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Squid Game: Pleasure and Consumption of Korean Drama by Young Saudi Audiences

Abstract: This study investigates why the *Squid Game* TV show is so successful among young Saudis across cultural divides. It explores the engagement of young Saudi audiences with the show and the range of enjoyment they derive from it, via a mixed-methodology consisting of two stages: a preliminary survey and comprehensive focus group sessions. The data is gathered via a preliminary online survey (N = 50) involving Saudi youths aged 18 to 21, and from a focus group of 23 Saudi participants aged 18 to 30, all of whom are viewers of *Squid Game*. The findings demonstrate that three factors promote the success of *Squid Game* among Saudi youths: first, the storyline; second, the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic turned young Saudi viewers into "binge-watching" viewers, and finally, the word-of-mouth marketing strategy employed by the show's broadcaster, Netflix, which inspired the engagement of Saudi youths with the show. The study also explores the nature of their pleasure, including intense emotions, and deep engagement experienced by viewers of *Squid Game*, since emotional engagement is a key driver of engagement.

Keywords: *Squid Game*; Korean drama; pleasure; young Saudi audiences; Netflix

Introduction

In recent years, Korean dramas have been broadcast widely to diverse audiences via digital platforms (Ju, 2018; Kaptan & Tutucu, 2021), including Arabs in countries such as Saudi Arabia. *Squid Game* in particular was watched by many people worldwide

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(Kim & Park, 2023; Correia et al., 2022). The show was Netflix's most popular show in 2021, at a time when the world was recovering from the restrictions and intense emotions stimulated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the show is intense, with so much violence and death, it nevertheless touches the heart of the audience. The set design and augmented gameplay are analogue-like, rather than more contemporary digital aesthetics, mining the sense of nostalgia for a lost era. The show's concept was proposed by Hwang Dong-Hyuk in 2008, before *The Hunger Games* had become a globally successful franchise. It involves a competition among 456 entrants, with the prize of boundless wealth available to whoever survived a brutal series of fatal gameplays designed to whittle down the number of contestants. In the show itself, when the viewer is first introduced to the main protagonist, played by Korean actor Lee Jung-Sae, he is not a likable character, having a gambling addiction and thereby an inability to retain a job and support his family. Nevertheless, he appears to have good intentions. In a chance encounter, he meets a stranger on the street who entices him to play a very unusual game that catapults him into what appears to be another world. While the rationale for *Squid Game* remains unclear, it was explained to an extent in the concluding 9th episode of the first season.

The October 8, 2021 *Variety* review by Daniel D'Addario, explored why such shows have dominated the charts worldwide in recent years. Moreover, several researchers have investigated the global success of *Squid Game* as a digital drama (Widodo, 2022; Putri et al., 2023; Akildiz & Şeşen, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2022). These studies reveal that there are several theoretical gaps in the understanding of such show concepts alongside a lack of empirical evidence to enable a fuller comprehension and appreciation of their popular appeal. This is particularly the case in the context of Saudi viewers, specifically regarding the success of *Squid Game*. Thus, this study seeks to fill the current knowledge gap by addressing the following research objectives:

– to investigate why *Squid Game* is successful among Saudi youths across cultural divides;

– to explore the engagement of Saudi young audiences with *Squid Game*, and the range of pleasure they derive from it.

To address these research questions, the study employs a mixed-methods approach in two phases. The preliminary study of the first phase utilizes a quantitative online questionnaire to gather the participants' demographic data, including their age, gender, and relationship status; along with information about their online consumption of Korean drama generally, and their engagement with *Squid Game* specifically. This is followed by a qualitative phase in the form of online focus groups, in which the participants are asked to share their experienceas digital viewers of *Squid Game*, to explore the range of pleasure experienced via their engagement with the show. The participants are also questioned about their motivation for watching *Squid Game*,to help understand why the show is so popular with Saudi youths and across cultural barriers.

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Korean culture: K-drama, from the local to the global

Engagement with Korean pop culture has become popular in many countries, spreading from East Asian countries to other Asian countries, and then to the rest of the world. Currently, Korean pop culture is gaining global prominence (Jang et al., 2016). When discussing Korean culture, it is important to understand the term "Korean Wave", a phenomenon that scholars such as Madrid-Morales and Lovric (2015) and Ju (2017) explained. It includes a wide range of cultural genres, from film, pop music, and TV programmes to fashion and digital games. According to Bae et al. (2017), the term "Korean Wave" was coined by the Chinese media in 1999 to describe the fact that Chinese youths were showing great interest in Korean popular culture, including Korean dramas and popular music. As Ju (2018, p. 2) explained, "the beginning of the Korean Wave – the phenomenal Chinese attraction to Korean dramas – was not planned by Korean broadcasters or government strategy". An alternative to the term "Korean Wave" is "Hallyu", which Choi (2015, p. 31) explained in the manner it, "merges the soaring popularity of Korean television dramas, films, music, as well as some idols and beauty products in foreign countries (…) every Korean TV drama [is] a legitimate part of Hallyu". Moreover, Kim (2015, p. 154) argued that Hallyu has several forms, explaining that "the golden goose called Hallyu can be conveniently dissected into four parts for export abroad: Hallyu 1.0 (K-drama), Hallyu 2.0 (K-pop music), Hallyu 3.0 (K-culture) and Hallyu 4.0 (K-style)".

In Saudi Arabia, the increasing popularity of Hallyu among the younger generation is due to factors such as access to media, social media, and a desire to connect with global popular culture. This has led to changes in fashion, music, and even lifestyle choices, with many adopting Korean-inspired fashion styles. However, this influence is not universal, as certain social groups resist to embrace foreign pop culture. This suggests a need for a more holistic approach to encourage cultural tolerance (Abdullah & Ubaidillah, 2023). Similarly, in the United States, K-pop and K-drama have found different audiences, especially among Asian Americans, who promote a sense of cultural identity and bridge gaps between East and West. Despite language barriers and cultural differences, K-pop continues to relate to a broader audience. This has led to an increasing interest in learning Korean and contributing to the diversification of American culture (Longenecker & Lee, 2018).

The aspect of the "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu" that centres on dramas, or "Hallyu 1.0", which is otherwise known as K-drama, has become increasingly popular and attracts wide audiences in both the local and global market. The revolution of the Internet exposed a global, or foreign, audience to K-drama, via digital platforms such as Netflix, Shahid, and YouTube. Indeed, previous studies found that the popularity of K-dramas is more prevalent among foreign than home audiences. For example, the qualitative study by Ariffin et al. (2018) investigated the impact of K-drama on Malaysian audiences and found that they meet the emotional needs of

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Asian viewers by being expressive and by presenting a similar way of life to their own culture.

A recent qualitative study by Abdullah and Ubaidillah (2023) found that exposure to K-drama has impacted the fashion, hairstyles, and personal care habits of Saudi youths (Appendix A). Meanwhile, a survey conducted in the UAE by Albers and AlNuaimi (2020) revealed that Emirati females were initially attracted to Korean culture via Korean pop music and dramas. Thereafter, they developed a keen interest in acquiring proficiency in the Korean language and exploring various avenues by which to expand their knowledge of Korea. The study found that Arab students who were proficient in Arabic, English, and Korean, and who had a good understanding of Korean culture, contributed positively to the ongoing bilateral relations between the UAE and Korea. In addition, the recent study by Naguim and Nfissi (2023) found that Moroccan fans of popular Korean entertainment are drawn to the genre because they can relate to the emotions and morals conveyed, as well as the shows' aesthetic features. They indicated "that fans' motivations are both hedonic and eudemonic, as they seek both psychological pleasure and meaning in their consumption" (Naguim & Nfissi, 2023, p. 46).

The fact that K-drama has become popular globally raises questions about the concept of globalization being synonymous with Americanization. Kurniadi and Triana (2020) reported that Korean culture has become one of the most prevalent cultures worldwide. In this context, *Squid Game* is one of the most popular and successful K-dramas, engaging audiences globally. For example, Ahmed et al. (2022) indicated that the television series *Squid Game* significantly boosted Netflix subscriptions, with a notable surge reported in the third quarter of 2021. According to Rushe (2022), Netflix gained 4.4 million new users during this period, marking a doubling of subscriptions compared to the previous quarter. Additionally, it was reported that approx. 142 million households tuned in to watch the show (Rushe, 2022). Nevertheless, while the show is hugely popular with audiences in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries, including Saudi Arabia, there is currently a gap in the research regarding the reasons for this in the Arab world.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia plays an essential role in the MENA region's video streaming market. In 2024, the country's streaming revenue is expected to reach USD 195.30 million, with an average revenue per user of USD 49.53 (Statista, 2024). This makes Saudi viewers one of the largest and most important groups for streaming services in the region. The preferences of Saudi audiences, especially among the young population, can determine media trends across MENA, as streaming platforms might tailor content to meet their tastes. Understanding Saudi viewership is therefore crucial to understanding broader trends in the region. Thus, the current study addresses this gap by investigating the reasons for the success of *Squid Game* among Saudi youths across cultural divides, exploring the engagement of the young Saudi audience with the show, and the range of pleasure they derive from it.

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The media literacy through *Squid Game*

The specific games used are borrowed from everyday children's playground activities. Such children's stories are common across all cultures but with a fatal twist. Most notably, more than half of the contestants are gunned down in the first game, recalling a version of "Red Light, Green Light"; picking off contestants who move after the sounding of the red light. The contestants are depicted as tragic victims and greedy participants, highlighting broader societal inequalities except for a few chosen ones who appear to constitute a cross-section of contemporary Korean culture. For example, a North Korean defector and a migrant worker from Pakistan – almost like archetypes of cultural division – are representatives of marginalized identities. By all accounts, the games amplify the potential for violence and raise the stakes to unbelievable levels of horrific inhumanity.

Later in the series, audiences are privy to VIPs being introduced to the set, presumably outlaying large amounts of money up-front to physically interact within the diegesis of the series, rather than digitally at a distance. This is in contrast with the majority of the series audiences vicariously observing the contestants and games from afar. Meanwhile, these VIPs, having earlier viewed them vicariously, as part of a controlled set of blood sports, now "enjoy the real thing". Pushing the ethical aspect of the role-play, our chief protagonist emotes after the games are completed "We are not horses!". But of course, all this gameplay calls to mind the historical popularity of Roman circuses, emphasizing humanity's enduring fascination with spectacles of cruelty and power. Certainly, the world has witnessed such live episodes before, reflected in modern dystopic reality television and brutal entertainment narratives.

The final big game involves jumping over glass panels – again suspended high off the ground with random panels crushing under the weight of a body, leading to more fatalities. In the end, there were three survivors, sitting around a triangular-shaped table and having their (last) supper in celebration of their success so far. Paradoxically, the meal consists of a very substantial meat stake meal, with a very high-carbon footprint. Unfortunately, the only female contestant left standing cannot enjoy such rich food, being already mortally wounded from broken glass puncturing her body from the previous game.

Note, earlier this contestant [Sae-byeok] had to play with her other female friend [Ji-yeong], who decided she had less to live for in the end and thereby willingly forfeited her life. From virtuous self-sacrifice to selfless suicide to wilful killing of others, to trusting others and being killed for it – all of life lessons and human survival strategies are here in abundance. These games consciously serve as a set of cautionary dystopic tales, dramatizing the lengths humans might or are willing to go to survive, if crudely put to the test. The ultimate survivor is so annoyed with his opponent and erstwhile friend from his region, that at first, he appears willing to descend to his level of naked barbarism. Nonetheless, he cannot descend to such depravity, unlike his erstwhile friend who had earlier helped him to survive. Surprisingly, this opponent ends up taking his own life and somewhat redeems his earlier actions. All the memories of inhumanity

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and viciousness by humans have left deep scars on the winner, as he roams around the streets of his beloved city, striving to dispense his ill-gotten wealth to his own family and his co-players relations.

One certainly wonders how audiences decode this strange closing sequence, especially on listening to a dying man's final wish. We discover he is the architect of the overall experiment, who is trying to tease out the rationale for playing such games, tying them to his twisted nostalgia for "childhood pleasures" and the broader societal appetite for such dark spectacles. Such fatalism mirrors the despair embedded in *Squid Game*'s portrayal of human nature, power, and survival, ultimately forcing audiences to confront their complicity in enjoying dystopian narratives.

What Saudi viewers say about K-dramas, particularly *Squid Game*

This study utilized a mixed methods approach to examine various aspects of the scope and characteristics of K-dramas, particularly *Squid Game*. The first, quantitative stage of the study, conducted in the middle of September 2023, gathered data via an online questionnaire which was administered to ($N = 53$) individuals out of which only ($N = 50$) responded. Among the ($N = 50$) respondents, only ($N = 47$) people had previously watched K-dramas. Therefore, questionnaires of only these individuals were analyzed. The preliminary information was utilized to create the patterns and the contextual framework involved in the consumption of Korean drama in general, and the engagement with *Squid Game* in particular. Most of the participants were aged between 18 and 21 years (68%), 58% of whom were male, and most of the participants were single (94%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	29	58
	Female	21	42
Age	18–21	34	68
	22–24	12	24
	25–30	4	8
Marital status	Bachelor	47	94
	Married	3	6

Source: Authors' own study.

The results of the survey showed that 44% of the participants always viewed K-dramas, while 36% viewed them for more than eight hours per week. In addition, 46% of the participants usually watched K-dramas on Netflix. Furthermore, 38% of the respondents said that their main reason for watching K-dramas was pleasure. In terms of the K-dramas they enjoyed watching the most, the participants listed *Squid Game*,

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The Heirs, and *The Legend of the Blue Sea*. In all, 94% of the participants had watched *Squid Game*, comparing it with the K-dramas *All of Us Are Dead*, and *Mouse*.

Regarding their favourite character on the *Squid Game* show, the findings of the questionnaire demonstrated that the participants favoured Song Seung-Heon for his creative acting. The participants strongly agreed with the statement, "I watch *Squid Game* for fun", while they disagreed with the statement, "*Squid Game* makes me laugh". They agreed with the statements,"I like *Squid Game* because it has a lot of suspense" and "I feel fun and excitement when watching the *Squid Game* series". They responded neutrally to the statement, "I watch *Squid Game* to pass the time", and disagreed with the statements, "I prefer *Squid Game* because it is based on real life" and "I watch *Squid Game* to escape reality". Furthermore, the findings showed that participants responded neutrally to the statement, "I watch *Squid Game* because it stimulates my imagination", while they strongly agreed with the statement, "*Squid Game* helps me to empathize with the hero". Interestingly, 60% of the sample reported that the storyline was their favourite aspect of the show, while 36% cited characters as their favourite part of the show (Table 2). Finally, 90% of the participants stated that they would like to watch another season of *Squid Game* because viewing it gave them pleasure and because the show's story had not concluded, and the storyline was very different and exciting.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of survey responses (n = 50)

Statement	Categories	n	%
Describe the degree of your viewing of Korean series?	Always	22	44
	Rarely	15	30
	Sometimes	13	26
What is your favorite app when watching Korean drama?	Asia TV	1	2
	HiTV	1	2
	Netflix	23	46
	Multiple	6	12
	Others	17	34
	I don't watch K-dramas	2	4
Have you watched the Korean drama *Squid Game*?	Yes	47	94
	No	3	6
What is your favorite part of *Squid Game*?	Actors	18	36
	Story	30	60
	I didn't like the series	1	2
	I don't watch K-dramas	1	2
I watch *Squid Game* for fun	Strongly agree	30	60
	Agree	12	24
	Neutral	5	10
	Disagree	1	2
	Strongly disagree	2	4
Squid Game makes me laugh	Strongly agree	0	0
	Agree	1	2
	Neutral	10	20
	Disagree	26	52
	Strongly disagree	13	26

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Statement	Categories	n	%
I like *Squid Game* because it has a lot of suspense	Strongly agree	20	40
	Agree	25	50
	Neutral	3	6
	Disagree	0	0
	Strongly disagree	2	4
I watch Squid Game to pass the time	Strongly agree	4	8
	Agree	13	26
	Neutral	17	34
	Disagree	14	28
	Strongly disagree	2	4
I feel fun and excitement when watching the *Squid Game* series	Strongly agree	16	32
	Agree	24	48
	Neutral	7	14
	Disagree	1	2
	Strongly disagree	2	4
I prefer *Squid Game* because it is based on real life	Strongly agree	0	0
	Agree	2	4
	Neutral	15	30
	Disagree	21	42
	Strongly disagree	12	24
I watch *Squid Game* to escape reality	Strongly agree	1	2
	Agree	7	14
	Neutral	15	30
	Disagree	17	34
	Strongly disagree	10	20
I watch *Squid Game* because it stimulates my imagination	Strongly agree	1	2
	Agree	7	14
	Neutral	20	40
	Disagree	12	24
	Strongly disagree	10	20
Squid Game helps me empathize with the hero	Strongly agree	21	42
	Agree	15	30
	Neutral	6	12
	Disagree	4	8
	Strongly disagree	4	8

Source: Authors' own study.

Focus groups

Based on the preliminary questionnaire, focus groups were conducted to delve deeper into the initial responses of the participants. Therefore, focus groups consisting of a total of 23 individuals aged between 18 and 30 years formed the second phase of this study. They were held at the beginning of February 2024, and at the end of May 2024, and were employed to gather comprehensive insights into the nature and extent of individuals' pleasure with watching and engaging with the K-drama *Squid*

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Game. Focus groups were deemed to be a suitable tool for exploring a broad range of perspectives and for obtaining an in-depth understanding of the two primary research questions, which were as follows:

RQ1. Why is *Squid Game* successful across cultural divides and legacy screening versus online platforms, propelling Netflix into the mainstream?

RQ2. Why do young Saudi audience members obtain pleasure from viewing *Squid Game*?

To explore the multifaceted perspectives concerned, and to obtain the insights necessary to address the research questions regarding the widespread success of shows such as *Squid Game* across cultural and generational boundaries, as well as their role in propelling Netflix into the mainstream, seven focus groups were conducted. These focus groups also aimed at developing a deeper understanding of the source of pleasure gained from *Squid Game* by young Saudi audience members. In total, five were all-female groups and two were all-male groups with each group consisting of 3–4 individuals. In Saudi Arabia, gender segregation is a defining feature (Meijer, 2010) and hence dictates all aspects of social life and public interactions. Therefore, the decision to conduct single-gender focus groups is crucial for ensuring comfort and openness among participants. Gender norms in Saudi society prescribe separate social spaces for men and women, and discussing sensitive topics, such as personal enjoyment or emotional reactions to media as in this study, is more comfortable in single-gender settings.

Participants were recruited using social media outreach and through university networks. The decision to use small group sizes was to facilitate more detailed conversations with participants. Each group met online via Zoom, for approx. one hour, and each session was recorded. Zoom was used instead of in-person interviews for the sake of convenience of the participants from different locations across Saudi Arabia. This also provided flexibility in scheduling the interview and created a more relaxed environment for participants to share their views. The data collected underwent a thematic analysis that adhered to the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2023). Table 3 shows the characteristics of the groups.

Table 3. Focus group participants

Group number	Group characteristics		
	Age	Number	Gender
Group 1	23–26	3	Female
Group 2	20–24	4	Female
Group 3	21–23	3	Female
Group 4	20–24	4	Female
Group 5	21–23	3	Female
Group 6	20–24	3	Male
Group 7	22–25	3	Male

Source: Authors' own study.

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Why is *Squid Game* successful with the young Saudi generation?

Storyline

The majority of the focus group members described the plot of *Squid Game* as unique, and half of the participants claimed that the format of the drama constituted a new concept. Wissam in Group One explained that:

> no drama portrayed this concept or plot before. *Squid Game* should successfully achieve high ratings and viewing figures. [This was partly due to the selection of] a successful platform that targeted viewers of different ages, such as teenagers, youths, and fans of K-drama.

Meanwhile, half of the sample claimed that the show's plot and selection of characters were masterful, with every character possessing a distinct personality and backstory that enhanced the storyline and made it compelling. As Seham in Group One commented:

> I see the concept is not new, we have always [had] animations, or stories like this concept, [such] as *Death Leave*, but the most remarkable thing in *Squid Game* is the depth and the characters. Every character was portrayed with special feelings and conveyed special emotions. For instance (…) the main hero, who is the main character, was [initially] a bad person. I mean he had stolen his mother's money, he was gambling, and he forgot his daughter's birthday (…) the drama depicts different aspects of the character, and that was a beautiful thing that made this drama more popular than other dramas.

Therefore, *Squid Game* was perceived to possess an exceptional concept, compared with other shows in the same genre, for instance, in the way it depicted the contestants striving to survive to win money. As Shin and Whitaker (2023, p. 527) noted, it is a form of "»quid game« (money game)". It could be argued that this form of the game is perhaps only enjoyable for its players, who win the money, with the latent goal of the game for the viewer being viewing pleasure. As Bosman (2022, p. 108) explained, "the premise of *Squid Game* is not an unfamiliar one: people forced to compete with one another to the death for the pleasure of others". This is different than fighting for survival, as in the example of *The Hunger Games*. According to Irwin (2012, p. 219), "seems to suggest that in a struggle for survival, obligations between individuals do not exist". The storyline of *Squid Game* was perceived by the participants of the present study to be one of the main factors that prompted its success, due to both its concept, the cast of characters, and the dialogue between them. The study by Awan (2022) reported similar findings, noting that the storyline of the show was exceptionally well-structured via its character interplay, emphasizing the importance of character portrayal in driving the plot and maintaining the engagement of the audience.

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Timing of the COVID-19 pandemic

This study explored how the participants described their viewing habits. The majority of the sample indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic played a key role in their decision to watch *Squid Game*. During the focus group discussions, the term "binge-watching" was used commonly by the group members to describe their viewing patterns, especially in the unique and dynamic context of the pandemic. In other words, timing was a crucial factor that may have increased the global viewing rates of the show. As a result of the circumstances, intense emotions, and restrictions of the pandemic, the consumption of media content, such as Korean drama, in the form of binge-watching was frequent. In addition, the pleasure gained by the participants from watching *Squid Game* may have been a factor that inspired their binge-watching.

The phenomenon of "binge-watching" has been discussed by several previous scholars, including Starosta and Izydorczyk (2020) and Winland (2015), who explained that it is a fairly recent trend that involves the viewing of multiple episodes of a TV series, typically between two and six, in a single sitting. The practice became more popular due to easy access to digital platforms, such as Netflix and Disney. The term "binge-watching" was employed by the majority of the present study's participants in the context of how they chose to view *Squid Game*. As Zaher in Group Seven explained:

> I watched *Squid Game* in two days, and my sister finished it in one day. I remember that happened in COVID-19. It was a bad time, we spent our time watching movies and eating food, staying at home. It was really bad time, even studying was online.

Similarly, Hammas in Group Four said:

> I watched *Squid Game* in one day with my family. Even my father, who does not like Korean drama, enjoyed watching it with us. He was surprised regarding the plot and characters, particularly the old man. My father usually watches Arabic dramas, I mean the Egyptian ones. *Squid Game* was the first Korean drama my [whole] family enjoyed watching. After watching first four episodes, the Netflix subscription expired, my father renewed the subscription only for watching *Squid Game*. I think the time of COVID-19 changed people's lives.

Since many members of this study's sample binge-watched all 10 episodes of the show in one or two days, it is arguable that the timing of the show, during the COVID-19 pandemic, was one of the key reasons for its popularity. This echoed the findings of Sekartaji (2023), who claimed that the COVID-19 era may have been responsible for the widespread binge-watching of the show.

Therefore, while the engagement of the present study's participants with *Squid Game* may have been due to its plotting, characterization, and scripting, the COVID-19 crisis was a key reason for the binge-watching of movies and TV series via

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digital platforms, including *Squid Game*. In terms of the global situation, Ahmed et al. (2022, p. 224) reported that "the COVID-19 global pandemic has significantly impacted binge-watching and video streaming behaviour". Similarly, a recent study by Yu and Alizadeh (2024) suggested that in the challenging circumstances of the pandemic, there was a notable surge in binge-watching worldwide, as individuals turned to this activity, seeking solace and comfort in the familiarity of their favourite dramas and series. Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic may have driven the globalization effect of K-dramas among audiences worldwide.

Marketing

The participants in this study believed that two marketing techniques may have been responsible for the success of *Squid Game*. The first of these was word-of-mouth (WOM) discussions about the show among family and friends, or on digital platforms such as social media, including in the comments sections, which played a crucial role in providing essential background information about the show. Moreover, the participants cited a current trend for such dramas in Saudi Arabia, where *Squid Game* and other such shows are currently popular. Furthermore, the analysis of the findings suggested that there was a certain approach employed in the WOM promotion of *Squid Game*, as Loujen in Group Two explained:

> I watched *Squid Game* after I saw it in the top ten of the most viewed series and dramas, and one of my sisters recommended [that I should] watch [it]. She said the series is very, very, very beautiful. It has impacted Saudi society. For example, there is a group of people who began to play a particular game from *Squid Game*. It was the game of "biscuit", and others who have a coffee shops air the show there to encourage customers to visit (…) some owners of coffee shops wear masks [of characters from the show], like the La ca sa or the Professor.

Reflecting the view of Shin and Whitaker (2023), the majority of the present study's participants believed that one of the main reasons for the success of *Squid Game* was the fact that it was broadcast on Netflix. The platform has become a powerhouse in the entertainment industry, reshaping how media is consumed in the digital age. Indeed, the very foundation of Netflix was rooted in the evolving landscape of digital media. The success and the global reach of the platform are emblematic of the current shifting audience preferences towards on-demand, streaming content, marking a significant departure from traditional forms of entertainment consumption. Thus, the success of *Squid Game* is in part testament to both the innovative nature of the Netflix platform and the broader transformation of media consumption habits in the digital era. The Chinese study by Jiang (2024) emphasized the significance of Netflix's global strategy for the success of *Squid Game*, noting the utilization of ad-

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vertising, marketing, and big data algorithms in its launch on the platform. This was echoed by Lena in Group Five, who explained:

> *Squid Game* is a successful series, firstly because it produced by Netflix, which is [everyone's "go-to" streaming platform]. Secondly, it is a Korean drama, which attracts a mass audience, and thirdly, [its success is due to] the approach that Netflix used to market *Squid Game*. For instance, [characters from] the drama appeared on the street, wearing masks, and people asked what is that? Then, the advertisements on Netflix, I mean, Korean dramas know how to market their shows on the street, then on Netflix, to make everyone want to watch the show.

Similarly, Saeed in Group Six observed:

> I think *Squid Game* is popular because it was broadcast on Netflix, because all Saudi people have a Netflix account. I mean, Saudi audiences like to watch things on Netflix more than on other platforms like Disney; I do not have it. We are familiar with Netflix.

Observations such as these are evidence of the fact that the contemporary media landscape, including the rise of Netflix, has transformed audience's engagement with shows, and the forms of pleasure they gain from them. Moreover, the advent of digital streaming platforms and social media has enabled Saudi audiences to interact with *Squid Game* content in a way that is more personalized and participatory than was previously possible. Platforms such as Netflix not only provide a vast array of choices, but also foster communities in which viewers can share their enjoyment, critique, and discussion of shows. This enhances the collective enjoyment and appreciation of the content, which in the case of the present study was that of Korean drama.

The pleasure obtained from viewing *Squid Game*

The pleasure and meaning obtained from viewing *Squid Game* reported by the young Saudi participants in this study's focus groups were synthesized and evaluated critically. This section discusses the taxonomy of potential pleasures the participants reported deriving from viewing the show, categorized as follows: 1) identification with characters; 2) emotions; 3) gaming; 4) reflection of Korean culture.

Identification with Characters

The majority of the participants reported that they gained pleasure from watching *Squid Game* via their identification with particular characters in certain scenes. Some specifically identified with the girl named "Sae-byeok", as Rffat in Group Three commented:

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> I like the girl in the [show]; her performance was amazing. I thought about her throughout the season, because I know that North Korea is a strict country. I mean the girl "Sae-byeok" did not have a family, and her brother wanted her back because she was only his person in his life. Throughout the season, she focused on herself and did not help others, although ultimately, she opened her heart to the young girl, "Ji-yeong", who sacrificed herself for her, something no-one else in her life had done for her.

The majority of the participants indicated that they favoured the character of the old man, "Jang Deok-su", who was one of the main heroes featured in the story. Surprisingly, they justified the fact that he killed people. For instance, Safa in Group One argued that "the old man did not force the players [to act]; he provided opportunities for them". Similarly, Afnan in Group Four commented: "I was really surprised about the old man. I respected his intelligence, the [other] players were stupid and loved money". When discussing the motivations of the old man, Sara in Group Two argued: "Maybe he wanted to help others with the money, or to teach them not to be selfish". Similarly, Nadia in Group Two explained: "The old man [was] smart. I think he was »sick«, and he did not want to kill people". The unwillingness of the participants to criticize the sometimes questionable actions of the old man may therefore have been due to the enjoyment they gained from watching him, in the same way that they gained pleasure from watching the character, Sae-byeok.

Emotions

The analysis of the findings from the focus groups showed that the participants experienced a wide range of emotions when watching *Squid Game*, including excitement, happiness, sadness, tears, laughter, fear, and fascination. This range of emotions was inspired by certain scenes and situations. For example, Hadeel in Group Three explained: "When Ali, the Indian man, died, it was very sad. My sister and I were crying". In addition, Aisha in Group Four said: "It was exciting to see the amount money rising continuously until by the end, it was a large amount of money". Meanwhile, Sarh in Group Five noted: "I was interested to watch the main hero at the train station, to finally get the offer after perceived a plenty of hit", and Mohammed in Group Six explained: "I couldn't move when I saw the old man playing with ball with the main hero. It was so exciting. I mean, I was so sad when the old man forgot how to play". Meanwhile, Maram in Group Three observed: "I like *Squid Game*. All the episodes were very enjoyable, but for me, the most interesting thing was the portrayal of how each character died".

Interestingly, many of the focus group participants described experiencing mixed emotions when watching the show, both negative and positive, concurrently, and

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likely gained enjoyment from these conflicting feelings. For example, Lama in Group Five explained:

> I really felt conflicted between two different emotions: excitement and fear. I mean, I was excited while I was watching the episode, but at the same time, I was afraid to lose one of the best characters if they died.

In all, three of the participants reported experiencing pleasure from the violence and bloodshed in *Squid Game*. This may have been because repeated exposure to violence engenders a certain degree of familiarity with it. According to O'Connor and Klaus (2000, p. 10), the familiarity audiences gain with media content in the form of news inspires feelings of pleasure, explaining:

> The more that TV uses the codes with which people are familiar, the more likely it is that people will be able to construct news reports into a story that they will understand, that will have a resonance for them, and that they will experience as pleasurable.

Another potential reason for the pleasure this study's participants reported when watching the killings and bloodshed on *Squid Game* was the fact that their identification with the characters and their engagement with the show transported them from the real world to an imaginary scenario. They felt as though they were part of the game, fighting and killing alongside the characters. As Hu et al. (2019, p. 2) explained, this occurs because:

> Flow refers to the feeling of enjoyment and pleasure arising from deep immersion in an activity. In that line, Flow is viewed as the ideal middle ground between anxiety (i.e. when a task is beyond the capability of an individual) and boredom (i.e. when an individual's level of skill exceeds the demands of a task).

For example, Ahmed in Group Seven explained:

> I was so afraid and sad when saw people killed in the games, but finally, I mean in the last game, I really felt sad and excited to know who would win. I mean, it was a mixed emotion (…) because I feel I am (…) in the game, [although the characters] are not real people.

The pleasure gained by the participants when watching *Squid Game* was therefore centred on the intense emotions and deep engagement they experienced with the show and its characters.

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Gaming

A total of six types of games were included in *Squid Game*. The analysis of the findings of the focus group discussions showed that some of the participants enjoyed watching the players engage with the first game, which was called "Red Light, Green Light". This may have been because they were in the "flow" of the world of game, whilst simultaneously recalling a comparable game in Saudi culture. The high degree of pleasure they experienced due to this "flow" state was described by Boyle et al. (2012, p. 772) as an "emotional state of optimal pleasure". As Abed in Group Six explained:

> I really liked all of the games, but I preferred the first one, the "Red and Green Light" with the doll. Although it was frightening and sad to watch people being killed, it was also interesting, because we played this game when I was a child with my friend at school, although it had a different name; I think "Fire and Ice" or "Water and Ice". I really felt as though I entered through the screen and became a player with the large doll (…) it was so exciting to see the Korean game's similarity to the Saudi game.

Meanwhile, other focus group participants preferred the second game, "Dalgona", believing it was more challenging for the players. As Ahmed in Group Seven observed, "I really felt the pressure. [It was] stressful, especially the game the players played with the biscuit (…) oh, I just wanted to see who would be the one to die".

Meanwhile, Waleed in Group Seven explained:

> I watched all the games, all of them were so exciting for me because each one was different, but I liked the game with the candy, or sugar [best]. I mean, when the players tried to choose the [right] shape, and tried to copy it exactly as a triangle, circle, [or] umbrella. It was such an enjoyable game, but I think it was unfair because it was based on chance, not on skill. I mean, the player who selected the easy shape would be the winner. It was really interesting, especially when I saw the old man, who was very old, and I was afraid he would not finish the shape.

The participants' enjoyment of watching these two games may have been due to the manner of their execution, as this enabled them to feel positive about the games and enter a "flow" state while watching the game. According to Moulard et al. (2019, p. 221), "entering »flow« during gameplay is a pleasurable experience, and thus filled with positive emotion". In this state, viewers can envisage themselves as a player, instead of a viewer, a situation that in turn inspires greater engagement and pleasure. As Uhm et al. (2023) explained, positive emotional experiences can enhance player or viewer engagement.

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Reflection of Korean culture

Korean drama series, as well as dramas from countries such as Turkey, constitute a successful vehicle through which to disseminate a country's culture among viewers more widely. Hence, Korean dramas, such as *Squid Game* are a means to transfer Korean culture from the local to the global audience, using a form of "soft power". Previous studies referred to K-drama as soft power (Kim, 2013; Nye & Kim, 2019; Jo, 2021) comparable to the echoes of the "soft power" of Hollywood (De Zoysa & Newman, 2002). The pleasure gained from engagement with media is not a one-dimensional phenomenon, rather it is influenced by cultural, social, and individual factors. Indeed, the participants in the present study described the presence of a variety of cultural values or practices in *Squid Game*, and a range of forms of enjoyment beyond simply watching the show. Although none of the male participants referred specifically to the Korean cultural values present in the show, nonetheless this aspect was mentioned by female participants. For example, Lena in Group Five commented: "Korean drama shows the significant value of the family, especially for the elderly".

Meanwhile, Sarh in Group Five added:

> I recall the view that the hero expressed to the old man early in the series when they talked and ate together. The young man spoke respectfully to the old man. I mean, all these values, concerning family, respecting older people, are a fundamental things in Korean culture; their respect of older people was unbelievable.

Similarly, Rffat in Group Three observed:

> Of course the family is sacred. I mean, even if you are an adult, your own family is going to be sacred. And the important example of this is that some of us are 30 or 20 years old, but even so, our families give us money. I mean, when you need money and do not want to ask your family, they know that, and they give you money without [you] needing to ask. It seems they deal with you as a child, and that's what I see in *Squid Game*; the mother of Cho Sang-woo deals with him as [though he were] a child.

As noted previously, many of the female participants in the focus groups expressed the pleasure and enjoyment they derived from immersing themselves in Korean culture via *Squid Game*. Indeed, some mentioned specific cultural rituals or practices that were depicted in the show. For example,Taif in Group Two said:

> When I saw the black coal, I already knew he would be a suicide, or would kill [one of the] others.

Explaining the significance of the symbolic "black coal", Taif added:

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> Financial debt is a very common thing among Korean people, also suicides. Like the Cho Sang-woo's friend when he "paid the coal". It is very common in Korea that people commit suicide by hanging themselves or throwing themselves off a high place, or into the Han River. They "pay the black coal", because it is cheap. Even very poor people can afford to buy coal from the supermarket, which is why the expression for committing suicide in Korea is "paying the coal".

It was therefore evident that the participants in the focus groups gained enjoyment from observing and discussing the details of Korean culture conveyed by the show, which provided a deeper understanding of some of the positive cultural values of the country, such as that of the family, of being respectful, being a good mother, and the willingness to be a sacrifice, alongside the particular cultural practices depicted by the show, such as the "black coal", suicide, and issues related to financial debt.

Conclusions

This study explored the relationship between the content of K-dramas and the pleasure experienced by the young Saudi audiences who consume them, with a particular focus on the show, *Squid Game*. The findings indicated that *Squid Game* achieved global success due to its compelling storyline, well-timed broadcast, and innovative marketing strategies. These factors enabled it to resonate with audiences across cultural divides and gain widespread popularity through Netflix's extensive international platform. The study also found that young Saudi viewers experienced pleasure from the show through their ability to identify with its characters, the emotional engagement it evoked, the gaming-like interaction with its narrative, and the cultural aspects of Korean society portrayed in the series. These elements contributed to a rich viewing experience that connected with Saudi audiences on multiple levels.

A key limitation of this pilot study was the small number of male participants (6 out of 23), compared with the number of female participants (17 out of 23), giving a male-to-female ratio of 6:17. Nevertheless, this study contributed to the understanding of shows such as *Squid Game*, and the reasons for their success in the Saudi context, by providing a methodological framework which can be scaled up to consider the impact of such shows, and the pleasure derived from them, specifically in the Saudi context. Future studies might further investigate audience perceptions of gender representation in *Squid Game*, or other such TV shows by employing both qualitative and quantitative in-depth content analysis methods.

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