

# Korean Dramas and Construction of Career Woman Symbols in Post Modern Era

## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** This study aimed to explore how the simulacra that occur in binge-watching and uncover symbols constructed in career woman fans of Korean Dramas.

**Study design:** The critical constructivist approach was used by applying Baudrillard's Simulacra Theory, which looks at simulations that occur in career women and construct symbols from sign receptions through the media.

**Place and Duration of Study:** Jakarta, Indonesia, from January – June 2023.

**Methodology:** This study used critical reflection. The interviews were conducted with ten informants who are careerwomen in Jakarta. The characteristics are having worked for at least three years, having at least one child who is a maximum of 12 years old, and watching Korean dramas for at least 2 hours a day.

**Results:** As a part of the media, the movie has become a simulation space for individuals. They get experiences that they do not get in their daily lives. Media builds a simulation space that eventually creates a symbol. It occurs in career women who are burdened with their job and managing their families, yet still setting time aside to watch Korean dramas continuously. Career women define movies based on the emptiness and lack in their lives. They hope that in real life, they can be such a character in the story. Therefore, Baudrillard stated that individual misreads signs. They cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy. Meanwhile, the media has a magic formula for constructing symbol, in which career women's symbol is constructed through simulation space in binge-watching practice.

**Conclusion:** Korean Drama has become a simulation space in binge-watching practice by career women. Career women symbol constructed by media is working women with constructed beauty and relation that can raise their social status.

**Keywords:** *Binge-watching, Career women, Korean drama, Simulacra.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Media convergence due to internet support makes it easier for people to enjoy Korean dramas. Through gadgets with the internet, people can watch (Korean dramas) anywhere and anytime. This then creates a practice of continuous watching known as binge-watching. In the preliminary study conducted by researchers on women after work, it is known that on the way home and public transport, they admit that they will allot their time to watching Korean dramas to relieve fatigue until they become immersed in the story and ignore their surroundings, including preferring to watch advertisements and waiting while there is a break in the show.

Watching is an activity that Indonesians are most interested in during their spare time. This has been proven in a survey by JakPat entitled "Isi WaktuSenggang, IniKegiatan yang Disukai Orang Indonesia ("Enjoy Your Spare Time, These Are Activities That Indonesians Like). The survey shows that 70% of respondents or Indonesians mostly like watching movies to enjoy their spare time, followed by other activities, including listening to music, watching serials/dramas, reading news online, and doing other hobbies. This reality is shown in the following Table 1.

No	Activities	Score
1	Watching movies	70
2	Listening music	68
3	Watching drama series	51
4	Reading online news	40
5	Doing hobbies	38
6	Reading online books/comics	38
7	Watching vlog	32
8	Watching news	31
9	Reading books/comics	28
10	Watching reality show	27

Table 1. Survey JakPat, 2022. Activities in leisure time.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020, where Indonesian people were obliged to carry out activities at home to reduce virus transmission, a significant increase in watching movie activities occurred. In this case, the data traffic used to watch streaming increased by 193% (Pasaribu, 2020). A survey conducted by McKinsey in 2020 involving 1,034 respondents in Indonesia discovered that 43% of respondents had a high level of intensity in using online streaming to watch movies (Chriswied et al., 2021). Another survey was also conducted by the Association of Internet Service Providers of Indonesia (APJII), revealing that there was an annual increase in internet connection use: 202.6 million people in 2020; 201.3 million people in 2021; and 215.63 million people in 2023 (APJII, 2023).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Indonesian people prefer to watch Korean dramas (Kristanty et al., 2022). This is proven through the statement of one of the informants in the preliminary study conducted by the researcher, N6, who admitted that he started to like watching Korean dramas during the Covid-19 pandemic, "Yes, it was during the pandemic when I was isolated. I had nothing to do other than watching Korean drama".

One of the driving factors of this phenomenon is the media convergence that provides streaming services such as Netflix and Viu, making it easier for Indonesian people to watch Korean dramas. A survey carried out by JakPat discussed the frequency of Indonesian people watching Korean dramas. The survey revealed that most of the respondents, around 29%, watched Korean dramas daily. Meanwhile, 28% of the respondents watched Korean dramas twice to thrice a week. On average, the respondents watched Korean dramas four times weekly (Angelia, 2022).

Media users can set the speed and time while watching movies (Elyan&Irwansyah, 2020). For example, it illustrates binge-watching as watching one episode after another (consecutively) from the same series in one sit (Asgher&Gohar, 2022). Current users are active, different from traditional media users who are passive in accepting one-way broadcasts (Al-Shafi&Erfina, 2021).

Ultimately, technological advances can create a new world for human life by providing many things through the internet. It is clear that technology has become an inseparable part of human life, so this has caused society to experience "social transformation"; anything that can be done in the real world today can also be done in digital space (cyberspace). The

convenience and comfort of technological advances indirectly change the audience's behavior.

According to Baudrillard, current societies live in a simulation world continuously surrounded by absurd signs, symbols, and codes (Saumantri&Zikrillah, 2020). This phenomenon is called "simulacra," where model and reproduction have become essential. In the simulacra world, humans do not live in reality anymore, but they live in the imagination, and delusion occurs in the simulation world. It further causes difficulties distinguishing right and wrong or reality and imagination because the distance between them feels far away and difficult to distinguish.

Simulation refers to creating reality through an abstract model or concept, which cannot be felt directly and is often related to a "myth" whose validity is difficult to prove in reality. Simulacra causes humans to believe that imaginative things seem to be real. Due to the presence of such technology, a new world appears and is categorized as a simulation world by Baudrillard, where this world is built by signs and codes. Those codes consist of fact signs (reality) that are constructed through the reproduction process and imaginative signs (images) that mix each other or overlap into a unit (Grigoriadis&Karabıçak, 2022).

Baudrillard's perspective explains that consumer culture during the postmodern era is determined by technology development, globalization, post-industrial community, image strength, and simulacrum (Gao, 2022). In addition, Baudrillard also stated that such culture is indicated by plurality, diversion, intensive fragmentation, and indirection. According to him, mass media creates requests and attraction towards an object, eventually changing the community into a strong consumer community. Furthermore, in the context of postmodern media and the consumer community, everything become image and signs.

Media continuously produces the current world, so each individual is affected by an information flow that never stops. Media has a more significant effect in transmitting something to people who communicate with each other than producing the communication itself (Oba & Berger, 2023). Therefore, postmodern culture is indicated by the presence of symbols, simulacra, and images that take a role in determining human behavior.

Women's involvement in double roles as a worker and homemakers cause heavier demand than usual. In the end, not a few career women have life-pressure tendencies. They further look for another alternative to get out of their routine. Hence, they will seek balance to reduce the physical pressure or misery in their spare time (Rewindinar et al., 2019).

This study wanted to see the simulacra that occur in binge-watching and what symbols are constructed through simulacra in the practice of binge-watching in career woman fans of Korean Dramas.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 APPROACHES AND METHODS**

This study uses the critical constructivist approach to explore simulacra that occur in binge-watching and determine the symbols that occur in the practice of binge-watching in career woman fans of Korean Dramas. This study used critical reflection.

The interview was carried out with ten career women who have school-age children. Such characteristics describe women who have a high level of busyness because they live to both work and take care of their children. However, they still have times to watch Korean dramas

for hours. The informants obtained in this research are references from one informant to another informant. Therefore, it was assumed they have similar interests and behavior in watching Korean Dramas.

Furthermore, the researcher analyzed the reflection through Baudrillard's perspective that sees consumption need to catch up symbol as encouraged by media. In this case, this research applied research design in the form of interrogation of a data set through a perspective that identifies the bias of ideology and implication from the bias of authority relation (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). In addition, the literature review also becomes a source for the researcher to conduct the analysis critically.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1 Defining Life through Korean Drama**

The movie is one of the emerging media. It is categorized as audiovisual media that combines music, picture, and sound. As a part of mass media, movies appear in the community to entertain them, provide information, and touch the viewer's emotions. In this case, the movie must contain a meaning because the viewer will relate meaning to it (Bordwell & Thompson, 2009).

Therefore, the audience cannot think of meaning as simple content that can be extracted from a movie. Sometimes the movie maker guides the audience to reach a certain meaning, or sometimes the audience will find a meaning unwanted by the movie maker. Most people choose movies that can immerse them in the plot, making them feel everything the movie characters and events do.

N1 is one of the informants (in this study) who likes Korean Dramas, especially those played by Choi Ji-Woo. N1 revealed in her interview, "She (Choi Ji-Woo) often plays characters of career women in Korean dramas. In her life as a career woman, she often falls (crumbles), but she is tough in facing all problems of her life". Then N1 adds that "I see her as a woman who can face all problems of her life well; whatever her problems are, she can handle them and solve them well." From N1's statement, N1 relates the meaning of watching Korean Dramas to the career and work she has.

N6 states similar things "I forget about the Drama. It is played by HyunBin and a woman whom he married to. In the Drama, the woman has positive behavior and positive thinking; she does not have negative thinking. In addition to the action, the Drama also gives a romance side, well the man is cool anyway. However, due to the positive personality of the woman, she does not have any negative thinking towards anyone. That is what we can take from the drama". Based on the statement from N1 and N6, they related the meaning of watching Korean Dramas to their current career and job.

Baudrillard assumed that simulacrum had replaced reality with its representation, which is accepted as truth. It is not limited to a certain object or picture and feels real. It represents a reality without origin or those whose origins have been fully replaced by an image. Career women define what they see through media and relate them with meaning in themselves. It is a phenomenon that occurs in the postmodern era when a human is never satisfied, or as Baudrillard claimed, as a greedy character (Baudrillard, 2004).

Likewise, N2 interprets Korean Dramas as a relationship with a partner (of life). In her interview, she stated, "Of course, it (Korean Drama) makes you imagine how it feels to be in a relationship with a man, who is not only handsome but also rich, while you are an ordinary

woman with ordinary family background, but his parents accept you. Everyone will definitely want that, right? However, in the real world, the handsome one wants the beautiful one and vice versa. The rich want the rich. But, in Korean (Drama), a handsome and rich man can be attracted to an ordinary woman."

N5 states, "Two people (a man and woman) who met in a condition that they are unfamiliar with. The woman is from a city in which she is familiar with urban life. Then she met a village man whose job is selling goods daily—his life is far different from urban life. That is called a very different personality, right? However, in the end, they met in one place and fell in love".

This statement claims that career women see the social level as one of the meanings obtained by watching Korean dramas, which they do not obtain in real life. There is a distinctive class in the communication process made between one another that further produces consumer community, indicated by the production and manipulation of a set of social indicators. In this case, appearance becomes a factor perceived by the individuals in the community.

Ultimately, it becomes one of the basics of how women define what they see through Korean Drama. Through the movie's strength in representing a story using extraordinary techniques, viewers are brought to feel that the imaginative reality is factual. The strength of the cinematic narration technique in movies creates "an adhesive" that makes the viewers absorb the movie. The combination between action and strong cognition further builds emotion for the viewers.

Acceptance is the process by which social agents produce an understanding and significance of what they consume in the context of consumption formation and habits (Jeong et al., 2017). Individuals will (only) see messages related to themselves when they watch dramas/movies, even though, in fact, dramas/movies may contain many other messages. This is done to fill the void in their life.

### **3.2 Simulation in Binge Watching**

A movie, which is part of the media, becomes a simulation space where individuals can experience things that they may not be able to experience in everyday life. According to Baudrillard, today's society lives in a simulated world where absurd signs, symbols, and codes surround them. Baudrillard calls this phenomenon "simulacra," in which model and reproduction are paramount.

N1 further gave an opinion related to career and job. She simulates that a successful career woman is a beautiful woman with the ideal body and neat clothes and becomes the idol of many men. "Moreover, based on the movies that I have watched, Choi Ji-Woo always takes a role as a career woman who is beautiful, thin, and tall, have pretty clothes, and is attracted by many rich men. She seems so perfect". In reality, by watching Korean Drama, N1 indicates that a good appearance supports the success of a career woman in her job.

Likewise, N2 simulates an attractive appearance as one of the keys to gaining social status. "You're an ordinary woman and then you meet a man who's really rich, so you date him. In the real world, it is usually impossible to do something like that, right? I want to be like that, but in the real world, it is all just imagination, right? If only my husband can be like that—handsome and rich. And me, I wish I am beautiful, thin like today's girls—especially with my body type which is chubby, so it's like... duh, I want to have a body as thin as those girls, as fair as those girls. So, of course, I have that imagination."

There is a symbol misread carried out by career women while watching the Korean Dramas. They simulate themselves from the symbols they obtained from Korean Drama. Simulacrum represents something that does not exist, but the image is provided as proof that it does exist. Although there is no reference to reality, the simulacrum is considered right (Grigoriadis&Karabiçak, 2022).

In her statement, N6 said, " I like to see their makeup and body shape more so that I can be motivated to be thinner and have simple makeup like them."

In this case, the concept of career women in the postmodern era has shifted. Career women consider themselves beautiful when they have characters like in the Korean Drama. Nowadays, experiments are conducted on bodies, such as using makeup to support beauty, beauty treatment to change the face shape, and slimming medication to lose weight. The body has become an object consumed and used to sell commodities and services. Ultimately, the body must be indirectly "rebuilt" by the owner to be seen as more attractive.

Whereas the body should be seen in terms of function, how it can support our job. In other words, we must prioritize how to keep our body healthy physically so that its function can work well. Unfortunately, the media has screwed it up and simulated career women like the characters in Korean dramas.

Through simulation, humans inhabit a reality where the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, the real and the fake—become very blurred. This is due to a magic formula that bewitches individuals so they cannot see the real and the unreal. A movie is often referred to as a role-playing art in which various elements of work are contained. Several intrinsic elements are analyzed in a movie, including themes, plot, characters, characterizations, settings, language, and moral messages (Hanum et al., 2022).

Viewers can be enchanted and simulate the symbols they see. When someone uses media, they do not only use the media; instead, the media builds something in their thinking. N5 expressed this in her statement, "It is just like any other movies. But we are happy to watch it. Sometimes we are carried away, our brain is simulated".

### **3.3 “Real” action on the reception of “Unreal” media**

As conveyed by Baudrillard, the ideology of symbols is to make people believe in all the falsehoods that make them content, rich, happy, and liberated. This makes career women follow up on the symbols they find when watching Korean Dramas fulfill their feelings.

This shows that the Korean Drama phenomenon is accompanied by certain symbolic power that is structured at the micro level, where individuals use, exploit, and adapt (Aziz et al., 2021). The power of Korean Drama can further transform the community. This is supported by the statement constructed by N2 "Yes, of course, it becomes a benchmark by the girls now. For example, I am afraid to eat noodles or rice because I want to be as skinny as Korean girls, but it is hard to be as beautiful as Korean girls. If I have money, I want to go to Korea for surgery, for example, to have a sharp nose, pretty face, and white skin. That is why lots of people go to beauty clinics; they want to become like Korean girls who have become the benchmark of beautiful girls. Therefore, if you want to be beautiful, you have to be thin like Korean girls, and if you are fat, you are not beautiful; you are ugly".

They are described as someone with a sharp nose, beautiful face, white skin, and a thin body. The description of such appearance will make a person wants to have a life partner with a high social level so that it will increase his status indirectly.

There are cultural powers that can change individuals. Now, the standard of an attractive woman is constructed as someone similar to Korean artists. They will sacrifice time, money, and body to feel satisfied. However, Baudrillard criticizes women in the postmodern era who are over consumptive and never feel satisfied. Such construction of a career woman results in wasteful behavior. They are not hesitated to spend much money to satisfy themselves with something unreal. This is the difference between traditional and postmodern societies, where extravagant consumption becomes an obligation.

The images created are only symbols, specifically referred to by Baudrillard as signs of reality. In the simulation context, these signs are not representations of a reality outside of them but refer to themselves as pure copies (simulacrum). Baudrillard explains how signs can be made into commodities in the discourse of capitalism, which demands appearance, fascination, and surprise.

Appearance in such a sign becomes more attractive for everyone rather than the meaning or message delivered. As a result, people are obsessed with having such an appearance through a simulation (Fitrianti, 2018). Everything related to their role models in Korean Drama films will be followed. Lee (2018) considered Korean Drama as an 'escape, a phantasy that is claimed to bright someone away from their own lives so that they can participate in another world, where the people are beautiful, have great clothes, and have stories. Jean Baudrillard sees that women in the contemporary era always use symbols or continuously without running out, which in turn causes them to become consumptive and hedonic individuals.

The statement delivered by the N7 respondent supports this, "That's what I'm going to say, it is about the makeup and skincare. For me personally, even though I am currently living in Australia, my skincare is from Korea because it feels more suitable. I personally think that Korean skincare focuses on hydration, so it really suits my dry skin. So I tend to use Korean skincare more than local skincare, like Australian skincare. I do not know whether it really fits me or if I am just being indoctrinated. Well, I do not really know".

This statement reveals how the media affects someone's consumption behavior, even for something that cannot be felt directly. When she sees shows that use skincare, she feels like becoming the character in the movie, even though she cannot directly feel it through his five senses. All she imagined was that she felt comfortable using the product. Hence, in the end, he took action by buying Korean skincare products. In comparison, domestic skincare products will suit that person's character better. Therefore, the ones who benefit are Korean-based productions.

When the media hits someone, the media becomes his reference. When an individual watches media that use domestic-based products, it surely will be considered. Since the individual watches it continuously, he is bewitched to consume what he sees.

This is in accordance with Baudrillard's statement that with the digital revolution and the rise of digital media and the communications industry, the attractiveness of an image as an object symbol is more important than what that image represents. With the production of images that no longer represent an object, the form of images has shifted. It appears to be real but is nothing but an image of the object itself.

N6 expressed her interest in consuming Soju as a result of watching Korean Drama "Hahaha... no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, I cannot even imagine it. However, their culture, such as Kimchi, I want to taste it and in fact it is delicious, right. Sometimes we want to try

Kimchi in our daily meal. Sometimes we also want to try Soju when we feel stress like the Korean people who drink Soju when they are stress. Well, there is such intention to drink Soju, that is it".

"Yes, it is sometimes like that. For example, when they want to solve a problem, and they feel dizzy, the Korean people always drink Soju. It seems delicious. Every time they face a problem, they will drink, and it seems great. However, we, as a parent, needs to filter the show, right. But, when we entertain our customer, and they ask for Soju, then we will give it and drink it with them."

Based on the statement delivered by N6, it reflects how Korean Drama constructs its thoughts on Soju. When compared to Indonesian culture, drinking alcohol is still considered taboo and inappropriate; well, in fact, it is no longer valid. There is an external consumption that is seemed forced. Nobody obliges career women to treat their customers with Soju. Nevertheless, she chose Soju as a result of what the media constructed. Indonesian cultural values related to drinking alcohol have been put aside and replaced.

Many other drink choices suit the tongue of Indonesians better. However, how career women express their concern for others has been manipulated, forced, and falsified through the simulations carried out by the media.

"This is one of the things that keeps me motivated at work. Whenever I feel down or stressed at work, I will remember Choi Ji-Woo and get excited again." Interestingly in N2's statement, she felt more resilient in doing her work due to the symbols she simulated in watching Korean Drama. This is what Baudrillard means when people want entertainment. Messages have been conveyed to them through the spectacle, causing them to grasp the symbols and idolize the play of the symbols.

### **3.4 The symbol of career women**

Baudrillard's thoughts regarding sign-value refer to a regime of symbols when humans live and enjoy life by consuming symbols—referring to the exchange value of an object, which is based on "image," "symbol," and "sign."

Career women who watch Korean Dramas consume symbols they associate with their daily lives. Career women form three symbols due to watching Korean Dramas. The first is a symbol of unnatural beauty. The visuals of Korean actors and actresses reinforce Korean beauty trends by showing beauty through the appearance of actors and actresses in Korean dramas. They display handsomeness, beauty, and good body proportions—tall and slim, fair skin (no pimples, mustache, or beard), rosy lips, various hairstyles, and clothing styles with branded goods.

This creates a lingering image of Korean actors, actresses, and idols in the eyes of the audience. The image of Korean stars is constructed because appearance, in Korean society, is the main focus of attention—and can influence individual success in both domestic and non-domestic contexts (Choi, 2019).

Career women will feel comfortable consuming goods or services that make them look beautiful. Everything they do is a result of the simulation. Body satisfaction becomes a priority. Career women in the postmodern era are a symbol. Their work is no longer a routine but self-actualization. Success as a career woman can now be seen in her attributes, such as makeup and good clothes. Even though from a functional perspective, successful career women can work well according to their capacity.

Second, it is a symbol of recognition of social status. Korean movies resembling fairytales describe relationships formed by couples with different social statuses. Someone who is described as having a perfect appearance, although coming from a low class, can have a partner from a high social class, likewise with career women. They are associated with social relations. What career women consume is something that is judged by others.

Attributes, services, or products consumed will influence how career women are treated in their workplace. Someone who looks like a Korean artist will be treated better or more special than someone who looks simple. Consumption has now affected the relationship between humans in the social system. This is part of a simulation built by the media to successfully construct career women's thoughts that influence how they consume in the postmodern era.

In Korean Dramas, romance is not focused on sexual scenes but rather on a journey toward a happy life. This is demonstrated through the dynamics of the relationship between the characters in the story, emphasizing harmonization as a representation of traditional Korean values. In this context, romance in Korean dramas focuses more on efforts to create a life full of happiness rather than sexual aspects (Bandasak, 2021).

Finally, the third is a symbol of optimism. They see the character in Korean dramas as capable, solutive, tough, and outstanding abilities. As time goes by and the production of Korean dramas and movies increases, the role of women depicted in them transforms. Many Korean dramas and movies feature brave, tough, strong female characters who do not give up easily. This becomes a contrast to the view of traditional society, which tends to see women as weak, motherly, and in need of protection (Hasanah&Ratnaningtyas, 2022).

Symbols emerged in binge-watching practice on career women who, like Korean Drama, are constructed by the characters that become the reference of each individual. Unfortunately, it was built by the media. They take actions based on these symbols because of encouragement from the movies instead of the awareness built in them. Baudrillard said that the postmodern era is marked by technological advances, where people buy or use something no longer because of its function but because of the symbolic meaning attached to the object.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Korean Drama successfully creates a simulation space that each individual specifically defines. They simulate themselves becoming better if they follow what they see. Continuously, what they see triggers their behavior.

The symbol of career women in modern society focuses on social status related to appearance, so it encourages symbol consumption. Body and relation become commodities so that they will meet their need that is unreal and never satisfying. Awareness building is needed so that career women do not construct themselves according to what they see from the media since it brings loss to themselves in terms of time and money.

## CONSENT

AS PER INTERNATIONAL STANDARD OR UNIVERSITY STANDARD, PARTICIPANTS' WRITTEN CONSENT HAS BEEN COLLECTED AND PRESERVED BY THE AUTHOR(S).

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

The authors of this study hereby declare that all experiments carried out have been examined and approved by the competent ethics committee and have therefore been performed following the ethical standards specified in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki.

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