

Consuming Representations of Korean TV Dramas among Indonesian Muslim Youth

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Abstract

This article dealt with Korean TV dramas consumption among Muslim youth in Pekanbaru. It aimed to understand their interpretations on the television dramas. The values of being a Muslim was constantly under scrutiny by the image representation in Korean TV Dramas. As transnational cultural products, they were considered as reducing Islamic values for Muslim youth. Using ethnographic study, forty two informants were selected based on a purposive sampling technique in which they loved on consuming Korean TV dramas. This article found that Muslim youth were active audiences consuming and interpreting Korean TV dramas. This can be seen from two characteristics. The first is that Muslim youth consumption of Korean TV dramas was not dominantly done through television medium, but through their laptop. As a result, their position as an active audiences or viewers was obvious. This was because the dramas to be watched were not interrupted by some advertisements. The audiences could also actively watch them without depending on the schedule decided by television stations. The second is that young Muslims watching Korean TV dramas did not accept some representations contradictory with their Islamic identity. However, some of Korean TV dramas were accepted due to their proximity with Islamic values.

Keywords: Korean TV Dramas, Representations, Muslim Youth, Active Audience.

Introduction

The popularity of Korean drama among global audiences has been called ‘Hallyu’ or the Korean Wave. Started from China and Taiwan, it then has been widespread in Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia. It indicates that media globalization has been vital to support the popularity of Korean cultural products as globalization provides a significant effect on culture (Febriana et al., 2019). As a result of the rapid development of globalization, Indonesian people can easily access cultural products from other countries including Korean TV dramas.

In Indonesia, Korean TV dramas started to be received well when a Korean TV drama titled ‘Winter Sonata’ was broadcasted by Indosiar in 2002. After that, some Korean TV dramas were aired by Indosiar. One of them was ‘Full House’ – a Korean television drama that tells a love story--became a hit amongst Indonesian audiences. Due to the great response from Indonesian audiences, Indosiar aired reruns of the drama several times until 2009. In 2012, ANTV, another private Indonesian television broadcasting company, decided to show ‘Full House’ and successfully managed to get an overwhelming response from its audiences. However, there were also some Korean TV dramas broadcasted on Indonesian television that did not get much response from Indonesian viewers. One of them was ‘That Winter, The Wind Blows’ which was cancelled by TransTV in September 2013.

The above description indicates that the popularity of Korean TV dramas is unstable as Indonesian television dramas. This is because the fact that audiences are active in

selecting, choosing and rejecting the television dramas they want to consume or watch. However, existing studies on Korean TV dramas do not focus on this issue. Several researchers focus on the production of Korean TV dramas such as Claire (2015), Hyejung (2017), Brian (2016), Seongseop, Sangkyun & Cindy (2015), and Su-Hyun (2015). Kyungjae (2019) studies one of popular Korean TV dramas titled “*Descendants of the Sun*.” Other researchers put East Asian, European countries and the United States as the place of study. Some of them are Huang (2011), Park, Lee & Seo (2019) Ahn (2014), Jiang & Leung (2012), Jonghoe (2012), Hyejung & Soobum (2015), Chen(2017), Bumsu & Seongjung (2016), Lisa & Hye (2013), Shao (2020), Kim & Wang (2012), Kang (2016), Kim & Kim (2016), Oh (2013), Kyong, Wonjung & Dal Yong Jin (2020), Kyong & Dal Yong Jin (2016), Cho (2017), and Jung (2019). Some scholars study Korean TV dramas in Indonesia such as Jae, Seul & Sang (2017). They however focused on audiences in Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia.

A study conducted by Rahmah Ida among urban ‘*Kampung*’ women (2008) shows that the concept of ‘cultural proximity’ has a role in driving the popularity of Korean TV drama in Indonesia. She does not describe or explain the active position of audiences. Lu, Liu and Cheng (2019) also demonstrated about cultural proximity concept which could not explain the enjoyment of Chinese audiences watching Korean TV Dramas. Han (2019) also demonstrated that cultural proximity was not determinant factor for the popularity of Korean TV Dramas in Latin America. A study done by Man Ng and Shin Chang (2020) indicated the active role of Korean TV dramas viewers based on their findings that Hong Kong audiences did not get a high impact from Korean TV dramas. This was seen from their moderate behavioral intention travelling to Korean tourism destination viewed on Korean TV Dramas. A number of these studies started their argument based on cultural proximity theory so that they did not focus on the audiences as active viewers. This study focuses on Muslim youth who are active audiences watching Korean TV dramas in Indonesia. A Muslim, in this case, is crucial because this religious identity becomes a distinction with other East Asian audiences. In fact, Indonesian Muslim youth, according to Chua (2012), do not share the underlying cultural values of East Asians such as those in Taiwan and China.

Some Muslims identified that they had to be protected from the influence of Korean TV dramas. This was because these transnational cultural products provided negative influence and deconstructed the Islamic identity and culture of young Muslims in Indonesia. This then supported the study of Korean TV drama reception among young Muslims in Indonesia to be urgent. This urgency was based on the fact that they are not passive viewers receiving all messages and images from global media. Therefore, this study argues that the popularity of Korean television dramas among Muslim youth could co-exists side by side with their Islamic identity. This is because Korean TV dramas audiences, namely Indonesian young Muslims, are active audiences who do not receive all images and messages without rejection and opposition.

The concept of active audience is employed in this article to demonstrate two important characteristics of Indonesian Muslim audiences watching Korean TV Dramas. The *first* is that the active audience concept is used to provide a description of Muslim youth consumption practice on consuming Korean TV dramas. It seeks to demonstrate the active role of the audiences to watch Korean TV dramas. In this context, this article proposes that Indonesian Muslim youth consume the Korean TV dramas on laptop, not television. This brings the impact to their position as audiences or viewers to be more active than those watching on television.

The *second* is that the notion of an active audience regards that media viewers are not cultural dopes but they are active producers of meanings sent by Korean TV dramas. It revisits an idea stating that the media have unavoidably straight, great and influential effect on their audiences. Herbert Blumer as Quoted by Defleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) states, ‘...both children and adults acquire attitudes, emotional responses, and new styles of conduct from all the media, and especially from films and television.’ This idea was based on the perspective that audiences create certain behaviours after receiving certain stimulus from the media. Marris and Thomham (2005) argue that ‘this tradition was marked by a behaviourist psychology and a functionalist sociology and tended to focus on the search for direct, palpable, short-term effect of media messages.’ This characteristic proposes that Indonesian Muslim youth watching or consuming Korean TV dramas are not passive audiences. They to some extent receive, compromise and agree with some images and messages sent by Korean TV dramas but they also reject and oppose other images and messages represented on Korean TV dramas.

Methods

Ethnographic method is employed in this article to understand the Muslim youth consumption on Korean TV Dramas. John Storey (2003) suggests that ethnographic study is not conducted to verify the ‘true’ meaning or the meaning of ‘text’. However, it is done as a means to find meaning made by people embedded in their daily lives. Thus it is hoped that this article would provide a useful balance to the results of quantitative approach which usually uses surveys. While quantitative method usefully details the overall pattern of Indonesian youth’ responses toward Korean television drama, it cannot hope to explain why these response are made. Furthermore, the complexity of audience’s responses to media messages has led some scholars to the ‘ethnographic turn’ so that many researchers have conducted ethnographic studies of particular occurrences of media consumption and discovered involved knowledge about the process (Milestone & Meyer, 2012). There are some stages in collecting data in this article. The first stage is selection of Indonesian Muslim youth to be interviewed and observed regarding their response to Korean TV dramas. They are selected based on a purposive sampling technique. Those who love consuming or watching Korean TV dramas are chosen to be interviewed and observed. There are forty two informants are selected. The second stage is interview and observation. Interviews are conducted in the form of focus group discussion and personal interviews to know their understanding on representations of Korean TV dramas. Observation is done to understand their consumption practice on Korean TV dramas. The following table is a description of the number of informants based on their ages.

Table 1. Informants Based on Their Age

No	Age	Amount	Percentage
1.	16-20	15	36
2.	21-30	27	64
	Total	42	100

Note: These informants were selected based on a snowball technique. A statistical analysis was made by the author

Pekanbaru is selected as a research site because it is the capital city of Riau which is known as the centre of Malay tradition in Indonesia. Malay culture is identical with Islam found in some terms coming from Arabic such as ‘*Adab*,’ ‘*Sejarah*,’ and others. Even, Malay transcripts are influenced much by Arabic transcripts. A Malay person who is not Muslim is considered that his or her Malay identity is questionable (Effendi, 2010).

As a result, young Muslims being informants in this study are actually close to Islamic values since they live and stay in Pekanbaru.

Results

In this study, there are two important characteristics of active audiences among Indonesian young Muslims who are consuming Korean TV dramas. This part presents these two characteristics chronologically. The *first* is the consumption practice of these audiences on Korean TV dramas. Muslim youth in Pekanbaru were selected as informants of this study because they were traditionally close to Islamic values. This Islamic identity may contribute to their interpretation on Korean TV dramas. However, these young Muslims as other cities in Indonesia easily access internet from their personal subscription or internet cafes available in the town. Due to this fact, their way on consuming Korean TV dramas is changing. They no longer depend on the television broadcast.

The rise of Korean TV dramas in Indonesia cannot be separated from the role of Indonesian media in which they play an important role in disseminating them. In Indonesia, media have been enjoyed their freedom after the fall of Soeharto. During the New Order, media were under government's control. However, this did not prevent transnational media programmes to be consumed by local audiences. Korean television dramas in Indonesia was started by its dissemination mainly through television. However, the dissemination of Korean television dramas in Indonesia nowadays has been characterized by the convergence of media which is not only conventionally dominated by television. Dewi stated: *"I love consuming Korean television dramas after I borrowed a pirated DVD from my classmates. I do not remember the title but since then I start to engage with Korean television dramas intensively"* (Personal Interview, September 19, 2017).

Nuraini also said: *"I can easily engage with Korean television dramas rather than in my previous village. When I want to get some files of Korean television dramas, I can search on internet, or buys CD and DVD on the shop. I can also get these files from my friends who also love consuming Korean television dramas. In my previous village, I cannot buy CDs or DVDs of Korean television dramas easily. This is because there is no shop which sells them. Internet cafes are also difficult to be found there. As a result, my access on Korean television dramas was only through television. In fact, I do not have a television set in my rental house. I collect a lot of files of Korean television dramas on my laptop"* (Personal Interview, October 21, 2017).

From the above narrative, one can also see that television nowadays is not the only medium or instrument to consume Korean television dramas. However, most youth start to engage with Korean television dramas through television. Nuraini acknowledges that her hobby on consuming Korean television dramas then has been reinforced through laptop since through this instrument she has been actively consuming Korean television dramas recently. There are some reasons behind this. *Firstly*, when she stayed in her village, she did not have laptop. This instrument was not important for her at that time. During her study in university, she needs laptop to support her study so that she bought it. Furthermore, her connection with Korean television dramas is not only limited by television but it extends in the form of files, CD, and DVD. These latest formats are limited in her previous place, namely in her village. In Pekanbaru, however, they are abundant and can be easily found. *Secondly*, television is not easily brought as laptop since the former sometimes big and heavy. It is different from laptop which is easily brought because it is light. In fact, most youth in Pekanbaru who stay in the rental houses

are mobile. They commonly move from one rental house to another. They can move twice in a year since they look for the comfortable rental house as well as the cheapest one. As a result, these youth do not need things which are difficult to be brought.

For youth in Pekanbaru, television and Korean television dramas in Indonesia has unstable connection. This is because their appearance on Indonesian television is not steady. In 2014, for instance, Korean television dramas are rarely screened on Indonesian television channels. Among national television channels, there is Indosiar which can be identified as consistent television channel which screen Korean television dramas. However, Indosiar recently does not broadcast Korean television dramas. Another Indonesian television channel, Global TV, has started to screen one of them since June 2014 at 04.00 p.m. This television channel has broadcast a Korean television drama entitled "*Coffee Prince*" which was once popular some years ago. This old Korean television drama basically can be found and consumed easily through internet and CD or DVD. Most youth who love consuming Korean television dramas already consumed this drama through other media such as internet and DVD or CD. Therefore, they are not interested in watching Global TV to consume this Korean cultural product.

Furthermore, youth in Pekanbaru regard that the appearance of advertisements during the broadcast of Korean television dramas has support their unwilling to consume them on television. They consider that sometimes these advertisements disrupt their consumption on Korean television dramas. Lisma argued: "*I stay in a rental house called kos near from my campus. I love consuming Korean television dramas through my laptop. But, sometimes when I am not busy, I also enjoy consuming them on television such as on TransTV and Global TV. But, I do not why recently Indonesian television channels are rarely broadcasting these foreign cultural products. They often broadcast in short period. TransTV, for instance, does not broadcast the television drama until the end of its episode. In fact, I do not like consuming Korean television dramas on television because watching Korean television dramas on television is not enjoyable. There are advertisements. I, sometimes, during the broadcast of these advertisements, select other channels to consume other television programmes to avoid the boring advertisements. I also do not like watching Korean television dramas on television because, sometimes, the scenes are cut*" (Personal Interview, November 9, 2017).

This means that, according to youth in Pekanbaru, consuming Korean television drama on television has two important weaknesses. The *first* is that it commonly broadcasts old Korean television drama which was previously already watched or consumed by most Indonesian youth through other media such as CD or DVD and internet. The *second* is the appearance of advertisement. This sometimes frustrates them. In fact, their main aim to consume Korean television dramas is to refresh their feeling which may feel frustrated and stressful from their daily activities. Thirdly, television has not become the main media and channel to consume Korean television dramas among youth in Pekanbaru.

The *second* characteristic of active audiences found in this study is that these young Muslims do not fully accept or agree with images and messages sent by Korean TV dramas. This is because there are some 'contradictive' values with Islam which are also apparent on Korean television dramas. Aan said: "*Consuming alcohol among youth is 'Haram' (forbidden) in Islam but it is represented and depicted frequently on Korean television dramas. In Korean culture, consuming alcohol is commonly legal. But, in Indonesia, especially for Muslim youth it is not*" (Personal Interview, October 2, 2017).

Zulia also said: *“For me, being cute as represented on the Korean television dramas is my imagination. However, being cute does not necessarily detach from Islam. I do not want to remove my hijab so that my beautiful hair can be seen by others. Being cute does not only refer to hair. Cute faces, behaviour and heart are crucial for me to be shown. And I can learn from the dramas that cute faces refer to clean and white. For me, white and clean faces can be realized by taking ablution (menjaga wudhu) every day, not only just use expensive cosmetics. Cute behaviour and heart are reflected by ‘akhlak yang baik’ (good morals). I understand that the television dramas also provide some ‘akhlak yang baik’ (good morals) such as being honest, respecting family, being discipline and independent”* (Personal Interview, July 2, 2017).

In this case, meanings received by audiences are not monopolized by the producers of Korean television dramas. These young Muslims actively interpret the meanings sent. They actually do not reject all images and messages of Korean TV dramas. Nuraini argued: *“I think some representations depicted on Korean television dramas are close to Islamic values. I always watch representations in which Korean younger people respect to the older ones. On Korean television dramas, there is a ‘clear line’ between old and young people on their relationship. As other Asian people including Indonesia, young people should respect older people both in their home and outside their home. On Korean television dramas, this respect can be seen from the young players who bow toward the elder characters. They also express ‘Oppa’ which is used to call old brother. This is similar with Indonesian culture in which youth use ‘Pak’, ‘Mas’, or ‘Bang’ to call their older males. This value suits with my culture and Islamic values”* (Personal Interview, July 4, 2017). From the above narratives one can see that, even though Korean television dramas have been providing values of Korean culture, youth in this study regard that these Korean cultural products still provide some values which are not contradictory with Islam.

Discussion

Indonesian Muslim youth in this study are active audiences consuming Korean TV dramas. The active audience concept proven in this study is based on two important characteristics. The first is related to young Muslim consumption on Korean TV dramas. Their consumption practice on Korean TV dramas is not monolithic but plural. It is true that some Muslim youth still watch Korean TV dramas on television, but other Muslim youth consume the television dramas on their laptops.

In this case, the development of modern communication has supported the spread of more diverse media in which television as one of modern media has been challenged by other media which are easily brought by youth for their mobility. In line with this, Tambunan (2015) says that ‘these television dramas were distributed to many other countries and the development of the internet made it possible for streaming and downloading to be alternative modes of circulation and consumption.’

The diversity of interest and hobby of Indonesian viewers basically cannot be covered by television only. This then has supported the engagement of Indonesian people including youth to search other media which can provide certain cultural products in order to satisfy their hobby and interest. This is because television tends to offer media programmes which are fixed and decided before. Youth for instance cannot consume certain media programme on television at certain time since they may have another activity outside their home. The desire of youth to consume Korean television dramas for instance cannot be fully accomplished by watching television because television may not broadcast them. When one television channel broadcasts one of them, it may not suit their

desire because they already consumed it. Furthermore, television cannot be brought easily like hand phone and laptop. It cannot be put in their bag or pocket. Television is commonly put in a room in which its programmes can be consumed together domestically with members of family (Pawanteh, 2005).

Television basically can be watched privately when it is not put in the living room but in the bed room. However, most Indonesian people put their television in the living room so that consuming television programmes is domestically known by members of family. Therefore, consuming television programmes in Pekanbaru is practically not in private. When a member of family watches television just by himself or herself, this does not mean that he or she can be free from other members of family who want to consume it together. Other members of family who do not watch it still hear television programme screened. This will provoke them to join the activity when they hear something interesting from the television programme broadcast. It is different if a youth consume cultural products through his or her laptop. She or he is able to conduct this activity in private.

The notion of active audience has been supported by the emergence of the new media such as internet and mobile hand phone. People are more actively engaging the media which is much different from their engagement with television for instance. Recently, Korean television dramas which are available on certain websites can be downloaded at anytime and anyplace into their own mobile phones and personal laptops. As a result, people, with the advance of communication technologies, are able to use their mobile phone to watch Korean television dramas. People do not only wait the television dramas sitting in front of television sets in their living rooms, but they can watch them at any place from their personal laptops and hand phones. This is of course suitable with 'busy' people who sometimes do not have much time to sit in front of their television to watch the programmes. However, it also indicates that people's engagement with the new media is more interactive.

Nowadays, the active interaction between the producers and audience can be found. Before the rise of new media, people tended to communicate with cultural products in one way flow. This means that audiences cannot communicate with the producers. However, with the rise of new media, audiences are able to leave comments, feedbacks, and protests to producers regarding the quality of cultural products and many others. On You Tube, for instance, people could criticize the performance and content of cultural products shown. This indicates that, with the emergence of new media, communication is no longer one-way making the audiences more active than before.

The second characteristic of active audience in this study is that young Muslims are negotiating meanings sent by Korean television dramas. Ien Ang (1991) argues that audiences remain exceptionally complicated to identify, attract and maintain in spite of television's stable achievement in fascinating people's attention. For her, there is a deep difference between daily practice and official discourse regarding audience. In fact, in the everyday life, consuming television programmes entails a multiple informal activities such as eating food, drinking a glass of tea, reading books, and others. Furthermore, different uses, interpretations, pleasures, disappointments, and compromises among audiences are involved in consuming television programmes. The need to control the audience from the cultural producers has been regarded by her as the institutional point of view in which it is explicitly aimed at facilitating their ambition to get the audience. The television programme is the main instrument for getting the maximum audience. In fact, even though, the producers always try to keep the television programmes to be interesting, it is not easy to attract the audiences. The institutions or producers have to

forever ‘desperately seek the audience’ (Ang, 1991). Furthermore Barker (2000) said: ‘Consumption-oriented cultural studies argues that while the production of popular music, film, television and fashion is in the hands of transnational capitalist corporations, meanings are produced, altered and managed at the level of consumption by people who are active producers of meaning. This is particularly significant in an environment of ‘semiotic excess’ in which the widespread circulation of polysemic signs makes it harder for any dominant meaning to stick.’

These Muslim youth actively interpret messages and images of Korean television dramas. They propose that Korean television dramas depict some elements of culture which are in fact different from their own culture such as drinking alcohol and some others. Therefore, these youth are able to take some positive values which are represented on the television dramas which they may not find on their formal education. They learn on being polite to older people for instance. They also have the agency to oppose some negative values which contradict with Islam and their culture. They are active audiences who are able to leave negative values seen on the dramas. Paul Willis (1998) acknowledges that ‘human consumption does not simply repeat the relations of production-and whatever cynical motives lie behind them. Interpretation, symbolic action and creativity are part of consumption. They bring experiences, feelings, social position, and social memberships to their encounter with commerce.’

In different word but same meaning, Appadurai proposes the agency as the notion which supports the active audience concept. Even, rather than receiving the meaning sent by the media, consumer or audience can resist and oppose to it. Consuming media programmes such as Korean television dramas provides pleasure for the consumers but this pleasure is not opium for them. Appadurai (1988) states ‘when there is consumption there is pleasure, and when there is pleasure there is agency.’

Indonesian Muslim youths think that Korean television dramas are very valuable because they are able to produce and create strong male and female characters. These characters can be used as important references in their daily interactions. These characters are mostly identified as strong because they struggle hard to achieve their ambitions. The representation of this character is frequently interpreted by these young Muslim audiences based on their Islamic understandings. In Islam, the strong male and female character facing daily problems is supported so that Muslims can gain their life goals. However, this study has some limitations and weaknesses. It cannot cover young Muslims who does not have a strong Islamic education backgrounds. Therefore, the notion of active audience among them may have a different meaning. Furthermore, this study does not discuss the consumption of young Muslims on Korean films and music (K-Pop). These two Korean cultural products have also successfully attracted these Muslim youth recently.

Conclusion

Korean TV dramas are popularly viewed and consumed by young Muslims in Indonesia. Some Muslims are critical to this trend. They regard that Korean TV dramas can bring transnational values which contradict with Islam. However, this article finds that Muslim youth are active audiences. They cannot even be easily dictated by the producers of Korean TV dramas. Recently, they consume Korean TV dramas on a laptop. They may not watch Korean TV dramas on television because they already consumed them on their laptops. Furthermore, they are also active audiences because they actively interpret meanings sent by Korean TV dramas. These young Muslims understood about positive images and values represented on Korean television drama. Muslim youth in

Pekanbaru were able to select values from the television dramas. They do not just swallow all the messages and representations of Korean television dramas. Furthermore, the popularity of Korean television dramas among Muslim youth could co-exists side by side with their Islamic identity. This is because Korean TV dramas audiences, namely Indonesian young Muslims, are able to interpret some images and messages of Korean TV dramas based on their Islamic values. This findings bring implication for further reasearch about the response of religious authority in Indonesia such as the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) to this phenomena. Furthermore, this findings also challenge further study on the issue of Western cultural products among Muslim youth in Indonesia.

Conflict of Interest

I certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial, personal, or other relationships with other people or organization related to the material discussed in the manuscript.

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