

Transnational Viewing, Local Meaning: Analyzing K-Drama Consumption Across Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: The popularity of Korean dramas (K-Dramas) in Indonesia has grown significantly over the past decade, offering a unique opportunity to examine how global media influences local audiences. This study explores the socio-cultural impact of K-Dramas on Indonesian viewers through a mixed-methods approach, including national survey data, YouTube comment analysis, and regional access patterns. The research investigates preferences for subtitled content, perceptions of gender roles, family values, and beauty standards, as well as the extent of cultural hybridization and expressions of national identity in fan discourse. Findings reveal that a majority of viewers prefer subtitled content, particularly among younger urban populations, due to its role in enhancing cultural understanding. K-Dramas shape perceptions of gender and family, reinforcing certain norms while also offering aspirational representations. Beauty ideals presented in these dramas influence consumer behavior and identity formation, though audiences often engage critically with these portrayals. Additionally, the study uncovers a strong presence of cultural hybridization and identity negotiation, alongside regional disparities in media access and digital infrastructure. These insights contribute to our understanding of media globalization, demonstrating how transnational content is both consumed and contested within local contexts. The study highlights the need for inclusive digital policies and further research on the long-term implications of cross-cultural media exposure.

Keywords: Korean Drama, Media Globalization, Cultural Hybridization, Subtitle Preference, Gender Representation, Digital Divide, National Identity.



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INTRODUCTION

The Korean Wave, or Hallyu, has experienced a remarkable and sustained surge in popularity throughout Southeast Asia, with Indonesia emerging as one of its most vibrant and receptive markets. This cultural movement, which began gaining traction in the late 1990s and early 2000s, initially found expression through the export of Korean dramas (K-Dramas). These television serials captivated international audiences with their emotional storytelling, high production values, and compelling characters (Bae et al., 2017; Lee & How, 2021). Landmark series such as *Winter*

Sonata played a pivotal role in cementing Korean cultural products as desirable and influential across borders. What started as episodic television content evolved into a larger cultural phenomenon encompassing K-pop, Korean cinema, fashion, cuisine, and beauty standards, representing a holistic wave of influence that transcended national boundaries.

Despite the widespread popularity of Korean dramas in Indonesia, scholarly understanding of their socio-cultural implications remains limited. Most existing studies emphasize the economic value of Hallyu and tourism impacts, yet fewer examine how K-Dramas shape everyday cultural practices, identity negotiation, and media literacy among Indonesian viewers. This gap is significant given Indonesia's diverse sociocultural context and digital disparities across regions. Accordingly, this article seeks to address the following questions: (1) How do Indonesian audiences consume and interpret K-Dramas in relation to gender, family, beauty standards, and national identity? (2) In what ways do subtitling practices, fan engagement, and regional access influence these interpretations? The main objective of this study is to analyze the socio-cultural impact of K-Dramas in Indonesia using a mixed-methods approach that integrates survey data, social media discourse, and regional access patterns. By clarifying these dynamics, this study contributes to broader debates on media globalization, cultural hybridization, and local meaning-making.

The expansion of Hallyu has been significantly facilitated by technological advancements, particularly the rise of digital platforms and the proliferation of subtitled content. These innovations democratized access to Korean media by lowering language barriers, thereby allowing non-Korean-speaking audiences to fully engage with the content in its original form while maintaining emotional resonance and cultural authenticity (Akhni, 2022; López-Múgica et al., 2024). Subtitles emerged as crucial tools in enabling global engagement with Korean culture, fostering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of its values and social themes. This shift reflects a broader transformation in global media consumption patterns, where cross-cultural exchanges have become increasingly participatory, inclusive, and user-driven, thanks to the connectivity enabled by the internet and mobile technologies (Ercegovac & Ercegovac, 2023; Widholm, 2018).

Culturally, K-Dramas have found particular resonance with Southeast Asian audiences due to their emphasis on universal themes such as familial loyalty, romantic idealism, and moral conflicts. These thematic elements align closely with the social values and emotional expectations of Indonesian viewers, offering both relatability and aspirational content (Xiao & Su, 2021). The cultural proximity between South Korea and ASEAN nations rooted in shared historical experiences and Confucian values further enhances the accessibility and appeal of K-Dramas (Ryo & Yamamura, 2024). This affinity reduces cultural friction and facilitates a seamless reception of Korean narratives, especially when compared to Western media, which may appear culturally distant or ideologically dissonant.

In Indonesia, the growing consumption of K-Dramas is largely enabled by online streaming services, social media interaction, and the efforts of fansub communities that provide subtitled content. These distribution channels have radically transformed traditional viewing habits by promoting on-demand, binge-watching behavior and fostering digital communities centered around shared content interests (Rosidi, 2022). Social platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube serve as spaces for discussion, critique, and cultural interpretation, empowering viewers

to engage with content beyond passive consumption (Castro et al., 2019; Tsapovsky & Frosh, 2015). The result is a participatory culture in which viewers not only consume but also shape the meanings and narratives surrounding their favorite media (Ahmed et al., 2022).

From a geopolitical perspective, the success of Hallyu is intricately linked to South Korea's strategic deployment of soft power. Recognizing the global appeal of its cultural exports, the South Korean government has invested heavily in the media and entertainment sectors, supporting content creation, international distribution, and cultural diplomacy initiatives (Flew, 2016). Through well-organized promotional efforts and international partnerships, Korean cultural products have been positioned not merely as commodities but as vehicles of national identity and international influence. This soft power approach facilitates organic cultural assimilation and contributes to the reshaping of public perception and identity construction among foreign audiences (Bae et al., 2017).

The advent of global streaming services such as Netflix and Viki has further amplified the reach and influence of K-Dramas. These platforms cater to diverse audience segments through algorithmic recommendations, multilingual subtitle options, and curated content libraries, enabling even more personalized and accessible cultural experiences (Davis & Zboralska, 2017). In doing so, they have altered not only the way media is consumed but also how it is produced, as content creators now tailor narratives to suit global sensibilities while preserving local nuances (Nachman et al., 2022). However, this globalization also raises critical questions about cultural homogenization, the marginalization of indigenous narratives, and the long-term sustainability of local media ecosystems (Chalaby & Plunkett, 2020).

In conclusion, the extraordinary popularity of Korean dramas in Indonesia is the result of a complex interplay of historical familiarity, cultural affinity, digital innovation, and purposeful soft power strategy. K-Dramas serve as more than entertainment; they function as potent agents of cultural transmission, reshaping how Indonesian audiences perceive identity, aesthetics, and narrative quality. This evolution in media consumption reflects broader global trends and signals an important shift in the dynamics of cultural globalization and regional media adaptation.

METHOD

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to analyze the popularity and socio-cultural impact of Korean dramas among Indonesian audiences. Mixed methods were chosen to capture both the breadth of audience trends through quantitative survey data and the depth of cultural meanings through qualitative discourse analysis. The integration of these approaches allows triangulation, ensuring that statistical findings are contextualized within audience interpretations and regional disparities. Specifically, the methodology includes survey analysis, social media data mining using topic modeling, and comparative analysis of regional preferences. This multifaceted approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how K-Dramas are consumed and interpreted in Indonesia.

The primary quantitative data were drawn from a national survey conducted by Jakpat Insight in April 2025. The survey involved 1,211 Indonesian respondents and focused on their media consumption behaviors, genre preferences, and subtitling choices related to K-Dramas. The

instrument comprised multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions designed to capture frequency of viewing, content preferences, and language choices for subtitles. Demographic information, including age, gender, and geographic location, was also collected to allow for comparative subgroup analysis and to identify broader audience trends.

While surveys offer valuable quantitative insights into audience preferences, several methodological limitations are inherent. Self-reported data are vulnerable to social desirability bias, recall inaccuracies, and self-selection bias, particularly in digital distribution formats (Plessis, 2019). To address these challenges, efforts were made to design clear, non-leading questions and to reach a demographically diverse sample. The data were also subjected to statistical cleaning and normalization procedures to ensure analytical reliability, and exploratory factor analysis was employed to detect latent variables influencing viewer preferences.

To analyze audience discourse, a topic modeling approach was applied to a dataset of 85,840 comments collected from 720 K-Drama-related YouTube videos. Comments were collected using a Python-based scraper and processed through multiple data cleaning steps. This included tokenization, removal of stop words, lemmatization, and filtering of non-verbal symbols to address the informal and noisy nature of social media language (Murshed et al., 2022). Preprocessing was critical in ensuring the interpretability and reliability of topic extraction.

The Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model was selected for topic modeling, and the optimal number of topics was determined using coherence score evaluations (Li & Lei, 2019). Additional experiments with NMF and hierarchical algorithms were conducted to validate topic relevance and improve thematic clarity (Jelodar et al., 2018). Evaluation was iterative, with qualitative reviews to refine topic labeling and semantic coherence (Doogan et al., 2023). Results were visualized using word clouds and bar graphs to enhance thematic readability and audience interpretation.

In addition to survey metrics, the study measured cultural preferences through multivariate analysis techniques, including factor analysis, to examine correlations between demographic profiles and media consumption patterns (Nzali et al., 2017). These methods help uncover latent variables influencing cultural affinity and viewer motivations. Social media analytics, such as engagement rates, comment frequency, and sentiment orientation, were also considered as indicators of cultural resonance (Zheng et al., 2020). The triangulation of statistical data and interaction metrics offered a holistic understanding of how viewers in Indonesia internalize and interpret Korean cultural narratives.

By triangulating data from surveys, comment analysis, and comparative regional insights (e.g., from the IDN Times dataset), the study enhances the validity of its findings. While survey data may omit nuanced behavioral insights, the inclusion of big data methods and social media metrics offers a robust, multidimensional understanding of K-Drama's impact in Indonesia. Nevertheless, limitations persist, particularly in the subjective interpretation of qualitative themes and the temporal limitations of cross-sectional data. Future studies may benefit from longitudinal designs or ethnographic interviews to deepen contextual understanding and account for evolving media behaviors over time.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study draw upon three primary datasets: national survey responses from the Jakpat platform conducted in April 2025, regional data on K-Drama viewership compiled by IDN Times, and a large-scale thematic analysis of audience comments on YouTube. These data sources collectively reveal trends in subtitle preference, genre interests, regional differences, and emotional and cultural engagement with Korean drama content among Indonesian audiences.

Survey Insights: Subtitle and Genre Preferences

Quantitative survey findings demonstrate that a significant majority (88.86%) of Indonesian respondents favored subtitles over dubbing when watching Korean dramas. This pattern is consistent with global studies showing the preference for subtitled media among younger and urban viewers (Oh, 2017; Tekin & İlhan, 2023). However, what is striking in the Indonesian context is the extent to which subtitles are perceived not only as a linguistic aid but also as a cultural bridge, enabling audiences to engage more deeply with Korean values and expressions. This suggests that subtitling practices in Indonesia may function as a form of cultural learning rather than mere translation, a finding less emphasized in previous research on media globalization.

Table 1. Subtitle Preferences by Demographic

Group	Subtitle Preference (%)	Dubbing Preference (%)
Urban, Age 18–25	92.4%	7.6%
Rural, Age 45+	58.1%	41.9%

In terms of genre preferences, viewers in Indonesia and across Southeast Asia consistently favored romance and fantasy genres. These genres were especially popular among younger and female viewers, with themes of emotional complexity, aspirational relationships, and imaginative settings driving engagement (Popović & Perić, 2019). Additional genres, such as slice-of-life and musical dramas, were appreciated for their relatable narratives and integration of everyday experiences. Among high school and university-aged respondents, slice-of-life dramas featuring student or coming-of-age storylines resonated particularly strongly, suggesting a cultural alignment with lived experiences (Lei, 2023).

Reliability of Jakpat Platform

The Jakpat platform provided timely and efficient access to a broad sample of Indonesian media consumers. With a wide and diverse user base that spans urban and suburban populations, Jakpat has proven useful for rapid-response academic studies (Park, 2023). Nonetheless, methodological caveats remain. The platform's user demographics skew toward younger, tech-savvy individuals in urban areas, potentially introducing sample bias. This may result in an overrepresentation of digitally connected users while underrepresenting rural and older populations (Tekin & İlhan, 2023). To mitigate these limitations, researchers recommend supplementing such surveys with qualitative interviews or regional case studies for more comprehensive insights.

Regional Differences in K-Drama Viewership (IDN Times)

Regional data reveal substantial differences in access to K-Dramas and in viewing preferences. While Java and urban centers show the highest streaming penetration, outer provinces such as Papua and East Nusa Tenggara lag significantly behind. This reinforces the digital divide highlighted by Lestari et al. (2023), but the present study adds nuance by showing how these disparities directly influence interpretive practices: urban audiences engage with subtitled global platforms, whereas rural viewers depend on dubbed television. This divergence implies that regional inequality is not only technological but also cultural, as it shapes how narratives are understood and reinterpreted locally.

Table 2. Streaming Access by Province

Province	Streaming Penetration (%)
Jakarta	87.3%
West Java	82.1%
East Nusa Tenggara	34.9%
Papua	28.4%

This regional gap underscores a persistent digital divide, which shapes not only the availability of Korean drama content but also the extent to which it integrates into local cultural discourse. Viewers in metropolitan areas tend to exhibit greater genre variety in consumption and show higher interest in culturally complex or internationally acclaimed series.

In response to the popularity of foreign dramas, Indonesian media producers have begun enhancing the narrative quality and production values of local dramas. Many local series now feature serialized storytelling structures and character development strategies modeled after K-Dramas, incorporating localized cultural elements to retain viewer loyalty (Tekin & İlhan, 2023).

YouTube Comment Analysis: Cultural Sentiment

Topic modeling of 85,840 YouTube comments revealed four dominant thematic clusters: entertainment & escapism, cultural admiration, family values, and nationalist sentiment. While entertainment appeal dominated (38.6%), the relatively high proportion of nationalist expressions (17.8%) is noteworthy. Compared to prior research on K-Drama reception in other Southeast Asian contexts, where admiration and escapism usually prevail (Kanča & Ušča, 2023), Indonesian audiences exhibit stronger tendencies to frame their viewing in terms of national identity and cultural sovereignty. This indicates a distinctive local negotiation process, suggesting that K-Drama consumption in Indonesia is not only a transnational cultural practice but also a site of identity defense and resistance.

The remaining clusters revealed more reflective and critical engagements. Family and relational themes (19.4%) evoked personal identification with characters, while 17.8% of comments demonstrated nationalist sentiment, either defending local cultural practices or critiquing perceived cultural imperialism. Common linguistic markers of nationalism included use of collective identifiers (“we,” “our culture”) and references to Indonesian identity or pride in contrast to foreign portrayals (Wijayanti, 2021).

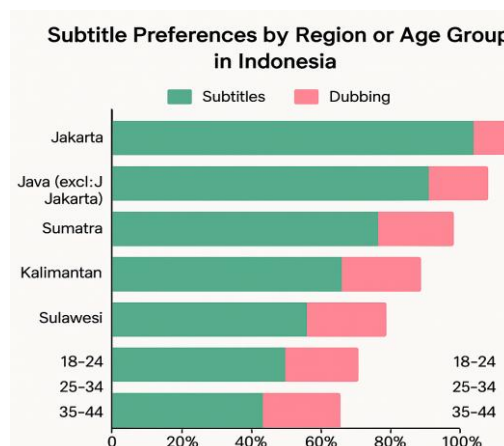


Figure 1. Comment Themes and Frequencies

Online fan culture also emerged as a significant interpretive layer. Viewer comments extended beyond basic praise or criticism and often developed into full discourses on plot theories, cultural reflections, and symbolic meanings. Fans engaged in content remixing (e.g., subtitled edits, memes, fan art) and shaped collective interpretations, amplifying both cultural admiration and critique. These participatory practices suggest that fan culture serves not just as audience feedback but as a dynamic co-creator of meaning in transnational media consumption (Hambandima, 2021).

These findings collectively underscore the multilayered nature of K-Drama reception in Indonesia, where infrastructure, identity, digital engagement, and cultural negotiation intersect to shape viewer behavior and interpretation.

The findings of this study confirm the multifaceted and dynamic influence of Korean dramas (K-Dramas) on Indonesian audiences, illuminating the diverse ways in which globalized media content shapes local cultural interpretations, social identity formations, and patterns of media engagement. By utilizing a robust mixed-methods framework including national survey data, thematic analysis of social media discourse, and comparative analysis of regional access to streaming platforms this study offers an in-depth examination of the intersecting dimensions of entertainment consumption and sociocultural transformation in Indonesia.

Subtitle Use and Cultural Proximity

The strong preference for subtitled content demonstrates that audiences value cultural authenticity and linguistic immersion. This supports Jugert et al. (2017), who argue that media consumption can foster intercultural understanding. Yet, the Indonesian case goes further: subtitles are not only a tool for comprehension but also a vehicle for cultural learning and identity negotiation. This suggests that subtitling has pedagogical value in strengthening cross-cultural literacy, a dimension not sufficiently emphasized in prior scholarship.

Furthermore, subtitled content fosters deeper intercultural empathy by presenting unfiltered expressions of interpersonal dynamics and societal norms within the Korean context. Viewers exposed to subtitled K-Dramas often develop a more accurate and holistic understanding of

Korean values, idiomatic expressions, and behavioral etiquette. In this light, subtitling acts as a cultural medium that bridges geographic and linguistic divides.

Nevertheless, as argued by Bergs et al. (2023), the act of subtitling is interpretative and can introduce unintended shifts in meaning. Translators, whether professional or amateur, bring their own cultural biases and interpretations into the translation process. As a result, the subtitled version of a drama may reflect a hybrid understanding of both source and target cultures. In Indonesia, where many audiences share cultural values rooted in collectivism and familial harmony paralleling Confucian traditions in Korea this translational mediation often aligns well with local sensibilities. Yet, inconsistencies in translation quality can still distort the intended emotional or cultural message.

Gender Roles, Family Ideals, and Beauty Norms

K-Dramas exert significant influence over how Indonesian viewers conceptualize gender roles, familial dynamics, and standards of beauty. Numerous studies have demonstrated that repeated exposure to media representations contributes to shaping internalized perceptions of gender and identity (Albarello et al., 2017; Breen et al., 2017). In the present study, both survey responses and YouTube comment analysis revealed that audiences gravitate toward female characters who embody a blend of traditional nurturing characteristics and contemporary professional ambition. Similarly, male characters who display emotional vulnerability and steadfastness challenge traditional patriarchal archetypes often prevalent in Indonesian popular media.

These portrayals serve dual functions. On one hand, they reinforce certain conventional roles women as caregivers, men as protectors. On the other, they also present aspirational models of empowerment, particularly for young viewers. Breen et al. (2017) note that such duality in media representations simultaneously upholds and contests established gender norms, offering a spectrum of identity possibilities. This tension reflects the cultural negotiation taking place in Indonesian society, especially among urban youth increasingly exposed to global values.

Family narratives in K-Dramas further enhance their cultural appeal in Indonesia. The depiction of multigenerational households, filial piety, and intergenerational conflict resolution resonates with Indonesian viewers who live within similar socio-familial structures. The comment analysis revealed a high degree of personal identification with these themes, suggesting that viewers do not merely consume these stories for entertainment, but also as mirrors of their own lived experiences (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Beauty standards portrayed in K-Dramas have also made a substantial impact. Characters often conform to South Korean ideals fair skin, slim body types, and minimalist fashion which are becoming aspirational for some Indonesian viewers (Perkins et al., 2023). This shift has tangible implications, including increased consumer interest in skincare and cosmetic products. Yet, local audiences do not adopt these ideals uncritically. As noted by Sutrisno (2023), many viewers engage in a reflective negotiation process, integrating these external beauty standards with local conceptions of natural beauty, skin tone, and body image. This critical engagement underscores the agency of audiences in shaping and contesting media influence.

Cultural Hybridization and Local Media Response

The ascendance of K-Dramas has triggered meaningful transformations in Indonesia's domestic media production landscape. Indonesian television networks and streaming services increasingly adopt Korean narrative techniques such as serialized story arcs, intricate character development, and moral ambiguity. This process represents cultural hybridization a blending of global media templates with localized content and context (Ginzarly & Teller, 2020).

Such hybridization not only transforms production aesthetics but also promotes a broader cultural dialogue. As Indonesian audiences consume foreign content, they do so through the lens of their own cultural knowledge, selectively interpreting and integrating foreign values into local discourse. Albarello et al. (2017) describe this as a form of symbolic literacy, where individuals develop an enhanced ability to navigate and decode cross-cultural narratives.

On a macro scale, this dialogic process encourages inclusivity in the cultural public sphere. Yau et al. (2019) argue that hybrid content enables multiple cultural perspectives to coexist within mainstream media, thereby fostering mutual respect and reducing cultural isolation. In Indonesia's multiethnic society, such inclusive representations can bridge regional and social divides. Yet, this same process carries risks particularly the marginalization of uniquely local voices if domestic media becomes overly reliant on global formulas (Chalaby & Plunkett, 2020). Thus, striking a balance between adaptation and originality remains imperative.

Regional and Digital Divides in Media Access

This study also surfaces important regional disparities in K-Drama access and consumption, revealing a persistent digital divide. Survey and secondary data show that streaming penetration is highest in urban centers like Jakarta, while rural provinces such as Papua and East Nusa Tenggara lag significantly behind in both infrastructure and content diversity (Lestari et al., 2023).

These discrepancies influence not only the volume of content consumed but also the form and depth of audience engagement. Urban viewers with access to high-speed internet and multiple streaming subscriptions are more likely to watch subtitled versions, interact in fan communities, and engage in interpretive practices. In contrast, rural viewers typically rely on dubbed television broadcasts, limiting their exposure to cultural nuances and potentially altering their interpretive frameworks (Park, 2023).

This structural inequality has broader cultural implications. It affects who gets to participate in global cultural dialogues and whose voices are amplified in the process of transnational media circulation. Bridging this gap requires strategic investments in digital infrastructure and inclusive media policy that ensures equitable access to cultural resources across regions.

Nationalism, Identity, and Fan Negotiation

The emergence of nationalist discourse in fan comments highlights that Indonesian audiences actively negotiate their place in the global media ecosystem. While prior studies of K-Drama

reception in Southeast Asia rarely emphasize nationalism (Kanča & Ušča, 2023), this study shows how Indonesian fans mobilize K-Drama discussions to assert cultural sovereignty. This reveals that global media can simultaneously foster cosmopolitan admiration and nationalist resistance, a paradox that underscores the complexity of transnational reception.

Such engagement reflects what Adams-Bass et al. (2014) and Willis & Neblett (2020) describe as identity tension a state in which individuals reconcile global influences with local allegiances. Indonesian fans negotiate their cultural positioning through various practices, from critiquing foreign portrayals of Asian identity to remixing content with local references. Hambandima (2021) emphasizes that fans, far from being mere consumers, are active co-creators of meaning, shaping the afterlife of media texts in transnational contexts.

This participatory culture amplifies diverse interpretations and fosters cultural dialogue. However, it also exposes underlying anxieties about cultural erosion or dependency on foreign media. Navigating these tensions is part of a broader project of cultural sovereignty, wherein audiences seek to assert local identity within a global media ecosystem.

Longitudinal Impacts and Sociopolitical Implications

Although the present study offers a valuable snapshot of media influence, longitudinal research is essential to understanding the deeper sociocultural transformations prompted by sustained K-Drama consumption (Amin et al., 2022). Long-term exposure to media narratives can reshape viewers' conceptions of self, community, and nation. For adolescents and young adults in particular, repeated engagement with K-Dramas can influence their worldview, civic attitudes, and even lifestyle aspirations (Sutrisno, 2023).

Moreover, during periods of political transition or social unrest, media can serve as an ideological touchstone. K-Dramas often portray themes of justice, resistance, and moral ambiguity elements that may resonate with viewers seeking frameworks for understanding their own social realities. In such contexts, K-Dramas can function as soft instruments of reflection and critique, indirectly shaping public sentiment and sociopolitical consciousness.

To fully appreciate the transformative potential of media, future studies should adopt longitudinal designs that capture temporal shifts in audience perception and behavior. This would allow researchers to map the evolving relationships between media consumption, identity negotiation, and collective imagination in a rapidly globalizing society.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the multidimensional impact of Korean dramas (K-Dramas) on Indonesian audiences, showing how global cultural products are locally interpreted through subtitles, gender and family ideals, beauty norms, and hybridized media practices. Findings confirm that while audiences admire Korean cultural expressions, they also critically negotiate them within Indonesian contexts marked by regional digital divides and identity tensions. Importantly, this research

demonstrates that Indonesian viewers are not passive consumers but active interpreters who adapt, resist, and remix global content in ways that shape both cultural affinity and national identity.

Beyond these insights, several practical implications emerge. Media producers should invest in high-quality subtitling and culturally sensitive localization strategies that preserve authenticity while respecting local values. Educators can integrate K-Dramas into media literacy curricula to encourage critical reflection on cultural representation and identity. Policymakers, meanwhile, should address the digital divide through inclusive infrastructure and equitable access policies, ensuring that all regions can participate in global cultural dialogues. Future studies should adopt longitudinal and ethnographic approaches to capture how these dynamics evolve over time, particularly regarding the long-term sociopolitical influence of K-Drama consumption in Indonesia.

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