely did. And his last goodbye definitely made me cry. (personal communication, February 14)

As one K-drama fan stated, "good dramas are more than just entertainment—they explore our humanity" (personal communication, June 14, 2022). The realistic portrayal of human connections and exploration of fundamental emotions, including joy, sadness, suffering, and affection, elicit deep emotional responses from audiences. Even the zombie drama *All of Us Are Dead* (J. Lee, 2022) is no exception. By investing in human nature and relationship dynamics, the show enhances viewer engagement with the characters and storyline, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

The emotional attachment of the children/parent bond had me moved. And of course the characters' friendships, they always had each other's back and were willing to sacrifice themselves in order to save the others. This series gives us an idea of bullying, unity and the harsh reality of the selfish people, who only care about themselves. On the other hand, it also shows people who can risk their lives for their loved ones or even strangers. (personal communication, February 1, 2022)

This drama is rollercoaster of emotions. It will make you cry, it will make you angry, it will make you laugh and many more. [. . .] My favorite thing about this drama was their friendship of cast in drama. Like how they always stayed together and moved forward with each other. [. . .] This is a great drama about friendship and sacrifices. [. . .] If you are an emotional drama fan. Then this is for you. (personal communication, July 8, 2022)

Despite primarily focusing on the romance between the main characters, *Our Beloved Summer* (Park, 2021–2022) and *My Liberation Note* (Kim, 2022a) deal with various aspects of human relationships and emotions. As a result, audiences find themselves reflecting on their own lives and relationships through the characters and situations depicted. One viewer expressed, "This drama [Our Beloved Summer] feels like a reflection of my life . . . I personally can relate to most situations in the drama, especially the relationships between the main characters" (personal communication, January 17, 2022). Another viewer said, "Watching

this drama [My Liberation Note] felt like watching my story. All the characters could relate in one way or another" (personal communication, May 30, 2022).

Among the various humanistic elements in K-dramas, the presentation of love, loyalty, and sacrifice within families significantly impacted American viewers. Young-woo's father from *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (Lee & Lee, 2022), who cares for his daughter with autistic symptoms, and Tae-moo's grandfather in the romantic comedy *Business Proposal* (Park, 2022), who stepped into the role of a parent and cared for his grandchild, are two examples cherished by viewers. According to one viewer, one poignant scene from *Twenty-Five Twenty-One* (Kim, 2022b) portrays Yi-jin and his younger brother visiting their uncle. Grateful for their presence, the uncle reassures them, saying, "You are family. How could you ever be a burden? Thank you for coming. You've done more than enough." In *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), it was a sense of familial responsibility and sacrifice that drove characters like Gi-hoon, Ali, and Sae-byeok to participate in the perilous game. Similarly, in action/thriller and fantasy dramas *All of Us Are Dead* (J. Lee, 2022) and *Hellbound* (Byun & Kim, 2021), parents never hesitate to sacrifice their own lives to protect their children.

Incorporation of Societal Issues and South Korean-Unique Perspectives

A significant portion of the K-dramas analyzed in this study address various pressing societal issues that resonate with audiences across borders. K-dramas achieve this by leveraging South Korean-unique background/character settings or by interweaving subplots into the main storyline. This pattern is not restricted to a certain genre, from bullying, teen pregnancy, and sexual assault in *All of Us Are Dead* (Lee J, 2022) dealing with a zombie apocalypse, to split personality disorder in the action/thriller genre of *Bad and Crazy* (Kim & Lee, 2021–2022), and workplace pressure, crazy fans, the power of public opinion, stalking, and suicide in the romantic comedy *Sh**ting Stars* (S. Lee, 2022).

Well-designed drama content has the potential to engage, educate, and inspire audiences by integrating important societal issues into captivating narratives. Offering a lighter and more enjoyable storytelling approach can reach a wider audience, raising awareness and fostering an understanding of critical topics that may have otherwise been overlooked or dismissed.

Dali and the Cocky Prince (Ki, 2021), *Thirty-Nine* (Choi et al., 2022), and *Our Beloved Summer* (Park, 2021–2022) incorporate the theme of adoption by centering their stories around adopted lead characters. These dramas received recognition from numerous viewers for addressing this infrequently explored subject as below:

I particularly rejoice in the inclusion of this deeply affecting theme of adoption and how love can forge an everlasting bond [. . .] Even if it [Our Beloved Summer] changes only a few viewers' minds and leads them to adopting children who are in need of love and care, it will be a victory worth dancing about with joy. (personal communication, January 12, 2022)

The inclusion of the adoption topic in these dramas enabled American audiences to gain insights into the social and cultural differences between South Korea and the United States. Viewers expressed their perspectives on various aspects addressed within the narratives, including the dynamics between

the child, biological parents, and adoptive parents, societal attitudes toward adoptees, and their identity-related challenges.

Some acknowledged that adoption still faces disapproval in South Korea, as shown in the following excerpt from a reviewer's comment on *Dali and the Cocky Prince* (Ki, 2021):

In the USA, at one time, kids were often not told they were adopted for fear of the social stigma surrounding a child that is not blood-related. It was all tied into the stigma around being born out of wedlock. As the prevalence of that social stigma has decreased, so has the stigma around being adopted. [. . .] South Korea, it seems that social stigma is still something that is dealt with as well perhaps to a slightly higher degree. I was surprised that her simply being adopted could cause such a major hit to her social standing. (personal communication, January 31, 2022)

Others expressed discomfort toward the uncle who exposed Dali's secret adoption, publicly shamed her, and attempted to strip away everything from her simply because she was not blood-related. Such actions were regarded as representing "The large gulf of a cultural divide between the west and South Korea" (personal communication, November 17, 2021).

The way adoptive families in these dramas dealt with the social stigma also provoked strong reactions among viewers. From a Western perspective, the scene where Dali's father kneels before the daughter's fiancé, who wants to end the relationship upon discovering her adoption, only makes Dali appear pitiable.

Viewers praised *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (Lee & Lee, 2022) for its exceptional portrayal of autistic characters and how autism is experienced differently by individuals on the spectrum. To many viewers, watching "Young-woo's journey and experiences as a woman, an individual on the autism spectrum, and a first-year lawyer" (personal communication, August 20, 2022) is beyond mere enjoyment. Given the rarity of "seeing a female autistic character" (personal communication, July 2, 2022), one viewer noted that it "has accomplished something even greatest minds in Hollywood tend to struggle with" (personal communication, August 19, 2022). Compared with Western media's occasional focus on detached White male savants, viewers found the intelligent Young-woo character more realistic and relatable.

Debates ensued about how accurately the character portrayed autistic people. Some argued that the drama presented an overly cute and idealized version of autism, potentially reinforcing stereotypes and misinformation. The use of a non-autistic actress for the role raised additional concerns about discrimination, with autistic viewers emphasizing the importance of autistic individuals having the opportunity to portray their own experiences on screen.

However, many viewers appreciated the drama's messages. They mentioned that the show sheds light on the struggles faced by autistic people, including their difficulties in being accepted by the larger community and the discrimination or micro-aggressions they encounter in various social contexts. The depiction of a genius young woman navigating her work, friendships, love, and social interactions provided a valuable learning experience for those without direct experiences with individuals with mental disorders.

Viewers expressed their gratitude for gaining a deeper understanding of autism through the drama and hoped for a future where people with autism could live without prejudice:

I enjoyed the portrayal of autism, and I feel like I've learned a lot—I'm definitely more interested in finding out more. [. . .] I hope one day we will also live in a world where people with autism can work, love, live, and be fulfilled without prejudice. (personal communication, August 20, 2022)

One of the most heart-wrenching moments of the series occurred when Young-woo openly spoke out about social stigmas held against those with autism; "Even now, hundreds of people click the like button on a comment that says, 'It is a national loss if a medical student dies, and an autistic person lives.' That is the weight of this disability that we bear." (personal communication, August 19, 2022)

The drama *Tomorrow* (T. Lee, 2022) tackles the sensitive topic of suicide and its social causes. This taboo subject was discussed using a fantasy genre that revolves around grim reapers who save people from taking their own lives. Unlike American dramas, it draws inspiration from real-life problems in South Korea, presenting diverse challenges, such as bullying, eating disorders, poverty, rape, sexual abuse, inattention to war veterans, and the detrimental effects of comparing oneself to others. American viewers appreciate the blend of familiar and fresh perspectives it offers on suicide. One viewer highlighted its impact on raising awareness of suicide and mental health by stating:

I believe it was all very eye opening and helpful to see who may need help. [. . .] I intend to keep the things I learned from this drama in my mind in order to be on the look-out for people who may need someone to simply talk to them [. . .]. (personal communication, May 17, 2022)

In addition, a group of viewers expressed how the drama inspired them to ponder the meaning of life. Numerous individuals who had experienced emotional difficulties in the past conveyed their gratitude in reviews, acknowledging the drama's significant contribution to helping them overcome their problems. For example, one viewer stated:

This series made me rethink many of my past mistakes but also sad past moments that I went through; [. . .] What is to remember is that no matter how hard life may be, it is not the end—we have so much more to see, discover, understand, meeting new persons that will impact our life some ways. (personal communication, May 29, 2022)

The comments above show how viewers, initially concerned about the drama's impact on their mental well-being, discovered it to be healing instead. Not only did the drama compel them to reassess their past mistakes and experiences, it also provided solace and facilitated their personal growth. As such, the messages that time and support can improve situations and that life offers opportunities for happiness, hope, and meaningful relationships despite difficulties have deeply resonated with viewers who carry heartbreaking memories.

Furthermore, *Tomorrow* (T. Lee, 2022) illuminates societal and historical issues that are unfamiliar to many in the Western world. It addresses subjects such as Korean War veterans and Japanese Military Sexual Slavery, bringing to light the challenges faced by those impacted. The episodes featuring the experiences of sexually abused women and their subsequent victimization evoked strong emotional responses from viewers, with many expressing feelings of outrage and sorrow. One viewer said, "It angers me that these women were blamed for crimes that were committed against them" (personal communication, May 14, 2022).

How is it the woman's fault that she is taken prisoner, because whether it was comfort women in the 20th century or the tribute women during the 17th century or even earlier? The treatment of these women once they "returned" was brutal by their own families, communities and country. [. . .] How is this different from the way many women who have been sexual harassed and/or assaulted are behaving today? (personal communication, May 21, 2022)

The above viewer comments condemn victim-blaming and underscore the necessity of a cultural shift in attitudes toward women who have experienced sexual harassment and assault. The drama effectively sheds light on the social stigma and isolation these survivors face, prompting meaningful discussions about the injustice they have endured.

Discussion

Little is known about what aspects of foreign cultural products appeal to global audiences. One dominant theoretical explanation so far is cultural hybridity, which posits that a mix of familiarity and novelty may positively impact diverse audiences (Kraidy, 2005). However, little research has examined how foreign audiences understand cultural hybridity. This study centered on how global audiences, particularly American fans, perceive and understand the hybrid nature of K-dramas.

The findings add several important theoretical contributions to the literature on transnational media consumption. First, American fans find genre-bending a prevalent trait of K-dramas. Most K-dramas use familiar genre codes, which help American viewers easily follow the storyline despite language and cultural differences. However, what is more notable than the use of familiar genre codes is K-dramas' active adoption of a multitude of subgenres in a single show. For example, *Twenty-Five Twenty-One* (Kim, 2022b) adroitly blends romance, sports, and comedy genres, although it seems closer to romance.

Our findings show that American audiences think that many K-dramas are not limited by typical genre conventions, making it hard to pinpoint a specific genre category that can be assigned to a drama. They said some K-dramas even redefine conventional genre categories. For example, the drama *All of Us Are Dead* (J. Lee, 2022) challenges the zombie genre's conventions with its gripping and innovative storytelling, heart-beating romantic scenes, authentic realism, and comedic relief. Thus, American audiences find the drama demonstrating a different type of zombie drama. Our research shows that K-dramas often create their own genre types, and global audiences like this aspect.

Second, this study finds that genre-mixing is seamlessly intertwined with various unique strategies that make K-dramas novel and intriguing to American fans. One such device is an emotional appeal. Emotion plays an important role in shaping transcultural fandom despite cultural distances (Chin & Morimoto, 2013). K-dramas tend to use emotion-provoking scenes and conversations without hesitation. American fans think emotion is deeply rooted in the base of K-dramas regardless of genre.

What is notable is that K-dramas make American fans feel indescribable emotions, connect them closely to the characters, and provide them with therapeutic effects. Many Americans said K-dramas were full of supersentimental scenes, which made them hard to look away from. Many audiences also mentioned feeling deep catharsis while being emotionally touched by K-dramas. Furthermore, K-dramas depict very complicated and sensitive emotions that may occur in interpersonal and social settings, which is uncommon in American dramas. Thus, our findings indicate that the combination of genre-mixing and the emotional appeal of K-dramas is not sufficiently explained by cultural hybridity theory. Rather, the combination suggests that K-dramas create a "new South Korean style" instead of simply mixing hybrid elements to attract global audiences.

Third, the analyzed K-dramas depict the social realities of South Korea realistically and sometimes critically, addressing issues such as bullying, teen pregnancy, suicide, sexual assault, stalking, and gender discrimination. While these topics in dramas are not entirely new, American fans note that K-dramas blend them with South Korean background and character settings and weave them tightly into unique narratives. Some viewers may feel uncomfortable with this method; however, many viewers said they gained insight into different viewpoints on societal issues between South Korea and the United States and found new perspectives on how to address and approach these issues. American fans praised K-dramas' creativity and strategies, which made these common topics interesting and different.

Furthermore, K-dramas often raise questions about the true meaning of life, which is rare in American dramas. Regardless of genre, most K-dramas incorporate fundamental themes of life and relationships into their narratives and highlight humanity. Notably, American fans perceive K-dramas as products that enhance humanity beyond mere entertainment.

Taken together, the combination of multiple subgenres, various emotional appeal strategies, and new perspectives about important societal issues adopt the attributes of hybridity, but it is more than hybridity. As Stuart Hall (1991) said, cultural hybridity is contested and negotiated by locality. This study argues that hybridity is not sufficient to explain K-dramas' charm and traits among global audiences. Rather, by combining various elements, including subgenres, emotions, and creative perspectives, K-dramas create a "new South Korea style," which is somewhat similar to the assertion by Werbner (2001): "cultures produce their own indigenous forms of transgression" (p. 133). Accordingly, we argue that K-drama producers successfully insert unique South Korean perspectives, values, and frames into K-dramas to create globally attractive media content.

Although each nation's local drama has its own style, K-dramas' unique style deserves attention, considering its notable popularity among global audiences. Our study shows that the new South Korean style may be a comprehensive and distinct factor that triggers American fans' interest in K-dramas and their

continued viewing. Mobilizing various unique strategies may enhance viewer engagement with K-dramas and provide global viewers with noteworthy values of and interest in K-dramas. With follow-up studies in other countries, we expect this new South Korean style of K-dramas to function as an important base for continuously drawing global audiences to K-dramas.

This study has several limitations. First, it focused solely on American fans of K-dramas. Thus, generalizing the findings needs caution. Furthermore, it should be noted that we mainly targeted active American audiences who shared their opinions on K-drama sites, suggesting the need for future research to include more diverse American audiences. Second, the analysis was based on comments from two K-drama sites in 2022. Including more comments in an analysis and expanding the data collection period will make our findings more convincing and generalizable. Lastly, the present study suggested three potential factors explaining the global popularity of K-dramas. Future studies could identify additional factors contributing to K-dramas' global appeal.

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