

# K-Wave Content as a Source of Comfort During Coronavirus Widespread in Indonesia

Riela Provi Drianda<sup>1\*</sup> Meyriana Kesuma<sup>2</sup> Nadia Ayu Rahma Lestari<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Social Sciences, Waseda University, Tokyo 169-8050, Japan

<sup>2</sup>Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Tarumanagara University, Jakarta 11440, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author. Email: reetea.bdg@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

Depressive symptoms in people during the outbreak of Covid-19 have been reported across the globe. In the period where people are forced to withdraw from the crowd and isolate themselves, coping with mental health is indeed very challenging. Previous studies showed how fandom or the state of being a fan of someone or something could create healthy support systems and a feeling of belonging. Focusing on Indonesia's case, this paper aims to understand better why people consume K-wave content during the pandemic and whether consuming it could bring comfort in coronavirus's widespread. The first survey was carried out online in August 2020 and collected 254 responses through random sampling. Meanwhile, the second survey was conducted in early January 2021 and retrieved 100 answers. This study's findings provide pieces of evidence on the rise in consumption of K-wave content in Indonesia during the pandemic. K-wave content can be considered as a form of entertainment that saves people in the face of a pandemic. From the questionnaire results, respondents verified that K-wave content consumption is an option to fill their free time, keep a social and emotional connection, and overcome several mental health syndromes they experience during the COVID-19 crisis.

**Keywords:** *Fandom, mental health, coronavirus, pandemic, Indonesia*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On March 2, 2020, the first case of coronavirus was detected in Indonesia. At that time, people believed that the virus was not as dangerous as reported in mass media. Coronavirus-related memes were circulated, emphasizing how the country's people would not be infected by the virus [1]. People started to take coronavirus more seriously after the infection cases arose. This rapid spread made the national government announced the social distancing campaign. As the situation worsened, the Indonesian government had to enforce the large-scale social restriction (LSSR) by the end of March 2020. For the first time, people were asked to spend more time at home and avoid unnecessary mobility. For Indonesian who loves to socialize outdoors, forcing themselves to withdraw from social gathering and stay at home is indeed very challenging. To get rid of the boredom, people started to rely on digital home-entertainment. Nielsen Indonesia's survey revealed the increased of Indonesian who watched online movies or series every day during the pandemic [2]. At the same time, another study by LIPI identified the increased consumption of Korean dramas (hereafter, called K-dramas) among Indonesian throughout the pandemic [3].

This phenomenon sparked our interest as the Korean wave has been the talk of the town. Many newspapers began to suggest K-dramas' consumption as the new source of comfort during the Covid-19 pandemic. Likewise, TV

stations also started to air more K-dramas and K-pop concerts to attract Korean lovers' audiences.

In reality, the popularity of Korean content had soared even before the pandemic hit the country hard. Numerous fandoms of Korean boybands and Korean culture flourished across Indonesia. But back then, there was a relatively limited discourse on how K-wave content consumption could provide Indonesian a comfort source all through distressful time.

Marie [4] highlighted how belonging to a fandom or the state of being a fan of someone or something can create healthy support systems and a sense of connectedness with other people. However, few academic studies examined how being a fan of Korean pop culture would help people deal with the sudden life changes due to the coronavirus pandemic. To date, the evidence mostly came from fans' testimonies that are written online, in the online forum or website. Focusing on the case of Indonesia, this paper aims to understand better why people consume K-wave content during the pandemic and whether consuming it could bring comfort in coronavirus's widespread.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *Mental Health and COVID-19*

Stavridou et al. [5] identified mental health deterioration among children, adolescents, and young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women and participants with low sleep quality showed more tendency to have post-traumatic stress symptoms after the mass outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China [6]. For the coronavirus crisis duration, people in the quarantine may have emotional distress and feelings of fear of contracting COVID-19 [7].

The vulnerable population may go through the worst collective traumatic COVID-19, such as domestic violence, financial burden, loneliness, emotional and behavioral problems, fear of losing family, and even mental health issues [8]. A study by Ueda et al. [9] further indicated how the stress during COVID-19 could lead young women to commit suicide. They were more likely to experience mental breakdown due to a job or income loss due to an outbreak of coronavirus in Japan [9].

The COVID-19 pandemic is also driving a spike in suicides in Indonesia. The reasons were varied from the despair from contracting coronavirus to income loss [10,11]. According to a survey by the Indonesian Psychiatric Association, approximately 63 % of the surveyed respondents reported anxiety and depression throughout the pandemic [12]. More anxiety cases were discovered in healthcare staff as they had to deal with the people who have COVID-19 on regular basis [13].

As the coronavirus continues to spread, WHO has stressed out that it is normal for people to feel sad, confused, and scared. Henceforth, WHO suggested that everyone maintain a healthy lifestyle and manage their emotions during the challenging time of the COVID-19 outbreak [14]. Correspondingly, Hwang et al. [15] also emphasized the importance of keeping social connections with technology. Enabling people to stay connected in various ways is very important to prevent the detrimental effect of loneliness and social isolation [15].

### 2.2. *The Restoration of Human Connection Through Korean Pop Culture*

One way to stay connected through the pandemic is to embrace cultural content and enjoy it together with other people who like the same artist. Many fans noted how being a fan of Korean pop culture whether as a casual and original fan could restore human connection during the pandemic [16]. When comfort is difficult to find everywhere, Korean pop culture or also known as Korean Wave, Hallyu, or K-Wave, has been offering some reassurance to many fans worldwide. Yeo [17] highlighted how a fan coined the term the “emotional support K-pop boys” to identify the artists who inspire and reassure people through their music, livestreams, and even their general personalities. BTS is one of “the emotional support of K-pop boys” who provided

the source of comfort for the fans. Albesta [18] highlighted how the powerful message behind “life goes on”, the BTS’s latest song, have helped many fans to go through the coronavirus crisis.

The relationship between fandom and its power to reduce loneliness has been examined by Reysen [19]. Fandom encourages members to share their thoughts and feelings [4]. In the context of Korean pop culture fans, this connectedness fostered a supportive culture of understanding and helping fans who experience hard times [17]. While the connectedness helps Korean pop culture fans support each other, evidence has shown how these Korean fandom community has also demonstrated their care to the general people fighting with the coronavirus widespread. Septarini [20] reported that many Indonesian-based K-Pop fandoms such as SONE, UNIVERSE, MELODY, and NCTZen had distributed donations to the healthcare staff, children, and people who are suffering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 3. THE CURRENT STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in two phases between May 2020 and January 2021. The first phase focused on identifying Korean Pop Culture (hereafter, K-wave content) consumption, including drama and music, during the first wave of COVID-19 in Indonesia. To obtain information, the survey comprised of four topics as follows, (i) The profile of the respondent; (ii) Their interest in K-wave content; (iii) The platform used to consume K-wave content; and (iv) The reasons behind the consumption of the K-wave content. The first survey was carried out online in August 2020 and collected 254 responses through random sampling. The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 2.0 to determine the frequency and proportion of each variable of the questions studied and examine the relationships between the variables questioned in the survey.

Reflecting on the findings from the first survey, we became interested in verifying whether K-wave content consumption manages their mental health all through the difficult time. Henceforth, we carried out the second phase survey in January 2021. The survey aimed to measure respondents’ mental health in general, such as experiencing the changing of emotion, fatigue, and inability to concentrate during the first three months of the outbreak and the second three months (September to November 2020). Further, the survey aimed to investigate whether consuming K-wave content during the pandemic period could reduce stress and enable social connection with other fans. The data were collected through the same methodology as the first phase. The online-based survey retrieved 100 responses. The collected data were analyzed by bivariate analysis to examine whether K-wave content consumption brings comfort during the pandemic.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1. The Consumption of Korean Pop Culture Throughout the Pandemic

The first survey respondents were dominated by unmarried young people age between 18-24 years old (See Table 1). Most respondents have the status as students who live in the Greater Jakarta Area. The findings of the first survey revealed that the consumption of K-wave content increased after the outbreak of COVID-19 in Indonesia. The number of respondents who consume K-dramas and K-pop during the pandemic escalated significantly.

**Table 1** Profile of the first-phase respondents

Variable	Percentage (%)
<i>Age</i>	
Under 18	5.1
18 - 24 yo	41.7
25 - 34 yo	29.1
35 and above	24
<i>Origin of the city</i>	
Jakarta	26
Bodetabek	32.7
Java Island	26
Outside Java Island	15.4
<i>Occupation</i>	
Student	42.9
Civil Servant	7.9
Employee	24.8
Professional	5.9
Entrepreneur	5.5
Others	12.2
<i>Marriage Status</i>	
Married	36
Not married	64
n=254	

Approximately 65% of the respondents spent more than three hours per day to access K-wave content (See Table 2). This finding is interesting since nearly 65% of the respondents mentioned that they only consumed K-wave content for less than three hours per day before the pandemic. A study by Rastati et al. [3] also encountered similar finding that identified the increase average watch time of K-drama from 2.7 hours to 4.6 hours per day all through the COVID-19 pandemic.

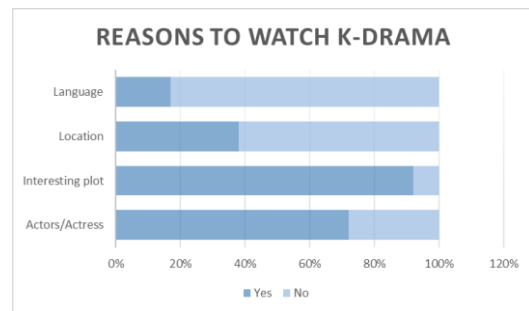
**Table 2** Time spent on K-wave content

Variables	Total (n=254)	Percentage
<i>Time Spent on K-wave Content before Pandemic</i>		
Less than 3 hours	163	64.3
3 - 5 hours	64	25.2
6 - 8 hours	18	7.1
More than 8 hours	9	3.5
<i>Time Spent on K-wave Content during Pandemic</i>		
Less than 3 hours	91	35.8
3 - 5 hours	82	32.3
6 - 8 hours	56	22
More than 8 hours	25	9.8

Our study further identified the age group that experienced the most significant shift in the K-wave content consumption. The majority of the respondents from the age group, 18-24 years old, claimed to spend six to eight hours after the pandemic. Following this, respondents from the age group of 35 years old and above also reported a shift in the K-wave consumption, which is about three to five hours per day. This increase verified Bhatt's [21], who identified the increase of K-wave consumption in India due to the upsurge demand for home-entertainment that can offer a perfect mental escape from the COVID-19 crisis. The Philippines have also seen a rise in the popularity of K-wave content during the pandemic [22].

Fresh is the word often described to explain the reasons behind the skyrocketing popularity of Korean drama in the global world [23, 24]. The plots and types of characters feel new and different for the western audiences, and many dramas are clean from excessive love scenes and foul language, thus interesting [23].

The finding of this study confirmed the strength of the K-drama plot and how it attracted Indonesian audiences (See Figure 1). Approximately 92% of the respondents chose the story plot as the reason why they enjoy watching K-dramas. Another finding echoed General [23], who argued about the K-drama stars' attractiveness for global audiences. About 72% of this study's respondents also chose the cast as the reason they watch K-dramas. Other than the two above reasons, less than 40% of respondents identified the shooting location and language behind their reasons to watch K-dramas. The above results are in line with Rahmiati [25] who mentioned about the quality of K-dramas story plot and attractiveness of the actors and their excellent performance.



**Figure 1** Reasons to watch K-drama

Unlike K-drama, some listeners did not value the song because of the artist. They enjoy listening to the song because the song is good (85%). Additionally, they also mentioned the importance of music videos and dance choreography. As observed by Jung [26], music videos and dance choreography have impressed many fans. Fans depict the dance choreography itself as powerful, colourful, unique, and well-choreographed [26]. The Korean unique dancing style appeared to attract the Swedish youth and young people as well. Other than dancing choreography, HübINETTE [27] further identified that Swedish youth are also attracted to K-pop music videos' visual appearance and their catchy melodies. But contrasting to Bhatt [21], our study

identified that most respondents appeared to be less interested in the meaning behind the song's lyrics (71,7%). In India, a female fan became interested in K-pop songs after looking up the lyrics of a particular Korean song and found depth in the meaning [21]. Unlike western pop songs, many K-pop songs have indirectly addressed issues in society. For example, Miss A's song, "I don't need a man," which was released in 2012, encouraged young women to be more independent in South Korea's patriarchal society. Likewise, BTS songs are often labelled as socially conscious songs as they approached many sensitive issues such as depression, loneliness, and even the economic gap [28].

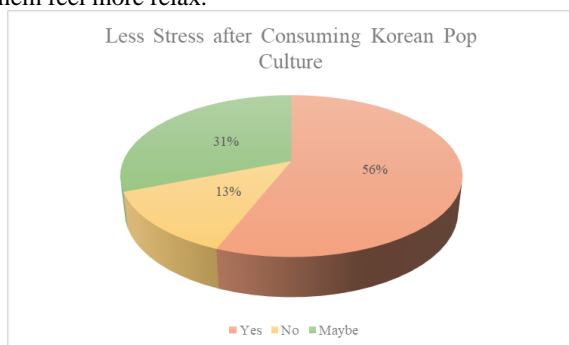
### 4.2. Korean Pop Culture as The Source of Comfort

As for the second-survey, the respondents were dominated by those younger than 35 years old (See Table 3). Alike the respondents from the first survey, the respondents in the second-survey are mostly resided in Greater Jakarta Area.

**Table 3** Profile of the second-phase respondents

Variable	%	Variable	%
<i>Respondent Sex</i>		<i>Respondent Jobs</i>	
Female	95	Student	33
Male	5	Civil Servant	12
<i>Respondent Age</i>		Employess	23
under 18	9	Professional	5
18 - 24 yo	32	Entrepreneur	8
25 - 35 yo	31	Others	19
above 35	28	<i>Working From Home</i>	
<i>Respondent Domicile</i>		Yes	80
Greater Jakarta	51	No	7
Java Island	35	Not Really	13
Outside Java Island	14		

The finding of this research revealed how the consumption of K-wave content during pandemic could reduce stress (See Figure 2). More than fifty percent of the respondents noted that enjoying K-wave content mentioned above could help relieve their stress. In the meantime, thirty-one percent were not sure whether consuming the culture could help them feel more relax.



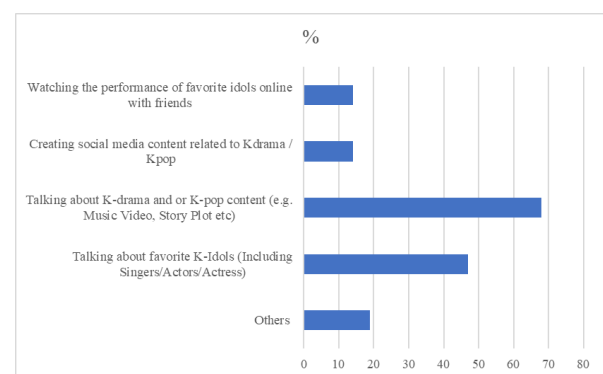
**Figure 2** Korean pop culture and stress reduction

The upsurge demand for home-entertainment during the LSSR appeared to contribute to the rise in consumption of K-wave content in Indonesia. About fifty three percent of respondents consumed both K-dramas and K-pop music (See Table 4). On top of this, they also seek Korean related entertainment from social media such as Instagram (81%), Twitter (50%), and YouTube (50%). Further, some respondents reported that they joined K-wave fandoms to seek more information about their biases. While others reported different activity such as creating a new fan account for their biases.

**Table 4** K-Wave and social media

Variable	%
<i>Content Consumption</i>	
Korean Drama	35
Korean Pop (Kpop)	12
Both	53
<i>Following K-Wave Content Social Media</i>	
Yes	85
No	15
<i>Social Media Type which followed</i>	
Twitter	50
Facebook	12
Instagram	81
YouTube	50
Other Media	12

Figure 3 showed the capability of Korean Pop Culture to bridge conversation among fans. The majority of the respondents mentioned that they usually talk about the content of Korean pop culture they watch or listen such as the story plot of a drama or the performance of K-pop singers in their promotion video. The next popular topic to talk with is related to the biases whether the singers, actors, or singers. The findings clearly indicated how K-wave content could enable respondents to find some topics to chat about or share their stories or thoughts about Korean idols, dramas, and music with their friends or other fans.



**Figure 3** How Becoming a Fan of Korean Pop Culture Enables Social Connection

Table 5 below identified several mental health issues among respondents in their first three months of the COVID-19 outbreak. The problems include sleep disturbances, anxiety, loss of concentration, drastic changes in the mood and

atmosphere, and inability to cope with stress or other issues. But after a while, the findings identified an increase in mental health among the surveyed respondents. They seemed to be able to overcome some problems except for the loss of concentration. This problem may still occur because most respondents are women (95%) and work from

home (80%). Adapting to the new working style under the COVID-19 crisis is deciphering many women [29]. The recurring finding is that women are more likely to carry out more domestic responsibilities while working flexibly, whereas men are more likely to prioritize and expand their work spheres [30].

**Table 5** The state of mental health in early 3 months and last 3 months during pandemic Covid-19

Indicator	Significant fatigue, decreased energy, or sleeping trouble		Losing the ability to focus or concentrate		The fear, worry, or guilt that always haunts you		Inability to cope with stress or everyday problems		Feeling sad, insignificant, powerless, discouraged, or hopeless	
	early 3mos	last 3mos	early 3mos	last 3mos	early 3mos	last 3mos	early 3mos	last 3mos	early 3mos	last 3mos
Never	8	12	8	16	15	22	19	29	27	32
Rarely	20	15	32	27	27	33	29	31	31	28
Sometimes	28	39	38	37	21	21	30	19	15	18
Often	31	20	15	14	31	13	16	10	16	11
Very Often	13	14	7	6	6	11	6	11	11	11

Indicator	Experiencing drastic mood swings that cause problems in relationships with other people		Feeling confused, forgetful, angry, offended, anxious, upset, worried, and unusually afraid		Unable to perform daily activities such as caring for children or going to school or work		Feeling Loneliness	
	early 3mos	last 3mos	early 3mos	last 3mos	early 3mos	last 3mos	early 3mos	last 3mos
Never	23	28	18	27	43	47	30	30
Rarely	21	26	30	26	19	15	23	30
Sometimes	22	22	22	26	20	21	13	12
Often	27	12	17	8	12	10	21	12
Very Often	7	12	13	13	6	7	13	16

Table 6 reported how most respondents feel the impact of consuming K-wave content to improve their mental health, especially during the first three months after the outbreak. Although respondents felt better on several mental health issues during the last three months, some were unsure whether K-wave content consumption caused the improvement. But most of the respondents agree that K-wave content has a good impact on their mental health.

This result is in line with an article from Alodokter.com, an online healthcare consultation platform for Indonesian. The platform mentioned that watching K-dramas has good mental health benefits such as reducing anxiety, relieving stress, easing psychological problems, and building self-confidence [31]. However, warning about K-dramas' adverse impacts on health, such as experiencing insomnia or excessive obsession, is also given [31].

**Table 6** The relationship between mental health and the effect of consuming K-wave content

Variable	Early 3 Months - Kwave Contents Effect			Last 3 Months - Kwave Contents Effect				
	Indicator	yes	No	Maybe	Indicator	yes	No	Maybe
Significant fatigue, decreased energy, or sleeping trouble	Often	16	3	12	Sometimes	21	7	11
Losing the ability to focus/concentrate	Sometimes	25	4	9	Sometimes	19	6	12
The fear, worry, or guilt that always haunts you	Often	17	6	8	Rarely	25	5	3

Variable	Early 3 Months - Kwave Contents Effect			Last 3 Months - Kwave Contents Effect				
	Indicator	yes	No	Maybe	Indicator	yes	No	Maybe
<i>Inability to cope with stress or everyday problems</i>	Sometimes	20	3	7	Rarely	18	4	9
<i>Feeling sad, insignificant, powerless, discouraged, or hopeless</i>	Sometimes	20	3	7	Never	14	3	15
<i>Experiencing drastic mood swings that cause problems in relationships with other people</i>	Often	17	3	7	Rarely	10	7	11
<i>Feeling confused, forgetful, angry, offended, anxious, upset, worried, and unusually afraid</i>	Rarely	16	3	11	Never	9	8	10
<i>Unable to perform daily activities such as caring for children or going to school or work</i>	Never	20	6	17	Never	22	6	19
<i>Feeling Loneliness</i>	Never	14	4	12	Rarely	20	0	10

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The study contributes to how Korean pop culture or K-wave content is helping people get through the pandemic. This study's findings provide pieces of evidence on the rise in consumption of K-wave content in Indonesia during the widespread coronavirus. Further, the study verified the reasons behind K-wave content's popularity amid pandemics, which is related to its high-quality content and ability to differentiate from other entertainment types, thus creating a uniqueness that attracts people.

Through this study, we also verified that K-wave content consumption during a pandemic could reduce stress. The knowledge about the content enabled the respondents to keep their social connection and maintain their mental health amid the pandemic. The outbreak of COVID-19 had affected the respondents in numerous ways. They experienced sleep disorders, anxiety, and loss of concentration. However, K-wave content consumption appeared to bring in the comfort they need to get through the pandemic.

Further research on K-wave content's capability to be the source of comfort for people who are going through a pandemic is suggested. As the on-going coronavirus brings added stress and uncertainty, protecting people's mental health and ensuring them to be socially and emotionally connected is really important. Henceforth, we should make more efforts to keep people connected and build resilience as we weather the crisis.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by Special Research Project for Research Base Creation, Tokutei Kadai Fund FY2020, Waseda University Japan.

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