A semiotic analysis of humor in K-drama memes

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ABSTRACT

This study is a qualitative semiotic analysis of the humor in 13 representative K-drama memes drawn from a corpus of approximately 200 memes bearing the hashtag *#kdramameme*. K-dramas are one of the key aspects of the global Korean Wave, and there is a thriving body of memes created by and for the global K-drama fandom. Despite the centrality of humor to the meme genre and the fact that memes constitute a prominent form of 21st-century expression, K-drama memes have not previously been analyzed from a humor theory perspective. We analyze the humorous element of the K-drama memes in our corpus according to three semiotic theoretical mechanisms, namely the concepts of meme templates, blending, and benign violation. We argue that these three semiotic mechanisms feed into two overarching functions of K-drama meme humor, i.e., a social function (construction and enhancement of in-group identity and belonging), and a psychological one (expression of emotions). Our study shows that the K-drama memescape is multifaceted and connected to K-drama and real life in complex ways.

1. Introduction

A meme is a humorous digital text typically incorporating one or more images accompanied by written captions. Memes are a central form of global 21st-century creative expression, and offer a vibrant repository of material for humor studies because humor is an intrinsic element of the genre. Because of their online nature, memes are the subject of a rapid and ever-shifting

process of sharing and adaptation, serving as a flexible vehicle for strengthening in-group identities in the context of internet communities devoted to a shared interest (e.g., Shifman 2013; Wiggins 2019).

Our study is dedicated to the shared-interest internet community comprising Korean television drama series fans, commonly known as K-dramas. In recent decades, the popularity of K-dramas worldwide has led to a concomitant emergence of a large body of memes based on the genre. These memes comprise a rich source for humor analysis, yet they have not yet been studied from this perspective despite the flourishing bodies of scholarly literature devoted to K-drama and the Korean Wave (e.g., An 2022a; Kim K. H. 2021; Kim Y. 2013, 2022; Lee and Nornes 2015; Love and Kim 2022; Samosir and Wee 2023). Our study seeks to fill this gap by providing a semiotic analysis of the humor in K-drama memes. Our analysis is important first because it can enrich humor scholarship by offering insights from a widely popular, globally engaged pop culture genre, and second because it can offer a new, humor-centered perspective on K-drama memes, particularly the Korean Wave, more broadly. It can contribute to our understanding of the meaning of K-drama to viewers and fans and shed light on group identity formation in digital media through semiotic means.

We begin our study with a contextualizing overview of Hallyu and K-drama (section 2). We then present the theoretical frameworks relevant for our analysis of K-drama memes (section 3), against the background of which our research questions are: a) What makes the K-drama memes funny? and b) What are the social and psychological functions of the humor of K-drama memes in the context of the K-drama fandom? We subsequently detail our methodological approach and dataset, a corpus of approximately 200 K-drama memes purposively sampled from the hashtag *#kdramameme* (section 4). Our analysis of the memes focuses on the three semiotic mechanisms underlying K-drama *meme humor, namely meme templates, blending,* and *benign violation* (section 5.1), followed by an examination of the two overarching functions of the humor, namely the social function of group identity and cohesion and the psychological function of articulating fans' internal emotional landscapes (section 5.2). The conclusion (section 6) summarizes our findings and discusses potential avenues for further research.

2. Hallyu and K-drama

The initial wave of international popularity of Korean television and music, known as *Hallyu 1.0*, began in the 1990s when K-dramas and K-pop spread from Korea to East and Southeast Asia. In the 2000s, *Hallyu 2.0* became a global phenomenon, thanks to social media and the internet, as well as the support from the Korean government (Jin 2016; Walsh 2014). Hallyu's soft power has had various effects. It has not only increased K-pop

album and concert ticket sales and the streaming of K-dramas on global platforms but has also stimulated associated phenomena like the study of Korean as a foreign language (Curran 2024) and the popularity of Korea as a tourist destination (Bae et al. 2017; Lee and How 2022). This is especially so among female audiences, fans, and consumers (e.g. Chan 2007; Hirata 2008; Shin 2014; Tilland 2017; Wang and Pyun 2020).

It has been noted that newer waves of Hallyu involve multidimensional and multidirectional transnational cultural flows (Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021; Ono and Kwon 2013) and networks in the social mediascape (Jin and Yoon 2016), which the present study also clearly shows. In other words, Korean culture is consumed by "omnivorous audiences" also in the digital sphere (Hong-Mercier 2013), and is characterized by contextual hybridity (Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021). Using social media allows Hallyu fans opportunities to participate and network, thus gaining agency in the social mediascape (Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021:71), which our analysis highlights.

The cornerstones of Hallyu are K-pop and K-drama. The addictive power of the latter has been noted by Jo (2022:201), who attributes the popularity of K-drama to the themes listed in Larsen (2008), namely (1) human themes, including family, friendship, relationships, loyalty, respect, and true love; (2) high production values (including cinematography, locations, and costumes); (3) well-written scripts, good dialogue, and excellent acting; (4) portrayal of love and affection that is not centered around sex; (5) emotional soundtracks; and (6) insights into Korean culture. In addition to these homogenizing themes, K-drama includes heterogenizing factors that stem from traumatic collective memories and the political and economic situations in South Korea (Yoon and Lee 2025; see also An 2022b).

A prototypical K-drama is still a melodramatic story of beautiful young people trying to achieve true love despite all obstacles in a fictional yet contemporary version of Korea, where conservative family values and society prevail (Kang 2023:175). There is often a fairytale or supernatural element. Still, even in these cases, the setting is made unoffending and unthreatening, and suitable for a wide range of global audiences (cf. Glynn and Kim 2017). The universal appeal is demonstrated by the fact that K-drama is consumed on all continents, including, e.g., Latin America, the Middle East, Morocco, Nigeria, and India (Jang, Kim, and Baek 2024:154). The most extensive viewership of K-drama is still in East Asia (Jang, Kim, and Baek 2024). Recent studies on K-drama include gay representations (Glynn and Kim 2017), feminist perspectives (Boman 2022; Wall 2019), and an analysis of K-drama as a decolonial third space (Yuan 2023).

Fans' affective connections to K-drama are obvious online and offline. Samosir and Wee (2023:88) perceive social media as a space where fans of K-drama can share emotional reactions to the shows, thus creating a sense of community. Jo (2022:209), on the other hand, notes that images are circulated through digital spaces by fans in "digital assemblages." Jo (2022:209-210) sees the proliferation and sustainability of these

digital assemblages as dependent on the K-drama fans' affective labor (e.g., collection and dissemination of relevant information, translation), which then creates affective connections to South Korea.

Our study complements these examinations of Hallyu by analyzing memes relating to K-drama fandom through the lens of humor theory. In our research, Jo's (2022:209) "digital assemblages" serve as a way of strengthening in-group community identities, a la Samosir and Wee (2023:88), and processing emotions by means of humorous mechanisms, which we will outline in the following section.

3. Semiotic mechanisms and functions of humor in K-drama memes

In our study, we rely on three semiotic mechanisms that make humor possible (meme template, blending, and benign violation), and two main functions (one social, the other psychological). In other words, humor created through meme templates, blending, and benign violation contributes to the maintenance of a strong online group identity and is used to achieve well-being and express emotions within the group (see Figure 1). We should note that by doing this, the creators and sharers of the memes are participating in Hallyu themselves as active participants (cf. Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021:71; see also Cheoi 2023). In line with Hallyu's multimodal, networked, transnational, and multilingual nature, these memes combine K-drama and real life in complex ways (cf. Jin, Yoon, and Min 2021).
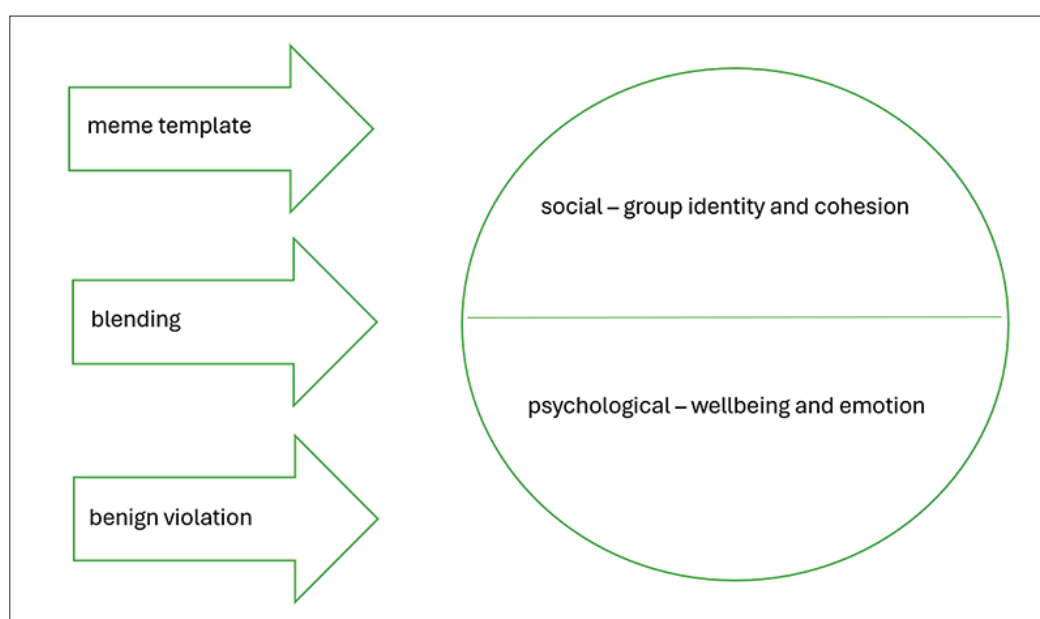

Figure 1. Mechanisms and functions of humor in K-drama memes

The first semiotic mechanism is the use of templatic meme structure harnessing "vernacular creativity" (Burgess 2006), according to which memes can be seen as a type of modern folklore that is shared online (cf. Oring 2016:129-146). The use of this mechanism in K-drama memes is discussed in section 5.1.1. Shifman (2013:99-118) roughly divides these meme folklore templates into three categories: 1) genres that are based on the documentation of "real-life" (e.g. recurring photos); 2) genres that are based on explicit manipulation of visual or audiovisual mass-mediated remixed content (e.g. misheard lyrics and repurposing of news); and 3) genres that evolved around a new universe of digital and meme-oriented content (e.g. LOLCats and stock character macros). Within these broad categories, when creating a K-drama meme, one can substitute a favorite actor or scene, and the meme is still easily understood by virtue of being a meme.

The second mechanism is blending, which has been extensively studied in cognitive linguistics and constitutes an extension to metaphors. The use of this mechanism in K-drama memes is discussed in section 5.1.2. The characterization of blending as an extension of metaphors is rooted in the fact that metaphorical constructions often result in an *emergent structure*, something that is not present in either source (Fauconnier 1997:150-158), i.e., these structures merge from the blending of elements from different conceptual domains (Fauconnier 1997; Oring 2016:33-56). In our data, the real-life realm and the K-drama realm together form a blended domain within the meme, and are funny to the viewer for this reason.

The third semiotic mechanism is benign violation: humor is derived from the assumption of violating a moral principle, but one benign enough to be acceptable (McGraw and Warren 2010:1142). The use of this mechanism in K-drama memes is discussed in section 5.1.3. One relevant example of humor deriving from benign violation is the comparison of K-drama to a drug (see Figure 4). This addiction is mild or benign enough to be funny despite the moral violation. Another example of benign violation is the expression of an extreme negative emotion, which would be perceived as aggressive or otherwise inappropriate in most circumstances, but is permitted and indeed amusing within the context of a meme, because the extreme emotion is placed within an obviously absurd context (as in the bride crying on her wedding day in Figure 13).

These three mechanisms feed into the two overarching functions of K-drama meme humor. The first is their role in social organization, i.e., establishing and reinforcing group identity. Shifman (2014:100) notes that memes "play an important role in the construction of group identity and social boundaries." Many of the K-drama memes in our dataset assume extensive knowledge of K-drama, and in this way, the appreciation of K-drama meme humor functions as a form of social organization. More specifically, humor serves a communicative process that establishes the

group's boundaries and the overall identity of the group members. This applies whether the communication in question constitutes banter between mushroom collectors and jokes between weather forecasters in real life (Fine and De Soucey 2005) or memes between fans of K-drama online. Blake and Mouton (1964) called this use of humor relational, as it serves to increase social connection within the in-group. Relational humor has been studied mainly in workplaces and among professionals (e.g., Crowe, Allen, and Lehmann-Wllenbrock 2016; Lynch 2010; Tracy, Myers, and Scott 2006), but also in activist groups (Fominya 2007) and as a marker of ethnic belonging (Holmes and Hay 1997) or national affiliations (Fiadotava and Chłopicki 2025). Through humor, "in- and out-group boundaries are (re)produced by excluding individuals (or groups) who do not have the stock of the in-group's references, skills, language, and sensemaking process" (Lynch 2010:130-131; see also Gheorghe and Curșeu 2024).

In some cases, this group identity is created through shared criticism (Tsakona 2024:127-130), but in the K-drama meme context, it is shared experience and expertise that make the group. For the viewer to understand the humor in the memes, they need to have watched hundreds of hours of K-drama, know the actors (e.g. Byon Woo-seok, shown in Figure 13), be familiar with individual dramas (e.g. *Sky Castle*, shown in Figure 6), and understand the typical plot structures and stock characters (e.g. the undercover *chaebol* 'rich business conglomerate' boss or the 'second male lead,' shown in Figure 5), and have at least minimal familiarity with the Korean language. This expert-knowledge humor is the foundation of the online K-drama fandom in-group on Instagram, in general, and is also prominent more specifically in the K-drama memes: the recurring categories and components show a cohesiveness typical of the group (cf. Gal, Shifman, and Kampf 2016).

The second function of humor in K-drama memes is psychological, which partly overlaps with social. Humor has been described as an affiliative and self-enhancing mechanism (Martin and Ford 2018:122-123). In the K-drama context, the memes' creators and consumers joke among friends to relieve tension and bond with their group members. Simultaneously, they use humor "to enhance and maintain positive psychological wellbeing and distance themselves from adversity" (Martin and Ford 2018:122). Thus, K-drama and the associated memes become a way to distance oneself from one's problems. While some of the memes are instances of self-defeating humor as the creators and consumers poke fun at their own weaknesses, mainly their K-drama obsession and their yearning for the actors or characters (cf. Martin and Ford 2018:123), overall the memes are likely to have a positive effect on their mental health (cf. Martin and Ford 2018:283-318) by providing an emotional community and a safe space for the fans (cf. Barclay and Downing 2023:14-15). In this way, watching

K-dramas and enjoying K-drama meme humor are connected in a recursive pattern that enhances positive emotional experience and enjoyment. The humor in the memes can also be used to acknowledge and process adverse emotional reactions to, e.g., plot twists, drama endings, or having to wait for the next episode. Hence, the memes function as psychosocial entities that allow digital media users to unify individual and collective emotions (Davison 2012; see also Barclay and Downing 2023).

4. Method and data

Our study is a qualitative corpus-based analysis. The corpus consists of approximately 200 memes hashtagged *#kdramameme* on Instagram (cf. Tomlinson 2022), from which we have selected 13 representative examples to illustrate our analysis. Our choice of *#kdramameme* is based on the considerations that a) sharers employing this hashtag have themselves identified the content in question as a meme, and b) they have a specific interest in, and knowledge of K-dramas as opposed to Hallyu more generally. This decision is linked to Shifman's (2013:100) point about different levels of literacy that are required to understand and create memes: some can be made by anyone, whereas others require detailed knowledge about the meme subculture.

While the K-drama memescape is multilingual, most of the memes hashtagged *#kdramameme* were in English, and therefore, we have limited our corpus to memes in this language. Spanish memes are also widespread under this hashtag, but they are beyond the scope of this study. Some other languages also appear under *#kdramameme*, namely Turkish, Arabic, and Portuguese, but they are marginal in number compared to English and Spanish. The English used in the corpus is typically very informal in register, as is usual for the meme genre in general, and reflects varying levels of fluency as the memes are composed by a highly international fandom. There is very little Korean-language content in the text of the memes, except certain extremely high-frequency words familiar to K-drama fans, in particular *oppa* (literally 'older brother', but used with reference to a male love interest).

We used purposive sampling to select the most illustrative examples of memes in each category (Palinkas et al. 2015; Patton 2002). We identified the meme categories through saturation, i.e., we obtained a comprehensive understanding by continuing to sample memes until no new substantive information appeared (Miles and Huberman 1994). Based on our knowledge of the corpus, we selected 13 representative memes to illustrate our main points to those unfamiliar with the setting (Patton 2002; Palinkas et al. 2015). We have omitted the names of creators and sharers of the memes to ensure anonymity.

5. Analysis of the K-drama meme corpus according to the relevant theoretical frameworks

In this section, we analyze the chief formal mechanisms for conveying humor through K-drama memes (5.1) and the overarching functions into which they feed (5.2). As mentioned above, we have identified three overlapping semiotic mechanisms, namely the use of meme templates (5.1.1) combined with the harnessing of blending (5.1.2) and benign violation (5.1.3). These three mechanisms of humor serve two main social and psychological functions: the construction and reinforcement of group identity (5.2.1) and the role they play in the emotional life of meme creators and consumers.

5.1. The three semiotic mechanisms for conveying humor through K-drama memes

5.1.1 *Meme templates*

K-drama memes are templatic in nature, conforming to the stylistic conventions of the meme genre (Shifman 2013:99-118). In terms of composition, they consist of either a single image or several images presented in split screens like comic book panels, with accompanying text that gives the images a new and humorous twist. Most memes in the corpus are based on images from K-dramas (e.g., Figures 5-6). Still, certain memes are intertextual in that they exhibit images which are instantly recognizable as stock elements of global meme culture (cf. Wiggins 2019). For example, Figure 2 contains an image from the iconic US children's show *SpongeBob SquarePants*, which is in widespread circulation in meme format. Similarly, the stick figure in Figure 4 is a familiar character from the meme sphere. In contrast, the glamorous young woman in Figure 10, enjoying K-drama in front of a burning building, replicates a well-established fire meme, which consists of a person in the foreground who is totally unconcerned by the burning fire immediately behind them. It is also reminiscent of the famous "disaster girl" meme, in which a little girl smiles in front of a burning building (see Attardo 2020 for discussion of this meme).

Figure 2. K-drama meme based on an image from the US television show SpongeBob SquarePants

Figure 3. K-drama as a fantasy world

5.1.2 *Blending*

The second mechanism the K-drama memes in our corpus harness to convey humor is blending, whereby structures merge from the blending of elements from different conceptual domains (see Oring 2016:33-56). In our case, the domains of real life and K-drama merge in an unexpected and funny way. For example, the meta-meme in Figure 3 represents this blending by centering around the concept that K-dramas constitute an alternative reality that exists in parallel with the one that fans actually inhabit. These memes present K-drama stars as mythical beings and the world they inhabit as a fantasy realm. In Figure 5, the real world of a lecture or a school lesson is combined with the insider knowledge about the "second male lead" role in K-dramas. The fact that this is not usually a real topic in education, combined with the very specific information being taught about a niche aspect of K-drama fandom knowledge, create a blended space that is funny. An equally complex blending of fictional and real-life domains can be found in Figure 8, where the K-drama consumer's expectations of romantic relationships, English literature, and the specific K-drama plot and couple are combined to create a blended space where the fictional love in K-dramas is more coveted than the love in the classic dramatic work *Romeo and Juliet*. In Figure 9, the funny fact that K-drama and your bed will comfort you when you are sad is expressed using a screenshot from a K-drama where the two comforting things are hugging you as the protagonist. Your feelings, the function of K-drama, and the K-drama image blend into one humorous domain.

5.1.3 *Benign violation*

The third mechanism the K-drama memes in our corpus employ to create a humorous effect is benign violation, whereby a moral principle is violated enough to be acceptable (McGraw and Warren 2010:1142). Examples of memes in this category are those that portray K-drama as an addictive substance. In these memes, fans of K-drama struggle to perform their daily activities, such as going to school or work, because of their intensive K-drama watching schedules. This is comparable to the way in which an individual with a serious substance abuse problem may be unable to function in their everyday life because of their addiction. Certain memes in this subset are more direct in drawing the parallel between K-drama addiction and substance abuse, for example, by presenting the K-drama addict as desperate for their next fix, or by highlighting the disastrous effects on the addict's mood when their K-drama supply is cut off. The meme in Figure 4 is the most explicit in its framing of K-dramas as an addictive substance, making a direct equation between K-dramas and drugs. A similar violation occurs when difficult emotions, such as stress, are portrayed through and dealt with in K-dramas. In Figure 10, worries or even disasters cannot touch you when you are enthralled by a K-drama. In contrast, in Figure 13, the image of a bride weeping on her wedding day (which in most contexts would be highly upsetting) is explained as stemming from the bride's unfulfilled desire for a K-drama actor, thus making the violation benign. Expressing extreme negative emotions would typically be taboo, but when such emotions are placed in an absurd or trivial K-drama meme template, the violation becomes benign and therefore humorous.

Figure 4. K-drama is directly equated with drugs

5.2. **The two functions of K-drama meme humor: Social and psychological**

The three semiotic mechanisms discussed in section 5.1 contribute in overlapping ways to the two main functions of K-drama meme humor. The first of these functions is social, namely the construction and reinforcement of group identity, while the second is psychological, relating to acknowledging and managing emotions. The following subsections will discuss these two functions in turn.

5.2.1 *Social function: group identity*

A powerful function of K-drama meme humor is creating and reinforcing group identity. K-drama memes serve as a way of highlighting the differences between the in-group (K-drama fans) and the out-group (non-fans). Humor is based on shared identity and insider knowledge that stems from the common experience of consuming large quantities of K-dramas. In-group jokes may set out the difficulties of explaining insider knowledge to outsiders, as in Figure 5, which underscores the complexity of the material and the concomitant challenges of conveying it to the baffled non-fan with the caption *Have a seat, it'll be a while*. Certain memes reinforce the in-group/out-group dichotomy through scenarios in which insiders use their niche K-drama expertise as a playful way of tricking innocent outsiders into unwittingly partaking in a K-drama-informed worldview. A case in point is shown in Figure 6, in which a K-drama fan presents their humorous plan to tell their children that the cast of the K-drama *Sky Castle*, set in an exclusive gated community in Seoul, are the Real Housewives of Orange County.

Figure 5. Explaining the role of the second male lead to an outsider unfamiliar with K-drama tropes

Figure 6. A K-drama fan's humorous plan to trick their children into a K-drama-informed worldview
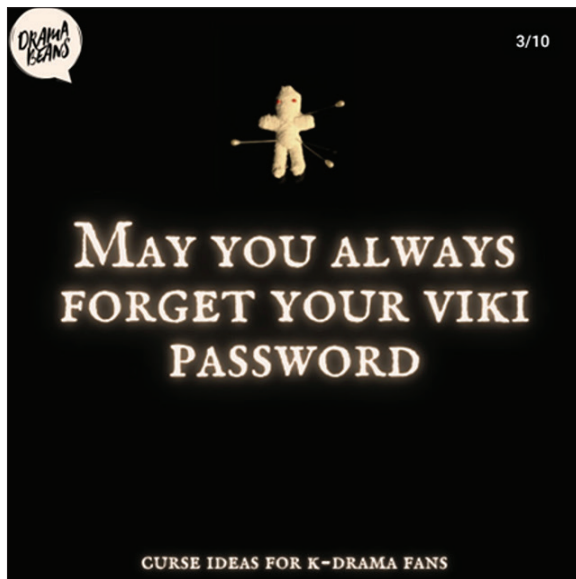
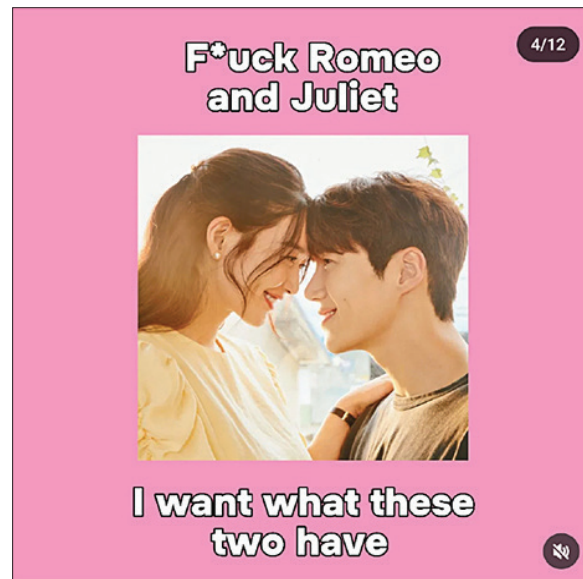**Figure 7.** A "curse" which applies only to
K-drama fans

Figure 8. Insiders view K-drama couples the
way outsiders view Romeo and Juliet

Similarly, memes may center around insider experiences to which all K-drama
fans can easily relate but which would be meaningless for outsiders. For example, the
curse in Figure 7, *May you always forget your Viki password*, derives its humor from in-
siders' dependence on the streaming company Viki, which is considered the best plat-
form for K-drama content, but which is largely unfamiliar to those who are not part
of an Asian drama fandom. The insider/outsider dichotomy is also in evidence where
romantic love is concerned, with K-drama fans represented as having a different list of
priorities for romantic partners and a different canon of romantic archetypes than their
non-fan counterparts. This is illustrated in Figure 8, in which the in-group member
eschews outsiders' idealization of the *Romeo and Juliet* model of romantic love in favor
of that depicted in a K-drama.

5.2.2 *Psychological function*

The other major function of K-drama meme humor is psychological, with the memes articulating and validating the emotional world of K-drama fans. The meme corpus shows us that one of K-dramas' key roles is to comfort and soothe their viewers, as a balm for stressful and challenging life experiences. This point is illustrated in Figure 9, which highlights the central role of K-dramas to calm someone when they are feeling low, and, in a more extreme way, in Figure 10, which depicts K-dramas as a panacea with the ability to keep the protagonist happy even though their life is burning down around them. Conversely, memes also acknowledge that K-dramas are not only a remedy for life's stresses and disappointments but may also *cause* distress to viewers who get emotionally invested in the heartbreak experienced by characters onscreen. A case in point is Figure 11, which highlights the emotional lows suffered by K-drama fans. The humor conveyed in Figure 11 serves as an in-group, affiliative means to deal with their favorite drama ending. The memes can also serve as a humorous way to express fans' disappointment with their romantic relationships, which are regarded as inadequate compared to the ideal partners portrayed in K-dramas.

Figure 9. K-drama as comfort on a bad day

Figure 10. K-drama as a protective factor against adverse life experiences

Figure 11. K-dramas have the capacity to cause emotional distress in viewers

Figures 12 and 13 illustrate this type of meme. In Figure 12, the text highlights the inadequacy of a real-life boyfriend who claims to be too busy to answer his partner's text by pointing out that the protagonist of the K-drama *Vincenzo* can make romantic gestures while running an international crime syndicate. Likewise, in Figure 13, a bride mourns that her real-world groom will never live up to the K-drama actor of her dreams. These memes function as tongue-in-cheek, absurdist vehicles to elucidate true yearning.

Figure 12. The inadequacy of a real-life partner compared to the K-drama hero Vincenzo
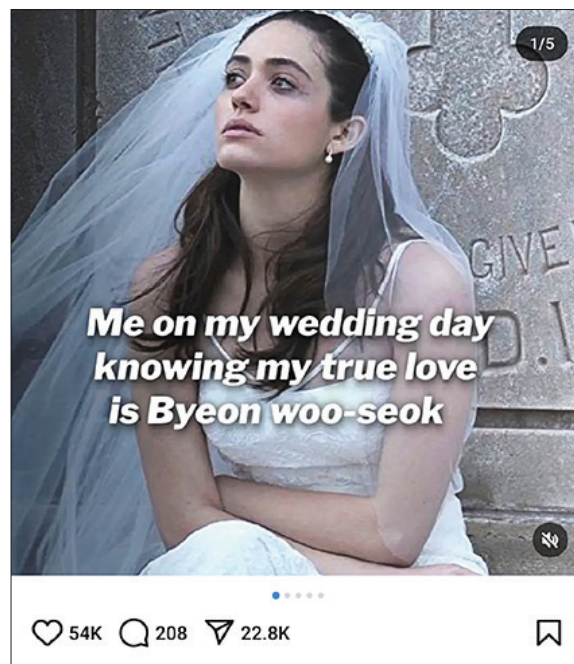

Figure 13. A bride laments the fact that her husband-to-be will never live up to her dream partner, the K-drama actor and model Beyon Woo-seok

6. Summary and conclusions

Our study has shown that K-drama memes constitute a rich source of online 21st-century humor within the broader context of the Korean Wave and global digital culture. We used a qualitative, corpus-based approach to answer the research questions of a) what mechanisms generate the humor in K-drama memes and b) what are the overarching functions that humor serves.

We answered the first research question by arguing that humor in K-drama memes is constructed via three semiotic mechanisms: meme templates, blending, and benign violation. The fact that K-drama memes are based on meme templates means that their semiotic and humorous conventions conform to those of the wider global memescape; this templatic format ensures that creators of K-drama memes have an easy, ready-made vehicle at their disposal for the expression of humorous content, and similarly that consumers of K-drama memes are primed to instantly recognize these creations as humor, because they are already aware that the genre as a whole is a humorous one. Blending is a fruitful conceptual tool for producing humor because the fusion of real life and the world of K-dramas creates a blended space, which is surprising and therefore generates humor. Intertextuality is another element of the humor produced by the blending mechanism, whereby reference can be made to other fictional worlds outside the realm of K-drama (e.g., *Romeo and Juliet* or *SpongeBob SquarePants*). Benign violation serves as a third mechanism by which humor is created in our corpus: humor results from placing a typically taboo topic, such as substance abuse, in a benign situation. This type of unexpected juxtaposition (e.g., equating K-drama fandom with drug addiction) neutralizes the taboo and allows the audience to laugh.

We answered the second research question by pinpointing two overarching functions these humorous mechanisms contribute to. The first is a social function: constructing and reinforcing group identity and belonging and highlighting the contrast between in-group members and outsiders. The memes in our corpus draw on the niche viewpoints, preferences, and specialist knowledge of K-drama fans (e.g., the names, plotlines, actors, and stock characters of individual K-dramas) to express their sense of distance from those outside the fandom. The situations portrayed in the memes provide K-drama fans with a humorous way to bond virtually with other members of the in-group over their shared identities and experiences, in contrast to the outsiders in their everyday life who cannot relate to them. This can provide K-drama fans with an online social network and help promote well-being by combating feelings of isolation. The second function is psychological: not only do the memes pinpoint the role of K-dramas in their fans' emotional lives, highlighting their unique ability to comfort them during difficult periods (and conversely to trigger emotional distress), but they also act on the metalevel as conduits of mental wellbeing by reassuring fans that they are not alone in their feelings (e.g. that any real-life husband is bound to be

a disappointment when compared to a favorite K-drama actor or character). As such, the humorous mechanisms underpinning the memes are harnessed to play a decisive role in negotiating K-drama fans' identity and inner world.

Our study has focused on an understudied aspect of the Hallyu scene, demonstrating that K-drama memes forge and strengthen the ties between members of the global K-drama fandom through humor. Further research on this topic, including quantitative analyses, a comparative study of English- and Spanish-language memes, the examination of production and reception of K-drama memes by geographic location, and linguistic analysis of K-drama meme content, could yield more in-depth and wide-ranging findings on the role of K-drama memes at the intersection of humor, semiotics, sociolinguistics, and cultural studies.

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