

The Malice That Creeps In Exploring the Influence of Bullying and Revenge-themed K-dramas on Viewers' Perceptions and Attitudes from Cultivation Theory

Christina Li

Received February 21, 2024

Accepted April 23, 2024

Electronic access April 30, 2024

Korean pop culture, including music, movies, and TV dramas, has captured a mass audience of followers, setting off an international "Hallyu," or "Korean wave." Korean television, in particular, has become a dominant feature in global entertainment over the last two decades. Of the many narratives portrayed in these shows, themes of revenge and bullying have been especially prevalent, attracting millions of viewers worldwide. While there is a growing body of research on how Korean dramas have been used as a form of cultural export and soft diplomacy, little attention has been given to how themes of revenge and bullying impact individual viewers. In light of the vast number of global audiences consuming these aggressive narratives, this study seeks to fill this research gap by exploring how exposure to these negative messages impacts international viewers on a personal level. Using Cultivation Theory as a critical framework for this investigation, this research examines how these themes of revenge and bullying may be internalized by viewers, causing them to blur the lines between fiction and reality. This study also uses content analysis as the primary methodological framework to critically assess comments posted by 210 viewers on two popular discussion platforms. Three of the most popular bullying and revenge-themed K-dramas, "The Glory" (2023), "Penthouse—War in Life" (2021), and "Weak Hero Class 1" (2022), were selected for this study.

Keywords: Korean drama, Cultivation Theory, revenge-themed media

Introduction

For over two decades, South Korean popular culture (K-pop) has profoundly impacted the global entertainment industry. The K-pop movement, which includes music, movies, and TV dramas - has captured a mass audience of followers, setting off an international "hallyu"—or "Korean wave." As one of its largest exports, Korean TV dramas have over 230 million viewers worldwide¹. While the popularity of Korean entertainment first took root in China and Taiwan in the mid-1990s, the globalization of digital technologies has dramatically contributed to this unprecedented popularity². Recent data indicate that the export of Korean dramas has increased by over 72

In the distinctly competitive world of digital entertainment, the popularity of K-dramas shows no sign of abating. Recent data indicates that along with the 200

Given the mass global appeal of this genre, it is essential to explore how exposure to the aggressive messages conveyed in K-dramas impacts international viewers on a personal level. However, despite a growing body of research on how this Korean wave has been used as a form of cultural diplomacy, little attention has been given to how these dramas' personally impact viewers. Considering this research gap, this paper aims to ana-

lyze the effect revenge dramas have on viewers through the lens of Cultivation Theory. In doing so, this research also provides new avenues to empirically apply Cultivation Theory in the age of digital media.

Literature Review

With the success of K-dramas, it is natural to ask what makes K-dramas so globally appealing. Some scholars have explored the reasons behind this popularity, offering an array of explanations. Initial research into the Hallyu phenomena linked the early success of K-dramas in Asia to the cultural similarities conveyed in these shows, creating an accessible cultural bridge for viewers in neighboring countries, particularly China and Taiwan³. While cultural proximity offers insight into the global appeal of Korean entertainment in Asia, other factors have likewise been found to contribute to the popularity of K-dramas outside of Asia. For example, some researchers have noted that government-led policies supporting the export of South Korean entertainment have gone a long way in helping the cultural spread of Hallyu⁴, while others have noted that recent shifts in technological innovations have altered how entertainment is viewed and consumed, allowing for the global spread of Korean

media⁵.

The themes contained in K-dramas have also been cited for driving their global popularity. De Witte⁶, for example, notes that "Korean dramas strike a balance of predictability and originality" while also adding a dark twist to the story arc that artfully captures the empathy of viewers. Additional research also suggests that K-dramas tap into the vulnerability of the human psyche, allowing viewers to connect to themes that socially resonate⁷ and fulfill cognitive expectations by providing a balance between novelty and coherence⁸. Similarly, some scholars have noted that dramas add elements of "foreignness," making the storylines of K-dramas particularly appealing in their unique way while also exploring themes universally understood by audiences worldwide⁹.

Although some common themes include love, the pursuit of dreams, family, friendship, and social status, there has been a noticeable increase in revenge narratives in K-dramas in recent years¹⁰. With increased frequency, many popular K-dramas center on revenge themes, with characters pursuing justice through elaborate and often unrealistic strategies. A review of the most popular Korean revenge dramas reveals that these shows focus on several globally relevant themes, such as class inequality, economic disparities, and corruption¹¹. By depicting these social issues, revenge dramas provide a space for audiences to vicariously process complex personal feelings about social and economic inequalities, which often normalize the aggressive themes depicted in these shows¹².

Bullying & Revenge in K-dramas

Bullying is defined as a repeated and detrimental behavior formed by an imbalance of power between the victim and perpetrators¹³. Evidence suggests that school bullying, in particular, affects children's physical and mental health, with negative impacts lasting long into adulthood¹⁴. School bullying and social-class bullying have been dominant themes in K-dramas recently, supporting the perception among both Korean and global audiences that South Korea has a serious bullying problem¹⁵. There is evidence to suggest that these storylines do, in fact, reflect reality, with many K-dramas incorporating the theme of school bullying to reveal this social dilemma. For example, a study conducted by the *Korean Institute for Children's Social Development* evaluated 1756 middle schools in South Korea and found that 40% of all children from these schools participated in school bullying as victims, perpetrators, or victim perpetrators¹⁶. Thus, it was unsurprising to see "The Glory," which tells the story of tortured and mistreated high school students seeking revenge, dominate South Korean television ratings more than a month after its launch¹⁷.

In addition to school bullying, many Korean dramas depict social-class bullying. The popular K-drama "Penthouse" represents this theme, which centers on a working-class single mother

subjected to vengeful bullying by wealthy neighbors. Discussion on social inequality has become increasingly analyzed in Korean society in recent years. Social inequality is commonly cited among South Koreans as a prominent issue, with 73% of South Korean citizens believing that wealth distribution was "not fairly equal" or "not at all equal," which is 19% higher than the average global percentage¹⁸.

Bullying and revenge themes in K-dramas often follow a similar story arc where the main protagonist, who is often presented as the victim of bullying, takes their revenge against the perpetrators in dramatic ways; this process of revenge is undoubtedly the key point that is most exciting and addictive to the viewers¹⁹. The theme of revenge also enables many non-Korean audiences from different cultures to experience the thrill of revenge²⁰. Whether it's "Penthouse," aimed at a group of wealthy individuals seeking revenge, "Sky Castle," aimed at the high school system, or "The World of Married," centered on romantic relationships, Korean dramas provide a vast space for global viewers to process their own personal revenge fantasies²¹.

It is important to note that bullying and revenge themes are not new concepts in television. Many popular TV shows or movies center on these themes, such as the renowned film series by Marvel "The Avengers²²." However, K-dramas are unique in that themes of bullying and revenge have led to a record number of global viewers that are, in turn, redefining global television. This massive popularity is further helped along by the South Korean government, which views these dramas as a unique form of cultural export²³. While government support of global marketing budgets has undoubtedly contributed to high viewership, there is a clear indication that these revenge dramas resonate strongly with audiences as an unprecedented number of viewers continue to tune in.

Given the massive appeal of Korean revenge dramas, it is important to consider the potential impact of these themes on viewers. Revenge is defined as "harm done to someone as a punishment for harm that they have done to someone else²⁴." When presented as a form of third-party viewing, ethical questions begin to emerge as to how these dramas can potentially desensitize viewers²⁵. These social implications are further exacerbated by the fact that these *revenge dramas are often dismissed as "mere entertainment."*

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory explores the role television plays in shaping audiences' perceptions, beliefs, and interpretations of social reality²⁶. This theory initially emerged from a larger Cultural Indicators Project conducted in the 1960s to explore how media shapes culture²⁷. As an important theoretical perspective in media studies, cultivation theory is based on the idea that the amount of time spent watching television directly impacts viewers' conceptions of social reality²⁸. To support this view,

Gerbner²⁹ conducted a survey, dividing television viewers into categories depending on the number of hours spent watching television. He found that individuals who spent 4 hours or more a day watching TV were far more likely to hold the same beliefs conveyed on these shows than those who consumed 2 hours or less a day. Other scholars have also investigated the effect of cultivation theory on television consumers. Guseshoven and Van den Bulck investigated 909 students and found that heavier television viewing led to an earlier start in smoking behaviors³⁰. From these results, the researchers concluded that television viewing gives positive messages about smoking and, therefore, affects viewers' attitudes toward smoking.

It should be noted that cultivation theory holds several theoretical assumptions. For example, it proposes that a cultivation effect is the mere result of a positive relation between the amount of time a person spends watching television and the degree to which the person's perception of the reality of the world reflects a television world point-of-view³¹. Specifically, this means that the effect appears when information on television is integrated into personal beliefs and values³². Cultivation effects are also viewed as influencing heuristic processing, which enables individuals to apply simple decision strategies. Some common examples of the application of such a process include "experts can be trusted," "rich people are superficial," "attractive people are extroverted and sociable," and so forth³³.

According to Cultivation Theory, the heavy consumption of violent television can cause interpersonal mistrust among individuals, leading to the increasing perception that the world is a more dangerous and unwelcoming place, a phenomenon called "the Mean World Syndrome"³⁴. Additionally, it has been found that heavy viewers are also more likely to experience shyness, loneliness, and depression than those who watch less frequently³⁵.

According to Gerbner³⁶, the "Mean World Syndrome" phenomenon suggests that television and media play a pivotal role in cultivating people's perception of the world as an extremely dangerous place. Indeed, as past literature points out, simply picking up the remote and channel surfing through the many options' available exposes viewers to content that often reflects bizarre, frightening, and violent scenes. Thus, what should be shocking in reality becomes routine and mundane in the world of media, reinforcing the perception that our world is a place of consistent threats, dangers, and mean people³⁷.

It should also be noted that some researchers indicate that Mean World Syndrome is not consistently reflected among viewers. Instead, critics point to other influences such as personal lived experiences among viewers³⁸, as well as the role education and socioeconomic status play in shaping audience perceptions³⁹. Despite this dissenting research, however, there is clear evidence that mean world syndrome cannot be easily dismissed. For example, Scharrer Leone⁴⁰ found that mean world syndrome to be a factor among adolescents playing violent video

games, while Andersen et al.⁴¹ found evidence that watching the News can cultivate anxiety and fear of violent crimes among viewers.

Placing the K-drama themes of bullying and revenge in the context of Cultivation Theory raises the question of how these stories can possibly "cultivate" the audience to be immersed in the story and feel insecure and anxious about life. Research indicates that watching violence on TV, viewers learn from and adapt to the characters' responses by changing their internal cognitive maps⁴². According to the availability-heuristic model, the tendency to judge the likelihood of a particular violent event is based on how easily one can recall similar experiences⁴³. Waters offers an example of how watching the news about plane crashes causes people to be afraid of flying, despite the reality of dying in a car accident is far higher⁴⁴.

Likewise, it is also important to note that while cultivation theory proposes that viewing violence impacts how individuals internalize and perceive violence, the theory also recognizes that images from television are often more vivid than those recalled from real life⁴⁵. The *availability heuristic model* supports this by suggesting that people tend to believe that an event is more likely to occur when they can easily recall a similar event from memory⁴⁶. This ease of retrieval is defined as *accessibility*⁴⁷. This means that when people encounter bullying or any other events seemingly similar to what is depicted in K-dramas, they tend to think real life is similar to TV life and, thus, react based on what they recall from the television⁴⁸. This raises some concern for K-dramas because, for the primary purpose of entertaining, these dramas usually depict a violent and unrealistic way of responding to bullying that is not necessarily practical or helpful in reality. However, it is important to note that this heuristic process occurs relatively automatically, meaning that there is little or no conscious motivation behind applying such a heuristic⁴⁹.

The Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior (KAB) framework is a model that illustrates how knowledge, attitudes, as well as behaviors, are interrelated and can influence an individual's actions⁵⁰. Based on the KAB model and the cultivation theory, Potter claims that there are six types of media effects on individuals: cognition, belief, attitude, affect, physiology, and behavior⁵¹. To make the scope of this research manageable, this paper will focus on the impact of violent content on viewers from three of those different aspects: affect, cognition, and behavior.

Affective Impact

Affect refers to the emotions and feelings that individuals experience. This can include emotions and moods like fear, lust, laughter, and anger. It has been found that fundamental emotions such as anger, joy, or fear occur when specific stimuli activate universal "affect programs" that naturally and cross-culturally cause typical reactions such as fear, stress, and the impulse to

run away⁵². On the other hand, the media also gives people opportunities to manage their emotions. For instance, when people feel angry about real-life problems, they can virtually vent their frustrations by watching and empathizing with the characters taking revenge on television⁵³. In this case, when assessing the impacts of bullying and revenge-themed K-dramas, it is evident that the emotional engagement facilitated by K-dramas can lead to increased empathy for characters experiencing bullying and seeking revenge. Viewers may find themselves sympathizing with characters' struggles, ultimately cultivating more compassionate attitudes toward those who have experienced such situations.

Cognitive Impact

Potter suggests that a cognitive media effect appears when exposure to media impacts a viewer's mental processes⁵⁴. Potter notes that acquiring factual information from media messages is the most common cognitive impact; the human mind can assimilate that information and convert it into knowledge, thus generalizing beyond media information to produce principles about real life⁵⁵. In sum, repeated exposure to a particular narrative can shape viewers' perceptions and understanding of these concepts in real-life contexts, which can ultimately lead viewers to develop a deeper interpretation.

Behavioral Impact

Behaviors are generally defined as the overt actions of individuals⁵⁶. Researchers have implemented various studies to investigate the media effects by observing people's media exposure behaviors to see how they use media. Researchers also expose people to specific media messages and then study the people's subsequent behaviors towards things like violence, aggression, debating political events, and the use of advertised products etc⁵⁷. Moreover, cultivation Theory suggests prolonged exposure to media content can influence behaviors⁵⁸. In this context, while it might not necessarily lead to direct emulation of vengeful or bullying behaviors, viewers may develop a heightened awareness of these issues and a greater willingness to stand against bullying and consider the moral implications of seeking revenge.

As mentioned above, despite the immense popularity of K-dramas worldwide, how the unrealistic and violent portrayal of revenge impacts global viewers remains understudied. With this research gap in mind, this research examines aspects of bullying and revenge in three popular K-dramas through the lens of cultivation theory.

Methodology

In the context of cultivation theory, this research aims to explore how global viewers receive and internalize themes of bullying and revenge in K-dramas. Content analysis was the methodological framework used in this research. This analysis included quantitative and qualitative responses from viewers on IMDb and Viki platforms discussing three prominent K-dramas: (1) *The Glory*, (2) *Penthouse: War and Life*, and (3) *Weak Hero Class 1*. The two popular discussion platforms used for this study were IMDb and Viki. Discussions and comments included in this research were posted over one year from August 2022 to August 2023. The platform IMDb was selected for its global appeal among members seeking to discuss various media content, including movies, TV series, video games, celebrities' biographies, fan ratings, and reviews. The second platform, Viki, is a popular American streaming website that provides extensive access to Asian TV shows, including Korean, Japanese, and Chinese dramas. The data captured for this study were randomly selected from these two platforms and included a total of 210 respondents.

The three bullying and revenge-themed K-dramas ("*The Glory*," "*Penthouse–War in Life*," and "*Weak Hero Class 1*") were selected for their high global appeal and mass viewership. "*The Glory*", in particular, claimed the third spot among all Netflix movies and TV series in 2023⁵⁹, while *Penthouse* and *Weak Hero Class 1* had over 3.77 million⁶⁰, and 2.3 million viewers⁶¹, respectively. In addition to their extreme popularity, these three revenge dramas were selected due to their diverse storylines. For example, "*The Glory*" centers primarily around revenge among female bullies in high school, while "*Penthouse*" explores revenge against a group of Korean plutocracy, and "*Weak Hero Class 1*" explores revenge against teenage male bullies. These three shows also portray different forms of violence, providing a good cross-section for analysis. For example, "*Weak Hero Class 1*" is an action-packed drama that is heavily dependent on physical violence, while "*The Glory*" and "*Penthouse*" lean more toward psychological violence.

A random selection of 70 responses from each of these three dramas on IMDb and Viki were systematically reviewed and analyzed to collect quantitative data. In addition, comments on the platforms were also culled for words and phrases that reflected favorable or unfavorable responses regarding the depiction of bullying and revenge in these three shows. A third category was also included to reflect the responses did not definitively fit into either of these two categories.

It should be noted that reviews that indicate signs of binge-watching were collected to investigate the relationship between time spent watching and the cultivation effect. In addition, given the number of shows per series and the hours per episode, it can be estimated that the average time spent for the first season of *The Glory*, *Penthouse-War in Life*, and *Weak Hero Class 1* was

14, 21, and 6 hours, respectively.

Discussions

Binge-watching K-dramas

Given that cultivation theory is linked to the hours spent watching television, the responses were analyzed based on the binge-watching tendencies of viewers (see Table 1). Binge-watching is watching three hours or more of television in a single sitting⁶². The reviews for all three dramas show a clear tendency for most of the viewers of these K-dramas to binge-watch. The percentage of respondents indicating a propensity to binge-watch “The Glory,” “Penthouse–War In Life”, and “Weak Hero Class 1” are 58%, 53%, and 56%, respectively. As one viewer of “The Glory” notes:

“this drama can make you mad to the point where you can’t wait for the next episodes. The madder you get and the madder you get the more you want to see the faces of the bullies when she takes revenge in the next episodes. It’s when the meme “me: after this episode, I’ll go to sleep, ends up watching it to the end”

This review indicates how the themes of bullying and revenge can make this K-drama particularly addictive. Similarly, in the other two K-dramas, viewers demonstrated the tendency to binge-watch. For instance, in “Penthouse–War of Life,” one respondent watched a total of 21 hours in four days:

“I finished the whole drama in just four days. Keep in mind that this drama has 21 episodes. I can’t believe I finished the whole drama in just 4 days. The story is so addicting.”

Likewise, one respondent reviewing “Weak Hero Class 1” stated:

“Spending the night watching Ep1 til end Ep8, weak bullied school drama was never really my favorite, but this one got me hooked”

The “Weak-Hero Class 1” season includes 6 hours of watching. This means that this viewer spent 6 hours in one single night. Another respondent in this drama’s review stated:

“You have to binge watch this drama can’t stop after finishing 1 episodeI am so very curious what happens next ...”

It appears that binge-watching is a common phenomenon among K-drama audiences, especially when watching K-dramas with bullying and revenge themes. As cultivation theory suggests, the more hours people spend watching a show in one

sitting the more likely they are to be influenced by the themes presented⁶³. In these reviews, the high tendency to binge-watch these K-dramas marks the potential for cultivation effects, meaning that the viewers’ perceptions of the real world will likely be affected by the portrayal of bullying and revenge.

As the data in Tables 1 and 2 suggest, the likelihood of cultivation effects occurring due to binge-watching was evident in this research. For example, “Penthouse” viewers had the lowest number of binge-watchers and the lowest tendency toward normalizing violence. In contrast, both “The Glory” and “Weak Hero Class 1” audiences reported a higher tendency to binge-watch and a greater inclination toward accepting the violence portrayed.

Normalization of Bullying among K-drama viewers

Table 2 shows statistics of viewers’ attitudes towards the violence and unrealistic actions involved in the dramas. Assessing the reviews from the three dramas, there was a clear indication that viewers tended to normalize the violence and unrealistic behaviors depicted. The overall percentage of respondents in this study shows an inclination toward accepting the depictions of aggression and revenge, with 58% of reviewers having a favorable response. In contrast, the overall percentage of respondents who expressed a negative attitude toward violence and unrealistic actions was 8%, with 33% of respondents whose attitude towards violence and unrealistic actions was undetermined from the responses.

Based on the data collected, the percentages of viewers that tend to normalize violence or unrealistic actions in the three bullying and revenge-themed K-dramas (i.e., “The Glory,” “Penthouse–War of Life” and “Weak Hero Class 1”) were 60%, 53%, and 61%, respectively. These findings indicate that more than half of the viewers of all three K-dramas were apt to perceive violence and unrealistic revenge strategies taken by characters as acceptable. Among the three K-dramas included in this study, “Weak Hero Class 1” had the highest level of normalizing violence and unrealistic actions, with 61% of comments being coded as favorable responses.

“Weak Hero Class 1” is an action-packed revenge-themed drama that includes various scenes of schoolboys confronting bullies with their unique fighting styles, including extensive and highly descriptive scenes of present physical violence in the name of justice. As one review on “Weak Hero Class 1” stated:

“this series is super fantastic, interesting, most importantly it’s so exciting to watch the fighting.” Another review states: “I’m blown away. Absolutely mesmerizing from start to finish. It was incredibly gritty and, yes, violent but somehow like watching a car crash in slow motion, unable to turn away!! Will there be a season two?”

Table 1 Binge-Watching Tendencies

Name of Show	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
	Showing A Tendency to Binge-Watch	Showing A Tendency to Binge-Watch
“The Glory”	41	58%
“Penthouse–War In Life”	37	53%
“Weak Hero Class 1”	39	56%

Table 2 Tendency towards normalizing violence/unrealistic actions

Tendency	Percentage of Respondents			Number of Respondents
	”The Glory”	”Penthouse–War In Life”	”Weak Hero Class 1”	
Yes	42 (60%)	37 (53%)	43 (61%)	58
No	5 (7%)	9 (13%)	3 (4%)	8
Undetermined	23 (33%)	24 (34%)	24 (35%)	33
Total	70	70	70	100

In these responses, watching the physical “fighting” between the villains and the seemingly weaker students was experienced as “exciting” and “mesmerizing.”

This finding aligns with research that found violent entertainment most attractive when disliked characters are defeated⁶⁴. Moreover, according to cultivation theory, exposure to television and mass media can cause distorted and unrealistic perceptions of the nature, frequency, and factors of violence within our society. This respondent clearly shows how “Weak Hero Class 1” cultivates this respondent’s attitude towards violence by making violence seem “exciting” and “mesmerizing.”

Although “Weak Hero Class 1” has the largest number of viewers who tended to normalize violent and unrealistic actions, comments regarding the other two shows also indicated a certain acceptance of violence. For in “Weak Hero Class 1,” revenge is depicted in a lively and dramatic with a lot of physical fighting and killing, while “The Glory” and the “Penthouse” tend to focus more on the strategizing of violence, with revenge being achieved as primarily executed through cunning strategy. Despite this difference in how violence was portrayed, 60% of the comments for “The Glory” and 53% for “Penthouse–War of Life” contained favorable responses toward violence. Thus, while the storylines in “Weak Hero Class 1” emphasize physical “fighting,” and “The Glory” and “Penthouse” emphasize strategic and psychological approaches to exact revenge, the potential for viewers to normalize violence remains similar.

Some scholars argue that violence in storytelling has been a reoccurring throughout history, and it is even necessary to convey the challenging and natural complexities of human conflicts⁶⁵. However, as some researchers have noted, what makes the aggression in K-dramas different is the way they depict what media experts call “happy violence,” i.e., these storylines are often thrilling and somewhat glamorous and lead to a happy

ending⁶⁶. It could be argued that “happy violence” is reflected throughout K-drama, with audiences rooting for victims who are seeking revenge to succeed, even when characters engage in extremely violent actions.

It is true that not all respondents normalized violence, with some participants even expressing empathy and concern for the show’s characters. This aligns with other research that indicates watching negative scenes can increase empathy among viewers. For example, Mrug et al. suggest that exposure to a limited amount of violence increases one’s empathy. However, their findings also suggest that repeated exposure to violence can run the risk of decreasing empathy over time. Desensitization over time was also reflected in a study by Funk et al., which found that repeated exposure to negative media can cause viewers to detach from others, causing an increase in aggressive behaviors⁶⁷. Likewise, Huesmann and Taylor found that violence in television and movies contributes to both a short-term and long-term increase in aggression and normalization of violence⁶⁸. Thus, while it is noteworthy that some people can become more caring towards others after watching violent themes, long-term exposure can cause even the most empathic viewer to eventually become desensitized.

Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral Impact of K-Dramas

As mentioned previously, there are three cultivation impacts on viewers: affective, cognitive, and behavioral. These two reviews noted above show the affective impact of television on viewers. By feeling the excitement from the revenge and violent fighting scenes from the “weak heroes,” the response indicates how a viewer can be drawn into empathizing with the characters’ struggles, thus cultivating more compassionate attitudes toward those experiencing such situations. Similar affective impacts have also been found in other reviews as well. For instance, one

respondent reviewing “Penthouse–War In Life” remarked:

“I legit threw a bottle out of anger towards the bullies and that was basically what made me keep going.”

Here, the viewer points out that it “anger towards the bullies” that makes the viewer keep watching the show, implying a level of emotional engagement and empathy with the characters experiencing bullying. According to the affect impact embedded in cultivation theory, establishing emotional engagement with characters leads some viewers to emotionally connect with the characters experiencing bullying despite the unrealistic actions involved in these characters’ route of revenge.

Furthermore, the cognitive impact of watching these shows was frequently conveyed in these reviews as well. As mentioned earlier, heavily watching violent content in television programs can shape perspectives of how much violence there is in a culture, making the viewers perceive the world as a much more dangerous and unsafe place than it actually is⁶⁹. In this study, this construct seems to hold true, with one commenter on “Penthouse–War of Life” stating:

“this drama teaches more about life. People living around, people we call family, people we call friends, people we think they love us but later finding out that they’re the ones behind your problems.”

The potential of the mean syndrome was also conveyed in a number of responses posted. As one viewer in particular highlighted:

“People live good life and they do not have mercy for others who are not fortunate like them. They teach their children and they also become like them if they are not stopped by a bold and confident person. The story is true.”

These comments demonstrate how interpreting real-life complexities through the lens of K-dramas can contribute to a more cynical worldview. As cultivation theory suggests, the phenomenon of “Mean World Syndrome” can lead to anxiety and distrust among viewers, potentially impacting interpersonal relationships⁷⁰. There is some indication that this propensity to internalize online content has become more prevalent in modern society, with discussions of “gaslighting” and videos on manipulating interpersonal relationships becoming increasingly widespread in online spaces⁷¹. It could be argued that K-dramas are contributing to the spread of this negative worldview, with revenge-themed dramas bringing increasing challenges to real-world interpersonal relationships. According to the availability-heuristic model, people make judgments about social reality and how they should behave based on what they recall from television, which also indicates that if viewers believe that the

world is a dangerous place, they will be more likely to learn how to respond to the dangers from watching the show, despite how realistic the revenge strategies are⁷².

The behavioral impact linked to these dramas was also indicated in the responses. In “Weak Hero Class 1”, for example, viewers were inclined to support characters who, when encountering both verbal and physical bullying, fight back physically, eventually overcoming the bullies. In this case, there is research to suggest that exposure to violent television shows further strengthens the position that acts of violence are natural responses to situations of conflict⁷³. This trend was evident throughout the discussion platform and is captured distinctly by two viewers who state:

“this series make me feel badass, i want to fight everyone.”

And,

“sometimes it’s just best to fight fire with fire.”

As cultivation theory tells us, these shows can serve as powerful models of behavior. Dramatized actions of retaliation can carry messages that such actions are valid responses to conflict, and over time, regular exposure to these narratives can desensitize viewers to real-world aggression⁷⁴. Thus, these dramas not only have the potential to impart the impression that the world is meaner and more sinister than it actually is, but they also have the power to deceive viewers into believing that it is okay to emulate aggressive responses when confronted with conflict.

In addition, there is evidence that these dramas provide a kind of cathartic process among viewers. For “The Glory”, one reviewer says:

“This show describes the real pain one can experience that leaves ugly scares for the rest of their life, which me personally can relate to when thinking of my life when I was at school. And the revenge at the end, glorious. It was such an immersive watching experience that it almost makes me feel like I’m giving the bully at my childhood a punch in the face.”

Similarly, one viewer of “Penthouse” says:

“The series is directed so well that you will feel yourself experiencing the roller coaster of emotions. It just directs your train of thought or manipulate your opinions so well that you will feel like you are one of the characters winning the revenge.”

In a discussion on “Weak Hero Class 1”, one reviewer reports:

“It shows how the mind reacts when it gets cornered. The friendship, the bullying, everything so relatable. Absolutely enjoyable and relieving, especially when you can relate it to yourself when watching.”

These reviews show the tendency for respondents to immerse in these shows and relate to the characters on a personal level. As reflected in the above responses, when the protagonist gets their revenge, these viewers report feeling “excited and relieved,” affording them the virtual experience of “giving the bully” at his/her childhood “a punch in the face.”

Conclusion

The messages of revenge and bullying in K-dramas have captivated global audiences due to their relatability and exploration of universal human experiences. Through the lens of cultivation theory, we can gain a clearer understanding of how these storylines influence and shape viewers’ real-world perceptions. For avid K-drama fans, the acts of retaliation in these shows can be perceived as not only acceptable but also a natural course of action, causing viewers to blur the line between fiction and reality.

Although the cultivation theory was first introduced 50 years ago, this research demonstrates how cultivation theory seems to stand the test of time. As the data generated in this study indicate, continual exposure to revenge dramas can lead some viewers to become desensitized to the violence portrayed in these dramas. To gain a fuller picture of this impact, further research is required. Additional studies comparing the impacts of revenge-themed K-dramas with other types of revenge-themed media, such as violence in video games would also add an important dimension to this discussion. Sociocultural variations should also be considered in future research to provide insights into how cultural factors may also shape viewers’ perceptions.

With more and more global audiences consuming these narratives, it is essential to consider the potential for their cultivating impact. While not every viewer will be influenced in the same way, these shows offer an opportunity to reflect on the larger societal responses toward aggression. In addition, these dramas also provide a space to consider how we can foster a positive approach to these challenging themes.

References

- Kim, W. *Www.airuniversity.af.edu*.
- O. Pietrewicz, *The “Korean Wave” and the Expansion of South Korean Culture*, <https://pism.pl/publications/The.Korean.Wave...and.the.Expansion.of.South.Korean.Culture>.
- J. Yang and S. Shim, *Development and Society*, **41**, 103–147.
- Kim, W. *Www.airuniversity.af.edu*.
- M. Schulze, *KOREA vs. K-DRAMALAND: THE CULTURALIZATION OF K-DRAMAS by INTERNATIONAL FANS*, https://edoc.unibas.ch/92057/1/20221230113745_63aebf7932b9a.pdf, 2013.
- W. M., *The Secret to K-Pop, K-Drama Success Is Its Relatable Appeal, Says Stanford Scholar*, <https://news.stanford.edu/press-releases/2021/11/09/secret-k-pop-k-drama-success/>, news.stanford.edu 9 November 2021.
- M. Schulze, *KOREA vs. K-DRAMALAND: THE CULTURALIZATION OF K-DRAMAS by INTERNATIONAL FANS*, https://edoc.unibas.ch/92057/1/20221230113745_63aebf7932b9a.pdf, 2013.
- S. An, *Schema Theory in Reading*, <http://www.academypublication.com/issues/past/tpls/vol03/01/19.pdf>, 2013) 3 *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*.
- R. Busselle, *The New York Times*.
- S. Lee, *Film as Cultural Diplomacy: South Korea’s Nation Branding through Parasite (2019)*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7786884/>, 18 *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 93.
- M. Schulze, *KOREA vs. K-DRAMALAND: THE CULTURALIZATION OF K-DRAMAS by INTERNATIONAL FANS*, https://edoc.unibas.ch/92057/1/20221230113745_63aebf7932b9a.pdf, 2013.
- Jin, ‘ ’, [http://www.riss.or.kr/search/detail/DetailView.do?p_mat_type=be54d9b8bc7cdb09&control_no=dfa73bcc3b7e1f65ffe0bdc3ef48d419&key=2000 TV ‘ ’](http://www.riss.or.kr/search/detail/DetailView.do?p_mat_type=be54d9b8bc7cdb09&control_no=dfa73bcc3b7e1f65ffe0bdc3ef48d419&key=2000%20TV%20%27%27) (Riss.or.kr2018).
- W. M and N. AB, *Bullying*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK441930/>, PubMed2020.
- R. F and L. M. S, *Consequences of Bullying Behavior*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK390414/>, Nih.gov14 September 2016.
- Y. Kim, K. Y-J and B. Leventhal, *Prevalence of School Bullying in Korean Middle School Students*, 158 *Archives of Pediatrics Adolescent Medicine* 737.
- Y. Kim, K. Y-J and B. Leventhal, *Prevalence of School Bullying in Korean Middle School Students*, 158 *Archives of Pediatrics Adolescent Medicine* 737.
- Y. JY and S. M, *The New York Times*.
- The Deloitte Global 2021 Millennial and Gen Z Survey*, https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/kr/Documents/consumer-business/2021/kr.consumer_article_20210706.pdf, 2021.
- J. Schorn, *Empowerment through Violence: Feminism and the Rape-Revenge Narrative in the Girl with the Dragon Tattoo - ProQuest*, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/d6fdca3b5b3c167eefdb05a5686741d/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=29335>, www.proquest.com2013.
- J. Stolyar, *Remaking Revenge: Transnational Television Drama Flows and the Remaking of the Korean Drama Mawang in Japan*, Forum Mithani and Griseldis Kirsch eds, Cambridge University Press2022) 90.
- Jin, ‘ ’, [http://www.riss.or.kr/search/detail/DetailView.do?p_mat_type=be54d9b8bc7cdb09&control_no=dfa73bcc3b7e1f65ffe0bdc3ef48d419&key=2000 TV ‘ ’](http://www.riss.or.kr/search/detail/DetailView.do?p_mat_type=be54d9b8bc7cdb09&control_no=dfa73bcc3b7e1f65ffe0bdc3ef48d419&key=2000%20TV%20%27%27) (Riss.or.kr2018).
- Ma, *Circuitous Action: Revenge Cinema*, 57 *Criticism* 47.
- S. JUNG, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1xcrmm>, Retrieved from.

- 24 C. Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/revenge>, **revenge**. @CambridgeWords. Retrieved from.
- 25 A. P. Association, *Violence in the media: Psychologists study potential harmful effects*, <https://www.apa.org/topics/video-games/violence-harmful-effects>, Retrieved from.
- 26 G. Gerbner and L. Gross, *Journal of Communication*, **26**, 182–190.
- 27 W. Potter, *Cultivation Theory and Research*, <https://academic.oup.com/hcr/article/19/4/564/4575874>, 19 Human Communication Research 564.
- 28 E. Mosharafa, *All You Need to Know About: The Cultivation Theory*, <https://globaljournals.org/GJHSS.Volume15/3-All-you-Need-to-Know.pdf>.
- 29 G. Gerbner and L. Gross, *Journal of Communication*, **26**, 182–190.
- 30 G. K and B. J, *Television Viewing and Smoking Volume in Adolescent Smokers: A Cross-Sectional Study*, 39 Preventive Medicine 1093.
- 31 E. Mosharafa, *All You Need to Know About: The Cultivation Theory*, <https://globaljournals.org/GJHSS.Volume15/3-All-you-Need-to-Know.pdf>.
- 32 L. Shrum, *Processing Strategy Moderates the Cultivation Effect*, 27 Human Communication Research 94.
- 33 E. A and C. S, *The Psychology of Attitudes*, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1992-98849-000>, Psycnet.apa.org1993.
- 34 V. Salmi, S. M and J. Kivivuori, *Crime Victimization, Exposure to Crime News and Social Trust among Adolescents*, 15 YOUNG 255.
- 35 H. J, *Life without TV? Cultivation Theory and Psychosocial Health Characteristics of Television-Free Individuals and Their Television-Viewing Counterparts*, <http://cultivationanalysisrvtvf173.pbworks.com/f/Cultivat1.pdf>, 17 HEALTH COMMUNICATION 253.
- 36 G. Gerbner, *Cultivation Analysis: An Overview*, <http://web.asc.upenn.edu/gerbner/Asset.aspx?assetID=459>, 1998) 1 Mass Communication and Society 175.
- 37 L. Alper, *THE MEAN WORLD SYNDROME: Media Violence the Cultivation of Fear [TRANSCRIPT*, <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Mean-World-Syndrome-Transcript.pdf>, Media Education Foundation 2010.
- 38 M. Fried and S. Oprea, *Poetics*, **96**, 101761.
- 39 J. Intravia, K. Wolff, R. Paez and B. Gibbs, *Computers in Human Behavior*, **77**, 158–168.
- 40 E. Scharrer and R. Leone, *Mass Communication and Society*, **9**, 261–286.
- 41 K. Andersen, M. Djerf-Pierre and A. Shehata, *Mass Communication and Society*, 1–23.
- 42 L. Shrum, *Assessing the Social Influence of Television*, 22 Communication Research 402.
- 43 L. Shrum, *Assessing the Social Influence of Television*, 22 Communication Research 402.
- 44 S. Waters, *The Cognitive Biases Caused by the Availability Heuristic*, <https://www.betterup.com/blog/the-availability-heuristic>.
- 45 Cohen and Weimann, *Cultivation Revisited: Some Genres Have Some Effects on Some Viewers*, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2000-16358-004>, psycnet.apa.org2000.
- 46 Sherman and Corty, *Cognitive Heuristics*, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2011-28549-006>.
- 47 L. Shrum, *Processing Strategy Moderates the Cultivation Effect*, 27 Human Communication Research 94.
- 48 C. Obert-Hong, *Cultivation Theory and Violence in Media: Correlations and Observations*, <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/75489>, 2019] repositories.lib.utexas.edu.
- 49 Chartrand and Bargh, *The Chameleon Effect: The Perception-Behavior Link and Social Interaction*, 76 Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 893.
- 50 S. PG and L. KA, *PDF) the Knowledge, Attitudes, Behaviors Approach How to Evaluate Performance and Learning in Complex Environments*, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229542766-The-knowledge-attitudes-behaviors-approach-how-to-evaluate-ResearchGateSeptember-2004>.
- 51 W. Potter and M. Effects, <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/media-effects>.
- 52 J. Eder, *Media and Emotion: An Introduction - NECSUS*, https://necsus-ejms.org/media-and-emotion-an-introduction/#_edn17, necsus-ejms.org27 May 2019.
- 53 W. Potter and M. Effects, <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/media-effects>.
- 54 W. Potter and M. Effects, <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/media-effects>.
- 55 W. Potter and M. Effects, <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/media-effects>.
- 56 A. D, *Attitudes: Introduction and Scope*, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2005-04648-001>, psycnet.apa.org2005.
- 57 W. Potter and M. Effects, <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/media-effects>.
- 58 E. Mosharafa, *All You Need to Know About: The Cultivation Theory*, <https://globaljournals.org/GJHSS.Volumel5/3-All-you-Need-to-Know.pdf>.
- 59 S. Tanya, *Top 15 most-watched K-dramas on Netflix: The Glory, Squid Game, Twenty-Five Twenty-One, and more*, <https://www.pinkvilla.com/entertainment/top-15-most-watched-k-dramas-on-netflix-the-glory-squid-game-twenty-five-twenty-one-and-more-1278896>, Retrieved April 6, 2024, from.
- 60 J. Park, *SBS drama “Penthouse” finale enjoys high viewership rate. koreatimes*, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2024/03/398_302038.html, Retrieved April 6, 2024, from.
- 61 N. Chou, *MyDramaList*.

-
- 62 R. Stoldt, *THE BEHAVIORAL EFFECTS of the BINGE-WATCHING MEDIAMORPHOSIS a Thesis By*, https://soar.wichita.edu/bitstream/handle/10057/12677/t16032_Stoldt.pdf?sequence=1&isAll, 2016.
- 63 R. Stoldt, *THE BEHAVIORAL EFFECTS of the BINGE-WATCHING MEDIAMORPHOSIS a Thesis By*, https://soar.wichita.edu/bitstream/handle/10057/12677/t16032_Stoldt.pdf?sequence=1&isAll, 2016.
- 64 Goldstein, *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1998-06699-000>, psycnet.apa.org1998.
- 65 R. Appelbaum, *The Aesthetics of Violence: Art, Fiction, Drama and Film*, https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=SOTaDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=violence+art+literature+film&ots=4WCCwwLvZR&sig=Vg5ToTm3RRnODAEUDcp_eniuEA#v=onepage&q=violence%20art%20literature%20film&f=false, Rowman Littlefield 2017.
- 66 L. Alper, *THE MEAN WORLD SYNDROME: Media Violence the Cultivation of Fear [TRANSCRIPT*, <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Mean-World-Syndrome-Transcript.pdf>, Media Education Foundation 2010.
- 67 J. Funk, H. Baldacci, T. Pasold and J. Baumgardner, *Journal of Adolescence*, **27**, 23–39.
- 68 L. Huesmann, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, **41**, 6– 13.
- 69 G. Gerbner, *Cultivation Analysis: An Overview*, <http://web.asc.upenn.edu/gerbner/Asset.aspx?assetID=459>, 1998) 1 Mass Communication and Society 175.
- 70 Nabi and Riddle, *Personality Traits, Television Viewing, and the Cultivation Effect*, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2008-12896-001>, psycnet.apa.org2008.
- 71 F. M and M. H, *Digital Fascism: Challenges for the Open Society in Times of Social Media*, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/87w5c5gp>, 2019.
- 72 J. Schroeder, *The Selfie in Consumer Culture*, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3947939, Social Science Research Network22 July 2021.
- 73 L. Huesmann, *Television Violence and Aggressive Behavior*, <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/83374>, Deep Blue Documents1982.
- 74 R. ME and G. BS, *Resolving Conflict: Methods Used by TV Characters and Teenage Viewers*, 23 Journal of Broadcasting 285.