

# Korean Media Strategies: Gaining and Sustaining the Popularity of Korean's Drama in Malaysia

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**Abstract—** The rising in popularity of Korean entertainment contents in Asia has created a boom in the entertainment industry. TV drama series in Korea have become the most favorite media genre. As consequences, Malaysian viewers are prone to Korean dramas compared to other Asian dramas. The purpose of this study is to understand the Korean's media strategies to continuously gaining and sustaining the popularity of Korean's drama in Malaysia. The success of the Korean drama industry can provide inspiration and motivation as well as encouragement to propel the Malaysian drama industry to emulate the glorious future as what the Korean Wave has achieved. The strategy and approach of the Korean drama industry then could be applied and exploited for the Malaysian drama industry to success globally.

**Index Terms—** TV drama, Malaysian viewers, Korean drama, popularity, media strategy, Malaysian audiences, foreign market. Industry

## I. INTRODUCTION

Korea has developed a new sense of globalization, the culture industry and newly forming Asia in a short time span. The emergence of the Korean popularity news has moved forward to European countries and spread as a new culture phenomena around the world. In the past few years, the popularity of Korean television dramas, songs and movies skyrocketed across North and Southeast Asia, more so in countries such as Japan, China, Mongolia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand.

The popularity of Korean music and dramas are noticeable in Malaysia through the immense flow of their singers and actors into the country. This is due to the fact that Malaysian radio and television stations have begun to subscribe to and incorporated Korean music and dramas into their local programmes. Looking back, Korean drama TV series have become popular since 2002 with the production of highly acclaimed traditional romantic drama "Winter Sonata". Since then, there are a number of dramas that have emerged and have become favourites of Malaysian audiences such as "Deajanggum, Boys Over Flowers", "Full House" and "City Hunter". Apart from that, this situation raised the question of the ability of Korean drama to penetrate Malaysian market, thus cultivating the minds of Malaysians. Salleh (2011) did not include Asian dramas in his study but only addressed Western dramas and its impact on the audiences mind. He found that most of Malaysian families interviewed admitted that viewing television, especially foreign dramas, were mainly for entertainment purpose. 'While watching television

dramas, the viewers learned new ideas and information. Not much information is accepted at face value, particularly if such information contradicted with their core values, especially pertaining to religious teaching.' Malaysian families also showed their support and willingness to adopt new attitudes and ways of life shown in television dramas only when they believe it could improve their lives. Indeed, many of the families admitted that life in the west shown in foreign dramas were generally high standard but they did not indicate any desire to live overseas or lead a Western kind of lifestyle (Salleh, 2011). According to Sang (2010), although Korean television drama has been popular in Asia, it was not something that was initially planned by the Korean government. Sang, noted that historically, South Korean government has invested in the development of popular culture, but Korean Wave was not a planned phenomenon and the government was unprepared to maintain it. Also, the Korean entertainment industry was focusing on profits, rather than trying to provide an upgraded version of its products. For many critical reasons, Korean Wave faced a sudden decline. However, recognizing the potential of television drama in Asian region, the Korean government began to take progressive steps. From then on, Sang (2010) explained more that the South Korean government has recognized the importance of maintaining and reinitiating Korean Wave all over Asia, as well as the importance of spreading its popularity to places where Korean Wave is unknown. The reinitiating of Korean Wave no longer focused merely on economic benefits but are reflected in their long-term policy, in the belief that Korean Wave would play an important role in upgrading the image of South Korea's national brand. However, there is no clear statement of how the Korean government will plan or execute it in order to maintain and gain popularity in the future. Previous studies have also not indicated the media strategies that have been used by Korean to maintain their name in the future.

## II. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Lee (2004), Cho (2005), Kim and Ryoo (2007), Tunstall (2008) and Ju (2010) explained that within Korea itself, TV drama series have become the most popular media genre and are greatly preferred by average television viewers. Having said that, Kim (2009) noted that the popularity of Korean music and dramas have been an object of heated discussions around the East and Southeast Asia since the end of 1990s. Previous studies on Korean dramas argued on two major areas: the first argument is that the factor that has helped the success of Korean dramas is due to the less expensive market price. Kim (2007), Yeon (2008) and Ryo (2009) mentioned that apart from audiences' acceptance, beauty, good looks and celebrity culture, another main factor that has been able to

attract most people to buy Korean products is in its cheaper price compared to the Japanese and Hong Kong dramas.

The second argument is in the range of cultures. According to Ching (2000), Hayashi & Lee (2007), Lee, (2008), Ju (2010) and Vu (2011), the similarity between Asian cultures in certain aspects (respect for elders, strong family relationships, love and do not show the sexuality publicly); has been able to attract Asian audiences to watch Korean dramas. There are also other several factors that are discussed as noted by Vu (2011) including cultural proximity, modern consumerism. Concerted efforts involving politics and economics have also contributed to the success of Korean dramas. The popularity of the Korean dramas into East and Southeast Asia with their own culture and approach has clearly shown the need for other countries, especially Malaysia to study and understand on how the Koreans managed to penetrate an international market and at the same time be able to maintain their culture. It also seems to suggest that the Korean media must play an important role to make it a success.

### III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTION

This study is to understand the Korean media strategies to gain and maintain the popularity of Korean's drama in Malaysia. The following research is:

What are the Korean media strategies to gain and maintain the popularity of Korean's television drama in Malaysia?

The success of the Korean drama industry can provide inspiration and motivation as well as encouragement to propel the Malaysian drama industry to emulate the glorious future as what the Korean Wave has achieved. The strategy and approach of the Korean drama industry then could be applied and exploited for the Malaysian drama industry to success globally.

### IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

The popularity of Korean dramas has attracted a great amount of attention from researchers recently. Most studies show that Korean dramas is now part of a globalizing world and that Korean popular culture has substantial number of followers outside the country. This debate can be categorized into two types.

The first type of research on Korean drama was related to the market and pricing of Korean dramas. Kim (2007) noted that the story of compressed industrialization is an experience shared by many Asian nations, and thus helps to explain the popularity of dramas such as 'Winter Sonata' among so many people throughout Asia. He then reiterated that Korean dramas that depict a modern exterior with traditional values provide a nostalgic relief for the Seoulites' ultra-modern cosmopolitan life. Yeon (2008), continued that the reasonable price of Korean popular culture, such as music, television dramas, and movies was one of the main factors that attracted Asian production companies to purchase Korean products at the beginning of the Korean Wave. In 2000, Korean television dramas were cheaper by a quarter of the price of Japanese ones, and a tenth of the price of Hong Kong television dramas. In contribution to this, the economic crisis in Asia quickly led Asian buyers to prefer cheaper Korean products compared to Japanese products. Yeon also mentioned that the popularity of Korean dramas in Malaysia has in fact, contributed to a high appreciation towards Korean culture, language and fashion amongst the younger generation. However, some scholars

viewed that the factor of cheaper prices of Korean dramas is not sufficient enough to bring about their popularity. This is as the actors and actresses' good-looks also play an important role towards the upsurge of Korean dramas popularity. According to Ryoo (2009), initially, as the regional exposure to South Korean drama increased, the programming has resonated with Asian audiences and their popularity has grown. Therefore, many Asian television companies started to be interested in broadcasting South Korean shows as their productions were impressive-looking and their syndication was inexpensive. The second type of research looks into the cultural aspects that reinforced the Korean wave. Ching (2000) said that the importance of conceptualizing the Korean Wave is not only to understand its unique characteristics, but also to investigate integrated industrial conjunctures within and outside the region. In fact, Ching asserts that the Korean Wave is "a transnational form of cultural production and consumption very different from cultural forms heretofore associated with nation states."

Adding to that, Ju (2010), said that the spread of Korean pop culture throughout Asia has been accelerated in a large part of media commodification. The nationally-supported commercial drive in Korea took advantage of demands for media content by the Asian region and this has created new outlets for Korea's cultural products (Ju, 2010). Asian media often view the Korean wave as a celebrated national triumph. This media content has had a significant impact on the regional media scene. This has made Asians actively rethink what Korean Wave is. Vu (2011), in his article of 'Soap Operas as a Matchmaker: A Cultivation Analysis of the Effects of South Korean TV Dramas on Vietnamese Women's Marital Intentions', concluded that there were several factors that constituted the triumph of Korean dramas. First, many studies found that the genre's viewers frequently refer cultural proximity as one of the reasons for their passion toward Korean dramas. This affinity includes cultural values and social norms that are shared between Korean and other East Asian societies. Second, South Korean dramas adoption of romantic love and emotion-ridden stories, which are often told from women perspective, has enthralled a large number of audiences in East Asia. Third, another common feature in South Korea dramas is modern consumerism. Vu (2011) quoted from Yang (2008) said, a major selling point for these trendy dramas, is to "use the idol to sell idol-related commodities". Realizing this as a profitable business package, Korean dramas rely heavily on attractive men and beautiful women, who dress meticulously.

Finally, the success of Korean dramas in particular is based on concerted efforts involving politics and economic, rather than just content and technology improvements. Based on the previous studies mentioned above, the researcher came with the knowledge that there needs to further study and explain not only the media content and cultural perspectives but also the Korean media strategy approaches. It has; in fact, fail to highlight the type of media strategies that are implemented by South Korean productions for their drama series that has enabled them to attract a vast amount of Asian audiences, mainly in Malaysia. The strategies and approaches used by the South Korean media are significantly important to understand the virtues of Korean media in penetrating international market including Malaysia. According to Hennick, Hutter & Baily (2011), qualitative research is most suitable to address 'why' questions to explain and understand

issues or 'how' questions that describe processes or behaviour. This further enforces the reason behind why the researcher has decided to use qualitative method as the research methodology as it enables the researcher to understand how the Korean dramas gaining and maintaining the popularity in Malaysia. In order to fulfill the objectives of this study, the researcher decided to use the method of in-depth interviews in the form of face-to-face interview with four (4) respondents which divided into two (2) from Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and other two (2) from Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS).

#### V. FINDING

Surprisingly, the respondent admitted they do not have a strategy oriented body but, they do have a department that is actively seeking popularity and exporting sales. Based on the interviews, the explanation are reflects into two different dimensions which can be elaborated to examine the Korean media strategies. The result are i) customers and, ii) foreign market.

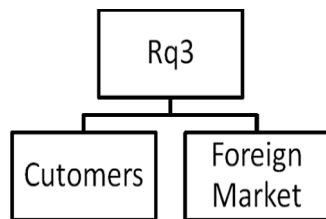


Fig 1: Model of Rq3

According to scholars (e.g., Boddewyn & Hansen, 1977; Hill & Still, 1984; Jain, 1989; Walters, 1986; Wind & Douglas, 1972), differences in culture can affect acceptance of marketing standardization. As mentioned in the association with product characteristics, differences between national cultures possibly influenced product adaptation decisions, in particular for consumer products, since culture, encompassing all the activities of social heritages (Cateora & Graham, 2001), is the basis on which people think and behave in a similar or different way. (Oba, 2007). Due to that, the respondents highly appreciate and value customers' opinion and needs. For them, all the requests and suggestions of the customer is a major task to tackle for the Korean media. Undoubtedly, Malaysia is a unique country with various races and diversified cultures. The Korean media believe that with these advantages, Malaysians are more open to other cultures and capable to accept different perspectives. According to the respondents, these are the elements that the Malaysian audiences could accept and enjoy while watching Korean television dramas besides of its storyline. It is crucial to understand the outside market such as Malaysia before venturing into any marketing strategy. One of the respondents also admitted that opportunity to live in Malaysia and was once employed as a consultant in Malaysian Radio Television, Angkasapuri where he works closely with TV3 and ASTRO, gave him a chance to learn as much as possible on Malaysian broadcasting and explored Malaysian needs and requirements of television program.

As a result, preparing a product based on customer's need, will have caused a better selling and a better influence (Mohammadian & Mohammadreza, 2012). Therefore, to captivate Malaysian audiences, Korean media broadcasting made an effort by providing a translation in Malay or English language to every drama that aired in Malaysia. Customer is a

major part in any marketing and it is essential to review their needs and requirements from time to time. At the point of foreign market, the respondents point out the imbalance of Korean economy production. He said that the Korean local market is small whereas Korean productions are increasing every year. Therefore, it forces them to venture out for other markets outside Korea. They have to make it more vary and have to secure the market overseas. Basically the exploration of the market are not limited to Asian countries or China, but to the Middle-East, Europe. In pre-production period, normally they prepare everything and consider all the overseas market from the very beginning. As mentioned by Yang (2008), Korean drama is seen as an example of successful packaging of national culture into a commodity to generate profit from overseas markets and thus increase national competitiveness in the global economy.

In addition, strategic cooperation and cultural partnership to strengthen and stabilize the regional media industry is a great opportunity to upgrade Korea's own media capability, as well as broadening Korea's current media business in foreign markets (Ju, 2010). The exportation of Korean dramas has created a number of commercial tactics targeting foreign media markets. To reach broader foreign markets, a systemic business strategy has routinely been implemented by the Korean television industry. In this case, the respondent stressed out that their first strategy is to place Korean channels in other targeted countries for free to create a familiarization among foreign audiences. When there is a response and attention from the country, then only payment will be imposed to continue the program. Interestingly, Korean productions have been willing to take a risk to implement their strategy. In order to be known in Malaysia, the respondent admitted that in Malaysia they have implemented a different approach whereby they initially paid Malaysian channel such as ASTRO to broadcast their program. One of the important strategies of Korean television stations is employing foreign media facilities and investments. Due to the business in the regional media sphere, the Korean broadcasting system became well aware of the importance of business cooperation with neighboring media firms and markets. In turn, sharing regional media infrastructure – programming facilities, advanced technology, financial investment, and expert production crews – is recognized as a precious asset for the Korean television industry itself (Ju, 2010).

In order to gain and maintain the popularity of Korean dramas in Malaysia, the understanding of Malaysian audiences is the main objective. With the knowledge that Korean drama is the most popular genre among other Korean programs, Korean broadcasting decided to increase more of the dramas in order to fulfill Malaysian's interests such as romantic and mellow dramas with some custom modern devices. As said by Ju (2010), this flow varies depending on the size of the local media market, ownership of media entities, the level of industrial development within a locale, and cultural preferences among local media consumers. There is no doubt that the popularity of Korean dramas is simultaneous with the advancement of internet technology and that allows for better spreading of Korean dramas throughout the world in a faster way. Furthermore, the audience had the opportunity to communicate straight with the actor and continuously get any information that is related to their favorite drama more easily.

V. CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore the Korean drama in attracting Malaysian audiences, investigate the strategies of Korean media broadcasters in promoting Korean drama's, as well as understanding the Korean media strategies to gain and maintaining the popularity of Korean's drama in Malaysia. This finding has in fact would be contributing a significant knowledge to gain and maintain the popularity of Korean dramas, the Korean broadcasters always believe preparing a product based on customer's needs have caused a better selling. They learn to understand the audiences as well as the current foreign market. Due to that they have successful packaging of national culture into a commodity to generate profit from overseas markets and thus increase national competitiveness in the global economy. In additional, they also create a strategic cooperation and cultural partnership to strengthen and stabilize the regional media industry. Like any other business, identifying targeted audience needs and desires is very important. As a country that had never been known before, the courage to take risks in business is a great step. This study assessed that what people do to be known by others. The Korean media realize that the western drama has long-established globally. However, persistence in taking risks and trying to impress the audience is something the Korean media bravely does. Doing a research and explore more market is crucial part for promotion preparation. The study also found that to be successful we need to expand the empire of businesses overseas. Even so, its own culture is not forgotten and always brought with pride. Identify market and current needs and always think ahead to develop themselves and the country.

VI. REFERENCES

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