
UNVEILING SOCIAL LEARNING THROUGH EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF *IT'S OKAY TO NOT BE OKAY* KOREAN DRAMA IN MALAYSIA

Mohd Yusof Zulkefi

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
yusofzulkefli@uitm.edu.my

Ahmad Farid Abdul Fuad

Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Malaysia
farid@umt.edu.my

Roslan Lateh

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
latehroslan973@uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Social learning is a process that happens in all human beings through the observation, imitation, and modelling of the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. In Malaysia, mental health is the second most prominent health problem among Malaysians after heart disease. In 2020, the entire world was brought down by the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, cases of mental health issues arose as people were struggling with job loss, monetary matters, separation from loved ones, and many more. The same year, the Korean drama *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (IOTNBO) was shown on Netflix, with the premise on mental health issues and the struggles of people suffering from trauma and mental illness. The K-drama delivers significant educational information to the audience on mental health awareness. Based on the premise of this K-drama, this research employs emotional experience to further elaborate the presence of social learning via a qualitative approach in this phenomenology study to understand the perception and emotions of the audience. In this study, 11 young Malaysian audiences aged between 18 and 30 were selected via the purposive sampling method as participants for the study's in-depth interviews. The results show that the message from the drama had changed the participants' perception of mental health issues and their behaviour towards people with mental health problems, i.e., by treating them equally and becoming more tolerant. The implication of this study indicates that the adage "charity starts at home" is the baseline of every behaviour development.

Keywords: *Social learning; adaptation; mental health; emotional experience; young Malaysian*

INTRODUCTION

Social learning is a learning process that occurs when one observes and imitates others. Social learning is done every day through observation and interaction with others, which is fundamental to humanity's significant success (Emilly, 2024; Rendell et al., 2010). Social learning happens not only by observing others, but also by influencing their behaviours through entertainment. According to O'Rorke (2006), social learning theorists have shown that behaviour is influenced not only by individuals or living models, but also by mass media such as films and dramas which affect human motivation and daily behaviour. Saarni et al. (2007) further state that emotion tends to be most intricately connected to an individual's feelings such as anger, happiness, sadness, and hesitation. Hence, emotional experience is based on how individuals think and express something that triggered them.

In the context of mass media, emotions guide the audience in interpreting messages and retrieving messages effectively. People's emotional experience and attitude formation are bound to differ despite the situation (Nogueira, 2014). Society, in general, has different life experiences, which makes people look at things from different perspectives. According to Petraschka and Werner (2024), if the audience understands and realises what is going on, they will feel empathy for the character, leading to the development of compassion and care.

Mental health is associated with depression, anxiety, and stress, which significantly impact people's daily life. Mental health is the second most prominent health problem in Malaysia besides heart disease (Lee & Lai, 2017). Based on a report by the Ministry of Health Malaysia, there is an increasing number of mental disorder cases among individuals aged over 16 years old, i.e., up to 4.2 million cases. There had been a 30% increase in mental health cases since 2006 due to the lack of awareness among Malaysians regarding mental health issue (Ministry of Health, 2015). Another study indicated that insufficient media attention and exposure on mental health issues leads to inadequate knowledge about psychiatric illness and treatment (Loo & Furnham, 2012; Hassan et al., 2018). Hence, mass media plays an essential role in conveying information in a quick manner to a large audience. Unfortunately, there is a lack of studies on the significance of mass media as a medium for cultivating knowledge among the audience.

This current investigation underscores the centrality of learning in elucidating human existence. Learning is an omnipresent phenomenon in the daily routines of individuals, often occurring subtly and imperceptibly, integrated into the subconscious fabric of human cognition. Notably, the medium of cinematic and televised entertainment, particularly emotive genres such as drama series, serves as a potent conduit for social learning to infiltrate the human psyche. Numerous studies have corroborated the efficacy of entertainment-education paradigms, wherein didactic messages are seamlessly embedded within entertainment narratives to effectively engage and influence targeted audiences (Singhal, 2016). Exposure to meticulously crafted messages within entertainment media engenders discernible shifts in cognitive schemas, behavioural patterns, and ideational constructs (Marques et al., 2019).

Consequently, the pervasive influence of Korean dramas (K-dramas) on cultural norms and values necessitates a systematic inquiry into how these narratives shape audience perceptions and emotional experiences. By synthesising the social learning theory and cultivation theory frameworks, this study endeavours to elucidate the nuanced interplay between K-dramas and audience emotional engagement, thereby advancing our understanding of the multifaceted dynamics underlying media consumption patterns. In line with this, the research objective of this study is to delve into the emotional experiences

garnered by the audience as a result of engaging with the K-drama *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (*IOTNBO*) which premiered on Netflix in June 2020. By exploring the emotional terrain traversed by viewers while watching *IOTNBO*, the research aims to uncover the depth and nuances of the affective responses evoked by the series. Through qualitative inquiry and phenomenological analysis, the study seeks to illuminate the intricate interplay between the narrative content, character portrayals, and viewer emotions, thus providing valuable insights into the role of televised media in shaping emotional experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hallyu

“Hallyu” refers to the Korean wave phenomenon which flooded many Asian countries including China, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam in the mid-1990s (Boycillo, 2023; Farrar, 2010). In 2002, the K-drama *Winter Sonata* debuted on Malaysian TV, i.e., Media Prima Berhad’s TV3, and had successfully infiltrated the heart of Malaysians and profoundly influenced people’s perception of Korean fashion, song, food, and film (Azizan, 2012). In a 2019 survey, 85% of the respondents agreed that South Korean dramas are popular in Malaysia (Waldeck, 2020). Malaysians widely accept K-dramas, resulting in a high demand for them (Mazdan & Lau, 2018). According to Mustafha and Razak (2020) and Cho (2010), the Korean wave phenomenon had successfully enhanced the relationship between Korea and Malaysia. However, there is yet any discussion about how K-drama consumption may influence the audience’s behaviour and attitude.

Emotion

Emotions are released from the human brain and manifested on one’s face or behaviour (Ekman, 1992; Torres, 2014). Predominantly, emotions carry messages that associate them with the antecedent event. Emotions can emerge for many reasons, but they sometimes exist beyond human consciousness (Coan, 2010). Emotions emerge not only because of intrinsic personal reasons; it may also be triggered by external events (Gendron & Barrett, 2009; Boiger & Mesquita, 2012). Emotions transpire due to human interaction. For example, expressing emotion helps send information to others such as feelings of unhappiness, pain, or uneasiness.

As emotions are complex and comprehensive, psychological constructionists have developed an approach for understanding emotions. In psychological constructionist studies of emotion, humans make meaning of what they have seen and experienced through cognitive interpretations, whereby the emotional arousal will then be tailor-made into the context (Harlow & Stagner, 1932; Chiari, 2020). The essence of emotion can be understood by looking at how the core system affects a person over time. Emotions cannot be separated from other forms of consciousness in the human brain (Gendron & Barrett, 2009; Ji, Jeong & Jeong, 2019). For instance, memory, reasoning, and feeling are all controlled by emotion. In addition, these cognition exist at once. Often, emotional fluctuations are closely connected with the human nervous system (Coan, 2010). For instance, whenever individuals experience frightening events, they will feel a sense of fear, their heart rate will increase, and they will try to run away.

Emotional Experience

Research shows that older people are more likely to experience complex emotions than younger people due to structural and cultural considerations. The emotional experience is interpreted as the function of age (Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2008; Thye & Lawler, 2013). In different stages of life, human beings will choose different roles and identities at various ages based on cultural practice, and these identities enable people at the same stage to share emotions (Lively & Heise, 2004). According to psychological arguments, individuals aged 60 years and above tend to build shorter schemas that prompt them to quickly chase away negative emotions and recall positive memories (Carstensen, 2006; Phelps, 2017). Similarly, Ong and Bergeman (2004) suggest that a decline in the brain function of old individuals will selectively impair the negative stimulus processor in the human brain. As a result, it protects older people from being threatened by many negative emotions. Most of the time, emotional experience occurs because people feel something positive or negative.

To describe an emotional experience, one needs to understand the trigger of the emotional experience (Barrett et al., 2007). When one's perception of the world is combined with the conceptual existence of emotion, it will produce an intentional state that triggers one's emotions. In other words, human beings experience emotion because past interpreted events trigger their affective components. When all the experiences accumulate in their memory, individuals will summarise their meaning to align with the feelings they experienced (Fossum & Barrett, 2000; Li, Baucom, & Georgiou, 2019). The researcher presumes that emotional experience occurs when the individual's feeling components are being attended to (Barrett, 2006). Hence, evaluating and reacting to stimuli is the emotional process where people add to their memory to recognise specific emotional triggers (Cunningham et al., 2013). Similarly, emotional experience plays a significant role in the human coping process. For example, when an individual has cancer, their memories of experiencing a similar event will motivate their will to fight the disease. Therefore, emotional experience boosts one's memory recognition of emotions towards new life events.

Study Framework

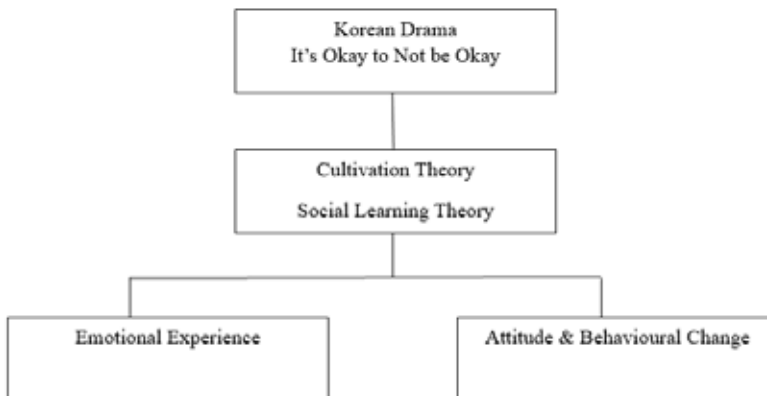


Figure 1: The framework of the study

This research aims to understand the existence of emotional experience in the social learning process when watching *IOTNBO*. Figure 1 above shows the study's conceptual framework. In this research, *IOTNBO* is the subject matter for social learning and cultivation. Audiences perceive information from the drama and imitate the perceived behaviour in daily life. According to Jin and Jeong (2010), television programmes serve as the natural fundamental that allows the audience to encode the underlying information and store it in their memory. It simply means that people will remember scenes from the drama and reflect similar actions or behaviours in real life.

Besides that, this research explores the social learning and cultivation process by studying the emotional experiences of the audience after watching the drama. Out of the drama's 16 episodes, the audience may have encountered some emotional scenes that make them feel angry (e.g., when the female protagonist was slapped by her mother) or upset (e.g., when the older brother uncovers the secret of his young brother). Such triggering of emotional experience proves that people observe actions in scenes that can lead to social learning and cultivation. Sze et al. (2010) indicate that greater coherence would be affected by body awareness and emotional experience. Namely, emotion will generate body awareness and indirectly trigger an emotional experience.

Finally, the process ends with the audience's attitude and behavioural change after watching *IOTNBO*. After receiving all the information, the audience has undergone the cultivation and social learning process through an emotional experience. The audience will then develop new beliefs or thoughts as modelled by the drama, which guides their imitation into the real world. Likewise, Leksmono (2016) proves that people see the casts of dramas as role models and wish to have a similar life. Therefore, such dramas significantly impact the audience's affective, cognitive, or emotional involvement. Ultimately, the audience will try to change their behaviour based on the drama. Su et al. (2011) expressed that the audience's attitude will balance their perceptions as they tend to form a sense of belonging towards the TV show.

METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature, explicitly employing the phenomenological approach, to delve into the emotional experiences of young Malaysian audiences as they navigate the intricacies of the social learning process. To ensure methodological rigour, stringent criteria were followed during participant selection: individuals aged between 18 and 30, representing diverse racial and gender demographics, were recruited. Moreover, the participants must be those who have watched all episodes of *IOTNBO*, ensuring comprehensive exposure to the narrative content under investigation. Notably, the participants were likely to confront various challenges, including job retrenchment, caregiving responsibilities for family members with disabilities, or contemplation of seeking professional assistance for mental health concerns.

Drawing from Armstrong's (2016) delineation, phenomenological research illuminates the inner dimensions of the participants' experiences. It elucidates the construction of meaning within the cultural milieu. Anchored in the analysis of lived experiences, phenomenology affords a nuanced understanding of participants' narratives, perspectives, and emotional responses. This analytical lens facilitates a deep exploration of the intricate interplay between viewers' emotional engagement with *IOTNBO* and its repercussions on their attitudes, behaviours, and life trajectories. Central to the phenomenological ethos is recognising that

individuals' experiences are multifaceted and subject to diverse interpretations, underscoring the significance of subjective perceptions and affective states in shaping their existential realities (Moore, 2017). Employing in-depth interviews, qualitative data were meticulously collected to elucidate the participants' cognitive and affective responses vis-à-vis the dramatic material. This methodological approach enabled a nuanced exploration of the transformative impact of *IOTNBO* on the audience members, delineating observable shifts in their attitudes and behavioural dispositions as they navigate the complex landscape of social learning.

Instrumentation

The researcher used the interview protocol as a research instrument. According to Hunter (2012), the interview protocol serves as the guide for the data-gathering process and follow-up by analysis. The interview protocol gives researchers an idea of how the qualitative research should be run, including constructing relevant questions. Besides that, the Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) framework also helps strengthen the reliability of the interview questions and ensure that the constructed interview questions are aligned with the research questions for exploring the social learning process in terms of emotional experience. In this research, a list of semi-structured questions was established. The researchers adapted the questions from various related research papers namely Cohen (2001), Busselle and Bilandzic (2009), Tal-Or and Cohen (2010), Hosotani and Mastsumuru (2011), and Trujillo et al. (2015) to make the data more reliable and to strengthen its credibility.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis method was used to identify, analyse, and report themes through the collected data. According to Vaismoradi et al. (2013), thematic analysis should be more familiar to qualitative researchers as it is fundamental to qualitative data analysis and can help generate an independent and reliable qualitative approach towards the analysis. In the first phase, familiarisation helped the researchers become acquainted with the informants without missing any information, such as the informants' feelings or unconscious behaviour. The researchers transcribed the informants' responses into written form and indicated all the information provided, including the non-verbal messages. The researchers immersed themselves in the content, and indirectly obtained an overall view of the whole research. To familiarise themselves with the data, the researchers re-read the transcript several times to determine possible themes and patterns. The second phase involved coding, whereby the researcher came up with some ideas about the content of the data and analysed the exciting part that triggered the audience (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This helped the researchers identify significant text sections by labelling the helpful data related to the theme or issue. The researcher started to organise and identify the codes related to the research question during the coding process. Furthermore, detailed definitions and sample texts were included, which helped generate precise figures for the reader.

During the reviewing stage, themes were added to new codes to make the data more supportive and uniformed. The collected data will become more manageable and show an exact figure for the reader in the future. After that, the researchers reviewed the created codes by referring to the interview transcript. This stage aimed to ensure that the codes created did not drift too far from the data collected and the research question. Moreover, it allowed the researchers to expand the codes into numerous categories based on the initial codes

list. At the same time, some of the codes were collapsed into each other, and some themes were eliminated. Lastly, the report was ready to be produced when the themes were fully established and ready for the final analysis. It will answer the research questions with a full explanation and provide an argument to further discuss the phenomenon.

FINDINGS

Given that this study encompassed the participation of 11 informants, each informant was systematically assigned a unique identifier, denoted as V1 through V11, to facilitate the organisation and presentation of the research findings.

Overall, the findings of this study reveal a discernible positive transformation in audience attitudes and perceptions after their exposure to *IOTNBO*. A reflective analysis of participant responses underscores a notable shift towards a more empathetic and understanding stance regarding mental health concerns. Before engaging in the drama, the participants exhibited varying degrees of apprehension and stigma towards individuals grappling with mental illness. However, following their viewing experience, the participants expressed heightened awareness of and appreciation for the complexities surrounding mental health issues, acknowledging the authenticity of *IOTNBO*'s portrayal of societal challenges in this domain. This reflective positive change was manifested in the participants' increased empathy, tolerance, and advocacy for mental health awareness, indicative of the drama's profound impact in fostering a more enlightened and compassionate outlook among its audience.

Notably, the observed positive transformation in the audience's attitudes towards mental illness is intricately linked to their pre-existing perspectives before watching *IOTNBO*. The data elucidates a spectrum of preconceived notions and misconceptions surrounding mental health, ranging from apprehension and avoidance to ignorance and stigma. However, the immersive narrative of *IOTNBO* serves as a catalyst for transformative change, challenging entrenched stereotypes and fostering greater understanding and empathy towards individuals grappling with mental health issues. The participants' pre-existing perspectives, shaped by societal norms and cultural influences, underwent a discernible evolution as they engage with the nuanced portrayal of mental health struggles depicted in the drama. Consequently, their post-viewing reflections underscore a profound shift towards a more enlightened and empathetic stance, indicative of the drama's efficacy in reshaping audience perceptions and attitudes towards mental illness.

Theme 1: Reflection

Mental issues have become a current hot topic that grabs everyone's attention. The responses obtained have proven that this drama is a realistic portrayal of the mental health problem in society, emphasising the people suffering from it. The informants' demonstration of a fresh new perspective towards the realistic interpretation of mental health topics is distinct compared to those who have not watched the drama. For instance, V2 stated that people should treat those who suffer from mental health issues equally. V2 realised that human beings are the same and that no one deserves unequal treatment. Besides that, V9 and V11 supported the point that society should not emphasise on people's mental health problems; instead, we should show more care towards them. V1, V7, and V8 came to the same conclusion after obtaining the added moral values from the drama. Additionally, V4 and V5 perceived

hidden messages from the drama, which reflected how they treated others. It made them to think about themselves and on how to deal with others. In general, the drama indicates how society works, and that everyone is responsible for taking good care of others, especially those with mental problems.

The so-called normal people in the real world and the abnormal human joint together and it needs us to care more and to understand each other. We should treat each other as equals. We are all human beings living in this world, so we should understand and tolerate each other.

(V2/07012021)

I think its storyline is incredibly special compared to other dramas. It has many hidden messages that wanted to be perceived and I think it is interesting. When I watch the second time, I will get different messages or information compared to the first time and the third times as well. I will perceive more things and learn something new. I think everyone will feel like there is something wrong with people who have a mental disorder, afraid to communicate with them and choose to stay away from them. Yet, after I watched the drama, I think they need more patience and love from us to make them feel better.

(V5/13012021)

Theme 2: Emotion

All the participants' responses concur in revealing a profound emotional resonance, predominantly stemming from personal experiences or familial encounters. The participants immersed themselves in the roles of Sang-tae and Gang-tae, experiencing emotions such as empathy, pity, poignancy, and sorrow. Notably, V2, V7, and V11 extolled Sang-tae's courage, admiring his steadfast pursuit of his dreams despite his Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis. The portrayal of Sang-tae's resilience inspires the participants to embrace bravery and assertiveness, irrespective of societal expectations. The emotional potency of the drama is underscored by the participants' swift emotional engagement, triggered by scenes mirroring real-life experiences. Furthermore, the research elucidates that emotional experiences are multifaceted, encompassing cognitive evaluation and affective response to stimuli, often evoked through personal memory triggers.

Drawing from their personal narratives, V3 and V4 empathised with Gang-tae's sacrificial devotion to his brother, prompting introspection on the intricacies of their own lives and the relentless pursuit of familial obligations amidst existential realities. Concurrently, V1, V5, and V9 attributed their emotional arousal to familial experiences, particularly relating to ASD children. The scene depicting the altercation between Sang-tae and Gang-tae serves as a poignant catalyst, eliciting a profound understanding and empathy towards relatives grappling with ASD-related challenges. The participants' insights underscore the nuanced complexities of ASD families, emphasising the inherent desire for love, learning, and mutual support within such familial dynamics. Thus, the drama fosters empathy and engenders a deeper appreciation for the resilience and familial bonds forged amidst adversity.

I think it is the scene of the two brothers at the psychiatric hospital. The thing was the small brother thought that her brother forgot about the incident, but her brother actually remembered it since he is small. And finally, he got to voice out the things at the hospital and everyone heard that. During this scene, my emotion triggered as I felt a bit of pity when the big brother voiced out and the small brother felt guilty toward his brother also. I think that the small brother did not think that his brother was a burden, but he took the responsibility to take care of his brother because he had the idea of wanting his brother to die during the incident. Also, because of the death of his mother, so the small brother thinks that he should take the responsibility to take good care of his brother since his mother has educated him to protect his brother since he was child.

... Actually it has nothing to do with me, but it did happen to my family member, who is my cousin. Sometimes my relatives would say my cousin suffers from mental disorder, but I don't think so. The reason is because his father chose to love his sister more than him, so he will choose to vent to his family members. After that, his family member started to misunderstand him and thought that he was a rebel. My cousin chooses to go out every night rather than stay at home and his family members disagree with her actions. Hence, I will feel pity and empathetic whereby I will think of this incident when I saw the scene.

(V11/13012021)

DISCUSSION

The drama provides a realistic portrayal and shows that the informants have a strong awareness and interpretation of the drama's theme concerning mental health issues. Aligned with Felitti et al. (2019), emotional experience results from the effect of certain events on individuals and how they currently view and interpret those events. Here, the emotional experience occurred when the informants became aware of the message being conveyed by the drama, and emotions were subsequently triggered when they became highly engaged with the series. The sense of realisation and awareness of reality changed their perception of mental health issues and how they look at people struggling with cognitive problems (Roberts, 2019). Based on that, the participants' emotional experience was triggered by their recognition of a connection between reality and certain past events in their lives. It also entails past emotions that are portrayed in the drama. Insight connects the events that the audience had experienced emotionally in real life with the narration and characters in the drama, creating strong resonance. It then stimulates the audience's emotional sustenance or expression when watching the drama, which allows the audience to have a deep emotional connection after watching it. Likewise, the exciting portrayal of realistic scenes and personalities in the drama conveys a message and a reminder to the audience about the prevalence of mental health problems. Subsequently, the realistic portrayals impact the audience emotionally, aligning with their own understanding of the natural world, specifically those related to mental health.

Emotional experience transpires when memories are evoked, regardless of whether they are positive or negative. Therefore, when the audience recognises certain emotions as evoked by their memories, emotional experience occurs. Such emotions hold messages linked to the memory which consequently stimulate the audience's reactions, triggering feelings of

happiness, excitement, sadness, or anxiety. But according to Dai and Yang (2015), emotional experience is not necessarily triggered by personal experience. The audience may experience emotional fluctuations due to the actors' effective acting or the drama's narration, even when they have no personal experience with what is being portrayed. As a result, when significant incidents befall the characters, the audience will experience strong emotions that would later be embedded in their memory, thus becoming "past events that trigger emotions".

Besides that, witnessing impactful incidents can also naturally become a past event for the individual (Serrone et al., 2018). Experiences that are stored in one's mind are linked to certain feelings. Therefore, emotional experience is often associated with one's past experience, leading to attitudinal and behavioural formation. In this study, emotional experiences took place among the audience as evoked by the characters and scenes in the drama. To a certain extent, the audience used those emotional experiences to draw positive inspiration and gain new insights about their current emotions.

CONCLUSION

This study addressed the research questions on the adaptation process of social learning among young Malaysian audiences after watching the K-drama series *It's Okay To Not Be Okay*. Subsequently, the informants interpreted the valuable knowledge conveyed in the drama, which influenced their existing behaviour. Furthermore, the findings of this study deliver information about mental health to the public, particularly the younger generation, leading to the formation of new perceptions regarding mental health. The realistic portrayal of mental health issues in *IOTNBO* allows the younger generation to understand this prevailing universal issue better.

Besides that, findings from the interviews illuminate how the social learning process occurs with emotional experience and audience involvement. Consequently, all these lead to attitude and behavioural change. Among else, the current research focused on two main theories namely the cultivation theory and social learning theory. By integrating the two alternate theories with emotional experience and audience involvement, the study was only able to explain the entire process of social learning in general. Future studies could focus on only one theory to gain more in-depth findings thus contributing more significant messages to the media and the communication field of study.

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