MALAY WOMEN READINGS OF KOREAN DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

Korean drama has a stronghold position in the global entertainment scene. In Malaysia, the craving for Korean drama started about a decade ago when the hit-drama 'Winter Sonata' made its debut. Korean dramas become household favorites, especially among women. This study reports some findings on the audience reception study of Korean drama among avid Korean drama fans. Four focus group interviews using semi-structured protocol were conducted of which two groups were comprised of adolescents and another two groups were adults. The main research question was, "How do Malay women read Korean drama media text?" The analysis of the verbatim transcriptions yielded eight salient themes: 1) Male-centric; 2) Family oriented; 3) Female-centric; 4) Cultural values; 5) Storyline; 6) Cosmopolitan lifestyle; 7) Realism (Fantasy Love); and 8) Parasocial relationship. The findings are discussed from Stuart Hall's dominant, preferred, negotiated, and oppositional reading.

Keywords: reception study, Korean drama, reading of media text, audience study.

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Introduction

Winter Sonata is epitome of Korean Wave or *Hallyu's* presence in Malaysia. The term 'Korean Wave' or *Hallyu* was first coined by a Chinese journalist back in 1997 to describe the popularity of a Korean drama, *All About Love*, that was aired in the republic (Shim, 2006; Shim, 2008; Jung, 2009). The term is also representing a whole bulk of South Korean cultural exports such as music, films, games and food. The eminence of Korean Wave's is felt across the world including the Asian region, United States, Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Europe (Jung, 2009; Lee, 2012; Oliver, 2012).

The first Korean drama aired in Malaysia was the classic piece, *Winter Sonata*. Since then, almost every broadcast channel in Malaysia started to offer Korean programs with dedicated slots (e.g.: TV9's *Saranghae*; 8TV's Best of East, NTV7's Korean drama slot). Meanwhile Pay-tv service provider offered dedicated Korean channels, such as KBS World and ONE HD on ASTRO, as well as Channel M and RED, which aired Asian movies, including Korean movies on Hypp TV. Korean programs enjoyed the largest percentage of total airtime compared to other foreign counterparts, totaling up to seven hours on private terrestrial channels, and one hour 13 minutes on RTM, which is less than one per cent of the airtime on Malaysian terrestrial television (Md & Amira, 2010).

The popularity of Korean dramas has also sparked interest among researchers to study their effects on audiences' clothing purchases, perception of having fewer children in married life, and marrying a Korean man (see Hsu, 2012; Jin & Jeong, 2010; Rhee & Lee, 2010; Vu & Lee, 2013). However, as media audience research witness a steady growth, the study of active audience simultaneously gained its momentum. Together, this consortium of research interest contributes significantly towards understanding the complex nexus of cross-cultural media text and audience engagement. Often the theoretical frameworks underpinned this type of research revolved around uses and gratifications and media reception studies (e.g.: Ang, 1985; Espiritu, 2011; Jiang & Leung, 2012; Katz & Liebes, 1984; Livingstone, 1990, 1991; Lin & Tong, 2007, 2008).

Television audience in Malaysia is presented with a wide variety of contents originated from different countries. In the early days of Malaysian broadcasting, programs from Britain and the United States dominated the airtime (Schiller, 1997; Karthigesu, 1995). The main concern of such dependency was cultural imperialism (Karthigesu, 1995). However the domination of the Western countries gradually lessened as more media content from non-Western countries such as Japan and Korea came into the picture. Instead of one-global flow, the flow is now argued to be of contra-flow, signifying the diminishing domination of Western countries (Thussu, 2006). From that macro perspective of cross-cultural media content, it is interesting to study a more micro perspective of audience engagement with the media text concerned; in this context Korean drama. Studying how Malaysian Malay women of different age groups read Korean dramas could illuminate us on the intensity of the engagement. This would

enable media researchers to pave ways into understanding how popular culture in the form of Korean drama may have the power to disseminate public opinion and influence people and their attitudes in ways dissimilar to Western soap operas (Cho, 2005; Creighton, 2009).

Problem Statement

In the early years, cultural globalization referred to the spread of Western culture to non-Western countries, but these days, the spread of culture from Asia, especially South Korea, is finding an unprecedented acceptance globally (Shim, 2005). However, Jung (2009) argued that the success of the Korean wave had very little to do with the traditional Asian values but attributed it to the increasing transnational and hybrid aspects of the popular culture. Many popular cultures originating from South Korea such as pop-music, TV series, films, and fashion, are examples of hybridized cultural manufacturing. It has also been noted that Korean dramas tend to carry the themes of capitalistic and strong patriarchal values (Lin & Tong, 2007; Espiritu, 2011).

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

Meanwhile in Malaysia, previous studies mostly studied the historical relationship between Malaysia and South Korea as well as the surface of the Korean wave phenomena in Malaysia (e.g.: Ha, 2010; Chua, 2010; Cho, 2010; Hasmah, 2010; Nor & Zaharani, 2011; Zailin, Khalifah, Ridhuan & Wan, 2013), However, those studies did not provide readers with a deeper understanding about the reception of the audiences towards Korean media text and how they reacted to the content shown to them. Thus, it would be more significant to investigate a phenomenon that would yield richer data to better understand the breadth and depth of audiences' engagement with Korean drama.

Researchers have also recognized the value of studying a genre whose audience is marked by devoted viewing over the years (Perse, 1986) and in that respect, Korean dramas seem to have a strong following among their fans from different media sources including television, streaming online video or VCDs and DVDs (Shim, 2006; Jiang & Leung, 2012; Lin & Kwan, 2005). Furthermore, Hisham and Nuraini (2009) argued that it is timely for Malaysian industry to recognize the importance of gathering qualitative data to garner better understanding of the Malaysian audiences' preferences, perspectives, belief systems, attitudes and behaviours toward small screen production, as there has been virtually no major study that has sought the voices of the audiences or viewers in Malaysia.

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

Research Objective And Research Question

The main research objective of this study is as follows:
1.   To identify the readings of Korean drama media text among Malay women.

The research question is:
1.   How do Malay women read Korean drama media text?

Literature Review

Korean Drama

The quintessential Korean drama *Winter Sonata* is said to have reached high rating in every Asian country where it was broadcasted (Kim, Singhal, Hanaki, Dunn, Chitnis & Han, 2009). In Malaysia, *Winter Sonata* kicked off the Korean wave fever followed by other dramas such as *Autumn in My Heart*, *All About Eve*, *My Love Patzzi* and *Jewel in the Palace* (also known as *Dae Jang Geum*). Kim (2004) notes that Korean dramas have good sales in the Asian region as they come with beautiful scenes, original sound track, romantic storyline and Confucian culture. Chua (2010) and Iwabuchi (2010b) argue that audiences watch Korean dramas because they are attracted to the 'foreignness', 'exoticness' and the 'difference' they imply, which are preserved in the various visual elements in the dramas such as costumes and foreign location, making them 'less boring'.

 Korean dramas have also been said to be heavily influenced by Japanese 'trendy dramas' as well as American dramas (Cho, 2005; Iwabuchi, 2008). Ang (2007) pointed out that although both Korean and Japanese dramas tend to reverberate around the lives of young people in modern urban settings, what distinguishes them is that of the storyline of the former which focuses on family relationships as integral to the life of the characters. Heavy

viewing of South Korean TV dramas therefore may lead to positive impression of the country's familial relationships, which may not always be accurate.

Vu and Lee's (2013) cultivation study of Korean dramas on Vietnamese women found that there was intention to find a South Korean husband among the respondents after watching the dramas. The finding seems sensible as the overriding themes portrayed in Korean dramas centered on favorable values such as bonding between families, motherhood as the utmost important value of an ideal women. In Espiritu's (2011) reception study, she found that young Filipino women could identify with the Korean culture and were intrigued by Korean dramas which offered realistic storyline and wholesome values, compared to American and Mexican dramas that were aired in the Philippines.

Korean Drama Themes

In Lee's (2012) content analysis of the earlier and popular Korean dramas such as *Autumn in My Heart*, *Jewel in the Palace*, *Stairways to Heaven*, *Lovers in Paris*, and *Winter Sonata*, it was found that the dramas offered 'fantasy' characterized by ideal love (pure, loyal, immutable), ideal human relationships (relationships among family members are portrayed as the foundation of true happiness of the protagonist) and ideal characters (idealized masculinity and femininity). Hogarth (2013) claimed that although female characters were shown to have modest personality, they were also portrayed as being strong and independent. Even the Cinderella-like female leads were shown as kind and proud despite coming from low-income families, while the male leads were shown as gentle, romantic and caring.

Meanwhile, Kwon (2006) examined Filipino audiences' reception of Korean dramas and found that the production quality (music, story setting and cinematography), fast-paced plot and stylishly dressed characters appealed to them. Although the Philippines is not a Confucian society, Kwon (2006) found the concept of cultural proximity applicable to how Filipino audiences received Korean TV dramas. His informants expressed attraction to "community based culture such as hierarchical family relationship between elders and younger ones, and the extended family relationships" (p. 1). Similarly, Hogarth (2013) argued among other reasons, Korean dramas were so popular in China and other Asian countries were due to the portrayal of beauty in its cinematography, sceneries, actors and actresses and fashion.

Yang (2012) found that the demographic of the fans and consumers of Korean wave varied according to countries, for example, Japanese fans were mostly middle-aged women who regarded the content of Korean dramas as having a sense of nostalgia (Mori, 2008; Iwabuchi, 2008), while the majority of Chinese fans were made up of the younger generations (below 30), who were eager to consume and imitate the modern Western elements portrayed in Korean dramas.

Meanwhile, Zailin et al. (2013) found that Korean wave had a huge following among Malaysian youths. Nor and Zaharani's (2011) surveyed Malaysian youths from different ethnicities and pointed out that the respondents were very responsive towards the Korean wave, in which the majority expressed their love for learning the foreign language and toyed with the idea of furthering their studies in Korea or just to visit the country. The youths, who were also university students, also expressed their fondness for Korean dramas, which were said to have nice plots and happy endings.

Malaysian Malay Women

The status of women in Malaysia has also progressed since Malaysia achieved independence with a visible increase in female employment as well as an increase in higher education. However, despite the progress, Malay women are expected to closely adhere to traditional values, which include being feminine, being a good wife and mother and also being the one that makes sacrifices whenever necessary (Kalthom Abdullah, Noraini M. Noor & Saodah Wok, 2008). It should be noted that, patriarchal ideology still dictate Malaysian women despite efforts to improve their economical standing (Wang, 2006).

In studying Malay women, the religious aspect of Malay identity – Islam – along with the local Malay custom or *adat*, both act as the core of the Malay identity and exist in a complementary fashion (Hanita, 2011). Often, when faced with difficult and stressful situations, it is the Malay women's belief in God that helps them get through (Kalthom Abdullah et al., 2008). Therefore, Islam is a significant part of Malay women's identity.

Theoretical Framework

Reception analysis

The root of reception studies can be traced back to Marxist theory. As the theory evolved, neomarxism theory was used in Britain during the 1960s, which deviated from the classic theory by focusing on the ideology and culture, rather than the production level. The British cultural studies school also focused on studying popular culture as it appealed to a larger group of people. British culturist Stuart Hall, however, objected to cultural elitism and believed it was wrong to assume that popular films worked to undermine working class audience (Baran & Davis, 2003).

In communication and cultural studies, the reception analysis is also known as audience reception theory that is used to characterize audience research and tend to be qualitative in nature to explore active audiences and their interpretation of media text (Livingstone, 1998; Baran & Davis, 2003). Alasuutari (1999) in the book *Rethinking the Media Audience*, asserted that reception analysis is typically associated with Stuart Hall's *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* with some pointing out that its other roots include re-addressing the themes already raised in what is known as the Uses and Gratification studies (U+G) (Alasuutari, 1999; Livingstone, 1998).

Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding prompted the work of television studies by David Morley (1980) called the *The Nationwide Audience*, where a total of 29 groups were involved and the discussions were put into one of the three readings: dominant, negotiated or oppositional (Livingstone, 1990; Jensen, 2003; Baran & Davis, 2003).

Katz and Liebes (1984) explored five different cultural groups' receptions of the US soap opera through focus groups supporting the notion that different cultural groups have different interpretations of the same media text. The study by Katz and Liebes (1984) highlights the fact that meaning is not exported in Western television programming but created by different cultural sectors of the audiences in relation to their already-formed cultural attitudes and political perceptions (Sreberny, 2006).

Recently, there have been more studies that narrow the focus of reception studies by concentrating on Korean dramas, mainly conducted in the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore (e.g.: Chan & Xueli, 2011; Espiritu, 2011; Kwon, 2006; Lin & Tong, 2008; Mori, 2008; Yang, 2008a, b) where it is argued that those cultural backgrounds shared similar Confucian values, languages and cultural proximity.

Encoding/Decoding

The work of encoding/decoding of media text situates the role played by the content producers when constructing media content (encoding) to carry 'preferred reading' in the media text for the recipient of the message to decode. However, this premise allows for one media text to have various 'reading', which varies according to individuals' social and cultural backgrounds. Thus, understanding the media message is a problematic practice as no matter how transparent and "natural" it may seem, due to the "structured polysemy" of media content, the construction of multiple meaning is likely (Hall, 1980).

Hall (1980) stressed in his work that, "before a message can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be appropriated as meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (p. 130). Further, the "preferred reading" as assigned by broadcasters in their programmes have "social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and belief" (Hall, 1980: 135), but it is important to note that viewers may not always be able to follow concepts shown on the show as it may be too difficult to comprehend or because the viewers have selective perception.

However, some degree of mutual understanding between the encoding and decoding moments must exist to have any sort of communication exchange at all. For this, Hall (1980) proposed three ways of reading a media text, which are opposition, negotiated and dominant or preferred readings. Dominant-hegemonic reading occurs when the viewer decodes and accepts the connoted 'preferred' message of the media text provider, which is intended to reinforce the status quo of the elite and the working group. Negotiated reading happens when the audience's decoding contains adaptive elements whereby the viewer creates a personal or alternative interpretation of the content that differs from the dominant reading in important ways. The last type of reading proposed by Hall is the oppositional reading which takes place when the viewer understands the dominant message but chooses to ignore it and instead decodes a totally contradictory message (Hall, 1980; Baran & Davis, 2003).

Methodology

This study targeted Malaysian Malay women who were avid fans of Korean dramas and watched the dramas on either television or the Internet. Previous studies have shown that women of all ages tend to watch Korean dramas across Asian countries, but studies in Malaysia indicated Malaysian youths as those who are most likely consuming the Korean wave, in particular, Korean dramas (Zailin et al., 2013; Nor & Zaharani, 2011).

Since this study was interested in finding out the differences of reading between different age groups, the researcher focused on the reception of Malay women centering on two different age groups which were adolescents (18-24 years old) who were mostly students, single and unemployed, as well as adults (aged 25 and above) who may or may not be married and employed. There were 24 informants participated in the focus group interviews and each group was comprised of six participants.

Focus group research strategy is said to use 'purposeful' sampling, in which the researcher selects participants who are argued to be 'information-rich' on the research topic (Creswell, 2012; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Kruger & Casey, 2009). Essentially, audience research is interested in capturing the experiences which are private and more concerned with meaning rather than practice (Livingstone, 2004).

Taking cue from other researchers, there were eligibility requirements set forth for the participants to participate in the focus group interviews, which were the participants must have had exposure to Korean dramas in the last month and liked one or more of the Korean dramas they have watched (Lin & Tong, 2008).

Consent from the informants to use audio and video recording was attained at the beginning of the focus group session for the purpose of attributing correctly each discourse to the informants, apart from capturing facial expressions, gestures and other non-verbal forms of communication. With the apparatus in place, the researcher was able to preserve all the interview discourse and focus on the informants (Creswell, 2012; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). During the sessions, the moderator showed a prompt in a form of edited clip of a number of popular Korean dramas to orient the group to the topic of the discussion. Snacks were provided so that the informants would feel at ease during the whole session. Token of appreciation were given at the end of the focus group sessions in the form of Korean-made items such as chocolates and beauty products.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used and the questioning method followed the funneling method; from general to specific questions, with probing or follow-up questions to extract information that the respondents gave ambiguously (Steward & Shamdasani, 1990; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

The analysis of focus group result began with the transcribing of the entire interview into text data as the basis for further analysis (Creswell, 2012; Steward & Shamdasani, 1990). The researcher then analyzed the qualitative data by means of reading the text data, marking the important data, developing a categorization system to divide data into parts or codes, and merging the codes into broad themes to form major ideas in the database (Creswell, 2012).

The developing themes allowed a deeper understanding of the central phenomena. Initial data analyses saw over 30 codes or categorization, which were later reduced to eight to avoid redundancy "as it is better to write a qualitative report providing detailed information about a few themes rather than general information about many themes" (Creswell, 2012: 245).

In reporting the findings, a narrative discussion is used, in which the researcher summarizes the detailed findings and includes dialogues or quotes that provide support for the extracted themes, report multiple perspectives and highlight contrary evidence (Creswell, 2012).

Malaysian Women Readings Of Korean Drama Media Text

This section will discuss the type of readings used by the informants in understanding the common reading of Korean media text. This is to answer the main research question which addresses the type of readings engaged by the respondents when watching Korean drama text. The analysis of the verbatim transcription of the four focus group interviews yielded eight salient themes: (1) *male-centric*, (2) *family life*, (3) *female-centric*, (4) *cultural values*, (5) *storyline*, (6) *cosmopolitan lifestyle* (7) *realism* (fantasy love), and (8) *parasocial relationship*.

The next part of this section will be divided into three sub-headings which will discuss the themes according to how they were highlighted by the respondents across the four groups, which are: (i) dominant or preferred reading, (ii) oppositional reading, and (iii) negotiated reading. Under these three subheadings, there will be another division to compare the findings of adult and adolescent respondents.

Dominant Reading

Dominant reading is also known as preferred reading, in which the audiences respond to or read media text in a way parallel to what the media producers intended for the viewers. According to Hall (1980), dominant reading occurs when audiences decode the media text and accept unconditionally the messages inherent in it. In other words, the audiences will passively accept the mass produced message without any resistance to the message received.

The organization of this section is segmented according to the two audience clusters, which are adults and adolescents. The presentation would discuss the themes that they see as offering a dominant reading. The adult respondents appeared to offer a dominant reading on three themes which are: 1) *male-centric*, 2) *female-centric* and 3) *storyline*. Meanwhile, the adolescents offered a dominant reading towards two themes which are: 1) *storyline* and 2) *parasocial relationship*. Only the storyline theme had a similar dominant reading between the respondents of both age groups.

Adult Respondents
The working adult groups showed a propensity to offer a dominant reading on the *male-centric theme*, in which they read both the dominant side of the male characters as well as the sensitive side. Lee's (2012) study found that Korean dramas' protagonists are the embodiment of stereotypical males who possessed "economic, intellectual and physical competence and power" (p. 456), with a growing demand for more "sensitive, warm and gentle masculinity" (p. 457). Thus, it is common that the male characters, especially the main lead in Korean dramas to incorporate a stereotypical façade that is dominant, but also gentle and sensitive.

Respondents generally agreed that the lead hero of any Korean drama was usually portrayed as being egoistic and having rude behaviour; however, attitude change would be observed as the drama progressed over time. Meanwhile, the second hero was often portrayed as being kind and sweet.

Nazrah: In *Secret Garden*, at first the guy always force her to follow him and make her do what he says…I think he even paid the rent for the place she works…so her boss can't say anything when he takes her away

Q: But how did the girl end up liking the guy…?

Has: it's not logic…supposedly the girl's feeling, if a guy does that, she will not like him at all...but in Korean drama, she can take it and end up liking the guy and continue to depend on the guy...

(Adults, FG1)

Suzie: The guy must be bossy *lah*…

Mawar: It's weird how they fell in love..

Suzie: I think half of Korean dramas are like that

Ain: BUT… *My Love from the Stars* is different…the guy kinda ignored the girl, even though he likes her

(Adults, FG2)

From the above quotations it is clear that the lead male character in Korean dramas is often seen as being male-chauvinist; however, that type of portrayal is perhaps one of the reasons why Korean dramas have strong followings.

Maybe he is a bit rough but he has a romantic side, that's why the girl like him, that's why that kind of story is what people like, because of the storyline and how the male character change.

(Watie, 39, Adults, FG1)

Suzie: They are a bit ego…macho

Ain: Sometimes if he's just romantic from episode one to episode 20...it gets quite boring to watch...there has to be some egoism

Orked: a bit immature...sometimes a bit dumb

(Adults, FG2)

Another theme that epitomizes dominant reading among the adult respondents was the *female-centric* theme. In the Korean Confucius culture, the status of the daughter or daughter-in-law is less significant compared to their counterparts (Kang & Kim, 2012). Yang (2008b) pointed out that filial piety for a woman meant, "being filial to her in-law and tolerant of abuses from her husband's family who usually treat her as an outsider" (p. 67). The working adults seemed to be aware of the discrimination towards the female gender or more precisely the daughters-in-law since they were often portrayed as working hard to support a family, as the conversation below indicates:

Kasih: But Korean dramas…do you notice, when they get married, the daughter-in-law have to stay at her in-laws house…

Has: Like Chinese

Kasih: then the daughter-in-law has to cook, right

Has: Maybe it's the culture over there…

Kasih: Ha…..it's like bullying the… daughter-in-law, and then if it's the rich family, the daughter-in-law doesn't eat with the rest, she is isolated, stands at the side

(Adults, FG1)

The majority of the adult respondents shared the common feminine characteristics with the female characters in the dramas. Lee (2012) also mentioned how the female lead is submissive towards the male lead. Some respondents also noticed how the female leads were protective of their family, taking the example of the female lead in the drama *My Love from the Star*, who starred as a popular celebrity that appeared arrogant, but actually longed to be reunited with her missing father.

Nazrah: …if you see the drama…even if she looks like hot tempered and all but actually … She loves her family and actually she misses her dad, that why she acts out. She blames her mother. Her mother was the reason she got involve in the industry… becoming an artist

Kasih: and she loves her little brother right

Nazrah: Her family *lah*, her family condition made her like that

(Adults, FG1)

The third dimension on dominant reading touched by the adult informants was the *storyline*. They extrapolated that the actors in those Korean dramas acted with so much passions and emotions. They also liked the pace of Korean dramas which they considered to be fast, in which each episode offered something new compared to locally produced dramas. It would seem sensible that the informants would compare the Korean drama storyline to home grown productions as they are within their immediate environment.

The storyline is different…from Malay dramas. Malay dramas nowadays, if not horror, then it's about love, if not love, then then it's a novel-based drama…boring!

<div align="right">**(Ain, 27, Adult, FG1)**</div>

… usually if I watch from the first episode to the 20th or the 16th episode, there must be something exciting that keeps me going...not just because of the hero. If the hero is great but the storyline is boring, someone keeps on crying...I'll stop watching...there are dramas that I stop watching after 2-3 episodes...it depends …you don't watch the drama to search for guidance...no…it's just interesting story...wanting to know…what's going to happen next? What's going to happen?"

<div align="right">**(Suzie, 34, Adult, FG2)**</div>

The findings related to dominant reading amongst adult respondents showed that adults who were older and had more experience in life, were more accepting of the dominant gendered characteristic for both male and female themes that highlighted both the positive and negative portrayals associated with men and women. In general, adult respondents appreciated the unique and interesting storyline.

Adolescent Respondents

This section presents the adolescents' dominant readings of two themes, which are *storyline* and *parasocial relationship*.

The adolescent respondents also echoed a similar theme with the adult respondents under the dominant reading, which is the *storyline* inherent in Korean dramas. They emphasized on the interesting drama plot or storyline and the portrayal of believable characters; although the plot may be perceived as unreal, they continued to admire the creativity and production quality of Korean drama production. Similar to the adult respondents, they were also aware that Korean dramas tend to mix genres. The excerpts below demonstrate the point:

...some stories [plot] are not shown in Malaysia, like historical drama…you know, they (Koreans) have their own history or folk tale, but they alter or add a bit of twist in the plot when making it into a drama….and they have done so many dramas like... back to the past…it seems not logic right? BUT it's interesting because Malaysian [producers are] not doing that, plus the actors...the CG [computer graphic]…

<div align="right">**(Huda, 20, Adolescent, FG3)**</div>

Huda:	Some of the movies…they have specific genre…like thriller…but [it also] has romance. Imagine, the title is thriller…but you see many other genres...Sometimes we don't know what is the specific genre…They state just one, but you see so many...
Q:	Like *Master Sun*?
Iera:	Yeah, *Master Sun*...(Gets excited) They say it's a scary [genre] drama, but at the same time it's funny…
Shai:	And sad….everything is inside it…romance, and drama…

<div align="right">**(Adolescents, FG3)**</div>

Similar to adult respondents, the adolescents also compared Korean dramas to dramas from other countries and the majority of them believed the Korean version is better.

I think…*To The Beautiful You*…it's [a remake] from a Japanese drama… I don't know how and what it is…but they [Korean] make the drama more interesting…they make me want to watch it…

<div align="right">**(Huda, 20, Adolescent, FG3)**</div>

The majority of the respondents pointed out that after watching Korean dramas over a period of time, an avid audience would be able to predict the storyline, with its commonly recycled plot of a love triangle or love between people of two social classes. Some dramas may even offer surprises in terms of unexpected plot twists.

Iera:	…if you watch too many Korean drama, you can predict what's going to happen next…sometimes there will be a plot twist...but most of the time you can predict…
Huda:	there will be some drama that you don't expect…

<div align="right">**(Adolescents, FG3)**</div>

…*Gu Family Book* is not the same…Because in the end, the lead couple do not end up together…Choi Kang Chu and Suzy's character...they are not together…Suzy died...Its fate…if they fall in love with each other…one of them will die…

<div align="right">**(Leha, 22, Adolescent, FG4)**</div>

Another theme that emerged saliently under dominant reading among adolescents is *parasocial relationship*. In the discourse of this theme, the respondents indicated that besides watching Korean dramas, they also indulged in Korean variety shows and reality shows such as *Star King, We Got Married* and *Running Man*. These variety shows starred by Korean celebrities showed a glimpse of their personality to the audiences. Although variety and reality shows are not at the center of our discussion, we cannot dismiss the discussion on how audiences follow

their favorite celebrities through genres other than dramas. In fact, it is argued that, their parasocial relationship with their favorite actors heightens the possibility of them (experiencing parasocial identification with the characters beyond the drama text.

The adolescent respondents' discussions on the eighth theme: *parasocial relationship (with Korean celebrities)* seemed to be more extensive and characterized dominant reading. After watching a number of Korean dramas, some of them even noticed how Korean celebrities have improved on their acting ability. The dialogue below illustrates this point:

> Like Suzy from *Dream High* to Suzy now in *Gu Family Book*…people say that she improved [her acting ability]. And from what I see, she did improve…did better than when she was in *Dream High*. The plot also...they change...like in *Dream High*, she played a high school student and then she played a warrior…they change, they don't do the same thing…Park Yoochun also, he's doing *Three Days*…they change [characters type] he usually does romantic characters…
>
> **(Iera, 19, Adolescent, FG3)**

> …the recent drama *Gap Dong*…? I think Lee Joon did extremely well portraying a psychopath…I think that's the most outstanding character I've seen….because I…when watching the *Gap Dong* and see Lee Joon…I feel..eh, goose bumps…it was scary…eerie…
>
> **(Ummu, 22, Adolescent, FG4)**

Not only the acting ability, the adolescent respondents were also aware of their favorite Korean celebrities' personality as shown in reality shows, which they perceived to be true.

> She's [*Girls' Generation* member Seohyun] innocent and knowledgeable…and she doesn't drink alcohol, one time in *We Got Married*, she drank alcohol and when "Ughh" (makes disgusted face), meaning to say, she's not in to it.
>
> **(Shai, 24, Adolescent, FG3)**

> Iera: There's this one actor, Cho Kyu Hyun, he doesn't smoke, in *2 Days 1 Night*
> Huda: Even Heechul cannot drink…and he is the only one in *Super Junior* that did not do plastic surgery.
>
> **(Adolescents, FG3)**

> Shai: When I watch *Strong Heart*, the variety show, *Strong Heart*…I actually cried when he (Jo Kwon) was telling his story when he was…
> Iera: Yeah..His story was really-really sad because…
> Shai: He cried and I cried too…Before this, I knew Jo Kwon as the vibrating dancing master…always do the vibrating [shakes head]…but after watching *Strong Heart* …knowing the hardship
> Iera: Few years of training…Hardship…training…training…
> Huda: He had the longest training days…8 years.
>
> **(Adolescents, FG3)**

The majority of the respondents also kept themselves up-to-date with the Korean celebrities' personal life and knew the gossip of who is dating who, which entertainment agency they worked at and how their real personality differed from the characters they portrayed in dramas, as shown in the dialogue below.

> I love Yoon Eun Hye …*Running Man*'s Joong Kok's girlfriend…from *Goong* and the heroin from *Coffee Prince*.
>
> **(Minah, 22, Adolescent, FG4)**

The adolescents seemed to have dominant reading on two themes which were *storyline* and *parasocial relationship*. The common storyline coupled with a twist was loved by some respondents, while others attributed the values portrayed in Korean dramas as heartening.

In conclusion, under the dominant reading of Korean drama media text, there were five themes, three of which were discussed previously under the adult groups (*male-centric*, *female-centric* and *storyline*) and two themes were discussed under the adolescent groups (*storyline* and *parasocial relationship*). The next section will present the oppositional reading engaged by the informants from the four focus group interviews.

Oppositional Reading

This section discusses the oppositional reading yielded from the discourses held with respondents on Korean drama media text. Hall (1980) defined oppositional reading as a situation whereby the audiences are in a complete disagreement or dismiss the idea inherent in the media text, even if they understand the message. Simply said, audiences do not accept what was shown to them as being the truth. The oppositional reading of media text showed that audiences were not passive viewers, rather were very much capable of developing multiple readings of the

media text, shaped by their cultural contexts, religions and traditional values while at the same time were capable of resisting and rejecting dominant reading (Livingstone, 1998; Chua, 2008; Straubhaar, 2008; Norbaiduri, 2007).

The organization of this section is segmented according to the two audience clusters, which are adults and adolescents, and the discussion will be presented with the themes that fall under oppositional reading. The adult respondents were found to offer an oppositional reading on two themes which were *realism* and *parasocial relationship*, while the adolescents showed proclivity towards oppositional reading for one theme which is was *cosmopolitan lifestyle*.

Adult Respondents

One of the themes that was discussed by the respondents that indicated oppositional reading was the discourse on r*ealism*, particularly the portrayal of unrealistic romance between characters from two different social classes. The majority of the working adults believed that the concept of love between the different social classes was over-fantasized, which caused them to have oppositional reading of the theme. The dialogue below illustrates this point:

Has: …like now we can see…the males are all in the top management…and all these men fall in love with some normal or poor girl, like the daughter of a grocery shop owner or a clerk…it's a bit too made up… fantasy, it's too much fantasy…a bit extreme to me…but sometimes that is what people love to see, so they [Korean producer] make it like a commodity that can be sold and use repeatedly in the other productions.

Kasih: People…I think from all over the world like watching Korean movies, drama series because of this.

(Adults, FG1)

As seen in the quotes above, one working adult respondent, Has (41), shared her thoughts on the narrative of Korean dramas where she inferred that the male character to be economically stable, while the female lead faced financial trouble. Her thoughts were echoed by other respondents in the group. They agreed that the gap in social classes between the two leads and how they overcame the obstacle was the reason why they continued watching Korean dramas. Meanwhile, Suzie (34) named a few dramas that offered the same sense of realism regarding love between characters from two different social classes.

There's a lot... *Bride of the Century*, *Boys over Flower*, *Rooftop Prince*, *and Master's Sun*…in all of them the guy is rich and the girl is poor…

(Suzie, 34, Adult, FG2)

Generally, the adult respondents asserted their observation of the 'fairy-tale like' theme that was profoundly present in a number of Korean dramas was based on their viewing experience.

even their love stories are a bit over exaggerated …it's like giving the girl a whole garden of flower rather than just a flower…it's not realistic *lah*.

(Has, 41, Adult, FG1)

The next theme for the adult respondents to have a seemingly oppositional reading was the eighth theme, which is *parasocial relationship*. Through the limited discourse, it was transpired that the majority of the adult respondents admitted to watching Korean dramas, variety shows and reality shows due to the attraction of the leading actors or other celebrities. They noted that some programs were entertaining and fun to watch, a few programs were informative, while others were just plain entertainment, to which they had negative feelings about.

Nazrah: Hah, *Star King*...and another show that gives a lot of traditional tips

Has: At home, I'm the only one that watches, *Star King* and *Running Man*…that's their game show

Kasih: I don't like watching *Running Man*...I don't watch it, it's stupid.

(Adult, FG1)

In conclusion, even though the discourse of unrealistic portrayal of romance was raised and received oppositional reading among the majority of the adult respondents, it did not deter the respondents from continuing to enjoy and view the dramas because they had accepted the theme as being commonplace in Korean dramas.

Adolescent Respondents

One of the themes yielded from the interview data which represents oppositional reading among adolescent respondents was *cosmopolitan lifestyle*. The major discourse among the adolescents showed that despite being fascinated by the cosmopolitan and glamorous lifestyle shown by Korean actors through their looks and appearances, particularly among the younger celebrities, generally, the respondents appeared to be quite critical about the obsession that Korean actors have towards perfect look, with one respondent questioning if Korean people all look as beautiful as shown on those dramas. A few informants were aware that the transformation of beauty among Korean celebrities, regardless of gender, through plastic surgery has become a common practice in their industry. The quotes below illustrate this point:

Shai: Some are very perfectionist…always want their skin to look good…so they go for plastic surgery.

| Iera: | there's a movie…*200 pound of beauty* surgery about plastic surgery |
| Huda: | that's what the boys always ask, "why do you like Korean actors, they are all plastic you know?" |

(Adolescents, FG3)

Iera:	Eh, Siwon (of *Super Junior* fame) did it? (Plastic surgery)…
Huda:	[shows the eye lids] Mostly Korean artists, they have their eyes redo…
Erra:	Yeah…that's right

(Adolescents, FG3)

Meanwhile, the respondents also commented on the fashion style that was shown in the dramas. To them the fashion sense was either cute, attractive and fashion forward, but definitely something they will not emulate.

Tipah:	I really love to watch *Heartstring* so…the way Park Shin Hye dress up
Minah:	Ohh yea yea…
Syazna:	Very simple and cute…
Ummu:	Comfortable
Q:	[Do] you dress up like her?
Tipah:	No no no [shakes head]

(Adolescents, FG4)

Minah:	They are um…I think their fashion is beautiful...up to date…even though it's not something that we can wear…
Ummu:	Eye candy…its good…
Leha:	Attractive…
Minah:	It attracts us to watch

(Adolescent, FG4)

For me, in terms of fashion too...er...sometimes it's fashionable and it looks good, but sometimes it's like a bit 'over'…sometimes I feel like "doesn't he feels like a mess wearing clothes like that.

(Minah, 22, Adolescents, FG4)

In conclusion, under the oppositional reading of Korean drama media text, there were three themes, two of which were discussed in the adult group (*realism* and *parasocial relationship*) and another theme was discussed in the adolescent groups (*cosmopolitan lifestyle*). Both themes received oppositional reading from the respondents that could be attributed to their own life experience or perspective on life. Meanwhile, the adolescent respondents offered oppositional reading of the *cosmopolitan lifestyle* theme, which may be attributed to their own perspective.

The next section will continue to unravel the themes that are seen to have negotiated readings by the respondents of both groups.

Negotiated Reading

Negotiated reading occurs when the audiences fully understand the message that is choreographed by the media producers; however, there is partial agreement on the message. Hall (1980) mentioned that negotiated reading ensues when the decoding process has both adaptive and oppositional elements, whereby the reader accepts some of the narrative and rejects the rest, according to his/her values and socio-cultural experience. In other words, the audience may accept certain parts of the message and disagree with the others.

The organization of this section is based on the two cluster groups, which are adults and adolescents and the themes that they saw as offering negotiated reading. The adult respondents seemed to offer negotiated reading on several themes which are *family life*, *cultural values* and *cosmopolitan lifestyle*, while the adolescents seemed to offer negotiated reading on five themes which are *male-centric*, *family life*, *female-centric*, *cultural values* and *realism*. It would seem that the themes for family life and cultural values had the same negotiated reading by both the adult and adolescent groups.

Adult Respondents

The first theme that characterized negotiated reading among adult respondents was the *family life* theme. It has been established that this theme has a substantial presence in Korean dramas, which often include strong ideas of patriarchy and Confucian filial piety (Chua, 2004; Lin & Tong, 2007; Espiritu, 2011). Korean dramas are also said to offer a form of idealistic portrayal of human relationships such as amongst family members, showing them as being family-oriented as well as respecting of the elders, which is admired by viewers (Vu & Lee, 2013; Lee, 2012; Chan & Xueli, 2011). However, this is not necessarily true as this research found that the respondents generally reported seeing both the good and bad portrayal of family relationships.

The majority of the adult respondents acknowledged the positive aspects of family life as shown in Korean dramas, such as eating together and filial piety, as illustrated below:

When it's time to eat, they always eat together...I mean, Malaysian as well, but sometimes Malaysian like to eat alone too.

(Watie, 39, Adult, FG1)

Only take the good values… Eat together…in dramas I feel like everything is kinda [of] acceptable…

(Mawar, 29, Adult, FG2)

Despite accepting the dominant reading of the positive family life shown in Korean dramas, half of the adult respondents further discussed the negative portrayal of Korean family life, which eventually overwhelmed the discourse.

And then when they get angry….when they start to talk they really seem aggressive…I mean the way they talk seems very rough, I mean… it's something that can be said nicely, but they tend to speak harshly.

(Nazrah, 31, Adult, FG1)

Farah: Siblings always hit each other's head when they fight
Q: Do you apply that action in real life?
Farah: Not on the head...maybe elbow them
Ain: I always follow the way they say.... "Yah!"… At home…'Yah!' At my niece and
            nephew.

(Adults, FG2)

The adult respondents generally observed that family relationship was often portrayed in Korean dramas to demonstrate both the relationship between the nuclear family members (parents and children) and extended family members, such as the in-laws as well as the grandparents that are not always good despite the influence of Confucian values. The observation is presented in the excerpts below:

… if they show a divorce couple…it really shows, when they breakup…the relationship with the in-laws suddenly stops…like in *Emergency Couple*…it's like there's no connection at all…

(Nazrah, 31, Adult, FG1)

A number of adult respondent shared how the daughter-in-law's character was often mistreated and to some extend bullied and ordered around by the in-laws. Some respondents also shared how the portrayal of parenthood in Korean dramas may depict bad relationship between the parents and children caused by prolonged misunderstandings as those involved were not seen talking to each other.

That one… *You're Beautiful*…the guy that looks like a girl, it shows that he is not...not in good terms with his mother …even when his mother wanted to migrate or something, he still refuse to talk to her.

(Has, 41, Adult, FG1)

Another theme that offered a generally negotiated reading by the adult respondents was the *cultural value*. The culture theme entails underlying sub-themes such as language, show of romance, food, respect and drinking routines.

On the matter of romance in Korean dramas, half of the adult respondents said that the newer releases of Korean dramas are more daring in terms of showing kissing scenes and intimacy among the lead characters, to which they found rather uncomfortable, especially if the respondents were watching with their children, as the following quotation shows:

Has: Hah, there's so many now… sometimes when the kids are around, and we want to
            watch...what do we tell them…I can't ask them to close their eyes
Kasih: Would they want too…
Has: Of course not…which means, as the mother I also cannot watch

(Adults, FG1)

Another aspect of the Korean culture discussed by the adult respondents was concerning Korean food, which most of them found to be very appealing as the dramas often make the scenes involving food very enjoyable to watch. However, at the same time they also wondered if Korean culture actually serves many dishes per serving as typically shown in Korean dramas.

Kasih: I think almost seven or eight dishes even though they are poor...
Nazrah: Ha'ah
Sue: I think one dish is enough, but they have so many small-small side dishes
Has: They always eat together
Has: ha'ah, eat together. Morning, evening, day and night always eat rice
Nazrah: And when they eat…they eat like...

Has: Like us, we eat slowly, when we eat we don't talk…but for them, even with a full mouth, they still want to talk

Nazrah: I guess they are just like that …Koreans…they all seem like that, when they eat the food looks so good

(Adults, FG1)

Korean dramas are well known for having alcohol drinking scenes. However, all the respondents were quick to add that alcohol drinking scenes do not affect them at all, as shown in the dialogue below:

Watie: Because we already know their culture is like that...so it doesn't affect us

Nazrah: Like…we just watch like normal…there is no weird feeling

Kasih: It's like watching a western production…

All: Hah!

Nazrah: It's similar…

Kasih: it really doesn't affect me…I never wanted to try

(Adults, FG1)

The finding may also reflect the religious belief of the Malay women respondents whom are devout Muslims, which prohibit the drinking of intoxicating drinks.

More than half of the adult respondents also praised how consistent Koreans are showing their loyalty towards their authorities and in asking for forgiveness from the elders or authorities after committing a mistake, as shown below:

Sheema: In Korea, if they respect, or they are guilty they will bow …

Watie: They quickly kneel…its automatic

Has: For example, if a person does something wrong …or makes another person mad, they will beg that person to forgive them by kneeling, as long as that person doesn't say anything to forgive the other person will continue to kneel, maybe that's their way of apologizing…we are not like that

Watie: as long as they are not forgiven, they won't get up…sometimes for days

Nazrah: Just sit, kneeling there…

Q: Example?

Watie: In the drama *Princess Hour*…there was a scene when the princess kneeled for days...she made a mistake and had to kneel to the king to apologize

(Adults, FG1)

Another theme that fall under negotiated reading by the adult respondents was the sixth theme, which was *cosmopolitan lifestyle* in Korean dramas with the focus on superficial desire such as being youthful, beauty, fashion and/or materialistic possession. The adult respondents generally understood the dominant reading related to the glamorous life as shown in Korean dramas. In terms of beauty, half of the respondents indicated that Korean drama actors and actresses are usually attractive and they were very aware when a drama production decides to use actors or actresses who are less pretty or are older. In short, the respondents agreed that Koreans in general are very concerned about face value.

If you compare film and drama…for film, the actors are not just about the face…In films it's not that important…but in drama all of them have nice and attractive looks.

(Has, 41, Adult, FG1)

Koreans are obsessed with how they look.

(Ain, 27, Adult, FG2)

Ain: Korean themselves place upmost values on their looks

Farah: If he's not handsome, he has to be really good in bringing his character to life …like Lee Bum Soo...I don't think he was the main actor….but it's not about being handsome or not, it's about the character

Orked: It means that his acting is believable…

(Adults, FG2)

A few of the respondents also pointed out that the scenery shown in Korean dramas tend to focus only on beautiful areas, which the respondents found may be a bit overdone, especially when even poor people live in areas that do not seem to be like a typical housing area, as shown in the discussion below:

Nazrah: And then their…scenery, there's not one that looks ugly, everything looks beautiful…the landscape…there is no scenes near the *longkang*, trash can…

Has: in some ways, that is not logical

Nazrah: Haa...it's like they don't have those things

Watie: The really poor are not homeless…they have a flat…but when they go up the flat, there's no flat that looks dirty or trashed…

Kasih: Maybe their place is really clean

Has: Ala, Kak Kasih, just because it's in Korea, doesn't mean everything is clean

Kasih: I wouldn't know, I've never been to Korea …[laugh]

(Adults, FG1)

It would seem that the adult respondents offered a negotiated reading on several themes which were *family life*, *cultural values* and *cosmopolitan lifestyle*. Depending on the theme, the negotiated reading may be shaped either by the adult respondents' family life experience, religious belief and/or cultural values.

Adolescent Respondents

The *male-centric* theme emerged salient among the adolescent groups under the negotiated reading. The majority of the respondents seemed to accept the mixed idea of a dominant and gentle masculinity as shown in the quotes below:

Ummu: I think the main lead is always…
Minah: Always like that…Always the rich one who seem arrogant…
Leha: Ego…Annoying…
Minah: But another character …the second hero is the respectful and the nice one

(Adolescents, FG4)

Ego…Ego is really big...Like in *Playful Kiss*, in the beginning Kim Hyun Joong did not accept [his own feelings]…he liked the girl but he did not accept the fact because of his ego…ego is really big in Korean dramas…each movie there will definitely be [an] ego problem….

(Iera, 19, Adolescent, FG 3)

Mostly, the adolescent group talked about the *male-centric* theme in a positive way, focusing on how the characters were caring towards others, were romantic towards their love interest and were more likely to get involved in domestic activities.

For me I like when the character…like Kim Won Bin in *The Inheritors* [the second lead]... he's faithful…you know he plays a jerk boy but …actually he is a nice guy right, he try to help Lee Min Ho cover his secret…

(Huda, 20, Adolescent, FG3)

Erra: I really like the teacher in *Dream High*...the one who guides them in… [in] *Dream High 2* ...I really wished he was in it…I like that character
Q: Isn't he always being bullied by his student?
Erra: Yeah, but he really takes care of his student…

(Adolescents, FG3)

Despite understanding the reading of Korean dramas' masculinity ideal, the respondents in the adolescent groups out rightly rejected the possibility of searching for Malay men with similar qualities to Korean men, and the intensity of the dialogue below illustrates this point:

Huda: I don't think I can see a Malay guy like that…
Dila: They're (Malay guys) SO ego…
Huda: If I find someone like that, I might be insecure, you know…someone might want to snatch him from me…better don't…
Dila: how can we get a husband like that…If Malay people do their hair like Kpop…it's like "HUSH…" [Disgusted face]
Huda: what are you trying to do…?
Shai: The pants…oh my god!! (Exaggerated hand gestures)
Iera: uhhh (gags)…! Flowers…
Dila: Right…if Lee Min Ho wears read pants it's okay…if they [Malay men] wear red pants… "What is this??"
Iera: it's because we have seen someone really handsome wearing it, so if you see normal guy wearing it, it's different

(Adolescents, FG3)

The second theme to have negotiated reading among the respondents was the *family life* theme. It has been discussed under the adults' respondent negotiated reading that Korean dramas were well liked due to their idealistic portrayal of family relationship. However, similar to adult respondents, it would seem that the majority of the adolescents reported reading of both the good and bad portrayal of family relationship. The positive aspects of family life as shown in Korean dramas that some of the adolescent respondents pointed out is illustrated below:

I don't know if the drama shows real family life...but if it's true then it is good cause they eat together, hang out together…and if they have problem they talk about it…

(Fatim, 24, Adolescent, FG3)

They portray good family relationship…Every time that…Always eat together…most Korean dramas show that

(Minah, 22, Adolescent, FG4)

Some respondents also discussed the relationship between parents and children, especially between father and son, which was considered as very important in Korean Confucius culture. A few respondents highlighted that the father-son tense relationship was usually shown in wealthy families. The following discourses represent that viewpoint:

Minah:	The father character always play the role of a strict, the one who doesn't talk with the son
Leha:	Yeah...The one that controls their family...
Minah:	the…the decision maker…
Q:	Can you give example of any drama?
Minah:	In *The Heirs*…the father is very strict and …force the sons to do what he wants. Like marry the girl of his choice, the son cannot decide for themselves or the father will cut him out from his will.

(Adolescents, FG4)

They also noted that the model of harmonious and close-knit family relationship which is loving and supportive of one another was more profoundly present among poor families compared to rich families. The latter were often shown to have a more complicated relationship as the parents were portrayed as being always busy, especially the father, while the mother was depicted as powerless, going against the father.

And when they have problem, like uh...with their mother they can get angry…raise their voice towards their mother just like that…whereas in our [Islam] religion you cannot do that, even an 'ah' is not allowed what more raising your voice…but in their culture is seems like normal…You don't really get any good values because when the children are angry they can just raise their voice at their parents.

(Leha, 22, Adolescent, FG4)

The third theme to have negotiated reading among the adolescent respondents was the *female-centric* theme. They generally acknowledged the dominant readings of female characters who were portrayed as kind, cheerful, forgiving, cooked well and was treated differently than the opposite gender as illustrated in the excerpt below:

Q:	How do you think Ji Hyo was treated after people found out she was a divorcee?
Syazna:	Mean…so mean, they bullied her just because she was divorced…but they didn't say anything to her ex-husband. Unfair…cause she's a girl…and she just keep quiet…let people talk bad about her

(Adolescents, FG4)

They also highlighted the characteristics that discredit female characters such as the portrayal of the female lead as being weak, must be visually beautiful, economically poor and sometimes childish. The dialogues below explain such view:

In *The Heirs*…Park Shin Hye is always crying…like, actually I like the drama but sometimes I just…I think why must the girl be crying all the time…relax *lah*.

(Ummu, 22, Adolescent, FG4)

Like acting cute…Innocent sometimes but I...I really don't like when they are childish …You have to be matured.

(Minah, 22, Adolescent, FG4)

However, some of the younger respondents also read some uncommon characteristics that are not expected from female leads, such as being empowered, strong and able to do what men do. A respondent, Fatim (24) shared her preference towards the character in *Jewel in the Palace,* which she claimed she had watched over ten times. Fatim loved the character, who was portrayed as being independent and did not easily giving in to people's criticism. The lead female in the drama was based on a real-life historical figure who became the first female physician for the King.

I like *Jewel in the Palace*, it was about women and her independence, so her acting was very real…to me…

(Fatim, 24, Adolescent, FG3)

Other than *Jewel in the Palace*, a number of respondents also mentioned other dramas that they read as resounding the concept of women empowerment and independent women who stand up for themselves and do not rely on men, as the quotes below illustrate:

I…I like funny character…in *Reply 1997*, Jung Eunji…Eunji, she is really cool. She bosses everyone, she's cute, and she's tough…she beats the guys…but of course, it doesn't influence me. The way she talks and everything, it's funny to see…Eunji is totally different, she's an idol, but she acted like that. She totally broke the cute *APink* image and became like a tough girl…

(Iera, 19, Adolescent, FG3)

More than a quarter of the adolescent respondents rejected the suggestion that the female characters were portrayed in gender-stereotypical manner in that the household chores were strictly performed by women. They resented the idea that women should shoulder domestic chores completely and highlighted that most Korean men as seen on television, could cook simple dishes.

Q:	Do you feel the characters are gender specific?
Iera:	Not really, in *City Hunter*, Lee Min Ho did cook…its mix…for girls it's cooking…NO…they do both
Q:	What about in other dramas besides Lee Min Ho's?
Erra:	In *Playful Kiss* also, Kim Hyun Jung can cook…doesn't depend on the girl...but I think in Korea the guys can cook…

(Adolescents, FG3)

The next theme that recorded the adolescent respondents' negotiated reading was the theme *cultural values*. In terms of language, the majority of the adolescents were aware that Korean language has informal and formal elements depending on the age and status of the speakers. They also pointed out how Koreans addressed an older friend.

The culture is different...I mean umm..if …if they are close…there are certain term… like…*dongseng* [Korean for younger sibling or younger friend], right…if you are close with someone, they can call you like this...if not, they cannot call you like this...

(Minah, 22, Adolescent, FG4)

Dila:	If they have different age, like even one month...still use "Hyung, Oppa" (term for older male)...but like, me and Erra…different months…we just call our name
Huda:	Even 10 days different, like *Super Junior*, the leader is born in early July, member Kim Heechul is born 10 days after…still call the leader "Hyung"

(Adolescents, FG3)

Some of the respondents also shared that they are slowly picking up the Korean language after watching a number of Korean dramas.

Huda:	Some drama, when release online, don't have subtitles yet…slowly we learn the language… sometimes without subtitle we could understand
Shai:	Yeah…[nodding]
Iera:	Yeah …we can understand what they are saying
Q:	You pick up the language..?
Huda:	Yeah….
Fatim:	A little bit…like *Annyeong* [Hello] and *Kamsamnida* [Thank you]
Iera:	There's this one drama…*Commitment*…The subtitle and what they are saying is different… so you go like "*eh, this is wrong*"…
Q:	You take Korean language classes or you just pick it up from the drama?
Iera, Huda, Fatim:	Just from the drama….

(Adolescents, FG3)

Another part of the Korean culture that the adolescent respondents took interest in was the Korean food culture. The respondents in general agreed that after watching Korean dramas, they became interested in eating Korean food, which was also portrayed deliciously by the actors who ate the food on the screen.

Minah:	[What is] good food and what is bad food...the quality of the food…they are really concern about it
Leha:	their food is very healthy…they don't like to fry more… they like to steam…like steam the food…I have tried *BiBimbap*…its very…very delicious

(Adolescents, FG4)

The culture of respect in Korean dramas was also noticed by most adolescent respondents, not only towards the parents but also to authorities and the elders. One of the respondents stated that despite Koreans having no *halal* and *haram* issue by shaking hands with the opposite gender, they politely bowed to each other, which she believed to be something Muslims can emulate.

Sometimes while waiting for the drama [to begin], I also watch some [Korean] documentaries and it really shows that how…you know, we as Muslim…when we see or meet someone of higher status than us, like the PM right…we shake hands right? But Koreans…they bow…even though they are not Muslim…

(Huda, 20, Adolescent, FG3)

Drinking is also part of the Korean culture that the majority of the adolescent respondents raised in the interviews. They acknowledged the prevalence of drinking culture in Korean dramas; although they disliked and rejected the drinking culture, they understood that drinking made up a large part of the Korean culture.

Q:	How about things that you don't like about Korean drama?

Erra:	their social life…they simply… drink the alcohol…
Iera:	Oh, they LOVE to drink…
Erra:	Yeah…so much…if they have problem, they will go to drink…
Huda:	we can expect…drinking
Shai:	They have problem…we can guess what happens next

(Adolescents, FG3)

The majority of the respondents also believed that some elements of Korean traditional culture were preserved in the Korean dramas, which showcased the country's history and culture to viewers. Nevertheless, there certain values that respondents noticed have drifted from its traditional roots, for example, how women's clothing have changed over time in Korea.

> Maybe, they also have strayed from their traditional culture…if you see in historical drama, the ladies wear a nice and long *hanbok*…but now, they wear miniskirts and clothes that don't even cover the navel…

(Fatim, 24, Adolescent, FG3)

Iera:	If you notice…how they wear...they cover their *aurah*...their *hanbok* [traditional Korean cloth], they have a cloth to put in their hand...you can't see anything except their neck and hair…
Erra:	Yeah…Islamic clothes

(Adolescents, FG4)

The respondents' religious belief seemed to affect the reading of Korean drama cultural values text as they were able to read and accept some of the dominant reading such as respect in Korean culture. However, there were some oppositional readings toward other aspects of the Korean culture such as drinking and skin-revealing clothes in modern dramas.

The final theme to have a negotiated reading among the adolescent respondents was the theme of *realism*. The majority of the respondents were aware of the social class differences between the two lead characters; however, the respondents stated they still liked the cliché in the characters.

Shai:	The rich guy and the poor girl…every single time
Erra:	I still like that genre

(Adolescents, FG3)

> Love between rich people and the poor people and then…there must be one women that is attracted to the same men …

(Tipah, 22, Adolescent, FG4)

The adolescent respondents also talked about how common it is in Korean dramas to have a love triangle plot, whereby a poor girl seemed to attract two well-off guys and how the rest of the drama focused on whom the girl chose. However, not all respondents were happy with the tendency of Korean dramas to focus on the love aspect, as shown below:

> City Hunter… it's more to Lee Min Ho and Park Min Young. I wanted to watch how he seeks revenge but it was too much about Lee Min Ho and the girl.

(Huda, 20, Adolescent, FG3)

This section has attempted to answer the research question on Malaysian women's reading of Korean drama media text, which can be categorized under three different categories; namely oppositional reading, dominant reading and negotiated reading. The readings of the themes regarding Korean drama media text were found to differ between the two groups due to the variables of age, life experience, perspective of life and marital status, while three themes were reported to have corresponding reading perhaps due to similar religious beliefs and cultural values. A summary of the findings is shown in Figure 1.
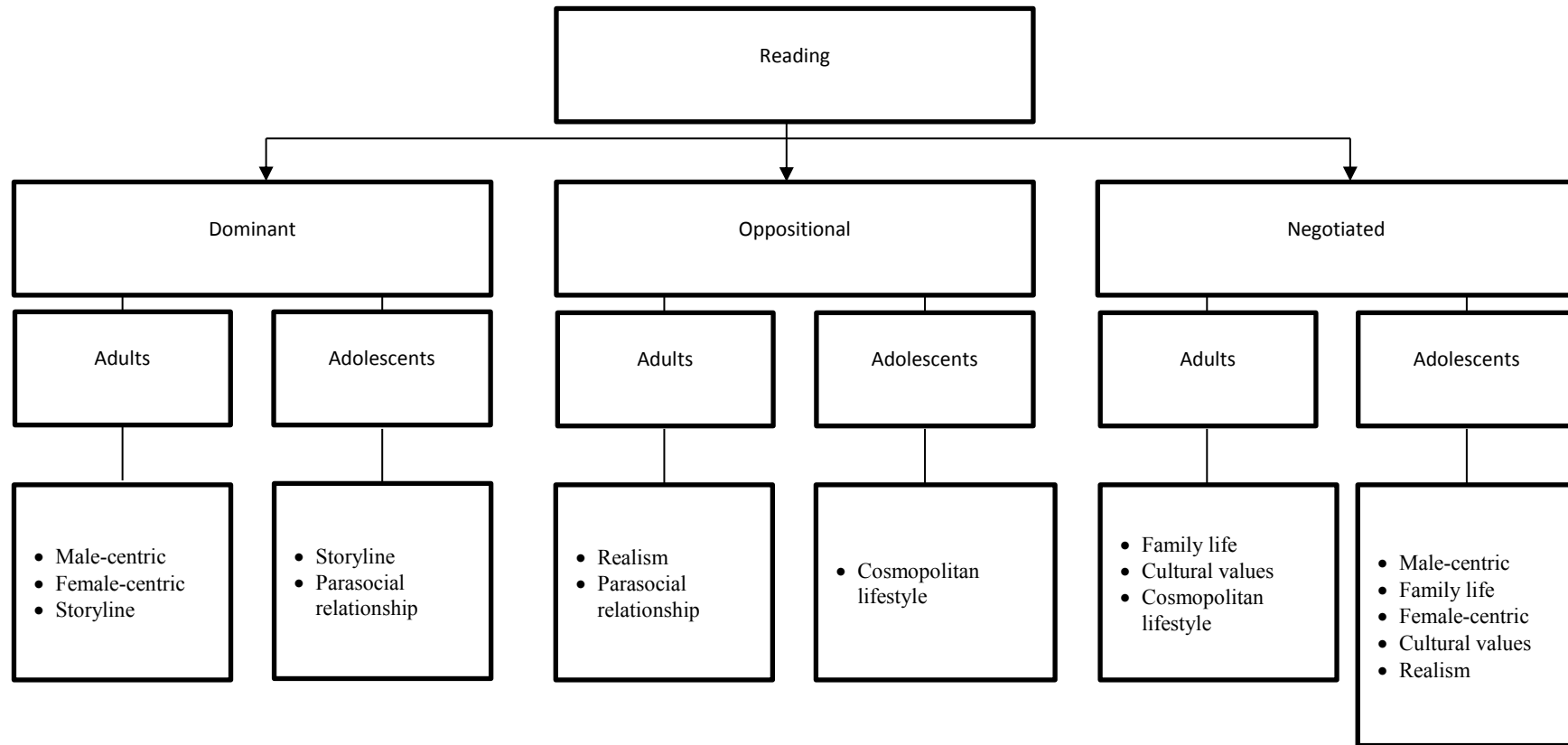
Figure 1: Summary of Korean drama media text Reading by Adult and Adolescent Respondents

Conclusion And Discussion

The main objective of the research was to identify the readings of Korean drama media text among Malay women. The proposed research question was, "How do Malay women read Korean drama media texts?" There are three types of media text readings according to Stuart Hall (1980) which are Dominant/Preferred, Oppositional, and Negotiated. The readings were tapped from four focus group interviews. Twenty-four informants who represented two age clusters; adolescents and adults became the basis of comparison to ascertain whether their receptions would be distinguished by their demographic difference. Out of the three types of readings, negotiated reading appeared to be more salient, especially among adolescent informants, as it yielded five themes (out of eight) from the adolescent groups, while three themes were extracted from the discourses of the adult groups. It is important to highlight here that negotiated reading is a decoding process which entails both adaptive and oppositional elements and is subjected to one's social-cultural background.

The adolescent informants were found to read Korean drama using negotiated reading for these themes: Male-centric, female - centric, family life, cultural values, and realism. The main resemblance between the two age clusters were cultural values and family life's themes of which both groups read the family life portrayed in Korean drama favorably in some aspects and unfavorably in another. Further analysis revealed that the idealistic portrayals of family life appealed to both groups, such as good family values, sense of belongings and filial piety, but at the same time they acknowledged the negative elements that were shown in the dramas, such as the head- hitting culture and harsh talk. It seemed that despite informants' fascination for Korean drama, they realized that they are bounded by Malay culture and Islamic values.

Another highlight of the study is how sex-role expectations and human relationships were central in the discourses. In fact, these aspects are quite profoundly showcased in Korean dramas particularly by the lead characters.

Dominant reading produced quite a marked difference between adolescents and adults in which the themes salient to the adult groups were male centric, female centric and storyline. Generally, adult informants read the drama in line with the dramas' mainstream portrayal. However, adult and adolescent informants shared similar reading of storyline. Both groups thought the storyline to be catchy, substantive, and unique and often raised how the storyline differed distinctively from Malay dramas. Therefore, it appeared that the informants, in general were critical of home grown productions particularly of its typical and mundane plots. Another theme that separated adolescents' dominant reading from the adult groups was the parasocial relationship's theme. It could be argued that the adolescent informants showed proclivity to continue following their favorite celebrities development and in some cases even argued that they knew their real personalities.

Oppositional readings yielded two themes for the adult groups which were realism and parasocial relationships. The realism or fantasy love showcased across Korean drama caused some concerns among the adult informants. Romantic gestures and intimate scenes were cited to be among the discomfort for the adult clusters particularly when their children are also watching the drama. The adult groups were less likely to engage in parasocial relationship due to commitment to family and career. On the other hand, the adolescent groups appeared to discuss profoundly on cosmopolitan lifestyle which revolved around the discussion of beauty, capitalistic, and materialistic lifestyle. Even though they admitted that they enjoyed those elements, that fascination was not translated into adoption into their real lives. They acknowledged that some of those portrayals may not be in harmony with Malay and Islamic values.

As the population sample of this study were Malay Muslim women, the findings were expected to differ from other studies related to Korean wave which typically sampled ethnic Chinese in Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong, who shared similar Confucian values (Shim, 2007; Lin & Tong, 2007; Lin & Tong 2008; Chan & Xueli, 2011; Yang, 2008b), as well as Japanese viewers (Iwabuchi, 2008; Lin, 2011) and Christian Filipinos (Espiritu, 2011). When religious and cultural background are in the equation, the findings may involve negotiated and oppositional readings.

Comparatively, Yang (2012) noted that the portrayal of globalization in Korean dramas saw younger Chinese viewers to be eager to consume and imitate Western elements as portrayed in Koreans dramas. This study revealed that Malay Muslim women did not show signs of abrasive and total fascination for Korean images. They were able to differentiate what to emulate and what to stay in the dramas.

In conclusion, the readings of Korean drama media text did vary across different age groups and was underpinned by the respondents' own background, including cultural and religious beliefs, as well their marital status and life experiences. Despite their admiration and love for Korean dramas, the respondents kept their own values intact when reading the Korean media text, as most informants indicated that Korean dramas merely served as a form of escapism from real life.

This study is hoped to make an inroad into cross-cultural readings of media texts. It sheds light into audiences' engagements with Korean drama and indicate reasons as to what led them to 'fall' for Korean drama and eventually became rather critical of local home grown production. Among the issues worth considered from this finding is how popular culture from an Asian culture is commodified and repackaged with capitalistic and westernized culture and presented to be 'authentic'. It is important for researchers in this region to chart the effects that Korean drama may have on local audiences and their culture and to ascertain whether they bring about far reaching effects on audiences.

Future research could undertake inter-gender readings and receptions of Korean drama. The focus could be on both divergent and parallel readings. A mixed-method would better illuminate this phenomenon. More demographic differences could inform us on the breadth and depth of Korean drama influence in our society. The study has its limitations. The number of informants was small and there were only four focus group interviews conducted. Nevertheless, the study has yielded significant findings that warrant further investigation into the phenomenon of Korean drama in Malaysian society. Future research may look into inter-religious and inter-ethnic dynamics among Malaysian audiences.

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