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## Analyzing the global increase in k-drama viewership through Netflix's top 10 ratings over the last 5 years

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### Abstract

The global increase in the popularity of K-drama which has taken place within the last two decades has completely reshaped traditional methods of advertisement and relevance of the media. The present study has opened with the history of Korean drama and its spread in the last century, the efforts made by the government and its transition during the pandemic. The findings of the research have shown how the government has offered loans to help the industry and the role of the musical industry in promoting artists. It has been observed that the unique narrative style and emotional depth of the research have led to increased cultural appeal. The role of Netflix has been explored within the research, the study has discussed how localization and adding subtitles and dubbing have helped in the content reaching multiple crowds. Investment in the production of original content for Netflix has been shown to be profitable as this provides Netflix with more rights over the product while using an algorithm to promote the content that a viewer is interested in. Finally, the research has discussed the role of social media, the use of viral marketing for the promotion of the series to attract new consumers and ensure the show resonates with them.

**Keywords:** K-drama, South Korea, Culture, Netflix, government, algorithm

### Introduction

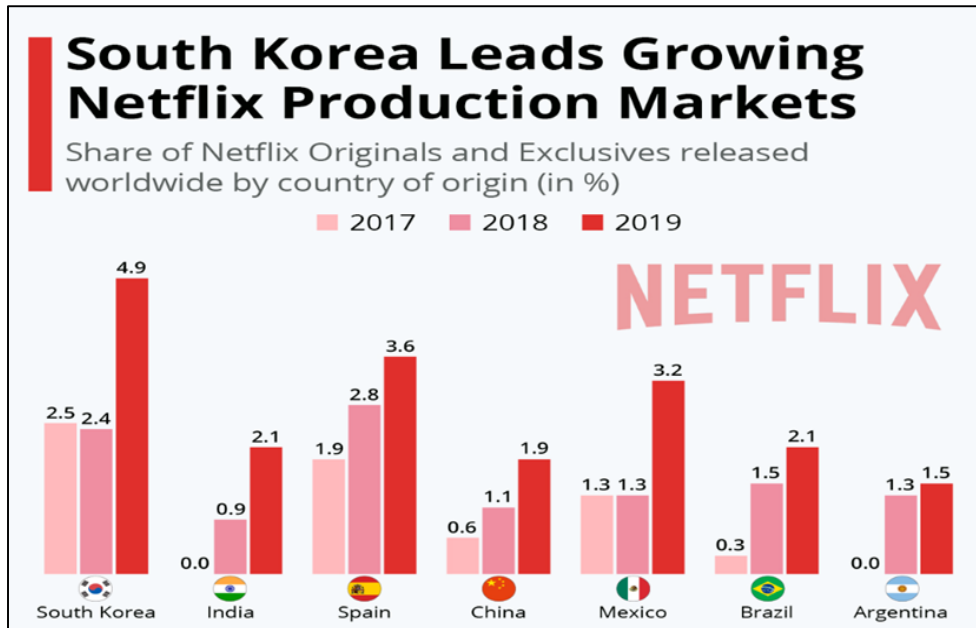
At present, Korean dramas have obtained the pinnacle of global success through their unique storytelling and high production quality. The popularity of Korean pop music and easy access to content through several streaming platforms have further helped in raising the cultural appeal. K-dramas have been produced since the 1960s, however, they started getting international recognition only during the 1990s under the presidency of Kim Youngsam. He understood the significance of the cultural industries of South Korea and used these shows as a national economic strategy. The first countries to embrace K-drama were China and Japan, dramas such as “What is Love All About”, “Star in My Heart” and “Autumn Fairy Tale” were highly popular (Sarkar & Yang, 2024) <sup>[31]</sup>. Following the success, the license fees for Korean dramas increased in these neighboring countries in 2002 and the productions were able to increase the budget for the shows. During the 2010s, K-dramas transformed from terrestrial broadcasting to online streaming, and the popularity of the shows and music in China contributed greatly towards the global spread.

Netflix became one of the first international streamlining platforms to enter the Korean TV and film industry in 2016 and since then has used K-dramas to boost and expand its subscriber base in Asia. Statista (2021) <sup>[32]</sup> shows South Korea as leading among the Netflix production markets, the company has been commissioning original content and funding production while purchasing licensing deals and co-commissioning productions. Streaming services such as Netflix have been successful in making K-dramas popular worldwide and helping the content reach consumers who would have otherwise never seen these shows. Although many of these shows deal with Korean culture and society, the universal message resonates with the global audience, making the shows popular (Aljazeera, 2023) <sup>[1]</sup>. Squid Game was the most popular show of 2021, the show highlighted the stiff competition, and social inequalities that exist in South Korea, but was also relatable in other parts of the world as well. The different genres and themes within the K-dramas also help in attracting different audiences. A study conducted in 26 countries revealed that nearly 41% agreed with the positive perception of K-dramas in their country (Statista, 2024) <sup>[33]</sup>.

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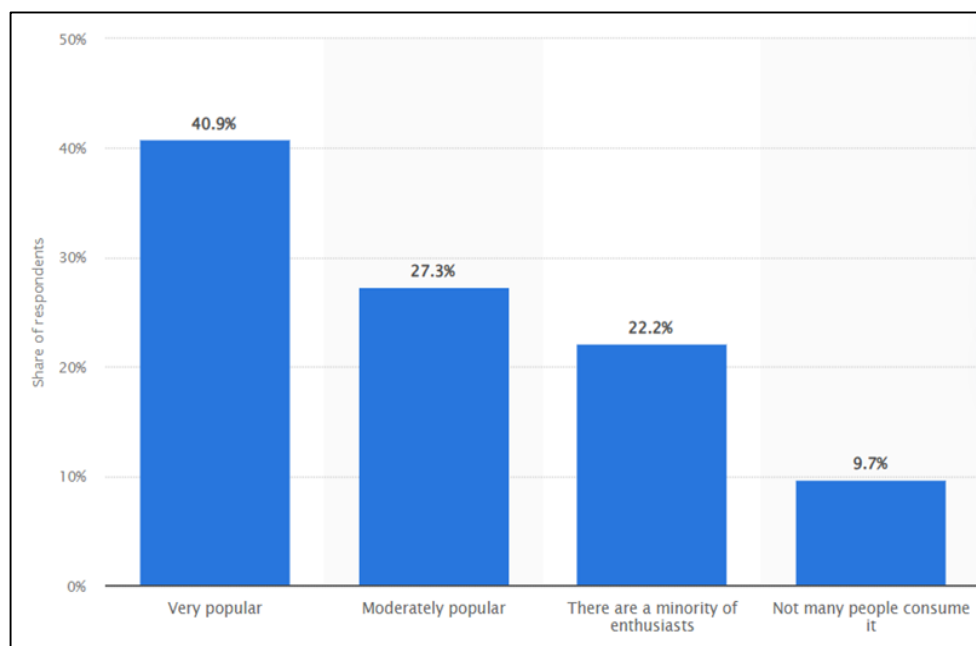
The study also helped in revealing the global success goes beyond the dedicated fan base of the shows, the purpose of

the present research is therefore to research this global increase in K-drama popularity.



Source: Statista, 2021

Fig 1: Netflix Production Markets



Source: Statista, 2021

Fig 2: K-drama Popularity Worldwide

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Past studies

Suratmi (2024) [34] in their research states that the global popularity of the South Korean culture is called “Hallyu”, it is a powerful public diplomacy tool that has been used to improve the country’s image and influence worldwide. While the popularity of K-pop groups such as BTS and Blackpink has helped with a surge in tourism, K-dramas have opened up new markets for entertainment companies, helping with their revenues and exports. Cabañes & Uy-Tioco (2024) [5] have pointed out that the popularity of K-dramas has promoted nationalism, which has helped push back Western influence. As most K-dramas are grounded in

reality and everyday experiences, the viewers are able to navigate through the Western and Asian values of global neoliberal capitalism. K-dramas are therefore a counter to the dominant American media as they highlight the alternate lifestyles of Asians. The research of Roslan, Nasharuddin & Azmi Murad (2024) [28] has defined the evolution of Hallyu in 4 different stages, “Hallyu 1.0” defines the beginning and development of Hallyu, when it started to spread in the neighbouring Asian countries, “Hallyu 2.0” refers to the growth of K-pop during the mid-2000s, “Hallyu 3.0 policy” was an effort by the Korean government to boost the Korean culture as a whole, with the current stage being “Hallyu 4.0” and its promotion of the K-style. The study shows that the

effort has not only strengthened the Korean economy but has also promoted cross-cultural dialogue and mutual understanding between different cultures.

Gatchalian & Handig (2023) <sup>[13]</sup> define K-dramas as a cultural phenomenon as it has not only captured the hearts of young audiences but also had other far-reaching impacts. These drama series can resonate with a large audience and are able to cross linguistic and cultural barriers. The study conducted by an (2022) has shown how K-dramas are able to show new patterns of diversity which have helped to attract a diverse range of audiences. Rana (2021) <sup>[27]</sup> states that the low prices of the K-series helped in its growth, the shows were able to provide impressive production to the consumers. The Korean production houses helped with the planned promotions that led to selective programming and international distributions and re-structuring the broadcasting system. The Hallyu impact has led to the audience being more aware of Korean culture. The K-dramas are characterized by the portrayal of idealized and romanticized bonds between characters, this has led to the younger audience being obsessed towards the shows. The characters of these shows also portray perfect body shapes and beauty standards, leading to a falsified perception of the viewers. Watching K-dramas has also been liberating for its global viewers as a study carried out in Pakistan revealed that the shows have sparked curiosity among different cultures (Saleem, Hatim & Jaweria, 2023) <sup>[29]</sup>. The success of K-dramas lies in their ability to portray characters that can break free from Confucianism and similar oppressive values, the shows show a mix of Western values and the urge to create an own free self. Studies show that K-drama is usually more popular among female audiences as the industry is truly post-colonial, the show depicts racial and ethnic melancholia (Oh & Jang, 2022) <sup>[22]</sup>. K-pop and K-drama are also successful in attracting female fans who are tired of the pop culture from Japan or the USA.

## 2.2 Theoretical Perspectives

The study aimed to analyze the global viewership increase for K-dramas and therefore constructs from social learning theory have been utilized within the research. Social learning theory believes that the behaviour and beliefs of a person are based on observations in a social context. The study conducted by Dacholfany, Saifi & Sulaiman (2022) <sup>[8]</sup> has stated that the attitudes and behaviour of a person are shaped by others in their circle. The theory is also based on socialization and the fundamental assumptions of social interactions providing context to the learning context. Social

learning takes place when people belonging to different backgrounds can interact openly and exchange information, this leads to the generation of new understanding and beliefs that serve as a foundation for effective participation. This theory can therefore be utilized for understanding the dramatic rise of K-drama viewership, as the theory explains that when viewers observe certain character traits in the shows, they try to copy them, this increases engagement and the desire to immerse themselves further into the Korean culture. Observational learning leads to the viewers being educated about Korean culture, internalizing certain behaviours and expressions that are exclusive to the Korean culture. Therefore, using this theory will be beneficial for the present research and help understand the increase in viewership.

## 2.3 Research Gap

A number of past literature has been analysed in the form of a literature review within the research, this has helped in revealing the broader socio-economic impact of K-drama on South Korea as well as globally. The studies have highlighted the contribution of the Korean government in promoting Hallyu and increasing the international reach of the K-series, however, the research on the contribution of Netflix in expanding the reach of K-dramas has been limited within the research. Considering these aspects, the major focus of the present research has been on understanding the factors that have led to a rise in K-drama viewership through the top 10 rated shows on Netflix from the last five years.

## 3. Methodology

A qualitative approach has been undertaken to conduct the research and the method of data collection is secondary. The use of secondary sources has helped in collecting large amount of information to aid the successful completion of the work. Journal articles, online articles published by top media houses and Netflix data has been used to provide the required insights. The key findings of the study has been presented in a tabular highlighting the Top Rating Korean shows in the last five years and the year-on-year trend associated with it. Apart from that, thematic analysis of the collected data has been done to understand the global increase of K-drama consumption with special reference to the Netflix platform.

## 4. Findings and Analysis

### 4.1 Key Findings

Year	Popular K-dramas of the year	Key trends and milestones
2020	Crash Landing on You Itaewon Class The King: Eternal Monarch Start-Up It's Okay to Not Be Okay Sweet Home Extracurricular Hospital Playlist Record of Youth Alice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. During the pandemic, the Korean government gave out low-interest loans and subsidies which helped with better development of the K-dramas and K-movies (Lee &amp; Kim, 2020) <sup>[18]</sup>.</li> <li>2. The musical genre has greatly contributed towards the growth of K-drama, people started watching the shows due to special appearances from K-pop idols (Santos &amp; Marques, 2022) <sup>[30]</sup>.</li> <li>3. Shows such as "Crash Landing on You" differed significantly from other shows, the wild action scenes show the hardship of living in North Korea. The romantic comedy-drama shows the diverse nature of K-dramas.</li> </ol>
2021	Squid Game Vincenzo Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha Hellbound My Name The Silent Sea Move to Heaven	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "Squid Game" became one of the most defining features of 2021, the show highlighted the problems of capitalism. The show's portrayal of poverty and class inequality also shows the potential of the show (Huang, 2022) <sup>[14]</sup>.</li> <li>2. The success of "Squid Game" has also been dependent on the increased popularity of the survival game genre and the overarching message (Nan, 2023) <sup>[21]</sup>.</li> <li>3. The popularity of K-drama made Netflix and the production industries inseparable, the practice of carrying out shows in different genres greatly helped in this growth. The focus on action, comedy and</li> </ol>

	D.P. Love Alarm Season 2 The King's Affection	romance made K-dramas more fascinating (Kim <i>et al.</i> 2023) <sup>[26]</sup> .
2022	Extraordinary Attorney Woo All of Us Are Dead Alchemy of Souls Business Proposal Twenty-Five Twenty-One Little Women The Glory Tomorrow Narco-Saints Juvenile Justice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. During 2022, the focus of the K-dramas became focused on global expansion and worldwide reach. The industry started focusing on countries that were similar to the US market. After the widespread success of "Squid Game", Netflix has been observed to have increased the number of Original Korean series (Park, Kim &amp; Lee, 2023) <sup>[26]</sup>.</li> <li>2. K-dramas have been found to not only invest in expanding their business internationally but also focus on hybrid technology and virtual reality to make their story plots more compelling. The research has found AR technology to be at the centre of K-dramas (Park, 2022) <sup>[25]</sup>.</li> <li>3. "The Glory" became one of the most popular shows of 2022, ranking in high numbers in 38 different countries, showcasing the potential of the K-dramas (Lee &amp; Hong, 2203) <sup>[19]</sup></li> </ol>
2023	The Glory Bloodhounds Crash Course in Romance D.P. (Season 2) Black Knight Queenmaker The Good Bad Mother A Time Called You Celebrity See You in My 19th Life	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. During 2023, cultural integration significantly increased as engagement with the shows was shaped by consumption. The effort of South Korea to expand on a global scale has only been made possible due to cultural hybridity which has promoted diversity and sustainability (Dang, Ahmad &amp; Hashim, 2024) <sup>[10]</sup>.</li> <li>2. K-dramas were able to influence the Western audience as they developed a hybrid identity for the consumption of the series, the emotional investment in the narrative greatly influenced this (Dang, Ahmad &amp; Hashim, 2024) <sup>[10]</sup>.</li> <li>3. The sense of community also increased during this period as more people started communicating on social media, through Twitter and Instagram. Sharing their views and creating a sense of community for discovering and learning about new content (Baid &amp; Gautam, 2021) <sup>[3]</sup>.</li> </ol>
2024	Queen of Tears Squid Game (Season 2) Family by Choice Love in the Big City The Trunk Marry My Husband A Shop for Killers No Gain No Love Welcome to Samdal-ri Queen of Divorce	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The high production of K-dramas is also another key aspect of the global prominence that has helped with the expansion of this media. The South Korean companies are known for investing significantly in production, set designs and cinematography and as a result, they have been able to produce a large amount of content in a short amount of time (Oktaviana &amp; Latifah, 2024) <sup>[23]</sup>.</li> <li>2. During 2024, a number of high profile releases have also taken place. "Queen of Tears" is a highly popular show, and although "Squid Game 2" was not as successful as "Squid Game", it still has been successful in getting a large audience.</li> </ol>

## 4.2 Thematic analysis

### 4.2.1 Themes in K-Drama Global Popularity

K-drama is known for blending traditional Asian values with modern Western culture, the hybrid products that are created transcend the natural borders and have a global appeal. The K-dramas deal with many unique themes which have cultural appeal due to the familiarity of the concepts, these genre codes make the shows reach the global audience despite the existing language barriers. The storytelling in these shows is compelling and well-crafted, and the diverse acting and filming techniques further contribute to making these works a success (Park & Jo, 2024) <sup>[17]</sup>. The K-dramas are composed of mini-series with storylines that deal with the concept of love, in comparison to the highly sexual and violent soap operas from the US, these shows have cultural values. The streaming services of Netflix have allowed these shows to reach a global audience and expand the competition in the Western markets (Cabañes & Uy-Tioco, 2024) <sup>[5]</sup>. These shows not only have a cultural appeal but also foster cross-cultural exchange that leads to cultural consumption (Fatima & Kewalramani, 2024) <sup>[11]</sup>. Although love is a central theme in many of these shows, they also touch on other emotional storytelling formats, from social issues to family dynamics and personal growth.

Over the years, the K-dramas have also diversified into many different genres which has contributed to increasing the viewership. Researchers believe that the traditional depiction of love on a constant basis would make it fade away and therefore focus on the sub-genres such as thriller or light horror (Kiejziewicz, 2022) <sup>[15]</sup>. The use of innovative and engaging depictions of different technological tropes helps in providing commentary on the problems of society, the direct experiences of the consumers are contextualized. "Squid Game" deals with the themes of thriller and suspense, whereas "The Glory" shows the

societal problems with bullying, revenge, crime and the impact which dysfunctional families have on children. Therefore, as it can be observed the shows have moved on from love and have been rather focused on different social phenomena (Liu & Zhang, 2023) <sup>[20]</sup>. The theme of change is constant in the K-dramas, they are constantly changing with the changes in society to meet the needs and expectations of the audience, boosting the viewership and enabling the viewers to live through new social realities. The themes are easily accepted by the audience and therefore the production industries do not have to struggle with the shows.

### 4.2.2 Role of Netflix in Expanding K-Drama Reach

The contribution of Netflix in increasing the reach of K-dramas cannot be overemphasized as through Netflix Originals, the organisation has boosted production for different comedies and thrillers. During the 2010-2019 era, Netflix has greatly focused on providing consumers with video-on-demand, this provided the consumers with a new form of immediate access to several different types of content. The OTT service market developed further as Netflix provided a proper streaming environment for their target market (김수현, 2020) <sup>[36]</sup>. In the research carried out by Chima (2023) <sup>[7]</sup>, the contribution of the Korean government has been assessed, through digital fan communication, K-drama has been promoted and spread abroad. The researcher considers K-drama to be captivating as it provides the viewers with an escape from their real life and local communities, the fans are also exposed to different cultural aspects indirectly, helping these shows gain recognition. Netflix makes sure the workflow is localized, and the subbing of these series is also done more professionally than before, showing Netflix's intention to hold on to the market. Through subtitles and dubbing, the



content is also made available in different languages, making the content more accessible.

Through platformization which OTT platforms provide, Netflix is able to gather data to improve their algorithm which is generally used to boost recommendations and suggestions (Dal Yong Jin & Han, 2023) <sup>[9]</sup>. These platforms help in the collection of user data which is then processed to help provide the subscriber with content based on their preferences and patterns. The recommendation algorithm which Netflix has created and perfected over the years helps in making sure that the users are assisted based on their previous selections (Yoon & Lee, 2025) <sup>[35]</sup>. In this context, the different genres within the platform are constantly upgrading and evolving through homogenization and heterogenization. The global success which “Squid Game” achieved shows the potential that the local production houses possess, Netflix Originals was created to partner and collaborate with different Korean TV providers. The attention towards the original K-drama series also shows the company's determination to expand its horizons and include more than just the previously used genres. This reveals Netflix's relationship with the Korean media industry and its impact.

#### 4.2.3 Media & Audience Discourse on K-Dramas

The impact of Hallyu has been influential across the globe, the demand for different Korean goods has significantly risen, and the viral social media challenges surrounding certain shows show the influence of Korean culture and the demand for Korean products in the market (Baid & Gautam, 2024) <sup>[3]</sup>. Hallyu content can be consumed across various digital media, through the engagement of consumers on social media apps such as TikTok and Instagram, markets can get an idea of which type of content goes viral and therefore they take appropriate development strategies for understanding consumer behaviour (Kim & Park, 2024) <sup>[17]</sup>. Creation and sharing of memes are a great part of viral marketing in the modern era as these reach out to a far greater audience and it drives widescale popularity for the show.

There is a strict difference between the reviews provided by professional reviewers and consumers as the ones provided by consumers are driven by their interest in their show or cast. The professional reviews are based on the cultural significance of the show, the things they portray and the representation. Market data shows that South Korea has emerged as one of the few countries in recent times that can produce its cultural content and make it a global platform (Bouguern Hamida, 2023) <sup>[4]</sup>. The Korean wave has helped in ensuring all people are equally influenced by K-drama, the themes and stories that K-drama deals with are all unique to the Korean culture but through their representation and shared stories they turn universal. Several Korean soap operas are famous for the songs which they use, the massive appeal towards the Korean pop culture and their music has led to their shows being more attractive to the people.

#### 5. Discussions

The focus of the entire research has been on understanding the global surge for K-drama, the findings have shown that there are many contributing factors which has led to the cultural appeal. The research has first discussed the significance of the Hallyu wave, the government of Korea

has constantly funded efforts towards increasing investments towards music, shows and movies to boost the local economy. Each of the K-dramas is unique and deals with specific issues which reveal social and personal issues, although most of the shows are rooted in traditional and cultural practices, the show offers a fresh perspective as the characters try to break free from their social constraints and navigating through their own identity instead of following the old traditional patterns. The culture and influence which K-drama brings are significantly different from Hollywood and therefore stop the latter from spreading. The research has revealed that the earlier K-dramas mostly dealt with themes of love, but recent shows such as Squid Game portray thriller while “The Glory” shows dysfunctional families and their problems.

The present research has shown the impact which Netflix had on spreading Korean culture through K-drama, being one of the first streaming services globally, the company invested in local production houses in Korea to develop original series that would be available in multiple different languages. The company has also made use of their algorithm to boost Korean content and suggest consumer recommendations for Korean shows. The investment in the original shows in particular has been the driving factor behind the success of “Squid Game” and the other popular shows from the last 5 years. The role of the media has been discussed briefly, in the present day, following and participating in social media trends is one of the ways to gain success and therefore many shows carry out viral marketing through videos and memes. The cultural representation in K-dramas is also something that helps with the increased viewership. The findings show that even though the cultural contexts are specific to South Korea, the representation of social issues become universal as people from all backgrounds are able to relate to them.

#### 6. Conclusion

##### 6.1 Summary of Key Insights

As concluding remarks, the present research has listed the 10 popular series from the last five years, the trends and milestones that were set during the period. The study portrays that the previous popularity of K-pop and the COVID-19 pandemic has led people to be more interested in K-drama. The study has found the unique and diverse themes within the shows to be one of the main factors that have led people to be invested in these stories. The drama series has also evolved with time and shed light on some of the critical social issues that are faced in South Korea, the diverse range of shows belonging to different genres has further helped in gaining a global reach. The popularity of BTS and Black pink along with other bands have seeped into Western culture, as a result, influence from them also helps in increasing the visibility of the series. Netflix also has immense contributions in increasing viewership, from promoting and marketing the product to closely working with local Korean production for the development of shows. Localization has been one of the best strategies for Netflix to increase their production while still funding international projects, investments in Netflix's original series focused on Korea have also been found to be significant for the present research. Overall, the study provides a comprehensive view of the different benefits which K-dramas have achieved due to the global increase in viewership.

## 6.2 Implications of the Research

As the present research has focused on K-dramas and their international viewership there are several implications for the media platforms on which these shows are promoted and the streaming services. The study has shown the positive aspects of content localization, for the future success of K-dramas, Netflix needs to increase their global appeal through content localization and ensure proper subtitles and dubs for its shows. The platform can create diverse content libraries which would catalogue the different regional shows. With the advancement of artificial intelligence, much of the content would become data-driven and therefore, Netflix needs to further diversify their products for better cultural exchange and innovation.

## 6.3 Future Research Directions

The findings from the present research have shown that the influence of K-drama goes beyond mere entertainment, as these shows are being used to voice against social evils and other problems that plague Korean society. The impact which this has on cross-cultural understanding needs to be studied, likewise incorporating primary quantitative research would have helped in acquiring first-hand information and opinions from the viewers about the global increase of K-drama viewership. Future research can therefore expand on these findings and incorporate primary data to strengthen the results and discuss the importance of cross-cultural influence on the youth.

## 7. Declarations

### 7.1 Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study does not involve human participants, animals, or personally identifiable data. As a result, ethical approval was not required. All data used in this research were obtained from publicly available sources, ensuring compliance with ethical research standards.

### 7.2 Consent for Publication

The author confirms that the manuscript has not been previously published and is not under consideration elsewhere. The author consents to its submission and potential publication in the Schmalenbach Journal of Business Research.

### 7.3 Availability of data and material

The data supporting the findings of this study were sourced from publicly available platforms, including Netflix rankings, Statista reports, and published academic literature. While raw datasets are not owned by the author, any specific details or processed data from the study can be made available upon reasonable request.

### 7.4 Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could influence the research findings or interpretations presented in this study.

### 7.5 Funding

This research was conducted without any external funding or financial support from institutions, organizations, or commercial entities.

## 8. Authors' Contributions

**Urvi Nikhil Kumar is the sole author of this manuscript and was responsible for:**

- **Conceptualization:** Developing the research idea and objectives.
- **Methodology:** Designing the study and selecting the appropriate research approach.
- **Data Collection & Analysis:** Gathering and interpreting information from various sources.
- **Writing-Original Draft:** Composing the manuscript.
- **Writing-Review & Editing:** Revising and refining the paper for clarity, accuracy, and coherence.

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