



RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA YAZISI

# A Study on Korean Drama Viewers in the Context of Parasocial Interaction Theory

## Parasosyal Etkileşim Kuramı Bağlamında Kore Dizileri İzleyicilerine Yönelik Bir Araştırma

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### Abstract:

The proliferation of digital platforms has enabled popular culture media texts to reach much wider audiences. In this context, television series have become a significant tool for communicating with viewers. While the narrative structures of dramas attract large audiences, fictional characters create strong impressions and contribute to the formation of intensive fan cultures. Korean dramas, which originated in South Korea and rapidly became a global phenomenon, have generated a broad audience and a strong fan community in Türkiye. This study examines the effects of Korean dramas on viewers, the emerging fan culture, and its position within the framework of parasocial interaction. It focuses on the forms of communication viewers establish with fictional characters, the reflections of these interactions on self-perceptions, and identification practices. In this qualitative study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 participants who regularly watched Korean Dramas between May 1 and June 1, 2025. Ethics committee approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants. The findings indicate that media-constructed characters foster parasocial interaction and strengthen viewers' identification processes. Participants were found to associate these characters with their own life experiences, develop emotional closeness to them, and occasionally derive motivation, inspiration, or guidance from them. The study concludes that characters fictionalized in Korean dramas are internalized through an interpretive process and that this interaction carries a massifying dynamic. The findings are discussed within the literature on parasocial interaction, contributing particularly to discussions on how digital platforms reinforce audience engagement and reshape the structure of fan culture.

**Keywords:** Parasocial Interaction, Korean Dramas, Fan Culture, Digital Media, Identification

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## Öz:

Dijital platformların yaygınlaşması, popüler kültür aracısı olan medya metinlerinin çok daha geniş kitlelere ulaşmasını sağlamıştır. Bu çeşitlilik içinde özellikle televizyon dizileri, izleyicilerle etkili bir iletişim kurulmasında önemli bir araç haline gelmiştir. Diziler, senaryo içeriğiyle geniş izleyici kitlelerini ekrana bağlarken, kurgusal karakterler, izleyici üzerinde güçlü bir etki yaratarak yoğun bir hayran kitlesi ve kültürünün oluşumuna zemin hazırlamaktadır. Güney Kore’de ortaya çıkıp kısa sürede küresel bir fenomene dönüşen Kore dizileri, Türkiye’de de geniş bir izleyici kitlesi ve güçlü bir hayran topluluğu oluşturmuştur. Bu çalışma, Kore dizilerinin izleyiciler üzerindeki etkilerini, ortaya çıkan hayran kültürünü ve bu kültürün parasosyal etkileşim bağlamındaki konumunu incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. İzleyicilerin dizi karakterleriyle kurdukları iletişim biçimleri, benlik algılarına yansıyan yönleri ve özdeşleşme pratikleri araştırmanın temel odak noktalarını oluşturmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, 1 Mayıs–1 Haziran 2025 tarihleri arasında Kore dizilerini düzenli olarak izleyen 16 katılımcıyla derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışma için etik kurul onayı alınmış ve katılımcılardan bilgilendirilmiş onam sağlanmıştır. Elde edilen bulgular, medya üzerinden inşa edilen dizi karakterlerinin izleyici kitlesinde parasosyal bir etkileşim yaratarak karakterlerle özdeşleşmeyi güçlendirdiğini göstermektedir. Katılımcıların Kore dizilerindeki karakterleri kendi yaşam deneyimleriyle ilişkilendirdikleri, duygusal yakınlık kurdukları ve zaman zaman bu karakterlerden motivasyon, ilham ya da yönlendirme aldıkları görülmüştür. Kore dizileri üzerinden kurgulanan karakterlerin izleyiciler tarafından belirli bir anlamlandırma sürecinden geçirilerek içselleştirildiği ve bu etkileşimin kitleselleştirici bir dinamik taşıdığı sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Bulgular, parasosyal etkileşim literatürü temelinde detaylı biçimde tartışılmış, özellikle dijital platformların bu etkileşimi nasıl pekiştirdiğine, izleyici bağını nasıl güçlendirdiğine ve hayran kültürünün dönüşen yapısına yönelik alanyazına katkı sunan öneriler geliştirilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Parasosyal Etkileşim, Kore Dizileri, Hayran Kültürü, Dijital Medya, Özdeşleşme.

## Introduction

The use of the internet has rapidly become widespread today (Koca & Eryücel, 347). Rapid developments in communication technologies have transformed the media production landscape, enabling the production and consumption of film and series content in digital environments. In this process, the content offered on digital platforms has emerged as a product of the different perception styles created by new media culture. Digital culture has contributed to the formation of popular culture by increasing the reproducibility of content. Media figures featured in series and movies are associated with real individuals to create a certain impression in viewers; thus, individuals socially interact with fictional characters. The relationship established with characters across all mass communication tools, including visual and auditory elements, is defined as a 'parasocial relationship' (Fügan & Kars, 2019: 258). In other words, the one-sided, symbolic relationship viewers establish with media characters is called parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In parallel with the widespread use of the internet, access to media personalities has become easier, thereby increasing the power of parasocial interactions and deepening the sense of closeness between viewers and characters (Kim & Sintas, 2021).

This situation leads individuals to evaluate media characters over time as 'friend' (Vorderer et al., 2004). The individual who identifies with media characters in their everyday life reality reconstructs themselves through this emotional bond and begins to internalize the social attitudes of media figures.

This study examines how young adult viewers in Turkey develop parasocial relationships with characters in Korean dramas; it addresses several sub-questions to explore this fundamental issue in depth.

How much influence do the characters in TV series have on real-life individuals?

What are the emotional and behavioral dimensions of this interaction?

How are viewers using this interaction to reduce feelings of loneliness?

How does the level of admiration and social media monitoring affect the intensity of parasocial interactions?

Studies have shown that parasocial interaction is closely related to individual characteristics, identity formation, and social behaviors. Boğazkesen, Yiğit, and Bulut (2024) found in their research on K-Pop fans that personality traits and self-esteem play a determining role in the level of parasocial interaction. Conde and Casais (2023) demonstrated, in their study of social media influencers, that follower count, perceived popularity, and opinion leadership influence users' willingness to follow recommendations through parasocial bonds. From a more theoretical perspective, Fügan and Kars Tayanç (2019) emphasize that parasocial interaction takes different forms depending on variables such as media character, content type, and viewer characteristics, and that it creates distinct interaction patterns within each viewer group.

## Method

In the study, a semi-structured interview method, a qualitative research method, was used to understand the impact of the series' characters on the audience. To reach participants aligned with the study's purpose, snowball sampling was employed. This method allows for identifying suitable participants by consulting knowledgeable individuals (Yılmaz and Sezgin, 2023, p. 355). By obtaining suggestions from the initial participants, other participants with similar characteristics were identified, and the sample was expanded.

In the qualitative research paradigm, the sample size is determined not by a predetermined fixed number but by the principle of data depth and data saturation (Yılmaz, 2024, p. 1381). Within this framework, interviews were

conducted with 16 participants who regularly watched Korean Dramas between May 1 and June 1, 2025. After the interviews, no new themes emerged from the data, and the existing themes began to repeat; this was considered an indication that data saturation had been reached, and the data collection process was concluded.

Her interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes. The nine open-ended questions on the interview form aimed to understand participants' viewing habits, the level of identification they form with characters, their emotional reactions, their social media usage patterns, and the effects of TV series on their daily lives.

First, the interview recordings were transcribed into text, and then the data were thematically classified. The themes were grouped under headings such as 'emotional interaction,' 'identification,' 'relationship continuing through social media,' and 'loneliness and seeking support.'

For the research, Ethical Committee Approval was obtained from the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University Scientific Research Ethics Committee under number 2025/450 on June 18, 2025. Additionally, informed consent was obtained from participants before the interview.

### Findings

The study sample consists of 16 participants, 12 women and 4 men, aged 19 to 25. Most of the participants are undergraduate students.

The answers to 9 questions about these Korean dramas, as asked of 16 viewers, have been categorized separately. Brief responses are provided for each, and then they are summarized in a table.

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Educational Status
P1	20	Female	Undergraduate Student
P2	22	Female	Undergraduate Student
P3	19	Female	High School Graduate
P4	23	Male	Undergraduate Student
P5	21	Female	Undergraduate Student
P6	25	Female	Graduate (Master's) Student
P7	24	Female	Bachelor's Degree Holder
P8	20	Female	Undergraduate Student
P9	22	Male	Undergraduate Student
P10	23	Female	Undergraduate Student
P11	19	Female	Associate Degree Student
P12	24	Male	Undergraduate Student
P13	25	Female	Bachelor's Degree Holder
P14	21	Female	Associate Degree Student
P15	22	Female	Undergraduate Student
P16	23	Male	High School Graduate

#### Since when have you been watching these series?

Most participants reported starting to watch Korean dramas in middle or high school. Some participants mentioned that they began watching during their university years or were influenced by their social circle. Among those who started watching at an early age, they generally said they watched dramas to distract themselves and learn about new cultures. This group has been following Korean dramas regularly for a long time. Those who started watching later mostly said they turned to Korean dramas because of their social environment or social media influence, and that their interest in them increased over time.

#### What is the name of your favorite Korean drama?

These dramas are described by participants not only as a form of entertainment but also as content through which they can establish emotional connections and reflect.

Viewers have stated that they are influenced by the stories of characters who pursue their dreams, do not give up despite difficulties, or experience emotional growth. For example, one mentioned being inspired by the resilient nature of the female character in the K11, When Life Gives You Tangerines series, saying, 'The ambition to have a career, courage, hope... All of these inspired me.'

Some participants expressed that they find motivation and personal development-themed series inspiring and that they review their own goals through the characters in these series. K4, who said Navillera is their favorite series, mentioned being moved by the elderly character's journey to realize their dream of becoming a ballet dancer.

#### Which platforms do you follow these series on?

When examining participants' habits of watching Korean dramas, it is observed that there is a high degree of

diversity in digital platforms. However, among this variety, Netflix stands out as the most preferred platform by a wide margin. In addition to Netflix, independent websites are commonly used as alternatives. These sites are often used alongside Netflix, providing easy access to a wide variety of content. According to participants, YouTube is frequently used to rewatch drama scenes, view short summaries, and access drama-related content. Social media also plays an important role in following Korean dramas. Participants reported encountering drama-related content in short clips and recent posts on platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

#### **Do you feel a closeness to the characters in the TV shows you watch?**

The majority of participants reported developing emotional closeness to characters in Korean dramas. This closeness was described in terms of 'empathy,' 'identification,' and 'emotionally reactive responses depending on the situation.' Participants reported that sharing the characters' feelings enabled them to experience the joy, sadness, and anger the characters go through. Participant K13 said they felt close to the characters and used expressions like, 'I feel a strong closeness... There are times I cry with the character, times I feel sad or angry together.' This indicates that viewers not only watch the scenes but also emotionally participate in the process. Some participants noted that this bond strengthens when they share similar life experiences with the characters. K8 explained that this closeness stems from personal similarity, saying, 'If I really relate to myself, I can establish a connection... If there's an event in the series that I have experienced or witnessed, I feel a closeness both to the series and to the actor.'

#### **Can you give an example of a character or player who has influenced you or left a mark on your life?**

Participants' responses reveal that characters in Korean dramas have emotional, cognitive, and behavioral effects on viewers. These effects are generally categorized under the headings of 'personal awareness,' 'behavioral change,' and 'life motivation.' In terms of personal awareness, participants noted that they became aware of their own feelings through the characters' internal conflicts and emotional processes. Some participants expressed that these scenes helped them develop empathy and better understand themselves. Regarding behavioral transformation, participants noted that the characters' determination, patience, and positive attitudes served as examples. They mentioned that they try to adapt these qualities into their own lives, and that this is reflected in their behaviors. In the life-motivation theme, participants indicated that they are influenced by the characters' resilience and hopeful attitudes in the face of difficulties. Some participants stated that these scenes boost their morale and inspire them to start anew.

#### **Are you following news, social media accounts, and fan pages related to the TV character?**

Participants' responses indicate that social media interactions with characters and actors from Korean dramas are generally limited, temporary, and passive. Most participants stated that

their interest in the dramas does not last long on social media and is usually confined to the period when they are watching the show. Some participants mentioned that they follow actors or pages related to the dramas only out of brief curiosity. It was noted that interest tends to increase during the drama's broadcast period and then decline afterward. Other participants said they encounter content related to dramas on social media, but do not actively follow.

#### **How do situations like the TV characters feeling sad, happy, or achieving success affect you?**

Participants' responses indicate that the emotional experiences of characters in Korean dramas strongly impact viewers. Participants stated that they especially feel a deeper empathy with the characters during dramatic scenes. They also mentioned feeling similar emotions when characters are sad, happy, or successful.

K1 expressed this situation with the words, "I feel sad when the character cries, and I am proud when they succeed. It's like I really know them." Similarly, K11 said, "I feel like I am experiencing all the emotions they go through." K14, on the other hand, described the intensity of the connection they feel as, "When they are overwhelmed with tears, I can't stand it. When they are happy, my heart feels like it's going to jump out of my chest." Some participants noted that this emotional impact depends on the character's realistic portrayal and the strength of the acting performance. It was noted that scenes with a heightened sense of realism make it easier to empathize.

#### **How would you describe your level of admiration for a TV series or actors you watch?**

The participants' responses indicate that their admiration for Korean dramas and actors is generally balanced, conscious, and maintained within personal boundaries. This approach has been examined under three categories: 'balanced admiration,' 'changing admiration over time,' and 'selective admiration.' Most participants stated that they experience their interest in actors in a moderate way and that it does not affect their daily lives. Participants reported maintaining emotional distance in their attachments. Some participants mentioned that their admiration, which was more intense in their youth, has decreased over time and has been replaced by a more moderate appreciation. Others said they do not openly express their feelings but continue to follow the projects of the actors they like.

#### **When you watch these Korean dramas, are there moments when you feel like you're not alone?**

Participants' responses indicate that Korean dramas reduce feelings of loneliness and strengthen viewers' sense of understanding, emotional sharing, and belonging. Especially in emotional scenes, participants who empathize with the characters described the shows as a kind of emotional companionship. K1 expressed this by saying, "Especially when I feel lonely, Korean dramas cheer me up. They're like friends." Similarly, K14 stated, "Sometimes there are scenes where I feel like they understand me. At those times, I think, 'Maybe I can also be understood,'" indicating that they sometimes cope with loneliness through these dramas.

**Table 2:** Level of Parasocial Interaction of Participants with Korean Dramas

Questions	Categories	Number of Participants	Percentage
<b>Viewing Onset</b>	Started between 2012 and 2015	4 participants	25%
	Started between 2017 and 2019	5 participants	31%
	Started in 2020 or later	7 participants	44%
<b>Favorite Drama Type</b>	Romantic–Drama	6 participants	38%
	Motivation / Personal Development themed	7 participants	44%
	School / Youth themed	3 participants	19%
<b>Viewing Platform</b>	Primarily Netflix	8 participants	50%
	Independent internet websites	5 participants	31%
	YouTube / social media	3 participants	19%
<b>Closeness to Characters</b>	Strong	11 participants	69%
	Moderate	4 participants	25%
	Weak	1 participant	6%
<b>Impact on Life</b>	Personal awareness	5 participants	31%
	Life motivation	6 participants	38%
	Behavioral change	3 participants	19%
	No clear impact reported	2 participants	12%
<b>Social media Following</b>	Followers	7 participants	44%
	Partial followers	2 participants	12%
	Non-followers	7 participants	44%
<b>Emotional Influence</b>	Strong	12 participants	75%
	Moderate	3 participants	19%
	Weak	1 participant	6%
<b>Admiration Level</b>	Balanced admiration	7 participants	44%
	Admiration that changes over time	7 participants	44%
	Selective admiration	2 participants	12%
<b>Not Feeling Lonely</b>	Report not feeling lonely	7 participants	44%
	The report reduced feelings of loneliness	3 participants	19%
	Report no effect	6 participants	38%

## Discussion

The emotional closeness and empathy develop toward characters in Korean dramas directly support the concept of parasocial interaction developed by Horton and Wohl (1956). Participants' statements indicate that the characters in the dramas are perceived as real people, and the viewers share their sadness, happiness, and success. This situation reveals that viewers form a one-sided but intense emotional relationship with the characters.

The findings of this study also align with the relevant theoretical framework. Participants reported forming an emotional bond with characters in Korean dramas not only on a viewer-character level but also as if they were personal acquaintances. As Tukachinsky and Stever

(2018) also noted, viewers often perceive media personalities as part of their social circle and feel they are engaging in real interactions with them.

The data obtained shows that media characters influence viewers not only on an emotional level but also on a behavioral level. Some participants stated that they adopted qualities such as perseverance, determination, and a positive attitude from the characters in TV series into their own lives. This finding aligns with the study by Fügen and Kars (2019), which revealed that viewer characteristics strengthen parasocial interactions.

Finally, although a large portion of viewers develops a strong empathy for the characters, they maintain this emotional connection in a balanced way. According to

Giles (2002), parasocial relationships do not always manifest as excessive admiration or dependency; instead, in many cases, they serve as healthy social experiences conducted within a certain emotional distance. The findings of this research also support this view, showing that participants experience emotional satisfaction through TV series while simultaneously maintaining their connections to real life.

## Conclusion

Many factors influence a community's cultural structure in daily life. At this point, amid changing world dynamics, it is evident that the impact of leisure and entertainment activities, commonly referred to as popular culture, in the cultural and social fields is significant.

Although the TV characters are fictional, their attitudes, perceptions, and emotional and behavioral states in daily life are portrayed in ways that can influence audiences. Indeed, in this hyper-modern era, dominated by the internet, parasocial interactions between individuals and media characters are increasingly maintained. The relational dynamics established between media figures and viewers, facilitated by digital culture, manifest in various forms.

Feelings such as admiration, identification, and the desire for recognition define the one-way communication that viewers establish with media characters, known as parasocial interaction. This interaction causes viewers to incorporate media characters into their daily lives and to experience their emotions as if they were real rather than fictional. Most of the data obtained from the interviews analyzed in this study indicate that the figures within the content of the Korean dramas watched have a significant impact on viewers. This influence shows that viewers

identify with media figures and develop a certain level of admiration. In this study, most participants stated that their closeness to media characters leads them to incorporate fan culture into their real lives and that these characters influence their social and cultural experiences. Future research could explore the effects of fan culture surrounding Korean dramas on viewers. Specifically, examining the relationship between parasocial interactions with Korean dramas through bibliometric methods could more clearly reveal academic trends and research directions in this field.

## Declarations

### Ethics Approval and Participation Permission

Approval for the implementation of the research has been obtained from the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University Scientific Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics Committee Approval was granted on 06/18/2025, with the number 2025/450).

### Publication Permission

Not applicable.

### Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

### Funding

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### Author Contributions

All processes in the study, conceptualization, method development, data collection, and analysis stages, have equal contributions from all authors. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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