
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Second Lead Syndrome in the Reception of Romantic Relationships by Indonesian Female K-Drama Audiences

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ABSTRACT

The Second Lead Syndrome, popular among Indonesian K-drama viewers, involves favoring the second lead over the main character in love triangles, sparking audience contestation. *Start-Up* (2020) is one of the K-dramas that sparked it and divided its audience into Nam Do-san Team and Han Ji-pyeong Team based on differences in audience views, so this descriptive qualitative research was conducted to describe Han Ji-pyeong Team's reception of romantic relationships in *Start-Up*. This research combines Hall's Reception Theory, the participatory audience concept, and Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love. Research data was obtained through in-depth interviews with six informants representing Han Ji-pyeong Team.

The findings indicate that the informants perceive the romantic relationships in dominant-hegemonic and negotiating positions. They support the second lead character, Ji-pyeong, by negotiating the romantic relationships shown. They acted on this reception by expressing emotions, preferences, and narrative interpretation on social media, driven by their preferences, identification, and parasocial relationships with the second lead. Their actions become a collective activity contributing to forming a popular culture, the second lead syndrome. This study explores audience reception of romantic relationships in K-dramas and their participation, setting an academic precedent for the second lead syndrome in Indonesian context.

Keywords: *Second lead syndrome; Reception analysis; Korean drama Start-Up; Romantic relationship; Participatory audience*

INTRODUCTION

New media audiences are characterized as those who actively interact with media content (Cover, 2006). They do not just consume media content because it is possible to extend their viewing experience through social media but, in the context of the Netflix audience, they use social media to also connect with other audiences, discuss topics, and even contribute to online campaigns or petitions to change or maintain existing stories (Burkhardt et al., 2021).

The existence of differences in views and values can divide an audience into different groups (Jenkins, 2018). The different views on media content between said groups can sometimes allow



for conflict to arise. These audience groups can attack each other to defend their perspectives on media content. This is due to emotional attachment and investment in media content elements, such as romantic relationships between characters (Burkhardt et al., 2021). South Korean dramas (hereafter referred to as K-dramas), especially the romantic genre, are an example of fictional media content that can trigger conflict between audiences because of the narrative and characterization present in the drama. Ju (2020a) explains that cross-cultural aspects allow K-drama narratives to shape and influence the audience's perspective.

Indonesian society has widely adopted South Korean popular culture. This can be seen from how K-dramas have gained significant popularity in Indonesia through melodramatic narratives and romantic themes that the Indonesian audience prefer (Kenasri & Sadasri, 2021). The same source stated that K-dramas are the benchmark of the romantic genre for the Indonesian audience. This shows that the attachment between the Indonesian audience and the romantic narratives has been established through Korean dramas. Not only are they attached to the romantic narratives, but the Indonesian audience also creates romantic beliefs through an emotional attachment to the K-drama characters (Syafrina et al., 2016). However, romantic beliefs among Indonesian K-drama viewers have different critical proportions regarding the culture and characters depicted in K-dramas. They tend to accept hegemonic norms, such as similar cultures, and negotiate or reject different cultures (Setiawan et al., 2022). It is this emotional attachment and differences in perspective that Burkhardt et al. (2021) confirm as a catalyst of conflict between audiences.

One of the K-dramas that sparked conflict between audiences was *Start-Up* (2020). This drama tells the story of Seo Dal-mi, who is trapped in a love triangle between Nam Do-san and Han Ji-pyeong. *Start-Up*'s triangular love story has been generating heated debates among K-drama audiences. In South Korea, the Naver site conducted a survey regarding the Nam Do-san Team vs. the Han Ji-pyeong Team. The result was that 81% of *Start-Up*'s fans supported Han Ji-pyeong as the second lead rather than Nam Do-san (Anjani, 2020). This euphoria is triggered and facilitated by social media, where audiences can search for and meet other audiences with similar views on specific content and share their emotional experiences on a larger scale (Jenkins, 2018; Lee, 2018; McCormick, 2018).

This festivity was also significant among the Indonesian society. Indonesian netizens declared their support for one of the teams for various reasons via X, previously known as Twitter. This euphoria was also enlivened by celebrities and influencers, including Arief Muhammad, who supported Ji-pyeong.

Daisy Indira Yasmine, an academic from the Department of Sociology at Universitas Indonesia, stated that the *Start-Up* phenomenon not only affects the ratings of the show itself, but can also generate economic value, such as monetization, for the participants. This is reflected in the marketing strategies adopted by several businesses in Indonesia (CNN Indonesia, 2020), where they would drive this momentum by offering special menus and promotions to buyers based on their bias toward one of the teams (Rialdi, 2020). The famous restaurant and entertainment venue, Holywings, also joined the feud by showing its support for both Do-san and Ji-pyeong.

The polarized view between Do-san and Ji-pyeong is known as the *second lead syndrome*. The term *second lead syndrome* is popularized in K-drama viewing culture to describe how viewers tend to like and sympathize with the *second lead* in a fictional story. In romantic K-dramas, the love triangle theme is often used involving three main characters, consisting of a pair of main



Figure 1. Arief Muhammad's Support towards Han Ji-pyeong via Instagram (Muhammad, 2020).



Figure 2. Documentation of the Inter-Branch Feud of Holywings (USS Feed, 2020).

characters and a third person known as *the second lead* (Anwar, 2019; Effendi et al., 2016; Hartford, 2021; Hisham, 2019; Kenasri & Sadasri, 2021; Lytle, 2022) one of the most popular theme is love affair between married men (pebinor).

Essentially, *the second lead syndrome* refers to the audience supporting the character who loses the love triangle battle. Generally, K-drama narratives tell the romantic relationship of a pair of main characters. Based on such narratives, the audience typically treats the third person in a romantic relationship as a stranger and give a negative view even though the third party is not depicted as an antagonistic or evil figure (Fitria, 2020; Jin & Kim, 2015; Tae, 2020). The audience's negative perception of third persons in romantic relationships in K-dramas reflects the audience's personal beliefs, understanding, habits, and expectations of romantic relationships (Jin & Kim, 2015; Tae, 2020). However, there are anomalies in the *Start-Up* euphoria where the audience supports the *second lead* as a third party in a romantic relationship to end up with one of the leading characters (Anwar, 2019; Effendi et al., 2016). Therefore, *the second lead syndrome* can be seen as a new way to consume fictional shows.

This euphoria shows diversity in the audience's meaning of romantic relationships in Start-Up, namely the relationship between Dal-mi and Do-san and between Dal-mi and Ji-pyeong. Differences in audience interpretation can divide audiences into heterogeneous groups whose textual meanings compete with each other, triggering conflicts and arguments on social media (Bothe, 2014; Burkhardt et al., 2021; Effendi et al., 2016) or hear users in a text based forum gives the assumption that individuals will default to an open and socially inclusive mind-set. At a superficial level participation, fandom and fan fiction appears to be a completely socially inclusive forum. Individuals are unable to tell the age, race, gender or demographic of other users. Membership of forums such as Fanfiction.net (ff.net, such as commenting and posting their interpretations of scenes and dialogue that support their views. Audiences' interpretations of the same program can be different from one another due to several factors, such as differences in socio-demographic

characteristics, values, social circumstances, and cultural context (Beyerl et al., 2016; Ju, 2020a).

This research believes that there is a shift in the position of the *Start-Up*'s audience's meaning-making from the hegemonic romantic relationship message, which is manifested in the relationship between Seo Dal-mi and Nam Do-san, giving rise to a massive movement that supports the *second lead*. Therefore, the differences in the audience's interpretation of romantic relationships in *Start-Up* need to be investigated further to read the phenomenon of *second lead syndrome*. Considering the magnitude of the rivalry between the Nam Do-san Team and the Han Ji-pyeong Team in Indonesia, it can be assumed that socio-cultural aspects navigate differences in the *Start-Up* audience's interpretations. These differences in the Indonesian audience's interpretation, how socio-cultural aspects play a role in the interpretation process, and their significance in the second lead syndrome phenomenon will be examined using the reception analysis method.

Without any precedent in the academic literature, the second lead syndrome phenomenon serves as the focus of this research due to its scarcity as a research interest. The lack of basic knowledge regarding this phenomenon underscores the need for efforts to disentangle the *second lead syndrome* as a scientific phenomenon. This research attempts to read the phenomenon of *second lead syndrome* by using reception analysis as a scientific lens with Indonesia as the research context.

METHODS

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with reception analysis as its main method. The audience-centered data collection was done using in-depth interviews, observation, and reviews of relevant text sources.

In-depth interviews were conducted with six informants with several criteria representing Han Ji-pyeong Team, namely: having watched all episodes of *Start-Up*, identifying themselves as part of Han Ji-pyeong Team, being female because they tend to pay attention to romantic stories and male characters in K-dramas (Ju, 2020a), is a young adult (between 20-29 years old), and coming from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. This sociocultural diversity is achieved based on the differences in the ethnicity, religion, and romantic relationship status of the informants, which are determined by their domicile and the culture inherent in their daily lives. Meanwhile, the differences in romantic relationship status reflect the cultural practices and expectations of the informants' romantic relationships. The six informants are Grace, Elvira, Amanda, Tiara, Sarah, and Jasmine.

Table 1. Informants' Background

Informant	Age	Religion	Ethnicity	Relationship Status
Grace	25	Islam	Javanese-Ambonese	Single
Elvira	22	Islam	East Javanese	In a relationship
Amanda	22	Islam	Sundanese-Javanese	Single
Tiara	22	Islam	Central Javanese	Single
Sarah	20	Islam	Sundanese	Single
Jasmine	22	Christian	West Nusa Tenggara -Javanese	In a relationship

The Triangular Theory of Love (Sternberg, 1986) acts as a unit for analysing romantic relationships in the *Start-Up*. This theory includes three elements, namely intimacy, passion, and commitment, which help limit the scenes that are being perceived.

In addition, the concepts of encoding and decoding from Reception Theory (Hall, 2005) are used to see the symmetry of audience reception. This can be seen from the conformity of the audience's reception with the *Start-Up* creators' preferred code, which mainly celebrates the relationship between Dal-mi and Do-san (Rinjani, 2020). Based on this alignment, their reception will be labelled into dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional. The concepts of frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and technical infrastructure are also used to examine the factors behind the reception's symmetry and asymmetry (Hall, 2005).

K-drama audiences have a participatory nature as they are able to extend their reception into the public sphere (Jenkins, 2018; Livingstone, 2005). Thus, social media observations and follow-up interviews were carried out to understand the extension of the audience reception. Then, these activities are grouped thematically based on the concept of participatory audience engagement in fictional media (Cohen, 2006; Rain & Mar, 2021; Ulusoy & Lee, 2019) to understand the second lead syndrome phenomenon and its relationship to audience activities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The six informants are no strangers to romantic relationships, especially in K-dramas. The six possess quite a variety of perspectives towards the romantic relationships in *Start-Up*, such as the relationships between Do-san and Dal-mi and Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi as coded in *Start-Up*.

Han Ji-pyeong Team Reception: Intimacy, Passion, and Commitment

The six informants accepted the existence of *Start-Up*'s romantic relationships, which are wrapped in a love triangle 'Male/Female/Male' narrative (Veldman-Genz, 2014), namely between Do-san, Dal-mi, and Ji-pyeong. Therefore, the informants' interpretation of romantic relationships is categorized into three elements of love: intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986).

Intimacy

Intimacy refers to closeness, connectedness, and bonding in a loving relationship. It can be expressed by (a) communicating inner feelings, (b) improving the partner's welfare, (c) sharing possessions, time, and self, (d) expressing empathy towards the partner, and (e) providing emotional and material support to the partner (Sternberg, 1986).

In *Start-Up*, the informants perceived intimacy through in-depth communication. They assessed intimacy in both romantic relationships, as shown in the drama. Deep communication as intimacy in *Start-Up* manifests in scenes where the two characters (Dal-mi and Ji-pyeong/Do-san) express their true feelings, dreams, and futures to each other.

The informants' preferences regarding romantic relationships underlie their views regarding deep communication as intimacy. According to Amanda, relationship compatibility can minimize conflict in romantic relationships, as she explains:

What truly matters is that we can communicate comfortably. Having differing opinions

can make communication more challenging and lead to frequent disagreements. While it's unrealistic to expect complete agreement all the time, it's important that we don't always find ourselves in opposition either.

Intimacy can be expressed in efforts to improve the partner's well-being. This effort includes actions that can contribute to a partner's happiness in a romantic relationship. The actions in question include empathy, support, and attention to the partner's emotional, physical, and psychological needs (Sternberg, 1986). The informants associate it with acts of service. Grace, Elvira, Tiara, Sarah, and Jasmine interpret intimacy in the scenes where Ji-pyeong or Do-san pays attention to Dal-mi's needs, assists her work, or provides emotional and practical support.

Their love language drove the reception of the informants above. Grace, Tiara, Sarah, and Jasmine said their love language is an act of service. Acts of service is a love language in which individuals express affection by carrying out actions that are beneficial or considered to reduce the burden on their partner. Understanding a partner's love language, such as acts of service, can contribute to greater emotional aspects in romantic relationships (Mostova et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Sternberg (1986) associates this emotional aspect with intimacy.

Passion

Passion is a romantic urge, physical attraction, and sexual consummation. It is expressed in physical stimulation, such as kissing, hugging, staring, touching, and making love (Sternberg, 1986). The informants see Do-san and Dal-mi's passion in their hand-touching, hugging, and kissing scenes. Despite social norms in Indonesia labeling it taboo, they accept it as influenced by prior media exposure like social media, K-dramas, and foreign films. Sarah, a Muslim, opposes physical contact outside marriage but normalizes it in fictional media, as she is aware of the differences between Korean and Indonesian culture regarding physical affection. She admitted, "*I'm just indifferent about it though I don't agree with it because of the cultural differences.*"

Passion is also expressed by the desire to unite (Sternberg, 1986). If this desire is unrequited, it leads to feelings of emptiness, anxiety, and hopelessness (Hatfield & Rapson, 2013). The informants see it in *Start-Up*, where the characters show negative feelings as they might miss out on being with someone they love. The informants' experiences regarding heartbreak motivate this reception. This negative experience makes individuals reevaluate their beliefs and expectations in romantic relationships (Baumeister et al., 1993). As Tiara disclosed:

He treated me like he loved me. However, he suddenly left to get back with his ex. Like, "Heck! What have I been doing all this time? Waiting for you to get back with her?" That really hurts.

Interestingly, while it aligns with expressing passion, the informants do not view scenes where Ji-pyeong gazes at Dal-mi as portraying passion. Their perspective stems from associating passion with sexual desire, yet distinguishing between admiring glances and lustful ones, shaped by their religious teachings and cultural norms. As Elvira explained:

I'm a Muslim and have been taught about it [zina¹ of the eyes] as there are people who gaze out of admiration and others who gaze with lust, which leads to zina. Gazing in admiration is like seeing someone giving a great speech or having impressive

achievements. Gazing with lust involves bad thoughts, like “Wow, they must be really sexy in person,” and so on.

The informants negotiate passion based on their culture and vocabulary. Passion for Indonesians is closely related to sexual activity (Panjaitan, 2012). This prompted the informants to reconsider ‘staring’ not solely as a display of passion.

Commitment

Commitment refers to a decision to love someone and to maintain that love. It is expressed through promises, loyalty, maintenance a relationship through difficult times, engagement, and marriage (Sternberg, 1986). The informants perceive promises as commitment through explicit or implied dialogs of *Start-Up*’s characters about their decisions regarding romantic relationships, such as confessing romantic feelings to a partner.

Despite her frustration with Do-san’s choice, Tiara views his refusal to break up with Dal-mi as a sign of commitment. She negotiates it because their relationship stems from a deception—Do-san pretending to be Dal-mi’s pen pal during their teenage years. Tiara’s disagreement is based on her view of lies in relationships, a view constructed by her personal experience. As she admits:

I really hate it when people lie, which ends up ruining everything. I think it’ll cause even more damage if it starts with a lie. Sometimes, people don’t want to say something and fabricate another story when they could just say they don’t want to. No need for lies.

Subsequently, the informants interpreted efforts to maintain relationships through difficult times as commitment in *Start-Up*. They saw it when Dal-mi and Do-san talked about their relationship, which was not in good condition. Grace believes this moment demonstrates commitment as the result of observing her parent resolving conflicts as it is a way to develop romantic beliefs (Hall, 2006). She explained:

I don’t think my parents ever wanted to check each other’s phones. When a couple start checking each other’s phones, it means one is distrustful, afraid of being betrayed, or something like that, right? So, communication and talking things through are essential.

The informants also interpreted commitment in the form of engagement and marriage. The informants refer to the scenes where the characters show their willingness to get married and, eventually, wedding scenes. They believe that marriage is the end goal of romantic relationships as constructed by their sociocultural and religious beliefs. Sarah disclosed, “Because, you see, our goal in romantic relationships is to find a partner. To find someone who can be with us, who can accompany us forever.” She is also one of the informants who values marriage as a gate for other romantic aspects based on Islamic beliefs that require marriage before expressing physical intimacy and passion towards a partner. This reflects the general Indonesians’ view of marriage, which is a means to establish a household and build a strong foundation for the community (Simatupang, 2021).

Interestingly, Elvira sees no commitment in Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi’s relationship, believing only Ji-pyeong is committed. She feels that true romantic relationships require commitment

from both parties. Her experience with unrequited love has negatively influenced her views on romance (Baumeister et al., 1993).

Han Ji-pyeong Team's Negotiation on Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi's Relationship

When discussing the *Start-Up*'s love triangle, informants tend to accept Do-san and Dal-mi's relationship as the dominant relationship. This is motivated by their official relationship, and they have more scenes than Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi.

Interestingly, informants remained more invested in Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi's relationship despite the dominant relationship, ignoring Do-san and Dal-mi's higher intimacy, passion, and commitment levels. The storyline reinforces Ji-pyeong's strong character despite being the second lead. For the informants, his early appearances make his character seem stronger and create the illusion that he is the main character.

The informants saw Ji-pyeong as an ideal male figure. They labeled him a "green flag" for his persistence, intelligence, kindness, loyalty, understanding, responsibility, good looks, and financial stability. The characters' personalities and visuals are essential for the audience, as they use characters as role models and reflections of social life, including romantic relationships (Putri & Yatim, 2019).

Ji-pyeong's efforts in *Start-Up* are also a consideration due to the informants' love language as a contributing factor to their romantic beliefs (Bland & McQueen, 2018). Five informants stated that their love language is acts of service, and some of them have memorable experiences related to this love language. They even considered that Ji-pyeong's efforts to make Dal-mi happy were more important than the romantic elements shown by Do-san. From Ji-pyeong's struggle, they perceived that Ji-pyeong deserved Dal-mi more than Do-san as a consequence of the narrative, as Jasmine explained, "Maybe because we can see the struggles of the second lead, we get to understand what the second lead truly feels." Aside from that, sociocultural factors encourage informants to invest in Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi's relationship—first, the informants' views regarding first love. Ji-pyeong is depicted as Dal-mi's first love, and she makes him an ideal partner figure. For informants, first love is a big deal. Tiara revealed:

First love is the sincerest love because it feels love without being forced; it gives us much experience with love issues; it teaches us how to be sincere and patient, feel the dissimilarity, and feel disappointed too from first love.

The second sociocultural factor is the role of family in romantic relationships. Of the six informants, Grace was the only one who thought that Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi's relationship was more dominant than Do-san and Dal-mi's. Grace prefers a family man and constructs the romantic idea from her familial background.

For Grace, Dal-mi's grandmother's role is essential to Dal-mi's romantic relationships. She observed that the grandmother knew Ji-pyeong before Do-san, loved him like a grandson, and acted as a liaison between Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi. Given Grace's background, which values family approval, she believes that her grandmother's blessing is vital. Grace thinks her grandmother has approved Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi's relationship from the start because of their childhood connection.

However, the informants did not rule out the elements of romantic relationships when looking at K-drama romantic relationships as they demand changes in the narrative between

Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi, such as the addition of scenes where Dal-mi accepted Ji-pyeong's love in the end, Ji-pyeong hugging Dal-mi, and Ji-pyeong proposing to Dal-mi. However, other factors are more substantial in influencing the informants' negotiations of romantic relationships in K-dramas, namely the creator's narrative framing and informants' sociocultural factors related to first love and family roles.

The Second Lead Syndrome: How Han Ji-pyeong Team Acts Over the Negotiation on Romantic Relationship in *Start-Up*

The informants make adjustments to the reception of romantic relationships within *Start-Up*. Even though Do-san and Dal-mi's romantic relationship elements are stronger, the informants remain invested in Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi's relationship. This adjustment differentiates them from other audiences who symmetrically perceive romantic relationships just as the series' creator prefers to. This difference in views caused the audience to be divided into two teams: Nam Do-san Team and Han Ji-pyeong Team. Han Ji-pyeong Team is the embodiment of the second lead syndrome because they are more supportive of Ji-pyeong as a male second lead to establish a relationship with Dal-mi as the female main lead, instead of supporting Dal-mi with Do-san as the male main lead (Anwar, 2019; Effendi et al., 2016).

In seeing the second lead syndrome phenomenon, the informants agreed on several characteristics that make a character a second lead. They defined the second lead as the second male character who enlivens the conflict in the romantic narrative by being the opposite of the first lead but is destined to have a sad ending. According to informants, the second lead has more substantial characteristics than other supporting characters. At first, some informants were fooled by the appearance of Ji-pyeong at the beginning of the story, which is usually a character marker for the first lead. However, as the story develops, Ji-pyeong's traits meet the criteria of a second lead. In addition, Do-san's portions of scenes or screen time are more than Ji-pyeong's, confirming Ji-pyeong's role as the second lead.

The informants are already familiar with the second lead syndrome, which is inconsistent with the conventional culture of watching K-dramas. Amanda explained:

The second lead syndrome is when, you know, it's clear that the main female and male leads will end up together, but there are moments when we actually prefer the female lead to be with the male second lead.

The second lead syndrome's deviation from the K-drama-watching culture, in general, is caused by several factors. First, the informants revealed that Ji-pyeong is their preferred character. Informants assessed this through Ji-pyeong's personality, depiction, and visuals (Cohen, 2006; Correa, 2012; Ulusoy & Lee, 2019). This preference is the main factor in negotiating Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi's romantic relationship, which was mentioned previously as the narrative framing.

Parasocial relationships also drove this phenomenon, which Han Ji-pyeong Team experienced. Informants identifying as Han Ji-pyeong Team developed a sense of attachment with Ji-pyeong, even though they realized that the interaction was not real. This happens because informants, as audiences, project their emotions, thoughts, and desires onto K-drama narratives (Putri & Yatim, 2019). This parasocial relationship is manifested by the informants' desire to establish a relationship with Ji-pyeong because his relationship failed in the drama.

Apart from that, the second lead syndrome also occurs because of self-identification with the character. The informants deeply sympathize with Ji-pyeong because they feel connected to Ji-pyeong's story (Cohen, 2006; Rain & Mar, 2021) as they experienced a similar love story, namely unrequited love. Tiara shares her love story:

If that is the case, I relate more to Ji-pyeong because, from personal experience, that's how it is for me, too. I often like someone, and they don't feel the same. It's unrequited love, just like Ji-pyeong. Our fates are similar.

This connection with Ji-pyeong's experience underlies the informants' annoyance with the ending of *Start-Up*. They expressed annoyance, disagreement, and disappointment at the ending of *Start-Up*, where Ji-pyeong failed to realize the relationship he had hoped for. This disagreement underlies the actions taken by informants in interacting with other audiences. The informants were frustrated with the storyline, Dal-mi's decisions, and Do-san's character.

These annoyances do not stop at the characters only but extend to another audience, the Nam Do-san Team. The informants considered the Nam Do-san Team's attitude in supporting Do-san to be illogical, as represented by Tiara:

Oh, GWS! Like, what are you doing? But, yeah, it can't be like that either. Honestly, they they should be a bit more aware. They should know why Ji-pyeong should be chosen, right?

Negative emotions, such as dissatisfaction, anger, frustration, alienation, and disappointment, trigger audience participation (Burkhardt et al., 2021). Informants as audiences respond to these negative emotions by expressing them in the fandom community. The online platform becomes a medium for audiences to share their emotions and opinions with other community members to find other audiences with similar views, thereby minimizing feelings of alienation in the community (mihai, 2011).

These practices show the evolution of the participatory audience. Within this scope, the audience's private activities also have consequences in the public sphere (Jenkins, 2018; Livingstone, 2005). In this case, the informants' private activities included watching *Start-Up*, building engagement with K-drama narratives and characters, and developing emotional attachments. The public consequence would be the creation of discussions in social media.

As K-drama audiences, the informants actively participate in online activities to discuss K-dramas, especially on X. This was done to extend their meaning-making from the private to the public sphere. Their activities include sharing emotional responses, preferences, and interpreting narratives (Ju, 2020a).

The informants' negative emotions towards the storyline or characters were brought to social media to interact with other audiences. Through her account, Tiara expressed her frustration with Dal-mi's character, who was unable to make a good decision, namely choosing Ji-pyeong to be her partner. She expressed this annoyance in response to the *Start-Up*'s discourse, conveyed by other audiences through the autobase account @moviemenfes.

Likewise, Sarah expressed her frustration with Dal-mi for creating false hopes for Ji-pyeong. Through her account, Sarah responds to a question from the autobase account @moviemenfes regarding actress Suzy Bae. It can be seen that the audience uses media activities in existing public



Figure 3. Tiara's post on X



Figure 4. Sarah's post on X



Figure 5. Elvira's post on X



Figure 6. Grace's post on X

spaces to strengthen their engagement with fictional characters or narratives (Välisalo, 2023).

The informants' other behavior is to share their preferences, namely their character preferences. Their preferences will signify their identity in the online community. To maintain that identity, audiences attempt to dominate online communities' discourse with their opinions and preferences. They use specific keywords to create distance and separation between groups



Figure 7. Jasmine's post on X



Figure 8. Amanda's post on X

and cover the perspectives of other groups (Burkhardt et al., 2021; Kenny, 2019), in this case, the Nam Do-san Team.

Elvira participates in discussions regarding Do-san's character in the autobase account @*kdrama_menfess*. Here, she expresses her dislike for Do-san and how his character was created. This is done in an effort to reduce the perspective of Nam Do-san's supporters.

Meanwhile, Grace and Jasmine's actions were only to confirm their identity as Han Ji-pyeong Team. Grace did this by sharing that Ji-pyeong is her favorite second lead. Slightly different, Jasmine uses her account to convey her identity as Han Ji-pyeong Team.

The informants also share their narrative interpretations, such as discussion and analysis of the storyline, plot development, and character motivation. By interpreting the narrative, audiences can share their knowledge and affection for the K-dramas they watch (Ju, 2020a, 2020b; mihai, 2011). Amanda described her interpretation of the *Start-Up*'s narrative, where she understands that Dal-mi will not reciprocate Ji-pyeong's feelings even if the storyline changes. Her post shows that she has a parasocial relationship with Ji-pyeong, where she builds imaginative narratives to connect with Ji-pyeong.

Informants show a collective activity in discussing aspects of K-dramas, such as storylines and character motivations. This collective activity can contribute to the creation of a new popular culture, one of which is the second lead syndrome. Through this research, the collective activities of the audience, such as Han Ji-pyeong Team, contributed to the affirmation of the second lead syndrome as a phenomenon and popular culture.

Audiences interpret K-drama texts from their own social and cultural perspectives, forming popular narratives or general rules regarding K-drama narratives. They do this by sharing their

interpretations and building a collective understanding regarding the unique symbolic meaning of K-dramas (Schulze, 2013). Thus, the audience community forms a new popular culture through negotiation and discussion called the second lead syndrome.

CONCLUSION

Table 2. Audience's Reception of Romantic Relationships in *Start-Up*

Informant	Audience's Positions			Reception's Extension
	Intimacy	Passion	Commitment	
Grace	Dominant-hegemonic	Dominant-hegemonic	Dominant-hegemonic	Sharing preferences; Maintaining identity
Elvira	Dominant-hegemonic	Negotiated	Negotiated	Sharing preferences
Amanda	Dominant-hegemonic	Dominant-hegemonic	Dominant-hegemonic	Sharing narrative interpretation
Tiara	Dominant-hegemonic	Dominant-hegemonic	Negotiated	Sharing emotional comments
Sarah	Dominant-hegemonic	Negotiated	Dominant-hegemonic	Sharing emotional comments
Jasmine	Dominant-hegemonic	Negotiated	Dominant-hegemonic	Maintaining identity

This research obtained two main findings, namely the reception position of the Indonesian *Start-Up* audience and the implications of this reception in the second lead syndrome phenomenon. Based on the findings and discussion above, informants perceive romantic relationships in *Start-Up* in two positions: dominant-hegemonic and negotiated. In more detail, the six informants perceived intimacy in the dominant-hegemonic position, half perceived passion in the negotiated position, and two of the six informants perceived commitment in the negotiated position. The different romantic beliefs of the informants cause these varied reception positions. This romantic belief was constructed by informants from various sources, such as family culture, religious teachings practiced by the informants or in the surrounding community, as well as the informant's romantic relationship culture.

The audience's reception reflects the culture of romantic relationships in Indonesia. Firstly, love language plays a vital role in creating expectations of romantic affection, in this case, acts of service, as the love language dominates Indonesian society (Lestari & Darmawanti, 2023). Second, the experience of having romantic relationships, both positive and negative, helps informants as women identify actions that are considered romantic. Third, negotiation of societal norms regarding romantic relationships occurs due to media exposure (foreign movies and social media) and the youth environment that normalize certain things, such as physical affection. Fourth, the measure of commitment in a romantic relationship is determined by the cultural views in Indonesia regarding the institution of marriage.

Then, the implication of this reception in second lead syndrome was seen in the informant's behavior in watching *Start-Up*. Informants who are female audiences have a high interest in K-dramas because they see them as a form of escapism into a romantic fantasy world through emotional storytelling. The romance in K-dramas resonates with female audiences' emotional and psychological desires for romance, affection, and relationship experiences, as well as male characters who are seen as romantic heroes (Ju, 2020a; Wu et al., 2021).

They would observe a love narrative, internalize it, arrange the narrative priorities, and create a hierarchy of preferred stories manifested in perceptions and expectations of a romantic relationship. The audience's diverse sociocultural backgrounds and romantic beliefs cause these preferred stories to differ, so reception positions differ (Jenkins, 2018; Sternberg, 2022). In this case, informants as the Han Ji-pyeong Team showed asymmetrical reception with the *Start-Up*'s creator's preferred codes, where they negotiated the relationship between Ji-pyeong and Dal-mi despite Do-san and Dal-mi's relationship being more dominant. This negotiation occurs because the audience has admiration, frustration, and the urge to affirm and transform the media text (Jenkins, 2018).

Due to that, informants as participatory audiences have public consequences. In the private space, they have a high emotional attachment to the narrative or characters of K-dramas (Ju, 2020a). They reflect on K-dramas in their personal lives or from their personal lives to Korean drama shows (Baldacchino, 2014). However, within the fan community, they express their interpretations through emotional engagement toward the drama's narrative. This results in collective activities such as discussions, analyzing the storyline, and creating characters that align with their personal satisfaction (Ju, 2020c) as the informants of this research did, which include sharing emotional comments, sharing preferences, maintaining identity, and sharing narrative interpretation. Carpentier (2011) refers to these activities as participation 'through' the media, where the audience can participate in discussions in public spaces. The practice of autobase account in X (Cesar & Aprilia, 2023) helps to nurture this participation.

The meaning-making process will only become culturally significant if shared within a larger group. However, the audience is diverse and has many voices, thus forming a diverse community. As a consequence of the participatory nature (Jenkins, 2018), *Start-Up* audiences divide themselves into small groups based on their preferences for romantic relationships (Effendi et al., 2016; van Monsjou & Mar, 2019) in *Start-Up*, thus constructing a 'war between audiences' (Effendi et al., 2016; Mathieu, 2015), namely between Han Ji-pyeong Team and Nam Do-san Team. This separation is also a consequence of using a love triangle narrative, which forces the audience to choose one party (Leavenworth, 2015). The existence of the Han Ji-pyeong Team represents the second lead syndrome phenomenon, where audiences sympathize with the second lead (Anwar, 2019) as the result of viewers' interpretation K-dramas through their own social and cultural lenses, creating a shared understanding and popular narrative by exchanging interpretations and collectively defining the unique symbolic meanings (Schulze, 2013).

The second lead is a supporting character who acts as a second love interest for the female lead and the third party in the love triangle relationship. This character is generally depicted with different traits, values, or circumstances from the male lead character to provide comparison. The presence of this character sparks conflict by challenging, pushing, and demanding that the female lead make decisions. This character is depicted as a rival to the male lead without needing to be an antagonist (Glasser, 1997; Hartford, 2021; Hisham, 2019; Kenasri & Sadasri, 2021; Lyttle, 2022; Veldman-Genz, 2014).

The second lead syndrome is closely related to *ship wars* and *fantagonism*. *Ship* (relationship) *wars* in love triangle narratives are wars between two groups that support two romantic relationships in fictional content (van Monsjou & Mar, 2019). This war is based on emotional investment in a romantic relationship, differences in interpretations of media texts, and competition for these

interpretations to dominate each other (Bothe, 2014; Burkhardt et al., 2021; Kenny, 2019; van Monsjou & Mar, 2019) or hear users in a text based forum gives the assumption that individuals will default to an open and socially inclusive mind-set. At a superficial level participation, fandom and fan fiction appears to be a completely socially inclusive forum. Individuals are unable to tell the age, race, gender or demographic of other users. Membership of forums such as Fanfiction.net (ff.net). The choice of the relationship is considered a sign of their identity in a fan community. Facilitated by social media, they voice opinions, challenge dominant narratives (Kenny, 2019), separate two fans' (sub)groups, and cover the perspectives of other groups through the use of hashtags and specific keywords (Burkhardt et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, *fantagonism* shows divisions, disagreements, and contestation among fans regarding their understanding of media texts. One form of *fantagonism* is intra-fandom antagonism, where fans of the same object compete (Booth, 2016). Conflicts between fan groups are used as marketing, and ship wars can positively influence content because fans voice their opinions and influence through social media (Kenny, 2019; Martens, 2011). This marketing function is beneficial not only for media texts but also for other local industries, such as food and beverage, which occurred during the *Start-Up*'s euphoria in Indonesia (CNN Indonesia, 2020; Rialdi, 2020; USS Feed, 2020).

ENDNOTES

- 1) *Zina* in Islamic law refers to any unlawful sexual activity, including adultery, fornication, and other acts of sexual intimacy outside of a lawful marriage.

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